

DAVID AARON



Large Cycladic Head

H: 15.2 cm, W: 7.5 cm

Marble

Cyclades

Circa 2600-2400 B.C., Early Bronze Age II

A simplified marble head from a Cycladic idol. The head is on an impressively grand scale, making the full estimated length of the figure 70 cm tall – much larger than most idols of this type.¹ The head is typically abstracted, with a slightly rounded chin and broader, flatter top, the smooth surface broken only by the long triangular nose in raised relief. The neck is set back from the chin and meets the rear of the head at an angle, forming a curved profile.

Much of the evidence we have for the Early Cycladic period comes from goods and objects that were found in tombs on the Greek islands of the Cyclades. The tombs contained a range of objects in different materials: tools and weapons of Melian obsidian and bronze; shell, stone, bone, bronze and silver jewellery; and elaborately carved soapstone boxes. However, marble was clearly the preferred material for sculpting. The marble came mainly from the islands of Naxos and Keros, and some from Paros and Ios. Marble objects were made only during the first two phases of Early Cycladic culture, with the folded-arm figures appearing only in the second stage.

The meaning and use of such figures remains uncertain, and may have changed across the five centuries in which they were produced. Some archaeologists have suggested that they were produced solely for funerary use, and may have fulfilled the same role as ushabtis in Egyptian graves (to perform

work for the owner in the afterlife), as substitutes for human sacrifice, or as guides for the soul of the deceased. Others have suggested that they had apotropaic qualities. Another theory is that they represent figures from Cycladic mythology, and could even have been images of the 'Great Mother' goddess. There is little evidence for this deity in Cycladic culture, however, and androgynous figures such as this, as well as examples with male genitalia have also been excavated. Some figures were found broken and repaired prior to their placement in the tomb – this suggests that they were used before they were interred, perhaps within a domestic shrine.

Literature:

Pat Getz-Preziosi, 'Cycladic Objects in the Fogg and Farland Collections', *American Journal of Archaeology*, 70:2 (April 1966), no. 8, p. 110, pl. 31.