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Egypt in material and mind : the use and perception of Aegyptiaca in Roman domestic contexts of Pompeii

Mol, E.M.

Citation
Mol, E. M. (2015, May 27). *Egypt in material and mind : the use and perception of Aegyptiaca in Roman domestic contexts of Pompeii*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/33706

Version:	Corrected Publisher's Version
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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page

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Author: Mol, Eva Martine
Title: Egypt in material and mind : the use and perception of Aegyptiaca in Roman domestic contexts of Pompeii
Issue Date: 2015-05-27

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION, STUDYING AEGYPTIACA IN ROMAN DOMESTIC CONTEXTS

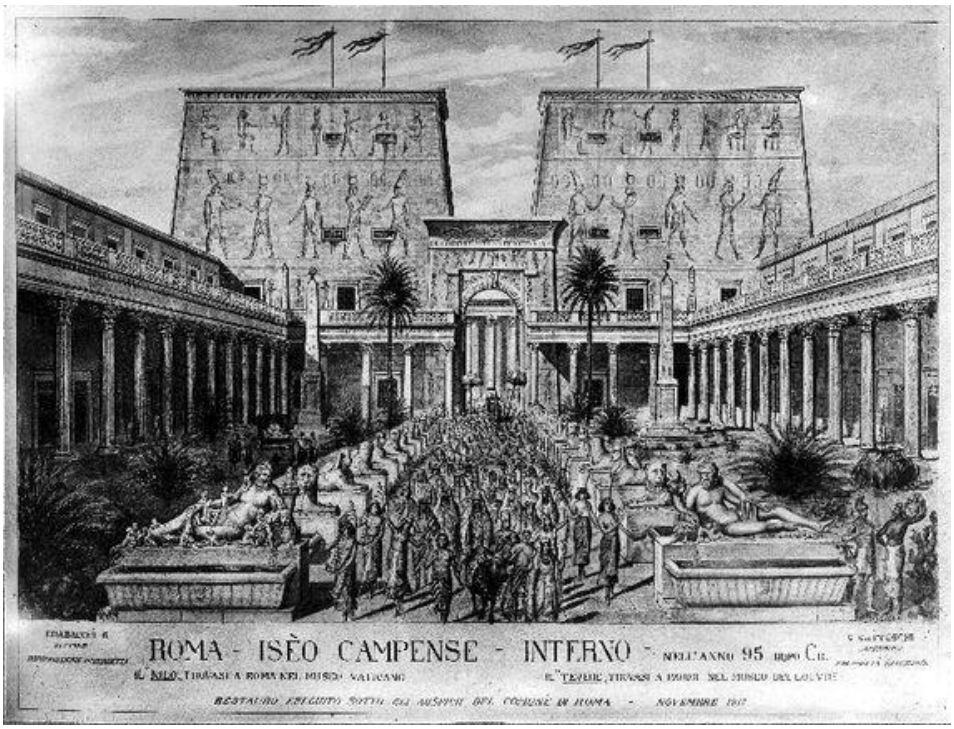

Fig. 1.1) Reconstruction of the Iseum Campense in Rome, made by Guido Trabacchi and Giuseppe Gatteschi (1918-1940). Gattischi 1924, picture from the Archive of the American Academy in Rome.

This dissertation investigates how objects that scholars call Egyptian or Egyptianised artefacts, were integrated, used, and perceived in the Roman world in the period between the 1st century BC and the 1st century AD. From the perspective of objects, it will attempt to study what people classified and perceived as Egyptian and how this influenced use; it therefore also focuses on the pivotal role that objects and object-(cultural)styles themselves play within the process of perception. When the term Egypt is used therefore, it generally does not refer to the physical country that was Egypt, but to Egypt as an association, as a classification, and as a material and cultural influence on the Roman world through the workings of objects. In order to achieve this, it will use the domestic contexts of Pompeii as a case study.

To introduce the central concern of this thesis we will first briefly regard the illustration in figure 1.1 above. This picture shows an image of the reconstruction of the so-called Iseum Campense in Rome. It was constructed by Guido Trabacchi (architect) on the occasion of the project *Restauri della Roma Imperiale* under the direction of Giuseppe Gatteschi.[1] The Iseum Campense, most probably built in the 2nd half of the 1st century AD in the Campus Martius area in the city of Rome, was a sanctuary dedicated to the goddess Isis. The picture above shows a temple that conspicuously resembles those of Egypt, of which remains nowadays can still be seen in places like Philae, Dendera, Esna, Edfu, or Kom Ombo in Egypt.[2] Those temples emphatically represent Egyptian sanctuaries as constructed during the heyday of the Late Period and especially during the Ptolemaic Empire. In their original state these sanctuaries were characterised by enclosed halls, open courts, and massive entrance pylons lavishly decorated with Egyptian iconography, obelisks flanking the entrance, and statues of animals that were aligned along a path leading to the court used for festivals and ritual processions. However, the Iseum Campense is a temple in Rome, and architecture such as figure 1.1 shows, has never been found on the Italian peninsula in this particular Egyptian manner. All the Roman temples dedicated to Isis which ground plans could be recovered throughout the Roman world, show sanctuaries that look completely different from this reconstruction.[3] They show distinctive Roman designs with rectangular platforms, porticoes, cellas (often raised by a flight of stairs), tympanums, and Graeco-Roman styled columns. The discrepancy that can be observed between the actual temples belonging to the Roman Isis and the reconstruction that was conceptualised by Trabacchi therefore raises a number of questions. Because if there are no such structures known from the Roman world, why then was the temple of the Iseum Campense reconstructed like this? It seems that Egypt as a concept was so closely connected to Isis and was accompanied by such a strong visual image, that a Roman temple of Isis in Rome could be reconstructed as an Egyptian one.

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[1] See Gatteschi 1924. The publication is composed of photographs of Roman architecture paired with reconstructive architectural drawings of Imperial Rome. It consists of 346 photographic prints that may be dated from the end of the 19th century to the 1930s.

[2] The temple of Horus in Edfu was built between 237 BC and 57 BC, into the reign of Cleopatra VII. Of all the temple remains in Egypt, the Temple of Horus at Edfu is the most completely preserved; the temple of Isis in Philae was dedicated to Isis and was first built by Nectanebo I (380-362 BC), with important additions done by the Ptolemies, especially Ptolemy Philadelphus, Ptolemy Epiphanes, and Ptolemy Philometor. See Manning 2009.

[3] For an overview on the design of Roman temples dedicated to Isis, see Kleibl 2009.

This latter observation illustrates a fundamental problem which will be guiding the present research. Our modern conceptions and projections seem to have significantly influenced and could even literally re-shape objects of the past. It furthermore shows how influential material culture can be in the understanding and recreating of the world and of the past. Because Egypt in present society is such a strong visual concept it affects the interpretation for past contexts, an observation which denotes serious consequences for the study of Egyptian artefacts in the Roman world.

Approaching this problem therefore requires a well preserved context in which the use and perception of these objects can be analysed, for which Pompeii has been selected to serve as a case study. Pompeii presents an equally famous Roman site in Italy to Rome, however, not for its grandeur of representing the capital of an Empire, but for the unique preservation of the remains of everyday life in an 'ordinary Roman town'. Pompeii has no extremely large and elaborate bath complexes, sanctuaries, or palaces, no high quality and impressive objects made of precious materials and it does not possess pyramids or massive obelisks imported from Egypt. Pompeii, however, just like Rome, also yielded many objects that scholars nowadays would call Egyptian or Egyptianised. In the case of Pompeii these form a large and heterogeneous group of objects spread throughout the town, consisting of objects such as small statuettes of the deities Isis, Harpocrates and Anubis, of blue-glazed figurines of Bes, of a bronze table support decorated with an Egyptian-styled sphinx, of small pieces of jewellery, of numerous wall paintings showing Egyptian deities, pharaohs or sphinxes. The dataset of Egyptian artefacts from Pompeii just described is often referred to as *Aegyptiaca*. In general this term has been used by scholars to denote the complete range of objects connected to Egypt in terms of provenance, style and content, divided under those objects that were imported from Egypt (Egyptian), and locally produced objects meant to look Egyptian (Egyptianising).[4] This means a scholarly division was made between the real Egyptian artefacts and artefacts that were copies or imitations of Egyptian objects. Moreover, this division has often been used as distinction in quality, in which Egyptian artefacts were 'real' and of religious importance, while copies would merely be an example of Roman cultural demise and a taste for exotic display in non-cultic settings. Egyptian

[4] For a detailed discussion on the terminology and historiography concerning Aegyptiaca Romana, see part 2.2 and 2.3.

material culture was seen as a cultural achievement of extraordinary proportions, just as Greek art was, and Rome would have proved this both by trying to imitate it and by failing in their attempt to do so. Although this view has been questioned in recent approaches to Aegyptiaca Romana (discussed in detail in the next chapter) whether the Romans ever conceptually employed such a distinction has remained underexposed thus far. To get a better grip on this separation from a Roman perspective asks for a more thorough regard of the perception and contextualisation of this category of artefacts.

The distinction made between Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts and whether it actually mattered to a Roman audience aside, the category Aegyptiaca presents more problems regarding its interpretation. The most predominant interpretations made by scholars for the group of objects called Aegyptiaca have mainly been on the basis of two accounts. Firstly, the objects were interpreted as religious artefacts, and explained in the context of the cults of Isis.[5] Secondly, Egyptian and Egyptian-looking objects were interpreted as *exoticum*, being acquired for their exotic and foreign features, of which the taste for it increased especially after the annexation of Egypt by Augustus in 30 BC. The assumed rise in popularity following this historical event scholars usually call 'Egyptomania', named after a seemingly comparable process of renewed interest of Europeans in ancient Egypt during the 19th century as a result of Napoleon's campaigns to Egypt (1798–1801).[6] However, there are several problems with these interpretations, first of all, if it is not known what 'Egyptian' entailed for a Roman, or whether this understanding was related to a fixed category of objects, it is difficult to contextualise a concept such as Egyptomania. Secondly, what is problematic of both lines of thought, the Isis cult and exoticism alike, is that they have been made a priori using a top-down explanatory framework which was imposed on the past, without conducting a proper contextual analysis or a critical investigation of the actual uses of the objects in different contexts.

[5] For the Aegyptiaca of Pompeii this was mainly done in Victor Tran tam Tinh's *Essai sur le culte d'Isis en Pompei* (1964), which will be discussed in chapter 2.

[6] The Egyptomania view has been the dominant explanation for the appearance of Aegyptiaca in various publications, such as de Vos, *L'egittomania in Pitture e Mosaici* (1980), but it has been used as a explanatory framework as well in more general works on the Roman world such as, for instance, in John Clarke's *Houses in Roman Italy* (1991) or *Rome's Cultural Revolution* (2008) by Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. Both these lines of interpretation and the complications for the field of Aegyptiaca will be discussed in chapter 2 of this book.

More difficult even, thirdly, is how both these interpretations uncritically use the label Egyptian for these objects without any attempt of examining whether this was the case from a Roman point of view. They seem to be a reflection of the scholar on what they believe Egypt and Egyptian entailed rather than that it reflects the thought of the Roman viewer. In this respect it can be observed, regarding the reconstruction of figure 1.1 once again, that although the size and the objects that are found in Pompeii are different, the category of Aegyptiaca from Pompeii equally suffered from modern projections as the Iseum Campense did. What exactly, for example, do we have to consider as Aegyptiaca from a Pompeian perspective? In order to study the integration of Egyptian artefacts, some basic conceptions that we today consider evident need to be asked again. Did the people know that a pyramid was Egyptian? Or hieroglyphs? Was this always the case in every situation? Was Isis considered an Egyptian or a Roman goddess? And concerning the use of such artefacts, were these regarded as exotic materialisations of the magical and alien country of Egypt? Or did such objects blend in with the rest of the hundreds of thousands of objects that were used, admired, venerated, discarded, and ignored in the houses of Pompeii?

Now that the key problems have been identified, that of *a priori* categorisation and cultural labelling of Egyptian artefacts based on modern conceptions of Egypt, the aim of the project becomes to study the different layers of perception of Egyptian artefacts through a bottom-up approach, through contextualisation, and by acknowledging the agency of material culture in its own right. The next step is that a solution needs to be found which is able to critically investigate the use of the objects, avoiding as much as possible the preconceptions that the modern concept of Egypt affords. When arguing top-down with a (modern) concept of Egypt in mind, thinking about a temple of Isis in Rome naturally turns into a picture such as figure 1.1. However, when starting not with this concept of Egypt, but with a terracotta vase decorated with the head of Isis (one of the finds from Pompeii), then the associative process will be quite different. Only from a bottom-up perspective it is possible to assess the meaning of these objects, how they might have functioned in their religious lives or as decorative objects, and whether they were conceptually connected to the classification Egyptian. Therefore, it is through the study of the way Aegyptiaca were handled in Pompeii that we can make an attempt to unravel what exactly

these objects meant for a Roman audience, whether they amalgamated or whether they were singled out in everyday use. This means that it is attempted to investigate the pre-interpretative level of object experience. By broadening the scope materially and contextually, this thesis wants to shed a new light on Aegyptiaca. Moreover, when this can be accomplished, it is possible to say something meaningful about Pompeian society. About how the society used objects and regarded Egyptian material culture, and how the integration process of artefacts functioned.

First, however, some steps should be taken in order to be able to arrive at a level in which the objects can be studied bottom-up. Firstly, by trying to carefully analyse how modern preconceptions of Egypt have been shaped and how they affected the study of Roman Aegyptiaca. This will be done in chapter 2 by charting the appropriation of Egyptian objects outside Egypt in a diachronic perspective and by studying how these were received by scholars. Egyptian objects found outside Egypt from the Bronze Age to the modern period will be used to study the way they were classified and interpreted by scholars and on what accounts these interpretations were made. This will elucidate what objects scholars usually deem Egyptian and how it relates to the interpretations of Aegyptiaca from Pompeii. This undertaking will also involve a reception study of the development of the modern concept of Egypt, in order to see where our current ideas of Egypt are derived from. When a clearer picture on scholarly preconceptions is obtained, and when a better understanding of how projections such as those made in figure 1.1 came about, it becomes possible to study their perception for a Roman case.
Secondly, a method should be developed that is able to avoid the label Egyptian but starts from the object and has at its primary aim to contextualise the finds in their original use-context. The design of this method will be attempted in chapter three, with the aid of recent approaches in archaeology focusing on concepts such as materiality and networks. The first concept contributes to the current undertaking because it offers a larger role to the object in people's lives, moving beyond artefacts as symbols, but instead seeing them as a constitutive power, not only affecting but co-creating how people behave and think. Networks, or relationality, are able to lift the objects out of their restraining *a priori* classes because the focus now becomes placed on their relations, which is a clear addition because it avoids categorisation. It was furthermore decided – due to the scope of the research

that examines perception – that the objects which were gathered as Aegyptiaca for the dataset, were selected on the basis of scholarly perception, meaning the database consists of objects that scholars deemed Egyptian or Egyptianised artefacts. It is important to stipulate this, as it was argued above that there might be a difference between what scholars think is Egyptian and what the Pompeians thought was Egyptian, and as this is one of the research questions it is necessary to start with the preconception of the scholar.[7] By commencing with our own perception of what Aegyptiaca are, and then contextually analyse the objects, I believe it becomes possible to separate more accurately our preconceptions from those that were held in the past, and more complexity can subsequently be allowed in the interpretation. The aim of the method is to deconstruct the label Egyptian for several categories of objects that are currently interpreted as such. However, while such an analysis can aid in pulling the artefacts out of their previous bounded categories, it does not solve yet how they were used. Therefore, in the second part of chapter 3, another method will be put forward, called place-making. This method is designed to analyse the artefacts in their house contexts. Place-making combines the material aspects of the house in relation to psychological aspects, how people move about in a house, how they interact and how this becomes affected by the spatial and material aspects present. The focus is put on studying their meaning from a holistic perspective of the house and all other artefacts found there.

After this brief outline of Chapter 2 and 3 in which the new approach for rethinking Aegyptiaca is proposed, it becomes clear that the issues of use and perception have to be dealt with on different levels. The two ways of contextualising Aegyptiaca, deconstruction and place-making form the basis of their rethinking and will be executed in two different analytical chapters (subsequently Chapter 4 and 5). The first contextualisation, attempted in chapter 4, will study all artefacts from Pompeian houses that were considered Egyptian by present-day scholars and their contextual and material associations. This approach will make an inquiry in how and where objects, material, or styles that were linked to Egypt, were applied,

[7] All the objects gathered from previous research, museum catalogues, and from the collections of the *Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli*, were put in a Microsoft Access database, with attached information about their find location, material, size, iconographical specificities etc. In order to obtain a wider picture of the number, the appearance, and the distribution of certain objects, both artefacts without a clear find context and those found outside domestic contexts were also included in the database.

integrated, and with what other artefacts they were conceptually associated. Because a network approach is taken up as a method, the artefacts do not necessarily need to be labelled as Egyptian beforehand, as the relationships they have with other artefacts and contexts are considered most important, and because they will be compared with all other material and visual objects from Pompeii. How, for instance, were Isis figurines employed in domestic contexts in relation to other deities, such as for instance Venus? When the table support in the form of a sphinx is not compared to other Egyptian artefacts, but to other types of table supports, might it give us better clues on how it was conceptualised? How did Egyptian styled and Greek styled sphinxes relate to each other, and did they function in similar cognitive frameworks? Through scrutinising such relations from a material culture perspective it will be attempted to gain access to the concepts and associations that the Romans applied when using such objects.[8] Through this type of relational contextualisation of Aegyptiaca, an effort is made to understand what people thought of these objects and whether that thought was (still) connected to Egypt. Furthermore, the approach is able to bring a deeper understanding of the role of Egyptian artefacts in Pompeii, and how they related to the use of other artefacts with different cultural labels, such as Greek or Roman. Through comparing all objects that were used in a certain context (not only those deemed Egyptian) in Pompeii, more can be learned about the different ways that Egyptian artefacts could integrate in the Roman world.

As chapter 4 is aimed to give a clearer view on the perception of Egyptian material culture and its relation to concepts of Egypt, chapter 5 will treat the second level of contextualisation, which takes place on the level of its use-context through the before mentioned method of place-making. This means that the houses in which Aegyptiaca were found shall be analysed in detail in order to observe how they were socially, visually, materially, and spatially employed in a house. While chapter 4 attempted to deconstruct the label Egypt, the second level of analysis wants to build up the argument again by looking at how exactly these objects were used when they become socially and spatially contextualized and when they are compared to all the other material, objects, and cultural styles that were present in the social unit of the house. A stone slab containing hieroglyphs imported from Egypt was found in a house where it was re-used as a threshold. How did this object

[8] For a detailed account of how this thesis deals with the notion of concepts see part 3.4.

function within the social context of the house? Why was it re-used as a threshold? What was its role regarding social and religious issues and if it did, how might its 'Egyptianness' have played a part in it even when it was not necessarily a conscious perception? The use of such objects can become clearer when their function in the house is elucidated through a holistic approach. The threshold forms an example in which the cognitive association with Egypt might not have been present by its users, or at least this could not be verified. The two houses that were selected to function as a case study for place-making, however, seem to show examples of houses in which a conscious concept was present, though they were employed in very different ways. The Casa degli Amorini Dorati (VI 16, 7-35), treated in the first case study, possessed an elaborate shrine in its peristyle completely devoted to Isis, a shrine which also contained an alabaster statuette of Horus in an Egyptian style and a green-glazed faience imitation lamp displaying Isis, Anubis, and Harpocrates, all gods that originated from Egypt. The Casa di Octavius Quartio (II 2,2), discussed in the second case study, did not possess any shrines, but displayed green-glazed statuettes of a pharaoh and the Egyptian deity Bes in its garden, and a marble sphinx in an Egyptian style next to a water feature. Such observations for the two houses without examining the rest of the contents of the house, the remaining decorations, other shrines, and the exact spaces and locations in which the artefacts were displayed, can be considered meaningless. However, this is the way how Egyptian or Egyptian-looking artefacts are usually approached. They are collected from all the houses of Pompeii and heaped up as one big pile of Egyptian 'stuff', after which they were monolithically interpreted as either exotic or religious. The contribution this thesis wants to make in chapter 5 therefore, is to show that when 'Egyptian' artefacts are analysed as part of a household, their function and their use within the social dynamics of the house can become clearer and consequently they will move beyond being just an exotic or religious artefact.

Contextualisation, both on a broader artefactual level and on a use-level, emerges as the key concept for a better understanding of Aegyptiaca. Because of its level of conservation and the large amount of Egyptian objects with a clear find context, Pompeii can be considered an ideal case study to investigate the perception and use of Egyptian artefacts and discuss their problems. A detailed contextual analysis of the function of Aegyptiaca in Roman houses that takes account of all objects that made up a household

can become established taking Pompeian houses as a case study. The strength of a site like Pompeii furthermore lies exactly in the fact that through its unique preservation it is able to show the material complexity of the Roman world. The two facts combined, the level of preservation and its complexity, makes the site the ideal playground to ask new questions about how Romans dealt with Egyptian artefacts, and how these objects were able to influence people and human thinking about material culture, both in the past as well as in the present.

Besides these levels of investigation, however, through its particular scope, aims and methods, this research might also contribute to a broader debate on the use and perception of objects in scientific research. Because by focusing on the cognitive relation of Egypt with certain objects, what is also studied is the extent of people's awareness of objects in their everyday life in relation to that within scholarly interpretation. Returning to the main problem of categorisation and labelling of Aegyptiaca it can be questioned for instance, whether cultural labels such as Egyptian were always present within the use and perception of objects. For example when the terracotta vase displaying the head of Isis from the example above is handled by its users in a domestic setting, 'Egyptian' might not be the first association, 'Isis' might not even be the first association. It might simply be associated with its function as a pourer of water and not even be contemplated upon at all. This counts of course, for many more archaeological classifications than Egyptian and shows that the problem is more complex than finding out whether something is perceived as Egyptian or not. The context in which things can 'become' Egyptian in the human mind is also of concern, together with the influence that Egyptian artefacts had when they were not consciously regarded Egyptian. Can we find a way to study this level of dealing with material culture? For this latter issue it is important to regard the unreflective aspect of object perception, and to acknowledge that because objects are often not important to reflect upon consciously in the daily lives of people, they possess agency. On a larger level therefore this thesis will deal with the development of a strategy, using Egyptian objects as a tool, that approaches objects, object perception, and object agency, from the level of everyday non-reflective use.

Within this larger level of object perception, the issue of projection that was discussed through the example of the Iseum Campense reconstruction is

also significant. Returning to figure 1.1 once more, the influence of the concept of Egypt and its visual image that becomes imposed on the past reveals an issue that goes beyond cultural labelling, but refers to the agency of style and objects on human thinking. Because if the issue is deliberated further, where does the problem of projection derive from, how does it affect the study of Aegyptiaca and how does it affect the study of material culture in general? It shows that projection is a natural and unconscious response to situations, and that both the normal observer and the scholar understand situations by projecting their own sense of reality onto it. The human being is in essence a projecting animal that shapes its own reality; this is a more efficient way of coping with everyday life. However, more important is that the issue illustrates that perceiver and the world are separate entities. It shows how much these projections and ideas are shaped in accordance to what can be seen in the world, influenced by the things and visual images which surround people. The ideas that we have about reality are derived from the world, as the Iseum Campense drawing shows, from the visual image that Egyptian temples provided for. For scholars it is both a truism and continuous hardship that we ourselves are part of the world we try to understand, but it is not something that needs to be denied nor something that is in need of artificial boundaries in order to solve it. The fact that a strict dividing line between us and the world cannot be drawn should be a starting point instead. The most important theoretical guiding principle of this research therefore, is that matter and meaning are not separate elements. They are inextricably fused together, shape each other, change each other, and understanding parts of its dynamics can be of importance to better comprehend culture and the past. Matter, as argued by Barad, is simultaneously a matter of substance and of significance.[9] Therefore, the picture of the Iseum and the objects that are called Aegyptiaca bring to the surface a much larger issue important for this research and in archaeological research in general, that of the relation between objects, classifications, and concepts within perception. The reconstruction of the Iseum is an example of the power the visual environment has to influence the thinking and that objects (in this case temples from Egypt) are able to affect and change concepts as well. Throughout all the levels of the different chapters of the dissertation, this agency, tension, and dialectic will be deliberated. Furthermore, because Egypt is such a strong visual concept, for modern people, but maybe also for Romans as was argued before, it can be

[9] See Barad 2007, 3.

considered an excellent tool to study the relationship between meaning and material. By bringing in this debate in conjunction with the archaeological aims, the dataset serves as a good example to show how the material which surrounds us influence the way we think.

To conclude this introduction, the research aims to deconstruct the cultural label Egyptian within the context of object-use and instead move to artefact perception. The interpretation of objects should go beyond cultural containers such as Roman, Greek, or Egyptian, but has to be viable in the context of the people that used these objects. This means, that Pompeii serves as an experimental study on how objects are used, and how we might study these on a cognitive level. Its model can therefore not serve as a blueprint for the entire Roman world, and although objects from Campania, Rome, and beyond will be used to serve as a background for the objects that are analysed, their analysis will not result in 'the Roman perception of Egypt'. What is hoped to be achieved through the close study of Pompeian objects, however, is to add a level of complexity to the study of Aegyptiaca and the study of archaeological objects that can also be taken into consideration studying 'foreign' objects within the wider study of the Roman world. Because it is possible to obtain insights in the integration process of Aegyptiaca, these understandings might be applied to other categorisations and different contexts as well. Trying to study Egyptian artefacts as a Roman phenomenon implies studying Aegyptiaca as part of a broad material framework no longer isolated in any respect from the multicultural visual language that was engaged by the Roman Empire and its spheres of influence. It should also employ a view that is disassociated from the aprioristic religious interpretation which has often dominated the study of Egyptian material culture in the Roman world. Pursuing this also means that it is attempted to critically approach ourselves as scholars and how our own perception of Egypt influenced the way we executed research and shaped our categories accordingly. The picture of Egypt, and Egyptian objects in the Roman world, are more complex than just being Egyptian, and that more cultural and social processes are involved giving these objects meaning. In order to reveal such processes, however, Egyptian objects make a very suitable tool and it is argued therefore that something important can be learned about Roman society, by studying this complex but fascinating collection of objects.