



Small head in marble of a male figurine

Not on display

Title/Description: Small head in marble of a male figurine

Born: 2800 c. BC - 2700 c. BC

Object Type: Figure, Head, Sculpture

Materials: Marble

Measurements: h. 44 x w. 20 x d. 30 mm

Accession Number: 353

Historic Period: Early Bronze Age (c. 3000-2700 BC), 3rd millennium BC

Production Place: Cyclades, Europe, Greece

Cultural Group: Keros-Syros

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small head is one of the most interesting objects from the Cyclades in this collection. Made around 4500 years ago from marble, it is the head of a small sculpture originally probably representing a male figure (the figurine is broken at the neck and the body is missing). Unlike the more common female figurines of the time, where details such as eyes and hair would typically have been added in paint, on this figure such features have been represented by the sculptor.

Viewed from the front, the head is tall and narrow; viewed from the side, it is much wider in profile (thicker) than it is wide at the front. The nose is long and narrow, and at the top is joined with two arcs in relief forming eyebrows. Below these the eyes are incised as long and narrow ovals. Below the nose the mouth is shown by an incision perhaps surrounded by slight relief representing the lips. At the sides, toward the back of the head, the ears are shown in relief. At the rear, the flat area often shown on Cycladic figurines is rounded, and taller than it is wide - again quite unlike the usual 'folded-arm' figurines. All over the top of the head small pits may originally have been filled with pigment to indicate hair - but it is also possible these simply represent surface damage concentrated toward to top of the object. The discolourations seen in some areas, such as at the mouth, eyes and eyebrows, might also be thought to be pigment, but equally may simply be staining from long burial in the ground.

While some have compared this figure to early, 'precanonical' Cycladic figurines [1], in fact the best comparison may be with male 'hunter-warrior' figurines, generally thought to come later in the sequence. This head is similar in appearance to examples known from the Museum of Cycladic Art in Athens [2], a drawing of a now lost piece previously in the British Museum in London [3], and a head in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford [4]. While the overall shape of the head is very similar to these examples, these three have hair shown by straight incisions, and two of them have a 'bun' arrangement at the back of the head: our example doesn't have the hair indicated in this way. Interestingly, the example in the Museum of Cycladic Art and the lost piece from the British Museum were both members of male-female pairs (the female from the British Museum is lost along with the male counterpart, but a drawing survives). The female examples have similar facial features but the hair is rendered in a more simple manner, so it would be possible to ask whether our example in fact represents a female. However, both female figures have rounder faces, meaning that our example overall is closer to the male examples.

Based on the height of the head the original piece would have been about 150 mm in height. If indeed male, it would probably have been naked; existing examples have a belt draped over the shoulder and wear a dagger at the waist. The original was an elegant and accomplished piece. Dating from the second half of the third millennium BCE, the emphasis on sculpted facial features, along with the dagger shown at the waist, perhaps indicates a slight shift in the range of meanings to be found in Cycladic sculpture at this time.

Michael Boyd, March 2022

[1] Jurgen Thimme & Pat Getz-Preziosi (eds.) *Art and Culture of the Cyclades* (Badisches Landesmuseum, 1977), 452 no. 118.

[2] Christos Doumas, *The N. P. Goulandris Collection of Cycladic Art* (Praeger 1968), 308.

[3] J. Lesley Fitton, 'Perditus and Perdita: Two Drawings of Cycladic Figurines in the Greek and Roman Department of the British Museum', in *Cycladica: Studies in Memory of N. P. Goulandris*, ed. J. L. Fitton (British Museum, 1984), 76-87.

[4] Sherratt, S., *Catalogue of Cycladic Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum: The Captive Spirit, I* (Ashmolean Museum, 2000), III.7.31, no. AE147.

Further Reading

C. Broodbank, *An Island Archaeology of the Early Cyclades* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

M. Marthari, C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd, *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context* (Oxbow Books, 2017).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1952. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
