THE ITALIAN GRAVETTIAN AND EPIGRAVETTIAN “VENUSES” IN A EUROPEAN CONTEXT

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Twenty female statuettes, known as Gravettian “venuses”, are currently known in Italy (figure A). This is the highest concentration in Western Europe, with pieces found in both open-air sites and caves, especially at Balzi Rossi (Barma Grande and Grotte du Prince). For the Epigravettian, we retain seven localities with portable and parietal art (figure B). This second phase of artistic production, attributed to the last millennia of the Tardiglacial period, is not continuous from the preceding one.

The Gravettian venuses

We describe here the venuses that can be compared across long distances. Some have a well-defined typology, such as the Yellow Venus of Balzi Rossi. From the Russian Plains (Kostenki, Avdeevka, Gagarino, Khotylevo, Zaraysk) to the Danube (Willendorf), to the Mediterranean (Yellow Venus) and the Pyrenees (Lespugue), we find the same representation: tilted head on small shoulders; breasts forming a single mass with the abdomen; flat buttocks; tapered legs; sometimes small folded arms. The available dates indicate a late phase of the Gravettian.

A detailed analysis is possible. A triangular appendage extends from the nape to the shoulders on the Yellow Venus and on that of La Marmotta, as on the figures of Laussel and Cussac. The double skin fold on the back of La Marmotta is also present at Willendorf and Dolní Věstonice.
“The Beauty and the Beast” from Balzi Rossi, composed of two back-to-back creatures (a woman and a chimera, part snake, with horns and arms), corresponds to an engraved figure from Předmostí (a single syncretic female creature with a triangular head with small horns).

Other comparisons exist beyond the Gravettian context. The lower part of the Losange Venus of Balzi Rossi is a perforated V-shaped roll of fat framing the pubis. This same perforated fat roll is found on two pieces from Mal’ta. In Siberia, however, the face is in a vertical position, framed by a bonnet, like the one on the Bust from Balzi Rossi. The Dame Océe also resembles a piece from Mal’ta, with its smooth, vertical and slightly rounded face surrounded by a mass of hair with horizontal bangs. Behind the head, two long, undulating curls. This cannot be the result of accidental convergences.

The Epigravettian venuses

At Vado all’Arancio, dated to 11 500 BP, a figure engraved on bone, with an equilateral pubic triangle, has the same posture as the anthropomorph on a disk from Le Mas-d’Azil, with its arms open and legs separated. We find this same, clearly delimited pubic triangle on the Venus of Tolentino, with an elk head, engraved on a pebble. This is similar to the many triangles from Gouy, dated to 12 000-13 000 BP.

At two sites in Sicily, female figures compose part of the engraved panels. At Addaura, a minimum of 16 anthropomorphs, some with a sort of elongated beak and large headgear, mostly male individuals, often with raised arms, recall the engravings from La Marche. There are also two female images, one of which is recognizable by its small breast, and a probable second one with no sexual attributes and a very thin body. Crude engravings, dated to the beginning of the Holocene, are superimposed on this panel. A chronology similar to that of Vado all’Arancio can be proposed based on an engraved male head with headgear identical to those from Addaura.

The engravings from the Grotta dei Cervi form a panel with 37 animal and human figures, including one with a mushroom-shaped head that has a bump on the torso suggesting breasts. At the entrance to the cave, the archaeological sequence begins with layers dated to 10 000-11 000 BP, which probably correspond to these panels.

Two female representations of the Gönnersdorf type are present at the Grotta Romanelli and Grotta di Pozzo, and perhaps at Macomer. At Romanelli, this is a 2 cm long engraving, while the age of the Tardiglacial deposit is 10 000-12 000 BP. At Grotta di Pozzo, there is a silhouette on a stone ridge at the height of a man relative to the Final Epigravettian layers dated to 12 000-13 000 BP. Finally, at Macomer, one statuette represents a theriogyne with the head of a Prolagus sardus (a Pleistocene lagomorph). Other than the animal head, and even if it is not proven that Sardinia was colonized during the Mesolithic, the general form of this figure resembles the Gönnersdorf type.

In conclusion, it is possible to establish relationships both within archaeological cultures and beyond their arbitrary limits. This is the case for the Gravettian as a whole and Siberia. The Epigravettian is closely linked with the Magdalenian and Azilian contexts. At two or more stages in their development, hunter-gatherers developed behavioral models and a network of ideas and symbols at the scale of the European continent and beyond.