

Introduction

Amy C. SMITH
University of Reading

The papers collected in this volume emerge from a conference, the gods of SMALL THINGS, held at the Ure Museum at the University of Reading, 21-22 September 2009, to which we welcomed a wide range of scholars who had come into contact with and developed interests in small things, not just across the Mediterranean, but from Britain to Colchis. We gratefully acknowledge support for the event from Reading's Department of Classics, the Classical Association, and the Society for the Promotion of Hellenic Studies. We are especially grateful to the speakers, chairs, and other delegates for their enthusiasm and useful thoughts that have helped the contributors to this volume refine their own ideas. The idea for such a conference emerged from a discussion I had with two of my postgraduate students—Marianne Bergeron, my coeditor, and Katerina Volioti—in which we realised that a commonality of our diverse research interests was small artefacts that are interesting in their smallness yet often overlooked or even ignored in scholarship and even on archaeological excavations.

Small and portable objects functioned in a variety of non-commercial contexts in the ancient Mediterranean, including some ways that perhaps we haven't discovered or fully understood. What was the significance, for example, of knucklebones and mass-produced vases deposited in caves? Such objects are often fragmentary and/or overlooked, even by excavators. While some individual dedications or funerary paraphernalia have received considerable attention as artworks, exemplars of craft and the mercantile activity, assemblages of small things are at best counted or otherwise measured and put aside. The gods of SMALL THINGS conference and indeed the collected papers in this volume have sought to understand how these examples and assemblages of small things inform us about relationships between humans and their gods.

At the conference we considered disparate contexts in which small things operated, with a first day dedicated to sanctuaries—in which we considered “toys for life” (including, but not restricted to, articulated figurines and knucklebones), “women's toil and trouble” (concerning dedications of plaques, loom weights, and other items associated with textile production), “preparing the feast” (culinary implements as well as sympotic and other pots)—and a second day dedicated to the transition from homes to graves—with “domestic trinkets” (small statues and statuettes), “inscribed tokens” (Egyptian magical gems and other votives), other “depositions” (e.g. miniature weaponry and small oil jars), and finally graves (ceramics, coins, pebbles, and cosmetic palettes). What is the value of mundane, non-prestige, or commonplace items in a ritual context and how is this value different from that of the same object in the home or workplace? Jean-Marc Luce's keynote speech at the conference (which has evolved into the third

essay in the present volume) considered value and other important theoretical considerations, about defunctionalisation both in sanctuaries and in graves, as well as the concepts and issues associated with miniaturisation.

In the present volume we have deemphasised the contexts of these small things, perhaps because of the realisation that contexts might change through space and time (a point considered especially by Katerina Volioti in art 12). After an introductory section, “Life in miniature” (part 1)—which presents a theoretical basis for our understanding of miniatures, at least from symbolic and aesthetic perspectives—we have divided the small things into three functional categories. In part 2, “Transformations of scale”, we consider the small things in relation to similar items at full and monumental scale. In part 3, “Small by nature”, we seek to understand the value of assemblages of items that were always small, whether through natural or human production. In part 4, “Object biographies”, we delve more deeply into the multitasking nature of these small things, with a consideration of a variety of disparate contexts in which such items have been found. This section works as somewhat of a conclusion insofar as it brings together issues considered in the earlier contributions, such as: what the mobility and portability of an object contributes to its object biography; the local traditions that favour the dedication of small, personal and/or mundane objects; and how small objects relate to the human body and its participation in travel and other human endeavours.

We are grateful to Prof. Jean-Marc Luce for the idea to publish these papers as a volume of *Pallas* and to Christian Rico, the Editor of *Pallas*, for his enthusiasm, encouragement, and patience from the beginning, and to a wide range of expert peer reviewers who helped us navigate through relatively uncharted waters. It is now our hope that the small things brought together in this volume will make a bigger impact on archaeological practitioners and theorists who might in turn begin to ask not just what they are but if, how, and why they were used in different times and places.