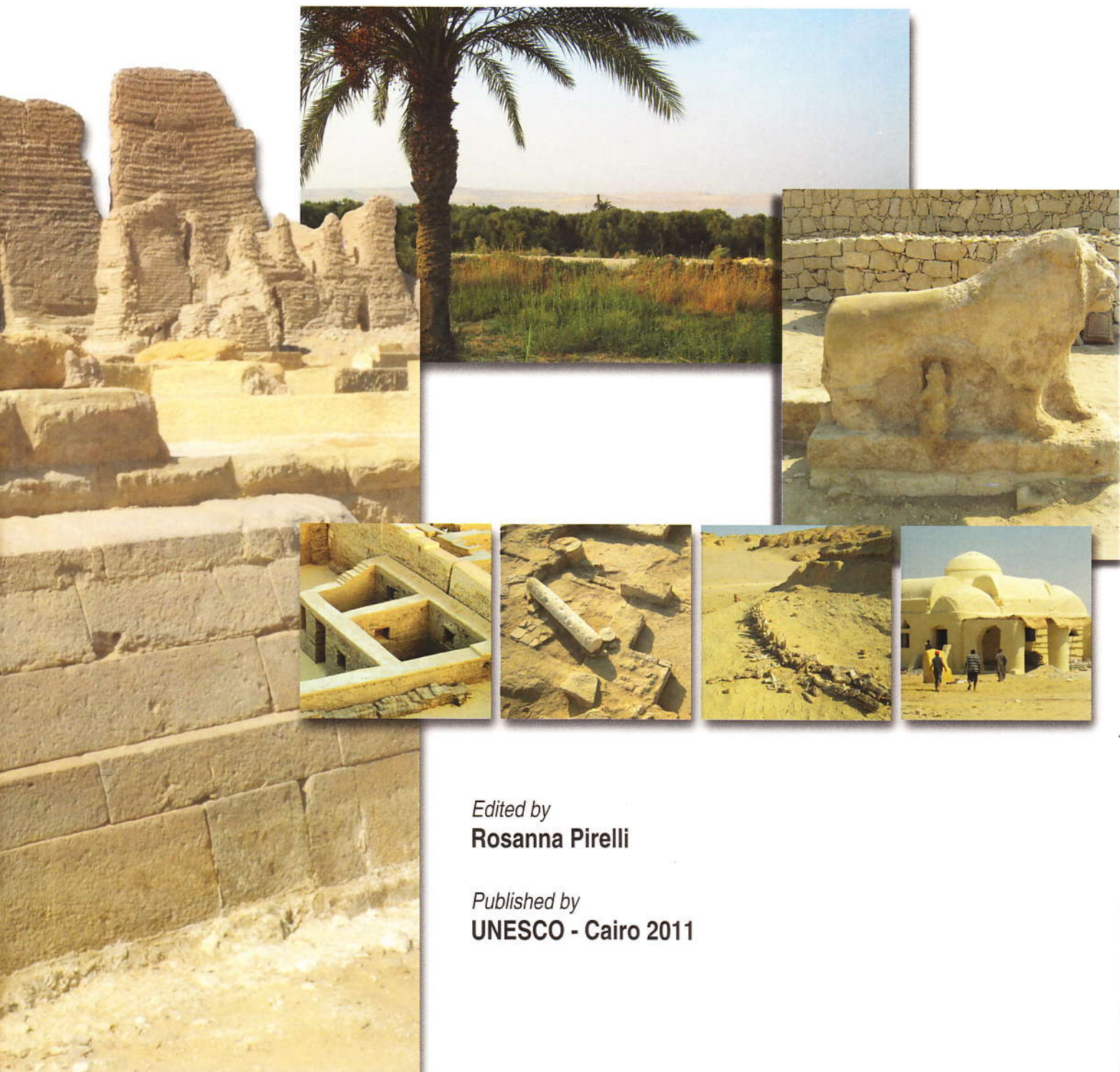


NATURAL AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES IN THE FAYOUM

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FAYOUM PAINTED PORTRAITS

Mummy portraits in 'Roman style', known as Fayoum portraits, were painted in the first centuries CE. As is well known, many of these portraits preserved in museums abroad lack their original funerary context, the tombs and necropoleis that housed them, whose global analysis would have offered invaluable clues for 'reading' them.¹ We have therefore no other choice but to analyse this body of evidence trying to reconstruct 'from the inside' what these images may have been meant to express. In doing so, I will use the methodological approach usually applied in classical archaeology to interpret the 'langage des images', an especially rewarding methodology when we are confronted with a coherent body of evidence featuring recurring signs; and indeed, these portraits display a consistent figurative language, whose meaning we can try to understand through a global analysis of the whole dossier (repertoire, person depicted, different painting styles and techniques...).

I hope to demonstrate here that, following this path, we can try to overcome the lack of an archaeological context and understand the function these portraits, aimed at enhancing the image of particular social groups in Egypt, may have expressed. To achieve this end, we are fortunate enough to be able to draw on a number of recent studies on this subject, which have already observed the Fayoum portraits 'under the lens' of different methodological approaches, and most notably the work of Montserrat, Borg, Corcoran and Riggs, who have ascribed a deeper meaning to these images, shunning the 'descriptive approach' common to so many old or new books, or exhibition catalogues.² Indeed, under the spell of the skill exhibited by the artists in so many of these paintings, one runs the risk of considering them as physiognomic and psychological likenesses of a specific individual, and thus completely missing the social stereotypes the painted mummy portraits – as so many portraits in different media of the period – actually express and convey.

I wish to stress that I'm not an Egyptologist: what I am setting forth here is the perspective of a classical archaeologist wishing to analyse these portraits combining their observation with the problem of the meaning of the portrait in Roman society, with special regard to the imperial period.

Archaeological practices that were widespread between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth (when the bulk of the portraits were found and in large part conveyed to the antiques market) has dismantled the archaeological evidence, dividing what was originally a 'bilingual' unity: a body treated according to Egyptian funerary practices in a carapace with Egyptian funerary iconography, and a face 'painted in Roman style'. By 'bilingual unity' I mean a coherent way of switching between different modes of expression, to be distinguished from a 'mixed style', which mingles languages, styles, and iconographies.³

A number of scholars maintain that the reason this evidence has been preserved only here is the peculiar

1 A welcome exception is the recent discovery of a monumental tomb containing six mummies with painted portraits at Marina El-Alamein. The best preserved portrait, with a gold-leaf crown, is dated on stylistic grounds to the beginning of the second century CE: Daszewski (1993), esp. p. 409-412, Figs. 6-7; *Id.* (1997).

2 Among the many contributions of D. Montserrat on these topics, cf., e.g., Montserrat (1993); *Id.*, (1996), pp. 48-55. Corcoran (1995); Borg (1996); Riggs (2002); *Ead.* (2004); Borg (2009). A more traditional view is offered by Lehmann (2010).

3 On these topics, Castiglione 1961; Guimier-Sorbets (1997); Riggs (2002), pp. 96-97; cf. also Wallace Hadriell (2008), esp. pp. 3-37.

climate of Egypt.⁴ On the contrary, I wish to stress that the archaeological context of these portraits, with the mummified body and the visual imagery they display, are *unica*, lacking parallels in the rest of the Roman empire, and we cannot consider this uniqueness as a mere by-product of an exceptional state of preservation.⁵

Another important consideration is that these objects place a strong emphasis on religious/ funerary aspects and belief in the afterlife.⁶ All this does not match with what we know about the funerary ideology of Roman society: judging from the evidence from the city of Rome and its *suburbium* in the first centuries CE, we could even say that religious beliefs play a definitely minor role in images and, generally speaking, that tombs function here more as honorary monuments than as 'containers of the dead body'.⁷

The figurative system of the Fayoum portraits

The archeological debate about the Fayoum corpus has mainly focused on issues of chronology, on the one hand, and the primary function of the portraits, on the other. The issues of chronology are quite solved by now,⁸ whereas the same cannot be said as regards our understanding of the primary function of the portraits.⁹ Here the methodology I referred to above (in-depth analysis of repertoire, person depicted, different painting styles and techniques) may help, suggesting that the system of the painted portraits, the figurative language that informs them, points towards a primarily funerary destination.

As regards iconography, the depicted person often holds garlands and beakers.¹⁰ The same objects can be found on funerary sculpture, as well as on shrouds, objects of clearly funerary destination, underscoring the funerary destination of the portraits.¹¹ This hypothesis might find an objection in the 'realistic' appearance of the portraits: how could the painter convey such a 'true' image of the person, if the portrait was painted when the person was dead? Here studies on portraits from other areas in the Roman empire can be of great usefulness.¹²

Painted personae, social norms and stereotypes

In so many painted portraits¹³ - no doubt to meet the demand and social requirements of the clients - the

4 It will suffice here to cite Bianchi Bandinelli (1970), pp. 282-291; Riggs (2005), p. 140; Stewart (2008), p. 79.

5 Occasional findings from other contexts – for example Kirchhof, Rehorovics (2010) – do not alter this state of things.

6 On these issues, cf. especially Corcoran (1995); Römer (2000).

7 Funerary evidence from Rome can also explain the poor conditions in which the mummies are usually found, often contrasting with their costly decoration. Actually, built tombs remained in use over a long period of time, sometime changing owners. As a consequence, due to lack of space, older corpses were often displaced to make room to new burials. On these issues, cf. Baldassarre (1983), esp. p. 159; *Ead.* (1987).

8 On this point cf. especially Borg (1996), pp. 19-88.

9 Parlasca considers the funerary destination of the portraits as secondary: see *e.g.*, *Id.*, (1966), pp. 59-90, and, more recently, *Id.* (1997). Contrary views are expressed by Borg (1996), pp. 191-195; Montserrat (1997 a), p. 37.

10 Cf., *e.g.*, Parlasca (1980), p. 53, n. 618, pl. 147, 1 (Brooklyn Museum, inv. 41. 848, from er-Rubayat); *ibid.*, p. 54, n. 620, pl. 147, 3 (Brooklyn Museum, inv. 54. 197, from er-Rubayat).

11 Cf. Breccia (1926), pp. 64-65, pl. XXX, Fig. 1 (from Abukir); Parlasca (1977), p. 74, n. 422, pl. 105 (shroud from Antinoe, now Louvre P 215); Wrede (1977).

12 The social character of Roman portraiture has been repeatedly stressed by Zanker: cf., *e.g.* *Id.* (1981); *Id.* (1995).

13 The portraits from er-Rubayat represent an important 'anomaly' (see *infra*).

painters skillfully convey a sense of life - I would even speak of a sense of 'resemblance' -, which largely explains the appeal of these images for the modern observer. Nevertheless, a global analysis of the whole corpus reveals the amount of stereotypes built into these images. Through the consistent representation of different groups of personas, in different age groups, these portraits do convey social norms and stereotypes: a function, it is important to note, that painted portraits from Egypt share with sculpted portraits in the whole Roman world.¹⁴

Among the subjects the portraits represent we find a very large number of children and young people. This circumstance is not at all common in the rest of the empire, where portraits featuring young people mainly occur in the case of princes of both genders, and members of families of the highest rank.¹⁵ In this case, too, I would suggest that the figurative system informing the painted portraits in Roman-period Egypt points to a primarily funerary destination. Indeed, I find it hard to understand how the same object (a portrait painted using the same technique and displaying the same figurative language) could play such different roles: a funerary one in case of children; a 'domestic' one in case of adults.

Observing Fayoum portraits of young males, D. Montserrat has identified two different age groups, stressing the social significance of the portraits: adolescent young males can be represented with a lock of hair, alluding to the *mallokeurion* or the cutting of a lock of hair, the 'rite de passage' that will mark their 'social birth', whereas young, sexually ripe males are represented with thin moustaches.¹⁶ Among examples of this kind of portrait,¹⁷ we can recall the mummy of Artemidoros, whose age of death has been fixed between his 19th and 21st birthdays,¹⁸ or the Herakleides mummy in the Getty Museum, whose age at death has also been estimated at around 20 years.¹⁹ I regard these data as an important confirmation that, at least to some extent, the 'young' look of the deceased actually corresponds to his or her age at death and should not be interpreted as an idealized representation.²⁰

In the case of females, we can distinguish between 'infants' and 'girls'. Female children are usually recognizable by their jewelry, as in the case of a portrait in Berlin,²¹ but we lack the distinction into two age groups observed for young males, and what we might call 'sexually ripe girls' (in the sense proposed by Montserrat for young males) are mostly characterized as such only by jewels and dress in fancy, costly colors. So, the

14 Cf. *supra*, note 12.

15 Examples from the middle imperial period can be found, e.g. in the 'imperial gallery' of the Villa of Chiragan, now in the Museum of Toulouse (Cazes (1999), p. 122, inv. 30162, 140-142, inv. 30163, 30169), or in the *nymphaeum* built by Herodes Atticus in Olympia: Bol (1984); cf. also Fittschen (1999).

16 Legras (1993); Montserrat (1993); *Id.* (1996), pp. 51-53.

17 About fifty are known, according to Montserrat (1996), p. 52.

18 Parlasca (1969), p. 71, n. 162, pl. 39, 1 (British Museum EA 21810); Montserrat (1996), p. 52 (with bibliography).

19 Corcoran, Svoboda (2011) (non vidi).

20 Elsner (1998), pp. 115-117, envisages the possibility that the youthful look is a choice, the way 'their mourners chose to remember them though they perished in old age', whereas Filer (1997) offers evidence that 'in most cases the age of an individual as indicated by an accompanying portrait was confirmed'. The head covered by the portrait of a young male from Hawara (Parlasca (1969), p. 80, n. 198, pl. 48, 4 now London, British Museum EA 74704), has revealed an age of death at around 20 years (Borg (2009), p. 307, VI. 11). The age of the elderly man painted in the portrait found by Fl. Petrie at Hawara (Parlasca (1969), pp. 67-68, n. 148, pl. 35, 3, British Museum EA 74708), has been fixed at around 60 years: Borg (2009), p. 305, VI. 6.

21 Parlasca (1969), pp. 26-27, n. 5, pl. 2, 1.

'social personae' the portraits represent mirror the different social roles of males and females. While males are represented so as to stress age groups and their different social position, the lack of a corresponding social distinction for females is expressed by their less specific representation.²² 'Brides' and mothers, grown-up females who have accomplished their role and social function through marriage and childbearing, are instead clearly recognizable.²³

Although no precise identification seems to be possible for portraits featuring persons in military habit, these stand out for general artistic quality and consistent iconographical features. Men are all around the same age, their hair and beard are styled according to the *Zeitgesicht* (period face) principle, the white *tunica* contrasting with the dark *paludamentum* on one shoulder, and they often wear a sword-belt.²⁴

Another group of portraits, featuring young men with bare torsos, does not appear easy to understand, although they have often been identified as young athletes, and connected with the meaning of athleticism as 'an important part of civic identity in Egypt'.²⁵

Through archaeological analysis, we can show that the portraits do not reproduce the physiognomy of a specific individual, but rather represent 'social types' (male and female children, young males in different age groups, young girls, 'brides and mothers'). These types can be reconstructed by analyzing the system of the figurative language used to represent them in Roman-period Egypt. My contention is that the life-likeness exhibited by these portraits should actually be regarded as the result of able craftsmanship. Indeed, the stereotypy of this language becomes very clear when we compare portraits that 'look similar', even though they are clearly works by different painters.²⁶ Thus, the objections raised by scholars maintaining that the life-likeness of the portraits should be regarded as proof that they were painted during the deceased's lifetime for a primary domestic function can be refuted.

The life-likeness of the Fayoum portraits should therefore be regarded as an intended goal, the result of high skill on the part of the painters, who are able to grant these images an 'aura of life'. This is especially evident in the portraits' intense gaze. For example, in a well-known portrait from Hawara, now in London, the peculiar quality of the gaze is obtained by careful distortion in the rendering of the eyes.²⁷

22 Bagnall (1997) stresses that the different linguistic roots of most of the names underscore the different social positions of males and females, and differences in 'declining ethnicity' between the public sphere of the male component and the domestic sphere of the female component.

23 Cf., e.g., the famous 'Aline' in Berlin, Bodemuseum inv. 11411: Parlasca (1969), p. 25, n. 1, pl. I, 1; Borg (1996), p. 184, said to have been found together with the child portrait, *supra* note 21 (Borg (1996), p. 184, n. 9).

24 Borg (1996), pp. 156-159. See also the later shroud from Thebes, now in Luxor, Museum of Ancient Egyptian Art, J. 194/Q. 1512: Parlasca, Frenz (2003), n. 763 pl. 171, 1; Riggs (2005), pp. 222-232; 293-294, n. 117, pl. 12.

25 Monsterrat (1996), p. 53; Borg (1996), p. 159.

26 Borg (1969), pp. 97-100. Cf., e.g., Parlasca (1969), pp. 25-26, n. 2, pl. I, 2 (Cairo, CG 33268) and *ibid.*, p. 26, n. 4, pl. I, 4 (Berlin, Bodemuseum, inv. 17073). *Id.* (1969) p. 59, n. 119, pl. 29, 1 (Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung, P. Vindob. G 808), and *Id.* (1980), p. 32, n. 536, pl. 130, 1 (Cairo CG 33246; Borg (1969), p. 99). Parlasca (1969), pp. 29-30, n. 15, pl. 4, 3 (Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 31161. 16, da er-Rubayat), and *ibid.*, p. 85, n. 218, pl. 54, 2 (British Museum, EA 64706, da Hawara). Parlasca (1980), p. 31, n. 531, pl. 129, 1 (Philadelphia, University Museum, inv. E 462, from Hawara), and *ibid.*, p. 31, n. 533, pl. 129, 3 (Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. 1928. 42, from er-Rubayat). Borg (1996), pp. 93-97, lists portraits to be referred to the same 'Werkstatt' or the same painter.

27 Parlasca (1969), p. 29, n. 13, pl. 4, 1 (British Museum, EA 74716).

“Formal” portraits?

If we consider the evidence Fayoum portraits present, we will observe a prevalence of certain groups of individuals (children and young people of both genders, of different age groups, young ‘brides’, soldiers...). Ian Morris coined the concept of ‘formal burial’ to describe selective funerary customs in Attica, where ‘from c. 1050... to the late sixth century’ burials such as to leave traces in the archeological record were reserved only to certain social groups.²⁸ Paraphrasing this concept, we could characterize the Fayoum portraits as ‘formal portraits’, where foremost among the portrayed are young people whose untimely death is stressed, emphasizing the loss of the family or the social group.²⁹ Although a different interpretation cannot be ruled out, as maintained by scholars who regard the youthfulness of portrayed people as an idealized portrait³⁰ (or not a realistic one, anyway), the high number of portrayed children forces the interpreter to envisage also other, different possibilities. Through specific signs I have described above, the portraits stress the social condition of the dead, their families and their social groups. We can infer that, as in other periods, here funerary rituals act as occasions of displaying and stressing social as well as family bonds.³¹

A ‘declining’ identity? An identity ‘under construction’? An archaeological perspective

In their emphasis on signs of social status, the Fayoum images might even reveal an active role, comparable with other actions aimed at stressing and promoting the role and social position of specific personae or social figures in the Roman Empire. The consistency of the repertoire they exhibit invites a comparison with freedman funerary reliefs of first-century-BCE Rome, whose figurative language is centered on the newly acquired social status represented through family bonds: marriage and the legitimate couple, with veiled heads and wearing togas, the children and their free status, expressed especially through the image of the son as a soldier.³²

What remains hard to define from an archaeological perspective is the way the portraits might act in defining identities: do they emphasize and reinforce identities that especially need to be emphasized and reinforced (as in the case of ‘declining’ identities)?; or – like the freedmen reliefs from Rome - are they aimed at ‘promoting’ identities?

This point might be of special interest here, in the context of Egypt in the Roman empire. Here written sources tell us of a rigid division of the population of the country into three different groups.³³ If we compare these assertions with the statements made by these portraits, for example those displaying military images referred to above,³⁴ we could follow Corcoran in her highlighting of ‘a shift toward local recruitment of soldiers, from the middle of the II c. veterans settling in Egypt tended more and more to be men from the country towns making their way through enlistment and military service into the world of Roman privilege...

²⁸ Morris (1987), pp. 97-109.

²⁹ On premature death, cf. Riggs (2005), p. 131; Borg (2009), p. 68.

³⁰ Cf. *supra*, note 20.

³¹ Bussi (2008), pp. 129-130.

³² Kockel (1993).

³³ Sartre (1991), pp. 423-430; Legras (2004), pp. 66-75.

³⁴ See p. 73.

the date for the *floruit* of the soldier portraits corresponds precisely to the induction of Hellenized Egyptians into the military service during the Hadrianic period', and in her conclusion that 'rather than being paintings of Roman soldiers, the soldier portraits could well have been commissioned by the native officer class'.³⁵ In the light of these considerations, it will be clear how these images could possess an active role in the process of 'negotiating identities'.³⁶

As in other fields in the study of ancient societies, here archaeology might offer clues shedding a different light on situations defined by law and administrative rules. In many provincial areas of the Roman Empire, privileges granted to persons or groups of persons can overcome and bypass what is defined by law. As regards Egypt, we could wonder if the strict division of people into three classes known from written sources did not allow exceptions, promoting social status as a personal privilege granted by the imperial administration.

Given the use Roman society makes of the Greek figurative language, it seems difficult to me to accept the idea of scholars regarding the way deceased people are often dressed, wearing the *himation* instead of the toga, as a way of expressing their 'opposition' to being portrayed as Roman citizens.³⁷ If the way special groups of Greek people are represented in the imperial period stresses their pertaining to the cultural world of Greek *paideia*,³⁸ I find it difficult to use this point as evidence that these portraits express 'opposition' against an 'imperialistic' power, as we might consider it today.

A good point can be made here from the observation of the famous wooden aedicule in the Cairo museum: the young male head is inscribed in a *clipeus*; above the head, in the roof of the structure, is painted an *alabastron* (oil bottle) between two pair of strigils; a papyrus roll and wooden tablets flank the head of the young male (Fig.1). This is certainly a way of referring to Greek *paideia* and to being '*apo gymnasiou*' with the particular meaning this can have in the society of Roman Egypt.³⁹ But we should not forget that in first-century-BCE to first-century-CE houses from Roman Italy, the same signs express not an opposition to 'being Roman' or acting as one, but an adherence to a Greek lifestyle as a sign of luxury.⁴⁰ In fact, as a long tradition of study has by now made clear, the use the society of Roman period makes of Greek figurative language often makes a distinction between 'what is Greek' and 'what is Roman' nonsensical.

The fact that so many of the Fayoum portraits come from the Egyptian *chora* should be regarded as a strong indication of the social identity of the portrayed individuals. As for the painters themselves, an important clue regarding their culture (as well as how the paintings were produced) are the solicitations for the

35 Corcoran (1995), p. 70.

36 Riggs (2002), p. 99.

37 Riggs (2002), p. 98; *Ead.* (2005), pp. 160-165; cf. also Borg (1996), pp. 161-167; *contra* Bussi (2008), p. 119, stresses the frequency of painted *clavi*.

38 Cf. the *kosmetes* portraits from Athenian *gymnasia*: Krumeich (2004).

39 Cairo CG 33269. The objects shown in the painting clearly indicate that, *pace* Parlasca, the head is male: Parlasca (1969), p. 31, n. 19, pl. 5, 2; Corcoran (1995), pp. 75-76 (with the review of Monserrat (1997 b); Borg (1996), pp. 181-182; Török (2005), p. 54, note 22; Bussi (2008) p. 117. As Montserrat (1997 c) has demonstrated, this is also the meaning (*paideia* as a sign of social identity) of the inscription *grammatike* on the Hermione portrait from Hawara, now in Cambridge, Girton College, Parlasca (1969), p. 25, n. 3, pl. I, 3.

40 Cf., *e.g.*, Ling, Ling (2005), pp. 56-63, pl. 55 (Pompeii, House of the Menader, I 10, 4: mosaic with strigils and alabastron). This is also the meaning of the many paintings with *instrumenta scriptoria* from Pompeii: cf. Cavallo (1989), Figs. 3-14.

painter to complete the job written in Greek on an unfinished portrait from Tebtunis.⁴¹

The painted portraits attest to different traditions of craftsmanship in Roman Egypt, different ways of 'looking at' and representing people. If we consider the so called 'Golden Girl' in Cairo,⁴² we will notice a face characterized by big eyes, far from the language usually displayed in the 'classic' Fayoum portraits, more in line with an 'international' tradition shaped by the Greek naturalism inherited by Roman art (Fig. 2). The influence of strong figurative traditions like the Egyptian one, with its long, 'autonomous' history, can misleadingly result in expressive forms appearing as an 'announcement of late antiquity'.⁴³

The portraits from er-Rubayat

Let us now look at some evidence '*a contrario*' in the corpus of the painted portraits from Roman Egypt (and actually not only in these). I am referring to a group of portraits with similar characteristics, mostly tempera painted on sycamore boards, said to have been found at Rubayat.⁴⁴ Notwithstanding the similarity of the medium and technique with other portraits, they are easily distinguishable from the rest; indeed, they are so alike that they are probably all by the same painter.⁴⁵ Their consistency from one specimen to the other seems to indicate that their peculiar characteristics are not due to a lack of skill by the painter; rather, they reflect a particular communicative intent. The faces lack any hint of idealization, age signs are especially stressed (although I do not think that the white streaks sometimes found in the hair are actually meant to depict salt-and-pepper hair; I regard them instead as a means to represent and stylize curls),⁴⁶ jewellery and costly dresses are often absent, and the necks, trapezoidal in shape, appear 'inserted' above the tunic. These portraits actually display a completely different artistic language, and, accordingly, a completely different communicative intent. Are they intended to represent completely different themes, on behalf of a different social group? (Fig. 3).

To sum up, images do not 'translate reality', but set forth a 'constructed reality', a product of the ideology and social constraints of their 'visual audience' of buyers, craftsmen and viewers, each of them playing a different role in this construction.

41 Parlasca (1977), n. 432.

42 CG 33216, Parlasca (1969), pp. 48-49, n. 83, tav. 20, 2 (from Hawara); Corcoran (1995), pp. 171-180.

43 The results of a 'longue durée' analysis applied to the way different artistic traditions are reflected in imperial portraiture can be found in Zanker (1983).

44 Cf. especially portraits Wien, Kunshistorisches Museum, inv. ASX300: Parlasca (1980), p. 23, n. 499, pl. 121, 3, Zurich University, inv. 3801: Parlasca (1980), pp. 27-28, n. 518, tab. 126, 2; British Museum P87: Parlasca (1980), p. 27, n. 517, tab. 126, 1; St. Louis, City Art Museum, inv. 128:51: Parlasca (1980), p. 28, n. 520, tab. 126, 4; Moscow, Pushkin Museum, inv. 4297/1 1a 5783: Parlasca (1980), p. 28, n. 519, tab. 126, 3. Only for portraits Edinburgh 1902. 70, (Parlasca (1980) p. 53, n. 619, pl. 147, 2) and Dublin 1902. 4 (Parlasca (1980) p. 54, n. 621, pl. 147, 4) can provenance from er-Rubayat be actually demonstrated: Bierbrier (1997 b) pp. 16-17, pl. 19, 1-2.

45 Borg (1996), p. 108, n. 47.

46 Note the regular way the white strokes in the hair are arranged, following individual curls, in the portraits *supra*, n. 44 Cf. also Parlasca (1980), p. 24, n. 500, pl. 121, 4. That the strokes should be understood as a way of stylizing hair seems clear given the young look of the subject of portrait Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, inv. 1939.111 Parlasca (1980), p. 27, n. 516, pl. 125, 4); *contra* Borg (1996), p. 57.

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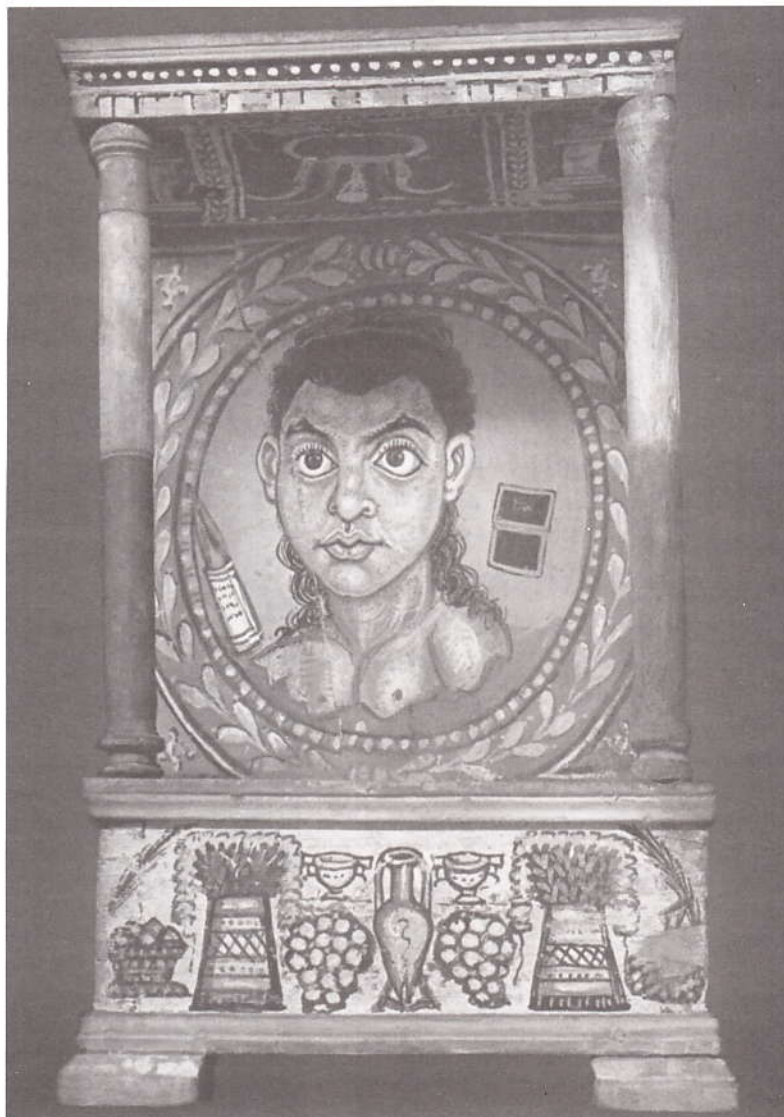


Fig. 1. Cairo Museum, CG 33269: wooden aedicula (after Bianchi Bandinelli 1970).



Fig. 2. Cairo Museum, CG CG 33216 (after Borg 1996).

Fig. 3. Zurich, Archaeological Collection of the University, inv. 3801 (after Borg 1996).

