

Which was the role of Cycladic marble figurines in funerary rituals?

Cycladic marble figurines are particular objects that for their style and shape already in ancient times have produced a great interest on them, still present after their rediscovery in the last century [1]. In Minoan Crete there was a production of imitations, while the originals are widespread in the whole Aegean area attesting their use as merchandise. The figurines were luxury objects in the same Cyclades; they were not very common, at least in marble [2]. However, they must have had a role in the society that produced them originally. Paradoxically, whereas we understand the significance of their presence in contexts outside Cyclades, as art objects and exchange goods, we have some difficulties to understand their meaning and purpose in the society, which produced them.

The production of these figurines was certainly stimulated by the wide presence of marble in the area, and probably firstly were shaped marble figurines and then their possible imitations in wood or other perishable material. The emery from Naxos and the obsidian from Melos were extremely useful to work the marble, the first as an abrasive in powdered form, the other as cutting and incising tool. In the island of Thera there was also another abrasive agent, perhaps less used: pumice. The most important centres of production were in Paros and Naxos, where it is possible to find the best Cycladic marble. These two islands were particularly prosperous in Early Cycladic certainly also for the production of marble objects, not only figurines.

The figurines appear for the first time in Early Cycladic period, precisely in the second stage of Early Cycladic I in a schematic form [3], an ancient moment of the Cycladic culture, while the first naturalistic ones appear in the third stage of the period. There are no clear antecedents, even if many have been suggested. Among these, probably Neolithic material from Saliagos [4], Kephala and the mainland could really have influenced them. Renfrew thought to the Bulgarian figurines as prototypes for the folded-arm position; anyway certainly there is an high degree of originality in the Cycladic figurines: they are really considered as examples of prehistoric art. The newest parallels are from Sardinia, but even if similar, it is impossible to do a strict comparison with

any other figurine from other cultures. Another singular thing is their size: it varies from 5 cm to 1.5 m. The figurines are anthropomorphic and the majority has been found in graves, but the existence of repaired exemplars and the large quantity found as offerings on Keros, as well as the single figurines found in settlements, demonstrate that they were not made specifically for the graves. Unfortunately many figurines, too many, do not come from archaeological contexts, and a few at least could be a false, while others could be hidden in private collections. In any case, there was a loss of precious archaeological data that constrict us to wait for new unearthing to have definitive answers, or at least valid hypotheses. The type of marble cannot help us to distinguish among the varieties: similar fine marble is present in the whole Aegean area, from Paros and Naxos to Crete and the mainland.

The earliest figurines are schematic, stylised, with a body, a neck without head and arms minimally traced. Since the beginning there are various types attested. Among the schematic figurines, particularly famous and suggestive is the "violin form". There are also more naturalistic types in which there are attempts to define the head, the legs and a few details in the body. Three are the most important earliest groups: Pelos, Plastiras and Louros. These names derive from the cemeteries, where firstly these groups of figurines were found, but a figurine of one type could be present also in a site where the common group is another. In particular both males and females, in standing position with an head and face, compose the Plastiras type, while the Louros type is extremely schematic.

The folded-arm figurine is the most common type, originally it belongs to the Syros group, but there are many variants. Exemplars reached Asia Minor and western Greece, while in Crete and Attica they were imitated. Renfrew suggested a relative chronology for the folded-arm figurines, basically analysing the stylistic differences. The face is upturned with only the nose indicated; the neck is short; the figurines generally represent a female, always naked with the pubic triangle signed by incision. The arms are folded in the middle of the body, while the legs are always held together and often the feet, except in the Kapsala and Chalandriani varieties, are inclined suggesting a lying position. Fingers are indicated by incisions, but there is a lack of many other details. Also the back is extremely simple. The result is a very graceful, slim figurine. Sometimes, for the dimensions, we should speak of these as statues, probably could have been existed also exemplars bigger than 1.5 m in height, the maximum dimension known for these objects. However what we see today is not how the figurines looked in the past: many details, such as facial ones, hair, and sometimes jewellery were painted. When the folded-arm

figurines appeared, the schematic ones continued to survive and some of these were found in contexts later than EC, even if after the end of Early Bronze Age it is difficult to think to a continued, though reduced, production according to the evidence we have. For this reasons we can presume that the production of marble figurines has ceased in Early Cycladic III A.

There are also more complex and varied compositions, like several musicians, a cupbearer, hunters-warriors [5] and others. The meaning of these figurines can be clearer, as in the case of hunters-warriors, but also more cryptic, in the other cases. All the figurines, comprised the complex ones, use a system of proportions since the earliest period. The schematic figurines could be divided generally in three parts, while the naturalistic ones in four. A simple form of compass was probably used to mark these divisions on the block of marble. The complex ones, instead, use a less definite sum of geometrical rules.

The cemeteries in the Cyclades were grouped in base of their characteristics: it is useful therefore to provide a brief description of founds for each group. In the Lakkoudhes group there is an entire absence of any kind of figurines and marble objects. In the Pelos [6] group the common type of figurines is schematic, sometimes they present few anatomical details. The figurines in the Plastiras [7] group are the most naturalistic, they constitute a new type, and they are often associated with Pelos type. In graves, Plastiras figurines are associated with obsidian. In the Kampos group graves it is possible to find the Louros type and the folded-arm figurines. In one grave of this group a figurine was particularly connected with a frying-pan: a vessel traditionally connected by archaeologists to religion. There was also obsidian as blades and cores. In the Syros [8] group there are folded-arm figurines and the complex figures, as well as schematic figurines. In the Kastri group there are a few figurines, without particularities, they come from other groups. To be noticed tomb 14 in the Amorgos cemetery, part of the homonymous group, where there were two folded-arm figurines classed by Renfrew as Dhokathismata. In Phylakopi I group are attested folded-am figurines, schematic ones and a few typical of the Pelos and Syros group.

Figurines were found in settlements, particularly Ayia Irini and Phylakopi, in the ritual site of Dhaskaleio Kavos on Keros and in a few graves out the many found in the Cyclades. These graves generally present rich goods, but it is important to notice that not every rich grave contains figurines; the reality is far from this affirmation. Dumas thought to the figurines as offerings present in the richest tombs, but if this idea is true when we have graves with

figurines [9], certainly it is not a rule. However, the lack of documentation from one hand [10], and the possibility of the presence of figurines in perishable materials on the other hand, could permit us to imagine that figurines could have been really common in that society, but in a "poorer type". I think that also ancient people was fascinated by the shape of these objects, as the imitations demonstrate, but the costs of the production in marble should have been extremely high, so people probably used wood painted, that at the end looked exactly as the marble figurines. If this is true, we could also think, but it is an hypothesis, that the original production was done for living people and only in few cases people agreed to put in the tomb a so beautiful and expensive object, preferring to substitute it with a copy in wood, when not using a wood imitation also during the life! Not everybody probably had the economic possibility to have a marble figurine. Supporting the argumentation of a long life for figurines, with several different uses, is also the fact that a few examples show sign of repairs. This is a clear confirmation that figurines were considered precious objects, to use during all the life or probably more, from generation to generation. It is difficult to imagine why these figurines were repaired; possibly because of their cost or more probably for a special value or symbolism they carried. The figurines had probably also a role in burial practices, but not important as the lack of figurines from the majority of tombs suggest. At least they were not an essential part of the ritual. Wood figurines cannot be considered as replacement in the ritual, because generally a rite has strict rules. A confusing thing is that sometimes archaeologists have found more than one figurine in a grave; this means that these objects were not so strictly personal, probably they were used by an entire family, and for different purposes. We do not know if a difference in the style had a particular symbolic meaning or it was just a variant produced by craftsmen. However four uses are at the moment attested: as objects for ceremonial exchanges, as objects used in ceremonies, as cult images and as part of the funerary ritual. What we know about the ritual is that there was a limited space available and for this reason when there were later inhumations in the same grave, the bones were removed while the skull was always left in its original position. Offerings were left to the dead, probably for its life after death. Among the offerings, we find sometimes marble figurines, different in style and probably sometimes also they carried a different symbolism. We do not know the meaning of figurines in the various uses, nor if there were really other uses outside religion, as it is highly suspected, for examples as art objects and/or personal amulets. Figurines may simply have been felt appropriate in the tomb to bring personal possessions along with the dead, because of their intimate connection with him or her. If there was belief in an afterlife, the buried figures could

have been intended as servants or concubines. Otherwise they could have been intended as gifts to the deities who controlled the destinies of people. In this case they could be representations of duties.

In particular, the marble figurines of female form found in graves are often thought to have a special religious significance, to be figures of a deity or perhaps her worshippers. The use of female figurines with explicit sexual characteristics could be easily explained thinking to an agricultural society, where fertility played an important role. Most likely these figurines, found in graves, were used during the life by the dead; they were not made specifically for the funerary ritual and should have had not a great part in the ceremony, even if they certainly had an important symbolism and meaning, so that they were left for the important function of accompanying the dead in its new world. During the life probably the most common place was in household shrines. In this case a possible meaning for their deposition in graves could be the devotion of the owner, the meaning of figurines would be limited to a religious sphere, as point of contact between deity and owner. The time lost in the production of these figurines, in a prehistoric society, is another indication of their importance: there were evidently many difficulties to permit to specialised craftsmen [\[11\]](#) to produce objects whose usefulness was not immediate.

In conclusion, these fascinating figurines remain mysterious for some aspects, especially their meaning and symbolism, but with this shade of mystery figurines are also more fascinating. Only a general description and a few hypotheses are possible at the moment. Only new discoveries could bring new light on this theme. In my opinion, they were used in funerary contexts with a double meaning: as personal beloved by the owner with also a religious symbolism that was probably the original reason when the production of figurines began. But soon their artistic shape may have changed their original religious meaning to a non religious one, even if the original symbolism remained. Repairing figurines makes sense in an artistic collection: I do not think that a prehistoric society decided to offer to the deity a "second-hand" object. The Cycladic society could have discovered a primitive sense of art. Yet connected with religious matters, figurines were probably appreciated also because "beautiful". This was a new and confusing feeling for the same ancient people, but it will explain why sometimes we find repaired figurines (they were something more than an idol or an amulet: a loved personal possession), why there are graves with more than one figurine (probably there were collectors of these nice things, interpreted by the rest of community as a very religious person for the original meaning that figurines still

carried), why sometimes we do not find them (they were not a fundamental object for the funeral ritual and as some people decided to have them in the grave, others could have thought to conserve the figurines in the family's house, as a prestige object, something that could have distinguished a little group from the others, in a community where there was only a little space for things not directly connected with survival). Figurines in this hypothesis carried a new meaning after a certain time of their production (a primitive sense of art), while their symbolism become less and less important. Other hypothesis are however possible.

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Notes:

[1] The first figurines were unearthed and studied by Christos Tsountas at the end of 19th century. They seem creations of some tendencies of modern art, so they look very modern and original. This is one reason of their popularity, attested also by the quantity looted.

[2] Probably these figurines were also produced in wood or in other perishable material. The difference between the two versions was covered at a first look by the painted decoration, which surely was used in the marble figurines as the traces visible in our days clearly show.

[3] The earliest schematic type, made by a flat piece of marble shaped in an anthropomorphic outline, and sometime incised in one surface, is called "*Brettidolen*". At least fourteen figurines of this type were found in grave 103 in the Pyrgos cemetery in Paros. The majority however come from Paros, Antiparos and Dhespotikon cemeteries.

[4] Though the Neolithic figurines from Saliagos, schematic and very similar in the form to the Cycladic ones, do not appear at the later site of Kephala, where there are other types.

[5] This type is constituted by male figurines with a dagger or a similar object, and are interpreted as images of people that had to hunt and offered this image to the deity for protection and good results or as images of warriors offered to the deity before the war to ask protection.

[6] A cemetery in Melos island.

[7] Plastiras cemetery in Paros.

[8] In Syros particularly important is Chalandriani cemetery.

[9] It is an hypothesis.

[10] There are more figurines in museums all around the world than figurines quoted in reports of regular excavations.

[11] The stylistic analysis has shown that all the figurines were created by few persons that were evidently specialised in their production.

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