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The Lawrence Room at Girton College

‘All sisters... But few twins’[1]: Tanagra and its figurines

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Introduction

The Lawrence Room Tanagra figurines are overshadowed by the more immediately spectacular parts of the collection. But they were among the earliest Mediterranean antiquities to enter Girton – they arrived in 1902, nine years before Hermione Grammatike, and are well worth a second glance. ‘Tanagras’ are small, mould-made figurines of fired clay, generally about 10–20 cms high. Some portray boys, young men or deities, but the majority are girls and women, sometimes seated, occasionally in pairs but usually standing individuals. Similar figures were made in most parts of the Greek world from the late fourth to the second century BCE: the most recent addition to the collection was probably manufactured at Myrina, in present-day Turkey **[Fig. 1]**. This cheerful-looking, round-cheeked little girl with an elaborately back-combed hairstyle was given by her former students to Miss Alison Duke, Director of Studies in Classics at Girton from 1951 to 1982, and after her death in 2005 returned by Miss Duke’s family to the College. But such figures are generically named after the Greek city of Tanagra in Boeotia, central Greece, where large numbers of them were found; and most of the Girton figures can be assigned on grounds of both clay and style to Tanagra itself.

Fig. 1: Young woman holding an apple (LR.1014). Photographer Peter Sparks.

1 Quotation translated from E. Pottier (1890) Les Statuettes de terre cuite dans l’Antiquité (Paris, Réunion des Musées nationaux), 79

Fig. 2: A woman believed to be Evelyn Saumarez, circa 1901. Photographer unknown.

The majority of Girton's 'Tanagras' were donated by the Hon. Evelyn Saumarez, later the Hon. Mrs Wood, in 1902 **[Fig. 2]**. Evelyn read Medieval and Modern Languages from 1901 to 1904; during the First World War she became a Red Cross commandant and district representative of the Land Girls. Subsequently she founded the Suffolk Herb Growers' Association, presided over three separate Women's Institutes, and campaigned for affordable housing in Cambridge. It is tempting to surmise that at the age of 19 it was Evelyn's idea to donate her family's 'Tanagras' to the College. These figures had been acquired in Athens in 1873 by her father, James St Vincent, fourth Baron de Saumarez (1843–1937), who studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, in the early 1860s before entering the diplomatic service: in 1873 he was Secretary to the British Legation in Athens.

'Tanagras' in the 19th century

The 1870s were precisely the time when many thousands of terracotta figurines were discovered at Tanagra. This rather unimpressive site, near the modern village of Schimatari, is not much visited today **[Fig. 3]**. But in antiquity, Tanagra was an important and prosperous city, and the eight roads that led out of it were all lined with tombs.

Fig. 3: Sketch map showing the position of Tanagra. Drawn by Peter Sparks.

For centuries, peasant farmers ploughing the soil, planting olives or digging foundations for their houses must from time to time have discovered ancient tombs. The earlier finds, however, seem to have been largely of archaic or classical terracottas, which were not at that time particularly saleable or desirable. In the later 1860s, however, rumours started to spread about more profitable discoveries being made among the vineyards on a hill known as Kokkali, and these seem to have prompted, in 1870 or 1871, the arrival on the scene of one Georgios Anyphantes, a 'professional' grave-robber from Corfu. Establishing himself at Schimatari, Mr Anyphantes set to work in a systematic fashion and his experience quickly enabled him to hit upon a rich series of later fourth- and third-century BCE graves, overflowing with beautiful, finely modelled and colourfully painted figurines, which therefore came to be known as 'Tanagras'. Mr Anyphantes' example was rapidly followed by the locals, who neglected their fields of vines and olives to devote themselves to the wholesale looting of the ancient tombs. For the next couple of years they dug and dug, usually re-burying gravestones and smashing unwanted pottery in their single-minded search for figurines, which flooded on to the antiquities market in Athens. It is estimated that in less than three years between 8,000 and 10,000 tombs were looted. In 1873, the Greek archaeological authorities in Athens attempted to check the looting and carried out a series of excavations of their own, the figurines from which are now in the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. But they were basically too late and apparently less industrious than the peasants, who were said to take over the excavations at night when the archaeologists had retired.

1873 was also the year of James St Vincent's Athens posting. In the market for 'Tanagras' he will have been up against most of the leading museums and private collectors of Europe and America. The French were the first in the field, but others were soon jostling for their share. It was lucky for Girton that St Vincent reached Athens no later than 1873. From the very first appearance of 'Tanagras' on the market, there was a tendency on the part of the dealers to 'improve' them, by brightening the colours and restoring missing heads or arms, supplied either from other authentic figures or in plaster. Some of the Saumarez terracottas are suspiciously

over-colourful – and the heads of some figures have been either re-painted or completely replaced **[Fig. 4]**. But the quality of the figures on offer declined markedly by the middle of the decade, when the dwindling supply of genuine 'Tanagras' started to be replaced by downright forgeries. The British Museum's agent in Athens was Charles Merlin, and as the decade wore on the Museum's Keeper of Greek and Roman Antiquities, Charles Newton, became increasingly critical of Merlin's offerings and rejected a good number, complaining about excessive restoration and forgery. Merlin did his best to disarm Newton's grumbles, admitting that in some cases 'a head may have been borrowed from one and an arm from another' and at one point going so far as to assert that '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!'

Despite Newton's vigilance, at least thirty partial or complete forgeries made their way into the British Museum's collection.

One factor influencing 'Tanagra-mania' was the relatively sudden availability of the figurines – their novelty. To people accustomed to classical art, epitomised by majestic, white marble statues of gods and goddesses, heroes and elder statesmen, the 'Tanagras' must have seemed much more lively and accessible. That they seemed to show, for the most part, ordinary people, rather than gods or heroes, perhaps made them more attractive to the burgeoning middle classes of European society. At the same time their small scale and relative cheapness – because they were so numerous and made of clay rather than marble or bronze – put them within reach of wealthy but not super-wealthy collectors. The average price of a 'Tanagra' in the early 1870s was about £25

Fig 4: Woman with chiton and himation. The excessively sweet features of this young girl's face suggest that either it has been heavily re-painted or the head is a 'modern' addition (LR.798). Photographer Phil Mynott.

Fig. 5: 'Athlete'. Note the pink flesh, orange-red hair and bright blue wreath of this male figure (LR.801). Photographer Phil Mynott.

– roughly equivalent to about £500 today. So while expensive they were not completely un-affordable and were also highly portable – easily shipped home in the diplomatic bag. Nor did they need to be displayed in a grand sculpture hall; like Dresden or Sèvres figures, 'Tanagras' could be slipped into a china cabinet or arranged along a mantelpiece.

'Tanagras' in Antiquity

How were the 'Tanagras' made? All Tanagra figures derive from so-called 'archetypes', solid clay figures modelled freehand. The archetype would be fired in a kiln and then moulds would be made from it, and also fired. The actual figures are thin-walled and hollow, and a typical 'Tanagra' would require four basic moulds – front and back of the figure from neck to foot, and front and back of the head. The backs were generally not fully modelled and even if they were, a large vent was usually cut in them – to allow air to escape during firing and also to facilitate the joining together of the component parts. The separate hollow sections were attached to each other when they had dried in the sun, with clay slip, and then fired. Owing to the nature of the manufacturing process, we might expect many absolutely identical figures to have survived. Hundreds of figures could be produced from one mould; when this eventually wore out, a new mould could be taken from a figure and the process repeated *ad infinitum*. In fact, however, it is extremely rare to find two Tanagras that are absolutely identical. Variations in scale arise, first, from the re-moulding process. As clay shrinks in firing, the first moulds taken from an archetype will be smaller than the archetype itself. The figures taken from the first set of moulds will be smaller than the moulds themselves. Moulds taken from these figures will be smaller again, and the figures produced from the new moulds will be smaller still. Eventually, the figures in the series are too small to be useful and the line comes to an end; if more of the same type are required, the terracotta-maker must hunt out an earlier model, perhaps one put safely away for just this purpose. Secondly, slotting a different head on to the same body can make a drastic difference. The pose may be the same, but different heads with divergent hairstyles set at different angles can give a completely different look to a figure, even before the addition of separate accessories such as fans or wreaths. Finally, variations could also be effected by the terracotta-makers' habits of introducing changes to the archetypes or the moulds, and by the application of colours. These were added after firing, which is why they do not always survive. Usually, a layer of white, kaolin-rich clay was painted on first, and over this, colours were applied, mainly vegetable or mineral pigments such as rose madder or red and yellow ochre. The brownish tone of male flesh derives from red ochre, the vivid blue of some garments from powdered blue frit (a glass-like preparation of quartz, lime, copper and an alkali); green is powdered malachite **[Fig. 5]**.

What was the function of Tanagra figurines? Some have been found in sanctuaries, where they would have served as surrogate worshippers, remaining to honour the dead when their depositors had returned home. Others were retrieved from domestic contexts, for example among the houses at Priene, Ephesus or indeed Pompeii. Some of these 'domestic' figures are very large and exceptionally statuesque – cheaper alternatives to small-scale statues in more valuable materials. But the great majority of the 'Tanagras' known today have been recovered from tombs, and this was clearly the place for which large numbers of them were destined in antiquity. We do not know exactly what they signified in this context, although in general terms they may represent the women whose role it was to tend the family tombs. Certainty is made more difficult by the absence of good documentation as to the graves

Fig. 6: Some tombs have yielded large numbers of figurines of types similar to these Girton examples. Photographer Peter Sparks.

in which they were found: it is rare to know which figurines came from the same grave, let alone whether it belonged to a man, woman or child.

The only substantial set of terracotta-rich tombs for which the documentation has been carefully compiled is that of Taranto in southern Italy. Preliminary conclusions drawn here suggest that terracotta figures were most usually deposited in the tombs of young women or children. Elsewhere in the Greek world, figurines have been found laid carefully around the body or on the rim of the tomb: both positions suggest guardianship of the dead **[Fig. 6]**. It is not clear why such figures were not thought appropriate for male tombs; perhaps their gender made them seem more suitable for women and children who were largely restricted to the women's quarter of the house – in other words, they provide companionship of the type the occupants of the tomb would have experienced in life. At the same time, like other grave goods, the quality and quantity of figurines must reflect the status of the dead person and her family.

'Tanagras' thus form a small but significant element of the legacy of Ancient Greece, and the Lawrence Room figurines contribute to this. Their association with the Saumarez family enriches their more recent history: taking their place within the 'Tanagra' craze of the 1870s, they are also evidence of one Girton student's enthusiasm and affection for her College.

FURTHER READING

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