

INTRODUCTION: FROM EGYPT TO ITALY

“Just as none of us is outside or beyond geography, none of us is completely free from the struggle over geography. That struggle is complex and interesting because it is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, about forms, about images, and imaginations.”

Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), 7.

This book investigates the Roman interest in Egypt in the century and a half following its annexation as a Roman province, as mediated by visual and textual material from Roman Italy. In this critical period, Romans “invented” Egypt in both the ancient and modern senses of the word.¹ Conquest brought Egyptian materials as large as obelisks and as small as scarabs before audiences for whom they were novel, thus enabling the discovery of a different culture. Roman understandings of this foreign culture were necessarily constructed, drawn from what Romans in Italy thought they knew of Egyptian history, habit, and religion more than from firsthand experience of the place and its peoples. Egypt was an imagined place as well as one that could be visited, explored, or exploited.

I take as a given that Roman attitudes to Egypt were shaped by conquest, the product of ways of thinking about the world that insisted on the centrality and cultural hegemony of Roman Italy, whether we label these habits of mind and practice “colonialism,” “imperialism,” or something else.² In this sense, the taste for works of art from far-off places or evoking foreign styles was inherently political, reflective of the reality that one region (Italy) held sway over the other (Egypt). Yet I resist explanations that frame the phenomenon solely relative to specific historical periods or as reflective of the idiosyncratic tastes or religious beliefs of the emperors. Watershed events – the death of Cleopatra, Augustus’ triple triumph, Hadrian’s travels – shaped public interest but do not wholly explain it. Underlying any aesthetics that prized Egyptian and Egyptian-looking artworks were complex processes of transculturation, played out over long periods of time, in communities with their own

practices of votive commemoration, patronage, and artistic production. My thesis is that, however unusual in appearance, these works of art must also be understood as Roman cultural products, their many meanings dependent first and foremost on context and audience. Egyptian-looking artworks were foreign-seeming, in the sense that they were marked by visual difference. But they do not need to be explained away as non-Roman or treated as historiographically “other”; to the contrary, they are central to any explanation of the Roman visual arts that purports to be comprehensive. This is the first work of scholarship that takes as its express goal the integration of exotica into the intellectual and social history of Roman art.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND FRAMEWORK

The historical period addressed in this book begins with the defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra at the battles of Actium and Alexandria and the Roman annexation of the territory of Egypt into the province Aegyptus. There was, of course, ample contact between Italy and Egypt before this point, based on trade and diplomacy, but it was only in the imperial period that Rome came to depend on staple goods from Egypt and that the taste for Egyptian-looking works of art became most prevalent.³ Rome was a capital of the Mediterranean world, with an increasingly diverse and multicultural population. Egypt’s grain fed the urban poor and became such a pivotal (and dependable) part of the economy that bushels of Alexandrian wheat acted as currency of a sort, serving as collateral for loans and underpinning a thriving futures trade.⁴ Many other products – oil, wine, papyrus, and innumerable smaller luxuries – were so vital to daily existence that Pliny the Elder could report that a shortage of papyrus during Tiberius’ reign almost brought the government to a standstill.⁵

Without doubt, conquest inspired widespread interest in Egypt, evident in both artworks and literature of the early empire: Augustus circulated coinage that proclaimed “Egypt has been taken!”; poets celebrated the decisive battles, from Vergil’s depiction of the battle of Actium on the shield of Aeneas to the less famous but no less pointed *Carmen de Bello Actiaco* preserved in a papyrus from Herculaneum.⁶ The Augustan age, however, was not a time of first contact with Egypt. Some knowledge of Egypt’s people, gods, and cultures was widely disseminated long before Augustus claimed Egypt for Rome. By the early empire, most Romans could recognize Isis’ distinctive iconography. Roman poets made reference to the deity, playing on the fact that their readers had more than a passing awareness of her unusual attributes. Ovid, for instance, creatively inserted Isis into a story in his *Metamorphoses*, in which a woman pleads for divine aid for a daughter she has raised since infancy as a son. Isis complies and changes the child’s gender. Ovid’s Isis is powerful and benevolent, and his detailed description calls to mind representations of



FIGURE I.1. Bronze statuette of Isis-Fortuna (first century CE).
Photo credit: Koppermann: Neg. D-DAI-Rom 60.490.

the goddess from shrine paintings or statuettes from Pompeii, Herculaneum, and other sites: “Moon-like horns and regal ornament were upon her brow, of bright gold with sheaves of yellow wheat.”⁷ [Figure I.1] In the visual arts, an Egyptian-looking style came into vogue in diverse media. One of Rome’s citizens constructed a tomb in the form of a pyramid. Some wealthy homeowners in Rome and Pompeii painted their walls with images of Isis and other Egyptian subjects, at times using a bold, primary color palette that highlighted the unusual subject matter. These many and varied celebrations of Egypt’s annexation, however, give the false impression that transition to Roman control was seamless and taken for granted by those living in Italy. To the contrary, the decade following Actium witnessed numerous small rebellions within the province, including a border dispute in the South that required a military response.⁸ Tensions within the multiethnic population of Alexandria posed a serious risk to the grain supply through the Julio-Claudian period and sometimes necessitated imperial intervention.⁹

For the century following annexation, symbolic control of Egypt and its resources remained critical to the emperor’s public image. Vespasian’s nearly

year-long stay in Alexandria, called by Suetonius the *claustra* or “lock” guarding Egypt, proved vital to his success in vying for the principate in 69 CE and also provided the fodder for rumors showing that he possessed the *maiestas* or “divine majesty” necessary to serve as emperor. While in Alexandria, Vespasian made a visit to the Serapaeum, where he experienced a vision of himself bestowed with the customary offerings given to Serapis, likening him to the god and suggesting his suitability for rule; later, like Serapis, he seemed able to heal the injured. Returning to Rome, he and his sons spent the night in the city’s largest sanctuary, the Iseum and Serapaeum in the Campus Martius.¹⁰ Hadrian, too, included a long stop in Egypt in his travels around the Mediterranean, during which his lover Antinous met his untimely end.¹¹

Both periods saw waves of interest in Egypt in the arts of both the public and private spheres. Domitian rebuilt the Iseum and Serapaeum Campense after the devastating fire of 80 CE, thereafter one of the grandest structures in the Campus Martius. Recent work suggests that Hadrian’s Villa included a lavish temple dedicated to the Egyptian gods, and Egyptian and Egyptian-looking works stood in conversation with those that emulated the masterworks of Greece along his sumptuous “Scenic Canal.”¹² A wide range of Egyptianizing works owned and commissioned by ordinary citizens, too, date to these periods – votive obelisks, statues of Isis and Serapis, sculptures of Egyptian animals. Mosaics from private homes included motifs of pygmies and nilotic animals. Sculptures of personified Niles paired with Tibers were a common visual metaphor for the very empire itself. By the mid-second century CE, the terminus of the present inquiry, the infrastructure that delivered Egyptian grain, antiquities, granites, and marbles to Italy was well in place, aided by new and often-improved canal systems and Roman roads in Egypt, such as the Via Hadriana and Via Traiana. Egypt had never been closer to home.

Throughout the period covered in this study, the sanctuaries to the Egyptian gods were fixtures of Italian cities. Eventually, the cults spread to all corners of the ancient world, and their members included men and women of varying backgrounds and social classes. There had long been worship of Isis and Serapis in Italy, at best guess beginning with increased trade with the region in the second century BCE, mediated by merchants and first introduced in the port towns and cities of Campania. But even long established cults were revitalized in the period following conquest. By the late first century CE many Italian sanctuaries, as in Rome, Beneventum, Praeneste, and Pompeii, could be found interspersed with the most important structures in Roman cities, located in densely urbanized regions. Isis exercised a universal appeal, a promoter of prosperity and fertility, and protector of women and children.¹³

Discussing Rome’s relationship with Egyptian culture within these political and religious contexts, as is often done, is both necessary and worthwhile. Yet to move forward, we must also ask more probing questions – not segregating exotica but pressing to integrate them into our study of Italian votive,

commemorative, and decorative practices, and exploring too the relationships between the literary and visual arts. Who commissioned Egyptian-looking art, and who made it? What is our evidence for Egyptian immigrants in Italian communities? What did Romans in Italy know of Egyptian culture and history, and based on what sources? How were foreign materials integrated into preexisting practices of dedication and devotion? How did Latin authors write about Egypt, its peoples, and its gods?

Such wide-ranging questions do not yield a tidy explanation or definitive account of something one might call a Roman Egyptomania. This, however, is to the good. Roman interest in Egypt was neither brief nor passing. It spanned centuries, attested in all domains of social life, public and private, sacred and profane, political and personal. In short, the Egypt's one finds in Roman Italy are as manifold as the contexts providing evidence of them.

EGYPT IN ITALY: RECONSIDERING,
RECONTEXTUALIZING

Investigating Roman interest in Egypt can set us on unsteady ground. Even the simplest seeming question – what did the Romans know about Egypt's history? – leads to quagmires, because both literary and archaeological source material sometimes prove difficult and contested.

To take one example, briefly consider Manetho's Αἰγυπτιακά, a history of Egypt written during the reign of Ptolemy I Soter (satrap, 323–306/4 BCE; r. 306/4–283/2 BCE) or Ptolemy II Philadelphus (r. 283/2–246 BCE). Its composition forms a pivotal moment in Greek historiography, for Manetho was a native priest who wrote in Greek, therefore representative of both the Greek and Egyptian populations of Alexandria. One of his most important contributions was the division of Egyptian history into dynasties, δυναστεῖαι, a method of organizing time that derived from Egyptian king-lists and annals, like that recorded on the so-called Palermo Stone. Manetho's work remains fundamental to the way historians and archaeologists frame Egyptian chronology today, though now established largely on other grounds. Little acknowledged, however, is that this key source was only preserved through Roman-period interest and intervention.

Manetho's text is long lost, painstakingly reconstructed by philologists from the nineteenth century to the present, who have culled references and redacted quotations from later authors. Much of what is left are short summaries condensing his history.¹⁴ This practice of abridgement was common in antiquity and indicates that a source was important, widely enough read to warrant this Cliff's Notes treatment either as rhetorical exercise or educational aid. We do not know when Manetho was epitomized; his history could have been abridged at any time (and in any place) after he wrote the work, though it makes sense to associate this act with the Ptolemaic library of

Alexandria. Yet there are no extant references to the summaries until the late first century CE, when Josephus made use of them in the *Contra Apionem*. Where and how did Josephus come across this obscure history? Although widely traveled, he did much of his writing in Rome. And another historian to make use of Manetho was Aelius Claudius, who resided in and worked from the nearby town of Praeneste. It is possible, therefore, that manuscripts of Manetho were available *in Italy*. And it is manifest that the epitomes of Manetho were in circulation and found their widest ancient readership during the Roman period.¹⁵

While this source-history brings us no closer to answering the simple question posed earlier, it does highlight several critical issues and point to some useful conclusions. First, at least some educated Romans had access to information about Egyptian history, culture, and religion; knowledge was not limited to those involved in the Egyptian cults. One need not look far for confirmation: Plutarch had access to specialized sources on the myth of Osiris; Ammianus Marcellinus quoted a book that translated the obelisks in Rome; Apuleius nodded to the ritual language employed in aretalogies of Isis.¹⁶ Second, the Roman conception of Egyptian culture and history differed greatly from any history of Egyptian civilization we would write today, particularly in its understanding of chronology and religion. As a source used in contemporary scholarship, Manetho remains relevant to continuing debates about the date of the Pentateuch, testifying to the rich hybridity of Ptolemaic culture.¹⁷ Roman-period readers and writers, however, used Manetho for purposes all their own, often in support of arguments about the relative antiquity of cultural groups in the Mediterranean. Indeed, that the text they read and the one we have reconstructed are close to the same is an assumption that, however likely, should not be taken as a given. What we can take as fundamental, however, is that Roman interest in Manetho, shaped by different agendas from our own, ensured its transmission.

The Romans played an active role in preserving for posterity literary and material evidence of immense value for the study of Egyptian religion, culture, and history. We must take care not to conflate our systems of evaluation with those of the Romans, however, or to judge Roman-period knowledge by modern metrics. This basic point applies doubly to the aesthetics that motivated Romans in Italy to collect antique Egyptian artifacts, all the more crucial because so much of what we know of ancient Egypt derives from the careful and systematic study of material culture. The artworks that give testimony to Rome's interest in Egypt are by no means unknown. They are inextricably entwined with the discovery of Egyptian culture by the European West, and generations of scholars have expertly catalogued and discussed them, from the early modern period through the present day.¹⁸ Yet one result is that assumptions about the values of these materials – aesthetic, monetary, and evidentiary – are so long-standing that they have become invisible. Many



FIGURE I.2. Detail of the “Mensa Isiaca” (first century CE).
Photo credit: Gianni Dagli Orti / The Art Archive at Art Resource, NY.

Egyptian and Egyptian-looking artworks came to light in the context of the early modern and Renaissance re-urbanization of Rome. This means, first and foremost, that information about context is often sorely lacking. These exotic works were prized by collectors as *objets d’art*, status symbols that conferred prestige on their owners; their discoverers did not document findspots as we would today. Many changed hands multiple times, eventually making their way into private collections and the major public museums of Italy, France, and Great Britain, there reflecting those societies’ claims to the heritage of Classical Antiquity and Dynastic Egypt.

Renaissance humanists studied Rome’s Egyptian monuments with the express goal of uncovering a lost, mysterious culture, and they saw the Egyptian and Egyptian-looking monuments primarily as material evidence of Dynastic Egyptian history and religion. Often, it was difficult to determine whether a work was Egyptian or Italian-made. So, for example, Brian Curran has outlined the unusual story of the object known as the “Mensa Isiaca,” a bronze inscription, inlaid with gold and silver, covered with hieroglyphic-looking text and Egyptian imagery. [Figure I.2] It was presumed to be from Egypt, and quickly mythologized; some claimed it had been acquired by Augustus after the siege of Alexandria. In 1556, Pierio Valeriano attempted to decode the hieroglyphic script using its enigmatic text. It moved from collection to collection, increasing in monetary and perceived historical value with each transaction.¹⁹ Today, the object is considered to be of Roman date, and perhaps even of Italian

origin. Its texts are not thought legible in any literal sense. A recent scholarly treatment by Heike Sternberg-el Hotabi has shown that even the few characters longest thought to be meaningful, a supposed cartouche of Claudius, are as “fantastic” as the rest.²⁰ This text was never intended to be read as early humanists tried to decipher it.

Despite more recent scholarly correctives, a lingering result of early inquiry into objects like the “Mensa Isiaca” is the investiture of authenticity in Egyptian imports in contrast with Egyptian-looking, Italian-made emulations. Lacking legible hieroglyphic text or employing imagery used contrary to what is perceived to be proper convention, such artworks may appear to be “spurious,” “incorrect,” or “derivative” when measured by that standard. Yet in this case, as Sternberg-el Hotabi and others have shown, the monument – though not Egyptian – may nevertheless have been richly symbolic.²¹ If we place greater interpretative emphasis on the contexts in which these works were found, contexts in which Egyptian and Italian-made works were often displayed together, it becomes evident that any value judgment prizing Egyptian over Roman-made, even if tacit, is untenable. Both are equally worthy of study, and bear equal testimony to the Roman interest in Egypt. As important, however, is to recognize that, though Egyptian imports certainly have much to tell us about ancient Egyptian history and culture, if we think of them *only* or *primarily* as Egyptian we constrict fruitful avenues of interpretation.

More extended consideration of one case, an Egyptian hieroglyphic inscription found in Pompeii, will serve to drive home this point. [Figure I.3] It was originally part of a limestone sculpture in the round, discovered during the excavations of the sanctuary of Isis in Pompeii reused as facing for a statue base or plinth in front of the small temple. The Egyptian text of the inscription remained unpublished until 1857, when it came to the attention of scholars working in the then nascent field of Egyptology, including Gustav Seyffarth – who argued fervently that this piece proved wrong Champollion’s phonetic and ideographic system for deciphering the hieroglyphic script. Seyffarth’s own system of translation followed more closely the description of hieroglyphic characters in Clement of Alexandria. In his view, the inscription was a dedication made by the Pompeian Isiaki to honor the emperor Vespasian.²²

Today, we have a very different understanding of its content. The text states that the dedicator, a priest named Semtowy-Tefnakhte, presented a gift in honor of his patron deity, Harsiphef. Composed a year or two after Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt in 323 BCE, it is a rare testament to the experiences of a man who lived under three different regimes in Late Period Egypt: the priest gives thanks for the benefits the god has shown him throughout his life; he mentions having been given his privileged position by the last Egyptian king, Nectanebo I, and praises Harsiphef for assuring his safety as first the Persians and then the Greeks took Egypt by storm.²³ Conceived as an Egyptian object, the value of the Pompeian inscription to the historian is clear. In recent

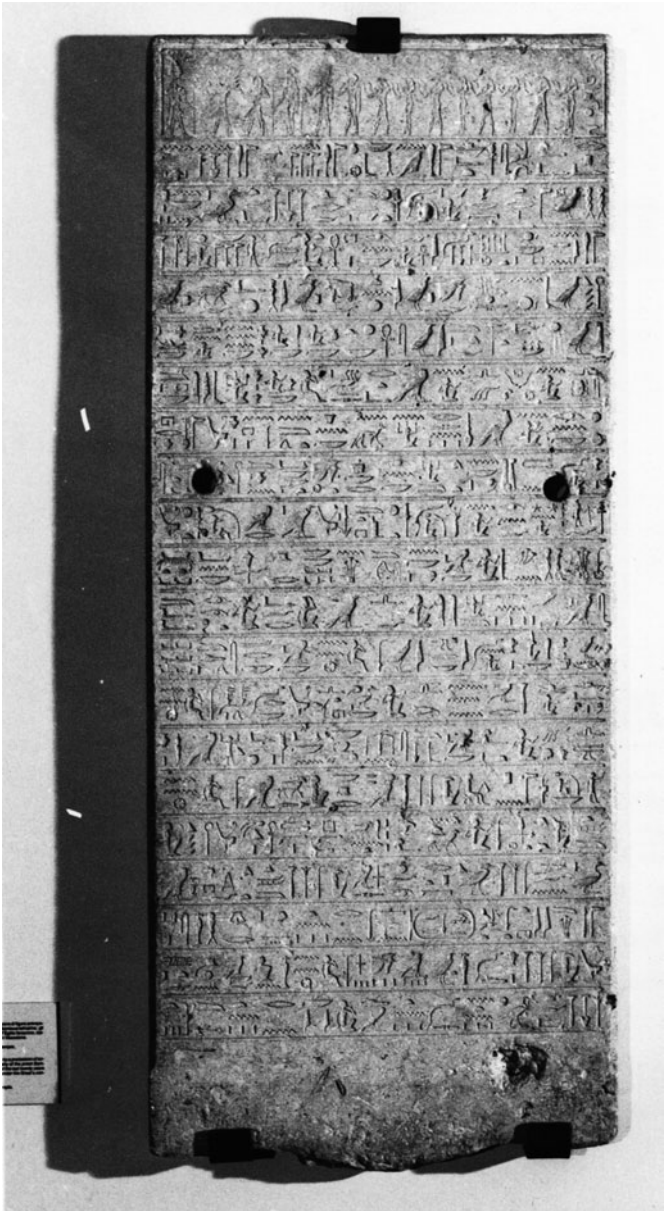


FIGURE 1.3. Hieroglyphic inscription of Semtowy-Tefnakhte from the Temple of Isis in Pompeii (manufactured after 323 BCE; imported to Pompeii, first century CE).
Photo credit: Ministero per i Beni e la Attività Culturali, Soprintendenza Speciale per i Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei.

years, the standard historical narrative for this period, previously driven by Greek and Latin sources, has undergone a sea change in favor of approaches that balance the seminal narratives of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and others with Egyptian sources and material culture, including graffiti, sacred dedications, and documentary papyri.²⁴ Although rare, Egyptian

sources like this one reveal cultures in contact, as local elites tried their best to accommodate themselves to rulers with worldviews different from their own. Fascinating as it is, however, this is not the only story this object has to tell. To understand the redisplay of this piece in the Pompeian sanctuary, we must refrain from prioritizing the object’s creation over its reuse or favoring literal meaning over symbolic.

Anthropologists and archaeologists have long argued that material goods reflect culture; the *chaînes opératoires* used to manipulate any raw substance to finished handicraft reflect the societal organization and internal value systems of a community.²⁵ In this way, facture reveals cultural identity. Once created, however, objects sometimes take on lives of their own, beyond the intentions of their makers. Objects are both portable and mutable. Over the course of time, objects may be subject to repeated modification that alters their physical or functional nature, as, for example, they deteriorate through use and are repaired, traded, bought, or sold. Recent work across a number of academic disciplines argues for conceiving of material objects as imbued with agency in their interactions with their makers, owners, and viewers – that is, the ability to shape human experience. Some are even viewed as magical, perceived to have power that breaches the rules of everyday existence. On this view, artworks and artifacts have individualized histories that reflect their presence and movements through time and space and which encompass a number of different human interactions.²⁶ Reuse is reinvention.²⁷ Yet agency is not innate to the object but is a product of interpretation; the human mind creates and constructs meaning, even if unconsciously. The functions and symbolism of objects are always dependent therefore on the social and cultural context of the viewer.²⁸

Egyptian artworks brought to Rome can be understood to have long and varied “biographies” that included any number of interactions with their owner(s) over time, from creation at the hands of artists, through modification or adaptation to new settings or uses, to their eventual destruction or deposition.²⁹ A number of changes were made, in fact, to the hieroglyphic inscription from the Pompeian sanctuary: the limestone panel was planed from the sculpture’s plinth, and its surface pierced with a number of dowel-shaped holes. In the process, much was lost. Nothing remains of what we assume was a costly dedication; there are remnants of text on both lateral sides of the inscription, which suggest it once contained a wider range of religious or efficacious formulae. At the same time, changes that look like damage from the perspective of the student of ancient Egypt reflect a process of remaking from the vantage point of the Roman art historian. The changes made to the physical object re-commodified it, assigning to the same piece of stone a new set of values, both monetary (as an object that could be traded or sold) and symbolic (as bearing extra-pecuniary significance).