

A ROMAN PORTRAIT OF A YOUNG BEARDED MAN FROM MEDINET MADI

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Finding context

In Medinet Madi, during ISSEMM 2 sand removal works in 2009,¹ the head of a bearded man was found in the so-called North Cult Place (Pls. 1, 2), a depression in the north part of the Roman

Square (Pl. 11) north of the main temple (Temple A+B). It consists of a rectangular building that measures 12.30 m × 15 m, successively covered by the pavement of the square. Its main architectural feature is a small mud brick plastered chapel in its centre, possibly surrounded by a Portico.² We



Pl. 1 The North Cult Place in the Roman Square, Medinet Madi.

¹ In 2008 the second phase of the Italian-Egyptian cooperation program ISSEMM (Institutional Support to Supreme Council of Antiquities for Environmental Monitoring and Management) was started. The main archaeological result of the sand removal is the dromos South-North, 230 m. long, starting from the original access with the sacrifice's altar; four unique statues of lions and one of a lioness were discovered along its sides, and as well Greek dedication inscriptions dated to the year 116 B.C. The most recent

phase of ISSEMM project, ISSEMM 3 (2013–2014), directed by Prof. Edda Bresciani and managed by Hisham el-Leithy and the writer, has opened the site to Visitors enhancing its facilities, as the Visitor Center. The bearded head was found in 2009, when I was field director for the Italian part of the project, and Inspector Sayed el-Shouip was the chief inspector of the site.

² BRESCIANI and GIAMMARUSTI 2012, 175–181.



Pl. 2a+b The context of finding of the head looking north-west (a) and south (b; inspector Sayed Shouip on the left).



Pls. 3–4 Fragments of *togati* and of gypsum composition from the North Cult Place.

found there large foundations and scattered architectural elements surrounding the chapel.

The finds were numerous and important: beside the head discussed in this paper, many fragments of private statues were found together with hun-

dreds of fragments of a great gypsum composition, with many figures of different sizes, one of them colossal, maybe a Sarapis (Pls. 3–4).³

The place was certainly considered of utmost importance at the beginning of the Roman Empire.

³ Some fragments could be part of a Sarapis crown. A few fragments were gilded with gold. On the cult of Serapis in Medinet Madi, see BRESCIANI *et al.* 2010, 133–134, n. 148–149; 145–146, n. 155.

The Egyptian chapel at its centre, in axis with Temple A, could be older and possibly made to contain the sacred cobra, the living hypostasis of the goddess Renenutet. The large hypaethral structure was probably accessible through a staircase, now lost, on its south side, and was entirely surrounded by massive limestone walls. The gypsum fragments and the architectural remains may suggest some analogy with Alexandria and Luxor Serapea, whose peripteral structure surrounded the cell leaving an opening on the front.⁴ It should be noted, however, that sculptured fragments found there can be considered out of context, as we found them in the filling sand, possibly thrown there during renovation works of the Roman period or even during previous archaeological excavation.⁵ Therefore the Roman head could belong to the archaeological context of the Roman square, whose pavement covered the previous cult place.

Features of the Medinet Madi head

The head (Pls. 5–8) is made in fine limestone, the hair is arranged in thick curls. The right front of the head is cut to the height of the eyebrows, and on the attachment on the back of the head there are concretions that prevent the adherence of both parties. Around the contour of the eyes traces of red are visible, black on the preserved eyebrow. The whiskers are short, a short beard surrounds the cheeks, but the facial features, especially the nose, are disfigured by mutilation.

The preserved part of the head, from the neck to the top of the head, measures 29 cm. in height. The type of the head of Medinet Madi would seem at first glance to be the portrait of an emperor. Besides, inventories such as those in the temples of Oxyrhynchus and Kynopolis, at the time of Caracalla, suggest that every temple and every village in Egypt had a portrait of the emperor, of his father and his mother. Even if all imperial portraits from known context were found in sanctuaries, honorific statues in public areas are also attested, some of them placed above high

columns.⁶ The *ostraka* demonstrate that subscriptions for the erection of statues or busts of emperors could be made more than once in the same realm.⁷ The emperor statues until the time of Caracalla were made certainly in marble or limestone, while only Egyptian style statues could be in Egyptian stone (basalt, granite or porphyry). At least in the Byzantine period it is well known the custom to notify the advent of an emperor by sending his portraits to the most important cities in the empire. From these “originals” portraits were created that ended up all over the country.⁸

After Hadrian some features are generalized throughout the empire: plastic rendering of pupils and irises, smoothing of the marble surface, use of the drill for hair and beard. In Egypt the use of the drill, however, is extremely limited, and is absent in the head of Medinet Madi. Regarding the eyes, there are some particularities. In Egypt, as in Athens and Rome, towards the end of the reign of Trajan the details of the eyes are not yet fully specified, with only the iris carved.⁹ This is because the sculptor tended to delineate only the field where the painter would have defined the work. It is only when the use of paint tend to disappear that the sculptor gradually outlines the details of the eye as well. On the head of Medinet Madi the carving of the iris is clear, but at the same time there are traces of color. However, in Egypt, the use of paint lasts much longer than elsewhere, and it is thus refuted the old assertion that the use of color in the portraits ceases starting from the Antonini¹⁰. Still in the third century the details of the eye are not yet marked by chiseling and yet the drill is not employed to animate the colors of hair. Some heads in limestone or gypsum appear to have received a yellow artificial *patina*, intended to give the illusion of marble¹¹.

The statues of graeco-roman style are, as well as from the capital, from Athribis, Terenouthis, Leontopolis in the Delta, Hermopolis in Upper Egypt. But not all the portraits found in the province have been manufactured there. The Alexandrian sculptors sent off sometimes their works up

⁴ BRESCIANI and GIAMMARUSTI 2012, 181, n. 5. According to Pensabene, the Alexandria serapeum served as a model for all successive serapea: a staircase led to a propylaeum and the building was surrounded by a porch (PENSABENE 1993, 12).

⁵ In his sketches Achille Vogliano, who discovered Medinet Madi temples in 1936–1939, drew a porch and a staircase at the end of the Roman square, thus possibly misinterpret-

ing structures belonging to the Northern Cult Place. Cf. VOGLIANO 1936, VOGLIANO 1937.

⁶ BAILEY 1990, 129–133; BORG 2012, 615.

⁷ GRAINDOR 1937, 18.

⁸ GRAINDOR 1937, 19.

⁹ GRAINDOR 1937, 24.

¹⁰ HEKLER 1912, XLII.

¹¹ GRAINDOR 1937, 27.



Pls. 5–8 The young bearded head of Medinet Madi

to Upper Egypt, as evidenced by a papyrus of AD 140¹².

It is also assumed that the imperial portraits were imported into Egypt, but rather it is true that the Egyptians drew on their imperial portraits, and, as we shall see, even of individuals on the basis of models sent from Rome to Alexandria. In fact, materials and style of the imperial effigies not differ from those of individuals. And therein lays the main problem of interpretation of the head of Medinet Madi. Is it really a head of an emperor or instead a head of an individual that imitates an imperial model?

Models comparable with the head of Medinet Madi

One of the most similar portraits is certainly the bust in marble from Tell Abu Billo, Cairo Mus.



Pl. 9 The "Aelius Verus" bust, CG 44671 (JE 44671), from RUPPRECHT GOETTE 1990, Taf. 60, 3.

No. 44671, assigned by Graindor to Aelius Verus¹³ (Pl. 9.) based on the extraordinary resemblance to the bronze bust of Aelius Verus of the British Museum¹⁴: the details of the curls and the eyebrows are quite similar, as the beard, which forms a thin crown on his cheeks and chin. Before his death Hadrian raised statues to him who was to succeed him throughout the empire.

The portraits of Marcus Aurelius, which in some way resemble the head of Medinet Madi¹⁵, display the use of the drill; the beard is absent in the early portraits, while it is more pronounced in the mature portraits, as the mustache, and covers the cheeks as well.

The head of Septimius Severus in the Cairo Museum¹⁶ (No. 2748) has in common with that of Medinet Madi the type of beard and the sculpture of the iris alone, but the Medinet Madi portrait could eventually have had the pupils carved and subsequently damaged; besides, the hair is shorter and just moved, the eyebrows thinner and more stylized.

More recently, the attributions of numerous portraits of emperors have been doubted by many scholars. Günter Grimm has reconsidered the "imperial" attribution of many portraits by Graindor; he argues that almost always we deal with influence of imperial portraits on those of private individuals¹⁷. Hans Goette, about the portrait in Cairo attributed from Graindor to Aelius Verus and other similar cases, claims that the hair, even in the absence of the starred diadem, is typically Egyptian, and adds that the type of garment and the contexts of discovery make plausible the attribution of similar portraits to a circle of people linked to the cult of Serapis in Roman times¹⁸. Many priests of Serapis would indeed have played civil duties within the Roman system and this would explain the use of the toga. And we cannot of course doubt that the Medinet Madi bearded man wore a toga. Kiss re-examined the issue of imperial portraits in Egypt¹⁹: after a period of great abundance of imperial portraits under Augustus, then a good number (3 or 4) of Vespasian, we are seeing a decline. We do not know in fact any imperial portrait in Egypt of Titus, Domi-

¹² GRAINDOR 1937, 29.

¹³ GRAINDOR 1937, 52, Pl. XI. RUPPRECHT GOETTE 1990, Tafel 60, 3 L81 Kairo. For a discussion on Graindor's and other scholars' identification of "imperial" portraits, see RIGGS 2015, 554 ss.

¹⁴ BEAUCHAMP WALTERS 1899, 151; DELBRÜCK 1914, pl. 24.

¹⁵ GRAINDOR 1937, Pls. XV, XVIa, b, far less the portrait on Pl. XVII.

¹⁶ GRAINDOR 1937, N. 19, Pl. XVIII.

¹⁷ GRIMM 1975, 9, Pls. 52–54.

¹⁸ RUPPRECHT GOETTE 1990, 73–74.

¹⁹ KISS 1984, 56–64.



Pl. 10. The “young Marcus Aurelius” bust, CG 39468 (JE 39468), from RUPPRECHT GOETTE 1990, Taf. 60, 4.

tian and Nerva, only one of Trajan. More recently, Barbara Borg has stated that, despite emperor statues were very common in Egypt at certain times, after Augustus, except for Caracalla, no further emperors can be securely identified, thus most of the previously credited imperial portraits are now considered of private individuals.²⁰ Finally Christina Riggs asks for a “holistic approach” to the interpretation of the Roman portraits in Egypt, using textual and archaeological evidence instead of “trying to categorize sculpture along stylistic lines”.²¹ Unfortunately, we don’t have any textual or even archeological evidence for the Medinet Madi head. At least all scholars agree that with Hadrian things changed substantially. As it had happened with Vespasian in Alexandria, the journey of 130–131 increased the popularity of the

²⁰ BORG 2012, 615.

²¹ RIGGS 2015, 556.

²² KISS 1984, 61, figs. 130–131.

²³ KISS 1984, fig. 132. It is instead attributable to Antoninun Pius according to Graindor, Edgar, Bonacasa.

effigies of the emperor in Egypt, dedicated to the renewal of the sensitivity of the Hellenistic period. On the contrary, Antoninus Pius did not show any particular interest in Egypt. The only portrait certainly attributable to him is CG 41650²², while the bas-relief CG 27568 would not because of the diadem, characteristic of the priests²³. Therefore Kiss agrees with the interpretations of Parlasca and Grimm²⁴, that they are private individuals of the time of Antoninus Pius, who may be dated about the year 150 AD.

The bust CG 44671 attributed to Aelius Verus would also be a private individual of 150 AD, as also Grimm states. The treatment of the eye, with an indication of the iris and pupil, remembers certainly the portrait of Medinet Madi, the pupil of which is lost, as the shaping of beard and eyebrows sculpted in short strokes. In both portraits the curls are very soft, barely carved. The straightforward and clear design is replaced here by an all plastic and pictorial approach, near what is called the Eastern Hellenistic style. The young “Marcus Aurelius” CG 39468 (Pl. 10), an attribution refused by Kiss, Adriani, Wegner, Parlasca, Bonacasa and many others²⁵, might have in common with the Medinet Madi portrait the treatment of curls, which display however extensive use of the drill.

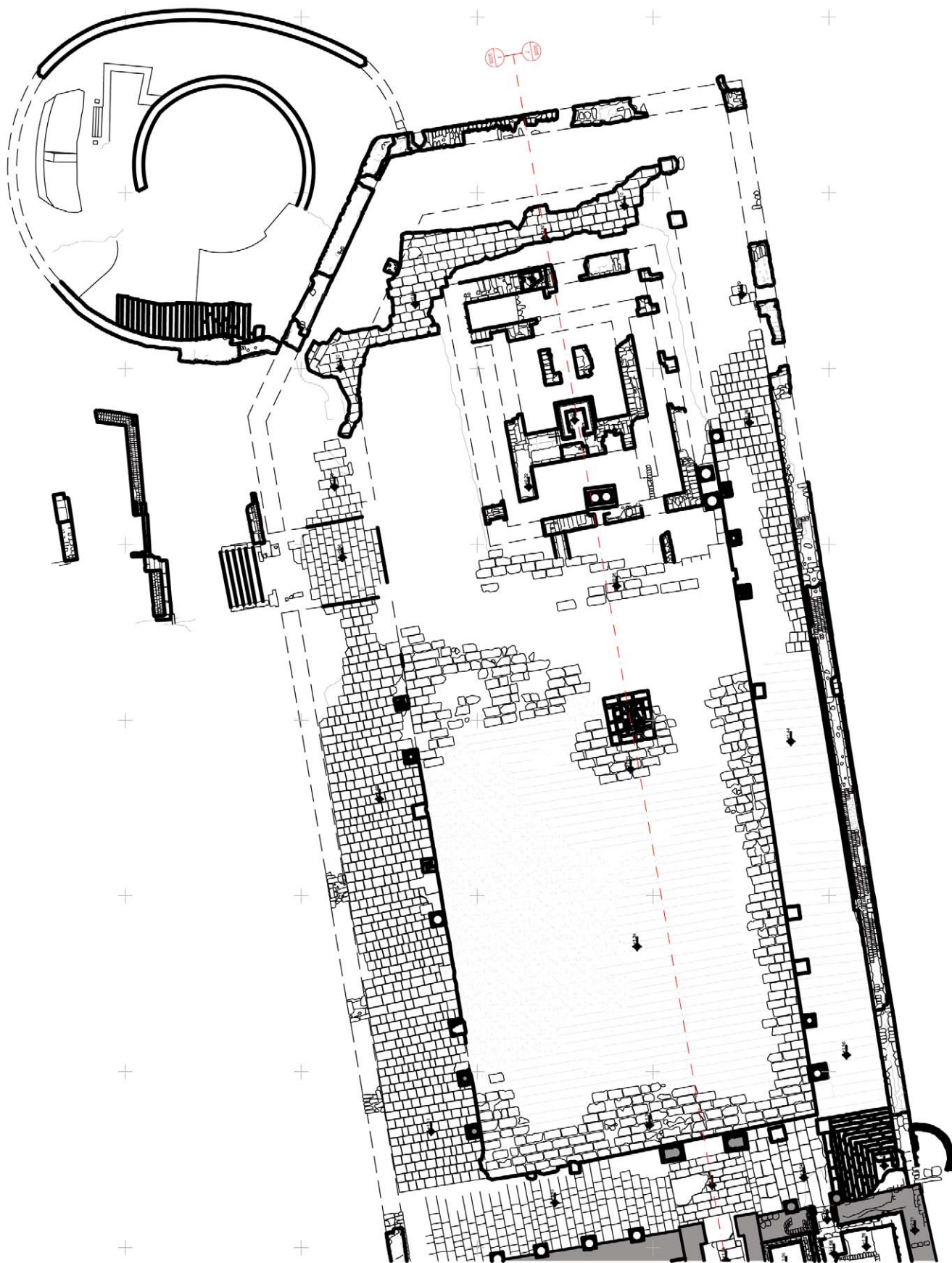
Chronological conclusions

From this review of the portraits of imperial type or imitation, it emerges that in a given period must have existed in Egypt one or more different ateliers, if not a workshop, that carved portraits or busts on the model of imperial portraits for the local people of high society. The temperament of these portraits depended on the different artists, but it remains as a common characteristic the research of the plastic, sometimes pictorial effect, rendered through a precise incision and a soft shaping. Such trends are occurring in all the art of the empire, but here they have a local character derived from the traditions of the eastern Hellenism²⁶. Regarding the dates of this group of imperial style portraits, in which we can eventually include the head from Medinet Madi, the connec-

²⁴ KISS 1984, 62; PARLASCA 1999, 86; GRIMM 1975, 21, n. 26, pls. 49, 52–53.

²⁵ KISS 1984, 63, figs. 139–140.

²⁶ BONACASA 1971, 14.



Pl. 11 The Roman Square in Medinet Madi: the North Cult Place in the north, the sacred shaft north-west (Survey by Dr. Emanuele Brienza).

tion with the young Marcus Aurelius and his family made most of the scholars hypothesize the dates 140–150 AD. According to Kiss, instead, there would be no reason not to date the activity of this school in the late Antonine kingdom, towards the reign of Commodus, when the style of this Egyptian school neared its trends (but not the execution) to the “Baroque” in force throughout the empire²⁷.

The portrait of Medinet Madi seems to date back to the Hadrian or maximum Antoninus Pius age, on the basis of its similarity with the bust CG 44671 (attributed by old scholars to Aelius Verus). It would be surely attractive to connect this sculpture with the supposed visit of Hadrian at Medinet Madi, attested by the famous Demotic ostrakon 298²⁸, during which Hadrian would have stayed with 5 priests of the city. The emperor arrived in Tebtynis December the 1st of 130 AD, during his return journey from Thebes to Alexandria²⁹. We do not know if really Hadrian visited Medinet Madi, or whether he had received the priests of the city in Tebtynis or elsewhere in Fayum; but the very fact that the ostrakon remembers the event about 60 years later at the time of Septimius Severus, is clear indication of how much the visit of the emperor was regarded as epoch-making in the Fayum. In Tebtynis a celebration of “The Coming” (ἐπιβατήρια)³⁰ was celebrated, probably in memory of the visit of Hadrian. According to Sijpesteijn, Tebtynis is likely to have been only the place of entry into the Arsinoite, coming from

Oxyrhynchus, and he argues that the emperor had also visited other places in the Fayum, including the Labyrinth, successively visited by his imitator Septimius Severus during his trip to Egypt.³¹ In this context, it is not surprising that the majority of Roman statues in Medinet Madi may have been erected following the visit of the emperor, even after some years or decades. After all, we cannot exclude that the Medinet Madi head could be a real portrait of an Antonine emperor. Whether it depicts an emperor or a wealthy private individual, it would be possible to imagine this statue above a base or atop a celebrative column in the Roman square. As we have seen above, honorific statues in public areas could be placed above high columns.³² Such a practice is well attested by the Roman period in Egypt, for instance at Oxyrhynchus, where a marble statue of a woman dating to the second century AD was found next to the base of its column.³³ It is thus significant that we have both a large base on the Roman square (Pl. 11), upon which could stand a (equestrian) statue, and a double column at the entrance of the North Cult Place (Pl. 1), just a few meters from the site of the discovery of the head. It can finally be reminded that the Luxor “little Serapeum” (see above), a peripteral chapel which the North Cult Chapel could resemble, was dedicated in AD 126, Hadrian’s birthday, by an *ex-decurion*.³⁴ The suggested dating of the Medinet Madi head and of the site of its discovery could then coincide.

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²⁷ KISS 1984, 64.

²⁸ MENCHETTI 2004. Cfr. PFEIFFER 2010, 158.

²⁹ MENCHETTI 2004, 29; SIJPESTEIJN 1969.

³⁰ SIJPESTEIJN 1969, 115; PFEIFFER 2010, 164 n. 861.

³¹ SIJPESTEIJN 1969, 115, 111 n. 20.

³² BAILEY 1990, 129–133.

³³ BORG 2012, 615.616, fig. 37.1. RIGGS 2015, 557–558.

³⁴ RIGGS 2015, 559–560.

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