

Ritual Contexts of the Banqueters with Stringed Instruments in the Western Greek *Poleis*

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**RITUAL CONTEXTS OF THE BANQUETERS
WITH STRINGED INSTRUMENTS IN THE
WESTERN GREEK *POLEIS***

ANGELA BELLIA

Abstract. Greek terracottas of male and female players is a valuable subject of investigation for understanding the function of music in the contexts of both production and performance. The figurines are transmitting musical meanings that the ancient observer knew how to decode. Moreover, the representations of musical instruments in coroplastics help us to reconstruct their role in the specific context of worship, and their function in different ritual performances. Among these relevant representations of musical iconography, one of the most popular subjects is the reclining male figure who supports himself on his left elbow, while holding a stringed instrument. This is the typical banqueter motif that is found in funerary and sacred contexts in southern Italy and Sicily from the Archaic period to the beginning of the Hellenistic Age. In this paper, it will be argued that the instruments depicted on the terracotta figurines found in the sanctuaries allow us to understand the status and the age of the musicians, as well as their role in ceremonies.

INTRODUCTION

Greek terracotta of male and female players is a privileged field of survey in understanding the function of music in sacred sphere. The figurines are valuable testimonies, transmitting musical meanings that the ancient observer, who possessed the same communication code as the craftsman, could immediately understand.¹ Moreover, the representations of musical instruments in coroplastics help us to reconstruct their role in the specific context of worship, and their function in the different ritual performances.

On the one hand, if the archaeological context of these particular votives allows us to explore the musical instruments related to worship and the ritual sphere,² on the other, it is necessary to understand the meaning of the “musical offering” evoked by the representations. Given the extraordinary presence throughout the Greek world of terracottas representing male and female musicians in sanctuaries related to the rite of passages of status, some representations appear in connection with important ritual occasions in the communities:³ in these cases, musical performances strengthened social ties, and created the opportunity for young people to present themselves as members ready to actively enter into the society of adults.

Among these relevant representations of musical iconography, one of the more engaging is that of a reclining male figure who supports himself on his left elbow, while he holds a stringed instrument. This is the typical banqueter motif that is found in funerary and sacred contexts in southern Italy and Sicily from the Archaic period to the beginning of the Hellenistic Age. It also will be argued that the instruments depicted on these terracotta figurines found in the sanctuaries offer the opportunity to understand

¹ Lippolis 2001, 240-1; Roscino 2012, 153-4.

² Bellia 2009, 157-75.

³ Bellia and Marconi 2016.

the status of both male and female musicians, as well as their age, and their specific roles in ceremonies.

TERRACOTTA FIGURINES OF BANQUETERS HOLDING THE LYRE
(OR *BARBITOS*) IN THE WEST

Terracotta figurines representing banqueters holding instruments have been brought to light at a number of sites around the eastern Mediterranean,⁴ such as at Lindos, Samos, Claros, and at sites in Tunisia.⁵ But it is in southern Italy and Sicily that the representation of a male holding a lyre or a *barbitos*⁶ was coroplastic repertoire⁷ from the Archaic period to the Hellenistic Age. In these west Greek examples, a beardless, youthful banqueter is most common (Figure 1),⁸ although there also are banqueter figurines representing adult men. It is worth noting that the banqueters holding the lyre are beardless, whereas the banqueters with the *barbitos* tend to be bearded (Figure 2).⁹

⁴ Mollard-Besques 1954, 14 B 79, tav. X (Tespie); 20 B 115, tav. XV (Tebe); 83 C 9, tav. LVII (provenance unknown); 120 C 229, tav. LXXXV (provenance unknown); Higgins 1954, 111 nn. 349, 350, tav. 53 (Alicarnasso); Huysecom-Haxhi 2009, 139-54, T 1358, 1365, 1366 e, 1382.

⁵ Blinkenberg and Kinch 1931, nn. 2345, 2350 (Lindos); Brijder and Gerhartl-Witteveen 1999, 35 n. 12 (Samos); Dewailly 2000, 343-7, fig. 1 (Claros); Cherif, Fantar and Uberti 1997, 89 n. 300, tav. XXXV (Tunisie).

⁶ West 1992, 56-9.

⁷ Bartoccini 1936, 152-60, 74, fig. 48, 49, 50, 54; Belli 1970, 198-9; Abruzzese Calabrese 1996, 190-1, fig. 139; Herdejürgen 1971, 6; Loiacono 1985, 342, fig. 409; Lippolis 1995, 51-3; Bencze 2010, 25-8; Barra Bagnasco 2009, 247-9; Bellia 2009, 172.

⁸ Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Taranto. Inv. 20074. Bencze 2010, 25-8, fig. 4.

⁹ Museo Archeologico Nazionale. Taranto. Inv. 20031. Lippolis 1995, 51, tav. VII, 2.



Figure 1. Terracotta figurine of a banqueter holding the *lyra*
(from Torelli 2011, 114, tav. 27)



Figure 2. Terracotta figurine of a banqueter holding the *barbitos*
(from Lippolis 1995, tav. VII, 2)

All the banqueters are portrayed reclining with head and torso turned frontally toward the viewer, but with the lower body shown in profile, the right knee bent and the left leg extended. Typically, a *himation* covers the left shoulder and arm and falls over the body and legs in wide, curving and oblique folds. The left hand usually presses a lyre or a *barbitos* against the left hip with outstretched hand, while the right hand holds a *phiale*, a *rhython* or a *kantharos* against the chest. Generally, the instruments are undetailed and are mostly covered by the outstretched hand of the banqueter.

The majority of the banqueter figurines with lyre or *barbitos* that have been brought to light in the Greek West come from funerary and votive contexts at Taranto.¹⁰ Their interpretation has given rise to much discussion concerning the meaning of this theme, some of which contradict one another.¹¹ Interpretations range from a divine figure, and in particular Dionysus, to a deceased hero, sometimes in connection with the chthonic cults and the funerary realm.¹² Arguments in favor of Dionysus are based on the drinking vessels held by the male figure, which are related to the *symposion*. However, considering the diffusion of this class of votives and the comparisons that have been made with reliefs depicting the funerary *symposion* from the Late Classical to the Hellenistic periods,¹³ most often the banqueter has been viewed as belonging to the funerary realm. According to this view, the banqueter is a heroized representation of the deceased, who takes part in a *symposion* in the afterlife.¹⁴ This interpretation is based on the hero worship of the deceased that was in vogue in Taranto, as well as in the mother city

¹⁰ Baldassarre 1996, 98, fig. 9.4, 101, fig. 9.26; Loiacono 1985, 344, fig. 411; Lippolis 1995, 71-2.

¹¹ Lippolis 1995, 51-3.

¹² Herdejürgen 1971, 172.

¹³ Portale 2010, 39-78.

¹⁴ Torelli 2011, 114.

of Sparta.¹⁵ To these interpretations we can add that of J.-M. Dentzer,¹⁶ who argues for an unspecified significance, given the widespread diffusion and production of this iconographic motif from the 7th to the 4th centuries B.C. He also suggests a consideration of the representation of banqueters on a case-by-case basis, keeping in mind the polysemic nature of terracottas and the differing archaeological context within which the figurines were found. In more recent studies the connection between the Tarantine banqueters and the funerary realm has been dismissed altogether, in favor of a more generalized votive interpretation, whereby male imagery belongs to the male sphere, in the same way that contemporary figurines of females are related to the female sphere.¹⁷

It has been also proposed¹⁸ that the reclining banqueteer holding the lyre or the *barbitos* be considered a specific votive offering that recalls the *symposion* during which, as is well known, music was a fundamental component. However, it needs to be taken into consideration that, according to literary and figurative sources,¹⁹ the lyre (Figure 3) and *barbitos* (Figure 4) accompanied different performances because of their acoustic differences. The *barbitos* was the preferred instrument to accompany singing at banquets because its low pitch and volume were suitable for a small space. Yet the figurines holding the lyre or *barbitos* from Taranto reveal that these instruments also belong to the funerary realm,²⁰ where representations of banquets accompanied by music mimic the earthly pleasures of the banquet in the joys of the afterlife.²¹

¹⁵ Bencze 2010, 25-41.

¹⁶ Dentzer 1982, 190-201.

¹⁷ Lippolis 1995, 51-3.

¹⁸ Dentzer 1982, 190-201; Iacobone 1988, 166-72; Lippolis 1995, 51-3.

¹⁹ Bessi 1997, 145. Written sources are collected in West 1992, 57-9 n. 47.

²⁰ Felletti Maj 1953, 60; Bisconti 1990, 40; see also Delatte 1913, 329.

²¹ For the instruments found in the burials at Taranto, see Bellia 2012b, 66-8.

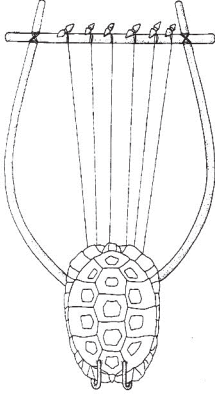


Figure 3. Drawing of a lyre
(from Lepore 2010, fig. 30.33)

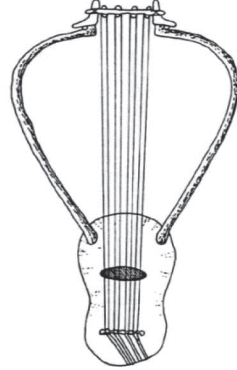


Figure 4. Drawing of a *barbitos*
(from Bellia 2012b, 62, fig. 64a)

The lyre or *barbitos* seem to offer clear references to a retrospective representation of the deceased and to his socio-political role. On the one hand, the representation of these musical instruments may be a reference to elements of Greek *paideia*, but on the other, the lyre and *barbitos* may be related to the particular customs of this Italiot community of southern Italy. Thus, the terracotta figurines of banqueters holding instruments may represent the *polites*, the newly-formed citizen, or the younger man ready to enter into society. These representations appear to evoke the notion that these men are taking part in the *symposion* while displaying the “musical symbols” of their status and age. Furthermore, the stringed instruments could characterize the socio-political role of the deceased, offering praise to his *arete* and his cultural background; in fact, as is well known, musical *paideia*, particularly those involving the lyre and gymnastics, were fundamental to the education of young people.

While the lyre was an emblem of refined and aristocratic education, it was also a symbol that recalled the initiation rituals celebrated in specific sacred places where musical activities were performed. In this case, the banqueters holding this instrument are a “sema tangibile del rapporto instauratosi tra l’offerente e la divinità,”²² established thanks to music.

THE RECLINING BANQUETERS HOLDING THE LYRE FROM THE SANCTUARY OF APHRODITE AT LOCRI

Terracotta figurines representing reclining banqueters holding a lyre that were found in the sanctuary complex at Centocamere-Marasà South in Locri²³ document a votive function as it relates to these rituals. In this Locrian sanctuary complex there were two distinct places dedicated to Aphrodite (Figure 5).²⁴ The first was the u-shaped stoa that remained in use from the late 7th to the middle of the 4th century B.C. The second was a late archaic, sacred building adjacent to the u-shaped stoa, which was the actual place of worship. In the u-shaped stoa there was a large central courtyard that is believed to have held ritual banquets related to ceremonies dedicated to Aphrodite (Figure 6).²⁵ In this sacred place the participants of the *symposion* could recline together on *klinai* that were likely to have been placed against the walls of the room. M. Barra Bagnasco underscored the fact that the size of these spaces in the stoa, the *oikoi*, facilitated the arrangement of benches for initiation banquets,²⁶ in which it is likely a selected part of the Locrian community took part.

²² Iacobone 1988, 166-9.

²³ Barra Bagnasco 1977, 151-69; 1996b, 223; 1996c, 30; Bellia 2012a, 65-77.

²⁴ Torelli 1977, 147-57; 2011, 79-86; Barra Bagnasco 1996c, 27-8; 2009, 47.

²⁵ Barra Bagnasco 1996c, 27; Costabile 1996, 22.

²⁶ Barra Bagnasco 1996c, 27.

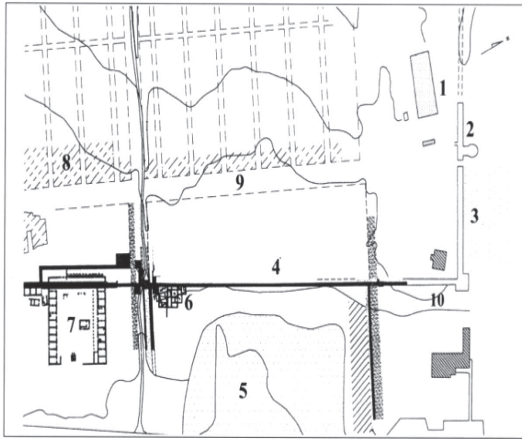


Figure 5. Locrian sanctuary dedicated to Aphrodite
(from Torelli 2011, 79, fig. 46)

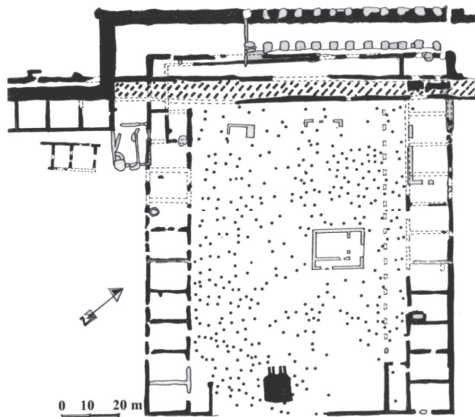


Figure 6. U-shaped stoa at Centocamere
(from Torelli 2011, 81, fig. 48)

The sacred nature of the banquets at Centocamere-Marasà South is further documented by the remains of meals and votive material from the sacrifices that date from the mid-6th to the mid-4th centuries B.C. that were found inside the 370 *bothroi* in the central courtyard.²⁷ The material from these *bothroi* included pottery, most likely from the banquets, the bones of dogs and various other animals (probably sacrifices dedicated to Aphrodite),²⁸ as well as terracotta figurines,²⁹ among which were many reclining banqueters holding objects for the banquet, such as the *rhython*, the *kantharos*, the *phiale*,³⁰ and the lyre. A fragmented male figurine from this corpus that dates to the first half of the 5th century B.C. may be singled out for its particular iconography (Figure 7).³¹ The figure is shown holding a lyre by one of the two arms of the instrument, both of which are markedly curved, connected by a yoke with square ends, and are incorporated into a sounding box made from tortoise shell. The strings are depicted together in a relief, but they are not distinguishable from one another. A second noteworthy example from this corpus dating to 500-470 B.C. is very similar to a fragmentary figurine found in a Locrian domestic context,³² where a male figure playing the lyre, an attendant to the banquet, sits in front of a reclining banqueter (Figure 8).³³

Considering that the majority of the reclining banqueter figurines were found in a sacred context dedicated to Aphrodite, it is possible, according to M. Barra Bagnasco, to discern in this representa-

²⁷ Lissi Caronna 1996, 31.

²⁸ Torelli 1977, 149; 2011, 82.

²⁹ Barra Bagnasco 1996a, 181-206.

³⁰ Barra Bagnasco 1977, 151-69; Lissi Caronna 1996, 31; Sabbione 2005, 225-7, II.22-6; Barra Bagnasco 2009, 223-49.

³¹ Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Locri. S.n.i. Barra Bagnasco 1996c, 30.

³² Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Locri. Inv. 1971/31. Barra Bagnasco 2009, 226 n. 413.

³³ Sabbione 2005, 227, II.26.

tion a “male offerer,”³⁴ who is an emblem of the Locrian *polites* participating in a ritual banquet. In this case, the reclining banqueter holding the lyre could be related to some particular aspect of musical performance in this Greek *polis* that was characterized by a notable amount of musical activity within the sacred realm.³⁵

At Locri, given the proximity of the port area and of the u-shaped stoa to the shrine dedicated to the goddess, the protector of sailors, it is possible that before undertaking a sea voyage, rituals and collective worships³⁶ were celebrated in order to protect against the dangers of navigation.³⁷ The solemn and sacred character of the rituals derived not only from the consecration of wine consumed during the *symposion* to propitiate the success of the enterprise,³⁸ but also from musical performances.³⁹

In a discussion of the role played by instruments during sacred banquets, C. Calame noted that the *aulos* could be played during the consecration and the consumption of wine,⁴⁰ while the lyre was played to strengthen the ties between participants to ritual banquets⁴¹ that also included distribution and consumption of the sacrificed animals among all attendees.⁴²

³⁴ Barra Bagnasco 2009, 248-9.

³⁵ Bellia 2012a, 13-24.

³⁶ Lissarrague 1989, 34; Fenet 2011, 407-9.

³⁷ Barra Bagnasco 1996c, 28; 2009, 47.

³⁸ Fenet 2011, 407-9; see also Burkert 2003, 170-5.

³⁹ West 1992, 93-4.

⁴⁰ Calame 2010, 67.

⁴¹ Lissarrague 1989, 34-7, 147-57; 1999, 32-5.

⁴² Burkert 2003, 147-55.

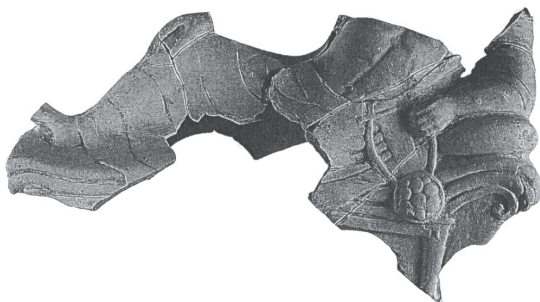


Figure 7. Reclining banqueter holding the *lyra*
(from Barra Bagnasco 1996, 30)



Figure 8. Male figure playing the lyre
and sitting in front of a reclining banqueter on the *kline*
(from Sabbione 2005, 227)

The fact that the rituals in the sanctuary of Aphrodite were also related to the wedding sphere cannot be excluded. In this case, the terracottas of reclining banqueters holding the lyre could recall the musical performances during the ritual banquets celebrated in the u-shaped stoa as an offering of the new bridegroom to the community in the days after his wedding.⁴³ It is probable that the reclining banqueters holding several objects, among which was the lyre, were produced to remember these occasions, as a particular *anathema*. For this reason, it is not surprising that the male figurines were also found in the area of Centocamere (Figure 9),⁴⁴ sometimes next to a female figure (Figure 10),⁴⁵ where domestic worship was related both to Aphrodite and marriage.⁴⁶ Moreover, a *pinax* representing a female *aulos* player next to a reclining banqueteer (Figure 11)⁴⁷ found in same sacred area, similar to an *auletris* depicted in the same pose on a *pinax* found in the *Persephoneion*,⁴⁸ is a further figurative reference to the nuptial sphere and its related rituals. The female figures sitting next to the reclining banqueters found in funerary contexts have been interpreted as the bride of the deceased.⁴⁹ This interpretation does hold true for the female figures represented next to the banqueters found in sacred contexts in Locri, as well as in the habitation area.⁵⁰ If the figures of reclining banqueters holding objects are recalling the activities of the Locri-

⁴³ Barra Bagnasco 2009, 323; see also Smith 2011, 93-4.

⁴⁴ Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Locri. Inv. 1980/36. Barra Bagnasco 2009, 404 n. 365, tav. LXXII.

⁴⁵ Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Locri. Inv. 1980/57. Barra Bagnasco 2009, 414 n. 417.

⁴⁶ The statuettes are not well-preserved; see Barra Bagnasco 2009, 242-3 nn. 365, 383, 406-8, 417, tav. LXXII, LXXV, LXXVIII-LXXIX, LXXX.

⁴⁷ Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Reggio Calabria. Inv. L 128801 / Centocamere. Barello et al. 2004-2007, 835 n. 1.

⁴⁸ Bellia 2012a, 62, fig. 19.

⁴⁹ Abruzzese Calabrese 1996, 191-2.

⁵⁰ Iacobone 1988, 169; Barra Bagnasco 1996d, 81-8.

an citizen in a sacred context, then, as we have seen, these terracotta representations evoke the wedding rituals. The marriage as an initiation was formed by a series of actions, including participation in the banquet to strengthen new ties between the families.⁵¹ For this reason, the introduction of a new wife inside the community had a religious and civic meaning. Thus, the female musician playing the *aulos* on the *pinax* can be considered to be a young bride;⁵² her representation, next to her companion, can be related to the rituals after their wedding, which served as her introduction to the other members of the community.⁵³



Figure 9. Reclining banqueter holding the *lyra*
(from Barra Bagnasco 2009, 404 n. 365, tav. LXXII)

⁵¹ Barra Bagnasco 2009, 222-3.

⁵² See Bellia 2012a, 73-4, fig. 11, for a statuette of a female lyre player sitting next to the reclining banqueter found at Hipponion, subcolony of Locri.

⁵³ Burkert 1981, 60-1.



Figure 10. Reclining banqueter holding the *lyra*
(from Barra Bagnasco 2009, 414 n. 417)



Figure 11. *Pinax* representing a female *aulos* player next to a reclining banqueter on a *kline*

(from Barellò et al. 2004-2007, 835 n. 1)

THE LYRE AS AN OBJECT OF MALE EDUCATION IN SACRED CONTEXTS

The depiction of the lyre on the Locrian statuettes puts the instrument in close relationship with the male ritual sphere of the *polis* in the Greek West. The stringed instrument is an emblem recalling

music education. With poetic art, athletics and training in hunting and warrior virtues, music was an irreplaceable element to reinforce the relationship between members belonging to the same group. Moreover, the representation of the lyre is a further reference to the lively artistic and cultural activities of the Locrian *polites*, which were recorded in written sources.⁵⁴ Thus, the reclining banqueters holding the lyre could not only be an offering recalling the musical competences and the cultured and refined world of the Locrian *polites*, but could also be a specific reference to the rituals during which, it is likely, members of Locrian society underwent a change of status.⁵⁵

Keeping this in mind, one wonders whether the role assigned to the representations of the lyre could be related to the presence of the instrument in the Locrian tombs – with other objects related to the male sphere – also concentrated around the Late Archaic to the Classical periods,⁵⁶ and lasting until the middle of the 4th century B.C. (Figure 12).⁵⁷ Furthermore, in view of the role assigned to the lyre in the Locrian male sphere, one wonders if the instruments buried in the tombs of young men and boys, who had not completed the normal cycle of human life could have been placed there as “compensation” due to the inability of the deceased to live long enough to celebrate his emergence into adulthood, and to establish his future status as a citizen in the Locrian *polis*.⁵⁸

The process of inclusion was marked by precise rites of passage for different age groups involving males from adolescence to adulthood. Keeping this in mind, we can also understand the presence of the reclining banqueters holding the lyre at Agrigento

⁵⁴ Bellia 2012a, 14.

⁵⁵ Beschi 1991, 39-59; see also Todisco 1996, 130.

⁵⁶ Elia 2010, 405-22; Bellia 2012b, 121-38.

⁵⁷ Lepore 2010, 442, fig. 30.18, 456, fig. 30.39.

⁵⁸ Todisco 2005, 713-21; Torelli 2011, 134-5.

(Figure 13),⁵⁹ and in the sanctuary of Malophoros at Selinunte (Figure 14),⁶⁰ where it is likely that ritual banquets were celebrated.⁶¹ Moreover, two figurines of a young seated man playing the lyre were discovered in the votive deposit of Piazza San Francesco in Catania (Figure 15).⁶²

A. Pautasso⁶³ has underscored the fact that the Piazza San Francesco deposit had the same features as the other “international” sanctuaries in the Mediterranean during the Archaic period. These sanctuaries were dedicated to female deities, such as Hera, Artemis, Aphrodite, and Demeter, and were the locus of numerous dedications of terracotta figurines representing females holding flowers, fruits, and garlands. The goddesses in these sanctuaries had the task of regulating the entry of new generations into society, and under their protection girls gained social integration through marriage, while boys acquired the status of citizen, becoming a new member of the community. Thus, as the flowers, fruits and garlands depicted on the female figurines are symbols of the pre-nuptial status of the girls, so the depiction of the lyre on the reclining banqueters found in the sanctuaries emphasizes the two fundamental stages of the male: first, education during adolescence, and second, the affirmation as a *polites* in adulthood. Thanks to the communication codes used by the Greek coroplasts, we can understand more fully the “musical offering” of the male statuettes holding the lyre in western Greek sanctuaries.

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⁵⁹ Kekulé 1884, 19, fig. 41; Bellia 2009, 34 n. 31.

⁶⁰ Gabrici 1927, 225; Bellia 2009, 135 n. 338.

⁶¹ Antonetti and De Vido 2006, 430.

⁶² Pautasso 2014, 249, figs. 1-2.

⁶³ Pautasso 2014, 249-52.

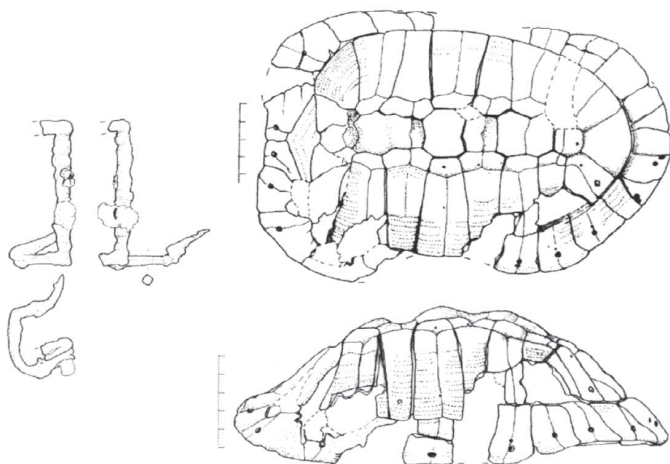
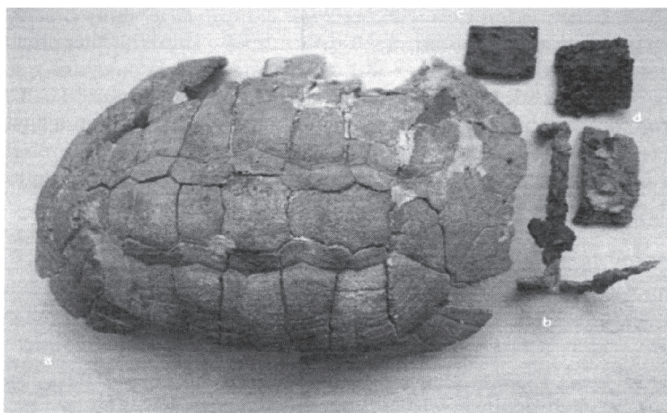


Figure 12. Tortoise shell from the tomb 730
in the Necropolis of Contrada Lucifero at Locri
(from Lepore 2010, 442, fig. 30.18; 456, fig. 30.39)

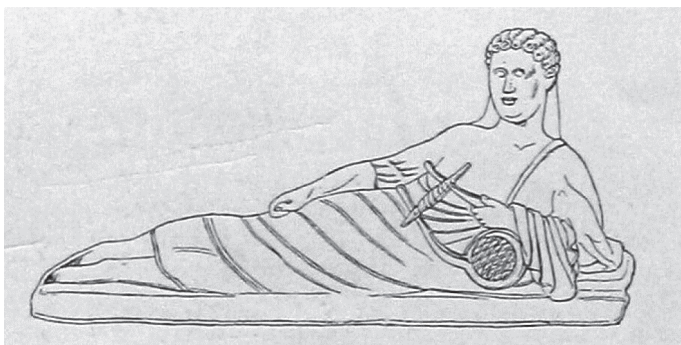


Figure 13. Reclining banqueter holding the lyre from Agrigento
(Kekulé 1884, 19, fig. 41)



Figure 14. Reclining banqueter holding the lyre
from the sanctuary of Malophoros at Selinunte
(from Gabrici 1927, 225)



Figure 15. Young man playing the lyre
from the votive deposit of Piazza San Francesco in Catania
(Pautasso 2014, 249, figs. 1-2)

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