

**KAREN FOLEY:** Welcome back to Opening Up Classical Studies here at the Student Hub Live at The Open University. This session focuses on The Votives Project. So we're going to take a look at Greek and Roman votive offerings, which were objects that were left in sanctuaries for the gods, often in thanks or hope for their divine help.

And I'm joined by Emma Jane Graham and Jessica Hughes, both of whom conduct research into ancient votive offerings. And together, they coordinate The Votives Project, which you can find out more about by visiting the website, [TheVotivesProject.org](http://TheVotivesProject.org).

And in this session they're going to explain some of the background to this incredibly important aspect of ancient religion. So what are votives?

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Well, we've brought some along to show you. And when we say votives, we generally mean objects that have been left in sacred spaces. So churches, temples, sanctuaries. And they're given by people often in hope for a miracle, or in thanks for one that's been received.

These ones that we've got today aren't ancient. These come from southern Italy, from Catholic churches. They're ones that we've collected on various trips around Europe. There's also a Japanese one here.

You can see that votives come in all different shapes and sizes, and materials, and different kind of symbols. We've even got a wax ear that was from Portugal, from the Catholic site of Fatima. So you get an idea of the kinds of things that are being represented, body parts.

But it can also be figurines, or candles, or flowers, all different kinds of objects. And every one of these things has got a story behind them, haven't they?

**KAREN FOLEY:** And did people in classical antiquity dedicate votives too?

**EMMA JANE GRAHAM:** They did. And, in fact, they dedicated similar things to the sorts of things that Jess has just been showing you. We've got some examples that you can see on the board here. This is totally a random selection of things.

So you can see body parts, like Jess has just been pointing out. But one of the things to take from this, I think, is the fact that they also come in all sorts of different types of materials. So this little miniature, which is only about that sort of size, is made from copper alloy or bronze.

Then we've got terracotta things.

These two here, this lady with a baby were probably made in mould. So the clay pressed in. And then we've got this one here, which is made from stone, possibly marble, and is carved in relief.

So we've got things that are in the round, as objects, but also things that sort of show pictures of people actually giving offerings. Here he's giving a giant leg.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Wow.

So do we know then why people dedicated these? And what do we know about like the stories behind some of them?

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Well, we can never know exactly why any single person dedicated a votive offering. We can have a broad guess, can't we, at some of the kinds of things. So, for instance, health, I think, was a very common concern in ancient society, as it is in our own. And a lot of the body parts are generally assumed, aren't they, to have been dedicated for health reasons.

**EMMA JANE GRAHAM:** Yes. For health reasons. So it has been assumed, for example, that the man here with his giant leg has got a problem with his leg. It's also interesting that right next to it are two little models of feet. So somebody else has also come along. You can just see those in here.

**JESSICA HUGHES:** And he's got a varicose vein running down.

**EMMA JANE GRAHAM:** He's got possibly a varicose vein. So that's the possible reason for why he's gone to the god, and said my leg is painful. Can you heel me?

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Yes. But then also early infancy and childbearing. We seem to have lots of votives that were related to that kind of thing. So perhaps the breastfeeding mother, that might be for an issue around that.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Down here.

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Yes. And then EJ, you brought one along, didn't you?

**EMMA JANE** I did. This is a model.

**GRAHAM:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** May I hold that up for people to see at home?

**EMMA JANE** That's a modern replica of, believe it or not, a uterus or a womb. It doesn't really look like one.

**GRAHAM:** It looks a bit more like a sack. But we find those in hundreds and sometimes thousands at sites in Italy. And they're usually assumed to be connected with women who are struggling to have children, or just would like to have children, going to the gods and asking for their assistance.

They do look a bit weird, I'd have said that.

**JESSICA** But not many of the votives have inscriptions on them. In fact, in anatomic ones from Italy,  
**HUGHES:** there are only about five, aren't there, with inscriptions on. So we don't really get the dedicants explaining in their own words the stories behind their gift to the gods. So there is a lot of guesswork involved.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. So you're speculating then about a lot of this. How does that then stand up in terms of academic rigour?

**JESSICA** Well, OK. It's important to say that we do have textual evidence, don't we, for votive offerings.  
**HUGHES:** So we've got stories in most of our Greek and Roman literary texts. They're so common, votive offerings. There are hundreds and thousands of the actual things. But then we do hear about them in literary records.

So we've got poems, which describe people, say, given hair and clothes maybe when they're adolescents, or when they retire, when they have children. So we know that some of the reasons that people generally did dedicate votives. So it's not complete guesswork.

And we also have some inscriptions from ancient Greece, don't we, that we can look at, like ones from the site of Epidaurus.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Let's take a look at that.

**JESSICA** Yes.

**HUGHES:**

There we are. And I know that some of our studio audience have actually been to Epidaurus quite recently. That's right. Isn't it? So maybe you could even have a go at identifying some of

the structures on this plan.

[LAUGHTER]

Yeah. Yes, go on.

**EMMA JANE**

Yeah. I was going to say, Epidaurus is a site. It started off with a small temple to Apollo. And then it grew into this great sanctuary associated with the healing god, Asclepius, who was the son of Apollo.

**GRAHAM:**

And there people would go. And they might spend a night in a special room known as the Abboton, where they would go to sleep, and hope that the deity would come to them in their dreams. And this, in fact, here is a modern model of Asclepius. You can tell it's Asclepius, partly because he has a beard, but also because he has a snake around his staff. And so he was the god of healing who was believed to reside at Epidaurus.

And you might do other things whilst you're at Epidaurus. There's a theatre. And we've been talking about Greek theatre as a stadium. So it's a big sanctuary. But one of its main aims seems to have been for people to go and get divine cures.

**JESSICA**

Yes. And actually one of a really fascinating piece of evidence for votives comes from

**HUGHES:**

Epidaurus. And that's a series of stone stelae, which have stories written on them. And they're stories that were told by people who came to the sanctuary in the hope of healing. And they slept there. They had a healing miracle. They experienced something like that.

And they told sometimes quite eccentric stories. They were written down on these stelae. And we can read them today. And actually, we've brought along a selection to tell you.

**KAREN FOLEY:**

But not stone ones, I hope.

**JESSICA**

Not stone ones. No. These are kind of homemade scrolls. So I don't know, Karen, if you might

**HUGHES:**

like to even choose one.

**KAREN FOLEY:**

Yes. Thank you.

**JESSICA**

OK.

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:**

All right. Let's see what this one says. Would you like to read it out?

**JESSICA** Yeah. Sure.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** Ambrosia from Athens, blind in one eye, came a suppliant to the god. Walking around the  
**GRAHAM:** sanctuary, she ridiculed some of the cures as being unlikely and impossible.

So that tells us that she's going around reading these same stories that she's now writing. Sleeping here, she saw a vision of the god who came to her and said he would make her well, but she would have to pay a fee by dedicating a silver pig in the sanctuary as a memorial of her ignorance.

When he had said those things, he cut her sick eye and poured a medicine into it. And when day came, she left well.

**JESSICA** So something that's very interesting about this story is that if, as archaeologists, we were to  
**HUGHES:** find the offering that Ambrosia left, which is a silver pig, there's no way that we could come up with that backstory to it. We'd say, well, maybe it was somebody commemorating a sacrifice, or someone who had a sick pig. But there is no way we'd say, well, actually it was her eye that was poorly, and Asclepius told her to dedicate the pig because she hadn't believed the other miracles.

So that's a really good warning, in a way, isn't it, that we can't guess at the obvious story all the time. There are probably all different kinds of narratives behind these things.

**EMMA JANE** Especially because we do also find- and here's other models of eyes. So we might sort of be  
**GRAHAM:** tempted to associate these with this type of story. But there's so much more information in here.

**KAREN FOLEY:** So you're finding that the scripts and things like the terracotta eye, which is a model of one of the votives that you might have found.

**JESSICA** Yes. I mean, that one is a replica of one from an Italic context. And we don't get this kind of  
**HUGHES:** inscription, unfortunately, in Italy. But they are the same broad concerns about healing. And votives are found all over the ancient world, weren't they? So France. Even in Britain. We've got some from Roman Britain, a bit from Egypt and Gaul, all over the place. So it's a very, very rich source of evidence.

But do you want to read another story?

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yes. Let's do it. All right. You did that so well.

**EMMA JANE** Shall I read again?

**GRAHAM:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** Yeah. I love the way these are written so beautifully.

[LAUGHING]

**JESSICA** I did that yesterday in front of a television.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** OK. Panderas, a Sicilian, had marks on his forehead. He saw a vision as he slept. That's,

**GRAHAM:** again, him sleeping in the Abbaton.

It seemed to him that the god bound the marks with a headband, and then told him to remove the band when he left the sleeping area, and dedicate it as an offering to the temple. When day came, he got up and took off the band, and saw his face free of marks. And he dedicated to the temple the band with the signs which had been on his forehead.

So there's an example, again, of something that we might not actually find in the archaeological record. If you read that story that he actually took the band off the bandage and left it in the sanctuary, that's not going to survive 2,500 years. So we have the story, but we don't actually have the object that goes with it.

**JESSICA** If I may, I'll just show you the cover too. We've brought along our books that we've written

**HUGHES:** about votives. But this is a kind of example of a possible multimedia type of offering. So it's got a terracotta votive hand on it, which is from an Etruscan Italic sanctuary. And it's got a bandage tied around it.

Now, that's the museum that's put the bandage on. But I think it's a really effective image. And we also have to think that we just find the raw terracotta objects. Don't we? But they could have been decorated. They could have been painted. They could have had soft fabrics that now haven't stood the test of time. So we really do have to leave our imaginations free. Don't we?

**EMMA JANE** We do. And there are some stories, as well, in some of the written texts that talk about people

**GRAHAM:** going to sanctuaries and leaving food stuffs, in particular cakes. So people might make these little cakes, bring special cakes to the gods. And obviously those are not going to survive either.

So we're making it sound like there's an awful lot we don't know. I think that's why we like votives. Isn't it? We can start to speculate.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Imagine cake at this time of day. You'll set everybody off in the chat. But do we have any votives surviving from Epidaurus or not?

**JESSICA**  
**HUGHES:** Not very many from the period that we're talking about, which is the 4th century BC. So we don't have any of the things that are described in the Yamata, the miracle inscriptions.

But we do have a lot of votives from elsewhere in ancient Greece. So including, there's a sculpted relief from- is it Oropos, with the healing of the shoulder?

**KAREN FOLEY:** So let's take a look at this slide here. And we'll see one of the Greek votive reliefs, which is showing a man being healed.

**JESSICA** That's it. Yeah.

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** So tell us about this.

**JESSICA**  
**HUGHES:** Well, there are many examples like this from throughout classical Greece. And in a way, you might have seen them. They just look a bit like this, but they're actually grave stele. This one is from another healing site where the ritual of we say incubation where people slept in the sanctuary was practised. And it shows one story, but in two kind of comic strip boxes in a way.

So one, the patient is sleeping. And in the next one, he's seeing this vision of the god, who is healing his shoulder. And I don't know if you can see that there's a pair of eyes at the top, which might symbolise the vision that he had during his sleep.

So then it was a very complex iconographic representation. And it does tell us a little bit about the story, the experience that the person had at the sanctuary. But there are still an awful lot of details that we don't know.

But we do have a lot of votives from Italy. And we've brought some more along, haven't we, to show you. It was really difficult to choose, because there were so many to pick from.

These are all anatomical votives. They show, for instance, somebody with a gaping hole in their tummy. And that might be for some kinds of intestinal illness, or something to do with the symbolism of sacrifice perhaps.

You might like to have a go at guessing what some of these are about. I mean, the eye is an easy one to start off with perhaps.

**AUDIENCE:** Blindness? It might be.

**JESSICA** It could be.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** It could be for blindness. Absolutely. That's what's usually associated with eyes. Other people  
**GRAHAM:** have suggested that it's perhaps to have your eyes opened to the gods. So it may be that you've had this deep, religious experience. And you've suddenly had your eyes opened to some mystery that you didn't know before.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Or you need laser eye treatment.

**EMMA JANE** Or you need laser eye treatment. Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't think that was on offering in an  
**GRAHAM:** Italian sanctuary, unfortunately.

**JESSICA** But like the foot. At first glance, that might be a kind of foot or toe problem. But it could also  
**HUGHES:** symbolise a journey. That would be a sort of tailor made offering that you could go and pick, and then repurpose for something that's not health. If you were going on a long journey or wanted to symbolise your arrival at a sanctuary after a pilgrimage, that would also be a feasible thing to use the offering for.

And, what about these ones?

**KAREN FOLEY:** One of them is strange. Strange objects. What are they? They look like sea urchins or something.

**JESSICA** Anyone in the audience wants to have a guess?

**HUGHES:**

**AUDIENCE:** Brains.

**JESSICA** Brains.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** Brains. You're not far off with brains.

**GRAHAM:**

**JESSICA** Not far off actually.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** They seem to be scalps. Or basically hair. So if you think about particularly classical sculptures

**GRAHAM:** and things, well, you'll see people with these curly hair. These are exactly that, basically taken off the head.

And there is, in fact, a story from Epidaurus, from one of the stele, which is on one of our mystery scrolls somewhere.

**JESSICA** I think it's the green one. Yeah. You have a look at that.

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** I know. Right. Ah, yes. OK. This relates.

So this man had no hair on his head, but plenty on his chin. And we've seen some great beards actually. Ashamed because he was laughed at by the others, he slept here. The god anointed his head with a drug and made it have hair.

**JESSICA** So there you go.

**HUGHES:**

**EMMA JANE** I mean, that's one of the things I love about studying votives. You get real people with real

**GRAHAM:** concerns.

**KAREN FOLEY:** And real problems.

**EMMA JANE** Yeah. Real problems. I mean, that might not be a real problem. But it's a problem that some people might understand today. I think there's that real connection between past and present that we all have bodies, and they all stop working, whether it's they really stop working, or whether you've just gone bald. And that's that nice connection.

**JESSICA** So just to get back to these terracotta scalps, because they could be for baldness. But we do

**HUGHES:** also know that people dedicated real hair offerings sometimes at kind of liminal transitional

moments in life, like when you become a citizen, when you're little, or when you're an adolescent, or you get married.

And, in fact, that is a parallel with modern Catholic practise today. Because some of these sanctuaries in southern Italy that you go around, you will see plaits of real hair. And it's sometimes after the little girl's done her first holy communion. Or maybe because I read one story, and there's a plat of hair where they were saved from an earthquake. The whole village was saved. So this little girl then decided to cut her plat of hair off.

And we get lots of textual sources from Greece and Rome about people offering either their first lock of hair, or their plat, or something like that.

**EMMA JANE GRAHAM:** Yes. Pausanias talks about, I think it's the statue of Artemis that you can hardly see the statue, because it's just draped in hair that's been dedicated.

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Yes. And one maybe final thing about this is the colour on it. So you can see there's the white and the black paint. We mentioned the paint earlier. And it is very, very rare to find the paint on these votive offerings. But this is possibly one form of evidence for the personalisation or individualization of votive offerings, that, yes, these things are mould made. They all do look pretty much the same.

But perhaps you could go to the store where you bought the votives. And then either scratch your name in, or paint something, or paint a little picture, or something like that.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Customise it.

**JESSICA HUGHES:** Exactly. Make it more of your own. Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Wow.

I know there's a lot of discussion with our remote audience, AJ.

**HJ:** Yes. Well, we have decided if cake is left out somewhere, it's not going to stay there long, especially around here. But Susan Davis has a fantastic question. She says, I think it's interesting that this still goes on in Greece today. I've seen lots of tin body part votives in Greek Orthodox churches. And she's seen people leave offerings at ancient Greek centuries. And she wants to know why you think this still endures.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Good question.

**EMMA JANE** That's a good question.

**GRAHAM:**

**JESSICA** Yes. I've seen those ones in modern Greece as well, the tamata. They're very similar to this,  
**HUGHES:** but somehow in Greece they seem to be a little bit smaller. But I think it's just a very kind of easy and natural way of communicating with something that you can't see.

I don't really want to say it's kind of a universal impulse, because the minute you call something universal, then there's always exceptions and reasons why people don't do that. But I think it's partly traditions. There may be generations, and generations, and generations have done that.

But also, I mean, I'm sure people here today as well have also kind of had the urge when you see a wishing well with a coin to put one in yourself, even if you don't know quite why you're doing it, or putting a flower in the Roman forum. There are people who leave flowers, aren't there, at the sight of Caesar.

**EMMA JANE** Julius Caesar.

**GRAHAM:**

**JESSICA** Yeah. Julius Caesar's assassination. It's not necessarily that you have your own religious  
**HUGHES:** conviction about why you're doing it. But it's just almost a ritual that you feel will connect you to both generations gone past, and other people, whether that's a faith community, or just tourists who've gone in line in front of you.

So it is a difficult question- a good question. Yeah.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Perhaps something again about the physical presence of something, when things are so out of your control as well. Having that aspect there could make you, perhaps, embody it in a certain way. Or maybe because it works, as is clearly the case.

Should we have time for one more?

**JESSICA** Another scroll?

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** One more. OK. Closest first. All right. Let's see who this is.

Oh, a man's toe was healed by a snake. Oh, this is slightly farfetched. Isn't it? He was in terrible condition from a malignant ulceration on this toe.

During the day he was carried out of the temple by servants and was sitting on a seat. He fell asleep there, and then a snake came out of the temple and healed the toe with his tongue. Oh.

When it had done this, it went back into the temple again. When the man woke up, he was well, and said he had seen a vision. It seemed to him that a good looking young man had sprinkled a drug over his toe.

**EMMA JANE**

Well, that's quite interesting. Cause that brings us back to Asclepius here, with the snake

**GRAHAM:**

around his staff. Because I think what that story's telling us is that he's understanding that the snake has acted as a kind of extension of Asclepius and has come in, and by biting him, he's brought the divine powers into him.

But at the same time you've also got that mix of a medical world going on. And the fact that some of the other ones we've talked about have mentioned medicine, or even sort of divine surgery. So you've got this blending. That was quite nice with this blending of ways of thinking about your body, and of healing it.

So there's the sort of slightly more medical, and the sort of mystical divine that sort of mix together. And without that being an issue. We might see it as more of an issue today. But the agents try a bit of everything.

**JESSICA**

And Asclepius is often embodied in the form of a snake. So when new sanctuaries to Asclepius are founded, the foundation story, a bit like on the Tiber island, is that a snake slithered there, and made his home there, and then that becomes the sanctuary of Asclepius. So that is quite common, in a way, to find that mixture of Asclepius and the snake, and the snake itself playing a role in healing.

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:**

Ah. Well, it's been amazing. We've seen some wonderful sources here. What would you say is our sort of take home point about the relevance of votives and why they matter?

**EMMA JANE**

I think they matter because, for me anyway, they give me a way, as I said before, thinking about the ordinary people of the ancient world. Every single votive that was dedicated was dedicated by an individual. And whatever issues they were having, whether they were just

**GRAHAM:**

asking for good fortune, whether they were ill, whether they were hoping for a baby, they all had these stories behind them.

And I think, for me, that's a way of understanding ancient people as real people, people who are not so different from us, even though they might react in slightly different ways to life situations, are kind of just a way of humanising the past really. So not big political history, and great battles, and great rulers, but actually ordinary men and women, and children.

**KAREN FOLEY:** Well, there've been so many stories. And each one of them is unique. But it's been wonderful to see such a lovely range of them.

**JESSICA** Thanks so much.

**HUGHES:**

**KAREN FOLEY:** Thank you so much, Emma Jane and Jess. You can find out more about The Votives Project. And the links to that and so much more are available on the Student Hub Live website. That's [StudentHubLive.open.ac.uk](http://StudentHubLive.open.ac.uk).

And we're going to be back after. Hilary Hodgson is going to tell us a bit about the work with the charity Classics For All. And then we're going to show you one of our animated versions of *The Odyssey*, which is *Troy Story II*. That's not *Toy Story 2*, but *Troy Story II*. So join me for a couple of minutes after this break.

[MUSIC PLAYING]