

*Plus Ça Change*: Notes on the Conservatism and Innovation of Greco-Roman Egyptian Art and  
Architecture

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## Introduction

The culture and history of Greco-Roman Egypt might best be summarized by the venerable proverb coined by Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Any student of Greco-Roman Egypt will discover the truth of this with even a cursory glance at the available body of evidence. Egypt under the Ptolemies and subsequent Roman emperors was a melting pot of languages and ethnicities that each contributed to the cultural landscape. Accordingly, we encounter an Egypt that is a vibrant pastiche of old and new. Elements of art and religion from Egypt's halcyon days of the Middle and New Kingdoms are easily detectable during this time, and yet undeniable and substantial elements of change and innovation arose swiftly upon the Greeks' entry into the land.

Perhaps this paradigm is best represented by the quasi-historical legend surrounding Alexander the Great after his conquest of Egypt. As retold in a second century CE biography of Alexander, the Macedonian prince "had himself crowned in the temple of Ptah at Memphis, thereby firmly asserting that he was assuming the mantle of an Egyptian pharaoh, but there is no doubt at all that he was conceptualized in those terms by the Egyptians, who gave him a standard royal titulary, and that he showed great respect for Egyptian religious susceptibilities."<sup>1</sup> A Greek dressed up and identified as an Egyptian. It is not too much of a stretch to say this captures the aesthetic *Zeitgeist* of Egypt after the fourth century BCE onward.

Needless to say, an exhaustive look at artistic conservatism and innovation during the Greco-Roman Period could easily span volumes. Greco-Roman Egypt saw the continuation of many hallmark Egyptian architectural, literary, and artistic traditions. Temple reliefs, tomb

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<sup>1</sup> Alan B. Lloyd, "The Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BC)," in *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, ed. Ian Shaw (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 395–396.

decorations, statuary and sculpture, vignettes accompanying religious texts, etc., all continued into the Greco-Roman Period. At the same time, Hellenism introduced in some cases unprecedented artistic innovations into the cultural dialogue. Think, for instance, of the mummy portraits of the Fayum that sprung up seemingly overnight in the first century BCE (more on this later). Any study of Greco-Roman Egyptian art, therefore, is going to have its work cut out for it, as there is an ample body of evidence and multiple languages (including Greek, Coptic, and Demotic in addition to classical Egyptian hieroglyphs) that must be dealt with.

As such, this study will remain modest in scope and objective. In these few pages I will overview only a few samples of the sort of innovations we observe in Greco-Roman Egyptian art. I will draw my observations from tomb art, temple art, and manufactured art (such as statuary). I will look at both private and royal art to see what trends of conservatism and innovation are discernable in both realms. As will be seen, it is difficult to quantify just how “conservative” (that is, adhering to older, “classical” Egyptian styles) versus “innovative” (that is, introducing new elements to style) Greco-Roman Egyptian art truly is. While examples can be organized in both categories, there is also a clear syncretic blending between Egyptian and Greek art that calls for a third category.

Just as I thought I had identified a possible trend in some regard, I encountered examples that seemed to disrupt that trend. This testifies of the lively and somewhat erratic artistic activity one can see in the surviving evidence. Nevertheless, I shall point out a few patterns that seem clear enough from the available evidence that can be used to launch into a discussion for suggested research in the future. Along the way I will make a few comments on how these innovations in Greco-Roman Egyptian art, particularly the rendering of the royal statuary, contributed to the political climate of the period.

## **Tomb Art and Architecture**

We begin with a look at the tomb art and architecture of Greco-Roman Egypt. While a number of tombs are known from multiple sites in Egypt during this time, perhaps the most striking examples are to be found in Alexandria. This should come as no surprise, as Alexandria was the metropolitan capital of the Ptolemies and thus a hotbed for Greco-Egyptian interactions and exchange. It was a veritable ground zero for the sort of innovation that we would expect in the sort of multicultural environment that was Greco-Roman Egypt. The examples we shall draw from for this section have been helpfully gathered and analyzed by Venit in a recent monograph.<sup>2</sup>

The first thing that immediately stands out when it comes to Alexandrian tombs is that they tend to not follow older Egyptian templates but instead appear to be patterned on classical Greek styles (although not exclusively). The likely reason for this is simply that the city was home to numerous Greek immigrants (among others). Venit explains:

In accordance with the classicizing intellectual and physical vista of the city, Alexandria's monumental tombs . . . assume a Graeco-Roman visage. Deeply cut into the nummulitic limestone, Ptolemaic-period tombs are multiroom buildings accessed by a staircase and often built around an open courtyard, so that they were easily visible from above. Though in its aggregate the Alexandrian-type tomb follows no earlier Greek model, it nevertheless incorporates conceptual inspiration from Macedonia; klinai, for example, – which trebled in Greece as a bed, bier, and banqueting couch – are cut to lay out the dead, permitting them to join in the funerary banquet. Walls of Alexandrian tombs are decorated in both the Greek zone style and the Greek masonry style, and architectural components – columns, capitals, and entablature friezes – all follow Greek architectural principles.<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 1).

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<sup>2</sup> Marjorie Susan Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 51.

This Hellenized style of tomb contrasts sharply, both in layout and décor, with more overtly Egyptian examples known from such contemporary locales as Tuna el-Gebel, suggesting that the further one moved away from the epicenter of Ptolemaic dominion the less susceptible one was to Hellenistic influence.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, if only the tomb of Petosiris (a pious high priest of Thoth at Hermopolis Magna) was available to us for study we might mistakenly think that Egyptian tomb art escaped being transmogrified into Hellenistic forms. With only a few exceptions in one or two scenes, there is little Greek influence in Petosiris' tomb art, which is decorated with what we would normally expect: scenes and spells from the Book of the Dead, mummification and offering scenes, etc. (Fig. 2).

Returning north, the funerary art of Alexandrian tombs contains unmistakable affinities with earlier Egyptian examples. Take for instance the tombs of the Anfushy necropolis in the western part of the city, which dates from the second to first centuries BCE. Tomb II, for instance, contains a mural depicting the deceased flanked by Osiris and Horus (Fig. 3). “At the right of the panel, a figure of Osiris is seated to the left on a throne with a jackal seated upright on a stand behind him. Any figures facing Osiris are no longer visible, but Adriani identified the figure immediately in front of Osiris as the dead man, and he saw another figure, which he identified as Horus.”<sup>5</sup> The customary Egyptian gestures are identifiable on Horus, and the deceased “is garbed in an ankle-length garment, intricately arranged across his torso, and he wears an elaborate pectoral; his hair is styled in a conventional Egyptian manner.”<sup>6</sup>

Other instances of tomb art, however, break this conservative artistic trend. The Sāqiya Tomb, for instance, notably blends both Greek and Egyptian elements in its art. The “at once

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<sup>4</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 8–48.

<sup>5</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 58–59.

<sup>6</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 59.

recognizable” *ba*-bird hovering over the sarcophagus of the deceased, a staple of earlier Egyptian mortuary art, is accordingly depicted as a Greek siren (Fig. 4).<sup>7</sup> This particular *ba*-bird is even adorned with what appears to be a Grecized version of the *nemes* headcloth and uraeus, which is all the more remarkable since it is found in a non-royal tomb. To be sure, the *ba*-bird here retains its mortuary significance, but it has been syncretized with Greek artistic and even mythological elements to find a new imaginative rendering. In this way “the Sāqiya Tomb is bilingual . . . since the [images] also can be read to embrace both Greek and Egyptian eschatological viewpoints.”<sup>8</sup>

Alexandrian tomb statues and reliefs do not escape this bilingualism either. A first century CE tomb in the Great Catacomb of Kom el-Shoqafa highlights this. The pronaos of the tomb features two niches occupied by “two almost life-sized statues – one of a female, the other of a male.”<sup>9</sup> These funerary statues, like earlier Egyptian examples, are almost certainly statues of the tomb’s patrons. What is rather clear, however, are the unmistakable Greco-Roman elements.

These statues are in the tradition of Roman tomb-statues, and their heads are carved in Roman style. The male has snail-like curly hair arranged above a countenance that shows a plastic treatment of his furrowed brow, the hollows under his eyes, his bony cheeks, and the deep groove and ridges that form the nasolabial fold. The pupil of his eye is drilled out, affording him a piercing gaze. The female’s head also assumes a Roman-portrait form, and her hairstyle – the locks pulled to either side forming neat waves – is found in many classicizing works from the Greek Classical period to the Late Antique.<sup>10</sup> (Fig. 5)

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<sup>7</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 60.

<sup>8</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 62.

<sup>9</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 68.

This is not all. Both statues, though rendered with unmistakable Grecized styles, also feature Egyptian elements as well. Both statues, for instance, are depicted in the classical Egyptian pose of stepping forward. Not only that, both statues “wear garments that also speak to Egypt’s antiquity.” The male statue wears the royal *shendyt*-kilt, known from as early as royal Old Kingdom portraits, while the female statue wears a form-fitting garment known from past Egyptian examples but “unseemly for a Greek (or Roman) matron.”<sup>11</sup> This syncretism with Greco-Roman aesthetics is remarkable, as is the fact that these non-royal patrons (and even very possibly non-Egyptians themselves) are depicted with royal motifs. This may easily say something about either the high opinion these patrons had of themselves or the broader cultural ethos of the Greco-Roman period.

Also from the Great Catacomb is the stunning portrayal of an Egyptian deity in non-Egyptian (in this case unmistakable Roman) garb. In the burial chamber of the main tomb of the catacomb stands two figures of Anubis carved in relief. One of these reliefs show Anubis

with the head of a jackal and a human body stand[ing] frontally in a differentiated pose with his weight borne by his left leg and with his head, crowned by a solar disc, turned to his right. . . . Assuming the pose developed for Hellenistic rulers and appropriated for Roman emperors, he holds in his upraised left hand a spear or scepter, on which he leans his weight, and with his lowered right, he holds a shield that rests on the ground. He wears a muscle cuirass with *pteryges* (flaps) over a short chiton and has a short sword suspended at his left hip from a baldric over his right shoulder.<sup>12</sup> (Fig. 6)

As with the example of the *ba*-bird seen just before, on a surface level the presence of Anubis in this tomb is completely sensible. Anubis long enjoyed funerary associations in Egyptian myth, primarily as a guardian of the dead and a god intimately involved in the mummification process.

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<sup>11</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 69.

<sup>12</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 70.

And this appears to be the obvious association in this instance as well. However, in this case he is likely more a merely a tomb guardian. In keeping with the artistic bilingualism already spoken of, Anubis here “is refashioned in Roman terms, but he also takes on an extended meaning as his assimilation to a Roman centurion—a Roman guard, as it were,—at once reiterates and broadens his Egyptian function.”<sup>13</sup>

Why and how would these Greek elements make their way into a funerary setting? After all, one might suppose that the tomb would be the last place you would want foreign intrusions, given the Egyptians’ scrupulous concern that the funerary cult—with its multifaceted and often complex rites and functions—fulfilled its desired *telos* of assuring the deceased enjoyed a glorified afterlife. Venit proposes that the Greek mystery cults, often rich with underworld motifs, found a ready audience in Egypt (and vice versa with regard to Greek immigrants coming into the country). The themes of traversing the underworld, initiation into the mysterious presence of the deity, and the glorification or deification of the heroic deceased are shared in Hellenic and Egyptian mythic systems. That syncretism between the two could naturally arise upon sustained intercultural contact is therefore not surprising.<sup>14</sup>

To be sure, “The reason behind the co-option of Egyptian imagery is undoubtedly complex,” and we should therefore be cautious in our approach.<sup>15</sup> Still, it cannot be denied that this artistic and mythic syncretism took place in even the most religiously intimate spheres. This syncretism, however, is more often subtle than blatant. “Greek and Egyptian features of design are combined in subtle ways which on the surface look Greek,” notes McKenzie, “while on other occasions Greek and Egyptian decorative elements are used together” to more expressly convey

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<sup>13</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 70.

<sup>14</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 80–86.

<sup>15</sup> Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife*, 86.

the sort of Greco-Egyptian bilingualism that pervades the Alexandrian examples.<sup>16</sup> The examples of the Grecized *ba*-bird and Anubis reliefs easily support this view. All of this, of course, raises questions about how we understand not only the development of Egyptian religion as memorialized and idealized through artistic media but also Egyptian cultural identity, as this free blending of native, even archaic, Egyptian motifs with imported Greek elements problematizes how we define these ethnic or cultural categories.

### **Temple and Cosmos**

In this section we will look at examples of this dynamic interplay between conservatism and innovation in temples from the Greco-Roman period. As with earlier stages in its history, temples dotted the landscape of Greco-Roman Egypt.<sup>17</sup> Practically every one of the Ptolemaic pharaohs contributed to the construction or renovation of a temple. “The economic prosperity of the country . . . permitted opulent temple building, and the Ptolemaic dynasty advanced this activity, despite its foreign origin and Greek orientation.”<sup>18</sup> There were obvious political advantages that came with placating the native Egyptian population with the continuation of temple-building and upkeep. By affirming the traditions and cosmology of centuries of Egyptian religion, the Ptolemies could secure popularity for themselves in the eyes of their subjects. And after all, in a polytheistic mindset what’s the harm in building or renovating shrines to a handful of foreign deities in addition to your own native gods? On their part, however, the Egyptians retained a very conservative attitude towards how they decorated their temples. “These attempts [at conservatism] from the Egyptian side cannot be explained as a pure passion for antiquarian

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<sup>16</sup> Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt c. 300 BC to AD 700* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 74.

<sup>17</sup> Dieter Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 143–273.

<sup>18</sup> Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, 143.

collecting and preservation but rather as an attempt to counter the progressing Greek cults and ideas with the power of the established Egyptian cosmos.”<sup>19</sup>

This is especially true in how deities are depicted in temple reliefs. As can be seen in numerous examples, deities are widely depicted in Greco-Roman temples in their very traditional forms with little to no discernable Greek influence. The temple at Edfu, to pick just one prominent example, is replete with reliefs of Egyptian divinities that betray no obvious signs of Hellenistic influence (Fig. 7). The overwhelming trend with Ptolemaic temples is that of archaism and conservatism. Unlike private tombs there does not appear to have been much artistic or mythic freedom in syncretizing Egyptian and Greek deities. This is only to be expected, given the central importance of the Egyptian temple as a microcosm that architecturally and ritually upheld the principle of *Ma'at* in Egyptian cosmology. As recognized by McKenzie, “In order to be accepted as ruler by the Egyptian population and especially their priesthood, the Ptolemaic kings, and later the Roman emperors, had to take on the role of pharaoh” by upholding *Ma'at*, and thus their temple projects deferred to native Egyptian tastes and standards.<sup>20</sup>

Be that as it may, not even the august institution of the Egyptian temple could entirely escape Hellenistic syncretism. While deities themselves may not have been the target of a Grecized aesthetic, other elements of the temple undoubtedly were. For instance, Ptolemaic and Roman temples saw architectural evolutions that clearly reflect a Hellenized influence. Recalling the idea that not just the art itself but the very architectural layout, design, and composition of a temple contributes to the overall *Gesamtkunstwerk* of the site, such Hellenized artistic aspects

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<sup>19</sup> Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, 143.

<sup>20</sup> McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, 120.

of the temple include the addition of the *dromos* (or processional way) to several temples of “a mixed Greek and Egyptian character.”<sup>21</sup> Not uncommon along the *dromos* were statues or shrines to Greek deities and other mythic heroes. An example of such has been identified at “the temple at Hermopolis Magna (el-Ashmunein), in honour of Ptolemy III Euergetes I and Berenice (246–222 BC). It was built in front of the entrance to the enclosure of the Egyptian temple of Thoth” (Fig. 8). Besides the *dromos* itself, the complex features “Corinthian capitals and a Doric frieze.”<sup>22</sup> All of this, however, occurred *outside* of the precinct of the temple proper, once against suggesting the reticence to allow too much of a foreign presence within the realm of the gods.

This reluctance, however, waivered across Egypt. Two examples highlight the diversity in thought amongst different temple staffs or priesthoods in how much Hellenistic influence in temple architecture would be tolerated. In the first example, Moyer draws our attention to “a series of four hymns composed in Greek by a certain Isidorus and inscribed in the early first century BCE on the southernmost gates of the temple of Hermouthis and Isis in Narmouthis (modern Medinet Madi), a small town in the Fayyum region of Egypt” (Fig. 9).<sup>23</sup> These hymns are noteworthy as evidence for Greeks and Egyptians directly interacting in artistic and sacred space. “From this liminal position, Isidorus engaged with widespread, universalizing ‘syncretic’ traditions but also with the traditions of a local Egyptian temple, a temple that had origins deep in the Pharaonic past, but that was now situated in a Ptolemaic present.”<sup>24</sup> As far as we can tell, Isidorus was not commissioned by the state to compose his hymn for the temple. Thus, it seems

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<sup>21</sup> McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, 120.

<sup>22</sup> McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, 120, plates 74–78.

<sup>23</sup> Ian Moyer, “Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple,” in *Graeco-Egyptian Interactions: Literature, Translation, and Culture, 500 BC–AD 300*, ed. Ian Rutherford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 210.

<sup>24</sup> Moyer, “Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple,” 211.

likely that his invitation to provide a written dedication to the goddess was extended at a local level. Whether by the priesthood or local governmental authority is unknown, but in either case the priesthood must've gone along with the project to a certain extent.

Moyer has examined the poems at length, and the reader is encouraged to review his analysis for a more comprehensive treatment of this subject. For our purposes here it is important to highlight the fact that these hymns were inscribed in Greek directly onto the walls of the temple in a similar way in which we might find hieroglyphic inscriptions. That is to say, these Greek poems became a part of the temple aesthetic itself, part of its décor or artistic program. They function the same way earlier (or even contemporary) hieroglyphic inscriptions on the walls of a given temple would function: as a literary-artistic medium that communicated not only a written text but an artistic expression. “In each of the hymns to Hermouthis-Isis, Isidorus adopts a coherent rhetorical and discursive practice to persuade the goddess to bestow benefits on him,” Moyer observes. “What stands out most is the complexity of Isidorus’ practice in mediating between both religious syncretism and nativism, and between the various discursive and literary genres through which he articulates those positions.” What this ultimately reveals are “sophisticated local innovations that drew from both a persistent Greek literary *habitus* and also the Egyptian literary modes to which he had indirect access.”<sup>25</sup>

But notice once again that this Hellenistic innovation does not breach the sanctuary of the temple itself. Instead it is kept at arm’s length just outside the temple. Nevertheless, it is still evident that the hymns were enmeshed in the cosmological architecture of the temple. Moyer reminds us, “Monumental pylons, forecourts, and processional ways had long provided points of partial or peripheral access to the temple for the broader populace, and these spatial and

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<sup>25</sup> Moyer, “Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple,” 240, emphasis in original.

architectural practices continued into the Ptolemaic period.” The placement of the hymns served to both inspire public admiration for the goddess (their composition in Greek would unquestionably facilitate that better than if they had been written in hieroglyphs) and to participate in the cosmology of the temple, even if in a liminal way. “The gate of the vestibule at which Isidorus inscribed his hymns was part of this intermediate zone between the outside world and the ancient religious traditions within. The central axis of the temple complex, its series of portals and especially its outermost gate provided the architectural *mise-en-scène* for Isidorus’ hymns.”<sup>26</sup>

Isidorus’ hymns to Hermouthis-Isis, however, remained at the walls of the temple in both a literal and figurative quasi-profane, quasi-sacred ambiguity. To find even more explicit evidence of Greek artistic penetration into Egyptian sacred space, we must look to the temple of Hathor at Dendera. Within the temple are two zodiacs which “have been incorporated into the decorative programme of the temple of Hathor at Dendera. The older one, which is circular in shape and dates from the middle of the 1st century BCE, forms one half of the ceiling of the second eastern room in the series of chapels that were built on the roof of the edifice to house the mysteries of Osiris.” The second zodiac, “created some eighty years later, is found high in the pronaos as part of the strips of images that are known as the astronomical ceiling of Dendera” (Figs. 10).<sup>27</sup> The history of the discovery of the zodiacs at Dendera by the French at the turn of the nineteenth century is interesting in its own right,<sup>28</sup> as are their astronomical and mythic

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<sup>26</sup> Moyer, “Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple,” 214.

<sup>27</sup> Gyula Priskin, “The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus,” *Égypte nilotique et méditerranéenne* 8 (2015): 133.

<sup>28</sup> Jed Z. Buchwald, “Egyptian Stars under Paris Skies,” *Engineering & Science* 4 (2003): 21–31.

functions in the broader context of Egyptian science and religion.<sup>29</sup> For now we will focus on what the presence of these zodiacs—specifically the circular zodiac found in the Osiris chapel—in the temple means for the issue of Greco-Egyptian artistic syncretism.

The zodiac itself was likely not native to Egypt but was rather imported from Mesopotamia.<sup>30</sup> The zodiac at Dendara is also not technically the first known “zodiac” from ancient Egypt (even if it was the first to incorporate the astronomical reckonings of the Greeks). Betsy Bryan has discussed how several pharaohs of the New Kingdom incorporated astronomical representations in various temples to calculate the timing of rituals.<sup>31</sup> True, these earlier tabulations are a far cry from what we might consider a proper zodiac in the classical Greek sense, but at the very least they demonstrate that incorporating astronomical knowledge and symbolism into the decorative program of the temple was not strictly a Greco-Roman innovation. What *was* a Greco-Roman innovation, however, was the rendering of the Greek constellations in their Greek forms.

Even a cursory glance at the figures on the Dendera zodiac at once reveals the recognizable Greek forms: Sagittarius, Capricorn, Pisces, Aries, Taurus, Leo, Virgo, Libra, and Cancer. The only exceptions are Aquarius and Gemini, which are depicted in classical Egyptian style. In fact, Aquarius is depicted as wearing the *hedjet* crown, as is Mars (Fig. 11). That these figures would be depicted in classical Egyptian poses is perhaps understandable given their

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<sup>29</sup> Richard A. Parker, “Ancient Egyptian Astronomy,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London. Series A, Mathematical and Physical Sciences* 276, no. 1257 (1974): 61–64; Priskin, “The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus,” 133–185.

<sup>30</sup> Parker, “Ancient Egyptian Astronomy,” 61.

<sup>31</sup> Betsy M. Bryan, “The Statue Program for the Mortuary Temple of Amenhotep III,” in *The Temple in Ancient Egypt: New Discoveries and Recent Research*, ed. Stephen Quirke (London: The British Museum Press, 1997), 62–67.

anthropomorphic characters. In any event, the Greek renderings are positioned just atop the correlating Egyptian decans.<sup>32</sup> But more than merely a snapshot of the Egyptian sky sometime circa 50–30 BCE, as has been supposed by previous researchers, Priskin argues extensively that “the reception of the zodiac into Egypt . . . was an active process of appropriation by which the zodiac was transformed into a means that could express the long-held traditions of indigenous astral myths.” In this case Priskin believes the zodiac was utilized to associate the myth cycle of Osiris, Isis, and Horus with “a series of cosmic events.”<sup>33</sup>

If this was in fact the intention of the zodiac, this would be a radical divergence from what we’ve become accustomed to seeing in the syncretic art from other temples. It is one thing to add some Greek architectural elements to the outskirts or peripherals of the temple (such as a Greek processional way or some Greek hymns on the wall of the temple). It is quite another thing to not only incorporate the Greek zodiac directly into the heart of the temple architecture but to actively utilize it in retelling some of the foundational myths of the Egyptian religion. It would therefore seem that the conservatism typically encountered in the Egyptian temple during this time was not universal.

### **Statuary and Mummy Portraits**

We conclude with a brief look at just one more prominent form of Egyptian art, namely, rendering a person’s likeness in the form of a sculpture or statuary portrait. To this we shall add a few notes on a truly Greco-Roman innovation: the mummy portrait. As with other periods, Greco-Roman Egyptian statuary can broadly be divided into royal and non-royal categories. We

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<sup>32</sup> Priskin, “The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus,” 168.

<sup>33</sup> Priskin, “The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus,” 179.

will devote a little bit of attention to both. Happily, we have recovered a sizable quantity of statues representing the Ptolemaic pharaohs. Enough, in fact, that we can discern some general trends for the dynasty. The work that has been done on this body of evidence is extensive,<sup>34</sup> so we shall only highlight a few salient aspects here.

First, it is important to note an innovation made during the Ptolemaic period that is unattested in past eras of Egyptian history, namely, the depiction of the rulers of the dynasty on currency (specifically coinage). Ptolemy I himself set the precedent for his successors in providing a “realistic image of a Greek ruler” (*das realistische Bildnis eines griechischen Herrschers*) to Egypt’s currency (Fig. 12). As would be expected, this filled a propagandistic need to assert the legitimacy of the new dynasty.<sup>35</sup> Accordingly, the images of the Ptolemies as they appear on the coinage (and other small commodities and pieces of jewelry) is entirely Greek.<sup>36</sup> Contrast this with how the Ptolemies are rendered in the presence of deities or on temple walls, where they appear with no discernable Greek elements (Figs. 13–14). Instead they are depicted as plainly Egyptian as you might expect any previous native dynasty, complete with the royal accrements appropriate for the context of the scene. This would go to reinforce what we have seen above when it comes to the overall conservatism of the temple *Dekorprinzip*, and indicates that the legitimization of the new dynasty took place in both profane (the economy) and sacred (the temple) spaces.

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<sup>34</sup> Helmut Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, Deutsches Archäologisches Institut Archäologische Forschungen 2 (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1975); Katja Lembke and Günter Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil II: Königsplastik,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 43 (2001): 7–35; Paul Edmund Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies: Greek Kings as Egyptian Pharaohs* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

<sup>35</sup> Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, 4.

<sup>36</sup> Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, pls. 8, 16–17, 30, 40, 46, 54–55, 68, 70, 82, 88, 100; Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 213–244.

Given this impulse to legitimize the new dynasty by rendering Ptolemy and his successors as Greeks, one might expect the royal statuary to follow this trend. But the picture is much more nuanced. The examples of the royal statuary recovered so far feature Egyptianized, Grecized, and syncretic forms. In addition to striking the venerable Egyptian poses (e.g. stepping outward, holding the *shen*-sign in the hand(s), arms straight down besides the torso), Ptolemaic royal statues are often adorned with classical Egyptian dress (e.g. the *shendyt*-kilt) and various crowns (Figs. 15–19).<sup>37</sup> By far the most popular crown for the Ptolemaic king is the *nemes* with uraeus, although the double crown and no crown are also attested.<sup>38</sup> A few of the Ptolemies (such as Ptolemy IX) even sport *both* the *nemes* with uraeus as well as the double crown (Fig. 20).<sup>39</sup>

This is not to deny that the Ptolemies also had Grecized renderings of their likenesses in busts and sculptures.<sup>40</sup> Indeed even several of the Egyptianized statues of the Ptolemies also contain faint hints of Grecized elements, most notably curly bangs or sideburns sticking out from under the *nemes* crown (Figs. 21–23). The statues of Ptolemaic women are also Egyptianized. Thus the likeness of Cleopatra III, who steps forward proudly in her full dress and wig while holding the *shen*-sign (Fig. 24). Or Arsinoe II, who appears (apparently nude) with the classical wig, double uraeus, vulture cap, and Hathor horns, slightly exaggerated pelvic region, and holding the (now broken) *shen*-sign (Fig. 25).

The royal statuary thus exhibits a mix of both Greek and Egyptian renderings, with some examples being predominantly Egyptian with a few Greek complements. This naturally raises questions about why the dynasty executed their royal portraits in such a manner. Ashton believes

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<sup>37</sup> Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*,

<sup>38</sup> Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*,

<sup>39</sup> Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 133–134.

<sup>40</sup> See Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, passim; Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 245–282.

there may have been a simultaneous practical and ideological motive. Inasmuch as Egypt was for all intents and purposes a bilingual country that catered to the needs of two prominent ethnic communities (Greeks and Egyptians), it would understandably follow that this bilingualism would make its way into royal portraits. “The necessary elements were there for Greeks to recognize their ruler and for Egyptians to identify the statue as a representation of their king.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, the dynasty could legitimize themselves in the eyes of both communities by adopting this bilingualism in the state art. Of course individual aesthetic judgements likely influenced which style individual Ptolemies preferred, but Ashton’s observation is nonetheless likely true as well. As for why the royal statuary almost always portrays the king as youthful, healthy, and handsome, the answer is rather obvious: the idealism of most royal art was eagerly accepted by the Ptolemies as befitting their images.

Turning away from the royal sphere and into the private, we can see a similar trend in the statuary of everyday citizens, including the priesthood and private citizens. As seen in the samples collected by Lembke and Vittmann, private statues of members of the priesthood trend towards being Egyptianized, and even remarkably lifelike.<sup>42</sup> For instance, several heads and busts depict the subject as bald (which would be understandable for a priest) with a realistic visage that shows a folded brow, chubby cheeks, and sunken eyes, etc. (Fig. 26), or by other traditional means (Fig. 27). There are, as to be expected at this point, some exceptions, including a few Grecized renderings of members of the priesthood (Fig. 28). For the most part, however, these Greek expressions of the priesthood are very rare. The male priesthood thus remained

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<sup>41</sup> Sally-Ann Ashton, “Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian Sculpture,” in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt, Volume II*, ed. Alan B. Lloyd (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 978.

<sup>42</sup> Katja Lembke and Günter Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” *Jahrbuch der Berliner Museen* 42 (2000): 7–57.

largely Egyptian, as do representations of female members of the priesthood, which likewise “betray no foreign influence and follow pharaonic tradition in all aspects.”<sup>43</sup>

In the non-priestly private sphere we see much more variance. This is consistent with what we discovered above from private (non-priestly) tombs of Alexandria, which simultaneously manifest varying degrees of Egyptian or Greek influence. Private portraits or statues could thus be Egyptianized (Fig. 29) or Grecized (Fig. 30) depending, it seems, on the personal preferences of the commissioner of the piece. Of course the interpretation that lends itself most naturally to this evidence is that private individuals had much more freedom to select from preferred Greek or Egyptian elements to meet their personal tastes, whereas the priesthood, evidently, felt more constrained to uphold traditional or archaic trends (which would be in keeping with the overall conservatism of the temple itself).

Finally, we simply cannot conclude this section without a few words about mummy portraits, which we might classify loosely under the same category as statuary.<sup>44</sup> Mummy portraits are an entirely (late) Greco-Roman innovation, and are part of a wider cultural phenomenon involving various means of expressing funerary art. Riggs classifies them alongside various other artistic media from the period, including painted shrouds, plaster mummy masks, and tomb sculptures.<sup>45</sup> The first impression most have when viewing mummy portraits is their

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<sup>43</sup> Sabine Albersmeier, “Ptolemaic Statues of Priestesses from Thebes,” in *Perspectives on Ptolemaic Thebes*, ed. Peter F. Dorman and Betsy M. Brian, *Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization* 65 (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 2011), 53–67, quote at 65.

<sup>44</sup> The standard work on this remains M. L. Bierbier, ed., *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London: British Museum Press, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> Christina Riggs, “Facing the Dead: Recent Research on the Funerary Art of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt,” *American Journal of Archaeology* 106, no. 1 (2002): 86.

astonishing “lifelike” quality (Figs. 31–33). Indeed the very word used to describe these pieces (“portrait”) is indicative of how strongly they communicate an undeniable level of realism.

To be sure, as with almost every other aspect of Egyptian art, debate exists around how “lifelike” mummy portraits and related works really are. Riggs explains that even “realistic” art cannot escape some level of idealization based on the aesthetic goals of the artist. This is especially true with Egyptian funerary art, which undoubtedly attempted to communicate important mythological significance through aesthetic means as much as it attempted to communicate any sort of realism. “Creating an image of this sort necessitated the selection of appropriate visual cues and provided an opportunity, perhaps otherwise rare, to communicate the subject’s self-identity and whatever considerations influenced the construction of that identity.”<sup>46</sup> As such, Riggs contends that funerary art, such as mummy portraits, attempted to do much more than merely provide an ancient realistic snapshot of the deceased. “The inhabitants of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt . . . wished to be seen within the parameters of mortuary commemoration” besides any other possible attempt at capturing a natural image of themselves.<sup>47</sup>

At any rate, what is significant regardless of how “realistic” these portraits may or may not be are the clear indications of Greco-Egyptian syncretism. Egyptian religious ideals concerning death and the afterlife are still clearly discernable on many surviving examples of this kind of funerary art, but at the same time the representation of the deceased often employed Greek artistic styles. Thus the shroud of Tasherytwedjahor which depicts familiar scenes from the funerary sphere (Fig. 34). “The shroud represents the arms, shoulders, and head of the deceased in the formal language of Hellenic art, while the fields below contain Egyptian

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<sup>46</sup> Riggs, “Facing the Dead,” 95.

<sup>47</sup> Riggs, “Facing the Dead,” 99.

scenes.”<sup>48</sup> This is not universally the case, however, as some surviving examples are thoroughly Egyptianized with little to no Greek influence, such as the shroud of a boy by the name of Nespawtytawy (Fig. 35). Based on the names that are decipherable on some of the sarcophagi, it is possible that some sort of preference for a Greek or Egyptian rendering followed along ethnic lines (i.e. Greeks preferred Greek renderings, Egyptians preferred Egyptian), although this trend is by no means definitive, and in any event, it is not always easy to tell from onomastics the ethnic background of the deceased.

### **Conclusion**

We have only scratched the surface when it comes to the areas explored in this brief survey. Each category listed above deserves much more careful analysis. For now, however, we will be content with laying out these few bits of evidence as pointing in promising directions for further research. To recap what we have seen so far, there appear to be some undeniable broad trends when it comes to the conservatism and innovation seen in Greco-Roman Egyptian art. As we have seen, we can break the evidence down into two broad categories: royal and non-royal artistic projects (whether statues, reliefs, or architecture). Within each category we can see Egyptianized, Grecized, and syncretic modes of aesthetic expression. Egyptianized artistic expressions are seen predominantly in sacred or cultic as well as the royal contexts. The priesthood and the temple preferred to Egyptianize their art to uphold conservative values, including the maintenance of *Ma'at*. On the royal level the Ptolemies rendered their likenesses in Egyptianized expressions to legitimize themselves to their subjects as participants, even guardians, of the traditional ideological religious and political system.

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<sup>48</sup> Riggs, “Facing the Dead,” 94.

At the same time, the royal artistic program saw the incorporation of innovative new styles into the equation by representing members of the dynasty in thoroughly Greek modes. Whether on the country's coinage or in statuary, the Greek identity of the Ptolemies was perpetuated and revitalized clear down to the last Greek ruler of the country, Cleopatra VII. This could take the form of either thoroughgoing Greek renderings or syncretic renderings that clothed (literally) Greek bodies in Egyptian garb. In the non-royal realm we see the perpetuation of Greek identity in the form of private portraiture and sculpture. Even after centuries of cultural integration we see clear signs of Greek ethnic expression in the surviving art from the period.

This, of course, raises several questions in its own right, such as how to approach the issue of ethnic identity in a multiethnic country. It also urges us to be on guard in detecting the possible ideological motivations of the Ptolemies and other elites. "In order to link the two cultures, the Ptolemaic royal house, or perhaps its advisors, attempted to merge the Greek and Egyptian traditions ideologically," notes Ashton. "These developments included iconographic associations between the Egyptian and Greek-style representations."<sup>49</sup> As with older examples of Egyptian art, Ptolemaic art was unquestionably highly ideology, and therefore following older traditions, while at the same time innovative in ways that addressed contemporary needs.

And so we end where we began, with Karr's quip: *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. The more things change, the more they stay the same. This is true of Egyptian art during the Greco-Roman Period. As we witness Egypt become bilingual (both in its actual language as well as in its artistic culture) under the Ptolemies we see fresh innovations in aesthetic-communicative acts that still manage to capture the traditions of the earlier years of the pharaohs. In short, with Greco-Roman artistic innovations (even the unique hallmark of the mummy

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<sup>49</sup> Ashton, "Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptian Sculpture," 976.

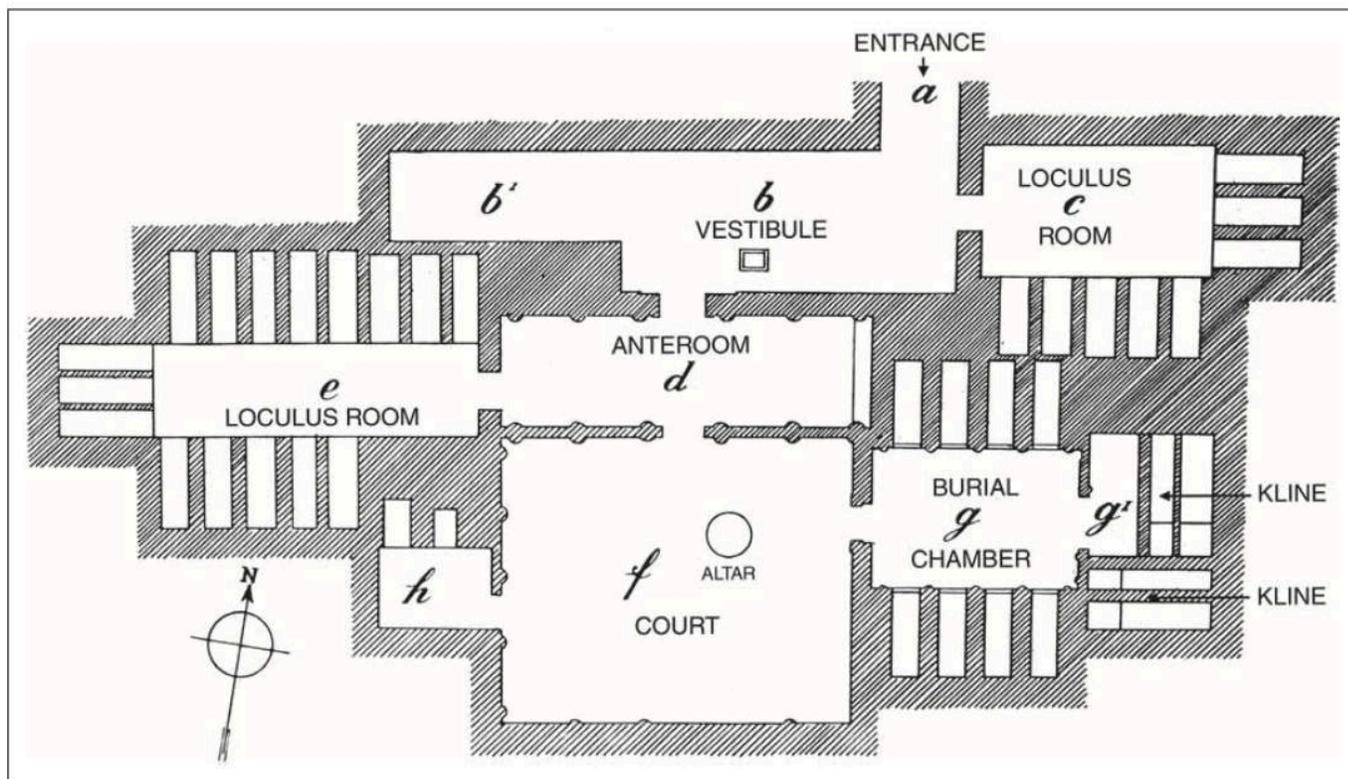
portrait) we see attempts to capture the sort of immortality so long sought after by Egyptians in earlier centuries.

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## Appendix: Images

Figure 1: Plan of an Alexandrian tomb (Hypogeum A).<sup>50</sup>

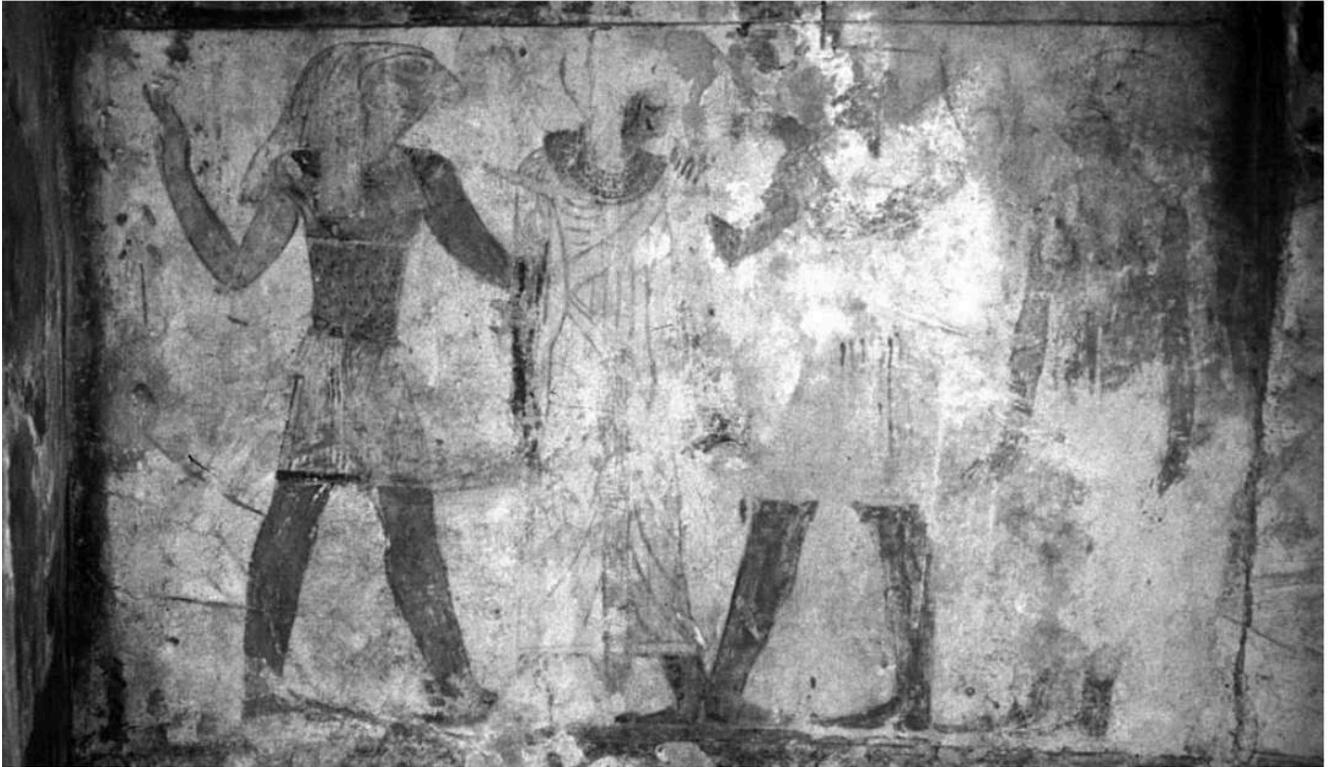
<sup>50</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 52.

Figure 2: Scene from the tomb chapel of Petosiris.<sup>51</sup>



<sup>51</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 11.

Figure 3: Tomb painting at the Anfushy necropolis, Tomb II.<sup>52</sup>



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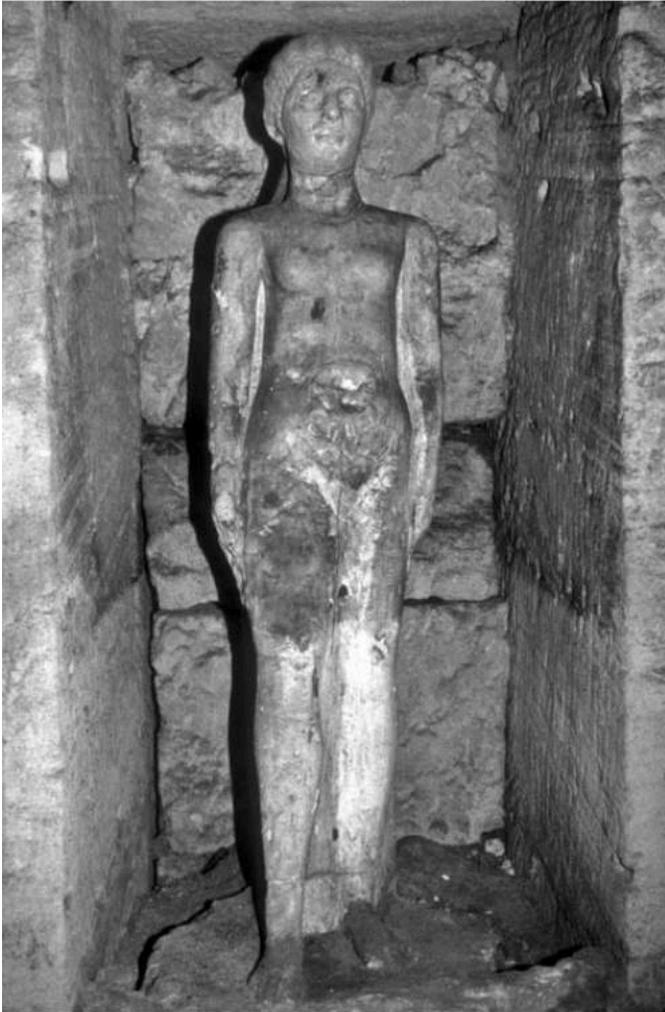
<sup>52</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 68.

Figure 4: A Grecized *ba*-bird from the Sāqiya Tomb of Alexandria.<sup>53</sup>



<sup>53</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, Pl. VII.

Figure 5: Female (left) and male (right) funerary statues from the Great Catacomb of Kom el-Shopafa.<sup>54</sup>



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<sup>54</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 68.

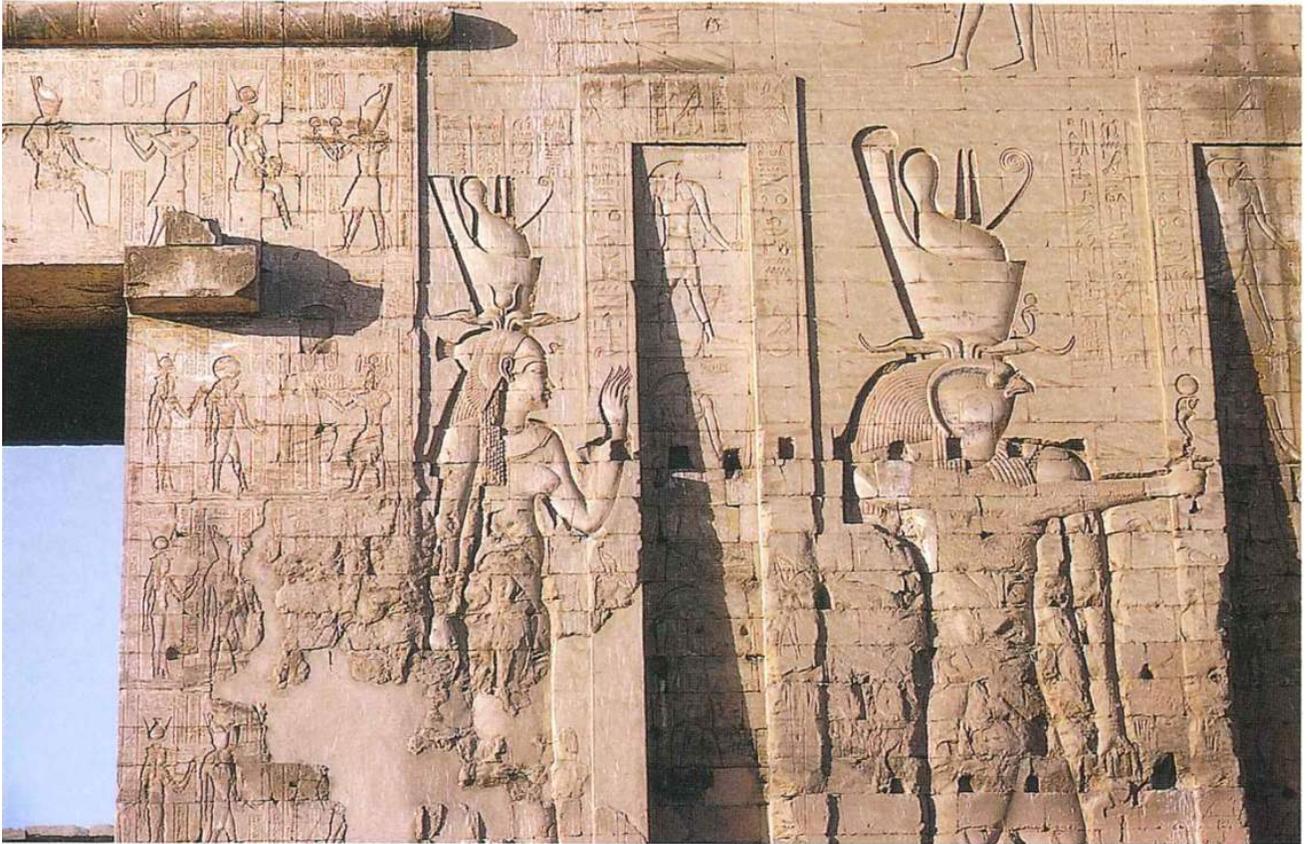
Figure 6: Anubis dressed in Roman military regalia and striking a Roman pose as seen in the main burial chamber of the Great Catacomb of Kom el-Shopafa.<sup>55</sup>



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<sup>55</sup> After Venit, *Visualizing the Afterlife in the Tombs of Graeco-Roman Egypt*, 70.

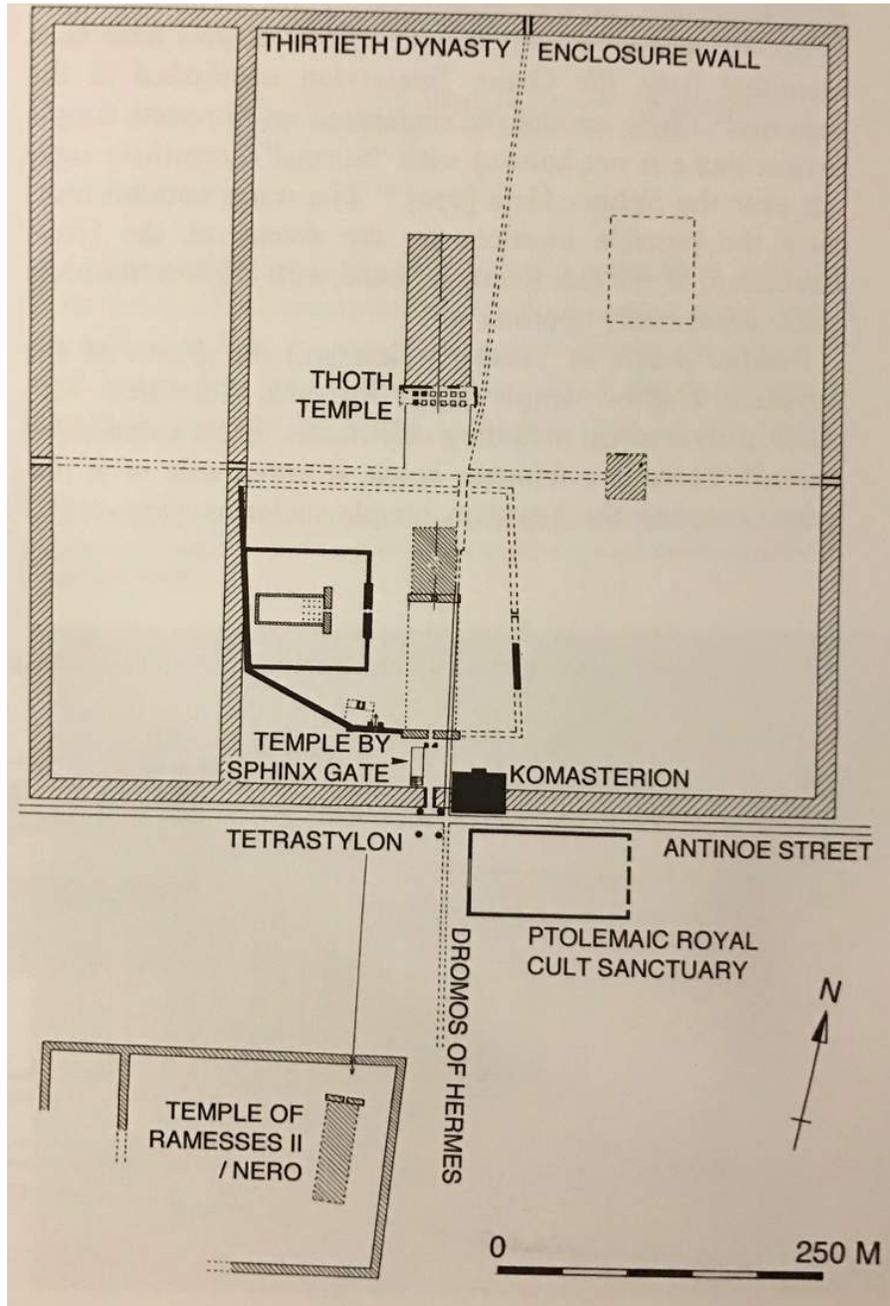
Figure 7: A relief of Horus on the pylon of the temple at Edfu.<sup>56</sup>



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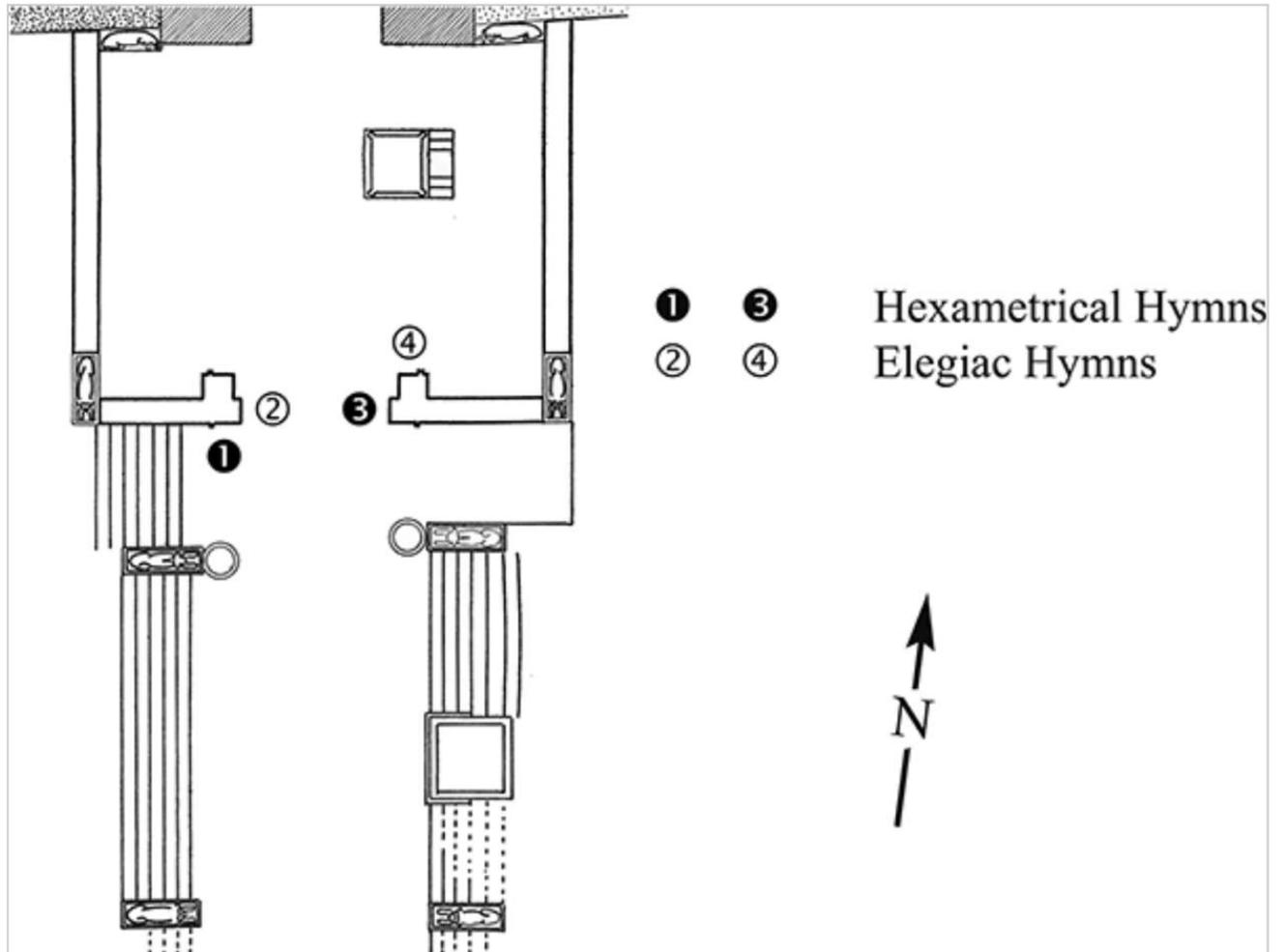
<sup>56</sup> After Arnold *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, 219.

Figure 8: Site plan of the temple at Hermopolis Magna.<sup>57</sup>



<sup>57</sup> After McKenzie *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt*, 159.

Figure 9: Greek hymns composed by a certain Isidorus and inscribed on the outer walls of the temple of Hermouthis and Isis in Narmouthis<sup>58</sup>



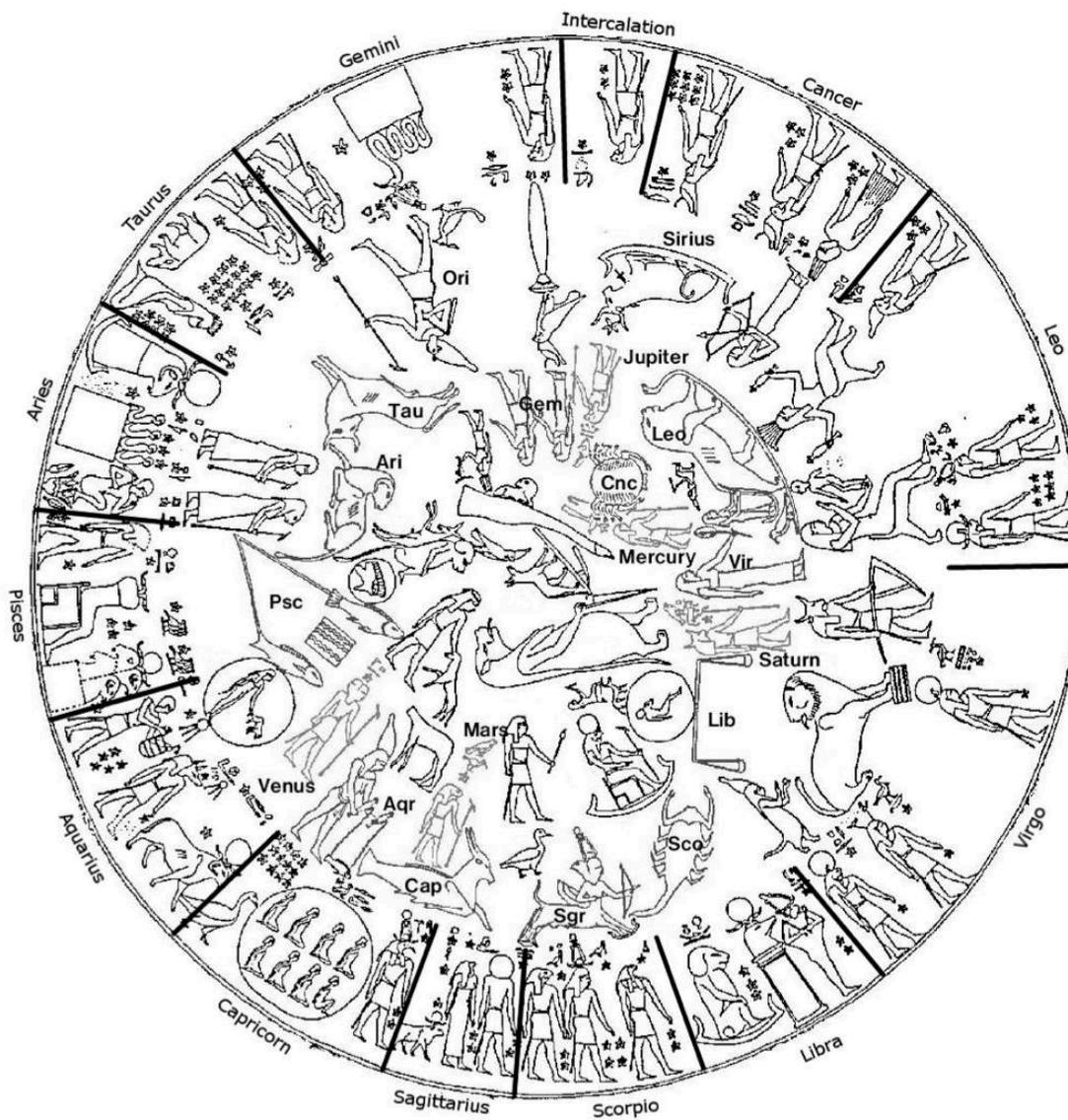
<sup>58</sup> After Moyer "Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple.", 213.

Figure 10: The zodiac on the ceiling of the second Osiris chapel at the temple of Hathor at Dendera.<sup>59</sup>



<sup>59</sup> After Buchwald, "Egyptian Stars under Paris Skies," 24.

Figure 11: A breakdown of the constellations on the Dendera zodiac.<sup>60</sup>



<sup>60</sup> After Priskin, “The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus,” 134.

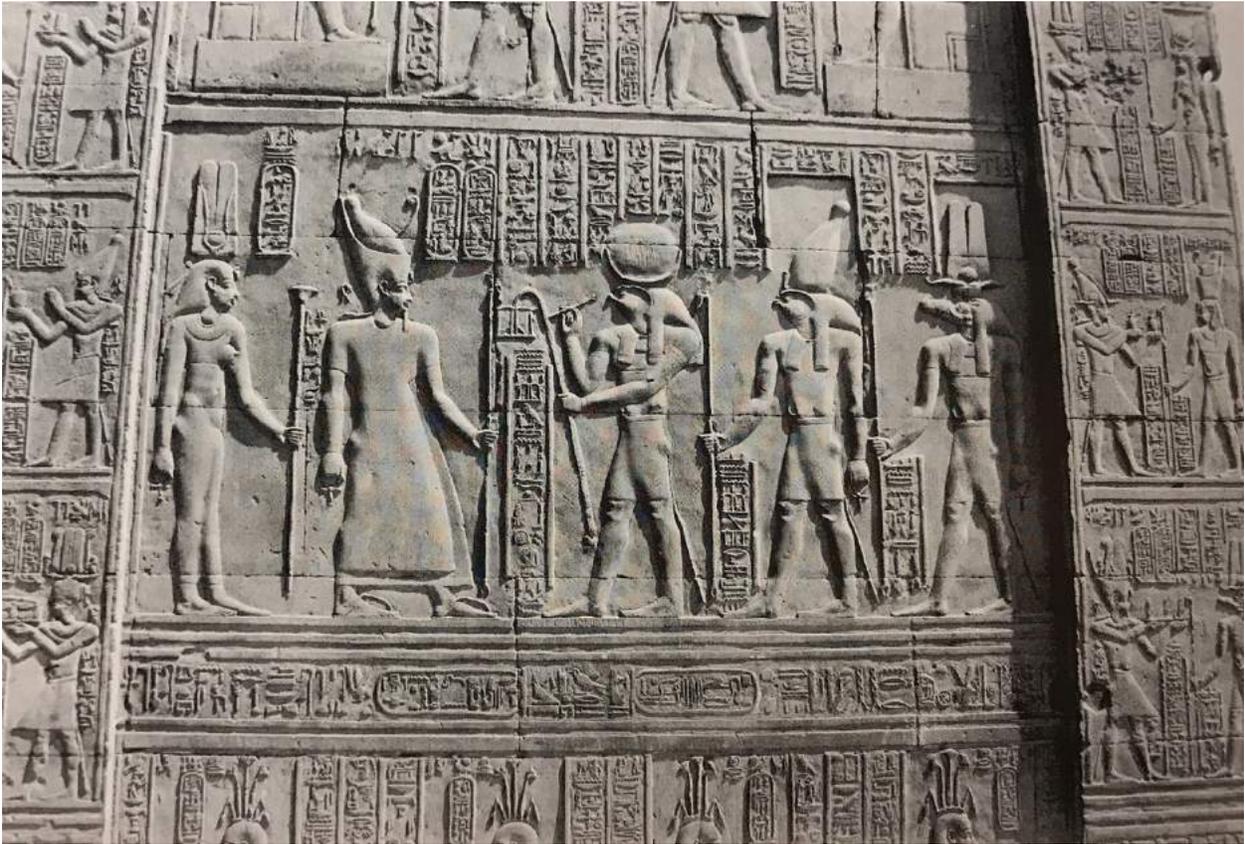
Figure 12: A silver *drachma* with an image of Ptolemy I.<sup>61</sup>



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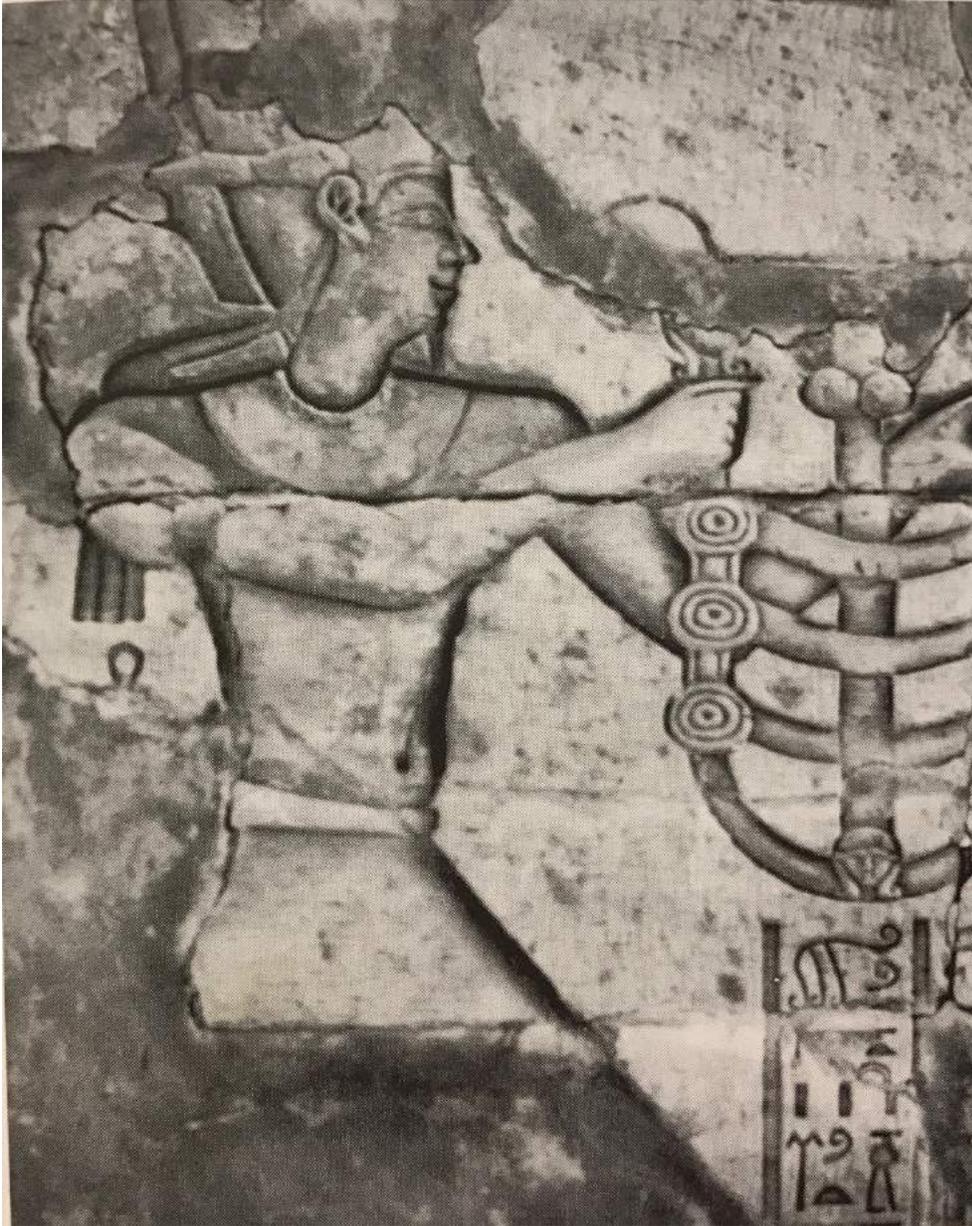
<sup>61</sup> After Kyrieleis, *Bildnisse der Ptolemäer*, pl. 1.

Figure 13: Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II receiving the right to kingship from Horus and Sobek at the temple at Kom Ombo.<sup>62</sup>



<sup>62</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pl. 205.

Figure 14: Ptolemy VIII is presented with the *hps*-weapon, a symbol of kingship, at the temple at Kom Ombo.<sup>63</sup>



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<sup>63</sup> After Alan K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs, 332 BC–AD 642: From Alexander to the Arab Conquest* (London: The British Museum Press, 1986), 33.

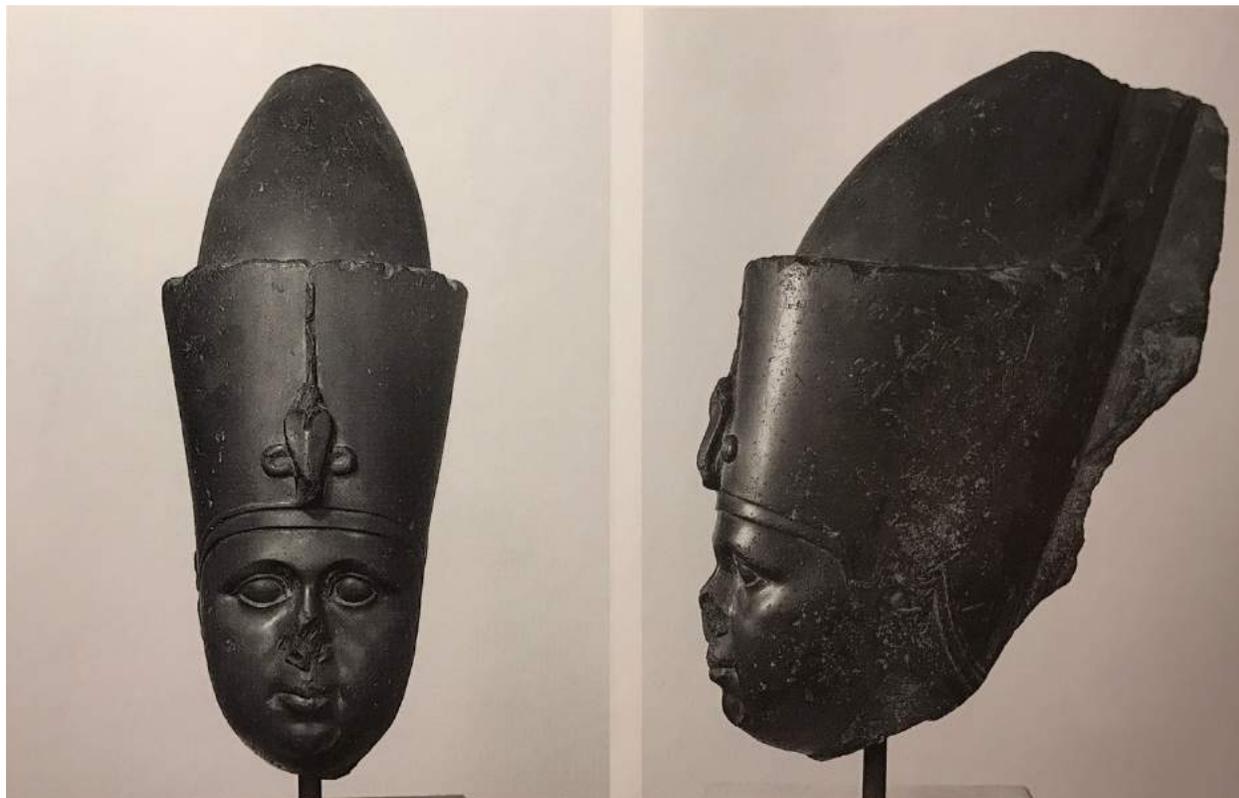
Figure 15: Statue of Ptolemy II.<sup>64</sup>



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<sup>64</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 2–3.

Figure 16: Head of Ptolemy VIII.<sup>65</sup>



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<sup>65</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 79–80.

Figure 17: Statue of Ptolemy VIII.<sup>66</sup>



<sup>66</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 98–99.

Figure 18: Statue of Ptolemy IX.<sup>67</sup>



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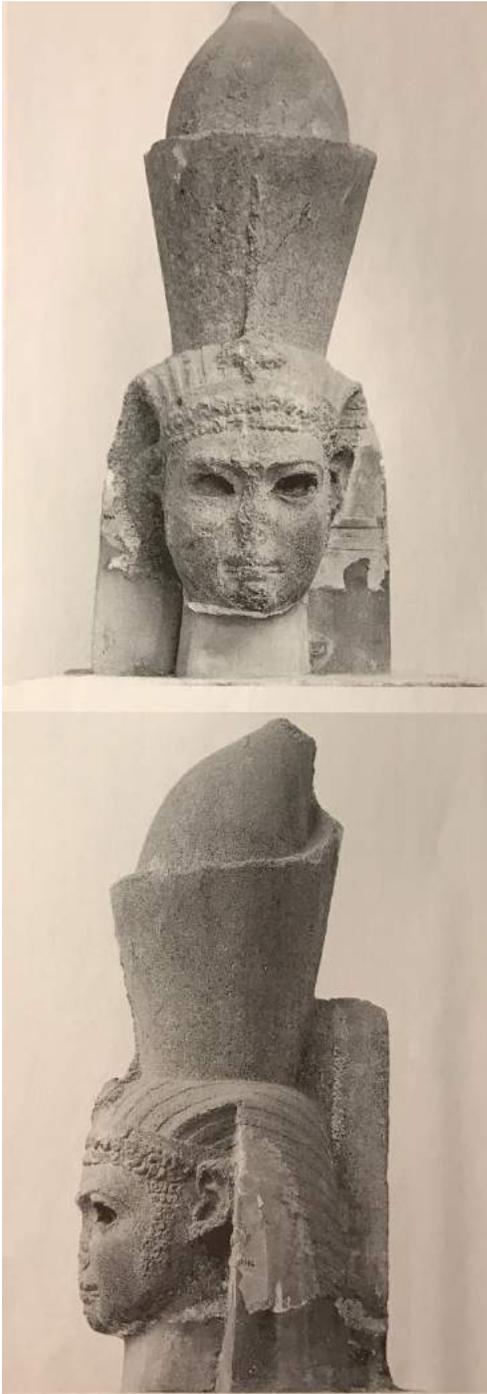
<sup>67</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 141–142.

Figure 19: Bust of Ptolemy XII.<sup>68</sup>



<sup>68</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 165–166.

Figure 20: Head of Ptolemy IX. Notice both the nemes headdress as well as the double crown as well as the Greek bangs and sideburns.<sup>69</sup>



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<sup>69</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 133–134.

Figure 21: Head of Ptolemy VI with Greek bangs.<sup>70</sup>



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<sup>70</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 52–53.

Figure 22: Bust of Ptolemy VIII with Greek bangs.<sup>71</sup>



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<sup>71</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 81–82.

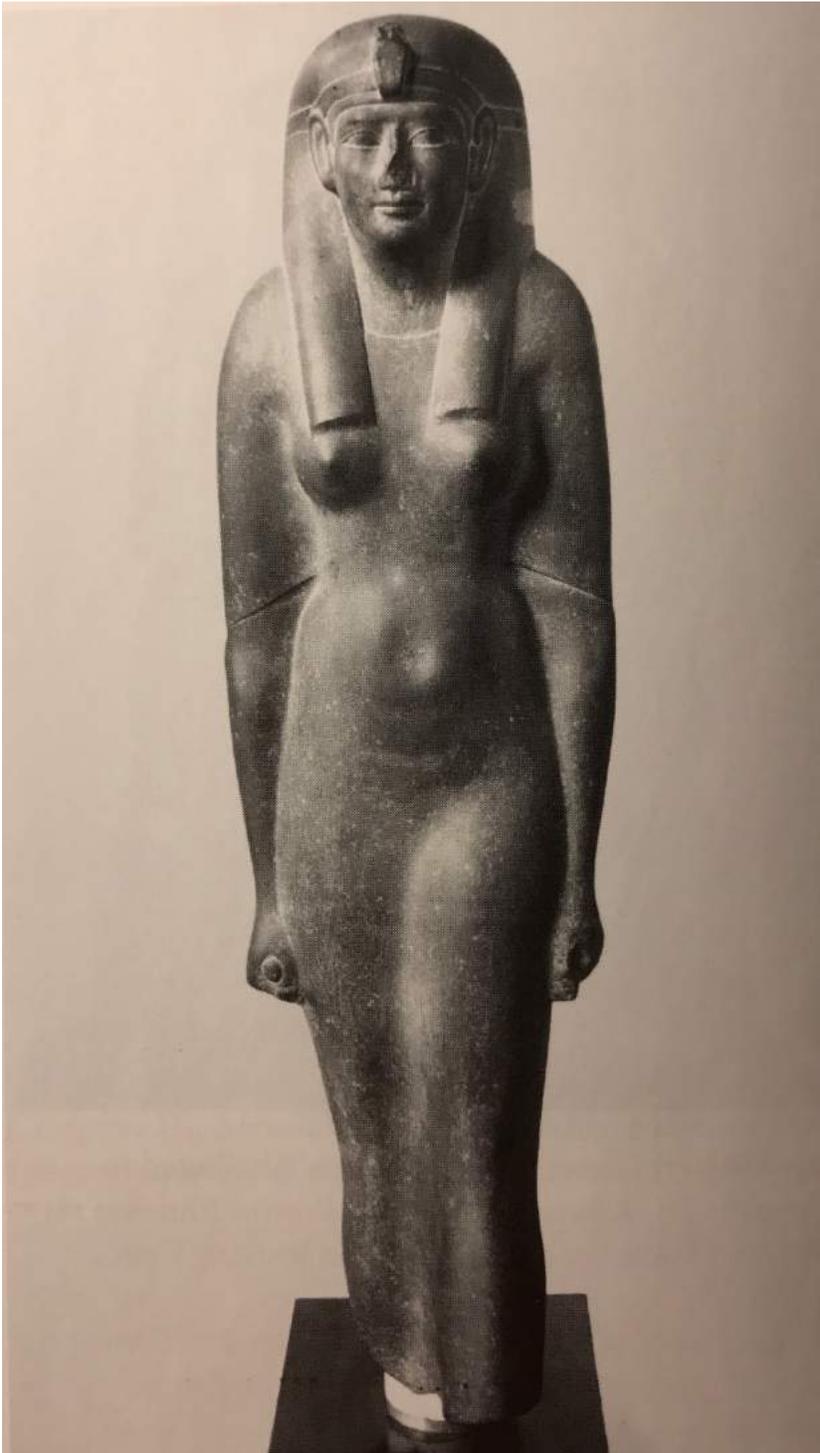
Figure 23: Head of Ptolemy X with Greek bangs.<sup>72</sup>



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<sup>72</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pls. 143–144.

Figure 24: Statue of Cleopatra III.<sup>73</sup>



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<sup>73</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pl. 130.

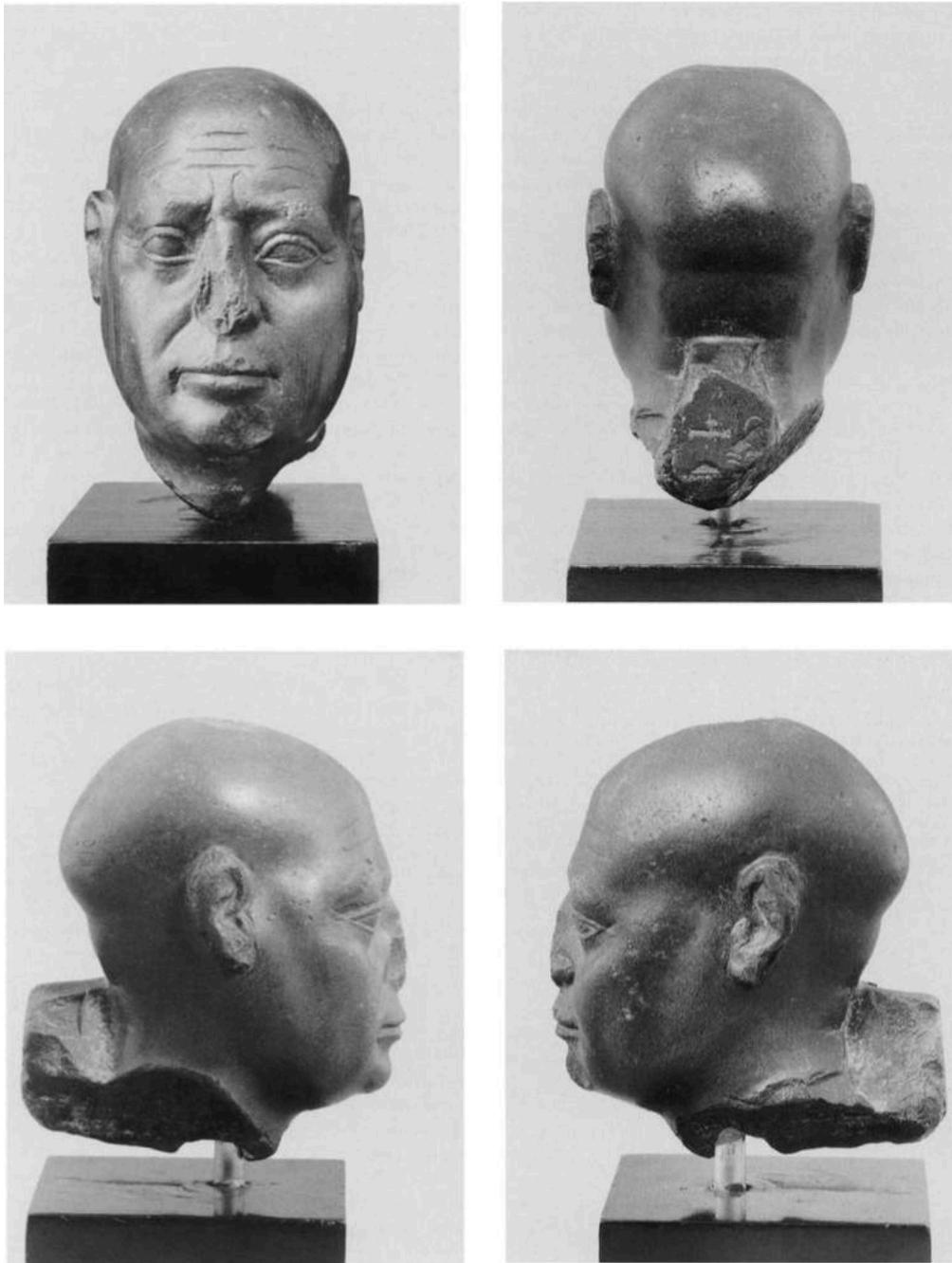
Figure 25: Statue of Arsinoe II.<sup>74</sup>



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<sup>74</sup> After Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, pl. 170.

Figure 26: Head of a priest from the late Ptolemaic period.<sup>75</sup>



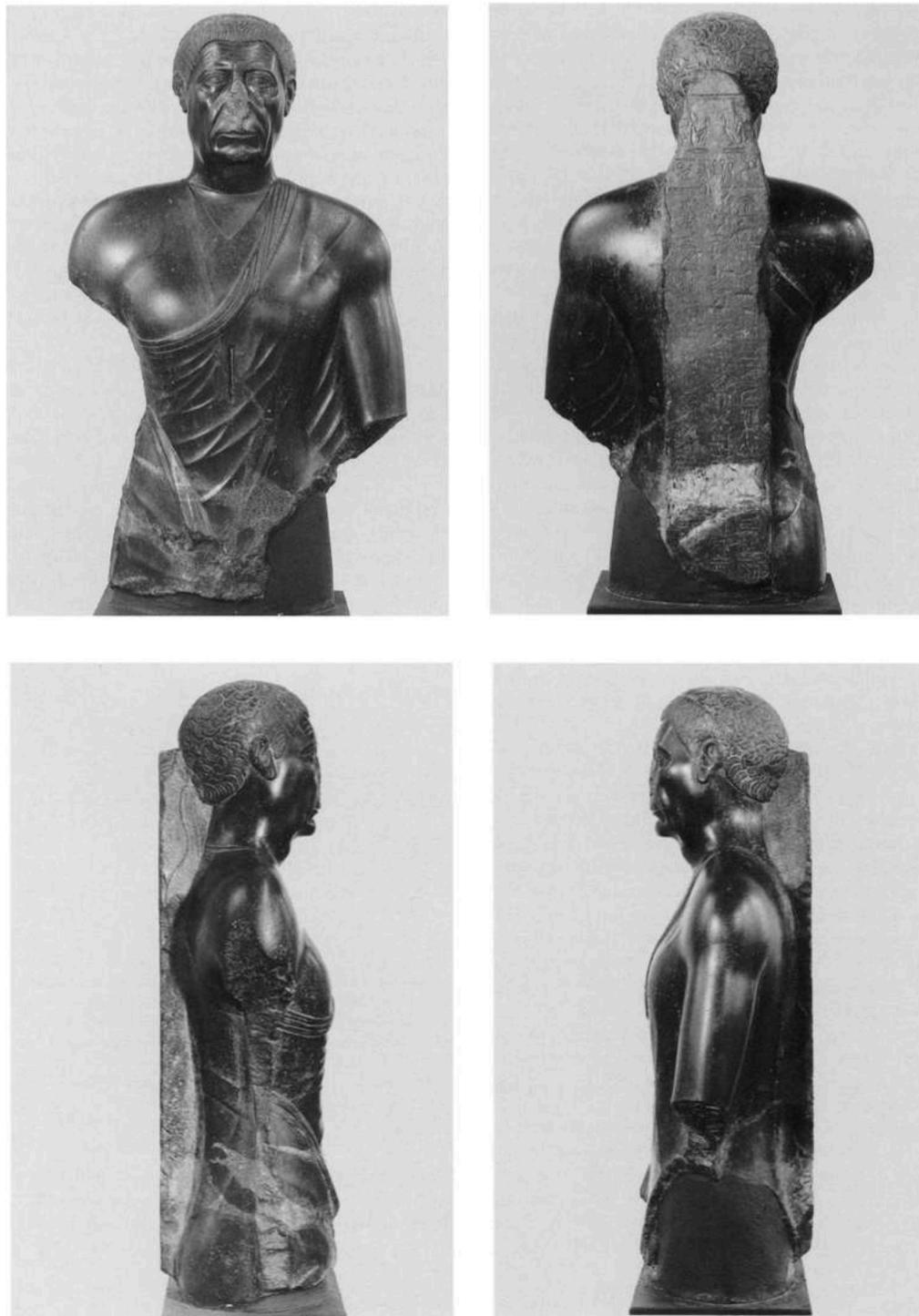
<sup>75</sup> After Lembke and Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” pls. 31–34.

Figure 27: Statuette of the priest Espmentis (*Ns-p3-mdw*) from Karnak (third century BCE).<sup>76</sup>



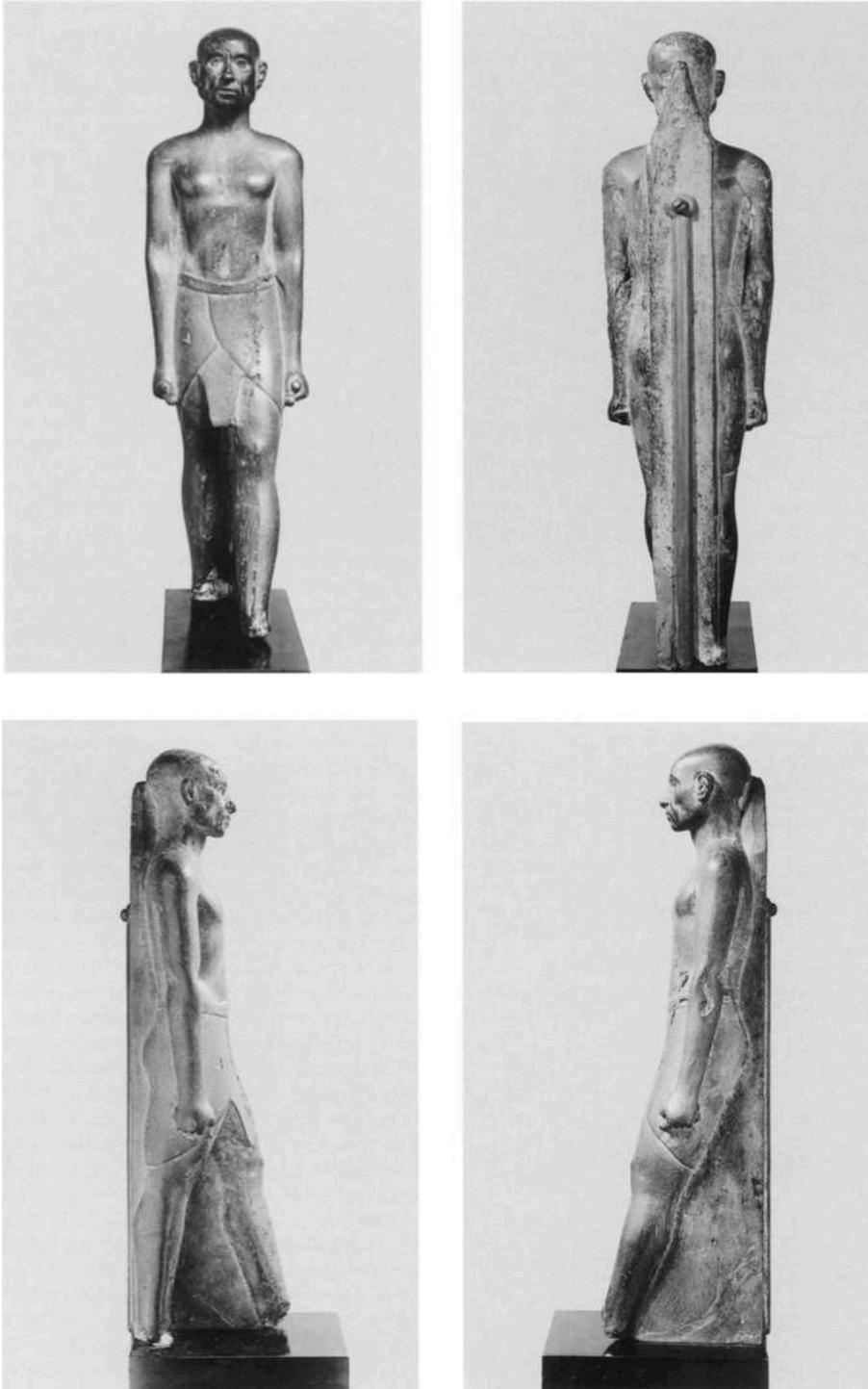
<sup>76</sup> After Lembke and Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” pls. 25–26.

Figure 28: Statue of Horos, son of Thotoes (*Hr s3 Twtw*), priest of Neith at Sais with Greek hair (late-Ptolemaic).<sup>77</sup>



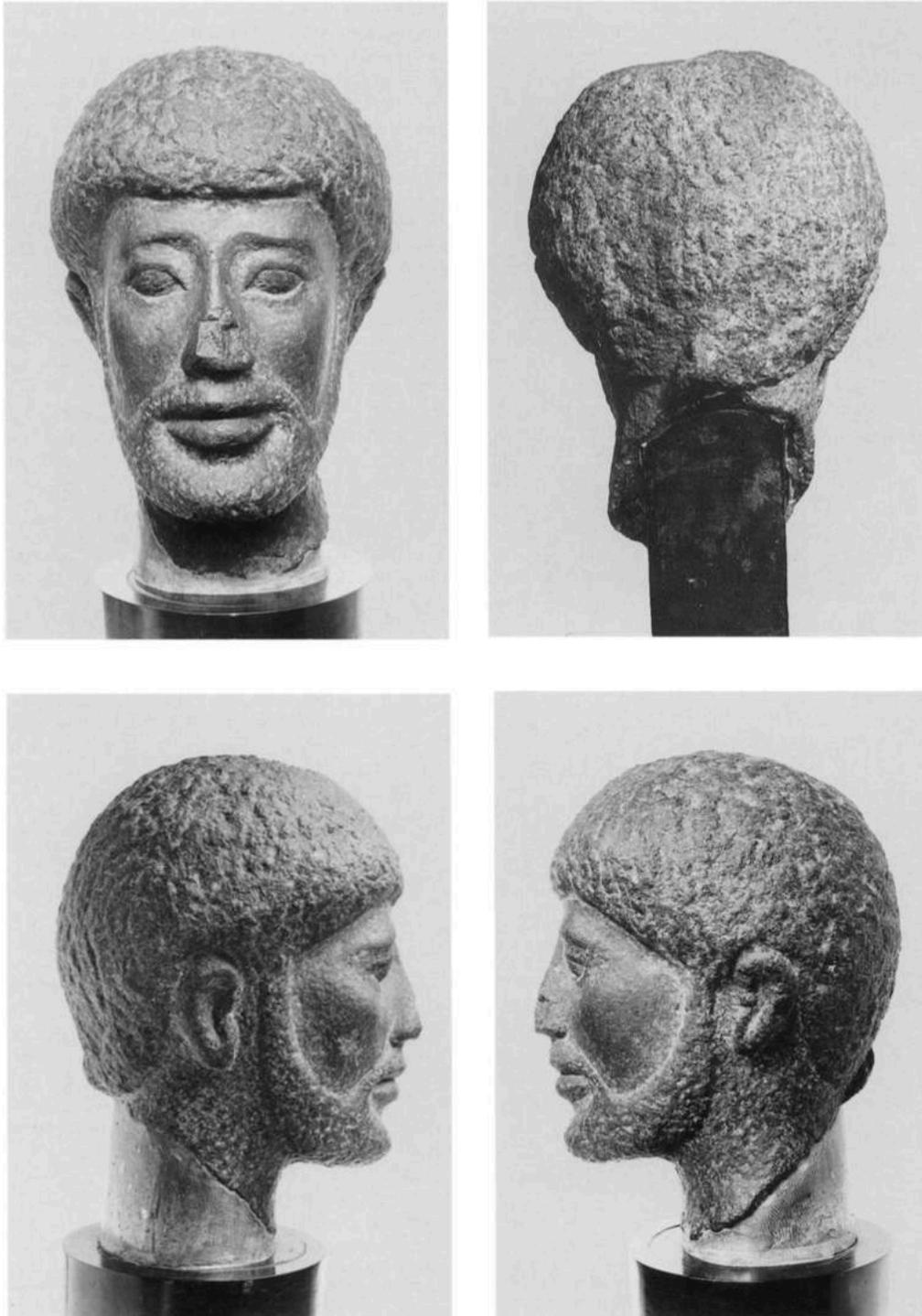
<sup>77</sup> After Lembke and Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” pls. 1–4.

Fig. 29: Standing statue of an anonymous Egyptian man (late-Ptolemaic).<sup>78</sup>



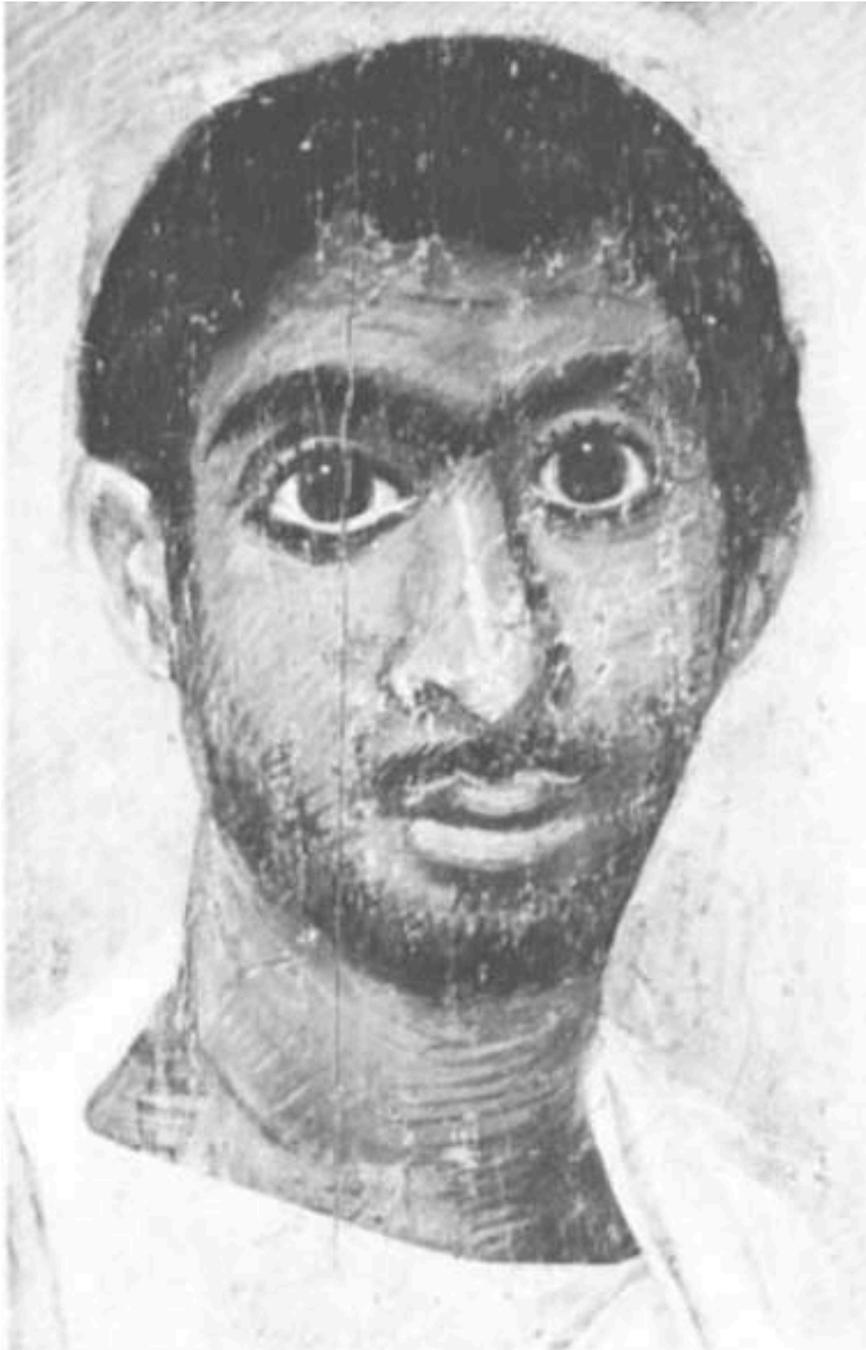
<sup>78</sup> After Lembke and Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” pls. 5–8.

Figure 30: Private portrait of an anonymous man (late-Ptolemaic).<sup>79</sup>



<sup>79</sup> After Lembke and Vittmann, “Die ptolemäische und Römische Skulptur im Ägyptischen Museum Berlin. Teil I: Privatplastik,” pls. 43–46.

Figure 31: Mummy portrait of a man from the Fayum (third century CE).<sup>80</sup>



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<sup>80</sup> After David L. Thompson, *Mummy Portraits in the Paul J. Getty Museum* (Malibu: The Paul J. Getty Museum, 1982), 3.

Figure 32: Mummy portrait of a woman from the Fayum (second century CE).<sup>81</sup>



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<sup>81</sup> After Thompson, *Mummy Portraits in the Paul J. Getty Museum*, 5.

Figure 33: Mummy portrait of a boy named Eutyches from the Fayum (second century CE).<sup>82</sup>



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<sup>82</sup> After Thompson, *Mummy Portraits in the Paul J. Getty Museum*, 11.

Figure 34: Shroud of Tasherytwedjahor of Asyut (first century CE).<sup>83</sup>



<sup>83</sup> After Riggs, "Facing the Dead," 88.

Figure 35: Shroud of the boy Nespawtytawy of Thebes (second century CE).<sup>84</sup>



<sup>84</sup> After Riggs, "Facing the Dead," 89.