CAAS Abstract for October 2017 Annual Meeting
March 10, 2017

Small Sacrifices: Miniature Altars and Household Religion in Hellenistic Sicily

Scholarship on Greek household religion has long acknowledged the discrepancy between the numerous references to domestic cult practice in ancient written sources and the near absence of corroboratory archaeological evidence. Ancient authors allude to an array of ritual activity that took place in the home, from routine sacrifices and libations honoring household deities, to ceremonies marking birth, marriage, and death. Yet, attempts to confirm these practices in the archaeological record have proven largely unsuccessful. Few houses excavated in the Greek world were furnished with fixed altars or permanent hearths. Miniature terracotta altars, sometimes called arulae, are archaeologically attested, however. These objects are broadly associated with domestic cult practice because of their diminutive stature, but have received little scholarly attention, despite their ubiquity from Italy to the Black Sea region. As a result, this corpus of material has not been fully considered in the scholarship of Greek household religion. This paper accounts for this neglect by exploring the ritual significance of arulae, specifically those from Hellenistic Sicily. Situating the altars within their original archaeological contexts at different sites reveals patterns of use and distribution unmentioned by the literary sources. Arulae were not confined to the household, but dispersed throughout the city, from shops and administrative buildings in the agora to neighborhood sanctuaries along the streets. Their frequency in a range of domestic and public settings suggests that arulae fulfilled a ritual function distinct from that of fixed altars, while replicating certain sanctuary practices in the home. A contextual approach to terracotta altars in a specific region complicates the normative impressions of domestic cult derived solely from the ancient sources, and allows for a more flexible understanding of household religious rituals.

Selected Bibliography

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Audio-visual Aids

I would like to use a PowerPoint presentation to show images of the materials and sites discussed in my paper.