THE INCOMPLETENESS AND SEGMENTATION OF FEMALE BODIES IN THE PALEOLITHIC IMAGINATION:

the Gravettian Sculptures of Kostenki 1-I
(Russian Plain 22 000-23 000 BP)

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Two of the main Gravettian complexes (between 25 000 and 22 000 BP), in well documented archaeological contexts, Dolní Věstonice/Pavlov in Central Europe (Czech Republic) and Kostenki/Avdeevo in Eastern Europe (Russia), contain some complete representations of the female body, but mostly incomplete bodies and portions of bodies. Their high proportion has led numerous European researchers to propose the hypothesis that these pieces were intentionally broken. The statuettes would thus have been broken during or at the end of their use. This hypothesis has nonetheless never been tested and masks, in my opinion, another possibility that is supported by many arguments: incomplete bodies and segments of bodies could have been intentionally represented.

The results presented here were obtained during my doctoral research (2007) on one of the statuette assemblages most frequently cited in support of the hypothesis of intentional fragmentation: the Gravettian sculptures from the site of Kostenki 1-I on the Russian Plain (22 000-23 000 BP). This collection, composed of approximately 300 pieces, is representative of the specificity, as well as the problems, associated with Paleolithic sculpted assemblages. As in other Upper Paleolithic statuette assemblages, the initial phase of the inventory of the subjects represented, which is the basis of all thematic analyses, raised as yet unresolved methodological problems. Other than a few realistic statuettes particularly well-illustrated and studied in the literature, the great majority of Gravettian sculpted and modeled assemblages are composed of pieces that are difficult to identify. These pieces are usually left out of studies and grouped by default into categories such as “unidentified”, “roughout” or “fragment”.

A complete study of all the sculptures of the Kostenki 1-I assemblage required the development of a methodology permitting both an identification of the codes of figurative representation that are far from visual realism, and the integration of the fragmentary sculptures that compose most of the assemblage. The identification of codes of representation (schematic or stylized) implied being able to distinguish between finished figures of a simple style and unfinished roughouts. To analyze the fragmentary sculptures, it was necessary to identify the moment at which they were broken, which could theoretically occur from the phase of manufacturing until the discovery of each piece, passing through the stages of use, discard and preservation in the archaeological layer.

A technical analysis of the assemblage was thus undertaken with these two aims. The method is based on two data categories (a comparative analysis of the morphology of the pieces and the identification of marks on their surfaces) and three main tools (the principle of recurrence,
reconstruction by default and experimentation). Limestone sculpting techniques, procedures and manufacturing sequences were thus identified and then integrated into a technical classification of the pieces (primary blocks, secondary blocks, supports, roughouts, finished sculptures). This result leads to two important conclusions.

The comparative analysis of the morphology of the finished pieces showed the existence of a graphic continuum for each subject represented and thus enabled the identification of new, extremely codified representations. In addition, the technical analysis supports the hypothesis of intentional fragmentation at Kostenki 1-I and shows the existence of autonomous sculptures of partial female bodies (one part is missing) and segmented bodies (portions of bodies: head, bust, abdomen, hips, legs, ...). The cleavage surfaces visible at one of the two extremities of these figures are identified as fracture planes created during the phases of reducing a primary block into a secondary block, a secondary block into a support, and sometimes during the shaping of the pieces. The many fractured surfaces, previously interpreted as indices of the fragmentation of complete statuettes, thus occurred during the manufacturing of the sculptures.

An inventory of the subjects sculpted in limestone is proposed based on these results. Among the entire limestone assemblage, 37 blocks and supports are identified, 194 complete sculptures in different manufacturing stages (including 159 female representations, 17 animal representations and 18 unidentified pieces), and only 8 fragmentary sculptures. Among the complete female sculptures, one has a complete body, 83 a partial body (mostly headless) and 75 consist of body portions. The inventory, based on the results of the technical analysis of the sculptures, thus shows the importance of two new themes in the iconography of Kostenki 1-I: the incompleteness and segmentation of the female body.

We can now develop new interpretative orientations for these themes. To do this, we must first clarify, based on an analysis of the female representations, what we consider to be significant features: what are the zones of cleavage of the female body? Was the body seen as the sum of its parts, to which the assemblage would give meaning, or as an entity whose fragmentation would be significant? In other words, does the meaning lie in the capacity of the body to be composed or decomposed into parts, or the opposite, in its unitary nature, which would imply focusing interrogations on the idea of a rupture, symbolized by a segmenting of the body?

This latter hypothesis, supported by the material analysis, raises more precise questions concerning both that which the female body can represent through its incompleteness and segmentation and the anthropological and universal contribution of the theme of segmented bodies.