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Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana

Müskens, S.W.G.

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Author: Müskens, Sander

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2. Object parameters: selection and definitions

Theoretically speaking, there is an infinite number of object parameters that, by itself or in relation to others, can contribute to the particular impact of artefacts. This implies that, in order to assess the question how the objects that we call Aegyptiaca were able to evoke particular associations, and how this effected the ways in which these objects were used and perceived by Roman viewers, ideally all potentially relevant parameters and the relations between them should be taken into account. However, this requires a level of data completeness that is not available for the selected objects,³²² and analytical (ontological) models that are beyond the scope of the present study.³²³ Therefore, on the basis of the discussions in the preceding sections, four object parameters were selected that may have contributed to the impact of so-called Aegyptiaca and the ways in which these objects were perceived. These are style, object category, subject matter, and date. Each of these parameters will be studied in relation to the aforementioned material aspects and one another later on. The remainder of this section defines and explains these parameters. This is preceded by an explanation of rock colour, the second material property that will be central to this study's material analyses besides geological provenance, which was discussed in the previous section.

322. As will become evident from the corpus of Aegyptiaca in section III.3 below, the selected objects are surrounded by many uncertainties, which particularly relate to the reconstruction of their Roman Imperial functional contexts. This limits the possibilities for a close contextual analysis, and hence of the ways in which these objects were used and, by extension, how they were possibly understood by Romans; cf. *infra*, n. 345 and p. 342.

323. For a general introduction to ontological modelling in archaeology see, e.g., D'Andrea *et al.* (2006). I will shortly start an ontological pilot study to assess the impact of non-local artefacts in and on Republican Rome in the context of my postdoctoral research in the NWO-funded VICI-project "Innovating objects. The agency of global connections in the Roman world (200-30 BC)" under direction of Prof. M.J. Versluys (Leiden University, 2016-2021).

Colour

In the context of this study, natural colouration is meant to indicate the colour of stones as they occur in nature, without artificial treatment like painting.³²⁴ In order to structure and analyse my data, I distinguish between naturally coloured and uncoloured stones, where white marble, limestone, and sandstone are considered to be 'uncoloured' stones. We can reasonably assume that such a division is useful from a Roman perspective, since there is evidence to suggest that Romans made a distinction between 'white' and 'coloured' stones.³²⁵ Naturally coloured stones are subsequently divided into different colours. On the basis of the selected objects' colours, a distinction is made between the following colours: grey/black, red/pink, yellow, and green.³²⁶

324. Recent studies into the polychromy of Hellenistic and Roman marble sculpture emphasise the importance of paint and gilding, which are nowadays often lost. For polychromy on ancient sculpture see Brinkmann *et al.* (2006), Bradley (2006), Blume (2012), and various contributions in *Diversamente bianco* (2014).

325. Contemporary evidence suggests that Romans had white marbles: marbles we describe as 'white' were sought after because of their white colour (*candidus color*), while coloured materials were known by and sought after because of their respective colours, as was demonstrated in section II.2 above. However, this distinction "was not necessarily grounded in the aesthetics of colour", as Bradley (2006, 16) argues.

326. However, few stones are truly grey/black, red/pink, yellow, or green: they often have heterogeneous colours in which a particular shade dominates. These dominating shades are taken into account for the current assessment of rock colour. Moreover, seeing that modern colour descriptions not necessarily correspond to ancient colour terms and categories, since colour perception is socially and culturally constructed, and colours should be understood accordingly, I do not argue that the colours differentiated in this study necessarily reflect the way Romans would categorise the colours in question. By contrast, the distinctions made are unmistakably *etic* constructs, made on the basis of modern and Western categorisations of colour, which are used for the organisation and analysis of my data. On Roman colour perceptions see McCann (2015), Goldman (2013), Bradley (2009), and Bagnall and Harrell (2003); for understandings of colour in ancient societies in general see, e.g., *Colouring the Past* (2002).

Style

The concept of style is often described as one of the most fundamental yet elusive concepts in the study of art and material culture.³²⁷ For art historians and archaeologists, style is the main heuristic device to date individual works of art, and to ascribe them to a particular artist. In archaeology, the notion of style that is most often used is that of culture style, which is the idea that certain artistic styles are characteristic for certain periods or people.³²⁸ This idea was formulated as a central concept by Winckelmann, who, as we have seen above, added a historical dimension to the understanding of ancient art, and established a tangible method for the periodisation of works of art. The notion of culture styles and the associated method of *Stilgeschichte* remain deeply embedded in modern approaches to material culture.³²⁹ This becomes especially apparent from modern definitions of style as the “coherence of qualities in periods or people”, or “the constant form – and sometimes the constant elements, qualities, and expression – in the art of an individual or group”.³³⁰

However, the pervasive notion of culture style is problematic for bottom-up assessments of Roman understandings of style. Acknowledging that this is a modern construct, which draws on 18th century evolutionary understandings of history in patterns of rise and decline,³³¹ we cannot automatically assume that Romans understood style in a similar way.³³² Indeed, as the discussion in Part II has shown, in the Roman world artistic style was *not* necessarily bound

to the cultural or ethnic background of an object or its sculptor. Moreover, as Riggs argues, “the spectrum of art produced in the Egyptian and Greek worlds is too broad to be reduced to a single ‘style’”.³³³ Seeing that the prime goal of Egyptian art was to convey timeless and eternal ideas of how people knew things to be based on knowledge and prior experience, rather than on the basis of empirical observations under ephemeral conditions, Egyptian methods of representation are typically conceptual; it has been described as a “system of symbolic representation based on the most characteristic views of parts united in a diagrammatic whole”.³³⁴ As such, ‘the Egyptian style’ has recently been characterised as “the way in which images are rendered in their most characteristic aspect from period to period, in combinations of frontal and profile views, plan and/or elevation”.³³⁵ However, multiple styles were used throughout the history of Egyptian art, including what modern scholars define as naturalistic styles, which are predominantly regarded as canonical of Greek art. Therefore, the interpretation of objects with ‘conceptual’ stylistic properties as ‘Egyptian’, and of objects with ‘naturalistic’ stylistic properties as ‘Greek’, as is implicit in many studies that engage with style to date, is not representative of how the totality of available styles comprises a cultural repertoire.

This suggests that current approaches to style, and the notion of culture style in particular, are too static to account for what we may call the agency of style, that is, how particular styles were able to evoke particular associations that do not necessarily relate directly to the culture they are often named after.³³⁶ The key assumption, which underlies the prominent position of style in historical studies, is that what matters about any given work of art and what may be revealed by stylistic analysis, is when and where it was created.³³⁷ However, for Romans, style may have done much more than merely representing fixed Egyptian, Roman, Greek, or Hellenistic meanings – if this was the case at all.

327. See, e.g., Elkins (1996) 876: “the further the concept is investigated, the more it appears as an inherently partly incoherent concept, opaque to analysis”.

328. On the distinction between ‘style’, defined as “sets of enduring formal characteristics shared by significant numbers of artefacts. Formal in the sense of the result of the shaping activity of a human hand. Characteristics in the sense of observable traits, resulting from choice”, and ‘culture style’ (Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and so on), defined as “sets of common characteristics of material and design shared and displayed by large groups of artefacts, over extended geographical ranges and/or periods of time”, see Van Eck *et al.* (2015) 5–6 with literature.

329. See also the discussion on the category and classification of *Aegyptiaca*: *supra*, section 1.2.

330. Quotations from Elkins (1996) 876 and Schapiro (1994) 51, respectively; after Hartwig (2015) 39.

331. Cf. *supra*, n. 58.

332. Cf. Elsner (2003) 106: empirical analysis of style entails “a particular and [...] an inevitable process of translation by which we understand (in a particular way) what it is we have been looking at” (my italics).

333. Riggs (2005) 8–9, who, on this basis, proposes to think of Egyptian art in terms of the used systems of representation, which transcend time periods.

334. Peck (1996) 799.

335. Hartwig (2015) 53; cf. Robins (2008).

336. Cf. Versluys (2013b), esp. 432–434.

337. Elsner (2003) 106.

Since the use of terms like Egyptian (and Pharaonic), Roman, or Greek to characterise a particular artistic style by definition entails notions of culture styles that are not necessarily compatible with Roman understandings of style, and, as such, implicitly maintains the dichotomy between Egyptian and Egyptianising and its associated binary oppositions, I will not use these (cultural) terms. Rather, in an attempt to move ‘beyond representation’, and to enable an assessment of Roman understandings of the stylistic properties of the objects that we call Aegyptiaca without predetermining their interpretation, for the purpose of the present study I define style as ‘the way in which natural forms are shaped’. On the basis of this basic definition, I distinguish the following styles:³³⁸

Naturalistic

Representations of natural forms are as they are empirically observed, rather than in a deliberately stylised or conceptual manner.³³⁹ The finished product obeys the rules of perspective, as a result of which one can imagine the represented image or scene taking place in the “real world”.³⁴⁰

Conceptual

Representations of natural forms are more in accordance with artistic ideals or conventions than with empirical

observations of objects. This often involves an emphasis on universal characteristics rather than observation of individual examples of those forms.³⁴¹

Conceptual-naturalistic

Representations of natural forms are in accordance with both aforementioned traditions.

Object category

This is meant to indicate the general class to which the objects in question belong. In this study the following object categories are distinguished: statue, obelisk, clepsydra, stela, altar, relief, column, capital, antefix, pediment, entablature, and frieze.

Subject matter

Subject matter is defined as the substance of an object, as distinguished from its form or style.³⁴²

Date

The classical periodisation of Egyptian history into distinct timeframes is maintained. While derived from modern (19th century) understandings of Egyptian history as divided into periods of rise and decline, which are no longer uncritically subscribed to,³⁴³ it is a useful way to structure the data, and to facilitate the analysis in Part IV and comparison to other research. The following timeframes are used: Middle Kingdom (Dynasties 11-13, ca. 2055-1650 BC); New Kingdom (Dynasties 18-20, ca. 1550-1077 BC); 3rd Intermediate Period (Dynasties 22-25, ca. 1069-664 BC); Late Period (Dynasties 25-31, 664-332 BC); Ptolemaic Period (sometimes called Dynasty 32, 332-30 BC); Roman Period (30 BC – 395 AD).

338. To avoid any misunderstanding, I do not argue that these (necessarily rigid) categories reflect Roman (emic) understandings of style in any way. Rather, I use them to organise and subsequently analyse my data. Therefore, I should like to emphasise once more that the distinctions made are unmistakably etic constructs. They are based on my conceptualisation, as a modern Western scholar, of style, which basically draws on different ways of representing natural forms (perspective and conceptual); cf. Schapiro (1994), esp. 76-78. It should be noted that, in the case of fragmentarily preserved objects, the stylistic categorisation is by necessity based on their current state of preservation. For instance, the head of the statue of a priest (*infra*, 214-215 no. 101) is shaped in a naturalistic way. Because only the head has been preserved, this is the only stylistic categorisation that can be made empirically. However, the head was likely part of a well-attested sculptural type in Egypt, which, when complete, would have been categorised as conceptual, based on certain features, such as the back-pillar and the figure's posture. Therefore, it is important to realise that preservation influences perception of style (etic and emic!).

339. Naturalism is not incompatible with idealisation, “for Greek sculpture may be naturalistic in its command of anatomy, but idealistic in that it sets up a standard of physical beauty remote from the everyday world”: *The Oxford dictionary of art* (2004) 495; cf. Needham (1996) 685, Hartwig (2015) 44.

340. Elsner (2003) 99.

341. *Conceptual* is meant to indicate here “of or relating to mental concepts or conceptions”, whereas *concept* is used in the sense of “a mental representation of the essential or typical properties of something”, and *conception* in the sense of “anything conceived or imagined in the mind, an idea, a mental representation; a mental image, idea, or concept of anything” (definitions after the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989); cf. Mayer (1981) 383-384 on stylisation.

342. Definition after the Oxford English Dictionary, second edition, 1989.

343. See, e.g., Ritner (1992a), and Spalinger (2001).

