



# Figurines as codified human bodies in Iberian Late Prehistory : *Idolos Miradas Milenarias/Idolos Olhares Milenares, The Exhibition*

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Received:  June 16, 2021

Published:  June 24, 2021

## Abstract

Archaeological exhibitions are a unique opportunity to highlight the social value of diverse materialities of the past. This objective has presided over the research, documentation, recovery, conservation, and dissemination that we have carried out for almost five years with teams from the Archaeological Museum of Alicante, the Regional Archaeological Museum of Madrid, and the national Archaeological Museum of Lisbon. Our choice to examine the small pieces commonly referred to as “idols” stems from our interest in unifying the vision of the widespread evidence of Late prehistorical human representations in Iberia.

**Keywords:** Bodys Mobile Representations; Iberia; Neolithic; Chalcolithic

## Introduction

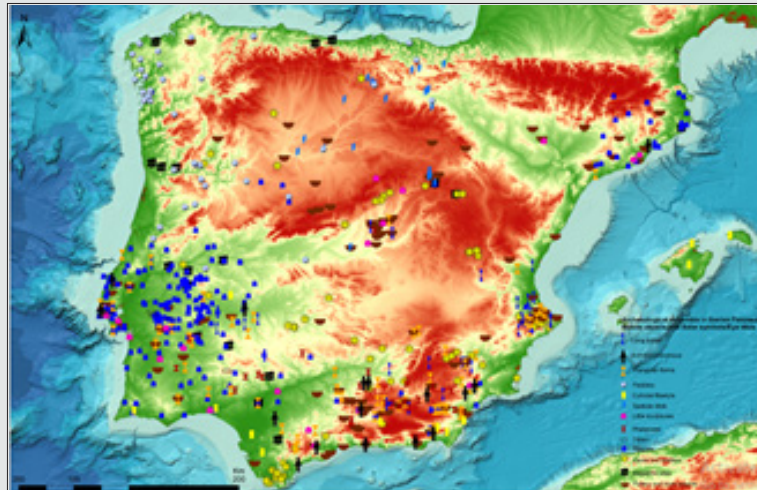
Several scholars have attempted to develop the arguments about materialisations of the body to interpret past societies, in particular in European Late Prehistory [1-7]. Many research lines were opened from the first considerations, when religion was the only way to approach these images. In a later time, scholars started considering the nuances of their fabrication, chronology, and context [8,9]. Their meanings cannot be approached from a single perspective as this would leave the wide range of forms of expression of these objects to one side, and their contexts and chronologies to the opposite side. In this regard, the most satisfying hypotheses ought to consider their marked multifunctionality and therefore their polysemy. The ubiquity of human figures on all kinds of objects, and in different territories and sites, is one of the characteristics of the Iberian Late Prehistory symbology. Female figurines are not the only type, and not even the most common in the context of the Iberian graphic expressions. There are also figurines with no information about their gender, and different zoomorphs (Figure 1). Their materialisation took place in at least two complex settings: the social level, on a large scale, and the family or lineage context (in codified typologies). Given their size and visibility, menhir, stelae, and painted rock-shelters are located right where images with the greatest impact are placed. On the other hand, figurines closely fit in the realm of families or lineages, in relation to funerary contexts or everyday life.

Figurines, therefore, possess their own biographies (at least some of them do) as they were possibly handed down from

generation to generation until they were finally buried as grave goods or used as other kinds of offerings. This is precisely where they exhibit most of their value from the Past. This practice is supported by the case of other decorated items in the megalithic world, such as the stones themselves [10]. The concentration of figurines from the fifth millennium onwards (mostly in the fourth and third millennia cal BC), as nearly all the researchers agree upon, in combination with reused hypotheses for the oldest objects, suggest that the Iberian inventory of fifth millennium objects may be larger than we suspected. Even so, the shorter period of the fourth and third millennia cal BC reveals the great expansion of these human images all around the Iberia (mostly in the South) (Figure 2). Quantities have partially been suggested for some typologies [11]. We can now state that about 6,000 figurines, in different raw materials, display an apparently diverse materiality but are closely connected because of the frequency of the so-called ‘sun-eyes’. In Iberia there are approximately 4,000 plaques in the Southwest and its extended geography, plus 1,800 diverse figurines types in Andalucía, one hundred of decorated bones in the Spanish East, one hundred decorated spatulae and a similar number of pieces in clay. The personality of Iberian figurines was formed from codes that were present in ancient rock art. In Iberia, there is a rich repertoire of human images in rock-shelter representations—unique in Europe in quantity, variety and diachrony—which provides some keys to understanding the role of the movable figurines. Schematic paintings detail human figures as complete bodies with legs and feet, clothing, and sexual and size elements. This promotes

the hypothesis of different gender and age representations for the movable pieces. The sun-eyes that define an important part of the portable objects belong to that background, as well as the formalisation of their diverse typologies. The large masks worn by some anthropomorphs - sometimes in an attitude of dance or movement as in the shelters, which can be related to bitriangular;

ramiform and T-shaped individuals-provide unique evidence suggesting that part of the sun eyes could have been masks made of organic materials. This does not rule out the use of paintings or tattoos that reproduced the same images that we see in the shelters in a more abstract and individualized way (Figure 3).



**Figure 1:** Figurines, decorated vessel, painted shelters and megaliths with oculates in Iberian Late Prehistory. Cartographic base from SRTM, Shuttle Radar Topography Mission (NASA, Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California Institute of Technology) y GEBCO, General Bathymetric Chart of the Oceans. Lancharro and Bueno image published in Bueno Ramírez and Soler, Eds, 2021.



**Figure 2:** Typologies of Iberian Figurines. 1. Almizaraque, Cuevas del Almazora (Almería); 2. Loma de la Torre, Cantoria (Almería); 3. Blanquizáres de Lebor, Totana (Murcia); 4. Cueva de la Pileta, Benaolán (Málaga); 5. Loma de la Torre, Cantoria (Almería); 6. Perdigoes, Reguengos de Monsaraz (Évora); 7. Rambla de las Pocicas, Almería; 8. Los Millares (Sepultura 57), Santa Fe de Mondújar (Almería); 9. El Garcel, Antas (Almería) 10. El Miradero, Villanueva de los Caballeros (Valladolid); 11. Bédar, Almería; 12. Lisboa, 13; Perdigoes, Reguengos de Monsaraz (Évora); 14. Granja de Céspedes, Badajoz; 15. Anta do Curral da Antinha, Arraiolos (Évora); 16. Dolmen de Garrovillas (Cáceres); 17. Cueva Sagrada, Lorca (Murcia); 18. Almizaraque, Cuevas del Almazora (Almería); 19. Cova de Bolumini, Alfara (Alicante); 20. Ereta del Pedregal, Navarrés (Valencia); 21. Los Millares (Sepultura 8), Santa Fe de Mondújar (Almería); 22. Perdigoes, Reguengos de Monsaraz (Évora); 23. Tholos do Barro, Torres Vedras (Lisboa); 24. Cabezo de El Conquero (Huelva); 25. Orden Seminario (Huelva); 26. La Pijotilla (Badajoz); 27. Los Millares, Santa Fe de Mondújar (Almería); 28. La Encantada, Cuevas del Almazora (Almería); 29. La Pijotilla (Badajoz); 30. Perdigoes, Reguengos de Monsaraz (Évora); 31. Valencina de la Concepción, Castilleja de Guzmán (Sevilla) ,32. Private collection, Llerena (Badajoz); Era Arqueologia, Cruz Quebrada (6, 13, 22 y 30); Archaeological Museum of Almería (3 and 27); National Archaeological Museum of Madrid (1,2,5,7,8,9,11,14,16,18,21 and 28); Museum of Huelva (24 and 25); Archaeological Museum of Málaga (4); National Archaeological Museum of Lisbon (12,15,23); Museum of Lorca (17), Archaeological Museum of Seville (31), Museum of Valladolid (10). Images provided by the Museums participating in the exhibition.



**Figure 3:** Painted human figures in rock-shelters with mask: 1. Los Órganos, Santa Elena (Jaén); 2. Arroyo Hellín, Chiclana de Segura (Jaén) 4. Abrigo I Cabeçó d'Or, Rellu (Alicante); 9. Abrigo 11 de Regato das Bouças, Mirandela (Bragança); 11. Abrigo de los Oculados, Henarejos (Cuenca). Faces painted in rock-shelters: 7. Cueva de la Diosa Madre, Segura de la Sierra (Jaén) ;10. Peña Escrita, Tárbená (Alicante). Human mobile figurines represented in same scale: bones: 3. Tritriangulars. Cova d'En Pardo, Planes (Alicante); Anchoriforms Cova de la Barcella (5), Torremanzanas (Alicante), Cueva de los Blanquízares de Lébor (6), Totana (Murcia). 8. Cylinders: Moncaparacho, Olhão (Faro). Images provided by Archaeological Museum of Alcoy (4), Archaeological Museum of Alicante MARQ (5), National Archaeological Museum of Lisbon (8).

The narratives shared in rock shelters with the possibility of an audience are synthesized in the movable figurines, which sometimes adopt solar disguises to take up the prominent position given to them by the oral narratives of the open-air media. From nature to funerary contexts, from the collective to the individual (family or lineage), these figurines bring together ancestral biographies, taking on multiple meanings that can be traced throughout the diachrony of the megaliths and all their contemporary contexts. Vivid Iberian typologies are only comparable with the expressive wealth of Mediterranean figurines. But these are more coherent within themselves. This means that the Cycladic objects are related to one another, and so on. Therefore, the variety of Iberian social responses, their old dates, the richness of some raw materials and the quality of the craftsmanship in some figurines are outstanding on a European scale. Several interpretations can be proposed for this situation. The simplest is that Iberian idiosyncrasies from the Upper Palaeolithic onwards sustained a technical and thematic intensity that explains part of the Neolithic production. This hypothesis can be extended to some European versions, as explained in the first section of the edited volumes. Clay figurines, decorated plaques, phalanges, and figures made from bone (including the spatulae) form the oldest records in Iberia and in the rest of Europe. These oldest Iberian figurines display (as far as our current knowledge goes) closer connections with the Neolithic in the Continent than with the Mediterranean. On the other hand, figurines are included

on “Atlantic” architectures, adding a key issue to understand the complexity of the Iberian Neolithic networks.

The gradual increase in the intensity of exchanges of funerary goods (late 4th and first 3th millennium BC) is part of the reason why these interactions may be visible through the more recent figurines. Iberian connectivity is observed in some records, especially in the anthropomorphic figurines, whose relationship with the Mediterranean and particularly with the Cycladic world is undeniable. At the same time, these relationships are sufficiently distant for the personality of both versions to be recognisable. Likewise, the generation of these typologies in the Iberian Peninsula is also visible, or at least its importance in the production of these items. It is noticeable that a few European examples can be associated with these formulae. In contrast, the expansion of graphic formulae applied to armed statues and stelae in the European Chalcolithic (partly contemporary with these figurines) denotes a significant Iberian imprint, both in the use of models related to the decorated plaques and in the decoration of coloured geometric textiles that are so common in Iberian megalithic art [12].

Greater interactions with the LBK Neolithic and closer trading relationships with the Mediterranean from the late fourth millennium BC cannot mask the particular personality of Iberian figurines and the continuation of several interactions at the same

time [13,14]. As mentioned above, these rich connections explain the presence of varied typologies better than any other hypothesis, and this is quite unique on a European scale. The exhibition of *Idolos Miradas Milenarias/Idolos Olhares Milenares* shows both researchers and the public, the enormous potential of studying these small images of human bodies. This has been attempted through the contribution of numerous colleagues, who have updated the state of the art on each of the areas or topics they were asked to address. It has resulted in a rich background of images, distribution maps, contexts and chronologies that consolidate networks over large areas, at the same time as singular developments in smaller regions [15-17]. Figurines are presumably dressed in geometrically decorated cloaks, sometimes with hoods or ornaments on the top of the head and sophisticated hairstyles (elaborate braids), and are generally presented standing, facing the viewer. They range in size from small pieces used as personal pendants to figures attached to some other material or displayed as small stelae on altars or in delimited enclosures. The small figurines in question also reveal the value of external elements to communicate status, provenience, gender, age, and social trajectories, as well as beliefs and funerary and quotidian narratives.

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DOI: [10.32474/JAAS.2021.04.000187](https://doi.org/10.32474/JAAS.2021.04.000187)



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