Chapter 34

Prehistoric Figurines in Italy

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34.1 Introduction

This chapter offers an overview of prehistoric anthropomorphic figurines in peninsular Italy and Sicily between the Palaeolithic and Copper Age (Figure 34.1). It builds on a previous synthesis by Holmes and Whitehouse (1998), presenting some updated patterns in the data and contextual interpretations of the production, use, and deposition of this well-known but still poorly understood category of artefact. This approach contrasts with traditional Italian studies, characterized by an emphasis on stylistic comparisons and classifications, and a tendency to speculate about ritual and religious meanings (e.g. Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè 2002-2003; Giannitrapani 2002; Graziosi 1973). I follow Bailey (2005) in defining figurines as miniature, three-dimensional representations of the human body (and of other figurines), and therefore exclude larger modelled anthropomorphic figures, including monumental statue-stele. The large Italian island of Sardinia is also not included here, partly for reasons of space but also because the Sardinian 'prenuragic' figurines represent a very distinct regional tradition, summarized well by other scholars (e.g. Lilliu 1999; Losi 2012; Ruju 1980; Vella Gregory 2006 and see Chapter 35, this volume). Nor is the Bronze Age included, since figurines are not a characteristic feature of this period in Italy, with the exception of the well-known 'nuragic *bronzetti*' of Sardinia (see Chapter 35, this volume).

<Insert Figure 34.1>

34.2 Upper Palaeolithic

Italian Palaeolithic figurines comprise a well-established part of the corpus of European Upper Palaeolithic 'Venus' figurines. However, they are also highly problematic, particularly due to unresolved questions regarding their provenance. A total of twenty claimed examples come from five sites extending along the full length of the Italian peninsula.

Two relatively well-provenanced examples are a pair of carved bone female figurines (the 'Parabita Venuses') from the Grotta delle Veneri in South-East Italy (Piscopo and Radmilli 1966; Radmilli 1966, 1966–1969) (Figure 34.2). This large limestone cave appears to have been an enduringly significant place in the prehistoric cultural landscape that was repeatedly occupied in various phases of the Upper Palaeolithic. It can be interpreted as a 'base camp' for small groups of hunter-gatherers—given the accumulation of flint artefacts and bones of large game animals in the stratified deposits, and also as an arena for symbolic communication—given the burial of a pair of adult skeletons decorated with red ochre and perforated deer canines in the inner cave during the Gravettian, and the deposition of over 400 incised stones and bones in the outer rock-shelter during the Epiromanellian (or Mesolithic).

<Insert Figure 34.2>

The two figurines were discovered by a local 'enthusiast', who gave them to the archaeologist Radmilli but failed to note the exact spot where they were found. However, on the basis of reddish soil adhering to the grooves of the figurines, Radmilli assigned them to the reddish deposits associated with an Early Epigravettian flint industry identified in the inner cave, as opposed to the underlying grey-brown Gravettian deposits.

So, although not secure, these figurines can probably be assigned to the Late Upper Palaeolithic, and dated to around 20,000–18,000 BP.

The larger of the two figurines is 9 cm long (Figure 34.2.1). It is carved from a flake of bone from the diaphysis of a large mammal. It retains an area of spongy bone tissue, which gives its right side an irregular outline. It also has a polished patina. The head is elongated, and a band around the lower part of this carries two deeply incised curving grooves. They have been plausibly interpreted as representing a necklace. Other deep grooves delineate arms extending from the shoulders, which widen and meet under the bulging belly. The latter has been interpreted as an indication of pregnancy. The breasts are outlined by two grooves. The pubic area is also clearly defined, and a deep groove divides the thighs. On the reverse side, the back, buttocks, and thighs are marked. The legs terminate intentionally at the level of the knees.

The smaller of the two figurines is 6.1 cm long (Figure 34.2.2). It is made from a similar flake of bone and also has a polished patina. However, it exhibits a number of contrasts with the larger figurine. It appears more two-dimensional, has a more tapering form, a flat stomach, and less detailed working, except in the area of the hands, which are elaborated by general indications of fingers. Various practical suggestions have been offered to explain these differences: that the smaller piece is a rough-out, or less skilfully made, or simply limited by the smaller size of the original bone fragment. But, despite these differences, we should not overlook the fact that the two figurines were found together. In other words, their pairing as well as their differences may have been meaningful.

The practical, performative significance of their carving, handling, inspection, and ultimate deposition by the people who occupied this economically and socially important cave should not be underestimated. Despite their small size and number, we can regard them as significant material props that contributed to the rich drama of life in and around the cave. As to more specific meanings, there is little doubt that both figurines represent the bodies of adult females. On a general level, this could lead one to suspect that they had a gender-related significance. One might speculate, for example, that by 'objectifying' women's bodies, perhaps according to male ways of seeing, their making and use contributed to a redefinition of gender relations during the Late Upper Palaeolithic, including a more specialized sexual division of labour and a more marked differentiation of social status and control (cf. Whitehouse 2001: 59–61; Zampetti and Mussi 1991). But, more specifically, their visual focus on the belly and breasts provided them with the symbolic potential to highlight the centrality of female pregnancy in the vital process of human reproduction—practices and themes that would have characterized social life at this 'base camp'. Their deposition might also have echoed the formal burial ritual accorded to a pair of adults performed at an earlier time in the same part of this cave.

Another moderately well-provenanced example is the 'Frasassi Venus'. This was found recently in secondary deposits outside the entrance to the Grotta della Beata Vergine di Frasassi—a large cave situated in the Frasassi gorge in East Central Italy (Coltorti et al. 2012). It is presumed to have originally been deposited in this cave and has been assigned stylistically to the Gravettian. The figurine is 8.7 cm long and is made on a piece of cave stalactite, which is rare but not unique as a raw material used for

Palaeolithic art in Italy and France. It represents a rounded head, breasts, arms (uniquely) held forward resting on a swollen belly, triangular pelvis area, and tapering legs.

Two other claimed examples of Palaeolithic figurines made of carved and polished steatite or serpentine come with more problematic provenances. The 'Trasimeno Venus' is a minute (and partly broken) object, 3.7 cm high, reported to have come from 'around lake Trasimeno' in Central Italy (Palma di Cesnola 1938; Zampetti 1993, 1995). Its smoothed but irregular form has been interpreted in terms of protruding breasts and a single buttock, with reference to the Gravettian 'Venus of Mauern' from the Weinberghöhlen cave complex in Germany. However, we should remain cautious about its identification as a figurine. By contrast, the large 'Savignano Venus' is certainly a female figurine. It is 22.1 cm long, with a pointed head, large breasts flanked by arms, swollen belly, pronounced ('steatopygic') buttocks, and tapering legs. Mussi (1996) also sees a double phallus in its form. Traces of red are present on the head, right arm, and lower backside. It was found in 1925 by workmen in a Pleistocene alluvial deposit of the River Panaro, near Savignano, towards the southern edge of the Po Valley in Northern Italy (Antonielli 1925, 1926). Unfortunately, no other cultural remains were found here, and there is a long-running debate about its date—is it Neolithic rather than Palaeolithic?

Most problematic of all are the fifteen figurines claimed by Louis Alexandre Jullien to have been found between 1883 and 1895 during his excavations in two of the Balzi Rossi (or Grimaldi) caves (Grotte du Prince and Barma Grande) on the Riveria of North-West Italy. The figurines are made of a range of materials (steatite, chlorite, antler, and ivory) and are characterized by their relatively large number, small size, and wide variety of forms (ranging from figurative female representations with prominent breasts

and buttocks to abstract anthropomorphic forms). The archaeological importance of the Balzi Rossi caves and rockshelters is undeniable, with at least six originally containing rich Gravettian deposits, including human burials. However, the authenticity of the figurines has always been contested (e.g. Lander 2005; Mortillet 1898). The figurines could be fakes, four key accusations having been made. (1) The French prehistorian Émile Rivière, who had previously excavated in the Balzi Rossi caves (including the Barma Grande where he found no engraved or sculpted artefacts), witnessed forgeries being sold as prehistoric artefacts at the entrance to the caves in 1892 (Mortillet 1898: 152). (2) Jullien was an antiquities dealer who wished to sell the figurines: he eventually sold seven of them for the French Musée des Antiquités Nationales, and his daughter sold another to the Peabody Museum in the USA. (3) Jullien provided imprecise and inconsistent information concerning not only the stratigraphic layers but also the caves in which the figurines were supposedly found. (4) Jullien kept the figurines' initial 'discovery' a secret for up to twelve years, only revealing them after the publication of the Brassempouy figurines, which share some formal similarities with the Balzi Rossi examples. Nevertheless, many scholars have been willing to accept the authenticity of the Balzi Rossi figurines (e.g. Bisson and Bolduc 1994; Cook 2013; Mussi et al. 2000; Piette 1902; Reinach 1898; White and Bisson 1998), finding close technological and typological similarities with Gravettian figurines found across Europe.

34.3 Mesolithic

For the Mesolithic in Italy, only a single object can be tentatively described as a figurine. This artefact can only broadly be regarded as a stylistic descendant of the Palaeolithic figurines. Its interpretation therefore lies in something of a contextual vacuum.

The object in question comes from Later Mesolithic deposits in Riparo Gaban near Trento in northern Italy (Bagolini 1979; Kozlowski and Dalmeri 2000). This is a large south-facing rockshelter, located at a relatively low altitude (for the Mesolithic in this mountain region) of about 280 m, in a hanging valley that runs parallel to and above the major Adige Valley.

The artefact is a female figure carved in relief along one edge of the 10.2 cm long end-section of a deer antler, the rest of which is smoothed but plain (Figure 34.3)—in contrast to the fully three-dimensional Palaeolithic figurines discussed above. Breasts, a swollen belly with arms stretching down the sides, and legs can be identified, but no head is visibly attached to the body. Some incisions at the apex of the piece might represent a separate head, and a groove below a possible neck (as well as potentially a point from which this portable object was suspended).

<Insert Figure 34.3>

This object was found in fragments, which have since been successfully refitted, although a few pieces are missing. They were recovered from the bottom of a Late Mesolithic pit, which also contained a bead made from a large fish vertebra and a Late Castelnovian lithic assemblage (*c*.5900–5800 BC). These intentional acts of digging a pit and of depositing a small but symbolically significant assemblage of visually expressive portable artefacts in its base tie in with evidence of greater symbolic behaviour from other Castelnovian deposits at the same site, which have produced a human bone, and five animal bone artefacts decorated with abstract geometric motifs.

Riparo Gaban was first occupied during the Earlier Mesolithic and may therefore have been regarded by local human groups as a significant historic place in the landscape by the time of its Later Mesolithic occupation. Kozlowski and Dalmeri (2000) suggest

that, during the Later Mesolithic, the site was mainly occupied during the winter as a residential base camp by a human group practising hunting, fishing, and gathering, whose hunting territory extended into the adjacent uplands of Monte Calisio during other seasons. However, Clark (2000: 110) argues that the Later Mesolithic in the Trentino saw a reduction in the size of subsistence territories, an economic focus on the increasingly environmentally diverse valley bottoms, and a more intensive occupation of rockshelters in the Adige Valley, and that, consequently, the occupation of Riparo Gaban could have taken the form of 'a more permanent year round settlement'. Either way, the performative act of placing the special carved figure in the bottom of a pit dug at this site confirms the idea of a human group investing greater value in this particular place—a process that might be described as digging in and settling down. Furthermore, the increased production and use of decorated artefacts might be understood in terms of an increase in symbolic communication among members of a group who were experimenting with new, more intense and extended ways of living together and socializing at this particular place and time. More specifically, the carving, handling, and display of the female figure might have contributed to discourse over the role of women within this altered socio-economic context.

34.4 Neolithic and Early Copper Age

Figurine production and use in peninsular Italy and Sicily increased significantly during the Early and Middle phases of the Neolithic (*c*.6000–4400 BC), falling off somewhat during the later Neolithic (4400–4000 BC), and becoming more-or-less restricted to Sicily during the early Copper Age (4000–3400 BC). After this, human representations shifted

from the small-scale to the monumental, reappearing in the Copper Age landscape and occasionally in tombs as stone statue-stele and rock art (e.g. Skeates 2005).

Riparo Gaban, which continued to be occupied by groups of hunter-gatherers during the Early Neolithic period, saw the deposition of an increased number of artworks carved from the bones of hunted animals and from stone (Bagolini 1972; Graziosi 1975; Pedrotti 1998: 128–9). Three of these artefacts might be described as figurines. A female example, 10 cm long, was made on a bone plaque. It has a small head with incisions representing long hair, a necklace possibly with a suspended pendant, shoulders and arms, a notched belt, broad hips, a vulva surmounted by a plant-like motif, and a tapering lower half terminating in a point. The lower part and the back are coloured with red ochre. A much smaller figurine, 3.5 cm long, was also marked by incisions on the root part of a boar's molar. It could represent, in abstract form, a female body with two round breasts (or perhaps eyes) and legs (or a vulva). A stone pebble, 13.4 cm long, with rounded ends was also engraved: at one end, with a head on the front and two sides, including eyes, eyebrows, nose, mouth and ears; and at the opposite end and in the middle with linear geometric motifs. This form might also be read as phallic. The Early Neolithic deposits also yielded other bone and horn artefacts decorated with figurative and geometric motifs, pottery with 'Gaban style' decoration, and some shell ornaments. As in the Mesolithic, the materials and forms of the figurines and other artworks from Neolithic Riparo Gaban stand out on an Italian scale, and might best be interpreted again in terms of the local traditions and concerns of a particular community, which used these visual materials expressively at a place and time of continuity and change.

Two other Italian 'Neolithic' figurines might instead be regarded as reutilized Palaeolithic artefacts. The 'Venus of Chiozza' lacks stratigraphic details but was found in a pile of pebbles by quarrymen in 1940 (Graziosi 1943). It is a sandstone figurine, 20 cm long, with a rounded head, shoulders, breasts, belly and belly button, incised vulva, buttocks, and legs. It was originally attributed stylistically to the Palaeolithic, then to the Neolithic with reference to the Holocene clayey formation along the River Secchia in which it was found and to a nearby Neolithic settlement, although Graziosi (1973: 20) argued that it could still be Palaeolithic in origin but then reused in the Neolithic. A similar argument has since been applied to the small stone figurine found during underwater excavations in 2000 at the submerged Early Neolithic lake-dwelling of La Marmotta in Lago Bracciano in west-central Italy (e.g. Fugazzola Delpino 2001). This intact object is made of carved and polished green steatite and is just 4.8 cm long (Figure 34.4). It represents a round head without facial features but with hair at the back, shoulders, arms cupping large breasts, large belly with belly button, pubic triangle, thighs, buttocks, and legs. It was deposited under the floor of a rectangular house, which has been interpreted as a cult structure due to the presence, close to a hearth, of fragments of ochre, decorated bones, and unusual pottery vessels. It can be broadly compared stylistically to Palaeolithic figurines, and stratified Palaeolithic deposits have been identified only 100 m away from the Neolithic site where it was found, so it is possible that this object 'affords a remarkable glimpse of Neolithic people collecting a striking item from a nearby ancient site, assimilating it to their own categories of material production, and integrating it into their ritual practices' (Robb 2007: 55). However, the debate about these two unusual examples is unresolved.

<Insert Figure 34.4>

The remaining figurines of Neolithic peninsular Italy and Sicily are numerically, technically, and stylistically distinct from their Palaeolithic and Mesolithic predecessors, even though they generally continue to represent female human bodies.

The Neolithic examples are much more numerous, with around 235 fragments and whole examples now known from seventy-three sites. This number is two to three times greater than previous estimates (cf. Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 96; Robb 2007: 46), in part due to the recent discovery of large numbers at the sites of Ponte Ghiara near Fidenza in northern Italy (84 fragments) and Catignano in east-central Italy (17 fragments) (Bernabò Brea et al. 2000; Colombo 2007). Nevertheless, this total remains small compared with the current estimate of over 50,000 known examples of figurines from the Neolithic and Copper Age in the Balkans (J. Chapman pers. comm. 2013). From this European perspective, then, Neolithic Italy lay on the western margin of the grand Balkan tradition of figurine production (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 100), numerically, geographically, and culturally.

The Neolithic figurines are predominantly made of fired clay. The fabrics and surface treatments of the clay figurines are generally comparable to those of contemporary pottery vessels, clay stamps, and spindle whorls—a connection that is particularly evident in the case of 'face pots' decorated in relief with anthropomorphic faces (e.g. Coppola 1999–2000; Giannitrapani 2002). Indeed, Robb (2007: 46–8) plausibly suggests that figurines were made by potters, perhaps during potting sessions. But not all the techniques used to form pots and figurines were the same. In particular, traces of peg holes on some figurines indicate that these particular objects were made in more than one piece then joined together (and potentially later detached), including at the

head and waist on examples from Grotta Patrizi, Tufarelle di Allumiere, and S. Matteo Chiantinelle (Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè 2002–2003; Gravina 2008; Grifoni Cremonesi and Radmilli 2000–2001).

Over Italy as a whole, the Neolithic figurines appear in a variety of forms. Some echo stylistic features of Balkan Neolithic figurines, although never to the extent of appearing as copies or imports (Biagi 1996: 53). But there are also some regional variations within Italy. Figurine sites in northern Italy have produced an average of five fragments or whole specimens compared with an average of two per figurine site in the centre and south. As Holmes and Whitehouse (1998: 100) have pointed out, this may partly reflect the larger scale and quality of archaeological excavations in northern Italy, but also genuine cultural differences. Certainly it is only in the north that anything approaching distinct Neolithic traditions of figurine production can be identified (e.g. Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè 2002–2003).

The best-defined of these figurine traditions is associated with the earlier Neolithic Vhò culture at sites in the central and western areas of northern Italy, including Campo Ceresole and Campo Castellaro at Vhò di Piadena, Dugali Alti at Ostiano, Travo, Brignano Frascata, and Borgo Moretta (Bagolini and Biagi 1977a, 1977b; Bernabò Brea 1991: 38–9; Biagi 1994, 1996; Mosso 1907; Traverso 1993; Venturino Gambari 1992). Here, a stylistically homogeneous group of female figurines with mushroom-shaped heads can be identified (Figure 34.5a). These are also characterized by incised hairstyles, small holes placed either side of the head, breasts, small protruding arms, emphasized buttocks in contrast to the relatively flat profile of the body, belly button hole, and cylindrical legs terminating in expanded 'elephant' feet.

<Insert Figures 34.5a and 34.5b>

A moderately well-defined form of figurine is also linked to the Middle Neolithic Square-Mouthed Pottery Culture (or *Cultura del Vaso a Bocca Quadrata* [VBQ]) in northern Italy (*c*.4900–4300 BC), at sites including Caverna delle Arene Candide, Grotta Polera, Castello di San Martino Canavese, Castello di Annone, Cascina Cascinetta, Vicofertile, Quinzano Veronese, and Rocca di Rivoli, extending from Liguria in the west across to the Veneto towards the east (Bagolini and Barfield 1976: 65–6; Bernabò Brea 2006; Biagi 1972: 441; Tinè 1975, 1999; Venturino Gambari 1997: 145, 1998: 110). Here, the upper half of a distinct type of female figurine is characterized by a cylindrical or oval head with a prominent nose shown in relief, long hair hanging down to the shoulders, and arms (and even hands) joined under the breasts (Figure 34.5b). Additional facial features usually include the eyebrows, eyes, and mouth.

Another, less well-defined, form of female figurine, known as the 'coat-hanger' or 'crutch' type—due to its simple torso with breasts and stump-like arms—is also associated with VBQ sites. These include Caverna delle Arene Candide, Grotta Polera, Grotta di Ponte Vara, Ponte Ghiara, Via Guidorossi–Parma, and Chiozza (Bernabò Brea et al. 2000, 2010: 86–7; Laviosa Zambotti 1943: 81, 86; Odetti 1992; Tinè 1975, 1999). However, Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè (2002–2003: 44) acknowledge that this category of figurine overlaps with the long-haired VBQ type, as seen in examples from Grotta di Ponta Vara and Via Guidorossi–Parma, which combine 'coat-hanger'-shaped torsos with heads featuring a prominent nose and long hair.

Holmes and Whitehouse (1998: 112) also describe as 'purely a Sicilian phenomenon' figurines that have been interpreted as human–animal hybrids, but their number is very restricted and their identification as such is not clear-cut. The most

obvious example is the upper part of a clay figurine from Piano Vento, with an anthropomorphic torso with breasts and short arms, and a bird-like elongated neck and 'beaked' head, both parts covered by incised lines that might represent feathers (Castellana 1995: 18).

With the significant exception of the relatively well-defined 'mushroom'-headed figurines of the earlier Neolithic Vhò culture, the traditional Italian archaeological concern with typology seems poorly suited to the highly varied repertoire of Italian Neolithic figurine forms (cf. Robb 2007: 52–3). A partial exception might be made for the 'pairs' of similar figurines found at three sites in southern Italy and Sicily (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 103–5): Passo di Corvo, Grotta Stuffe di San Calogero, and Cozzo Busonè (Bianchini 1968; Tinè 1971, 1983, 1989) (Figure 34.6.1–2). But these 'pairs' do not contradict an overall impression of the highly localized, even household-scale, nature of production of, and transmission of knowledge about, figurines in Neolithic Italy—indeed, figurine styles appear to have been much more variable than pottery styles. But we still need to account for the relative homogeneity of the Vhò culture figurines in northern Italy. This might reflect a greater degree of human mobility and intercommunication within this earlier Neolithic culture, in which technical skills and styles were actively shared and maintained between dispersed communities, particularly compared with the larger, more settled and more self-sufficient communities of the Middle Neolithic VBQ culture in the same region, where figurines seem to have been made, used and deposited on a household scale.

<Insert Figure 34.6>

In form, the Italian Neolithic clay figurines predominantly share a focus on the passively seated or extended (standing or lying down) female human body—and

especially its head and breasts. In contrast to the Palaeolithic figurines, there seems to be little emphasis on pregnancy (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 108). The pubic area and vulva are also only rarely marked—the most explicit examples coming from Favella di Sibari in south-west Italy, represented by two torso fragments of figurines with incised vulvas, one also highlighted by decorative notches (Tinè 1996: 423–5). In a few other cases, the vulva appears in a more abstract and symbolic form. For example, the female figurine on a bone plaque from Riparo Gaban (see above Section 34.3) has an incised vulva surmounted by a plant-shaped motif, which has been interpreted as symbolizing procreativity in the human and plant worlds (Pedrotti 1998: 129). And on a finely modelled clay figurine head from Grotta di Cala Scizzo in south-east Italy (Geniola and Tunzi 1980), the elaboration of the mouth—which is represented by an incised triangle, intersected by a vertical line that continues down the neck and terminates in a semi-circular protrusion—might be read as mimicking a vulva and division between the legs. The same motif appears on two VBQ clay figurine heads from the Caverna della Arene Candide in north-west Italy (Bernabò Brea 1956: 97; Tinè 1999: 320). Similarly, on an intact clay female figurine from the Middle Neolithic settlement of Monte Canne in south-east Italy, an incised line descends down the chin from the mouth (Radina 1992) (Figure 34.6.3). In addition, on the front of this same figurine, in an anatomically correct position at the base, there is a triangular motif marked by double incised lines that could represent a vulva, although it is flanked by other geometric motifs, which have the combined effect of drawing attention to this motif at the same time as rendering it less sexually explicit. These examples suggest that, in contrast to the common and

unambiguous representation of breasts, representations of the female genitals were generally either avoided or masked by abstract symbols (cf. Skeates 2007).

Unambiguous male figurines, marked by a clearly defined penis, have likewise not been found so far, although a few possible examples do exist, albeit in a fragmentary state and even in intentionally ambiguous forms. For example, a damaged clay figurine (7 cm long) with short arms and legs, found on the surface of the settlement site of Ortucchio in east-central Italy (with occupations ranging from the Mesolithic through the Neolithic and Copper Age to the Bronze Age), does appear to have a broad penis in relief (Irti 1979). And at Catignano in east-central Italy a torso fragment of a figurine exhibits traces of arms and legs and an elongated lug, perhaps representing a penis, but also two other small lugs, perhaps representing breasts, which potentially render this body not male but hermaphrodite (Colombo 2007). Similarly, but in more abstract form, some female figurines have also been described as phallic due to their smoothed and elongated form—especially the female figurines engraved on pebbles from Riparo Gaban (see above Section 34.3) and Cozzo Busonè in Sicily (Bianchini 1968).

V-shaped motifs applied around the necks of some of the figurines can plausibly be interpreted as necklaces. A prominent example comes from Early Neolithic Sammardenchia in north-east Italy (Ferrari and Pessina 1996: 53, 60). On the upper half of this clay figurine, two parallel incised lines filled with a red pigment form a V-shape extending down from the neck through the breasts and also part way down the back. Other examples appear on figurines from Riparo Gaban, Campo Ceresole, Passo di Corvo, and Monte Canne (Bagolini and Biagi 1977a; Giannitrapani 2002: 86; Radina 1992; Tinè 1983) (Figures 34.6.1 and 34.6.3). Given the conscious choice of makers to

represent these necklaces on the bodies of the figurines (and not to represent other essential features, such as feet or clothing), we might assume that necklaces were particularly important cultural symbols, whose social values were imparted to the figurines. Holmes and Whitehouse (1998: 108) argue that these necklaces might be seen as culturally reinforcing the female gender of the figurines (also marked biologically by their breasts). But the wearing of necklaces by female members of society may also have carried more specific social meanings, related to their social status—as wives, mothers, or elders, for example. In other words, the necklaces may have been socially as well as culturally prominent symbols.

Special abstract geometric symbols are also repeated symmetrically on a few figurines, particularly in southern Italy. For example, large impressed and white-filled dentellated circles appear on the Monte Canne figurine: two beneath the breasts and two on the back (Radina 1992) (Figure 34.6.3). Incised lines appear on both cheeks of a figurine head from Grotta Pacelli (Striccoli 1988) (Figure 34.6.4), and incised zigzags appear on figurines from Passo di Corvo and Montocchio (Grifoni Cremonesi 2001; Tinè 1983) (Figure 34.6.1). Given that zigzag lines were also painted across the face of a remarkably realistic Neolithic face pot from the Grotta di Porto Badisco in south-east Italy (Innocenti 2004), it is possible that such marks referenced culturally significant decorations applied to living people's bodies.

Traces of pigment have also been identified on some figurines. In northern and central Italy, where Neolithic painted pottery appears only rarely, simple patches or bands of red appear on a few figurines, including examples from Riparo Gaban, Castello di Breno, and Via Guidorossi, Parma (Bagolini 1972; Bernabò Brea et al. 2010: 86–7;

Fedele 1989: 123; Graziosi 1975). But in central and southern Italy and Sicily, where Neolithic painted pottery is more common and elaborate, red and white pigment usually appears to have been applied in a more targeted manner: to draw attention to the heads of figurines (especially the hair and face)—as at Grotta Patrizi, Grotta Pacelli, Grotta di Cala Scizzo, and Monte Canne (Geniola and Tunzi 1980; Grifoni Cremonesi and Radmilli 2000–2001; Radina 1992; Striccoli 1988) (Figure 34.6.3–4) —and also their breasts, in the case of one of the examples from Piano Vento (Castellana 1995: 68–70). In the exceptional case of Grotta Pacelli, the head is further emphasized and elaborated, being crowned by a layered headdress, that is in turn decorated on top by incised lines (Striccoli 1988).

We can also say more about the significance of the Italian Neolithic figurines by considering their deposition contexts. The majority of these are not clearly defined (Holmes and Whitehouse 1998: 101), but our knowledge has improved significantly over the last decade as a result of new and more precisely recorded archaeological excavations, particularly in northern Italy.

In earlier Neolithic northern Italy, broken ceramic figurines appear to have been discarded and accumulated along with other domestic debris in extensive midden deposits or in pits on residential sites, including open sites and rockshelters. For example, the earlier Neolithic Vhò culture figurines were regularly deposited in pits on settlement sites (e.g. Bagolini and Biagi 1977a, 1977b; Bernabò Brea 1991; Biagi 1994, 1996; Mosso 1907; Traverso 1993). These pits, which measure up to 3.4 m wide and 2.4 m deep, also contained pottery sherds, stone artefacts, faunal remains, and botanical remains. Although traditionally interpreted as either hut bases or rubbish pits, it is more

likely that they were originally dug to extract clay and then later gradually filled with mixed, broken, and discarded, low-value, domestic debris resulting from a range of quotidian dwelling activities. The incomplete, fragmentary nature of the figurines found in these pits ties in with this interpretation. However, we should note Pearce's (2008) alternative explanation that the fills of these pits were formed through a more ritualized process involving 'structured deposition' and the intentional fragmentation of figurines. One convincing example of this kind of process is provided by the foot of a figurine, deposited at the base of a post-hole situated close to the entrance through a wooden palisade at the settlement site at Lugo di Grezzana near Verona, which might be regarded as an intentional 'foundation' deposit (Cavulli and Pedrotti 2001).

This pattern of domestic deposition continued at north Italian residential sites assigned to the Middle Neolithic VBQ culture. However, figurines were now also deposited more purposefully in VBQ cemeteries. The most spectacular mortuary find of a figurine is from Vicofertile (Bernabò Brea 2006). Here, a large (almost 20 cm long), fragmentary but whole, figurine was found in front of the face of an adult women, above her folded left arm (Figure 34.5b). The figurine represents a seated woman of the VBQ variety, with an oval head, prominent nose, long hair, and arms with hands joined under the breasts at the waist. Two pottery vessels also accompanied the deceased. This grave lay in the centre of a group of four other burials, all of which contained the contrasting remains of relatively young male individuals, two accompanied by stone tools—mortuary symbolism that could indirectly have highlighted the maturity and gender of the adult woman. It is tempting to suggest, given this highly patterned mortuary context, that the figurine also contributed to the symbolic construction of a formalized identity for the

deceased woman. However, at Via Guidorossi-Parma, the grave of an infant also contained a figurine—the upper half of a 'coat-hanger'-type VBQ female figurine, with a large nose, eyes, breasts, traces of red, and the pubic triangle delimited by an incision (Bernabò Brea et al. 2010: 86–7). It is unclear whether only this upper part of the figurine was originally deposited in the grave, or whether the bottom half was removed when the grave was disturbed in the Copper Age by the construction of a building.

Here it is more difficult to think in terms of the female figurine signifying the identity of the infant, so we should not rule out the possibility that both figurines carried a more religious significance. By contrast again, a fragment of a figurine was found in a secondary burial deposit in a pit at Le Mose near Piacenza (Bernabò Brea et al. 2010: 68), which also contained human skull fragments, fragments of hut plaster, and flint flakes. Here one might suggest that, like the human remains, the symbolic value of the figurine was retained, despite comprising only a restricted sample of what may have been originally a more compete primary body. Clearly, then, not all Italian Neolithic figurines were 'casually made and discarded items' (Robb 2007: 52).

In central Italy, almost all the Neolithic figurines come from relatively poorly defined deposits at residential sites, which perhaps suggests that they were ultimately discarded in domestic midden deposits, as in northern Italy, having fulfilled whatever purposes they were made for. A possible exception is the unusual Palaeolithic-style stone figurine from the lake-dwelling of La Marmotta (see Section 34.4).

The same kind of refuse disposal process also appears to have been the norm at residential sites in southern Italy and Sicily, where generally fragmented figurines ended up in midden deposits filling layers, pits, and ditches. However, the unusual discovery of

the upper halves of a pair of figurines in a C-shaped ditch at Passo di Corvo (Tinè 1983) may require a different explanation. Here, as at other residential sites with enclosure ditches on the Tavoliere plain radiocarbon dated to the last quarter of the sixth millennium BC, ditches and their fills may have taken on a more symbolic role, being filled with richer cultural deposits, including primary and secondary human burials, all of which could have contributed to the symbolic demarcation of space and society at these sites (Skeates 2000: 178–80). If this is the case, then it is also possible that these similarly halved figurines were subjected to intentional fragmentation (c.f. Chapman 2000; Talalay 1993).

This hint of figurines taking on a more symbolic role in special contexts in the Middle Neolithic developed more fully during the later Neolithic in southern Italy and Sicily, as in northern Italy. For example, in south-east Italy, two finely modelled clay figurine heads were deposited under large ritual installations in caves: one under a stone platform in the interior of the Grotta di Cala Scizzo, another under a large stone hearth in Grotta Pacelli (Geniola and Tunzi 1980; Striccoli 1988). And in Sicily during the early Copper Age (where the tradition of figurine use continued for a little longer compared with mainland Italy), large figurines (or statuettes) were deposited in a few cemeteries: clay examples in 'votive ditches' associated with tombs at Piano Vento (Castellana 1995) (Figure 34.7), and rare stone examples in two tombs at Cozzo Busonè (Bianchini 1968). In all these cases, one can imagine the figurines being actively handled, displayed, and considered within the context of meaningful ritual performances and religious beliefs. However, as Robb (2007: 53) notes, 'There is no reason to suppose that figurines

represent a common pan-Italian dogma; the substance as well as the style would have been reinterpreted and transformed from group to group.'

<Insert Figure 34.7>

34.5 Conclusions

Overall, we can divide the prehistoric figurines of peninsular Italy and Sicily into two major typo-chronological groups. Those of the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic remain particularly problematic, due to unresolved questions concerning their provenance, dating and authenticity. However, from the better-contextualized examples, we can think, on the one hand, about the performative nature of their manufacture, handling, inspection, and deposition at key residential sites, and, on the other hand, about their symbolic significance as representations of pregnant women's bodies. The Neolithic and early Copper Age figurines generally continue to represent female human bodies, but the focus now shifts from the belly and breasts to the head and breasts, sometimes elaborated by hairstyles, necklaces, abstract symbols, and colour. They are also more numerous, and, with the exception of two possibly reutilized Palaeolithic examples, are stylistically distinct. Although at least one regional tradition of figurine production can be identified in northern Italy, the overall impression given by the variety of forms is of localized production, usages, and understandings. Broken ceramic figurines, like pottery vessels, were most commonly discarded along with other domestic debris at Neolithic residential sites. However, from the Middle Neolithic onwards, figurines were also handled, displayed, and deposited more purposefully at cemeteries and other ritual contexts. By the end of the Copper Age, this tradition of miniature representation of the human body was more-or-less obsolete, although elements of it endured in monumental landscape art.

Better-quality recording of figurine finds-contexts will further enhance this picture in the future. The establishment of a more detailed catalogue of known examples, close-up use-wear and breakage studies, and experimental replication work also have the potential to deepen our knowledge of the biographies of these overt yet obscure artefacts.

Suggested Reading

A well-illustrated introduction to Italian prehistoric figurines (and other artworks) was originally published by Graziosi (1973). Mussi (2001: 258–64) has since provided a brief but useful introduction in English to Italian Palaeolithic figurines. There are three major syntheses of Italian Neolithic and Copper Age prehistoric figurines: the first, in English, by Holmes and Whitehouse (1998); the other two, in Italian, by Fugazzola Delpino and Tinè (2000) and Giannitrapani (2002).

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Fig. 34.1

Map of sites mentioned in the text: 1. Castello di San Martino Canavese; 2. Castello di Annone; 3. Cascina Cascinetta, Castelletto di Branduzzo; 4. Le Mose, Piacenza; 5. Castello di Breno; 6. Rocca di Rivoli Veronese; 7. Quinzano Veronese; 8. Riparo Gaban, Trento; 9. Lugo di Grezzana; 10. Sammardenchia, Pozzuolo del Friuli; 11. Dugali Alti, Ostiano; 12. Vhò di Piadena; 13. Balzi Rossi, Grimaldi; 14. Borgo Moretta, Alba; 15. Grotta Polera, Finale Ligure; 16. Caverna delle Arene Candide, Finale Ligure; 17. Grotta di Ponte Vara, Pietra Ligure; 18. Brignano Frascata; 19. Travo; 20. Ponte Ghiara; 21. Vicofertile; 22. Via Guidorossi–Parma; 23. Chiozza di Scandiano; 24. Savignano sul Panaro; 25. Lago Trasimeno; 26. Grotta della Beata Vergine di Frasassi; 27. Tufarelle di Allumiere; 28. Grotta Patrizi, Sasso di Furbara; 29. La Marmotta, Anguillara; 30. Catignano; 31. Ortucchio; 32. S. Matteo–Chiantinelle, Serracapriola; 33. Passo di Corvo; 34. Monte Canne; 35. Grotta di Cala Scizzo, Torre a Mare; 36. Grotta Pacelli, Castellana Grotte; 37. Grotta di Porto Badisco; 38. Grotta delle Veneri, Parabita; 39. Favella di Sibari; 40. Montocchio; 41. Piano Vento; 42. Cozzo Busonè; 43. Grotta Stuffe di San Calogero, Sciacca. (Copyright R. Skeates)

Fig. 34.2

The Upper Palaeolithic 'Parabita Venuses' from Grotta delle Veneri: 1. the larger example, 2. the smaller example. (After Radmilli 1966–9)

Fig. 34.3

Mesolithic antler figurine from Riparo Gaban. Length: 10.2 cm. (After Kozlowski and Dalmeri 2000)

Fig. 34.4

Stone figurine from the Early Neolithic lake-dwelling of La Marmotta. Length: 4.8 cm. (Photo: Maria Antonietta Fugazzola Delpino)

Fig. 34.5

Neolithic clay figurines from northern Italy: (a) mushroom-headed example from a pit at Campo Ceresole, Vhò di Piadena (length: 13.8 cm); (b) long haired example from a female grave at Vicofertile (length: *c*.20 cm). (After Biagi 1994; Bernabò Brea et al. 2010)

Fig. 34.6

Neolithic clay figurines from south-east Italy: 1–2. Passo di Corvo, 3. Monte Canne, 4. Grotta Pacelli. (After Radina 1992; Striccoli 1988; Tiné 1983)

Fig. 34.7

Large Early Copper Age clay figurine from a votive pit above a tomb at Piano Vento. Length: 51.5 cm. (After Castellana 1995)

An overview is provided of anthropomorphic figurines in peninsular Italy and Sicily between the Palaeolithic and Copper Age. Some updated patterns in the data and contextual interpretations of the production, use, and deposition of figurines are

presented. For the Upper Palaeolithic and Mesolithic figurines, we can think about the performative nature of their manufacture, handling, inspection, and deposition at key residential sites, and about their symbolic significance as representations of pregnant women's bodies. In the Neolithic and early Copper Age the focus shifts from the belly and breasts to the head and breasts, sometimes elaborated by hairstyles, necklaces, abstract symbols, and colour. The large number and variety of forms give the impression of localized production, usages, and understandings. In addition to domestic use, from the Middle Neolithic onwards, figurines were also handled, displayed, and deposited more purposefully at cemeteries and in other ritual contexts.

Italy, Palaeolithic, Mesolithic, Neolithic, Copper Age, production, deposition, symbolic, women,