MALE NUDITY IN THE GREEK IRON AGE

Why did the male nude come to occupy such an important place in ancient Greek culture? Despite extended debate, the answer to this question remains obscure. In this book, Sarah C. Murray demonstrates that evidence from the Early Iron Age Aegean has much to add to the discussion. Her research shows that aesthetics and practices involving male nudity in the Aegean had a complicated origin in prehistory. Murray offers a close analysis of the earliest male nudes from the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages, which mostly take the form of small bronze votive figurines deposited in rural sanctuaries. Datable to the late second and early first millennia BCE, these figurines, she argues, enlighten the ritual and material contexts in which nude athletics originated, complicating the rationalizing accounts present in the earliest textual evidence for such practices. Murray’s book breaks new ground by reconstructing a scenario for the ritual and ideological origins of nudity in Greek art and culture.

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Male Nudity in the Greek Iron Age

Representation and Ritual Context in Aegean Societies

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This book is dedicated, with immense gratitude, to Paul Christesen
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3.1 Distribution of iconographic types represented among assemblages of EIA naked figurines from different sites

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WHY AND WHEN DID THE MALE NUDE COME TO OCCUPY SUCH AN IMPORTANT
place in ancient Greek culture? Despite extended debate, the answer to this
question remains obscure. In this book, I show that the evidence from the
Early Iron Age (EIA, ca. 1100–700 BCE) has much to add to the discussion,
although it has not received a complete treatment to date.

I suspect that many readers will wonder, based on my publication record
and previous research, why and how I came to write a book focused on EIA
figurines and ritual. I therefore thought it might be helpful to include a preface
to this book to ground the current project in my intellectual history as a
researcher and to contextualize how I came to embark on this vector of
investigation into nudity in early Greece.

The first reason that I came to be interested in writing a new book on EIA
figurines, and that I continued to pursue the project despite many dead ends, is
a simple matter of curiosity. The bronze figurines at the center of the study
here have always struck me as extremely interesting, even mysterious. I wanted
to do a research project on these figurines because I wanted to understand
them better. However, it turned out that the project also had useful and
thoroughgoing methodological intersections with some of my previous
research, even though it was very different in its subject matter, and here
I try to explain how these intersections are manifest.

My first professional research project, a dissertation-turned-monograph,
covered changes in the intensity and nature of trade and institutions across
the Bronze to Iron Age transition in the Aegean. I sought to understand how
we might best use material evidence to assess dynamism in economic systems,
especially institutions and mechanisms for long-distance exchange in com-
modities and finished value-added goods. In the course of this work, I
continually found that the story of the topic was almost completely domin-
ated by thinking drawn from earlier and later textual evidence. For example,
based on textual evidence from the eastern Mediterranean, such as the Amarna
letters, the nature of trade in the palatial/Mycenaean Late Bronze Age has

1 Murray 2017.
usually been reconstructed as kingly exchange occurring mainly among palatial agents and aimed at providing rulers with extraordinary objects that could be used for elite self-fashioning. Despite the fact that these texts and the economic and political systems that produced them were clearly no longer extant in the twelfth century, material from this period was often being interpreted the way that palatial-era texts would suggest it should be—as related to elite exchange and self-fashioning.

However, if one removed the assumptions based on these texts while thinking about postpalatial material, it seemed to me that the nature and contexts of the material suggested that exchanged objects were doing something else entirely. For example, at the site of Perati in east Attica, I argued that imported exotic were personally or ritually meaningful objects that had little or nothing to do with self-aggrandizement or elites, based on some of their archaeological characteristics: they are highly worn and visually unimpressive, seemed related to non-local mortuary ritual, and were not located in particularly wealthy tombs.²

When it comes to the EIA, the Homeric texts still dominate many discussions of trade. For example, because Homer talks about gift exchange, when we find imported objects from sites like Lefkandi, they are usually interpreted as evidence for Homeric-style gift exchange. But in the case of the EIA, reasoning according to a paradigm drawn from texts is not optimal, because it does not take into account the fact that the relevant objects are dated to the tenth or ninth centuries, a considerable remove from whatever society Homer is talking about. If we take away assumptions that the EIA world resembles the world Homer presents, the archaeological record does not independently lead to the conclusion that exchanged objects must relate to Homeric xenia.³

Questions concerning the relationship between text and archaeology have been at the center of much excellent scholarship, and this book builds on that body of work. In general, untangling inferences drawn from texts from reconstructions of society based on archaeological evidence is a central concern of my research. Ultimately, I am trying to identify places where the material record seems to be at odds with interpretations that have been imposed from texts. I then seek, as best as possible, to resuscitate the material record, and to build new interpretations that are built up primarily from archaeological evidence, often informed by analogical reasoning drawn from parallel contexts in the ethnographic or anthropological literature.

That general aim is consistent with the work I am doing in this book, on the emergence of cultural institutions revolving around male nudity in the Aegean. My interest in nudity in ancient Greece began when I was an

undergraduate research assistant for Paul Christesen, a prominent scholar of ancient athletics and athletic nudity, and grew during my career as I taught courses and published a few pieces on topics related to ancient sport and spectacle. Engaging in this work led me to two conclusions that ultimately resulted in my embarking on this research project. First, it convinced me that the history of practical and visual cultures of nudity in ancient Greece was an interesting and important topic worthy of study. Extant scholarship on the Archaic and Classical emergence of regular practices of male nudity in the context of athletics, ritual, and civic activities is of extremely high quality and does an excellent job of demonstrating how functionally important the culture of male nudity was within ancient Greek history overall. It also makes clear that the Greek obsession with male nudity in art and in life was apparently unique in the ancient Mediterranean; even the Romans thought the Greek penchant for nude practice was off-kilter. This stimulating body of research inspires curiosity about the origins and impetus behind such unusual developments.

The second thing I saw in the scholarship was that the origins and impetus behind a culture in which male nudity played a prominent role were poorly understood. This lack of understanding seemed connected to their origin in the EIA, and the concomitant lack of interest within extant EIA scholarship on the question of nudity and nude athletics. While historians of the Archaic and Classical periods working on these questions occasionally brushed up against the EIA evidence, it was not the focus of their analysis, and so they had not pursued a complete treatment of it. Moreover, because the EIA evidence is not enlightened by texts, but exists in the form of material culture alone, scholars trained as historians were not in an ideal position to deal with it thoroughly. As a scholar trained as an EIA archaeologist who has also acquired some expertise in the topic of ancient athletics, it seemed to me that I was in good position to make this contribution. I set out to do so through a detailed study of the earliest evidence for a visual and practical culture of nudity in the EIA.

Academic projects tend to evolve as they move forward and this one has not been an exception. As I researched and wrote about naked males in the EIA, I was increasingly convinced that this material demonstrated a number of patterns and details that might both complement and complicate current views on the history of a Greek culture of nudity. However, I also began to see that the EIA evidence for nudity had been treated in a way that was elegantly expressive of two enduring issues of method that confront researchers dealing with EIA material culture in the Aegean. The first is the issue of Homer’s influence on interpretations of EIA Aegean society. The second is the way the

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transitional status of the EIA within the master narratives of Aegean prehistory and Greek archaeology imposes unhelpful interpretative frameworks that hinder our ability to reconstruct EIA society independent from expectations that we bring to it from better-documented earlier and later contexts.

For the first several years that I was working on the project, I did not get very far in terms of new interpretations or new insights because I was working within the intellectual corridors where existing disciplinary frameworks tend to lead. I was thinking about naked EIA males in terms of origins (of Greek athletic nudity) and evolutions (whether there was continuity or discontinuity in nude practice and imagery between the collapse of Mycenaean states and the Archaic period), and I was bothered by the fact that Homer did not seem to be interested in nudity at all. However, while I was inspecting the bronze figurines at the center of the study to understand some technical details about methods of manufacture, I reached a point of clarity with the material which led me to believe that it had been fundamentally misunderstood specifically because of a lot of the baggage that the structure of the field has imposed onto it. In the case of depictions of unclothed males from the EIA, interpretations influenced by Homer and history have impeded a contextual understanding of the material that is relevant to the specific social and cultural world of the EIA, rather than to earlier and later periods.

While the content of the book remains centered on naked males in the EIA Aegean, I think that much of its value resides in its contribution as a case study that illustrates some persistent issues in the way that EIA material is usually framed. The research demonstrates how treating EIA material as transitional or subordinating it to inferences drawn from Homer hinders the accurate reconstruction of social and political realities of the EIA itself. Treating the EIA archaeological evidence in its context, without letting either Homer or the ideological frame of a “transition” lead interpretation, enables the reconstruction of a complex social history of ritual practice, metal working, and initiatory nudity that bears little resemblance to extant narratives about social, political, economic and religious developments in the EIA. A study of early male nudity therefore provides an ideal nexus for exploring important issues of method and approach, while also constituting a full treatment of evidence that has not been forthcoming to date.

I did not expect for the research project to end in this way. Instead, when I began writing the book, I intended for the main conclusion to be an extension of the history of nude athletics in Greece into the EIA, and a revision of the view that this cultural institution could not be identified with any confidence prior to the sixth century. In that sense, I started out expecting to find something in the EIA that was familiar from historical Greece and thus to bridge the divide between prehistory and history as the current disciplinary paradigm would suggest is desirable. Although I ended up finding something
different, the intellectual design of the project remains embedded in the master narratives of the field, and it seems likely that the main reason that people will be interested in the book is because it relates to the origins of male nudity, which is a topic of general interest among many historians and art historians. However, I now think of this framing as a hook rather than as the project’s substance. I hope that focusing on an issue that is of broad general interest might open up the readership of the book to scholarly communities unlikely to otherwise take a great interest in the EIA, who may then be surprised by the complexity of what the EIA evidence can reveal. In a way, then, I am trying to make a kind of advertisement for the importance of the EIA by starting with a topic many people are already interested in, but then demonstrating how rich the EIA is as grounds for new and unexpected insights in the cultural history of the Aegean.

Along these lines the book contains three often interlocking but ultimately separate vectors. One seeks to correct the distortions introduced into the interpretation of the EIA because of periodization and framing. As a corrective to the distortions that have been introduced into our interpretations of the EIA by the structure of the field, I produce a reconstruction of EIA ritual and visual culture independent from the idea of this era as a transitional period primarily important for developments that led from the Bronze Age to the historical Greek era. Instead, I recast the EIA as a self-contained phase with a structure and logic that does not relate very closely to the institutions that we know about from the preceding Late Bronze Age or the subsequent historical period. In the case of the earliest depictions of naked males from the Aegean, I show that interpreting these figures within their EIA context, rather than seeing them primarily as primitive forbears of something (heroic, athletic, or civic nudity) that comes later allows us to reconstruct a dense web of meaning around them in ways that have not emerged from analysis that positions them within an evolutionary narrative.

A second vector in the book aims to engage with the idea that ancient Greco–Roman textual sources provide useful evidence for interpreting archaeological material from the EIA. Although Homeric epic continues to pervade many archaeological works that deal with the EIA, viewing EIA material through a Homeric lens usually does more interpretative harm than good. In the case of EIA nudity, the Homeric evidence has led scholarship astray in important ways. On the other hand, reconstructing the apparent ideological and material histories of nudity based on material evidence alone helps to explain a number of aspects of the textual record that had previously seemed perplexing. The study thus demonstrates how the usual model in Classics – where we use texts to enlighten material evidence – can actually be reversed, so that material evidence provides a logic to explain the content of some Greco–Roman texts.
These two methodological points are pursued by means of the third substantive vector: the presentation of a thorough treatment of a category of EIA material evidence that has been mostly considered meaningless within extant scholarly discourse on nudity in early Greece, and the demonstration of how much these objects can contribute to a reconstruction of complex social and ritual worlds in the prehistoric Aegean.
It is always strange to arrive at the end of a research and writing project, look back at the origins of the ideas it contains, and realize how many years have passed since the project began. I have been thinking about the origins of some kind of meaningful practice or iconography involving nudity in the ancient Greek world for almost exactly half my life. In 2002, Paul Christesen hired me as an undergraduate research assistant at Dartmouth College. He was finishing a long article on nude athletics in Archaic and Classical Greece, and one of my jobs was to read and check the manuscript. At the time, of course, I hardly knew anything about Greek social history, but – typical of Christesen’s work – the writing and argumentation of the paper were extremely lucid, so that even a novice reading it could immediately grasp how unusual athletic nudity was as a form of politically meaningful civic practice embedded in Greek social life. In the early years of my PhD program at Stanford I started to tinker with some ideas about the strange obsession with the male nude in Greek art and culture – I wrote a short paper on nudity in Homer during my first-year Ancient Greek survey course, and then a longer paper on theories of embodiment and Greek athletic nudity for my archaeological theory seminar. But eventually I settled on a different research area for my dissertation (Late Bronze and EIA trade and exchange) and set my vague ideas about the naked Greeks aside.

Between 2010 and 2016 I wrote a couple of short papers on topics related to ancient athletics, and taught about sport and nudity in undergraduate courses several times, but I was too busy working up various dissertation-related projects for publication to start any kind of fresh research. With all that finally winding down during the winter of 2016, I was ready to have an intellectual break from thinking about prehistoric trade and exchange, and that is when I began working on EIA figurines in earnest. After a hectic semester of teaching, I had an uninterrupted stretch of time (three weeks or so) during the winter holiday break, which I spent at my favorite ‘battle stations’ in the American School of Classical Studies at Athens’ Blegen library, the perfect place to start scaffolding up a big new research project. My original plan was to write a long article arguing against the idea that evidence from Homer serves as a suitable terminus post quem for the beginning of nude athletics, and then providing a new analysis of naked figurines from the EIA to show what they
might reveal about such beginnings. But the first draft of that ‘article’ weighed in around 50,000 words and was still far from doing justice to the topic. I tried to think of ways to break the piece down into two or more articles, but, in the end, I felt that the material should be treated all together, so it seemed like the best route forward was to reorganize and expand the text of the article draft into the beginnings of a book.

That draft was written a long time ago. While at first it seemed like the text and argument of the book might come together relatively rapidly – I’d already put a lot of thought into the article draft – in reality the process of writing this book has not been straightforward at all. The structure and argument have gone through so many major evolutions that it is hard even for me to keep track of or reconstruct the pieces at this point. I initially came to the material with a lot of ideas rooted in my previous work on EIA archaeology and engagement with extant research on ancient athletics and festivals, but eventually I found that a lot of those ideas were at odds with the details that I was seeing in the material evidence. Attending to those details yielded a major reinvigoration and transformation of the whole trajectory of the research project, so that this book is completely different in approach and argument to the article draft I started with nearly five years ago. I do not wish to insult the glory of the natural world by directly comparing the process to a caterpillar’s transformation into a butterfly, and I am aware that this book is far less spectacular and perfect than any specimen of that insect, but it is not an exaggeration to say that the first article draft bears about the same resemblance to the final manuscript as those two entities do to one another.

While it was often frustrating to continuously restructure and revise the text, it was rewarding to find that a long period of iterative and open-minded research eventually yielded results, insofar as a set of material evidence that first seemed extremely perplexing eventually began to make more sense to me. The EIA nude figurines at the center of this book are a difficult nut to crack. I read and wrote about them for several years before I had an opportunity to handle and study them, in the summer of 2019, which encounter completely changed my view of their function and meaning. That is when things got fun. I am sure that most other academics know the feeling of finally having a sense of what your project is about and what you must do to bring it to a conclusion after many years of fruitless, aimless toil. It is the best and most exciting moment of the research process, usually (at least for me) followed by an obsessive phase of manic writing. This tends to be a nearly out-of-body experience, where the neuroses associated with being a human in the world fade away, and you are totally consumed by the task of working out new ideas through the text. To me those are fleeting and special moments, similar to the weird euphoria a person experiences after running very fast for several hours and beginning to feel that there is no other reasonable state of being, so that
one could keep running fast for an infinite amount of time. Maybe the greatest scholars and intellectuals feel like that all the time, because they are constantly having great ideas and getting excited about writing them down, which sounds exhausting. But for the more average among us, it is nice to get that exhilarating experience once in a while, and I have had a really amazing time writing up this project over the last year, once I figured out what I had to say that was actually original and maybe convincing (but that last part is up to the reader to decide).

Like anyone coming to the end of a project that has undergone such a long period of gestation, I’ve incurred many debts to colleagues and friends who have brought their intelligence, ideas, or advice to bear on the material in one way or another. The book is dedicated to Paul Christesen for many reasons. I would never have thought of working on the topic of athletic nudity without his influence, but much more is owed than that. I was not a confident undergraduate student, and Paul was the first person who told me that my ideas were good and that I might have something important and interesting to contribute if I put some effort into it. He has supported my intellectual development as a scholar and my professional advancement in many ways since then: advising my (voluminous and tedious!) undergraduate thesis, hiring me as a teaching assistant for two Dartmouth Foreign Study Programs in Greece, and bringing me on as a collaborator or coauthor in a number of enriching research and writing projects. It is not an exaggeration to say that this book, my career, and my reasonably high-functioning adult life in the world would almost certainly not exist without his help and influence.

There are others to thank, although to some degree this has been something of a secret project, and I never really circulated drafts to my Bronze and Iron Age archaeology colleagues, for fear that the text would bore them or that they might think I was too crazy for writing a book on a topic that is superficially unrelated to my dissertation research. As I mentioned above, some seeds of the project were sown in papers that I wrote in graduate school at Stanford University (way back in 2007 and 2008). I am thankful to Richard P. Martin and Ian Hodder for feedback on those papers and for running excellent and thought-provoking graduate seminars on early Greek literature and archaeological theory, respectively. I presented some aspects of the research at the 2018 meeting of the Society for Classical Studies in Boston and the 2018 International Scholars’ Symposium at the International Olympic Academy in Olympia, and in the context of invited lectures at Princeton University, Simon Fraser University, and Dalhousie University in 2019 and 2020. I received important and valuable feedback from the audiences and panel members at all of these events, and especially would like to thank Princeton University faculty members Dan-el Padilla Peralta, Marco Gygax, and Michael Flower for very thought-provoking comments on the way that Homeric
Additional conversations with Philip Sapirstein, Carl Knappett, Sylvian Fachard, Maeve McHugh, Charles Stocking, Dimitri Nakassis, and Catherine Pratt have been challenging and valuable.

More generally, my interest in the transition between the Bronze and Iron Ages emerged from many years of productive mentorship from Jeremy Rutter and Ian Morris. My experience at Stanford also brought me into contact with anthropological and theoretical archaeology, especially in the context of courses taught by Lynn Meskell and Ian Hodder. The perceptive and creative scholarship of other EIA archaeologists, especially Anthony Snodgrass, John Papadopoulos, Sarah Morris, Susan Langdon, Angeliki Lebessi, Anna Lucia D’Agata, Antonis Kotsonas, and Mieke Prent, has influenced my views about and interpretations of the period and/or proven very useful to me as I’ve written this book in particular. I’ve generally benefited from the recent explosion in sophisticated work on the social archaeology of the Aegean EIA; it is an exciting time to work on this period, and it is encouraging to meet so many other junior scholars who are constantly invigorating many areas of research within the field.

Throughout my career, I have also benefited from generous interlocution with many, many other colleagues. In roughly chronological order of how long I have known them, this list would include Roger Ulrich, Jared Benton, Bartek Lis, Thanos Webb, Matthew Loar, Mary Dabney, Jim Wright, Sabrina Higgins, Robert Stephan, John Sutherland, Lela Urughart, Darian Totten, Melissa Bailey, Tom Tartaron, Daniel Pullen, Miriam Clinton, Amy Dill, Adam Stack, Hüseyin Öztürk, Elissa Faro, Alex Clapp, Eph Lytle, Lindsay Montgomery, Hans Weitzke, Tom Strasser, Louis Ruprecht, Alex Knodell, John Cherry, Sue Alcock, Chris Cloke, Effie Athanassopoulos, Sarah Craft, Fotini Kondyli, and Catie Steidl. I’m constantly inspired by the enthusiasm of students both in and out of the classroom and field, and I want to thank my graduate students – Katerina Apokatanidis, Elliott Fuller, and Taylor – and other graduate students with whom I have worked – Grace Erny, Joey Frankl, Melanie Godsey, Matthias Kalisch, and Aikaterini Psoma – for keeping me excited about the future of the field. Thanks are also due to Megan (Leah) Stephens who assisted me with collecting images as a Research Assistant in the winter of 2019. I’d also like to thank my Toronto Ancient History colleagues Eph Lytle, Seth Bernard, Katherine Blouin, Ben Akrigg, Carrie Atkins, Boris Chrubasik, and Kevin Wilkinson for constant good cheer and enriching interlocution my Toronto archaeology colleagues Carl Knappett, Ed Swenson, Michael Chazan, Tim Harrison, and Ted Banning, who have cultivated an active and stimulating community at the Toronto Archaeology Centre, my departmental mentor Alison Keith for excellent guidance through the early phases of my career in a large, complex institution, and the three
chairs that I worked with during the production of this book, Christer Bruun, Jonathan Burgess, and Victoria Wohl, for facilitating institutional support for my research.

Funding for travel to study objects in Greek museums during the summer of 2019 was provided by the University of Toronto Classics department’s Norwood Travel Grant. Additional resources for travel to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and work in the Blegen Library were made available through a start-up grant provided by the University of Toronto’s faculty of Arts & Sciences. Additional thanks are due to Ioanna Damanaki, Administrative Assistant to the Director and Archaeological Heritage Director at the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, who facilitated applications for and management of a series of permits to study materials in the Olympia, Delphi, and Heraklion Archaeological Museums, as well as the National Archaeological and Acropolis Museums in Athens. I would also like to thank the French and German schools who gave permission for me to study objects from their excavations, and the museum staff who facilitated these visits for their patience and collegiality: Panagiotis Kalpakos and Kostas Antonopoulos at the Olympia Archaeological Museum, Maria Karimi of the Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Nikolaos Petrocheilos at the Delphi Museum, and Mrs. Hatzipanagiotou, Mrs. Avronidaki, and Giorgos Kavvadias at the National and Acropolis Museums in Athens. I always do my best writing in the Blegen Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, and, indeed, essentially the entirety of the research, writing, and revision for this book took place there. I would like to thank all of the library staff and administrators of the school for maintaining such a magnificent space for archaeological research. The final revisions were undertaken in the spring and summer of 2020, and thanks are also due to the University of Toronto and its library staff for facilitating access to a large amount of HathiTrust resources that made at least a little research possible during the sweeping library closures induced by the global pandemic. A generous grant from the Archaeological Institute of America made possible the inclusion of color plates, and the book is much improved by their inclusion. I would like to thank Beatrice Rehl for editorial her very patient guidance through the extensive duration of the project, three anonymous reviewers who provided helpful feedback and suggestions during the review process, and the staff at Cambridge University Press for their assistance during the production process.

Writing this book has taken a long time, but it has been a very fulfilling process. I am mostly thankful to all of my friends in the field of Aegean archaeology for constituting such a wonderful community within which to work, and for forgiving all of the shortcomings and blunders that probably still exist in this book. I hope that some of the ideas in it prove useful or interesting to others, despite its flaws.