

УДК: 7.032'02"-5/-4"(38); 7.061

ББК: 85.133(0)32

A43

DOI: 10.18688/aa177-1-18

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## Art without Context: The “Morgantina Goddess”, a Classical Cult Statue from Sicily between Old and New Mythology

The so-called *Morgantina Goddess* (Ill. 29) represents an important case study for strategies and methodologies to be adopted on an ancient artifact resulting from illegal excavations, and thus deprived of its context, identity and history by the criminal network<sup>1</sup>.

Formerly known as the “Getty Aphrodite”<sup>2</sup>, the classical statue, dated around 400 BC, was stolen by looters in Sicily, bought by the Getty Museum in 1987, and returned to the Italian State following an agreement signed in September 2007, and finally exhibited at the Museo Regionale di Aidone in May 2011<sup>3</sup>. The statue is thought to have been excavated illegally from the ruins of the ca. 6<sup>th</sup> BC — 1<sup>st</sup> AD town of Morgantina in Sicily (Fig. 1), where the US archaeologists have been excavating since 1955<sup>4</sup>.

For a long time the sculpture has been the worldwide symbol of looted antiquities: scandals, millionaire checks, investigations, dealers, and also the public exposure of excellent archaeologists and their unclear swinging between art and crime. A mix of elements has created a very popular new mythology surrounding the statue, which has made Italian words “*Tombaroli*” and “*Clandestini*” as famous as Spaghetti, Pizza and Cappuccino, so far in so to have been added — with good reason! — to the international Italian dictionary.

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to thank the VII Actual Problems of Theory and History of Art International Conference Committee (2016) for their kind invitation to present this work that constitutes a preview of sorts of a future project. I am grateful to all staff and directors of the Morgantina Archaeological Park and the Aidone Museum for their fruitful and generous collaboration: S. Gueli, G. Susan, T. Greco and P. Marchesi, as well as former directors E. Caruso and L. Maniscalco. I am particularly indebted to Prof. C. Gasparri for his invaluable help and enriching discussion about various issues related to the statue. My heartfelt thanks to unforgettable judge S. Santiapichi for his insightful observations on the contemporary Sicilian context. I owe my sincere thanks to Prof. M. Vickers who, more recently, has provided very inspiring remarks, and to Prof. A. Stewart and Arch. M. Lefantzis for their useful scientific suggestions. I am also happy to thank my friends M. Bianca for the photographs of the “Morgantina Goddess”, and L. De Fazio for her editing and comments. I am also grateful to the “Kore” University of Enna for supporting the “Archaeological Mission in Morgantina”, which I am honored to direct. Finally, I would like to thank Dr. Marion True for shaping my life experience at the Getty.

<sup>2</sup> The J. Paul Getty Museum, Accession Number 88.AA.76 [35, pp. 20–21].

<sup>3</sup> The “Museo Regionale di Aidone” is located in the eponym modern city next to the ancient town of Morgantina (see note 4) and collects materials from the nearby Archaeological Park [25].

<sup>4</sup> For the history of Morgantina and archaeological studies [19; 25; 26; 2; 37]; on the multiethnic cultures in Archaic and Classical Morgantina [17]; for ancient literary sources, visit “*Bibliografia*” at [23].



Fig. 1. Morgantina, Agora. Google Earth view

The long-term quarrel between the Getty and the Italian authorities has produced a huge amount of books and articles released around the world [38; 39 and 12]: these include the reports by two LA Times journalists, J. Felch and R. Frammolino, nominated 2006 Pulitzer Prize finalists for their investigations on the criminal network behind the scene of the Getty acquisitions<sup>5</sup>.

In this respect, the statue is currently a pop superstar for its contemporary history, a symbol of the illegal antiquities market, more so than for its original value and significance: in other terms, a new mythology has replaced the old mythology, which, in fact, is still a “mystery” from some archeological points of view.

As a matter of fact, although everything possible has been said about the statue’s whereabouts, serious doubts still remain unsolved over the years and the main problem continues to be ignored: what and why has the current archaeological research accepted as sound information from the looters? Should we admit a risk of a “fabrication of history”? In other words, before “rumors” are considered as evidence, it’s time to explore the best approach to stem — even if partially there is the lack of scientific information. Of course, any definitive answer rests in the hands of looters, which explains why this contribution aims at approaching by questioning, rather than by asserting any truth<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> The scandal broke out on mass media when the statue was one of the body of evidence during the trial in Rome against the Getty Museum’s former antiquities curator, Marion True, in 2005 (the case was later dismissed because the criminal proceedings were time-barred): [10; 11].

<sup>6</sup> The very first time similar questions were officially raised in 2007, while the statue was still at the Getty under negotiation with Italian authorities: “*Secondly, what do we know of its more recent history, in other words its provenance based on what we might term ‘forensic evidence’?*” [6, p. 2].

The “Morgantina Goddess” is an over-life-size statue (about 2,20 m) depicting a wind-blown draped goddess. The statue is made in the acrolithic technique:<sup>7</sup> head, arms and feet are in Parian marble; the body is made of fine limestone from a quarry located in South-East Sicily, between Syracuse and Ragusa [1]. The figure wears a combination of a foot-length chiton and a himation which would have originally been pulled up over her shoulder and, presumably, the head would have had gilt bronze hair [14, p.57; 5, p.14 and p. 17]. She stands on her right leg, with her left leg flexed and her left foot placed to the side. The goddess was barefoot (Ill. 30):<sup>8</sup> by contrast, compare to the later acrolith feet with sandals from Kalydon (Fig. 2) [18, pp. 137–141]. Her right arm is raised to the front while the left arm is missing. Posture of shoulders, torso and legs is in Polykleitan contrapposto. Stylistic features belong to the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and relate to works of art influenced by Pheidias’ rich style. As for proportions and quality of execution, she was presumably intended to stand within a temple. According to the looters, she is from Morgantina.

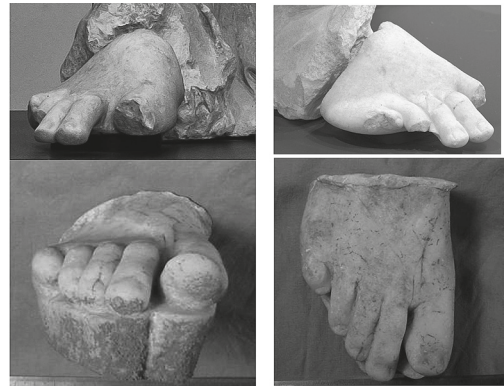


Fig. 2. Marble acrolith right feet of: (above) *Morgantina Goddess* Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone; (below) *Goddess from the Artemis Laprha sanctuary in Kalydon*, National Museum in Athens, AMN 336. Photo courtesy of M. Lefantzis

The archaeological site of Morgantina is under scientific research by US missions since 1955; at first lead by Princeton University and, since 1980, by Virginia University [24]. Recently, a new archaeological mission has been established by the nearby “Kore” University of Enna [40], in the Northern area of *plateia A*, close to the so-called Eupolemos House, where 15 Hellenistic silvers were illegally excavated, then bought by the Metropolitan Museum of NY and finally returned to the Aidone Museum in 2010. In the survey conducted in 2014 in the area, several holes made by the “clandestini” have been found and reported to the authorities [7, p. 185].

Undoubtedly, Morgantina has been a great bottomless pit for American museums and private collectors. Here is the list of lost & found & returned objects, other than the Goddess:

- marble acroliths (bought by NY tycoon, Maurice Tempelman), returned to Sicily in 2009;
- 15 Hellenistic silvers (bought by the Metropolitan Museum, NY), returned in 2010;
- the Hades terracotta head (bought by the Getty Museum) returned in 2016<sup>9</sup>.

The first public show of the Goddess Cult Statue was in 1988, at the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu. During its 22 years in California, the sculpture was mostly ignored by scholars. The

<sup>7</sup> For measurements, preservation status and bibliography [22, pp.1–2]; for the acrolithic technique [9, pp. 251–254]; for acroliths in Sicily [21].

<sup>8</sup> *Contra* [22, pp. 6–7], no traces of sandals are given.

<sup>9</sup> For the acroliths: [21 and 26]; for the silvers: [16; 8 and 27]; for the Hades’ head: [29].

only scientific occasion regarding it was held at the Getty in 2007. The meeting released two clear pieces of evidence: the marble comes from Paros and the limestone from Sicily [1].

From an archaeological point of view, at the time of writing, no other proof is given: no close comparable cult statues dated 450–400 BC are present in Sicily, and no pedestal or temple, which could have hosted the statue have been discovered in decades of excavations in Morgantina.

For many reasons, she is like an “alien” in late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Sicily and many questions are left unanswered due to the lack of archaeological data and context: Who does she represent? Who made her, for what and why? Was the author of the Parian marbles the same of the Sicilian limestone body? Were the marbles modeled in Sicily or shipped to Sicily after being modeled in their final shape in Greece? What was she doing? What was she holding in her left hand? Was she alone or part of a group? How long did she stand in her original site? What about the political, social and economic environment that wanted to offer this important cult statue in town? Also, regardless of the well-meaning opinions expressed by scholars within this context barren of evidence, two questions — the most important — continue to be overlooked: Does the head belong to her? Does she indeed come from Morgantina? The truth lies with the looters. The only way to get closer would be to find the temple. In the meantime, caution at its maximum is the least to be expected.

**The provenance.** As was already mentioned, the statue is said to come from Morgantina. In actual fact, there is no archaeological evidence, but rumors, indicating that area [12, pp. 100–110]. These rumors, if accepted by the scientific community as told by the looters risk setting the basis for a fabrication of history that could hardly be corrected in the future. Very cautiously, at the Getty workshop in 2007 (when the statue was still in Malibu), Malcolm Bell, who had been directing the Virginia University mission in Morgantina since 1980, said “*I am unaware of any evidence that might either point to an actual find spot for the Cult Statue at Morgantina or indicate if, when, or by whom the sculpture was found there*” [5, p.22]<sup>10</sup>. Later, when the statue returned to Sicily, scholars simply assumed she comes from Morgantina, in particular from the cult area of San Francesco Bisconti. Actually, that sanctuary (6<sup>th</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC), presumably dedicated to the cult of Demetra and Kore [15], appears as a complex of terraces and rooms unable to host a 2,20 m freestanding cult statue. Moreover, the terraces mostly collapsed in the past, and so the statue, consistently with many other fragmentary materials from the area, should have been found too, in small pieces. Prudently, the Aidone Museum displays the statue’s provenance: “*Sanctuary of San Francesco Bisconti (?)*”.

Problems also arise with regards to the cultural and economic framework, as the above-mentioned dating of the statue would correspond to a probable period of economic crisis in the town. If this cultural and social scenario was correct, it would be very hard to imagine the town able to buy such expensive material as marble pieces from Greece and the expertise of a sculptor close to the Pheidian entourage<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> In addition to that, according to [12, p. 100], Bell “*believed that a cult statue the size of the Getty’s Aphrodite would have been housed in a large temple, but in thirty years of excavation at Morgantina, no one had found such a shrine*”.

<sup>11</sup> “*It didn’t make sense to Bell that the city would have commissioned such a monumental statue during an economic depression*” [12, p. 100]. Of the same opinion is the distinguished Italian judge Severino Santiapichi who expressed serious doubts about the Morgantina provenance [31].



**The head.** A significant issue is whether the head (Ill. 31) belongs to the statue. For sure, the limestone body was cut in 3 pieces by looters. Body and marbles travelled in separate boxes from Sicily to Switzerland and London through the long chain of looters — intermediaries — dealers, and finally were delivered in pieces to the Getty in December 1987. Question: are we sure the marble head belonged to this statue? Not at all. Many conflicting versions from the looters disturb us, archaeologists: one said the body had been found in Morgantina and was driven to the Swiss border on a Fiat truck filled with carrots; another said the statue's body was spotted by itself in a Gela house; others said there were 2 or 3 heads in Morgantina, then in Gela, and also that the body had been joined with one of the heads in Switzerland, etc. Two more curiosities relate to the truck filled with carrots in which the statue was carried and its travel deserves to be mentioned: firstly, carrots are not known to grow in the Morgantina area (whereas they are in Gela and Syracuse territories); secondly, the accounted trip would have been indeed a very long way out of Sicily: it took three times longer because, according to looters, the statue was detoured back to Gela before leaving the island.

The tangled plot seems to have also troubled the Getty staff: *“The museum's experts also had a lengthy debate over whether the body and the head belonged together, noting that the head appeared to be of slightly smaller proportion and did not fit snugly onto the limestone torso [...]. ‘It is difficult to determine if this head was actually part of the original composition’, — True wrote in her 1988 curator's report to the Getty board”* [11]<sup>12</sup>. Scholars have generally accepted the Getty's reconstruction, which is also currently on display at the Aidone Museum (Ill. 29).

From a stylistic point of view, the quality of execution of the limestone body shows the sculptor knew about the experiences of last quarter of the 5<sup>th</sup> BC Athens (such as the Nike of Paionos and the reliefs of the balustrade of the temple of Athena Nike), and also he was greatly skilled at carving local Sicilian limestone. An excellent combination of different experiences which can be explained by speculating about the diffusion of Athenian influence on the island during the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, following the Peloponnesian War, through the dominant role of Syracuse as the cultural and artistic epicenter [5, pp. 14–15; 30, pp. 233–240]. In this perspective, the head, which most likely does not belong to the statue, does add an important contribution to the understanding of the relations between Greece and Sicily through the very idea of the acrolith itself. In this regard, it will be more and more important to understand in depth the liaisons between quarries and workshops in mainland Greece and their potential interactions with customers and craftsmen from areas in scarcity of marble.

**The Goddess.** The Morgantina Goddess has been variously identified by scholars as Demeter [14], Persephone [20; 22] or Hera [5]. In short, Demeter and Persephone because of the

<sup>12</sup> And more, in [11]: *“Mascara told Basso that he had seen the statue's body in the Gela house [...]. As for the head, Mascara said it had been found at the same time as two other marble heads in Morgantina. Mascara said he heard that Di Simone had joined it with the statue's body in Switzerland. Parts of Mascara's account echo one given by Sicilian art collector Vincenzo Cammarata, who in a recent interview told The Times that the Aphrodite's head was one of three marble heads he had been offered in the late 1970s by local tomb raiders. He said he later heard that the Campanella brothers had sold the heads to middlemen who sold them to Di Simone. Shown a photo of the Aphrodite's head, he identified it as one of the three heads he had seen years earlier: ‘That's the one,’ he said. ‘I'm sure of it.’ Cammarata's story about the heads has changed over the years. In 1988, he testified about seeing only two heads. A day after his interview with The Times, he said he was no longer sure whether he had seen two heads or three”*.



Fig. 3. Left: *Aphrodite*, Athens Agora Museum S 1882. Photo by Agora Excavations  
 Center: *Morgantina Goddess*, Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo by M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone  
 Right: *Aphrodite*, Athens Agora Museum S 37. Photos by Agora Excavations

many archaeological evidences related to the mother-daughter cult in central Sicily. Hera and Demeter because of her supposedly matronly-looking body. Demeter again, because she might seem about to run to her daughter Kore back from the Hade's Kingdom. Curiously, the first Getty attribution as "Aphrodite" has been completely foregone by scholars, as an instinctive *damnatio memoriae*, in spite of the fact that the Getty's suggestion still seems to be the fittest; in fact recent studies show that mid-late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Aphrodite statues were almost fully draped, and sometimes veiled [33, pp. 278–279]. Among possible comparisons, also in contemporary pottery<sup>13</sup> (while bearing in mind that the mentioned pieces are constantly under revision by scholars), here are remembered: the Doria-Pamphili Aphrodite type, the "Brazzà" Aphrodite (Berlin Staatliche Museen SK 1459) and the Aphrodite from Athens (Agora Museum S 37, Fig.3, right)<sup>14</sup>.

For style, posture and drapery, the statue can be placed near the fully draped Aphrodite also from Athens (Agora Museum S 1882)<sup>15</sup>. Neither the Agora Aphrodite nor the Morgantina Goddess are running: one foot stands, the other is at the side, and in both sculptures bodies stand in Polikleitan posture, not walking. In particular, for posture and general schema, the Morgantina statue recalls the Agora S 1882 while for rendering of some drapery (see the shallow depth of the folds on the left leg) it is similar to Agora S 37 (Fig. 3); this analysis helps place the statue right in-between the two mentioned Athenian goddesses, around 400–390 BC, and it would, at the same time, be consistent with the supposed amount of time needed by an Athenian artist, who could have arrived with the 413 BC expedition to Sicily, to make himself known, exper-

<sup>13</sup> For some examples, cfr. the veiled Aphrodite in the kalyx-krater by the Dinos Painter (Mus. Bologna, 300), and in the cup (Berlin, F 2536) by the eponym painter.

<sup>14</sup> See bibliography and recent studies [33, respectively: p. 273, note 19; p. 272, note 13; p. 277, note 25].

<sup>15</sup> Complete bibliography and recent studies [33, p.276; 32, p.587 ss., and pp. 619–622].

iment with the local limestone, and finally produce a statue of such grandeur.

Some scholars suggest Demeter or Hera on the basis of its matronly look. In actual fact, there is no way to imagine what the height of the base would have been and how any “optical corrections” would have impacted on the viewer, had the statue been situated inside a temple or in an open public space. Today’s perception is spoiled by her exhibition space in the hall of the Morgantina Museum. With this in mind, it would be very useful to undertake digital simulations to verify how her proportions change with different pedestal heights from different points of view, such as has been recently rendered for the Temple of Ares in Athens [32, p.610 ss., figs. 32–33] (Fig. 4). In any case, even without the simulation, her silhouette may strongly be perceived differently by just changing the angle of our observation in her current display (for example, she may look slim and young as in Fig. 5).

To sum up, we have seen how many problems arise in studying ancient material coming from illegal excavations. Sometimes, the disaster caused by looters to the



Fig. 4. Hypothetical digital reconstruction of the interior of the Temple of Ares, Athens, ca. AD 14. Reconstruction by Janet Juarez and Andrew Stewart, based on Pausanias 1.8.4–5 and the extant remains. Courtesy of Andrew Stewart



Fig. 5. *Morgantina Goddess*, Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo by M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone

history and identity of such material can be never fixed by scholars. Only a multidisciplinary approach combining different fields such as investigations, archaeology and technology may get us closer to the historical and cultural interpretation of a piece of art without provenance and, as in this case-study, to the real meaning of one of the most astonishing classical cult goddess statues from Sicily. To this effect, in order to reduce any risk that unsupported factoids may be in good faith transferred to the scientific field, we should admit and keep in mind that the starting point is a sum of “negative” points. We hope that new excavations will answer some of the questions briefly outlined here; archaeology is often capable of overturning any previous opinion.

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**Title:** Art without Context: The “Morgantina Goddess”, a Classical Cult Statue from Sicily between Old and New Mythology.

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**Abstract.** The *Morgantina Goddess*, a late 5<sup>th</sup> century BC statue that was stolen/returned to Sicily, is a worldwide symbol of looted art. It is thought to have been excavated illegally in 1977 from the ruins of Morgantina in Sicily. It was acquired by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 1987 and returned to Italy in May 2011. The fame for her recent history has replaced her old mythology and many archeological questions are still unanswered, such as: no other close comparable cult statue, dating back to 450 BC, is present in Sicily; neither pedestal nor temple, which could have hosted the statue in antiquity, have yet been discovered in over 60 years of excavations in Morgantina; its identity as a young goddess or a mature one (Aphrodite-Kore or Demeter-Hera) should be evaluated under the optical corrections offered by the final position and height on its (missing) base inside the (missing) temple. As a matter of fact, although everything possible has been said about the statue's whereabouts, the issue is problematic: what and why has the current archaeological research accepted as sound information from the looters? Should we admit a risk of a "fabrication of history"? These questions and many others might risk that unsupported 'factoids' swiftly add on to the "new mythology" related to her recent manipulated history. For these reasons, the *Morgantina Goddess* represents an important case study on strategies to be adopted on antiquities deprived of their context by the criminal network.

**Keywords:** Morgantina; The J. Paul Getty museum; Sicily; Classical archaeology; looted; Aidone; Goddess; mythology; Kore; Aphrodite; Pheidias.

**Название:** Искусство без контекста: «Богиня из Моргантины», классическая культовая статуя из Сицилии между старой и новой мифологией.

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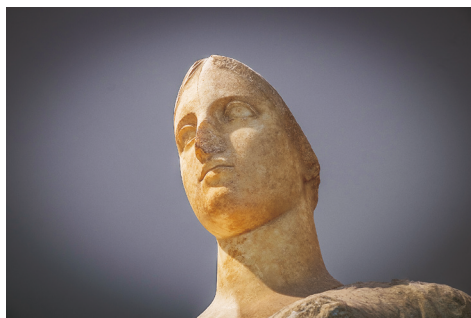
**Аннотация.** «Богиня из Моргантины», статуя конца V в. до н. э., похищенная из Сицилии и впоследствии возвращенная, стала всемирно известным символом грабительских махинаций в сфере искусства. Считается, что в 1977 г. она была грабительским путем извлечена из руин античной Моргантины — города существовавшего на Сицилии в V–I вв. до н. э. В 1987 г. скульптура была приобретена музеем Пола Гетти, а в мае 2011 г. вернулась в Италию. Прославившая памятник современная история затмила окутывавшую его мифологию древнюю, и многие археологические проблемы и вопросы по сей день остаются открытыми. Так, на Сицилии нет ни одной культовой статуи середины V — конца I в. до н. э., сопоставимой с этой скульптурой; за 60 лет археологических раскопок в Моргантине не были найдены ни пьедестал, ни храм античного времени, с которыми она могла бы быть соотнесена. Открыт вопрос о характере образа — считать ли фигуру изображением юной богини или женским божеством зрелого возраста (Афродитой-Корой или Деметрой-Герой), зависит от оптической корректировки, которая может получиться при анализе позы и оценке высоты расположения статуи на некоем пьедестале, находившемся внутри некоего храма. Так или иначе, хотя, казалось бы, о местонахождении статуи всё известно, остро встает вопрос: почему в современных археологических исследованиях информация, исходящая от грабителей, принимается как достоверная? Вправе ли мы допустить саму возможность фальсификации истории? Перечисленные проблемы, как, впрочем, и многое другое, угрожают тем, что неподтвержденные «фактоиды» стремительно обогащают ту «новую мифологию», которой история скульптуры обросла совсем недавно в результате подтасовок. В силу этих обстоятельств, исследование этого памятника представляет собой значимый и весьма характерный пример научной стратегии, которой следует придерживаться при изучении древностей, вырванных из контекста криминальными действиями.

**Ключевые слова:** Моргантина; Музей Пола Гетти; Сицилия; античная археология; подделки; Айдоне; богиня; мифология; Кора; Афродита; Фидий.

Ill. 29. Morgantina Goddess. Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo by M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone



Ill. 30. Morgantina Goddess: marble acrolith foot. Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo by M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone



Ill. 31. Morgantina Goddess: marble acrolith head. Museo Regionale di Aidone. Photo by M. Bianca, courtesy of Museo Regionale di Aidone