

Does Size Matter in the Serial Production of Terracotta Offerings?

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Abstract

Moulds made possible the mass production of numerous inexpensive dedications in the Greek world. The use of derivative moulds in the serial production of terracottas inevitably results in products that are both smaller and less clearly defined than their prototypes since details are often indistinct or obliterated. What factors may have influenced dedicants to choose smaller versions of terracottas? Was it simply a matter of lower cost or could there also have been other considerations such as portability, suitability for mass dedications and groupings, or even availability of display space? Furthermore, the symbolic value of dedications, for example, as tokens of participation in a cult activity, would not be affected by size. And did size matter to the recipient divinity? I argue that small size did not decrease the perceived efficacy or religious significance of an offering. In fact, reduced size would have intensified the significance of the most important features, those that communicate the messages inherent in the form of the dedication.

This paper addresses aspects of the economic and social dimension of coroplastic serial production, primarily focusing on a large group of mould-made plaques (6th–4th century BC) from the hero sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra in Lakonia. These plaques vary widely in quality and size, ranging from sizeable, detailed images to a large number of small and simplified versions.

Introduction

Recent research in social anthropology and archaeology, including Classical archaeology, has emphasised the material nature of objects, their social role, and people's visual and sensual engagement with them. Increasing attention has also been given to integrating the materiality of religion into any study of its theology and rituals.¹

The dedication of personal offerings as a way to honour and influence the gods was a customary act of worship in the Greek world. Offerings were tangible manifestations of personal piety, motivated by the dedicant's need to establish a relationship with the divine and to make a public display of piety.

In this paper, I address some aspects of the economic and social dimension of Greek coroplastic serial production, focusing on products destined for dedication. I consider their material attributes and their role both as products of workshops and as items of popular use across all social strata. I thus aim to contribute to the discussion about



Fig. 1: Successive generations of the “Polos Lady” from the Artemision of Thasos.

popular rites and beliefs, the materiality of small offerings, and the significance these were thought to have.

Coroplastic Serial Production

At the beginning of the 7th century BC there was a dramatic increase in small personal offerings in sanctuaries; this reflects greater market demand for offerings as well as large-scale participation in cultic activities by a wide range of social groups, not just the aristocracy as was the case earlier.²

The moulding technique was introduced to Greece, probably from Cyprus, at that time. As the new technology spread throughout the Greek world in the 6th century, it transformed terracotta production. Moulds allowed large numbers of replicas of a single original to be produced while requiring only minimal competence, because, after the model (the “prototype” or “archetype”) had been produced, moulds and mouldings could be made by apprentices.³ This ushered in an era of mass production of inexpensive terracottas that allowed worshippers from various socio-economic backgrounds to make such dedications.⁴

Inherent in the moulding technique is serial production.⁵ From a single prototype, hundreds of terracotta figurines⁶ can be produced directly or indirectly, with the total output constituting a “mould series”. All moulds taken directly from the prototype are considered “first-generation” moulds; the identically-sized figurines fashioned in those moulds are “first-generation” figurines.

Derivative moulds can further extend the period of production of the same type of terracottas. “First-generation” figurines were used as prototypes for “second-generation” moulds and figurines. This process of using figurines of earlier generations as new prototypes could be repeated several times, resulting in a family of mechanically related products that could extend to several generations. For example, the “Polos Lady”, a type



Fig. 2: Terracotta plaque with seated man from Amyklai.

of 6th-century figurine from the Artemision of Thasos representing a seated figurine type, was produced in a sequence of up to ten successive generations (fig. 1).⁷

Clay shrinks during the drying and firing of new moulds and figurines, and this affects the size, quality, and legibility of the derivative figurines. The degree of shrinkage between terracottas of two successive generations can range from about 10 to 20 percent, depending on the type of clay, duration of firing, and kiln temperature. Thus, with each generation the figurines become progressively smaller and less clearly defined than their prototypes, with details often indistinct or obliterated.⁸

Even though the prototype is generally still recognizable, derivative production often results in schematic, stylised representations. However, in some cases, paint could compensate for the lack of definition in the modelling and the loss of detail.



Fig. 3: Terracotta plaque with seated man and female attendant from Amyklai.

Case Study: the Amyklai Plaques

Now, let us briefly examine a large and distinctive assemblage of terracotta plaques that form the basis of my remarks. The plaques were found in a votive deposit at the hero sanctuary of Agamemnon and Cassandra at Amyklai, near Sparta; they date from the late 6th to the late 4th century BC. Similar groups have been found in other Lakonian and Messenian deposits. The most popular and distinctive subject depicts a seated man often holding a drinking cup and sometimes accompanied by a snake (fig. 2); he is often attended by a female (fig. 3) or more seldom a boy (fig. 4).⁹

The plaques, made in moulds that can be followed through up to five generations (fig. 4),¹⁰ vary widely in quality and size, ranging from sizeable, detailed images to a large number of small and simplified versions with an almost abstract effect. The intensive production of these plaques over a long period indicates they were popular mass-produced offerings from local workshops.

An iconographic model for the Amyklai plaques was provided by two large handmade terracotta reliefs found in the deposit and dated at the end of the 6th century,¹¹ which in turn followed the iconographic type of the larger and more elaborate stone reliefs found throughout Lakonia and first created some time in the late 6th century.¹²



Fig. 4: Terracotta plaques with seated man and boy attendant from Amyklai: five successive generations.

As I have argued in my monograph on the Amyklai plaques, reliefs and plaques decorated with this iconographic subject were considered appropriate dedications to heroes. This fits well with evidence about the nature of the cult at Amyklai and the importance of heroes in Spartan society. But, while the plaques were modest personal offerings, the large and costly stone reliefs were conspicuous elite, or possibly communal, dedications.

The plaques vary considerably in size, from about 4–6 cm square to about 28 cm square. The figures on many of the small-sized plaques are rendered schematically: lumps of clay for the head and vertical or bent strips for the body and legs (fig. 5); arms and facial features are seldom rendered in relief, though painted details (limbs, features, or attributes), now lost, could have made them appear more natural and lively.¹³ In many cases, the size and schematic rendering of the small plaques is clearly the result of derivative production.

Does Size Matter?

In studying the Amyklai plaques, I often wondered if size mattered. Were small-scale, later generation terracottas cheaper? Was limiting financial expense the only purpose



Fig. 5: Small-sized terracotta plaque with seated man and attendant from Amyklai.

of their production? Were they confined to poorer dedicants who could not afford the larger ones?

Incidentally, Archaic handmade types of figurines were also made in various sizes, as shown, for example, by columnar female figurines from Eleusis and the Athenian Akropolis;¹⁴ therefore, questions regarding size would also apply in their case.

The public today would associate small size, mass production, and inexpensive materials with lower socio-economic groups, but was that also the case in antiquity? Of course, we cannot exclude economic reasons for the production of small size terracottas; most dedicants could surely have afforded such small, inexpensive offerings.¹⁵

The question then is: are factors other than cost important when considering the serial production of terracotta figurines and especially their consumption? I argue that the economics of serial production and consumption may be driven by several factors in addition to cost, because, as has been observed with miniatures and models,¹⁶ size can limit certain actions but facilitate others: for example, a large figure would be more visible to a group of people, but a small figurine weighs less and is thus more easily transported, handled, and interacted with. Smaller figurines, therefore, are more tactile objects.¹⁷



Fig. 6: Terracotta plaque from Amyklai held in palm.

Factors from the Point of View of the Dedicant

Various factors may have encouraged dedicants to choose smaller versions of terracottas as dedications.

First, there are practical reasons like portability. Small size and relatively light weight would make later generation terracottas more suitable for dedication when someone had to travel to a sanctuary further away from home. Small, light objects are also inconspicuous, unassuming, and easily concealed, since they could comfortably fit into the palm of a dedicant (fig. 6).

Second, small size may encourage the offering of multiples of one type of terracotta or a group of different subjects. Worshippers could intentionally choose to dedicate more than one votive offering on behalf of family members who could not visit the sanctuary, and multiple offerings might increase the efficacy of gift-giving by addressing several aspects of the honoured figure as a whole. Furthermore, by grouping individual generic offerings the dedicant could construct a personal narrative related to their familial and social circumstances.¹⁸ Of course, such display narratives are lost to us today because the vast majority of offerings are discovered mixed together in votive deposits.

Third, small terracottas may be more easily placed inside the temple, close to or even on the cult image, thus achieving physical closeness with the divinity. Indeed, literary,

inscriptional, and iconographical evidence associates small offerings with the divine image.¹⁹

A fourth factor behind the dedication of small terracottas could be links to childhood.²⁰ Some small objects could have been consciously selected for dedication by children or on behalf of children (for example, by their parents) as mementos of childhood and to mark their change of status in rituals of maturation.²¹

Finally, simplifying and compressing details in small, derivative terracottas focuses the viewers' and users' attention on the main features, thereby intensifying the inherent messages.²² The iconographic model of the small schematic plaques from Amyklai is still recognizable because of their close spatial proximity to larger versions.²³ But, since many features (like the drinking cup or the snake) are omitted, our attention focuses on the main figures – the honoured seated hero and his attendant.

On the other hand, the more generalised appearance of small scenes may also encourage other interpretations, creating new meanings of their own. Thus, dedicants may perceive the featureless standing figure as a worshipper, with whom they could easily identify, and even small offerings would be attractive if they create the impression of physical closeness with the honoured hero.

Factors from the Point of View of the Coroplast

Derivative production is of course convenient and cheap for the coroplast. But did supply drive dedicatory practice? When choosing offerings, was a worshipper influenced by what was sold at or near the sanctuary? Or, did the coroplast respond to the needs of nearby sanctuaries or to demands from worshippers who, for whatever reason, may have wanted smaller offerings? Did demand influence production? These are difficult questions to answer, but it seems likely that demand for particular offerings and their supply by workshops were interconnected.²⁴

Another reason for the coroplast to produce derivatives could be the lack of prototypes or first-generation moulds – if, for example, they were broken, worn out, or lost. Furthermore, in order to easily enlarge his repertoire or introduce a foreign type that had succeeded elsewhere, the coroplast could take a mould from an imported terracotta even at a cost of reduced size and quality.²⁵

Interestingly, some coroplasts did seem concerned about the reduced size of later generation terracottas, because they tried to compensate by modifying them. Thus, to make up for lost height, an enthroned goddess of the Classical period from Santa Venera at Paestum often has a step added to the footstool of the second generation or is provided with a higher polos.²⁶ In another modification at the third-generation stage, the third-generation mould of the torso was combined with a first-generation mould of the legs to create a taller figure with disproportionately long legs.²⁷

Factors from the Point of View of the Sanctuary

Was small size also a matter of expediency, perhaps to save space and avoid lots of offerings cluttering the sanctuary?²⁸ Conversely, sheer quantity may sometimes be preferable to a few large conspicuous dedications, because the accumulation of offerings, even inexpensive ones like miniature vessels and figurines, might mark the cult's popularity, reputation and grandeur. This would testify to the power of the gods and their care for overseeing events like rites of passage of the community members.

Factors from the Point of View of the Wider Community

Small size, low cost, and numerous offerings may point to individuals participating in a regularly repeated, group cult activity that emphasized communal participation over personal elite display. Small terracottas could be dedicated by each person, rich or poor, as a sign of participation in a ritual event or as symbolic, "token" votives accompanying prayers. Such commemorative or communicative functions would not be affected by size. Small size would also facilitate handling where offerings were used in performance-related ritual activities before being dedicated.²⁹

The moulding process produces repetitive, stereotyped forms and thus more homogeneous offerings regardless of size. Such uniformity may encourage conformity,³⁰ reduce the gap between socio-economic classes, and reinforce a unified group identity. This is especially applicable in the case of the Amyklaian and other Lakonian plaques, which were employed in heroic cults that promoted communal ideals centred on important local heroes.

Factors from the Point of View of the Divinity

In the worshippers' own belief, did the divinity care more about the size than the type of offering or its iconography? Like Susan Stewart,³¹ I believe that, in a religious context, reducing the dimensions did not necessarily reduce the significance, because offerings have symbolic value, not just economic value.

The social value of offerings depends on personal motives and cultural context; for example, value depends on what is appropriate in specific cases, not just on monetary worth (such as raw material and labour). Thus, while a small-scale dedication may have low economic value, it may be rich in symbolic value because it embodies social and religious ideas or represents human qualities like the desires and identities of the dedicant. Meaning can reside in type and form rather than size, raw material or technical elaboration.³²

Conclusion

Dedications of all kinds aimed to attract the attention of the divinities and establish a reciprocal relationship with them. In some instances, poorer worshippers who could not afford larger, expensive gifts would indeed offer small, low-cost terracottas – many the result of serial production. Sometimes, however, smaller votives could be chosen deliberately, not just as inferior alternatives.³³ As we saw, various factors may influence the selection of small terracottas, with practical and personal needs and considerations interrelated. For example, small size facilitates transportation, is generally less costly, and may have been more appropriate when related to children. Dedicants of small terracottas may have been influenced by personal circumstances, by specific rituals practised in the sanctuary, by regional dedicatory practices, or simply by what was available in local workshops.

The efficacy of dedications did not necessarily depend on their size, because symbolism was significant in ritual acts.³⁴ Size does not affect the role of the offering as a device for communication, nor does it decrease its religious significance. And, in many cases, the act of giving, in a religious sense, would have been more important than the offering's size.

Notes

¹ Barrett 2016.

² Gimatzidis 2011, 81. 85 f.

³ Muller 2014, 75 f.

⁴ Salapata 2018. On mass production of terracottas, see Muller 2014, 65–67.

⁵ Muller 2014, 67 f.

⁶ I use “figurines” as a general term to include also terracotta protomes and plaques.

⁷ Huysecom-Haxhi 2017, 348 and fig. 1. Cf. six generations of a 6th-cent. seated female figure from the Artemision of Thasos: Muller 2017, 61 fig. 1.

⁸ Salapata 2014, 52.

⁹ Salapata 2014.

¹⁰ Salapata 2014, pl. 11 and pl. 21.

¹¹ Salapata 2014, 64 f. pl. 1a–b (0,38 × 0,55 m and 0,25 × 0,35 m in size).

¹² Salapata 2014, 105–115.

¹³ Salapata 2014, 50.

¹⁴ Eleusis: Parisi 2014, 30 fig. 11; Athenian Akropolis: Georgaka 2011, 12 fig. 1.

¹⁵ Salapata 2018, 98. 105.

¹⁶ Zeman-Wiśniewska 2016, 113.

¹⁷ Cf. Kohring 2011, 36; Davy 2015, 9.

¹⁸ Salapata 2015.

¹⁹ Salapata 2002, 26.

²⁰ As Knappett (2012, 93) remarked, in archaeological research, children as a social category are often neglected (except in the case of burials).

²¹ Cf. Luce 2011, 61 f.

²² Knappett 2012, 103; Bailey 2005, 32; Foxhall 2015, 3.

²³ Cf. Knappett 2012, 92.

²⁴ Salapata 2018, 102.

²⁵ Ferrandini Troisi – Buccolier 2012, 28 f.

²⁶ Miller-Ammerman 2002, 105 fig. 5 and pl. 26 (no. 222).

²⁷ Miller-Ammerman 2002, 105 pl. 26 (no. 227).

²⁸ Cf. Pearson 1998, 39; Kiernan 2009, 6.

²⁹ Salapata 2018, 101–104.

³⁰ Cf. Davy 2015, 9.

³¹ Stewart 1993, 43.

³² Salapata 2018; Schattner – Zuchtriegel 2013, 262 f.

³³ Langin-Hooper 2015, 62–65.

³⁴ Kiernan 2009, 6 f. 212.

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