

Anthropomorphic and Zoomorphic Miniature Figures in Eurasia, Africa and Meso-America

Morphology, materiality, technology,
function and context

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Cult Artifacts from the Neolithic and Chalcolithic Settlement of Leceia, Oeiras, Portugal

João Luís Cardoso

Abstract

This study concerns 53 ideotechnic artifacts collected in the prehistoric settlement of Leceia, during a period of 20 years of excavations (1983-2002). They correspond to the most important group of artifacts found until now in Portugal due to their certified stratigraphic location in a vast fortified complex. The statuettes and other artifacts of cult character document the existence of religious practices from the second half of the 4th millennium BC through the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Following the Late Neolithic zoomorphic representations, the Chalcolithic feminine images were related to fecundity, life and regeneration, corresponding to the omnipresent idol common to all agrarian societies of the Mediterranean basin. Images of this idol, represented in various shapes and materials, are found in domestic settlements and necropolises.

Key-words: Late Neolithic; Chalcolithic; idol; terracotta; limestone; statuettes; Leceia; fortification; Portugal.

Introduction

Fifty-three ideotechnic artifacts collected in the prehistoric settlement of Leceia during a period of 20 years of excavations (1983-2002) constitute the most important group of artifacts found until now in Portugal due to their certified stratigraphic location in a vast fortified complex. The cult statuettes and other artifacts contribute to a better understanding of religious practices from the second half of the 4th millennium BC through the second half of the 3rd millennium BC. Following the Late Neolithic zoomorphic representations, the Chalcolithic feminine images were related to fecundity, life and regeneration, corresponding to the omnipresent female idol common to all agrarian societies of the Mediterranean basin. Images of this female idol, represented in various shapes and materials, are found in domestic settlements and necropolises.

The site of Leceia

The prehistoric settlement of Leceia is located in a rocky reef limestone promontory of Cretaceous (Upper Cenomanian) date that overlooks the valley of Barcarena, about 3 km straight away from its confluence with the Tagus estuary and about 12 km from the city of Lisbon (Fig. 1). Though the site has been known since 1878 (Ribeiro 1878), systematic excavations started in 1983, continuing for twenty years under the direction of the author (Cardoso 2003). The duration of the fieldwork was instrumental in revealing a vast and complex fortification, covering more than 11000sqm that is organized by three defensive curved walls and exteriorly

reinforced by half-circular towers or bastions in articulation with the morphology of the platform ground. The bastions were built with large limestone blocks of local origin and cemented by a locally available calcareous clay matrix. Several lines of evidence, including stratigraphy and associated materials, show the length of the platform's occupation, from the Late Neolithic through the Full and Late Chalcolithic, in the second half of the 4th millennium BC. The Late Neolithic occupation is characterized by the existence of two groups of ceramics, carinated cups and indented lip vessels (Cardoso 2000, 2007, 2008).

After a short period of abandonment, possibly corresponding to a few dozen years, the construction of the defensive complex was initiated at the beginning of the Early Chalcolithic (2900/2800 BC). Later rearranged and reinforced several times, it is temporally equivalent to finely manufactured pottery recipients with vertical walls and slightly convex bottoms, containing geometric fluted decorations made in the fresh clay. This pottery was replaced around 2600/2500 BC with the Full and Late Chalcolithic pottery characterized by patterns of 'acacia leaves' and 'crucifer leaves' on large and small spherical recipients (provisioning vessels). In this period the appearance of Bell Beaker pottery in the afore-mentioned assemblage occurs before the definitive abandonment of the settlement at the end of the 3rd quartile of the millennium.



Fig. 1: 1 – Location of Leceia in the Iberian Peninsula; 2 – Location of Leceia, with the two other main Chalcolithic fortified sites in the Lower Estremadura region, Zambujal and Vila Nova de São Pedro; 3 – Plan of the excavated area in Leceia, with the location of the cult artifacts found in the Late Neolithic (Layer 4), the Early Chalcolithic (Layer 3) and the Full and Late Chalcolithic (Layer 2).

Layer 4 dates to the Late Neolithic or second half of the 4th millennium BC. It yielded six terracotta artifacts and a small baguette made of translucent calcite, likely more modern.

Layer 3 corresponds to the period of the construction and use of the defensive structures during the Early Chalcolithic, 2900/2800-2600/2500 BC. It yielded 20 artifacts made of material from various sources.

Layer 2 dates to the Full Chalcolithic, a time of decline of the fortification until its definitive abandonment, c. 2300/2200 BC. A notable reduction in the occupation of the area surrounding the settlement's nuclear zone is observed at this time. Yet, the apogee of the agricultural economy occurs during this occupation, as well as an increase in the kinds and sources of imported materials brought in from medium and long distances. The cultural artifacts, numbering 26, concentrate in the settlement's nuclear zone and show considerable diversity of forms, attributes and materials.

The cult artifacts of Leceia

Excavations recovered 53 artifacts related to cult practices from the settlement's nuclear zone, whose temporal distribution from the Late Neolithic to the Middle Chalcolithic was presented above.

The materials from the earliest occupation during the Late Neolithic are made of terracotta. The first examples consist of two finely modeled small pig statuettes that may indicate the practice of fertility rites since the second half of the 4th millennium in Extremadura (Fig. 2: 1). The second example is a large terracotta phallus (Cardoso 1995a), equally well modeled, and similar to the pig statuettes in its light reddish slip, a vital color traditionally evoking notions of life and fertility (Fig. 2: 2). The coexistence of statuettes of feminine gender with the phallus is notable since the former are almost exclusive to the Chalcolithic.

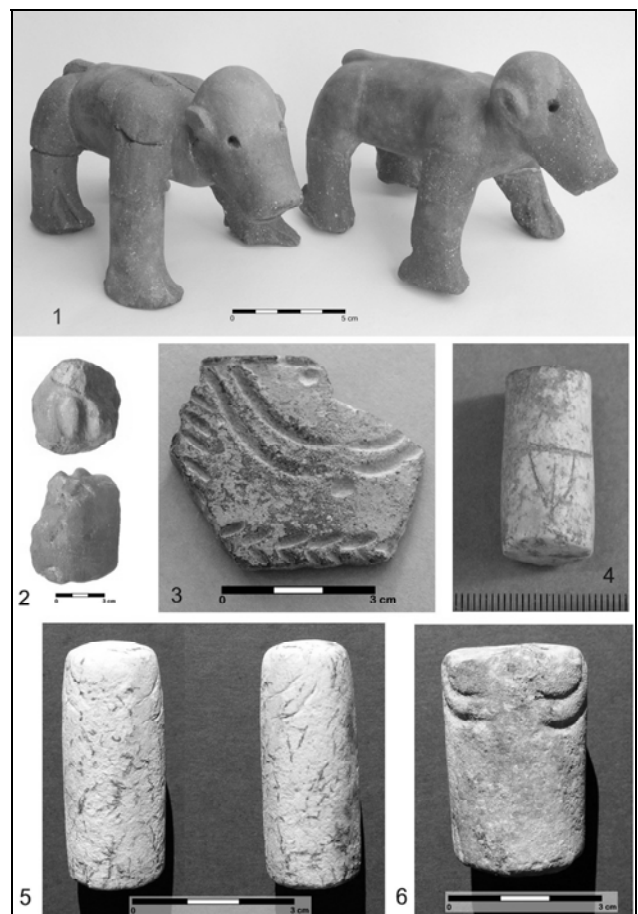


Fig. 2: Cult statuettes from Leceia. 1 – Two pig statuettes of terracotta (Late Neolithic); 2 – Phallus in terracotta (Late Neolithic); 3 – Fragment of a recipient with symbolic decoration (tatoos of the face of the female idol) (Full Chalcolithic); 4 – Small limestone cylinder with the sexual pubic triangle engraved, as an explicit indication of the femininity of the idol (Full Chalcolithic); 5 & 6 – Two limestone cylinders with the facial tattoos of the face of the female idol (Full Chalcolithic).

The third example of Late Neolithic terracotta statuettes is a group characterized by cylindrical bodies with flat heads, precursors of the Chalcolithic models made of limestone. Two observations are particularly pertinent in this case. First, since the clear Chalcolithic preference for the use of

limestone is nearly exclusive to Extremadura and south Portugal, the shape of these artifacts may suggest a pre-existence of a supra-regional cognition common to the western and eastern peninsular areas and oriental Mediterranean. In fact, contacts between the farthest ends of this interior sea during the Chalcolithic are illustrated by the recent identification of Indian elephant ivory in artifacts collected in graves from Los Millares (Schuhmacher and Cardoso 2007; Schuhmacher *et al.* 2009). And second, based on the stratigraphic register, most cylindrical calcareous idols may be dated to the Full Chalcolithic, when these came into fashion, then substituting the antecedent terracotta ones of the Late Neolithic.

Of the 13 limestone Chalcolithic cylinders found, two are directly made from Jurassic crinoid branches. Eleven of the specimens come from the Middle Chalcolithic layers, including the four decorated ones. One decorated specimen is particularly interesting due to the representation of an incised triangle, here considered the feminine pubic triangle of the idol (Fig. 2: 4).

The three other decorated cylinders have two incisions near the end of each specimen which are commonly considered facial tattoos (Fig. 2: 5, 6; Fig. 3: 1). One of these (Fig. 3: 1) shows percussion marks on the decorated end which altered part of the decoration and indicates the use of the piece as a smashing device, once the symbolic charge was lost. This re-use contrasts with the restoration and cult maintenance of other limestone pieces from the same period and region, after their accidental fracture (Cardoso 1995a). It is important to note that facial tattoos also are known in small terracotta statuettes with heads, breasts and occasional arms, such as the pieces found at Vila Nova de São Pedro (Jalhay and Paço 1945) and Pedra do Ouro, Alenquer, other Chalcolithic fortified settlements in the Lisbon region (Paço 1966).

The iconography of these limestone cylinders and terracotta images parallels that of other types of artifacts, namely recipients with ritual decoration (Fig. 2: 3) that are comparable to the well-known vase collected in the *tholos* of Monte do Outeiro, Aljustrel (Viana *et al.* 1961), which is decorated also with pubic triangles. The vast geographic distribution of these Chalcolithic female idols representations throughout Portuguese territory is illustrated by comparable materials such as the specimen from the Chalcolithic settlement of S. Lourenço, in the far north portion of Portugal (Jorge 1986).

The presence of an unfinished cylinder at Leceia suggests local production of these items. Another cylinder, fractured and showing fire marks, that was recovered from inside the habitation area suggests use in a domestic cult. These data, in conjunction with the known abundance of these locally produced artifacts (generally of small size) in domestic contexts in the fortified settlement of Vila Nova S. Pedro (see Gomes 2005), indicate that they were destined not only for funerary deposits, but also for use in family or collective small altars.

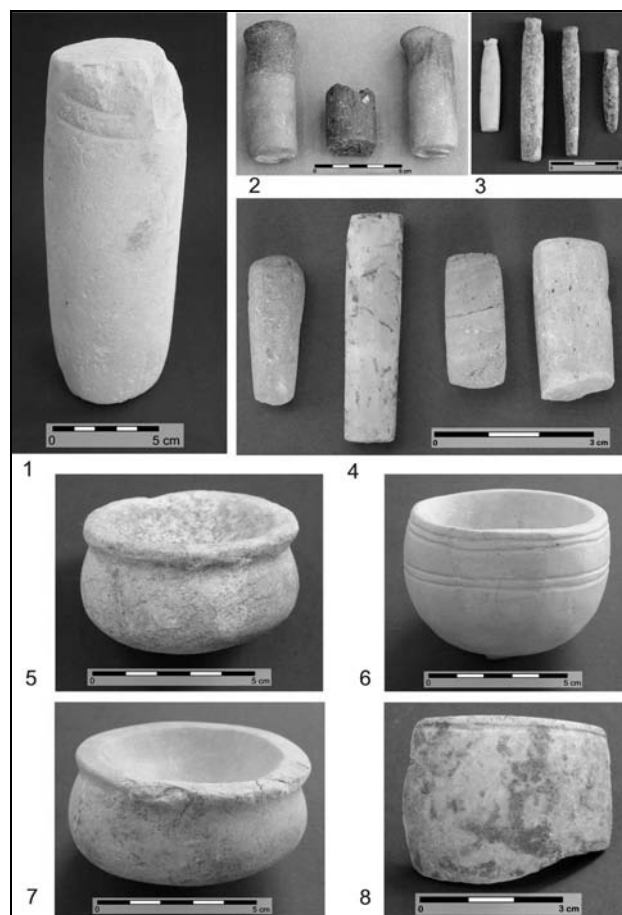


Fig. 3: Cult statuettes from Leceia. 1 – Limestone cylinder with the facial tattoos of the idol which, when reutilized as a smashing device, lost its symbolic character (Full Chalcolithic); 2 – Three terracotta statuettes, prototypes of the limestone cylinders (Late Neolithic); 3 – A set of ‘bottle-type’ or ‘gullet idols’ (Early and Full Chalcolithic); 4 – A set of ‘baguettes’ of crystalline calcite (Early and Full Chalcolithic); 5, 7 & 8 – Limestone vases for the preparation (mortars 5 and 7) and use (vessels 6, 8) of ritual substances.

Now turning to the Early Chalcolithic specimens of Leceia, it is notable that there are two common vases bearing incised pubic feminine triangles on their lips. These motifs were placed during a specific phase of their use which likely was of a ritual nature due to the female idol attributes that clearly are similar to the limestone cylinder mentioned above and to the ceramic weaving weights from the Chalcolithic fortified settlement of Outeiro Redondo, Sesimbra, another fortified Chalcolithic settlement 30km south of Lisbon, on a hill overlooking the ocean (in preparation by the author). Taken together, the evidence suggests that domestic activities may have held symbolic connotations, mainly those associated with feminine tasks and its particularities, such as linen spinning and weaving.

The artifacts known as baguettes are similar to the small cylinders but have a flattened cross-section. Until now they are known only in Leceia in the Early and Full Chalcolithic. In addition there are bone artifacts and pieces of translucent well-polished calcite, both compatible with ideotechnic functions (Fig. 3: 4).

The bone artifacts include three polished horse phalange statuettes which occur only in the Full Chalcolithic. One was reduced to a small graven fragment. The phalanges, obtained from wild horses, were chosen for their general similarity to anthropomorphic form. The decorations in some of these statuettes do not diverge from the pattern displayed in other types, such as the large radiating eyes, eyebrows and facial tattoos, sometimes accompanied by other even more explicit anthropomorphic characters, such as arms and hands, or the representation of the pubic feminine triangle, which reinforces the parallels with the Chalcolithic female idols (Cardoso 1995b). In addition, there is a first phalange of a deer showing two encircling grooves near one of its ends, which acts as a graphic device isolating the head from the body while at the same time making the object easy to suspend as an amulet hanging from a leather string. The spatial distribution of such artifacts extends from Extremadura and southern Portugal to Andalusia.

Another group of artifacts is called the 'bottle-type' or 'gullet idols', which are small cylinders whose upper flattened or inclined end is separated from the rest of the body by a smooth channel (Fig. 3: 3). This channel clearly enhances the anthropomorphic appearance of these artifacts, which is the preferred explanation for its existence in the present study. However, an alternative interpretation suggests these artifacts were used as corporal ornaments, a proposal based on parallels with modern ethnographic peoples (Gomes 2005), seems dubious since the channel or groove is not deep enough to guarantee fixation and the 'head' diameter is barely larger than the 'body' diameter, which also minimizes the efficiency of attachment.

The assemblage of cult artifacts includes small limestone recipients which are unique due to their material and strong presence in funerary contexts in Extremadura and south Portugal (Gallay *et al.* 1973). They include two groups. The first corresponds to small mortars whose shape is found across a wide geographical area including all southern Portugal; they were used to prepare substances for ritual practices (Fig. 3: 5, 7). The second group includes thin-walled deep recipients that held these substances before their ritual use (Fig. 3: 6, 8). The two groups are closely linked in terms of function, and the four pieces from Leceia date to the Full Chalcolithic period.

Final comments

Altogether, with the exception of the Late Neolithic phallic statuette, the artifacts discussed in the present study predominantly show feminine representations. The earliest forms, two zoomorphic statuettes of pigs, seem to be a clear allusion to the cult of land fertility and domestic animals. Later, in the Chalcolithic, female idol representations increase in number along with smooth or decorated limestone cylinders, both as examples of an extreme simplification of the human image. One artifact showing the female idol's sex illustrates a small item used in a domestic shrine to the idol.

These statuettes originated in the Late Neolithic, when they were made of terracotta, and reached their peak in the Full

Chalcolithic, when they were made almost exclusively of limestone. In spite of the common occurrence of limestone in the region, its selection for the elaboration of these artifacts may have symbolic meaning, since similar items are known in eastern Iberia and in the eastern Mediterranean region, which suggests mechanisms of cultural diffusion in which religious principles centering on the female idol were spread to agrarian societies thriving in the Mediterranean basin during the 3rd millennium BC.

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