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## In This Issue

CONSTANTINA ALEXANDROU, BRENDAN O'NEILL Examining the <i>Chaîne Opératoire</i> of the Late Cypriot II-III (15 <sup>th</sup> -12 <sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.) Female Terracotta Figurines: An Experimental Approach	2
MARIA MINA Virtual and Actual Corporealities in Bronze-Age Cyprus: Exploring Humanity through the Study of Anthropomorphic Figurines and Material Culture	3
New Book on Archaic Tarentine Terracottas Agnes Bencze, <i>Physionomies d'une cité grecque développements stylistiques de la coroplastie votive archaïque de Tarente</i>	4
CHRISTINE MORRIS, ALAN PEATFIELD Cretan Peak Sanctuary Figurines: 3D Scanning Project.	5
GERRIE VAN ROOIJEN The Terracotta 'Enthroned Goddess' of Sicily	6
GIACOMO BIONDI In the Forger's Workshop: Hellenistic Terracottas and the Mold-Made Fakes of Centuripe	7
MARIA DIKOMITOU-ELIADOU, GIORGOS PAPANTONIOU, DEMETRIOS MICHAELIDES The Employment of pXRF Analysis for the Qualitative Study of Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas from the House of Orpheus in Nea Paphos	10
JAIMEE UHLENBROCK First International Summer School on Greek Coroplastic Studies. <i>La coroplastica greca: metodologie per lo studio di produzioni, contesti e immagini</i>	11
JAIMEE UHLENBROCK Conference Report. Hellenistic and Roman Terracottas: Mediterranean Networks and Cyprus	14
GELTRUDE BIZZARRO Le terrecotte votive del santuario settentrionale di Pontecagnano (SA)	20
FRANCOIS QUEYREL, GÉRARD PAQUOT, ISABELLE HASSELIN ROUS At the Museums 1. <i>Eclats d'antiques: Sculptures et photographies à Constantinople il y a un siècle</i>	23
ANGELA BELLIA At the Museums 2. <i>Musica e archeologia. Immagini, reperti, e strumenti musicali nel museo archeologico regionale "Pietro Griffo" di Agrigento</i>	26
Other Recent Papers Presented on Coroplastic Topics, 2011-2013	28
Announcements Roman Terracotta Figurine Session at Reading, March 2014	29
Recent Appointments 2011-2013	30

Giacomo Biondi (CNR-IBAM, Catania)

## IN THE FORGER'S WORKSHOP

### HELLENISTIC TERRACOTTAS AND THE MOLD-MADE FAKES OF CENTURIFE

A small group of Hellenistic figurines in the Libertini Collection of the Catania University Archaeological Museum<sup>1</sup> is the focus of an ongoing authenticity study. These are all unpublished and comprise both genuine and fake figurines, as well as others that appear suspicious. Ancient Greek figurines of the Hellenistic period used as prototypes and mold-made replicas of these same figurines have been identified in other museum collections and in vintage photographs that belonged to Mr. Antonino Biondi (1887-1961), a forger who operated in Centuripe, Sicily, in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These photographs, as well as actual terracotta replicas of figurines still made openly at Centuripe using plaster casts taken from second generation figurines made by Mr. Biondi, allow us to “have a look” at a forger’s workshop of the last century and to trace both the place of origin of the ancient Greek models and the author of the counterfeit examples. Considering that Mr. Biondi operated continuously for about half a century and that he must not have been the only tomb-robber, dealer, and counterfeiter at Centuripe, the phenomenon of the diffusion of both genuine and false figurines must have been very broad. Examples of Mr. Biondi’s craft are now being recognized in increasing numbers in public and private collections all over the world, and I think that we are seeing only the proverbial tip of the iceberg. It seems that the warning given by Paolo Orsi in 1924 to collectors, museums, and scholars to beware of the numerous and sometimes very beautiful fakes of Centuripe was not always taken seriously.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 1a. Regional Archaeological Museum “P. Orsi,” Syracuse. Fig. 1b. Archaeological Museum of Centuripe

The most traceable and most emblematic example of the relationship and identification of a genuine terracotta with its related fake is found in a Silenus mask in the Regional Archaeological Museum “Paolo Orsi” in Syracuse (Fig. 1a), purchased in 1932 “*dall’antiquario centuripino Antonio Biondi, che l’avrebbe rinvenuta nella sua proprietà in contrada Casino.*”<sup>4</sup> It has a smaller replica, clearly a fake,<sup>5</sup> in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe (Fig. 1b). A proof of the authorship of the latter, which is a cast replica of the genuine mask in Syracuse, is the reproduction by means of third generation plaster casts of still smaller replicas. However, until a few years ago, these were lawfully sold as modern imitations in the workshop of the descendants of the forger. Fourth generation tourist imitations are still produced in some workshops in Centuripe.<sup>7</sup> The same applies to another satyr mask purchased by the Regional Archaeological Museum “Paolo Orsi” in 1914.<sup>8</sup> This one also has a second generation replica, now in the Castello Ursino in Catania, whose dimensions and details are an exact match to a commercial imitation in my

possession that was made recently by descendants of Mr. Biondi.

When additional reproductions known only from photographs are compared to both the forgeries and the genuine terracottas in various collections, the usual way the forger worked can be confirmed. He made plaster molds (surmoulages) from the best of the genuine terracotta figurines that passed through his hands and then from such molds he was able to make true second generation replicas, but only after more than two millennia. Two late 3<sup>rd</sup> to 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. clay statuettes used as prototypes for the surmoulage of this skilled forger were



Fig. 4a. Archaeological Museum of the Catania University (photo G. Fragalà, CNR-IBAM). Fig. 4b. A Biondi photograph (after Biondi, forthcoming)

Fig. 5a. Archaeological Museum, Catania University (photo G. Fragalà, CNR-IBAM). Fig. 5b. from *La Provincia di Enna* 1937.

located in the Libertini Collection: an Eros figurine (Fig. 4a),<sup>10</sup> of which a slightly washed out<sup>11</sup> replica can be seen in one of Biondi’s photographs (Fig. 4b), and a dancing satyr (Fig. 5a),<sup>12</sup> of which a bad copy believed to be genuine was published in an old tourist guide to the Enna district (Fig. 5b).<sup>13</sup> Consequently, we should think that other counterfeit figurines could have been produced from genuine, first generation terracottas found at Centuripe. A group of a satyr possessing a nymph, formerly in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe (Fig. 6),<sup>14</sup> for example, could have been a humorous invention of Mr. Biondi’s, but also more probably



Fig. 6. Formerly in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe. Photo Rizza Archive

could have been a replica by means of surmoulage of a genuine first-generation work that now is lost. Third generation imitations of this group were produced in the workshop of the descendants of Mr. Biondi. One copy of this type is still on display in a barbershop in Centuripe.<sup>15</sup> An older replica of the same type now in a Sicilian private collection<sup>16</sup> is believed to be genuine by its owner.



Fig. 7. Detail of a Biondi photograph.

A previously unknown terracotta type presenting a variation on the theme of “Invitation to the Dance” has aroused suspicion (Fig. 7). It is documented in one of Biondi’s photographs, but that is the only evidence for it that exists. Consequently, we cannot be sure if this is a pastiche, a mold-made replica, or even a genuine object. Unfortunately, in this and in other cases we cannot infer much from mere photographs, but it is hoped that their on-line presence will facilitate the recognition of these photographed objects.

Another aspect of this study involves provenance. Some figurines in both public and private collections that lack information on their provenance have been erroneously attributed to workshops other than those of Centuripe. For example, thanks to a modern replica shown in one of Biondi’s photographs (Fig. 8b), we can now attribute to Centuripe a group of a tri-



Fig. 8a Formerly in the Lusingh Scheurleer collection (after *AA* 1922). Fig. 8b. From a Biondi photograph.

ton and a nymph, presumably genuine, that was mentioned in 1923 in a Dutch collection and wrongly believed to be a product of Taranto (Fig. 8a).<sup>17</sup> The same applies to a flying Eros purchased in 1922 by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and erroneously attributed to Myrina (Fig. 9a).<sup>18</sup> This, in fact, has two ancient counterparts produced at Centuripe,<sup>19</sup> as well as a modern copy in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe (Fig. 9b).<sup>20</sup> A figurine of a crouching Aphrodite in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu (Fig. 10a) has been linked to Myrina as well.<sup>21</sup> But in all aspects, including its size,<sup>22</sup> this is a perfect match to some forgeries documented in Biondi’s photographs (e.g. Fig. 10b-c). The



Fig. 9a. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (after *BMMA* 1923). Fig. 9b. Archaeological Museum of Centuripe.

“source,” most likely, was a remarkable terracotta figurine recorded in a photograph that belonged to Prof. Guido Libertini.<sup>23</sup> It also must be said, however, that since Mr. Biondi’s repertoire included other types inspired by monumental sculpture,<sup>24</sup> these types and the crouching Aphrodite may



Fig. 10a: Paul Getty Museum Malibu (after *LIMC* II, 1984). Fig. 10b, c. Biondi photographs

also reflect a figurative trend of the Hellenistic period, even though they also could have been derived from equally as hypothetical, faithful 19<sup>th</sup>-century copies. Consequently, one of the aims of this paper is to provide a few “mug shots” of terracottas that were put into world-wide circulation between the 1920s and the 1950s of the last century, whether genuine or false, in the hope that these might be recognized and subjected to scientific analysis, or at the very least to a careful scholarly examination.<sup>25</sup> This certainly will not solve the problem of Hellenistic-style forgeries, but it could make the study of the Hellenistic terracottas of Centuripe less rand

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graphs, unless otherwise specified, were taken by me.

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G. Biondi, G. Buscemi Felici, E. Tortorici, forthcoming, Chemical and physical analyses, whose results are forthcoming, were carried out by P. Romano and L. Pappalardo (CNR – IBAM) using PIXE-alpha and XRD techniques. The examination of the pigments of some polychrome vases from Centuripe has yielded initial results that will be presented this year: L. Pappalardo, F. P. Romano, G. Biondi, G. Buscemi Felici, F. Rizzo, E. Tortorici, Combined use of portable PIXE-alpha and portable XRD techniques for the non-destructive compositional and mineralogical characterization of polychromatic Hellenistic pottery, *Technart* 2013, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, 23-27, September 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Some 90 photographs were retrieved and scanned by Eng. Giuseppe Biondi (cultural association "SiciliAntica"). Currently the owner of the vintage prints and the rightful owner of the digital copies is Mr. Antonello Catania, great-nephew of the forger, who gave us permis-

sion to publish a selection of the photographs. For a preliminary notice of the photographs, see Biondi, Biondi, in press. For the forger, see Biscegni Felici 2012, *passim*, and Biondi, in press.

<sup>3</sup> Orsi 1924

<sup>4</sup> Bernabò Brea 2002, pp. 119-120, fig. 107 a-b.

<sup>5</sup> Apart from the reduced dimensions, due to the shrinkage in firing that is typical of the second generation copies (both modern and ancient), the earthy patina, artificially applied, the pristine surface, and the unusual hardness of the clay provide additional evidence for the recognition of a forgery.

<sup>6</sup> *La Provincia di Enna* 1937, p. 255, pl. xxiv,3, believed to be genuine.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kenart.it/scheda.php?codice=M5>

<sup>8</sup> Libertini 1926, p. 117, pl. xxxvi,2; Bernabò Brea 2002, p. 122, fig. 110.

<sup>9</sup> Bernabò Brea 2002, p. 122, fig. 109: believed to be genuine.

<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Kekulé 1884, p. 72, pl. xlvii,3 (from Centuripe). For the late Hellenistic style of the Soluntum and Centuripe terracottas, cfr. Bell 2012, p. 197

<sup>11</sup> For a natural (both in ancient and in modern second generation copies) loss of detail due to serial production and to the shrinkage of the clay in firing.

<sup>12</sup> For the type and the unusual radiating hairs, see Winter, 1903, p. 370, n. 4 (in the cab. Janzé), "aus Unteritalien oder Sicilien." I would suppose from Centuripe.

<sup>13</sup> *La Provincia di Enna* 1937, p. 255, pl. xxii,2.

<sup>14</sup> The photograph is in the private archive of the late Prof. Giovanni Rizza. This archive includes photographs, and notes made in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe in 1954, and documents dating back to G. Libertini. I thank my colleagues Salvatore Rizza and Antonella Pautasso for allowing me to consult the archive and publish the photograph.

<sup>15</sup> Belonging to Mr. Giuseppe Russo: Biondi, forthcoming, fig. 21b.

<sup>16</sup> Pitanza 2009, p. 139, no. 19.

<sup>17</sup> *AA* 1922, p. 212, fig. 6. A presumed mold-made fake was in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe (*La Provincia di Enna* 1937, p. 255, pl. xxii,3: believed genuine). For a modern imitation see, Biondi, forthcoming, fig. 5c.

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.flickr.com/photos/mharrsch/625368566/>; *BMMMA* 1923, p. 214, fig. 4; Bieber 1955, p. 144, fig. 612.

<sup>19</sup> Libertini 1926, p. 107, pl. xxv,3; Musumeci 2010, no. 64, p. 55, fig. 8, Pl. v.

<sup>20</sup> *La Provincia di Enna* 1937, p. 255, pl. xxii,3. Now it is on display among the fakes, but in the guide it was believed genuine. A third generation mold is still in use in Centuripe for the production of commercial imitations: <http://www.kenart.it/scheda.php?codice=S47>.

<sup>21</sup> Chesterman 1974, p. 73, fig. 86; *LIMC* II (1984), "Aphrodite," no. 1030, pl. 102.

<sup>22</sup> In the back of the Biondi photographs is often written the height of the pictured terracottas.

<sup>23</sup> Biondi, forthcoming, fig. 11, from one of the photographs in the Rizza Archive (see note 13).

<sup>24</sup> From photographs, as well as excellent modern replicas, we know of a Hermes of Andros, many copies of an Aphrodite inspired by the Knidian type, and the satyr of the well-known Invitation to the Dance group.

<sup>25</sup> See also an elephant with a rider documented in a photograph purchased by the German Archaeological Institute in Rome in 1931: Ambrosini 2005, p. 167, fig. 6. Only a replica of this interesting group survives in the Archaeological Museum of Centuripe. Contact: g.biondi@ibam.cnr.it