

## **A Short Note on Paradoxes Associated with Venus Figurines**

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### **Summary**

In this note few common paradoxes about the Paleolithic figurines and Cave paintings will be discussed and the reconciliation of these seeming paradoxes within the seclusion-of-girls-at-puberty framework will also be explored.

### **Introduction**

There are some well-known paradoxes surrounding Prehistoric Venus figurines and the cave paintings from the Paleolithic period. A well-known contradiction is about the obesity embodied in the figurines and the actual body shapes of the women who lived in those prehistoric times. Another contradiction is about the inconsistencies between fertility and obesity. Third paradox is about the sites around the dwellings where these figurines were uncovered. Another interesting fact pointed out by the anthropologists is that the Cave artists painted animals that they usually wouldn't hunt or wish to increase<sup>1</sup>. Are these contradictions insurmountable? This doesn't seem to be the case when looked at these contradictions in the light of puberty rituals for girls.

### **Fat Figurines and Slender People**

The figurines depict women who are obese. But in reality, as many scholars believe, "women were fat more in male fantasy than in reality"<sup>2</sup>. The estimate is that less than 25% of women at most were obese<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, it is believed that the women in prehistoric times were relatively slender as they had very active life<sup>4</sup>. It is also said that deducing that the prehistoric women were obese by looking at the figurines is like working out the shape of the modern women through the works of Picasso<sup>5,6</sup>. Then why do we have the Paleolithic Venuses representing obese females? How can we explain away this paradox? One very plausible answer is offered by the seclusion of girls at puberty. As a practice of initiation the females at puberty were secluded. For an example, via long-term isolation, eating and inactivity, they could have put on weight. One can argue that these figurines were made just as work of art and has no other meaning. But why, then, should these artists and artisans mainly show obese women with no face and no feet? Convergence of all figurines to the above form is very likely to share a deeper meaning.

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<sup>1</sup> p47, Lewis-Williams, D. (2002) *The Mind in the Cave*, Thames and Hudson

<sup>2</sup> p343. Guthrie, R. D (2005) *The Nature of Paleolithic Art*, The University of Chicago Press.

<sup>3</sup> ibid

<sup>4</sup> Trinkaus, E (2005) The Adiposity paradox in the middle Danubian Gravettian, *Anthropologie*, XLIII/2-3.p263-271

<sup>5</sup> p111. Aczel, A. D (2009) *The Cave and The Cathedral*, John Wiley and Sons Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey

<sup>6</sup> Leori-Gourhan, A (1967) *Treasures of Prehistoric Art*, Abrams, New York

The fatness of women represented by the figurines is very widely discussed and many authors are quick to point out that the fatness represents fertility. But this poses another contradiction. As Arachige (2009) pointed out previously, the fertility can be adversely affected by fatness and this was known to historic societies at least as evidenced by the historical reference to the fact<sup>7</sup>. In modern medical research, it is known that increasing obesity reduces the fertility<sup>8</sup>. According to these authors, the obesity and the insulin resistance that usually occurs with the onset of excessive fat are associated with various issues such as menstrual dysfunction, anovulation and miscarriages<sup>9</sup>.

Another interesting paradox is about the locations these figurines were uncovered. According to scholars these figurines were not discovered inside Paleolithic caves. They were found outside the caves and shelter walls<sup>10</sup>. Were they representing the ones living inside the caves?

Arachige (2015) proposed that the secluding girls at puberty could be associated with the caves. Thus, if the above proposal holds some water, the Venus figurines might be representing the secluded females, perhaps, the special ones. May be they are the women with true shamanic powers or a Goddess associated with the practice of seclusion. This is not a totally ludicrous idea. Note that the analysis of burnt material from the lamps found from the Puits at Lascaux, showed Juniper charcoal and resinous conifer suggesting the early use of perfume burning<sup>11</sup>. This is a significant comment from an archaeologist of renown. Does this indicate the possibility of prolonged staying inside the caves where odour had to be minimized? However, we know that in the caves the people did not engage in daily activities such as cooking and eating<sup>12</sup>. Is this an insurmountable contradiction faced by the idea linking the girls at puberty and Prehistoric Cave Paintings? It is not easy to conclude whether it is or it isn't. However, it is obvious that the paintings might have taken hours of work. There is evidence that the artists used lamps. The opinion that the artists used scaffolding, at least, at Lascaux is hinting at a long-term stay inside the caves<sup>13</sup>. It may also be possible that the numbers inside the caves never had been large and thus, the middens were not formed. There is also the possibility that the daily refuse were collected and taken out due to hygienic reasons arising from the long-term use of the caves. Burning perfume is a good reminder about their understanding of the acceptable odours, which also indicates their sophistication. There is no reason to believe that even these prehistoric people enjoyed smell of putrid food, especially if the place had some religious underpinning. On the other hand, we don't know whether food was consumed outside among the rest of the group

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<sup>7</sup> For relevant references, see Arachige, D (2009) Paleolithic Venuses and The Puberty Rites, [www.thelureofnoma.com](http://www.thelureofnoma.com)

<sup>8</sup> Mitchell M, Armstrong D.T, Robker R.L, Norman R.J (2005) Adipokines: implications for female fertility and obesity. *Reproduction*; 130: 583–597

<sup>9</sup> See above.

<sup>10</sup> p240. Pike-Tay, A (2001) Perigordian, in *Encyclopedia of Prehistory*, Vol. 4, Europe, ed by P.N. Peregrine and M. Ember, Kluwer Academic/ Plenum Publishers, New York

<sup>11</sup> p43. Scarre, C (1998) *Exploring Prehistoric Europe*, Oxford University Press

<sup>12</sup> p240. Pike-Tay, A. (2001)

<sup>13</sup> p43. Scarre, C 1998, *Exploring Prehistoric Europe*, Oxford University Press

even though the prolonged stays were allowed inside the caves.

However, in the light of the material discussed in Arachige (2015)<sup>14</sup>, the above paradoxes should not be insurmountable to ignore the possibility that the secluded girls at puberty used the caves.

### **Animal Paintings and Animals for Food**

Many scholars wonder why the animals painted by the Paleolithic people and the remains of animals they might have hunted differ<sup>15</sup>. Why should they wish to even increase the population of dangerous animals including felines, which they might not have usually eaten, using sympathetic magic of painting them<sup>16</sup>? Is there really a big contradiction here? From a mere logical perspective, there is no cause for concern. Big cats, horse, bison and mammoth are big animals. If we consider the climate in these prehistoric times, we know Europe was in the last ice age roughly between 10000 years and 100000 years ago. It is deduced using various methods such as ice core data and pollen studies, that the fluctuations of the temperature during the ice age were prevalent. However, near the last Glacial Maximum in Eurasia, people usually lived below the latitude 60 North. The ancestors of modern humans who had to survive temperatures colder than the present occupied area near the Pyrenees Mountains in Europe. The northern Europe suddenly became subject to what is called Bolling warming around 14500 years ago. However, it is only around 10000 year ago, the benign climate took hold in Europe<sup>17</sup>. Cold climate could have made the caves cold too. If the speculation about seclusion of girls inside these caves of some merit, then these cave inhabitants might have been suffering from cold climate harsher than ours. For these girls, heaven would have been one filled with animals whose fur coats and animal fat could provide warmth to their cold-stricken bodies. As we know these Paleolithic people also used animal hides to build their tents. In general, in a cold climate the people might have been more concerned about the warmth as much as the food. This can easily explain why we find big animals whose depiction is more common in those prehistoric caves. The hides last longer and hence the number of animals killed and the remains left behind had to be smaller. Even though modern humans didn't leave many records to suggest that they hunted big animals as much as Neanderthals did, they also might have loved the larger hides for less stitching they had to do. In this view, Abbé Henri Breuil's suggestion of sympathetic magic lives on.

Our ancestors might have started drawing much before the cave paintings started. The little kids at the beach today draw with a stick with no guidance from adults. Rudimentary drawing might have come naturally to us as a species.

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<sup>14</sup> Arachige, D (2015) Reflections on Palaeolithic Cave Art, Girls at Puberty and the origin of Religion, [www.thelureofnoma.com](http://www.thelureofnoma.com)

<sup>15</sup> p23 Clottes, J (2008) *Cave Art* Phaidon

<sup>16</sup> p47, Lewis-Williams, D. (2002) *The Mind in the Cave*, Thames and Hudson

<sup>17</sup> Chapter 2 and 3, Burroughs, W. J, *Climate Change in Prehistory*, Cambridge University Press, 2005. Chapter 5, Hoffecker, J.F, *A Prehistory of the North*, Rutgers University Press, 2005. In Dordogne region where some of the well-known caves are located, people had lived even during the Last Glacial Maximum around 29000 years ago

Later, this natural talent might have developed into a sophisticated skill. Like pottery, this could have been the domain of women who would stay back at the dwellings and looked after the children. The Paleolithic people might have used tree barks, animal skins, soft soil or sandy surfaces to draw. This especially true if the cave art had some ritualistic meaning. Due to awe of the unknown, these ancestors of ours might have only allowed proficient artists to draw on the walls. Drawing might have come naturally. The only shift that took place with the emergence of cave art is very likely to be the use of cave walls along with the other surfaces.

As seclusion took hold due to some cultural shift, the secluded women had so much free time on their hands. They might have started drawing animals as a pastime or ritualistic chore. The definitive reason may never be known. As I suggested in a previous post<sup>18</sup> these girls might have drawn the outline of animals on hides and then prepared the cutouts during the daytime at the entrance to the caves or at nighttime in the light of animal fat lamps at the entrance area where there are signs of more habitation. Then the finished product might have been taken inside the cave to trace the outlines. Note the fact that some of the handprints are based on tracing the outlines. Thus, this is not an unknown technique to these prehistoric artists.

As we know from the evidence left, about 12000 years ago, cave art disappeared. One possible reason is the disappearance of the cultural need to seclude girls in caves. Another reason may be the arrival of warmer climate in which the attraction of big animals as providers of warmth became less important. It is unlikely that secluding girls disappeared straight away. But warming climate might have accelerated the gap emerging between seclusion and drawing animals on cave walls.

### **Conclusion**

Even if the modern scholars haven't acknowledged the possibility of the connection between the Venus figurines, cave paintings and the ritual of secluding pubescent girls, the latter rituals seem to explain away the contradictions as discussed in this note.

Cite this note as:

Arachige, D (2015) A Short Note on Paradoxes Associated with Venus Figurines, [www.thelureofnoma.com](http://www.thelureofnoma.com)

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<sup>18</sup> Has the Oldest Enigma of Humanity been really solved?, [www.thelureofnoma.com](http://www.thelureofnoma.com), published on 30-05-2016