

Her and him, exploring the creation myth and symbolism of gender in the Upper Palaeolithic portable art of Eurasia

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The Palaeolithic “Venus” figurines from sites such as Kostenki 1 in modern-day Russia, dating to around 24,000 years ago, are among the most alluring and appealing traces of the earliest human art. Since their discovery in the early twentieth century these objects have generated discussion and debate. In this short paper, which draws on the results of an ongoing re-survey of materials held in collections in Russia, I will propose a new interpretation of these figurines which combines the principles of twenty-first century contextual approaches, with an interpretative stance that draws on contemporary understanding of questions of gender and social identity.

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 key concepts into archaeology: self and other. Despite their understood opposition in the context of interpreting the past, I would suggest the apparent complementarity of these ideas. In archaeology, the self is us, archaeologists operating in the modern world, with our ways of communicating particular understandings of contemporary and past societies. The other is past communities that can only be understood by us in this space and time in terms of our own concepts, the ones we use to understand our own notion of self. Such interpretations of the past allow us to use our contemporary concepts, for example gender, and try to look at how such ideas can be interpreted via the material culture which we archaeologists study. Further, by acknowledging and accepting that past communities have their own unique historical and cultural identities, contemporary concepts become a heuristic device to communicate between ourselves through an understanding of the past. By combining this understanding of self and other in interrogatory processes, historical evolutionism, rooted in nineteenth century thinking that encourages the use of analogy, becomes redundant and different possibilities of the unknown or the other are opened up for our understanding.

By using notions of gender as a culturally defined category, I look at multiple relationships between images of the human female and other representations; the material they have been carved from, as well as the contexts in which they were

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found. In particular, I focused on the specific depiction of the human female, the so-called Venus figurines. I examined the material from which they were made, the processes by which they were broken, their place of deposition, and their relation to the mammoth. Mammoth was used as a source of material to make many of the figurines, although not as I document below, the only source, and mammoths were also often the subject of the sculpture *per se*. Finally, I present a link between depictions of other mammals, materials, the human female and mammoth figurines. This analysis, which is still ongoing, takes us beyond our culturally defined categories of gender, and encourage us to look for particular relationships specific to different areas and regions of Pleistocene Eurasia.

In this paper I focus on the symbolic relationship between visual representation and the materials from which these representations are made in the context of Pleistocene Eurasia with a focus on the site of Kostenki 1. The figurines and their fragments are the centre of this analysis, and in my interpretation I draw on the concepts of performativity, fragmentation and dividuality.

The concept of performativity has been introduced to the study of sex and gender by Butler, who treated the categorisation of both sex and gender as culturally defined rather than naturally given (Butler 1988). As I present below, this allows for flexibility in understanding of 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 Chapman (2000). He proposed that 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, that of dividuality, used by Chapman and borrowed from Strathern (1988). Dividuality reflects the multiple relationships between people, material culture and ideas they represent (Strathern 1988).

Archaeological data

Complex 1 at Kostenki 1 is dated to around 24,000 BP. Kostenki 1 was excavated by a number of archaeologists during the twentieth century, first by Efinmienko, followed by Rogachev and Praslov (Efinmienko 1958; Praslov 1993, 2009; Praslov & Rogachev 1982). The site consists of two independent complexes. These two complexes are different in nature, but it is difficult to be specific about the precise kind of the differences since the second complex of Kostenki 1 has not yet been published. Therefore my analysis of the figurines is based on the material from the first complex only (Abramova 1962; Efinmienko 1958). Kostenki 1 is part of a cluster of sites located in the valley of the River Don. The site belongs to the Kostenki-Avdeevo archaeological culture which, in broader terms, is part of the Pavlovian-Kostenki-Gravettian culture dated between 30,000 and 20,000 BP (Soffer 1997).

The area of Kostenki 1 context 1 contains a number of pits distributed across and around a 35m long oblong shape habitation area, punctuated by the presence of between nine to eleven hearths. This alignment of hearths creates a straight axis running through the living area. On the edge of this area are a series of human made depressions interpreted as pit houses, and twelve pits understood as storage facilities. In the central part of the site a number of activity places have been identified. Distributed throughout all these structures, the activity areas and in so-called "cache pits", were found a number of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and figurine fragments, object of personal ornamentation, flint and worked

bones. The representations of women, cave lions, bear, wolves, horses, birds, mammoths, and possibly rhino have been discovered, along with a series of objects described as generically zoomorphic. Sometimes it has been impossible to define precisely what certain images depicted, and such examples have been described by archaeologists as representing one or the other, i.e. mammoth or rhino, or rhino or horse.

The female figurines from this site are termed Venus figurines on the basis of their supposed feminine, divine, attributes. Similar figurines are identified from different areas of Palaeolithic Europe from the Pyrenees to the Russian European Plain (Fig. 1). By comparing the shapes of so-called Venus figurines with the shapes of contemporary women, McDermott came to the conclusion that they represent self portraits created by pregnant women (McDermott 1996). He argues that the Lespugue figurine (France) represents a four-month pregnant 30 years old Caucasian female, while the Willendorf figurine (Austria) embodies a 26 years old Caucasian female, six months pregnant.

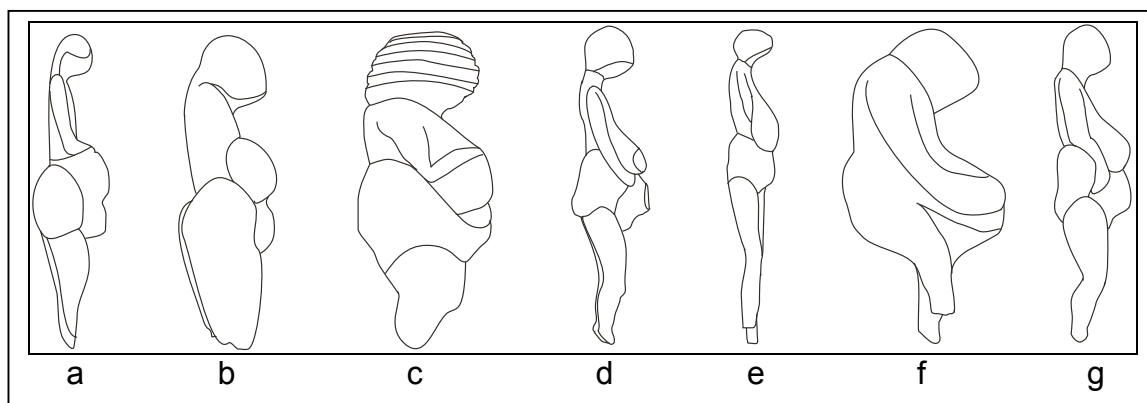


Fig. 1. Venus figurines (redrawn and modified after Mussi 1999): **a.** Lespugue; **b.** Yellow Venus; **c.** Willendorf; **d.** Kostenki; **e.** Gagarino; **f.** Khotylevo; **g.** Avdeevo.

What is essential to stress here is that none of those figurines has a face, which suggests that they were not produced to convey the identity of the female (Janik *in press*). Since part of the human brains is devoted to facial recognition that leads to non-verbal communication in identification of the other, I suggest that there was an intentional choice made not to show the face, so the recognition of any particular woman by the other was concealed or was not regarded as important (Janik *in press*).

Overall 19 figurines and 104 figurine fragments were included in this analysis. They were all made by carving two different materials: the first is soft sand stone-marl; the second is mammoth tusk (Abramova 1962). Female figurines were the only category of figurines that were made from both mammoth tusk and marl, while all other images have been made from marl only. Further, the only figurines that are relatively complete are the female figurines made out of mammoth tusk: if anything is missing it is only the head and the rest does not appear to have been intentionally broken. The figurines made out of marl, on the other hand, are all fragmented (Fig. 2).

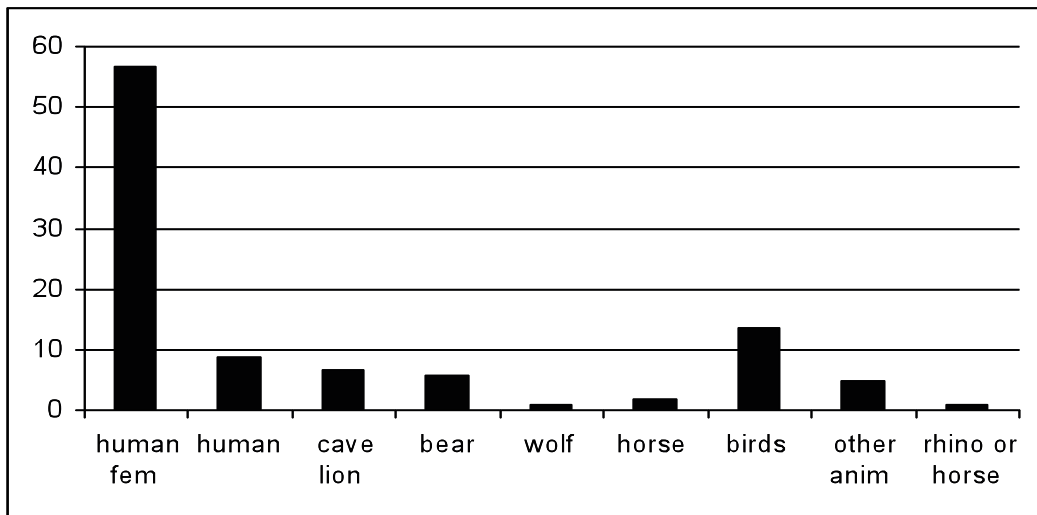


Fig. 2. Percentages of the figurines fragments found at Complex 1 at Kostenki 1.

Depictions of mammoth, or those in the “mammoth or rhino” category made out of marl, were not fragmented. However, the representations of all other animals were intentionally broken (Fig. 3).

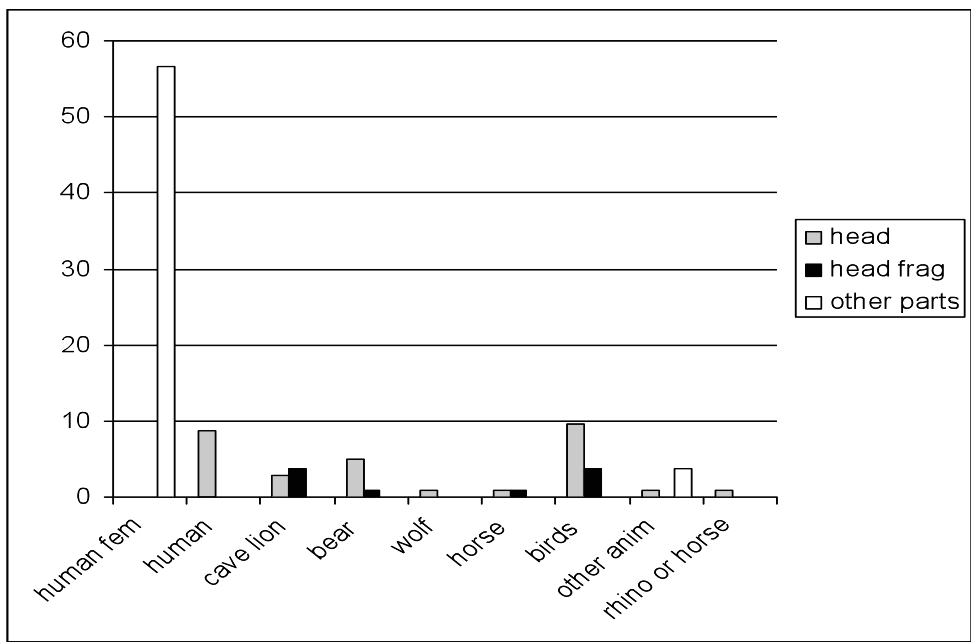


Fig. 3. Percentages of different body parts in the marl figurine fragments.

What is striking is that almost all animal fragments represent the heads with carved faces. While fragments of female figurines represent all aspects of the female body, however, the face is missing. It appears that cave lions, bears, wolves, horses, birds and “rhino or horse” body parts, with the exception of the head, were carried away from the site, while all female body parts were left on site. Regarding figurines, only one fragment of any particular figurine was left behind, all other parts being taken from the site.

There is one more category of depictions that has other parts of the body found at the site, namely the non-specific “other animal”. It is very difficult to put forward any interpretation for this, other than to note that we do not know what they represent, and that they are rare: they represent only 4 of the total 104 fragments found. I propose to keep in mind their existence, however, accepting that they fit the general pattern of the broken representations and their constituent parts, noting that they are possibly the “other”, whose body parts are also represented at the site, but they cannot be linked to any known animal.

Performativity and dividuality

I will now draw on the three concepts of performativity, fragmentation and dividuality, to suggest a preliminary interpretation of the archaeological data. The interpretation is based upon the observation that the remains of the figurines at Kostenki result from an apparent diversity of acts, choices and categorisations: the choice of female self portraiture, deliberately anonymized through the removal or non-depiction 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 which they are made. By looking at these acts, choices become embodied as performances that left some images or parts of others on the site and others taken away: through this we discern the dividuality of the sculptresses in relation to self and the other.

Perhaps the most interesting examples here are those of the mammoth, whose images were never broken and from whose tusk the non-broken female figurines were made: in a way they share the substance. The sculptures share the substance of the mammoth’s physical being, by being carved in it and creating the embodied self portraiture. This self portraiture was 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.

At the same time, the relationship between the female and the other creatures differed from the relationship with the mammoth. In one way there was a shared relationship, their symbolic significance being expressed through the act of fragmentation. They differ, however, from the others by having all their body parts left on the site. The mammoth itself shares the substance it is made from with the other representations. But it is not fragmented in a deliberate process of breaking, always remaining complete.

The relationships between substances and visual representations create the symbolic network of relationships that link dividual relationships of female, mammoth and others in the acts of carving, breaking, removal of or leaving parts on the site.

Conclusions

This short paper offers some preliminary new interpretations of the figurines from Complex 1 at Kostenki 1 in Russia. Drawing on concepts of dividuality, fragmentation and performativity, it is possible to begin to move towards an understanding of the way in which relationships were gendered in the Palaeolithic, building on the ideas proposed by Butler, Strathern and others. I have offered an interpretation of prehistoric figurines that proposes symbolic relationships between the figurines, the material they were made of, and the ways the communities that created them

performed acts of fragmentation upon them. This research forms part of a longer-term reassessment of the Russian Palaeolithic Venus figures and the other objects with which they are associated, and suggests that we can begin to explore new and original ways of looking at some of the earliest human artistic material culture created around 24,000 years ago.

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