

The Ancient History of the Breast in Anatolia

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ABSTRACT

In Anatolia, the breast has long served as a symbol of divinity, abundance, leadership, warrior strength, and intimacy, from the eras that celebrated the sacred feminine to periods dominated by patriarchal values. Its nudity, size, and number have reflected the cultural codes of each era. With the onset of written history, breasts were first covered with cloth, later constrained by corsets, and eventually flattened by bras. Nonetheless, the cultural, spiritual, powerful, and intimate connotations represented by breast imagery in Anatolia spread across the globe and became a subject of both art and science throughout history.

Keywords

Breast, Amazons, Ancient History, Afrodite.

Introduction

The breast has historically incorporated different concepts such as gender, sanctity, eroticism, and motherhood, serving as the most fundamental anatomical symbol of femininity. From prehistoric goddesses to contemporary cultural representations, the breast has embodied female identity, symbolized the divine fertility of goddesses endowed with sacred power, nourished the newborn, modeled for the bra industry, represented the political stance of anti-bra feminists, showcased the artistry of plastic surgeons, and become an integral component of transgender healthcare. The breast, which is the most important anatomical awareness of the idol of femininity, appears in different presentations throughout known history.

As a symbol of femininity, the breast has been a subject of art [1], politics [2], religion [3], and moral judgment [4] across different regions of the world throughout history. In prehistoric times, it represented life, abundance, and fertility. In ancient Egypt, it was believed that pharaohs attained divinity and sanctity by suckling

from the breasts of the goddess Isis [5]. Five centuries ago, Italian painters depicted the sanctity of the female breast through images of the Virgin Mary nursing the infant Christ [6]. In the 18th century, the breast was important enough to break with tradition and name the subgroup that includes animals and humans in modern taxonomy as Mammals, regardless of gender [7]. During the French Revolution, a woman with a rifle in one hand and a flag in the other led the people in breaching the barricades. With her bare breasts, she came to symbolize the revolution, opposing absolute authority, the aristocracy entwined with bureaucracy, and the gendered dominance of patriarchy [8].

In certain cultures of Africa and the South Pacific, where women have historically been topless, the breast has never held the fetishized status it has in the West. This is because these cultures have their own fetishes: small feet in China [9], the nape of the neck in Japan [10], and buttocks in parts of Africa [11]. In some regions of India, covering the upper body is considered a marker of prestige and nobility. As a result, upper-caste women were permitted to cover their breasts, whereas lower-caste women were taxed if they chose to do so; this was known as the breast tax [12].

Globally, there are many myths, beliefs, and cultural judgments regarding breasts. Anatolia is one of the regions with the most iconic and mythological examples of the breast's cultural impact. As the historical crossroad for many civilizations since prehistoric times, Anatolia offers deep insight into the formation of civilization. It is difficult to fully understand how the breast was perceived across all cultures and time periods from the pre-Neolithic era to the present. However, available evidence demonstrates the strong influence of this anatomical structure representing the femininity on societies throughout history.

Material and Method

Prehistoric archaeological findings in Anatolia can be categorized into the pre-Neolithic, Chalcolithic, Bronze, and Iron Ages. Archeological finds surviving from these pre-literate eras were examined within the context of their respective periods. The figures in the manuscript are based on photographs taken by the author.

Results

The Breast in Pre-Neolithic and Neolithic Anatolia (9000-5500 B.C.)

Göbekli Tepe, located in southeastern Anatolia and dated to around 9600-9500 BC, is considered the cult center of the Pre-Neolithic formation in Mesopotamia and is currently the oldest known architectural site in the world. The Pre-Neolithic complex of Göbekli Tepe consists of 20 temples surrounded by walls [13]. Among the reliefs in this cult center, with one exception, all human and animal figures are depicted as male. The only female figure is rendered with clearly defined breasts, genitalia, hips, hands, and feet. The breasts of the depicted woman are pronounced and ptotic. The presence of breasts in this symbolic representation of femininity is significant (Figure 1A). That the only female depiction at the world's oldest known structure includes an explicit portrayal of the breast suggests that even in the pre-Neolithic period, femininity was symbolized through the breast.

At Çatalhöyük, Neolithic site, the seated goddess figurine has wide bodily proportions representing abundance and fertility [14]. Her breasts are large, full, and extend down to her navel, featuring inverted nipples (Figure 1B).

In another female figurine unearthed at Çatalhöyük, a nude goddess is depicted seated, covering her breasts with her hands. The figure features prominent, wide hips and a rounded abdomen (Figure 1C).

Chalcolithic Period (5500-3200 B.C.)

It is evident that during the Chalcolithic period in Anatolia, the image of the woman as a fertile and nurturing mother goddess persisted. Almost all the figurines uncovered from this era are female figurines [15].

It can be seen that female figurines from Chalcolithic Anatolia have less artistic detail when compared to earlier periods. In these plastic representations, facial and bodily features are rendered in a simplified manner: the faces are flat, and details such as the eyes,

ears, and nose are either absent or only faintly suggested. The breasts, however, are distinctly depicted in relief (Figures 2A,B). The depiction of the breast is less intricate, and the breasts are notably smaller after the Neolithic period.

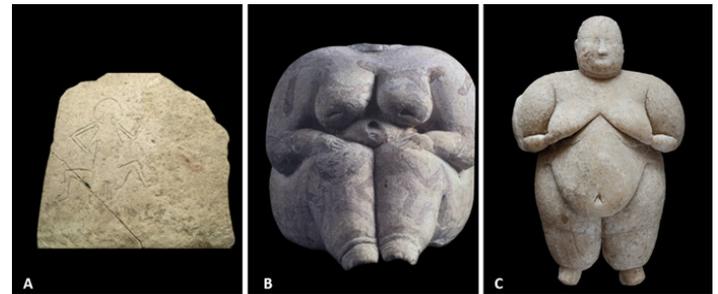


Figure 1: A) At Göbekli Tepe, distinctly feminine motifs are lacking from both the animal and human images. There is a single exception – a naked woman, breast hanging down on both sides engraved on a stone slab placed between the so-called lions' pillars. (Göbekli Tepe, 12th-9th Millennium B.C., neolithic period, limestone H:28,2 cm, Archaeological Museum Şanlıurfa, Şanlıurfa). B) Figurine of a seated goddess with large pendulous breasts that have inverted nipples. The head was broken. (Çatal Höyük, first half of the 6th Millennium B.C., neolithic period, baked clay H: 9,4 cm, Museum of Anatolian Civilisations, Ankara). C) Goddess standing with hands on breasts. In the statue, her belly and breasts are large and saggy. (Çatal Höyük, 8th- 5 .5th Millennium B.C., neolithic period, H: 17 cm. Konya Archaeology Museum Konya).



Figure 2: A) Chalcolithic standing nude female figure. (Hacılar, 5.5th-5.3th Millennium B.C., steatite, painted, H: 21cm. Museum of Prehistory and Early History in Altes Museum, Berlin). B) Seated goddess statue from the Chalcolithic period. Her breasts are smaller compared to her body. (Canhasan, 5th Millennium B.C., H: 19 cm. Museum of Anatolian Civilisations, Ankara).

Bronze age (3200-1200 B.C.)

In contrast to the fuller and more corpulent female figures of earlier eras, the women depicted during this period were slender and graceful. The artists of this era created figures reminiscent of those in Ancient Greek art, erect, small-breasted, with flat abdomens and narrow waists. A female statue found in the Hasanoglan burial site was made of solid silver. A mask-like gold plate extends from the top of the head down to the neck. Two gold plates crisscross between her breasts, and another encircles her waist. While her left breast is covered with a gold plate, her right breast is exposed

(Figure 3).



Figure 3: Statue of a woman. (Hasanođlan, End of the 3th Millennium B.C., Bronz age, silver and gold H: 24.4 cm Museum of Anatolian Civilizations, Ankara).

One of the prominent myths of the Bronze Age is the Amazons. This community of warrior women, known globally, is first mentioned in Homer's renowned epic *The Iliad*. The Amazons are believed to have lived along the Black Sea coast in a place called Therme. Although the exact meaning of their name remains uncertain, the popular belief is that it derives from the term *amazoi*, meaning "breastless." Hippocrates claimed that the Amazons were different from all other races. They rode horses, used bows, hurled spears while mounted, and fought enemies as long as they remained virgins. According to their laws, they could not relinquish their virginity until they had killed three enemies, nor could they engage with men until their vows had been fulfilled. Once a woman found a mate, she would typically cease horseback riding unless necessary. The Amazons were said to lack right breasts; in childhood, their mothers would heat a specially made copper instrument and cauterize the right breast, thereby the cauterized breast couldn't develop. The strength concentrates in the right shoulder and arm [16]. Diodorus wrote that when the Amazons had children, they would entrust the infants to men who nourished them with milk and age-appropriate cooked foods. If the child was a girl, her breasts were cauterized during puberty to prevent the development [17]. From the Archaic period through the Late Roman era, Amazons were depicted in vase paintings, reliefs, sculptures, and mosaics. These representations often combined elements from Eastern warrior types: Thracian warriors' peltae (crescent-shaped shields), Scythian warriors' bows, arrows, pointed caps, and patterned cloaks, and Anatolian warriors' labrys (double-headed axes) [18]. The earliest example of mosaics portraying scenes from Amazon life, known as the House of the Amazons, was found in Antioch, Anatolia (Figure 4). Another mosaic from Şanlıurfa in Anatolia depicts four Amazon queens engaged in a hunting scene [19] (Figure 5).



Figure 4: Amazonomachy, an Amazon woman fighting with one breast exposed, armed with a double-headed axe. (Antakya, limestone, 2nd half of the 4th century AD. measures 1.5 m x 3.8 m, Louvre Museum, Paris).



Figure 5: Upper part of the figure in original mosaic: Amazonomachy, the rectangular panel depicts four Amazon lions and a leopard hunting. In addition, there are various animal figures such as bears, dogs, ostrich, partridges and hungry motifs around the Amazons. (Şanlıurfa, is dated to the 5th-6th centuries AD, measures 3.91 x 9.02 m, Şanlıurfa). The mosaic has been recolored by A. Rahman Birden, faithful to the original.

Iron age (1200-500 B.C.)

With the emergence of written history, one of the final examples of female statuary is the Artemis (Cybele) the mother goddess statue discovered in the ancient city of Ephesus. This statue represents the goddess of fertility. There are many breasts at the center of the many animal motifs on her body (Figure 6A).

The female statues of this period were perfectly depicted. The anatomical detail of the female body was portrayed in detail. These figures were perfectly idealized, with particular emphasis placed on the aesthetic appeal of the breasts. One of the most prominent sculptors of the era, Praxiteles, was the first to create a life-size statue of a nude woman [20]. Many copies of Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite of Knidos were unearthed throughout Anatolia (Figure 6B). These statues are characterized by their alluring posture, with the upper body exposed from the pelvic region upward. The breasts are depicted with near-perfection, with clearly defined anatomical boundaries along the anterior thoracic wall and axillary region. Though nearly equal in size, the breasts avoid the monotony of perfect symmetry. Anatomically, the breasts are laterally positioned on the chest wall, with the nipple-areola complex slightly protruding and located in a lateral-superior orientation relative to the thoracic plane.

A statue from 2nd century AD Anatolia, found in Amasra, depicts a nude water nymph leaning against a vase mounted on a pilaster. The figure is life-sized. Her right hand lightly grasps a garment draped loosely over her hips (Figure 6C). The breasts are proportional to the body and idealized in accordance with the perfectionist aesthetic of the period.



Figure 6: A) Statue of Artemis. This colossal Artemis statue is covered with multiple breasts, symbolizing fertility (Ephesus, Ephesus Museum, 2st century AD, white marble, H: 174cm, İzmir). B) Aphrodite statue from the Iron Age. (Dardanus Tumulus, 1st century BC, Iron age, terracotta H: 31.5 cm. Troy Museum, Çanakkale). C) Nymph statue from the Iron Age. (Amasra, Amasra Museum, 2st century AD, Iron age, H: 153 cm, Bartın).

Discussion

In depictions of the female body in ancient Anatolia, the breast is often the most distinctive feature. When assessed in terms of size, shape, and even number, breasts were diverse and prominently displayed. The only known female figure from Göbekli Tepe, the oldest known architectural structure in the world, features breasts that hang symmetrically to either side, conveying a sense of sacredness devoid of eroticism. The choice to portray the sole female figure in the world's oldest sanctuary with accentuated breasts indicates that even in the pre-Neolithic period, femininity was symbolized through the breast.

The gradual transformation of primitive hunting and gathering lifestyles, the discovery of arable land, and the resultant end of nomadic existence marked a significant advancement and the dawn of a new era for humankind. During this time, the fertility of the earth became symbolically associated with the fertility of women. Like the soil, which bears fruit when seeded, women conceive and sustain the lineage. The woman, who nourishes her child with milk from her breast, offers the entirety of her body's resources, much like the land, to ensure the survival of the human species. Compared to men, this was an extraordinary power, and therefore, woman was deemed worthy of deification. Female figurines unearthed in Neolithic archaeological sites across Anatolia share common features: full-bodied forms with exaggerated breasts and hips.

The frequent portrayal of these figurines as plump, fleshy, large-breasted, and broad-hipped supports the existence of a powerful, fertile, and sexually potent Mother Goddess cult. These figurines, crafted from bone, stone, or fired clay, are notable not only for their prominent breasts but also for their exaggerated abdomens and hips. Even though not aligned with today's aesthetic norms, such corpulence likely represented abundance in a time when food was scarce. The realization during the Neolithic period that soil could be cultivated marked the end of nomadic life and represented a significant advancement for humanity, ushering in a new era. The seated goddess figurine discovered at Çatalhöyük features notably large and full breasts that extend down to the navel, with inverted nipples depicted on the breast tips. The detailed depiction of the shoulders, breasts, navel, and hands suggests that women may have left their upper bodies uncovered during this period. The depiction of inverted nipples may well represent the first known example of breast deformity in history. In Neolithic sites across Central and Western Anatolia, most female figurines are depicted nude, with fleshy torsos, full breasts, and meticulously sculpted abdomens and hips.

The warrior women and female leaders of the Bronze Age suggest a matriarchal culture until the end of that era. In territories under the dominion of mother goddesses, the emergence of the warrior Amazons is not surprising. The legendary claim that Amazons severed one of their breasts to shoot arrows more effectively marks the unique role of the breast in their mythology. As men began to assert power within matriarchal societies, the ensuing climate of warfare reshaped women's societal roles in the centuries to follow. The Amazon myth deserves analysis from both ancient and modern gender perspectives. The absence of one breast and the resulting asymmetry evoked distinct psychological reactions in men and women. By deliberately removing a breast, these women transformed into awe-inspiring and fearsome beings. They retained both the nurturing and reproductive symbolism of the breast and the martial prowess associated with its absence. This duality fostered a bisexual perception that combined masculine traits with feminine anatomy. The asymmetry produced by unilateral mastectomy signified empowerment for women and intimidation for men. Legends of the Amazons living apart from men and

engaging in warfare have served as inspiration for women of all kinds, including transgender men. Their valor and capabilities held symbolic significance for Renaissance-era feminism [21]. Hundreds of ancient Greek works depicting mythological male warriors attacking and killing Amazons reflect the patriarchal view of these women [18].

The myth of the Amazons evolved into a process wherein the militant breast, once symbolic of resistance, gradually gave way to the anatomical norm, coinciding with a historical shift from fertility goddesses to male deities. In the majority of archaeological depictions of Amazons, the warrior breast is concealed beneath clothing, while the anatomically “normal” breast is exposed. These representations suggest that the form and number of breasts held significant cultural meaning amid the transition from matriarchal to patriarchal, gender-based social structures.

The warrior women of the Bronze Age, the Amazons, were immortalized in mythologies such as the Trojan War, chronicled by historians like Diodorus and Herodotus, and embedded in the European imagination through various art forms. The myth of the warrior woman was transported to the New World when a Spanish explorer, inspired by vague reports of women who fought alongside men during his expedition, named a great river “Amazon.” Since then, female warriors have been known globally as “Amazons” [22].

In Anatolia, female figures once emblematic of the mother goddess faith underwent a transformation with the rise of male-dominated commerce and agriculture. This shift marked the ascendancy of male deities in religious and social hierarchies. With this divine reordering, the female ideal began to morph into a construct shaped by the male gaze. A myth surrounding the renowned sculptor Praxiteles centers on the creation of his statue of Aphrodite and exemplifies the idealization of the breast. According to legend, one evening near Knidos, close to present-day Datça, Praxiteles observed a group of nuns descending from a hilltop monastery for a swim. While most entered the water clothed, one young woman disrobed completely. Struck by her form, Praxiteles felt compelled to immortalize her body in marble. He sought permission from the abbess and learned the woman’s story: her name was Phryne, and she had been sentenced to death for killing a man. During her sentencing, her lawyer, seeing no other hope, tore off her clothing before the judges and exclaimed, “Would you really destroy these breasts?”. The sight of her bare breasts led the judges to convene anew and ultimately commute her sentence to lifelong confinement in a monastery. Praxiteles then sculpted the very breasts that had saved her life [19,23]. Since that time, nude statues of Aphrodite have filled museums, galleries, and souvenir shops throughout the Mediterranean.

Ancient goddesses symbolizing fertility and sanctity (Cybele in Anatolia, Inanna and Ishtar in Mesopotamia, Astarte among the Hebrews, Isis in Africa, Ushas in Indian culture, and others across the ancient world) represent sacred embodiments of the same

cosmic season. In Anatolia, the breast has long served as a symbol of divinity, abundance, leadership, warrior strength, and intimacy, from the eras that celebrated the sacred feminine to periods dominated by patriarchal values. Its nudity, size, and number have reflected the cultural codes of each era. With the onset of written history, breasts were first covered with cloth, later constrained by corsets, and eventually flattened by bras. Nonetheless, the cultural, spiritual, powerful, and intimate connotations represented by breast imagery in Anatolia spread across the globe and became a subject of both art and science throughout history.

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