

Anne E. HAECKL    Multicultural Masculinity: Paired Portraits of Young Men from Severan Coptos, Egypt

Far from the urbane social circles of Italy, the provinces of the Roman Empire also functioned as arenas for cultural contestations of Roman manhood. Roman Egypt, where long established local models of masculinity collided and competed with imported Classical norms, is particularly rich in textual and archaeological evidence that awaits interrogation about what it meant to be a Roman man in a multicultural province. Nevertheless, few studies on manhood and material culture have followed Dominic Montserrat's pioneering 1996 work on *Sex and Society in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, while Egyptologists are only beginning to apply gender theory to representations of masculinity in Pharaonic art and literature. A case in point is the current debate over two embracing male figures portrayed in a Fifth Dynasty (c. 2350 BCE) tomb at Saqqara. Do the entwined arms of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep, manicurists to the pharaoh, signify that these men were brothers, identical twins, conjoined twins, close professional colleagues or male lovers?

Similar questions can be asked of a unique assemblage of Roman relief portraits of young men from Coptos, Egypt. In 1911 Adolphe Reinach excavated twelve relief panels, each depicting a pair of bust-length portraits of young men, in a building on the outskirts of Coptos. Dated to the Severan period, the Coptos reliefs (now in Cairo and Lyon) are carved in a simplified, schematic style. Each panel contains a frontal, bust-length double portrait of two moon-faced youths, posed side by side and, in several cases, linked by an affectionate embrace. Their *habitus* integrates Egyptian and Roman iconographies of male adolescence: shaven bald in the fashion of Egyptian children and priests or garlanded in Classical style; dressed in Roman-style tunics or mantles; holding wreaths or palm fronds freighted with multicultural cultic and civic associations. From the perspective of queer theory, it is surprising – or perhaps not – that scholars have yet to explore the culturally complex homosocial and homoerotic implications of these provincial paired portraits of young men.

Reinach attributed the Coptos reliefs to merchants and soldiers from the Syrian caravan city of Palmyra, whose third-century activity in the Red Sea region of Egypt's Eastern Desert is amply documented by inscriptions. This paper argues that the Coptos reliefs more properly belong to native traditions of Romano-Egyptian portraiture such as the Berlin Tondo, a painted dynastic portrait of the Severan imperial family in which the boyish princes Caracalla and Geta appear in a compositional format almost identical to that of the male Coptos couples. I propose that the twelve Coptite panels depict youthful Egyptian priests of the Severan imperial cult, represented in a manner designed to reconcile artistically two culturally incompatible constructions of royal heirs apparent. The bald heads and childish chubbiness of the Coptos portraits evoke Egyptian priestly purity and the Pharaonic boy-god Harpocrates, divine heir of Serapis and Isis; simultaneously, their rounded fleshiness and intimate embraces sexualize the portraits as mortal objects of Classical pederastic desire.

