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A Terracotta Portrait-Head of Alexander the Great from Karanis

SOBHI ASHOUR, AHMED HASSAN*

The subject of this article is a terracotta head, kept in Kom Oushim Museum Magazine (Inv. no. 886). The head measures 10 cm high, the face, from the chin to the skull, measures 5.5 cm high with a maximum width of 6.6 cm. The object was found during a rescue excavation at Karanis in 1989 by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, directed by Ahmed Abdelaal. The find spot is reported to be a shaft in the southern part of the necropolis. The head apparently depicts Alexander the Great, based on the particular form of the hair *anastole* and the facial features (fig. 1).

The Macedonian is portrayed with a youthful and soft face, sharply turned to the left and wearing a poignant (*pathos*) expression. The forehead is triangular and the melting eyes gaze upwards and to the left. The neck muscles convey this strong left-side movement, but no Adams-apple is seen. The chin is tipped and carefully separated from the lower lip, the mouth is closed with full lips in a cupid-bow form. The nose is strong, the eyebrows swollen and the details of the eyes are not carved. The hairstyle shows two thick central locks of *anastole* coiled hair in a crescent-like form and falling down both sides of the forehead. A band of freely falling long locks crowns the forehead and frames the face (figs. 2–3). An apparently sunken socket is still visible behind these frontal hair locks. The hairstyle from behind is less intricate, but still shows hair divided into individual locks on the cranium (fig. 4).

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MATERIAL, TECHNIQUE AND MOULD

The material of the Karanis head was described by Clementina Caputo as follows: "Nile clay, medium-fine texture, medium quantity of fine inclusions, mainly sand and black, rare medium red particles. Grey core with thin layer of red clay. Lightyellow crème slip very well smoothed."[1] These remarks concerning the clay indicate that the chief component is Nile sediment, with minor amounts of secondary inclusions, which conforms to the "Nile Sediment Marginal Group" according to Marti Lu Allen's analysis of Karanis terracottas in the Kelsey Museum.[2] This group mostly depicts human figures, orants, gods and goddesses. The 4th and 5th century examples show chaff or plant tempered material.[3]

The head was made in a bipartite mould; this is very clear from the left-profile view (fig. 4). One mould was evidently used for the front half, and another one for the back half, since the seam line between these two parts is still visible inside the head. The hair locks which crown the forehead were apparently added after the moulding process. This technique is known from other terracotta heads from Egypt, among which is the well-known Alexander head in Alexandria,[4] and other examples of royal effigies[5] and other heads.[6] This feature indicates the familiarity of Alexandrian coroplasts with the technique of hand modelling additions before firing, a common characteristic of Alexandrian terracottas, also employed for crowns and hats.[7]

The Karanis head shows further indication of this technique, the left cheek displaying signs of the use of sharp tool, most likely resulting from the modelling of the hair side-locks while the clay was still in its *Greenware* phase (fig. 3). Traces of finger prints are also seen above the frontal hair locks which were added. Some terracottas from Karanis show the same technique of hand modelling, dating from the early Ptolemaic Period,[8] to the late 4th century AD,[9] thus indicating the continuity of this technical tradition in the local workshop. The coroplast of the Karanis head used a very thin smooth coat of slip after firing. This coat is now cracked on some parts of the cranium, revealing the reddish layer of the clay used. Some traces of black paint are seen near the right eye and on the neck, which may suggest the standard polychromic scheme for such art works.

Only a few terracotta heads of Alexander the Great are known whether from Egypt[10] or elsewhere[11] and most of these show different iconographic types from that discussed here, apart from Alexandria GRM. 23168, bought near Cairo, which is very similar.[12] The two heads show

1 This remark was deposited on a paper sheet in the Karanis Magazine Museum, handled by Ahmed Hassan. Our gratitude goes to Clementina Caputo for her permission to use this data in this article.

2 Allen 1985, pp. 25, 236.

3 Allen 1985, cat. 45, 47, 68, 73, 86, 88, 91, 92, 93, 94, 96, 98, 100, 103, 104, 105, 110, 121, 127, 128, 130, 131, 145.

4 Grimm 1978, no. 77; Nenna 1998, p. 28.

5 A head of Ptolemy Soter in Amsterdam, see Scheurleer 1978, p. 2 ff., figs. 1–4.

6 A terracotta portrait-head in Athens comes from the Hadra necropolis, see Marangou 1968, p. 459 ff.

7 Kassab-Tezgör 2012, p. 288.

8 Allen 1985, cat. 144.

9 Allen 1985, cat. 143.

10 Other terracotta heads of Alexander are known from Egypt, including a painted head measuring 6 cm high from a tomb in Ezbet el-Makhlouf in Hadra, Breccia 1933, p. 20, pl. V; Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 89, K. 32. Another head in Alexandria, 7 cm in height, Breccia 1934, no. 305, pl. 26; Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 90, K. 33. A third head is mentioned by K. Gebauer (1938-1939, p. 90, K. 32a) from Kom el Schugafa, 5.2 cm, but we have been unable to source an image of this piece.

11 A head in Munich, Emerson 1886, a replica of the Rondanini type, Moreno 1994, p. 390, figs. 493, 495, in addition to a head from Sinope in Brussels, Moreno 2004, fig. 570.

12 Breccia 1934, p. 41, no. 22, pl. 79, figs. 412-414; Grimm 1978, no. 77; Grimm 1998, p. 24, no. 19a-c; Nenna 1998, p. 28.

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the same strong turn of the neck to the left and the particular arrangement of the *anastole*, where the two central locks are not swept-up, but rather fall onto the forehead. The locks of hair on the right cheek are also comparable with one lock over the ear and another one just beneath it. A third coiling lock is represented on the neck (fig. 2). The two short locks on the right side of the head are remarkable, as are the hair locks on the left side.

Furthermore, the modelling of the right ear without the earlobe is interesting on both heads. One notable difference, however, is a protruding area on the centre of the head in Alexandria, which perhaps functioned as the base of an Egyptian crown.[13] This feature is absent on the Karanis head, which suggests that they were made in different moulds.

In addition, the two heads are of different scales, the Karanis head measuring 10 cm high, while the Alexandria head measures 13 cm in height; both heads are believed to have originally been part of complete statuettes.[14] The differences in height, the absence of the crown base, and also the more fleshy cheeks of the Karanis head, confirm the use of two different moulds. The Alexandria head was bought from "near Cairo," according to Günter Grimm,[15] and it seems possible that it may also have come from the Fayum region, based on the dark brown clay used.[16] It also seems reasonable to suggest that both heads were produced in the same workshop. The Fayum region produced its own terracotta and ceramics, and it is likely that Karanis had its own workshop for terracottas, based on the moulds found at the site and the originality of some of its figurines.[17]

Despite of the reasonable assumption that both heads were successive productions made in the same workshop, it is not yet possible to establish an iconographic and chronological sequence of the two moulds. First of all, both heads cannot belong to the first generation of the *archetype* since their facial features were retouched.[18] It seems difficult to establish a *stemma* of an iconographic series and thread, because there are no other examples of either heads. The hair locks on the cranium appear today more lined on the Alexandria head, while on the Karanis head they are not so well rendered, a feature that may be due to the repeated use of both moulds.

ICONOGRAPHIC TYPE

The hairstyle and downward inclined, left-turned face are considered typological criteria for a faithful replica series of the so-called Leochares portrait-statue of Alexander,[19] carved in the Philippeion in 338-336 BC.[20] Volkmar von Graeve gathered 17 heads of the same type, including some examples from Egypt,[21] one of which, interestingly, originates from the Fayum (Cairo CG 27476).[22] Zsolt Kiss added another head from Kom el-Dikka to the series.[23] G. Grimm

13 Grimm 1978, no. 77.

14 This size is mentioned in Grimm 1978, but E. Breccia (1934) indicates 12 cm, L. Marangou (1968, p. 461, n. 11) gives 15 cm, and M.-D. Nenna (1998) gives 13 cm.

15 Grimm 1978, no. 77.

16 E. Breccia (1934, p. 41) excluded the Fayum provenance, but instead suggested a flourishing Hellenic centre like Memphis.

17 Allen 1985, p. 146 ff. esp. 148; M.L. Allen (1985, p. 142) points to the existence of furnaces in Karanis, but they were not precisely identified as terracotta or pottery furnaces.

18 Kassab-Tezgör 2007, p. 256.

19 Graeve 1974, p. 231 ff.; Queyrel 2003, p. 477.

20 Schultz 2007, p. 205 f.

21 Graeve 1974, p. 236, pl. 89–90.

22 Edgar 1903, p. 20 f., no. 27476, Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 50, K. 38, 91; Graeve 1974, p. 236, pl. 89 (1–2).

23 Queyrel 2003, p. 477; Kiss 1999, p. 34 ff., figs. 1–3.

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suggested that the Alexandria head discussed hereabove had typological affinities with the same group,[24] which has grown now with the addition of the Karanis head. Evaristo Breccia compared the Alexandria head to the younger Alexander of Lysippos, while Andrew Stewart thought that it might be a miniature copy of the Copenhagen Alexander from Egypt.[25] Paolo Moreno reasonably suggested that the Copenhagen head was wearing a helmet, based on the form of the cranium and its less detailed hair locks,[26] which challenges A. Stewart's typological comparison.

The Karanis head, and its closest parallel in Alexandria, follow the so-called Leochares type, with its characteristic form of *anastole*, and particular locks of hair on the right cheek, but they are still comparable to many other portraits of the Macedonian, with the pathetic expression and the left-turned face. The Leipzig Alexander from Egypt, despite its different form of *anastole*,[27] still presents a closer parallel in terms of the inclination of the head and the strong pathetic expression. These features are attested on the Guimet Alexander from Egypt[28] and the Paul Getty Alexander reportedly from Megara,[29] both of which belong to earlier types of Alexander the Great portraiture. Another head in Warsaw, found in Rome, depicts young Alexander with similar *anastole*, his head turned to the left and bearing the pathetic expression in addition to tiny incised side-locks; it was connected to a statue representing Alexander as a successor to his father in year 336 BC.[30]

Roland R.R. Smith pointed out that many small marble heads from Egypt and Alexandria depicting Alexander the Great are characterized by extreme youth, pathetic expression and an Apollon-Dionysos hairstyle.[31] The Alexander head from Karanis finds its place among these divine images of *small Alexanders*, but regarding the absence of a direct sculptural model until now, it might be suggested that the head perhaps imitated an eclectic model from the early Hellenistic Period.[32] Concerning the body type once surmounted by these heads, the strong turn of the bare neck may suggest an Alexander *Aigiochos*. This type, with an enhanced angle of the neck, accentuated the youthful pathetic face.[33] It should be noted that the *Aigiochos* type is attested all over Egypt from Alexandria, through Ptolemais, to Thebes.[34] In our opinion, this type is the likely candidate for Karanis head.

DATE

The relationship between the two terracotta heads of Alexander in Karanis and Alexandria cannot be denied and they may belong to a close chronological span. The Alexandria head is dated to the 2nd century BC, on a stylistic basis,[35] therefore the Karanis Alexander can be easily placed in the same century. Both heads show affinities to R.R.R. Smith's marble

24 Grimm 1978, no. 77.
25 Stewart 1993, p. 424.
26 Moreno 1995, p. 162, no. 4.19.5.
27 Gebauer 1938-1939, pl. 10.
28 Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 44; Stewart 1993, p. 251, fig. 85; Reinsberg 2005, p. 224, fig. 6b; 556, cat. 123.
29 Stewart 1993, p. 116 f., fig. 16.
30 Moreno 2004, p. 135 ff., fig. 197, 199, 202, 204.
31 Smith 1988, p. 89.
32 Bieber 1949, p. 390–392; Kiss 1999, p. 35.
33 Perdrizet 1913; Bieber 1949, p. 392, figs. 20–21; Reinsberg 2005, nos. 126–129.
34 Perdrizet 1913; Stewart 1993, p. 250; Reinsberg 2005, nos. 126–129.
35 Breccia 1934, p. 41; Grimm 1978, no. 77.

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small Alexanders,[36] which flourished in the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. One interesting example is the Leipzig Alexander, measuring 12 cm, which dates back to the first quarter of the 2nd century BC.[37] This head shows a youthful Alexander with a sharp inclination of the head to the left and a strong pathetic expression, which may connect the Karanis Alexander to this group of miniature effigies. The life-size Guimet Alexander head from Egypt is also very similar in the execution of the hair locks and their movement on the forehead, especially those of the *anastole,* in addition to the dramatic expression of *pathos*.[38] Stewart dated the Guimet Alexander to the early 3rd century BC,[39] while Carola Reinsberg dated it to 170-160 BC.[40] The similarities in the *anastole* hairstyle and the facial expression lead us to suggest a date for the Karanis Alexander in the 2nd century BC or later.

Technically, the Karanis head belongs to the Nile clay *Marginal Group*, figurines made in which appear from the 1st century BC until the 5th century AD. Many figures of deities, of male and female heads, are dated more closely between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD.[41] Another Karanis terracotta head also belongs to the *Marginal Group*. It depicts the "Hellenistic ruler as Hermes," dated to the late 1st century BC, and likewise was found in a stratum dating back to the 4th or 5th century.[42] This Karanite figurine is very comparable in subject, function and depositional context to the Alexander head. The two objects perhaps belonged to the same Ptolemaic cult context in Hellenistic Karanis, and the late 1st century BC date of the "Ruler as Hermes" may suggest a closer date of the Alexander head from the site. Taking the *terminus post quem* for the Karanis *Marginal Group* in the 1st century BC, and considering the stylistic similarity between the Karanis-Alexandria terracotta heads and the two marbles in Leipzig and the Louvre, a date in the late 2nd to early 1st century BC may be favoured.

CONTEXT AND FUNCTION

The head was found inside a shaft in the southern part of the Karanis necropolis to the west side of the Fayum-Cairo Desert Road, between the road and the most southern funerary mound no. 1. The excavator's report mentions some remains of stone and mud bricks, and remarks on the probability that the area was plundered in Antiquity or modern times.[43] The funerary find-spot is unusual, and may not represent its original archaeological context. Mound no. 1 in Karanis necropolis is datable to the 5th century AD,[44] and seems unlikely to be the original context for the Alexander head. A terracotta head of Alexander was found in a tomb in Ezbet el-Makhlouf, in the Hadra necropolis,[45] but its Hellenistic date justifies its funerary use, which does not apply to the Karanis Alexander and its Byzantine necropolis. It

36 Smith 1988, p. 89.
37 Reinsberg 2005, p. 554, no. 121.
38 Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 44; Stewart 1993, p. 251, fig. 85.
39 Stewart 1993, p. 251, fig. 85.
40 Reinsberg 2005, p. 556, no. 123.
41 Allen 1985, cat. 45, 47, 68, 104, 105, 110.
42 Allen 1985, cat. 110.
43 This data is derived from the excavation report in the Kom Oushim Museum Magazine. Our gratitude should be addressed to Ahmed Abdelaal, the former director of Fayum Archaeological Inspectorate who conducted these excavations, for these details via personal communications.
44 Buzi 2004.
45 Breccia 1933, p. 20, pl. V; Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 89, K. 32.

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is possible that the head was used in a public or, perhaps, domestic cult of Alexander the Great in Karanis, then dumped in late Antiquity.

Ptolemy Soter established the state cult of Alexander in Alexandria, its first eponymous priest being his brother Menelaos, reflecting the central role of cult in dynasty's religious policy of the time.[46] This cult is attested in many metropoleis and Greek poleis, such as Hermopolis and Ptolemais.[47] The proof of a portrait of Alexander in terracotta is in keeping with the abundance of such small representations in cheap materials in Egypt like bronze,[48] plaster,[49] wood[50] and faience,[51] equally used in his cult and honours during the many Ptolemaic festivals. A bread mould with the effigy of the Macedonian king[52] indicates the range and practices of his image in many *pompe* of the Ptolemaic dynasty. It can be expected that Alexander's cult shared the same spaces as the Ptolemaic royal cults in Alexandria and in the *chora*.

Two main temples dedicated to the Crocodile God have been revealed at Karanis and the town houses show a wide range of domestic cults.[53] Direct evidence for an Alexander cult is still lacking at the site, but it is known from other pieces of evidence from other Fayum towns, dating to Ptolemaic and Roman times. The alabaster head from Tell Yakuta, on the western side of Lake Qarun, shows a very tiny diadem and a hole on the second row of locks of hair,[54] perhaps to receive a crown. The head is 10 cm high and broken off of a statue, it dates to the Roman Period,[55] and maybe comes from a cultic context. Another valuable item can be cited: P. Berlin 13993, from Tebtynis and dating to 120-121 AD, attests the cult of Alexander *Ktistes*.[56] The chief priest, Boukolos, was *archidikastés* in Alexandria, a fact that reveals the rank and social backgrounds of the Alexandrian citizens who sponsored the cult in the *chora*, and which are attested throughout the Nile Valley.

Furthermore, the attestation of Alexander *Ktistes* cult in Roman times most likely indicates a Ptolemaic foundation of the cult in the Arsinoite nome. There is no direct known evidence, but other Ptolemaic royal cults are documented. A temple of the deified Arsinoe II and the Euergetes gods was dedicated in Medinet Madi, as we know from an inscription dated between 163-145 BC.[57] Another temple, in Magdola, was dedicated to Berenike Aphrodite and a Syrian goddess[58] in the late 3rd century, and it is possible that such temples housed images of divine Alexander and the Ptolemies, in a similar manner as the Thmuis royal cult building.[59] Perhaps Karanis had housed the same royal cult institution, and it may be possible that the terracotta fragment of a Ptolemaic king in Egyptian style,[60] which came from a surface find, was also once used in a royal cult context.

46 Fraser 1972, p. 215 ff.; Caneva 2012, p. 84 f.

47 Fraser 1972, p. 215 ff.; Smith 1988, p. 87 ff.; Stewart 1993, p. 250.

48 Perdrizet 1913, figs. 6–7; Grimm 1998, fig. 17.

49 Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 89, K. 31.

50 Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 33.

51 A small bust in Alexandria, see Seif el-Din, Nenna 1994, p. 304 f., pl. III-1.

52 Empereur 1998, p. 56.

53 Yandek 2013, p. 52 ff., where cults of Sarapis, Isis, Isis-Termouthis, Osiris Canopus and Aphrodite are attested.

54 Edgar 1903, p. 20 f.; Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 91, K. 38; Graeve 1974, p. 236, pl. 89 (1, 2).

55 Gebauer 1938-1939, p. 50, K. 38, 91.

56 Cohen 1995, p. 61, n. 131; Rizzi 2010, p. 133, n. 62.

57 Bernand 1981, no. 155; Hölbl 2001, p. 271.

58 Fraser 1972, p. 240, n. 402.

59 Queyrel 2003, p. 474 ff.; see as well Lembke 2000, p. 113 ff. for different identifications of the portraits.

60 Allen 1985, p. 470, cat. 109.

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Fig. 1. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv. 886, frontal view.

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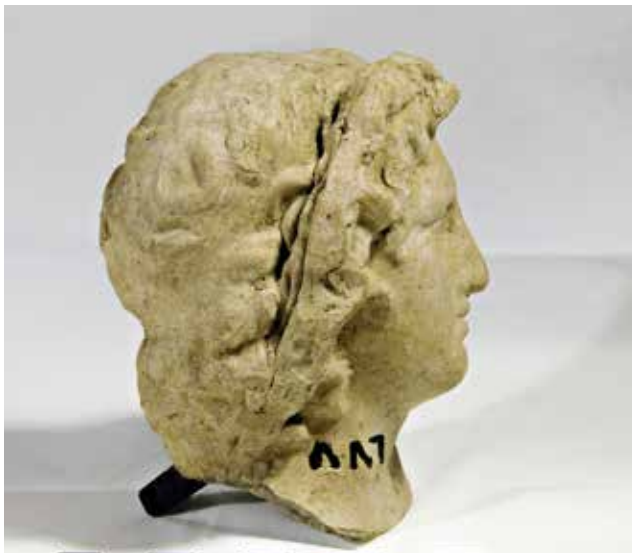


Fig. 2. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv. 886, right side view.



Fig. 3. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv. 886, left side view.



Fig. 4. Kom Oushim Museum, Inv. 886, back view.

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