

The Meaning of the Venus Figurines of the Stone Age

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I. Introductory remarks

The meaning of the Venus figurines made by Homo sapiens of the Stone Age has been discussed many times in both scientific and popular literature.

The interpretations vary tremendously. A survey of the meaning of the Venus figurines of the Upper Paleolithic can be found, for example, in an article by Karen Diane Jennett (1).

I think that when considering the meaning of the Venus figurines, it is crucial to take in consideration:

The way of life of the people who created them; i.e. the basic features of the then society (societies).

The fact that the artefacts found on archaeological sites were by far and foremost the artefacts which were abandoned by the then people, and thus were not the “first-class products”. (A good example is the Brassempouy Venus figurines (2)). Moreover, we could find only the artefacts made of durable material (plus we need a good luck).

Influence of our culture on our way of thinking: Lots of things which we consider “natural” were not natural for the then people and vice versa.

Influence of authorities: The interpretation of the Venuses cannot be verified by experiments similar to experiments in physics or chemistry. As Albert Schweitzer pointed out, a brilliantly formulated (but false) view too often disables any discussion which could lead to the recognition of the truth.

II. Upper Paleolithic Society: feminization, collaboration and rise of Venuses

I endeavoured to describe in detail the way of life of the Pavlovian-Gravettian people in the article (3). Here I will deal with the subject more briefly, with an emphasis on the information relevant to the interpretation of Venuses.

Probably the most important phenomenon of the Upper Paleolithic was the emergence of new, advanced technologies and art. There are reasons to consider the advances to be the result of decreased levels of testosterone in the then Homo sapiens (because testosterone makes people less cooperative and more egocentric (4)), which led to lowered aggression, enhanced social tolerance and cooperation. Because general intelligence is closely connected with the social and emotional abilities, it is reasonable to suppose an enhancement of the general (and emotional) intelligence (5) with enhanced cooperation among people. This evolutionary step was recently documented by craniofacial feminization (6). It is possible to say that people's traits changed as if they modified from the chimpanzees' (Pan troglodytes) to the bonobos' (Pan paniscus) traits.

Shortly afterwards, the Venus figurines emerged.

Here it is important to note that the "feminization" was one of the important components which made people "hyper-cooperative". The other, which was, as it seems prerequisite of this cooperative behaviour, is much older and is called cooperative breeding (7), that is that children are not cared for solely by their mothers/fathers, but also by other people of the group (both related and unrelated), called alloparents (8). What is typical of the cooperative breeders is "other-regarding preferences", which are related to altruism.

So it seems that for a blooming society the cooperative breeding was prerequisite one and the feminization prerequisite two. (Sole cooperative breeding would not be enough, because, for example, common marmosets (*Callithrix jacchus*) are cooperative breeders and still are less intelligent than chimpanzees (*Pan troglodytes*), which are not.)

So we can say that people of the Upper Paleolithic were intellectually advanced, altruistic, cooperative, non-violent. We can suppose that there was no patriarchy, as we know it from the written history and present day. A matriarchy as an antithesis of patriarchy is not a little bit meaningful. Women in general had no reasons to subjugate men, as men did (and do) to women.

Instead of subjugation, it was enough to recognize the importance of women (or females in general). For example, most males in a population can perish without diminishing the ability of the population to reproduce (9). Mortality of male embryos and adults is higher than that of female embryos and adults (9). Men die earlier than women (10). Biologists even state that: "Males are dependent on females and propagate at their expense, rather as in parasite-host relationship" (11). So matriarchy was not necessary; it was sufficient to recognize plain facts, which were (and are) not beyond the mental capabilities of any thoughtful modern Homo sapiens, both now and 40,000 years ago.

III. Neolithic society, the twist caused by plough agriculture and twilight of the Venuses

The Neolithic is the era connected with the arrival of agriculture, which brought many changes into the lives of the then people. Most of the changes were changes for the worse (worse nutrition, more communicable diseases, etc.), and it is still a matter of speculation why European hunter-gatherers became agriculturalists.

Nonetheless, there are sound reasons to believe that the main change in relationships among people came with plough agriculture (with ploughs drawn by large animals), which led to the onset of patriarchy (12, 13, 14). The command over large animals, which became the major means of subsistence, was almost solely male business. This led to the dependence of women on men. Sooner or later, some men (which were prone to do so) started to misuse their positions, which resulted in the subjugation of women and the onset of patriarchy.

In Europe, plough agriculture first emerged in the late Neolithic, some 6,000 years ago with Funnelbeaker Culture, TRB, or TBK (15).

The above-mentioned scenario was recently supported by the study by Monika Karmin et al. (16). The study of human genome shows that around the late Neolithic there was a dramatic decline in the number of men who fathered descendants, while the number of women, who had children was on the rise. This corresponds with the situation, when dominant groups of men usurped the power, including the power over the women. It is highly probable that the men abusing their power were the men with a high level of testosterone, and so the trend of non-violence, cooperation and social tolerance of the Upper Paleolithic had been reversed. An inevitable question follows: As the more aggressive and dominant people are generally also less intelligent (17, 18), did the described situation lead to a decrease in intelligence? The fact is that today's Europeans have a smaller cranial capacity than Europeans in the Upper Paleolithic (19).

The onset of patriarchy corresponds with the **demise of Venus figurines** in Central Europe.

IV. The Meaning of the Venuses

When interpreting the meaning of Venuses, we are in a special situation. There is probably not such contemporary culture, where the ratio of female/male figurines it produces is so heavily biased in favour of female figurines. According to Sandra Sázelová, who looks for similarities between contemporary hunter-gatherers of Northern Eurasia and the people of the Upper Paleolithic (20): "There is a significant gender disproportion in the discovery rates of Upper Paleolithic anthropomorphic figurines, which swing in favour of female figurines (Svoboda 1999 (21)). We will not find the same situation in the ethnological context, however. ...in practice, the ratios of male to female figurines and spirit entities are approximately equal..."

That is why we must rely on the facts derived from the reconstruction of the Venus-making cultures described above.

So we can infer that in the cultures in question women and feminine qualities were held in high esteem, and the same could be said about female figurines.

If they represented ancestors, they must have represented female ancestors; if they represented guards, they must have been female guards; if they represented deities, they must have been female deities.

Because human beings are spiritual beings, we can suppose some spiritual meaning of the Venus figurines. I think they were considered sacred and/or magical objects.

There is a question whether they could be called “goddesses”. So another question follows: What does a goddess look like? Written history tells us that a goddess can look like a woman and only her description reveals that she was or is considered a goddess. That is why I think that when we have no written record of the Venuses, we must admit the possibility that at least some of them were considered goddesses, or an equivalent of goddesses as we understand them today.

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