

Faces from the Fayum: Cultural *Bricolage* in the Fayum Portraits

This paper will seek to highlight the practice of self expression through portraiture in the Roman Fayum by utilizing three exemplary portraits as case studies and employing the ideological framework provided by Nicola Terrenato's conception of cultural *bricolage*. The Fayum portraits offer a glimpse into the lives of those living under Roman rule, but often raise more questions than they answer; however, by considering portrait style, physical features, and clothing indicators, it becomes apparent that the subjects of the Fayum portraits were the result of cultural *bricolage*, utilizing portraiture to express self-identity. This unique approach allows for a better understanding of the preservation of both Egyptian and Greek culture in the face of Roman imperial expansion.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century alone, publications concerning identity in antiquity more than quadrupled (Meskell, 2002, 282). These pieces of literature seek to uncover how those subjugated by imperial expansion not only viewed themselves but how they preserved their own culture within, alongside, or contrary to Roman influence. David Mattingly understands lived experiences through discrepant identities (Mattingly, 2004, 8). This framework seeks to highlight who is providing the information uncovered by archaeologists—the conquerer or the conquered—and considers cultural “diversity and different levels of conformity” (Mattingly, 2004, 8). Expressing discrepant identities may play a role in how the subjects of the Fayum portraits chose to present themselves, but cultural *bricolage* provides a better lens through which the portraits might be understood.

The term cultural *bricolage*, defined by Nicola Terrenato, describes how a group acquires aspects of multiple cultures to create a separate cultural identity (Terrenato, 1998, 24). This

framework “works at different scales: not only in communities, but also individual cultural sets can be composed of different parts, some old, some new, some coming from outside” (Terrenato, 1998, 24). The Fayum portraits are an exemplary form of cultural *bricolage*: Greek subjects preserved their own culture through epigraphy and aesthetic choice; they then adopted an Egyptian burial practice and adapted it as needed; finally, many portraits feature the apparent influence of Roman culture, seen in minute details such as hairstyles, jewelry choices, and clothing. *Bricolage* asserts that culture is preserved on multiple levels, and evidence of Roman influence dominating certain spheres is not entirely diagnostic.

The individuals discussed within this paper adopted varying aspects of culture to different degrees. This indicates the personal preference of the deceased and the small ways in which cultural influence is found within the material record. When analyzed in this way, the portraits offer a wealth of information on individual identity and the desire to express that identity through portraiture. Analyzing minute details, such as hairstyle and jewelry, considering those alongside other cultural indicators, and employing the ideological framework provided by cultural *bricolage* provides a more complete narrative, one that may be utilized to better understand the ethnic and cultural identities of those living in the Roman Fayum.

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