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RESEARCH

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By Alethea Roe

Since the Italian adventurer Pietro della Valle (1586-1652) in his 1615 expedition to Egypt purchased two portrait mummies and brought them back to Europe,² the “Fayum”³ mummy portraits have been as fascinating as they are fraught for scholars and laymen alike. The portraits, thought to have emerged as a genre early in the Julio-Claudian period⁴ and to have persisted for several centuries,⁵ depict individuals clad in Greco-Roman attire, with women often mirroring imperial styles in their hairstyles and jewelry. They are typically painted on wooden panels using encaustic or tempera and show the deceased at bust-length. (Later portraits also regularly include the upper torso and hands.) Typically, the panels were then inserted into the mummy wrappings or occasionally painted directly on the wrappings; from the middle of the first century CE, they also appear in

² Published in two volumes, 1650 and 1658.

³ Also transliterated as “Faiyum,” “Fayoum,” or “Fayyum.” This paper will employ “Fayum” throughout.

⁴ S. E.C. Walker (1997) 23: “mid-first century.”

⁵ Their exact termination is debated; K. Parlasca (1996, 35-36) argues they endured until the fourth century. CE; Borg (1996, 108) argues for the mid-third century CE.

the form of full-body shrouds.⁶

Historically, the intense interest generated by mummy portraits has fueled centuries of collecting, underhanded dealing,⁷ and even formal excavations whose material consequences were not greatly distinguishable from all-out looting. Famed Egyptologist W.M. Flinders Petrie is, on the whole, a “laudable exception” to a sadly general rule: his 1888 and 1911 excavations at Hawara were systematically documented and promptly published.⁸ In the main, however, the loss of so much archaeological context in the excavations of the past—truly the great challenge, bugbear, frustration, and perverse fascination of studying the mummy portraits—has left many questions about them likely, perhaps even doomed, to remain open.

This has not, however, much dampened enthusiasm for the approximately one thousand portraits and fragments known to be extant and scattered throughout the museums of the world. Indeed, the impassioned intricacies of the many scholarly debates surrounding them have, if anything, only intensified.

This enthusiasm typically features portraits being hailed as “naturalistic,” which seems to be generally understood to convey that their execution of the human form largely calls upon Greco-Roman rather than pharaonic Egyptian models as well as to articulate the portrait’s capacity to give the impression that one is in the presence of a

⁶ Shrouds are characteristic of the site of Antinoopolis, but are also seen at Hawara (Freccero [2000] 3).

⁷ Forgeries were, are, and likely will continue to be quite common (Thompson [1982] 12).

⁸ B. Borg and G. Most (2000) 65. Even Petrie conducted his excavations with a certain disregard for some aspects of contextualizing evidence, but on the whole he must be commended as rather ahead of his time.

carefully individualized personality.⁹ The latter effect has culminated in some rather ecstatic, indeed almost mystical strands of criticism. A characteristic example is given by Euphrosyne Doxiadis, who rhapsodizes, “they are not art, but truth.”¹⁰

This succinctly captures the enraptured sentiment that has historically been—and clearly continues to be—pervasive in mummy portrait reception. Doxiadis is not alone among moderns to make such declarations; Berenice Geoffroy-Schneiter writes: “Not yet dead but no longer alive, the people depicted look us straight in the eye, without affect, desire or provocation, *in the nakedness of truth*.”¹¹ The portraits are even anthropomorphized as prophetic sages, speaking simultaneously as and on behalf of their ancient human referents, dispensing “silent reminders to us to seize the day.”¹²

The problem with taking such impulses too far (i.e., making the leap from art to “truth”) is that the mummy portraits are, of course, *not* “without affect, desire or provocation,” no more than any other portrait—and any art, for that matter, ancient or modern. Portraits of any era are the product of social as much as personal realities; “their imagery combines the conventions of behavior and appearance appropriate to the members of a society at a particular time, as defined by categories of age, gender...social and civic class.”¹³ However, viewers have long succumbed to the temptation to conflate the visual expressions of the ancient

⁹ Employing “naturalistic” wholesale to describe the corpus can obscure the fact that later tempera portraits are often highly stylized, as well as the fact that term “veristic” is slowly beginning to appear in the scholarship.

¹⁰ E. Doxiadis in J. Picton, S. Quirke, P.C. Roberts (2007) 143.

¹¹ B. Geoffroy-Schneiter (1998) 17.

¹² *ibid.*

¹³ R. Brilliant (1991) 11.

social realities of Roman Egypt with modern artistic traditions and social realities. Where identities have been lost—as the majority have been—they have been readily supplied with contemporary analogues to their style and even lovingly detailed analyses of supposed personality of their subjects. Ulrick Wilcken’s enthusiastic statement that “The best of the portraits are of such a convincing truthfulness to life, so full of individuality,”¹⁴ is on the restrained side of such responses, when compared to elaborately imaginative frenzies such as those of German Egyptologist Georg Moritz Ebers:

Special interest has attached recently to the splendid Number 21.... It represents a man who has just recently passed beyond the borderline of youth. His hair falls deeply onto his forehead in casual, perhaps intentional disorder, and if we look into the eyes—which know many things, and not only permitted ones—and the sensual mustached mouth of this countenance which, though certainly not ugly, is restless, then we are include to believe that it belonged to a pitiless master who yielded all too readily when his lustful heart demanded that his burning desires be satisfied. It seems to us that this Number 21 is still in the midst of *Sturm und Drang* and is far removed from that inner harmony which the philosophically educated Greek was supposed to reach at an age of greater maturity.¹⁵

Petrie’s excavation journals from Hawara are also an endless fount of such amusing and opinionated character studies; one portrait (now unfortunately unidentifiable) receives the following treatment: “A man who was no beauty certainly

¹⁴ U. Wilcken (1889) 2.

¹⁵ B. Borg and G.W. Most (2000) 66.

anyhow, he looks as if he would have made a very conscientious hardworking curate with a tendency to pulpit hysterics.”¹⁶ Petrie also recorded, with some resentment, an anecdote regarding Egypt Department of Antiquities Director M. Eugene Grébaud, who appeared to claim several particularly engaging specimens of Petrie’s portraits on behalf of the Department: “When he had apparently done, I asked if he was now content; he hesitated, and then said that he ‘once knew a young lady like that,’ and therefore took one more of the best.”¹⁷

Also, in 1929, Mary Swindler, professor of archaeology at Bryn Mawr College, commenting on a portrait labeled “Hermione grammatike” (now in Girton College, Cambridge) used the latter epithet as evidence that Hermione was a “reader in classics,”¹⁸ and, after observing, “the face of Hermione is a joyless one” used that face as a sounding board for contemplations about her own profession: “We do not know whether to sympathise with the young who came under her eye or regret, rather, that the profession was so uninspiring. In any case the Hermione type seems to be self-perpetuating.”¹⁹

Such reactions call to mind Richard Brilliant’s penetrating observation that, “so many viewers feel compelled to ascertain the identities or names given to the images of men, women, and children in portraits—once the art works are known to be portraits—when the same viewers feel no similar compulsion to do so in their encounter with art works in other genres.” Ebers’s and Petrie’s personality profiles, Grébaud’s reverie, and Swindler’s reflections reveal

¹⁶ J. Picton, S. Quirke, and P.C. Roberts (2007) 36.

¹⁷ W.M.F. Petrie (1932) 95.

¹⁸ Many other glosses of “grammatike” have been offered; it may merely denote the fact that she was literate (Montserrat 1997 b, 224).

¹⁹ M. A. Swindler (1929) 323.

another telling aspect of this transfixion—it is nearly always implicated in contemporary anxieties, needs, fantasies, or situations; this compulsion to learn about is, nearly always, also a compulsion to project onto. One must wonder how much the sheer intensity of the interest in ascertaining (or inventing) as much as possible about their human referents can simply be attributed to momentum triggered by the initial identification of these works as portraits. Certainly, the Petrie and Swindler types also seem to be self-perpetuating, as present-day attempts are made to identify “a young man with sensual lips and the beginning of a moustache like a figure from a film by Pasolini...a woman who looks bored, an Emma Bovary of another age, steeped in gentle melancholy immortalized by the brush of some Leonardo or Rembrandt.”²⁰

Ancient social realities have also been obscured by a different, but equally problematic reaction—the determination to identify them with the *right* past, that is, whatever past is presently in vogue, both among scholars and the public at large. Attempts mounted to “redeem” the portraits from the “decadence under the Romans” by identifying them as the forerunners of Coptic icons have also been unrelenting, glossing over the significant problems with crowning the mummy portraits as icons’ immediate artistic forerunners (perhaps most glaringly the lapse of time between the cessation of mummy production and the emergence of the icons).²¹ Georg Moritz Ebers—consulted by Viennese antiquities dealer Theodor Ritter von Graf to authenticate the decontextualized portraits he assembled for an exhibition that toured throughout Europe—was determined to claim them for the then-popular Ptolemaic period: “Some of the most

²⁰ B. Geoffroy-Schneiter (1998) 5.

²¹ J. Fleischer (2001) 54. See also K. Weitzmann (1978), 8 and Parlasca (1966) 209-212.

beautiful are of such a high standard of execution that they may be ascribed to the time of the Ptolemies, when the flower of Alexandrian art was only just beginning slowly to fade, rather than to the period of decadence under the Romans in the Christian era.”²² (This has even been accused, probably unfairly, of being a “calculated error” to increase the selling price of the portraits.²³) Petrie, on the other hand, described the first of his discoveries at Hawara as “a beautifully drawn head of a girl, in soft grey tints, entirely *classical*.” Egyptologists and classicists have long debated that the portraits are rightly assigned as the province of their discipline.

Consequently, the mummy portraits have all-too-often been more or less regarded as “prizes” in various scholarly tugs-of-war. As with so much in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, they have been subject to power plays between classicists and Egyptologists, as well as between scholars of the “classic” and later periods of both disciplines.²⁴ With the encouraging ascendancy of the “growing school of thought which sees Hellenistic culture generally in terms of juxtaposition rather than of mixture”²⁵—in which one tradition triumphantly and definitively supersedes another—debates have become, in the main, more nuanced and comfortably interdisciplinary than of yore, but disconnects between the disciplines are by no means a thing of the past.

Steadily increasingly dialogues between the fields are certainly one reason why recent years have proved an exhilarating time to study mummy portraits. Another is that the necessary cataloguing groundwork is falling ever more

²² B. Geoffroy-Schneiter (1998) 7.

²³ A. Freccero, (2000) 2.

²⁴ One thinks, for instance of the debates as to whether the Greek Magical Papyri should be regarded as more the product of Egyptian or Greco-Roman cultural milieu.

²⁵ R.S. Bagnall (1982) 18-19.

into place. Parlasca's Herculean efforts in assembling the *Ritratti di mumie* series for A. Adriani's *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto Greco-romano* must take pride of place here; but Susan Walker's *Ancient Faces*, the Petrie Museum's *Living Images* and Barbara Borg's Mumienporträts, and the stunning full-color photographs of Euphrosyne Doxiadis's *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits*, ought also to be acknowledged among the valuable entries in an ever-widening field.

Perhaps most encouragingly, one can cite a proliferation of scholarship (to which this paper hopes to have contributed) that forcefully demonstrates that emphasizing social realities over supposed verisimilar individuality in ancient art such as the mummy portraits does not, as it may seem to do, erode the viewer's connection to the expressions of ancient identities, though it may require reconsiderations of certain assumptions about the content of that expression, such as supposedly ethnic distinctions. Rather, it is much more likely to reveal something of the portrait subjects' thought-world than any amount of physiognomic or psychoanalytical communions with them (communions that historically have and, as we have seen, still frustratingly *do* dominate certain strands of discourse surrounding the portraits).

Then there are the biases the archaeological record seeds in our reception of ancient art. In antiquity, panel paintings were highly prized as an art form; unfortunately it was only the arid climate of Egypt that ensured the survival of the mummy portraits, one of the all-too-scant examples remaining to us of a vibrant, integral, and fairly commonplace artistic tradition of the ancient world. Were we more accustomed to the sight of such paintings, the mummy portraits would, perhaps, not seem quite so anomalously akin to contemporary pictorial art.

That the mummy portraits are, in fact, also the "only corpus of coloured representations of individuals to survive

from classical antiquity”²⁶ is also critical. The mere fact that they are painted gives them a vibrant novelty so seductively different from, for example, the monochromatic marbles and bronzes of Greece and Rome. Such sculptures, of course, looked quite different at the time of their creation. Most would have been brightly painted and many would have had colored inlays; it is only the passage of time that has rendered them monochromatic. Reconstructions, based on chemical remnants of pigments, consequently seem garish, and continue the cycle of an idea of painted sculpture is still “widely ignored in scholarship and not well known to the public.”²⁷ It is, perhaps, this potent combination of color (which now seems so much more exceptional than the norm it was in ancient art) and the idea of the portrait—especially the fascinations of the funerary portrait—further strengthened by the fact that the fame of pharaonic mummies such as “King-Tut” influenced stereotypes of what mummies “look like” that gives the mummy portraits much of the mystique and allure, as well as the perception that they possess a unique and undeniable “truth.” One wishes that works on mummy portraits pitched to the general public—as many often are—might spare a contextualizing sentence or two to help rectify this skewed perception of ancient aesthetics. One might also wish treatments of mummy portraits were little more forthcoming about the extent to which, due to conservation and restoration efforts of the past, we experience the portraits through a materially altered lens. These factors, perhaps as much as any, are to blame for the “not-art-but-truth” school of responses that can be greatly entertaining and entrancingly creative, but rarely very informative about their ancient referents.

Any study of the mummy portrait corpus consequently

²⁶ S.E.C Walker in M.I. Bierbrier (1997) 1

²⁷ R. Panzanelli, E. D. Schmidt, K. D. S. Lapatin (2008) 100.

must go hand in hand with an acute awareness—and a vigilant interrogation of—the ways they have been appropriated and sentimentalized in the past, in order that we may steadily shed the biases of the past, and effectively critique those of the present. Historically, mummy portraits’ perceived unconventionality as ancient art objects has tilted their study toward the superficial, and occasionally even the sensational. Few authors can resist appropriating them—however tangentially—to make one point or another, exploiting the portraits’ uncanny power to entrance their every audience. As a further case study, I will explore one such topos that has stubbornly lodged itself into portrait reception—the idea that a work known as the Tondo of the Two Brothers is a depiction of two ethnically distinct “brothers.”

The tondo almost certainly could not have been used as a “mummy portrait,” in the sense of being affixed directly to the individuals it depicts. Not only is it far too large (with a diameter of sixty centimeters²⁸) and unwieldy to have been inserted into an individual’s mummy wrappings, but it also bears no traces—common in other portraits—of having been so used: the portrait has not been cut down to accommodate insertion into the mummy wrappings, nor have fringes been left unpainted in anticipation of their being covered by the wrappings. It is also unstained by the embalming substances that often dot portraits.

One has to wonder whether it was funerary in nature at all, especially since all we know of its context is that it was excavated by Alfred Gayet at Antinoopolis in 1888-1889, though his excavations did unearth many shrouds and panel portraits. However, despite its unusual form, it is possible the Two Brothers Tondo might have still been intended for

²⁸ Doxiadis (1997) 211.

eventual appropriation for the mummy. The tondo in fact consists of two separate pieces of wood joined between the two portraits, leaving the possibility that it could have been cut down and converted into two discrete panel portraits.²⁹ The garment of the younger man (proper right), however, seems to extend over into the other man's panel, weakening the force of such an assertion. Yet there are other indicators that point to a funerary purpose:

The date Pachon 15, inscribed next to the man at proper left, likely, though not necessarily, records the date of death. Parlasca's identification of the gods that flank the men as Osirantinous (a syncretization of Osiris and Antinoos) and Hermanubis (a syncretization of Hermes and Anubis) would have held strong funerary connotations. A tondo-style portrait might well have been displayed in a funerary chapel or banquet hall.³⁰ Dominic Montserrat muses, reconciling its probable funerary function to its puzzling form, that its "unique format and array of symbols might commemorate something unusual about the two deceased men, such as the circumstances of death."³¹

That sense that there is "something unusual" commemorated in the tondo has long dogged the reception of the portrait. French connoisseur Emile Guimet in 1912 declared "sans doute" that such a dual representation must imply the two were be brothers, and the idea has remained largely unchallenged, even becoming enshrined in the designation "Tondo of the Two Brothers" most commonly used to refer to

²⁹ A. Haeckl (2001) 77.

³⁰ D. Montserrat in M.L. Bierbrier (1997) 33-44, op. cit.

³¹ A. Haeckl (2001) 78.

the dual portrait.

This durability is due in part, no doubt, to the impossibility, in the near-total absence of any context, to disprove such an assertion. However, the identification has held all the more fascination for the fact that the two men possess distinctly different skin tones; the idea that such—ostensibly ethnic—variety could exist even with the bounds of the family, and be so frankly depicted must have exercised a shocking, even scandalous allure in an era when miscegenation was ostracized—if not illegal—and racial heritage obsessively and self-consciously quantified via terms such as “quadroon” and “octoroon.” In recent years, as Western societies attempt to refashion and celebrate themselves as “post-racial,” the appeal of the “brothers” identification has, if anything, strengthened. The two “brothers”—and the multi-ethnic family and racially tolerant society extrapolated from them—have become an ideal modern society seeks to emulate; in short, they have become poster children as much as portraits. They “seem to embody all the important elements of the long story of Graeco-Egyptian co-existence on Egyptian soil.”³²

Anne Haeckl complicates this enduring assumption of ethnically mixed brotherhood by offering the intriguing—although, as she rightly admits, absolutely unprovable—possibility that the tondo depicted not fraternal siblings but lovers. Antinoopolis would perhaps be the most logical site to find such a document of such a relationship, as it would have emulated the imperial example of Hadrian and his young male favorite Antinoos, in whose honor Antinoopolis was founded after his untimely drowning in the Nile.

Admittedly, not all segments of society would have embraced the obvious parallel to Hadrian and Antinoos, as

³² E. Doxiadis (1995) 212.

Clement of Alexandria's criticism of the famous liaison as "a passion which took no account of shame" demonstrates. Even this criticism, however, seems less directed at the homosexual nature of the liaison itself, than at the excess of its expression.

Would such a liaison therefore mark a clear, comparatively uncomplicated case of Greco-Roman self-affiliation? It is true that homosexuality seems traditionally to have been somewhat frowned upon in Egypt, as it is featured in the negative confession in the Book of the Dead, in which the deceased asserts their innocence of particular misdeeds.³³ However, there are also (rare) textual attestations of homoerotic relationships in dynastic Egypt, but they were never formulated as a full-fledged and universally accepted cultural institution as pederasty was in classical Athens. Even in the Ptolemaic and Roman times, "[h]omosexuality is never mentioned as being an important component of social or educational life among the élite."³⁴ The most well known of such fleeting references in Egyptian history is the tale of an illicit liaison between a pharaoh and one of his generals. Though the affair is conducted in secret, the relationship is laid out rather matter-of-factly, and the author does not offer any condemnation of its nature. The tale could imply that Egyptian formulations of homosexuality—though whether pharaonic literature would have much influenced attitudes millennia later is an open question—could also encompass such relationships between coevals, strikingly at variance with the Hellenic practice of pederasty.³⁵

Such a relationship being depicted in a funerary context would, however, from a traditional Egyptian perspective, present something of a theological conundrum, as

³³ Chapter 125: "I have not done wrong sexually, or committed homosexuality." Cited in D. Montserrat (1993 b), 140.

³⁴ D. Montserrat, (1993 b) 139.

³⁵ D. Montserrat (1993 b), 140.

emphasizing the deceased's *reproductive* sexuality was typically of paramount importance in Egyptian funerary art, and deeply intertwined with conceptions of divinely mediated and divinizing rebirth—most importantly, the topos of the Isis and Osiris myth, in which Isis's magical restoration of Osiris's phallus enables her to conceive the god Horus.

Depicting the “Two Brothers” as lovers would divest the funerary image of magically resurrective potency, and hence undermine deceased's emulative rebirth as an Osiris or Isis/Hathor figure. If the image is indeed funerary, such a scenario would represent an instance in which Greco-Roman values take clear and culturally transformative precedence over pharaonic religious beliefs. Unfortunately, as it bears reiterating, this cannot be proved, and the starkness of its opposition to Egyptian funerary values seems at once one of the potential weaknesses and tantalizing possibilities of such a theory.

Another important aspect of Haeckl's theory that bears on the question of verisimilitude is that it could undermine the typical reading of the skin tones as being attempts to capture ethnic distinctions. Skin tone was deeply tied to sex and gender roles—women were routinely depicted with pale skin; men with tan—establishing visually encoded connotations of active versus passive roles that were carried over in homoerotic contexts. Haeckl points out how closely the features of the young ephebe in the tondo maps onto Martial's “wish list” for a young male lover (at least in comparison to the older man), potentially destabilizing assumptions that the manner in which the man is depicted more or less mirrored his actual appearance:

...Hear, Flaccus, what sort of boy I should like to ask for. First, let this boy be born in the land of the Nile; no country knows better how to give naughty ways. Let him be whiter than the

snow; for in dusky Mareotis that complexion gains beauty in proportion to its rarity. Let his eyes rival stars and soft tresses float upon his neck...curly hair is not to my liking. Let his forehead be low and his nostrils not too large and slightly aquiline...³⁶

Although we must be wary of falling into circularities, the converse of Haeckl's argument would also hold true—if the two *are* lovers, their “portraits” would be subject to assimilation to the cultural ideals of what an *erastos* and an *eromenos* should look like. Since only a very particular manifestation of homosexuality was socially acceptable in Hellenized contexts—the older, experienced male as active sexual partner to a passive, callow youth—adhering to such visual tropes would be especially critical to vindicate the liaison and remove (or at least mitigate) any suggestion of impropriety. Thus Haeckl suggests the tondo presents “more the portrait of a relationship rather than of two individuals.”³⁷

This prompts a further question that is of course equally unprovable. Given the obvious importance of the story of Antinoos (and his relationship with Hadrian) as the “founding myth” of Antinoopolis, it seems natural that the story of Antinoos would be appropriated to process—and add divinizing connotations to—the untimely deaths of young Antinoopolitan men. And given the curious—not necessarily significant, but at least noteworthy—fact that the date (of death?) is positioned next to the young man, as though it were not relevant to the older man, could this be intended *solely* as funerary portrait of a youth who was of age to have been an *eromenos*, and not yet old enough to marry, and the reason the date is not applicable to the older one, or a different one not

³⁶ Martial. *Epigrams*. trans. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA and London 1993), 311.

³⁷ A. Haeckl (2001), 77.

added is because the other man never actually existed?

That is, the older man is a visual prop to the “story” of the young man’s tragically young demise, further denoting the deceased’s age category. Hence the tondo would represent a portrait of a *real* relationship, but rather of a relationship that *could* have existed, that *would* have been age-appropriate. That it was, in short, necessary to round out the Antinoos narrative with a Hadrian, even if a particular “Antinoos” was never actually involved with an *erastos*? The Two Brothers demonstrates perhaps better than any work of Roman Egyptian portraiture just how labyrinthine the questions of cultural affiliation and depicting “reality” are.

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