

Calloway Scott // In Part I, I made a case for the way ancient Graeco-Roman healing temples created a sense of community for sick suppliants through the careful collection and display of “patient narratives” within sanctuary space. Here I want to take a look at another facet of this community building, the dedication of anatomical votive figurines (like the one pictured [here](#), from the Athenian Asklepieion, c. 350 BCE). These figurines were dedicated as a form of thanks-giving to the god, meant as a memorial “replacement” of the part of the body healed. As such, they are usually studied in terms of the religious commerce between suppliant and god. But what if we focus instead upon on how sick suppliants might have reacted to such bodily traces? By taking these dedicatory objects together with the inscribed narratives, I think we can get a sense for how religious healing can be usefully approached through the frameworks of intersubjectivity and intercorporeality, which in turn helps us to see more crisply that Greek thinking (beyond the discourse of Hippocratic medicine) could conceive health and healing broadly in terms of socio-somatic integration.

The dedication of anatomical figurines in some religious context is a near universal phenomenon, both diachronically and transculturally. Within the Mediterranean we have examples of anatomical dedications from Minoan and Mycenaean cult sites, and offerings of votive body parts continues to form part of Catholic practice. From Greece and Rome specifically have come large quantities of anatomical votives. These votives could be made of humble terra-cotta or more expensive materials, such as marble, silver, or gold. The (Greek) reliefs clearly prize naturalistic representation, underscoring their purpose to “stand-in” for the real thing.

(Image: [Anatomical Votives from the Asklepieion at Corinth](#))

We know these dedications were a significant part of ritual praxis not only from the material finds themselves. In addition to frequent mention of them in literary sources, temples made scrupulously precise inventories of such dedications, taking note of who dedicated what, its material, and where in the sanctuary the object was located. From such sources it is clear that, after the event of dedication, the offerings were themselves absorbed as features of a curated religious landscape, the phenomenal presences which informed the experience of subsequent suppliants. The question becomes, then, how did these suppliants experience these objects and what sorts of meanings did they attach to them? And how are we meant to recover the meanings which inhered to these figures, when they themselves speak no more than the occasional name of the dedicator?

Recent work has transformed this hermeneutic problem into a virtue by emphasizing that, immediately following their dedication these objects necessarily became “multivalent” for the viewing audience.^[1] That is, like any reading public after the dissemination of a text, so after the initial act of dedication new suppliants might pick and choose the sorts of meanings to assign these object bodies. Of course, the act of viewing is itself already a culturally conditioned one. The meanings one might extract from viewing flow along socio-cultural horizons and competencies, where, in this case, the objects encountered are contextualized by their proximity to and suffusion with divine immanence.

Yet other forms of viewing might take hold. For instance, Petsalis-Diomidis has contended that at the Asklepieion of Pergamum, examination of anatomical ex-votos by suppliants would have *empowered* them by casting them into the authoritative role of the physician applying his expert gaze upon the fractured bodies of others.^[2] In applying this gaze the suppliant might not only diagnose the illnesses of their predecessors, but fashion expectations and even knowledge about their own bodies and suffering. So, too, Petsalis-Diomidis writes, this visual engagement with the bodies of others—either through the direct viewership of anatomical votives or that of the votive inventories—enrolls these viewers into a historical community of the ill. Anatomical votos thus are polysemous, conveying multiple meanings to multiple audiences, or even allowing a solitary viewer to adopt multiple subject positions relative to the same object.

On such a view, the ill suppliant qua subject is fundamentally fashioned oppositionally. It articulates itself reactively through the projection of a normative self (which has been temporarily disrupted) against an Other; activity against passivity; wholeness against fragmentation; illness against health. This is done even as the subject is supposed also to be reconstituted by its reintegrating initiation amongst the suffering, both past and present. On the one hand, these scholars views of the subject are fundamentally predicated on (and limited to) a solitary, autonomous mind striving to create sense from a body whose “felt” boundaries are coterminous with that of the flesh. In addition to the possibly anachronistic assumptions made about Greek perceptions of the body and its boundaries, such views on subjective, embodied experience are overly mentalistic, lodging the creation of cultures’ symbolic networks within the always veiled operations of individual minds and closing off the contributions of *habitus*, landscape, and interpersonal interaction.

At the same time, I think these scholars are fundamentally correct in stating that the display of anatomical ex-votos helped enlist suppliants into notional communities with shared histories of illness and pain. Thus, I want to offer an alternative way of thinking about the encounter between suppliants and these mimetic body parts, divine healing, and the generation of community through the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, whereby embodied experience and its meanings are always generated through the phenomenal implication of persons and things. In particular, I want to borrow from the anthropologist Thomas Csordas, who, riffing on Ricoeur, states that:

We are neither isolated cogitos that must bridge a gulf of solipsism nor participants in the same shared substance. We are similar: all others are like me in the sense that all others “are egos just

like I am..." (Csordas 2008: 113)

On a basic phenomenal view, "objects" spring into being in the moment of direct perception, and, reciprocally, or perhaps *reflexively*, the subjective-self comes into being in relation to this interaction. When this co-constitution takes place within the interaction of two embodied subjects, we may call this intersubjectivity. For Csordas, too, the analogical foundation of perceiving other persons as *alter-egos* is paramount.^[3] For these thinkers the encounter with an other is an encounter with another ego who may be *like* me. This likeness, this perception of physical, emotional, and mental similitude, is a recurrent feature not only in the interpretation of the postures of others but of *ourselves*. The reflexivity of intersubjectivity is thus central to understanding how lived, embodied interactivity exists as the *primary* site of cultural expression and social relation. The repertoire of meanings we attach to experiences are themselves derived intersubjectively, grounded in the co-presence and actions of other embodied persons or objects. Thus, as Gail Weiss has put it "to describe embodiment as intercorporeality is to emphasize that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but it is always mediated by our continual interactions with other human and non-human bodies."^[4] This is all to say, then, that the "subjective-self," as it is commonly understood among contemporary historians of classical antiquity, may do well with being replaced by the intersubjective one the shape, margins, and boundaries of whose body and "self" are emergent from a suite of dialectical relationships.

What, then, is the relevance of all this to the viewership of anatomical ex-votives? As I suggested at the very outset, I think this aids us better understanding the practice of ritual viewing of these dedications. This is both because these mimetic representations of body parts were, or could be, very life-like and therefore created compelling substitutions for real persons, as alter-ego's with whose embodied experiences I might plausibly plot the meaning of my own. So too, it preserves for us the sense that the suppliant viewer is enrolled in a wider community of the suffering. Intersubjectivity in the context of the healing sanctuary thus consists in viewing the representations of others—even in their fragmentary yet-life-like state—as the traces of subjects like oneself. More than this, the creation of meaning for the sick suppliant flows not only from these intercorporeal exchanges, but inheres in the verbal and embodied expressions they provoke. Like the narrative miracle cures inscribed as the written records of the *iamata*, viewing the images of other suppliants both offers a framework for the interpretation of one's own experience and populates a world of alter-egos, who have, perhaps, suffered just like me.

^[1]Hughes, J. 2008. "Fragmentation as metaphor in the Classical Greek Healing Sanctuary," *Social History of Medicine* 21 (2): 217-36; Petsalis-Diomidis, A. 2010. *Truly Beyond Wonders: Aelius Aristides and the Cult of Asklepios*. Oxford.

^[2]Petstalis-Diomidis 2010.

^[3]Csordas, T. 1993. "Somatic modes of attention," *Cultural Anthropology* 8(2): 135-66, and 2008. "Intersubjectivity and intercorporeality," *Subjectivity* 22: 110-21.

[4] Weiss, G. 1999. *Body images: Embodiment as intercorporeality*. New York.