Venus Figurines of the Upper Paleolithic

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Archaeologists interpret the past. In so doing, it is imperative that they understand and acknowledge their cultural biases which inevitably influence and colour their perception and interpretation of evidence. This is especially true when considering the interpretation of prehistoric art including the Venus figurines of the Upper Paleolithic. Scholars have offered numerous interpretative frameworks to explain their function, most of which lack any substantial archaeological support. As well, such theories are ultimately clouded by the underlying causes of gender hierarchy within western culture. Rejecting and challenging these frameworks is a recent contention. Rather than being engaged in the domains of entertainment, myth or religion, it has been postulated the Venus figurines actually served a practical purpose in the everyday life of prehistoric women. More specifically, these statuettes were perhaps forms of self representation and were employed as reproductive aids linked to the population increases of the Upper Paleolithic.

Originally, these figurines were associated with two interpretations. First, given the preoccupation with female sexual characteristics, scholars believed that the statuettes were a prehistoric form of erotica (McDermott 1996: 233). This idea rests on the assumption that they were crafted exclusively by men for men, an assumption that leaves women no role in their creation. Second, many archeologists assigned them religious and/or ritualistic functions. Many believed the figurines were associated with fertility and hunting “magic” (McDermott 1996: 233).

Scholars have also made more practical and pragmatic assertions. For example, McDermott (1996) believes that the figurines were the result of Upper Paleolithic females modeling their own bodies. In his study, he found five different vantage points that women could have employed while crafting the statuettes (McDermott 1996). He compares figurines constructed by modern women of childbearing age to prehistoric models (McDermott 1996:239). Closely related to this idea is the contention that Upper Paleolithic women employed these artifacts for obstetrical purposes (Conkey 1983: 222). After inspecting a number of these statuettes, Marshack (1972: 282) also believes that the figurines could have possibly been the guardians of information relating to such biological processes as menstruation, pregnancy, and birth. Roosevelt (1988:1) feels that they may have supported and been involved in what she calls a “populationist ideology” which is devoted to an increase in population size. If women who employed these figurines understood their biological cycles, they would be in a better position to control their reproductive rates (McDermott and McCoid 1996: 323) Accordingly, women would be better able to manipulate population increases or decreases. In this way the figurines may have played a role in the Upper Paleolithic population increase.....“in order to supply more people for labor, warfare, and colonization.” (Roosevelt 1988: 1).

There has been much debate within archaeological circles centering around the debate related to whether or not ancient art forms were a part of one or two common
prehistoric cultures or representative of various localized customs. Some, like Ehrenberg (1989: 72) believe that there was a common European culture, encompassing both social and religious traditions. Gamble (1982) also believes that the statuettes helped support a common Upper Paleolithic communication system, helping to form new alliances and consolidate networks between prehistoric groups. What unites these perspectives is the belief that the Venus figurines were utilitarian and were employed by women to better understand and manipulate their biological processes with resulting adaptive consequences and advantages.

**EARLY INTERPRETATIONS OF THE VENUS FIGURINES**

The Venus figurines are associated with two prehistoric time periods (Ehrenberg 1989: 66). The first were found at Upper Paleolithic at sites stretching from France to Russia (Ehrenberg 1989:66). There is a consensus that these statuettes began to emerge between 28,000 and 30,000 B.P. (Ehrenburg 1989: 66). There are over 60 figurines from this period (Ehrenberg 1989: 66). Most are carved from bone, ivory, stone and a few are modeled from fired loess (McDermott 1996: 231). The second group, found in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean, are associated with the Neolithic period (Ehrenberg 1989: 66). However, my investigation will concentrate on figurines of the Upper Paleolithic. Additional examples from the Americas will be discussed as possible ethnographic analogies.

Historically, most studies of Upper Paleolithic art are characterized by a focus on the interpretation of imagery and the (often implicit) view that temporal and spatial variability is stochastic in nature (Barton, Clark and Cohen 1994: 185). To them Barton et al. (1994: 188) approach also tended to separate art from its “broader social context”. For example, the figurines were assumed to have had various religious and ritualistic implications as they were, in some circles, presumed to be female goddesses associated with fertility and the successful outcome of hunting expeditions (McDermott 1996: 233). For example, Gimbutas (1991: 222) believed that the figurines represented the “The Great Mother Goddess who......personifies the eternally renewing cycle of life in all of its forms and manifestations.” However, Bailey (1994: 322) contends that Gimbutas’ (1991) claims are unsupportable due to the fact that they are based on psychoanalysis. Gimbutas (1991) relies on the psychoanalytic notion of the Great Mother archetype and the concept of the collective unconscious (Bailey 1994:322). Bailey (1994: 322) feels that Gimbutas’ assumptions are not empirically valid and are “imaginative suggestions”. Others have also made psychoanalytic interpretations. For example, Wallace, (1950: 256) feels that the depiction of breasts and short or absent arms reveals a “tendency to regress to an oral dependent attitude” and a feeling of maternal rejection. However, as Bailey (1994: 322) states, these assumptions are merely imaginative speculation unsupported by empirical data.

While many figurines clearly depict pregnancy, most have a uniformity of form and design and are faceless women with large breasts, thin torsos, abnormally diminutive legs and feet, and an overall disproportionally small stature (McDermott 1996: 228). It has been argued that they were crafted by prehistoric men, thereby affording women no role in their production. Following this assertion, many hold that the emphasis on female sexual characteristics is evidence of the artist’s preoccupation with female sexuality. This led some to believe that they originated as an early form of male erotica (McDermott 1996: 233). Some have
suggested that they are nothing more than “Pleistocene pinup or centerfold girls” (Chard 1969: 162). However, Nelson (1993:54) suggests that this merely illustrates “unexamined assumptions about gender.” She believes that most archaeologists automatically assume that the Venus statuettes were constructed by and for men. They also presume the immediate relationship between erotica and female nudity (Nelson 1993: 55). Nelson (1993: 54) believes that assigning the figurines with erotic and reproductive connotations is sexist.

Recently, there has been a reexamination of the evidence associated with the Venus figurines and many researchers are beginning to question past interpretations and to explore alternative explanations. For example, a number of scholars view Upper Paleolithic art as an important factor connected with prehistoric information exchange, group affiliation, social conditions and individual needs (Barton et al. 1994:186-187). As well, Mithen (1987:297) believes scholars are beginning to legitimize the notion that Upper Paleolithic art may have been employed to encapsulate and disseminate information, assisting Late Pleistocene groups better adapt to their environment.

VENUS FIGURINES AS FORMS OF SELF REPRESENTATION

As a result of this theoretical debate, many scholars have been recognizing the relevance and validity of the contention that these figurines were based on forms of self representation as opposed to the long held belief that they were male pornographic “entertainment”. In this context, some have interpreted the disproportionate stature shared by most examples as evidence of self inspection (McDermott 1996: 227). In this vein, McDermott (1996) initiated a study in which women attempted to craft figurines that accurately represented their physical proportions reflected through this process of self inspection. As it turned out, the resulting statuettes were similar to the prehistoric Venuses, thereby lending credibility to the aforementioned presumption (McDermott 1996). He found that the effects of foreshortening of limbs, abdomen, thorax, and buttocks played a key role that eventually gave rise to the relatively standardized forms of both modern and prehistoric examples (McDermott 1996).

According to McDermott (1996: 237), there were five “primary vistas” or vantage points the subjects employed in order to help them construct the figurines; the head and the face, the upper and lower frontal surfaces of the body, and the inferior and posterior surfaces. The fact that the statuettes lack any observable facial features is explainable by the fact that during self examination such features would be visually exempt (McDermott 1996: 237). As well, the abdomen, thorax and feet, in the women’s view, would be foreshortened. While in relation, the breasts, which are situated close to the visual field, would thereby, in comparison appear distinctively enlarged and magnified (McDermott 1996: 239). During his research found that:

when looked at from above, as a women observes herself, the breasts of the PKG style figurines assume the natural proportions of the average modern woman of childbearing age (McDermott 1996: 239).

A further illustration includes a modern figure which depicted a pregnant twenty-six year old woman with a 34C bust and its comparable similarities with the Willendorf Venus of Austria (McDermott 1996: 239). As well, the fact that the torsos of many of the figurines seem to be abnormally
thin can be reasonably explained by the fact that the true thickness of the upper body cannot be accurately interpreted during self inspection (McDermott 1996: 239). In addressing representations of the attributes of the lower half of the body, he states:

when one rotates at the hips and raises the arm to look down obliquely in front of the shoulder, one sees the side of the body as expanding from the lower torso toward the buttocks before contracting as the eye encounters the more distant rectus femoris and vastus lateralis muscles of the thigh and the bulging gastrocnemius of the calf (McDermott 1996: 242).

The particular arrangements of the muscles as seen from the aforementioned vantage point is another characteristic that accounts for the stylistic homogeneity embodied in the statuettes. Finally, with reference to the last of the “primary vistas” mentioned by McDermott (1996: 243), there are two possible ways to view the posterior surface of the body: underarm and over-the-shoulder vantage points. The former results in a “foreshortened outline of the upper buttock below the tailbone” (McDermott 1996: 244). The second, less frequently used example, is exemplified by statuettes found at Savignamo and Grimaldi. From this regard, the buttocks are interpreted as projecting outward and rearward from the body (McDermott 1996: 245). In conclusion, what were once interpreted as “exaggerated distortions” are now, in light of recent research, seen as characteristics that may have resulted from the activities of self inspection on the part of prehistoric women themselves (McDermott 1996: 245).

The fact that McDermott could provide credibility and validity to the assumption that these figurines were made and produced by the women themselves is of the utmost importance. The significance of this argument lies in the fact that for these figurines to serve any didactic functions in relation to bodily processes, female self inspection would be vital. The statuettes could have been used to encapsulate the information obtained through such examination. Thus, the creation of these figurines would lead to greater understanding of women’s bodies and those physical functions and processes that designate them as female. The idea that the process of self inspection gave rise to and was the impetus behind, their creation lends momentum to the theory that the functional aspect of these figurines included the recording and encapsulation of knowledge which could have possibly included information relating to reproduction and obstetrics.

VENUS FIGURINES AS REPRODUCTIVE AIDS AND TOOLS IN THE TRANSMISSION OF BIOLOGICAL INFORMATION

As alluded to above, some are beginning to subscribe to the idea that the Venus figurines were linked with obstetrical information (Conkey 1983: 222). Trinkaus (as cited in Conkey 1983: 222) feels they may be linked to the evolution of neonatal care and obstetrical practices that so many believe to be included within the process that gave rise to the biological evolution of modern Homo sapiens. Therefore, what this ultimately suggests is that not only were these objects crafted by women, but that they were of practical use possibly employed to educate and retain information concerning and leading to the survival of the group itself. This is certainly a far cry from early “passive” interpretations with which they were
previously endowed. Instead of simply being used for entertainment or ritual, Venus figurines may have had practical functions whose content was initiated and maintained by and for women. Supporting this is the fact that:

The figurines are seldom found in large numbers in fields or in temples, but rather are most common in household refuse in domestic activity areas associated with female activities. They are very rare in the contexts associated with high ritual and men’s activities. This suggests that the figurines were more likely related more narrowly to concerns over female fertility (Roosevelt 1988:15).

In the same vein, many figurines have been found around the circumference of huts and hearths (Ehrenberg 1989: 74). For example, figures found at the Gagarino site in Russia were unearthed near huts and a statuette uncovered at the Dolni Vestonice site in the Czech Republic was found near a large hearth (Gamble 1982: 96).

If these figurines were crafted by men for erotic entertainment, one would expect that the objects would be discovered near male activity areas. Similarly, if their main function was to fulfill a ritualistic purpose, one would, again, presume that the figurines would be situated near areas devoted to religion and ritual. Archaeologists distinguish between different activity areas employing ethnographic analogies (Fagan 2001: 354-355). The fact that they were found near areas commonly associated with female activity supports the idea that they were crafted by women and it may lend credibility to the assertion that these statuettes were put to practical use by women.

Employing examples from the Neolithic, Gimbutas (1991: 223) claimed that the statuettes with characteristics of pregnant women possess large representations of vulvas. White (1999: 19) believes that these figurines were intended to reflect women undergoing the birthing process. After inspecting a number of statuettes he claims to have found various anatomical details, such as dilation, that would be indicative of this process. He believes that the figurines were employed to protect the health and safety of pregnant women (White 1999:19).

Marshack (1972:283) offers further evidence supporting the claim that one of the functions of the figurines was to maintain knowledge concerning female biological functions and may have been used to explain these processes to girls and women. Through his investigation, he came to believe that included within that knowledge were the processes and biological periods relating to menstruation, pregnancy, maturation, and birth (Marshack 1972: 282). For example, on the surface of a figurine from the Dolni Vestonice site, Marshack found marks in eighteen different places which he believes that they could possibly relate to “biologic periods” (Marshack 1972: 290). As well, a Neolithic figurine found at Malta is depicted, not only in a “birth giving” posture but also has nine lines drawn on its back. It is possible that these lines may depict the nine month human gestation period (Gimbutas 1991: 224).

Furthermore, after investigating and studying the statuettes Rice (1981) came to the conclusion that they could be divided into three categories or three “stages in life” based on the physical characteristics the figures represented (Rice 1981: 404). The first category included figurines that seemed to portray characteristics of young, pre-reproductive females as their breasts were high and firm, stomachs round and flat, and
hips round and firm. The second group of statuettes represented women of childbearing age as their breasts seemed to be enlarged and full, stomachs “protruding” and “fleshy”, and hips and buttocks, again, “fleshy”. Finally, the third group of Venuses seemed to embody females described as old or those occupying post childbearing years; their breasts, stomachs, hips and buttocks were represented as “sagging” and “wrinkled” (Rice 1981: 403) (Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Breasts</th>
<th>Stomachs</th>
<th>Hips</th>
<th>Buttocks</th>
<th>Faces</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Young</td>
<td>high and firm</td>
<td>round and flat</td>
<td>round and firm</td>
<td>firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pre-reproductive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle</td>
<td>a. enlarged and full</td>
<td>a. protruding</td>
<td>fleshy</td>
<td>lined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Reproductive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Pregnant</td>
<td>b. elongated due to milk producing</td>
<td>b. fleshy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. Nonpregnant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Old</td>
<td>sagging</td>
<td>sagging</td>
<td>sagging</td>
<td>sagging and wrinkled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Post-reproductive)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Rice 1981

Following this, McDermott (1996: 245) believes that the minimally observed stylistic variability of the figurines could possibly be accounted for by women’s ages and as a consequence of individual reproductive histories. The results of Rice’s (1981) investigation support the contention that these Venus statuettes helped women better understand their bodies and the various functions that governed their biological existence and enabled them to take and maintain control over them. Following this, they could have been used to help these women take an increasingly active role in reproduction (McDermott & McCoid 1996: 323).

As well, Rice’s (1981) findings could point to women’s attempts to understand the aging process and, in turn, use the statuettes to better preserve and relay this information on to the next generation. The fact that Duhard (1993: 88) found that 68% of the French Gravettian figurines appeared to possess the physical attributes of pregnancy as opposed to only 36 % of the French Magdalenian examples may suggest that, over time, Upper Paleolithic women gained control over their reproductive lives.

If prehistoric women were not only able to understand the processes behind reproduction but, were also able to pass this information on to the next generation through the use of the Venus statuettes, it is obvious that such valuable knowledge would lead to an enormous amount of social power. Those who possessed such intimate information would have an obvious perceived advantage over those who lacked such knowledge. One only has to examine the modern example of the introduction of birth control. With the advent of the female birth control pill in the 1960s, women were better able to plan and take control of their reproductive cycles. This led to more choices and major social changes that, ultimately, echoed through, and affected, every area of our culture.

Prehistoric women with such perceived knowledge and power would also
find themselves occupying an enhanced social position, better able to control their reproductive lives and control population increase. However, some may question the contention that these figurines were employed to embody, teach, and pass on information related to female biological processes. Some may argue that the statuettes would have been redundant as Upper Paleolithic populations could have used the real living bodies in their midsts. Women would not have, therefore, needed to go to such extremes. However, the human capacity for symbolic communication was developing during the Upper Paleolithic (Binford 1982: 178). Following this, it would be much easier for a society to pass on and teach information through the use of symbols (much like language). The figurines could have been symbols of this information.

man lives in a symbolic universe...language, myth, art and religion are parts of this universe...No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. ....Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man’s symbolic activity advances. Instead of dealing with the things themselves man is in a sense constantly conversing with himself. He has so enveloped himself in linguistic forms, in artistic images, in mythical symbols or religious rites that he cannot see or know anything except by the interposition of this artificial medium (Cassirer 1953:43).

**POPULATION INCREASE IN THE UPPER PALEOLITHIC**

As mentioned above, anyone with intimate knowledge of female biological cycles would possess an obvious social advantage. For example, in referring to figurines found in Mesoamerica, Ecuador and the late prehistoric tropical lowlands of South America, Roosevelt (1988: 1) believes that since each respective economy was undergoing drastic change and renovation needed to go to such extremes. However, the human capacity for symbolic communication was developing during the Upper Paleolithic (Binford 1982: 178). Following this, it would be much easier for a society to pass on and teach information through the use of symbols (much like language). The figurines could have been symbols of this information.

during these time periods, the statuettes may have been included within a “populationlist ideology” (Roosevelt 1988: 1). However, Randall White (1999: 19) points to the fact that most surviving hunting cultures are interested in reducing pregnancy, and he believes that prehistoric populations, following hunting cultures existing today, are interested in population control, attempting to restrict increases in their numbers. On the other hand Roosevelt contends that the figurines may have contributed to the much needed population increase by encouragement of human reproduction:

in order to supply more people for labor, warfare, and colonization. Thus it may be at a time of economic and demographic growth, women gained in status due to their roles in reproduction (1988: 1).

Roosevelt (1988: 16) believes that the figurines may have been part of a larger process of prehistoric adaptation in which the population responded to the rise of chiefdoms and agricultural societies. In comparison, the Upper Paleolithic examples appear to draw and hold parallels in relation to the aforementioned New World figurines. These parallels suggest that both the Neolithic and Upper Paleolithic societies possess many similarities, both in ideology and organization
Both were faced with the challenges relating to population increase, and the use of figurines in each of the cultures may have been used to encourage population increase. As a result she believes that these processes may have helped sustain the reproductive change and population increase in both time periods. If through the use of these statuettes women were better able to understand the processes behind reproduction would they be able to manipulate these cycles and, thereby, increase their population?

To test these assumptions, one would have to investigate the relationship between periods of cultural transition and their corresponding reproductive rates in addition to the sociocultural status of the women in these societies (Roosevelt 1988: 2). To do so, Roosevelt (1988: 2) suggests that through osteological and paleopathological information such patterns could possibly be decoded and better understood. She suggests that to investigate birth rates one could study the scarring on the pelvic area of female remains in order to estimate a particular birth rate per capita for various populations (Roosevelt 1988: 17). For example, Suchey, Wiseley, Green and Noguchi (1979) found a slight correlation, between number of pregnancies and associated female pelvic scarring. To gather information concerning women’s status female burials, subsistence remains and domestic arrangements could be further investigated (Roosevelt 1988: 2).

Through his research, Gamble (1982) came to a similar yet divergent conclusion. He believes that the figurines helped to create new alliances and an extension of mating networks by establishing communication links between hunter gatherer groups (Gamble 1982). The Upper Paleolithic was plagued by environmental problems including climate deterioration and as a result, these hunter gatherers were forced to adapt (Gamble 1982: 103-104). One such strategy was to expand the territories in which subsistence activities took place. In his opinion the resulting population increase of this particular period was partly due to this form of communication (Gamble 1982: 103-104). As a result, hunter gatherer groups were able to live and reproduce in areas that would have previously resulted in the severing and fracturing of formed alliances (Gamble 1982: 104).

In fact, Gamble (1982: 101) believes that as time passed one would expect to see an increase in terms of communication and alliance complexity as the principles of group organization passed from the socio-biological to the social. Therefore, in describing Upper Paleolithic communication networks, one is illuminating the increasing complexity of prehistoric alliance systems. To study these systems Gamble (1982: 101) believes that analyzing the stylistic visual components of material culture is a justifiable place to begin.

Similarly,

....(a) provocative contrast [exists] between the earlier time ranges and the Upper Paleolithic in its “modern man” manifestations....It is my impression that the ability to anticipate events and conditions not yet experienced was not one of the strengths of our ancestors prior to the appearance of clear evidence for symboling ....“art”, “notation”....things which mark the appearance of culture as we know it (Binford 1982:178) (italics original).

Binford (1982: 178) claims that the inability of Middle Paleolithic populations to plan ahead explains their failure to move into and successfully inhabit the Eurasian steppe. In fact, in reference to Southwestern France, Mellars (1973: 267-8) believes that during the
Upper Paleolithic there was an increase in contact between groups. He points to the fact that during the Middle Paleolithic there was a virtual absence of distant exotic materials. On the other hand, during the Upper Paleolithic, such materials became much more frequent (White 1982: 171). White (1982:176) believes that this is indicative of contact between widely dispersed groups.

The Venus figurines could have been part of a communication system that allowed Upper Paleolithic groups to expand into previously uninhabitable areas and to consolidate social networks. As Gamble (1982:92) feels that representational art of the Upper Paleolithic was developed in order to deal with the evolution of Late Pleistocene information requirements. Gamble (1982: 103) feels that through their minimal stylistic variability, these figurines could have served as a connection, a visual exchange of information integrating various Upper Paleolithic groups. As well, it is within reason to assume that the statuettes were a part of the same system that included ornament and dress (Gamble 1982: 98).

Although approached with a divergent set of ideas as to how the figurines were utilized, both Roosevelt’s (1988) and Gamble’s (1981) perspectives still support the conclusion that the Venus statuettes were employed to better enable these societies to adapt and to reproduce and multiply giving rise to the Upper Paleolithic population increase. For example, Hassan (1978, as cited in Gamble, 1982: 103-4) has claimed that, while the Middle Paleolithic population density was 0.03 person per kilometer squared during the Upper Paleolithic that rose to 0.1 persons per kilometer squared. He bases this on the fact that the number of archaeological sites rose during the Upper Paleolithic and that Asia was colonized (Hassan 1978, as cited in Gamble, 1982: 103-4). Mellars (1973: 268) relying on figures pertaining to the total number of Middle and Upper Paleolithic cave and rock shelter sites, also believes that there was a significant increase between the two periods (Table 2). However, much more research needs to be conducted to test these claims. Conkey points out that:

a regional approach to the cultural dynamics of the late Pleistocene of southwest Europe has been blatantly underdeveloped in a tradition of prehistoric research that is primarily site-centered (1983: 222).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERIOD</th>
<th>NUMBER OF SITES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mousterian</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chatelperronian</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aurignacian</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upper Perigordian</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solutrean</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magdalenian</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Number of Upper Paleolithic sites</td>
<td>168</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Mellars 1979
LIMITATIONS OF THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

It is impossible to use the archeological record itself to interpret the functions of the statuettes. As Carneiro states:

a society's iconography certainly bears some relation to its ideology. But how close is this relationship? And how easily can it be interpreted in the absence of direct observation of a society or of exclusive written records of that society (1992: 181).

Roosevelt (1988: 15) herself admits that the ethnographic record is sparse. However, she also points to the fact that preindustrial women create figures based on the images of children, genitalia, and females in their efforts to conceive (Roosevelt 1988:15). Further, Heizer and Baumhoff (1962: 237) report that Pomo women who use pitted boulders as “baby rocks” to help them get pregnant. As well, many Peruvian figurines are believed to have been female children’s dolls. Solecki (as cited in Roosevelt 1988: 10) reports that modern Andean girls are encouraged to play with dolls in order to learn about parenting. Roosevelt (1988:11) says that the dolls may be employed to teach and instruct young girls about parenting and the skills required of competent mothers.

CONCLUSION

Did these statuettes embody, conserve, and retain valuable information pertaining to the functional processes of the female body? They may have been guardians of knowledge that formed the basis of alliance and mating networks. This may have been one of the factors involved in the population increase of the Upper Paleolithic. Ultimately, this supports the contention that these figurines were the practical means by which women took control over their reproductive lives. This premise, at least, affords prehistoric women an active social role. As Nelson (1993: 55) states, “in all of the discussion (of the figurines) the passivity of women is assumed.” Such a position rejects those explanations that negate the assumption of women’s conscious participation and control as an important aspect of prehistoric life and culture. Moreover what the past interpretations of the Venus figurines highlight is what Nelson (1993:56) describes as imposing our modern day cultural assumptions onto the interpretation of the archaeological record. Reinforcing this, Miller and Tilly (as cited in Nelson 1993: 56) go on to say, “we must recognize the importance of taking into account the conceptions we hold of our own society which inevitably mediate our understanding of the past.”

Male patriarchal domination and women’s supposed subordinate social affordibility are, for all we know, purely current inventions which occupy modern cultural discourse. Therefore, there is a danger of superimposing these assumptions onto archaeological data pertaining to prehistoric lifestyle, behavior, and culture. Although more research needs to be conducted, we are at least beginning to understand the consequences of projecting our modern view of the male-female dichotomy onto the interpretation of the evidence that links us to prehistoric lifestyle, social organization, and thought.

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