

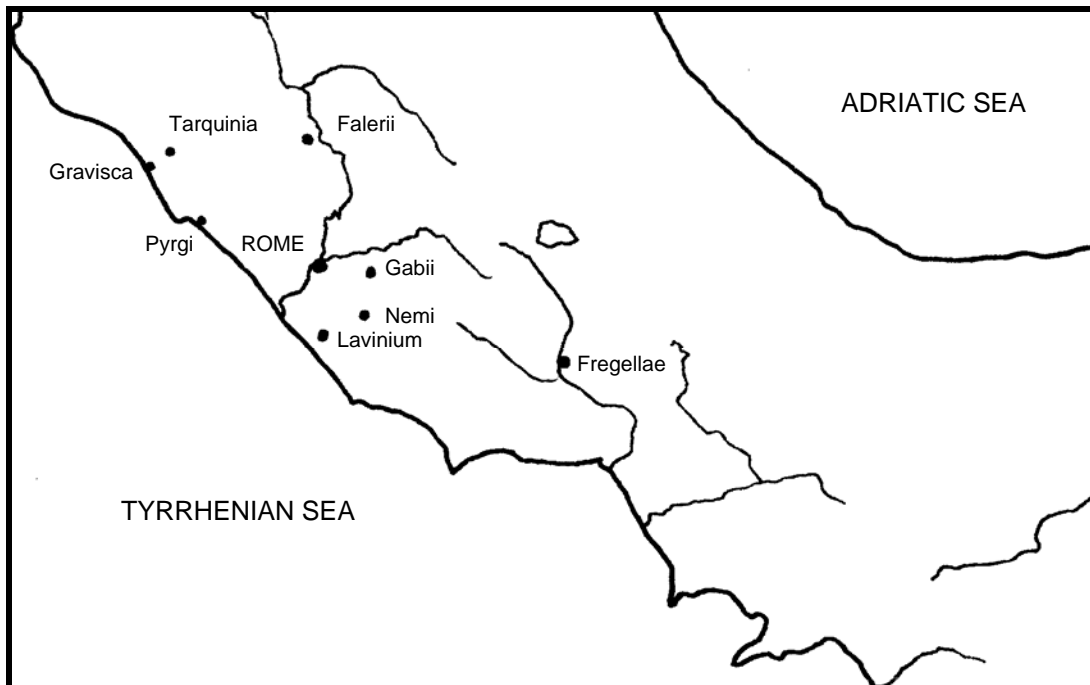
The Anatomical Votive Terracotta Phenomenon in Central Italy: Complexities of the Corinthian Connection

by Alexandra L. Lesk

Introduction

The dedication to a deity of a model of an ailing body part has been going on for millennia. The practice survives today in many churches where petitioners attach inscriptions of thanks for healing to church walls and body parts embossed on metal plaques to iconostases. Such practices hearken back to the ancient phenomenon of offering votive gifts in the shape of the object in need of divine attention.

In my Master's Thesis entitled, "The Anatomical Votive Terracotta Phenomenon : Healing Sanctuaries in the Etrusco-Latinal-Campanian Region during the Fourth through First Centuries B.C.," I examined ten of the most completely published healing sanctuaries in central Italy (Map 1) (Lesk 1999).



Map 1. Central Italy with sites mentioned in text

Most revealing of healing cult practice are two sites where the anatomical votive terracottas (AVTCs) were found *in situ*: the Thirteen Altars at Lavinium and the sanctuary of Demeter/Vei, Hera/Uni and Aphrodite/Turan at Gravisca, the port town of Tarquinia. The sanctuary at Ponte di Nona was chosen because it is a large version of the quintessential rural healing sanctuary where over 8,400 AVTCs have been recovered. The sanctuary of Juno at Gabii demonstrates how late Republican monumental architectural development affected the AVTC phenomenon, as I call it. The sanctuary of Diana at Nemi shows how the AVTC phenomenon fits into a long and complex

development of a once politically important site and illustrates the demise of the AVTC phenomenon in central Italy. Outside of Rome, the sanctuary of Aesculapius at Fregellae is the only other extant Asklepieion in central Italy dating to the Republican period, and its stratigraphy demonstrates the dissociation of the AVTC phenomenon from Aesculapius' cult. The votive deposit near the Ara della Regina at Tarquinia reveals the importance of the south Etruscan sites in the transmission of the ELC (Etrusco-Latium-Campanian) votive practice from Greece to Rome. The cave of Ninfeo Rossa at Falerii presents a long cult history of a special feature in nature. And finally, the sanctuaries of Aesculapius on Tiber Island and Minerva Medica on the Esquiline at Rome expose many of the complexities of the history of the AVTC phenomenon.

This paper summarises the conclusions of my study, including two new contributions to the discourse on faith healing in Antiquity: a typological connection between the AVTC phenomena at Corinth in Greece and the sanctuary at Gravisca on the south-western coast of Etruria, and an exposition on the disassociation of the cult of Asklepios and the healing cults in central Italy where AVTCs were employed.

The Problem

Most scholars assume that the Greek cult of Asklepios, the god of medicine *par excellence*, is the inspiration for the healing cults in Italy, and that the Roman idea of offering an anatomical votive terracotta derives from Corinth. But their reasoning is flawed. The false assumptions on which it is based are the result of an insufficiently detailed examination of the evidence for these transmissions. This paper will show, using archaeological evidence, how the idea of dedicating terracotta models of body parts was transmitted from Corinth to south-western Etruria significantly earlier than the practice arrived in Rome. This additional step between Corinth and Rome reveals that Mario Torelli's generally accepted theory of how the AVTC phenomenon spread outwards from Rome through Roman colonisation needs modification (Torelli 1988: 71). I will also demonstrate the complexity of the problem of interpreting the impact of Asklepios' arrival at Rome in 291 B.C. on the healing cults of central Italy.

Background

In the late fifth and fourth centuries B.C., AVTCs were offered to Asklepios, the god of medicine, at Corinth. Asklepios' importance and influence were growing quickly at this time alongside his gradual apotheosis and takeover of various sanctuaries of Apollo such as at Epidauros, Kos, as well as at Corinth. At other healing sanctuaries in Greece votives to Asklepios and Amphiaraos, another hero/deity with healing powers, took the form of carved votive reliefs, inscribed stelai, painted wood or terracotta plaques, and anatomical votives made of other materials.

Why, then, did the Corinthians instead choose to make their votives out of clay? Roebuck suggested that because the Corinthians lacked good stone for carving, they naturally turned to their coroplastic industry that had been strong for generations (Roebuck 1951: 112). Inexpensive and handmade, this votive type was accessible to many echelons of society. Of foremost importance for the purpose of this paper, these votives, which could take the shape of almost any part of the body, were pierced in order to hang on a wall (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Anatomical Votives from Corinth (Photograph by author)

At some point during the fourth century B.C., people in central Italy began to dedicate terracotta reproductions of human body parts in sanctuaries. This activity continued until the first century B.C. when radical socio-political changes in Italy disrupted the usual *modus operandi* at its healing sanctuaries (Lesk 1999: *passim*). Thousands of replicas of body parts have been found in votive deposits, left to deities as requests or thanks for healing in Etruria, Latium and Northern Campania (Fenelli 1975; Fenelli 1992: 127-128). AVTCs from central Italy could also take the shape of almost any body part that a suppliant wanted healed, for example, hands, heads, uteri, teeth, eyes, male and female external genitalia, limbs and internal organs. Unlike the Corinthian AVTCs, the ELC-type AVTCs were not designed to hang on a wall.

Deposits of AVTCs are a primary indicator that a healing cult once functioned nearby. The sheer number of these AVTCs and their wide distribution throughout central Italy testify to the popularity of the cult practice (Lesk 1999: Appendix II for list of sites with AVTCs and the AVTCs found at each). The only necessary cult equipment was an altar. Suppliants either laid down their anatomical votives near the altar or cult statue or they threw their votives into open pits. When these votives are found where the suppliants themselves laid them, they are said to be in their *primary votive context*. Periodically, a sanctuary had to be cleared out in order to make room for more dedications, but the votives could not just be thrown away because they were sacred to the deity and had to be kept inviolate. Consequently, the non-perishable votives are usually found in pits dug especially for their ritual disposal within the boundary of the sanctuary. These pits represent a *secondary votive context*.

The identity of the presiding deity at a healing sanctuary is commonly unknown because it was rare in central Italy to inscribe votives and altars. By the late fourth century B.C., every village shrine in central Italy had become something of a clinic – healing powers were ascribed as necessary to the local deity. In general, these deities were multi-functional, serving the local concerns of good harvests, fertility, health and political protection.

Some sanctuaries specialised in healing certain body parts or were frequented primarily by female suppliants. At Ponte di Nona, for example, more than 8,400 AVTCs were recovered during excavation, the highest concentration being limbs, as well as a

surprisingly large number of eyes found clustered together in the sacred enclosure. Potter suggested that this relative concentration indicates the patronage of a rural population whose main concerns were the parts of the body most likely to be injured during farming activities, and perhaps a local speciality in dealing with eye problems by exploiting the special qualities of the local water sources (Potter 1989: 31-39).

Unlike in Greece where the inscriptions invariably reveal that the votive is offered in thanks for services received, the situation is ambiguous in central Italy because of the aforementioned lack of inscriptions on AVTCs. The AVTCs may have been offered either in propitiation or in thanks, that is before or after the divine intervention.

ELC AVTCs were mould-made and mass-produced. Mould-series analysis can reveal the itinerancy of either or both the mould and the craftsmen who used them. As most AVTCs were mass-produced, the majority do not show the nature of the complaint held by the suppliant. On rare occasions, however, anatomical votives, both from Italy and Greece, show symptoms of a disease. Although no examples survive, paint, which was sometimes used to pick out details such as sandal laces on a votive foot, likely offered an inexpensive method of personalising a dedication. Dating these mould-made items is notoriously difficult. Most votive deposits lack external datable evidence such as a coin or diagnostic pottery; therefore, we must rely on the stylistic analysis of head votives and figurines of deities that are quite common in AVTC deposits.

The AVTC phenomenon may have spread with *romanitas* according to Torelli's theory with the defeat of the Latin League in 338 B.C. and the establishment of Fregellae in 328, Lucera in 314, Alba Fucens in 303 and Carsulae in 291 B.C., but why did the cult practice catch on so quickly and tenaciously? Edlund (1987b) and Blagg cite nonspecific economic, political and religious changes to explain its popularity. The Roman colonies were the means of diffusion for Roman institutions and influence throughout the territory. The Via Appia (312 B.C.) provided the means for new ideas and practices to spread north-south. (Blagg 1985: 37). Economically speaking, terracotta was much cheaper than the bronze of which earlier votives were made, and the moulds were reusable. There was already a well-established terracotta antefix industry in place in Magna Graecia and Sicily whose techniques were easily adapted for the manufacture of a new product suddenly in high demand. AVTCs, especially heads, were a logical way for this industry to branch out (Blagg 1985: 39).

Fourth century changes in cult affected all of Italy. In the wake of Etruscan social change and Roman expansion, a sizable non-aristocratic segment of the population was able to participate in the self-indulgence of curative practices as suggested by the deposits of AVTCs. The less affluent segments of society gained access to the sanctuaries, especially those, such as the Thirteen Altars at Lavinium, that had once been elaborate, even exclusive, political meeting places with fine monuments (Edlund 1987a: 144). This is not to say that the wealthy did not also employ AVTCs for healing or to ensure fertility; however, suddenly, those who could not afford to give a bronze votive to the deity, as was customary in the Archaic period, were able to leave a permanent, personal, non-perishable dedication to the deity, made of terracotta.

Hundreds of thousands of AVTCs were dedicated in central Italy during the span of just over two hundred years, more than those recovered from all the Greek healing sanctuaries put together. Despite the practice's evident popularity, there was a sudden decline in the first century B.C. Scholars have ascribed the fall to non-specific "political

events” (Edlund 1987b: 56), others associate the decline of the practice with the rise of medical technology and to the presence and accessibility of physicians (Girardon 1993: 31). These generalised explanations are neither very satisfying nor likely. The people who patronised the healing sanctuaries and dedicated the AVTCs are the very people who could not pay for medical consultations, and access to physicians in rural areas remained limited.

As construed from my analysis of the above mentioned sites, the decline in dedication of AVTCs coincides with the reorganisation and redevelopment of many central Italian sanctuaries, Gabii and Nemi for example. Monumental architecture was erected through the patronage of local nobles or by generals triumphing Rome’s increasing military and commercial involvement in the eastern Mediterranean. These socio-economic changes and architectural developments resulted in the extrusion of rural faith healing and in the exclusion of the lower classes from the sanctuaries they had frequented for generations (Blagg 1985: 46). Also, the trend of building villas by wealthy Roman senators and equestrians caused further displacement of the small farmers from the areas surrounding Rome. With their local interest and investment, these wealthy Romans also took an active role in the development of the sanctuaries, becoming priests and curators at the local shrines. Some shrines disappeared when the local population dwindled, others became the venue for the self-promotion and commemoration of the wealthy during the late Republic. Local religious practice was realigned “in a new framework, that of urban, Roman Italy” (Crawford 1981: 46).

The Corinthian Connection

We turn now from this overview of the AVTC phenomenon to the problem of its origins. The sanctuary at Gravisca provides physical evidence to support my hypothesis that southern Etruria was the point of entry to Italy from Corinth for the custom of dedicating clay body parts in a healing cult.

Gravisca was the port town of Tarquinia and, like the nearby coastal site of Pyrgi, was visited by both Greeks and Phoenecians during the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Just outside the town, there was a sanctuary dedicated to Hera, Aphrodite and Demeter that served the sixth century B.C. Greek merchant settlement (Coarelli 1975: 216). The shrine received votives of Corinthian, Ionian, Laconian and Attic pottery as well as bronze and ivory statuettes of Astarte (Torelli 1977: 445-446; Torelli 1982:159-161).

Political events such as the Persian Wars lessened the frequency of visits by mainland Greeks, but with the Syracusan victory over the Etruscans in 474 B.C., the Greeks of Magna Graecia had hegemony in the Tyrrhenian Sea. At the end of the fifth century, the deities worshipped at Gravisca were the native Etruscan versions of Demeter, Hera and Aphrodite: namely, Vei, Uni and Turan, respectively. The top two closed strata of material from the sanctuary, namely Stratum III (400-300 B.C.) and the Final Stratum (300-250 B.C.) are pertinent to this discussion (Comella 1978: 9). The Roman conquest of the area in 280 B.C. ended most of the cult activity at the site. A Roman colony was only founded at Gravisca in 181 B.C., long after the AVTC phenomenon had flourished and ended here. These chronological facts are problematic for Torelli’s model of dissemination, therefore I propose an additional step for the transmission of the idea of offering terracotta anatomical votives prior to the practice’s arrival at Rome.

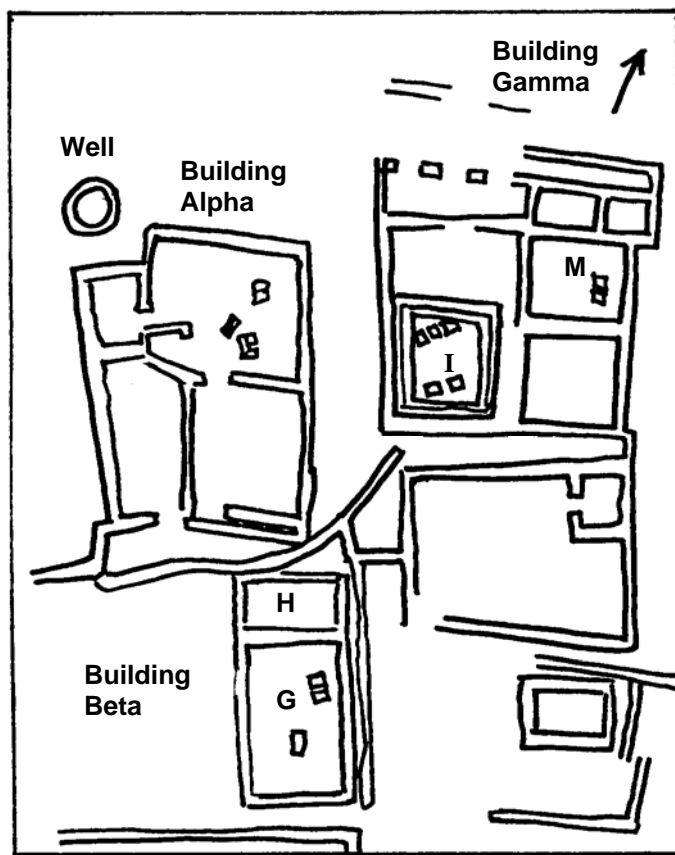


Figure 2. Plan of the Sanctuary at Gravisca (After Comella 1978: pl. 1)

The archaeological evidence to support my hypothesis is as follows: The votive material comes mainly from two of the five buildings that make up the fourth and third century sanctuary, Beta and Gamma (Figure 2). Space I in building Gamma is a courtyard with two altars built on top of the older shrine of Aphrodite, and the AVTCs were found *in situ*, that is, piled up around the southern altar. In space M of Building Gamma, an area associated with the cult of Hera, the votive material accumulated around two statue bases on the east side of the room (Comella 1978: 70). Breast votives DIV 1 (Figure 3), DIV 2 (Figure 4) and DIV 3 (Figure 5) (Comella 1978: pl. XXX) were found in the fourth century stratum in spaces M and I and provide an archaeological link to the cult at Corinth (Figure 6 and 7): these votive breasts are mounted on plaques which were pierced for hanging.



Figure 3. Breast Votive DIV 1 from Gravisca (After Comella 1978: pl. 30)



Figure 4. Breast Votive DIV 2 from Gravisca (After Comella 1978: pl. 30)

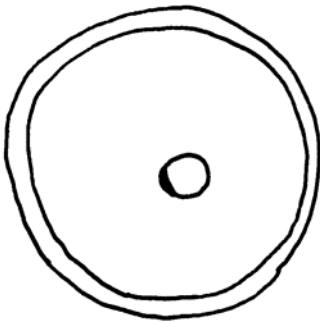


Figure 5. Breast Votive DIV 3 from Gravisca (After Comella 1978: pl. 30)



Figure 6. Breast Votive from Corinth (Photograph by author)

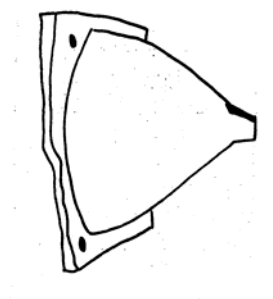


Figure 7. Breast Votive from Corinth (After Lang 1977: 13)

We know from vase-paintings that anatomical votives were hung from walls in Greece. A Boeotian red-figure krater shows two votive legs and a hand suspended above Hygeia who is receiving offerings. Asklepios reclines with his snake on the other side (Pensabene *et al.* 1980: 32). Also, as mentioned above, the assemblage of anatomical votive terracottas from Corinth were specifically designed to hang from the wall (Figure 1). Depending on the body part, most are pierced to allow for their fixation to a vertical surface for display or for suspension by twine or a thong.

The “pierced-plaque” breasts from Gravisca are obviously not fulfilling their original destiny as they were not hung on a wall, but dedicated instead in the manner of the Etruscans, that is, placed in greatest proximity to the sacred object, be it the altar or statue of the divinity. In central Italy, the ELC-type AVTCs were not designed for hanging. The breast votives from Gravisca straddle the Greek and Italian traditions and illustrate the transition required to adapt the Corinthian type of anatomical votive to the type found in central Italy. In fact, this transition may even be detected in our sample of three. DIV 2 (Figure 4) has holes in the plaque above the breast and corresponds most closely with the Corinthian examples (Figure 6 and 7). DIV 1 and 3, both of which are still on plaques, are only pierced in the centre of the plaque, a necessary measure to prevent the object from cracking or exploding in the kiln. These may represent the second generation of breast votives at Gravisca.

Besides this physical evidence, there are also historical and economic reasons to support my hypothesis that the practice of dedicating anatomical votive terracottas arrived from Corinth in southern Etruria before arriving at Rome and then disseminated throughout central Italy through Roman colonisation. Roman colonisation began in earnest in the fourth century B.C., but southern Etruria was not conquered by the Romans until the third century nor colonised until the second, thus making Dr. Torelli's theory chronologically untenable.

From the sixth century B.C. onwards, the ports of southern Etruria – and their accompanying sanctuaries – served the merchants sailing from Greece, Sicily, and the Levant, as well as the hinterland of Etruria. From Gravisca and Pyrgi's sanctuaries, inscriptions in all three languages have been recovered. The idea of dedicating anatomical votives – and the votives themselves – most likely arrived in Italy at these Etruscan port sites on the boats sailed by Greeks familiar with the Corinthian votive practice. Cheap and transportable, this votive type may have appealed to those travelling great distances from the economic hub at Corinth.

There was an already well-established antefix industry of Southern Italy and Sicily that was primed technologically for the mass-production of anatomical terracottas and figurines as evidenced by the early heads from Campania. Rome lies within the liminal area between these Greek and Etruscan spheres of influence whereby the Romans likely learned of these practices and appropriated the ideas and techniques of their manufacture via the growing arteries of communication, namely the nascent Roman road system (Blagg 1985: 39). From southern Etruria, the appealing idea of dedicating a terracotta body part in order to compel a deity to heal caught on in Rome as a way to honour a wide range of deities such as Minerva Medica (Gatti Lo Guzzo 1978).

Asklepios

The perception of the role and impact of Asklepios, as the Greek god of medicine, on healing cults in Italy is problematic. It must be emphasised that the cult of Asklepios is not to be associated with the transmission from Corinth to Etruria of the practice of dedicating AVTCs. Nor must the worship of Asklepios be associated with the dedication of AVTCs in central Italy. This erroneous conflation has resulted in widespread confusion in the study of the influence of Asklepios in Italy.

Many scholars, in particular those who write general books about Roman medicine, have linked the rise of the AVTC phenomenon to the arrival of Asklepios from Epidauros to Rome at the order of the Sibylline Books in 293 B.C. But, as I have shown, the phenomenon was already flourishing in the fourth century in Etruria, would do so a little later in Rome, and began to flourish by the late fourth century in sanctuaries of local deities unrelated to and uninfluenced by Asklepios all over central Italy with Rome's colonisation efforts. The following is a reinterpretation of the evidence for Asklepios' presence in Italy and Sicily prior to his official introduction to Rome in 293 B.C. presented by Comella (1982-1983) and Degrassi (1986).

The impetus to bring Asklepios to Rome was a great pestilence that ravaged the city from 295 to 293 B.C. An analogous catastrophe in 433 B.C. had resulted in Apollo being summoned from Delphi to rid the city of disease. His temple was dedicated in 431 in the Circus Flaminius and he was worshipped in his role as the primary healing deity, Apollo Medicus. Apollo maintained his salubrious reputation until the pestilence raged

once again. His healing powers were no longer adequate and the state lost faith in his abilities.

When the cult of Asklepios arrived at Rome from Epidauros in 291 B.C., the only healing rites practised by the Romans involved the dedication of anatomical votive terracottas. Asklepios arrived at the peak of this phenomenon, but his cult was distinctly Epidaurean and came equipped with an Epidaurean set of rituals, including the hallmark of Greek healing ritual - incubation - and votive inscriptions. At no time did an Epidaurean cult receive anatomical votive terracottas, and this remained true for Asklepios in Italy. Despite his immediate popularity for ridding the city of the pestilence, Aesculapius, in his Roman guise, was not widely embraced in central Italy. Aesculapius could not replace the old divinities in charge of protecting health and fertility.

The origin of the conflation of Asklepios and the dedication of AVTCs lies in Rome where tens of thousands of such votives were recovered from the Tiber which flows on either side of Asklepios' island shrine. An examination of the distribution of AVTC finds in the Tiber (Figure 8), however, reveals that the great majority of the votives were deposited *upstream* from Asklepios' shrine (Pensabene 1980, 15). In addition, several of the AVTCs predate Asklepios' arrival. Together, these factors preclude the possibility that the AVTCs found in the Tiber were dedicated exclusively to Asklepios. In any case, only four ELC AVTCs have been found on Tiber Island itself: two legs, a statuette and a foot (Pensabene 1980, 10).

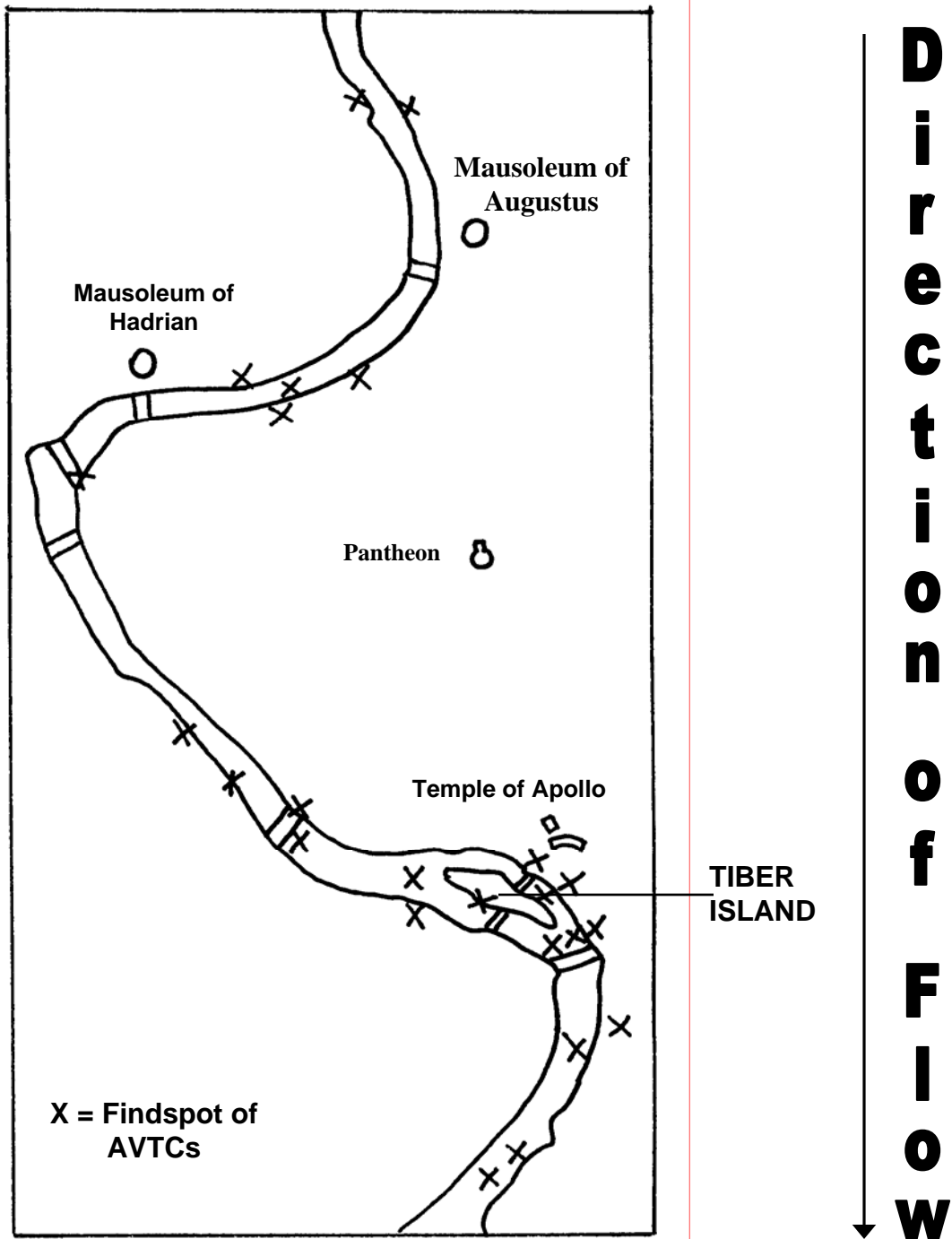


Figure 8. Findspots of ELC votives in the Tiber River (After Pensabene 1980: 15)

To whom these votives were dedicated from the fourth century onwards is a matter of great debate, but the indigenous god of the river, Tiberinus, is one strong candidate (Le Gall 1953: 67; Degrassi 1986: 146-147). Suppliants may have thrown their

votives into his watery depths at any point along the river even though his shrine was on the island from early times (Lugli 1953: 133, 195).

Lanciani (1967a: 70) has suggested that these votives found in the Tiber once belonged to shops along the river whose excavation he claims to have witnessed, but there is no way that the vast numbers retrieved from the river can be attributed solely to the destruction of these vendors. He also suggested that the whole of the Tiber River was a giant votive pit for Asklepios' temple (Lanciani 1967b: 62), but this is impossible since many of the votives pre-date Asklepios' arrival.

Apollo Medicus *in Circo* cannot be a candidate, as some scholars have suggested, because, like Asklepios, his was a state cult, reserved for minding the health of the Roman People as a whole; no anatomical votive terracottas have been found within his sanctuary proper; and, it was not customary to dispose of votives outside the god's sacred precinct. Both Asklepios and Apollo were imported from Greece to Rome at times of plague, cured the disease ravaging the populace, and received temples outside the *pomerium*; however, at no time during the Republic is there evidence for individuals approaching these foreign gods for healing. Instead, within the *pomerium* of Rome, Minerva Medica received anatomical votive terracottas at least fifty years before Asklepios was summoned from Epidauros (Gatti Lo Guzzo 1978: *passim*). Only much later do written testimonia and archaeological evidence show that this state cult of Asklepios was adapted for use by the individual (Degrassi 1986: 151).

Only one other sanctuary of Asklepios is known from the Republican period in central Italy. The sanctuary at Fragellae, in the Liri valley, shows this adaptation of Asklepios's cult to the individual and the disassociative relationship between AVTCs and Asklepios (Figure 9). The town of Fragellae was founded as a Latin colony in 328 B.C. at which time a small sanctuary, perhaps to Mefitis, was established on top of the hill above the settlement, near a spring. She received anatomical votives until about 170 B.C. (Ferrea 1986: 89-152) when Asklepios took over at the site and a new Hellenising sanctuary was constructed complete with a temple flanked by two L-shaped porticoes (Crawford and Keppie 1984: 21-35). An altar inscribed with a dedication to Aesculapius and a statuette inscribed "Salute" to Salus, a syncretisation of Hygieia, point to the identification of the sanctuary as an Asklepieion (Coarelli 1986: 178-179).

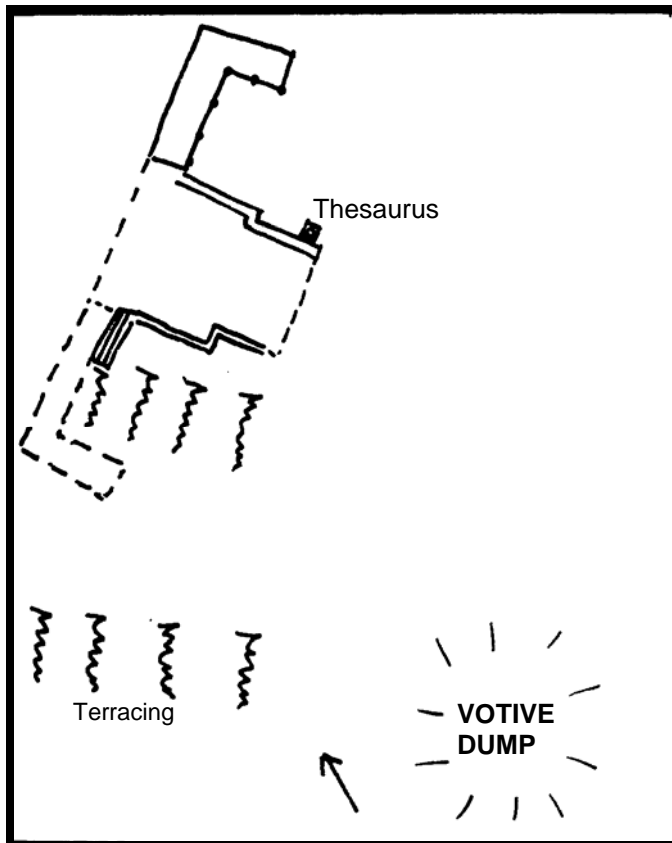


Figure 9. Plan of the Sanctuary of Aesculapius at Fregellae (After Coarelli 1986: 164)

After this time, no more anatomical votives were offered, as indicated by the stratigraphy of the votive dump below the new sanctuary. A drastic change in ritual was effected with the introduction of “incubated sleep,” which likely took place in the porticoes. Sleeping accommodations never co-existed with the phase when anatomical votive terracottas were dedicated at other sanctuaries in central Italy such as at Gabii. Many of these sanctuaries, especially the rural ones, had provisions for little more than a visit and a prayer. At Fregellae, Asklepios accommodated individual suppliants who, instead of offering anatomical terracottas, dedicated more valuable votives that were deposited in the thesaurus located outside the temple, a practise that had also become current in the third century Greek world and symptomatic of the change to dedicating cash and valuables to deities in central Italian sanctuaries during the late Republic, at least as early as 125 B.C. when Fulvius Flaccus destroyed the town for her refusal to back down on demands for either independence or Roman citizenship.

Conclusions

In spite of the debt the AVTC phenomenon owes to votive practice at the sanctuary of Asklepios at Corinth, I have demonstrated that the Greek god of medicine himself had little impact on the popularity and diffusion of healing cults throughout central Italy, before and after his introduction to Rome. I have also demonstrated how the votive practice arrived from Corinth at the international port towns on the Etruscan coast

by showing examples of votives from Gravisca that share with Corinth that peculiar morphology of a pierced plaque designed for hanging, at a time prior to AVTCs arriving at Rome and the practice spreading throughout central Italy through Roman colonisation.

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