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The Archaeological Journal.

MARCH, 1889.

ROMAN LIFE IN EGYPT.¹

By W. M. FLINDERS PETRIE.

I have no intention of entering on a systematic or general consideration of the subject I name, but rather of laying before the Institute some of the more remarkable products of Roman work in Egypt, which have come to light in the course of my excavations this spring. Nearly everything that I have brought to England was found in a large cemetery belonging to the town of Arsinoe, the capital of the province of the Fayum; this district is about 60 miles south of Cairo, and is really one of the oases of the western desert, near enough to the Nile to be fed by a canal. I had this province assigned to me last winter by M. Grébaut, the director of the department of antiquities at Cairo, and for the archaic interest of the pyramids and labyrinths, and the later value of the Roman portraiture, I could hardly wish for a better district. The whole of the work in the cemetery of Hawara was entirely a bye-affair; I did not stop there a single day outside of the time spent in opening the pyramid there, of which I hope to have somewhat to say next year; and the products of the cemetery were so much given in as well, a prize to maintain patience.

The whole system of the mummification in later times, and the decay of Egyptian customs, could be traced out in this cemetery with great advantage. The native

¹ Read at the Monthly Meeting of the Institute, July 5th, 1888.

custom in Egypt, as is well-known, was to embalm the body and deposit it in a subterranean chamber approached by a tunnel or well. In the Ptolemaic times this system degraded into cutting a pit 8 or 10 feet deep, and letting the coffin down on end into it, finally laying the coffin flat at the bottom with its feet in a recess cut on one side of the well and the head end in the bottom of the well itself, in fact reducing the chamber to a minimum. But about the beginning of our era a great change took place, perhaps consequent on the Roman occupation of Egypt. The embalmed bodies in place of being interred were kept for years above ground, probably in the houses of their families; and hence arose a new motive, and a powerful one, for decorating them. This decoration at first took the form of a more elaborate style of the same covering used before. The head piece of canvas covered with stucco and painted was enlarged downwards over the chest, and covered with brightly painted scenes of the deceased and the divinities; not only the face was gilt but more and more gilding crept into the decoration. This stage, retaining the old motive but making it purely decorative, with the original ideas partly lost, and the old hieroglyphic inscriptions reduced to nonsense or mere twirls of the brush, or even omitted altogether,—this was in force during the first century of our era; and a late type of this is dated to about 100 or 120 A.D. by the name of a person Titas Flavias Demetrias (misspelt Flagias).

The next stage, when all the religious decoration had become confused and corrupt, was to introduce the arms of the figure in relief on the stucco work of the chest. Rarely the flesh was naturalistically painted, usually the whole was gilt; the conventional attitude was with the left fore arm horizontal, and the right arm bent up and holding a wreath of red flowers, grasped together in the hand. This stage probably lasted some little time, judging by the number of examples; and if it is dated between 100 and 140 A.D. it will not be far wrong. These mummies usually had a canvas wrapper richly painted with the traditional religious scenes; afterwards it was of pink with gilt figures. The gilt heads were more and more carefully modelled, the faces being in some an evident portraiture

of the individual; and the general work is about as fine as such materials could possibly allow, the richness of the burnished gilding and its condition after such a long burial being surprising.

Something more life-like was still craved for, to represent the lost faces in the house, and the painted canvas cover of the mummy suggested the next step, to paint the face on canvas instead of modelling it. Accordingly we find a few instances of portraits painted in colours on a canvas ground, sometimes in tempera on gesso, sometimes with wax on the thread of the canvas directly. The scheme was not very happy, and was felt to be unsuitable, for it was continued but a very short time. Probably this introduction of Greek painting—for Greek it distinctively is—at the period of about 140 A. D. may be traced to the great impulse given to late Greek art, particularly in Egypt, by Hadrian; and his visit to Egypt in 130 A.D. may well have been the cause of the settlement of Greek artists in Egyptian towns. Another attempt was made by the placing of a portrait on a wooden panel in the place of the face, amidst the moulded and gilt draperies, and arms encrusted with onyxes and agates in their jewellery. This wooden panel had a gilt background to the head, like a Byzantine picture; only one example was found, now at the Bulak Museum.

These tentative experiments in decoration quickly gave place to the use of a portrait on wooden panel alone, without any remains of the gilt draperies or arms, but with occasionally a simple stucco gilt border of vine pattern around the face. The bandaging of the mummy covered the edges of the panel portrait and secured it in position; while the body was covered with an elaborate system of cross bandages forming sunken squares, with a gilt button in the bottom of each. This system prevailed for probably a century or so, from about 150 to 250 A.D.

About the time of Constantine portraiture seems to have finally disappeared, and probably the mummies were no longer kept above ground. The bodies seem to be then merely dried without the elaborate preparations with bitumen or cedar oil which belong to those of earlier times. While at the same time the personal possessions,

such as children's toys, &c., were more usually buried with the body. Funereal offerings of coins in jars were still made down to the end of the fifth century A.D. ; as large numbers as late as Leo are found buried, in one case all cut into fragments to prevent their re-use, and in another case plain blanks of thin copper foil were buried.

In all the Roman period the custom was to bury not in a coffin, nor in a pit-well ; all that system went out when bodies were kept above ground and decorated. The custom then was to build brick chambers above ground, along the sides of the road in the cemetery, and to bury the bodies in shallow graves in the floors of the chambers covered with loose earth and dust, often only a foot or two down. Very frequently a whole family of mummies appears to have been huddled off by an undertaker, and buried anyhow in the first convenient hole, heads and feet in any direction : in one case a dozen gilt head mummies were forced into a square pit of an old tomb, several upside down in order to get room for their shoulders among the legs of the others.

All this period is of little interest from an Egyptian point of view ; but as an illustration of the decay of beliefs and customs of extreme antiquity, as a study of the extent to which Greeks and Italians adopted the habits of the people among whom they lived, and as the surrounding of an important chapter in the history of painting, we may well give some attention to this series of changes which I have now briefly traced.

We will now turn to some technical examples of the products of Roman life in Egypt. The portraits on cedar wood panels are rarely in tempera, only a few early trials being thus executed. The regular mode was by mixing the colours with melted wax, exactly as we do with oil, and then laying them on, usually with a brush, sometimes with pastel. A coat of priming of the ground-colour of the subject was laid on first, and then the painting was worked in upon that. Cross-hatching of a darker tint, or spotting, is occasionally seen in the earlier examples ; but usually the right tint was mixed and laid on smoothly with a great delicacy of blending in and shading. Of the technical excellence of these portraits I need not speak, as it is manifest to all ; many of them could hardly be surpassed,

and would be creditable to any master of the present age. Yet it must be remembered that these do not shew us the best work of that time ; they belong to a small provincial school of painting in an out-of-the-way district of Egypt, and they may have been as far below the work of the Greek artists of Alexandria, as a portrait painter's work in a county town in England is below the quality of Royal Academy pictures. If such work as we see in the Fayum belonged then to a mere province, what would be the skill of really celebrated artists in Alexandria ? And if such was the art in the decadence of Greek work, of a time when their vase paintings and sculpture are considered barely passable, what must we imagine the paintings of the grand age of Zeuxis and Parrhasios, and the richer magnificence of Apelles, to have been ?

But pictures were painted not only to decorate the dead, but also to hang on the walls of the rooms. The first actual example of a picture frame preserved to us comes from one of these tombs at Hawara. It is almost exactly like a modern Oxford frame, but with a slit and groove in front of the picture to slide in a sheet of glass over it ; and clear glass as large as this I have found some years ago at Tanis. This had been placed by the side of a mummy in its grave, having evidently been hung on a wall before that, by the cord fastened to it.

Over the bodies wreaths of flowers were often placed, both when buried in wooden coffins, and when laid in the open ground. These wreaths of red roses, of narcissus, of *immortelles*, and many other flowers are beautifully preserved, and can be identified, and the separate flowers laid out as botanical specimens in the present day. Thirty-five different species of plants have been labelled by my friend Mr. Newberry in this collection from the cemetery of Hawara. We are brought much nearer realizing the flower wreaths of the Greek and Egyptian banquets, when we see and handle these actual plants entwined when the Ptolemies still ruled.

Some of the toys are remarkable for originality. Rag dolls and pottery dolls may be expected ; but a bird on wheels, and a sedan chair with a lady inside borne by two porters all modelled in terra cotta, are very curious, and unique as far as I know. A good example of the

Roman cinerary urn of lead, filled with burnt bones, was discovered.

In technical work a cut glass vase is worth notice, from the clearness and whiteness of the glass, and the firm and regular execution of the wheel cut pattern upon it. A set of paint saucers was found in the tomb of a man who was probably a tomb decorator; and a perfect example of a bow drill occurred amongst a quantity of carpenter's chips and leavings, lumps of pitch, &c., &c.

My other work of this season, the examination of the site of the Labyrinth, the tunneling of the pyramid of Hawara, and the discovery of the remains of the celebrated colossi mentioned by Herodotus, all lie outside of the scope of this paper. But I hope it will be seen how for purely classical art, literature, and work, Egypt is one of the best grounds for research; in no other country could such remains have been preserved in such perfect condition.