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Clay Figurines of Aphrodite in Roman Thessalonike

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In the Roman period Thessalonike was a crowded, powerful city, as is apparent from its two extensive cemeteries, one outside the east city wall, the other outside the west wall, both of which continued to be used in the Hellenistic period. The most commonly found grave goods are various kinds of figurines, most notably of the goddess Aphrodite.

The types of figurines found in graves of the Roman period in Thessalonike's cemeteries are as follows.

1. Venus Genetrix or Frejus Aphrodite

There is only one figurine of this type from Thessalonike.¹ (Fig. 1) It is intact, but re-assembled. Traces of colour survive: pink on the chiton, blue on the himation, brown on the hair and eyes.

The original, fifth-century work has been attributed to various sculptors. The type continued to be copied until the Roman period. The hair is usually bound, but in the Thessalonike example is loose. The inscription on the rear of the base dates it to the early third century AD, in the reign of Caracalla.

The goddess stands on a high four-sided base, on the front of which is a representation of a cupid and on the back the inscription 'Mono/machou'. She stands on her left leg, with the right flexed. She wears a chiton that leaves the left breast bare, while the thin fabric reveals the outline of her entire body. It falls in abundant folds around the supporting leg. Her left hand holds the folds at thigh level, while, with the arm bent at an acute angle, the right hand draws the himation up her back. The centre-parted hair hangs loose, following the curve of the shoulders.

¹ See S. Korti-Kondi, *I koroplastiki tis Thessalonikis*, Thessaloniki 1994, 40-1, No. 90.

2. Aphrodite Anadyomene

Aphrodite Anadyomene is regarded as a Hellenistic type, though there are quite a number of Roman figurines of Aphrodite Anadyomene from Thessalonike.² We can attribute Apelles' painting of the birth of Aphrodite to as early as the fourth century BC. The type either originated with Apelles or is ascribable to the Lysippian tradition. The latter view is supported by the opinion that the figure of the Anadyomene does not originate from a painting but that the archetype was conceived as a plastic work before Apelles' time. The types of figurines of Aphrodite Anadyomene that were common in the Roman period are:

i) a naked figure with the body bending sharply to the left and a dolphin between the legs covering the pubis with its tail;³ (Fig. 2)



*Fig. 1. Thessaloniki museum
no. 10263*



*Fig. 2. Thessaloniki museum
no. 772*

² Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 41f.

³ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, No. 134.

ii) a near naked figure standing on a base with one leg flexed and the himation billowing behind the left shoulder, where it is secured by the left hand. Her right hand holds a dolphin by the tail, while in another case there is a bird—a swan or a goose—on her right. (Fig. 3) There is no doubt that this Aphrodite type is not derived from a statue. There is no known statue of a similar Anadyomene Aphrodite. The Anadyomene of this type is a koroplastic creation. Its dating to the Roman period is supported by the inscriptions borne by two of the figurines ('Oualairiou' and 'Apollounos').⁴ (Fig. 4, 5)

3. Aphrodite of Knidos

This is the most numerous type of figurine in the graves of Roman Thessalonike.⁵ These figurines originate from a statue type, Praxiteles' statue of Aphrodite of Knidos, which was apparently made c.360 BC. Only copies of it survive. (Fig. 6, 7)

The Aphrodite of Knidos type has survived in koroplastics down the ages in a number of variants, though it has retained certain basic characteristics, namely the nudity and the hydria with the himation thrown over it, which is often shifted from the figure's left side to the right. The goddess does not hold the himation in her hand, as in the marble figurine in the Vatican, but allows it to hang from her elbow.⁶ The hair differs from the original and is styled in the fashion of the time when the figurines were made.

Comparatively recent excavations in the west cemetery have brought to light a figurine of the Aphrodite of Knidos, among other things. In this case, the himation is draped over both arms and the hair hangs loose over the shoulders.⁷ The excavations in Thessalonike's ancient agora have yielded another, fragmentary figurine of the Aphrodite of Knidos.⁸ Figurines of the Aphrodite of Knidos are, of course, very common not only in Thessalonike but also on other Roman-held sites nearby. Figurines of this type have also been found during excavations at Stobi and elsewhere.⁹

Figurines of the Aphrodite of Knidos are the most characteristic group in Thessalonian koroplastics, for in them we can detect three generations of figurines that are



Fig. 3. Thessaloniki museum
no. 6322

⁴ Korti-Kondi, op. cit., Nos. 75, 107.

⁵ Korti-Kondi, op. cit., 43f.

⁶ R. R. R. Smith, *Hellenistic Sculpture*, London 1991, Fig. 98, 1-2.

⁷ P. Adam-Veleni and K. Konstandoulas, *AEMTh* 5 (1991) 226, Fig. 10.

⁸ P. Adam-Veleni et al., *AEMTh* 10B (1996) 520, Fig. 17α.

⁹ V. Bitrakova Grozdanova, *Religion et art dans l'antiquité en Macédoine*, Skopje 1999, 205f, Fig. 11.



*Fig. 4. Thessaloniki museum
no. 2956*



*Fig. 5. Thessaloniki museum
no. 2956*

identical, albeit of different sizes.¹⁰ The figurines in the first group are about 0.24 m tall. A second group comprises identical figurines, but smaller, around 0.17 m; while those in the third group are even smaller, being 0.15 m tall. These groups of figurines must have been produced by the same workshop, despite their different size.¹¹ The hypothesis that the moulds were made from figurines and not from an archetype accounts for the blemished surface of the figurines, which is due not to the passage of time or to wear but to an ill-made mould. This shortcoming was concealed by the white slip and, especially, the colours, traces of which survive on many of these figurines. The workshop that made most of the figurines of the Aphrodite of Knidos mass-produced figurines of this type - and others - which means that there was great demand for them.

4. Aphrodite on a goose

Another type of Aphrodite figurine of the Roman period is that of the goddess upon a goose.¹² (Fig. 7) The type represents a female figure sitting on the back of a

¹⁰ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 65.

¹¹ G. R. Nicholls, *Two Groups of Archaic Attic Terracottas, The Eye of Greece: Studies in the Art of Greece*, Cambridge 1982, 224.

¹² Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 49f.



Fig. 6. *Thessaloniki museum*
no. 2931



Fig. 7. *Thessaloniki museum*
no. 3036

goose that walks towards the right. The figure wears a chiton and a himation, which also covers her head, from which she draws it with her right hand. The goose is on a round base. There is no doubt that the figurines of female figures astride birds represent Aphrodite, and this is anyway confirmed by the inscription on Pistoxenos' kylix with the same subject.¹³ The *anakalyptomene* gesture is also characteristic of Aphrodite.¹⁴

The fact that we find three almost identical figurines of the same subject in Thessalonike, with no exact counterpart in figurines from other areas, supports the conclusion that this specific type was created by the Thessalonike workshops.

The considerable number of figurines from Thessalonike is indicative of the presence of koroplastics workshops, which have been located on the site of the city's ancient agora. Fragments of moulds survive representing all types of figurines.¹⁵ The inscriptions on some of the figurines also supply the names of owners of workshops that must have operated in Thessalonike. Apollounos (Apollous?; No. 107) is a Greek name from 'Apollo', though here it is the name not of the god but of a person, the owner of the workshop. The same name was also inscribed on another Aphrodite figurine, now lost.¹⁶ The name Monomachos (No. 90) is Greek, although its meaning

¹³ E. Simon, *Die Götter der Griechen*, 3rd edition, Munich 1985, 246, Pl. 235.

¹⁴ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 78.

¹⁵ Adam-Veleni *et al*, *ibid*.

¹⁶ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 68f. See C. Avezou and C. Picard, *La nécropole de Thessaloniki, Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire*, 32 (1912), 352, Fig. 10c.

relates to the Roman period.¹⁷ The other two names in the inscriptions, Oualairiou and Oualetos, are Hellenised Roman names. The names in these inscriptions are probably those of owners of koroplastics workshops in Thessalonike in the Roman period.

What does the presence of Aphrodite figurines in the graves of Roman Thessalonike mean? The fact that their provenance is sepulchral highlights the goddess's chthonic aspect. Her connection with the dead is illustrated by Plutarch's Aphrodite Epitymbia and Pausanias's Aphrodite Melainis.¹⁸ The sepulchral provenance of the figurines of Aphrodite Anadyomene supports the chthonic character of this type. Aphrodite on a bird (goose or swan) is identified with Aphrodite Urania, the daughter of Uranos, birds being the sacred creatures connected with the sky (*ouranos*).¹⁹

From the foregoing it is apparent that Aphrodite was a very important deity in Thessalonike in the Roman period, as she had been in earlier times, chiefly in her chthonic form, given that most of the figurines found there come from graves, with very few being votive offerings. It should be noted that we have a votive inscription to 'Queen Aphrodite' in Thessalonike as early as the third century BC.²⁰ It is also worth noting the presence of Aphrodite in the temenos of the Egyptian gods.²¹

The presence of the Aphrodite figurines in Roman Thessalonike reflects one aspect of the inhabitants' religious beliefs. They continued to venerate their ancient deities, especially Aphrodite with her various attributes as their protector in this life and in the next.

¹⁷ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 70.

¹⁸ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 75. See also S. Drougou and G. Touratsoglou, *Ellinistikoi laxetoi tafioi Veroias*, Athens 1980, 182.

¹⁹ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 78.

²⁰ IG X 2,1, 965.

²¹ Korti-Kondi, *op. cit.*, 85.