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Neolithic Figurines of Western Europe

Chris Scarre

Introduction

Western Europe is distinguished from regions to the east, and indeed from the Central Mediterranean, by the relatively scarcity of Neolithic figurines. Figurines in durable materials such as stone, bone or terracotta are furthermore divided among a series of regional traditions that are separated in both space and time. A number of explanations suggest themselves, from intentional avoidance (Thomas 2005) to use of perishable materials, or simply perhaps diversity of ritual practice, diversity of representational practice, and social context.

The focus here will be on human representations, rather than on zoomorphic figurines; although the latter are known in a number of areas, including the Baltic, and in Bandkeramik contexts (Götherström et al. 2002; Hofmann 2012; Riche et al. 2010). It should be noted, however, that several aspects of the conventional terminology may not accurately capture the symbolism and significance of figurines for these prehistoric communities. There is sometimes evidence, for example, of the elision of human and animal features (Hofmann 2012; Martinsson-Wallin 2008). Furthermore, the relationship between figurines (small scale portable artefacts) and human, or potentially human, representations in other media, such as rock art or megalithic art, must be emphasised. Among megalithic art, particular relevance attaches to statue-menhirs whose overtly human forms should be viewed within the growing recognition that many megalithic blocks of less overtly human form may also have held anthropomorphic connotations (Bueno Ramírez 2010; L'Helgouach 1997; Scarre 2007, 2011a).

The attribution of West European Neolithic figurines to broad interregional traditions has a long and controversial history. Crawford saw in them evidence of a Neolithic cult of the 'Eye Goddess' originating as a fertility cult in Syria and being carried from there across the Mediterranean to Iberia, where some of its most striking expressions are found, and thence northwards to Brittany, Britain and northern Europe (Crawford 1957). The sweeping generalisations behind this narrative were effectively challenged (Fleming 1969), but the idea that figurines and other human representations were manifestations of a common underlying Neolithic religion extending across the whole of Europe has continued to draw support (e.g. Gimbutas 1989). It is evident that particular regions have long-term traditions of symbolic representation spread across a variety of media (rock art, ceramics, figurines), and furthermore that there are no more powerful representations than those of the human form (as demonstrated by the effect prehistoric figurines continue to exert on us: Bailey 2005, 2-3), making intercultural exchange a particularly powerful process of dissemination.

Britain and Ireland

There are nevertheless Neolithic societies in which human representations seem to have been rare or absent. One such is Britain and Ireland. Recent discoveries

have seen a multiplication of discoveries, but overall numbers remain low. Four small figurines have been found in the Orkney Islands: one fragmentary clay figure from Ness of Brodgar, and three from the Links of Noltland, a Late Neolithic Grooved Ware settlement on the island of Westray (Goring 2011; Varndell 2012). Two of the figurines from Links of Noltland are of sandstone, and take the form of a quadrangular or slightly tapering body with a sharply differentiated spherical head. The better preserved of the two (Figure 2) has incised circles indicating breasts, angular eyebrows with dots below for eyes and a lightly carved nose between. A lattice of slightly engraved lines on the front and back may represent textile or clothing. The figure is small – only 4cm tall – and was found within midden material in a domestic context, associated with a radiocarbon date of c.2600 BC (Varndell 2012, 221). The second figurine – more eroded although slightly larger (60mm tall) was found in a similar context, at the entrance to a house, beneath a deposit of articulated sheep bone and pottery, where it appeared to have been intentionally placed. A third figurine fragment from the same site is of fired clay and missing the head (Varndell 2012, 221-222).

A partial parallel for the Noltland figurines is provided by the Folkton drums, a group of three solid chalk cylinders excavated in a burial mound in eastern Yorkshire in 1889 (Kinnes and Longworth 1985, 115-116). Measuring 8.7 cm to 10.7 cm tall and 10.4 cm to 14.6 cm in diameter, they are decorated with a face on one side, flanked by geometrical decoration extending around the back of the drum and further geometrical decoration on the slightly domed top. The geometric motifs have parallels in Grooved Ware pottery and confirm the 3rd millennium date of the Folkton drums, but they remain for the present without parallel in Britain and Ireland (Longworth 1999, 86-87). They may be translations into stone of objects more usually made in another material such as wood.

Other human representations from British Neolithic contexts are rare. They include a fragment of sandstone plaque with what may be part of a schematic human face found in a Grooved Ware pit at Rothley in Leicestershire (Varndell 2012, 219). More intriguing is the hermaphrodite wooden figure known as the ‘God-Dolly’ from the Somerset Levels, found upside down beneath a 3rd millennium timber trackway where it may have been placed intentionally (Coles and Coles 1986, 81; Coles 1990, 1998). A second wooden figure was discovered on the bank of the Thames at Dagenham in 1922. Somewhat larger in scale (49.5cms tall) and later in date (AMS 2350-2140 cal BC), it is carved out of a single piece of pine, with a socket for a separate penis (Coles 1990).

The Somerset Levels and Dagenham figures remind us that alongside figurines of stone there were also human representations in perishable materials. It is difficult to argue, however, that the loss of perishable examples accounts for the scarcity of surviving Neolithic figurines from Britain and Ireland. Explanations have been sought in the character of British Neolithic burial practices and the attitude to the body that they display: where disaggregation of the corpse was commonly practised. A direct link might be drawn between the disaggregated body and the representation of body parts, such as chalk phalluses (Thomas 2005).

That argument might be extended to northern France, where once again figurines are rare. A limited number are known from the Middle Neolithic of the Paris basin, mainly from settlement contexts (Scarre 2007). The practice of collective

burial in chamber tombs is a prominent feature of the burial record in northwest France, where figurines are absent, whereas individual burials in which the integrity of the corpse was respected are found in the Paris basin at this period. During the Later Neolithic (3500-2800 BC) when collective burial becomes established throughout the whole of northern France, figurines are no longer found, but clearly identified human forms appear for the first time in the megalithic art of the region. These include a small number of statue-menhirs in Brittany and the Channel Islands, and analogous carvings in the rock cut tombs of the Marne (Kinnes 1980, 1989; Villes 1998; Scarre 2011b). They portray female forms, with prominent breasts modelled in relief, and necklaces and schematic facial features. Occasionally, breasts alone are depicted, suggesting the portrayal of the female principle in the burial context, perhaps symbolically to nurture the dead (Scarre 2011a, 247).

The farming frontier

In Central Europe, figurines are part of the cultural repertoire brought by Bandkeramik farmers during their westward expansion in the second half of the 6th millennium BC. Figurines are, however, much less common in the western Bandkeramik area than they are in southeast Europe: Becker catalogues only 257 examples, along with a further 213 anthropomorphic figurines (Becker 2011, 31-33). That compares with more than 1300 from the single site of Vinca alone (Hansen 2007, 203). Bandkeramik figurines are particularly frequent in western Hungary, though they occur more sporadically throughout the rest of the Bandkeramik area as far west as the Rhineland. Almost all are fragmentary, and only one third of them display sexual characteristics, mostly female (Becker 2011, 91-93) (Figure 3). They can be divided into two types: a simple columnar variety lacking identifiable arms or legs; and a more naturalistic kind, some of which are standing and others seated, and some of which are holding vessels. The same two categories are found also in southeast Europe, with Starcevo figurines providing the closest parallel (Becker 2011, 254). The detail of the faces, however, and the occasional traces of shell-inlaid eyes, are specific to the Bandkeramik (Hofmann 2012, 227-229).

Bandkeramik figurines appear to represent the retention or adoption of Balkan cultic practices and beliefs among the early farming communities of central Europe. All of them come from settlement sites, and none from graves (Becker 2011, 103), a feature that distinguishes them from other aspects of Bandkeramik material culture that can occur in either domestic or funerary contexts. Many of them appear to have been intentionally fragmented, and parallels have been suggested between the controlled fragmentation of figurines in settlements and the controlled fragmentation of bodies in the graves of Bandkeramik cemeteries (Hofmann 2012, 232-234). Their domestic associations suggest that the ritual practices in which they featured operated at the household level. Such ritual practices may have involved culturally prescribed actions involving words, gestures and symbolic objects, seeking communion with ancestral or supernatural entities and forces. In a few cases, Bandkeramik figurines have been found in pits containing special deposits such as intact vessels, miniature vessels, and red chalk (Becker 2011, 333-334). What is particularly striking, however, is the scarcity of figurines in Bandkeramik contexts. That raises the possibility that these are only the durable survivors of a larger production of figurines that were made mostly of

wood, basketry or other perishable materials. Against that is the intentional fragmentation of many of these figurines, which can only have been achieved with ceramic examples. The practice of figurine fragmentation has been widely documented in southeast Europe (Chapman 2000).

In the western Bandkeramik area, the production of figurines ceases in the early 5th millennium. It is only in the east, among the Lengyel successor-communities of Austria, Moravia, Slovakia and Poland, and the Tisza group in Hungary, that figurines continued to be made on a regular basis. Their roles may have been assumed by other aspects of material culture (Hofmann 2012, 237), and changes in burial practices in the post Bandkeramik world certainly suggest the development of new attitudes to the human body. That is reflected in the abandonment of cemetery burial and the adoption of practices involving increasing fragmentation of the human corpse.

France

Bandkeramik farming communities and their successors spread across northern France in the late 6th millennium BC, bringing rare fired clay figurines as part of their cultural tradition. A few centuries later, fired clay anthropomorphic figurines appear at a number of Paris basin settlement sites, in late 5th millennium contexts (Figure 4). Fragments of eleven such figurines came from the enclosure site of Noyen-sur-Seine, in one case with torso showing clearly defined breasts (Mordant and Mordant 1986). Neighbouring sites yielded similar assemblages: 15 figurines or figurine fragments from Jonquières; 11 from Fort Harrouard (Blanchet 1986; Mohen 1986). It is possible that the majority of these figurines were female, but at least one masculine example is known. Similar figurine fragments are known from the Loire valley and Burgundy, and from the southern part of the Massif central in the Auvergne. A handful of Middle Neolithic figurines or figurine fragments in fired clay are also known from Languedoc (Montjardin and Roger 1993).

The Paris basin figurines, fall within a restricted timeframe, as if they represent a specific cultural or ritual practice of relatively short duration. Breasts and hips were modelled to indicate the female form, but the provision for detachable heads in two examples might suggest that these were interchangeable, or were made of different materials (Scarre 2007). At Jonquières and Fort Harrouard, fired clay figurines were associated with decorated pottery stands known as ‘vase supports’, which were probably small braziers for the burning of special substances or aromatics (Blanchet 1984, 1986; Mohen 1986). At Jonquières there was also an unusual zoomorphic ‘altar’. It is hence possible that the figurines were deployed in household rituals or in small shrines. The sites at which they were found, however, may have been special in themselves: a floodplain enclosure at Noyen-sur-Seine, promontory enclosures at Jonquières and Fort Harrouard. That suggests a communal context to their use, although their small size (only 10-15 cms tall) would limit their visibility in large-scale rituals.

The Paris basin figurines and their southern analogues in the Massif Central appear to represent an isolated group. They do not resemble Bankeramik figurines, although fragmentation may still have been a feature of their life-cycle, and the domestic, non-funerary context of deposition also supplies a suggestive parallel. Although they overlap in distribution with the western extension of Bandkeramik farming

settlements, however, the chronological gap of almost a millennium provides a significant obstacle to arguments for continuity.

Iberia

Far greater numbers of figurines are found in southern Iberia, where the majority fall within the Late Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods (late 4th and 3rd millennium BC). They are associated with the emergence of complex societies. Prestige goods assume increasing prominence in funerary and non-funerary assemblages, including exotic imports such as Sicilian amber and African and Asian elephant ivory indicating connections with North Africa and the Near East (Murillo Barroso and Martinon Torres 2012; García Sanjúan et al. 2013). Copper artefacts come into circulation, and large enclosed settlements make their appearance, in Almería (exemplified by Los Millares), in the Middle Guadiana basin (La Pijotilla) and in the Lower Guadalquivir, where the settlement of Valencina de la Concepcion covers an estimated area of over 400 hectares. Not surprisingly, some have argued for the presence of a Copper Age state or states in southern Iberia at this period, and although that argument is not widely accepted (Chapman 2007; García Sanjúan and Murillo Barroso 2013), the evidence for social and symbolic complexity is undeniable. The figurines of this period in Iberia fall into two principal categories: the so-called ‘idols’ of stone, bone and ivory found across southern Spain and Portugal; and the flat schist or slates plaques of southern Portugal and the southwest.

Iberian ‘idols’

The figurines associated with these societies range from realistic, clearly identifiable human forms to simple stylized forms where no human characteristics are present. Between these two extremes are a series of forms that are more or less recognisably human, although much more schematic and leaving in some cases the explicit human reference open to question. A key component of this group are the ‘eye idols’ (*ídolos oculados*) where a pair of eyes is clearly indicated, sometimes accompanied by eyebrows, marks interpreted as facial tattoos, and even (more rarely) hair (Figure 5). More summary forms occur on phalanges, and the eye motif itself is found in other media such as pottery and even gold sheet (Costa Caramé *et al.* 2010; Bueno Ramírez 2010, 48). Some of the engraved or sculpted stone plaques of southwest Iberia have ‘eye’ motifs similar to those of the *ídolos oculados*, for which they are perhaps the regional equivalent (Figures 6 and 7).

Traditional studies of Iberian figurines, represented above all by the seminal study *Los ídolos del Bronce I Hispano* by Almagro Gorbea (1973), take a predominantly typological approach to their subject. Recent studies have focused on the distinctive regional traditions, and their social and cultural implications (Hurtado 2008). Early records of excavated examples are often imprecise or insufficiently detailed for a full understanding of the context of use or discard, and many of the figurines in museum and private collections today come from surface finds or lack provenance information (e.g. La Pijotilla: Hurtado 2010, 140). This makes it difficult to understand the context in which the different kinds of figurine may originally have been displayed and discarded, and the roles that they played within the lives of their communities. What is clear, however, is that

there are significant differences, not least between types that had primarily funerary associations and those from settlement contexts.

At Los Millares, for examples, two kinds of 'idol' are prominent in funerary contexts: the *betilos* and the *ídol-falange*. The latter consist of phalanges of horse, red deer or ovicaprid, with smoothed surfaces, a well-marked neck, and in rare cases incised or painted motifs indicating a pair of 'eyes' with eyebrows above and marks beneath normally taken to indicate facial tattoos. The predominantly funerary associations of this category were recognised from an early stage: Siret reported that of the 250 phalange-idols known to him, 200 were from funerary contexts (Siret 1908, 196). The anthropomorphic reference present in the rare carved and painted examples can probably be extended to the entire category: they represent people or powers in human form.

The *betilos* or baetyls may also be considered anthropomorphic although they are highly schematic and paradoxically much more heavily worked than the phalange-idols. They are small cylindrical or slightly tapering columns of shaped and polished stone (mainly limestone, although sometimes schist or marble), with no additional surface carving or engraving to represent human features. Groups of baetyls carefully arranged in rows were found associated with tombs at Los Millares (Almagro and Arribas 1963, 73-74, 78). Whether they represent the dead, or the living in conclave with the dead, or supernatural beings in human form, is once again unclear; but the funerary association is again very strongly marked.

Not all the figurines from Los Millares, however, came from funerary contexts. Several came from Fortín 1 during excavations in the 1980s, including eye idols of bone and stone that suggest this was a centre of ritual activity (Molina and Cámara 2005, 95; Maicos Ramos 2010, 119).

Iberian idols also occur in contexts that appear to be special deposits associated with household or community rituals. Cylindrical 'eye idols' of limestone were found in two pits at La Orden-Seminario, on the outskirts of Huelva, which appear to have been arranged as small shrines (Vera Rodríguez 2010). Two sunken circular hut bases at La Pijotilla contained plaque-like eye idols with similar motifs, in one case as part of an abandonment deposit, in another, buried in a pit below a house floor (Hurtado 2010, 142, 191-192). The latter suggests a specific association with active life of the individual household. The largest assemblage of 'idols' from La Pijotilla, however, came from Tomb 3, a rock-cut collective tomb containing the remains of 178 individuals (Hurtado et al. 2000; Diaz Zorita et al. 2012), introduced successively over a relatively short period of time (Odriozola et al. 2008). The figurine assemblage comprised 11 baetyls; 39 phalange idols; 11 wide blade bone idols (rare in this region, and unusual in a funerary context); and most striking of all, two ceramic anthropomorphic figurines. These had large eyes, noses and facial tattoos, and breasts, and one had bent arms forming a pair of 'handles', unique among Iberian figurines but similar to anthropomorphic motifs represented in Iberian rock art.

The ceramic figurines from La Pijotilla belong within a mid-3rd millennium tradition in which more naturalistic renderings of the human form were desired. Eight such figurines have been recovered in the ongoing excavations at the Perdigoões enclosure in southern Portugal, associated with cremation deposits. The

conjunction of naturalistic figurines with highly fragmented bodies is particularly notable and may be a reflection of important changes in the power and perception of individuals (Valera and Evangelista 2014). The stiff upright posture, with legs joined together and arms by the sides and folded over the abdomen, strongly suggests the appearance of the corpse laid out on a bier awaiting the funeral. Display of the corpse may have part of the dramatic performances at funerals that helped to project and reinforce new political and social identities in this period of change.

Portuguese schist plaques

The various categories of ‘idols’ number several hundred in total, but much more numerous are the engraved ‘schist’ plaques found in megalithic tombs and other funerary contexts throughout southwest Iberia, with a distribution centred on the Portuguese Alentejo (Lillios 2004, 2008; Gonçalves 2004; Bueno-Ramírez 2010) (Figures 8 and 9). These flat stone objects, usually of slate or schist, bear incised geometric motifs in a series of horizontal registers. Many of them are also perforated for suspension. Surveys suggest that over 2000 perhaps as many as 4000 survive in museum or private collections (Gonçalves 2004; Lillios 2008, 17).

They bear a variable resemblance to the human form, and indeed their anthropomorphic connotations have been questioned. A few examples have two rayed eyes or two perforations close to their upper edge. These may be anthropomorphic and bear comparison with the ‘eye idols’ and the paired eyes on special vessels from sites such as Los Millares (e.g. Tomb 15: Leisner and Leisner 1943, 513 and Tafel 20). It is clear that they belong to the same symbolic tradition. Alternatively they have been interpreted as representing an “Owl Goddess” (Gimbutas 1989, 192). The latter, however, overlooks the iconographic continuity with other more obviously anthropomorphic representations.

The schist plaques are closely associated with funerary contexts and may have been deposited with individual corpses, perhaps worn on the body or outside a shroud. Experimental work with replica plaques suggests that they were unlikely to have been worn in life, since few of the archaeological examples showed signs of wear, and the slate rapidly absorbs body oils which obscure the engraved lines (Thomas et al. 2009, 58). Comparing the number of schist plaques to the numbers of individual burials in a given context, however, produces variable results. Some large megalithic tombs have large numbers of plaques: 110 at Anta Grande do Zambujeiro, 134 at Anta 1 do Olival da Pega, and as many as 167 at Escoural (Lillios 2008, 16). In other instances, such as Anta 3 da Herdade de Santa Margarida, excavated in 2001, the number of plaques and the number of inhumations did not coincide (Gonçalves 2003, 261). At Cabeço da Arruda 1, too, there was a deficit of plaques (11) in relation to inhumations (19) (Lillios 2008, 16).

Typologies divide the plaques into a number of varieties based on their overall shape and surface decoration (Almagro Gorbea 1973; Gonçalves 2004; Lillios 2008). Key dimensions of variability are the presence or absence of notches that define ‘shoulders’ on some plaques, and enhance the anthropomorphic effect; the presence of one or more perforations, presumably for suspension, but occasionally surrounded by rayed incisions converting them to oculi or ‘eyes’; the

arrangement of engraving between the upper and lower part of the surface (some appearing to have a belt separating torso (or head) from the lower body; and the number of horizontal registers of geometric engraved motifs. The most common (constituting 70% of the all engraved schist plaques) are the bipartite ‘classic’ plaques where the surface is divided approximately one third/two thirds, with diagonal bands and central perforation in the upper part, and horizontal registers in the lower part. Lillios suggests that geometrically engraved plaques were genealogical markers, and that “the number of design registers on the Classic plaques may have recorded the number of generations that separated the deceased from a founding ancestor. Thus a person buried with a four-registered triangle plaque was four generations removed from an important founding ancestor of the clan” (Lillios 2008, 174). The geometric motifs themselves may represent textiles, and can be compared with the famous decorated stele from Sion-Petit Chasseur, or indeed with the designs found on Iberian Beaker pottery (Bueno Ramírez 2010, 45-46).

The florescence of figurative imagery in late 4th and 3rd millennium southern Iberia is not a sudden and novel phenomenon but has deep roots in the symbolic conventions of earlier Neolithic communities. Rudimentary stone ‘idols’ of anthropomorphic shape have been found at Middle Neolithic sites such as El Garcel (Almagro Gorbea 1973, 27-29). Rayed eyes or solar motifs occur in even earlier contexts, as in the Early Neolithic pottery (late 6th millennium BC) from Cueva del’Or. The most striking antecedent of all, however, is the fragmentary pottery figurine from the Gava variscite mine. This has rayed eyes together with nose, arms and breasts in raised relief. The apparently swelling belly suggests that the representation is of a pregnant female, and the figure has been inevitably interpreted in fertility terms. The fragments were found in different levels of the pit fill but the layers consistently gave a date range of 4000-3800 cal BC (Bosch Argilagós 2010, 25-31).

There are two other crucial connections to be made. The first of these is with rock art, and above all the Schematic Art of southern Iberia during this same period. The rayed eyes that are such a characteristic feature of the eye idols are found in Schematic Art in Murcia and elsewhere (Pascual Benito 2010, 106). The second connection is with megalithic art. The schist plaques of southwest Iberia might indeed be considered miniature versions of the painted orthostats present within megalithic tombs such as Antelas, Maa Grande, Areita, or Mamo de Alagoa (Bueno Ramírez 2010, 64; cf. Gonçalves 2004). If the schist plaques, and indeed the other figurines, represent ancestors, then so might the decorated orthostats.

At the opposite end of the time range, the zigzag and geometric motifs present on many of these schist plaques and other figurines find a close parallel with the geometric decoration of Maritime Beaker pottery. The emphasis on textile patterns, dark background surfaces and lighter coloured motifs (sometimes picked out in white paste) suggests a degree of technical and symbolic continuity between the two, which also overlap chronologically (Bueno Ramírez 2010, 72). Given the schematic and formalized nature of many of the south Iberian figurines that we have discussed here, with in many cases only a vestigial reference to the realism of the human form, it might indeed be suggested that the highly decorated Beaker vessels were in some sense, like the plaques and figurines, representations

of clothed bodies. Pots and people are certainly sometimes elided in ethnographically documented communities (Alberti and Marshall 2009).

Northern Europe

At the opposite extremity of Europe, a very different figurine tradition is represented at Combed Ware sites in Finland and Pitted ware sites in Sweden, the former including anthropomorphic examples, the latter mainly zoomorphic (Götherström *et al.* 2002). The anthropomorphic figurines fall into three groups, and Eastern and Western group in Finland, and a third group in the Åland Islands, in the Baltic Sea midway between Finland and Sweden. Similar figurines are also known from Latvia, Karelia and northern Russia (Kashina 2009). The Western group lack facial features, are usually decorated with lines or dots, and often show signs of having been painted with red ochre. They are associated with pottery of the Early Comb period (5200-3900 BC). Figurines of the Eastern group often have bent bodies, and fall into two variants (cylindrical and leaf shaped). The surfaces are marked with incised lines, dots and comb impressions in geometric designs, although there are fewer signs of red ochre. These Eastern figurines have Typical Comb and occasionally Late Comb associations (3900-2800 BC) (Nuñez 1986; chronology after Pesonen and Leskinen 2009, 300).

The figurines of the Åland group are larger and more naturalistic. They are decorated with incised lines or points sometimes suggesting an apron or poncho. Faces are well-defined faces, with some traces perhaps indicating hair, beard, and facial tattoos. Some have modelled breasts and appear to be female. It is assumed that the Åland group are related to the Finnish figurine tradition although they are associated with Swedish Pitted Ware (3300-2700 BC: Larsson 2009) rather than Finnish Comb Ware.

A key site is Jettböle on the Åland islands, where a Pitted Ware occupation with burials and scattered human remains has yielded some 100 fragments of approximately 60 anthropomorphic figurines (Nuñez 1986) (Figure 10). They may have been broken intentionally. The figurines come from a restricted area of the site and belong to its later phase of occupation. They do not appear to have been associated with graves, although human remains were discovered in an earlier occupation layer 150m to the south, where there was evidence of intentional dismemberment as well as formal burial (Götherström *et al.* 2002). In one location there was an accumulation of human and animal bone (4 adults and 3 subadults, and in addition 2 dogs and at least 2 harp seals) that was interpreted as a ritual deposit (Götherström *et al.* 2002, 62). The parallel between dismembered bodies and fragmented figurines is striking. At other Pitted Ware sites, complete animals or animal parts are found in graves, indicating their incorporation in the mortuary rituals. It is indeed possible that there was some elision of animal and human identities in death: one of the figurines found at Jettböle has been held to depict a human with a bird's head (Martinsson-Wallin 2008, 178).

The origin of the Baltic figurine tradition may lie in the Late Palaeolithic or Early Mesolithic past. Figurative art is a feature of Mesolithic cemetery sites such as Zvejnieki and Olenij Ostrov in the eastern Baltic region (Irsenas 2006), and it is interesting to note that studies of ancient DNA from Pitted Ware sites have emphasised their genetic separation from the Neolithic farming populations of

southern Scandinavia. It has been suggested, indeed, that the eastern Baltic may have been a refugium for European hunter-gatherers at this period (Malmström et al. 2009). Thus the Comb Ware and Pitted ware figurines may be part of a deeply rooted regional tradition. At the same time, they tell of specific interrelationships between human and animal bodies and their deposition and representation.

Conclusion

In seeking to understand the Neolithic figurines of western Europe, three issues demand particular emphasis: their patchy distribution in both time and space; their variable iconicity; and their relationship to larger scale representations in the form of statue-menhirs and perhaps megalithic standing stone more generally.

A rapid classification of the figurines might divide them into three or four traditions: the Bandkeramik figurines, the Iberian ‘idols’, and the Baltic figurines of Pitted ware and Comb Ware traditions. Each form a coherent family of related types, to which the British and Paris basin figurines might be added as separate further categories, with no clear origins in any of the others. Two of these traditions might conveniently be mapped onto the major axes of early farming expansion: the Bandkeramik communities who brought farming from the Balkans to the Atlantic; or the Mediterranean Cardial communities that carried farming around the shores of the Central and Western Mediterranean. Although the majority of the Iberian ‘idols’ fall within the later stages of the Neolithic, key elements of their iconography can be traced back to the Early Neolithic. It is interesting to observe that even in the eastern Baltic, where there is a greater degree of cultural and demographic continuity with the past (Malmström et al. 2009), anthropomorphic figurines are uncommon in pre-Neolithic contexts.

That might suggest a connection between figurines and farming, with a new cosmology bringing new ritual practices in which representations of the human form were increasingly accepted and indeed required. That would be to overlook the fact that figurines are a rare phenomenon in western Europe, much less numerous than in the Balkan Neolithic, and in many areas occupying relatively narrow time horizons. A partial exception would be southern Iberia where several thousand ‘figurines’ have been recovered from late 4th and 3rd millennium contexts’ but many of these do not conform to the common understanding of figurine, being highly schematised in conception. Hence at the broadest level, western Europe is largely devoid of Neolithic figurines, in sharp and significant contrast to the southeast.

The variable iconicity of these objects ranges from those that are very clearly representations of human and animal forms to others that are so highly schematised that only broad comparative study reveals that they form part of the same continuum. The process of schematisation reaches its furthest expression in the ‘idols’ of southern Iberia, and in particular the so-called ‘betyls’. Do these stand for people, or at least for powers or qualities in human form? The argument in the affirmative rests on their resemblance to other cylindrical stone objects that have recognisable human features such as eyes, eyebrows, and hair. The schist plaques of southwest Iberia can – cautiously – be considered human representations by the same argument. It could be objected, however, that far from representing people, these stylised objects represented mythological beings

or abstract powers and principles that are depicted with limited human features in order simply to give them agency. That is to say, they may not be stylised representations of people, or even of supernatural beings in human form. The diversity of the southern Iberian examples deserves particular emphasis, since schematic, semi-schematic and naturalistic human representations appear to have co-existed, within a structure of regional variation it is true, but sometimes within the same sites and contexts.

Finally we return to the relationship between figurines – small-scale representations of human or animal forms – and larger size human figures, notably the statue-menhirs of southern France, Iberia and the Alpine zone. These appear to be a mainly 3rd millennium BC phenomenon, hence contemporary at least in part with the ‘idols’ and plaques of southern Iberia. In Italy, too, figurines are ultimately replaced by statue menhirs (see Skeates this vol.). It has been argued that the Iberian examples, along with smaller stone plaques, represent ancestors (Bueno Ramírez 2010, 70), and in other regions there is an association – demonstrated or inferred – with funerary traditions. The presence of painted motifs on the orthostats of megalithic chambered tombs in western Iberia suggests that they, too, may have denoted the human form or personified human powers, an observation that can perhaps be extended much more widely among the megalithic monuments of western Europe (Scarre 2009, 2012).

Figurines may hence have been part of a broader world of representation in Neolithic western Europe that also incorporated standing stones and some categories of rock art. In many cases, the human form was only hinted at rather than represented in naturalistic detail. This may reflect a lack of emphasis on individual bodies and a greater preoccupation with embodied and perhaps ill-defined powers that may have included both supernatural or mythological beings and specific or anonymised ancestors. Their variable associations and morphologies warn against any single overarching interpretation of either meaning or function. Above all, they urge the importance of considering them in context, as part of a broader world of social practices.

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Table 1: Principal figurine traditions in Western Europe

<i>region</i>	<i>numbers</i>	<i>date range</i>	<i>context</i>
Bandkeramik	c.250	5500-5000 BC	settlement
Paris Basin	c.50	4300-4000 BC	settlement
Baltic	c.450*	5200-2700 BC	settlement and funerary

Britain	<10	3000-2400 BC	settlement
Iberia	>4000**	3500-2300 BC	settlement andfunerary

* Wyszomirska 1984: note that Isernas 20006 challenges some of these identifications

** includes engraved schist plaques, cylindrical ‘idols’, and other highly schematised examples

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1. Map showing location of principal figurine groups discussed in the text. A: South-East Europe; B: Bandkeramik; C: Paris basin; D; Britain; E: Southern Iberia; F: Baltic.
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3. Bandkeramik figurines and figurine fragments from Bavaria (later 6th millennium BC) (from Becker 2010).
4. Late 5th millennium fired clay figurines from the Paris basin and northern France: Maizy, Fort-Harrouard, and Noyen-sur-Seine (from Lebolloch et al. 1986; Mohen 1986; and Mordant and Mordant 1986).
5. Limestone ‘eye-idol’ (3rd millennium BC) from La Pijotilla, Badajoz (Spain): height 24.5 cm (from Hurtado 2010).
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10. Fired clay figurine (mid/late 3rd millennium BC) from Jettböle on the Baltic island of Åland (Sweden) (from Martinsson-Wallin 2008).

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