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A sublime encounter with Antiquity



Fig. 1. Fragmentary funerary shroud with so-called 'Fayum' portrait.

FGA-ARCH-EG-0593

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What could be more natural in the 21st century than to have your picture taken? The invention of photography gradually democratised this mode of representation, and those of the smartphone and selfie have multiplied it in a dazzling way. However, the history of the portrait begins very early, long before Mona Lisa sat as a model for Leonardo da Vinci. The oldest realistic portraits that have survived to the present day have their origin in Egypt. The production of this Greek-influenced art dates back to the Roman period, from the first to the third century AD. Funerary in nature, these portraits were meant to accompany their deceased owners into the afterlife, tucked into their shrouds.

What is a "Fayum portrait"?

As the name suggests, they are - but only in part - portraits, faces whose realism is sometimes breathtaking and whose confrontation between an apparent familiarity and a gaze from the distant past does not fail to intrigue (fig. 2). Today, we know of more than a thousand of these painted portraits, which are commonly grouped under the name "Fayum"; they can be found in the halls of the world's greatest museums, from Cairo to Los Angeles, from London to Cape Town. Often only the thin wooden boards painted with encaustic remain, so that these works may seem very similar to portraits as we know them in Western

Fragmentary funerary shroud with so-called 'Fayum' portrait

Egypt, probably Hawara, Fayum
Roman period, 1st-IInd century AD
Linen, stucco, painted wood, and gold
45.4 cm high, 37 cm wide, 12.5 cm deep
FGA-ARCH-EG-0593

PROVENANCE

Collection J. Behrens (1874-1947), Bremen, bought in 1936 in Egypt from Habib Tawadros ;
Collection D. S., Bremen, 1986 ;
Pierre Bergé & Associés, Paris, 26 November 2013, lot n° 130 ;
Phœnix Ancient Art, Geneva, 16 September 2014.



Fig. 2. Portrait FGA-ARCH-EG-0593, close-up detail.
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art since the Renaissance. The FGA portrait (fig. 1) is thus not out of place in an exhibition dedicated to modern portraiture, from Rembrandt to the present day.¹

Fortunately, the portrait is still embedded in several layers of linen cloth covered with red stucco, which was used to model the gilded decorative elements in relief. For this artefact is much more than a portrait: about 1900 years ago, the painted boards were placed on the mummified body of the man depicted. A red, stuccoed cloth wrapped the entire mummy, leaving only the portrait visible, like a window onto the soul of the deceased. Only the head covering survives from this funerary envelope, but an extraordinary, most likely contemporary parallel, executed in a very similar style, is preserved at the British Museum in London (fig. 3).² It bears the inscription ΑΡΤΕΜΙΔΩΡΕ ΕΥΨΥΧΙ: this deceased was thus called Artemidoros, a Greek and not Egyptian sounding name. Its excellent state of preservation allows us to appreciate how the man in our portrait was probably prepared for his eternity.

As no inscription remains, he will forever remain anonymous. This does not mean, however, that we know nothing about him, or at least about the social context in which he lived. It seems that it was the members of an elite of Greek descent, from the Hellenistic period, who chose to be painted in this way (see below). Artemidoros and the man in the FGA portrait may have been more than contemporaries: in this social and regional microcosm, it is highly likely that they knew each other. Were they friends or did they dislike each other cordially? Were they related? Or neighbours? The mystery remains.

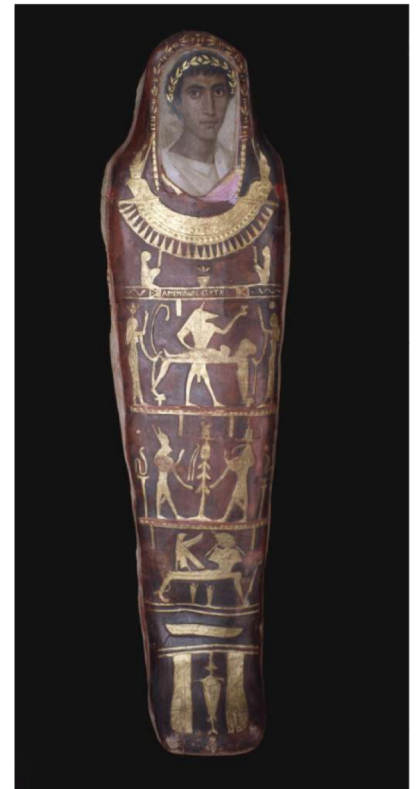


Fig. 3. Funerary shroud of Artemidoros with painted portrait. Fayum, Hawara necropolis.

¹ This Fayum portrait is exhibited at the Musée Jenisch Vevey in the exhibition *Portrait, Autoportrait*, guest curated by Frédéric Pajak (29.05–05.09.2021).

² British Museum EA 21810. See the British Museum online catalogue: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA21810.



The Fayum, between lake and desert

These two people, like many others in the Fayum and in Egypt, had chosen to be mummified after their death. This practice, however, is alien to ancient Greek culture, while realistic portraiture is alien to traditional Egyptian art. It seems that over time, these communities borrowed indigenous traditions, while adapting them to their own culture.

Thus, on Artemidoros' shroud, the gilded decoration shows us Egyptian deities and scenes. For example, in the upper register, Anubis with the head of a jackal performs a ritual on the mummy lying on a bed with the head and legs of a lion, accompanied by Isis and Nephthys. Below, ibis-headed Thoth faces a falcon-headed god, probably Horus. It is of course impossible to know whether the funerary envelope that completed the FGA portrait was similarly decorated, but a comparison of the two *ousekh* necklaces suggests that the two mummies must have been very similar in appearance (Fig. 4). The clasps of both necklaces, shown on the shoulders, have the head of a falcon wearing the *pschent*³ crown; they are almost identical, as are the lower row of triangular pendants and the one with floral motifs.

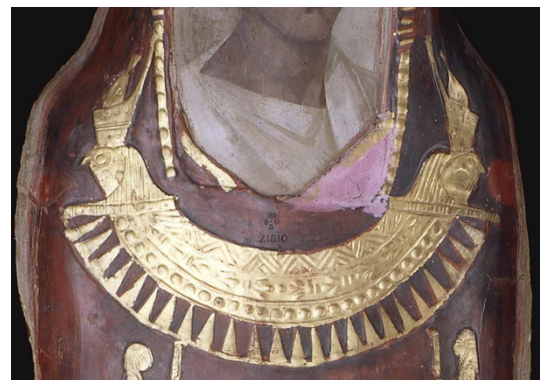
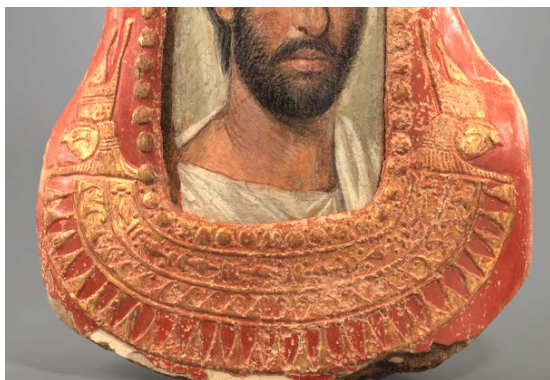


Fig. 4. Detail views of the *ousekh* necklaces of the FGA (left) and British Museum (right) shrouds.

³ The *pschent* is one of the royal crowns of ancient Egypt; it merges the 'red crown' *decheret* of Lower Egypt and the 'white crown' *hedjet* of Upper Egypt. This crown thus symbolises the union of the country.



Artistic contrasts

The man in our portrait and Artemidoros lived when Egypt had already lost its independence for more than a century: the powerful kingdom of the pharaohs had been relegated to the status of a province of the Roman Empire, controlled by a prefect appointed by the emperor.

However, traditional Egyptian art, in which the human figure is invariably stereotyped, still exists, as do the ancient gods. The temples in which they are worshipped continue to be built, enlarged, and decorated with hieroglyphic texts and reliefs. The emperors of Rome, just as the Ptolemies had done before them, are represented like the pharaohs of ancient times, head and legs in profile, eye and chest in frontal view.

This bears little resemblance to the frontality, the vitality, and the realism of the Fayum portraits. The painters even used an artifice that was far ahead of its time: the deceased looks at us with his wide eyes, while the shoulders are slightly off-centre. The face thus seems to turn towards us (or towards his afterlife), as if the painter had wanted to fix a precise moment in time or gesture.

This posture is reminiscent of that of Mona Lisa (fig. 5), painted some thirteen centuries later, although there is of course no direct link between the Fayum portraits and European Renaissance art. Just like Mona Lisa, these faces are surrounded by a mysterious aura and offer us a direct link to a distant past. In contrast to the FGA portrait, other Fayum portraits even show a slight smile, which Leonardo da Vinci would certainly have appreciated had he known about this ancient art.



Fig. 5. Mona Lisa, © 2018 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Michel Urtado.



The Fayum, between lake and desert



"Fayum": this strange word is the name of a region of Egypt on the outskirts of which stand two pyramids, rarely visited by modern-day tourists. It is the geography of the area that allows us to understand that neither these pyramids nor the Fayum portraits, which are more than two millennia apart, are there by chance.

Fig. 6. Northern Egypt, with location of the Fayum basin.

The Fayum is a vast natural depression, a few hours' drive southwest of Cairo (fig. 6), in which the Birket Qaroun lake is located. The presence of man is documented there going back many millennia, and fishing and hunting are attested since the Epipaleolithic period (7200-6000 BC), when the lake was much larger: its surface level was 65 metres higher than today. During the annual flood of the Nile, some of the water could flow into this depression through a natural outlet; however, the period covering the end of the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2200-2000 BC) is marked by remarkably low floods that did not allow for the water to reach the lake, which started rapidly evaporating. The level of the lake dropped by about 1.7 metres per year, freeing up large areas for cultivation.

Controlling the waters of the Nile: an ancestral necessity

Once royal power was consolidated in the Middle Kingdom (1994-1650 BC), the rulers attached great importance to this region and undertook colossal hydraulic management works.⁴ They dredged and widened the Bar Yussef (fig. 7), a canal that allowed the return of the flood waters to the depression. But in order to prevent the lake from gradually reclaiming the arable

⁴ See esp. Hassan et Hamdan, "The Fayum Oasis".



land, they built gigantic dykes at the entrance to the narrow passage that links the Nile Valley to the Fayum. These dykes are nearly six kilometres long and fifteen metres thick.

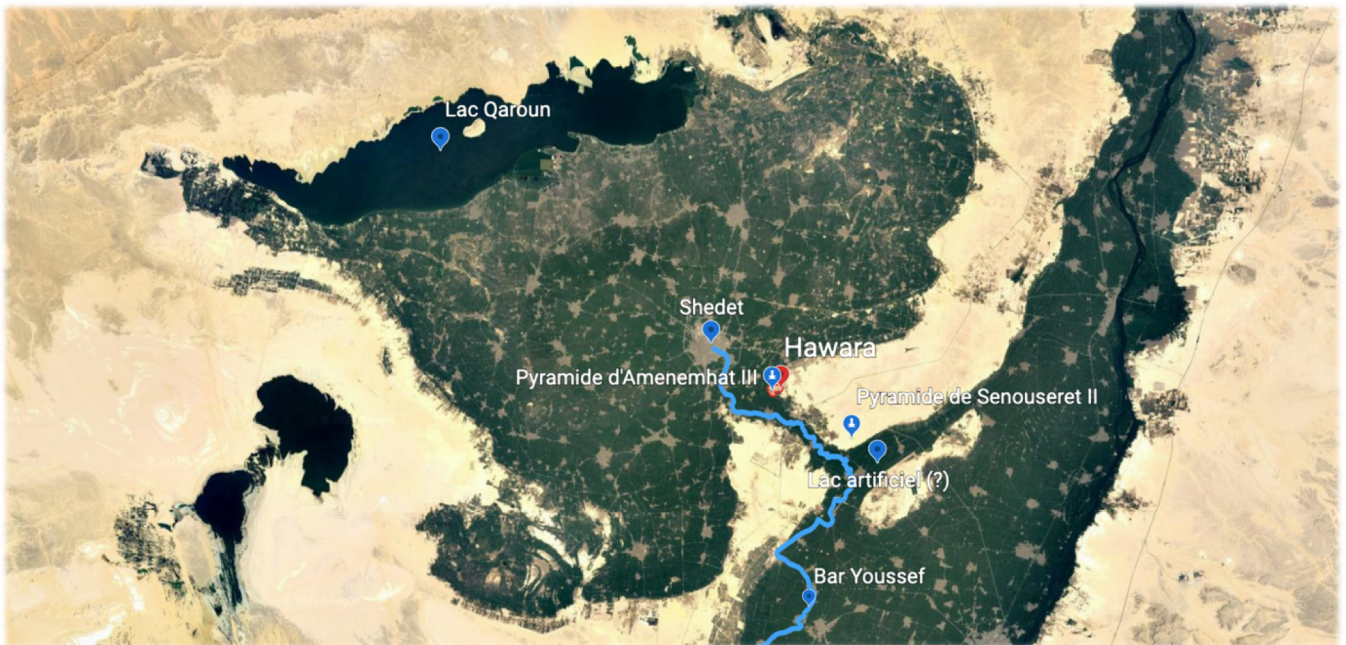


Fig. 7. Fayum region with location of the Hawara necropolis excavated by Petrie, and Bar Youssef canal.

Alongside these gigantic constructions, a new capital – Ititaouy – was established in the region (its exact location remains unknown), near which the necropolis of el-Lahoun is located. Senuseret II had his pyramid erected not far from the extraordinary hydraulic engineering works he may have initiated. In the Fayum depression itself, the city of Shedet developed during this period. A temple dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek and an obelisk bearing the name of Senuseret I were built there. At Biahmu, not far away, two enormous colossi of King Amenemhat III were erected, of which only the pedestals remain in situ.

The kings of the 12th dynasty

Amenemhat I (1994–1964 BC)
↓
Senuseret I (1974–1929 BC)
↓
Amenemhat II (1932–1898 BC)
↓
Senuseret II (1900–1881 BC)
↓
Senuseret III (1881–1842 BC)
↓
Amenemhat III (1842–1794 BC)
↓
Amenemhat IV (1798–1785 BC)
↓
Sobekneferu (1785–1781 BC)



Unfortunately, already by the New Kingdom, it seems that the dykes had given way and that the level of the lake had risen sufficiently to cover the monuments of the Middle Kingdom. A new city was therefore established on the heights, at Gurob. The presence there of a vast 'Harem' palace, however, seems to indicate that the region and the access to the Fayum had not lost their importance at all.

The Fayum, land of plenty during the Ptolemaic period



Fig. 8. Gold ctodrachm of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II.
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André Longchamp.

It was not until the Ptolemaic period that waterworks were again undertaken. These led to a sharp drop in the level and surface area of Lake Qarun, thus (re)creating a large cultivable area. The lowering of the waters allowed the ancient Shedet to be reestablished under the new name of Crocodilopolis: the cult of the crocodile god Sobek had not been forgotten by the Ptolemaic kings, who however soon renamed the city Arsinoe in homage to Queen Arsinoe II (316–270 BC; fig. 8).

These lands were allocated to veterans of the Greek army as well as to high officials of the Ptolemaic administration. The desert climate around the Fayum depression has preserved documents in their thousands, that tell us about the landowners. This is for example the case of the records of Zenon,⁵ the private secretary and manager of the vast agricultural estate of Apollonios, οικονομος or Minister of Finance of Ptolemy II.

It is probably the descendants of these families who had immigrated in the Fayum, as well as others who had joined them over time, who are known to us through the Fayum portraits from the first century AD onward. Although some portraits were known in Europe as early as the beginning of the 17th century AD, the first substantial collection of portraits only

⁵ See e.g., ORRIEUX, C., *Les papyrus de Zénon*.



appeared in the early 1880s, assembled by the Austrian antiquarian Theodor Graf.⁶ He collected more than 300 portraits from the necropolis of ancient Philadelphia (el-Rubbayat), the very city where the estate of the minister Apollonios was located and where Zenon had lived. In the West, some people remained sceptical about the authenticity of these portraits until the first scientifically documented archaeological finds.

A pyramid for starting point

The presence of the Middle Kingdom pyramids on the outskirts of the Fayum was key to this discovery. In addition to the pyramid built by Senuset II (see above), there is a second one, built for King Amenemhat III, barely eight kilometres away. It was this pyramid, near the modern village of Hawara, that attracted British archaeologist William M. Flinders Petrie in the late 1880's (Fig. 9). While most of his workforce was busy clearing Amenemhat's royal structures, he explored a few nearby burial pits, many of which were completely looted,



Fig. 9. W. M. F. Petrie in Egypt, 1922. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London.

dangerously collapsed, or even below groundwater level.

So he turned his attention to much shallower mud-brick chambers, where he made a sensational discovery: mummies with heads covered by extraordinary painted portraits (figs 3, 10).⁷ He thus proved not only the authenticity of the portraits collected by

Graf, but also the date of production of these ancient masterpieces. Graf believed them to be portraits of members of the Ptolemaic royal family, when in fact they do not predate the later part of the Roman emperor Tiberius' reign (42 BC–37 AD), more than half a century after the death of Cleopatra VII, the last queen of Egypt (69 BC – 30 BC).

⁶ See EBERS, G., *The Hellenic Portraits*, and GRAF, T., *Catalogue of Theodor Graf's gallery of antique portraits*.

⁷ See PETRIE, GRIFFITH, NEWBERRY, *Kahun, Gurob, and Hawara*; PETRIE, *Hawara, Biahmu, and Arsinoe*.



An elitist art rich in details

Children, young adults, old people, men and women were depicted in these portraits. Undoubtedly, not all the inhabitants of the Fayum could afford to hire painters, let alone sophisticated mummification processes or gilded ornaments. It is likely that the vast majority of the native Egyptian population, the very people who toiled in the fields, orchards, and vineyards of the 'foreign' elite, are absent from these portraits, reserved for the local elite who, if not royal, were nonetheless wealthy.

Close examination of the FGA portrait reveals a few more details that allow us to get a little closer to this man. His short, neat beard already tells us that he is no longer a young adult; the addition of grey streaks to his dark hair indicates that he is already middle-aged.

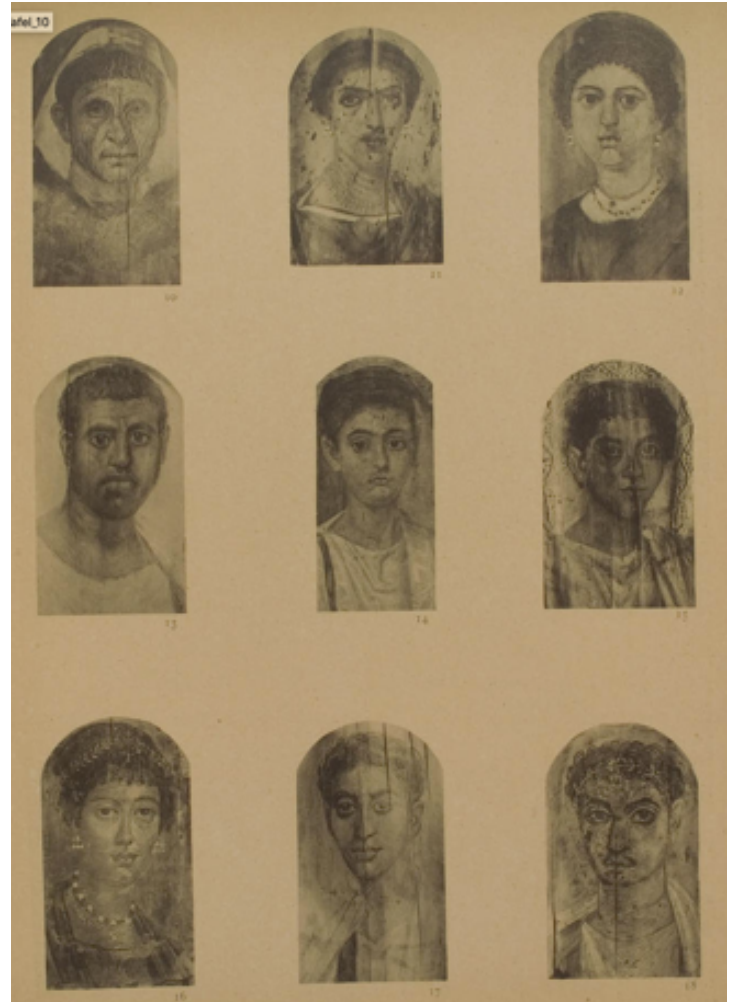


Fig. 10. Frontispice de la publication des fouilles de W.M.F. Petrie : *Hawara, Biahmu, and Arsinoe*.

These grey streaks lead to another question, one that has already been much discussed: were these portraits painted while their models were alive, or did the artists render them so lively when they were painting the faces of the deceased? The answer remains elusive, and it is possible that some portraits were painted after death, particularly those of children - it is hard to imagine parents preparing funerary portraits of their offspring 'just in case'. Other portraits could have been painted earlier in life and perhaps even exhibited during the lifetime



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of their owner. Before being placed on mummies, these portraits could be adapted to reflect the older age of the deceased.

The FGA portrait may in due time help us answer these questions, as we do not know at present whether the grey streaks were painted before the golden wreath, or whether they are a later addition. The surface is damaged, uneven, and difficult to read. We will have to use modern imaging techniques, such as those used for detailed analysis of master paintings, to find out more. After all, this portrait is no less important than a Rembrandt or a Monet. High-tech scientific analyses can also tell us a lot about these portraits. The anonymous man in this portrait still has many secrets to tell us about his time and about an art form that, although ancient, is strikingly modern.

Dr Xavier Droux

Curator of the Archaeology collection

Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, July 2021.



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