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

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## 10 By way of conclusion

### 10.1 Pavlovian anthropomorphic figurines and the female statuette zone

The Venus of Dolní Věstonice was introduced as belonging to a Gravettian age, female statuette zone, a special class of mobiliary art distributed from the Pyrenean foothills into Russia and even Siberia. Instead of comparing the Venus of Dolní Věstonice with this class of objects, this study chooses to situate it in the regional context of the Central European Pavlovian. In this context, it belongs to a group of anthropomorphic figurines that can be divided in two classes on the basis of the presence of human facial features. I have classified the Venus of Dolní Věstonice as part of a group that I described as fictional-being representations in the absence of human facial features. This approach has led to several conclusions relevant to the idea of a female statuette zone. Firstly, though female sexual characteristics are frequently present, it cannot be stated that the anthropomorphic figurines are *restricted* to the female sex. The design frequently lacks primary sexual characteristics and male figurines are present as well. Secondly, the figurines demonstrate a considerable variation in shapes where each object is quite individualized. There are no series of identical figurines. Similar degrees of morphological variation are described for the Grimaldi collection. Mussi, Cinq-Mars and Bolduc (2000) refer to this phenomenon as ‘paleo-morphing’. Lorblanchet (1989) describes such patterning in the palaeolithic cave-art of south-west France. Thirdly, the anthropomorphic figurines are not different from zoomorphic figurines in terms of technique, material, depositional context, size, fragmentation etc. Of course, the difference makes sense as a description of forms. Fourth, the anthropomorphic figurines of the Pavlovian are notably different from the ones of the Willendorf-Kostienkian, in terms of technique, material, design and size. Significant is also the difference in context, in particular the absence of animal figurines in the Willendorf-Kostienkian.

The Pavlovian figurines that fit in the female statuette zone are selected out of a wider group of objects only on the basis of formal similarity. If the idea of a female statuette zone has any value, then not with respect to the Pavlovian but to the Willendorf-Kostienkian. Looking into the place of these Pavlovian figurines in the wider group of anthropomorphic,

zoomorphic and indeterminate figurines and the sites where they are found, the archaeological significance of the female statuette zone dissolves into regionally and locally differentiated clusters of objects.

I do not want to deny the formal similarities between certain figurines from France, Italy, Central Europe and Russia. The question is whether this cross-continental Eurasian, thematic-cum-stylistic unity must reflect some characteristic of palaeolithic society. Must such a unity have some social correlate such as the scale of palaeolithic adaptive systems or cultural entities? As far as the Pavlovian is concerned, there is no evidence to support that the Venus of Dolní Věstonice itself was circulating within an alliance or exchange network sustaining such an adaptive system or cultural entity.

I prefer to read the evidence in a different way. The kind of unity could be different from a thematic-cum-stylistic unity, from a similarity in what is depicted and how. Like the mathematical perspective in a Renaissance portrait shows something of the new era that opened up, besides the question whose portrait it is, so too Pavlovian art may show something of the Upper Palaeolithic besides the question what theme is depicted. The perspective is not what characterizes the Pavlovian in distinction from e.g. the Aurignacian or Magdalenian, but what the Pavlovian shows as a member of the Upper Palaeolithic family. Here I counter the notion of a spatio-temporal collapse (Conkey 1987), that I have referred to in the introduction as an important reason to focus on the Pavlovian figurines specifically. In my opinion, there is not just variability and diversity in the Upper Palaeolithic, but also family resemblance. In this final and more explorative chapter I speculate a little in this direction.

### 10.2 The historization of material culture and the nature of ‘ceramics’

The Venus of Dolní Věstonice belongs to the group of so-called ‘ceramics’. Technological analysis of the ‘ceramics’ demonstrated that these were never meant to be ‘lasting products’. It was argued that the ‘ceramics’ never left the hearth that preserved them, subverting the traditional division of parietal art in Western Europe and mobiliary art in Eastern Europe. In my opinion, this analysis also points to more significant differences with the aesthetic starting-points

presented in the introduction. It seems that the making of the 'ceramics' did not make a point of being viewed: it did not need a viewer, a spectator. As such it suggests that the 'ceramics' are not to be understood as images. In addition, the 'ceramics' were not set out to be present, lasting and constant, durable and settled, suggesting that they are not re-present-ational. It seems that the Venus of Dolní Věstonice is not a depiction of something in a certain style, not a third step removed from the Platonic truth. It does not have some baked-in meaning for us to decipher. In this conclusion I like to point to these aspects in the light of the 'historization' of objects taking place in archaeology.

Objects are compared with human persons in having a life-span and a biography (Appadurai 1986, Miller 1994, Marshall and Gosden 1999). The biographical approach emphasizes that objects accumulate a history of owners, events and transactions. Objects gain prestige and value in their life and become objectifications in which the politics of (group) identity is played out. As a consequence, deposition and destruction of objects are understood as the withdrawal of an object from circulation, the transfer to another cycle of exchanges (with ancestors, mythical beings, gods) or it is understood as the fixation of identity and ultimate inalienability, as cosmological authentication (Weiner 1992). In other words, destruction and deposition are understood in the light of or as the continuation of the biography of an object. The technological analysis of the 'ceramics' however suggests that they lack a biography. They lack a life history, the sedimentation of significance through circulation and the steadiness for a 'lieu de memoire'. As such the 'ceramics' are at odds with the 'historization' of objects. The 'ahistorical' interpretation of the 'ceramics' does not fit well in 'the strength of archaeology as a whole [...] to concentrate on the long-term uses of artefacts and monuments to construct and transform social relations' (Gosden 1999, 8). It is however not easy to describe the 'ceramics' without reference to the 'historization of objects'. It shows in their description as ephemeral, short-lived, ahistorical, lacking biography. The 'ceramics' seem to have a degree of immediacy, belonging to that place then and there. They did not have a value as heritage, as a historical source of identity. The 'ceramics' have nothing spectacular, let alone monumental. Is this ahistorical nature only characteristic for this class of 'ceramics', or might it be significant in a wider sense for the Upper Palaeolithic?

### 10.3 Sharing and contextual analysis

In the foregoing chapters I have relied quite substantially on the word 'sharing'. In the use of this word, I have stressed the 'situatedness' of things and their embeddedness in their environment. Sharing was described as a cosmology and a way of identification rather than an economic relation. It was

suggested that the identity of something in a sharing cosmology is not a fixed, essential core, but instead that something is as, when and because it belongs to a certain environment. As Bird-David (1999, 73) describes it, hunter-gatherers 'do not dichotomize other beings vis-à-vis themselves, but regard them, while differentiated, as nested within each other'. In my opinion, this sharing cosmology is characteristic for the hunter-gatherers of the Pavlovian as well.

With hindsight it is necessary to point at some similarities between 'sharing' and the contextual approach to meaning. In the introduction to this study, I motivated a contextual approach by emphasizing that what something means comes to the fore in a particular setting. Meaning is expressed in relations and is not a property of something. In other words, a contextual approach can be defined as a 'relational epistemology' (cf. Bird-David 1999). An emphasis on relations and circumstances resonates with the characterisation of 'sharing' as identification. At first glance it may seem that such an approach is therefore well suited and more or less congruent with the sharing cosmology.

However, the similarity hides a far greater incongruity.

The contextual approach lives in the subject-object-relation (*contra* Hodder 1986, 170). After the separation of the object of study, it can subsequently be placed back in a universe of relations, a relevant context. Before being able to contextualize 'anthropomorphic figurines', it is first necessary to define and identify them. This procedure implies deciding on what a human being is. After isolating these objects from other kinds of objects, meaning can be attributed to the relationships with other objects.

What I try to express by the term 'sharing' is an entirely different way of identifying. Trying to express something of this other way, it seems that things *are*, while differentiated, as, when and because they are nested in each other. This 'sharing' does not live in the subject-object-relation that is the ground of scientific archaeology. This tension between 'sharing' and contextual analysis also came across in the preceding chapters where images did not depict, representations did not make something present, and camps were not homes in a hostile environment. As such it points to an unbridgeable abyss between us and them, questioning in what sense they are actually 'people like us'. It recalls the friction between the Dreaming of Aboriginal elders and the Aboriginal cultural construction according to Myers that was mentioned in the intermezzo. This emphasis on difference, however, should not be misunderstood to suggest that they are just simple primitives. Perhaps it is the tension between the familiar and the strange *within* the Venus of Dolní Věstonice that is the cause of so much research effort. The questions about what it represents are efforts to remove the tension between the humanness and the inhuman silence of the Venus of Dolní Věstonice.

#### 10.4 Approaching the Upper Palaeolithic, speculating about boundaries

In this final part I take the opportunity to speculate a little on one aspect from which it may become questionable in what sense they, the hunter-gatherers of the Pavlovian and the Upper Palaeolithic in general, are actually 'people like us'. It is therefore of an entirely different order than the detailed discussion of the preceding chapters. It is more explorative and it has many loose ends, leaving many questions unanswered and even more unasked.

The issue I like to consider is the low archaeological visibility of 'architecture' in the Upper Palaeolithic. The Pavlovian evidence as discussed in chapters 3 and 8 is illustrative in this respect: the claims for 'architecture' are cast in doubt by the geological situation. In fact there are only a few examples of dwelling structures from the entire Upper Palaeolithic and maybe none so far from the earlier parts before about 25/20 kyr BP (Kolen 1999)<sup>1</sup>. There are good reasons for this scarcity of evidence. As the dwellings of mobile hunter-gatherers are most probably 'light-weight', they leave only few, often insubstantial traces. These few traces, vulnerable to post-depositional processes, are therefore quickly removed.

The low archaeological visibility of Upper Palaeolithic 'architecture' is translated in a quite different approach to this aspect in comparison with later archaeological periods from the Neolithic onwards. At Upper Palaeolithic sites, dwelling structures are seldom self-evident. Detailed spatial analysis of the find distribution and exceptional preservation conditions are often necessary to argue in favor of the presence of a dwelling structure. In contrast, traces of architecture abound at Neolithic sites, even when the ancient living floor has been disturbed. The archaeological record comprises house plans, wall constructions, fences and ditches, burial and ritual monuments, and other divisions of space. It is often the architecture that organizes a site into analytical units. Of course, these are gross generalizations and there are numerous exceptions (especially for the later periods) which blur this distinction. Nevertheless, it is my conviction that this difference in the visibility of architecture is not as superficial as it may seem.

The significance of this difference might be looked for in terms of the meaning of boundaries of which spatial, architectural ones form only one, archaeologically visible expression. It must be stressed that the difference is not one between the presence and absence of boundaries, but one in terms of the nature of boundaries and the meaning of their transgression. Low visibility of architectural boundaries must not be mistaken for indistinction and the absence of any dwelling structure and any boundary.

The reason why I think that this difference between the Upper Palaeolithic and the Neolithic is significant is associated with an anthropological study of impurity and cosmological

contamination by Douglas (1966). In her study of food taboos in *Leviticus*, Douglas argues that the impure animals that should be avoided are those animals that transgress the boundaries between classes (see also chapter 7). The camel, for instance, is impure because it ruminates, but does not have cloven hoofs. To act in accordance with holiness and to avoid impurity requires the separation of things that should be kept apart. Impurity, she argues, is matter out of place. However, anomalies, things that combine features of separate classes such as the pangolin, exist and cannot be expelled from the world. In other words, transgression of boundaries cannot be avoided. Transgression of boundaries is both dangerous and powerful and can only be circumscribed and maintained with ritual action. In addition, Douglas argues that the transgression of boundaries in one realm is contagious. It may have consequences in all realms: e.g. because of a case of incest, the harvest may be lost, the village may be attacked and other evil may come over the inhabitants. In my opinion, though it requires a much more thorough explanation, the 'Neolithic' visibility of architecture is somehow related with the sort of cosmology that Douglas describes here.

What then could be the significance of the low visibility of architecture in the Upper Palaeolithic? Is it just a matter of high mobility, a post-depositional question or might it be of greater significance? Could it be that this cosmology of purity and danger, of keeping things apart and unavoidable transgression, is of only little concern in the Upper Palaeolithic? In my opinion, the low archaeological visibility of architecture in the Upper Palaeolithic is related to an entirely different cosmology than the one described by Douglas.

I think this cosmology is somewhat similar to the sharing cosmology of recent hunters and gatherers (following Bird-David 1990, 1992 and 1999). It is important to emphasize that the low visibility of architecture is not the same as an absence of boundaries, but an indication of the nature of boundaries. It is indicative of a membrane character: differentiating, while affording passage and transgression (cf. Tanner 1979 and Fienup-Riordan 1994). In the sharing cosmology, as Bird-David (1999, 73) describes it, 'beings' are regarded, 'while differentiated, as nested in each other'.

Whereas things need to be kept apart, though it can never be complete and successful, in the kind of cosmology described by Douglas, Bird-David describes a kind of cosmology in which things need to be kept, while differentiated, in each others environment. In my opinion, the low archaeological visibility of 'architecture' in the Upper Palaeolithic is related with the kind of cosmology Bird-David describes.

These suggestive, speculative and necessarily vague remarks require a more thorough exposition for which this is not the place. Nor am I concerned here with the archaeological operability and the diversity of the Upper Palaeolithic as

well as the Neolithic. Perhaps these remarks are not even primarily about the past, but rather about our relation with the past. Still, I think, it is the archaeological signature at large that forms the starting point for these speculations. But these speculations also find a source in two other, general problems with regard to the study of hunters and gatherers, past and present. Ingold has argued in several papers that it is important to try to avoid viewing hunters and gatherers as a first step in:

*the story we tell in the West about the human exploitation and eventual domestication of animals [as] part of a more encompassing story about how humans have risen above, and have sought to bring under control, a world of nature that includes their own animality.* (Ingold 1994, 1)

The two general problems with this story for the study of hunters and gatherers in general and the Upper Palaeolithic in particular are, in my opinion, summarized by the terms ‘modernity’ and ‘Neolithic’.

1. If ‘modernity’ is understood in terms of dichotomy, fragmentation, disrootedness and disenchantment, how can the ‘pre- or non-modern’ world be anything else than original unity and harmony of being at home and sharing in an enchanted world? It seems that the hunters and gatherers of the Upper Palaeolithic are particularly vulnerable to this image of ‘original ecologists’ (cf. chapter 7) living in the ‘bosom of Mother Nature’, a return to paradise.

2. In chapter 7, I have referred to Hodder’s remarks about the palaeolithic origins of domestication (1990) as a ‘Neolithization’ of the Palaeolithic. Perhaps the reach of this ‘Neolithization’ is best expressed in the word ‘culture’. ‘Culture’ seems to be firmly rooted in the world of cultivating fields and harvesting crops (for example ‘agriculture’ and ‘horticulture’). Its Latin root ‘colo’ is also the root of ‘cultus’. According to Hodder (1990), the ‘Neolithic’ is basically domestication: on the one hand the selective breeding of animals and plants, on the other hand the control of man’s own wildness in social structures and settlements. In my opinion, this leaves some problems for thinking about the Upper Palaeolithic. What does it signify that the inescapable word ‘culture’ may be rooted in the Neolithic? What was the world like *without* domestication? For example, what is wildness in the absence of domestication? With these final remarks I only want to express some of the bewilderment that this study has caused. Maybe they only serve to make the Upper Palaeolithic more questionable, more problematic than it is at present.

## notes

1 I am not concerned here with the presence or absence of dwelling structures at Lower and Middle Palaeolithic sites nor with the differences between the Middle and Upper Palaeolithic.