

Part II

Africa

Chapter 4

Predynastic Egyptian Figurines

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4.1 Introduction

The centrepiece of the ancient Egyptian gallery of the Brooklyn Museum is a sleek predynastic pottery figurine enticingly referred to by the curators as ‘the bird lady’ ([Figure 4.1](#)). Her form was considered to be so timeless and captivating as to be a fitting feature in season two of the American gothic supernatural television drama *True Blood*.¹ She has also become an icon for the predynastic period, gracing the cover of books (Hoffman 1979) and journals (*Archéo-Nil*) devoted to the discussion of Egyptian prehistory. Arguably, such aesthetic resonance is not restricted to modern observers: this figurine was probably equally affecting 5,500 years ago.

<Insert Figure 4.1>

Brooklyn’s ‘bird lady’ is one of only a very small number of diverse freestanding, anthropomorphic figures that are known from the fourth millennium BC of Egypt ([Table 4.1](#)), the period during which the Egyptian state first began to emerge. The corpus is further constrained by the perennial problem of authenticity, as many prized pieces were sourced from the antiquities market and are likely to be forgeries (Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2012: note 23; Ucko and Hodges 1963; cf. Needler 1966). Of the 227 Egyptian figurines brought together in Ucko’s widely cited work (Ucko 1968), for instance, less than half—some eighty-one figurines or parts thereof—could be attributed to archaeological contexts. All but one were from Upper Egypt and the overwhelming

majority were from cemetery sites. Nearly fifty years later the number of examples recovered archaeologically remains restricted. These include only a handful more statuettes that have surfaced from predynastic graves since Ucko's catalogue was compiled (Friedman 2013, 2014; Friedman, Van Neer, and Linseele 2011; Hartung 2011). Examples from habitation sites are, however, now better represented (Anderson 2006: 216–22; Di Pietro 2011; Hill 2010: 324; Hill and Herbich 2011; Midant-Reynes and Buchez 2002: 454, 474, plate 4.23.2; Rizkana and Seeher 1989: 11, plate 1). Nevertheless, amidst some 15,000 known predynastic burials and about fifty settlement sites dated between Naqada IA and Naqada IID (Hendrickx and van den Brink 2002) human figures in the round are still exceptional. In total only around 120 are documented archaeologically. This surprisingly small number stands in contrast to many other early societies where figurines are far more abundant and ubiquitous (e.g. Clark 2009: 232; Joyce 2007; Meskell 2007). The paucity of such representations is all the more striking given the rich visual culture of predynastic Egypt.

Insert Table 4.1 Here

Like many other areas of world prehistory attempting to address *what* such objects mean is an alluring, but difficult problem (Hamilton 1996; Nakamura and Meskell 2009: 209). When figurines were first encountered during the excavations of the late nineteenth century they were frequently referred to simply as 'dolls' and cited as evidence for the racial characteristics of the early Egyptians (e.g. Petrie and Quibell 1896: 45). They have since been variously described as fertility symbols, deities, servants, and votive offerings (Patch 2011; Ucko 1968). There are degrees of plausibility surrounding any such claims, although a multiplicity of meanings for any one image is likely. Overall, the diversity of forms, materials, and decoration within the corpus often

undermines the coherence of the category ‘figurine’ (Clark 2009: 235; Meskell 2004: 39–58) and they defy any simple typological patterning. Yet this in itself, together with their scarcity, might indicate that their significance lay in their ability to enable particular types of novel engagements that other forms of material culture could not.

Any examination of significance, however, must contend with the question of the contexts of figurine use (Kuijt and Chesson 2005), a topic that has received remarkably little attention, especially for predynastic Egypt. Analysis of early Egyptian contexts can demonstrate that these were certainly not widespread and pervasive things of daily life. Rather, they are more likely to have been short-lived apparatuses for transcending mundane experience. It is suggested here that if there is a way of linking these objects together then it would be through their shared roles as affective devices that elicited emotional attention within ritual practice, whether that be for the group or the individual. Questions concerning *how* figurines mean (e.g. Joyce 2007; Lesure 2002: 588) may therefore offer more productive interpretive avenues for this body of material. Yet what might be equally illuminating for the predynastic corpus is *when* these representations mean because not only are they rare, but they are also not a continuous feature of the period: they are largely unknown in Naqada IIC–D. The discussion here, therefore, while focusing first upon figurine presence—by defining the corpus, examining a few of their possible meanings in production and form, and giving selective consideration to their contextual performances—ultimately leads to questions concerning their absence.

4.2 Defining the Corpus

A wide variety of figurative artefacts were created during Egypt’s predynastic period. This includes cosmetic greywacke palettes decorated with heads, ivory tusks carved with

faces, two-dimensional tags bearing human features, and anthropomorphic pottery vessels. These Ucko excluded from his catalogue, as they are here, not just because of their dissimilar forms, but, more importantly, because they were manufactured via very different processes and materials from three-dimensional anthropomorphic representations. As will be explored below, these aspects were an inherent part of figuring meaning. Ucko additionally excluded figurines attached to vessels (Ucko 1968: 65), but in practice this is more problematic. As Wengrow (2006: 104–5, 2009) has remarked, there exists considerable fluidity between surface decoration and plastic modelling across many categories of predynastic art. A pottery bowl excavated from cemetery U at Abydos is a case in point (Dreyer et al. 1998: 114, fig 12.4). Found in tomb U502, this late Naqada I vessel is ornamented with the upper portions of eight female figures that project upwards from the rim. If these anthropomorphic embellishments had been recovered only as fragments unassociated with a vessel, they would easily have been accommodated within Ucko's catalogue.

Chronologically, few figurines are known from preceding Badarian contexts of the late fifth and early fourth millennium BC. Yet in the subsequent Naqada I–IIB of the predynastic, as human groups became increasingly tethered to cultivation and ritual activity along the Nile, the frequency of provenanced figurines increased markedly to more than one hundred specimens. In stark contrast, there is only a single isolated figurine with a provenance that can possibly be placed within the Naqada IIC–D period (Randall-MacIver and Mace 1902: 24). Towards the very end of the fourth millennium BC, a new repertoire of anthropomorphic forms emerged, this time almost exclusively carved out of ivory (cf. Ucko 1965) and all found as part of varied groups of votive

deposits at what are generally inferred to be early temple sites, such as at Tell el-Farkha, Hierakonpolis, Elephantine, and Abydos (Kemp 2006: 116–31). These large Naqada III assemblages extend into the Early Dynastic period and possibly beyond, and their development seems to have been situated within the restricted context of elite consumption. Consequently, they constitute very different phenomena in terms of production, form, display, and, by extension, purpose. They are therefore not considered in this chapter, but they are the focus of ongoing study, which will bring much of this unpublished material together for the first time (McNamara in prep.).

Spatially, the majority of figurines from Naqada I–IIB have been recovered from tombs in Upper Egypt. Pit burials are the most archaeologically visible feature of the predynastic, clustering in large cemeteries along the desert promontories of the Nile Valley (Stevenson 2009a). These were carefully orchestrated spaces within which complex dialogues of bodies and materials were constructed. As focuses for display-orientated ritual, predynastic graves formed culturally central intersections for contemplative viewing by surviving communities, and acted as arenas within which social relations and collective memories were vividly encountered, renegotiated, and enacted (Stevenson 2009b; Wengrow 2006). No two graves are identical, but there are observable patterns in mortuary deposition that suggest that there existed a structure of choice in how tombs could be furnished. This allowed for material improvisation, and it is within this dynamic that figurines could be accommodated within wider funerary assemblages.

In contrast, fourth millennium BC settlements are poorly attested, a result of previous excavation biases and environmental processes. More recent research agendas

have begun to redress the dearth of habitation data through work at sites such as Adaima, Hierakonpolis, Mahasna, el-Amrah, Naqada, and Tell el-Farkha. Despite these endeavours, the figurine corpus has not been significantly enhanced. Only seven fragmentary examples were found at Mahasna, two at el-Amrah, one possible portion at Adaima, and at least five from Zawaydah (Naqada). The best published of these are the seven from Mahasna, all found in settings dating between IC and IIA/B. Significantly, six of these were recovered from excavation block 3, which has been interpreted as a ritual structure of some sort on the basis of the specialized nature of the assemblage (which also included zoomorphic clay figurines) and observable differences in faunal remains (Anderson 2011). At Zawaydah a high concentration of such objects was observed in the south-western sector of the site in spatial association with a rectangular, mud building (Di Pietro 2011: 72). Although minimal, the evidence as it stands confirms the rarity of figurines and the restricted extent of their social lives within what are plausibly to be interpreted as ritualistic locales.

From their find-spots in burials or settlements, many of these figurines have since percolated into museum displays around the world. Within their glass cases they are often individuated and isolated from the wider assemblages of which they once formed part. Many are rough and fragmentary, any painted decoration now badly faded. For the majority of pieces these are not the objects that they once were: active and vibrant. Resituating these museum artworks as dynamic material culture involves seeking traces of manufacture, manipulation, and articulation. Such an attempt is often frustrated by insufficient documentation, but some clues do exist in terms of their production and contextual associations, to which this discussion now turns.

4.3 Manufacturing Meaning: Production, Form, and Decoration

The earliest known portable human representation in the round from Egypt was recovered from the mid fifth millennium BC habitation site of Merimde on the western edge of the Delta (Ucko 1968: cat. no. 76). Its context is poorly documented and given that only the trunk has survived, little can be said about its significance. More definite in form is an oval clay head, with two cavernous eye sockets, a flat nose, and a small, open mouth, which was also found at this site (Eiwanger 1992). No parallels are known. Puncture marks across the forehead and under the chin may have permitted organic decoration, while a hole in its base has indicated to many that this was displayed on a pole or staff. These features all suggest that the figure itself was a site of performance and transformation (Meskell 2007: 145).

Along the Nile Valley, the earliest anthropomorphic representations derive from Badarian cemeteries, but only four examples are known (Midant-Reynes 2000: 155–8, figure 4). Each is unique. One is carved out of ivory; another was moulded in mud; the third was sculpted in red-polished clay and fired; while the final example was modelled in a grey, unfired clay (Ucko 1968: cat. nos. 1–3, 27). Two of these are realistic; one, schematic; a fourth is fragmented (perhaps deliberately broken). The only thing that these have in common was their deposition in graves and that all appear to be female. A fifth figurine recovered from the unstratified refuse at Mostagedda that was originally described as Badarian (Ucko 1968: cat no. 26) is unlikely to be ancient given more convincing ethnographic parallels (Blackman 1927: figure 119).

In contrast to the Badarian sculptures, a few common features do allow some of the predynastic corpus to be grouped together, despite considerable variability in

postures, raw material, and realism. The majority of these Naqada I–IIB representations were hand-modelled in the plastic mediums of clay, ‘vegetable paste’, or mud, but a very small handful of anthropomorphic ivory carvings have also been found (e.g. Dreyer et al. 1998: 84–5; McNamara 2014). Most figurines vary in size from c.10–35 cm in height. The preponderance of images that have been identified as female is probably an artefact of the tiny sample size available for comparative purposes (Hassan and Smith 2002), a problem compounded by the fact that only just over half the small excavated sample can even be sexed at all on the basis of the representations of genitals (breasts or penis sheaths for instance—see [Figure 4.2](#)) or the hip-to-waist ratio. Other examples are simply too fragmentary to make any firm statements regarding sexual characteristics.

<Insert Figure 4.2>

Perhaps the most distinctive and arresting of the predynastic figurines are the so-called ‘bird-headed’ figurines like the one now in Brooklyn. They derive their name from their abstracted facial features, which are attenuated to a simple downward curve. This trait is frequently identified as a beak and, by extension, is often interpreted as forming a reference to avian imagery, itself a popular motif in predynastic visual culture. More recently it has been argued that these ‘beaks’ are in fact simply noses (Patch 2011: 113). On the el-Ma’amerieh figures no other elements of the face are visible, but traces remain of a black resinous overlay upon the heads of several (Needler 1984: 336), which implies the addition of hair or headdresses. The portrayal of hair is known to have been modelled separately, such as an example in the University of Oxford Ashmolean Museum, constructed from twisted strands of clay (Payne 2000: 19, cat. no. 45). A further two unpublished clay wig fragments are accessioned into the Petrie Museum collection from

Naqada (UC5075–6) and a figurine with separately fashioned long, wavy hair has recently been excavated (Dreyer et al. 2003: tafel 15).

The bodies of a few of these evocative bird-faced figurines capture a very particular posture: their slender torsos stretch upwards from their neat waists, their buttocks are thrust outwards, their arms (where present) curve upwards behind their heads terminating in long fingers, and their elongated legs are pressed tightly together and are frequently abbreviated to a conical form that tapers towards a rounded base without any representation of the feet. The naked upper torso is often painted red while the lower body in a few cases was coloured white. Examples that share some of these features are also known from Abadiyeh (Ucko 1968: cat. nos. 8) and Abydos (Dreyer et al. 2003: tafel 15d; Hartung 2011), particularly in the conical abbreviation of the legs, occasionally delineated simply by a central groove. Several of the finds from Abydos possess eyes in the form of incised slits lined with black, green, or white pigment. Heads are missing from others, however, meaning that it is unknown if they all once possessed bird-like facial features, but their slim waists, colouration, and arm positions indicate that they might be considered related to this group. Certainly one ‘bird-head’ fragment from the group of otherwise headless figurines in tomb B101 at Abadiyeh strengthens this theory (Payne 2000: cat. no. 51). Some examples were never intended to have arms, with the trunk of the body simply possessing triangular stumps (Needler 1984: 343), a feature shared with many of the provenanced specimens (e.g. Friedman, Van Neer, and Linseele 2011: figure 12; Ucko 1968: cat. nos. 8, 9, 15, 18, 32, 45, 46, 74). Others possess variations on the raised arm gesture (e.g. Ucko 1968: cat. no. 10) and combinations of these forms are known from the same contexts (e.g. Abadiyeh grave B101 and

Hierakonpolis HK6 tomb 73 discussed below). Several—although not all—of the el-Ma'amerieh figurines have individually modelled, drooping breasts (see also Anderson 2006: figure 6.49), but bird-shaped heads are by no means restricted to female bodies. The two bird-headed figurines recovered from a grave at Alawniyeh early last century are explicitly male as shown by their protruding genitals (Garstang 1901: plate III; see also Friedman 2014).

All of the examples from el-Ma'amerieh were hand-sculpted out of clay and fired, lending them some durability and affixing their postures more securely. In contrast, several of the more recently recovered examples of 'bird-headed' figurines from Abydos were modelled out of unfired, light-brown clay and left unpainted. Others from the site were formed around a reed or wooden stick utilizing what Flinders Petrie (1920: 6) first referred to as 'vegetable paste' (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011: 419–25), which could then be slipped and partially baked, as is the case for the figurines found in Abadiyeh tomb B101. The reed/wooden core often runs through the entire length of the body, perhaps extending beyond the bottom of the figurine, conceivably allowing them to be inserted into the ground or held close to hearths or fires. The actual composition of the substance that overlay this core is unknown, but it has been described as having a gritty, sand-like texture. Whatever the nature of this material, it seems to be quite specific to figurines in a funerary context (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011: 420). Few other types of artefact from predynastic times are reported to be composed from anything comparable (although see Hartung 2011: 476). Therefore, in contrast to other areas of world archaeology, where scholars have emphasized that figurines should be understood within wider technological practices such as pottery production and may not have been

conceptualized as separate categories (e.g. Bailey 2005: 187–8; Nanoglou 2008: 318), in predynastic Egypt some statuettes were deliberately set apart from other things by the nature of their material. Moreover, several examples seem to have been constructed as part of the funeral proceedings, such as those from Abydos where the crushed nature of the figurines suggested to the excavators that they had been set down in the grave while still pliable (Hartung 2011: 47). This implies that the physical creation of these figurines was an integral aspect of their function.

Fired clay was the material used to create a very different group of human forms found at the necropolises of Naqada and Ballas (Ucko 1968: cat. nos. 30, 38, 47–8; [Figure 4.3](#)). In contrast to the slender, graceful poise of the el-Ma'amerieh figurines, these are rough, stocky, and obese. Some are shown standing, and possess realistic features, including sturdy feet and lively facial expressions (Payne 2000: figure 10.41), while others seem to be seated or kneeling, with their corpulent thighs stretched out in front of them. Notably many are coated in red ochre. From the same site, however, come much more abbreviated male and female forms that are peg-like in appearance (e.g. Ucko 1968: cat. no. 32), similar to examples from el-Amrah (Ucko 1968: cat. nos. 14, 17–18; see also Boston MFA 13.3815), which have painted facial features, curved noses and chins, and separately modelled tight, curly hair.

<Insert Figure 4.3>

At the settlement of Mahasna, all six of the apparently seated (or bent over) figurines from excavation block 3 were produced using a fine, untempered Nile silt clay that was allowed to dry slowly, but was never fired. Each was comprised of distinct parts—individual legs, torso, and breasts—that were brought together to form the whole (Anderson 2006). No heads were recovered, but the bodies are female. In one case

incised decorations might indicate tattooing or scarification. Again the transient presence of the human form within predynastic communities is underscored by the fragmentary state of many of these examples, their friability militating against their long-term manipulation and survival. Their poor state of preservation itself, however, together with their wide dispersal in the excavation block, might suggest that these were deliberately broken during use, and abrasion on the breasts and body indicate handling.

In summary, within the heterogeneity of form and material, a few recurrent themes seem to underlie the manufacture of many of the predynastic figurines: their red colouration, the attention paid to coiffure, and the significance of particular postures. It is doubtful that any one specific meaning would satisfactorily account for these artefacts and even an individual figurine may constitute what Victor Turner (1967: 39–43) might have recognized as examples of the ritual ‘condensation’ of diverse concepts, actions, and relationships. One thing does seem likely, however: their manufacture and use elicited embodied responses.

4.4 Articulating Meaning: Contextual and Material Performances

The infrequency of predynastic anthropomorphic representations, together with the brevity and selectivity of many early excavation reports and the prevalence of tomb disturbance, militates against statistical analyses of figurine associations. Where these have been attempted, such as in Ucko’s (1968) detailed review, few regular or significant patterns have emerged. This is unsurprising given that early predynastic burial groups were eclectic in their composition. Nevertheless, even a cursory review of the character of the assemblages within which many of these items were situated can still be informative, and examination of their contexts methodologically benefits the available

data far better than merely a comparison of figurine morphologies alone (Kuijt and Chesson 2005; Marcus 1996). In so doing, at least two general roles for predynastic figurines can be discerned: those that seem to have mediated group and collective identities, and those that functioned at a more intimate, individual level.

In studies that examine figurine morphology there is a tendency to individuate figurines as static, singular representations. In at least thirteen cases, however, (accounting for almost half of all known provenanced examples) figurines were actually found as sets. Exceptionally, in tomb 186 at el-Ma'amerieh at least sixteen bird-headed forms were reportedly discovered, while two of the more complete examples were both attributed to tomb 2 of the same site. Minor variations in size and posture might suggest these were offerings from several different people (Needler 1984). At Abadiyeh, at least four broadly similar types of figurines were recovered from grave B101. Despite sharing slim waists and tapered legs, however, each is distinctive so much so that it seems that at least three different individuals were responsible for their production. The pair of statuettes from Naqada tomb 1488 are also alike, yet differ in their dimensions perhaps similarly implying that more than one hand lay behind their creation. Seven examples, both of males and females, from Naqada IIA–B tomb 73 at the elite cemetery HK6 at Hierakonpolis are also individually unique with varying arm positions (Friedman 2014).

In the case of the extraordinary set of figurines from tomb 186 at el-Ma'amerieh, details of associated finds are unfortunately sparse. For the figures from tomb B101 at Abadiyeh, on the other hand, there is information pertaining to the other objects found alongside them (Petrie 1901: 33). Despite being plundered, grave B101 was described as one of the richest at the site and contained an intriguing ensemble of items. This included

stone cones, a hippopotamus-shaped greywacke palette, a pair of stone hippopotami figures, ivory combs, and six models of ostrich eggs. It is perhaps notable that other very rare items of material culture occasionally co-occur with figurines. For instance: miniature model boats at Ballas (grave 394) and el-Amrah (grave a56); decorated pottery boxes at el-Amrah (graves a41 and a56); and mace heads (several unusual in shape and decoration) at Naqada (grave 1488), Badari (grave 3740), Mahasna (grave H29 and H85), Abadiyeh (grave B119), and el-Amrah (graves a90 and a56). These dynamic sets of objects leave the impression that they formed part of some kind of narrative repertoire.

This is also the case even where a full assemblage for a figurine is lacking, as it is possible to extend some of these artefacts into the wider world of predynastic visual culture within which they had associative coherence. Researchers have been particularly drawn towards interpreting the bird-headed figurines with upraised arms in this manner because their postures find parallel in the decoration of contemporary and later material. Best known are the silhouetted human forms painted upon later Naqada IIC–D decorated ware (D-ware) (Hendrickx 2002), and which have been subject to extensive discussion (see Patch 2011: 113–15), often focusing upon themes such as the interplay between beaks, bulls horns, and plants (Hendrickx 2002). Equally relevant are the fragments of a unique painted linen from Gebelein (Patch 2011: 114), depicting a circle of stylized figures with shoulder-length hair and long black skirts. Some have their arms curved above their heads, just like the figurines, but others appear to be holding hands (see also [Figure 4.4](#)).

<Insert Figure 4.4>

This latter gesture characterizes the eight female bird-headed figures that emerge from the rim of the Naqada IC beaker found in grave U-502, Abydos. Also contemporary

with this beaker are red polished vessels with creamy-white motifs, which Petrie termed white crossed-lined ware (C-ware). These are relatively rare in graves of the Naqada I period (Hendrickx 2006: 73), but it is perhaps significant that inventories of at least twelve of the burials with figurines also record the presence of C-ware. Most such ceramics are decorated with geometric patterns, but figurative depictions do occur infrequently, including those bearing silhouettes of individuals with beak-like profiles (e.g. Hendrickx 2011: figure 2) or upstretched limbs (e.g. Graff 2004). One example was actually found with a group of bird-headed figurines in grave L209 at Alawniyeh (Garstang 1903: plate III). Now in the Ashmolean Museum (Payne 2000: figure 27, 389), this four-footed bowl contains on its interior a scene with three schematic human representations: two with arms raised above their heads and a third lassoing a pair of hippopotami. Like grave B101 at Abadiyeh mentioned above, this type of association between collective action, specific gestures, and images such as hippopotami is likely to be meaningful and these subjects are repeated upon several other known decorated vessels (Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2012). On some of these other vessels, additional combinations of images co-occur with figures with upstretched arms. This includes the presence of mace heads, as on a conical beaker from grave U-239 at Abydos, echoing the material presence of mace heads in graves with figurines mentioned above (Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2012: 25). The interconnections between these elements have been explored in several comprehensive analyses of predynastic iconography and symbolism, drawing particular attention to themes of elite hunting and military activity, leading to the suggestion that the upraised arms relate to victory in such contexts (Hendrickx 2011) as opposed to dancing (Garfinkel 2001). These studies usefully underscore Joyce's (1993)

emphasis upon the value of considering the multilayered interaction of different types of representational media when approaching the interpretation of figurines.

Specific meanings aside, however, what has perhaps not been explored fully for the predynastic corpus is the significance of the transference of the human form from the two-dimensionality of the painted surface to the tangibility of the three-dimensional figurine. With the ‘body-turn’ in the social sciences more widely, this would seem a promising line of investigation, as increasing attention has been given to the manner in which cognition is not detached from the body, but grounded—embodied—in sensory precepts (Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006; Lazzari 2005; Meskell and Joyce 2003). There is no single definition of embodiment and several disciplines offer distinct approaches, but a few select avenues can be explored briefly here as examples of ways in which we might think about *how* predynastic figurines had meaning. All are predicated upon the principle that the relationship between persons and things can often be more somatic than semiotic, a position that resonates well with those anthropological discussions that seek to transcend discursive rhetoric concerning the symbolic dimensions of ritual (e.g. Kapferer 2004; Tuzin 2002).

First and foremost is the way in which figuration allowed predynastic ritual performances to not just be depicted, but be given substance, weight, and mass that could be directly experienced and comprehended through handling miniaturized human forms. In a consideration of embodied aesthetic engagement with sculpture, the philosopher Roberta Zuckert (2009: 289), for example, has argued that through the aesthetics of touch we can ‘transpose’ ourselves into the stance of sculptured forms. In other words, the embodied encounter with animated figurines can prompt projective engagement (or

proprioception) with the experience of that sculpture, in turn encouraging the handler to have a heightened consciousness of their own body. Similarly, some art historians have noted the role of motion, emotion, and empathy in aesthetic experience (e.g. Freedberg and Gallese 2007; see also Rappaport 1999: 387), highlighting the relationship between embodied empathetic feelings in observers and the qualities of paintings or sculpture in terms of the actions, emotions, and sensations represented. Bird-headed figurines, then, through abbreviation, call attention to specific body compartment and the physicality of certain types of ritual proceedings (Morris and Peatfield 2002; Rappaport 1999: 142–3): the positioning of the arms, the stretching of the torso, the tightness of the legs, and, if we entertain the possibility that the beak-like face is a representation of the nose, a focus on breathing.

Complex hairstyles, colourful eye pigmentation, and specific attire—traces of which remain on many of these figurines—may further reference particular social identities that were enacted and experienced through the ritual performance. That these elements of body ornamentation drew from social reality is evident from comparison with the human remains recovered from the period, several of which possess elaborate hairstyles (Fletcher 1998; Friedman 2003) and show an attention to the use of body pigments, particularly around the eyes (Crubézy, Thierry, and Midant-Reynes 2002: 463–4). The addition of these attributes to figurines underlines the significance of hair and skin not only as important symbolic media at this time, but also as distinct forms of bodily aesthetics. The figured body was not, however, simply a depiction of such human subjects (Clark 2009: 233). These artefacts distilled certain qualities of social bodies, and it was these that were then encountered in arenas of heightened emotional awareness,

specifically during funerals and other group ceremonies. By their very nature, these settings positioned participants outside of the daily tempo of life, from which their view of society could be refocused vis-à-vis figurative objects. Such things were particularly relevant for ritual action through which transformation of social conditions occurs, because the human body is a familiar point of reference, but the miniaturization, attenuation, and abstraction of the figured body can increase an awareness of ritual conduct and its tacitly felt transformative effects.

We might therefore consider the bird-headed figurines of el-Ma'amerieh and Alawniyeh as projections of group ritual action. The repetition of these images across media and at several sites across Upper Egypt points towards a common conception of such collective practice and thereby a sense of shared identities (DeMarrais 2011; Whitehouse 2012). In contrast, several of the more idiosyncratic predynastic figurines do not have the same resonances with other categories of material or visual culture and seem not to be explicitly connected with wider communal action. Rather their creation was embedded within more discrete, subjectively personal moments in the past, as has been explored recently for a figurine found a century ago in the grave of a young woman at el-Mahasna (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011).

Grave H41 was discovered at a time when archaeologists were selective in terms of the tombs they chose to report. This burial, however, caught the eye of the excavators, as it was one of the richest at the cemetery of el-Mahasna and held a remarkable assemblage. Amongst the pottery rattles, ceramic vessels, unfired clay cones, models of garlic bulbs, numerous beads, and carved ivory tusks and tags, was a small 'vegetable paste' figurine. Its arms were bent up before its red-painted chest, its lower legs flexed.

Traces on the back of the head show that this artefact, like many predynastic figurines, once possessed a separately modelled hairpiece (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011: 419). Despite the grave being partially plundered, this little statuette was found still resting upon the body of the deceased, which had been laid in the usual contracted manner of the period, with the arms curved in front of the face and the legs crouched behind (Figure 4.5). The human body and the handmade figured body therefore both shared the same pose, a mimetic display that underscored the intimate relationship between them. Whereas the bird-shaped figurines convey animate bodies, this example from el-Mahasna captures the antithesis: a dead and motionless body. Like the figurines found at Abydos, the object's deformed shape appears to indicate it was not fully dried when set down in the grave (Eyckerman and Hendrickx 2011: 420), highlighting the immediacy of its fashioning, caught up within the emotionally charged moments of funerary performance. The maker's gestures may further have induced empathetic feelings, and traces of those moments of manufacture themselves could have become a point of emotional engagement for others that came into contact with the work (Freedberg and Gallese 2007: 202). With the miniaturized body grasped or cradled in the palm of the hand, the handler would have been able to interact with a body in a very different way to the life-sized corpse (Bailey 2005: 26–44), enabling a close mediation between survivors and the deceased individual.

<Insert Figure 4.5>

Such intimate scales of object encounter may also go some way to explaining the care taken to depict facial expressions on a handful of the more unusual figurines, such as the stout human form found in the cemetery at Naqada (Payne 2000: figure 10.41; Figure

4.3). This latter object has no parallels, and unlike the figurine from H41 has little in the way of a documented context that might allow for the grounded inference of past constructions of meaning. Nevertheless, it is still possible to comment upon this object's ability to affect because of the somatic, psychological, and emotional responses that humans have to such media (Freedberg 1989; Rappaport 1999: 386–7). This is particularly the case for physiognomic expression (Freedberg and Gallese 2007) evident on the Naqada figure in the form of an open and upturned mouth. Considerable debate exists around the correlations between specific emotions and facial expression (e.g. see fuller discussion in Houston 2001: 207–9; Tarlow 2012) and we should concede that it might be impossible to know how these figurines were culturally perceived, whether as welcoming or menacing. Either way we might still be able to glimpse here references to sentient lived experience, and we can recognize that figurines were a locus for not just the expression of some sort of emotion (Bailey 2005: 156), but also its elicitation. Figurines therefore made ritual 'performatively stronger' (Rappaport 1999: 143), and in the context of mortuary practice such emotional cues may have conferred further force, meaning, and memorability to these occasions (Tarlow 2012: 173–4; Williams 2007).

4.5 Figuring Absence

Figurines are so few and far between in early Egypt as to undermine any sense that a 'figurine tradition' ever existed in predynastic times. This tiny number of human forms is surprising because these were not generally elaborate artefacts. On the contrary, many were extremely easy to manufacture from widely available materials. Moreover, along the Nile Valley the body had been, from at least the fifth millennium BC, a focus for elaborate self-presentation through pigmentation and ornamentation (Wengrow et al. al.

2014). Consequently, mediation through anthropomorphic imagery might be expected to echo and reinforce this key frame of social reference. So why was their use so infrequent? We could blame their fragility, their oversight by previous generations of explorers, or the persistence of tomb plundering over the millennia for their archaeological absence. Notwithstanding these issues, however, the number is so low as to demand other explanations for their scarcity. Their formation may have been circumscribed by the social responsibilities and roles available in predynastic society. Their use might have been associated with particular specialists within local communities. Perhaps their manufacture was only invoked by the deaths of certain individuals. Yet it is maybe precisely because of the pre-existing body focus of early predynastic society that figuration was an exceptional cultural elaboration that lent something original to more routinized bodily displays. Rarity itself would have formed part of the efficacy of the few predynastic figurines that were created.

The subsequent disappearance of hand-modelled figurines from Naqada IIC onwards seems equally difficult to explain, especially given the larger number of tombs that can be attributed to this phase. If, however, we remind ourselves that figurines are not arbitrary sets of objects, but forms of practice situated within the wider material world, then some useful insights can be gleaned. Notably, it is with Naqada IIC that a broad sweep of changes is clearly visible in the archaeological record. These suggest fundamental shifts in the scale and orientation of social networks at this time, together with concomitant developments in group dynamics and social complexity.

Changes evident include a recession of the material eclecticism that marked early predynastic assemblages, with artefacts such as tusks, tags, pottery boxes, unusually

shaped mace heads, and zoomorphic models all disappearing. Idiosyncratic regionalization in burial treatments and pottery manufacture also became less noticeable (Friedman 1994) as more standardized traditions of craft production were established across Egypt. Related to this was an increase in coarse-ware vessels for use in funerary contexts (Hendrickx 2006)—a development that has been linked to the centralized production of bread and beer, implying transformations in modes of dependency (Wengrow 2006: 92–8). C-ware, like the figurines that they had at least some resonance with, is completely absent by this time. In their stead, new pottery forms were introduced, incorporating innovative technologies and materials of production. Marl clay is one example, a fabric acquired not from Nile alluvial sources as previously, but from more restricted desert locales and likely created in new workshops. Such pottery became vehicles for an alternative iconography, which whilst occasionally citing past traditions also incorporated original features, constituting an ‘iconographic rupture’ with previous systems (Hendrickx 2011: 247). These vessels additionally have a much wider spatial distribution than Naqada I–IIB assemblages, being found southwards to the second cataract of the Nile and northwards to the Delta, and very occasionally appearing in the southern Levant. Other vessels combined Egyptian features with traits adopted from Levantine imports (e.g. wavy ledge handles) and possibly Mesopotamia (Hendrickx and Bavay 2002). These are but a few examples of a series of reverberations of expanding social currents captured materially as Upper Egyptian influence spread towards Lower Egypt, cross-cutting trends emanating outwards from the Near East with the Uruk expansion. These propelled small, but socially influential, quantities of novel materials

and technologies towards Egypt, including lapis lazuli and cylinder seals (Hendrickx and Bavay 2002; Stevenson 2012).

Taken together, such transformations constituted new geographies of craft production, exchange, and consumption that mediated the scale and nature of community relationships. Furthermore, as the conditions and identities of communities alter, so too do ritual practices (Bell 1997: 252). As argued above, at least some of the early predynastic figurines may have constituted embodied projections of inward-looking group ritual action, and served to create and consolidate a sense of shared identities and internal social cohesion. With the introduction of new sources of social power and ritual knowledge that were external to these groups, however, the narrative repertoires within which figurines had been animated previously were likely to have been destabilized as community boundaries and collective action were re-negotiated. There were also likely to have been repercussions in bodily customs, for as Mary Douglas maintained (e.g. Douglas 1973) the human body is a fundamental symbol in ritual processes; how it is presented, ornamented, or handled is considered to be a central marker of wider social values. Arguably, as state formation processes gathered pace in Naqada IIC–D, those values were reconfigured profoundly to the detriment of previous modes of corporeal expression and materialization, including perhaps the relevance of anthropomorphic imagery.

4.6 Conclusion

Figurines were never ubiquitous and never integral to ritual practice in predynastic Egypt. They were, however, uniquely expressive. Their charisma emanated in part from either the stylized abstraction of the human form in ritual guise, or else through a caricatured

realism. Yet it was not just their forms that captivated, it was also their manner of deployment, restricted to particular spaces and temporalities of activity in settlements or in materially effusive burial rites. Both were likely to have been emotionally engaging gatherings that solidified social relationships through explicit forms of aesthetic practice focused on the body, aspects of which can be glimpsed through the figurines in their postures and decoration. There nevertheless remains a considerable amount of research to be undertaken on these enigmatic objects in terms of their material composition and their contextual associations, including their use outwith the funerary arena. Given the breadth of approaches described in figurine literature to date, such a fuller appraisal is certainly timely.

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Suggested Reading

Peter Ucko's work (1968) remains an essential first point of reference both for an overview of the majority of the known predynastic Egyptian corpus and for comparative, critical interpretation. Despite the widespread impact of Ucko's oft-cited work, there has been a limited reappraisal of the predynastic Egyptian figurine corpus as whole in the last few decades. Notable exceptions include Patch's essay (2011) on 'the human figure', although several of the artefacts discussed are unprovenanced and their authenticity open to question, while those with provenance are isolated from their contexts. Predynastic figurines have been the departure point for a discussion of gender (Hassan and Smith

1993: 52–5), but few of the more recent theoretical approaches to anthropomorphic representation have been incorporated into the analysis of the predynastic data. Rather, figurines tend to feature within broader, historically contingent analyses of early Egyptian iconography (e.g. Hendrickx and Eyckerman 2012), with the exception of the broader synthetic overview of the archaeology of early Egypt by Wengrow (2006).

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Fig. 4.1

The 'bird-lady' figurine from el-Ma'amerieh. (*Female Figure*, c.3500–3400 BCE.

Terracotta, painted, 11½ in. × 5½ in. × 2¼ in. (29.2 cm × 14 cm × 5.7 cm)) Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 07.447.505. Creative Commons-BY

Fig. 4.2

Baked clay figurine of a male from tomb U.96 Abadiyeh. (UC10796, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL)

Fig. 4.3

Excavation photograph of two obese figurines from Naqada. (PMAN2632, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL)

Fig. 4.4

Sherd of decorated (D-ware) pottery from Hemamieh North Spur depicting two figures holding hands. (UC10361, Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL)

Fig. 4.5

Photograph of Tomb H.41, Mahasna, showing a figurine resting upon the body of the deceased. (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.)

Table 4.1

Chronology for predynastic Egypt

Badarian	4350–3750 cal. BC
Naqada IA–B	3750(?)–3650 cal. BC
Naqada IC–IIB	3650–3450 cal. BC
Naqada IIC–D	3450–3325 cal. BC
Naqada IIIA–1st Dynasty	3325–3085 cal. BC

Anthropomorphic figurines attributed to fourth millennium BC predynastic Egypt are exceptionally rare. This chapter focuses its attention on the even smaller subset of those representations that can be contextualized archaeologically. This more selective treatment is intended to shift the core of the discussion of these artefacts from the usual focus upon visual representation towards consideration of embodiment and the spaces in which these things were made, encountered, and experienced. In particular, it is argued that figurines were affective devices that elicited emotional attention within ritual practice. Attention is also paid to the broader social and material contexts of predynastic development in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of both the presence and the absence of these figurines.

predynastic Egypt, figurine, ritual, embodiment, emotion

¹ <<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/2009/07/01/hbo's-true-blood-team-kindly-answers-our-'bird-lady'-questions/>> (accessed 12 January 2013).