

ANTHROPOMORPHIC AND ZOOMORPHIC FIGURINES OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN

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We will begin by clearly defining the terms ‘zoomorphic’ and ‘anthropomorphic’: a zoomorph is simply a figure of an animal; while an anthropomorph is a figure which combines human and animal features, such as the centaurs we shall presently meet. I include both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines in this study, because I consider both to be intriguing and mysterious: why, when humans first began to create two- and three-dimensional artefacts, did they choose to so constantly represent animals and animal-human anthropomorphs? These zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines extend across geographies and also across temporal space: indeed, the earliest anthropomorphs have been dated to the Palaeolithic. However, our focus is upon the Neolithic through the Bronze and Iron Ages. Humans’ creations, from the earliest imagery, were not merely decorative art, but rather had a purpose. As we will see, such figurines are in fact an early form of technology,¹ created in order for their applications to usefully assist humankind. Thus the earliest forms of human symbolic creations, as well as, arguably, the earliest forms of sacred ideas and objects,² can be described as humans’ earliest technology.

The development of human creativity and producing of artefacts such as these are precisely what distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from other animals: I find it captivating that these artefacts so often include such abundant zoomorphic and anthropomorphic imagery. Why did humans, in beginning to express themselves creatively, not focus solely upon the themes we would imagine would most interest them: the human form, or their immediate environment, the earth, the sky, the stars, the trees and fields? Why focus so often and so particularly upon animals and animal forms? The anthropomorphic forms, with their combining animal and human characteristics, are particularly interesting and mysterious. Why do so many of our ancestors’ creations include fusions of integrated human and animal forms? Were they differentiating between themselves and animals, playing with the idea of differences? Or were they, contrariwise, suggesting an ethereal or spiritual similarity between themselves and the other animals? Perhaps we may never unequivocally answer these questions. However, the more we analyse, compare and investigate the archaeological evidence and its inferences, the more we can learn about *Homo sapiens*’ beginnings, our ancestors’ focuses and concerns, and development of our own belief systems: where we have come from, and in which direction we perhaps should be heading.

There is much contention, and no great agreement, on the functions behind the mysterious anthropomorphic figurines. However, we can ascertain that east Mediterranean centaurs certainly appear to represent a long tradition. Despite their temporal and geographical range, the centaurs are clearly all very similar creatures to one another: they all possess the body and four legs of a quadruped (either bovine or equine: apparently horses were introduced to Greece at the end of the Early Helladic period, by 2000 BCE),³ and the upper torso, arms and

1 Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 20-26.

2 Renfrew (1994), 47f.

3 Shear (2002), 151f.

head of a human figure. They are also found in far-ranging locations: discovered artefacts include two Late Bronze Age Mycenaean terracotta centaurs excavated from Ugarit on the Levantine coast, one standing seven centimetres high, and 12.5 centimetres in length, the other slightly smaller.⁴ These two Levantine centaurs are identified as Mycenaean because of the parallels between these figurines and Mycenaean centaur figurines from the Greek mainland,⁵ including the presence of arms on the human torso (this is significant, since later Roman centaurs often did not possess human arms),⁶ and also the specific shapes of their bovine or equine bodies.⁷

This similarity in form is revealed in the analysis of a hollow cylinder, terracotta centaur discovered in two rock-cut shaft tombs at Lefkandi on the island of Euboea,⁸ the second largest Greek island, and only separated from the Greek mainland by a narrow strait. This 36 centimetre tall centaur was cracked in two, with its body buried in one tomb, and its head buried in another tomb three metres away.⁹ Interestingly, this anthropomorphic centaur's body was found alongside a 14 centimetre tall zoomorphic hollow cylinder quadruped of uncertain species.¹⁰ The importance of this association will become apparent when we compare anthropomorphs with zoomorphs. This Euboean centaur is dated to between 1000 and 900 BCE through much associated Athenian Protogeometric Style pottery,¹¹ and very similar hollow-bodied cylindrical centaurs have been found throughout Mycenaean Greece,¹² including at Melos, Delphi, Thebes, Athens, Mycenae, Argive Heraeum, Asine, Tiryns, Epidaurus, and Amyclae, and for the most part are dated to the LHIIIB and LHIIC periods¹³ (that is, 1300 to 1100 BCE).¹⁴ Correspondingly, and revealingly, the Ugarit centaurs are dated to LHIIIA or LHIIIB periods (1400 to 1200 BCE)¹⁵ through the centaurs' linear decoration, and by the presence of Mycenaean vases from this same period.¹⁶

A similar centaur from the Greek island of Cos serves as a vase¹⁷ and dates to the tenth century BCE.¹⁸ In light of the discovery of the two centaurs at Ugarit, it has been theorised that there was not really a 'dark ages' between the Bronze Age and the Classical periods at all, but rather a continuation of human culture throughout Crete, Cyprus, the east Mediterranean and Levant, which has not been recognised as such.¹⁹ Thus these Mycenaean-type centaurs' existence on the Levantine coast is evidence of a tradition of communication and interaction between various cultures of very different geographies.²⁰ However, the physical differences in centaurs from various other locations, including this Ugarit centaur and another six centimetre tall centaur from Corinth,²¹ suggests that, despite maintaining that the widespread existence of the same type of anthropomorph—centaurs—indeed evidences communication, the differ-

4 Shear (2002), 147f.

5 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 26, 28.

6 Demetriou (1989), 51; Shear (1931), 424f.

7 Demetriou (1989), 51f.; Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 25f.; Shear (2002), 147.

8 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21, 25.

9 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21f.

10 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21.

11 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 22f.

12 Demetriou (1989), 51.

13 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 26.

14 Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 8.

15 Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 8.

16 Shear (2002), 148.

17 Higgins (1967), 20, plates 6A, 6B.

18 Higgins (1967), 20.

19 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 24, 27, 30; Shear (2002), 152.

20 Demetriou (1989), 51; Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Shear (2002), 150f.

21 Shear (2002), 150.

ences between the centaurs evidence an oral tradition rather than more direct communication, and that the artist merely heard about the concept of a centaur, rather than seeing any representation of it at all.²² If the concept of centaurs was transmitted across various east Mediterranean and Levantine cultures, which direction did it take? It has been suggested that centaurs in fact originated in the Levant and Anatolia,²³ once had wings or also a tail,²⁴ or are developed from sphinxes, which have been discovered at various locations as far apart as Egypt and Crete.²⁵

There is no widely accepted theory on the use or function or meaning of the centaurs.²⁶ However, we can at least infer, through the wide-ranging locations where centaurs have been unearthed, significant Mediterranean- and Levantine-wide communication and interactions between various cultures:²⁷ it has been suggested that for the very concept of centaurs to exist in different geographies, an oral communication tradition, at the very least, would have been essential, evidenced by the distribution of such a concept.²⁸ Thus we can indeed infer interaction between cultures through such similar symbolism. However, the function and meaning of such anthropomorphic imagery remains a complete mystery.²⁹ Perhaps, particularly in light of their being discovered alongside one another at Lefkandi,³⁰ comparison and examination of prehistoric zoomorphic imagery can reveal some possible uses and functions of this analogous anthropomorphic imagery.

There have been numerous prehistoric zoomorphic sculptures unearthed across the east Mediterranean, extending into the Levant and to Anatolia. Clay bulls have been discovered in the Levantine Neolithic Village of 'Ain Ghazal, in modern-day Jordan, and have calibrated dates circa 8300 to 6000 BCE;³¹ Interestingly, very similar clay bulls have been unearthed at Crete's Atsipades' peak sanctuary in inland Agios Vasilios, just south of Rethymnon, dated, by the presence of pottery, to MMII (that is, around 2,000 BCE).³² Bulls immediately bring to mind hunting and feasting activities or rituals.³³ However, prehistoric zoomorphic figurines include not only farmed animals, but other species whose symbolic uses are more mysterious: to illustrate, 'Ain Ghazal's finds also include figurines of lizards, a genus certainly not normally eaten.³⁴ Furthermore, several figurines of hedgehogs, certainly an indisputably inedible animal, appear in different locations: an endearing upright, sitting hedgehog holding a bowl, which extends within the hedgehog's body, from Chalandriani on Syros,³⁵ in the Cyclades, and dated to the Early Cycladic II period (circa 5,000 BCE);³⁶ and a gypsum quadruped hedgehog bowl from the PPNB-Early Pottery III site (circa 6,000 BCE) of Bouqras in modern-day Syria.³⁷ Does this similarity in figurines' species, over such a wide geography, indicate interaction or communication between far-flung locations, in order to share this zoomor-

22 Shear (2002), 150f.

23 Demetriou (1989), 51; Shear (2002), 151.

24 Demetriou (1989), 51f.; Shear (2002), 151.

25 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 28.

26 Demetriou (1989), 52.

27 Demetriou (1989), 51; Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Shear (2002), 150f.

28 Shear (2002), 148.

29 Demetriou (1989), 52.

30 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21.

31 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 49.

32 Watrous (1994), 732f.

33 Bergquist (1993), 11-13; Burkert (1983), 81; Furley (1981), 238; Isaakidou, Halstead, Davis & Stocker (2002), 86-90.

34 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 49.

35 Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 55-57.

36 Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 8.

37 Clason (1993), 46, 50.

phic tradition?³⁸ Indeed, zoomorphic jars have been found as far east as Deve Huyuk, west of the Euphrates River,³⁹ where a vase in the shape of a ram dates to the Middle Bronze Age, specifically 2000 BCE.⁴⁰ The earlier PPNB site at Bouqras also includes discovered figurines of a gypsum hare,⁴¹ and a basalt tortoise:⁴² these zoomorphs indeed falsify the generalised, overused feasting or hunting hypotheses on the functions of such zoomorphic figurines.

Regarding comparison with our anthropomorphic (half-human, half-animal) figurines, let us recall that the Euboea centaur was discovered alongside a zoomorphic figurine.⁴³ Since they were unearthed in an identical context to one another, can we thus infer that these zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines shared similar functions or meanings? An intriguing theory suggests that both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines were symbolic representations of either sacrificial animals or gods, and were used as literal substitutes⁴⁴ for such animals or gods, symbolic and literal representations in ritual dedications, votive offerings.⁴⁵ This symbolic substitute theory is attested by the discovery of many such artefacts—both zoomorphs and anthropomorphs—in sacred places such as tombs, on altars, and in temples and sanctuaries.⁴⁶ But might there have been numerous, various functions for these figurines, rather than one overall function? There have been various interpretations of function and meaning of these figurines, and Denise Schmandt-Besserat provides an astute alternative to the hunting hypothesis through her analysis of those found at 'Ain Ghazal. Schmandt-Besserat instead theorises these figurines as symbolic representative substitutes of animal dedications for sacred purposes, and draws upon Mesopotamian magical texts to evidence this idea, as we shall see presently.

The Levantine Neolithic Village of 'Ain Ghazal, in modern-day Jordan, has yielded 126 zoomorphic figurines of bulls, and also several goats, rams, gazelles, one boar, and two lizards.⁴⁷ The 'Ain Ghazal figurines range between three and fifteen centimetres tall, and cover a period of 2000 years, having calibrated dates circa 8300 to 6000 BCE.⁴⁸ They are all made from locally available yellow-brown clay roughened with gravel and pebble, and are remarkably homogeneous both stylistically and temporally.⁴⁹ Their legs are consistently highly stylised, with the figurines obviously designed to stand.⁵⁰ Furthermore, all of the figurines are damaged, and several of the figurines have been pierced with flint blades in their throats, abdomens, chests, or eyes, and one has its neck completely severed: these damaged figurines nevertheless are still able to be stood upright.⁵¹ They were sometimes found buried under kitchen floors, and sometimes in apparent rubbish dumps mixed with ashes, indicating that they were disposed of with kitchen rubbish: furthermore, they are all partly oxidised, indicating purposeful exposure to fire.⁵² Does the intentional damage to the figurines indicate some

38 Bergquist (1993), 42f.; Preziosi & Hitchcock (1999), 54.

39 Moorey (1980), x.

40 Moorey (1980), 12f.

41 Clason (1993), 46f., 50f.

42 Clason (1993), 46f., 50f.

43 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21.

44 Postgate (1994), 178f.

45 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Postgate (1994), 179; Spaey (1993), 411f.

46 Cosmopoulos (1991), 115; Demetriou (1989), 52; Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27.

47 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 49.

48 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 49.

49 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 49f.

50 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 50.

51 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 50-52.

52 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 51f.

type of hunting ritual? Or, upon analysis of further evidence, do other likely functions of these figurines become apparent?

The damage to the figurines may, on this initial, immediate evidence, lead to the presumption that the figurines were involved in some type of hunting ritual.⁵³ However, Schmandt-Besserat has a very different interpretation: she compares these figurines' details and contexts with textual evidence from Mesopotamian cuneiform texts, dated from the third to the first millennium BCE, which describe such clay animal figurines' uses in magic.⁵⁴ This theory and research pertains to possible functions of our mysterious anthropomorphic figurines, too.⁵⁵ Magic rituals described in the texts include presenting a clay dog as a present to the Mesopotamian Goddess Gula,⁵⁶ in order to gain her favour and protection, as well as ritual burying of animal figurines to protect buildings against evil,⁵⁷ which the author compares to our Levantine figurines' positions below the floors of homes. Regarding our Levantine lizard figurines, a seventh century BCE Assyrian Namburbi cuneiform text explains that lizard figurines protect houses from the bad omen of the sighting of a lizard.⁵⁸ Overall, far from interpreting the 'Ain Ghazal figurines in terms of simple hunting symbolism, comparison of their contexts with the Mesopotamian cuneiform texts indicates ritual protective magic activities:⁵⁹ the textual evidence and the 'Ain Ghazal figurines and contexts are certainly strikingly similar. And pertaining to our centaur figurines, this is exactly the suggested function of many such anthropomorphic figurines, right across the east Mediterranean.⁶⁰ as symbolic representations of real votive animals, dedicated to a god or used in a magic ritual, in order to gain protection.⁶¹ Of course, there may have been multiple uses and functions of similar figurines: we cannot presume that all figurines had the same meaning or purpose⁶² (unless, of course, the context is quite identical, as were the Euboean zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines).⁶³ Nevertheless, comparative evidence from the Mesopotamian cuneiform texts supports exactly this representative, votive function, in fact a technological function in order to achieve protection.⁶⁴ and this theory is applicable to both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines.

An alternative hypothesis, in attempting to explain the prevalence of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic prehistoric figurines, posits Shamanism.⁶⁵ This theory suggests that the combining of human and animal characteristics, so present in anthropomorphic imagery, reflects a Shamanistic connection with 'animal spirits' while under the influence of hallucinogens.⁶⁶ Indeed, this theory is supported by the common use of the opium poppy flower right throughout east Mediterranean, Levantine, Egyptian and Anatolian imagery, and from the Neolithic period through the Bronze and into the Iron Age. However, the greatest evidence suggesting this Shamanistic interpretation of zoomorphs and anthropomorphs is based on the study of modern hunter-gatherer societies' Shamanism, and comparison of their present-day animal

53 Cosmopoulos (1991), 115.

54 Lambert (1993), 192f.; Leichty (1993), 237; Postgate (1994), 176f.; Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 55-57.

55 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Lambert (1993), 195, 201.

56 Postgate (1994), 176; Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 55.

57 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 56.

58 Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 56.

59 Postgate (1994), 176-78; Schmandt-Besserat (1997), 56f.

60 Lubsen-Admirall (2003), 19.

61 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Immerwahr (1990), 136f.; Leichty (1993), 237, 241.

62 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 27; Isaakidou, Halstead, Davis & Stocker (2002), 91.

63 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 21.

64 Immerwahr (1990), 136f.; Leichty (1993), 237.

65 Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998), 45f., 95.

66 Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998), 81.

symbolism with that of past millennia.⁶⁷ This is an intriguing analysis, but can we presume *Homo sapiens* of millennia past to have thought and felt the same way that we do?

Can we successfully infer that our thoughts and feelings, as *Homo sapiens*, can be taken to reflect the thoughts and feelings of *Homo sapiens* of millennia past? True, we are all the same species: despite the massive geographical and temporal differences, is there more that unites us than that which separates us? Would we not surely have the same concerns and the same philosophical questions about ourselves, our universe, and our place in it? Or are we, in attempting to impose anthropological interpretations upon archaeological studies of ancient people, imposing cultural-centric biases, presumptions and constructions of our own society, and our own subjective beliefs, which we can never even be entirely and consciously aware of, let alone remove ourselves from?⁶⁸ While we are indeed all the same species, with similar questions and concerns about ourselves and our worlds, perhaps our answers and solutions to those questions will reflect our diversity of human cultures and societies and belief systems. So of course, we must remain aware that our interpretations of millennia-past cultures and their symbolism can only be tentative.⁶⁹ Our own cultural axioms are reflected in our archaeological interpretations of peoples of the past. This is precisely why the best archaeological methodology draws upon available evidence, however scant, whether textual or only contextual, and formulates hypotheses on the basis of evidence, rather than the other way around.

To summarise and conclude: I began with the mysterious anthropomorphs, including two Late Bronze Age Mycenaean terracotta centaurs excavated from Ugarit on the Levantine coast; I also made mention of various terracotta centaurs from Mycenaean Greece, focussing on one unearthed at Lefkandi on the Greek island of Euboea, and another from Cos, east of the Cyclades. We considered the inferences we can draw from the similarities and differences in these artefacts, and following this visual analysis, examined corresponding connections between various geographies and cultures. We moved on to investigate potential functions and meanings of the figurines, in doing so moving from the anthropomorphic to the zoomorphic figurines, because of the additional evidence regarding possible functions, and because of the relevance between anthropomorphs and zoomorphs, both in animal imagery and also in situation, as we saw in the Euboean artefacts, where a zoomorph and anthropomorph shared the one tomb. The zoomorphic artefacts we examined also encompassed various cultures and locations, including Neolithic Levantine bulls from 'Ain Ghazal in modern-day Jordan; very similar clay bulls from Crete's Atsipades' peak sanctuary in inland Agios Vasilios; and various zoomorphs ranging geographically from Chalandriani on Syros in the Cyclades, to Deve Huyuk and Bouqras in modern-day Syria.

We explored possible functions, including figurines' uses in hunting or feasting ritual; comparisons with modern-day Shamanism; and the figurines as representational votive dedications, used in magic rites, in order to gain protection from gods. Thus, with this final theory, which can be applied to both the zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines, as we have seen on the basis of the interpretative evidence, we can accurately describe these figurines as the earliest technology, created in order to usefully assist humankind.⁷⁰

67 Clottes & Lewis-Williams (1998), 45f., 95.

68 Burkert (1983), 73; Renfrew (1994), 47f.; Wasilewska (1993), 471, 482.

69 Desborough, Nicholls & Popham (1970), 24.

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