

Aniconism – the denotation of divine presence without a figural image – has long been viewed as a primitive tradition within Greek antiquity. It has been judged as belonging to an early stage in the development of Greek religious art, and as a type of behavior unaffected by forces of rationalization and cultural progress. Depending on context, the adjective ‘primitive’ can either be deemed a positive trait describing phenomena which have not been touched by time (e.g. Lovejoy and Boas 1965); or it can be seen in a negative light, as backward and thereby qualitatively worse than more ‘advanced’ representational strategies. Following the lead of Winckelmann, modern scholarship has mainly viewed aniconism as primitive in a negative sense – as inferior to more ‘civilized’ figural representations precisely because of its lack of naturalistic forms (e.g. Nilsson 1971). This paper examines and contests such deep-seated preconceptions.

Modern scholars have explained the existence of non-figural or aniconic objects such as unwrought stones, pillars and planks as the continuation of a remote ancient practice that preceded the worship of fully figural images (cf. Donohue 1988). Alternatively, Greek aniconism has been interpreted as the product of external influence, primarily from the Orient. The coexistence of aniconic monuments with other forms in Greek religious art has also been taken as testimony for a kind of religious traditionalism in Greek worship. Aniconic monuments have thus been viewed as the inferior, primitive precedents of fully figural, sophisticated representations of the gods, and effectively as marginal opposites of normative Greek images of the divine (cf. e.g. Spivey 1996).

This paper tackles these modern notions by considering ancient discourses on prehistoric religious practice and aniconic monuments in the texts of Herodotus (e.g. *Histories* 2.50), Xenophon (*Memorabilia* 1.1.4), Theophrastus (*Characters* 16) and Pausanias (e.g. *Periegesis* 7.22.4). In the writings of these authors, imageless worship is described as typical of the cult practices of hallowed antiquity and an expression of extreme fear of the divine. But these traits of aniconism are not necessarily negative, and in Pausanias’ narrative the account of aniconic representation serves as positive proof of continuous Greek cultic practice from remote antiquity to the Roman Imperial period. It is only within the Christian polemics particularly of Clement of Alexandria (*Protrepticus* 4.40) that the worship of aniconic objects emerges unambiguously as primitive in any derogatory sense. Despite the complex ways in which aniconism was discussed in Graeco-Roman antiquity, it was primarily the early Christian, anti-pagan view that shaped modern perceptions of the phenomenon. In pagan antiquity, aniconism could be seen as primitive, but in a positive sense – and one that sheds light on other forms of representational practice.