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## **Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana**

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### 3. Set-up and aims

The above sections show that the concept of Aegyptiaca has always been at the heart of studies into Egypt in the Roman world. It can be observed that whereas understandings of the presence of Egyptian manifestations in the Roman world have changed over time, conceptualisations of the category of Aegyptiaca have essentially remained unchanged and unchallenged since the days of Winckelmann. This implies that subject matter and perceived style are still used as main heuristic devices to understand artefacts as Aegyptiaca, and to classify them as either Egyptian or Egyptianising objects. This dichotomy, meant to distinguish between authentic Egyptian artefacts and Roman-made imitations of Egyptian objects, draws on several assumptions about the (supposed) provenance of these objects, in which place of manufacture and ethnicity of craftsmen play crucial roles. However, while these terms are generally used, no attempt has been made so far to structurally test the underlying premises. Moreover, since the distinction between Egyptian and Egyptianising objects is essentially a modern construction, these terms do not warrant an assessment of Roman perceptions of these artefacts right away. Indeed, the used terminology seriously complicates a bottom-up assessment of Roman understandings of material culture that we associate with Egypt, because, first, they imply a direct equation between modern and Roman understandings of what Egypt entails and, second, because they presume from the onset that it was this *Egyptianness* that determined how these objects were used and perceived. Also, the current focus on representation implies that other object parameters, like materials used and the social values related to materials, have only rarely been involved in analyses of how these objects functioned and were perceived by Romans.

In response to the observations outlined above, this study sets out to develop a different perspective to study the objects that we call Aegyptiaca, which could be characterised as an approach that aims to move ‘beyond representation’. Starting from the observed focus

on representation and the primacy of subject matter and style over materials used and the social values attached to certain materials, ‘beyond representation’ is meant to indicate, first, the novel emphasis in this study on the material aspects of so-called Aegyptiaca. As such, this study sets out to make the materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca part of the discourse on these objects.<sup>103</sup> This will be done by an initial focus on these objects’ material aspects and subsequent integration of these data with other object parameters, including style and subject matter, in order to arrive at a more inclusive understanding of the objects we call Aegyptiaca. Second, ‘beyond representation’ refers to the archaeological perspective that tries to break away from static interpretations of material culture as mere passive expressions, or representations, of fixed cultural meanings.<sup>104</sup> By redirecting questions of what objects

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103. Materiality is understood here as the agency and social meaning of the material itself (after Van Eck *et al.* 2015, 5), in which the agency of materials is understood as the way in which certain materials are able to evoke particular associations and effects, or, as Ingold (2007a, 12) has it, as materials’ “capacity to stand forth from the things made from them”. In other words, materiality, in the sense that it is used here, is all about the conjunction of the material and the social, or the social significance of materials, which results from the relations between materials and their properties on the one hand, and people on the other: it is through people’s engagements with materials that certain materials with particular properties become significant and are able to affect human conduct (cf. Tilley 2007, 17-19; Knappett 2007). For an overview of the concept of materiality and other definitions, see Miller (2005), Ingold (2013) 27-28, and Ingold (2007a) plus the responses to this article (Tilley 2007, Knappett 2007, Miller 2007, Nilsson 2007, and Ingold 2007b).

104. For theoretical background see, e.g., *Materialising Roman histories* (2017), Van Eck *et al.* (2015) 13-15, Versluys (2014) 14-19, all with relevant literature. As such, this study situates itself in the context of the so-called Material Turn in the Humanities and Social sciences (see Hicks 2010 for a historiography from an anthropological and archaeological perspective). This ‘turn’ essentially shifts away from traditional views of material culture that reduced things to meanings, as if an object is as a text, as something that represents something else, and which is there to be deciphered and interpreted (this is the so-called textual analogy, part of a broader, multidisciplinary interest in language and symbolism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century that is known as

mean, to questions of how objects were used, and which characteristics determined how they functioned, this perspective provides an alternative to problematic top-down projections of what objects mean to us (etic), and instead enables a bottom-up assessment of Roman (emic) understandings of objects we call Aegyptiaca.<sup>105</sup>

In order to do so, the wider framework of this study's approach will be outlined in Part II, *Understanding stone in the Roman world*. Two subsequent sections will deal with different aspects of Roman engagements with and understandings of stone materials. The first section uses the Roman stone trade and stone working practices as a model to evaluate relationships between artistic style, iconography, and (origins of) materials, in order to assess the persistent premises underlying the current understandings of Egyptian objects in the Roman world. Building on these insights, the second section sets out to explore Roman perceptions of stones. If we want to assess the materiality of so-called Aegyptiaca from a Roman perspective, while acknowledging that materials are perceived differently in different places and social and historical contexts,<sup>106</sup> we must first turn to understandings of stone materials in the social and historical contexts in which the objects that we call Aegyptiaca were used and perceived,

namely, the Roman world. The concluding paragraph of this section then studies the materials and materiality of selected Roman stone sculptures in relation to their subject matter and stylistic execution, and demonstrates that, in order to fully appreciate the efficacy of stone artefacts in the Roman world, the material data should be integrated with other object parameters that have traditionally received more attention.

Hereafter the book returns to so-called Aegyptiaca. Building on the insights obtained in Part II, the remainder of this study sets out to apply a different approach to a selection of Aegyptiaca. Starting from a focus on these objects' material aspects, these data are subsequently integrated with other object parameters, in order to obtain a more inclusive and bottom-up understanding of the objects that we call Aegyptiaca. Part III addresses the methods and materials. The first two sections explain the method that is used in this study to obtain the material data of selected objects and provide definitions of the object parameters that will be studied in relation to these data later on, respectively. Finally, the corpus of selected objects is presented in the third section. For each object, a fixed set of data is given first, as well as a brief description, which focuses on possible disagreements in previous studies. In addition, material descriptions are given for the first time for a selection of the studied objects. The corpus will then be analysed and subsequently discussed in the two respective sections that form Part IV, *Aegyptiaca beyond representation*. Ultimately, this final part tries to move 'beyond representation', and to demonstrate the potential of this study's novel approach to so-called Aegyptiaca.

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the 'linguistic turn': see, e.g., Boivin 2008, 10-15 and Hicks 2010, *passim*). These traditional views have been criticised for their failure to take the physicality of objects and its resulting efficacy into account, which, as Boivin (2008, 21) argues, has resulted in the reduction of the material world to "little more than a theatre, with objects as kinds of props [...] in a story that has already been written by human agents". By contrast, recent studies, aware of the limitations of the textual analogy, have set out to study material culture in its own right. By redefining the fundamental research question of what objects 'mean' to what they 'do' or, more radically, what they 'want' (Gosden 2005), this object-centred approach shifts from a discussion of how objects signify to how they effect, and it thus accommodates the active role and the impact of objects on people and social relationships that results from their physicality; this is often called 'object agency' or 'material agency' – the latter concept is usually meant to indicate the agency of material things, or objects (e.g., Boivin 2008, 27-28), instead of the agency of materials (cf. *supra*, n. 103). As such, the Material Turn in fact redresses the relationships between the social world and the material world that was previously dominated by anthropocentric views, "so that artifacts are not always seen as passive and people as active" (Gosden 2005, 194; on human and/versus object agency see also Boivin 2008, Jones – Boivin 2010, Hodder 2012, and Versluis 2016).

105. For this important methodical manoeuvre, with particular focus on so-called Aegyptiaca, see also Mol (2015).

106. Tilley (2007) 20, cf. Knappett (2007) 22-23.