



Review

**EGYPTIANIZING FIGURINES FROM DELOS:
A STUDY IN HELLENISTIC RELIGION**

CAITLIN E. BARRETT

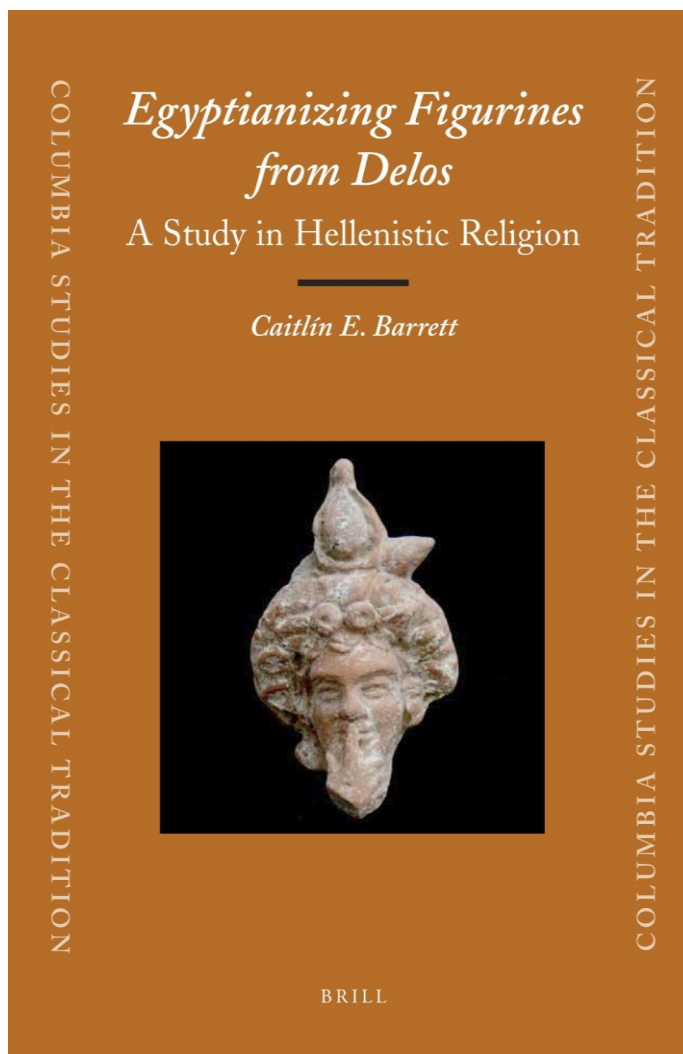
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Reviewed by Rebecca Miller Ammerman, Colgate University

The focus of Barrett's study is a corpus of 82 figurines recovered in excavations at Delos that present imagery related to Egyptian religion. The figurines date from the second to the early first century BCE and thus belong to a period in the life of the island when it flourished as an international commercial hub within networks of trade that crossed the Mediterranean. In other words, the figurines are a potentially important resource for better understanding Egyptian interconnections with the ethnically diverse populations of this small island located strategically in the middle of the Aegean Sea. Barrett explores the evidence that the terracottas provide regarding questions of interactions between Greeks and Egyptians, religious syncretism, and constructions of identity at Delos.

The 82 figurines with Egyptianizing imagery, which include 9 figured plastic vessels,



represent only 5% of the 1610 terracotta figurines and figured vessels from Delos that to date have been published. In 1956, Laumonier published 1391 terracottas from excavations going back to the late 19th century on the island, while in 1970, Bovon published 62 figurines from excavations of the 1960s at the Insula of the House of Comedians. In 2004, Hatzidakis published 157 plastic vases.¹ Barrett presents only 3 figurines that have not been previously published: 59-M-204, F120, and a figurine without inventory number from recent excavations at the Aphrodision. Most of the figurines with Egyptianizing imagery are instead already known from Laumonier's extensive survey, while Hatzidakis presents the Egyptianizing plastic vases in his study of this class of artifact as well as another 4 terracottas in a publication from 2003.² An additional 3 figurines with Egyptianizing imagery appear in Bovon's publication. So

what then has Barrett's lengthy monograph added to our understanding of this small group of terracottas? A great deal.

First, in order to determine whether the Egyptianizing terracottas were made on Delos or imported to the island from Egypt or another Mediterranean site, Barrett conducted a study of the clay fabrics of the 82 figurines. To establish the place of manufacture of a given terracotta is a *sine qua non* for exploring questions about the intentionality of the craftsmen who designed and produced a figurine with a specific imagery – in this case, one that recalls Egyptian religious beliefs and practices.

For comparative purposes, Barrett expands her study to include a group of 104 Greco-Roman figurines made of Egyptian fabrics in the Cairo Museum, 98 Greek figurines of local Attic, and possibly Aeginetan, fabrics from the Athenian Agora, and 50 figurines with non-Egyptianizing imagery from several different contexts at Delos that include coroplastic workshops, graves, houses, and two Sarapeia. Her study was limited to only macroscopic visual examination and she had to work under a time restraint of 15-20 minutes for each of 33 pieces she was allowed to examine outside of the exhibition cases in Cairo. Notwithstanding these constraints, Barrett's systematic observations concerning color, voids, inclusions, and so on provide a valuable baseline for identifying local Delian and imported Egyptian fabrics among the terracottas found at Delos. Perhaps the study may one day be refined by petrographic, chemical, and other archaeometric analyses. The results of the study of fabrics suggest that at least 65 of the 82 Egyptianizing figurines and vases were made locally at Delos, 4 may have been made of Attic clay, and of another 10 that were imported to Delos, 3 were made of Nile clays and thus came from Egypt. In short, the majority of the Egyptianizing terracottas were made locally at Delos.

Barrett pays careful attention to the techniques employed in the manufacture of the Egyptianizing figurines from Delos and the three control groups she uses for comparison of fabrics. She refers to the composite of choices made by a craftsman in the production of a figurine as "technological style" and observes that the figurines produced in Egypt are distinct from those produced at Athens and Delos. The Egyptian coroplasts were more concerned with producing large numbers of figurines rapidly while the Athenian and Delian coroplasts paid more attention to the aesthetic appearance of their products – a point that she hammers home repeatedly throughout her discussion of manufacturing techniques. Her concern here (p. 92) is to determine whether or not Egyptian coroplasts created the Egyptianizing figurines manufactured at Delos. Epigraphic evidence, for instance, attests to the presence of Egyptian-born individuals living and dying at Delos. A straightforward equation between "technological style" and "national origin" is, I would suggest, too simplistic. The study of manufacturing practices reflects the workshop traditions in

which a craftsman was trained and may not reflect his ethnic or national origin. An Egyptian immigrant to Delos may have indeed been among the artisans who produced terracotta figurines, but he would more likely follow the technological processes of the workshop (Athenian, Delian, or Egyptian) where he learned his craft. Many speculative scenarios could certainly be written on this complicated question. Somewhat sharper clarification would benefit discussion of these matters. What Barrett's important analysis of technical procedures illustrates is not so much the absence of Egyptian-born coroplasts working on Delos, as the absence of Egyptian coroplastic procedures being followed in the terracotta workshops on the island, regardless of the ethnic origin of the workers employed in the various stages of manufacture of figurines.

Having established that most of the Egyptianizing terracottas from Delos were made locally using Greek rather than Egyptian manufacturing practices, Barrett shifts focus to an analysis of the iconography of the figurines and plastic vases. She sees festivals celebrating the Inundation of the Nile and the associated New Year reflected in the imagery of most of the terracottas. More than half of the figurines portray Isis, females in Isiac dress, and the so-called "Oriental Aphrodite." Barrett interprets them as references to the returning solar eye goddess who is closely associated with the Inundation festival. Possible portraits of Ptolemaic queens, Harpocrates, and Sothic Dogs are likewise linked to religious concepts related to the returning solar goddess and the Inundation of the Nile. Barrett suggests that terracottas presenting explicit sexual imagery, such as an ithyphallic Harpokrates and the so-called "Baubo," are allusions to the sexual union, or *hieros gamos*, of the returning solar goddess and her consort, a subject that a figurine of a male and female pair with cornucopiae may similarly evoke. The several figurines portraying Harpocrates, whose rebirth results from the *hieros gamos* at the time of the Inundation, may also be related to such celebrations. Barrett views the dozen terracotta images of Nubians as yet another reference to the returning solar goddess who, as she makes her return from the south, is accompanied by an entourage from Nubia. Figurines of Bes and the dwarfish Ptah-Pataikos may likewise belong to the retinue of the returning solar goddess and reflect the theme of the birth of the solar child from the *hieros gamos*. A handful of figurines and plastic vases may point toward rites involving liquid offerings of wine and water, and even perfumed oil.

Of special interest as an illustration of cross-cultural translation of imagery and themes are two identical figurines unique to the coroplastic production at Delos. The designer of the figurines transformed a herm (with its characteristic phallus) that represents the Greek god Hermes and his *kerykeion* into a representation of the Egyptian god Thoth. The craftsman did this

by placing the double crown of Egypt onto the bearded head of the herm. Thus, instead of representing Thoth in the guise of a baboon or ibis, as was common in Egypt, the coroplast translated the concepts of the Egyptian god's clever personality into terms that would be more intelligible to a Hellenized audience at Delos.

Barrett, in effect, ties most of the Egyptianizing iconography of the terracottas to festivals celebrating the Inundation of the Nile and New Year, packaging the diverse imagery presented by the figurines and plastic vases into a neatly wrapped bundle with few loose ends. The actual stories embodied in the imagery of the terracottas may well have been more complex and open ended, as is normally the case with any telling and retelling of a story – be it verbally or visually – that seeks to narrate religious concepts. Nonetheless, Barrett's discussion ranges widely, presenting a wealth of fascinating textual, epigraphic, and architectural information on Egyptian religion for the non-specialist. Of particular interest for interpreting the imagery of the terracottas and the observation of Egyptian rites at Delos, are the lines in Callimachos' *Hymn to Delos* (206-208) stating that the Inopus River on Delos experiences its deepest flood at the same time as the Nile. Moreover, water installations in the Sarapeia at Delos imitate Nilometers in Egyptian temples and the water of the Inopus River was explicitly (and apparently illegally) brought into Sarapeion A for cultic use. Thus, the Inundation of the Nile was most certainly a central concept of religious practice at Delos. In addition, Barrett observes that the imagery of the terracottas reflects predominately Alexandrian and Memphite influences from Lower Egypt. This accords well with epigraphic evidence that describes individuals leaving Alexandria and other sites in Lower Egypt to settle at Delos and is especially significant in light of the important Sarapeion A Chronicle that states that the priest, who first brought Egyptian cults to Delos in the early third century BCE, came from Memphis.

The imagery of the terracottas does indeed then suggest that the craftsmen who fashioned the figurines and plastic vases at Delos possessed a detailed knowledge of religious practices and beliefs associated with Lower Egypt. This would presumably hold true also for consumers of these terracottas who provided the market for production of these figurines on the island. In order to explore this question, the contexts in which the terracottas were found must be examined in order to understand better the intentions of the consumers in their various uses of these mass-produced, affordable objects that convey such a rich set of religious concepts.

By careful sleuthing through excavation archives and publications, Barrett identifies a context for 46, or roughly half, of the terracottas. Of these, 24 were found in several different residential areas of Delos, but only 10 may be assigned to a specific house, and of these only 4 to a specific area of a given house: that

is, the *oculus maior*, an interior courtyard, a room with fragments of marble statues, and a room with evidence for burning. Although the hope is that archeological context might shed light on the intended function of a figurine as well as the social and economic status, or even the ethnic or national origin, of the individual(s) who purchased and used the figurine, there is not sufficient data for such specificity. This is even the case for a figurine found in the large, well-appointed House of the Herm that Barrett sees as portraying the divine couple Agathe Tyche and Agathos Daimon. Barrett concedes that although epigraphic and other evidence, such as paintings associated with the cult of the Lares Compitales, indicate that the owners of the house were Italian, a slave or freedman of unknown national origin may have owned the Egyptianizing figurine. Nevertheless, epigraphic evidence does suggest that at least one member of the household was associated with the Paconii *gens*. Several other members of the Paconii family are moreover listed in an inscription from Sarapeion C. Thus, it is tempting to envision the inhabitants of the House of the Herm as practicing Italian rituals while accommodating some degree of interest in Egyptian cult.

In trying to assess the evidence of the Egyptianizing figurines for the domestic practice of cult at Delos, Barrett suggests that the figurines may have been used in domestic shrines similar to those attested textually and archaeologically in Egypt. In light of the frequent presence of shrines to the Lares Compitales in houses at Delos, it is worth recalling the presence of statuettes of Egyptian deities among the traditional Roman figurines placed in domestic *lararia* at Pompeii, as Barrett points out (p. 346, n. 1400). In other words, the presence of statuettes portraying Egyptian religious subjects appears to be equally at home in Italian households as Egyptian. In the mixed international community at Delos, the Egyptianizing figurines do not then point to private domestic rituals of a single ethnic group.

Private ritual is again reflected in the presence of two figurines of an ithyphallic Harpocrates in a single or possibly two separate graves on Rheneia. The burial may have been of a child, but the archaeological records are so muddled, little can be said with certainty about the performance of burial rites, much less the purpose and intentionality of the placement of these figurines in such a funerary context. It is of interest however that both figurines appear to be made of Nile clay fabrics and are thus among the very few terracottas that were imported to Delos from Egypt.

Turning to the use of figurines at public sanctuaries at Delos, it is striking that no figurine with Egyptianizing imagery was found at the Egyptian Sarapeia, where figurines portraying women, children, Aphrodite, and Eros instead comprise the most commonly selected subjects among the votive terracottas. On occasion, Egyptianizing figurines were however dedicated at sanctuaries where Greek deities presided. A single Egyptianizing

figurine was found at small chapel of Dionysos and another at a shrine to the local hero Anios, while four terracottas come from the island's famed sanctuary of Apollo. At the sanctuary of the Kabeiroi there seems to be evidence for a conscious choice of subject matter on the part of the person leaving a terracotta as an offering. Of the 4 Egyptianizing terracottas from the Kabirion, 3 portray the dwarf gods Bes and Ptah-Pataikos. Herodotus (3.37) equates Pataikos with the Kabeiroi. Since the Kabeiroi resemble dwarfs, the syncretism between the gods makes sense. The apparent compatibility between (1) the dedication of figurines recalling Egyptian religious beliefs and practices and those reflecting Greek traditions in the non-Egyptian sanctuaries and (2) the dedication of figurines portraying Greek deities at Egyptian sanctuaries signals the coexistence of multiple cultural traditions with regard to the votive use of terracotta figurines on the island.

Circling back to the production of the figurines, a similar integration in the fashioning of different religious images is witnessed in the contexts of local Delian workshops. Excavations at a coroplastic workshop in the Theater Quarter recovered 13 figurines and a mold among which 2 figurines present Egyptianizing imagery, while excavations at a workshop in the Agora of the Italians recovered 3 figurines with Egyptianizing subjects among a total of at least 59 terracottas. The presence of Egyptianizing figurines at two workshops, that more frequently fashioned figurines with conventional Greek imagery, underscores the cosmopolitan nature of terracotta production at this Aegean trade center.

It is worth emphasizing in this discussion that Delos has produced more inscriptions linked to Egyptian cult than any other Greek city. The same holds true of terracottas. Although the 82 figurines and plastic vases represent only 5% of the published corpus of terracottas from the island, they constitute the largest assemblage of Egyptianizing figurines yet documented outside of Egypt. As such, the terracottas, coming primarily from residential contexts, hold great promise for exploring fascinating questions of diversity in the practice of domestic rites based on ethnic identity as well as social, political, and economic status among the different nationalities who lived at this thriving Hellenistic entrepôt. This is one of the expressed aims of Barrett's ambitious monograph that still carries a few trappings of its origin as a Ph.D. dissertation. A more careful editorial eye by the press would have easily alleviated many minor, careless errors, such as neglecting to include in the bibliography works cited in the notes (for instance, Bettinetti 2001 and Nick 2003 in n. 967) or, more importantly, it could have curtailed a penchant for excessive repetition of words, statements, contents of footnotes, and so on that weighs down and unnecessarily lengthens the text.

In light of Barrett's praiseworthy attention to fabric, techniques of manufacture and archaeological context, it is perplexing why she sets up as a kind of "straw man" on more than one occasion a slim volume, heavily illustrated by figurines that do not come from a properly controlled archaeological excavation, that was written 40 years ago as an introduction to classical terracottas by James Chesterman, an amateur collector of figurines. She would have been better served, especially in light of her own focus on domestic contexts of the Delian terracottas, to consult more current scholarly publications, such as Frank Rumscheid, *Die figürlichen Terrakotten von Priene: Fundkontexte, Ikonographie und Funktion in Wohnhäusern und Heiligtümern in Licht antiker Parallelbefunde* (Reichert: Wiesbaden, 2006), an impressively detailed study of the Hellenistic terracottas from Priene that similarly focuses on terracottas found in excavated domestic contexts. His introductory survey of figurines from houses at 39 sites, ranging from Seleucia on the Tigris to Sicilian Iatos and Italian Pompeii, may likewise point to other useful comparative material for Delos from the larger Hellenistic world.

Such suggestions should not however detract from the admirable, painstaking research that Barrett has conducted under frequently challenging conditions. Her monograph makes a highly commendable contribution to coroplastic studies, demonstrating how the Egyptianizing terracottas, a hitherto underutilized source of information about personal belief and ritual, may advance our knowledge of the practice of Egyptian religion on Delos. Barrett's focus on the terracottas as a lens for discerning diversity in the construction of identity in the practice of domestic cult among the ethnically mixed inhabitants – Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Jews, and Italians – at Delos has not led, in most cases, to the fine-grained distinctions that she may have been envisioned at the outset of her study. This is not for any want of thorough and exhausting analysis on Barrett's part. It is simply due to limitations of the material itself and to the impossibility of reconstructing in sufficient detail the original contexts of the terracottas. Barrett's investigation has nevertheless advanced considerably our appreciation of these complex issues. She has shown that, even were there additional data from textual sources, inscriptions, figurines, architecture, and archaeological analysis of stratigraphic contexts, the terracottas would probably continue to tell the same intriguing story. In short, at Hellenistic Delos, producers and consumers of the Egyptianizing terracottas were able to navigate skillfully a route that intersected multiple cultural and social identities – identities that were defined by shifting boundaries that were perhaps more fluid and permeable than modern scholars might imagine.

Notes

- ¹ A. Laumonier, *Exploration archéologique de Délos 23. Les figurines de terre cuite* (Paris: de Boccard, 1956); Bovon, A. “Les figurines,” in P. Bruneau *et al.* (eds.), *L’îlot de la Maison des Comédiens* (Paris: de Boccard, 1970), 209-218; P. Hatzidakis, “Ειδωλιόμορφα σκεύη από τη Δήλο,” in S.

Drougou *et al.* (eds.), *Στ’ Επιστημονική Συνάντηση για την Ελληνιστική* (Athens: 2004) 367-392.

- ² P. Hatzidakis, *Delos* (Athens: Eurobank- Latsis Group, 2003) 258, 270, 271, 438 nos. 392, 395, 439, figs. 392, 395, 439.
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