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AN EXPERIMENTAL TECHNOLOGICAL STUDY OF UPPER PALEOLITHIC KOSTENKI-TYPE FIGURINES

Principal stages in the manufacture of zoomorphic, polyiconic, and anthropomorphic Upper Paleolithic figurines are reconstructed. General factors determining their characteristics include universal conventions of representation and the limited set of technological operations available, whereas local factors include specific ways of processing materials and combining artistic techniques, the manner of individual masters, technological faults and accidents, as well as taphonomic processes.

Keywords: *Upper Paleolithic, mobile art, figurines, technology.*

Introduction

Objects of portable art have been found at various Eurasian Upper Paleolithic sites. Evidence of their manufacture outside Eurasia, specifically in America and Africa, is rather scanty and problematic (see, e.g., (Wendt, 1974; Purdy et al., 2010; Alpert, 2012)). Owing to the uniqueness and expressive potential of these artifacts, numerous writers have addressed their meaning. Other important research vistas are technology, local artistic traditions, and factors underlying the differences between them.

Raw materials used by the Upper Paleolithic people include mammoth ivory, bone, horn, soft rocks, amber, stalactites, etc. (see, e.g., (Shovkoplyas, 1972; Béguën, Clottes, 1990; Abramova, 2005, 2010; Coltorti et al., 2010)). Zoomorphic and anthropomorphic figurines made of clay and argillaceous materials have been found at certain sites such as Pavlov and Dolní Věstonice in the Czech Republic, and Maina in Siberia (Vasiliev, 1983;

Klima, 1984; Pavlov I..., 2005). The shape and artificial surface texture of some of these artifacts are reminiscent of natural objects and materials such as teeth, shells, fish-scale, wood, etc. (Bibikova, 1965; Taborin, 1990; Chollet, Airvaux, 1990; White, 1997; Volkova, 2010).

Reconstructing all steps in the chaîne opératoire whereby objects of mobile art were made, from choice of material to final trimming is difficult if not impossible in many instances. The use-wear analysis is often hampered by the nature of the material and by the poor preservation of the artifact. In addition, series of figurines, blanks and unfinished artifacts that would allow us to reconstruct the complete manufacturing cycle are rare. Figurines made of rarer materials such as steatite, amber, serpentine, teeth, etc., are unique. That being said, certain important conclusions relating to the manufacture of Upper Paleolithic representations have been drawn by a number of specialists.

Specifically, R. White proposed a typology of Upper Paleolithic female representations, focusing not so much

on technology per se, but on its connection with an underlying system of reconstructed beliefs:

- (1) the appearance of specific beliefs relating to females;
- (2) the appearance of magical beliefs concerning materials, artistic techniques, and artifacts;
- (3) choice and extraction of raw materials;
- (4) the meaning of the artifact;
- (5) the social, spatial, and temporal organization of manufacture;
- (6) selection of tools and techniques;
- (7) manufacture;
- (8) ritual use of representations;
- (9) storage of representations in connection with their perceived magical power (White, 1997).

Based on ethnographic data, M. Mussi reconstructs four stages in the manufacture of Upper Paleolithic figurines such as those from Grimaldi, Italy:

- (1) primary reduction;
- (2) modeling;
- (3) rendering details;
- (4) smoothing (Mussi, 1995).

A.K. Filippov also speaks of four consecutive stages in the making of the figurines from Malta, Siberia:

- (1) crude reduction of a piece of mammoth ivory;
- (2) designing the shape of the artifact;
- (3) modeling the shape;
- (4) rendering details and decorating (Filippov, 1983).

G.A. Khlopachev has described two types of Upper Paleolithic female figurines from the Russian Plain. Each type corresponds to a respective category of blanks differing in proportions and size. The “Kostenki type” was based on the vertical axis of symmetry. On the back, the surface was modeled with two similar and parallel V-shaped slots. On the anterior side, the V-shaped slot delimited the bosom and the abdomen (Khlopachev, 2006: 128). In the “Khotylevo type”, the body was always modeled from a short cylindrical blank whereas the V-shaped slot separating the bosom from the abdomen is absent (Ibid.: 129). According to Khlopachev, both types can be regarded as stages in evolution from a simpler type (Kostenki) to a more elaborate one (Khotylevo). He describes two groups of sites. In the first group (Khotylevo-2, Avdeyevo new site, and both Kostenki I sites) only one of the two types was found whereas in the second group (Avdeyevo old site, and Gagarino) both types are present (Khlopachev, 1998, 2006).

Many researchers note that Upper Paleolithic sculptors fully envisaged the ultimate result of their work, and the very first step of the manufacturing process was aimed at achieving this result (Gvozdover, 1953; Filippov, 1983; Gromadova, 2012; and others). Sometimes natural details such as curvatures were transformed into details of the representation with minimal effort.

Marl and soft limestone objects of portable art from Kostenki I

A series of sculpted and carved marl and limestone figurines from Kostenki I, totaling some 300 specimens, was studied by P.P. Efimenko (1958). Some figurines represent humans, others represent animals, and the rest are indeterminate. Results of the use-wear analysis (Korobkova, 1969) suggest that both two-dimensional and three-dimensional elements of these objects are artificial and were made with flint knives, with a variable blade width, as well as burins and borers.

The Kostenki I series allows us to address several aspects of Upper Paleolithic art: (1) the reasons why most specimens are fragmented or unfinished; (2) the polyiconic nature of certain representations; (3) possibilities of technological experiments with the view of reconstructing the chaîne opératoire.

Certain scholars believe that female marl figurines, unlike those made of mammoth ivory, were intentionally broken, and that the reason for this may be related to ritual practices (Abramova, 1966; Dupuy, 1999; Dupuy, Praslov, 1999). Several likewise fragmented zoomorphic figurines made of sandstone were found at Isturitz (Mons, 1986). Terracotta figurines from the Gravettian sites in Moravia were also intentionally broken, and one of the possible explanations for this is the practice of hunting magic (Svoboda, 1999). However, D. Dupuy, who undertook a revision of the Kostenki I collection, concluded that representations of the female body or of parts thereof were intentionally left unfinished, and that the same is true of figurines from Dolní Věstonice and Pavlov. In her view, this artistic custom was also common in later epochs (Dupuy, 2012).

E.Y. Fradkin (1969) believed that many indeterminate pieces of marl described by P.P. Efimenko are sculptures representing humans and animals, and that nearly half combine human and animal representations. Fradkin proposed that each combined sculpture represents several (sometimes more than four) images, describing them as polyiconic.

Polyicony possibly originated at earlier stages of the Paleolithic as a form of “hyperimagery,” whereby the unusual shapes of natural objects (rocks, bones, etc.) were perceived as the representations of humans and animals (see, e.g., (Edwards, 1978)). The idea that portable sculpture stems from the custom of collecting and preserving natural objects (manuports) and of their subsequent modification was proposed by J. Boucher de Perthes as early as the mid-19th century (see (Stolyar, 1985)). The presumed activities were explained by the psychological phenomenon of pareidolia (the perception of vague or random stimuli as meaningful), which is a variety of apophenia – the tendency to regard random

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