

Chapter 9

Figurines

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This season Lynn Meskell and Lindsay Der were briefly joined by Monique Arntz (Leiden University) who helped with data entry and also developed a potential research project. This year we recorded 69 figurines in total. Twenty-four examples came from the 2015 excavations, while the rest were returns from other labs covering previous years, some going back as far as 1996. As is the norm at Çatalhöyük zoomorphic figurines were the most numerous with horn fragments dominating, followed by abbreviated forms and finally anthropomorphic examples.

Table 9.1. Figurine types and tallies from the 2015 season Figurine 31852.x3

Very late in the season, excavators in the TPC Area recovered a rather large, headless human figurine made of stone (31852.x3) (Fig. 9.1). Since all specialists were off season we rely on the recording by others and plan to examine it in its dimensions are 11.3cm high, 10.2cm wide, 7.1cm at its thickest point and weighs 890 grams. It was found in association with a fire spot in Space 585, in rubble fill, with burnt material directly above a floor. Below/ very close to the figurine unit, excavators found another cluster of objects just east of the platform; this contained numerous worked bones and stones, flint and obsidian tools, a fragment of a horn core and two wings from a large bird.

In terms of form, 31852.x3 is a familiar robust headless (broken off) human form in a standing or vertical position. The arms and hands are folded across the mid-section and rest under flattened breasts; the upper arms and shoulders appear to be quite fleshy, while the lower arms and hands are more delicate.

Figurine form

Zoomorphic

Abbreviated

Anthropomorphic

Non-diagnostic

Count Examples

45 21660.H1, 19850.H1, 21661.H3, 22130.x1

18 22060.x1, 22635.H3, 21122.H1

3 22641.x1, 31852.x3

3 21183.H1

Total 69



Figure 9.1. 31852.x3 in the fill of Sp.585.

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The large divided legs are straight and taper to rounded feet. The thighs and buttocks are quite exaggerated and from side, the buttocks project horizontally outward with the lower body forming an exaggerated triangular shape. Just under the waist in the front, a rounded triangular area protrudes slightly from the main body and bears a wide vertical line with rather rough edges down the center. It does not appear that the piece is self-standing. The head appears to have been intentionally removed. Based on photographs, Christina Tsoraki has observed that the smoothing above the arms goes over the fractured edge (especially near the shoulder area), which indicates that the head was snapped off before the figurine was finished by smoothing/grinding its surface (Fig. 9.2).

Figure 9.2. 31852.x3 (three views of the figurine).



While we do have examples similar to this figurine in form, treatment and deposition, they are rather rare. So 31852.x3 is notable in a few ways: first, like the other stone anthropomorphic examples we have found to date it is quite large; second, we rarely find figurines of this type in clusters, and third, the vertical line down the front of the figurine – if original – is unique among Çatalhöyük figurines. This last feature is likely to provoke immediate interpretations of femaleness, since at first glance it evokes a striking emphasis on female genitalia. However, at present (without having been able to examine the object in person) we remain skeptical of this interpretation for various reasons that we outline below. We discuss other examples that bear similarities to 31852.x1 in terms of material, deposition context, treatment, and form.

Parallels in material, treatment, form and deposition

The current excavations have found only seven human figurines made of stone and these range significantly in size and form (Table 9.2), and we have records of 26 pieces from Mellaart's excavations. Stone figurines, therefore, comprise 33 (18%) of approximately 180 anthropomorphic figurines found at Çatalhöyük. Examples 1-5 in Table 9.2 all portray the familiar fleshy human form. All five figurines have their arms across their stomach area and depict fleshy or even rotund legs and back ends. While the overall forms of 10264.x1 and 12102.x1 are rendered more

abstractly, there is a clear emphasis on the lower rear portion of the body suggestive of this general trend to exaggerate the buttocks and legs, which is especially visible in 10475.x2 and 15839.x10.

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Id

1 7814.x1

2 10264.x1

3 10475.x2

4 12102.x1

5 15839.x10

6 18523.x1

7 18545.x1

Image

context

midden

cluster

pit/burial fill

midden

fill

construction/make-up

fill

Height / Weight

1.56cm

9.13cm / 203gr

7.51cm / 84gr

4.6cm

1.61cm / 2gr

12.02cm / 152gr

8.54cm / 92gr

Level

TP R

North H

South R

North I

TP O

South O

South O





Table 9.2. Stone anthropomorphic figurines

In terms of treatment, there are two other examples of stone figurines with their heads removed, most likely intentionally. 12102.x1 is a limestone figurine that appears similar in form to 10264.x1 (see Table 9.2). Karen Wright suggested that a head was originally attached to the neck stump of 12102.x1. A close examination of the neck reveals that the break has been carefully executed at the precisely the same point all

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around the neck. She argues that since the neck is quite thick relative to the shoulder area, the detachment cannot be attributed to simple breaking; marble does not fracture in this neat way. Furthermore, the neck stump was abraded down to form a flat surface, although the grinding was not to the same level of fineness as on the rest of the artifact (Wright pers.com. in Nakamura and Meskell 2013). Based on

Christina Tsoraki's observations, it is possible that the head and neck of 31852.x3 underwent a similar process. She suggests that there appears to be a worn (possibly polished?) edge around the circumference of the break. It is hard to understand how the head and neck could have been broken off with such an even break located so close to the shoulder line. Tsoraki proposes that they may have first scored a line around the neck to ensure that the head and neck broke off along a certain line.

In addition, an example from Mellaart's excavations now in Ankara (79-8-6), also appears to have had its head intentionally removed (Figure 9.3). This figurine, from a late level (A.II.1) made from limestone, has some close stylistic similarities to 31852.x3. Although the bodily posture is different - seated with legs crossed instead of straight legs in a vertical orientation - its overall form and rendering is very similar: it has broad shoulders with arms crossed under flattened breasts, a slightly protruding stomach in front and an emphasis on rotund legs and presumably the buttocks (which cannot be seen in the photo). Hands and feet are depicted in a way similar to 31852.x3 (Fig. 9.3). Neither ground stone nor figurine specialists have examined this piece in person, so we cannot say anything more about the head removal, material or production techniques. We also have no details about the context from which it came. However, in terms of style and treatment, this figurine may be the closest parallel to 31852.x3.

In terms of deposition, we most commonly find figurines in secondary contexts such as fill and midden. Figurines rarely occur in clusters of objects. To date we have only found three human figurines in such contexts. 14522.x8 was found in a possible placed deposit in the southeast corner of Building 65, under the pre-construction make-up of platform F.2086 (Figure 9.4). This cluster included an equid scapula, unworked animal bones and stones, a pot fragment and the leg of a baby. This figurine, made from soft, light colored clay, also depicts a rather fleshy body in a vertical or standing position. The arms and head are missing and the breakage points appear to be very worn (Fig. 9.4).



Figure 9.3. Figurine (79-8-6) from Mellaart's excavations.

Figure 9.4. Figurine 14522.x8.

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12401.x7 (Figure 9.5) is an unusual clay figurine found in the Istanbul

area near the edge of the mound; it was made headless, with a dowel hole and depicts a robust female with large breasts and stomach on the front and a skeleton on the back (see Meskell and Nakamura 2005 for detailed description). The figurine



Figure 9.5. Figurine 12401 x7.

was found in the southwest part of Sp.252, in an ashy area along a wall that contained many worked stones, some tools, a grinding stone, a mace head and this figurine.

Finally, 10264.x1 (Fig. 9.6) (also noted in Table 9.2) was found in a rich cluster of artifacts in the southeast corner of B.58. Other materials included obsidian arrowheads, a nearly complete pot, a horn, worked bone, green stones, animal bone, shells and flint. This cluster just above the floors came from building infill rich in artifacts. Since many building infills are relatively clean and contain few artifacts, excavators suggested that this deposit resembled bedded midden; however, it is also similar to the infill of B.2.

Obviously, these four examples do not provide a very robust data set. Moreover, three of the four cluster contexts do not provide clear indications of intentional placement. Except for (14522), which is more suggestive of an intentional act of marking (Nakamura and Pels 2014), these clusters may have resulted from trash disposal or more deliberate building infill practices. It is, perhaps, notable that three clusters occur in fill just above room floors and all four occur in the southern areas or

corners of rooms. Further studies of the specific materials and artifacts from these clusters may provide a stronger argument for intentional deposition if objects appear to be intact and/or intentionally damaged or broken.

Finally, we should address the possible depiction of a vagina on this piece. In an earlier paper (Nakamura and Meskell 2009), we quantified the depiction of certain physical traits across the anthropomorphic figurine corpus and found an emphasis on bellies, buttocks and breasts and striking de-emphasis on genitalia. Aside from a few phalluses and two figurines with pubic triangles, sex-



Figure 9.6. Figurine 10264.x1.

ual traits are not present and there are no examples of female genitalia in the Çatalhöyük figurine corpus. Furthermore, stomachs and breasts are often depicted as sagging and oftentimes small, while buttocks and thighs are consistently exaggerated and are sometimes quite sensuously rendered. We have thus suggest- ed that these idealized bodies could have articulated ideas of maturity, longevity, abundance, and perhaps mature sexuality, rather than fertility and reproduction, or indeed, divinity (Nakamura and Meskell 2009; Pearson and Meskell 2013, 2014).

Examining high-resolution photographs and videos provided by Jason Quinlan, we suspect that the vertical line down the mid-section of the body is not original to the piece and traverses the stomach or abdomen rather than the pubic region. The central vertical line appears more coarsely rendered than the other lines of the figure, and other examples found by Mellaart and the current project depict the stomach/ abdomen area as a rounded projecting triangular area located at the upper intersection of the lower limbs. The other anthropomorphic figurines, while certainly exaggerative of the bellies, buttocks, and breasts do maintain a sense of proportion and anatomical positioning. If this originally intended to represent a vagina, it is overly large in comparison to the rest of the body, and sits above the axis at which the buttocks begin.

We have asked Christina Tsoraki to examine this object in future seasons to determine if the vertical mark is a feature added later, possibly as an act of defacement or deliberate destruction. Currently, because of the encrustations it is not possible to say how the vertical groove intersects with the open U-shaped groove (that forms the border between the top of the thighs and the pubic area) without using a microscope. If someone has transformed the abdomen into a vagina, snapped off the head and placed it in an unusual context, then we need to consider what such actions might have meant in a Neolithic context. There are interesting earlier parallels for possible defacement and/or

crude rendering of female genitalia, remembering that in almost all cases there are no explicit renderings of females as opposed to images of phalluses at Çatalhöyük. At Göbekli there is a female image incised on a stone slab on a low bench. This splayed figure has minimal facial features, sagging breasts that hang to the side of the torso and thin arms and legs. Most striking, however, is the exposure of the body, the complete opening up of the naked form. Specifically, the explicit depiction of the genital region, previously unknown in the Turkish and Levantine Neolithic (Hodder and Meskell 2011), is marked by an engraved hole that might be interpreted as being penetrated by a disconnected penis. On either side of the penis are incised areas that can be seen as accentuating the penis or perhaps representing emissions from the vagina. Since the splayed figure is the only female portrayal from Göbekli, was on a bench that people may have sat on and is a passively penetrated figure, one might interpret this as not being a particularly positive rendition of women and is unlikely to be associated with notions of fertility or matriarchy (see Hodder and Meskell 2011).

This year Lindsay Der continued her doctoral research on the role of changing human-animal relations in the social and material organization of Çatalhöyük continues with an examination of the correlation between figurine horns and faunal horns, tusks, and antlers in buildings. The latest study focuses on the North Area and has revealed changes through time with a strong linear relationship occurring in the middle levels which is absent in the later levels (although a non-linear relationship may exist). Future work will expand this analysis to the South and TP/TPC areas of the site.

We were joined briefly by Monique Arntz from Leiden University who worked with us on cataloguing, data entry and figurine analysis. Arntz is also interested in the ways in which materiality and context can lead to new insights into the potential functions and meanings in prehistoric society. In line with our own work, she suggests that simply studying prehistoric figurines based on their imagery, style and iconographic

Research projects

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content is problematic and has created a bias in that there has often been a general focus upon intact anthropomorphic figurines. She proposes to study figurine production sequences and examine more closely their material properties. By looking at patterns of weathering between different types of figurines in different contexts and investigating surface markings she hopes to gain insight into how figurines are affected by various processes after deposition and to what extent surface markings can still be identified as being a result of their production or use. This may provide evidence about the life-cycle of figurines and further explore the meanings association with their production, use and deposition.

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