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FORMS OF INDIVIDUAL REPRESENTATION IN ROMAN FUNERARY CONTEXTS*

(Taf. 1–5, Abb. 1–5)

Abstract

In order to stress the polarity between individual representation and social values in Roman period portraiture, the paper will discuss some cases from funerary realm: reliefs, painted portraits, sarcophagi.

Roman portraiture, considered as one of the most ‘genuine Roman’ artistic genres in the first half of the past century, has been subject in the following decades of many significant contributions which have led to a more in-depth analysis of the evidence, helping to put these objects – which are preserved in huge quantities from different areas of the Roman world – within a contextual evaluation of the figurative language of Roman society¹. Along these paths, recent contributions focus on the polarity between individual representation and social values in Roman period portraiture². Based on a deeper analysis of the different periods and class of objects, these studies emphasize the amount of social conventions Roman portraiture reveals, when trying to retrace the choices of the different actors involved in the production of objects: sculptors, patrons, and viewers. Roman portraits therefore are not any longer and foremost considered as a fascinating, individual representation of a given person, allowing us to bridge the chronological gap thanks to the emotions they can awake: first and foremost, they are instead considered the products of a society whose figurative language we are trying to understand.

The polarity of Roman period portraiture finds its counterpart in the difficulty scholars nowadays face when trying to agree on what we should consider as a portrait, on how to define portraits. We can dare to treat this problem only by defining the chronologies and social systems we want to observe. Indeed, we cannot find a definition of what portraits are, good for all societies or all periods (including – obviously – contemporary art!).

But even focusing on well-defined chronologies and societies, scholars lack clear consensus on this matter. The strictest position on this point has probably been proposed by KLAUS FITTSCHEN, who is willing to consider as portraits heads samples “mit... idealer Physiognomie und Frisuren” only in cases inscriptions are preserved (such as the statues of Eumachia in Pompeii or Plancia Magna in Perge)³.

More recently, focusing on the contextual and social function of the portraits, other scholars have broadened their area of interest. So, in ROLAND R. R. SMITH’S catalogue of Roman portrait statuary from Aphrodisias, he prefers to include in his study what might have been excluded “on the grounds of being, in modern terms, insufficiently portrait-like”⁴: a statement revealing all the difficulties of treating this subject⁴.

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¹ Among the many contributions to this ‘mainly German dominated research area’ (Fejfer 2008, 4 f.) cfr., e. g., Zanker 1981; Zanker 1983; Zanker 1995c; Fittschen 1991.

² Fejfer 2008; Stewart 2008, 89 f. (Roman portraits as ‘artificial constructions’); Birk 2013, 15, writes about “self-representational statements of the deceased” and of “symbolic representation of the person”. Ma 2013, 278, refers to the tension between individual representations and civic attitudes as shown in the ‘faces’ of Hellenistic honorific monuments. On funerary portraits from Roman Egypt treated *infra*, see Ma 2013, 255 f. A more traditional view, considering the portrait as a physiognomic representation of a given person and opposing it to the stereotypical representation, can be found in Bartman 2011.

³ Fittschen 1984b, 191 f.; on the “not portrait” style of Plancia Magna statue cfr. Dillon 2010, 156–163.

⁴ Smith 2006, 7.

In studying private portraits, the risk ultimately lies in judging in a personal way which is a portrait and which is not, as we are obviously not in the position to decide whether the portrait “looks like the portrayed person”⁵. As R. R. SMITH has clearly put it, this is a particularly slippery track, where “it is easy to be persuaded to take them (*i.e.*, Roman portraits) as they want to be seen, that is, to be seduced into seeing the real person in the image or interpreting the image straightforwardly in the light of what we know of the person. These are both fallacies about which we need to be explicit”⁶.

Given this situation, and in order to overcome these methodological problems, it seems advisable to attempt overcoming these difficulties by putting the portraits into the frame of the intent of the patrons and craftsmen, in this way trying to understand whether an ‘individualizing intent’ was at stake. In order to do so, we must attempt to retrace through a historical process the reasons for the choices on the side of the patrons and craftsmen and the results of their choices on the viewers⁷.

The long debate on Roman portraiture can therefore help focus on the methodological issues at stake in the debate on late antique and Byzantine private portraits. Following the organizers recommendation to explore this issue ‘in a wider context’, I will present at this workshop three case studies pertaining to Roman funerary contexts. Indeed, the social function of the funerary realm can be of great significance in evaluating how social norms and stereotypes might affect individual likeness, especially if patrons from middle social strata are involved.

In order to analyse the images in a ‘gattungsspezifisch’ way, we must first of all recall the strong ‘honorary’ function that tombs possess in the late Republican and early Imperial period, a function making these monuments first and foremost aimed at representing the individuals and social groups towards the community of the living people⁸. Following a chronological order, I will briefly start with the freedmen reliefs (‘Kastengrabreliefs’) from the Republican and early Imperial period; I will then discuss more at length the so-called Fayum portraits; to turn eventually to sarcophagi with mythical and not mythical subjects, datable to the second half of the 2nd century AD.

Freedmen Funerary Reliefs

‘Kastengrabreliefs’⁹ might be regarded as a ‘new genre’ in the Roman figurative language, born out of the strong social needs – especially on the side of the freedmen – to ‘preserve their memories’ and to ‘tell their stories’.

The phenomenon is a very complex one, of paramount importance in Roman society, resulting from a new consciousness of their social identity and position in the society these social strata have now developed. We could consider this phenomenon as an access to personhood: it is highly significant to stress the contribution that archaeological analysis can offer in understanding this historical phenomenon. Marks of this phenomenon in the material record allow us to trace it at first in the funerary realm, in the course of the 1st century BC, and later in the following century in the domestic realm¹⁰.

‘Kastengrabreliefs’ – the earliest archaeological record of this phenomenon – are of particular value for us, given that epigraphy assures that this ‘new genre’ was born out of a clearly identifiable social group: inscriptions define the social status of the patrons as *liberti*, a condition exercising a strong influence in the iconography the reliefs display.

⁵ Ma 2013, 302, conveniently writes that, besides not being determinable, this is also “beside the point”.

⁶ Smith 1998, 60.

⁷ The methodology is defined by Trimble 2011, 3 as “relational aesthetics”, meaning “to treat these statues seriously as visual images, with effects and meanings as such, but which operated in and through their relationship to the physical, social, spatial, and conceptual world in which they were produced and seen”. It appears equally important to state that archaeological analysis can in fact operate in retrieving meanings in the ancient record: throughout her book, the Author succeeds in demonstrating that “individual identity was as much a creation of social categories and visual conventions as the result of a mimetic and unique depiction”: Trimble 2011, 162.

⁸ Baldassarre 1987.

⁹ Balty 1991, 9–11; Kockel 1993; Smith 2012; Borg 2012b. On this type of reliefs see also Mouritsen 2011, 279–299, esp. 281–289, considering the risk of over-interpreting the evidence on the basis of “an external, essentially literal agenda”.

¹⁰ Bragantini 1995.

Among the first examples, as well as the few preserving the whole archaeological context, are two ‘twin’ tombs in Via Statilia in Rome, featuring inscriptions and reliefs¹¹. One of them presents a woman and two men, apparently of different ages: poor craftsmanship and material result here in objects of low quality, in which inscribed indications appear equally or more important than the individual representation (Abb. 1, 1–3).

Reliefs of later date (always within the 1st century BC) do show a better quality¹²: but more important seems the desire on behalf of these ‘new patrons’ to express the newly acquired social status and the new rights it permits (legal marriages and free children, sometimes represented in military habits). The will on behalf of the patrons to make this new status the theme of the funerary representation results in repeated iconographic formulae: men wear the toga, women are veiled or wear the *stola*, hands are often joined in the *dextrarum iunctio* gesture, and hair styles repeat contemporary styles. So, single people even when they might appear more ‘clearly’ portrayed, are ‘disguised’ and ‘disappear’ under repeated gestures and stylish dressing, making their representation conform to social values (Abb. 2, 1).

Preserved in huge quantities from the city of Rome, freedmen reliefs allow us to perceive the high grade of ‘standardization’ they display, as regards both iconographies and individual representation, thus revealing the strength of social values and the social function they possess in late Republican society¹³.

PAUL ZANKER’s analysis of some of the late Republican male portraits can well demonstrate ‘to what extent’ social norms and stereotypes might affect a person’s look. P. ZANKER has shown how strongly ‘Kastengrabreliefs’ exhibit traits which look individual, but are in fact derived from Caesar’s portrait: he writes of characteristic “Gesichtsproportionierung und –bau und mimischer Ausdruck” and of a “Bildschema”, with “längliche Gesichter mit betontem Knochenbau, kurzem Haar und angespannten Gesichtszügen” (Abb. 2, 2–3, 1)¹⁴. Clearly, it is not just a period face (‘Zeitgesicht’) or hair style he is describing: physiognomic details are also at stake here, in sum, the entire ‘look’ of the portrayed person, so that it is hard for us to judge whether ‘Kastengrabreliefs’ do show a major intent of representing a single person, or the social values bound to the new social status prevail, as the formulaic iconography and its consistent use would suggest¹⁵.

Within the frame of the funerary ideology of the Roman society, as we can reconstruct it for the period, the new theme of social ascent shows up. Craftsmen represent this new theme operating on schemes of their repertoire and articulating social stereotypes: married couples in different age groups, children of both genders, young males in military habits featuring ‘Schulterbausch’ as an important iconographical marker.

In parallel with the epigraphic record, the subject of the figuration is not an individual but a social group, and freedmen reliefs offer us a rich material to consider how a new figurative language – in which preexisting schemes and iconographies ‘acquire’ new functions – comes out from the interaction between craftsmen, patrons and observers.

In two ways, mutual relation, the language of these reliefs is built on social norms, featuring male and female ideals and at the same time contributes to reinforce the same social norms it is built on.

Fayum Portraits

A rather peculiar corpus of images, painted funerary portraits from Egypt, is investigated in our discussion, as I hope to show: (i) that through the consistent representation of different social *personae* in different age groups (male and female children, young males and girls, brides and mothers), these portraits do convey social norms and values; (ii) that they also rely on stereotypes; (iii) that the image of likeness they convey is at least part of the social function of these objects¹⁶.

Recent works by CHRISTINA RIGGS, DOMINIC MONTSERRAT, BARBARA BORG, and LORELEI H. CORCORAN have contributed greatly to give a deeper meaning to these images, escaping the descriptive approach common to

¹¹ Kockel 1993, 83–85 (“um 80 oder etwas später”): cat. A1–A2 pl. 1; 2 b – 3: tombs of the Clodii and of Caelia Apollonia.

¹² See, e. g., Kockel 1993, 113 E 2, pl. 25 b: Getty Villa, Malibu, inv. 71.AA.260 (relief of Popillius and Calpurnia).

¹³ Kockel 1993, 62–76.

¹⁴ Zanker 1981, 354–355.

¹⁵ P. ZANKER describes freedmen reliefs as characterized by an ‘individual’ face (at least, in the intention of patrons and sculptors) and a body conformed to social norms: “Jeder individuelle Togatus mit individuellem Gesicht...bekennt sich gleichzeitig mittels völlig gleichförmiger statuarischer Erscheinung zu einer bürgerlichen politischen Norm” (Zanker 1995c, 481).

¹⁶ I rely here on arguments treated more at length in Bragantini 2011.

so many old or new books or exhibition catalogues¹⁷. Some ‘area of disagreement’ is still to be found concerning the primary function of the portraits, a problem which is also due, at least partially, to the generalized lack of archaeological contexts¹⁸. Even if most of the scholars I have referred to do agree in considering that the portraits were mainly made for funerary purposes, others follow KLAUS PARLASCA’S view that they were originally made for a domestic use and regard their use in tombs as secondary¹⁹.

A funerary primary intention can be inferred first of all by the repertoire the paintings display: people are often painted holding beakers or garlands of flowers, which are the same items that people hold in objects of a clear funerary function, such as shrouds²⁰.

Moreover, the huge numbers of children and young people portrayed speaks also in favor of a funerary function: in fact, honorary (and then, ‘living’) portraits featuring young people mainly occur in cases of princes of both genders and families of the highest rank²¹. The figurative system of the painted portraits would then point to a primary funerary function: in fact, I find highly questionable the suggestion that the same object (painted in the same technique and presenting the same figurative language) could be made for different occasions and play such different roles: a funerary one in case of children; a ‘domestic’ one in case of adults.

This hypothesis might find an objection in the ‘realistic’ appearance of the portraits: how could the painter convey such a ‘true’ image of the person, if the portrait was painted when the person was dead? In fact, and due to the social function of the portraits in the complex society of Roman Egypt, the painters were able to convey a ‘liveliness’ (I would say even a ‘likeness’) which can largely explain the appeal these images exercise on the modern observer²²: patrons were obviously strongly willing to ‘honor’ their dead with high quality portraits (the work of highly trained craftsmen, using a ‘fixed’ repertoire, material and techniques which are in themselves the expression of social codes).

A comprehensive analysis of the whole dossier can indeed highlight the number of stereotypes these images are also built on²³. Observing the portraits of young males, D. MONTSERRAT noticed that they are consistently distributed among two clearly identifiable groups: in the first group, adolescent young males are often represented with a lock of hair, alluding to the *mallokeurion* or the cutting of a lock of hair, the ‘rite de passage’ which will mark their ‘social birth’ (Abb. 3, 2–3); in the second group young, sexually ripe males are represented with thin moustaches²⁴. Among the examples of these kinds of portraits²⁵, we can recall the

¹⁷ Montserrat 1993; Corcoran 1995; Borg 1996; Riggs 2002; Riggs 2005; Riggs 2010; Borg 2012a. On portraits from Hawara cfr. Uytterhoeven 2009, 463–546.

¹⁸ A monumental tomb containing six mummies with painted portraits has recently been discovered at Marina El-Alamein: Daszewski 1993, esp. 409–412 figs. 6–7; Daszewski 1997; Cartron 2012 (2), 210–213. The best preserved portrait is dated on stylistic grounds at the beginning of the 2nd century AD. Important information on late Hellenistic mummy burials can also be found in Guimier Sorbets 2010: analysing decorated *loculi* in rooms 4 and 5 of tomb 5 in the necropolis of Anfouchi in Alexandria, the Author proposes that they should contain embalmed mummies.

¹⁹ Lehmann 2010, 175–213. Scheidel 1998, 290, regards the executions of portraits among the reasons for the long time needed (around 70 days) for completing the mummies, thus implying that the portraits were not painted ‘from life’. Nowicka 1998, 123 adopts an open-minded view: “Reste toujours ouverte la question de savoir quelles étaient la destination primitive de ces portraits et les raisons du passage d’un masque modelé à une peinture sur bois, à un moment donné et seulement au sein d’un groupe de la population”. Cfr. also Nowicka 1993, 152–162.

²⁰ Beakers and garland of flowers are often painted on the shrouds from Antinoe: cfr., e.g., Parlasca 1977, 74 n. 422 pl. 105 (Louvre P 215). On objects accompanying the representation of deceased children cfr. Nenna 2012, 286–290.

²¹ Fittschen 1985, 21–23. Examples from the middle imperial period can be found e.g. in the ‘imperial gallery’ from the Villa of Chiragan, now in the Museum of Toulouse (Cazes 1999, 122, inv. 30162; 140–142, inv. 30163 and 30169), or in the *nymphaeum* built by Herodes Atticus in Olympia: Bol 1984; cf. also Fittschen 1999. Young people ‘of noble families’ are attested in Aphrodisias: Smith 2006, 50 f. n. 279 (J. Lenaghan – J. Van Voorhis); cfr. also Ma 2013.

²² On the technic and artistic qualities of some portraits cfr. Barthelet 2012, 199–203. Torelli 2007, esp. 459–464, highlights different artistic traditions and different ‘styles’ in the whole *corpus* (on the important ‘anomaly’ of the portraits from er-Rubayat see *infra*). Brecoulaki 2015 points out the high quality of the painting. On the economic situation of the painters see Drexhage 2000.

²³ Already Drerup 1933, 17 f., writes of “Gesicht ohne besondere individuellen Züge“, of limited “Bildnistreue“ and “Variierung eines bestimmten Typus“. Thompson 1982, 15: “Most are portraits in only a symbolic sense“. Borg 2004c, 98, underlines that “Porträts keineswegs neutrale Abschilderungen der Physiognomie ...sind, sondern mindestens z. T. bewusst konstruierte Bilder“: *contra* Lehmann 2010, esp. 183 f.

²⁴ Legras 1993; Montserrat 1993; Montserrat 1996, 51–53; Borg 1996, 115–121. According to Bergmann 2016, 156 “the importance [of the mallokeurion] might have been enhanced by the concurrent youth-lock of Egyptian tradition”.

²⁵ Ca. 50, according to Montserrat 1996, 52.

mummy of Artemidoros, whose age of death has been fixed between 19 and 21, or the Herakleides mummy in the J. P. Getty Museum in Malibu, whose age at death was estimated around 20, or a portrait from Hawara whose age at death has been fixed around 20 years²⁶.

‘Sexually ripe girls’ (in the sense proposed by D. MONTSERRAT for young males) are mostly characterized as such by jewels and dresses in fancy, costly colors. Portraits of young females lack the clear distinction in age groups observed for young males: therefore, the ‘social personae’ the portraits represent mirror the different social role for males and females, and whereas the representation of males stresses age groups and different social positions, the lack of a corresponding situation for females is expressed by their less specific iconography.

‘Brides’ and mothers, adult females who have accomplished their social function through marriage and childbirth, are once again clearly recognizable (Abb. 4, 1–2)²⁷.

Other ‘specialized categories’, identifiable through their consistent iconography, are so-called athletes²⁸ and people in military habit. The latter are all around the same age, hair and beards are styled according to the ‘Zeitgesicht’ principle, contrasting with the white *tunica* the dark-color *paludamentum* appears on one shoulder, the sword-belt is often present²⁹.

Through archaeological analysis, we can show that the portraits are mainly aimed at representing ‘social types’. The stereotypy of this language is even more enhanced when we compare portraits which ‘look similar’, regardless if they are the work of the same painter (Abb. 4, 3–4)³⁰. The ‘likeness’ the portraits exhibit should be regarded as an intended goal, the result of the painters’ high craftsmanship, conveying to these objects a ‘scent of life’. This is especially evident in the way the eyes ‘look’: so, in a well-known portrait from Hawara, now in London, the peculiar quality of the gaze is obtained with a careful distortion in the rendering of the eyes³¹.

A comprehensive analysis of the archaeological evidence can lead us to reject the objections of scholars positively proposing that the ‘liveliness’ the portraits exhibit should be regarded as a proof that they have been painted during the deceased’ person’s lifetime for a primary domestic function.

²⁶ Montserrat 1993, 217. Artemidoros: Parlasca 1969, 71 n. 162 pl. 39, 1 (British Museum, inv. EA 21810); Montserrat 1996, 52 (with bibliography); Green 2001, 46 (the mummy carapace varied from ‘bright and gilded’ cinnabar red, described in a late XIX c. guide, to a dull red color – metacinnabarite – probably because of exposure to high light). Herakleides: Parlasca – Frenz 2003, 50 n. 719 pl. 164, 1 (Malibu, Getty Villa, inv. 91.AP.6); Warren – Trentelman 2009; Corcoran – Svoboda 2011 (non vidi). Portrait from Hawara (London, National Gallery, inv. 1261); Borg 2009, 307. We regard this data as an important confirmation that, at least partly, the ‘young’ look of the deceased corresponds to the age at death and should not be interpreted as an idealized representation.

²⁷ For the age of marriage of men and women, based on papyrological sources, see Malouta 2012, 291.

²⁸ This conventional definition applies to young males with bare chests: Borg 1996, 159, following Montserrat 1993, 221–224, rightly points to the inconsistency of this definition.

²⁹ Borg 1996, 156–159. See also the later shroud from Thebes, now in Luxor (Museum of Ancient Egyptian Art, inv. J.194/Q.1512): Parlasca – Frenz 2003, 61 n. 763 pl. 171, 1; Riggs 2005, 222 f. 293 f. n. 117 pl. 12.

³⁰ Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 31161/4 (Parlasca 1977, 31 n. 254 pl. 62, 3, here Abb. 3, 2), and Copenhagen, National Museum inv. 3892 (Parlasca 1969, 49 f. n. 86 pl. 21, 1, here Abb. 3, 3). The wood is European imported *Tilia* as in Herakleides mummy, *supra*, note 26: Cartwright *et al.* 1991, 50 f.). Cairo, C.G. 33265 (Parlasca 1969, 45 n. 72 pl. 18, 2, here Abb. 4, 1), and Cairo, C.G. 33256 (Parlasca 1969, 51 n. 91 pl. 21, 6, here Abb. 4, 2). Parlasca 1969, 59 n. 119 pl. 29, 1 (Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung, P. Vindob. G 808, here Abb. 4, 3) and Parlasca 1980, 32 n. 536 pl. 130, 1 (Cairo C.G. 33246, here Abb. 4, 4; see also Borg 1996, 99, with other comparisons). Borg 1996, 93–105 discusses portraits to be referred to the same painter or the same ‘Werkstatt’. Cf., *e. g.*, Parlasca 1969, 25 f. n. 2 pl. I, 2 (Cairo, C.G. 33268) and Parlasca 1969, 26 n. 4 pl. I, 4 (Berlin, Bodemuseum, inv. 17073); Parlasca 1969, 29 f. n. 15 pl. 4, 3 (Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 31161.6), and Parlasca 1969, 85 n. 218 pl. 54, 2 (London, British Museum, EA 74706); Parlasca 1980, 31 n. 531 pl. 129, 1 (Philadelphia, University Museum, inv. E 462), and Parlasca 1980, 31 n. 533 pl. 129, 3 (Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, inv. 1928.42); Parlasca 1977, 51 f. n. 334 pl. 81 (Berlin, Antikensammlung, inv. 31161/2), and Parlasca 1969, 38 n. 42 pl. 11, 4 (Berlin, Staatliche Museen, inv. 19722). The portraits Parlasca 1980, 27 n. 515 pl. 125, 3 (Cairo C.G. 33248) and Parlasca 1980, 27 n. 516 pl. 125, 4 (Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, inv. 1939.111); Parlasca 1980, 30 f. n. 530 pl. 128, 4 (Hildesheim, Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum, inv. 3066), and Parlasca 1980, 52 n. 615 pl. 146, 1–2 (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. 1966.1112) look similar, even if they appear to be work of different painters.

³¹ Parlasca 1969, 29 n. 13 pl. 4, 1 (London, British Museum, EA 74716). Ma 2013, 302 underlines the ‘technical trick’ of painted portraits engaging ‘the viewer’s gaze’, and ‘the success of the artwork to achieve presence’.

The evidence from the Fayum portraits shows the macroscopic presence of certain groups of individuals (children and young people of both genders, in different age groups, young ‘brides’, soldiers...). Following the principles that led IAN MORRIS to speak of ‘formal burials’ (only specific groups of the dead receiving burials capable of leaving traces in the archeological records in Attica “...from c. 1050...to the late 6th century”)³², and considering the extremely low percentage of painted portraits in comparison with the mummies found (1:100)³³, we could consider the painted portraits from Egypt as ‘formal portraits’: mostly represented, among the people portrayed, are young people, whose untimely death is stressed, so emphasizing the loss both on the family side and on the social group’s side³⁴.

Through the specific features highlighted here, the portraits can be regarded as aimed to display the social conditions of the dead, of their families and their social groups. We can also infer that, as in other periods, the funerary rituals (the realm the painted portraits should be connected to) act as occasions to display social as well as family bonds³⁵. Focusing on the signs of a social status, these images might even reveal an active role that we can compare with actions aimed at stressing and promoting the role and social position of specific personae or social figures, as was the above case with ‘Kastengrabeliefs’.

The painted portraits seem then to find their ‘raison d’être’ in the needs of social groups of Roman Egypt that are not so easy to be identified on the basis of an archaeological analysis solely³⁶. In fact, given the almost total lack of context, what remains hard to define from an archaeological perspective is the way the portraits might act in defining identities: do they ‘enhance and give strength’ to identities needing affirmation and protection (as might be the case of ‘declining’ identities?); or – as the freedmen reliefs from Rome – are they aimed at ‘promoting’ identities?

This point might be of special interest in the context of Egypt under the Roman Empire. As in other fields of ancient societies, archaeology here might offer clues shedding a different light on situations known to us mainly through written sources, transmitting legal and administrative rules. Given that in the provinces of the Roman Empire privileges granted to a person or to groups of people can overcome and bypass what is defined by law, we could wonder if the same might apply to Egypt: here the strict division of people in three classes known from written sources might allow exceptions, promoting social status as a personal privilege granted by the imperial administration. Onomastic analysis would anyway support the view that patrons of the painted portraits wished to stress their membership of privileged social groups in Roman Egypt³⁷.

I would like to recall now a group of painted portraits from er-Rubayat, mostly painted in tempera technique on sycamore tables³⁸. Notwithstanding the similarity of support and technique with other portraits, they are easily recognizable in the whole *corpus* of painted portraits from Egypt and are probably works of

³² Morris 1987, 97–109.

³³ Bergmann 2010, 6.

³⁴ Riggs 2005, 131; cfr. also Martin-Kilcher 2000. Uytterhoeven 2009, 520, considers the high percentage of young people “In line with...low life expectations”.

³⁵ Bussi 2008, 129 f.

³⁶ Montserrat 1993, 223 f.

³⁷ Legras 2004, 66–75; Malouta 2011; cfr. also Bowman 2002, 195–201; Broux – Depauve 2015; Rowlandson 2013, 230 stresses Roman administration concern to ensure that “changes of status [be] carried out with the proper formalities and patronage”, as well as “Roman officials [...] considerable discretion in enforcing the letter of the law”.

³⁸ Cf. especially the portraits Parlasca 1980, 23 n. 499 pl. 121, 3 (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung Inv. X 300); 27 f. n. 518 pl. 126, 2 (Zurich University, inv. 3801); 27 n. 517 pl. 126, 1 (London, British Museum P87); 28 n. 520 pl. 126, 4 (St. Louis, City Art Museum, inv. 128:51); 28 n. 519 p. 126, 3 (Moscow, Puschkin Museum, inv. 1a 5783). Only for the portraits Parlasca 1980, 53 n. 619 pl. 147, 2 (Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Museum inv. 1902.70) and 54 n. 621 pl. 147, 4 (Dublin, National Museum of Ireland inv. 1902:4) the provenance from er-Rubayat can be demonstrated: Bierbrier 1997b, 16–17 pl. 19, 1–2. Given the peculiar characteristics of the portraits assigned to er-Rubayat, it is interesting to refer the late XIX c. description of Fouquet 1887, 229 (Drerup 1933, 13 f.; Borg 1996, 185): the paintings he saw were not part of mummies but hung on the walls of a grotto (‘Les parois de la grotte etient ornées d’un très grand nombre de portraits peints sur bois’: the reliability of this description is questioned by Cartron 2012 [2], 155). The two portraits described by Fouquet 1887, 229, have been identified as follows: Hannover, Kestner Museum, inv. 1961.5 (Parlasca 1980, 25 f. n. 509 pl. 124, 1); Santa Barbara, Museum of Art, inv. 59.18 (Parlasca 1980, 36 n. 551 pl. 133, 2). On the portraits from er-Rubayat cfr. also Trouchaud 2013. The dimensions (cm 58 × 48) of the portrait Wien, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Papyrussammlung, P. Vindob. G 807 indicate that this also hung on a wall and was not part of a mummy: Parlasca 1977, 63 n. 383 pl. 93, 1; Seipel 1998, 170 n. 55 (U. Horak).

the same painter³⁹. Instead of the ‘idealized’, mostly young faces described above, we find here mostly elderly faces, with marked wrinkles and white ‘curls’ in the hair⁴⁰. Jewels and dresses in expensive colors are mainly absent, and the necks, trapezoidal in shape, appear ‘inserted’ above the tunic⁴¹. Looking at the artistic quality of the portraits (brush strokes and hatching to give plasticity to the faces, combined with a ‘well trained’ use of gradation in colors), we can conclude that their peculiar characteristics are not due to a minor quality of the painters⁴². In fact, they seem to possess different ‘artistic qualities’ and display a completely different language, what we might interpret as a completely different ‘communicative intent’: are they intended to represent completely different ‘themes’ (on behalf of different social groups?).

Mythological Sarcophagi

Mythological sarcophagi featuring figures with individual traits represent the last case I wish to discuss here⁴³.

The sarcophagus from Ostia representing the death of Alcestis⁴⁴ is regarded as one of the earliest examples of these kinds of figurations (Abb. 5, 1)⁴⁵. In the front centre, a female figure is dying on a kline: instead of a youthful, ideal face, the heroine has realistic traits, contemporary hair style and an elderly face. A reduced emphasis on the tragedy of the scene can be observed, as the dying person and her family have more restrained gestures than other sarcophagi with the same myth⁴⁶. We can hence accept that the central figure is meant to represent Metilia Acte, although we can speculate ‘when and how’ the sculptor might have produced the portrait after her death⁴⁷. It seems wiser to hypothesize that the heroine face is built on only realis-

³⁹ Borg 1996, 108 n. 47; cfr. also the portraits Borg 1996, pl. 48–53.

⁴⁰ Although adults feature conspicuously in the portraits of this ‘group’, and contrary to the general interpretation of this detail (see *e.g.* Borg 1996, 57), I doubt that white lines in the hair of the portrayed people are meant to render ‘salt and pepper hair’, and consider them instead as a stylized or ‘abstract’ way (like an incision) of representing different ‘curls’, as in Byzantine paintings. The young look of the portraits Parlasca 1980, 27 nn. 515–516 pl. 125, 3–4 (Cairo, CG, 33248; Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, inv. 1939.111), or Parlasca 1977, 55 n. 346 pl. 84, 3 (Cracow, National Museum, inv. VII 1023) would suggest the same. The portrait Parlasca 1980, 37 n. 556 pl. 135, 1 (Northampton, Mass. Smith College of Art, 32:9–1), shows the same way of stylizing the different curls, here represented in different tones of brown.

⁴¹ Cfr., *e.g.*, the portrait Parlasca 1980, 23 n. 499 pl. 121, 3 (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung Inv. X 300), *supra*, note 38.

⁴² It is interesting to note that Drerup 1933, 62 f. refers to the painter of the portraits Parlasca 1980, 23 n. 497 pl. 121, 1 (Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum, inv. H 2196); Parlasca 1977, 27 n. 516 pl. 125, 4 (Cambridge (Mass.) Fogg Art Museum, inv. 1939); Parlasca 1977, 23 n. 499 pl. 121, 3 (Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung Inv. X 300) as a ‘Meister’. On the possibility that different ‘painting styles’ might possess a peculiar, communicative intent see Borg 1996, 110: “Die Wahl des Porträtstils muss demnach auch inhaltlich, d.h. durch die mittels eines bestimmenden Malstils umgesetzte Aussage des Bildnisses, begründet gewesen sein”.

⁴³ Blome 1978; Zanker 2004, 45–50; Newby 2011.

⁴⁴ Musei Vaticani, Galleria Chiaramonti, inv. 1195: Helbig I, 229 f. n. 291; Grassinger 1999, 110–128. 227 f., cat. 76; Andreae 1984b, 120; Fittschen 1984a, 141–143; Zanker 2004, 202–204; Ewald 2004, 298–301; Newby 2011, 194–200.

⁴⁵ The inscription, referring to C. Iunius Euhodus and Metilia Acte, dates the relief at around 160–170 AD.

⁴⁶ Cfr. the sarcophagus front in Villa Albani: Grassinger 1999, 228 cat. 77; Zanker 2004, 99 f. In order to better grasp the role of heads with realistic traits on mythological sarcophagi, we can observe that heads with ‘realistic’ traits occupy the centre of the scene, but do not really ‘take part’ in the story, do not ‘live the story’. As has already been noted (Grassinger 1999, 228), only the dying Alcestis has a realistic, elderly face: the veiled figure near Hercules can hardly be distinguished from the Proserpina head at the far right. The same can be observed on the sarcophagus with Adonis and Aphrodite in the Vatican Museum from the ‘Pancratii’ tomb in Rome (Musei Vaticani, Museo Gregoriano Profano, inv. 10409: Helbig I, 800–802 n. 1120; Grassinger 1999, 219 cat. 65; Herdejürgen 2001; Ewald 2004, 290–292): the couple with contemporary traits occupies only the front of the scene, in the well-known iconography of the goddess seated near wounded Adonis, while on the rest of the front both Adonis and Aphrodite show ideal heads. This leads us to consider the distance these images are meant to convey between the story told by the myth and the ‘portrayed people’.

⁴⁷ Given the subject of the iconography, it seems highly unlikely that the female head should be realized during a person’s lifetime, the more so because Admetos attire seems to emphasize distance from the ‘contemporary, realistic’ dying figure; *contra* Birk 2013, 29. Basing on his chronology of the dying figure head, Fittschen 1984a, 141–143 even hypothesizes a distance of around 20 years between Metilia Acte death and the production of the sarcophagus; he also considers (Fittschen 1984a, 151) that funerary masks could be used to produce the dead portraits. Zanker 2004, 48 touches on the issue with a different approach.

tic elements, meant to convey “the appearance of the face, including signs of age, to negotiate an ideal identity”⁴⁸. It is also highly questionable whether – as is usually assumed – Admetos face possesses individual traits (Abb. 5, 2): on the contrary, styled hair and beard might only suggest a contemporary, ‘living’ look on an idealized face and a ‘heroic’ body; varied opinions on the identification of the male figures on the sarcophagus front reveal the image intended ambiguity⁴⁹.

Mythological themes appear of special interest for patrons ‘near freedmen status’, „auch weil die mythologischen Themen statusspezifisch nicht gebunden waren“: this statement brings out the function of myth as an inexhaustible narrative device, by which personages whose social position did not give them access to figurative themes defining status or linked to public life represent norms, expectations, and behaviours⁵⁰. But even sarcophagi pertaining to people from the highest rank⁵¹ might be considered here: the “genormte Biographie”⁵² constituting the theme of these sarcophagi features the protagonist within the representation of what we might term ‘the myth of the life of a military commander’. As HENNING WREDE has already clarified, even in the case of such high-level patrons as with ‘senatorische Sarkophage’, “individuelle und genormte Biographien widersprechen ... nicht” and lead “zu sich wechselseitig bedingenden Aussagen”.

Lastly, when considering role and meaning of individual representation on sarcophagi featuring ‘individualistic’ traits, mention should also be made about the sarcophagi with ‘unfinished’ heads: the more so, given the duration of the phenomenon and its occurrence on sarcophagi featuring different iconographies⁵³. Of particular interest on this issue is JANET HUSKINSON’S paper: devoting deeper attention to this phenomenon, she underlines its collective character and long duration, pointing to the decreased interest in facial representation these objects demonstrate⁵⁴.

Conclusions

The above analysis can help shift the traditional emphasis put on Roman portraits being a ‘trustworthy’ representation of individual traits, showing that in this society other elements are at work beside ‘likeness’, when the social need arises to ‘build’ or ‘shape’ the memory of the deceased: his/her role in the society or in the social groups must be communicated to the viewers through iconographic formulae or ‘stereotypes’, well rooted in contemporary society. In fact, the portraits we treated here differ in provenance, chronology and context, but they all share the role of the cultural construction they exhibit in rendering the physical appearance of a given person. A focus on the funerary realm allows to widen the evidence, involving wider groups of patrons that otherwise would have been excluded if only the portraits from the public realm were taken into consideration⁵⁵.

In this way, I hope to have shown the role of social norms in shaping and forming individual representation, the more so when patrons from the ‘lower’ social strata are involved: their interest in following models set by higher class patrons can in fact strongly affect individual representation.

The polarity between individual traits and social norms appears then ‘embedded’ in the function of portraits in the Roman society: therefore, we can conclude highlighting – once more – that images do not ‘trans-

⁴⁸ Birk 2013, 15. As noted by Ewald 2004, 300, the ‘conjugal’ theme of the story of Admetos and Alcestis makes even Proserpina leaning as a ‘confident wife’ on her ‘husband’; see also Grassinger 1999, 114.

⁴⁹ See *e.g.* Blome 1978, 443 f.; Andrae 1984b, 120; Wood 1993; Zanker 2004, 48 f. 202; Ewald 2004, 298–301; Newby 2011, 194–196; Birk 2013, 27 f. fig. 11; 98–100; 299 n. 552; Newby 2016, 285.

⁵⁰ Wrede 2001, 16. According to Mayer 2012, 142, “inscribed mythological sarcophagi were almost exclusively used by freedmen and freeborn commoners”, while Newby 2016, 333–338 hypothesizes that “uninscribed mythological sarcophagi also served to bury members of senatorial families”. Since the late Republican-early Imperial period, patrons of libertine status appear particularly interested in exploiting the contemporary domestic repertoire for the decorations of their tombs, especially *columbaria*. This is well attested by the so-called great Columbarium in Villa Pamphili in Rome, featuring a huge quantity of paintings derived from contemporary domestic decorations: Bragantini 2003, 517 f.; for the monument typology see Haps 2012.

⁵¹ Indeed, sarcophagi attributed by Wrede 2001 to people of senatorial standing.

⁵² Wrede 2001, 57–60.

⁵³ Andrae 1984b; Herdejürgen 2001, 224 f. (with bibliography on n. 83); Zanker 2004, 49 f.; Russel 2011, 138–141; Newby 2011, 192 pl. 1; Smith 2012, 176 f.

⁵⁴ Huskinson 1988.

⁵⁵ On funerary portraits in Christian realm *cfr.* Zimmermann 2007.

late' reality, but feature an augmented reality, the product of the ideology and the social constraints of the visual audience, patrons, craftsmen and viewers, each of them playing a different role in this construction, that archaeology can try to trace⁵⁶.

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⁵⁶ This is obviously more difficult in the case of the observer: if actions and choices on part of craftsmen and patrons leave a more retraceable sign in the archaeological record, the role of the observer can only be secondary inferred by speculating on these choices. For this reason, one can think of a 'virtual observer', meaning someone whose 'mid-level' visual habits and culture we can try to reconstruct, using as a starting point the visual strategies of imperial iconography (*e.g.*, frontality, centrality and symbolic proportions): all of this leaves us with a "scholar reconstruction" whose achievements can only be argued with a high level of speculation.

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