

Asja Müller, **Ägyptens schöne Gesichter. Die Mumienmasken der römischen Kaiserzeit und ihre Funktion im Totenritual.** Archäologische Forschungen, volume 39, publisher Dr. Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden 2021. XIV and 428 pages with 18 tables, 2 graphics and 100 plates.

With the exception of a few pioneers such as Klaus Parlasca and Achille Adriani, who started to publish material from Greco-Roman Egypt in the nineteen-sixties, this late period had long fallen through the cracks of rather narrowly conceived disciplinary fields. While for Egyptologists the era was one of decline and ›contamination‹ by foreign influences, Classicists regarded it as too marginal to their interests. This only changed in the nineteen-nineties, when precisely that element that had been scorned, the lack of ›purity‹ in Greco-Roman Egypt's culture, started to become a major attraction, and when, triggered by modern concerns, multiculturalism, new concepts of eth-

nicity and then globalisation became prominent lines of enquiry. This interest has not faded since.

The publication under review here, the author's revised Kiel doctoral thesis, stands within this tradition. It is concerned with the mummy masks produced throughout Egypt during the imperial period and aims to study this material as comprehensively as possible, with a particular interest in its functionality and meaning. The result is truly impressive, and not just for the monumentality of the tome.

The book starts with short introductions to the subject matter (chapter 1) and to the history of scholarship (chapter 2), followed by a well-informed and up-to-date discussion of some theoretical foundations such as ritual theory, agency and inter-cultural relationships (chapter 3). Another short chapter explains Müller's analytical methods of typology, iconography and iconology, and thick description (chapter 4). The following about 230 pages present the results of her research on 1422 mummy masks that are well enough preserved to allow assessment, with some statistics helpfully summarised in tables (which would, however, have benefited from some proper captions).

The second half of the book starts with three appendices, on minor cemeteries with mummy masks not discussed elsewhere (appendix 1), 56 pages of ›Beleglisten‹, lists of items that feature certain characteristics discussed in the main chapters (appendix 2), and a catalogue of masks arranged according to their current location (appendix 3). All items have also been given unique identifiers (Entity-ID numbers), through which they are linked to an online catalogue integrated into the German Archaeological Institute's Arachne database (<https://arachne.dainst.org/project/mumienmasken.html>). The volume concludes with a 38-page bibliography and a lavish one hundred plates of maps and plans, a few drawings and an impressive number of photographs, mostly in colour.

The catalogue, appendices and plates alone are of huge value to anyone interested in this material and the questions to which it contributes, as they extend the only other published list of items (in Günther Grimm's monograph of 1974) by 546 items and make publicly available an unprecedented level of primary data. My one regret is the lack of an index, an unfortunate German tradition. Even though the book is very well structured, various aspects of interest are discussed in different places, so someone who does not have the time to read through the 268 pages of main text will find it difficult to access certain information unless it features under one of the headings in the Contents.

Appendix 2, valuable though it is, is impossible to navigate on its own, since the characteristics for which evidence is listed range from former membership in certain private collections to technical peculiarities to iconographic elements to findspots, which are not even arranged in alphabetical order but follow broadly the discussion in the main text. While everyone who has ever compiled an index knows the pain involved, it pales

in comparison with the benefits of improved accessibility to the wealth of information and thought generated in a huge effort and with generous support from the German Archaeological Institute.

The volume is valuable far beyond its collection of evidence, nevertheless. The analytical chapters (p. 29–282) start with basics such as dates, technical aspects of production and general typology (chapter 5). Chapter 6 discusses iconographic details of the masks such as hairstyle, dress and attributes, followed by the Egyptian figures and scenes featured on the masks, then inscriptions, and finally the mummy types associated with masks. On the basis of masks with a recorded findspot, the author identifies a total of eight workshops with their own distinct formal characteristics, which also allow the majority of masks without known provenance to be re-contextualised. She notes that the cemeteries were all related to metropoleis, while the costs involved in creating not just the mask but also the mummy, and the iconography of hairstyle, dress and jewellery suggest the local Hellenised elite as patrons (pp. 219–220).

Considering various dating criteria, Müller rejects the traditional chronology (first to fourth century A. D.) based on style alone, and concludes that the masks' main production comes to an end as early as the mid-third century, albeit with different lifespans in different parts of Egypt (Lower Egypt: beginning of the empire to the seventies A. D.; Middle Egypt: mid-first to mid-third century; Upper Egypt: mid-second century to a few examples from the second half of the third). Rightly discounting some previously suggested reasons for their discontinuation (such as the advent of Christianity), she considers a combination of causes while leaving the question essentially open. I wonder whether we might need to look beyond Egypt as well given that, around the same time, portraits largely disappear from tombs across the empire.

Within each region, the author observes a development from masks with iconographic elements predominantly rooted in Egyptian tradition and linked to religious concepts and magical properties (götterweltliche Ebene), to an increasing dominance of quotidian elements connected to the social persona of the deceased (lebensweltliche Ebene). She traces the origins of each of the iconographic elements, identifying their associations in the traditional Egyptian or the Hellenistic world and discussing any changes in their outlook or significance, before finally considering their likely readings in context.

Chapter 7 addresses the archaeological contexts of the masks. While the evidence for embalming halls is very meagre, and that for tombs in which masks have been found is not very rich either, the discussion of the latter is important and revealing. Describing first the necropoleis and then selected tombs in greater detail, Müller demonstrates that there was a wide range of different tombs and forms of burial, ranging from newly erected buildings to re-used pharaonic tombs and abandoned houses to simple shafts in the ground. There is

clear evidence of funerary rituals within some tombs and on their mummies, while in other places such evidence was lacking. Given the scarcity of properly excavated tombs with mummy masks, I would perhaps have been somewhat more cautious with generalisations, but the existence of this range of habits is clearly evidenced and well argued.

Chapter 8 discusses textual evidence that may elucidate the meaning and functionality of the masks. It starts with the Egyptian and Greek terms that could be used to refer to a mask, albeit noting that these typically mean ›head‹ or ›face‹. There is no term that exclusively signifies ›mask‹, a meaning that can only be gleaned from the textual context. This poses some methodological challenges for understanding the texts, which are rare in the imperial period and only one of which clearly refers to a mask in a single passage.

The other texts attest to the great importance of the head and its sensory capacities in rites that enable the resurrection of the deceased. The effort put into creating a mask for the head, which both protected the body within and was conceived as magically becoming one with it, therefore makes sense in religious terms. It is also plausible to assume that where a mummy with a mask underwent these rituals, some of the actions would have been enacted on the mask itself. That these rituals may indeed still have been performed is perhaps less well supported by the very few ritual papyri from the early imperial period, but is indicated by short phrases and the image decoration on the masks, which the author has shown to refer to traditional concepts and rituals that were clearly still understood and may therefore have been enacted as well.

The final chapter draws conclusions from the wide range of observations, discussing first the funerary rituals in general (distinguishing between human rituals and actions and the imagined actions and transformations the deceased passed through on their way to a new life), then looking at the mask as object (›patient‹) and as agent (both as agent of magic and as communicator of the deceased's social persona), before finally considering changes to the rituals effected by the influx of Greek and Roman ideas into Egypt (*Ritualwandel durch Kulturkontakt*).

If, in what follows, I raise some questions and suggest that there are still a few unacknowledged loose ends, I want to stress from the outset that they are testimony to the book's stimulating effect, since Müller has provided us for the first time with firmer foundations for our thinking about the purpose and function of mummy masks (or mummies with masks). To start with, questions around purpose and function are clearly linked to an issue that has occupied scholars for a long time, namely when and where the lavishly decorated mummies may have been visible to a wider audience.

I had myself speculated years ago that some mummies with painted portraits from Hawara could temporarily have been kept in people's houses, there receiving something akin to ancestral cult. This idea was soon

rejected, with good reason. The author argues that the texts I cited in support and physical evidence for interference with the mummies can best be explained by tombs that resemble the layout of houses (thereby misleading foreign authors) and by rites that took place there on the mummies, before they were finally re-buried in simple shaft graves to make space for new depositions. While this reconstruction of events is highly speculative for Hawara due to lack of evidence, the visible deposition of mummies within their tombs, where they also received some form of cult, is evidenced elsewhere (e.g. in Tuna el-Gebel [p. 207] and Antinoopolis [p. 210]), as is the relocation of mummies within tombs used over a long period.

Elsewhere, however, mummies were no longer visible after their deposition, because either they were buried in shafts in the ground (without any evidence for secondary burials) or they were enclosed in wooden sarcophagi. Müller convincingly argues that those parts of their decoration that contributed to the magical protection and transformation of the deceased could take effect independently of any human viewers. But how about their mundane elements, which became increasingly prominent and even dominant on masks from all parts of Egypt? The author makes the interesting point that individuality was an important concern in Egyptian ideas of resurrection (p. 147–248), and explains well how the masks, although not physical likenesses, convey this individuality (p. 157–162). No two masks were ever identical. Even when the basic shape was created from a common mould, the addition of hairstyles, details of physiognomy and colour, dress and attributes made each of them unique.

It could also be argued, as Müller does, that the individualised mask could replace an inscribed name, given that such inscriptions are rare. Yet the extent to which these masks were still thought to possess the powers of old Egyptian masks is less clear. Due to the linguistic ambiguities, Spell 151a in the Book of the Dead is much less obviously related to the mask than Müller wants us to believe (p. 233–237), and it is unclear whether those texts where a mask is likely mentioned refer also to those with mundane portraits and no traditional elements. As the author herself notes, the Book of the Dead went out of use precisely when individualised masks were introduced (p. 235). The only papyrus that mentions details of a mask within a ritual context (*Boulaq 3*) clearly refers to a traditional Egyptian mask and to the magical properties of materials not used for the later ones, such as silver, lapis lazuli, turquoise or jasper (p. 238–240).

From this point of view, masks whose mundane features substitute for the deceased's divine image as Osiris NN may be seen to be weakening that magical power. To be sure, there often were many other elements that supported the deceased's transformation, such as religious scenes, figures and objects painted on parts of the mask or on the mummy, or papyri with ritual texts. Yet not all attested mummy types featured figure decoration (p. 152–157 with pl. 55), and relevant papyri are rare and

mostly dated to a time when masks with traditional iconography were still produced.

This leads me to a more general point. While it is important to note the continuation of traditional rituals and religious concepts into the high empire, and the role that the masks could play within them, I feel that Müller is perhaps over-optimistic in her assumption that these rituals were performed with little change throughout. She does not talk about the mummy itself (except for its outer appearance). X-rays have demonstrated that methods of embalming, despite their ritual importance attested to in our texts, were no longer being carried out with the same attention to detail as in earlier times.

An individualised head or an inscribed name were also presumably not essential for the deceased's afterlife, or else the vast majority of Egyptian deceased would have missed out, given the preponderance of undecorated mummies. Should we not expect that corners were being cut in other parts of the rituals as well? Are we really to assume that the mouth-opening ritual traditionally enacted at the entrance to the tomb was still practised in the middle of a vast desert cemetery of simple shafts next to a hole into which the mummy was then lowered and covered with sand? Or, to put it more positively, should we not rather expect that rituals were followed more selectively, not just for economic reasons but maybe because it was understood that the afterlife could be secured with less effort, or to allow room for other rituals that focused more on the social persona and their role in society? After all, the ritual papyri are often selective as well.

As the author herself notes, the mundane iconographic elements as well as the biographical inscriptions had a communicative purpose, promoting the deceased in their social roles as members of a local élite. In each part of Egypt, including the conservative Thebes, within a few decades after masks were introduced these elements took over the entire mask, relegating any religious and magical elements of the decoration to other parts of the mummy or even dispensing with them entirely. The latter had often occurred with mummies featuring painted portraits, which in the Fayum could be regarded as a continuation of the trend, as they had taken over from the masks as early as the Flavian period. These changes do not happen accidentally but reflect deliberate choices. Müller importantly observes that the social persona of the deceased was evoked and commemorated in tombs of the pharaonic period as well, be it in the form of statues, which at times could feature highly individualised faces, or in relief scenes on the tomb walls (p. 267 s.).

The masked mummies therefore combined elements that had always been relevant in funerary contexts. Yet the messages related to the deceased's social persona get lost when nobody is there to see them. Where and when was viewing them possible, especially when mummies were not visible in whatever tomb they ended up in? The author notes that the transition to wholly mundane masks was faster in those areas where burial forms

offered greater opportunities for the masks to exercise their communicative function in the tomb (p. 223 s.). Yet why were naturalistic masks introduced at all in regions that hid mummies in the ground or in sarcophagi? Maybe we need to allow for a little more »Ritualwandel durch Kulturkontakt« than Müller envisages and consider the possibility of rituals and festivities in the presence of the unburied mummy that were unrelated to old Egyptian customs, and for which we have little or no hard evidence.

Regarding the masks' communicative function, the author stresses that any audience would have been local, so that some explanations for the globalisation of material culture and habitus, such as participation in an empire-wide *koinē* and its competition, are unconvincing (p. 265). Yet is this the case? Does it not suffice that the local élites perceived themselves as part of this *koinē*? Müller even proposes (p. 266) that the individualised masks were introduced by these Hellenised élites in reaction to their new classification as Egyptians under Roman law, a suggestion that is, however, hard to reconcile with the masks' chronology.

More could perhaps be said about their patrons' choices and self-perception. The iconographic details analysed so well in Chapter 6 would have allowed for further exploration and detail. Why is it that none of the Roman female dress types based on classical divine statues has been imitated? Why do we not even see the contemporary draping styles occasionally used in Roman sculpture – and also sometimes shown on painted mummy portraits? Why are there no togas (possibly but not necessarily because there were no Roman citizens among the patrons), no bare-chested men (which could have alluded to the hallmark of Hellenism, the gymnasium) and no men with sword belts as we find on mummy portraits?

Some of these questions could be more successfully addressed in a comparative study that looks at portraiture more widely and includes other mummy types that share with this group some formal as well as functional characteristics. Müller notes this potential herself (p. 268) and observes that, while she has laid the foundations for such research, it would have exceeded what even her own highly ambitious project could achieve. I am also not suggesting that there are easy answers to all of these questions that the author should have found. I would rather propose that there is still much exciting research to be done.

The range of aspects that the author has covered with so much knowledge and methodological rigour is truly impressive, and she offers for the first time a more holistic approach to an important part of Egyptian culture of the imperial period. One could easily imagine a researcher running out of steam after collecting the evidence and describing and analysing the masks and their decoration. What makes this book so much more than a convenient presentation of material is the insistence that the masks had a function; and that they integrated well into millennia-old religious traditions and beliefs,

where they could assume magical powers and support the transition of the deceased into a living divine being. In doing so, Asja Müller has also demonstrated that these masks should be of interest not just to art historians and archaeologists, but to historians as well, since they contribute to our wider understanding of Roman Egypt and its societies. While a German book of 428 pages may look intimidating to non-native speakers, it is worth the effort of engaging with it, and both the clear and accessible writing style and the conclusions (Auswertung) following each sub-section are helpful.

Pisa

Barbara E. Borg