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Short articles



## HER AND HIM, EXPLORING THE CREATION MYTH AND SYMBOLISM OF GENDER IN UPPER PALAEOLITHIC PORTABLE ART OF EURASIA

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Trying to interpret prehistoric reality with its unique historical and cultural identity within our own cultural modes of interpretation and understanding of the world around us brings two concepts of self and the other into archaeology. Despite their understood opposition in the context of interpreting the past, I would suggest the apparent complementarity of these ideas. Here, the self is us, with our way of communicating particular understandings of contemporary and past societies and the other the past communities that can only be understood by us in this space and time through our own concepts, as in understanding of self. Such interpretations of the past allow us to use our contemporary concepts (e.g. gender) and try to look at how such ideas could be interpreted via the material culture which we archaeologists study. Further, by acknowledging and accepting that the past communities had their own unique historical and cultural identities our contemporary concepts become a heuristic device to communicate between ourselves through an understanding of the past. By combining understanding of self and the other in interrogatory processes, the historical evolutionism that encouraged the 19<sup>th</sup> Century use of analogy becomes redundant and the different possibilities of the unknown or the other are open to our understanding. By using notions of gender as a culturally defined category I looked at multiple relationships between images of the human female and other representations embodied in the figurines of Complex 1 at Kostenki (ca. 24 000 BP), the material they were carved from, as well as the context in which they have been found. In particular, I have focused on the specific depiction of a human female, so called Venus / self portraiture. In this process I have used three concepts, those of “performativity”, “fragmentation” and “dividuality”. Performativity was introduced to the study of sex and gender by Judith Butler: sex and gender are culturally defined categories rather than naturally given. This allows for flexibility in understanding prehistoric figurines in terms of their independent cultural characteristics. Most of the figurines from Kostenki have been deliberately broken. The breakage of figurines in a process of fragmentation has been introduced to archaeology by John Chapman: through the intentional breaking of the visual representation the particular qualities embodied in those images were shared. This idea is related to the third concept of dividuality, borrowed by him from Marilyn Strathern, reflecting the multiple relationships between people, material culture and the ideas they represent.

Drawing on the three concepts I have suggested a preliminary interpretation of the archaeological data. The interpretation is based upon the observation that the remains of the 19 figurines and 104 figurine fragments at Kostenki result from an apparent diversity of acts, choices and categorisations: the choice of female self portraiture, deliberately anonymised through the removal or nondepiction of the face; the choice of material from which the female and the other figurines were made; the multiple acts of intentional fragmentation; the choice of not-to-break relating to particular images and the materials with which they were made. By looking at these acts, choices

become embodied as performances that left some images or parts of others on the site while others were taken away: through this we discern the dividuality of the female sculptures in relation to self and the other. In contrast the mammoth images were never broken and the non-broken female figurines were made from the tusks of those animals: in a way they shared the same substance. The sculptures share the substance of the mammoth's physical being, by being carved into it and creating the embodied self portraiture. They were never intended to be broken and taken off site. In the same way the mammoth figure was never intended to be fragmented or taken from the site, despite being made out of marl. Perhaps in a way they shared the substance. The relationship between the female and the other creatures such as cave lions, bears, wolves, horses, birds, rhino and "rhino or horse", differed from the mammoth, their symbolic significance being expressed through the act of fragmentation. At the same time, there was a difference since all their body parts were left on the site. The mammoth itself shared the substance it was made from with the other representations. But it was not fragmented in a deliberate process of breaking, always remaining complete.



Venus figurine, Kostenki 1 complex 1,  
Kunstkamera (St-Petersburg, Russia).





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