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A Cycladic Female Figure

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Greek, Cycladic, Spedos Variety
Early Cycladic II, ca. 2600-2500 B.C.

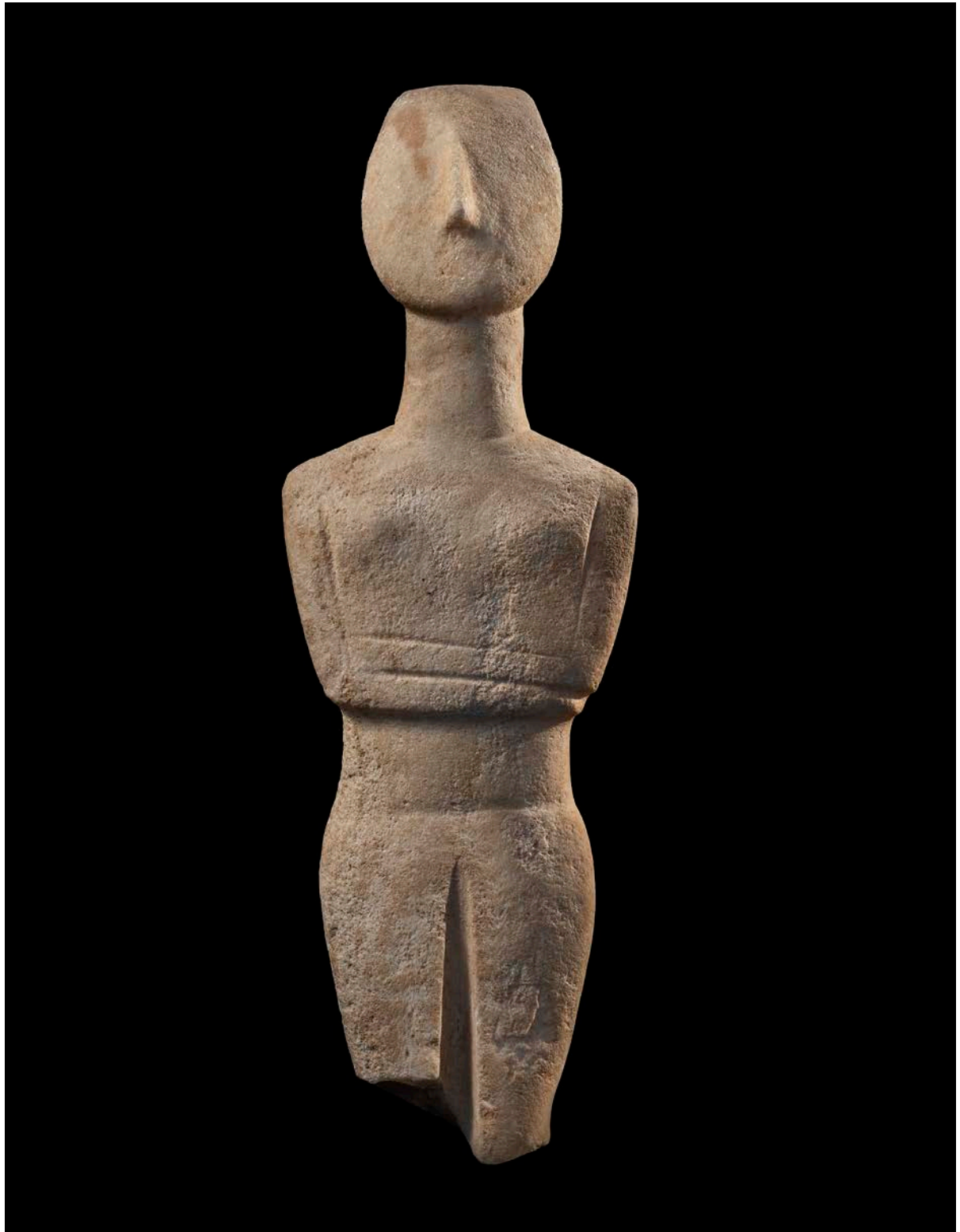
Reclining Female Figure

Marble
h: 30 cm; 11 7/8 in.

Provenance

N. Koutoulakis, Switzerland, 1960s-1970s.
Bud Holland, Chicago, USA, acquired January 28 1980 (invoice).
Private Collection, Chicago, 1980-2017.
Distinguished Private Collection, Pennsylvania, 2017.
Accompanied by Art Loss Register Certificate #10315.13.WK

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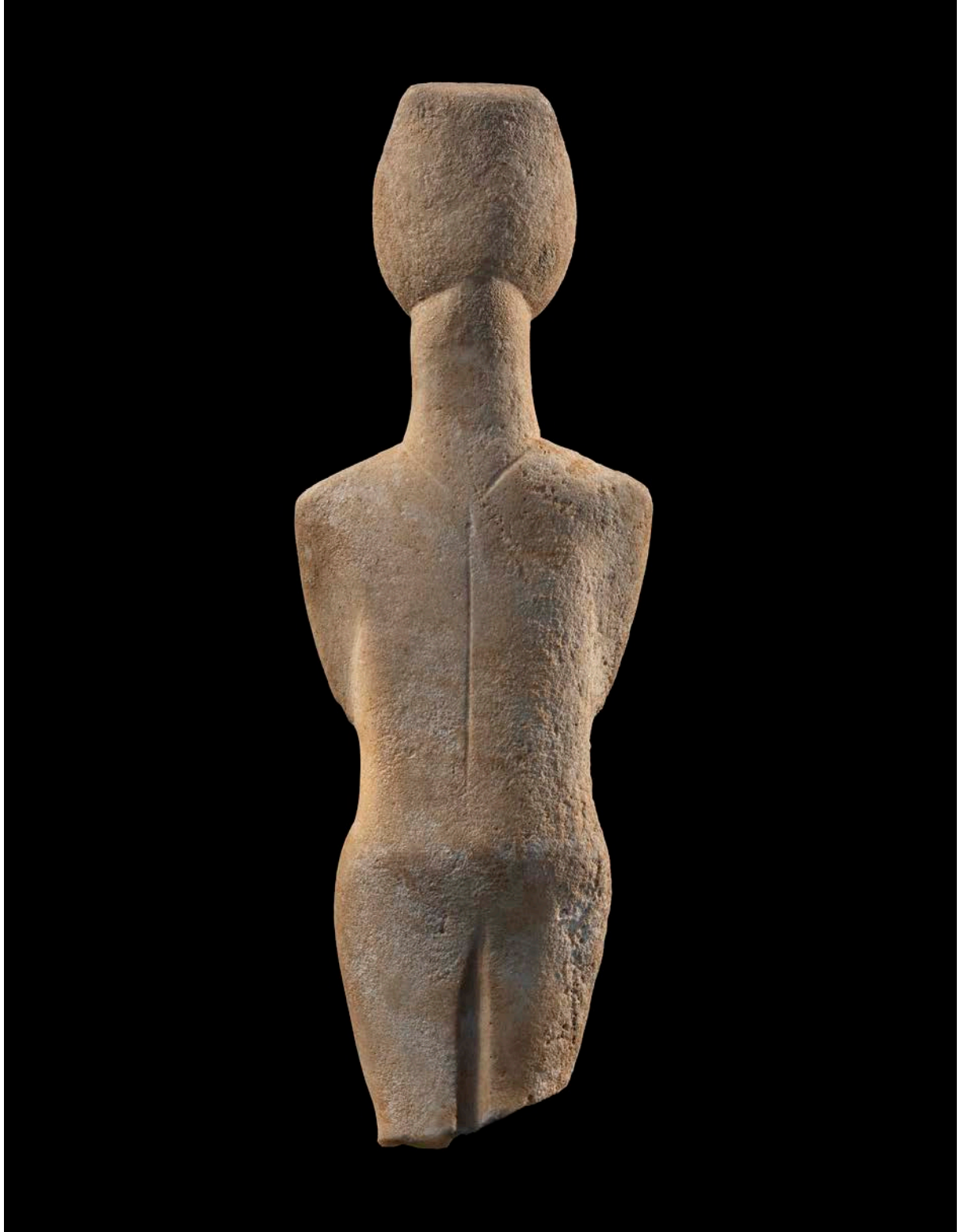
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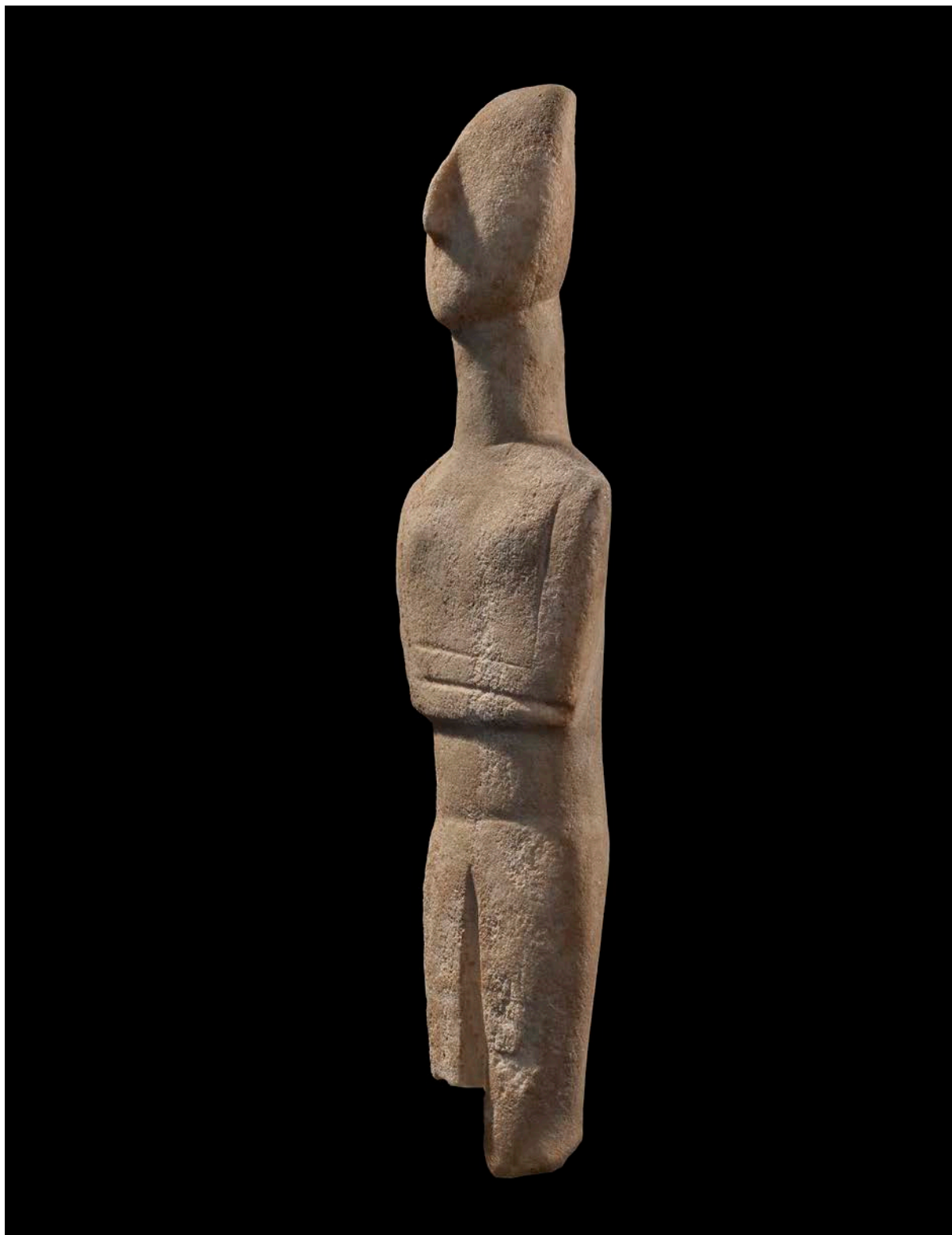
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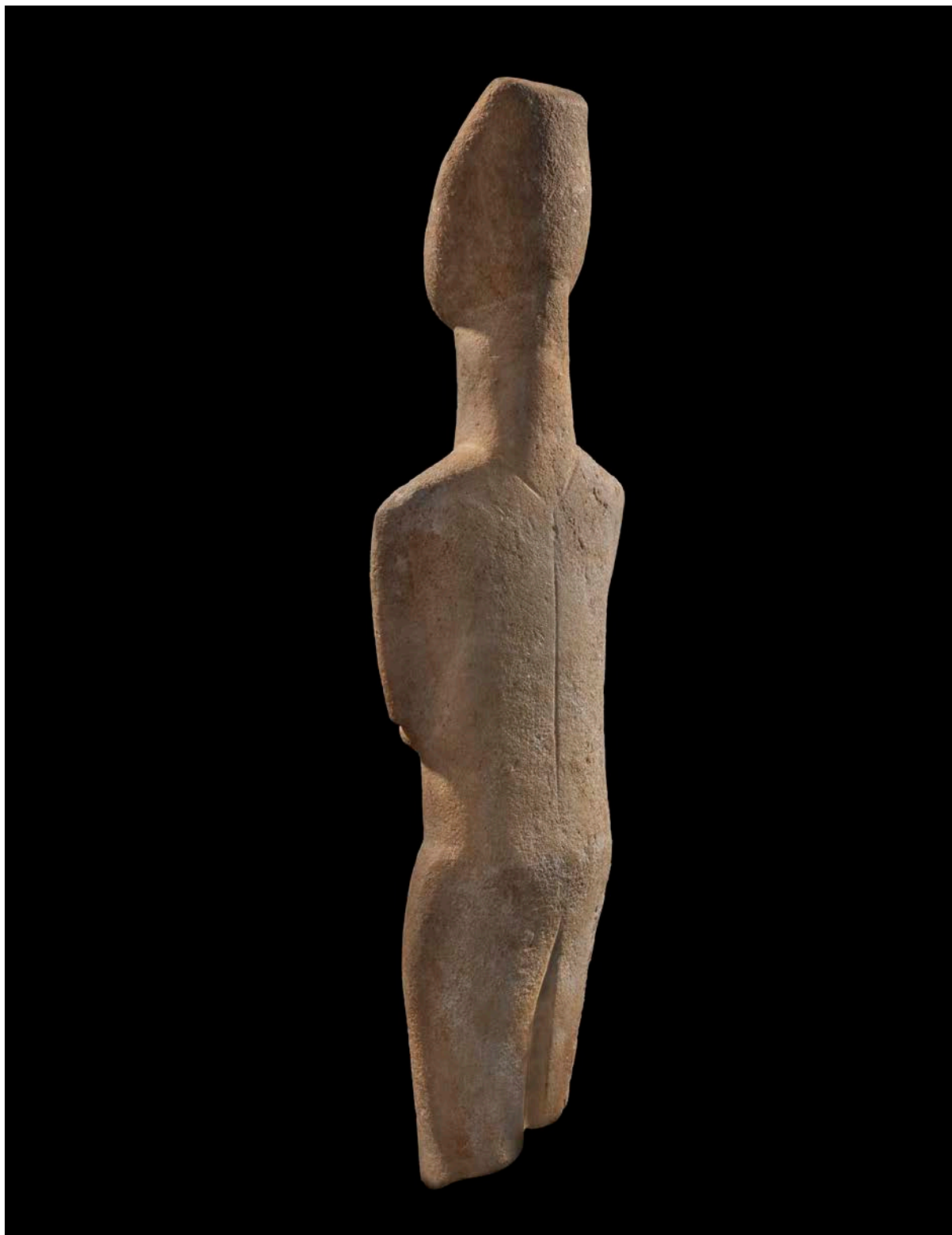
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The folded-arm figurine from the Greek Cyclades islands is one of the most striking artistic images from antiquity. Predominantly representing the human female, these figures were the principal sculptural type in the Greek Islands from 2700-2200 B.C., during the Early Cycladic II period. The peoples inhabiting these islands took advantage of the abundant natural deposits of marble to create sculptures and vessels that still fascinate observers today with their stark, remarkably abstract designs and elegant lines.

The present figure is an unusually large example of the Spedos variety of the canonical type. Named after the region on the island of Naxos where many were found, the Spedos variety is generally regarded as the pinnacle of the type and is characterised by its lyre-shaped head, rounded shoulders, and carved cleft between the legs. The Cycladic sculptors worked according to an established set of proportions and applied a 'harmonic system' of certain specific angles in the outline and surface details. According to the system, the figure was divided into four sections, with each section equal in length to one another. The sections comprise the top of head to base of neck; base of neck to lower abdomen; lower abdomen to knees; and knees to the feet. It is this ingenious system that gives rise to the overwhelming sense of harmonious symmetry and balance for which these figures are so admired.

Cycladic figures come from a prehistoric culture that flourished in the Greek islands in the middle of the Aegean Sea from around 5,300 to 2,000 B.C. Various purposes for these figures, which were most commonly female, have been supposed since their discovery by archaeologists nearly 200 years ago: from representations of a fertility goddess, to apotropaic figurines, children's toys, or representations of slaves or attendants who were meant to accompany their owners into the afterlife. More recently, however, archaeologists have complicated these understandings by focusing on the variety of representations among these figures (as there are male figures, figural groups, representations of musicians, and more) as well as the fact that some figures show signs of erosion, repair, and repainting, implying that they were owned or used for much longer than a simple burial deposit implies.

Controlled excavations of Early Cycladic cemeteries have shown that the marble figures belonged to a very small percentage of the population, some of whom possessed several examples, while the majority had none. The figures' ownership, and the fact that some were repaired several times, suggests that the few individuals who owned them kept them complete and repainted them during their lifetime and then, in some instances, were buried with them. Some graves also contained small jars and bowls with pigments that could have been used to paint or tattoo humans both in life and in the afterlife. It was common practice to dismember the marble figures methodically at the ankles, knees, waist or chest, and neck, perhaps to ensure that their light or essence was dispersed and could not re-enter them. Such a "killing" of the figure may have coincided with their owner's disincarnation, as often only fragments of the figure are entombed. But this was also the practice in the sanctuary at Kavos in Keros, so there may have been more complex reasons to render these figures powerless when they were deposited there, perhaps at the conclusion of a specific rite or festival.

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A note on condition: the head has reattached to neck (both original and belonging to the same figure); the proper right upper corner of the head has been restored. A full x-ray and scientific report is available (conducted by John Twilley, 2017).

References

A thorough study of Cycladic art is presented by J. Thimme, *Art and Culture of the Cyclades in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Chicago, 1977), esp. p. 47 for the proportional canon applied by Cycladic sculptors.

Individual hands are discussed by P. Getz-Preziosi, *Sculptors of the Cyclades: Individual and Tradition in the Third Millennium B.C.* (Michigan, 1987).

On the typology and development of Cycladic figures, C. Renfrew, *The Cycladic Spirit: Masterpieces from the Nicholas P. Goulandris Collection* (New York, 1991).

For further reading on the purpose of Cycladic figures, see Hendrix, Elizabeth A. "Painted Early Cycladic figures: An exploration of context and meaning," *Hesperia* 72, 2003, pp. 405–46.

On ritual practice, see Renfrew C., O. Philaniotou, N. Brodie, G. Gavalas & M.J. Boyd (eds.) *The Sanctuary on Keros and the Origins of Aegean Ritual Practice: The Excavations of 2006–2008, vol.II: Kavos and the Special Deposits*. (McDonald Institute monographs) Cambridge: McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research, 2015.

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