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Terracotta Figurines and the Acrolithic Statues of Demeter and Kore from Morgantina

Laura Maniscalco

- 1 An interesting and relatively unexplored aspect of Greek coroplastic production is the relation between individual terracotta figurines and built structures, such as thrones. The relatively complex construction of thrones is a kind of architecture onto which terracotta elements could be added, much in the same way that terracotta architectural elements were added to Greek buildings in order to complete roofs, or to provide decoration and symbolic content to the structure overall. Careful analysis of a series of female figurines from the site of Morgantina in central Sicily offers an example of such construction, which also helps to contextualize a famous group of marble sculptures from the same site.

The Figurines

- 2 These figurines, representing a standing female holding a dove, are attested in three examples (fig.1). Only one is complete, but the others are preserved well enough to demonstrate that they all came from the same mold or the same generation of molds.

Figurine A (fig.1a).

Height 30.0 cm.

- 3 This figurine, produced in a single, frontal mold as an applique, preserves a female standing frontally with her legs and feet together and her right arm brought up to the chest, while the right hand holds a bird, facing left, by the feet; the left arm hangs at the side. The female wears a double-belted chiton with symmetrical folds that fall along the legs in broad, diagonal curves on either side of a wide central fold. A diagonal himation passes over the right shoulder and under the left arm, with long zig-zag folds that fall from beneath the right elbow. Nude feet emerge clearly from beneath the chiton. The figure has hair parted in the center in finger waves that frame the face and that fall

behind the ears and down the back, while a thick band encircles the skull. The head is stylized with large, almond eyes and thick lips; large ears are set high on the head.

Fig. 1, a–c. Three female figurines from San Francesco Bisconti

AUTHOR PHOTO

- 4 The rear of the figurine has an irregular concave surface, perhaps in order to favor the attachment to a support with a sticky substance. The figurine is recomposed from three fragments (the head and neck, the body from the shoulders to the ankles, and the feet on a quadrangular base). The face is slightly abraded on the right side and around the chin, and the figure has a slight forward bend that probably occurred during firing. The fabric has a uniform reddish color with a smooth frontal surface (as if it were covered in slip) and rough on the rear surface with light inclusions ca. 3 x 1 mm in size. It is not possible to observe the core. This figurine presents all of the elements present or missing in the other figurines, and all of them seem likely to have been made from the same mold

Figurine B (fig.1b)

Preserved height, 21.0 cm.

- 5 Terracotta applique of a female figure that, in most respects, is almost identical to Figure A. It is recomposed from two fragments, one that comprises the head to just above the knees, and a second that preserves part of the himation that descends from the right arm of the figure; this is slightly chipped at the point. The lower part of the figure, left arm, and the nose are missing; the left arm is slightly chipped.

Fig. 2, a–c. The back of three female figurines from San Francesco Bisconti

AUTHOR PHOTO

- 6 The fabric is reddish on the modelled front part (it would seem to be a slip altered by intentional firing or other heat). The core is grey. Although the fabric on the back might be soiled, it has a yellowish color with reddish inclusions of about 3 x 1 mm.

Figurine C (fig.1c).

Preserved height, 16.0 cm

- 7 This preserves the lower portion from waist to feet of a female figure that in most apparent respects is identical to Figurine A. It is recomposed from two fragments with some chips and spalls; the feet and base are missing. The left hand is preserved but the left index finger is chipped. The right and left edges of the figure are irregular and not modelled. The rear portion is not modeled, but instead is very irregular with long, vertical channels made by a stick, almost as a recess and probably for the attachment of some sort of support, either with a glue or some other sticky substance. The fabric is reddish both on the front and the back (there seems to be slip that has been altered by intentional firing or other heat); grey core with inclusions of rough size 3 x 1 mm.
- 8 Figurines B and C (fig.1b-c), with the same reddish fabric, were found during the excavation of the Sanctuary of San Francesco Bisconti, which is located on the steep slope of the deep valley between the Cittadella hill and the rest of Serra Orlando.¹ Figurine A (fig.1 a), the only one that is complete, is reported to have been a sporadic find, but it is possible to have come also from the San Francesco Bisconti area.² The backs of the figurines have long vertical impressions, almost as a recess and probably to facilitate attachment to some support with a glue or other sticky substance (fig. 2). The sides of the figure are smooth and molded as the front edge. X-ray fluorescence analysis of the traces of red color on Figurine B (fig. 1 b) shows that the red color is iron oxide³.

- 9 Two more figurines identical to these come from the Archaic settlement on the Cittadella hill at the eastern end of the Serra Orlando ridge, where the Archaic period site of Morgantina is located. One came from a deposit in the area of the settlement, the other from a chamber tomb.⁴ Outside the area of Morgantina the only other similar figurines are one from Camarina, now in the Museum of Ragusa and another, in the British Museum, said to come from Locri.⁵

The Context of the Sanctuary

- 10 The sanctuary of San Francesco Bisconti dates back to the Archaic period, and it continued to be in use until the destruction of the city in 211 B.C.E. Proper excavation of the sanctuary began in the 1980s, after clandestine activities had resulted in the removal of a number of large-size, marble sculptures. Scientific excavations brought to light a series of small buildings identified as cult and service structures, as well as offering areas, arranged on three levels along the steep terraces above the valley (fig.3).⁶ The disposition of the buildings along what seems to have been a sort of ritual path, and the typology of the finds, suggests that this sanctuary was a Thesmophorion.⁷ A large number of terracotta finds, mostly mass-produced female figurines, have been recovered from the sanctuary, along with a fragment of a feline paw pertaining to furniture,⁸ and a few fragments of flat elements that could have been part of a larger structure. The presence of a fragment of a mold with drapery suggests that in the sanctuary area terracotta statuettes were made. Regarding the figurines in question, a recorded provenance is available only for Figurine B, which is Room Number 7 on the lower terrace. In the floor of this room there was a square base in sandy limestone and next to it a rectangular inset in the floor whose interior was completely plastered. These two features led Graziella Fiorentini, the director of the first excavations, to suggest that statues could have been placed in these positions.⁹

FIG. 3. PLAN OF THE SANCTUARY OF SAN FRANCESCO BISCONTI AT MORGANTINA

Plan from Maniscalco 2015, pl. II; Fiorentini 1980–1981, pl. LXXXI (detail)

The Throne

- 11 There is reason to believe that Figurines B and C from S. Francesco Bisconti, and perhaps also Figurine A, were once part of a fragmentary terracotta throne now on display in the Kunsthistorisches Museum at Vienna. The remains of the throne were published by Ella van der Meijden at the time that they were on display previously in Switzerland at the Basel Museum.¹⁰ The throne, dated to the second half of the sixth century B.C.E., consists of two fragmentary sides with flat rectangular elements to which there are attached two rows of draped kouroi below and korai above, as well as feline paws at the front. One side of the throne is complete with six figurines: three kouroi on the lower part and three korai with a dove on the upper part. The other side of the throne is much more fragmentary with only two kouroi remaining on the lower part of the side, while the upper part is missing. The female figures on the throne are identical to the figurines under discussion from Morgantina in every aspect — the size, surface texture, and surface color of the terracotta figurines from San Francesco Bisconti are identical to the size, surface texture, and surface color of the figurines in Vienna.
- 12 The feline paw from San Francesco Bisconti is larger in size than the paws in the front of the Vienna throne, but it is possible that this fragment could also have been part of another separated element such as a stool that almost always is associated with thrones in the representation of seated divinities. The flat elements from the Sanctuary also could be part of the terracotta encasing of the structure for a portion not yet identified in the manner of the other elements of the Vienna complex.¹¹ Everything suggests that the three figurines missing from the throne are the figurines from the Thesmophorion at San Francesco Bisconti, which are of a higher quality, in comparison with the numerous, other mass-produced figurines from the same sanctuary.

The Acrolithic Sculptures

- ¹³ In the Archaeological Museum of Aidone there is on display a precious group of marble sculptural elements that comprise the oldest known acroliths in the Greek world. These were uncovered during clandestine excavations at Morgantina around 1979 and sold on the art market. In 2009 they were returned to Italy after a long court case established their provenance as the area of Morgantina, and more specifically the Thesmophorion of San Francesco Bisconti.¹² Of the two acrolithic statues, which are larger than life-size, there survive only the marble parts: the heads, hands, and feet of Acrolith A, and the head, one hand, and one foot of Acrolith B. Differences between the two faces suggest that the sculptural intent was to distinguish two individuals different in age, and the current interpretation is that Acrolith A should represent Demeter and Acrolith B her daughter, Persephone. The proportions of the preserved parts and the similar shape and placement of the feet suggested to Clemente Marconi, the first to publish them, that the statues were represented seated and completely covered with clothes from the neck to the feet with only their extremities visible.¹³ Analysis showed that the acrolithic elements of the statues were made out of marble from a quarry at Cape Vathy on the island of Thasos.¹⁴ X-ray fluorescence analysis shows that the red color painted on the feet of Acrolith A to represent sandals is iron oxide, just like the red paint on one of the figurines. The differences between the upper part of the head of Acrolith A and that of Acrolith B may be interpreted as differences due to hairstyle and/or related headdress¹⁵. The curved shape of the upper part of the head of Acrolith A could have served for the placement of a high, closed crown with which Demeter is often represented, while for the head of Acrolith B, a suggestion for the headdress may come from that of Figurines A and B, which consist of a diadem and a veil. This latter headdress would be appropriate for the goddess Persephone.
- ¹⁴ A silver ring, a silver fragment of a tiara, and a silver earring, all sporadic finds from the Thesmophorion of San Francesco Bisconti, can be listed among the offerings, and we should consider the possibility that they were used for the embellishment of statues.¹⁶ A hint of what a Thesmophorion like the one at San Francesco Bisconti could hold comes from the inventories of the sanctuaries at Delos, which range in date from the late fourth century B.C. to the second century A.D.¹⁷ There are particularly detailed lists of objects dedicated at the Delian Thesmophorion. One list begins — and presumably this is a sign of importance — with two acrolithic statues, set on thrones, adorned with tiaras and gilded wooden earrings and dressed in clothes of purple linen. The items that follow include ceramics, various kinds of wood and metal objects, many torches in gold and silver of various sizes that evidently were given in offering. Perhaps some of these torches could have been used as attributes of the divinities and may have been mounted in the fists of the statues in Delos.

Seated Figures

- ¹⁵ Since there is reason to believe that in antiquity the acrolithic statues from Morgantina were represented as being seated, for the presentation in the Museum of Aidone seats were created in careful proportion to the dimensions of the feet, the arms and the head of each figure, following indications in Marconi's publication (207 cm. for Acrolith A, 180

cm. circa for Acrolith B should be their respective heights) (fig.4).¹⁸ But, also in antiquity, a support in the shape of a chair was necessary to hold the marbles, and we must think that the construction of such a statue group would have been a major enterprise for the city. We know that acrolithic statues were made from different materials, and this required specialists able to work in stone, wood, terracotta, glass paste, and metals, in order to make not only the anatomical stone portions of the statues, but also the wig, the eyes, the attributes, and the jewelry. We must think, also, of the many other tools and materials that would have been necessary to construct the bodies and to connect all the separate pieces to the same support. A strong and also practical and beautiful support could be of wood, but what kind of wood would have been available at that time and place and suitable to the task? And how would the wood be presented — painted or perhaps covered with stucco or elements in terracotta? We do not have any analysis of wood from the excavations at Morgantina, but we do from the relatively close sanctuary of the Divine Palikoi near Mineo — that fir was a common building material.¹⁹

FIG. 4. RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ACROLITHS FROM THE SANCTUARY OF SAN FRANCESCO BISCONTI

AUTHOR PHOTO

- ¹⁶ A graphic reconstruction of the acrolithic statues from Morgantina on the Vienna throne demonstrates that the dimensions of the throne fit perfectly the space required for the absent chair by the acrolithic statues. If the two statues were displayed side-by-side, such decoration may have been put only on the outer, visible sides of a single throne or pair of thrones that together formed a sort of bench (fig. 5). The decoration could have belonged, also, to a throne for only one of the sculptures (fig. 6). The published provenance of the only figurine for which an exact find spot is known is the very same room where the acroliths were found,²⁰ and the presumed width of the terracotta throne in Vienna — 43 centimeters — is precisely the dimension reported in Fiorentini's publication of the square limestone base in room no. 7 at San Francesco Bisconti. This width is also the

width that resulted from the reconstruction of the display support made in 2008 for the acrolithic sculptures at the museum, thus suggesting again that all the measurements are consistent.

Fig. 5. GRAPHIC RECONSTRUCTION OF THE ACROLITHS ON THE VIENNA THRONE WITH FIGURINES FROM S. FRANCESCO BISCONTI

Photo after M. Puglisi; Graphic reconstruction by Mariella Puglisi

Fig. 6. GRAPHIC RECONSTRUCTION OF ONE ACROLITH ON THE VIENNA THRONE WITH ADDITIONAL FIGURINES FROM S. FRANCESCO BISCONTI

Photo after M. Puglisi; Graphic reconstruction by Mariella Puglisi

- 17 Could such an enterprise have been completed at Morgantina? This is a possibility, at least, for the throne itself, as the rich coroplastic history of the town can demonstrate. The figurines B - C were not imported, but rather were locally made,²¹ and the topography of the Sanctuary located in a deep valley with very steep slopes suggests that the statuary structure, composed of heavy marble parts and fragile terracotta elements, could only have been assembled *in loco*.

- 18 The artists involved in such a big enterprise were probably several in number, each with different, specialized skills. The strong East Greek influence on Sicilian archaic production in sculpture, pottery making, and architecture is well known.²² It is also known that in the Archaic period actual itinerant artists from different parts of the East Greek world were working in Sicily.²³ The extensive activity in many sanctuaries in eastern Sicily during the sixth century B.C.E. seems to have created a familiarity and character in locally produced sculpture that seems to fall in line with a certain 'stylistic geography' that encompasses several sites, including Camarina and Naxos, as well as Morgantina, for the acrolith's heads and these figurine's heads.²⁴
- 19 Compelling evidence suggests that the fragmentary throne in Vienna not only came from San Francesco Bisconti, but that it was an element of the acrolithic statuary complex and served as a kind of casing for a supporting wooden structure. Unfortunately, we will never know if the acrolithic sculptures themselves were really in Room Number 7, and even if we did, we still would not know if they were presented as cult statues with all their attributes and paraphernalia or, instead, if the statues were there just for storage, or even if they had been hidden in anticipation of the Roman attack on Morgantina in 211 B.C.E. The floor of Room Number 7 was remade in the fourth or third centuries B.C.E., and it is possible that during the roughly two centuries that had elapsed since the time that the acrolithic statues had been created, some modifications may have been made to the statuary complex. Perhaps more elegant elements were added or simply substituted for old ones. Perhaps, in order to be more fashionable, ivory elements were added, as was common in Hellenistic times. The thrones of large seated figures of the Archaic period often bear simple decoration, limited to the feline paw of the legs, as one may see in the throne of the seated figure from Grammichele or in pinakes from Locri, even though we read in ancient literary sources descriptions of the thrones of cult statues, probably of later period, with rich reliefs and figures both on thrones and on footstools.²⁵ The insertion of figurines on the side of the throne, however, seems to be a solution present only in this case, and this statistic in itself suggests a local provenance for the creation of the structure. The typology of the female figurine used on the throne originated from a mold perhaps from Camarina and seems to have been popular also in archaic Morgantina, since it was used in tombs, in the settlement, and in the Thesmophorion. The male figurine and particularly the draped male figure used in the throne are much rarer in Sicily, even if this typology is not completely absent.²⁶

A Builder's Approach To Sculpture

- 20 The acrolithic statues from Morgantina are rare examples of actual, large-scale cult statuary, but their significance goes much further than that. They represent not a carved approach to sculpture, nor a plastic approach to sculpture, but rather one of the first attempts in the Greek world to make built sculpture — a kind of art that involved a vast range of craftsmanship and complexity in design. There is relatively little discussion of built statues in the Greek world. The corporeal matrix in which acrolithic stone elements were placed is most visibly other stone, such as the metopes sculpted in relief with acrolithic elements from Temple E at Selinus or the rather bulky body of the so-called goddess of Morgantina. Greek statuary, whether small-scale terracotta figures, or large-scale statuary in stone, is generally known from solid materials that were modified

through plastic or glyptic techniques. Bronze statuary is a case apart, in which bodily elements could be fitted together in a limited way.²⁷

- 21 There is no question, however, that the large-scale chryselephantine statues of pan-Hellenic and other prominent sanctuaries were built works on the scale of architecture, or rather ship-building. Lapatin discusses the literary and limited physical evidence for the construction of such statues.²⁸ There are clear traces of the armature, a kind of wooden mast, that supported the statue of Athena Parthenos in the Parthenon at Athens. The exterior construction with a sheathing of ivory perhaps together with clay and plaster is a conceptual parallel to the construction of the hull of a ship (often from the outside in, where the shape of the hull was built first and the skeletal structure of the craft was added successively or at least concomitantly during construction, in order to provide support), and ultimately such construction is identified as an actual derivation from nautical technology.
- 22 We do not know exactly what the body structure that held the acrolithic pieces was like, but we can presume that it included socket joints of the sort that one sees in the acrolithic pieces themselves. While solid wood, ivory or other 'soft' material could have been carved as a whole for smaller statues, the scale of the Morgantina goddesses was far greater and would likely have required some sort of frame. In this sense the goddesses themselves would have been similar structurally to the thrones they sat on. The clothing, like the appliqué, to the throne would have been a form of dressing, much along the lines of interpretation of Gottfried Semper for Greek architecture, in which sculpture and painted decoration was essentially independent of the basic three-dimensional frame of a building.²⁹

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ENDNOTES

1. Fiorentini 1980-81, pl. LXXXIV, fig. 2; Raffiotta 2007, cat. 21, 22.
2. All the finds from Serra Orlando area labelled according the system used by the American Excavations (year/number). This find, on the other hand, is labeled with a Soprintendenza/Parco code, and the primary, and for many years the only, Soprintendenza excavation was, in fact, the Sanctuary of San Francesco Bisconti. Another possibility is that Figurine A is the statuette of a woman with a bird found in the Soprintendenza excavation of a necropolis in C. da Gambero in 1973 (Lyons 1996, 11 n. 18).
3. Analysis made by S.T.Art-Test di S. Schiavone & C.
4. Bell 1981, 123 n. 2 a-b, pl. 3; Lyons 1996, 107 ff.
5. Pautasso 1996, 133 ff pl. XX:f. The figurine from Camarina is larger than the others and can be older by perhaps one generation.

6. Fiorentini 1980–81, Fiorentini 1988–89, Greco 2015.
7. Greco 2015.
8. Raffiotta 2007 cat.152.
9. Fiorentini 1980–1981, pls. LXXX-LXXXV.
10. Van Der Meijden 1990; Pautasso 1997, fig.10.
11. Van Der Meijden 1990, pl. 26: 5, 6.
12. On the acrolithis, see Marconi 2008; Maniscalco 2015. On the sanctuary see Greco 2015.
13. Marconi 2008, 9.
14. Analysis made by Lorenzo Lorenzini; Maniscalco 2015, 53, n. 4.
15. Maniscalco 2015 figs. 3–4.
16. Maniscalco 2015, fig. 11.
17. Hamilton 2000.
18. Marconi 2008, 7.
19. Castiglioni 2008, 375 ff.
20. Fiorentini 1980–1981, 595, pl. LXXXIV:2.
21. Raffiotta 2007, 119.
22. Pautasso 1996, 114; Barletta 1983, *passim*. For Morgantina, Bell 1981, 9; Kenfield 1990, Kenfield 1993, Raffiotta 2007, 111 ff.
23. Pautasso 1996, 114; Marconi 2008, 17.
24. Pautasso 2012, 129.
25. Richter 1966, 14 ff., figs. 49, 60.
26. Van Der Meijden 1990, 131, note 6.
27. The appearance of fitted bronze statuary toward the end of the sixth century B.C.E. is, however, a parallel to the kind of ‘body building’ that is posited here, and there may be a general similarity in approach to making sculpture.
28. Lapatin 2001, 70–73. Of particular interest is a reference in Lucian (*Jupiter tragoedus*, 8) to hollow statues with many interior supports (for the text, *ibidem*, 71, n. 107) and a reference in Pausanias (I.40.4) to the statue of Zeus Olympios at Megara that employed clay and plaster, together with gold and ivory.
29. Semper 2004.

ABSTRACTS

Archaic figurines of women holding a dove recovered from in and around the Thesmophorion of S. Francesco Bisconti at Morgantina (Sicily) can be associated with a fragmentary terracotta throne now in Vienna. It is possible that this throne was made for one or both of the famous acrolithic sculptures that represented the goddesses Demeter and Kore, from the same sanctuary. The strong East Greek influence on Sicilian archaic sculpture is noted, as well as the possibility that the acrolithic group and the throne may have been made locally with the participation of itinerant artists. Both the throne and the acrolithic sculptures may represent a built, rather than a glyptic, approach to sculpture making, which would anticipate the achievements of the Classical period in chryselephantine sculpture on a much larger scale.

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Keywords: figurines, throne, acrolith, archaic sculpture.

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