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Places of art, traces of fire. A contextual approach to anthropomorphic figurines in the Pavlovian

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1 Introduction

1.1 The Venus of Dolní Věstonice: the year 1925

In 1924 Absolon began the excavations near the village of Dolní Věstonice, also known by its German name Unter-Wisternitz, located at the foot of the Pavlov Hills in South Moravia in the present Czech Republic (figure 1.1). Previous surface finds in hollow roads cross-cutting the loessic slopes had indicated the presence of Upper Palaeolithic occupation. After a successful first year, the excavations continued in 1925. In the report on the excavations in the second year — 1925 — Absolon described a remarkable event that had an enormous impact on his later activities:

13. VII., Monday, row II, m2 Nr. 7, 8 and 9. The lower cultural layer black, overlying the brick-red, burnt-out layer with completely burned bones and artefacts, 10 cm thick. In the afternoon between 3 and 4 o'clock, the foreman Josef Seidl finds a remarkable object in m2 Nr. 7, a human leg in clay. This little leg, bent at the knee, was similar to a foot from m2 Nr. 33 in the Gänksdorfer parcel. Several minutes later he finds the right broken leg of a statuette and 10 cm away the main part of a complete body. Both parts belong together and represent a female figure with hanging breasts. A "Venus" was there, a sister of the world-famous Venus of

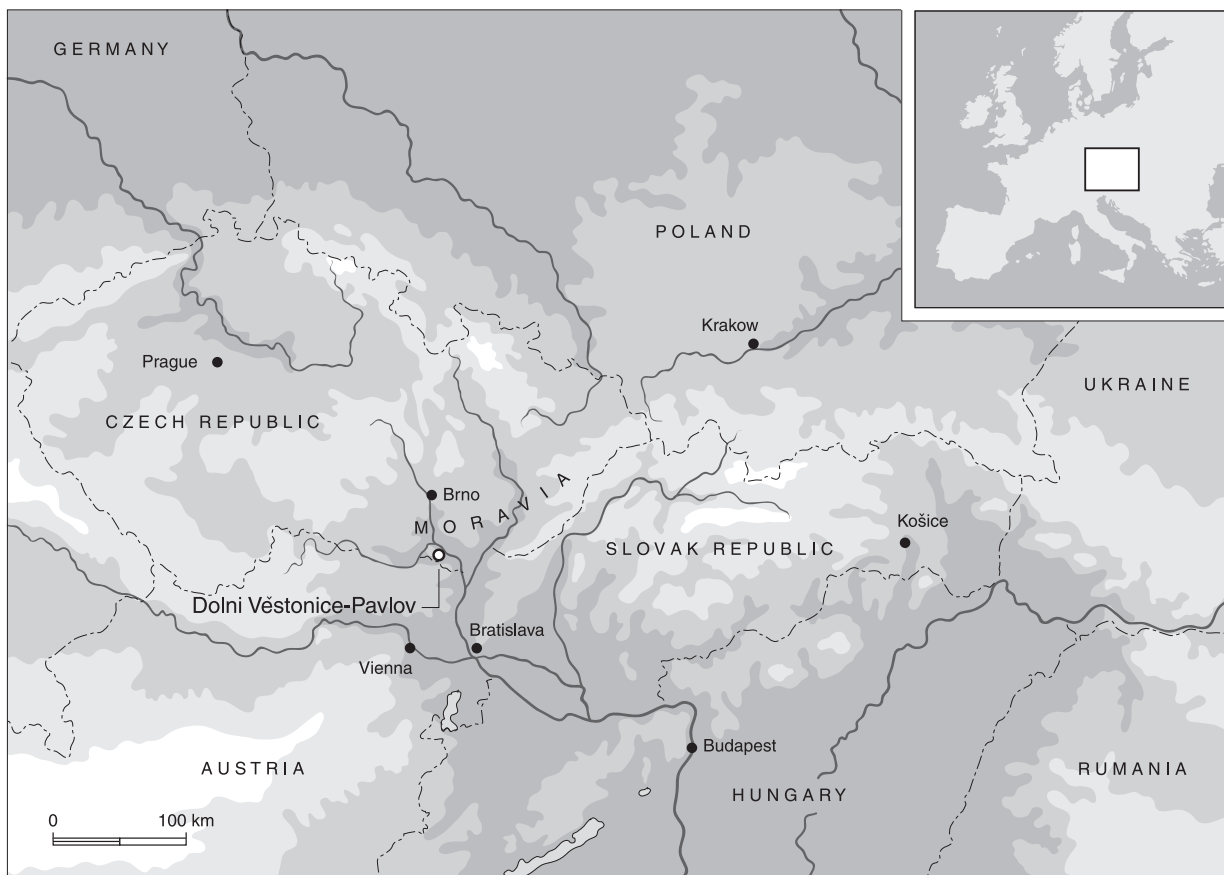


Fig. 1.1 Political geography of the research area with the location of Dolní Věstonice-Pavlov (grey tones indicate altitude).

Willendorf! “We look in vain for the feet, that the statuette lacks”, E. Dania [the site supervisor AV] mentions consciously in the excavation protocol. I can add *post festum*: “This I honestly believe, because the statuette never possessed them”. The statuette was not lying in the brick-red ash, but just underneath it in the black, soft ashes that surrounded her completely, like a crust, but that could later be brushed away easily. The Venus was immediately dealt with further by E. Dania. By chance the chief conservator H. Mrázek and Dr. Zdeněk Jaroš came that day for a site-visit, took charge of the statuette and brought it to the museum the same day. (Absolon 1938b, 17)¹

According to Absolon (1938b, 90), the ‘Venus’ (figure 1.2) was modelled in a mixture of charred and pulverised bone as well as ivory and loess. He referred to it as diluvial ‘ceramic’. Several other examples, including a bear head, had already been found in genuine palaeolithic layers — i.e. without neolithic intrusions — in the excavations of 1924 (Absolon 1938a, 23-24). In the following days, several other ‘ceramic’ figures were found in the vicinity of the ‘Venus’.

14. VII., Tuesday, the m2 Nr. 10, 11 and 12 were next. In m2 Nr. 10 Andreas Wrana found a remarkable fragment of a statuette, which we couldn’t identify. In fact, it turned out to be the head of a large statuette of an owl. Fortunately, we had carefully saved all the lumps of earth lying in the wide surroundings of the Venus statuette. (Absolon 1938b, 18)



Fig. 1.2 ‘Venus’ of Dolní Věstonice.

15. VII., Wednesday [...] “Hurrah!” foreman Seidl calls out soon after. “Another animal statuette.” It was a sculpture of a small carnivore, most probably a little bear. It was by this time no longer necessary to ask for advice or to make a protocol for such finds. (Absolon 1938b, 18)

16. VII., Thursday, m2 Nr. 16, 17 and 18; first thing early that morning there appeared a beautiful small reindeer head in m2 Nr. 16. (Absolon 1938b, 18)

Gradually it became clear that these figurines were lying in a large area of black and reddish layers of ash covering at least 35 m² and in some places reaching a thickness of 80 cm. The area was interpreted as a huge hearth, in fact part of an even larger area which stretched into the adjacent field (Absolon 1938b, 93). What had happened here? How to interpret such a place? Absolon answers rhetorically:

Are we dealing with the central area of the gigantic settlement, a blockhouse or something? Or is it legitimate to see in this place around the naked woman a hunters’ — erotic — mystical cult place? In later years we found other hearths. In the year 1933 in particular, we found a place where, under similar circumstances, the animal figures had been grouped together with numerous flints. (Absolon 1938b, 94)

These discoveries from 1925 form the basis for the dissertation research presented here. Over the period that Absolon excavated in Dolní Věstonice, from 1924 till 1938, many more figurines were discovered, both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic. Later research, in particular by Klíma, in Dolní Věstonice and other, related sites, added extra information, not just on the understanding of the find circumstances, but also in the form of new collections of figurines. All known figurines from these sites are dated between 29 and 25 kyr BP. They are attributed to a regional archaeological culture known as the Pavlovian.

I was struck by several aspects of Absolon’s description of the archaeological context of the figurine. The ‘Venus’ of Dolní Věstonice was found in a thick layer of ashes and charcoal, i.e. amidst the remains of fires. It was accompanied by several animal figurines: an owl, a reindeer and a bear are mentioned. Other occupational debris — animal remains, stone tools, etc. — scattered around in considerable amounts. These finds and features were part of a large area with traces of more and less intensive occupation, covering several hundreds of square metres. The reason that these aspects caught my attention is that the class of anthropomorphic figurines of which the ‘Venus’ of Dolní Věstonice is an example are most frequently described with respect to their form and are compared across the continent, whereas other aspects, in particular their archaeological context, seldom add much in terms of interpretation.

1.2 Structure of the text

With this research I have two broad goals in mind. On the one hand I want to offer an overview of the anthropomorphic figurines in the context of the Pavlovian settlement of Central Europe. Particularly important are the many investigations in the area of the Pavlov Hills, the vicinity of Dolní Věstonice and Pavlov. On the other hand I want to explore what these archaeological traces might reveal of the character of Upper Palaeolithic art and society.

These aims provide the main structure of this text. In the following part of the introduction I shall present some basic premises of this study and provide an outline of the interpretive history of Upper Palaeolithic anthropomorphic figurines. Chapter 2 provides a general introduction to the Pavlovian. The geography, geology and environment of Central Europe in the relevant period are discussed as well as several archaeological characteristics of the Pavlovian. Chapter 3 starts with defining criteria to select what is and what is not an *anthropomorphic* figurine. This is followed by a detailed description of the figurines and a critical discussion of their archaeological context. This description forms the basis for a first analysis in chapter 4 of such characteristics as the raw material, size, fragmentation and the sexual characteristics of the figurines, leading to a classification. A separate chapter 5 is dedicated to the technological analysis of the ‘ceramics’ of which the ‘Venus’ of Dolní Věstonice is one of the most complete examples.

The more descriptive part, comprising chapters 3, 4 and 5, is followed by a more interpretative part. As I make use of ethnography and cultural anthropology in these interpretations, I felt the need to specify and justify this use in a short intermezzo. The interpretative part contains discussions of three themes. In chapter 6, the notions of ‘realism’ and ‘representation’ are explored. The question of how to interpret the relation between anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines is discussed in chapter 7. Finally, chapter 8 investigates the nature of the Pavlovian sites on which the anthropomorphic figurines occur.

In the concluding pages, I shall try to provide some general remarks about Pavlovian anthropomorphic figurines, and material culture in general. Finally, I see in some aspects of the Pavlovian an impetus to speculate on the nature of the Upper Palaeolithic in general.

1.3 Main issues

This book is an investigation into the Pavlovian through the anthropomorphic figurines found in the Early and Middle Upper Palaeolithic of Central Europe. What are the issues at stake in the discovery of the Venus of Dolní Věstonice that form the background for this investigation?

First, the discovered figurine is part of a large collection of (European) Upper Palaeolithic art. The prime example of

Upper Palaeolithic art is of course the cave art from southwestern France and Spain. Cave art dominates both the public imagination and scientific interpretation. The ‘Venus’ figurines are another well-established theme of Upper Palaeolithic art. Examples of ‘Venus’ figurines — frequently the figurine from Dolní Věstonice itself — illustrate most handbooks on prehistoric archaeology as well as art history. In Dolní Věstonice, this figurine is accompanied by animal figurines. Investigating these finds means investigating an Upper Palaeolithic art, which is different from the well-known cave art.

This brings us to the second issue, because is it not that ‘art is notoriously hard to talk about’? Even, as Geertz (1983, 94) continues, ‘it not only is hard to talk about it; it seems unnecessary to do so. It speaks, as we say, for itself: a poem must not mean but be; if you have to ask what jazz is you are never going to get to know’. On the other hand however, ‘the surface bootlessness of talking about art seems matched by a deep necessity to talk about it endlessly’:

Something that meaningful to us cannot be left just to sit there bathed in pure significance, and so we describe, analyze, compare, judge, classify; we erect theories about creativity, form, perception, social function; we characterize art as a language, a structure, a system, an act, a symbol, a pattern of feeling; we reach for scientific metaphors, spiritual ones, technological ones, political ones; and if all else fails we string dark sayings together and hope someone else will elucidate them for us (Geertz 1983, 95).

In other words, the question is what archaeology as a scientific enterprise can actually say about these kinds of finds. If this investigation is an investigation into the *meaning* of these things, what are we looking for? In this respect, this study forms only a first exploration of the issue.

Thirdly and ultimately, this investigation is concerned with the nature of the Upper Palaeolithic as such. The Pavlovian is not another unique culture. I am not primarily concerned with distinguishing the Pavlovian from other Upper Palaeolithic cultures. In my opinion, the Pavlovian, in its own particular characteristics, may betray something more general about the Upper Palaeolithic at large. In the concluding pages I shall try to speculate on this period in human history, situated between the origins of modern humanity and the origins of domestication.

Before we engage in our explorations of the archaeology of the Pavlovian, it is necessary to start with the two main issues at stake: art and meaning.

1.4 What is art?

Trying to sum up the study of Upper Palaeolithic art in the last few decades, I see three general strands in the *mêlée* of interpretations, opinions and descriptions:

1. Upper Palaeolithic art indicates behaviourally and cognitively modern humanity. The presence of art is taken as evidence for such modern capacities as symbolic thinking and time/space displacement. It is evidence of the existence of a modern human mind.
2. The appearance of art in the history of humanity requires an explanation in terms of the natural selection pressure or social function that enhances its development. Art has an adaptive function. It is taken as an instrument in the evolution towards more complex societal structures or as a medium of communication in the increased information demands for survival in more difficult environments.
3. Upper Palaeolithic art is motivated. It is the expression of a world view, the illustration of an ideology, the materialisation of a cosmology, whether archaeologists are able to grasp the motivation or not.

This study fits best within this last strand of inquiry. I shall not be directly concerned with the 'origins' of art, what art may reflect of cognitive capacities or under which conditions art appeared and evolved. Instead I shall concentrate on the question of what art may have meant in the Upper Palaeolithic. Any investigation into Upper Palaeolithic art is based on an implicit definition of what art actually is. In the proceeding section I shall try to make this definition explicit.

1.4.1 THE AESTHETIC THEORY AND PRACTICE OF ART

The recognition and identification of specific objects as *art* objects takes place within our modern, what I shall call, aesthetic theory and practice of art (Gadamer 1990, Layton 1991, Van den Braembussche 1996, Feagin and Maynard 1997, Carroll 1999). This modern view can be summarized in five, interrelated points.

First, art is an autonomous field set apart by its own rules, theories and philosophies, separated from other realms of society (to which it can subsequently be related). The artist, likewise, is an outsider in society.

Second, art is an illusion and beauty but skin-deep. Art creates a world of its own, different from reality but understood in relation to reality. Whereas technique and craft shape reality, art disguises or transcends it. Whereas technology is an activity in view of a goal, e.g. a product, artistic activity is significant in itself. It doesn't have a goal outside itself. However, art is craft to the extent that it is the imposition of form on matter.

Third, art is beauty without purpose. It is opposed to function. Pure beauty is an aspect that can only be seen when looking away from use, function, content, place, etc. The beauty of a tool has nothing to do with it being a tool, but with for example the shape or more generally its appearance to the senses.

Fourth, art is exemplified by the image. It is not a coincidence that the visual arts, in particular painting, are considered first

among the arts. Consequently, the reception of art is dominated by figurative thinking. It is therefore no surprise that palaeolithic art is exemplified by the cave paintings from Lascaux, Altamira and others.

Fifth, art is timeless, it has eternal value — once an art object, always an art object. The art objects, including palaeolithic ones, are collected and compared in a timeless pantheon.

1.4.2 COMMENTS

Many authors, in particular in the Anglo-American archaeological world, have pointed to the ethnocentrism of the concept of art (Tilley 1991, White 1992, Conkey et al. 1997, Bradley 1997). They object in particular to such notions as the 'genius' and 'free creation', the lack of attention for the social conditions of production and consumption, and the elitist, heightened importance attributed to art in contrast to plain artefacts. They therefore try to avoid the word 'art' (or place it between inverted commas) and prefer several alternatives. Most prominent among these are 'material culture' (White 1992) and 'image-making' (Conkey et al. 1997). Though I agree that these alternative words have helped to open new fields of palaeolithic research, I do not think that these words are anything less ethnocentric than 'art'.

In fact, both words fit well into the aesthetic theory and practice of art that I have tried to summarize above. If anything is most characteristic of the modern theory and practice of art, it is that it is almost exclusively concerned with images. In this sense, the alternative word 'image-making' says much about the changes in our experiences with and ideas on art and how we subsequently come to appreciate palaeolithic art. With the word 'material culture', the question is more complicated, because it has become the key concept of the entire scientific industry called archaeology. Art exists as a specific class of objects or artefacts within material culture as a whole, stressing the common foundation of art and craft. As such, the word 'material culture' identifies art as a hybrid of material and culture. It shares this hybrid character with other objects such as stone tools. The position I have taken is that what I have tried to describe as our modern aesthetic theory and practice of art is not an objection, but a precondition to knowledge. It is only under this regime of aesthetics that palaeolithic art can appear as an object of study.

One of the main changes in the study of palaeolithic art, signalled by these alternative words, concerns the archaeological context. Contextual data used to be primarily a means to a chronological end. Contextual analysis was foremost a dating method for studies of the development of forms. Also palaeolithic art was often published without adequate contextual information. Not so much because the information was not documented, but because it did not contribute to the art itself. It only provided a date, a location

and possibly a maker. Palaeolithic art was and is art because of the special qualities of the thing and not because of its context. The negative tone of art and art history (cf. White 1992, 538) in archaeology is partly due to this neglect of the archaeological context: 'To be interested in artifacts without any contextual information is antiquarianism, and is perhaps found in certain types of art history or the art market' (Hodder 1986, 120). Nowadays the archaeological context is considered to be of prime importance. This changed position is related to the meaning of things and how archaeologists approach it.

1.5 What is meaning?

The simple question that actually forms the basis for this entire investigation is: what does it mean, this 'Venus' from Dolní Věstonice? What, however, are we asking with this deceptively simple question? It is necessary to dwell on this subject for a moment. In general, two approaches to meaning can be distinguished (cf. Noble and Davidson 1996).

1.5.1 TWO APPROACHES TO MEANING

The first approach supposes that the object is a depiction of its meaning. The object refers to, stands for, is a symbol for, or an image of its meaning, i.e. some ideal concept or a real thing. Meaning is a property of the thing. The most obvious clue is the form of the object. In our case, the question would be what the 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice depicts.

The answer could be 'human female' or 'mother goddess' or a number of other things.

The second approach suggests that the meaning of an object is its use, in the relations in which it functions. What an object depicts — if it depicts anything at all — is one of a number of relations in which the object stands. With respect to the 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice, this requires a study of the archaeological context for clues to the relations in which this object functioned.

Whereas the first approach looks for a more dictionary-like meaning of objects, the second approach is far more complicated in defining what can be understood as an object's meaning. In this investigation I opt for this second, contextual, approach. The reason is threefold.

1.5.2 MOTIVATION OF A CONTEXTUAL APPROACH

In the first place, it is theoretically motivated. Think for a moment about the Coca-Cola-bottle. The name, the bottles and their content are the same everywhere. Still the meaning is quite different according to the situation. Drinking a bottle of coke in a fast food restaurant in America is something quite different from doing the same thing in the streets of Beijing, the slums of Calcutta or in a tropical tourist resort in Polynesia. The meaning of the coke bottle is different because of the different cultural, economic, social and political

situations. This example goes to show that the contextual approach to meaning is more adequate than the depiction theory of meaning. Even if the 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice can be said to 'mean' 'human female', what this actually entails comes to the fore in a particular setting. Meaning is not a property of an object, it is expressed in relations. This points to a second reason to opt for this approach. The 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice can be subsumed in the category of anthropomorphic figurines. Consequently the relations in which this category stands can be identified and studied. The category of anthropomorphic figurines forms a central point from which to study the many dimensions of the archaeological context. It forms an interesting point of departure for organizing the archaeological investigation. The contextual approach helps to move away from an unhelpful emphasis on comparing forms.

And thirdly, it also helps to move away from another dead end, the idea that palaeolithic archaeologists cannot get at the meaning, because they have no written records about it or they cannot interrogate the participants. However, it is not to be expected that either provides a definite answer (e.g. O'Hanlon 1992, Bloch 1992). The idea is based on the first approach to meaning, i.e. as a depiction, as a dictionary-like or picture-book meaning. If, however, meaning is in the relations of things, then palaeolithic archaeologists are able to reveal something through an investigation of these relations. The contextual analysis reveals meanings that participants may or may not have been able to articulate. The meanings such an analysis reveals are not mirroring past meanings in the heads of participants.

1.6 History of interpretations: a sketch

This study builds on a long history of interpretations. After these considerations concerning art and meaning developed above, I shall now sketch the history of interpretations of figurines like the 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice.

The 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice, as mentioned above, belongs to a well-known class of prehistoric objects, the so-called 'Venus' figurines, part of a larger group of anthropomorphic figurines. The first, palaeolithic figurine of this kind was found in the Magdalenian layers of Laugerie-Basse in France in 1864. The excavator de Vibraye designated this image of a naked female body as a 'Vénus impudique', an impudent Venus, i.e. a female figure of which the genitals were not covered. Many palaeolithic 'Venus', female and anthropomorphic images have been described since and there is more than a century of interpretations to build on.

Though the term 'Venus' figurines is often used in a rather imprecise manner, designating any female or even human-like figure, it usually refers to a group of figurines that is dated to the Gravettian, roughly between 30,000 and 20,000 years ago. This group of figurines forms what has been

termed a “female statuette zone” (Delporte 1993b). It stretches from Lespugue and Brassempouy in the Pyrenean foothills, via the Grimaldi caves on the border of France and Italy, across Central Europe with Willendorf and Dolní Věstonice, on to the sites of Kostienki and Avdeev in the Russian Plains and even to the Siberian sites of Mal’ta and Bour’et. I shall concentrate on the history of the interpretation of this group of figurines. Many aspects in these interpretations however are not restricted to this group. I shall discuss three main strands in the history of interpretation of the figurines. More or less in historical order they concern: 1. the emphasis on the female body; 2. the structuralist approach of palaeolithic art, and 3. the information economy of the figurines. My aim with this discussion is not to provide a complete overview of all interpretations, but the identification of some general trends. These trends are not mutually exclusive, but are combined in different ways in concrete interpretations.

1.6.1 THE FEMALE BODY

As is evident from the most common terms to designate the objects, i.e. ‘Venus’ figurines, female statuettes, images of women, the primary concern of most interpretations is with the depiction of females. Two aspects of the depictions are emphasized frequently: the female is depicted as a naked body and the primary sexual characteristics are exaggerated. Reviewing the ‘Venus’ figurines from the Moravian Palaeolithic, Absolon concluded:

Through the many new discoveries Moravia has become decisive for the question whether these statuettes represent idols, fetishes, cult figures, divinities or real women with sexual emphasis. The origin of these statuettes is due to sexual-biological, erotic motives. (Absolon 1949, 204)

Some of the objects are even described as ‘diluvial plastic pornography’ (Absolon 1949, 208; cf. Guthrie 1979). The female body is interpreted by Absolon as saturated with sexuality. It is a natural symbol of sexuality, the expression of a sexual-biological drive.

From a different angle and with reference to the finds from Kostienki and Avdeev, Abramova (1979) also stresses the sexuality of the female figurines:

One has remarked that, in the image of the woman, the prehistoric artist has underlined those traits of her appearance and activities that have a social importance: the breasts, the belly, the hips, i.e. the parts of the body that in the mind of primitive man incarnated the physiological functions of the woman [...] they are conceived as the iconographic supports of an ideology embodied by the woman-mother. (Abramova 1979, 335-336).

Abramova stresses the physiological functions of women rather than the erotic motives of men. The woman is important in her role as mother, guaranteeing the continuity of society and the biological reproduction of the group (cf. Duhard 1993). The fecundity of the woman represented in the mother figure is identified as the background for the depictions.

Slightly different again is a recent interpretation of the collection of figurines from the Grimaldi caves on the French-Italian border. According to White (1997, 116), ‘the Grimaldi figurines are best interpreted as individually owned amulets meant to ensure the safe completion of pregnancy’. By representing females, in particular pregnant ones, the figurines help women in the safe completion of their pregnancy and in becoming mothers (also Bisson and White 1996). The role of the woman as mother is also prominent in the interpretation of the figurines as a reflection of society. The quantitative dominance of images of women is interpreted as reflecting the dominance of women in society. As Abramova suggests, it reflects an ideology embodied by the woman-mother. Klíma (1989) describes the ‘Venus’ of Dolní Věstonice as the model of a totemic, primeval mother. In other words, it indicates a matriarchal, palaeolithic society. Klíma also points to other aspects of the role of women in society, in particular with respect to ritual:

It is very well possible that, analogous to the Tschuktschen where women were more familiar with all ceremonial matters and the cult than the men, where as ‘keepers-of-the-fire’ they cared for the sacred objects and where their house magic was adjudged more power than the hunting efforts of the men in the tundra, cultic matters were a task of the women at the lower stages of the development of society (Klíma 1963a, 273).

In another sense, the dominance of female figurines is also translated in the relations between the sexes. It is remarked in this respect that the female figurines are not opposed to male figurines, but to sexually unmarked figurines. According to Conroy (1993), this constellation indicates the existence of ‘gender’. Sex roles in the Upper Palaeolithic are no longer determined by biology, but instead they are socially constructed.

Another interpretation is offered by Faris (1983) with reference to France. Extrapolating from contemporary hunters and gatherers, he suggests that women contributed the daily, reliable and basic foods for survival, whereas the contribution by men is more incidental, punctuated and unpredictable. According to Faris (1983, 108), the female figurines ‘may be read as sexist and relevant to appropriate social relations of production’. Men appropriate women’s productive activities by constructing the role of women as

mothers, reproducers of society and the role of men as big game hunters. The dominance of females and big game in palaeolithic art is masking inequality in the relation between men and women.

Summarizing these various interpretations, the feminine body is analyzed as saturated with sexuality and as such it is part of the social body whose fecundity and reproduction it is supposed to ensure. These interpretations are exemplified by the role of the woman as mother.

1.6.2 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

In the research history of palaeolithic art, a special place is reserved for structural analysis, largely a French affair, both with regard to researchers and the object of study, i.e. the cave art. It deserves our attention because, in contrast to the first group of interpretations, structural analysis is explicitly concerned with *relations* between themes rather than with the themes themselves. Main influences on the structuralist approaches to palaeolithic art are the structural linguistics of de Saussure and the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss. The structural linguistics of de Saussure provides two fundamental points: a model of a coherent structure (*langue*) underlying the diversity of actual language use (*parole*) and the model of the sign which combines the signifier and the signified in an arbitrary, i.e. conventional manner. In the structural anthropology of Lévi-Strauss, itself building on de Saussure, this underlying structure is not restricted to language, but is also valid regarding mythology, ritual, art, etc. Mythology, rituals and art are just different media in which this structure manifests itself: they are transformations of each other, all based on the same set of rules. Lévi-Strauss argues that they can be derived from a basic scheme by means of a number of transformations, involving parallelism, inversion and elaboration.

With respect to the study of palaeolithic cave art, the structural analysis tries to extract the set of rules (the syntax), that determines the ordering of the images, which are seen as signs or symbols. As a coherent entity, paleolithic art is comparable to a language family: just as individual languages are variations of one structure, so is the art in each individual cave a variation of *the* structure of palaeolithic art.

Leroi-Gourhan is the most prominent structuralist researcher of palaeolithic art. The main object of his research was the cave art of the Franco-Cantabrian region, but the 'Venus' figurines and other anthropomorphic figurines are considered as well. They are, after all, just another manifestation of palaeolithic art as a whole.

His research proceeds through the 'global study of forms in time and space' (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 68). His aim is not to uncover or decipher the symbolism of individual signs and representations, but to investigate their *function* in the cave

art as a whole. The same meaning and function can therefore be found for completely different objects as they can occupy the same position in a structure. He is preoccupied with finding *order*, not with illuminating the symbolism of, for example, *tectiformes* (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 68). In view of the long timespans involved here (20,000 years and more), the structure of palaeolithic art demonstrates, according to Leroi-Gourhan, a surprising long-term stability.

According to Leroi-Gourhan, the underlying structure of palaeolithic art has a dual nature. It is essentially a system of binary opposition and complementarity of male and female values:

All seems to point to the fact that the decorated caves are sanctuaries, the decoration of which is strictly organized and proceeds by repeated compositions, separated by transitional zones marked by signs or specific animals. For the compositions, the formula that one can perceive corresponds with a group of large herbivores, belonging to two species, almost always figuring the horse. One of the two species is numerically dominant. The central group is flanked by complementary animals, usually cervids or ibex. It translates here the generally abstract representations of man and woman or in a more general manner, male and female values. (Leroi-Gourhan 1958, 395)

The central themes, which the male-female value system represent, are death and fertility in their most general sense. These may well be very vague, even banal concepts:

How many religions do not possess among their major themes the alternation or complementarity of male and female values? Moreover, fertility and destruction are not incompatible and the metaphysics of birth and death evidently underlies the entire figurative assemblage. It is also a fact so common to all religions that it seems banal. (Leroi-Gourhan 1958, 395).

Leroi-Gourhan incorporates the interpretation of female figurines in terms of fertility and birth, as shown above, in a more general structure. The structure of opposed and complementary values in the cave art is, according to Leroi-Gourhan, proof of the existence of a true metaphysics in the Upper Paleolithic. This is what paleolithic art is for Leroi-Gourhan: 'The realistic or abstract figures constitute the direct illustration of an ideology' (Leroi-Gourhan 1968, 70). His stress on a religious system, on rich and complex ideology, is mainly an emancipatory move against interpretations in terms of primitivity and backwardness: Upper Paleolithic humans were not different from modern humans with respect to ideology, religion and metaphysics 'before the inevitable drainage that the symbols endure in the course of

the development of scientific civilization' (Leroi-Gourhan 1976, 15).

1.6.3 INFORMATION ECONOMY

Another context in which the 'Venus' figurines have been placed is that of the alliance networks, necessary for survival in specialized environments. Here I shall summarize this perspective as derived from the studies by Gamble (in particular 1982 and 1991).

According to Gamble (1982), art is a system of communication. In this respect, Leroi-Gourhan and Gamble share a common starting point. But whereas Leroi-Gourhan searches for the rules governing this system of communication, Gamble is interested in the nature and scale of the system. According to Gamble, it is basically an exchange system of information by visual means. He is not interested in the specific messages emitted by visual means, because they may be 'obscure, ambiguous or implicit even to participants at the time' (Gamble 1991, 3). Instead, the changing properties of art — and material culture in general — are an index for changes in the system of communication that supports society.

In Gamble's view, the social and cultural evolution of the European Palaeolithic is closely linked to the extension of alliance networks. With the occupation of more severe types of environments, open communication networks were required enabling the circulation of information necessary for survival between groups and individuals operating at large distances from each other. The social need for survival information is reflected in the properties of material culture, or as Gamble (1982, 92) states: 'the addition of representational art to the cultural system at c. 33,000 years ago is regarded as a response to changed circumstances in the information requirements of palaeolithic society'.

As a focus for this wider discussion, Gamble choose the 'Venus' figurines of the "female statuette zone". He stresses the similarity in style and the stability of design across the continent by quoting Leroi-Gourhan:

No matter where found ... they are practically interchangeable, apart from their proportions. The most complete figures have the same treatment of the head, the same small arms folded over the breast or pointing towards the belly, the same low breasts dropping like sacks to far below the waist, and the same legs ending in miniscule or non-existent feet. (Leroi-Gourhan quoted in Gamble 1982, 93)²

The figurines are thought to date to a fairly short period, between 25 and 21 kyr BP, in which the climate deteriorated towards the last glacial maximum. The adherence to a few stylistic rules reflects the flow of information in an open communication network and which enhanced the maintenance

of relations and the accessibility of other regions for food resources and mating partners: 'The appearance of items showing widespread stylistic similarity is thought to correspond with specialized environments that required open interaction networks' (Gamble 1982, 92). Gamble is not interested in the question why the item takes the form of a female figurine — this question is left for cognitive archaeologists (Gamble 1991) — but rather in why the female figurines are similar across such an enormous territory. This similarity is an indication of the scale of palaeolithic adaptations.

1.6.4 CONCLUSIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

A common denominator of most interpretations is an emphasis on the female sex of the figurines. With respect to Dolní Věstonice and the Pavlovian, this emphasis may not be entirely justified. In addition to a female figure, Klíma also noted the presence of male and asexual figures. He writes:

The series of eight figurines in the dwelling of Dolní Věstonice form a unity not only due to the find circumstances, but also in their meaning content. Therefore the presence of a male element cannot lack in such a unity. In the forefront of this unity stood an important female person, that is represented by a larger and carefully modelled statuette. It was accompanied by small figures, that have no sexual characteristics and that could probably represent non-adult members or subordinate individuals. (Klíma 1989, 89)

Svoboda also observed sexual ambiguity and hermaphroditism in some Pavlovian figurines. He noted that:

For the human subjects, the masculine/feminine symbolism permits sometimes a double reading; just as the presence of asexual beings and hermaphrodites suggest that the dichotomy between the sexes was not as sharp as it is stated in the literature. (Svoboda 1995, 271)

A second general characteristic emerging from this sketchy overview is an emphasis on the comparison of form at the cost of many other aspects. The definition of a "female statuette zone" across the Eurasian continent is entirely based on the outline of the figures. Other aspects such as the raw material, technical characteristics, size and fragmentation are all of descriptive value, but of little interpretative importance. Also the archaeological context is mainly of descriptive value. Despite the interest in relations, especially in locational terms, structural analysis limits the archaeological context to the broader realm of art forms and usually to a set of recognizable, identifiable themes. The analysis of the female figurines in terms of information and communication theory defines the context in ecological terms. Such aspects as the kinds of sites and settlement systems, the distribution

within sites and the depositional context bear little weight in these interpretations.

It is in these respects that this investigation hopes to contribute something to the discussion of Upper Palaeolithic art in general. Such an endeavour requires a critical selection of what counts as an anthropomorphic figurine. The find circumstances of the anthropomorphic figurines must be examined. It will also be necessary to investigate the sexual characteristics of the figurines as well as their technical properties.

The overview of interpretations also gave occasion to the selection of three themes to explore in more detail. First, the emphasis on the form of the figurines is also reflected in the use of the terms 'realism' and 'representation' in the description and interpretation of anthropomorphic figurines. This usage deserves some attention. Second, Absolon describes the finds of several animal figurines in the vicinity of the 'Venus' of Dolní Věstonice. This association of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines requires elaboration. Third, the site of Dolní Věstonice is unusually large and rich, which asks for an investigation into the structure of the site and its position in a wider settlement system.

1.7 Regional case-study: why Central Europe?

A third tendency in the interpretations of the figurines is to compare the figurines across the Eurasian continent rather than to study the relations within a region. It presupposes that the degree of similarity in form is more important, more informative or more accessible than the local and regional context of the figurines. In this study I shall explore one such regional context, that of the Pavlovian in Central Europe.

A reason to focus on a particular regional context is what Conkey (1987) has termed the spatio-temporal collapse. She argues that many common analytical units in palaeolithic archaeology (e.g. palaeolithic art) collapse a long timespan, a large space and considerable variation in a homogeneous entity. In this way, the dynamic historical process is cut into homogeneous time-space slices. The problem Conkey notes is the problem of scale. She does not argue in favour of a specific scale of research which is most adequate for the palaeolithic, but she calls 'for more flexibility and diversity in the geographic units of investigation' and for a stronger link 'with the specifics of given culture-historical trajectories and with a variety of features of the particular geographical

(both physical and social) context(s) under consideration' (Conkey 1987, 71). My restriction to the Pavlovian is guided by Conkey's analysis of the spatio-temporal collapse. In the light of the history of interpretations it seems most promising to look into the region rather than across the continent. However, I would like to add two remarks. Despite the call for flexibility and diversity in scale, the notion of spatio-temporal collapse is vulnerable to a regression *ad infinitum*: any scale of analysis seems to collapse a certain timespan, a spatial unit and a degree of variation, even at the level of the individual artefact. This leads to a second problem. It threatens to reduce the problem of scale to the problem of resolution and chronological control. The value of the notion is not absolute, but heuristic in view of a particular research history. Why a case-study of this particular period and region: the Pavlovian in Central Europe? The reasons for this choice are several. First, a large number of objects have been described as anthropomorphic figurines. Second, a lot of information is available which allows a study of the archaeological context. Most objects have been found during excavations since the 1920s, though the long research history, actually starting in the nineteenth century, requires a careful evaluation of the differential quality of the information. A third reason is of course the accessibility of the documentation for study. Fourth, the (Upper) Palaeolithic of the region is very intriguing and has seen a new flourishing of archaeological research in the entire region since the late 1980s. For me at least, knowledge of the Upper Palaeolithic of this region was mainly based on excavations carried out in the 1950s and earlier. It is interesting to see what new light the recent investigations shed on the earlier research.

notes

1 Quotations were translated in English by the author unless stated otherwise.

2 In a later paper, dedicated to Lévi-Strauss, Leroi-Gourhan situates the 'impressive unity' of the palaeolithic figurines in a far more general context, i.e. 'a general phenomenon of isometry of which numerous examples are found in the art of all periods, but that strikes most particularly where it concerns the oldest known sculptures' (Leroi-Gourhan 1970, 664).