What are Greek votive statues? We are far more accustomed to such a question being posed about cult statues or Kultbilder. Perhaps the only way to define votive statues is to describe them. They were freestanding statues of marble or bronze dedicated in sanctuaries and, more often than not, inscribed with the name of a dedicator, singular or plural. Their inscriptions typically used the formula “X dedicated” (X ἀνέθηκε), with or without the name of the recipient deity in the dative. Some votive statues were inscribed with metrical epigrams resembling prayers from the dedicator to the deity. A vow is occasionally explicit in the inscription, but in other cases it may be implied. Votive statues were occasional, in the sense that they were commissioned on some occasion in the life of the dedicator; yet relatively few votive inscriptions describe such occasions with any degree of specificity. Votive statues were agalmata, offerings meant to please the gods, yet their contexts distinguished them from divine cult images displayed on axis in the cellas of Greek temples, also called agalmata. Although smaller anthropomorphic figures and various other objects were offered to the gods as votives, votive statues were large enough to require support by a stone base and were often placed outdoors rather than inside temples or other cult buildings.

Even such a straightforward description of Greek votive statues leaves questions unanswered, and perhaps these questions are unanswerable. Is
the distinction between cult statues and votive statues purely a matter of context? How relevant are the ubiquitous, inexpensive terracotta figurines found in so many Greek sanctuaries to the interpretation of monumental votive statues? As a religious and cultural phenomenon, Greek votive statues as I have just described them had a relatively short period of prominence in the Archaic and Classical periods. In the fourth century BCE, it became a common practice to set up portrait statues in Greek sanctuaries, and to inscribe them with a formula naming the subject the statue represented (“X dedicated Y”). By the late Hellenistic period, to judge from the epigraphic corpora, votive objects were still being dedicated and inscribed, but fewer of them were statues on bases: marble votive reliefs, votive altars, crowns, and phialai continued the practice of Greek votive religion in a different physical form. The monumental votive statue had been marginalised by the honorific portrait, a development that W.H.D. Rouse, in his classic study of Greek votive offerings, read as no less than a sign of creeping moral decay in Greek culture: “the dedication of these is a departure from the simple thanksgiving of the older worshippers, which recognised only the divine help, to a feeling which soon degenerates into flattery or self-glorification”. Although Rouse’s rhetoric seems hopelessly out of date, we still need to take into account not only the heyday of the Greek votive statue in the Archaic and Classical periods, but also its eventual decline.

Simply describing where and when Greek votive statues were set up does not really explain what they are. We need to consider whom or what these statues represented. In his classic discussion entitled “Gott oder Mensch”, F. Brommer offered the following Faustregel (rule of thumb): in the Archaic period, most votive statues represented human subjects, but in the Classical period the situation reversed itself, and most represented gods. There is no need to dwell here on the obvious exceptions to this rule, which Brommer never intended to be absolute. Instead, it seems worth mentioning the epigraphic implications. The statue base inscribed

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4 For the problem of identifying and interpreting terracotta figurines, see most recently Hamilton et al. 1996 (prehistoric figurines); Dewailly 2001 (sanctuary of Apollon at Claros); Lippolis 2001.
5 For votive reliefs, see Comella 2002a; for Greek votive offerings of the Roman period, see Schörner 2003.
6 Rouse 1902, 269.
7 Brommer 1986, 53. Cf. Boardman et al. 2004, 283: “Offering to a deity a statue of himself is somewhat less common than might be supposed”.
8 One Classical example that demonstrates the seriousness of the identity problem is the under-life-size marble figure of a man dedicated by Lysikleides, son of Epandrides,