

CHILDREN OF ALEXANDRIA: LATE PORTRAITS FROM ANCIENT EGYPT

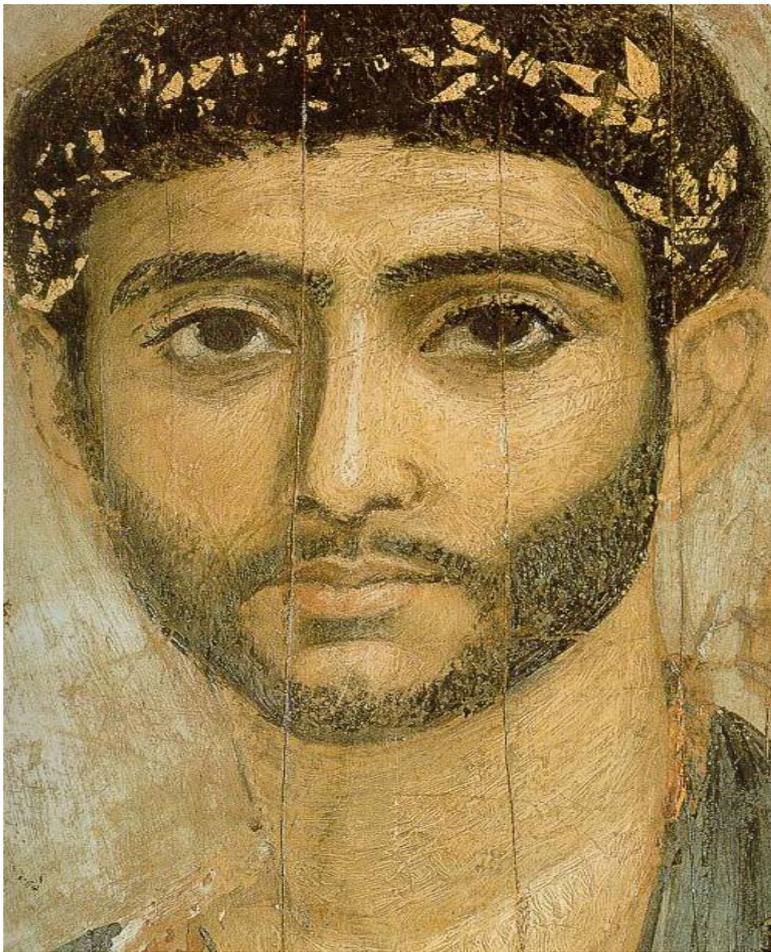
Rogério Sousa

Instituto Universitário de Ciências da Saúde

CITCEM-FLUP



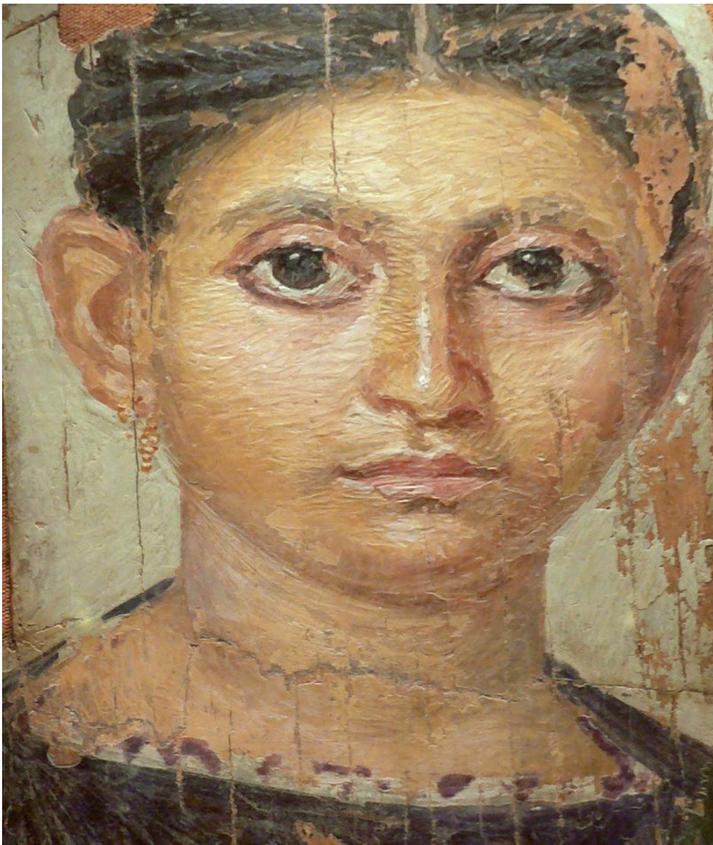
Dating from the Roman Period, from the late first century BC, or the early first century AD onwards until the middle of the third century, the Faiyum Portraits gave us a glimpse of the multiculturalism of the late Egyptian society. They attest to a unique confluence of traditions of the Ancient World, mingling together Ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs, with the artistic tradition of the classical world, which was continued into [Byzantine](#) and Western traditions in the post-classical world.



The universal character of the culture created in Ancient Alexandria is widely known. As the crossroad of the “inner ocean,” Alexandria soon became the brightest capital of the Mediterranean. Many outstanding public buildings were erected under the patronage of the Macedonian kings that ruled Egypt after

its conquest by Alexander the Great (332 AD). Such is the case of the famous lighthouse of Pharos (one of the Seven Wonders of the World), the great gymnasium, or even the *heptastadium*, a bridge that linked the island of Pharos to the coastline of Alexandria. Besides this extraordinary architectural activity, the Ptolemies also financed the Museum as a way to take from Athens its traditional status of capital of the Hellenistic culture and philosophy. This temple of the Muses was the stomping ground for some of the most important

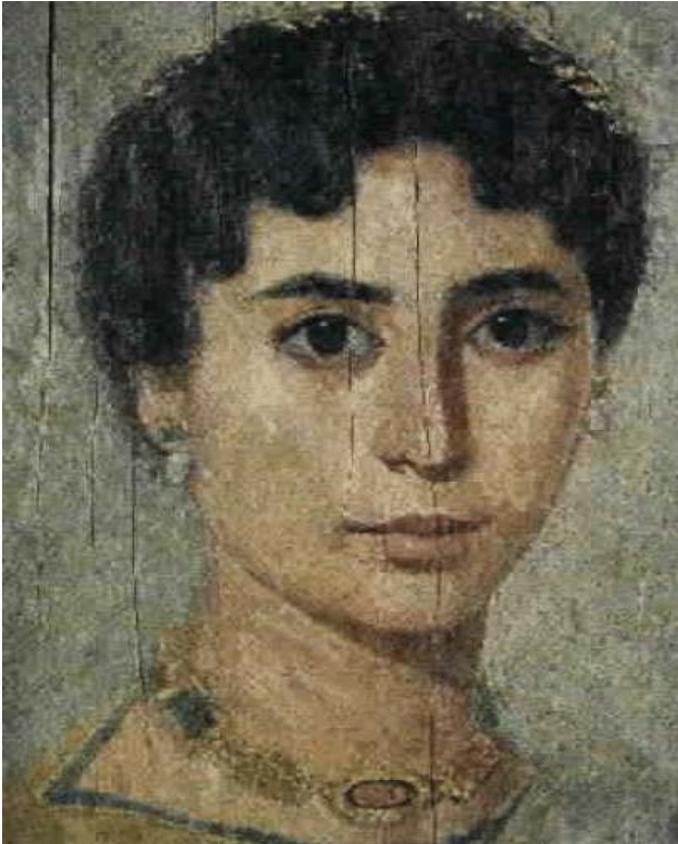
philosophers and sages of Antiquity: Archimedes, Aristarch of Samos, Erasthenes, and Heron, among many others who worked and lived there. Long before Copernicus and Galileo, they were at the forefront of the development of a scientific way to understand nature and the universe. The influence and scope of this knowledge lasted until our own times: we must not forget that it was there that the heliocentric thesis was first formulated (and highly criticized!), the perimeter of the earth was calculated through geometrical methods with an outstanding accuracy, and even the steam machine was invented. The writings of these sages certainly formed a very significant part of the famous Library of Alexandria, which also gathered more than 500,000 scrolls, being the most complete collection of manuscripts of Antiquity that aimed to collect all the written achievements of the human spirit.



Notwithstanding the scope of the scientific achievements of Alexandrian sages, it was perhaps among common people that the real miracle of Alexandria flourished. Over the substrate of the subdued local population, foreign communities arose and formed powerful elites. The Roman conquest brought to Alexandria a Roman administrative and military elite that lived side-by-side with numerous

Greek and Jewish communities that already existed before their arrival. From its very beginning, Alexandria was a cradle of a universal culture and, first and foremost, a meeting point for people who created an extraordinary multicultural civilization. If the few surviving texts of Alexandria can give us glimpses of its

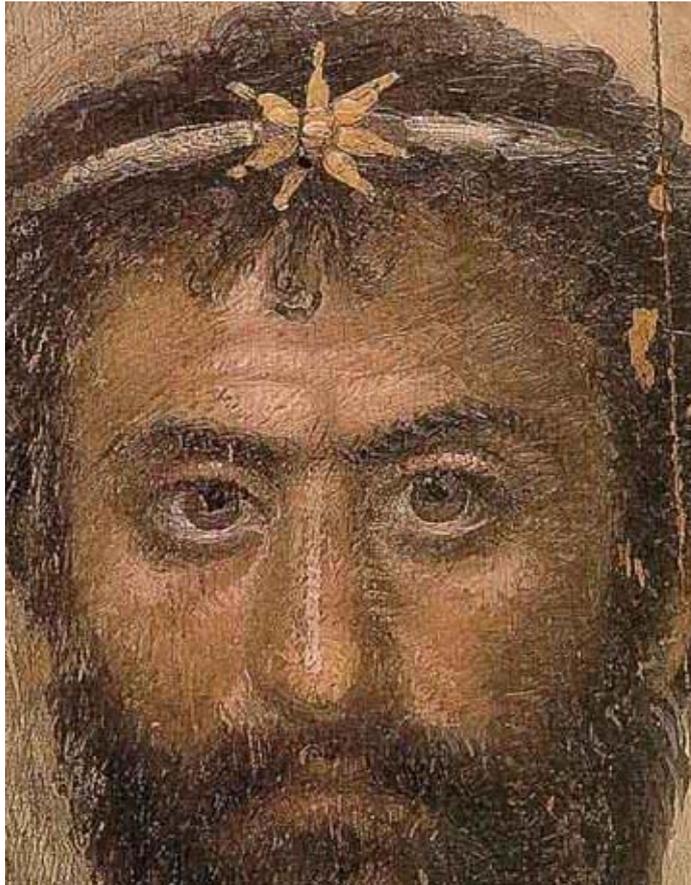
heterogenic people and culture, it is perhaps in the so-called Faiyum portraits that we find a living portrait of the late Egyptian society.



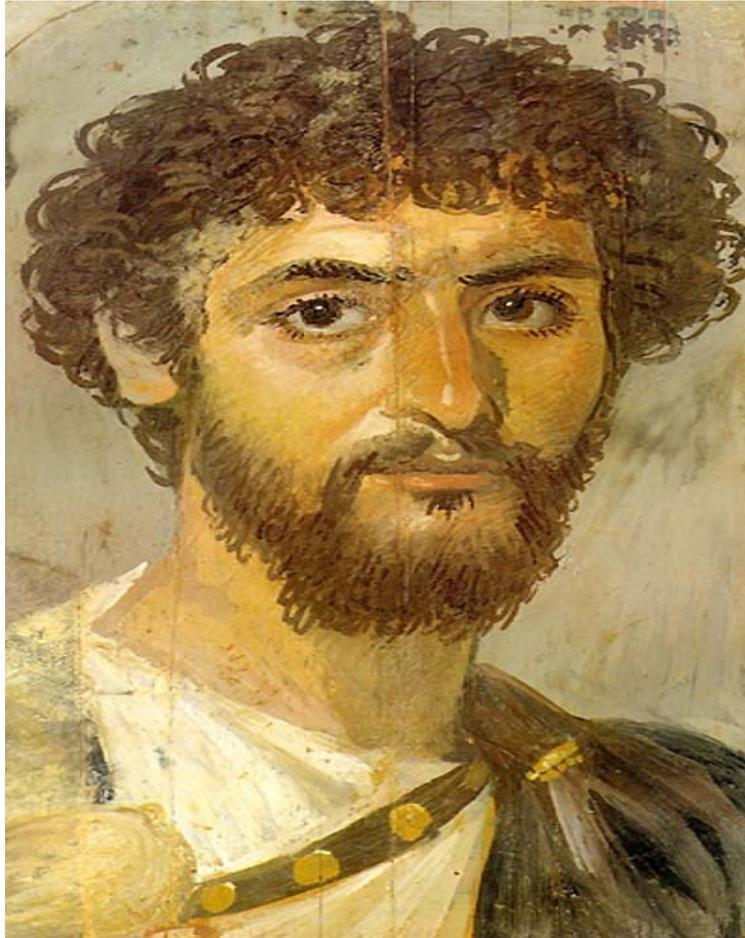
Painted on wooden boards, through encaustic (wax) or tempera techniques, these portraits were attached to mummies and deposited in the necropolis, usually located on dry spots, thus preserving their vivid colors. Especially common in the Faiyum area, these portraits are most probably of Alexandrian origin although the climate of the northern delta did not allow their lasting endurance. Usually these portraits depict a single

person and show the head and the upper chest painted against a monochromatic background.

Following the pharaonic tradition of the funerary masks, the deceased are always depicted as living persons and, strikingly enough, they are portrayed approximately at their age of death. It is possible indeed that these portraits were made during the lifetime of the individual and served a decorative purpose before his own death. Although the funerary context of these portraits is Egyptian in essence, the images clearly derive from the Graeco-Roman artistic tradition and its aesthetic standards. Such portraits may be related also to the Roman tradition of producing images of the dead to [worship](#) the ancestors. In this way the development of painted mummy portraits can be understood as the result of the combination of elements of Roman ancestral worship, Hellenistic painting methods, and Egyptian funerary tradition.

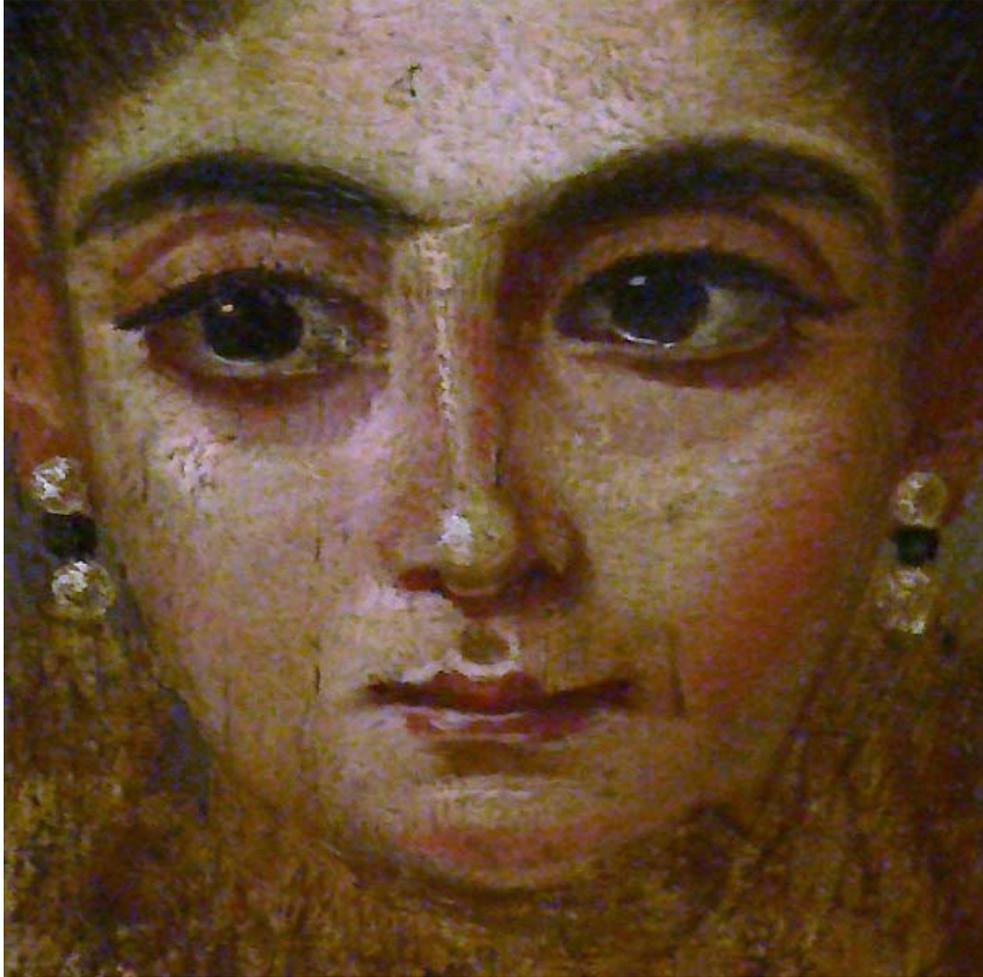


In fact, with few exceptions, even the individuals depicted are of clear Greek or Roman origin, which allows us to admit that the commission of these objects may have been so off-limits, financially speaking, that only the elite could afford this expensive funerary practice. Therefore, the first certain fact is that these silent men, women, and (sadly often) children that stare at us with their tender eyes had material wealth. Many of them are clearly veteran soldiers of Greek or Roman origin that settled in the area, while others seem to be closer to the native Egyptian genetic pattern, which either means that a few Hellenized Egyptians could be admitted on the upper levels of the society or, most probably, that they descended from mixed Egyptian-Greek marriages. Jewish and Semitic traits also have been identified on a handful of these portraits, which indeed is expected since Jewish communities in Egypt were prosperous and particularly numerous.



Although some signs of the individual social status might be discreetly depicted in the portraits, the subjects' official titles are rarely mentioned. Nevertheless, the seven pointed star used as diadem can help us to identify a priest of Serapis in the same way that a sword-belt hung across the shoulder might tell us that we are facing a soldier. More often than not, names are included, but for the most part, they are left unknown to us.

However interesting the discussion related to sociological aspects of these portraits is, their real strength comes from their funerary significance. The most outstanding feature of these portraits is the peaceful way in which each individual faces death. The focal point of these depictions is indeed the depiction of the eyes. Carefully illuminated through impressionistic brush strokes, the subjects' big dark eyes seem to be staring at the observer, but what the subjects really are seeing is situated far beyond our dimension.



Since they were crafted in order to be attached to the mummy, these faces are intended to see eternity. This is also the common ground to all of them. Their ethnic or social differences seem to be eclipsed by the strength of their vision, somehow expressing the everlasting truth that death mocks man's social divisions. This is the silent portrait of a multicultural society that once lived in the noisy and busy streets of Alexandria and other Hellenistic settlements that sprang in Egypt during Greco-Roman Period. In their colorful diversity these people are indeed children of Alexandria, in the sense that they mirror the universal character of its culture. Nevertheless, despite their differences of sex, age, ethnic features, religious or social statuses, somehow all of them became united in the mortal condition that leads them to face death. In doing so they remind us to *carpe diem*, not so much hedonistically, but with the responsibility that lies upon one's shoulders as someone who, briefly, still lives in the realm of the living and, as such, has the power to make a difference

in this great and beautiful world. As they did long before us, we will also stare into the eyes of eternity one day. May we be able to face it with such dignity as they still do.



Works Cited

BAILLY, Jean-Christophe (2001). *La llamada muda: Ensayo sobre los retratos de El Fayum*. Madrid, Akal Ediciones.

BORG, Barbara (1996). *Mumienporträts. Chronologie und kultureller Kontext*. Mainz.

PARLASCA, Klaus (1969-2003). *Ritratti di mummie, Repertorio d'arte dell'Egitto greco-romano*. Vol. B, 1-4, Rome 1969-2003 (Corpus of all known mummy portraits).

WALKER, Susan, BIERBRIER, Morris (1997). *Ancient Faces, Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt*. London.