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## Treasures for the God

### Viewing Votive Offerings in the Temples of Asklepios<sup>1</sup>

*This paper aims to draw attention to the significant contribution of the display of dedications of past worshippers in a sanctuary to the creation of a space where direct contact with the divine was possible. Focusing primarily, but not exclusively, on the cult of Asklepios, it draws together strands of thought from new materialism and the study of visuality in religion to outline an understanding of viewing votives as an active, reciprocal activity. In doing so, it highlights three major functions of the votive display in Asklepieia: the votives anchor the power of Asklepios; create a sense of the (diachronic) presence of worshippers; and prompt reflection on the nature of the interaction between human and god. Together, these examples demonstrate that the votive display, approached with ritual-centred visuality and recognised as an active agent, was a key factor in making Asklepios accessible to his supplicants.*

**Keywords:** Asklepios; votives; sanctuaries; new materialism; visuality.

The Doric columns, wrought from fairest stone,  
Severe but graceful, round the *cella* thrown,  
The lofty front, the frieze where sculptures shine,  
The long, long architrave's majestic line,  
Dazzle the eye with Beauty's rich excess,  
O'erpower the mind by too much loveliness.

– Nicholas Mitchell, *Ruins of Many Lands*<sup>2</sup>

Despite its loftiness, this fragment of *Ruins of Many Lands* – in which Mitchell guides us across the ancient world like a Victorian Pausanias –

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<sup>2</sup> From the second edition: London, 1850, p. 160.

probably comes rather close to how most people imagine Greek temples: shining marble, soaring columns, serene majesty.<sup>3</sup> How different is the impression left by this 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC decree from the Asklepieion of Rhodes:

No one is permitted to request that an image be raised or some other votive offering set up in the lower part of the sanctuary [...] or in any other spot where votive offerings prevent people walking past.<sup>4</sup>

This was a sanctuary so full of objects and offerings that they were beginning to form a hazard. It was not serene or stately, but crowded, chaotic, *alive*. Although the votive display was a central part of this, it has not yet received its due attention.<sup>5</sup> Using the cult of Asklepios as a case study and drawing together theoretical threads based on the agency of material objects and on the importance of visibility in Greco-Roman religion, this paper aims to sketch an understanding of viewing votives as a reciprocal activity – in which the viewer did not only look at the votive, but the votive also *acted on* the viewer – which helped establish the sanctuary as a place where direct contact with the divine was possible.

## Materialising Religion

The first of the two theoretical concepts that have shaped the approach to votives in this article is that of *new materialism*. New materialism is an umbrella term under which scholars have developed a wide variety of new approaches to material culture, all of which aim to put objects more firmly in relation to the rest of the world.<sup>6</sup> The line of argument taken up

<sup>3</sup> See also VAN STRATEN (1981: 78).

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in VAN STRATEN (1981: 78).

<sup>5</sup> As emphasised by PETSALIS-DIOMDIS (2016: 53), this display was in a constant state of becoming.

<sup>6</sup> GRAHAM (2020a: 32); DOBRES-ROBB (2005: 161–163). Helpful discussions of agency and materiality can be found in JONES-BOIVIN (2010); GRAHAM (2020a: 18–40), and OLSEN

in this article focuses particularly on the *agency* of objects, their ability to make a difference to the world and to actively co-create rather than simply inhabit it.<sup>7</sup> This agency is not inherent in objects (or in humans), but emerges when they are *brought into relation* with other things – with no hierarchical distinction between human and non-human things.<sup>8</sup> In the terms of this article, this means that in the encounter between viewer and votive offering, the votive acquires agency and emerges as a significant factor in shaping the viewer's experience of the sanctuary. Emma-Jayne Graham has demonstrated the value of such an approach in studying the material culture of Graeco-Roman religion.<sup>9</sup>

This emphasis on the relational character of material agency leads directly to another important concept, that of the material assemblage. Contrary to the standard archaeological assemblage, a material assemblage contains not only objects, but also people, ideas, actions, and more in a constellation that is always in motion.<sup>10</sup> Through these interconnections, an agentive power emerges that is greater than the sum of its parts.<sup>11</sup> Treating the sanctuary as such an assemblage, whose components include but are not limited to votives, buildings, prayers, beliefs, and divinities, is very helpful in clarifying how votives operated within this whole.<sup>12</sup>

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(2010: 1–17), and of their place in material culture studies in general in HICKS (2010), especially 74–79.

<sup>7</sup> The concept of materiality employed in this paper is grounded primarily in JONES–BOIVIN (2010: 335–337); DOBRES–ROBB (2005: 161–163).

<sup>8</sup> This emphasis on relationality is especially taken from GRAHAM 2020a, 29–30 and KNAPPETT 2004, 46, see also HAMILAKIS–JONES (2017: 79); JONES–BOIVIN (2010: 340; 351); BOIVIN (2008: 166–168). Compare TANNER (2006: 84–85) who describes the process by which aniconic cult images are recognised as deities as 'co-action'.

<sup>9</sup> GRAHAM (2020a); (2020b); (2017).

<sup>10</sup> These material assemblages are extensively discussed in the CArchJ 17.1, and this paper draws especially on HAMILAKIS (2017: 171–177), see also FOWLER (2017: 96); HAMILAKIS–JONES (2017); HARRIS (2014: 90).

<sup>11</sup> HAMILAKIS' focus on affectivity (2017, 173) is of particular note here. See also HARRIS (2014: 90–91); GRAHAM (2020a: 33–34).

<sup>12</sup> Compare GRAHAM's treatment of the fountain of Anna Perenna (2020a).

## Viewing Religion

The second theoretical thread concerns the visual dimension of ancient religion, which has recently come to the fore in the work of, for example, Jaś Elsner, Alexia Petsalis-Diomidis, and Verity Platt.<sup>13</sup> They draw an important distinction between vision and visuality: whereas vision is a straightforward, sensory experience, visuality describes the way in which this sensory experience is mediated by any number of cultural constructs and individual experiences.<sup>14</sup> Elsner has defined a particular type of visuality that he terms ritual-centred visuality, which ‘constructs a ritual barrier to the identifications and objectifications of the screen of discourse and posits a sacred possibility for vision, which is by definition more significant since it opens the viewer to confronting his or her god’.<sup>15</sup> It is a kind of viewing that allows the viewer to see *more* than what is in front of them, and thus come into contact with the divine.



Figure 1. Attic votive relief (350–300 BC) with Hygieia leaning against a votive. © 2006 Musée du Louvre/ Daniel Lebée/Carine Deambrosis, <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010279053>.

<sup>13</sup> Including: PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017); (2006); (2005); PLATT (2011); ELSNER (2007); RUTHERFORD (2000).

<sup>14</sup> PETRIDOU (2013: 311–312), ELSNER (2007: 24–25).

<sup>15</sup> ELSNER (2007: 25).

Although this concept has added much to our understanding of the mechanisms of Greco-Roman religion, it has so far focused primarily on direct encounters with deities – in the form of images or costumed cult personnel – with little attention for the other sights of the sanctuary.<sup>16</sup> This paper sets out to explore how a similar mode of viewing might be employed in the encounter with one of those sights, the votive display.

### The Sights of the Asklepieion

The importance of the votive display is not only attested to by the hundreds of votives that have been found in excavations, but also by pictorial, epigraphic, and literary sources. This includes votive reliefs with images of earlier dedications in the background, usually other votive reliefs placed on a pillar (*figs. 1, 4*).<sup>17</sup> Such a votive serves as a marker of the sanctuary setting, but also ‘declares its own contribution to the numinous qualities of the sanctuary it adorns and its influence upon subsequent pilgrim-worshippers’.<sup>18</sup> There was an explicit awareness of the agency of these objects in shaping the assemblage – the sanctuary – that they were a part of. Similar depictions of votive offerings, usually pinakes but sometimes also anatomical votives, can be found on vase paintings (*fig. 2*).<sup>19</sup> It is, in many ways, the presence of these votives and their relational ties to the people and the space that created the sanctuary.<sup>20</sup>

Viewing these votives was part of an established, self-conscious tradition in the Asklepieion.<sup>21</sup> Such viewing is included in Herodas’ 3<sup>rd</sup>

<sup>16</sup> For example: ELSNER (2007: 228–246); PETRIDOU (2013: 327–330); GORDON (1979). Notable exceptions that do focus on the encounter between worshipper and votive are PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017); (2006) and VAN STRATEN (1992: 254–274).

<sup>17</sup> HUGHES (2017: 46–48); VAN STRATEN (2006: 26); (1992: 255–261).

<sup>18</sup> PLATT (2011: 45). See also VAN STRATEN (2006: 26); (1992: 261–262).

<sup>19</sup> HUGHES (2017: 39–40); VAN STRATEN (1992: 262–265).

<sup>20</sup> EIDINOW (2024: 150); GAIFMAN (2008: 99); VAN STRATEN (1992: 268).

<sup>21</sup> VAN STRATEN (1992: 269).



Figure 2. Athenian oenochoe (c.410 BC) showing pinakes suspended from a tree. © 2008 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre)/Hervé Lewandowski, <https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010274889>.

century description of the visit of Kyno and Phiale to the Asklepieion of Kos:

What works are here! You would say that Athena carved these lovely things—greetings, Lady. This naked boy, if I scratch him, won't he have a wound, Cynno? [...] And the ox, and the man leading it, and the woman following, and this hook-nosed man and the one with his hair sticking up, don't they all have the look of life and day? If I did not think I was acting too boldly for a woman, I should have cried out, in case the ox might do me some harm.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Herod. 4, 57–71. Translated by I. C. CUNNINGHAM.

Although Kynno and Phile are awe-struck, the source of their amazement is the statues' life-like beauty, not their connection to Asklepios.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, their references to Athena and to the ox come to life do suggest that they experienced a certain sense of the more-than-natural in their encounter with these objects.

A very different attitude is described in the first of the Epidaurian *iamata*. Inscribed on several stelai set up around the Asklepieion, the *iamata* are a collection of stories of divine healings.<sup>24</sup> Beyond attesting to the paramount importance of a *vision* of Asklepios as a source of the cure,<sup>25</sup> these stories reveal much about the behaviour of visitors to the sanctuary. One of them was Kleo, who sought Asklepios' help after a five-year pregnancy:

After this success, she inscribed upon an offering: 'The wonder is not the size of the pinax, but the act of the god: Kleo bore a burden in her stomach for five years, until she slept here, and he made her well.'<sup>26</sup>

This entry directly references the votive and quotes the inscription attached to it. It is remarkable for the way it speaks in Kleo's voice, shaping the encounter with the viewer by redirecting their presumed awe towards its proper recipient.<sup>27</sup> Kleo was clearly aware of the interactive nature of votive viewing: without a responsive viewer interacting with agentive objects, this inscription makes no sense.

<sup>23</sup> See also PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 214).

<sup>24</sup> LiDONNICI (1995: 40–44). That that *iamata* themselves were also an impressive object of ritual viewing, is suggested by Paus. 2, 27, 3.

<sup>25</sup> RENBERG (2017: 215); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 206).

<sup>26</sup> LiDONNICI (1995: A1).

<sup>27</sup> PRÊTRE (2019: 178).

Not all viewers, however, responded with wonder.<sup>28</sup> The *iamata* contain multiple tales of more sceptic viewers, including Ambrosia, blind in one eye:<sup>29</sup>

Walking about the sanctuary, she ridiculed some of the cures as being unlikely and impossible, the lame and the blind becoming well from only seeing a dream.<sup>30</sup>

Another concerns an unnamed man, known only as Unbeliever:

When he was looking at the plaques in the sanctuary, he didn't believe in the cures and was somewhat disparaging of the inscriptions.<sup>31</sup>

Both Ambrosia and Unbeliever are punished for their cynicism, but these entries make clear that walking around the sanctuary to examine the votives was a normal part of a visit, and even that visitors could engage with this display on different terms.<sup>32</sup>

Together with Herodas' poem, these entries allude to two important facets of the votive-viewing experience: the reciprocity of the action, and the materiality of the votive. Although studies of votives often give a prominent role to dedicatory inscriptions and epigrams,<sup>33</sup> the above demonstrates that a votive does not need such an inscription to 'talk back'. Even Kleo's inscription suggests that she expects the viewer to

<sup>28</sup> PRÊTRE (2019: 183–184).

<sup>29</sup> The nature of the ailment is not, of course, a coincidence. For the dynamics of (not-) seeing, see PETRIDOU (2013: 316–323).

<sup>30</sup> LIDONNICI (1995: A4).

<sup>31</sup> LIDONNICI (1995: A3).

<sup>32</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 213–214).

<sup>33</sup> For example: PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2018: 421–431); (2005: 212–217); DAY (1994); VAN STRATEN (1982: 69–77).



be struck by the materiality of her dedication more than anything else.<sup>34</sup> Through their active evaluation of the sight before them,<sup>35</sup> the viewers are brought into a responsive relationship with the votive, and it is in the charged space between them that both the ability of the object to co-create the sanctuary and the possibility for the viewer to take on a ritual-centred visuality emerge. Simultaneously, the stories of Ambrosia and Unbeliever emphasise that these potentials may not be realised when the viewer is not willing to take up the challenge. Even when viewers do take on this visuality, it does not preclude them from seeing what the object actually *is*:<sup>36</sup> Kleo's inscription and the conversation between Phile and Kynno vibrate with an awareness of the material dimension of the offerings, which shape their experience by prompting amazement, surprise, and even fear.

### A Note on the Viewer

We must now first make a brief comment on the identity of the viewer, as they are not only a viewer of the dedications of others, but also the (potential) dedicant of a dedication of their own. Within their experience of viewing, memories of previous dedications they had made and observed, knowledge about the rituals, and personal concerns about the events that had prompted this visit to the sanctuary, and much more came together, profoundly influencing the experiences of both viewing and dedicating.<sup>37</sup> Elsner speaks of the 'viewer-pilgrim',<sup>38</sup> but in an attempt to emphasise that material engagement with the dedications, I shall call them the dedicant-viewer.

<sup>34</sup> The manner in which a viewer might approach an inscribed offering is discussed in DAY (1994: 39–40).

<sup>35</sup> On active viewing, compare GOLDHILL (2006: 5–6); RUTHERFORD (2000: 137–139).

<sup>36</sup> GORDON (1978: 7–17) and PLATT (2011: 31–50) discuss this tension.

<sup>37</sup> GRAHAM describes these different types of religious knowledge as distal and proximal knowledge (2020a, 22–25).

<sup>38</sup> ELSNER (2007: 24).

## Asklepios Present

So what did these dedicant-viewers see? First of all, they saw divine power: the sight of the votive display confirmed that Asklepios was actively present in his sanctuary.<sup>39</sup> This experience may be characterised in two slightly different, but complementary ways. From a perspective centred on visibility, a dedicant-viewer employing a ritual mode of viewing may look at a statue or figurine, but *see* Asklepios.<sup>40</sup> This process is the focus of much of the work on visibility in Graeco-Roman religion.<sup>41</sup> If on the other hand, we take on a material perspective, we recognise how votives serve to make the supposed presence of the divine at a particular site into a material, tangible reality, so that it can be confronted and experienced by the worshippers.<sup>42</sup> These processes work in tandem: it is only because the dedicant-viewer is open to a ritual-centred mode of visibility that an object can be used to substantiate the presence of the divine, and vice versa, it is only because objects are recognised as active co-contributors to the experience of the sanctuary that the dedicant-viewer is able to see something more than the object.

This process functions on both a direct and an indirect level. The direct sense concerns images of Asklepios himself, in the form of statues, figurines, plaques, and more, which immediately evoked a sense of the presence of Asklepios within the sanctuary, and, as Eidinow emphasises, prompted the recounting of narratives that established both the presence of Asklepios and his relationship with mortals.<sup>43</sup> Petsalis-Dio-

<sup>39</sup> PLATT (2011: 38; 47); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 209); (2005: 187–188; 208).

<sup>40</sup> Platt (2011: 12–13); ELSNER (2007: 11).

<sup>41</sup> For example PETRIDOU (2013: 330–331); ELSNER (2007: 23–26).

<sup>42</sup> GAIFMAN (2008: 99). Compare RAPPAPORT's comments that objects can be used within religion to substantiate the insubstantial (1999: 141) or MEYER's definition of religion as mediation (2020: paragraphs 6–7). See also EIDINOW (2020: 193–194, 200), where votives are described as markers of the relationship between human and divine which grants the divine its existence.

<sup>43</sup> VAN STRATEN (1981: 81); EIDINOW (2020: 193–194).

midis, in her article *Amphiaraos Present*, from which the title of this section was taken, has outlined this phenomenon in great detail for images of the healing hero Amphiaraos at his sanctuary in Oropos. She notes that the various images of Amphiaraos that could be found around the sanctuary did not necessarily conjure the presence of the god in the same manner: a simple coin with a head of Amphiaraos is likely to provoke a different response than a relief showing the god at work.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, these ‘minor’ images, through their location, iconography, and sense of divine nearness, served as signposts towards the most prominent image of the god: the cult statue.<sup>45</sup> This is where the god was felt to be absolutely present, and therefore it was treated like a real person: it was fed, dressed, washed, and carried around in processions.<sup>46</sup> The sanctuary is an *assemblage*, in which different elements – votives, statues, rituals – acted together to firmly anchor the presence of the god in a manner more convincing than any one element could have achieved on its own.<sup>47</sup> This made him accessible to worshippers seeking help, but these worshippers’ encounter with Asklepios through his images was not uni-directional – to a dedicant employing a ritual-centred mode of viewing, the image was capable of responding.<sup>48</sup>

To be able to evoke the presence of Asklepios it was not necessary, however, that a votive actually depicted the god. In their most basic sense, votive dedications are prayers made physical, material manifestations of past healings.<sup>49</sup> Any votive thus attests to the power of Asklepios and his presence in the sanctuary, simply by recalling these healings, although

<sup>44</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 214–215; 218).

<sup>45</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 216). See also TANNER (2006: 88).

<sup>46</sup> PLATT describes a statue of Artemis as ‘activated as a material agent’ (2011: 19; also ch. 2). See also ELSNER (2007: 11–12); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 215–216); GLADIGOW (1985–6: 114–119).

<sup>47</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2016: 58); PLATT (2011: 107–108).

<sup>48</sup> BREMMER (2013: 15); ELSNER (2007: 24); TANNER (2006: 45).

<sup>49</sup> SZABÓ (2021: 110); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 213); DAY (1994: 43); VAN STRATEN (1981: 74–75). The stelai with *iamata* acted similarly, PRÊTRE (2019: 178).

perhaps in a manner somewhat different from directly encountering him in a statue.<sup>50</sup> This does require, however, a dedicant-viewer who is *will-ing* to see these miracles.<sup>51</sup> An example of the opposite is Cicero's tale of Diagoras the Atheist who, when a friend tries to show him the mass of votives displayed in the temple of the Great Gods of Samothrace as proof of the gods' care for humans, replies that things would have looked different if those who were not helped could also dedicate votives.<sup>52</sup> Like Ambrosia and Unbeliever, Diagoras knows he is expected to recognise the power of the gods here, but he refuses to employ this ritual-centred mode of viewing. Or, in terms of materiality, this passage emphasises that the agency of these votives is not an inherent quality, but can only come into effect once they enter into a *responsive* relationship with something else.<sup>53</sup> Such responsive viewers, by entering the assemblage of the sanctuary, allowed the votive display to actively shape their experience by establishing it as a place where the divine is present.<sup>54</sup>

### The Dedicant Present

If a votive is a prayer made physical, it is an anchor for the presence of its dedicator as much as for that of the deity, who asserts their identity in the giving of the gift.<sup>55</sup> This sentiment is poignantly expressed in a 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC inscription attached to a votive image of a priestess of Aphrodite from Argos:

<sup>50</sup> TANNER (2006: 88); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 187–188); VAN STRATEN (1981: 77). See also PLATT (2011: 83–85).

<sup>51</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 213). Note RENBERG's emphasis on distinguishing between solicited and spontaneous dreams, (2017: 3–7).

<sup>52</sup> Cic. *Nat. D.* 3, 89.

<sup>53</sup> See also PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS 2006, 213–214 and the discussion of Pentheus in PETRIDOU (2013: 314–315).

<sup>54</sup> SZABÓ (2021: 101); PLATT (2011: 74); ELSNER (2007: 24).

<sup>55</sup> EIDINOW (2024: 149); (2020: 180); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2006: 211; 214); VAN STRATEN (1981: 76). On memorialising dedicants, see also PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017: 114); (2016: 53).

Blessed Kypris, look after Timanthis; with/on account of a prayer for her sake Timanthes sets up this image so that later too, oh goddess, when this sanctuary on the promontory is visited, a thought be given to this servant of yours.<sup>56</sup>

The statue ensures that Timanthis will remain present within the sanctuary assemblage in perpetuity,<sup>57</sup> and the inscription calls out to later – willing – viewers to step into this interaction of votive, dedicant, and deity.

Although this individual memorialising function is well-recognised, the effect of the sheer mass of dedications visible in the sanctuary is considered less often.<sup>58</sup> If each votive is thoroughly entangled with its dedicant, then the assemblage of votives can only represent a *communitas*, made tangible within the space of the sanctuary.<sup>59</sup> *Communitas* is an anthropological concept denoting a spontaneous experience of communication and unity among pilgrims, which transcends the daily boundaries of class, nationality, and more.<sup>60</sup> Petsalis-Diomidis has used the idea to explore the fellow-feeling created among pilgrims to the Pergamene Asklepieion by the rules set out in the *lex sacra*.<sup>61</sup> She only briefly mentions the votive dedications left behind, and presents them primarily as an opportunity for pilgrims to highlight their individual narrative.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in VAN STRATEN (1981: 103). Compare also KLÖCKNER (2008: 139) and the story of the Orneatai told in Paus. 10, 18.5.

<sup>57</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017: 117; 121); VAN STRATEN (1981: 103–104).

<sup>58</sup> For example: PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017: 116–121); (2005: 208–217); VAN STRATEN (1992: 284). Compare, however, PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017: 54), which emphasises the collective dimension of inventory inscriptions.

<sup>59</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2016: 54–55); (2005: 217). See also HARRIS' discussion of communities as assemblages (2014: 90–91) and PRÊTRE's description of the *iamata* as a polyphony of individual voices drawn together by an editor (2016: 184).

<sup>60</sup> TURNER–TURNER (1978: 250–255); HIGGINS–HAMILTON (2020: 2–3); DI GIOVINE (2011: 250–251). The concept is not without critiques, some of which are summarised in DI GIOVINE (2011: 248, 254–255).

<sup>61</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 204–206).

<sup>62</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 206; 212–217).

But this does not do justice to the potential for the collection of votives to evoke a sense of tangible *communitas* based in the material.<sup>63</sup> They facilitated a telescoping of past, present, and future, gathering all these pilgrims in a single place through their dedications, incorporating them into the sanctuary assemblage, and thus giving a voice to both the sanctuary and its community.<sup>64</sup> It told the ritually-oriented dedicant-viewer that this was a place where Asklepios interacted with his worshippers, and provided them an opportunity to join that interaction through dedicating their own votive.<sup>65</sup>

A final opportunity for identification with past worshippers presented by the votive display is imitation. Returning to the stories of Ambrosia and Unbeliever, we can imagine a dedicant-viewer arriving at the sanctuary, reading these entries on the stele, and then walking around the sanctuaries themselves, only too aware that they were now *doing the exact same thing*.<sup>66</sup> This created a deeply responsive connection between the past and present visitor, emphasising to the dedicant-viewer that their own activities within the sanctuary were part of a continuous cycle of worship and dedication.<sup>67</sup> Through the votive display, the sense of diachronic *communitas* within the sanctuary is thus made not only material but also experiential. The confrontation between the material votive and the dedicant-viewer employing a ritual-centred visuality makes the experiences of past pilgrims accessible and emphasises the possibility of direct contact with Asklepios in his sanctuary.

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<sup>63</sup> Tangible *communitas* was first developed by Cox in her study of the Los Angeles Wisdom Tree (2018).

<sup>64</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2017: 113–114); (2016: 54–55); (2005: 217). See also EIDINOW (2020: 190). For the idea of material objects giving a place a voice, see COX (2008: 36). HARRIS emphasises the diachronic nature of a community (2014: 90).

<sup>65</sup> PLATT (2011: 38).

<sup>66</sup> DAY (1994: 72). Cf. GAIFMAN (2008: 90); PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 198–207).

<sup>67</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 205–206).

## Between Dedicator and Asklepios

Finally, this experiential, imitation-based element of the votive display provided the dedicant-viewer with a model.<sup>68</sup> Sometimes, the lesson is clear: anyone reading the *iamata* of Ambrosia or Unbeliever would understand that this was not the right behaviour in the sanctuary.<sup>69</sup> Similarly clear instructions are contained within the Pergamene *lex sacra*.<sup>70</sup> More interesting are the votive reliefs, which do not necessarily tell the dedicant-viewer what to do, but rather condition them on how to interpret what they will see in the sanctuary.<sup>71</sup> Many of these reliefs feature ritual scenes and, even when they are not ‘photographic’ images of what happened in the sanctuary,<sup>72</sup> the consistency of their iconography indicates that there was a shared understanding of how these events should be *understood* and communicated. A common theme, for example, shows one or more worshippers approaching the god, often seated behind an altar. After seeing this image, the dedicant viewer would understand that, when they prayed at the altar, Asklepios would be there to hear it, even if they could not see him (*fig. 3*).<sup>73</sup> Or, alternatively, a relief with an image of Asklepios visiting a patient in their dreams would tell the dedicant-viewer that when they had confusing dreams that night, this was actually a visit by the god (*fig. 4*). In short, by giving them the language and images they needed to interpret it, the viewing of dedications had a significant influence on how the dedicant-viewer understood their experience in the sanctuary.<sup>74</sup>

<sup>68</sup> RUTHERFORD (2000: 139–140).

<sup>69</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2016: 54); (2006: 214).

<sup>70</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 199–204).

<sup>71</sup> PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2016: 59–60); PLATT (2011: 31–33).

<sup>72</sup> RENBERG (2017: 221–226); GAIFMAN (2008: 87; 99); KLÖCKNER (2006: 149); VAN STRATEN (1992: 283–284); also PETRIDOU (2013: 325). *Pace* VAN STRATEN (1981: 85).

<sup>73</sup> Reliefs often maintain a careful ambiguity as to whether they depict a cult statue or a living deity: PLATT (2011: 12); TANNER (2006: 87–88).

<sup>74</sup> PETRIDOU (2013: 231); PLATT (2011: 39–42; 74).



Figure 3. Athenian relief (c.400 BC) showing a worshipper approaching Asklepios, Hygieia, and a hero.

© 1993 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre)/Hervé Lewandowski,

<https://collections.louvre.fr/ark:/53355/cl010279051>.

This immediate type of knowledge is related to a broader understanding of religion that is also communicated by these votives. In her discussion of reliefs dedicated to the Nymphs, Milette Gaifman has shown that they could be used to communicate complex messages about the relationship between the human and the divine.<sup>75</sup> The interplay between the relief and the inscription takes centre stage here, emphasising

<sup>75</sup> GAIFMAN (2008: 99–100). See also PLATT's discussion of a relief to Amphiaraos (2011: 44–47) and PETSALIS-DIOMIDIS (2005: 209–210).





Figure 4. Attic relief (400–350 BC) to Amphiaraos showing incubation scene, with votive pillar in the background. Wellcome Collection. Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0). Source: Wellcome Collection.

that the potential agency of material objects is only fully realised when they brought into connection with other elements in an assemblage.<sup>76</sup>

The many reliefs dedicated to Asklepios feature similarly diverse representations of the relationship between the god and his worshippers, and through the carving of a relief, these notions are made material, tangible, and long-lasting.<sup>77</sup> When they are subsequently encountered by a dedicant-viewer employing a ritual-centred mode of viewing, they actively prompt the viewer to reflect on the experience of supplication and dedication, contribute to shaping how that viewer conceived their own interactions with the divine, and thus prepare them for their own encounter with Asklepios.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> GAIFMAN (2008: 86–87), see also PETSALIS-DIOMDIS (2005: 213).

<sup>77</sup> GAIFMAN (2008: 97–99). See also TANNER (2006: 85–87); VAN STRATEN (1992: 283–284); and PETRIDOU (2013: 325–326).

<sup>78</sup> PETRIDOU (2013: 317–318); PLATT (2011: 32–39); PETSALIS-DIOMDIS (2006: 213); (2005: 207). See also RENBERG's comment on the possible 'autosuggestion' of cures, (2017: 229).

## Conclusion

So what did a visitor to the Asklepieion see? Certainly, they saw statues, plaques, figurines, and any other type of votive imaginable. But in looking at them, they would *see* much more: they saw Asklepios executing miracles, a community of worshippers being healed, a commentary on the relationship between the human and the divine, and a model for their own behaviour within it. In short, they saw far more than just objects and were prompted to do so by these objects' active role in co-creating the world of the sanctuary. This was a cyclical process: the double role of the dedicant-viewer and their inclinations towards ritual-centred visuality left more room for the votives to become active co-constituents of that world, but it was also precisely the agency of those votives that encouraged the dedicant-viewer to employ such ritual-centred vision. Although they draw from different strands of scholarship, concepts from new materialism and from the study of visuality in Graeco-Roman religion clearly work in tandem here.

This paper has outlined three major primary experiences growing out of this encounter between dedicant-viewer and votive display. It does not pretend at completeness – an endless number of other experiences could be imagined, nuances added to the experiences already described, and other senses considered. Nor is a strict division into three types tenable: an awareness of the activities of past pilgrims, for example, automatically implies an awareness of the divine presence towards which these activities are geared. Nevertheless, it has become clear that the votive display was a more powerful factor in giving shape to the experience of the Asklepieion than has so far been recognised, and that it actively collaborated with the dedicant-viewer's ritual-centred visuality and the other constituents of the sanctuary assemblage to create a space where direct contact with Asklepios was not only possible, but to be expected.

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