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Terracotta Offerings from the Sanctuaries of Poseidon and of Athena at Sounion

Zetta Theodoropoulou Polychroniadis

- 1 The material presented here is part of a wider research project over several years, still in progress, on the sanctuaries of Poseidon and Athena at Sounion, Attica, Greece, which deals, among other issues, with the study of the numerous unpublished finds of diverse material, such as clay, marble, metal and faience objects. The project evolved from my PhD research at King's College, London, and is shortly to be published in a monograph. For the purposes of this article and within the wider context of unravelling the cults and cult-practises as well as the role played by successive structures in the two sanctuaries, I have chosen to present a brief overview of the various groups of terracotta finds from the two sanctuaries at Sounion, stored in the National Archaeological Museum, Athens.

Sanctuary of Athena and sanctuary of Poseidon in the background, looking south west.



Photo : Z. Theodoropoulou Polychroniadis, 2009.

- 2 Sounion, the southernmost promontory of Attica, projecting into the Aegean Sea, lies on the sea routes between eastern Attica, the western Cyclades, the Peloponnese and beyond. The promontory itself was inhabited from the 3rd millennium B.C. Minoans, mariners from the Cyclades, and later Phoenicians, sailing the eastern coast of Attica on to Euboea, would have used Sounion as a landmark. From the 11th century B.C., rural sanctuaries were established astride or near communication routes, a pattern that was eventually applied at Sounion. At around 700 B.C., two religious centers developed : that of Athena, which most likely also housed an ancient hero-cult, and that of Poseidon.¹ Around 600 B.C., kouroi were set up in both sanctuaries, testament to the fact that already in the Archaic period, the Cape was a focus of cult. Homer describes Sounion as a 'sanctuary' ("Σούνιον ἱρόν"), which implies that cult was practised there, even before the burial of Phrontis.² For decades, serious questions have been raised on the topography of these sanctuaries, on some of their now-almost-untraceable structures, on the patterns of their socio-economic growth and in particular on the early cults in both sanctuaries.
- 3 Valerios Stais' excavations, (conducted between 1897 and 1915) were – and still are – the only extensive project ever undertaken at the two sanctuaries at Sounion.³ Impressive Archaic and Classical sculptures came to light, of which the most striking are the two colossal kouroi, as well as architectural elements, which have all received considerable scholarly attention. He also unearthed a substantial quantity of pottery and small finds, carefully deposited in two bothroi – one at each sanctuary – but also in respective landfills, and their classification, analysis and interpretation constitute a substantial part of my forthcoming publication. These diverse assemblages of finds, most unrecorded in terms of context, include terracotta figurines, pottery, terracotta relief and painted plaques, as well as faience amulets, scarabs and seals, metal objects, among them jewellery and weapons, and finally fragments of stone sculpture. Among them are precious and imported items, as well as objects of common everyday use. The majority can be classified as votives. Selectively presented here are the terracotta groups of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines as well as the terracotta votive plaques deriving from the deposits (bothroi) and artificial fills at the Sounion sanctuaries.
- 4 Terracotta female figurines dominate quantitatively, namely mold-made protomai, as well as hand-made figurines. The protomai, which derive from the bothros and the fill of the Athena sanctuary, form a homogenous group and are clearly Attic in origin. Of the protomai, half are modelled with a polos, while the others have different headdresses or are bare-headed. The polos, usually high, is flat at the top, slightly slanting and bears either one suspension hole in the middle or two, symmetrically placed, at its sides. A white slip is often visible, as well as sporadic traces of black and red color on the polos, the hair, ears and around the neck. Chronologically, the majority of the protomai can be dated from the mid-7th to the late 6th centuries B.C.⁴

Archaic protome with polos, from the Athena sanctuary at Sounion (Nat. Arch. Mus., Athens)



PHOTO : V. STAMATOPOULOS, 1992.

- 5 The female figurines, also discovered in the bothros and in the fill of the Athena sanctuary, can be classified as seated or standing. The seated figurines can in turn be classified as follows : a. hand-made, seated, with a flat body and a bird-faced head, b. an intermediate type with a plank-like hand-made upper body and a mold-made seat, c. a hollow mold-made enthroned figurine. Chronologically they span the 7th to the first half of the 5th centuries B.C.
- 6 All standing female figurines are hand-made, bird-faced, their heads flattened from front to back, usually with a flat torso, extended cylindrical or flattened arms with triangular terminations and with cylindrical or more rarely with flattened lower bodies. The cylindrical solid lower body however dominates in this group, ending in a round, elliptical, or flaring, concave base. Typologically, these mass produced figurines, offerings exclusively to female deities, find parallels in other Attic sanctuaries, in particular the Athenian Acropolis. On stylistic grounds they can be dated from the late 8th to the 5th centuries B.C.⁵

Two Archaic hand-made figurines and two fragmentary plaques.

Archaic hand-made columnar female figurine from the Athena sanctuary at Sounion (Nat. Arch. Mus., Athens)



Photo: Elias Eliades, 2009.

Archaic hand-made horse figurine (Nat. Arch. Mus., Athens)



Photo: V. Stamatopoulos, 1992.

Fragmentary Protoattic painted plaque, attributed to the Checkerboard Painter (Nat. Arch. Mus., Athens)



Photo: Elias Eliades, 2009.

Fragmentary relief plaque depicting a lion's body (Nat. Arch. Mus., Athens)



Photo: Elias Eliades, 2009

- 7 Only 9 figurines, all undocumented, have been identified as representing males. Nearly all are not only fragmentary but also in poor condition: the group consists mainly of standing and seated headless torsos of riders, charioteers, a flute-player as well as the head of a charioteer. This small group can be dated to the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.
- 8 Zoomorphic figurines form a substantial group of objects, of which two thirds are horses with or without a rider and chariot groups, some of them with their charioteers preserved. Other types of identifiable animals are rams, goats, bovines, a dog and a dove. The majority of these mostly undocumented figurines, are in a very fragmentary condition. The manufacture of the Sounion animal figurines is crude, firing was irregular and only a very few preserve a white slip. Traces of matt paint, black, red, orange or purple, lengthwise on the body and the legs of the horse or other animal, are preserved on 18 figurines and only in very few cases to a satisfactory degree. Similar types are frequently found in other Attic sanctuaries, settlements and graves.⁶ Chronologically they span the 7th to the middle of the 5th centuries B.C.
- 9 The most important group of offerings deriving from both sanctuaries consists of fragments of painted and relief votive plaques. Thirty painted plaques were discovered by Stais⁷ in the sanctuary of Athena, most fragmentary with only a few still intact. Stais illustrated the 4 plaques that preserved paintings and commented on the technique of their decoration,⁸ which seemed to have many similarities to that of the early Corinthian aryballoi found together with the plaques. Studied by many scholars,⁹ the best preserved is a plaque attributed to the Analatos Painter. The importance of this plaque lies not only in its precise dating but also in the subject depicted. A warship with helmeted warriors, the outline of their faces rendered in black paint, and the imposing figure of a steersman at the stern, recalls Homer's reference to Sounion and the burial of the legendary Phrontis on the Cape, further hinting at an early hero cult practised in the area of the sanctuary of Athena. The other plaques depict the head of a lion in profile, the head of a winged creature, while the fourth has been attributed to the Checkerboard Painter by the present author. The surviving fragment of this plaque depicts a checkerboard frame and the lower part of a fringed garment, probably worn by a female figure, with her tiny feet visible below, the scene connected to a ritual, a dance or a mourning procession.
- 10 The surfaces of the remaining 26 painted plaques are almost completely worn. These fragments were recently studied and photographed under ultraviolet and raking light by the present author. Traces of colour and figures or motifs are still visible, sometimes even to the naked eye. Certain characteristics apply to all 26 fragments: they are rectangular or square in shape, have a slip and are made of a clay that is generally micaceous and usually brownish-orange. The colours, still visible, are red, black, less often purple and in a few cases a strong yellow. The majority have one or two suspension holes usually painted red all round. A combination of incisions and paint is frequently visible on one surface of most plaques, although a few appear to have had both surfaces painted. Most plaques also have a red-painted border, usually on both sides, serving as a frame to the main scene. Their reading remains a work in progress.
- 11 The last group of coroplastic offerings comprises 7 plaques identified by the excavator and 4, all in low relief, found by the author in the stores of the National Archaeological Museum, Athens. They are very fragmentary and rather poorly preserved. Five very likely feature Herakles wrestling the Nemean lion¹⁰ and on one only the body of the lion survives. Three plaques feature a winged creature, possibly a deity, one depicts the chiton, bare feet and lower body of a male or female figure and another plaque a male

figure, possibly a charioteer. These plaques derive from the sanctuary of Poseidon and chronologically span the end of the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.

- 12 The stylistic analysis of these assemblages, as well as their dating and evaluation in terms of their find context, contribute to a better understanding of the cults practised in the two sanctuaries at Sounion from the Late Geometric to the dawn of the Classical period.

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NOTES

1. PICARD 1940, p. 13, considers the death and burial of Phrontis to be the poet's acknowledgement of an existing cult on the promontory; see also Abramson 1979, p. 9 on the votive deposit in the sanctuary of Athena. See PARKER 1996, p. 18 and n. 34, and more generally for other sites in Attica; PARKER 2005, p. 58.
2. OSBORNE 1985, 37.
3. STAIS 1900, pp. 113–150; STAIS 1912, p. 266; STAIS 1917, pp. 168–213.
4. See Kerameikos VI. 2, p. 383, pls. 93, no. 107, and pls. 94–95, no. 106; MORGAN 1935, p. 198, fig. 6a–d; for similar protomai from Brauron, see Mitsopoulos-Leon 2009, pp. 65–114, pls. 22–30; Croissant 1983, pp. 236–237, n. 1; for protomai from Eleusis, see KOKKOU-VIRIDI 1999, 114–115, ns. 322, 325, 327, 329, pl. 20, nos A165–A174.
5. HIGGINS 1967, 42; WINTER 1903, p. 24, no. 8; BURR 1933b, 616, figs 82 and 83; MORGAN 1935, pp. 194–195, pl. 4c; YOUNG 1938, p. 421, pl. 10; PALAIOKRASSA 1991, pp. 103–104, nos. E6, 7, 9, 10; KOKKOU-VIRIDI 1999, p. 108; PAPADOPOULOS 2003, pp. 176–178, figs. 2.108, 2.109, 2.110, 2.111 and 2.112; For the typology of the Archaic hand-made figurines from the Acropolis and the Sanctuary of the Nymph, see GEORGAKA, 2013, pp. 5–6; KALOGEROPOULOS 2010, p. 181, pl. 43, no. 1.
6. MORGAN 1935, pp. 190–200; BURR 1933b, pp. 616–620; THOMPSON 1958, p. 151; BRONEER 1938, p. 201; *Kerameikos* XV, p. 169, pl. 96; KOKKOU-VIRIDI 1999, pp. 212–213, pls. 18–19.
7. STAIS 1917, pp. 208–209, fig. 19.
8. STAIS 1912, p. 206; STAIS 1917, p. 194.
9. COOK 1934–1935, p. 173, pl. 40b, who attributes the plaque to the Analatos painter; BOARDMAN 1954, p. 198; Kirk 1949, p. 119 ff.; HAMPE 1960, pp. 17, 24, 30, 77; MORRISON, WILLIAMS 1968, pp. 73–74, pl. 8b; NEUMANN 1979, p. 14, pl. 11b; For the Analatos Painter see DENOYELLE 1996, pp. 71–86.
10. STAIS 1917, p. 197, fig. 10. The excavator wrote that they depicted the same theme but came from different molds.

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