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Minoan peak sanctuary figurines as expressions of materiality and ritual practices related to health and wellbeing

ABSTRACT

In this short paper we consider the material affordances of votive offerings and the human need to make, offer and display votives as material expressions of human engagement with health and well-being in the ritual setting of Cretan Bronze Age mountain shrines. Excavated in 1903, the site of Petsophas established many of the general ideas about the class of sites more usually known as peak sanctuaries, including their role in healing. Around thirty such sites are now known across the island, with their well-known characteristic finds of hand-modelled figurines: anthropomorphic and animal forms, as well as anatomical body parts (or votive limbs). Focusing on the clay figurines, the key aims of this paper are: a) to draw attention to the importance of considering *locally distinctive* practices, since it is increasingly clear that peak sanctuaries exhibit important local and regional variation in finds; and b) to reflect on the materiality of the votives, including their technology, materials and scale.

KEYWORDS: clay figurines, votive offerings, Minoan peak sanctuaries, ritual, materiality.

In 1903, ‘the knife of a small shepherd-girl turned up ..., close below the turf, the little series of clay figurines of animals’ at Petsophas in eastern Crete (Myres 1902-3, 357). From this modest discovery, the first excavations of this Bronze Age mountain-shrine followed; they were completed in only one short season, with a long report published in the Annual of the British School at Athens (Myres 1902-3). Unsurprisingly then, some important general ideas about these mountain sites or peak sanctuaries began to take shape around the Petsophas material, many of which are sustained in the peak sanctuary literature to the present day.

The peak sanctuaries are characterised by their location, that is by being consistently positioned on the peak which appears most prominent from nearby habitation areas (often not the highest peak within a larger mountain massif), and also by their finds. Most distinctive among those finds are hand-modelled clay figurines, which comprise humans and animals in large numbers, as well as smaller quantities of anatomical body parts and models. From the earliest excavations, the anatomical body parts – including arms, hands, legs, feet, split bodies and torsoes (often

referred to as ‘votive limbs’ within Minoan archaeology) – quickly attracted attention; they were compared to the votives from Greek and Roman Asclepeia and to the modern tamata offered in Greek Orthodox churches and chapels, which had already themselves been commented on comparatively by travellers to Greece. Theodore Bent, for example, described the offerings to the Panayia in a church on Amorgos as follows: “all along the screen were hung feet, arms, ships, each of which had a history to tell of relief from pain or peril,” and he continues “it is but an old idea which the Greeks have inherited from their ancestors; similar things have been unearthed from the ruins of ancient temples – votive offerings to the gods.” (Bent 1885, 471). Both the classical material and contemporary ritual practices thus offered a comparative context for thinking about anatomical votives as agents for healing, alongside a wider range of imagery concerned with general wellbeing and human concerns (Morris and Peatfield 2014).

In this short paper, we offer some methodological perspectives on the figurine material. We aim here to begin to tease out some specific themes which can be used to think about the ritual processes around healing and well-being, but which are also of broader value for understanding the life histories and agency of figurines within ritual practice. First, we draw attention to the importance of looking carefully at local and regional variation, encouraging us to begin to think more about difference and complexity within the context of an over-arching peak sanctuary cult. Second, we advocate for a renewed focus on materialities, considering key material affordances such as technology, stylistic choices, size/scale, while drawing upon other archaeological and ethnographic data as a comparative tool. The discussion here draws both on our earlier work at Atsipadhes in the Rethymnon area (Peatfield 1992; Peatfield and Morris 2012; 2019; Morris and Peatfield 2020), and on our ongoing East Cretan Peak Sanctuaries Project (ECPSP), the latter developed at the kind invitation of, and in collaboration with, our dear colleague Costis Davaras to bring his peak sanctuary excavations of the 1970s to publication.

Turning first to local and regional variation, study of both fabric and style point clearly to local production and local consumption of the clay figurines. In other words, as a general rule, the figurines brought to each mountain sanctuary were made locally, to be used locally. This is here represented visually in diagrammatic form (Fig. 1). As noted earlier, at the overarching or pan-Cretan level, all peak sanctuary sites share both topographic features (the choice to use the peak providing the best intervisibility with its settled landscape) and key find types, most notably clay figurines in large quantities. Locally, fabric and technological and stylistic choices mean that

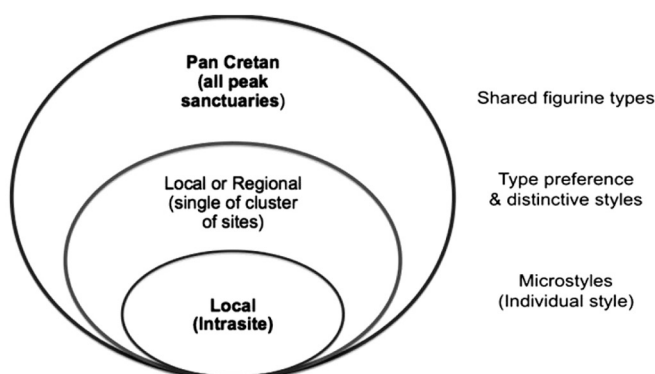


Fig. 1. Diagrammatic representation of variation between (inter-site) and within (intra-site) peak sanctuaries, indicating the interplay between overall figurine type and local preferences and choices. (CM)

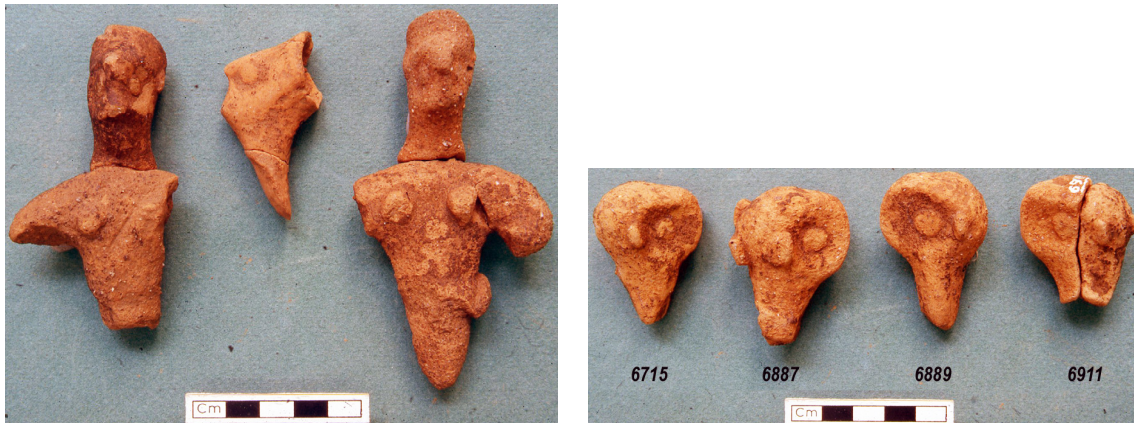


Fig. 2. Clay anthropomorphic figurines from Atsipadhes, examples of microstyle groups.
2a (left): Atsipadhes style group A; 2b (right): Atsipadhes style group F.

the products from individual sites are often easily distinguishable. Thus, figurines from Atsipadhes are, for example, readily distinguishable from those from the neighbouring sanctuary of Vrysinas above Rethymnon. And at the intrasite level, further variety – micro-styles or even individual makers or ‘hands’ are observable (Morris 1993), as illustrated here with two stylistically distinctive head groups from Atsipadhes (Fig. 2). Or, at Prinias, one of the distinctive styles is the delicately modelled face with the use of pierced features rather than the more usual applied pellet eyes (Fig. 3; Morris, O’Neill and Peatfield 2019).

Variation can also be observed in other important ways. It has become increasingly clear that there are significant differences between the figurine assemblages from different peak sanctuaries. This observation comes with a note of caution – our knowledge of the material is uneven and incomplete, so new publications or excavations will surely continue to modify and add to our understanding of these differences. For the moment, our main point is that we should pay greater attention to potential local variations.

At the time we were excavating at Atsipadhes, our general expectation was that material finds might mirror those already known. One notable absence from the assemblage was the highly miniaturised animal figurines, well-known from many sites, including Iuktas, Petsophas and Prinias (Iuktas: Zeimbeki 2004; Petsophas: Myres 1902-3, 376-8, with pl. XIII; Rutkowski 1991, 35 with pl. XLVIII-XVIX). As seen here in these examples from Prinias, they are tiny enough to nestle in the hand (Fig. 4); it is not difficult to imagine the domesticated animals gathered or arranged as herds or flocks, as can be glimpsed within other clay models, such as the clay bowl with flock and shepherd from Palaikastro (Bosanquet and Dawkins 1923, pl. VII) (Fig. 5), and a fragment of a similar arrangement from Philioremos (Kyriakidis 2018, fig. 1). We have suggested elsewhere that miniaturised figurines may be a feature of sanctuaries with stronger



Fig. 3. Clay female figurines from Prinias, illustrating one of the distinctive styles from the site.



Fig. 4. Clay miniaturised animals from Prinias, held in a human hand for a sense of scale. (CM)



Fig. 5. Clay bowl with a flock of sheep with a shepherd, from Palaikastro. (AP)

palatial links, a suggestion which finds support in their absence from the more rural Atsipadhes assemblage (Morris and Peatfield 2020, 115-6). This is largely comprised of medium-sized bovine figurines, and it also lacks the wider variety of animals that are often so skilfully captured within the highly miniaturised material (for example, bovids, pig, sheep, goat, weasels).

The possibility that specific concerns (around illness, injury, life crises, etc) might have been foregrounded at, or a speciality of, specific sites is one that also merits a closer look. At Petsophas, anatomical offerings are well represented in the finds from the early excavations by the British School at Athens and from Davaras' later work in the 1970s. Notable among the many interesting anatomical offerings are the female torsos with clearly marked genitalia (Fig. 6), as well as birthing figures and swaddled infants. Simone Zimmermann has made a convincing case for a specific association between obstetric practices and weasels, which makes excellent sense of the concentrations of both female anatomical offerings and weasels (Zimmermann 2021). We can suggest then that one special focus or concern at Petsophas is around reproduction and childbirth, while not suggesting that this is wholly absent from other sites.



Fig. 6. Female torsos from Petsophas (left: HNM 10576; right: HNM 10577).

We turn now to our second focus on materialities, thinking here about the material affordances of the Minoan peak sanctuary figurines, while also drawing upon other archaeological and ethnographic data as a comparative tool. Choice of material, technology, stylistic choices, and size/scale all impact on the life cycle of a figurine, from production to consumption. Cross-culturally, a huge range of materials have been used to make votive figurines and anatomical body parts – clay, stone, wax, metals, wood, among others. The materials used, together with the associated technologies of production, shape the degree to which offerings are standardised and ‘off the peg’ versus opportunities for individualising them.

As the Minoan material is largely (but not exclusively) handmade rather than moulded, there would have been ample potential for individualising offerings – either in their shaping or via the addition of further modelled and painted details – whether to represent specific health conditions and concerns or to articulate social identities, for example through hairstyles, clothing or jewellery. Interestingly, work on later classical mould-made votives from Corinth also suggests that there was a ‘desire for customisation’ and that moulded objects were on occasion adapted, for example by adding clay or painted details (Petersen 2019).

In more modern contexts, there are plentiful examples of the ‘off the peg’ types but also of more individualised items. Looking at metals, most contemporary Greek *tamata* and Spanish *milagros* are cast or stamped and thus mass produced, although hand-made and customised examples are attested historically (*tamata*: Handaka 2002; *milagros*: Egan 1991; Oktavec 1995). Another frequently documented material is wax. Here, the mould-made offerings purchased at the Fatima shrine in Portugal represent a good example of mass-production. But wax is also a favoured material on Cyprus, where votive objects can be made to order, suggesting again the possibility of customisation (Carroll 2018). In wood, ‘ema’ are plaques offered in Japanese Shinto and Buddhist shrines – though in the latter case, the modern practice of writing a prayer or message on the plaque has decreased older traditions of more individualised imagery (Reader 1991; De Smet and Reader (2017). And it is also worth considering wooden carvings, such as those well-known from the Caninde shrine dedicated to St Francis in NE Brazil: these wooden carvings range from the generic to the highly individualised; generic forms may also be elaborated with red paint or gashes and incisions intended to show wounds and injuries (King 2005).

Let us pause for a moment and look at the Brazilian wooden tradition through an ethnographic lens, before coming back to the Minoan material. In this composite narrative related by Greenfield and Cavalcante (2006), Fatima is about to set off to the shrine of St Francis with a votive offering in thanks for her recovery from a leg injury caused by falling from a cart – a disastrous event for this poor, rural family, as she is unable to do agricultural or other work. A strikingly similar point has been made in relation to ancient Etruscan votives, where Turfa notes that “in rural or pre-industrial populations, walking and working are of prime importance, and healing of hands and feet is commonly sought.” (Turfa 2006, 105).

Fatima’s preparations are described as follows: “The two women carefully packed food, a small stove, their hammocks, clothes and the wood carving of a leg that Francisco, Fatima’s mate, had made for her to deposit as a votive offering attesting to her miracle cure by the saint.” (Greenfield and Cavalcante 2006: 66). The material offering is a wooden leg made by her husband Francisco. This raises interesting points about practices of production – here the



Fig. 7. Female seated clay figurine from Traostalos (AP).



Fig. 8. Clay hand, pierced at wrist, with swollen knuckles and indented nails, from Traostalos.

object is individually carved by a family member, making an intimate connection between the object and person. Interestingly, we are also told that they have been given objects to offer on behalf of others. Of course, for the Minoans we lack these rich personal details, but these kinds of narratives invite us to consider different aspects of the process: the context of making; whether an offering shows an injury or illness or a whole, healed body part (both are known across many traditions); and the idea of community – that offerings may be made on behalf of others unable to travel.

Since Minoan terracottas are mostly hand-made, they do afford (at least in principle) more opportunity for bespoke or individualised representation, which might include depictions of illnesses, injuries or times of heightened concern such as pregnancy and child-birth – as already seen earlier from Petsophas. An important and well-known piece of evidence in this context is the female figurine from Traostalos (Fig. 7). It is important to keep in mind that female figurines are typically formed with a bell skirt for the lower body (as in Fig. 3), hence legs were not present or needed as the figurine ‘stood’ comfortably on the rim of the skirt. Only by seating the Traostalos lady has the figurine maker been able to modify the figurine tradition to show her legs, where we can immediately see how carefully differentiated they are – one very thin, the other seemingly swollen. Regardless of the differing views about the specific pathology, it is clear that the intention is to show an ailment, and that the figurine should be considered a customised product.

Cross-culturally, anatomical votives are produced not only in many materials but at many differing scales, from the miniaturised to closer to life size. The majority of Minoan peak sanctuary figurines are miniaturised representations of humans and animals which can easily be held or carried (though there are also notable examples of larger figurines, both anthropomorphic and animal). Figurines made at a larger scale stand out. Made at around two-thirds life size, the votive hand from Traostalos shown in Fig. 8 is also pierced at the wrist for suspension, and is

considerably larger than most anatomical offerings. Two distinctive features are emphasised – swelling across the back of the knuckles, and indented nails. A smaller (around one-quarter) size hand from the same site has similarly swollen knuckles, though unfortunately the fingers are not preserved.

Inferring a specific medical condition from the material is challenging, but the knuckle swelling suggests an arthritic condition; the nail abnormality, so carefully observed in the modelling, is associated with a wide range of health conditions. It is again clear that customised details (larger size and pathologies) are purposefully represented.

Figurine size impacts directly on the degree of detail that can be incorporated into the modelling, and how readily visible or tactile those elements (such as the indented nails) are. Scale and size are thus further important aspects of figurine materiality – and attention to scale encourages us to consider interactions between person and object. It is surely not accidental that the majority of the peak sanctuary figurines are of a size that fits comfortably in the hand, promoting easy intimacy with the human body and the sensory qualities of touching and holding an object. Well-represented in the assemblages of some sites are votive limbs: hands, arms, legs and feet. Many (though not all) of the limbs are pierced for suspension; we might consider the possibility that they could have been carried or worn on the body prior to their deposition, as well as there being some provision for hanging or display on the site. Analogy with other bodies of votive material, both archaeological and ethnographic, indicates the importance of display and the creation of visually striking groups of material which speak to the repeated visits to the sanctuary and to its success. These may include larger objects that commanded particular attention, figurines purposefully made as a group on a shared base, or groups or clusters of similar material. Within this process, the individual objects are expressive of a community of practice and become part of the collective power of ritual performance and offering.

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