Introduction

Αφροδιτήν ἐλεφαντίνην ἐν ὑπαλοίς μυρρινώσαρν ἔδωσαν ἀπαλαι κόρας, διδάσκαλος αὐτὰς ἀγαθή σοφή καὶ σοῦδε ἐξωρας. ἤφιξάνει γάρ τις ὄρα καὶ ῥυτίδα πρώτη, γῆρος μὲν τὸ ὑπόσεμων ἐλκοῦσα, τούτῳ δὲ αὐ- κερανύσατα τὸ σοζόμενον τῆς ἁμης. καὶ τὸ μὲν σχῆμα τῆς Αφροδίτης λιθαμώθη, γυμνὴ καὶ εὐσχήμων, ἢ δὲ ἔλη συνήθη μεμοκότος ἐξεφαντό. ἀλλ’ αὐτὶ βούλεται γεγράφθαι δοκεῖν ἢ θέως, ἐκείται δὲ όνο λαβέσθαι. 

βούλει λόγου τι ἐπιλείβομεν τῷ βοωμῷ; λιθαμωτῷ γὰρ ἰκανός ἔχει καὶ κασίας καὶ σμύρνης, δοκεῖ δὲ μοι καὶ Σαπφοῦς τι ὀνομαῖν. ἐπαινετέα τοῖν δὲ σοφία τῆς γραφῆς, πρώτον μὲν ὅτι τᾶς ἐγαπωμένας λίθους περιβαλούσα σῶν ἐκ τῶν χρωμάτων αὐτῶς ἐμμεμαστο, ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ φωτός, ἔναν ὕψος κύριτον τῆς διαυγείας αὐτῶς ἐνδείκνυε, ἐπ’ ὅτι καὶ τοῦ ἕμιτος παρέχει ἀκούσειν, ἐδῶσι γὰρ αἱ παιδεῖς, ἐδούσι, καὶ ἡ διδάσκαλος ὑποβλήτει τῆς ἀπαγόρου καταλύσας τὰς χεῖρας καὶ ἐς τὸ μέλος ἰκανὸς ἐμμεμαστό.

Aphrodite, made of ivory, delicate maidens are hymning in delicate myrtle groves. The chorister who leads them is skilled in her art, and not yet past her youth; for a certain beauty rests even on her first wrinkle, which, though it brings with it the gravity of age, yet tempers this with what remains of her prime. The type of the goddess is that of Aphrodite goddess of Modesty, naked and graceful, and the material is ivory, closely joined. However, the goddess is unwilling to seem painted, but she stands out as though one could take hold of her.

Do you wish us to pour a libation of discourse on the altar? For of frankincense and cinnamon and myrrh it has enough already, and it seems to me to give out also a fragrance as of Sappho. Accordingly the artistry of the painting must be praised, first, because the artist, in making the border of precious stones, has used not colours but light to depict them, putting a radiance in them like the pupil in an eye, and, secondly, because he even makes us hear the hymn. For the maidens are singing, are singing, and the chorister frowns at one who is off key, clapping her hands and trying earnestly to bring her into tune.

Philostratus, Imagines 2.1–3

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A statue, a song, a scent: the stage is set for Aphrodite. A libation of *logos*—composed by her singing worshippers, by the painter, by the narrator of the ekphrasis, by Philostratus himself—is poured in expectation of her presence. But where is the goddess? In an infinite recession of registers, she stands as an ivory image, depicted within a painting, described within a text. This Aphrodite, here in her guise as a goddess of Modesty (*aidōs*), is surely beyond our grasp. Ivory, medium of duplicity (and the gate through which false dreams pass), signals the statue’s capacity to tempt and deceive, even as its flesh-like tones and organic warmth recall the wish fulfilment granted to Pygmalion (whose living doll, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, was also made of ivory).² And yet, despite the veil of representation that stands between reader and goddess, Aphrodite ‘does not want to seem painted’; she is ‘set forth’ or ‘projected’ (ἐκθέτει) from the screen of discourse, willing herself to be ‘seized’, even ‘possessed’ (λαμβάνει) by the viewer. Is it not strange to impute motives to the image in this way, to refer to it as ‘the goddess’ (ἡ θεία), rather than ‘the statue’? What does it (she?) want?³

She wants, Philostratus suggests, to be experienced as an epiphany.

Here, in the programmatic introduction to his second book of ekphraseis, Philostratus gives form to an abiding tension that exists between art and the sacred (and, indeed, at the heart of representation itself): what does it mean to make the gods present through acts of human creativity? How can images be experienced as divine, when their material, their facture, their framing are so clearly dependent upon cultural artifice? When, as in the opening words of the ekphrasis, deity must be inevitably coupled with statue, Aphrodite with ivory (Ἀφροδίτην ἐλεφαντινυν), in a necessary symbiosis of form and matter? The text generates a double affect akin to the play of ‘absorption and erudition’ that accompanies the viewing of any naturalistic image, giving form to the viewer’s simultaneous desire for the image to be ‘real’ and recognition of its status as a man-made object.⁴ In this sense the ivory


⁴ On the relationship between ‘absorption and erudition’ in the *Imagines*, see Newby (2009), whose helpful phrase reappears throughout this book. On the desire to collapse distinctions between image and prototype in practices of viewing, see Freedberg (1989) and Maniura and Shepherd (2006).
Aphrodite occupies a perfect position as the lure between books 1 and 2 of the *Imagines*, an embodiment of art’s sensuous promise and the inevitable experience of thwarted desire that accompanies any act of beholding (or reading).\(^5\) The goddess’s palpable presence draws us in, only to be revealed as a play of mirrors; the shuttling between Ἀφροδίτη and ἔλεφαντίνη, or goddess and image, is a programmatic expression of the continual shifting between wonder and wisdom (*thauma* and *sophia*) generated by the text’s educated exegete, whose word-pictures express now emotional involvement with the painting’s content, now detached commentary on the *technē*, or skill, of the painter.\(^6\)

Yet there is more at stake in this particular ekphrasis, signified by the elaborate ritual frame that shapes our mental picture (or *phantasia*) of Aphrodite.\(^7\) For although the goddess exists as a statue within a painting within a text, the epiphanic manoeuvre by which this ontological hierarchy is collapsed is generated by a hymn. Aphrodite is made present and palpable for the reader through a series of embedded textual performances prompted by the ekphrastic fireworks of the sophist, who conjures up the hymnic invocation directed by the female choir-mistress (the *didaskalos*) within the text. Together, these enact a libation of *logos*, a verbal offering that through its synaesthetic potency stands for (is literally *redolent of*) the fragrant offerings poured upon the altar in the painting, and which, through a sensuous form of intertextuality, ‘breathes forth a scent of Sappho’ (Σαπφοῦς τι ἄνωτενίφι).\(^8\) Sappho it was who, as a *didaskalos* of maidens similar to those described in the painting, invoked Aphrodite in her famous hymn as ‘enthroned in many colours’ (ποικιλόθρων) and ‘weaver of wiles’ (δολόπλοκη), begging her to facilitate the fulfilment of her desire for an elusive love-object.\(^9\)

In this way Philostratus indirectly invokes Aphrodite

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\(^6\) On the significance of *paideia* in the *Imagines*, see Maffei (1991) and Elsner (1995: 21–39). The important of *technē* is twice made clear in the proem to book 1, where it is used to refer to proportion (1) and the use of colour (3).


\(^8\) Cf. Libanius on the offering of a ‘feast of logos’ to Artemis as the crowning event of celebrations in honour of her cult, in a letter to Bacchius of Tarsus, c. 362 ce (83 Norman, with Goldhill, 2006: 118–19). On synaesthetic effects in the *Imagines*, see Manieri (1999) and R. Webb (2006b: 120–2).

\(^9\) Sappho fr. 1, lines 1–2; cf. *Imagines* 2.1.3, where Philostratus describes the maidens as ‘honey-voiced (μελιόφωνοι), to use a charming expression of Sappho’, evoking fr. 71.6, μελιθυόφωνος, ‘soft-voiced’. On the role of Aphrodite in the hymn, see A. Cameron (1939),
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as a goddess of painting (and writing, for graphein refers to both), alluding to epithets that would, of course, be entirely appropriate for a collection of ekphraseis in which painted and rhetorical ‘colours’ are woven together in an increasingly dazzling examination of the playful elusiveness of both prototypes within images, and images within texts.\(^\text{10}\) Through this play of allusion and description, the ekphrasis becomes itself a form of worship.

By pointing to Sappho’s Hymn to Aphrodite (itself placed first within the collection of her poems known to antiquity), Philostratus facilitates a form of indirect epiphany, diverting us to an ancient prayer in which the goddess was indeed presented as animate and present, speaking and smiling to and through her female devotee(s).\(^\text{11}\) His ekphrasis closes with the maidens singing of Aphrodite’s birth: ‘By looking upward they indicate that she is from Heaven (Ouranos), and by slightly moving their upturned hands they show that she has come from the sea, and their smile is an intimation of the sea’s calm (τὸ μείβισα δὲ στρώμα γαλήνης ἔστιν αἰνίγμα).’ Their use of aetiological myth to narrate the goddess’s original epiphany prompts a smile (μείβισα) that echoes Sappho’s description of Aphrodite ‘smiling with an immortal countenance’ (μείβαιαίασσαι ἀδανάτῳ προσώπῳ), uniting the goddess with her worshippers through gesture and performance.\(^\text{12}\) The ekphrasis suggests that when experienced within the context of ritual – when the song can actually be heard – text and image can generate a ‘real’ experience of the divine. Crucially, however, such encounters can be facilitated only through the most exquisite human


\(^{11}\) On the programmatic positioning of Sappho fr. 1 within collections of her works formed during the Hellenistic period, see Winkler (2002: 42–5).

\(^{12}\) Fr. 1, line 14. Compare H. Hom. 5.3, which describes Aphrodite as ‘always smiling’ (αἰτὶ μείβηνε); see Boedeker (1974: 23–6, 32–5) on Aphrodite’s Homeric epithet ἀναρμηνηθηκέρας, and on the Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite, my discussion in Chapter 1, 63–72. On the ritual orchestration of myth in archaic and classical choral poetry and the mutually reinforcing relationship between belief and practice in Greek religion, see Kowalzig (2007).
technē: the ivory must be ‘closely joined’ (συνοθήκη); the choristers must sing ‘in tune’ (ἐκ τὸ μέλος). In this sense *thauma* and *sophia*, or absorption and erudition, need not be mutually contradictory. Indeed, it is only through such co-ordinations of wisdom and skill – through the acquisition and demonstration of *paideia* – that the divine might actually be apprehended. It is significant in this sense that the final phrase of the ekphrasis describes the maidens’ smiles as an *ainigma* of the sea’s calm at Aphrodite’s birth, a verbo-visual ‘riddle’ that by intimating divine epiphany nevertheless reasserts its resistance to all but the most subtly calibrated invocations of presence.13

Nowhere is this careful equilibrium between mortal skill and divine radiance more palpable than in Philostratus’ description of the precious or ‘cherished’ gems (τὸς ἀγαπημένος λίθους) that have been ‘cast around’ the painting (περιβαλόσα), presumably as a kind of frame.14 On one hand, the *technē* required to manipulate base pigments into transparent, gleaming stones is presented as a sign of the painter’s *sophia* – his technical wisdom. On the other hand, the suggestion that he has painted with light itself (ἐκ τοῦ φωτός) to generate a radiance (διαυγείαν) that transforms the jewels into shining eyes takes us beyond the boundaries of representation, shifting into a revelatory mode. In their dazzling indeterminacy, the gem-eyes are akin to the iridescence of Athena’s epiphany at *Imagines* 2.27.3, when she springs fully formed from the head of Zeus: ‘As for the material of her panoply (ἡ), no one could guess it; for as many as are the colours of the rainbow, which changes its light now to one hue and now to another, so many are the colours of her armour’.15 Likewise the embroidered flowers on the garments of Aphrodite’s *korai* at 2.1.3 ‘are miraculous

13 Compare 1.6.3, where the allegorical significance of the Erotes’ play is described as a ‘beautiful riddle’ (καθέν ὅ τὸ οὐνύμια). Significantly, 2.1 makes visible an Aphrodite who is present but unseen at 1.6.7, signified only by offerings in a rural shrine: ‘Do you look, please, at Aphrodite (σοῦ δὲ μαί τὴν Αφροδίτην βλέπτει). But where is she and in what part of the orchard yonder? . . . Be sure that Aphrodite is there, where the Nymphs, I doubt not (οἴμα), have established a shrine to her.’ The pointed contrast in 2.1, which makes ‘Aphrodite’ the very first word of book 2, draws attention to the increased emphasis on the sacred in the second book of the *Imagines*, with its focus on divine epiphany and its corresponding rituals in 2.1, 2.16 (Palaemon) and 2.27 (the birth of Athena). I am grateful to Jaś Elsner for sharing with me an unpublished piece on Philostratus’ use of religion in these ekphraseis.

14 This is the interpretation of περιβαλόσα suggested by Fairbanks, following Benndorf and Schenkel (1893). It does not, however, preclude the idea that the gems are ‘scattered around’ Aphrodite’s shrine as votive offerings. On the dedication of gem collections, or *dactyliothecae* in temples, see Pliny *HN* 37.11 and Suetonius *Divus Iulius* 47.

15 On this and parallel descriptions of divine materials at 1.10.3 (Amphion’s chlamys), 1.16.4 (Pasiphae’s iridescent tunic) and 2.2.2 (Achilles’ chlamys), see Dubel (2009: 317).
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[literally daemonic] imitations’ (δαιμονιώς ἐκμεμήνηται).

When experienced as divine or daemonic, matter (hulē) has the power to confound conventional categories of material, colour and description altogether, just as at 2.1.1 Aphrodite resists her status as a painted statue and wriggles out of conventional iconographic schemata, being simultaneously ‘modest’ and ‘naked’ (note the juxtaposition of Αἴθους, γυμνή).

The gem-studded frame that surrounds her, and points to the ekphrasis’ status as a frame for the book itself, is simultaneously matter and light, a painted ainigma that demonstrates the artist’s skill while pointing to the divinity of its depicted content.

As one might expect, the programmatic ekphrasis of Imagines 2.1 foregrounds the act of looking. But in line with Philostratus’ increased emphasis on the sacred in book 2, the visual operations he traces within the text continually push beyond the conventional limitations of human artistry in order to suggest that the object of the gaze looks back. In this respect the all-seeing gems encourage us to read anew the dancing korai of the opening paragraph: are they maidens, or, in a pun on an alternative meaning of κόρη (‘pupil’), might they too be eyes? Surrounded by all-seeing gems and dancing ‘eyes’, the statue of Aphrodite cannot but be imbued with a subjectivity of her own, viewed as a sentient being who ‘does not want to seem painted’, but to engage directly with her worshippers beyond the frame. In this way, Philostratus not only highlights a cultural predilection to attribute agency to anthropomorphic divine forms, but also demonstrates how a complex

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16 Fairbanks translates ‘are represented with wonderful truth’. Compare 2.34, the final ekphrasis in the collection where the Horai are described, in a wonderful echo of 2.1, as being depicted ‘with miraculous skill’ (δαιμονιόν τέχνης); see Elsner (2000c).

17 On hule as matter itself (‘that from which [things] are generated’, as opposed to ‘wood’), see Arist. Metaph. 1032a17, and in late antique theology, Finney (1994: 47–53). Philostratus may imply here that Aphrodite is represented in the Pudica pose, with her arms concealing her breasts and pudenda, yet as the juxtaposition of Αἴθους and γυμνή suggests, such a simultaneous revelation and concealment of the goddess’s body is itself a form of visual paradox. On the problems inherent in making Aphrodite visually and corporeally accessible to her mortal viewers, see my discussion of Praxiteles’ Aphrodite of Knidos in Chapter 4.


19 See LSJ s.v. κόρη, citing PL. Alc. 1.132e–133a: ‘Have you observed that the face of the person who looks into another’s eye is shown in the optic confronting him, as in a mirror, and we call this the pupil (ὁ ἐν κατά τον ἑαυτὸν οπτικόν) for in it is an image (τιμολογίαν) of the person looking?’ (translation from W. R. M. Lamb, Plato, vol. 111 Loeb Classical Library, 1955). Cf. the proem to Imagines 1, where Philostratus specifically claims that ‘the varying nature of bright eyes the plastic artist does not bring out at all in his work; but the “grey eye”, the “blue eye”, the “black eye” are known to painting’ (καὶ σοφίας ὑμάτων ὑποκεῖται εἶναι ὁ πλαστικὸς μὲν τῆς ἤκτας ἤργῳ, χρωτόν τί ζωμα καὶ γάλακτον καὶ μέλαν γαφική οἶκν, proem 2); see Newby (2009: 325).
interweaving of ritual performance, synaesthetic effect and iconographic, literary and mythological know-how might generate *enargeia*, 'clarity' or 'vividness', in the (mind's) eye of his viewer-readers. In short, he reveals to us the mechanics of epiphany – the cultural codes of representation, performance and reception by which the gods might be made present and accessible to mortal perception. In doing so, he also demonstrates the high level of self-consciousness with which the relationship between epiphany and cultural practice was explored, celebrated and problematised in the literature of imperial Greece (or as he himself termed it, the ‘Second Sophistic’). For Philostratus was well aware that in order to come face to face with the divine, one must – as the title of this book suggests – supply the very face one seeks.

I start with Philostratus because, as Charly Clerc long ago observed, it is in the prose literature of the second and third centuries CE that we find our most sustained, sophisticated theorisation of the relationship between Greek gods and their images. Texts such as the *Imagines* and Philostratus' works on more overtly sacred themes, such as the *Heroicus* and the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, repeatedly draw attention to the idea that within Greek culture, epiphany (by which I mean the manifestation of deities to mortals) inspired, and was in turn inspired by, practices of visual and literary representation, generating a mutually reinforcing bond that operated within both identifiably sacred contexts and the cultural imagination at large. In examining this relationship, Philostratus and his contemporaries repeatedly highlight the hermeneutic challenges raised by the notion of unmediated access to beings who are by definition invisible and incorporeal, and the difficulty of conveying such experiences through human modes of expression. For example, even a supposed 'first-hand' account of epiphanic autopsy, such as that supplied by Aelius Aristides in his *Sacred Tales* (which relate his experiences of incubation in the sanctuary of Asclepius at Pergamon), is filtered through a complex process of rhetorically self-conscious

20 On *enargeia* in the *Imagines*, see R. Webb (2006b), and in Second Sophistic literature more broadly, my discussion in Chapter 5, with further bibliography. On the attribution of agency and interiority to sacred images, see Gell (1998: 134–6).


22 Clerc (1915).

23 Graf (2004a: 1122) defines epiphany (and the Greek term ἐπιφάνεια) as 'the manifestation of a deity in a spontaneous vision, or during an actual ritual process, as well as in stories'. On the unity of the Elder Philostratus' *œuvre*, see Lannoy (1997) and Elsner (2009a).
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narration. Despite the inevitably aporetic nature of much epiphanic discourse, however, these authors repeatedly advance modes of reading and viewing that offer the possibility of crossing the gap between human artifice and divine reality – between ‘ivory’ and ‘Aphrodite’.

Crucially, for Philostratus, as for Dio Chrysostom, Pausanias, Aelius Aristides and Plutarch, any attempt to access divinity in the present is heavily dependent upon the cultural conventions of the past. Just as Aphrodite’s maidens must invoke her presence by telling the story of her birth (her first epiphany, itself a programmatic demonstration of her divine identity), so Philostratus’ attempt to render Aphrodite present through language in the Imagines must draw upon the hymnic invocations made by his literary predecessor Sappho. Such a concern for the cultural conditions of divine presence (and equally, its absence) is therefore inseparable from the broader motivation of Second Sophistic thinkers to recover and preserve their religious and cultural history; their sense of ‘secondariness’ is inevitably dependent upon what came before. In this sense, the model of epiphany they advance is dependent upon a particularly Hellenic form of paideia, which looks to sacred tradition in order to emphasise continuity with the living religious culture of the present. So it is that while Part II of this book concentrates upon the relationship between epiphany and representation in the Second Sophistic, Part I addresses some of the religious, artistic and literary practices that characterised epiphanic discourse in archaic, classical and Hellenistic Greece, providing the necessary cultural background for a proper understanding of epiphany in the Greek culture of the Roman Empire. Even so, we shall see that in many cases, the intense interest in the phenomenon displayed by later Greek writers entails that much of our evidence for its earlier history is filtered through imperial texts. In order to understand the various epiphanic strategies employed by archaic and classical cult statues, for example (as I do in Chapter 2), it is necessary to perform a kind of textual archaeology, sifting between competing strata of evidence while bearing in mind the interpretative idiosyncrasies and ideological commitments of the author at hand. We might call it the ‘curse of Pausanias’ that the Narnia of Greek religion is often only accessible through the wardrobe of later tradition. Yet as much recent scholarship has


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demonstrated, Pausanias and his colleagues have a great deal to offer the historian of antiquity in their own right. 26

Until recently the role played by epiphany in Greek culture received rather limited scholarly attention; for decades the standard reference work for historians of Greek religion has been Friedrich Pfister’s attempt to catalogue a definitive typology of human–divine encounters in an encyclopaedia entry of 1924. 27 Yet several recent doctoral theses, conferences and ensuing publications have suggested that the cognitive and hermeneutic dilemmas raised by epiphany are of particular interest to contemporary scholars. 28 The vanguard has been led by cultural historians of the French school inspired by Jean-Pierre Vernant’s structuralist approach to religious mentalité, such as Renée Koch Piettre, together with classical philologists excited by the potential for deconstructive readings of the modalities of divine presence and the aporetic nature of epiphanic language in literary texts. 29 Epiphany


27 Pfister (1924), where he distinguishes between epic, mythic, legendary, cultic and Christian epiphanies; see also Pax (1955), who focuses upon cross-cultural similarities between Greek, Indo-Iranian, Egyptian, Babylonian and Christian models of epiphany, Lührmann (1975), who emphasises their soteriological function, Lane Fox (1986: 102–67), who traces the cultural history of Greco-Roman epiphany against the background of religious change in late antiquity, Versnel (1987), on the vexing question of what ancient viewers actually saw in their visions of the gods, and, for helpful summaries of epiphany’s role in Greek religion, Cancik (1990) and Graf (2004a).

28 Doctoral theses include Stevens (2002) and Turkeltaub (2003), on Homeric epiphany, Platt (2004), on which the present volume is based, and Petridou (2006, to appear in book form with Oxford University Press), which offers a comprehensive survey of the evidence for epiphanic experience in literary and epigraphic sources, together with an analysis of their role in Greek cult and significance for cultural and political identity. Conferences in America and the UK have led to a special edition of Illinois Classical Studies on the role of epiphany in Greek religion from Minoan Crete to early Christianity (2004), and a forthcoming volume edited by Petridou and Platt (in press) which foregrounds the special hermeneutic challenges raised by epiphany in Graeco-Roman literature, art and philosophy.

is a subject, after all, with a long literary pedigree and a powerful (albeit more secular) resonance in modernist fiction.30

Classics have shown less interest, however, in the *visuality* of Graeco-Roman epiphany – the practices of viewing, and thinking about viewing, that informed and reflected the ways in which invisible gods were made visible to their worshippers.31 Admittedly, not all epiphanies are ‘visions’: from the shouts of encouragement heard at the battle of Salamis to Zeus’ thunderclaps and Hecate’s howling hounds at Stratonikeia, epiphanies can be sonic (and even olfactory) as well as visual. Manifestations of divinity often involve significant crossover between the categories of ‘vision’ (opsis) and ‘miracle’ (aretē), and have much in common with other forms of sacred semiosis, including oracles and portents.32 Yet insofar as manifestations of divinity can only gain significance through human perception (or aisthēsis),