

## Code-Switching and Semantic Narratives: Cleopatra's Portraiture within the Hellenistic Visual Koine

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## **John Cabot University**

Department of Art History

Bachelor of Arts in Art History  
Minor in Creative Writing

Code-switching and semantic narratives: Cleopatra's portraiture  
within the Hellenistic visual *koine*.

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## Abstract

The thesis is an overview of contextual implications in Cleopatra's portraiture created from 51 BC to 35 BC. The objective of this paper is to identify three different types of portraits based on the pictorial heritage in which they are grounded – Egyptian, Hellenistic, and Roman - and to demonstrate how the principle of code-switching applies to these images in the framework of a universal Mediterranean visual *koine*. It is an attempt to outline the stylistic and semantic approaches of Cleopatra's portraits: from the earliest Egyptian representations inherited from pharaonic tradition, to the Hellenistic iconography with royal connotations legible across the Mediterranean world. It analyses connections between status and its appropriate iconographic markers within the multicultural medium in which Cleopatra's images operated. In doing so this thesis seeks to establish the place of the portraits within a temporal and visual narrative. It discusses the ancestral Ptolemaic characteristics that dictated the iconography of the royal portraits and how they in turn influenced elite female imagery of the Hellenistic world. The scope thus is to establish the manner in which these portraits engaged efficiently with a vast audience of culturally diverse backgrounds, serving as linkage to legitimized royal discourses on diverse semantic levels simultaneously. A close study of Antonian-Cleopatrian coinage and Caesar-coded images of the queen in Rome provides evidence of the inevitable acculturation that impedes one from dividing royal images into singular national narratives. It proves that Cleopatra's portraiture had undergone a process of connotational expansion, consciously and skillfully code-switching between strategies that were assessed by multiple strata of audience.

## **Dedication**

To family that never ends in blood, and sometimes does not start there either.

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	1
Dedication.....	2
Acknowledgements.....	3
1. Introduction.....	5
2. Egyptian Royal Portraiture .....	11
3. Hellenistic International Style.....	20
4. Rome: A case study of multidimensional code-switching.....	29
5. Conclusions.....	36
6. List of Images .....	40
7. Bibliography .....	44

# 1. Introduction

The figure of Cleopatra VII Ptolemy has accumulated, over the course of history, a compendium of myths and superstitions greater than most universally renowned female rulers could relate to. The roles that have been continuously assigned to Cleopatra within the Western study of history and art history reflect the development of thought and analysis in these fields across centuries: from the evil foreign seductress composed by Augustus to the desirable male Orientalized fantasy of the 19th century, to a historicized tool interesting only as an element inextricable from the stories of Great Men whose lives were tied, at some point, to her.

This paper is an attempt to approach Cleopatra's portraits from a different perspective. It uses her images as a study base for the concept of *code-switching* within particular visual media and how it was pertinent specifically to the cultural amalgamation of the Mediterranean world in 1st century BC. To understand what kind of context this environment provided for the creation of the portraits, one could refer to Miguel John Versluys and his argument that "globalization indeed provides a goof thought perspective when analyzing Roman visual material culture".<sup>1</sup> Cleopatra inhabited three spaces simultaneously: her presence was defined by the Egyptian royal visual discourse, it was present in Rome at different points of her relationship with the city, and it was broadcasted across the whole Mediterranean. All three of these spheres were heavily influenced by the queen's narrative and they overlapped regularly, as demonstrated through the iconography of her portraits.

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<sup>1</sup> Versluys, 2015. He places Rome inside an ongoing exchange of cultural experience, often decontextualized from its original meaning, and proves that it was the case not only in Rome, but in the whole Mediterranean.

It is my primary research interest to identify these implicit tangents and establish what political, cultural, and religious purpose they served, if any. The paper will hence be organized in a manner that allows tracing manifestations of code-switching in all three ramifications of the royal portraiture. The first chapter will observe her Egyptian images, namely the decorative program of the temple complex at Dendera and the free-standing statues of her executed in the traditional Egyptian style. It focuses on negotiations between local visual heritage and personal innovation, between the legacy of the Ptolemaic dynasty and the shifts in iconography, as well as mythological contributions, dictated by the modified political situation. Hellenistic portraiture will be discussed in the second chapter, analyzing the approach adopted by a Queen who managed to remain coded as Egyptian and loyal to her legacy within the visual requirements of the globalized world she inhabited, with her images receiving inspiration from the customary depictions of Hellenistic queens and, at their own turn, leaving an impact on portraits of royal and elite women across the whole Mediterranean<sup>2</sup>. The third chapter will serve as a culmination of the subtlety and simultaneously of visual languages incorporated within the iconography of a single object – it will discuss, both individually and in close connection to each other, the coin minted in 35 BC with Cleopatra's and Marcus Antonius' profiles as a double obverse, as well as the notorious gilded statue from the Temple of Venus Victrix in Rome through the lens of a surviving potential reference – a wall painting in Pompeii depicting, presumably, this specific sculpture. All three components of Cleopatra's presence on the international arena will thus be taken into consideration in hope to find an answer to the question – how exactly did her images

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<sup>2</sup> Cleopatra's influences on Hellenistic female portraiture have been discussed by Walker, Ashton, and Kleiner alike, more specifically to be cited and discussed in the according chapter. For understanding of context, also see Davies,



operate in a world of so many cultural crosslinks, and to what audiences, and how, did they speak?

In finding satisfactory answers to these questions, one has to lean on the most contemporary body of scholarly research based on the Queen's identity. Like many other prominent female figures emerging from a male-centered account of history, Cleopatra had to wait until the relatively recent rise in interest towards female agency in the language of art to be considered an active force in designing and defining her own image through the numerous types of portraits she had. Scholars of the 21st century have the unprecedented opportunity to look at Cleopatra's portraits as reflections of her own will and political strategies rather than of narratives dictated by men in power. For this possibility, for the chance to start a discussion on the Queen's images within her own story, we are to thank Susan Walker and her extensive labor in finding the voice of Cleopatra herself among the biased, often inaccurate, discourses that persisted until the end of the past century. The exhibition *Cleopatra of Egypt: from History to Myth* curated by Walker from 2000 to 2002, became the most comprehensive and, unironically, Cleopatra-focused body of images and texts – considering the invaluable catalogs created with Peter Higgs and Sally-Ann Ashton – to be ever published.<sup>3</sup> Besides the mere volume of images collected from across three continents, which in and of itself would greatly facilitate any study of Cleopatra's portraiture within its historical context, the catalogues manage to challenge several myths surrounding these portraits and to update the discussion to the level of academic knowledge of recent studies.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, writing any type of visual analysis on the last Egyptian

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<sup>3</sup> Higgs, P; S. Walker , 2001, and the eventual "Cleopatra Reassessed" by Ashton, S. A; and S. Walker are the two works that most visual material of this paper come from, along with quotations from elaborate essays by Art History experts in the field to create a more complex and well-rounded argument.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, Walker and Higgs provide a number of bust portraits and jewelry pieces that have been normally presumed to depict Cleopatra, proving that to establish whether these images really depict her, or a different Ptolemaic queen is in most cases quite challenging.

queen without consulting these two catalogues makes little sense and is barely efficient within the framework of contemporary studies.

It is, however, unwise not to consider that twenty years have passed since the installation of the exhibition and the creation of accompanying texts. While Walker, Higgs, Ashton, and later, in part, Kleiner, have indeed created a solid foundation for building research and study based on Cleopatra's portraiture, more recent publications provide the necessary context for a better understanding of the cultural and political medium that allowed these images to function. One cannot fully read the implications of coinage, busts, full-sized statues, and temple friezes, without having a clear understanding of the world in which and for the sake of which they were created. The study of the Mediterranean area in the temporal period of interest for this paper has increased greatly in the past ten years and has brought up notions and ideas that were simply not talked about before. Works on the interconnections within the Mediterranean framework and explanations of *how* and *why* it was a complex system that could not be separated into particles of nationality-based components change not only the usual approach to the formal elements art in this defined period of history, but also to the way this art communicates efficiently to specific audiences.

For the sake of a clearer ability to follow the development of thought, here are some fundamental writings in chronological order: in 2011 Penelope J. Davies publishes the article "Aegyptica in Rome: Adventus and Romanitas" that discusses the Greek (read Hellenistic) and Egyptian artistic elements emerging within Roman visual culture.<sup>5</sup> The author compares two different approaches towards foreign artistic influences: while Hellenistic art gets "completely

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<sup>5</sup> Davies, P. J. "Aegyptica in Rome: Adventus and Romanitas" in *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean* E. G. Gruen, 2011, Getty Research Institute, LA.

absorbed” in the local tradition, the Aegyptica remains defined as different, external, exotic, and never reaches the same level of assimilation. Similar ideas are expressed in Versluys’ writings, first in 2008 and later in 2015, where citations from both Greek and Egyptian cultures end up reflected in Roman art in different proportions and for different purposes, and Versluys provides elaborated explanations on why this type of visual appropriation happened.<sup>6</sup> Here Versluys draws on Andrew Wallace-Hadrill’s use of “code-switching” and it is one of the first instances when the approach appears fully integrated in the context of visual language and viewership particularities in the Hellenized Mediterranean of the 1st century BC.<sup>7</sup> Versluys creates an overview of a functional interconnected space where visual forms were detached from their immediate cultural background and perceived as semantic signs that stood for different implied meanings depending on the specific context in which they were used. Within such a framework the portraits of Cleopatra, be they of Egyptian, Hellenistic, or specifically Roman provenience, acquire more than a singular way of reading and demonstrate that it was an aspect known by the queen and used purposefully in respective cases. The statement is echoed and reinforced by Christopher H. Hallett in 2015, his article “Defining Roman Art” discussing exactly this: which parts of what today is considered “Roman Art” are actually Roman, how they relate to the rich cultural soil of the Mediterranean, and why the necessity to divide art into specific backgrounds pertinent to exclusive cultural groups only is a modern one that does not fit within the Roman artistic paradigm and, therefore, cannot define it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Versluys, M. J. “Globalization and the Roman World”, 2015 Cambridge University Press, and “Understanding Egypt in Egypt and Beyond” in “Isis on the Nile: Egyptian gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: proceedings of the IVth International Conference of Isis Studies, Liège, November 27-29, 2008: Michel Malaise in honorem”, 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Wallace-Hadrill, 1998.

<sup>8</sup> Hallet C. H., 2015, on the complimentary relationship between Roman and Mediterranean concepts of art.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the inclusion of Cleopatra's portraiture in the recently reassessed and rediscovered Mediterranean cultural framework. The vastness of images with Egyptian, Hellenistic, Roman-Hellenistic iconography is composed of portraits that might look like they were crafted only to have one specific function legible for people of one specific background. My goal is to ask the question – could there be more than one discourse incorporated within each image, with the full awareness of Cleopatra and fitted to her own agenda? In the light of new definitions of the globalized Mediterranean world, it is worth taking a look at how these images combined different cultural identities simultaneously, how much of it was conscious code-switching and how much was conditioned by influences that the queen could or could have control over.

## 2. Egyptian Royal Portraiture

To construct an exact definition of code-switching, especially in the context of Cleopatra's life-long constructed narrative, it would be useful to first look at her Egyptian portraiture, especially at images created in the advanced period of Cleopatra's reign, after her relationship with Caesar and Rome. Nowhere does the importance of context, both in terms of place, origin, and exact timeline emerge as prominently, as it does in these images that manage to successfully assemble the tradition and the innovation. Rooted deeply into the national regal visual language, they combine elements of the culture abandoned by earlier Ptolemaic Pharaohs with the narrative of the Queen's own life, incorporating her into the mythological iconography and, respectively, into the canvas of the myth itself. Indeed, Egyptianized portraits were not uncommon among Ptolemy kings, queens, and other prominent members of the royal family, however, for generations they have been crafted after one certain fashion that had one most important function: to serve as visual proof of the line's legitimacy. Cleopatra envisioned more. While her portraits are a natural progression of this iconography, she does not limit herself to traditional formal elements but ceaselessly comes up with visual metaphors borrowed from the rich and complex body of Egyptian mythology, something that her predecessors were not accustomed to. In fact, Cleopatra VII was the first in generations to learn the Egyptian language along with the cultural layers only available for those who understood it.<sup>9</sup> It is not entirely clear

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<sup>9</sup> Walker and Ashton, 15. They demonstrate how her advanced (compared to her predecessors) knowledge of local culture both reaffirmed her legitimacy as a queen and also highlighted her individual personal approach to Egypt as opposed to her only Greek-speaking predecessors.

whether the implementation of mythological motives in the portraiture was her own vision or if it was wisely shaped by advisors from the priesthood, most probably a collaboration of ideas took place. As a result, Cleopatra's images manage to operate with substantial visual clues connected to her person on two parallel levels simultaneously: they legitimize her embodiment of divine grace as the "Queen of the Two Lands"<sup>10</sup> by placing her in the fundamentally traditional environment of the Egyptian pantheon, but they also keep the viewer informed on the divine-associated aspects of her private recent biography. This subtle switch comes to life first and furthestmost in the decorative reliefs on temples associated with the queen.

A highly illustrative example of such cooperation between the personal and the abstractly mythological is the scene on the rear wall of the temple of Dendera (Fig. 1). The foundation of the temple was set in 54 BC, undergoing adjustments and improvements by two generations of ruling Ptolemies until 47 BC. This dating allows us to identify the Queen named Cleopatra in the cartouches as specifically Cleopatra VII Philopater.<sup>11</sup> Visually, every feature of the sequence manages to stay firmly grounded into pharaonic complex of iconography. As mentioned before, this aspect creates a break from the recent regal norms of depiction and desired associations and invokes older imagery familiar to the educated Egyptian viewers, but not necessarily included in the visual vocabulary of previous Ptolemies.<sup>12</sup>

A double procession occupies the entirety of the wall: monumental figures over life-size engage in a ritualistic dialogue, seemingly unaware of the viewer's presence. The composition mirrors itself: on both the left and the right side of the frieze we witness Cleopatra VII and her

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<sup>10</sup> The official title featured on the cartouches accompanying her royal imagery.

<sup>11</sup> Bianchi, 14. But also see Kleiner, 112, especially for visual analysis.

<sup>12</sup> John Ray claims that Cleopatra might have had advisors from the priesthood who helped her coordinate the mythological aspects of her discourse, "for once in Ptolemaic history, parallels with Egyptian religion were falling on willing ears" (Ray, 9).

son from Caesar, Caesarion, who is also granted a cartouche with his name inscribed in hieroglyphs – that alone would elevate him to the royal status of his mother. Ka, the Pharaoh's divine spirit, stands behind Cesarean as additional proof of his new position within the dynasty.<sup>13</sup> Both Cleopatras and Caesarions face each other, yet they are unaware of the doubling, each pair interacting with separate groups of gods. The right half of the wall presents them making offerings to Hathor, the patron goddess of the temple, and her son Ihy. The parallelism between mother-Cleopatra and mother-Hathor is evident and suggestive, becoming even more so when one notices that Hathor has the temple in her complete autonomous possession, not sharing it with a male consort – and an Egyptian viewer, upon an inspection of the whole site, would have clearly identified this particularity. Both women, human and goddess, would be presented thus as active and capable rulers of the portion of land that rightfully belongs to them, both having heirs to secure and legitimize the legacy of the line, and both theoretically married to identifiable and quite exceptional men – but elsewhere, not in their sacred space. In such context it becomes obvious that Caesarion's depiction as an adult enabled Pharaoh, accompanied but no longer shadowed by his mother, only reinforces the statement of Cleopatra's own agency as queen and intercessor between the mortal and the divine realms.

The left side of the wall represents a similar act of offering, this time to Osiris, joined by his wife and son. Cleopatra's propagandistic associations with Isis would have been largely acknowledged at the time – by both the Egyptian and the international communities – and the appearance of them in such proximity on the same wall would certainly remind the viewer of this connection, which, in its own turn, would echo the implications suggested by the Hathor-

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<sup>13</sup> For comparison material: at the Temple of Edfu a similar miniature Caesarion is additionally protected by two falcons at the entrance, again, linking his persona to the myth of Horus. (Kleiner, 85).

Cleopatra engagement. The queen's divine nature is asserted through a sophisticated interlay of figures, motifs, and narratives that work within a unified scheme of representations. This fragment of the wall also touches on aspects that have been purposely silenced in its reflected side: here we see the presence of the male god-husband and father. I believe this choice of placement an intentional and carefully planned commentary on the Queen's position as a ruler: while the male deity does appear and stands ichnographically for the absent father of Caesarion, whose story mirrors Osiris' myth to surprising extents (both left their regal wives with unborn/infant sons while passing away under tragic circumstances), he is smartly connected to Isis, and not Hathor, the main goddess of the temple complex. Her agency and command over the place remain unaltered by male interference, she remains the main acting force of her consecrated grounds. Subsequently, so does Cleopatra.

All the particularities discussed above demonstrate the customization of the mythological sphere in favor of the Queen's own story. They certainly read as innovative and personal, distanced from the common centuries (if not millennia) long program. Yet while Cleopatra – or whoever was responsible for the concept of this specific relief – strays away from tradition in the narrative, she certainly remains highly conservative in terms of style. The figures adopt conventional poses characteristic for Egyptian art at any stage of its development: feet and legs in profile, torso turned to face the viewer, head in profile again, the half-step giving the static figures a form of particular dynamism, especially in the case of Caesarion and male deities, not constricted by body tight skirts that women wear. The outlines of the figures are sharply cut in the stone, separating them from the surrounding illusionistic space and from the surface itself. Most of the free space of the wall is covered in hieroglyphic texts, cartouches, and extensive praise offered to the gods, the queen, and the young king.



Another aspect to consider when scrutinizing the carved procession would be its location: it was not common to place scenes of such importance (patron deity of the shrine, commissioner, etc.) on the back side of temples.<sup>14</sup> The surrounding space would not obscure the wall, so the risk of reduced visibility is out of question – yet the effect this visibility produces on viewers intensifies, since one surely is to pay particular attention to a procession of such scale discovered in a place where it would normally not be present.

The decorative program of the Dendera temple remains a powerful and complex visual description of Cleopatra's positioning herself on Egyptian grounds. Besides the iconographic clues that would have not escaped the attention of a local viewer at least partly initiated in their Queen's private life, the shrine itself has crucial importance for building her reigning narrative. The constructions of the site have been conducted on the orders of Ptolemy XII Auletes, her father<sup>15</sup>, elevated by Cleopatra's personal contributions already mentioned and discussed, and the whole spectacular scene on the rear wall would have probably been created to commemorate Caesarion's ascension to the throne as his mother's co-ruler. A straightforward yet elegant narrative of legacy, ancestral glory and an uninterrupted lineage going back to the divine origins becomes thus embodied not only by the frieze, but by the whole complex of the temple. This level of formal eloquence is achieved, in big part, due to the constant switching between the personal and the legendary, between iconography proven successful by time, and elements that are only characteristic to Cleopatra herself.

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<sup>14</sup> Ray, 10. It is worth considering the reasons why the portrait of the queen and visual proof of her secured line (Caesarion) was placed on the rear wall, aside from the matter of increased visibility. Would she be the last impression of a departing visitor, or the first thing an approaching pilgrim might see if they come from the other side of the temple?

<sup>15</sup> Porter and Moss, 83.

A similar approach towards weaving in mythological sequences in Cleopatra's royal discourse reemerges at the temple of Armant, another building project curated by Cleopatra. Here, again, portraits of herself and her son in their full royal-divine hypostases appear, surrounded by figures of gods to whom they bring offerings and with whom their private stories interconnect. The male patron of this site is Montu, the Egyptian god of war and victory – as fitting a metaphor for Caesar as Isis and Hathor were for Cleopatra. As a number of other divinities from the local pantheon, Montu was associated with sons with miraculous powers conceived under supernatural conditions and raised to avenge their fathers and bring glory to their names – this aspect of the story fitting perfectly into Cleopatra and Caesarion's unstable situation after his Caesar's death. Moreover, another male figure was present in one of the decorative scenes of the temple. The god Amun would substitute Montu as the father of the child in a depiction of divine birth giving, where Cleopatra also manifested her presence. The inclusion of this figure had connotations rooted deeply into the fertile ground of Egyptian mythology: according to the official doctrine, Amun could occasionally assume the role of the father for the heir to the Egyptian throne.<sup>16</sup> His link to the mother and the infant on the painting – and, respectively, to Cleopatra and Caesarion – would provide the young Pharaoh with secure lineage and proof of legitimacy not only at the level of his biological parents, themselves legitimate and potent, but also at the level of divinities. In essence, the subtle message of the scene acts in ways employed widely by the Roman elite, but tailored to be legible for Egyptian audiences with direct connections to the local land and its history.

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<sup>16</sup> Walker and Higgs, 2001.

Cleopatra's freestanding sculptures, where she is only represented by her own figure, without the additional weight of children, husbands, and patron deities, present just as much interest. It is difficult to speculate on the number of portraits – unlike reliefs and paintings, they are not accompanied by cartouches, and the preserved traditional style of the statues sometimes creates confusion in identifying the figures as Cleopatra, Arsinoe II, or any of their numerous namesake predecessors. The statues that can, with certain relativity, be identified as Cleopatra VII, are, indeed, quite scarce. One of the most known examples of her Egyptianized portraits is a statue of black basalt, c. 51-30 BC, now in the Hermitage Museum (Fig. 2). It is 104 cm in height and presents the queen in an emphatically traditional visual manner implemented in Egyptian portraiture. She stands on a small podium in the typical one foot ahead of the other position, as if stepping forward. A body-tight dress covers her from the neckline to the calves, yet it obscures nothing of her figure, exposing every curve of the flesh – the queen is dressed, as it is appropriate for her status, yet her body is the body of a divine creature, perfect in terms of health and aesthetic qualities. The use of basalt here accomplishes two goals at once: first, the glow of black polished stone adds a very palpable physic quality to the otherwise schematic and stylized body, second, it is the most often used material for royal and elite Egyptian portraiture of such kind, therefore, extremely appropriate for the depiction of a queen who seeks to highlight her provenience. Cleopatra's head is covered by a wig – as much as the word “traditional” has been overused in the description of the statue, it is the most appropriate term for each of its elements, wig included. Although no crown is visible on the lavish braids, the triple snake symbol, the uraeus, emerges on the forehead, stating quite clearly the rank of the woman wearing it.<sup>17</sup> The

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<sup>17</sup> The presence of the triple uraeus is most often the single solid clue that allows one to identify a portrait as Cleopatra VII, it might have been incorporated in her images specifically to set her apart from similar portraits of recent Ptolemaic Queens.

constricting pose and the clear-cut character of the lines leave little space for additional elements to enlarge the context of the portrait, yet the ones she clutches in her hands are of primary importance: the ankh in the right hand reinforces the statement of royalty denounced by the headpiece, so does the cornucopia nested in her right arm.

This particular symbol speaks concomitantly to two different audiences: while it has been largely associated with Greek queens and goddesses during the 3d century BC, “it was also used by Egyptian sculptors for royal representations in the second and first centuries BC”.<sup>18</sup> Hence, another case of code-switching: wherever the portraits might have been exposed and whatever background the viewers would come from, the double-cultural reference to queenship is difficult to miss. Indeed, Egyptian portraits, this statue included, were mostly crafted for local display, but one should remember that Alexandria, for instance, was a city of prime international importance. Not only frequent visitors from Hellenistic shores were familiar with the symbolism of the cornucopia, but also the highly educated locals could read the message and link it to iconography beyond an Egyptian legacy.

While the statue has been conceived as a portraiture of a particular queen and is meant to represent specifically her, it is crucial to understand that it did not function as most modern viewers would expect a portrait to. The purpose of the was not to capture the exact facial features of Cleopatra or to flatter her by perfecting those to the taste of her contemporaries. As soon as the uraeus finds its place on the gorgeous wig, the image stops being a simple statue and becomes a symbol of royal power and glory. Certain physical elements indeed imitate facial features observed on other portraits of the queen, especially of the Hellenized type: the upturned

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<sup>18</sup> Walker and Higgs, 160, also Treggiari expands on the use of cornucopia within Roman female elite imagery.

chin, the downturned curve of the mouth, the shape of the eyelids, but they remain strictly framed by the conventional Egyptian representation norms and do not pretend to create a “real-life” likeness. The triple snake headpiece does more with the task of signaling Cleopatra and Cleopatra alone out of all her predecessors: it is an element that belongs particularly to her portraits and differs from similar cases of royal headwear implemented by other queens.<sup>19</sup> If regarded as a portrait from this perspective, the statue does exactly what it is supposed to: it portrays, indeed, an unmistakably Egyptian queen with symbols of her power and the appearance of a divinity, more than suitable for a Pharaoh.

Of course, there are numerous other case studies of Cleopatra’s Egyptian portraits, both in the context of temple decorations where she would make an appearance in the company of selected divinities, and as separate statues where the only goddess would be her. While differences in iconography and style mark every single of these works as an individual carefully conceived image, the tradition from which they all sprout dictates certain restrictions and similarities in representation. The common narrative of these portraits remains the same: not only is Cleopatra a truthful and legitimate “queen of the two lands”, but she is also a queen acutely aware of her Egyptian heritage, and she knows how to incorporate herself visually into it.

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<sup>19</sup> Traversari, 1997, demonstrates that the identification of this particular statue as Cleopatra VII was partly possible due to the fact that her uraeus is triple, while the one of Arsinoe II, another potential model for the sculpture, has always been double only.

### 3. Hellenistic International Style

Despite having preserved a strong national conscience and a tendency towards tradition and heritage, Egypt, in the 1st century BC, was very much part of a rapidly developing multicultural inclusive area that dictated its own norms of visual expression – the Mediterranean world. In fact, Alexandria, the city that has served as a royal residence from the Ptolemies since the foundation of the dynasty, was not an ordinary establishment bound to follow the trends of the cultural ecosystem it profited from – Alexandria was herself one of the greatest trendsetters. Cleopatra spoke from a gigantic hub of Mediterranean economy and culture, in which traders, scholars, politicians exchanged experiences and crafted a new international identity for each other. According to Strabo, Alexandria was one of the most impressively learned cities of the world, where both foreign scholars were admitted and local scholars were distributed to other cities and countries for advanced learning.<sup>20</sup> These statements offer an accurate overview of the influence Alexandria had over the ethnically diverse mass of people who inhabited it or who had an interest in it from abroad. A queen who ruled in a city of such scale could no longer apply Egyptian conservative visual language when crafting her image and spreading it over such an audience. Cleopatra needed an international vocabulary that would be equally valued by any of the possible viewers.

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<sup>20</sup> Strabo, *Geographica*, XIV.5.13 ("With the Alexandrians, however, both things take place, for they admit many foreigners and also send not a few of their own citizens abroad").

The choice of the Hellenistic style for the portraits intended to impress this audience was wise from two simultaneous perspectives: 1<sup>st</sup> century BC Mediterranean hub adopted Hellenistic culture as its koine in the most globalized sense, being obviously aware of its origins but no longer limiting interpretations to them.<sup>21</sup> For Cleopatra of the Ptolemaic dynasty, however, it was quite personal as much as it was universal, and she surely would emphasize this direct connection in her images as well: not only a queen of a prominent Hellenistic cultural center but a fully legitimate Hellenistic queen in her own right. In the context of the portraits, her provenience becomes a statement and part of transcultural language, a semantic element, hence, a vivid example of code-switching.

As it is the case with most types of Cleopatra's portraiture, only a few pieces can be identified as her with a level of certainty. According to Cadario, there are only two marble portraits that could safely be labeled as Cleopatra's: one is currently exposed in the Vatican Museums (Fig. 3), and the other one is in Antikensammlung, Berlin, to which is owes its widely accepted name as the Berlin Cleopatra (Fig. 4).<sup>22</sup> Walker and Higgs mention the Chercel Cleopatra pair as yet another "twentieth-century identification", an attribution of an already known marble head (two, in this case).<sup>23</sup> Since the Berlin Cleopatra is the image referred to most often by contemporary scholars as a likely portrait of the queen, it would not be without reason to start analyzing the Hellenistic images from her.

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<sup>21</sup> Versluys, 2015

<sup>22</sup> Cadario, 41. Both found in Lazio villas, where they have made part of Imperial portraiture collections.

<sup>23</sup> However, they also agree upon the fact that by the end of the 20th century numerous attempts to re-identify portraits as Cleopatra's based solely on distinctive facial features have generated a considerable number of mismatches.

The provenience of the bust remains fairly obscure and has caused debates about its authenticity, however, today the most popular scholarly theories attribute the artwork either to Alexandrian or Roman workmanship – it could be a symbiosis of the two, a piece executed in Rome by Egyptian sculptors who were part of Cleopatra’s court when she visited the city in 46 BC.<sup>24</sup> In my opinion, however, the fact that the exact origin of the portrait cannot be identified is also directly connected to the international visual language discussed previously, it was never intended to read as strictly Egyptian or Greek or Roman. Indeed, the portrait has seemingly nothing in common with the Egyptian representations seen before, it was clearly intended for a different audience – although the message remains surprisingly familiar, even accentuated in an elegant manner. As it is characteristic of Hellenistic portraits, this image represents a youthful woman with facial features that mention some personalization, but have been clearly idealized in accordance with the tradition. Much like Venus, whose cult she so intelligently infiltrated and appropriated, this Cleopatra has soft full lips touched by a promise of a smile, big eyes framed by perfect curves of smooth eyebrows, and a nose that only hints at massiveness rather than truly being massive. In the following chapters images with much more prominent noses will be provided, images that not only express no shame of this particular facial feature but deem it as a value for a number of political rather than aesthetical reasons and highlight it on purpose. Here the shape of the nose bridge and tip (restored, so we have to take the anonymous restorer’s word that the original looked similarly) echo the Ptolemaic aquiline nose that defined the portraits of Cleopatra’s father, linking her to the bloodline and adding a touch of identity to the otherwise perfected image. A more emphasized personalization of features is not necessary in this case: first, it would go against the iconography of Hellenistic royalty inherited from Alexander’s

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<sup>24</sup> Walker and Higgs, 206



portraits, second, this bust possesses a statement of status more suggestive than any nose could ever be.

The hairstyle is a typical Hellenistic low bun tied at the base of the neck. It is a fashion seen on numerous portraits of goddesses; Cleopatra's favorite Venus/Isis/Hathor triad included. What differentiates this portrait from a portrait of a goddess – or of an ordinary noblewoman from the Mediterranean – is the diadem that crowns the carefully combed waves of hair. Indeed, a most appropriate accessory for a Queen, and it is not surprising that it reappears on Cleopatra's images in all possible contexts: stylized to harmonize with the Egyptian, Greek, or even Roman-related images, modified in accordance with medium and purpose, but very often present.<sup>25</sup> If this portrait was intended for an Alexandrian audience, the presence of the crown would inform viewers from all possible backgrounds of whose image exactly they were looking at. If it was crafted in Rome and was meant to be seen by Romans, at least for a segment of time, it would inevitably present Cleopatra as another, a foreign queen, the embodiment of Eastern and Exotic and Different and all the things that Rome would not accept within itself – even if at this time Cleopatra was not the enemy and her presence in the city was conditioned by Caesar welcoming her, the element of non-inclusion would certainly not go unnoticed. But neither would the iconographic recognizability of the portrait – just like Alexandria, Rome was part of the Mediterranean world and was surely familiar with the visual staples of its icons. Whatever the location in which this bust was sculpted might have been, a cross-reference between cultures and political discourses would inevitably be perceived by any viewer. While being perfectly capable of speaking the intercultural Hellenistic visuality, Cleopatra still remained the Queen of Egypt,

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<sup>25</sup> It is important though to mention that it is not strictly always the case, especially with portraits that cause most controversy in terms of their attribution.

and these two identities did not compete, but completed each other within this and similar portraits.

Cleopatra's head from the Vatican Museums (Fig. 4) follows similar guidelines. It is more damaged than the Berlin Cleopatra (Fig. 3), but the resemblance is still quite obvious. A typically Hellenistic youthful face with a small but fully-lipped mouth, completed by large almond-shaped eyes is a quotation from earlier Ptolemaic portraiture, while the melon hairstyle – absent in the portrait from Berlin – is such a characteristic element of Cleopatra's images that it appears sequentially not only on marble busts, but also on coins, where the choice of emphasized elements is never accidental given the dimensions.<sup>26</sup> Again, the diadem is not only present as a decorative asset, but as a most important part of the whole composition that manages to indicate status while not trespassing the limitations of the Hellenistic style. This image might have played the code-switching card with even more boldness and refinement than the one discussed before: there is a lump of marble in the front section of the diadem that most likely served as base for a now lost ornamentation. Given the background and the usual iconography implemented in the Queen's portraits, it might have been, with considerable probability, a lotus flower or a triple uraeus, and if so, then the portrait manages a double narrative: a specifically Egyptian queen, a female pharaoh grounded in the tradition of her own land, but also a Hellenistic queen both by birthright and personal refined educated identity. Moreover, Walker mentions that this portrait might have been the copy of the famous statue of Cleopatra installed in the temple of Venus Genetrix in Rome. Unfortunately, there is no way to firmly establish whether it was the case or not, but the addition of the Roman viewer to the already complex equation of ethnic identity

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<sup>26</sup> Higgs, 816; Cadario, 43

brings an extra layer of cultural negotiation and makes one wonder about the amount of royal discourse that the commissioners of the image wanted to encode in it.

Marble busts were not the only medium tailored to suit the Queen's self-propaganda directed towards the Hellenistic audience, she was also actively using coinage for the same purpose. The first observation to make when analyzing the extent in which coinage was part of building the image is that Cleopatra was the only Ptolemaic queen who minted her own coins with her name and her portrait on them.<sup>27</sup> Much like in the case of any other prominent Mediterranean ruler, they come in types that characterize certain periods of her rule and employ iconography best suiting the official discourse of said periods. The earliest type of coins we know are the bronze ones (51-49 BC) and the silver drachm (47-46 BC), all minted in Alexandria (Fig. 5). Recognizable features allow us to identify these images as belonging to the early period of the Queen's presence on the Egyptian throne, features already noticed in her portraits made in different media. She certainly looks young (which would be chronologically appropriate, since the queen was only 19 years old when the minting of the bronze coins began), quite conventionally attractive, with large eyes, a nose of considerable proportions, yet elegant, full lips, a prominent chin. While having evident common iconography with bust likenesses, these images depart from the tradition of idealization to an extent that, although still maintaining the construct of a youthful female ruler, do not diminish her particular facial characteristics in order to better fit the standardized concept of beauty.

Since the size of the coin only allows this much preciseness, decisions must be made on emphasis: the minter chooses to highlight the famous Ptolemaic features: chin and nose. The

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<sup>27</sup> Johansen, 75.

central objective of the remaining portrait is to flatter the queen as a ruler more than as a woman, which makes sense in the context of coinage – unlike busts, coins are not artworks but pieces meant for everyday use with direct material value, and they serve as a good reminder of who exactly grants the population prosperity and security. The decision to opt for a regal image is consolidated through the purposeful and emphatic depiction of the royal diadem. Indeed, the diadem, combined with the familial facial traits, makes a clear statement on whose picture it is that we are looking. Broad and well-defined, the diadem is placed upon the hairstyle implemented as well in Cleopatra's bust portraits: the *Melonenfrisur*, with rows of braids plaited closely to the head and gathered in a low bun at the nape of the neck. The image on the silver drachm offers additional expression to the hairstyle: several curls are let loose behind the ears for extra volume and playfulness – in the end, the queen is still a young woman who cares about her appearance and styling.

The way in which the requirements of the international visual arena influenced Cleopatra's choice of images has already been observed and analyzed; it would be most logical to trace the continuation of this influence and establish her position as an intermediate between the earlier tradition and its ulterior manifestations. Cleopatra's portraits have contributed to the formation of a new system of visual idioms in elite female representations. Even after the battle of Actium and its consequences this system has not disappeared from the Mediterranean arena, solidly incorporated in the range of visual languages adapted by Hellenistic elite women.<sup>28</sup> In fact, most busts, and statues that originate from this period present a challenge for scholars who seek to attribute it to Cleopatra for the very reason that her hairstyle and the approach to facial

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<sup>28</sup> For a more detailed analysis of informational and cultural transfer in the Mediterranean see chapter 3 and references to Versluys, 2015.

features becomes so widely spread that it is no longer reads as a direct connection to the queen's person, but rather as a sign of specific social and cultural status that the commissioners belong to.

For instance, a marble bust of a woman resembling Cleopatra, created in between 50-30 BC, of unknown provenance, now displayed in Cairo, collects several visual elements that were clearly inspired by her portraiture but do not necessarily signal her presence (Fig. 6). The hair is centrally parted and gathered in the back of the head, several soft curly locks frame the face, pulled from the general composition. It is not exactly a *Melonenfreisur*, but the arrangement on the head resembles the ones seen in Cleopatra's portraiture and almost asks for the conventional diadem to be placed upon the waves of hair – the lack of any headpiece would be the most direct clue that this is not really the queen herself, but a member of upper social classes. The big elongated eyes, combined with a thin, but emphatically aquiline nose, read like the features seen on Cleopatra's coinage, they look modeled after the queen, but as appropriated (Cadario calls it “accultured”) traits that read both Cleopatrian and Hellenistic, depending on the desired context.<sup>29</sup>

To pinpoint a specific niche occupied by Cleopatra's portraits in the Mediterranean world of visual strategies is to negotiate between multiple cultural backgrounds that mutually enrich each other and have agency both within the cultural framework they originate from and outside of it. To disassociate elements from each other and declare them as purely Greek or purely Egyptian is impossible – instead, it makes sense to observe how these elements cooperate in the creation of a truly Hellenistic (read – international) image that manages to speak a language

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<sup>29</sup> Cadario, 39.

perceivable language on a multicultural arena, but still carry personalized touches of the Queen and adapt to the backgrounds of all possible audiences targeted by these portraits.

## 4. Rome: A case study of multidimensional code-switching

The previous chapter placed Cleopatra's portraiture within the Mediterranean framework as part of an ongoing cultural flow, a world of visual interconnectivity that refers back to each other and quotes each other with or without keeping the initial meaning encoded within each element. On the one hand, Rome is certainly part of this world and has to adapt its visual culture to its expectations, on the other, however, Rome's political relationship with Egypt suffers drastic shifts, respectively, so does the assessment of Cleopatra's portraits, since she embodies the whole kingdom in the Roman mentality. It is worth paying attention to her Roman-related images both in the context of the globalized Mediterranean koine, and as evidence of the complexities that marked the dynamics of these two states in particular.

First of all, how does one define koine in this framework? In general lines, when referring to culture, the term is attributed to elements of a civilization widely accepted and assimilated across multiple cultures simultaneously. In relation to the 1st century BC Mediterranean this term encompasses, as Versluys puts it, a common language of semantic elements enriched and modified more or less equally by all participants in the discourse.<sup>30</sup> In other words, it is a functional cultural sphere where ideas, terms, and concepts travel freely and are not strictly connected to their original background. For the Mediterranean context, it means that visual elements originating from Greece might and do read differently in distinct geographical and cultural contexts. Although these elements – like the hairstyles, the choice of rendering facial features, the connections to certain deities – do come historically from Greece, they do not read as symbolizing it in particular, but rather as a recognizable

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<sup>30</sup> Versluys, 2015, demonstrates that this exchange of culture becomes even more pertinent in the context of Mediterranean Rome.

international language that can be adopted and modified, if need be, by any of the cultures connected through and by it.

That is not to say that elements of national identity disappear completely in this everchanging world of mutual appropriation and input. In the case of Rome, for instance, the negotiation between Hellenized and Egyptian art was certainly not even. The former became absorbed by Roman art, the latter “never seems to have been absorbed or to have cast off its exotic aura: it sits apart, beside but not part of Roman art”.<sup>31</sup> This interchange creates a premise for Cleopatra’s portraits to take the code-switching process to new, triple levels: images created in Rome or influenced directly by Roman background would read as part of the Hellenized world with a significant touch of Egyptian “exoticism”.

The most secure case study preventient from these circumstances is the coin minted in Alexandria in 36-30 BC, celebrating the prosperous and fruitful union of Marcus Antonius and Cleopatra (Fig. 7). With Antonius’ face on the reverse and the queen’s face on the obverse, the coin is an example of complete synchrony between Roman and Hellenistic discourses.<sup>32</sup> According to Walker and Higgs, “the fact that the legends are in the nominative case, rather than the genitive, suggests that the inspiration for these coins is Roman rather than Greek”. Cleopatra’s title, however, clearly reads the status of the woman whose profile the coin bears – it says “Queen Cleopatra Thea II”, a title that would be unthinkable in any Roman Republican context. The message is clear: Rome, represented by Marcus Antonius, enters into a harmonious relationship with the kingdom of Egypt, both sides keeping their respective titles and uniting their policies.

The symbiosis also persists on the visual level: both Anthony and Cleopatra are depicted in accordance with the tradition of veristic Roman Republican portraiture. It is not

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<sup>31</sup> Davies, 2011

<sup>32</sup> Walker and Higgs state that the repartition of sides and the choice of portraits is highly unusual for coins of the period, with no immediate evidence of who the issuer is.



surprising in his case: the strong jaw, the pointed chin, the frowning brow and the general sensation of sturdiness are the legacy of a tradition that has marked Roman art and distinguished it from the visual vocabularies of other cultures. Cleopatra's image suffers modifications to be placed within the same iconographical context: gone is the soft youthfulness of her portraits on earlier mints, instead we are presented with a mature woman with extensive visual proof of her status and magnificence. While her features surely do resemble stylistically the features of Antonius – the same sharp lines, the aquiline nose with an exaggerated crook, a pointed chin, big eyes and thick visible eyebrows – they also manage to maintain her within the traditional Ptolemaic iconography of used for portraits of kings. This representation has ambivalent reading patterns: on the one hand, there is a stylistic dialogue between the two faces on the sides of the coin, on the other, Cleopatra's features quote images of Ptolemy XII Auletes, her father.<sup>33</sup>

What remains untouched from earlier images of the queen, both on coins and in stone, is the hairstyle. The little braids of the *melonenfrisur* are emphasized here even more so than on certain marble busts – the restricted surface area demands accents and exaggeration. A wisp of hair hangs loosely over the ear, replicating the twist of the small knot tied under the circlet of the diadem. Of course, no portrait of Cleopatra, especially as politically engages as this one, could have omitted the diadem. The effect is magnified by the lavish decorative jewelry and hints of a richly embroidered dress peeking from underneath. The overall effect is a strong sensation of witnessing royalty and power, masculine to a certain extent, therefore, encoding the typical masculine values, such as the strength of character and valor, but entwined with evident femininity that defines the queen and makes her Antony's perfect counterpart.

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<sup>33</sup> Susan Walker (2001) develops on how this choice of formal elements benefited both Cleopatra's and Antony's political agendas.

How this portrait serves Cleopatra is similar to the cases previously discussed but to an even bigger extent. If before she could only speak from an Egyptian or Hellenistic perspective (or both, depending on the desired effect), now an additional nuance of Roman presence is added. The coin manages to fulfill several tasks at the same time: it softens the cultural differences between Cleopatra and Anthony, grounding them firmly in their own and each other's backgrounds, it connects this royal representation to the ones already known and accepted by the Hellenistic koine (hence the exact hairstyle), and it restates Cleopatra's own legitimacy as heir of the longstanding Ptolemaic tradition. Visually, Marcus Antonius is invited into the royal sphere that was not accessible for him as a Roman citizen before, yet he does so without abandoning his Roman status, moreover, he extends it over Cleopatra, too. In terms of code-switching and cultural exchange this coin might be her most eloquent representation.

This, however, is not the only image that speaks for Cleopatra within the Roman context. By the time this coin was minted she has gained a very specific reputation in Rome, her images and the myths surrounding her would be juxtaposed against the "proper" Roman visual and moral canons, vilified, ridiculed. This has not always been the case, of course. During the times when Cleopatra was Caesar's guest in the capital, she and her royal status would have been regarded through the optics of an exoticized partnership rather than hostility.

If the statue at the sanctuary of Venus Genetrix was a gift from Caesar himself or from the Egyptian diaspora of Rome, we cannot surely say. The reception of the unthinkable artwork – the first case of a living human disguised as a deity in a functional temple in Rome! – would certainly be modified by the identity of the commissioner, but the statue itself and its complicated baggage of connotations presents interest for this study no matter who decided to erect it.

In the 1st century BC Rome had an interest in Aegyptica and had a number of artifacts that pertained to the culture, those either having been imported from Egypt or produced locally as symbols of the culture and not as actual excerpts from it.<sup>34</sup> The most prominent element of Egyptian mythological and cultural corpus was the figure of Isis, a goddess assimilated throughout the Mediterranean as part of the international treasury discussed in previous chapters. Stylistically the Isis known in Rome could assume different hypostasis, as long as she possessed a certain number of elements associated with her, there was a freedom of representation, of course, minding the Hellenistic framework.<sup>35</sup> The fact that statues of Isis appeared in Rome through any of the two ways mentioned by Versluys was not at all uncommon, as wasn't the concept of Cleopatra's association with the goddess. It was the combination of a popular, yet still foreign deity, mixed with the persona of a living Hellenistic and simultaneously Egyptian queen, placed in a sacred temple (gilded!), that made this artwork outstanding. While the statue itself has not made it to the present times, an image that might replicate it could be very much of interest in this context: it is presumably the Venus and Cupid wall painting from the House of Marcus Fabius Rufus at Pompei (Fig. 8).<sup>36</sup>

Whether this painting indeed is a copy of the gilded statue from the temple of Venus Genetrix or not, it presents interest as a Roman view on Cleopatra's imagery. A youthful matron, veiled, with most of her hair hidden under the headcloth, proudly looks in the distance while Cupid (presumably Caesarion) gently cups her face on the right side. This Cleopatra has none of the hypertrophied features present even on her own earliest mints and busts: her nose is straight and thin, the chin is obscured by Cupid's arm, the lips are full and soft, and, of course, the most striking part of her face are the giant dark eyes contoured by

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<sup>34</sup> Verslyus calls them "Egyptian" and "Egyptianising" respectively, but also notes that they were, in essence, part of the same koine when viewed and used from the Roman perspective.

<sup>35</sup> As F. Naerebout puts it: "Objects in a more or less traditional Egyptian idiom [...] because in artefacts daring from Hellenistic and Roman Egypt [...] creep in "foreign elements", Greek style adulterates Egyptian".

<sup>36</sup> Walker, 2008

elegant thin eyebrows. Unfortunately, the condition of the painting does not allow one to see clearly, but it looks as if the golden dress had the traditional Isiac knot tied at the breasts, the only reference to Egypt this painting makes – of course, except the personality of the model, in case if it truly is her. Another strong marker of status is, however, present instead: it is hard to miss the diadem that crowns the head of this Cleopatra-Venus-Isis, a bright golden crown with imposing decorations and jewel work. Elements that could never make it to coins here shine in their full glory – rubies, gilded edges, engraved ornaments. Disguised as a goddess, she still remains a queen, even and especially in the Roman context.<sup>37</sup>

Much like the Antonian coin, this image functions as semantic marker on multiple simultaneous levels. The location of the statue makes it impossible to separate Cleopatra from Caesar's personal space, moreover, it is his triumphant space, a place of victorious celebration, as the dedication of the temple suggests. Cleopatra remains strongly tied to very particular aspects of Caesar's background: his victories and his legacy, both metaphorically and quite literally through the figure of Caesarion-Cupid. The placement of the statue in the temple of Caesar's family patron deity welcomes her into his space and places her under his protection, yet, as it is the case with Antony, the relationship is of mutual nurturing. Not only is Cleopatra presented as an Egyptian deity through the perspective of Mediterranean multiculturalism, but as a deity as functional in Rome as she would be in her native lands. Associating her with Venus allows one to trace a connection between her benevolence, her will, her affection, and Caesar's (and, respectively, Roman) glory.

There is no doubt that in the 1st century BC Rome was as integrated into the Hellenistic *oikumene* as any other Mediterranean and Near Eastern state would be. It is also impossible to deny that Rome never allowed this pluralism of culture to take over its own

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<sup>37</sup> Johnson, 1967, discusses how Cleopatra's persona was constructed by Roman poets after the battle of Actium and how much of it was a calibrated distortion of known facts – interesting to compare these intentional literary caricatures to the presentation in this image.

completely, but rather borrowed from Hellenistic cultural *crème de la crème* and adjusted it to its own scopes and policies. No matter how the relationship between Rome and Cleopatra might have fluctuated, the images of her that are connected to Roman audiences always present extraordinary interest: they surely are the products of the political and cultural movements that generated their iconography, and the use of multiple visual discourses that switch between backgrounds and messages is more visible in Cleopatra's Roman portraits than in any other representations of the queen.

## 5. Conclusions

Before connecting the premises of this thesis in a final point of intellectual intersection I would like to bring into attention one last case study. Despite being only partially tangent to the protagonist of this paper, it will serve as the outline of a global framework in which all conclusions drawn within previous chapters should settle as a whole complex visual mechanism.

The Roman museum Centrale Montemartini possesses within its collection a female bust of brilliant aesthetic qualities that incorporates multiple visual strategies discussed in this paper. Alfano lists this bust as “Marble head of a Ptolemaic queen with vulture headdress” (Fig. 9). In Walker and Higgs it appears under a similar title, it being specifically stated that scholars have changed opinions on the dedication of this bust several times since its discovery, one of the possible options being Cleopatra during her stay in Rome as Caesar’s guest.<sup>38</sup> It is a vivid example of the 20th-century misattributions mentioned in Chapter Two. Indeed, the iconography of the portrait does not allow an unequivocal identification of the person it depicts: it is a beautiful young female face with large eyes, thin and long eyebrows of an elegant shape, a straight, symmetrically correct nose (what remains of it), and full lips, touched by the faintest hint of a smile. No hair is visible, the woman wears an elaborated wig of Egyptian-looking braids and adornments, with an even fringe cut sharply at the middle of the forehead. A crown, or, rather, a complex headpiece in the shape of a vulture is nested firmly on the top of the head, with a hollow round space in the front where an attribute was once attached, possibly a sun disc, or, if indeed the bust was designed as Cleopatra’s likeness, the triple uraeus.

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<sup>38</sup> Alfano, 2000; Ashton, 2001. The latter source offers additional versions of the hypothetical model: it could have been Berenike II, the goddess Isis herself, or it could have simply been inspired by one of the earlier portraits of Cleopatra.

The facial features look characteristically Hellenistic, but the headdress is a little too elaborated and too obvious in its emulation of traditional Egyptian temple imagery to pass as authentic. It looks rather like a foreign idea of what an appropriate royal appearance should be than what Cleopatra normally demonstrates as a standard in other Hellenized images of her. On the one hand, if this is indeed her portrait, it might have been created by an artist who was not part of the royal workshop, someone who was familiar with Egyptian iconography only by the aspects of it that became elements of the globalized Mediterranean visual language. On the other hand, it might never have been the intent to represent Cleopatra in a manner that she would normally employ in her Hellenistic portraits. Hence, for instance, the unusually idealized face with lack of the typical nose and eye structure: the sculptor crafted his artwork from the fundament of a different tradition, and instead of adjusting it to the formal official visual language of Cleopatra he framed the queen with reference to typical Hellenistic iconography. By choosing not to use Ptolemaic physiognomic references, a new reading of the portrait is presented, which does not function as her other Hellenistic images, because it was never indeed supposed to.

If it is not Cleopatra but some other Ptolemaic queen, this piece serves as evidence that by the 1st century BC Egyptian influences were an acknowledged part of the Hellenistic arsenal of visual languages. Whenever it suited the design of the commissioner, these elements, even if detached from their original context and adjusted to the multicultural demands of the Mediterranean art market, were combined with “classical” Greek iconography in a harmonious finished form. Such citations from different strata of cultural heritage are part of the globalized world constructed by Versluys and discussed in previous chapters. While certain elements of this portrait read inevitably as Egyptian, they are not necessarily a direct extraction from their native context, but a modification that becomes part

of a universal visual tradition and receives proper assessment in all cultures that Mediterranean Hellenism has adopted and enriched.

Most of Cleopatra's portraiture can be regarded through a similar semantic approach. It may at first glance appear that the images in Egyptian shrines and the basalt statues are only nurtured by a single tradition and do not interact with viewers who come from different cultural backgrounds. However, as seen in Chapter One, these portraits of the Pharaoh manage to fluctuate between different royal narratives even within a single Egyptian context. It is a case of historical code-switching, of deliberate myth and iconography and composition choice that fulfills a connection to desired ancestral legitimacy and, at the same time, serves as testimony of Cleopatra's uniqueness as a ruler. Considering that a substantial percentage of the images was displayed in Alexandria, they would surely be seen by non-Egyptian residents and guests, and none would miss the implicit suggestions.

The Hellenistic portraiture, although apparently so different from traditional Egyptian depictions, serves the same goal: it creates a royal presence and grounds it in the fundament of the country Cleopatra rules. The bust from the Vatican Museums (Fig. 4) demonstrates an iconographical approach that would be most functional on a vast international arena with an established set of representational conventions. It does not break completely from earlier images intended for specific local audience. Instead, it takes everything that proved to be visually efficient in the Egyptian context and expands it over a conveniently existing language that recognizes and actively uses Egyptianized visual elements as icons. Moreover, it brings elements that inherently read as Egyptian – the triple *uraeus*, for instance – into a Hellenized medium and secures the logical connection between Cleopatra, the pharaonic dynasty, and Hellenistic royalty.

Lastly, Chapter Three demonstrates that the pinnacle of this intricate, intellectually charged game of context, globalization, and inherited tradition is achieved by the modest in



number, but incontestable in significance body of Cleopatra's Roman portraiture. The coin of 35 BC with joined faces of Marcus Antonius and the Queen (Fig. 7) specifically demonstrates how implementations from two different personal backgrounds create an object that has value both within Alexandrian economy and on the international political arena. It combines promises of a secured legitimized future, the impeccable provenience of both parties claiming power, and assimilates them wisely within iconographic traditions so echoing of each other that they become a single composed narrative. The silver drachm is Cleopatra's voice combined with the voice of her Roman consort and expanded across one of the greatest hubs of globalized culture in the Ancient world.

It is, of course, possible to trace a separative line around the corpus of images that we attribute to Cleopatra. It is even possible to group her portraits into types for a facilitated maneuvering among images that pertain directly to the Queen's discourse and those that do not. But while the study of individual cases might benefit from such attempts at specific classification, the whole context crucial to the understanding of Cleopatra's multiple identities coexisting within her portraits will be inevitably lost. I believe that to approach her imagery correctly is to consider all the complexity of visual narratives directed at specific target groups of audience, as well as the globalized framework that dictated its regulations on how images should be constructed and viewed. The goal of this paper, in effect, was to regard code-switching as an essential tool in deciphering the carefully crafted multilayered persona that Cleopatra VII Ptolemy, her allies, and her enemies, have made a statement of across the whole Mediterranean.

## 6. List of Images



Figure 1. Cleopatra VII and Caesarion, eastern side of the rear wall of the Dendera temple.

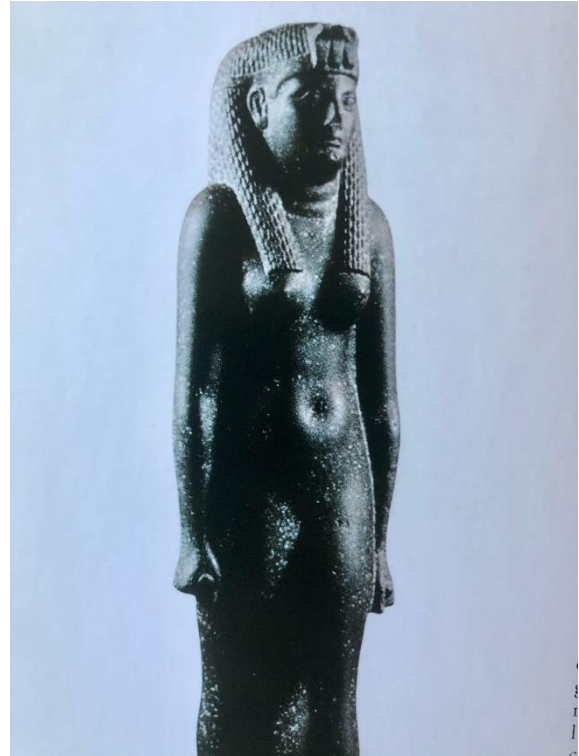


Figure 2. Basalt statue of Cleopatra VII, c. 51-30 BC. Height 105 cm, provenance unknown.



Figure 3. Marble portrait of Cleopatra VII, c. 50-30 BC, height 27 cm, now in Berlin.

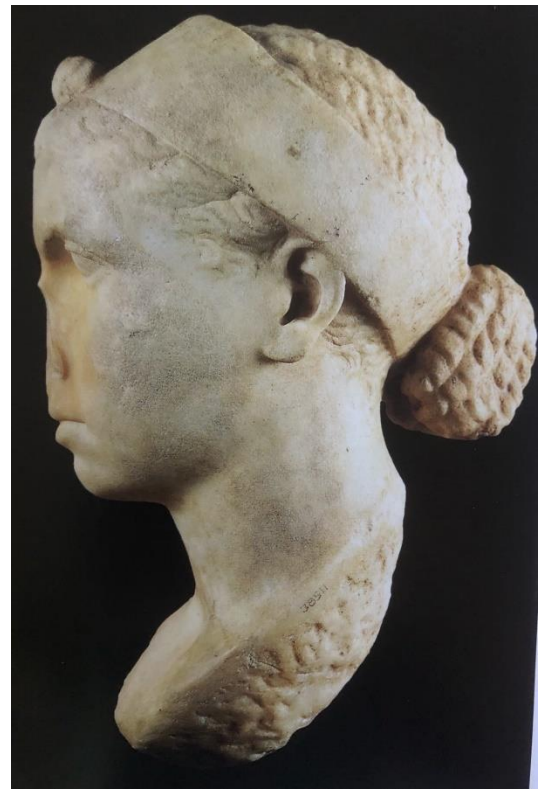


Figure 4. Marble portrait of Cleopatra VII, c. 50-30 BC, height 39 cm, now in the Vatican Museums.



Silver tetradrachm depicting Cleopatra, 47/46 BC, London, British Museum.

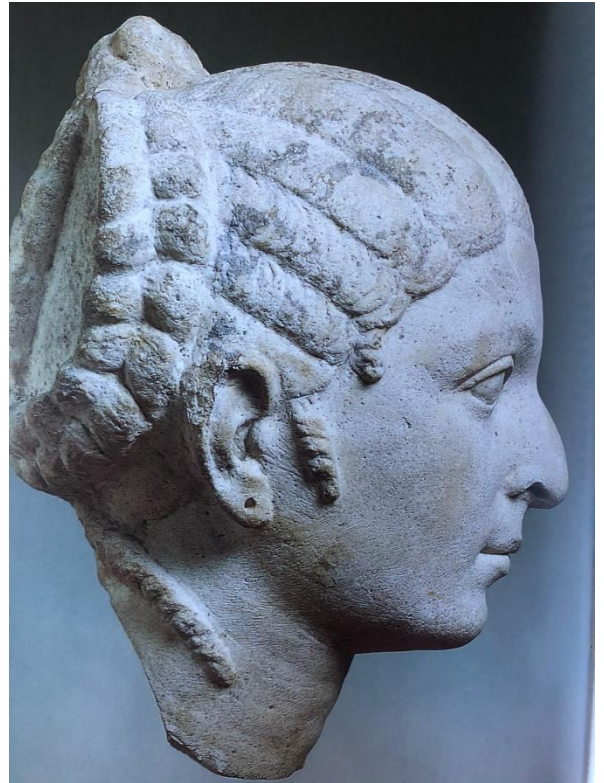


Figure 6. Head of a woman resembling Cleopatra VII, c. 50-40 BC, height 28 cm, London, British Museum.



Figure 7. Silver tetradrachms of Ascalon, 50/49 and 39/38 BC, London, British Museum.





Fig. 8. Venus and Cupid from the House of Marcus Fabius Rufus at Pompeii, most likely a depiction of Cleopatra VII. Eastern wall, Room 71. 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

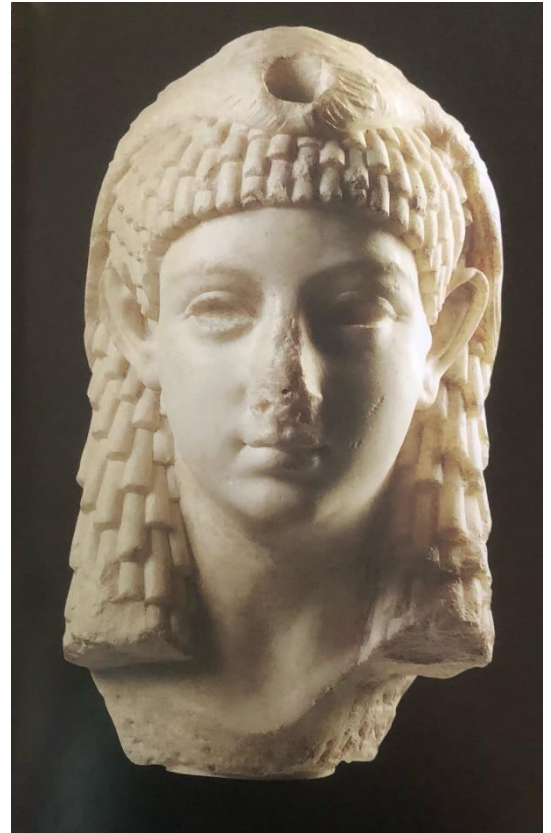


Fig. 9. Marble Head of a Ptolemaic Queen with a vulture Headdress. First century BC, height 39 cm, Rome, Museo Montemartini.

All images are from Walker and Higgs 2001 except Fig 8 which is from Walker 2008

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