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‘How few men have the right head on their shoulders!’

by Lucilla Burn¹

This seemingly world-weary sentiment was expressed in a letter written in 1877 by Mr C.L.W. Merlin, at that time British Consul at the Peiraeus, Athens, to Sir Charles Newton, Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities at the British Museum. Merlin, himself a friend of Schliemann and an antiquarian of some reputation and experience, acted as agent or broker for the British Museum in the acquisition of a large number of classical antiquities in the 1870s and 80s. Among these were about one hundred ‘Tanagra’ terracottas, some fresh from the largely illicit diggings at Tanagra, others ‘improved’ at the hands of unscrupulous dealers who skilfully blended ancient and modern elements to provide the complete figures still eagerly sought for the public and private collections of both Europe and the United States. Newton had complained to Merlin of his suspicions that he was sending him too many ‘terracottas ... found to be made partly of plaster, not to mention false moulds, and arms and heads borrowed from other figures...’: Merlin’s disarming reply assured Newton that he was well up to the dealers’ tricks: ‘But as to the wrong head being on the wrong shoulders, why it is the way of the world. How few men have the right head on their shoulders!’ (Higgins 1986, 175-6)². Among these few I am sure that Merlin, had he known them, would have included Don Bailey and Catherine Johns, right-headed people par excellence: in their wide-ranging knowledge and enthusiasm, their generosity and their integrity, both personal and academic, they can have few rivals.

There is no doubt that all three terracottas to be discussed here do have the right head on their shoulders, in the sense that there is no sign that any of the three heads in question is other than the one with which the figure was provided by its original, ancient maker. None of the heads appears to have been detached at any time, and each is a

perfect fit for the neck and/or shoulders that carry it. As the heads of terracotta figures of the Hellenistic period, to which these three belong, were almost always made separately from the bodies, there was quite a lot of potential for combining heads and bodies in a variety of ways. This potential was readily exploited by the coroplasts, for whom swapping heads around facilitated the creation of a wide range of different-looking figures with the minimum of effort. Usually, as in the case of the ubiquitous standing, draped female figures, the commonest type of ‘Tanagra’, the effect is subtle rather than dramatic: the head may turn in a different direction, or the hair may be arranged in the ‘melon coiffeure’ instead of being confined beneath a snood or kerchief. But the heads of these three figures, however ‘right’ they may actually be, look at first sight quite alarming when viewed in combination with their bodies; nor is it a simple matter to find relevant or convincing parallels. In other words, had any one of these three heads been missing, it is highly unlikely that any nineteenth-century forger or twenty-first century scholar would ever have dreamed of restoring it as originally intended, as we see it today. The converse also applies: that is, had the heads survived in isolation from the bodies, no-one is very likely to have imagined correctly the body to which the head belongs.

The aims of this brief paper are simple: to bring these three unusual terracotta figures, two in the British Museum and the third in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, to the attention of a wider audience, and through them to explore broader questions of the function, purpose, or significance of such figures.

The first terracotta (Fig. 1) was purchased by the British Museum in 1993; its find-spot is unknown but it had been in a Swiss private collection for some decades (Burn & Higgins 2001, 146-7, n° 2382)³. The back of the

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² Higgins quotes letters of Charles Newton to Charles Merlin, 18 December 1877, and of Merlin to Newton, 27 December 1877, in the library of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, the British Museum.

³ British Museum GR 1993.12-11.1 (Terracotta 2382).



Fig. 1 — Terracotta figure, probably of an Egyptian priest. London, British Museum, GR.1993.12-11.1. Photo: © The British Museum 2005.

figure is mould-made but not modelled, with a large, rectangular vent; the low plinth base is modelled in the front mould only. The head was made separately. The clay is fine and an even shade of brown with a burnished surface and considerable quantities of micaceous particles. Though not easy to parallel, it resembles some of the clays of Asia Minor, such as Smyrna. Apart from a small amount of damage to the lower back edge, the condition is very good. The figure stands with the weight on his or her left leg and the right slightly bent at the knee. The left arm is bent so that the hand lies at the waist, the right hand pulls at a fold of the garment. The dress seems to consist of a thin undergarment, presumably a chiton, through which the outlines of breasts and legs are visible; over this, draped across the upper chest and shoulders like a wide scarf or shawl, is a thicker mantle, one end of which is looped around the lower left arm. The head is bald with large ears, prominent, rather diagonally set eyebrows, a long nose with widespread nostrils and a large, thick-lipped mouth.

The figure’s sex is not immediately easy to determine. Had only the lower part, from the neck down, survived, the garment and small but obvious breasts would have suggested the subject was female. On the other hand, had the shaven head survived in isolation from the body, no-one would have hesitated to describe it as male. The shape of the head, the thick lips, ears and strongly marked eyebrows all suggest that the figure is an African; and the combination of shaven head and long garment, indicates that he – for on balance the figure does seem male – is a priest. It was the custom for Egyptian priests to shave their heads, and there are Egyptian bronze and terracotta figures with heads not dissimilar to this⁴. While the long, flowing garment, with its possible shawl or scarf, is also appropriate for a priest, the breasts remain a sticking point, offering us basically two choices. We can, if we wish, imagine that they were a ‘mistake’ on the coroplast’s part, that is, he was using a mould that ‘properly’ belonged to a female figure. Or else we can suppose that they were a deliberate part of the design, intended perhaps to express the idea that the figure was plump or feminine, possibly even a castrated male or eunuch.

Were the figure clearly made in Egypt its appearance would be less unusual, its context slightly easier to reconstruct. Egypt, the home of shaven-headed priests, was also the place where unexpected artistic combinations of heads and bodies were regularly found in the persons of Egyptian deities – think of the cat-headed goddess, Bastet, of Horus, or Anubis, the falcon- and jackal-headed gods. Within Egypt, offered in a public sanctuary, decorating a private shrine or laid in a tomb to offer protection to the dead person in his journey to the next world, such a figure could be understood as a symbolic representative of a known and respected social group. However, the mica-



Fig. 2 — Terracotta figure of an actor dressed as a bird. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, GR.2.2002. Photo: courtesy of and © the Syndicate of the Fitzwilliam Museum.

ceous clay of this figure does not resemble either Nile silt or the marl clays commonly used for Egyptian terracottas, and while the head does find parallels in Egyptian figures, the delicacy of the drapery does not. If, as seems possible, the figure was made in one of the Greek cities of Asia Minor, it may perhaps indicate something of the spread of Egyptian influence outside Egypt, a phenomenon well attested in the Roman era, but incipient in the Hellenistic period. However, Egyptian influence is generally most marked in Cyrenaica and Cyprus, countries that for much of the Hellenistic period came largely under the control of the Ptolemies. It is more difficult to assess the significance or impact of the Egyptian-seeming iconography of this terracotta in its likely production place, an eastern Greek city such as Smyrna or perhaps Pergamon; yet the head at least is by no means unique, as images of shaven-headed black Africans are not uncommon among the terracotta

⁴ For a bronze example see Paris, Louvre Br 4165, Walker & Higgs 2001, 115, n° 140; for terracotta examples see Weber 1914, pl. 31, n° 328a, Bol 1986, 182-3, n° 96.



Fig. 3 — Terracotta figure of a veiled satyr dancer. London, British Museum, GR.2001.4-30.1. Photo: © The British Museum 2005.

production of these cities. It used to be customary to classify them as ‘grotesques’, a term that has been used, sometimes rather carelessly, to categorise several separate, if sometimes overlapping, categories of individual, including people of non-Greek race, principally Africans, actors with exaggeratedly enlarged features, ‘dwarfs’ and people suffering from various types of disability, including distorted limbs or facial features or unusually-shaped heads. In Egypt some of these figures had a particular place, or even a specific role to play, in society, especially in religious ritual, and it is likely that many of the types originated there⁵. But they were also made and found a market elsewhere in the Hellenistic Greek world, most

notably in Asia Minor, and it is difficult to understand their precise appeal in a Greek context. Various suggestions have, of course, been made, from the Hellenistic fascination with the non-Greek, the exotic, to the growing scientific appreciation of racial distinctions, the advances in medical observation that were enabling the identification of various medical conditions, or the idea that they served an apotropaic function, reminders to wealthy Greeks of an inferior, non-Greek underclass.

Few intact terracotta figures come from a well-documented provenance. This particular figure is no exception to this general rule, but it is extremely likely to owe its excellent preservation to the security of a well-constructed tomb: such a context would suggest it was seen either as a permanent mourner and guardian for the dead person, as a gift for the gods of the underworld, or perhaps as a talisman to protect and serve him in the life he would enjoy after death⁶. Perhaps it was a combination of these considerations or potential functions that guided this choice of grave offering.

The second and third terracotta figures to be considered here may both represent types of actors, but neither is particularly straightforward in its significance. The smaller of the two is the Fitzwilliam Museum’s ‘birdman’ (Fig. 2), acquired in 2002, and formerly in the Mustaki collection, formed in Egypt in the central decades of the twentieth century⁷. The back of the figure is mould-made and lightly modelled with drapery folds, through which a large, roughly circular vent has been cut. The clay is reddish brown and fairly coarse, with a cream-coloured wash laid over the top. The lower edge of the figure is missing so that it is not clear whether or not it originally stood on a base of any kind.

The figure is heavily muffled in a long cloak so that neither arm is visible; around the neck is a thick wreath, tied at the back and similar to those that encircle the heads of some ‘Tanagra’ figures: such wreaths are usually thought to reproduce, in clay, those wreaths of tiny, close-set flowers, sometimes described as ‘immortelles’, found miraculously preserved in Egyptian tombs (for an example see Higgins 1986, 123, fig. 144)⁸. Above the wreath, without a neck of any kind, arises the figure’s most striking feature – the domed head of a bird, complete with gaping and projecting beak. The only other possibly bird-like feature of this figure occurs in the area where, on a human figure, the knees might be expected: here there are two notched or ridged vertical strips, perhaps a suggestion of a bird’s scaly legs.

⁵ See Ashton 2003.

⁶ More work needs to be done on the study of terracottas in tombs and their correlation to the age, sex and other grave goods of the deceased person. The best study so far is Graepler 1997.

⁷ Fitzwilliam Museum GR.2.2002. Ht. 8.6 cm. Given by the Friends of the Fitzwilliam Museum. Published by Nicholson 1968, n° 150.

⁸ British Museum, GR.1890.5-19.7, excavated at Hawara.

The third figure, purchased for the British Museum at Christies’, South Kensington in April 2001 and formerly in a private collection formed in the 1950s and 60s⁹ is comical where the other two are mildly disturbing (Fig. 3). The heavily veiled figure belongs to the class known as ‘muffled dancers’; it is one of many known terracotta versions of a subject most strikingly and memorably embodied in the beautiful, bronze ‘Baker Dancer’ now in New York¹⁰. The Embiricos dancer pirouettes gracefully, drapery caught up in one hand, head bent back to the shoulder. The back is lightly modelled with a large, oval vent cut through it that somewhat spoils the otherwise three-dimensional effect of the figure as a whole. The clay is light brown and fine, with a little mica: the surface retains traces of the white slip that was almost certainly originally laid overall, with added red for the lips and possibly some yellow on the drapery. There are many examples of such dancing figures, which it has been suggested might be connected with a cult activity or perhaps represent a dance of young, pre-nuptial women (Sumerer 1996, 110-13). But this particular dancer is a wolf in sheep’s clothing: the himation may be drawn up to muffle the back of the wreathed head, but the clearly visible face is that of a satyr, whose protruding ears, full cheeks, wrinkled forehead and long beard form a most startling and comical contrast with the grace and delicacy of his dance and his feminine-seeming garments!

As always it is difficult to disentangle considerations of the significance of these two figures – the birdman and the satyr-actor – from those of their function. Like the African priest, it is likely that these figures ended up in the tomb. The clay and the relatively large scale of the satyr dancer suggest the likelihood that it was made in southern Italy, where the importance of the god Dionysos as an underworld deity may well have contributed to the popularity of Dionysiac and/or theatrical subjects for grave offerings. But it may still be legitimate to ask whether the satyr dancer is intended as a coroplastic joke (‘why don’t we try a satyr head on that one for a change?’) – or whether there were real-life occasions when actors dressed as satyrs did perform perhaps parodies of the ‘muffled dances’ more normally associated with the sober performances of ‘real’ women? Similarly, how was the bird-man seen by his

maker or his owner? Did bird choruses still make dramatic appearances two centuries after Aristophanes? Or does this figure relate to an Egyptian festival when priests or revellers donned animal masks for some ritual purpose? What did such a figure signify in the context of the tomb? Was its owner perhaps an initiate into some mystery cult?

As yet we are not in a position to answer questions such as these. But hopefully the very act of bringing these three figures to the public notice will promote their better understanding. Don Bailey and Catherine Johns are both keen pursuers of irreverent anomalies: long may they continue masterfully to unveil them.

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⁹ British Museum GR.2001.4-30.1, Christies, 25.4.2001, lot 237. Ht. 21.2 cm.

¹⁰ For the Baker Dancer, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971, 1972.118.95, see Kozloff 1988, 102-6. For examples of comparable terracotta figures see Burn & Higgins 2001, nos 2724-5.