

The *Golden Girl*: a Case Study in Bead Assemblage Deposition and Unrealized Fertility in the Roman Fayum

Bead assemblages played a prominent role in Romano-Egyptian society, and their importance is reflected in the mortuary sphere via grave depositions and their presence in mortuary art. Assemblages were often passed down from one generation to the next through the matrilineal line at major life events, such as the onset of menstruation, in response to a marriage, or at the birth of a child (Swift et al. 2022). These assemblages eventually gained heirloom status, being repaired and improved over the course of their use, indicating their importance (Swift et al. 2022). It is of note, then, that Flinders Petrie reported that “nearly all the women [unearthed in the Fayum] were buried with necklaces and armlets of beads [...],” as families likely did not relinquish ownership of these heirloom pieces lightly, and instead deposited them alongside the deceased in specific circumstances (Petrie 2013). This paper will argue that bead depositions in the Roman Fayum are directly related to fertility, or a lack thereof, and the perpetuation of the familial line. To explore the relationship between bead assemblages and fertility in the Fayum, this paper will utilize the portrait colloquially known as the *Golden Girl* as a case study. The portraits and the associated grave goods of older, presumably fertile women will provide comparanda.

The remains associated with the portrait of the *Golden Girl* belong to an individual who was likely too young to marry or reproduce (Doxiadis 1995). Despite this, both the subject of the portrait and the associated cartonnage are draped in jewelry, a known symbol of fertility in Egyptian culture (Riggs 2006). Given her premature death, it is unusual that she should appear bearing the symbols of an older, fertile woman. In contrast, the portrait of a 35-year-old woman from Hawara named Aline is far less opulent. She was discovered buried alongside two younger

females, presumably her daughters, and wears only one necklace and a pair of earrings in her portrait (Doxiadis 1995). The portraits of Aline's daughters are more similar to the portrait of the *Golden Girl*: both wear more jewelry than their mother in their portraits, having presumably received these items from their mother either prior to or upon her death. The portrait of the *Golden Girl* therefore provides a unique opportunity to study the relationship between depictions of beads assemblages and unrealized fertility. This paper will argue that the ornate nature of the *Golden Girl*'s portrait was meant to communicate to viewers that her fertility remained unactualized, and assemblages that would have otherwise been passed down to the girl at various life stages were instead preserved in the portrait and deposited alongside her, providing a way for the family to mourn the loss of both their child and the unrealized potential for the youth to contribute to the family's perpetuation.

Works Cited

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