Gift, Offering, and Reciprocity

Personalized Remembrance and the “Small Finds”

Small finds are the “grab bag” of archaeology; in this category are all the portable objects—explainable and unexplainable—found on sites. At the Demeter Sanctuary the variety is great: the group includes figurines, jewelry, personal ornaments, implements (ranging from cosmetic tools to serving implements), vessels, appliqués, cosmetic palettes, mills, and mortars (hardly “small finds”), even agricultural tools and hardware. This is the detritus of history, and while the heterogeneity of the material can pose problems, its range sometimes allows for surprises and discoveries not forthcoming from better-defined classes of objects.

Interpretation

It is difficult to generalize about so many different types of objects. Although all were found in the Sanctuary, we cannot even be certain that they are all votive in nature. The first question that needs to be asked, therefore, concerns an object’s presence in a religious context. Was it a dedication, a votive offering, or can its presence be explained in some other way? Was an iron chisel, for instance, dedicated because of its function or value, or was it merely lost or discarded by a craftsman working at the site? The latter may seem more likely, but what if the tool is an axe or a scythe, an agricultural implement appropriate to a fertility cult? Tools might make perfectly suitable votive offerings. In the classical world a tool might have been dedicated by an artisan at the end of his career, as a way of marking an important change, of irrevocably terminating a phase of his life.

Other kinds of objects are more easily interpreted as dedicatory in nature yet remain elusive of further interpretation. For example, among the most common metal finds from the Sanctuary are 458 bronze rings of varying dimension and weight. These are objects of obvious value; solid pieces of metal, carefully made, and seemingly dedicatory in nature. These rings are too large to be finger rings, too small to be bracelets or armlets, and are almost always undecorated. Since their weights and sizes vary, they are probably not currency. Might they, however, have been dedicated because of the value of the metal? Perhaps they were sold by vendors to visitors to the sanctuary after being weighed out, much as metal jewelry is still sold in some parts of the world today.

Or were these rings dedicated because of symbolism that is now unclear, some special connection with the cult of Demeter and Persephone? Might a bronze ring be a symbol of wholeness, of infinity, of binding together, or, even more far-fetched, might it be a symbol of investiture or power, as is the case in Near Eastern art? The question remains open, even though this phenomenon is not unique. Bronze rings have been found at other Greek sanctuaries, for instance at the Argive Heraeum (about 530 examples), and at Tocra, where a casting mold was also found. Even when we can identify an object as dedicatory in nature, we do not necessarily know how it was used in a religious/dedictory context. The ritual in some cases might be more important than the nature of the object dedicated. But the ritual is difficult to reconstruct. In the following sections two groups of small finds from the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone—animal figurines and personal pieces—are used to explore ritual through its material remains.

Bronze Animal Figurines

A fascinating group of objects from the Sanctuary is the menagerie of small animal figurines in bronze (Figs. 1, 2). The most popular are birds—roosters, hens, and, less frequently, water fowl (Fig. 3)—and seashells (Fig. 4); human representations are rare. These are beautifully made objects of no small value, and the preponderance of birds and sea creatures does not seem coincidental. These two types of animals may have had a special meaning to the cult. But why birds? Were roosters and hens a special attribute of the goddess? Small bronze birds were popular dedications at other Greek sanctuaries, particularly in the 6th and 7th centuries B.C., and David Mitten has suggested that real birds might have been popular dedications at these same sanctuaries (Kozloff 1981:65). Perhaps our bird figurines are surrogates or replacements of some kind, permanent and costlier representations of animals that were considered appropriate to the cult, possibly symbols of ritual. Unfortunately, I know of no evidence for an iconographic link. Birds were considered appropriate to Aphrodite and, in the Roman period, to Mercury, but there is no connection with Demeter or Persephone. As dedications, however, birds would have been perfectly appropriate at any sanctuary; we only have to recall the birds, usually doves held by female offerers, commonly shown in Greek sculpture.

Were animal figurines considered surrogates for animals dedicated in sanctuaries? Finds from different
symbolic expression of the sea. Might these ornaments have some connection with sailors: Cyrenaica Demeter as a protective divinity for some of the many sailors who made their way here? On account of her agrarian nature, Demeter seems an unlikely candidate for a sailors' divinity; a more likely candidate would be Isis, often shown holding a rudder. Could this be a case of syncretism, a blending of the aspects of two cults? The shell pendants are from an Archaic context and seem to be earlier than the periods in which we would normally expect syncretic religions, the Hellenistic and Roman periods, but a fusion of divinities is not out of the question in earlier times. Herodotus, for instance, in the 5th century B.C., associates Isis with Demeter.

Personal Remembrance and Reciprocity

Many of the earliest small finds are items of a personal nature, objects that may have been given because of their importance as personal possessions. The most obvious examples are the engraved gems which were used as signets or stamps. Each is curved with a unique symbol, a mark of personal ownership. A small but splendid series of gems, mainly from the Archaic period, has been found at the Demeter Sanctuary. The group includes scarabs (Fig. 5) carved out of semi-precious stone, glass, ivory, faience, and blue frit. It also includes a beautiful ram's-head seal (Fig. 14), and the largest group (nine examples) of rare Cycladic "Island Gems" known from excavated, stratified contexts (see box and Figs. 7a, b). Even more unusual is a rock crystal seal in the shape of an eight-sided cone with a scene of a lion attacking a goat (Fig. 13a,b), which may have been produced in Persia.

The Island Gems

Forty-four gems and engraved finger rings have been found at Cyrene's Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone. The engraved gems are mainly Archaic in date, and nine of them are of the type known as "Island Gems," usually cut from serpentine (Fig. 6). These gems were produced somewhere in the Cyclades, possibly on the island of Melos, and date to the 7th and 6th centuries B.C. Island Gems are extremely rare; only about four hundred examples are known. The group from the Demeter Sanctuary at Cyrene is the largest from any sanctuary (four were excavated at the Argive Heraeum, three at Perachora, and Aegina).

Engraved gems in the Greek world could have been used as ornaments, as amulets, and as personal seals. John Boardman has argued that the Island Gems were used as ornaments and not as personal signets (1963: 161), but Steven Lowenstam has shown, in his careful study of the new evidence from Cyrene, that the Island Gems were, in fact, probably used as signets and thus were probably the most personal of dedications. "One might even suppose that the offering of one's sealstone to the goddesses was essentially a statement that one was dedicating oneself to the cult" (Lowenstam in Lowenstam et al. 1987:1).

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context would suggest so. In her study of Roman Istratio rituals (purification ceremonies) at Italian sites, Ingrid Edlund has gathered strong evidence that the animal figurines found in votive deposits near the site of the rituals were used as tokens or substitutes for real animals (1986). Also, some of the bronze animal figurines I have studied from the Apollo sanctuary at Krouton have badly burned surfaces; might not this suggest that the figurines were burned on an altar, perhaps as substitutes for real animals? Here we are dealing with gifts to divinities that serve as both offering and sacrifice. There is also evidence that figurines could have served as mementos of sacrifices. With the figures representing animals that had actually been sacrificed: at Thasos, terracotta figurines of pigs with slit bellies and exposed entrails have been found. Terracotta cakes and cake molds from sanctuaries are another example of how sacrifices could be eternally "fossilized" into more permanent, tangible form (Van Straten 1981:87). Another explanation, particularly at the sanctuary of a goddess associated with agriculture and fertility, is that the figurines might have been dedicated with the intention of providing protection for living animals. This kind of practice still occurs in Puerto Rico, where at rural sanctuaries metal animals are attached to images of the Virgin to secure protection for valuable animals, occasionally even to cure them from disease (Vidal 1974:7-10). The Puerto Rican figurines include hens and roosters, as well as larger farm animals. The latter were not found at the Demeter Sanctuary; the only thing approaching such images are two hollow head pendants, objects of personal adornment. But even if the bird figures can be explained as tokens or surrogates, this explanation does not help with the bronze shells. Although we might expect shells at a sanctuary of Aphrodite and we know that shells were suitable dedications to the goddess Astarte on Cyprus, there is no obvious connection with Demeter. In addition, the seventeen bronze shells found at the Sanctuary were pendants (Fig. 4); all are drilled or have suspension loops. Shell pendants in bronze are not common at other classical sanctuaries. They must have been considered particularly appropriate, but why? Seashells in general might have been objects of value— as currency, as adornments, as vessels, or as exotics. (In this last category we should include shells of a different sort also known from the Sanctuary, ostrich egg shells.) Seashells are found in burials as well as in sanctuaries in the classical world. In

Figure 5. Many of the small finds are items that may have been given because of their importance as personal possessions, such as these Egyptianizing scarabs. Archaic period.

Figure 6. The Sanctuary's nine extremely fine and rare Island Gems, dated to the later 7th century B.C.
Other objects, clearly dedicated by women, are also personal in nature: pins, cosmetic implements, jewelry (pendants, beads, earrings), and hair coils or hair slides (Fig. 17). The latter might be connected with a common practice: boys and girls who had come of age dedicated a lock of their hair at a sanctuary. Most of the feminine articles are early in date, 6th or 5th century B.C., but there are exceptions. A small ivory leg (Fig. 18) is probably Roman. It may be part of a doll or puppet, and may reflect a dedicatory practice similar to the hair offerings. In this case, the doll could have been part of the gift of childhood playthings by a girl who had reached maturity or was about to be married.

In some cases the personal nature of an object may have been more important than its material value. Many of the small finds are "luxury" items (Figs. 13, 16), but, as Irene Winter has pointed out in another context, "luxury" items need not be merely the opposite of "necessities", but "incarnate signs" (1988:195), things whose principal use is rhetorical and social. For instance, in a secular context a silver ring would have a certain material value, but in a social sense the ring would have a different value as an indicator of wealth and status, or, to use a modern example, a symbol of marriage, for instance, in the case of a wedding ring. In a religious setting, at a sanctuary, this same ring could have had a different meaning, a reminder of the person who owned it, a gift that created a personal bond between donor and god, a clear symbol of personal sacrifice, or a symbol of the surrender of something that was materially, socially, and personally valuable to the offering.

A well documented ancient example of this kind of personal surrender concerns Aelius Aristides, a hypo-chondriac who visited the sanctuary of Asclepius at Pergamum. Aristides was directed in a dream to cut away some part of his body, but was eventually allowed to offer up a finger ring instead (Burkert 1987). In this case the finger ring replaced the finger—less of a sacrifice but still a gift of obvious value as a symbol of personal surrender.

The Changing Nature of the Gift

At the Demeter Sanctuary, the more lavish small finds date primarily to the early history of the sanctuary (e.g., Figs. 8-12). These luxury objects in gold, silver, ivory, and other costly materials attest to the cult’s prosperity. At the end of the Archaic period, in the 5th century B.C., the quality and quantity of the smaller dedications seem to decline. This change, in retrospect, seems abrupt. Rare are the jewelry, personal ornaments, gems, and finger rings of an earlier period; instead, mass-produced objects such as terracottas (see Uhlenbrock, this issue) and bronze rings become increasingly common. Entire classes of objects, such as engraved gems, pins, and hair slides, disappear or are rarely encountered.

This change might be explained in a number of ways. One possibility is that the importance of the cult declined. An agrarian cult important in the city’s early history, when colonial agriculturists were struggling to exist in a difficult environment, may not have had the same appeal in later periods. This suggestion is belied by the splendid nature of other types of expenditures dating to later in the Sanctuary’s history, such as statues, altars, or new building activity. Clearly the cult remained popular, and Cyrene remained a wealthy city; only the nature of the dedications changed. That the same pattern of giving can be found at other wealthy sanctuaries elsewhere in the Mediterranean (the Heraion at Samos, the Artemision at Ephesus) suggests that the phenomenon needs to be seen in more general terms.

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There may be an explanation that has to do with the importance of the cult or the economy of the city than with the nature of dedicatory practice. White has pointed out that there is a change at the Sanctuary from anonymous gifts in the 8th and 5th centuries B.C. to more individual gifts in the Hellenistic period and later. This may well be explained by a change in religious attitudes to "more private considerations of death and the immortality of each individual's soul" (see White's "The Sanctuary's History and Architecture," this issue).

The different nature of the gifts can also be seen as that between dedications that were personally significant and those that were publicly individualized. I am making a distinction between dedications that were owned by the offerer—a ring, a fibula, an earring—and dedications that were individualized because they were made to be dedicated (statues, inscriptions, cultic reliefs). The former are found in markedly higher quantities in the early history of the late Sanctuary, while the latter are found in all periods. The decrease in the former might have resulted from changing attitudes, variability regarding the very nature of gift and dedication. Making an offering to a divinity is a rectification of an activity or condition. The action has as much to do with the offerer as with the god. As Jane Harrison put it, "The material of sacrifice is conditioned, not by the character of the god, but by the circumstances of the worship" (1909:85).

Gifts affirm a kind of kinship, both between humans and between humans and divinities, as was understood by Mauss: "It follows clearly...that in this system of ideas one gives away what is in reality a part of one's nature and substance, while to receive something is to receive a part of some one's spiritual essence" (1954:10). Mauss was referring to gift exchange as a socio-economic mechanism, but the quote is applicable to the ritual of giving in a religious context. Given the nature of this kind of exchange, what is as important as the object itself is how the gift was given—the vow and ritual, the "spiritual essence" associated with it. A votive is by definition an object given in association with a vow.

Unfortunately, while the object itself survives, the vow and the ritual associated with it rarely do. In exceptional cases an object will be inscribed, but inscriptions are rare on small finds. One of the few such examples is the bronze "Mantillo's Apollo" in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; the inscription clearly states that it was given to Apollo in expectation of "gracious recompense." This kind of gift implies an expectation of reciprocity. A dedication is given as part of an exchange, and something is expected in return. A bond is created.

Because of the personal nature of many of the small finds, the exchange of one's "nature and substance" is all the more immediate. The offerer is giving up not merely something of value but something of value to him, part of himself. Value is based on precedents of ownership, of appreciation of objects as symbols of status, indicators of rank, and markers of individuality—objects as "inscriptions of signs." This is the personal quality of gifts that is an important part of gift-exchange in pre-monetary societies. The act of offering in a sanctuary was merely a different form of the kind of gift-exchange that was the economic and social norm.

The change to a monetary economy occurred in the Greek world at the end of the Archaic period. It is no coincidence, I think, that the personal dedications of the Archaic period gave way to mass-produced or patron-produced offerings, just as the system of gift exchange, with all its concomitant meanings and its reflection of underlying social structure, gave way to the less personal exchanges of a monetary economy.

There is other evidence for this shift from a personal religion to more institutionalized forms of dedication in the Classical period. By the 4th century B.C. the very idea of giving...
to the gods with an expectation of reciprocation is mocked by Plato as a form of bribery: "Piety is the skill of trading with the gods." Thesphestas, another philosopher of the 4th century B.C., remarked that "the Gods like what is cheap, and the deity attaches more importance to the disposition of the sacrifices than to the quantity of what is sacrificed" (Van Straten 1981:68). The very fact that Thesphestas felt the need to make this observation suggests that existing attitudes toward votive offering and sacrifice had changed dramatically.

In his analysis of these changing concepts during the classical period, Burkert has pointed out that the change may result from attitudinal changes toward deity, as well as from changes in the institution of gift giving. "Here we meet with a crisis in the system of giving: in the background there is a dissociation of giving and morality... and probably in general the advance of commerce, the invention of money which made trade anonymous, oriented toward profit in its naked form" (Burkert 1987:49). Naked commerce and personified religion may in the long run have been irreconcilable, but the evidence from Cyrene points to clear changes in the patterns of giving, in concepts of, and attitudes toward giving, rather than any change toward the deity and any change in her importance to her city and her citizens.

Figure 17. Archaic Greek silver hair curl on hair slide, perhaps connected with the common practice of offering hair at a sanctuary. It was standard procedure for boys and girls who had come of age to mark the transition by dedicating a lock to the deity.

Warden, in Warden et al. 1990, cat. no. 170, Dim. 25 cm

Figure 18. Imports from the Greek mainland and from Italy have also been identified among the small finds. This small ivory leg, once part of a doll, is probably Roman.

Warden, in Warden et al. 1990, cat. no. 36, L. 3.5 cm

Bibliography


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For centuries the Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene attracted the attendance of the faithful, whose dedications included coined money. The numismatic evidence is virtually contiguous from the late 6th century B.C. to the middle of the 4th century A.D. and is scattered throughout the site. Thus we might expect the finds to provide a good survey of the small change in use in Cyrene for almost a millennium (see box). But contrary to all expectations, the finds from the Sanctuary included over a hundred silver coins and even four of gold, quite abnormal for an excavation that produced no hoards.

A second feature is the large number of bronze coins relative to silver among the later Cyrenian issues, including relatively low value pieces of the sort customary in excavations but not necessarily to be expected at a sanctuary site. As we shall see, these results illustrate intensity of worship rather than general monetary circulation, and the particular denominations present may

Figure 1. A typical Cyrenian silver tetradrachm of the 6th century B.C. The earliest tetradrachms of Cyrene bore the design of the amphipod (or twist-pod), the plant which was to make Cyrene the richest city in Africa before the foundation of Alexandria. All coins illustrated here were found at the Sanctuary and are shown at three times their actual size except (Fig. 2.) Buttrey nd., cat. no. 3.