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EARLY REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SO-CALLED “SCYTHIAN RIDER” OR “PERSIAN RIDER” FROM EGYPT AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE PHENOMENON OF “MILITARY RELIGION”

ABSTRACT Early representations of terracotta riders from Egypt’s Late Period form a fascinating category of artefacts associated with the early development of the military rider figure. These figures are often loosely referred to as “Scythian” or “Persian” and are sometimes linked to Persian iconography, possibly in response to Achaemenid expansion. This paper proposes the hypothesis that these early terracotta riders may be connected to the religious sphere or, more broadly, to the military aspects of magic.

Key words: Terracotta riders, Egypt, Late Period

ABSTRAKT Wczesne przedstawienia jeźdźców z terakoty z Egiptu Okresu Późnego stanowią fascynującą kategorię artefaktów, związanych z początkowym rozwojem figurek jeźdźcy wojskowego. Terakoty te często określane są luźno jako „scytyjskie” lub „perskie” i bywa, że kojarzone są z perską ikonografią, prawdopodobnie w odpowiedzi na ekspansję Achemenidów. W niniejszym artykule postawiono hipotezę, że te wczesne przykłady jeźdźców z terakoty mogą być powiązane ze sferą religijną lub, szerzej, z militarnymi aspektami magii.

Early representations of terracotta riders from Egypt’s Late Period form a fascinating category of artefacts associated with the initial development of the military rider figure. These figures often referred to loosely as depicted as Scythian or Persian and sometimes linked to a tendency to place this figurine type within the sphere of Persian iconography, as a response to Achaemenid expansions. As Céline Boutantin pointed out, at least twenty-five figurines representing the so-called Scythian rider from Memphis were crafted using a mixed technique: the horse was modelled by hand, while the rider was shaped using a single-sided mould.¹ It is also difficult to prove whether these figurines were produced in Memphis and subsequently distributed, or whether they were made locally at other sites in the Delta area.² Similar iconographic parallels to the representations of the “Scythian Rider” or “Persian Rider” from Memphis³ (Fig. 1) can be

observed at sites such as Tell Toukh el-Qaramous (south of Abu Kebir),⁴ Naucratis,⁵ and Tell Dafana.⁶ The correspondences to these terracotta figures remain indicated not only by their iconographic features but also by the modelling techniques used in these artefacts. Other noteworthy examples of terracotta statuettes depicting the early rider include from Tanis (modern San el-Hagar, also known Djanet), presented in the catalogue of terracotta figurines by Françoise Dunand, *Catalogue des terres*

Thomas, 2013: 202,204, fig. II.1. In the context of figurines of “Persian horseman” Mary Boyce and Frantz Grenet state that *The cultural union can be seen to coincide broadly with the sphere of Achaemeion expansion; it is precisely from the Achaemenian epoch onwards, it seems, that one the western sites local types of fertility goddesses are joined by “Persian horseman” wearing on their heads the characteristic tiara.* (M. Boyce, Grenet, 1991:186).

⁴ Edgar, 1909:273-277.

⁵ Thomas, 2015: 28; Edgar, 1909: 276; Hogarth, Lorimer, Edgar,1905: 129-130; Besques,1963: 5.

⁶ Leclère, 2014: 56-57, 177, tab.19, no 1906, 0301.5. See also: Leclère, Spencer, 2014.

¹ Boutantin, 2014: 26.

² Boutantin, 2014: 26.

³ Petrie, 1909a: 15, 17, pl. XL. no 46; Petrie, 1909b:17, pl. XXIX, 84; Petrie,1908:129, pl. I; Minns, 1913: XXXVII; Boutantin, 2014: 635, pl. IV. fig. 1;

cuites gréco-romaines d'Égypte.⁷ Interestingly, the archaeological context of these terracotta representations spans both Greek and Egyptian ritual spheres. Despite the absence of literary sources, the mentioned terracotta figurines derive their universal religious significance from their unique iconography and cultural associations. The discussed iconographic type, widespread across many regions of the Persian Empire in the first half of the 1st millennium, as interpreted by Peter R. S. Moorey, can be particularly distinguished by its headwear in the form of a pointed cap during the Achaemenid period. According to the researcher, these terracotta figurines are not depictions of deities or princes, but rather symbols of men with a distinct, exceptional status, with specific roles in the military, politics, and society.⁸

The subject of this article is not a discussion about the ethnic⁹ or chronological identification of the figurines in question, but rather the presentation of a proposition concerning their possible magical and ritual significance. In the first of these aspects, the depiction of a rider is a universal theme,¹⁰ especially within the eastern regions of the Mediterranean. In terms of the chronology of this category of artefacts, it should be noted that their production dates to a period before the conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great. A substantial group of terracotta riders, although sometimes differing in iconographic details, shares a common feature – the portrayal of the headgear, and occasionally a beard. These figures sometimes identified as Scythians or Persians, although attributing them to a specific ethnic group can be challenging. However, if we accept Ross I. Thomas's view

that the characteristic headgear (hood) of these figurines is the *kyrbasia*, then at least part of this group may be associated with Persian Riders.¹¹ The research also noted that certain terracotta statuettes characterized by additional attributes, such as a shield.¹² However, these figurines were crafted in an imprecise and often highly simplified manner, making it difficult to definitively determine the type of shield depicted. A similar challenge arises with certain terracotta rider figurines, which are chronologically associated with the Hellenistic; however, conclusions about them are often speculative. Concerning the chronology, it is reasonable to agree with Ross I. Thomas's suggestion, summarized in the statement: Persian rider figures are present in Egypt from the 5th century BC, but parallels from elsewhere in the Achaemenid Empire suggest that they could also be expected in late 6th-century BC contexts. Common in 4th-century BC contexts, they were subsequently replaced by Macedonian rider types in the late 4th century BC.¹³ It should also be noted here that William M.F. Petrie, when discussing figurines found in Memphis (the administrative center and headquarters of the Persian garrison during the Persian occupation), stated, *A very rough variety of the Scythian horseman [...], moulded but solid, was found with the pottery group of about 300 B.C. We may then probably date the great majority, which are solid modelled figures, to about 500 to 300 B.C.; and the few moulded hollow figures from 300 to 200 B.C.*¹⁴ However, I suspect the upper date may now be significantly overestimated. It might be suggested that the 5th-4th century BC, perhaps even slightly earlier, seems most appropriate. I believe that Persian rule in Egypt is an appropriate period with which to associate these materials.¹⁵ An interesting proposition is found in *Terres cuites et culte domestique: bestiaire de l'Égypte gréco-romaine* by Céline Boutantin, who noted that, although the rider is typically identified as a Scythian, this may not be particularly precise, as similar depictions appear throughout the eastern Mediterranean, especially in Phoenicia and Cyprus.¹⁶ According to

⁷ Dunand, 1990: 215-212, nos: 583 (E 16151), 584 (E 16152), 585 (E 16153), 586 (E 16154), 587 (E 16155), 588 (E 16156), 589 (E 16157).

⁸ Moorey, 2000: 469-486, 4 pl. In the context of The Iron Age of ancient Syria, Peter M.M.G. Akkermans and Glenn M. Schwartz, state that *Perhaps the most obvious example is the appearance of clay "Persian Rider" figurines representing horsemen dressed in Persian garb. The symbolism and function of these figurines remain obscure but are ostensibly associated with the perceived power and prestige of the Persian military* (Akkermans, Schwartz, 2006: 393-394.)

⁹ One interpretation is that the figure represents a Persian, identifiable by a Persian hood, or more generally, a Scythian in service of the Persian army. This figure could depict a rider from the nomadic Saka tribes of Central Asia, whom the Greeks associated with the Scythians. The interpretation of early rider figurines as Scythian mercenaries is thus highly plausible.

¹⁰ Salles Jean-Francois, 1986: 143-200.

¹¹ Thomas, 2015: 41. See also, Erlich, 2006: 47-48.

¹² Petrie 1909: pl. xxix.84. By Petrie tis terracotta were identified as Scythian rider.

¹³ Thomas, 2015: 41.

¹⁴ Petrie, 1909a: 15; Petrie 1909b: 17, pl. XXIX, no. 78-81. See also, Petrie, 1908: 129.

¹⁵ Valske, 2012: 13; Boutantin, 2014: 166.

¹⁶ Moorey 2000: 482. As noted, Heather Jackson, *Cyprus is home to a long tradition of producing small, handmade baked-clay horsemen, which at the end of the*

Boutantin, these figures can also be compared to a fragment of a red-figure vessel discovered in Memphis, attributed to the potter Sotades and dated to around 450 BC. The figure, as the researcher observes, has been identified as a Persian.¹⁷ No matter how we identify the discussed group of terracotta artifacts, linking it to a specific ethnic group or culture, it should be noted that the group of horsemen represents a unique phenomenon associated with a personal image of military religiosity, that of warriors stationed in Egypt. This viewpoint is supported by later coroplastic statuettes whose iconography literally refers to the military of the Ptolemaic period as well as deities, often of Egyptian origin, which may also refer to the personalist religion of warriors.¹⁸ However, in the case of the discussed category of artefacts, it seems that we are observing a broader perspective on the personal religiosity of warriors – an aspect that does not necessarily need to be reflected in official religious sources – expressed through conventions perhaps connected to the military role of the ruler, particularly the Persian king, or, more broadly, the Persian administration. The very formula of the rider and his significance in the world of that time remains richly documented. The horse itself symbolized military aristocracy, wealth, and status. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones has noted, horses were regarded by the Persians as animals endowed with magical abilities, which is why hippomancy rituals were common; Persian priests believed that horses could see and communicate with the spirits of the dead.¹⁹ Eran Almagor, pointed out *As nomads, the Persians attached great importance to horses in a social context – in which horsemanship was valued and provided a means of legitimacy for the king – in education, as a source of pride and prestige, and in religious rites, where it was sacrificed in honor of the sun. In the Persian sedentary society of the Empire, the horse assumed a different meaning as a symbol of the central power as well as of the means to expand the scale of civilization [...].*²⁰

In an imperial perspective we can also observe that cavalry played a key role in the military conquests of both the Medes and the Persians.

sixth century BCE were given moulded faces on their handmade bodies. After, Jackson, 2019: 383.

¹⁷ Boutantin, 2014: 166. See also: Daumas, 1985: 289-305.

¹⁸ See for example: Jędraszek, 2020: 97-109; Jędraszek, 2023: 183-190; Jędraszek, 2025 (in print)

¹⁹ Llewellyn-Jones, 2024: 119.

²⁰ Almagor 2021: 29.

Therefore, we can believe that this universal iconographic formula, unifying diverse symbolic, ritualistic, and propaganda meanings, was of particular interest to warriors. Today, in a broader sense, we can identify this with the formula for military religion, intricately linked to royal propaganda.



Fig.1. So-called “Scythian Rider” or “Persian Riders”, UC 49906 Courtesy of Petrie Museum, UCL

This category of terracotta figurines associates well with Egyptian coroplastic traditions from the Ptolemaic period, particularly those connected to a form of military belief or ‘warrior religion’ closely tied to the ideology of war and military success. For my opinion this “belief system” could reflect the personal spirituality of those engaged in military professions. Based on iconography, certain types of representations may sometimes be linked to specific military formations or ethnic groups. While this remains one interpretation, it seems plausible, especially when considering the diverse iconographic traditions of coroplastic art from the Late and Greco-Roman periods in Egypt. These groups of terracotta figurines reflect political shifts and ideologies concerning kingship,

warfare, and imperialism – central themes in royal ideology. Roel Konijnendijk has noted, in the context of royal Persian ideology, that [...] *their ideology legitimized their wars, and their wars, in turn, legitimized their rule*.²¹

One notices that in this however, such a hypothesis is challenging to confirm definitively, as these archeological materials offer limited perspective especially given the absence of a supportive literary tradition. The character of terracotta artifacts often encompasses a broad range of meanings and multi-dimensional aspects strongly associated with personal, individual ritual practices. Yet, given the nature of these figurines, I am biased to suggest that their primary recipients were warriors, from elite formations, such as riders.

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²¹ Konijnendijk 2021: 1145.

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