



(photo by DE)

GR- is a head from the top of a marble statue. It depicts a bearded male with a band in his curly hair. It is probably a god, and possibly Serapis. It is 30 cm high, and seems to be part of the Wellcome Loan (although there is a question mark on the record). It is kept in the Keir Hardie storeroom.

Focus on this object provides an opportunity to discuss the classical antiquities in the Egypt Centre, the cultural crossovers of the Graeco-Roman period, and in particular, the cult of Serapis.

[Classical Antiquities in the Egypt Centre](#)

Before the Wellcome Loan came to Swansea University in 1971, there was a small teaching collection of classical antiquities in the Department of Classics and Ancient History. This was set up under George Kerferd, a previous head of department. According to Griffiths (2000: 6), he acquired Greek and Roman antiquities through London art shops, primarily examples of Greek vase painting, and some statues (most probably casts). These were originally displayed in the foyer of the University Library. This small collection was subsequently subsumed into the Wellcome Museum, and the Wellcome Loan itself included some classical pieces. And indeed, many of the Egyptian artefacts date from the Graeco-Roman period. Furthermore, Swansea Museum also loaned a number of classical objects to the new Wellcome Museum (Gill & Gee, 1996: 257). In the accompanying list of classical antiquities, Gill & Gee only note one piece of sculpture, the marble head under discussion here, which is no. 1 on the list:

'1. WM GR-.¹ Marble head. Bearded figure, perhaps of god. Band in hair. H.0.30.² (PLATE IIa)'

And indeed, it is pictured on Plate II, described as 'Marble head of god'. We note however that no provenance is given, whereas other artefacts in the list of 86 items frequently state that they are from the Wellcome collection, on loan from Swansea Museum, or purchased by the department (i.e. part of Kerferd's teaching collection). The other items on the list come under pottery (nos. 2-36), lamps (nos. 37-38), terracottas (nos. 39-78), glass (no.79), inscriptions (nos. 80-84), jewellery (no. 85) and coins (no. 86). Some listed items are on display at the Egypt Centre today: the funerary stela of Arisa (GR90) and the three mummy labels (W540, W549, W550). The majority of items are in store, as they are not directly linked to Egypt.

Egypt in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (or Graeco-Roman Period)

Alexander the Great defeated the Persian occupiers of Egypt and conquered the country in 332 BC; he founded the city of Alexandria, and after his death in 323 BC, his immediate heirs were in power for a short period. One of Alexander's generals, Ptolemy, became pharaoh in 305 BC, the start of a dynasty. The last ruler of the dynasty was Cleopatra VII. The Greek pharaohs had much respect for Egyptian culture and religion, acknowledging gods and building temples to them, although Alexandria was very much a separate, Hellenistic centre. Greek was the language of empire, but important documents and decrees were often written in Egyptian scripts as well as Greek (such as the Rosetta Stone).

Egypt became part of the Roman Empire after the death of Cleopatra VII in 30 BC. Following the assassination of Julius Caesar, Mark Antony had been ruling over the Eastern Roman Empire, and Octavian over the western half. Antony began to collaborate closely with Cleopatra, and in 31 BC, with the support of the Italian communities, Octavian defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the naval battle of Actium. He conquered Egypt in 30 BC, and Antony and Cleopatra committed suicide. Cleopatra's heir, Caesarion (her son by Julius Caesar) only outlived his mother by a few months. He was declared pharaoh by his supporters but was soon killed on Octavian's orders. Octavian became Emperor Augustus in 27 BC. The Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt with their long dynastic history became the Roman province of Aegyptus. However, it did have special status as the Emperor's private domain, and the Romans retained the bureaucratic system set up by the Ptolemies. Hence, in contrast to the western empire, the language of the ruling class continued to be Greek rather than Latin. In the fourth and fifth centuries CE, the western empire fell into decline. Rome was sacked by the Visigoths in 410. The eastern, or Byzantine, empire was ruled from Constantinople until 1453. But Egypt had already been lost to Arab conquests from 639-642 CE.

¹ WM = Wellcome Museum. GR is the code given to most of the items on the list, usually followed by a number. However, a few artefacts have a dash and no number: apart from ours (no.1 on list), nos 13, 21-24, 36, 54, 80, 85 & 86 have no number (for unknown reasons). GR is a code still used in the EC online catalogue, up to number 125. A search for 'Graeco-Roman period' will come up with 173 items on the database, many of which also appear in a search for 'Roman period', giving 185 items; 'Ptolemaic period' lists 52 items.

² H = height in cms.

The Graeco-Roman Period is a term which covers both the Ptolemaic Period (332-32 BCE) and the period of Roman influence before the decline of the western Roman Empire (30 BCE-395 CE). It is used as it is often difficult to distinguish between artefacts from the 2 sub-periods, as the style was very similar, and the Greek influence very strong throughout.

However, the influence went both ways: the Greeks and Romans in Egypt adopted Egyptian customs and culture, particularly in the domain of religious and funerary practice. Mummification was practised throughout the period, and indeed, was most widespread at this time. However, some believe that the emphasis was more on social standing than religious belief. The bandaging became more elaborate, and gilded cartonnage was frequently used to cover the head and body. We have various cartonnage masks in the collection, including W917-920, and body coverings such as W894. Later, Romans replaced masks with panel portraits of the deceased (such as W646). However, the mummification process itself was poor, so preservation was not good. Furthermore, many animal mummies of the period have been found in recent scanning programmes to contain little, if any, of the animal they depict.³

In the Egypt Centre, the baby crocodile (W985) has elaborate geometric bandaging, but the animal inside is far smaller than one would guess from the outside. Our mummy foetus (W1013) takes up a very small part of the case in which it is enclosed; and the hieroglyphs make no sense (another indication that appearances were more important than genuine prayers and spells; also at this time, there were fewer scribes who could write hieroglyphs⁴). On Tashay's shroud (W651)⁵, a Roman-looking lady faces forward, being led through mummification and to the afterlife by Egyptian gods in profile, accompanied by 'hieroglyphs' which are for the most part, nothing more than squiggles.⁶

In addition, characteristics of Egyptian gods were subsumed into the Greek and Roman pantheons: Horus was linked to Apollo and Harpocrates, Seth to Typhon, and Amun to Zeus for example. Many amulets, spells and curses from the period combine appeals to Egyptian, Greek and Roman gods, or use a mixture of symbols and scripts from the three cultures.

The Cult of Serapis

Perhaps the best illustration of this syncretism (merging of religions)⁷ is the establishment of the cult of Serapis, apparently by Ptolemy I in the third century BCE, in an attempt to unify Greeks and Egyptians in his kingdom; or alternatively, in an attempt to associate the royal family with the gods, showing it had both Greek and Egyptian ancestry. Serapis was depicted as a bearded Greek male, resembling Zeus, with curly hair, sometimes crowned with a grain basket (a modius). He had qualities taken from both Greek and Egyptian deities. He derived principally from the Egyptian god Osirapis, who designated the deceased Apis bull joined with Osiris, god of the afterlife. He also shared features with Greek deities, in particular Zeus, Pluto, and Dionysus. The cult was deliberately spread and encouraged by the Ptolemies, and his popularity increased during the Roman period, surviving until the suppression of paganism under Emperor Theodosius I in 391CE.

Acceptance by the Egyptians was helped by the name of the new god, with '-apis' as part of the name, and Serapis gradually came to almost completely replace Osiris. The two were seen to be interchangeable, both linked to funerary roles and to fertility. And, just as the earlier pharaohs identified with Osiris, the Ptolemies closely associated themselves with the Serapis cult. Furthermore, Isis was depicted as the wife of Serapis. In the Egypt Centre, we have on display a stela of two entwined uraeus snakes which represent Isis and Serapis (W56):

³ From a theological point of view, this lack of animal substance may not have mattered greatly.

⁴ Although false hieroglyphs are noted as early as the New Kingdom.

⁵ This period marks the first time bodies were encased in large pieces of linen (ie shrouds) rather than being bandaged.

⁶ Although some are translatable.

⁷ For more on syncretism, see Engel (2018).



(photo by DE)

The temple precincts of Serapis were known as a Serapeum, such as the one built at Alexandria by Ptolemy III. The Alexandrian Serapeum included a library, and shrines to Isis and Anubis. The term was also used by the Greeks to describe the ancient underground burial galleries at Saqqara, near Memphis, where the sacred Apis bulls had been buried for fifteen hundred years. It was discovered in 1851 by the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette . The cults of Serapis at Alexandria and Memphis diverged somewhat. At Memphis, Serapis was still closely linked to funerary roles alongside Osiris and Apis, whereas in Alexandria, his link to the royal family of Greek Ptolemies was emphasised.

One of the earliest Greek magical papyri was found in the main temple of Oserapis in the Serapeum at Memphis. In it, a mother prays for justice for her daughter's deprivation of burial by her father, and curses him:

O master Oserapis and gods sitting with Oserapis, I, Artemisie here, the daughter of Amasis, pray to you, against the father of my daughter, because he deprived her of her funeral gifts and tomb....may Oserapis and the gods grant that he should receive no tomb from his children...may he be destroyed miserably on land and sea...by Oserapis and the gods that sit in attendance on him, and may he not find Oserapis propitious...'⁸

Conclusion

Our marble head bears a close resemblance to other attested heads of Serapis in many museums, as depicted in books and online.⁹ And just as Serapis bridged the cultural ties between Egypt and Greece, and then Rome, the development of our museum at Swansea University moved, like the Classics department, from Greece and Rome to embrace Egypt. As the Egypt Centre celebrates its 20th anniversary in 2018, we must not forget its Classical origins, nor the cross-cultural links between these three centres of early civilisation which have shaped our own culture in so many ways.

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⁸ Quoted in Ogden, 2009: 221-222

⁹ For example as seen in Shaw (2000: 439), and online examples from: Ashmolean Museum, British Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Liverpool World Museum, Louvre Museum, Metropolitan Museum , Walters Art Museum, etc...

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