The non-fraud of the Middle Bronze Age stone goddess from Ustica: a reverse Piltdown hoax

SUSAN S. LUKESH & R. ROSS HOLLOWAY*

The authors examine claims that the sole surviving example of relief sculpture from the Middle Bronze of Italy or Sicily, discovered in the excavations on the island of Ustica in 1991, is a forgery that was deliberately planted on the site. Their refutation is based on examination of the photographic evidence that has been published in support of these claims.

Key words: Bronze Age, Ustica, figurative art, forgery, relief sculpture

In 1913, Charles Dawson discovered the first of two skulls found in the Piltdown quarry in Sussex, England, skulls of an apparently primitive hominid, an ancestor of man. The Piltdown Man, as he became known, constitutes perhaps the greatest scientific fraud of the last century (Turrittin n.d. (site accessed 28 December 2001); Harter n.d.). It was not until 1953, and after an estimated 500 articles and books were written about the remains, that the two skulls were

* Lukesh, 144 Hofstra University, Hempstead NY 11549-1440, USA. Holloway, Center for Old World Archaeology & Art, Brown University, Providence RI 02912, USA.

Received 15 March 2002, accepted 1 October 2002

ANTIQUITY 76 (2002) 974–9

declared frauds. Countless articles and books have been written since, purporting to unmask the perpetrators and to understand the why of their deception. There is no definitive answer. Numerous reasons have been suggested for such scientific frauds: student high jinks (such as the recently reported Runestone Fakery in Minnesota, supported by an elaborate web site, http://www.runestonemuseum.org/runestone.htm), the lure of creating evidence to support one's theories, the money to be gained from gullible collectors, and vanity, the chance to enhance one's own reputation or to damage another's. One consequence of the Piltdown hoax, though possibly not its original purpose, was to put a cloud over the career of Sir Arthur Smith-Woodard, Keeper of Geology of the British Museum (Natural History). It still remains uncertain why the Piltdown Man skulls were faked, or by whom, although in the climate of discovery and debate related to the antiquity of man in the later 19th and early 20th centuries the time was ripe for the faker to appear. That the hoax was not unmasked for some 40 years strengthened the hand of those who denied any relationship between man and the other primates and thus was detrimental to the advancement of science.

Archaeological fraud did not begin or end at Piltdown. Although different in many ways from the Piltdown Man hoax, a late 20th-century fraud, perpetuated on the small island of Ustica (north of Palermo, Sicily), demonstrates that archaeological hoaxing will continue as long as someone finds reasons to do so, even if it means denying the heritage of one's own country. The fraud we discuss here was not perpetrated to bolster a theory, to enhance a professional reputation or to deceive a collector. Its purpose was to discredit professional reputations, and those responsible for it were willing to sacrifice the first stone sculpture of the Middle Bronze Age found on the Italian mainland or in Sicily to reach their goal. This important discovery would then be consigned to the same fate as the Piltdown skulls and the archaeologists who reported it would be labelled incompetent dupes.

The statue, preserved height 22 cm, was discovered on the morning of 21 May 1991 (FIGURE 1). The trench in which the statue was discovered in two fragments, well separated from each other, was under the constant supervision of a member of the excavation staff. The field director (RRH) was present on the site as well (Holloway & Lukesh 1995; 2001). The details of the discovery have been published in full, but we must emphasize that the statue was found only after 23 cm of earth had been removed on that very morning from the stratum over it and that there was no indication of any recent disturbance to this layer. Because of its unique nature, a report was made quickly in *Sicilia Archeologica* (Holloway 1991). During the days immediately after the find, one of the local antiquarians of the island was permitted to examine the statue, which he did with some care.

While attending the First Congress of Sicilian Prehistory at Corleone in July of 1997, we were surreptitiously handed a pamphlet on the archaeology of Ustica whose author, Giovanni Mannino, is a retired excavation assistant of the Superintendency of Cultural Property of the Province of Palermo (Mannino 1997a). It was at the invitation of the then Superintendent, Dr Carmela Angela De Stefano, that the authors of this paper were conducting the excavations on the island as External Collaborators of the Superintendency.

Together with other topics, Mannino's pamphlet contained a direct attack on the authenticity of the statue. In this pamphlet Mannino related how he had received a letter from the embarrassed pranksters (and archaeological amateurs) who claimed that the statue was a piece of innocent fun playfully abandoned near the excavation trench. Much to their surprise the foreign archaeologists were completely taken in, and the pranksters were hastening to set the record straight (though taking care not to reveal their identities by sending their unsigned letter through a third party). While the original pamphlet offered only a photograph of the statue in unbroken condition (thus prior to its purported deposit on the excavation) (FIGURE 2), a subsequent article by Mannino in Sicilia Archeologica included two other photos showing the statue, as it was claimed, in an unfinished state (Mannino 1997b) (see FIGURE 3). The photographs offered to discredit our discovery are indeed photographs of a similar figure, one closely copied from images of the original published in our first report in *Sicilia Archeologica* but *made after the fact with the sole purpose of discrediting the excavation on Ustica.* RRH



FIGURE 1. *Excavated statue.*



FIGURE 2. *Fraud.*

replied to this story of the anonymous amateurs in 1997 with a detailed refutation of this story, based on the slight but telling variations between the two figures (Holloway 1997). But even before the publications that appeared in 1997, including a renewed attack by Mannino in the same issue of *Sicilia Archeologica* for 1997 (Mannino, 1997b), the poison was already at work, spread by rumour, '*Fama malum qua non aliud velocius ullum*' (Virgil *Aeneid* IV: 175).

The second edition of Sebastiano Tusa's *La Sicilia nella Preistoria* of 1992 contained a footnote referring to 'a dubious female sculpture' (*una dubbia scultura femminile*) from the excavations (Tusa 1992: 545, note 74). Robert Leighton, in his general work on Sicilian prehistory in 1999, found it best not to discuss the statue because of its questionable authenticity, for which he could quote no printed discussion but only hearsay (Leighton 1999, p. 280, note 11):

> Unusual evidence of figurative stone sculpture has been published in the form of a carved tufa slab, resembling a cult figure, similar in style to some decorated handles of large pedestal vases from Thapsos. It has recently been suggested that, unbeknown to the excavators, this item was mischievously manufactured in recent times, and therefore I have omitted it pending further inquiries.

Franco De Angelis, in his lengthy review of archaeology in Italy and Sicily in *Archaeological Reports for 2000–2001*, publishes a photograph of the statue but with the usual cautions, and citing Mannino's pamphlet but neglecting to mention our refutation of his charges in *Sicilia Archeologica* for 1997 (De Angelis 2001: 189):

> In connection with cult, serious doubts have recently been raised as to the authenticity of the tufo sculpture of a woman; these are stated in full in G. Mannino, *Ustica* (Palermo, 1997). It is apparently rumoured that the sculpture is a modern forgery, a hoax by a group of youngsters; how seriously this rumour should be taken remains to be seen, but for the time being we may enjoy the sculpture, whatever its status.

Even the editors of ANTIQUITY felt it necessary to make a gesture in the direction of doubt when discussing the final publication of the excavations: 'A cult statue disputed by some' (Stoddart

2001: 281). Needless to say, the statue has never been displayed, despite the recent reinstallation of the antiquarium on Ustica (we last visited the island in June of 2000). Ernesto De Miro, however, in his summary of recent archaeological work in Sicily (De Miro 1977–98: 705) prudently refrained from repeating gossip.

But before the Ustica statue is forever consigned to a niche beside the Piltdown skulls in the cavern of archaeological *dubitanda*, we feel called upon to point out once more, in a periodical that reaches a world-wide audience and particularly the English-speaking audience reached by Leighton and De Angelis, why the photographs published to attack the piece are those of a second figure made expressly to discredit the original; and that original, we stress, is the sole surviving image in stone from the Italian mainland or Sicilian Middle Bronze Age. More and more authors now, writing on the prehistory of the central Mediterranean, will simply leave out the Ustica statue because it is somehow tainted, just as some students of human origins left out the Piltdown skulls from their accounts before the hoax was proven in 1953 (Sherwood Washburn quoted in Lewin 1987: 75). In respect to Piltdown the omissions were prudent but if a genuine and unique piece of evidence of the past is removed from discussion, then prudence has turned into tragedy. To the proof given in *Sicilia Archeologica* for 1997 we can now add the results of superimposed photo imagery.

We will begin by repeating our direct observation from comparing photographs of the two sculptures, to which we shall refer as 'the excavated piece' and 'the fraud'.

First, in the fraud the left breast of the figure is flattened. In the excavated piece it is fully conical. This difference is important because, if the photograph of the fraud were that of an earlier state of the excavated piece, it is impossible to explain how the fully rounded breast of the excavated piece appeared earlier in a flattened form. While it would have been possible to remove more stone from the figure, restoring the flattened breast to its conical shape that exists today — JUST AS IT WAS MADE WITH NO SIGN OF ANY REPAIR — is impossible.



FIGURE 3. *Fraud under development.*

Second, the makers of the fraud became confused in rendering the ribs of the figure. At the top right side of the figure (viewer's left) they mistook the direction of the channel immediately below the breast of the figure, slanting it upwards rather than downward. Then they also blundered in the placement of the channel below the one just mentioned. In the original piece only the upper edge of the channel is preserved, but that upper edge meets the central area of the statue's thorax significantly lower in relation to the matching channel on the other side of the figure than is the case in the fraud, whose makers produced a more symmetrical pattern than that found on the original. Once again, it is impossible to explain how the excavated piece could have a different pattern of channels on its body than what we are asked to believe existed in an earlier state of the same sculpture.

We do not rest our case here, however. In addition to the evidence cited above we offer another set of images (FIGURE 4). The first two images, of the fraud on the top left and the excavated piece on the top right, have superimposed outlines — black for the fraud, grey for

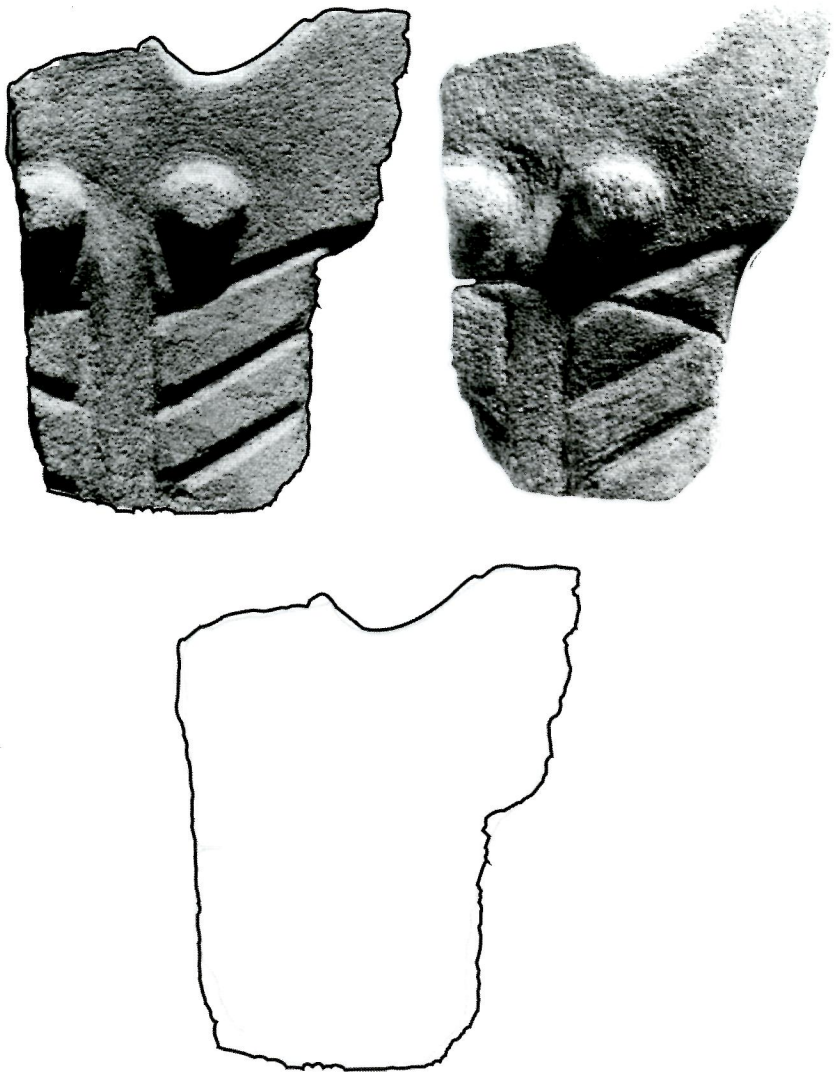


FIGURE 4. *Superimposed images.*

the excavated piece. The third image displays the outlines only superimposed. Two facts are immediately clear. The first is that in two small areas — one on the left and one on the right — the black outline is inside the grey, indicating that at these points the black (or fraud) is smaller than the grey (or excavated piece). Just as with the flattened breast described above, stone does not grow. It may be chipped or worn away over time, but it cannot enlarge its original shape. The second fact is the enormous care with which the fraud was created and the implications this has for the intent of the perpetrator.

To this evidence provided by the photographs of both pieces, we must emphasize again that the excavated statue was not found carelessly abandoned in the excavation enclosure but was excavated only after 23 cm of undisturbed stratum covering it had been removed on the morning of the discovery. The statue was found in two pieces, both of whose surface and *broken edges* showed the same lengthy exposure to the conditions of the soil in which they lay as any other rock in the deposit.

Finally, it is clear that the genuine Ustica statue fits perfectly into the repertoire of con-

temporary Middle Bronze Age Sicilian decorative art. A monumental chalice in cup form from Thapsos near Syracuse, exactly contemporary with the Ustica statue (14th and 13th centuries BC), shows the same dendritic pattern of lines and knob-like features, here used to suggest breasts or eyes (FIGURE 5).

To summarize: the slight but telling variations between the two figures, the demonstration of their differences by the computer overlap image and the wear of the broken pieces show without doubt that there are two versions of this sculpture: the excavated piece and the fraud. The fact that the perpetrator of the fraud created photographs of the work in progress proves the intent of the fraud and magnifies the seriousness of the act. Moreover, in the attempt to discredit our competence in directing the excavations on Ustica, a sinister shadow was also thrown over the judgement of the Superintendent in inviting us to undertake the work. In recent years various covert moves against Superintendents of Cultural Property have been made in Sicily. Dr Giuseppe Voza at Syracuse and Dr Graziella Florentini at Argrigento have both suffered house arrest as a result. In 1999 Dr Di Stefano herself was transferred from Palermo, a superintendency with responsibilities for large-scale and large-budget restoration projects involving the historic buildings of the regional capital, to the smaller superintendency at Trapani. The Ustica hoax may well have been part of a larger story.

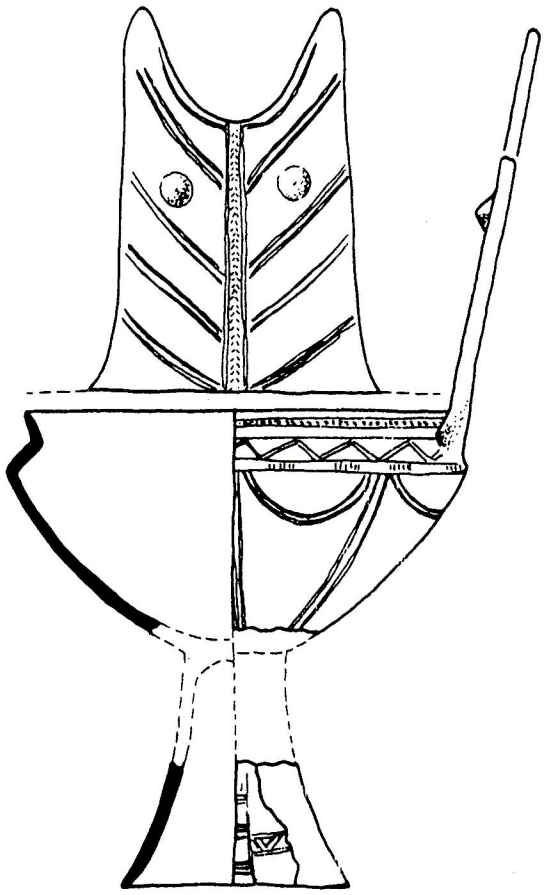


FIGURE 5. *Chalice from Thapsos.*

References

DE ANGELIS, F. 2000–2001. Archaeology in Sicily 1996–2000, *Archaeological Reports for 2000–2001*: 144–99.

DE MIRO, E. 1997–98. Rassegna Archeologica. Anni 1993–97, *Kokalos* 43–44: 701–25.

HARTER, R. *A homage for Piltdown Man*, http://www.tiac.net/users/cri/piltdown.html, site accessed 28/12/01.

HOLLOWAY, R.R. 1991. Rinvenimento di una scultura della media età del bronzo, *Sicilia Archeologica* 24: 81–5.

1997. Si parla di Ustica, *Sicilia Archeologica* 30: 13–15.

HOLLOWAY, R.R. & S.S. LUKESH. 1995. *Ustica I, Archaeologia Transatlantica* XIV.

2001, *Ustica II, Archaeologia Transatlantica* XIX.

LEIGHTON, R. 1999. *Sicily before history*. Ithaca (NY): Cornell University Press.

LEWIN, R. 1987. *Bones of contention: controversies in the search for human origins*. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press.

MANNINO, G. 1997a. *Ustica*. Palermo: privately printed.

1997 b. Sul villaggio dei Faraglioni di Ustica, *Sicilia Archeologica* 30: 15–20.

STODDART, S. 2001. In 'Among the New Books', *Antiquity* 75: 887–9.

TURRITTIN, T. *A mostly complete Piltdown Man bibliography*. http://www.tiac.net/users/cri/piltref.html

TUSA, S. 1992. *La Sicilia nella Preistoria*. 2nd edition. Palermo: Sellerio.

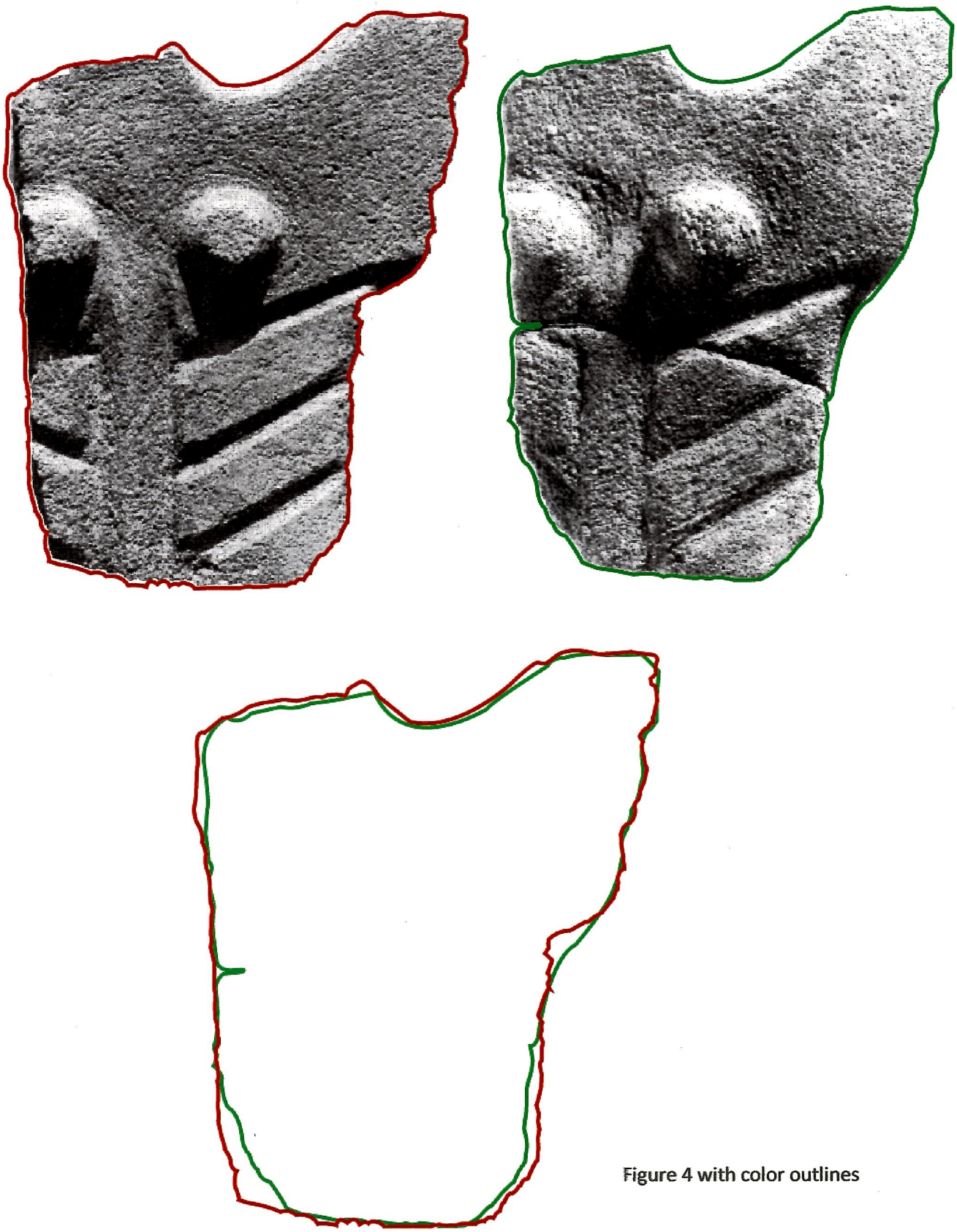


Figure 4 with color outlines