

FEMALE TRIADS ON LACONIAN TERRACOTTA PLAQUES¹

AMONG the many Archaic and Classical terracotta relief plaques discovered in sanctuary deposits in Laconia, there are several representing three standing females. About thirty come from a large votive deposit excavated half a century ago near the church of Agia Paraskevi in modern Amyklai (Christou 1956, 1960*a*, 1960*b*, 1961) and some more were found nearby in 1998 in a second similar deposit (Themos 1998). The first deposit contained more than 10,000 objects ranging in date from the seventh century BC to the early Hellenistic period. Included were vases of regular and miniature size, terracotta figurines, and hundreds of terracotta relief plaques of the late sixth through to the fourth century BC. In addition to female triads, the plaques bear representations of seated figures, standing couples, warriors, riders, and banqueters. The most popular subject, a seated male figure holding a kantharos and often accompanied by a snake, is iconographically and stylistically related to a series of Laconian stone reliefs, most likely dedicated to various local heroes (Stibbe 1991; Salapata 1993).

Literary, epigraphic, and archaeological evidence associates the deposits with the sanctuary of Agamemnon and Alexandra, who was identified with Cassandra by the local people (Paus. iii. 19. 6; Salapata 2002*b*). The iconography of the plaques, especially the seated figures, is appropriate to the honoured figures. The bearded man depicted in a dignified pose holding a drinking cup and occasionally a staff conforms well to the image of the hero-king of epic, with the snake emphasizing his heroic status. The woman occasionally seated next to him or by herself assumes the role of his consort (Salapata 2002*b*, figs 2–4; ead. 2006, 554 fig. 10).

Many plaques with female triads have been found in other votive deposits in Sparta, containing assemblages similar to that at Amyklai and thus presumably also associated with heroic figures, but whose identity remains unknown: one from Chatzis plot (Steinhauer 1973–4, 291–2), several from unpublished excavations (e.g. Karmoiris plot, Sparta Museum no. 7066; Panagopoulos plot, Sparta Museum nos. 7627, 7434–9) and twenty-three from a votive deposit in the kome of Limnai, significantly in close association with earlier graves (Flouris 1996; 2000, 96–7 pls. 99–103). Finally, a single plaque depicting a female triad was found at the Menelaion near Sparta (Thompson 1908–9, 121, fig. 3. 32; Jenkins 1932–3, 74; pl. 11. 1).

The most common type of Laconian plaques with triads (FIG. 1) depicts identical frontal figures standing side by side. The rendering is very schematic: a lump of clay for the head and a strip for the body, with no arms or feet indicated. On two plaques, one from the Menelaion and the other from Amyklai (FIGS. 2–3), the figures are more detailed, shown as female and clothed. It is thus very likely that the schematic figures were also intended to represent draped females. The females on the plaque from Amyklai shown in FIG. 3 appear to be holding hands, implying they are dancing (six plaques from Panagopoulos plot, Sparta also belong to this type).

¹ I should like to thank A. Villing and the second, anonymous, referee for their very useful suggestions to improve this article. I am grateful to I. Peppas-Papaioannou for providing detailed information on the

Voidokilia plaques and to Ch. Flouris for allowing me to read his unpublished dissertation. C.M. Stibbe, B. MacLachlan, and A. Themos have shared their thoughts and knowledge with me.

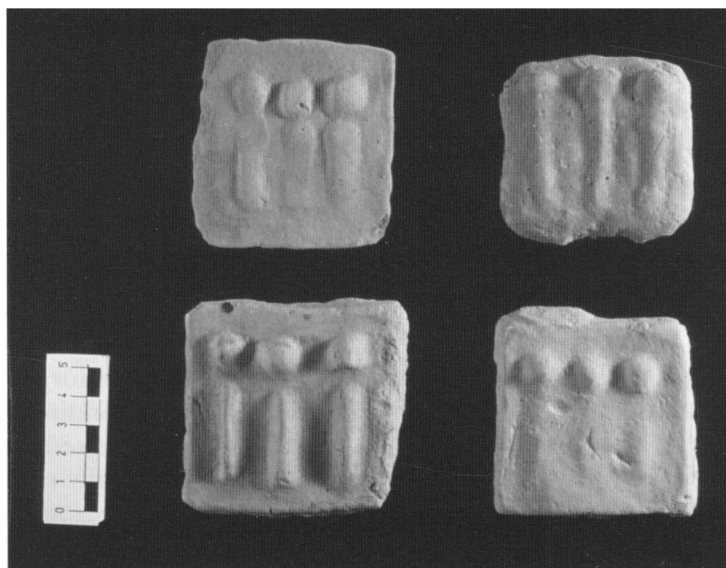


FIG. 1. Terracotta plaques from the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon, Amyklai: schematic triads. Sparta Museum nos. 6237/15, 6237/10, 6237/14, 6237/6.

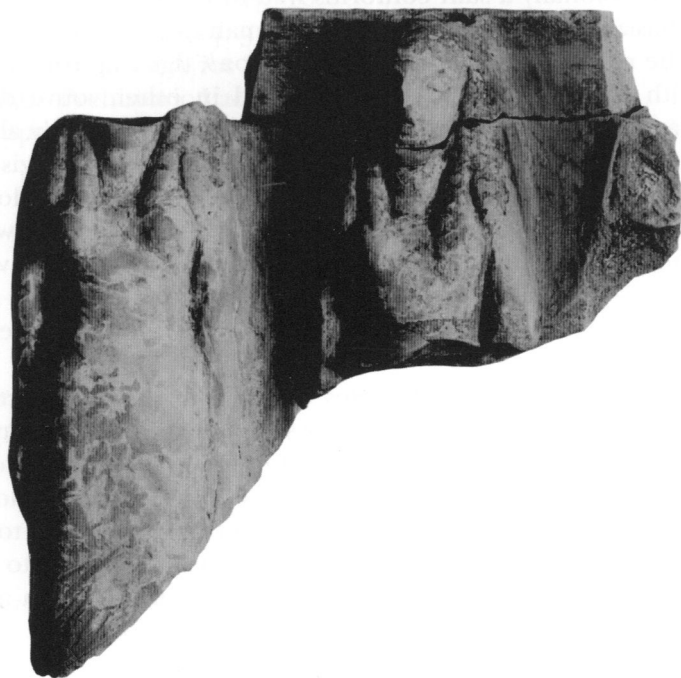


FIG. 2. Terracotta plaque from the Menelaion: three female figures (after Thompson 1908–9, 121 fig. 3. 32).

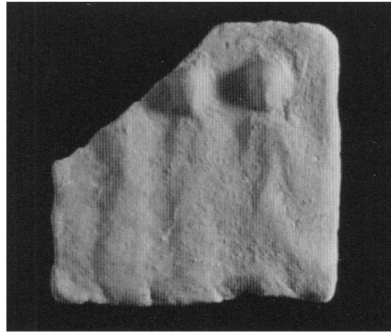


FIG. 3. Terracotta plaque from the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon, Amyklai: female triad holding hands. Sparta Museum no. 6237/28.

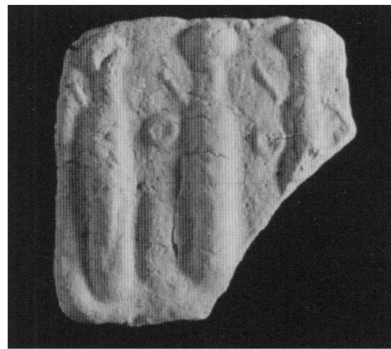


FIG. 4. Terracotta plaque from the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon, Amyklai: schematic triad with wreaths. Sparta Museum no. 6237/18.

An exceptional plaque, also from Amyklai, depicts three identical females with wreaths in the background (FIG. 4). The figures have their right arm raised while a line extending from the left side of the figure to the right most likely represents the left arm. Two small wreaths are placed in front of the middle and right hand figures. The arms and wreaths were probably a later addition, engraved into a mould that originally belonged to the simple schematic type.

Another Amyklaian plaque shows a taller middle figure (FIG. 5). Exceptionally here the three figures have arms and feet and are wearing long garments rendered in relief outlines. They are depicted frontally but their feet are shown in profile to the left. The closest parallel for this type is a plaque found near Astros in Kynouria (FIG. 6), with all three figures wearing a kind of headdress or wreath, and the middle, taller one rendered in higher relief and provided with rudimentary features.² The rendering in relief outlines, the similar size, and the type of clay suggest that the Astros plaque is most likely Laconian, perhaps dedicated by a visiting Spartan.

² The plaque was found in a sanctuary (maybe of Apollo) around 400 m north of the village Elliniko (near

Astros), possibly identified with ancient Thyrea: Phaklaris 1990, 185–92 esp. p. 189 and pl. 96 δ.



FIG. 5. Terracotta plaque from the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon, Amyklai: female triad with taller middle figure. Sparta Museum no. 6145/1.



FIG. 6. Terracotta plaque from near Astros, Kynouria: female triad with taller middle figure (after Phaklaris 1990, pl. 96 δ).

Finally, the most interesting type, represented by six fragmentary plaques from Amyklai, depicts three standing frontal figures flanked by four upright snakes (FIG. 7 *a*) (Sparta Museum nos. 6236/1, 6154, and four unnumbered examples). Although no complete examples survive, the composition can be reconstructed with certainty (FIG. 7 *b*). The figures are here provided with a rudimentary hairstyle or a headdress.

The Menelaion plaque (FIG. 2) certainly belongs to the early Archaic period, as indicated by the figures' stiff pose, defined waist, type of coiffure, and 'Archaic smile'. The date of the schematic plaques is uncertain, but based on comparative material from Messenia (for which see below) it probably falls in the fourth century BC.

ICONOGRAPHY

Two interconnected questions are raised in the examination of the iconography of these female triads. The first concerns their number: does their appearance in groups of three

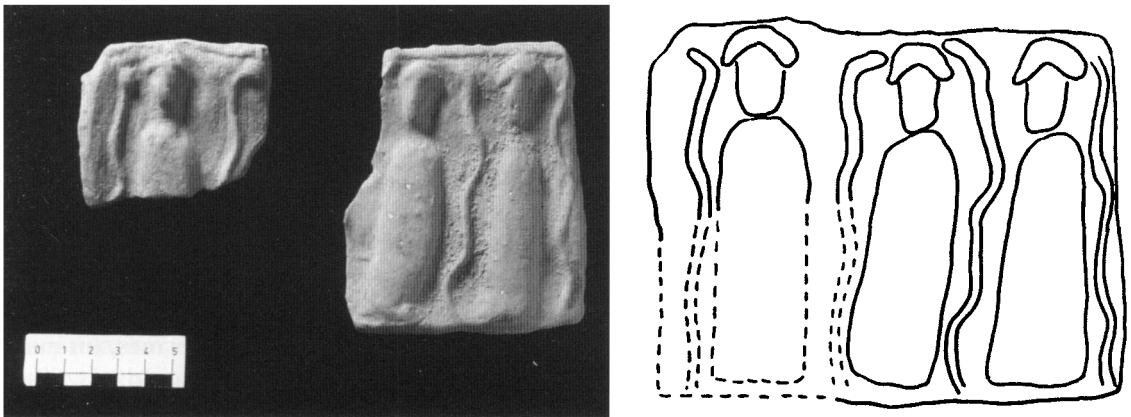


FIG. 7. (a) Terracotta plaques from the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon, Amyklai: female triad flanked by snakes. Sparta Museum nos. 6236/1 and 6154; (b) Female triad flanked by snakes: graphic reconstruction.

mean that they are a defined triad or is it just an indication of unlimited plurality, a way to suggest ‘many females’? The second question relates to their nature: are they divine or mortal?

The iconographic analysis of the triads should start with a reminder that all terracotta relief plaques were originally enhanced with painted details, of which only traces may remain. Thus in the case of the more schematic figures, features such as arms and attributes could have been added solely in paint, making their identity more specific (Salapata 2002*a*, 21–2). Judging from the more detailed plaques, we may assume that all figures were female and wearing long garments.

FEMALE TRIADS IN GREEK ART

Greek mythology and cult provide us with abundant examples of triads of minor female divinities, with individual members more or less undifferentiated: e.g. the Horai, the Charites, the Hesperides. In Greek art female pluralities, mainly triads, are especially well attested, but many remain anonymous. The oldest example of an identical female triad comes from Crete. It is an early Orientalizing gold ornament from the Idaian cave showing three draped women depicted frontally with arms on the sides and wearing a polos (Blome 1982, 11, 76, fig. 4). Similar triads were particularly popular at the sanctuary on the acropolis of Gortyn, where these figures are naked with one hand on the pubis (e.g. Böhm 1990, 97–9; pl. 37 *a, c*). The nudity, strict frontality, and gesture of the Gortyn figures can be traced to eastern sources,³ and the iconography may have been introduced to Greece through small, portable votive objects. The examples of draped female figures, with which we are particularly concerned here, seem to be an adaptation of the eastern iconographic scheme to Archaic Greek taste which did not favour the naked female body. It may be significant, therefore, that Laconia, an

³ For Egyptian examples, see Rizza and Santa Maria Scrinari 1968, 251; for Near Eastern examples, see Böhm 1990, 47–8, 98, 156 (fig. 7 *a–b*).

area with early contacts both with the East and Crete,⁴ produced at least one Archaic plaque with a female triad (FIG. 2).

Female triads of identical or very similar figures lacking specific attributes appear on stone reliefs and terracotta plaques of later times (Usener 1903; Hatzisteliou-Price 1971; Larson 2001, 258–67). Such groups are traditionally identified with semi-divine beings, such as the Horai, the Charites, the Moirai, or the Nymphs, all of whom appeared in the plural and tended to form triads. In particular, triads of dancing women are identified with the Charites and more commonly with the Nymphs, in accordance with early popular belief (Hom. *Od.* xii. 316–18; *Cypria* fr. 5 Allen; Schwarzenberg 1966, 1; M. Bell 1981, 92; Kleine 2005, 74).⁵ Thus the dancing figures on the Chiaramonti relief, a version of an original of about 470 BC, are identified as the Charites,⁶ while the three dancing maidens, usually led by Hermes, on many Attic fourth-century BC votive reliefs, are identified as Nymphs (Fuchs 1962, 242–9; pls. 64–6, 69.1; Kleine 2005, 82–3; Larson 2001, 258–67; fig. 3. 1).⁷ In many cases, however, there is nothing more than the gender and number of the figures to suggest their identification with either of these groups.⁸ The likelihood of misinterpretation becomes obvious when one considers the early fifth-century BC reliefs flanking the Passage of the Theoroi on Thasos. On one side is Apollo with three Nymphs and on the other Hermes with the three Charites (École française d'Athènes 1968, 37–9; figs. 12, 104; Larson 2001, 170–1). Both Nymphs and Charites are depicted in a similar manner, and would have been indistinguishable without inscriptions. It is clear, therefore, that any specific identification of such a triad would be highly speculative.

Occasionally, however, dedicatory inscriptions, find spot, and accompanying figures help with the identification. Thus the three overlapping females on two sixth-century BC painted wooden plaques from the Pitsa cave near Corinth can be securely identified with the Nymphs because of the dedicatory inscription on one of them and their find spot, since caves were popular places for the worship of the Nymphs (Orlandos 1965; Larson 2001, 232–3).⁹ Similarly, stone reliefs and terracotta plaques depicting dancing female triads found in cave sanctuaries can be assumed to depict these specific divinities. Moreover, the association with the pastoral gods Hermes and Pan, typical companions of the Nymphs, may also offer a clue (Levi 1923–4, 34 fig. 9 nos. 2–4; Larson 2001, 226–67).¹⁰

A late sixth-century BC stone relief from Laconia, now in Brussels, may also depict Nymphs according to one interpretation of its inscription. Three peplos-wearing women stand in profile to the right, one holding a necklace or garland, the second a fruit, and the third a

⁴ Indeed, the finds from the Orthia sanctuary are generally very similar to the ones from Gortyn: Carter 1985, 156–7.

⁵ In *Od.* xviii. 193–4 Aphrodite joins the dances of the Charites; Sokrates (in Xen. *Symp.* 7. 5) refers to the dance of Charites, Horai, and Nymphs.

⁶ Perhaps the group on the Athenian Akropolis by Sokrates: Ridgway 1970, 115–18; figs. 153–5; but see more recently Palagia 1990.

⁷ A small marble relief probably from Sparta reportedly depicts in flat relief three similar frontal females wearing a chiton and himation and having the right hand on the breast and the left by the side. The relief has been dated to the 1st c. BC and interpreted as a votive to the Charites or Nymphs: Tod and Wace 1906, 190 no. 572; Stibbe

1991, 42 (no. H14). Since no picture has been published, we cannot venture an identification.

⁸ There is no good reason, for example, to identify 5th- and 4th-c. BC figurines representing a group of three females with the Charites: Higgins 1967, 82 no. C34 (from Corinth); Mollard-Besques 1954–86, i. 88; pl. 62 (from Boiotia) nos. C34, C35; Goldman 1940, 395–6; fig. 21 (from Halai).

⁹ Cf. a stone relief from Lesbos depicting three frontal women holding hands, and inscribed with a dedication to the Nymphs: Charitonides 1965, 492; pl. 629.

¹⁰ See also the terracotta plaques from the Caruso cave at Lokroi Epizephyroi, depicting three female heads at the top of a broad pillar: Larson 2001, 251–6.

flower, very much like the Charites and Nymphs on the Thasos reliefs (Fitzhardinge 1980, 83 fig. 97; Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 56–7). The inscription on the background, ΚΟΡΑΣ ΣΟΤΙΑΣ, can be interpreted as either ‘Sotias dedicated to the Kora’, or ‘Sotias dedicated the korai.’ Although the maidens are not shown dancing, they could very well be Nymphs, since the name *korai* could be applied to them (e.g. Hom. *Od.* vi. 122; Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 56; Fitzhardinge 1980, 83 proposed the Fates). It has also been suggested that *Sotia* was a local version of *Soteira*, an epithet of Kore, whose sanctuary was by the Spartan agora (Paus. iii. 13. 2); in that case the relief would represent three maidens bringing offerings to Kore (with the dedication ‘of Kora Soteira’: Jeffery 1961, 193).

The early Gortyn triads have been identified by some also as local Nymphs.¹¹ Another interpretation, however, sees the females as mortal women-priestesses in the service of a fertility goddess, based on the association of naked female figures in Greece, as in the Near East, with sexuality and fertility.¹² The presence, however, in the same sanctuary of numerous objects on which the same type of female figure appears both in single and in multiple form has inspired a third, indeed controversial, approach for the interpretation of groups of identical females: that the double and triple representation of a female figure may not indicate distinct deities very closely connected, but one and the same divinity in multiple form (Levi 1955–6, 244; Rizza and Santa Maria Scrinari 1968, 54, 250–1; Christou 1968, 36–41; Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, esp. p. 69; Blome 1982, 76). Such a repetition could be understood as strengthening of the divine potency (Usener 1903, 191; Blome 1982, 77), as an expression of the various aspects of the same deity (Christou 1968, 46–8, 170–1), or both (Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 54, 69).

It is true that Greek religious mentality allowed different personae and aspects for one and the same divinity, so that the existence of more than one statue and temple for the same god was not unusual (Usener 1903, 195–200, 205–8; Herington 1955, 35–7; e.g. on the Athenian Akropolis Athena had several cults and shrines). Some literary references in the plural to deities commonly known in the singular appear indeed to support the idea of the multiplication of a single divinity. The birth goddess Eileithyia, for example, was known at least since Homeric times both in the singular (Hom. *Od.* xix. 188) and in the plural, Eileithyiai, as daughters of Hera (Hom. *Il.* xi. 270; a cult of the Eileithyiai is indeed attested in Boiotia, Megara, and Delos: Paus. i. 44. 2, viii. 21. 3; Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 53; and in Athens Eileithyia had three xoana: Paus. i. 18. 5). The reason for this variation, however, may be that the functions embodied by the goddesses, originally conceived in the dual as assisting in labour from either side, were later condensed into one figure.

In visual art, a few enigmatic works show a single divinity in multiple form. A late Archaic votive relief, for example, shows two identical ‘Athenas,’ as the gorgoneia on the shields indicate (Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 55; pl. 1. 1). Whatever the message communicated by this image, it cannot have been the illustration of two different aspects of Athena (as Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 53 believes) because one would expect some differentiation. Representations

¹¹ S. Marinatos 1962, 915–16 identified them with the Geraistian Nymphs, nurses of Zeus, based on two glosses of the *Etymologicum Magnum*, one referring to the Geraistian Nymphs as especially honoured in Cretan Gortyn, and another explaining Geraistian as a place in Arcadia where Zeus was swathed in swaddling clothes.

See, however, the cautious remarks of Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 50 on the chronological difference between the references and the monuments.

¹² This goddess could be different in each case: Böhm 1990, 127–34, 136–40. N. Marinatos 2000, 27–31 associates the naked females with initiation rituals.

such as this are indeed puzzling, but because of the lack of conclusive evidence, such as inscriptions, the theory of the visual expansion of one deity into two or three figures should remain hypothetical.

LACONIAN TRIADS

The find spots and iconography of the Laconian plaques do not generally support an identification of the female groups with a specific divine or semi-divine triad or with a single divinity shown in multiple form. The only exception may be the plaques with the three women holding hands (FIG. 3). If they are indeed dancing, the Charites and Horai must be excluded, since the Laconians worshipped only two Charites and two Horai (Paus. iii. 18. 6, 10; 14. 6). They could still, however, be Nymphs, since these were conventionally depicted as a triad and were associated with dancing. With the exception of the Menelaion plaque, on which the arms of the women are clearly by their sides, the same could be assumed for the other triads, since painted details may originally have portrayed them with joined hands. The find spots, however, do not support such an interpretation, since the link is with heroic cults.

A more likely and flexible interpretation would see the figures as mortal worshippers in the service of the divinity of the sanctuary to which the plaques were dedicated. Their number would have been just an expression of the concept of plurality: not one or two, but many. There is indeed some evidence for such a concept of plurality in ancient sources and its application to religion. According to Plutarch (*De Is. et Os.* 36), 'thrice' was used instead of 'many times'. Aristotle, who like the Pythagoreans considered the triad the number of the complete whole, added that the number three was provided by nature to be used in the service of the gods (*Cael.* i. 1).¹³ From an artistic point of view, three standing figures are a convenient number (Harrison 1899, 218), since they create a balanced composition that fits nicely into the restricted square ground of the plaques.

The interpretation of the female triads on Laconian plaques as mortal worshippers, which may also apply to other triads of identical females (Kassimatis 1982, 461; Hadzisteliou-Price 1971, 66–7), is supported by similar fourth-century BC plaques found in neighbouring Messenia alongside other plaques depicting seated figures, riders, warriors and banqueters, similar to those from Amyklai. Sixteen plaques found in the area of a tholos tomb at Voidokilia, and associated with hero cult, represent three female figures walking to the left or right (Korres 1982, pl. 135 δ; 1988, 319, fig. 4; Peppa-Papaioannou 1987–8, 259, 271; figs. 13–14). On one plaque the figures have one arm bent carrying offerings (Korres 1982, pl. 135 δ left), while on another they wear long dresses, which swing slightly at the back, and possibly a mantle over the head; the right arm is bent and raised in the adoration gesture (Pylos Museum no. 1917; Korres 1988, 319, fig. 4 right). The schematic rendering in flat relief with slightly raised outlines recalls the Amyklai and Astros plaques (FIGS. 5–6). Other plaques found in a hero shrine located in the later sanctuary of Demeter at ancient Messene again represent three female figures whose rendering varies from very schematic to more naturalistic. Several are made in the same moulds as those from Voidokilia (FIG. 8 a–b).¹⁴ Another plaque found in Sparta (Sparta Museum no. 6459/57) shows similar frontal figures

¹³ For 'three' as a term of approximation or of an indeterminate number of times ('a few', 'many'), see Usener 1903, 357–60; Lease 1919, 57, 67–9; Deonna 1954, 409–14; Perry 1973; A. Bell 1975; Hansen 1976.

¹⁴ Themelis 1998, 174–5; figs. 37–40; 2000, 25–7; figs. 22 α–γ, who identifies the triads with Leukippos' daughters, Phoibe, Hilaieira, and Arsinoe.

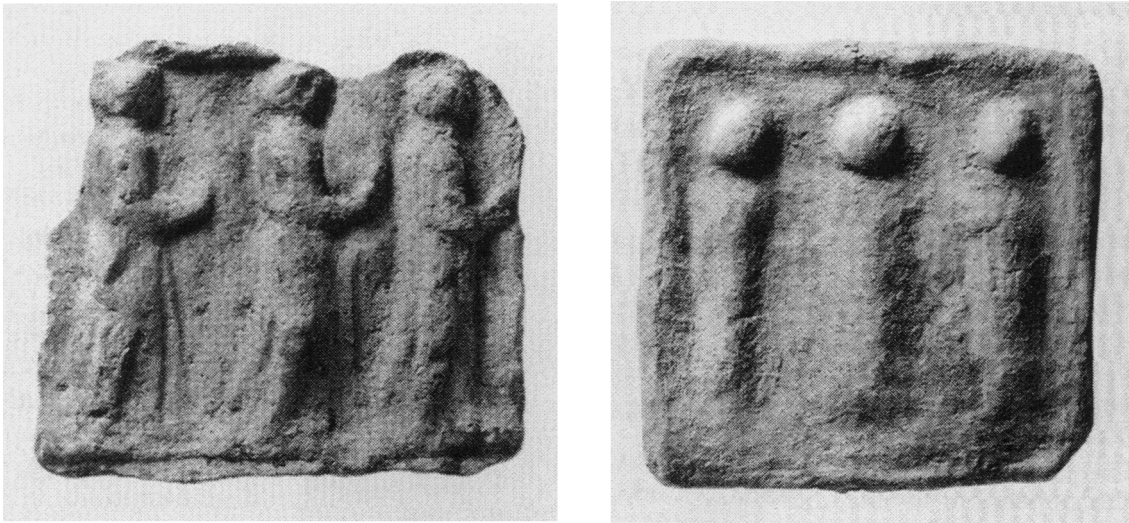


FIG. 8 (a–b). Terracotta plaques from Messene: female triads (after Themelis 2000, 26 fig. 22 a and γ).

with one raised arm, possibly holding something, but because of its fragmentary state it is not entirely certain it originally depicted a triad (FIG. 9).¹⁵ In short, the arms of the figures raised in adoration or holding objects on the Messenian and Laconian plaques support their identification as mortal worshippers bringing offerings or involved in a ceremony.

Scenes representing a divinity approached by one or more adorants are very common on votive stone reliefs. But adorants could also be depicted without the divinity being present. For example, votives representing adorants alone are described in the inventories from the Athenian Asklepieion (*IG II² 1534a* = Inv. IV, l. 90; van Straten 1981, 82 n. 80), and a fifth-century BC Laconian stone relief from Angelona (Athens National Museum no. 3120) shows a man in adoration gesture in front of an altar (Stibbe 1991, 9 fig. 26). Similar representations of worshippers raising one arm appear on fourth-century BC metal votive plaques from Mesembria in Thrace. The mortal figures are depicted either together with the deity¹⁶ or alone, and may appear in the singular, in dyads or triads.¹⁷ I would suggest that the plaques with images of adorants alone were placed next to plaques depicting the divinity,¹⁸ thus composing scenes analogous to those on which deities and mortals appear together. The same could be assumed for the Laconian and Messenian plaques: plaques with worshippers could have been placed side by side with those depicting the seated hero. An exceptional

¹⁵ The estimated size and shape of the plaque support the restoration of three figures. The plaque was found together with other plaques and lead figurines on Tripolis Street in Sparta and not at Amyklai as reported in Stibbe 1991, 38, 43; fig. 39. An unpublished plaque from the second Amyklaian deposit shows the figure to the left raising one arm, as reported to me by the excavator N. Themis.

¹⁶ e.g., Ninou n.d. 106, no. 452; pl. 60 represents Demeter approached by a family of four making the adoration gesture.

¹⁷ Ninou n.d. 104–5, nos. 434–44; Tsatsopoulou-Kaloudi 1984, 63 fig. 11 upper left. Plaque no. 445 reportedly depicts three ‘Nymphs-Eumenides’; the differentiation implies that we are dealing with figures that are not adorants, perhaps if the arm is not raised.

¹⁸ Cf. a fragmentary Tarentine plaque depicting at least four standing women with trays on their heads: Wuilleumier 1939, 398–9, pl. 27. 4. The divinity to whom they bring the offerings is not depicted on that plaque but separately on others.



FIG. 9. Terracotta plaque from Sparta: female triad (?) raising one arm.
Sparta Museum no. 6459/57 (after Stibbe 1991, 30 fig. 39).

plaque from the Limnai deposit gives an idea of the final effect of such positioning. In front of an enthroned male are depicted three diminutive figures; the one to the left, larger and apparently male, is taking a step with one arm probably bent and raised.¹⁹

The existence of plaques depicting three figures clearly characterized as worshippers or offering-bearers suggests a plausible explanation for most of the Laconian plaques depicting three identical figures; a raised arm may originally have been added in paint on the schematic plaques. Even the figures holding hands (FIG. 3) could be mortal women performing a ritual dance in honour of the divinity, instead of Nymphs, since ritual dances were a significant component of Spartan cult in general.²⁰

The disparity in height of the figures on the two plaques from Amyklai and Astros (FIGS. 5–6) may indicate varying ages of the worshippers, as on the Limnai plaque and a metal plaque from Mesembria that include children (Ninou n.d. 106, no. 452, pl. 60).²¹ The plaque depicting three figures with wreaths (FIG. 4) seems to represent females making the adoration gesture. The position of the wreaths in mid-air, however, cannot be easily explained. They could be an indication of a festive occasion, as on a Laconian votive relief depicting a

¹⁹ Sparta Museum no. 13469; Flouris 2000, 55, 105; pl. 86. The scene strongly resembles that on the Chrysapha relief (Pergamon Museum, Berlin no. 731; Salapata 2006, 544 fig. 3). A plaque from Messene shows two worshippers in front of a larger seated male: Themelis 2000, 21 fig. 17.

²⁰ On the ritual dances performed in honour of Orthia, see Plut. *Vit. Thes.* 31; Alkman's *Parthenion*; Constantinidou 1998. Cf. a Lokrian plaque with three maidens holding hands and thus presumably dancing

towards a seated woman, most likely Persephone: Prückner 1968, 65–6; pl. 11. 1. They are usually interpreted as the Charites, but are more likely mortal worshippers. On women dancing in a cultic context, see Kleine 2005, esp. 65–6.

²¹ Phaklaris's suggestion (1990, 189) that the figures on the Astros plaque represent the Delian triad remains hypothetical, since the gender of the figures is undifferentiated.

procession, where a wreath is held by one figure and another appears in the background (Smith 1892–1904, iii. 238 no. 2181, fig. 29). Alternatively, if the wreaths were supposed to be carried by the figures, a ribbon, added in paint, could have shown them as hanging from their arms. Regardless of whether the hands of the figures are raised in adoration or carrying the wreaths, the composition resembles scenes commonly found on votive reliefs.²²

TRIAD FLANKED BY SNAKES

Notwithstanding the interpretation of the Laconian female triad as mortals, a special case can be made for the unusual group of plaques showing an identical female triad flanked by snakes (FIG. 7 *a–b*). This female triad is certainly outside the sphere of ordinary mortals, with the presence of the snakes pointing to the chthonic character of the figures.²³

For parallels of a female figure flanked by snakes we may first turn to the sanctuary of Orthia. A fragmentary seventh-century BC ivory fibula plate found there depicts a winged female figure, presumably the honoured goddess, with a bird in her right hand and a snake curling up in front of her (Dawkins *et al.* 1929, 207, pl. 93. 2; Marangou 1969, 22 fig. 14). The snake and the bird, very likely duplicated on the missing right side of the plaque, may have symbolized the chthonic and the celestial realm of the goddess (Christou 1968, 145). A related painted scene is preserved on a fragmentary early fifth-century BC jug from the same sanctuary (FIG. 10; Dawkins *et al.* 1929, 104 fig. 78 *b*; Stibbe 1998, 71–3; fig. 6. 15–17). Two vertical undulating snakes flank a figure in long dress, painted in the black-figure technique. The gender of this figure is uncertain, since in Laconian vase-painting males also can wear a long garment and females can be rendered in black. By analogy with the ivory fibula, however, this figure is probably also female, presumably Orthia (Marangou 1969, 24, 222 n. 119).²⁴

Moving beyond Laconia, we find a female figure flanked by upright snakes on a mid-seventh-century BC terracotta plaque found in the Athenian Agora (Burr 1933, 604–9 no. 277; figs. 72–3; D’Onofrio 2001, 305–8). The snakes point again to the chthonic realm, and the plaque, because of its find spot, may have been associated with the cult of the dead.²⁵ The snakes and the epiphany gesture of the frontally depicted female recall the Minoan ‘snake-goddess’, a *πόρνια θεῶν* (Evans, *PM* i. 500–8, figs. 359–62), and indeed the Agora figure has been considered by many her iconographic survival.²⁶

Unlike the case of the single female figure flanked by snakes, the iconographic scheme of a triad flanked by snakes is, on present evidence, not found anywhere else in the Greek world. The closest parallel is the Erinyes, who were conceived as a triad from the fifth century BC

²² See a fragmentary Laconian votive relief in the British Museum: two women followed by a girl are shown in procession to an altar holding up a wreath in their right hand; on the other side of the altar was probably Eileithyia, if the fragmentary inscription has been restored correctly: Smith 1892–1904, iii. 238 no. 2180; fig. 28; Dressel and Milchhöfer 1877, 432 no. 5; Pingiatoglu 1981, 60–1; pl. 14. 2.

²³ On the role of the snake as a heroic emblem on other Laconian plaques, see Salapata 1997; 2006.

²⁴ Stibbe 1998, 73, arguing that the meaning of the figure flanked by snakes changed in the fifth century BC, associates it with hero cult.

²⁵ Burr 1933, 637–9 tentatively associated the deposit in which the plaque was found with the sanctuary of the Mother or the Sennai/Eumenides, but identified the oval

structure where the deposit was found with a house. Since the discovery, however, of a triangular enclosure nearby and of Geometric graves in the area, the oval structure has been identified as a building dedicated to the cult of the dead: Abramson 1978, 159–61. D’Onofrio 2001 argues that the oval structure, after having been used as a house, became a heroon, maybe associated with civic functions.

²⁶ Cf. the Lydian Kybele standing at the door of her shrine and flanked by snakes on a 6th-c. monument from Sardis: Hanfmann and Ramage 1976, 15 no. 7; figs. 20–50. On the survivals of the Minoan goddess with upraised arms in later art, see Alexiou 1958, 275–92; Christou 1968, 55, 145. N. Marinatos 2000, 119–29 disagrees that there is a link between the Minoan and Greek mainland goddesses with upraised arms.

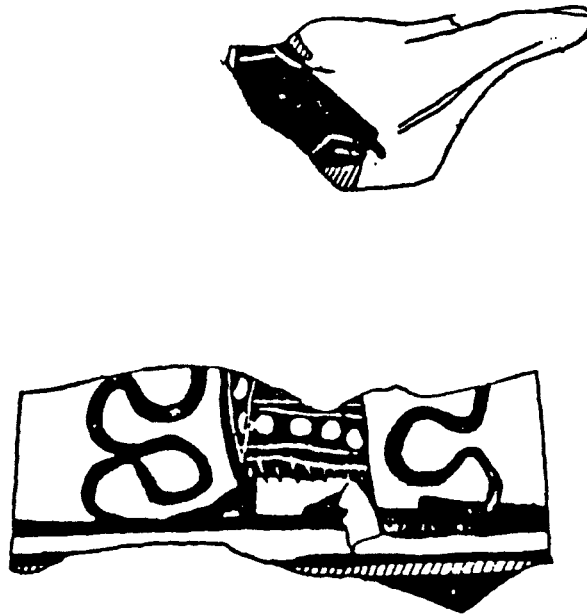


FIG. 10. Early fifth-century BC jug from the Orthia sanctuary: figure flanked by snakes (after Dawkins *et al.* 1929, fig. 78 *b*).

onwards and were associated with snakes. As protectors of the order of the universe and executors of divine justice, these avenging divinities pursued and punished those guilty of interfamilial strife (especially murder), perjury, and violation of hospitality. As chthonic goddesses they had the power to destroy but also to promote human well-being, and thus received cult under the propitiatory name Eumenides (Sarian 1986; Lloyd-Jones 1990; Johnston 1999, 250–87; Lissarrague 2006).

The connection of the Erinyes with snakes seems to be an early one and may have been related to their association with the dead and the Underworld since they often act as avenging agents of the dead.²⁷ Originally conceived as snakes or at least as creatures with serpentine qualities (e.g. *Aes. Cho.* 1049–50 *πεπλεκτανημένα πικνοῖς δράκουσιν*, *Eur. Or.* 256 *δρακοντώδεις κόραι*, *IT* 286 *Ἄιδου δράκαιναν*), they were later imagined as women associated with snakes. While in mythological illustrations the Erinyes are usually depicted aggressively pursuing their victim brandishing snakes,²⁸ in a cultic context the snakes become simply their attributes. Thus, on an unusual group of Hellenistic stone votive reliefs found near Argos are depicted three standing females holding one snake in each hand or snakes and poppy-flowers (or poppy-heads). Three of these reliefs are inscribed with dedicatory inscriptions to the Eumenides (Milchhöfer 1879, 152–3 nos. 498–500, pls. 9–10; Papachristodoulou 1968; Sarian 1986, 839 nos. 112–19; Schaefer 2001–2).

On the basis of the stone reliefs from the Argolid and the general association of the Erinyes

²⁷ Lloyd-Jones 1990, 206, who suggests that they originally were ghosts of murdered persons. Johnston (1999, 273–9) argues strongly against their identification as souls of the dead.

²⁸ Lissarrague 2006. For a possible 6th-c. BC representation of the three Erinyes in the form of snakes, see Grabow 1998, 162.

with snakes, the Laconian terracotta female triad flanked by snakes can be identified with these characters.²⁹ It is significant that plaques depicting a triad with snakes were found only in the deposit associated with the sanctuary of Alexandra/Cassandra and Agamemnon at Amyklai. If the identification with the Erinyes is correct, the Amyklai plaques would provide further insights into the nature of the cult at this sanctuary and its associated legends.

The personality and cult of Alexandra at Amyklai were based on the Panhellenic epic character of the Trojan princess, the captive and consort of Agamemnon, who was murdered with him (Salapata 2002*b*). Pausanias (iii. 19. 6; ii. 16. 6–7) states that in this sanctuary were located the reputed graves of Agamemnon and Cassandra, a statement reported with reservation since the people of Mycenae also claimed to possess their graves. The Amyklaian cult then had a heroic character, centred on the alleged graves of Agamemnon and Cassandra. The foundation legend must have involved their murders, which according to a variant local tradition had taken place not in the Argolid but in Laconia, and specifically at Amyklai. This version of the myth and the related cult may have been promoted by the Spartans when they aspired to become the sovereigns of the Peloponnese. By appropriating the most famous epic king, traditionally also affiliated with Argos, they could have placed a claim on the hegemony of the Peloponnese and appeared superior to their rival city.³⁰

On the basis of the information we have about the Amyklai sanctuary, we can deduce that representations of the Erinyes, ministers of divine justice, would refer to the murders of Cassandra and Agamemnon, which must have been an important constituent of the cult there.

CONCLUSION

On present evidence, we cannot ascribe a single interpretation to all cases of triple figures depicted on Laconian terracotta plaques. Despite the almost total lack of specific attributes, most triads seem to represent a group of mortal female worshippers rather than a specific divine or semi-divine triad. The addition of painted details may originally have provided the figures with arms raised in adoration or with joined hands suggesting ritual dancing. Plaques representing worshippers were generic offerings that could be dedicated at different sanctuaries with the intention of ensuring the repetition of the dedicator's prayer or celebration in perpetuity.

The triads flanked by snakes undeniably imply divine or semi-divine beings with chthonic associations, most probably the Erinyes. Given that the only examples come from the Amyklai sanctuary, such an interpretation would harmonize with the nature of the cult there. Offerings with the representation of the avenging spirits would have been very appropriate for Agamemnon and especially Cassandra, who suffered an untimely, violent, and wrongful death that was never properly avenged.³¹

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²⁹ It is possible that the schematic figures may originally have been provided with painted arms that held the snakes, giving a similar appearance to the Argos figures. For a cult of the Erinyes in Sparta, see Hdt. iv. 149. 1.

³⁰ The tradition is presented clearly first by Stesichoros (schol. Eur. *Or.* 46: *PMG* 216) but may go back to earlier

times: Malkin 1994, 28, 31–3; Hall 1997, 91–3; Salapata 2002*b*.

³¹ On the connection of the Erinyes to the *biaiothanatoi* and the *aoroi*, see Johnston 1999, 273. In Salapata 2002*b* I have argued for an expiatory ceremony at the Amyklai sanctuary instituted to atone for Cassandra's murder.

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