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Review Article

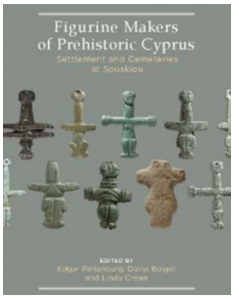
Figurines in context

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Timothy Insoll (ed.). 2017. *The Oxford handbook of prehistoric figurines*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 978-0-19-967561-6 hardback £110.

Edgar Peltenburg, Diane Bolger & Lindy Crewe (ed.). 2019. *Figurine makers of prehistoric Cyprus: settlement and cemeteries at Souskiou*. Oxford: Oxbow; 978-1-7892-5019-0 hardback £48.



For 50 years, Peter Ucko's *Anthropomorphic figurines* (1968) has served as an entry-point for anyone approaching the study of figurines: this new Oxford handbook now provides a broader alternative, which conveniently summarises much current evidence and thinking. Following the standard format of this series, Tim Insoll has brought together a wide array of studies covering many different periods and places as well as diverse approaches to analysis.

The first three chapters include the editor's insightful introductory overview and two more theoretical and methodological contributions. Meskell draws on the evidence from Çatalhöyük to develop an argument that figurines should be seen in terms of process rather than simply as static objects, while Lesure sets out a formal structure for cross-cultural or comparative analysis, avoiding older, simplistic interpretations such as the now discredited concepts of female fertility and of a universal 'Mother Goddess'.

The other 35 contributions that make up the bulk of the handbook are primarily concerned with summarising the material evidence and reviewing explanations from particular periods and places. These, for general convenience, are arranged in broad geographic groups: Africa, including Egypt, has six contributions; the Americas (10 chapters); Asia, covering Turkey, the Levant, India, China and Japan (seven chapters); Europe, including the Mediterranean (11 chapters). From my antipodean perspective, the lack of representation of my part of the world is disappointing: there is only one chapter in the section notionally covering Australasia and the Pacific. Southeast Asia, too, is among the missing. In his editorial Introduction, Insoll provides some explanation for this, noting both the difficulties in finding appropriate contributors and the relative paucity of material from some regions or periods. In his words, the book is "comprehensive but not exhaustive" (p. 5), and certainly there is still more than enough in its 900 pages to satisfy—if not exhaust—the reader.

The region- or culture-specific surveys are, as might be expected, somewhat varied in style and level of sophistication. Some focus on outlining the range of figurines, the local cultural

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history and the history of research; other contributions put more emphasis on current ways of looking for meaning. These latter give more attention to method and theory, and articulate a variety of approaches to address themes such as gender, identity, embodiment, personhood, agency and the like, sometimes touching on those dealt with in the introductory chapters. Such analyses are more generally and successfully used in dealing with older, purely archaeological, material, and to explore deeper underlying patterns and processes. In many cases, however, especially in Africa, longer-term continuities are suggested where the most recent material dates to modern times. Here, authors do not hesitate to make appropriate reference to local ethnographic or historical evidence to identify peoples' attitudes to, and uses of, figurines—a reminder of the many, varied and complex meanings ascribed to artefacts and the social circumstances in which they were, and sometimes still are, made and used. The term 'prehistoric' in the title should not, therefore, be taken too literally or prescriptively.

The contributors to the Oxford handbook all note the importance of the physical, historical and social contexts in any attempt to understand or analyse figurines. The second book reviewed here provides a substantive example of this, using evidence of the manufacture and deposition of small stone figurines characteristic of the Middle Chalcolithic in Cyprus (late fourth to early third millennium BC). *Figurine makers of prehistoric Cyprus* is a comprehensive site report on 11 years of excavations by the University of Edinburgh and directed by the late Edgar Peltenburg, whose research over many decades has framed our understanding of the period. Following his death in 2016, Diane Bolger and Lindy Crewe have coordinated the contributions of 17 other members of his team to bring out this dense but handsome volume that covers all aspects of the site, its setting, finds and significance (much supplementary data will be found online through the Archaeology Data Service). It is a fitting tribute to a much-valued colleague.

The excavations at the settlement and cemetery at Souskiou *Laona* followed directly on from earlier research on the associated, heavily looted, cemeteries at Souskiou *Vathyrkakas* (Peltenburg 2006). The volume expands and develops further the implications of that work, especially in regard to funerary practices and figurine production.

Although the *Laona* settlement, set on an eroding ridgetop, is not well preserved, there are still significant remains of the round houses typical of Chalcolithic Cyprus. Manufacturing residues within excavated buildings and widespread across the site provide evidence of the procurement and working of picrolite, a soft, blueish stone favoured for figurines and other ornaments. All stages of the *chaîne opératoire* are represented. Smaller pieces of stone were available as river pebbles, while larger, better quality slabs were quarried from outcrops some 30km away, high in the Troodos Mountains.

Elsewhere in Chalcolithic Cyprus, burials took place within settlements. Only at Souskiou do we know of cemeteries of rock-cut pit or shaft tombs. These were used for successive, multi-stage burials accompanied by pottery as well as figurines, pendants and other small items. Very many more of these sought-after collectables must have been extracted from these tombs by generations of looters, a parallel to the situation with the more famous Cycladic figurines discussed by Renfrew in the Oxford handbook, where the context and authenticity of many items are so severely compromised.

As both Goring (p. 207) and Peltenburg (p. 227) discuss, establishing a typology of 'figurines', 'figurative pendants' and 'other body ornaments and objects' has proved extremely

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difficult. In this volume, for example, they now prefer the more general descriptor 'figurative' to the more conventional 'anthropomorphic' (as in Peltenburg 2006). While perforated items can confidently be regarded as pendants, others may also have been worn. Patterns of wear show that while some were used prior to deposition, many others may have been brand new. This is more clearly the case with those left unfinished, lacking their final polish. These, Peltenburg argues, were made especially for burial.

Variations within the settlement and slight differences between the *Laona* and *Vathyrkakas* cemeteries indicate developments in the community over a dozen or more generations. The history of the site and its place within the broader, evolving world of Chalcolithic Cyprus are considered in the last of the 21 chapters ('Ritual identity and community at Souskiou: traditions and transformations'). Here, Peltenburg, Crewe and Bolger draw the various strands of evidence together. Souskiou was unusual in its location, burial practice and specialisation in figurine manufacture. This, they argue, gave it a key role within a broader ritual economy, dependent on the sustained demand for picrolite. It is their close analysis of the depositional context of figurines at this site and at others that allows them to consider challenging questions of social behaviour and relationships, echoing those addressed by many of the contributors to the Oxford handbook.

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