READING MUSEUM SERVICE

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GREEK FIGURINE AH56

This figure of a woman is made from terracotta, a brownish red baked clay. Figures like her were mass-produced in the Greek world in the fourth and third centuries BC. It is thought they were first made in and around Athens and then copied across the Mediterranean. They have been found in Cyprus, Sicily and Turkey, as well as in Greece.

They are commonly known as Tanagra figures. Tanagra is a place in Boeotia, the central area of ancient Greece where thousands of these statuettes were found in one necropolis (cemetery). It is thought they may have been placed there as offerings to the gods or to accompany the dead person in the Underworld. They have also been found placed at religious sanctuaries, perhaps to act as worshippers in place of people. Others have been found in the remains of private houses where they may simply have been used to decorate rooms.



The large majority of these figurines are of women and the sculptors who produced them were known as koreplasts, from the Greek Kore, meaning girl and Plastein, to sculpt. Some figures of men, children and comic actors were also produced.

A feature they all have in common is their design. They are always in relaxed, informal poses and have small heads and long bodies. The sculptors were particularly interested in arranging the clothes of the figures into patterns and folds that emphasised the shape of the body beneath.

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GREEK FIGURINE AH56

The lady in this figure wears typical clothing from ancient Greek times. She wears a loose gown, called a chiton and a heavier cloak, called a himation. On her head she wears an elaborate headdress and in her right hand holds what is probably a mirror.

Statues like this one were commonly made in two-part moulds, one for the front half of the body and one for the back. These two halves were then joined together and mounted on a rectangular base. The head was usually moulded separately and attached by inserting a long spike into the shoulders. In some examples both the front and back halves of the figure are decorated, but in this instance the back is left plain. The hole in the back of this figure is a common feature. The purpose is thought have been to be to allow the sculptor to get his fingers inside to press the separate pieces together. It would also allow moisture to escape from the clay when it was being baked. Details such as hats and in this case the mirror would probably have been made separately and then attached. A solution of clay and water was then applied to the statue and it was baked until it became hard. Afterwards it would be painted with bright colours.



Two other Tanagra figures in Reading Museum's School Loans Collection (left AH56/B and right AH56/A)