Kontextualisierung von Terrakotten im spätzeitlichen bis spätantiken Ägypten

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The idea of a group discussion of excavation-based results concerning coroplastic art along with a simultaneous exhibition of the terracotta collection of the Martin von Wagner-Museum (Fig. 1) was generated earlier by the authors of this report. The idea was not to dismiss conventional methodical approaches, such as stylistic analysis or religious inquiry but rather to verify or to correct their positions. For that reason, the members of the conference either reported from archaeological projects all over Egypt, or they took the defendant’s role in sustaining the value of traditional methods.
For the title of the conference the word “contextualization” was chosen, and not “contexts” because from the outset it seemed clear that excavations cannot live up to the expectation of answering every historical question by lining up significant find spots. “Contextualization” merely characterizes the attempt to understand terracottas, not only within their actual archaeological environments, but also within a wider causative network involving production and consumption modes, as well as semantics.

Therefore, the first impression given by excavation reports is not surprising: Very often the terracotta material has not been found in an actual context revealing an anthropogenic event with a figurine at its center, but rather in secondary contexts, such as fill, whose dating is approximate. Additionally, the figurines found there are mostly fragmented, contrasting with the many complete terracottas in museum collections that form visual encyclopedias of Egyptian religion and culture. But on the other hand, the advantage of the archaeological material is a secured provenance and a dating proposal at the very least—as inaccurate as it might yet be. Consequently, during the conference the mutual examination of the material resulted in numerous conclusions. For example, the traditional dating by formal phenomena has lost little of its value, but in fact is frequently confirmed by many excavations. Therefore very important were the presentations of Ross Thomas on the large number of figurines from Naukratis, as well as of James Bennett on the figurines from a votive pit of the 1st centuries B.C./AD at Thmuis. The occasional finding of molds or products from the same mold—for example at Schedia, Kiman Faris, or Bubastos—widens the possibility of reconstructing the ancient production network.

Further results were the establishment of chronological and regional variations in coroplastic art, as the use of some types is obviously time-specific, while for others,
such as the so-called “naked goddess,” either as a figurine or a relief, the line of development from the Late period to Roman times becomes even clearer. The deviation of thematic preferences already can be seen between the eastern and western Nile delta in the talk by Pascal Ballet.

5 Vaelske spoke about a major production center of coroplastic art during the 4th to 3rd centuries B.C. at Bubastos/Pi-Beseth, where hundreds of figurines of Bes and of the so-called Persian rider were manufactured. These subjects are also found at other sites, such as Memphis or Naukratis, but obviously in much lesser quantities and in different types and molds. Ross Thomas and Marianne Bergmann both spoke about erotic depictions, such as the “phallos-men” that are frequent in the western delta, but are seldom found at Bubastos. Moreover, a type that might have been expected to be dominant at Bubastos, Bastet as a cat, to date is completely absent, while Sergej Ivanov illustrated how the transformation of Bastet figurines from bronze to terracotta might have taken place at Memphis and, as Eva Lange illustrated, at Alexandria, where the early Hellenistic Boubasteion recently yielded many terracotta figurines of Bastet or the hellenized Bubastis.

6 Distinctive features of terracotta figurines from Middle and Upper Egypt pointed out by Pascale Ballet in a short report on the figurines from Coptos and by Esther Pons Mellado on figurines from Herakleopolis also were impressively demonstrated by Nahla Hussein. She provided evidence of a Roman terracotta workshop at Arsinoe/Krokodilopolis whose products could also have been exported as far away as Alexandria. The figurines from Arsinoe will raise the question of whether there was an actual “Fayum-ware” beyond the older usage of this term.

7 The talk by Martin Fink about the figurines of Assuan directed the focus to a region often unattended during the exploration of coroplastic art. He not only presented a convolute attributable to specific periods from Hellenistic to Byzantine epoch but he could also specify the respective use of clay variants. This exemplary approach is not only relevant to this special project but brings up the difficult issue of material analysis that is affiliated with important legal and infrastructural questions in modern Egypt. The discovery that the Isis-temple at Assuan triggered no fabrication of Isis-figurines is proving once more, that the local coroplastic repertoire cannot necessarily be predicted by religious traditions that may be evident from other local sources like inscriptions.

8 Penelope Wilson’s talk on the terracottas in domestic environments at Kom Rebwa (Sais) took us back to the New Kingdom by showing one of the figural types that was in use in earlier Egyptian history, but that became unfashionable in the Graeco-Roman period. Also, her conclusions concerning the display and ritual destruction of these hand-modeled snake figurines brought an important question about Egyptian coroplastic art back into focus: the performative function of terracottas. Apart from only limited explanations, such as the use of figurines as lamps during certain festivals, or as instruments of magic, the actual functioning and handling of many terracottas remains unclear. Experimental archaeology, as demonstrated by Penelope Wilson and her students, is a most promising way to shed some light on this issue.

9 While Olga Vassilieva introduced the vast terracotta collection of the Pushkin Museum in Moscow by elaborating on a statuette with a modern hieroglyphic inscription and obviously amalgamated from different prototypes, Jutta Fischer used material from the same collection to demonstrate the value of exploring the stages of stylistic
development type by type. Focusing on popular subjects of Roman production, such as Isis Thermouthis, she believes that it is possible to arrive at a persuasive chronological sequence that can be cross-checked with archaeological data or geographical divergencies. Sandra Sandri equally pointed out that contextualization of terracottas by archaeological projects should not be self-absorbing, but should lead back to inquiries into iconography and religious history. She presented one of the most popular groups of terracottas from the Nile, that of the so-called child-gods—mainly Harpocrates—sitting or riding on various animals. Here, the grouping of different figural motives does not signal a variety in substance, but is in itself an expression of the common (Egyptian) desire for lasting and abundant fertility.

Considering the fact that this was the first meeting devoted to Egyptian terracottas, much was achieved at Würzburg! The excellent combination of archaeology, Egyptology, and museology provided fertile ground for future research in Egyptian terracotta production and consumption from Pharaonic to Byzantine times. The question of continuing the productivity of this joint research effort was prevalent during the whole conference, which, along with the exhibition GRIECHISCH-ÄGYPTISCH (see below) promoted much research interest in the field and launched future Masters and PhD projects. This was clear from discussions during breaks that were lively and engaged (Fig. 2).

Conference participants were engaged in lively discussions about Egyptian terracottas during breaks at the conference.

Future meetings are anticipated, and we hope that frequent reports of Egyptian coroplastic research will appear in the Newsletter of the Association for Coroplastic Studies. Scholars doing research on Egyptian terracottas are strongly encouraged to join. A publication of the Würzburg meeting is envisaged for this year.
ABSTRACTS

In the first weekend of December 2013 fifteen archaeologists and Egyptologists from Germany and abroad met at the Martin von Wagner-Museum in Würzburg, to discuss current research on the coroplastic art of ancient Egypt. The meeting, under the auspices of the Institute for Ancient Studies (Institut für Altertumswissenschaften) of the Julius-Maximilians-Universität Würzburg, was generously funded by the Thyssen-Foundation (Fritz Thyssen Stiftung für Wissenschaftsförderung).

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