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Mutual Cultural Exchange: Egyptian Artefacts in the Roman Landscape

Introduction

With obelisks seemingly appearing around every corner in Rome, it is unsurprising that scholarly interest in the Egyptian artefacts of the Roman Empire has always been avid. The study of the dissemination of Egyptian cults in particular has been pursued enthusiastically and though the famous Alexandrian grain ships have left little physical trace, they too have made an indelible mark upon scholarly literature¹. Other foci of academic interest include decorative *Aegyptiaca* and the luxury Red Sea trade². Never, however, have all of these channels of influence been brought together under the auspices of one system of connectivity. Versluys assembles the widespread scholarly literature on *Aegyptiaca* in the various provinces, a data set that is implicitly set against his own distribution of Nilotic scenes. His is one of the few studies that makes an attempt at such an empire-wide examination. Even with this detailed and comprehensive study, however, there is little synthesis in terms of trade connections or comparison between the distribution of *Aegyptiaca* with the distribution of other Egyptian products for a broader outlook³.

In addition, current research often emphasizes the Roman initiative in this cultural exchange: for example, how the Romans refashioned Egyptian imagery or how they took the primary role in propagating Egyptian cults⁴. Some have even noted certain cases in which Romans appropriated Egyptian imagery, altered it for their own purposes, and then exported it back to Egypt where it took root because of Roman

¹ Egyptian cults (major works): VERMASEREN *EPRO*; MALAISE 1972; TRAN TAM TINH 1972; TAKÁCS 1995; ARSLAN 1997; BRICAULT, LECLANT 2001. Grain trade: ERDKAMP 2005 for introduction and wider bibliography; FREDERIKSEN 1980 for Puteoli. Grain ships and other ships with primarily perishable cargoes do not generally survive in the archaeological evidence because of the nature of underwater site formation processes (PARKER 1981); as a result, literary sources provide most of the evidence for this trade (e.g.: the grain ship the *Isis* in Lucian, *Navigium* 5).

² *Aegyptiaca*: ROULLET 1972, VERSLUYS 2002, SWETNAM-BURLAND 2002 (*non vidi*), 2007; VOUT 2003; ASHTON *ET AL.* 2004; Red Sea trade: CASSON 1989.

³ VERSLUYS probably declines to make comparisons with the distribution of known cults in an effort to avoid the very theoretical issue of which he warns others: many have made the mistake of assuming that just because something looks Egyptian, it heralds the presence of a cult, thereby subsuming non-cultic *Aegyptiaca* under the title of cult objects (VERSLUYS 2002: Nilotic distribution, 239–248; *Aegyptiaca* distribution, 314–323; theoretical difficulties: 12, 16, 314–315). The connection between cults and trade is made explicit by Malaise (see MALAISE 1972, 264–314, 331–332, 352–354). Further trade objects (non-Egyptian in appearance) are not examined closely. Vout makes mention of Egyptian stones but more for their role as a material for Egyptianising objects, not as a trade object in their own right (VOUT 2003, 184). Swetnam-Burland acknowledges the role of the grain ships in the transportation of *Aegyptiaca* but does not greatly elaborate (SWETNAM-BURLAND 2007, 124–125).

⁴ Image appropriation: ASHTON *ET AL.* 2004, 48–51. Cult distribution: MALAISE 1972, particularly 352–354; BRICAULT, LECLANT 2001.

influences there⁵. The focus is most often on the actions of Rome, rather than the impact of Egypt. This approach is both edifying and valuable but it can be expanded.

This paper, as part of a larger session on the connectivity of Egypt and North Africa, examines Egypt not at home but abroad, specifically concentrating on how Egypt impacted the everyday visual environment across the Roman Empire. To this end, however, one must examine the wide range of existing Egyptian artefacts in order to get a sense of the totality of trade between Egypt and Rome and the intense connectivity between the two. The Egyptian artefacts to be discussed are not only those that are explicitly Egyptian in appearance, but also those that represent the resources of Egypt. The term “Egyptomania” is still widely used in scholarly literature and it carries particular connotations sometimes associated with the decorative habits of the elite, sometimes with Egyptian cults and their popularity⁶. After examining the archaeological remains of Egypt in the Roman Empire as one system of connectivity, however, it is clear that the desire for Egyptian artefacts was not an irrational “mania”; instead, it was the result of intensive and wide-ranging trade connections that affected not only the elite or cult participants but also the average Roman citizen.

Why Egypt?

Before surveying *how* Egypt impacted daily life in the Roman world, we must first ask *why* Egypt? Very rarely do we pose the question of why so many Egyptian artefacts are traceable in the Roman landscape. There are various obvious answers: it was a monumental society with interesting and exotic objects, as well as the realm of an enemy and eventually a productive province, one to be exploited for the benefit of Rome⁷. A further supplementary explanation exists, however: namely, the unique connectivity within Egypt itself.

In recent scholarship, the concept of connectivity has become the subject of intense examination, exemplified by Horden and Purcell's recent book, *The Corrupting Sea*⁸. More and more scholars emphasize that the ancient world was not insular but was in fact very sophisticated in its exchanges and was highly connected through economic and social ties. Though *The Corrupting Sea* has been instrumental in developing the concept of connectivity as applied to the ancient world, it is by no means a singular work; of late, the scholarly realm has been flooded with evidence for the economic and social relations within and among various regions, particularly for the Roman period⁹. Undoubtedly this new trend, based as it is on archaeology and historical text, is one that will only expand and improve our understanding of the ancient world.

Nevertheless, it is important to take a critical approach and to acknowledge a concept often ignored: relative connectivity. Though all areas of the Roman Empire appear to have been much more highly connected and interactive than previously thought, there still are varying degrees of connectivity largely determined by geographical factors. As this relative connectivity is difficult to quantify, however, its significance has been largely ignored thus far. In the case of Egypt, its peculiar geography lends itself to advanced connectivity. Though Egypt's vast deserts isolated the population and protected them from invasions, once the Romans gained control of Egypt, they also gained control of Egypt's greatest natural asset: the Nile. Even though it is difficult to quantify its relative connectivity, the Nile does appear to give Egypt a comparative advantage in terms of trade and exchange in the Roman world, an advantage that should be taken into consideration when examining any sort of Romano-Egyptian relations.

⁵ Imagery of Isis (reinterpretation): ASHTON *ET AL.* 2004, 48.

⁶ For recent usage of the term: ASHTON *ET AL.* 2004 (*Roman Egyptomania*) and DE CARO 2007 (*Egittomania: Iside e il Mistero*); note here, in DE CARO's title, the explicit connection between the term Egyptomania and Isis cults.

⁷ Several studies include reviews of the Roman attitude towards Egypt in literature, often with varying interpretations of the same evidence: VOUT 2003, 180–183; VERSLUYS 2002, 4–7; most extensive: CURRAN 1997, 8–67.

⁸ HORDEN, PURCELL 2000.

⁹ Most recently SCHEIDEL *ET AL.* 2007, with extensive bibliography.



Fig. 1 – Distribution map of the provenance of Egyptian monuments in Rome (author, created using GoogleEarth ©).

Simply put, because of the Nile, Egypt was infinitely more exploitable than many other regions under Roman rule. The Nile exposed miles of civilization that otherwise would have been accessible only by overland routes, and because of the inhospitable desert surroundings, the Nile also provided direct access to the majority of Egyptian cities as most rested in the fertile region directly abutting it¹⁰. The resultant penetrating exploitation of Egypt by the Romans can be seen by looking at a map of the original provenance of several monumental objects imported to Rome (fig. 1). Roulet, in her study of the Egyptian monuments of Rome, recorded 29 with a defined or supposed original provenance; these 29 objects derived from 11 different sites. Those that came from Lower Egypt include 4 from Alexandria, 2 from Hermopolis Parva, 3 from Sais, 2 from Behbet el-Hagar, 10 from Heliopolis, and 2 from Memphis; those from Upper Egypt include 1 from Hermopolis, 1 from Akhmim, 3 from Thebes (2 from Karnak specifically), and 1 from Elephantine¹¹. While it appears that the Romans primarily exploited the Delta region, it is clear that at times this exploration (and exploitation) continued further into Egypt, even as far as Elephantine. Though the sample size is small,

¹⁰ The green areas in figure 1 represent the primary cultivable areas in Egypt as seen today from satellite images; most of Egypt's ancient cities, with the exception of those in some oases, lie within this zone.

¹¹ Figures and distribution map based on information from ROULLET 1972, appendix III, 153–156.

there is little reason to doubt its representative nature as it is a random sample of those artefacts that found their way to Rome.

Versluys notes that Alexandria was filled with objects from earlier Pharaonic periods and thus there is some bias towards this city; Alexandria was the site of their first re-use, Rome the second¹². And, indeed, from ongoing harbour excavations at Alexandria, there are several objects that date to the Pharaonic period: for example, an inscribed statue base of the 19th dynasty, a falcon-head sphinx dating around the 7th-8th century BC, and a fragment of an obelisk also dating to the 19th dynasty¹³. But whether it was the Greeks or the Romans who arranged for these objects to be displayed in Alexandria, it was the Nile that allowed for such connectivity and reliable transportation.

In addition to exporting *Aegyptiaca*, the Romans also heavily exploited quarries for Egyptian stone, some of which were located as far south as Aswan¹⁴. If these resources had been accessible by land only, would we have as many indications of Egypt in the Roman landscape? No doubt the Romans had the technical abilities to make such trade possible but the enormous expense makes this unlikely. In the end, the geographic connectivity of the Nile specifically, rarely the focus of attention, in fact goes a long way towards explaining why there was such an intense level of connectivity between Egypt and the rest of the Roman Empire.

Evidence of Impact

In terms of maritime archaeology, it is rather difficult to prove archaeologically the impact of Egypt on Rome. The evidence for the potential volume of trade with Rome is surprisingly slim because of heavy silting from the Nile and rapid coral growth in the Red Sea, which has surely obscured many ancient wrecks¹⁵. Wrecks that should be in evidence are hidden from our current technology because of various site formation processes. The recent discovery of over 60 shipwrecks in the harbour of Heracleion-Thonis alone demonstrates the wealth of material which does exist but which can be found only under ideal conditions, conditions which are unfortunately rare in Egypt and the Red Sea¹⁶. As a result, one must look primarily to land-based archaeology and literature in order better assess the incorporation of Egyptian products and culture in the Roman landscape. This study focuses primarily on archaeology and will first discuss those artefacts conceived of as explicitly Egyptian in appearance: namely, the remains of cults and decorative *Aegyptiaca*.

The potential impact of cults on average Roman citizens, non cult-participants, is evident not so much in their dissemination or their exotic appeal but through their locations within Roman cities. In the pre-imperial period, one of the most important centres of Egyptian cult outside of Egypt was Delos, namely the Serapeum C. On Delos, the Egyptian cults were placed towards the edge of the town¹⁷. Though they were popular, the cults were a destination location rather than the central focus of the *polis*. The cults in towns of imperial Italy that have reliable archaeological testimony, by contrast, are all located in very prominent and heavily-frequented locations¹⁸. The Iseum Campense in Rome was in the Campus Martius, while in Puteoli the cult of the Egyptian gods was located in the harbour and may even be depicted on souvenir glass

¹² VERSLUYS 2002, 328–329.

¹³ GODDIO, FABRE 2008: statue base, no. 451; sphinx no. 452; obelisk no. 461; these objects and others recently discovered may be added to the four listed by ROULLET, supra n. 11.

¹⁴ For location of quarries during the Roman period: ALESSANDRINI *ET AL.* 1989, 228; for distribution through exports of some Egyptian stone: LAZZARINI 2004, 103–107.

¹⁵ For site formation problems in the Red Sea, see RABAN 1973, 179. See also the limited number of wrecks thus far published from Egypt, in comparison with the Western Mediterranean (PARKER 1992, 7, table 2, map 1).

¹⁶ Franck Goddio, personal communication. For Heracleion-Thonis, see GODDIO 2007, 1–28, 69–130. Full excavation of the wrecks has not yet taken place and thus publication is planned but is not yet in progress.

¹⁷ Egyptian cults on Delos: ROUSSEL 1915, 47–69; BRUNEAU, DUCAT 1983: Serapeum A (219–221); Serapeum C (227–229).

¹⁸ For a list of the Italian Egyptian cults with firmly attested archaeological evidence (not simply presumed), see VERSLUYS 2002, 316, Table 10.

vessels¹⁹. Similarly, in Ostia the Iseum was near the public baths and even had an attached *horeum*, while the cult at Florence was on the outskirts of town, but near the main city gate of Fiesole²⁰. In Pompeii, the Iseum was situated directly next to the theatre, a regular gathering place for citizens.

This quick assessment of the geographic distribution of these cults is not intended as a statement regarding their relative popularity among Roman citizens; in other words, just because these cults were centrally located, this does not automatically signify that they must have been the most important and most popular cults in the city, nor that they were more popular among the citizens of imperial Italy than the cult was among those living in Delos. Instead, this assessment merely highlights, regardless of the relative popularity of the cults or the number of their adherents, their visual prominence for *all* citizens as a result of their locations, whether those citizens were cult participants or not.

A similar phenomenon occurred through the presence of decorative *Aegyptiaca*. Vout in particular notes the metropolitan impact of such large monuments as the Cestius pyramid in Rome²¹. What is often ignored, however, is the evidence for the wide availability of smaller Egyptian or Egyptianising works; though they abound in museums, they often lack provenance and thus are difficult to study in depth from an archaeological perspective. In Pompeii, however, Swetnam-Burland notes that the majority of Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts are not the large and attention-grabbing objects one is accustomed to seeing in the city of Rome or at Hadrian's villa²². Instead, the artefacts are rather small-scale, such as statuettes and amulets²³. In Roulet's volume, the focus lies upon large monuments found in Rome (statues, sphinxes, obelisks...). Rome, however, probably has a slightly skewed representation in that, as the capital, it was the site of the most ostentatious display and presumably had the greatest amount of wealth. In addition, Roulet traced many of these objects through collections and even through old drawings and descriptions, a body of evidence more likely available for larger finds than for small, easily transportable objects²⁴.

In other well-preserved domestic structures, this pattern of small Egyptian or Egyptianising objects is confirmed as the norm. Though Delos flourished before the imperial period it acted as a gateway for many Egyptian influences and was home to a number of Roman *mercatores*²⁵. At Delos, outside the cult context, there are no large Egyptian statues or even Nilotic mosaics; instead, there are a number of Egyptianising terracottas that were found not just in the cult complex, but also in the streets, in houses, and in workshops²⁶. Though these were not of Egyptian manufacture, they do reflect the popularity of small affordable Egyptianising objects.

Like Delos, the Terrace Houses of Ephesos, which are of the imperial period, contained small-scale objects²⁷. Aquileia, too, is a site with numerous Egyptian finds and, here again, small objects far outnumber larger finds²⁸. The predominance of small Egyptian objects among decorative *Aegyptiaca* in domestic contexts, particularly in these port cities, suggests a large trade in such objects, wide familiarity and easy accessibility, perhaps a large enough trade that such objects would have been affordable even for Romans of the lower class. Though the houses at Ephesos represent a clearly elite context, Pompeii, Delos, and Aquileia are not precise in their find locations and these finds may represent the possessions of either the wealthy or the average citizen. In this way, through the location of cults and the ubiquity of small-scale objects, Egypt affected the daily visual environment of the elites and regular citizens alike.

¹⁹ Iseum Campense: LEMBKE 1994: 74–83. Puteoli: VERSLUYS 2002, 311 for a brief discussion and further bibliography, particularly OSTROW 1979.

²⁰ Ostia: VERSLUYS 2002, 47 for information and further bibliography; Florence: VERSLUYS 2002, 309; GUIDOTTI 1997.

²¹ VOUT 2003, 177–180.

²² Hadrian's villa: bibliography and review in VERSLUYS 2002, 24–6; villa di Cassio: PIETRANEGLI 1949-1950.

²³ SWETNAM-BURLAND 2007, 124; GUZZO 1997; DI MARIA 1989. Size range of small finds from GUZZO 1997: 1.7-17.6 cm.

²⁴ ROULLET 1972.

²⁵ MALAISE pinpoints Delos as the essential key in the dissemination of Egyptian cults (MALAISE 1972, 264–311, 331–332).

²⁶ LAUMONIER 1956, 138–43, catalogue nos. 370-381, pl. 41.

²⁷ ERDEMGIL 1989: Sarapis: inv. no. 30/25/75; priest: no. 1965; lamp: no. 2186; fertility figurine: no. 780. Size range: 8-38 cm.

²⁸ See GIOVANNI, SCOTTI 1997; CALVI 1977; DOLZANI 1953-1954, 1956, 1977. Size range of smaller finds from GIOVANNI, SCOTTI 1997: 7.4-15 cm.

But it was not only through typically “Egyptian-looking” objects that Egypt made its impact on Rome. Other traceable artefacts that highlight Egyptian influence are two particular exports of Egypt: coloured stones and gems. In the imperial period, Rome became the first to actively import coloured marbles and stones from the provinces for use in sculptural and architectural works²⁹. It was not a phenomenon explicitly connected with Egypt in the minds of the Romans as Egypt was only one of many suppliers of coloured stone³⁰. The Egyptians did, however, provide the model for the use of coloured stones in sculpture and architecture in addition to some of the material. Though they did not use it to express the same ideological concepts, the sculptures and architecture of Egypt were influential in this new and creative mode of Roman ideological expression³¹.

In addition, the use of coloured marble was a mode of expression that was highly visible. Though these marbles were acquired only at great expense, they were most often used in imperial contexts, and thus were not limited to elite homes. They were in fact on public display, visible to everyone in the major cities of the Roman Empire³². Egypt also had its influence on architecture through design, not solely through colour. As McKenzie has successfully demonstrated, certain architectural motifs such as the popular broken pediment and *tholos* motif, visible both in the wall paintings of Pompeii and the architecture at Petra, had their origins in Alexandria (fig. 2)³³.

Finally, the export of gems and other luxuries from Egypt greatly affected the Roman mentality at all levels of society. In the tirades of Roman moralists against the *luxuria* of the age, when jewelry is mentioned, emeralds and pearls are often singled out as the greatest expression of wasteful extravagance³⁴. In the Roman period, Egypt is the main source of emeralds while pearls were primarily acquired through the Red Sea trade. As Schörle discusses in more detail, in the imperial period there appears to be an increased exploitation of gems in Egypt and a greater availability that is reflected not only in mining sites but also in the iconographic evidence from the Fayyum portraits of the second century³⁵; these portraits show several women wearing extravagant jewelry - most display gems and the most commonly displayed appear to be pearl earrings and necklaces of alternating emeralds and pearls (fig. 3)³⁶. In Pompeii, not only were there two *gemarii* workshops, but the physical remains also reflect the general preoccupation of Roman matrons with gems in general, and pearls and emeralds in particular³⁷.

The emeralds and pearls described above also tie in with the larger Red Sea luxury trade. Though the luxuries from this trade originated in India and Africa, it was the Nile that made this trade possible, or at least more economically feasible. Lucian, when he describes the “typical day” of Roman matrons and the luxuries in which they indulged, mentions the specific origins of only three goods, all of which were available primarily through the trade with Egypt: perfumes, pearls, and gems (*Amores*, 40-1). He also describes nearly-transparent veils and clothing that is likely made from some sort of sheer linen or silk, both of which were available through Egypt. Though the Romans criticized most foreign societies for their corrupting ways, it was Egypt that provided the highest material expression of this luxury. For the Romans, the goods that came from and through Egypt after its conquest and the image of Egypt itself defined the new concept of

²⁹ SCHNEIDER 2002, 83. For basalt and its sculptural use: BELLI PASQUA 1995.

³⁰ PENSABENE 2002, 34–46 for 24 major stone wrecks and descriptions of their cargo, which derive from several different regions.

³¹ The Romans seem to have often used such marbles to express some sort of conception of the fantastical other, be it mythological characters, foreigners or slaves (SCHNEIDER 2002, 95–105).

³² PENSABENE 2002, 9.

³³ MCKENZIE 2007, 96–105.

³⁴ For a general overview of attitudes towards jewellery and gems in this period, in addition to specific evidence from Pompeii: D’AMBROSIO 2001, 28–49; even among the literary sources provided in this general review, pearls are specifically referenced in six cases, emeralds in three – far more than most other precious stones.

³⁵ SCHÖRLE, this session.

³⁶ WALKER 1997: of the approximately 40 female portraits shown in this catalogue, around 30 women are depicted as wearing pearls and/or emeralds, mostly commonly some combination of the two. Some of the more spectacular examples include nos. 37, 86, and 108. WALKER also includes real jewellery from Egypt and Cyrene which is used to complement the catalogue and aid in dating the portraits, most of which appear to date around the second century. Of about 37 items, pearls and/or emeralds are part of 10 pieces (WALKER 1997, 162–76).

³⁷ D’AMBROSIO 2001: *gemarii*, 34–36; pearls, 40–1 and catalogue nos. 1, 10–13, 36; emeralds, 42–43 and catalogue nos. 20–21, 37.



Fig. 2 – Broken pediment and *tholos* motif, al-Deir, Petra (photo courtesy of Josephine Quinn).

luxury and prosperity, not only for the elite who could afford such goods, but also for the people at lower levels of society who coveted them, sought after them, or despised them.

Conclusion

In the end, by examining the various available archaeological remains and different forms of Egyptian trade as a whole, both Egyptian-looking objects and resources, we may formulate a better conception of the way in which Romans experienced Egyptian influence in daily life. The purpose of this study was not to investigate individual Egyptian products in detail; as mentioned previously, this has often been done extensively already. Instead, by taking a more general view, and looking at these products as a whole and how they affected the daily visual environment of the Roman Empire, I intended merely to give a sense of the wealth of Egyptian products, both in terms of variety and quantity, provided through particular trade connections enhanced by the Nile. Egyptian influence, while perhaps not always explicitly Egyptian in appearance, was widespread, not confined to the elite or to cult participants as it may seem when examining only cults or *Aegyptiaca*.



Fig. 3 – Mummy Portrait of a Woman, attributed to the Isidora Master, about AD 100-110, encaustic on wood. The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California, 81.AP.42. Photo courtesy of The J. Paul Getty Museum, Malibu, California.

By looking at the trade objects of Egypt as a connected whole, further inroads of investigation are available. It would be interesting, for instance, to investigate not only how Egypt affected the visual environment in cities throughout the empire, but also how it may have affected actual daily subsistence, perhaps with more emphasis on literature than, as here, on archaeology; the grain trade obviously provided food, but all forms of Egyptian trade also increased not only the amount of seasonal work available at harbours but also work in the countryside at production sites, both in Egypt and throughout the empire³⁸. The mines of Mons Claudianus alone employed over 924 people, and this was only one quarry³⁹.

Another intriguing investigation, one that would strike at the heart of the question of relative connectivity would be one that compares the relative distribution of Egyptian objects and resources: for example, why does Asia Minor, which engaged in trade for Egyptian stone, lack the large amount of Roman *Aegyptiaca* so prevalent in other provinces⁴⁰? What factors are involved – trade, taste, or both? To draw such parallels and to examine Romano-Egyptian trade relations from such a bird's-eye view is difficult because of the range of specialist information, but to do so also allows for a better sense of the cultural and economic incorporation of this province into the Roman Empire and its total effect upon Roman life.

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³⁸ See CASSON for an idea of the products (luxury and agricultural) that were shipped between India, Africa and Rome, through Egypt on the routes described in the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (CASSON 1989, 39–43).

³⁹ PENSABENE 2002, 24.

⁴⁰ Distribution maps of Egyptian stone reflect that Asia Minor was generally as involved in such trade as the other provinces (LAZZARINI 2004, 103–107). VERSLUYS, on the other hand, notes a distinct lack of Nilotic motifs as well as a general deficit in *Aegyptiaca* in general for the Roman period in Asia Minor (VERSLUYS 2002: Nilotic, 241; *Aegyptiaca*, 321).

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