

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE NUDITY, OBESITY AND SEXUALITY OF THE MALTESE GODDESS FIGURES

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The Maltese Goddess figures from the late Neolithic (3200 - 2500 B.C.) stand out as unique expressions of their creators' conceptions of the numinous. They represent the continuation of a philosophical idea given visual form by a long line of female deity figures originating in the Paleolithic. Because of their particular characteristic — some figures are nude, other clothed, some do not show primary sexual traits, and all are obese — there have been considerable and diverging speculations about their significance. Although there has been abundant research and writing on the Maltese archaeological material since the beginning of this century resulting in a variety of different interpretations, so new comprehensive examination as to the specific morphology and meaning of the figures has been made for the past two or more decades.

It is the purpose of this paper to focus on the morphology, archaeological context and derivations of these images, to discuss various interpretations concerning the significance of their nudity, obesity and sexuality, and to offer additional explanations concerning their form and meaning.

About thirty of these figures ranging in size from 20 cm to about 3 meters have been found in the late Maltese temples and in the Hypogeum. Most of them were carved from Globigerina limestone and then painted with red ochre. They seem to be a product of local development, for there is nothing else quite like them in the Mediterranean. The prototypes for these figures reside in the Paleolithic — e.g., the Venus of Willendorf, the Venus of Lespugne and the Savignano Venus — via the Mediterranean early Neolithic — e.g., the Anatolian figures at Hacilar and Çatal Hüyük, the early Neolithic figures of Greece and the Balkans, the Seated Fat Lady of Saliagos, the Predynastic figures of Egypt, and many others.

There are basically two varieties of figures: nude and clothed. The nude figures share certain characteristics. They are all represented as being enormously fat, with huge buttocks, bulbous thighs, legs, arms, and forearms, a corpulent chest and tiny hands and feet. A further

feature is that they lack all sexual characteristics, either male or female. They appear in various positions and stylized poses. There are standing figures, and squatting or seated figures with legs folded to the left or right (Pls. 14-16).

The seated figures average 22 cm in height. Hands are placed gracefully either at the sides or on the folded legs. Some figures lack heads but have a hollow socket between the shoulders for a separate head. Small holes around the neck area indicated that a head was attached by means of a dowel or string that could be used to make the head move (Evans 1959: 142). The separate carved heads are small in proportion to the bodies (Evans 1959: pls. 55 - 56). The face is oval, the hair close to the head, the eyes small and set horizontally, the nose wide with a definite ridge, the mouth small with full lips, and the chin barely indicated. Prototypes for the poses of the seated figures were found among Predynastic Egyptian figures (Weinberg 1951: 1) and in the Balkans (Renfrew 1969: 28 - 29); figures with small separate heads were discovered at Hacilar (Mellaart 1970: 168-178).

The standing figures are less numerous, but much larger — 49 cm in height. Usually three rolls of fat appear at the abdomen, and the legs are so stylized that sometimes the figures seem to be wearing shorts. Some figures stand on pedestals that have carved motifs on the sides.

Clothed figures are represented sitting on stools or couches (Pls. 17-18). These figures are dressed in bell-shaped skirts that reach halfway down the legs. About seven of these clothed figures, either complete or fragmented, have been found in various sacred inner areas of the Maltese temples and in the lower chambers of the Hypogeum. They vary in size from 23 cm high to an estimated 2.75 m. Some display a necklace or décolletè which is reminiscent of earlier deity figures along the Mediterranean. One fragment from Tarxien shows part of the calf and fringed skirt of a draped figure seated on a stool (Evans 1971: pl. 48, 4-5). Four small figurines of the nude fat variety are represented below the figure's skirt. The largest seated goddess figure which, when complete, was about 2.75 m high, belongs to this variety. She wears a full pleated skirt and is supported by small feet. She stands on a pedestal that is decorated by a relief reminiscent of the "egg and dart" pattern of Classical Greece. (Pl. 19).

It is significant that the Maltese Goddess is depicted both nude and clothed. Clothing and adornment are and always have been symbolic of rank and status; nudity has been used symbolically in art to elicit emotions and to express ideas. That some of the figures are nude

and others clothed might signify that they were meant to have different functions in Maltese religion. Perhaps their special sanctity and magical power was increased by their nudity. Perhaps they represented different aspects of the same deity to be invoked on different occasions and for different reasons, or perhaps they even represented different deities.

That the clothed and nude figures represented a similar divine being is suggested by their similarities: both are fat, are approximately the same size, show traces of red ochre, are made of stone, had moveable heads, stand on pedestals, come from the same period and neither shows sexual characteristics. The moveable heads could have been made to move in ritual to assent or dissent a particular request made by a worshipper. Their differences show that they represented different numinous aspects of the Goddess: the clothed figures are often seated on a stool decorated with sacred symbols, wear a bell shaped skirt, and are shown with much smaller figures crowding below; while the nude figures stand or squat and are always alone. These trappings of rank, the sacred stool, the bell shaped skirt, and the necklace, suggest a special numinous quality and are found in other recognized deity figures around the Mediterranean — e.g., the Enthroned Goddess of Çatal Hüyük or the Snake Goddess of Crete. The clothed Goddess or her priestess had to be approached and addressed in a certain manner, after certain preliminary rituals had been completed, much like the Pithia of Archaic Greece.

The clothed and nude figures could represent two aspects of the Goddess, perhaps invoked at different times and for different reasons. The seated figure could be the Great Mother of all, while the nude figures could be the quintessential fecund vegetation Goddess. The clothed figures could be the Goddess, shown sometimes with her votaries or acolytes depicted much smaller than herself and seated under her skirt. She could represent the Goddess as queen, sitting properly gowned and adorned on her earthly throne. The queen may have been considered to be the human manifestation of the Goddess, her divine representative on earth, just as the Egyptian Pharaoh was regarded as the human manifestation of Horus, while the nude figures could simply depict the Goddess in her extreme opulence. Perhaps the nude figures, representing the opulent sensual Goddess, were ritually clothed during certain sacred periods of the year. Finally the nude and clothed figures could have represented two aspects of one deity worshipped by different groups in Maltese society.

The claim that the purpose of the nudity of the figures was to

“excite the senses of males” (Battaglia 1927: 141) is unwarranted given the fact that the figures were found in the sacred areas of the temples and that they were covered with red ochre, the sacred anointment of death and rebirth. The nude figures could have evoked erotic-mystical emotions in both sexes in the early Maltese society which was unencumbered by later patriarchal sexual codes that objectify and therefore preclude the mystical in the female body.

The significance of the figures’ obesity is based on a long tradition dating from the Paleolithic period. “...The ‘Monstrous Venus’ of prehistory was one manifestation of a long-enduring tradition of cosmogonic myth as old...as human culture. Its evolution may be seen in later form, even in historic times. The ‘Monstrous Venus’ is a religious representation — the reification of the Life Genetrix” (Gimbutas 1981: 18). The obesity of the Maltese figures may have been a measure of their sanctity. Zammit believes that obesity was associated with power, wealth and fertility; that it was related to sanctity and was considered a desirable and beautiful condition (Zammit 1924: 77). Ugolini thinks that it symbolized prosperity (Ugolini 1934: 124).

Although these scholars believe that the obesity of the Maltese sculptures was symbolic, Battaglia seems to think that it was inspired by obese living models who were considered special in their society (Battaglia 1927: 159). According to Battaglia there are two problems to solve: 1) the nature of this obesity, and 2) the reasons for reproducing obese female figures.

Battaglia divides the figures into three groups according to geographical and chronological distribution: Mediterranean-Balkan (Malta, Crete, Aegean, the Balkans), Egyptian-Ethiopian (Egypt, Ethiopia), and Berber (West Sahara, Gran Canarias). In each group the figures are dealt with in slightly different ways. In some cases (Gran Canarias), neither the breasts nor the pubic region are shown. In others (Balkans), the breasts are not emphasized, but the pubic triangle is slightly visible. Still others (Bulgaria), which are very stylized, stress the pubic triangle, but not the breasts. Breasts are not a necessary component in the representation of females. Obesity in Neolithic representations can take several forms: in some cases specific parts of the body are enlarged (the legs and hips, as in the Canary Islands); in others, the entire body is obese (Malta, Rumania).

To support his contention about living models, Battaglia draws evidence from a number of writers, both ancient (Xenophon) and

modern (Jãos dos Barros, John Speke, Mehmed Emin Paşa), who had witnessed actual examples of extreme, artificially produced obesity around the Mediterranean and in Africa (*Ibid.* 159). Artificially induced obesity was still practiced in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco at the time of Battaglia's writing (*Ibid.* 151).

Obesity in women could have had a magical function, to favor fecundity (*Ibid.* 159). According to Neolithic and even Paleolithic peoples, a woman is endowed with magical powers which, among other things, have influence on the growth of vegetation. "Therefore, according to the law of mimetic magic, to increase the volume of her body by fattening is to increase the intensity of the magic powers which emanate from her" (*Ibid.* 159). Although natural obesity in women may have been thought to favor fecundity in ancient times, I think that artificially produced obesity is a product of a patriarchal culture because it presupposes the loss of woman's control over her own body, which is not a characteristic of early Goddess worshipping cultures.

It is my contention that the stylized obesity of the Goddess figures was established to create an aesthetic-symbolic connection with the temples. Rachel Levy believes the shape of the Maltese temples was inspired by the seated deity figures (Levy 1946: 111-113). Even though Levy's theory is valuable because it establishes a link between Maltese sculptures and architecture, I believe that the sculptor was inspired by the architect, and not the other way around. There is a strong and undeniable affinity between the shape of seated goddess figures and the shape of the temples. This becomes apparent when one compares the temple shape with the little clay temple model and then compares it with the goddess figure, especially as seen from the back (Pls. 20-22). Because Maltese sculptors could see the contour of the models at one glance, they may have realized that the shape of temples resembled seated figures. This may have inspired them to stylize their sculptures so that they echoed the temples, rendering them more effective as sacred images.

There are diverging opinions concerning the sexuality of the Goddess figures, for they lack primary sexual characteristics. The nude figures do not have apparent breasts nor evident vulvas. However, a roll of fat appears on the chest. The fact that there is no central division within this mass of fat to separate the breasts in a naturalistic fashion has caused scholars to claim that the figures represent males. However, if one examines the seated or standing figures from the back, one will notice that the furrow of the buttocks is not delineated — in fact the buttocks appear as a continuous surface. This stylized departure from

realism was obviously adopted in the depiction of the breasts (Battaglia 1927: 143). Furthermore, the vulvas of the figures are not visible in the seated or standing figures because they are obfuscated by the fat.

Zammit claims that the sexless figures are male, even though there is never any indication of a phallus or a beard (Zammit 1924: 74). The lack of sexual attributes can be discerned in other Neolithic representations thought to be female, such as the goddess images of Çatal Hüyük. In these the reproductive organs are not shown (Mellaart 1967: 202). Evans states that the sexless quality of these figures, probably the result of a gradual evolution, had become incidental and did not detract from their power as deities (Evans 1959: 142).

Christopher Kininmonth thinks that the figures might have represented eunuchs (Kininmonth 1979: 54). After lengthy examination of the figures, I concluded that, despite the lack of clearly defined sexual characteristics, the statues appeared more female than male. Their lack of sexual characteristics might be due to extreme stylization and to a change in ideology. In early art, male figures usually exhibit male characteristics (a beard, a phallus), or their physical shape and their stance designates them as males (the Sumerian priest figure and the Cycladic cupbearers). In the so-called Maltese priest figure the reconstruction of the chest area which eliminates breasts seems totally arbitrary (Evans 1959: pl. 60). It's more likely that the figure was a priestess. Therefore, I do not think that the nude deity figures represent males. It is difficult to believe that more than twenty statues, laboriously carved in stone with stone tools, were meant to represent eunuchs, beings who have been shorn of their fertility, which was considered so crucial in early societies.

The lack of sexual characteristics is prevalent in the Paleolithic and early Neolithic female figures, which far outnumber male figures. The femaleness of a figure is gleaned from other characteristics such as morphology, context, or its similarity and derivation from other female figures. At Hacilar "The absence of marked breasts...a possible indication of youth, frequently contrasts with marked opulence" (Mellaart 1967: 178). The wide hips and narrow shoulders of the Maltese figures certainly are more female than male; no male figures in early art look like the Maltese figures. Red ochre with which the figures were painted, which may have been menstrual blood in its earliest manifestation, is the color of fertility, death and rebirth — the color of the Goddess.

The lack of sexual characteristics might represent the result of a process of evolution from figures whose power as sacred images lay in well defined sexual characteristics, to figures whose power lay in their opulence. The sex of the figures may have been deliberately left out to concentrate on the most important thing — the fatness and therefore the opulence and sanctity of the figures. The lack of sexual delineation in the late figures might also be interpreted as a recognition of the similarities between the sexes, as in the Medieval angels, whose sexuality was not apparent. But, because they are the product of Maltese religion, which was female oriented, these nude figures were more female than male. The Medieval angel, on the other hand, is assumed to be male, because he is the product of the patriarchal Christian religion. The Maltese figures seem to embody cosmic power and overflowing fullness on a superhuman scale which is beyond dualism, beyond sex.

These very fat sexless goddess figures contrast with the earlier Skorba figures (Trump 1966: pl. 26) and with other contemporary figures, such as the Sleeping Priestess (Evans 1971: pl. 36, 6-9) and the Venus of Malta (Evans 1959: pl. 65) all of which (the Skorba figures) have strongly emphasized pubic regions. All of these figures are made of clay and are much smaller than the earlier figures. The attributes of the earlier figures could be the result of the newly established religion brought to Malta by the first colonists and influenced by the prevailing artistic depiction of the numinous which, at that point, emphasized sexual characteristics. Depictions of the numinous tend to increase in size and elaboration or stylization when a religion becomes entrenched in a society. The Sleeping Priestess figure is not the Goddess, she is a priestess engaged in dream incubation, adept in giving oracles, interpreting dreams, or suggesting cures for illness. The Venus of Malta is very different from the larger stone goddess figures because of her size and her naturalistic proportions and stance. Her slightly voluminous yet natural form recalls Paleolithic figurines, e.g., the Savignano figure (Antonielli 1925: pls. 1-2). The faint traces of red ochre on her body suggest that she must have been important, either as another aspect of the Great Goddess that had its roots in the Paleolithic, as a priestess, or a fetish figure. The position of her arms might be significant in identifying her as a fetish figure, created to insure the fertility of a particular woman.

The worship of the Great Goddess was universal from the upper Paleolithic to the late Neolithic in Europe and the Near East. The Maltese goddess figures represented the very stylized visual manifestation of that worship in Malta. The nude and clothed figures

represented two aspects of the Goddess; their obesity was important because it implied power, sanctity and fecundity, because it strengthened their symbolic connection with the temples which they resembled in shape; and their sexlessness signified their universal quality — female in identification, but beyond the dualism of male and female.

The Maltese scenario may have gone like this. The Maltese had a female centered culture and worshipped a Great Goddess. Priestesses guided in temporal as well as religious matters. But, contacts from abroad put the Maltese — especially a dissatisfied contingent dominated by men — in touch with new ideas. Men became more and more active in the religious practices; their temporal power also increased, as perhaps in trade. In the meantime, the economy of Malta was failing. Over-population and soil exhaustion caused disease and famine (Trump 1966: 51). A political crisis ensued and a large part of the population migrated to the mainland. The balance of power was thus upset, the priestesses lost their credibility and the remaining Maltese were weakened, thus making it easy for the bronze wielding people to come in and take over without much struggle.

Summary

This is an examination of the Maltese Goddess figures from the late Neolithic (3000 - 2500 B.C.) that represent the continuation of a philosophical idea given visual form from a long line of female figures originating in the Paleolithic. Thirty of these figures, both nude and clothed, have been found in the late Maltese temples and in the Hypogeum. The product of local development, they share two important characteristics: obesity and lack of sexual traits. After evaluating the figures themselves and what has been said about them, I concluded that the nude and clothed figures represented two main aspects of the Goddess. Their obesity was important because it implied power, sanctity and fecundity, because it strengthened their symbolic connection with the temples which they resembled in shape. And their sexlessness signified their universal quality — female in identification, but beyond the dualism of male and female.

Résumé

Il s'agit d'une étude des sculptures maltaises de la Grande Déesse parvenant du Néolithique tardif (3000 - 2500 B.C.); elles représentent la suite d'une idée philosophique qui a pris forme à partir d'une longue ligne de sculptures féminines qui eurent leur origine à l'époque paléolithique. Trente de ces sculptures nues et vetues, ont été trouvées dans les derniers temples de Malte et dans l'Hypogée. Produit du développement local, elles ont deux caractéristiques en commun; l'obésité et l'absence de traits sexuels. Ayant évalué les sculptures elles mêmes et ce qui a été écrit à propos j'ai conclu que les sculptures nues et vetues représentent deux aspects de la Déesse; leur obésité était importante parce qu'elle impliquait le pouvoir, le sacré et la fécondité, car elle renforçait leur relation symbolique avec les temples dont elles ressemblaient la forme; l'absence des traits sexuels signifiait leur qualité universelle — d'une identification féminine, mais celle-ci outre le dualisme du mâle et du féminin.

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