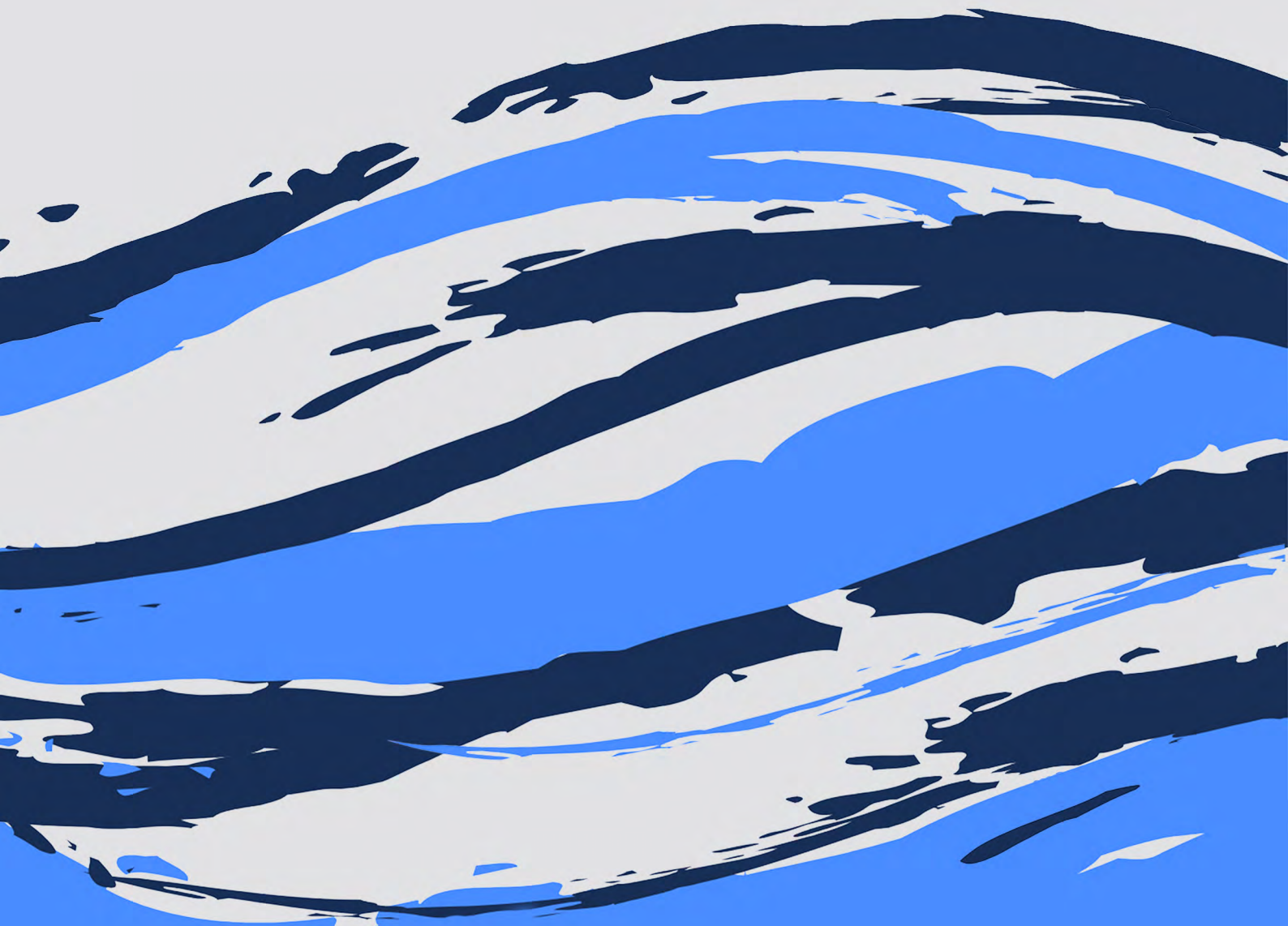




Giving Voice to Silence  
Material and Immaterial Evidence of the  
Female World and Childhood from the Coroplastic Perspective

Edited by  
Marianna Castiglione and Ida Oggiano



CONSIGLIO NAZIONALE DELLE RICERCHE  
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Material and Immaterial Evidence of the  
Female World and Childhood from the Coroplastic Perspective  
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Edited by

Marianna Castiglione and Ida Oggiano

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# CLAY FIGURINES REPRESENTING MUSICIANS AND DANCERS IN THE FEMALE WORLD AND CHILDHOOD: TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF MUSICAL AND DANCE PERFORMANCE

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ANGELA BELLIA\*

*Abstract:* Terracotta figurines representing musicians and dance activities are spread across a broad geographical space and a wide chronological spectrum in the ancient world. Yet it is only recently that coroplastic art featuring musical and dance performances has been incorporated into the body of sources and documentation within the fields of archaeology of musical and dance performance. Figurines depicted as grotesques or caricatures seem to recall the noisy performances of ritual reenactments that included masked and costumed musicians and dancers in a sacred setting. These caricatures may have been conceived as souvenirs of particular moments in a given ritual that involved not only girls and children but also singers, dancers, and musicians.

*Keywords:* Music; Dance; Soundscape; Dancescape; Ancient Musical Instruments.

## 1. AN OVERVIEW ON THE FUNCTION OF MUSIC AND DANCE IN THE SACRED SPHERE

As a virtually universal human activity, music and dance making is an essential social and cultural behaviour, playing a fundamental role and providing an indispensable function in rituals and sacred manifestations in almost every ancient society. While the performance of music in the sacred sphere should be considered as an aspect of the actions that contribute to the effectiveness of the ritual, it is also necessary to consider it as more than a mere accompaniment or means of filling various phases of the ceremony with sound: musical practice is an important aspect of rituals through which musical messages are transmitted to an audience within a precise context and sonic event. Indeed, musical performance must not only consider the instruments involved or what the musicians, dancers or singers are accomplishing, but also the relationships between space, performance and environment. Furthermore, the relationship with the audience and the behaviour of the audience itself must be taken into consideration in order to fully understand the role of music and dance in rituals and ceremonies, which have religious and social implications. As an essential presence within the lived sonic experience of cult and as ritualised sound, music (alongside other non-musical sounds) evoked certain sensorial and behavioural responses in both the worshippers who performed and those who listened<sup>1</sup> in a sacred space, where complex soundscapes fully engaged the

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<sup>1</sup> Power 2019, p. 15.



ear of the worshippers: they could hear musical performances of all kinds, utterances, outbursts, and acclamations, the “buzzing noises” of crowds and the sounds of sacrifices, instruments and worshippers.

As two components that are inseparable in the sacred sphere, music and dance strengthened the power of performances. At a time when appropriate individuals acted during events, musical and choral performance in cult could be considered a favourite means of communication with the gods and an offering to the deities completed in the framework of the ritual ceremony. Furthermore, music, sound and voices, as well as natural sounds and sound objects, improved sensory experience and enhanced social interaction through the construction of a sacred environment and sacred soundscape<sup>2</sup>: usually involving highly visual imagery, dramatic sounds and other tactile, olfactory and gustatory stimuli, performance communicates on multiple sensory levels<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding Greek ceremonies, ritual activity took place in a special location, the sanctuary, which was deemed closer to the other world and distant from this world<sup>4</sup>; this setting produced a sensorial and behavioural response in worshippers and a feeling of connectedness. The figural decoration of sacred architecture, along with all the images related to cult – including terracotta figurines –, may have contributed to achieving the goal of ritual performances using music, dance, sacred verbal formulas and the offerings of material gifts to the gods to induce a sense of the numinous in the participants. Thanks to their low cost, the terracotta figurines representing musicians and dancers made for perfect religious offerings. Indeed, people who took part in musical and dance performances customarily dedicated personal objects to divinities<sup>5</sup>. From this perspective, terracotta figurines provide strong visual evidence of various acts of worship and rituals involving music and dance performances. In many cases, the figurines are the only visual documentation of musical and choral performances in cults and rituals<sup>6</sup>.

## 2. TERRACOTTA FIGURINES AS MATERIAL EVIDENCE OF MUSICAL AND DANCE PERFORMANCES

Clay figurines representing musicians, dancers, and singers are spread across a broad geographical space and a wide chronological spectrum in the ancient world. However, it is only recently that these terracotta figurines have been included in the body of sources and documentation for investigating ancient music and dance performances<sup>7</sup>. Moreover, taking into account the contexts of their discovery, the study of these figurines have enabled the understanding of their functions in sacred contexts as well as in domestic and funerary spheres: they serve as valuable pieces of evidence

<sup>2</sup> Miles 2016, p. 185.

<sup>3</sup> Bell 1997, pp. 159-164.

<sup>4</sup> Marconi 2007, p. 28.

<sup>5</sup> Angliker 2018, p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> Bellia 2016, pp. 191-192.

<sup>7</sup> Bellia – Marconi 2016, *passim*.



not only for the comprehension of their function in religious and social practices, but also for enriching our understanding of musical and dancing activities in daily life of the past. Through an anthropological approach to the study of archaeological evidence which places musical and dance performances within an actual or symbolic space, the survey on figurines representing musicians, dancers, and singers is an indispensable subject of investigation: their study can shed light on ritual meanings and the social function of sonic events in antiquity as well as on the role of music, sounds, and body movements in the life cycle.

The figurines representing lively musical and dancing activities could recall a sacred setting during seasonal feasts, which often involved the active participation of worshippers. An example is offered by the figurines of female and male musicians from sanctuaries in Sicily and in Magna Graecia, dating from the 6th to the 3rd centuries BCE. They are emblematic of a change in musical and dancing performances on the island, which occurred in close association with drama and related to a range of gods including Demeter, Dionysos, Aphrodite, and Apollo<sup>8</sup>. These figurines, some of which were found in theatrical places in connection with shrines, show female musicians who are singing and dancing, and playing wind, stringed, and percussion instruments<sup>9</sup>. These terracottas may represent musical and dancing activities and sonic events performed by professionals and non-professionals in a cultic context<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, these figurines highlight the way music, sound, and ritualised movements were closely aligned with ceremonies involving rites of passage and initiation, nuptial rites, and rituals of social transformation. These sacred occasions were privileged moments for the consecration and dedication of the statuettes to the divinities that ensured these passages.

### 3. SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON THE REPRESENTATIONS OF MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS

An interesting issue raised by figurines representing musicians, dancers, and singers concerns not only what music and playing music and dance meant for ancient societies, but also which musical instruments were best suited to the diverse array of ritual occasions. These terracotta figurines help us to understand the functions of particular instruments in different religious spheres and ceremonies. Generally, such instruments are depicted being played, but they also are often merely held in the hand, functioning as attributes or sacred objects with the ability to enter into relationships with the gods<sup>11</sup>. In this regard, wind, stringed, and percussion instruments have specific roles associated with certain religious spheres and ceremonies<sup>12</sup>: the depictions of these instruments in the terracottas may shed light on what types of music were performed during particular ritual occasions.

<sup>8</sup> Boshier 2013, pp. 111-121. See also Kowalzig 2008, pp. 128-157.

<sup>9</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 157-175.

<sup>10</sup> Bellia 2014b, pp. 26-29.

<sup>11</sup> Carboni – Giومان 2015, *passim*.

<sup>12</sup> Bellia 2015b.



Percussion instruments marked time, underlined rhythmic and metrical patterns of music<sup>13</sup>, and produced an exciting sound to accompany the rhythmic movements particularly connected with cults and rituals<sup>14</sup>. For this reason, the depiction of percussion instruments must be connected to the widespread function of music being closely related to dancing movements. Moreover, the main functions of figurines holding percussion instruments seem to involve music and dance performed during rituals of socialisation and integration; these instruments conveyed a strong symbolic meaning related to these rituals, in which boys and girls were admitted into the society of adults<sup>15</sup>.

However, musicians playing wind instruments are depicted most frequently, because these instruments accompanied the processions to sacred places. Indeed, wind instruments were played during sacrificial rituals and dances performed at ceremonies that required a large number of performers, who were not necessarily professionals. Some figurines featuring wind instruments are depicted as grotesques or caricatures. The latter figurines seem to recall the noisy performances of ritual reenactments that included masked and costumed actors (Fig. 1)<sup>16</sup>. Moreover, the caricatures of these musicians may refer to special instrument players who were rumoured in popular belief to possess supernatural sexual powers (Fig. 2)<sup>17</sup>. It is worth noting that, especially regarding grotesque figurines representing *aulos* players – the instrument that embodied the true festival spirit and



Fig. 1. Antiquarium of Himera, inv. n. HA 2460. 4th-3rd century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 58, n. 72).



Fig. 2. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, inv. n. 8403. 5th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 43, n. 43).

<sup>13</sup> Saura-Ziegelmeier 2021, *passim*.

<sup>14</sup> Bellia 2022a, pp. 118-120; Ferri 2022, pp. 14-16.

<sup>15</sup> The clay statuettes from the sanctuary of Kharayeb, located in southern Lebanon, are a remarkable example. See Castiglione 2020, pp. 106-108.

<sup>16</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 58, n. 72.

<sup>17</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 43, n. 43.



accompanied the processional approach to the shrine –, we can assume that this wind instrument soundmarking served to bond the worshipping group closely together as well as accompany dances, deepening perceptual sympathies between members and heightening collective feelings of euphoria and enthusiasm. Moreover, grotesque terracottas representing caricatures of female *aulos* players in particular could be related to musical and dance activities performed during rituals associated with the female world and childhood.

#### 4. MUSICAL AND DANCE PERFORMANCES AT THE TIME OF LEAVING CHILDHOOD: THE CASE OF THE SANCTUARY OF FONTANA CALDA

Terracotta figurines highlight the importance of music and sound in the sphere of childhood and in the female world<sup>18</sup>. Examples of these figurines are the dolls playing *krotala*<sup>19</sup> and the nude female figurines of young girls holding *kymbala* on their legs (Fig. 3)<sup>20</sup>. These figurines, which seem to reproduce the image of young girls, with slightly marked hips and breasts and a flat stomach, were found in the sanctuary of Fontana Calda where<sup>21</sup>, from the Archaic Age, there was an important cult of the Nymphs and Artemis, and a connection with female divinities and water sources<sup>22</sup>.

Fontana Calda is a locality near Butera, a few kilometres north of Gela, where the “Sicana” Omphake could be placed<sup>23</sup>. In the autumn of 1951, the archaeologist Dinu Adamesteanu discovered a votive deposit belonging to a sanctuary located outside the old town centre, but still connected to it<sup>24</sup>. The place of worship, situated under the rock of Butera that overlooks Fontana Calda, is dominated by two cliffs between which flows the torrent Comunelli. Adamesteanu’s excavations were on the eastern bank of the torrent, in a vineyard where, at the foot of a retaining wall built to restrict any sliding of the land, he found fragments of statuettes and terracottas<sup>25</sup>.

Traces of burning on some of the finds from the votive deposit made Adamesteanu think that there must have been a rural shrine



Fig. 3. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, without inv. n. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 43, n. 449).

<sup>18</sup> Bellia 2015a, pp. 14-34; 2021, pp. 71-84.

<sup>19</sup> de' Siena 2009, pp. 53-58; Bianchi 2012, pp. 27-32; Carè – Scilabra 2013, pp. 93-97.

<sup>20</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 43, n. 44.

<sup>21</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 124-125, nn. 310-312.

<sup>22</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 113-127. See also, Pizzi 2012, pp. 221-234; Parisi 2017, p. 300.

<sup>23</sup> Adamesteanu 1994-1995, pp. 109-117; Orlandini 1961, pp. 145-149.

<sup>24</sup> Adamesteanu 1954, p. 467; 1958; Guzzone 1998; 2003.

<sup>25</sup> Portale 2008, pp. 9-11.



and that the site, being outside the town and near the stream, might have been dedicated to a cult associated with water as long ago as the 7th century BCE<sup>26</sup>. A large quantity of coroplastic material comes from the votive deposit, most of which was produced locally, from the 6th to the 3rd centuries BCE<sup>27</sup>. This production was at its height between the second half of the 4th and the beginning of the 3rd centuries BCE.

Given the discovery of more than one hundred female musical instrument players and dancers in this sanctuary, as well as the nuptial connotations of the other objects found there, these terracotta figurines seem to highlight how sounds and rhythmical movements were closely alligned with ceremonies involving rites of passage and initiations, as well as nuptial rites and rituals of social transformation involving offerings of objects related to girlhood. In this context, the female figurines holding *kymbala* – which, like *tympana*, were percussion instruments particularly suitable to accompany the dances and ritualised movements of young girls – not only had a ludical and educational function, but also a sacral and initiatory meaning. These figurines could be toy figurines with an educative function in a ludic frame which aimed to support the socialisation of girls<sup>28</sup>. Thus, evoking the end of childhood games of girls ready for marriage, the offering of figurines holding percussion instruments could also suggest a relationship with the *choroi* of girls who, still maidens, danced accompanied by the rhythm of percussion instruments, exposing themselves to the admiration of young males. The figurines holding *kymbala* in particular may be interpreted as effigies of the maiden and of the nubile female: the female figurines playing a percussion instrument suitable for accompanying the dance of young girls may be seen as a visual reference to a key theme, namely the chorus maidens at the flower of their youth who danced in honour of deities by offering them not only their musical performance, but also their instruments, before marriage. The clay female players seem to evoke ritual acts in sacred places, where young girls took part in offerings in honour of the divinities at the time of leaving childhood.

As written sources state, the custom of dedicating musical instruments and sound toys as *aparché* during wedding ceremonies, sometimes with a doll (the net holding back the hair) and the ball (at times itself a rattle containing a little stone)<sup>29</sup>, symbolises the passage to a new status in the adult world. An example is offered by the well-known epigram in the *Palatine Anthology*<sup>30</sup>, which mentions the prenuptial offering of *Timarete* to Artemis, the patroness deity of the female transition phases. The percussion instrument and the other objects dedicated by *Timarete* are associated with adolescence. Their dedication to Artemis signifies for the young girl the end of childhood and, probably at the same time, the transition to adulthood through marriage.

<sup>26</sup> Adamesteanu 1958, p. 611.

<sup>27</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 113-127.

<sup>28</sup> Sabetai 2022, pp. 161-166.

<sup>29</sup> Bellia 2012, pp. 19-25; 2022b, pp. 191-194.

<sup>30</sup> *Anth. Pal.*, VI.280.



In the sanctuary of Fontana Calda, several clay single figurines of female instrument players (Fig. 4)<sup>31</sup> and plaques representing three girls performing music and dance have also been found (Fig. 5)<sup>32</sup>; other figurines of female *aulos* players are wearing masks (Fig. 6)<sup>33</sup>, and are dressed in jewellery and transparent clothes<sup>34</sup>. According to the types of these depictions, the *choroi* depicted on the clay plaques were formed variously by three maidens who dance and play wind and percussion instruments. These two-dimensional representations, which impart a general impression of a dance movement, seem to be the replacement for the clay circular models of dancers<sup>35</sup>. These figurines help us to understand the different roles of the female musicians and dancers depicted in the terracotta *choroi*<sup>36</sup>.



Fig. 4. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, inv. n. 6333. 5th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 114, n. 255).



Fig. 5. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, inv. n. 6376. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 126, n. 315).



Fig. 6. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, inv. n. 6345. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 122, n. 298).

<sup>31</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 114-126, nn. 255-314; pp. 126-127, nn. 315-320.

<sup>32</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 122, n. 298.

<sup>33</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 122, n. 298; cfr. p. 44, nn. 46-47.

<sup>34</sup> See, Larson 2001, pp. 114-115.

<sup>35</sup> Liveri 2009, pp. 2-6; Albertocchi 2014, pp. 237-248; 2015, pp. 13-15.

<sup>36</sup> Bellia 2012, pp. 115-119.



Detailed identification of the terracotta figurines representing musicians provides important information about the type/kind of instruments that were used in the particular rituals celebrated in the sanctuary of Fontana Calda. Whilst percussion instruments were chosen to represent the exciting noise accompanying the rhythmic gestures made by the dancers, the musicians were predominantly depicted playing the *aulos*, since this was the instrument most likely to have accompanied the processions and dances in (or, to) the sacred place. On the clay plaques, the *auletris* is shorter than the other figurines playing instruments and/or dancing; her role therefore seems secondary in the representations. The female figurines without any musical instruments probably represent singers; the dancers are most often depicted playing the *tympanon* with accompanying body movements. It is interesting to note that this percussion instrument is also depicted on vases discovered in the sanctuary where girls wearing jewellery and transparent clothes, and holding a large *tympanon*, are represented<sup>37</sup>.

On the basis of the archaeological evidence, the exact nature of the dance itself remains unknown, as no amount of inference will ever recreate the dance exactly as it was practised. However, it is worth mentioning that the circular dance embodies two fundamental moments in the maidens' lives<sup>38</sup>: rituals of initiation into puberty and marriage, encompassing all the stages from the maiden's first encounter with her prospective groom to the wedding celebration. It seems that the circular dance in a collective performance was considered an ideal moment to display the qualities of girls who were preparing to leave their family home to join the groom's *oikos*. Dance was an integral part of ritual performances that marked stages and transitional phases of life, such as the initiation of girls into adult maturity and marriage<sup>39</sup>, and that enabled girls and young women to be seen in public at a time when they were most graceful and attractive<sup>40</sup>.

The dancing female groups found in the sanctuary of Fontana Calda seem to evoke music and sounds for the wedding of the archetypal bride, perhaps recalling local marriage customs in Magna Graecia and in Sicily<sup>41</sup>. The rendering of this dance in choral performance groups of young girls creates a focus on the group: they might not be a generalised grouping of girls, but a specific community of female adolescents on the brink of marriage. The terracotta plaques from the sanctuary of Fontana Calda exhibit close parallels with examples from the sanctuaries near the water sources of San Biagio at Agrigento (Fig. 7)<sup>42</sup>, the Hellenistic Fountain at Morgantina<sup>43</sup>, the Caruso cave at Locri (Fig. 8)<sup>44</sup>, and those at Reggio Calabria (Fig. 9)<sup>45</sup> and Lipari (Fig. 10)<sup>46</sup>. These parallels also seem to have nuptial connotations and a connection with female divinities and water sources.

<sup>37</sup> Portale 2008, p. 45, fig. 48.

<sup>38</sup> Smith 2011, pp. 88-93.

<sup>39</sup> Calame 2001, pp. 34-43.

<sup>40</sup> Shapiro 2004, pp. 310-311.

<sup>41</sup> Bell 1981, pp. 92-93; Larson 2001, p. 220; Bellia 2012, pp. 150-152.

<sup>42</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 32-33, n. 28.

<sup>43</sup> Bell 1987, p. 117, pl. XXXVIII, fig. 2.

<sup>44</sup> Bellia 2014a, p. 24, fig. 4; Bellia forthcoming.

<sup>45</sup> Bellia 2014b, p. 44, fig. 18.

<sup>46</sup> Bellia 2009, pp. 70-86, nn. 100-166.



As with Fontana Calda, the cults of Persephone and Aphrodite were closely intertwined in these sanctuaries. Aphrodite's cult begins to be well attested in Magna Graecia and Sicily around the time that the nude 'nuptial' terracotta figures appear<sup>47</sup>. In many cases, these terracotta figurines incorporate the same nuptial gesture of holding their dresses (Fig. 11)<sup>48</sup> and/or of *anakalypsis* with one of the figurines depicted dancing in the *choros*: it is a ritual act during which the bride unveils her face in front of her husband. Through this gesture, performed during the nuptial rites, the maidens showed their readiness for sexual maturity and welcomed the new status of the bride<sup>49</sup>.



Fig. 7. Regional Archaeological Museum of Syracuse, inv. n. 16097. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, pp. 32-33, n. 28).



Fig. 8. National Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria, inv. nn. 128 and 587/129. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2014a, p. 24, fig. 4).

<sup>47</sup> Costabile 1991, pp. 114-127; Sabbione – Schenal 1996; MacLachlan 2009, pp. 204-207.

<sup>48</sup> Bellia 2009, p. 122, nn. 299-301.

<sup>49</sup> Pautasso 2008, pp. 285-291.





Fig. 9. National Archaeological Museum of Reggio Calabria, inv. n. 399. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2014b, p. 44, fig. 18).



Fig. 10. Regional Archaeological Museum of Cefalù, inv. n. 140. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 75, n. 118).



Fig. 11. Regional Archaeological Museum of Gela, inv. n. 6330. 4th century BCE (after Bellia 2009, p. 122, n. 299).



## 5. SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

The choral dance featuring multiple performers moving in unison, and their synchronicity, is an important element of the aesthetic impact of ritualised dancing movements<sup>50</sup>. The presence of these dancing groups expresses the essential nature of ritualised movements in performance and in defining the space of rituals as a dancescape<sup>51</sup>: the depiction of dancing groups serves as an invitation to the audience to engage with special gestures within a well-defined place. Overall, these terracotta representations highlight how sounds and rhythmical movement were closely aligned with ceremonies involving rites of passage and initiations, as well as nuptial rites and broader rituals of social transformation performed in a sacred place. During these wedding celebrations, almost every element could be accompanied by musical and dance performances and sonic events.

Clay figurines representing musicians and dancers related to the female world and childhood (some of which are grotesque terracottas representing caricatures of musical, dancing, and singing performers, including female and male musicians), are not simply dedications and material objects, but dynamic and expressive products of human musical behaviour in worship. These depictions may have been conceived as souvenirs of particular moments in a given ritual that involved not only priests, priestesses, and/or cult personnel, but also singers, dancers, and musicians. Thus, it is necessary to consider the representations of musical instruments and their relationship with the religious sphere on a case-by-case basis, while keeping in mind the “polysemic”<sup>52</sup> nature of clay figurines representing musicians, the different uses of the same representations for different sacred occasions, and, when possible, the differing archaeological contexts within which the statuettes were found. Making the link between sacred events and musical performances during celebrations would be the key to understanding the symbolic meanings and the rich production of clay figurines representing musicians, dancers, and singers in the ancient world.

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<sup>50</sup> Olsen 2021, p. 28.

<sup>51</sup> Naerebout 2017, pp. 39-40.

<sup>52</sup> Huysecom-Haxhi – Muller 2015b, pp. 426-428.



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