

Aphrodite of Knidos: Sex symbol or precursor of the modern woman?

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I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the organisers of the *Symposium* for creating a conducive atmosphere. The concert was also really remarkable.

When I was invited to the Symposium, I couldn't say "no". I was here since 1988 when the Knidos excavations were restarted under the presidency of Prof. Dr. Ramazan Özgan. Of course, I'm usually in Yazıköy now. Since then, I've been working in Knidos, so I was really happy to be able to take part in this project.

Our subject is the nude statue of Aphrodite of Knidos, also known as *Knidia*, the original of which has been lost. I will also try to show you the connection between Aphrodite of Knidos and the woman in antiquity. My title may strike you as unusual. I thought it would be useful to introduce Aphrodite of Knidos first. I will briefly touch on the debates between the original and the copy of this lost sculpture. It is also important to look at the work of the artist Praxiteles. Only after these two issues have been addressed will we be able to define Aphrodite. I think I should also mention the perception of nudity at the time. Here we will see how nudity was perceived with examples from the period. Then we will look at what kind of message Praxiteles was trying to convey, hence the importance of Aphrodite of Knidos and the connection of women in antiquity. I will conclude with the impact of *Knidia* to the present day.

Aphrodite of Knidos: Evaluation of Replicas

It is firstly necessary to provide a reminder of certain facts: The original sculpture of Praxiteles is no longer extant. What we

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have are replicas of the Roman Period. One such example is the Colonna Venus, which is currently on display at the Vatican in Rome. As a result of the research and evaluations conducted to date, it is the sculpture that is considered to be the most accurate representation of the art of Praxiteles.



Figure 1 Venus Colonna, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican

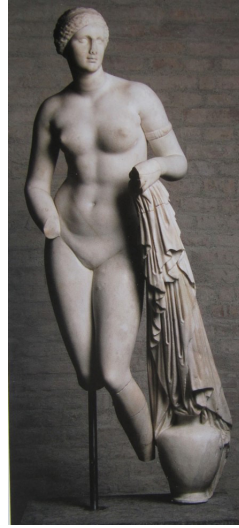


Figure 2 Aphrodite Braschi, Glyptothek, Munich

The differences between the Braschi sculpture in the Glyptothek in Munich, Germany and Colonna are immediately apparent. For example, the *hydria* (water jug) is smaller than the one in Rome. In both sculptures, Aphrodite either places her clothes or towel on this hydria or takes it from it. This has been a subject of debate among experts. Is Aphrodite getting ready for a bath or getting out of it? The prevailing opinion, which I also believe to be correct, is that Aphrodite is preparing the bath.

While searching traces of Praxiteles, how do we know that Colonna is the closest copy to the original? Coins can help us. The Aphrodite figure found among the coins of Knidos belonging to the Roman period probably reflects the original

sculpture. The dimensions of the hydria, the water jug, match the Munich and other copies. The Colonna Venus sculptor evidently altered the original slightly. Their style, however, corresponds to the classic original.



Figure 3 Coin of Aphrodite of Knidos

Who is Praxiteles?

Let's come to Praxiteles, the creator of Aphrodite of Knidos. Sculpture had important place in ancient Greek civilization. Until the 4th century BC, the gods and mythological figures that were the subject of sculpture were portrayed as authoritarian and distant from human beings. A new understanding began with Praxiteles: From then on, the gods were portrayed as human-like, in all their positive and negative aspects.

The father of Praxiteles, who lived in the 4th century BC and belonged to a renowned Athenian artistic family, was also a sculptor. It seems reasonable to posit that they must have worked together. Furthermore, the era in which Praxiteles lived was a period of significant advancement in philosophy, science, and technology, accompanied by notable transformations across a range of disciplines.

Before sculpting *Knidia*, the artist created sculptures such as *Aphrodite of Arles*, *Apollo Sauroktonos* and the *Resting Satyr*. Of course, the question of how these works reflect Praxiteles is important. However, since our subject is Aphrodite, the answers to this question should be discussed next time.

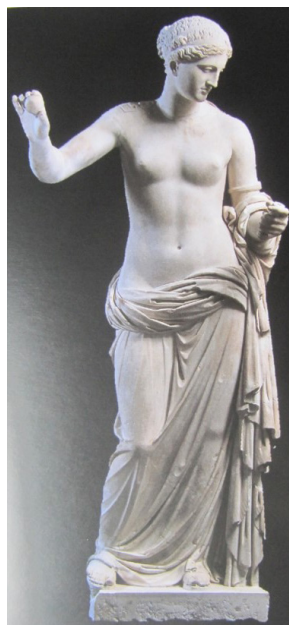


Figure 4 Aphrodite of Arles, Musée de Louvre, Paris



Figure 5 Apollon
Sauroktonos, Musée de
Louvre, Paris

It is important to note that Praxiteles made the Aphrodite of Arles more masculine with small breasts and a narrow hip. This indicates that the Aphrodite of Arles was not depicted realistically by a model, but was portrayed more like a young girl.

Apollo is depicted as a youthful god. He is leaning against a tree. On the tree is a lizard. Apollo is holding a rope tied to the lizard in one hand and an arrow in the other. Sauroktonos means “lizard killer”. Praxiteles created him as a naughty child. Apollo is by no means a well behaved god in mythology, but in this statue the artist has emphasised a negative side of the god. Was Praxiteles trying to create a new image of Apollo? He

makes the gods and mythological figures look human with all their negative characteristics.

Aphrodite of Knidos!

Praxiteles finally carved the Aphrodite of Knidos. We have just emphasised that the Colonna sculpture is said to be the closest to the original.

The sculpture is standing upright, completely naked. The weight of the body is on the right leg. The left leg is slightly bent inwards, the knees drawn together. The right arm and hand cover the genital area. In other words, the genital area is slightly covered by both legs and the right hand. The breasts are exposed. She has turned her head slightly to the left. A *hydria* is placed on her left foot. *Knidia* is holding a garment with her left hand. The researchers were also interested in whether this garment was placed on the *hydria* when she entered the bath, or whether it

was removed from the *hydria* when she left the bath.

We see that the sculpture reflects a very relaxed attitude. Although there is a sense of embarrassment, there is no sense of shyness or stress, no anxiety, no hurry, such as “Is someone watching me, is someone coming?” The eyes are slightly closed and looking away. The mouth is slightly open.

Although the precise location in Knidos remains unknown, it is believed that the original sculpture was situated within a temple (We don't know whether to call it a chapel or an arbour) in Knidos. Written sources indicate the presence of a garden in the vicinity. Based on these sources, it can be surmised that the sculpture had a front and back entrance or door. Consequently, it is postulated that the goddess could be viewed from both the front and back. Upon examination of the images of *Knidia* from the rear, it becomes evident that the craftsmanship is particularly meticulous.

It is evident that Praxiteles' *Knidia* was the subject of considerable admiration when we consider the sculptures of the period. In order to better comprehend the messages conveyed by the sculptor, it is essential to look at the symbolic significance of nude figures in Antiquity.

Nudity: Men - Women

Let's start with male nudity. Here you can see an Archaic funerary sculpture and a Classical funerary stele. Both show young men who died in battle. The men are naked. This is symbolic because, of course, these soldiers did not go to war naked. In fact, the man on the funerary stele is holding his weapons. The nudity is not a realistic portrayal, it conveys a certain message. According to the understanding of the time and

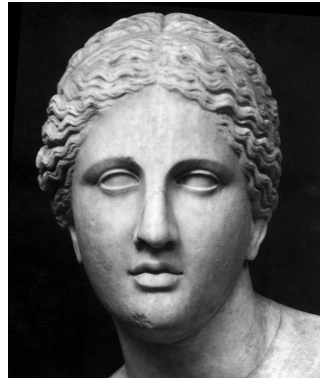


Figure 6 Head of Colonna Venus, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican

according to ancient sources, young men have beautiful bodies. The Hellenes called them *kalos*. To be a *kalos* is to have an athletic body, to be able to run fast, to be strong and brave. What else could you ask for to describe a man! Both immortals and mortals are depicted naked to reflect these characteristics. These are emphasised by the form of the skulpture's body.

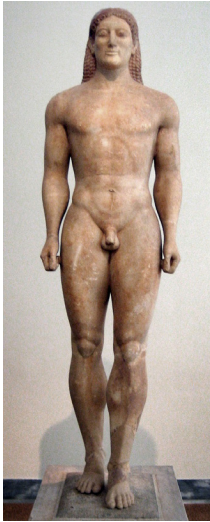


Figure 7 Kroisos sculpture,
National Archeological Museum,
Athens



Figure 8 Ilisos tomb stele, National
Archaeological Museum, Athens

When we reach the fourth century BC, we observe a number of changes. The passage of time had brought about a change in thinking. In the necropolis known today as the cemetery of Ilissos in Athens, a remarkable funerary stele was discovered, perfectly preserved. The figure on the left is younger than the other. He is accompanied by his grieving father. The presence of the Heracles cudgel in the hand of the deceased indicates that individuals were beginning to present themselves as gods. This suggests that the level of male nudity had reached a new peak, with nudity being perceived as a form of glorification.

With regard to women, they were fully clothed in the same period. The female figures were kept hidden and closed. This is also observed in the case of goddesses and female figures and persists in some countries to the present day.

In antiquity, there was a development over time. This development is thanks to artists and philosophers. Let us consider mythological figures and goddesses from the 5th century BC. For example, in the sculpture of Venus Genetrix from the late 5th century BC, there is a very thin dress which shows the body lines.

A further example of the same period is the sculpture of the Niobe group. Niobe is the protagonist of a mythological narrative. She is the mother of fourteen children. She attempts to outdo Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, with her own offspring. In a brutal act of retribution, Apollo and Artemis, the children of Leto, slaughter all of Niobe's children. In this sculpture we see one of Niobe's dying daughter. Her dress has fallen off, she is half naked. The artist chose nudity here to show vulnerability. In other words, artists of the time (late 5th century BC) discovered the female body and began to depict mythological female figures half naked.



Figure 9 Venus Genetrix ,
Louvre, Paris

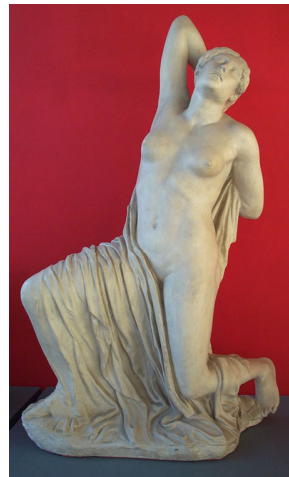


Figure 10 A daughter of
Niobe, National Museum,
Rome

Renowned artists such as Phidias, working in the 5th century BC, reflected this change in Aphrodite. Whereas in earlier periods Aphrodite was depicted fully clothed, in this work her dress has shifted, clinging to her body and revealing her mature curves. The goddess of love is shown here resting on the lap of another goddess, like a normal woman after an active night. This sculpture is an original work made for the Parthenon in the 430s BC.



Figure 11 Aphrodite from Phidias, East pediment of the Parthenon, British Museum. Londra

The messages Praxiteles wanted to deliver

In keeping with the new image of women described above, Praxiteles was the first sculptor to depict Aphrodite, the goddess of love, completely naked.

I would like to open an important parenthesis here. It is a very common story that Praxiteles made two sculptures of Aphrodite, one clothed and one naked, and that the naked one came to Knidos when the rulers of the island of Kos preferred the clothed one. But it makes no sense for the truth to be like this. Because in those days sculpture was made to order. Sculpting is very difficult; it is a long process that requires experience. This work was carried out by the production and delivery of the order, not by the sculptor making his own sculpture and selling it left and right. In short, the truth of this Kos-Knidos story must be different. Such stories are, of course, partly based on reality. Kos must have commissioned a clothed Aphrodite. On the other hand, it is useful to understand why Knidos preferred a naked Aphrodite statue by looking at the location of the city.

Knidos has always been in contact with Cyprus and Syria. We can see this from our findings since the Archaic period. For example, many small *kuroi* i.e. sculptures of young men, in Cypriote style have been excavated from the Apollo sanctuary in Emecik. These sculptures prove the connection of Knidos and Datça or the Knidos peninsula with Cyprus. Cyprus here geographically includes Syria and Phoenicia and even Egypt.

Let me show you two examples. In this Cypriot figure in particular, we see a posture similar to that of *Knidia*. With her right hand she is trying to cover her genital area, or rather to show it, while with her other hand she is holding her breast.

Another example from Syria is a sculpture of a completely naked woman. The figures represent Ishtar or Astarte, the goddess of love and fertility in Eastern cultures. Their culture emphasises sexuality and reproduction. This is why the breasts and genitalia are particularly well represented. The female sculptures of prehistoric times fall into the same category. Such an idea and perception also existed in Cyprus. As mentioned above, the people of Knidos may have commissioned a nude sculpture of Aphrodite because they were influenced by these eastern regions.

In order to fully understand the creative and ingenious power of Praxiteles, let us take a look at the sculptures of Aphrodite from later periods.

Let us recall the feelings and thoughts that we highlighted when we described Colonna Aphrodite: *Knidia* is the image of a woman



Figure 12
Cypriot figure,
Nationalmuseet,
Kopenhagen

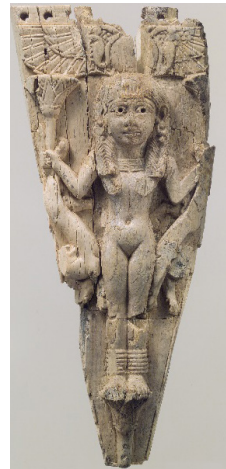


Figure 13 Ishtar or
Astarte, ivory relief,
The Metropolitan
Museum, New York

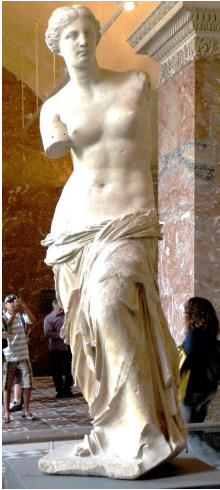


Figure 14 *Aphrodite of Melos, Musée de Louvre, Paris*

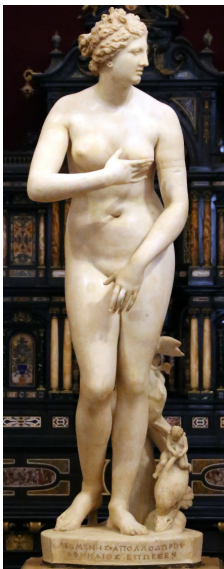


Figure 15 *Medici Afroditi, Uffizi Galerisi, Florance*

who is not ashamed of her surroundings, who is not afraid, who does not hesitate, who is completely naked, who goes about her daily work, who is very comfortable. However, we see that later artists changed this new image of Aphrodite in a certain way. Let's take Aphrodite of Melos, for example.

It is original and dates from the 2nd century BC. She has a mature body, full breasts and large hips. It is a typical Hellenistic sculpture. Half-naked, far from the *Knidia*. You can see the stampede at the Louvre Museum in the picture; she obviously has many admirers.

Let's take another example. The Medici Aphrodite. Experts believe that it dates from the Hellenistic period. Here Aphrodite is trying to cover herself, she is in a hurry, she does not want to show herself. She has lost her comfort. She is portrayed more as a sex symbol. But I am not saying that sex in antiquity was something to be ashamed of, that it should be perceived negatively.

A well-known painting by the celebrated Italian painter Sandro Botticelli, entitled "La nascita di Venus" is worthy of note. The painting depicts Aphrodite emerging from a giant seashell. In the Renaissance painting from the 15th century, Aphrodite is depicted with her genitals covered. Botticelli has created an innocent and defenceless character far from the self-confident *Knidia* of Praxiteles.

I want to add something here. Ancient sources tell us how much *Knidia* resonated. However, all the sources were written in the dates after the period when Praxiteles lived. Especially during the

Roman period, tourists came to Knidos just to see *Knidia*. As I mentioned before, the sculpture was erected in a structure like a chapel in a garden. A guard opens the door both in front and behind for the tourists. It was possible to enter through any door and look at the sculpture. We also know that there are stories of men staying overnight and having a kind of “love affair” with her.

After Praxiteles, people’s views of Aphrodite changed. They lost the meaning she was trying to give. What effect did this have on the people of Knidos, especially the women of Knidos?

In this context, let us look at how the people of Knidos, especially women, lived.

First of all it is necessary to say the following: The social life and belief system of Knidos is actually based on Apollo, Asclepius and Demeter. If we consider only the women, Demeter is the main goddess for the women of Knidos. During the *Thesmophoria* festivals, which were exclusively theirs, the women shared a wide range of topics with her. It is Demeter who protects the women and organises their lives. There are even some traditions that have survived to this day because of this belief. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Güray Ünver, the speaker of the session entitled “*Symposium Knidia*”, presented a broad framework on this subject through the curse tablets.

And what was life like for women in ancient times?

Here we see a relief from the 8th century BC. The full dining table in front of the woman indicates that this is a rich house. Nevertheless, the Lady of the house has a spindle in her hand. She is preparing thread to weave cloth. Although she is rich, she does this work herself.

This iconography persists throughout the entirety of antiquity. A tomb stele from the early 4th century also depicts the same image. The figure is accompanied by an attendant. This is the world of women. There are innumerable examples of such tomb steles and other reliefs.



Figure 16 Tomb stele, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin

For example the writer and historian Xenophon (c. 430-354 BC) writes in his *Oikonomikos*: “Woman is physically weak; therefore she cannot do heavy work, any physical work tires her, and she is therefore despondent and fearful. She should stay at home and do the housework”. Here I would like to underline the adjectives “despondent and fearful” and remind you that Aphrodite of Knidos was not like that.

According to this view, the woman of that time was responsible for the education of the children and the production at home. She was in control of food preparation and cooking, of gathering wool or cotton for clothing, spinning it into rope, weaving cloth, sewing, distributing the tasks of the servants and slaves in the house, and solving problems. In short, the woman was the patroness of the house.

The celebrated philosopher Plato employs comparable terminology. Aristotle gives examples from animal life, stating, “The man should preside, and dominate the woman.”

In this context, the concept of *oikos*, which can be translated as ‘household’, was of great importance. Throughout this period, the institution of the “family” was officially recognised as the foundation of the state. Thus also children were depicted on these objects. The status of the family was further strengthened by the statesman Pericles in the 5th century, who granted certain privileges to Athenian families. For example, only Athenian women were allowed to enter into official marriages, and their offspring were granted the status of Athenian citizens. However, although Pericles himself introduced this rule, he could not marry Aspasia of Miletus,

with whom he lived, because she was a foreigner, and their children could not become Athenian citizens.

A significant number of vase paintings depict *oikos*’ life in this manner. The term *gynaikon* (or *gynaikonitis*) refers to the women’s quarters in a house. Here the woman lived as the patroness of the household and took care of various matters.



Figure 17 Vase painting,
National Archeological
Museum, Athens

This is how life goes on for the woman, as depicted in the numerous vase paintings that we have previously examined. Baths are prepared, guests arrive, marriage preparations are made, and household necessities are produced.

The impact of the Aphrodite of Knidos to the present day

The status of women in society remained largely unchanged until the 5th and 4th centuries BC. However, during the Hellenistic period, the concept of *oikos* began to lose its significance. While women's rights saw a degree of advancement. The right to own property was established, and women were able to accumulate wealth. Young girls were permitted to pursue education and attend theatre competitions as spectators. Artists created portrait sculptures of living women.

The sculpture was discovered on the terrace of Demeter at Knidos. It is the portrait of the priestess Nikokleia. In contrast to the perfect facial features, she shows slight signs of age: bags under the eyes, hollows around the mouth and facial wrinkles. It can therefore be concluded that the existence of women is now recognised.

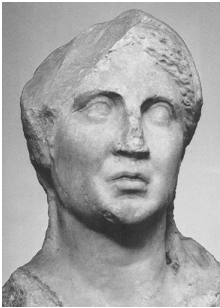


Figure 18 Nikokleia, British Museum, London



Figure 19 II. Coins of Berenike and Kleopatra Thea

As time progresses, the number of such sculptures continues to increase. In addition to the sculptures of gods, goddesses, statesmen and heroic men, we begin to see the emergence of sculptures of women who are



Figure 20 Sculpture of the couple Kleopatra and Dioskurides, Delos



Figure 21 Tomb stel, Centrale Montemartini, Rome

self-confident, who perform valuable work and who contribute to the greater good.

Let us look to the coins struck in honour of Egyptian queens. The figures are portrayed as corpulent. The fatness of the figures depicted has a symbolic meaning associated with wealth. The horns depicted on the coins also symbolise this.

Let's take a look at another portrait sculpture of a confident woman from the Hellenistic period. This time from the island of Delos. Unfortunately the heads of the couple are missing. These statues were found in a villa. So it was commissioned by a woman and her husband. The woman is standing beside her husband.

In the Roman period, the importance and status of women was further developed. Let's look at this funerary stele. It shows an elderly couple. As a figure it has the characteristics of the Hellenistic period. The details of age on their faces represent positive qualities such as experience and wisdom.

As the images show, women in Anatolia were allowed more freedom. A portrait sculpture

discovered at Perge is a vivid example of this phenomenon: Plancia Magna of Perge. This woman was mayor of the ancient city of Perge three times in the early 2nd century BC. She also held the position of high priestess of Artemis Pergaia, the most important cult in Perge, and priestess of the imperial cult. These are remarkable positions for a woman. Plancia, a member of an ancient Italian family of merchants, undertook the renewal of the city entrance and the setup of numerous sculptures. The inscription on the base of the sculpture gives her the title “patronissa”.



Figure 22 Plancia Magna, Antalya Museum

The mosaic provides an insight into women’s participation in sport in late antiquity. The mosaic from Villa Casale in Sicily, dating from the 4th century AD, is remarkable for its depiction of young girls engaged in athletic activities and competitions. Their dresses, which could be described as a bikini, are remarkable.



Figure 23 Bikini Mosaic, Villa Casale, Sicily

In the light of the above examples, it can be argued that the Aphrodite of Knidos represents the gradual evolution of women's struggle for autonomy, which began with modest advances. Nevertheless, it seems that the centuries-long struggle of women for emancipation will continue.

Praxiteles determined Aphrodite as a woman with her own nature, independent and self-confident. In contrast to earlier artistic periods, Praxiteles demonstrated that the female body is very beautiful. The inhabitants of Knidos were well aware of this. At least the women... However, those who visited Knidos in later times attributed a different meaning to Aphrodite. For some she was a sex symbol. Written sources suggest that tourists visiting Knidos during the Roman period attributed the pornographic items sold in the stalls to Aphrodite. Such figurines and oil lamps have been discovered during archaeological excavations. However, these figurines are not related to Aphrodite, but directly to Dionysus.

In summary, Praxiteles created a new image of Aphrodite of Knidos, humanising the gods and undoubtedly placing a higher value on the women of his time. This sculpture therefore represented a turning point.

Note: This text corresponds to the oral version of the presentation with minor changes.

Image Bibliography:

Figure 1 Venus Colonna, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican
Wikipedia Commons. Afrodite Cnidia. [2024] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Afrodite_cnidia.jpg

Figure 2 Aphrodite Braschi, Glyptothek, Munich
Wikipedia Commons. Aphrodite Braschi. [2024]. credit:Bibi Saint-Pol https://tr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:Aphrodite_Braschi_Glyptothek_Munich_258.jpg

Figure 3 Coin of Aphrodite of Knidos
Knidos Excavation and Research Archive

Figure 4 Aphrodite of Arles, Musée de Louvre, Paris
Wikipedia Common. Venus of Arles. [2024]. Credit: Marie-Lan Nguyen https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Venus_of_Arles#/media/File:Venus_of_Arles_Louvre_Ma439_n01.jpg

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Figure 5 Apollon Sauroktonos, Musée de Louvre, Paris
Wikimedia Commons. Apollo Saurocton [2024]
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Figure 6 Head of Colonna Venus, Museo Pio-Clementino, Vatican
Diekenes' Antropology Blog "New anthropometric calculator released"

<https://photos1.blogger.com/blogger/5379/496/1600/knidos.jpg>

Figure 7 Kroisos sculpture, National Archeological Museum, Athens

Wikimedia Commons. Kouros Anavissos, Credit: Mountain [2024]

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Figure 8 Ilisos tomb stele, National Archaeological Museum, Athens

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Figure 9 Venus Genetrix , Louvre, Paris

Wikimedia Commons. Venus Genetrix. credit: Baldiri [2024]

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Figure 10 A daughter of Niobe, National Museum, Rome

Museum of Classical Archeology Database, Daughter of Niobe, n. 560

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<https://museum.classics.cam.ac.uk/collections/casts/daughter-niobe-0>

Figure 11 Aphrodite from Phidias, East pediment of the Parthenon, British Museum. Londra

The Parthenon Sculptures Serie: Mus. number: 1816,0610.97

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1816-0610-97

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Figure 12 Cypriot figure, Nationalmuseet, Kopenhagen

Object Id.:2988, Item: 3719, Photo: Soren Greve

<https://samlinger.natmus.dk/as/object/2988#AS-50705>

©Nationalmuseet

Figure 13 Istar or Astarte, ivory relief, The Metropolitan Museum, New York

Acces. number: 61.197.5, credit: Rogers Fund, 1961

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325348>

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Figure 14 Aphrodite of Melos, Musée de Louvre, Paris

Wikimedia Commons. Aphrodite dite Venus de Milo. credit: Vitold Muratov [2024]

Louvre Mus. Number: 20090412

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Figure 15 Medici Afroditi, Uffizi Galerisi, Florance

Uffizi Gallery Mus. Number: 1914.224, credit: Sailko [2024]

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cleomene_di_Apollodoro,_venere_medici,_I_secolo_ac_ca.jpg

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Figure 16 Tomb stele, Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin

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Figure 17 Vase painting, National Archeological Museum, Athens

Wikimedia Common, Nama Gyne. Credit: Marsyas [2024]

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Figure 18 Nikokleia, British Museum, London

Photo: Christine Özgan, personal archive

British Museum, Mus. Number: 1859,1226.25

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Figure 19 II. Coins of Berenike and Kleopatra Thea

Coin of Berenike II.

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berenike_II_coin.jpg

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Figure 20 Sculpture of the couple Kleopatra and Dioskurides, Delos

Simple Wikipedia. House of Cleopatra. Credit: Heiko Gorski , [2024]

https://simple.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Delos_House_of_Cleopatra.jpg

Figure 21 Tomb stel, Centrale Montemartini, Rome

Wikimedia Commons, Funerary relief representing a married couple. Credit: Carole Raddato [2024]

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Funerary_relief_representing_a_married_couple,_2nd_quarter_of_1st_century_BC,_Centrale_Montemartini,_Rome_\(21942637739\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Funerary_relief_representing_a_married_couple,_2nd_quarter_of_1st_century_BC,_Centrale_Montemartini,_Rome_(21942637739).jpg)

Figure 22 Plancia Magna, Antalya Museum

Wikipedi Common, Statue of Plancia Magna. Credit: Carole Raddato , [2024]

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Statue_of_Plancia_Magna,_a_great_benefactress_of_Perge,_2nd_century_AD,_Antalya_Museum,_Turkey.jpg#/media/File:Statue_of_Plancia_Magna,_a_great_benefactress_of_Perge,_2nd_century_AD,_Antalya_Museum,_Turkey.jpg

Figure 23 Bikini Mosaic, Villa Casale, Sicily

Villa Romane del Casale Bikini Mosaic. credit: Disdero , [2024]

https://tr.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dosya:Casale_Bikini.jpg