

FACT SHEET 02: First thoughts from experts

The discovery of the figure is highly important for archaeology in Scotland and across the UK. A great deal of academic discussion is likely to take place as experts consider what it tells us about life and culture 5,000 years ago – a time when representations of the human form were exceptionally rare in Britain and Ireland. This process has begun with a brief examination by Dr Alison Sheridan, Head of Early Prehistory in the National Museums Scotland archaeology department.

Dr Sheridan suggests the figure was made by shaping a beach pebble, and points out “striking similarities” between its heavy, wavy eyebrows and dot eyes, and a design on three chalk “drums” found in a youth’s grave at Folkton, Yorkshire. This motif is also present on a lintel in the tomb on the nearby island of Holm of Papa Westray and on a star-shaped piece of flat stone from Skara Brae. But, she warns, it is much less possible to be sure that these designs are necessarily intended to show human features.

Dr Sheridan says of the Westray carving that it is unclear whether it was intended to be human or divine: “Was this a sacred object? A toy? A bit of fun? “The other finds of the ‘eyebrow and eye’ motif suggest that it had special meaning to Late Neolithic society, so it may be that this is a representation of a goddess or ancestor figure.”

In the immediate future it is likely that experts are likely to generate at least as many questions as answers as they try to get to grips with the significance of the Orkney Venus.

Another examination by Dr Elizabeth Goring, a freelance expert in figurines, has started to look at issues like what the figure was for and how it might have been used. One option is that it was worn as a pendant, but there is little of the kind of wear that would give substance to this idea. And while it does stay upright, it is not

very stable and does not appear to have been specifically designed to stand as a statuette or figurine. Close examination using microscopes and raking fibre optic lights have shown a faint V-shaped incision linking what appear to be the female figure's breasts.

Dr Goring suggests that the stone is so soft it could have been shaped with something as soft as a bone tool, and that the markings may have been made quite quickly. One possibility is that it was made with the specific intention of placing it inside the farmhouse where it was found as an act of closure when its main period of use came to an end. The report concludes: "If this object was used as a pendant, it was very lightly worn or not worn in life at all. If this object was used as a figurine, there was no evidence that handling was involved in its function. The existence of decoration on both front and back surfaces might suggest it was intended to be viewed in the round. The freshness and smoothness of the surfaces suggest that it could have been made shortly before deposition, or indeed for deposition."