

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Interpreting Ancient Figurines

This book examines ancient figurines from several world areas to address recurring challenges in the interpretation of prehistoric art. Sometimes figurines from one context are perceived to resemble those from another. Richard G. Lesure asks whether such resemblances should play a role in our interpretations. Early interpreters seized on the idea that figurines were recurrently female and constructed the fanciful myth of a primordial Neolithic Goddess. Contemporary practice instead rejects interpretive leaps across contexts. Dr. Lesure offers a middle path: a new framework for assessing the relevance of particular comparisons. He develops the argument in case studies that consider figurines from Paleolithic Europe, the Neolithic Near East, and Formative Mesoamerica.

Richard G. Lesure is an associate professor of anthropology at the University of California, Los Angeles. He conducts archaeological fieldwork in Mexico and has authored papers on prehistoric figurines in *Current Anthropology* and the *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*. His most recent book is *Settlement and Subsistence in Early Formative Soconusco*.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Interpreting Ancient Figurines

Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure
University of California, Los Angeles



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.orgInformation on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521197458

© Richard G. Lesure 2011

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2011

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.**Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication data*

Lesure, Richard G.

Interpreting ancient figurines : context, comparison, and prehistoric art / Richard G. Lesure.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19745-8 (hardback)

1. Figurines, Ancient. 2. Art – Historiography. 3. Art and anthropology. 4. Art and society. I. Title.

NB70.L47 2011

738.8'209 – dc22 2010035783

ISBN 978-0-521-19745-8 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or
third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on
such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

*To my parents,
Frank and Nancy Lesure*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>Figures and Tables</i>	page ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
Introduction	I
One: Universalist Explanation and Prehistoric Figurines	10
Two: Comparison and Context	26
Three: The Questions We Ask of Images	48
Four: A Cross-Cultural Explanation for Female Figurines?	68
Five: Mesoamerican Figurines and the Contextualist Appeal to Universal Truths	112
Six: Figurines, Goddesses, and the Texture of Long-Term Structures in the Near East	156
Seven: On Figurines, Femaleness, and Comparison	207
<i>Notes</i>	219
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
<i>Index</i>	251

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Figures and Tables

Figures

1	Andrea Mantegna, <i>St. Sebastian</i> , ca. 1457–1459	page 3
2	Paleolithic figurine from Willendorf, Austria	13
3	Marija Gimbutas at the Sitagroi dig house, Greece	15
4	Spatiotemporal “macro-units” of prehistoric figurine making	19
5	Neolithic figurine from Umm Dabaghiyah, Iraq	20
6	The halo of figurine making around the Fertile Crescent	21
7	Formative figurine heads from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	22
8	Formative figurines from Tetel site, Mexico	23
9	Pre-Pottery Neolithic statues from ‘Ain Ghazal, Jordan	31
10	Image on restroom door	32
11	Formative figurine torsos from Paso de la Amada and nearby sites, Mexico	33
12	Figurine types from Tlaxcala, Mexico, 900–500 B.C.	35
13	Variation in subject matter in the Cuatlapanga type, Tlaxcala, Mexico	36
14	Formative figurines of the Valdivia culture, Ecuador	37
15	Map showing the Formative figurine traditions discussed in Chapter 2	39
16	Kubler’s six dimensions of visual style	50
17	“Map” of the interpretation of images	51
18	Analytical modes arranged in a hexagon	53
19	Adriaen van Ostade, <i>The Cottage Dooryard</i> , 1673	56
20	Lega wooden figurines, Democratic Republic of Congo	57
21	Two approaches to synchronic stylistic analysis	61
22	Guide to comparison of imagery	65
23	Map showing Paleolithic and Neolithic sites discussed in Chapter 4	70
24	Map showing Formative sites discussed in Chapter 4	71
25	Paleolithic “profile-figure” engravings from Gönnersdorf, Germany, Magdalenian era	74
26	Paleolithic “profile-figure” figurines from Gönnersdorf, Germany, Magdalenian era	75
27	Paleolithic figurines from Mal’ta, Siberia	77
28	Comparison of anthropomorphic images from four Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites	80
29	Traits of the Seated Anthropomorph thematic complex	81
30	Iconic system of figurines from Jarmo, Iraq, interpreted as involving two dimensions	82
31	Paleolithic imagery from Dolní Věstonice, Czech Republic, Gravettian era	83
32	Paleolithic figurines from Kostenki I, Russia, Gravettian era	85
33	Formative figurine heads from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	86

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Figures and Tables*

34	Formative figurine types from Zacatenco, Mexico	87
35	Leroi-Gourhan's analysis of the design of Gravettian-era figurines	91
36	Pre-Pottery Neolithic figurines found together at Cafer Höyük, Turkey	95
37	An idealized Later Pre-Pottery Neolithic assemblage of small, molded-clay objects	96
38	Diagram of an actual assemblage of molded-clay objects, from Jarmo, Iraq	97
39	Zoomorphic imagery on stone pillars from Göbekli Tepe, Turkey	100
40	Image of woman etched on a stone slab from Göbekli Tepe, Turkey	100
41	Paintings on floor of Pre-Pottery Neolithic residence, Tell Halula, Syria	101
42	Complex imagery on sculpture from La Venta, Mexico, Formative era	102
43	Decorated pottery contemporaneous with Cuatlapanga-type figurines	103
44	Ceramic statuette from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	104
45	Relief carvings in stone from "sanctuary" at Laussel, France, Gravettian era	105
46	Map of Mesoamerica, with sites discussed in Chapter 5	113
47	Formative figurines from Tlatilco, Mexico	115
48	Catalog of typical patterns among Formative figurines	119
49	Fragments of hollow ceramic figures from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	120
50	Formative figurine depicting person holding ball, Tetel site, Mexico	121
51	Masks from seated, obese figurines, Paso de la Amada and other nearby sites, Mexico	122
52	Model of texture of figurine patterning across Formative Mesoamerica	123
53	Spatiotemporal texture of departures from typical patterns among Formative figurines	124
54	Olmec-style ceramic figurine heads from sites more than 500 km apart	125
55	Abstract signs on hollow figures from different sites, Formative-era Mexico	127
56	Formative figurine with elaborate garb, Tlapacoya, Mexico	135
57	Similarities in painted designs on Formative figurines from Central Mexico	139
58	Sculptures from San Lorenzo, Mexico, with facial features in Olmec style	143
59	Ceramic figurines of the Early Horizon from the Valley of Oaxaca, Mexico	144
60	Ceramic figurines of the Early Horizon from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	145
61	Hollow face fragment in Olmec style from Paso de la Amada, Mexico	145
62	Greenstone figurines from La Venta, Mexico	147
63	Formative figurines of the Huehuetitla type, Tlaxcala, Mexico	148
64	Formative figurines of the Cuatlapanga type, Tlaxcala, Mexico	149
65	Coaxomulco type compared to Cuatlapanga and Ehco types, Tlaxcala, Mexico	151
66	The Seated Anthropomorph complex, reprised from Chapter 4	162
67	Figurines from Tell Aswad, Syria	163
68	Figurines from Çayönü, Turkey	165
69	Map of Near East with Pre-Pottery Neolithic sites discussed in Chapter 6	166
70	Figurines from Ganj Dareh, Iran	168
71	Figurines from Nevalı Çori, Turkey	169
72	Figurines from Gilgal I, Israel	171
73	Figurines from Mureybet, Syria	173
74	Figurines from Sarab, Iran	174
75	Figurine from PPNC level at 'Ain Ghazal, Jordan	175
76	Figurines from Mezraa Teleilat, Turkey	177
77	Map of Near East with Ceramic Neolithic sites discussed in Chapter 6	180
78	Coffee-bean-eyed figurines from Sha'ar Hagolan, Israel	182
79	Pebble figurines from Sha'ar Hagolan, Israel	183
80	Incised pebbles and other stone imagery from Sha'ar Hagolan, Israel	184

x

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Figures and Tables*

81	Statue from Sha'ar Hagolan, Israel, compared to figurine	185
82	Correspondence in imagery between pebble and clay figurines, Sha'ar Hagolan, Israel	186
83	Figurine of obese woman flanked by two felines, Çatalhöyük, Turkey	186
84	Figurine of woman seated on feline, Hacilar, Turkey	187
85	Figurine from Çatalhöyük that appears fleshy and female in front but skeletal in back	187
86	Figurines from Hacilar showing differences in posture, gesture, and physical attributes	188
87	Potsherds from Koşk Höyük, Turkey, with modeled anthropomorphic representations	189
88	Figurines from Höyücek, Turkey	190
89	Schematized anthropomorphic image, Koşk Höyük, Turkey	191
90	Painted anthropomorphic vessel from Hacilar, Turkey	191
91	Stylized figurines from Yarim Tepe II, Iraq	193
92	Figurines from Chagar Bazar, Iraq	194
93	Figurines and other objects from Arpachiyah, Iraq	196
94	Anthropomorphic ceramic vessel from Yarim Tepe II, Iraq	197
95	Visual linkages among different categories of Halaf images	199

Tables

1	Patterning of Sexual Characteristics on Valdivia Figurines	38
2	Chronologies of the Three Cases Considered in Chapter 4	69
3	Summary of Results, Chapter 4	108
4	Figurines Distributed by Rank and Age/Sex at Tlatilco	129
5	Stylistic and Iconographic Characteristics of Sets of Figurines from Tlatilco Burials	135
6	Distribution of Arm Positions in Two Figurine Assemblages from Central Mexico	138

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

It was Joyce Marcus who, twenty years ago, as my graduate advisor at the University of Michigan, first encouraged me to pursue my fascination with Formative figurines and to think expansively about their interpretation. I am deeply indebted to Joyce for her insights, advice, indulgence, and unflagging encouragement over many years. John Clark, as director of the New World Archaeological Foundation and co-director of the Mazatán Early Formative Project, encouraged and facilitated my first significant analysis of figurines from the Soconusco region of Mexico. I have benefited greatly from his inspiring example and keen thinking.

Colin Renfrew's invitation to participate in the planning of the symposium entitled "Image and Imagination: Material Beginnings" (Cambridge University, 2005) came at a low point in the writing of the book, when the project I had set for myself increasingly seemed impossible. The interactions surrounding that conference were important in shaping the specific topics of the case studies. Mary Voigt and Rosemary Joyce provided detailed, insightful commentary on a full (much longer!) original draft of the book. Reinhard Bernbeck, Jeffrey Blomster, Cecelia Klein, and Olga Soffer all contributed crucial feedback on chapters pertaining to their areas of expertise. Numerous other scholars working in the various world areas considered here have also suggested references, patiently answered questions, tried to correct my misperceptions of evidence, and asked pointed but helpful questions concerning my goals or procedures.

In conceiving this volume, I sought to avoid reading all figurines by extrapolating from some particular case. Still, the discussion benefits from primary observations of figurines from Mexico, Ecuador, Iraq, Turkey, Malta, and the Southwestern United States. I particularly acknowledge the institutions and individuals who contributed to the recovery of the two collections I personally excavated in Mexico, chief among them the Consejo de Arqueología of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (Mexico), which issued permits for the work, but including as well Joaquín García Bárcena, Michael Blake, Aleksander Borejsza, David Carballo, Jennifer Carballo, and John Clark. Some of the wonderful figurine drawings of Jeremy Bloom and Laura Baker, created from the originals in the field, have found their way into this book. Numerous institutions contributed to the funding of my work in Mexico, including the National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, the New World Archaeological Foundation, the H. John Heinz III Fund of the Heinz Family Foundation, the University of California Institute for Mexico and the United States (UC-Mexus), the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the UCLA Academic Senate.

The following museums and institutions generously facilitated examination of their collections: the Anthropology Division of the American Museum of Natural History (Vaillant collection); the Smithsonian (La Venta); the New World Archaeological Foundation of Brigham Young University (Early Formative Soconusco); the Arizona State Museum (Snaketown); the Oriental Institute of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-19745-8 - Interpreting Ancient Figurines: Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art

Richard G. Lesure

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Acknowledgments

the University of Chicago (Jarmo); and, in Ecuador, the Complejo Cultural Real Alto (CEAA, Escuela Politécnica del Litoral, Guayaquil), the Archaeological Reserve and Museums of the Banco Central of Ecuador (Quito and Guayaquil), the Anthropology Museum of the Banco del Pacífico (Guayaquil), and the Nahim Isaías Museum (Guayaquil).

In Ecuador, Costanza Di Capua and Mariella García were extraordinarily gracious and welcoming. I also particularly acknowledge Charles Spencer, who has welcomed me repeatedly to the American Museum of Natural History. Elizabeth Carter encouraged my trip to Turkey and hosted me at the Domuztepe dig house. My research trips outside of Mexico were funded by Scott Waugh as UCLA Dean of Social Science, the UCLA Latin American Center, and the UCLA Academic Senate. A succession of deans – Scott Waugh, Reynaldo Macías, and Alessandro Duranti – generously authorized leave time that allowed me to complete this book.

Alana Purcell worked diligently to produce illustrations of a whole variety of figurines and related imagery from Europe, the Near East, and Mesoamerica specifically for this book. Most of her drawings are based on published photographs. We have tried to make them as accurate as possible, but they should not be taken to be the equivalent of technical drawings made from the objects themselves. They are presented here as illustrations for the arguments developed in this book.

Finally, I would like to thank my wife, Paola Demattè, who has been unceasingly patient with what has sometimes seemed like a project without end. I have learned much about art history from her and her colleagues at the Rhode Island School of Design, and I benefited from her keen observational eye in studying figurines from Tlaxcala.