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# Work in progress: Roman painted funerary portraits from Antinoopolis, Egypt

My doctoral thesis examines the development of Roman-period painted funerary portraiture from Antinoopolis, the settlement founded c. AD 130 in Middle Egypt by the Emperor Hadrian to commemorate the mysterious death by drowning of his favourite, the youth Antinous. Found at sites across Roman Egypt, the mummy portraits comprise a group of over 1000 paintings dated to between the 1st and the 4th centuries AD which constitutes the only corpus of colour portraits to survive from Classical antiquity (Walker 1997, 1). They were executed by anonymous artists using the tempera or encaustic techniques, and were painted either on wooden panels that were placed over the face of the deceased and incorporated in the mummy wrappings or on linen shrouds that enveloped the entire body. The examples from Antinoopolis include both types of mummy portrait, dated to the 2nd, 3rd and 4th centuries AD. This longevity of production therefore provides the ideal opportunity for a site-specific investigation of the evolving nature of portrait production in Roman Egypt, with a focus on the visible changes in self-presentation and fashions over time. To provide some background, Antinoopolis lies on the right bank of the Nile, close to the present-day village of el-Sheikh Ibadeh, and is set on a narrow strip of desert

delimited by mountains to the north, east, and south, and by the river to the west. As Egypt's fourth Greek city or polis, it was intended to provide a bastion of Hellenism in Middle Egypt (Bell 1940, 134; Thompson 1981, 44-46), and as such was populated with residents of Greek stock, predominantly drawn from the city of Ptolemais to the north, and from villages in the Fayum region. The site was initially excavated beginning in 1896 by the French archaeologist Albert Gayet. In the course of successive campaigns that spanned 18 years, Gayet and his team uncovered a rich variety of mummy portraiture. Yet, together with much of the material excavated, the portraits have become divorced from their original context. Many of the tombs investigated by the archaeologist had already been pillaged in antiquity, and, indeed, the site had suffered significant degradation over time. Aside from the ancient tomb disruptions, Antinoopolis was more or less destroyed in the early 19th century, its stone taken for construction or burnt for lime, and over time a large proportion of Antinoite material, including portraits and textiles, became dispersed on the antiquities market and in private collections through the wide-scale, illegal looting of burials. Additionally, Albert Gayet's campaigns, for which we

lack a true diary or journal, neglected to record context or stratigraphy. Governed by the will of his patrons, the excavations were carried out with bias and haste, and the subsequent treatment of the material and its division amongst museum collections was largely economically motivated (as discussed in Calament 1989; Calament-Demerger 1998; Calament 2005a and 2005b).

This thesis seeks to tackle the problem of the dispersal of the mummy portraiture and its separation from its original context, and, crucially, to assess the paintings as a coherent group. The core paintings under consideration comprise the thirty-three examples for which Antinoite provenance is confirmed. These include nineteen pieces which were directly referenced in Gayet's publications, today divided between the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lyon and the Museo Egizio (Musei Vaticani) in Rome, as well as 11 portraits that reached the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Dijon as accessions resulting from Gayet's will (Quarré 1941). Two further portraits are included due to the assertion of Antinoite provenance in their accessions records, while one piece was identified by Calament from a photograph of a display cabinet in the 1909 exhibition of Gayet's finds (Calament 2005a, 15, fig. 15; Cortopassi 2008, 308). However, the thesis catalogue also features 32 further mummy portraits which have been ascribed to Antinoopolis in various publications (Parlasca 1969; 1977; 1980; Parlasca and Frenz 2003), as well as several other figured representations from the site including fresco paintings and miniature painted wooden tablets.

In addition to investigating issues of burial context and the materials employed in portrait manufacture, a key focal point for the thesis is the self-presentation of the deceased in the paintings. The mummy portraits have already been subjected to a fairly exhaustive treatment regarding the hairstyles and jewellery which they display, since such features can be used as dating criteria based on their imitation of imperial court fashions seen on datable figured representations from across the Roman Empire (e.g. Drerup 1933; Borg 1996). However, analysis of the garments worn by the portrait subjects has generally revolved around using specific case studies to illuminate issues of profession, ethnic background or religious affiliation (e.g. Doxiadis 1995), despite Walker's emphasis on the value of clothing in establishing further chronological frameworks for the portraiture (Walker 1999). What is lacking thus far is an in-depth, site-oriented study of clothing in painted funerary portraiture in its local context.

The longevity of portrait production at Antinoopolis and the comparatively high proportion of painted shrouds from the site augments the rather limited waist-up view provided by the panel portraits, which tend just to show the head and shoulders of the deceased. On certain pieces, for example, we can identify garment length, some decorative features or finishes on the lower edges

(such as fringing), and we may even ascertain details of footwear. We are also fortunate, when dealing with Egypt generally, in having at our disposal an unusually large number of actual preserved garments and textile fragments as well as leather shoes and sandals, which survive as a result of the country's favourable climatic conditions and its particular burial customs in antiquity. Many thousands of pieces are today assembled in worldwide museum- and private collections and include finds from excavated contexts, as well as unprovenanced examples purchased on the antiquities market. Finds of textiles and shoes at Antinoopolis were especially plentiful and the extant collections form an essential record with which to compare the portraiture.

As well as assessing the hairstyles, jewellery and footwear worn by Antinoopolis' portrait subjects, this thesis seeks to establish the main garments depicted and to chart changes in their cut, construction, chosen fibre, colour and decoration over time. For example, the 2nd century AD paintings present individuals of both genders wearing a sleeveless tunic, or Greek chiton, with plain monochrome clavi that is mirrored in contemporary excavated garments from Mons Claudianus and the Cave of Letters in Israel. However, on portraits of women this tunic is supplanted at some point in the 3rd century AD by the voluminous, long-sleeved dalmatic. A number of portrait shrouds from Antinoopolis depict this garment, embellished by richly decorated bands whose motifs find parallels in extant textile collections.

It is intended that such comparisons will illuminate the degree of reality in the self-presentation of Antinoopolis' portrait subjects. Furthermore, the objective is to highlight the ways in which garments, jewellery and footwear were exploited by the deceased to express their status and social membership, and to stress their identity as the Νέων Ἑλλήνων ('New Greeks') in this distinctive local community (Bell 1940, 134).

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