

THE FAYUM AND ITS PEOPLE

R.S. Bagnall

The mummy portraits are often called 'Fayum portraits' because so many of them were found in the cemeteries of the Fayum district of Egypt. Portraits have turned up, however, in many other parts of Egypt, ranging from Upper Egypt to the Mediterranean coast west of Alexandria. If we ask who the people represented in the portraits are, we are thus asking a question that is about all of Roman Egypt, not just about the Fayum. But it is for the Fayum that we have the most striking collocation of portraits and documents, for it holds almost as prominent a place in the sources of papyrus texts from Roman Egypt as it does among those of the portraits. Here better than anywhere else we should be in a position to know something about these people whose faces, clothing and adornment meet us so vividly.

Even so, the task of retrieving their identity and character is anything but simple. For one thing, few portraits bear any name, and even those that do rarely tell us what we would need to know in order to identify the individuals with confidence: father's and mother's names, place of residence, perhaps date of death. So we must proceed at a less specific level, asking what the nature of the elite of the Fayum was during these centuries: for the elite is what we are talking about. Only a tiny fraction of those who came up with the money to pay for mummification (which was not cheap) also found the wherewithal to pay the extraordinarily skilled artists responsible for these portraits.

With the Fayum, however, we have another critical difficulty. It was in many ways a most unusual area of Egypt, and we cannot take it for granted that what we find there was true throughout the land. This is the problem of typicality: was the elite of the Fayum similar to the top strata of other parts of the country? For that matter, was the population as a whole at all typical of Egypt? Or are we dealing with something so distinctive that it must be considered an isolated case? Historians have often been at pains to stress the Fayum's individuality, its uniqueness. To see why this is so, and what it might mean for our purpose, we must step back to the half-century after the death of Alexander the Great (died 323 BC), when the

Ptolemies were consolidating their Egyptian kingdom and making the Fayum into what it was by the time the Romans arrived.

Very little is actually known about the Fayum during the few hundred years before the early third century BC. It has some monuments showing that parts of it were inhabited more than 1500 years earlier, but we have to work backward from what we can identify of the activity of the early Ptolemaic kings to see what they found there. One virtual certainty is that the land looked very different. The Fayum is a low-lying area, watered by the Nile through a long branch canal, the Bahr Yussuf, which runs parallel and to the west of the main river channel for a long way before reaching the entrance to the Fayum basin. There the water divides into a network of canals that bring the water around the edge of the basin and into its centre. The fields of the Fayum are in turn drained by channels that bring what remains of the water into the Birket el Qarun, called Lake Moeris, or just 'the lake', in antiquity.

The size of this lake depends essentially on how much water is let into the Fayum from the Bahr Yussuf, and the amount of land available for cultivation depends in turn on the size of the lake, as well as on competent maintenance of the irrigation and drainage network. To oversimplify: more water let in means a bigger lake and less usable land; less water means a smaller lake and more potentially usable land. The Ptolemies figured this out and started both to shrink the lake and to create the canals, drains and dikes that would make the land cultivable. Over time, the Fayum acquired a greatly enlarged zone of cultivation and became one of the richest agricultural areas of Egypt, with particularly high concentrations of gardens, orchards and vineyards.

It was not simply love of improvements that led the Ptolemies to do this, not even just a desire for more revenue. Rather, they had a need for new land, for they had adopted a common Macedonian practice of supporting their army by giving the soldiers plots of new land from which they could derive an income. As kings of Egypt, the Ptolemies owned a lot of land, but most of it had existing tenants farming it, and

simply removing them was not a very attractive policy for many reasons. So new land was enormously useful to the kings. And into the Fayum they put large numbers of new settlers, mainly their Greek soldiers. But not all of the settlers were Greeks or soldiers. After all, the military settlers were not very interested in digging ditches, building dikes and bringing land under cultivation themselves. They wanted someone else to do this and pay them rents, which would support them and their families no matter where they were at the moment – and sometimes they were certainly away on military service.

These other people who did the hard labour were Egyptians, and there are clues in the village names, the personal names and the gods of the Fayum that people were brought from all over Egypt to settle the rich new land and make it work. The importation of these people is even mentioned explicitly in some papyri of the middle of the third century. Some came from the Delta, some from Upper Egypt, while others came from the nearby Oxyrhynchite and Memphite nomes.

From these twin streams of immigrants came a Fayum with a remarkably diverse population. About 30 per cent were Greeks – we will ask in a moment just what that meant – and the rest Egyptians, coming in this village from Oxyrhynchus, in that from the middle of the Delta, in another from the Thebaid, in still another from the region of Memphis. More than in other parts of Egypt, there was considerable heterogeneity in the gods worshipped. As Egyptian personal names are mainly derived from those of the gods of a particular community, many names are distinctive to one or a few places. Sometimes we find names known only in one or two Fayum villages and in some remote place in another part of Egypt. The Fayum might then be seen as a kind of microcosm of Egypt, with more Greeks than elsewhere but also a more varied Egyptian population than was typical.

We must now ask what the word 'Greek' meant in this description of how the Fayum came to have its population. In the Ptolemaic system all people were divided into two groups, Hellenes (Greeks) and Egyptians. Hellenic – or 'not Egyptian' – status was based on official national origin, and virtually all foreigners qualified as Hellenes: Thracians, Paeonians, Judaeans, Idumaeans – all sorts of people that a classical Athenian would have been aghast to think of as Greeks. For most purposes, the term meant 'immigrant' or 'foreign settler'. The third-century census records show us a population in which ethnic designations apply not so much to individuals as to entire households. The wife of a Hellene is therefore a Hellene, no matter what her ancestry. The results

were from our point of view quite remarkable: one could become a Hellene. About half of the Fayum's Greeks were military men and their families, about half civilians.

Ptolemaic ethnicity thus looks a bit slippery. That should not actually be surprising if we know anything about ethnicity in modern societies, for ethnic terms and categories are always based in historical circumstances and forces, and people struggle to control them. Ethnicity does not exist in isolation from the relationship of one group to another; there is no consciousness of ethnicity except where one must talk about one group as against another. There may be, as in Ptolemaic Egypt, official definitions of ethnicity, and these are what we find in official or legal documents; but we cannot assume that they are identical to the way terms were used in private speech. Certainly ethnicity is not simply equivalent to race (itself an elusive and perhaps illegitimate concept), to geographical origin, to language or to culture.

The complex, contested, relational and mutable character of ethnicity is undoubtedly at the root of our difficulty in speaking of the ethnicity of particular individuals or families. When Dionysios, alias Plenis, entered the army around 105 BC, he acquired the status of Macedonian instead of that of 'Persian'. But at the same time that he bears the ethnic of the conquerors, he moves freely in the world of the Egyptian temples, is himself holder of a priestly office and is designated in some texts as a royal cultivator, the very definition of the purely Egyptian peasant. He could write with a high degree of competence in both demotic Egyptian and Greek. There is absolutely no doubt that he was recorded in the royal accounts as holding the status of Hellene; that is, he occupies a position in the dominant class of Egypt, the royal system. Yet his ethnicity is not exhausted by the official designation. The editors of his archive concluded that Dionysios came from a predominantly Egyptian background. What he represents is a pattern in which individuals operate in multiple social roles, each with their own official ethnicity: being a 'Macedonian' soldier is Hellenic, being a priest or a royal cultivator is Egyptian.

We do not know what Dionysios, alias Plenis, thought of all this. But he and others managed to operate in two spheres. His bicultural class may not have been vast in numbers, but neither was it trivial. We must not suppose that later Ptolemaic Egypt was a society divided tidily into Greeks and Egyptians. The Graeco-Macedonian military settlers, civilians of Greek descent, official Greeks of Egyptian or mixed descent, and Egyptians untouched by the presence of

foreigners all coexisted in the countryside. Official ethnicity had moved from representing the national origin of the head of the household to being a heritable status, and from that to being an acquirable status.

Faced with a situation of this complexity, the Romans took an entirely different approach, one rooted in their categories of legal status. As in the Ptolemaic period, we find a distinction between Greeks and Egyptians. But those words mean something different: Hellenes turn out to be a subcategory of Egyptians, not their opposite! In the Roman class structure of Egypt there were several strata. At the top were the holders of Roman citizenship; below them were the citizens of the three, later four, Greek cities of Egypt: non-Romans, but citizens. Of these, Alexandria occupied a somewhat higher niche than Ptolemais, Naukratis or Antinoopolis, but the citizens of all four were recognisably Greeks by any definition. The Romans did not call these people Hellenes, however; they identified them collectively as 'citizens', *astoi* in Greek. The third stratum was composed of Egyptians, peregrine non-citizens in Roman terms, and it included all of the inhabitants of the country outside of the two citizen groups already mentioned.

This 'flagrant divorce between social reality and juridical categories', as one scholar has called it, called for further subcategorisation. And so within the Egyptians the Romans distinguished a privileged group of residents of the *metropoleis*, or chief towns of the nomes, and these were variously called *metropolitai* or *Hellenes*. Their chief privilege was to pay poll-tax at a lower rate than other 'Egyptians', but they were not, unlike citizens, exempted altogether. They also emerged as the governing class of the *metropoleis*. But they were still 'Egyptians'.

This kind of 'ethnicity' is obviously just as much a creation of the Roman legal and administrative system as the Ptolemaic official categories were of their system. As with Ptolemaic society, it raises for us the question whether the inhabitants of Egypt saw matters, either initially or eventually, as the Romans did. That is, when the Romans drew the line between ethnic groups in a different place from that used by the Ptolemies, altering legal ethnicity, was perceived ethnicity changed along with it? Here the Jews serve as a valuable test case. The so-called Acts of the Pagan Martyrs preserve vignettes of Alexandrians speaking before the emperor. In one of them Isidoros says, 'I accuse them [the Jews] of wishing to stir up the entire world . . . We must consider the entire mass. They are not of the same temperament as the Alexandrians, but live rather after the fashion of the Egyptians. Are they

not on a level with those who pay the poll-tax.' Isidoros thus glides effortlessly from legal ethnicity, reflected here in subjection to the poll-tax, to way of life, or perceived ethnicity. Tendentious he is, of course; the Alexandrian citizens were the closest thing to winners in the Roman redesign of Egypt, and Isidoros had every interest in exaggerating the distinctions. But at least his words suggest that the Roman innovations produced a new zone in which ethnicity was contested.

Do we then have any means of asking how these newly created 'Egyptians' saw themselves? Did they all 'live after the fashion of the Egyptians' and see themselves as such, or did some of them see themselves as Greeks? This is the nub of the problem. There is little or no direct evidence for questions of self-perception in this population. Sometimes it is possible to discern the ways in which a member of the village elite identified his interests with those of the ruling power, like local elites all over the Roman Empire. It would not be unreasonable to imagine that such people thought of themselves as both Greeks and Romans, perhaps even as Egyptians, Greeks and Romans simultaneously. We cannot say if the notion of these as disjunctive categories even came into the thinking of such people.

It would be natural to suggest that language was still a basic discriminant of culture, and even of ethnicity. But we face here the basic problem that Greek very quickly became almost the only written language of Roman Egypt. Those bastions of Egyptian identity, the temples, operated mainly in Greek, at least so far as written documentation is concerned, although they preserved much literature in demotic for many decades. The relationship of spoken to written language is extremely complex in this society, and someone capable of operating in Greek might nonetheless have thought of it as an alien language – the language of foreigners.

Our best tool turns out to be names, not so much because they are inherently attached to an ethnic group but because they tell us something of what sense of social and religious location parents had in naming their children. The urban elite of the Fayum was the body that referred to itself most formally as 'the 6475 Hellenes in the Arsinoite nome' – probably the descendants of the Ptolemaic military settlers, for in some documents the term for military settlers is part of the description of the status. When we look at their men's names, we find that only a little over 20 per cent are Greek names commonly found outside Egypt and with no special Egyptian connection. Another 24 per cent are dynastic names or linked to

the initial settlement of the Fayum. A handful (5 per cent) are of Roman origin. But the largest block, some 44 per cent, are based on the names of gods, and almost all of these are either clearly or possibly Greek renderings of Egyptian theophoric names or else Greek formations on the names of Egyptian gods. The overall character of this 'Greek' onomastic repertory is unmistakably rooted in Egyptian religion.

When we compare this group to the residents of several villages in the Fayum, we find mainly a drop, in varying degree, in the Greekness of the names. That is, the names are still largely based on the Egyptian gods, but more of them are, linguistically speaking, Egyptian formations, not Greek formations. Some villages have many more Greek names than others, but none comes close to the distinctive blend of this elite group. In both the city and the villages, however, we find that women's names are more often Egyptian, and less often Greek, than men's are. No one, probably, will argue that in an 'ethnic' sense generations of intermarriages kept producing Greek boys and Egyptian girls; we must instead see that the gender differences reflect the more public roles played

by men and the sense that those roles – being trained in the gymnasium, for example – were Greek.

By now it is obvious that the ethnicity of the elite inhabitants of the Roman Fayum cannot be seen in simple binary terms, Greek *or* Egyptian. Some of these people may indeed have seen matters in such terms, but the way they named their children suggests something much more complex. When we move from the elite to the villages, the degree of overall connection to Egypt changes very slightly, but the Greekness of that connection declines. It seems reasonable to conclude that most of the Greek-speaking inhabitants of the region, and especially of its elite, saw themselves as *both* Greek and Egyptian. This duality, even plurality, of identity was commonplace in the Roman East, where it was in no way necessary to abandon local pride and identification in order to participate in the metropolitan culture of the Greek regions of the Roman Empire. And what form could better exemplify this complex ethnicity than the combination of Graeco-Roman clothing, hairstyles, and jewellery with the quintessentially Egyptian funerary practice of mummification?