

James E. Bennett

A Troupe of Six Terracotta Acrobat Figurines found in a Votive Pit at Thmuis

Summary: Excavations by the University of Hawaii at the Greco-Roman City of Thmuis in 2011 unearthed a group of fragmentary acrobat terracotta figurines in a votive pit located up on the central portion of the tell in grid square R-13 in the heart of the ancient city. Examination of the terracottas and the material from within the pit showed that these figurines dated to the Late Hellenistic Period or the Early Roman Period. They were subsequently ritually deposited in a pit within an abandoned structure around the second half of the 1st Century A.D. The acrobats are modelled in classical Greek style and form part of the genre of figurines and scenes representing Africans that were popular in Egypt during the Greco-Roman Period. These terracotta figurines are the first example of this terracotta mould series to be found in Egypt depicting this pose.

Keywords: acrobatics – Ptolemaic – Roman – Thmuis – terracotta

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The Early History of Thmuis

The University of Hawaii has been excavating at the Greco-Roman site of Thmuis just to the south of Mendes in the North Eastern Nile Delta since 2007. The monumental remains so far recovered from the site all date to the Greco-Roman Period¹. However, Yoyotte proposed

that Thmuis was originally the site of a Late Third Intermediate Period Libyan fortress to the south of Mendes, its sister city to the north². However, as yet no remains dating to the Late Third Intermediate Period have so far been recovered in excavations at the site, with the possible exception of a large sarcophagus lid located at the north of the city that seems to have been dragged out of position. A Late Period to Early Ptolemaic date has been attributed to it. However, the history of the city of Thmuis becomes clearer in the Greco-Roman Period. The earliest reference is from Herodotus (Histories 2.166), when in the 5th century B.C. he enumerates the nomes from which a military class, called the Calasirians came. He mentions both the sites of Mendes and Thmuis, indicating that the cities maintained distinct identities at this time. As the population of Mendes decreased during the 4th to 1st centuries B.C., Thmuis began to flourish as a city. This could have resulted with a Ptolemaic restructuring of the proposed Late Third Intermediate Period fortress discussed by Yoyotte. Later in the period of the First Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66–70) the writer Josephus (Jewish Wars 4.656) tells us that the Roman Emperor Titus sailed with his army from near Alexandria via the Nile along the Mendesian Nome and disembarked his army at Thmuis for the start of an overland march to Jerusalem. This indicates the presence of a major port at Thmuis, which the Hawaii mission has been looking for in the north of the Tell. In the 2nd century A.D. Thmuis is the capital of the Mendesian Nome³. During this period the perfume of the Mendesian Nome was popular in the ancient world according to the Roman historian Pliny (Naturalis Historia 13.2.4)⁴. By the time of the 4th century A. D. Thmuis had become one of the most important cities in Egypt (Ammianus Marcellinus, Roman History 22.16).

¹ For the monuments and papyri found at Thmuis see Daressy 1913, 181–4; Edgar 1907, 154–7; Edgar 1915, 1–13; Johnson, Martin and Hunt 1915, Nos 213–22, 426–433; Kambitsis 1976a, 225–30; Kambitsis 1976b, 130–140; Kambitsis 1985, 68–160; Langsdorff and Schott 1930, 135–6; Martin 1967, 9–48; de Meulenaere, Mackay, Hall and Bothmer 1976, 105; Naville 1892–1893, 1–5; Ochsenschlager 1967, 32–52; Ochsenschlager 1971, 185–191; Ochsenschlager 1968, 185–191; PM IV, 35–7.

James E. Bennett: Durham University, Dept of Archaeology, South Road, Durham DH1 3LE, Great Britain, E-Mail: j.e.bennett@durham.ac.uk

² Yoyotte 1962, 5–9

³ Ball 1942, 109.

⁴ de Rodrigo 2000, 33–39.

The Western Pit and its Phasing

In the 2011 summer season, excavations up on the central portion of the Tell in grid square R-13 uncovered the remains of a destroyed room in the area of the public and administrative buildings. A mud brick floor was uncovered within a substantial mud brick structure with as of yet unknown function. The floor was adjacent to the western side of a visible wall exposed within the excavation unit. The floor itself was pitted and uneven but a consistent elevation and the surface deposits substantiated it as an occupational floor of the Late Hellenistic or Early Roman Period. The floor was covered by a 13 cm thick layer of ash and debris which had been sealed by a collapse in antiquity of a plastered wall or ceiling. Within the sealed debris layer were the remains of several amphorae sherds, a faience platter, a bowl and a small pitcher. These were most likely burial offerings that had been placed with the body of an infant which was found at the foot of a wall. The infant itself was found underneath the broken amphora sherds. There was no evidence of a burial pit or stain beneath the infant's body, and it indicated that the infant had been discarded against the wall sometime after the decomposition of the body, possibly from an amphora burial which was destroyed when the walls and ceiling collapsed. A Roman coin was also found but it was too degraded to date. Based on ceramic evidence, the structure probably went out of use in the second half of the 1st century A.D. The pit in which the acrobat terracottas were deposited was designated as the western pit. The ash lens from the 13 cm thick burning was shown not to cover the western pit, and that evidence of burning lenses across the floor area and that which were present on the other side of another mud brick wall showed that the western pit had truncated the ash lens of the Late Hellenistic or Early Roman Period. The western pit was round and intruded on the mud brick wall in the north section. The interior of the pit had been lined with a mud coating. The pit itself had cut through a series of earlier phases and deposits. The pit included fish bones and an assemblage of Early Roman vessels along with some residual Late Ptolemaic Period sherds. The soil matrix indicated that the pit had been filled in one single instance during the second half of the 1st century A.D. The ceramics within the western pit have a deposition date of around the second half of the 1st century A.D. This date rested on a few chronological markers, principally a set of carinated bowls of a form that is similar to ESA Atalante II form 39⁵. In addition to the ceramics and the acrobat figurines were a number of other terracottas including two fragments of

stylized grapes probably belonging to a larger vessel, which had some Bacchic religious significance. These grapes have been dated by similar examples to around the Roman Period. A terracotta animal with striations that represent hairs or feathers probably falls under the category of a ritual animal, most likely the Sothic Dog or the Cockerel of Hermes. Furthermore it could have also represented a deity such as Harpocrates riding a Goose, however the fragmentary nature of the piece inhibits one from giving a positive identification, but appears to be Roman in date. A head of a Roman aristocratic woman in Greek style shows her hair in the top knot fashion and represents a typical woman of the Roman Period⁶. Furthermore a broken fragment of a lamp was recovered that probably showed a scene of everyday life which were so popular in Egypt during the Greco-Roman Period. Furthermore a well preserved statue 'lamp' of the God Bes which has been given a date of the 1st to 2nd century A.D.⁷. There were also pieces of metal that possibly depicted animals (maybe a bird, however the oxidation of the metal prevented a positive identification). A gemstone of garnet or carnelian probably from a finger ring, a bezel, an amulet or another item of jewellery were found. There were also two bone beads probably belonging to a necklace or bracelet, a Harpocrates figurine seated on an unidentified animal and a second fragmentary figurine of a female of Roman date. The associated terracotta assemblage has a date range of around the 1st century A.D. based on parallels from museum catalogues and early excavations from within Egypt. However it must be stressed that dating of terracottas is a highly debatable issue. The vast majority of the terracottas that now make up museum collections and catalogues were not found in controlled stratigraphic excavations, while many were bought on the antiquities market in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even now with the controlled stratigraphic excavations being carried out in Egypt little is still known, and many of the dates proposed in the early terracotta catalogues were guesswork and probabilities at best⁸. However the assemblage excavated from within this pit from Thmuis appears to have a consistent date range of around the 1st century A.D. based on the Roman ceramics and the associated figur-

5 For a full ceramic report of the western pit see, N. Hudson, in *Bulletin de Liaison de la Céramique Égyptienne* (forthcoming).

6 For a parallel of this female head from Kom el-Schuqafa see Brecchia 1934, 61, no. 322, pl. XLIV.6 (dated to the 2nd Century A.D, but probably earlier).

7 For a parallel see Kaufmann 1915, taf. 24 (top right).

8 Bailey 2008, 3.

ine parallels. Admittedly they could be a little earlier. It is likely that these terracottas formed part of a group of votive terracottas that belonged to a shrine possibly situated in an upper class house or an administrative building. Based on the number of acrobats found, the assemblage may have had some connection with the Gymnasium or the Theatre of Thmuis. The quality of these terracottas indicates that they were prized and used over a sufficient amount of time. This is furthermore indicated by the addition of two or three different pottery fabrics used to manufacture the acrobat figurines, including also slight style changes that could show a chronological development in the mould.

The Acrobat Figurines

Within the western pit were two partially complete terracotta figurines, each depicting a single acrobat (Figs. 1 and 2), and two fragmentary pieces that were reconstructed and depicted a pair of acrobats side by side (Figs. 3 and 4). Further analysis of other terracotta fragments within the pit showed that a fourth figurine was deposited along with the other terracotta acrobats and probably made up a second pair of acrobats side by side like the latter pair. This was determined by the dimensions of the supporting base which had survived and its similarity in design and manufacture to the other double acrobat figurine. Overall within this deposit there were six African male acrobats depicted, two single acrobats and two pairs of double acrobats, making up a troupe. A further fragment that depicted a face of an African man was found within the terracotta assemblage of the pit and may have belonged to another acrobat figurine. However the pottery fabric used for the face could not be matched to the fabric used for the fragmentary base. Therefore, it is possible that a seventh acrobat was deposited within the pit, but was heavily damaged so that only the face was recognisable during excavation or that there was another figurine type with an African theme. All of the acrobats were originally manufactured as 'lamps' with lug holes at the top and wick emplacements at the base, however none of them were ever used as lighting devices and therefore were solely for the use in a domestic shrine, which seems to be a common theme of other terracottas of the period with lug holes and wick emplacements at the bottom⁹.

The best preserved acrobat 'lamp' found within the pit was one of the single acrobats designated as 'Acrobat 1' (Fig. 1).

It measures 20.3 cm high, 9.28 cm long and has a width of 6.65 cm. Its manufacture was by a two piece mould and was made using a medium brown Nile silt. The base was added on as a separate element. Before firing, the sides where the joins met were covered up with a clay slip. On the inside of the figurine the sculptors fingerprints were preserved where he had pushed the clay into the mould. The back of the figurine was not modelled, indicating that it was meant to be viewed from the front and that it was probably set up in a household shrine. The acrobat is depicted upon a circular table with three legs. Each leg had lions paws used as the feet while the man's face looks outward to the viewer and his upper body is outstretched vertically, with the feet pointing up.

The table appears to have functioned as a type of platform, or vault, which the acrobat would use to project himself into the air to perform his moves. The acrobat himself is in an unusual position, in that his arms are bent back behind his body with his shoulders resting on the table in front of his head. His forearms are behind him and his palms resting on the back of the table, almost as if he is about to spring off the table, or perform a handstand. This position would be difficult to maintain for any long period of time and therefore has been determined that the acrobat is shown in the process of performing a movement giving the figurine a sense of action and motion. The face of the acrobat is clearly male, with typical African features that were depicted in the Greco-Roman Period. The hair is fashioned in tight curls, the nose is broad and flat, his cheekbones are high and the lips appear to be relatively thick. The proportions of the size of the head to the body are exaggerated, with the head being larger and the most prominent element of the figurine. It is almost as if the sculptor was trying to highlight the ethnicity of the figurine rather than the pose itself. The man is depicted as being naked with well-defined buttocks and leg joints. In the calve muscles of the extended legs there is a lug hole for the connection of a chain for its use as a lamp. However even though this figurine was manufactured as a 'lamp', there is no evidence that it was ever used as lamp in its lifetime. The lug hole is not worn, while at the base of the figurine between the front table legs are two wick holes that do not appear to be functional, as they have no projecting nozzles. The absence of any burning or oil residue in the oil chamber might suggest that its use in the household shrine was as a votive or decorative piece. The figurine preserved a considerable amount of pigment that allows

⁹ L.c. 145.



Fig. 1: Acrobat 1.



Fig. 2: Acrobat 2.



Fig. 3: Acrobat 3.



Fig. 4: Acrobat 3: Upper Fragment.

for a colour scheme to be proposed for this object. In between the leonine footed table legs is preserved a red pigment that would have filled the areas between the legs including the two wick holes. While the table itself was painted in a yellow pigment, however, the pigment on the body is not well preserved. It appears that the face had some yellow on it and that the extended body had traces of red, with some yellow remaining towards the ankle area.

The second single African acrobat, 'Acrobat 2' (Fig. 2), was reconstructed from the associated fragments found within the western pit. The upper part of the left leg is missing, along with a large part of the bent left arm. Acrobat 2 was of the same design to Acrobat 1, but was almost half the size of Acrobat 1 measuring 12.3 cm high, 7.31 cm long and 6.84 cm wide. This indicates a different mould series for this figurine. The difference is also indicated by the fabric type used to manufacture this terracotta. Acrobat 2 was made from a dark brown Nile silt and was a much thinner fabric, which had caused it to break considerably in the pit after it was deposited. The design of this acrobat shows all the same features as Acrobat 1. The same facial features clearly distinguish it as an African male. The same round table with leonine feet acting as a platform or vault, and the body and arm position is the same as Acrobat 1. The back was not modelled indicating it was to be viewed face on. The details of Acrobat 2 are sharper and better defined with details of the face clearer and the table legs showing fur striations for the leonine legs. No evidence of pigment was found on this figurine. It was manufactured in the same way, a two piece mould was used, with the base being added as a separate feature, and the side joins were covered with clay slip. It was formed as a 'lamp' with the lug hole pierced through the calve muscles of the acrobat, and it had two wick holes at the base in between the table legs. Like Acrobat 1 there was no evidence that it was ever used as a lighting device for the home, and therefore belonged with Acrobat 1 in a household shrine. The difference of fabrics and mould series shows that these acrobats are probably of different date. There is no indication as to which one was the earliest, but it does show that the collection was added to as time went by, possibly as a replacement for one that had been damaged.

Along with the two single acrobats was a pair of fragmentary double acrobats depicted on the same terracotta figurine side by side to each other classified as 'Acrobat 3' (Figs. 3 and 4), measuring 22.36 cm high, 14.26 cm long and 5.98 cm wide.

The fabric used was of a medium brown Nile silt like that of Acrobat 1, while the colour scheme also has simi-

larities with Acrobat 1. The fragments preserved the base with the tables and lower bodies of the acrobats along with the extended vertical legs. The lower bodies and the tables of the acrobats were heavily degraded, and worn. The base had a flat rectangular front that curved round at the back forming an overall semi-circular shape for the base with remnants of green pigment across the front. The front of the base preserved two wick holes with slight projections at the front, but still they would not have been functional to any great degree. Furthermore there is no evidence of burning or oil residue in the oil chamber. This flat base was the stand for two tables that appear to have been circular, based on the analogies of Acrobats 1 and 2. The tables or vaults each have three leonine legged feet like the other acrobats, and have preserved yellow pigment on the legs and bases, indicating that they had the same decorative pattern as Acrobat 1. The faces of the acrobats are badly worn, but the rendering of the hair in tight curls is the same as the previous acrobats and can therefore show that these two acrobats also depict African males. The faces of both the acrobats are badly worn and facial features are difficult to determine, but it is likely that they once had African features of Greco-Roman style. On the face of the left hand acrobat there is some evidence of a yellow pigment and the hair appears to have been coloured in red or pink. The position of the lower bodies has been crudely modelled, with no rendering of detail on the upper chests with them being flush to the top of the tables, while the hands of the acrobats unlike the singular representations are shown grasping the front edges of the table. The lug hole for suspension is pierced through a small protruding plinth that emanates from between the two sets of feet.

The fifth fragment called 'Acrobat 4', measuring 6.54 cm high, 11.82 cm long and 4.98 cm wide is part of a base which would have originally depicted a pair of acrobats side by side like that of Acrobat 3.

However only some of the base is preserved, but its dimensions and style indicate that it belonged to this acrobat terracotta corpus. The fabric is the same type as that of Acrobat 3 and also includes traces of green pigment on the preserved parts of the front of the base. The right hand side wick hole is preserved, however the rest of the front of the base is not, and also no evidence of burning has been found.

As has been shown these terracottas form a troupe of acrobats that were probably once venerated within a shrine with other terracotta figurines in around the Late Hellenistic or Early Roman Period based on the associated ceramics and terracottas found within the deposit. They all depict men of African ethnicity based on their

distinctive classical Greek styling. These terracotta figurines are unique within the corpus of terracottas so far found in Egypt and have no direct parallels, making them the first of their kind to be published.

Statues and Figurines of African Gymnasts in Rome and Egypt

The popularity of Africans as acrobats in the Roman Empire is clearly demonstrated by a 1st to 2nd century A.D. white marble statue of an acrobat found in Rome in 1908 in the area of the former Villa Patrizi near the Via Nomentana (Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo Alle Terme 40809)¹⁰. It measures 55 cm high and is in classical Greek style and represents an African, probably based on an Alexandrian original. What is important about this statue is that the pose and style are identical to that of the terracottas found at Thmuis, but the base and lower legs of the statue have broken away. The table or vault on which the acrobat rests is damaged but appears to be circular in shape, but it is unknown if the base had leonine legs like those depicted in the terracottas of Thmuis or was erected on a plain upright plinth. The styling of the hair, being in tight curls, the broad flat nose and the thick lips all match that of the terracottas. The dating of the Roman statue is the same date proposed for the terracottas of Thmuis. It demonstrates that the classical Greek style of depicting acrobats was maintained throughout the Greco-Roman Period in Rome and Egypt. A second marble statue of an African acrobat (London BM 1768) acquired in 1805 in Rome and dated from the 1st century B.C. to the 1st century A.D. shows a young male acrobat balancing on top of the back of a crocodile. His hands grip the crocodile from the back and forces himself up using his shoulders. His back and legs are straight up in the air with his face looking outwards¹¹. The pose of this acrobat is again the same as that depicted on the Thmuis terracottas only this time the table or vault is substituted for a crocodile. Pliny (*Naturalis Historica*, 8.38.92–93) tells us that the Tentyritae, who were men of small stature, had a reputation for pursuing crocodiles and dove into the river (probably referring to the River Nile) and mounted their backs. This is possibly a reference trying to be portrayed on this sta-

tue by using a classical African acrobatic pose combined with the knowledge of Tentyritae and crocodiles, both originating from Egypt and Africa. The Roman geographer Strabo (17.1.44) also informs us that Tentyritae from near the Egyptian city of Coptos accompanied crocodiles to Rome and dragged them in a net to a basking place where spectators could see them. Furthermore a fresco from Pompeii depicts little African men capturing crocodiles in Egypt and this probably represents a real method of hunting crocodiles used by the Tentyritae in the crocodile regions of Africa¹². The use of an African acrobat on the back of the crocodile probably reflects the sculptor's knowledge that he associated the Tentyritae with Africans from the crocodile regions of Egypt and Africa using the classical African acrobatic pose as his subject. Only a few examples of terracottas from Greco-Roman Egypt show Africans in acrobatic poses predominately lifting objects above their heads¹³. An example from the British Museum (BM EA 3568) shows a male acrobat, broken from a group that was acquired in the Fayum dated to the 2nd to 1st century B.C.¹⁴. The acrobat is seated with his knees pressed up against his body, and supporting on upraised hands an object that has broken away, but has a lower horizontal moulding at the rear. He is naked except for briefs, marked with impressions, possibly to represent an animal skin. He has a necklace with three strung elements; two beads and a pendant. His hair is cut short, but appears to have been styled in short curls, a typical classical Greek African characteristic. The back has received only limited treatment while the left knee is broken away¹⁵. Another terracotta example shows an African male holding up a stool with a seated male figure¹⁶. Ultimately the acrobats found at Thmuis are an important new style of figurine to be added to the corpus of previously known terracottas from Egypt. They form part of a wide series of figurines and scenes of daily life that included African people as their subject that were so popular in Alexandria and the major Egyptian cities of the Greco-Roman Period. They also have stylistic associations with the statues of African acrobats that were being erected in the city of Rome in the 1st to 2nd century A.D.

¹⁰ Aurigemma 1946, 72, no. 184; Deonna 1953, fig. 67; Snowden 1970, fig. 51.

¹¹ Beardsley 1929, 104, cat. no. 229; Smith 1904, cat. no. 1768; Snowden 1970, 166, fig. 107.

¹² Daniels 1932, 260–271.

¹³ For African acrobats raising objects above their heads see Kaufman 1913, fig. 86:17; Graindor 1939, pl. XXI:60; including two that were acquired in the Fayum now in the Petrie Museum, UC 50512–3, dated to the Early Roman Period.

¹⁴ Bailey 2008, 150 pl. 105, who says that the acrobat is female.

¹⁵ L.c. 150.

¹⁶ Weber 1914, no. 338.

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