

**UNPUBLISHED FUNERARY STELE FROM EL-
ASHMUNEIN ARCHAEOLOGICAL MAGAZINE (INV.
NO. 678)**

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines an unpublished stele of a woman from El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine (Inv.No. 678). It is carved in limestone of roughly rectangular shape with an arched top, 73 cm high and 30 cm wide. The thickness of the limestone slab is 11–11.5 cm.

The stele depicts a standing female figure in frontal pose, dressed in a Greek style tunic with a round high-cut neckline, and a himation enveloping the figure in the arm-sling variant.

The aim of this paper is to propose a date and place of production for this object, depending on the analytical study and the parallel examples

The funerary relief in question must have belonged to a woman of importance and high social standing in Roman Egypt as suggested by her robes. The parallel examples discussed in this study assume that our stele belongs among the funerary reliefs from Oxyrhynchos and can be dated to the end of the second to the early third century AD.

KEYWORDS:

Funerary stele, Limestone, El-Bahnasa, Oxyrhynchos, El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine, Arm-sling variant.

الملخص:

تتناول هذه الورقة البحثية شاهد قبر غير منشور، من الحجر الجيري، محفوظ بالمخزن المتحفى بالأشمونيين برقم (٦٧٨)، ارتفاعه ٧٣سم، عرضه ٣٠سم، والسّمك ١١-١١.٥ سم. للأسف مكان الاكتشاف غير معلوم، ملامح الوجه مدمرة، الجزء العلوي، والجزء السفلي من الشاهد. وهو ما شكل تحدياً في دراسة هذه القطعة.

يمثل الشاهد سيدة تقف في الوضع الأمامي. ترتدي قميص ضيق بفتحة دائرية، وعباءة. تستند باليد اليمنى علي الصدر، بينما تحمل في يسراها ما يشبه باقة ورد. تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلي تأريخ الشاهد، وتحديد المكان الذي أتى منه، والمكانة الاجتماعية لصاحبة الشاهد.

الدراسة التحليلية للقطعة المكتشفة، من خلال طراز الملابس، الوقفة، والأمثلة المقارنة أثبتت أن الشاهد يمثل سيدة رومانية تحتل مكانة اجتماعية مرموقة اعتماداً علي طراز الملابس وثناياها الثرية، كما أن معظم الأمثلة التي تم تناولها في هذه الدراسة ترجع إلي إقليم اوكسيرنخوس (البهنسا) في المنيا، ولعل هذا الشاهد قد اتى من هناك. يمكن تأريخ هذا لشاهد بنهاية القرن الثاني وبداية الثالث الميلادي.

الكلمات الدالة:

شاهد قبر، الحجر الجيري، البهنسا، اوكسيرنخوس، المخزن المتحفى بالأشمونيين، وضعية اليد اليمنى علي الصدر.

INTRODUCTION:

One of the unpublished objects in El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine is a fragmentary funerary stele carved in limestone of unknown provenance (Inv.No. 678). In effect of an analytical study of this object it is now possible to propose a date and place of production for this piece.

DESCRIPTION:

The carved stone is of roughly rectangular shape with an arched top, 73 cm high and 30 cm wide. The thickness of the limestone slab is 11–11.5 cm. The slab appears to have been cut down from a larger piece, possibly a rectangular-shaped stele decorated with an aedicule or niche as suggested by the remains of an entablature behind the figure's head and the traces of a rosette or shell at the top suggest (**Fig.1,a**). The lower part

of the stele is broken off just above the figure's thighs. The surface, especially of the face of the figure, is abraded.

The stele depicts a standing female figure in frontal pose. The body is well shaped under the folds of the robe, the neck thick and columnar (**Fig. 1,b**). Despite the damage, the face can be said to be round and fleshy. Little can be said of the eyes and nose due to the abraded surface. The mouth is small. The forehead is low, partly covered by hair, which also conceals the ears except for their lower part. The hairstyle consists of curly locks around the face and arranged in several rows above the forehead. The locks were drilled.

The figure is dressed in a Greek style tunic with a round high-cut neckline, and a himation enveloping the figure in the arm-sling variant (**Fig.1,c**). The right arm is bent at the elbow and drawn up to the chest, grasping the edge of the himation. The left arm hangs loosely at the side. The object held in the hand is a small garland of flowers typical of funerary representations.

The folds are rendered with a good feeling for both the fabric and the body shape. V-shaped folds can be seen at the neck of the tunic. Deeply carved, the folds of the himation are draped in loose curving lines over the right hip, and rise diagonally across the abdomen to the shoulder and over the left arm. They fall in straight lines on the left side of the body. Traces of yellow paint can be seen over the tunic and himation.

DISCUSSION:

There are many examples in Roman art of statues, grave reliefs, and stelae depicting a standing male or female figure in frontal pose, both the *togata* and *palliate* types.¹ Roman Egypt has also produced many examples of

¹ Hekler, A. (1912), *Greek and Roman Portraits*, New York, p. XXVI, Pls 133,134 ; Borg, B.E. (2019), *Roman Tombs and the Art of Commemorative*, Cambridge University Press, p. 152, fig. 3.8; Borg, B.E. (2015), *A Companion to Roman Art*, Welly Blackwell, pp. 225–226, fig. 11.6; Vout, C. (2015), Gender Studies, in: Marconi, C., *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Art and Architecture*, Oxford University Press, p. 7, fig. 27.4; Vermeule, C.C.(1981), *Greek and Roman Sculpture in America*, University of California Press, p. 259, fig. 217; Frel, J. (1981), *Roman Portraits in the Getty Museum*, J. Paul Getty Museum, p. 24, fig. 10; Koch, G. (1988), *Roman Funerary Sculpture, Catalogue of the Collection*, The Paul Getty Museum, p. 70, fig. 24; Heng, M. (1983), *A Handbook of Roman Art*, Cornell University Press, p. 92, fig. 78; Clark, J.R. (2003), *Art in the Lives of Ordinary Romans*, University of California Press, p. 118, fig. 66; Kleiner, D. (1992), *Roman Sculpture*, Yale University Press, p. 79, figs 58, 60; Strong, D. (1980), *Roman Art*, Penguin Books, p. 46, fig. 15; Comstock, M.B.

statues and grave reliefs of both men and women, standing in the same pose, wearing the tunic and himation, the latter wrapped around the body with one arm across the chest in the so-called ‘arm-sling’ type. A statue from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Inv. No. 25780), representing a bearded man dressed in a tunic and himation in the arm-sling type, and carrying a scroll in his left hand, can be cited as an overall parallel for our piece. **(Fig.2)** This second-century AD sculpture demonstrates a similar rendering of the himation folds over the right side of the body and across the front.¹ A grave relief in marble from Cairo Museum (CG 27568) shows a row of male figures, of which the second from the right, carrying a scroll in his hand, wears a tunic and himation in the arm-sling type. The drapery is rendered in a very similar way in this case. **(Fig. 3)** The relief is dated to the mid-second century AD.² A very close parallel to the type of statue is the male figure depicted on a wooden coffin cover from Roman Egypt, kept at the British Museum (EA 55022). **(Fig.4)** The folds of the drapery are very similar to our stele. The coffin cover is dated to the first century AD.³

This type of funerary stelai is also well known from Oxyrhynchos (El-Bahnasa).⁴ A stele from El-Bahnasa, documented by Ashour, represents a man dressed in similar style with a tunic underneath and a himation wrapped around the body in the ‘arm-sling’ type. The object held in the left hand resembles the garland held by the figure on our stele. **(Fig. 5)** The carving is more crude in this case, but one can see the same kind of

and Vermeule, C.C. (1976), *Sculpture in Stone. The Greek, Roman, and Etruscan Collection of the Museum of Fine Art*, Boston, p. 201, fig. 319; Fejfer, J. (2008), *Roman Portraits in Context*, 2, Walter and Gruyter, Berlin, p. 30, fig. 16.

¹ Maehler, H. (2000), Remarks on Some Sculptures in Alexandria, in: *BSAA (Bulletin de la Société Archeologique d’Alexandrie)*, 46, *Alexandrian Studies II, in honor of Mostafa El-Abbadi, Alexandria*, p. 227, Pl. 9.

² Riggs, C. (2005), *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt*, Oxford University Press, pp. 88–89, fig. 30.

³ Vandenbeusch, M. (2020), Coffins as Statues? The study of Cover British Museum EA55022 from Roman Egypt, *JAIE (Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnection)*, 23 (September 2019), pp. 127–153, figs 1–5. <http://jaei.library.arizona.edu>

⁴ Breccia, E. (1932), *Le Musée Gréco-Romain 1925–1931*, Instituto Italiano D’Art Grafische, Bergamo, p. 101, Pl. XXXIX, No. 137; Petrie, F. (1925), Tombs of the Courtiers and Oxyrhynchos, in: *British School of Archaeology in Egypt and Egyptian Research Account*, 37, London, pp. 16, pl. XLVI,17; Breccia, E. (1933), *Le Musée Gréco-Romain 1931–1932*, Instituto Italiano D’Art Grafische, Bergamo, p. 50, pl. XXVII, No. 83; Parlasca, K. (1978), Der Übergang von der spätrömischen zur Frühkoptischen Kunst im Lichte der Grabreliefs von Oxyrhynchos. Internationaler Kongress für Koptologie, Kairo 8–18. Dezember 1976, *Enchoria, Zeitschrift für Demotistik und Koptologie*, 8, pp. 115–120, Pls 37, 38, 39.

V-shaped folds at the neck of the tunic, and the deep folds crossing the chest and the abdomen. The stele is dated to the third century AD.¹ Another statue from Oxyrhynchus, made of limestone and now at the National Museum Scotland (A.1971.674), presents a young man wearing a tunic and himation in the ‘arm-sling’ type. **(Fig. 6)** The right hand grasps the edge of the himation in a similar gesture to our stele, while the left hand holds an object that is damaged, but could well represent a flower garland. The overall similarity to our piece is evident, and added to that the robes of the figure were also painted yellow. The statue dates to AD 200–300.²

Moving now to the form of the stele, the scant remains of an entablature and a carved scalloped shell above the head of the figure indicate that the stele originally had an architectural frame. Parallels for this form abound and it is enough to point out just a few examples. The closest one is a stele of a woman from the Harvard Art Museum (Inv. No. 1977.197). Behind the figure’s head is a carved shell decorating the top of the aedicule. The pose and attire of the figure closely parallels our figure, even if the carving of the drapery is not as fine. She also holds a flower garland in her left hand. **(Fig.7)**. The provenance is unknown, but it could be Oxyrhynchus. The stele dates to AD 160.³ Another stele from the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria (Inv. No. R.483) depicts a woman dressed in the same way in a tunic with round neck and a himation worn in the ‘arm-sling’ version. **(Fig. 8)**. Here, the niche, in which the figure was set, is fully preserved with an entablature supported on two flanking columns and a carved shell adorning the top of the niche above her head. The provenance of this stele is unknown, but it is dated to the third quarter of the third century AD.⁴

DATING:

¹ Ashour, S. (2010), Unpublished Group of Bahnasa Reliefs, *Archaeological & Historical Studies*, 13, The Archaeology Society of Alexandria, pp. 75–77, fig. 5.

² Brent Nongbri (2018), *Faces from Oxyrhynchus*. <http://brentnongbri.com/2018/04/28/Faces-From-Oxyrhynchus>.

³ Vermeule, C. and Brauer, A. (1990), *Stone Sculptures: The Greek, Roman and Etruscan Collections of the Harvard University Art Museums*, Harvard University Art Museums (Cambridge, MA.), p. 162, Fig. 148.

⁴ Schmidt, S. (2003), *Grabreliefs im Griechische-römische museum von Alexandria*, *Abhandlungen des Deutschen Archäologische Insitut*, Kairo, Band 17, Berlin, p. 151, Pl. 53, Cat. No. 170-Inv. Nr. R.483.

The 'arm-sling' type of the drapery in the case of our stele is not useful for dating the piece, because it was a common type, appearing already in late Classical and Hellenistic times, gaining in popularity in the end of the second century B.C, and becoming widespread during the Roman era.¹ However, it was an indication of importance and high social position.² Nonetheless, taking into account the specific combination of robes, the figure's pose and the architectural form of the stele, one can propose a provenance and date for this piece.

The most important parallels mentioned in this paper are attributed to Oxyrhynchos, and dated to the period of AD 200–300. Of the two pieces where the architectural frame is well preserved, one is dated to AD 160 and the other to the third quarter of the third century AD. Neither has a known provenance, but it is likely that they come from Oxyrhynchos. Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that our stele belongs among the funerary reliefs from Oxyrhynchos and can be dated to the end of the second to the early third century AD.

CONCLUSION:

The funerary relief in question must have belonged to a woman of importance and high social standing in Roman Egypt as suggested by her robes. She would have lived sometime in the late second–early third century AD, if the dating of the stele based on stylistic parallels is accepted. The figure is representative of painted limestone statuary of the high Roman period in Egypt, showing the Roman aspirations of the Egyptian elite in both the dress and the frontal pose.

¹ Riggs, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

² Stewart, P. (2003), *Statues in Roman Society*, Oxford University Press, p. 93; Lovén, L.L. (2014), *Roman Art: what can it tell us about dress and textiles? A discussion on the use of visual evidence as a source for textile research*, in: Harlow, M & Noch, M.L., *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress*, Ancient Textiles Series, 19, Oxbow Books, p. 266; Whitehouse, H. (1998), *Roman in Life, Egyptian in Death: The Painted Tomb of Petosiris in the Dakhleh Oasis*, in: Kaper, O.E., *Life on the Fringe*, Nederland-Vlaams Institute in Cairo, pp. 259–261.

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Figures



Fig. 1,a: Funerary stele from El-Ashmunein Archaeological Magazine (Inv.No.678). front view. By the Author

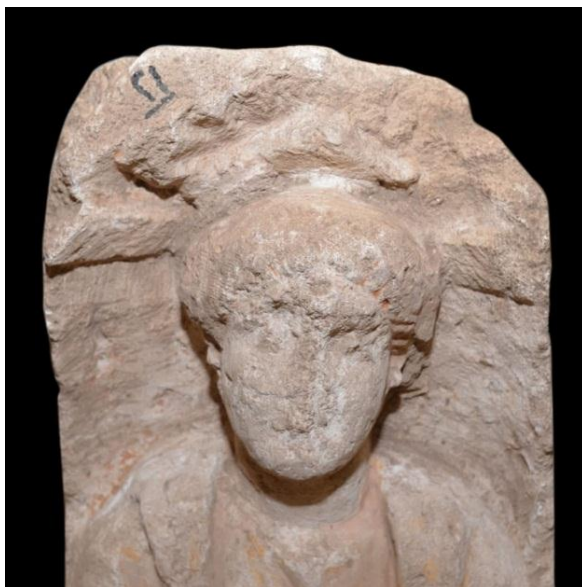


Fig. 1,b: The face of the woman,
By the Author.

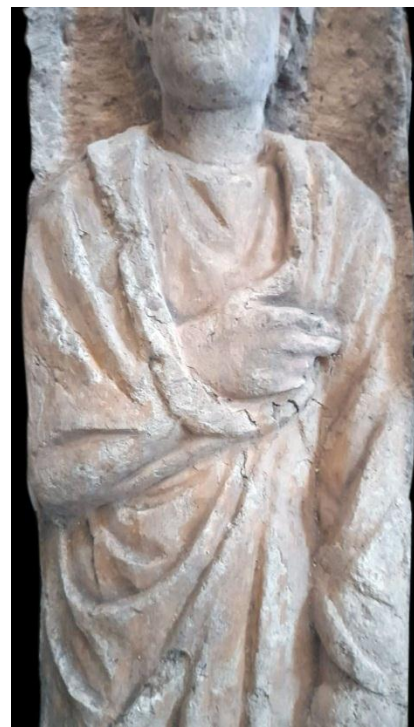


Fig. 1,c: the clothes, By the Author

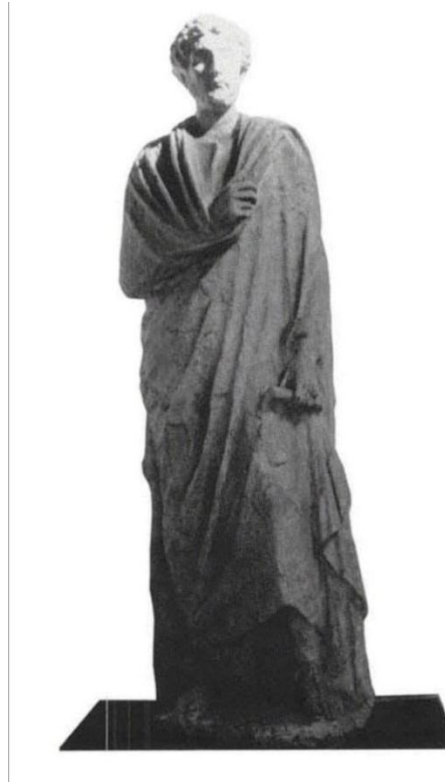


Fig.2: A statue from the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Inv. No. 25780), representing a bearded man, 2nd century AD.

Maehler. H, (2000), p.227, Taf.9, photo.J.

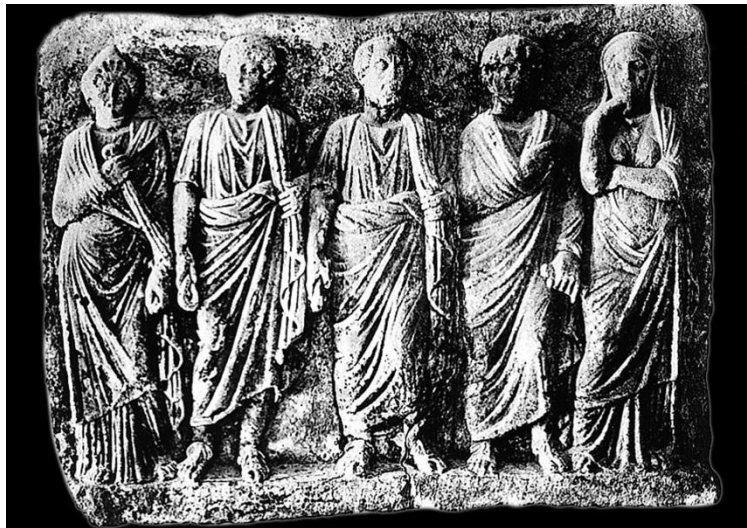


Fig.3 : A grave relief, marble, Cairo Museum (CG 27568), mid-second century AD.

Riggs .C,(2005), p.88-89, fig.30



Fig.4: Male figure depicted on a wooden coffin cover from Roman Egypt, The British Museum (EA 55022), 1st century AD. Vandenbeusch. M,(2020), , P.127-153, figs 1-5. <http://jaei.library.arizona.edu>



Fig.5: A stele from El-Bahnasa, 3rd century AD. Ashour.S,(2010), pp.75-77, fig.5.

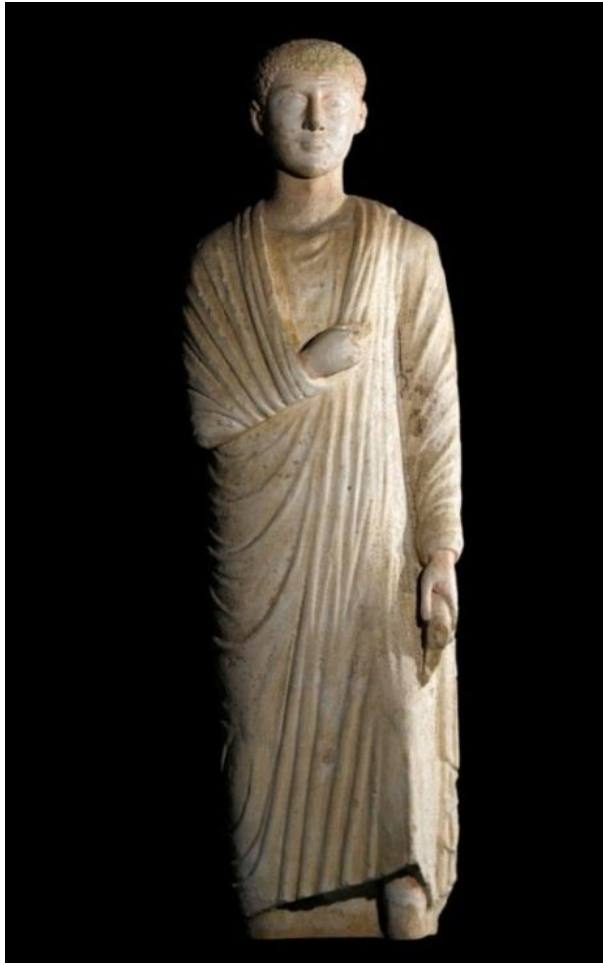


Fig.6: A statue from Oxyrhynchus, limestone, the National Museum Scotland (A.1971.674), 200-300 AD.

Brent Nongbri,(2018), Faces from Oxyrhynchus.

[http://brentnongbri.com/2018/04/28/Faces-From-Oxyrhynchus.](http://brentnongbri.com/2018/04/28/Faces-From-Oxyrhynchus)

Fig.7: A stele of a woman, the Harvard Art Museum (Inv. No. 1977.197). 160 AD.

Vermeule .C. C. p.162, Fig.148.

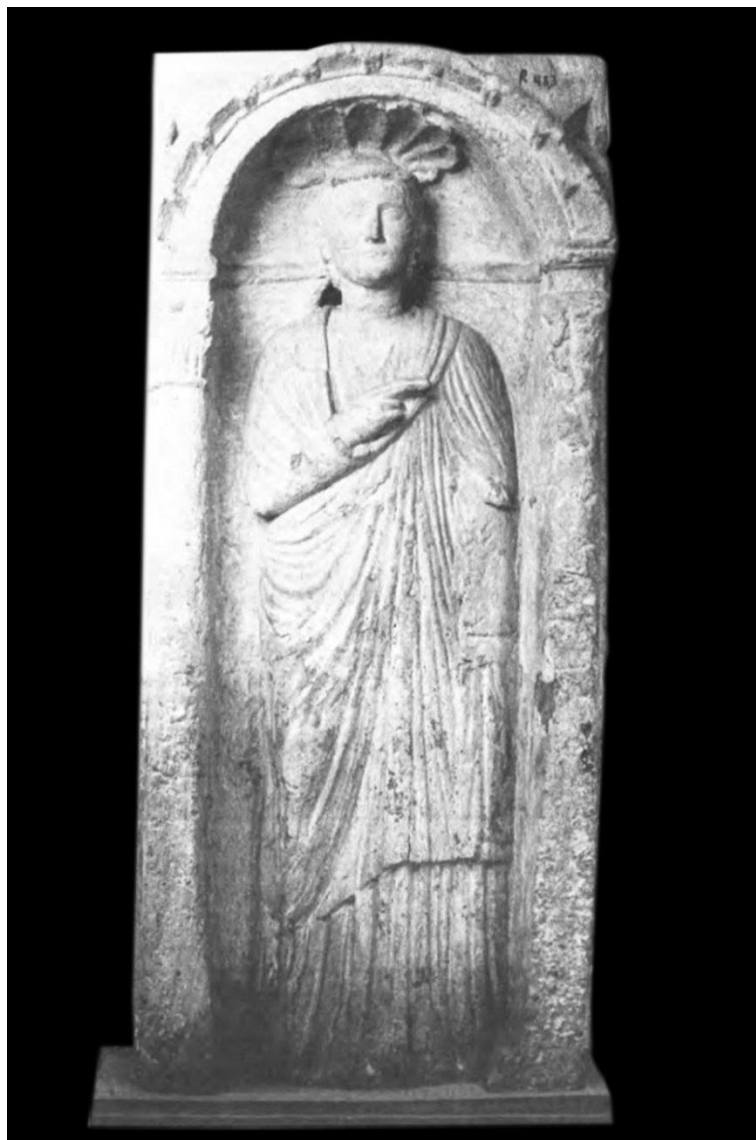


Fig.8: A stele from the Graeco-Roman Museum at Alexandria (Inv. No. R.483), the third quarter of the 3rd century AD

Schmidt. S,(2003), p.151, Taf. 53, Kat. Nr170-Inv.Nr. R.483.