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Terracottas from the Votive Deposit of the Thesmophorion at Gortyn (Hatzidakis Excavation, 1909-1910).

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Abstract: The unpublished votive figurines from the *thesmophorion* of Gortyn in southern Crete discussed in this preliminary paper include piglet-holding female votaries, women carrying baskets or water jars, women holding flowers or fruits, enthroned female figures, nude or clothed men and male adolescents, Daedalic-type figurines and relief plaques, a large Zeus figurine, and various Isis, Aphrodite and Nike types. These votives point to a much-frequented sanctuary dedicated to the female cult of Demeter and Kore/Persephone and, in particular, to marriage- or death-related rites of passage for young girls. In terms of date, the material is predominantly Hellenistic, but Geometric, Archaic and Classical examples can also be identified. From the study of these terracottas, interesting observations can be made regarding artistic production, cult and votive practices, religious beliefs and social organization in Classical and Hellenistic Crete.

Keywords: Gortyn; *thesmophoria*; animal sacrifice; terracotta; women's rituals

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1. INTRODUCTION – HISTORY OF RESEARCH

This paper is a preliminary presentation of the coroplastic material from a votive deposit that was discovered in 1909 and 1910 on the southern slopes of the Profitis Elias hill, outside the fortifications of the ancient city of Gortyn in southern Crete (fig. 1)¹. The exact location of the excavation and therefore the exact findspot of the votive deposit can no longer be determined with any certainty. In total, the assemblage comprises some 1,600 terracotta figurines dating from the Geometric to Hellenistic periods. The excavation was conducted by Joseph Hatzidakis, then Ephor of Antiquities for Crete, who recorded part of the discovered material in the inventories of the Heraklion Archaeological Museum and organized the entire assemblage into formal groups for storage. Only a

¹ We would like to thank Romina Carboni, Claudia Cenci and Nicola Chiarenza for the opportunity to participate in the Cagliari conference. The material presented here is currently under study at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum by Maria Kyrimi as part of her doctoral dissertation at the National Technical University of Athens under the supervision of Manolis Mikrakis, Assistant Professor of Ancient and Medieval Art at the same university. Additional members of the supervising committee include Dimitrios Bosnakis, Professor of Classical Archaeology, University of Crete, and Theodora Voutsina, Associate Professor Emerita of Plastic Arts, National Technical University of Athens. Study and publication permits for the material were issued by the Directorate of Prehistoric and Classical Antiquities, Hellenic Ministry of Culture and Sports. Work on the material was greatly facilitated by Dr. Stella Mandalaki, Head of Directorate at the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, and the museum staff. Digital photographs for this paper were taken by Maria Kyrimi and graphically processed by Nikos Kritsotakis. Special thanks are due to Nunzio Allegro, Professor of Classical Archaeology, Università degli Studi di Palermo, who allowed Maria Kyrimi to consult the coroplastic material from the 1992 Italian excavations in the area of Profitis Ilias at Gortyn.

brief mention of this early excavation was published by Georg Karo in 1909², whereas the coroplastic material remains unpublished to date.

In 1992, excavations by the *Scuola Archeologica Italiana di Atene* (SAIA) in the same area (fig. 1, no. 19) brought to light more fragmentary figurines, *kernoi* and lamps that show extensive similarities with the material from the Hatzidakis deposit. In 2004, a report on the excavation was published by Nunzio Allegro and his collaborators³. Since no architectural remains have been discovered thus far, we can refer to the site as an open-air sanctuary, although evidence for the existence of a cult statue and, consequently, a temple is not entirely absent from the site, as shown below.

Excavation daybooks are not available from the early excavation, so there were no stratigraphic data available for us to consider. Therefore, the material was primarily subjected to iconographic and stylistic analysis to define typological groups with fairly probable chronological significance. The typological range is wide, but figurines depicting women of different ages carrying piglets as sacrificial offerings prevail (fig. 2, a-d), supporting the view that this was a votive deposit at a sanctuary where visitors made offerings for women from early childhood to adulthood and a sanctuary where some ceremonies were probably held with the participation of women. Such is the case for *Thesmophoria* dedicated to Demeter and Kore/Persephone⁴. Some eighty variants of this type of figurine belonging

² KARO 1909, p. 103.

³ ALLEGRO *et alii* 2008.

⁴ KYRIMI 2020, p. 75. For a recent concise overview of the Demeter cult in the Greek world, see ASIMAKOPOULOU 2021, pp. 67-71, 73-78, 95-96; for an overview of the Demeter cult on Crete, see SPORN 2002, p. 325-328.

to the Hellenistic period have been identified. In this paper, however, we will focus on the less common types represented in the assemblage.

2. SANCTUARIES OF DEMETER IN CRETE

Comparative material will be drawn from two well-known Cretan sanctuaries of Demeter at Knossos, Gypsades⁵, and at Kamilari, Grigori Korfi⁶. In the case of Knossos, the attribution to Demeter is indicated by the inscription on a second century BC silver ring mentioning her name, which makes Gypsades the only epigraphically confirmed sanctuary of Demeter on Crete despite the absence of piglet-bearing figurines⁷. In the case of the Kamilari votive deposit, on the other hand, the presence of certain types of female figurines carrying hydrias, baskets or torches, as discussed below, convincingly point to Demeter⁸, whereas geographical proximity to our site makes the Kamilari material useful for comparisons. A significant number of seated female figurines similar to those from Gortyn can be found at the so-called Greek Sanctuary A at Kastelos, near Vryses in western Crete, where the presence of pig figurines, miniature hydrias, *hydria*-bearing figurines and *kernoi* point to a Demeter and Kore/Persephone cult⁹.

In Crete, there are no inscriptions referring to *Thesmophoria* or other Demeter festivals, but two month names, *Thesmophoros* in Lato and *Eleusinos* in Olous and Viannos, are found¹⁰. Moreover, there are so-called

⁵ COLDSTREAM 1973.

⁶ ENGLEZOU 1988-1989.

⁷ COLDSTREAM 1973, pp. 132-133; SPORN 2002, p. 326.

⁸ ENGLEZOU 1988-1989, 79; SPORN 2002, p. 211-212.

⁹ MORTZOS 1985, especially pp. 100-106; SPORN 2002, p. 326.

¹⁰ SPORN 2002, p. 328.

Orphic-Dionysiac *lamellae* or *epistomia* from the area of Mylopotamos near Rethymnon, inscribed with invocations to Persephone¹¹. In the case of Gortyn, not only the prominence of female figurines with piglets among the coroplastic material but also the osteological material from the 1992 Italian excavations point to pig sacrifices¹², the primary ritual performed at *Thesmophoria* festivals¹³.

The Demeter sanctuary at Gortyn enjoyed great popularity in Hellenistic times, judging from the number of figurines that date to this period. However, what can these terracottas tell us about the sanctuary in the Classical and earlier periods? In what follows, a preliminary overview is provided.

3. OVERVIEW OF THE MATERIAL

The earliest examples in our assemblage are two fragmentary nude females and the head of a male figurine, probably from the Early Archaic period (fig. 3, c-d). A similar head from Cyrene is dated to the early seventh century BC¹⁴. The earliest female figurines in our assemblage are Daedalic in style (fig. 3, a-b), including an early type of Aphrodite *anasyromene* (fig. 3, a), that is, a figure lifting her skirt to reveal her pubic area. Among the Early Archaic material there are also relief plaques showing young male figures in profile, wearing some kind of long ritual garment, a common type of terracotta votive in Cretan sanctuaries during

¹¹ TZIFOPOULOS 2004; 2010.

¹² ALLEGRO *et alii* 2008, pp. 118-121.

¹³ For sacrifices in the cult of Demeter and Kore/Persephone in general, see HERMARY *et alii* 2004, p. 79-82. For an example of a sacrificial pit with charred piglet bones from the sanctuary of Demeter and Kore/Persephone on the acropolis of Mytilene, see RUSCILLO 2013.

¹⁴ UHLENBROCK 2015, p. 155, fig. 4.

the Archaic period (fig. 3, e). Several identical plaques at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York come from Praisos in eastern Crete. The presence of Early Archaic material at Gortyn makes this sanctuary chronologically second in Crete only to Gypsades at Knossos, where cult might have started in the late eighth century BC, and also one of the earliest Demeter sanctuaries in the Greek world including Magna Grecia¹⁵.

Let us now turn to the so-called 'Late Archaic Korai' type, named after the type of Attic monumental sculpture that these figurines vaguely resemble (fig. 4, a-b), even imitating the gesture of holding the garment. They are rather thin, solid figurines, flat on the back side, with a strongly projecting base. Traces of white slip can be seen on the surface. Similar figurines are known from the Demeter sanctuary at Knossos¹⁶. The type also appears in a hollow variant, and both variants can be dated to around the middle of the fifth century BC¹⁷.

In our deposit, there are also figurines of *hydriaphoroi*, women carrying water jars (fig. 5, a, d), a common votive for Demeter sanctuaries that has been unknown from Gortyn so far. Two types are represented, one supporting the *hydria* on the head with the right hand and another supporting it with a veil, which allows the right hand to hold some kind of offering. *Hydriaphoroi* might represent or commemorate ritual action¹⁸, as shown on the Demeter and Persephone votive relief from Tegea, Early Hellenistic in date, which depicts a *hydriaphoros*¹⁹. Water carried in the jars

¹⁵ For a chronological overview of Demeter sanctuaries, see COLDSTREAM 1973, p. 180; SPORN 2002, p. 327 with n. 2434.

¹⁶ COLDSTREAM 1973, p. 63, pl. 37, fig. 40.

¹⁷ ALLEGRO *et alii* 2008, p. 109, fig. 5.

¹⁸ SCHIPPOREIT 2014, pp. 330-333 with n. 40.

¹⁹ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 1422. KALTSAS 2002, p. 277, no. 579.

would have been used in purification rituals²⁰ or rituals exploiting the symbolism of water as fertilizer of the soil²¹. The type is already known from Sanctuary A at Kastelos, dated to the middle of the fifth century BC²².

Some *hydriaphoroi* from Gortyn hold offerings that look like poppies (fig. 5, a, d), and there are also poppy-bearing figurines that do not carry hydrias (fig. 5, b). A terracotta votive in the form of an opium-poppy capsule was also discovered in the deposit (fig. 5, c). The opium poppy (*papaver somniferum*) is firmly associated with Demeter and Kore/Persephone both as a source of hypnotic, relieving and psychoactive drugs, and as a container of seeds symbolizing abundance and fertility²³. In several representations of Demeter, including two Roman-period marble statuettes from the Ancient Agora²⁴ and the National Garden²⁵ of Athens, opium poppies appear to be held by the goddess together with a wheat sheaf. Poppies also appear among other symbols of Demeter in the relief decoration of the containers (*cistae*) carried by the colossal *kistophoroi* that flanked the Lesser Propylaia at Eleusis around 50-40 BC²⁶. Two small terracotta spheres from Axos on the northern slopes of Mt. Ida, where another open-air sanctuary of Demeter and Kore/Persephone has been identified from its votives, have been convincingly interpreted as poppy

²⁰ TSAKALOU-TZANAVARI 2002, p. 120, n. 434 with further references.

²¹ ASIMAKOPOULOU 2021, p. 95.

²² MORTZOS 1985, p. 76, pl. 45.

²³ HNILA 2001, p. 96; GERSHT 2006, pp. 31-34; SPAETH 2017, p. 411.

²⁴ Athens, National Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 3989. KALTSAS 2002, p. 253, no. 529; ASIMAKOPOULOU 2021, p. 117, pl. 1b.

²⁵ Athens, Ephorate of Antiquities of the City of Athens, inv. no. M2540. KATAKIS 2012, pp. 99-106, fig. 4; ASIMAKOPOULOU 2021, p. 117, pl. 2a.

²⁶ Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, inv. no. GR.I.1865 and Eleusis Museum, inv. no. 5104. PALAGIA 1997, p. 83, figs. 3-4.

capsules associated with Demeter-Isis²⁷. The poppy capsules on the head of a large wheel-made terracotta figure with upraised arms from Gazi, dated by Rethemiotakis to the early Late Minoan IIIC (ca. 1200 BC)²⁸, if not already the poppy-bearing female figure on the Minoan-style gold ring CMS I, no. 17 from Mycenae, dated to Late Bronze Age I-II (ca. 1700–1400 BC), suggest that poppies had a long Cretan tradition of symbolic significance in female cults²⁹.

The poppy-related finds of the Hatzidakis excavation discussed here shed new light on the long-known bronze imitations of a 26,9 cm high torch and a 17,5 cm high poppy seed stalk in the Berling Antikensammlung, said to come from Gortyn, Crete. Their attribution to a lost statue of Demeter in Gortyn³⁰ and the association of this statue with the sanctuary on the southern slopes of the Profitis Elias hill³¹ now seem even more probable.

Among the figurines from Gortyn, the *kanephoroi*, basket carriers, or *kistophoroi*, carriers of *cistae* (fig. 6), show a notable peculiarity: two wreath- or hoop-like elements, one around the base of the figure and another around the hips (fig. 6, a–b). These features are usually dotted, which may imply flower wreaths or garlands of some ritual significance. The figures hold piglets in their right hand. This particular type, which might represent female votaries participating in a ceremony, also appears

²⁷ TEGOU, BOWSKY 2020. The authors date the spheres to the early Roman Imperial period.

²⁸ Heraklion Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 9305. RETHEMIOTAKIS 2001, p. 33, figs. 38a–c, 144.

²⁹ For an overview, see TEGOU, BOWSKY 2020, pp. 43–48.

³⁰ HEILMEYER 2014, p. 145.

³¹ TEGOU, BOWSKY 2020, p. 46.

in the Kamilari deposit with some fragmentary examples³². Their facial characteristics point to a mid-fifth century BC date. Another variant of *kanephoros* wears high-belted *peplos* and a *himation* falling on both shoulders (fig. 6, c-d). Similar types dating to the early fourth century BC are known from Kamilari³³.

Turning now to the seated or enthroned figures, there are 28 more or less complete examples and 22 fragments (fig. 7), extending chronologically from the mid-fifth to the early fourth century BC. Their size varies between 9 and 17 cm. In the Gortyn votive deposit, there are at least 15 different types of seated figurines distinguished by the rendering of the head and the throne, and the position of the arms. Divine iconography can be identified with some certainty in the case of a figure wearing a low *polos* (fig. 7, a) or another figure sitting on a throne with lion legs, holding a *phiale*, that might imply Kybele (fig. 7, b). There is also a rare type of seated figure holding a flower to her chest, similar to figurines from the sanctuary of Demeter *karpophoros*, the fruit-bearing or fruit-bringing Demeter, at Tegea³⁴ and the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene. Among the material from Gortyn, a seated figure with a *kernos* full of fruits on her lap (fig. 7, d) can be identified as Demeter *karpophoros* herself. The type is absent from Kamilari, Knossos and Kastelos, and very rare in general. A unique marble statuette of an enthroned Demeter *karpophoros* with a cloth filled with fruits rather than a

³² ENGLEZOU 1988-1989, p. 68, pl. 34, fig. 12.

³³ ENGLEZOU 1988-1989, p. 67, pl. 32, figs. 6-7.

³⁴ Tegea Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 5606a. KARAPANAGIOTOU, LEVENTI 2018, p. 201, fig. 5.

kernos comes from Athens, dated to the second century AD³⁵. Other seated figures show a protruding footstool.

Regarding provenance, several imports can be identified on stylistic grounds, including Knossian (fig. 7, f), Attic and Corinthian types. Seated figures wearing a *polos* and holding *phialai* on their laps or in their right hands (fig. 7, g-i) are not found at Knossos but appear at Gortyn in a range of types. There are also figurines wearing a *stephane* covered by a veil (fig. 7, j). As a whole, the Gortyn deposit seems to have a greater variety in seated figures than both Knossos and Kamilari, whereas the material from Kastelos is very fragmentary.

Men and boys are known to have participated in the Eleusinian Mysteries and several festivals of Demeter and Kore/Persephone. Relevant votives (male figurines, arrowheads, miniature shields) are also known from their Cretan sanctuaries³⁶. Among the male figurines from the votive deposit of Gortyn, three major types of fifth century figurines can be found: fully nude male figurines (fig. 8, a), male figurines with a *himation* draped over the left shoulder (fig. 8, b), and figurines with a *chlamys* covering both shoulders (fig. 8, c). Similar *chlamys* figurines are known from Boeotia³⁷. In Gortyn, there are also figurines with a *himation* around the waist, leaving the upper body uncovered, for which there are parallels from the Sanctuary of the Chthonic Nymphs at Cyrene³⁸.

Among the male figurines, boys (fig. 8, g) and *epheboi* holding a kind of offering are a significant group, showing that boys of different ages also

³⁵ ASIMAKOPOULOU 2021, p. 118, pl. 2b, 3.

³⁶ SPORN 2002, p. 328.

³⁷ PEPPA-PAPAIIOANNOU 2010, pp. 97-98, fig. 53-55.

³⁸ UHLENBROCK 2012, figure on p. 5.

participated in cult activities, either in their own right or as part of women's rites related to marriage. Piglets are the most common item they offer and, like the girls with piglets, they probably date to the Hellenistic period. Some of the youths with piglets wear a *kausia*, the Macedonian flat hat (fig. 8, f). Others hold fruits or a cock (fig. 8, e).

Another significant group of terracottas in the Gortyn votive deposit are the Tanagra-type draped figurines, covering the entire chronological range of the Late Classical and the Hellenistic periods (fig. 9, a-c).

The last group of terracottas we would like to discuss here are the divine figures. All of these figures from Gortyn probably belong to the Hellenistic period, but some conservative elements can be observed, such as the stiff, barely perceptible *contrapposto* and the thick *himation* folds of a Zeus or Poseidon figurine on a rectangular base (fig. 9, d). In fact, Zeus with the epithet '*Eubouleus*' has chthonian aspects that would fit well with a *thesmophorion*.

Aphrodite appears in three variants. First is a headless figurine with a long, sleeved *chiton* belted just below the breasts and a long *himation* wrapped around her torso, hips and thighs and secured over the left shoulder in a tight manner that reveals the contours of her body (fig. 10, b). Then, there is a type with handmade details in the decoration of the sleeves (fig. 10, c). The third type of Aphrodite elegantly touches a colonette, barely leaning against it; this figure probably dates to the Late Hellenistic or Roman period (fig. 10, d). Finally, there is an Aphrodite leaning against a miniature structure in the form of a temple façade with a

pediment. Within this edifice, a rigid frontal figure should represent the cult statue of the goddess (fig. 10, e)³⁹.

There are also several fragmentary figurines of Nike. An almost complete example shows the goddess on a high cylindrical pedestal wearing a *peplos* with handmade folds. The presence of the type might reflect dedications after a victorious battle (fig. 9, e-f).

To finish, there is a figure of Demeter sitting on a rock, probably 'the mirthless stone' (*agelastos petra*) of Eleusis, where the goddess sat down to rest during her search for Persephone, when she arrived at the sanctuary site for the first time (fig. 10, a)⁴⁰.

4. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, 'what can terracottas tell us' about the open-air sanctuary on the Profitis Elias hill outside the city of Gortyn? Judging from the number and variety of the figurines, the sanctuary must have already been quite popular in Classical times. During this period, numerous seated female figurines coexisted with *kanephoroi*, draped standing figures with piglets and male figurines. Demeter was already present without monopolizing the cult. In the Hellenistic period, female figurines with piglets were the rule, but other deities received votives as well. Figurines representing different age groups indicate rites of passage for boys and girls, which are consistent with a *thesmophorion*. We hope that further study will shed more light on questions regarding the nature and significance of cult activities on this site.

³⁹ For a detailed discussion of this terracotta plaque, see KYRIMI 2020.

⁴⁰ KERÉNYI 1967, pp. 38-39.

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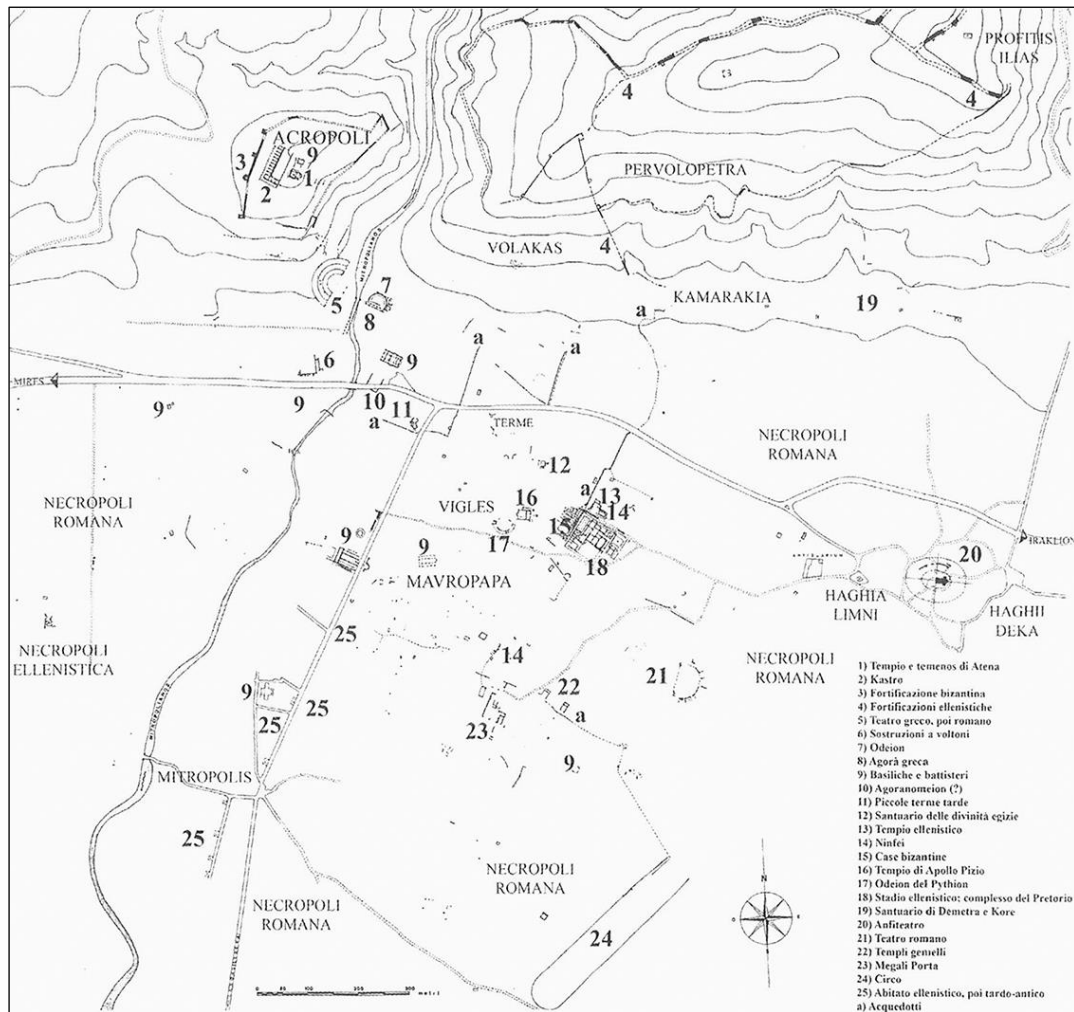


Fig. 1. General topographic map of Gortyn; after DI VITA 2010, fig. 7.

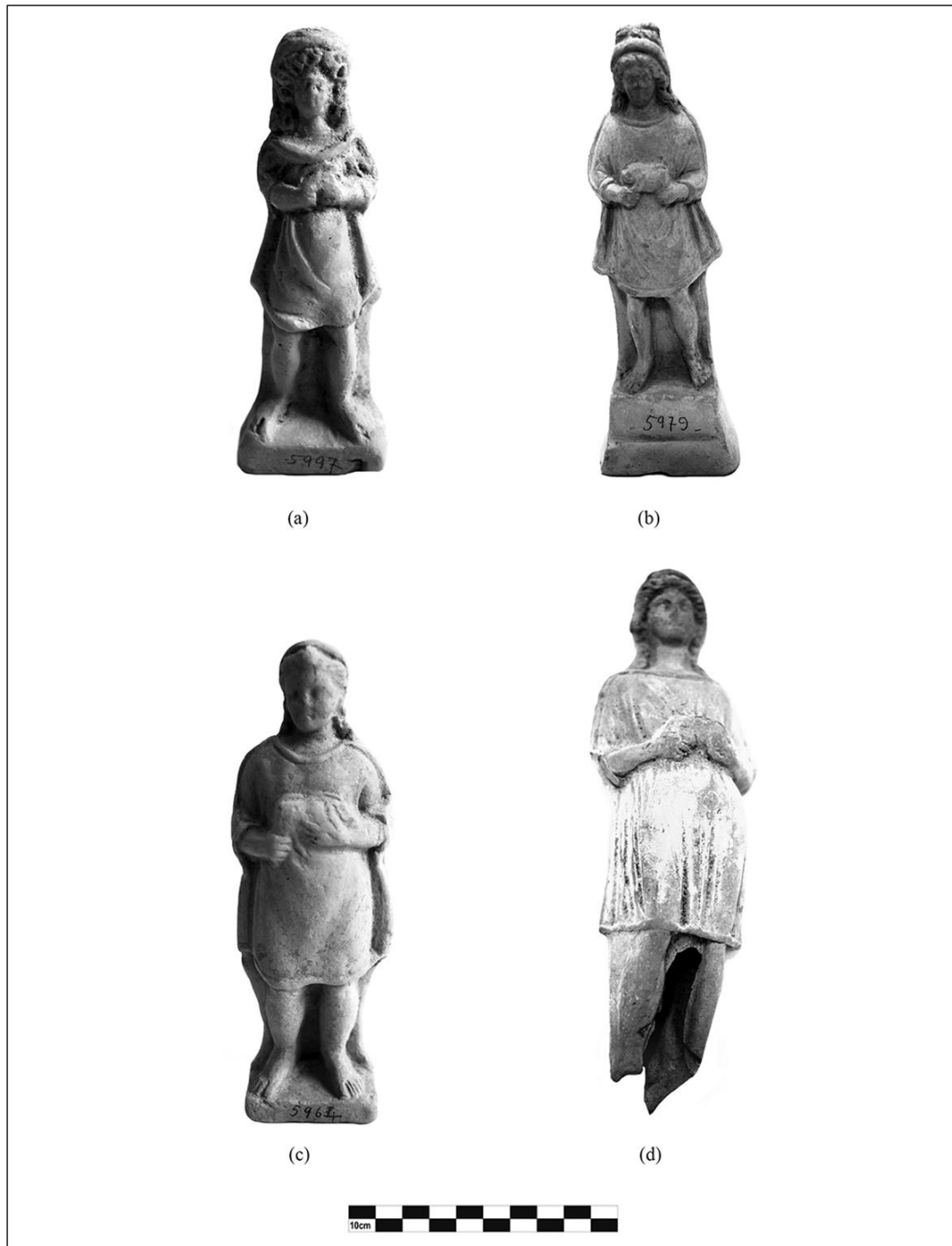


Fig. 2. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Female figurines holding piglets, fourth to third centuries BC; a: figurine of a little girl; b: figurine of a girl; c: figurine of a girl; d: figurine of an adult woman.

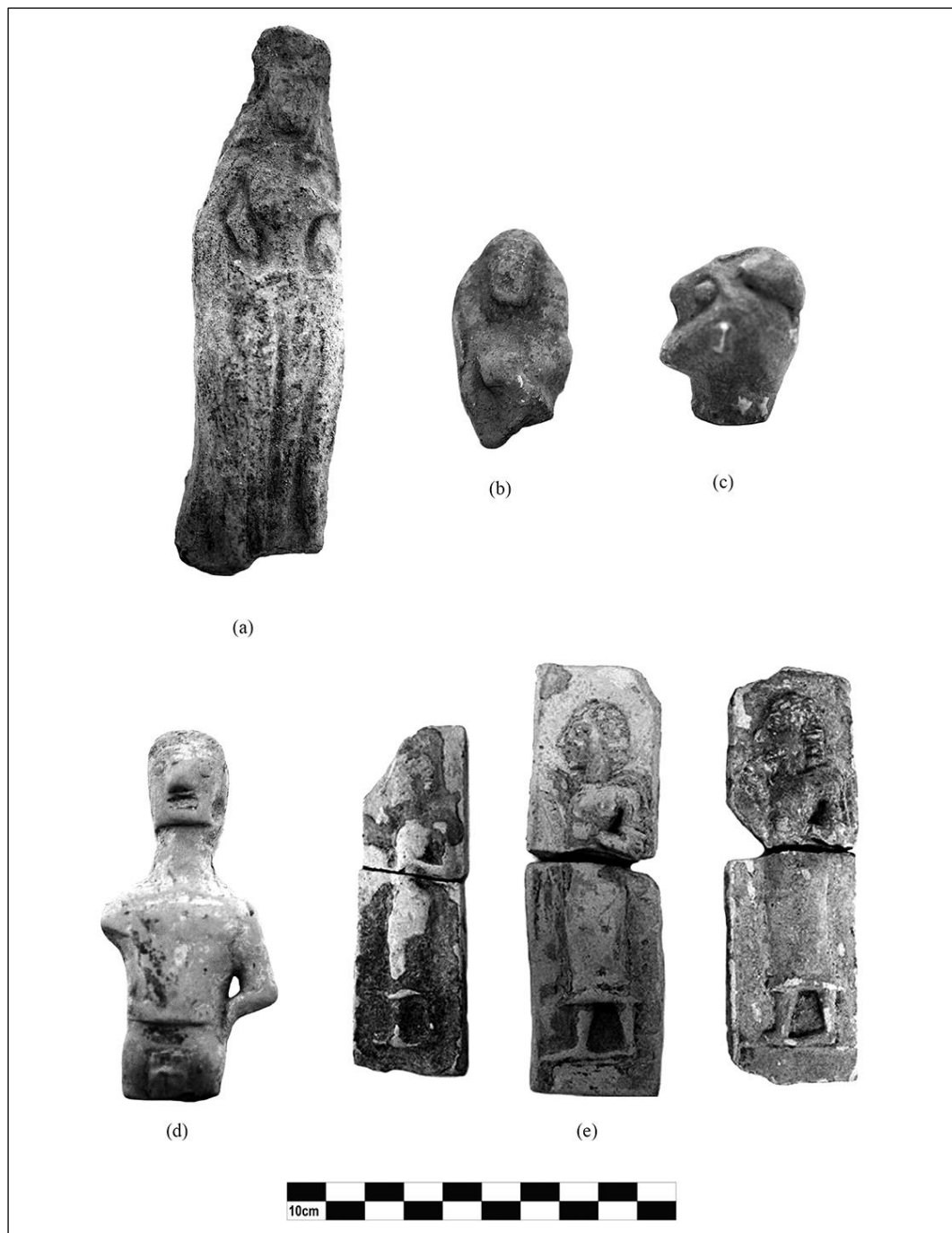


Fig. 3. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Archaic male and female figurines; a: figurine of Aphrodite with *anasyrma*, Daedalic; b: upper part of a female figurine, Daedalic; c: male head, Early Archaic period; d: female figurine, Archaic period; e: terracotta plaques with a male figure in a long garment, Early Archaic period.

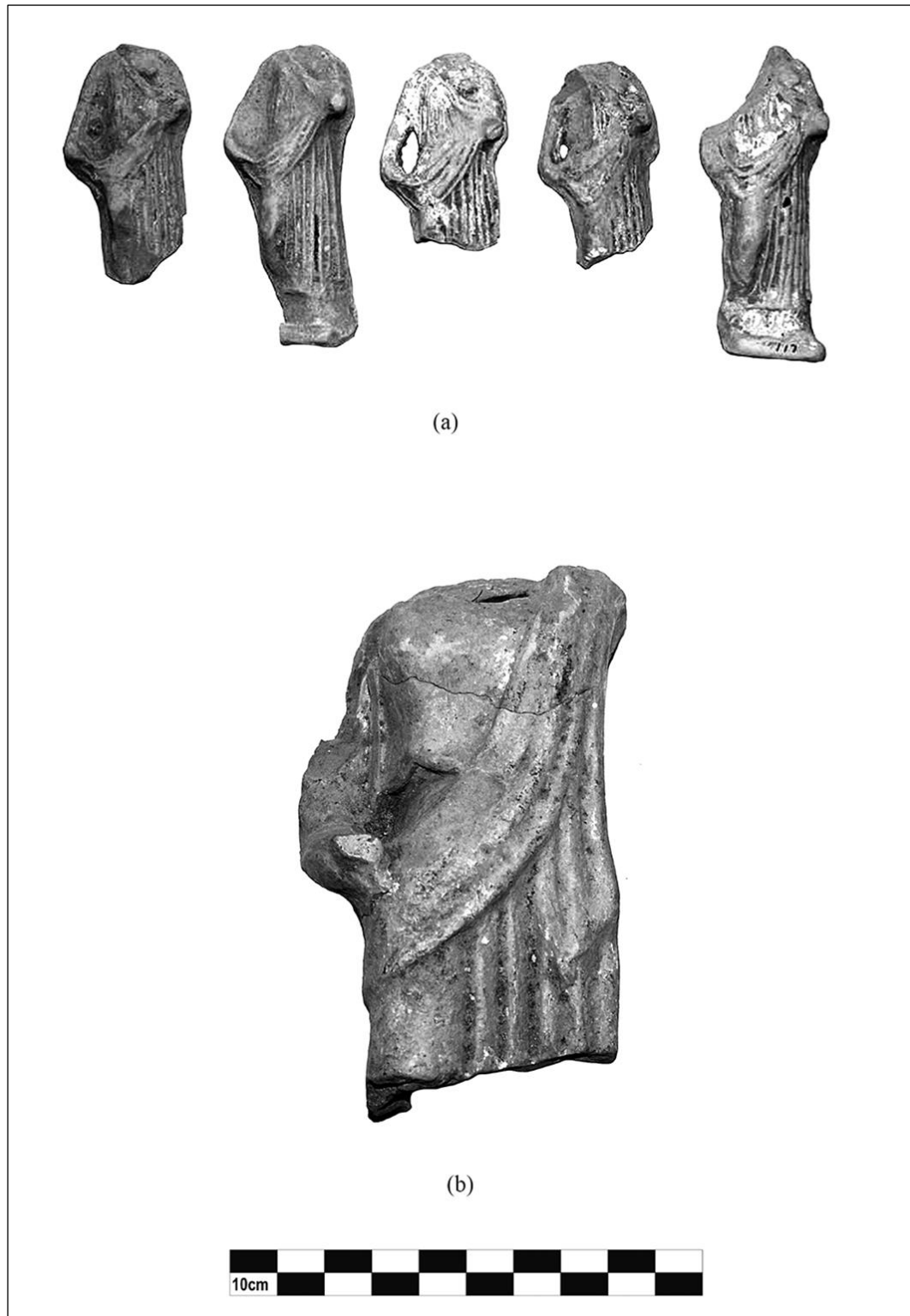


Fig. 4. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*; a, b: figurines of the 'Late Archaic Kore' type, mid-fifth century BC.

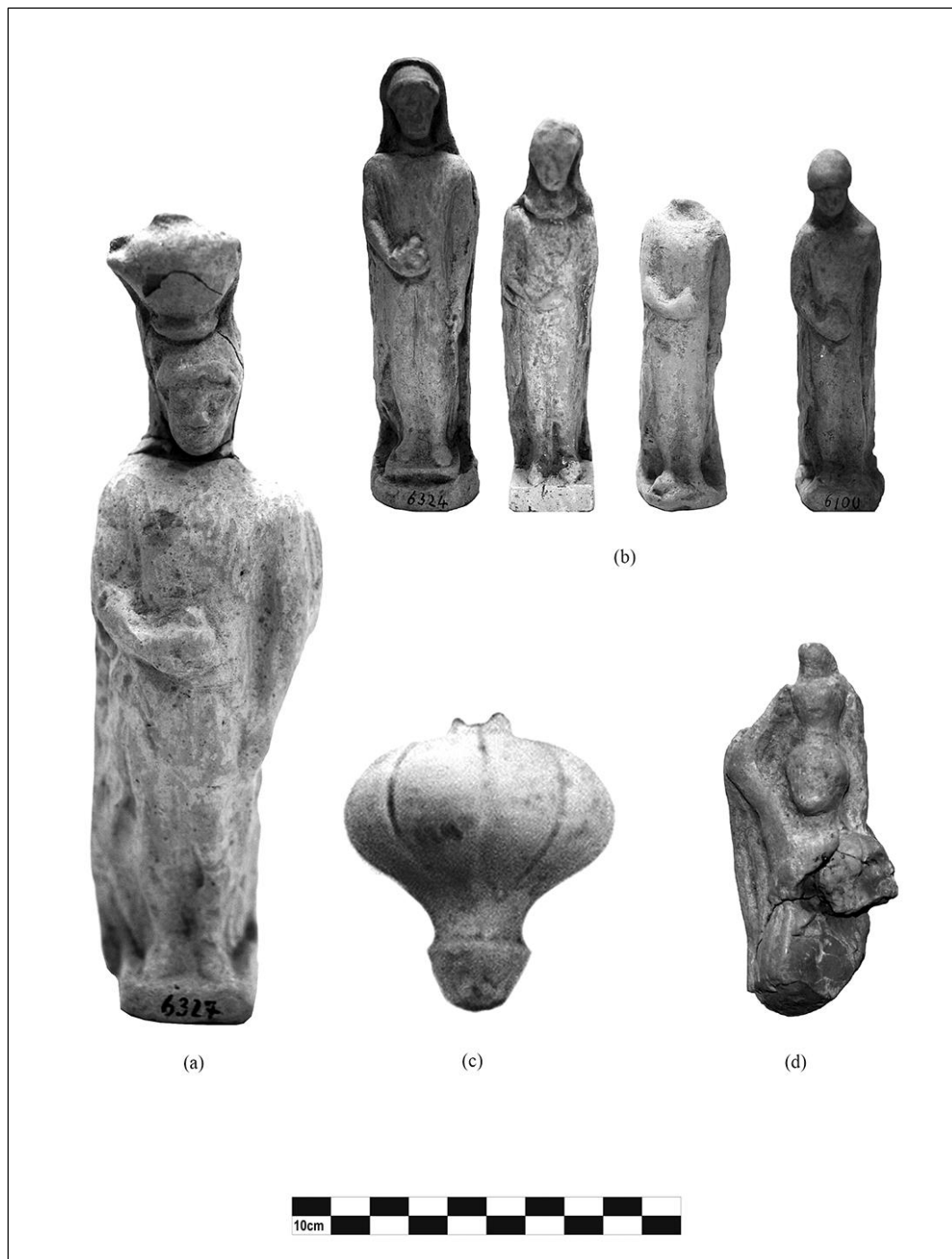


Fig. 5. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*; a: *hydriaphoros* with poppy offering, fifth century BC; b: female figurines holding poppies, fifth century BC; c: terracotta poppy votive; d: upper part of *hydriaphoros*, fifth century BC.



Fig. 6. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Figurines of *kanephoroi*, mid-fifth century BC; a, b: Cretan type *kanephoroi* holding piglets in their right hand; c: upper part of *kanephoros*; d: *kanephoros*, head missing.



Fig. 7. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Seated female figurines, mid-fifth to fourth centuries BC; a: seated woman with low *polos*, late fifth century BC; b: figurine of Kybele, late fifth century BC; c: seated woman holding a branch; d: seated woman holding a *kernos* with fruits; e: seated woman; f: seated woman similar to a Knossian type, first quarter of fourth century BC; g: seated woman holding a *phiale*, fifth to fourth century BC; h: seated woman holding a *phiale* in her right hand, fifth to fourth century BC; i: headless seated woman with a *phiale*, fifth to fourth century BC; j: seated woman with a veil and a *stephane*, last quarter of fifth century BC.

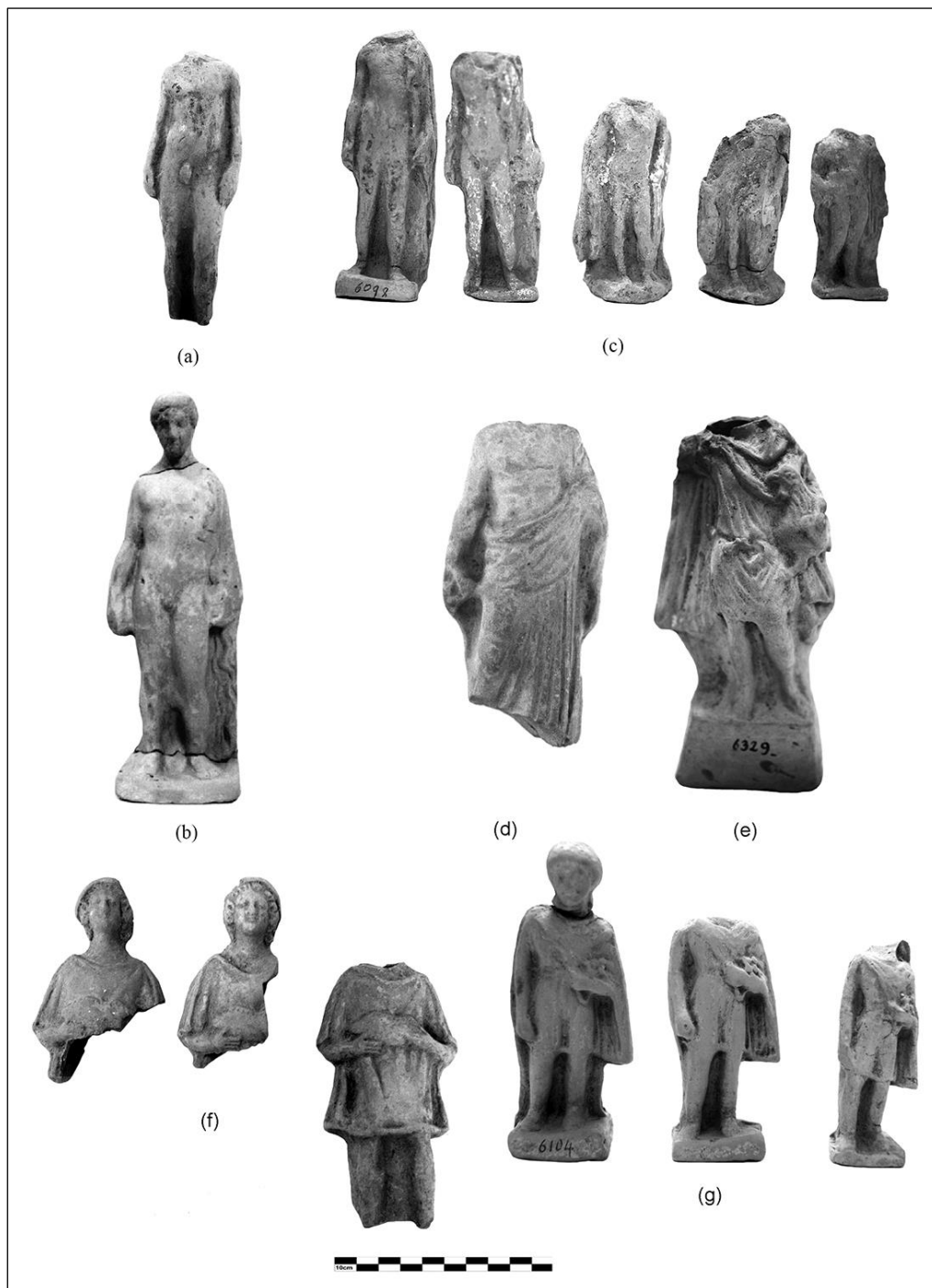


Fig. 8. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Male figurines, fifth century BC; a: small figurine of a nude male, mid-fifth century BC; b: small figurines with *chlamys*, mid-fifth century BC; c: male figurine with *himation*, mid-fifth century BC; d: male figurine with *himation*; e: male figurine with a cock; f: parts of figurines depicting *epheboi* with *kausia* and piglets, late fourth-early third century BC; g: boys with *chiton* and *himation* holding fruits, late fourth century BC.



Fig. 9. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Tanagra-type and divine figurines; a: headless figurine of Tanagraia, early fourth century BC; b: headless figurine of Tanagraia, early fourth century BC; c: Tanagraia, late fourth century BC; d: headless statuette depicting a male god, fourth century BC; e, f: Nike figurines.



Fig. 10. Gortyn, *thesmophorion*. Demeter and Aphrodite figurines; a: Demeter resting on the 'mirthless stone'; b: headless statuette depicting Aphrodite, early fourth century BC; c: upper part of a figurine depicting Aphrodite, early fourth century BC; d: figurine of Aphrodite, late fourth century BC; e: terracotta plaque depicting Aphrodite leaning against a miniature temple façade with her cult statue (?) inside, late fourth century BC.