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Reconsidering cruciform figurines of Chalcolithic Cyprus

Düring, B.S.; Akkermans, P.M.M.G.

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STYLE AND SOCIETY IN THE PREHISTORY OF WEST ASIA

Essays in Honour of Olivier P. Nieuwenhuyse

edited by

Bleda S. Düring and Peter M.M.G. Akkermans



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LEIDEN MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES



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Olivier Nieuwenhuyse taking a well-deserved coffee break during his work in the pottery yard at Tell Hammam et-Turkman, at the excavation house of the Tell Sabi Abyad project.
Photo taken by Peter M.M.G. Akkermans.

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Reconsidering Cruciform Figurines of Chalcolithic Cyprus

Bleda S. Düring

Abstract

Hundreds of cruciform figurines have been found in Chalcolithic sites across Cyprus, and these were produced in a variety of media that include clay, limestone, and picrolite. These stunning figurines continue to fascinate people today, but they remain enigmatic in the context of the Chalcolithic communities that produced them. What meanings did they capture in the Chalcolithic and why were these objects so important to these societies? In this paper I will survey existing scholarship and evaluate the merits of previous interpretations of these objects. Finally, I will suggest a new interpretation of these iconic objects. In this manner I aim to contribute to a topic that was dear to Olivier Nieuwenhuyse: how to understand prehistoric iconographies.

Introduction

This paper is concerned with prehistoric imagery, which is a topic that I am sure would have interested my friend Olivier Nieuwenhuyse, who passed away much too early and whose personal flair and contributions to archaeology are much missed.

Olivier's main focus was of course on prehistoric ceramics, on which he became one of the most preeminent researchers in the field (see his bibliography at the start of this volume). However, it would be a mistake to reduce Olivier to a ceramic specialist. Apart from the fact that he investigated ceramics in order to reconstruct social practices, such as dining habits and the emulation of style, his interests were wide and included, for example, climate change, heritage, and the ceramics of Pieter Groeneveldt.¹

Here, I would like to latch onto one of Olivier's other interests: his fascination with depictions of human figures in prehistoric art and the significance of these images in the societies that made them. He was intrigued by depictions of human figures possibly engaged in drinking, feasting, and dancing (Bartl and Nieuwenhuyse 2008; Nieuwenhuyse 2017; 2019). In his work on such images Olivier was primarily interested in understanding what these figures were doing and what these activities might have meant in a particular cultural context. For example, Olivier wrote on a Halaf-period image:

1 A Dutch ceramicist of which Olivier was a fan, see <https://pietergroeneveldt.nl/88>

I argue that these designs are structural 'building blocks', acting as culturally-accepted components from a narrative 'tool-kit' available to Halaf painters. By arranging these elements in a process of bricolage the artist was able to convey a specific message. (Nieuwenhuys 2017, 135).

In this and other papers (e.g., Nieuwenhuys 2019), Olivier wrote about Late Neolithic figurative scenes in language analogies, in which images have grammar and syntax, and consist of specific elements that are combined to convey a message (in this he was a product of a particular moment in post-processual archaeology; e.g., Tilley 1991). The figurative components and message resonated with the people that made and interacted these objects, as they were derived from their cultural repertoires and everyday lives. It is up to us to try to reconstruct these complex compositions by analysing these components and how they were combined.

Thus, for Olivier understanding such imagery was a hermeneutic exercise, in which engagement and familiarity with a specific cultural tradition was of key importance. This can be contrasted with totalising approaches in which images are understood as transcending symbols of 'the Neolithic', i.e., representations of pervasive ideas that were common across West Asia over a span of time of at least four millennia. Examples of such approaches can be found in the works of Cauvin (1997), Lewis-Williams and Pearce (2005), and Hodder and Meskell (2011).

Olivier's approach to prehistoric figurative art is exemplified in a brilliant analysis of a human figure on a Halaf bowl from Tell Sabi Abyad (Nieuwenhuys 2017). In this study Olivier contextualised this image in the broader iconography and archaeological knowledge of Halaf society in order to arrive at his interpretation of this scene representing a feasting episode. This emphasis on understanding cultural practices in Olivier's work, rather than reading images as broad symbols, is a very productive one, I think, and one that can be used as a starting point for other scholars trying to make sense of prehistoric imagery. In this contribution I would therefore like to follow in Olivier's footsteps and apply this approach to Chalcolithic Cyprus. In particular I would like to focus on the remarkable assemblage of Chalcolithic cruciform figurines that have achieved iconic status in recent decades.

The Chalcolithic Cruciform Corpus

Hundreds of Chalcolithic cruciform figurines have been found across Cyprus (but not beyond), although most were retrieved from the art market rather than excavations. They range in size from about 3 to 15 cm, with the smaller and more schematic variants often

classified as pendants. These schematic andromorphic figurines typically have bent knees with legs pressed together, outstretched arms, a long neck and a tilted head with simplified facial features (Figure 9.1). In general, these figurines lack features that mark their identities or sex, although a minority (c. 20%) have features that might be breasts (Winkelman 2020, 302). Indeed, Lessure has underlined these impersonal characteristics of the cruciform figurines by labelling them as *logo-like symbols ... vaguely anthropomorphic* (Lessure 2017, 33). There are a number of synthetic studies on these objects, which provide a good overview of their characteristics (a Campo 1994; Winkelman 2020).

The cruciform figurines are typically made from picrolite, a rare type of serpentinite rock occurring on Cyprus that is relatively soft and occurs in veins of a few centimetres wide in rock formations and in the form of river pebbles (Peltenburg 1991; Xenoponthos 1991; Moutsiou *et al.* 2022). Figurines were also made in other types of stone, such as limestone, chalk, and ceramics. There are clear links in the imagery in the various media, with, for example, tilted heads on elongated necks and outstretched abbreviated arms occurring in picrolite, limestone and ceramic figurines. This overlap in the imagery has been of central importance in how picrolite cruciforms are now commonly interpreted.

Reading Cruciform Figurines

The cruciforms resonate with contemporary tastes, and have become iconic in the articulation of Cypriot identities in the present. They feature on Cypriot Euro coinage and appear on public buildings, such as Paphos Airport. In popular culture these figurines are often linked to the 'Mother Goddess' and are presented as a manifestation of a predecessor of Aphrodite. Thus, they are associated with fertility and childbirth, such as, for example, on the website of the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens:

They may have been linked with the cult of the Great Mother Goddess or with practices associated with childbirth. It may not be coincidence that the district of Paphos (where many such figurines have been found) became in historical times the focus of worship of another fertility goddess, Aphrodite.²

These popular understandings of Chalcolithic cruciform figurines are firmly rooted in academic studies. In a study published in 1977, entitled *La grande déesse de Chypre et son culte*, Jacqueline Karageorghis argued that these cruciform figurines were representations of the Great

2 <https://cycladic.gr/en/page/i-techni-tis-kiprou>, accessed on 24 May 2022.

Figure 9.1: Three picrolite cruciforms from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rogers Fund, 1951. (Reproduced under CC0 permission, retrieved from Wikimedia).



Mother Goddess (Karageorghis 1977). This interpretation was also put forward in a follow-up study by Flourentzos published in 1988. In essence, these studies are variations on the ideas of Gimbutas (1974), which had an enormous impact on how figurines were understood. This narrative was further reinforced by the idea that Cyprus was the island of Aphrodite, a theme celebrated in academic and popular sources (Bolger and Serwint (eds.) 2002).

A significant shift in the interpretation of the cruciform figurines occurred in the work of Morris and a Campo in the 1980s and 1990s, both of whom argued that these figurines represent mere women rather than deities, and that their bent knees are best understood as representation of being in labour (Morris 1985, 113-35; a Campo 1994, 83-8, 163-4). This new interpretation, *i.e.*, that cruciform figurines are best understood as women giving birth, was further strengthened by contextual evidence found at the site of Kissonerga-Mosphilia. Here, in the so-called ‘ceremonial area’, a house model was found with a series of associated figurines in and around it. One of these ceramic figurines, ‘KM 1451’, is commonly interpreted as representing a woman giving birth with the baby emerging between her legs. There are also four further ceramic figurines from the same context with legs spread apart and possibly representing the act of giving birth (Goring 1991).

This interpretation was subsequently transposed from this (small) group of ceramic figurines from Kissonerga-Mosphilia to the much larger corpus of picrolite cruciform figurines. The latter also have outstretched abbreviated arms, and tilted heads on slender necks. Diane Bolger and Elizabeth Goring firmly dismissed the interpretation of these picrolite cruciforms as representations of the Great Mother Goddess. Instead, like Morris and a Campo, they argued that these figurines were closely associated with childbirth, and depicted woman in labour. They also suggested that some of these objects were used as part of birthing ceremonies and initiations (Goring 1991, 54-5; Bolger 1996; Goring 1998, 164-6).

After the emergence of this new interpretation of cruciform figurines in the 1980s, which was supported by all key scholars working on Chalcolithic figurines at the time, this reading has been often repeated and not much scrutinised. While the ceramic figurine KM 1451 found at Kissonerga-Mosphilia, and the additional ceramic figurines found in the same context, might well represent women giving birth (although this interpretation too can be challenged; see Lesure 2017, 39), the transference of this interpretation to the corpus of cruciforms is by no means self-evident.

Importantly, the small corpus of ceramic figurines from Kissonerga-Mosphilia differ in a number of key

respects from the picrolite cruciform figurines found in great numbers across Chalcolithic Cyprus. For example, while the ceramic figurines have clear indicators of their sex, in the form of breasts and vulva, such indicators are rare in the picrolite cruciforms. Moreover, while the ceramic models are depicted with legs spread apart and often seated on a stool, the picrolite cruciform are invariably standing with bent knees and with both legs pressed together. Thus, the idea that ceramic birthing figurines can be used to understand the meaning of the much larger and rather different corpus of cruciforms is not unproblematic. Nonetheless, the idea that picrolite figurines are depictions of women giving birth has been so often repeated that it might be considered a factoid, *i.e.*, a speculation or guess that has been repeated so often it is eventually taken for hard fact (Yoffee 2005, 7).

Rereading Cruciform Figurines

Christine Winkelman, in her recent study that considers Chalcolithic Cypriot figurines in great detail, outlines the problems with the interpretation of the cruciforms as representing women in labour (Winkelman 2020). First, she argues that the large majority of the cruciform figurines should be understood as lacking any indication of a clear sex. Thus, the classification of such figurines as (fe)male represents *our* focus, and might have been less important to people in prehistory (see also Kuijt and Chesson 2005; Nakamura and Meskell 2009). Second, none of the cruciform figurines have characteristics that suggest that they are pregnant, such as a swollen belly or pendulous breasts (indeed, as has already been mentioned, cruciforms only rarely have breast-like features that might suggest that they represented women, and vulvas and pubic triangles are altogether absent). Thus, both their pregnant status and femininity should be called into question. Third, the bodily postures of the ceramic birthing figurines (seated on stools, legs spread apart) is quite different from those of the cruciform (legs pressed together with bent knees). Hence, the idea that the posture of the cruciforms represent the act of giving birth is not unproblematic. As Lesure (2017, 39-40) puts it:

the idea that an uplifted face and cruciform-style arms illustrate the stance of a woman at the moment of birth – straining, with arms flung wide for support by other women – is problematic, because those features are actually common among figurines of every posture.

In particular, the fact that legs are not spread apart in the cruciforms, is an issue that warrants further scrutiny. To resolve this apparent contradiction, Morris argued that the cruciforms represent the moment *after birth* (Morris 1985, 122-3), but in that case it is not clear why is

the body still in a straining position and why would it need to be supported.

In a recent study of the cruciform figurines, Richard Lesure stresses their impersonal and schematic qualities and argues that they are each to be understood as a prehistoric 'logo'. He states:

The basic referent of cruciform figurines was a logo-like symbol conceived as vaguely anthropomorphic. Like many powerful symbols, its meaning was complex and layered. It invited explication. Figurine makers were agents in that process. Instead of copying by rote, they engaged with the cruciform as sign. (Lesure 2017, 49).

This thesis put forward by Lesure that the standardisation of the cruciforms was linked to a circumscribed meaning of these objects for Chalcolithic people, much like a cross signifies specific things to Christians, is a plausible one, I think. At the same time, one would like to understand more about what these cruciforms might have meant specifically and why these figurines were so prevalent, and presumably highly valued, in Chalcolithic Cypriot societies.

Picrolite Cruciforms and Chalcolithic Practices

A lot of ink has thus been spilled on what Chalcolithic figurines might have stood for, be it the Great Mother Goddess, women in labour, or logos that were (as yet undefined) powerful symbols. Yet, relatively little has been said how these objects might have been used in social practices or how they might be a representation of such practices, which is the type of analysis that Olivier successfully applied to Neolithic images in Upper Mesopotamia. Is it possible to crack the visual language of these figurines, by analysing the components occurring in these figurines and how they were combined in various figurines and materials? Given the substantial corpus of cruciforms I can only explore a few issues following the approach outlined by Olivier. To address these images more substantially would be a project for future research. So, what can we say about how Chalcolithic cruciforms might have been used in social practices or might be a representation of such practices?

One clear starting point is that a few of these figurines, both picrolite and ceramic examples, are shown wearing a cruciform pendant around the neck. Indeed, many smaller cruciforms have been found which are clearly pendants, and many of these have perforations. Some of these cruciform pendants were found in association with other beads in grave contexts that show that they were indeed part of necklaces (Peltenburg *et al.* 2019; Winkelman 2020).



Figure 9.2: Traditional women's dance in Limenaria on the island of Thassos. Photo taken in 1958 by Gerhard Haubold. (Reproduced under CC0 permission, retrieved from Wikimedia).

Winkelmann extended this functional interpretation beyond the cruciform pendants and argued that also the larger picrolite cruciform figurines were worn as necklaces (Winkelmann 2020, 307). In her view, the larger objects without perforations would have been strung below the head and worn on a necklace, or were attached to clothing. Such a use would be similar to current uses of amulets in the eastern Mediterranean, where amulets such as the hand of the Fatima (*hamsa*) and eye beads circulate widely to ward off the evil eye. They are part of necklaces and bracelets, and are attached to cloths or to rear windows in cars (Abu-Rabia 2005).

On the one hand, such an interpretation of cruciforms as amulets would explain the logo-like adherence to particular visual combinations, as observed by Lesure. On the other hand, this type of analogy runs the risk of uncritically and anachronistically imposing beliefs from recent times onto prehistory, which moreover cannot be evaluated in any substantive way. For example, while picrolite is a soft material that can be scratched easily, there is no good evidence that the larger picrolite cruciforms were strung and worn in the manner envisaged by Winkelmann (Goring 2019). However, this observation, *i.e.*, that there is no use wear to indicate that larger cruciform were indeed worn, does not in itself disqualify a possible talismanic function, as such

objects could also have been strung up on house walls, for example above entrances.

Whatever the specific meaning of the picrolite cruciform (whether an amulet or something else), it is clear that these figurines are part of a broader visual assemblage that also includes figurines and statuettes made in ceramics and stone. The figurines in different media share the outstretched arms, long necks, tilted heads and highly schematic rendering of faces. There is thus a considerable overlap in the visual language used in various objects of different sizes. It is likely that the gesture of extending the arms horizontally sideways conveyed a broadly similar message, as perhaps did the tilted head. It has been suggested that these outstretched arms were extended for support during birth episodes, (Morris 1985, 122), but as has been discussed this interpretation is far from self-evident. Other readings are equally possible, for example arms outstretched in anticipation of an embrace, or to reach out to other beings situated to either side of the figurine.

So, what activity are the picrolite cruciform figurines engaged in? Why do we see outstretched arms and tilted heads? Why the bent knees? Here it should be noted that even in the smallest cruciform pendants an effort is always made to represent the bent knees, so they were clearly crucial in some way for Chalcolithic people.

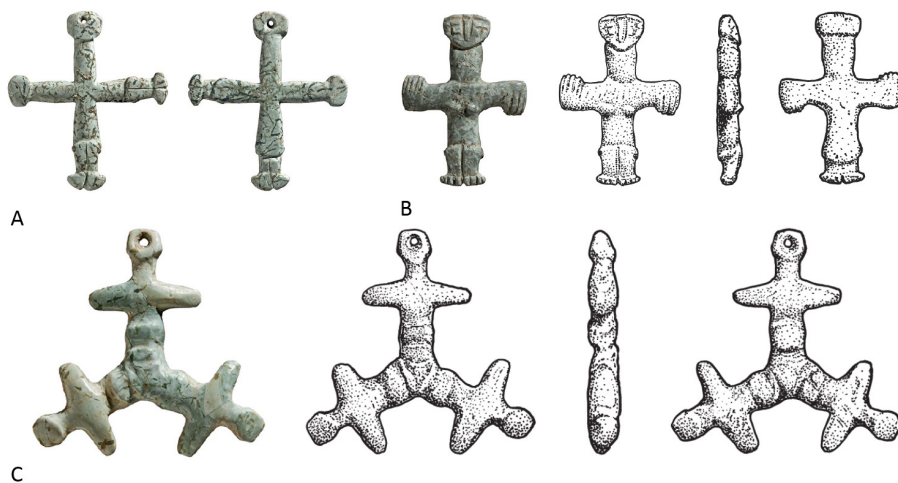


Figure 9.3: Picrolite cruciforms showing indications of rotational movement, not too scale. After Peltenburg *et al.* 2019 plate 47.8; 48.7, and 85.8. (Reproduced with permission of the Souskiou-Laona project).

To me, the combination of bent knees, outstretched arms and tilted heads suggests that we might be dealing with an activity that might involve movement. The most likely activity I can think of that would fit is dancing. The idea that dancing and feasting was of central importance to Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies of Western Asia and that dancing features prominently has been forcefully and successfully argued by Garfinkel (2003) in a book called *Dancing at the Dawn of Civilization* that has met with much approval. In his book, Garfinkel does not discuss the cruciforms from Chalcolithic Cyprus, but he does discuss a series of gestures / body positions that might indicate dancing activities. These postures include outstretched arms and bent knees (Garfinkel 2003, 29-30), and this body posture is indeed one replicated today in many traditional dances in the Eastern Mediterranean (Figure 9.2).

The idea that the cruciforms depict a dancing pose would explain why the bent knees were so central in their iconography, and the outstretched arms and tilted heads would also make sense in such an activity. Dancing might have been culturally meaningful as a representation of feasting activities and in the creation of social ties. The cruciforms could then represent a typical dance pose.

If we follow this idea, it would be possible to interpret necklaces of cruciform pendants as a representation of a group dancing in a circle. The juxtaposition of multiple cruciform pendants in a necklace was quite common, for example in the cemeteries at Souskiou (Vagnetti 1980; Peltenburg *et al.* 2019; Winkelmann 2020, Fig. 27.1).

Further, there is a number of cruciforms in which one hand is held up and the other down (a Campo 1994, Pl. viii.2; Peltenburg *et al.* 2019, Pl. 48.7; Winkelmann 2020, Figs. 19.11, 20.5, 20.11, 22.13, 26.4), possible denoting a dance posture or how hands were held in a line of dancers (Figure 9.3).

These hands held upwards and downwards could also be understood as representing a rotating movement. If this idea of rotation holds true the cruciforms would

indicate both clockwise and counterclockwise directions, as the direction of which hand points up or down varies. That (some) cruciforms might be engaged in a rotating movement, finds further support in two other sub-categories of cruciforms. One of these consists of a number of figurines in which three figurines are linked at their feet to form a triangle of otherwise similar figures (a Campo 1994, Pl. ix.5; Peltenburg *et al.* 2019, Pls. 42.4, 85.8, 86.1; Winkelmann 2020, Figs. 23.2, 23.3), which again suggests a rotating movement. The other category includes the most celebrated of the cruciforms, those known as the 'Salamiou' type, in which the arms represent a secondary figure, often executed in less elaborate form, at right angles to the main figure (a Campo 1994, Pl. viii.1; Peltenburg *et al.* 2019, Pls. 47.8, 85.10, 86.5, 102.5; Winkelmann 2020, Figs. 19.17, 20.4, 20.9, 20.14, 20.15, 21.4, 21.5). Like for upward and downward held hands, these figures suggest rotation in both clockwise and counterclockwise direction.

These indications for rotational movement suggest to me that the cruciforms represent dancers. While such an idea cannot be proven, at least there are no direct contradictions in the visual imagery of the picrolite cruciforms (figurines and pendants) that would make such a hypothesis problematic. Further, we can be confident that dancing was important to these prehistoric societies, as it is in most societies across the globe. Thus, if these are in fact representations of dancers, they would reference something that resonated with activities that would have been very familiar to Chalcolithic people.

Conclusion

Chalcolithic figurines were obviously of great significance to Chalcolithic societies in Cyprus, as they occur across the island and hundreds of these objects have been found. At the same time, the fact that none have found beyond the island suggests that their appreciation was strongly related to a local cultural repertoire in which these objects

held a specific meaning. Over time various interpretations have been put forward for these objects, including that they represent fertility goddesses and women giving birth. These interpretations are generally variations of much more widely circulating ideas on the meaning of (female) figurines in the ancient Eastern Mediterranean, and often do not take into account the particularities of culturally specific iconographies.

When exposed to greater scrutiny such generic models can be shown to be problematic for the Chalcolithic cruciform corpus. Thus, the fact that these cruciforms sometimes wear a cruciform pendant is a good indication that they are probably not goddesses, as they are unlikely to wear a representation of themselves. Likewise, the fact that their legs are invariably pressed together and the common lack of (pregnant) female characteristics, suggest that we are not dealing with women giving birth.

The way forward, then, is to take the characteristics of these cruciforms seriously, and to try to develop interpretations that resonate with our knowledge of these societies and what people were doing in these societies. I have suggested, based on the bent knees and legs pressed together and the fact that some figurines display indications of rotational movement, that the picrolite cruciforms are schematic representations of dancing. This fits with the iconographic evidence, and there is little doubt that dancing was important in Chalcolithic Cyprus, like elsewhere in the Eastern Mediterranean and West Asia.

Someone who was also clearly an important advocate of the idea that dancing, feasting, and intoxication were crucial in Neolithic and Chalcolithic societies in West Asia was Olivier Nieuwenhuyse, who has made this point concertedly in his works on ceramics and on figurative art (Nieuwenhuyse 2007; Bartl and Nieuwenhuyse 2008; Nieuwenhuyse 2017; 2019). I like to think he would approve of the ideas put forward here.

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