

Anatomical Votive Offerings

Have you ever visited a museum and seen ancient Roman clay models of body parts? Why would someone choose to make a model of just one body part, such as the hands, foot, eye, or intestines shown on this page? These items served a specific purpose and were a kind of **votive offering**. Each one was a gift to a god from a person in need of healing or help. The person would obtain a model of the affected body part and place it in a god's temple in the hopes that the god would provide healing. The person might also make a similar offering at the temple after being healed.



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The votives would initially be displayed at the temples. Over time, though, the most popular temples surely became crowded with these offerings. Space had to be cleared for new ones! It appears that the older ones were often moved out and buried together in pits. Many pit sites with thousands of anatomical votive offerings have been found by archaeologists.



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Above: a foot, intestines, and an eye

It is impossible to know the specific ailment behind each votive offering, but it is interesting to imagine the various scenarios. Someone offering a foot might be suffering from a broken foot bone. Perhaps the person offering an eye was going blind. Or, maybe the offering was more metaphorical. Some scholars have suggested that a foot might have been given in order to request safe travels for an upcoming journey. Similarly, an eye could symbolize a request for foresight or for clarity in a situation. Whatever the case, these anatomical votive offerings are more complex than they first appear!

Sources:

Miller, Mark (2016, Nov. 22). Experts Try to Solve Mystery of Thousands of Ancient Clay Body Parts Strewn Across Italy. *Ancient-origins.net*

O'Hare, Ryan. (2016, Nov. 21). Why were thousands of clay body parts buried in ancient Italy? *DailyMail.com*