Les Carnets de l'ACoSt

Association for Coroplastic Studies

19 | 2019

Varia

The Study of Figurative Terracottas: A Cautionary Tale from a Personal Perspective

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/1703>

DOI: 10.4000/acost.1703

ISSN: 2431-8574

Publisher

ACoSt

Electronic reference

Jaimee P. Uhlenbrock, « The Study of Figurative Terracottas: A Cautionary Tale from a Personal Perspective », *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* [Online], 19 | 2019, Online since 11 June 2019, connection on 21 March 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/acost/1703> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/acost.1703>

This text was automatically generated on 21 March 2020.

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The Study of Figurative Terracottas: A Cautionary Tale from a Personal Perspective

Jaimee P. Uhlenbrock

- ¹ According to the *Macmillan English Dictionary*, a cautionary tale comprises a series of events during which something bad happens that then can be used as a warning for the prevention of unfortunate events in the future. A good example of such a tale comes from the German children's book *Struwwelpeter*,¹ whereby a boy nicknamed Hans-Guck-in-der-Luft, or Hans-Look-in-the-Air, appears oblivious to where he is going and as a result steps into a canal (Fig. 1). While the focus of this discussion is not intended to label as "unfortunate" some popular directions that have been taken over the course of the last century in the study of Greek figurative terracottas, it is hoped that it will provide some guidance in the avoidance of future misdirection when interpreting coroplastic material. Most important in this regard is an awareness that past scholarship and current interpretation must be used critically and not be taken at face value. The researcher must be willing to look beneath the veneer of an argument to its

core to determine its soundness. With each study that contributes to conclusions I would advise asking its author a simple question: “How do you know that?”²

Fig. 1. Die Geschichte von Hans Guck-in-die-Luft.

The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs: Picture Collection, The New York Public Library. (1876).

- 2 There are many assumptions evident in Greek coroplastic research that have evolved out of scholarly biases that are too firmly embedded in archaeological literature to ignore. Those of you who read *Les Carnets de l'ACoSt* will know that one of my areas of investigation concerns a particular and very deeply rooted research bias that identifies most archaic terracotta types found in Sicily with the goddess Demeter.³ I must emphasize that I am not opposed to that identification in the abstract. It may be that in the eyes of a Greek worshipper in Sicily in the Archaic period a terracotta votive left in one of the many sanctuaries there may, in fact, represent Demeter, or it could represent the worshipper, who makes a dedication to Demeter, or even a worshipper who wishes to assume aspects of Demeter for whatever purpose. It could also have been dedicated to a completely different deity altogether, such as Persephone, or even Hera. But I believe that, in the majority of the cases, we simply cannot say for certain. When asking the question of researchers who wish to see Demeter in most terracotta images “how do you know that?”, the answer usually is because such terracotta images are found in sanctuaries believed to have been dedicated to Demeter. Yet, when asking “how do you know that?”, that is, how do you know that these sanctuaries are dedicated to Demeter, the answer usually is “because terracotta images of Demeter are found there.” Circular arguments such as these are of no benefit to archaeological research, since they continue to provide the unstable foundation for future investigations carried out by young researchers who accept these notions as fact. This has become more evident to me recently, since I am a reader for several dissertations that concern figurative terracottas, and several times a year I am sent manuscripts or

articles to review. It is always with considerable chagrin that I still read of sanctuaries identified as belonging to Demeter, when there is no direct evidence to support this view other than the terracotta typology.

- 3 It is very important that cultic and iconographic identifications that lack epigraphic confirmation should always be couched in a nuanced way that illustrates the uncertainty of the argument for the generations of researchers to come, who also must understand the nature of the uncertainty. In this regard I am reminded of the fourth of the ten research principles that were outlined by the Italian historian Arnaldo Momigliano in his seminal article “The Rules of the Game in the Study of Ancient History.”⁴ He said, “The competence of the historian is manifest from his not ascribing certainty to the dubious and from not making generalizations from isolated examples. In some cases the historian should say: I don’t know. At other times, he might advance a hypothesis but with caution.”
- 4 Ascribing certainty to the dubious appears to have been a feature of early coroplastic research, particularly as it concerns Sicily that has left a weighty inheritance. At the risk of repeating myself, I ask your indulgence in allowing me to briefly review the issue of the Demeter identification once again, since it is an excellent illustration of the misuse of coroplastic evidence, for which a cautionary tale might be useful.
- 5 As is well known, over 30 archaic sites in Sicily have yielded coroplastic material, some in impressive quantities. A percentage of this material, whether imported or local, is related to the typology of the so-called Aphrodite group of figured vases, figurines, and protomai that was developed in the Greek East⁵ and that arrived in Sicily, as elsewhere around the Mediterranean, in the earlier 6th century B.C.E. These then provided models for an extensive local production.⁶ Without exception, throughout the later 19th and most of the 20th centuries these terracotta types found in Sicily were all identified with the worship of Demeter and/or Persephone because they were found in Sicilian sanctuaries believed to have been dedicated to these goddesses.
- 6 Let us take a brief look at this evidence. Initially, the arguments in favour of a Demeter identification that were developed in the mid- to later 19th century were based on the protomai of this group, which, because of their truncated form, were seen as representations of the *anodos*, or the emergence of Demeter from the earth.⁷ To this was added a second hypothesis concerning the protome as a figural type, which, to some, appeared to be mask like. Because of this the protome was equated with the ritual mask that was used in a ceremony of Demeter Kidaria in Arcadia that was described by Pausanias (8, 15, 3). During this ceremony a priest put on a mask of the goddess and smote the underground spirits with rods. Both of these assertions concerning the relevance of this type to the *anodos* and to Demeter Kidaria were further supported by a what was considered to be an authoritative statement of Cicero, who said that the Sicilians themselves believed that their entire island was dedicated to Ceres, or the Greek Demeter, and Libera, or the Greek Persephone.⁸ Finally, and most importantly, the occasional appearance of protomai in graves was believed to prove their use in a chthonic context, and therefore they must have represented Demeter and or Persephone, the chthonic goddesses.⁹
- 7 Early scholars argued that since all these factors indicated that the protomai represented Demeter, or more specifically Demeter Kidaria, therefore other associated Aphrodite-Group types, such as the standing kore alabastron,¹⁰ or the seated woman with or without a polos,¹¹ must also represent that goddess. This notion became

ingrained in the archaeological literature of the first half of the 20th century and was the basis for a continuing evolution in the second half. Thus, in 1982 an archaic figurine of a seated woman of the Aphrodite group found in Palermo was interpreted by its excavator as a representation of Demeter Kidaria, which also “proved” to its excavator that Demeter Kidaria was worshipped in the same form in Punic Palermo as she was in the Greek cities of Sicily.¹² In this instance, ascribing certainty to the dubious, as Momigliano would put it, or making generalizations from isolated examples, in his words, does not reveal the competence of this historian.

- 8 An excellent illustration of the necessity for caution in accepting the interpretation of others of archaeological evidence without examining its source can be found in the supposed discovery at the little theater of Epidauros of some 252 figurines of the 4th century inscribed by their dedicators. This was the topic of a notice that originally appeared in the Greek newspaper *Eleftherotypia*¹³ and that was picked up by Catherine Morgan for her report on archaeology in Greece for 2008 published in the “Chronique” section of the *BCH*, as well as in *Archaeological Reports* for 2008. This notice then was included in the *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* under the heading “SEG 59-374. Epidauros. Inscribed statuettes, 4th cent. B.C.”¹⁴ Yet, when researching these 252 so-called figurines, or statuettes, from the little theater at Epidauros that were inscribed by their dedicators, it was found that they did not exist. The original notice that appeared in Greek in *Eleftherotypia* referred to inscriptions on the faces of the seats of the theater, or εδωλια, misunderstood to mean ειδωλια, the modern Greek word commonly used for figurines. That this misunderstanding was incorporated into the *SEG* that then potentially could further erroneous notions about dedicatory inscriptions on figurines is particularly unfortunate. In fact, very little actually is known about the dedicants at a sanctuary relative to their intentions behind the offering of a coroplastic object, because such objects very rarely carry text that could shed light on the motivation of the dedicant and/or particularly the identification of the divinity worshipped.
- 9 Let us take a look at what actually is “known,” or in Momigliano’s words, “what is certain,” about the identification of Greek terracotta figurines, that is, what is held to be indisputable, or absolute, in the archaeological record. We know, or we are certain, that in at least one instance a terracotta female protome of the later sixth century was dedicated to the goddess Hera in a small sanctuary on the island of Delos. We know this because the dedicant, a woman named Mnelaris, inscribed the inside face of neck of the protome, or had it inscribed for her, with her name and the name of the goddess to whom the protome was dedicated before it was left at the sanctuary.¹⁵ This is absolute knowledge and cannot be disputed. We also know, in the absolute sense of the word, that a terracotta figurine of the later 6th century that was found in Athens and that represents a seated woman wearing a high stephane and an elaborately decorated garment was dedicated by a man named Aigon to the goddess Hekate because it was so inscribed on the back “Aigon anetheken thekatei.”¹⁶ In spite of the unequivocal identification of the aforementioned protome with the realm of Hera, no one would ever presume to recognize all protomai found everywhere as images of Hera. Nor has anyone attempted to identify all late sixth-century terracotta images from Athens, the city of Athena, that represent a seated woman of this distinctive typology as Hekate. So, it then follows that in the Sicilian archaeological literature attempts to see Demeter in all sixth-century terracotta figurines appear to the outsider as fallible. Again, the question must be asked, how do you, the excavator of this material, or you, the

researcher of this material, know this, in the absolute sense of the phrase “to know.” The answer must be that you do not.

- 10 In the case of Sicilian sanctuaries within which terracotta images were found, what indeed is “known,” or what is certain, is that for two sites secure epigraphic documentation exists for the nature of the cult, but not in the absolute for the figurines found there. The first concerns the small, archaic sanctuary just outside of Gela on the Bitalemi hill, from where a pottery fragment was brought to light that mentions the Thesmophoros, an epithet of Demeter.¹⁷ The second is the more monumental archaic sanctuary of the Malophoros at Selinus. Outside of its propylaia a small pedestal was found that was inscribed with a dedication, or vow, to the Malophoros by a certain Theullos, son of Pyrrhias.¹⁸ The sanctuary was immediately identified as belonging to Demeter Malophoros,¹⁹ since Pausanias (1. 44.3) tells us that there was a sanctuary dedicated to Demeter Malophoros in Megara Nisaea, the mother city of Megara Hyblaia in Sicily that, in turn, had founded Selinus. Additionally, within the sanctuary itself a fragment of an olpe was brought to light that carries the very incomplete inscription]νεθεκε ται μα[, interpreted to read “dedicated to the Malophoros.”²⁰
- 11 The word Malophoros has been subject to discussion and interpretation for more than a century. Originally taken to mean holder of apples or, according to some, sheep-bringer,²¹ this was broadened by Ettore Gabrici, the excavator of the sanctuary, to mean holder or bringer of all fruits, in the generic sense.²² But he stressed that one of these fruits in particular, the pomegranate, was sacred to Demeter²³ because several figurines of women holding pomegranates were found at the sanctuary,²⁴ along with at least one terracotta model of a pomegranate.²⁵ Yet, there are no ancient sources that associate the pomegranate with Demeter, but rather, as is well known, with her daughter Persephone, as we read, for example, in the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*.²⁶ The notion that the pomegranate was Demeter’s fruit has all but obscured the fact that, according to ancient sources, the pomegranate was sacred to Hera, as was the pomegranate tree.²⁷ At the Heraion at Samos many pomegranate seeds were found,²⁸ and terracotta models of pomegranates also were brought to light there. Moreover, Polykleitos’ chryselephantine statue of Hera at Argos had her holding a pomegranate in one hand and a sceptre topped by a cuckoo in the other.²⁹
- 12 Nonetheless, Gabrici’s affirmation took root and was continuously fertilized by hyperbole in successive studies. Thus in the *Princeton Encyclopedia of Classical Sites* of 1976 it is stated that “Demeter’s cult title of Malophoros is confirmed by inscriptions and several thousand terracotta statuettes of the goddess carrying the pomegranate.”³⁰ At this point, the few terracotta figurines found by Gabrici in the early 20th century that represent women holding pomegranates had grown to become “several thousand.” The young researcher who consults this important reference work uncritically no doubt will continue to propagate this notion.
- 13 There is no question that the combined hundreds, if not thousands, of figurines of differing typologies deposited at the Malophoros sanctuary in Selinus and at the Bitalemi Thesmophorion, among many other sites in Sicily, over the course of nearly two centuries embodied innumerable acts of devotion, and it could very well be that these acts sometimes, or even most often, were relative to Demeter or her realm. But, it must be stressed that the presence of such figurines in sanctuaries with firm epigraphic identification cannot be used as the basis for the identification of similar figurines found in sanctuaries lacking epigraphic identification. Nor am I personally convinced

that even when there is epigraphic confirmation can it be said with confidence that every image from that sanctuary represents the deity mentioned in the epigraphic source.

- 14 This is where the consequences of such identifications can become unfortunate. Once these identifications become embedded in the archaeological literature without being challenged, they are exaggerated and embellished in successive publications until they are fused into an impenetrable and monolith case for the seeming exclusivity of Demeter's worship in Sicily. Thus, in an informative paper on the Sicilian grain economy we read that "...in addition to agriculture being important to Sicily, the cult of Demeter and Persephone was widely distributed throughout the island in all periods of classical antiquity and in all kinds of topographic setting--urban, suburban, and rural."³¹ I would ask this researcher how does he know that? What is the evidence in support of this pan-Demeter notion, a notion that also was repeatedly reiterated at the international congress "Demetra; La divinità, i santuari, il culto, la leggenda," that was held in Enna in 2004, at which eight papers focused on the cult of Demeter in Sicily. In a review of the proceedings of this conference it was noted that "the enormous quantities of terracotta offerings found in the sacred areas--statuettes, vases and lamps--point towards the practice of Thesmophoric rituals."³² I would ask this reviewer, how do you know that? How do you know that the combination of statuettes, vases, and lamps points to Thesmophoric rituals? Enormous quantities of statuettes, vases, and lamps, to use the reviewers exact words, also have been found at the sanctuary of Athena at Lindos³³ that has epigraphic confirmation for its attribution, yet it is difficult to see Thesmophoric rites practiced there. Moreover, terracotta figurines of standing and seated women holding pomegranates, as well as terracotta models of pomegranates, were uncovered among the votives at the Lindian Athenaion³⁴ that call to mind female statues from the Athenian acropolis that portray the same theme.³⁵ How does anyone really know that statues and figurines of women holding pomegranates represent the chthonic goddesses exclusively? The answer is that we really do not.
- 15 What can be surmised from the existing coroplastic evidence relative to Sicily and the typological homogeneity that is evident among the figurative terracottas across all of its sanctuaries in the Archaic period, and especially in the earlier 6th century, I believe, may not reflect a need to represent a specific divinity. Rather, it could be seen simply as indicative of what was available on the market. There is no evidence to suggest that a worshipper singled out a specific type of image for purchase from among a range of different images for sale because that specific one chosen was generally accepted within the larger community of worshippers to represent a given goddess. In the late 7th and first half of the sixth century, all that appears to have been available for purchase by a worshipper for any ritual purpose whatsoever relative to any divinity at all were East-Greek figurines, East-Greek plastic vases, and East-Greek protomai, along with a relatively few Corinthian figurines, and after ca. 540 B.C.E., their eventual local imitations and versions. Effectively, there was nothing else available at that time. Once these figurines became established in the market and were replicated and even reinterpreted, they could have been used for any purpose, even if, as some may believe, they may have had a particular resonance for purported chthonic cults. Yet, we do not actually know this, and therefore cannot actually know this as a fact.

- 16 So, what are we left with and why is this a cautionary tale. As I have already mentioned, I am not opposed to the suggestion that figurative terracottas of the Archaic period in Sicily may indeed have been used in the worship of Demeter or Persephone or both, although probably not exclusively. My goal in this discussion is not to throw out the baby with the bathwater. However, for those engaged in discussions of religious practices that involve coroplastic iconography, especially for the Archaic period in Sicily, it may be prudent to articulate ideas regarding chthonic associations for certain coroplastic types in less absolute terms, so that future researchers will know that there is an element of uncertainty in such a position. This can be accomplished by the judicious use of statements such as, “in the opinion of the excavator...” or “interpreted by so-and-so as...,” that place the onus for faulty or uncertain interpretations on others. Such uncertainty is illustrated well by a recent reassessment of the finds from the Predio Sola sanctuary of Gela, identified by both of its former excavators as one of several Thesmophoria for Gela, in part because of its coroplastic typology.³⁶ This reassessment has resulted in a possible reattribution to a goddess of marriage.³⁷ So, just as the boy in the cautionary tale at the beginning of this presentation who does not look where he is going and as a result steps into a canal, in the same way the researcher who does not see the lack of certainty for most discussions of coroplastic evidence, or who does not look critically at the evidence, may also risk getting wet.

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ENDNOTES

1. Originally published by Heinrich Hoffmann in 1845 in Frankfort as *Lustige Geschichten und drollige Bilder mit 15 schön kolorierten Tafeln für Kinder von 3–6 Jahren*.
2. This is a slightly expanded version of the talk that was given at the conference "Terracottas in the Mediterranean Across Time II" that was held at the University of Haifa from March 12 to March 15, 2018. I am grateful to Adi Erlich for the invitation to present my thoughts at this venue. I also would like to thank Ioanna Patera, who read a draft of this paper and made helpful comments.
3. Uhlenbrock 2016.
4. Momigliano 2016, 41–42.
5. Higgins 1967, 32–37.

6. For example, see Gasparri 2016.
7. Gerhard 1857, 212, n. 5
8. Cic. Ver. 4. 48. 106. But see the discussion in de Angelis 2006, 33–36 that sees another side to this position.
9. Heuzey 1891, 233; Orsi 1891, col. 935.
10. Higgins 1970, pl. 13:57.
11. Higgins 1970, pl. 14:63, 69.
12. Tamburello 1982, 51.
13. *Eleftherotypia* 23, 4, 2008.
14. Chaniotis, A., Corsten, T., Papazarkadas, N. and Tybout, R.A., “SEG 59-374. Epidauros. Inscribed statuettes, 4th cent. B.C.”, *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum*, Current editors: A. T. N. R.A. Chaniotis Corsten Papazarkadas Tybout. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1874-6772_seg_a59_374>
15. Laumonier 1956, 74, no. 109, pl. 12.
16. Fränkel 1882, 268.
17. Orlandini 1966, 20, pl. 10, fig. 4.
18. Salinas 1894, 208–210, fig. 9; Gabrici 1927, col. 380–381; IGDS 54=Iscr. Sic. I² 38.
19. Gabrici 1927, col. 400.
20. Gabrici 1927, col. 340.
21. For a review of the complex meanings associated with the name Malophoros see Robertson 2010, 203–205. For Sheep-Bringer see Mantzoulinou-Richards 1986.
22. Gabrici 1927, col. 401.
23. Gabrici 1927, col. 402.
24. Gabrici 1927, col. 273, pl. LX:1, standing; col. 274, LX:4, seated.
25. Gabrici 1927, pl. LXVII:3.
26. Hymn to Demeter, 370, 410.
27. Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii*, 4.28.
28. Kyrieleis 1988, 219–220; Kučan 2000, 100–101.
29. Pausanias II, 17, 4.
30. Stillwell et al. 1976, 825.
31. DeAngelis 2006, 33.
32. Melfi 2009.
33. Blinkenberg and Kinch 1931, pls. 80–149.
34. Blinkenberg and Kinch 1931, for pomegranate holders, pl. 97: 2143, 2147, 2149; pl. 99: 2168; pl. 102:2217; pl. 107: 2300. For models of pomegranates, pl. 114: 2441, as well as 2443 and 2443, not illustrated.
35. Richter 1968, the Pomegranate Kore, figs. 147–150; Acropolis Kore 677, figs. 198–200.
36. Orlandini 1963.
37. Ismaelli 2011, 232–235.

ABSTRACTS

In the study of Greek figurative terracottas there are many pitfalls that have resulted from out-dated notions that continue to influence coroplastic scholarship. The young researcher, in particular, must be attentive to the sources of an argument and employ critical judgement in order to avoid misdirection when interpreting coroplastic material.

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Keywords: Figurative terracottas, coroplastic interpretation, Sicilian terracottas, Demeter Kidaria, Demeter worship.

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