

# C O M P T E S R E N D U S

GERRIE VAN ROOIJEN, *Goddesses of Akragas. A Study of Terracotta Votive Figurines from Sicily*, Sidestone Press, Leiden, 2021, 383 p, 202+32 fig., ISBN 978-90-8890-900-9

Initiated as a PhD dissertation, and published shortly after its defence at the University of Leiden, the book presents, as the title announces, the study of a category of finds from the Akragas excavations, namely 202 terracotta figurines produced between the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> and the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC. These are mostly block-shaped, almost aniconic female representations, characterized by an apron, pectoral pendants, and *polos* on the head. The work is an ambitious undertaking, which does not aim only to publish the material in a catalogue, but pursues a broad spectrum of questions, which go beyond the simply who and how is represented, and contextualizes the artefacts from the perspective of recent theoretical interpretations in archaeology. Thus, the catalogue at the end follows a typological and chronological classification (Chapter IV), the latter preceded by studies of aspects related to iconography (Chapter II) and technology (Chapter III), all set in their historical context (political, social and religious) at the very beginning of the volume (Chapter I).

The first part of the introductory chapter briefly reviews in several subchapters the state of research and the research questions, as well as the method and the structure of the work. But most of it consists of subchapter 6, dedicated to the historical context (p. 24-32). The written sources, namely the main authors making reference in their works to the Sicilian colonies (Thucydides, Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus), but also other archaeological data are correlated to provide the complex landscape of a multicultural society, which in a dynamic Mediterranean world and in a neutral colonial environment defined by the term “middle ground” led to the creation of an original local culture. The terracotta figurines are seen as a material manifestation of this hybrid culture playing an important role in the cultural mediation and the formation of a local identity through common participation in the cult.

The figurines are local products known in literature as Athena Lindia, according to Christian S. Blinkenberg’s identification<sup>1</sup>. The Danish archaeologist, who excavated at Lindos in Rhodes, started from the interpretation of an inscription (the Lindian Chronicle) discovered in the temple of Athena, which speaks of the connections between the colonies of Akragas and Gela on the one hand, and Rhodes on the other, and from the assumption that the Akragas statuettes reflect a local cult statue, probably originating in Rhodes. Other identification suggestions have been made since, considering the figurines as representations of Demeter, or Persephone<sup>2</sup>. The author (further G.v.R.) downplays the contribution of the colonists and the importance of the relationship between the colony and the metropolis, noticing that the Rhodian influence is supported neither in terms of the Rhodian contribution to the foundation of Akragas (a participation considered symbolic, p. 29), nor in terms of artistic and iconographic influence. G.v.R. argues for the identification of the statuettes as generic representations of local female divinities, a hypothesis sustained throughout the work.

What fundamentally changes this contribution from what has been written so far is the perspective on the artefacts, namely the context of a society with a hybridized culture. The idea of a Greek culturally dominated society is redefined: “the cultures of the island, including that of the inhabitants of Akragas, are no longer to be seen as culturally subordinate to a dominant Greek culture” (p. 33). Greater attention is paid to other local cultural groups, such as the Siceliotes and the Phoenicians, who left no traces in the written, or archaeological sources, but who “might have been part of the same society” (p. 20), at least in the Archaic period when it is accepted that

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<sup>1</sup> Blinkenberg 1917.

<sup>2</sup> Hinz 1998; Zuntz 1971.

the Greek city was much more inclusive compared to later periods (p. 26).

Thus, the work starts from the premise that the new settlement must have been independent from the beginning, in terms of religious relations (“the colonies might have been independent in aspects of society other than politics”, p. 32), developing its own local identity in terms of cult, with the terracottas representing the material expression of this particular reality. An important factor favouring the creation of social cohesion between the various immigrant groups is considered to have been, at least in the early stages of the settlement, the intermarriage. The religious festivals also had an equally important role, serving for polis community-building and overriding cultural differences. The terracottas, most likely votive dedications of women to local female divinities, are the best reflection of this reality: “a cultic symbiosis could have provided religious validation for marriages between local women and immigrant men (or vice versa). This symbiosis may have been reflected in the hybrid figurines, which rapidly changed over time, becoming more Greek in style and detail, but not losing their link to the past...” (p. 87).

The main objectives of the work are primarily the identification of the figurines represented by terracottas and the reconstruction of the prototype, respectively the model that inspired these figurines. This is mainly discussed in Chapter II, where an analysis of four aspects of the figurines is made: the shape of the body, the head and face, the dress and personal adornments, and the furniture.

The block-like body shape is characteristic and unique to Sicilian coroplastic. It consists of a rectangular block in the bottom half part, which becomes a prism towards the top, with a slight bending in the area of the knees as if the figure was sitting down, although at first there was no clear posture, either sitting or standing. The back of the figure is made by adding a sheet of paste, which was glued at the edges to the front part to give stability to the figure. The block-like body shape, at first without the articulation of hands and feet, has an aniconic appearance. Multiple influences are considered from the Beotian and Argive coroplastic technique of moulding to render three-dimensionality to local Sicilian and Phoenician aniconic artefacts, which may have served as model. The next subchapter (p. 44-53) analyses the constituent elements of the head: general shape and expression of the face, nose, mouth and chin, eyes and ears, and hairstyle from

the perspective of the various cultural influences of the Mediterranean area: Phoenician, Etruscan, and Ionian. An important topic is represented by the question of gender that the iconography reveals to the viewer. This is not expressed through the body, or even the facial features and hairstyle, but rather through dress and personal adornment, elements discussed at length in the next subchapter (p. 54-87).

A characteristic item of clothing for the terracotta figurines of Akragas is the long apron, made from a thick fabric, fastened on the shoulders, covering the entire front side of the figurine that explains the constancy of the block-shaped body, and which was probably related to cult. A thin undergarment, a *chiton*, is visible beneath, especially on the later pieces, which present a more naturalistic rendering. Another element as important as the clothing is the headgear. This consists of the veil and the *polos*, present alternatively, and rarely in combination. A special subchapter deals with the meaning of these clothing items, especially in terms of their value as indicators of social and marital status, but also of the demarcation between divine and human. Next comes the treatment of the ornaments: fibulae, pectoral pendants and other jewellery, such as bracelets, necklaces and hairbands. The fibulae, which can be disk-shaped, rosette, palmette, or rectangular, are rendered oversized on the shoulders by an addition worked separately. They functioned as clasps for pendants and as cloth pins for the apron. The pectoral bands and pendants are another characteristic of Akragantine terracottas; these are discussed in several subchapters (p. 69-82). Their number, composition, dimensions and shape are analysed to reveal a chronology of the fashion, but also to discern the symbolism of the pendants, and possibly their origin. An interesting idea is that the pendants had not only an aesthetic role, but also an apotropaic one, at the same time the choice of shapes and their combination aimed to express through image the specific vows and wishes of the dedicant. Another subchapter discusses the furniture, respectively the type of support on which the figure was placed: different types of benches, chairs and thrones, sometimes with footstools. Particular attention is paid to the origin of these elements. This shows a local evolution after East Greek models, another example of hybrid forms.

The conclusions of chapter II aim to specify the gender and identity of the figurines. It is appreciated that the clothing could have had a real-life equivalent, more precisely it could have been inspired by the

aristocratic dress. In terms of headgear, the veil is an indication of marital status, while the *polos* is an older element that indicates a special setting, being worn at specific cultic occasions. As with clothing, pendants were probably copies of real objects reserved for special occasions too. But like the *polos*, they seem not to have been regular items of adornment for all women. In addition, the sitting posture comes to reinforce the distinction between human and divine. All these justify the identification of the statuettes as representations of female divinities.

Chapter III describes in detail the stages of the production process from raw material to final product (p. 97-122). Besides the study of the objects, an archaeological experiment was carried out, in which two models were reproduced in the Leiden University laboratory with sample material brought from several locations nearby the site. The purpose of this enterprise was to identify the source of the material, but also its composition, workability and shrinkage, to reveal the coroplastic techniques and methods, to identify the individual coroplasts of Akragas, and to understand the terracotta moulding business and its social and economic implications. Four possible workshops were identified: the workshop of the white clay, of the convex back, of straight reworking, and of the chubby faces and the pendant necklace. A result of this analysis was to determine which iconographic choices were intentional, or whether they were just a side-effect of the applied technique. An exceptional case of the discovery of three wooden statuettes next to a terracotta one, which is most likely a copy of one of the three, indicates a possible development of terracotta figurine types from wooden models. The two traditions might have coexisted, the great difference between the two modes of production in terms of efficiency eventually led to the mass production of terracotta figurines. Finally, a subchapter is devoted to the exchange between the coroplastic of Akragas and other Sicilian cities, among which Selinous is the best known.

The results of the two studies on iconography and production technology lead to a typology, which is the subject of chapter IV (p. 123-139). Six groups have been analysed, of which groups 1-4 describe locally produced figurines, followed by group 5 with some imported pieces discovered at Akragas, and group 6 that contains other types of figurines. A very useful chronological overview of all groups is

illustrated in several tables at the end of the chapter, in a synthetic manner (p. 140-153). Finally, the last chapter of conclusions and bibliography are followed by the illustrated catalogue (p. 178-377).

Without a doubt, the work is a useful tool for anyone dealing with terracotta figurines, not only for iconographic comparisons, but also for understanding the production process. Notable are the diverse issues considered, as well as the ambitious goal of seeing society beyond the object, namely reviewing “the inhabitants’ perception and conceptualisation of movement, exchange and integration” (p. 22). In this regard, however, it must be remembered that the study of terracotta figurines has its limits. Likewise, the premises used for understanding the socio-political and religious context are debatable, namely minimizing the relation between metropolis and colony in matters of cult, and overemphasizing the contribution of other ethno-cultural groups. Also, the idea that “cultural hybridity may have aided contact and interaction between different cultures and ethnicities” and “made political unity easier, through shared cross-cultural forms and cultic practices” (p. 83) seems a predetermined conception, rather a wishful thinking than a solid unquestionable fact.

Furthermore, wanting to shed light on other socio-cultural components of the colonial society, a prejudice is made to history: “as we have learned more about local cultural identities, it has become easier to identify the presence of hybrid cultures each with their own characteristics, borrowing from Greek culture, but developed in new contexts” (p. 33). The fact that the original culture of Akragas has developed in a new geographical environment, probably under the influence of other cultural traditions of the local population, does not make it “less Greek”.

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