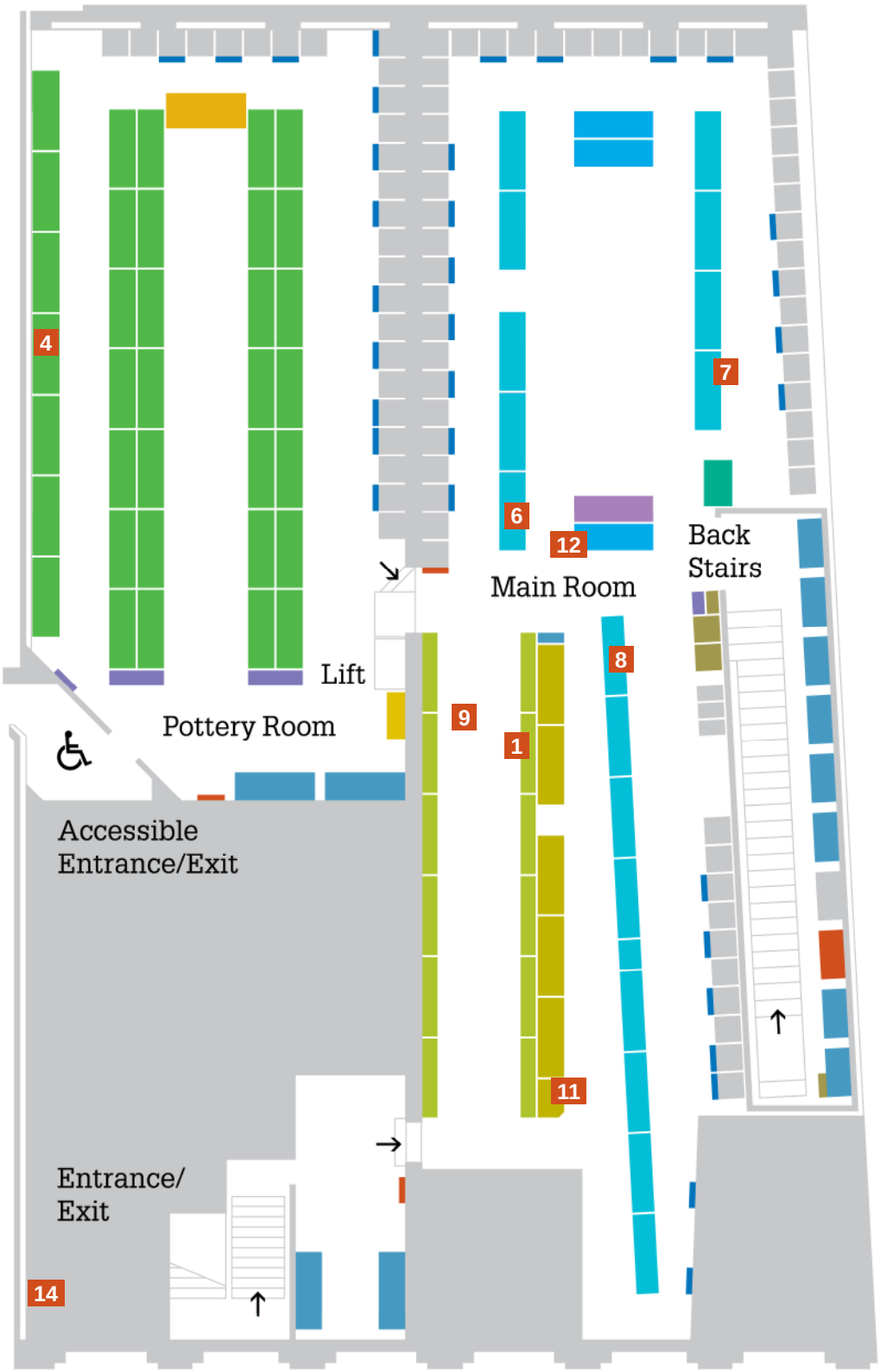
Trails

# Beyond Isis and Osiris
## Alternate Sexualities in Ancient Egypt

By John J Johnston

PETRIE

Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

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Only the objects on permanent display have been marked on the museum map. Images of other museum objects are provided in the trail.

This trail is the result of a series of lectures, which I have given either at the Petrie Museum or to the Friends of the Museum during LGBT History Month and at other times since 2008. In devising the trail, I have endeavoured to restrict myself to those objects within the museum's collection rather than considering the wider evidence with one notable exception, which lies beyond the confines of the museum but still within the grounds of University College London.

It is, I think, appropriate that the Petrie Museum should host this trail as Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) was particularly keen, in his excavation of settlement areas, to reveal the truth of the ancient Egyptians' day-to-day lives rather than uncovering the art treasures and funerary artefacts sought by his contemporaries.

I wish to begin by stating that the recognition and identification of objects directly exemplifying alternative sexualities is not easy. Many of the objects will serve merely as authentic illustrative tools. For various reasons, not least the intervening millennia of destructive and obstructive prejudice, the stories of these alterative sexualities are often obscured by innuendo and the mores of the period. However, sometimes, one is surprised by the refreshingly frank attitude towards sexual matters, which can reveal how differently the ancients viewed human sexuality and its manifold definitions.

That there is an 'official', somewhat censorious attitude towards homosexual acts in Pharaonic Egyptian culture is difficult to deny. However, the sources are varied and fragmentary. The twenty-seventh declaration of Chapter 125 of the Book of the Dead is a confirmation by the deceased that he did not have homosexual relations, however, in that same section he states that neither did he commit adultery (Parkinson, 1995, 61).

Similarly, there is a quite complex portion of the 'Instructions of Ptahhotep' which appears to dissuade one from having sex with a 'woman-boy' (Parkinson, 1995, 69) a phrase which appears to discriminate specifically against effeminacy.

I would suggest that although such references are few, they exist because such acts *did* occur and probably with some frequency. In a culture where procreative sex with one's wife engendered aspects of immortality both literally, albeit by proxy, and within a religio-funerary context there is a suggestion that to engage in non-procreative sexual acts was simply a waste of semen. It is apparent, as we shall see, that homosexual acts were certainly known and in certain circumstances accepted. As one moves forward through time and approaches those objects supported by Classical literary sources, a degree of clarity appears to develop although this, too, is open to substantial interpretation.

I have included a relatively full bibliography in the hope that the contents of this trail may encourage visitors to discover for themselves the rich vein of material in libraries, museums and galleries, which illustrate this alternative Egyptological approach.

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## The Objects

### 1 Funerary Stela of Khonsuirdis before Isis and Osiris

Location: Main Room IC8 Top Shelf (Inscriptions Cases)
UC14506 Ptolemaic Period (305BC–30BC)

Osiris, here represented as the King of the Dead and Isis, his consort, epitomise, with their son, Horus, the perfect ancient Egyptian nuclear family through whom many aspects of human experience: love, loyalty, birth and the darker elements, such as death, loss, rivalry, revenge, jealousy and violence are revealed and mythologized for consumption by the elite culture of ancient Egypt. Similarly, the tale of Osiris provides a starting point for the consideration of alternative sexuality in ancient Egypt.

Osiris is king of Egypt and like his siblings, including his sister-wife Isis, a god. However, his brother, Seth, is jealous of Osiris' royal position and determines to be rid of him.

Seth organises a sumptuous banquet at which he holds a small competition. Under his instructions artisans have crafted the most beautiful and elegant wooden coffin. It is his intention that the coffin will be won by whichever of his guests it best fits. The guests are stunned not only by their host's generosity but also by the magnificence of the casket and so each tries the coffin for size. Their efforts, however, are in vain as Seth has fashioned the coffin to Osiris' precise measurements. Therefore, when Osiris tries the coffin for size, Seth slams shut the lid and hacks both coffin and brother to pieces before hurling them into the Nile.

Seth then begins his campaign to succeed Osiris as king of Egypt.

However, Isis, in the form, of a kite travels up and down the Nile gathering the pieces of her husband's body. Although they are both gods, Isis' magic cannot return the bandaged Osiris to life; nevertheless, he enjoys a form of rebirth and eternal life as King of the Underworld and succeeds in impregnating her, which results in the birth of their son, the falcon deity, Horus.

The stage is set for the battle between divine uncle and nephew for the throne of Egypt.

**2 Papyrus Fragment: The Tale of Horus and Seth**
UC32158. Late Middle Kingdom (1850BC–1700BC)
Found at Lahun. Not normally on display for conservation reasons.

**The Tale of Horus and Seth.**

The reverse of this torn and damaged sheet of papyrus contains fragments of one of the earliest known examples of the tale of Horus and Seth's rivalry for the throne of Egypt. A later and more intact version of the tale is to be found on Papyrus Chester Beatty I, dated to the 20th Dynasty reign of Ramses V. This is usually referred to as 'The Contendings of Horus and Seth' (Lichtheim, 1976, 214–223) and, helpfully, provides a context for the Petrie fragment.

Horus and Seth, described as youths, have, nonetheless, been quarrelling for 80 years and the matter has now been placed before the divine court of Pre-Harakhti to decide upon the succession. However, he is becoming bored by this endless wrangling and Seth devises an alternative plan:

Then Seth said to Horus: ‘Come, let us have a feast day at my house.’ And Horus said to him: ‘I will, I will.’ Now when evening had come, a bed was prepared for them, and they lay down together. At night, Seth let his member become stiff and he inserted it between the thighs of Horus. And Horus placed his hands between his thighs and caught the semen of Seth.

Lichtheim, 1976, 219

When, the following day, Isis is shown Seth’s semen in Horus’ palm, she cuts off the offending hand and hurls it into the Nile, fashions a new one for her son and has him drop his own semen onto the lettuce growing in Seth’s garden, which Seth unwittingly eats.

On returning to the court, Seth states:

‘Let the office of ruler be given to me, for as regards Horus who stands here, I have done a man’s deed to him.’ Then the [Court] cried out aloud, and they spat out before Horus. And Horus laughed at them; and Horus took an oath by the god, saying: ‘What Seth has said is false. Let the semen of Seth be called, and let us see from where it will answer. Then let mine be called, and let us see from where it will answer.’

Lichtheim, 1976, 220

Of course, Seth’s semen answers from the waters where Isis has thrown Horus’ hand and Horus’ semen, which is in Seth’s stomach, emerges as a golden sun disk from his head, which the god Thoth then places as a crown on the head of Horus, the rightful heir to his father, Osiris’ throne.

The Petrie Museum fragment relates the same sexual encounter but it paints the protagonists as being rather more lustful in nature, including phrases, which have been described (Parkinson, 1995, 70) as the first recorded ‘chat-up’ line:

And then the Person of Seth said to the Person of Horus: ‘How lovely are your buttocks! And how muscular your thighs…’

In the Petrie version it is similarly evident that Seth views the penetrative act as more than the mere dominant behaviour of a conqueror: it will be ‘sweet to his heart’ (Quirke and Collier, 2004) to have carnal knowledge of Horus and the flirtatious nature of Seth’s approach suggests that Horus might also rather enjoy the activity.

## 3 Bronze Mount in the form of Seth

UC63715. New Kingdom (1550BC–1350BC). Not always on display.

**Bronze mount in the form of Seth.**

Although the regular form of Horus, that of the falcon, is generally well-known, it may be useful to briefly consider the nature and appearance of Seth. This unusual bronze shape shows the aegis of Seth: his head, perhaps that of a mythical creature, with curved snout and erect squared-off ears, atop a pectoral collar and surmounted by the two crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt. Petrie thought this object might be a brand although it has also been suggested as a mount, which would have held coloured inlays of paste or stone. If the former, it raises interesting questions about what was being branded and why.

Seth represents the ‘outsider’, he is the lord of chaos and confusion and as such he is the antithesis of all things the Egyptians believed to be right and proper. As the god of storms, he represents the unfettered forces of nature, including, perhaps, human nature. This primal power is not all bad, however, as he is the only deity with the ability to protect the sun god, Re, from the monstrous serpent Apophis in his nightly journey through the heavens. Furthermore the Ramesside kings adopted Seth as their patron deity.

It is too easy, therefore, to identify Seth as a god of evil with homosexual proclivities. Seth and his proclivities were aspects of the Egyptian psyche and experience, which helped to keep the world of the Egyptians in balance (Velde, 1977).

## 4 Pink Limestone Hippopotamus

Location: Pottery Room PC5 Shelf 3 (Pottery Cases) UC15195
Period: Pre-dynastic 5300–3100 BC

This pink limestone hippopotamus pendant was excavated at Gebelein and dates from Egypt's Predynastic period, somewhere in the region of 5300BC–3100BC. The hippopotamus was one of the most ferocious creatures to share the Nile valley with the ancient Egyptians. From the earliest periods the animal's nature earned it not only considerable respect and reverence but an association with Seth.

In the longer version of the 'Contending of Horus and Seth' from Papyrus Chester Beatty I, prior to Seth's invitation, mentioned at 'Object 2', above, the two gods transform themselves into hippopotami and wrestle in the Nile, goring at each other with their sharp elongated tusks (Lichtheim, 1976, 218–9).

In Egyptian art, Seth is often depicted in the form of a hippopotamus, usually being speared by Horus or the king in the guise of Horus. This identification is usually thought to be due to the beast's savagery and unpredictability. However, ongoing researches by the author seem to indicate that in a rare example of symbolic animal behaviour, a dominant male hippopotamus besting a rival will expect the loser to display his submission by yielding to an act of simulated anal intercourse by his rival. The parallels seem obvious with the sexualised, dominant behaviour of Seth and the observation of this behaviour in the wild may have contributed these elements of the tale.

## 5 Ostracon containing The Tale of Seth and Anat

Not on Display. UC31942. New Kingdom 1550–1350 BC

**Ostracon containing The Tale of Seth and Anat.**

This pottery ostracon reveals in eight lines of hieratic text, the cursive form of hieroglyphic writing, the tale of Anat and Seth. Anat was a Syrian warrior goddess, accepted into the Egyptian pantheon of deities in the New Kingdom. She has been described as, 'some sort of Amazon' (Manniche, 1987, 22), and is often depicted bare-breasted and brandishing weapons. There is a tradition, which this ostracon relates, that Seth attempted to force his attentions on her whilst she bathed, mounting the warrior goddess from behind, as though she were a man. This attempted rape, however, does not go well for Seth.

Interestingly, Anat is also usually depicted wearing the tall plumed Atef crown, more usually associated with Seth's fratricidal victim, Osiris.

### 6 Alabaster Head of Pepy II (?)

Location: Main Room Display Case I Shelf 1. UC16876. Dynasty 6 (2345BC–2181BC)

This tiny, broken, alabaster head from a statuette bears starling similarities to others of the infant king, Neferkare Pepy II who appears to have ruled from a very young age until 94 years. In light of his great age at death, it is ironic that the majority of sculptural works to have reached us show him as a child.

The Petrie Museum also holds a relief from Koptos, UC14281, showing his cartouche and the king in rather more vigorous, albeit badly damaged, form striding out with staff and mace.

A text described by the great philologist, Sir Alan Gardiner in 1961 as 'a story quite in the spirit of Herodotus' (p.101) reaches us from some point in the Late Period, although certain grammatical and stylistic elements may, in fact, suggest a considerably earlier date.

The papyrus relates the tale of King Neferkare and his general, Sasenet. For reasons which are never explained in the damaged papyrus, one Teti, son of Henet, watches the king after dark as he clambers up a lowered ladder into the home of his unmarried general, where he remains for four hours, leaving only 'after his Person had done what he desired with him' (Montserrat, 2000, 143). We have no idea how the tale ends but there is a suggestion that the king should not be spending his valuable time in such frivolous ways. If King Neferkare is the historical Pepy II, it is tempting to think that the memory of Egypt's descent into the decentralised chaos following this king's reign might have been the spur for such a cautionary tale.

### 7 Alabaster cosmetic vase bearing the cartouche of Hatshepsut

Location: Main Room WEC 7 Shelf 1. UC15862. Dynasty 18 (1550BC–1295BC). Found at Deir el Bahri

This alabaster jar was intended to hold some form of cosmetic – possibly kohl for the eyes. It bears the cartouche of Hatshepsut and may have been owned by her. It was discovered at Deir el Bahri, where her mortuary temple lies and, consequently, may have formed part of her funerary assemblage. However, it appears unfinished and may have been an item which was being worked and discarded with Hatshepsut's death and never completed.

Daughter of King Tuthmosis I, wife and half-sister of Thuthmosis II, Queen Hatshepsut reigned for some fourteen years following the untimely death of her husband and, although she originally acted as regent for her young step-son and nephew, the putative Tuthmosis III, by Year Two of her reign some interesting iconographic changes were underway as she assumed the role of king.

Although one could hardly describe Hatshepsut's transformation from female to male as transvestism, her statuary gradually adopted more and more male attributes from the *nemes* headdress to the wearing of the false beard and the short *shendyt* kilt.

Hatshepsut's Karnak obelisk depicts her as male on two sides and female on the other two whilst her birth name, which translates, somewhat unfortunately, in the circumstances, as 'Foremost of the Noble Ladies', is rendered without the feminine ending.

Although we can have no knowledge as to whether this masculine demeanour was adopted in life, the Egyptian elite must have found the adaptation and subversion of masculine royal iconography to be challenging.

This view can probably be borne out by the discovery of an obscene graffito in a tomb overlooking Hatshepsut's mortuary temple confirmed by Edward Wente in 1984 as dating from her reign. It shows a king, bent over and being entered, from behind, by another man. Although this has been interpreted as Hatshepsut being serviced by her architect and major domo, Senenmut, Wente has suggested, more plausibly, that it is a political satire on Hatshepsut's gender role as the king being incapable of fulfilling the role suggesting that:

The sexually active male may simply be an anonymous figure serving to provide the means for commenting pictorially upon the absurdity of Hatshepsut's acting as king, unable to be a 'Mighty Bull'.

Wente, 1984, 53

**8 Ivory cosmetic spoon in the form of a naked female**
Location: Pottery Room. UC2608. Dynasty 19 (1295BC–1186BC)
Found at Qau

The evidence for lesbian behaviour in ancient Egypt is even less prevalent than we find for male homosexuality. The 'Dream Book' of the Papyrus Carlsberg XIII advises, 'If a woman dreams that a

woman has intercourse with her, she will come to a bad end' (Manniche, 1987, 22). Nevertheless, in the New Kingdom, particularly, women are frequently shown enjoying female company in a relaxed and intimate atmosphere, often surrounded by nude or scantily clad female servants.

Furthermore, cosmetic jars and utensils are often adorned with naked girls during this period. Whilst there are clearly connotations with the goddess, Nut, as described by Arielle Kozloff (1998, 97–8), consideration must also be given to the intrinsic nature of the form these objects take. It is also evident from the soft woods and polished ivory used most frequently in the manufacture of these objects that the use of these items was intended to be sensual.

Of course, one must remember that cosmetic items were also used by men and consequently, this interest in the female form may be entirely predictable as men would not only use but commission and fashion such items.

However, equally, from the earliest periods these same men are portrayed as handsome, athletic, and desirable in works which are usually fashioned and commissioned by other men. An article on *The Guardian* website, dated 6 January 2009, described the recently restored painting from the tomb of Nebamun in the British Museum as depicting 'a rather hunky athlete hunting in the marshes' (Bennett, 2009). One wonders, consequently, how obvious this foregrounding of the athletic male was in the minds of the men involved. Were these elegant and vigorous males, figures of aspiration or desire or, indeed, both?

A point made by Jan Assman in his article on portraiture in Egypt (1996) raises some interesting questions regarding the supposedly idealised representations of the elite, particularly in the New Kingdom. He suggests that these are not idealised images, so much as *homogenised* and that the levels of depilation, cosmetic application, and wig wearing amongst the fashionable elite may have substantially reduced individuality to the point, where everyone resembled a 'type' as is evident from artworks, which probably suggests a concomitant blurring of outward gender distinctions.

### 9 Relief of Akhenaten and Nefertiti

Location: Main Room IC5 bottom shelf (inscriptions case). UC401
Early Akhenaten (1352BC–1336BC)

This exquisitely worked relief in alabaster from Akhenaten's newly found city of Akhetaten, modern Tell el Amarna, shows the king, his chief wife, Nefertiti and one of their daughters, Meritaten, worshipping their sole god, the sun's disk, the Aten.

Enough has been written about Akhenaten and his heretical beliefs to fill several libraries and yet we cannot be entirely certain about his motivation for choosing to be depicted in such an unusual fashion. Not only are we accustomed to seeing Akhenaten's elongated and distorted facial features but as in this piece, the king's body takes on entirely feminine dimensions. The protuberant breasts, slim waist, and wide hips are rendered almost identically to those of Nefertiti, standing beside him. Certainly, theories have not been in short supply. The combining of masculine and feminine traits was not unique in Egyptian art and mythology *per se*: the fecundity of the Nile god, Hapi is portrayed in a similar fashion and the sole creator god, Atum is, by reason of his actions, essentially 'hermaphroditic' in nature. However, the adoption of such traits by the king is without precedent save in the intermediary stages of Hatshepsut's iconographic transformation, which were to a very different purpose and effect.

A 'news' article dated as recently as 4 May 2008 details the work of a physician in Baltimore with the headline, 'Egyptian Pharaoh May Have Been Natural Transsexual' (Associated Press). The article states that:

The female form was due to a genetic mutation that caused the pharaoh's body to convert more male hormones to female hormones than needed, Dr. Irwin Braverman believes. The pharaoh had 'an androgynous appearance. He had a female physique with wide hips and breasts, but he was male and he was fertile and he had six daughters,' Braverman said. 'But nevertheless, he looked like he had a female physique.'

There is a somewhat cautionary tale regarding the interpretation of evidence and the concomitant long term outcomes thereof: Towards the end of Akhenaten's reign, Nefertiti appears to vanish from the historical record and to be replaced by a male co-regent, Smenkhkare. In 1928, Percy Newberry, perhaps one of the first to hazard an 'alternative' reading of an Egyptian artefact wrote, regarding Berlin Stela 17813:

[Howard] Carter has also drawn my attention to a remarkable stela in the Berlin Museum… which has always been supposed to represent Akhenaten and his queen Nefertiti, but, as Carter points out to me, the double crown worn by the one figure and the Khepresh-crown worn by the other make it clear that we have here two kings, and not a king and his consort. The two royal personages here are undoubtedly Akhenaten and his co-regent Smenkhkare. The intimate relations between Pharaoh and the boy as shown by the scene on the stela recall the relationship between the Emperor Hadrian and the youth Antinous.

Newberry, 1928, 7

It was not until 1973 that Professor J R Harris re-identified the individuals as Akhenaten and Nefertiti although for many the debate rages on and Akhenaten is still erroneously referenced in many publications as one of the first known homosexuals in history (Montserrat, 2000, 166–182).

## 10 Terracotta head of Alexander the Great (?)

Not always on display. UC4988. Ptolemaic. 3rd Century BC. Found at Memphis

**Terracotta head of Alexander the Great (?) .**

This hollow terracotta head probably represents Alexander the Great as it bears a strong resemblance to his portrait type with its full, slightly unkempt, locks brushed back from the forehead.

Alexander III of Macedon arrived in Egypt in order to rout the Persian invaders who had colonised many of the countries surrounding the Mediterranean and had ruled Egypt for some two-hundred years. As a result of his success, Alexander became the rightful ruler of Egypt, accepting the title of King of Upper and Lower Egypt.

Unlike his predecessors in the role, however, Alexander was the product of a Hellenic upbringing. His tutor was the great Athenian philosopher, Aristotle and he was accustomed to the prevalent fashion of socially accepted and promoted homosexuality between elite males. Dalliances with attractive young men were to be expected. Indeed, Alexander’s father, Phillip II, was rumoured to have been murdered by a former male lover in a fit of jealous pique before the eyes of his people and his wives.

The sources tell us that Alexander had a particular bond with one of his band of companions: Hephaestion, a boyhood friend, who in many respects appears to have emulated Patroklos, as Alexander strove to emulate his Homeric hero, Achilles. Both men travelled to the site of Troy where they sacrificed to the shades of these heroes. Although Homer, in his epic, does not make the relationship between the two heroes explicit, it was generally accepted during the Classical period that the relationship had been homosexual in nature.

Alexander's links with Egypt appear to have been considerably more than merely those of a visiting general. Whilst there, he sought the advice of the Oracle of Ammon at Siwa Oasis, travelling to that far flung outpost, after which, it is believed he believed himself to be the son of a god. He also visited the ancient fishing village of Rakhotis, where he founded the city of Alexandria. There are reliefs in the temple of Karnak, showing Alexander in typically Pharaonic poses, suggesting that he must have instituted some form of building or restoration programme at this venerable site. He then departed with Hephaestion to destroy the fleeing Persian army. Alexander sought to conquer the world and in so doing, to unite east and west. In this and many other things, Alexander was a unique thinker. Similarly, his relationship with Hephaestion continued long after the Greek tradition, which dictated that such relationships usually finished when the younger party approached his early to mid twenties.

Alexander married and begot heirs. However, Hephaestion was never far from his side and when Hephaestion died unexpectedly at Ecbatana in October 324 BC, Alexander reacted with extreme distress. He had the physician who had been tending Hephaestion executed on the spot and threatened to raze the city to the ground. We are further told that, against advice, he lay with the body for a full twenty-four hours without food or drink. He endeavoured to have Hephaestion deified but for the intervention of the Oracle of Ammon in Egypt, who decreed he should be worshipped merely as a hero.

Nevertheless, a massive funeral pyre was constructed at enormous expense, utilising bricks from the city walls of Babylon to create a platform over 7m in height, the remains of which, which may have been discovered by Robert Koldewey in 1904 (Palagia, 2000, p.173). Thereafter, Alexander fell into a downward spiral, from which he never recovered, dying, himself, only eight months later.

However, even in death Alexander's link with Egypt was not to be broken. His body was embalmed by Egyptians and Chaldeans, who, we are told, used honey as a preservative and would have been buried at the Macedonian royal necropolis at Vergina but for the fact that his body was intercepted *en route* by his former general, Ptolemy, who carried him to Egypt to serve as the ideological and political hub of his own dynastic ambition.

Alexander's final resting place is now lost to us, although it is known that both Julius Caesar and Octavian visited his mausoleum in Alexandria, some three hundred years later.

Alexander had amassed a vast empire and enormous wealth before he died at the age of thirty-two, during which time Hephaestion rarely left his side.

### 11 Terracotta figurine resembling Ptolemy VIII Euergetes (Physkon)

Location: Main Room IC19 (Inscriptions Cases/Ptolemaic Display) UC47632. Middle Ptolemaic Period (203BC–117BC). Found at Memphis

This tiny, terracotta figurine strongly resembles the descriptions which have reached us of the monstrous king, Ptolemy VIII Euergetes, known to the Alexandrian masses as Physkon or 'Potbelly'. He appears to sit in a throne or chariot, with his somewhat effeminate robes diaphanously revealing his grotesque bulk beneath. If this does represent the king, then such an object would have been a dangerous item to posses during the king's lifetime as his bloodlust and capacity for revenge were notorious.

The piece is, however, reminiscent of Diodorus Siculus' description of Ptolemy VIII puffing and sweating through the heat of the sun *en route* to the harbour with the notoriously austere envoy from Rome, Scipio Aemilianus, who had deliberately eschewed the use of a litter and later commented, 'The Alexandrians owe me one thing; they have seen their king walk' (Ashton, 2001, 65).

The incident is worth mentioning in this particular context, not only because the vision of Euergetes resembling a somewhat tacky and overweight drag act remains an amusing one but also because under the Ptolemies, Alexandria had become a hot bed of intellectual, philosophical, artistic and literary activity and was also deemed to be a rather good spot for picking up young men as exemplified in the poetry of Callimachus, Theocritus and numerous others working at the famous Library (Montserrat, 1996, 144–6).

### 12 Mummy Portrait of the 'Red Youth'

Location: Fayum Portraits Case. UC19610. Roman Period (AD 140 - 160). Found at Hawara

This portrait of painted in wax on lime wood was excavated by Petrie in 1911. It represents a muscular young man with tanned, naked shoulders and chest, rather like an athlete. Petrie, himself, christened the portrait the 'Red Youth'. This and the other mummy boards in the museum's substantial collection would originally have been affixed to the wrappings of the deceased in a manner similar to that of the mummy of Artemidorus, on display in the British Museum.

Dominic Montserrat placed emphasis on the erotic aspect of the fifty or so known mummy portraits of young men in their late teens to early twenties. Montserrat commented on the iconography employed in the portraits of young men ‘as being at the apogee of their sexual desirability’ (Montserrat, 1993, 225) with their slight moustaches, frequently naked torsos and garlanded hair. While this should not, necessarily, be deemed to represent *homosexual* desirability, it should be recalled that Roman society, at various periods, was distinctly ambivalent about one’s sexual proclivities outside of marriage providing one remained within certain rules regarding married women and freeborn girls and youths.

## 13 Coin of Hadrian

Not usually on display. UC39383. Roman Period. Found at Naukratis

**Badly corroded bronze coin of Emperor Hadrian.**

This badly corroded bronze coin of the Roman Emperor, Hadrian, from the site of Naukratis is one of the few representations held in the Petrie Museum of this oft-depicted emperor. Following the death of Cleopatra VII, the emperors of Rome came to rule Egypt and, for the purposes of Egyptian religion, the Kings of Upper and Lower Egypt, although few visited the country.

A Spaniard by birth, Hadrian was fascinated by Greek history and art and by the ‘mystery religions’ of Egypt. Hadrian was *philhellene* – a lover of Greek Classical culture – and endowed and restored many great buildings throughout the Greek provinces and rebuilt a number of historic structures in Rome itself. He was known as *Graeculus*, ‘Little Greek’ and was the first Roman emperor to wear a beard in the Greek style, although, in typically scurrilous Roman fashion, it was rumoured that he only did so because beneath it, his face was blemished.

Hadrian married Vibia Sabina, the Emperor Trajan's niece by marriage and, in so doing, secured for himself the Imperial throne. It has also been suggested that an intimacy between Hadrian and Trajan did not hinder matters.

Unlike the majority of Roman emperors, Hadrian spent much of his reign away from Rome, touring the provinces. This involved a substantial train of advisers, courtiers, intellectuals, the Empress and a young man from the city of Claudiopolis, near the Black Sea, whose name was Antinous…

### 14 Bronze replica of the 'Farnese Antinous'

Location: Portico of the Wilkins Building, Main Entrance UCL on Gower St. Eighteenth Century AD

This eighteenth century bronze copy of the so-called 'Farnese Antinous' was donated to University College London by Dr Robert Fellowes (1770–1847) in 1829. It, together with the 'Diskobolos', donated at the same time, were sited on the portico of the Wilkins Building, in 1872. The sculptor of the pieces is unknown.

Our textual knowledge of Antinous is slight: we cannot be sure when he first met Hadrian or even of his precise age. He was possibly born in AD 111 and almost certainly freeborn. A later votive text gives his date of birth as 27 November. It is likely that Hadrian encountered Antinous in Bithynia (modern Turkey) in approximately AD126 or 127.

Having travelled around the Greek provinces Hadrian, Antinous, and the Empress Sabina were initiated in September AD 128 into the Eleusinian Mysteries, which were related to the myth of Demeter and Persephone and centred upon death and rebirth (Lambert, 1997, 104). As the journey progressed Hadrian became increasingly obsessed with his own impending doom, foretold by dreams and the prophecies of the sorcerers with whom Hadrian had begun to consort.

By October AD 130 the Imperial party had reached Egypt and were travelling on the Nile, possibly returning from a visit to the nearby Hermopolis, the cult site of Thoth, the Egyptian god of writing, secret wisdom and magic, which would seem to fit the Emperor's interests at the time.

On 24 October, the traditional date of Osiris' death, the beautiful Antinous drowned in the river Nile. The Classical sources initially tell us, succinctly, 'During a journey on the Nile [Hadrian] lost his Antinous', and that Hadrian, 'wept like a woman' at the death.

Suspicions surrounding the death were raised by all ancient commentators with Aurelius Victor, writing some 150 years later providing the most information:

For when Hadrian was desiring to prolong his life by any means, the magicians proposed that someone should die voluntarily on his behalf, everyone refused, Antinous alone offered.

Lambert, 1997, 131

Certainly, by 30 October, Hadrian has founded a city, Antinoopolis, on the banks of the Nile closest to the spot where Antinous died and named a star in the constellation of *Aquila* (The Eagle) after the boy. Hadrian's mourning culminated in the unprecedented step of Antinous being created a god; the last god of the ancient world. In his worship throughout the empire, Antinous is often conflated with the Egyptian, Osiris or the Greek, Dionysos but most frequently as himself: a beautiful, ageless youth with gently downcast head.

We know that Hadrian survived his favourite by only eight unhappy years during which, he frequently but unsuccessfully sought his own death, before retreating to his villa at Tivoli, where excavators still search for the tomb of Antinous (Mari, 2006).

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