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Virtual and Actual Corporealities in Bronze-Age Cyprus: Exploring Humanity through the Study of Anthropomorphic Figurines and Material Culture

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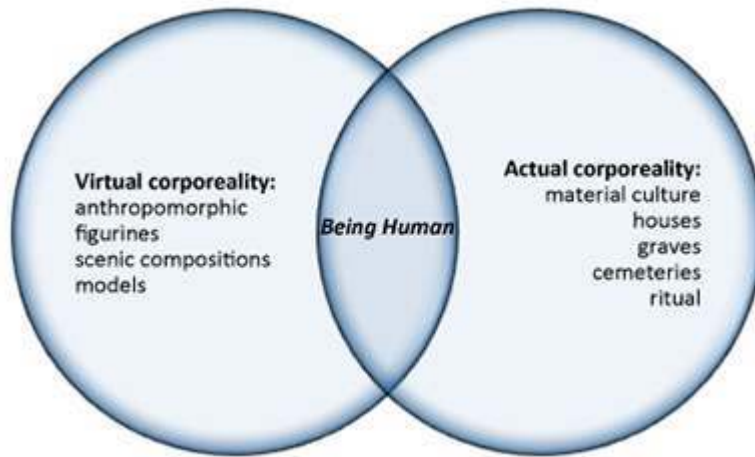
Maria Mina

I would like to thank the Department of Antiquities, Cyprus for granting me permission to publish Figures 2 and 3 in this communication.

- 1 My current research constitutes an extension of my earlier studies of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age (EBA) anthropomorphic figurines of the Aegean.¹ One of the aspects that I was particularly concerned with was the deconstruction of decorative syntheses displayed on figurines in an attempt to gain insights into the manipulation of external appearance for the construction of social identity and relationships.
- 2 The representation of human form holds valuable information on what it meant to be human in prehistoric societies² and such representations were the products of deliberate or unintentional acts that maintained or undermined social conditions and socially-constructed identities.³ Human representations are centrally involved in the process of socialisation and negotiation of power politics in prehistoric societies, and the mindful modelling of figurines expressed through the exaggerated representation of body parts, or stylised and repeated forms create the constructed body that is central to social dynamics.⁴ The modelled human form presented idealised images against which compliance or rejection of social norms could be measured, and the rendering of features such as posture, anatomical features, attire and adornment constituted components of the virtual definition of humanity. These virtual corporealities may or may not contradict actual corporealities in living contexts and other media, such as material culture, or in the arenas of habitational space, cemeteries, activities or ritual.⁵ Assessing the values instilled in human representations against practices in living contexts can help elucidate

prehistoric social norms of being human, and reveal areas of potential tension or conformity in the political dialectics of social relationships (Fig. 1).

Fig. 1: Interface of virtual and actual corporeality as common ground for understanding humanity in Bronze Age Cyprus.



My current research focuses on the study of human representations from Cyprus that date primarily to Early Cypriot III-Middle Cypriot I (approx. 2000-1850 B.C.) period. These representations took the form of free-standing plank figurines (Fig. 2), figures modelled on the rim of vessels, scenic compositions on the rim of vessels (occasionally inside the bowl) (Fig. 3) and models.

Fig. 2: Plank figurine from Bellapais Vounous – Fig. 3: Clay model from Bellapais Vounous



- 3 The modelling of human representations resumed after a long break in figurine production that lasted for the greater part of the EBA and was distinct from Chalcolithic figurine-making tradition. Particularly interesting are the highly standardised plank figurines, marked with elaborate motifs intended to denote attire, woven textiles, jewellery or tattooing, that indicate emphasis on external appearance for expressing social identity and status on a virtual level.⁶ In the living context, it is no coincidence that the EBA is characterised by marked production of metal objects that were intended to be displayed on the body (jewellery, weapons and attire-related objects, such as pins), and were associated with patterns of increased conspicuous consumption in funerary

contexts.⁷ The study of metal objects in terms of production, consumption and deposition patterns can complement the study of anthropomorphic representations (virtual corporealities) by providing insights into the sphere of actual corporealities at a time when metallurgical technology is oriented towards visible emphasis of the manipulated body. Although the focus is primarily on metal articles, other objects displayed on the body will also be considered in an attempt to reconstruct the synthesis of actual corporealities.

- 4 The particular research aims to explore how humanity was defined in Early and Middle Bronze Age Cyprus, and what were the social dynamics surrounding the construction, performance and negotiation of social identity and relationships as played out in the sphere of virtual and lived corporealities. One of the questions that is addressed is whether idealised portrayals of social identity are consistent or conflicting with the parallel materialities in the context of the living and the dead, which could reveal how power politics surrounding social identity and relationships were played out in the sphere of virtual and actual corporealities. It will not be possible to discuss social identity and relationships without taking into account the operation of regional patterns regarding social norms and organisation that suggest an apparent differentiation between communities of the north coast of Cyprus and those of inland and southern regions. Limitations that need to be taken into account, however, include our biased knowledge of excavated tombs from the north and centre of the island, the fragmentation of the archaeological record, and the extensive looting and damage of tombs.⁸
- 5 The study contributes to on-going research on anthropomorphic figurines of prehistoric Cyprus, while at the same time it proposes a comparative study of metal objects as traces and means of tangible corporealities. Though archaeometallurgical studies have significantly advanced the understanding of metallurgical production in prehistoric Cyprus, the current research connects metal objects to represented humans and ultimately seeks to understand how being human was defined in Bronze Age Cyprus.
- 6 Acknowledgements

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NOTES

1. MINA 2008.
 2. BAILEY 2005.
 3. TALALAY 1993.
 4. BAILEY 2005, 139-140, 199-200.
 5. *Ibid.*, 204.
 6. CAMPO 1994, 166; KNAPP, MESKELL 1997, 196.
 7. KWANI 2005, 342-343.
 8. Dies 1997, 12.
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