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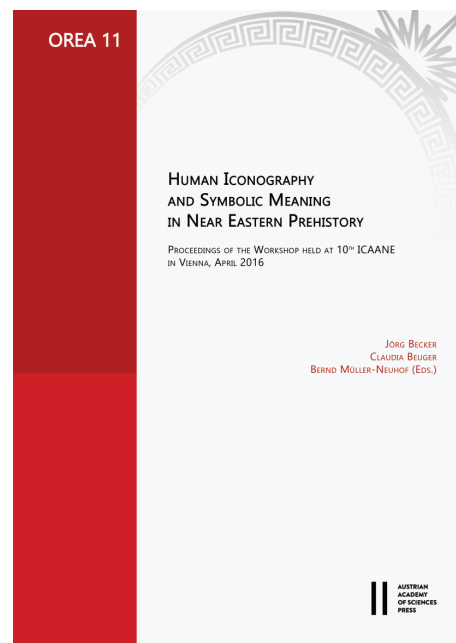
Review of Jörg Becker, Claudia Beuger and Bernd Müller-Neuhof (eds.), 2019. *Human iconography and symbolic meaning in Near Eastern Prehistory. Proceedings of the Neolithic Workshop held at 10th ICAANE in Vienna, April 2016*. Oriental and European Archaeology 11. Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences Press. ISBN: 978-3-7001-8205-4. € 149.-

The representation of humans is one of the most intriguing and fascinating subjects of prehistoric research. Humans are the only species that are not only able to create pictures of themselves, but that are also able to animate these depictions and to turn absence into presence by the creation of such representations. When looking at a face, we are conditioned by our phylogenetic heritage to instantly assess the mood of a person and try to catch a glimpse of their character. Eye tracking tests of museum visitors show that what people are looking at most are other people, especially their faces. Our genuine interest in prehistoric representations of humans, and to recognize faces in incised pebbles, is therefore probably due to our hope of gaining a deeper understanding of people in the past.

Having said this, it is evident that the Conference Proceedings of the 10th ICAANE workshop on “Human Iconography and Symbolic Meaning in Near Eastern Prehistory” have been anticipated impatiently (Fig. 1). Expectations were even enhanced by the editors’, Jörg Becker, Claudia Beuger and Bernd Müller-Neuhof’s, announcements in their preface that “the enormous increase in iconographic representations of the human being and the variety of anthropomorphic representations related to monumental structures [...] demanded a review of the type of human representation in the prehistoric art of the Near East. Such a re-examination must go beyond [...] aspects of fertility and divine representations by applying several well-thought-out strategies” (12-13).

The book assembles 13 contributions from very different fields of research: starting with disease patterns of entire populations to burial practices and from rather classical studies of human figurines to innovative ethological interpretations of depicted gestures. These diverse perspectives on human imagery had been chosen deliberately right from the beginning of the workshop. Regrettably, most of the communications on burial customs held at the conference did not find their way into the book. Yet, those who did, cover many aspects of the topic.

The papers can be grouped in three main clusters: The body, treatment of bodies – dead and alive –, and representations of humans, although the boundaries of these clusters are not clear cut. Michael Schultz and Tyede Schmidt-Schultz open up the book by using a broad brush and *longue durée* perspective and produce a bonanza of ideas on the health status of ancient populations. Their contribution synthesizes the results of a life-long project: Data from 21 different populations are compared, covering a vast ground encompassing



Neolithic Basta in Southern Jordan to Middle Kingdom communities of Elephantine Island in southern Egypt, Byzantine groups, European communities from all periods, and Pre-Columbian Grasshopper Pueblo communities of North-America (1300-1360 AD). Although one may wish for more examples from the Prehistoric Near East (e.g. Eshed *et al.* 2010), this methodological paper gives an idea of the potential of meta-comparisons in physical anthropology. The “disease-profiles” the authors show have far reaching consequences for the interpretation of social and environmental conditions among the investigated populations.

The two reports on burial practices at Dja`de el-Mughara and Tell Halula offer inspiring insights. They demonstrate the great inter-site variability, whereas internal coherence (at least within groups) seems to have been an important aspect of rituals. Remarkable differences emerge between both sites: On the one hand, at Dja`de el-Mughara the house of the dead (*Maison des Morts*) segregates certain individuals from the rest of the burial community, far too small to host all deceased inhabitants of the site. On the other hand, burial rituals at Halula were canonized, with subfloor burials in seated position in the southern parts of domestic houses. Differing numbers and types of grave goods and jewelry in – above all – child burials, seem to be veiled by standardization in burial rituals. The same holds true for the floor paintings, where individuals are represented in groups of almost identical persons.

The following contribution by Karina Croucher transgresses the border between burial and representation: With the plastered skulls of the Near Eastern Neolithic, the deceased definitely became a canvas for perceptions and concepts (Knüsel *et al.* 2010). The dead person was not present anymore, but was literally represented, at least for a while. In the frame of this short review, it is impossible to convey a profound consideration of Croucher’s stimulating approach. Her idea



Fig. 1 Group photo of the ICAANE workshop with [most of the] participants and organizers at Vienna, April 2016.
(Photo: É. Coqueugniot)

of considering grief and bereavement in archaeological investigations of burial rituals can be traced back to the seminal publication by Sarah Tarlow (1999). Croucher was among the first to adopt Tarlow's idea and has vigorously pursued it for many years. She argues for the necessity to consider personal feelings and attachment to the dead person in order to understand the plastering of skulls. People wanted to keep alive a relationship that had been disrupted by death. As appealing as Croucher's perspective is, it still remains an open question why some individuals were selected for skull plastering and others were not.

Her contribution leads over to the most extensive part of the volume on representation of humans in art: from dressing the body (Beuger, Drabsch) to various forms of representations, like figurines of stone, clay or applications on ceramic vessels (Becker, Dietrich *et al.*, Müller-Neuhof, Nieuwenhuys, and Naumov and Biehl). Much has already been written on this topic (to mention just a few classics: Voigt 2000; Hansen 2007; Rollefson 2008; Schmandt-Besserat 2013) and speculations about the function of figurines seem to be endless: from toys to magic devices and goddesses (see Schmandt-Besserat 2013: 317-334). Irrespective of (careful) critiques (Stordeur 2010; see also Chamel and Coqueugniot, Becker, and Watkins this volume), Cauvin's original ideas of bulls as male and women as female goddesses still dominate popular reception. Rear-projection of historic or even modern concepts of the meaning of these ancient objects have hampered rather than advanced our understanding of prehistoric communities: attributing corresponding meaning based on corresponding shape precludes *à priori* any changes in meaning (e.g. Schmandt-Besserat 2013: 64; cf. Becker *et al.* 2012: 33). Despite this burdensome heritage, the authors try to overcome these hurdles with new data and interpretations.

Oliver and Laura Dietrich and Jens Notroff, presenting human representations from Göbekli Tepe, underline the practice of deliberate removal of skulls (of

sculptures) from the torso and depositing these skulls in prominent positions near the large stone pillars. Their contribution condenses a longer version, published in German by Becker *et al.* 2012. The map of the distribution of isolated sculptured heads included in the former publication would have been a useful item in the present chapter, too. Irritating is their remark that "more proof is needed to exclude a severe modern distortion of the archaeological record" (156). Their additional focus on death rituals at Göbekli Tepe promotes ideas of Klaus Schmidt (2006). However, their view appears biased. In light of the general deposition of human dead in domestic houses at contemporaneous sites in the Upper Tigris Region, it is obvious that the positioning of the dead in special buildings is – at least – uncommon.

Their designation of isolated heads (of humans or sculptures) placed next to the Göbekli Tepe pillars as offerings may be supported by isolated skulls discovered in two of the "communal buildings" at Jerf el Ahmar. However, it should be mentioned that there is only *one* (vs. Dietrich *et al.* 158) individual without a head at Jerf el Ahmar (in Building EA30 II/W). Far from being a regular interment, this young woman was thrown into the building, which was burnt down, and her skull removed only long afterwards (Stordeur 2015: 344-349).

The deliberate placement of sculptured skulls at Göbekli Tepe is also in good accordance with observations made by other researchers, e.g. Becker (181), who considers many of the Halaf figurines as deliberately destroyed, possibly during small-scale rituals. To conclude that the idea of a deliberate breaking of figurines started at Göbekli Tepe (Dietrich *et al.* 155) should, however, be discussed against a wider background of similar phenomena (see e.g. Vandiver *et al.* 1989).

Most interesting is the shift in figurine style, which is described by Naumov and Biehl for the Chalcolithic West Mound of Çatalhöyük. Although the inhabitants of the West Mound depicted humans on pottery and sculptured sophisticated bull figurines of marble, anthropomorphic representations were reduced to

almost unidentifiable lumps of clay. This shift in style highlights its intentionality and draws attention to the question of what let the creators of prehistoric art decide how to present the human body. Obviously, the well-known obese female bodies from Neolithic Çatalhöyük East were no longer *en vogue*. Comparing human skeletons with representations of bodies – the ideal how people wanted to see bodies – would be an interesting transdisciplinary research subject. To quote the central remark by Naumov and Biehl concerning human representation at Çatalhöyük West: “[...] the abstractness of anthropomorphic miniatures does not indicate lack of consideration for the human body. It could be regarded as a different sphere of embodiment which does not concern individuality and specific body features” (220).

With this focus on the dialectic relationship between artists and the community, we turn to further important contributions on the relationship of reality and imagery. What can be taken as granted in analyzing an image from the past? How can we decipher “the visual messages” (Naumov and Biehl 218)? These crucial questions are only touched upon in the rather positivistic, but nonetheless notable contribution by Claudia Beuger.

Beuger tackles one of the most difficult questions: how people were actually dressed. “[The] scarcity of such evidence within iconographical records and burials lead [Beuger] ... to assume that veiling clothes played a minor role in daily life” (103) during Neolithic periods and that only within the stratified societies of the late 4th and 3rd millennium onwards dressing-up became an important aspect of social status. She surmises that during earlier periods “clothes were of personal value” (103). However, Beuger’s arguments remain speculative since the absence of evidence is turned into evidence of absence. This is all the more problematic because other contributions show that figurines were made for specific purposes, above all for being broken during some ritual. Their nudity – if it was nudity – may have been related to this special function. Moreover, it might at least be worth discussing whether painted figurines were not considered being “dressed” (e.g. Becker *et al.* 2012; Schmandt-Besserat 2013; cf. Müller-Neuhof 140). Many motifs drawn on or applied to the figurines’ bodies are recurrent, e.g. cross-shaped lines across the torso, a motif that is retained from the PPN to the Halaf culture. Jörg Becker’s comprehensive presentation of Halaf figurines shows many painted. Becker stands out in his approach because he carefully evaluates the function of figurines within the context of the Halaf culture, without claiming to identify a general meaning for other temporal and spatial contexts. On the contrary, he explicitly distinguishes the probably household-based rituals from the supra-regional focus of some PPN communities.

The intentionality of specific styles is also demonstrated for the Chalcolithic wall paintings at Teleilat Ghassul. The reconstruction of these wall paintings by Bernadette Drabsch is one of the most

meticulously interpretations in the volume. Her ideas about the nudity and absence of clear gender markers on the bodies address a much-neglected topic. The western male-female dichotomy has long obstructed an emic view on bi-sexual or not clearly gendered figurines which are a common theme from the PPN onwards (see Hermansen 1997). Drabsch offers two possible interpretations for the a-sexual nude figures: that they either represented children during initiation rituals or that, due to their specific roles in societies, some individuals were considered neither male nor female. Her investigations do not stop here, and she goes on to speculate about possible experiences of the persons taking part in the procession depicted at Teleilat Ghassul. This phenomenological approach goes far beyond traditional searches of meaning of human representation. She comes to the inspiring conclusion that these wall paintings were “creating a unique *habitus* that was both outcome and stimulus”.

In a similar vein, the two innovative chapters by Olivier Nieuwenhuys and Bernd Müller-Neuhof advance research in the phenomenological and ethopsychological spheres, respectively, and contribute illuminating aspects to former interpretations. Müller-Neuhof presents a comprehensive analysis of gestures of figurines from Pre-Pottery to the Late Neolithic. He thereby distinguishes between “Gesten” and “Gebärden”. The former is considered “a sign that has a fixed, quasi-lexical significance, which the sender assumes is known to the addressee”. Unfortunately, the English language does not make this same distinction and Müller-Neuhof goes on to use “gesture” in the above sense. His definition masks the difficulties of his approach. Gestures are not fixed interculturally, but can be interpreted in different ways, with these differences often being the cause of deep misunderstandings in communication. Müller-Neuhof elegantly avoids this trap by presenting a range of meanings for each identified gesture. This methodology of accepting a range of interpretations is quite promising. Taking this approach a step further would need, as he himself concludes: “more detailed information about the find context” (145). However, as amply outlined by Jörg Becker and others from the volume, figurines are rarely found in their primary contexts. So, it may possibly be more promising to compare figurines with other depictions of humans in the same cultural contexts.

The emphasis on context and on tactile experiences when studying the humanoid applications on ceramic containers, constitutes the strength of Olivier Nieuwenhuys’s text. His original perspective is not only refreshing, it also reminds us that the outer appearance did not have to be precise, as long as the meaning of a symbol was deeply embodied in a community. A photo-realistic representation did not necessarily have a stronger impact than a quick sign, of which everybody knew the meaning and strength.

Each contribution thus brings in a different, stimulating perspective. However, the expected synergies are largely missing. The expectation that the

closing chapter by Trevor Watkins would fill this gap is sadly disappointed. Nonetheless, it is still a pleasure to read his impressive essayistic synthesis of his many years of interdisciplinary research. His contribution is among the profuse harvest of the Templeton Foundation Project, initiated by him and Klaus Schmidt. Working with neuroscientists, cultural anthropologists and psychologists promoted his grand view on the Neolithic Evolution. When he elegantly comes to the conclusion that the megaliths of Göbekli Tepe were super-human *beings* but no super-human *agents*, it may sound somewhat undecided, but this reflects the “liminal” situation that he claims for the people of the late 10th millennium (Benz and Bauer 2013). They were hunter-and-gatherers, but forged a wide-ranging network; their symbols make us think of a canonized system, but can we speak of an emerging “doctrinal mode of religion”? Who created these symbols? Were these the acephalous large-scale communities Watkins thinks of? It seems that there is a long way to go until we can reach an understanding of these communities on a general scale but granting to each their own paths and paces without trying to fit them into a single “Neolithic” evolutionary track.

One gains the impression that the whole subject deserved more in-depth investigations. For example, the different styles of figurines from the contemporaneous sites of Çatalhöyük West with their deliberate neglect of gender and individuality and the female Halaf figurines of Upper Mesopotamia would have been worth a short comparison. Bi- and a-sexuality of many figurines is mentioned but is not the main focus of any of the contributions. The pressure to “publish or perish”, often causing unrealistically short deadlines, hamper in depth discussions between authors and their working together for a profound understanding.

Despite its attractive layout, and irrespective of negligible editing mistakes, some minor inconsistencies need brief mention: Dating Neolithic Basta to c. 6000-4000 BCE is incorrect (49), even if the BC range should indicate uncalibrated data. In their excellent report on burials from Dja'de el-Mughara, Chamel and Coqueugniot mention a figurine which was found in the sealing of a grave next to the *Maison des Morts* (63). However, in several instances in the book, it is repeated that no figurines were found in grave contexts (67, see also 15).

The volume proves impressively that the cataloging has been done. It will be the task of future *transdisciplinary* research to pull all the data and different approaches together to profit from advances in theory and field work. The *iconic turn* has opened the door for an anthropological approach to imagery and has convincingly shown the reciprocal relationship between images and human agents. The editors are to be credited to have brought this important book together. To cite their conclusion: “This volume serves to highlight the beginning of a new perspective on the growing corpus of image which needs to be extended in several directions” (19).

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