



Review

Roman Period Statuettes in the Netherlands and Beyond: Representation and Ritual Use in Context. By C. Veen. Amsterdam archaeological studies 30, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2023. Pp. xiii + 318, illus. Price £136. ISBN 9789463729383.

This book is based on Christel Veen's doctoral thesis of 2018. The introductory chapter establishes the subject area and scope of the study – the bronze and terracotta statuettes of the Netherlands – and defines the terminology used to analyse the deposition and character of the pieces. The only thing missing from this chapter is a map, which would help those not familiar with the Netherlands in the Roman period. Veen's stated aim in her study is how people used statuettes in everyday life and 'what the meaning and purpose of these artefacts could have been'.

Veen divides her study area into three regions: North of the Rhine, South of the Rhine, and the Roman Limes zone. Chapter 2 introduces each of these regions and lists the sites from which statuettes have been recovered, including a short description of the site, date, the statuettes found and any other interesting finds or context details. Included in this section is a map of the region and a table listing finds without contextual date. Unfortunately, there is no link between the text, table and maps, making them difficult to use; the find-spots on the maps are numbered, but the numbers are not cited in the text or the tables. This is a minor quibble, though, as there is a huge amount of information in this section which importantly gives context to the artifacts.

It is in Chapter 3 that analysis of the figurines themselves starts, examining the material, size and iconography of the artifacts in relation to their deposition in each of the three study areas. Veen discusses how the pieces came to the Netherlands and how this might be related to their size and quality of their execution. In the north, larger statuettes were perhaps diplomatic gifts or brought by returning soldiers. It has been suggested that imperfect statuettes were essentially dumped in the region with the possible assumption that the locals would not notice and retained them anyway.

Generally speaking, the distribution of statuettes in the Netherlands seems to match that in Britain, in terms of what is depicted, which types are more popular and where they are found. One interesting idea posited is the possibility that some of the less standard bronze artifacts were produced for an individual consumer, which is why they are unique, and that perhaps artisans could swap out heads, torsos, or legs. The iconography of pieces with Roman and non-Roman attributes and those attributed with the names of native deities are also examined in relation to local religious beliefs and Romanisation.

Chapter 4 discusses ritual – deposition, fragmentation and magical practices. A short discussion of each ritual type is followed by a list of the examples from the study area. Britain is used as a comparative dataset for the ritual deposition of statuettes, although Veen is rather dismissive of the evidence from the province, and in the table of British deposits, a Venus and Hercules from Silchester are listed, but the eagle and its reinterpretation as a foundation deposit are not mentioned.

Veen's study encompasses both metal and terracotta figurines, as she sees the distinction between the two materials as artificial. While I agree with this statement, her dataset consists of only 700 artefacts and one wonders how easy it would have been to consider both if the study area had, for instance, been France. It has been recognised for some time, however, that metal and terracotta statuettes often depict different subjects and appear in slightly different contexts, and this is the first time both types have been analysed for a whole region. The few examples in other materials such as lead, amber and clay are also considered. This study moves beyond the traditional approach of cataloguing types and discussing style into further consideration of context and deposition; the inclusion of size analysis produced interesting results. More studies such as this one are to be welcomed, and a further step that is being utilised in a current PhD project at the University of Reading studying statuettes in the British Museum is the use of pXRF.

Metallurgical study of statuettes has always been problematic, but analysis of metal type and surface finish could further the discussion of production, use and deposition of statuettes.

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