

**THE BODY IMAGE IN PALAEOOLITHIC TIMES. PRELIMINARY REMARKS ON
THE "TRASIMENO VENUS" (CENTRAL ITALY).**

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A PARADOX

First I would like to analyse the concept of body image, because apparently every bodily representation in a broad sense, both mental and by extension plastic or graphic, contains a paradox.

Man living in his own body goes ahead of it and represents it. So the dualism "nature et culture" can also be translated as the original dualism body/mind.

The relation between body and mind being of primary importance is reflected in behaviour and in every cultural expression even so when the body becomes an object to be depicted. We know that, at a more general and structural level, the aptitude for graphic representations presupposes the same cognitive background.

Nevertheless, when we consider content, that is as concerns Palaeolithic art, first of all the kind of object represented and secondly the social meaning or specific aim of representation (PANOFSKI, 1955), we must remember that the psychological and by extension the cultural implications of, for instance an animal image or a human one, can be very different.

In this sense each body image is really a kind of self-representation, because of the identity between the subject who makes the representation and the "object" represented. This is true even when it is not a question of a self-portrait.

The difficulty in self-representation cannot be underestimated and this special condition could partly explain the existence of a good percentage of strange and fanciful beings in late Upper Palaeolithic cave art and also in some portable objects. The other side of this singular condition is expressed by our complementary tendency to recognize as antropomorphic features also vaguely human traits in the Upper Palaeolithic figurative inventory (UCKO AND ROSENFELD, 1973).

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF BODY IMAGE

As H.Read wrote (1969) : "It is important to remember that the image we possess of ourselves is not necessarily definite: it is certainly not present at birth but is something that we have to construct as part of our growing consciousness of the external world.

Only by conceiving an image of the body can we situate the idea of ourselves in the external world. That image is not built up solely by sight. Sight gives us the image of other people, but only a partial image of ourselves, we also must touch our bodies and must take account of all our internal bodily sensations".

These concepts were inspired by J.Piaget (1967) who noted that the mental representations of our own body emerge only during the second year of life, in coincidence with the first stages of the object concept in psychological terms.

More recent investigations in Freudian psychoanalysis tend to underline the importance of the mental representations concerning body.

In fact it is a part of self-identity, it makes both possible and poses some insuperable limits to our experiences.

The dialectic body-mind together with the dialectic individual-social environment is a fundamental one in every cultural context, according to this perspective (FERRARI, 1992).

This kind of dialectic model on the other hand has a good explanatory effectiveness as concerns human behaviour in various concrete situations.

BODY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIETY

In cultural anthropology it was B.Malinowski (1944) who conceived body as a propulsive center in the history of culture.

So he wrote that man is compelled to satisfy first his bodily needs. He must create resources and carry out activities in order to feed, heat, house, dress or to protect himself against chill, wind and storms. He must organize defenses against external enemies and dangers both physical, animal or human.

All these primary problems are solved by means of alliances and also by developing knowledge, values and ethics.

This reference to origins by Malinowski seems an important one because it is not an expression of rough materialism. Really it points out that social life

is the result of complex relations between a given context ,including body ,natural environment and other human beings and the kind of needs and of responses to needs elaborated on this base.

At a more abstract and conceptual level,the tendency to use the body model to organize space in living societies (CARDONA, 1985), to identify animals and humans in totemic systems (LEVI-STRAUSS,1962) or to express the membership of the individual to the society by means of body paintings (LEVI-STRAUSS,1955) likewise marks the body centrality.

It is worth noting that one of the oldest symbolic evidences archaeologically detectable,as concerns Palaeolithic times, is represented by body ornaments and burials .

Then since the beginning,the body has been chosen as one of the media through which social life was described.

Moreover in the Upper Palaeolithic cave and portable art the so-called hybrids or the masked figures ,if they are true, represent one of the most ancient records concerning the cultural need to make the organic world anthropomorphic (Fig.1).

THE TRASIMENO VENUS

The preceding considerations, in underlining at the same time the peculiarity of the subject and its cultural relevance, allow us to introduce the little Trasimeno Venus.

Description

Here are presented some preliminary observations , to be integrated with other data resulting from the microscope analysis and the technological experimentations.

The object can be defined as a sculpture in the round (Fig.2).Two engraved lines ,both leaving beneath the main fracture,create the separation between two close protuberances and then become a single line marking the separation between the upper and the lower part of the figurine.Another engraved line ,visible only on one surface,marks the beginning of two little protuberances ,one of which is broken, placed laterally on both sides.

The mistery which till now hides its origins,would suggest caution in asserting the authenticity of the figurine. It is said to be found in an open air location and as a matter of fact its surface is very smooth. At last the fractures,affecting one side and one of the ends have their margins rounded ,as if the piece had been in an environment causing a polish on its edges.

All these elements seem to confirm both the authenticity of the piece and its antiquity.

The raw material is steatite ,a pebble of steatite . Steatite is a very tender material (MUSSI,1988-1989) easy enough to work ,but this quality does not explain to us automatically what kind of reactions it could have in different post-depositional contexts. So the measure of its antiquity is not so foreseen.

The smoothing effects on its surface could have been produced in a short time or in a very long period ,but we cannot know the relative importance of intentional work and manipulation and of natural agents on the final results now visibles.

Metrical data

According to the Munsell Charts the prevailing color is 2.5Y4/5(olive brown),with veins near to 7.5Y2/1.5 (olive black).

Dimensions vary according to different points measured :

- Minimum lenght is mm3.61,maximum lenght is mm 37.6.
- Minimum width is mm 10.4,maximum width is mm 16.3.
- Minimum thickness is mm 10.6,maximum thickness is mm 14.
- Weight is gr 12.5.

Interpretation

The anthropomorphic features of the statuette seem very clear,in any case the orientation and definition of its body parts has been discussed and debated since the very beginning of its discovery.

At first Al. Palma di Cesnola,who was the author of the discovery(1938) and P.Graziosi who made a first comment on the piece (1938) proposed an orientation as in Fig.2A and included the little figurine in the category of the "Aurignacian" Venuses ,later defined as Gravettian (DELPORTE, 1993).

According to this version the head , the neck , the shoulders and the arms are resumed in a single cylindrical form. The breasts are represented by the two little protuberances,one of which is broken,placed laterally ,while the pelvis and the legs are lacking because of a fracture.

The back shows the presence of the buttocks,one of which is broken.

P.Graziosi found analogies with the Savignano Venus (Fig.3),mainly for the cylindrical appendix which in this statuette is on the opposite side of the legs and seems to act as head and neck.H.Delporte has most recently published this version (1993).

Graziosi tried also another orientation , turning and reversing the statuette .

About fifteen years later A.C.Blanc (1954) maintained this last version (Fig.2B) : the cylindrical part stands for the legs,the bilateral protuberances represent the sides and the two fatty and close prominences,before considered as buttocks,become the breasts.The intact side shows near the breast a little elongated and folded protuberance possibly representing an arm. The head and the shoulders are broken.The buttocks, flattened,are just sketched by the two engraved lines ,one of which marks the waist.

Blanc compared this image with the most famous of the Willendorf statuettes (Fig.3).

A third element already mentioned by Graziosi, is the level of ambiguity of the representation ,that is the possibility of interpreting some of the figurative components ,like the cylindrical appendix,as male sexual characters.It was H.Breuil who defined the sense of this ambiguity comparing the piece to a calembour (in GRAZIOSI,1938).

Subsequent comparisons have been made with other works like the Mauern and Tursac figurines, which have similar slightly defined characters or with even more schematic representations,but apparently more decidedly bisexual,like the Dolni Vestonice Venus XIV (see for example DELPORTE,1993) (Fig.3).

Anyway we can not hide that there are various questions to be analyzed first.

INTERPRETATIVE VARIABLES

Now is the time to distinguish some basic variables, closely connected.

The absent context

The most elusive is the original context of the statuette and then its post-depositional story.

As concerns the original depositional situation we suppose that it really comes from an open air site (see the description).

There could be at least four hypotheses :

1.The object was abandoned during its manufacture.2. The object was simply discarded after use,possibly after repeated use. 3. The object was still in use and because it was produced to be used once,it was in its context of use. 4. It was lost.

The western side of the Trasimeno lake (Umbria) is known as the possible place of origin but it could also be identified with the environs of Arezzo in Northern Tuscany (FUNGHINI,1881; PALMA DI CESNOLA, 1938). These two regions ,Umbria and Tuscany, are contiguous.

The raw material is rather widespread in Tuscany (REGIONE TOSCANA,1991), but not in Umbria where some worked steatite objects were found in apparently late contexts (PASSERI,1970; BELLUCCI,1907)

Nevertheless, one of them, a pendant with reticulate incisions very similar to another one coming from an open air site,hypothetically of early Epigravettian age in Tuscany (GALIBERTI,1979),was found in the vicinity of the Trasimeno lake (BELLUCCI,1907; ZAMPETTI,1993).

The locations nearest to the Trasimeno lake with steatite outcrops are found in Tuscany ,in the Siena region (R.CAMERA DI COMMERCIO ED ARTI,1890); steatite is reported also in the Arezzo region (REGIONE TOSCANA 1991) (Fig.4).

Manufacture and style

The manufacture itself is a variable to be considered. It is the result of conditions partly fortuitous like raw material characteristics, technical abilities and individual creativity and partly socially imposed like stylistic conventions.

In this perspective we could have an unfinished object as concerns the cylindrical part of the Trasimeno statuette or a finished one.

In the latter case there is an alternative.The artifact could represent an intentionally androgynous being (ZOTZ ,1951) or,as R.Arnhem suggested (ARNHEIM,1954),be the result of a formal conception using spheres,more or less modified,as the basic drawing element.

Now sphere is the most primitive form because it is ,in a perceptive sense, very little defined . Nevertheless ,of course,it can stand also for a female body or anything else.

A.Leroi-Gourhan (1970) observed something similar as concerns the European Upper Palaeolithic statuettes ,that is, he stressed the question of style .

When he wrote the paper just mentioned ,the studies on style and technology of carved statuettes were not very advanced and above all the Aurignacian sculpture was less documented . At present the finding of the so-called dancing woman in Galgenberg ,found in a level with radiocarbon dates of about 30,000 BP,has increased our knowledge on the seemingly oldest examples of sculpture.

The Galgenberg figurine carved in serpentine or schist, shows a spatial conception, fairly different from other more or less contemporaneous sculptures coming from south-western Germany : it cannot be defined as a sculpture in the round but as a four-sided, flat object, similar to the so-called "contours découpés". The square seems to be the basic form of this figure and a dynamic attitude characterizes it (BEDNARIK, 1989).

It is evident that the use of spheres was not an exclusive way to represent an anthropomorphic image at the very beginning of the Upper Palaeolithic. Anyway the poor definition of body details and the use of "raccords fondus" (LEROI-GOURHAN, 1970) is generally still a valid description for many sculptures of the Upper Palaeolithic in Europe, including the Trasimeno statuette.

These stylistic elements undoubtedly add to the ambiguity produced by post-depositional phenomena and possible incompleteness.

Aesthetic variables

The question of style in turn relates also to the aesthetic field, that is to say to rules and values that inspired the manufacture of the figurine (MUKAROVSKI, 1966).

Here the distance between our culture and that of the Palaeolithic may play an important role.

First of all if there can be a question of style as proposed by Leroi-Gourhan and Arnheim, but the use of graphic conventions "primitive" enough does not mean automatically neither a conceptual confusion nor an intentional one between male and female characters.

The calembour can be unintentional.

Possibly for us ambiguity in graphic representation is a very large category including all details not very easy to identify. In general our scientific culture and in this specific case our anatomical information influence our discerning criteria.

The search for ambiguity is very strong in our culture and also in visual art, perhaps because it represents well the functioning of our psychic world and hence the existence of borderlines not so easy to identify.

In visual art it is possible to play with ambiguity in form or color to underline many perceptive or conceptual contents (Fig.5), but was it exactly the same in past times?

We want to say that now we have a theory, while in past times there was no theory in a modern sense but only its possible premises.

Moreover portable art and in particular these little carved objects had a function (personal decorations ? toys? ritual items?) conditioning the process of manufacture itself. For example ,as has been often underlined,the pointed end of some pieces could serve to insert them in a base,while different dimensions could reveal different uses (DELPORTE ,1993; HAHN,1990).

At last we can hypotesize that the content of the images was defined also by the context of use,that is to say by elements not included in the figure but sorrounding or completing it.

Imagination and perception

This leads us to consider another question.

The evocative power of lightly defined drawings is very strong and in the realm of imagination ,which is another sphere strictly connected with the aesthetic field ,all kinds of combinations are in theory possible.

The sides of carved objects can be conceived as a part of a whole figure or as distinct surfaces .

Moreover in perceptive terms we can distinguish various kinds of "doubleness".There is doubleness expressed through composition so that the different parts remain distinct;for example among the schematic carvings the mentioned Dolni Vestonice Venus XIV (Fig.3) or the.so-called "lame à la vulve " from Le Placard (DELPORTE,1993 :Fig.71) could evoke an androgynous figure.There can be doubleness expressed through duplication or split ,like for example in the supposed double bas-relief from Laussel (DELPORTE,1993 : Fig.46). At last doubleness can be expressed through vagueness of identity,that is to say ambiguity. In this perspective we can say that some anthropomorphic images in Palaeolithic art are in fact ambiguous if we are looking for their sexual identity.

Once again it is difficult to give this sensation an explanation in "scientific" terms. Not only style can produce vagueness but also all the pieces we put in categories like rough drafts,unfinished objects,adolescent images or broken objets like the Trasimeno statuette.

Here our personal evaluations and perceptions can come into play.

In this perspective we tried to make a little test asking eleven students ,male and female,of our seminar at the University to solve the question of the sexual identity of the statuette and to orient it. Previously they were informed of the debate on the statuette and of its somatic characteristics through slides . Then ,after one week,the students have been requested to orient a plaster cast of the statuette and to give an answer to the question of identity.

None, except one,doubted about the female identity of the statuette.

Seven people chose the orientation like in Fig.2B, only one, a boy, chose the other position, like in Fig.2A. At last a boy was convinced of the androgynous value of the image and then gave no importance to the orientation; the remaining two people could not decide any orientation.

Personally we prefer the version like in Fig.2A, because the proportion of the various parts seems better respected. So the statuette could be the portrait of a female, with unintentionally male elements.

Surely the test is very simple and is not really a "scientific" one, it is interesting but because it confirms the variety of responses and at the same time the apparently scarce weight of the sexual identity of the sample of students on final judgement. It would be important to assess the role of the preliminary information and on the other hand the way every person lives his sexual role and his relation with body, but this inquiry was beyond our intentions.

CONCLUSIONS

Setting the Trasimeno statuette in the Italian UP

The Trasimeno figurine, though the contradictory information on its provenance and its chronological situation, is very similar, even in its incomplete present condition, to other presumably Gravettian/early Epigravettian finds of Italy. The Gravettian /early Epigravettian of Italy is dated between 25,000 and 19,000 bp, but unfortunately no carved object has radiometric dates so we are compelled to flatten the temporal axis.

In particular in the version like in Fig.2 A it is similar enough, also in dimensions, to the Grimaldi statuette of yellow steatite (Fig.3). On the contrary in the version like in Fig.2B it remains more isolated because, even if the Savignano statuette has some analogies in the construction, the most convincing similarities are with other European Gravettian finds like the Mauern or the Tursac figurines (DELPORTE, 1993). Really in its present condition the piece is a mixture of features.

Undoubtedly for now it would seem that style is the only criterion usable to frame this object and it is clear that style is a fragile base when it is not combined with other data on the context.

We know that in Italy except for another bone find coming from Riparo Gaban and going back to the Mesolithic (GRAZIOSI, 1975), there are two other pieces not very well defined. The Chiozza Venus said to be Neolithic in age, but really without any well known context (GRAZIOSI, 1973) and another statuette in black stone, perhaps coming from the Marche region in central Italy, but now definitely lost (DALL'OSSO, 1915).

These three pieces show figurative elements very similar to the palaeolithic figurines (Fig.6) but on the other hand other finds coming from well dated late contexts are very different (ATTI DELLA XXVIII RIUNIONE SCIENTIFICA DELL'ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI PREISTORIA E PROTOSTORIA, 1992; GRAZIOSI,1973).

At the same time steatite has been in use till later prehistoric times in Italy, but in different forms and not to carve figurines: see for example, from the same regions, the steatite fragments from Pozzi della Piana in Umbria: (PASSERI,1970) or the manufacture of beads from Neolithic or Eneolithic sites of Tuscany (GRIFONI CREMONESI,1988-1989).

At last, as concerns the contextual problem, in Tuscany there are Gravettian, early Epigravettian or Upper Palaeolithic open air sites including steatite objects and other works of art like Monte Longo, Gavorrano, Poggio delle Monache, Castagnino and the environs of Livorno (AGUS,1965; BARTOLI, GALIBERTI AND GORINI,1977; COCCHI,1951; ISTITUTO ITALIANO DI PREISTORIA E PROTOSTORIA,1969) (Fig.4).

The existence of similar sites in Umbria, even if until now never recorded (PALMA DI CESNOLA,1993), is not to be rejected.

Le regard éloigné

The questions related to the interpretation of the image itself are various; some are particularly connected with the vicissitudes suffered by the piece. Others have a more general importance. First of all the anthropomorphic content of the figurine reminds us that one of the fundamental aspects of the relation nature/culture is represented by the relation body/mind. The organization of this relation has some consequences also at the figurative level and we can think that it was the same in Palaeolithic times. Social and individual factors have played a role in the formation of the body image, but not all of them are knowable by the archaeologist.

Some aesthetic elements like style, when it is possible to recognize unchanging characteristics like for example the "raccords fondus" described by A.Leroi-Gourhan or the combination of different body parts in a single piece so that every component becomes a distinct decorative element, like for example in the mentioned Dolni Vestonice XIV Venus, are in fact visible. Anyway much more should be known and is in fact not knowable as concerns the social functions of the artistic activity in the various periods of the Upper Palaeolithic: for example aesthetic conceptions but also the functions assigned to works of art and even the kind of development in imagination and perception of visual art.

There are of course levels of recognition and of communicability of contents and also function can be supposed with a degree of reliability, but since art is not organized as a code even if it can work like a bridge between reality and the imaginary or other kinds of needs and experiences, its interpretation remains by definition an open one.

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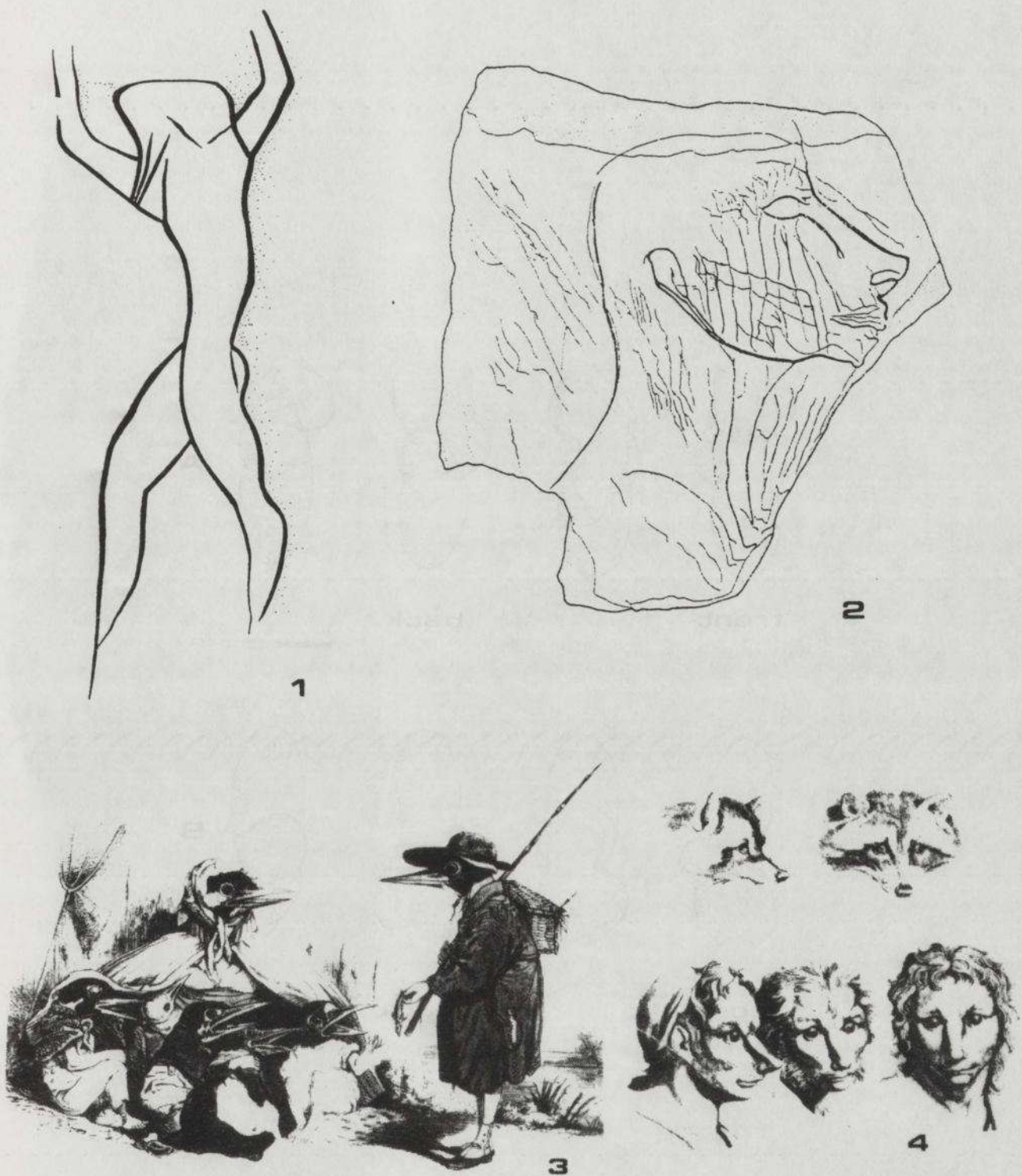


Fig.1 : Transformations of human and animal physiognomy using human body as starting point. In Palaeolithic times ; 1,Mural engraving from Addaura cave in Italy (length. about 25 cm: P.GRAZIOSI,1973); 2, Engraved plaquette from Grotte La Marche in France(length 12.5 cm : L.PALES,1976). In modern times : 3,4 XVIIIth century depictions (C.LEVI-STRAUSS,1962).

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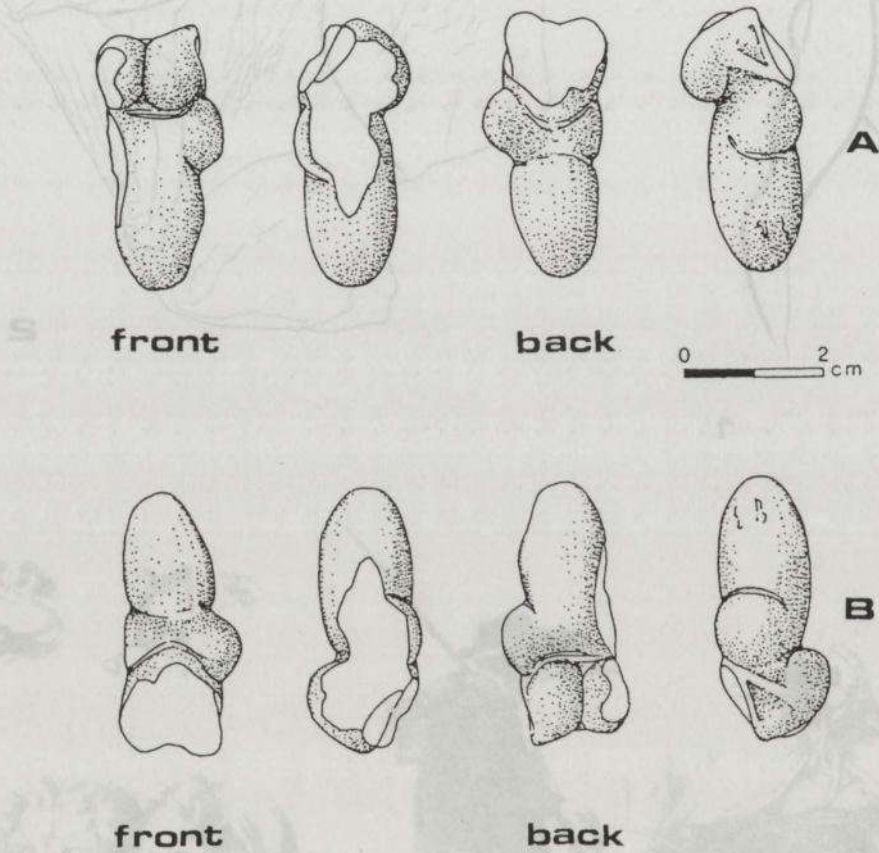


Fig. 2 : The so-called Trasimeno Venus . A and B different orientations of the figurine according to various authors.

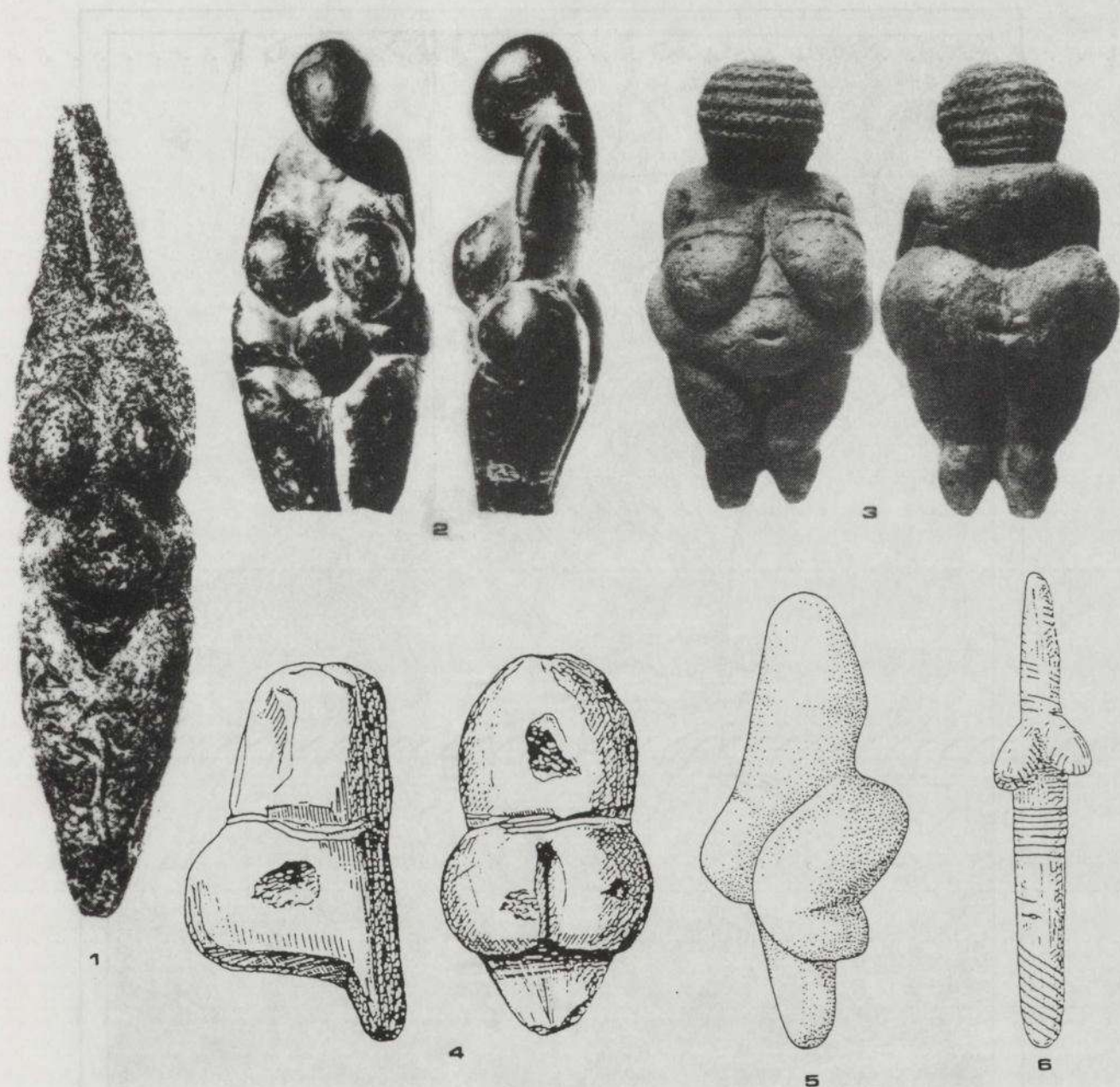


Fig.3 : Gravettian figurines compared with the Trasimeno Venus .Italy:1,the Savignano statuette (22 cm in length); 2, the yellow statuette from Grotta della Barma Grande (4.7 cm in length) (P.GRAZIOSI,1973).Austria :3,the Willendorf statuette (11 cm in length:A.C.BLANC,1954). Germany: 4,the Mauern figurine (7,2 cm in length: M.OTTE,1981). France: 5,the Venus from Grotte Tursac (8 cm in length) . Czech Republic:6,the Dolni-Vestonice Venus XIV (8.7 cm in length)(H.DELPORTE,1993).

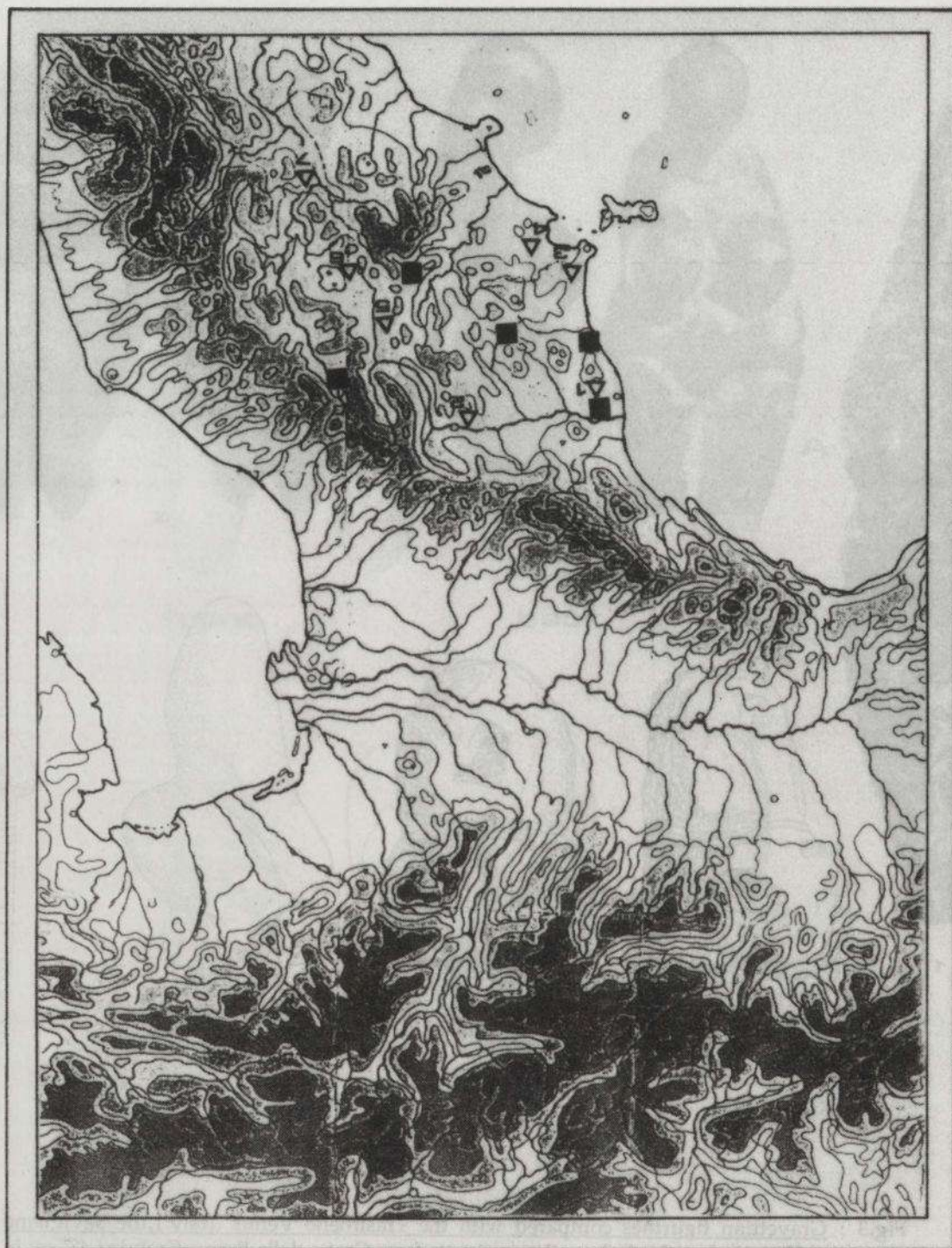


Fig.4 : Map showing the distribution of the present steatite outcrops (black squares) and of sites including steatite findings (triangles) in Tuscany and Umbria, mentioned in the text. List of sites: 1, environs of Livorno; 2, Poggio delle Monache; 3, Castagnino; 4, Gavorrano; 5, Monte Longo; 6, environs of the Trasimeno lake; 7, Pozzi della Piana.

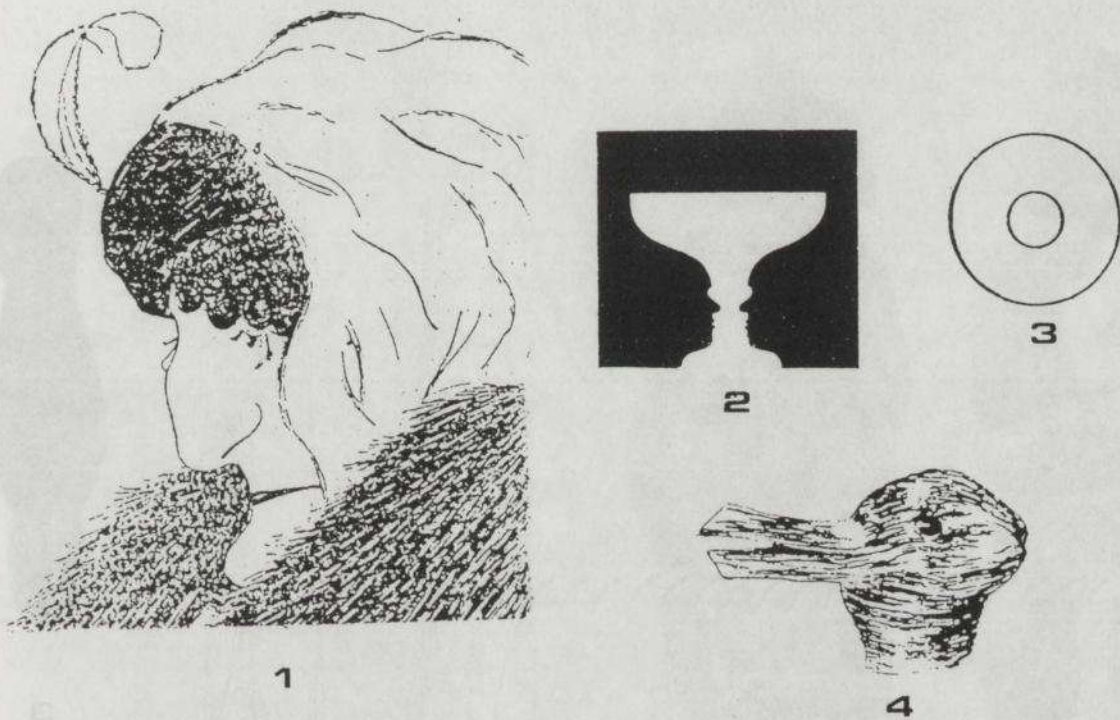


Fig.5 : Example of perceptive ambiguity in modern drawings.1,Face showing the profile of a young woman,changing in an old lady profile if you consider the base of the neck as a chin and the chin as a nose;2,a white cup,wich could be interpreted alternately as two opposite profiles in black;3,the most ambiguous form titled "a Mexican with his hat "(R.ARNHEIM,1954);4,a profile titled "goose or rabbit?"(E.H.GOMBRICH,1959).

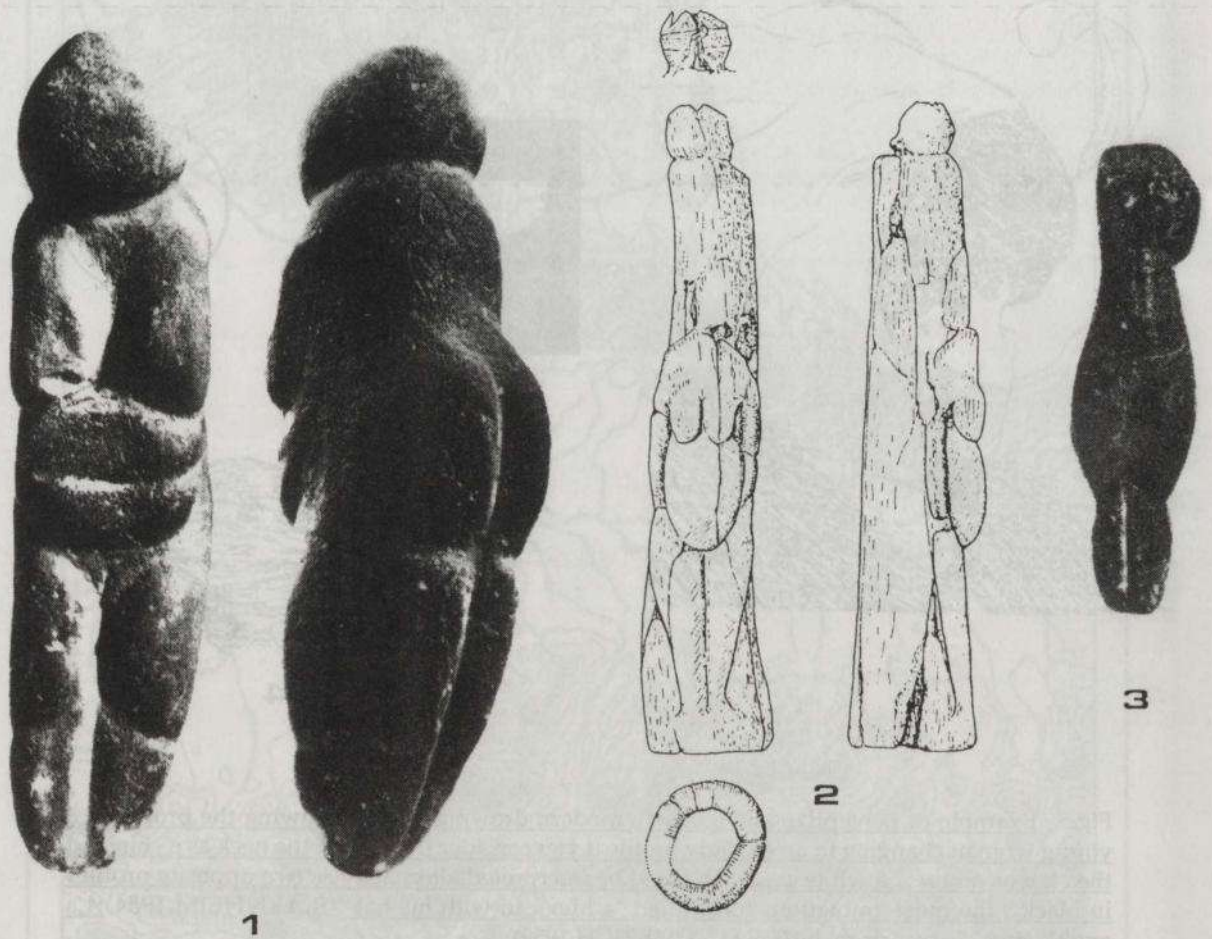


Fig.6 : Series of Italian figurines lacking their original context or going back to post-palaeolithic times.1,The Chiozza Venus (20.5 cm in length)(P.GRAZIOSI,1973); 2,a female image in low relief,decorating a bone handle from the mesolithic levels of Riparo Gaban (10 cm in length) (P.GRAZIOSI,1975); a statuette in black stone probably found in the Marche region (I.DALL'OSSO,1915).

Fig. 4 - Map showing the distribution of the present stone culture (black spots) and sites including skeletal remains (triangles) in Tuscany and Liguria mentioned in the study of sites: Langhorns of Livorno; 2, Fucine della Marna; 3, Casapalata, Casavalle; 4, Monte Longorotrone of Via Tassopiana lake; 5, Torre della Pieve.