

Moulding Expressions of Culture: The Terracotta Figurines from the House of Orpheus, Nea Paphos

Principal Investigator: Demetrios Michaelides, Professor, Department of History and Archaeology, Faculty of Letters, University of Cyprus

Research Associates: Giorgos Papantoniou and Maria Dikomitou-Eliadou, Department of History and Archaeology, Archaeological Unit, Faculty of Letters, University of Cyprus

Abstract

The multifaceted significance of Cypriot terracottas has been acknowledged by the large corpus of published data, which addresses a series of interlinked issues, related to their typological, stylistic and chronological classification, the technology and techniques employed in their manufacture, their provenance, the mode of their production, the scale of their distribution, and their role as cultural artefacts in differing social contexts. However, despite the substantial studies on earlier Cypriot terracotta figurines, the Hellenistic and Roman material remains – with very few exemptions – highly neglected, and outside recent theoretical and scientific developments.

The terracotta figurines from the House of Orpheus in Nea Paphos, excavated by the Cypriot Department of Antiquities between 1982-1992 and by the University of Cyprus since 2010, form part of a significant material assemblage that spans in time from the Hellenistic to the Roman periods. These high-quality terracotta figurines fall within the mainstream of Cypriot art and its associated ancient technological and cultural systems. This project, bringing together scholars from different backgrounds, aimed at a systematic and holistic assessment of this assemblage. Stylistic, analytical and theoretical methods of study were employed, tackling the aforementioned issues for these later periods of Cypriot Antiquity. Additionally, through comparative studies with other Cypriot and Mediterranean sites, the project examined continuing and changing patterns of production, distribution and function of Cypriot terracottas, as a result of the interplay between local structures and incoming Ptolemaic and Roman socio-political and socio-cultural impositions.

More specifically, the project undertook: 1. a typological, stylistic and iconographic analysis of the figurines; 2. their compositional study focusing on fabrics, slips and pigments; 3. a systematic attempt to interpret the analytical data addressing issues related to chronology, technology of manufacture, provenance and distribution; 4. the study of the inscriptions incised on some of the figurines; 5. the contextualisation of the figurines within their individual depositional intra-site context, as well as their broader socio-cultural and socio-political Cypriot and Mediterranean contexts; and 6. the reconstruction and visualisation of specific fragmented specimens in their anticipated full shape and colour. The implementation of this project was achieved using a range of multidisciplinary approaches and methods, such as traditional examinations of style, statistics, social theory, chemical analyses, and drawing software.