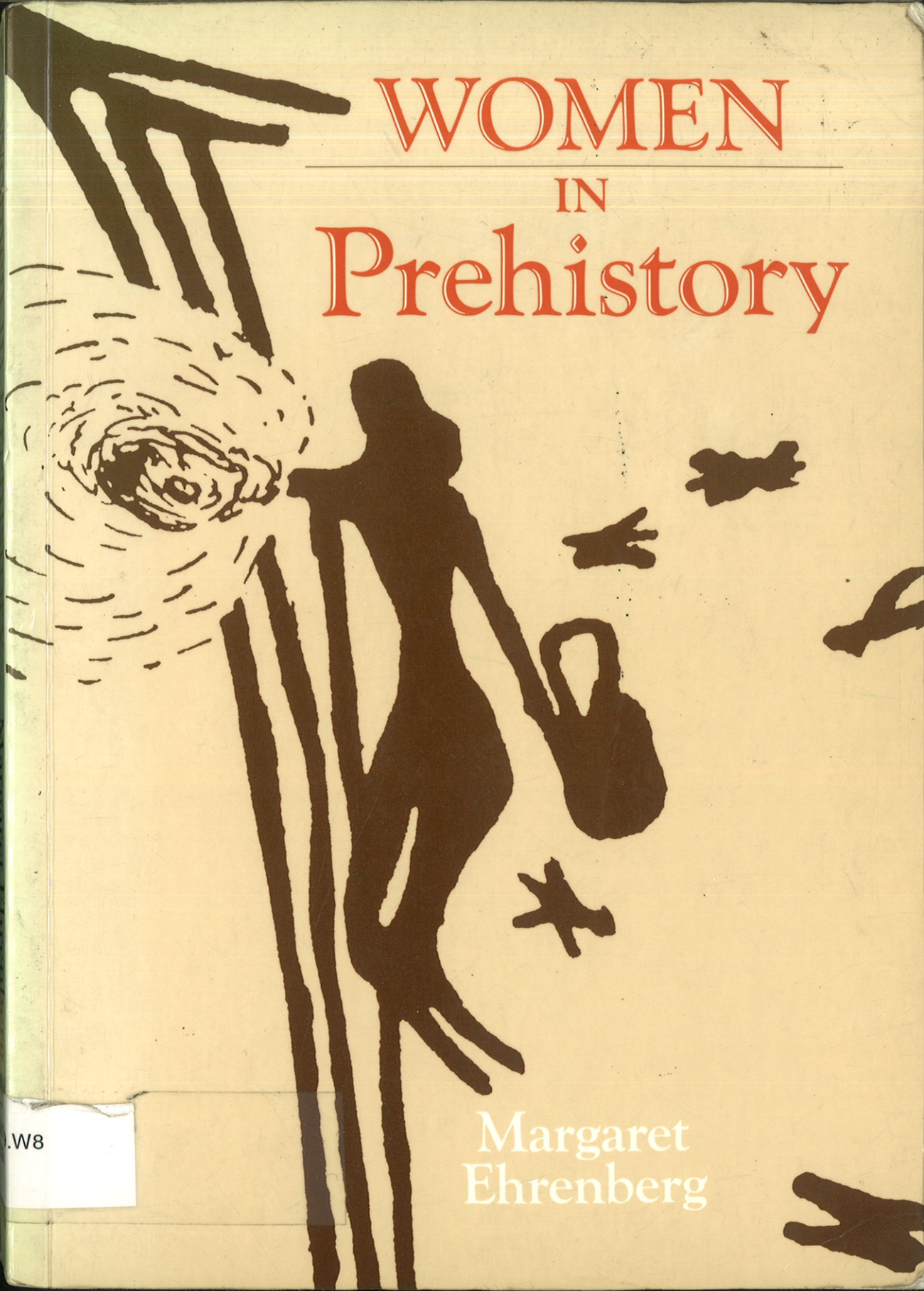
WOMEN IN Prehistory



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knowledge of their territory and contact with other people; the importance of women's role as producers of the next generation in societies whose populations are small and could fall below a critical point is also appreciated. Women are therefore seen to be as important members of the community as men, and their tasks, though different, are rated as highly as the male skills of hunting.

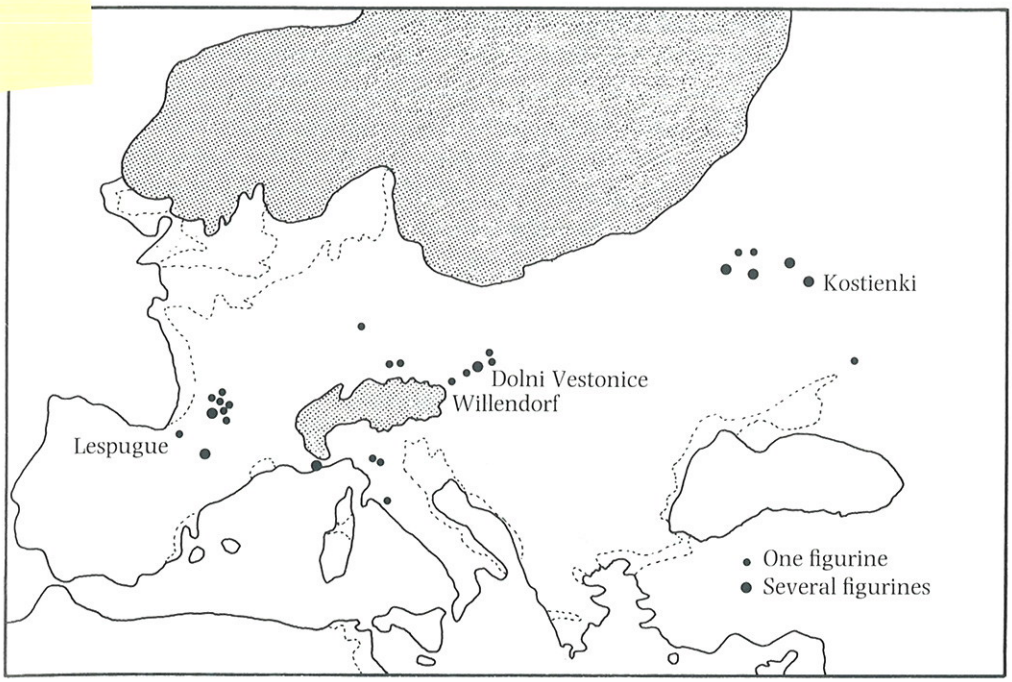
Mother goddesses or Venus figurines?

Prehistoric human figurines dating from various periods are found in several parts of Europe and have attracted considerable attention over the last century. They have often been discussed as a single phenomenon, despite the fact that they cover an immense time-span, from the Upper Palaeolithic (*c.*25000 BC) to the Bronze Age (*c.*2000 BC), include many variations on the basic theme and should not necessarily be interpreted in the same way. I will do the same here, discussing the Neolithic figurines as well as the Palaeolithic ones, before considering other aspects of the former period in the next chapter. The female figurines have been considered almost to the exclusion of the male ones. This has led to the notion of a Mother Goddess worshipped and represented by idols throughout prehistoric Europe. Two aspects of this concept need to be examined here. Firstly, the figurines themselves must be reviewed. Where and when were they made? In what context are they found? Do they represent women exclusively, and is there sufficient similarity in their design and context to suggest that a single explanation is plausible for all the figurines from all over Europe? Secondly, the evidence for the belief in such a Mother Goddess needs to be considered, along with other possible interpretations.

Most of the figurines belong to one or two phases. Those from the Upper Palaeolithic are often referred to as 'Venus figurines' (from the Roman goddess of fertility), and come from a wide area of Europe stretching from Western France to Russia. A second, larger and more diverse group belonging to the Neolithic period is found in the Mediterranean islands and in Eastern Europe. We will examine these two groups separately before considering a range of possible explanations for them.

The art of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe falls into three categories, the best known of which is perhaps the cave paintings from France and Spain depicting the animals that were hunted. Secondly, there are bone and stone objects with carved or engraved designs, often of animals; and thirdly, the 'Venus' or 'Mother Goddess' figurines.[33]

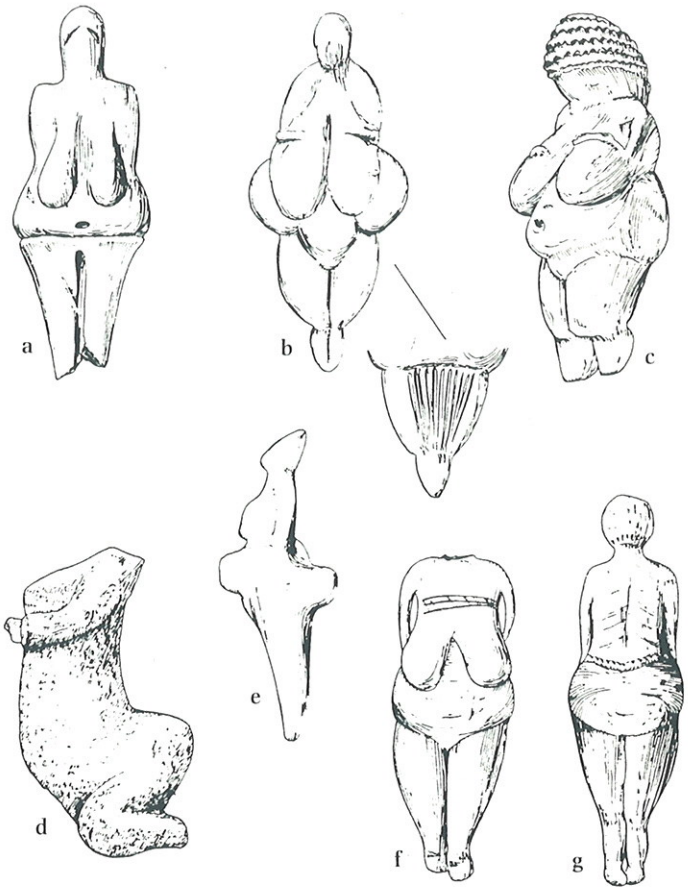
Over sixty Palaeolithic female figurines have been found in widespread locations in Europe. A few are made of moulded baked clay or carved in bas-relief, but most are carved from softish stone or in mammoth ivory and



15 Map of the distribution of Venus figurines, showing contemporary (*solid*) and modern (*dashed*) coastlines, and areas covered by ice sheets (*shaded*). After Champion *et al.*, 1984.

are between 4 cm and 22 cm in height, mostly at the smaller end of this range. They show remarkable uniformity in style, and all are characterised by very large breasts, large buttocks and thick thighs. Other parts of the body, such as arms, feet and facial features, are sketchily represented or absent, and the women are naked, though some seem to be wearing ornamental girdles or chest bands. The care and skill with which these figurines have been executed varies considerably: some have clearly had a great deal of effort expended on them, while others appear to be very roughly made. They have been found from the Pyrenees in the west as far east as the river Don in Russia, an area of over 2,000 km from south-west to north-east, and seem to belong to a narrow timeband in the Early Upper Palaeolithic between around 25000 and 23000 BC.[34] Most are associated with houses or homebases, and they are usually found singly amongst assemblages of flint tools and debris, though sometimes, as at Kostienki-Borchevo on the river Don, several have been found together.

Among the best known are the baked clay figurines from Dolni Vestonice in Czechoslovakia (Fig. 7), which were found amongst domestic debris in a hut, along with bone and flint remains. In another hut on the same site



16 Venus figurines:
a. Dolni Vestonice, Czechoslovakia (baked clay);
b. Lespugue, Haute Garonne, France (mammoth ivory);
c. Willendorf, Austria (limestone);
d. Sireuil, Dordogne, France (calcite);
e. Balzi Rossi, Italy;
f–g. Kostienki, USSR (mammoth ivory).
Approximately half actual size. From Wymer, 1982.

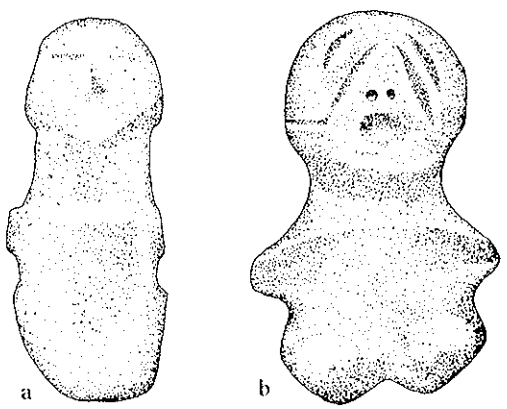
was a kiln thought to have been used for baking or firing such figurines, as well as clay models of animals. This is particularly noteworthy, as it is the earliest evidence of clay firing. Another well-known figurine is the 'Venus of Willendorf' in Austria, carved from limestone and 11 cm high; she has carefully arranged hair or a head-dress, but no facial features. Her arms are laid across her breasts, but her legs end just below the knees. The southern French examples from Abri Laussel and Abri Pataud are carved in bas-relief, and are considerably larger than the portable figurines. The Laussel example is 44 cm high and holds a horn in one hand, while the other rests on her stomach. Also from the same rock shelter, however, is a male figure, the presence of which must be taken into account when the function of these figures is considered.

Although the female 'Venus figurines' must be seen to form a group, they should also be considered as part of a much larger, and usually neglected, series of carved figures of Palaeolithic date. Some, but by no

means all, of these are female, though most have naturalistic rather than exaggerated proportions, while others are clearly male, and most appear to be sexless.[35]

The second group of clay or carved prehistoric figurines dates from the Neolithic period. The introduction at this time of clay for pottery-making provided a new medium for the sculptor, which allowed far more detail and flexibility in the figurines than was possible in the Palaeolithic, when they were normally carved. The distribution and eventual decline in importance of these figurines may shed interesting light on the changing status of women during the early prehistoric period. They are found throughout much of Europe and in south-west Asia, including especially south-east Europe and the Mediterranean islands from the Cyclades in the east, through Crete to Malta and Majorca in the west, but interestingly not in central or north-west Europe. Although many of these figurines are of female form, it cannot be ignored that animal models are also sometimes found. Moreover, many figurines show no obvious sexual characteristics, and although male figures also sometimes occur, like the animals they are often left out of the discussion. Many of the figurines from each area and island in the Mediterranean have specific characteristics which mark them out from those of other areas; also the contexts in which they are found vary from one area to another.

One of the groups of European Neolithic figurines which has been studied in detail is that found on the island of Crete. These figurines belong mainly to the Middle and Late Neolithic, from around 5500 to 3000 BC. Many authors have linked the Cretan Neolithic figurines with those of later, Minoan, Crete, which will be considered in a later chapter, but a number of important contrasts have been noted by Peter Ucko in a wide-ranging discussion of the interpretation of prehistoric figurines.[36] Although thirty-three figurines are definitely female, six are clearly male and another forty-



17 Neolithic figurines from Crete:
a. Petra tou Limniti (height 18 cm);
b. Ayia Mavri (height 16 cm).
After Ucko, 1968.

two are without sexual features. The existence of even a few male figures makes the interpretation of the females as an all-important 'Mother Goddess' difficult, without allowing the possibility of the equal existence of a male deity. Do the sexless examples represent children, or 'humanity'? Unlike figurines from other places, the Neolithic Cretan female images do not have particularly marked sexual characteristics. They were nearly all found in rubbish pits or piles of debris outside houses. None come from any context which might be regarded as a shrine, and none from burials, though no tombs are actually known from this period in Crete.

Another remarkable series of early Neolithic female figurines comes from Anatolia (modern Turkey). This area is particularly important as it is one of the few areas in which fertility cults and a 'Mother Goddess' are historically attested at a later period. The site of Çatal Hüyük is of especial interest in this context, and the implications of the symbolism of the figures have been discussed by the excavator and other authors.[37] The site lies in the Konya plain of Anatolia, and is the largest Neolithic site in the Near East. The village or town, with an estimated 1,000 houses and perhaps a population of around 5,000–6,000, was occupied over a long period, from around 6250 to 5400 BC. The figurines fall into two groups. The first have crudely shaped female forms, with pointed legs, stalk-like bodies and a beaked or pointed head. They are found tucked into crevices in the brickwork or shrines, but never actually inside them. The second group are carved in stone or clay, and do come from shrines. They include a variety of representations of both men and women. The men have penises; the women have breasts and some seem to be pregnant. While most are naked, some are clothed. A series of plaster reliefs on the walls of the shrines depict women giving birth to bulls' heads. The only humans represented in this way are women, and the excavator thought that men might be represented by bulls and rams.

Another site of similar date and in the same area, Hacilar,[38] has also produced a number of clay statuettes. None of these represent animals, and the human figures fall into two categories. Twenty-five figurines are clearly of women, while another twenty have no breasts or other sexual features. The excavator of the site, James Mellaart, considered these to be representations of younger women, though other scholars have been less certain about whether one particular sex was intended. Many of the figurines are described as steatopygous, meaning that they have over-large buttocks, but Ucko[39] has pointed out that these are not out of proportion with the other, ample dimensions and stomachs of the figurines. Unlike at Çatal Hüyük, the figurines were found inside houses, and were therefore presumably kept there, rather than in communal shrines.

The figurines from the Cycladic islands include representations of both

18 Two Cycladic figurines:
(*left*) from Amorgos, *c.* 3200–2800 BC (height 11.1 cm);
(*right*) Spedos type, *c.* 2800–2300 BC (height 20.9 cm).
British Museum.

women and men.[40] They cover a wide chronological span from the early Neolithic to the Late Bronze Age, and it is possible to see typological changes from simple clay models to the highly schematised figurines, characteristically with folded arms, carved from local marble in the Bronze Age. In contrast to the Cretan figurines, they have usually been found in graves, rather than on settlement sites. Although male figures do occur, most of the representations are of women, some of whom may be pregnant. Most have very stylised faces, their arms folded below the breasts, and an incised triangle representing the genital area. We do not know whether these female figurines were buried with women or men, or whether the possibly pregnant figurines were perhaps buried with women who died in childbirth, though these are questions which future excavation should be able to answer. Some are carved in semi-relief, giving a flat appearance, while others are more naturalistic. Others again, particularly of the later phases, show people, who always seem to be male, involved in activities such as playing the flute or the harp and hunting. Interpretations of the Cycladic figurines have been varied. It has been suggested that they may have been designed to satisfy the sexual appetite of the deceased; that they were substitutes for human sacrifice, images of venerated ancestors, or toys to amuse the dead. Often they are seen as images of deities, perhaps a great Mother Goddess or one who would care for the dead on their journey to the underworld. Although none of these theories outweighs the rest, some questions may help to strengthen one or other of them. If the figurines are intended to give satisfaction to the dead, why are examples – however simple – not found in all graves? Often they seem to have been put into the grave in a manner not particularly suggestive of reverence, such as one might expect towards a deity. Sometimes broken images are found in the graves, which may suggest that they were used in funerary or other rituals before being placed with the dead.

The function of both the Upper Palaeolithic and the Neolithic figurines and the significance they had for the societies which made them have been the subject of much speculation and debate. As the majority of them are representations of women, their interpretation is clearly central to our theme. Most of the Palaeolithic figurines show marked similarities, which strongly suggest a common meaning and linked social or religious tradition throughout Europe. By contrast, in the Neolithic the figurines of each separate area have different distinctive features, and so although at a very basic level they may all have a link – which may be merely a common ancestry in the Palaeolithic figurines – each group needs to be considered separately, taking into account the detail and the context in which they are found in each culture. It certainly cannot be assumed that every human figure modelled in prehistory had the same function.[41]

As we have seen, there are significant differences between the Palaeolithic 'Venus' figurines and those of the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. Also, because in most ways the contrasts between the Neolithic figurines of different areas of the Mediterranean are more notable than the similarities, it has been argued that it is unlikely that the whole area shared one belief system or common set of meanings. On the other hand, in recent times large areas of Africa were populated by completely autonomous, and sometimes hostile, tribes which nevertheless shared many characteristics of ritual and religion, even if each tribe manifested the belief in a slightly different way. As the same arguments, ethnographic analogies and considerations are relevant for discussing the numerous possible interpretations for the figurines of both phases of the Stone Age, these will be considered before turning back to think about specific groups of figurines.

The majority of writers discussing the Palaeolithic 'Venus' figurines emphasise their sexual characteristics, especially the large breasts and pubic triangle, and the fact that many of them may be pregnant. These figurines may, however, simply depict women who to our eyes would be obese; yet this obesity may have been a highly desirable state to generally thinner, less well-nourished women. These characteristics, it is often argued, demonstrate that the figures are concerned with fertility. Fertility is much more important to small societies who are dependent on maintaining a constant birth-rate simply for their survival than to larger societies in the modern Western world. Two lines of argument have been taken. Some people believe that a goddess of fertility or a Mother Goddess is represented, while others have suggested that the figurines are part of sympathetic magic rituals aimed at making individual women pregnant.

The likelihood of a significant continent-wide cult of a Mother Goddess has been greatly exaggerated.[42] However, the worship of a fertility goddess is attested in historical records in Anatolia, some several thousand years after the Neolithic figurines were produced in the area, and this strengthens the possibility that the earlier Anatolian figurines are representations of the same goddess, particularly when their form and context are examined.[43] If this interpretation is correct, is a single goddess represented in different postures and forms, or is a series of different goddesses intended? It does not, however, automatically follow from this that every figurine in prehistoric Europe must be interpreted in the same way. A universal religion based on a specific female goddess is unlikely in a society such as that of Palaeolithic Europe, both because it assumes closer and more detailed contact between different groups over a wide area of Europe than is implied by links in other aspects of material culture, and particularly because religion based on deities would be very unusual in similar societies today. The belief systems of forager and other small-scale societies, who are closely in touch with the

natural world and whose own social systems are based on greater equality than that of later socially stratified societies, typically centre on general spirits and forces, rather than on personified gods and goddesses. Such beliefs in deities are characteristic of, for example, the classical Greek and Roman world and have inspired archaeologists to refer to the Palaeolithic figurines as 'Venus' figurines by analogy with the Roman goddess of fertility. They are typical of complex societies where social stratification and craft specialisation is closely mirrored in the 'pecking order' and special tasks assigned to the deities. While the origin of the classical belief systems is worthy of consideration in its own right, it seems unlikely that such a system would have prevailed in the Palaeolithic and early Neolithic periods. By analogy with other social and economic changes in the later Neolithic and early Bronze Age (see Chapter 3), these periods are probably more likely to have provided a context in which such cults could have originated.

Another interpretation of the Palaeolithic figurines[44] stresses the domestic context in which many of the Venus figurines are regularly found, often near hearths in some of the earliest huts and houses. A link is made between women's role within the family and home and as 'fire-makers' in many traditional societies. The figurines are thus interpreted as spirits, if not images of 'goddesses', connected with protecting the newly 'invented' home and hearth.

A related interpretation which has sometimes been put forward for the later figurines is that they represent votaries, or priestesses, sometimes in a particular attitude of prayer, sometimes taking part in actions appropriate to the worship of the relevant deity. As argued above, religions involving deities, let alone priestesses with specialised functions, imply a political and social organisation far more complex than that likely to have existed at the periods in question.

The figurines might also represent pseudo-historical characters who formed part of the mythology or explanatory framework of the society. In parts of Africa, for example, figurines are used as teaching aids in initiation ceremonies, to illustrate characters in myths or to demonstrate appropriate behaviour within society. After use these models are thrown away, and might thus be expected to be found in contexts similar to those of the Neolithic Cretan figurines. The predominance, even if it is sometimes overemphasised, of female representations would then be particularly interesting. Could they perhaps have been used in women's ceremonies, or to explain pregnancy to girls at puberty? Or, if they represent specific historical or mythical women, do they argue for the importance of women within the history and mythology of the society? It may be objected that even if women are revered within a religious context such as in the modern Catholic world, this may give little indication of their true status within

society. But this objection has also been counteracted by the suggestion[45] that there is a much closer link between ideology and behaviour in egalitarian than in hierarchical societies, where inequality and exploitation are deliberately veiled by ambiguous and contradictory ritual and rhetoric.

The use of figurines in sympathetic magic[46] to aid fertility is attested in many ethnographic examples, and may have been perceived as even more important in societies where the link between male impregnation and childbirth was not fully understood. A woman wishing for a child would make, or have made, a model either of herself pregnant, or – more commonly in known ethnographic examples – of the hoped-for child, perhaps shown as the adult they would eventually become. She might then carry the image around, perhaps sleep alongside it, or use it to perform other rituals. Amongst several North-American Indian tribes, such as the Zuni, a woman wanting a baby carries a model around, keeps it in a cradle or places it on an altar until she becomes pregnant. After the successful birth of a child the model is in some cases thrown away and in others carefully kept by the mother to ensure the child's future prosperity. In some West African groups it is common for a pregnant woman to carry a model on her back, while among other peoples in the area, such as the Senufo, fertility figures are given to children at puberty; they are looked after and eventually buried with the individual upon their death. The sex of the desired child might be specified by the model, or left undefined. The small size of some of the prehistoric models would make them easily portable. The fact that both the Palaeolithic and many Neolithic figurines are commonly found within houses or homebases, and often among debris, would strengthen this possibility if the image could be cast aside once it had fulfilled its function, while the idea of discarding the image of a specific deity seems less likely. If some of the early prehistoric figurines are intended to depict a desired child, the implication of the dominance of female figurines, followed by sexless representations over male figures, would have to be that girls were more highly desired than boys, while some parents were indifferent to the sex of their child.

In some modern societies figurines are commonly employed in other forms of sorcery and magic. To do harm to an individual it might be necessary to carry out an equivalent action on the model, such as breaking it to imitate death, or sticking pins into it to represent wounds. Alternatively, a model might be used for good, such as healing, perhaps by anointing it with a particular substance.

On the other hand, more mundane explanations of the figurines are possible. For example, in many areas of the world figurines are played with by children as dolls, and such an interpretation of some of the prehistoric models cannot be dismissed. The use of cheap materials such as clay, the

occurrence of animals as well as humans in some areas, and the apparent carelessness with which they are sometimes disposed of makes this a possible hypothesis for some of the groups of figurines.

Clive Gamble[47] has looked at a rather different aspect of the Palaeolithic figures, which is not necessarily incompatible with any of the interpretations which we have discussed. He emphasises their role as a means of communication, linking far-flung communities through a common symbolism. The date of the figurines coincides with the period of maximum glaciation, when communities would have needed extra social safety nets to cushion imbalances in resources. The figurines come from open-air sites and rock shelters rather than from the deep recesses of caves, suggesting that they could be viewed, and therefore their 'message' read, by anyone at any time. This interpretation might be considered additional and complementary to whichever hypotheses are preferred for explaining why the 'Venus figurine' was chosen as the medium for communication, even if the implication of a far-flung and important link is accepted.

We have now considered a range of possible interpretations for the figurines of all periods, and it is clear that 'mother' or fertility goddesses are by no means the only possibilities. We have also seen that some interpretations are more or less likely for some groups of figurines, due to the context in which they were found, whether in graves or in domestic or rubbish deposits, because of the cheap or, on the other hand, the rarer or harder-to-work materials out of which they are made, or the regularity of distinctive features of the body form or posture. The social, environmental and economic contexts of the societies which produced the Palaeolithic and the Neolithic figurines are very different: the contrasting roles of women as food-providers in each society must be considered, and the huge chronological gap between the two groups must be appreciated. The Palaeolithic figurines are the products of hunter-gatherer communities living in extremely cold climates, on the edges of the glacial ice-sheets, where meat probably acquired largely by men would have been a mainstay of the diet, whereas the Neolithic figurines were made thousands of years later within simple agricultural societies, where, as we shall see in the following chapter, women played the key role in food production. It is therefore not necessary to use any one explanation to account for all the figurines. And, as with any works of art, their role in creating and reinforcing a particular ideology, which might not relate directly to the actual role of the object portrayed, in this case women, needs to be borne in mind. The reader must in the end make up her or his own mind, and only be aware of the problems involved in the interpretation of any archaeological material. Whichever interpretation is preferred, the dominance of female representations over male, even where the forms are not uniquely female, must be significant.