

Bronze Age Terracotta Statues of Ayia Irini, Kea: An Experimental Reconstruction and Technical Examination

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This project focuses on the large-scale terracotta statues from the temple of Ayia Irini on the Aegean island of Kea (Late Minoan IB/Late Cycladic II or 1500–1425 B.C.E.), examining the material and physical challenges involved in their manufacture. Our investigation consisted of two major efforts: a preliminary experiment in the United States in which we re-created the most complete of the statues (inv. no. K3.611; ht. 0.986 m), followed by a close examination of select pieces from the original Bronze Age group of more than 50 statues kept in the Archaeological Museum of Kea.

By completing the reconstruction project first, our intention was to gain a deeper understanding of terracotta as a medium and, more specifically, a more comprehensive knowledge of the clay techniques involved. For this portion of the project, we worked over a period of five months, typically sculpting in 3–4 hour sessions that were held 1–2 times per week. We began with a basic understanding of the techniques of the statues based on Caskey's 1986 publication and relied on this knowledge to help us adapt such techniques as constructing the skirt in the coil method, building the upper body with the support of an internal wooden armature, and other structural considerations.

With the knowledge of terracotta gained from our reconstruction, we were thus better prepared to examine and understand the originals from the artisan's perspective. Because of our familiarity with the challenges of terracotta, we could identify and interpret such clues as breakage points, finger marks, clay join sites, and other aspects of the fragments that give complex information on the processes involved. We also had a better appreciation for the time and labor commitments required to build statues of such a size, as well as the difficulty of maintaining stability while transporting the statues.

It must be emphasized that our reconstruction is by no means intended as an exact replica of the original Bronze Age statues but is, instead, a preliminary investigation of the material issues encountered in the production of large-scale terracotta sculpture. Importantly, the reconstruction gave us a more subtle insight into many of the creative processes involved for the Bronze Age terracotta sculptor. Our final examination of the original Bronze Age fragments, then, was enriched by this technical foundation of knowledge, and we were ultimately better able to contextualize the terracotta sculptures within Bronze Age Kea craft production as a whole.