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Figurines. A Microcosmos of Clay. An Exhibition

Angeliki Koukouvou

1 On April 3, 2017, a major exhibition opened at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, Greece. “Figurines. A Microcosmos of Clay” is an exhibition dedicated to one of the most pervasive, diachronic, and global productions of the ancient world. This new exhibition is a production of the Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum with the collaboration of 16 Ephorates of Antiquities of the Greek Ministry of Culture and Sports. It presents a panorama of 671 clay figurines dating from the earliest Neolithic period (7th millennium B.C.E) to late Antiquity (4th century CE). These artefacts, 348 of which belong to the collection of the Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum, derive mainly from recent excavations in Macedonia and Thrace. This is the first exhibition of this scale that focuses exclusively on terracotta figurines that has been organised in Greece by any institution, public or private.



2 The selected objects document the coroplastic production of this region of northern Greece for over 6,500 years, while for the majority of these objects this is their first public presentation. The exhibition aims to unravel the history of the local workshops within the perspective of cross-cultural exchanges throughout thousands of years: their influences, their affinities, their achievements. In addition, this exhibition offers a

multi-dimensional presentation by commenting on aspects of technology, function, and symbolism, along with the economic, social, and ideological contexts within which these figurines were created.

- 3 The challenge in organizing this exhibition was great: the figurines that were selected display had to be integrated into the curatorial concept to form an organic synthesis that would support the original idea and respond aesthetically and perceptively to all aspects of the subject.
- 4 Two interconnected galleries of the museum host the installation, while wall text panels and object labels in Greek and English provide information to the visitors.
- 5 In the first hall the exhibition is structured in units following a chronological and geographical narrative.
 - *Figures from the mists of time* – prehistoric times: figurine making in Macedonia and Thrace
 - *With earth and water* – historic times: technical procedures in figurative terracottas
 - *A colourful microcosmos* - colour decorative techniques
 - *Workshops and craftspeople* - significant coroplastic workshops in northern Greece
 - *The figurines in the settlements and cemeteries of Macedonia and Thrace* - a panorama of figurines from the Archaic to Roman times
- 6 In the second hall the material is organised in the display cases according to typology and iconography (protomes, Tanagras, theatrical figurines etc.) aiming to hint at the aspects of use, interaction, and interpretation according to modern theoretical approaches.
 - Uses and interpretations of figurines
 - Gods and believers - figurines found in sanctuaries, which represent gods or dedicators
 - Companions and protectors in the underworld - figurines as burial offerings
 - Forming life - figurines as a resource of information on everyday life
 - Zoomorphic figurines
 - Special form, valuable content - 'plastic' vessels that combine the art of figurine making with pottery
 - 'An enactment of a deed that is important and complete' - theatrical figurines
- 7 The exhibition is accompanied by a catalogue of 504 pages with general texts, detailed entries for all the figurines on display – most of them unpublished – and colour photographs. The Greek catalogue is now available and the English one is in press.
- 8 The exhibition will be open to the public from April 2017 to April 2018. Throughout its duration, educational programmes and guided tours will be held. On the occasion of the exhibition a scientific conference and an experimental workshop will be organised.

Exhibition

- 9 General coordination: Polyxeni Adam-Veleni
 - 10 Curators: Evangelia Stefani, Elektra Zografou, Angeliki Koukouvou, Ourania Palli, Eleftheria Akrivopoulou, Katerina Behtsi, Eleonora Melliou
 - 11 Museographic design: Giorgos Tsekmes
 - 12 Graphic design: Roxani Vlachopoulou
- Visiting hours daily:
- 13 April 10–October 31: 8:00 to 20:00; November 1–April 9: 9:00 to 16:00.

Exhibition catalogue

- 14 Polyxeni Adam-Veleni, Elektra Zografou, Angeliki Koukouvou, Ourania Palli, Evangelia Stefani (eds), *Ειδώλιο. Ένας μικρόκοσμος από πηλό*, Thessaloniki 2017.

Fig. 1. Detail of the exhibition hall.



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Fig. 2. Detail of the exhibition hall.



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- 15 Fig. 3 is an extremely rare example of a large sized Neolithic figurine in Greece. The belly and the navel of the figure are accented, possibly indicating pregnancy. The imposing size of the female figure – it is indeed an actual small statue – the posture, and the jewellery (bracelets on the wrists) point to some special significance, which, however, judging by the furniture on which the figure sits (seat without a back covered with textile), is possibly related to the domestic space.

Fig. 3. "The Lake Lady, seated female figure." Lakeside settlement of Dispilio, Kastoria. Late Middle / early Late Neolithic I



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Fig. 4. Figurines of seated females from the same series through six successive generations. Artemision of Thasos, Archaic period.



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- 16 The archaic repertoire of Thasian coroplastic workshops is dominated by enthroned female figures. Despite their lack of identification, these types in the past have been interpreted as representations of deities. Nevertheless, more recently some scholars have argued for their interpretations as conventional depictions of mortals according to their social and family status: the lawful wife and mother is seated on a throne.
- 17 Fig. 5 is a clay figurine of a Milesian canine, the most common small domestic dog in ancient Greece. Its rich fur and the anatomical details are plastically formed. The white slip, as substrate for the paint, is very well preserved.

Fig. 5. Milesian canine. Therme cemetery 450–400 B.C.E.



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Fig. 6. Actor in the role of a slave. 400–350 B.C.E. Acanthus (Ierissos), Chalkidiki.



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- 18 The actor impersonates a bearded slave, sitting on a stone plinth or altar. The prototype is Attic. The preservation of the figurine and the quality of its execution make it exceptional, not only as a work of art, but also for its importance in dating the transition from Old to Middle Comedy, as well as for its discovery in the city of Akanthus. Olynthus and Akanthus were gateways, as also was Amphipolis, for the dispersal of the production of Attic theater in the northeastern coasts of the Aegean during the late Classical period. The Macedonian dynasty from Archelaos (late 5th century B.C.E.) showed a great interest – for its own propagandistic reasons – in spreading the Attic theatrical entertainment in Macedonia.

Fig. 7. Funerary ensemble from a young girl's grave. Southern cemetery of Pydna (Alikes near Kitros), Pieria. 325–300 B.C.E.



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- 19 This burial of a young girl contained 21 clay figurines, clay vessels, a gold coin of Philip II, and gold jewellery. Young children were often accompanied by large numbers of figurines that have been interpreted as farewell offerings or gifts that were made during the burial ceremony. Ensembles of clay figurines also often accompanied the burials of girls or young women, whose lives were cut short before they could attain marriageable age.

Fig. 8. War elephant. Thessaloniki, Western Cemetery. 3rd century B.C.E.



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- 20 The elephant is represented in a passive stance and has a thick textile that covers its body. A rectangular basket is attached to the back of the elephant and holds two warriors, while on three sides of the basket there are hanging shields. An elephant rider sits at the back of the elephant's head holding a small shield of Macedonian type; he may be wearing a kausia. This elephant figurine is an extremely rare find.

Fig. 9. Mould of a female figure and a modern cast. Agora of Pella, Eastern Stoa. Early 1st century B.C.E.



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- 21 This mould was found in a destruction layer along with various vessels, lamps, and moulds for the manufacture of relief vessels. On the back, deeply incised before firing, are the letters IC. To the same workshop and bearing the identical letters IC on the back, but with differences in several details, belongs another mould found also in the Agora of Pella.

ABSTRACTS

A major exhibition opened at the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki on April 3, 2017. Entitled “Figurines. A Microcosmos of Clay,” this exhibition presents some 617 terracotta figurines from Macedonia and Thrace that range in date from the early Neolithic period to late antiquity.

INDEX

Keywords: Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, Greek terracottas, Neolithic figurines, Bronze-Age terracottas, terracotta figurines, clay figurines

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