

The Tanagra Figurines: Origins and Meaning

The elegant terracottas known as the Tanagra figurines are some of the most ubiquitous objects in the Hellenistic world. The Tanagras differ from Archaic and Classical terracottas in both manufacturing technique and subject matter. They were made using a double mold, which allowed for a high level of detail on both the front and the back of the figurine, and the majority depict draped human women or girls instead of the deities popular in earlier periods. Although they are named for the town in Boeotia in which they were first discovered in an Early Hellenistic cemetery, figurines and molds in the style of the Boeotian Tanagras have been found in places as far apart as Italy, Egypt, Asia Minor, and modern-day Kuwait.

This paper will focus on two major aspects of these popular works of art. After a brief overview of the Boeotian Tanagras and their find contexts, I will address the question of the origins of the Tanagra style. Although Athens has been widely accepted as the place of origin for the Tanagras since the mid-twentieth century (see Thompson 1966, Higgins 1967, Uhlenbrock 1990, Bell 1993), very few examples from a demonstrably mid-fourth century context have been recovered from the city. Arguments based on technological innovations in coroplasty or stylistic comparisons to images of women in other media also fail to establish Athens as a definitive place of origin. In fact, Boeotia itself had a rich terra cotta tradition, and many Boeotian centers experienced a period of heightened wealth and power after Alexander's destruction of Thebes after 335 BCE (Aravantinos 2010). I argue that Boeotia itself should not be ruled out as a probable birthplace for the Tanagra style and that other cities in mainland Greece besides Athens could be vital centers of artistic innovation in the Hellenistic period. The Tanagras are also valuable sources of visual information about Hellenistic women, and I will explore what they may convey about female experience and ideals of femininity in the

Hellenistic period, especially in regards to clothing and adornment. These figurines depict articles of women's clothing, such as the sunhat (*tholia*) and face-veil (*tegidion*), which are described in literary and epigraphic sources but are often absent from large-scale Hellenistic female portrait statues. The Tanagras therefore can provide insight into the dissemination of these fashions throughout the Hellenistic world.

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