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COROPLASTIC STUDIES IN GREEK AND ROMAN LIBYA



Terracotta figurines from the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene. Above: head of a woman, broken from a seated figure (CAM 77-815); right: standing woman with fruit and wreath (CAM 74-234).



Terracotta figurines from the Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene. Left: standing woman holding a piglet and a silphium stalk; above, head of Apollo, broken from a full figure (CAM 71-348). All photos courtesy University of Pennsylvania Museum

This is a very exciting time for coroplastic studies for Greek and Roman Libya, and in particular for those from Cyrenaica. Libya is a relative newcomer to the field of coroplastic studies and, until the last 30 years of the 20th century, presented a barren field for coroplastic research. That coroplastic production was an active part of the ancient Greek religious, social, economic, and industrial landscape in Cyrenaica never was in doubt, for anyone who cared to look. Hellenistic terracottas had been recovered in sizable numbers from Cyrenaican tombs that had been looted over the course of the 19th century and comprise some of the oldest collections at the Louvre Museum, the National Archaeological Museum in Madrid, and the British Museum, among others.¹ Yet they received very little attention for almost 100 years.

The first coroplastic ensemble to come from a documented excavation anywhere in Cyrenaica remained in obscurity for nearly three-quarters of a century. This was uncovered by Richard Norton in 1911 at a sanctuary on the north-east slope of the acropolis of Cyrene, where some 3,500 figurines and fragments were brought to light.² This discovery promised to reveal much about the local coroplastic industry and the impulses behind it, and a two-page report was immediately published with a few accompanying photographs.² However, the effects of the two World Wars on Libya resulted in the loss of this material and for most of the 20th century knowledge of its ex-

istence was all but forgotten. The subsequent discovery of terracottas as part of a discrete votive ensemble at Cyrene's Artemision in the 1930s also never attracted much scholarly attention.³ No doubt the poor state of preservation of these figurines and the absence of any satisfying aesthetic character contributed to their obscurity.

It was only in 1978 that the first publication appeared that was dedicated to Cyrenaican figurines from an scientifically excavated context. This presented a homogeneous corpus of types completely unknown outside of Cyrenaica, but one that was deemed worthy of investigation, despite the aesthetically unappealing character and fragmentary state of this material. This corpus, comprising some 300 figurines, was uncovered at the port city of Apollonia in a back fill of a foundation trench for the south rampart wall of the acropolis.⁴ The range of types was limited, and included females holding cups, wreaths, or the plant silphium, an important Cyrenaican commodity, as well as types of cloaked or nude epebes, and types of an older bearded male. Some of these were identical to the figurines from Cyrene published by Norton, and this clearly indicated a typological exchange between the cities. The Apollonia publication resulted in the important documentation of a prolific coroplastic industry producing a shared, local typology over the course of the late 5th and 4th centuries B.C. that was unrelated to any outside influences.

Eight years later in 1987, Patrizio Pensabene published a survey of sporadic coroplastic finds from various contexts within the city of Cyrene and its hinterland⁵ that illustrated an identical typology to that of Apollonia and a much wider dissemination than was previously recognized. The importance of the Apollonia corpus was brought into sharper focus by the fact that Pensabene had a body of comparative material against which he could view the figurines in his own study. Although this was only slightly more than 20 years ago, this was the first time that a comparative study of coroplastic material from Libya was ever undertaken. The scholarly availability of this new material also occasioned several investigations into the unusual iconography of these figurines.

Roughly around the same time that the Apollonia figurines were being excavated, masses of terracotta votives were being unearthed at the terraced Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone at Cyrene by Donald White. By 1979 roughly 4,500 figurines and figurine fragments dating from the early 7th century B.C. to the 2nd century AD had been found in varying concentrations throughout the middle of the three terraces that were believed to comprise the sanctuary.⁶

These figurines presented a completely unexpected cosmopolitan and international typology that represents every terracotta-producing site of commercial importance in the Archaic and early



Terracottas from the Sanctuary of the Chthonic Nymphs at Cyrene. Photos after Micheli/ Santucci.

Classical Greek world and illustrate with clarity the roles that the products of these sites played among the coroplasts' workshops at Cyrene. They also provide excellent documentation for a lively local industry from the later 6th century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D. that, from the late 6th century to the later 4th century B.C., favored seated females, among other types. Additionally, the figurine finds brought to light thus far suggest that votive practices at the sanctuary began to change around the late 4th century B.C., when the offering of terracottas seems to dwindle to a mere trickle, even though it continued into the period of Roman rule. However, the upper and lower terraces of the sanctuary are largely unexplored so it is imprudent to draw definitive conclusions based on what is known to be only a part of the archaeological record. The need for prudence is brought into even higher relief by the recent find of a concentration of figurines during repair work on a wall in the sanctuary in 2007.

Cyrenaican terracottas have been the focus of considerable attention over the last decade, whether they have come from older excavations or from recent discoveries. Unquestionably this is due in part to the coming of age of coroplastic studies in general and the realization that this genre of industrial production has much to offer scholars for an understanding of

the religious, social, economic, and industrial environments for which, and within which, these figurines were made. Now, as a result of the publications that have appeared over the course of the last 30 years, Cyrenaican coroplastic studies are based on scientifically-excavated bodies of material that are available for comparison and re-evaluation, such as the figurines from the British excavation of a sanctuary of Demeter and Kore at Tocra,⁷ or those from Sidi Krebish.⁸ Moreover, the eventual publication of the catalogues of Cyrenaican terracottas in the Louvre Museum in 1992 and those in the British Museum in 2001 have provided substantial corpora of comparative material for study and reflection.⁹

This also has stimulated an interest in material from older excavations, such as that of Richard Norton's at Cyrene in 1911. Although most of Norton's coroplastic material had disappeared, a photographic catalogue of some 813 figurines resurfaced in Italy, as well as Norton's photographs, excavation reports, and 89 actual figurines that had been deposited in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston after Norton's death in 1917. In addition, 20 figurines were discovered to be at the University of Swansea in Wales. The typology revealed by this material comprised silphium holders, nude epebes, and cloaked male types that are identical to those discovered at Apollonia, in Cyrene's agora, and at sites in Cyrene's hinterland.

The exact site of Norton's excavation also was located and revealed still to be rich in coroplastic material that awaits further exploration. In the publication of these figurines that came out in 2000 this site was identified on the basis of the terracotta typology as an indigenous sanctuary dedicated to the Chthonic Nymphs.¹⁰ Curiously, this typology that is so diffuse in Cyrenaica appears to be completely absent so far from the nearby extramural sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone.

Exactly why this is the case is a question that warrants further inquiry.

Currently under investigation are Richard Norton's activities in the necropolis of Cyrene.¹¹ Among Norton photographs in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston are those that document the discovery and contents of three tombs dating from the late 5th century B.C. to the first century AD that contained figurines among the scores of both fine and coarseware vases. These figurines, mostly from the Hellenistic period and early Imperial era, have a particular importance as they are the only ones at Cyrene to come from an unlooted tomb, whose co-finds and location are known.

Recent excavations at Apollonia, at Euesperides, and at Cyrene have brought to light more assemblages of figurines that presently are undergoing study and evaluation. When completed these studies will considerably expand our understanding of the nature of the coroplastic industry in Greek and Roman Cyrenaica. In 2002, excavations conducted on the acropolis of Apollonia brought to light a concentration of terracotta figurines and other votive material in an abandoned quarry that was adjacent to a series of rock altars and other architectural structures.¹² The proximity of the altars to the quarry and the dedicatory inscriptions found on some associated pottery fragments suggests that the quarry was the locus of a votive pit. Based on the pottery and coins found in this assemblage, a date within the 4th century B.C. has been suggested for its formation. This is a period for which much already is known about coroplastic production in Cyrenaica, yet among these terracottas from Apollonia there are types of temple boys that are completely new to the repertoire, as well as some 20 examples of an enigmatic type of plump boy with grapes.

The Greek city of Euesperides is another site that has produced intriguing assemblages of coroplastic material, this time from industrial and residential quarters of the city. Figurines dating from the 4th to the mid-3rd century B.C. were brought to light in almost every season of digging, and among cosmopolitan types are several identical to those from Apollonia and from the sanctuary of the Chthonic Nymphs. Several fragments of molds found in backfills attest to coroplastic activity at the site, although no architectural evidence has been forthcoming for the presence of actual coroplast's workshops in the industrial quarter. One of these molds for the production of a head of a bovine is incised on the outside sur-

face with the letters ΦΙΑ, perhaps a coroplast's signature or workshop mark.¹³

Recent excavations at Cyrene conducted by Mario Luni immediately outside of its southern gate have unearthed concentrations of terracotta figurines from several areas. The most interesting of these concerns a sacred precinct with a Doric temple, altar, and at least two other temples that were brought to light immediately to the south of the southern city gate along the southern slope of the Wadi bel Gadir. Terracotta figurines dating from the 4th to the early 2nd century B.C. were found along with pottery and other finds in disturbed fill along the base of an altar and represent a variety of known Cyrenaican coroplastic types. Another group of figurine fragments now in the storeooms of the Antiquities Service had been recovered from the area earlier and are being considered together with the finds from Luni's excavation.¹⁴

As to be expected, heads belonging to characteristic types of enthroned females predominate, but among other types there also are varieties of cloaked male figures and female silphium holders similar to those from the Sanctuary of the Chthonic Nymphs and from the foundation fill of the acropolis wall at Apollonia. Of particular interest is a mold for a female head of the 4th century B.C. that was found fortuitously in the area.¹⁵ Our first documentation for the actual presence of coroplastic workshops at Cyrene, this mold may perhaps indicate that a workshop was nearby.

It is clear that excavations carried out over the course of the last 30 years demonstrate that coroplastic production in the Greek cities of Cyrenaica was an active and vital industry driven by the changing traditions and requirements of religion. What still remains to be investigated are the roles played by economic, social, and political factors in the development of this industry, as well as the general character of the industry itself. We await the results of more clay analyses, such as those conducted recently by Keith Swift for Cyrenaican pottery fabrics,¹⁶ that will enable the identification of local figurine fabrics from different centers of manufacture. Comparative statistical analyses also promise to illuminate typological inclinations, although a number of the terracotta-producing sites still have much to reveal.



From Apollonia Young boy holding grapes. Photo courtesy Jean-Sylvain Caillou



From Cyrene. Mold for the head of a woman and a modern cast. Photo: after C. Cardinali, fig....

In particular, the extramural sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone holds significant promise for future coroplastic research. Unfortunately, over the last 30 years political tensions between the United States and Libya prevented continued exploration of the sanctuary and further seasons of study of the finds. However, with the establishment of the new regime it is hoped that work at the sanctuary can resume and the study of the terracottas from the 1969 to 1979 seasons can be brought to completion.¹⁷

NOTES

¹ *Catalogue raisonné des figurines et reliefs en terre-cuite grecs, étrusques et romains* 4,2. *Epoques hellénistique et romaine Cyrénaïque, Egypte Ptolémaïque et romaine, Afrique du Nord et Proche-Orient*, Paris 1992, pp. 20-92; A. Laumonier, *Catalogue des terres cuites du Musée Archéologique de Madrid*, Bordeaux 1921, pp. 83-106; L. Burn and R. A. Higgins *Catalogue of Terracottas in the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum* 3, 2008, pp. 211-255; P. G. Leyenaar-Plaisier, *Catalogue de la collection du musée national des antiquités à Leiden. Les terres cuites grecques et romain*, Leiden 1979, pp. 86-88

² R. Norton, C. Densmore Curtis, "The excavations at Cyrene. First Campaign 1910-1911, Bulletin of the Archaeological Institute of America, II, pp. 166-167. See also see L. Bacchielli and J. Uhlenbrock, in M. E. Micheli and A. Santucci (eds.), *Il santuario delle nymphai chthoniai a Cirene*, Rome 2000, pp. 17-22

³ L. Pernier, L'Artemision di Cirene, *Africa Italiana* 4, 1931, pp. 212-213, fig. 37-38; tomb finds from Benghazi

⁴ A. Davesne and Y. Garlan, Découverte d'un lot de figurines grecques en terre cuite à Apollonia de Cyrenaïque, *LibyaAnt* 15-16, 1978-1979, pp. 199-226

⁵ P. Pensabene, Statuine fittili votive dalla chora cirenaica, in *Cyrene e i Libyi*, (*QuadALibia* 12) Rome 1987, pp. 93-169

⁶ J. Uhlenbrock, History, Trade, and Terracottas at the Demeter Sanctuary, *Expedition* 34, 1992, 1-2, pp. 16-23

⁷ R. A. Higgins in J. Boardman and J. Hayes, *Excavations at Tocra, 1963-1965, The Archaic Deposits* I, London 1966, pp. 151-155; R. A. Higgins in J. Boardman and J. Hayes, *Excavations at Tocra, 1963-1965, The Archaic Deposits* II and Later Deposits, London 1973, pp. 75-76, 99-101.

⁸ A. Bonanno, in *Excavations at Sidi Krebish, Ben-ghazi, (Berenice) II*. (J. Lloyd, ed.) Tripoli 1979, pp. 65-90.

⁹ See note 1 above.

¹⁰ M. E. Micheli and A. Santucci (eds.) *Il santuario delle nymphai chthoniai a Cirene. Il sito e le terrecotte*, Rome 2000.

¹¹ A. Santucci and J. Uhlenbrock, Richard Norton and the Exploration of the North Necropolis of Cyrene (October 24, 1910 – May 4, 1911): From archives to archaeological contexts, in preparation.

¹² This material is currently being studied by Jean-Sylvain Caillou. I would like to thank Mr. Caillou for his generosity in sharing his knowledge of this material with me.

¹³ This material is being studied by Lucilla Burn, to whom I owe thanks for a photographic catalogue of it.

¹⁴ C. Cardinali, *Terrecotte figurate da Cirene*, in *Cirene, "Atene d'Africa"*, (M. Luni, ed.) Rome 2006, pp. 125-132

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132, fig. 8.

¹⁶ K. Swift, *Classical and Hellenistic coarse pottery from Euesperides (Benghazi, Libya): archaeological and petrological approaches to pottery production and inter-regional distribution*, Oxford 2006. See also *Tocra* II, pp. 73-74

¹⁷ These are being prepared for publication by me for a volume in the series University Museum Monographs *The Extramural Sanctuary of Demeter and Persephone: The Final Reports*