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Article in *Journal of Coptic Studies* · January 2012

DOI: 10.2143/JCS.14.0.2184691

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FRAGMENTS OF A RELIEF FROM OXYRHYNCHUS: ELEMENTS OF LATE ROMAN-COPTIC ICONOGRAPHY AND STYLES

BY EVA SUBÍAS PASCUAL

Background

Some small fragments of sculpture were discovered in 2007¹ during excavations in the Byzantine fortress of Oxyrhynchus. Due to their similarity to other Middle Egyptian reliefs from the late Roman and early Byzantine period, they were very probably from a funerary relief. In this article, we examine these fragments and compare them with other reliefs from the region, and consider some iconographic and stylistic issues that transcend the discovery itself.

The fragments appeared to be discarded materials, and were found in a layer of filling which contained ceramic materials roughly datable to between the fifth and sixth century.² The function of the layer that concerns us here was to fill a room on the ground floor of a house/tower (*pyrgos*) on the north-western outskirts of the city of Oxyrhynchus. The house was very near one corner of the Byzantine fortress, and was virtually adjacent to a tower reinforcing the perimeter wall of the large rural area. It was therefore situated outside the *oikos* but closely related to it, as the house/tower and the plot of agricultural land associated with it had been untouched during the design of the grounds of the fortress. However, the small property adjacent to the larger area was no doubt unable to survive next to a neighbour of that size, and during the fifth or sixth century it declined to the extent that only one of the spaces on the ground floor remained in use, for an uncertain period of time. When preparing for this period of use, its owners decided to fill in the service rooms in the western part of the building, and even walled up the staircase that had previously allowed access to upper floors.

¹ Subías, “La fortaleza” (forthcoming).

² The chronologies of the early Byzantine period in Egypt rely to a large extent on locally produced materials that currently lack chronological accuracy. However, the decline in imports of TSAD in the sixth century AD is important, because its absence may be significant from the chronological point of view.

During this filling process, debris and earth from demolition, probably from the surrounding area, were thrown into the rooms.³ Surprisingly, a small block decorated with a Nilotic scene of birds and fish was found in the debris, together with a series of disconnected fragments of sculpture, which come from a very large relief. The fragments contain human, animal and plant figures, and have been carefully separated from their original block, which may possibly have been ground to obtain a smooth block for construction. Under these circumstances, the relief's stratigraphy is of no use for dating the findings. However, it provides interesting information about the timeframe surrounding its production, as we shall see.

Finally, it is important to note that despite the amount of late Roman reliefs from this region, no archaeological survey that expands our knowledge of these unique productions from the artistic and architectural standpoint has yet taken place. We know nothing about where the positioning of the reliefs, of which there are two main varieties: those that are part of a baroque decoration for a niche, and those from horizontal friezes of various degree of size and importance. Traditionally, both types of relief have been interpreted as decoration from some kind of burial. However, there is not a single monument in Egypt dating from the period from which similar pieces have been preserved *in situ*, and indeed, very little is known about the funerary architecture of the late Roman period. The baroque decorations and the friezes may therefore come from other types of buildings.

What seems certain is that the baroque pediments are part of an architectural tradition which emphasizes an interior space with one or more niches for deposition. T. Thomas has suggested that the decorated pediments of Herakleopolis may possibly be finishings for *arcosolia*, and suggests that the underlying intention is to evoke a grotto-shrine or *speos*.⁴ Moreover, the Oxyrhynchus site provides confirmation that late Roman funerary architecture in Egypt consisted of complex spaces with an appearance that belied their function, unlike the mausoleums of the high imperial period. The publication containing F. Petrie's investigations at the Oxyrhynchus site shows several remains of tombs around the outskirts of the city. According to the author, some of these date from the late Roman period.⁵ These

³ It is impossible to state how high the tower was at this time with any certainty, because of the erosion of the surface layers of the ruins. In any event, the debris are not the result of the structure's demolition, but instead of a deliberate filling process that enabled its continued use in the ancient period.

⁴ Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, 16-19 and fig. 49.

⁵ Petrie, *The tombs of the Courtiers*, 16-19 and pl. XL-XLVII.

remains are very varied and some are highly reminiscent of the ground floor of the house/tower where the findings were discovered, and which must have been used for domestic purposes. Other buildings in the article which had apses and architectural decorative features led the author to believe that they were used as chapels or hermitages. It is therefore possible that the outskirts of the town contain a mixture of buildings dating from different periods that were used for different purposes. Unfortunately, these structures are no longer visible, and as such it is impossible to re-examine them and ascertain their function, and no new monuments have been found with architectural decoration *in situ* that could lead to progress in the discussion. However, hermitages with apses with a similar appearance have been found.

In short, the baroque-like pediments with figurative representations could come from architecture with various functions — mausoleums, houses or monastic cells. However, they have traditionally been thought to be solely for funerary purposes, and the suitability of the iconography of all the reliefs has immediately been considered in this context. In some cases, the meaning of the representations is clear, as in the case of the heroic nature of the deceased and the Old Testament images of salvation by faith, which are apparently much rarer.⁶ However, the best known and most plentiful works of this late Middle Egyptian art depict episodes from Greek mythology that are of interest due to the daring nature of some of the scenes, such as the seduction of Leda, and are also the source of some degree of perplexity due to their original orientaling style.⁷ Due to the necessary coexistence of the Christian and pagan communities, the images have been read in terms of their psychological and moral components, by virtue of which the subject matter puts the ascetic life to the test and extols it by doing so.⁸ The opportunity to reuse funerary monuments as cells for hermits possibly arose, but even if this was the case, the message from the mythological reliefs should not be seen from a strictly Christian and monastic perspective, except to highlight the coexistence of the traditions. An exegetical Christian perspective on the myth is not therefore applicable in this case, except in the light of the pagan theosophies of the late empire. From the iconographic point of view, in our opinion it is

⁶ For example, a baroque niche with Daniel in the lions' den, of unknown origin. Rassart-Debergh, *Antiquités*, 21, n° 5, E.8220.

⁷ Wessel, *L'art copte*, 231. The author finds elements of inspiration for some motifs in Asia Minor, and for others in India.

⁸ Wessel, *L'art copte*, 37. The author mentioned Daphne and Leda as images of temptation for anchorites in 1964.

most advisable to limit ourselves to the contemporary literary references for the mythological scenes.⁹

Be that as it may, the same kind of baroque pediment was used both to protect the loves of Zeus and to shelter a liturgical Christian image. For example, a currently inaccessible pediment in Oxyrhynchus included a representation of Christ holding a cross, and surrounded by animals such as dolphins and gazelles.¹⁰ Moreover, both the reliefs with mythological figuration and those from the Christian repertoire could be part of other architectural features, such as continuous friezes. Bearing this in mind, we should not be thinking in terms of an architectural setting for the fragments of the relief, which means that we can consider other functions as well as those of a funerary nature.

It also appears as yet impossible to establish a chronological sequence for either the architectural forms or the iconographic themes, as mythological and Christian themes apparently coexisted during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries. The truth is that a great deal of work remains to be done on the stylistic study of the late reliefs of Middle Egypt, and in the absence of further archaeological data, dating will continue to depend on an appreciation of the style. Our findings offer nothing new except for the unusual fact that they appeared in the stratigraphy rather than in the hands of a collector. This at least guarantees that the fragments originated in Oxyrhynchus and can be included in a stylistic discussion of workshops. However, the fragments studied, which are scarce and not connected, do not provide for a great deal of progress as regards a comprehensive iconographic reading. In fact, studying them provides a pretext for a rereading of some iconographic elements from the period.

Study of the fragments

For our study, we will consider the following fragments: a decorated block with a geometric border and a scene with a bird and two fish (Pl. 4, Fig. 1); a bearded head with the hairline on the forehead receding on two sides (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.1); another head, grimacing, with hair on the chin and

⁹ Cameron, "Poets and Pagans".

¹⁰ Several reliefs from this period are well-known due to publications dating from the early twentieth century, but access to them is difficult or they are even thought to be lost, as is the case with the pediment mentioned above, which is shown in fig. 84 of Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*. See also *Exposition d'art copte*, n° 168.

wearing a kind of diadem (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.2);¹¹ another similar head, viewed from the front, with a diadem and a circular object in the backplane (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.3); a beardless head with a three-quarter view and abundant hair (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.4); a hand with an open palm (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.5); a wing (probably of a cherub) (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.6); a bird (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.7); an ivy leaf (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.8) and a much smaller and more schematic head (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.9). There were some other fragments in very poor condition, including two scrolls that undoubtedly belonged to a foliate scroll from a very high relief, like the other fragments.

The first problem with these disconnected fragments is to determine whether they come from one or more reliefs or monuments. Indeed, at first glance one could argue that the features of the characters are based on different figurative languages. Of the four main faces, the one with a beard and receding hairline complies with one of the stereotypes of the wise man, while the other two characters with a type of diadem have expressions that might be described as satirical, as does the character in three-quarter view with short and voluminous hair. However, despite the differences in the physiognomic treatment and the iconographic models used, the type of carving is very similar. One only need look at the shape of the pupil in all the faces to see that they have been made using the same tool or punch, and that the tool has been used in the same way — turned to create a hollow conical shape. This technical detail is repeated in other reliefs in the series, including a relief reproduced below, of unknown origin (Pl. 6, Fig. 5).¹² This feature appears to be one of the parameters identifying a particular workshop, and thus suggests that the relief mentioned above can be attributed to Oxyrhynchus. However, the pupils in another group of figurative reliefs are deeper and more cylindrical, accentuating the chiaroscuro. Some have been attributed to Oxyrhynchus (Pl. 5, Fig. 4) but most appear to come from Herakleopolis.

Despite the differences in the pupils, it is interesting to note the similarity of some of the hairstyles, both male and female, in the reliefs in Pl. 5-6, Fig. 3-6. The hair appears to be gadrooned, as either a sort of *melon-frisur* or as a gathered braid. This is an obvious contrast with other groups, in which the hair is represented differently, either in a more

¹¹ The diadem has similarities with headresses of Aphrodite, Isis, Horus, or even Dionysus, but is difficult to be more precise about its sense. See for instance Rolley, “Nattes, rubans et pendeloques”.

¹² Coptic Museum 6471. It is recorded as without an origin in the catalogue of the Budapest Coptic collections. Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 101, n° 47, where it is dated to the mid-fourth century.

naturalistic way with movement in the locks, or in a more abstract manner as a rigid cap. It is also tempting to look for characteristics of the local workshop in this feature. However, no single style of hair matches one type of pupil.

Among the animal and plant figures in our finding, the cuts of the carving create facets with rough edges, which is another common feature. In addition, the style is *naïf*, and very similar to the treatment of the wise man's face. By contrast, in the satyrs' faces, the cut facets are more abrupt and the incisions are deeper, giving the relief greater strength and expressiveness. The same is true of the smallest fragment, which is a small head (Pl. 4, Fig. 2.9) only 4 cm high, and which has a very schematic carving because of its size. There are some interesting similarities in the treatment of this head with some wooden carvings from the same chronological period that were used for toys, and with grave goods.¹³

The head with short hair and well-faceted locks in Pl. 4, Fig. 2.4 also shows the influence of wood or ivory carving, and perhaps this exchange of techniques is not surprising considering that woodcarvers' workshops were producing the same iconographic repertoire.¹⁴ In fact, it is possible to find statues with the same plastic effect of schematic and abstract definition, and with even higher levels of work.¹⁵ That is why given the type of carving used, our interpretation of the expression in the fragment in Pl. 4, Fig. 2.4 as a satirical grimace is open to argument. Taken out of context, the slanted eyes of the character convey a sense of sarcasm that could suggest a satirical setting, but a very similar angel appears in an Oxyrhynchus relief depicting the martyrdom of Saint Thecla¹⁶ (Pl. 5, Fig. 3). The other possibility is that we have over-interpreted the figuration and that the message of the gesture should be analyzed in the context of martyrdom. There is no shortage of arguments to suggest that the smile is used to convey the joy of the martyr, or the just, like Thecla emerging

¹³ Faceted and stylized wooden statuettes like the fragment analyzed here can be seen in Torök, *After the Pharaohs*, 238, fig. 162.

¹⁴ Late Egyptian doors, often reused as sarcophagi, also contain mythological and early Christian repertoires. For an extraordinary example of the human figure in this medium, see the carvings in the church of al-Mo'allaga in Cairo, now in the Coptic Museum. See for example a detail in Török, *Transfigurations*, fig. 176.

¹⁵ Duthuit, *La sculpture copte*, pl. X, a male head with a long beard and tresses treated as thick folds.

¹⁶ The Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri n° 48.10. Cf. Davis, *The Cult*, 172-173, fig. 29. The relief comes from Oxyrhynchus and appears to date from between the fourth and fifth century AD, according to Weitzmann's assessment in the *Age of Spirituality*, 574-575, note 513.

victorious from the trial,¹⁷ but in any case, for the purposes of stylistic analysis, this seems to be a characteristic of the Oxyrhynchus workshop which would therefore call into question the satirical interpretation of Pl. 4, Fig. 2.4.¹⁸

Continuing with the technical perspective, it is interesting to consider the hairstyles of the other satyrs, which have highly schematic vertical locks, as if the aim was to depict the hair standing on end. This appearance of the satyrs is reminiscent of some terracotta theatrical masks.¹⁹ Furthermore, in a niche relief in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, perhaps from Herakleopolis, Pan has a similar hirsute hairstyle.²⁰ This simplified way of representing the hair is in contrast to the execution of the hair under the chin, which evokes the character's bestial nature, and is part of the traditional repertoire here carved using a somewhat more naturalistic working style.

As we shall see from the items compared, the fragments may have belonged to the same relief despite showing different types of faces separately. This disparity is not an obstacle because in the Roman and late Roman world, different languages could be included in the same relief if they were part of a complex representation from the point of view of the symbolism or the message. For example, this occurred when one of the characters in a relief was emphasized as a counterpoint to a group of figures belonging to a mythical or literary narrative. One need only recall the sarcophagi with mythological scenes which included a portrait of the deceased, or even the depiction of literary passages, such as the early Christian iconography referring to the Old Testament.

The craftsman's skill is apparent in the series analyzed here. He carved characters with different and even contradictory expressions, as on the one hand he conveys the dignity and wisdom of the philosopher, and on the other the brutality and ignorance of the satyrs. The other fragments of the relief — the bird, ivy and foliate scrolls — may be part of a bucolic landscape from a conventional mythological repertoire, as might the wings of the *erotes*. What is doubtful is that they were all part of the

¹⁷ For the religious significance of the smile, see Bowersock, "Les euemerioi", 1241-1256, citing Louis Robert.

¹⁸ Interestingly, other authors have mentioned a smile characteristic of productions from Oxyrhynchus (Török, *Transfigurations*, 207).

¹⁹ Several examples in the Louvre, such as the copy in the Campana Collection (1861) exhibited in Aile Sully Premier étage — Section 38.

²⁰ Inv. 7044. See Török, *Transfigurations*, fig. 23. Baroque niche with Maenad and Pan.

same relief. For this reason, the inclusion of the fragment of the hand may be vital in ascertaining the possibility of giving a sense of unity to all the elements in the relief.

Iconographic elements

The representation of the palm of the hand extended toward the viewer was a common sign of worship in Egypt, and was perpetuated as a sign of prayer in the Christian funerary repertoire, not only in the praying position, but also often depicted as a single hand.²¹ There are other options besides those above for contextualizing an open palm, such as the testimony of faith of the followers of a saint, as in an ivory pyx associated with St. Menas.²² In the set of fragments that analyzed here, the outstretched hand and philosopher's face could form a consistent association from the symbolic point of view. Indeed, the open palm also appears as a gesture of worship related to the apostles.²³ The same connection is apparent on a frieze from the monastery of Bawit, depicting St. Peter on a medallion.²⁴ Other cases include gestures of acclaim or glorification that are not strictly part of a devotional context, but instead fall within circus or agonistic situations, although they come from a later period and a context of a triumphant Christian church.²⁵

Taken together, the two motifs of the sage or philosopher and an open palm seem to suggest that the fragments analyzed come from a relief with Christian content. However, reconciling this meaning with the faces of the satyrs is problematic, and we will therefore consider other possibilities. In particular, it is possible to find open palms in the obviously pagan context of a Dionysian procession, in which the deity is presumably not invoked, but in which the open palm is instead one of the gestures made

²¹ A depiction, for example, of a deceased woman with her right palm open and an ank in the other. Shroud in the Musée de Louvre, AF 6640.

²² Piece in the British Museum in London, originating in Rome and dated to the sixth century. Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 40 and fig. 5.

²³ For example, Saint Peter, in a depiction of the apostle at the front of the nave of the Church, on a bronze lamp dating from the fourth century in the Florence Archaeological Museum. Seventh century ivory depicting St Mark (?) and followers (Musée de Louvre, accession n° OA3317).

²⁴ A sixth-century frieze from the Monastery of Bawit shows Saint Peter on a medallion (Coptic Museum, Cairo). Krauspe, *Das Ägyptische Museum*, Abteilung 103.

²⁵ For example, the acclamation of Helladia and the blue faction on an ivory comb from the late fifth/early sixth century. Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 222 and fig. 277. Ivory E 11874, Musée du Louvre.

by a procession of musicians.²⁶ Moreover, Ampelos in the midst of transfiguration raises the palm of his hand in a Roman sarcophagus dating from the Tetrarchy representing a Dionysiac procession.²⁷ The open palm therefore does not necessarily mean that a hypothesis of a Christian scene must be true, but is instead only significant in a context of religious devotion which also includes the Dionysiac scenes, particularly in a context of late Hellenism.²⁸

As noted previously, the clear face and short beard were often used to characterize the apostles. However, they also represent pagan deities such as Dionysus and Heracles, who become paradigms of spirituality and salvation by their deeds, efforts and immortal destiny. This is particularly true of Heracles, who may come to embody a god of eloquence.²⁹ This facet creates a mature image of the god-hero, with the cloak or gown of a philosopher, although it should be noted that his appearance mostly remained consistent with the version of the muscular, half-naked hero. In a mixture of both aspects, the muscular and half-naked Heracles may be shown with the appearance of the mature man, as in a relief in the Brooklyn Museum representing the exploits of Achelous, in which the hero has a thick moustache that would also suggest a philosopher. What is interesting about this parallel is that as in our fragments, the scene takes place in a context of very high relief scrolls that also come from an Oxyrhynchus workshop (Pl. 5, Fig. 4).³⁰

The face of Heracles often appears with signs of maturity in Dionysian scenes. If we remember that among the fragments there are two clearly satirical faces in the series analyzed here, it is possible to consider the hypothesis that the fragments belong to a scene like those that abound on Roman sarcophagi and in late Roman mosaics. In some cases, Heracles is part of the procession, mingling with other followers of Dionysus, but in others the two deities are placed on an equal footing, evoking the drinking contest or symposium. The comparison with drunkenness, which has a well-known eschatological meaning, extends to other venerable members of the procession, such as the old man Silenus and on some

²⁶ It is well-known in a fifth century Alexandrian ivory now preserved in the Cabinet des médailles in Paris, which was part of the treasure of the cathedral of Bourges. Beckwith, *Coptic sculpture*, fig. 38.

²⁷ Sarcophagus from Acqua Traversa. Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*, 341-343, and 565, pl. 61a.

²⁸ Without counting the frequency of the open palm in other contexts in the Middle or Far East, such as Parthian, Sassanid and Kushan art, in which it also proliferates.

²⁹ Favreau-Linder, "Lucien", 155-168, and 156 in particular.

³⁰ Collections Egyptian, Classical, Ancient Near Eastern Art Accession n° 61.128.

sarcophagi, it even suggests an identification of the deceased with these deities.³¹ According to J. Bayet, the allusion to the eternal — Dionysian and redeeming — sleep of Heracles, is often associated with the presence of centaurs and satyrs, and the God in these images is shown dressed in a cloak, as if it were a ritual prescription, according to the author.³²

As far as our fragments are concerned, the key question is the identification of the main character. If we rule out a Christological context due to the appearance of satyrs, Dionysus and Heracles are the obvious candidates, but not the only ones.

Dionysus and Heracles in late Middle Egypt

In the Egyptian reliefs from the same timeframe, the greatest iconographic similarity to the face of the wise man appears in the relief in the Coptic Museum in Cairo, which according to L. Török depicts the drunkenness of Heracles.³³ The drunken hero is depicted with a long dress because he has dressed up as Omphale in the presence of Dionysus as Apollo Lyceus³⁴ and a Bacchante. In that relief, the central character is presented from a frontal view, with the oval defined by the hairlines of the hair and beard (Pl. 6, Fig. 5). The scene is unusual, and unlike other examples of the drunken Heracles, particularly due to his female garb.³⁵ Heracles appears drunk on a number of sarcophagi, but usually retains his heroic iconographic attributes. However, the bibliography contains some identifications of the drunkard with a tunic as Heracles, despite the absence of some of his attributes.³⁶ At other times, it is a drunken Silenus or even Dionysus as an old man.³⁷

³¹ Bayet, "Hercule funéraire (pl. VII)", 219-266, and 260 in particular.

³² Bayet, "Hercule funéraire (suite et fin)", 25-26.

³³ Coptic Museum, Cairo (inv. 6471) of unknown origin. Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 101. According to the author, the scene also evokes the hero's relationship with Omphale. I thank the author permission to reproduce the image of his publication.

³⁴ This iconographic slip was well-known in late Egypt, as it is also present in another relief that may be from Oxyrhynchus. Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, 63, fig. 80.

³⁵ The drunken character in the relief in fig. 5 has not always been interpreted as Heracles, but instead as a companion of Dionysus. Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 157 and fig. 148.

³⁶ A sarcophagus from Naples in the National Museum shows the scene of drunkenness with a naked Heracles, with a wreath as a necklace, attended by satyrs.

³⁷ Another sarcophagus from the same National Museum, but related to the Secret Museum, shows a bearded man with a long tunic holding a crown, who has been identified as Dionysus himself. Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*, 385 and 392, pl. 6a.

The distinctly feminine garments of the central figure in this relief are so rare in depictions of Heracles that it would really be more appropriate to think in terms of a drunken Dionysus after his triumphant return from India. If it is Dionysus and not Heracles, the relief is using a narrative strategy based on the reiteration of the figure of the God in two different manifestations. It would not be the first time that Dionysus was broken down into various facets because as noted by R. Turcan, he is a *dimorphos* god who can appear as the oldest or the youngest, beardless or bearded, and male or female.³⁸ However, the identification of the Apollo Lyceus as Dionysus could also be reviewed: an alternative to this identification could be the character of Ampelos accompanying Dionysus in his drunkenness, as Nonnus of Panopolis makes a comparison between the beautiful boy with long hair and Apollo.³⁹ A possible alternative would therefore be the scene of the intoxication of Dionysus in the presence of the young Ampelos, in accordance with the more usual iconography. However, the Dionysian iconography is well-known as being full of slips, and unconventional readings should not be ruled out.

The decisive factor in the identification of the character in Pl. 6, Fig. 5 is the face of the sage, who under no circumstances appears to be Dionysus, while Heracles has a well-defined facet as an elder. Among the characters in the Dionysian procession, the bald man is generally considered to be the teacher, Silenus, but the female dress suggests that it is someone else. There may perhaps be another explanation for this image, which combines the face of the teacher with that of intoxication, which does not directly involve either Heracles or Dionysus: it is the representation of a decedent, as part of a process identifying the latter with Heracles, as noted in some Roman sarcophagi⁴⁰ and with Dionysus-Osiris in the Egyptian tradition. This would provide an explanation for the surprising fact that in this relief Dionysus-Apollo is half-naked whereas Heracles wears a cloak.

Heracles is depicted quite frequently in late Egyptian reliefs, sometimes as an isolated figure within a plant-scroll, either trapping the Ceryneian Hind, fighting the Nemean lion or in other motifs.⁴¹ In almost all

³⁸ See Turcan, "Dionysos Dimorphos", 276, for the form of the old man in particular.

³⁹ Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, X, 193.

⁴⁰ Dionysiac Triumph sarcophagus, at Woburn Abbey, according to Turcan, *Les sarcophages romains*, 470.

⁴¹ For the former case: Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, fig. 76. For the latter case, see the relief in the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (National Museum of Antiquities) in Leiden cited in Schneider, *Beelden van Behnasa*, 47, fig. 43 and in Thomas,

cases, the hero is depicted in the normal state of semi-nudity. This is also the case in another relief that is possibly from Oxyrhynchus, despite its complex message about the hero's life: Heracles, with his lion's skin hanging from his arm, is depicted between two victories holding a wreath and a crown.⁴² He is the crowned hero in apotheosis, although the supposed victories are best understood as cherubs. Indeed, there are very few representations of Heracles as a philosopher, despite the Cynic school's emphasis of the virtues of the hero and/or god at a very early stage. This is a formula that is found in only a few reliefs from classical Egypt, which invites scepticism.⁴³ However, there is another relief in the Coptic Museum, which according to the editor provides at least two versions of Heracles: Heracles dressed in a short tunic and Phrygian cap hunting the Ceryneian Hind in one scene, and naked in an offensive pose with a club in another.⁴⁴ In this case, given the context of the Herculean labours, the identification is certain regardless of the garments worn.

Moreover, in another relief from the region, Dionysus and Hercules apparently appear once again, surrounded by volutes: the naked god next to the vine, and the hero as a philosopher or a patriarchal divinity, with a cup extended as a sign of offering (Pl. 7, Fig. 7a).⁴⁵ However, the identification of the divinity with the cup as Heracles is not obvious, especially when another fragment, which could have belonged to the same relief, clearly depicts Heracles, wearing the philosopher's mantle, but wielding the club (Pl. 7, Fig. 7b).⁴⁶ Either Heracles is repeated or at least three divinities appear in this continuous frieze, which suggests that the intention was to establish some sort of comparison between them. If it is not Dionysus once again, the third figure may represent Zeus-Serapis. Its visual contrast, in a strategy of reiteration, has an instructive function that we usually find in early Christian art and which is not often found in mythological representations. That is why I believe that what essentially predominates above all

Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture, fig. 77. There are other reliefs in Zaloscer, *Die Kunst*, fig. 53 and 54.

⁴² Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, fig. 78. Török, *Transfigurations*, 191-192.

⁴³ Subías, "Héraclès et Asclépios".

⁴⁴ Zaloscer, *Die Kunst*, 120-121 and the original article by Zaloscer, "Une scène de chasse", 145-163.

⁴⁵ Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, 62 and 122 note 13, fig. 75. The figure on the left, "drinking bowl in hand" has a robe and beard, and on the right is Dionysus as Apollo Lyceus. Coptic Museum ME. 11.9. 21.22 according to the reference given by Thomas.

⁴⁶ Duthuit, *La sculpture copte*, 43 and pl. 24 b. The author identifies Heracles by the presence of the club.

else is the eschatological meaning, which can blur the boundaries between gods that are used as models for the deification of the deceased.⁴⁷

The significance of this association, which dates back to the syncretic processes of the Hellenistic period, could also be seen in cosmological terms, as suggested by T. Thomas,⁴⁸ following H. Zaloscer, for whom the selection of the episodes of the fight with the Nemean lion and hunting the Ceryneian Hind are a metaphor for the sun and the moon.⁴⁹ Moreover, the author compared the relief in Pl. 7, Fig. 7 with Christian and Buddhist iconography to base his arguments on the juxtaposed layout of the scenes adapted to spiritual education.⁵⁰ There are in fact some images of Heracles that come from Greco-Buddhist art which are part of the assimilation of Heracles as Buddha's Vajrapani, which would justify his appearance as a philosopher.⁵¹ From the Greek perspective, the key fact for a Buddhist reinterpretation is that Heracles, according to Apollodorus (*Bibl.* II, 7.7), undergoes an apotheosis amid thunder and lightning,⁵² and the main attribute of Vajrapani is indeed lightning. Nonnus reworks this aspect of Heracles by calling him *astrochiton*, god of fire and founder of Tyre (*Diony.* XL, 367-423).⁵³

Elsewhere, Turcan has emphasized the neo-Platonic background of the divine hypostases of Dionysus as an expression of a creative *Logos*.⁵⁴ Everything seems to suggest that Heracles experiences a similar process of deconstruction, which is particularly noticeable in the East, from the Middle East to India. The Dionysus-Heracles reunion is not limited to a comparison of their most transgressive aspects, their experiences of violence, their knowledge of the underworld, and even the fact that they both dressed up as women. Dionysus and Heracles are itinerant hero-gods, who journey to the ends of the world, from Gades to India, and gain knowledge by experience. Dionysus and Heracles become the bridge between cultural and geographical regions, and even between states of knowledge in an era — late antiquity — that was defined by a profound intellectual and spiritual curiosity.

⁴⁷ On the mixtures between Serapis-Asclepius-Dionysus and Heracles. According to Bayet ("Un nouvel Hercule funéraire", 15-20), it is a "divinisation diffuse".

⁴⁸ Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, 49.

⁴⁹ Zaloscer, *Die Kunst*, 151.

⁵⁰ Zaloscer, *Die Kunst*, 148-149.

⁵¹ Rowland, "Gandhara", 445-448. The author identifies an iconographic form of Buddha as a philosopher.

⁵² Van Liefferinge, "L'immortalisation", 107.

⁵³ Détienne, "Héraclès: héros pythagoricien", 31.

⁵⁴ Turcan, "Dionysos Dimorphos", 285.

Other considerations

The series of mythological reliefs from Middle Egypt are part of the exceptional iconographic repertoire produced in the late Roman era between the late third century and fifth century AD. This repertoire includes scenes mainly involving Dionysus and Heracles as male protagonists, and is often based on classical compositions dating back to Greek art. Nevertheless, they also include other mythological figures that often evoke the afterlife, such as Orpheus, or evoke prosperity, such as the god Nilus. However, of particular interest in this group of pagan representations is the reference to female deities such as Daphne and Leda, as well as Ge, Aphrodite and even dancers that may be associated with religious holidays due to the crotals and pendants, as well as a wide variety of Nereids.⁵⁵ It is these female divinities that distinguish the group of reliefs from other iconographic repertoires from the eastern Mediterranean.

They also suggest that parallels and artistic influences should be sought in other regions of the late classical Eastern world, where images of strong female sensuality also proliferated. A very significant link with the Middle East and Asia can be seen in the depictions of dancers grasping the inflated veil on their heads in both the palatial context of Sassanid culture and images of the “celestial nymphs” of Brahmanism.⁵⁶ In some cases this is a hedonistic reference, while in others it is an evocation of a life of plenitude accompanying the divinity. Finally, in classical culture in Egypt, it is the ecstatic dance of the Dionysian procession. The images of Daphne metamorphosed into a laurel, also common in this series of mythological reliefs,⁵⁷ have some similarities with deities of Brahmanism, by being depicted as grasping the ends of the foliage with their hands.⁵⁸ In this case, there are even greater grounds for the comparison with India, as Daphne conveys a metaphor for the metamorphosis of the deceased, who becomes a divinity.

⁵⁵ For an example of a dancer, see the relief Duthuit, *La sculpture copte*, pl. XVIIb. The author describes it as “bacchante aux jambes croisées”. As an example of Nereids, see the relief from Trieste, XXXII plate. They all have a *bullā* around their neck, compared by Duthuit to Indian, Scythian or Celtic accessories, 41.

⁵⁶ For example, divinities from the post-Gupta period, i.e. the sixth-seventh centuries AD.

⁵⁷ For example, the figure in the Coptic Museum inv. 7061. Badawy, *Coptic Art and Archaeology*, fig. 3.52. Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 160 and fig. 154.

⁵⁸ See for example the relief in the Coptic Museum reproduced in Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 160, n° 54.

The orientalizing reminiscences of so-called Coptic art have many nuances: Sassanid links⁵⁹ in textile art, Parthian connections⁶⁰ and Kushan influences in relief art and religious sculpture. These similarities have sometimes been emphasized.⁶¹ Moreover, the influence of India on Coptic art has often been argued by leading experts in the field such as F. Petrie, U. Monneret, E. Drioton,⁶² H. Zaloscer⁶³ and K. Wessel, although their comments do not answer modern questions about the significance of these links. However, arguing that these “oriental” forms are purely a loosening of Greek figurative language, and that they were recreated in the light of Egyptian rhythm and colourism⁶⁴ is a way of avoiding analysis of these artistic productions. Except in a few works, the artistic conception of late Egyptian art is unconnected to naturalism, as is the case in other regions in the Greco-Roman world from the East to the West. This is not a result of incompetence, but rather due to a conscious choice being made. There may be several reasons for these contacts: participation in the war against the Sassanids, or craftsmanship, as Egypt became a major centre of silk textile production. There may even have been religious reasons, as pilgrimages took monks from the region to Syria and India along the maritime route.⁶⁵ It is therefore important to distinguish between the productions and their contexts, and to understand how the artistic borrowing process took place.

Figurative languages have suffered most in the investigation due to the difficulty of transcending major categories such as naturalism, abstraction, expressionism, etc., which have a meaning that is too precise for the

⁵⁹ These contacts have been confirmed archaeologically, as well as historically, near Oxyrhynchus in Antinopolis, with the discovery of woollen Sassanid gaiters with battle motifs. Catalogue *L'art copte en Égypte*, 49.

⁶⁰ The gesture of holding the wreath and the hairstyle of the cherubs in fig. 7 is very similar to a relief from Palmyra with the coronation of soldiers in Parthian dress. Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités orientales AO 15556.

⁶¹ Schlumberger, “Descendants”, 293. The author also related Kushan art with child-birth. He would soon subsequently address reciprocal relationships between Rome, Egypt, and Indian art, 315.

⁶² Drioton, “La sculpture et les arts mineurs”, pl. IV.

⁶³ Zaloscer, *Die Kunst*, 161. The author passes on the legend of the patron saint of Ahnas, St. Elias, who was exiled to a place called Konthia (interpreted as being part of Scythian culture) after serving as a soldier in the Chinese court. He was transported to the city of his birth, the city of Heracles, after being beheaded. Zaloscer cites Monneret de Villard as his source, in *La scultura ad Ahnas*, 14 (which I have been unable to consult), and includes the observations of Flinders Petrie regarding Indian influences from the fifth century BC onwards.

⁶⁴ Duthuit, *La sculpture copte*, 34.

⁶⁵ Karttunen, “Greci, indiani, indo-greci”, 196.

western viewer. A history of Egyptian art during the late Roman period should reconsider the figurative analysis of this artistic expression in terms of a visual strategy and not merely as a religious manifesto, as unlike Egyptian production during the high Roman imperial period, production in late Middle Egypt is of high quality in some workshops.⁶⁶ In recent decades, analysis of the late ancient aesthetic has highlighted crucial aspects, such as the relationship between literature and the image, and the visual preferences of late ancient culture, which should be taken into consideration when studying these productions.

However, the final result from the better quality reliefs is an illusion from the spatial point of view, as the statue is emphasized on the flat background, for both the characters in the narrative and for the frame of vegetation, scrolls and vines.⁶⁷ The desired effect is also to display economic wealth using the skill of the work, and according to L. Török, it meets the standard of luxury of an “international” style conveyed by the architectural decoration.⁶⁸ This explains the similarities with other productions from relatively similar historical contexts: Sassanid palace art,⁶⁹ or the Umayyad reliefs from the palace of Qasr al-Hajr al-Gharbi, which were modelled under the influence of late ancient currents, based on the local Palmyran tradition and under the aegis of a new political framework.⁷⁰ What makes them so similar, despite their differences, is that these productions are part of the same conception of art, involving a “hedonistic aesthetic and Puritanical guidelines,” to paraphrase A.K. Coomaraswamy when discussing Buddhist art.⁷¹ The art analyzed here, was produced for a time of sharp contrasts between layers of population, when distinction involved the literary culture of the ancients and establishing a distance from the devotional message that used hieratic figurative language and even heraldic language, by suggesting a total symmetry about the axis marked by St. Thecla, as in Pl. 5, Fig. 3.

⁶⁶ Török, *Transfigurations*, contains the most comprehensive documentation to date on the problems with these productions.

⁶⁷ Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 101.

⁶⁸ Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 75.

⁶⁹ For example, the dancer with an inflated veil on a seventh century cup from the Walters Art Gallery. Ghirshman, *Iran. Parthes et Sassanides*, fig. 258.

⁷⁰ For a sample of these reliefs, see the catalogue of the Grabar exhibition, *Chateaux Omayyades*.

⁷¹ Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Shiva*.

Questions of style

Late ancient art can be distinguished from compared to high imperial art by the increased amount of combinations between figurative language, forms of composition and scene selection, leading to a heterogeneous repertoire in both iconographic and stylistic terms. From a stylistic point of view, the sculptural productions of Middle Egypt are fully immersed in the Mediterranean currents that define the productions of mythological reliefs and their more decorative aspects in particular, i.e. the architectural framework. The influences of Constantinople on the friezes, cornices and capitals are very obvious and persistent, although the style changes in the main scene. The deep, rough treatment of the acanthus leaves, the eggs or scrolls in those reliefs aroused particularly heightened passions. However, in other productions, which are often Christian, the tendency is to downplay the relief, and with it the illusion.

Based our comparisons, we believe that it is possible to speculate that the fragments found belong to the group of mythological reliefs which are usually known as the “Ahnas style”, despite the problems involved with applying that name to this location. However, one of the fragments, the cherub in Pl. 4, Fig. 2.4, seems technically more similar to the religious relief in Pl. 5, Fig. 3, and as such it should perhaps be excluded from the mythological series. What is most interesting, however, is that the size of the pupil is similar to that in the other figures, and we believe that this identifies the same workshop. We should not be surprised, as the same hands carved both pagan and Christian iconographies.⁷² What is outstanding above all in the series of Middle Egyptian mythological reliefs is the scene's position on a single plane lacking depth. It is a schematic carving that is concerned with a prominent and idealized corporeality, a selective and abstract attention to detail in order to achieve textures; very clearly defined outlines; the sinuosity of the images and the harmony of the series, the liking for energetic scenes using abstract and systematic carving of fold lines and hair, the prominence given to the facial expression by exaggerating the eyes, and finally the sophistication of the decorative frame.

From a technical standpoint, these reliefs experiment with forms of horizontal transmission interrelating fabrics, terracotta, paintings, sculptures, ivory and wood, etc., and transform technical features into elements of

⁷² Daniel in the lions' den in a very similar style. Coptic Museum of Cairo, E. 8220. Rassart-Debergh, *Antiquités*, n° 5.

style. One form of horizontal transmission that particularly stands out involves recognition in the schematics of the folds of the persistence of a technique acquired by Egyptian artisans by working on hard stones.⁷³ The perceptible influence of wood carving on the oblique use of the chisel in limestone reliefs, panels and wooden doors is worthy of emphasis.

Some pieces in the Ahnas-Herakleopolis series present a remarkable consistency of style, and in particular those related to baroque niches.⁷⁴ However, pieces with similar characteristics have been attributed to Fayoum, Sohag and Oxyrhynchus.⁷⁵ Meanwhile, the outstanding productions attributed to Herakleopolis include pieces with other qualities, to the extent that L. Török accepts that different styles coexisted in the same workshop.⁷⁶ Judging by the attributions compiled by T. Thomas, no less than five different styles come from the city, raising the question of whether these are approximate attributions assigned by antiques collectors.

It will be difficult to consider the matter of the workshops in more depth, as there are many unknown factors about the origin of the most significant sculptures in the production of mythological reliefs. The most significant, in Pl. 6, Fig. 5, of arguable origin, or of Leda and the Swan in Pl. 6, Fig. 6,⁷⁷ cannot be attributed with any certainty, which means that they might be from Oxyrhynchus. Indeed, these two mythological reliefs have common features, including a deep pupil and a generally much exaggerated relief, as is also the case in the relief of Heracles attributed to Oxyrhynchus.⁷⁸ There are also other similarities between these reliefs,

⁷³ Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 100.

⁷⁴ In reality, it is difficult to know which pieces come from this city. In Naville's publication of the excavations, only a relief of Orpheus with the lyre, accompanied by a lion, on loan from the Coptic museum in Cairo, is attributed to this city. Hayter Lewis, "Appendix", 34 and pl. XIV in Naville, "Ahnas el Medina". From what is apparent in the group photo, the type of dress and lion can be related to other decorated baroque niches — one of Pan and Maenad, and the other Apollo and Daphne in the Coptic Museum. Thomas, *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, fig.s 41-42.

⁷⁵ A baroque niche relief attributed to Oxyrhynchus shows a dancer with a sistrum, which despite its fragmentary nature, is reminiscent of the pieces from Heracleopolis evoked. Krumeich, *Spätantike*, pl. 117, n° 14.

⁷⁶ Török, *After the Pharaohs*, 110.

⁷⁷ Piece in the possession of the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, acquired in 1970. According to Thomas in *Late antique Egyptian Funery Sculpture*, fig. 7 comes from Oxyrhynchus, but he does not give his grounds for this in detail. On the other hand, this piece is not in the same style as another piece depicting Leda and the swan which comes from Heracleopolis. According to Török, *Transfigurations*, 13 note 21, it comes from Heracleopolis, following Monneret de Villard and Gayet.

⁷⁸ Coptic Museum, 7039. Török, *Transfigurations*, fig. 42.

such as a similar treatment of the hairstyles of the main characters and the proportions of the figures, as well as the fact that they all belong to a continuous frieze. Despite this unity of style, the links with other products can be extended towards the reliefs from Herakleopolis by the way texture is added to the Ceryneian hind in Pl. 5, Fig. 4, similar to that found in a *ketos* from a niche in the Brooklyn Museum, which comes from Herakleopolis.⁷⁹ There may be similar relationships between some reliefs from Herakleopolis and others from Antinopolis.

As a result of this state of the documentation, it appears too early to suggest that the workshops were in either city, as they were all very close to each other and used the same type of easily accessible limestone. It is possible that it was precisely this proximity that led to intense exchanges in their craft, driven by the demand for particular themes or renowned craftsmen. The same disparity and ubiquity of the styles can be seen in the architectural decoration. The enormous friezes, cornices and jambs from the region appear to share the same difficulties. L. Török, supporting the attribution of most reliefs to Herakleopolis, considers that these dissonances are due to large workshops where work was distributed among specialists in decoration and figuration, and within this specialist field, some craftsmen would be more skilled than others.⁸⁰ However, a total of no more than 50 fragments are associated with this mythological repertory and their places of origin are practically limited to Herakleopolis and Oxyrhynchus. In my view, it is preferable to think of the existence of local workshops in Herakleopolis, Oxyrhynchus and perhaps some other places producing the same themes and using a similar style.

Finally, the mythological narrative reliefs developing a scene at length, as in Pl. 6, Figs 5 and 6, are long enough and luxurious enough to suggest that they exceed reasonable expectations for decoration of a funerary room. We believe that given the importance of divinity in Greco-Roman Egypt, these continuous reliefs could come from a structure with a specifically Dionysian vocation.⁸¹ The importance of Dionysian motifs in mosaics appearing in domestic structures from the Roman and late Roman era has sometimes suggested a shared use of these spaces by religious congregations.

⁷⁹ Russmann, *Unearthing the truth*, 32. In this case, however, this is contradicted by other traits, such as the hair and the unperforated pupils.

⁸⁰ Török, *Transfigurations*, chapter 7.

⁸¹ We know of the existence of Dionysiac spaces in Hellenistic Greek sanctuaries, described as a sacred “reposoir” of the *thiasos* or as a civic offering. Picard, “Un type méconnu”, 127-157. Also on Thassos: Salviat, and Berard, “Nouvelles découvertes”, 288-335.

In the case of Egypt, which lacks mosaics, we cannot rule out that the sculpture or painting would have had the same function in private homes or even in specific buildings or facilities since in support of the same type of typological specialization, there were special buildings for the gathering of religious processions in the Egyptian cities of the time.⁸²

Recapitulation

Returning to the source of the article, the scattered fragments found in the house/tower on the north-western outskirts of Oxyrhynchus, we must admit that any hypothesis on its subject matter and function must be based on indirect reasoning, and as such we will not propose any outcome here. However, what is interesting is that regardless of the scene depicted and the religious context to which the relief belonged, it is part of an artistic horizon that is unique to Middle Egypt, in a period that can be dated to between the late third and early fifth centuries. This artistic production occurred in an erudite context that was receptive to the teachings of other cultures and religions with which it came into contact via the army, trade and/or pilgrimage and found a particularly fertile substrate of reception among learned Egyptians who engaged in rites ranging from Osirian initiation to gnosis. Significantly, from the period of the Tetrarchs onwards, Middle Egypt was known as Arcadia, a region which was internally consistent from the administrative point of view. This province was strongly influenced politically and ecclesiastically by the presence of families of large landowners containing prominent members of society. The persistence of convivial poetry, the outstanding Egyptian example of which is the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus, enabled these reliefs to be recovered and placed in a more or less sacred position for the celebration of festivals. The great landowners thus echoed the palatial nature of these festivities in the Hellenistic Age.

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⁸² As regards the *komasterion* of Hermopolis, the attribution of the papyrus that mentions it has recently been called into question, which leaves the reasonably probable alternative of the city of Oxyrhynchus. Medini, "La topographie religieuse".

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Fig. 1. Decorated block with a geometric border and a scene with a bird and two fish.



Fig. 2. Other fragments of the relief discovered during excavations in the Byzantine fortress.

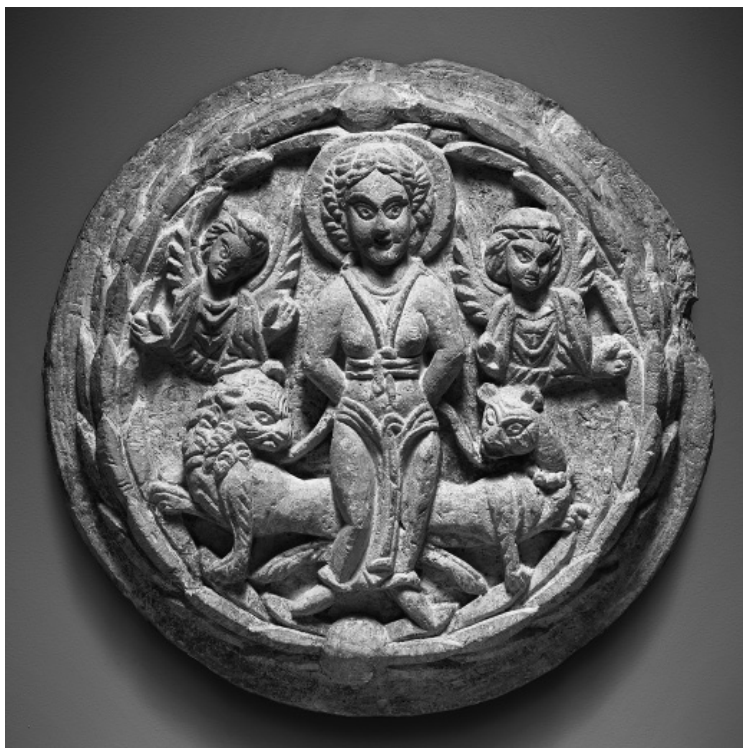


Fig. 3. Saint Thecla martyrdom.

Source: The Nelson Gallery-Atkins Museum, Kansas City, Missouri accession number: 48.10.



Fig. 4. Heracles Smiting Acheloos in the Form of a Bull.

Source: Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 61.128.

(Caption: Creative Commons-BY-NC Image: overall, 61.128_PS2.jpg. Brooklyn Museum photograph, 2007.)



Fig. 5. Drunken hero depicted with a long dress.

Source: Coptic Museum n. 6471.

(<http://www.coptic-cairo.com/museum/selection/stone/stone/files/page47-1005-full.html>)

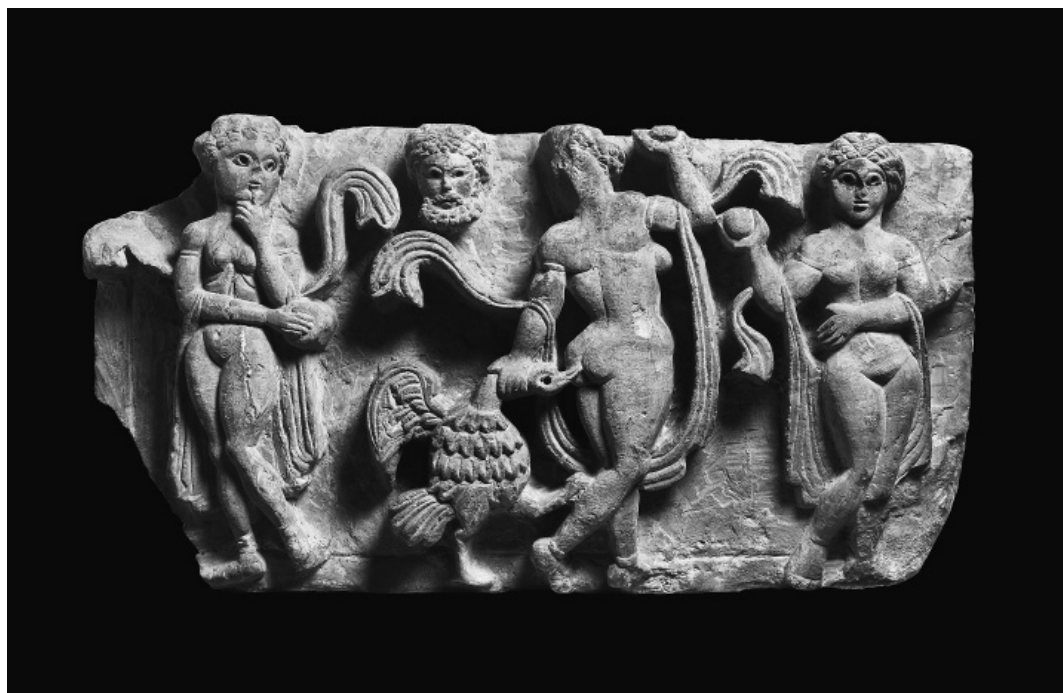


Fig. 6. Leda raped by Zeus disguised as a swan.

Source: Ashmolean Museum (AN1970.403.), Oxford.



Fig. 7a. Vine-scroll with two heros; relief from Coptic Museum.
Source: Thomas *Late antique* figure 75.



Fig. 7b. Vine-scroll with Heracles; relief from Egyptian Museum n.49658.
Source: Duthuit *La sculpture copte* pl. 24b.