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fertility symbol?

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## The gold woman from Smøreng on Bornholm – an ecstatic fertility symbol?

In May 2013, Ingvard Pedersen, a metal-detecting amateur archaeologist, made a remarkable find in a field at Smøreng on the island of Bornholm. The site was previously known foremost for finds of several small golden human figurines, all apparently depicting men (Laursen 2013). The object brought to light this time is a slender gold figurine with distinctly female attributes (fig. 1). Considering the find context, the figurine has been dated to about AD 500 (Laursen 2013). So far, no parallel has been reported. In the blogosphere, this unique find aroused considerable interest, and interpretations ranged from a ritual fertility symbol to an acrobat making a back flip (Laursen 2013; Rundkvist 2013). Some thought she may have been used as a hair clip.

Two features of the figurine are especially intriguing: the exaggerated backbone and the arched pose. In the following, we present some new angles of approach as to the interpretation of these oddities.

### *The backbone*

Martin Rundkvist (2013) has suggested that the serrated ridge along the woman's back simply represents the backbone of a skinny person. However, the figurine has a posture where the spinous processes of the vertebrae would actually withdraw instead of protrude from the profile of the back. Therefore, we propose that the exaggerated backbone constitutes a symbolic rather than a naturalistic feature.

According to a comment from Bornholms Museum, there is no known parallel to the gold woman's dented back (Laursen 2013). In another geographical and cultural context, however, similarly exaggerated backbones are seen on Maltese figurines from c. 3600–2500 BC (fig. 2). These terracotta statuettes have no generally accepted interpretation. Suggestions have included depictions of malignant disease (Zammit & Singer 1924), objects of fertility rites, voodoo and sorcery practiced by midwives (Rich 2008).

What common denominator could there be between the exaggerated backbones of these ter-

racotta statuettes and the gold figurine made some 2000 kilometers and more than 3000 years apart? Looking at possible symbolic parallels, it appears that the Indian philosophy of Hatha yoga offers an interesting idea. In Hatha yoga the backbone is regarded as a bodily representation of the column that supports the world – the *axis mundi* – which connects the human with the divine and canalizes a flow of “spiritual energy” (Harris 2001, p. 52 ff). In line with this idea, the exaggerated backbones of the images in question may be seen as symbols of such spiritual power. This hypothesis leads to the second of the gold figurine's intriguing features.

### *The pose*

In many cultures, flow of spiritual energy and divine contact are intimately connected to a state of ecstasy. This may explain the arched pose of the gold figurine as something else than the previously suggested acrobatic back flip. One phenomenon seen in connection with ecstasy (Pfeiffer 1965) is a posture called *arc de cercle* or *opisthotonus*, in which a person's body is bent backwards into a rigid arch, supported only by the head and the heels (fig. 3). This is what we see if placing the gold figurine horizontally.

The *arc de cercle* is also well known from psychiatry as a symptom of so called hysteria or conversion disorder (Alsaadi & Marquez 2005), and it was commonly observed among the “hysterical” women demonstrated publicly by the famous Professor Charcot at the Salpêtrière mental hospital in Paris in the late 1800s. The *arc de cercle* occurred in these women as a climax of symptoms called *attitudes passionnelles*, that is, sexual poses (Gilman et al. 1993, p. 307 f). In line with these psychological phenomena, the arched pose of the gold woman fits well with her overall sexual attitude, being naked apart from a belt (and possibly bracelets), pointing with both hands towards her conspicuous vulva.

Considering the possibility that the slender – some have said emaciated – figurine from Smøreng represents an ecstatic sex symbol, note that

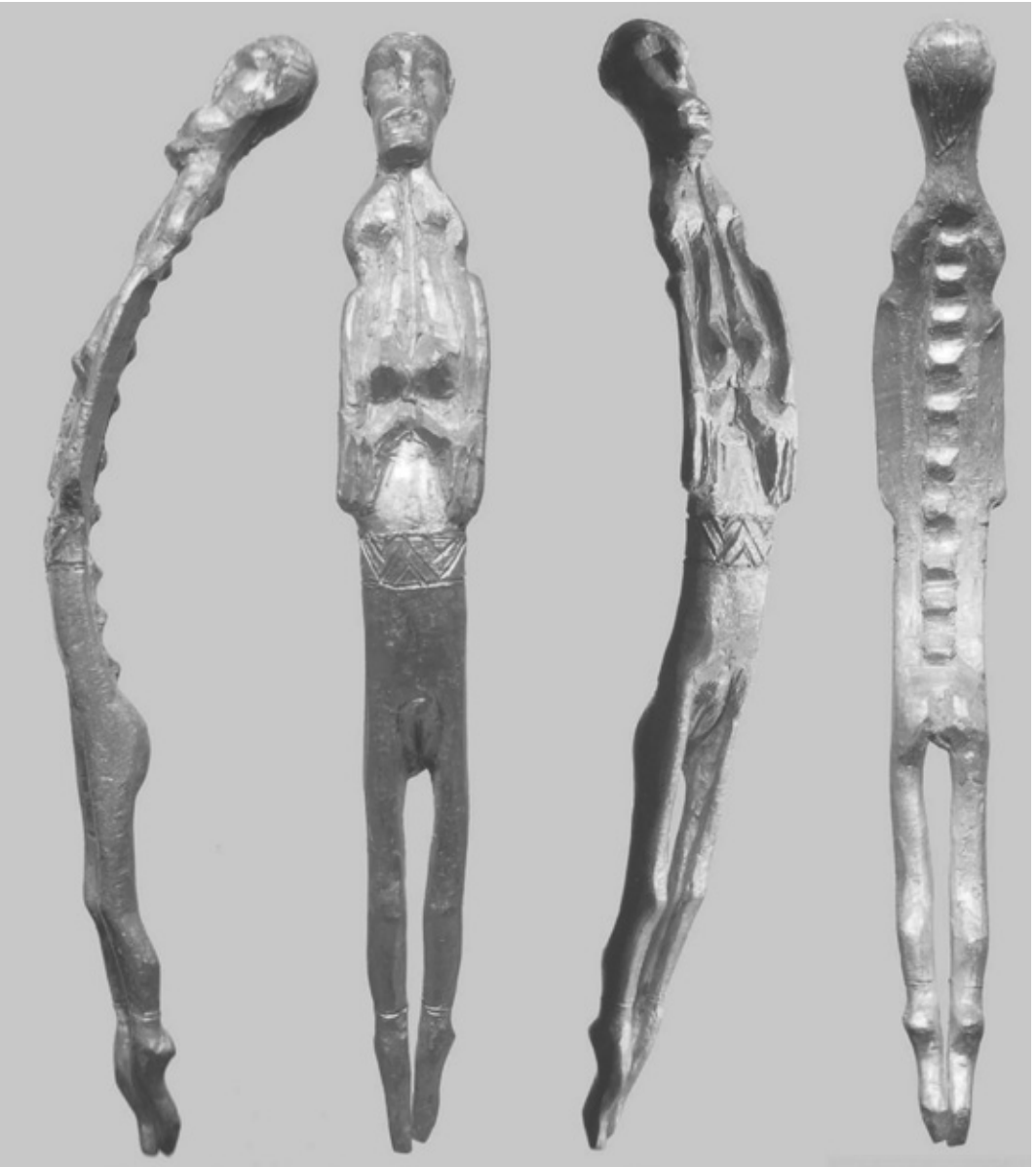


Fig. 1. Gold figurine from Smøreng on Bornholm. Length 42 mm. Weight 3 g. Photo René Laursen.

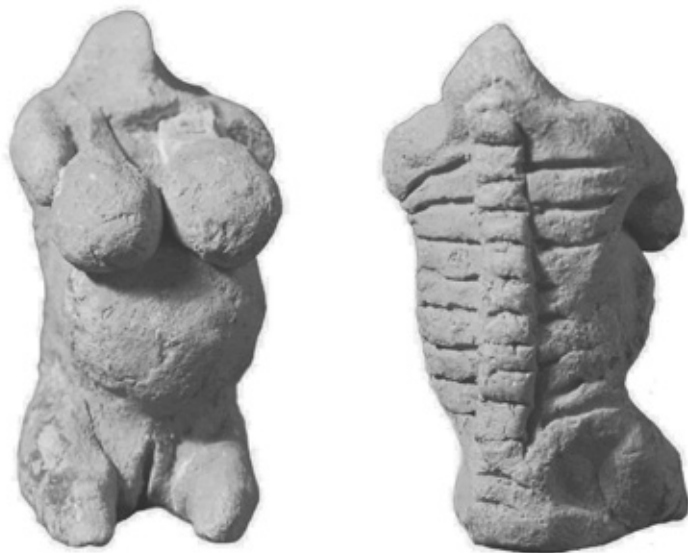


Fig. 2. Terracotta statuette from the 3rd or 4th millennium BC, found at Mnajdra on Malta. Note the exaggerated backbone. Photograph © Bernadette Flynn, courtesy Heritage Malta ([www.spacesofmnajdra.com](http://www.spacesofmnajdra.com)).

Fig. 3. The ecstatic posture called *arc de cercle* or *opisthotonus* (Richer 1881, pl. III, courtesy BIU Santé Médecine).



prolonged fasting and starvation can be used as part of systematic measures to induce a state of trance and ecstasy (Fessler 2002). Note also that the figurine's prominent thumbs and decorated belt are consistent with symbolic expressions of spiritual power. In former times, the thumb was thought to be particularly sensitive to the supernatural (Davidson 1989, p. 73 ff). As to the garment, certain Arctic shamans performed their spiritual excursions almost nude, like the figurine, wearing only a magical belt (Eliade 1992, p. 146).

The Smørenge figurine's prominent thumbs and her hands placed on the belly are strikingly matched in the design of a gold-foil figure (*guld-gubbe*) from Uppåkra in Scania (Watt 2004, fig. 12c), and by two phallic figurines from Lunda in Södermanland, dated to the Late Migration Period or Early Vendel Period, c. AD 450–600. The latter two figurines are naked apart from a belt and thought to be of divine or mythological nature, associated with fertility (Andersson et al. 2004, pp. 136, 144 & 164). As to the previously suggested acrobatic nature of the gold woman from Smørenge, it can be objected that her gesture with both hands on the belly differs markedly from the appearance of such prehistoric images that are generally regarded as acrobats performing back flips – including a Danish bronze statuette (natmus.dk) and Swedish rock carvings (historiska.se) – which portray figures with their arms stretched out and up towards the head.

Critics of the idea that the Smørenge figurine had to do with fertility rituals (detectingpeople.dk) have pointed out her markedly different appearance compared to what is usually associated with ancient female fertility symbols (e.g. Venus of Willendorf). However, it is possible that well-fed women were not around – as models or as sculptors – when the figurine was created. In AD 536 some sort of natural catastrophe(s) – volcanic eruption, meteorite impact, or exploding comet, singular or plural, possibly in combination – caused an extreme climate event in the Northern Hemisphere, resulting in failed harvests and famine for years (Gräslund & Price 2012). In those days, being skinny was probably normal on Bornholm – even for a fertility symbol.

### Conclusion

We suggest that the arched pose and the dented back of the gold figurine from Smørenge depict an *arc de cercle* representing a state of ecstasy expressed by a fertility symbol, whose exaggerated backbone is a sign of strong spiritual power.

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