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Conjoined Twins in Antiquity: Reality  
or Part of the Mythology?

**Abstract**

Conjoined twins, was a known type of birth in antiquity. It was mentioned in manuscripts and depicted in terracotta figurines and vase paintings. Such findings were discovered in a variety of territories. Religion, local cult, and simple iconography of a known phenomenon create a debate among scholars to annotate their discovery. Gods and goddesses, magic figurines, sacred marriage, a binary hypostasis, or just Conjoined twins?

**Keywords:** Conjoined twins, Prehistoric art, Vase paintings, Religion, Greek mythology

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## Introduction

Human births of conjoined twins were not unknown during the antiquity. They were described in a passage of Aristotle's work, *De Generatione animalium*, where the Greek philosopher underlines the distinction between the completed conjoint organisms and the uncompleted teratomorphic ones with multiple organs: «Outgrowths differ from the production of many young in the manner stated before; monsters differ from these in that most of them are due to embryos growing together. Some however are also of the following kind, when the monstrosity affects greater and more sovereign parts, as for instance some monsters have two spleens or more than two kidneys. Further, the parts may migrate, the movements which form the embryo being diverted and the material changing its place. We must decide whether the monstrous animal is one or is composed of several grown together by considering the vital principle; thus, if the heart is a part of such a kind then that which has one heart will be one animal, the multiplied parts being mere outgrowths, but those which have more than one heart will be two animals grown together through their embryos having been confused», (Greek: «Διαφέρουσι δ' αἱ μὲν παραφύσεις τῆς πολυτοκίας τὸν εἰρημένον τρόπον, τὰ δὲ τέρατα τούτων τῷ τὰ πολλὰ αὐτῶν εἶναι σύμφυτον. ἓνια δὲ καὶ τοῦτον τὸν τρόπον, ἐὰν ἐπὶ μειζόνων γένωνται καὶ κυριωτέρων μορίων, οἷον ἓνια ἔχει δύο σπλήνας καὶ πλείους νεφρούς. ἔτι δὲ μεταστάσεις τῶν μορίων παρατρεπομένων τῶν κινήσεων εἰσι καὶ τῆς ὕλης μεθισταμένης. ἐν δ' εἶναι τὸ ζῷον τὸ τερατῶδες ἢ πλείω συμπεφυκότα δεῖ νομίζειν κατὰ τὴν ἀρχήν, οἷον εἰ τοιοῦτόν ἐστιν ἡ καρδία μόριον, τὸ μὲν μίαν ἔχον καρδίαν ἐν ζῷον, τὰ δὲ πλεονάζοντα μόρια παραφύσεις, τὰ δὲ πλείω ἔχοντα δύο μὲν εἶναι, συμπεφυκέναι δὲ διὰ τὴν τῶν κυημάτων σύναψιν»)¹,².

- 1- Akurgal, 1985.
- 2- Bérard, 1974.
- 3- Brann, 1962.
- 4- Campo, 1994.
- 5- Chourmouziadis, 1994.
- 6- Contenau, 1927.
- 7- Dahm, 2007.
- 8- Dasen, 1997.
- 9- Delcourt, 1996.
- 10- Flourentzos, 1975.
- 11- Dowson, 2003.

## Artistic representations of Conjoined twins

This phenomenon can be identified not only inside the ancient literature but also in prehistoric art<sup>3</sup>. Some conjoint, male and female figures could be considered as representations of Siamese twins<sup>4</sup>. The majority consists of conjoint terracotta figurines, found in a great variety of different areas<sup>5</sup>. Neolithic ones were discovered at Rastu (female)<sup>6</sup> (Figure 1), Vinča (male)<sup>7</sup> (Figure 2), Gomolava (male)<sup>8</sup> (Figure 3), Çatal Hüyük (female)<sup>9</sup> (Figure 4), Peukakia (unspecified sex)<sup>10</sup> (Figure 5) and Rachmani (unspecified sex)<sup>11</sup> (Figure 6). Bronze Age's examples were found at Lapithos





Figure 1. Neolithic conjoined figures<sup>12</sup>



Figure 2. Neolithic conjoined figurines from Vinča<sup>13</sup>

12- [http://www.nyu.edu/isaw/exhibitions/oldeurope/sites/default/files/images/41.12100\\_IMG\\_0704.preview.jpg](http://www.nyu.edu/isaw/exhibitions/oldeurope/sites/default/files/images/41.12100_IMG_0704.preview.jpg)

13- Gimbutas, 1974: 122, 286, figure 90.







*Figure 3. Neolithic conjoined figurines from Gomolava<sup>14</sup>*



*Figure 4. Neolithic conjoined figurines from Çatal Hüyük<sup>15</sup>*

14- Gimbutas, 1974: 127, 287, figures 100 and 101.

15- <http://www.pbase.com/dosseman/image/33314094>.



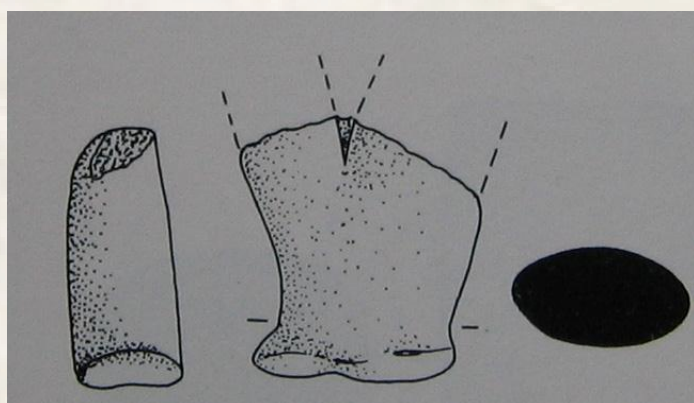


Figure 5. Neolithic conjoined figurines from Peukakia<sup>16</sup>

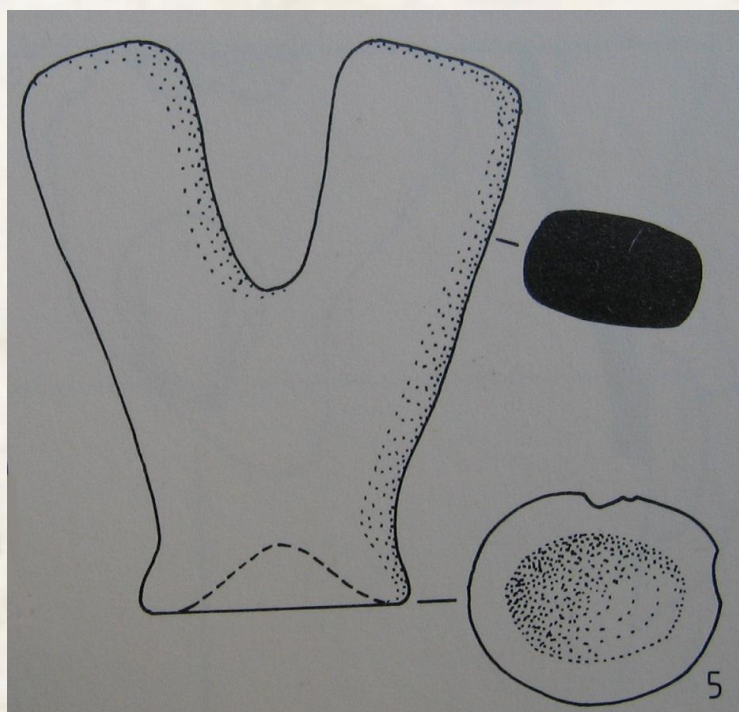


Figure 6. Neolithic conjoined figurines from Rachmani<sup>17</sup>

(unspecified sex)<sup>18</sup> (Figure 7) and at Anatolia<sup>19</sup>, where the origin of a similar figurine of unknown provenance is located (male) (Figure 8).

This type of Conjoined twin representation, appears definitely on a Neolithic vase relief from Truşeşti (unspecified sex)<sup>20</sup> (Figure 9) and on a relief from Çatal Hüyük (female)<sup>21</sup>, where a female figure gives birth to a child. When studying another example of a Paleolithic rock relief from France (female)<sup>22</sup> (Figure 10), we could assume about conjoined twins, but without an obvious place of conjoint between them.

16- Weisshaar, 1989: 201, Tab. 66, no. 14.

17- Weisshaar, 1989: 201, Tab. 91, no. 5.

18- Gimbutas, 1974.

19- Mallory, 1989.

20- Gimbutas, 1989.

21- Graf, 1996.

22- Grimal, 1951.





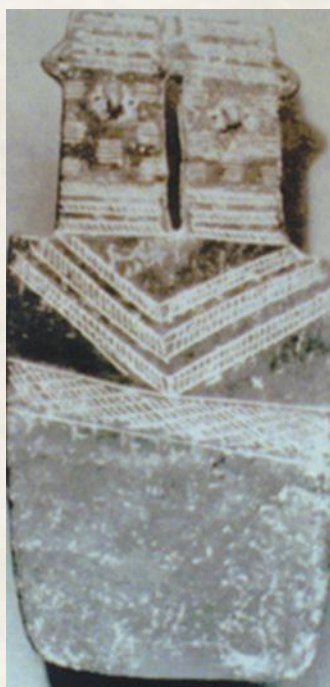


Figure 7. Bronze Age conjoined figurines from Lapithos<sup>23</sup>

23- Thimme, 1976: 407, 565, no. 574. Genf, Geneux Collection. H.: 27.9 cm. 2300-2000 B.C.  
24- Thimme, 1976: 559-560, no. 552.



Figure 8. Bronze Age conjoined figurines from Anatolia<sup>24</sup>

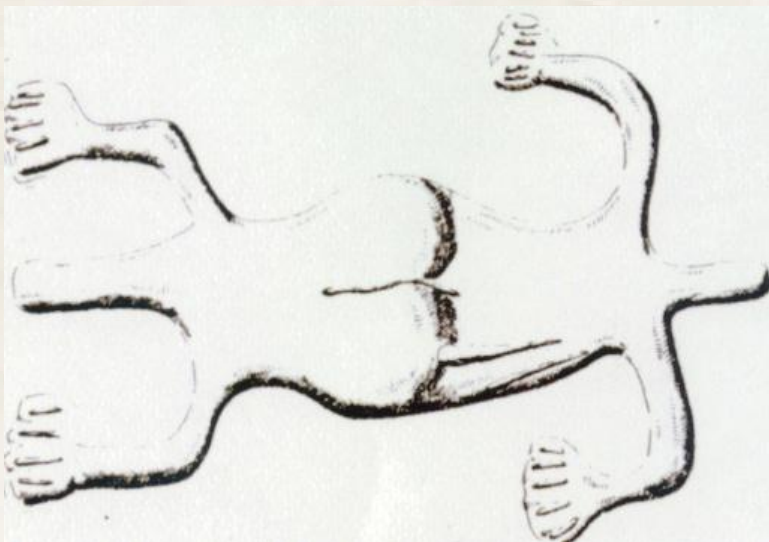


Figure 9. Neolithic vase relief representing conjoined figures from Truşeşti<sup>25</sup>



Figure 10. Paleolithic rock relief from France representing conjoined figures<sup>26</sup>

### Discussion

The figurines' interpretations are focused on this special form of conjoint and scholars used ancient religions as starting points, in order to explain this peculiar characteristic as a particular relation between two divinities or as a magic sign. Therefore the female figurines were considered as goddesses<sup>27</sup>, pair of mother-daughter<sup>28</sup> or two sisters according to the belief that these representations are the prelude of the double goddesses of Mycenaean and Classical period<sup>29</sup>. Using the

- 25- Gimbutas, 1989: 164, figure 253.
- 26- Gimbutas, 1989: 172, figure 272.
- 27- Karagiorghis, 1977.
- 28- King, 1977.
- 29- Schefold, 1993.





same point of view the male figurines were considered also as gods, as these from Lapithos. Interpretations included magic monsters<sup>30</sup>, sacred marriage<sup>31</sup> (Greek: ιερός γάμος), double headed gods and goddesses and magic figurines in order for a twin birth to be achieved<sup>32</sup>. There is only one different approach regarding Lapithos' figurines, stating a realistic representation of a couple embraced or a couple in bed<sup>33</sup>.

Beside all interpretations, the representations of actually Conjoined twins, fits better. Their similarity to this type of birth could not have been coincidental. The majority of these representations could be classified as Thoracopagus twins<sup>34</sup>(Figure 11-12), as Pygopagus<sup>35</sup>, like those from Rachmani and Truşeşti (Figure 13) and as Omphalopagus<sup>36</sup>, like the Paleolithic one from France (Figure 14). The physiocratic characteristics of their structure are distinguishable in the formation of the body recalling this type of deformity<sup>37</sup>. The inclination of the head in the figurine of Anatolia and the position of the hands in the figure of Çatal Hüyük remind us of everyday life's moments of conjoined twins<sup>38</sup>. Besides that, we could imagine the impression induced to the prehistoric people by the labor of a Conjoined twin woman remembering the relief from Çatal Hüyük. A very important factor is the emphasis of the conjunction, as being their primary characteristic, which is highlighted in most of them by the linear decoration, unifying the figures as crossing their chest and reminding the common body. This element is also very clear in the figurines of Peukakia<sup>39</sup> and Rachmani<sup>40</sup> with their schematized-abstract form.

30- Sforza, 2002.

31- Morris, 1985.

32- Orfanidis, 1998.

33- Papadopoulos, 1999.

34- Roscher, 1937.

35- Theochari, 1993.

36- Weisshaar, 1989.

37- Mellaart, 1967.

38- Thimme, 1976.

39- Morin, 1989.

40- Fraser, 1940.

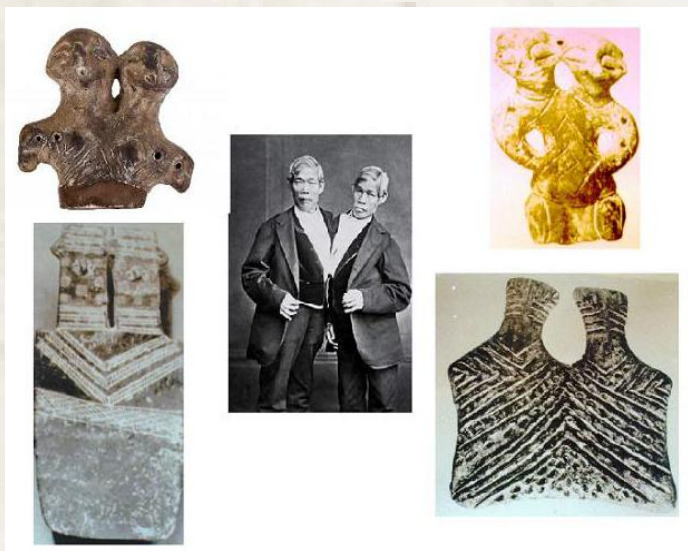
41- <http://casadecha.files.wordpress.com/2010/03/changandeng.jpg>

Figure 11. Thoracopagus twins. In the center the famous Conjoined twin, Chang and Eng Bunker<sup>41</sup>





Figure 12. Thoracopagus twins<sup>42</sup>

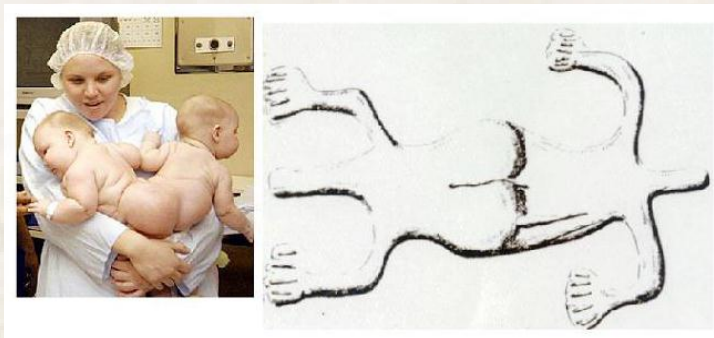


Figure 13. Pygopagus twins<sup>43</sup>

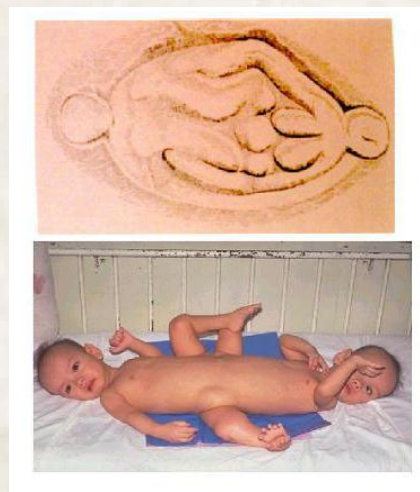


Figure 14. Omphalopagus twins<sup>44</sup>

42- <http://www.magnetmagazine.com/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/evelynevelyn5304.jpg>

43- <http://static.stuff.co.nz/1192014000/275/75275.jpg>

44- <http://www.nusantaraku.org/forum/en/horror-spooky-scary-Figures/16608-Conjoined-twins.html>



The fact that all these figures, except this from Çatal Hüyük<sup>45</sup> and some from Lapithos, had not been found inside shrines or tombs, makes their religious potential use, obscure. Whatever religious interpretations can be put into question, it should be proper to be considered as a result of their monstrous form. The belief that these representations were precursors of the later ones for the double gods and goddesses of the later times is hazardous, as the religious thought and cult of these primitive communities was strongly correlated towards the Mycenaean and Classical one, while there was a chaotic chronic and cultural gap between them to have had the same meaning of depiction<sup>46</sup> (Thimme J. 1976). Another reason to argue the religious approach, is their limited number as unique examples in combination with the different areas of their presence, considering also that they were discovered in few prehistoric areas of Europe and Anatolia during a broad period of time. Furthermore their inability to be correlated with other elements of the local art and culture, where they appeared, leads us to the above mentioned conclusion<sup>47</sup>.

Lapithos' figurines need a special examination. Due to their numerous production and their discovery partly inside tombs, may the objection be raised for a religious interpretation<sup>48</sup>. These creations were a local phenomenon and their use in cult as findings in tombs, concerned only a part of their production. Therefore we may assume that the local community was influenced by a physical but strange phenomenon in life, which sometime found a place inside their religion and cult. On the other hand, all the above representations should not be confused with other ones of conjoint men and women, due to the fact that their significance and iconography is rather different. Such an example, dated at the Bronze Age, that must be mentioned, is the double or three-headed figurines from Kappadokia (Figure 15). These have had decorative form; so that some of them used as earrings<sup>49</sup>. Their number was massive and they were discovered exclusively inside shires, so their interpretations as double or triple deities should not be far from their real role.

A similar case is represented by the conjoint figurines of women, which were all discovered inside tombs in the Aegean and continental Greece, manufactured during the Archaic Age (Figure 16). The aim of these creations, which do not have any realistic characteristics, was to underline the binary hypostasis of dead people, one for the underworld and one for the living world and their relation with Gaia, under

45- Mellaart, 1967.

46- Thimme, 1976.

47- Morin, 1989.

48- Morris, 1985.

49- Morris, 1985.





Figure 15. Bronze Age double-headed figurines from Kapadokia<sup>50</sup>



Figure 16. Archaic Greek conjoined figurines representing goddesses Demeter-Daughter<sup>51</sup>

50- Contenau, 1927: Pl.XLIV (b).  
51- Hadzisteliou-Price 1971: 61,  
Pl.VII, no. 18a.





the influence of the mythology of Demeter-Daughter<sup>52</sup>. It is a well-established fact that the dead people were called Demetreioi (people of Demeter) as is mentioned in ancient literature. Under the same principal could be explained the conjoint female figurines illustrated on each side of the South Italian red-figured amphora which is the name vase of the so-called 'Conjoined Painter' (Figure 17). The symbolism of the paintings is correlated to death and religion. These monstrous figures recall the above mentioned archaic figurines, so that they could be identified also as Demeter-Daughter ones. We must have in mind that the woman figure emerging from the earth, which is illustrated on both sides of the neck of the same vase, is identified as Gaia, reminding the continuous death-rebirth of the earth and nature.

52- Scheffold, 1993.

53- *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum*  
Italy 11, Capua, Museo Campano  
(1), Tav.21.1,4.



*Figure 17. South Italian red-figured amphora which is the name vase of the so-called 'Siamese Painter'<sup>53</sup>*

Monsters of Greek Mythology, especially Aktoriones-Moliones (Eurutos and Kteatos), have raised up the question, whether they represented or not Conjoined twins, due to the fact that many times in Ancient Greek art of Post-geometric and Archaic period they were represented as conjoint, thoracopagus, twins. Fraser first expressed the idea that the il-



Illustration of Aktoriones-Moliones on a peculiar attic Post-geometric oinochoe with internal crossed tubes (Figure 18) was influenced by a Conjoined birth at the time, believing that this oinochoe was created in order to prevent another Conjoined birth. King studying the fragment of a Geometric crater, was led up to the conclusion that Aktoriones-Moliones as warriors do not fit in a funereal scene, and therefore they must have represented a team of two separate or Conjoined twins<sup>54</sup>. Dasen though, does not accept the interpretation of Aktoriones-Moliones as Conjoined twins, but according to his opinion, their similarity to Conjoined twins, as can be ascertained by their illustration on a bronze fibula, reveals the fact that the artist had the knowledge of this peculiar form of birth, recognizing the image not only of newborn twins but also of adult ones. Aktoriones-Moliones is a mythological theme, which firstly is irrelevant to Conjoined twin's births, and secondly inside the Ancient Greek mythology not any pathological phenomenon is represented<sup>55,56</sup>.



Figure 18. Attic Post-geometric oinochoe<sup>57</sup>

The iconographic type as conjoint twins appeared only during Post-geometric and Archaic period, following their earliest report in ancient Greek literature as conjoint twins in Hesiodus Theogonia, where it can be found a monster with two heads, four legs and only one body. There are also scholars, who dispute the Conjoined twin interpretation of the above mentioned oinochoe, as they note the importance of some fragments in Iliad, where Eurutos and Kteatos' first accomplishments were mentioned, as two separate twins. In the same way they were illustrated separately in other representations too<sup>58,59</sup>. These two brothers are one pair of the numerous mythological twins. Their conjoint symbolize the idea of hermaphroditism, which is common in ancient Greek mythology<sup>60</sup>. They have a binary hypostasis, one for the living's world and one for the underworld, combined also with a divine one as Poseidon's sons, and a human-common one as Aktor's sons.

Geryon's (mythical monster) mythology and iconography may also raise the question, whether this teratomorphic

- 54- King, 1977.
- 55- Fraser, 1940.
- 56- Dasen, 1997.
- 57- Fraser, 1940: 462, figure 4.
- 58- Hadzisteliou-Price, 1971.
- 59- Trendall, 1967.
- 60- Graf F. 1996.





monstrous being (Figure 19) can be associated with an uncompleted teratomorphic birth of an offspring with multiple organs<sup>61</sup>. But like in the case of Aktoriones-Moliones, we must consider the terms of Greek mythology, by accepting a fantastic creature, a monster, representing the demonic powers, which were defeated by Hercules, powers that did not correspond to any pathological phenomenon. According to mythology Geryon has three heads and three conjoint bodies up to the hips. His iconography on the other hand, has many alternative types; one body and three heads, one body and three legs or three conjoint bodies. This variety manifest his unrealistic, mythological character; the artists had not any physiocratic sings on their artefacts, as we can also notice in the iconography of other mythological figures with monstrous, fantastic form and symbolic context like the double-headed deities under a binary hypostasis, the roman Janus and the Vedic Agni, and the three-headed, apotropaic monster of the Indo-European cattle-raiding myth<sup>62,63</sup>.

61- Schefold, 1993.

62- Trendall, 1967.

63- Sforza, 2002.

64- [http://www.sikyon.com/athens/Archaic/amphra\\_gr18.html](http://www.sikyon.com/athens/Archaic/amphra_gr18.html).



*Figure 19. Attic black-figure Amphora representing the mythical monster Geryon. Paris, Louvre. Inv. No.: F 53. H.: 44,5 cm. 550-540 B.C.<sup>64</sup>*





### Conclusion

Conjoined twins births were described in ancient Greek literature and represented in prehistoric art as conjoint figures of men and women. These must be distinguished from other conjoint representations or similar mythological monsters, which serve a symbolic concept. The physiocratic structure, the dissociation of religion or mythology and the potentiality of the cultural environment to accept a pathological phenomenon in its artistic expressions can help a conjoint figure to be considered as a representation of conjoined twins.

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