TRADITION AND INNOVATION IN THE BURIAL PRACTICES OF ROMAN EGYPT

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Introduction

In the 1860s, Lucie Duff Gordon wrote from Egypt to a family friend back in England:

This country is a palimpsest in which the Bible is written over Herodotus and the Koran over that. In the towns, the Koran is most visible, in the country Herodotus.\(^1\)

Duff Gordon’s succinct observation captures the deep sense of continuity that imbued the experience of European visitors to Egypt, and it is a sense that continues today, when tourism accounts for a large share of the Arab Republic’s GDP. Such an assumption of timelessness suggests that the stratified cultures of Egypt—Islamic, Christian, Classical—are only a thin veneer over the culture of most interest to tourists then, as now: the rural Egypt of pharaonic times. Scratch the surface and the western observer, like his precursor Herodotus, can see an unchanging Egypt, supposedly ‘unsullied’ by historical change, technological progress, or cross-cultural contact.

This seeming changelessness is, of course, a simplification. European thought has applied a similar myth of timelessness to all of Africa, as if chronological development were an exclusively western phenomenon. Added to that is the ancient Egyptians’ own ‘myth of timelessness’, as Egypt was a deeply conservative society in which elite culture placed great emphasis on continuity with the past. To do things and make things in the same way as they had always been done or made—in Egyptian society this was virtuous, not tedious. The challenge in scholarship, then, is how to identify change (or, as importantly, the lack of change) in the archaeological, art historical, and textual record, and how to interpret the significance of such observations.

\(^1\) Frank 1994, 251.
In considering the funerary art and burial practices of Roman Egypt, this is made all the more difficult by a gap in the record for Ptolemaic Egypt, where the wealth of documentary evidence, such as the Theban choachyte archive, serves to highlight the poverty of securely dated archaeological and art historical material.\(^2\) There has been no detailed study of funerary art, such as cartonnage pieces, mummy masks, and coffins, which would enhance understanding of developments in Roman Egypt. A lack of relative chronology or more precise dating, for instance based on prosopography, has added to the problem, combined with scholarly readiness to assign anything ‘odd’ to as late a date as possible. Some funerary material once assigned to the Roman Period appears to date to the Ptolemaic Period instead, based on the evidence of inscriptions and iconography (Fig. 1), and there are no doubt more such examples still to be identified.\(^3\) Keeping in mind the difficulty of discussing ‘continuity’ with confidence, this

\(^2\) Pestman 1993.

\(^3\) Two examples are the coffins from Akhmim, discussed in Riggs 2005, 62–64, and shrouds with iconographic parallels to Ptolemaic sculpture, for which see Riggs 2008.