

1 | Approaching Nemrud Dağ

1.1 Between Alexandria, Rome and Antioch

Consider Alexandria around the middle of the first century BC. After the death of Ptolemy XII, also known as New Dionysos, in 51 BC, the Ptolemaic queen-pharaoh Cleopatra VII has just taken over power. With a failing economy, competitive candidates for the throne and an all-decisive but only indirect Roman involvement, the political situation is chaotic. In this rapidly changing world, Cleopatra is dependent on Rome for political and military backing, and during her reign she intelligently secures the support of various key Roman generals, even residing at a villa along the Tiber for a certain time. Simultaneously, Cleopatra (still) is one of the most important Hellenistic monarchs. She thus holds immense cultural prestige and consequently she is compelled to take up Alexander the Great's legacy of ruling a genuine world empire centred on the Near East and so becoming the King of Kings.¹ She is also, and probably first and foremost, the pharaoh of Egypt. Cleopatra is venerated in temples all across the country as the representative of the gods on earth – Egypt and the cosmos cannot function without her.² Political and social uncertainties do not prevent Egyptian culture from blossoming during the period; Alexandria is still one of the main cultural centres of the Hellenistic world in every respect. “Philosophical eclecticism,” for instance, is further developed and refined in Alexandria during the late Hellenistic period, which Cicero would take to Rome and make into one of his most important legacies.³ Material culture testifies to creative innovation as well. After the careful conservatism of the first Ptolemies – in order to underline continuity with the indigenous Pharaonic past – the development of their royal portraiture is characterised by a range of inventiveness from the second century BC onwards. Egyptian and Greek forms were made into a new idiom, but were

¹ Cf. *Strootman 2010* and, for the functioning of the concept of world empire with Hellenistic monarchs in particular, *Strootman 2013a/b*.

² Recent scholarly literature on Cleopatra includes *Walker 2001*; *Andreae/Rhein 2006*; *Ashton 2008*; *Miles 2011*.

³ Cf. *Steel 2002*. On this Ciceronian strategy in a more general sense, see *Van der Blom 2010*. For eclecticism, see *Epron 1997*.

also used alone or in juxtaposition.⁴ This did not only happen in the great urban metropolis at the Mediterranean coast itself, but also in the hinterland. A portrait from the late Hellenistic period, probably found in the Fayum, illustrates this.⁵ The young boy – perhaps Caesarion – combines the Greek *kausia* and hairstyle with characteristically Egyptian facial features; in this case, it may have been to emphasise the claim that he was the inheritor of Egypt and the Greek East alike. The Alexandrian tombs and their decorations are probably the best extant evidence of the dynamic use of this Egyptian and Greek (and other) visual formula. They likewise demonstrate how the many forms of their intermingling and juxtaposing are a characteristic of society at large and were not confined to the circle of the court alone. Alexandrians seem to have strategically made use of these different elements at their disposal to evoke certain associations. In the third century BC, the tombs and their decorations were distinctly Greek to underline (or suggest) how “Hellenic” Alexandria was (or would like to be).⁶ But only a century or so later the Alexandrians use both Greek and Egyptian architectural and iconographical forms – on their own or in combination – in a sophisticated and subtle manner: a strategy that has been described as cultural interplay.⁷ They did so to achieve specific goals. The Sāqiya tomb, for instance, dating from the second half of the second century BC, witnesses the adoption of Egyptian forms, like the *ba*-bird painted on the façade of a kline-sarcophagus illustrated here, to communicate Greek conceptions of the afterlife. (Fig. 1.1) It therefore shows, to quote Marjorie Venit, “the strength and efficacy of Egyptian decorative and religious tradition as it penetrates a community that envisions itself as ethnically Greek.”⁸ For Alexandria itself papyrological evidence is scarce, but for other places from late Hellenistic Egypt papyrological documents provide us with data on who these actual people were, where they came from and how they perceived their identities. The picture that emerges from these data is confusingly complex for archaeologists and ancient historians.⁹ People with Greek names (Greeks), for instance, can sometimes be identified

⁴ Stanwick 2002, especially Chapters 7 and 8.

⁵ Stanwick 2002, catalogue number E18 (and fig. 178), with interpretation on page 87. For Stanwick, this possible Fayum portrait belongs to what he calls the *mezzo* style, which he considers as typically “provincial.” It was first published in Bianchi 1992.

⁶ For this and what follows I refer to the classic study by Venit (Venit 2002).

⁷ Venit 2002, Chapter 4.

⁸ Venit 2002, 118. The idea that Alexandria was, in cultural respects, a distinctly Greek city with a Greek cityscape that had turned its back to Egypt and its traditions is clearly wrong; see, from a growing bibliography, Ashton 2004 and Savvopoulos 2010.

⁹ For these questions see now Moyer 2011 with all earlier bibliography. For Alexandria itself the Hadra vases provide us with ethnic information on the people buried; cf. Enklaar 1992.



Figure 1.1 Detail of the decoration of the Sāqiya tomb showing a depiction of the *ba*-bird. Alexandria, second half of the second century BC, in situ.

as ethnic Egyptians because they bear their Egyptian names in other documents. Simultaneously, almost all inhabitants from this multi-ethnic port city developed a preference for the Egyptian gods and their visual language whenever the afterlife was concerned.¹⁰ Especially from the first century BC onwards not only the ethnic Egyptians but also the Mediterranean and Near Eastern inhabitants of Alexandria were buried surrounded by Egyptian visual imagery. Around the middle of the first century BC Alexandria must therefore be characterised, in cultural terms, as Egyptian and Greek and Roman and Near Eastern alike, just like Cleopatra VII herself.

Consider Rome around the middle of the first century BC. Through the conquering of Greece and large parts of the Hellenistic East as well as the Roman involvement with Alexandria and Egypt, the city has gradually become an influential centre of Hellenistic culture.¹¹ Greek, Hellenistic, Near Eastern and Egyptian works are brought to Rome as loot, or purchased as collectibles, and there is a fervent discussion on how to deal with all these new influences, how to understand them and how to incorporate them along

¹⁰ Cf. Riggs 2005. ¹¹ Pollitt 1986, Chapter 7.

with Republican traditions.¹² During this period – when, in cultural respects, Roman generals in charge often behave like the Hellenistic monarchs they just had conquered (and are still condemning) – Rome is more part of the wider Hellenistic world than ever before. Similar to Alexandria, there is an enormous dynamic of reception and innovation, of intermingling and juxtaposing. Although Rome had been appropriating and incorporating influences from the wider Mediterranean (mainly Greek) and Italic (mainly Etruscan) world from its very beginnings onwards, clearly there is something rather different going on now in terms of scale and speed. Especially from the period of around 200 BC onwards, Rome is “inundated” with things from the Eastern Mediterranean, especially Greece.¹³ There now are so many objects around, that viewers have to make sense of their historical and cultural significance in relation to one another. In that respect the city indeed is a museum staging the world.¹⁴

The Roman Republic in the first century BC has rightly been characterised, therefore, as having witnessed a cultural explosion.¹⁵ Material culture, in some cases, seems to illustrate these processes quite literally. The statue of a general from the period around 80 BC, found in Tivoli, shows an imposing person with a Roman face and a Greek/Hellenistic body. (Fig. 1.2) Also the so-called Ahenobarbus altar, a large statue base dated around 100–80 BC, juxtaposes what are usually called an Italic/Roman veristic style with a Hellenistic baroque within a single monument.¹⁶ (Figs. 1.3 and 1.4 respectively) During said period these were certainly no anomalies. The shock of so much new brought about cultural anxieties and deep reflections on what it meant to be Roman.¹⁷ One could say, perhaps, that the cultural explosion characterising late Hellenistic Rome consisted of an exploration of and experimentation with the many (Hellenistic) models and styles available at that time in order to arrive at a form of self-definition. This accounts for the literature and (as has already been illustrated by means of Cicero) the philosophy of the time, but it accounts for politics and material culture, too. Rome thus took from the Hellenistic repertoire what it deemed appropriate for its own context and, at the same time, added its own traditions

¹² Cf. Ferrary 1988. ¹³ Pollitt 1978, 155.

¹⁴ Rutledge 2012 for ancient Rome as museum; Östenberg 2009 for triumphal processions as staging the world.

¹⁵ Beard/Crawford 1999, 20–24.

¹⁶ These examples can be found in most handbooks of Roman art as, for instance, Zanker 2007, and are further discussed below in 4.3. For honorific statues like the Tivoli general see now Ma 2013.

¹⁷ Cf. Dench 2005; Farney 2007; Rutledge 2012.

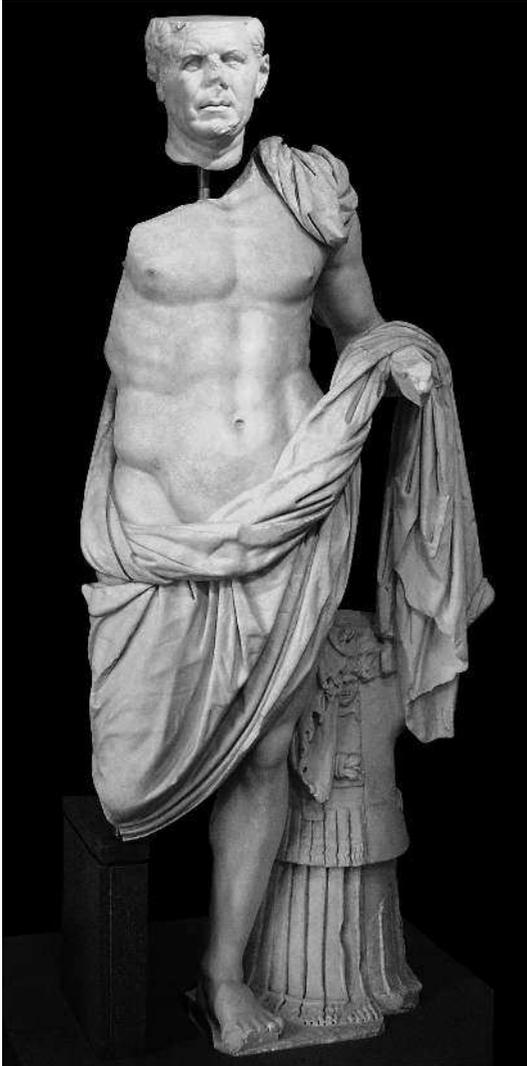


Figure 1.2 Statue of a general, Tivoli, c. 80 BC.

and innovations to that repertoire.¹⁸ As for Alexandria, it seems somewhat naïve to relate all these processes to ethnic or cultural identities in a direct and simplistic way. It has been suggested, for instance, that the use of Roman verism by some Hellenistic kings shows a desire to please the Roman conquerors, but this is difficult to imagine seeing that such

¹⁸ For example, the Italic/Roman tradition of verism that was added to and interacted with similar developments in the Eastern Mediterranean; cf. *Croz 2002*.



Figure 1.3 Ahenobarbus relief, overview of one of its four sides in an Italic/Roman veristic style, showing the *census* and a sacrifice to Mars, c. 100–80 BC.



Figure 1.4 Ahenobarbus relief, overview of one of the three other sides in a Hellenistic baroque style, showing a marriage procession and sea-creatures, c. 100–80 BC.

verism was as much Hellenistic as it was Roman.¹⁹ Simultaneously, as has been described above, Hellenistic elements could be used in the formation of a Roman identity. Moreover, Rome even located its own Roman past in Anatolian Eastern beginnings.²⁰ Also on the Italian peninsula these dynamic experiments did not solely take place at the centre of power. The Second Style wall paintings from small towns around the Bay of Naples, for instance, testify to similar processes of intermingling and juxtaposing.²¹ Second Style paintings, like the one from the Villa of Oplontis illustrated here, are decorations of upper-class houses that often show architecture and architectural elements. (Fig. 1.5) Although best known from Rome and Pompeii, this so-called Second Style was a general Mediterranean phenomenon that was popular from around 80 to 20 BC. Although they certainly give that impression at first glance, the aim of these paintings was not to imitate real, existing architecture in an illusionistic way. Rather, their designers and painters built new and autonomous forms of decoration from existing components. Forms and materials from all over the Hellenistic world were

¹⁹ Initially suggested in *Smith 1988a* (and elaborated upon in *Smith 1988b*) and already criticised for this reason by A. Stewart (*Stewart 1990*). See now extensively *Croz 2002*. *Kropp 2013*, 56, however, follows Smith. “Verism” is the term scholars use to characterise the (over) life-like portrayal in statuary; see *Croz 2002*, 238–250.

²⁰ Think of the Aeneas legend that located the beginnings of Rome in Troy; cf. *Erskine 2001*.

²¹ See *Tybout 1989*; *Grüner 2004*; and further below in 4.3.

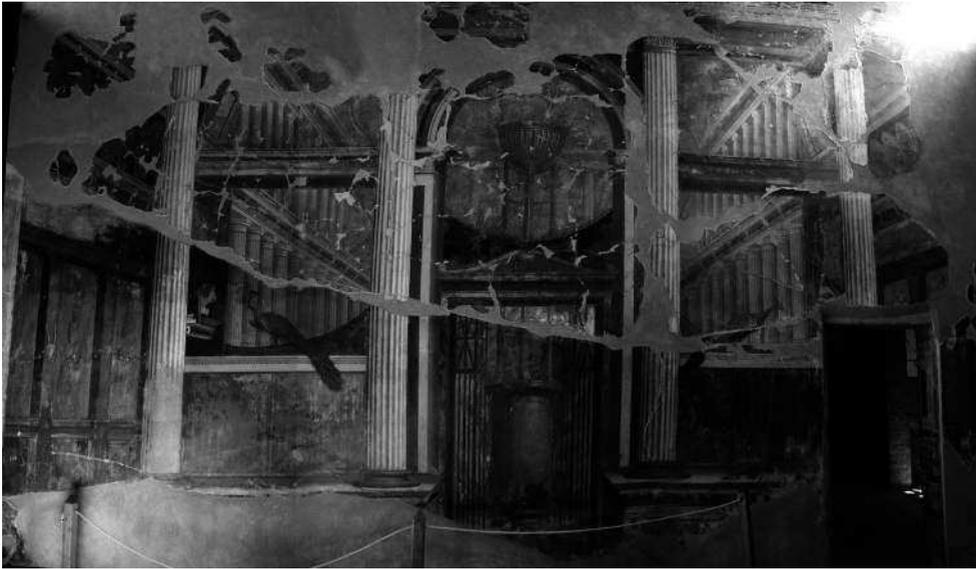


Figure 1.5 Room 15, eastern wall, Villa of Oplontis, Bay of Naples, c. 60–40 BC, in situ.

combined in novel ways to create something that was markedly different from what had been done before. During the first part of the twentieth century – when examples of the Second Style were only known from the Italic peninsula – there was heated debate over the question whether the Second Pompeian style was Roman or had originated from what was then imagined to have been the only cultural capital of the Hellenistic world: Alexandria. Now we know that this was the wrong question to be asking, because the Second Style was both Roman and Alexandrian. Likewise, Rome around the middle of the first century BC must be characterised as being Roman and Greek/Hellenistic alike. Egyptian and Near Eastern elements played a smaller role, be it as constitutive parts of what we describe as Hellenistic or on their own. But in many respects Rome and Alexandria were part of the same cultural context.

Consider Antioch (on-the-Orontes) around the middle of the first century BC. Drawing a circular line from Rome to Alexandria over Anatolia and the Levant, this third metropolis of the late Hellenistic world is situated roughly between the other two.²² Antioch is an important Hellenistic centre as well, although now we know relatively little

²² For *metropoleis* in the ancient world, see Nicolet *et al.* 1999.

about its archaeology.²³ In dynastic and cultural respects the Seleucids choose to strongly underline their membership to the wider Hellenistic world by doing Greek, probably also in their Mediterranean capital. By no means, however, is this an active form of Hellenisation: the cultural and ethnic diversity of the territories under Seleucid rule is very much respected. In Babylon, for instance, another Seleucid capital, the Seleucid kings present themselves as quintessential local, Babylonian successors because, apparently, the context or occasion requires them to do so.²⁴ But in general the Seleucid court uses the Greek cultural formula for dynastic self-presentation. Where the Ptolemies initially felt a need to be conservative in developing new forms of dynastic and cultural expression to stress continuity with Egypt's past, the Seleucids feel free to do so right away. The (limited) evidence available shows that these new forms could be dramatically innovative and are characterised by the intermingling and juxtaposing of various cultural elements. Consider, for example, a personification of the city of Antioch that was probably commissioned by one of the early Seleucid kings.²⁵ It displays a female figure wearing a mural crown who is seated on a rock with her legs crossed, her right foot just touching a male figure below her. (Fig. 1.6) Although the statue seems to look conventionally Greek, it is novel in almost every aspect. The female personification is adorned with a crown in the form of a city wall with towers, an element that obviously belongs to the Anatolian-Cyprian world and that had never been combined in this way before. Also new is the use of topographical references – like the swimming man (representing the Orontes river) and the rock (representing the Silpios mountain at Antioch) – and the dynamic display of a seated woman with crossed legs. In Anatolia and the Levant this new and innovative iconography quickly becomes a successful and much used element of the Hellenistic repertoire. It is difficult to document these kinds of dynamics of reception and innovation on a wider scale and for the entire Hellenistic period due to a lack of

²³ Its half million (or so) people were formally under Roman control for a decade by then; but the Romans were quick to guarantee their autonomy. For the archaeology of Antioch, see still *Downey 1961* and *1963*, now with the overview of *De Giorgi 2016*.

²⁴ As can be deduced from the so-called Borsippa cylinder; see *Strootman 2013a*. For aspects of Hellenisation of Babylon in general, see *Kuhrt 2013*.

²⁵ Generally known as the Tyche of Antioch; for all information, see now *Meyer 2006*, the conclusions of which I follow here. The original or other Hellenistic copies have not been preserved; one probably gets the best idea of them through a much later Hadrianic interpretation of the iconography as preserved in the Vatican Museums and illustrated here. For Seleucid Antioch in general, see *De Giorgi 2016*.



Figure 1.6 The Tyche of Antioch (Hadrianic period, second century AD).

data. Therefore it becomes virtually impossible to present concrete conclusions about the various ethnic and cultural identities involved – as could be done for Alexandria and Rome. As a former Hellenistic Seleucid capital at the Mediterranean coast, Antioch around 50 BC is likely to have shown Greek/Hellenistic and Near Eastern elements in its material culture. It is difficult, however, to be more specific and say something, for instance, about Egyptian (or other) elements or about socio-cultural developments as a consequence of new political circumstances. Did Antioch witness a cultural explosion similar to that in Rome? Did its people make a similar strategic and contextual use of the various Greek, Hellenistic, Egyptian and Near Eastern styles at hand, like they did in Alexandria? We cannot tell. However, similar processes have been well documented for other areas of the Levant in the late Hellenistic period. In the hinterland of Antioch, on a hilltop in the northern Beqa'a Valley, stands the so-called mausoleum of

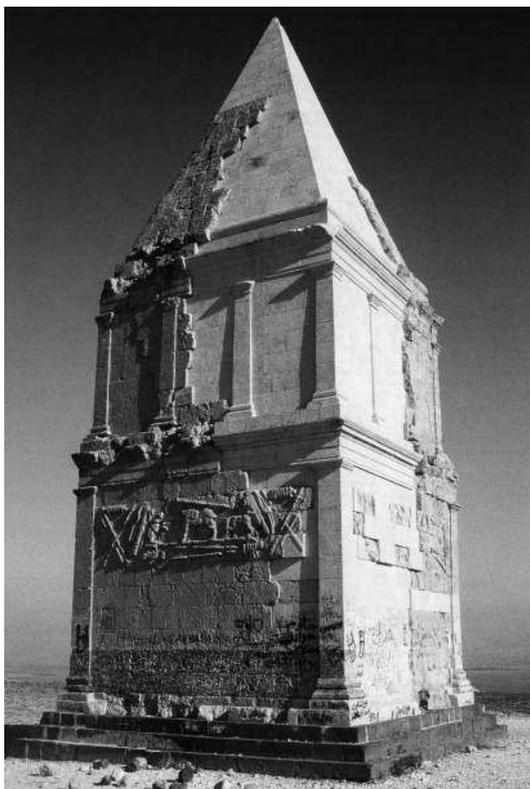


Figure 1.7 Mausoleum of Hermel, Beqa'a Valley, Syria, first century BC, in situ.

Hermel.²⁶ It has a *crepis* with steps and a sort of podium that is decorated with pilasters at the corners, and there are reliefs showing hunted animals on four sides, all hewn from the stone of the hill itself. There is a second layer above, decorated with four pilasters at each side and crowned by a large pyramidal roof. (Fig. 1.7) Again there is a combination of different stylistic elements here that resists an easy interpretation in terms of Greek, Eastern or local.²⁷ This mausoleum is part of a larger

²⁶ Cf. *Perdrizet 1938*; *Freyberger 1998*, 18 and 108; *Kropp 2013*, 212–216. It is dated to the first century BC (see *Sartre 2001*, 282–283), and it seems difficult to narrow this dating down. The monument is a solid block construction and could not be entered; the burial itself was probably meant to be under the ground (or elsewhere).

²⁷ It is tempting to see in the pyramid roof a reference to the Egyptian style. Although this may certainly be the case, pyramid roofs are used for mausolea probably already from the seventh century BC onwards in the Levant (see *Kropp 2010*). With this question it is important to note, moreover, that the pyramid form may refer to the concept of *nefesh*, which is the belief that the stone standing on a monument is the resting place of the soul of the deceased (cf. *Kropp 2013*, 216–224).