



Review Article

‘Idols’ in late prehistoric Iberia

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PRIMITIVA BUENO RAMÍREZ & JORGE A. SOLER DÍAZ (ed.). 2021. *Mobile images of ancestral bodies: a millennium-long perspective from Iberia to Europe* (Zona arqueológica 23, 2 volumes). Alcalá de Henares: Museo Arqueológico Regional; 978-84-451-3938-7 paperback €50.

These two handsome volumes stem from the landmark exhibition ‘Idolos: Miradas Milenarias/Ídolos: Olhares Milenares’ (Idols: Millenary Gazes), which assembled an impressive collection of figurines and decorated artefacts from Neolithic and Copper Age Iberia. A total of 270 archaeological artefacts from 27 museums (plus one private collector) were displayed together for the first time, with the aim of bringing current understanding of these artefacts and the communities that made and used them to the general public (statistics can be found here: <https://www.museunacionalarqueologia.gov.pt/?p=8813>). The exhibition was an ambitious project and initially sparked by conversations between Jorge Soler, Head of Exhibitions at the Archaeological Museum of Alicante (MARQ) and Enrique Baquedano, Director of the Regional Archaeological Museum of Madrid (MAR)—both award-winning museums—and later joined by Primitiva Bueno, Professor at the University of Alcalá de Henares, a leading expert in late prehistoric art in Iberia and António Carvalho, Director of the National Museum of Archaeology of Portugal (NMA). The international exhibition travelled between Alicante (January to July 2020), Madrid (July 2020 to January 2021) and Lisbon (April to October 2021) and was well attended despite subsequent COVID-19 lockdowns (e.g. the exhibition at the MARQ had 29 000 in-person and 60 000 virtual visitors). If you did not have the chance to visit the exhibition, you can still take the NMA virtual tour here: <https://my.matterport.com/show/?m=vd8nAmTpg85&play=1&title=1&ts=3&help=0>, or here: <https://mpembed.com/show/?m=r1G1HjKBeDT>.

I was fortunate to visit the exhibition in-person in Lisbon in August 2021, while I was conducting research on plaques and stelae using digital imaging techniques. The exhibition made me reflect, as a researcher, on the challenges we face when generating and disseminating knowledge—among the public *and* researchers—about the lives, deaths and beliefs of past communities through prehistoric art. This exhibition is a great example of how that can be successfully achieved when museums and the academic sectors work together. The exhibit had a beautiful design: it was threaded through an intriguing storyline based on the idea that these were representations of ancestral (human) beings, while capitalising not only on the aesthetic value of

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those artefacts, but also (and importantly) on their material and contextual dimensions. It showcased the huge quantity of new, high-quality information that has been generated in the last few decades by archaeological teams across Portugal and Spain. The book reviewed here grew organically from the exhibition, thanks to this joint international effort, into an output that will have an enduring impact on the research of prehistoric art in South-west Europe.

The book is not a catalogue, but an up-to-date compendium of works focused on portable art (primarily on images that are interpreted as human bodies or bodily features) from late prehistoric Iberia, and its links to other art genres and comparable traditions from across Europe. The structure of the volumes is not self-evident to me, as chapters do not follow a thematic, chronological or geographical order. There are two introductory chapters by the editors, one exploring the Palaeolithic roots of human imagery in Neolithic Iberia (Bueno) and one reviewing the historiographic origins of the interpretation of figurines and related representations as 'idols', and how we can make sense of them to inform our understandings of past societies (Soler). Two chapters by Sousa and Maicas, respectively, also highlight the contributions made by the Leisners' and Siret's archives to scholarship on Neolithic 'idols' in Iberia.

The chapters covering regions beyond Iberia are diverse. There is a chapter by Boric providing an updated overview of the impressive Late Mesolithic boulders of Lepenski Vir. There is also a set of chapters focused on Neolithic clay figurines from South-west Asia (Hansen), the Balkans and the Carpathian basin (Palaguta), and southern Central Europe (Hofmann, contrasting these with Copper Age stone stelae from the Alps), while Becker discusses anthropomorphic clay vessels from across Neolithic Europe. Sardinia is covered by Paglietti (figurines and statuettes), while Spanedda discusses representations of idols or anthropomorphic figures in rock art traditions in the Western Mediterranean islands. Figurine traditions in other Mediterranean archipelagos are covered by Vella-Gregory (Maltese Islands) and Storaopoulou (Cycladic islands). This is supplemented by a chapter by Scarre, with an overview of the rare Neolithic figurines known in Atlantic Europe (although, as he notes, there is evidence suggesting that they could have been more abundant, made of wood or bone, but that they are just not preserved. Here, you can explore an example from southern Britain, the so-called 'God Dolly': <https://skfb.ly/OKBt>).

In Iberia, there is a good representation of scholarship conducted by different researchers and research teams from Portugal and Spain. Some chapters give state-of-the-art overviews from different angles. For north-west Iberia, Fábregas presents a synthesis of Neolithic stone figurines, while Sanches and colleagues discuss anthropomorphic images (figurines, stelae, rock art and ceramic vessels) in the north of Portugal. Also covering a northern distribution (now in Spain) is the splendid chapter by Villalobos García and colleagues, which gives an overview of the so called 'spatula-idols' found in central Iberia, which have yielded some big surprises in the last few years. One of the most prolific portable art traditions from Iberia are engraved stone plaques, which appear in contexts from south-west Iberia. These are discussed from different perspectives by Bueno, Lillios and Gonçalves, who present their long-term research in three different chapters, while Cardoso gives an overview of research on the related tradition of slate 'crooks' in southern Portugal. Oliveira offers a perspective across genres by comparing slate plaques with their representation in schematic rock art in central Portugal. The contexts where figurines and decorated artefacts were found in south Portugal are reviewed by Rocha (funerary contexts) and Andrade and colleagues (settlement contexts).

While Martínez-Sánchez and colleagues provide a synthetic overview of clay figurines in late prehistoric Iberia, which are mainly restricted to the southern half of the peninsula, an outline of portable art in southern Spain is provided by García Perez and colleagues. Martínez Fernández and López Reyes focus on portable art from south-east Iberia, and this is supplemented by Barciela's review of representations of idols or anthropomorphic figures in rock art traditions in the region. More general overviews are presented by Soler, who traces connections between south-west and south-east Iberia through the distributions of different types of 'idols'; Lancharro and Bueno, who discuss the benefits of mapping different traditions or types of 'idols' to trace connections and overcome the limitations of regionally focused studies; and Barroso Bermejo, who provides a necessarily general outline of Bronze Age and Iron Age anthropomorphic imagery in Iberia.

These regional or general discussions are supplemented by a series of chapters presenting the valuable contextual evidence recovered through various recent fieldwork projects in Portugal. For Alentejo, in South Portugal, Diniz presents a case study of an Early Neolithic clay figurine from Valada do Mato, while Valera presents a synthetic perspective of the human image in Perdigões. For the Portuguese Estremadura, close to Lisbon, A.F. Carvalho presents the intriguing stone stela found in the cave of Algar do Bom Santo (Lisbon), while Martins and colleagues give an overview of figurines and decorated objects recovered from the famous Copper Age site of Vila Nova de São Pedro. These contextual chapters are complemented by Parreira and Morán's overview of Late Neolithic and Copper Age portable art from the territory of Alcalar in the Algarve. A final chapter by the editors wraps up the book with an overview of the phenomenon informed, amongst others, by the different contributions of these volumes.

There are a variety of traits that distinguish these volumes from previous works providing overviews of Iberian portable art, figurines and/or decorated artefacts. This is the first time such a book has been published in English, which is fantastic, as this will facilitate access to this wonderful set of materials and valuable research to a much greater pool of researchers, further enabling research on Europe-wide connectivity or broad comparative studies. Second, in comparison with previous books derived from exhibitions focused on 'idols' (e.g. Maicas *et al.* 2009; Pascual 2012), this book, while not substituting them, has a broader take (geographically and chronologically), includes more works that are holistic (e.g. including comparisons across genres) or contextual (through case studies), and has better coverage of the whole of Iberia (it offers wide coverage of Portugal, although detailed case studies from Spain are missed). Finally, most (if not all) of the works contained in these volumes have approaches that go well beyond the typological frameworks which were so dominant decades ago (e.g. Almagro Gorbea 1973). Added to a strong emphasis on bottom-up approaches and contextualisation of recent research (epitomised very clearly by the research conducted by Valera and colleagues in Perdigões), and the exploration of transfer of ideas across genres, there are highly interesting takes (and results) on the social lives of some of these artefacts.

I can see how some of this work has the potential to flow naturally into further new approaches exploring not only portability across genres, but also cross-craft interactions (e.g. clay figurine and copper pyrotechnology), connectivity across different European regions through, for example, social network analysis, the application of experiential (non-representational) approaches to the study of these artefacts through a focus on making and

'process' (e.g. as explored in Jones *et al.* 2017: 206–16, also with Iberian material), or the study of itineraries of artefacts and their ontological fluidity through fragmentation theory and archaeometric techniques (e.g. Valera 2019: 16–17; Lucíañez-Triviño *et al.* 2022: 48–51). Scholars and students of prehistoric Europe alike will find these volumes inspiring and they certainly will ignite new ideas with fresh research potential.

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