Wax Tokens of Libido

Whitney Davis

It is not as well known as it should be that the collection of antiquities assembled by Sigmund Freud in the 1920s and 1930s included a number of phallic amulets made of bronze, ivory, and faience (Fig. 1). To be sure, Freud's acquisition of figurines depicting pharaonic Egyptian, classical Greco-Roman, and Asian divinities and mythological characters—personages such as Isis, Janus, and Eros—constituted the most important part of his collection. Some of these figurines were given to him by friends, colleagues, and patients. At Freud's urging, for example, Serge Pankejeff—the patient known as the Wolf Man—offered an Egyptian statuette (though we do not know which one) when his four-year-long psychoanalysis with Freud was completed in 1914. Some items were purchased by Freud, perhaps heeding the advice of his old friend Emanuel Loewy—a Viennese classical archaeologist and expert on Greek sculptural technique. Many of the figurines can be seen in photographs of Freud's consulting room at Berggasse 19 in Vienna, in pictures of Freud at work, and, at the present time, at the Freud Museum at 20 Maresfield Gardens in Hampstead, London, the house in which Freud and his family settled in 1938. Unfortunately, Freud's phallic amulets were not illustrated in the semi-official publication of his collection sponsored by the Freud Museum. We do not know exactly how he acquired them, though it seems likely that he purchased them on his travels in Italy—perhaps on his trip in 1902 to the ruins of Pompeii near Naples.[1]

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[1] For Freud's collection, see Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells, eds., *Sigmund Freud and His Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities* (Binghamton: State University of New York

Freud believed that his figurines were ancient—that is, that they had been produced by ancient Egyptian, Greek, or Roman artisans. In fact, Freud's figurines *are* ancient—with one or two possible exceptions. But probably some of the phallic amulets were *modern*—made in Naples and other central and southern Italian towns and villages in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, later finding their way into nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European collections, like Freud's, as so-called antiquities.[2] Indeed, Freud might have known that such objects could readily be secured—as contemporary trinkets—in Naples, whether or not he had acquired his own specimens in this way. But this does not mean, of course, that Freud's phallic amulets—even if they were modern things known by him to be modern—were not ancient in *another* sense proposed by Freud himself and by writers such as Aby Warburg, most notably in Warburg's 1902 essay on "the art of portraiture and the Florentine bourgeois" and in Freud's 1910 treatise on "a childhood memory of Leonardo da Vinci."[3]

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and London: Freud Museum, 1989); Stephen Barker, ed., *Excavations and Their Objects: Freud's Collection of Antiquity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Lydia Marinelli, ed., *"Meine . . . alten und dreckigen Goetter": Aus Sigmund Freuds Sammlung* (Frankfurt am Main: Stroemfeld, 1998); and see also Richard H. Armstrong, *A Compulsion for Antiquity: Freud and the Ancient World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005). For Freud's exchanges of objects and images with the Wolf Man, see Whitney Davis, *Drawing the Dream of the Wolves: Homosexuality, Interpretation, and Freud's "Wolf Man"* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996). For Freud's trips to Italy and Greece, see Christfried Toegel, *Berggasse – Pompeii und Zuruck: Sigmund Freuds Reisen in die Vergangenheit* (Tubingen: edition diskord, 1989), 68-102.

[2] Important nineteenth and early twentieth-century collections of "ancient" phallica and erotica—including some modern replications—included Franz Fiedler, *Antike erotische Bildwerke in Houbens roemischen Antiquarium zu Xanten abgebildet* (privately published, 1839); Theodor Birt, *De amorum in arte antiqua simulacris et de pueris minutis* (Marburg, 1891); Gaston Vorberg, *Die Erotik der Antike in Kleinkunst und Keramik* (Munich, 1921); and *Ars erotica veterum: Ein Beitrag zum Geschlechtsleben des Alterthums,* ed. Gaston Vorberg (Stuttgart, 1926).

[3] Aby Warburg, *Bildniskunst und florentinisches Burgertum* (Leipzig: Hermann Seemann Nachfolger, 1902); translated as "The Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeois," in *Aby Warburg: The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, trans. David Britt, introd. by Kurt Forster (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 1999), 185-221, 435-50. Sigmund Freud, *Eine*

As already noted, phallic amulets and related objects—such as bells, lamps, and herms elaborated in phallic shapes or with phallic ornament—had certainly been made in the ancient Mediterranean world. They would have been well known to such writers as Pliny, who witnessed the destruction of Pompeii and Herculaneum in 79 A.D., and they had been discovered by modern antiquarians and archaeologists *in situ* in these buried cities. Even if some of Freud's examples did not actually have this impeccable Etrusco-Roman vintage—even if they were not, in other words, real remnants—their modern makers might have reproduced ancient examples that had been culled from the ruins of Pompeii. These had circulated in Europe since the late eighteenth century (in the early 1760s J. J. Winckelmann observed a local Neapolitan industry of forging ancient phallic or erotic paintings) and could be seen by the early 1820s in the restricted, "secret," or pornographic section of the Royal Museum at Naples, in private collections, and possibly in the collections of the Italian states or the Roman Catholic church. By the 1840s, publications of the "Secret Cabinet" at Naples included illustrations of the phallic objects from Pompeii and Herculaneum and a wide array of complementary "erotic" depictions (including many paintings of sexual intercourse) recovered from the houses of the buried cities. After this time, then, modern reproductions of the ancient artifacts could have been based on illustrations—even though the nineteenth-century illustrated publications

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Kindheitserinnerung des Leonardo da Vinci (Leipzig and Vienna: Deuticke, 1910); translated as "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood," trans. Alan Tyson, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey et al., 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1953-1974), vol. 11, 59-138 (quoted here in the Norton reprint, introd. by Peter Gay [New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1964).

(like the ancient objects themselves) came to have restricted (and clandestine) circulation and were treated by the art and book trades as collector's items.[4]

Strictly speaking, the modern artisans' reproduction of ancient phallica could have been a kind of revival—a remaking of objects and images also made in the ancient world, however the authors of the reproductions had come to learn about the archaeological remannts to which they reverted. As Warburg and Freud supposed, however, perhaps the modern makers—whether or not they were explicitly aware of particular ancient exemplifications—simply continued to replicate persisting ancient phallic and erotic traditions, as it were reflexively repeating the ancient imagery and techniques. Warburg took the wax portrait effigies of donors at the Church of the Annunziata in Florence to exemplify a "magical use of images cultivated in the most unblushing form by the Florentines, descendants of the superstitious Etruscans, right down to the seventeenth century"—what he called a "lawful and persistent survival of pagan barbarism" in the modern Italian Catholic context.[5] In this kind of survival, as

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[4] The essential nineteenth-century publication was L. Barre, *Herculanum et Pompei: Recueil general des peintures, bronzes, mosaiques, etc. . . .*, vol. 8, *Musee secret* (Paris: Didot, 1840), though it was not a comprehensive publication of the phallica and erotica retrieved from the buried cities and surrounding territory since the mid 1700s (see G. Fiorelli, *Catalogo del Museo Nazionale di Napoli, Raccolta pornografica* [Naples, 1866], and Jules Lacour, *Le musee secret de Naples, et le culte des organes generateurs* [Brussels, 1914]). An unauthorized publication was equally influential: M[onsieur] C[esar] F[amin], *Peintures, bronzes et statues erotiques, formant la collection du cabinet secret du Musee Royal de Naples* (Paris, 1832, new ed., 1836/1857); Colonel Fanin [sic], *The Royal Museum at Naples . . ."Cabinet Secret"*, trans. John Campbell Hotten (London: Hotten, 1871). Important twentieth-century scholarly discussions of the material (now widely published) include Hans Licht [i.e., Paul Brandt], *Sittgengeschichte Griechenlands,* supplementary vol., *Die Erotik in der griechischen Kunst* (Zurich: Paul Aretz & Co. Verlag, 1928), and Jean Marcade, *Roma Amor: Essay on Erotic Elements in Etruscan and Roman Art* (Geneva and Paris: Nagel, 1961). For Winckelmann's remarks on eighteenth-century replications of ancient erotic frescoes, see his *Sendschreiben von den Herculanischen Entdeckungen* (Dresden, 1762), 31-32, 39-40.

[5] Warburg, "Art of Portraiture and the Florentine Bourgeois," 189-190. Warburg compared the "magical fetishism of the waxwork cult" with the "inclusion of portrait

Warburg and Freud called it, there need be no relation of mimetic reproduction—no duplication of the configuration of a particular ancient prototype on the part of a modern artisan making a modern artifact—in this history of a "magical use of images" supposedly stretching from ancient into modern times. Indeed, for Warburg—as for Freud—certain forms of repetition *cannot* involve a specifically duplicative imitation. Instead, they require—they depend on and they express—modes of displacement, transformation, and forgetting in which the modern repetition need not know its ancient ancestor.

Writing specifically of phallic imagery in his 1910 essay on Leonardo da Vinci, Freud asserted that "in view of the indelibility that is characteristic of all mental traces, it is surely not surprising that even the most primitive forms of genital-worship can be shown to have existed in very recent times and that the language, customs, and superstitions of mankind today contain survivals from every phase of this process of development."[6] This ambitious statement preceded Freud's interpretation of the image of the bird's tail in Leonardo's childhood dream as the artist had reported it in his notebooks many years later. According to the manifest content of the dream as Leonardo described it, the bird (which Freud, like other German translators of Leonardo's notebooks, took to be a "vulture" [*Geier*]) struck the boy several times between the lips with its tail. According to Freud, this vivid image was a displaced remembrance of an even *earlier* time in the boy's imaginative life when the little boy believed that his mother had a genital organ, a penis or "tail," like his own, even though she was, Freud

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likenesses on a church fresco of sacred scenes," what he called "a comparatively discreet attempt to come closer to the Divine through a painted simulacrum" (ibid., 190).

[6] *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood*, 52. Freud's essay on Leonardo devolved in part from his psychoanalysis with the Wolf Man; see Davis, *Drawing the Dream of the Wolves*, 134-40.

concluded, a *faultily* phallic mother: she overvalued and to that extent prematurely eroticized her illegitimate son's penis as a compensation for her own social marginalization and libidinal frustration. (In "The Sexual Theories of Children," Freud had cited ancient sculptural examples of the female with a phallus—Hellenistic "hermaphrodites" and ancient fertility figures of various kinds—as a cultural-historical prototype for the putative infantile belief. And in cases like "Little Hans," a boy who produced a striking drawing of a giraffe with an extended penis, Freud thought one could see the depictive manifestation, equivalent in some ways to a dream-image, of this persistent belief.[7]) The adult Leonardo's paintings of both women and young men, such as the *Mona Lisa* and various depictive iterations of Saint John, supposedly replicated the dangerous phallic mother's smile of traumatizing sexual love for her son—a little narcissist who had meanwhile (and for this very reason) developed into a "homosexual," a man who over-estimates the beauty, desirability, and uniqueness of the penis.[8]

In Freud's text, the scholarly authority for the supposed survival of "primitive forms of genital-worship in recent times"—a worship supposedly recapitulated by Leonardo and his mother in their sexual fantasies of one another—was given simply as "Knight," without title or date.[9] Freud was referring to Sir Richard Payne Knight, whose *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and Its Connexion with the*

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[7] See Sigmund Freud, "On the Sexual Theories of Children" [1908], *Standard Edition*, vol. 9, 107-126, and "Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy" [1908], *Standard Edition,* vol. 10, 3-147.

[8] See Whitney Davis, "Freuds Leonardo und die Kultur der Homosexualitaet," *Texte zur Kunst* 5, no. 17 (1995), 56-73, and "Narzissmus in der homoerotischen Kultur und in der Theorie Freuds," in Mechthild Fend and Marianne Kroos, eds., *Mannlichkeit im Blick: Visuelle Inszenierungen in der Kunst seit der fruhen Neuzeit* (Cologne: Bohlau, 2004), 212-32.

[9] The English translators and editors of the *Standard Edition* (p. 52) supplied the date incorrectly in the main body of the text (i.e., "1768") and correctly in the bibliography.

Mystic Religion of the Ancients was published in London in 1786—an edition to which I will return momentarily—and remained controversial well into the twentieth century. Freud knew this work in a late-nineteenth-century French translation of an 1865 British edition. (Both editions involved reduction and re-arrangements of the illustrations to Knight's original text as printed in London in the eighteenth century, but this fact will largely be immaterial to the issues I want to pursue here.) In fact, it is to Knight and his social and intellectual circles in Britain and Italy that we can ascribe the first true antiquarian and what we might even call "comparative anthropological" investigations of modern Catholic survivals of ancient genital imagery and sexual symbolism. Coincidentally, Knight's personal collection of more than a hundred ancient bronzes—like Freud's—contained ancient phallic objects; they were purchased by him in 1791-93 from Britain's long-time envoy at Naples, Sir William Hamilton, and eventually made their way to the British Museum after Knight's death.[10] Both Knight and Hamilton belonged to the Society of Dilettanti. Knight was the most eminent—or perhaps notorious—Hellenist and Latinist in the Society in the heyday of its sponsorship of classical scholarship in the 1780s and 1790s. Hamilton had been inducted in 1777 at a memorable occasion probably commemorated in Sir Joshua Reynolds's striking double group portrait of members of the Society, completed for them in 1778; although not a scholar, he

[10] For Knight's career and collections, see especially Michael Clarke and Nicholas Penny, eds., *The Arrogant Connoisseur: Richard Payne Knight, 1751-1824* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1982). For Hamilton's, see Brian Fothergill, *Sir William Hamilton, Envoy Extraordinary* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969). For Knight's bronzes acquired from Hamilton, see Clarke and Penny, *The Arrogant Connoisseur*, 69-70, and Ian Jenkins and Kim Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection* (London: British Museum, 1996), 216-17, cat. no. 126. For context, see Jonathan Scott, *The Pleasures of Antiquity: British Collectors of Greece and Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

had long been a distinguished patron, collector, and advocate of the study of Greco-Roman antiquity.[11]

Knight's putative starting point for his book on the "worship of Priapus and its connexion with the mystic religion of the ancients"—a supposed *Ur*-cult of cosmic principles of attraction and generation—was a set of wax ex votos of phalli presented by Hamilton to the British Museum in 1784. They were published by Knight for Hamilton and the Society in his 1786 *Discourse* along with Hamilton's short epistolary report describing the discovery of the phalli.[12] Addressed to the President of the Royal Society, Sir Joseph Banks (also a member of the Society of Dilettanti), Hamilton's letter was dated December 30, 1781; it drew both on the report of an unnamed Italian informant who had initially drawn Hamilton's attention to the objects and on Hamilton's own investigations. As Hamilton's correspondence with Banks makes clear, the communications began as an in-house affair, even an in-joke, in the Society of Dilettanti. In May, 1784, however, the Society decided to print Hamilton's letter to Banks "with such

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[11] For the portraits, see David Mannings, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), vol. 1, 166-67, nos. 510/11; for intriguing commentary on the erotic and sexual, and even "Italian" or Neapolitan, connotations of the mens' gestures in the paintings, see Shearer West, "Libertinism and the Ideology of Male Friendship in the Portraits of the Society of Dilettanti," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 16 (1992), 76-104.

[12] *An account of the remains of the worship of Priapus, lately existing at Isernia, in the kingdom of Naples: in two letters; one from Sir William Hamilton K.B. His Majesty's minister at the court of Naples, to Sir Joseph Banks, Bart. president of the Royal Society; and the other from a person residing at Isernia: To which is added, A discourse on the worship of Priapus, and its connexion with the mystic religion of the ancients, by R. P. Knight, esq.* (London: Society of Dilettanti/T. Spilbury, Snowhill, 1786). See also William Hamilton, "Some particulars of the present state of the Mount Vesuvius . . . with an account of a journey into the province of Abruzzi, and a voyage to the island of Ponza," *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society* 76 (1786), 365-81. For Hamilton's original—and more unblushing and satirical—comments to Banks, see BM Add MSS 34048, quoted in Fothergill, *Sir William Hamilton*, 173.

illustrations as they think proper."[13] The wax phalli were illustrated in the engraved frontispiece to this publication (Fig. 2), that is, in what was widely identified as Knight's book (his *Discourse* occupied by far the bulk of its pages)—suppressed by the author in the early 1790s (so far as it was possible for him to recall the copies) after it had become publicly known and widely vilified in Britain. The same picture of the phalli (albeit cropped, re-drawn, and much reduced in detail) was published in the 1865 edition of the *Discourse*, in which Knight's treatise was bundled with a text by Thomas Wright on the "worship of the generative powers" in the Middle Ages. This edition (in a string of reprints as recent as 1992) is the one commonly found now and it will be cited here; as already noted, it was the edition known to Freud in a French translation.[14]

Freud, of course, had not seen the actual surviving objects acquired by Hamilton and illustrated in Knight's book—four wax phalli, including testicles,

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[13] Fothergill, *Sir William Hamilton*, 173; for additional details on the participation of the Society, see David Constantine, *Fields of Fire: A Life of Sir William Hamilton* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2001), 108-109.

[14] [William Hamilton, Richard Payne Knight, and Thomas Wright], *A discourse on the worship of Priapus, and its connection with the mystic theology of the ancients . . . (a new edition). To which is added An essay on the worship of the generative powers during the Middle Ages of Western Europe* (London: [J. C. Hotten], 1865; another edition was released in 1894). Reprints include the edition published by the Dorset Press, New York, in 1992. Freud owned a French translation released by a well-known publisher of erotica, J. J. Gay, in Brussels in 1883; the translation had already appeared in 1866. Wright's text for this edition illustrated a Roman stone relief, supposedly excavated at Nimes in 1825, depicting a vulture with wings spread out and a "phallic tail" (*Worship of the Generative Powers*, 17, and pl. 3). Though the connection has not, to my knowledge, been noted before, I believe that this image had a direct (and distorting) impact on Freud's identification of a "vulture" (*Geier*) in Leonardo's childhood memory; it might have prepared him to accept this widely circulated German mistranslation of *nibio*, or "kite," the Italian word that actually appears in Leonardo's statement, and which Freud quoted in a footnote (*Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood*, 32, n. 1). Wayne Andersen has briefly discussed Knight and Wright as a context for Freud's work—a context overlooked in histories of psychoanalysis (for example, in Armstrong's exhaustive *Compulsion for Antiquity*—but he does not mention the relief of the phallic vulture from Nimes (*Freud, Leonardo da Vinci, and the Vulture's Tail* [New York: Other Press, 2001], 196-200).

moulded in shells ranging from two to about five inches in length (and thus more or less lifesize) and seemingly individuated or particularized (though we will have to return to questions of their apparent mimesis) (Fig. 3). Two of the phalli, one larger and one smaller, represent erect penises. The other two phalli—one larger and one smaller—are flaccid. It is possible, as we will see, that we should attach some significance to this seeming double "pairing" (i.e., small flaccid and erect; large flaccid and erect)—especially because Knight's engraving appears to visualize it in the way it arrays the four objects in relation to each other. But Hamilton and Knight say nothing about it in their texts. In the smallest votive in the group of four surviving artifacts, the foreskin of the flaccid penis is not retracted. In the three other surviving votives—large and small, flaccid and erect—it is not entirely obvious from the illustration (and Hamilton's and Knight's reports do not say) whether the foreskin (especially in the two erect phalli) is retracted, as would seem likely, or whether it has been partly or wholly removed (in subincision or circumcision). In any case, in these three examples the glans of the penis is fully exposed. This is a somewhat puzzling feature, of course, in the case of the large *flaccid* penis; perhaps this phallus was actually meant to be represented and seen as tumescent. It is difficult to resolve any of these questions by inspecting the surviving artifacts, but it is likely, for reasons we will explore in due course, that the original makers and users of the objects attached specific representational valences to the differences we can identify.

The wax phalli were received as whole objects from Hamilton in 1784 and they were illustrated as such by Knight's engraver in 1786. But in the nineteenth century they were broken into fragments while in storage at the British Museum. Two of them were restored—specifically, made whole again—for an exhibition in

1996 dealing with Hamilton's collections and their contributions to the Museum.[15] Early nineteenth-century observers (who returned to Hamilton's source for the collection of the artifacts) say that the phalli were red—made out of "red wax." But the surviving broken examples (as exhibited in 1996 and as they can be seen now) are orangey-yellow; evidently they were meant to create an impression of waxy fleshiness. (The two restored phalli are darker.) We will need to return in due course to this uncertainty about the color of the phalli.

The phalli sent to London by Hamilton had been collected in the year 1780 by Hamilton's Italian informant, a road engineer who claimed to have witnessed the objects in use, or possibly in the following year by Hamilton himself. They came from the town of Isernia in the Abruzzo in the Bourbon Catholic Kingdom of Naples and the Two Sicilies; Hamilton's informant had been present at Isernia in the autumn of 1780 and Hamilton visited it in February, 1781, in order to follow up on his correspondent's communication.[16] Hamilton himself certainly had not seen them in actual use at Isernia. The functions and significance of the phalli—the examples actually secured by Hamilton and the many others noted and described in his and his informant's reports—remain somewhat obscure to this very day. Indeed, Knight explicitly asserted that their real mystic meaning was unknown to the *original* makers of the objects, the rural peasants and the

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[15] Jenkins and Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes*, 238-39, cat. no. 142. As Jenkins and Sloan note, Hamilton gave *five* waxes to the Museum (BM MLA M560-564); Knight illustrated only four—probably because one of the artifacts was only partly preserved when it was acquired. In 1865 the Museum acquired two phallic votives from Isernia collected in the nineteenth century by George Witt (BM W319, 320; illustrated in C. Johns, *Sex or Symbol?* [London: 1982), 25, fig. 11); "these are identical with pieces in the engraving [in Knight's book] and show that more than one cast was struck from the master mould taken from any one member" (Jenkins and Sloan, *Vases and Volcanoes*, 239).

[16] Hamilton's published letter, dated December 30, 1781, says the phalli were secured "last year." He could mean "in the preceding twelve months," i.e., 1781, or "the previous twelve-month," i.e., 1780. On balance it seems likely that Hamilton did not collect the artifacts; they came from his informant in 1780.

ordinary townsfolk of Isernia and its surroundings—despite what Hamilton had reported about the use of the objects as his Italian informant had described it.

According to Hamilton's 1781 report, the wax phalli were sold as votives in Isernia at the late-September festival of Saints Cosmo and Damian, the twin physician-martyrs. It is necessary to quote Hamilton at some length:

One of the days of the fair, the relicks of the Saints are exposed, and afterwards carried in procession from the cathedral of the city to a church about half a mile from the town, attended by a prodigious concourse of people. In the city, and at the fair, ex-voti of wax, representing the male parts of generation, of various dimensions, some even the length of a palm, are publickly offered to sale. There are also waxen vows, that represent other parts of the body mixed with them; but of these there are few in comparison of the number of Priapi. . . . If you ask the price of one, the answer is, 'the more you give, the more's the merit.' . . . The vows are chiefly presented [in the vestibule of the Church of Saints Cosmo and Damian] by the female sex; and they are seldom such as represent arms, legs, etc., but most commonly the male parts of generation . . . The person who was at this fête in the year 1780, and who gave me this account told me also that he heard a woman say, at the time she presented a Vow, 'Blessed St. Cosmo, let it be like this'; another, "St. Cosmo, I recommend myself to you'; and a third, 'St. Cosmo, I thank you.' The vow is never presented without being accompanied by a piece of money, and is always kissed by the devotee at the moment of presentation. At the great altar in the church, a canon attends to give the holy unction, with the oil of St. Cosmo. Those who have an infirmity in any of their members, present themselves at the great altar, and uncover the member affected

(not even excepting that which is most frequently represented by the ex-voti); and the reverend canon anoints it, saying, 'By the intercession of blessed St. Cosmo, may you be liberated from all sickness.' The oil of St. Cosmo is in high repute for its invigorating quality, when the loins, and parts adjacent to it, are anointed with it. . . . [After the ceremony] the women sleep two nights in the church near the friars and priests while their men are accommodated outside in the porch. And being thus divided from their men, if the women became pregnant one cannot doubt that it is a miracle, a work of devotion. Many barren wives went home pregnant, to the benefit of the population of the provinces; and often the grace extends, without causing amazement, to the Spinsters and Widows.[17]

All this is very striking; it was immediately interpreted by Hamilton and Knight to be rare evidence for the supposed survival of ancient customs and beliefs. Deep confusions, however, have entered the story from the very beginning—probably during Hamilton's communications with his informants—and in its repetition and interpretation by Knight, Freud, and many other commentators. Fortunately for present-day students of the subject, in 1996 Giancarlo Carabelli published a comprehensive study of Hamilton's "worship of Priapus in the Kingdom of Naples" and Knight's branch of Enlightenment phallicism. Carabelli's painstaking research uncovered many aspects of the story unknown to previous scholars, and all subsequent scholars—including the present writer—must depend on his findings. Following his lead, we can cut our way through a thicket of obscurities—even if this occasionally means differing

[17] Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 21-23.

with Carabelli's own carefully reasoned and thoroughly researched conclusions.[18]

In the case of the wax phallic votives of Isernia—especially in their interpretation by sexual anthropologists of the nineteenth century and later—to some extent the confusions in the *material evidence* for a history of sexuality have been converted into evidence of the supposed *psychic history* of sexuality as such. But as material, wax lends itself precisely to the transferences we need to notice. In general, wax depictions of the human body or body parts are peculiarly corporeal: even if they sometimes have the torpor or rigor and the cold pallor of death, they recall the vigor, motility, and warm expressiveness of life.[19] In the case of the wax phalli specifically, and as Knight's engraving seems to have been intended to make clear, the properties of wax itself—softening and hardening,

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[18] Giancarlo Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus* (London: Duckworth, 1996). Carabelli's studies of eighteenth-century aesthetics gave him specially relevant background for his research on Hamilton and Knight; see Giancarlo Carabelli, *On Hume and Eighteenth-Century Aesthetics: The Philosopher on a Swing* (New York: Peter Lang, 1985). For comments on the intersections between Enlightenment aesthetics and late eighteenth-century erotica, see Whitney Davis, "Homoerotic Art Collection from 1750 to 1920," *Art History* 24 (2001), 247-77.

[19] A thorough review of one major aspect of the artifactual record of wax—the production of lifesize wax models of the human body—with comments on its historiography can be found in Susann Waldmann, *Die lebensgrosse Wachsfigur: Eine Studie zu Funktion und Bedeutung der keroplastischen Portraetfigur vom Spaetmittelalter bis zum 18. Jahrhudert* (Munich: tuduv, 1990). For incisive comments on wax simulation, polychromy, and lifelikeness, see Alison Yarrington, "Under the Spell of Madame Tussaud: Aspects of 'High' and 'Low' in 19th-Century Polychromed Sculpture," in Andreas Bluehm, ed., *The Colour of Sculpture 1840-1910* (Amsterdam and Leeds: Van Gogh Museum and Henry Moore Institute, 1996), 83-92. The peculiar corporealities—vital or morbid and vital *and* morbid—of wax models of the body were highlighted in an important recent exhibition: Martin Kemp and Marina Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies: The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now* (London and Berkeley: Hayward Gallery and University of California Press, 2000). All these discussions largely leave aside the custom of making wax "anatomical votives." For its diversity in the Christianized world, see especially Lenz Kriss-Rettenbeck, *Das Votivbild* (Munich: H. Rinn, 1958) and *Ex Voto: Zeichen, Bild und Abbild im christlichen Votivbrauchtum* (Zurich, 1972); see also F. Cabrol, "Cierges," *Dictionnaire d'archeologie chretienne et de liturgie,* vol. 3, pt. 2 (Paris: XXX, 1914), col. 1613-1622. For comments that are especially relevant to the themes of the present essay, see Georges Didi-Huberman, "Image, organe, temps: approche de l'ex-voto," *Le Fait de l'analyse* 5 (1998), 245-260.

melting and soldifying, shrinking and expanding, reddening and going pale—figure the economy of human sexual arousal. Despite the phallic exemplification at Isernia, however, this is not exclusively the economy of *male* sexual arousal. Wax might also figure the economy of *female* arousal—the matter at the heart of the confusions, conflations, and conversions in the legend of Isernia. As Aristotle famously (if incorrectly) pointed out, "the male organ of generation is the only one [in the human body] which increases and subsides apart from any change due to disease."[20] Partly for this reason, in the Christian tradition it represented and relayed (indeed, it incarnated) human concupiscence, the self-sensing, self-arousing, and self-discharging lustful organicity of the body—the sin, animality, and devilishness of involuntary corporeal voluptuousness or "libido."[21] If a penis is male, however, concupiscence or libido—of which the penis of the male human body is the Aristotelian avatar—is bi-gendered: it belongs to both sexes. Hence the "phallus," in the theoretical sense of that term in modern thought, can arise in both men and women in a complex exchange; indeed, it arises in an exchange of gender(s) itself. It is possible that the Aristotelian and Augustinian framework,

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[20] Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, trans. A. L. Peck, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), Bk. IV, chap. x (689a) (Loeb). About the penis, Aristotle continues, "its increasing in size is useful for copulation, its contractionfor the employment of the rest of the body, since it would be a nuisanceto the other partsif it were always extended. And so it is composed of substances which make both conditions possible: it contains both sinew and cartilage; and so it can contract and expand and admitsair into itself."

[21] For the traditional (dogmatic) literature on concupiscence (especially in Augustine and Aquinas), see John J. Ming, "Concupiscence," *The Catholic Encyclopedia,* vol. 4 (New York: Appleton, 1908), 208, and Karl Rahner, Theological Investigations, vol. 1 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 345-82; and for a more contemporary perspective, see Conan Gallagher, "Concupiscence," *The Thomist* 30 (1966), 228-59. The most influential consideration of the late antique Christian theory of libido and its subsequent conceptual influence on theories of generation, sexuality, personal identity, and moral responsibility can be found, of course, in the late work of Michel Foucault—a topic too vast and contentious to be addressed here.

the surviving long-term libido theory, helps explain the complicated circulations of the penis/phallus at Isernia—both in its original Italian social contexts and in its interpretations by Hamilton, Knight, and their readers.

It should be clear enough—but it needs to be reiterated—that the phallic waxes of Isernia in 1780 have little or nothing to do with the magnificent waxes produced at the end of the eighteenth century in Florence, Bologna, and elsewhere to demonstrate human anatomy, including the processes in the male and female bodies of urination, ovulation, semen production, erection, ejaculation, insemination, fertilization, pregnancy, and childbirth. (Implicitly these processes might include masturbation, copulation, and sodomy, even if the waxes—unlike contemporary pornography—did not actually depict these activities.) An anatomical wax made by Clemente Susini in 1804 in the workshop of "La Specola" in Florence, for example, demonstrates the blood-supply of the head, left upper arm, and trunk of a male body—including the penis and testicles and their integration in the vascular, nervous, and urinary systems.[22] A handful of contemporary anatomical waxes specifically display the structure and functions—including erection—of the penis, represented as a detached body part or organ system in an artifact that resembles the wax votives of Isernia.[23] Indeed, Carabelli says that Hamilton's "wax simulacra are not different, except for their rougher execution, from the refined anatomical waxes made to be used as

[22] Kemp and Wallace, *Spectacular Bodies*, cat. no. 281 (illus. p. 58). More refs.
[23] Monika von Duering, ed., *Encylopedia anatomica: collezione completa di cere anatomiche (Museo La Specola Florence)* (Cologne and New York: Taschen, 1999), 624 (demonstration of erection), 629-30 (penises).

didactic materials in faculties of medicine."[24] But the phalli of Isernia, though particularized in certain ways, are certainly not "didactic" even if they do display or demonstrate something. Any similarity between the wax phalli representing an *actual* penis sought by the female devotees of Isernia, and to be anointed with the oil of St. Cosmo when presented by the *male* congregant, and the wax models displaying the *anatomy* of the penis mostly lies in their common assimilation under similar latter-day nomenclatures—namely, "anatomical votives" in the case of Hamilton's phalli and "anatomical waxes" in the case of the medical models—and, of course, in their close association with healing.

As Knight's, Warburg's, and Freud's emphasis on survivals might suggest, the proper parallel with the wax phalli—though Knight and Freud did not cite it—must be the anatomical votives of antiquity, usually dedicated at Aesculapian sanctuaries and shrines. A number of terracotta penises (along with other terracotta body parts) were dedicated, for example, at the Aesculapeion at Corinth in the fifth and fourth century BC.[25] In keeping with Warburg's emphasis on the "Etruscan" lineage of the Florentine wax *donaria* at the Annunziata and elsewhere, we should cite the many penises, vaginas, and uteri making up the greatest proportion of the votives recovered at the Etruscan site of Veii and also to be found at Roman healing centers such as Lavinium and Ponte di Nona during the Republic. In view of the concentration of phalli and uteri at Veii, probably the site sheltered a specialized *sexual*-healing shrine.[26]

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[24] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, XX.
[25] See Carl Roebuck, *The Asklepieion and Lerna*, *Corinth* 14 (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1951); Mabel L. Lang, *Cure and Cult in Ancient Corinth* (Princeton: American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1977).
[26] For the sites mentioned here, see L. Vagenetti, *Il deposito votivo di Campetti a Veio* (Florence: XXX, 1971); M. Fenelli, "Contributo per lo studio del votivo anatomico: I

This takes us to the greatest confusion at the heart of Hamilton's account—in part it originated in his tongue-in-cheek determination to construe an ordinary healing cult as a cult of priapic worship—and repeated ever since. Because the wax phalli are said to have been dedicated by women, the supposed devotees of Priapus, they are said to have been intended to cure "female sterility." As Carabelli states flatly, the "phallic simulacra were votive offerings by sterile women"; or, stated more circumspectly, "what people were looking for in Isernia was a remedy for sterility, which was why women were the leading figures in the festival."[27] But in the ancient world and in modern healing cults, women supplicate for their own fertility or give thanks for it, or ask for remediation of sterility or give thanks for it, in votive objects taking the form of *vaginas* and *uteri*, as at Etruscan Veii, and sometimes *breasts*, as at Corinth—as would seem magically reasonable. The striking and shocking feature of the Isernian festival, then, if we can believe the report, was the presentation of a simulacrum of the

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votivi anatomici di Lavinio," *Archeologia Classica* 27 (1975), 232-XX; and especially T. W. Potter, "A Republican Healing-Sanctuary at Ponte di Nona near Rome and the Classical Tradition of Votive Medicine," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 138 (1985), 23-47. An overview of Roman practices can be found in Audrey Cruse, *Roman Medicine* (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2004), 113-121.

It is unclear whether eighteenth-century antiquarians, such as Hamilton and Knight, would have been aware of the widespread ancient custom of dedicating images and simulacra of body parts. The custom was not prominently described by Greek or Latin authors. But it was mentioned by Clement of Alexandria and other writers; at least two scholarly studies had been devoted to it in the early eighteenth century (Carl Friedrich Pezold, *Membra humana diis gentilium consecrata* [dissertation, Leipzig, 1710], and Johann Jacob Frey, *Disquisitio de more diis simulacra membrorum consecrandi* [dissertation, Altdorf, 1746]). By the end of the nineteenth century, the anatomical votives noted in ancient inscribed offering lists had been well documented. It is likely that specimens of ancient anatomical votives had been discovered in Italy since the later Renaissance, but many of these might not have been understood to be ancient. (At the same time, of course, modern Catholic anatomical votives—inherited from medieval contexts of production—continued to flourish.) By Freud's day, a considerable knowledge of the Greek and Roman practices had been acquired; see W. H. D. Rouse, *Greek Votive Offerings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902), 212-216. I thank my colleagues Andrew Stewart and Christopher Hallett for comments on these matters.

[27] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, XX, XX.

male organ of generation by *women* in the hope of securing their *own* sexual and procreative success—a wish corporeally satisfied by the priests themselves, as Hamilton's account goes, while the women bedded near them inside the church for two nights and the cuckolded husbands slumbered outside. Obviously the possibility arises that the phalli were dedicated to plead for the *men's* potency or to cure the *men's* sterility—presumably as identified by their wives or wives-to-be or at least as mediated by the women in dedicating images of their husbands' penises, the real organs presented *by the men* (Hamilton's account also tells us) in an actual ritual of anointment that must be distinguished from the votive act. But in this case the usual, virtually universal, pattern of dedication would have been for the *men* to dedicate phalli to the healing god or the saints to request (or give thanks for) potency or to request (or give thanks for) the relief of disorders of *masculine* sexual action or function. Whichever way we parse these relations, then, the phallic dedications conducted by the women of Isernia seem inverted and possibly "perverted"—to use Knight's term for the custom.[28]

Needless to say, it was for this reason—though not *only* for this reason—that Hamilton and Knight were interested in the festival of Isernia. Both writers hoped to use the festival, and especially the votive dedications of wax phalli, not only as a case of an ancient survival in the strict sense—as Freud would later see it. They also wanted to use it as an example of modern corruption, and not only in the editorial or philological sense but also in the *ethical* sense—namely, as an example of the iniquity of the contemporary Catholic priesthood and, as Hamilton put it in his letter to Banks, "of the similitude of the Popish and Pagan

[28] Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, XX.

religion" in their toleration and replication of [29]"obscene" practices. Despite the similitude, the two cultural situations were manifestly different: whereas the ancient cultures had often tolerated phallicism in devotion, as Knight and other eighteenth-century writers made clear, the Church, however, explicitly condemned it. The "survival" of the ancient practice in an ostensibly Catholic context, then, could be taken to bespeak ecclesiastical hypocrisy at best, or, more likely, to betray ecclessiastical perversion. The strong insinuation—virtually the explicit claim—of Hamilton's report is that the women of Isernia had been lured by their priests into a phallic cult, exciting their religious devotion and erotic yearning, culminating in intercourse with the priests themselves. If we pursue the logic of these relations, this devotion masqueraded as a cure for a sterility the women probably did not really have—insofar as Hamilton tells us that they could somehow become magically impregnated. Whether or not the women were actually sterile, then, Hamilton's account turns on the point that the *priests* were evidently fertile and fully concupiscent in the least chaste of ways: relative to the female devotees (who might be seen as deluded or seduced), the priests were truly libidinous in the way that they transferred *their* sexual lusts onto the women who in turn supplicated for phallic relief. As the turns, twists, and layers of Hamilton's account accumulate to suggest to his readers, and as he clearly intended, in the end it was the phallus of the priest—as it were the survival of the figure of Priapus or Pan—that the women were really worshipping even if they believed that they were curing failures of phallic potency in their husbands. Indeed, in the festival as described, in the female devotee's handling of the phallic image—its mediation of all these relations—the penis of the priest came

[29] *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 13.

to subsitute for and actually to replace the penis of the husband. In fact, throughout Hamilton's account it is not obvious whether the phallic waxes themselves literally or indexically modeled the penises of the husbands *or* of the priests—or of a more totalized or abstracted pseudo-phallic divinity, the so-called "Great Toe" of St Cosmo, believed to preside over the festival. If we stick strictly to the implications of Hamilton's account taken at putatively factual face value, our natural guess as readers must be to suppose that the priests made and sold the wax penises in their *own* phallic image: whether or not this actually occurred at Isernia, it fulfills the inner logic of Hamilton's account of the festival.

The *ancient* antecedents for this perversion at Isernia were not the cults of Aesculapius and other healing gods. Rather, as Knight argued at length in his *Discourse*, aspects of the ancient Dionysian festivals or Bacchanalia (understood in a very broad sense) might be taken to have survived in the Catholic festival. The heterodox and not always specifically heterosexual) eroticism of the ancient festivals and performances was well known to Hamilton and Knight on the basis of a number of ancient sources, including ancient works of art—for example, the so-called Mantuan Gem, an early imperial Roman cameo that belonged for a time to Sir Roger Wilbraham, one of Hamilton's friends in the Society of Dilettanti. In his discussion of this representation (Fig. 4), Knight took it to depict the universal principle of generation—personified by the figure at the far left, a Bacchus supported by Silenus—supervising a satyr who is about to copulate with a hermaphroditic humanoid reclining at the far right; the hermaphrodite (accompanied by "the egg of chaos broken under it") supposedly symbolizes the

possibility of fertilization.[30] To take another example, an early imperial Roman cameo (said to have been found in the tomb of the Horatii and Curatii) which passed through Hamilton's hands in 1791 depicts two satyrs ravishing a young man while a maenad, a female devotee of Bacchus, watches the group at a distance.[31] Aside from their supposed mystical symbolism, such pictorializations provided visual evidence of the supposed phallic licence—not only adultery but also prostitution, pederasty, and sodomy—of Greco-Roman sexuality as described by Martial and Petronius. Just as these ancient texts had sustained modern replications like the *Hermaphroditus* of Antonio Beccadelli, written in about 1460 and published again in Paris in 1791, the ancient pictorializations provided prototypes for such modern fantasies as a pseudo-antique cameo owned by Hamilton, which he probably took to be an ancient object, showing Apollo and Marsyas, two male lovers, and two priapic herms. It was described in Hamilton's inventory as "une fête de Priape."[32]

It was *this* sexuality, a Bacchanalian "worship of Priapus," that supposedly survived among the women at Isernia as Knight described it (Fig. 5)[33]—although again, we need to note, in a confused and corrupted form insofar as the survival replicated *both* the ancient practices of bathing or anointing the phallus with water or oil *and* ancient jokes about women, and sometimes men, sexually

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[30] *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 80-82, pl. 5, no. 3; illustrated by Hancarville, *Recherches*, vol. 1, pl. 18. For the object, see *Vases and Volcanoes*, 102-103, and fig. 51.
[31] *Vases and Volcanoes*, 196, no. 73.
[32] *Vases and Volcanoes*, 192, no. 65; the catalogue provisionally dates the artifact to the sixteenth or seventeenth century. For the publication, dissemination, suppression, and replication of Beccadelli's *Hermaphroditus*, an important point of reference for later eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century historians of ancient eroticism, see Davis, "Homoerotic Art Collection," 249-50.
[33] *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, pl. 3, no. 3; see Gaston Vorberg, *Antiquitates Eroticae*, 89, no. 5 Cf. the statuettes in the "Secret Cabinet" showing priapic old men anointing their phalli (Fanin, *The Royal Museum*, pl. 16; Barre, *Musee secret*, pls. 36, 39).

enjoying themselves—or pleasuring other people—with the ithyphallus of Bacchus, Priapus, or a herm.[34] Because this specifically priapic ancient sexuality had been suppressed by the early church, its survival in Italy in a devotional practice conducted *by* the church vividly revealed the simultaneous denial and return of the phallic and pagan origins of Catholic devotion—to use Freud's terms, with only mild anachronism in this context, its de-repressed libido.

As Knight understood it, the long-term history of the survival of what Freud (following Knight) called "genital-worship" was not a simple case of an original, ancient belief and its later or modern corruption—of primary and secondary layers of representation that might be analogized to *un*-repressed (ancient or archaic) and *de*-repressed (modern or contemporary) fantasy mutually organized in an an intervening history of psychic and social censorship, repression, and redirection reappearing finally in symptomatic or neurotic recollection. The very notion of *two* strata of significance in image making—an inaugural stratum that expresses primary beliefs and a secondary stratum that involves its partial disguise—cannot be rendered fully coherent. Imaginative productions (we might conclude on reading Knight's presentation) must devolve from at least *four* discriminable strata—first, an original stratum of irreducible primary belief, virtually a principle of thought itself though it need not be "rational" (in Knight's history, this might be found in prehistory); second, an archaic stratum of

[34] We can be fairly sure that the pederastic-homosexual origin of the Dionysian myth of Priapus was perfectly well known: Dionysus made the fig-wood phallus (the prototype of the phallic herm) as a pleasurable (and in the event quite usable) substitute for the penis of his deceased boyfriend Prosymna (see Julius Rosenbaum, *Die Lustseuche im Altertum* [Halle: XX, 1839], sect. 17). Eighteenth-century pictorializations of women (and sometimes men) pleasuring themselves with the phallus (of the herm) of Priapus were common; for a homosexual example, see Gerhard Femmel and Christoph Michel, eds., *Die Erotica und Priapea aus den Sammlungen Goethes* (Frankfurt am Main: XX, 1990), 174-175, no. 10, fig. 6 (possibly to be attributed to Goethe himself).

expression, inherently requiring some degree of interpretation, translation, transformation, and reduction (found in the earliest documented—i.e., pre-Romanized—religious cultures in Egypt, Persia, India, Celtic Europe, and elsewhere); third, an extended historical period of replication, diversification, and transformation, including suppression, reformation, and recollection (in pagan and Christian traditions); and fourth, the latest horizon—as it were the most neurotic period—of the contemporary reproduction of all the earlier moments in new contexts (the eighteenth-century survival at Isernia). In setting forth this complicated temporality in ancient and modern cultural history, Knight's treatise went far beyond the straightforward historical relationship of duplication between "ancient" and "modern" culture imagined by antiquarians like Hamilton—the simplistic and avowedly tongue-in-cheek notion, as Hamilton put it, that at Isernia "a sort of devotion is still paid to Priapus, the obscene Divinity of the ancients (though under another denomination)."[35]

It would take a full-length study to unravel Knight's evidence, argument, and rhetoric—not my purpose here.[36] At the prehistoric heart of human sexual

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[35] *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 13.

[36] In particular, I cannot examine Knight's use of the writings of P. F. Hugues d'Hancarville, a close associate of Hamilton's and author of an inventory of his collection. Knight certainly drew examples from Hancarville's *Recherches sur les origines, l'esprit et les progres des arts de la Grece*, 3 vols. (London: B. Appleyard, 1785). But Knight had a more perspicuous sense of a long-term cultural history extending from "prehistory" to modern times than Hancarville. Indeed, the whole point of Knight's *Discourse* was to interpret present-day survivals—a concept not to be found explicitly in d'Hancarville, whose chief aim was to discover the phallic-erotic constitution of pagan iconography. For further discussion, see Peter Funnel, "The Symbolical Language of Antiquity," in Clarke and Penny, eds., *The Arrogant Connoisseur*, 50-65, and Alain Schnapp, "La pratique de la collection et ses consequences sur l'histoire de l'antiquite: Le chevalier d'Hancarville," in Annie-France Laurens and Krzysztof Pomian, eds., *L'Anticomanie* (Paris: XX, 1992), 209-18. So far as I know, Nikolaus Pevsner was the first—and only—historiographer to have observed that "Knight's approach to his subject is . . . psychoanalytical," "expeditions into the unconscious [that are] amazing for their date" ("Richard Payne Knight," *The Art Bulletin* 31 [1949], 297, 298), though

beliefs Knight, following the Orphic corpus, wanted to identify "first-begotten Love"—an abstract if archaic principle of pansexual generativity, whether sexually active or passive, anatomically male or female, or erotically homo-, bi-, or heterosexual. In the longest-term history of human image making in art, poetry, dream, and fantasy, Primal Eros had initially been depicted (or, to use Knight's proto-semiotic vocabulary, it had first been signified pictorially) by the sun, by the bull, cow, lamb, and goat, by horns, and by the egg—basic signs of generativity, all of them well-nigh universal so far as Knight's wide-ranging anthropology seemed to show. All these signs of generation—they are not specifically phallic—must be distinguished, Knight thought, from the mere erect penis of Pan-Priapus, the familiar garden god of what Knight tended to call "poetic mythology" (i.e., the Ovidian and cognate traditions). In Knight's reconstruction of a multi-stranded and multicultural history ranging from Egypt, Persia, and India to Greco-Roman, Teutonic, and Celtic societies, and picking out the strand most relevant to the historical outcome specifically manifested at Isernia, an original and seemingly pan-human cult of Primal Eros degenerated into phallic representation in Roman art and literature, especially in the Ovidian tales of the amours of animals, men, heroes, and gods—a forgetful, vulgar, and decadent corruption of the original metaphysical principle of Eros as Prime Mover. Knight's erudition as a classicist allowed him to identify, as he thought, several interwoven textual modes and historical moments of the original Orphic

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Pevsner does not actually mention Freud's citation of Knight's *Discourse*; for an early appreciation of Knight's achievements, see Karl Boettiger, "Ueber Richard Payne Knight," *Amalthea* 3 (1806), 408-18 (like Hamilton and Knight, Boettiger collected phallica).

and the reductive Ovidian imaginations of generation, including Platonic and Platonistic-patristic variations—an immensely intricate and tangled lineage.

In the terms mapped in Knight's history of prehistoric and ancient cultures, an *already-secondary* pagan or Ovidian/Priapic Greco-Roman culture—it was historically overlapped with Christianity at the doctrinal and social birth of that new religious movement—survived into Catholic European culture. As we have already seen, however, this survival only occurred in *further* and *continuing* perversions, to use Knight's term—further reductions of the primal signs of generativity to the phallic symbols used, practically unwittingly, in the architecture of churches, the iconography of saints, or, in the case reported by Hamilton, the votive practices of the faithful. From Knight's point of view, then, the phalli of Isernia represented a Catholic corruption of a pagan perversion of a submerged primitive or prehistoric belief—ignorance, resistance, and reduction built on ignorance, resistance, and reduction. For Knight, *both* ancient *and* modern cultures of image making in art and poetry and in festival and devotion had been created in dynamics of making and destroying, hiding and exposing, and acknowledging and denying—in accepting and resisting a primal Eros. In this sense, the corruption/perversion at Isernia—the women's dedication of phallic votives—relayed an inherent cultural tendency (it could be conceived as a devolution or degeneration) to *deny* Eros: to convert generativity to a single, limited, simple sexual symbolism, and in so doing to misrecognize and mislocate the signs of attraction. This symbolism—though libidinal, a concupiscent arousal—was like a tic or similar involuntary gesture; the women of Isernia—and perhaps even their priests—did not really know the meaning of their acts. In effect, then, the supposed survival of the merely phallic symbolism

at Isernia represented the *disappearance* of Eros—of an overt, knowing, and free worship of the powers of creation. As Knight pointed out, it was Galileo and Newton—not the Catholic Church and its followers at Isernia—who returned the great principles of cosmic coherence and attraction to explicit awareness in modern times as the analog of the solar cults and cosmologies of the most ancient world; scientific cosmology (and Knight's rational textual-iconographic reconstructions of prehistory) served as a "confirmation and explanation" of the *Ur*-cult of Eros.[37]

Can we say, then, that Knight's subtle—if intricate and involuted—theory of Eros sensed the historical anomalousness of the putative evidence for it at Isernia? To revert to the anthropological and archaeological substance of the story, the very notion of a votive image intended to cure "female sterility" that would take the form of a penis is unusual and unlikely, whether the custom was ancient or modern—virtually calling into being Knight's elaborate explanation in terms of a surviving pagan "worship of Priapus" to be explicated in turn in terms of an earlier panerotic system of primary beliefs that subsist before the differentiation, bodily location, and gender assignment of sex. Returning to Knight's sources, it is not fully clear whether Hamilton manipulated the reports of the festivals of Isernia in order to exhibit their "popery," whether his anticlerical bias caused him to be duped by his informant, or whether he partly garbled the information—or all or none of these. The informant himself, it turns out, had a pre-existing theory of pagan survivals in Catholicism. Carabelli has shown that the Italian road engineer who furnished the original observations to Hamilton, a

[37] See especially Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, XX.

Sicilian official named Andrea Pigonati, had already propounded the idea that Italian priests sometimes "combined the cult of the Madonna with that of Diana"—a notion vehemently rejected in 1792 by Michele Torcia, an educated Neapolitan observer of Italian peasant folkways.[38]

Whether or not Hamilton's source was reliable, we can understand the reasons for Hamilton's confoundings. The so-called worship of Priapus was probably an amalgam of several traditions—or survivals—in various states of reproduction and revision. As Hamilton's report suggests, Isernia seems to have had a broad healing cult involving people of *both* genders burdened with *many* afflictions; after all, Sts. Cosmo and Damian were physicians credited with several miraculous cures, and their hagiography has been said to be a Christian survival of the mythography and iconography of Aesculapius.[39] Although Hamilton did not interpret the fact, he did report that legs, arms, and other waxen anatomical votives were presented at Isernia—though phalli were the most common—and that men were among the devotees. Indeed, as already noted, men exposed their penises for anointment with the oil of St. Cosmo—a feature of the festival that Hamilton did not try to reconcile with his insistence on *female* dedication of the phallic votives. In other words, we might have to say that the *penis* was represented and exhibited in the healing cult at Isernia—not, as Hamilton and all later commentators have assumed, that a healing cult for the *uterus* was bizarrely phallic in its mode of representation and, in the end, in its sexual consummation or cure. In that last regard, as Carabelli has pointed out,

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[38] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, 72-77; in 1792, Torcia published his *Saggio itinerario nazionale pel paese de'Peligni* (Naples: no publisher named). As Carabelli points out, however, Torcia did partly reproduce views like Pigonati's and Hamilton's.

[39] See G. Meier, "Cosmas and Damian," *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 4 (New York: Appleton, 1908), 403-404; Ludwig Deubner, *Cosmas und Damian* {Leipzig, 1907).

we should note the seeming survival at Isernia of an ancient tradition quite different from the worship of Priapus supposedly replicated in the wax votives—namely, the practice of so-called incubation or sleeping in the house of the deity, often in the service of female fertilization.[40] The possibility that women incubated around the altar at the church of Sts. Cosmo and Damian could well have been conflated by Hamilton with the notion that women dedicated the votive phalli—even though men showed their penises to the priest for unction.

Finally, Hamilton's *firsthand* knowledge of ancient survivals in modern Naples derived from winged phalli, phallic birds, and similar small amulets, tokens, and talismans—like those collected by Freud—used both by the rural peasants and by the city-dwellers and collected by Hamilton himself (Figs. 6, 7).[41] The ancient analogs for these objects included the many phallic amulets and other apotropaic devices recovered from the excavations at Pompeii and Herculaneum as well as more-highly-elaborated or even monumental objects—for example, sculptures such as the notorious "Vatican Bronze" (Fig. 8), inscribed *Soter Cosmou* or "Savior of the World," showing an erect phallus projecting from the head of a rooster, emblem of sunrise, supported by the neck and shoulders of a man and, according to Knight, representing the mystic "generative power of the Eros, the Osiris, Mithras, or Bacchus, whose centre is the sun, incarnated with man."[42] According to other eighteenth-century accounts, *Soter Cosmou* was the name given to another striking sculpture

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[40] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, XX (fig. 4 is a photograph of "woman pilgrims sleeping by the altar in the shirne of Madonna della Libera at Pratola Peligna, near L'Acquila . . . taken around midnight on 4 May 1957"). For the ancient customs, see Ludwig Deubner, *De incubatione* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1900).
[41] Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, pl. 2, nos. 1-2; Wright, *Worship of the Generative Powers*, pl. 1, nos. 3-4.
[42] Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, pl. 2, no. 3. More on this.

(circulated in several replications though probably based on an actual Hellenistic-Roman prototype) that depicted a satyr buggering a goat.[43]

In Naples, Hamilton was especially struck by the "modern Amulet most in vogue" among women, the so-called *mano in fica* or "making the fig"—an "emblem of consummation" (i.e., a gesture of "get fucked," "fuck you," or "up yours") used as a "preservative from the evil eyes."[44] The gesture was said to represent the *female* genitals by Winckelmann, who had made personal studies of Neapolitan slangs and gestures; according to Hamilton, it had a special "connection with Priapus" because he had seen the gesture on ancient priapic figurines retrieved in the region of Naples, one of which later came to be displayed in the Secret Cabinet (Fig. 8).[45] Insofar as the hand-in-fist was a phallic apotropaism used by Neapolitan women, however, it would have been a short step for Hamilton (or his informants) to see the wax phalli of Isernia as objects deployed by women as well—part of the same overall modern survival of the maenads, the *female* devotees of Bacchus, Pan, and Priapus, who later came to interest Warburg because of the dramatic expressiveness and primal or universal pathos of their gestures and motions.[46]

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[43] Knight, *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, pl. 7. The replication illustrated by Knight was *not* the replication exhibited in the Secret Cabinet (see Fanin, *The Royal Museum*, pl. 1; excluded from Barre, *Musee secret*).
[44] *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*, 14.
[45] For one figure, see Fanin, *The Royal Museum*, pl. 19, no. l, and Barre, *Musee secret*, pl. 37. As these antiquarians pointed out, the figure is not Priapus, as Hamilton thought, but probably a buffoon or mime. For another figure, see Fanin, *The Royal Museum*, pl. 19, no. 3, and Barre, *Musee secret*, pl. 45, no. 2. This figure makes a gesture with index finger extended. On a phallic lamp representing Mercury and a lamp representing Silenus, the figures seem to make similar gestures (ibid., pls. 46, 53).
[46] See especially Warburg, "Sandro Botticelli's *Birth of Venus* and *Spring*: An Examination of Concepts of Antiquity in the Italian Early Renaissance" [1893], in *Aby Warburg*, 89-156; as Warburg says in the Prefatory Note to this famous study, "this evidence has its value for psychological aesthetics in that it enables us to observe, within a milieu of working artists, an emerging sense of the aesthetic act of 'empathy' as a determinant of style"

But this complicated overlay of traditions and histories of dedication, anointment, incubation, and apotropaism, combined and partly conflated in Hamilton's report as a female devotion to Priapus, cannot override the likelihood that the wax phalli of Isernia were sometimes or even always dedications made by *men* in a routinely Aesculapian and decidedly non-Bacchanalian context—an anthropological likelihood overturned, virtually *reversed*, by Hamilton and Knight. Carabelli has discovered that Pigonati's critic Torcia, a scholar of the folkways of his region of Italy, noted that the phalli of Isernia "concern the treatment of ailments of the ithyphallus"—that is, the male erection.[47] In Italian villages in the 1950s, seemingly continuing a tradition that dated to the eighteenth century or before, wax images of penises were dedicated by men, often immediately post-pubertal or newly married, mostly coping with phimosis—with difficult, painful, and sometimes unsuccessful retraction of the foreskin, at worst preventing penetration or orgasm.[48] The condition is common;

(ibid., 89). Although Warburg emphasized the flowing hair, garments, and gestures of the "nymphs" depicted in Classical art, a specific connection with the human *maenads*—who must, of course, be distinguished from nymphs—was never far from his mind. For wide-ranging discussion, see Louis Rose, *The Survival of Images: Art Historians, Psychoanalysts, and the Ancients* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001). In this regard, we should not fail to note a possible connection with the context of tarantism and the *tarantella,* the frenzied though fluid Neapolitan dance, that shadows Hamilton's account of Neapolitan symbolism and the cult at Isernia. Tarantism was associated with maenadism and was sometimes blamed for male priapism and erectile disorder.

[47] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, X.

[48] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, fig. 15, reproduces a photograph of wax phallic votives from Palmi (Reggio Calabria) "still in use around 1950." Phimosis was known to ancient writers, who recommended operations for it; it has been supposed that ancient anatomical votives representing the penis were primarily intended to supplicate or thank the healing god for the relief of phimosis (see P. Decloufe, *La notion d'ex-voto anatomique chez les Etrusco-Romains* [Brussels: Latomus, 1964], *Collection Latomus* 72, 7). For late eighteenth-century understandings, see Moses Cohen, *Dissertation on Circumcision regarded under its Religious, Hygienic, and Pathological Aspects* (Paris, 1816), and Rosenbaum, *Lustseuche*, sects. 29 and 36. Jesus made a cryptic analogy between circumcision—relieving and cleaning a suffering part of a man—and the "making whole" of a man afflicted in all his members (John 7:23).

in modern social groups, it befalls about ten percent of any population of uncircumcised males. Historically it has led to numerous and occasionally deadly complications—ulceration; forceful retraction of the foreskin by the boy or his parents, doctors, or priest, leading to tearing, bleeding, and scarring; amateur, partial, or clumsy subincisions, slicing the foreskin or the penis as deep as the urethra; adult circumcision, which can be an extremely painful operation; and increased incidence of dangerous infections, notably staphococcal and gonococcal infection. As we have seen, some of the phalli of Isernia are erect with foreskin retracted while others are flaccid and unretracted—perhaps referring to the dedicants' desire to achieve retraction in erection or giving thanks for a successful alleviation of phimosis in delicate subincision or in full circumincision, possibly represented in one or two or all of the erect wax phalli from Isernia. The small unretracted votive penis from Isernia—though it is difficult to tell from Knight's illustration or the surviving object—might be intended to show *failed* erection due to phimosis; the penis seems as it were to be bent or broken halfway along its length. The differences in size between the phalli from Isernia could refer to the distinct problems of prepubertal boys and sexually mature men in coping with phimosis. Phimosis in boys chiefly leads to difficulties in hygiene and to intractable infections, whereas in sexually mature men it leads to acute pain during erection (whether involuntary and "libidinal" or sexual and procreative), constriction causing priapism (not to be confused casuistically with mere libidinousness), erectile dysfunction, and, as noted, difficulties in penetration and insemination. Twentieth-century examples of ex votos presented by men to relieve phimosis and related afflictions (including infection, scarring, or tearing of the glans and foreskin) typically have red dots or

lines painted around the area of retracted foreskin, the scrotum, and/or the glans to indicate the location of the painful problem—perhaps the source of the "red" color attributed to the wax phalli of Isernia by observers coming after Hamilton.

Hamilton's informant Pigonati described the phalli of Isernia—collected *whole* by Hamilton—as *membri rotti* or "broken members." Carabelli takes this to mean that Pigonati, followed by Hamilton, took the wax votives to show "detached" body parts—as if broken-off from a whole body at some point. Carabelli gives this as one reason to suppose that the wax votives resemble *anatomical* waxes in showing "single organs that can be mechanically assembled to form the human body."[49] The "brokenness" of the phalli—their seeming to be detached or cut off from a whole body—probably did encourage antiquarians like Hamilton to make an association with antiquity and its ruined survivals—the *disjecti membri* of ancient art and poetry described by Winckelmann. But this would apply to any kind of anatomical votive—to a penis, but also to an arm, leg, eye, or uterus.

As we have seen, the "broken members" of Isernia specifically aroused fantasies of a perturbed masculine generation. Images of non-procreative and sodomitical male sexuality—homosexual or not—hover all around the edges and can be found at practically every turn in the history and the representations of the healing cult at Isernia. But the deficiency or disturbance of masculine sexual function was transferred in the historical legend promulgated by Hamilton and Knight—who never mentioned (and perhaps denied the idea of) "ailments of the ithyphallus"—to a supposed phallic cult among *women*. These women—maenads in the service of Bacchus, Pan, and Priapus or devotees of Ss. Cosmo and Damian as the case might be—incarnated a possessive and

[49] Carabelli, *In the Image of Priapus*, XX.

passionately devoted femininity or maternity, even if the anatomical or corporeal affliction, failure, or lack resided in the husband's body (presumably impotent) and even if the wives were deluded about the libidinal arousal and phallic potency of their priests (supposedly chaste) and about their own putative insufficiency or disorder (supposedly infertile). Caught in this entanglement, as the rhetorical logic of the legend of Isernia has it, this species of woman (ancient or modern, pagan or Christian) obsessively loves, seizes, and incorporates the male penis, redressing its real or putative deficiency or absence in the woman's sexual life for the purposes of her own frustrated libidinal gratifications—that story proposed by Freud as the psychic history of Leonardo's devouring adulterous mother, an explanation for the artist's own inescapable homosexual devotion to the penis of beautiful young men. In this complex rhetorical and ideological circuitry, the penis circulates between men and women or between child and mother or between husband and wife. It is fully possessed by neither, desired by both, and worshipped by all: it is *Phallos*, the phallic imago, always partial and provisional—as well as endless and original—in its broken, incomplete corporeal and psychic realizations.