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Problems in the Dating of the Mummy Portraits

by Barbara Borg

Assigning a chronological order to the mummy portraits has been a highly controversial subject from the very beginning.

When Theodor Graf first showed the mummy portraits he had acquired in 1887, they caused considerable excitement.[1] The few such portraits that had been unearthed previously had remained virtually unnoticed, so that the appearance of a large number of these paintings, and in so excellent a state of preservation, led to doubts as to their very authenticity. These misgivings were bolstered by the fact that the style of the portraits did not always accord with the then current conception of antique panel-painting, but rather resembled much later work, even that of 19th-century painters. However, any scandalous rumours soon petered out, and the first and only properly scientific excavations of mummy portraits by W. M. Flinders Petrie, soon afterwards, confirmed their authenticity once and for all.[2]

Graf thought the mummy portraits to be Hellenistic, and he even suggested that some of them might represent members of the Ptolemaic dynasty. His chronological assessment was based on the high quality of the panel paintings, which seemed to him to be consistent with the skill of Greek painters whose works are described in ancient sources. His views were supported by the Egyptologist Georg Ebers,[3] who particularly noted the realistic representation of the depicted, especially on the portraits in Graf's collection, and decided that they must have been painted approximately between 200 and 80 BC.

Ebers used several arguments to explain how he arrived at the above approximation. One of these referred to papyrological evidence, which tells us that the Egyptian practice of mummification had been adopted by the Greek settlers in the country as early as the 3rd century BC. A strong argument for Ebers derived from some portraits of males with a youth-lock on one side of their heads. Usually these youth-locks would be clipped when the boys reached maturity (at the age of fourteen). Since Ebers estimated some of the depicted as well over fourteen, he concluded that they had to be princes or pages at the Alexandrian court, where the lock was sometimes worn even after that age. Also, Ebers believed the colour purple of some of the cloaks or *sagi* of the 'officers' to have been possible only during Hellenistic times, since thereafter purple was strictly reserved for the emperors. The fact that some of these same 'officers' wear their sword belt over the left shoulder rather than, as more usual, over their right, he interpreted as a Greek custom. Finally, he asserted that neither the trim of the men's beards nor the women's hairstyles showed any influence of Roman fashions.

Nevertheless, Ebers did judge some of the mummy portraits to be Roman, especially several of very inferior quality from Petrie's excavations in Hawara, and dated the poorest examples as belonging to late antiquity.

Very few scientists supported Ebers' conclusions. Richard Graul took issue with them even before Petrie had published his excavation reports.[4] Graul did not agree that *how well* a painting was executed had any relation to *when* it was done, since 'Excellence had never feared comparison with inferiority'. Without going into the history or significance of the youth-locks, Graul expressed justified doubt about the royal blood of their wearers. He argued that they showed neither any family likeness to each other, nor any resemblance to the effigies on extant Ptolemaic coins. He declared that the find-site rather contended against the mummies being of royal origin, and that this demolished the argument in favour of a Hellenistic dating. He concluded that the circumstances that (stylistic and qualitative differences notwithstanding) the representational manner of the portraits was pretty uniform throughout suggested they had been serially produced – something more likely to have been done by the Romans than the Greeks.

For a long time it was believed that certain of the panels (now in the Louvre) were portraits of Pollius Soter, a Hadrianic official, and his family. Graul used this belief as a 'fact' to support his argument. Since the supposed identification could not, however, be substantiated in any way, these paintings could be used neither to prove the emergence of mummy portraits in Imperial times, nor to pinpoint a particular period in the 2nd century AD.[5] On the other hand, Graul was quite correct in recognizing that the clothing of the deceased corresponded to that in Pompeian frescoes and to fabrics found in graves from the Imperial era, and that the women's hairstyles recalled those of the Roman marble portraits of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. For Graul, therefore, all available evidence for dating the mummy portraits pointed to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD.

The conclusions arrived at almost simultaneously by Petrie were based chiefly on the material his own excavations had brought to light.[6] He divided the mummies he had unearthed at Hawara into four categories:

(i) without any decoration
(ii) with masks showing naturalistic features, although the busts are decorated in the Egyptian style
(iii) with masks in the Greek style (three-dimensional paper-maché coverings), which also show the arms
(iv) with portraits painted on wood or linen

He assumed that, with minor overlaps, these four types succeeded each other chronologically, showing a gradual

development towards greater naturalism. This theory seemed to be confirmed by two mummies whose panel portraits had been inserted into plaster masks, which Petrie considered to be a mixed, transitional form [cf. 60].[7]

Petrie acknowledged that indications for a definite dating of the mummy portraits were very scarce. One of the plaster masks in his category (ii) carried the name of the deceased – Titus Flavius Demetrius – thereby indicating that he was born and named in the time of the Flavian emperors (AD 69–96). He conjectured therefore that the whole of category (ii) should be assigned to that period. This would mean that the painted portraits could not be earlier than the 2nd century. Furthermore, he saw a *terminus post quem* for mummies in his category (iii) in a papyrus found together with the mummies of a woman and a man, which carried the date of 127 (AD). He also assigned the panel portraits of the 'family of Pollius Soter' to Hadrianic times.

Many of Petrie's conclusions, especially his thesis on the typological evolution of the mummies, were later revised or modified. However, he was one of the first to recognize the importance of both hair and beard styles in the mummy portraits for their more precise dating.

The earliest of the women's hairstyles, according to Petrie, is the curly coiffure of the Flavian era. He disagreed with C. C. Edgar's ascription of several of the women's portraits to the 1st century AD,[8] since their hairstyles were not sufficiently distinct. Petrie further realized that the hairstyles in some of the women's portraits were Hadrianic or even later. In view of the posited evolution of his mummy categories, there must have been a lapse of roughly one generation between the imperial fashions and their acceptance by the portrait subjects.

Men without beards were assigned to Hadrian's time, all other men to the period of whatever emperor's style of beard coincided with their own. Petrie allowed for a decade's delay in this, however, so as to leave enough time to accommodate the very large number of beardless men. The portraits of men with their hair and beard trimmed short in the military fashion he considered to be the latest, stemming from approximately AD 250.

On the basis of the above scheme, Petrie developed other criteria for dating, in terms of the decoration of the mummies, for instance, or of their jewelry. He eventually concluded, in contradiction of Graul, that an overall development was discernible from early portraits of high quality to increasingly poorer portraits later on.

In the years following the discovery and tentative dating of the mummy portraits, the scientific controversy polarized around the views of Ebers and Petrie respectively. It was very soon established that the dating of the better panels as Ptolemaic could not be upheld.

H. Heydemann had already pointed out that youth-locks could be found at least as late as Severan times (193–235). But he allowed that wearing the sword belt over the left shoulder was a Greek custom.[9] He took the hairstyles to be Graeco-Roman, but thought them irrelevant for a precise dating of the portraits.

U. Wilcken too disagreed with Ebers' interpretation of the youth-locks.[10] He moreover cast such serious doubts on the identification of the Louvre portraits as of the family of Pollius Soter, archont of Thebes, that their credibility as belonging to a definitely established period was undermined forever. Wilcken saw no valid criteria for assigning the mummy portraits to either Hellenistic times or late antiquity, and concluded that the entire genre belonged to the 1st–3rd centuries AD.

Another writer to make an important contribution to determining the chronology of the portraits was C. C. Edgar.[11] When, in his article 'On the Dating of the Fayum Portraits', he systematically examined the main arguments put forward by Petrie and Ebers, he found himself obliged to reject resolutely all of the latter's propositions for an early dating. He stated that, whether in the mummy portraits or Roman marble sculpture, the youth-locks were never worn by any but children. Ebers' examples of 'young men' with them concerned portraits that were either much repainted or misinterpreted. As for the purple colour of the so-called officers' *sagi*, this could be found also on some of the women's dresses, and in any case it is not known what the Imperial Purple looked like exactly. The contention that wearing the sword belt over the left shoulder had been a Greek habit was easily refuted by referring to C. Daremberg and E. Saglio,[12] who provide the reliefs on the columns of Trajan (98–117) and Marcus Aurelius (161–180) as examples.

Edgar concluded finally that there was no evidence in support of Ptolemaic dating, but that everything pointed to the Roman era. He supported his argument by citing papyri and inscriptions from Imperial times that had been discovered together with the portrait mummies. His knowledge of Roman portrait sculpture enabled him to reject Petrie's dogmatic assertion that men were clean-shaven in pre-Hadrianic times and bearded thereafter. He identified several of the women's coiffures in the mummy portraits as typical of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD, and so refuted Petrie's thesis that there were no painted mummy portraits until after AD 100. He did agree with Petrie, however, that all of the portraits came from before the middle of the 3rd century, and that those of men with short-trimmed hair were among the latest. He disproved Petrie's theory concerning the chronological evolution of four types of mummy, and explained the differences as merely local variants.

In 1914, A. Reinach let it be known that he was compiling a major catalogue of the mummy portraits, of which by now several hundred had been found. He published some of his ideas in advance.[13] He agreed with Petrie about the painted portraits being successors to the masks, and that, despite some chronological overlap, paintings on the mummy shrouds represented the final stage of the genre. Concerning the wooden panels, he largely accepted the dates proposed by Edgar, while assigning the shrouds from Antinoopolis to the time of the Tetrarchy (AD 293–323).[14]

In 1922, Paul Buberl published a catalogue of Graf's collection,[15] which led to a consensus of opinion on the dating of the mummy portraits as a whole in Imperial times. Buberl thought the earliest portraits to have come from the 1st century AD, and the latest from the 3rd, and quoted Wilcken, Petrie and Edgar in support of his thesis. While acknowledging that there have always been differences in artistic quality at any given period, he devoted quite a few pages to outlining the overall stylistic progression of the paintings. In his view they evolved from a soft, illusionist style to a strong, naturalistic manner with specific attention to plasticity. From there, the development was towards increasingly flat, more and more graphic, stylized panels, and by the end of the genre the eyes have begun to 'look mystically into the distance' – a characteristic of late antiquity.

Heinrich Drerup was the first scholar to examine the mummy portraits one by one to determine their date of origin.[16] He too concentrated on hairstyles as a decisive determinant, relied on comparing the coiffures of the mummy portraits with those of Roman portrait sculpture and coins, and noted different periods as having different stylistic characteristics.

Although Drerup's approach was painstakingly scientific and can still be regarded as exemplary, the present author considers some of his results questionable, due to two closely interrelated facts. For one thing, the chronology of the marble portraits, on comparisons with which he placed so much emphasis, was still far from established. In particular the complex and frequently uneven development of the imperial portraits of the 3rd and 4th centuries as well as the dating of private portraits was still poorly understood, so that far-reaching interpretations built on them were not likely to be definite. Indeed, when the dating of some of the sculptures was subsequently corrected, the dating of some of Drerup's mummy portraits was critically affected also.

The second point that makes Drerup's results questionable arises out of his own awareness of the above difficulties, which led him to diverge more and more from his initially rigidly systematic methodology. The later the portrait he was considering, the more he relied on its style when trying to date it, especially from the 3rd century onwards – sometimes even using style as the sole determinant. This meant that the stylistic development of the portraits which he posited as being a *result* of his studies and observations was now applied as an *a priori* criterion.

Drerup's findings can be summed up as follows. The production of mummy portraits began in the first quarter of the 1st century AD, which is one or two decades earlier than assumed previously. He also extended the time period at the other end, assigning the last of them to the second half of the 4th century, not the middle or late 3rd as had been commonly held. He agreed with Buberl that there was a more or less linear evolution in style, from generally naturalistic paintings of high artistic quality executed in the encaustic technique, to more abstract and serially-produced tempera paintings of generally poorer quality.

Until very recently, Drerup's work was the only study to have addressed itself intensively to the style and dating of the mummy portraits, and all subsequent scholars have leaned heavily on his findings. Since the general chronological development of the portraits now seemed to be established, research focused on other subjects, such as iconographic details, religious questions, etc.

When Klaus Parlasca, thirty years after Drerup, subjected the mummy portraits to a new and detailed investigation, his main focus was not on style and dating.[17] Nevertheless, in his *Mumienporträts und verwandte Denkmäler* he does discuss the date of some individual pieces or groups of portraits when this is of importance for typological or developmental issues. Also, his *Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano*, which has been published in parts since 1969 and which attempts the complete coverage of all known mummy portraits, proposes a date for every portrait; this is based in a rather generalized way on the 'style' or the 'coiffure', but usually without giving specific parallels to support his dating, and without a recognizable concept of stylistic evolution.

While Parlasca occasionally differs from Drerup concerning the dating of particular portraits or the identity of their painter, he basically accepts Drerup's methodology and conclusions, without adducing the objections noted above. For him too, it was the Theodosian edict of 392 on the prohibition of pagan cults that brought the production of mummy portraits to an end.

Hans Jucker was the first to cast fundamental doubts on Parlasca's interpretation of a large number of the mummy portraits.[18] In his review of volume III of the *Repertorio* he objects, quite correctly, that some of the panels Parlasca considers to belong to the period of Constantine the Great (306–337) in fact stem from the 2nd century. He points out that the marble portraits Parlasca used for comparison are

either also dated too late, or not examined correctly and therefore inappropriate. Jucker has not actually expressed any doubts as to the existence of mummy portraits as late as the 4th century, but has acknowledged indirectly that certain stylistic peculiarities, for a long time considered to belong to late antiquity, actually had precursors as early as the 2nd century. This insight must be seen as the key for a new approach to the dating of the mummy portraits.

The difficulties inherent in distinguishing 4th-century portraits from 2nd-century ones applies equally to the sculptures. Since Constantine's time saw a great revival of the fashions of the 2nd century, Drerup had felt himself to be on more or less safe ground in his day when he dated the portraits of this type on the basis of stylistic details. More recent research, however, has developed certain non-stylistic criteria for ancient portraits, especially of women, which facilitate dating.[19]

One of the things discovered in recent research is that the range of women's hairstyles was considerably broader in the 2nd century than in the 4th, when by no means all of them were revived; moreover, they were never copied exactly, but slightly adapted in accordance with later taste. The so-called turban-coiffure of Hadrian's time, which consisted of plaits wound around the head, became especially popular again in Constantine's day, and may serve as an example. The later versions differ from their original model in the following ways:

— While the Constantinian ring of hair is usually made up of one, never more than two plaits beginning deep in the nape, in the 2nd century it had consisted of a larger number of plaits and lain higher, more horizontally, on the head.
— In Constantine's time the edge of the ring of plaits never came as far forward as the forehead.
— In the 4th century the hair was parted in the centre, and either pulled back in such a way as to cover the ears completely, or more softly looped under them (similar to the coiffures of the 3rd century), leaving the ears uncovered.
— In the occasional variant, where the hair coming down on the forehead was arranged in a tongue-pattern, it always covered the ears, whereas in the 2nd century the ears had been left exposed.

Taking into account these details when considering the mummy portraits, one can add several other examples to Jucker's list of rejected 4th-century portraits. If, in addition, one further excludes all other supposedly 4th-century mummy portraits with definitely 2nd-century hairstyles (which includes almost all the portraits of men),[20] only a few remain that have no obvious parallel with urban Roman fashions and should, therefore, be left for separate consideration. Contrary to expectations, there are none among them with hairstyles known exclusively as belonging to the 4th or the second half of the 3rd century.[21] There are no paintings from that time showing women with hair looped under the ears or with a plait coming down over the top of the head, along the centre parting; neither are there any showing the combination of looped hair and the typical Constantinian ring of plaits.

It might well be objected that from the 3rd century onwards there may have been hairstyles completely different from those of Roman fashions. The argument against this is that very few indeed of the mummies' coiffures, men's or women's, cannot be found also in Roman sculpture. After all, even the ring-of-plaits coiffure Parlasca dates as early 4th century was a Roman fashion, and as such contradicts the theory that the Greeks of the Fayum were becoming more and more Egyptianized; the same applies to the supposedly exact copies of styles from the 2nd century.

There does not appear to be any evidence other than stylistic in support of dating the portraits of the 3rd and 4th centuries. So Drerup's and Parlasca's criteria of style need very careful examination. Unfortunately, neither of them has ever elaborated his ideas on the matter. It would seem that both rely on the concept of a general development of style, which meanwhile has been undermined by the results of more advanced research. The fact that they make no clear distinction between style and quality is another problem. Some things that have been passed off as stylistic characteristics are in fact simply poor-quality painting. Furthermore, neither Drerup nor Parlasca has taken sufficiently into account that painting is different from sculpture. Finally, it has yet to be proved that stylistic criteria applying to the art of urban Rome are equally valid for the art of provincial Egypt. It must be remembered that the influences at work in the Roman province of Egypt were not only those of the cultural imports of the Greek conquerors, but also strong memories of the high, if meanwhile somewhat degenerated, autochthonous tradition.

An attempt to analyse the painted mummies' hairstyles separately from stylistic considerations seems not only legitimate but in fact imperative, faced with such difficulties.

The often complicated and fast-changing women's hairstyles actually allow fairly precise dating. As has been mentioned already, the coiffures of the subjects of the painted mummy portraits are very similar to those of Roman sculpture, and may therefore be said with some certainty to have derived from Roman fashions. Even the smallest details and intricacies of the painted coiffures can be found in urban Roman sculpture portraits. Occasionally the closest parallels come from marble portraits found in other eastern

provinces, but they also derive from urban Roman portraiture. This close link with Roman fashions means that a comparison of mummy hairstyles with those of marble portraits of a definite date can result in relatively precise dating also for the mummy portraits.

While one should not ignore the argument that hairstyles may have been worn for a longer time than high fashion dictated, there are in fact almost no examples of this in the sculpted portraits. Only very few painted panels exist representing older people, which may be due to the known low life-expectancy in the Fayum. Inscriptions on the mummies themselves, as well as evidence from papyri, indicate that the portraits usually depicted the features of the deceased at the time of their deaths. These younger people living in a highly fashion-conscious society would not be likely to be wearing hairstyles that were out of date.

Employing hairstyles as criteria for dating the mummy portraits leads to the following conclusions:

— The first portraits were painted under Roman influence in the time of Tiberius (emperor AD 14–37). One of the oldest extant examples (P. 9, now in Hanover) is of a woman with hair dressed in a style identical to that of Antonia Minor, grandmother of Caligula (AD 37–41) and mother of Claudius (AD 41–54).[22]

— The latest of the women's hairstyles are wig- or loop-coiffures, similar to those worn by the Severan empresses (as for example Julia Mammea, d. 235) and their immediate successors. For the men, the latest style was the soldierly short trim, occasionally to be found as early as the 2nd century, but common only from the time of the princes Caracalla and Geta (first decade of the 3rd century).

It may be legitimately inferred that all portraits with hairstyles not precisely copying Roman fashion originated somewhere within this time span. This includes children's portraits, several portraits of men,[23] and a few of women. A reasonably precise dating of these portraits needs the support of stylistic criteria derived from the broad base of non-stylistically dated portraits. The investigation makes the linear stylistic evolution presumed by previous experts implausible. Separate stylistic trends, attributable to specific locations of areas of discovery and/or production, began to develop simultaneously from the end of the 1st century.

After flourishing in the 2nd century, the production of mummy portraits slowly decreased until it had come to an end altogether by the middle of the 3rd. Economic decline and the spread of Christianity have been suggested as the main causes, but were only two expressions of a much more fundamental change that began in Severan times. This affected every aspect of society, and led to the abandoning of a burial custom that had been observed for two and a half centuries.