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# A Survey of Terracotta Figurines from Domestic Contexts in South Italy in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C.E.

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# A Survey of Terracotta Figurines from Domestic Contexts in South Italy in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Centuries B.C.E.

Aura Piccioni

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- 1 My PhD thesis, developed under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Steuernagel at the Institute for Classical Archaeology at the University of Regensburg, Germany, with the title *Häusliche Kulte in Unteritalien und Etrurien (Household Cults in Southern Italy and Etruria)*, focuses on private cults in Etruria and southern Italy in the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E., but does not include Sicily. The central focus of this research is the recognition and reconstruction of private forms of worship based on the character of domestic assemblages from these areas, which comprise miniature pottery, and in particular bucchero kyathoi, terracotta arulae, architectural friezes, and terracotta figurines representing females.
- 2 One could believe that the most telling indicators for the cultic function of a given room in a house would consist of finds of terracotta figurines. These were among the most common offerings in the sanctuaries of the Greek and Italic worlds, where, depending on the context, they could represent either goddess or mortal votary. Yet, the evidence suggests that figurative terracottas from domestic contexts in Italy in the Archaic and Classical periods are quite rare. Nor any have been documented for Etruria, possibly because of the re-occupation of most of the houses in later periods. While there is evidence from houses in southern Italy and Sicily in these periods, this is sporadic. The following is a review of the available evidence for the role of terracotta figurines in domestic contexts in southern Italy. The evidence for Sicily will be reviewed on another occasion.
- 3 Terracotta figurines of females, mostly fragmentary, were brought to light at Croton,<sup>1</sup> Elea,<sup>2</sup> Lokroi Epizephyrii,<sup>3</sup> Sybaris,<sup>4</sup> and Rutigliano<sup>5</sup> in southern Italy, four Greek cities and one indigenous settlement (Fig. 1.) At Croton, a small Archaic head pertinent to a figurine

was uncovered in a room in the farmhouse known as Casa Iedà, and an additional female figurine was brought to light at a farmhouse Quota Pullano, also in the chora of Croton. From room 4 of a house on the acropolis of Elea two terracotta female heads that were uncovered during restoration work on the fortification wall, while another small terracotta head of a female was brought to light at a house in the southern district of the city. All these heads have the polos as the headgear.

Fig. 1. Map of south Italy with sites under discussion indicated in red.



- 4 At Lokroi Epizephyrii approximately 5,000 terracotta fragments were discovered during excavations in the urban part of the ancient city in the area known as Centocamere, but only a few of them can be linked with certainty to domestic contexts.<sup>6</sup> At Sybaris, in the courtyard of a house, a carefully arranged votive deposit was found that comprised two Ionic cups, ritually inverted, in association with a small clay altar and other ceramics, and several female figurines with discs on their shoulders, behind which is a goat protome. A house in the Bigetti district of Rutigliano yielded a small, veiled, female head, also broken from a full figurine. This was found in the central and oldest room, covered by fallen roof tiles.
- 5 All these fragments are pertinent to Archaic types of standing females wearing polos and/or veil. But lacking identifying iconographic characteristics their interpretation is speculative at best. In fact, the polos and the veil are common attributes both for a goddess and a mortal. In the case of one of the figurines from Sybaris, however, a divine identity is strongly suggested by the iconographic elements noted above, that consist of discs on the shoulder behind which can be seen a goat protome. This type of iconography is connected to the ideology of the *Potnia Theron*, comparisons for which are at hand in the sanctuary of San Biagio at Metaponto in the typology of the “winged” goddess.<sup>7</sup> These winged goddesses are characterized by the presence of a low, flaring polos, by a face with

strong, Archaic stylizations, and by shoulders that are enlarged to allow for the insertion of wings; there are also the aforementioned disks and goat protomes. The forearms of the female are normally extended forward to hold an attribute, usually an animal. This type has been dated to the last decades of 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.<sup>8</sup>

- 6 What emerges from this cursory review of the evidence is the preliminary suggestion that terracotta figurines are rare in domestic contexts in southern Italy during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E and appear to be totally absent from Etruscan domestic contexts, at least as far as the archaeological record is concerned. The available evidence also suggests a similar situation in southern Italy in contexts dating to the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the Hellenistic period. Only a few examples have been found in houses at indigenous settlements, such as Monte Moltone di Tolve,<sup>9</sup> Pomarico Vecchio<sup>10</sup> and Roccagloriosa<sup>11</sup> in Lucania, but also in the chora of Metaponto at the Fattoria Fabrizio,<sup>12</sup> and at Lokroi Epizephyrii.<sup>13</sup> A greater typological variety is represented by these finds, that include an enthroned female from room 1 of the “sacred space” of the house at Tolve,<sup>14</sup> or a figurine of a standing female wearing polos from room 2 of the house at Pomarico Vecchio; even though this fragment actually dates to the Archaic period, it was found in a 4<sup>th</sup> century context. Other examples include two seated and veiled females from the sacred deposit of house A at Roccagloriosa,<sup>15</sup> and a figurine of standing Artemis with a smaller worshiper at her side from what is believed to have been a room for a family cult in the Fattoria Fabrizio.<sup>16</sup> Other fragmentary figurines from the same context at the Fattoria Fabrizio represent enthroned females, female busts, and reclining males.
- 7 The relative scarcity of terracotta figurines in domestic contexts in south Italy in the Archaic and Classical periods is, in itself, a noteworthy phenomenon that is paralleled by a similar phenomenon in the 4<sup>th</sup> century and the Hellenistic periods, the finds from the cult room at the Fattoria Fabrizio notwithstanding. The suggestion that emerges is that family members may have preferred other tools for cultic expression, such as arulae and miniature vases, which are very numerous in domestic contexts. In comparison with the Archaic and Classical terracotta finds, however, those from the later 4<sup>th</sup> century and the Hellenistic period show a greater variety and diversity of typology.

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## NOTES

1. CARTER, D'ANNIBALE 1993.
2. BENCIVENGA TRILLMICH 1983, 421; NEUTSCH 1994, 66.
3. Cf. RUMSCHEID 2006, 110.
4. *Accademia nazionale dei Lincei* 1972, 111, nn. 211–212; 112, n. 202; 126–127, n. 241; *Accademia nazionale dei Lincei* 1992, 184.
5. RICCARDI 1988, 106.
6. BARRA BAGNASCO 1992, 286.
7. Cf. *Accademia nazionale dei Lincei* 1972, 116, n. 213.
8. OLBRICH 1979, 157.
9. RUSSO TAGLIENTE 1992, 270–271.
10. BARRA BAGNASCO 1997, 7.
11. RUSSO TAGLIENTE 1992, 97.
12. CARTER 2006, 139–140.
13. BARRA BAGNASCO 1992, 286–293.
14. RUSSO TAGLIENTE 1992, 270.
15. FRACCHIA, GUALTIERI 1989, 227.
16. CARTER 2006, 140.

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