

Venus in Mammoth Furs: Sanitising Paleolithic Figurines in the British Museum

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A recent exhibition on ice age art in the British Museum has drawn both scholarly and popular attention (e.g. Callaway, 2013). Not only has it show-cased stunning examples of such art—it has explicitly attempted to place them in the context of art history. The accompanying notes state that these objects offer a window into the Paleolithic mind—showing it to be fully modern in aesthetics. The physical presence of so many objects has allowed both scholars and the general public to view the range and scale of these ancient cultures and to make comparisons between objects that can now be seen in the round in ways that were difficult—if not impossible—before.

The centrepiece of this exhibition was, unsurprisingly, the display of the range of female figurines. Speculation has long been rife as to what these objects meant to those that made, viewed, and possessed them. There have been about a hundred objects that have been termed Venus figurines uncovered by archaeologists to date. They are all Upper Paleolithic art objects and are mostly associated with the Gravettian, Solutrean, and Aurignacian periods. The earliest that has been discovered is the Venus of Hohle Fels and this has been dated to 35000 BC. The latest object that belongs in this category is the Venus of Monruz, which has been dated to 11000 years BC (Conard, 2009).

Were such figurines objects of veneration—idealised figures? Some have suggested, on flimsy and somewhat fanciful grounds (e.g. Bachofen, 1967) that they are evidence of prehistoric matriarchal deity worship. Another possibility is that such figurines are plausibly drawn from ice age life, and reflect local ecological adaptations and preferences (Jozsa, 2012; King, 2013). The Willendorf Venus—if an accurate representation of a genuine woman—would weight about 80-90 kg. With a WTH ratio of 0.7 would have had high estradiol levels indicating fertility (Jozsa, 2012; King, 2013). The argument for this is simply that males who do not show preferences for locally relevant markers of fertility would be that much less likely to leave descendants (Darwin, 2009).

A glance around a modern teenager’s bedroom reveals that humans—especially young males—make (and these days purchase) models of things that they desire. If this is true in the case of these figurines, then what can be said of this glance back into human desire in the Ice Age?

One issue that has become apparent with the ability to compare figurines is that several of the ones from the Russian steppes—specifically Kostieki--appear to represent strikingly different phenotypes. Specifically, one type is tall and willowy, the other shorter and bulkier. The original excavation notes (Abramova, 1962) note these interesting discrepancies as well as the presence of a foreign and male skull at the site. However, the original archaeologists did not speculate as to why two strikingly difference morphs (figure 1) were represented artistically. Do these represent different female populations or different interpretations of the female form? There is one reason to think that the first interpretation is correct.

Some of the figurines—the heavier ones--show clear signs of having been taken in a raid. They are clearly tied up as captives—something that was noted about these figurines nearly twenty years ago (Taylor, 1996) but has been excised from the modern exhibition—perhaps because it is a notion that offends modern sensibilities.

The physical poses and the tied wrists of the second figure, indicate a submissiveness and an inability to resist. Is some form of sexual bondage being played out? Are these representations of women about to be initiated? Are they captives from a raiding expedition? p. 141

Anyone who doubts what Taylor is arguing for should take a look at the attached photographs (especially figure 2) and ask themselves whether the ropes joining the wrists could really represent “jewellery”, as the British Museum exhibition notes claimed. A side-by-side comparison of the figure in question with, for example, a modern depiction in an Amnesty poster of trafficking makes the point even more obvious (figure 3). These are depictions of capture.

Such bride capture could be of a purely symbolic nature, of course. However, in these figurines, we might be looking at the original source from which such symbolic bride capture rituals derived. Such rituals still exist, in highly watered-down form amongst, for example, the Romani (Barnes, 1999) and the Hmong (Yang, 2004). Scholars (e.g., Wilson & Daly, 1995) and feminists have long pointed out that many marriage rituals contain some element of property transfer (Dworkin, 1989):

Marriage as an institution developed from rape as a practice. Rape, originally defined as abduction, became marriage by capture. Marriage meant the taking was to extend in time, to be not only use of but possession of, or ownership p19-20.

Could slavery have existed back in Neolithic, perhaps even Mesolithic, times? The typical consensus is that slavery is only made possible by systemic inequalities in resources that come about after the advent of agriculture. However, we used to think that organised central religious observance followed a similar developmental path until we discovered Gobekli Tepe (Curry, 2008). Perhaps one of the fundamental inequalities in nascent human societies was in brides taken in raids. There are certainly modern stateless societies—such as the Yanomamo—that practice such things as routine (Chagon, 1966).

Finally, why have some (but not others) of the Kostenki Venuses (e.g. figure 2) been deliberately broken? It is tempting to speculate. Perhaps they were votive offerings broken when a real bride was obtained? Perhaps they were symbolic and broken by rescuers of the original women? Perhaps the artist simply disliked them? Of course we will never know for sure. However, a Bowdlerised version of history where obvious captives are represented as wearing “special jewellery” will not help us understand human origins—and how far we have developed from them.

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Figures



Figure 1. Kostieki figurines in comparison. Heavier type in foreground, thinner in background.

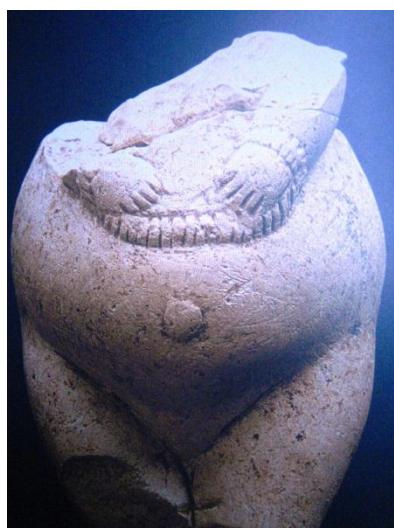


Figure 2. Broken Kostieki Figurine—also showing hands tied



Figure 3 Comparison of Kostieki pose and modern Amnesty depiction of sexual trafficking