

Beyond Representations

Animating Figurative Imagery in Archaeology

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This special section of Current Swedish Archaeology explores the relationship between figuration, animacy, and abstract imagery within the archaeology and ethnography of figurines. Departing from traditional representationalist approaches that have long been the *modi operandi* in the study of figurative imagery, as well as in the archaeology of figurines, the papers adopt ontological, new animist, and new materialist perspectives, viewing figurines not as mere depictions but as active entities affecting their makers, users and environments. They discuss non-representational theoretical approaches in relation to archaeological materials from middle Neolithic Fennoscandia, Neolithic and Iron Age Britain and Ireland, and ethnographic approaches focused on the recent past and present of Indigenous groups in Northwestern Siberia. Together the contributions seek to highlight the complexity of figurine research and the need for interdisciplinary methodologies and innovative treatments to properly reanimate both research and the figurines themselves.

Keywords: figurines, imagery, non-representational, relational archaeology, theory and method

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The starting point for the section was a workshop called *Figurines in Transformation: The Emergence of Figurative Imagery at the Edges of Europe*, held at the Department of Archaeology and Classical Studies at Stockholm University in 2023. Drawing on research carried out in Sweden, Finland, and Great Britain, it brought together early career researchers and established scholars working on figurines across Scandinavia and northern Eurasia. A couple of key questions emerged from the workshop: what does figuration imply about a society's relationship with their environment, does it imply a sense of animacy? How does this imagery relate to abstract imagery and mark making that appears alongside figuration? Does figuration emerge from abstract imagery, or do figurative images and abstract images emerge simultaneously?

Such questions, along with calls to move beyond representational approaches, are not new (see for example edited volumes by Back Danielsson et al. 2012; Back Danielsson & Jones 2020). In the last decade, researchers have started to recognise that a rigid separation between subject and object can be problematic in relation to figurines. Indeed, figurines are often not only depictions of certain beings. Instead, they are treated, or effectively function, as beings in themselves (e.g. Freedberg 1989; Mitchell 2005). This, of course, has implications for how we are to understand and approach them. Figurative images are not simply carriers of meaning. Rather, figurines and depictions are material entities with capacities to affect the contexts in which they are involved.

The papers in this section address these concerns in several ways. In their paper 'Rethinking Representation and Animation: A Visual Ethnoarchaeology of Material Spirits in Northwestern Siberia', Erik Solfeldt and Anna Naglaya are combining a new animist theoretical framework with Indigenous knowledge of Siberian figurines, often referred to as 'idols', to discuss the Western biased representational interpretations of the figurines made and used by the hunter-gatherers of the Stone Ages. They draw on the visual ethnography of northwestern Siberia, involving early artwork, as well as photo and video material that engages with various kinds of Siberian figurines in their ontological contexts. Based on this, they argue that to understand the role of figurines, made and used by both past and present hunter-gatherers and hunter-herders, we need to look at the complexity of animistic ontologies rather than explaining their role as representational art based on a Western view of reality. The figurines of northwestern Siberia are animated, they are subject-entities with souls that are equal to the souls of humans and animals. The figurines are together with gods, spirits, ancestors, humans and animals caught up in ecological material and immaterial relations that constitute reality and affects the tasks done within this reality. Based on this visual ethnoarchaeological study it is argued that the

figurines of the Stone Ages, made and used by hunter-gatherers, are caught up in similar complex ontological relations.

In the paper ‘Eyeing the Beholder: Anthropomorphic Clay Figurines and Reciprocal Gazing’, Tobias Lindström focuses on the physical attributes and visual capacities of the anthropomorphic figurines found on late middle Neolithic Pitted Ware culture (c. 2900–2300 BC) sites in Sweden and Åland. Acknowledging that figurines are often considered to be alive or animated, he contends that their physical attributes had an impact on how they were used and perceived. Certain attributes afforded or encouraged certain engagements between the figurines and the humans who made, held, and gazed upon them, while others served to complicate them. He further suggests an understanding of the Pitted ware culture anthropomorphs as ‘interactable’ beings who could be persuaded or coerced into aiding people in various tasks.

Both Solfeldt and Naglaya’s paper and Lindström’s paper stresses that these evocative creations were involved in the day-to-day lives of humans – deconstructing the Western dualism between the figurines being either sacred or profane.

In ‘Making Faces: Facial Imagery and the Non-Representational in Later Prehistoric Europe’, Helen Chittock and Andrew Meirion Jones criticize the tendency in archaeology to follow the art-historical interpretational process of converting non-representational imagery into representational images, trying to decipher and decode them to attribute meaning. Based on case studies from the British and Irish Neolithic and the European Iron Ages, they emphasize the relation between pattern and images of faces and bodies. They argue that imagery is to be viewed as ‘in the making’. This offers a way to understand the emergence of representational imagery without taking representation and symbolism for granted or as starting points in archaeological reasoning. The faces and bodies that emerge from the non-representational serve as focal points for affective potentials within the prehistoric human-imagery relations.

Taking these papers into consideration, along with the other workshop presentations, the discussant, Fredrik Fahlander, identified a shift from figurines as representations and symbols of ideology and mythology towards a focus on the figurines’ materials, their making, properties and ways of affecting human life-ways. In relation to this, as an emergent collective of figurine scholars, we argue that the archaeology of figurines has since long left post-processualism and is now deeply engaged in the new paradigm, or theoretical trend (see Harris & Cipolla 2017), of a relational and ontological based archaeology with materials and materiality in focus – a trend that indeed exists alongside the so-called third scientific aDNA revolution in archaeology (Kristiansen 2014). Only the future can tell how this shift

will influence future research, but it is safe to say that figurines studies in archaeology is at the forefront of archaeological theory, providing insights that have the potential to contribute to other disciplines such as anthropology, ethnology, history of religion, art history, and art, craft and design studies.

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