

CHAPTER 28

Images

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Cultic Images: Ancient Discourse and Modern Notions

The question of images – that is, of material representation of the divine – may seem a criterion for the definition of religious identities in the ancient Mediterranean world. Although the category of “idolatry” applied by Christians is clearly polemical, that of aniconism, the absence of images in cult, is not less so. From the biblical interdiction to the Christian critics of “idolatry”, the Ancients themselves inscribed their reflections on divine images in an identity discourse. As a result, the absence of figurative images is used to characterize an exclusive religious identity, like that of ancient Israel, or the otherness of barbarians, like the otherness of Persians when seen by Greeks (Herodotus 1.131) or of Germans when seen by Romans (Tacitus, *Germania* 9). It also characterizes, according to philosophical conceptions echoing in the writings of Varro or Pausanias, the primitive forms of traditional cults. According to the former, the Romans have honored gods in the absence of any image for more than one hundred and seventy years (*Divine Antiquities* fr. 18 Cardauns: *deos sine simulacro coluisse*), while for the latter, Greeks would have worshipped gods represented first in the form of “rough stones” (Pausanias 7.22.4: *argoi lithoi*).

The analysis of archaeological remains leaves no choice but to deny any historical value to these interpretative schemes, which, however, strongly influenced our modern perceptions. Indeed, it is by largely basing himself on Pausanias and ancient textual sources that Winckelmann elaborated the evolutionary model of his *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), the classification of which today still inspires the history of Greek sculpture. Recent debates on the origins of Jewish aniconism also showed how strongly representations conveyed by the biblical text stand against a necessary re-reading demanded by the advances in archeology and the questioning of the Old Testament chronology. The cultic opposition constructed by the Decalogue between Israel and the

other peoples of the Levant, especially through the prohibition of making images of God, is an ideological construct that reflects less the singularity of Jewish religion with regard to neighboring polytheistic systems than the strong internal tensions derived from the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE. Many scholars have now abandoned the idea of an original Judaic monotheism and agree to consider it a late and progressive development; however, the questioning of the primitive aniconism of the Yahweh cult is based on archaeological and textual clues the interpretation of which is a matter of controversy, even if some scholars tend to favor a figurative worship of this national god in ancient kingdoms of Judah and Israel.

This approach does not imply to cast aside the testimony of ancient textual sources and rely on archaeological evidence only. On the contrary, recent works on aniconism in the Greek world show that thinking this phenomenon as a cultural construction supposes reviewing the whole spectrum of divine iconography (Gaifman 2012). In a culture that favors an anthropomorphic vision of gods, the simultaneous use of non-figurative forms (rough stones, pillars, stelae) makes it possible to experiment with all the resources of visual language for expressing the ineffable otherness of the divine. The motif of the “litholatry” (veneration of stones) associated during the Roman period with the figure of the pious human being could then be diverted to mock the superstitious behavior (Theophrastus, *Characters* 16.5). Nevertheless, many “aniconic” objects taken into account in these studies belong to a hybrid genre, whether they are semi-figurative (Hermaic pillars, for example) or symbolic (empty throne). In a different cultural context, like nascent Judaism, where more controversial identity processes are engaged, does our approach to aniconism remain unchanged? Beyond Judaism, it is the systems of representation of the divine in the whole ancient Near East that should be reconsidered.

What Images of the Gods?

Historians of religion, art historians and archaeologists constantly redefine the notions they rely on when studying images from perspectives, which of course are necessarily diverse. Their approaches may be complementary. For example, typologies drawn up by archaeologists and iconographic derivations pointed out by art historians may help historians of religion reconstruct the process of standardization and formation of “canons” of the divine representation, which are necessary for the understanding of polytheistic representations. As emphasized by the pontiff Cotta in Cicero’s dialogue *On the Nature of Gods* (1.81), a god’s representation is determined by human conventions: it is due to the features provided by painters and sculptors that every Roman knows (and recognizes) Jupiter, Juno, Minerva and all the other gods. Being conventional, these representations are of relative nature and vary from one culture to another. But first one must determine the wide spectrum of possible images, reviewing the data, especially the iconographic ones, reveals the complexity of the processes involved and interpretation problems hence encountered.

A votive relief of Greek or Hellenistic origin, dated in the second century BCE and displayed in the Museo Lapidario Maffei in Verona, Italy, provides a good example (Figure 28.1). A Greek inscription identifies the dedicant as Argenidas, son of Aristogenidas,



Figure 28.1 Relief of Argenidas. Museo Lapidario Maffeiiano, Verona. Photo courtesy Universität zu Köln, Archäologisches Institut (FA 4820-03_55747,2.jpg, www.arachne.uni-koeln.de).

and the addressees as the Dioscuri (Di Filippo Balestrazzi 1985; Lippolis 2009). The originality of this image lies in the fact that it displays several types of representation of the divine twins: on the left we can see on a basis two anthropomorphic statues of the gods, recognizable by their headdress, the *pilos*; on the right on a rocky height overlooking a sea landscape an aniconic representation of the Dioscuri in the form of the *dokana*, a beam assembly presenting the shape of the Greek letter Pi: Π (cf. Plutarch, *On Brotherly Love* 478a); and finally, in the center, on a higher basis (or an offering table) a pair of amphorae, the status of which is ambiguous: they have been interpreted either as cult objects (recipients containing *panspermia*) or as a symbolic representation of the gods. The twin gods have then been deliberately depicted in three different forms. That suggests that a different value was ascribed to each form in the field of the image. Among possible interpretations, one could suggest that the iconic statues and the aniconic *dokana* had a topical meaning: they may symbolize two geographically and chronologically distinct cult places, whereas the amphorae may refer to the divine presence as constructed during a certain ritual, probably a vow associated with navigation.

Several iconographic signs (*pilos*, amphorae, *dokana*, snake and others) on this relief are well attested in other iconographic corpora as the Laconian stelae or the Tarentine pinakes; they express in a codified visual language the nature of the honored deities. Yet, one encounters here a unique combination deliberately chosen by the commissioner Argenidas and probably commemorating a specific occasion. Paying close attention to consistency within this semantic system has led commentators to emphasize the “abnormal” iconography of the Dioscuri statues represented near the altar: the twins are not represented in the heroic semi-nudity that usually defines their status in the divine world, but are tightly wrapped in a cloak, as is the dedicator himself. Is this a personal choice or is it an echo of a lost iconographic model? Questions of this type are frequently implied in archaeological literature when it comes to searching for an image-type, often regarded as a “cult statue”.

Cult Statue or Divine Image?

The notion of ‘cult statue’ has been the subject of numerous debates during the last decades. Those concerning the chryselephantine statue of Athena dedicated in the Parthenon on the Acropolis of Athens give a fairly good idea of possible expectations and methodological aporias in that field. The rich sources record concerning the statue mostly consists of texts, but the appearance of the statue can be precisely reproduced since many copies and reproductions have been preserved. Being 11.80 meters tall and covered by more than 1,000 kg of gold, this statue plays a particularly important role in the ancient and modern imagination as the acme of classical sculpture and the embodiment of Athenian power. Can we call it a cult statue (and to what extent)? Or is it only an oversized offering?

The debate has focused on three points: (a) formal characteristics of the statue and terms describing it in written sources; (b) its involvement in ritual practices; and (c) its architectural environment, especially its inclusion into the organization of the sanctuary. The first question comes up against a problem already identified by scholars studying Greek vocabulary of visual representation: none of the terms employed, *agalma*, *bretas* or *hédos* specifically designates a cult statue; the supposed epiclesis “Parthenos” may refer to the statue as being associated with the building (and not the reverse); finally the words “golden statue” by which it was frequently referred, emphasize its value as an offering rather than its religious function. The involvement of the statue in cultic practices cannot be established in a decisive way either: we know of no altar, and no priestess of Athena Parthenos, and the rare dedications took place before the construction of the Parthenon or at a very late (fourth century CE). Lastly, it is not clear whether the building housing the statue was intended for cultic practice. Admittedly, it has the architectural appearance of a temple, but the epigraphic documentation mostly presents it as a place for storing and hoarding the offerings, which comes close to a “temple treasury”.

Recent studies have proposed different ways to soften the distinction too strictly established between cult statue and offering. Prost (2009), drawing on the work of Scheer (2000), replaces the statue into its diachronic context. He recalls the vicissitudes of this process especially during the third century BCE, and emphasizes the alternating episodes of fervor and oblivion. Within the sanctuary on the Acropolis, a great variety of layouts and many successive rearrangements point to a much greater fluidity of religious practices. Platt (2011) analyzes the epiphany processes developing through the different effigies of Athena on the Acropolis. Most notably, she shows that these should not be considered as competing with or excluding each other, but as being complementary. Though it was not at the center of the cult, Athena of Phidias took part in a renewed epiphany mode in the complex and dynamic construction of the figure of Athena Polias.

The brief review of this complex case allows for a better understanding of one of the methodological difficulties raised by the modern notion of “cult statue”, which implies, on the one hand, that a particular image was intended to embody the divine presence permanently, and, on the other hand, that it represented the central pole of cult. The spatial layout of the great Greek and Roman public temples may be interpreted in this sense (see Chapter 24). In ancient texts, temple and statue are inseparably linked, as shown in a late period definition, which presents the tutelary divinity of a cult as the one “whose statue is in the center of the temple” (Servius, *Georgics* 3.16). Unfortunately,

archaeologists rarely have access to intact contexts and the sequencing of certain sanctuaries is more complex than generally expected (see also Chapters 2 and 23). Ancient testimonies, including that of Pausanias for Greek sanctuaries, also show that other statues, inside and outside of temples, were receiving cult honors. Conversely, recent inquiries on the status of offerings come up against the issue of statues offered to gods (*anathemata*): in the absence of specific context and inscriptions, nothing fundamentally distinguishes the offered statue from the statue placed at the center of the temple. Finally, rather than the statue, it is the altar and its surroundings, an area common to human beings and gods, that were the central place for most cult acts performed within a sanctuary.

Often based on written rather than on archaeological documentation sources, recent research on statues in Greece and Rome have rightfully questioned the notion of “cult statue”: philologists scarcely find any traces of it in the Greek or Latin vocabulary, archaeologists generally face serious difficulties in identifying it due to lack of usable context, whilst art historians try, often in vain, to retrieve its reflection from votive or numismatic material. Should we then abandon any attempt of emic or etic approach? Reconsidering the ancient discourse is necessary in order to deconstruct the notion of ‘cult statue’.

What is Idolatry?

When, at the end of the second century CE, Minucius Felix decided to present the defense of Christianity in the form of a philosophical dialogue, he took as starting point of the discussion a simple kiss thrown from his fingertips by Caecilius, a pagan to an image of Serapis. Octavius, a Christian, criticizes then “the blindness and crass ignorance of one who’s dashing himself against stones, even though they may be carved, anointed and garlanded” (*Octavius* 2.4–3.1). However, the question of “idols” and their place in religious practices is hardly addressed later in the arguments put forward by both opponents. For the Church Fathers, stigmatizing the “idolatry” of traditional religions is not so much a matter of literally denouncing the veneration of images as of denouncing the falsehood of wrongly honored gods. Therefore, if images admittedly are central to the Christian criticism, it is only because, being themselves conceived as appearances (the fact that Christians chose the Greek term *eidolon* is significant in this respect), they provide clear proof of the futility of pagan gods. In that sense, the denunciation of idolatry does not target specific rituals concerning images; on the contrary, it is aimed at all acts of traditional worship: libations, sacrifices, festivals and priesthoods. Tertullian, who claims the birth of idolatry took place before images were invented, expresses this idea very clearly: even with no idol idolatry is committed (*On Idolatry* 3.1–4).

However, Christian apologists employ in their demonstrations arguments borrowed from the philosophical culture of their time, which was strongly influenced by the ancient debates on *mimesis* (imitation) and the status of the image, on the nature of the gods and their representation, or on piety and *superstitio* (superstition). Identifying their sources and reconstructing the notions they borrowed from these may help to better understanding of the ontological status of the divine, as perceived through divine images in traditional Greek and Roman systems. One of the favorite targets of Christian apologists is the materiality of divine images: as Ando (2008) has noted, “the seemingly irreducible materiality of idols, on the one hand, and the seeming impossibility of representing

anything invisible and incorporeal in or through matter, on the other, formed the basis of all critiques of idolatry in Graeco-Roman literature” (2008: 27). Far from presenting pagans as simple souls confusing images with gods, signifier with signified, the Church Fathers, including Augustine, consciously play with the famous “ambivalence” of the relation between medium and image coined by the work of Belting (1994). In polemics between them and cultivated pagans who, as heirs of Platonic theories, favored an allegorical reading of divine images, it was easy for them to put forward the ritual practice itself, which constructs the divine in very different ontological mode.

Let us give Minucius Felix the floor once more: “Unless perhaps the stone, or the wood, or the silver is not yet a god. When, therefore, does the god begin his existence? It is reeked, it is wrought, it is sculptured – it is not yet a god; lo, it is soldered, it is built together – it is set up, and even yet it is not a god; lo, it is adorned, it is consecrated, it is prayed to – then at length it is a god (*ecce ornatur, consecratur, oratur; tunc postremo deus est*), when man has chosen it to be so, and for the purpose has dedicated it” (*Octavius* 23.5). With the art of an African rhetor, he claims here the very same thing as our contemporary image anthropology does: the “divine” nature of image is not built up by the intrinsic qualities of the latter, but by the interaction between the image considered as a material object and the gaze that constructs it as a presence (or a desire of presence). In such religious systems as ancient polytheism, based on ritualism and conceived as complex communication systems, ritual practices were not confined to “magical” acts transforming the status of an object, but could be conceived as sophisticated strategies by means of which it became possible to construct a divine presence based on the ambivalence of the image, as medium. However, one must keep in mind the diversity and fluidity of these processes, which are specific to each culture.

Ambivalence of Images and Ritual Strategies

Therefore, one can take a fresh look at idols and examine them in the light of the criteria used to define them. How did visual devices (iconography, materials, spatial arrangement) and ritual performances contribute to constructing a specific status of the divine image? Platt’s analyses (2011) on epiphany in Greco-Roman culture prove how fruitful this approach can be for understanding a visual culture of divine; they now inspire archaeologists and historians of religions. I will give here a few significant examples; further information can be found in recent articles from *Thesaurus Cultus et Rituum Antiquorum* (Hölscher 2005; Linant De Bellefonds 2004).

How should statue consecration be considered? To what ritual, for example, does Minucius Felix allude when he states that the god is “consecrated”? At first glance, in Greek or Roman worlds there was no consecration ritual for cult images similar to those known for other cultures, such as the Mesopotamian *Mîs-pî* ritual (the “washing of the mouth”) or the Egyptian “opening the mouth” ritual. In Mesopotamia in particular, the ritual not only required an anthropomorphic representation of the deity, but it also supposed denying the statue had been made by human hands. These rituals were not specific to divine images: the Egyptian ritual of “opening the mouth” was also part of the funerary practices.

In Greece, documentation on ritual consecration remains scarce and difficult to interpret. If there were placement procedures (*hidrusis*), they were not specific to divine images and left little place to the anthropomorphic character of gods. Similarly, in Rome, the consecration rituals were performed when establishing temples and altars as well as statues, all being perceived as the constituent elements of a divine property. The paradoxical nature of the divine image was probably expressed in another way, especially through etiological narratives defining some statues as miraculous or even *acheiropoietes*, “not made by human hands”.

For instance, the choice of materials the divine images were made of may be considered in a dynamic approach to manufacturing and ritual. In Egypt, gold was considered the “flesh of the gods”, while in Rome, it was not exclusively reserved to gods, through its use in statuary was no less significant. Its increasing use for imperial effigies was not intended to affirm the divine nature of the emperors but helped to emphasize their pre-eminence in the scale of honors. The sources concerning the statue of Serapis in Alexandria give insights into concrete procedures involved when manufacturing a divine figure: besides chosen iconography, the use of certain manufacturing techniques and materials (including use of mixed gemstones) helps express the nature of this new god and gives him shape of his own (Belayche 2011).

The anointing of stones and statues with perfumed oil, a typical gesture of common piety, has often been interpreted in very different ways, either functional (maintenance of cult objects) or symbolic (reinvigorating the divine effigy). More recently, this gesture has been brought into relation with the olfactory dimension of rituals (Prost 2008). Whatever ritual sequence the gesture took place in, the fragrance was associated with the statue and helped construct the divine presence in an epiphany mode. The well-documented presence of censers and incense burners in the sanctuaries then deserves to be taken into account when examining ritual procedures attested, for example, by epigraphy.

A description attributed by Augustine to Seneca, criticizing superstitious behaviors, gives an idea, though certainly distorted, of the lively spectacle that could be witnessed in Rome’s great public sanctuaries: “But if ever you go up on the Capitol, it will make you feel ashamed just to see the crazy performances put on for the public’s benefit, all represented as duties by light-hearted lunacy. So Jupiter has a special attendant to announce callers and another one to tell him the time; one to wash him and another to oil him, who in fact only mimes the movements with his hands. Juno and Minerva have special women hairdressers who operate some distance away, not just from the statue, but from the temple; they move their fingers in the style of hairdressers, while others again hold up mirrors” (Augustine, *City of God* 6.10). There is nothing strange about the actions of these devotees; instead, they offer a fully representative sample of the protocol governing relations between the faithful and the gods (paying homage, prayer, fulfillment of vows, etc.) and consisting of gestures staged in accordance with practices borrowed from the world of social relations between men (morning salutation, grooming and bathing, judicial patronage). Statues of gods here are at the center of the attention of the faithful and, even if Seneca criticized a perception much too literal of the anthropomorphic representation of gods, some details reveal at the same time the unalterable superiority of the divine body, which remains inaccessible.

Guide to Further Reading

For a discussion of idolatry and aniconism as cultural constructions in the Hellenistic world see Barbu (2011) and Gaifman (2012). For debates on Jewish aniconism and, more generally, on the cult images in the Ancient Near East, from a very extensive bibliography: Van der Toorn (1997) and Dick (1999). Issues of representation of the divine and visual construction through the statues are treated in Steiner (2001), Stewart (2003), Rüpke (2010), and Platt (2011). On problems of definition of images in cult see Martin (1987), Scheer (2000), Nick (2002), Hölscher (2005), Estienne et al. (2008), Prost (2009), and Mylonopoulos (2010). On the ambivalence of images and their religious definition consult Gordon (1979), Gladigow (1986, 1990), Graf (2001), and Ando (2008, 2010, 2011). For studies on images in ritual performances see Lorton in Dick (1999), Bettinetti (2001), Estienne (2001), Linant De Bellefonds (2004), Pirenne-Delforge in Estienne et al. (2008), and Prost (2008).

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