

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

PREDYNASTIC EGYPTIAN FIGURINES

Before the appearance of the unified dynastic Ancient Egyptian state in c3000 BCE, two distinct Neolithic/Chalcolithic Predynastic cultures existed along the Nile. The Lower Egyptian culture occupied Egypt north of the Fayuum. The Upper Egyptian culture (including middle Egypt) stretched from Asyût to Aswan, with the majority of sites mainly clustered around the Qena bend.

From the beginnings of modern archaeology in the latter part of the nineteenth century, archaeologists uncovered the best preserved sites in Upper Egypt, where the dryness of the land and climate facilitate preservation. The most startling and characteristic fact of Predynastic, and to a great extent Dynastic, Egyptian archaeology is that much of what is known about the Egyptians comes from the tens of thousands of graves that have been excavated. The most famous of these graves, of course, are the Old Kingdom pyramid tombs of some of the early kings. These tombs and their elaborate mortuary rituals and goods were preceded by a Predynastic mortuary culture which involved the inclusion of grave goods in the graves of most Predynastic people, not just the identifiable élite. Typical Predynastic Upper Egyptian grave goods include pots, beads, and stone palettes for grinding eye paint.

From the beginning of the scientific excavation of these graves, archaeologists such as Edward R. Ayrton and W.L.S. Loat, Guy Brunton, Gertrude Caton-Thompson, Henry de Morgan, D. Randall Maciver and A.C. Mace, Flinders Matthew Petrie, and James Quibell discovered the rare occurrence of anthropomorphic figurines ranging in height from about five to over thirty centimetres. Of these, 244 figurines are securely identified as Predynastic, 154 are assigned specific locations, and 88 of these are attributed to specific graves. All but two of the located figurines come from cemeteries, and all but two from Upper Egypt. Most figurines are female and, despite being categorised as anthropomorphic, many have theriomorphic attributes, usually in the form of animal or bird-like heads. Most are made from baked clay, but many are made from vegetable paste, some from ivory,

and a few from stone. Some are moulded from unfired clay, but these tend to be badly preserved, having turned nearly to dust over the centuries, and the friability of this material makes it impossible to determine the popularity of this medium.

Among the rich and varied array of Predynastic Egyptian artefacts, the figurines probably attract the most speculation in interpretation, particularly the anthropomorphic ones. As human beings, we identify with these images of ourselves, for our own culture teems with such images from the sacred to the most profane, from images of Jesus and Mary to Barbie Dolls. This thesis aims to extend our understanding of why and how the Predynastic Egyptians used these human-shaped figurines, and why they extended the human into the animal realm in this art form.

As a work of Studies in Religion, this exploration naturally concentrates on possible religious meanings, choosing this approach from among a range of interpretations. Although, particularly in the past, scholars of comparative religion have made major contributions to interpretations of these figurines, this study reaches outside the parameters of religious theory to draw on data and contemporary ideas from archaeology, anthropology, history, and Egyptology. Coming from the point of view of Studies in Religion, I am, however, not an archaeologist, anthropologist, historian, nor Egyptologist, and hence the work, in the end, must be understood from a Studies in Religion point of view, as an interdisciplinary work which attempts to utilise accurately and in good faith the knowledge attained in these various fields.

History of Figurine Interpretation and archaeological theory

Predynastic Egypt takes its place among other prehistoric figurine-using cultures from the Paleolithic cultures of Europe and the Near East to the Neolithic cultures of Greece, Crete, Europe, the Levant, Anatolia, Syria, Mesopotamia, and India, and similar contemporary figurine-using cultures around the world. A common conception amongst scholars outside the areas of archaeology, anthropology, history, and prehistory is that the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of small figurines excavated in these areas all represent the same idea and were used for the same purpose.

To illustrate my point, I will recount a conversation I had early in my research with a scholar from modern languages. I described briefly my area of research, that is, Predynastic Egyptian Figurines, and that I had recently concluded a study of Mesopotamian Prehistoric Figurines. I explained that I was trying to understand what they might have represented and been used for. She replied, in so many words, "Didn't they all have the same meaning?" I said, "Well, all of the Egyptian figurines, with insignificant exceptions, were found in graves, while only about 7% of the Mesopotamian ones were found in graves¹. Most of the Mesopotamian ones were found in domestic circumstances or rubbish tips." She gave me a blank look, to which I replied, "The difference seems to indicate that the majority of the Mesopotamian figurines had quite a different meaning from the majority of the Egyptian figurines."

What allows us to recognise this difference is the use of a method of interpretation, or methodology. Without a methodology, our interpretation of these figurines, in fact any material artefact, becomes arbitrary, completely subjective, totally biased according to our own cultural values, and subject to unreflective theories about "primitive" or prehistoric religion based on theories outside archaeology and its related disciplines: "Without some methodology for evaluating ideas, we are in the position of having a free hand to generate lots of stories about the past, but not having any means of knowing whether these stories are accurate" (Binford 1983: 21). Today we might question Binford's use of the term "accurate" and prefer, instead, to say "plausible".

The Mother Goddess Theory

Neolithic and Paleolithic peoples demonstrated a predilection for creating female figurines, most often from baked clay, but also from stone. Presumably, any made from unfired clay, wood, and other perishable materials, such as flour and textiles, would have long vanished, and so we cannot even hope to arrive at an estimate of how many figurines, female or otherwise, prehistoric people made and used.

¹ About 2% are accounted for in Ucko's (1968) Table (8.1) delineating the culture and context of the Mesopotamian figurines. Since the completion of his study, a further 26 grave figurines have been found at Tell es-Sawwan and published by F. El-Waily and B. Abu es-Soof (1965) "The Excavations at Tell es-Sawwan" in *Sumer* 21: 17-32., bringing the percentage up to 7.4% of graves.

Many early archaeologists and prehistorians interpreted these female figurines as evidence that prehistoric peoples worshipped a universal, supreme female deity - the "Mother Goddess". One champion of this theory, Edwin Oliver James, postulated an Asia Minor source for the Neolithic worship of the Mother Goddess, with Crete becoming the major centre around 4000 BCE (James 1957: 163). James Mellaart, another major archaeologist to support the Neolithic Mother Goddess theory, identified her worship in Anatolia at Haçılar and Çatal Hüyük (Mellaart 1964, 1967). The abundance of female imagery in the Aegean countries of Crete, Greece, Boeotia, and the Cyclades have all come under the umbrella of the single Mother Goddess: "...nothing can shake the mute evidence of the hundreds upon hundreds of little clay, bone and stone effigies of the Mother Goddess" (Hawkes 1963: 337).

The Egyptian figurines were not exempt from these early interpretations. Egyptologists such as G.D. Hornblower (1929), Elise Baumgartel (1970b: 492-4), and even the more contemporary Rosalie David (1982: 22) pointed to the figurines as evidence that the earliest Egyptians principally worshipped a female fertility goddess.

Mythologists and psychologists, particularly the early ones, took Mother Goddess worship into their own spheres. J. Bachofen and F. Engels, as early as the 19th century, and Robert Graves, mythologist and poet, and R. Briffault, among others, built into their theories the matriarchal origin of civilisation. According to them, prehistoric Mother Goddess worshipping cultures in which "men feared, adored, and obeyed the matriarch" (Graves 1955: 13) survived until the male role in procreation became evident. After this discovery, they claimed, matriarchy declined and suffered final defeat under the invading masculine culture of the Indo-Europeans. "Ancient Europe had no gods . . .", only the Mother Goddess, until these invasions (Graves 1955: 13).

The theories of Bachofen, Briffault, and Engels largely constituted the "methodology" used to interpret the earliest discoveries of these figurines. Reinforced by psychoanalytic theory postulating the necessity for a switch from identification with the mother to identification with the father in the early formative stages of a child's life, these theories claimed that societies passed through similar stages. Therefore,

the earliest, most "primitive" stage of society is matriarchy, and as the society matures, it must therefore evolve into the more sophisticated form of patriarchy. Concomitant with this maturation is a shift from goddess worship to worship of a single male Godhead. Most early works on the history of religion (at least prior to 1970), such as those of Mellaart, James, Hawkes, and Graves, demonstrated the acceptance of these ideas.

Inspired by these early social theories, Jungian psychologists and mythologists, such as Erich Neumann, frequently collect all female imagery into a universal archetype, *The Great Mother* (Neumann 1963). This tendency to universalise and generalise the feminine never appears to apply to masculine imagery and the gods of mythology. Apollo and Zeus maintain their independent characters as do Re, Ptah, Amon, and Atum of Egypt, despite the Egyptian tendency towards syncretisation of Re with Amon and Atum

Also, the equally ubiquitous bull imagery of the Aegean, Middle East, Near East, Egypt, and India often secures a very second place to the female imagery of the single supreme Mother Goddess. Not only does the theory of the supreme Mother Goddess obliterate the prominent male and animal iconography, but it overlooks the appearance of supreme male deities in early mythology, who, often, like Zeus, An, Enlil, Enki, Baal, El, Ptah, Shiva, and Amon, bring some association with bulls into the anthropomorphic forms they assume in the myths, even if, as in the case of the Sumerian deities, they merely display a crown of bull's horns. Clearly, the reflection of divinity in the bull must have some major prehistoric religious significance.

Some contemporary theories presented by recent archaeologists and prehistorians, such as the late Marija Gimbutas and Harry W.F. Saggs, still support the Universal Mother Goddess interpretation of prehistoric religious focus, despite its waning influence on current assessments by most archaeologists and historians.² With specific reference to prehistoric Mesopotamian religion, contemporary prehistorian Harry W.F. Saggs commented:

The Neolithic revolution (after 10,000 BC) brought new emphases. In particular, the old figurine of a

²See especially *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* (1996) for a selection of interpretations including a recent comment by Peter Ucko on contemporary approaches, as well as Goodison and Morris (eds) (1998) for recent contributions by archaeologists.

pregnant woman [Paleolithic stone figurines] began to develop into a Mother-goddess or Great Mother, the supreme supernatural being, who personified the power which prehistoric people recognised behind birth, motherhood and fertility. (Saggs 1995:34)

Gimbutas, in particular, joined forces with a faction within the contemporary feminist spirituality movement which freely utilises the works of James, Mellaart, Hawkes, Bachofen, Briffault, Graves, and Neumann, among others. Besides her own goddess-focused work (1982, 1989, 1991), her articles appear in feminist anthologies of feminist spirituality and her endorsements appear on their book covers (for example, Eisler 1990; Sjö & Mor 1975).

Feminist writers such as Merlin Stone, *When God was a Woman* (1975), and Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (1992), appropriated the ideas of these archaeologists, mythologists, psychologists, and prehistorians as the scholarly foundation of their newly-constructed cult of the Mother Goddess, but with a difference. In the 1970s, early feminists "deconstructed" the sexist values embedded in the theory that society "evolved" from primitive matriarchy to a more sophisticated form, patriarchy, (Stone 1975 in particular). Instead of society maturing from matriarchy to patriarchy, society now degenerated from a superior form of woman-centred society into a violent repressive form, patriarchy. In agreement with early theorists and the archaeologists who were informed by them (Evans, Hawkes, James, Mellaart, and later Gimbutas), these early feminist "prehistorians" and "thealogians" placed Goddess-worship at the centre of early, "superior" cultures, and drew on the evidence of material culture that demonstrated the existence of figurines in the Paleolithic and Neolithic cultures of Europe, the Mediterranean, and the Near East.

Despite the withdrawal of most of the current scholarly community from the Mother Goddess theory, the feminist body of literature expands. *Goddesses and Wise Women*, a 1992 bibliography of feminist spirituality, includes 266 specific entries on the Goddess. Many of the remaining 824 entries also contain chapters and references to the Great Goddess and more continues to be written. For example, the Fall 1996 issue of the *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* devotes nearly 100 pages to the topic. Although many members of the feminist spirituality movement have exchanged the crumbling scholarly

foundation for a post-modern one, claiming that no one has the sole right to interpretation,³ they still tend to support their publications with lengthy bibliographies containing the usual entries.

New Archaeology or Processual Archaeology

Beginning in the 1960s, a new methodology in archaeology developed which tried to base theory on material evidence, rather than analyse evidence according to preformulated theory. In other words, archaeologists adopted the scientific method as a more reliable methodology than one based on psychoanalytic and social evolutionary theories.

New excavation techniques meticulously documented artefacts in situ, scientific dating methods were borrowed from geology, and the emphasis shifted from prevailing theories to the evidence that material culture alone produced. The artefacts were understood as neutral, value-free, objective data out of which sound theories about their use and meaning would grow.

By using the scientific paradigm, archaeologists emphasised the adaptive, ecological, and biological aspects of culture. That is, a functional interpretation of artefact meaning was favoured. Objects were understood according to their ability to enable the group as a whole to adapt to its environment and form cohesive strategies of physical survival: "Culture is viewed as the extra-somatic means of adaptation for the human organism" (White 1959: 8, quoted in Binford 1962: 250). This approach "paid little attention to the social world and even less to symbolic and ideological issues" (Hodder 1992: 11).

Further developments in sociology and anthropology brought new "social" meanings to artefact interpretation. Artefacts which did not have a direct relationship to survival (tools, weapons, decorative food utensils), were termed "socio-technic" or "ideo-technic", the latter including "figures of deities, clan symbols, symbols of natural agencies, etc." (Binford 1962: 252):

These are the items which signify and symbolize the ideological rationalizations for the social system...
[T]his category of items must generally be related

³The argument is more complicated than I have demonstrated here. My comment paraphrases a point frequently made by Goddess Feminists when answering criticisms from archaeologists. It is, in no way, meant to disparage or represent their entire methodology.

to changes in the structure of the society, hence *explanations must be sought in the local adaptive situation rather than in the area of "historical explanations."* (ibid 252-3) (emphasis added)

Even if artefacts could be associated with religion, their value and explanation lay in their social and adaptive function, but such an explanation had to be determined by the artefact rather than any *a priori* judgment of its meaning. As far as the meanings of figurines were concerned, even if they could be associated with the religious beliefs of the group, in the absence of textual explanations, very few figurines could actually be identified as having any particular meaning at all. In fact, when I questioned archaeologist Dr. Wendy Beck of the University of New England, Australia, on the meaning of any of the figurines, she replied, "Nothing really can be said about them."

If anything dethroned the Mother Goddess it was New Archaeology (now termed "processual" archaeology). With scientific theory as its theoretical basis, the "mute evidence" presented by the figurines suddenly no longer proclaimed their universal divinity. As mute artefacts, the story they told depended upon the words we put into their mouths. In the hands of the processual archaeologists, they said little or nothing.

Peter Ucko's challenge

In the area of figurine analysis, the first archaeologist to apply the "New Archaeology" was Peter Ucko (1962, 1968, 1969a). Ucko's analysis and methodology became the foundation of a new approach to the interpretation of these images. Today he still exerts a major influence on the understanding of prehistoric art, specifically the parietal art of Paleolithic France and Spain, and more recently, that of the Australian Aborigines.

Ucko's methodology for assessing figurines comprises a four-stage analysis (1962: 38):

1. **Detailed examination of the figurines.** This would entail a physical description of size, material, stylistic traits, quality of execution and any other observable data.

2. Archaeological context. This includes the location in time and space, that is, precise dating of the figurine and where it was found – in a grave, debris, temple – and in association with what other artefacts.

3. Historical evidence. This includes the myths and use of comparable figurines as they appeared in the subsequent historical religion of the same geographical area and/or other similar contemporaneous historical cultures.

4. Relevant ethnographic comparisons. If a comparable contemporary society can be found, how these people use similar figurines would provide possible interpretations. The inclusion of ethnographic comparisons allowed the archaeologist, to some extent, to transcend the mute archaeological record, and hypothesise some probable uses, although still nothing definite could be said.

Ucko concluded that the prehistoric figurines of the Near East and Egypt do not represent a supreme Universal Mother Goddess. Rather, they probably do not represent divinities at all. Based on their appearance and findspots, he found nothing divine about them (1962: 43). Based on ethnographic parallels, largely from African pre-industrial societies, he concluded that they most likely had less august functions as dolls, ancestor figures, talismanic pregnancy aids, tools for sex instruction and puberty rites, twin substitutes in graves, and concubine grave figurines (1962: 45-8; 1968: 420-443; 1969a).

Ucko's conclusions impacted severely on theories previously held by archaeologists. One in particular, Joan Oates, prominent archaeologist of prehistoric Mesopotamia, with a special interest in the figurines, used Ucko's arguments and ethnographic parallels to conclude, I think somewhat reluctantly:

there is no reason to associate the vast majority of Mesopotamian figurines with any form of fertility cult, ... that despite some very interesting, at times even spectacular, evidence for what are certainly ritual practices, we know nothing of the 'religion' behind them. (Oates 1978:122)

In the area of the History of Religions, the shift away from the Mother Goddess theory is aptly illustrated by a comparison of Ninian Smart's chapters on prehistoric religion. In his 1969 publication, *The Religious Experience of Mankind*, the chapter on prehistoric religion contains photographs of female

figurines and references to goddess worship. The comparable chapter in his 1989 publication, *The World's Religions*, essentially a revision of the earlier work, virtually ignores the Mother Goddess issue. In the area of Egyptology, specifically referring to Egyptian figurines, Eric Hornung, prominent Egyptologist, dismissed any discussion of the divinity of the Predynastic figurines with a brief account of Ucko's conclusion (Hornung 1983: 102-3).

Only with regard to historical evidence, Stage 3, did Ucko find any possible evidence that the figurines represented deities. With respect to ancient Mesopotamia alone, he admitted that the Mother Goddess "interpretation, moving from historic to prehistoric material, may be important and legitimate..." (1962: 43). For some reason, he did not grant the same possibility to the Egyptian figurines.

The introduction of historical evidence can only be justified in the case where the prehistoric culture can be demonstrated to flow unbrokenly into the historic culture. Mesopotamia and Egypt are probably two of the few ancient cultures to rise from their autochthonic pasts. Other Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures, such as Greece, Crete, and Italy, show disruption, discontinuity, and a mythology and culture imposed on and blended with the autochthonic. However, even in the case of Egypt and Mesopotamia, it must be kept in mind that the unification or centralisation of these cultures resulted from the dominance of one or a few groups, and therefore the historic record is not a mirror of the prehistoric; the historic has its roots in the prehistoric but not all prehistoric materials flow into the historic. This point is discussed further under "Some Basic Premises" (see ahead).

Post-Processual Archaeology

The ideas of more contemporary historical, critical, and cultural theorists such as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, and Geertz profoundly impact on the theoretical underpinnings of Western knowledge⁴ (Tilley 1989). Like the paradigm shifts in the development of the scientific method (Kuhn 1970), a shift in perception and broad theory base is occurring in the humanities and social sciences. Having begun in the late 1960s, it became increasingly dominant in the 1990s. Taking its impetus from Quantum,

⁴For the adoption of these ideas into archaeology, Shanks, M. and C. Tilley (1987) *Re-constructing archaeology* (Cambridge University Press) and (1987) *Social theory and archaeology* (Cambridge Polity Press).

Probability, and Chaos theories developed by physicists, the new paradigm challenges the objectivity of the scientific method.

Accruing the appellation "Postmodernism" or "Poststructuralism", the new paradigm "in the broadest sense, ... can be taken to refer to a loss of faith in progress and western rationality, a loss of confidence in the fixity of meaning..." (Thomas & Tilley 1992: 106). This "loss of confidence" means the rejection, or at least, the questioning of the effectiveness of the scientific method in interpreting past cultures, let alone the present. The paradigm shift in archaeology involves a move from scientific theory into social theory where "the conception of material culture as a signifying system in which the external physical attributes of artefacts and their relationships are not regarded as exhausting their meaning" (Tilley 1989: 185). In other words, material culture is now recognised as a "signifying system rather than an adaptive technology" (Thomas & Tilley 107), pointing to meanings beyond its physicality.

To differentiate this new archaeology from the processual archaeology of the scientific school, the term post-processual was adopted. Post-processual archaeology, by no means, is a unified philosophy or theory. Within it are feminist, neo-Marxist, symbolic, post-modern, deconstructive, contextual, and interpretive approaches. These range from approaches which still draw heavily on scientific methods for basic data, to those which are more theoretical, postulating that one can never reconstruct the past, only construct it according to contemporary values and biases.

What the various approaches do share, however, is the acceptance that the scientific method is not the value-free, objective method it purported to be. Like all other points of view, it is relative to the observer, incorporating the observer's personal predilections, social and cultural biases, and the wider political agendas and élite interests of the society in which the individual operates. Particular emphasis is placed on the political, with the view that all "voices" which get heard, do so because they emanate from privileged positions and support the concerns of élite institutions.

Because of the political and social critique implied in the post-processual approach, post-processual archaeologists often tend to focus on political and social responsibility. In the area of figurine interpretation, the existence of "the Goddess" is no longer challenged, being widely accepted as an

inverse product of a sexist monotheism. Within the feminist post-processual archaeological theory, rather, the questions now asked are not so much, "Was there a Goddess?", but those having more social relevance, such as, "What value does she have for women, feminism, and understanding gender and archaeology?":

We have found that some of the implications of these developments in archaeology as it grapples with gender and feminism are thrown into relief by examining the ways in which the Goddess Movement, a seemingly feminist social movement within popular culture, conflicts with many of the goals and hopes of both an archaeology of gender and an explicitly feminist, engendered archaeology. For us, the Goddess literature crystallizes some of the central issues of contemporary archaeology and contemporary sociopolitics: it forces us to investigate how material culture is meaningfully constituted and mobilized in particular sociohistorical contexts, including our own. (Conkey & Tringham 1995: 205)

Questions asked of the Goddess feminists no longer demand historical accuracy, for it is recognised that there is little, but question whether their ideas are of any use to us. Jo Ann Hackett (1989), in "Can a Sexist Model Liberate Us?", although concerned for historical accuracy, was really more interested in whether the "fertility" goddesses of the Near East provide a liberating model for modern women or whether "'fertility religion' is a euphemism for ritual sex, for ritual prostitution" (ibid 68) and therefore only serves to enforce traditional sexual stereotypes. In "Who is the Goddess and Where Does She Get Us?" (1989), Mary Jo Weaver questioned the relevancy and even the possibility of knowing anything about a prehistoric Goddess when she asked, "What does it mean to talk about or believe in 'the Goddess' when the evidence for her existence is entirely preliterate?" (ibid 50). Contemporary feminist archaeologists draw on feminist historians such as Hackett and Weaver plus feminist critical theory in general as much as from theories and data within their own discipline.

For Conkey and Tringham, the main issues are ethical and social, and the adoption of a post-processual methodology looks for relevant meanings rather than any so-called truths about the past. The method of analysis is equally important to, if not more important than, the result, and a method which allows for multiple meanings serves feminist aims far better than a method which conforms to the pursuit of a single, coherent truth, no matter what it says about "the Goddess":

A definitive interpretation, even if it is alternative and gynocentric, does not provide the empowerment and liberation from the controlling narratives and practices

of androcentric scholarship and cultural logic. What is empowering, in our view, is the recognition and acceptance of ambiguity, which admits the role of constructedness and the possibilities for reconfiguring and renegotiating meanings, including what constitutes evidence. (Conkey & Tringham 1995: 231)

Consequently, the archaeologist is not so much reading the signs of the past as writing these signs into the present: constructing discourses which should be both meaningful to the present and playing an active role in shaping the present's future. (Tilley 1989: 192)

This new ethical archaeology needs further debate, for the danger lurks that the mutability of the evidence can support any number of "ethical" or political interests.

New Interpretations

The "liberation" of interpretation from the restrictions of the scientific method into the range of possibilities afforded by post-processual theories has resulted in a number of new approaches to the interpretation of prehistoric figurines. Largely informed by cultural theory, such as that of Clifford Geertz (1975), new secular meanings have arisen. The figurines are no longer seen as part of an overall normative human cultural phenomena, such as the universal worship of the Mother Goddess or even the broad range of uses outlined by Ucko (above). Rather they are seen as an inseparable part of a wider cultural symbol system – their meanings determined perhaps more by their associations with other artefacts, cultural activities and meanings rather than possessing any meaning on their own:

Figurines have been objectified, taken as devoid of spatial and cultural specificity; yet objects do not have inherent meaning divorced from their historically specific context of production and use. (Meskell 1995: 76)

In an inadvertent answer to Jaquetta Hawkes, Hodder (1987: 2) says:

...objects are only mute when they are out of their 'texts'. But in fact most archaeological objects are ... situated in place and time and in relation to other objects. This network of relationships can be 'read' by careful and self-critical analysis ..."

Therefore, nearly any interpretation becomes possible, provided a coherent explanation includes the full material evidence as well as cultural implications.

Most post-processual archaeologists reject the extreme relativistic position: the claim that one can never reconstruct the past, only construct it. Hodder warned of the problems in such a radical post-processual approach in which "the archaeological remains play a minimal role. ... [and] archaeology becomes a power play of theoretical positioning in the present" (Hodder 1992: 164). While facts and data are not value-free – data are identified and collected within a theoretical framework which largely identifies the data as data – data acquisition techniques remain, if anything, scientific.

"Post-processual archaeology [has] little impact on data acquisition", Hodder concluded (1991: 171). Rather, the real theoretical shift is in interpretation rather than in archaeological fieldwork methodology, making various interpretations of the same material highly possible. Language does not change the artefact, as the physicist's change of question changed the photon from a particle to a wave; rather the interpretation of the artefact changes depending upon which questions are asked and what theoretical framework is used to position the data within a "discourse".

For the figurines, most of these new interpretations are secular or sociological. They can probe the role the figurines may have had in a wider context of communication between groups (Gamble 1982; Talalay 1987). Some theories avoid a generalised interpretation of figurines as symbols of a shared cultural idea and prefer to understand them to have individual identity or references to specific people within the group (Bailey 1994; McDermott 1996). Or conversely they can be read as agents in social relationships, defining what constitutes human appearance: "To make an anthropomorphic figurine is to fit humanity into a preferred form and appearance. It is to re-locate individuals in a preferred scheme of relationships" (Bailey 1994: 291).

Context and physical appearance, including change over time, are still important factors in interpretation. Diane Bolger (1996) argued that a change of gender roles is reflected in the change of figurine style from birthing figurines to nursing figurines in prehistoric Cyprus. Joyce Marcus (1996) identified the ritual use of Zapotec ancestor figurines in a domestic cult by using parallels between the archaeological record and ethnohistorical evidence. Until presently, the sex of a figurine needed clear identification: either male or female, leaving unsexed figurines somewhat problematical. New theories

may now emerge which challenge a pan-prehistoric pre-occupation with male versus female (Hamilton 1996b: 285; Ucko 1996: 303).

In the area of the Egyptian figurines, Shelley Smith (1984) compared the physical attributes of the male to the female figurines, and came to some conclusions about the gender implications of the differences. Following largely on her research, Fekri Hassan (1992) used similar data to trace the use of female imagery in the rise of Egyptian state power and the divinity of the king.

Difference or sameness? Choosing a cognitive model for interpretation

The post-processual tendency is to place artefacts within the context of the culture from which they arise. Pan-cultural or even cross-cultural interpretations are avoided as the general consensus is that symbols and ideas are culture-specific and meanings cannot be borrowed across cultural boundaries, either in time or space. This approach, largely a product of post-modern theory, applies not only to archaeology, but to other disciplines as well, including comparative religion. How an artefact or a religious phenomenon is interpreted often depends on the degree to which the interpreter subscribes to this philosophy of difference. The interpretation of possibly religious artefacts which assesses only their immediate archaeological context can be vastly different from an interpretation which also considers the broader context of prehistoric cultures and religion in general.

The cross-cultural comparison of meaning, religious experience and conceptions proliferates today within the field of religion in debates on pluralism. Like post-processual archaeologists, some scholars of religion prefer to see each religion independently, on its own terms, and quite unique – that is, they focus on the differences between religions and would reject any wholesale statement which announces, for example, that all religions worship the same god only under different names. Other scholars emphasise the similarities among religions and choose from the various religions scriptural and descriptive examples which demonstrate some degree of common ground.

Within comparative religion, the view which places emphasis on difference is the pluralistic view allowing for the co-existence of multiple different meanings and experiences. Therefore, all meaning is

culture-contingent, and while various meanings in various cultures may appear the same, they are not. A good example of such thinking in contemporary philosophy of religion is that of Steven Katz, who maintained that the Buddhist experience of nirvana is peculiarly Buddhist and is not the same as the Taoist experience of the Tao or the Hindu experience of samadhi (Katz 1978: 22-74). All of these experiences, to Katz, are culture-specific and mediated by language. The Buddhist, Taoist, and Hindu, mystics experience what they've been taught to experience⁵.

In contrast, philosopher/theologian John Hick (1988) postulated that all religions worship the same god, only under different names and descriptions. He would disagree with Katz. Drawing on various comparable quotations from the world's scriptures, Hick created the Copernican analogy that God is like the sun and each religion a planet revolving around the sun. Christianity, previously at the centre of the religious universe, moved over, like the earth in the Copernican revolution in astronomy, for a pan-religious God (Hick 1988: 120-132), and Christianity became one religion/planet among many.

Both Katz and Hick are respected religious theorists, drawing on the same material but producing opposite results. To avoid having to choose between them, Edward Crangle used a third theory from psychology which places both Katz (theory of difference) and Hick (theory of sameness) at opposite ends of a continuum of cognitive styles. In the language of cognitive psychology, Hick is a global thinker whereas Katz is an analytical thinker (Crangle 1995: 24). This does not mean there is no overlap: that Hick is not analytic nor Katz synthetic. The fact that Katz put various systems into the same category and called them "religions" demonstrates some recognition of similarities. It means only that one prefers to emphasise difference whereas the other prefers similarity.

The post-processual notion that all data is theory-determined is comparable to Katz's position regarding the mystic: "The experience...is the experience he [sic] seeks as a consequence of the shared beliefs he holds through his metaphysical doctrinal commitments" (Katz 1978: 58); that is, the data is determined by a preformulated theory. Katz would probably agree with the post-processual

⁵What Katz does not appear to account for are the variations in descriptions of mystical experience within each of these systems. Those who claim to have the experience rarely use the scriptural terms to describe it. Often these accounts express surprise at the discrepancy between what they expected to experience what they do experience.

archaeologist Christopher Tilley: "The individual does not so much construct material culture or language, but is rather constructed through them" (Tilley 1989: 189).

These two extremes demonstrate the lack of consensus among scholars of religion about any universality of meaning and experience. Both views have sound arguments and evidence to substantiate them. Any choice between the two appears to be a personal one based on one's own cognitive processes:

Indeed, research in cognitive psychology suggests that the preferred cognitive style of the researcher determines the organisation and presentation of collected information. (Crangle 1995:22)

Placing the global and the analytical, or theories of sameness and difference, along a continuum can provide a framework within which to place a number of apparently conflicting theories and alleviate the necessity of having to "prove" one or the other wrong or right. It also allows for the recognition of the theorist's own unconscious cognitive style. By making unconscious processes conscious, the theorist can create a synthesis of both global and analytical interpretations, depending on what points need to be made.

This thesis attempts a synthesis of the global and analytical, placing the primary emphasis on the global in the belief that human experience and potential are universal and that human beings, over time and space, are more alike than different. Specifically, this cognitive choice means that I intend to illuminate the meaning of the Predynastic figurines by assessing them within their immediate context as well as by drawing on data outside the prehistoric culture in which they existed. The choice of this extra-Predynastic data, based on the notion that cross-cultural comparisons are relevant, explores possible meanings in historic ancient Egyptian practices and beliefs, the practices and beliefs of people living today in a similar way to the Predynastic Egyptians, and general observations from a comparative overview of tendencies in religious beliefs and iconography. Post-processual archaeologists have also felt the need to widen their discussion in a similar way, and the following section outlines further developments in archaeological theory.

The modified post-processual approach

Post-processual arguments are persuasive ones, in that they produce the subjective enlightening experience of "having got to the bottom of things", having uncovered unconscious motives, and having seen through the hubris and the illusions of the scientific method. They have a ring of truth about them – all knowledge is the result of the projection of the human mind on an unknowable world. Knowledge is an illusion in so far as we take it to be the objective reality.

However, the self-identified post-processual archaeologist Ian Hodder began to modify his standard post-processual position when he observed:

First, I realised that I had overemphasised the arbitrary nature of material culture symbolism. ... the arbitrary meanings are influenced by material considerations which may have universal significance.
(1992: 170)

This insight, coupled with Hodder's second "shocked" realisation about the static state of data acquisition (ibid 171), led him to conclude that the material evidence, rather than changing according to changes in theory as it was supposed to, like the particle and the wave, remains the same, and is only reviewed and re-analysed according to contemporary theories. Therefore, data does not seem to be embedded inextricably in theory. The practices of data retrieval, classification, documentation, and cataloguing remain largely unchanged. What changes are the interpretations and the ways in which data is used.

This realisation of at least some independence of data from theory led Hodder to the further realisation that an understanding of prehistoric material could be reached through including in the analysis all the relevant details, whether material or not, that could bring meaning to the object. Clifford Geertz, to borrow a phrase from Gilbert Ryle, called this approach a "thick description" (Geertz 1975: 6) and used the telling example of the understanding of a boy's wink as either a twitch or a meaningful gesture. The real significance of the gesture as a wink could only be understood through a "thick" rather than "thin" description of the act (ibid 6-7). By separating data from theory, Hodder realised that the artefact, like the eye movement, remained the same, but that a deeper understanding could be reached by drawing on tangential evidence:

Third, ... that the relationship between past and present was not entirely circular ... [and that a] particular, detailed, 'thick' description [could show] the possibility of making plausible interpretations of prehistoric symbolism... (ibid 173)

Ian Hodder appears to have lost his "faith" in the post-processual theory that data cannot be independent of theory. Coming to a new conclusion that data is at least partially autonomous (ibid 172), he observed that old data and archives can continue to be reused successfully in new theoretical frameworks:

The successful reuse of very old archives ... indicates the partial autonomy between higher-level theory and data acquisition. Although data are collected within a theoretical framework, as long as that framework is understood, the data can be reused within other frameworks. (ibid 172)

In the context of prehistoric figurines as a whole, the choice of subject (i.e. figurines) is subjective, but the indisputable fact that the figurines are found in divergent contexts must signify some meaning inherent in the figurines, not in the theory used to explain them, whether political, social, gender related, or religious. The figurines can be approached repeatedly with different questions, but essentially they remain untouched and unchanged by the theoretical models used to explain them, and they begin to speak only through the interpretive material brought to bear on them.

Perhaps underneath it all, Ian Hodder is a "global" thinker with an "analytical" sub-tendency. He became dissatisfied with the extremes of both views: that the past can be objectively known through the scientific method; and that the past cannot be known, we can only construct it in terms of the present. Therefore, his theoretical position is now a synthesis of the two, with the emphasis on flexibility of interpretation:

We are all theoreticians but we also deal in data. This is not to claim that the data are independent of theory, but to state that our theories must be better moulded to the historically specific data. (1992: 130-1)

In other words, there are no right answers, only better answers, and all answers must ultimately and primarily account for and relate back to the data:

...there is no external, objective basis for saying that any one theory, well argued and coherent internally and 'fitting' to the data, is any better than another theory, equally well argued but based on different assumptions. (Hodder 1992: 131)

Hodder's approach is a modified post-processual approach, one which is probably undertaken by most progressive archaeologists today, although many still adhere to processual theories as well as scientific techniques.

This last statement by Hodder guides my discussion. Both the empirical data provided by archaeology and ancient texts plus interpretive theories derived from comparative religion and ethnography form my argument. This latter information is obtained from more speculative sources, as much of it deals with the "invisible" aspects of religion – like those which give meaning to a wink – and how one postulates their presence in a culture we can only experience through its material remains.

For example What this Awl Means

In the 1970s Janet Spector undertook her doctoral research on the Winnebago people of Wisconsin, U.S.A. Her Master's thesis, on seeds from an aboriginal site near Milwaukee, had left her cold with its distanced, scientific approach to seed analysis and conclusions about subsistence practices of the people who had left them. Wanting to enliven her further research with an empathy towards the people whose lives she was trying to understand, she incorporated ethnohistorical records and ethnographic accounts into her investigation of the Winnebago people.

Later, in the 1980s, she applied this more multi-faceted approach to a Sioux community at Little Rapids, Minnesota. In the resulting book, *What this Awl Means* (1993), she extracted information from a broad range of sources in order to understand the possible significance of a single artefact – a 19th century awl handle found in the refuse area of a summer planting camp. Focusing on the single awl handle, she brought a new interpretation to the origin and use of this tool by placing it in the hands of an imaginary Dakota aboriginal girl. She imagined that the awl, valued by the girl, had been lost accidentally in the tip, rather than discarded as a useless or damaged object.

Her first source of information, of course, was the data collected by precise archaeological excavation techniques used to establish dating, context, and related artefacts. From this standard, traditional approach, the awl handle can be dated only to the 19th century and acknowledged to be thrown out for some reason. Further excavation located an awl tip nearby, which may or may not have belonged to the handle in question. As no other awl handle was found to accompany it, Spector and her associates joined the two artefacts into one (ibid 35-6).

The standard assessment of awls places them in the category of "Household Context of Utilization" (ibid 32), subcategory "Maintenance and Repair". Implicit in such a categorisation is the devaluation of the artefact as a tool for women's domestic work, having little significance for the more important public sphere dominated by men (ibid 32-3). The handle and tip are undamaged, merely separated. Therefore the assumption that it was discarded does not necessary hold (ibid 36). Decorations and marks on the handle are repeated in other awl finds, suggesting non-arbitrary significance. These points constitute the extent of interpretation offered by the artefact and context.

Spector, dissatisfied with such a limited interpretation, drew on wider sources for illumination, as she did in her doctoral work. Historical records taken from a nearby tribe from 1830-1870 provided information on women's work and indicated that their accomplishments are recorded on their tools. Each mark and colour represents a garment or a number of articles successfully made (ibid 37), conferring status on the artisan. Other records confirmed a similar method for the women of other tribes. Although no written sources confirmed such a system for the tribe in question, the ethnohistorical method strongly implied it (ibid). Information on another tribe revealed that lessons in the skilled use of an awl were imparted in seclusion at the onset of the first menses (ibid 38). Too precious to throw away, the awl was now presumed to have been lost rather than discarded.

Further information from missionary reports, oral histories of contemporary native peoples, artists' impressions, and traders' documents brought the tribe in question to life for Spector. She placed the awl within the context of the life of the community and into the hands of a young woman marking her achievements on the handle of her awl. Spector restored the importance of "women's work" to equal place with men's work.

Spector reconstructed the life of the tribe and the hypothetical awl-using young woman from far less tangible sources than the material record alone provides. "To get some sense of their world required acts of imagination, the weaving together of evidence from fragmentary sources" (ibid 79). Spector came to understand that 19th and early 20th century native women were as respected for their leather-working and horticultural skills as men were for their hunting and fighting achievements.

Putting all the information together, Spector transformed a quotidian maintenance tool of little importance into a ritual object signifying status, achievement, and talent, in the same way that bodily decoration or a number of feathers in a headdress signifies male achievements. Endorsing her book, Ian Hodder commented:

A revolutionary book: a personal and engaging account of the tensions in archaeology between distanced, objective reports and studies that attempt to understand *the other* in its own terms. (ibid, front jacket)

While the present study on Egyptian figurines does not place the figurines in the hands of imaginary funeral guests or officiants, it does, as does Spector's work, strive to place the artefacts within the context of the culture from which they come, drawing on less tangible sources not always reflected in the material record. While it is impossible to draw on ethnohistorical records from the period in question, I draw on the earliest textual material of the Dynastic period, assuming some continuity in funerary practice. Also, ethnographic accounts of nearby tribes do not exist, so I present contemporary tribal peoples as close to the early Nile dwellers as possible, stressing the parallels in life-style and religious conceptions. Rather than make a definitive case for the use of figurines, I stretch the conventional conclusions offered by processual archaeologists, such as Peter Ucko, to include the possible symbolic meanings of these objects by placing them within the wider context of Egyptian religion as a whole and Nile tribal practices as provided by these more indirect sources of information.

The use of ethnography and ethnohistorical data is not expected to result in definitive conclusions by those who advocate their use in arriving at interpretations:

Useful models developed from ... the insights gained from ethnoarchaeology will likely not be in the form of absolutes, but rather in the form of probabilities, with quantitative qualifications. (Atherton 1983: 98)

The cultural specificity of symbols and ideas is respected, but within a broader framework of human endeavour and understanding. The object is not so much to find past behaviour mimicked in contemporary practices, but to provide:

... a means of explaining the behaviour of past societies on the basis of analytical models derived from observed behavioural or cultural phenomena of living societies, traditional or not. (Agorsah 1990: 192)

Through the use of these more oblique forms of gathering data and the change from the exclusive use of the scientific method for analysing material data, archaeology moves towards a more flexible and fluid method of understanding past and prehistoric cultures in terms of probabilities rather than certainties.

Whatever the interpretation, the post-processual and modified post-processual positions allow for flexibility, recognising that "in the end we always have to accept that the past may have been different" (Hodder 1992: 19). In the absence of texts, we take visual symbols as a kind of language which we can only dimly interpret, drawing on theoretical frameworks from contiguous disciplines to position the symbols in a kind of syntax which can suggest possible, perhaps contradictory, meanings. Exclusive interpretations, such as the Mother Goddess theory, are seen as the contextualising of the figurines within a theoretical framework, drawn more from contemporary Western monotheism, than from what is known about pre-literate village or forager societies. In the same way, any alternate interpretations, based on contemporary concerns for social justice and acceptance of difference, and current political and social theories of human interaction, will also position the figurines within the context of dominant issues perhaps of more concern to us than to the people who used them. After all the interpreting is over, what still remains is the data, or a "mute" figurine, ready for any new context in which we choose to place it.

METHODOLOGY AND THESIS STRUCTURE

The Predynastic Egyptian figurines, unlike most figurine collections from any one culture, suggest a limited use. I say this because, with few exceptions, all have been found in graves. Based on context alone, I could say that the figurines, therefore, played some role in a prehistoric mortuary cult and therefore can justifiably receive a largely religious/ritual interpretation. Placing them within a religious context does not rule out the validity of examining the figurines for what they imply about human representation, social conventions, gender roles, and other factors involving communication and social structure. These, however, may be consequential or unconscious concerns to the people who used the figurines – unintentional statements about themselves. Even if they were intentional, such meanings are transformed by their context, in this case the graves, and take on a mortuary significance. For the sake of clarity, the example of black mourning dress in contemporary society can be used. While the style and quality of the dress indicate much about the wearer, its use as mourning dress declares its most explicit intention.

A second major factor justifying a religious interpretation is the well-documented and widely-known emphasis that the Dynastic Egyptians placed on mortuary beliefs and practices. Therefore I begin my analysis with this assumption or premise, and state here that I intend to identify the possible religious roles played by the figurines in the mortuary cult and in the wider system of religious beliefs. The social concerns of communication, personal and social identity, and gender/power relations will not be my subjects.

A crude example of the difference between the social role of a religious artefact and its meaning to the people using it is given in the following personal account. For a Year 10 assignment, I chose for my topic "The Disadvantages of Religion". Included in my penetrating critique was a criticism of the sacred cow phenomenon of Hinduism. I maintained that the Hindus, considering the level of starvation and malnutrition I was told prevailed in India, would be better served if they were to eat their cows rather than worship them. Years later I learned that the cow in India performs vital services. It costs nothing to maintain, but feeds off scanty grass growing wild in the streets and fields. It therefore provides free milk and plentiful fuel in a country lacking trees in some areas. After it dies, the carcass goes to the

underclasses, who use the meat and hides. The Hindus were not so stupid after all, I concluded. They worship their cows because they foster survival.

Yet years later, through talking to Hindus and friends who visited India, I learned that the Hindus do not think that way about their cows at all. They worship them because they believe they are the embodiment of the Great Mother who nurtures all - the immanent manifestation of an invisible, spiritual force. In some areas images of this goddess are moulded from the sacred dung of the cow and used in religious ceremonies. To kill a cow is akin to murder - it is matricide and a sacrilege. Also, the cow is the soul's last incarnation as an animal before moving into the human realm. Many cows live out their last days, well-fed and cared for, in "retirement" barns and pastures, indicating that the practical use of the cow is often superseded by other concerns. The free fuel, milk, leather, and care of the poor, to the Hindu, are lucky side effects of such veneration, not necessarily the cause. As gifts from the spiritual mother, these benefits confirm the integration of the spiritual and material so often discussed in Hindu philosophy. Although the cow, survival, and society are intimately entwined, the Hindus prefer to emphasise the spiritual rather than the bodily nourishment it provides. Had survival been the most important concern, the humble lentil and grain of rice would be the focus of worship.

Had the Hindus fed, housed, decorated, and embalmed their sacred cows, as the Egyptians did with the Apis Bull and other sacred animals, our appreciation of the Hindu cow would have been quite different. The Egyptians also used cattle, and many other animals, for physical survival, but they chose to imbue their cattle in particular with religious meaning and elevate them to symbols of royal and spiritual power, authority, and hierarchy. In addition, the prevalent act of animal sacrifice throughout Africa must be seen in a religious rather than a functional context, if one is to attempt to see these animals from the point of view of the culture in question. Certainly they eat the animal after the sacrifice and thereby are fed, but the sacrifice is a religious act relating to conceptions of deity rather than an act of butchering for the sake of a meal. In fact, in the Nuer and Dinka systems, butchering an animal for food is frowned upon, and an animal killed only for food can come back to haunt the living (Lienhardt 1961: 21). The usual procedure is to sacrifice an animal for spiritual reasons, after which, parts of the animal are distributed according to position and lineage (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 265-66; Lienhardt 1961: 21). While

people are fed and the social structure legitimated, the conscious intention is to maintain or repair the correct relationship with invisible forces.

To the sociologist, perhaps the practical outcomes are the most important. Certainly to social theorists such as Clifford Geertz (1975: 90) and Émile Durkheim, the social aspects of religion form their respective definitions of religion. In the case of Geertz's definition, no mention is made of gods, the transcendent, or the spiritual - any word which could differentiate the religious from the political:

a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to
(2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods
and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions
of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these
conceptions with such an aura of factuality that
(5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.
(Geertz 1975: 90)

Durkheim's definition employs the word "sacred", but not in a way which would distinguish a religious object from, let us say, the Nazi swastika, a royal crown, a national flag, the embalmed body of Lenin, the preserved head of Jeremy Bentham, the Kremlin or the Forbidden City:

a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices
relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set
apart and forbidden... (Durkheim 1976 <1915>: 47)

Both Geertz and Durkheim contribute major theoretical frameworks in which to contextualise religious symbolism, but both favour social and functional interpretations over the religious meanings attached to the symbols by the people who use them. As archaeologist Colin Renfrew said: "Both avoided placing religious experience as a central feature of their definition of religion, preferring instead to see religion rather as a social phenomenon" (Renfrew 1994b: 48).

Ritual activity is frequently interpreted according to its effects on the social cohesion of the group, and its development, maintenance, and/or change has been linked to social stability:

as a consequence of the sedentarization process...
as one means of providing a basis or foundation for
social differentiation... a means by which scalar stress
can be reduced ... an ecological buffer that serves to
regularize or formalize reciprocal social relations...
a communicator of social position ... (Aldenderfer 1993: 1)

In the highly political and sociological intellectual environment of Cultural Theory, religious concepts are understood as an integral part of any society's symbol system. However, to anyone who wants to understand the Hindu mind and religion, as in the above example of the cow, the Hindu's conscious intention must become the primary focus. The social benefits and effects are vital, but to consider these as the only "real" or most important aspects is to address only half the issue and miss a vital point which can often be answered with a simple question: Why is the cow placed above any other animal or food used by the society?

These functional aspects allow a ritual or belief to continue over time and become embedded in the culture and established as tradition. The functional aspects contribute to the maintenance of the social and political structure in which the symbols have their meanings, but without necessarily being the conscious reason for the belief or practice. They are not what the practitioners have in mind when they use the symbols. To critique a functionalist or reductionist interpretation of Nuer religion, Evans-Pritchard said:

An interpretation in terms of social structure merely shows ... how the idea of Spirit takes various forms corresponding to departments of social life. It does not enable us to understand any better the intrinsic nature of the idea itself. (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 121)

For the Predynastic Egyptians, the figurines were mortuary symbols, possibly related to some belief in the afterlife and used as part of the ritual involved in funerals. The funeral is the liminal area between this world and the next – a highly ritualised sacred space and time in which both the living and the dead experience a rite of passage. The human relationship with the afterlife, rather than with the world of social relations and survival, is the context in which I explore the possible meanings of the figurines.

I aim to explore the range of possible intentions of the Predynastic figurine user by adopting a modified version of Ucko's four-stage methodology. This includes physical attributes, archaeological context, suitable ethnographic parallels, and historical evidence.

1. Physical attributes

This stage involves a close look at the physical attributes of the various figurines and a discussion of the various "types". It delineates the "data", largely provided by Ucko in his publication *Anthropomorphic*

Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete (1968), a typology of the Predynastic figurines, both stratified and unstratified, broken down statistically according to sex and selected characteristics. This data constitutes Chapter 2 of this thesis, and contains a discussion of my reasons for choosing certain characteristics above others in an attempt to stress the importance of specific features in the context of Egyptian religion as a whole.

2. Archaeological context

The discussion of context takes place in Chapter 3. While one can say that all Predynastic Egyptian figurines come from graves, only about one-third of them are stratified: that is, correctly documented according to provenance. The others were found in private and museum collections, having been removed from the graves without proper documentation. Those which can be linked to specific graves will be analysed in the context of grave structure and accompanying artefacts.

I expand the notion of "context" to include the general climate and environment which assisted in the formation of the settlements of Predynastic Upper Egypt. Climatic and environmental notions are reflected in the mythology of ancient Egypt, and therefore their importance will be considered in the development of the Predynastic beliefs and rituals in which the figurines played a part. Coupled with a lengthy discussion of the Sudanese Nuer and Dinka people in Chapter 4, a plausible approximation can be created of the very earliest religion(s) of the Upper Egyptians.

Chapter 3 presents a lengthy and detailed account of the material context in which the majority of the provenanced figurines were found. Information is provided by original excavation reports and secondary analysis by archaeologists such as Elise Baumgartel, Kathryn Bard, Joan Crowfoot Payne, Winifred Needler, and Juan Jose Castillos. These data and commentaries are probed deeply in order to determine if any particular sub-group within the community used the figurines: the poor, the wealthy, the ritual specialists, or the politically powerful. The results of this analysis are related in Chapter 6 to the myths and symbols used by such groups during the Dynastic period.

3. Suitable ethnographic parallels

Various contemporary pre-industrial societies frequently employ grave figurines, and a survey of the variety of meanings of these figurines is interspersed throughout the thesis. More specifically, in Chapter 4, I present well-studied groups from the Nilotic Sudan in order to suggest some possible belief structures for the Predynastic Egyptians. Most archaeologists, anthropologists, and some Egyptologists will be familiar with these groups - the Nuer and the Dinka, as studied by Evans-Pritchard (1940, 1956) in the 1930s and Godfrey Lienhardt (1961). Comparisons of the religions and symbolism of these peoples are made with those of the Dynastic and Predynastic Egyptians, supplemented by further comparative material from other African religions.

The reasons for my choice might not at first be apparent because the Nuer and Dinka neither make figurines nor have a well-developed mortuary cult and accompanying eschatology. The ethnographic parallels chosen by Ucko during his study of the figurines were based on the figurine use common to the prehistoric and contemporary tribal groups, and he chose the contemporary groups for their figurine use as well as their life-style.

I discuss the Sudanese people for a number of reasons. First, like the Predynastic Egyptians, they depend on the Nile for survival, although the Sudanese climate is monsoonal as well. Second, they seem to share with the Predynastic Egyptians a common livelihood from cattle herds, pasture, and crops dependent on the annual wet season. Third, they appear to have lived a similar village life with similar infrastructure. Fourth, close examination reveals that the Sudanese people share many religious concepts reflected in Ancient Egyptian religion and typical of many African tribal groups, placing the Egyptian religion within the broader context of African religion. Fifth, detailed accounts of Sudanese culture and religion are available. These records give an in-depth description of the structure of their religions, the various deities and spirits, and the various practices and more abstract notions which only a trained and perceptive anthropologist can even begin to approach. From an examination of the Nuer and Dinka religious systems, a comparative understanding of how the religion of the Predynastic Egyptians might have operated can be constructed, and from there, a possible place for the figurines can be hypothesised.

I accept that any ethnography, especially that written before the widespread acceptance and analysis of cultural bias, will have a certain degree of ethnocentricity, androcentricism, and often say more about the anthropologist and his or her culture than the people being studied. Therefore, I approach Evans-Pritchard's and Lienhardt's conclusions and observations with some skepticism and critique, and I support or challenge some chosen statements with evidence outside their discussions. I have found, however, that many of the most important conclusions receive deeper confirmation from comparative religion and form an important contribution to the development of wider, more general theories on tendencies in religious systems. I apply some of their observations and conclusions in ways both specific to Egyptian religion and general to small-scale religions as a category and a group.

4. Historical evidence

Until fairly recently, the Egyptian material record seemed to suggest that the Egyptians responsible for the historic culture came from elsewhere, perhaps Sumer (Baumgartel 1952, 1960, 1970b). The current prevailing assumption has changed, and historians now accept that the Predynastic Egyptians were the direct predecessors of the Dynastic and historic culture, and the issue no longer generates debate. Any notions that the historic Egyptians were a people who migrated from elsewhere have generally been abandoned, although the debate on the diffusion of ideas especially from Sumer still continues (H.S. Smith 1992).

The impact of Sumerian culture on the formation of early Dynastic Egypt is widely recognised and understood. Some of the later symbolism and architecture of the Predynastic took its inspiration from Sumerian culture, but the main religious concepts and iconography of the Egyptians bear no resemblance to Sumerian examples and can be traced back far into the earliest Predynastic material record, which displays evidence of many of historic Egypt's major deities and mortuary practices. As I will argue, these Predynastic practices and beliefs are particularly "African" in flavour and owe nothing to the early trade with the Near East. The presence of animal deities, developed eschatology, and a mortuary cult involving elaborate grave goods separate Egyptian religion distinctly from Sumerian religion, with the isolated exception of the unique Sumerian "royal" graves of Ur. Only the rapid development of technology, architecture, impetus to writing, and some design motifs indicate a direct

influence from Sumer. Egyptian religion is not a Near Eastern religion. It is distinctly unique and autochthonic.

Therefore, direct comparisons will be made with Dynastic Egyptian rather than Sumerian Dynastic iconography, beliefs and practices. An attempt will be made to identify the Osirian cult as a Predynastic religion, contrary to current opinions (Griffiths 1980). As a result, some of the prehistoric figurines may be illuminated by an association with a possible early form of the Osirian eschatology.

The discussion of Osiris forms Chapter 5 and deals with the "invisible" data from the Predynastic period, that is, information which is not revealed by the material record. This invisible data largely takes the form of astronomical information, which places Orion in the perfect position to represent an early form of Osiris within the vegetation and mortuary cult which revolved around him.

Chapter 5 also uses comparative religion to construct a case for the existence of the mortuary cult of Osiris in Predynastic Upper Egypt. As well, it draws on historical texts, primarily the *Pyramid Texts*, to help characterise the kind of religion that could have centred on an Osirian-like deity from the earliest times. I discuss the *Pyramid Texts* because they are the oldest written account of religious beliefs, and hence, although separated by some 500 years, are the historic documents which are the closest in time to the Predynastic.

The use of historical evidence continues in Chapter 6, where Dynastic myths and iconography illuminate some of the symbolism identified in the examination of the figurines. This chapter also traces the changing interpretations of the Predynastic Egyptian figurines over this century and includes Egyptologists such as Elise Baumgartel, Margaret Murray, Fekri Hassan, and G.D. Hornblower, as well as Peter Ucko's major contribution to the interpretation of Egyptian figurines, in particular, and all figurines in general. Each of these scholars used the same, unchanging data to develop their various theories.

As well, Chapter 6 offers my conclusions. In keeping with the elusive nature of prehistoric symbolism, the silence of the material data, the variety of figurine styles, and the plurality of Egyptian religion as a

whole, I present several possible interpretations with a further explanation of why multiple meanings are possible, even probable. However, I do favour one interpretation over the others, at least for one selected group of figurines, and these reasons will be made clear.

SOME BASIC PREMISES

Having outlined my basic methodological structure, I now identify some premises upon which I base my analysis. As with any premises, they can be debatable and therefore need to be clarified in order to minimise the impression of an unexamined position. These premises focus on the relationship of pre-literate cultures to state-based literate cultures, and define my position on a number of issues regarding the nature of the "primitive" mind, the diffusion versus independent origination of ideas and technologies, and the origin of the institutionalised state-based religions.

1. The Neolithic/Chalcolithic mind was not different from the historical mind.

The use of ethnography and ethnohistorical data in understanding the behaviour and culture of even the Neanderthal and Cro-Magnon peoples of prehistoric Europe indicates a wide-spread belief that the minds of these peoples separated by up to 250 centuries were little or no different from the minds of contemporary twentieth-century human beings. Casual comments often appear in the media stating that we wouldn't recognise a Neanderthal in our own midst. Any notion that prehistoric and small-scale contemporary cultures are "primitive" in comparison with the "sophisticated" human beings who create civilisations is discounted. Therefore, no evolutionary cognitive development in the human mind is believed to have taken place as culture moved from the later prehistoric into the historic. Change is purely on a cultural, rather than a cognitive, level. Ethnoarchaeology is based on this premise and underlies Ucko's fourth stage of his methodology, in which figurine use by contemporary societies is applied analogously to possible uses in prehistoric societies.

This premise, however, is really a matter of faith and a commonsense conclusion based on the fossil record, rather than on observable evidence demonstrating brain or mental functioning. Hence debates about the "prehistoric mind" still go on. We can never really know how the human mind functioned at

any point in history or prehistory. The "unfounded" assumption of the equation of prehistoric with historic cognitive processes has led in the recent past to a rejection of any kind of hypothesising about the prehistoric mind – "palaeopsychology" as it was contemptuously termed by the processual archaeologist Lewis Binford (Renfrew 1994a: 4).

We can only work on the assumption that, while the mind of homo sapiens sapiens may have differed from the mind of homo erectus or homo habilis, the fossil record supports the notion that the brain of homo sapiens sapiens around the world does not vary in complexity or size ratio (Renfrew 1994a: 5). Whether the mind and the brain are so interdependent is more a philosophical, theological, or neurological debate, which will not be attempted here.

This equivalence does not imply that the ancient or prehistoric mind viewed the world with the same paradigms as the modern mind, any more than the variety of contemporary cultures around the world all agree on a pan-universal approach to the world. Each culture has its particular mode of thought, and we are fond of making distinctions between the linearity of "western" thought and the cyclicity of "eastern" thought. Oddly, those distinctions seem to be breaking down or switching places, as an observance of media and popular culture today suggests that some prominent people in the countries we have identified as "eastern" are adopting a more scientific, rational worldview, while some forces in the West are rejecting it in favour of a more "holistic" view.

The prehistoric approach may be more akin to the kinds of thinking anthropologists discover in what remains of the "small-scale" cultures in today's world. This is a kind of mytho-poetic thinking, more like that experienced by artists, poets, and mystics rather than scientists, although small-scale cultural empirical knowledge and manipulation of the external world is prodigious and has served these societies well for thousands of years⁶. In these societies, religious concepts and "reality" are often one and the same and little distinction is made between the "sacred" and "profane", except perhaps in those ideas and objects which are most "taboo" and need to be set apart and approached with precise rituals by specialists. Evans-Pritchard, in his study of Nuer religion (1956: 207), commented on the casualness with which the community attended important sacrifices and chatted and socialised throughout the

ceremony, even when standing close to the sacrificing officiant. It is hard to imagine this happening in most modern churches, mosques, or even an ancient temple, where solemnity and awe, or at least silence, particularly near the central shrine, are important parts of the ritual.⁷

So, despite cultural differences over time and place, it seems that the cognitive processes of the prehistoric and the historic mind may be similar, merely treating similar concepts in culturally specific ways. Religious concepts arise from previous concepts, and while they may change over time, their historical roots can usually be traced back to previous, often prehistoric, influences and notions. Religions, however new, evolve from pre-existing forms.

2. Neolithic/Chalcolithic culture preceded and gradually developed into state culture.

As stated earlier, I adopt the conventional opinion that Dynastic, historic, Egyptian culture is the result of independent origination rather than diffusion, although influences resulting from trade are not ruled out. This convention does not preclude differences between state culture and its antecedents. Indeed, they are very different, and such differences must always be kept in mind when moving back and forth between historic and prehistoric material.

Pre-state cultures tend to be loose confederacies of semi-autonomous communities, each with its own economy, culture, and religious system. Over time, through trade, other forms of communication, and political influences, they begin to share common ideas and technologies, but retain their own identities and social structures.

State cultures, by definition, are more uniform, with a centralised authority overriding local authorities. The economic and religious autonomy of local communities is often overlaid with the official state forms, often enforced by the presence of representatives of the state living within the community. If the higher authorities do not come from invading forces, they have risen from the confederacy of village

⁶It is the "scientific" world view, not the "mytho-poetic" world view which is threatening the viability of culture.

communities, usually as a result of conflict among them over power and resources. Hence state power and official practices have their origins in the previous culture of diverse communities and share many common traits with the people they now rule.

3. Powerful centralising groups select and promote certain religious characteristics above others.

This point seems obvious, especially considering the influence of the work of R. McC. Adams (1966), which offers a theoretical analysis of the evolution of urban societies from prehistoric to historic. This process is not, however, always sufficiently emphasised in discussions of Egyptian religion.

It is widely accepted that Egypt was united after a political struggle, but only occasional analyses, such as that of Fekri Hassan (1992, 1998), emphasise religious belief and iconography as a political tool in the process. We still read statements in discussions of the nature of Egyptian religions about the plurality of religious belief as demonstrated by the co-existence of at least three myths of origination, several supreme deities, two divine genealogies, and a plenitude of animal and therianthrope deities:

The Egyptians knew that their answers could not be definitive, and this flexible and pluralistic approach is the essence of their philosophical position. The idea that there is no single answer, that everything is flow and every answer provisional, is worth investigating today, in an age that has focused attention on fragmentation while continuing to cling to a history of absolutes. (Hornung 1992: 14)

Such a theological interpretation of Egyptian philosophy – or, should I say, such an assignment of post-modern thinking to the ancient Egyptians – is an act of projection for which there is no textual confirmation. It leaves the student in confusion as to how such religious contradictions can be supported, and only brief mention is made of how such a "mess" develops. I would suggest that a historical/critical approach which includes the role of pre-unification religion (or religions) would be more useful in untangling the complexities of ancient Egyptian beliefs, although the theological approach may help explain how such apparent contradictory beliefs continued to co-exist.

⁷ Variations and exceptions to this rule may exist in some religious communities.

Predynastic Egypt was a collection of separate groups, later identified geographically as "nomes". Each had its own religious beliefs and practices; each had its own major deities, symbols of life, rejuvenation, and group identity. Only when one realises that the beliefs and practices of certain, more powerful groups, eventually superimpose rather than eclipse local beliefs and practices, can one understand the "logic" of the apparent contradictions which often characterise ancient religions, especially Egyptian religion.

4. Many historical beliefs have their origins in Neolithic/Chalcolithic beliefs but are modified.

As the state develops and exerts its power over constituent smaller groups, such power is reflected in the beliefs and iconography. While new myths and rituals develop, certain pre-state deities are retained; others passed over. Certain myths are written down, expanded, and become part of liturgy, official mythology, funerary spells, and official theology; others are forgotten or remain localised. Certain iconography is adopted, and then modified to suit the political and ideological needs of the larger, more powerful group. Previously obscure gods become supreme; animal totems become local deities and sometimes state deities, if they belong to powerful groups. Further discussion follows later on how state iconography and mythology differs from earlier, more localised pre-literate practices, but retain certain elements.

For the purposes of this study, I read the *Pyramid Texts* keeping in mind any possible links between prehistoric and historic religious ideas. The historical texts such as the *Pyramid Texts* are often treated as though they were invented at the time they appeared. This thesis accepts the assumption that these early texts grew out of previous beliefs and practices, and that, in many cases, prehistoric iconography can be informed by the evidence from the early historical texts.

5. Neolithic/Chalcolithic practices continue to exist, sometimes in a modified form.

Despite the attention historians give to written texts, permanent and elaborate architecture, and precious, superbly crafted iconography, most people within ancient cultures remained non-literate and

poor. Despite the élite's occupation of palaces, construction of temples and mortuary complexes, the average ancient Egyptians lived and died as they always had – in small villages, mud houses or impermanent shelters, an essentially Neolithic life-style (Baines 1991c: 132) – and were eventually buried in simple pits with few grave goods. Their religious rituals and beliefs would have continued much as before, often carried out in the home or village shrine, and would concern their immediate needs, for example, protection against the dangers of childbirth, scorpion and snake bites, illness, hopes for a good harvest, a good inundation, and a safe transition to the next world.

L. Carless Huling (1989: 90-5) differentiated between the colonising culture and the "numerous small agricultural communities" which become dependent on it (ibid 90). He observed that:

There is often a considerable difference between the folk-rites of the SG [small group] and the more formal observances of the LG [large group], which adheres more closely to the norms of society. (Hulin 92)

In the case of ancient Egypt, the large group was the controlling élite and the small groups were those who did not claim victory in unification and those people who did not partake of the status and wealth of their own élites.

Egyptian priests carried out most official religious rituals, either in private, or in the presence of members from the small élite class. The religious texts on the walls of tombs and mortuary temples did not concern the ordinary people, although the myths and concepts might not be totally unfamiliar, some having come from Predynastic practice. State religion impacted most strongly on the ordinary people with the regular festivals conducted by the priests. In these processions, a concealed statue of a local deity would be on parade, perhaps for a visit to another temple. For example, in the annual marriage of Horus and Hathor, Hathor is paraded in front of the crowds as she makes her way to Horus in his temple at Edfu for the marriage ceremony. At these festivals, the common Egyptians came closest to their major deities, and celebrated the event with ritual and feasting.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In summary, this thesis on the Predynastic Egyptian figurines combines a traditional archaeological analysis of the material record with the greater latitude provided by bringing seemingly indirectly

related material from the other disciplines of ethnography, geography, historical texts, astronomy, and comparative religion. In keeping with the contemporary acceptance of multiple meanings, I do not attempt to arrive at a definitive conclusion about the meaning of the figurines. Rather, I offer a number of possible meanings for a variety of the figurines, with the recognition that the culture which used these figurines did not share the uniformity and centralisation of the historical culture which succeeded it, and hence, different groups of figurines may have had different meanings. While I have attempted to include all figurine styles within this study, one group of figurines seems to stand out from the others in its startling appearance and combination of symbols, lending itself to more detailed treatment than other groups whose physical elements are more enigmatic or suggest no particular symbolism.

I also acknowledge the impossibility of arriving at the "truth" about any prehistoric intention, and therefore offer several options. It may never be possible for us to understand the full and accurate meanings and uses of the Predynastic figurines. We can only work towards a plausible theory – one that takes into account as many mitigating factors as possible. And then, even if our research is thorough and exhaustive, exploring all information, physical and theoretical, at our disposal, the possibility always obtains, as Ian Hodder said, that we could be wrong (Hodder 1987: 2; 1992: 19).

CHAPTER 2: MORTUARY FIGURINES OF UPPER EGYPT

CHRONOLOGY

The following chronological chart of the development of Egyptian culture from Early Predynastic times to the end of the Old Kingdom has been adopted from Fekri Hassan's discussion of female imagery in the Predynastic (Hassan 1992: 309).

Early Predynastic	+4000-3900 Cal. BCE ⁸ Badarian
Middle Predynastic	3900-3650 Cal. BCE Nag I
Late Predynastic	3650-3300 Cal. BCE Nag II
Terminal Predynastic	3300-3000 Cal. BCE Nag III
Earliest kings	ca 3250 BCE (?) Dynasty 0
Scorpion?	
Sekhen (Ka)	ca 3100 BCE (?)
Early Dynastic	
Dynasty 1	
Narmer	
Aha	3023 +- 102 Cal. BCE
Djer	
Uadji, Edjo, Djet	3006 +- 85 Cal. BCE
Den	2969 +- 80 Cal. BCE
Anedjib	
Ka'a	2868 +- 90 Cal. BCE
Semerkhet	
Dynasty II	2770-2649 BCE
Dynasty III	2649-2575 BCE
Old Kingdom	
Dynasty IV	2575-2465 BCE
Dynasty V	2465-2323 BCE
Dynasty VI	2323-2150 BCE
Dynasty VII	2150-2134 BCE

⁸Calibrated radio-carbon dates do not always conform to the historical dates determined by other means. Predynastic dates are approximate when arrived at through historical methods reading back from written records. The more accurate calibrated dates here are applied to the Predynastic and Early Dynastic and designated "Cal."

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIGURINES

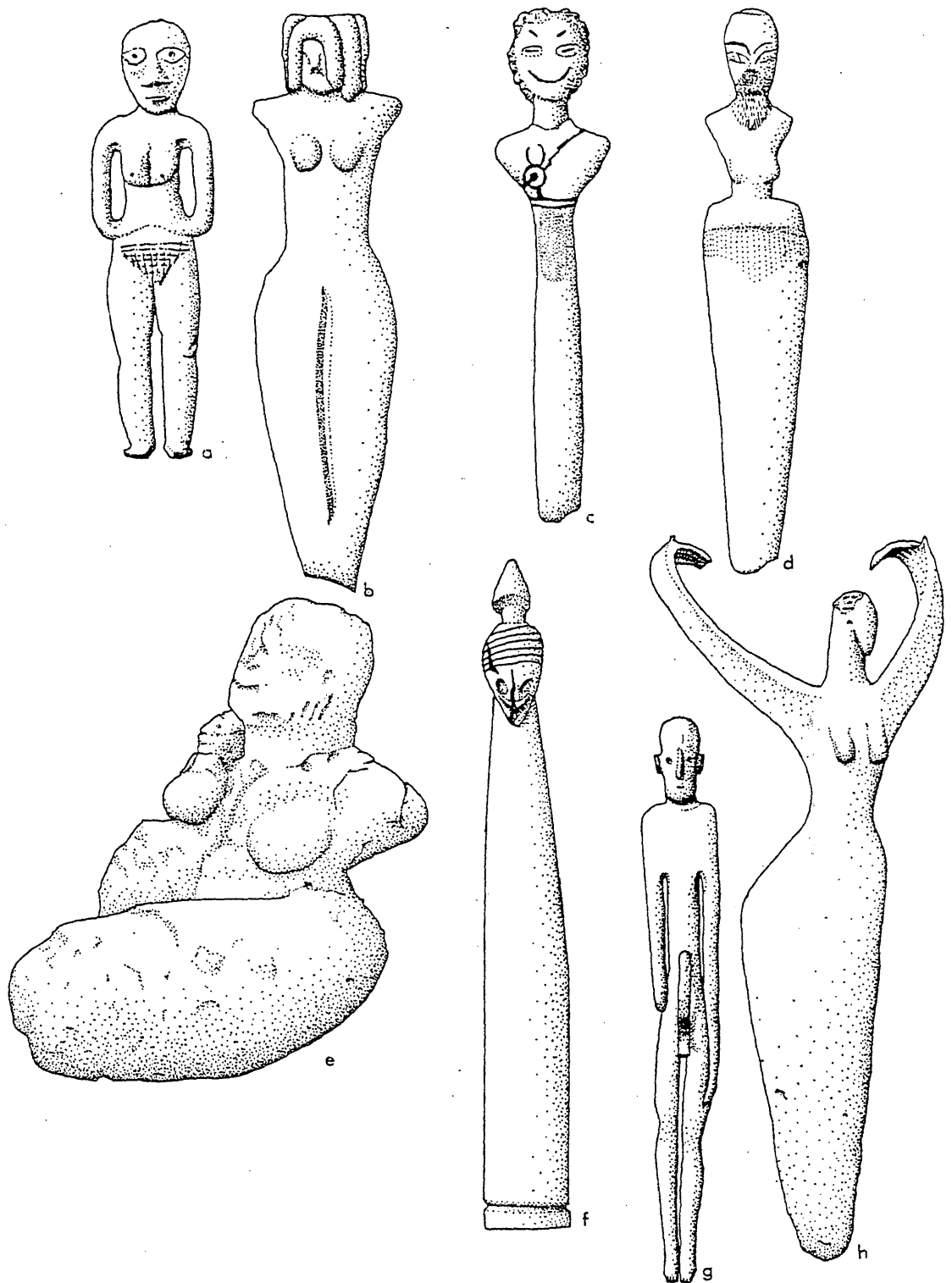
Of the many thousands of graves excavated from Predynastic Egypt, only a tiny fraction contains anthropomorphic figurines. Calculating conservatively, based on Ucko's methodology outlined below, 244 figurines can be accounted for. We cannot assume this figure represents all Predynastic figurines, for, no doubt, many burials still lie under Nile silt and many figurines have long since perished, often being made of fragile materials such as unfired clay. But, whatever the figurines signified, their use was not a universal, widely held practice. Their scarcity, however, does not preclude their possible role in widely-held beliefs, possibly about the afterlife.

Categorising the Egyptian figurines is problematic. While a wide variety of identifiable individual types present themselves, at least at first glance (Fig. 2.1), these types overlap to such an extent that setting clear distinctions can be an arbitrary exercise of classification. Observation of the variety of styles and overlapping similarities between apparently disparate figurines led Ucko to conclude:

Instead of exclusive types of figures, it seems that one is dealing with a variety of representations modelled within an accepted formula and with certain combinations of features more popular than others. (Ucko 1968: 202)

Ucko was loathe to see anything in the figurines beyond stylistic differences indicating an artistic freedom rather than symbolic intent (ibid 428).

While contemporary historians and archaeologists accept Ucko's conclusion about the non-divine nature of the figurines, they do not heed his rejection of any symbolic importance of the physical characteristics. The gender differences, arm positions, bodily decorations, colouring, markings, and other visible characteristics of all prehistoric figurines continue to exercise the minds of historians and archaeologists, who scavenge the material evidence for clues about prehistoric peoples, their cultures, social structures, and beliefs. For the Egyptian figurines in particular, Shelley Smith (1984) made significant observations about the gender differences in the physical appearance of the figurines. Her supervisor, Fekri Hassan, furthered her work, using figurine imagery to understand the role of gender and myth in the development of the Egyptian state (Hassan 1992).



Human figurines: (a) ivory, from Badari, Badarian; (b) pottery, from Abadiyeh, Amratian/Gerzean; (c) vegetable paste on reed from El Amrah, Amratian/Gerzean; (d) pottery from Mostagedda, ?Badarian; (e) painted pottery from Ballas, Amratian; (f) ivory from Badari, Gerzean; (g) ivory from Mahasna, Amratian; (h) painted pottery from Ma'mariya, Amratian. (After P. J. Ucko, *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt*, 1968.)

FIG. 2.1 A selection of the variety of figurines chosen by Barbara Adams for her book, *Predynastic Egypt* (1988) page 54.

Oddly, Hassan, a contemporary archaeologist and a scientist, came back to an old conclusion about the figurines:

The preoccupation with death and the after-life in Egyptian religion may be best understood in the light of the role of goddess cults in Predynastic and perhaps late Holocene prehistoric Egypt. (Hassan 1992: 313)

Hassan's conclusions do not vary all that much from earlier "Mother Goddess" theories. But unlike earlier archaeologists, Hassan based his conclusions on a close inspection of the physical characteristics of the figurines, careful statistical analysis of markings, gender indications, and body types, whereas the earlier conclusions were based on predetermined theory, rather than evidence, and founded on beliefs in the matriarchal origin of society, the original supremacy of women, and a Paleolithic and Neolithic supreme female deity.⁹ The predominance of female figurines seemed to support such a theory, and this broad similarity among the figurines constituted the main physical characteristic upon which the conclusion hinged.

Ucko in 1968, like the scientific archaeologists of his time, adopted a critical, analytical mode of thought, in which differences, which had previously been overlooked in favour of comparative approaches based on similarities, became the telling factors. The most important "difference" in the debate on the "Mother Goddess" theory was the existence of male and "sexless" figurines. This single point undermined the claim that the figurine complement as a whole proved the existence of the prehistoric belief in a supreme female deity. For example, the discovery of a male figurine in a prehistoric Mesopotamian grave of the 'Ubaid period canceled the "Mother-Goddess" interpretation of the previously discovered female figurines (Lloyd 1975: 47).

Taking differences into account, this chapter looks closely at the physical characteristics of the figurines, and isolates those which might be symbolic and express religious meanings, such as sex, arm position, the shape and style of the head, and combinations of these characteristics. Any meanings suggested by these physical characteristics, however, have to be in the context of Egyptian religion as a whole, as we know it from the historic period. The earlier "Mother Goddess" theory

⁹ At first glance, the déjà-vu feeling created by reading Hassan's article makes one feel that Ucko's book had never been written. However, the contrast between Hassan's and Ucko's scientific approaches highlights Ian Hodder's statements about the semi-independence of data and theory and the flexibility of well-considered interpretations.

removed the figurines from any cultural and archaeological context, as though somehow the prehistoric people who made them had nothing to do with the people who wrote down the myths after the development of writing. This is another point where Fekri Hassan's approach diverges from the earlier work, even though his conclusions might display some similarities.

Before examining specific physical characteristics, the following discussion presents an evaluation of some commonly held assumptions about the appearance of the typical Egyptian figurine.

THE "TYPICAL" PREDYNASTIC FIGURINE

Most students of Egyptian history and lay people interested in prehistoric Egypt rarely see anything but a limited selection of figurines from this period. Academic and popular books repeatedly display the same figurine illustrations in discussions of Predynastic culture. The three most commonly chosen figurines are the Badarian female ivory, the "dancing" figurine with raised arms and beaked face, and the dome-headed male ivory with a distinctive penis sheath.

The Badarian Ivory

An ivory figurine dated to the earliest settled Predynastic period, the Badarian (c4000 BCE) (Ucko 1968: fig.3) (see Fig. 2.1a), is so popular that it appears on the cover of a major work on prehistoric and Predynastic Egyptian archaeology, *Egypt Before the Pharaohs*, by Michael Hoffman (1989 Fontana paperback edition). This figurine was excavated at Badari by Guy Brunton (Brunton and Caton-Thompson 1928: PL XXIV,2). It is unique; similar figurines are not represented in any other find.

While ivory female figurines occur frequently (10.7% of figurines, Table 2.6), this example with its highly detailed face with huge eyes, hands to hips, and incised pubic triangle is one of its kind. All it shares with the complement of Predynastic figurines is its findspot – a grave. No doubt its popularity results from its startling appearance, rather than its ability to represent Predynastic figurines in

general. Therefore, this single figurine cannot be said to represent in any way a typical Predynastic figurine. It does not even resemble subsequent ivory figurines from the Nagada I and II periods.

Of the 5 Badarian figurines, 2 can be said to foreshadow subsequent styles (Figs. 2.2 a,b). The former was excavated from a grave at Badari, the latter from one at Mostagedda. These 2 figurines bend at the hips, with straight, undifferentiated legs. Whether they stand or sit is hard to determine, for they bend at an angle which makes them lean forward when standing up, and lean backward when sitting down. A pinched-out nose or a projection suggests facial features, making it hard to determine whether they are human. Stumps merely suggest arms. (I take the opportunity to point out here that Fig. 2.2b possesses the stomach protrusion found on some Nagada I and II female figurines discussed later in this chapter.)

If one had to choose from among the Badarian figurines a representative of female Egyptian figurines generally, either of these two would be a more accurate choice. The single largest group of figurines by arm style is the stump (42.9% of suitable figurines, Table 2.2), and a brief glance through Ucko's catalogue demonstrates the popularity of the undifferentiated legs and the pinched face. These figurines, however, are not nearly so distinctive as the ivory one, and hence are familiar only to those with access to Ucko's catalogue or the relevant museums.

The Male Ivory

A male figurine, carved from ivory, also frequently appears as a "typical" Predynastic figurine (Fig. 2.3). It has a domed head, projecting ears, a long, thin body, arms at sides, and sports a decorative penis sheath which seems to begin at the navel and curve downward to join a projecting penis (Ucko 1968: Figurine 52, fig.42¹⁰). Again, this figurine is a rare example from the Predynastic period. As a male, it is in the minority (Table 2.1), and as an ivory male with a penis sheath and a domed head, it belongs to a very small group of similar, but not as delicately carved and polished, examples (Ucko 1968: Figurine 91, fig. 62).

¹⁰ Ucko's numbering system can be confusing. Not all figurines are illustrated by figures, but all figurines appear in numerical order in the catalogue. Therefore Figurine 52, fig. 42 designates the fifty-second figurine catalogued. It is illustrated in Figure 42.

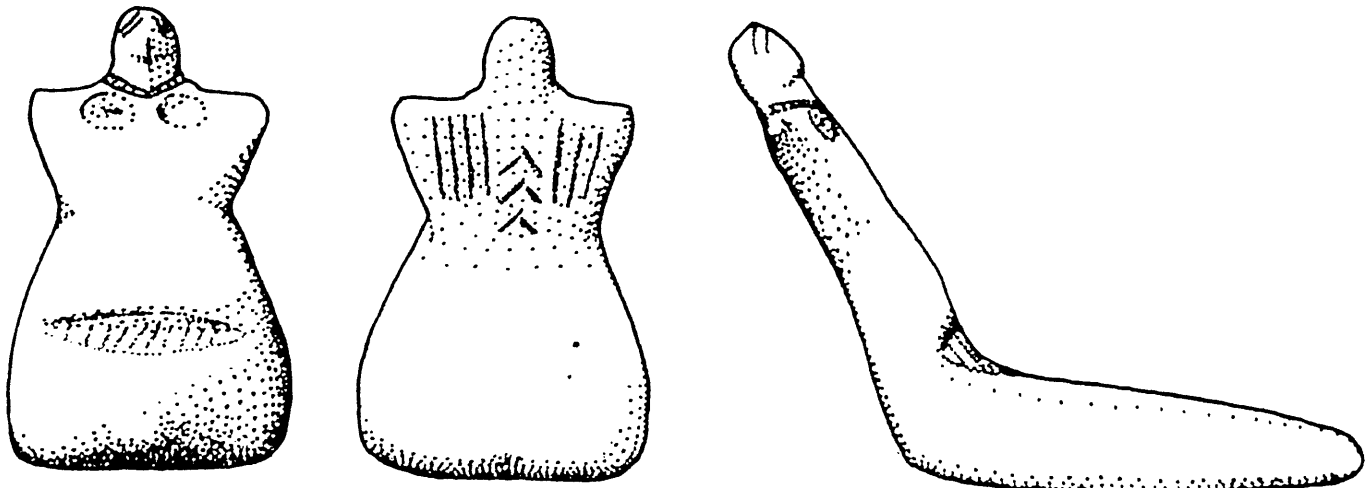


FIG. 2.2a Badarian clay female figurine from Badari

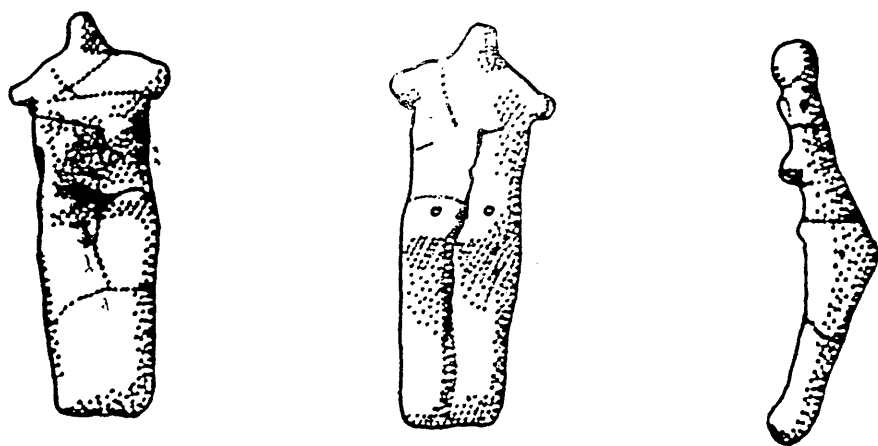


FIG. 2.2b Badarian clay female figurine from Mostagedda

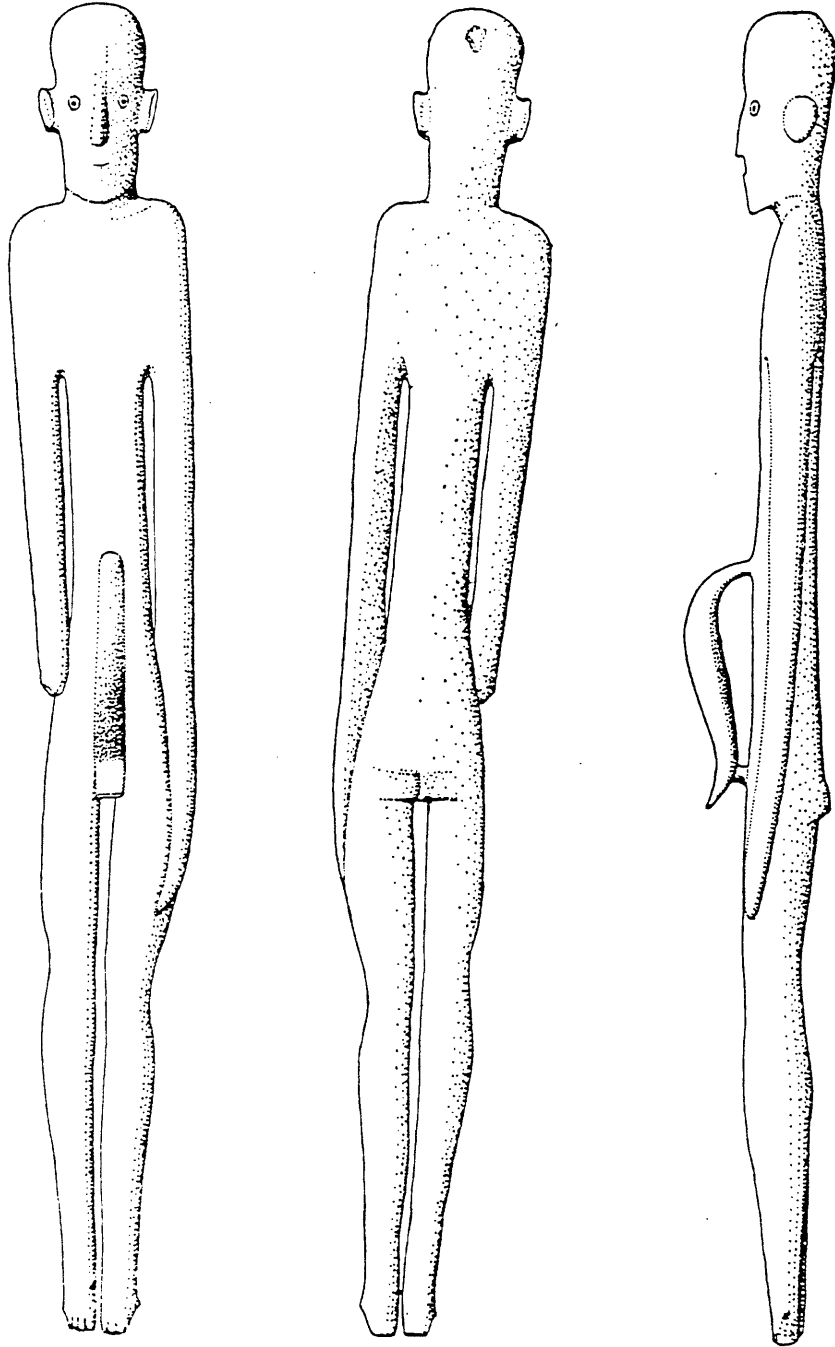


FIG. 2.3 Nagada I period ivory male figurine from Mahasna

This style of ivory figurine does occur elsewhere in the Egyptian record. A second group of 50 ivory figurines has been catalogued by Ucko (1965). Of these, 7 are male, one uncertain, and the remaining 42 are female. Three of these male figurines (Ucko 1965: Nos. 32,33,34) resemble the Predynastic male ivories discussed here; the others bear no resemblance to any Predynastic find.

The problems in dating this second group are complex (Ucko 1965: 219). They are all bought and unstratified, hence they cannot be assigned to any specific period or location, such as an individual grave.¹¹ Based on appearance alone, only these 3 males (Ucko 1965: Figs. 32,33,34) have any equivalents in the Predynastic stratified material, which can be allocated dates and findspots. We could add these figurines to the male component, bringing the total male figurines to 38 (see Table 2.1). However, one of these three (No. 32) displays a "peg" on the bottom of the feet – probably a pin for securing the figurine in a standing position on a plinth or an altar. This peg does not appear in the Predynastic record (Ucko 1965: 220). Number 34 is broken at the thighs, and therefore the existence of any peg cannot be determined. Only number 33 does not have a peg. Therefore, placing more than one of these 3 figurines in the Predynastic grouping is problematic. Since one figurine, or even three, will effect no major alteration in our statistics, I do not include them. The reader is free to make personal assessments and adjustments if deemed appropriate, but Ucko also did not include them in the Predynastic group.

The domed male ivory is startling, but not representative of figurines as a whole, nor even of male figurines. Table 2.6 demonstrates that only 5 out of a total of 26 catalogued Predynastic male figurines are ivory; most are made of clay. This ivory figurine discussed here does take its place in the Predynastic complement, but, its frequent appearance in academic and popular books is misleading, as it represents only a very small group of about 4 Predynastic male figurines.

¹¹ Bought and unstratified figurines have no "pedigree". Collectors purchase them from dealers, who cannot provide details of their excavation, i.e. dating and findspots. See below under "Source of Data".

The Dancing Female

A distinctive female figurine represents the third "typical" Predynastic figurine (Fig. 2.4) (Ucko 1968: Figurines 72,73; figs.47, 48). The arms curve above the head, fingers pointing inward, palms outward; the modelled face forms a large beak, the buttocks protrude, and sometimes the body bends at the hips. The legs, undifferentiated, end in a "peg", sometimes with upturned toes. These figurines appear to be "dancing".

Members of this figurine group come mainly from two locations, Ma'ameriah and Khizam (Map 2). A distinctive feature of many of these figurines, particularly those from Khizam, is the body stance. The Ma'ameriah figurines appear to stand upright, while the Khizam figurines either appear to be standing, leaning forward, or sitting, with the torso leaning back (Ucko 1968: 117-122). The Khizam group also distinguishes itself from the Ma'ameriah group by the variation of swelling of the stomach. The Khizam figurines seem to be at different stages of pregnancy, with some having a great or large swelling and some a slight swelling (*ibid*).

For some reason, the flat stomached Ma'ameriah figurines are preferred for illustrations over the Khizam figurines (Aldred 1998: 74, Fig. 37; Hassan 1992; Hoffman 1993: dust jacket; Neumann 1963: 26). Sometimes the Khizam figurines appear as examples of the "Mother Goddess" (Baring & Cashford 1991: 123, Fig 32b; Hornblower 1929 PL.VI;), but often the Ma'ameriah ones are chosen for this purpose (Hassan *ibid*; Neumann *ibid*). I would have thought the pregnant Khizam figurines provide more convincing examples to support the "Mother Goddess" theory than the Ma'ameriah ones. This "dancing" figurine is more typical than the Badarian ivory, and represents a larger group than the dome-headed male figurine, but it is probably chosen for its graceful form, upsweeping arms, and feather-like fingers, rather than its frequency in the archaeological record. It appeals to our sense of aesthetics and stands out from other Neolithic and Chalcolithic figurines of the Near East as vital and expressive compared to the often bizarre, unattractive, or inaccessible figurines of other contemporaneous cultures, for example, the "lizard-headed" figurines of the 'Ubaid culture of



FIG. 2.4

Nagada I or II clay female figurine
from grave #2 at Ma'ameriah

Southern Mesopotamia, the lumpy, potato-like heads of the Yarmukian figurines of the Levant, and the stalk-headed figurines of the Mesopotamian Halaf culture.¹²

Contrary to the popular impression, the prevalence of this figurine style is very limited and is restricted mainly to only two graves: 16 figurines in a single tomb at Ma'ameriah and 16 in a single deposit at Khizam. I assume the Khizam deposit, found under an earthenware lid, is part of the contents of a tomb, but since these figurines are in the unstratified, bought category, there is always some room for doubt (Ucko & Hodges 1963: 215-217). Of the 135 Predynastic figurines with heads and arms either intact or with enough remaining to denote position, 37 fall into this category, 32 in two deposits, leaving only 4 discovered in other graves, 3 of which are locatable (see Map 2).

Three male figurines also have raised arms and beaks, complicating any simple analysis about the meaning of the raised arms. These raised arms on the male figurines, although in conjunction with a beaked face, do not rise up in the same way as the vast majority of female raised arms, in a sweep far above the head. The males' arms reach head level only or bend at the elbows (Ucko 1968: Figurines 140,143,164).¹³ The expression appears less exuberant than the female expression.

In conclusion, to some extent the "dancing" female, which often appears in books, is more indicative simply because she represents a large group. However, she hardly reflects the figurine style found throughout Upper Egyptian Predynastic culture, for she appears mainly in two graves, with scant representation elsewhere.

Conclusions on the "typical" figurine

The typical Egyptian figurine is not necessarily the most distinctive. The 3 examples described above represent anomalies rather than regularities in the figurine record. They will, however, continue to be chosen as they are far more attractive and compelling than those figurines displaying the most common features of the Predynastic "style". The following analysis, tables, and descriptions will

¹² For illustrations of the Mesopotamian and Halaf figurines, see Parrot (1960); for illustrations of the Yarmukian figurines, see Garfinkel (1999).

demonstrate the frequency of certain features, give a better picture of the diversity of the group as a whole, and illuminate the characteristics more typical of the figurines of Predynastic Egypt.

SOURCE OF DATA

The data and information provided in this chapter come mainly from Peter Ucko's *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt and Neolithic Crete with Comparative Material from the Prehistoric Near East and Mainland Greece* (1968). For Egypt, Ucko catalogued 232 figurines, providing drawings and photographs of the main types. Records of other figurines have turned up in the course of this study: four female figurines found in a box in grave 2682 at Matmar and registered in Brunton's catalogue of his excavation (Brunton 1948: Table IX); and a few from Elise Baumgartel's supplement to Petrie's work at Nagada (Baumgartel 1970a), Joan Crowfoot Payne's appendix to the supplement (Payne 1990), Henry de Morgan's report on Ma'ameriah (de Morgan 1912), and Winifred Needler's further work on de Morgan's excavations (Needler 1984), bringing the total to 244. Unfortunately, these additional figurines do not have the benefit of Ucko's typology, and the available records provide no characteristics beyond sex. Therefore, I include them in the breakdown of the sex of the figurines (Table 2.1), but in no other breakdown. Their real usefulness comes later, in Chapter 3, in the analysis of individual graves with figurines, for this information is provided in excavation reports.

Ucko divided the 232 figurines into two categories: stratified and unstratified. The first category, the stratified figurines, numbers 77¹⁴; the remaining 155 are unstratified. The stratified figurines were excavated and documented by archaeologists employing standard archaeological methodology. Their documentation provides information on the specific cemeteries and graves in which the individual figurines were found, and enough information to enable the figurines to be dated. At the time of excavation, archaeologists used Petrie's Sequence Dating system, based on pottery styles, to date all objects within any given grave containing pots. Today, these dates are translated into a series of

¹³ An example can be seen in Hornblower (1929) Pl. VI, fig.5..

¹⁴ Including examples found in other sources, the total number of stratified figurines comes to 88.

Predynastic Periods from the Badarian to Nagada III, just prior to Egyptian unification and the beginning of the historic period.¹⁵

The unstratified figurines are often termed "bought" figurines, since private collectors and museums have purchased them from private sellers, who do not have the details of provenance, beyond occasionally the cemetery in which they were found. Therefore they come without the archaeological documentation which could assign them to any particular grave or period. The unstratified figurines represented in Ucko's study do not constitute the entire complement of bought figurines, but only those which Ucko ascertained as genuine and Predynastic, for many forgers benefited from the keen interest of the antiquities market for figurines.

Ucko based his study and conclusions on a detailed typology he applied to the stratified figurines and a few unstratified figurines which have sufficient details to date and place them. His typology includes the breakdown and analysis of the figurines by sex, numbers found in individual tombs, sex of skeleton, position in the tomb, head characteristics, material of manufacture, body posture, arm positions, and bodily dress and/or decorations. In his small, undeveloped section on accompanying grave goods (Ucko 1968: 177-181), he came quickly to the conclusion that grave wealth is not an issue, but he includes no specific details on individual graves or cemeteries. In short, Ucko's study is a detailed typology of the physical characteristics of the individual figurines, but not an in-depth study of the figurines in the context of the particular graves, villages, or cemeteries in which they were found.

For the purposes of this study, this chapter deals with the physical characteristics of the figurines - the first stage of Ucko's four-stage methodology. The following chapter explores the figurines in their environmental, cultural, and archaeological contexts, and discusses in some detail the figurines in relation to particular cemeteries and graves.

While Ucko divided the figurines into two groups, stratified and unstratified, I divide the figurines into two slightly different groups: those that are assigned a location (154 figurines), and those that are not

¹⁵ For a contemporary chronology of Egypt from the Predynastic to the Old Kingdom, see the opening of this chapter.

(90 figurines) (Appendix 1). By breaking the figurines into these two groupings, I am able to determine a geographical profile of distribution (Maps 1 & 2). Map 1 illustrates at first glance that the figurines on the whole were distributed over the entire Predynastic Upper Egyptian culture from Edfu in the south to Suâdi in the north. Only the "miserable fragments" (Ucko 1968: 167) of two figurines found in Lower Egypt, one at Merimde and the other at Abusir el Meleq, suggest any similar practice for Lower Egypt. Map 2 focuses on a specific female figurine type discussed later – those with raised arms – and demonstrates the limited distribution of this particular type. Map 1 also displays the distribution of figurines with a particular facial style – the beaked, bird's head style.

I proceed on the assumption that, since all but two of Ucko's stratified figurines come from graves, and many of the unstratified but locatable figurines come from cemeteries, the vast majority of all figurines are from graves as well. Literature on village excavations (Baumgartel 1960, 1970b; Brunton & Caton-Thompson 1928), discussions of Egyptian figurines in general (Hornblower 1929; Murray 1934, 1956; Ucko 1968), and general and specific material on Predynastic Egypt all mention figurines in association with graves. I found no mention of any figurine culture in connection with village life, except Ucko's concession to the two found in village sites, which he conceded may have been destined for mortuary use (1968: 428). The fragility of the figurines would cause broken fragments to turn up in rubbish tips or the domestic environment, had the figurines been part of domestic ritual. Since the graves supplied Egyptian objects for the antiquities market, I presume that private and museum collectors obtained their unstratified or unlocatable figurines from the plunder or excavation of Predynastic graves before the application of archaeological methods, or from people merely looking for objects to sell.

As well as forming a part of the Predynastic mortuary cult, these Upper Egyptian figurines, with the exception of 5 figurines dated to the Badarian period, all belong to the Nagada I and II (Amratian and Gerzean) periods. The significance of the decline of figurine use in the Nagada III period will be discussed in the following chapter.

Clearing up some misunderstandings

Occasionally general books on art and Egyptian culture contain contradictory and confusing statements. Rice (1990: 68) asserted that the figurines with raised arms are Badarian. This, I think, is a mere editorial error, for no other mention elsewhere assigns these figurines to any period but the Nagada I period, or perhaps Nagada II.

A.J. Spencer claimed that an ivory female figurine with a mounting peg at the bottom of its feet comes from the Nagada I culture (Spencer 1993: 31, Fig 15). This figurine, discussed earlier, forms one of a complement of 50 ivory figurines catalogued by Peter Ucko (1965). According to Ucko, the pegged ivory figurines in this collection "have no convincing parallels among predynastic material" (Ucko 1965: 220). This particular style of peg would slot into a stand of some sort (*ibid*), unlike the tapered peg legs of the Predynastic figurines, which probably held the figurines upright in the sand as they did the ivory figurines from grave 271 at Nagada (Baumgartel 1960: 70). Unfortunately the provenance of the figurine in question (Ucko 1965: PL.1, Fig. 1) is unknown, having been bought by the British Museum (*ibid* 214). With such limited information about these pegged figurines, until some method of dating ivory becomes reliable, the available evidence must assign a Dynastic rather than Predynastic date to them. Many display characteristics common to the male ivories with mounting pegs and many have obvious borrowings from Mesopotamian styles of the Sumerian Dynastic Period (c2900 BCE) and hence probably belong to the Early Egyptian Dynasties I and II (3100-2700 BCE).

Some other ivory figurines similar to those catalogued by Ucko (1965) come from Hierakonpolis, possibly from the Main Deposit. Barbara Adams (1974a) catalogued these with descriptions, illustrations, photographs (PLs. 44,45, fig. 360, description p.70; PL.47, fig. 368), along with fragments of 3 other human figurines (*ibid* # 369, 370, 371). Her figures 360 and 368, female and male respectively, resemble those catalogued by Ucko (1965). The female has a peg, suggesting display on a plinth rather than grave inclusion. Since the Main Deposit is dated to ca 2130-1785 BCE (Hoffman 1980: 9), these figurines are probably Early Dynastic, not Predynastic. The style of the female hair arrangement also suggests this date.

The pegs on those ivory figurines described by Ucko and B. Adams suggest a new use for figurines. While they could still be connected with mortuary practice in some way, they appear to have stood, at least temporarily, on some kind of platform or altar. Since they are not provenanced, we cannot know for certain if they eventually ended up in graves. This peg, however, might indicate the beginnings of anthropomorphic temple iconography in Egypt.

The following typology, which includes the Badarian figurines, provides the raw data for a discussion in further chapters of the Predynastic Upper Egyptian funerary beliefs and practices. My analysis includes all 232 figurines of Ucko's catalogue plus additions, bringing the total to 244. Ninety of these are not located, while 154 receive some indication of location, either the specific grave and cemetery or only the cemetery (Table 2.1).

SELECTED PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Ucko postulated that the diversity of characteristics and the blurred distinctions between any apparent figurine types prevent classification of the figurines into distinctive groups. To any observer, certain characteristics, however, do separate some figurines from others.

Sex (Table 2.1) is the most obvious, even though both sexes share certain characteristics (Tables 2.2, 2.3, 2.6). Material type falls generally into 3 categories: clay, ivory, and vegetable paste, with very few made of any other materials (Table 2.6). Not all figurines are completely anthropomorphic, for many have bird or animal heads (Table 2.3). Also a variety of arm positions suggest at least 2 major groups, with a third group composed of small numbers of varying positions (Table 2.2). Most, but not all figurines are standing (Table 2.4), and a significant group leans in such a way that archaeologists have been unable to decide whether they are standing or sitting. Many, but not all, figurine legs form a single peg and have no feet.

These are only some of the various physical attributes the Predynastic Egyptians gave their figurines. Ucko identified a multitude of other details, such as dimples, incisions, painted features and markings, feet and toe positions, clay colour, indications of clothing, and hair styles.

From among the variety of characteristics, I present those which tend to separate the figurines into identifiable groups, as displayed in the tables outlined above. I also combine some of these groups, such as certain head styles in conjunction with certain arm positions by sex to see if sub-groups form and whether male and female figurines diverge in certain areas (Tables 2.7, 2.8, 2.9).

A certain element of arbitrary choice may be at work in selecting these groupings, for the question arises as to why arm position should be more significant than dimples. My choices focus on those characteristics which seem to have some significance in the overall complement of Egyptian art, both Predynastic and Dynastic. Those Predynastic characteristics which the Dynastic Egyptians chose to retain or develop for official iconography can be understood to some extent through our understanding of Dynastic imagery. Characteristics that passed away with the end of the Predynastic remain silent symbols, unless clues to their meanings can be derived from similar iconography amongst twentieth century peoples living a similar life style. In most cases, however, symbols are culture-specific, and meanings are lost if no historic connection can be made. Figurines do not fall into a cross-cultural category of their own. They must be understood first within the context of the culture that uses them, and then, if a comparable figurine-using culture can be found, in that context as well.

Distribution by sex: undoing the myth of the Supreme Goddess

My treatment of the figurines applies Ucko's typology to the unstratified figurines, which he did not analyse, and makes minor adjustments, as described below, to his typology of the stratified figurines. It also includes the Matmar, Nagada, and Ma'ameriah figurines not represented in Ucko's catalogue. The breakdown by sex of this collection of Predynastic figurines is as follows. Data comes from Appendix 1.

TABLE 2.1 FIGURINES BY SEX

	Male	Female	Cannot Determine	Total
No location	11	58	21	90
With Location	24	81	49	154
Total	35	139	70	244
%*	20.1%	79.9%		

Total of sexed figurines = 174

*% of sexed figurines

Some of my assignments of sex to a few figurines may differ from Ucko's, but the numbers are so small as to be minor. My reasons for differing follow his criteria regarding hip to waist ratio (higher for female figurines) (Ucko 1968: 175). Acknowledging that a male figurine is usually represented by the presence of a penis or penis sheath but also by a beard (ibid 174), I assign those fragments of lower parts without male qualities but with small waists to the female category, where Ucko, being more conservative, would sometimes not assign a sex:

... it would be illegitimate to sex the lower part of a figurine with no penis or sheath as female or no-sex, since the predynastic Egyptians sometimes indicated the male sex by the representation of the beard alone. (ibid 174)

In most cases I concur with Ucko's reluctance to attribute sex based on the presence or absence of genitalia alone (females are not designated by genitalia either), but in cases such as that of Ucko's figurine 188 (Ucko 1968: Fig. 69 p.62-3) and figurine 79 (ibid Fig. 53 p.51), where the narrow waist, swelling hips, and protruding buttocks suggest the female shape, I assign a female sex, even though the hip to waist ratio overlaps that of some male figurines. Also, an attribute appears in the unstratified, bought figurines which does not suggest itself in the stratified figurines – a sharp stomach protrusion. In the unstratified figurines, this attribute accompanies only female figurines, and therefore, to the few examples from the stratified and unstratified groups which display this stomach protrusion but without any other sex characteristic, I assign the female attribution.

The ivory "pin" figurines present a problem in assigning sex. The "pin" figurines form a loosely defined group of figurines made of ivory. Their chins usually taper to a beard-like point, but their waists tend to be narrow in relation to their hips. No breasts are indicated, but an incised line

accentuates the hips. Incised designs often also delineate navels, necklaces, and facial features. Arms are suggested only by stumps. Five examples from a single grave at Nagada distinguish themselves by carrying pots on their heads. These 5 pin figurines stood upright in the sand, arranged in a straight line within the grave. For examples of "pin" figurines, see Ucko (1968: Figurines 25, 37, 63, 65). A similar one in vegetable paste is shown in Fig. 2.1d, although with breasts indicated.

In most cases, the hip to waist ratio of pin figurines falls within the female range, but the presence of a beard-like chin led Ucko to place them in the "Cannot Determine" category regarding sex. Fig. 2.1d (Ucko 1968: Figurine 32) has both breasts and a beard. Therefore, the presence of the "beard" is not necessarily a male characteristic, and I, perhaps somewhat incautiously, determine the pin figurines with small waists and large hips to be female, whether a "beard" is present or not. If the reader feels such a determination to be unwarranted, he or she is free to place these figurines in the "Cannot Determine" category (see below and Chapter 6 for a brief discussion of beard symbolism).

I assign a "male" designation to several figurines in possession of a beard and a narrow hip/waist ratio (for example, Ucko 1968: figs. 17,49,101,186,192), since here the hip/waist ratio appears to be the sexual determinate rather than the beard. The reader, again, can move these figurines to the "Cannot Determine" category, based on the absence of a penis or sheath. However, such alterations will not affect the distribution of male/female to any great degree. The female figurines still obviously make up the majority of the sexed figurines (*ibid* 169) (79.9%), leaving 20.1% as male (Table 2.1). A few figurines, moved one way or the other, will affect this proportion slightly but not significantly.

The predominance of female figurines seems to be universal among Neolithic figurine-using cultures, particularly of the Mediterranean, Near and Middle East, and India. Even the surviving European Paleolithic stone figurines, dated as early as 22,000 BP, are mostly female (Ehrenberg 1989: 68-69). The Egyptian complement follows this tendency, and, as a result, has been placed under the "Mother Goddess" umbrella as well, despite the many variations of style.

Unlike the other Neolithic and Chalcolithic peoples of the Near East, the Egyptians did not deliberately make a separate group of figurines without sexual characteristics (Ucko 1968: 175). Therefore, Ucko assumed the category "Cannot Determine" to contain both female and male figurines. Under this assumption, one could distribute these figurines proportionately over the male and female categories, raising the numbers but retaining the percentage ratio.

The exclusive distinction between female and male has recently been questioned by some archaeologists investigating other prehistoric cultures. Naomi Hamilton (1996b: 250-251) observed that a few burials at the prehistoric site of Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia contain items usually attributed exclusively to the opposite sex (ibid 259). Ucko even recently admitted that contemporary and future archaeologists working with prehistoric figurines will:

accept the possibility that the ancient world was not necessarily seen by its then inhabitants to have been exclusively populated by those of one of only two sexes. ... Archaeologists must really now develop a scepticism towards the assumption of a simple sexual dualism in the interpretation of the prehistoric figurine record. (Ucko 1996: 303)

Compositely gendered figurines might reflect gender ambiguities within the living community, but they also might refer to a mythical world in which genders are blurred, merged, or composite. The ambivalent "bearded" figurines may need to be re-examined in a context of over-lapping gendered beings in mythology. The Dynastic god of the Nile, Hapy, and a number of other unnamed fertility deities which share his iconography combine male and female characteristics such as beards, breasts, and male bodies along with a corpulence symbolising fecundity (Figs. 2.5 a, b) (Baines 1985: 83-145). A more detailed discussion of the relevance to the figurines of the fecundity symbolism of these gender-sharing images appears in Chapter 6 as part of the concluding interpretation.

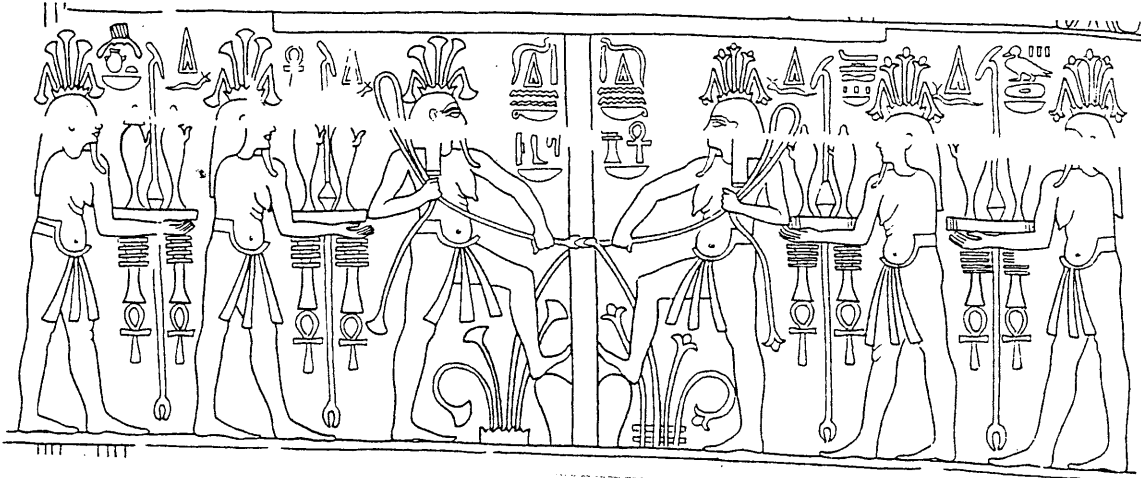


FIG. 2.5a Male fecundity figures incorporating female breasts with male form



FIG. 2.5b Male fecundity figure in forward leaning position

Distribution by arm style: stylistic or symbolic choices?

TABLE 2.2 FIGURINES BY ARM POSITION
for those with identifiable arms

	stump	raised	other¹⁶	total
Male	14	3	14	31
Female	55	47	27	129
C.D.¹⁷	13	3	15	31
Total	82	53	56	191
%	42.9%	27.8%	29.3%	

For those 191 figurines whose arm positions can be determined, the stump style constitutes the largest single category. The Egyptians deliberately modelled this feature onto some of their figurines. The arms are not missing; they are simply indicated by small protrusions from the shoulders (Figs. 2.1 b,c,d).

Ucko discovered in his investigation of figurine use that similar contemporary cultures often eliminate arms simply because they are vulnerable to breakage (Ucko 1968: 423). Therefore, he saw nothing symbolic or meaningful in this particular style. But earlier archaeologists called them armless figurines and debated whether they represented spirits or deities who had no arms (Baumgartel 1960: 70).

Ucko's conclusion on the stump arms seems logical, especially if these figurines were intended for use outside the grave prior to burial, either in some ritual or other activity which involved handling the figurine to any extent. Indeed, most of the figurines with extended arms have either broken or missing arms.

¹⁶ Includes various positions: arms down, horizontal, right and left in different positions, curved around breasts.

¹⁷ Cannot Determine sex of figurine

But other arm styles do not protrude from the body. The group of figurines with a variety of arm positions, indicated by the "other" category in Table 2.2, includes those with arms down the sides of the figure, like the ivory Badarian figurine described earlier. Possibly to avoid breakage, the artist attached the hands to the hips. The ivory male figurines with penis sheaths also typically have their arms down their sides, joining the thighs at the hand and lower arm (Fig. 2.3), and their sheaths attach securely to their stomachs (Fig. 2.3). Other figurines curve their arms around their breasts, or attach them to their bodies in other ways (see Appendix 1).

Ucko's comment on breakage could apply if a particularly fragile arm position was intended, perhaps raised or extended arms. Rather than take the risk of using broken figurines in a ritual, the participants may have simply "understood" the arms to be there. This point is worth considering, but too highly speculative to inform any conclusion.

Since other options were available to the Egyptians for securing the arms, more likely they chose the stump style for a particular reason. As Elise Baumgartel pointed out, spirits conceived without arms might be intended. This idea receives some support from the illustrations on some Nagada II pottery which depict armless figures (Figs. 2.6 a, b). In paintings, with no need to protect against breakage, the Egyptians could have easily painted the arms as conceived, without the need to "understand" them as there. Therefore, the "stump" arm style probably has a symbolic rather than practical significance.

The raised arms actually form two categories: arms sweeping up over the head, fingers often turned inward, palms outward (Figs. 2.1h, 2.4); and the arms raised to the side of the head, bent at right angles at the elbows. Of the 53 figurines with raised arms, 7 belong in the latter category. Three of these figurines can be identified as male, and three as female. It may be significant that no male figurine has the fully raised arms (all have the right-angle style) and that the female figurines share in both styles.

Ucko, as mentioned earlier, saw no particular significance in these raised arms, preferring to understand them as stylistic variations alone. But again, we do see an echo of this form in many

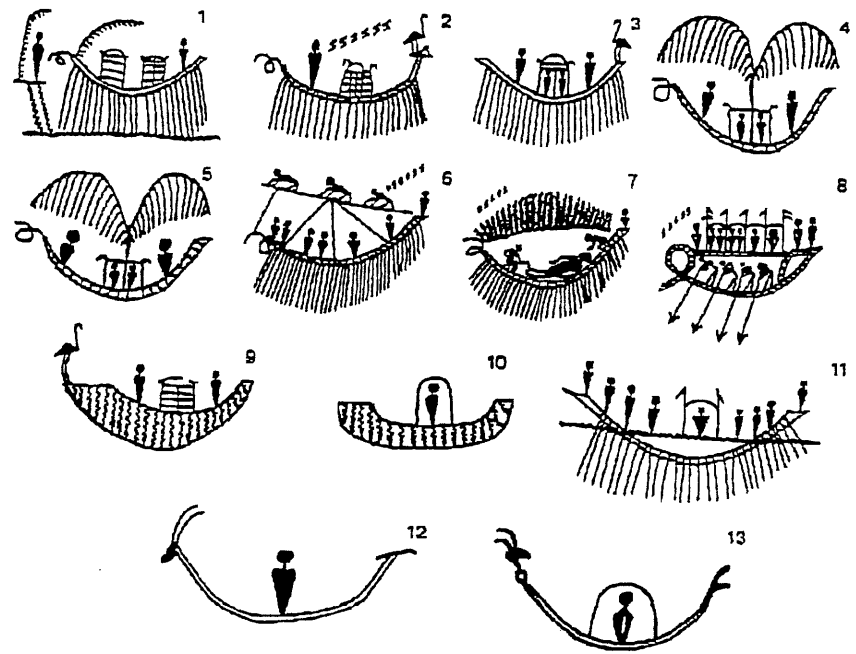


FIG 2.6a Armless figures on Nagada II boat scenes on Decorated Ware

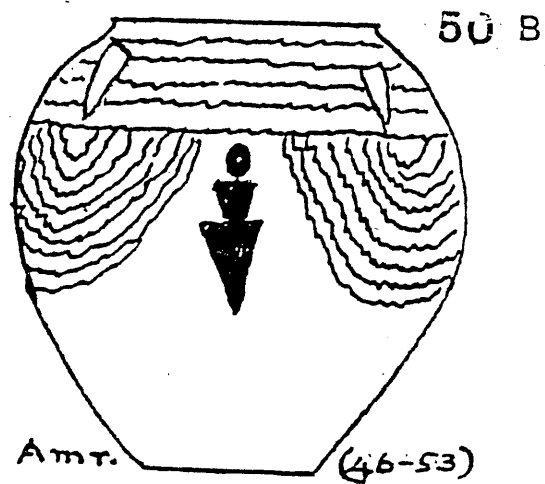


FIG. 2.6b Armless figure on Nagada II Decorated pot

examples of Dynastic art: the goddess Nut, painted on the inside of coffin lids, raises her arms over the deceased body lying beneath her; the hieroglyph for the life force, the *k3*, takes the form of a pair of raised arms, bent at the elbows; painted mourners in Dynastic tombs raise their arms over their heads in a lament. The concluding interpretation in Chapter 6 considers all these possibilities. Clearly, raised arms must have meant something to the Predynastic Egyptians. They are fragile and more difficult to create, making breakage an unnecessary risk if the symbolic meaning were not highly important.

Females with raised arms also appear on other Predynastic iconography. Paintings on the Nagada II Decorated ware (Fig. 2.7) include human figures with arms raised above their heads, hands pointing inwards. Since other painted figures on this style of pot have a variety of other arm positions, all must be seen as meaningful rather than merely stylistic choices.

Distribution by head style: The frequency of human and animal heads

TABLE 2.3 FIGURINES BY HEAD STYLE
for those found with heads

	<u>Human</u>	<u>Beak</u>	<u>Animal</u>	<u>Pinched¹⁸</u>	<u>No Features</u>	<u>Total</u>
Male	16	10	0	3	1	30
%	53.4%	33.3%		10%	3.3%	
Female	29	52	11	14	3	109
%	26.6%	47.7%	10.1%	12.8%	2.8%	
C.D.	20	10	3	2	6	41
Total	65	72	14	19	10	180
%	36.1%	40%	7.8%	10.6%	5.5%	

non-human head style
105 figurines, 58.4% of total

¹⁸ Also includes wedges and projections which cannot be defined as animal or beak.

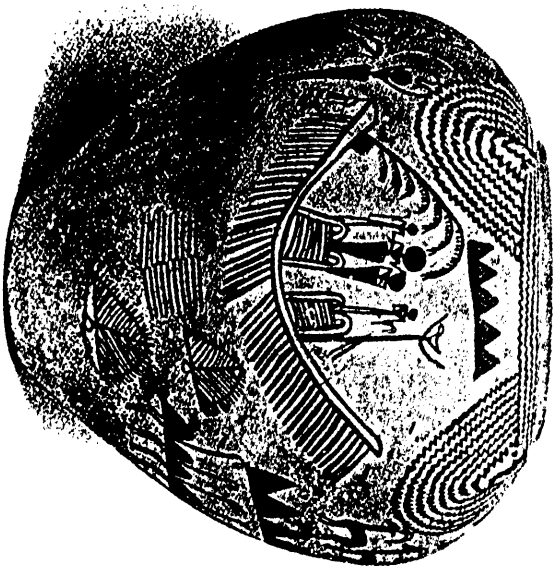
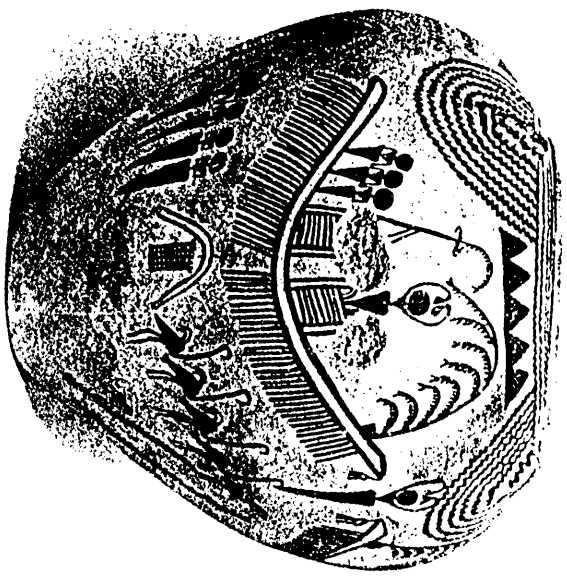
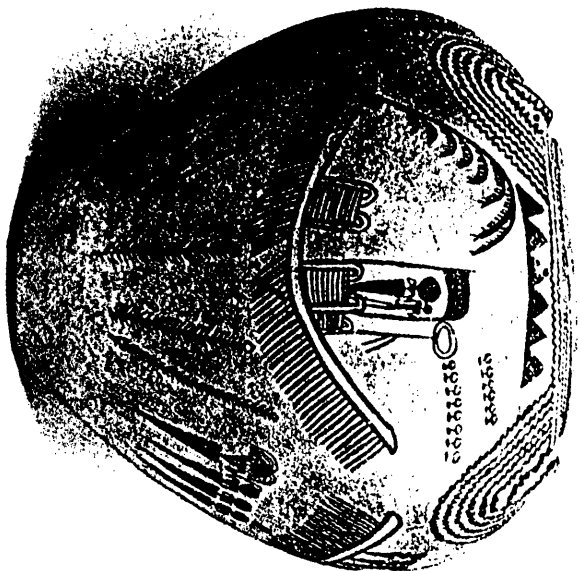


FIG. 2.7 Female figures with raised arms on Nagada II Decorated Ware

Informed by Ucko's typology, I present 5 categories of head style, although variations exist within each of these categories. I aim to distinguish therianthropic from anthropomorphic representations simply because the Dynastic Egyptians seemed to make this differentiation in their iconography.

Human characteristics consist of a variety of representations of eyes, noses, and mouths, while the beaked characteristic generally conforms to a round head which merges into a large beak-like protrusion in place of a human face (Figs. 2.1h, 2.4). Sometimes the beaked face includes eyes as well, often painted in black and green. Occasionally a painted mouth appears beneath the beak, but usually the beak constitutes the only facial feature. This beak, which Ucko generally described as "large" (1968: throughout catalogue), curves down toward the chest, suggesting the beak of a raptor rather than of a seed-eater, insect-eater, or water-bird.

Ucko, throughout his catalogue, described the animal faces as muzzles or snouts, clearly terms belonging to animal species. Therefore, I classify them as animal faces. The pinched style seems deliberately not human, and more like a less well-formed or smaller version of the beak. Conversely, a nose might be intended, but since the Egyptians often deliberately indicated human noses, a non-human intention is inferred as the "pinch" appears to be an intentional style and therefore may be symbolic.

Table 2.3 demonstrates that the largest single category is the head with a large beak and that most of these are female. The figurines from Ma'amariah and Khizam, which represent a large section of this group, have no facial features other than this beak. A smaller group of figurines displays the "pinched" face. The "animal" category forms the next smallest group, followed by a small group made with no features at all. Possibly the beak, animal, and pinched faces form a group of non-human faces with each distinct style expressing its own symbolic meaning in the choice of therianthropic. Together, this group of non-human-headed figurines comprises the majority at 58.4% of the total.

Over one third of the figurines have human-like faces with modelled features. This represents a sizable portion of the figurine complement (36.1%, Table 2.3), but still far smaller than the non-human

category. Not surprisingly, non-human faces characterise much of Predynastic iconography, for the Dynastic Egyptians were famous for their therianthrope bird and animal-headed deities with human bodies. While a few Egyptian deities are completely anthropomorphic, such as Isis, Nephthys, Osiris, Ptah, Nut, Geb, Shu, Tefnut, Amon, Atum, and most often, Hathor, wearing her horned crown, even some of these have close associations with animals: Isis and Nephthys with kites; Ptah with the Apis bull; Amon with a Ram; Hathor with a cow.

The therianthrope Predynastic forms are not merely a matter of taste or style. They point too clearly towards a typically Egyptian conception of deity, imaged with non-human heads and human bodies.

Distribution by body posture: standing or sitting? The "leaning" figurines

Ucko (1968) described standing figurines many times in his catalogue with the words "stand, with vertically extended legs". Most often these vertically extended legs form an undifferentiated peg, but occasionally the legs are separately modelled. Ucko used the term "vertically extended" to identify a style of figurine which clearly stands upright, probably meant for insertion into the sandy bottom of the grave. He clearly distinguished this style from the group of figurines which either stand but lean forward, or sit but lean backward. Sometimes he could not decide whether a leaning figurine stands or sits, and so he included both options in his description.

Table 2.4 delineates the distribution of body posture according to whether the figurines stand, sit, or lean. I do not differentiate between figurines described as leaning backward or forward because so many of them cannot be classified into either category. I group them together, but for those who wish to make the distinction, the leaning category, as determined by Ucko breaks down as follows: standing, leaning forward, 14 figurines; sitting, leaning backward, 24 figurines. In cases where Ucko indicated either possibility, I select his first option.

The first noticeable fact about the leaning figurines is that only female figurines lean. No leaning male figurine has been found yet. Possibly the 5 leaning figurines which cannot be sexed (Table 2.5) could include males, but nothing indicates this possibility.

Nearly half (15) of the leaning figurines have raised arms (Table 2.5). Of these 15 figurines, 11 come from the single deposit at Khizam and therefore also are bird-headed. As described earlier, these Khizam figurines all have varying degrees of swelling stomachs, probably indicating varying stages of pregnancy. Also, Ucko described many of them as having their feet turned up as well as their hands turned inward with fingers carefully incised. The beaked heads of the Khizam group also slightly tilt up. It is hard to accept that these deliberately chosen and carefully indicated features – the tilted bird heads, the pregnancies, the turned-up feet, the leaning posture, the carefully incised fingers – are mere stylistic features signifying nothing symbolic or meaningful.

The most obvious interpretation of the leaning and raised arm figurines forms the phrase which characterises these figurines – the dancing female. The body posture, the toes, the fingers, hands and arms, and the head tilt all suggest movement and specific gestures of a ritual dance. Rare would be a culture with no tradition of dancing, comprising specific movements, taught and perfected from generation to generation.

Dynastic tomb iconography often includes funeral dances (Fig. 6.6), undoubtedly performed live as part of the mortuary ritual. These leaning figurines may be the Predynastic record of a funeral dance performed for the deceased. The significance of the bird imagery, the pregnancy, and a possible alternative meaning of the leaning posture will be explored later in the chapter on interpretation.

TABLE 2.4 FIGURINES BY BODY POSTURE

	Standing	Seated	Leaning ¹⁹	Kneeling	C.D.	Total
Female	70	25	33	1	10	139
Male	30	3			2	35
C.D.	23	8	5	2	32	70
Total	123	36	38	3	44	244
%	50.4%	14.8%	15.6%	1.2%	18%	

TABLE 2.5 LEANING BODY POSTURE AND ARM POSITION

	Stump	Raised	Other	C.D.	Total
Female	7	15	7	4	33
C.D.	1		1	3	5
Total	8	15	8	7	38
%	21%	39.5%	21%	18.5%	

Distribution by stomach profile: pregnant or just fat?

The probable pregnancy of the Khizam figurines has already been discussed. To the 16 pregnant figurines of Khizam can be added another 21 female figurines with various abdominal extensions. Most of these extensions include swellings which can be attributed to pregnancy, but a small number of figurines (6) have a sharp projection on their lower abdomen. Figurines with stomach extensions are always female. Of this collection, half (19) are in a leaning position (see Appendix 1).

¹⁹ Forward or backward depending on whether Ucko decided the figurine was standing or seated. Often he included either option as he could not decide.

This sharp projection was pinched out from the clay, and the Egyptians made no attempt to model the projection into a swelling or a rounded fold of fat. In the case of Ucko's Figurine 79 (Ucko 1968), made of limestone, the projection was carved in a wedge-like shape, suggesting the intentional sharpness of the protrusion on the clay examples and not merely an effect produced by quickly pinching out the stomach to suggest a fold of fat. Ucko conjectured that these sharp protrusions represent some anatomical feature (Ucko 1968: 83), but he made no suggestions beyond that.

The projection appears on the earliest figurines of the Badarian period (Fig. 2.2b). Brunton (1937: 56) described it as "a curious raised bar running across the front of the figure at the waist, or rather below it, which is difficult to explain." Elsewhere, Brunton, according to Ucko (1968: 83), suggested that the protrusion might be a belt, but Ucko rejected that interpretation. I don't know what anatomical feature this sharp projection might represent, perhaps a deliberate tribal deformation, but Brunton's suggestion of a belt seems more logical. Perhaps the protrusion indicates a ceremonial girdle worn by women. It might be related to the swelling stomachs of the other figurines, but, because of its shape, it seems unlikely to represent pregnancy.

Figurine 166 of Ucko's catalogue, illustrated in Figure 68 (Ucko 1968) (here Fig. 2.8), could provide a clue to the projection's significance. This figurine wears a tight girdle which pushes the lower abdomen up and out until the lower and upper abdomen and the breasts ripple in a series of folds. Figurine 207, illustrated by Ucko (ibid) in his Fig. 70, also clearly displays five rolls of fat between the pubic area and the breasts. The deliberate rolls of fat on these two figurines may indicate a cultural meaning attached to fatness. Fecundity rather than fertility may be intended, as do the rolls of fat evident on Dynastic images of the Nile god Hapy and other fecundity figures (Figs. 2.5 a,b). In a subsistence culture, such as that of the earliest Egyptians, rare corpulence could have signified prosperity, abundance, surplus, and well-being. To a sociologist, these figurines of surfeit might imply an economy in which people get more than enough to eat. To the Egyptians, the material manifestation of fecundity expresses a spiritual harmony with the unseen forces governing the natural world, similar to Hindu beliefs of the spiritual mother expressing her generosity through the gifts of the

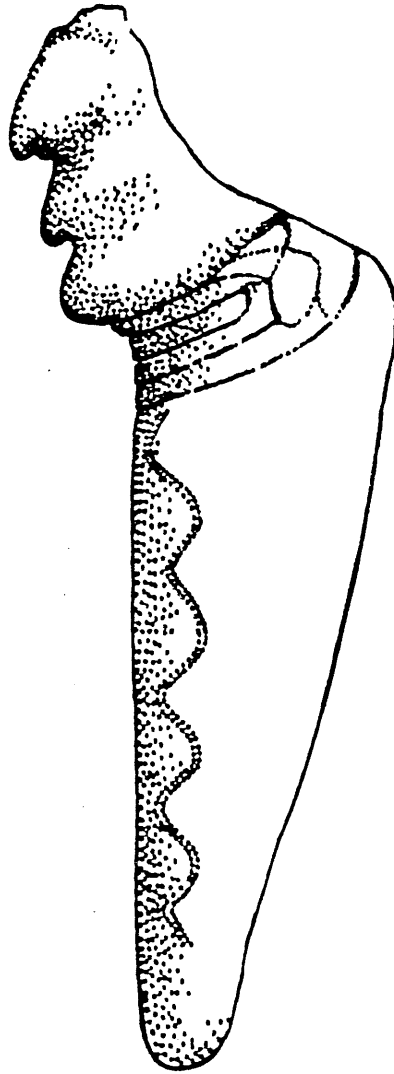


FIG. 2.8 Female figurine displaying stomach folds above a tight girdle

cow. The discussion of the religion of other Nilotic peoples in Chapter 4 teases out this interdependence of spiritual and material, and by analogy, demonstrates the probability that the Predynastic Egyptians also thought this way.

John Baines (1985) in his careful study of the Dynastic fecundity figures pointed out that these figures are distinguished by their long pendulous breasts and stomachs spilling over tight girdles. Some of the figures lean forward, and for those which do, rolls of fat form between the breasts and girdle (ibid 93-97). While the Dynastic images are, surprisingly, male, the Predynastic figurines with these attributes seem to be female. The Dynastic fecundity figures imply that the Predynastic figurines with similar characteristics have a similar meaning. The sharp projection could represent the abdominal fold created by a low, tight girdle. The fold, stylised as a bar or a wedge-like projection, perhaps became a stylised symbol of fecundity, making a more realistic representation unnecessary.

Out of the entire female figurine collection, 26.7% have some form of stomach extension, suggesting fertility or fecundity has something to do with the significance of the figurines. This important point will be explored in greater depth in the discussion of possible interpretations.

Distribution by raw material: precious or cheap?

Ucko considered the material of figurine manufacture to be of major interpretive significance. Repeatedly he stressed his observation that, in general, Neolithic figurines are made from "cheap" materials, such as clay, which are not worthy to be used in the representation of deities (Ucko 1962: 43; 1968: 417). Images of deities, being sacred, should be made from precious materials and be executed with skill and attention to detail.

Ucko's observation on the prevalence of clay is borne out by the Egyptian collection (Table 2.6). Three-quarters of the Egyptian figurines are made from some form of clay, either fired or raw. The rest are made from vegetable paste, ivory, and stone. For a large component of the clay figurines, Ucko's catalogue is indeterminate on whether they are fired or unfired, presumably because the original excavation reports do not specify. Although the unfired category is small, 3.3%, we cannot

assume insignificance for the unfired component, for the unfired ones would be the first to disintegrate into unrecognisable fragments within the grave. Ayrton and Loat described an unfired clay female figurine which "had crumbled to pieces" during the excavation of Mahasna grave H41 (Ayrton & Loat 1911: 13). Because of the friability of unfired clay, the figurines are in such bad shape that the sex of the majority of this group remains undetermined.

Ivory figurines, from local hippopotamus ivory, make up a very small portion of the figurines as a whole – 10.7%. To Ucko, ivory might qualify as a precious material, for it is more durable and is harder to obtain than clay or vegetable paste. Only a tiny portion of figurines are made from stone, a material much harder to obtain and work.

Pin figurines seem to be made exclusively from ivory, as are the male figurines with penis sheaths. The therianthrope bird and animal-headed figurines are all made from clay, as are the figurines with raised arms (see Appendix 1). The Egyptians modelled their vegetable paste figurines on a stick, and hence these examples tend to stand upright, "with vertically extended legs". To the Predynastic Egyptians, material choice might have been practical rather than symbolic. They made the more difficult "dancing" figurines from the most versatile and plastic material – clay. The figurines with the most careful details, such as the delicately carved penis sheaths and ornamented pin figurines were carved from the less friable ivory. Vegetable paste figurines resemble many of the clay figurines, with upright posture and stump arms, but not lending itself to extended arms and leaning posture, and needing internal support, the material produced more static images.

The wide-spread use of clay figurines even today in India, where unfired and fired clay images represent a variety of deities in ritual worship, render unclear why Ucko stipulated precious materials for sacred images. This seems to be a personal assessment. In his experience, prehistoric figurines in the ethnographic record do not represent deities, therefore no supporting evidence could suggest to him the "proper" material for prehistoric divine figurines. Perhaps he based his stipulation on his own observation of Dynastic Egyptian and other ancient iconography, carved from stone, cast in bronze or gold, fabricated from gold, or carved from wood and then covered in gold leaf. The Egyptian priests treasured these precious statues in their hidden sanctuaries in permanent, sacred places such as

tombs and temples. But Ucko seemed to have overlooked the more humble Dynastic Egyptian clay figurines of Bes, Taweret, Isis, and other deities, found in the graves and homes of ordinary Egyptians (Frankfurter 1998: 134; Quirke 1992: 124-5) (see Chapter 6), indicating that the Egyptians, unlike the subjects of Ucko's studies, did make divine images from "cheap" materials.

The Predynastic Egyptians had access to a wide range of "precious" materials, but they chose to use them for personal adornment – beads and amulets worn during life as well as death. They made objects specifically for the grave mostly, but not exclusively, from clay, and to a lesser extent, from domestic ivory, at least in the earlier Predynastic (the Badarian, Nagada I and II). As demonstrated in the next chapter, during Predynastic Egypt's move towards unification, a section of the population with the most access to precious and imported materials began to use them for grave goods and temple objects and distinguished themselves by the quantity of precious materials they could afford to lavish on their burials. Perhaps the confluence of the spiritually sacred and the materially precious had not occurred to the earliest Predynastic people. Instead, they chose the material appropriate for the physical demands of the task.

TABLE 2.6 FIGURINES BY MATERIAL

	Ivory	Clay			V.P.	Stone	Other	C.D.	Total
		Fired	Undesignated	Unfired					
Female	13	69	38	2	11	4	2		139
Male	5	12	13		3	1	1		35
C.D.	8	22	20	6	4	5	1	3	70
Total	26	103	71	8	18	11	4	3	244
%	10.7%	42.2%	29.1%	3.3%	7.4%	4.5%	1.6%	1.2%	
		 182 clay figurines, 74.6%							

IN SEARCH OF THE TRULY TYPICAL FIGURINE

Diversity seems to be the overriding rule in Egyptian figurine form, but within that diversity certain tendencies indicate that the Egyptians made specific choices from a limited repertoire of options. Raw material, sex, arm position, head style, and posture seem to be the most significant factors in determining style categories for the figurines. For example, while the stump arm form appears on figurines of all materials – clay, vegetable paste, and ivory – only clay was chosen for the figurines with raised arms. While a few of the female figurines with raised arms display the modified form with arms raised to head level only, not one male has the fully raised arm position. And only female figurines lean.

The following tables (2.7, 2.8, 2.9) further break down the figurines by sex, head, and arm style in order to determine if other patterns emerge.

Male figurines

TABLE 2.7 MALE FIGURINES BY ARM/HEAD COMBINATION
for those with intact arms and heads

A R M	H E A D				Total	
	Human	Beak	Animal	Pinched		No Features
Stump	5	2	0	3	1	11
Raised	0	3	0	0	0	3
Other	9	5	0	0	0	14
Total	14	10	0	3	1	28
%	50%	35.7%		10.7%	3.6%	

The paucity of male figurines makes solid conclusions difficult to draw. Fortunately most of them have arms and heads intact – 28 out of a total of 35 figurines (Table 2.7). This small sample

suggests a tendency that the male figurines are as likely to be fully anthropomorphic as therianthropic. Half of the 28 have human features, while 13 have either beak or pinched faces.

While male figurines often have human faces, not one with raised arms has a human face. Table 2.9 demonstrates that the faces of only 5 figurines with raised arms are human, and these are all female (Table 2.8). This data demonstrates a link between the raised arm form and the non-human face, usually beaked (Table 2.9). The Predynastic Egyptians chose specific combinations of arm and face style for certain intended reasons or meanings. The beak with raised arms forms a distinct category, with some overlap into other styles. The vast majority of figurines in this category are female; the males of this group display a modified raised arm style resembling the *k3* hieroglyph.

The typical male figurine, however, does not have raised arms with a beak face. It is more likely to have a human or beak face, but with stump arms or arms chosen from a diverse selection of possible forms (Table 2.7), often down the sides of the body (see illustrations, Ucko 1968). No male figurine of this description, to my knowledge, represents Predynastic figurines in general works. The dome-headed ivory with fancy penis sheath is a far more interesting choice, although somewhat misleading.

TABLE 2.8 FEMALE FIGURINES BY ARM/HEAD COMBINATION
for those with intact arms and heads

A R M	H E A D					Total
	Human	Beak	Animal	Pinched	No Features	
Stump	15	9	8	6	6	44
Raised	5	37	0	2	2	46
Other	7	9	1	0	0	17
Total	27	55	9	8	8	107
%	25.2%	51.4%	8.4%	7.5%	7.5%	

72 non-human, 67.3%

TABLE 2.9 TOTAL FIGURINES BY ARM/HEAD COMBINATION

ARM	H E A D					Total
	Human	Beak	Animal	Pinched	No Features	
Stump	20	11	8	9	7	55
Raised	5	40	0	2	2	49
Other	16	14	1	0	0	31
<hr/>						
Total	41	65	9	11	9	135
%	30.4%	48.1%	6.7%	8.1%	6.7%	
			85 non-human, 62.9%			

Female figurines

Clearer conclusions can be drawn from the data on female figurines, for so many more of them are intact – 107 female figurines have identifiable arm and head styles (Table 2.8).

Female figurines, far more than male figurines, tend to take therianthropic forms, usually with a beaked face, but sometimes with an animal or pinched face. In contrast to the male figurines, only about one-quarter of the female figurines has a human face, but, as with the male figurines, stump arms accompany these human-faced examples.

Two categories of female figurine seem to emerge: that with beaked face and raised arms, and that with a human face and stump arms, with the former category predominating numerically, and the latter appearing in more graves.

As cautioned earlier, the two deposits of female figurines from Ma'ameriah and Khizam severely limit the distribution of this more numerous style of female figurine. But logic suggests that where two such deposits are found, more were created. One would not expect to find all examples of any artefact after 6000 years of burial:

If my buddy throws a thousand bottles overboard
and I later pick up one on an island fifty miles away,
I do not assume that he only tossed a single bottle.
(Gould 1996: 156)

A good deal of archaeology and paleontology hinges on one or two samples alone: a single skull, a single tooth, a single tool. Where one is found, more have existed. And where two examples are found, as in the Egyptian case, an even greater chance exists that the practice of burying multiple female figurines with raised arms and beaked faces extended beyond the two graves at Ma'ameriah and Khizam. Neither biological fossils nor fully developed artefacts spring fully-formed into existence. Figurines as finely made and as stylised as these, like any fossil, must have antecedents, especially if examples range more widely than a single find (Map 2).

Further confirmation for the wider distribution of the raised arm imagery comes from the number of Nagada II Decorated pots depicting painted images of female figures with raised arms (Fig. 2.7). Although these figures do not have beaked faces, the raised arms suggest that the Khizam and Ma'ameriah figurines were part of rituals and beliefs more widely held and practised than only at these two locations.

The true distribution of such multiple figurine burials is, however, impossible to assess. We can only hypothesise. The record demonstrates that at least two individuals were buried with a minimum of 15 similar figurines each for some reason unknown to us. More are possible. Perhaps these individuals manufactured figurines and died before they could all be disseminated, taking their dangerous magic they carried with them into the grave. Shamans, such as the Yoruba sorcerers, are frequently buried with their ritual objects in order to protect the group from such unsupervised and dangerous power (Ucko 1968: 267). Or perhaps a large party of mourners brought offerings to the graves. The Ma'ameriah individual had 16 pots as well as 16 figurines in the grave (de Morgan 1912: 37) – the number could be more than a coincidence.

The most widely distributed female figurine type is an upright clay figurine with stump arms, either a human or non-human face, and with no particularly distinguishing characteristics. Unlike the more numerous popular "dancing" type, it appears in a far greater number of graves, and is the most likely

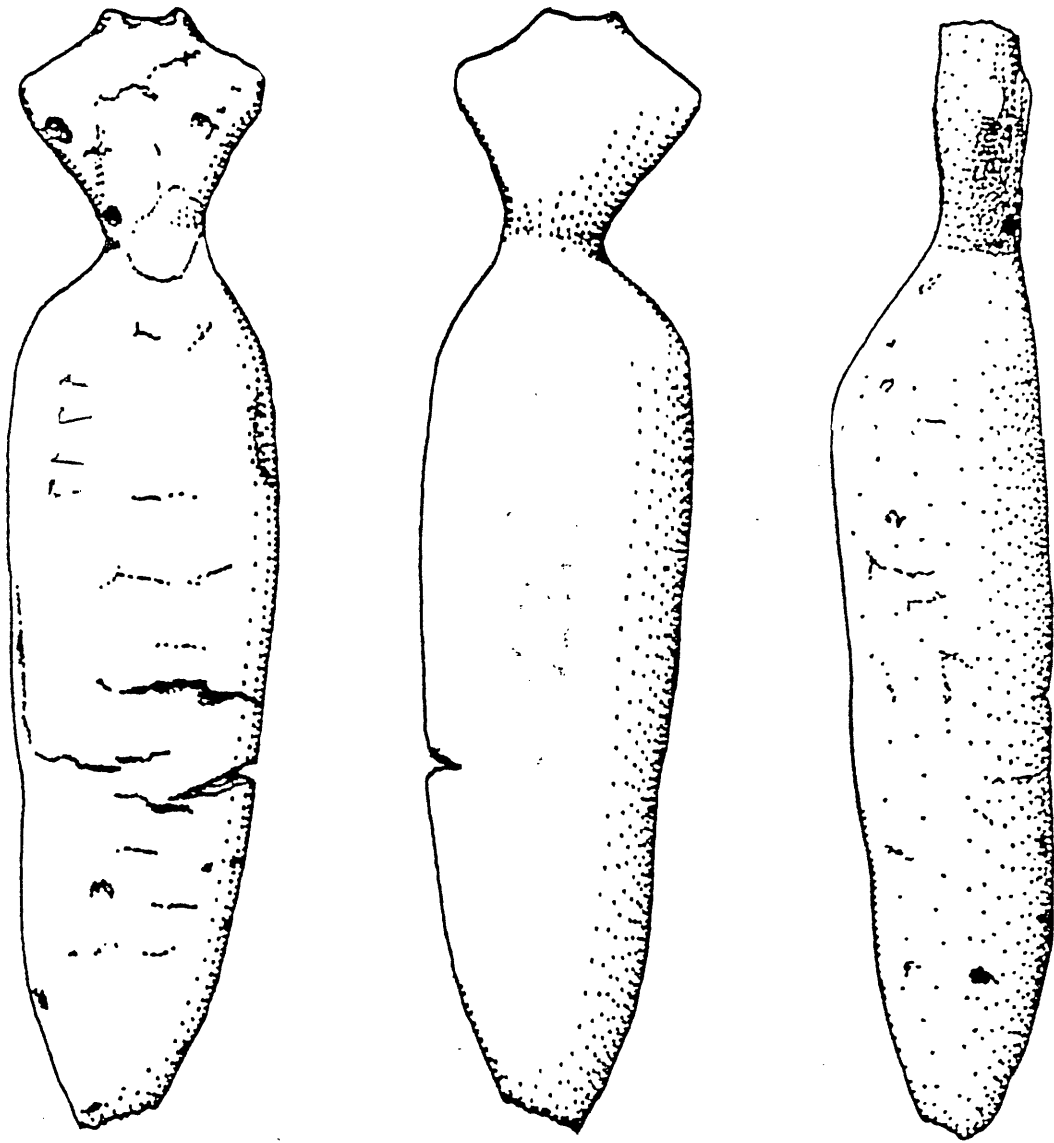


FIG. 2.9 Female vegetable paste figurine with stump arms

to turn up in any archaeological excavation. However, its humble appearance makes it unlikely to represent Predynastic art in general works, and it can only be found in museums, excavation reports, and Ucko's catalogue, where several examples are illustrated (Fig. 2.9).

The "typical" figurine

No single figurine adequately represents a "typical" Predynastic Egyptian figurine, for no such typical figurine exists. If one had to choose one figurine with the most frequently represented characteristics, perhaps one of the clay Badarian figurines with stump arms, pinched faces, and hip bend would best qualify (Figs. 2.2 a,b). While the upright clay female figurine is the most widely distributed, these two figurines point towards certain characteristics of the later figurines of Nagada I and II.

Even though the beak-faced figurines from Ma'ameriah and Khizam, with their striking raised arms, have such a limited distribution, they still form a large part of the overall figurine complement and some do display at least two typical characteristics: the non-human face and the bend at the hips. To be fair to the Predynastic artists, an example of this figurine would have to be placed alongside the Badarian figurines as another "typical" figurine. All "typical" examples, however, exist against a background of much greater diversity, making none of them indicative of the figurine complement as a whole.

The tables presented in this chapter demonstrate certain tendencies which point clearly towards the iconography of the Dynastic period. In particular, the figurines as a group indicate a tendency towards therianthropism, favouring bird imagery. Thoth, Horus, Isis, and Nephthys come most readily to mind, although these early forms may not specifically relate to any individual Dynastic deity. The raised arms suggest the *k3* concept or the protective arms of Nut. Therefore, Ucko's statements on the non-symbolic nature of the various physical characteristics displayed by the figurines contradict any understanding of Egyptian symbolism. Further investigations need to be made in order to determine the possible meanings of these symbols to the Predynastic Egyptians, before the development of state-controlled and centralised religion and authority.