

History, Trade, and the Terracottas

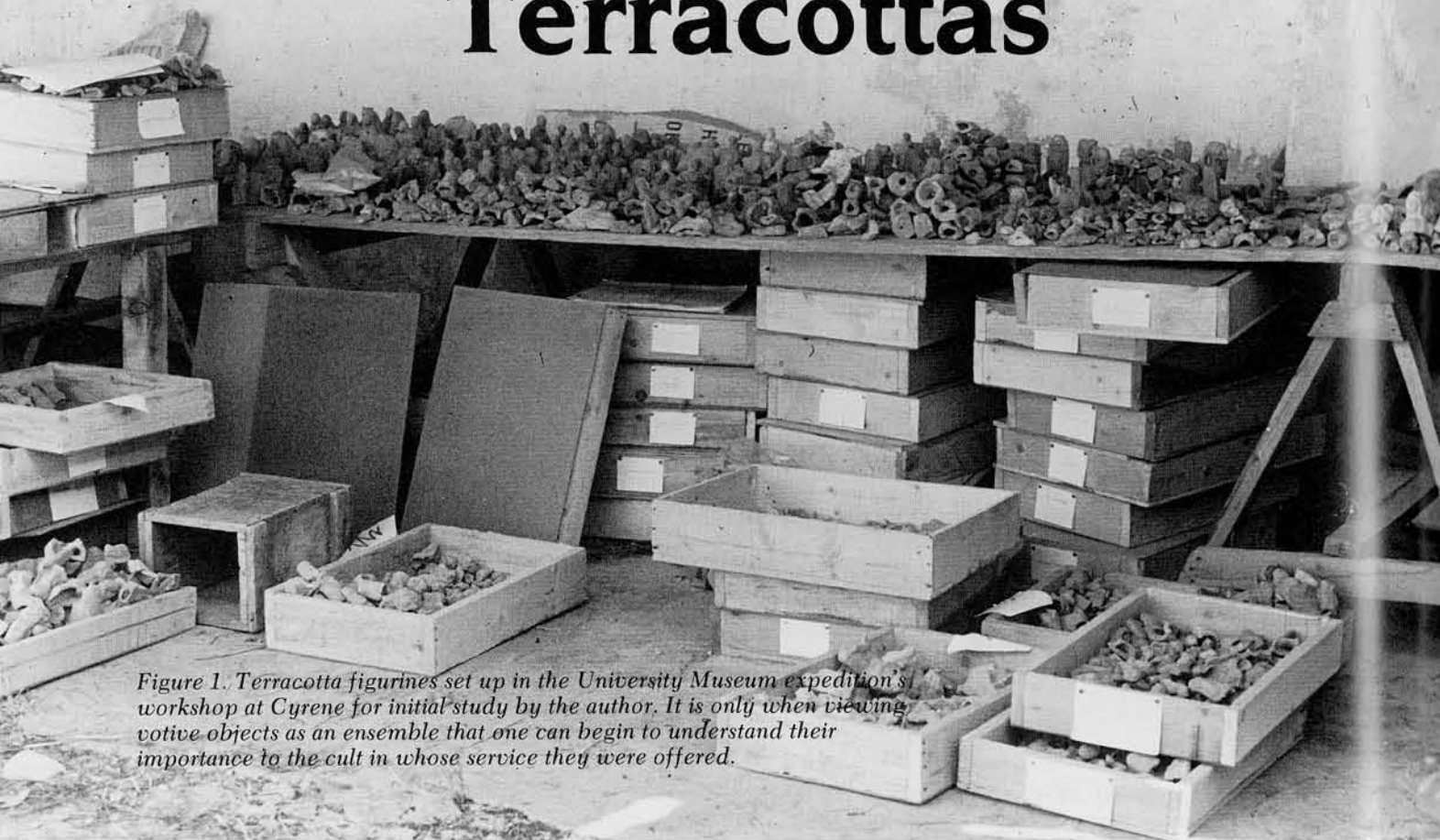


Figure 1. Terracotta figurines set up in the University Museum expedition's workshop at Cyrene for initial study by the author. It is only when viewing votive objects as an ensemble that one can begin to understand their importance to the cult in whose service they were offered.

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Over 4,500 terracotta figurines spanning some 800 years, from the 7th century B.C. to the 1st century of the Christian era, were recovered from the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene (Fig. 1). Individually, they represent innumerable acts of piety motivated by the need to supplicate or to express gratitude. Manufactured in clay and mass-produced by the hundreds with the aid of the mold, these figurines satisfied the broad popular demand for easily obtainable objects that could be placed before the divinity in order to establish a lasting bond between godhead and mortal. While ancient

sources have provided much information on the valuable dedications in bronze and marble of the wealthy, they are surprisingly silent on what must have been the most popular form of religious dedication, the terracotta figurine. Information provided by terracottas and their contexts allows us to augment the sometimes incomplete or biased picture provided by ancient writers (see box on Rhodian figurines).

Terracottas constitute the bulk of the great votive accumulations that are known for many Greek sites, where they are sometimes found by the thousands, if not the tens of thousands. A cave above Delphi sacred to Pan and the Nymphs yielded over 90,000 figurines, while from a votive pit at a sanctuary of

Hera in southern Italy fragments representing more than 20,000 figurines were recovered. Similar numbers are documented for the finds from Argos, Corinth, and Selinus, among other sites. The 4,500 terracotta figurines found thus far at the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene seem a modest number in comparison to the finds just cited. Yet these terracottas, second only to pottery in quantity, are the richest and most informative source for the history of religious expression, commercial enterprise, and social change in this part of the Cyrenaica. For the field of terracotta studies, moreover, the figurines provide the largest and most comprehensive body of material for any Greek site in North Africa.

The Archaeology of the Figurines

Terracotta figurines and their related figurative vessels were found intermixed with other votives in varying concentrations throughout the Middle Terrace of the Sanctuary. The archaeological record reveals little information concerning their specific role in cult practices at the Sanctuary, aside from their obvious function as religious donations to Demeter and Persephone. In no instance could the figurines be definitively associated with cult buildings, nor, given the successive remodeling the Sanctuary underwent, was there evidence to suggest that any were actually found *in situ*. Yet figurines from several areas in particular appear to fall within clear chronological limits, and it is difficult to escape the

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impression that they were moved as a relatively undisturbed mass, perhaps not far from their original location.

In one instance, for example, over 450 fragments of figurines and figurative vessels were recovered from earth that formed part of the constructional backfill of the wall T10 erected in the early Imperial era (see Fig. 9 in "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture"). Combined with the pottery and other finds from this area, the figurines form a relatively homogeneous ensemble dating from the early 7th to the early 5th centuries B.C. The homogeneous character of this ensemble is not unlike that of the large votive deposits that mark most extramural sanctuary sites around the Greek world.

The offerings that accumulated in a sanctuary or shrine were periodically removed and, as possessions of the divinity, carefully buried within



Figure 2. Fragment of a figured alabastron or perfume vase in the form of a sire imported from Miletus. Ca. 550 B.C.

Inv. 77-402, H. 3.8 cm

Figure 3. The distinct clay and stylization of the figure and drapery leave no doubt that this figurine came from Corinth. The fist of the right hand was pierced, perhaps for the insertion of a small flower. Ca. 500 B.C.

Inv. 76-696, H. 13.0 cm



the sanctuary grounds. In time such grounds could consist of several series of contiguous pits or trenches housing massive accumulations of votives. This is most clearly documented at the Sanctuary of Demeter Malophorus at Selinus in western Sicily, where the typological and chronological range of the figurines parallels that found at the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene.

Evidence for Cult Practice

The condition in which the figurines were found may shed a little light on the ritual practices of the worshipers who brought them to the Sanctuary. The figurines from the 6th century, which comprised mainly East Greek figurative vessels and figurines from the city of Miletus as well as local copies (see below), were recovered in varying states of preservation, with no discernable patterns of breakage or wear. Clearly,

these objects, many of them containing perfume, were simply buried within the Sanctuary grounds and broken only by the accidents associated with the later remodeling of the Sanctuary and the consequent moving of earth for backfill.

For the figurines from the 5th century B.C. and later, however, a consistent pattern of breakage emerges. Roughly 85 percent of all these figurines, regardless of size, were found without their heads. This circumstance has been encountered in many sanctuary deposits around the Greek world, and especially at the more rural sanctuaries located outside of city walls, such as our sanctuary here. At one extramural sanctuary in southern Italy, a deep well, fallen into disuse, contained tens of thousands of female heads broken from figurines. It was as if their donors cast them down into what was believed to be the bowels of the earth. It may be that a snapping off of the head was part of a purposeful mutilation that took place when the figurine was offered so that it could not be reused by anyone else.

Rhodian Figurines and the Founding of Cyrene

The evidence presented by certain individual examples or classes of figurines demonstrates the broad usefulness of terracottas in the reconstruction of the past. Among the terracottas found at the Sanctuary there are a handful that help to illuminate aspects of the early history of Cyrene.

The most widely accepted account of Cyrene's founding is told by Herodotus in his 4th book of *The Histories*. Herodotus relates that colonists, predominately from Thera, following instructions received from the oracle at Delphi, eventually settled on the shores of Libya in 631 B.C. Another version of the founding, however, is provided by the *Lindian Temple Chronicle*, a document written on Rhodes in the early 1st century B.C. This source links the Therans with a group of Rhodians, who were led by a certain Pancis. Even though the wording of the *Chronicle* suggests that the Rhodians were among the original settlers of Cyrene, in contradiction to Herodotus's account, it is generally accepted that the Rhodians arrived in Libya only with a second wave of colonists believed to have emigrated around 580 B.C.

Among the earliest terracottas recovered from the Sanctuary there are fragments of at least four figurines of a type otherwise known only from Rhodian contexts, while fragments of two others known from Rhodes as well as Samos also were recovered. The first group comprises the mold-made heads of presumably female figures, wearing a cylindrical type of crown called a *polos* (Fig. 4). The other two fragments belong to large statuettes that when complete must have measured 25 to 30 centimeters (Fig. 5). Chronologically, the heads and statuette fragments can be placed in the first

decade of the 7th century and therefore predate the founding of Cyrene by some 60 years. They represent, then, the earliest finds from anywhere in the city, and it is tempting to see in these early figurines precious documentation for a Rhodian presence among the original colonists.

Alternative explanations can be found for the appearance of these Rhodian figurines at Cyrene but none is satisfactory. One might argue that the figurines arrived via the normal avenues of trade, were it not for the fact that there is no evidence for the circulation of Rhodian figurines, aside from these Cyrenean examples, at this early date. That they were carried as "heirlooms" by colonists who arrived during the second wave of colonization also seems possible. But they would have been over 100 years old, and the likelihood of terracottas surviving in a domestic context for that period of time is not very strong. Instead, one could postulate that these objects, only several generations old, were brought from a sanctuary on Rhodes by Rhodians participating in the founding of Cyrene, so that cultic continuity could be established. Such was the case, in fact, with the statues of Pallas and Heracles mentioned in the *Lindian Temple Chronicle* that were brought from Rhodes and dedicated by the Rhodians in the Temple of Pallas Athena at Cyrene. Could the two large statuettes from the Sanctuary have been cult statues? While it is conceivable that these figurines could have been brought to Cyrene by Rhodians at any time in the city's early years, they do lend credence to the account of Cyrene's founding as narrated in the *Lindian Temple Chronicle*.



Figure 4. Even though it is only a fragment, this Rhodian terracotta head may document the early presence of Rhodians at Cyrene. Ca. 680 B.C.

Inv. 76-492, H. 2.4 cm



Figure 5. Dating from the beginning of the 7th century B.C., this Rhodian head represents the oldest Greek object found to date anywhere in Cyrenaica.

Inv. 76-332, H. 5.6 cm

Evidence for Trade

Almost every important center of terracotta manufacture in the ancient Greek world is represented by figurines found at the Sanctuary. These imports can be associated with their specific centers by virtue of their distinctive clay and characteristic typologies (see box on manufacture of terracottas). The geographical range of the imported figurines supports the evidence provided by the other finds from the Sanctuary and elsewhere at Cyrene. They speak of a vigorous city with broad-reaching commercial ties to the major centers of trade in the Greek world. An examination of groups of terracottas from well-known centers of production for the 6th and early 5th centuries B.C. can illustrate some of the differing systems of trade responsible for the arrival of imported figurines at the Sanctuary.

Sometimes the system was straightforward and direct. For example, there is a large group of figurines from the Sanctuary that were manufactured in the fine, pale cream-colored clay of Corinth. Among these figurines are several types represented by runs of seven or eight from the same mold (Fig. 3); they have a consistency of craftsmanship suggestive of a single workshop. It is striking that these mold-related figurines should remain together so far away from their place of origin, and the implication that they traveled as a group directly to the Sanctuary from a workshop in Corinth is very strong. Perhaps the knowledge of an upcoming festival prompted a traveler to invest in a basketful of figurines to sell as votive offerings at the distant port of Cyrene.

This evidence for the direct transmission of goods from Corinth to Cyrene is in contrast to that presented by numerous fragments of well-crafted figurines and figurative perfume vessels of a fine, dusky rose or orange colored clay, rich in small particles of mica (Fig. 2). This clay has recently been shown to have originated in the East Greek city of Miletus (Jones 1985:673). This city was a center of a vigorous perfume industry. Figurative vessels were manufactured there as perfume containers, and undoubtedly, the scented

oils they contained played a role in the cultic activities surrounding the worship of Demeter and Persephone. Among the groups of figurative vessels from the Sanctuary, the absence of mold sequences (i.e., figurines coming from the same or similar mold) and the striking inconsistencies in craftsmanship, indicative of different workshops, strongly suggest that these Milesian products came to the Sanctuary by way of a long and complicated trade route. Sold and resold all along the eastern Mediterranean coast, figurines from related mold families were separated as they formed part of the merchandise of many small markets and bazaars before arriving at the Sanctuary. Cyrene may have been one of the final outposts of such a circuitous trading network.

Evidence for Influences from Abroad

Toward the end of the 6th century B.C., the finely crafted East Greek perfume vases and figurines from Miletus were no longer available to the inhabitants of Cyrene, perhaps because of the Persian advance and the consequent disruption of trade toward the latter part of the 6th century. Even so, some of the Milesian types were imitated at Cyrene and remained in production for several decades.

Shortly after the beginning of the 5th century, a new type of seated female figure became fixed as the standard votive type at the Sanctuary and replaced the older Milesian products. This new type also was exported from East Greece, but its exact place of origin still remains unknown. Scores of imported examples found their way to the Sanctuary to be extensively imitated by local artisans (Fig. 6). This model, a simple figure lacking detail in any part but the head, lent itself to rapid mass-production.

The *coroplasts* (see box) at Cyrene were also influenced by the presence of Athenian types, especially the standing or seated *pepaphoros* representing a woman wearing a simple garment known as a *peplos* (Fig. 7). Local imitations of these began to appear at the Sanctuary around the



Figure 6. East Greek seated female figure, perhaps a goddess. Ca. 480 B.C.

Inv. 78-564, H. 7.5 cm



Figure 7. One of the most characteristic votive types for the 5th century is that of the standing female figure who wears a simple garment known as a *peplos*.

Inv. 71-245, H. 12.0 cm

middle of the 5th century. Later 5th century examples of Athenian peplophoroi are accompanied by figurines of *hydrophoroi*, also from Athens; they represent women carrying water vessels on their heads.

One would like to see in the popularity of these Athenian types a reflection of a general Athenian influence on the culture of Cyrene. This certainly was the case with the coins, which were minted on the Athenian standard. Yet, it was just at this time that the quantity of Athenian pottery recovered at the Sanctuary appears to be considerably diminished, and the indication is that commercial ties between Athens and the Cyrenaica, as well as between Athens and many other centers, may

have grown appreciably weaker. It is ironic that just when the trafficking of Athenian pottery around the Mediterranean appears to have been curtailed, Athenian terracotta types are the most often imitated at scores of coroplastic centers. The presence of Athenian types at the Sanctuary cannot be taken for evidence of commercial contact with Athens as they are merely a local manifestation of a widespread phenomenon that can be documented at votive deposits throughout the Mediterranean.

Later, in the early 4th century B.C., certain terracotta types from Sicily that have been connected with the worship of Persephone as Queen of the Dead began to influence coroplasts at Cyrene; it appears that the

Underworld aspects of the goddesses of fertility were becoming more prominent. (This modification of the cult of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene is also expressed in inscriptions and stone sculpture.) Local versions of a female figure sometimes holding a piglet and wearing a *polos* (a cylindrical crown) decorated with rows of rosettes in relief are very close to their Sicilian counterparts, even though no actual Sicilian imports of the type have been found to date. Both pig and polos are believed by some to symbolize the Underworld aspect of the goddesses (see Uhlenbrock 1988). Another series representing a female figure carrying a piglet at her side and a basket on her head (Fig. 11) is also a version of a

The Manufacture of Terracotta Figurines

The word *terracotta* means baked clay, and it is the term generally used to indicate figurines modeled in clay by hand or mass-produced with the aid of molds. The costly bronze and marble dedications to the gods mentioned by ancient writers must have been beyond the reach of a large segment of the population. In consolation, they could turn to the small and often appealing products of the *coroplast*, the artisan who modeled figurines in clay. *Coroplast* literally means "modeler of girls," from the Greek words *kore*, meaning girl, and *plastein*, to model. The word reflects the overwhelmingly female character of terracotta figurines, which suggests that their manufacture may have been oriented toward a basically female religious population. It is significant that large votive accumulations of terracotta figurines, such as that found at the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene, are not especially frequent at sanctuaries belonging to male divinities.

Once imported figurines arrived at Cyrene they often were reproduced by local coroplasts. By pressing moist clay around a given figurine a mold was created, which could be enlivened with details according to the whim of the coroplast. Such molds taken from imported originals sometimes provided the basis for a long-lived derivative production. In addition, many imported figurines were imitated, with more or less success—a practice that often resulted in rather debased versions of the original. Aside from imitating Milesian figured vases and figurines, at least one workshop at Cyrene was putting out versions of seated and standing women remarkable for their robust, peasant-like character and crude workmanship (Fig. 8). It is at this time, in the late 6th century B.C., that local production begins in earnest.

Figure 8. This seated female, perhaps a goddess, may be among the earliest local versions of a type that originated in the Greek East. Later 6th century B.C.

Inv. 73-974, H. 17.0 cm



The ability to differentiate imported from local terracottas rests primarily on the character of the clay fabric used and on the technique. The local Cyrenean fabric is soft and powdery in feel, and pale orange to pale yellow in color. It is easily distinguished from the hard reddish or brownish clay used by the coroplasts of Toca and Berenice, for example, with whom Cyrenean coroplasts shared many types. The workmanship tends to be careless, and the coroplasts often were content to use molds long after their details became indistinct.



Figure 9 (above). Male head broken from a full figure made at Myrina. The fleshy, rounded face and richly modeled hair of this youth suggest that he may represent the god Apollo. Ca. 180 B.C.

Inv. 71-348, H. 5.6 cm

Figure 10 (left). Terracotta figurines of comic actors with padded bellies and bawdy gestures were popular in the late 4th and 3rd centuries of the Hellenistic period.

Inv. 78-252, H. 12.0 cm

Figure 11 (right). Known as a *kanephoros* or basket-carrier, this type probably represents a worshiper bringing offerings to the goddess. Later 5th century B.C.

Inv. 74-211, H. 15.1 cm



type known in Sicily and southern Italy. In addition, fragments of large faces having a somber expression may belong to life-size shoulder busts of the types known from eastern and southern Sicily and believed to represent Persephone. Seemingly unrelated to the worship of Persephone is a comic figure also from Sicily representing a phlyax, or burlesque, actor with padded belly and exposed genitals (Fig. 10).

Figurines found to date at the Sanctuary from the Hellenistic period, i.e., the last three centuries before the Christian era, suggest that products from Athens continued to play a role in the workshops at Cyrene. The most popular Athenian types to be imitated were draped female figures in the Tanagra style. This is a style based on the secularization of the motif of the female figure, with an emphasis on cosmopolitan charm and grace. Accompanying these "Tana-

gras" were occasional imports again from the Hellenistic East, such as the figurine of a youth whose delicately modeled head reveals the workmanship of coroplasts from Myrina (Fig. 9). Figurines of comic actors, Aphrodite and members of her entourage, dancers, and musicians illustrate that the coroplasts at Cyrene were not immune to the artistic stimuli coming from the Hellenistic East that were felt almost universally throughout the Greek world.

The Native Cyrenean Production

The most popular type of terracotta figurine produced by local coroplasts at every phase in the history of the Sanctuary was that of the seated female figure. This type constitutes nearly 75 percent of all terracottas thus far recovered. The

majority depict a generic type of draped, seated female wearing a high or low polos (Fig. 12), with a *phiale*, or offering dish, sometimes held in her lap, or occasionally a piglet carried in her arms (Fig. 13). There is good reason to believe that official cult statues of goddesses most often represented them enthroned (see Kane, this issue), and the presence of the polos and the piglet may support the argument that this seated female represents Demeter or Persephone. Also found was at least one figurine of a woman holding an adolescent child on her lap. This calls to mind a stone relief recovered from the Sanctuary showing a similar motif. It may be that both are minor votive versions of some well-known monumental cult statue now lost.

While the majority of the terracotta types found at the Sanctuary represent a generic type of seated female suitable for the worship of



Figure 12a,b. Seated female. This fragment of a veiled female wearing a high polos can be reconstructed on the basis of surviving fragments as seated, with a phiale or offering dish held in her lap. Late 5th to 4th century B.C.

Inv. 78-487, H. 15.8 cm

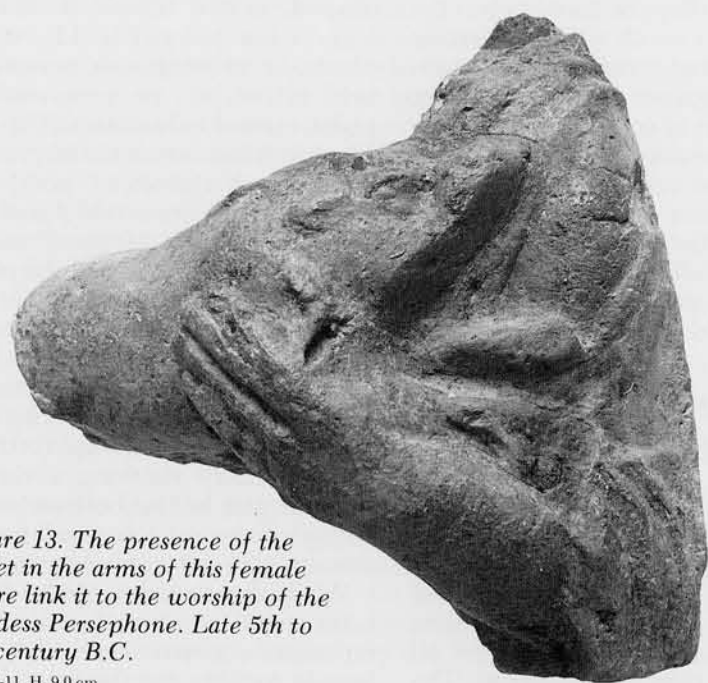


Figure 13. The presence of the piglet in the arms of this female figure link it to the worship of the goddess Persephone. Late 5th to 4th century B.C.

Inv. 79-11, H. 9.0 cm

any goddess, at least several others appear to have evolved in direct response to the particularly local needs of the inhabitants of Cyrene. This is the case with the so-called silphium-holder, which depicts a standing female figure clutching a leafy plant stalk to her breast (Fig. 14), or holding it down at her side, while in the other hand she holds a small vessel. Silphium, a plant that grew wild in the area around Cyrene, was highly prized for the medicinal value of the juice extracted from its roots and stalk. Exported in quantity throughout the Greek world, it was an important factor in the economic development of early Cyrene. Its profitable production no doubt was closely allied to the cult of Demeter, the goddess of fertility, and her daughter Persephone (see box on silphium in "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture," this issue).

Offerings of silphium must have been made at the Sanctuary, along with terracottas that may represent votaries carrying stalks of the valued plant, and the small vessels in which its juice was stored. It is of interest that the silphium-holder as a type was developed only toward the end of the 5th century and continued to appear in votive contexts around Cyrene with increasing frequency in the 4th century and later. This was the time during which the silphium fields were decreasing both in size and in yield, and figurines of silphium-holders must have represented a preoccupation with the threatened productivity of the crop.

Large terracotta bull and horse heads also were found at the Sanctuary and represent a class of votives not normally associated with Demeter and Persephone, whose animal *par excellence* was the pig. Figurines of pigs in both terracotta and stone were uncovered among the votives (Fig. 15), and the bones of sacrificed pigs were in the majority for the faunal remains from the Sanctuary. Yet the bull and horse heads remind us that stockbreeding was a vital part of the economy of Cyrene and must have been placed under the protection of the fertility goddesses, whose realm encompassed the growth and reproductive forces of Nature in all its aspects (see box on Demeter and Persephone in "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture").

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The finds from the Sanctuary suggest that the nature of religious expression may have changed during the Hellenistic period. The terracottas thus far recovered document a sharp slackening off of the practice of offering terracotta figurines to the goddesses. This is accompanied by an increase in the offerings of stone sculpture and by a monumentalization of the architectural character of the Sanctuary.

By the end of the 1st century B.C. terracotta figurines were offered only occasionally at the Sanctuary, although further exploration at the site may alter this view. The thousands of figurines once placed before the goddesses already had ceased to be a presence centuries before. Economic and social conditions may have been such that the craft of the coroplast no longer was considered an appropriate vehicle for religious expression. Thus, buried and inadvertently incorporated into building fill, thousands of terracotta figurines, representing the thanks and aspirations of twenty generations, were preserved, if only in precious fragments, to provide us with a glimpse of cult, economy, and society in ancient Cyrene.



Figure 14. Fragmentary figure holding to her chest a silphium stalk, the emblematic plant of Cyrene. 4th century B.C.

Inv. 78-511, H. 5.8 cm



Figure 15. Votive terracotta pig, perhaps offered as an inexpensive surrogate for the living animal that was most frequently sacrificed to Demeter and consumed in her ritual meals. 5th century B.C.

Inv. 76-410, L. 10.4 cm

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