

Playing 20 Questions With Inanimate Objects

An Examination of Ancient Peoples and Their Figurines

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PREFACE

The paper will examine a two-headed clay figurine from the Jackier collection at the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology and a bone figurine from the permanent display of the same museum. For each one, I will provide a brief historical context followed by an analysis of its possible functions and a discussion about what it reveals about ancient times. I will conclude with a comparison of the two objects and what they can tell us about material culture.

ON LEGITIMACY

The two-headed Jackier figurine is probably a forgery¹; however, my analysis of the Jackier figurine in this paper is founded on the information presented by Dr. Rudolph Dornemann. Dornemann's paper, *Comments On the Small Finds and Items of Artistic Significance from Tell Hadidi and Nearby Sites in the Euphrates Valley, Syria*, has photographs of many figurines that share characteristics with the Jackier figurine: the eyes, beak-like noses, collars, and pattern of a three-dimensional head on a flat, column-like body are all incredibly similar if not identical to those found on the Jackier figurine². This leads me to believe that the figurines either share an origin, if the Jackier figurine is not a forgery, or the Jackier figurine was based off of those that Dornemann analyzed or others like them. The legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the Jackier figurine thus does not preclude me from making some conclusions about the ancient world, as the link between the Jackier figurine and the legitimate figurines is quite strong. With that in mind, I now turn to the work at hand.

¹ My thanks to Hittite expert Dr. Gary Beckman for an incredibly helpful conversation. The forgery assessment comes from him.

² Rudolph H. Dornemann, "Comments On the Small Finds and Items of Artistic Significance from Tell Hadidi and Nearby Sites in the Euphrates Valley, Syria," in *Essays in Ancient Civilizations Presented to Helen J. Kantor* (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute, 1989), 64.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE BRONZE AGE³

The Bronze Age began circa 3500 BCE in Mesopotamia with the first production of bronze. This was a monumental innovation—the revolution in tools, particularly ones used for farming, allowed the ancient peoples to exert more control over their surroundings. For instance, using the new bronze tools, farmers near the Euphrates and Tigris rivers began collecting and conserving the floodwaters to use year-round, not just in the weeks of flood. Most importantly, the invention of such tools made the labor-intensive work of farming more manageable, which meant that fewer farmers could harvest the same yield. Because farming required fewer people, others were free to find other jobs and there was a corresponding rise in the number of urban settlements. The Bronze Age was also the time of the development of writing—Sumer, the oldest civilization that we know of, developed cuneiform by 3100 BCE.

The usual system of government in the Early Bronze Age was city-states, the few empires (Akkadia, Ur, and Egypt) notwithstanding. By the Middle Bronze Age, empires had become the norm, not the exception; their decline dominated the Late Bronze Age. The Jackier figurine, for the purposes of this paper, can be dated with the rest of Dornemann's figurines to between 3000 and 2000 BCE⁴. This is the Early Bronze Age, and it is within that context that I will examine it.

AN ANALYSIS OF FUNCTION: THE JACKIER FIGURINE

In order to analyze an object, you first need a framework within which to do so. I have chosen to use the one that Mary Voigt described in her monograph, *Hajji Firuz Tepe, Iran: The Neolithic*

³ The information for this section comes from: Nicholas K. Rauh and Heidi Krauss, "The Bronze Age Near East," in *A Short History of the Ancient World*, accessed November 27, 2016, http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~rauhn/CWC_text/CWC_4.htm.

⁴ Dornemann, "Comments On the Small Finds," 60.

*Settlement*⁵. While that monograph is focused on the analysis of figurines found in Iran from a different time period, the system of analysis that she uses is applicable to figurines from any time or geographic location. It describes four categories of figurines in detail: cult figurine, vehicle of magic, initiation figure, and toy⁶. Cult figures are representations of supernatural beings that were for worship or prayer; vehicles of magic were used in an attempt to catalyse an event, such as conception or the harm of one's enemies; and initiation figures were used to teach values or sexual facts. Toys were used primarily for entertainment; according to P.R.S. Moorey, the toy category was a common secondary function of other types of figurines⁷. Voigt gives several useful tables that list attributes for each category in order to help classify an object, and, with those as my reference, I can now discuss specific figurines.

The Jackier figurine is 22.5 cm tall and made of baked terracotta clay. It has two heads protruding from a relatively flat body, each with hair, ears, eyes, and prominent beak-like noses. There are two differences between the heads: the left head has a ponytail, and the right has pupils. The figurine has wide shoulders, two collars (which differ), and two hands with five fingers each that are held close to its chest. It is wearing robes of some kind, which obscure the feet and form a columnar base that allows it to stand on its own. The collars, eyes, and hair were all added in a second stage after the main body had been moulded. There are no remnants of

⁵ Mary M. Voigt and Richard H. Meadow, "Functional Interpretation," in *Hajji Firuz Tepe, Iran: The Neolithic Settlement* (Philadelphia: University Museum, University of Pennsylvania, 1983), 186, 190, 192.

This is the source for all information in this paragraph, with one notated exception

⁶ There is a fifth category—mortuary furniture, which describes representations of dead ancestors. This category is not discussed at length in Voigt's paper because none of the figurines excavated at Hajji Firuz were found at grave sites.

⁷ P. R. S. Moorey, *Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Published for the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2003), 7, 8.

paint or materials other than clay. It displays no signs of burning, though there is a small chip behind the left shoulder.

Given these facts, I can begin to rule out different categories. I am inclined to reject the primary function being a toy: it is baked clay, extremely well crafted, and in good condition. I also feel that it being an initiation figure is unlikely, as it is not made of precious material nor burned or found in water, and the lack of sexual features on the figurine leads me to believe that it was not used to teach sexual facts. It is possible to view the figurine as a vehicle of magic, though there are no signs of complete destruction by shattering or burning, which are common among vehicles of magic. I find, however, that between the lack of damage and the size of the figurine (it is far too large to be an amulet), it being a vehicle of magic is ultimately unlikely. This leaves the cult figurine category—the Jackier figurine was used for worship in some capacity. I further attest that it was relatively inexpensive, based upon the assessment made by Dornemann of his figurines⁸, so the Jackier figurine may offer a good window into the life of the everyday people of the Early Bronze Age.

THE JACKIER FIGURINE IN CONTEXT

What can this figurine tell us? It tells us that the people who made it needed it; they found that it gave them some sort of service as an object of worship. Conceivably, since it has two heads, it represented a deity who controlled choices. It is possible that people prayed to them when they had difficult decisions to make in life. Additionally, outside of this utilitarian perspective, the figurine can also show us a lot about how ancient peoples might have thought.

⁸ Dornemann, "Comments on the Small Finds," 61.

Images of gods usually convey something that people aspire towards. For instance, depictions of Zeus usually include a full, white beard on a handsome face in a gorgeous toga. Here, the desire is twofold: the people wanted both the beautiful physical appearance and the wisdom associated with the beard. But this clay figurine is plain: it does not seem to display overt signs of prosperity for worshippers to hope for. What does it have? Two heads. And the adage “two heads are better than one” was just as true then as it is today. I also find it significant that both heads lack a mouth: the figurine seems primed to think much and say little. Possibly, that disposition was incredibly desirable in those times. If it were, this is as close as we will ever get to knowing.

The figurine also hints toward the idea of more personalized worship. The statuette is small enough to easily hold by the base; it is definitely not immobile. This might indicate that it was in a home, rather than an official place of worship, or, if it was in a place of worship, it was designed to be handled. Handling something inherently connects you to that object in a way that is different than how you connect to something that you cannot touch. Holding a figurine gives you a sense of physical closeness with it, and that kind of connection is very powerful. It is also incredibly personal and very private—only one person at a time can truly hold a figurine of this size. This demonstrates that faith was not only a social phenomenon that occurred in communal settings: it was present on an individual level. Individuals of the time desired closer and more intimate relationships with their gods than those they could find in collective worship.

These conclusions say a lot about the Early Bronze Age world: they speak to the hopes, dreams, and desires that the people may have had in those times. But what about later times? An

examination of the bone figurine from the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology will give us a better look at the Greco-Roman Period.

AN INTRODUCTION TO GRECO-ROMAN TIMES

After Alexander the Great conquered much of the known world and died in 323 BCE, his remaining generals fought amongst themselves for control in the War of the Diadochi before splitting Alexander's conquests into five kingdoms. The Seleucid Kingdom ruled much of the Eastern Mediterranean and modern day Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Afghanistan. It fell around 63 BCE to the Romans. This period of Greek rule was defined by hellenization, a modern term that refers to the local people's voluntary adoption of aspects of Greek culture. After the Romans took over, the amalgamation continued, but this time it was a fusion of the Hellenistic and Roman cultures.

AN ANALYSIS OF FUNCTION: THE BONE FIGURINE

The object is approximately 5 centimeters tall, anthropomorphic, and made of bone. It is roughly rectangular, though there is a triangle cut out of the bottom to form two legs. There are incised lines near the waist, chest, neck, and head of the figure. The chest lines form an "x", possibly to delineate breasts, and the pelvis line is in a "v" shape. All incisions bear remnants of either red or black paint. The red is found particularly in the "x" and "v" of the sexual organs and the neck; there is black around the eyes. The head of the figure is found above a deeply cut red line, and it has two eyes, pupils, a long straight nose, and a mouth. There is no evidence of burning or other damage. The figurine was excavated, according to the description provided by the Kelsey Museum, in Seleucia, Iraq, and was made between 248 BCE and 226 CE; figurines like it were commonly found in houses or in graves⁹.

⁹ Museum label for *Figures of Females*, Ann Arbor, MI, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, November 29, 2016.

Using these features and Voigt's categories, I will attempt to identify possible functions. The figurine was probably not an initiation figure as it is not made of costly materials, there are no signs of burning, and figurines such as this one were found in houses, which is not the norm for initiation figures. The figurine could have been a toy, but I feel that sorting it into this category alone is limiting, since the toy function was often secondary to other functions¹⁰. This leaves vehicle of magic and cult figure. In this instance, differentiating between the two is difficult. The figurine is quite small, which makes it a good candidate for a vehicle of magic. It is also made of common materials and found in the ruins of houses, both of which support the vehicle of magic theory. But it being a cult figurine is also a viable option, though in my opinion it is perhaps a bit too small. The Kelsey Museum plaque identifies the figurine as a "fertility fetish"¹¹, which is a vehicle of magic used to ensure fertility.

THE BONE FIGURINE IN CONTEXT

This figurine is incredibly revealing. First off, it shows that fertility was desired; it was something worth going through the trouble of making or acquiring a vehicle of magic for. The figurine was a physical placeholder, a tangible expression of people's hopes for themselves (in this case the hope for children).

The fact that it is small is also of note: it is easily held in the hand, which, as previously discussed, creates an intense personal relationship between the holder and the object. That kind of closeness was important to them, or they would not have made such a figurine. Other design choices include the use of lines. The ability to incise circles was clearly there—the eyes are circular—but they chose to mainly use lines, even to express what I believe are breasts. This

¹⁰ Moorey, "Idols of the People," 7-8

¹¹ Museum label for *Figures of Females*, Ann Arbor, MI, Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, November 29, 2016.

hints that lines could have held some kind of significance. The lines are also painted in various colors. Red seems to have been important—body parts that had to do with fertility were done in red. The limited overall use of paint could be explained by several things: perhaps paint was expensive, in which case the use of paint had some significance to the function of the figurine, since color would not have been used otherwise, or the underlying bone was the truly important material. If this is true, then bones were meaningful to the creators and owners of the figurine. There was power in the dead. It is entirely possible that the fact that the figurine was made from something that had died was where it drew its supposed abilities from; in effect, using something dead, something with a past, helped to summon new life. The bone shows that the society needed that connection to the past. Powerful objects were not limited to precious materials or images of gods—bone was good enough. By the time that they carved the bone, though, it had become more than simply a bone. It was a remnant of history, and that may have been at least a part of what imbued the figurine with power.

Bones were not rare, and so the fact that the figurine is bone could indicate that its owners were not necessarily wealthy, and, as with the Jackier figurine, this means that its input is on the everyday people of the culture from which it came.

A LOOK ACROSS CULTURE AND TIME

Ultimately, the two figurines are not so different. They are separated in time by almost two thousand years, but the meaningful differences remain surprisingly few. The Jackier figurine is free standing and relatively large compared to the smaller bone figurine which cannot stand on its own. The breasts present on the bone figurine show a dimension of sexuality not present in the Jackier figurine, but this can be clearly attributed to its purpose: as a figurine meant to

catalyze conception, having it be distinctly female makes sense. Even the difference in legs, and thus the ability to stand, can be attributed to this, since as a cult figurine and object of worship, it is plausible that it was meant to stand on a table or shelf in a position of importance where it could be venerated. Thus these differences can be traced purely to a difference in function, not in time or culture.

Of course, there are differences that are not attributable to this, such as the mouth and paint on the bone figurine. The mouth was only conspicuous in its absence on the Jackier figurine; its presence on the bone figurine is unsurprising—it forms an additional link between the person using the figurine and the figurine itself. The lack of paint on the Jackier figurine could have several explanations, ranging from availability and cost to the conscious choice to leave the robes plain in order to be faithful to the clothing style of the day.

There are also many artistic similarities between the two figurines. The eyes, two concentric circles (counting the depressions in the bone figurine where the eyes are located), are almost identical, and the noses, while much more pronounced on the Jackier figurine, are also clearly comparable. Both figurines also possess flat bodies. Nearly two thousand years later, the stylistic patterns used in creating objects like these had barely changed; the bone figurine is an artistic descendant of the Jackier figurine.

That holdover speaks to something much greater than the similarities in artistic style between the world of the Early Bronze Age and that of Greco-Roman times. It reveals that some fundamentals remained the same. If the art style survived, then surely other qualities did as well. We need only to look towards the purpose of figurines to find out what.

All figurines have a higher purpose beyond their function. Regardless of their time period or supposed function, figurines are an echo of people's dreams and desires, a physical manifestation of what people want out of their earth-bound or spiritual life. The two figurines in question are examples of this. From the Early Bronze Age to the Greco-Roman times, people had not changed their view of the ultimate duty of a figurine: both the Jackier figurine and the bone figurine are reflections of people's better selves in some way, whether that way is through desired qualities or desired states, such as fertility. This commonality across figurines holds constant even today—Buddha statues, for instance, remind us of Buddha's qualities that we want to emulate in our own life.

MATERIAL CULTURE

The analysis done in this paper uncovered a facet of the material culture of the times and people from which the figurines came. Material culture is “the relationship of things...with human culture or society: things as an integral part of being human and living together with others,”¹² and is vitally important to our understanding of the ancient world. Material culture moves beyond the physical object and deals with the people's thoughts and feelings about the world around them.

Across time and space, the interaction between human and figurine has always come down to the interaction between humans and their aspirations. The material culture relevant to this paper, therefore, is not limited to the Early Bronze Age and Greco-Roman times. Rather, through these two figurines, this paper has found an aspect of the material culture of the human race.

¹² Chris Tilly et al, introduction to *Handbook of Material Culture* (London: SAGE, 2006), 4.

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