

A NEOLITHIC FIGURINE FROM LERNA

(Frontispiece)

SUCCESSIVE strata of the Neolithic settlement at Lerna were tested in depth over an extensive area in the course of the American School's excavations during the early summer of 1956. The three topmost building levels had been recognized in the preceding campaign.¹ This year some five others, belonging apparently to phases of the same cultural period, were cleared one after another; and below them a still deeper series of accumulations, different in character, was removed in turn, down to virgin soil and the level of standing water. The maximum total thickness of these Neolithic deposits was 3.75 m. (from 4.37 m. to 0.62 m. above sea level).

A terracotta figurine of more than usual interest was found among fallen debris of the third stratum from the top.² It is a representation of a standing nude woman, lacking the head and the lower part of the right leg, worn in places and slightly chipped, but preserved nonetheless in remarkably good condition (Frontispiece).³

The figure stands erect in an easy and graceful pose, arms resting across the thorax. There is no indication of the shape of the head; chipping below the nape of the neck may possibly indicate that a lock of hair hung down at the back, but this is uncertain and, from the form of the break, rather doubtful. The shoulders are rounded and slope naturally into plump upper arms. The forearms, bent slightly upwards, are also full but distinctly smaller; they are flattened where they meet at the tips, without indication of hands. The breasts, high on the chest and widely but not unnaturally separated, are small and triangular, depending only a little. At the middle of the body the waist narrows and the abdomen swells in a broad gentle convexity, under which

¹ "Excavations at Lerna, 1955," *Hesperia*, XXV, 1956, pp. 170-171. Further information about the Neolithic strata and associated pottery and other objects found in 1956 will appear in a later number.

² Inv. L6.100. Max. H. pres. (neck to left foot) 0.182; max. W. (at upper arms) 0.0705; W. at waist 0.044; W. at hips 0.062; W. at mid-point of legs 0.056; max. Th. (top of thigh to buttocks) 0.037; Th. at breast 0.03; Th. at waist 0.026; Th. at mid-point of legs 0.028. Head, lower part of right leg, and most of left foot missing, as well as chips from breasts, left upper arm, right forearm, back of shoulders below nape of neck, left hip, and parts of legs. Surface worn on shoulders, breasts, abdomen, thighs, upper part of back, and buttocks.

Biscuit fine with very few impurities and occasional specks of mica; compact, solid, heavy, fired hard; light pink-buff, grayish at core and brownish near surface; slight blackening on right arm and left leg. Surface firm, originally all coated with red slip (verging toward orange-brown); burnished to a high luster. The legs were built upon cylindrical cores, *ca.* 0.02 m. in diameter, around which a thick coating of clay was applied and modelled. Marks of paring and polishing visible.

³ We would thank Miss Alison Frantz for the photographs here reproduced.

there is a curving depression that rises and flattens out near the hips. The navel is not indicated. The surface of the lower abdomen, resting upon the pelvic case, is also very slightly convex. This is set off from the thighs by deep grooves slanting upward to the hip line from the mid-point, where they join the more pronounced median groove that divides the legs. A vertical incision indicates the sexual part, without elaboration. The legs are long, full, and tapering, nearly round in section, and they lack any sign of articulation at the knees. They were joined together from the fork to a point not far above the feet. At the ankle and foot the separation was evidently slight; the legs certainly did not splay outwards. The feet were probably no more than brief spreading pedestals.

The back of the figure is even more striking than the front. Its upper part is nearly flat, hollowed very gently toward the median line, and tapering toward the waist. The upper arms are deeply undercut, making it appear that they are nearly free of the body. On the right side there is a low convex ridge running vertically, parallel with the upper arm, and at the level of the elbow a short horizontal ridge, made by the application of a small roll of clay. On the left, traces of a corresponding horizontal ridge can be detected, but it is much less pronounced.⁴ The most remarkable feature of the entire statuette is the sensitive and lifelike modelling of the lower back with its transition to the curves of the hips and buttocks. This plastic quality is seen best in the rear view or from a quartering angle; the side view is less satisfactory because it emphasizes the contrast with the chest and thorax, which are disproportionately shallow from front to back. The buttocks swell outward and are undercut below. They are divided by a vertical incision, not quite straight, and the line is continued downward by the groove that separates the legs.

Texture and color of the clay, fabric, modelling, and style all indicate that the statuette was locally made. Certain characteristics link it with the large class of Neolithic standing figures found throughout Greece and the Aegean region, but in its entirety it is, to the best of our knowledge,⁵ unique. It was presumably made as a symbol of fertile femininity, perhaps a fetish (since it was evidently handled repeatedly over a considerable period of time), yet the craftsman was not content to achieve his aim in the usual manner by fashioning an image of monstrous steatopygy and an exaggeration of the generative parts. Up to a point he accepted the traditional pose of the arms, which cross the body in the general manner known from many examples in Thessaly and elsewhere,⁶ but he used it solely for its decorative effect, not as a

⁴ These may represent rolls of fat (cf. e. g. Tsountas, *Dimini and Sesklo*, pl. 32, 2), though such are notably lacking in other parts of the body; or possibly some abnormality (*ibid.*, pl. 33, 1).

⁵ The present account is not an exhaustive treatment of the subject; we intend later to offer a more comprehensive study with comments on the chronological evidence.

⁶ Cf. Tsountas, *Dimini and Sesklo*, pl. 32, 1-4, and a similar example from Chaeronea, Wace and Thompson, *Prehistoric Thessaly*, fig. 141, d. A still earlier and more distant parallel is found in

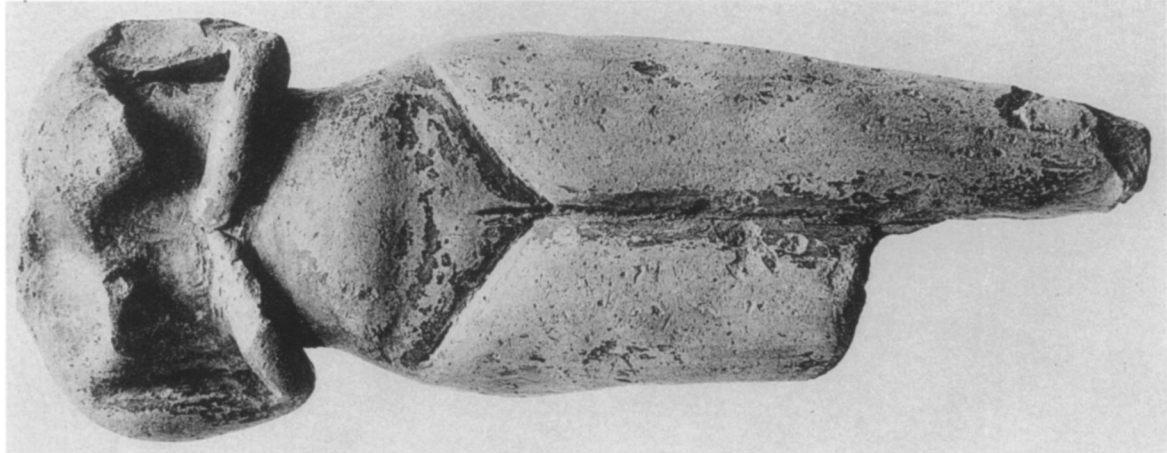
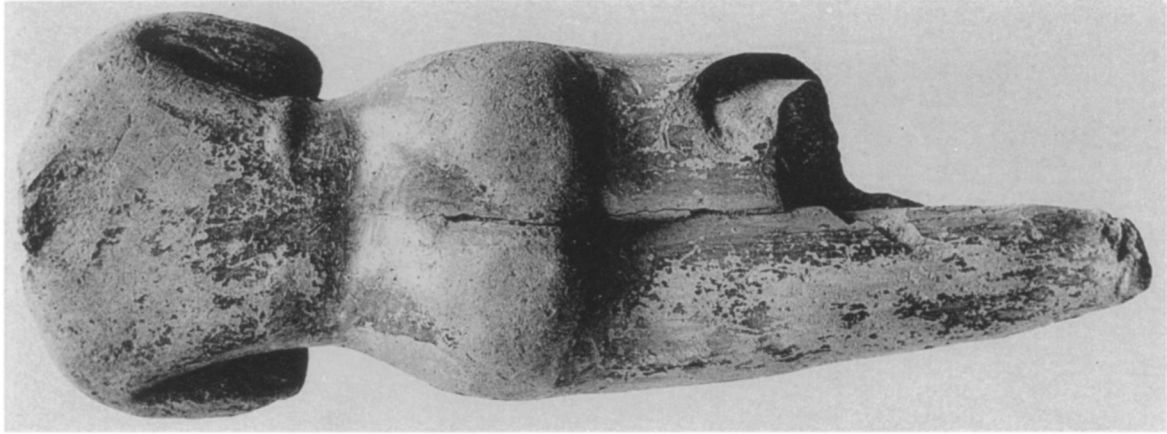
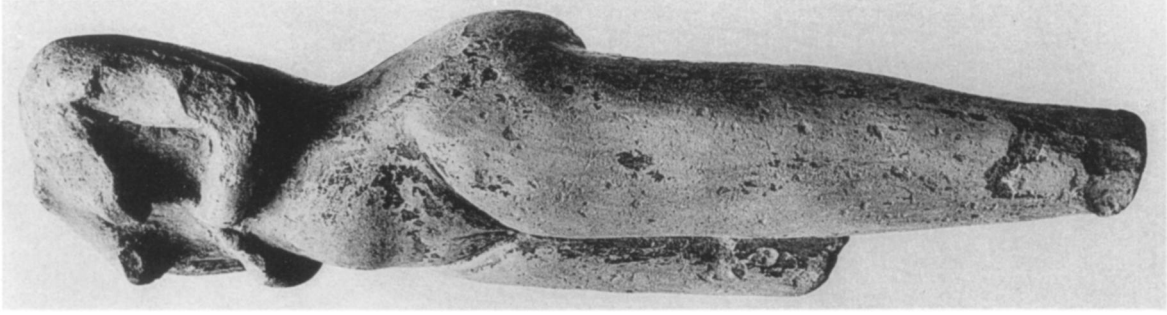
means of emphasizing the nurturing breasts. The rendering of planes and curves and transitions in the mid-section of the body is equally remarkable in its originality, surprising the observer into involuntary comparisons with classical realism, and the proportions of the lower body and legs, for all the lack of detail, suggest parallels with archaic Greek sculpture.⁷ One cannot escape the conclusion that he was in some measure an artist and sculptor in our sense of the words, consciously aware of natural beauty and capable of rendering it in three-dimensional form.

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a figurine of the Badarian period in Egypt, published by G. Brunton and G. Caton-Thompson, *The Badarian Civilization and Predynastic Remains Near Badari*, pls. XXIV, 1 and XXV, 6, 7.

⁷ Comparable attention to anatomical rendering in an early figure of very different aspect is seen in the "Venus of Malta," L. M. Ugolini, *Malta*, figs. 27-29.



JOHN L. CASKEY AND MARY ELIOT: A NEOLITHIC FIGURINE FROM LERNA