

**AN EGYPTIANIZING RELIEF
FROM MALTA**

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Introduction

From the very first announcement of the theme of this congress it was evident that the “Egyptianizing” phenomenon would be one of the most recurring topics in the diverse contributions, especially those concerned with cultural aspects, such as art and religion, outside Egypt itself. It would be presumptuous of me, therefore, and futile, even to try to define the phenomenon. At this stage I would only wish to emphasize the distinction between a) the more ancient version of the “Egyptianizing” movement, which was diffused throughout the central and western Mediterranean by the Phoenicians, who not only plagiarized indiscriminately Egyptian art and iconography for their commercial purposes, but made extensive use of Egyptian religious form and content to give some sort of shape to their own religion; and b) the later Hellenistic version, which spread throughout the Graeco-Roman world as a result of the incorporation of Egypt, with its rich cultural and artistic baggage, within the Hellenistic world after the conquest of Alexander.

The first movement started practically with the onset of the Iron Age which in the Near East coincided with the arrival on the scene of the Sea Peoples, one of the consequences of which was the emergence of the Phoenicians as a geopolitical reality. The Phoenicians foraged their way through the immense artistic and iconographic heritage of this ancient civilization and made it their own, often changing radically, if not completely, its original meaning. This Egyptianizing movement is also attested in Malta. It was introduced there by the Phoenicians who started their colonization of the islands towards the end of the 8th century and retained their presence in them till the second Punic war, Carthage having in the meantime shifted their political centre of gravity towards her. The physical products of this cultural movement in the Maltese islands have been catalogued and studied in Hölbl’s corpus of *Aegyptiaca* (1989).

The second, or Hellenistic, Egyptianizing movement saw the diffusion, first of Egyptian artistic iconography, and later also of religious cults, throughout the Graeco-Roman world in the process of the formation of that complex, but unified, cultural and artistic koiné that characterizes the Hellenistic phenomenon. This immensely rich cultural baggage was taken over, practically wholly, by the Roman empire. With the incorporation of Egypt within the Roman commonwealth, the last of the Hellenistic kingdoms to do so, the Egyptianizing movement in the Roman world intensified even further as an artistic fashion, and introduced the diffusion of Egyptian religious cults in all parts of the Empire. In spite of Augustus’ initial opposition to Egyptian cults in Rome, temples dedicated to Isis and Serapis proliferated, leading to the abrogation of his prohibiting edict. Egyptian cults were thus practised at all social levels (Lambrechts 1956, pp. 2, 34).

This second movement did not leave the Maltese islands untouched and Hölbl’s corpus of *Aegyptiaca* includes a number of Egyptian items of this period (Hölbl 1989, pp. 160-167). The purpose of this paper is to examine a relief fragment which is classifiable under this second Egyptianizing movement, and to investigate what light it

sheds on the "Egyptian presence" in Malta, whether it was the product of a purely artistic fashion, the "Egyptomania" that invaded Rome and Italy in the first century A.D., or a manifestation of a religious worship.

Description

We have in front of us a thin slab of white marble¹, 55 cm high, 42 cm wide and 15.5 cm thick, with the front face carved in relief (Fig. 1a). The composition shows, in strictly paratactic arrangement, an upright serpent and a stylized rearing cobra flanking a frontal rosette which stems from a stylized support. The whole effect is very formal and frontal: all three iconographic elements are straight upright and face rigidly the spectator.

The surviving slab seems to have been the extreme left part of a longer frieze since the left face² is tooled to a flat, plain surface which was held fast to another flat body by means of two dowels, one on the top face and one half way down the back (Fig. 1b)³. The narrow, plain border along the left edge further confirms this impression. The top and bottom surfaces⁴ are also pretty flat and plain, and the figurative elements fit precisely within the present height (Fig. 1d, e). On the other hand, the right side presents various breakages, the most serious one depriving the relief of a sizeable section of the head of the stylized cobra (Fig. 1c)⁵. This, in turn, suggests that the slab itself was longer and was broken at this end. As the side of the projecting lower part of the cobra is smooth, it appears to be the original surface and the relief to the right of it was at a considerably lower level, thus presenting a more vulnerable line for a break⁶.

The material of the slab, the overall style of the relief and the technique of its execution are all typical of Hellenistic and Roman art. Its neat, sober style suggests a date in the high Empire. I am not sure that the bold use of the running in defining the different parts of the rosette may justify a more accurate date, but if a more precise dating was called for I would be inclined to place the relief in the age of the Flavian emperors or during the reign of Trajan (A.D. 69-117)⁷.

¹ White, very fine-grained marble with frequent greyish-blue veins and a honey-coloured patina.

² The left face is worked smooth practically all over except for a small rectangular area at the inner top corner which has the same rough surface as the adjoining back surface. The face is also at a slight angle to the front and back sides. One can also note the narrower end of the two dowel holes. The central dowel is here c. 7 cm long. A largish chip affects the area to the right of it and the narrow border on the front face.

³ The use of dowels to bond stone blocks together is not commonly documented for ancient Maltese architecture. One such dowel hole, still containing the lead sheathing and powdered remains of a wooden cramp, was recorded in 1960 from the round tower at Ta' Gawhar (*M.A.R.* 1960, 7). An excellent, intact specimen of a lead dowel bonding two large blocks together survived for many centuries at the Tas-Silg sanctuary site, until it was vandalized a few years ago.

⁴ The top face is affected by the large break that has deprived the relief of its top right corner, and by a smaller and shallower chip at the inner left corner. In front of it is a horizontal dove-tail dowel with mortar inside it. The surface is smooth, except at the breaks, and has been worked down to a smoother surface on a 3.5 cm wide border along the front edge. This suggests that this border might have been left exposed. A small circular hole right above the left snake suggests the addition of another element, possibly of a different material. The bottom face is tooled to a slightly rougher surface still bearing the chisel marks. Its maximum width is 28.5 cm and the thickness varies between 10.4 and 11.5 cm. A triangular break on the rear edge containing mortar is probably modern. A rectangular hole beneath the cobra could be ancient but its purpose is not clear.

⁵ The right face is remarkably rough and chipped except for a small area behind the projecting curve of the lower part of the cobra which appears to be tooled down to a relatively smoother surface following the contour of the reptile. The large break affecting the upper third of this side is covered with mortar.

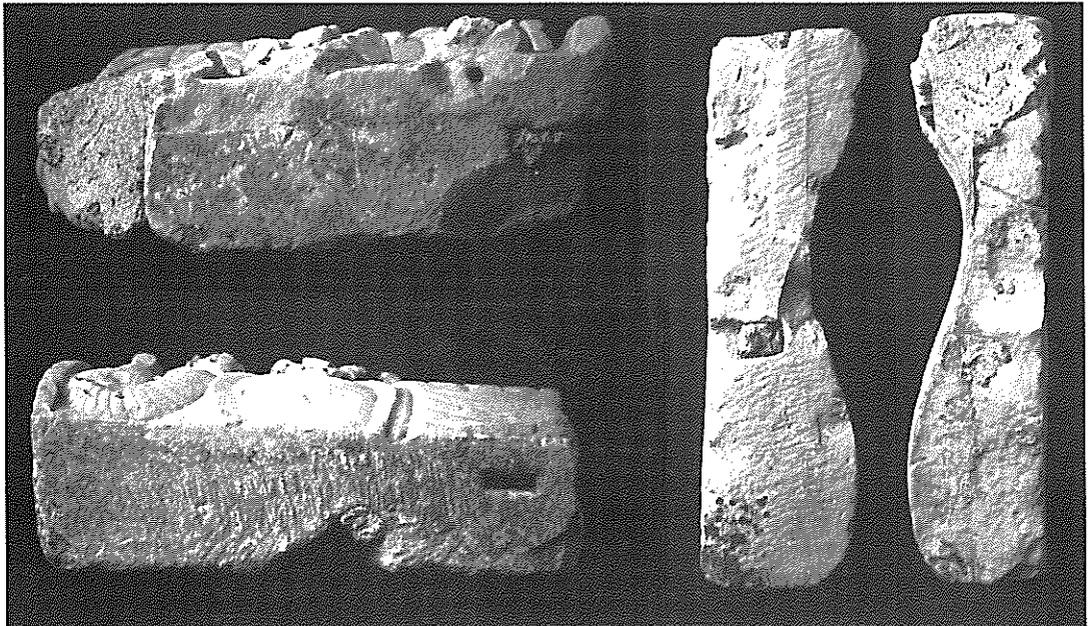
⁶ The back appears almost rectangular in shape (max. h. 55 cm; max. w. 42 cm), except for the curvilinear break at the upper left corner and a series of largish chips along the rest of the left side. A hole with a rectangular section half way down the right edge must have served as a dowel. The surface is plain but shows marks left by largish detached flakes where the smooth surface seems unworked. The rest of the surface is covered by the marks of a wide-pointed chisel.

⁷ For comparison see the architectural marble decoration of Trajan's Forum in Rome.

FIG. 1 – Egyptianizing relief in private collection, Malta
a - Front face
b - Top face
c - Bottom face
d - Left side
e - Right side



a



b

c

d

e

Iconography

The iconography is unmistakably Egyptianizing⁸. The most obvious and characteristic figure is the rearing cobra on the right which is unmistakably a frontal *uraeus* with broad shield, a subject that occurs very frequently in Egyptian iconography, even in religious architecture, exactly in this position, from as early as the third millennium. A building that is decorated with a long frieze of frontal *uraei* is the Southern Tomb close to the stepped pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara (Lange-Hirmer 1957, p. 295, pl.12). Closer to the date of the relief itself, parallels for it are found in both the Hellenistic world, especially in those centres that were influenced by Egyptian artists, and in Hellenistic Egypt itself, particularly Alexandria.

Egyptianizing architecture and architectural decoration seem to have been very much in vogue in the Roman world, not only in Italy, but even more so in North Africa. In Italy, Egyptianizing architecture is normally associated with religious sanctuaries dedicated to Egyptian divinities, such as the temples of Isis in Rome (Roulet 1972, pp. 23-39) and those at Pompei (Tran Tam Tinh 1964) and Benevento (Müller 1969). They seem to have been popular also in regions with a strong Punic legacy. An impressive number of temples dedicated to Isis or Serapis, or to both, are recorded to have been erected in various North African cities which, like Malta, had experienced a Punic presence or domination, e.g. Sabratha, Leptis Magna, Bulla Regia, Thamugadi, Lambaesis, and Carthage itself (Bullo 1994, p. 533).

Iconography: Individual items

The slim snake on the left is of the ordinary, cylindrically-shaped type. It stands upright supported on the coiled lower part of its body. The pointed tail is raised back up to reach half its height. The body is segmented horizontally on the front and scaly on the back.

What survives of the shape of its head strongly suggests that this snake was not an ordinary one, but carried a human head, possibly even wearing a beard and long hair. Such a hypothetical reconstruction brings immediately to mind the figure of Glykon, the human-headed snake whose cult was particularly popular in Paphlagonia from the second century A.D. (Potter 1896, p. 1615). A singular representation of the human-headed serpent Glykon, a free-standing one, comes from Costanza (Tomis) and is preserved in the city's Museum of Archaeology (Bianchi Bandinelli 1970, fig. 352). But, given the absence of any evidence of contact between Malta and this area on the Black Sea, and given the predominating Egyptian iconography of the Maltese relief, I would agree with Hölbl (personal communication) that this identification is unlikely and can be discarded.

The same type of snake, though not androcephalic, occurs on a stele from Alexandria where it is supposed to represent Serapis. It wears the Pharaonic crown of lower Egypt and is represented in profile, facing a cobra-type snake crowned by the solar disk between horns, said to represent Isis (Riad *et al.*, p. 99, fig. 18). Two similar snakes can also be seen flanking the doorway leading to rooms XII-XIV of the main decorated tomb in the Great Catacomb of the Kom el-Shukafa necropolis in the same city (Riad *et al.*, pp. 43-51; Adriani 1966, I, p. 178; II, pl. 99, figs. 332-4). Here the snakes are bearded and demonstrate their teeth. This type of crowned snake is thought to personify the *Agathodaimon* (the good genius).

⁸ I am most grateful to a number of colleagues who have generously helped me with their advice, particularly Dr Günther Hölbl for sharing his expert knowledge of the subject. I shall be referring to his suggestions at various points in the text.

The flower in the centre of the composition, on its own, is a very common element in Roman architectural decoration. It articulates itself as a small frontal rosette surrounded by a circle of leaf-shaped petals. From the point of view of carving technique, this is the part that stands out most for the ample and bold use of the drill: drilled holes separate the petals and drilled channels separate the inner rosette from the surrounding petals.

What is quite singular in this floral motif is the stylized support of its stem. This can be broken down into the following elements: a pear-shaped, rounded body flanked by two rising "petals" with their tips curved outwards. This is surmounted by a small sphere separated from it by a ring, on top of which is a stylized lotus flower⁹. These different elements have many parallels in Egyptian iconography, especially the lotus flower, but together they form quite a singular feature¹⁰.

I agree with my good friend Hölbl that we should see a stylized *atef*-crown in this motif. This special combination of the *atef*-crown brings to mind certain antefixes from Roman sanctuaries of, or connected with, Isis on which the *atef*-crown is flanked by *uraei* (Roulet 1972, pp. 55-56, figs. 27-31). Even greater similarity can be seen in the *atef*-crown carved on a still unpublished architectural relief from the Mausoleum of Augustus in Rome (De Vos 1980, frontispiece). Identical to the *atef*-crown in our relief is the one worn by a canopic figure carried by an Isiac priest represented in relief on one of three columns from the Isaeum Campense in Rome (Roulet 1972, p. 58, fig. 46). These parallels leave no doubt that the *atef*-crown on the Maltese relief is of the floral type, consisting of a bundle of papyri stalks tied together at the top, in combination with the simplified sun disk and lotus flower. However, the small disk below the lotus could be also interpreted as the top of the upper Egyptian crown typical of the other type of *atef*-crown, namely the one consisting of the upper Egyptian crown flanked by stylized ostrich feathers. Hölbl (personal communication) goes even further and interprets the rosette itself as an interpretation of the sun disk. A similar rosette, but without the drilled rendering, appears inside the coffering to the right of the *atef*-crown on the same relief from the Mausoleum of Augustus.

What remains unresolved is the meaning of the two notches at the bottom of the *atef*-crown. I have come across similar features, though much larger and more pronounced, on two fragmentary pink granite columns from Catania (Sfameni Gasparro 1973, pl. XVIII, 22-23). They seem to be hieroglyphs since a similar pair is engraved on one side of the Urbino obelisk.

The more common, I would even say stereotyped, element of Egyptian iconography is the frontal, rearing cobra, the *uraeus*, on the right. The cobra supports itself rigidly upright on the lower part of its body which is hidden behind the strictly frontal representation of its wider part. The very lower section of the visible body is marked by curvilinear horizontal segments. The rest of the body, the broad shield, is divided into three segments by semicircular plain bands the upper one of which articulates itself further in the shape of an inverted trefoil. A stylized vertical band separates the two sides of the body symmetrically. It is also rigidly segmented by horizontal bands. At the top it carries a stylized, broach-like feature.

As already remarked, the *uraeus* occurs very frequently in Egyptian iconography, both architectural and otherwise. For parallels I shall limit myself to comparisons from the Hellenistic-Roman architectural repertoire.

⁹ A very striking resemblance to this last combination of lotus on sphere is found on the limestone fragment of the so-called "Proto-Aeolic" frieze from Tas-Silg, dated to the 4th-3rd century B.C. (GOUDER 1991, p. 5) or the Hellenistic age (MOSCATI 1976-77, pp. 152-153).

¹⁰ Some foreign element seems to have been attached to it since a fragment of a copper-in-lead dowel is still embedded halfway up its height.

A pair of similar *uraei*, but less rigidly frontal and stylized are found flanking a solar disc and decorating the lintel of the doorway of a richly decorated Numidian "high shrine" (*Höhenheiligtum*) on Djebel Chemtou in Tunisia, dated to the late 2nd century B.C. (Rakob 1979, pp. 120-132, fig. 35). They show the same stylisation of the decorative pattern of the frontal broad shield, though not as stiffly as in the Maltese example. Examples of similar arrays of frontal *uraei* are numerous, including the cornice of the doorway of the same burial chamber in the Kom el-Shukafa catacomb referred to above (Adriani 1966, I, p. 178; II, pl. 99, figs. 332-334) and the *uraeus* frieze decorating an architrave on the 2nd century B.C. tower mausoleum at Sabratha, Libya (Di Vita 1968). A frieze from the Isaeum Campense in Rome, now in Berlin, displays a row of similar stylized *uraei* with similar, but not identical, division of patterns on the shield (Roulet 1972, fig. 49)

These iconographic parallels add further confirmation to our suggestion that the slab formed part of an architectural frieze, possibly repeating the same motifs, decorating some religious building.

Interpretation

I concur with Hölbl (personal communication) that the two snakes on the Maltese relief, as well as the scene in which they are set, have a very individual character and require a specific individual meaning. As we have seen from the cited Alexandrian iconographic parallels, the presence of two snakes, an *uraeus* with broad shield and a slim winding snake, normally denotes the representation of Isis, or Isis-Thermouthis, and Agathodaimon. If the Agathodaimon snake carries a human head, as ours seems to have done, then, at least in some cases, we are likely to have a combination of Agathodaimon with another god, for example, Serapis-Agathodaimon. A very instructive example of such a representation is found in the relief on the backside of the throne of Isis with Harpocrates from Carinola, in Campania, now in Berlin, Inv. 999 (Malaise 1972, p. 250, pl. 32)¹¹. Similarly, a fragmentary marble relief from the Drovetti collection, now in Turin (Egyptian Museum, Inv. Cat. 7149) shows Isis-Thermouthis and Serapis-Agathodaimon represented as cobra and serpent with their entwined tails supporting the chthonic symbols of Demeter (Valtz 1988, p. 237, fig. 330)¹². Thirdly, the *atef*-crown is a symbol of Osiris, from which, in this case, the new-born sun arises. The whole scene could, in such circumstances, be interpreted as a symbolic representation of Osiris between Isis-Thermouthis and Serapis Agathodaimon. A striking comparison, apart from the more naturalistic style and the material (limestone), is found in a relief from El Bahnasa, now in Leiden which, in a similar composition, shows Osiris (in the form of Osiris-Canopus) between Isis-Thermouthis (in the form of a female-headed cobra) and Serapis-Agathodaimon (in the form of a slim snake with a bearded head) (Hornbostel 1973, p. 475, fig. 310).

Provenance

The relief slab is now housed in the private residence of its present owner. It was bought in November 1985 from an auction sale held at a private house in Zejtun, the largest town nearest to the Marsaxlokk harbour.

¹¹ For representations of Agathodaimon and Serapis-Agathodaimon see DUNAND 1984.

¹² For representations of Isis-Thermouthis in combination with Serapis-Agathodaimon see TRAN TAM TINH 1990, pp. 788-789.

When the relief came to my attention, the first thing I tried to do was to establish its provenance. The immediate owners of the house in which the auction had been held were not helpful¹³.

Nevertheless, a small fragment of a marble slab carved in relief, illustrated in one of the volumes that carried the annual reports of the excavations conducted by the University of Rome in several localities in Malta between 1963 and 1970, revealed a perfect resemblance to the stylized rendering of the upper body of the *uraeus* of our relief (Fig. 2; Ciasca *et al.* 1968, p. 17, pl. 14,3). The fragment was discovered at Tas-Silg, the celebrated sanctuary overlooking the Marsaxlokk harbour on the southeast coast of the island of Malta, which was excavated by the same Italian mission from the University of Rome between 1963 and 1970. It came to light in Area A during the 1967 campaign and the director of the excavations, the late Michelangelo Cagiano de Azevedo, already identified it as a piece of an architectural frieze showing part of an *uraeus*¹⁴. The resemblance is so strong that it seems quite justified to suggest they both come from the same monument¹⁵. If this is correct, in view of the secured provenance of the smaller fragment from Tas-Silg, it follows that the relief slab being investigated here most probably came from the same monument and site. It is most unfortunate that it has still not been possible to establish when and how it was removed from that site and found its way to the Zejtun house from which it was bought in 1985.

Once the provenance from Tas-Silg is established with a high degree of probability, it is essential to investigate the consequences of such a provenance, namely, the presence in Malta, most probably in the ancient sanctuary at Tas-Silg, of an architectural monument decorated with an Egyptianizing figurative frieze, suggesting either a simple Egyptianizing aesthetic influence in the architecture or, even more probably, the worship of an Egyptian divinity.

Discussion

Hölbl's corpus of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects from Malta and Gozo (Hölbl 1989) is quite extensive and exhaustive, even for the Hellenistic-Roman period. I refer the reader, therefore, to his work for a detailed discussion of these. I shall dwell only on those items which I believe shed more light on the significance of the marble fragment under examination.

Epigraphic evidence would be the ideal source for any information relating to the possible presence of an Egyptian cult. However, there do not seem to be any inscriptions from the Maltese context of either the Phoenician-Punic period or the Roman period with Egyptian or Egyptianizing references except the well-known bilingual inscription on the identical pair of marble candelabra (better known as "*bétyles*" or "*cippi*")¹⁶. The

¹³ They stated that they had sold the slab on behalf of their friends who, they claimed, were also unaware of the slab's provenance. So, unfortunately, this track did not lead to anywhere.

¹⁴ "... un frammento di rilievo di marmo, che potrebbe verosimilmente essere identificato come un resto di serpente ureo appartenente ad un fregio architettonico" (CAGIANO DE AZEVEDO 1968, p. 49). Regrettably, neither measurements nor other details are given. CIASCA (1984, p. 181) rightly compares the fragment to the frieze on the blind doorway of the tower mausoleum in Sabratha (early 2nd century B.C.) and suggests Alexandrian influence on the Punic world. It is not clear whether MOSCATI (1973, p. 213; 1976-77, pp. 152-3) refers to the same fragment when he assigns '*un fregio egittizzante con urei*' to the late Hellenistic age. See also HÖLBL (1989, p. 152).

¹⁵ This attribution could only be confirmed if the measurements of the Tas-Silg fragments were found to correspond with those of the larger fragment. This verification has, however, not proved possible since the former piece could not be traced in spite of various searches kindly conducted by the personnel of the Museums Department.

¹⁶ Attention should be called to the alleged discovery of five Egyptian stele with inscriptions of the Middle Kingdom during the construction of the Bighi hospital on the east side of the Grand Harbour in 1829, which were eventually transferred to the British Museum (MAYR 1909, p. 80, note 2; MURRAY 1928, pp. 45-48). According to HÖLBL (1989, p. 168), however, these could only have been introduced in Malta in modern times.

iconography of these votive objects has, I believe, been firmly established to be of purely Hellenistic pedigree (Bonanno 1982, pp. 200-2). The Egyptianizing element consists of the name of the god *Osiris* in the Punic names of the dedicators *Abdosir* (servant of Osir) and *Osirshamar* (Osir has protected) (*C.I.S.* I, 122, 122bis; Guzzo Amadasi 1967, pp. 15-17), and the name of the god *Serapis* in the Greek version of the second name, *Sarapion*, as well as the name of the father of the two dedicators, *Sarapion* (*C.I.G.* III, 681, 5753)¹⁷.

We cannot make much of the presence of Egyptian-sounding names of human individuals, especially when these declare themselves to hail from Tyre, to confirm the presence of an Egyptian cult in Malta, but they add to the cumulative circumstantial evidence¹⁸.

Another inscription with an Egyptianizing element is the one written in ink on a minuscule fragment of papyrus contained in a bronze amulet. The latter comes from a rock-cut tomb discovered in 1968 at Tal-Virtù, near Rabat (Gouder-Rocco 1975). The Egyptianizing element, however, is not in the inscription itself but in the iconography of the container, a small hollow tube with a cover in the form of a falcon's head of Horus surmounted by a solar disc and rearing *uraeus*, and in the figure of *Isis* drawn in profile over the Punic inscription. This amulet is, however, dated to the 6th century B.C. and falls within another category of monuments, namely, that large range of Egyptianizing cult and votive objects, the *Aegyptiaca*, that are widely diffused in both the eastern Phoenician cities and in their western colonies (Hölbl 1989, pp. 19-22).

The figure of *Isis* on the early Phoenician papyrus recalls a statue which belongs to the Hellenistic-Roman age and which very probably represents the same divinity, even though it is traditionally identified with either Juno or Astarte (Fig. 3). The larger than life-size statue, in white marble, is preserved in the Museum of Roman Antiquities of Rabat. It recalls closely the Hellenistic typology of *Hygieia*, the goddess of healing, with respect to the general pose and the composition of the drapery (Bonanno 1971, pp. 196-201). But the missing head must have worn an African type of hairstyle, with the so-called "Libyan locks" which is often worn by statues of *Isis*, such as the one from Alexandria (Graeco-Roman Museum No. 23840). Even in this case, the provenance is unknown, but the presence of this statue in Malta has been documented since the 17th century (Abela 1647, pp. 31-32). The same type of hairstyle with "Libyan locks" is also worn by the female divinity represented on some of the earliest coins minted in Malta (Hölbl 1989, pl. 25,2a).

The connection between Astarte-Hera and *Isis* is also noted by Hölbl (1989, pp. 165-167; 171) with respect to the iconography of these early coins. It is commonly agreed that the coin types of Malta start soon after the island's annexation to Rome in 218 B.C. and continue with a few changes down to the end of the Republic (Hölbl 1989, p. 161; bibl. in note 11). I shall not dwell on the Egyptian iconography of the three divinities on the reverse of the earliest type identified by Hölbl (1989, pp. 161-164, pl. 25,1b) as *Osiris* with *atef*-crown between *Isis* and *Nephtys*; but I believe that the head of goddess in profile on the obverse of the type with the Greek legend *MELITAION* (Hölbl 1989, pl. 25,2a) deserves closer attention because it combines a number of Egyptianizing features connected with our relief and its probable provenance. In the first place, it wears a crown

¹⁷ The Egyptian elements of the candelabra and of their inscriptions, which derived from a Hellenistic milieu, were also observed by Paola Zanovello (ZANOVELLO 1981, pp. 20-21) who saw them as an infiltration of Alexandrian culture after the fall of Carthage in 146 B.C. See also A. CRISTOFORI (*infra*).

¹⁸ In view of this new attribution of an Egyptianizing component to the Tas-Silg sanctuary, the deep-rooted, albeit unfounded, tradition that the two candelabra were originally discovered in the Marsaxlokk area (BONANNO 1982, p. 200, note 61) assumes a new significance. Once the Egyptianizing component of the ritual iconography of the Tas-Silg sanctuary is firmly established, the Egyptian pedigree of the names of the dedicators in the inscription renders the provenance of the candelabra from the same sanctuary even more likely.

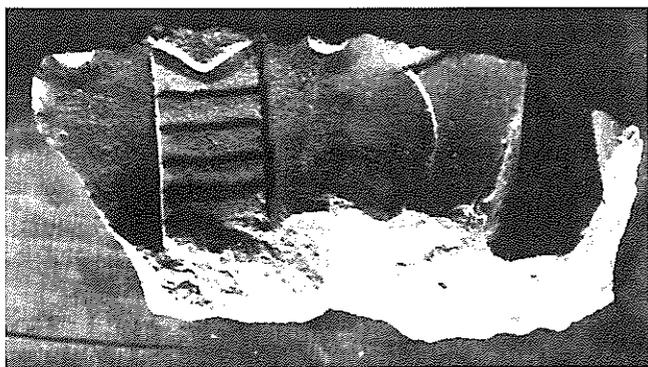


FIG. 2 – Marble fragment with *uraeus* in relief. From Tas-Silg sanctuary. Malta

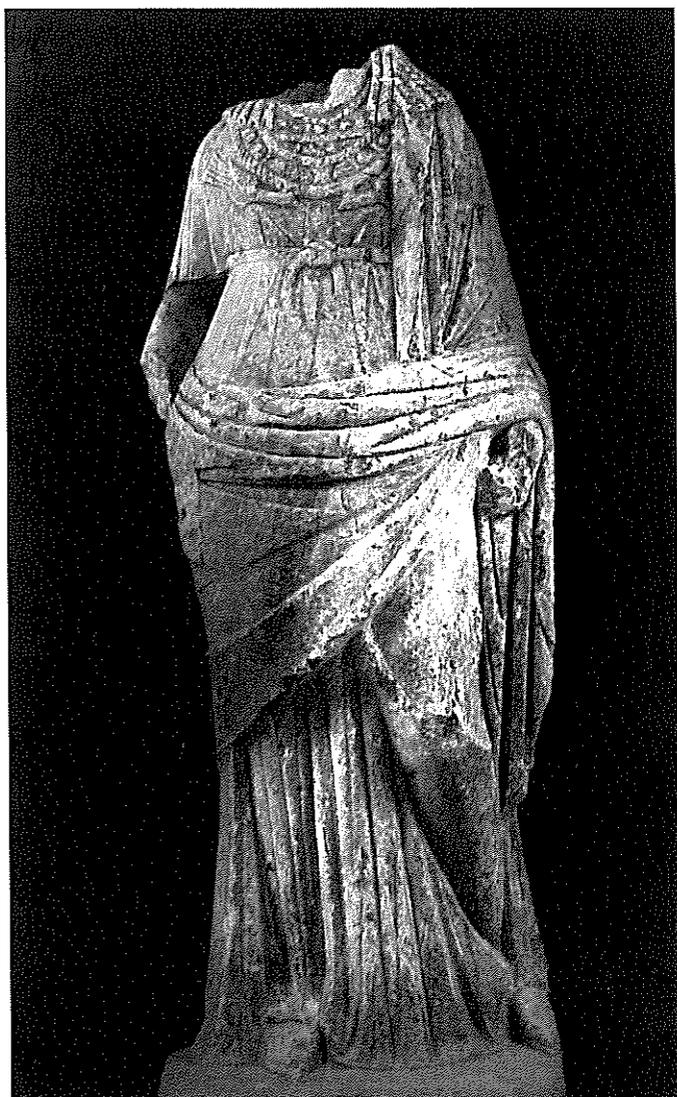


FIG. 3 – Headless draped female statue with Isis-type hairstyle. Museum of Roman Antiquities, Malta

with two *uraei* growing from the tips of the two horns. Secondly, the attributes on either side of the head identify the goddess as Astarte, to whom the sanctuary of Tas-Silg was dedicated, and who in the west had already been for long represented in the iconography of Isis (Hölbl 1986, I, p. 291).

Since, as has already been suggested, our relief is very probably a fragment of an architectural feature, it follows that among the *Aegyptiaca* from Malta, the Egyptianizing architectural elements deserve particular attention¹⁹. The Egyptian roll-and-hollow moulding (commonly referred to as “Egyptian gorge”) crowning the square-shaped, tower-like structure at Zurrieq is in general dated to the Hellenistic age, although Hölbl (1989, pp. 146-149, pl. 20) prefers a date in the late 6th-early 5th century. The same difference of opinion on dating applies to the fragments from the Mtarfa silos (MAR 1973-74, 1; Hölbl 1989, pp. 29-30, pl. 19,1), as well as to a series of blocks belonging to the same cornice, and the capital with two superimposed Egyptian gorge elements usually dated to the 4th-3rd century B.C., all from Tas-Silg itself (Hölbl 1989, pp. 35-36, 149-151, pls. 19-21; Gouder 1991, pl. on p. 4)²⁰.

If all the latter Egyptian architectural elements from Tas-Silg, including the limestone “proto-Aeolic” fragment of a pillar (Hölbl 1989, pp. 149-151, pl.22,1) could indeed be attributed to a structure (a shrine or a small temple) datable to the Hellenistic-Roman age, it would be very possible that the frieze, of which our fragment made part, decorated the same building.

Conclusion

Given the cumulative evidence listed above it seems quite reasonable to postulate the existence in Malta, most probably within the Tas-Silg sanctuary, of a temple or shrine dedicated to an Egyptian divinity. From the iconography documented at Tas-Silg and elsewhere in Malta, it could also be argued that the most likely divinity that was venerated inside this structure is either Isis (statue and papyrus figure) or Serapis (names of dedicators in bilingual inscription), or both. We have already observed the great number of temples dedicated to either or both of these divinities recorded for North African cities which, like Malta, had experienced a Punic presence or domination. The names of the two divinities occur also on an altar of Bubastis at Porto Torres in Sardinia (Le Glay 1984).

It has been firmly established that, after its prehistoric origins and use, the sanctuary of Tas-Silg was dedicated to an oriental divinity, abundantly documented by hundreds of dedicatory inscriptions to Astarte. In its Roman phase this divinity appears to have been assimilated with the Roman divinity Juno, as suggested by the allusions to such a sanctuary in Malta in Cicero and Ptolemy, and as confirmed by a number of dedicatory inscriptions to her Greek counterpart, Hera, found on the same site. From the evidence brought forward above, it would appear that the oriental character of this sanctuary persisted in Roman times and expressed itself in the worship, albeit a secondary one, of an Egyptian divinity. If our identification of the divinities symbolized by the iconography of the relief is correct, it could well be that this triad, Isis, Serapis and Osiris, was in fact the object of this worship.

However modest a contribution to the science of antiquity this piece of research might be, in view of the very fragmentary evidence forthcoming from this important ancient site, it appears that a significant jig-saw piece has been retrieved that joins with

¹⁹ A study of all these Egyptian and Egyptianizing architectural elements is included in HÖLBL 1989, pp. 146-159.

²⁰ For a discussion of the dating of these mouldings from their profile, see RAKOB 1979, p. 168, fig. 105.

a considerable number of other pieces in order to fill a sizeable gap in the lacunose picture of one important phase in the millennial life of the sanctuary of Astarte-Juno at Tas-Silg.

Epilogue

The relief presents clear evidence for a wilful defacement of the snake figures in the frieze. Such an iconoclastic act could have been perpetrated on one of several occasions of over-zealous manifestations of faith, possibly of the Christian one, even though it is not otherwise documented for the Maltese islands. It should be kept in mind that the site of Tas-Silg was eventually, that is in 5th or 6th century, turned into a full-fledged Christian shrine with a basilical church as its focal point (Luttrell 1984, 129). In the process, most of the blocks originally forming an "Egyptian gorge" cornice were reutilized in the foundations.

It is easy to imagine the reaction of a Christian in front of a representation of a human-headed snake and of a fearful cobra, both staring at the spectator in the face. One of the occasions when the defacement of our relief could have taken place is when pagan rites were formally banned by emperor Theodosius in A.D. 391, after religious tumults had broken out in Alexandria resulting in the destruction of the temple of Serapis.

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