

THE MORE THE BETTER? VOTIVE OFFERINGS IN SETS

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Scholarly interest in Greek religion has in recent years expanded from studying dedications of grand size and great artistic and monetary value to include the study of ordinary and inexpensive offerings. Even though found in large numbers in votive deposits throughout the Greek world, small and often mass-produced offerings, mostly in terracotta, hardly ever feature in ancient written sources. This is quite surprising given the wide popularity of the practice, but maybe it was because it was so common that this practice was ignored by authors. We thus know very little about the function and significance of small votive offerings.

Nevertheless, if studied carefully, such offerings are an important source of information on cult practice because they bring direct testimony of ritual actions. Inferences drawn from them can give us insights not only about the type of cult and the nature and character of the receiving deities, but also about popular tastes and the votive behaviour of the average individuals, including the way they wanted to represent themselves in public.

Votive offerings are physical manifestations of personal piety, motivated by the need of the dedicant to establish contact with the divine. Like performing a sacrifice or saying a prayer, making a gift to a supernatural power meant entering into a reciprocal relationship, even if the return from it was uncertain.¹ Thus, the beliefs and motives of the worshipper must have played an important role in the selection of the dedication.

How then did the Greeks decide which type of object to offer in a sanctuary? Because the small offerings found in sanctuaries are of great variety and interchangeable character, it is commonly thought that dedications were not, in general, deliberately chosen to fit the nature and personality of the honored figures. It has been argued, for example, that at least in the Archaic period the choice of votive offerings was determined more by the personal motives of the dedicator than by the identity and special characteristics of the recipient deity;² thus for many dedicators, the act of giving itself was what mattered, not the correlation between a particular offering and the honoured deity.

Moreover, since gods and especially minor divinities and heroes oversaw many aspects of the life of their devotees without particular specialization, various kinds of offerings could be expected to be dedicated to them. It is also possible that local workshops provided a limited variety of offerings, with the design of types set by the craftsmen themselves or the sanctuary officials. Of course, commissioning terracotta figurines was unlikely for both practical and economic reasons, since such offerings were usually mass produced.³

Factors that determine the choice of particular offerings may thus remain obscure, but it is likely that dedicants made their choice from a predetermined selection, depending both on their specific concerns or circumstances and the nature of the particular cult.⁴

¹ Osborne (2004) 2-3.

² Simon (1986) esp. 410-20.

³ Merker (2000) 325.

⁴ Cf. Baumbach (2004) 3.

In order to glean information on votive practice and choice, we need to look not just at individual objects but also at their find context, that is, their associations with other types of offerings and their conditions of discovery including their exact location.⁵ Unfortunately, it is very difficult to reconstruct the original position of small votives because the vast majority are found in deposits of discarded offerings. Another difficulty is that small votives, like pottery, are usually published in catalogues focusing on individual items rather than assemblages. They are studied mainly as artistic products or for their significance for dating, but rarely as parts of their assemblages and find contexts.⁶

Certainly, individual objects need to be analyzed and classified for their relative chronology to be established and their individual characteristics to be distinguished. But this study should be complemented by a consideration of the context in which they were found.⁷ Even though they are isolated images with an independent meaning, small votives may also have formed thematically related groupings that could have been offered and displayed together.

This is the aspect of votive practice and choice that I want to discuss here: small offerings acquired, dedicated and displayed in sets. The general assumption is that each object found in a sanctuary was the only offering a person made at that time. I would like to challenge this assumption and argue that sometimes more than one object were offered by a single dedicant, and that these were presumably also displayed together.

First, some inscriptional evidence on the practice of dedicating multiple offerings and some of the reasons behind the practice. For example, the votive inscription on a 6th-century bowl from Naukratis mentions two additional offerings made by an individual: *Polemarchos dedicated me to Apollo; also the jug and the stand.*⁸ The implication is that the objects were dedicated together and placed next to each other.

A tithe may have required more than one object to be dedicated together. Thus weapons were often dedicated in groups. An inscription from Olympia concerns three spearheads: *The Tarentines dedicated to Olympian Zeus spoils taken from the Thourians as dekate.*⁹

Another case of a tithe is a series of seven marble basins dedicated on the Athenian Akropolis; each bears a variation of the same inscription: *Onesimos, son of Smikythos, dedicated to Athena as dekate.*¹⁰

Some cases of multiple dedications are quite puzzling. For example, four images of snakes were offered together at the Athenian Asklepieion.¹¹ Though it seems likely that they had some reference to the temple snakes that assisted in the cures,¹² it is unclear why there were four of them.

Even though multiple offerings are hard to prove in the archaeological record, we do find some indications of this practice through careful examination of the iconography and form of the offerings themselves. For example, among the many bronze and clay animal figurines found at the sanctuary of Hermes and Aphrodite in Syme Viannou, Crete, were horses and bovids joined in pairs for the specific purpose

⁵ Merker (2000) 323.

⁶ This issue is well discussed in Osborne (2004).

⁷ Osborne (2004) esp. 3-4.

⁸ Lazzarini (1976) no. 782.

⁹ Lazzarini (1976) no. 979.

¹⁰ Lazzarini (1976) no. 622; Raubitschek (1949) 384-92 nos. 349-53, 357-58.

¹¹ Inv. V.76; Aleshire (1989) 281; cf. the dedication of two snakes: Inv. V.160; Aleshire (1989) 290.

¹² Eg. Ar. Pl. 689-90, 734-36.

of pulling a wagon or a plow, as harnesses and wheels indicate.¹³ Such teamed animals are not unusual, of course; what is atypical is other types of animals—rams and goats—that seem to have formed pairs or triads. They look very similar, and because they are handmade they must have been deliberately made in duplicate or triplicate; in several cases they were even found in the same area. Since the groupings do not correspond to any functional aspect of these animals, they may well represent special dedication sets with a symbolic meaning.¹⁴ Offering multiples of one type is one way to increase the efficacy of the ritual; it could also have played a role in exhibiting hierarchy:¹⁵ thus ‘the more the better’.

I will now refer to some other cases for offering multiples of the same type. Lead figurines are a characteristic offering in Lakonian sanctuaries and come in many different types.¹⁶ One of the most popular is the wreath.¹⁷ In some cases, several wreaths were found in strips, attached by the excess lead of the casting channel.¹⁸ Even though this was a convenient way for the craftsman to produce several individual wreaths at once, which would be separated for individual sale, in this case the wreaths were offered together, showing the intention of the votary to dedicate multiple wreaths.

A second case concerns pottery, which could also have been offered in multiples. From Samos and Naukratis come some strange-looking cups that resemble stacks of vessels, but were actually made in one piece. They are probably a quick, and presumably cheaper, alternative to offering a pile of separate cups, and imply that people may have given sets of cups that were piled in stacks rather than displayed individually.¹⁹

Miniature vessels could also have been dedicated in multiples. These resemble typical pot types except that they are made in a scale that is too small for practical use and were thus fashioned exclusively for dedication.²⁰ Being cheaper than regular sized vases, miniatures were good candidates for mass dedications.²¹ A possible case involves three miniature cups at the sanctuary of Alea, Tegea: they were found piled together *in situ*.²²

Iron spits (*obeloi*) were regularly used in sanctuaries as cult implements for roasting meat since at least 700 BC. They were often dedicated in standardized units, sets of six or multiples of six, most likely reflecting a banquet service during which a group of banqueters shared a *lebes* of wine and six spits.²³

Anatomical votives, a special type of offering very common in healing sanctuaries, could also be dedicated in multiples by the same person as inventories show. Thus four ears were dedicated at the Athenian Asklepieion by a certain Boidas,²⁴ while Philonides and Aristonike dedicated each a silver and a gold relief,

¹³ Muhly (2008) 135-36, 155.

¹⁴ Muhly (2008) 136, 155.

¹⁵ Antonaccio (2005) 110-11.

¹⁶ Boss (2000).

¹⁷ Dawkins (1929) pl. CLXXX.

¹⁸ Dawkins (1929) pl. CXCIII; Antonaccio (2005) 109.

¹⁹ Stissi (2003) 78, pl. 12.2.

²⁰ Ekroth (2003); Hammond (2005).

²¹ Ekroth (2003) 36.

²² Hammond (2005) 425 n. 45.

²³ The early value system based on iron spits led to the later system of the *drachma* consisting of 6 *obeloi*: Strøm (1992); Kroll (2001) 84-88. I owe these references to Gil Davis.

²⁴ Inv. IV.131; Aleshire (1989) 204.

each with two eyes.²⁵ We cannot be sure if these were successive dedications for one person's organs—a chronic problem perhaps—or if they were offered for the sake not only of the dedicator but also of another family member.²⁶ In more detailed entries this fact is explicitly mentioned: Myrrhine, for example, dedicated a woman's trunk and a bangle 'for the sake of herself and her boy', as the inscription specifies.²⁷ This recalls the Orthodox Christian ritual involving candles. Lighting a candle in front of the icons when visiting a church is a well-known tradition in Greece; it is a symbol of the prayer the worshipper is making. In some instances one can light more candles on behalf of other persons, either alive or dead.

We can conclude, therefore, that worshippers could have dedicated more than one votive offering either as a way of enhancing the worth or symbolic value of the offering, or on behalf of family members who could not visit the sanctuary.

Small offerings could also be dedicated and displayed in sets for reasons related to the specific cult. Several cases come from a large assemblage of terracotta offerings discovered in a sanctuary deposit at Amyklai, the fifth Spartan kome. The deposit is clearly associated with the sanctuary of *Kassandra* (known in Lakonia as *Alexandra*), which allegedly contained the graves of *Agamemnon* and *Kassandra*. The heroic cult practiced at the Amyklai sanctuary was an important one for the region and is related to a variant tradition that placed the palace, and consequently the murder of *Agamemnon* and *Kassandra*, not in the Argolid, as the tragic poets said, but in Lakonia.²⁸

Predominant among the Amyklaian offerings are Archaic and Classical terracotta plaques with relief decoration representing a variety of subjects, such as riders, warriors, reclining men and standing figures.²⁹ The most popular, and unusual, subject is a seated man holding a drinking cup and accompanied by a snake.³⁰ The man is sometimes accompanied by his consort, who can also appear on her own.³¹ Very frequently the man is accompanied by adorants or attendants: a serving boy or a woman,³² the rendering of these scenes varies from naturalistic to quite schematic, almost abstract.³³

Plaques with seated figures are a local type found exclusively at Lakonian and Messenian sanctuaries. This iconography is closely related to a series of more than fifty Lakonian stone reliefs,³⁴ with the series of plaques probably having started as an inexpensive and quickly made alternative to the large stone reliefs. Both groups are now considered appropriate dedications to heroes, with the iconography an original creation of Lakonian workshops that persisted with few variations for more than five centuries.³⁵ In the case of the Amyklai sanctuary, the bearded man depicted in a dignified seated pose and holding a drinking cup, and occasionally a staff, conforms well to the image of the hero-king of epic, *Agamemnon*. The woman assumes the role

²⁵ Inv. V.92; Aleshire (1989) 283. Cf. Inv. III.36, IV.114; Aleshire (1989) 138, 202. Cf. four hands in different materials (gold, silver, bronze, stone) dedicated by Philippe: Inv. IV.94; Aleshire (1989) 201.

²⁶ Van Straten (1981) 112.

²⁷ Inv. IV.101; Aleshire (1989) 201. Cf. Inv. IV.93, where Phanokrite dedicated a cup and a jaw for the sake of herself and her children: Aleshire (1989) 201. Van Straten (1981) 113.

²⁸ Salapata (2002b).

²⁹ Stibbe (1991) figs. 36-38; 43-44; Salapata (2002a) fig. 1; Salapata (2009) figs. 1, 3-5.

³⁰ Stibbe (1991) fig. 41; Salapata (2006) figs. 2a-b.

³¹ Salapata (2002b) figs. 3-4.

³² Salapata (2006) figs. 2c, 10.

³³ Stibbe (1991) figs. 33, 35; Salapata (2002a) fig. 3.

³⁴ Stibbe (1991) figs. 5-25.

³⁵ Hibler (1993) 201-3; Salapata (2006) 552.

of his consort *Kassandra*, with the sceptre she holds alluding to her priestly status and prophetic abilities. The often-depicted snake accentuates the heroic nature of the couple.³⁶

In contrast to this distinctive local visual conception of the hero, the reclining men, riders and warriors are generic, stereotyped images considered appropriate dedications to any hero, since they represent typical aristocratic and heroic activities—banquet, hunt and war. Their generic character allowed them to be dedicated to different heroes as a broad expression of their heroic status. Indeed plaques with these subjects have been found throughout the Greek world.³⁷

Terracotta plaques depicting seated figures, standing figures, riders, warriors and reclining men have been found in several other votive deposits inside and around Sparta, as well as in neighbouring Messenia.³⁸ They are very similar to the Amyklaian plaques and some have even been made in the same molds. What is even more interesting is that in these deposits we find the whole range of these subjects. The similar profiles of the assemblages suggest a correspondence in both the nature of the divinity and the cultic setting. Indeed the evidence points to an association of all these deposits with heroic figures, as in the case of *Agamemnon* and *Kassandra*. The same types made in the same molds could be used in separate cults because they were generalized and assumed their significance and functions from the specific ritual action and context.³⁹

At the same time, the similar profiles of the assemblages may suggest that people dedicated these plaques not only singly but also in sets. This action would have increased the efficacy of the gift-giving not only numerically but also thematically by addressing several aspects of the honoured figure as a whole. Each subject had an independent meaning but also expressed complementary notions about the cult and the recipient:⁴⁰ for example, the warrior referred to the protective role of the hero, while the rider was associated with elite status and wealth.

The Amyklaian rider plaques are fitting general offerings for *Agamemnon*. On the other hand, some of the riders might have been meant to represent the Lakonian *Dioskouroi*, who were often portrayed on horseback or next to their mounts.⁴¹ The heroic and funerary qualities of the *Dioskouroi*, figures who straddle the mortal and divine divide, would have made them appropriate offerings in any Lakonian heroic setting.

Plaques depicting the *Dioskouroi* riding galloping horses and sometimes approaching the feast set out for them have been found in the West, at Lokroi Epizephyrioi and at the Spartan colony of Taras, but not in Lakonia.⁴² Still, I would suggest that two different plaques, each with one rider, could have been dedicated together. Since there are plaques with similar riders facing left or right, the two plaques could have been displayed either with the riders facing the same direction or

³⁶ Salapata (2002b) 142-43.

³⁷ Dentzer (1982) 480, 503.

³⁸ E.g., Lakonia: Wace (1905-1906); Steinhauer (1973-1974); Messenia: Peppas-Papaioannou (1987-1988); Themelis (2000) 22, 25-27, 35.

³⁹ Cf. Lippolis (2001) 235.

⁴⁰ Cf. Broneer (1942) 132; Merker (2000) 323.

⁴¹ Bonano Aravantinos (1994).

⁴² Lokroi: Barello et al. (2004-2007) 25-31, types 8/34-37 (figs. 32-36); Taras: Letta (1971) pl. XXI.2; Stefanelli (1977) pls. LXXXIX.3-XCI.

in a mirror-like arrangement. Both compositions are familiar from monumental sculpture and vase painting.⁴³

In addition to duplicates of the same subject, two different subjects may also have been combined in one set to create an extended narrative. Identical triads on Lakonian and Messenian plaques have been identified as mortal worshippers, their number simply expressing the concept of plurality rather than a defined divine or semi-divine triad.⁴⁴ Such plaques were generic offerings dedicated with the intention of ensuring the repetition of the dedicator's prayer or celebration in perpetuity. The honoree, the seated man with drinking cup, is depicted separately on other plaques. I would suggest that plaques with worshippers could have been placed side-by-side with plaques depicting the seated hero, thus composing scenes analogous to those on which deities and mortals appear together. Indeed, a plaque from Messene with two worshippers in front of a larger seated male combines the two subjects in one scene.⁴⁵ The same could have been the case at Lokroi: plaques showing offering bearers⁴⁶ could have been placed next to plaques depicting Persephone and Hades.⁴⁷ Such arrangements would have brought the mortal dedicants, represented by the images of the worshippers, in closer physical proximity with the divinity.

A particularly interesting case from Amyklai involves a scene depicting a seated man and a standing couple. As mentioned above, the seated man is frequently represented alone on plaques; a standing couple, rendered in a more or less schematic manner, also appears occasionally (Fig. 1a).⁴⁸ The placement of two such plaques next to each other may have inspired the creation of, or created the demand for, a new scene that incorporated the couple and the seated man into one plaque (Fig. 1b).⁴⁹ Even though we don't have a complete example preserved, the iconographic fusion is clear from the extended arm of the seated man that appears on the right, just before the break. (Compare another plaque showing the intact male figure: Fig. 1c).⁵⁰ Two different molds belonging to separate subjects would have been mechanically combined to create the larger composition. The standing figures holding wreaths and fruit were probably mortals bringing offerings to the seated man.

A different case involves an Archaic figurine that shows an enthroned bearded figure wearing a *stephane*;⁵¹ the right hand probably rests on his knees, while the left is bent with open palm, a gesture common on contemporary Lakonian reliefs and plaques (Fig. 2). An interesting technical feature of this figurine is that the backrest of the throne is decorated with a frontal anthemion only on one side rather. It is certain that the anthemion on the other side existed in the original mold and is not broken off in the figurine. Instead it must have been eliminated by the coroplast before firing. Why? one may ask. This was likely done to accommodate another seated figure, presumably female, placed next to it; her throne would have had an anthemion on the opposite side, as examples from other sites show.⁵² The two figurines side-by-side

⁴³ Side by side: Himmelmann (2009) 56 fig. 25 (London Brit. Mus. 780); *LIMC* III (sv Dioskouroi), pl. 456 (nos. 2-3). Facing each other: *LIMC* III (sv Dioskouroi), pl. 458 (no. 24).

⁴⁴ Salapata (2009).

⁴⁵ Themelis (2000) 21 fig. 17.

⁴⁶ Prückner (1968) 44, fig. 6.

⁴⁷ Prückner (1968) 76, fig. 14.

⁴⁸ Sparta Museum no. 6153/13 (unpublished). The illustrations are on pp. 9-10 below.

⁴⁹ Sparta Museum no. 6153/2 (unpublished).

⁵⁰ Sparta Museum no. 6153/1 (unpublished).

⁵¹ Sparta Museum no. 6239 (unpublished).

⁵² <http://www.corbisimages.com/Enlargement/MI001948.html> (accessed on 16/2/11)

would have provided a three-dimensional rendering of the recurrent seated couple on the reliefs and plaques.

A contemporary female figurine, probably wearing again a *stephane*, has indeed been found in the Amyklaian deposit, but the throne has two anthemia.⁵³ My reconstruction therefore cannot be confirmed, but the strange technical characteristic of the male figurine makes the joint dedication and display of two figurines quite likely. Thus while male and female figurines were dedicated to the heroes individually, sometimes they must have been dedicated together as a pair, a practice that may have inspired coroplasts to stress the pairing of the heroic couple even more by producing a couple sitting next to each other on a single throne.

In conclusion, Greek votive behavior was relatively flexible and the choice of small offerings may not have been so casual. Small dedications could be deliberately chosen from the limited variety available at the workshops to fit both the personal motives of the dedicant and the identity and special characteristics of the honored figure. Their flexible iconography allowed many small votives to be dedicated singly or in groups. Multiples of one type could be dedicated as a way to increase the value of the offering and intensify the request, or could be given on behalf of family members. Sets of different offerings would have expressed several complementary notions about the personality of the honoured figure and could have reflected ritual actions. Finally, generic offerings that were appropriate for several cults could have been dedicated and displayed in groupings in order to produce images invested with specific meanings. Thus one rider may have denoted any hero, while two riders would have referred to the Dioskouroi; and while seated male and female figurines could have represented any divinity, placed together they would have stressed the closeness and affection of a specific divine or heroic couple.

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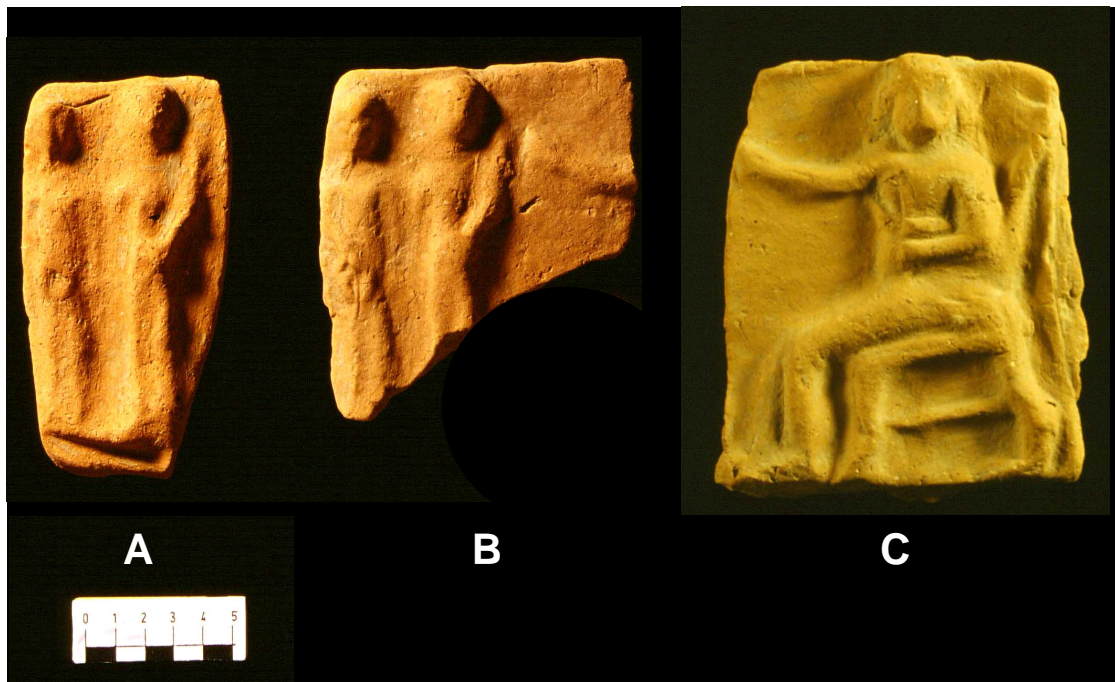


Figure 1. Terracotta plaques from Amyklai: (a) Sparta Museum no. 6153/13; (b) Sparta Museum no. 6153/2; (c) Sparta Museum no. 6153/1 (photos: author).



Figure 2. Terracotta figurine from Amyklai: Sparta Museum no. 6239 (photo: author).