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The stuff of the gods

The material aspects of religion
in ancient Greece

Edited by Matthew Haysom,
Maria Mili & Jenny Wallensten

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ABSTRACT

The “material turn” in the humanities and social sciences has brought about an expanded understanding of the material dimension of all cultural and social phenomena. In the Classics it has resulted in the breaking down of boundaries within the discipline and a growing interest in materiality within literature. In the study of religion cross-culturally new perspectives are emphasising religion as a material phenomenon and belief as a practice founded in the material world. This volume brings together experts in all aspects of Greek religion to consider its material dimensions. Chapters cover both themes traditionally approached by archaeologists, such as dedications and sacred space, and themes traditionally approached by philologists, such as the role of objects in divine power. They include a wide variety of themes ranging from the imminent material experience of religion for ancient Greek worshippers to the role of material culture in change and continuity over the long term.

Keywords: Greek religion, Etruscan religion, Mycenaean religion, materiality, religious change, *temenos*, temples, offerings, cult statues, terracottas, *omphalos*, cauldrons, sacred laws, visuality, purity, pollution, gods' identities, divine power, inscribed dedications

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BOOK EDITORS

Matthew Haysom, Newcastle University

Maria Mili, Glasgow University

Jenny Wallensten, Swedish Institute at Athens

13. Ambiguity versus specificity in modest votive offerings

Abstract

One problem associated with the identification of modest anthropomorphic figurines dedicated at Greek sanctuaries is their degree of specificity. Especially in the Archaic and early Classical periods, distinguishing representations of divinities, or even divinities and mortals, is difficult because their attributes are often non-specific, ambiguous or unidentifiable (at least by us), or because they lack identifying features altogether. This ambiguity and flexibility could have been intentional for both technical and ritual reasons. Manufacturers definitely benefited by producing figurines with broad iconography that could be used for different purposes and serve various cults. Clients also benefited: non-specific figurines of divinities or mortals could be dedicated at various sanctuaries, acquiring specificity and significance through cultic context and function. At the same time, workshops could also respond to clients' demands or to new cultic needs by creating or adapting types. Generic figurines could be endowed with a more specific meaning by the dedicator: they could have been personalised through the oral prayer accompanying the dedication or by the construction of a personal narrative through the grouping of offerings. On the other hand, in some cases, the merging of divine and mortal features, assimilating the dedicator with the god, may have been intentional.*

Keywords: votive offerings, ambiguity, flexibility, specificity, terracotta figurines, dedicatory practices, rituals

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Introduction

Recent scholarship emphasises the connection between material culture and aspects of ancient religiosity.¹ As one of the manifestations of the materiality of ritual practices, votive offerings embody ideas and values and thus can reveal much about the cognitive aspects of religion; that is, how people thought and what motivated them.² By investigating dedications as products of workshops and also as material objects of ancient religiosity with symbolic character and ritual use,³ we can recover information about dedicatory practices and the performative aspects of rituals.

This paper investigates the multiplicity and variability in the appearance, use, and function of modest votive offerings and highlights their fluctuating nature and role concerning production, consumption, and ritual context.

Anthropomorphic figurines: divinities or mortals?

Modest anthropomorphic figurines,⁴ especially in terracotta, which is the focus of this paper, are a common offering in almost all Greek sanctuaries. These often-mass-produced artefacts were affordable and widely used by all social classes. Identifying these figures, which were predominantly females,⁵ is often crucial for identifying the cult, especially in cases where

¹ See, e.g. Rask 2016.

² Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2015, 422–423.

³ Merker 2000, 323–324; Uhlenbrock 2016.

⁴ I use “figurines” here as a general term to include also protomes and plaques.

⁵ Merker 2000, 322; Huysecom-Haxhi 2009, 574.

there is no reliable information about the divinity worshipped and where epigraphic evidence is lacking.⁶

However, identifying these figures can also be problematic because of their varying degree of specificity. Do they represent divinities or mortals? If the former, are they indistinct, generic divinities or specific ones? If the latter, are they individualised, or are they generic, symbolic devotees, or are they perhaps priests?⁷

Early scholars regularly identified Archaic undifferentiated figurines and protomes as divinities, often using a seated pose and features like the *polos* or other forms of headdress or ornament as divine diagnostic attributes.⁸ Most notably, this trend led to the unreasonable attribution of almost all Archaic Sicilian sanctuaries to some chthonic aspect of Demeter and/or Persephone, despite the similarities of the terracottas to those from several sanctuaries of mainland Greece and the Greek East.⁹ Factors other than religion were not taken into account when considering the generic character of the offerings. For example, commercial factors seem to have played a role in the shape of Archaic female protomes introduced to Sicily but produced in East Greece as abbreviated versions of perfume vases in the shape of a woman. As Jaimee Uhlenbrock recently pointed out, these protomes were generalised because their East Greek manufacturer could not know the circumstances of their final use in the west; imitated and reproduced in Sicily through moulds, these protomes could thus have been suitable for a wide variety of divinities.¹⁰

Nevertheless, some offerings unambiguously represent specific deities, as shown by distinctive attributes. Athena is easily recognised by her helmet or *aegis* and Artemis by her bow, a short *chiton*, or a deer.¹¹ Others clearly represent mortals because they carry items such as a wreath, an offering tray and *oinochoe*,¹² or a sacrificial animal; represent a lowly subject, like an old shepherd¹³ or a menial task, like a water carrier;¹⁴ make a gesture of adoration; or are involved in a ritual activity,

like dance.¹⁵ Dancing, of course, is not necessarily unequivocal, because dancing figures could also be nymphs.¹⁶

In many other cases, especially in the Archaic and Early Classical periods,¹⁷ representations of divinities and mortals are hard to distinguish, either because their attributes are non-specific, ambiguous or unidentifiable (at least by us), or because they lack identifying attributes or gestures altogether.¹⁸ For example, in many sanctuaries of Demeter we find figurines of women holding piglets, torches, or both,¹⁹ but in which category should we place these? Do they represent a goddess (Demeter or Persephone), are they mortals participating in a nocturnal ritual, or are they priestesses?²⁰ And, is a fruit or other object held by a figure an attribute of the god or something already received by the god, or is it held by a mortal who is about to offer it to the god?²¹ How might we identify the standing or seated female figure (“Lady with Stars”) from the Aphrodision of Argos if we cannot identify the large four-pointed objects balanced on her upper arms? This peculiar attribute must have been an important cultic feature since it was offered also as a separate object in the sanctuary.²²

Stéphanie Huysecom-Haxhi and Arthur Muller have argued against this flexibility of meaning of generic figurines²³ and have proposed a strict solution: that unless figurines have incontrovertible signs of supernatural identity (in appearance, decoration, or attributes), they should be considered generic representations of mortals in a conventional or symbolic form denoting their social and familial status and placing themselves under the protection of gods; thus, a generic attribute such as a *polos* would indicate a priestess or a special role in the ritual, while a veil would indicate a married woman. The same would apply to protomes, which are considered abridged images of mortals.²⁴ This is an attractive argument and could indeed reflect reality in several cases: such figurines, left behind after a festival or ritual, could have functioned as substitutes for the dedicators to be placed under the protection of the divinity.²⁵

⁶ In many cases this is complicated by the presence of images of “visiting gods” for which see Alroth 1989, 65.

⁷ On the debate, see Uhlenbrock 2016, esp. § 27–28; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2015, esp. 422, 438; Croissant 2017; Muller 2022. Similar problems are encountered in the identification of Minoan and Mycenaean figurines: see Gaignerot-Driessen 2014, esp. 491; Blakolmer 2010, esp. 31–32.

⁸ For the bias in identifying female terracottas as divine or semi-divine figures, see most recently Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2015, esp. 423–424; Uhlenbrock 2016, § 16–28.

⁹ Uhlenbrock 2016.

¹⁰ Uhlenbrock 2016, § 14.

¹¹ See, e.g. Comstock & Vermeule 1971, 20, no. 19; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 235.

¹² E.g. Comstock & Vermeule 1971, 54 no. 55.

¹³ Spathi 2013, 401–402, fig. 6.

¹⁴ Merker 2000, 24, 327.

¹⁵ Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 235.

¹⁶ See more recently Kopestonsky 2015, esp. 411.

¹⁷ In later times the iconography becomes more specific: Merker 2000, 43, 326.

¹⁸ Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 235–236; Huysecom-Haxhi 2009, 574–580. See e.g. Lippolis 2001, 240–241 on banqueter figurines.

¹⁹ Raffiotta 2007, 51–83, nos. 32–92.

²⁰ Merker 2000, 124; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 238; Patera 2015, 195. See Muller 2019, 255–257, who identifies figurines from the Thasian Artemision representing female figures accompanied by Eros as mortal brides rather than Aphrodite.

²¹ Merker 2000, 24, 327–328; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 239.

²² Aurigny 2014, 652–653, fig. 3.

²³ Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2015, esp. 422–425, 433–434; Muller 2022.

²⁴ Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007; 2015; Muller 2009. Cf. Merker 2000, 24–25.

²⁵ Muller 2022, 342–343.

However, this interpretation cannot be applied universally.²⁶ Such generic figures could also simply be a concrete expression of an idealised mental image, an *agalma* that pleased and honoured the gods, and at the same time expressed personal devotion.²⁷

The importance of context

When attempting to interpret figurines as cultic objects, we need to examine not only their iconography but also their life cycles, from production and dissemination to function and use.²⁸ We must also remember that the same objects could have played different roles in different contexts: sacred, funerary, or domestic.²⁹

Visual ambiguity, multiplicity, and variability of meanings are common in Archaic art. Even large and expensive offerings, like the *kouroi* and *korai*, are hard to pin down. This is hardly surprising given the fluidity of scenes of myth and daily life, and the use of the same artistic language for both gods and mortals. Categories we today consider discrete, such as images of divinities and votaries, may have been less so in antiquity because the relationship between the divine and the human world was conceived differently, and the borders were more blurred. The merging of divine and mortal features may sometimes have been intentional, as will be discussed later.

In contrast with this flexible and ambiguous use of figurines, some rare types appear unique to a certain sanctuary and may have been created with the specific cult in mind: for example, the ithyphallic figurines from the sanctuary of Zeus Messapeus in Lakonia.³⁰ Likewise, the peculiar lead figurines of young men and maidens found almost exclusively at the Argive Aphrodision³¹ are certainly local creations because, unlike the well-known, flat Lakonian lead figurines,³² they were made in two-piece moulds and are thus rounded.³³

Offerings of ambiguous or unspecified iconographic character could have been used interchangeably, corresponding to the inherent plurality of polytheism.³⁴ Thus, similar types of

generic figurines of divinities or mortals could be dedicated at various sanctuaries, where they would acquire specificity and significance in the context of a particular cult.³⁵ For example, a figurine of a matronly seated female with *polos* would look at home in a sanctuary of either Hera or Demeter, who shared similar aspects such as a concern for fertility.³⁶ Additionally, some offerings may have expressed general concepts embodied in the cult rather than referring to specific gods or votaries. Thus, figurines of naked young females that refer to female sexuality/potential³⁷ could represent a divinity, a nymph, a bride, or a maiden in transition to adulthood, and could be dedicated in various cults assuming specificity in the particular context.³⁸ Visual ambiguity or neutrality does not necessarily mean an undifferentiated, generic character, and the meaning of an offering is not necessarily predicated on its formal characteristics. Moreover, it is the whole assemblage of different types that defined the cult.³⁹

Ambiguous representations could become more specific through contextual associations if, for example, they were viewed in association with easily recognisable offerings. An example is the spinning woman on plaques from the Athenian Akropolis; she is not easily identifiable,⁴⁰ and could represent Athena in her aspect as Ergane,⁴¹ or a devotee.⁴² Even if she were intended to be a mortal woman involved in an important feminine task and dedicated to the goddess of weaving, she was probably identified by many as Athena because she was placed alongside other plaques clearly representing the goddess.⁴³

Certain types of sanctuaries could attract similar offerings; for example, one could make similar offerings at two different *Thesmophoria*.⁴⁴ Types of divinities, such as heroes, who shared common characteristics of their nature and cult,

²⁶ Aurigny 2014, 655–656 and Croissant 2017 argue against this identification.

²⁷ Croissant 2017, esp. 267–270, 279.

²⁸ Uhlenbrock 2016, § 1.

²⁹ On terracotta figurines in domestic contexts, see *Chapter 9* in this volume. See also Sabetai 2015 on protomes in funerary and domestic contexts; Pérez 2007, 327, figs. 11–13 on terracotta boat models as both toys and offerings. Cf. French 1971, 107 on Mycenaean figurines; Weiss 2019 on female figurines in Roman Egypt.

³⁰ Catling 2002.

³¹ Aurigny 2014, 656–659, figs. 5–6.

³² Boss 2000.

³³ Cf. the distinctive iconography on vases such as the Brauron *krateriskoi* and the Kabeirion vases: Stissi 2009, 29.

³⁴ Pirenne-Delforge 2009, 319–320.

³⁵ See, e.g. Lippolis 2001, 225–228, 235, 241 on banqueters; Merker 2000, on horse and rider figurines; Sabetai 2015, 154–155 on protomes; Salapata 2014 on Lakonian and Messenian plaques. And of course, vice versa: different types could be employed for the same purpose. See Keesling 2010, who argues that ancient viewers perceived offerings more often contextually than iconographically; Sabetai 2015.

³⁶ Merker 2000, 43. Inscriptions, of course, could have helped to identify the offering but they are extremely rare in coroplastic art, so they were not deemed necessary. See the seated woman with an inscribed dedication to Hekate: Higgins 1967, pl. 29.

³⁷ Merker 2000, 43, 74, 324, 334; Prent 2005, 410.

³⁸ Kopestonsky 2015, 411.

³⁹ Merker 2000, 325.

⁴⁰ Vlassopoulou 2003, 51–52, type H; Parra 2013, 32 and fig. 4a–b.

⁴¹ Consoli 2010, 18–19.

⁴² Parra 2013, 327–328, who doubts she is Athena because she lacks characteristic attributes, like the helmet, and she is seated on a bed rather than a fancy throne.

⁴³ Vlassopoulou 2003, 72–74. In either case, the depiction was closely associated with Athena and likely related to the making of the Panathenaic *peplos*.

⁴⁴ Prêtre 2011–2012, 230–232; Merker 2000, 117–124, 250–255.

could also favour similar types of offerings. Terracotta plaques with seated figures often accompanied by snakes are a peculiar type of offering in Lakonia and Messenia found only in hero shrines, and these were offered to a variety of heroes. Local dedicators and viewers would have recognized the seated figures as distinct personalities according to context.⁴⁵

The local votive tradition

Previous dedications could also have exerted normative influence on the type of objects given to the gods.⁴⁶ These dedications would display and define sacred iconography; at the same time, they would signal to visitors what kinds of offerings were appropriate, thus influencing both dedicatory practice and workshop products. Religious practice is repetitive and conservative, and worshippers like to conform to local votive tradition through established iconographic types.⁴⁷ In that way, early undifferentiated types of divinities and votaries could have been perpetuated.

Repetitiveness and visual ambiguity in offerings may appear dull and uninspiring to us but can be understood if such offerings reflected and reinforced community concepts and values⁴⁸ rather than promoting individual identity. People who placed a generic image among other similar offerings may have found this reassuring, because it showed they belonged to a community, and it demonstrated group solidarity rather than differentiating themselves.⁴⁹

Glorifying the sanctuary might have been achieved better through an accumulation of similar offerings than the presence of particular types.⁵⁰ This would testify to the power of the gods and their care for overseeing, for example, rites of passage of the community members. When offerings representing the dedicator were placed among similar offerings, this would have composed a broad image of a community honouring the gods and at the same time under the gods' pro-

tection. Nevertheless, the reason for the individual gift could have arisen from personal needs.⁵¹

The role of the dedicator

An advantage of votive ambiguity and flexibility is that dedicators could invest offerings with specific and personal meanings at the time of dedication.⁵² Generic offerings in earlier periods were likely personalised through the oral prayer that accompanied the dedication.⁵³ We have a comparable situation in the realm of magic. In earlier periods, written spells were very brief, often containing only the binding verb and the name of the target. It is assumed that incantations would have included more details about the divinities they called upon, the reason for the spell, and the desired outcome. In later periods, the narrative devised by the magician or their clients to be used during the deposition of the spell was incorporated in the written spells, so that these contain elaborate and personalised details.⁵⁴ Similarly, the greater specificity developed in later offerings may reflect a diminished oral dimension in dedicatory practices.

Magic figurines ("dolls") also lack differentiation. Even though these images could be extremely schematic, they were certainly intended to target particular victims and were personalised either through the inscription of a name or through oral incantations.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, even inscribed "dolls" were not necessarily personalised. For example, a "doll" made of lead and probably from the 4th century BC is inscribed with a list of seven names, implying it does not represent a specific individual victim but the act of binding in general.⁵⁶ Thus, like these poorly differentiated magic figurines,⁵⁷ what mattered in votive figurines may have been the intention of the votary; the offering would have acted not as a likeness but as a symbol⁵⁸ and could therefore have been generic.

Dedicators could also construct a personal narrative related to their familial and social circumstances by grouping individual generic offerings and placing them appropriately at the sanctuary. Thus, a specific type could have different meanings depending on how it was presented: two (or more) similar figurines placed or hung side-by-side would provide a different interpretation from that of a single figurine, like a family

⁴⁵ Salapata 2014, ch. 7.

⁴⁶ Kopestonsky 2015, 413. On the issue of accumulated offerings of similar votive types and how this impacted the religious experience of worshippers, see the excellent article Rask 2020 (published while the present article was in press).

⁴⁷ Merker 2000, 49 on the local character of offerings.

⁴⁸ Renfrew 1985, 13–14, 22–24.

⁴⁹ Albertocchi 2015, 21 on dancing groups. Rask 2020 raises similar points.

⁵⁰ The range of types, though, could have mattered to address aspects of the cult. See Battiloro *et al.* 2010, 256–257 for an interesting case from Heraclea Lucania, near Taras, where only one example of each representative terracotta votive type was deliberately selected to be buried in a deposit after the sanctuary was abandoned; this deliberate selection aimed to preserve the most representative images of the iconographic repertoire, symbolically summarising the significance of the cult.

⁵¹ Kopestonsky 2015, 413; Patera 2015, 186.

⁵² Cf. Kindt 2015, esp. 37–38.

⁵³ Baumbach 2009, 213, 220. For example, invoking the divinity by name while offering a generic figurine.

⁵⁴ Gager 1992, 7; Wilburn 2012, 70–73.

⁵⁵ Gager 1992, 15; Patera 2015, 184. Magic figurines are also discussed by Barrett, *Chapter 9* in this volume.

⁵⁶ Curbera & Giannobile 2015, 124.

⁵⁷ Knappett 2012, 103.

⁵⁸ Cf. Patera 2015, 183.

group; and while a generic seated figure by itself could have denoted either a mortal or a deity, standing attendants placed next to it may have signalled it was definitely a divinity.⁵⁹

Although offerings were public, they were involved in an individual discourse between votary and divinity.⁶⁰ Generic images of mortals could have been stand-ins for the supplicants making the offerings, perpetuating their presence at the sanctuary, and placing them under divine protection,⁶¹ or they could have marked a change of personal or social status. They could also have accompanied a simple visit to the sanctuary, when a token offering of a generic nature would be adequate.⁶² Some figurine types, especially the cheap and mass-produced ones,⁶³ may have been mementos of large-scale participation in a ritual or may have been offered as tokens instead of direct participation.⁶⁴

More conceptually and symbolically, figurines could represent the dedicator's piety in visual form, in an effort to attract the attention of and establish a relationship with the god.⁶⁵ If it was the prayer or the relationship between mortals and divinity that was expressed visually, specificity would not have mattered much, and generic offerings could have been acceptable.

The performative aspect

The ritual occasion or action could also make generic figurines more meaningful. We are of course missing a lot of information about the performative aspect of religious ceremonies and votive religion; however, ethnographic evidence indicates that figurines, as durable and tangible objects, may have been interacted with in various ways, for example, touched or carried.⁶⁶ In some cases then it may have been more important what was done with these figurines than what exactly they represented.⁶⁷

Figurines, especially those representing actions such as carrying offerings or dancing,⁶⁸ may refer to rituals even if they do not record them precisely or accurately.⁶⁹ Thus, votaries could have dedicated similar objects in different sanctuaries during the same rite, or even for a different rite of a similar nature (for example, a transition rite).⁷⁰ Figurines of naked seated maidens, representing sexuality and fertility, which are relevant to several stages of a woman's life, were offered to reflect the occasion rather than the recipient deity. Such figurines, sometimes found with a corresponding draped version, may represent a stage of the nuptial ritual, the purificatory, fecundating bath, with the draped type referring to the adorning of the bride.⁷¹ Or naked figurines could have been dressed up in a second stage of the ritual.

Local rituals may have determined specific types to be offered, like the unusual figurines from Grotta Caruso, near Locri dedicated to the nymphs. These naked seated females wearing a *polos* and lacking legs below the knees were very likely used by young women in a prenuptial ritual to the nymphs who oversaw their passage from virgin to bride. The figurines could have been left in the basin water, with their legs giving the impression of extending down through the surface, thus showing bathing or emerging from the water. Differentiating them as divine or human would have been pointless, since they could have represented both the nymphs and the Locrian maidens involved in the rite.⁷² Similarly, the protomes with veil, *polos*-like crown and jewellery, as "abridged renderings of a bridal archetype", would embody bridal and matronly qualities of both mortals and goddesses overseeing female biological and social transitions.⁷³ This conscious blurring of identity between deity and worshipper, with the latter assimilated with the god during vulnerable and dangerous life stages like coming-of-age transitions, may have been quite common.⁷⁴

The role of workshops

Was this vague and flexible imagery, which allowed the dedication of offerings for different purposes, initiated by the manufacturers of small offerings for convenience or for technical reasons? Or, did the votaries themselves desire generalised offerings, with workshops responding to their demand?

⁵⁹ Salapata 2015. On creating specific meaning and value in offerings based on their positioning in deposits, see Parisi 2010, 461–463.

⁶⁰ Baumbach 2009, 203–204, 220.

⁶¹ E.g. Frevel 2008, 31–32; Connelly 1989, 211; Depew 1997, 249; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 433–434. But see Patera 2015 on substitution as a modern theory rather than an ancient concept.

⁶² Patera 2015, 189.

⁶³ This, however, does not mean that modest offerings were exclusively non-elite dedications; they could be offered by dedicators anywhere on the social spectrum, from pauper to king, so to speak: Salapata 2018.

⁶⁴ Cf. the Brauron *krateriskoi* decorated with scenes of running girls: Parker 2005, 234. The long-term function is doubtful since it is unlikely modest offerings were on display for long, if at all; it would have been the action of dedication that mattered most: Salapata 2018, esp. 100–101.

⁶⁵ Salapata 2018, esp. 101.

⁶⁶ Sabetai 2015, 158. On the difficulty in distinguishing the ritual character of objects, see Aurigny 2014; Prêtre 2011–2012, esp. 228–230; 2014.

⁶⁷ Blakolmer 2010, 56; Parisi 2010, esp. 462–463.

⁶⁸ Salapata 2018, 102–104.

⁶⁹ Aurigny 2014, 651–652, n. 23; Patera 2015, 185, 189, 194–195. Offerings, such as plaques depicting narrative scenes, might also have been dedicated in memory of a ceremony in which the dedicator participated: Salapata 2018, 104.

⁷⁰ Prêtre 2011–2012, 233; Parisi 2010, 460.

⁷¹ Huysecom-Haxhi & Papaikonomou 2012, esp. 353–360.

⁷² Salapata 2018, 103–104.

⁷³ Sabetai 2015, 155–158.

⁷⁴ Merker 2000, 24; Sabetai 2015, 156–158; Patera 2015, 195.

How much influence did workshops or consumers have on what was produced?

The ambiguity and flexibility in the iconography of small offerings may have been motivated in part by the desire of workshops to meet increased demand for small dedications⁷⁵ and to capture a wider market. It was of course advantageous for craftsmen, especially coroplasts, to produce generalised offerings to serve different cults,⁷⁶ like the type of a seated or standing female holding a bird, fruit, or flower,⁷⁷ because these could cater to several divinities and even mortals.⁷⁸

Other types of figurines may originally have been created for a specific sanctuary or region but were used in a more generic fashion in neighbouring regions. For example, the ornate version of the so-called Tirynthian Argive figurine, produced for the Argive Heraion in the late 6th/early 5th century BC, has a handmade seated body, mould-made head with *polos*, and a floral breast-band; it has recently been argued that this probably represented Hera. However, as this type of figurine later spread and began to influence the terracotta production of neighbouring areas, it became a more generic symbol of a goddess and was thus dedicated in a variety of sanctuaries in the northeastern Peloponnese.⁷⁹

By definition, moulds lead to mass production and repetitive, stereotyped forms (see fig. 3 in *Chapter 9* of this volume).⁸⁰ Moulds and figurines, which can be used to produce derivative moulds and figurines, can be exported, so the same types can be reproduced in several different locations. Derivative production could also have played a role in the creation of generic-looking figurines because figurines from later-generation moulds lose definition, and attributes existing in the original type often become indistinct or completely disappear.

At the same time, the moulding technique allows minor or major modifications, so production can be varied economically or to respond to specific demands. For example, heads, bodies, limbs, and attributes, made separately, could be assembled in various ways within the type⁸¹ or even recombined to change the subject.⁸²

Some variety and specificity could also be provided by re-touching before firing (for example, on the hair or drapery); by painting details;⁸³ or by adding mould-made or handmade attributes or accessories, either directly into the mould⁸⁴ or on the finished figurine at leather-hard stage.⁸⁵ For example, handmade arms with offerings (piglet, bird, or foodstuff) could be added to mould-made generic types to create more specificity and respond to cultic needs by relating them to local rituals.⁸⁶ As another example, a child added to the lap of a seated female would turn her into a *kourotrophos*, divine or mortal.⁸⁷

Mould reworking or partial moulding⁸⁸ could introduce modifications that may either be cosmetic (e.g. in the drapery) or would more radically transform one type into another:⁸⁹ a male into female and vice versa;⁹⁰ an Athena into Artemis⁹¹ or even a mortal adorant (see below); a figurine into a protome;⁹² or a figurine into a plaque.⁹³

In addition to one-off alterations, mould reworking could become the basis for mass production when the new version served as a secondary archetype.⁹⁴ The variant could replace the older version or the two versions could coexist, as in the case of the seated “Polos Lady” from Thasos. In the first two generations she had separately modelled arms, attached so they either extended forward or rested on the knees. In the two new types created in the third generation, both arms were moulded along with the rest of the figurine; one type showed both arms along the thighs, while the other showed the left arm bent and held on the chest. The original version continued to be produced, so the iconographic changes may have been motivated by an attempt to simplify the manufacturing

⁷⁵ Lippolis 2001, 241. On small-sized terracotta offerings, see Salapata 2022.

⁷⁶ Muller 1999b, 282; Sabetai 2015, 154–155.

⁷⁷ E.g. Kopestonsky 2015, 411 n. 20 and fig. 5; Raffiotta 2007, 45–47 nos. 20–23.

⁷⁸ Merker 2000, 328; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 239.

⁷⁹ Barfoed 2013, esp. 97–100.

⁸⁰ On the mould technique see Muller 1996, 27–47; Salapata 2014, 48–55, specifically for plaques.

⁸¹ Dewailly 1997; Huysecom 1997, 167; Muller 1999a, 67; Merker 2000, 14, 159; Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 233, 426–427.

⁸² Barra Bagnasco 1997, 217: use of the same head for different subjects, e.g. a reclining man and Zeus with a thunderbolt from Locri.

⁸³ Nicholls 1982, 222; Walter-Karydi 1997, 15, 20–21.

⁸⁴ E.g. Vlassopoulou 2003, 29, 37: gorgoneion added on Athena’s shield through a stamp-mould; p. 38: elaborate throne legs and a deer added to a plaque representing a seated Artemis; see also plaques with Athena on a chariot, who appears in variants with either *agis* or shield: Vlassopoulou 2003, 36, types Γα and Γε.

⁸⁵ Walter-Karydi 1997, 19, figs. 9, 14; Bencze & Véninger 2020, 18, 20–22.

⁸⁶ Muller 1999a, 68, 71; 1996, 367, 451, 486–489; Aravantinos *et al.* 2014, 57. Occasionally, limbs could be added after firing: Bencze & Véninger 2020, 19–20 and fig. 19.

⁸⁷ Nicholls 1982, pl. 28h.

⁸⁸ Huysecom 1997, 156, n. 2, 157, 166–167: seated figures with or without a seat.

⁸⁹ Huysecom-Haxhi & Muller 2007, 233.

⁹⁰ Muller 1999a, 68; Merker 2000, 159.

⁹¹ Parra 2010, 52; see also Parra 2013, 328: Artemis Tauropolos into Europa.

⁹² Muller 1999a, 68–69.

⁹³ Vlassopoulou 2003, 61: the *kore* on the Akropolis plaque no. 146 (pl. 47) may have been made in a figurine mould (shown by the height of the relief), and then pasted onto a background to create a plaque.

⁹⁴ Muller 1999a, 69.

technique and a desire to diversify the production, perhaps responding to market demand.⁹⁵

Coroplasts could easily transform generic figurines into specific gods and vice versa by adding or eliminating distinctive attributes directly in the mould or after moulding. For example, they could add a mould-made or painted gorgoneion to a simple seated or standing female and so create an Athena.⁹⁶ On the other hand, gods could be humanised, as shown in a case from Thasos, where copies of the Pheidian Athena Parthenos, dedicated in the sanctuary of Athena, were transformed into anonymous mortal worshippers (type “Agathe”) for the Thesmophorion. Attributes that were added separately in the original type (Nike and shield) were omitted, other attributes (*aegis* and helmet) were masked (but only at the front!), and handmade arms were added in a position of prayer.⁹⁷ The transformation of Athena to a generic worshipper shows that coroplasts were eager to respond to clients’ demands or new needs of popular religiosity by modifying their production;⁹⁸ at the same time, it exemplifies the nuances and variabilities in the use and function of religious objects.

Similarly, an entirely new, special type of figurine was created exclusively for the Thasian Thesmophorion in the first half of the 4th century BC by adapting pre-existing generic types of a standing *kore* and a seated woman. The new type is a female figure wearing a wreath and having handmade arms upraised in prayer. This type represents a worshipper addressing the goddess, thus perpetuating the memory of participation in a ritual. The old-fashioned *peplos* she most often wears could have represented a traditional ritual costume.⁹⁹

The new popular type of figurine indicates a remarkable change in votive practice, which has been connected with a reorganisation of the cult and a change in cult practice. This saw many figurines now relate to the Thesmophoric rite by representing a ritual gesture. The cultic need was important enough to make artisans change their production methods and create a whole new series by adapting pre-existing types, but it also encouraged them to invent new types of similar worshippers for exclusive use in this sanctuary.

A fascinating case of coroplastic workshops responding to a cultic need and contemporary socio-political circumstances

comes from a workshop in Argos that operated at the end of the third or beginning of the 2nd century BC. Among other products of standard Hellenistic types was a mould for a typical Argive figurine of the handmade “bird-face” type produced in the Archaic period.¹⁰⁰ Remarkably, the dimensions show that the artisan created a new archetype from which the mould was taken. This shows that it was not a case of simply using an old Archaic figurine to produce a mould of the second generation; instead, it was a conscious and laborious revival of an earlier emblematic iconographic type. This awareness of, and return to, the old tradition may indicate a desire to preserve a past period, expressed through these old-fashioned figurines in the Hellenistic period when new influences reached Argos.¹⁰¹

Conclusion: multiple meanings of votive types

Reading iconography and interpreting votive behaviour can be challenging because the type of offerings was not prescribed, and patterns of dedication are hard to detect. Manufacturing techniques and iconographic types, especially of mould-made terracotta objects, allowed the same offerings to serve different purposes, either because of their generalised or ambiguous iconography or because of ritual action and the context in which they assumed specificity and significance. Workshops obviously benefited by producing figurines with broad and versatile iconography, but clients could influence production by demanding more specific offerings that corresponded to local cultic needs or particular votive customs.

Material objects are cultural products embodying religious ideas and values and able to be infused with personal and emotional meaning and narratives by dedicators according to their needs. Viewers, too, could have understood them in different ways according to their individual backgrounds and circumstances. Precise identification of votive types is important to us because identifying cults is difficult, especially when epigraphic evidence is absent. Were ancient visitors equally interested in knowing the precise identity and meaning of modest offerings?

GINA SALAPATA
Massey University

⁹⁵ Huysecom 1997, 165–166.

⁹⁶ Nicholls 1982, pl. 24g and b respectively; cf. another figurine of Athena (Akr. 15117) which is a variation of a *kore* figurine with the addition of a mould-made gorgoneion and the elimination of the right arm originally bent on the chest (Vlassopoulou 2003, pl. 58.2, see also p. 134, pl. 58.1 for a figurine of Athena based on a type of *kore* [pls. 57, 59] with the addition of hand-modelled arms and an *aegis* on the left shoulder).

⁹⁷ Muller 1996, 81–85, pl. 24; 1999a, 68 and fig. 6. Pieces of drapery, incompatible with the *peplos*, were added in order to support the extended arms.

⁹⁸ Muller 1996, 501–508; 2000, esp. 103.

⁹⁹ Muller 1996, 471–472; Prêtre 2011–2012, 234.

¹⁰⁰ For the Archaic type, see Barfoed 2013.

¹⁰¹ Argos Museum MA 8271; Banaka-Dimaki 1997, 321–322, fig. 4.

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