

“Figurine may rewrite history of art: Researchers say a 40,000-year-old fertility statuette is the oldest known sculpture of the human form.”

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By Thomas H. Maugh II,

A 40,000-year-old figurine of a voluptuous woman carved from mammoth ivory and excavated from a cave in southwestern Germany is the oldest known example of three-dimensional or figurative representation of humans and sheds new light on the origins of art, researchers reported Wednesday.

The intricately carved headless figure is at least 5,000 years older than previous examples and dates from shortly after the arrival of modern humans in Europe. It exhibits many of the characteristics of fertility, or Venus, figurines carved millenniums later.

The figurine “radically changes our views of the context and meaning of the earliest Paleolithic art,” its discoverer, archaeologist Nicholas J. Conard of the University of Tübingen in Germany, wrote in the journal *Nature*.

Experts are excited about the find because of what it tells us about early humans -- and about ourselves.

“The origin and evolution of figurative art, portable art, appear on most lists of what constitutes modern human behavior,” said archaeologist Daniel Adler of the University of Connecticut, who was not involved in the research.

“Any time you can push the clock back on some of these behaviors, we get a better understanding of why these were important and were developed, where they were developed . . . and the roles they played in the social glue that holds groups together,” he said.

“For European archaeologists, it marks the appearance of behaviors they find familiar, modern human behavior,” said archaeologist John J. Shea of Stony Brook University in New York, who was also not involved.

“It suggests the same values and ways of seeing the world existed among the earliest humans that migrated to Europe” as among humans today.

The figurine was excavated at Hohle Fels, a large cave in the Swabian Jura region about 14 miles southwest of the city of Ulm. The cave shows evidence of a long period of prehistoric occupation and is probably best known for three ivory carvings previously discovered by Conard: a horse's or bear's head; a water bird that may be in flight; and a half-human, half-lion figurine, all dating from about 30,000 to 31,000 years ago.

The new figurine was found in September in six pieces about 9 feet below the cave floor. Nearby were flint-knapping debris, worked bone and ivory, and remains of horses, reindeer, cave bears, mammoths and ibexes. Radiocarbon data indicate that the layer originated 35,000 to 40,000 years ago.

The figure, about 2.4 inches tall, was carved from a mammoth tusk.

It has broad shoulders, prominent breasts and intricately detailed buttocks and genitalia, all grossly exaggerated.

Those features "are clearly more exaggerated than on others that come later," Adler said, "but many of the basic features that are seen later are already there. . . . It's a prototype for what you see later" from the Gravettian culture, which existed in France 28,000 to 22,000 years ago.

"The stylistic attributes are being carried on for many, many generations."

The figurine has two short arms with carefully carved hands resting on the upper part of the stomach; part of the left arm and shoulder are missing. One hand has five fingers, the other four.

The legs are short, pointed and asymmetrical, with the left noticeably shorter, typical of later Venus figurines. Also typical, the figure has no head. Instead, it has a carefully carved ring above the left shoulder. The polished surface of the ring suggests that the figurine was worn as an ornament around the neck.

The intricate detailing achieved with primitive stone tools indicates "the amount of energy these guys were willing to invest in these little objects -- tens if not hundreds of hours," Shea said. That suggests the objects were very important to them.

Many researchers believe that they were fertility totems, but their ultimate meaning may remain a mystery.

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