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PORTRAIT MUMMIES FROM ROMAN EGYPT (I–IV CENTURIES A.D.) WITH A CATALOG OF PORTRAIT MUMMIES IN EGYPTIAN MUSEUMS, by *Lorelei H. Corcoran.* (*SAOC* 56.) Pp. xxxii + 222, pls. 32, figs. 42. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Chicago 1995. $68.75. ISBN 0-918986-99-0.

This book deals with a subject much neglected among Egyptologists until very lately: material culture from Roman Egypt. Artifacts from this period were primarily left to classicists (such as myself), who mostly chose to study those objects that seemed familiar to them. They often took a biased view, pretending that the artifacts—as, in this case, the mummy portraits—represent a basically Graeco-Roman society. The separation of most portraits from their context, especially from the mummies to which they had been attached, by authorized as well as illegal excavators and art dealers has until now encouraged this view.

It is the very merit of Corcoran, then, to take an approach that attempts both to restore the portraits to their context—predominantly by insisting on the cognitive potential of the mummies proper—and to point to the genuine Egyptian tradition of religious beliefs. Twenty-three completely preserved bodies still kept in Egypt today (equivalent to about a fourth of the total) form the focus of her study and were measured, described, and documented most meticulously, both by drawing and photography. The interpretation of their decoration occupies more than half of the publication and shows convincingly that the representations depend on old Egyptian conventions. Like other genres of the Roman period studied more recently (e.g., D. Kurth on coffins and biers, or K.P. Kuhlmann on graves near Achmim), the portrait mummies show scenes and symbols familiar since pharaonic times. They offer no reason at all for further suspecting them to have degenerated into mere adornments, no longer understood by their patrons; instead, they fit perfectly into a system of traditional beliefs about the afterlife and the duality of solar and chthonic symbolism in funerary religion.

In addition, Corcoran attempts to establish the mysteries of Isis as a kind of religious substratum. Proceeding from the observation that several of the patrons had been devotees of the goddess, she tries to show that this holds true for all patrons of portrait mummies. Thus she interprets the lustration scene as a reference to the ritual bath that, according to Apuleius, the initiates took. Yet the evidence for such a far-reaching assumption does not seem sufficient: the lustration is perfectly explicable in a traditional way (cf. pp. 59-60). Among the attributes of the deceased, only a few (e.g., the *sistrum*, or the dress of the *melanephorai* with its celestial decoration) can be related to initiates with some certainty. Even the children with a sidelock are just partly initiates to the mysteries, whereas the others appear to wear the coiffure of a certain age and status group approaching the *mallokouria.* Wreaths and garlands are both unspecific and widely favored in all kinds of festivities, where they could unfold their symbolic power. They only gain a more specific sense in their context, and thus cannot serve as a starting point for an interpretation. The wreath of the initiate described by Apuleius would even argue against Corcoran's conclusion: it consists of palm leaves surrounding the head of Lucius like the rays of the sun—an obvious symbolism that remains without parallel on mummy portraits.

Thus it is uncertain—and not even probable—that the patrons of the portrait mummies were all initiates of the Isis cult. Consequently, it appears unlikely that the paintings were made to commemorate initiation into the mysteries during the actual lifetime of the subject. Not only would we expect more definite indications for this in the paintings, but also it can be shown that the portraits were all made only after death and were mummy portraits by intention. Apart from these objections, the religious recontextualization and interpretation of the mummies are most persuasive. For other questions, however, the mummies prove less helpful.

Corcoran rightly criticizes stylistic arguments as the sole basis of chronology. On the other hand, her attempt to promote the type of mummy as a major indicator for dating remains problematic—not only because of its poor statistical basis, but mainly because of her circular reasoning (as she herself recognizes, p. 33). She accepts two premises that should have been results: 1) that mummies found together in one pit are of similar date; and, more fatal, 2) that Parlasca's dating is basically correct. I have demonstrated elsewhere that the alleged fourth-century portraits all belong to the second century and that the necropolis of Hawara, which provides most of the evidence, was abandoned during the mid-second century in favor of the necropolis of er-Rubayat, which has produced only one mummy. So most of the categories observed by Corcoran are predominantly indicators of provenience.

Despite her welcome attempt to correct the Graecocentric view of former scholars, Corcoran has not entirely escaped bias herself. Although there is certainly some dichotomy between Greek and Egyptian culture, there can scarcely be any doubt that in Imperial times there was mixture as well; the portrait mummies, especially, show influences of both these cultures. Concerning religion, to be sure, the Egyptian tradition proved to be stronger and more convincing than Greek beliefs, to natives as well as to Greeks; but this should not seduce scholars to take religion as the sole indicator for culture as a whole. The portraits alone, their coiffures, jewelry, and clothes, all represent types common to the entire Roman empire, rooted in Greek and, to a much lesser extent, Roman tradition. It can hardly be mere coincidence, moreover, that portrait mummies almost invariably come from places with a strong Greek and Roman (which does not mean Italian!) population. Intermarriage with Egyptians occurred in all social classes. Thus, personal names like the few on portraits can prove neither Greek nor Egyptian descent. Nude males and those in military dress correspond in both iconography and chronological distribution with marble portraits throughout the empire and do not require a specifically Egyptian interpretation.

Corcoran's book has not convinced me in every last detail but, more important, it has filled one of the most serious gaps and will, one hopes, draw attention to further problems to be solved by scholars not afraid of late periods and multidisciplinary approaches.

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