

A unique wooden panel from Fayoum Region

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Introduction:-

This paper will investigate and focus on studying a unique painted wooden panel **JE. 38250**. Indeed, the main aim of this study precisely will be to examine and identify these figures which are depicted on the wooden panel, to recognize the religious significance, to find an approximate dating, and to find out the main function of this object.

Provenance:

The main provenance of this object is Fayoum Region, probably came from Tebtynis "Tell umm Breigat" (**fig.1**).

Dimensions: Height: 55cm; Width: 26 cm.

Current Status:

A large part of this object was totally destroyed, but recently the remaining part of it was retorted.

There is a very small part is missing in the lower part of the panel. There are some parts of the painted stucco layers that are chipped off the surface of the wood. The white background became yellow due to the time's factors.

This panel is made with tempera, which uses an egg-yolk medium. Using small brushes dipped in a mixture of pigment and egg-yolk, the paint was applied in very small, almost transparent, brushstrokes. Thin layers of paint would be used to create volumetric forms¹.

The wooden panels generally were used in many purposes like mummies' portraits, personal portraits and votive panels etc... Actually this panel is a votive one.

Physical Description (fig.2 a&b):

This panel consists of two gathered panels; one of them is still preserved in our hands. The scene represents a bust of young lady in the frontal pose but her face is in the three-quarters pose, she moves her head and her consideration towards her proper right a little. She wears a black Chiton with folds over her chest which is covered by long red Himation. She wears a long spiral red necklace around her neck ends with a small standing figurine. The neck seems fairly big and contains two or three folds. The head seems relatively large and the cheeks are chunky and painted in pink. The chin is pointed and short. She wears earrings consist of one bead of pearl in each ear. The head is surrounded by transparent veil headdress. It is wrapped around it in

1- Campbell, Lorne. National Gallery catalogues (new series): The Fifteenth Century Netherlandish Paintings, 1998, p.29.

semi-circles. She wears a tiara (corona), composed of two standing feathers above solar disk flanked by two cobras, which is also surrounded by thin white stripes of pearls.

The hair is black, thick and curly, dressed in spiral tufts from the beginning of her forehead till her back and shoulders, leaving a small part of her ear exposed. She has wide almond eyes with thick eyebrows colored in light brown (hazel). The nose seems long and big, the mouth is small with embraced lips.

On the top of the proper right side of the lady, there is a small part of headdress of god who is complaining this lady; this headdress looks like a part of the horizontal ram horns. Below, there is something unknown clearly. Also there is "Nimbus" (?) with three or four rays end by sharp edges. The rest of scene is totally destroyed.

Interpretation and Analysis:-

This scene represents some kind of Egyptian religious themes merged with Greek influences in so called "Graeco-Egyptian syncretism phenomenon". The Journal d'entrée of Cairo Museum informed us that this scene represents a bust of goddess Isis beside the Apollon, While **Klaus Parlasca** thought this iconography could be represents two busts of Isis and Serapis together in artistic remarkable².

We cannot be certainly sure that this iconography could be identified as Isis associated with (Apollon or Serapis?) particularly, in particular the lack of details which we can obtain it from this panel for finding a good interpretation for this object, we can suggest some questions: **Who is represented on this panel exactly? What does it indicate to? What is the main purpose of it?** To answer these questions, we should know well the main cults which spread and worshiped in Fayoum Region during Ptolemaic and Roman period.

Sobek was the main local god of Fayoum Region from pharaonic times till the Graeco-Roman periods. Fayoum's sacred lack was particularly associated to him. He is described in ancient texts as "the Lord of Shedet and the sacred lack", moreover that Sobek is knew as "the one who is raised out the primeval water, the lord of floating islands ... the lord of the Nile" and he was worshiped as a symbol of fertility and prosperity³.

The Greeks, who inhabited in Fayoum during Ptolemaic and Roman period continued to venerate him and call him with "Sochous" or "Suchos". They established a small town in Fayoum Region; it was called "Crocodilopolis" in the honor of him⁴. The inhabitants worshiped Sobek in different forms in Fayoum Region such as Petesuchos, Pnepheros, and Soxis in Karanis, Soknobkonneus and Soknobraisis in Bakhias, Sokonopis in Madinet Madi, and Soknebtynis in Tebtynis. Sobek "Souchos"⁵.

The "book of Fayoum" is dated back to Ptolemaic period illustrated to us the religious relationship between Sobek and Re in Fayoum Region. The religious spell in book of Fayoum mentioned that Sobek in Fayoum was embodied in the form of the crocodile at the night and

2 - Parlasca 2004, p.329.

3 - Pinch 2002, p. 200 -201.

4 - Hart 2005, p. 148.

5 - Helck 1984, p.1014.

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swimming in the water till the morning, thus he floated on the water surface, as a personification of the renewing the sun at each morning. Hence Sobek was known in Fayoum as Sobek-Re, the god of fertility and held the title "Sobek-Re, the lord of Shedet"⁶.

During Ptolemaic and Roman period, Horus was occupied the religious role of Sobek in Fayoum and held the title "Horus-Sobek, who established Shedet Region and who lives in it forever"⁷.

As a result of the association between Sobek and the Pharaonic king Amenhamt III in Fayoum since the Middle Kingdom, the god Sobek was associated with the god Horus the elder, therefore each of Sobek and Horus were merged and worshiped together in one form at Fayoum⁸.

In addition to this, Sobek was the counterpart of Osiris. The texts in Dendarh mention that Osiris was worshiped under the name of Sobek in everywhere, particularly, in Shedet Region where they were worshiped together under the name "Sobek-Re-Osiris ... the lord of Shedet"⁹. It perhaps explains to us that why Sobek is wearing the Atef crown, the crown of Osiris¹⁰. The cult of Sobek-Re in Tebtynis also associated with the Geb/ Kronos, and held the title "Sobek-Re-Geb / Kronos, the lord of Tebtynis (Shedet)"¹¹.

Beside the Cult of Sobek-Re, the cult of Hathor speared and was very popular in Fayoum during the Ptolemaic and Roman period¹². According to the Egyptian myths, Hathor was considering as the consort of Sobek with their son Khonsu in Shedet and Kom Ombo¹³. The spells of the Book of Fayoum mention that Hathor took the title "Hathor, the mistress of Shedet, the consort of Sobek"¹⁴.

We can find in Kom Ombo temple an inscription is dated back to Graeco-Roman period refers to Hathor as legitimacy wife of Sobek, the Local god in Shedet, and she took the title "Hathor, the mistress of Shedet, the wife of Sobek"¹⁵.

Although the lack of details which we can obtain them from our object, we can recognize some features and attributes in order to identify the figure which is represented on this panel. If we look accurately over the top of lady's head, we will find a style of crown composed of ostrich feathers above solar disk flanked by two cobras. These features might be belonging to Isis or Hathor.

As we know, Isis was represented from the beginning of Eighteen Dynasty and later in the late period till the Graeco-Roman period as a woman with cow horns and solar disk in between which appropriated it from Hathor¹⁶.

6 - Beinlich 1991, p.219.

7- Zecchi 2010, p. 153.

8 - Helck 1984, p. 1015.

9 - Wiedemann 1897, p. 143.

10 - Helck, 1984, p. 1013.

11 - Ronchi 1974, p. 998.

12 - Zecchi 2001, p. 80.

13- Hart2005, p.148.

14- Beinlich 1991, p. 161.

15- Zecchi2001,p. 81.

16 - Wilkinson 2003, p. 148.

Some scholars have gone to recognize and identify the iconography of our object as a representation of Isis due to the existence of the solar disk and the cow horns without checking or making an accurate verification by using the comparisons methods with other examples, therefore this view could not be accurate enough.

We have a possibility to compare our panel with the remarkable wooden panel, which is preserved now in J. Paul Getty Museum (74.AP.22) (**Fig.3**)¹⁷. This panel represents a bust of Isis wears her special crown "Basileion", which composed of the solar disk surrounded by two cow horns on her head.

Based on this simple comparison we cannot assert enough that this iconography represents Isis particularly, in the shadow of absent of the Isiac knot. The appearance of ostrich feathers above the sun disk on our panel could be implied that is Hathoric crown which is slightly different from the "Basileion".

Hathor is represented in this form on her temple at Dendarh (**Fig.4**), which probably means the iconography of Cairo panel (JE. 38250) might represent the goddess Hathor more than Isis depending on this comparison.

If there was a possibility that this unique iconography could represent a bust of Hathor, the question that still remains in our mind now is: **Who is this figure could be depicted beside Hathor?**

There are only three visible elements on the proper right side of the scene, the small part of horizontal ram horn (?), something obscures, and four rays with sharp edges. These elements could be useful to attempt the identification of this figure.

We can rely on three significant examples for the comparison and analyzing, firstly, the panel of Graeco-Roman Museum in **Alexandria (Inv. 22978)**, which was excavated inside the courtyard (Temenos) of Soknebtynis in Tebtynis¹⁸. The second example is the panel of Berlin is kept now in **Staatliche Ägyptisches Museum (inv.15978)**, perhaps the provenance is Tebtynis¹⁹. The last example is the panel of **Moscow Museum (inv.6134)** probably came from Tebtynis as well²⁰.

1- The panel of Alexandria (Inv.22978) (fig.5):

Current location: Graeco-Roman Museum

Provenance: Fayoum

On this panel Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis) appears with the god Min, while Soknebtynis sitting on the thorn in the left side, wearing green Chiton under long Himation covers the left shoulder. The head of god is turned slightly to the left, the head is surrounded by so called "nimbus" with sharp rays, but rays slightly disappeared. The god wears a crown with two thin horizontal ram horns with oval solar disk in the middle²¹.

17 - Thompson 1982, p. 46.

18 - This object kept before in the Cairo Egyptian museum and carried the registration number (JE.55961 and after that moved to the Graeco Roman Museum at 1931 and took the inventory number (inv.22978).

19- This panel was discovered by the German mission of Berlin Museum in 1902.

20 - Rondot 2013, p. 159.

21- Rondot 2013, p. 75 -80.

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2- The panel of Berlin (Inv.15978) (fig.6):

Current location: Neues Ägyptischer Museum, Berlin

Provenance: Fayoum

The scene which is depicted on this panel represents Soknebtynis (the local god of Tebtynis) with the god Amon, setting together on one throne. The upper part of this throne is decorated by cobras and carrying the solar disk upon the head. Soknebtynis sitting on the left side, wearing a green Chiton under long Himation covers the left shoulder while the other shoulder seems naked. The head of god is turned slightly to the left, the head is surrounded by "nimbus" with sharp rays, and he also is wearing a crown with two thin horizontal ram horns with solar disk in the middle²².

3- The panel of Moscow (Inv.6134) (fig.7):

Moscow museum of the art

Provenance: Fayoum

On this panel, Sobek-Re depicted face to face with the Pharaonic King Amenhat III "Pramarres". On the right side of the panel, Sobek-Re appears sitting on the throne looking for the left side and wearing Chiton under long Himation painted in white. Sobek-Re is represented as human with a head of crocodile in three-quarter position. The face and the mouth are shown in profile position. The neck and mouth are identified by the black colour. The lower part of the mouth is painted in red. There are some remains of a wig in Egyptian style, painted in golden colour, oblique to brown on the head of Sobek. The solar disk took place upon the wig in an oval form flanked by two cobras. The head is surrounded by "nimbus" with six rays, three of them moving to left and the other moving to the right²³.

We can find some similarities between Cairo museum's panel and the previous parallel examples could be summarized as following:

- 1- The existence of ram horns in Cairo Museum's Panel as is the same case in **Alexandria (22978)** and in **Berlin (15978)** on the head of Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis).
- 2- The manifestation of "Nimbus" with sharp rays that surrounds the head of god in all panels **Alexandria (22978)**, **Berlin (15978)** and **Moscow (6134)** obvious; even it disappears slightly in our panel.
- 3- The domination of the Hellenistic style on all these panels under the comparison.

We can say throughout this simple comparison that the god who is depicted beside Hathor could be Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis). It seems the artistic taste in Fayoum during Roman period going to put "Nimbus", surrounded the head of main god of region in order to indicate the importance of his cult.

The terracotta plaque is preserved in Berlin (**inv. 10314**) proves this evidence which represents a bust of young man might be Sobek-Re(Soknebtynis) wears a long Himation covers almost of the

22- Rondot 2013, p.122-123.

23 - Rondot 2013, p. 166-167.

body, he wears Atef crown while his head is surrounded by nimbus with sharp rays as we see in the Cairo museum's panel.(fig.8)²⁴.

A broken part of Terracotta plaque is preserved in Cairo Egyptian Museum (CG.26902), dated back to the 2nd century, probably from Fayoum Region is a parallel example to the previous one attests the same artistic taste in portrayal of Soknebtynis, wears Atef crown, and his head is surrounded by Nimbus with sharp rays (Fig.9)²⁵.

The major images of the main god Sobek-Re in this form were designated in his temple as Sobek-Re-Geb the lord of Tebtynis and the father of all gods. During Ptolemaic and Roman period and it is through the mechanism of this Greek syncretism Sobek-Re qualified with the Greek god Koronos. The Greek papyri from second century A. D which was discovered in the great temple of Tebtynis mentions the name of Sobek-Re in the Greek term "Soknebtynis"²⁶.

Dating:-

A remarkable wooden panel at Cairo Egyptian Museum (JE.31568), from Tebtynis, dated back to the end of the 2nd century A.D, is considered a good example for a comparison in order to find an accurate date for it. This panel depicts a little child (Dionysios – Harpokraties) half naked, leaning on the tree beside a dog, crowned by a floral crown around the head, holding grapes in his proper left hand and refers by his finger beside his mouth (fig.10)²⁷.

As it seems to us, the same Hellenistic art attributes context appeared again in our panel (JE.38250). It could be very similar and parallel to the artistic attributes of the Cairo Egyptian panel (JE.31568). In addition to this, two panels came from one provenance and were excavated from same temple which means they have the same archaeological context. Accordingly, our unique wooden panel (JE.38250) might be dated back to the end of 2nd century.

Conclusion:-

This unique wooden panel is considered as a great significance object, regarding the Graeco-Egyptian syncretism phenomenon. We can say that this panel could represent a bust of goddess Hathor more than Isis, depending on the importance of Hathor's cult in Tebtynis. As a result of the comparison between the Panel of Cairo Museum and other parallel panels from same provenance, we can say that this hidden figure beside Hathor could be interpreted as a Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis), the main god of Fayoum Region.

Moreover that, the artistic style and Hellenistic taste which depicting in our panel could be compared it with the similar and parallel Hellenistic panels from Fayoum particularly, Cairo Egyptian museum panel (JE.31568) could prompt us to say that our panel might be dated back to the end of 2nd century A.D.

24 - Rondot 2015, p. 148.

25 - Journal d'entée of Cairo Egyptian Museum informed us that this terracotta figurine represented Heliios, while the recent studies prove that this is a representation of Sobek Re (Soknebtynis)

Rondot 2015, p. 148 -149.

26 - Rübsam 1974, p. 181.

27 - Török, L. 2005, p.196.

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These types of panels maybe equally come from the context of a temple; so we can assume that the main purpose of our parallel panel is that could be used as a votive panel on the honor of god Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis) in his main temple in Tebtynis.

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(Fig.1)



Map of Fayoum during Ptolemaic and Roman period

<http://www.athenapub.com/aria-Map-Fayoum2.htm>, 1st of September 2016, 12:20 pm

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(Fig.2, a)



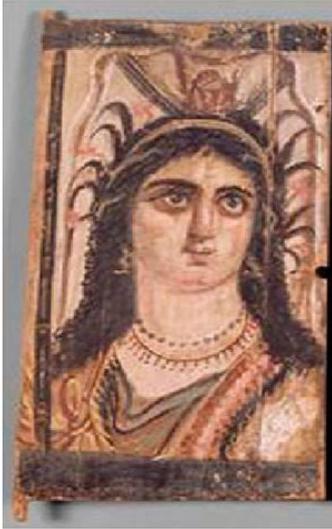
(Fig.2, b)



The wooden painted panel represented a bust of a lady, Fayoum provenance, Cairo Egyptian museum (JE.38250).

A Facsimile of the painted wooden panel represented of a bust of a lady. Facsimile by Mohamed Ibrahim

(Fig.3)



Wooden panel represented a bust of Isis,
J. Paul Getty Museum.

Biblio:- Thompson 1982, P.24, Fig.43

(Fig.4)



A relief from Dendera Temple represented Hathor wearing a Hathoric crown, composed of a solar disk between two cow horns above ostrich feathers. www.athenapub.com/aria-PE-Dendera3.htm, 3rd of September 2016, 11:15 pm.

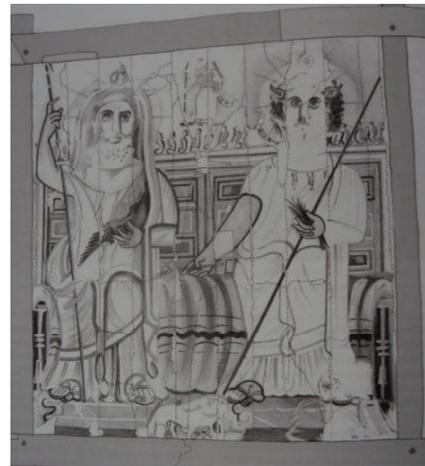
(Fig.5)



A wooden panel represented Sobek Re (Soknebtynis) wearing a horizontal ram's horns upon his head, from Fayoum, Graeco Roman Museum (Inv. 22978).

Biblio:- Rondot 2013, P.77

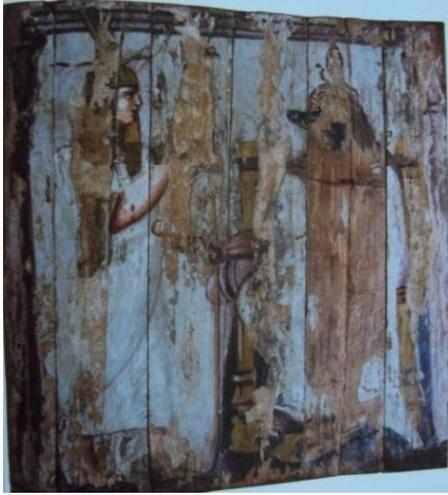
(Fig.6)



Unique wooden panel represented Sobek-Re (Soknebtynis) beside Amun Re, wearing a solar disk upon his head, surrounded by a nimbus with rays, Fayoum, Staatliche Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin (Inv.15978) Biblio:- Rondot 2013, P.244

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(Fig.7)



A wooden painted panel represented Sobek Re with crocodile-headed, sitting in front of Amenhat III, wearing a solar disk upon his head, surrounded by Nimbus with rays, from Fayoum, Moscow Museum (Inv.6134) Biblio:- Rondot 2013, P.169

(Fig.8)



Terracotta plaque represented a bust of Soknebtynis, wearing Atef crown, His head surrounded by Nimbus with six rays, three in the right and three in the left, Staatliche Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin, (inv. 10314) Biblio:- Rondot 2015, P.159, Plate2:(d)

(Fig.9)



A part of Terracotta plaque represented the god Soknebtynis, wearing Atef crown, and his head surrounded by Nimbus with sharp rays Cairo Egyptian Museum (CG.26902).

(Fig.10)



A wooden painted panel represented Harpokrates –Dionysos leaning on the tree, holding the grapes in his left hand, and referring his finger to his mouth, from Fayoum, Cairo Egyptian Museum (JE.31568). Biblio:- Rondot 2013, P.86.