



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

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

Müskens, S.W.G.

### **Citation**

Müskens, S. W. G. (2017, March 16). *Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana*. Archaeological Studies Leiden University. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/46693>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/46693>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Cover Page



Universiteit Leiden



The handle <http://hdl.handle.net/1887/46693> holds various files of this Leiden University dissertation

**Author:** Müskens, Sander

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

**Issue Date:** 2017-03-16

# 1. The study of ancient Egypt: historiography and present *status quaestionis*

*“The crowning attainment of historical study is a historical sense – an intuitive sense of how things do not happen (how they did happen is a matter of specific knowledge)”*

Namier (1952) 4

## 1.1 PRELUDE:

### THE 16<sup>TH</sup> AND 17<sup>TH</sup> CENTURIES

The interest in ancient Egypt has been long, strong, and diverse. In many ways, the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries can be considered as an essential formative period of scholarly interest in ancient Egypt.<sup>1</sup> The rapid rise of Western interest in ancient Egypt in the 16<sup>th</sup> century is closely associated with the increased availability of new source material from Rome and Egypt itself. As a result of the ‘Renovatio Romae’, the large-scale urbanisation process that would transform Rome into a Papal state, countless artefacts were brought to light, including Egyptian statues and obelisks that were soon to be re-integrated in the city’s urban fabric. Moreover, Egypt became more accessible to the Western world than ever before during this period. Through the publication of travellers’ accounts, new information about the country and its antiquities became available to a wider audience.<sup>2</sup> This first-hand knowledge of Egyptian antiquities increased further with the actual transportation of artefacts from Egypt to the Western world, which occurred especially from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards.<sup>3</sup>

Incited by this increased availability of new source material, Western interest in ancient Egypt began to shift from the Renaissance Hermetic tradition to a more critical, scientific approach in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>4</sup> The revived interest for ancient Egypt and the hieroglyphic script, in particular among European scholars of that time, culminated in the work of Athanasius Kircher (1602-1680). As a Jesuit scholar, Kircher made considerable progress with his (largely successful) translation of the Coptic language early in his career, and he subsequently addressed the hieroglyphic script. Its full decipherment was announced in 1654 under the title *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, an allusion to the author’s (false) claim to have solved the riddle of the Egyptian sphinx, namely, the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script. This multivolume publication, which included a catalogue of nearly all Egyptian artefacts known at that time accompanied by ‘translations’ of their hieroglyphs, is often considered as “the climax of the Egyptian Renaissance”.<sup>5</sup> Although the Egyptian Oedipus hardly appears to be a scientific work from a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, in many ways it is exemplary for the *status quaestionis* of the study of ancient Egypt in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century. The work was not the breakthrough in the decipherment of hieroglyphics that it claimed to be, but its scale and ambition nevertheless show that the study of Egypt and Egyptian history had acquired a

1. The following discussion is selective. Curran (2007) provides an excellent and in-depth analysis of the reception of ancient Egypt (in Italy) between ca. 1400-1600 and includes extensive notes as well as a thematic bibliography for further reading.
2. Several examples of travellers’ accounts that pay attention to Egyptian antiquities are mentioned in Whitehouse (1992); cf. Curran (2007) 282-283.
3. The first Egyptian objects that were brought to Europe were typically small, readily transportable items obtained from areas in Egypt that were easily accessible to Western visitors, notably the necropoleis at Saqqara: see Whitehouse (1989) esp. 188-189

- and (1992) 66-67 with several examples; cf. Curran (2007) 283.
4. In short, the Renaissance Hermetic tradition postulated that Egypt, and in particular the religious and philosophical writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, constituted the source of all primordial knowledge, wisdom, and skill. This notion prompted the early intellectual effort that was expended on the decipherment of hieroglyphs, which were believed to conceal this mysterious Egyptian knowledge, and in a broader sense gave an important impetus to the study of Egyptian objects in this period. The Hermetic tradition, its debt to the figure of Hermes Trismegistus, its influence on Renaissance Humanism, and its consequences for the study of Egyptian artefacts are discussed at greater length in Curl (2005) *passim* with further bibliography.
5. Excerpt taken from Curran (2007) 286; for Athanasius Kircher, the *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, and his other Egyptological studies, see Rowland (2000) and (2008).

prominent position in the nascent scientific climate of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

## 1.2 THE AGE OF REASON AND THE STUDY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

The development towards a more scientific approach to ancient Egypt that was incited during the 17<sup>th</sup> century accelerated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. This process should be regarded against the backdrop of the Enlightenment that permeated the Western world during this period. In short, this ideology deliberately moved away from the political, religious, and moral ideas and beliefs that had been grounded in tradition and faith for centuries. In contrast, the Enlightenment movement propagated human reason over faith and promoted the advance of knowledge through the scientific method that was based on empirical observations.<sup>7</sup> The development of this new scientific rationalism had considerable implications for the study and understanding of ancient Egypt. Scepticism prevailed over the Renaissance Hermetic tradition. Previous understandings of Egypt as the source of primordial knowledge and wisdom were increasingly perceived as speculative and rapidly made way for a shared interest in the ‘real’ Egyptian present and past: “in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century, Egypt finally emerged from the world of the imagination”.<sup>8</sup> As

a result, the publication of the first description of Egypt in 1735 was soon followed by accurately illustrated reports of European expeditions undertaken to map the country and its antiquities.<sup>9</sup>

This new scientific approach also changed the main objective of studies of Egyptian antiquities. Artefacts were no longer adduced to prompt speculation about the mysterious knowledge that they, or the hieroglyphs that were inscribed in them, might reveal. Instead, ancient Egyptian material culture was studied to reconstruct Egypt’s history and, as such, became ‘just’ a historical source.<sup>10</sup> Empirical observations concerning the visual and stylistic properties of antiquities would soon become the established method to write histories of the past. The latter half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century marks the emergence of grand art historical narratives and thereby incited the establishment of the modern academic discipline of art history. Comte de Caylus’ *Recueil d’antiquités égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques et romaines* included one of the first attempts to write a general history of the arts of ancient Egypt on the basis of a systematic comparison of the available source material.<sup>11</sup> However, this publication was soon overshadowed by the success of one of Caylus’ contemporaries, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717-1768). His most important work, *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, was originally published in 1764 and posthumously received a second expanded edition in 1776.<sup>12</sup> It established a new

6. From 1651 onwards, the Collegio Romano, where Kircher had resided since 1634, housed the *Musaeum Kircherianum*. This museum brought together all curiosities collected by the Jesuit Father, including a fair number of Egyptian antiquities that were discussed in his Egyptological publications. A large part of the Egyptian objects came from Rome, more specifically from the same location where the museum was situated. The Collegio Romano was built in 1582 on top of the ruins of the Iseum Campense, on the grounds that, for centuries, had yielded Egyptian antiquities, which had once belonged to that sanctuary. In 1642, some years before the official installation of the museum, a number of Egyptian objects were unearthed during renovations of the Dominican monastery situated nearby. Many of these objects ended up in Kircher’s *Musaeum* and formed the core of his Egyptian collection. Incidentally, the discoveries from 1642 gave rise to the first ever scientific discussion and reconstruction of the Iseum Campense, published by Kircher: see Lembke (1994) 16 and pl. 1.1. A (first) catalogue of the *Musaeum Kircherianum* was published as De Sepi (1678). For Egyptian objects in the museum, see esp. Leospo (1989); cf. Findlen (2003), Mayer-Deutsch (2010).

7. For a general introduction to the Enlightenment and syntheses of previous scholarship see Outram (1995) and Porter (2001).

8. Mastroianni (2008) 197; Curl (2005), esp. 140-170, discusses

this period at length.

9. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, few European travellers to Egypt ventured further south than Cairo, the necropoleis at Saqqara usually being the southernmost site. The first modern account that described the entire country was published by Le Mascrier (1735) on the basis of notes by B. de Maillet, the French consul in Cairo from 1692 to 1707. Besides sections on such topics as the country’s natural history and costumes, the publication included important sections on Egyptian antiquities. Other publications primarily devoted to Egypt’s main archaeological sites include Pococke (1743) and Norden (1755).

10. This approach is foreshadowed in De Montfaucon’s *L’Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures*, which was published in 15 volumes between 1719 and 1724 (De Montfaucon 1719-1724). This comprehensive study discussed Egyptian and other antiquities in order to address such topics as (relative) chronology and typology. It did so by systematically grouping careful empirical observations on the formal aspects of objects; cf. Décultot (2011) 191, Curl (2005) 141-142.

11. Caylus (1752-1767), published in seven volumes.

12. This section is based largely on Pott’s account (2003) of Winckelmann’s work; further references to both primary and secondary literature are found on p. 132-133.

paradigm for defining the history of art and artistic traditions, and hence Winckelmann has often been praised as the founder of modern art history. Today it is best known for its account of the historical evolution of the classical artistic tradition, which proclaimed Greek artistic supremacy over derivative and therefore inherently inferior Roman art.<sup>13</sup> However, it also provided an important historical narrative of Egyptian art, and the pervasive distinction between Egyptian and Egyptianising antiquities first began to take hold with Winckelmann.<sup>14</sup> This perspective came to have important implications for the scholarly discourse on *Aegyptiaca Romana* in the long term and remains deeply embedded in modern approaches. Section I.2.1 returns to this point.

### 1.3 THE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY: THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MODERN DISCIPLINE OF EGYPTOLOGY

Whereas scientific rationalism, and the work of Winckelmann in particular, may be considered as the most important contribution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to the future development of the study of ancient Egypt, the main importance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in this respect is marked by the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script and the subsequent establishment of the modern discipline of Egyptology. Napoleon Bonaparte's Egyptian expedition (1798-1801) played a substantial role in these events. It yielded a wealth of scientifically accurate data about the antiquities of Egypt, including the Rosetta Stone, which provided the final key to the decipherment of hieroglyphs by Jean-François Champollion in 1822-1824.<sup>15</sup> As a result of these events, the practical opportunities for the study of ancient Egypt had greatly increased during a few decades only. The creation of large collections of Egyptian antiquities in museums across Europe in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed further to this.<sup>16</sup> These new conditions created an unprecedented heyday of scientific interest in ancient Egypt that would finally result in the installation of an academic discipline devoted to its study, Egyptology.<sup>17</sup>

- 
13. This aesthetic distinction between authentic Greek originals and later Roman imitations or copies prompted the methodology known as *Kopienkritik* that would largely shape the scholarly discourse on Greek and Roman sculpture from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century on. For the influence of Winckelmann on *Kopienkritik*, a brief historiography of *Kopienkritik*, and more recent approaches to Greek and Roman sculpture, see, e.g., Gazda (2002).
14. Winckelmann's narrative of Egyptian art is rarely cited in Egyptian archaeological literature. An important exception is *Winckelmann und Ägypten* (2005). This volume, which accompanied an international exhibition held between 2004 and 2006, collects a number of essays on the relationship between Winckelmann and the re-discovery of ancient Egypt in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Its central aim is to emphasise the key role of Winckelmann in the development of the art history of ancient Egypt. This explicitly emerges from several individual contributions: "[...] die Kunstgeschichte Ägyptens, welche die Winckelmannschen ikonographischen, stilistischen und chronologischen Kriterien basierend auf dem seit Winckelmanns Zeit immensen Materialzuwachs zwar verfeinert hat, in der grundsätzlichen Behandlung von Denkmälern jedoch bis heute nicht über Winckelmann hinausgekommen ist, vielleicht auch nicht hinauskommen kann [...]" (Grimm 2005a, 89). Besides Winckelmann's general importance for the art history of Egypt, the relevance of his methodology is specifically emphasised: the "neue künstlerische Sehweise begründete eine methodisch überzeugende erste Geschichte zur ägyptischen Kunst" (Kunze 2005, 123); for Winckelmann's (lasting) impact on perceptions of Egyptian art see also Bartman (2011) 176-177.

- 
15. Napoleon's military troops were accompanied by 167 prominent *savants* who systematically recorded Egypt and its antiquities. This undertaking, which clearly echoes the Enlightenment ideal of knowledge acquisition, laid the foundations for two important studies that would further stimulate the interest in ancient Egypt: Denon (1802) and the monumental *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-1829), published in 29 volumes. For the influence of the Napoleon's Egyptian expedition on the study of ancient Egypt see, in general, Schneider (1998); Strathern (2007) gives an extensive account of the expedition.
16. Renowned collections of Egyptian antiquities mainly formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century include those of the Musée du Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Egyptian Museum in Turin, and the National Antiquities Museum in Leiden.
17. This increased scientific interest in the Egyptian past is part of a wider European preoccupation with Egyptian culture and visual language, which is often denoted as Egyptomania. European engagements with and fascination for Egyptian culture and visual language certainly were not new to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Napoleon's expedition seems to have been an important catalyst that set the intensified interest in Egypt in motion during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries; for Egyptomania, see,

It is important to note that the establishment of Egyptology as an autonomous discipline contributed to a growing scholarly dichotomy. Whereas Winckelmann had explored the histories of Egyptian art and Greek and Roman art in his *Geschichte der Kunst* in a comparative and integrated way, the installation of Egyptology turned the study of ancient Egypt the exclusive domain of Egyptologists, while the study of Greek and Roman artefacts was claimed by Classical Archaeologists. This academic compartmentalisation of the later 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries resulted in an overall increase of scholarly insularity.<sup>18</sup> This becomes apparent especially when we review the character of these two disciplines' research traditions in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Egyptology quickly developed its own disciplinary jargon, had its own geographically and culturally defined content, and was mainly preoccupied with the decipherment of its literary record and the archaeology of the dynastic period. Egyptological studies appeared in specialised publications and institutions like the Egypt Exploration Fund, established in 1882, were created specifically to support the study of ancient Egypt. Classical Archaeology largely developed along similar lines during this period. This discipline was also mainly focused on its historically recorded periods and the archaeology of its most renowned cultural centres, especially Athens and Rome. This focus was furthermore promoted by the installation of research institutes in these cities, like the British Schools in Athens and Rome in 1886 and 1901, respectively.<sup>19</sup>

In the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, these developments resulted in different specialisms, each with their own research agenda and priorities. Naturally, this implies that certain research areas remained largely unexplored – in particular areas at the boundaries of these newly established academic disciplines. The study of Egypt and Egyptian material culture in the Roman world explicitly suffered from this dichotomy, as it was literally situated in between two monolithic research fields.<sup>20</sup> Nineteenth century Egyptology generated such landmark studies as Jean-François Champollion's *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie* (1835-1845), soon followed by Karl Richard Lepsius' *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien* (1849-1859), and Classical Archaeology intensively explored specific sites, like Athens, Delphi, Rome and Pompeii. In contrast, the first synthesis on Egyptian cultural influences in the Greek and Roman worlds did not appear until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1884, Georges Lafaye published *Histoire du culte des divinités d'Alexandrie. Sérapis, Isis, Harpocrate et Anubis hors de l'Égypte* and thereby founded the study of 'L'Égypte hors de l'Égypte'.<sup>21</sup> For the first time, this book collected all known material and textual sources for the dissemination of the Egyptian gods in

e.g., *Egyptomania* (1994), Curl (2005); cf. Versluys (2002) 399-401 and the bibliography in n. 556.

18. The problem of insularity, the metaphorical ivory tower that results from academic isolation, has been recognised in Egyptology for decades: see already Redford (1979). The author speaks in this respect of the "old Egyptological arrogance" (quotation taken from p. 12). More recently, a series of eight books addressed this problem in an attempt to "[...] move the study of Ancient Egypt into the mainstream of recent advances in archaeological and anthropological practice and interpretation" (P. Ucko, foreword to *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* 2003, iii); see Peck (2005) for a review of this series. In general, the current emphasis within academia on multidisciplinary research that reflects a desire to move beyond traditional disciplinary boundaries undoubtedly needs to be regarded against the backdrop of a growing historical awareness of the (effects of) compartmentalisation.

19. For the academic fragmentation in the later 19<sup>th</sup> century, with a particular focus on Egyptology, see, e.g., Champion (2003), esp. 178-181. The history of the collection of antiquities of the British Museum in London clearly reflects the fragmentation that came with the growth of disciplinary specialisms. In 1861,

the Departments of Coins and Medals and Greek and Roman Antiquities were the first specialist areas to be separated from the original Department of Antiquities, founded in 1807. Further subdivisions included the establishment of separate Departments of Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities in 1866, and many new departments have been founded since.

20. Cf. Malaise (1972b) 1: "L'analyse des cultes isiaques a [...] durant de longues années suscité peu d'enthousiasme: les égyptologues négligent généralement ces problèmes relégués en marge de l'égyptologie traditionnelle et considèrent que c'est là matière de recherche pour des historiens de l'antiquité gréco-romaine, lesquels, à leur tour, ne sont guère attirés par ces questions peu «classiques»". This scholarly dichotomy, in particular the respective point of departure (either Egyptological or Classical Archaeological), would have significant implications for the interpretation of Egypt in the Roman world in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, as we will see below.

21. Lafaye (1884). The full title of the book is *Histoire du culte des divinités d'Alexandrie. Sérapis, Isis, Harpocrate et Anubis hors de l'Égypte depuis les origines jusqu'à la naissance de l'école néo-platonicienne*, which was included as volume 33 in the series of the Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome. It is interesting to note that Georges Lafaye was a Classicist/Latinist by training, and therefore had neither an Egyptological nor a Classical Archaeological background.

the Greek and Roman world.<sup>22</sup> The title clearly echoes the book's dominant emphasis on religious aspects. Lafaye's interpretations are based on the fundamental and seemingly self-evident premise that the available sources are indicative of the cults of the Egyptian gods. As a result, this 'evidence' is used to underpin and thereby reinforce the predefined historical narrative.<sup>23</sup> This *modus operandi* becomes evident in the discussion on 'Alexandrian temples in Rome'. This chapter presents an inventory of Aegyptiaca from Rome that is systematically categorised in topographical order according to the classical division of Rome into twelve regions.<sup>24</sup> The list that follows basically collects all available sources that somehow relate to Isis or other originally Egyptian gods. Rather than critically investigating the validity of the basic presumption, the

predefined equation between Egyptian concepts and Egyptian meanings determines the interpretation of this source material as automatically signalling the presence of Egyptian gods and their cults in Rome. Furthermore, its regional organisation gave the impression of more or less geographically confined clusters of evidence, which in turn resulted in the reconstruction of so-called Alexandrian temples in ancient Rome. This inductive approach, and the image of Egyptian religious contexts dispersed throughout ancient Rome that resulted from it, in many ways prepared the way for the emergence of scholarly understandings of Egypt in the Roman world during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### 1.4 INTO THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY:

##### 'L'ÉGYPTE HORS L'ÉGYPTE' AND THE 'CULTES ISIAQUES'

*"Face à chaque document égyptien ou égyptisant découvert en Occident se pose la même question: est-ce la trace d'un simple curiosité d'exotisme ou au contraire d'une adhésion ferme à des croyances isiaques?"*

Leclant (1968) 95

The aprioristic religious understanding of things Egyptian was further strengthened in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century by the publication of Cumont's *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain* and the convincing synthesis of the transformation of religious life in the Roman Empire that it presented.<sup>25</sup> This book coined the

- 
22. The fact that little work had been done on the subject is illustrated by the literature cited by the author. Although a significant part of the source material had been published – for instance, in the recently founded corpora of Latin and Greek inscriptions, *CIL* and *IG*, founded in 1862 and 1873, respectively, and in various (museum) catalogues and dispersed across various journals – there is a striking absence of interpretive literature on the subject. Besides a doctoral thesis that dealt with the subject but conspicuously omitted textual and archaeological sources (Reichel 1849, cf. Malaise 1972b, 2), there were only a few lemmas on such general topics as Isis in Pauly's *Real Encyclopädie*. These references furthermore illustrate the emphasis on Isis and underline the observation that Egypt at that time was mainly considered to be related with cults and religion. For the dominant role of Isis and the Isis cult in the European imagination see Versluys (2002) 17-22.
23. The fact that this premise unfortunately remains unexplained in Lafaye's book would suggest that it is obvious to equate things Egyptian with Egyptian religion. Because of the persistence of this equation especially during the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the criticism of it that has been raised in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, it would be interesting to see how this premise came into being and to assess the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century (German) conceptions of the Orient on this religious premise. The scholarly and artistic Western interest in the ancient Orient of that time seems to have largely redefined previously existing European ideas about its own cultural past. Oriental cultures were assigned greater importance in Western world-historical conceptions than before, and ancient Oriental religions were at the centre of this new interest. It is not inconceivable that a causal link may exist between the central role in the Western world of the Orient and Oriental religion at that time and the aprioristic religious conception of things Egyptian.
24. Lafaye (1884) 200-234. Several finds included in this section are mentioned again, with additional objects both from the city of Rome and elsewhere, in the concomitant 'catalogue méthodique' (p. 265-335) at the end of the publication. For the division of Rome into twelve regions, which dates from the Augustan period, see Versluys (2002) 336 and n. 455 with literature.

25. Cumont (1929). The important work of the historian of religions Franz Cumont (1868-1947) is not discussed in detail here, but reference can be made to a growing bibliography that discusses the persistent influence of Cumont's category of Oriental Religions at length. In recent years, serious criticism has been raised to this concept, which has largely resulted in the deconstruction of Oriental Religions. It seems, however, that scholars are currently struggling to 'come to terms' with religious transformation in the Roman world, which refers to the title of a recent review essay by Richard Gordon, one of the protagonists in the deconstruction of Cumont's category, wherein he provides a state-of-the-art overview of the discussion: see Gordon (2014). A large research project was recently set up by the Institut historique belge de Rome and the Academia Belgica to reassess the relevance of Cumont's work for current scholarship; the output of this project notably includes a new edition of Cumont's *Les religions orientales dans le paganisme romain*, with a historiographical introduction by Corinne Bonnet and Françoise van Haepere (published as *Les religions orientales* 2006), *Religions orientales – culti misterici* (2006), *Religioni*

influential concept of Oriental Religions and, with the Egyptian cults of Isis and related gods subsumed under that heading, reinforced the formal equation between Egypt and religion.

Cumont's thesis generated a profound interest in the *religions orientales*, which resulted in the establishment of the ÉPRO-series in 1962. Initiated by Vermaseren, this series' central aim was to ground the concept of Oriental Religions in empirical evidence.<sup>26</sup> A survey of the ÉPRO-volumes' titles is illustrative of the significant growth of interest in Egypt in the Roman world during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1962 and 1990, 32 titles (published in 41 volumes) were entirely devoted to subjects related to Egypt in the Roman world, while several other titles dealt with Egypt among other Oriental Cults.<sup>27</sup> While these publications significantly

enlarged the available source material for the study of Isis and other deities, their common point of departure implied that Aegyptiaca were essentially placed in a predetermined religious framework.<sup>28</sup>

Against the backdrop of this self-reinforcing argument, the fundamental premise of the research field increasingly shifted to the background, and so did the need for critical assessments. That is why the opening sentences of one of the ÉPRO-volumes dealing with Egyptian material culture, Anne Roullet's *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing monuments of Imperial Rome*, states that "the importance of the Alexandrian cults in the Roman Empire has been emphasized by many scholars, and a quick glance at any of the catalogues of the Roman museums is enough to confirm the significance of archaeological sites that have survived from various Roman sites dedicated to the Egyptian gods. But no attempt has been made to bring together systematically all the Egyptian and Egyptianizing monuments of Imperial Rome. I have tried to fill this gap, and to present a catalogue raisonné of these monuments".<sup>29</sup> However, this initial statement would in fact be equally

---

*in contatto nel Mediterraneo Antico* (2008), and *Les religions orientales dans le monde grec et romain* (2009). See also the contributions in *Panthée* (2013), in particular the article by Versluys (2013a), which explicitly explores new understandings of the deconstructed Cumontian category, and the recent volume *Romanising Oriental Gods?* (2015). All cited works provide extensive and recent bibliographic references.

26. In full, *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain* (Leiden 1962-1990). A total of 113 volumes were published in this series, the majority of which provided inventories of the available evidence for the so-called Eastern religions in the Roman Empire. For the ÉPRO-series, its debt to Cumont, and its intellectual legacy, see Gordon (2014) 664-665 and Versluys (2013a) 237-239.

27. The titles entirely devoted to Egypt are ÉPRO 1 (Wessetzky 1961), 12 (Grimm 1969), 15 (Salditt-Trappmann 1970), 20 (Roullet 1972), 21 (Malaise 1972a), 22 (Malaise 1972b), 25 (Stambaugh 1972), 26 (Dunand 1973, 3 vols.), 32 (Hornbostel 1973), 36 (Kater-Sibbes 1973), 37 (Tran Tam Tinh 1973), 39 (Gwyn Griffiths 1975), 44 (Engelmann 1975), 45 (Bruneau 1975), 48 (Kater-Sibbes 1975-1977, 3 vols.), 49 (Grandjean 1975), 51 (Heyob 1975), 57 (Grenier 1977), 61 (Budischovsky 1977), 62 (Hölbl 1979, 2 vols.), 65 (Padró i Parcerisa 1980-1985, 3 vols.), 70 (Leospo 1978), 71 (Grenier 1978), 73 (Hölbl 1978), 76 (Dunand 1979), 84 (De Vos 1980), 87 (Wild 1981), 94 (Tran Tam Tinh 1983), 101 (Van der Horst 1984), 105 (Curto 1985), 102 (Hölbl 1986a, 2 vols.), and 113 (Mora 1990, 2 vols.). Due to the quick expansion of scholarly literature on the Egyptian gods since 1972, a bibliographic inventory has been maintained that collects all references with brief critical notes. The *IBIS* (*Inventaire bibliographique des Isiaques*) was published in the ÉPRO-series between 1972 and 1991 in four volumes and lists references from 1940-1969 (ÉPRO 18: Leclant – Clerc 1972-1991). Previously overlooked references from that period and references from 1970-1999 were published online at <http://w3.etudes-isiaques.univ-tlse2.fr/> under the direction of Laurent Bricault; relevant references after 2000 are published in printed form again under the name *Chronique bibliographique* in the *Bibliotheca Isiaque*-series under the direction of Laurent Bricault

---

and Richard Veymiers. Note that the above list of publications only includes titles that were published in the ÉPRO-series. It would be substantially longer if relevant publications were included from outside the series, and if the publications on Egypt in the Roman world that appeared after ÉPRO was renamed RGRW (*Religions in the Graeco-Roman World*) in 1992 were likewise taken into account. The change of name is indicative of the emerging objection to Cumont's concept of Oriental Religions at that time, which was literally present in the old series title, and the more theoretical direction that the series would take under its new title. However, despite the growing criticism of the aprioristic religious paradigm, clearly advocated in Versluys (2002) and published as volume 144 in the RGRW-series, several titles that dealt with Egypt and Egyptian material culture in the Roman world still remained, to a greater or lesser extent, informed by the aprioristic religious paradigm.

28. The predominance of religious interpretations may have been further strengthened by the fact that the study of Egypt in the Roman world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was largely undertaken by trained Egyptologists and by the important role of religion in that particular research tradition, as was already noted by Versluys (2002, 21-22). The work of Jean Leclant (1920-2011), one of the most prominent protagonists of the *cultes isiaques* of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, illustrates this. Leclant was an Egyptologist whose work was firmly rooted in the ÉPRO-tradition and Cumont's concept of Oriental Religions. From the 1950s onwards, he collected and made available all Aegyptiaca from the Roman world through annually updated lists in the journal *Orientalia*, and he edited the four volumes of the bibliographic inventory *IBIS*, cf. *supra*, n. 27.

29. Roullet (1972) xv.



suitable to conclude the book, since what follows after the introduction does not offer a critical evaluation of the powerful statement in the above-cited first sentence, but an accumulation of a loosely gathered body of ‘evidence’ in support of it. Moreover, this evidence is essentially based on the author’s individual conception of Egypt and Egyptian religion.<sup>30</sup>

This example illustrates the dangers of what may be termed the inductive religious paradigm. This fundamental premise was clouded by a body of seemingly confirming evidence to such an extent that it became the generally accepted paradigm, which automatically determined the understanding of new source material.<sup>31</sup>

- 
30. Symptomatic for the inductivist religious approach, the criteria for the inclusion/exclusion of objects are not always clear. Therefore, rather than an archaeologically reliable corpus, the inventory is essentially a collection of Aegyptiaca that may or may not have a link to (religious contexts in) Imperial Rome: see also Lembke (1994, 13), who notes that “[...] A. Roullets Zuweisungen zum Iseum Campense [sind] in einige Fällen falsch”. Furthermore, unlike the title of the book suggests, the inventory does not include the majority of artefacts that other authors commonly classify as Egyptianising (often carved from marble), which seems mainly influenced by different personal conceptions of Egyptian material culture and therefore clearly illustrates the subjectivity of the category of Aegyptiaca. For related criticism on Rouillet’s book see also Versluys (2002) 332–333. However, it is interesting to note that, although nowhere explicitly stated, the 1972 publication appears to be a reworking of the author’s doctoral dissertation that was submitted to the Faculty of Oriental Studies at the University of Oxford in 1969 under the title “*The survival and rediscovery of Egyptian antiquities in western Europe from late antiquity until the close of the sixteenth century*” (manuscript in the Bodleian Library, Oxford; *non vidi*). This observation may help explain the somewhat remarkable position of the publication in the discourse on Aegyptiaca Romana. While published in the ÉPRO-series that, as its title suggests, mainly focuses on the so-called Oriental religions in the Roman Empire, the title of the dissertation instead indicates that the original focus and main strength of Rouillet’s study was in the post-antique rather than Roman life histories of Aegyptiaca Romana, and it is indeed in this respect that the 1972 monograph stands out.
31. However, it should be noted that the religious interpretive framework proved to be too narrow to explain the presence in the Roman world of all objects that were deemed to bring to mind an association with Egypt. Artefacts that obviously did not fit into the religious interpretive framework were most often dismissed as signals of Roman exoticism and commonly perceived in a negative way. Therefore, besides the religious interpretation, the concept of Egyptomania, which was originally developed to explain the resurgence of Western fascination with Pharaonic Egypt in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (cf. *supra*, n. 17), has increasingly become a mainstream interpretational framework to explain the so-called Roman predilection of things Egyptian as signs of Roman exoticism or fashion statements that followed

Aegyptiaca had thus become normative signals for the presence of Egyptian religious contexts in the Roman world.<sup>32</sup> Prepared by Winckelmann and first clearly advocated as a coherent concept in Lafaye’s study, the inductive religious approach dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship on Egyptian material culture in the Roman world, and its persistence seems to have overshadowed the occasional contemporary critical voice.<sup>33</sup>

---

the annexation of Egypt in 30 BC: see, e.g., De Vos (1980) and *Egittomania* (2006).

32. It is important to briefly consider the work of Michel Malaise here, which has been used as reference in many subsequent studies on Egyptian artefacts in the Roman world. In 1972, Malaise published two important volumes in the ÉPRO-series on the diffusion of the Egyptian cults in Italy (Malaise 1972a, 1972b). Following the ÉPRO-tradition to provide a material basis for the Cumontian category, the synthesis of the diffusion of Egyptian cults in Italy was accompanied by an inventory of relevant factual evidence. However, it is evident from the introduction to the catalogue that Malaise is well aware that not all Aegyptiaca necessarily have a religious meaning: “il faut distinguer le cultuel du culturel” (1972a, xii). Yet, as the thesis mainly focuses on Egyptian *cults*, the inventory of objects does not include artefacts that would be “de simples témoins de l’égyptomanie”, like some of the city’s obelisks (*ibid.*, xii). Because of this filtering, the work essentially subscribed to the religious interpretation of Aegyptiaca. The topographical organisation of the material evidence that followed Lafaye’s study further strengthened this, as it reinforced its seemingly geographical coherence and subsequently the idea that these ‘clusters’ of Aegyptiaca were testimonies of specifically Egyptian cult places. This conception of seemingly coherent assemblages of material and written evidence underlies the compilation of distribution maps that show the dissemination of Egyptian cults throughout the Roman world, which were mainly compiled during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. See, for instance, the map of Rome’s oriental sanctuaries (including those dedicated to the Egyptian gods) in Le Glay (1987) fig. 1, the extensive section in *Iside* (1997) dedicated to the diffusion of the Isis cults in Italy (Sist 1997, with fig. p. 300 for Egyptian religious contexts in Rome), and Bricault (2001), a topographical atlas of the Hellenistic and Roman world that brings together all the empirical evidence for the *cultes isiaques* that had been largely published in the ÉPRO-series over the previous forty years. For recent criticism on the topographical distribution of Aegyptiaca focusing on a particular context in Rome see Müskens (2014a).
33. For instance, as early as 1952, Kurt Schefold noted in his study on Pompeian wallpaintings with Egyptian elements that “Gewiss können nicht alle Bewohner der Häuser mit Isissymbolen Anhänger dieser Religion gewesen sein [...] Diese Symbole meinen nicht eine bestimmte Lehre, sondern allgemeiner Weihe, Unsterblichkeit” (Schefold 1952, 58); quotation taken from Mol (2015a) 32.

The research field noticeably began to open up in the final decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>34</sup> Besides Egyptologists, scholars from disciplines like Classics and Classical Archaeology in particular got involved. This development had important consequences for the understanding of Egyptian material culture in the Roman world, which became less one-sided as a result. Hence, although the religious inductive paradigm remained the fundamental interpretive framework for many studies, the debate on Egypt and Egyptian material culture in the Roman world increasingly widened. A fundamentally different understanding, for instance, was put forward in Takács' book on the integration of the cults of Isis and Sarapis into the Roman pantheon. The author took a critical position towards previous, essentially religious understandings and instead emphasised other interpretational frameworks, like contemporary Roman politics.<sup>35</sup> In a paper published some years earlier, Alfano critically questioned the reconstruction of Egyptian cult places in Rome by drawing attention to the fragmentary nature of the available evidence. However, the essential analytical framework, namely, the premise that all evidence would be indicative of Egyptian temples, remained unchallenged.<sup>36</sup>

## 1.5 'NICHT MEHR ÄGYPTEN, SONDERN ROM': TOWARDS A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF AEGYPTIACA ROMANA IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

This situation changed with the publication of Versluys' study on what he called the Roman views of Egypt in 2002.<sup>37</sup> His main aim was to test the aprioristic religious understanding of Aegyptiaca in the Roman world. Based on the analysis of so-called Nilotic scenes from different archaeological contexts throughout the Roman world, the book demonstrates that depictions belonging to that genre were more often than not unrelated to aspects of Egyptian religion. Therefore, rather than subscribing to aprioristic religious interpretations, it instead argued for flexible and, most importantly, contextually dependent understandings of Nilotic scenes and Aegyptiaca in general. This book's approach thus fundamentally differed from most previous studies, in that it took the concept of context seriously for one of the first times and, on the basis of that, considered Aegyptiaca as part of different, essentially Roman interpretive frameworks.<sup>38</sup>

The analytical framework laid out in Versluys' book quickly left its mark on subsequent studies. More than a decade after this contextual approach was first effectively advocated, it seems justified to argue that the aprioristic religious paradigm has been effectively deconstructed.<sup>39</sup>

34. I restrict myself here to outlining some general tendencies that characterise the development of the scholarly field and therefore refer to a selection of the available literature only. Some additional recent publications include (in chronological order): Ensoli Vittozzi (1993), Lembke (1994), *Le antichità egiziane* (1995), Meyboom (1995), Spinola (2001), Kleibl (2009), Capriotti Vittozzi (2013), Swetnam-Burland (2015); relevant museum catalogues: Grenier (1993) (Musei Vaticani), Sist (1996) (Museo Barracco), Manera – Mazza (2001) (Museo Nazionale Romano), *Musei Capitolini* (2010), *Palazzo Altemps* (2011), *Museo Palatino* (2014); exhibition catalogues including Aegyptiaca Romana: *Iside* (1997); *Aurea Roma* (2000), *Cleopatra of Egypt* (2001), *Ägypten Griechenland Rom* (2005), *Egittomania* (2006), *The She-Wolf and the Sphinx* (2008); new material (esp. from Rome): Alfano (1998), Insalaco (2002), and Capriotti Vittozzi (2005).

35. Takács (1995). In an article published a few years later, Söldner interpreted Egyptian motifs in Augustan Rome in a comparable way: Söldner (1999). These authors were trained in Classics and Classical Archaeology respectively, and, seemingly as a result of their respective educational backgrounds, worked towards principally Roman understandings of Egyptian influences in the Roman world.

36. Alfano (1992); the author conveniently sums up the most essential problems in one of the first sentences of the paper (p. 41): "Ciò è causato [i.e., the uncertainties about the precise location and appearance of Egyptian temples and sanctuaries in Rome] dallo stato frammentario di tali materiali, dalla loro dispersione su vastissime aree, dall'impossibilità nel risalire alle

provenienze di molti pezzi, dalla mancanza pressoché totale di resti architettonici demoliti nel passato o ormai sepolti sotto il tessuto urbano moderno, dalla difficoltà e spesso dall'impossibilità ad intraprendere scavi sotto luoghi, piazze ed edifici di valore storico, artistico o politico".

37. Versluys (2002).

38. Also in 2002, Swetnam-Burland submitted her PhD thesis at the University of Michigan on Aegyptiaca from Pompeii, which likewise propagated the importance of contextual understandings of Aegyptiaca: Swetnam-Burland (2002). Like Versluys, she had an educational background in the fields of Classics and Classical Archaeology rather than Egyptology, which may have contributed to the emphasis on contextual understandings that dominate these works. A summary of this unpublished thesis was published as Swetnam-Burland (2007); while finishing this manuscript, Swetnam-Burland published her much-anticipated monography on the subject: Swetnam-Burland (2015). Unfortunately, due to temporal restrictions, this book could not be fully taken into account here.

39. This does not mean, however, that the notion has disappeared altogether from recent literature. Wallace-Hadrill's book on Rome's cultural revolution is a good case in point. Egyptian material culture hardly plays any role in this book, and when it

This is clearly illustrated by the changing approaches to and focus of the international Isis Conferences that have been organised since 1999. The reference to Isis in the title of these symposiums evidently reflects the emphasis on religious understandings, which indeed remained an essential interpretive framework for the majority of the contributions to the first two volumes of proceedings.<sup>40</sup> An increasing awareness of the importance of contextual understandings of Aegyptiaca, however, becomes noticeable in the third volume and subsequently a general shift from a predominantly Egyptian to a quintessentially Roman interpretive perspective can be observed.<sup>41</sup> The respective points of focus of the fourth to sixth Isis Conferences – Egypt as a cultural concept in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt, the use of concepts of Egypt as symbols for Roman Imperial power, and the agency and agents of Egypt and Egyptian cults<sup>42</sup> – demonstrate that, in recent years, Aegyptiaca are no longer necessarily understood as religious expressions or as signs of Egyptomania, but that the focus has instead shifted towards different ways in which Aegyptiaca and Egyptian elements could integrate their (new) Roman contexts. “Nicht mehr Ägypten, sondern Rom”, as Schneider aptly noted.<sup>43</sup>

---

does, it is considered as a “purely aesthetic phenomenon with religious underpinnings” (Wallace-Hadrill 2008, 357-358); cf. Osborne and Vout (2010), esp. 238-242, and Van Aerde (2015) 26-29, and 284-291.

40. Published as *De Memphis à Rome* (2000) and *Isis en Occident* (2004), respectively. The article by Versluys and Meyboom in the first volume of the proceedings is a notable exception, as it clearly insists on the importance of context: see Versluys & Meyboom (2000).
41. Published as *Nile into Tiber* (2007); see also the introduction to that volume: Versluys (2007). A good example is Parker’s paper in this volume on Egyptian obelisks in Rome, which clearly summarises the new, Roman perspective (2010, 210): “Let us restate as the overarching question: what did obelisks mean to Romans of the Empire? This broad question clearly invites several possible answers, urging us to consider such varied aspects as their transportation; the measuring of obelisks and the use of them to provide measurements; the habit of adding inscriptions to them; problems involved in describing them; and finally imitations and representations. In all these respects one may examine Roman responses to and interactions with obelisks. By contrast, Egyptian ideas and practices are obviously relevant in a broader sense, without being central”.
42. The proceedings of the fourth and fifth Isis Conferences were published as *Isis on the Nile* (2010) and *Power, Politics, and the Cults of Isis* (2014), respectively; the proceedings of the sixth conference, held in two parts in Erfurt and Liège in 2013, are currently in press.
43. The excerpt refers to the title of an article on Egyptian obelisks

Yet, paradoxically, while such approaches have indeed successfully deconstructed the religious isolation of Egyptian material culture by emphasising its ‘Romanness’, some have argued that these approaches have basically effected the replacement of one monolithic and non-specific interpretation of Egyptian material culture by another: namely, the interpretation that Aegyptiaca Romana were not so much Egyptian as primarily Roman. For this reason, rather than adopting either religious or (Roman) contextual isolation, neither of which provide satisfactory answers to the important questions *why* Egyptian material culture integrated and *what* it specifically meant in a particular context, recent studies advocate contextual diversification and specification instead.<sup>44</sup>

The research history makes clear that, while the *interpretations of Aegyptiaca* in the Roman world have changed over time, the category *itself* and the premises on which it is based are only rarely scrutinised.<sup>45</sup> Therefore, regardless of the interpretive perspective, Aegyptiaca are most often still studied as if they constitute an isolated and coherent group of material culture.<sup>46</sup> This implies that, even though recent studies have convincingly shown that the objects that we call Aegyptiaca were an integral part of the Roman world, nobody has asked whether or not it is still valid to speak of ‘Egyptian material culture’ in the first place. If it is valid, then what do Egyptian – or other (cultural) labels, such as Roman or Greek – specifically mean in a particular context? Before we can tackle these important questions, it is therefore necessary to deal with the category of Aegyptiaca first. On which

---

in Rome, in which these monuments are studied in their Roman contexts and accordingly made part of Roman interpretive frameworks: Schneider (2004).

44. Hence, after discussing the paradigm shift from Oriental and exotic to Roman and unspecific understandings of the so-called Oriental Religions, Versluys (2013a, 242) says: “One should therefore not conclude by saying that something is “Roman” without further elaboration – especially not if we want to understand (cultural) choices – one should explain how something functions in society, what role it plays in the “Roman” system and what “Roman” then exactly means in a particular context”. For a similar focus on specification (of archaeological context in particular) see Müskens (2014a), esp. 99-100.
45. See, however, the remarks in Müskens (2014a) and Mol (2015a).
46. Note that conceptual categories, such as Aegyptiaca, reinforce the seemingly coherence of all artefacts that are grouped under its heading, and therefore inherently contribute to isolation.

conceptual grounds do we define objects as Aegyptiaca?  
What are the underlying assumptions of that definition?  
Why is there a scholarly distinction between Egyptian  
and Egyptianising, and what does it imply? The next  
section addresses these issues.