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The Goddess of Morgantina: Aphrodite or Demeter?

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The Goddess of Morgantina: Aphrodite or Demeter?

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ARTH 495: Topics in Greek Sculpture

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Introduction

The story of *The Goddess of Morgantina* (fig.1) is one of the most significant scandals linked to the illicit trafficking of historical artifacts on Italian soil. The statue excavated and illegally extracted near Morgantina, Sicily, is still shrouded in mystery because illicit excavations have increased the unresolved questions about the depiction of the goddess and its use of her. *The Goddess of Morgantina* is an acrolithic sculpture made with two types of stone material: the body is carved in limestone. At the same time, the head, and the limbs, carried over, are worked in fine Greek marble, presumably Parian¹. Despite the lack of the top of the head, arm, and left foot, the sculpture proved to be an authentic masterpiece of classical art. *The Goddess of Morgantina* has been undoubtedly declared as a Greek original of refined artistry and impressive dynamism, datable between the end of the fifth and the beginning of the fourth century BC. Academic discussions regarding the theories on the use and identity of women depicted as *The Goddess of Morgantina* have been broad and contrary². One of the main reasons why the statue is difficult to identify is that scholars often require context and provenience to help interpret a work of art. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, scholars started to identify the statue mainly as an Aphrodite or a Demeter. In my opinion, *The Goddess of Morgantina* depicts a Demeter, not Aphrodite, because of the mature physique of the statue, the matronhood, and the importance of Demeter's cult in Sicily, which plays an essential part in the identification.

The history behind the excavations: is the Goddess of Morgantina from Morgantina?

The statue was stolen from Morgantina in the second half of the twentieth century. It was firstly found in the San Francesco Bisconti district and then sold to the Paul Getty Museum, which

¹ Greco, Caterina. "Demetra a Morgantina." *Demetra a Morgantina* (2017): 157-177.

² Flavia, Zisa. "Art without Context: The 'Morgantina Goddess,' a Classical Cult Statue from Sicily between Old and New Mythology." *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art* 7 (2017):173.

bought it in 1988 and exhibited it in its rooms as one of the most important finds³. Because of this, art historians and archaeologists tried to reconstruct puzzles about *The Goddess of Morgantina* in another way: they looked at other statuary depictions of Greek goddesses made in the same period as *The Goddess of Morgantina*.

The scandal and interest linked to the statue *The Goddess of Morgantina* began when the State Police and the Carabinieri investigations began investigating the statue and the illicit excavation that took place. This happened following the revelation of Thomas Hoving, former director of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. He, over time, became the relentless accuser of all the great foreign museums in their approach to the ancient art market. Without indicating the source of his information, which he guaranteed reliable, Hoving declared that the cult statue recently acquired by Paul Getty came from an abusive and recent excavation at Morgantina. The statue's discovery is still shrouded in mystery, as is the phase of its export to Switzerland, where it appeared out of nowhere in 1986 in the hands of a strange character, a modest Lugano shopkeeper. A collector named Renzo Canavesi, who sold it for 400 thousand dollars to the English merchant Robin Symes who packed it in two boxes and moved it to his antique shop in London⁴. After unsuccessful attempts to place it in the most famous American art galleries, Symes offered it to the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. The import into Malibu took place on December 15, 1987⁵. The purchase was completed on July 25, 1988, after the Italian Ministry had assured the Museum of Cultural Heritage that the statue had not been stolen during illicit excavations from Italy. At the time of the exhibition, preceded by careful restoration to put the eighty-seven fragments back together, the then head of antiquities at the Getty Museum, Marion True, attributed the masterpiece

³ Modeo, Simona, and Serena Raffiotta. "Ladri di antichità." *Il mercato clandestino di reperti archeologici e di opere d'arte in Sicilia: traffici illeciti e leciti recuperi* (2020). 70

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

to an unknown Magna Graecia artist of the late 5th century BC. She admitted that the provenance was ignored, except for the collector who had sold it to Symes. The Getty paid \$18 million for *The Goddess of Morgantina*, at the time, the largest sum paid for a classical work of art in history. The recovery and re-contextualization of the statue constitute one of the greatest successes of the Italian Ministry of Culture⁶. The Getty Museum marked an irreversible turning point in Italian policy regarding purchasing cultural assets from foreign museums.

Knowing the history behind the illicit excavations in Morgantina made scholars realize that there would have been a significant problem in understanding the depiction of the goddess and its use of her. One findspot has been proposed for the goddess, the Sanctuary of San Francesco Bisconti, north of the Sierra Orlando and the walls of Morgantina⁷. The discovery of the monumental sanctuary happened by chance in 1977. The authorities have discovered secret excavations so deep and invasive that they revealed several well-preserved tall wall structures. The isolation of the San Francesco Bisconti district and its constant distance from the more closely monitored areas of the Hellenistic agora of Morgantina indicate the recent fate of the area long before it became the favorite target of tomb thieves.⁸ The first official excavations took place at the end of the 19th century and were resumed by the American Archaeological Mission in the 1960s. One of the essential places found following the excavations carried out in the Morgantina site is "the central sanctuary," which was devoted to the cult of Demeter and Persephone. The analytical study of the figured terracottas has considerably increased the knowledge of the sanctuary, confirming its consecration to Demeter and Persephone⁹. The Sanctuary is a complex

⁶ Greco, Caterina. "Demetra a Morgantina." *Demetra a Morgantina* (2017): 160

⁷ Raffiotta, Serena. "Spazi del sacro a Morgantina. Il santuario di San Francesco Bisconti" *Morgantina duemilaquindici. La ricerca archeologica a sessant'anni dall'avvio degli scavi* (2015): 45.

⁸ Bell III, Malcolm, and R. Ross Holloway. "Excavations at Morgantina, 1980–1985: preliminary report XII." *American journal of Archaeology* 92, no. 3 (1988): 333.

⁹ Raffiotta, Serena. "Spazi del sacro a Morgantina. Il santuario di San Francesco Bisconti" *Morgantina duemilaquindici. La ricerca archeologica a sessant'anni dall'avvio degli scavi* (2015): 48.

with a double courtyard located in the center of the agora. The sanctuary was dedicated to the chthonic deities of the soil and the nursing earth. The most common chthonic deities among the Greeks were Hades, Demeter, and Persephone, also called Kore. The building comprises two almost identical parts, each with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms. The southern part contains various religious elements in the courtyard: two large circular altars, one underground and the other raised; a *naiskos* or small temple with a base for a statue; two opposing porticoes, whose columns were perhaps made of wood, as they are now lost.¹⁰

Another statuary group, *the acroliths of Morgantina* (fig.2) is fundamental to broaden the contextualization of *The Goddess of Morgantina*. The acroliths could have been created at the sanctuary's foundation¹¹. Based on the archaeological site's evidence, they would have been an appropriate dedication for what it appears today. The sanctuary was one of Demeter and Persephone's main places of worship in Sicily. It is important to underline that in Greek civilization and religiosity, the sacred had numerous aspects. Sculptures often had to be recomposed and not broken down to maintain an overview or recover a unitary picture.¹² It doesn't seem just a coincidence that the acrolithic technique was mainly applied to cult statuary. At some point, this relatively minor statuary must have inspired or influenced the greater one. For this reason, the rise of acroliths productions happened. An acrolith is a sculpture of several elements, and different materials joined together. With the acroliths of Morgantina, it is possible to face the intention to emulate in a less expensive material the prestigious dedications in gold and ivory in the sanctuaries of the Archaic period¹³. Not surviving except through copies reduced and thanks to admiring

¹⁰ Raffiotta, Serena. "Spazi del sacro a Morgantina. Il santuario di San Francesco Bisconti" *Morgantina duemilaquindici. La ricerca archeologica a sessant'anni dall'avvio degli scavi* (2015). 46

¹¹ Marconi, Clemente. "Gli acroliti da Morgantina." *Prospettiva: rivista di storia dell'arte antica e moderna* 130 (2008): 14.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. 13.

descriptions, the most famous example is the chryso-elephantine statue of the goddess Athena performed by Phidias for the Athenian temple of the Parthenon. Athena Parthenos was sculpted in 438 BC. C., the masterpiece could soon become a model for similar works.

The analysis of *the acroliths of Morgantina* it is deeply connected to the analysis of *the Goddess of Morgantina* because the statues were used with the same purpose inside the sanctuary. For this reason, this analysis helped scholars to understand the location and, in part, the use of *the Goddess of Morgantina*. Moreover, the analysis of these two statues identified the period when the Sanctuary was frequented, and it proposes its interpretation as *thesmophóron*¹⁴. If archeologists had obtained these artifacts in situ, their context would have been more clearly defined. *The acroliths of Morgantina* were found as broken fragments, including two heads, hands, and feet, carved in marble from the island of Thasos. They belong to two statues slightly more giant than life-size, depicting two seated goddesses, side by side, identifiable with Demeter and Persephone¹⁵. Scholars attributed the identification with Demeter and Persephone to these two statues because the demetriad cult was widely spread in Sicily. The oldest has been identified in San Francesco Bisconti. The shrines housed offerings to the deities, such as votive statuettes, small everyday objects linked to the celebration of rites, and the simulacra of goddesses, sometimes even large ones. The statues of which the exposed fragments remain were made in the acrolithic technique, with the ends (heads, hands, and feet) made of marble and grafted onto a wooden body covered with fabrics. *The Acroliths of Morgantina*, datable to around 530 BC, constitute the oldest known example of this technique. However, they represent one of the finest examples of Greek sculpture of insular influence.

¹⁴ Greco, Caterina. "Il thesmophorion in contrada San Francesco Bisconti a Morgantina (Scavi e ricerche 2002-2004)." *La dea di Morgantina* (2008): 10.

¹⁵ Marconi, Clemente. "Gli acroliti da Morgantina." *Prospettiva: rivista di storia dell'arte antica e moderna* 130 (2008): 14.

The Goddess of Morgantina: Maybe an Aphrodite

Angelos Delivorrias most insisted on the iconographic models depicting female divinities and the "ambivalence" of Aphrodite¹⁶. Despite this, the differences that can be noted are vast if we look at Aphrodite's statues in the same historical period as *the Goddess of Morgantina*. The goddess was mostly depicted with the recurring attributes of sensuality, bare breasts, and soft lines. Aphrodite was never portrayed as advancing in a tumultuous and almost desperate way toward the spectator. The dense chiaroscuro play of the drapery and the "transparent" subtlety of the dress are the attributes that made scholars think that it was Aphrodite. Another association that made scholars think the statue depicted Aphrodite were the similarities in style, posture, and drapery, with the statue Aphrodite from Athens Agora (fig. 5). Neither Aphrodite nor *the Goddess of Morgantina* runs. Both goddesses present themselves with one foot standing while the other is on the side, and in both sculptures, the bodies are not walking. For posture and general schema, the Morgantina's statue recalls Athens Agora's Aphrodite (fig.5). Despite this, the overbearing physicality and the accentuated matronal character of the character do not suit the canonical iconography of the goddess of beauty. Considering the same historical and cultural period, Aphrodite was portrayed as a sensual human figure. The *Aphrodite of Knidos* (fig.3) and *Terracotta statuette of Aphrodite and Eros* (fig.4) are great examples of Greek and Sicilian statuary that represents the sensuality of the goddess. Many times, Aphrodite was depicted in a way that was showing at least one part of her breast. The indication of the décolletage was characteristic of statues of Aphrodite produced in the last quarter of the fifth century.

The archaeologist and art historian Antonio Giuliano raised the question regarding the identity of the Goddess of Morgantina. Giuliano recognized that the statue depicted Demeter when

¹⁶ Delivorrias, Angelos. "Problèmes de conséquence méthodologique et ambiguïté iconographique." *Mélanges de l'école française de Rome* 103, no. 1 (1991): 130

it was exhibited at the Getty Museum¹⁷. The divinity was highly venerated in Sicily and especially in the Enna district. Due to that, the theme of identifying the splendid sculpture has undoubtedly made it one of the most extraordinary originals of all-around Greek statuary from the end of the fifth century BC¹⁸. This question continues to raise debates in the ranks of specialists, from time to time making it appear for Aphrodite (Delivorrias), and Demeter (Giuliano, Greco). Some scholars like Claudio Marconi also identified the goddess as a Persephone/Kore¹⁹.

The Demeter of Morgantina

The physicality and the matron-like visage speak against the identification with Aphrodite. The statue of the goddess lacks the overwhelming sensuality, which in Attic sculpture identifies the goddess of love. The goddess was depicted with the “chiton” slipped on her right shoulder to reveal her breasts, another symbol of sensuality²⁰. On the other side, Demeter was a goddess that was mostly depicted with both breasts covered by a “chiton” as it is possible see from the Demeter of Knidos (fig.7). One of the question marks that caused many scholars to debate was the fact that the distinction between Persephone and Demeter was not clear enough. In fact, the “chiton” is not enough to distinguish the daughter Persephone from her mother Demeter²¹.

The crucial point on the depiction of *the Goddess of Morgantina* largely depends on the image of the goddess advancing "tumultuous" and regal in space, charged with gloomy drama. It is therefore probable that the moment represented was the one in which Demeter throws herself in

¹⁷ Giuliano, A. 1993. "Signum Cereris." *Rendiconti. Accademia nazionale dei Lincei* 4: 50.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Marconi, Clemente. "Acrolithic and Pseudo-acrolithic Sculpture in Archaic and Classical Greece and the Provenance of the Getty Goddess." *Cult Statue of a Goddess Summary of Proceedings from a Workshop*, (2007): 10

²⁰ Flavia, Zisa. "Art without Context: The 'Morgantina Goddess', a Classical Cult Statue from Sicily between Old and New Mythology." *Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art* 7 (2017): 176

²¹ Ibid.

desperation in search of her daughter, holding torches²²: a scene figuratively described in the Homeric hymn and later frequently reproduced in the Italic ceramography under the suggestion of the Athenian tragedy²³. The episode is reflected in the unstable weighting of the figure which, especially in the lateral and posterior views, suggests the movement expressed by the treatment of the garments. There are precise stylistic echoes in the Nikai reproduced on the balustrade of the Athenian temple of Athena Nike built around 410 BC. The Sicilian sculptural tradition has in common the dramatized drapery, the curvilinear and flamboyant performance of the folds, the effect of transparency on the bare the impetus of the movement that animates the whole composition. Another example of Sicilian sculpture that refers to the representation of *The Goddess of Morgantina* is the *Statuette of Demeter* (fig. 6). As seen from the figurine, the position of the goddess coincides with that of the acrolithic statue. Another aspect that unites the two sculptures is the position of the arm of the goddess, which appears to be inclined forward.

One of the most relevant things that made me realize that the Goddess of Morgantina is not depicting an Aphrodite is the close relationship between Morgantina, the Demetriad cult and the presence of Mount Aetna. The cult of Demeter has always been one of the largest in the Sicilian area. The geographical position of Morgantina is in the center of the Sicilian hinterland (fig. 8), which made me understand that Morgantina was strongly subjected to the cult of Demeter. Another prominent factor is the presence of the Molcano Etna, an active volcano, located less than a hundred kilometers from the current archaeological site of Morgantina. Mount Etna has been one of the most active volcanos in the Mediterranean area. Civilizations believed that chthonic gods lived where the Etna volcano was located. As Thucydides reports in the *History of Peloponnesian*

²² Greco, Caterina. "Demetra a Morgantina." *Demetra a Morgantina* (2017): 170

²³Ibid. 160.

War the volcano erupted in 475 BC and 425 BC²⁴, destroying the Sicilian land in both times. It is therefore probable that in Morgantina the cult of Demeter increased to ensure that the notorious events did not happen again. For this reason, in my opinion the connection between the Etna volcano, the cult of Demeter and the Goddess of Morgantina has determined the recognition of the statue as Demeter of Morgantina.

Sicily has been described by roman age writers Ovid and Cicero many times. Cicero greatly emphasizes the Sanctuary of Enna, where Demeter "was born and discovered cereals." During the archaic age, this situation is attributable to the very character of the cult, often oriented towards female entities with poorly defined boundaries and elusive to any univocal classification²⁵. On the contrary, in the classical age, scholars were able to count on a more precise definition of the profile and skills of each divine entity was hindered by the markedly repetitive nature of the votive objects, especially small-sized coroplastic, rarely accompanied by plant attributes. Some small metopes from Selinunte represent the first testimony that can be involved in the discussion, conventionally referred to as the metope of the "three goddesses," which represents two standing divinities facing a third.²⁶ Already in the Odyssey, Sicily is indicated as such a fertile land where without sewing or plowing, "everything is born, wheat, barley"²⁷. However, Demeter is the divinity of the cultivated land, as opposed to the wild or simply fertile land. Diodorus Siculus recalls how "the island is sacred to Demeter and Core" because here, mother and daughter would have made "their first appearance" and would have given its inhabitants "the fruit of wheat"²⁸. The link between the goddess and cereal culture is evident, but it would be minimal to interpret her as a simple protector

²⁴ Debiassi, Andrea. "Le tre eruzioni dell'Etna in Tuciddide." *Hesperia* 12 (2000): 227

²⁵ Pace, Alessandro. "Cereali e papaveri per Demetra: una storia siciliana." *Gli dei in giardino. Due convegni su mito, natura e paesaggio nel mondo antico. Mito e Natura dalla Grecia a Pompei. Il Fuorimostra*, 2,2 (2016). 86

²⁶ Ibid. 87

²⁷ Homer, et al. *The Odyssey*. Viking, 1996.

²⁸ Siculus, Diodorus, and Oldfather. *Library of History, Volume V*. V, Harvard University Press, 1950.

of the messengers. It not only donated wheat to men but also taught them how to work it or even introduced the techniques to produce bread; this is not a simple food, but it is an accurate cultural marker.

Demeter in the act of finding Persephone

In conclusion, *The Goddess of Morgantina* represents one of the most important historical finds that Italy has brought back to its territory. The name of the statue referred to as goddess remains generic. Although covered in this research, it would be more appropriate to refer to the Greek-Sicilian statue as *The Goddess of Morgantina*. It has been seen how many problems and debates can grow in the historical, archaeological, and artistic fields when one comes across illegal and illicit excavations. *The Goddess of Morgantina* remains a singular and exceptional work, both from a formal point of view and of the personal, poetic inspiration that animates it. The Sicilian "Demeter" turns out to be dark and sunny simultaneously, reflecting seasons connected with the myth of Demeter and Persephone. The statue projects her image beyond all time. Since nothing can be compared to the emotion it arouses, the human and maternal image, mighty and afflicted, of the mother-goddess in a desperate search for her lost daughter. With the analysis of Morgantina's location and the Mount Aetna volcano, I assume that the statue depicts a Demeter. However, as archaeology frequently challenges preconceived notions, the hope is that further discoveries will assure and provide more answers to the questions briefly discussed here.



(fig. 1) *The Goddess of Morgantina*, unknown, 5th century BC, 224 cm, limestone and Greek marble, Archeological Museum of Aidone, Sicily.



(fig. 2) *The Acroliths of Morgantina*, unknown, 530 BC, marble from Thasos, Archeological Museum of Aidone, Sicily.



(fig. 3) *Aphrodite of Knidos* (Venus Pudica), roman copy



(fig. 4) *Terracotta statuette of Aphrodite and Eros*, 3rd century BC, terracotta, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



(fig. 5) *Agora Aphrodite*, Attributed to the school of Agorakritos.
Marble, ca. 420 BC - ca. 410 BC, Athens, Agora Museum



(fig. 6) *Statuette of Demeter*, 450–400 B.C., Sikeliote (Sicilian Greek). Terracotta, 21 x 7 5/8 x 4 1/2 in. (53.3 x 19.4 x 11.4 cm).



(fig. 7) *Demeter of Knidos*, 350 BC. Parian Marble, London British Museum



(fig. 8) Sicily, Geographic Map.

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