

## **Prehistoric Venuses and Puberty Rites**

Since their discovery, the pre-historic Venus figurines had been subjected to much scrutiny and the theories to explain their existence abound. Present article is an attempt to provide another viewpoint that cannot be easily ignored. The idea reintroduced here is that these figurines are the representations of personage or personages related to the girls at puberty. The supporting arguments are provided from various angles including ethnographic studies.

### **Introduction**

A remarkably true statement about deep history is 'the voyage of discovery that takes us back to the remote periods of human development soon brings us back to the realities of human existence today' (Renfrew 2007: viii). A reason for this is that similar to what has been stated with regard to evolution, the soft tissues and behaviours don't leave any remains for us to determine why and when they 'evolved' (Clark 2002: 45). It doesn't matter which school of archaeology one belongs to, the interpretation of the past would always be shaded by our understanding of the present. In this article the author is trying to view the evidence from prehistory in the light of recorded anthropological understanding from the past even though such comparisons are always wrought with danger of misinterpretation.

Paleolithic Venus figurines which were uncovered by the archaeologists since the late nineteenth century had been the subject of many studies and interpretations. However, none of them seem to explain several key features of these Venus figurines across various geographies and periods. The author of this article argues using various anthropological studies to establish that the origins of these figurines are related to the female puberty rituals. If this assumption can be backed up by some evidence from our anthropological understanding of the cultures around the world, it is shown that the features of major class of Venus figurines which have so far been taken for granted can be explained with relative ease.

### **Some Interpretations**

The intention here is not to discuss all the interpretations of these figurines but to give a brief overview that would be helpful in the ensuing discussion. One of the first Venuses discovered is the well-known Venus of Willendorf the age of which was determined as European Gravettian. However, in the late last century, the figurine assumed to be the earliest Paleolithic Venus figurine was discovered in Hohle Fels in Germany (Conard 2009). Between these two time points there had been so many figurines discovered from various parts of Europe and subject to a vast amount of scrutiny. Considering the time elapsed between the making of these figurines and the present day, it is doubtful that we would ever know why they were made or what they really represented. The reasons for these figurines and their occurrences might have been time-factored, localized and storied many a time. Given that now we only can conjecture about them, no matter how good a theory we can come up with, it only can be another interpretation, equally plausible as the current theories in vogue, or more plausible as a challenger.

For a long time, the Venus figurines have intrigued archeologists and other scholars from various professions as wide as psychology and biology, attempting to understand their existence. Their views vary from these Venuses being representations of Archetypal Mother (Neumann 1991) to self-representations of their bodies by women who lived in the days before obsidian mirrors (McDermott 1996). In the late nineteenth century, studying the early figurines uncovered, Pettite (1870) noticed the

larger buttocks which were also a feature of Hottentot women suffering from a condition known as Steatopygia. As White (2006) observed, Pettite who referred to the figurines as Venuses used the word 'Venus' more as a reference to the so-called Hottentot Venus, Sartje Baartman, with a racially biased undertone. Referring to a Paleolithic 'myth of the genesis of the world from a cosmic egg laid by a bird' (Gimbutas 1990:106) which gave rise to the "so-called steatopygous figurines", Gimbutas (1991) mainly paid attention to the emphasis placed by the pre-historic artists and artisans on the body parts associated with reproduction. These included 'Pubic triangle' which could also be linked to fertility and the universal goddess giving rise to the Old European Mother Goddess. One of the authours from psychoanalytical school (Neumann 1991) looked at the fatness of the body and pondered over the connection between the fertility rites and body as a vessel. On the other hand, McDermott (1996) considered the faceless heads and the disappearing legs of these Venuses as narcissistic representations of their own bodies as pregnant women watching self from certain angles would only show distorted dimensions including tapering legs. Halverson (1987) thought these figurines have 'no purpose beyond themselves' or simply represent art for the sake of art.

The figurines' body shape is not a mere, symbolic representation of female body as an embodiment of fertility. The claims by authours like Neumann (1991) and Gimbutas (1991) as discussed above, to the effect that these figurines simply represent the Mother Goddess with the fullness of body, the great container, as a show of fertility were preceded by the ideas in Johann Jacob Bachofen's '*Das Mutterrecht*' published in 1861 (Campbell 1991). Gimbutas (1991: xxii) wrote that the idea of a cosmic Creatrix was first conceived by the people who did not understand the copulation as the cause of pregnancy. This opinion can also imply that the prehistoric people of the antiquity of the Venuses might not have understood the role of male in pregnancy. Hence, the assumption that the fertility might have been conceived as an all-female affair cannot be too far-fetched. Thus it is very natural that Neumann (1991) imagined the prehistoric fertility cult through Jungian Archetypes. Using a comparative study between the distribution of apparent ages of figurines and the distribution of similar female groups in a present-day community of primitive people, Rice (1981) concluded that it was the womanhood not the motherhood the Venus figurines recognized or honoured. Even Gimbutas (1991:141) considered that Venuses of Willendorf and Lespugue are not probably pregnant. Thus, the pregnancy is not the only process that is celebrated by the artisans who made these figurines. Presence of thin figurines like Ostrava Venus from the Gravettian site of Ostrava-Petrkovice in Moravia (Marshack 1991: Figs 173 a and b), the so-called 'immodest Venus' (White 2006: Fig 1) or the 'belted figurine' (White 2006: Fig 12), showing no sign of pregnancy definitely inconvenience the argument about the connection between the Venuses and fertility.

## Features of the Figurines

Many authours, overlooking their specific features viewed the figurines as whole body representations to find answers to the questions these Venuses posed. Some of these specific features can be found on many figurines scattered across Old Europe and nearby regions over long periods of time. Supporting the opinion of Gvozdover (1989), Soffer, Adovasio, and Hyland (2000) believe that there are distinctive features inherent to different parts of Europe. However, despite the differences in the shapes of thighs, hips, bellies and breasts, at least all PKG (Pavlovian, Kostenkian, and Gravettian) figurines (McDermott 1996) follow the same underlying 'lozenge' shape. McDermott (1996) observed that PKG figurines embodied the key features of nudity, obesity, down-turned head, thin arms disappearing under voluminous breasts, exaggerated buttocks, presumably pregnant abdomen with a large elliptical navel and unnaturally short tapering legs "terminating in either a rounded point or disproportionately small feet". This led him to the thesis that these figurines represented autogenous visual information.

Even though not common across all prehistoric Venus figurines or figures, two other noteworthy features are;

1. incisions on the body and
2. painted red ochre

which will be discussed in this article to round off the main hypothesis presented.

### **Venus Figurines and Puberty Rites**

In the present paper, it is endeavoured to take the idea of Venus figurines being representations of Life or Birth Giver in a slightly different direction. It is conjectured here that these figurines could have been shaped by puberty rites. This argument is not new as there had always been theories “that deal with sexuality in terms of the initiation ordeal that girls and boys often go through at puberty” Marshack (1991:282). In the light of DNA evidence, the African origin of humans is not disputed any longer even though the opinions expressed by Piette, as quoted by White (2006), regarding the African influences on the European Venus figurines have been discredited. Moreover, there has been a slight trend recently to look back at the contribution of African ethnography to European prehistoric art. Harding (1976) argued that the Venuses of Willendorf and Lespugue show the condition called massive hypertrophy of the breasts and like the witch-doctors in today’s Africa, the Gravetto-Solutrian medicine man would have made incisions on the breasts of females to cure this condition. Lewis-Williams (1997), even though reluctant to accept the diffusionist view of the shamanic practices to South Europe from Southern Africa, see clear parallels between two ethnographic dimensions. Thus, it is not totally out of context to look at the African influence in a different light which this paper partially attempts to do. Theorizing about the symbolic explosion during prehistoric times, Knight, Power, and Watts (1995) were inclined to associate the symbolic use of red ochre as a cosmetic in the prehistoric times to the San Bushmen in Africa who represent the oldest aboriginal people in the world.

As Robert Renfrew states that the hunter-gatherers of the late nineteenth century are as distant from the Upper Paleolithic hunter-gatherers as today’s urban societies (Renfrew 2007:179). However, the conceptual world of the people at the turn of the twentieth century might have been less spoiled than the one around us today. The observations made by the anthropologists about the societies less exposed to Western thought might have been more relevant to Paleolithic thinking than later observations. For an example, as Renfrew (2007:205) believes, the pre-history of Australia only ended in April 1770 with the arrival of Captain Cook. Until then, it is implied that there had been some parallels that could be drawn between the prehistoric people and the aboriginal people of Australia. In any case, to make cognitive archaeology sensible, some of the cognitive processes should have strong parallels between the prehistoric people and us. Thus, it is far better to use the facts collected by ethnographers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, hence less influenced by modern ways, than the ones in more recent times unless there are known issues about reliability. This is the reason the present author relies heavily on the compendium of ethnographical facts on the puberty rites from around the globe compiled by Sir James Frazer while referring to recent studies to reinforce the older work.

### **Girls at Puberty: not to see the Sun**

The Venus of Willendorf shows no facial features and shows a downcast head with a very intricate hair design which some authors consider as a form of hat made out of plant material (Soffer, Adovasio, and Hyland 2000). It is interesting to note that the Brassempuy Venus (White 2006:252) has a straight

looking face with beautiful eyes and exquisite facial features while the Lespugue figurine from the Rideaux cave of Lespugue (Haute-Garonne) has a faceless downcast head. While the Venus of Dolní Věstonice is faceless, the 'mammoth ivory head of a young woman from Dolní Věstonice' considered to be Gravettian or Pavlovian showed, despite of being asymmetrical, elegantly crafted facial features with eyes, nose, mouth and a headdress (Marshack 1991:300). The point this supports is that the prehistoric artisans didn't make facial features obscure due to their lack of skill. This can be further substantiated by another figure described in the literature. Bisson and Bolduc (1994) pointed out that the face of the female figure of 'a double figurine pendant' from Grimaldi Caves was intentionally made featureless by using a tool. Similarly, the downcast face was intentional symbolism on the part of the artisans. This leads us to the conjecture that the faceless downcast heads are what the artisans wanted to show on the figurines.

Frazer (1993:607) pointed out that in many cultures around the world, girls at puberty like 'divine personages', would not be allowed to see the sun or touch the ground. Frazer (1993:607) further says 'Nowhere...can [*the divine person's*] so precious yet dangerous life be at once so safe and so harmless as when is neither in heaven nor on earth'. As he described, many communities from various parts of the world feared the menarche of girls and imposed many taboos. In the not so distant past, Basotho girls wore an undecorated reed/rush veil (*lesira*) to cover her face from strangers (DuPooly 2006:123). In Haida society, a girl in seclusion at puberty had to cover her head with a cloak made out of cedar bark, 'leaving only a small aperture for her eyes' as quoted in (Blackman 1992:27). These girls in seclusion were expected to avoid looking at the important assets such as crops and livestock. In India and Sri Lanka, as recently as the turn of the current century, girls at puberty would not be left alone for the fear of attracting evil spirits and were asked to carry a piece of iron to fend off such spirits (de Silva 1981; Narayan, Srinivasa, Pelto, and Veerammal 2001). Even though this wouldn't be possible for a girl from a pre-Iron age society, the commonalities discussed cannot be ignored. It is not out of place to mention Artemis, the Huntress who was known in *Iliad* as the mistress of animals and inherited several features of a great goddess worshiped in prehistoric times by the people around the northern Black Sea Ginzburg (1992:211). No one could look at the statue of Artemis at Pallene kept concealed throughout the year except for a few days as "the eyes of the goddess turned fruits dry on the trees..." Ginzburg (1992:131). Thus, it can be implied evil influences either entering into or emanating from the girls at puberty had to be prevented. To this end, a person can be kept inside or allowed outside with some protection. The best way to stop the gazing eyes of the figurines of these puberty related personage or personages while leaving their likeness outside for people to look at, is to make the figurines faceless, perhaps, with an implied veil.

Soffer, Adovasio, Hyland (2000) conclude that the Venus of Willendorf wears 'fiber-based woven cap or hat' while a similar argument can be extended to the Kostenki I limestone figurine, too. The veil that covers her face can be part of the hat. Frazer (1993:600) says that 'the British Columbian Tsetsaut girls at puberty wears a large hat of skin which comes down over her face and screen it from the sun.' Marshack (1991: Fig 171c) described the head of Dolní Věstonice I figurine as 'depicting an unreal schematized face with slit, mask-like eyes'. The apparent headdress of Dolní Věstonice I figurine may well be a hood that covers her face like a Haida girl's cloak with two slits for the eyes and the hood ends on the figurine's shoulders. The thin lines starting at the slits and falling on her breasts may represent a few stray locks of hair telling us the existence of a veil covering the face.

### **Girls at Puberty: not to touch the Ground**

As Frazer pointed out the second taboo is about not touching the ground. To prevent the girls at puberty from touching the ground a plank or a carpet had been used (Frazer 1993:593). With the tapering or broken legs the prehistoric Venus figurines cannot stand on their own legs. Neither are they meant to be in a reclining position as their protruding buttocks or the position of hands rule this out. Thus, these figurines should be suspended or placed on a base so that it wouldn't touch the ground. As Marshack (1991:300) noted about the Dolní Věstonice Venus figurine “[t]he image..had either to lie down, be carried, or be placed upright in a hole as an idol’. The four depressions on the head of Dolní Věstonice figurine might have been used with wax and fibers to help the figurine to be suspended.

Conard (2009) describing the figurine from the start of the Aurignacian age wrote that “[t]he Venus of Hohle Fels lacks a head. Instead, an off-centre, but carefully carved, ring is located above the broad shoulders of the figurine. This ring, despite being weathered, preserves polish, suggesting that the figurine at times was suspended as a pendant.” If we accepted the longer antiquity of this figurine, we could conjecture that the tradition of depicting a headless figurine later took the shape of a figurine with a head but no facial features. This again shows the deliberate attempt by the Paleolithic artists and artisans to symbolize what they conceptualized and storied within their belief systems. Through time factored processes and comparisons, they seemed to have lost the fear of showing the head of the figurines while still dreading facial features. The figurines without legs give the impression of floating or were meant to be carried around.

### **Girls at Puberty: other features**

Next question which should be answered is about their obesity. The obese depiction of women might have associated with fattening process discussed later in this article or mere symbolism emphasizing the body parts such as breasts, genitalia and buttocks largely impacted by puberty. The obesity of figurines also point to an expression of “greatness” enjoyed by the persons behind the figurines, similar to a god or the king (Neumann 1991:115). Thus, this symbolism also implies ‘special’, perhaps ‘supernatural’, status of a person who should be carried around. This provides a clue to who they could be representing. The obese delineation of women by these figurines also makes them look more mature than the adolescent girls in the present times.

Trinkaus (2005) finds it difficult to explain the adiposity paradox posed by the obesity of the Willendorf and Dolní Věstonice Venuses. However, the rituals associated with girls at puberty help explain this paradox without resorting to semi-sedantism and brief high caloric eating habits of these prehistoric people believed to be very mobile and hard-working. In some African cultures the girls at puberty are required to undergo a period of fattening in what are called ‘fattening-houses’ (Benedict 2005:27-28, Oe 2009). The girl at puberty who can be secluded for years and refrained from any physical activity is fed with sweet and fatty food. Supposing our hypothesis holds true, the said cultural elements could have been found in the Paleolithic cultures too. This might have risen independently or through diffusion for which a directional dimension cannot be attributed without further research. The independent rise of the fattening can be due to biological observations these Paleolithic people made over thousands of years. It is a well known fact that the onset of menarche is dependent on girls achieving a certain average critical body weight (Frisch 1994:116). In the recent past, the girls didn't reach menarche until their mid teenage years (Cobb, 1998:194). This may lead to the assumption that the fattening was done not only for a perceived beauty but also for controlling the timing of menarche. On the other hand, the late menarche after a prolonged thelarche can also be a reason for the mature look that comes out of the Venus figurines. Moreover, not having the facial features makes it very difficult to judge the ages of women represented by the pre-historic Venuses. From a different angle,

the forced sedantism of puberty, if prolonged, could also result in obesity. This later case might be a more plausible scenario.

The view that the obese figurines embody the fertility should not be accepted without questioning. Since the times of Hippocrates, it was suspected that the obesity makes the women less fertile (Hill & Smith, 2005). The prehistoric people could not be totally oblivious to this historical observation as these obese women represented in their arts should have been modeled after people living among them. As many of the early inventions came through observing the surrounds, it is more than likely the prehistoric ancestors might have observed this and even might have used obesity intentionally to make the chosen initiate issueless. Neumann (1991:115) mentions the Paleolithic petroglyph from Algeria (Neumann 1991: Fig 11:114) where a male hunter is connected, from genital to genital, to a female figure with upraised arms, again with no feet. Note that Campbell (1972: Fig 17) considers the same drawing from a prehistoric site near Tiout as the hunter and hunter's mother. However, given the upraised arms and the torso without feet of the female figure, the former interpretation seems to be more plausible. Similarly, the Venuses carved on the limestone blocks at Laussel should be considered as a 'part of the repertoire of figures' (Marschack 1991:335) which includes a "hunter" and figures of animals.

One important observation was made by Conrad (2003) about the Aurignacian mammoth ivory figurines from Hohle Fels Cave where an Aurignacian female figurine was found was that "the Swabian Aurignacian figurines, while emphasizing predators as well as large, strong and fast animals, also depict a broad range of animals that the occupants of the region presumably admired". The depiction of animals admired by these Aurignacian people might indicate their desire for taming, at least some species of them. Irrespective of the fact that the figurines are connected with hunting or taming magic, the above mentioned rock drawing suggests the sexual connection between the goddess or priestess with the upraised arms and the hunter. If such a sexual connotation hinted at in Algiers figure can be extended for the Venuses, a pregnant woman would not be the best model for a special woman whose blessing would be sought to bridge the gap between the "hunter" or the "tamer" and the animals. Secondly, as the "goddess" should be a person of flesh and blood, not a spirit, it would more likely be the representation of a priestess or a special woman. Thus, the protruding bellies of Venuses can also be attributed to the obese looks of the woman or women immortalized in these figurines. Apart from alluding to pregnancy, a protruding belly can symbolically mean the significance of the belly, in combination with breasts and pubic area, in puberty.

## **Incisions and Red Ochre**

Now it is a good juncture to turn the attention to the incisions on Dolní Věstonice figurine and red ochre found on some of these Venuses including the Venus of Willendorf. According to Gimbutas (191:51) Dolní Věstonice figurine shows a stream flowing from her eyes down the body signifying the divine moisture. However, Harding (1976) thought the incision on Venus figurines can figuratively or realistically mean the work of a 'Gravettian-Solutrian medicine man' to treat the massive hypertrophy in the breasts. It is well known that the virginal breast hypertrophy can affect the girls at puberty and thus, points towards the puberty of girls. Regardless of the incisions being related to the hypertrophy, they can also be indicative of an initiation activity that is practiced in South African cultures. As DuPlooy (2006:98) states "[t]wo slight parallel cuts are made on significant points of the body. Notably, these include: at the base of the throat, at the hairline in the centre of the forehead, on top of the head, at the base of the skull, on the points of the shoulders, the inner part of the elbows, inner and outer wrists, lower back, at the back of the knees, ankles, the top of the feet and between the

big and second toes. The practitioner applies (sesetsa) protective medicines into these small incisions". These incisions will be filled with linctus made to Vaseline-like consistency. The incisions of the lower back of the Venus figurine of Dolní Věstonice may be associated with such incisions, though exaggerated, indicating an initiation ritual.

Other important observation, from a cognitive point of view, DuPlooy (2006) makes is about the perception of her Basotho informants about the origin of the initiation rite, which according to them started from the legendary Basotho prophetess Mantsopa. She prophesied the victory of tribal King Moshoeshe over the English led by Major Douglas Warden (Times Live 2006). Most of the initiation rites are looking for initiates who would become a witchdoctor or magician. In case of San Bushmen, every boy wants to become a 'doctor' and after many trials and years of apprenticeship about half would make it (Pfeiffer 1973: 349). The need for such a special person in a tribal setting is very clearly stated by (Thomson 2005: xviii).

'As religious principles developed themselves among primitive savages, men began to learn something of the mysterious natural forces which would enable one tribal wizard to pit himself in ghostly combat against the warlord of another clan, and defeat him by his superior magic.'

Petru (2006) states that the red ochre was associated with the Venuses of Mauern, Grimaldi, Willendorf and Laussel. The famous bas-relief of the naked woman at Laussel is 'ochered red' (Marschak, 1991:335). It is believed that red ochre is associated with initiation rites. According to DuPlooy (2006:136) painting body with a mixture of red-ochre and fat is the final stage of initiation process for the girls in Basotho even though there is no direct connection between the Basotho initiation and the puberty. After the end of seclusion related to rites of passage, tribes from Congo painted themselves red (Petru 2010). Quoting Jacobson-Widding (1979), Petru (2010) points to red as a sign of sexual maturity and beauty. In some cultures, the red ochre also has a therapeutic quality. Thus, the red ochre on the Venus figurines may indicate the significance of the puberty rites in the context of the origins of the figurines. In a very well researched-paper, Knight, Power, and Watts (1995) suggested a neo-Darwinian interpretation which go against Gimbutas (1991: xxii) who expressed the view that the pregnancy wasn't linked to copulation by the prehistoric people. According to them, in pre-historic times, the red-ochre had been used by non-menstruating members of a coalition of women with one or more members in their monthly cycle as a 'sham-menstruation' strategy to deceive the males by signaling fertility. This study directly points to the connection between red-ochre and menstrual blood.

## Conclusion

Arachige (2009:123) suggested that the puberty rites could have a Paleolithic origin and the present paper carried this idea somewhat further with supporting facts. However, in the past, puberty rites and Paleolithic Venuses have not been linked via the anthropological evidence about female puberty rites reported by various anthropologists and ethnographers. If we bring together the factual information from the sources including Frazer (1993), it was shown that an explanation for the some features of the Venus figurines can be constructed. It can also be seen that the plausible link between Venuses and puberty is not a new idea.

In the previous sections of this article it was tried to build up the case that the pre-historic Venus figurines are connected to the girls at puberty who were being groomed as initiates. To feed them to obesity and to keep them out of their daily chorus incur a social cost that should be compensated by

some special task they had to fulfill. Being initiates who would become a ritualistic functionary would be a useful way to serve their totem or social group. The pre-historic puberty rites should have been instrumental in a magical ritualistic endeavour. As in many societies described by Frazer (1993), in the pre-historic Europe, the pubescent girls might have had to participate in an initiation process which made them adhere to a penance like process of isolation. During this period they were bound by many taboos and hardships at the end of which some of them could have become initiates who had to fulfill the roles of ‘witch doctors’ or ‘shamans’. Finger prints found on the left side of the back of Dolní Věstonice Venus figurine (Kralik, Novtny and Oliva 2002) points to a girl around 11 years of age with a maximum age set at 15 year. This can indicate that the prehistoric girls at puberty made these images of a storied personage associated with puberty. The previous discussion about the Algerian figures of the hunter and the carvings on limestone blocks at Laussel point toward a storied being or beings. The prehistoric person’s ability to imagine such a being is very much evident from the mammoth tusk engraving of a ‘most unusual’, ‘geometricized female’ figure from Predmost, belonging to a time closer to Dolní Věstonice I Venus, which Marshack (1991:303-305) referred to as an ‘image of a mythical “female” beyond time’. Similarly, Neumann (1991:105) considers this as an “abstract” representation indicating the transformation and spiritualization that tends toward ‘an ornamental design’.

In the current paper, no attempt was made to explain the utility of the figurines as the utility could have been varied across different communities and is very likely to have time-factored. The viewpoint expressed in the article is that the Venus figurines from the Upper Paleolithic period represent an imagery related to girls at puberty or undergoing puberty related initiation ritual. The material presented in the preceding sections makes it difficult to ignore the importance of the viewpoint expressed in the current article.

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