

Portable Religion in Corinth: The Aesthetics and Function of Miniature Altars

Ranging in size between a coffee mug and a shoebox, the terracotta miniature altar forms a distinctive element of religious paraphernalia, particularly in domestic contexts. Despite literary implications for the presence of built altars in household courtyards, such altars are rare in the archaeological record. In comparison, miniature altars are relatively common objects, having been excavated at several sites across the Greek world, and found in abundance at Ancient Corinth in both public and private contexts. The excavated areas of the city have produced a total of 112 examples, not including the bench altars of the stele shrines in the Potter's Quarter (Williams 1981). However, these altars have received limited consideration in archaeological publications; Oscar Broneer devotes the most attention to the altars excavated before 1950 in two articles (Broneer 1947 and 1950), a few have been published in excavation volumes (Stillwell 1952 and Davidson 1952), and Charles Williams dedicates four pages to the altars in his report on the 1978 excavation season (Williams 1979). Corinth is an important locale for the study of miniature altars, not in small part because most found at the site were manufactured locally. Their appearance imitates monumental altar forms with architectural moldings; few have figural imagery, with the exception of several altars that bear a relief of a man riding a horse, apparently all from similar, if not the same, molds. A similar altar with a horse and rider in relief was found on the South Hill at Olynthus (Robinson 1931, no. 339, Pl. 33-34). The first aim of this paper is to establish a typology of miniature altars from Corinth and evaluate their connections to certain local cults as well as the production of altars from elsewhere in the Greek world.

Building on this typology, the second aim of this paper is to examine the role of miniature altars in religious practice at Corinth, comparing the altars from contexts near the Temple of Apollo with those associated with Classical Buildings I-IV under the South Stoa in the area of the later Roman forum. Informed by recent studies of miniature vessels (ex. Pemberton 2020), this paper argues that miniature altars played a special role in domestic religious ritual. Their diminutive scale allowed for their users to move them about as needed, in accordance with the prevailing value placed on the flexibility of domestic space (Jameson 1990). In keeping with this flexibility, sacred space in the house, like the women's quarters (the *gynaikonitis*), has been shown to be defined by behaviors rather than physical markers (Morgan 2007). Used for liquid, vegetal, and burnt offerings, the miniature altar served as an attention-focusing device for the behaviors involved in domestic ritual, providing a vehicle for the offering as well as acting as an aniconic sign for the divine. The altars are also often found in multiples along with other ritual paraphernalia. For instance, a sealed deposit of fourth century BCE domestic debris from Building IV contained seven miniature altars, an incense burner, and over seventy-three miniature vessels. By examining the find assemblages, imagery, and scale of these altars, a picture of domestic religion emerges that illuminates how ritual space was established materially within the house, leading to reconsiderations of how sacred space is defined both at home and in the Greek world at large.

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