Ritual is a physical manifestation of belief, but a ritual is also an action, or “a special type of action which is somehow connected to the belief system” (Bourque 2000, 20). Physical action is tantalizingly difficult to reconstruct through archaeological excavation. What remains is material culture, the sacred detritus that results from ritual or a series of rituals. This buried testimony is often elusive because objects are not actions, merely the result of them, but ironically ritual objects will only be understood through yet another set of actions: the rituals of the excavation, the laboratory, and the museum.

The offerings that provide evidence for religion at sanctuaries like Poggio Colla are usually explained as evidence for votive religion, a rubric that is both broad and potentially misleading, for not all objects found in sanctuaries are necessarily votive in nature, and the range of votive religion is vast.¹ There are countless ways for offerings to end up underground, and not just through ritual. Can we assume that dedications, after being displayed in the sanctuary, would eventually have been buried through a kind of secondary ritual? Would dedications always remain sacred? Certainly not in the case of a conquered sanctuary,² but even in other cases would offerings belong exclusively to the gods, or are there instances when dedications might be reused outside of the sacred space, thus recycled? And if so, then how would we know this archaeologically? Hoekstra has suggested that in the early Iron Age the social rhetoric of burial and bronze deposition created an economic mechanism that separated material wealth (metal) from its social (living) context, and that with time burial became the

¹ For which see Turfa 2006 with current bibliography.
² As pointed out by Glinister 2000, 61: “...broad belief in the sacredness of such places did not assure their inviolability in wartime....when a place was captured by an enemy it was no longer regarded as sacred”.
primary “arena for competitive consumption” (Hoekstra 1996, 61). This may be the case, but sanctuaries also continued to be areas for competitive consumption. In the Orientalizing and Archaic periods the ritual deposition of bronze continued in Etruria, especially in the north, but under different spatial and social structures in the context of organized sanctuaries. The economic result of massive giving to the gods is that large amounts of wealth are still taken out of circulation, but only if the contexts remain sealed, only if the dedications are not reused, recycled, or returned to a secular context. New evidence from the Etruscan sanctuary at Poggio Colla raises questions about whether such sacred contexts would always have remained closed.

Votive religion in structured, public contexts is a characteristic vehicle of religious observance from the 7th century BCE onward in Etruria, but we know very little about how the masses of offerings were handled. At issue here is the reconstruction and interpretation of aggregate ritual rather than single acts. If ritual is action that connects to a belief system, then a single act cannot be ritual unless it is understood as such and reproducible by others. Thus single acts become collective ritual, and individual meaning becomes collective belief. A votive, say a bronze figure, would have had a specific meaning connected to the individual who bought it and dedicated it, presumably along with a prayer or vow, but the single object tells us more about the giver than the divinity. But while the gift is singular, the ritual is a repeated social construct, so that when that single bronze figure is found in a deposit with hundreds of other objects, as we will see is the case at Poggio Colla, secondary rituals have taken place that reveal more about the belief system than about the motives of any individual. The challenge is to move beyond the singular to the collective, for as Annamaria Comella has pointed out: “Sostanzialmente, i messaggi contenuti nelle offerte… mirano, in modo particolare, a dare informazioni sull’offerente o sul beneficio richiesto e, in misura minore, a fornire indicazioni sulla divinità cui il fedele si rivolge” (Comella 2005, 51). While the nature of a single offering can be understood, at least in the most generic and banal way, aggregate ritual evidence can also have widely diverse meanings: foundation,