

Waking up to the Sleeping Lady

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A reconsideration of some of the modes of representation used by the Maltese "Temple" culture.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. Firstly, to question the tendency to read "Temple Period" representations as direct, straightforward scale models which represent their subject according to our modern preconceptions. And secondly, to suggest that these may instead be expressions of a highly sophisticated cognitive system of representation, which embody a different spectrum of knowledge and information, and which are sometimes more concerned with conveying perceptual sensations than correct proportions.

Current approaches to the "Sleeping Lady"

The image of the "Sleeping Lady" from Hal-Saflieni must be a familiar one with whole generations of Maltese schoolchildren, to say nothing of any archaeologist with an interest in Mediterranean prehistory. Discovered in 1905 in an underground complex that was hewn out of the rock during the fourth and early third millennium BC, this figurine soon attracted international attention (Mayr 1909). It has since been reproduced in countless publications, and has become one of the focal points of any visit to the national archaeological collection in Valletta.

If we were to stand by the showcase housing the "Sleeping Lady" in its handsome new setting, and ask random visitors what they knew about this figurine, chances are we would rapidly build up a representative portrait of the ideas and preoccupations which have dominated the thoughts and efforts of archaeologists who have worked on the subject. "Mother-goddess", "Venus" and "fertility cult" are bound to be among the terms we would hear most often. Before too long, it should become clear that the questions which have been posed and argued most vigorously by archaeologists, as well as popularised with the public, are those of ritual meaning and function.

Recent reviews of the current state of the debate on anthropomorphic figurines from the prehistoric Mediterranean have shown how dominant these themes have been (Meskell 1995; Hamilton 1996; Ucko 1996). Among the issues enumerated, there is the social status and role of the people producing and using these figurines; whether these figurines represent a divinity; whether figurines found in different regions had a single conceptual origin; whether they represent a female, male or androgynous figure; patterns of production, decoration and breakage; and possible relationships with other social domains such as sexuality and agricultural production (Meskell 1995, 76-82; Hamilton 1996, 284-5; Ucko 1996, 302). All these writers express their concern that contemporary agendas such as feminism have too often resulted in misrepresentations of the evidence, and appeal for approaches which do not treat these figurines in isolation from their material and cognitive context.

Looking at this debate as an outsider, in the sense that I am not a prehistorian, there appear to me to be some issues which may have been somewhat neglected in the efforts to grasp the meaning and function of the Maltese figurines, and more specifically, of the "Sleeping Lady". To begin with, there is the problem of generalisation. As Ucko has emphasised while pointing the way for a future agenda for such figurines, we must "avoid the constricting nature of assumed monolithic classificatory categories..." (1996, 304), which have tended to swamp the idiosyncrasies of individual figurines under the discourse on collective categories and their meaning. The "Sleeping Lady" is a case in point. Although it is singled out from other Maltese prehistoric figurines by its form and provenance, it has been the subject of very little separate discourse beyond the purely descriptive. In spite of an early awareness that this figurine called for individual treatment (Zammit & Singer 1924, 78; Pace 1995, 10) we find that its interpretation is almost invariably treated collectively with that of the rest of the corpus of "Temple Period" figurines, with an emphasis on

unifying themes such as their perceived obesity. The question of the obesity of these figurines brings me to another, more central point which I feel has been somewhat neglected. The proportions of these figurines, which by modern standards appear somewhat obese, have attracted much debate and attention. The discussion on the obesity of many prehistoric figurines has for long been dominated by the "...assumption that there would have been an ubiquitous... association between obesity and fertility" (Ucko 1996, 301). This closely echoes the dominant interpretation of the obesity of the Maltese figurines: "The basic association of ideas in this mode of portrayal of the deities we may regard as the leisure and fatness which comes from power and wealth and are associated with the idea of fertility" (Zammit & Singer 1924, 77). Meskell's alternative interpretation is representative of current approaches to this issue: "From a purely representational point of view we could be witnessing *obesity* rather than *divinity*" (1995, 77). What appears to continue to be at issue is the *meaning* of this perceived fatness, that is, which of the alternative interpretations of this characteristic is the more correct one. It is taken as a fact that the figurines are indeed representing very generously proportioned figures.

Languages of representation

To my thinking, a serious assumption is being made here. When we read these images as "obese", we are perhaps unconsciously bringing to bear a complex heritage of ideas, conventions and expectations on how an image should represent its subject. The development of our systems of representation today may be traced back through millennia of experiments and discoveries, which have deeply altered the way an object or figure is represented. To read a prehistoric representation with our current mind-set is to risk seeing it without removing our ethnocentric blinkers. This possibility may be worth considering because the relationship between a representation and what it represents is more susceptible to objective testing than most other cognitive processes, because by definition it is engaged in the creation of a material record of a mental process. In other words, a

consideration of the systems of representation which are being made use of in these figurines promises to be less precariously high on Hawkes' (1954) ladder of inference than many of the other questions which have often been asked regarding their meaning and purpose.

The assertion that different cultures in different periods have developed and employed different representational styles and conventions is not, of course, an original one. The issue of how different styles characterise different periods was a matter of paramount concern to a line of pioneers in the field of art history, particularly Wickhoff & Hartel (1895), Wolfflin (1899), Loewy (1900), Riegl (1901) and Panofsky (1927). Some of their most important contributions have been succinctly summarised (Witkin 1995: 1-25) and critiqued elsewhere (Gombrich 1977: 12-21). One of the ideas which emerged from this movement was Riegl's *Kunstwollen* or 'will-to-form', which essentially argued for a direct relationship between the "spirit" of an age and the representational styles current at the time. Like many original ideas which attempt to grasp with a new realisation for the first time, weaknesses in the argument left this approach vulnerable to vigorous criticism (Popper 1950, 1957 quoted in Gombrich 1977: 17, 23). The ideas and preoccupations of these thinkers went through a period of neglect during the decades following the second world war, to enjoy a revival of interest in recent years (Witkin 1995: 4).

Very little of this fundamental debate appears to have penetrated the realm of prehistoric figurine studies. While most researchers in this area have been drawn into discussion on the meaning and interpretation of these figurines, they have rarely stopped to consider the rather less ambitious question of what representational codes are in operation in their creation. Douglass Bailey's (1996) isolated effort to treat this dimension of the problem is a notable exception. Noting that "it remains the assumption of much figurine research that figurines are straightforward illustrations of the people of past worlds and their beliefs," (1996, 291), he goes on to critique and dismantle this assumption by bringing the issues of perception and illusion into the equation:

The connection between the represented object (figurine) and its representational subject (person)... is neither direct nor straightforward... To have made a figurine was to have transformed something or someone into something else. Transformation moves the subject across media (i.e. from flesh, living or dead, to fired clay) as well as altering the subject's form (Bailey 1996, 292).

Returning to the Maltese context, we find an early awareness that representational conventions may be playing an important role. Specifically on the issue of the obesity of Maltese figurines, it was long ago observed that "the fatness is represented in a highly conventionalized manner" (Zammit & Singer 1924, 77-8). In spite of this early pointer, subsequent research on the Maltese figures has only exceptionally dealt with the question of convention and style (Pace 1995).

In the specific case of the "Sleeping Lady", Zammit and Singer "...see here an extraordinary exaggeration of the secondary sexual characters" (1924, 78). This observation is closely paralleled by Bailey's comment that prehistoric figurines may "comprise only a selection of human attributes" (1996, 292). In their strategic selection of which features to represent or emphasise, figurines become "institutions and instruments for knowing (and for displaying) knowledge about the real and the artificial" (Bailey 1996, 293). In the same vein, Haaland and Haaland write:

We assume that the imaginative moulding of material objects to imitate, emphasize or elaborate the form and attributes of the human body, serve to express and foster ways of seeing and experiencing the world, understanding oneself and forming attachment to others (Haaland & Haaland 1996, 296).

What, then, is the knowledge, which "way of seeing and experiencing the world", is embodied and expressed in the Saflieni "Sleeping Lady"? Here it is suggested that the very experience, the very perception of a woman's body is at the heart of the matter. The "exaggeration" which

Zammit and Singer (and most others!) observe, particularly in the hips of this figurine, may betray the ethnocentric biases with which we have approached this figurine.

At this point it should be helpful to reconsider some of these biases. Our modes of representation today are dominated by a concern with correct perspective, a concern which is held by some to be a decisive influence on the western experience of reality since the Renaissance:

When we speak of the changes in perception that began after the twelfth century in the West, the year 1425 should be regarded as one of the most decisive in human history, for in that year (or thereabouts) linear perspective first (at least since classical antiquity) came into painter's practice... No other idea before or since has done more to shape the psychological outlook of the West... from that time until the early twentieth century, western peoples and their dominions believed that visual "reality" and geometric linear perspective were one and the same thing. (Edgerton 1991, 88).

The point is that our conception of "true" representation is dictated by the idea of a perspectively correct image, that is, one which reproduces lines and shapes in such a way that when read by the eye they produce an illusion of the optical experience of looking at the object represented (This subject has been treated extensively elsewhere; see for instance Panofsky 1927; Gibson 1950; Gombrich 1977; Edgerton 1976; Gombrich 1982; Harvey 1990; Edgerton 1991.) This mode of representation is inseparable from a history of cultural choices and constructs. It is by no means universal, as even the most cursory consideration of medieval representations should remind us; size of image reflects values such as importance and status, not optical impressions. When considering the history of human efforts at representation across different periods and cultures, perspectively correct images fall into place as a short and recent chapter. They form part of a tradition developed in the west during the present millennium, inseparable from a particular way of experiencing and organizing space, or constructing it into architectural form (Harvey 1990, 245).

Architectural parallels... and curves!

Architecture may provide some clues here. The most enduring evidence of the “Temple Period” culture is the structures that they built or excavated, and it is to these that we must turn. These structures differ from ours today in several fundamental ways, which may be indicative of different ways of treating and perceiving space and form. Curvilinearity is a dominant characteristic throughout these structures. Sub-circular apses are added to other sub-circular apses when larger spaces are required. Buildings are never laid out on an angular plan. Even megalithic orthostats have been described as appearing “...to swell slightly, like the sag of a soft cheese, giving an impression of comfortable solidity” (Trump 1972, 29).

In the Hal-Saflieni Hypogeum, this curvilinearity is even more inescapable in all three dimensions. Walls and ground are often inseparable, not meeting in a joint but forming part of a single curve. The skeuomorphic imitations of a temple interior that characterise the Hypogeum are particularly noteworthy here. These representations of a megalithic interior, carved out of the living rock, are a novel and remarkable sculptural and conceptual achievement in themselves. They are most often quoted as a fossil-index of temple structures and their roofing systems (Ceschi 1939). However, what concerns us here beyond their importance as a passive record of contemporary megalithic architecture is *how* this representation is undertaken, and what representational codes may be detected here. Having the possibility of comparing the remains of the original structures themselves to this contemporary reproduction tantalisingly suggests that we may be able to catch glimpses of how a subject is transformed into a representation, and with what degree and nature of artistic license to depart from or follow the original.

There is, in fact, a distinct difference between these sculptures and the buildings they imitate, which may be observed clearly and repeatedly. This is the bending of vertical lines representing orthostats and pillars, which repeatedly bulge outward away from the centre of the architectural composition, to create a fish-eye effect. The

optical impression that this creates is one of spaces which appear rather wider and higher than they are in reality. One of the most remarkable things about this formula is its resemblance to Panofsky’s description of how the retinal image reads straight lines as curves (1927, 32-36). These sculptured representations may in fact be as concerned with reproducing sensory impressions of contemporary megalithic architecture as with being accurate in perspective and scale. The “distortion” of the vertical lines, while departing from a modern conception of “precise” reproduction of temple architecture, may give us access to another way of “knowing”, of conceiving and perceiving, these buildings.

Hints of the same phenomenon may also be observed in other, miniature representations of megalithic architecture. The door-jamb in the fragmentary model of a temple facade found at Tarxien appears to have a similar outward curve, which may also be detected on both the doorjambs of the tiny model of a megalithic structure in the round from Ta’ Hagrat. The facade model from Tarxien also has a pronounced, overhanging curve on the surviving outer corner. It is worth noting that Ceschi’s (1939, 40-4) hypothetical reconstruction of the facade of the Tarxien temples, while resting heavily on the information provided by this particular model, edits out this pronounced outward curve. In the reconstruction, Ceschi proposes a structurally more plausible vertical edge right up to the cornice, which only juts out in the top two courses.

The evidence that has been quoted is admittedly fragmentary. Collectively, however, it allows us some glimpses into the stylistic conventions which dictate the model representations of the later “Temple Period”. As representations of architecture allow us to make some comparison between subject and image, one can actually observe how the stylistic treatment alters the subject. What emerges is a tendency to curve lines to wrap them around the viewer. Door-jambs curve outwards at their mid-point, and curve inwards above and below. External walls are represented as curving outwards to hang over the viewer. The overall effect is the accentuation of sensory experiences through the bending of lines. The sensation of a building towering over

the viewer is conveyed by the outward curve of the façade model from Tarxien. The curved orthostats in the Hypogeum replications of temple interiors and in the entrances of the models also accentuate such sense-impressions. This treatment is in fact remarkably close to Panofsky's description of what he terms the "retinal image":

The orthogonals of a building, which in normal perspective construction appear straight, would, if they were to correspond to the factual retinal image, have to be drawn as curves. Strictly speaking, even the verticals would have to submit to some bending (Panofsky 1927, 33).

Here then we have a treatment which appears to be more concerned with conveying and accentuating perceptual *sensations and impressions* than with being precise in *scale or proportions*. As noted earlier with Bailey, such representations may give us some understanding of other, past ways of knowing and experiencing reality. The images we are considering here allow us glimpses into some of the modes in which the people of the Maltese temple culture conceived, experienced and represented space and form. It is against this background that I shall now return to the "Sleeping Lady" once more.

Conclusion: The "Sleeping Lady" as tactile representation

One of the most striking features of this figurine is the realistic representation of certain anatomical details, such as the hollow of the back between the shoulder-blades, or the carefully observed yield of the flesh in areas which appear to be taking the weight of the reclining figure (Caesar Attard and Dennis Vella, personal communications). At the same time, however, the "extraordinary exaggeration of the secondary sexual characters" (Zammit & Singer 1924, 78) may be less naturalistic in execution. The curious combination of "small waist, exaggerated bust and hips..." has prompted the alternative possibilities that it may represent a pathological deformity, or "a specialized and local form of art" (Zammit & Singer 1924, 78). It is this second alternative which has been pursued here.

The representational codes and devices that have been observed in architectural representations of the same culture may also be relevant to figurative representation. It is suggested that the "Sleeping Lady" may in fact also be giving more importance to embodying perceptual sensations than precise scale or proportions. The problematic "extraordinary exaggeration" of her hip, which has been almost invariably read as obese at best, pathological at worst, is a mesmerically sensuous representation of the *tactile* sensation of feeling a woman's hip. It is not "correct" in its scale or proportions because it is not trying to be; the very concept of precise scale or proportions may have been quite meaningless in this culture. Instead, it is another expression of another way of knowing, another way of experiencing, which we have already caught glimpses of while considering architectural representations. It is not trying to produce a photographic or perspectively precise impression, but may be operating instead on another plane, where it embodies tactile knowledge and sensation. The gorgeous swelling of the hip as it soars in its splendid impossibility from its narrow waistline, is in its own way a faithful rendering of the physical sense-experience of the female anatomy.

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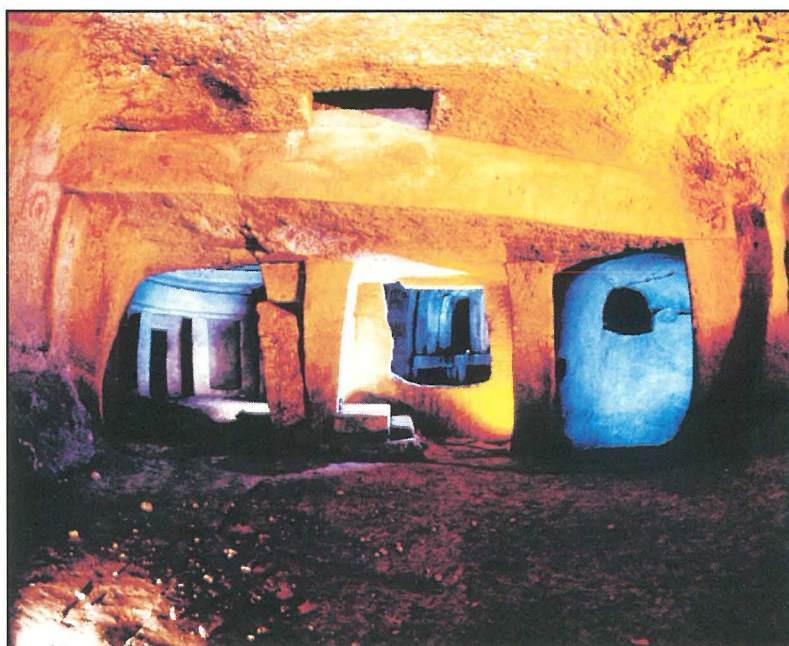
For colour plates illustrating this article see centre pages.

Waking up to the Sleeping Lady

"A gorgeous swelling of the hip, as it soars in its splended impossibility from her narrow waistline"



Photo: Jon Wrigley



*A view of the skeuomorphic sculpture
in the Hypogeum*