Terracottas in Motion Across the Ancient Mediterranean



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Edited by
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Cover: Terracotta figurine of a girl playing ball, 3rd century BC, from South Italy. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 07.286.18, Rodgers Fund, 1910. Photo: The Metropolitan Museum of Art (CC0).

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Preface

The impetus to explore the concept of terracottas in motion was born one Thursday afternoon in the fall of 2021 during a conversation that we were having while seated on a bench in the Study Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The subject of that conversation was the discovery on the seabed at Shavei Zion in northern Israel of a quantity of pottery and at least 156 terracotta figurines, mostly representing women, including several showing pregnancy and others carrying children. Since there was no evidence for an ancient shipwreck that could have carried these terracottas, we began to discuss how and why this material ended up in the sea, and what could have been the cultural forces that would have brought these terracottas to their final destination. But what was evident was that this material had been set in motion in some way. As we began to trade instances of other terracottas in motion, or that could be interpreted as having been in motion through a variety of circumstances, our conversation was becoming more animated. There were those terracottas that were interactive, that could be considered in motion according to their discovery contexts, or the ways in which motion could be implied by how terracottas might have been handled, used, manipulated, or even identified.

Explorations into the concept of terracottas in motion began to appear to us to be fruitful avenues of inquiry, and the suggestion that hung in the air to organize a colloquium on the subject seemed impossible to ignore. Since in 2021 we were still reeling from the effects of the Covid pandemic, during which time the platform Zoom became the principal means for group interactions worldwide, we decided to use Zoom as well. Not only would its digital interface eliminate the need for in-person contact, but Zoom would spare colloquium presenters and attendees from having to pay for travel and lodging. Originally conceived as a day-long event, the response to our call for papers was such that it became a colloquium that covered three days with 19 presenters representing France, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Turkey, as well as Canada and the United States. Attendees were able to initiate lively discussions, once even on their smartphones in their car and late in the night in spite of the difference in time zones.

We thank all our presenters and attendees for their participation that generated multiple and fruitful dialogues. We also are grateful to Adelphi University for providing material support in the form of group access to Zoom. In particular, we acknowledge the continuing support of The Association for Coroplastic Studies, under whose auspices this colloquium was held. Finally, we are completely beholden to Eric Yuan, the developer of the platform Zoom, without which this on-line colloquium would not have been possible.

Mike Schurer of Archaeopress was very receptive to the proposal we made for publication with Archaeopress, and to him we are grateful for his attention that has resulted in the publication of this book. In addition, we would like to thank Robin Orlić for assisting with the proofs and Ben Heaney for the attractive cover.

Jaimee Uhlenbrock and Maya Muratov

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Jaimee Uhlenbrock, Professor Emerita of the State University of New York at New Paltz, received her PhD in classical archaeology in 1978 from the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. For the last 50 years she has focused research on the figurative terracottas of ancient Greece, the industry that produced them, the popular piety that encouraged their manufacture, and their reception in the 18th and 19th centuries. With Arthur Muller she co-edited *Greek Terracottas: A Toolkit for Research,* Oxford University Press, 2026. A founding member of The Association for Coroplastic Studies, she also serves as President.

Eukene Bilbao Zubiri, currently at l'École française de Rome, obtained her PhD at the University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne with a thesis on the coroplastic production of the Archaic period from the Greek polis of Metapontion (Basilicata, South Italy). This aimed to characterize the coroplasts' craft on a polis scale. Her current post-doctoral project at the École française de Rome is a comparative study of the terracottas from Sybaris, Metapontion, and Poseidonia (7th-5th centuries BC), with the objective of determining the elements of convergence and divergence in their coroplastic production. This also includes a critical review of the ethnic reading applied to this craft within the so-called "Achaean colonies" of Magna Graecia.

Introduction

Motion is conventionally thought of as an act or process of change in time or across space, a displacement of a physical system that is measurable. Figurative terracottas, on the other hand, are inherently static, sculptural objects for which the term motion might be seen as contradictory. Yet it will be shown that the concept of motion as a physical change from one point, or moment, to another can indeed be applied to the terracottas themselves, or to their roles in given contexts. Within these parameters, the focus is on terracottas that are portable objects made either as unique images, or, more commonly, in the form of mass-produced sculptures, either in-the-round or in relief, either hand modeled, or made in molds.

Since the majority of ancient Greek terracottas that have been uncovered across the greater Mediterranean region were votive in purpose, it follows that local religious ritual must have been the engine that drove terracotta production and put these terracottas in motion with specific trajectories. Without ritual activity there would have been no need for terracottas, since they do not have an intrinsic function that would make them useful as everyday household items, such as is the case for loom weights, or for pottery, with the exception of perfume vases.

Although terracottas have been traditionally looked at mostly from the iconographic perspective – i.e., who is represented and why – we propose that the concept of motion, which is inherently multi-dimensional, could encourage more diverse approaches. The decision to examine motion as an abstract concept was based on the very broad spectra of circumstances within which terracottas have been found and through which they could be interpreted. Not only do figurative terracottas actualize aspects of motion in a literal sense, as in the representations of dancers, of figures in flight, or in the myriad actions of ritual activity, but they also often embody motion in the most abstract sense in the seriality of their production methods that has resulted in the movement of terracottas across time and across space.

As the concept of motion in itself is void of preconceived notions of function and significance that often have biased iconographic readings, it can encourage fresh, non-narrative avenues for dialogue, as well as revitalize more traditional approaches to figurine interpretation. Terracottas were put into motion in the process of being made, handled, used, carried, dedicated, set up, traded, copied, broken, repaired, treasured, and buried. They also traveled, sometimes across great distances, to appear in contexts far from the centers where they originally came into being. They were stand-ins for dedicants in ritual activity, when they often appeared immobile, but were set in motion by the action of the dedicant. On occasion, terracottas were fitted with outstretched wings and were designed to be suspended in space to be animated by both natural and human agents. The invitation to manipulation presented by terracottas with movable parts established an intimate relationship between object and user.

It is believed that explorations into the modalities of the broad spatial, or local movement of terracottas, or the representation of active or inferred motion, can open new pathways into an understanding of the varieties of use for which this wide-spread form of sculpture played a role in Greek material culture. But the movement of figurative terracottas across national boundaries in the 18th century also documents the place that terracottas occupied in the cultural dynamic of the time. As it is evident from the papers in this volume, such diverse approaches have resulted in the exploration of terracottas from iconographic, stylistic, technical, spatial, physical, sensual, theoretical, and historiographic perspectives.

The wide-ranging iconographic spectrum of terracottas and their almost universal presence in archaeological contexts provide an excellent vehicle for the diverse interpretations of the use/presence of motion as an important means for understanding their role(s) in ritual, as demonstrated, for example, in the paper by **Jennifer Moore**. By applying a context-based archaeology of the senses to a series of Punic or Punic-influenced incense-burners in the form of anthropomorphic heads from the vicinity of Carthage, she proposes that the visual, olfactory, and tactile experiences of participants in a ritual reinforced unconscious associations in their minds, thus programming their mental and emotional responses to those stimuli both at the next exposure and in their recollection of the events.

Movement hinted at through certain iconographic features is addressed in **Antonella Pautasso**'s paper. The very presence of Sicilian terracottas depicting women holding a *kanoun* with sacrificial offerings within the ritual context implies the movement of women toward dedicatory activity within which they played a special role. **Victoria Sabetai** concentrates on Archaic terracottas from the necropolis of Akraiphia, a city in northeastern Boeotia, where recent excavations have unearthed illuminating examples of human and animal figures shown in motion, as well as rare depictions of vehicles. A survey of this corpus shows that these representations of motion in fact embodied acts recalling valued human roles associated with the family and the *oikos*.

The movement of terracottas within or across a physical space is addressed in several papers. **Marina Albertocchi** discusses examples from the so-called Demeter sanctuary in Iasos, Caria, and postulates a direct relationship between the processional activity of worshipers as they moved through the sanctuary and the coroplastic dossier from the site. The movement of styles and iconographic types over a wider geographic area, rather than a limited physical space, is discussed by **Eukene Bilbao Zubiri**. She focuses on the relationship of the coroplastic production of Taranto and Sybaris in the Archaic period in order to identify their respective spheres of influence in the region, as well as the evolution of these dynamics over time.

A different approach to terracottas in motion is taken by **Anna Reeve** and **Claudina Romero Mayorga**, who emphasize the challenge to curators and museum educators that figurative terracottas present when they are the focus of interpretive museum displays. As terracottas were moved from one place to another during ritual activity, the authors explore the various ways that motion, implicit in the form of these objects, could be conveyed to museum visitors, while at the same time balancing object safety with tactile access to these objects.

How the movement of terracottas over centuries and across geo-political boundaries could take place is demonstrated by **Jaimee Uhlenbrock** in the case of six terracottas of standing females from Camarina, Sicily. Originally offered in a sanctuary in Catania sometime in the early 5th century BC, they were brought to light again in the early 18th century, sent overland to Paris to a French collector and antiquary in 1765, were bequeathed to the Cabinet des Médailles shortly thereafter, and were put online in 1999.

Finally, **Jaimee Uhlenbrock** and **Maya Muratov** offer a lengthier and more inclusive look at the issues and questions concerning ancient Greek terracottas in motion across time and across space, from production to final deposition. As figurative terracottas generally were portable, they were adaptable to a myriad of circumstances that required handling and manipulation that, in turn, reflect a wide spectrum of both explicit and implicit motion.