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Modelling Communities: Punic Terracottas in Rituals

Introduction¹

Human figurines are common materials in Punic shrines and sanctuaries. The techniques and styles used in representing human bodies in ritual practices show much variation and signify a heterogeneous panorama of understanding. I intend to analyse this variation by posing it in terms of the diversity of local identities inside Hellenistic and Classical art, considering the connectivity of different communities.

One of the most common approaches in analysing terracottas is the study of their manufacture and style. Figurines from Punic shrines are commonly divided into the so-called 'low styles', which are related to the local people, and 'high styles', which are, in contrast, linked with foreign Hellenistic and Classical models. In addition, an association is often drawn between the style and the actual manufacture of the figurines, Figurines that are made by hand and that are non-naturalistic in style are labelled as 'low' or 'popular' whereas those that are produced by mould or on the wheel and that conform to Classical and Hellenistic models are considered examples of the high style² (fig. 1).

The division goes one step further when discussing authorship: the manufacturers of the so-called 'low style' figurines are considered local manufacturers without enough skills to re-create or imitate the 'high style'³. However, this classification clearly does not work because both types of figurines coexist within the same sanctuaries. In my opinion, these are interesting cases to discuss because they relate to the broader topic of understanding bodies and communities in ritual contexts.

Bodies as ritual arenas

Clay figurines are powerful objects, since they are considered to be direct representations of a given reality. They show how people perceived themselves as well as others. But the methods available to us for their interpretation vary widely. Though the most common approach is to study the functionality of terracottas or their manufacture (as we have seen above), this strategy results in narrow interpretations and rules out many other possible perspectives.

Regarding terracottas as items of visual and material culture will help us to bear in mind that they affected the way people perceived and understood their cultures. Indeed, we should look at them not so

¹ This is a preliminary work of an ongoing postdoctoral project based on the analysis of terracottas from the perspective of embodiment.

² LÓPEZ-BERTRAN 2007.

³ SAN NICOLÁS 1987, 2; BISI 1986; MOSCATI 1992.

much as images 'in order to', but as images 'for'; in other words, we are not interested in simply decoding what they represent, but in achieving a holistic understanding of how they figured in the lives of people who used them⁴. From this standpoint, figurines are not passive objects but can be seen as material culture in motion. Terracottas not only model people or divinities praying or dancing, but also provoke movements and embody practices among the people who observe, touch, or interact with them⁵. In brief, terracottas are embodied material culture since they show us how bodies are constructed and which parts of these bodies are essential to a given culture through the representation or omission of particular organs.

From this perspective, the heterogeneity of styles and techniques may have nothing to do with the inferior or superior quality of the skills. Instead, the variation in style and type of manufacture may demonstrate a number of different ways that people understood and represented their physical bodies and corporealities. Our focus on corporealities is associated with the notion of embodiment. This concept regards bodies as agents within social dynamics and considers our relation with the world to have a corporeal dimension: we do not possess bodies so much as we are bodies⁶. Our bodies not only express identities and social relations but construct them as well. In the domain that interests us here, bodies create cultural differences through their decoration and their senses and these two elements are materialised via human terracottas.

Analysing figurines from the position of their embodiment leads us to consider them as active elements in social fabrics. All human activities have a corporeal dimension; so we construct identities and social relations with our body and, thus, bodies do not only express these issues. Colonial situations are good arenas for analysing corporealities because, like fashion or other aesthetic aspects of culture, the contacts that different groups have with each other are also materialised through physical movement and gestures. Indeed, in colonial scenarios, local and foreign bodies may be turned into hybrid ones (when there is a creation of a new conception of bodies, body movements or ornamentations) or may be resistant to new and foreign trends (persistence of corporealities). This can be shown, I argue, in the ways that clay figurines are modelled.

Punic shrines offer good opportunities for studying the importance of bodies and body movement through the presence of human figurines. I will now present some examples from the Iberian Peninsula and Sardinia that show different situations in which human figurines illustrate the construction and perception of bodies in ritual communities.

The shrine under consideration: from Sardinia to the Iberian Peninsula

La Algaida (Sanlúcar de Barrameda, Cádiz) is located on the Guadalquivir river marshes, and, in antiquity it was an island. The shrine was an open-air sanctuary with three small rooms, defined as chapels⁷ and it was in use from the seventh to the second centuries BC. Although this analysis focuses primarily on the figurines from this context, it should be noted that the shrine was full of pottery, oil-lamps, and jewellery, as well as other materials, such as ashes and shells. Interpretations of the shrine have usually focused on its location: as it is placed in the middle of the Guadalquivir lagoon (a very busy area in antiquity), it has been stated that the shrine would have had an 'international atmosphere', receiving visits not only from the local population but also from seafarers travelling across the Mediterranean to the Atlantic and vice versa. Indeed, some authors have identified the island with the one described by Strabo (III 1:9) as Lux Dubia or Phosphoros, an island devoted to Venus, the essential planetary body used in ancient navigation.

⁴ BAILEY 2005, 17–24.

⁵ BAILEY 2005, 20.

⁶ CSORDAS 1994.

⁷ CORZO 1992; see also FERRER 2005.

Mitza Salamu (Dolianova, Cagliari) and Linna Pertunta (St. Andrea Frius, Cagliari) are sites that have produced figurines similarly described as 'popular' in style, but also some hellenistic-style pieces. The first is a bell full of anthropomorphic figurines dated to the fifth and sixth centuries BC. The second is a deposit that contained non-naturalistic figurines and other materials. Both sites have been defined as rural shrines⁸.

Communities in rituals

In the shrine of La Algaida a number of different bodily politics seem to coexist, based on the fact that there are a number of mould-made figurines following Graeco-Roman fashions - traditionally labelled as 'hellenistic' - along with others that are naked and hand-modelled, a feature traditionally seen as 'Punic' (figs. 1 and 2). The variability that can be observed in the figurines' styles and production techniques sheds light on questions related to how people visiting the shrines perceived and constructed their corporeal identities.

The major difference between these two types of figurines is the presence or absence of clothing. Most of the hand-modelled, 'Punic'-looking figurines, which are similar in style to others that have been found in Ibiza and Sardinia, are naked, while most of the mould-made figurines are fully dressed and feature different types of ornamentation. In that sense, the manufacture of these groups of terracottas could be read as evidence of different corporealities being at play within these ritual contexts. Yet, though the differences in how the figurines are dressed are important, what is perhaps more significant is their shared functional purpose: that is, as votive offerings in rituals related to fertility and fecundity.

At la Algaida, for example, one of the main rituals seems to have been the offering of figurines related to fertility. Indeed, most of the 'classical' figurines present features related to feminine health or healing and fecundity. Unfortunately, the others are fragmented and the gender is not identifiable. Breasts, however, are present on most of the figurines. The presence of breasts is commonly associated with notions of both female and male fertility. In that sense, the ambiguity of which fertility - either feminine or masculine - may indicate an even broader lack of definition in what was considered to be 'local' or 'global'.

The heterogeneity of corporealities embodied in the figurines also highlights the variety of visitors that came to the shrines and their motivations. It has been argued that local women might have gone to la Algaida asking for good labour and good health⁹. Equally, if we assume the presence of 'international' seafarers or visitors, they are likely to have asked for safe sailing or travelling and for good fishing. As with the female (and, significantly, more 'local') worshippers, the idea of good



Fig. 1. Hellenistic terracotta from la Algaida (photograph: Mireia López-Bertran).



Fig. 2. Popular terracotta from la Algaida (photograph: Mireia López-Bertran).

⁸ SALVI 1989, 1990; BARTOLONI 2005.

⁹ CORZO 2007.

luck and fertility would have been present in the rituals conducted by the travelling and probably mostly male visitors. Whoever the worshippers were and whatever materials they offered, they all would have shared the same ritual space. In this way, they constitute a ritual community, sharing practices and possibly coming into contact with each other.

Moving to the Sardinian cases, they are interesting in terms of the representation of both the physical body and the senses. The standardised mould-made figurines render the whole body without highlighting any specific part. In contrast, the handmade figurines especially emphasise faces, a tendency that in turn indicates the agency of the artisans, since the sculpting of the face allowed for the artists to stress particular features that they deemed significant.

These faces deserve more attention because they can perhaps be read as tangible representations of the senses. On many of the figurines, the eyes, noses, mouths and ears are clearly modelled and sometimes exaggerated. With these, it is possible that the artisans meant to allude not just to the body and the abstract sense of fertility that the figurines represent, but also to the sensory experiences provoked by the ritual itself. Sight and smell were highly significant in ritual practices. Eyes would of course be essential for viewing the ritual, particularly those performances that may have involved figurines. But, the stress on the eyes may have also been more allegorical in nature, perhaps indicating the necessity of being able to envision a relationship with divinities or other fantastic beings. Smell was considered an equally essential sense in ancient times since it was related to both hygienic practices and the search for pleasant odours through the burning of perfumes or oils¹⁰.

In the Sardinian cases, the variety of terracottas may express differences in ritual experiences: the users of handmade figurines could have more sensorial experiences than the mould-made ones.

In brief, the three examples show that the presence of different figurines does not mean the existence of different ritual practices, although it can imply different ritual experiences and intensities, especially in the Sardinian cases. It is likely that everybody performed the same rituals (donation of votive offerings) regardless of their origins. In short, they share the same habitus, to use Bourdieu's term.

In that sense, can we consider the existence of the same practices as a way of creating a ritual community? Understanding communities as something dynamic and not rooted in space allows us to define the variety of participants as constituents of a community (this is useful for la Algaída). Communities are created through the relationship between people and place, so that they play a part in cultural traditions and are symbolically constructed.

Multiple communities

Although the figurines discussed above do not express significant differences in terms of ritual practice, the variety in their form is meaningful. So, how can we interpret the coexistence of different corporealities? Why did foreign mould-made figurines come to be used together with hand-modelled ones in ritual performances?

The first thing to consider is the idea of election and selection since the specific object, technique, and mode of representation must have all mattered for different people with diverse corporealities, but in possibly very different ways. In that sense, choosing between the different available choices in figurine manufacture would be related to the different ways in which bodies and the body were conceived. The 'hellenistic' pieces appear more fashionable and were connected to stylistic trends that extended all over the Classical and Hellenistic Mediterranean. Thus, one interpretation could be that the people who offered a hellenistic-type figurine were more connected to contemporary global trends, a distinction that perhaps defined groups inside the broader ritual communities.

But, there is even more. For instance, due to the fact that mould-made figurines are standardised, the hand-modelled ones turn out to be arenas for elaborate corporealities. Consequently, people might have

¹⁰ CLASSEN 1993, 7.

been able to express local and specific politics of the body through and with them. This would be most clearly shown in Sardinia, where the coexistence of the different terracotta forms might have been a way of expressing tensions within the global scenario in late Punic Sardinia. In fact, it has been stated that Punic fashions or techniques were appropriated as local at the moment when Roman presence in the island intensified.¹¹

Consequently, inside a community of ritual performers, different groups with various perceptions of bodies are together: they share ritual practices but no corporealities. In that sense, rituals appear as open and permissive arenas breaking up the traditional assumptions which define them with a high degree of formalism and as closed entities¹².

Concluding remarks

The cases here presented have shown different ritual contexts where the relation between local and global is heterogeneous in terms of body politics. The examples have in common the specific role of local communities in reinterpreting global Mediterranean materials. Thus, the borders between the local and the global are blurred and the materials have to be studied in connection with their uses and practices and not per se.

In conclusion, the traditional division between 'low' and 'high' styles and techniques does not account for the multiplicity of figurines in ritual contexts. Interpreting the differences between terracottas as diverse corporealities and various understandings of bodies offers a rich perspective to analyse the tensions between 'global' and 'local' trends in modelling communities.

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¹¹ VAN DOMMELEN 2001.

¹² BELL 1992.

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