The Face of the Elite

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Translated by Glenn W. Most

Wᴴᴱɴ ᴛʜᴇ Rᴏᴍᴀɴ ɴᴏʙʟᴇᴍᴀɴ Pietro Della Valle put out to sea near Venice on June 8, 1614, in order to set out on a long voyage to the Orient, it was not only his hope of overcoming his deep sorrow over an unhappy love affair that drove him on. To be sure, according to his own testimony it was only the intervention of Saint Catherine on the Sinai that finally succeeded in curing him of the anguish of his love; but in fact the affair had occurred five years before he departed. Instead, it seems to have been the prospect of "winning a resounding name and eternal fame" that appealed to him. As the son of an old and wealthy Roman family, he had of course already inherited a share in that "resounding name" as his birth-right. But although Pietro had enjoyed the education and training in Rome appropriate to his status, he had not yet performed exceptional exploits or achieved "eternal fame" in any area. Instead, it looks as though Pietro's desire for great deeds, fame, and a typically Humanist form of immortality stood in a certain disproportion to his own capabilities in the classical fields of noble accomplishment. So he saw the struggle for Christian virtues and ideals in distant, dangerous lands as a more promising field for his ambitions.[1]

From Venice, Della Valle sailed first to Constantinople, where he spent about a year, learning Turkish and a little Arabic, and then traveled on to Egypt, where he spent the winter in Cairo. From there he undertook various excursions into the nearer and farther surroundings, during which he indulged in his passion for antiquity and antiquities. He visited the pyramids as well as other graves—whenever possible, inside as well as outside.

In the celebrated necropolis of Sakkara he found the broad field of graves already largely ransacked by peasants who had

dug for treasures. Della Valle set up his tent in the middle of the "molehills" which these excavations had left behind and began to study the surrounding graves and mummies. On the morning of December 15, 1615, however, he made an extraordinary discovery of which he provided a description in the letters he wrote concerning his voyage—a description that was to become the first, and for over two hundred years the only, discovery report about portrait mummies.

That morning, a peasant who wanted to show Della Valle a very special find in complete secrecy led him to the shaft of a grave from which he had recovered the richly decorated mummy of a man (fig. 1). The mummy was complete and undamaged. Its upper side showed the portrait of the dead man, painted in a naturalistic manner, as well as various ornaments and symbols which decorated his whole body, some painted in various colors, others gilt. Written on the chest stood the inscription: ΕΥΨΥΧΙ, "farewell." Della Valle was enthusiastic about the find: the mummy was, he wrote, "the most exquisite sight in the world . . . , quite apart from the fact that the curiosity of scholars can draw a thousand conclusions from it for the knowledge of the antiquities of those days." The peasant then brought to the light of day another, no less richly decorated, mummy, this time, to Della Valle's delight, that of a young woman.[2] Finally Della Valle climbed down into the grave himself in order to see how the mummies were buried. "When I arrived at the bottom of the shaft myself, I found corpses in all the graves, so that it was clear that, as the peasant had said, the shaft had only just then been discovered. The corpses lay buried in the sand without any particular order . . . , one on top of another, just like macaroni in cheese." Evidently, what Della Valle's informant had shown him was an older subterranean grave which had been filled by the shifting desert sand, to which later burials had been added unsystematically.

Comparable discoveries were not made again for a long time. Most of the mummy portraits exhibited today in museums scattered throughout the whole world—that is, those portraits which were once placed upon mummies but were removed from them by the people who found them—were not discovered until

the latter part of the nineteenth century. For most of these portraits, unfortunately, far too little is known about the circumstances of their discovery: many derive from illegal excavations, and even most scholars behaved not much better than the professional thieves competing with them. A laudable exception was W. M. Flinders Petrie, who not only carefully documented his excavations in Hawara in the Fayum but also published them quickly.[3] These mummy portraits were discovered all over Egypt, but restricted to the vicinity of those cities and villages especially influenced by the Greek and Roman conquerors. The forms of burial involved were extremely various. At some sites, for example in Hawara or Antinoopolis, the expensive mummies were merely interred in shallow sand graves without any sign on the surface. Elsewhere, for example in er-Rubayat and in Panopolis/Achmim, rock tombs of various types were used; as a rule these were quite modest compared with the older Egyptian tombs. Locally, graves from the Pharaonic period were reused— for example, on Della Valle's testimony, in Sakkara.

In general, a detailed summary of the history of the discovery of the portrait mummies[4] would reveal a remarkable discrepancy: on the one hand, there has evidently been an enormous enthusiasm for Egyptian antiquities, for the mummies and for the portraits which were sometimes attached to them, an enthusiasm expressed not least in the great demand for such collector's pieces; but on the other hand, those of us who study these objects are constantly running into a wall of silence, concerning the exact circumstances of their discovery, erected by the lucky people who found them. Just imagine what detailed observations of the arrangement of the necropolises, of their size and development, of the kinds of graves and funeral gifts, of the precise modes of production and decoration of the mummies, etc., could have taught us about the deceased individuals as well as about the society to which they belonged: about their social and material conditions, about their religious notions and rituals, about their hopes for the after-life. Of course it must be granted that it was not until this century that questions like these moved more conspicuously into the center of scholarly interest—or rather: it was only gradually that people recognized how much could be

contributed towards answering questions of cultural history, in the largest sense,[5] by detailed archaeological observations, even when written evidence was missing—or, indeed, precisely then.

In the nineteenth century, and also during the first half of the twentieth century, on the other hand, the portrait panels were viewed in the first instance as works of art to be presented as isolated display pieces, like masterpieces of later artistic periods; the aesthetic enjoyment accompanying the viewing and admiration of life-like realism and splendid color seemed one of the essential purposes of the paintings, sometimes in fact their only essential purpose. But since it is probably only rarely that genuine aesthetic enjoyment can come about without any connection at all to the content of what is represented, it is not surprising that already in the nineteenth century there arose a lively interest in the portrayed individuals themselves and in their identity: people tried to guess their social status and their origin, to investigate their way of life and, not least, to penetrate to their very personality.

But the chances for the success of such attempts at reconstructing the patrons of the mummy portraits had been virtually reduced to zero by the very fact that the portraits had been isolated from their cultural context. So some viewers tried to approach the patrons' personalities by using psychologizing interpretations, for which the following is an extreme but, alas, by no means isolated example:

Special interest has attached recently to the splendid Number 21 [fig. 2].[6] Lenbach considers it the most extraordinary of them all. It represents a man who has just recently passed beyond the border line 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, moustached mouth of this countenance which, though certainly not ugly, is restless, then we are inclined 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.

This interpretation by the famous Egyptologist Georg Ebers and similar ones from the 1890s, which themselves seem to be still in the midst of their own *Sturm und Drang*, admittedly remain unsurpassed, but even later similar attempts were not lacking. During the Third Reich, physiognomic studies once again reached a dismal climax. Using pseudo-scientific arguments, racist theoreticians attempted to develop criteria to determine what race the individuals represented belonged to and what their personality characteristics were; they tried to distinguish above all Greeks and Jews from one another, but also Arabs and other peoples. These studies, whose complicity in Nazi propaganda cannot help but disgust us, were largely ignored after World War II—and, by the way, they may well have contributed to the lack of interest, on the part of scholarship since then, in the question of the identity of the patrons of the mummy portraits.

But it is not only the ideology of these attempts that makes them absurd, but also their content—and not just because many of these pictures are thoroughly stereotyped. After all, portraits are never the pure, objective copy of a person and of his or her personality, especially not those portraits made as a special commission for a representative function. What applies to contemporary photographs—think only of family photos from the beginning of this century or of the images of politicians on their election posters—is even more true in the case of ancient painted or sculpted portraits: they show the person, if not primarily, then at the very least additionally, as he or she *wanted* to be seen, and hence they present a personality which, at least in part, is deliberately constructed.[7] This is not only a question of superficial beautification or rejuvenation (procedures which even today, by the way, convey metaphorical meanings such as *beautiful = good* or *young = active*). A person's appearance is always determined to a great extent by his or her facial expression, which, in the case of painted or sculpted portraits, could be seen as a kind of gesture superimposed upon the physiological foundation. So certain stereotyped facial "gestures"—a lowered corner of the mouth, a furrowed brow, or a suggested smile—can serve to characterize a person in a specific way, as friendly, grim,

energetic, reflective, et cetera. But it is extremely difficult to reach even this superficial layer of the personality, the way in which the patrons wanted to be seen. The philosopher Nelson Goodman reminds us in a similar connection that Western viewers were extremely confused when they saw the first Japanese movies and at first were hardly able to recognize just which emotions the actors were trying to express—"whether," for example, "a face was expressing agony or hatred or anxiety or determination or despair or desire . . . ; for even facial expressions are to some extent molded by custom and culture."[8] Even if many facial gestures, especially the more expressive ones, only permit a restricted range of interpretations, nonetheless in the case of foreign cultures we can never determine with absolute certainty just how these traits are evaluated and what their connotations are; such evaluations are always derived from the context of the culture as a whole, from its traditions, values and experiences, and from the specific situation for which such a portrait was made. In the case of ancient cultures, it is only very incompletely, if at all, that either of these aspects can ever be reconstructed.

Another attempt to get closer to the patrons could start from the names that are sometimes written on the portraits or on the mummy's body (pls. 1 and 6).[9] But a name alone does not tell us very much. It is only when a person of this name is known to us from other sources that we can restore to the portrait a part of its identity *by means of* the name. But because it is only in exceptional cases that the few inscriptions on the portrait mummies provide not only the deceased's name but also the names of his parents, his place of residence or his profession, there is no point in searching for them throughout the extensive papyrus archives, since almost all these names are quite common in Roman Egypt. Hence the individual persons involved will always remain unknown to us.

Some scholars have tried at least to infer from these individuals' names their ancestry, for we find Egyptian names as well as Greek and Latin ones. But this attempt too has proven futile.[10] Since the Hellenistic age there had been mixed marriages in the higher levels of Egyptian society between Egyptians and the Macedonian conquerors and immigrants from the Hellenized

regions of the eastern Mediterranean. In the first two and a half centuries AD, the period which produced most of the portrait mummies, this ethnic intermingling within the population of Egypt went so far that no conclusions whatsoever can be drawn any longer from the names concerning the ancestry of their bearers. When descriptions like "Egyptian" or "Greek" appear in the written records, they refer exclusively to the person's *legal* status—which leads to the seemingly paradoxical consequence that the "Hellenes" ("Greeks") are a sub-category of the "Egyptians."[11]

But there is one thing that the names do tell us: they are one piece of evidence among others that reveal something about their bearers' *cultural* reference system, and to this extent they reflect an ethos which tends to be either more Egyptian, or Greek, or else Roman. Understood in this sense, the names on the portrait mummies even permit a cautious generalization: the classification of all the names transmitted on the mummies (i.e., the names not only of the deceased, but also of their parents where these are indicated) into categories like Greek theophoric, Egyptian theophoric, "Common Greek," Roman, etc., shows a statistical distribution that lies between that of the most strongly Hellenized group in the Fayum, the "6475 Arsinoite Katoikoi,"[12] and that of the population of Karanis, a village which is distinguished from many smaller villages of the oasis by its still relatively high percentage of a privileged population. Judging by the names, the patrons of the portrait mummies clearly tend to belong to the more strongly Hellenized parts of the Egyptian population; but on the other hand it is certainly not the case that the portraits represent a purely Greek population, as scholars have often thought—even if "Greek" here were understood in a cultural sense.[13]

Furthermore, we can infer that the subjects of the portraits belonged to a well-to-do social class. This conclusion is based not so much upon the portraits themselves; while we are accustomed nowadays to determine the price of a picture by artistic criteria, in antiquity pictures were produced by artisans and their value was essentially dependent upon the materials, for example the expense of the color pigments. Thus, it was more

the quantity of linen in which the mummies were wrapped than the portraits themselves that determined the cost of the portrait mummies. As the papyri inform us, the cost of such linen wrappings could easily exceed the yearly income of a man with even a respectable profession. In the year 113 AD a foreman at an irrigation plant earned thirty-six drachmas a month, and in the years 114 and 150 AD a guard at custom station received sixteen drachmas a month;[14] but prices of up to six hundred drachmas are recorded in the papyri for the mummy wrappings of a single burial.[15] In some cases the mummies were also partially or completely gilt (pl. 2),[16] a luxury which was doubtlessly available to only a small number of wealthy people.

The same circles are also pointed to by the few indications of professions found on the portraits. About twenty panels show men with a coat which characteristically is either lying in a fold on the left shoulder (pl. 4) or is closed over the right shoulder, and is often combined with a sword-belt. Many of these men may have been soldiers, who received Roman citizenship and other privileges either when they enlisted in the military or after they completed their service, and who, according to the written records, belonged to the well-to-do local elite.[17]

Another portrait bears an inscription designating the represented person as a *naukleros*. According to ancient law, these *naukleroi* were freight contractors for commercial transport by water, who could own the ship or else, under certain circumstances, merely leased it. In any case, these *naukleroi* were liable with their private wealth for every load they transported, even in the case of loss due to force majeure. Probably no one would have entrusted a load to them unless they had a sound financial background, and often we have evidence that in fact they did belong to the most wealthy inhabitants of a place.[18]

But perhaps most interesting of all is a group of portraits of children, which show the boys in white garments and with an unusual hairdo (pl. 3). In contrast to ordinary fashionable hairdos, here the hair is long and, as with girls, is combed backwards from the forehead and is bound into a short pony-tail.[19] The key to the interpretation of this unusual hairdo for boys can probably be found in a literary text of the second century AD. In "The

Ship or the Wishes," Lucian reports the conversation of some Athenian friends in the harbor of Piraeus, where an unusually large and splendid ship with a load of grain had just arrived from Egypt. They have visited the ship with amazement and now that they once again have solid earth under their feet they notice that one of their companions is missing. Samippus voices the suspicion that this man had forgotten everything around him "when that pretty lad came out of the hold, the one in pure white linen, with his hair tied back over both sides of his forehead [and] coiled in a plait (*plokamon*) behind."[20] In the ensuing conversation of the friends concerning the meaning of this unusual hairdo, Timolaus finally explains that among the Egyptians this is a sign of noble birth and that all aristocratic boys wear their hair braided in this way until they have reached adolescence (*ephebikon*). The description of hairdo and clothing could hardly correspond more precisely to the appearance of these boys in the mummy portraits, who consequently were not only free-born but also of good birth.[21]

Perhaps we can even go a step farther. Several papyri refer to a ritual on the occasion of a boy's entrance into the age of (fiscal) adulthood, of which the central symbolic action was the cutting off of a lock of hair during a ceremonial *rite de passage*, the Mallokōuria.[22] The boys belonged to the highest local social class. If this connection of the hairdo on the mummy portraits with the passage in Lucian on the one hand and with the Mallokouria on the other is correct, then the boys on the mummy-portraits belonged to the highest social class of the Fayum, the "6475 Arsinoite Katoikoi" mentioned above (and to their equivalents in the other towns from which the portraits originate). In the Fayum these "6475 Arsinoite Katoikoi" were a rich and, what is more, tax-favored circle of persons into which one could only be admitted after a strict examination (*epikrisis*), on the basis of one's descent from ancestors who themselves had already belonged to this group, presumably since the Augustan age.[23] These 6475 Katoikoi had dedicated themselves especially to the task of preserving Greek culture, and they had their children taught in the gymnasium according to traditional Greek custom.[24]

These and some further indications in the portraits show that the patrons of mummy portraits were members of the local upper class of the various towns. The majority of the persons present themselves in a fashionable dress which is typical of the upper classes of all the Roman provinces and even of the city of Rome. Thus the men imitate the famous hairdo of Nero, they take over the beard fashion of the Emperor Hadrian and his successors, or they present themselves in a military mode with a short hair-cut (pl. 4) like the soldier-emperors of the third century (fig. 5). The ladies do their hair according to the current fashion (figs. 3 and 4) with luxuriously playful curly wigs, braided hairdos similar to turbans, or else the more restrained coiffure of the Empress Faustina Minor from the second half of the second century.[25] The same applies to the clothing, which always consists of an undergarment with decorative stripes (clavi) and a cloak worn on top of it (pl. 5). The painted jewelry of the ladies has real parallels in the museums of Europe, deriving from sites throughout the whole Roman empire.[26]

On the basis of observations like these, Classicists have often concluded that the background of the patrons was "purely Greek." Just how problematic the mixture of populations since the Hellenistic period makes any such conclusion was already pointed out above in connection with the personal names; furthermore, there is good reason for fundamental doubt whether any cultural group ever preserves itself as "pure" (whatever that might mean). But those scholars who have interpreted the evidence in this way have also completely overlooked the fact that the portraits were originally not isolated pictures but formed part of a larger ensemble: the mummy. It is quite wrong to interpret the burial form of the mummy as an arbitrary whim, as though it were accidental or had been chosen for reasons of fashion. Burial customs and ideas about death and the afterlife tend to be particularly conservative—in the face of the existential threat of death, people recall the tried and true convictions and rituals of their ancestors. Instead, this mode of burial must be seen in connection with the persuasive power of the Egyptian tradition, its religious doctrines and hopes for the afterlife,

which already had a powerful effect upon the Greek conquerors of the Hellenistic Age and thereafter upon their descendants.

The best proof of this fact, and at the same time the most striking expression of the religious doctrines themselves, are the symbolic and scenic images placed on many mummies.[27] They were either painted and applied in gold onto the outermost linen bands (fig. 1), or they were sculpted in relief and gilt on the mummy cases, which were formed with stucco into solid casings like sarcophagi (pls. 1 and 2). These images are by no means an exotic decoration of a decadent age of decline, as people once suspected. Instead they depict meaningful religious concepts based upon traditional Egyptian ideas. In the end, all the scenes serve a single purpose: to facilitate the deceased's journey into the Underworld and to guarantee him or her eternal life in the world beyond. That is why every single one of the scenically decorated mummies includes a depiction of the mummification ritual: behind an often lion-headed bier, upon which the deceased is lying in the form of a mummy, stands the jackal-headed god Anubis, who has started the mummification rituals which are indispensable for resurrection. The bier is flanked by the divine sisters Isis and Nephthys, who appear over and over again; they mourn and protect the deceased, Osiris so-and-so, just as they once mourned and protected the god Osiris himself. As though for confirmation, the effect of the correctly performed mummification ritual is depicted upon the mummies of Thermoutharin and the younger Artemidorus (pl. 1): in a lower register the mummy upon the bier has just been awakened to a new life and is in the process of standing up.[28]

The majority of the other scenes represent the worship of the god Osiris in his various manifestations, or the deceased person in one of his or her forms in the afterlife. We can confidently conclude that the religious, and in particular the sepulchral, ideas of the persons on the mummy portraits are deeply rooted in ancient Egyptian tradition. Through the mummification itself, through magical symbols, scenic images and actions, people reassured themselves about their resurrection to a new life in the world beyond, about the good will and proximity of the gods, above all of Osiris, who had overcome death himself and

was now lord of the Underworld, and of Amun-Re, in whose light and splendor people wanted to enjoy freedom and all the pleasures of a carefree life similar to that on earth.

But now we suddenly find ourselves confronted with an interesting phenomenon: the well-to-do local elite of the Fayum and of other places presents itself in its portraits entirely in Greco-Roman appearance, but in its mummification and mummy decoration it demonstrates its religious anchoring in Egyptian belief.[29]

How can we understand the connection between such disparate cultural elements? We can come somewhat closer to an answer if we consider the function of these mummies in the funeral ritual and ask what it means when the traditional Egyptian mask on the head of the deceased is replaced by a painted portrait. After all, it was not because of lack of imagination that these masks had always been shaped in the same way: instead, as the face of Osiris, they had been an important part of the mummy's magical equipment. The key to the answer could lie hidden in a series of observations and ancient reports that indicate that, starting at the latest in the third century BC, the mummies remained unburied for some time and were kept somewhere above ground.[30] In Hawara, for example, the mummies were buried in plain pits in the desert sands without any marker above ground, so that the grave could never be traced again. This made a cult of the dead at the grave impossible, so that such a cult must have taken place *before* the burial. Furthermore, Flinders Petrie observed that "the mummies had been much injured by exposure during a long period before burial" and that they were "dirtied, flymarked, caked with dust which was bound on by rain." In point of fact, some ancient authors too report that the Egyptians kept the mummies of their relatives above ground and even at their home for some time, a custom the Church Fathers still complained about. According to Athanasius, Saint Anthony retired into the loneliness of the desert to die; he wanted to be buried there by a few close friends, for he feared that otherwise his corpse would be embalmed and exhibited by the monks in a monastery, who had offered him their hospitality. Some earlier authors even report that the mummies

took part in banquets. Perhaps we should understand this to mean that on certain days, in connection with ceremonial banquets, the portrait mummies received their cult of the dead. In some cases, this may have taken place in their relatives' houses, in others in a kind of heroic sanctuary in the necropolis. An impressive example of such a "heroic sanctuary" was excavated a few years ago by the Polish team led by Wictor Daszewski in the coastal village of Marina el-Alamein.[31] In a large necropolis they discovered an elaborate grave complex with subterranean chambers, reached by a long corridor leading downwards (fig. 6). In two chambers branching off to the sides from this corridor they found a total of fifteen mummy burials of children, women, and men. Some of the mummies bore painted portraits, which unfortunately are not well preserved; some were completely gilt, with the mouth covered additionally by a gold leaflet. Particularly remarkable is a banquet hall on the surface with a view of the sea and couches for the banquet connected with the cult of the dead.

In this custom of exhibiting the mummies, either in the relatives' house or in this kind of banquet hall, we can recognize that the cult of the dead served not only for their survival in the afterlife but also for the self-representation of the family of the deceased, who presented his or her mummy to the limited public of those present at the ceremony. In this connection we can also easily understand the introduction of naturalistic portraits into the cult of the dead, for they are particularly well suited for public representation. Public self-representation had already become increasingly important in Pharaonic Egypt, and it also played a significant role in the Hellenistic kingdoms. In Roman culture, with which people in Egypt now saw themselves confronted, this kind of self-representation, also and especially on the part of private persons, was the basis, to a degree previously unknown, for determining personal identity and establishing social relations. Both the self-consciousness of every individual and his or her position within society seem to have depended to a large extent upon that image of himself or herself which, quite literally, was placed before his own and other people's eyes. During the festivals for the dead, people seem to have taken advantage of the

opportunity for this kind of self-representation. Mummification and Egyptian decoration fulfilled their magical function for the survival of the deceased in the world beyond; the realistic representation of a relative in the portrait reminded people of their social roles in this world, demonstrated their membership in a social group shaped by Hellenistic-Roman culture, and in this way guaranteed their survival in the memory of society.

In view of these considerations it should by now have become clear that the various elements of the portrait mummies were originally anchored in different cultures and were capable of satisfying different requirements of one and the same person or family. At the same time it has turned out that the question I raised earlier concerning the identity of the persons portrayed is considerably more complex than one might have thought at first. We have already discovered that in the social classes with which we are dealing here we can no longer speak of Greeks or Egyptians in the sense of racial descent. Now we have a series of indications that make the question of *cultural* identity multilayered too. In the last few years, historians and papyrologists have increasingly directed their attention to the disparity of the roles that a person can play in a society.[32] In Egypt these roles were related to areas of life which were determined in very different ways, sometimes more by Egyptian traditions, sometimes more by the culture of the new rulers. So someone who belonged to the upper class could be said to act, according to circumstances, one time as "a Greek" (for example in the gymnasium, as the sanctuary of Hellenic culture), another time as "an Egyptian" (for example in religious cult), and possibly a third time as "a Roman" (for example in the administration or in the military domain). Persons often bore two different names, one Greek or Latin and the other Egyptian. And in fact it can be shown that the choice of using the one name or the other could depend upon the particular context, the particular role.[33]

Now, what is *the* identity of such a person? Unfortunately, we lack documents that could tell us how the individuals saw themselves and whether they felt this change of roles as a change from one identity to another. But there seem to be good grounds for supposing that it is our modern, analytical perspective that splits
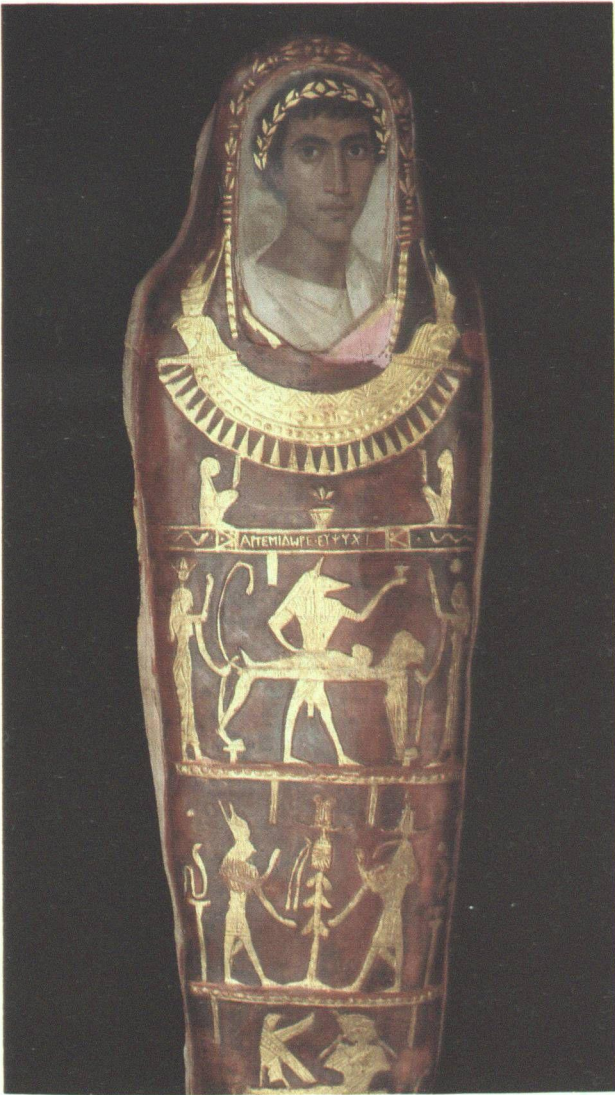
Plate 1 Portrait mummy of Artemidoros the younger found together with the portrait mummies of an elder Artemidoros (his father?) and a lady named Thermoutharin (his mother?) in the necropolis of Hawara. London, British Museum EA 21810.
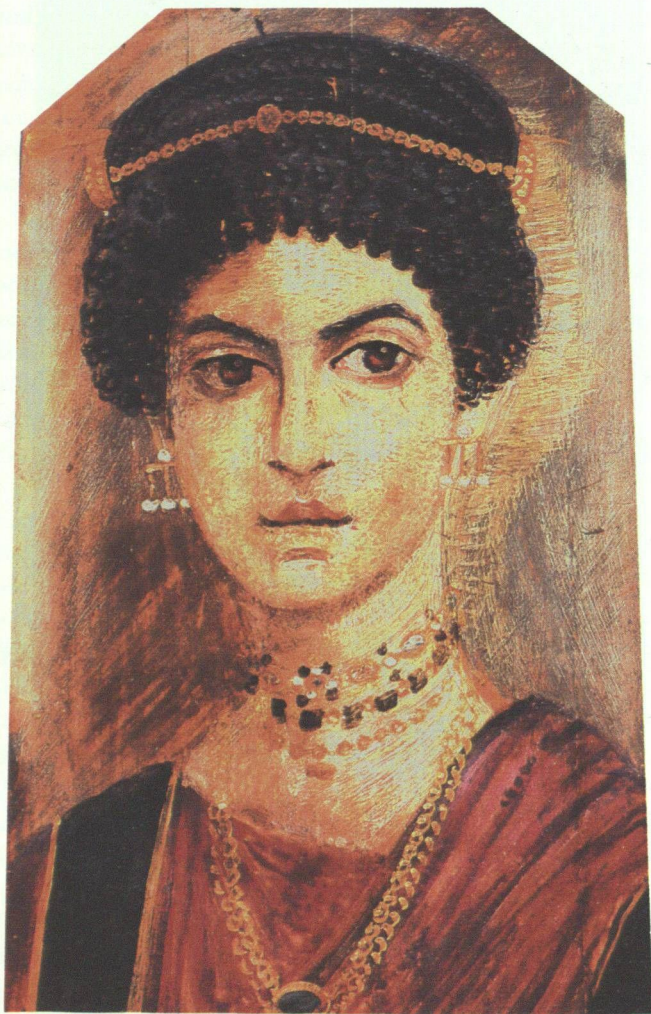
Plate 2 Portrait mummy of a girl, called the "Golden Girl" because of her gilt stucco case. Courtesy of E. Doxiadis, *The Mysterious Fayum Portraits: Faces from Ancient Egypt.*
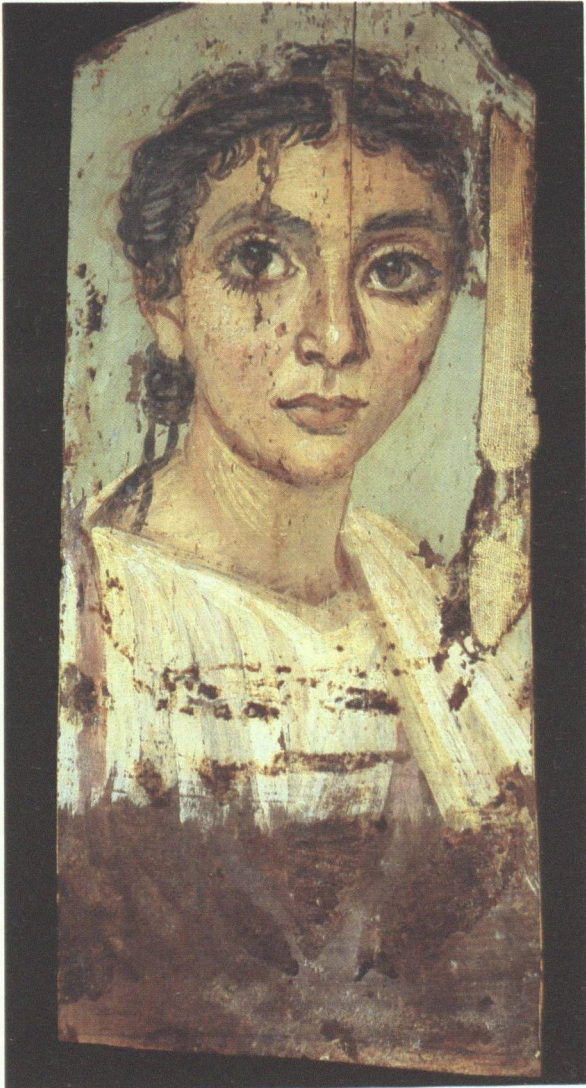
Plate 3 Mummy portrait of a boy displaying a hair style typical of children belonging to the local Egyptian elite. Copenhagen, National Museum 3892.
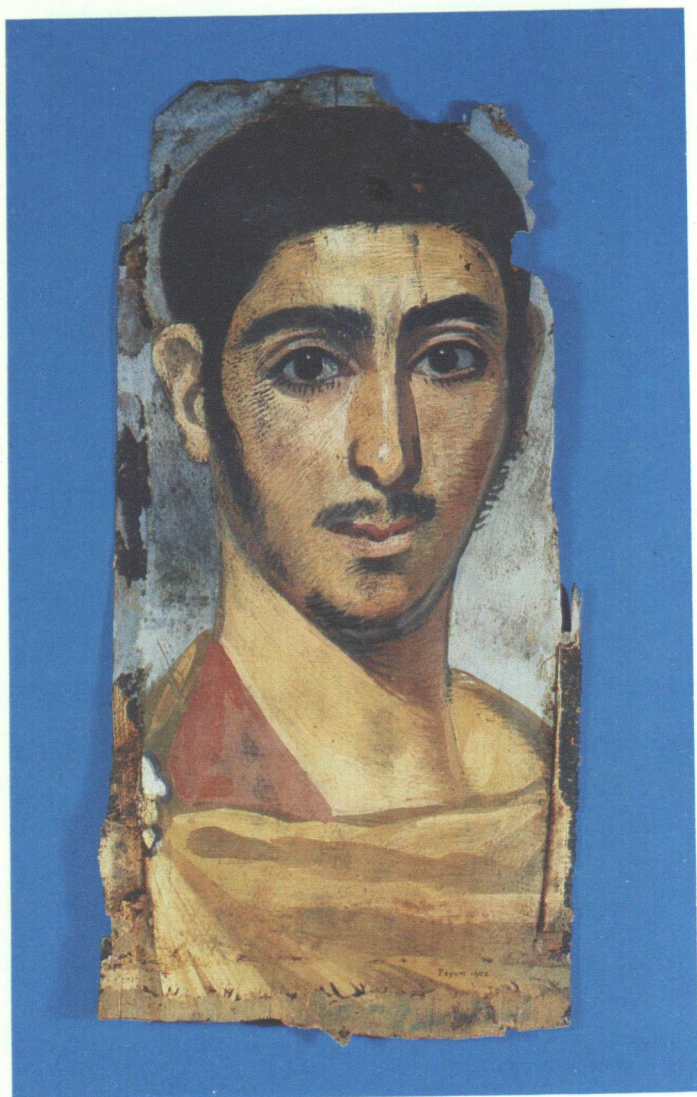
Plate 4 Mummy portrait of a soldier(?) presented in a habit typical of soldier emperors of the third century AD (cf. fig. 5). Oxford, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology 1896–1908 E.
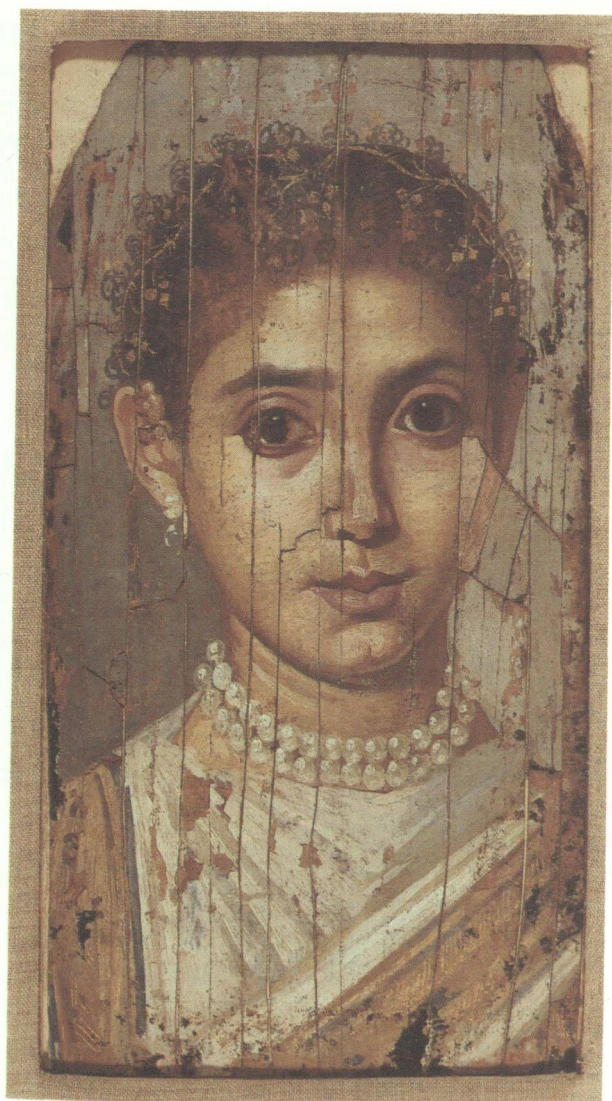
Plate 5 Mummy portrait of a girl, one of the finest surviving ancient paintings with most delicate features, and wreath and clavi patterns painted in real gold. Bonn, Akademisches Kunstmuseum D804.

Plate 6 Mummy portrait of the young Eirene. The demotic inscription reads: "Eirene, daughter of Sulvanus, her mother is Senpnoutis. May her soul live forever in Osiris-Sokar, the great god, the Lord of Abydos." Stuttgart, Wuerttembergisches Landesmuseum 7.2.

human beings up into discontinuous partial ethnic identities, whereas for the persons involved the change of role took place more or less unnoticed. At least in those circles of Roman Egypt which, as a consequence of their various functions within society, had united such different roles within themselves, people will perhaps have felt not so much a split between cultural worlds, or even a crack in their personal identity, as rather the chance of creating a synthesis of all the positive aspects of the different cultures—a consideration which must appear all the more plausible if we remind ourselves that no group within a society can ever preserve an unchanging identity free from external influences. This does not mean projecting our modern vision of a harmoniously coexisting, or even unifying, multicultural society onto Roman Egypt; there is certainly no need for that. Neither was the high society of Roman Egypt one big happy family, nor is it likely that the difference in the cultural origin of the individual aspects ever entirely vanished from people's consciousness. And finally the social conditions turned out in the long run to be unstable. But there are many reasons to believe that the combination of cultural elements of different origins was not necessarily felt as a contradiction, at least in certain circles and during the first two centuries AD, but instead as an enrichment and expansion of a person's possibilities and potentials, both in daily social life and with regard to religious ideas and hopes. So we shall probably have to answer the question about the identity of the persons represented in the mummy portraits either by supposing that they possessed many identities or—as I would prefer—that they possessed more complex identities than the ones that scholars have so often looked for.[34] The awareness of a specific ethnic identity develops exclusively in contrast to another one, that is, it results from a need for demarcation. But just this kind of need for demarcation does not seem to have been very strongly felt during this period.[35]

It is precisely the phenomenon, that the patrons of our portrait mummies possessed a multicultural background, which can probably help explain their disappearance at many places around the middle of the third century AD.[36] For in the third century a feeling of difference evidently increased, one which was

supported by changing political and economic conditions and was also intentionally strengthened by the behavior of the metropolitan and urban populace. In the first and second centuries— the heyday of the portrait mummies—the thoroughgoing interpenetration of the cultures in the Fayum also expressed itself in a very concrete way. The members of the upper class resided not only in the metropolises but also in the villages, where they strengthened the economy in general and also supported the Egyptian temples. Members of the lower classes tried their luck in the metropolises and there they came into contact with Hellenic culture.

In the third century, the social groups separated out again. We find scarcely any evidence any more for villagers who settled in the metropolises, and the elite moved back from the countryside into the cities.[37] Their ambition was now no longer directed to their reputation in the immediate social context; instead they oriented themselves towards other elites of the Roman Empire. The Egyptian villages now lacked the support of the well-to-do; as a consequence, the economic pressure rose and the contrast between rich and poor, as a contrast between city and country, intensified. Perhaps, among the population of the Egyptian villages there may even have developed a mood hostile to the "Greeks," as Alan Bowman has argued. For him one expression of this can be found in the revival of the so-called Potter's Oracle, an apocalyptic Egyptian poem prophesying the fall of Alexandria. It was originally directed against the privileges the Greeks enjoyed under the rule of the Ptolemies, but is transmitted to us in several Greek manuscripts of the second and third centuries AD. Whatever the attitude of the rural populace may have been,[38] in the third century, the elite seem to have withdrawn from the support of the Egyptian temples, which gradually became neglected or deteriorated or were turned into military camps when the Emperor paid a visit to the province.[39] So it looks as though the deepening of socioeconomic and status differences brought with it among the elites an increasing awareness of and interest in Greco-Roman culture, which led, at least temporarily, to a new, almost anachronistic Greek identity on

the part of the pagan elites, one which was to a certain extent more one-dimensional than previously known forms.

In this context it seems to me a plausible speculation that the local elites also developed a new feeling for the fact that the funeral customs they preserved were genuinely Egyptian. The fact of the general decline of the Egyptian cults proves that people had become on the whole less rooted in ancient Egyptian beliefs—and presumably this was true above all among the Hellenized population. Hence, in view of the new antagonism—or at least indifference—with regard to Egyptian religion, it seems only logical that the old burial customs no longer convinced these metropolitan people to the same degree—so that the bell began to toll for the end of the portrait mummies as well, which had been dedicated to these customs.

At the risk of a certain degree of exaggeration we could therefore perhaps summarize part of the development in this way: the times of the type of bicultural, Greco-Egyptian identities and forms of expression, to which the portrait mummies owed their origin, had passed.[40]

NOTES

This article represents a slightly expanded version of a lecture which I delivered in February 1998 in Copenhagen at the invitation of Mogens Jørgensen and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek as well as in various German versions in Berlin, Mainz, Göttingen, Leipzig, Darmstadt, and Heidelberg; only the most indispensable footnotes have been added. I would like to express my sincere gratitude for the invitations and for the ensuing discussions. I owe particular thanks to Glenn W. Most for the translation.

1. The article is based upon my work on portrait mummies, which goes back to my dissertation of 1990 and from which two monographs have issued, in which the arguments presented here can be found in much more detail but, alas, in German: *Mumienporträts: Chronologie und kultureller Kontext* (Mainz 1996), cited here as Borg, *Mumienporträts*; and *"Der zierlichste Anblick der Welt . . . " Ägyptische Porträtmumien*, special issue of *Antike Welt* (Mainz 1998), cited here as Borg, *Antike Welt*, which is intended for a broader audience but also represents a later stage in my thinking about this material. Other works cited here in abbreviated form are the following: Parlasca, *Mumienporträts*: K. Parlasca, *Mumienporträts und verwandte Denkmäler* (Wiesbaden 1966), the first thorough monograph on the subject; Parlasca, *Repertorio* I–III: K. Parlasca, *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano* (ed. A. Adriani) B I, *Ritratti di mummie* I (Palermo 1969), II (Palermo 1977), III (Palermo 1980), the most

complete catalogue of the mummy portraits; Bierbrier, *Portraits and Masks*: M. L. Bierbrier, ed., *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London 1997), an important recent collection of articles.

On Pietro Della Valle and what follows, see P. G. Bietenholz, *Pietro Della Valle (1586–1652). Studien zur Geschichte der Orientkenntnis und des Orientbildes im Abendlande* (Basel 1962). The citations concerning the motives for his travels are taken from "Gedanken, die ich in der Accademia [degli Umoristi] bei der Präsentation meines Buches vorzutragen beabsichtige" = Bietenholz, 225–30., those about the discovery of the mummy from his letter of 25.1.1616 = Bietenholz , 205–8.

2. Both mummies were later purchased by an agent of August, "der Starke" ("the Strong") and are now in the Staatliche Kunstsammlungen in Dresden (Inv. 777 and 778); see R. Germer et al., "Die Wiederentdeckung der Lübecker Apotheken-Mumie," *Antike Welt* 26 (1995), 23.

3. W. M. F. Petrie, *Hawara, Biahmu and Arsinoe* (London 1889); *Roman Portraits and Memphis* (IV), British School of Archaeology in Egypt and Egyptian Research Account, Seventeenth Year (London 1911).

4. A survey of the history of the discoveries and collections is provided by Parlasca, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 1–58 and elsewhere, Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 183–90 and Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 5–31.

5. Here and in what follows, the concept of "culture" is intended to include all social practices, ideas, and institutions, as well as the material objects that correspond with them; these are conceived as being dialectically related with one another. Hence the concept of culture does not imply any sort of evaluation or hierarchical position (e.g., in the sense of a limitation of the term to "the higher accomplishments of civilization"), nor is it my intention to accord a privilege to one of the aspects of the cultural totality mentioned here in contrast to the others (which is why none of them—including the pictures—is understood as a pure representation of one of the others). Two consequences for understanding the suggestions presented here arise from this conception. When stating that a certain phenomenon is anchored in Greek or Egyptian or some other culture, I intend first of all to indicate its source, but at the same time I also claim that its original context remains relevant in some way. However, this should not be understood in an absolute sense, as though the meaning of cultural elements of a certain tradition which are adopted into a more or less new context remained entirely untouched. Hence I explicitly concede that meanings, connotations, et cetera, are constantly being modified, and all the more, the more the other factors change with which they interact in the above sense. In this brief article I cannot explore these interactions in any more detail. In contrast to any forced attempts to harmonize the various elements of the portrait mummies into "monolithic" concepts of culture and/or ethnicity and to alternative attempts to attribute them to an unreflected and arbitrary eclecticism, it is my foremost intention to demonstrate and accept the different roots of these elements and present them as parts of a coherent multifaceted whole.

6. The number refers to the mummy portraits of the collection of Theodor Graf, which was published by the Berlin Egyptologist Georg Ebers (G. Ebers, *Antike Portraits: Die hellenistischen Bildnisse aus dem Fayum* [Leipzig 1893] passim, the quotation on 57–58). The portrait is now located in Berlin, Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz Inv. 31161/8. For the historical context of psy-

chologizing interpretations like these see J. Bažant, *Roman Portraiture: A History of Its History* (Prague 1995), 19–23; 76–90.

7. On this subject see in general L. Giuliani, *Bildnis und Botschaft* (Frankfurt 1986), and with special reference to the mummy portraits Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 34–40.

8. N. Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (London 1969), 48.

9. The inscriptions on the portraits and mummies are collected in Parlasca, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 76–84; L. H. Corcoran, *Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt*, SAOC 56 (Chicago 1995), 66–68; D. Montserrat, "'Your name will reach the hall of the Western Mountains': Some Aspects of Mummy Portrait Inscriptions," D. M. Bailey, ed., *Archaeological Research in Roman Egypt.* The Proceedings of The Seventh Classical Colloquium of The Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum. JRA Supplement 19 (Ann Arbor, MI 1996), 177–85; Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 150–56; R. S. Bagnall has kindly brought to my attention the following corrections: (d) the name of the deceased is Demo (not Demos); (p) the name of the deceased is Dioskorous; (y) the second word is in fact a name: Eudaimonis; the readings of (g) and (s) do not look persuasive.

10. On what follows it will soon be possible to consult the fundamental work of W. Clarysse and D. J. Thompson, *Counting the People*, Collectanea Hellenistica (Leuven, forthcoming); a good summary is R. S. Bagnall, "The People of the Roman Fayum," Bierbrier, *Portraits and Masks* (note 1), 7–15.

11. J. Mélèze Modrzejewski, "Entre la cité et le fisc: le statut grec dans l'Égypte romaine," *Symposion* 1982, Valencia 241–80 = *Droit impérial et traditions locales dans l'Égypte romaine* (Aldershot 1990) chap. 1; a summary in Bagnall (note 10).

12. On these see below, note 22.

13. A list of all the names transmitted on portrait mummies, brought up to date and classified by the kindness of R. S. Bagnall, can be found in Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 41; on the criteria for the classification see Bagnall (note 10). I take the opportunity to sincerely thank Roger Bagnall once again. It must be acknowledged that the interpretation summarized here rests upon the quite small statistical basis of thirty-nine names and hence is not free of the corresponding uncertainties. But it agrees in its result with the data that can be inferred from other evidence as well (see below).

14. For these and other salaries see A. C. Johnson, *Roman Egypt to the Reign of Diocletian: An Economic Survey of Ancient Rome* II (Baltimore 1936), 301–10.

15. On the costs of funerals see D. Montserrat, "Death and Funerals in the Roman Fayum," Bierbrier, *Portraits and Masks* (note 1), 33–44.

16. E.g., the so-called "Golden Girl" in Cairo, Egyptian Mus. C.G. 33216 (pl. 2).

17. See, with further bibliography, Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 156–59.

18. See the provisional publication of the portrait fragment: E. Graefe, "A Mummy Portrait of Antinous from Thebes," Bierbrier *Portraits and Masks* (note 1), 54 Fig. 5. 2. On the *naukleroi* see A. J. M. Meyer-Termeer, *Die Haftung der Schiffer im griechischen und römischen Recht* (Zutphen 1978).

19. The hairdo differs as well from that of those boys who received certain preliminary initiations in the mystery cult of Isis: for among these latter only the

bunch of hair which is gathered together in the lock on the side is long, while the rest of the hair is either cut according to the usual fashion (i.e., more or less short) or else is entirely cut off. On the Isis boys, whom I do not further discuss here, see Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 113–21.

20. Luc. nav. 2–3 (trans. K. Kilburn).

21. Even if there is good reason to examine closely Lucian's assertions before taking them for representations of historical facts, I do not see in the passage cited here either an external reason or one internal to the text which would justify skepticism regarding its content.

22. On the papyrological evidence referring to the Mallokouria see D. Montserrat, "Mallocouria and Therapeuteria: Rituals of Transition in a Mixed Society?," *BASP* 28 (1991), 43–49; B. Legras, "Mallokouria et mallocourètes: Un rite de passage dans l'Égypte romaine," *Cahier du Centre G. Glotz 4* (1993), 113–27.

23. On the 6475 Katoikoi see D. Canducci, "I 6475 cateci greci dell'Arsinoite," *Aegyptus* 70 (1990) 211–55; and "I 6475 cateci greci dell'Arsinoite, Prosopografia," *Aegyptus* 71 (1991), 121–216.

24. For a more complete discussion of the observations and sources mentioned here see Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 113–21.

25. In detail, Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 19–88; in summary, Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 45–49.

26. On the clothing, see Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 161–67; on the ornamentation, see Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 167–72; in summary Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 49–52.

27. On the religious images on the mummy bodies see Parlasca, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 152–92; Borg, *Mumienporträts* (note 1), 111–49 and especially L. H. Corcoran, *Portrait Mummies from Roman Egypt*, SAOC 56 (Chicago 1995). With regard to her (in part problematic) conclusions, which are intended to demonstrate, against the traditional opinion of classicists, that the patrons of the portrait mummies were pure Egyptians, see the review by B. Borg, *AJA* 101 (1997), 187–88.

28. London, British Museum EA 21810 (Parlasca, *Repertorio* [note 1], no. 162; S. Walker and M. Bierbrier, eds., *Ancient Faces, Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt: A Catalogue of Roman Portraits in the British Museum* [London 1997], 56–57 no. 32); Cairo, Egyptian Museum C.G. 33221 (Parlasca, *Repertorio* [note 1], no. 260).

29. In the sense of what I said above in note 5, of course I do not intend to deny here that not only many iconographies but also many contents of the images had changed considerably since the Pharaonic period—not least under the influence of Greek religion. My point here is above all to demonstrate that the religious and sepulchral ideas expressed in these images agree in their basic aspects with traditional Egyptian beliefs. Aside from this, a study of the changes during the Imperial period is an urgent desideratum of which the results would certainly be most interesting.

30. See the detailed discussion of the sources in B. Borg, "The Dead as a Guest at Table? Continuity and Change in the Egyptian Cult of the Dead," Bierbrier, *Portraits and Masks* (note 1), 26–32, with a rather too one-sided emphasis upon the preservation of the mummies in the house of the family of the deceased.

31. W. A. Daszewski, "Mummy Portraits from Northern Egypt: The Necropolis in Marina el-Alamein," Bierbrier *Portraits and Masks* (note 1), 59–65; most

recently: W. A. Daszewski, "Marina el-Alamein Excavations 1998," *Polish Archaeology in the Mediterranean. Reports 1998* (Warsaw 1999), 41–46.

32. W. Clarysse, "Greeks and Egyptians in the Ptolemaic Army and Administration," *Aegyptus* 65 (1985), 57–66; and "Some Greeks in Egypt," J. H. Johnson, ed., *Life in a Multi-Cultural Society: Egypt from Cambyses to Constantine and Beyond*, SAOC 51 (Chicago 1992), 51–56; Bagnall (note 10), 8.

33. Bagnall (note 10) and "The Fayum and its People," in Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces* (note 28), 17–20.

34. Bagnall's conclusion is similar, note 10, 10 and note 33.

35. To be sure, this claim must be limited in certain contexts. It will certainly not have been a matter of indifference to the individual whether in a legal sense he was a Greek or a Roman or an (non-Greek) Egyptian, since this particular status resulted directly in certain reductions of financial obligations and application of a specific law code. Furthermore, there can be no doubt that the 6475 Arsinoite Katoikoi assigned a high value to their Greekness and to a "traditional" education of their children in a gymnasium.

36. There is considerable controversy among scholars concerning the date of the end of the production of portrait mummies. I have argued elsewhere, on the basis of detailed typological comparisons between the fashion hair styles of the mummy portraits and those of sculptured portraits from the rest of the Roman Empire, against the hitherto seemingly well-established thesis that the mummy portraits flourished once again in the fourth century and only came to an end with the prohibition of pagan cults in Theodosius' edict of 392 AD (see Borg, *Mumienporträts* [note 1] 19–84); for similar results see the catalogue of the British Museum portraits: Walker and Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces* (note 28). The traditional view depends for the most part upon an unproven prejudice concerning a linear stylistic evolution in art from naturalistic beginnings to a formular, abstract "end"; furthermore, it misunderstands the effect of the edict, which neither prohibited the practice of mummification nor led to a sudden end of pagan cults in Egypt (see, e.g., R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* [Princeton, NJ 1993]; Ch. Haas, *Alexandria in Late Antiquity: Topography and Social Conflict* [Baltimore and London 1997], 128–172). The end of the portrait mummies evidently depended upon local traditions. While in most places the production dries up in the second quarter of the third century, at a few others it continues until the latter part of the third century (e.g. Sakkara: see Borg, *Mumienporträts* [note 1], 177–78) or even into the fourth century (e.g. in Antinoopolis: S. Walker, "Porträts auf Leichentüchern aus Antinoopolis: Eine Anmerkung zu Kleidung und Datierung," K. Parlasca and H. Seemann, eds., *Augenblicke: Mumienporträts und ägyptische Grabkunst aus römischer Zeit* [Frankfurt 1998], 74–78).

For a more detailed discussion of the circumstances that contributed to the end of the portrait mummies, see Borg, *Antike Welt* (note 1), 88–101. The following considerations are not intended as an explanation for the disappearance of the mummy portraits. Considering the deep changes in the material culture of the whole Roman Empire in the third century, which were the context within which Egyptian conditions too must be seen embedded, these brief remarks can only provide a sketch of some specific Egyptian conditions which, together with many other factors, may well have played a role.

37. Cf. H. Braunert, *Die Binnenwanderung*, Bonner Historische Studien 26 (Bonn 1964).

38. In general we must exercise caution when judging the attitude of the Egyptian rural population, for our sources are focused too one-sidedly upon the upper classes. Thus Ewa Wipszycka points rightly to the danger of a circular argument in interpreting too quickly the material remains with their particular stylistic features, which are sometimes all we have, as "Egyptian popular art" or the like (E. Wipszycka, *Études sur le christianisme dans l'Égypte de l'antiquité tardive* [Rome 1996], 157–58).

39. See in detail R. S. Bagnall, *Egypt in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, NJ 1993).

40. I do not intend hereby to support the obsolete idea that a kind of Coptic nationalism set itself in opposition to Greek culture in the fourth and fifth centuries (see in detail with further literature: Wipszycka [note 38], passim). I am merely thinking of a reorientation of the (pagan) local elites of the third (!) century, for whom that part of Egyptian culture which was most clearly distinguishable, namely religion, had evidently come to lose some of its attractiveness.

Figure 1 The mummy found at Sakkara by Pietro Della Valle
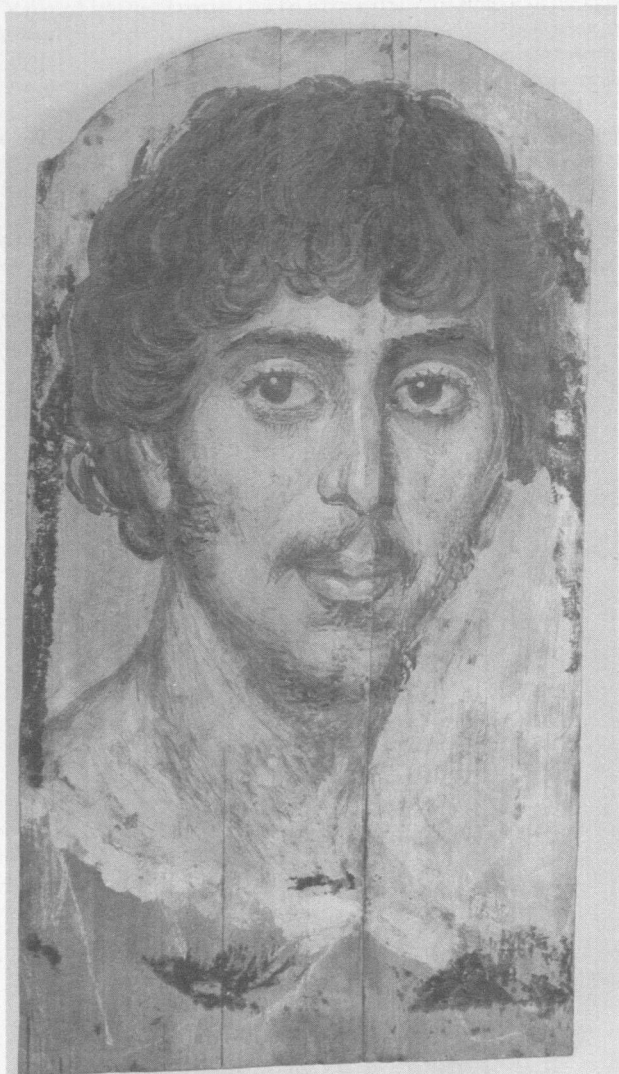(see his letter of January 25, 1616). Dresden, Staatliche Skulptur-
ensammlung Aeg. 777.

Figure 2 Mummy portrait of a man, analyzed and discussed by the Egyptologist Georg Ebers. Berlin, Staatliche Museen 31161/8.
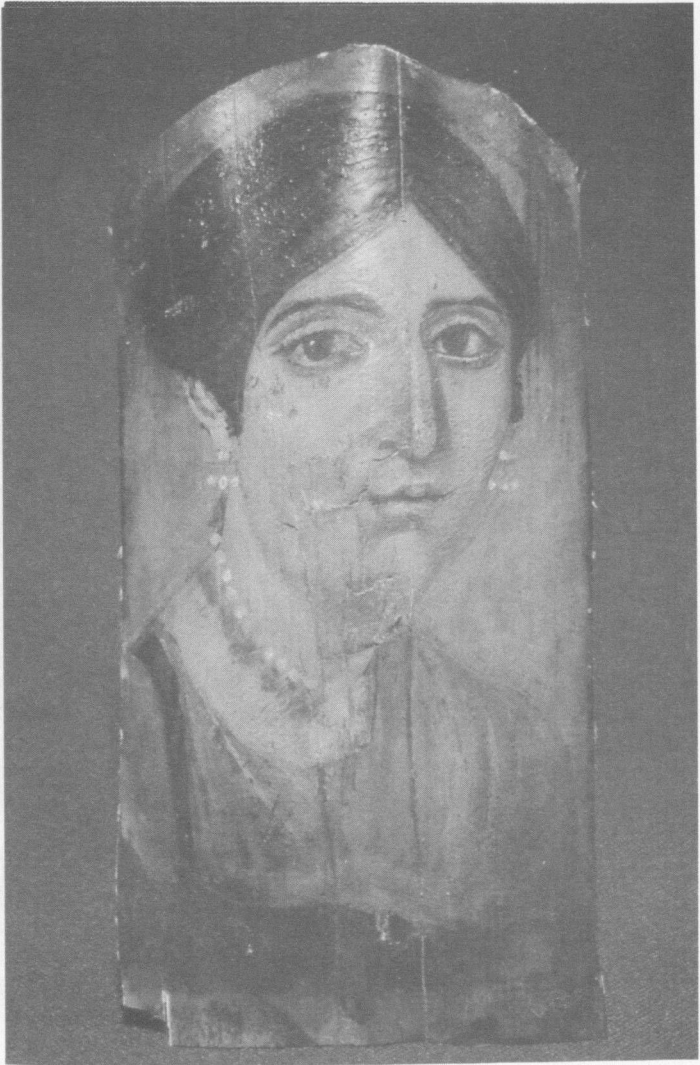
Figure 3 Mummy portrait of a lady from Hawara with typical hair style of the early Antonine period (mid-second century AD; cf. fig. 4). The Manchester Museum 5379.
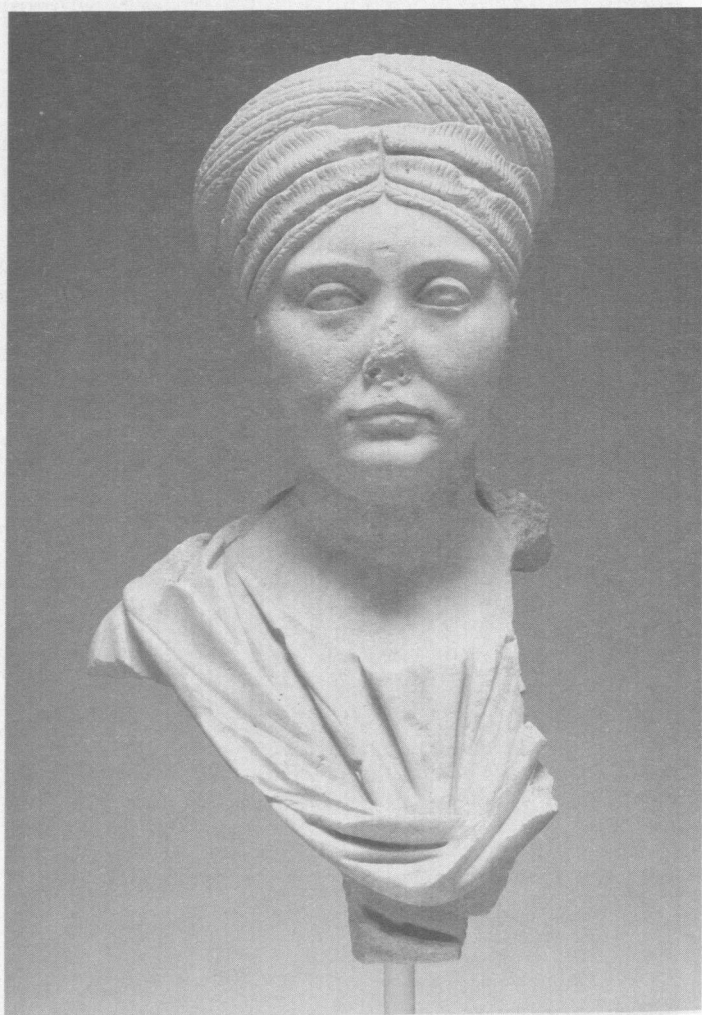
Figure 4 Marble bust of a lady with the same hair style as in fig. 3. J. Paul Getty Museum 79.AA.118.
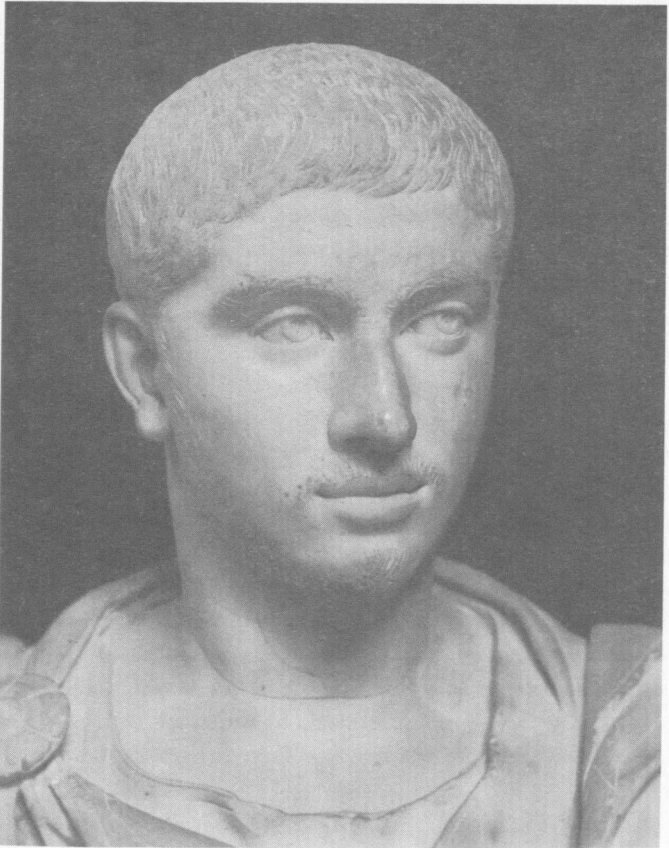
Figure 5 Marble portrait of Alexander Severus, Roman emperor,
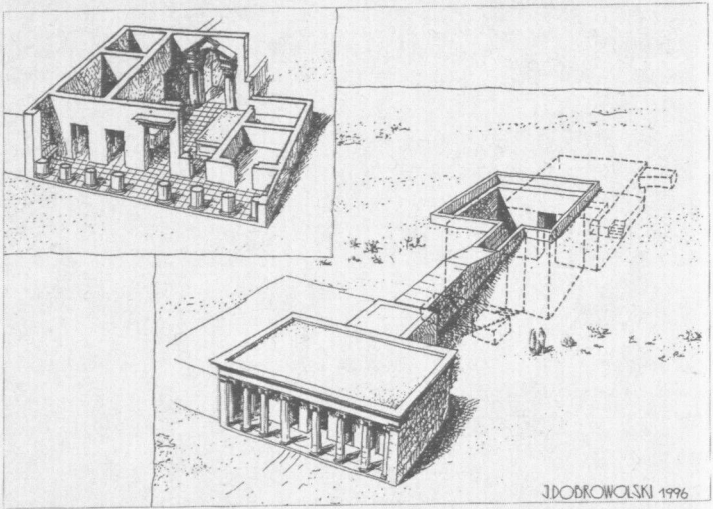222–235. Rome, Vatican, Sala dei Busti 361, acc. no. 632.

Figure 6 Reconstruction of the spectacular tomb in the necropolis of Marina el-Alamein, with subterranean burial chambers and *heroon* above ground with dining couches and a view of the sea. Drawing by J. Dobrowsolski, by kind permission of W. A. Daszewski.