



Almost life-size head of a marble sculpture

Not on display

Title/Description: Almost life-size head of a marble sculpture

Born: 2700 c. BC - 2400 c. BC

Object Type: Figure, Head, Sculpture

Materials: Marble

Technique: Carving, Incising

Measurements: h. 228 x w. 134 x d. 105 mm

Accession Number: 352

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

Production Place: Cyclades, Europe, Greece

Cultural Group: Keros-Syros culture

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This remarkable head, sculpted in marble some four and a half millennia ago on one of the Cycladic islands (Greece), once belonged to an almost life-size representation of the human form. The rest of the sculpture has not survived, and the head itself is broken in two pieces. Despite that, it is well preserved and gives us an insight into one of the most enigmatic aspects of prehistoric Cycladic life.

Although 'folded-arm figurines' (so called because they are usually represented with arms crossed) are well-known, they are usually smaller in size than this piece. Less than a dozen examples (excluding those without a secure provenance) are thought to have been more than a metre tall, and only one of those (from Amorgos, now on display in the National Museum in Athens) is complete. By comparing the proportions of our example with other known figures we can calculate its original height as being between about 863 mm and 1079 mm.

The features are simple and striking. From the front, the head is oval in shape, a feature probably marking it out as early in the sequence of folded-arm figures (other heads may be more triangular or 'lyre-shaped' in appearance). The flat area at the top of the head (the 'cranial plane') is much less pronounced than on some figures. The nose is bold and dominates the face which, as is usual with Cycladic figurines, has neither eyes nor mouth. We know from other figures that these features were often added in paint [1], but it is very hard to distinguish any traces of paint on this figure (there is a possibility of a faint trace of an eye on the left side).

An important characteristic at the sides is the ears, which are rarely depicted on Cycladic figures and usually only on larger examples. These are only visible when viewed from the sides or rear. The rear of the head is a little better preserved than the front, and in general the upper fragment is more weathered than the lower. This is an indication that the upper piece was exposed for longer than the lower piece. Thus it may be that, rather than being placed in a grave, these pieces may have been instead deposited ritually in a broken state (as we know happened with fragments deliberately

deposited at the Early Bronze Age sanctuary on Keros [2]).

While there is much that we still do not know about the meaning, use and importance of Early Cycladic sculptures, it is clear there was a role for such large, almost life-size sculptures. These would have been very heavy, requiring two or more persons to move, and not easily manipulated (whereas the smaller ones could have been carried easily by one person). Thus they may have been carried by a group in a procession, or they may have been approached at a fixed point (but no such cult place has been recognised archaeologically). Most were, at the end of their use-life, deliberately broken, as this one may have been.

Michael Boyd, March 2022

[1] Kiki Birtacha, 'Examining the paint on Cycladic figurines', in *Early Cycladic Sculpture in Context*, eds. M. Marthari, C. Renfrew & M.J. Boyd (Oxbow Books, 2017), 491-502.

[2] Colin Renfrew, 'The sanctuary at Keros: questions of materiality and monumentality', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 1, 187-212.

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 1955. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
