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The anthropomorphic figurines from Willendorf

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Zusammenfassung

Die Arbeit beschäftigt sich mit den drei Venusfiguren der Fundstelle Willendorf II: der berühmten Venus I aus oolithischem Kalk, der möglicherweise unfertigen Venus II aus Elfenbein und der sogenannten Venus III. Es werden vor allem die Herstellung und die Fundgeschichte der Venus I diskutiert.

Abstract

This contribution presents the three figurines from the uppermost layer of the site Willendorf II: the well known Venus I made of oolithic limestone, the probably unfinished ivory figurine Venus II and the so called Venus III. Especially the production of the well known Venus I and the history of its finding are discussed.

Keywords: Gravettian, figurines, history of finding, documentation, working traces

Apart from the incomparable sequence of archaeological layers the most outstanding finds are three figurines from the uppermost layer: the well known Venus I made of oolithic limestone, the probably unfinished ivory figurine Venus II and the so called Venus III.

From the stratigraphical point of view only the so called Venus III was found within layer 9, Venus II had been deposited in a deep pit, which could be attributed by Bayer to layer 9. The famous Venus I was found approximately 25 cm below layer 9.

Venus I

The Venus I from Willendorf is a rather realistic representation of an obese woman which combines the natural form with the stylistic scheme of palaeolithic statuettes reflecting past transcendental ideas. The composition of the body is symmetrical, only the head seems to be turned slightly to the right.

Hundred years after the finding of the Venus from Willendorf a first comprehensive presentation of the documentation was published (ANTL-WEISER 2000-2001, ANTL 2008).

On August 7, 1908 the Venus from Willendorf was found during excavations of the Natural History Museum of the Imperial Court in Vienna. Josef Szombathy, the curator of the anthropologic-prehistoric collection of the museum as well as Hugo Obermaier and Josef Bayer, then two young scientists, were present when the figurine was unearthed.

Willendorf had already been known as a Palaeolithic site for 25 years when the excavation started in 1908 (SZOMBATHY 1909, SZOMBATHY 1910). Local collectors had been investigating at the sites Willendorf I (Fig. 1) and Willendorf II for many years.



Fig. 1: Oil painting from Hugo Darnaut showing the site Willendorf I

In 1908, when the railroad cut through the loess at Willendorf II, seven Palaeolithic layers could be distinguished at first sight. Szombathy, Bayer and Obermaier knew at once that this would be an excellent opportunity to study the cultural development of the Upper Palaeolithic in Central Europe.

Josef Szombathy planned the project and organized finance for the excavation. As a very experienced excavator he gave advice in respects of measuring and the method of excavation itself.

Hugo Obermaier was already known within the scientific community and was familiar with excavations at open air sites in the loess. Szombathy and Obermaier had worked together for several years. Therefore it was not unusual that Obermaier directed the excavation on behalf of the museum supervised by Szombathy. Obermaier was responsible for the documentation. His excavation diary contained indispensable documents of the excavation at Willendorf II.

Josef Bayer was co-directing the work in Willendorf as far as administration was concerned. As the direct representative of the museum in Willendorf he held the money and kept records of the workers. As for science, he seemed to have disagreed with Obermaier from time to time, but according to our records it was Obermaier who took the final decisions.

In the morning of the 7th of August Bayer, Obermaier and the employed workers carefully scraped off a horizon with only few stone tools. They were already through layer 9 in this place. On that day Szombathy paid a visit to the excavation in order to control the progress of the works.



Fig. 2: The Venus I from Willendorf



Fig. 3: Bayer at the place where the Venus I was found

Johann Veran, one of the workers, found the statuette (Fig 2.). Szombathy, who stood nearest to Veran, saw the figurine first and showed it to Bayer, who worked not far away from Veran. Szombathy took some photographs of the situation (Fig. 3). Obermaier excavating further to the west heard of the find in the evening because Szombathy and Bayer didn't want the public to take notice of the find. The molestation by various private collectors was already big enough. Obermaier wrote about this moment of finding that all of them, the workers, Bayer and he himself, were excavating in a line when the figurine was found. Therefore it was not unusual that at that very moment none of them – neither Bayer nor Obermaier – was present. This passage led to doubts that the finding had been documented adequately. But Obermaier did not mean that they had not been at the site when the Venus was found. He only said that none of them stood behind Veran, because all of them were working. Only Szombathy went along this line of workers and saw the figurine near Veran or perhaps even watched Veran unearthing the Venus.

There are two authentic statements which support the above mentioned interpretation of Obermaier's passage about the finding. Although Obermaier's diary

has been lost in Freiburg in Switzerland, we have a handwritten transcript of some parts of the diary written by Felgenhauer. Obermaier wrote into his diary that Veran had found the Venus. He also mentioned the names of the eye witnesses: Szombathy and Bayer.

The second statement was made by Szombathy on his visit on the 7th of August in Willendorf. He wrote the following note into his diary (Fig. 4):

“Dr. Bayer and Dr. Obermaier are busily excavating layer II/7. They have already finished half of it. Layer 7 contains some dark spots and in one place a 40 cm deep hearth. (FA-PA, Willendorf) Photo 5 and 6 findspot from the north”

The Prehistoric Department also possesses drawings from Szombathy, Bayer and Obermaier concerning the stratigraphy. In 1909

Bayer made a copy of Obermaier’s plan of layer nine. We also have a drawing of the layer according to scale (Fig. 5). In both plans the position of the Venus is fixed. With regard to all these documents the Venus from Willendorf was the best

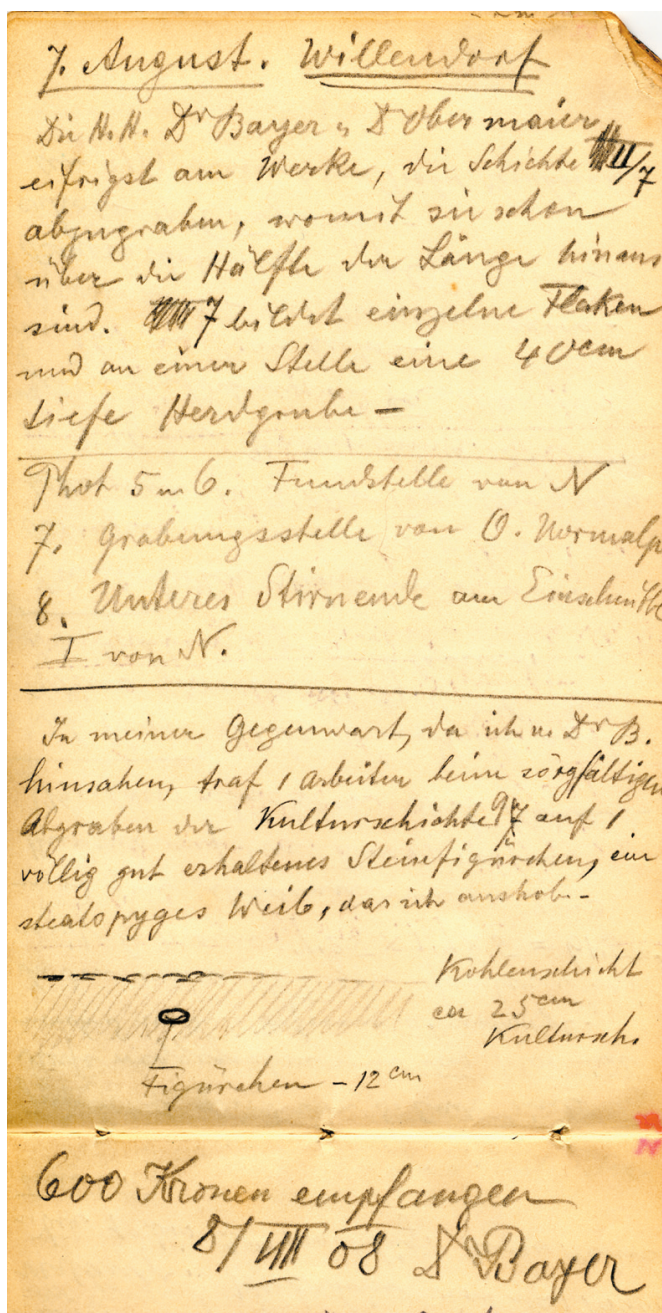


Fig. 4: Szombathy's diary

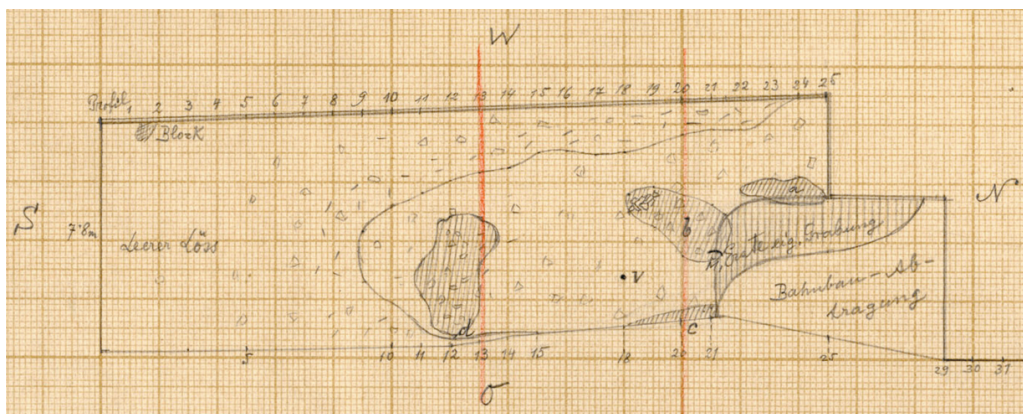


Fig. 5: Plan of the excavation in Willendorf I 1908 with the position of the figurine

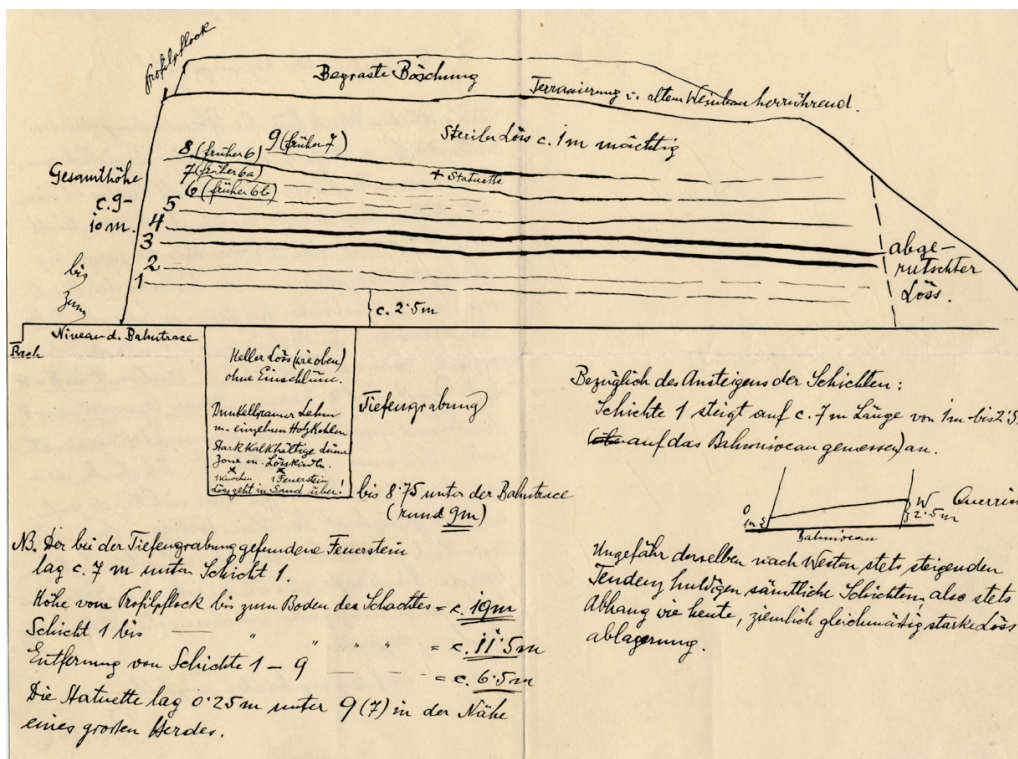


Fig. 6: Bayer's description of the layers in 1909 supposed to be an information for Szombathy's speech in Potsdam 1909

documented and best preserved Palaeolithic figurine of that time.

In Obermaier's diary Felgenhauer found a drawing which shows two horizons separated by 3,5 cm of loess. Beneath the lower horizon Obermaier had marked the position of the Venus.

Szombathy's diary also contains a drawing of the situation: a charcoal layer (layer 7=9)¹ and beneath it a layer of 25 cm, the figurine is drawn in the lower part of this layer.

After Szombathy the charcoal layer is part of layer nine.

The third drawing comes from Bayer's diary. Bayer fixed the position of the Venus with 25 cm beneath layer seven (=nine).

In spite of some divergences the drawings of the three diaries correspond very well. Obermaier's drawing contains two horizons and the Venus beneath it. Szombathy only saw the lower horizon at his visit because Bayer and Obermaier had already dug off layer 9. Therefore he drew only this lower horizon. Bayer who did not distinguish the two horizons of layer 9 only outlined layer seven respectively nine and the figurine 25 cm beneath it (Fig. 6). In a later description of the finding Bayer wrote that they worked very carefully on this level because there were some scattered finds between layer eight and layer nine.

Despite the obviously same localisation of the find in each of the three diaries the position is interpreted differently. Bayer and Szombathy published that the figurine was found 25 cm beneath layer nine while Obermaier attributed the Venus to layer nine. Nevertheless we may take for granted that the Venus from Willendorf was found 25 cm beneath the lower charcoal horizon of layer nine.

Although Bayer had mentioned a separate horizon between 8 and 9 he seemed to have added the scattered finds of the Venus level to the finds of layer nine when he wrote the inventory of the Willendorf finds. Due to the lack of further documents we are unable to attribute real objects to the mentioned intermediate horizon. In fact he attributed the horizon with the Venus and the two horizons of layer nine to the same group of hunter gatherers. Almost 100 years later it is difficult to say whether the 25 cm of loess below the charcoal layer belonged to layer nine or not.

Having a closer look at the picture taken by Szombathy on the 7th of August 1908 we can see the two horizons of layer nine as well as the hearth in the west. The position of Bayer at the pictures trying to fix the findspot is not very helpful because he covers an important part of the stratigraphic context.

The making of the Venus I from Willendorf

The Venus I was carved from oolitic limestone. The origin of the raw material was often discussed (F. EPEL 1950). In 2007 A. Binstener started an investigation concerning the source of the oolitic limestone on behalf of the Natural

1) After Bayer's excavation in 1909 the numbering of the sequence was changed from layer 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 6a, 6b, 7 to 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

History Museum. In cooperation with Godfried Wessely and Antonin Přichystal he analyzed a series of samples from sources in Lower Austria and Moravia. Finally a sample of the collection of Antonin Přichystal from the Stranska skala near Brno turned out to be most similar to the material of the Venus I (BINSTEINER, PŘICHISTAL, WESSELY 2008). This provenience could have been part of the activities of the group living in Willendorf, if we look for instance at the raw material procurement with flint from moraines in Northern Moravia or Poland (BINSTEINER, EISNER, ANTL 2008). As the Venus is the only piece of oolithic limestone in Willendorf the figurine might have been already finished when it was brought to Willendorf.

The composition of the body is symmetrical, only the head seems to be turned slightly to the right. The “hairstyle” or design on the head has been achieved by a combination of transversal scratches and concentric lines. Especially in the cavities of this design remains of red ochre are very well preserved (Fig. 7).

Looking at the breast it can be seen that the artist made rather long cuts to produce the fingers of the right hand (Fig. 8). These cuts are crossed by the main line of the breast which was deepened as the last step of modelling the breasts. In the same way both hands were underlined by corresponding lines.

At the middle of the body it appears that breast, belly and the thighs were first modelled by deep vertical scratching. These scratches were smoothed by horizon-



Fig. 7: The head of the Venus I with remains of red ochre



Fig. 8: The fingers of the right hand



Fig. 9: Working traces between belly and thighs



Fig. 10: The knee

tal scraping (Fig. 9). At the thighs horizontal traces are overlain by vertical ones.

A view of the Venus from the right shows scraping traces at the breast as well as the horizontal traces on the belly and the vertical ones on the thighs.

The knee was produced by vertical scratching which first diminished the size of the thighs. There is an overlay of clear horizontal scratches. Beneath the knee there are again vertical scratches (Fig. 10).

A view to the back of the figurine shows traces of horizontal smoothing and parts where horizontal traces are overlain by vertical ones (Fig. 11). The same scheme is to be seen at the back side of the thighs.

Two clear cuts mark the line between bottom and thighs.

Summarizing the different working traces on the figurine we can observe a constant overlay of traces from different directions in order to smooth the surface. It seems that the last step of modification should underline the specific cha-



Fig. 11: Crossing traces of working at the back

racter of the worked part: vertical traces at the back and the thighs, horizontal ones at the belly or the breast, the vulva etc.. Border lines between individual parts of the body such as arms and breast, breast and belly, belly and thighs were once again deepened by further scratching thus contributing to the plastic impression of the figurine. One of the last steps in modelling the Venus seems to have been modelling the labia minora. The scratches cut through the borderline between thighs and vulva.

Venus II

In 1926 Bayer found the Venus II from Willendorf in a hole which had been dug into the sequence of cultural layers by clandestine excavators. In 1927 he made a systematic excavation on this spot. In the course of this excavation he found the evidence of a deep pit which was dug from layer 9 down to layer 5. The pit contained bones from mammoth and a jaw of a mammoth. Bayer reports that the original position of the ivory figurine Venus II was on top of the jaw (BAYER, 1930).



Fig. 12: The Venus II from a front view

The head of the only roughly cut figurine is broken off (Fig. 12). The front view shows that the sculpture is slightly twisted in the middle of the body (Fig. 13). The area of the shoulder is well modelled. Below the neck on the left side of the breast there is a rather indistinct structure possibly representing the left arm. Between belly and thighs there is only a roughly cut depression. The back of the figurine seems unmodified only the transition from the bottom to the legs is clearly cut. In the area of the shanks the separation between left and right leg is clear. The Venus II is rather roughly cast in most parts, only the shoulders and the legs seem well modelled. Perhaps it was left unfinished when the head broke off.



Fig. 13: Side view of Venus II



Fig. 14: "Venus" III

Venus III

The so called Venus III from Willendorf is certainly a modified piece of ivory but was often doubted to be a figurine (Fig. 14). Only the side view gives an illusion of the shape of a human sculpture possibly with head, bottom, feet, belly and neck. In ethnological contexts wooden pieces are used as puppets but would never be recognized as such without a description. So we cannot be sure what the piece meant to the ice age hunter although there are too few indications to classify the piece as figurine from a formal point of view.

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