



Ain Sakhri Lovers Figurine

*Stone sculpture, found at Wadi Khareitoun, Judea, near Bethlehem
9000 BC*

As the latest Ice Age came to an end, somebody picked a pebble out of a small river not far from Bethlehem. It's a pebble that must have tumbled downstream and been banged and smoothed against other stones as it went, in the process that geologists poetically describe as 'chattering'. But about 11,000 years ago, a human hand then shaped and chipped this beautifully chattered, rounded pebble into one of the most moving objects in the British Museum. It shows two naked people literally wrapped up in each other. It's the oldest known representation of a couple having sex.

In the Manuscripts Saloon at the British Museum, most people walk straight past the case that contains the carving of the lovers. Perhaps it's because from a distance it doesn't look like very much; it's a small, muted, greyish stone about the size of a clenched fist. But when you get nearer to it, you can see that it's a couple, seated, their arms and legs wrapped around each other in the closest of embraces. There are no clear facial features, but you can tell that these two people are looking into each other's eyes. I think it's one of the tenderest expressions of love that I know, comparable to the great kissing couples of Brancusi and Rodin.

At the time this pebble was shaped by human hands, human society was changing. As the climate warmed up across the world and people gradually shifted from hunting and gathering to a more settled way of life based on farming, our relationship to the natural world was transformed. From living as a minor part of a balanced ecosystem, we began trying to shape our environment, to control nature. In the Middle East the warmer weather brought a spread of rich grasslands. Until then people had been moving around, hunting gazelle and gathering the seeds of lentils, chickpeas and wild grasses. But in the new, lush savannah, gazelle were plentiful and tended to stay in one place throughout the year, so the humans settled down with them. Once they were settled, they started gathering grass grains that were still on the stalk, and, by collecting and sowing these seeds, they inadvertently carried out a very early kind of genetic engineering. Most wild grass seeds fall off the plant and are spread easily by the wind or eaten by birds, but these people selected seeds which stayed on the stalk – a very important characteristic if a grass is to be worth cultivating. They stripped these seeds, removed the husks and ground the grains to flour. Later, they would go on to sow the surplus seeds. Farming had begun – and for over 10,000 years we've been breaking and sharing bread.

These early farmers slowly created two of the world's great staple crops – wheat and barley. With this more stable life, our ancestors had time to reflect and to create. They made images that show and celebrate key elements in their changing universe: food and power, sex and love. The maker of the 'lovers' sculpture was one of these people. I asked the British sculptor Marc Quinn what he thought of it:

We always imagine that we discovered sex, and that all other ages before us were rather prudish and simple, whereas in fact – obviously – human beings have been emotionally sophisticated since at least 10,000 BC, when this sculpture was made, and I'm sure just as sophisticated as us.

What's incredible about this sculpture is that when you move it and look at it in different ways, it changes completely. From the side, you have the long shot of the embrace, you see the two figures. From another side it's a penis, from another a vagina, from another side breasts – it seems to be formally mimicking the act of making love as well as representing it. And those different sides unfold as you handle it, as you turn this object around in your hand, so they unfold in time, which I think is another important thing about the sculpture – it's not an instant thing. You walk round it and the object unfolds in real time. It's almost like in a pornographic film, you have long shots, close-ups – it has a cinematic quality as you turn it, you get all these different things. And yet it's a poignant, beautiful object about the relationship between people.

What do we know of the people captured in this lovers' embrace? The maker – or should we say the sculptor? – of the lovers belonged to a people that we now call the Natufians, who lived in a region that straddled what is today Israel, the Palestinian territories, Lebanon and Syria. Our sculpture came from south-east of Jerusalem. In 1933 the great archaeologist Abbé Henri Breuil and a French diplomat, René Neuville, visited a small museum in Bethlehem. Neuville wrote:

Towards the end of our visit, I was shown a wooden casket containing various items from the surrounding areas, of which none, apart from this statuette, was of any value. I realized immediately the particular significance of the design involved and asked the source of these objects. I was told that they had been brought by a Bedouin who was returning from Bethlehem towards the Dead Sea.

Intrigued by the figure, Neuville wanted to know more about its discovery and sought out the Bedouin he had been told about. He managed to track down the man responsible for the find, who took him to the very cave – in the Judaean desert not far from Bethlehem – in which the sculpture had been discovered. It was called Ain Sakhri, and so these sculpted figures that had so captivated Neuville are still known as the Ain Sakhri lovers. Crucially, the sculpture had been found with objects which made it clear that the cave was a dwelling rather than a grave, and so our sculpture must have played some kind of role in domestic everyday life.

We don't know exactly what that role might have been, but we do know that this dwelling belonged to people who were living at the dawn of agriculture. Their new way of life involved the collecting and storing of food. The result was as profound a transformation for human beings as any revolution in history. This process of settling down did, of course, make them more vulnerable than hunters or nomads to crop failure, pests, diseases and, above all, to the weather; but while things were good, society boomed. A guaranteed abundant food source fuelled a sustained population explosion, and people began to live in large villages of between two and three hundred – the densest concentration of people the world had yet seen. When larders are stocked and the pressure is off, there is time to think, and these rapidly growing, settled communities had the leisure to work out new social relationships, to contemplate the changing pattern of their lives and to make art.