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Reassessing the Orans Pose in Roman Egyptian Funerary Art: Two Unpublished Stelae from Mendes

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Abstract: *This study presents, for the first time, two funerary stelae from ancient Mendes (Dakahlia) while aiming to date and interpret them. It also compares these stelae with similar examples from Kom Abu Bellou and Roman-era sarcophagi, tracing their origins and examining the continuity of their design into the Coptic and Christian artistic contexts. The research explores the intended meaning of the raised-hand gesture of the deceased on these stelae, emphasizing the orans posture and relating it to the prevailing religious beliefs of the time. The analysis indicates that the owners of the two stelae were not necessarily Egyptian; however, they were clearly influenced by ancient Egyptian religious concepts, including the depiction of funerary deities such as Anubis. Furthermore, the study shows that the orans posture served as a visual tool, expressing the moral identity of the deceased and their successful passage through divine judgment, in line with Greco-Roman notions of pietas. This approach reflects a hybrid strategy, preserving Egyptian funerary ideology while visually adapting it to be comprehensible within a multicultural environment. In conclusion, the artistic culture in Mendes during the Roman period maintained the continuity of Egyptian funerary practices through the conscious adaptation of traditional symbols and techniques. This reflects a productive interaction between local heritage and classical influences in shaping the posthumous identity of the deceased.*

Keywords: Roman Egypt, Funerary Art, Gestures, Mendes, Stelae, Anobis, Supplicant, Orans Pose

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Stela A

Material: Limestone.

Dimensions: Height 40 cm; width 23 cm.

Inventory number and place of preservation: P.350, housed in the Old Port Said Museum.

Provenance: Mendes (Tel er-Rub'a);¹ donated by the merchant Farag al-Gabbari. Excavation registration number 7643.

Date of registration: 21 July 1986.

Condition of the stela: The upper part shows fine cracks, with slight surface erosion on some faces, particularly around the head and arms. The stela is currently covered with a transparent plastic protective layer to prevent further deterioration.

Description: The main scene depicts two human figures alongside a ritual element, represented by an altar, and a symbolic figure of the god Anubis in the upper register, which gives the composition a distinctly funerary character.

The figure on the right is interpreted as a suppliant or worshipper and is shown from the front, raising its right hand in a gesture of prayer or supplication (often referred to as the orans posture). This figure is dressed in a long, draped tunic that reaches the feet and covers the left shoulder.

To the left, the second figure extends its left arm slightly forward toward the altar, suggesting a libation or liquid offering, while the right arm is bent across the chest. The figure's head is rounded, with hair depicted by short, successive incised lines, and the face lacks intricate features.

In front of the left figure is an altar shaped like a cylindrical column with a concave upper surface, resembling a censer or miniature altar.

In the upper left section of the stela, directly above the altar, a small figure representing the god Anubis is depicted. Shown in profile, this deity has the head of a jackal and a body inclined forward, as if receiving offerings or bestowing blessings on the funerary rite.

Anubis's body appears to be suspended above ground level, which may symbolize his spiritual rather than physical presence, emphasizing his role as the protector of the deceased and the guardian of embalming rituals and the afterlife.

¹ In 275 BCE, Ptolemy II Philadelphus rebuilt the city of Mendes after it had been completely destroyed during Persian rule. He completed the construction of a temple and dedicated a statue to his wife, Arsinoe, known as Arsinoe Philadelphus, Beloved of the Ram. During his reign, Mendes was granted several privileges, including exemption from transit taxes, and it became the capital of the Sixteenth Nome of Lower Egypt throughout both the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. Papyrological documents from Mendes highlight the city's prominence during these times, as well as its social and religious significance, particularly under Philadelphus. Additionally, Mendes played an important economic role during the Roman period, serving as a center for wine production, perfume manufacture, and the creation of Roman garlands. It was also connected by trade routes to various regions of the Mediterranean. During the Christian period, the local population repurposed the temple as a church, demonstrating the continuity of sacred use at the site across different religious phases; Redfor, 2001, 2005; Ball, 1942.

Stela B

Material: Limestone.

Dimensions: Height 26 cm; width 24.5 cm.

Inventory number and place of preservation: P.39, housed in the Old Port Said Museum.

Provenance: Mendes (Tel er-Rub'a); donated by the merchant Farag al-Gabbari. Excavation registration number 13711.

Date of registration: 10 July 1986.

Condition of the stela: The surface is relatively smooth, with traces of pitting and minor breaks indicating natural erosion, possibly resulting from humidity or handling during transport.

Description: Relief of a figure is depicted in a devotional posture, known as the orans pose, depicted between two columns with both arms raised upwards, bent at the elbows, and palms facing forward. The individual wears a long tunic that reaches just below mid-calf, indicated by vertically incised lines running down the body. The garment appears to be a single piece, worn over the head and fastened at the shoulders. The tunic lacks decorative elements or clavi, suggesting that the deceased belonged to a middle social stratum or that the sculptor intentionally emphasized the devotional aspect rather than ornamental detail. Light diagonal incised lines at the left shoulder may indicate the presence of a simple mantle or cloak draped around the body, identifiable as a pallium. The figure's feet are bare and not detailed, which is consistent with Egyptian-Roman funerary representations that prioritize the depiction of the upper body. One foot is shown facing forward, while the other is positioned laterally. The figure is framed at the upper and lateral sides by a slightly raised rectangular border, typically interpreted as a niche. There are no inscriptions or additional decorative motifs present.



Fig. 1. Funerary Stela (A) from Mendes, the Old Port Said Museum, inv. P.350 (photo by Shaimaa Ahmed).



Fig. 2. Funerary Stela (B) from Mendes, the Old Port Said Museum, inv. P.39 (photo by Shaimaa Ahmed).

Context

The standing figures depicted with raised arms in the orans posture on funerary stelae have traditionally been interpreted as a visual manifestation of Egyptian influence, often in dialogue with Greek and Roman artistic traditions. These figures are generally centrally positioned on the stela, with arms extended at right angles and forearms raised, palms facing forward or occasionally outward. Despite extensive scholarly attention, the precise significance of this gesture remains debated. Four primary explanations have been proposed, each offering a different perspective on origin and meaning.

Discussion

The two funerary stelae under consideration [Figs. 1-2] provide a particularly clear example of how the orans gesture functioned as a visual marker of post-judgment status rather than a generalized sign of prayer. In both cases, the deceased is represented standing frontally, with arms raised symmetrically and bent at the elbows, the forearms lifted upward in a controlled and balanced manner. This bodily configuration is significant, as it conforms neither to gestures of supplication nor to narrative action, but instead conveys a stable and resolved corporeal state. Such bodily stability is consistent with Egyptian visual conventions for depicting achieved order and moral integrity rather than transitional or uncertain moments.²

Stela A

On Stela A [Fig. 1], the figure's frontal stance and proportional symmetry emphasize bodily completeness, a key prerequisite for successful existence in the afterlife according to Egyptian belief. As Assmann has demonstrated, corporeal integrity was inseparable from moral legitimacy in the Egyptian conception of judgment, where the preservation of the body reflected the righteousness of the individual before the divine tribunal.³ The raised arms, therefore, should not be read as an appeal for mercy, but as a visual affirmation that judgment has already been passed in favor of the deceased.

This interpretation is reinforced by the absence of any iconographic indicators of danger, punishment, or anxiety. Egyptian funerary imagery consistently differentiates between those awaiting judgment and those who have successfully passed it through bodily posture. Figures associated with guilt or condemnation are shown bound,

² Baines, 2007: 155-178.

³ Assmann, 2005: 62-90.

attacked, or dismembered, whereas upright and open postures signal acceptance and transformation.⁴ The orans gesture on Stela A thus functions as a post-judgment image, projecting the deceased's integration into the ordered realm of the afterlife.

In Aglan's thesis on the "Aspects of Animal Worship in Ptolemaic and Roman Antiquities in Egypt," a question was raised regarding the reason for depicting animals beside the deceased, presenting two potential possibilities.⁵ The first possibility concerns the significant role these animals played in funerary customs by assisting the deceased in passing safely into the underworld, as Anubis was the god of mummification. Examples from the Roman Period appear in the depictions of the Kom el-Shuqafa tomb (dated to the 3rd century CE), where Anubis is shown during the mummification process wearing Roman attire, while Horus stands at the foot of the couch wearing the double crown, holding a was-sceptre in one hand and a vessel containing a plant in the other, symbolizing rebirth according to Osirian belief.⁶ It is said that Anubis constructed the "House of Purification" with the assistance of the god Thoth to mummify Osiris's body, thereafter being regarded as the god of mummification; he was depicted in black to symbolize the color of the Nile from which crops emerge, signifying rebirth.⁷ Furthermore, he was given several titles representing his functions, including "He who is in the place of embalming" (Imy-wt). Some scholars noted that was symbolizes rebirth and immortality, as parts of the offerings presented to him were burned to symbolize the ascent of the body to heaven with the rising smoke.⁸ The second possibility relates to the role played by both Anubis and Horus in the judgment of the deceased.⁹ In the court of Osiris, the hearts of the deceased were weighed, and the justified survivors were presented to Osiris's throne. Anubis or a masked priest performed the Opening of the Mouth ritual for the dead to revive them in the tomb, a ritual that continued into the Ptolemaic and Roman periods,¹⁰ where embalming priests wore Anubis masks to represent the deity, extending this divine impersonation to the funeral where Anubis – as a masked priest – presented the mummy for funerary ceremonies.¹¹ An example is depicted on the western wall of the Akhmim tomb (dated to the 2nd century CE), showing Anubis and Horus holding the scale with one hand and the scale pans and indicator with the other.¹² Other Roman Period scenes showing the judgment of the deceased in the presence of Anubis and Horus are documented in tombs across Bahariya Oasis,

⁴ Assmann, 2005: 83-88.

⁵ Aglan, 2013: 144-145.

⁶ Rowe, 1942: 20; Corbelli, 2006: 25; Aglan, 2013: 144-145.

⁷ Rossiter, 1979: 19.

⁸ Mercer, 1949: 147; Hart, 1986: 23-25.

⁹ Aglan, 2013: 144-145; Bissing, 1950: 570.

¹⁰ Kákosy, 1971: 95-106; Hart, 1986: 21, 25, 26.

¹¹ Hart, 1986: 21, 25, 26.

¹² Bissing, 1950: 570.

Saqqara, Akhmim, Tigrane in Alexandria, and Thebes.¹³ Anubis played a crucial role in the beliefs held by Egyptians, Graeco-Egyptians, and Romans living in Egypt during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. His popularity spread, leading to his syncretism with the god Hermes as “Hermanubis,” and he was titled the guide of souls (*Psychopompos*).¹⁴ His role persisted as the deity responsible for preserving the corpse of the deceased, alongside his functions in the judgment and general protection of the dead. Consequently, protective depictions of Anubis were placed on coffins and worn as amulets by the deceased to invoke the god's power and abilities on their behalf.

The funerary stela under study (Stela A) exhibits distinctive iconographical features reflecting the artistic and cultural synthesis of ancient Egyptian traditions and Graeco-Roman elements. The deceased is rendered in a full-frontal pose, holding a libation dish (*Patera*) and performing a sacrifice/libation rite over an altar.

When comparing the stela under study with contemporary tombstones from Upper Egypt [Fig. 3], a strong stylistic and religious parallel emerges with the funerary stela discovered at Abydos. The latter represents a unique composition depicting the god Anubis alongside an altar.¹⁵ On the Abydos stela, the deceased is rendered in a full-frontal pose, placing his right hand over an incense burner/altar, flanked on either side by two distinct mummified forms of Anubis – one wearing the 3tf-crown and the other wearing the double crown, both framed within a shrine structure.¹⁶



Fig. 3. Funerary stela from Abydos, the deceased performing libation over an altar (after Abdalla, 1992: 45, Cat. No. 95, Pl. 38a).

¹³ Breccia, 1970: 59; Grimm, 1974:117; Abd el-Al, Grenier & Wagner, 1985: 84; Parlasca & Seemann, 1999: 310; Regen, 2012: 631; Aglan, 2013:146-147.

¹⁴ Al-Ghannam, 1985: 246.

¹⁵ Abdalla, 1992: 34-40.

¹⁶ Abdalla, 1992: 45.

The significance of depicting altars on this category of tombstones (both in the stela under study and the Abydos stela) relies on specific ritualistic and religious considerations. The altar or incense burner served as a focal element for executing offering rites, burning incense, and pouring libations, all of which were designed to purify the deceased, ensure resurrection, and sustain the *ka* (soul) in the afterlife.¹⁷ These stelae broadly demonstrate a synthesis of Egyptian and Graeco-Roman typologies, as the depicted altars are divided into two main categories: the traditional Egyptian type (such as rectangular offering basins and stand-supported tables) and the Graeco-Roman type, which commonly features a bowl set on a splayed-base stand, as exemplified in the Abydos stela.¹⁸ Furthermore, portraying the deceased actively engaged in burning incense or pouring libations over the altar before the gods (or in the presence of Anubis) served to emphasize individual piety and devotion, thereby securing divine acceptance and favor in the underworld.¹⁹ In the funerary stela under study, this ritual meaning is clearly manifested through the deceased holding a libation dish (*Patera*), a prominent ritual emblem frequently represented in the hands of reclining women in the funerary sculpture of Mendes.²⁰ However, the stela under study confirms that the depiction of the *patera* was not restricted to reclining female figures; it was also held by standing men positioned at altars, as seen in the aforementioned Abydos stela. In these scenes, the altar/incense burner operates in tandem with the libation rite to emphasize the deceased's piety and ensure resurrection.²¹

This iconographic tradition further resonates in a funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou [Fig. 4]. In this stela, the deceased is depicted standing in a full-frontal pose within a pedimented niche/shrine, holding a libation vessel and extending his hand over a conical altar positioned before him to perform sacrifice and libation rites, with Anubis couchant at his feet. The strong iconographic coherence between the stelae from Mendes, Abydos, and Kom Abu Billou demonstrates the widespread popularity of this ritual formulation and piety motif across various artistic centers in Roman Egypt.²²

¹⁷ Abdalla, 1992: 108-109.

¹⁸ Abdalla, 1992: 108-109, 114, Cat. No. 95.

¹⁹ Abdalla, 1992: 108.

²⁰ Ahmed, 2021.

²¹ Abdalla, 1992: 108-109, 114; Ahmed, 2021.

²² Abd el-Al, Grenier & Wagner, 1985: Pl. 39, No. 151; Abdalla, 1992: 108-109; Ahmed, 2021.



Fig. 4. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou showing a deceased figure holding a libation vessel at an altar (after Abd el-Al, Grenier & Wagner, 1985: Pl. 39, No. 151).

Stela B

Stela B [Fig. 2] further strengthens this reading through its schematic simplicity. Here, the raised-arm posture is isolated as the primary visual message, stripped of narrative context or elaborate divine presence. This reduction suggests that the gesture itself had become sufficient to convey the theological meaning of successful judgment. As Baines has argued, such visual condensation is characteristic of later funerary practices, in which images increasingly replaced extended textual or narrative programs as carriers of belief.²³ The body itself becomes the medium through which doctrinal certainty is communicated.

The placement of these stelae within semi-public funerary spaces also plays a crucial role in shaping their meaning. Unlike tomb paintings, which addressed the divine realm and the deceased's ritual needs, funerary stelae were designed to be seen by the living. Their imagery participated in the social construction of memory and posthumous identity.²⁴ In this context, the orans gesture operates as a declarative visual statement addressed to the viewer, asserting that the deceased has attained a legitimate and favorable status in the afterlife.

Within the multicultural environment of Roman Egypt, the gesture's meaning was further enriched by its cross-cultural legibility. While deeply rooted in Egyptian funerary ideology, the raised-arm posture was also intelligible within Greco-Roman

²³ Baines, 2007: 287-312.

²⁴ Baines, 2007: 309-315.

visual traditions as an expression of pietas and moral virtue. Elsner has emphasized that Roman-period images often functioned polysemantically, allowing different audiences to interpret the same motif through distinct cultural frameworks.²⁵ The figures on both stelae exemplify this phenomenon: Egyptian viewers could read the gesture as confirmation of successful Osirian judgment, while Greek and Roman viewers could interpret it as a sign of piety and ethical conduct.²⁶

Crucially, this visual hybridity does not imply a weakening of Egyptian religious identity. Rather, it reflects what Frankfurter has described as a strategy of religious translation, whereby core beliefs were preserved through adaptable visual forms capable of operating within pluralistic societies.²⁷ The orans gesture on these stelae thus represents continuity through adaptation, maintaining Egyptian eschatological concepts while engaging broader Mediterranean visual conventions.

From an art-historical perspective, the formal characteristics of the figures – frontality, symmetry, and the absence of dynamic movement – further support their interpretation as representations of achieved status rather than ritual action. Toynbee has noted that Roman funerary art increasingly favored static, iconic forms that communicated moral and social ideals over narrative realism.²⁸ In Egypt, this tendency intersected with a long-standing tradition of symbolic bodily representation, resulting in images such as those on Stelae A and B, where gesture alone encapsulates the entire afterlife narrative.

Parlasca's observations on Graeco-Roman funerary stelae underscore the importance of bodily posture as a marker of identity and status.²⁹ The orans figures on these monuments are not portrayed as participants in a ritual process, but as completed subjects whose fate has already been secured. The gesture, therefore, should be understood as descriptive rather than performative: it describes a state of being rather than an action in progress.

Previous explanations of this gesture

- a. **Pharaonic adaptation** (most widely accepted) The first and most convincing explanation sees the gesture as derived from Pharaonic art, linked to prayer or post-judgment happiness.³⁰ Egyptian funerary texts, such as the *Book of the Dead* (Chapters 30 and 125), describe the judgment of the deceased and emphasize moral accountability and rewards in the afterlife.³¹ Scenes from the tomb of

²⁵ Elsner, 1995: 21-45.

²⁶ Barrett, 2011: 45-89; Elsner, 1995: 21-25.

²⁷ Frankfurter, 1998: 34-67.

²⁸ Toynbee, 1971: 37-58.

²⁹ Parlasca, 1966: 14-29.

³⁰ Seeber, 1976: 120.

³¹ Quirke, 2001: 211.

Petosiris [Fig. 5]³² and Roman-period shrouds depict the deceased with raised arms being led to judgment by Maat and Anubis, confirming the gesture's association with successful passage through the afterlife.³³

- b. **Hieroglyphic sign of the ka** Some scholars suggest that the gesture reflects the *ka*, a vital component of the human being in Egyptian belief [Fig. 6)].³⁴ However, the *ka* is abstract, whereas stela figures are fully embodied, individualized humans, making the identification tenuous.
- c. **Greco-Roman and early Christian pietas** Another view links the gesture to Roman funerary art and early Christian prayer imagery.³⁵ While the orans posture appears in Roman sarcophagi as a symbol of piety (*pietas*) [Fig. 7]³⁶ Kom Abou Bellou stela predate widespread Christian use, weakening this explanation.
- d. **Minoan antecedents** Some argue for Minoan influence, citing terracotta figures with upraised arms [Fig. 8].³⁷ Yet, the continuous Egyptian tradition, particularly representations of Nut,³⁸ renders a Minoan derivation unnecessary.



Fig. 5. The judgment scene of Petosiris from Tuna el-Gebel, (After Osing, 1982: 86 Taf. 31,1).



Fig. 6. Wooden statue of King Hor (Au-ib-Ra) with the ka symbol on his head, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. (by Jon Bodsworth³⁹).

³² Osing, 1982: 86, Taf. 31,1.

³³ Osing, 1982: 68; Dunand & Zivie-Coche, 1991: 183-185.

³⁴ Assmann, 2006: 215.

³⁵ Dalton, 1916; Abrahamsen, 2002.

³⁶ See a marble sarcophagus in the church of Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome, c. 275 C.E.

³⁷ Budin, 2009: 234, Fig. 8.5.

³⁸ Walker & Bierbrier, 1997: 150, Fig. 166.

³⁹ Public Domain: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ka_Statue_of_horawibra.jpg



Fig. 7. Orans posture in Roman and Early Christian art: Sarcophagus of Sabinus (Musei Vaticani, Cat. 31509),⁴⁰ Sarcophagus from Santa Maria Antiqua in Rome,⁴¹ and wall painting from the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome.⁴²



Fig. 8. Terracotta statue of a Minoan goddess with upraised arms, Gazi, Crete (c. 1200–1100 BC (After Budin, 2009: 234, Fig.8.5)

Critical Assessment

While previous interpretations offer valuable insights, they share a fundamental methodological limitation: an overemphasis on origin rather than function within funerary visual culture. The Pharaonic adaptation, although widely accepted, risks conflating dynamic narrative sequences of judgment with the isolated imagery of the stelae. In Pharaonic contexts, raised-arm gestures occur within complex scenes that

⁴⁰ <https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/museo-pio-cristiano/sarcofagi-a-fregio-continuo/sarcofago-di-sabinus.html>

⁴¹ https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zearly/1/1sculptu/sarcopha/1/0antiqu1.html

⁴² https://www.wga.hu/html_m/zearly/1/2mural/3priscil/2velati5.html

depict divine presence, ritual interaction, and moral evaluation. When transposed onto stelae, these gestures are extracted from their narrative framework, raising questions about whether they represent an act of prayer, post-judgment happiness, or a symbolic state. Without considering the funerary medium's communicative purpose, the interpretation remains incomplete.

The *ka* hypothesis, while formally suggestive, suffers from a similar limitation. It assumes semantic continuity between the abstract hieroglyph and a fully embodied, individualized figure. Yet, stelae figures are personalized, visually expressive, and socially coded, which contrasts sharply with the abstraction of hieroglyphic notation. Equating form with meaning oversimplifies the gesture and risks obscuring its culturally specific significance.

Interpretations linking the gesture to Greco-Roman or early Christian *pietas* introduce chronological and functional challenges. Although the orans posture is well attested in Roman funerary art [Fig. 7], the Egyptian stelae in question predate widespread Christian adoption. Moreover, in Roman contexts, the gesture signifies active devotion or prayer, while on Egyptian stelae, it is detached from ritual action and embedded within a funerary discourse centered on judgment and afterlife status.⁴³ The Minoan antecedent argument similarly relies on distant formal comparisons without sufficiently accounting for the continuous and contextually rich Egyptian tradition of raised-arm imagery [Fig. 8], particularly in representations of the goddess Nut.⁴⁴

A more compelling approach shifts the focus from origin to function. The orans gesture on funerary stelae should be understood as a symbolic condensation of afterlife ideology, rather than a literal depiction of ritual or a borrowed motif. It communicates the deceased's moral legitimacy, their successful passage through judgment, and their secure integration into the ordered cosmos of the afterlife. By distilling complex theological and moral concepts into a single, legible posture, the gesture functions as a visual declaration aimed at the living audience, asserting posthumous identity, social status, and moral accomplishment. This approach emphasizes the communicative and didactic function of the stela, highlighting how imagery operates as a medium for memory, moral instruction, and ideological reinforcement.

Visual analysis of the Kom Abou Bellou stelae further nuances our understanding of the orans gesture and its symbolic function. Unlike the standardized representations in earlier Pharaonic and Roman-period funerary contexts, the stelae at Kom Abou Bellou exhibit considerable variation in posture and bodily configuration. Some figures raise a single arm [Figs. 10-11],⁴⁵ others both arms [Fig. 9];⁴⁶ in certain instances,

⁴³ Seeber, 1976 : 120; Dunand & Zivie-Coche, 1991: 183-185; Aglan, 2001: 132.

⁴⁴ Walker & Bierbrier, 1997: 150, Fig. 166.

⁴⁵ Hooper, 1961: pl. 14b, 14c.

⁴⁶ Hooper, 1961: pl.12d.

the legs are depicted side by side [Fig. 13], while in others one leg is frontal [Fig. 9] and some cases the legs are shown with heels touching and feet turned outward, creating an open stance reminiscent of a ballet dancer's position, clearly revealing both feet [Fig.13],⁴⁷ or one leg appears flexed as if stepping forward [Fig. 14].⁴⁸ These variations are not merely formal inconsistencies but appear to reflect different narrative or symbolic emphases. For example, a crouching or flexed posture, reminiscent of figures on boat scenes [Fig. 12],⁴⁹ may suggest a dynamic "journey" motif, potentially symbolizing the deceased's passage through the Netherworld or along the sacred river of the afterlife.⁵⁰

Such variability reinforces the argument that the orans gesture on stelae is not a simple replication of ritual or hieroglyphic forms, but a flexible visual language capable of encoding multiple layers of meaning. A single raised arm [Figs. 10-11] could symbolize invocation or supplication, while both arms raised might emphasize triumph, divine favor, or moral completeness. Similarly, the positioning of the legs could encode ideas of movement versus stasis: figures with one leg advanced [Fig. 14] may indicate progression along a spiritual journey, whereas figures with legs aligned could signal stability and successful integration into the ordered afterlife. This interpretive reading aligns with the broader Egyptian funerary ideology in which gestures and bodily postures convey moral, cosmological, and social messages, rather than strictly literal or ritual acts.

From a critical perspective, these observations challenge previous interpretations that sought singular origins or direct borrowings from Pharaonic, Roman, or Minoan models. Instead, the Kom Abou Bellou stelae demonstrate that the orans posture functions dynamically, adapting to the symbolic needs of the funerary medium, the narrative of judgment, and the communicative relationship with the living audience. The diversity in arm and leg positioning may also reflect personalized aspects of the deceased, including their social identity, gendered comportment, or moral achievements, thereby reinforcing the idea that stela imagery operates as a sophisticated semiotic system rather than a static set of formal conventions.

In conclusion, the Kom Abou Bellou evidence supports a functional and symbolic interpretation of the orans gesture. It emphasizes movement, journey, and moral resolution, illustrating the deceased's passage through the afterlife as both a personal and cosmologically integrated process. This reading underscores the adaptive and multilayered character of Egyptian funerary imagery, revealing how even subtle variations in posture can carry profound theological and social significance.

⁴⁷ Hooper, 1961: pl. 7c.

⁴⁸ Hooper, 1961: pl. 16c.

⁴⁹ Hooper, 1961: pl. 15c.

⁵⁰ Ahmed, 2025.

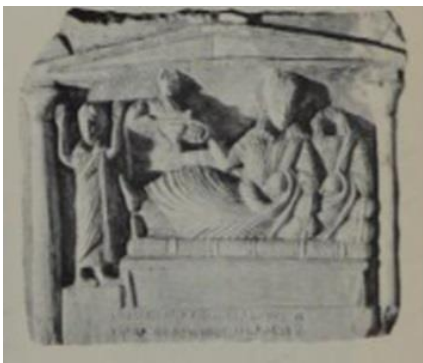


Fig. 9. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou showing a deceased reclining figure accompanied by a standing orans figure within a pedimented shrine (after Hooper, 1961, pl. 12d).



Fig. 10. Funerary stela fragment from Kom Abu Billou depicting a figure with a single raised arm in supplication (after Hooper, 1961, pl. 14b).



Fig. 11. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou depicting a standing figure raising a single arm (after Hooper, 1961, pl. 14 c).



Fig. 12. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou depicting a figure in a flexed posture in a sacred boat (after Hooper, 1961, pl.15c).



Fig. 13. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou showing an orans figure flanked by jackals, with turned-out feet position (after Hooper, 1961, pl.7c).



Fig. 14. Funerary stela from Kom Abu Billou depicting an orans figure within a niche with one leg flexed forward (after Hooper, 1961, pl.16c).

Visual Correlation

The visual evidence reinforces this functional interpretation. Stelae from Kom Abou Bellou, the tomb of Petosiris, and Roman-period shrouds consistently depict the deceased with raised arms, guided by deities such as Maat and Anubis. This consistent posture, along with standardized attire and positioning, underscores the symbolic role of the gesture rather than its narrative or ritualistic enactment. Curved shapes above the figures' heads likely signify Nut, linking the gesture to cosmic and moral order and grounding it firmly within Egyptian afterlife ideology. Variations in frontal and profile representation, clothing, and associated iconography further suggest that the gesture was tailored to convey both individuality and theological meaning, making it an enduring and adaptable symbol of moral and posthumous legitimacy across centuries.

Dating

The depicted subjects, carving techniques, hairstyles, and even the overall external form of the funerary monuments; therefore, a comparative approach is warranted. In general, archaeologists have dated the majority of funerary stelae from Kom Abu Billou to the period extending from the second century to the early 4th century CE. This dating is primarily based on a substantial corpus of coins discovered in the area, either placed in the hands of the deceased or deposited inside the tombs. These coins, bearing the names of Roman emperors, securely belong to this chronological range. The stelae under discussion closely resemble those from Kom Abu Billou, particularly in the carving of garments, the treatment of drapery folds, and the rendering of the eyes.⁵¹

Conclusion

This study examines and dates two funerary stelae from the city of Mendes, a significant urban center during the Ptolemaic and Roman periods in Egypt. Particularly during the Roman era, Mendes served as a vital military camp, providing important historical context for the three stelae discussed in this research.

The inscriptions on these funerary monuments suggest that the individuals commemorated were not of Egyptian origin. This is evident from their attire and the Western themes depicted in the scenes. However, these elements do not diminish their clear engagement with ancient Egyptian religious concepts or their beliefs in resurrection and immortality. In fact, several ancient Egyptian deities closely

⁵¹ Hooper, 1961: 3; Parlasca, 1970: 181; Elsayy, 1977: 77; El-Nassery & Wagner, 1978: 234.

associated with funerary beliefs are depicted on these stelae, often in syncretic combinations with Greek gods, especially Hermes and Anubis, who is frequently referred to as Psychopompos, or the guide of souls.

Anubis appears on numerous Roman-period funerary stelae from Egypt and can be interpreted in various roles: as a figure similar to Orpheus leading his wife's soul from the underworld, as a guardian of the tomb, or in relation to Osirian cult practices, symbolizing resurrection, eternal life, and the ascent of the soul to the heavens. Despite these recurring motifs, it is not possible to claim definitively that such representations were standardized in the funerary stelae of Mendes without a broader examination of Roman-period materials from the region.

Moreover, Anubis is typically depicted with a jackal's head in a profile view, consistent with ancient Egyptian iconography. In contrast, representations of Anubis from Kom Abu Bellou during the Roman period show more variation, alternating between profile and frontal views – though frontal representations appear to be more prevalent.

The analysis of the two funerary stelae indicates that the orans gesture served as a powerful visual expression of post-judgment identity in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Rather than representing a generic act of prayer, this gesture, characterized by raised arms, signifies the deceased's successful passage through divine judgment and their acceptance into the ordered realm of the afterlife. Furthermore, an intriguing iconographic parallel to the raised-arm posture can be traced back to the dawn of Egyptian art. Certain Predynastic terracotta figurines (such as the well-known Naqada II dancing figures) and painted pottery motifs depict individuals with uplifted, curved arms. Although separated from the Roman period by several millennia, these early representations establish a long-standing indigenous visual tradition of using upraised arm gestures to signify ritual performance, divine invocation, or bodily transformation. The stable, symmetrical, and open stance of the figures visually affirms their moral legitimacy and eternal integration.

Additionally, the compatibility of the orans gesture with Greco-Roman concepts of pietas allowed it to function as a hybrid visual language in a multicultural context. This hybridity reflects a conscious process of cultural negotiation, preserving Egyptian funerary ideology while reconfiguring it to be understandable to diverse audiences. Thus, these stelae exemplify how visual culture in Roman Egypt maintained religious continuity, not through rigid adherence to tradition, but through intentional and meaningful adaptation.

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