

Book Reviews

Hasan Can Gemici and Çiğdem Atakuman. *The World of Figurines in the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Aegean: the case of Uğurlu Höyük on Gökçeada (Imbros)* (Oxford: BAR Publishing, BAR no. S3021, 2021, 188 pp., 12 tables, 107 b/w and colour illustr., pbk, ISBN 9781407357751)

Let me start with the distilled verdict: this is an important study that will be a lasting reference point for figurine studies in the Aegean and beyond. Gemici and Atakuman publish the figurine assemblage from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic settlement of Uğurlu Höyük on the island of Gökçeada (Imbros) in northeastern Aegean, but certainly, and thankfully, go beyond a mere catalogue.

The book is nicely produced, written in jargon-free language, and contains many coloured figures, apart from the usual black and white photos and drawings, and many illuminating tables. An initial chapter situates the study within the current disciplinary context, while the second one presents the context of the excavation, with a short but comprehensive description of the site. The excavation has defined five main periods of occupation, from Phase VI (6800–6600 BC), through Phase V (6500–5900 BC), Phase IV (5900–5500 BC) and Phase III (5500–4900/4800 BC) to Phase II (4500–4300 BC), with a possible hiatus between Phase III and II (4800–4500 BC). Remains of these phases are not always superimposed.

The analysis of the figurines in Chapter 3 is extensive, capitalizing on a substantial array of other figurine studies and, thus, presenting an account as inclusive as one would hope. It is important that the typology is not based on non-existent traits, like for example genitals (although gender is addressed in the study), but builds on the assemblage itself. Equally important is

the discussion of other categories that the authors believe to be linked to the figurines, like bone awls, interpreted as possible inserted heads, or vessels with anthropomorphic/zoomorphic traits. The general character of the assemblage fits squarely within the traditions discernible from seventh to fifth millennium BC Aegean: a modest number of figurines were recovered from the site, most of them anthropomorphic (there is only one zoomorphic in the study); furthermore, most of them are made of clay and the few stone ones, when from a secure context, are later in the history of the site.

Regarding the depositional history of the figurines, the authors stress that the majority derives from Phase III contexts (figs 3.2 and 3.31), despite the fact that Phase II is the most extensively excavated one (pp. 39, 73). Accordingly, a reduction in the number of figurines deposited in Phase II contexts, in comparison to Phase III, is evident, whereas the upsurge noted in Phase III, from Phase IV, might be due to the more extensive area uncovered. Information on the relative volume of soil removed for each phase, or the relative volume of other categories uncovered (like pottery) would be most welcome to help clarify the character of the ‘explosion’ invoked for Phase III (p. 49). Most figurines were found concentrated in one particular area that has a special and interesting depositional history (for which see further below).

A more synthetic chapter (Ch. 4) ensues, and it is here I want to delve a bit more. A great part of this synthesis is dedicated to comparisons, especially with the rest of the Aegean. This is rightly done, for it matters whether a practice resonates with the wider world, whether making and using these particular figurines were understood as 'normal' practices within their world. The authors go a bit further to suggest that figurines might have been actively used by communities to communicate ideas with each other (p. 74), a view about which I am more skeptical. Nevertheless, as they rightly state, '[n]either Uğurlu Höyük nor its figurines existed in a vacuum' (p.71) and this is important work. Unfortunately, comparisons with Greece are of varying significance, since most of the referred studies from Thessaly or central Macedonia are either old or general, secondary treatises. For example, the presence of bodies with a socket, presumably for the insertion of heads made of different materials, is a much more complicated issue in mainland Greece, than the discussion in p. 84 allows (Nanoglou, 2006: 169; 2008: 321–23), and it would be very interesting to compare the practices employed at Uğurlu Höyük with the relevant ones in the Greek context.

In general, I find that comparisons between practices, rather than individual figurines, would be more fruitful, but I admit this is difficult, partly because, as indeed the authors note (p. 90), publications of figurine assemblages are still rare. Being among the first draws a disproportionate attention for the better or the worse. The authors of this study had a difficult work to do, since published assemblages, rather than a few selected examples that illustrate a point, are not as easy to locate. It is unfortunate for example that a synthetic study of the Gölpinar material by T. Takaoglu and myself appeared

almost simultaneously (Takaoglu & Nanoglou, 2021), given the proximity of the two sites. Furthermore, there is a dearth of sites that date safely after 4500 BC, which makes Phase II at Uğurlu Höyük difficult to assess (Tsirtsoni, 2016 for Greece). The authors do offer three examples, namely Hacilar, Franchthi, and Hamangia, but these do not change the overall picture. Nevertheless, even if I have a few reservations for the picture advocated regarding the connections of the assemblage from Uğurlu Höyük with the rest of the Aegean, it is far more important that new studies will now have a solid reference material for possible *comparanda*, because of this volume.

Another matter of concern for the authors of the volume is fragmentation, specifically intentional fragmentation (p. 96). I have pointed out before the circularity of the most common argument, that is, that the fact that the figurines break on their weakest point means they were intended to do so. The authors do take account of this objection (p. 96), but continue to hold that breakage was intentional, adding that 'a single lump of clay would have sufficed to give their intended form to Type A figurines, but instead we see that three lumps or more were often used' (p. 96), building at this point on what they presume people in the past should have done, for the whole process to be efficient. Effectively, this turns out to be about reading the intentions of people on the objects themselves. I would hold that it is possible that people were intentionally breaking figurines, but it cannot be argued on this premise. There is no space here to do justice to the entire argument, but intentions were formed in context and may not correspond to what we think people should have done (Nanoglou, 2015). This is an important point, in view of the significance the authors put on it later on, when they

consistently foreground the connectivity implied by the intended fragmentation as a social aspect that somehow emerges as the *raison d'être* of the figurines (e.g. p. 102).

A more important point, which I feel is left relatively unexplored, concerns the discussion of the heads and the material they were made of. The authors, correctly in my view, emphasize the differences between the body and the head, which are articulated by resorting to different materials, clay and stone/shell/bone/other, respectively. The authors further point out the common technology used on the materials that form each group ('clay is soft, malleable, and has to be kneaded by the hands', whereas the other materials 'had to be carved to give them their intended form', p. 98), which gives these groups further consistency. This is something already discussed regarding the Greek material (Nanoglou, 2008), and I would love to know more about the authors' take on this issue.

In this chapter there are also sections discussing sex/gender issues, burials, and the relation between figurines and pottery. Most significant is the discussion that concerns the deposition of the figurines. It should be stressed that reference to context is by no means constrained to this section and the authors do incorporate relevant information throughout the volume. Overall, there is an understandable focus on a particular area that is characterized by intensive pit-digging, where most of the figurines were found (see also the more detailed exposition of the excavation of the area in Karamurat et al., 2021). This was an area that was clearly used to dig several pits, line them with plaster, use them for a yet undetermined purpose and for an equally undetermined period of time, and then fill them up. The series of activities of digging, disturbing, and re-depositing the soil, cutting through earlier

deposits and pits, was long and complex. Incidentally, most of the figurines were not found in the pits, but in the area around and among them, but arguably that does not diminish the significance of the spatial concentration. There was certainly something of great interest happening there; an impression which is strengthened by the observation of similar practices in nearby and contemporary Glpınar II (Takaoglu & Nanoglou, 2021: 100). Yet, importantly, it is not clear whether the material that filled the pits and the area around them was selectively deposited there, or whether the artefacts were deposited each time individually or in groups as artefacts, rather than as soil containing artefacts. On that account, it seems as if the authors predicate their interpretation of the process as a purposeful deposition of artefacts as artefacts on their already formed view that figurines were purposefully fragmented to be distributed there (p. 102).

The synthesis ends with some overall comments on the social significance of the figurines, which is followed by a final chapter with the conclusions. The authors offer here an important discussion that builds on all the previous exploration, especially on three guiding axes (p. 109): first, the connection to other communities, second, the deposition of most of the figurines in the pit area, and third, the view that figurines were made to break. As one would expect, and rightly so, there is no simple and unitary explanation offered. All in all, there are moments when figurines are viewed as possible reference points and resources to build one's life and I would love to see these further explored; still, there are also other moments, when intentions are there before any contextualized sociality. For example, the upsurge of Phase III is equated to 'an intensification of symbolic communication', which possibly serves the need 'to conserve the

cohesion of an increased population' (p. 105). This reading implicitly or explicitly also informs the authors' understanding of connections to other communities and the purpose of intentionally breaking the figurines, more so making them in such a way, so as to break them, and is arguably an interpretation that clings to the functionality of material culture (p. 109).

Despite these reservations—or indeed because of them, since the book allows one to have reservations by creating space to discuss matters of significance, rather than just presenting nice illustrations—this is a book of great merit. It paves the way as few other studies of figurines from the area have done (although I would single out here Talalay's publication of the assemblage from Franchthi, Talalay, 1993), for a rich future discussion on the place of figurines in people's lives in the past. I would highly recommend it to anyone interested in the Neolithic and the Chalcolithic of the Aegean, Anatolia, and the Balkans, but I am certain it will be favourably received even further afield.

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In all geographical and cultural-heritage contexts and since the beginning of archaeological exploration, caves have been attractive to archaeologists. They have offered them the opportunity of investigating an unconventional and liminal

landscape inscribed with a range of multi-period and multi-faceted cultural assemblages that often include the earliest traces of human history at an utmost state of preservation. In Europe, aside from a few prominent publications on caves starting