

7

Greco-Roman Egypt

Christina Riggs

7.1 Introduction

Egypt enjoyed close trade links with the Greek-speaking Mediterranean from the 7th century BCE, cemented by the foundation of a Greek colony at Naukratis in the Delta and the widespread use of Greek mercenaries in the Egyptian army. Egypt formally became part of the Greek world in 332 BCE, when Alexander the Great took the country from Persian hands, and this date marks the start of the Greco-Roman Period of Egyptian history. Egypt subsequently became a Hellenistic kingdom ruled by Alexander's former general Ptolemy son of Lagos, founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Cleopatra VII was the last ruler of the Dynasty, and her defeat at the hands of the Roman Octavian, later Augustus, in 30 BCE made Egypt a province of the nascent Roman Empire, which it remained until the 640s.

This Chapter considers the *c.* 252 Greco-Roman (332 BCE–650 CE) objects from Egypt in the Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), which form only a small part of its *c.* 11,639-strong Egyptian archaeological collections. The Greco-Roman Period in Egypt witnessed a number of political, social, and cultural developments. In the early part of the Ptolemaic period, Greek immigrants, and in particular military veterans, settled in the Delta, the Fayum, and in smaller concentrations throughout the Nile Valley, and frequently married into Egyptian families. The ensuing hellenization of the upper and middle strata of Egyptian society was well advanced by the start of the new Roman regime, which recognized and encouraged it, and favoured the use of Greek over Egyptian language. The material culture of Greco-Roman Egypt helped shape these broader cultural changes, as artists and craft workers adopted new formal languages and working techniques. These included naturalistic painting and sculpture (in stone, metals, and plaster), mould-made terracotta figures, mouth-blown glass, and mosaic floors, while classical architecture featured to some extent in all the major towns and cities, especially in the Roman period. These new art forms co-existed with more traditional Egyptian workmanship, although the latter became increasingly identified with the temple and mortuary spheres. The PRM collections range from tools and implements to clothing, baskets and other containers, and also include funerary items typical of the time. This chapter outlines the history of the collection (7.2) and provides an overview of the objects from Egypt (7.3) and Sudan (7.4), before drawing conclusions about the significance and research potential of the collection (7.5).

7.2 History of the Collection

Nine objects in the Museum that were originally listed as 'Greco-Roman Egyptian' formed part of the PRM founding collection, and were presumably collected by Pitt-

Rivers on his trip to Egypt in 1881, or obtained through his personal and professional contacts (1884.57.2, 1884.57.3, 1884.58.51, 1884.63.77 .1–3, 1884.67.20, 1884.67.25, 1884.67.27). Of these, two are not, in fact, ancient as originally catalogued: one, a painted wooden panel (1884.57.3), appears to be a 19th- or 20th-century Islamic-inspired piece, and another is most likely a 19th-century decorative item in ‘Egyptomaniac’ style, acquired as if ancient (1884.67.25). This small, solid bronze of a nude male has an incomplete depiction of the Egyptian *nemes* headdress, which is unlikely to have been the case for a genuine ancient object, including a Roman version of an Egyptian statue. Amongst the rest of the PRM founding collection Greco-Roman objects are 3 faience inlays in the form of rosettes (1884.63.77 .1–3), dating to the Ptolemaic Period, and said to have been collected by W.M. Flinders Petrie from Tell el-Yahudiya in the Eastern Delta (although the collection date predates the Egypt Exploration Fund’s 1886 excavations at the site, supervised by Edouard Naville).

As is the case with the Predynastic and Dynastic Egyptian collections (see Chapters 5 and 6), the main field collector represented is W.M. Flinders Petrie, who excavated in Egypt between the late 1880s and the 1920s, distributing finds to museums and individuals who supported his work. Important sites that are represented in the Petrie-donated material include Lahun in the Fayum (11 Roman objects), which includes both cemeteries and a settlement area (the latter known as Kahun), and the Roman-period cemetery at Hawara in the Fayum (3 Roman objects).

The site of Oxyrhynchus (Bahasa) was a provincial capital in Middle Egypt in the Roman Period, and the source of 36 objects in the PRM collected by Petrie, Bernard Pyne Grenfell and Arthur Surrige Hunt, including reed pens (1897.49.7–12) and a number of wood, metal, basketry, and textile implements (1903.22.1–2, 1904.35.38–71). Archaeological material was of secondary concern to Grenfell and Hunt, who collected thousands of Greek (and some Demotic Egyptian) papyri at the site in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, a large proportion of the papyri are held in the Papyrology Room at the University of Oxford’s Sackler Library.¹ Grenfell was a student and fellow of The Queen’s College, Oxford, appointed Professor of Papyrology in 1916; Hunt was also a student at Queen’s, and was Professor of Papyrology from 1913 until his death in 1934 (Bowman *et al.* 2007).

7.3 The Objects

7.3.1 Overview

The majority of the objects from Greco-Roman Egypt are tools and everyday objects. An overview of these is presented below, outlining the writing implements (7.3.2 below), objects used in clothing and textile production (7.3.3), basketry and cordage (7.3.4), knives and keys (7.3.5), ceramic and glass containers, sealings and stamps (7.3.6), coins (7.3.7), and lamps (7.3.8). As well as these everyday objects, the collection includes objects with religious imagery (7.3.9), and material from mortuary contexts (7.3.10).

7.3.2 Writing Implements

The collections include 6 reed pens (1897.49.7–12) and 4 wooden tablets with wax writing surfaces (1891.33.9–12, which may be earlier than the 3rd–5th century CE dates assigned to them in the catalogue), and Balfour’s recreation of a codex formed from such tablets (on display, case 107A). Wooden styluses like 1897.49.6 – with tips like modern fountain pens – were for use on a soft material, like wax, rather than an ink pen. Such styluses are associated with writing Greek, although scribes did adapt to writing Demotic using these implements rather than using brushes.

¹ <http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/POxy/lists/lists.html>

7.3.3 *Clothing and Textile Production*

The collections include some six items of clothing, including a beautifully made leather shoe (1889.27.94 .1–2) for a small adult left foot, with triangular details cut out of the leather around the foot opening. Its original provenance may be Gurob, next to Lahun, which Petrie excavated around this time. A more uncommon rare item of clothing is a pair of socks (1889.27.95 .1–2), one of which is intact. Both socks have a split toe design. A small sandal identified as a model (1898.37.14) may be a child's sandal, since it is made of leather like normal footwear. It consists of a leather sole with incised decoration inside, a strap that passes around the ankle, a plaited or twisted strap across the foot upper, and a toe thong (broken). Object 1904.35.71, which is catalogued as a girdle or belt, seems somewhat rough in terms of material and construction for use as clothing, and may be a handle or carrying strap.

The wooden implement 1903.22.1 is catalogued as a papyrus beater, but another possible interpretation is that it is a flax beater, and thus relates to the production of linen textiles. A second textile-related implement in this part of the collection is 1915.41.41, which is catalogued as a spindle whorl, although its small size may argue against this identification.

7.3.4 *Basketry and Cordage*

The collection includes 14 well-preserved items of basketry and cordage. A very finely worked basketry object (1902.31.22) has been identified as a hat but is more likely to be a bowl-like container. A large basket (1889.27.68 .1–2) was described on an accompanying card as a carpenter's basket and contained a length of rope. According to the card with the object, both came from Petrie's excavation at Lahun (Ilahun, el-Lahun).

Nine examples of baskets are recorded as coming from Grenfell and Hunt's work at Oxyrhynchus, including: an unusual, openwork basket made of narrow reeds (1904.35.64), twisted to form a flat bottom, and supported at the middle and top by plaited reeds; a basket (1904.35.68) which, though damaged, is of very fine work, with a double twisted rim; and a well-preserved basket (1904.35.69). Other basket-related objects from the site include a length of rope (1904.35.63), probably of palm fibre.

One unusual object (1902.31.23 .1–2) consists of multiple strands of twisted rope, in two colours, with a wooden peg, and is identified in the catalogue as a horse harness. The source is Petrie/Egypt Exploration Fund from the years 1901–1902, but it is unclear whether this indicates that it comes from an excavation or was purchased by Petrie.

7.3.5 *Knives and Keys*

Iron objects in the collection include 7 keys (1898.37.13, 1904.35.42–47), 12 knives (1904.35.48–59), a saw blade (1904.35.60) and 3 blades (1904.35.60 .1–3) from Grenfell and Hunt's work at Oxyrhynchus. One knife (1904.35.59) has a fine bone handle, suggesting a possible domestic, use. Similarly, knives 1904.35.50, 1904.35.52, and 1904.35.54 have slender, twisted handles. Another iron object is a sickle blade (1903.22.3); its source is Petrie/Egypt Exploration Fund, with a findspot attributed to the Shunet el-Zebib (Shuneh) area at Abydos in 1902–1903, which correlates with Petrie's 1900–1904 excavations at the site.

The iron keys from Oxyrhynchus (1904.35.42–47) and 3 bronze keys (1904.35.47, 1951.13.546–547) are examples of 'skeleton'-type keys from the Roman Period, which are sometimes depicted in the hand of the god Anubis at this time, or around the necks of his associated animal, the jackal. The keys refer to his role as a guide to the underworld (Riggs 2005: 290). Related to the keys is an impressive bronze door fitting from Lahun (1889.27.93), which includes the iron keyhole plate.

7.3.6 Containers, Jar Sealings and Stamps

The collection of 38 wood and pottery jar stamps (1915.41.29–38) and related jar sealings (1915.41.1–28), all from Antinoe (Johnson 1914), dates from the Late Roman or Byzantine periods, and includes a number of inscriptions which could be translated by a specialist in late Greek or Coptic. These inscriptions may identify the products or producer. Several stamps also bear a cross motif, since Egypt was predominantly Christian at this time. Stamps like these were impressed in mud jar sealings, several examples of which are among the Antinoe objects. Some of the Antinoe sealings also include the necks of the pottery vessels, two of which have Greek inscriptions inked on them. The largest sealing incorporates the neck, shoulder, and two handles of a pottery jar, which is sealed inside with resin or pitch.

Other pottery vessels or containers include a large, circular platter with incised palm or tree decoration (1889.27.90), probably for serving food in a domestic context or for food offerings; it comes from Petrie's excavations at Lahun. Object 1902.31.1 is a pottery flask which is unusual in that it is extremely heavy from whatever contents are inside it; there are grains of sand at the neck, perhaps stuck in the sealing material (or escaped contents?), two small handles on either side of neck, and a spout at same level of the handles; the mouth and neck of the vessel are covered by a piece of leather and an intricately wrapped cord. The donor is Petrie/Egypt Exploration Fund, but with no specific site mentioned other than the Fayum region.

Object 1904.35.36 is a Janus (two-faced) jug of heavy pottery, with one handle. The faces are identified in ink on the side of the vessel as 'Negro'. Given interest in racial classification in the late 19th and early 20th centuries – Petrie himself wrote on the topic (Petrie 1907) – the depiction of an African was probably a motivating factor in collecting the jug, which comes from the site of Ehnasya (Ahnas el-Medina).

Several small containers, in materials other than pottery, are interesting additions to the collection: 1968.22.2–3 are typical Roman-era products – slender, blown glass vessels for perfume oil; the iridescence forms when the glass is deposited in the ground. Object 1902.31.21 is an unusual cup made from the natural, tapering form of a shell, from Petrie's 1901–1902 work for the Egypt Exploration Fund, said to be from the Fayum. Usually on display in Case 63A, with musical instruments, is a faience object depicting a man playing a lyre (1929.78.1). The concave shape suggests that it may be a fragment from the rounded body of a vase, jug, or bowl. The back is not decorated, and the figure is in raised relief, probably mould-made.

7.3.7 Coins

There are 17 Ptolemaic coins in the collection (1933.51.16–32), in three sizes, donated in 1933 by Henry Balfour. These all bear the name 'Ptolemy', and numismatists would be able to provide more detailed information and identify the mint.

7.3.8 Lamps

The Greco-Roman material includes a relatively large collection of 65 pottery lamps² most of which have been identified as Roman in date, and which are representative of the range of lamps from the period. Such lamps are extremely common in the archaeological record and afford the opportunity to examine the organization of industry and economy in the Greco-Roman world (e.g. Harris 1980). A total of 34 (1904.35.1–34) were excavated at Ehnasya by Petrie and formed part of his classification of Romano-Egyptian lamps (Petrie 1905: 5–7). Petrie also donated two

² 1904.35.1–34, 1911.59.7, 1915.41.39–40, 1932.88.319–327, 1932.88.396–401, 1932.88.429–430, 1932.88.505, 1932.88.515, 1932.88.518, 1932.88.574, 1932.88.582–583, 1932.88.585, 1932.88.587, 1932.88.676–677.

lamps from Antinoe (1915.41.39 and 1915.41.40), both of which are inscribed in Greek (see Griffith 1916: 198; Bilabel 1926).³

7.3.9 *Objects with Religious Imagery*

This category includes four figures – three of terracotta and one of bronze. Terracotta figure 1884.58.51 is of Isis and the infant Horus, with a base depicting a lotus flower (or possibly a boat). Isis has the corkscrew curls typical of her imagery in the Roman Period, and she wears a small crown on top of her head: the sun disk between cow horns, topped by two feathers, which again is typical of her iconography in Greco-Roman Egypt. Terracotta figure 2004.60.1, moulded in two halves (smooth on the back), depicts a woman with incised pubic triangle, hands held up in the *orans* (prayer) posture, with palm branches arched over the top, pierced holes either side of her head, and traces of pink-red paint over gesso. The workmanship and general style suggest that this object is not ancient, but compare Bailey (2008) for examples of two similar female figures, from Shurafa, dated to the 4th to 5th centuries CE (British Museum EA 1912, 1019.15). A third terracotta object is from a figure of an Egyptian priest or cult celebrant (1884.67.29). The ‘grotesque’ facial features are for comic effect, giving the figure a pointy chin, close-set eyes, furrowed brow, large bulbous nose, and large ears. He wears a floral wreath and a veil (cf. Bailey 2008, 64 (no. 3176) and pl. 31 for a dwarf priest or cult celebrant with similar grotesque head and wreath, dated by Bailey to the Ptolemaic Period, 2nd–1st centuries BCE). Finally, a bronze head of an Egyptian priest (1884.67.27) is also depicted as a ‘grotesque’ type.

7.3.10 *Human Remains and Funerary Objects*

A mummy of a very young child (1945.6.1 .1–2), is likely to date to the Greco-Roman Period. The gilded plaster or cartonnage (plaster-and-linen layers) face-mask dates to the late Ptolemaic or early Roman Period, but since it is an adult mask, and only the fragment of a mummy mask, it is unclear whether it was originally intended for the mummy or was a later addition, either in antiquity or in more recent times. The most likely explanation may be that the mask was reused on the mummy in antiquity, indicating that the mummy dates from later in the Roman Period. There is evidence for similar re-use of earlier funerary equipment in the 3rd century CE (Riggs 2005: 170).

A painted cartonnage footcase (1889.27.75) was donated by Petrie in 1889. Although the accession records indicate Lahun as the provenance of this object, it is worth noting that Petrie also excavated the nearby site of Hawara for the first time in 1888. At Hawara Petrie discovered Roman Period mummies decorated with a variety of objects, such as encaustic panel portraits, painted shrouds, cartonnage masks, and footcases. The footcase is typical in that it depicts bound prisoners on the bottom, which the deceased would ‘trample’ in the afterlife, symbolizing victory over harmful forces. On top, the pink feet wear sandals; there is water damage in the middle portion of the case here. Around the sides of the case are painted rosettes (similar to the faience inlays collected by Pitt-Rivers mentioned above (1884.63.77 .1–3)), and on either side of the feet is a chequer-board pattern imitating basketwork, with the colours pink, blue, and white predominating. On the inside of the footcase, swirls of plaster can be seen, along with a dark patch of resin from the linen-wrapped surface of the mummy. The case dates to the very end of the Ptolemaic Period or the early Roman Period, in the 1st century CE: not from the Twenty-second Dynasty, as

³ See also http://www.trismegistos.org/tm/detail_plus.php?tm=98643 and http://www.trismegistos.org/tm/detail_plus.php?tm=103774



Figure 7.1 Wooden mummy label from Akhmim, Egypt (PRM Accession Number 1994.4.179). Such labels would usually identify the deceased by name along with a formulaic prayer written in Demotic or Greek. Dating to around 450 CE, this is one of the latest labels known.

the accompanying label states. One of many comparable examples is one in the Brooklyn Museum of Art.⁴

Accessioned in the same year and noted to also be from 'Lahun, Gurob' are a series of 11 crudely-carved wooden faces (1889.27.78–88), which would have been pegged/dowelled onto coffins or half-length covers for mummies. Very similar objects from the same excavation are now accessioned into the Petrie collection.⁵ Although often recorded to be of Ptolemaic date, an earlier Third Intermediate Period dating is also possible and there are similar flat examples from Thebes, taken from coffins dating to the Roman Period thus extending their possible date range.

A cartonnage *wesekh* (collar) (1884.57.2) is described as 'Late Dynastic' but may date to the Ptolemaic Period. Such collars were placed over the chest of a wrapped mummy, protecting and contributing to the rebirth of the dead. The shrine-shaped pectoral in the centre, with an outstretched *ba*-bird, supports a Ptolemaic rather than Late Period date.

Two gold tongue covers (1911.33.10 and 1911.33.11) are from the mouths of Roman Period mummies, discovered at Hawara in the Fayum during Petrie's 1910–1911 season. Object 1911.33.10 has creases where it was folded twice over to fit into the mouth.

Also of note is a wooden mummy label from Akhmim (1994.4.179, *Figure 7.1*). Such labels would originally have been attached to mummies and usually identify the deceased by name, together with a formulaic prayer in Demotic or Greek. Dating to around 450 CE it is one of the latest of such mummy labels known (Rupprecht 1976; Mark Depauw pers. comm.).⁶ It was originally part of a private collection belonging to Rev. Bigg-Wither of Winchester County, before being transferred to the PRM from the Hampshire Museum Service.

7.4 Meroitic Sudan

The Meroitic period, named after the type-site of Meroë between the Fifth and Sixth Cataracts of the River Nile in Sudan, follows the end of Napatan Period in the 4th

⁴ Brooklyn Museum Accession Number 73.89 See <http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3827>

⁵ e.g. Petrie Collection Accession Number UC 55101 See <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/gurob/archive/uc55101.gif>

⁶ See also <http://www.trismegistos.org/tm/detail.php?quick=16059>

century BCE (see Chapter 6) and runs until the 4th century CE. Apart from the move southwards, there is no real material distinction between the Napatan and Meroitic periods. There may be some 20 Meroitic objects in the PRM collection, and a box of several hundred beads (1945.11.182), although the material donated by F.L.L. Griffith from Faras represents several periods of activity (see Chapter 6) including a Meroitic cemetery (see Eisa 1999). As such, some collections management work is required to clarify the associated dates for specific objects. In addition to the Griffith donation there are 5 sherds of pottery described in the catalogue as Meroitic (1940.12.849 .1–5) from Charles and Brenda Seligman's collection. These sherds are all provenanced to the Wadi Howar. There is also a single, intact Meroitic large globular pottery vessel, with matt-impressed pattern, from the type-site of Meroë (1954.6.2), sent to the PRM by the Sudan Museum in 1954. It is noted as having been originally acquired during the excavations of John Garstang in 1910 (Török 1997).

7.5 Summary

Like the Egyptian archaeological material from other periods, the material from Greco-Roman Egypt offers scope for research on collectors and collecting histories, as well as studying the objects themselves and in comparison with objects from the same sites and material now in other museums. Many of the artefact types represented have been the subject of significant recent research in other collections, for example Wendrich's (2000) work on Roman Egyptian basketry. The research potential of the inscribed material – the Antinoe jar sealings, the coins, and the mummy label from Akhmim – is particularly strong.

References

- Bailey, D.M. 2008. *Catalogue of the Terracottas in the British Museum. Vol. IV, Ptolemaic and Roman terracottas from Egypt*. London: British Museum Press.
- Bilabel, F. 1926. *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten*. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Bowman, A.K., R.A. Coles, N. Gonis, D. Obbink, and P.J. Parsons (eds) 2007. *Oxyrhynchus: a city and its texts*. London: Egypt Exploration Society.
- Eisa, K.A. 1999. *Le mobilier et les coutumes funéraires kousbites à l'époque méroïtique*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (Meroitica 16).
- Griffith, F.L.L. 1916. A tourist's collection of fifty years ago. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 3(2/3): 193–198.
- Harris, W.V. 1980. Roman terracotta lamps: the organization of an industry. *The Journal of Roman Studies* 70: 126–145.
- Johnson, J. de M. 1914. *Antinoe and its Papyri*. London: Egypt Exploration Fund.
- Petrie, W.M.F. 1905. *Roman Ehnasya (Herakleopolis Magna)*. London: Egypt Exploration Fund.
- Petrie, W.M.F. 1907. *Janus in Modern Life*. London: Archibald Constable.
- Riggs, C. 2005. *The Beautiful Burial in Roman Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Rupprecht, H.-A. 1976. *Sammelbuch griechischer Urkunden aus Ägypten, Zwölfter Band (Nr. 10764–11263)*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Török, L. 1997. *Meroe City: an ancient African capital: John Garstang's excavations in the Sudan*. London: Egypt Exploration Society.
- Wendrich, W. 2000. Basketry. In P.T. Nicholson and I. Shaw (eds) *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 254–267.