

What if God Was One of Us: Old Fishermen, Elderly Market Women, and *Xenia*

Sculptures of the elderly—such as the famous Old Fisherman, Old Market Woman, and Drunken Old Woman—proliferated in the Hellenistic period and are notable for their honest and sensitive treatment of advanced age. Variouslly interpreted as theatrical characters, aged *hetairai*, elderly followers of Bacchus, or genre figures, these statue types are typically seen as reflective of the Hellenistic interest in depicting non-noble types and those from the fringes of society.

In this paper, I propose an alternative reading of these subjects. Using literary evidence and analysis of the statues themselves, I suggest that these sculptures represent gods in disguise. Classical literature is rife with examples of gods and heroes appearing as elderly people, beggars, and/or peasants to interact with humans. From the *Iliad* to the Homeric Hymn of Demeter to Ovid's tales of Lycaon or Baucis and Philemon, the gods use these guises both to interfere with human affairs and to test adherence to *xenia*, the Greek bond of guest-friendship. Further, these statues of elderly figures all bear some type of food or drink, reflecting another meaning of *xenia* given by Vitruvius: representations of the delicacies provided to guests (cf. Vitr. De arch. VI.7.4). These sculptures perhaps reminded their audience that the gods could be anywhere, reinforcing the importance of *xenia* and serving as signifiers of culture and civilization, whether in a Greek or Roman context.