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A FAIYUM PORTRAIT RECONSIDERED

LEENA PIETILÄ-CASTRÉN

In Finland there are altogether three Faiyum portraits, which have ended up in the North as the result of intentional purchasing at the end of the nineteenth century or towards the middle of the twentieth. At present one of the portraits has been lost from the archives and its whereabouts are unknown, a second is not otherwise available. The third and oldest purchase is the only one around, belonging to the Antell Collection of the National Museum.¹ All three were published in an article in 1990.²

The first note on the only portrait currently at our disposal was made in 1965 in a ladies' magazine³ and it was published scientifically in 1969 by Klaus Parlasca in his profound *Ritratti di mummie*.⁴ A note was written about it in an exhibition catalogue of 1993,⁵ and, for the moment, the last comment on it was made in 1996 by B. Borg, who connected the Antell portrait with a workshop which had also produced three ladies' portraits.⁶ In these publications the dating of the Antell portrait varies from the Flavian era (69–96) to the whole second century AD.

In the mid 1990s two serious works on Faiyum portraits, in addition to the one written by Borg, were published.⁷ The three explore different aspects

¹ KM 5981:93. See p. 114.

² J. Kuurne, Three Faiyum Portraits (in Finnish), Suomen Museo 97 (1990) 77–87.

³ T. Elo, The Treasures Hidden from the Eyes (in Finnish), Hopeapeili 3, 1965, 5.

⁴ K. Parlasca, *Ritratti di mummie*. Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano, ser. B, vol. 1, Palermo, 75, no 176, tavola 42,5.

⁵ This is the only one of the three portraits which was displayed in the exhibition 'Ancient Egypt – A Moment of Eternity' in the Tampere Art Museum in 1993–1994. In the catalogue p. 201, nr. 341.

⁶ B. Borg, Mumienporträts. Chronologie und kultureller Kontext, Mainz 1996, 99.

⁷ L. H. Corcoran, Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt, Chicago 1995. E. Doxiadis, The

of the subject in general: L. H. Corcoran underlines the Egyptian features of the portraits and their belonging to a pharaonic tradition. E. Doxiadis' view is hellenocentric, as, in part, is that of B. Borg, who points out that the portraits' clothing fashions are those prevailing in Rome.⁸ With so much new scholarly work at hand, it seems worthwhile reconsidering once again the portrait in the Antell Collection in order to see if the dating can be set in a more precise chronological framework and if any new details of the portrait's history can be deduced.

The chronology of the Faiyum portraits as a whole has been widely discussed since the discovery of the first portraits in 1887 in the necropolis, er-Rubayat, of the city of Philadelphia in the western Nile valley. It suffices here to state the now generally accepted guide to the portraits' dating from the Julio-Claudian period to the middle of the third century. It is a notorious fact that more information can be deduced from the ladies' portraits with their artificial hairdresses, jewellery and wardrobe. The variation for men in this sense is much slighter. The example from the Antell Collection is even more difficult, being a portrait without soldierly or priestly attributes, or any other objects, such as vase, flower or corn, held in the hand.

According to the most detailed analysis of 1990, the subject is a young beardless man with straight black hair, wearing a white tunic with pinkish *clavus* on the right shoulder. The author of the article dates the portrait to the Trajanic era or early period. As the criteria he uses the high artistic level of the portrait, the technique, encaustic, typical of the early portraits, and the beardlessness, which was fashionable before the Hadrianic period (117–138).⁹

The first two criteria are unsustainable, as many of the later Faiyum portraits are of good artistic quality. The difference in the artistic level seems to be more a question of a painter being a real artist and seasoned portrait painter, rather than a mere artisan. As to the technique, the encaustic was in

Mysterious Fayum Portraits. Faces from Ancient Egypt, New York 1995.

⁸ All the three books are commented on by R. S. Bianchi, *The Mummy as Medium*, *Archaeology* 6 (1995) 62–63. About Doxiadis' is written by P. Goula (= A. P.) in *Hellas kultur* 1 (2000) 12–19. A fourth book on the subject was published little later by S. Walker and M. Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces, Mummy portraits from Roman Egypt*, London 1997. It does not, however, offer new ideas on our portrait in the Antell Collection.

⁹ Kuurne, 78, 82–83. In the photo text of the article, p. 77, Fig. 1, the dating is given as the end of the first century or the beginning of the second.

use for all the period of production with seemingly minor experiments in tempera.¹⁰ To the other points I come in my present paper.

Provenience. Not much is known about the origins of the Antell portrait. It came to Finland in 1897 as part of a set of objects bought for the Antell Commission and the future National Museum of Finland from F. R. Martin, the amanuensis of the National Museum in Stockholm.¹¹ The date of purchase was winter 1895–1896 and the location is given as "from the antique dealers somewhere between Cairo and Luxor"¹² without further specification. Parlasca takes this to mean Faiyum.¹³

Description and analysis. The wooden¹⁴ plaque measures 33.3 x 20 cm, the thickness is 1–2 mm. It has seven vertical cracks, five of which run the length of the plaque. The upper part is diagonally cut, a fragment is broken off the upper right leaving this side of the head half incomplete. At the bottom there is an unpainted strip including the corners, bearing traces of mastic and the bandages.

The figure represents a grave young man with no traces of a beard – a feature indicating his age or a current fashion. In accordance with most of the Faiyum portraits the eye area is rendered very dark. In this case thick purple lines are drawn on the upper eyelid and under the eyes, and there is also a relatively large brown shading under the eyes. The subject's slight sideways and upwards glance is definitely directed away from the viewer, and it is perhaps a feature which might help us to define more precisely the chronology.¹⁵ In the public portraiture of Septimius Severus, large, uplifted

¹⁰ Doxiadis, 93. Borg, 12–15.

¹¹ T. Talvio, H. F. Antell and the Antell-Commission (in Finnish), Vammala 1993, 34.

¹² F. R. Martin, Föremål af koppar och brons från Cypern och Egypten, samlade år 1896, Kongl. Vitterhets Historie och Antiquitets Akademiens Månadsblad, Stockholm 1897, 112. Kuurne, 79.

¹³ Parlasca, 75.

¹⁴ No analysis has been made of the timber species. The plaques were usually of cypress, sycamore, cedar, pine, lime or fig. Some of them were imports, some grew locally in the Faiyum area where the most important necropoleis producing the portraits were situated, some species grew in other parts of Egypt; Borg, 16.

¹⁵ This has not been used much as a chronological criterion when dating the Faiyum portraits.

eyes appear after 200. More intimately, this dreamy and detached expression has been described as a mood characteristic to the Antonine period.¹⁶

The hair is not straight, it is curly and cut short in a way that a strongly unyielding hair can only be cut. There are even some short corkscrew locks falling from the hairline. Short hair was fashionable, in general, in the Julio-Claudian period and then again in the third century, but was never completely absent during the intervening period. Curly hair was fashionable from Hadrian all through the Antonine period to the early Severan dynasty,¹⁷ although in this case it is rather an ethnic feature than a fashion. Above the head there are two darker lines, to which no attention has been paid in the former analyses, perhaps due to the difficulty in interpreting them. The area above the head being otherwise without any traces of paint suggests that originally something must have been there. To my mind, the dark lines could be taken either as traces of the bandages, or of a diadem, or perhaps of an arched frame of gilt stucco, peculiar to Hawara, the necropolis of Arsinoe.¹⁸ The top of the head, as it is, seems to be too low.

The face is full of personal features, creating the impression of a very individual portrait. It is a classical oval, slightly turned to the left. It is characterized by large eyes set far apart,¹⁹ an aquiline nose and a small mouth with a delicately rendered Cupid's bow. The clothes, a white tunic, with rose coloured traces of the originally purple *clavus*, is completed with a white himation, the drapery of which can be surmised by the slight vertical shadows. In accordance with many other male Faiyum portraits the neckline is angular due to the non-visible right arm, draped in the himation and drawing the tunic down by its weight.²⁰ Furthermore, the painting of the neck has clearly been executed with a brush and the shading of the skin is

¹⁶ R. Bianchi Bandinelli, Roma. Fine dell'arte antica. L'arte dell'impero romano da Settimo Severo a Teodosio I, Milano 1970, 23–29. D.E.E. Kleiner, Roman Sculpture, New Haven – London 1992, 320, 363.

¹⁷ Borg, 68.

¹⁸ Doxiadis, 72, fig. 61.

¹⁹ I find it difficult to connect the Antell portrait with the two female portraits from Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Antikensammlung, Inv. 31161/26 and 27, as productions of the same workshop, Borg, 99. Neither the eyes nor eyebrows or eyelids are similar.

²⁰ This phenomenon is known from many full length sculptures and is obvious in most of the male Faiyum portraits.

produced by alternating horizontal brown and white lines. This feature is seen in some portraits from Hawara.²¹

Proposal for dating and provenience. Comparing the Antell portrait with Roman imperial portraiture and taking for granted a certain amount of willingness to follow the official fashions of the capital, as a relic of the Hellenistic koine, even in the distant cities along the Nile, I would like to date the Antell portrait to the Antonine period (138–193). The beard, one of the characteristics of the period, is missing due to the youthfulness of the person depicted. We know that the Antell portrait was bought in the winter 1895–6 from dealers somewhere between Cairo and Luxor. In 1895 the French amateur enthusiast Emile-Etienne Guimet visited Antinoopolis and began a preliminary survey in the area in March 1896 with his compatriot and Egyptologist Albert-Jean Gayet. During the following years a large number of mummy portraits were discovered.²² In the winter of 1895–6 it was this area of the city of Antinoopolis, founded after 130 in the memory of Antinoos, Hadrian's favourite, that in this way came to the attention of those interested in antiques, the dilettanti, scholars and, inevitably, the clandestine excavators. It would be tempting to think that the antique dealers from whom the Antell portrait was bought and who operated "somewhere between Cairo and Luxor" had premature investigations in Antinoopolis for obtaining merchandise.²³ On the other hand, some features in the Antell portrait, such as the low top of the head and the unpainted area (excepting the two dark lines) above it, could point to an arched frame, typical of some portraits from Hawara and Arsinoe, where excavations were performed since the 1880s.*

Finnish Institute at Athens

²¹ E.g. a male from the Antonine period, (London, British Museum, Egyptian Antiquities, inv. 74704; the photo e.g. Doxiadis p. 72 and p. 203, fig. 61) and another male from the second century (Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London, inv. 19612; the photo e.g. Doxiadis p. 97 and p. 207, fig. 40).

²² Doxiadis, 150.

²³ From the necropolis of Antinoopolis originates an Antonine portrait depicting a young man, now in Berlin (Berlin, Aegyptisches museum, Inv. 17900 the photo e.g. in Doxiadis, p. 115 and p. 213, fig. 87) whose features with the oval face, aquiline nose, small delicate mouth and detached eyes are very much akin to the Antell portrait. One could perhaps discern some family resemblance between the two portraits.

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**KM 5981:93, f. 53313. El Faiyum, Egypt.
(By courtesy of the National Board of Antiquities and Historical Monuments)**