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Egypt beyond representation : materials and materiality of Aegyptiaca Romana

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Outlook

Current approaches to so-called Aegyptiaca are often still plagued by top-down projections of modern definitions and understandings of Egypt and Egyptian material culture onto the Roman world. This has resulted in persistent monolithic views that consider Egyptian and Egyptian-looking artefacts as representations of Egyptian culture. This is particularly evident in the overarching interpretations that have been put forward to account for these objects, which are typically expressed in binary oppositions, such as authentic versus copy, religious versus exotic, and understanding versus misunderstanding. Central to these views and the interpretations that result from them is the fact that the Roman meaning of these artefacts would be essentially determined by their *Egyptianness*. However, this is problematic, because such interpretations often say more about modern understandings of Egyptian material culture than about Roman ones. We have singled out *Egyptianness* as the most important characteristic of artefacts that we believe to be somehow associated with Egypt and, subsequently, we presume that Romans maintained the same criteria to understand them. Therefore, traditional approaches complicate a bottom-up assessment of *Roman* understandings of the objects that we call Aegyptiaca and that we have reduced to mere Egyptian meanings.

By redirecting questions of what these objects mean to what they do and how they were capable to affect Roman viewers, this study has aimed to move beyond monolithic and essentially modern interpretations of so-called Aegyptiaca as cultural representations of Egypt. As such, this ‘beyond representation’ approach aimed to work towards more flexible and specifically Roman understandings of material culture, in which our ethnically and/or culturally defined categories collapse, as the assessment of the premises underlying current understandings of Aegyptiaca has demonstrated. Despite the different perspectives and approaches that this book has addressed, it focuses on a single message: we should study the objects that we call Aegyptiaca in their own right, without reducing them from the onset to fixed (Egyptian) meanings. I have proposed in this particular study that, in order to

assess the associations that so-called Aegyptiaca were able to evoke, we need a more integrated approach, one that also accommodates the physicality of these objects, which has remained underexplored in view of the strong reliance on their representational aspects. Starting from this novel focus on the stone materials of a selection of Aegyptiaca Romana, the material data were subsequently studied in relation to other object parameters that have traditionally received more attention, like subject matter and style. In doing so, the structural complexities of these objects were unravelled through an analysis of the internal relationships between their various properties, all of which, by themselves or in relation to others, may have contributed to their particular impact. This demonstrates that the category of objects that we usually call Aegyptiaca comprises clusters of artefacts with distinctly different material and stylistic properties, which appear to be closely associated with these objects’ date of manufacture, provenance, object categories, and, albeit with more diversity, particular subject matters. Egyptian imports and their Roman emulations stand out through their atypical material profile and their consistent execution in conceptual styles, while a second group of Roman productions combines white marble with either naturalistic or conceptual styles, depending on their respective object types and subject matters. These two predominant clusters largely correspond to the so-called Egyptian and Egyptianising subdivisions of Aegyptiaca that prevail in existing literature. However, rather than explaining the observed differences in simplistic (and etic) oppositions like understanding versus misunderstanding, I have argued that their distinctly different material and stylistic configurations affected the associations that these artefacts were able to evoke: they mattered from a Roman perspective. *Egyptianness* may have been among these associations, but these objects were able to do much more by means of their specific characteristics. Material choice appears to have been an important factor in the selection of Egyptian artefacts for transport to Rome. Through their specific materiality, these objects were capable of communicating notions of luxury, prestige, and

strangeness or exoticism to Roman viewers. At the same time, the materials of Egyptian imports enhanced their stylistic and thematic execution in their alterity and otherness, in contrast to Roman productions made out of white marble and executed in naturalistic styles, which, by means of their specific material and characteristic properties, may have signalled familiarity as part of the Roman 'self'.

While these are undoubtedly only a few of the associations that so-called Aegyptiaca were able to evoke, they nevertheless illustrate that aprioristic reductions of these objects to Egyptian meanings by definition entail an oversimplification of how these objects were perceived by Romans. I have suggested that, in order to assess the ways in which these objects were possibly relevant to Romans, it is useful to start by making the physical properties of artefacts and their interrelations central to our investigation, since these are powerful agents that are able to affect human behaviour. Yet, at the same time, this study shows how difficult it is to go from the physicality of the studied objects to wider patterns of behaviour that they enforce and, as such, how difficult it is to give specific answers to questions of *how* these objects were perceived and *what* they did exactly, and herein lies an important challenge for future research.

This book has focused on the social and historical context in which so-called Aegyptiaca were used and perceived in its broadest sense, namely, the Roman world. However, the ways people perceive things are always in flux. Therefore, we cannot really speak about 'the Roman understandings' of the totality of objects that we associate with Egypt, since there will have been many different perceptions, depending on the specific socio-historical and functional contexts in which these artefacts were used and viewed. To gain closer insight into these various Roman understandings of the studied objects, contextual analysis is as important as it is notoriously difficult. This study has taken a first step towards a contextual analysis by only including artefacts with known find locations. A more in-depth analysis of the functioning of these objects in their Roman use-contexts may help to address questions of how exactly these objects were used and which associations were capitalised upon. Therefore, contextual specification should be considered as an important next step to further break down the persistent view that these objects would (only) represent something Egyptian. Ultimately, this

also implies breaking down the isolation that a focus on the seemingly coherent category of Aegyptiaca by definition entails. Only through assessing the working relations between all objects that inhabited the same environment, including those that we do not associate with Egypt and which we therefore call, for instance, Roman or Greek, can we work towards an object-centred, bottom-up perspective that studies material culture in its own right, and can we truly move 'beyond representation'.