

Faces Past: Ancient Imaginations and the Craft of Social History

Jeremy Hartnett

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EXCERPT

I confess that I do not study Roman art because it is seductively gorgeous; with rare exceptions, it is not handsome. But these images of individual Romans I find singularly affecting, first because of their astonishing beauty and technical acumen. We can see individual brush strokes; they mark out an intricate play of light and shade, as gradations of tone suggest a light source coming from one side; the shading, in turn, lends the portraits a three-dimensional depth. As in the work of impressionists like Monet, the brush strokes coalesce to form something truer to life than what any HD television can offer. Our mind's eye smoothes out the individual marks and "sees" our own version of reality. Perhaps more impressively, the portraits seem to capture the subjects' personalities; with the heads turned several degrees, the pose creates a slight distance from the viewer. It contributes to the sense of pride, aloofness, and reserve embedded in the expressions. But with the highlighted sparkles in their eyes, the subjects seem brilliantly awake, a presence that is only heightened by their direct gaze at the viewer. As was noted by André Malraux, the French novelist and theorist, these portraits glow with a flame of immortal life.

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The Charles D. LaFollette Lecture Series

Faces Past: Ancient Imaginations and the Craft of Social History

Jeremy Hartnett
Department of Classics

The Fayum Mummy Portraits of Roman Egypt:



Doing Social History of the Ancient World

When I sat in class about 20 years ago, I saw projected on the screen images like the ones before you. These are the familiar touchstones of my academic field, which concentrates on Roman antiquity. From the History Channel and Sword-and-Sandal films, we recognize great monuments of Roman civilization: here I offer two examples, the arena we call the Colosseum and the Romans called the Flavian Amphitheatre; and the bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius, which survived from antiquity because it was mistaken for Constantine, the first Christian emperor. When I first learned about Roman archaeology, I was captivated by the technical sophistication Romans possessed and the messages of raw power they marshaled through art and architecture. When we think of the Romans, images of giant buildings and great leaders are easy to conjure in our mind's eye. And you can be sure the Romans intended to leave these impressions.

But another type of image, more fragile and more personal, has haunted me over the decades. These are the so-called Fayum portraits, and they will be the focus of my time today. You see on screen two prime examples of this type of painting, which captures the face of someone who lived about 2000 years ago, when the Roman Empire had reached its greatest extents. At this time Saint Paul was evangelizing throughout the Mediterranean, the civilization at Teotihuacan was taking shape in Central Mexico, and Buddhism was making inroads in Han China. I want to pause for a moment and ask you to really look at this pair...

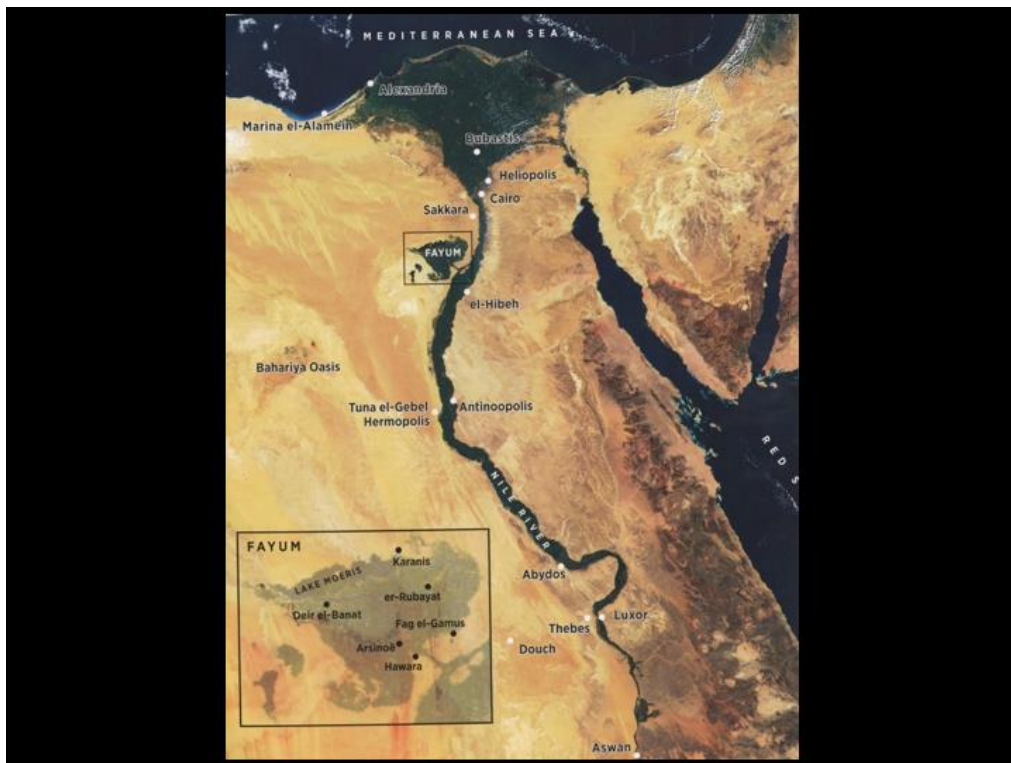


...and another.



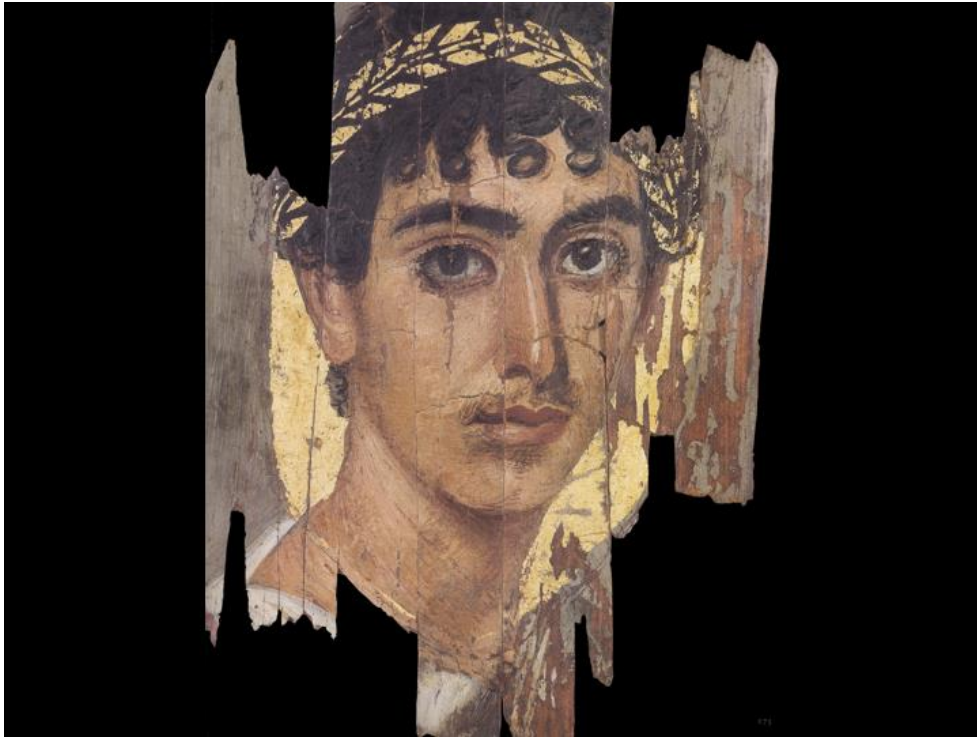
I confess that I do not study Roman art because it is seductively gorgeous; with rare exceptions, it is not handsome. But these images of individual Romans I find singularly affecting, first because of their astonishing beauty and technical acumen. We can see individual brush strokes; they mark out an intricate play of light and shade, as gradations of tone suggest a light source coming from one side; the shading, in turn, lends the portraits a three-dimensional depth. As in the work of impressionists like Monet, the brush strokes coalesce to form something truer to life than what any HD television can offer. Our mind's eye smoothes out the individual marks and "sees" our own version of reality. Perhaps more impressively, the portraits seem to capture the subjects' personalities: with the heads turned several degrees, the pose creates a slight distance from the viewer. It contributes to the sense of pride, aloofness, and reserve embedded in the expressions. But with the highlighted sparkles in their eyes, the subjects seem brilliantly awake, a presence that is only heightened by their direct gaze at the viewer. As was noted by André Malraux – the French novelist and theorist – these portraits glow with a flame of immortal life.

That these works survive to us at all is extraordinary. They are painted on linen and wood, materials that usually succumb to decomposition over time. But the portraits come from the sands of Egypt, largely from an oasis called the Fayum.



While much of the surrounding area was engulfed by the Nile's annual flood, the high-lying lands outside the wealthy and fertile basin remained dry. In this desiccated environment, the backings of the portraits have not only been preserved, but have also retained remarkable colors and gold leaf for two millennia.

Our vision of the ancient world is one dominated by stone and shades of white and beige; sandy and arid Egypt ironically reminds us of the softer, fleshier, and more colorful forms of organic materials and ancient life.

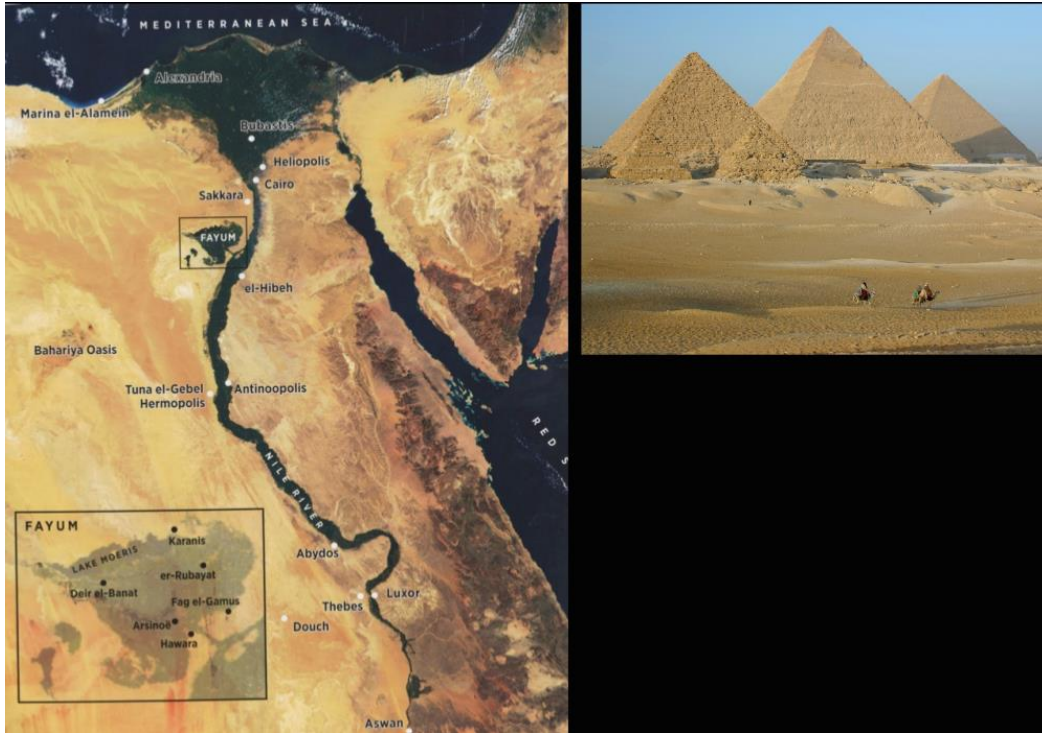


The way that the subjects' humanity leaps off the wood panel has led me to choose these paintings as my topic today. My scholarly specialty is Roman social history, that is, studying everyday life in the Roman world: how people lived and related to one another through realms as diverse as politics, sexuality, humor, deviance, cleanliness, and entertainment. And, since my training is as an archaeologist, my work concentrates especially on how social relations are revealed through the material remains that the Romans left behind, intentionally or not.

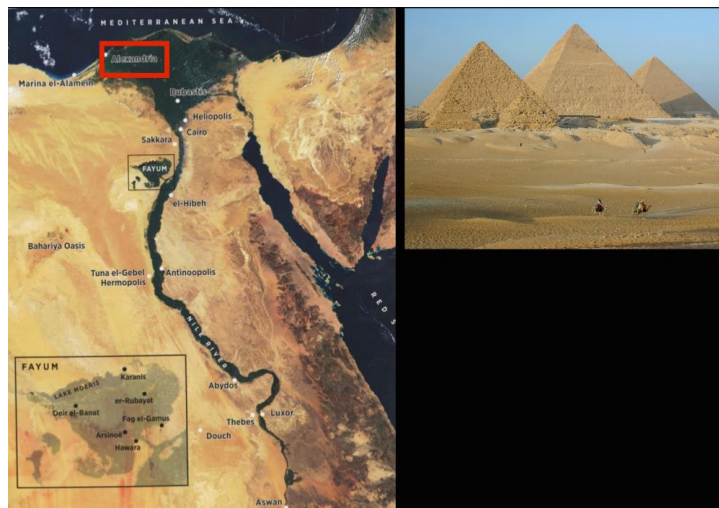
Now, I don't study the Fayum portraits directly in my research, but they offer a regular touchstone as I write my scholarship, design my classes, and ponder why the past – even the remote past – is worth examining for today's student. Over the next forty minutes, I intend to use these portraits as a lens of inquiry into what I see as the challenges and opportunities of studying Roman social history. Through this case study, I will cast a small light on some of the “big questions” of the liberal arts. My talk will have four parts.

Part I: The Context of the Portraits and the Danger of Categories

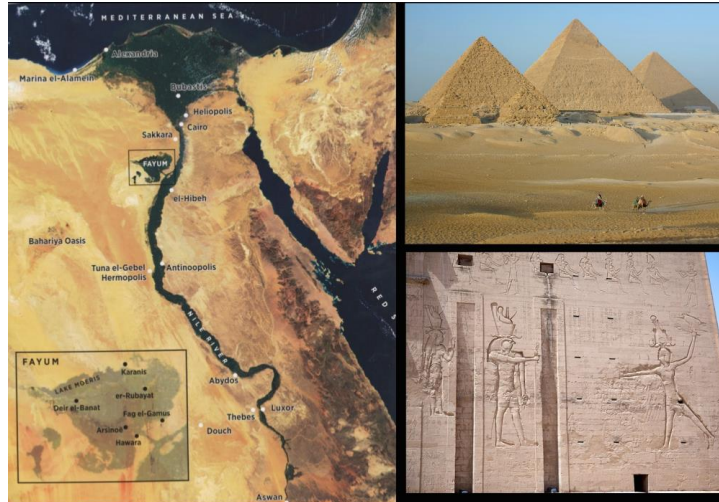
To understand these portraits better, let's begin by resituating them within their original historical and cultural context.



Egypt is known best for the time of the pharaohs, when monuments like the pyramids at Giza were constructed. What is less well-known is Egypt's post-pharaonic period, when other powers in the Mediterranean shaped this already-ancient land.



After Alexander the Great swept across Egypt, his eponymous city on the Nile delta became a nearly peerless center of Greek culture, with libraries, museums, and other institutions attracting and inspiring generations of artists and intellectuals.

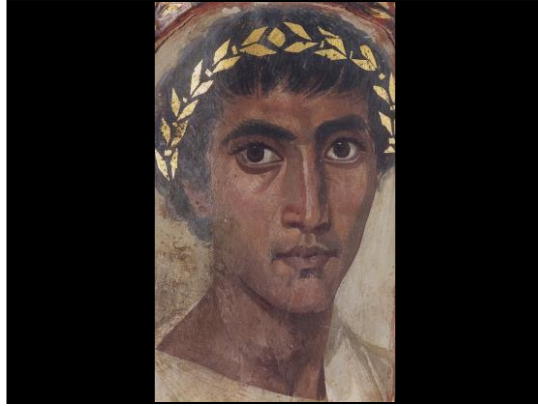


One of Alexander's generals, named Ptolemy, established a dynasty here that mingled Greek culture with native customs: he employed the title of Pharaoh, appeared in artwork in a traditional Egyptian manner, and even married his sibling, as pharaohs had done. At this time, Greek made inroads as a language, and Egyptian was written in the Greek alphabet in what is called Coptic script.



Soon, as the nascent empire of Rome spread beyond Italy, its influence was felt in Egypt. In 30 BCE, with the suicide of Cleopatra, Egypt officially became a Roman province and was subject to taxes in cash and wheat, thus cementing its role as Rome's breadbasket. Here's what I want you to grasp from this brief overview: post-pharaonic Egypt is fascinating because of the complicated melting-pot it represented, with elements of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman culture intermingling.

The Fayum portraits reflect such a rich cultural *mélange*. Let's take the example of Artemidorus, whose name we know from an inscription I will show you shortly. His portrait, now in the British Museum, was found in Arsinoe in 1888.



In his face, we see many features we encountered before – the slightly turned head, the impressionistic brush strokes, the highlighted eyes. When we move beyond the portrait and zoom out, however, we start to appreciate just how Egyptian this fellow appears.



First, his body was handled in an Egyptian manner, mummified and then placed within a shell of painted stucco. Second, the paintings on his body show a variety of Egyptian gods:



dog-headed Anubis at Artemidorus' deathbed, flanked by Isis and Nephthys;



falcon-headed Horus and Ibis-headed Thoth framing an emblem of Osiris;

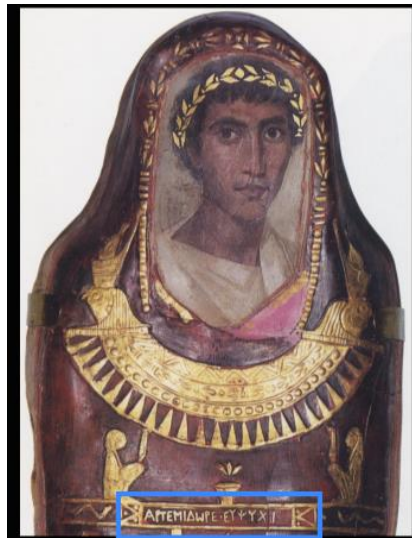


the soul of the deceased departing the body, which is likened to Osiris, in bird form.

Last, the deities are rendered in Egyptian style, with jaunty limbs and, to our eye, awkward stances. Overall, this example shows that the paintings were not free-floating tablets, but were part of greater physical and cultural ensembles that have many Egyptian elements.



Or was Artemidorus Greek? We know his name from an inscription on his chest. It reads, in Greek, *Artemidore eutychi*, which translates as “Artemidorus, fare well!”



Artemidorus, as a name, is certainly Greek, meaning “gift of or gift to Artemis.” Though he may have known some Egyptian, this young man likely spoke Greek as he caught up with friends on the streets of Arsinoe; if he was literate, as is likely given his apparent wealth, Greek letters flowed from his pen as well. Interestingly, during the same campaign that yielded Artemidorus, another mummy was discovered; beneath its head was a large roll of papyrus containing much of Book Two of Homer’s *Iliad*. Artemidorus was probably familiar with the epic as well, since he undoubtedly spent time in Alexandria, a heart of Greek learning and culture into the Roman period.

Last, we might ask whether Artemidorus identified as Roman. He lived at the height of the empire; he followed laws enforced by a governor sent from Rome; and coins bearing images of emperors passed through his hands. These are superficial and external considerations, however. It is the fashioning of Artemidorus that speaks most convincingly to his deep engagement with Roman social custom. He wears a Roman tunic and a golden wreath surrounds his head.



And, more tellingly, his hair mimics fashions popular in Rome at the time. Compare his haircut with that of Trajan, the contemporary emperor, and the closely-shorn locks that fall loosely over the forehead.



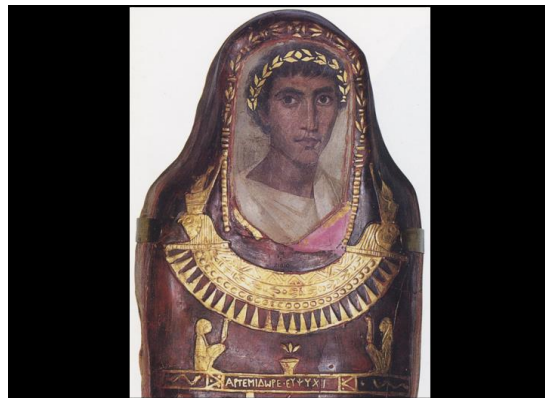
Female portraits showcase correspondences to fashion in Rome all the more clearly, such as in this portrait of a woman named Demos. Her hair, with its abundant frontal curls and braids curved around the crown of her head, mimics contemporary styles in the imperial court, while similar jewelry has been found in the rich Italian cities buried by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 CE.



The stripe on her shoulder is repeated on many male portraits – it is the *clavus* that signaled social rank in Rome.



All these devices mark Demos and her fellow Fayum denizens, like Artemidorus, as part of an empire-wide elite who were conversant with the same social conventions.



To sum up, then, Artemidorus appears deeply fluent with Roman attitudes, even as conversations about Homer flowed in Greek from his mouth, and he hoped for rebirth, in mummified form, like Osiris.

This was not a case of cultural schizophrenia, the guy who, mid-flight between New York and Paris, swaps his Yankees cap and Big Mac for a beret and baguette. Artemidorus' case speaks, rather, to the complicated dance of identity and cultural heritage in the ancient world. If we were to ask Artemidorus which of the three categories he belonged to, he might have had an interesting answer. Scholars have recently shown how, for Artemidorus' contemporaries in Egypt, Greek culture and Egyptian influences were not at odds; rather, Egyptian traditions were revitalized through the vehicle of Greek culture. And Artemidorus, if he were especially self-aware, might have articulated something along those lines. Alternatively, Artemidorus might have been stumped by our question of identity, which itself would be interesting, for it would offer a reminder of the dangers of applying labels as we try to write history. One of Artemidorus' near contemporaries, the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, had this to say about his native country: "Egyptian affairs are intricate and diversified, hardly grasped by those who have made a business of studying

them from their earliest years.”¹ There are risks, whatever period we consider, from ancient Egypt to the present day, of segmenting lives along lines that simply don’t apply for those who live them. We might inject our own categories of analysis and thus separate realms that were intimately bound up with one another, such as, for example, religion and politics in ancient Rome.



There is a special irony in discussing categories when it comes to the Fayum portraits. Their deeply-personal portrayals encourage nuanced and textured readings of history. But, because the portraits defy easy categorization, they haven’t received as much scholarly attention as you might expect: archaeologists want to leave them to art historians; art historians are reluctant because the portraits are part of larger ensembles. Egyptologists don’t consider them Egyptian, while specialists in Greece and Rome insist they are Egyptian. In other words, we are potentially missing out on a valuable perspective on a host of issues – such as the subtle complexities of identity – precisely because we bring ill-fitting categories of analysis and inquiry. It is the very in-between-ness of the Fayum portraits that has led scholars to say, in effect, “That’s someone else’s job; I’m not qualified.” Or, rather, “they don’t seem to answer the questions I’m asking.” How often do we, in liberal arts endeavors, shape our inquiries by putting ourselves, our categories, and our attitudes first, rather than re-imagining our investigation from the perspective of the people we are studying?

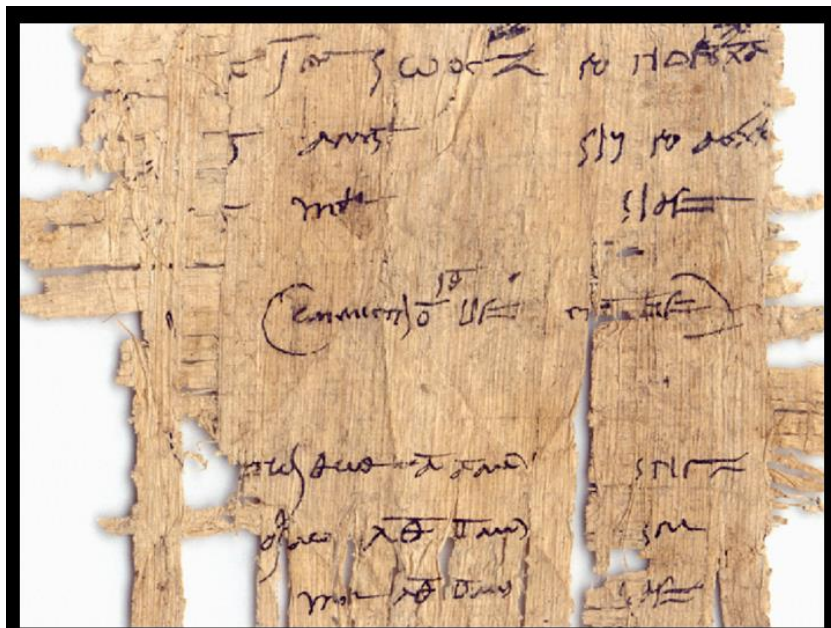
It’s easy, because of the vividness of these portraits, to think of them as an object of study in themselves; yet even the simple move of recognizing that they were attached to mummies containing the deceased does two things.



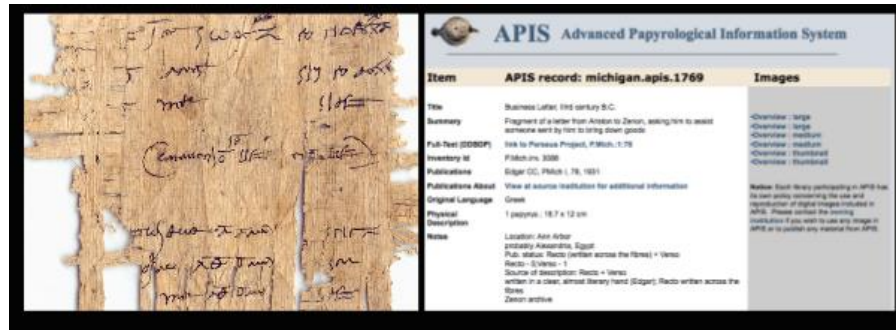
First, it underscores again the importance of context and, second, it draws our attention to the lives led by the inhabitants of this time and place, whatever amalgam of cultures and traditions shaped their worldview. In the next section, I want to continue to be mindful of contexts – turning specifically to how these mummies were interred and what that might tell us about their place within the realm of the living. At the same time, I want to think more about the two faces of the deceased: the one painted on the portrait and the one on the corpse just beneath that thin plank of wood.

Part II: The Portraits in their Context and the Tension between Representation and Reality

There is much discussion nowadays about the “Digital Humanities,” which entails bringing technology, especially on the web, to bear on the work of humanists. Classicists, especially those who study Egypt during the Roman period, have been among the vanguard. This might seem unexpected, given how uncomfortable many Classicists seem in the 21st century.



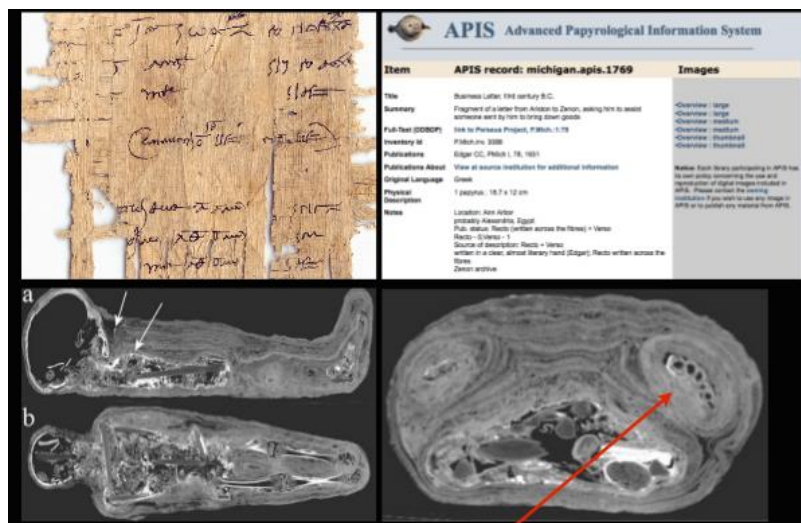
Yet, in addition to wood and linen, the other notable organic survival from Egypt is papyrus, the reed that could be processed to make a paper-like writing surface for letters, documents, and the like. Papyrologists, the people who study ancient hand-written materials, [*] have since the 1990's created an on-line library of images and transcriptions of papyri across collections worldwide.



Still before this project, our mummies and their portraits were subject to other cutting-edge technologies, namely x-rays and, more recently, CT scans.



What these technologies reveal is fascinating. The CT scan of one portrait-less child mummy at the University of Michigan, for instance, discovered that the child had six fingers on its left hand.





Nothing so striking has been exposed by the Fayum portraits that are still attached to their mummies, but technology has also not revealed a consistent relationship between the portrait's *representation* and the body's *reality*. In the majority of cases, the two correspond in age and gender; that is, the osteological evidence chimes with the painted portrait.



This might be surprising in one respect, namely that so many portraits show people who are young, apparently in the full bloom of life. There are two potential explanations for this phenomenon. First, the youthful faces may simply reflect the realities of life and death in Egypt at this time – from census reports on papyri, we know that the average age at death was in the mid-twenties. So, in this explanation, the faces on the portraits are young because people died young.

The second possibility is that the portraits were painted while their subjects were still alive. Favoring this explanation are the portraits themselves. They were larger paintings cut down to fit above the head and shoulders of the mummy.



Also, one portrait was found, badly damaged, within a frame, which raises the possibility that images were created for display, probably in the family house, only to be removed from the walls, cut down, and then unified with the mummified body. Support for this contention comes from other mummies whose X-rays show a significant gap between their painted representation and physical remains.



For example, this fellow, whose name, Demetris, we know from an inscription on his

mummy, is shown as older than many of the other portraits – witness his salt-and-pepper hair and slight forehead wrinkles. He looks like he's in his 50's or so, I'd say. But the inscription gives his age as 89, which the radiology confirms.

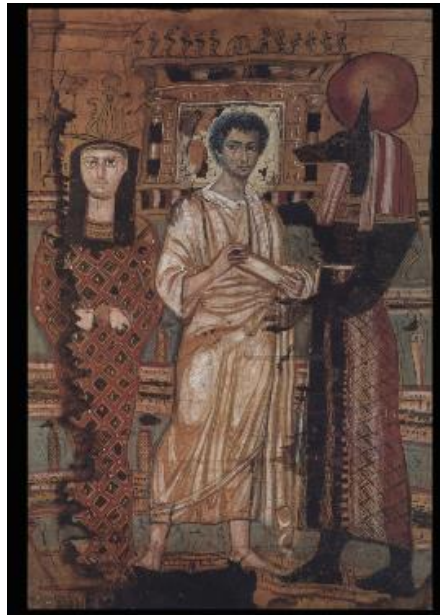


Neither theory is completely satisfactory in and of itself, since the paint-at-death hypothesis can't explain figures like Demetris and is hard to reconcile with the vivacity of the portraits themselves. The paint-from-life camp, meanwhile, has to answer why there is such a close match in age between portraits and their mummified subjects – the answer would have to be regularly-updated portraits, even in the case of child deaths. What both arguments suffer from is a lack of flexibility, something endemic to historians of the ancient world. All too often scholars stitch together individual scraps of scattered evidence, try to reconcile them into a coherent fabric, and assume that it can be draped unproblematically over all cases. The truth is that what we're probably witnessing is a variety of different processes for the portraits' creation. Life is messy; culture is complicated; and all-encompassing explanations rarely satisfy.

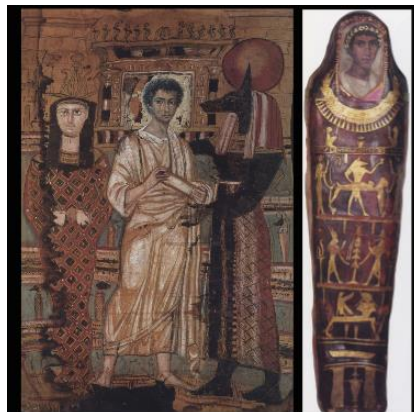
The portraits, even if they do not reflect the same timeline, do share another feature, however – their creators' desire that the paintings be seen. Those hung in houses would have been on display to visitors, and portraits painted shortly after death were similarly conspicuous, if more briefly, since the funerary ritual involved processing the corpse through its city or village.



Mourners likely carried the paintings in such a display; in fact, some portraits like the one on the screen are double-sided, which would make them especially visible to onlookers lining the streets. Once the parade was over and the body and portrait delivered to the embalmer, the show did not stop. Mummies show extensive signs of weathering and deterioration, which suggests to archaeologists that they were kept outside their graves for a significant amount of time – perhaps as much as a couple of generations – where they could be visited by relatives, who might have dined with the departed or paid their respects in some other way. Also pointing to a similar conclusion is a set of paintings on linen.



Here's one example. The deceased, dressed in a toga-like garment and holding a scroll, is flanked by Osiris and Anubis. The painting's large-scale – it is nearly life-size – suggests that it was made to be spread out and displayed, perhaps at funerary feasts or in tombs that visitors could enter. One scholar notes that the portrait itself shows more wear than the rest of the cloth; by this reasoning, the face was excised – cut out – from a previous shroud and stitched back in here.



This all underscores, first, the many roles that portraits played. We encounter the paintings enshrined in their final resting spot – affixed to mummies – but before that they were artwork in motion, passing through a variety of contexts and audiences, homes and streets, and only then entering the funerary ambit. Second, the updated shrouds point up another issue we have already encountered – the living’s continual dialogue with the dead. These objects were meant to speak to, if not with, those left behind. We have to remember, when studying the past, especially that removed so far from us in time and distance, that it was once the present. That is, its artifacts – whether physical, textual, or musical – were designed and employed as *agents* in their own world long before they became, to us, artifacts and documents reflecting that environment. Or, to reverse the sentiment: they were not intended to be passive embodiments of cultural traits that we should dissect on a table, separating out this influence from that; rather, they sought to shape perceptions and to satisfy people in their own time and place.

And so we must ask: What social *realities* do these portraits seek to bring about through their *representations*? What messages were they trying to send? The simplest aspect to appreciate is the wealth on display.



The women depicted, as we have seen, are dripping in jewelry, often wearing as many as three or four necklaces simultaneously. Of course, this was unlikely to have been their normal get-up as they strolled about, or were carried through, Arsinoe. It shows them in their best, perhaps all at once, and it offers a reminder: the portraits’ subjects were the richest folks in their respective towns; only one or two percent of discovered mummies were adorned with portraits such as these, which were not just a *symbol* of wealth, but in the case of gold leaf, a *concrete form* of it. Pliny the Elder astutely observed that the wealthy “left behind them portraits that represent their money not themselves.”²

Yet this explanation of consumption made conspicuous is too facile. The abundance of jewelry meant more to contemporary audiences. On papyrus are preserved documents related to marriages: contracts, notices of divorce, and other legal petitions. Many mention dowries, which offered a financial reserve that could be drawn on or

pawned if circumstances, such as the husband's abandonment of his wife, required. Cash was a common element in dowries, but so too were clothing and jewelry, and we hear of rings, earrings, necklaces, bracelets, and the like. In other words, female portraits rife with gold were not only broadcasting wealth, but also marital status and the social security that having a substantial dowry provided. So too with women's hair, which both proclaimed a sensitivity to styles in Rome and also indirectly boasted the free time and slave hairdressers necessary to conjure architectural coiffures.

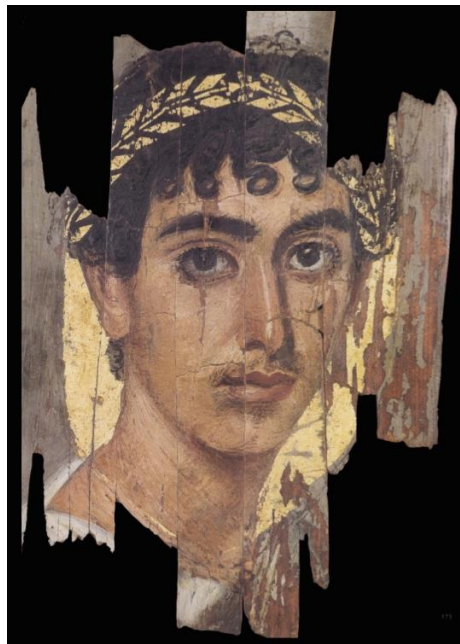


Values and messages were similarly embedded within male portraits: the *balteus*, or sword-belt, that crosses the chest of some adult males, together with the dark cloak called the *sagum*, appear to have signaled a role in the military.



But I want to concentrate on the more intriguing case of adolescent males, such as we met in Artemidorus. That post-pubescent males are recognizable as a group at all – because of their downy moustaches – is a broad testament to how important the three distinct categories of masculine development were to the inhabitants of Roman-period Egypt. These figures fall between the much younger boys shown on some portraits and the older,

fully adult males, who are frequently shown with robust beards. Facial hair, for adolescents, is a proxy not just for age, but for sexual and social status. Sexual because, in Hellenistic poetry, the moustache was, as one scholar has put it, the “strong erotic focus for both male and female” lovers; it signaled a young man’s availability for sexual activity. Social because of the moustache’s frequent combination with a gilded wreath and a naked torso, both of which link a young man to the institution of the gymnasium. This was where youths from Hellenistic times onward practiced the arts of manhood, such as athletics and military matters. More specifically, this constellation of signs appears to have signaled a thirteen or fourteen year-old’s induction into an honorary group in his city, after he underwent a formal public scrutiny in the city’s central temple that confirmed his family lineage. In other words, these marks were outward signs of an officially-sanctioned social class and privilege.



Overall, the Fayum portraits are quite small; on average, their painted space measures about 15 by 30 centimeters. Yet these last few examples demonstrate how much information they code about the deceased; sex and age are most obvious, and claims of wealth are also readily apparent. At first glance, all the gilding and jewelry might look like showy bling, but, when we combine those signs with other contexts, other documents, and other artifacts that help to paint the socio-cultural backdrop, we begin to see how these were very specific representations. That is, a key feature of the art-cum-science of doing social history is the process of approaching an artifact, be it material (like the portraits) or text, not only as an isolated piece, but from a series of increasingly broad contexts (from face to mummy, from mummy to body, from body to tomb and house, and from those locations to social institutions and cultural currents). All of this is part of trying to *really* look, and of doing so, as much as possible, through the culture’s eyes. The images granted by CT scans and the Digital Humanities allow us to look inside a mummy, but the real goal of a social historian is to get inside the culture.

Part III: Whom do we see? Flinders meets Hermione

This process of viewing a culture from within is remarkably difficult. The degree to which scholars do it can tell us as much about the historians as the object of their study. Let me give one brief example and then a second with more depth.



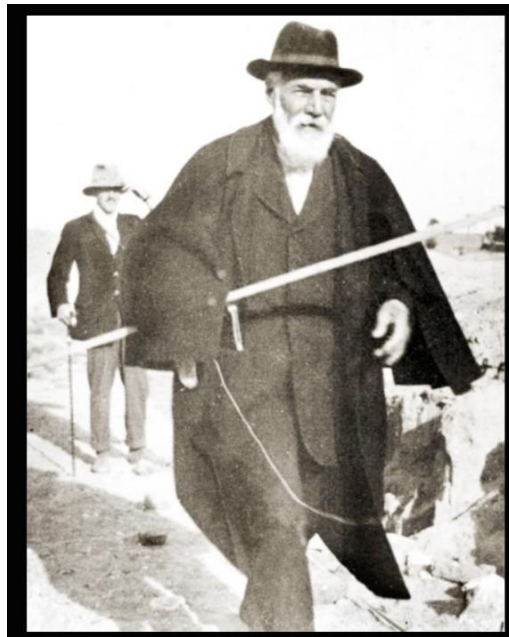
Perhaps the portrait most frequently shown in books is this one, which is now in the Louvre. It is undeniably captivating, especially for its unique golden bib-like garment, not to mention its fashionable earrings, golden hairpin, and the play of ovals throughout the portrait. You can no doubt recognize much of the coding I discussed moments ago.

This example raises interesting questions about the Fayum portraits and the study of other cultures. When French excavators unearthed this portrait in Antiochopolis in the late nineteenth-century, Egypt was occupied by European powers, and colonial outposts divided the globe among various imperial players. Not long after its discovery, it received a fairly charged nickname; it was called “The European.”



What impulse lay behind the name given to this young woman? Was it simply her peachy complexion? How much did the wealth of gold matter? What about her slightly different gaze, which avoids the viewer's eyes and instead looks a bit to the left? What did French excavators see that reminded them of themselves and that distinguished this from other portraits? Answers are elusive, but this list of questions prompts still broader ones: when we look at the past, whom do we want to see? And how often do we place the most value upon objects that we believe mirror ourselves?

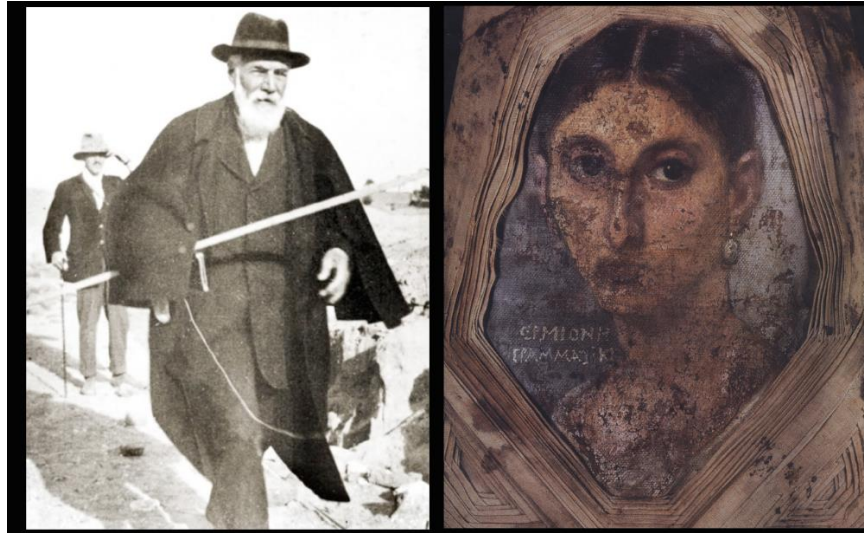
Other excavators were much more forthright about their reactions, and they help to shed light on responses we might have when we encounter ancient names and faces.



Let me tell the story about the excavation and afterlife of another Fayum portrait. On January 4, 1911, while digging at the site of Hawara, the famed British Egyptologist Flinders Petrie encountered a group burial, two of whose members were exceptional.



The first, a male, has one of the most piercing gazes of the Fayum portraits. One of Petrie's contemporaries, a Frenchman named Adolphe Reinach, claimed the man's physiognomy belonged to the classic type found in Italy and southern France. Again, then, a situation similar to "the European."



The desire to read the past against or in alignment with the present extended all the more strongly to this fellow's group mate, a female whose portrait on linen was embedded within intricately-patterned and thus extremely-pricy linen wrappings. Though the face has suffered some damage, we still discern her beautiful and delicate visage, framed by small earrings below hair parted in the middle and pulled back behind her ears. The image captivated Petrie, especially when combined with its accompanying Greek inscription. It reads "Hermione Grammatike." Hermione, Harry Potter fans will be happy to learn, is undoubtedly the woman's name. From here, I'll let Flinders Petrie speak for himself. The day after Hermione's discovery he wrote in a letter:

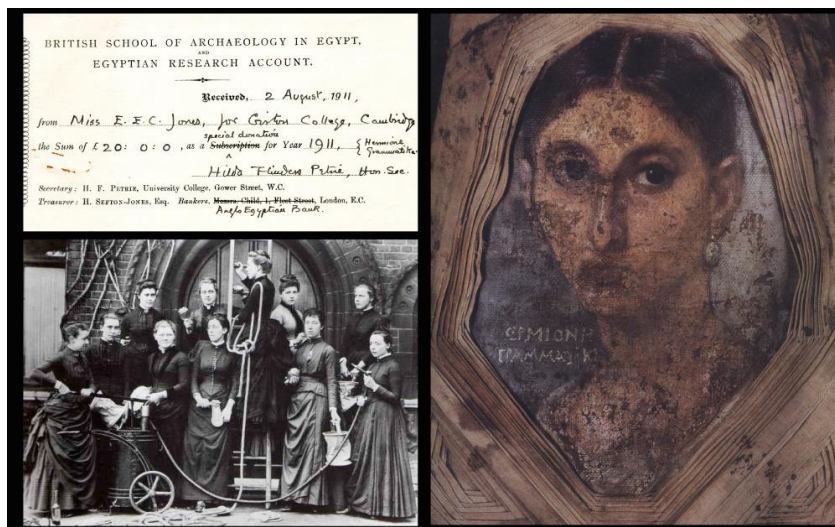
The great prize...is in the painted Portraits of Roman age. Part of the cemetery which I could not work before owing to mounds is now exposed. We have only four men on it but they have found 13 Portraits already....We have half a dozen fairly good, the best is a canvas portrait a little injured, of a woman very refined and thoughtful in type, inscribed HERMIONE GRAMMATIKE. Hermione must have been classical Lecturer in Arsinoe.³

Grammatike is an adjective that modifies Hermione, and it describes a relationship with language, as in the English word *grammar*. Petrie took *grammatike* to mean that Hermione was a teacher of languages. For him, this inscription presented not merely an interesting factoid, but potential inspiration. His letter continues:

If we can get a good photograph of it, the Association of Head Mistresses might well adopt it as a seal – the oldest portrait of a lady professor. I fear that Cairo will claim it.



Petrie was excavating at time when the face of education in his native Britain was changing; the first two women's colleges at Cambridge, Girton and Newnham, had opened within the previous generation. And Petrie was apparently a supporter, particularly of Girton, where, tellingly, the study of Greek was compulsory. His idea that Hermione would prove fitting encouragement for female students found traction, though not as he originally imagined. Rather than using a photograph of the portrait as a seal because Hermione was supposedly a "lady professor," Petrie managed to surpass any obstructive authorities in Cairo and, together with his wife Hilda, started to raise money for Girton to purchase the mummy.



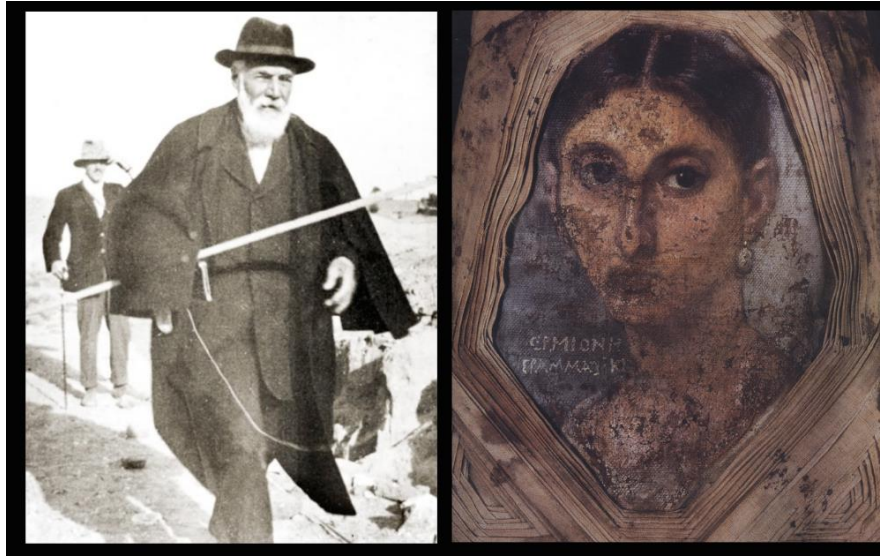
On August 2, 1911, less than six months from Hermione's unearthing, a special donation to Petrie's excavation was completed, and the deal was done. You see the receipt for £20.



Twenty years later, Petrie reflected on this discovery and donation in his memoir, and he embeds still more details in Hermione's biography:

In the Hawara cemetery we soon found more portraits, and altogether equaled the output of twenty-four years before. One of the most interesting was that named 'Hermione Grammatike,' the only portrait of a teacher that is known, looking a typically studious and meek schoolmistress without a trace of show or ornament. As soon as I saw it I said it must go to the women's college, and so it is now in the library at Girton, a patron saint of learning enshrined, body and portrait.⁴

For Petrie, the inscription and portrait were linked, and they together formed an inspirational and aspirational message for students at Girton, both in terms of their course of study and their way of life. Hermione's epitaph of *grammatike* was especially relevant, for it showed a woman who had succeeded in the study of languages and even, in the eyes of Petrie, had gone on to teach them. For Petrie, Hermione Grammatike still had something to teach, for the memoir interestingly shifts focus from the mummy to its impact on students, imagining Hermione as a figure of intercession and adulation. And within the broader context of Edwardian England, where worries persisted about the place of educated women in society, the painting offered an antidote for anxieties, since it reassured viewers that modesty, restraint, gentility, beauty and education could go hand-in-hand for women.



But Petrie's vision of Hermione likely stretched the truth a bit, for subsequent scholars have wrestled with the adjective *grammatike*. All agree that it has to do with letters and language, but it may mean something as basic as "literary lady," or simply "literate," a telling epitaph nevertheless. No other job title is found among the inscriptions on Fayum portraits, so "lady professor" is very unlikely. My point is that Petrie saw what he wanted to see in Hermione Grammatike; he shaped her as a person of encouragement – a saint even, to use his term – for the young women studying Classics at Girton.



And, with the body and portrait nearby, they too may have felt stirred by Hermione's presence as they wrote their papers and translated their Greek assignments in the Lawrence Room of the library.

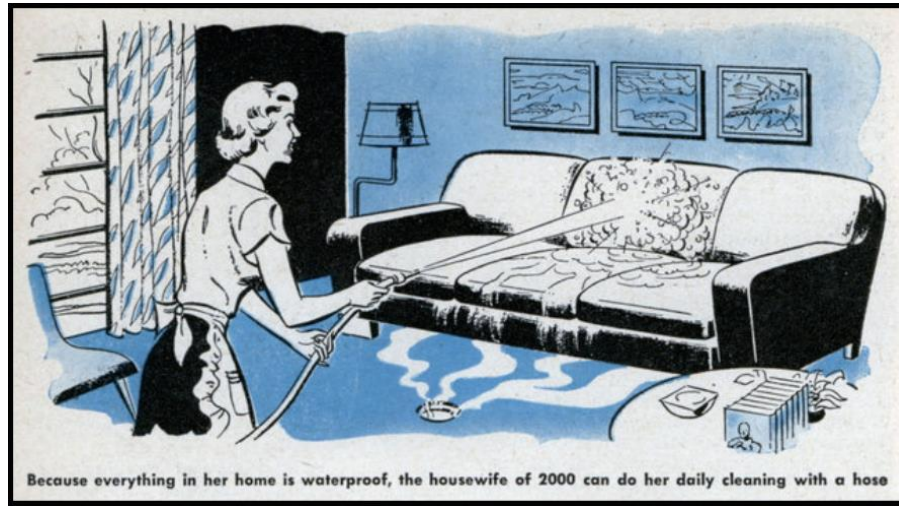
I don't think that it is a bad thing to draw inspiration from the past – I wouldn't be in this business if I did – but the example of Petrie and Hermione does set in high relief the degree to which we might read ancient figures into our world or read ourselves into theirs.



Witness this series of portraits that have been created on an iPad by an artist named John Bavaro, who paints his subjects into the Greco-Roman-Egyptian world. His work foregrounds a process that often occurs much less explicitly.

Part IV: Past and Present, Eutyches and Us

To flesh out this point about studying the *past*, I want to turn briefly to an astute observation about visions of the *future* made by the linguist Geoffrey Nunberg.



He writes about an image that appeared in *Popular Mechanics* in 1950; as you can see, it shows a woman wearing an apron and hosing down what was then considered futuristic furniture. The caption explains, "Because everything in her home is waterproof, the housewife of 2000 can do her daily cleaning with a hose." Nunberg points out how the image embodies two misunderstandings of human progress. First, it assumes that, as new technology arrives, the old is quickly replaced. No more brooms or mops. Second, and more importantly for our purposes, the image also does the opposite. It does not recognize how much things might change in the future, especially social life. That is, while the image envisions technological change as inevitable and revolutionary, it still presumes that a woman will be cleaning the house. Technological changes, in this vision, are unaccompanied by social changes. As Nunberg puts it, "the first sort of error is in seeing the future as being insufficiently like the present,...whereas the second sort of error involves seeing the future as insufficiently different from the present."⁵ When we're looking to the near future, we can correct the first error by remembering that, basically, it will look a heck of a lot like today, just with additional gadgets. To overcome the second error, however, one needs both analysis and imagination.

This image speaks also, I think, to how we encounter the past: how much we, like Flinders Petrie, see the ancient world as similar to our own, or different from it. It's true, much in our lives encourages us to draw connections to Greco-Roman antiquity.



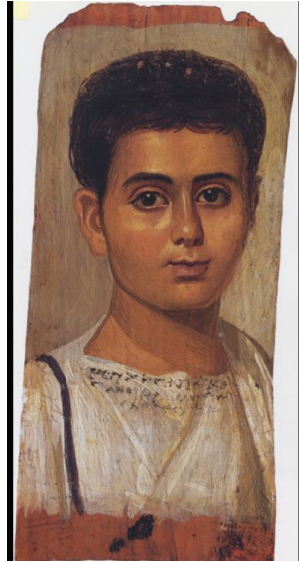
On the most superficial level, we too have a senate, our banks and courthouses resemble their temples, and many of *their* words find what seem to be direct parallels in English and the Romance languages.



In America, our predecessors have consciously modeled themselves on the Romans – witness this portrait of George Washington as an emperor.



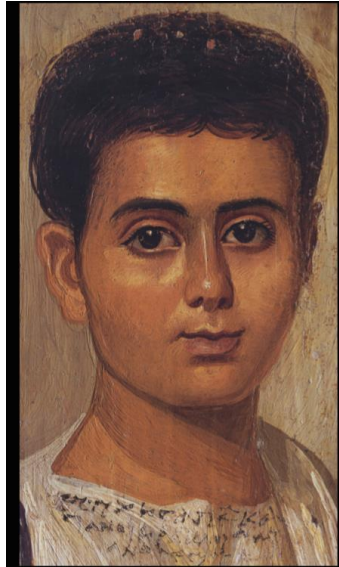
Such familiarity can at times encourage us to seek out analogies between past and present, to see much of them in us. But huge gaps separate us from the Romans and their civilization as well, and a challenge in doing social history of antiquity is that we have to face both of the gaps that Nunberg highlights – the technological one and the social one – at a still greater remove.



Let's think about two substantial differences – one structural, one social – by examining another portrait, this of a young teenager, which is now in the Met in New York. His face, still bearing some youthful fleshiness, is especially serene, his hair neatly parted on his forehead. He wears a Roman tunic decorated with a purple stripe, the *clavus*. You've no doubt noticed the writing, again in Greek, on the figure's clothing. As with Hermione, it gives the subject's name: Eutyches, Mr. Goodluck. Right after his name, however, comes a different sort of identifier, "freedman of Kasaianos." The content of the second and third lines is disputed. With this inscription and portrait, the hazy outlines of a biography begin to emerge, a life story that can seem very distant from our own experiences. We can start with Eutyches' death as a pubescent. As we learned before, life expectancy was much shorter in Greco-Roman Egypt than today, with an average age at death in the mid-twenties. From this perspective, Eutyches seems unlucky since he obviously died before reaching that age, but the life-expectancy figure actually obscures massive child mortality rates. 1 in 3 babies born did not make it to their first birthday, and only 1 in 2 made it to age 10. On this score, Eutyches beat the odds. Most 10 year olds could expect to live another 35 years. He obviously died well before then. His portrait offers a reminder of the massively-different demographics of the ancient world, in which city streets teemed with many more children, on average a woman had 5 to 6 pregnancies over her lifetime just to maintain the population, and virtually every family knew the pain of losing babies and children. We might ask how these dynamics structured ancient lives in many ways, not least economically and psychologically.

As Eutyches mourned playmates, he still may not have considered himself especially worthy of his name. That's because the "freedman" designation in his inscription shows that he had at one time been a slave who was later freed by his master, Kasaianos. We don't know how he became a slave – the most likely possibilities are that he was abandoned by his birth family for some reason (too many mouths to feed, for example) or that he was born to a slave mother. His liberation may come as a surprise to us, since, by virtue of America's past, we think we understand institutional slavery. But the Roman situation was much

different; slavery there was not based on race or ethnicity, nor was it necessarily a life-sentence. Slaves were manumitted in much greater numbers than in the American South. Also, though slaves on very rare occasion revolted en masse in Roman Antiquity, there was no abolitionist movement to speak of. In the case of Eutyches, the very fact that we have his portrait suggests that someone funded its creation; the former master named in the inscription is the most likely candidate. He probably had affection for Eutyches and, if broader patterns in Roman society hold, he could have been the boy's biological father or lover.



Upon his liberation, Eutyches joined the ranks of a substantial portion of society as ex-slaves. In Rome itself, where our evidence is much fuller than in Egypt, the names listed on tombstones suggest that as much as three-quarters of the population had origins as slaves. If Eutyches had lived longer, the stain of his former servitude would have prevented him from holding public office, but the sons of freedmen bore no such taint. Some freedmen did well for themselves, gaining great wealth and influence; this was all the more true for the next generation. The poet Horace, for instance, was the son of a freedman. Eutyches, then, first belonged to a sector of the population about which we know less than we might expect, and upon being freed, became a member of another sector for which we have no direct parallel. Roman society was relentlessly hierarchical, but even Eutyches' story – from an infancy on the dung heap or in slave's quarters to an elaborate portrait atop his pricey mummy – hints at an astonishing degree of social mobility.

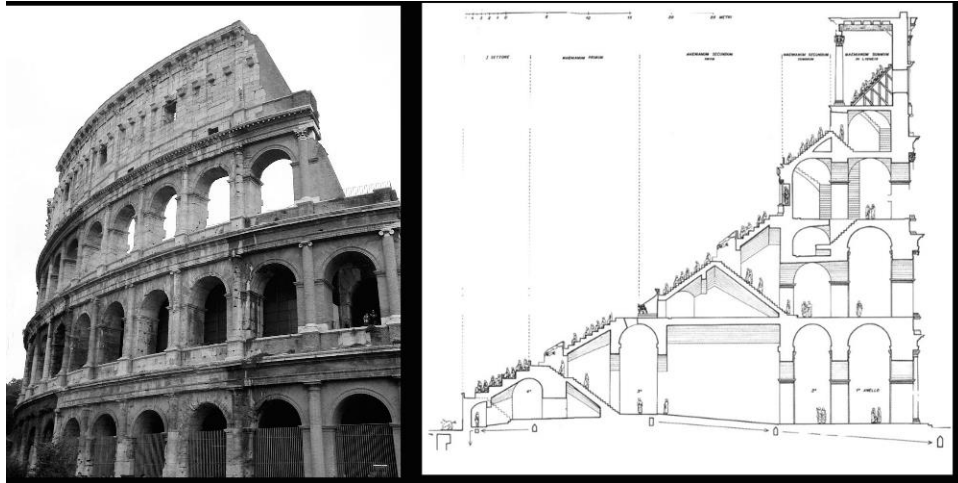
These differences – in mortality, in institutions we think we recognize like slavery, and in categories for which we don't have cognates, like freedmen – these differences between the Roman world and our own could be multiplied. We might point to Romans' pantheon full of gods, the high instances and devastating consequences of crop failure, the difficulties of communication and trade by sea or land, the shrunken worldview that could result from that, the worship of some leaders as deities.... We could go on. Studying any culture other than one's own is bound to set your own attitudes and practices in striking relief. But for many of us the Greco-Roman world especially gets at this contrast because

we're so tied up in its legacy. We can't simply hold it at arm's length or disregard it as too alien. Rather, it creates in us a productive tension between the familiar and the foreign. To borrow the Freudian term, it is *das Unheimliche*, the uncanny. It feels recognizable and odd at the same time, which encourages us to interrogate sensibilities both ancient and modern. What we take for granted – the high wall that we say we erect between church and state, for instance, or the notion of human equality – seems odder by comparison, and invites introspection. By the same token, our sense of familiarity and comfort with antiquity is destabilized by looking carefully, imagining life within ancient societies, with their power structures, habits, institutions, superstitions, and questions about their surroundings. If one of the goals of a liberal arts education is to make your head a more interesting place to live for the rest of your life, then I think there are worse ways to do that than to look and think deeply about the ancient past.

Conclusion: Face-to-Face Social History



I began this evening's lecture with the iconic image of the Flavian Amphitheatre in Rome, aka the Colosseum. This monument itself embodies the type of tension I just described: architecturally, it seems so familiar, and we can see some distinct parallels to our society's cathartic (or infecting?) celebration of violence on the field or within the squared circle. Yet we usually stop short of the vicious bloodsport and executions by which Romans delineated social outsiders from insiders in the arena.



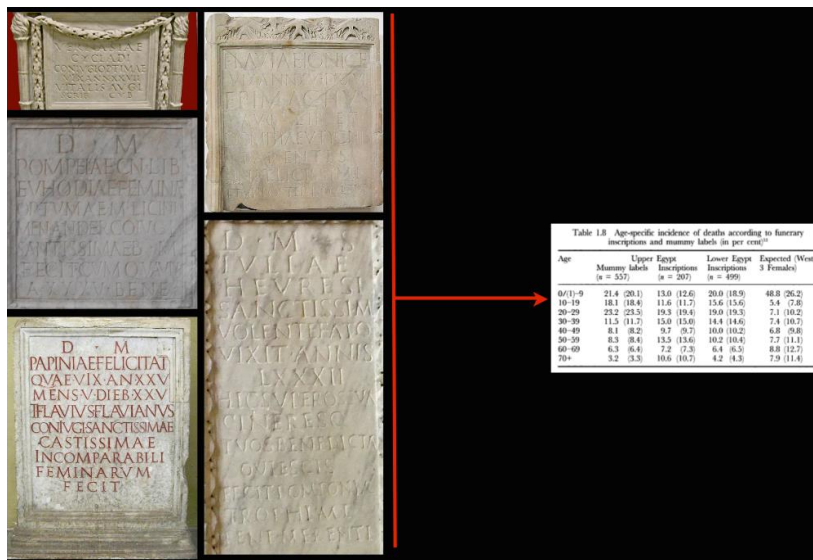
I bring us back to the Colosseum less for its events than for their spectators, however, [*] since this building hosted a stunning range of Roman society, from slave to emperor, and those various ranks were literally stratified by law in the amphitheatre's seats: the lower you were on the social ladder, the higher you sat, if you made it into the building at all. When we try to imagine the people who took their spots here, it's fairly easy to pack the place, or at least the first few rows, where the senatorial class sat. They, after all, are the ones whose words we encounter in ancient texts and who commissioned the artworks and buildings that you pay admission to see in a museum or on an archaeological site. Yet what about the spectators further removed from the action?



One of the primary challenges that historians face as they try to study Roman society is “getting at” the majority of the population and how they lived their lives. Now, it is abundantly clear that the subjects of the Fayum portraits were not part of this broader mass. Their jewelry, hair, and pricy gold shouts that they represent a small and select minority: wealthy urbanites. If they weren't in the first few rows of the arena in Rome, they would certainly have been in North Africa. Nevertheless, the portraits shape how I try to do social history of the broader populace. Let me explain.

We have many textual sources for ancient life, yet their perspective is typically that of the elite and the literate. When they discussed those below them on the social pyramid – such as foreigners, slaves, or former slaves – they frequently sought to cement their own social position by denigrating or caricaturing those groups. So, the portrayals speak to the attitudes of a narrow minority, and can leave us with potentially misleading perspectives on, and few perspectives of, the lower classes. In response, a solution has been to let the masses speak for themselves, but in the aggregate.

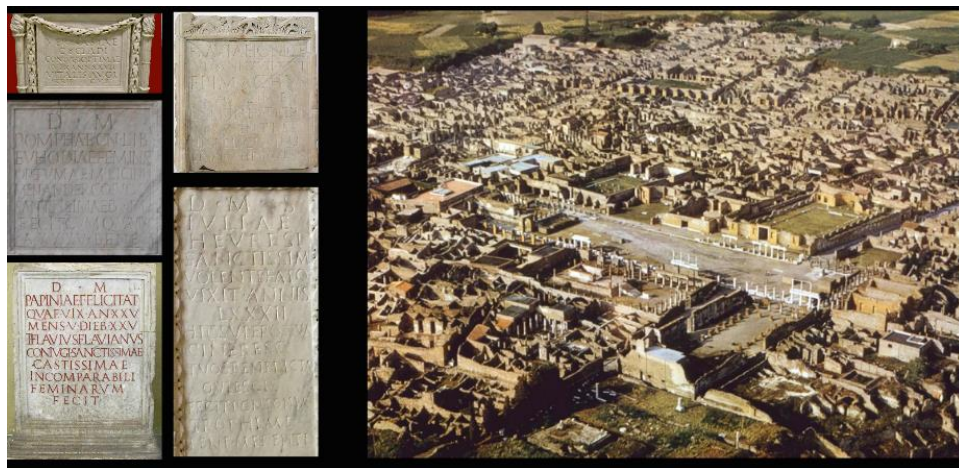
In this strategy, which we might call “history from 1000 feet,” scholars think in grand terms about the status of the non-elite, accumulating what data they can find and stockpiling it into analyzable data sets, such as huge databases of Roman tombstones and their inscriptions.



Because these monuments often record the age of the deceased at death and the name of a commemorator, they can produce valuable results in terms of demography, patterns of social relationships, and the like.



My own field of archaeology has its corollaries to such a strategy; in urban sites like Pompeii, archaeologists will look at broad samples of the urban fabric to try to produce a picture of how the non-elite lived.



I'm sympathetic to this approach to studying the so-called inarticulate of history, yet it also reminds me of something that was written by the historian Polybius about the relationship between history and painting. When discussing historians who write without first-hand knowledge of their subject-matter, Polybius compares them to "painters who make their sketches from stuffed dummies. In these cases the draughtsman sometimes captures the correct outlines, but there is none of the vividness and animation of real living creatures which the art of painting is especially able to convey."⁶



My fellow historians and archaeologists of course know their subject matter intimately and examine its limitations critically, but when we look at the Fayum portraits, we can recognize that there's something unsatisfying about considering Roman society from 1000 feet. Such approaches threaten to obscure personal agency and reduce individuals to data points. While we might make out contours of populations and inhabitation patterns from on-high, we can't see discrete and distinct people.



This coin showing the Colosseum makes the point: we see lots of heads in the crowd, but no faces.



And that's why I have the Fayum portraits on my mind when I'm writing about Roman antiquity. They put us face-to-face with individuals like Artemidorus, Hermione, and Eutyches, pushing us to recognize their full humanity and to imagine their lives in all its complexities.



When we look at these portraits, we don't treat Romans as a chorus singing in unison, but as a seething and somewhat discordant mass of particular personalities, hopes and dreams, loves and losses. Thinking or writing about these individuals sometimes means chocking our claims full of "mights" and "mays" and "as it weres", but history written in the subjunctive, I want to contend, isn't all that bad. When we give ourselves some latitude, we trigger an empathetic view of our subjects; leaving behind our own world momentarily,

we envision theirs with its own rules and struggles; we consider our subject's sentiments, motivations, and tactics.

Then, when we re-emerge into our own time and place – as when we set down a moving book, step out of a great movie, or clear customs after returning from abroad – we might see our world not as something we've always known, but somehow anew.

Thank you.

¹ Philo, *In Flaccum* 3.

² Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 35.5.

³ Flinders Petrie, 5 January 1911, Medinet el-Fayum. The “Petrie Journals” are currently housed in the Griffiths Institute, Oxford.

⁴ Petrie, F. 1932. *Seventy Years in Archaeology*, New York, 237.

⁵ Nunberg, G. 1996. “Farewell to the Information Age,” in *The Future of the Book*, G. Nunberg (ed.), Berkeley and Los Angeles, 104.

⁶ Polybius, *Histories* 12.25.