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Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana

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Part I

Introduction

This study investigates the materials and materiality of the objects that we call Aegyptiaca in the Roman world between approximately the late 1st century BC and the late 4th century AD. Starting from the observation that current approaches to so-called Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts are essentially informed by modern notions of what Egypt entails – which are associated with various assumptions about style, subject matter, and (supposed) provenance – this research sets out, first, to evaluate these premises. Subsequently, it proposes a new line of inquiry that, for the first time, emphasises material properties when studying so-called Aegyptiaca from the Roman world, thereby working towards a more inclusive approach to assess specifically Roman understandings of these objects.

In order to elucidate this study's background, this introduction first presents an outline of the relative scholarship of ancient Egypt so far, with a particular focus on the development of the study of Egypt in the Roman world. This overview reveals that, although interpretations of the relations between Rome and Egypt have significantly changed over time, the material basis on which these understandings largely rely – the corpus of so-called Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts – is only rarely scrutinised. To this end, the second section explores the category of Aegyptiaca in greater detail, focusing particularly on the conceptual grounds on which Egyptian and Egyptian-looking objects are defined, as well as the (often implicit) assumptions that the classification of these artefacts entails. The set-up and aims of this research follow from this discussion.

