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Department of Humanities

Bachelor of Arts in Classical Studies
Minor in History

The Reception of Egyptian Culture in Early Imperial Rome

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Abstract

Historically, the Romans tended to integrate rather than suppress the cultures of the peoples they vanquished. Between the end of the Republic and the early stage of the Empire, however, the city of Rome broke with their traditional tolerance, just as it was annexing Egypt. At this moment, in fact, a negative view about the Egyptians spread among the Roman authorities. The result was that, in Rome, a series of decrees were issued to counter the spread of the Egyptian culture. This reaction was in full contrast to the Roman cities of Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, which did regard positively and integrate Egyptian culture. The reason for this difference was the Roman need to re-embrace traditional Roman values at a time when the city was experiencing political and social clashes. The result was that Roman authorities enforced a negative and hostile view towards Egyptian culture, which was considered contrary to Roman values. This thesis explores and compares the different reception of Egyptian culture in the cities of Rome, Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, and seeks to find reasons for those differences.

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1. Introduction

The Roman appreciation for Egyptian culture is evident from the multiplicity of Egyptian elements that can be found in ancient Roman art, architecture, literature, and music. The intensive and expansive trade and intercultural communication between the ancient Romans and Egyptians played an important role in the spreading of Egyptian culture in the Roman territories. Towards the middle of the second century BCE, Italian merchants from the Greek island of Delos brought Egyptian cults to Pozzuoli (in the South of Italy, near Naples), from where they spread to the nearby city of Pompeii and the Northern Italian city of Aquileia. Because the Roman Senate never issued decrees to limit the practice of the Egyptian religion in Roman cities, followers of Egyptian cults were free to practice their faith and allowed to form sects and congregations. By the beginning of the first century BCE, Egyptian culture was making inroads into Rome, and some followers of Egyptian cults were erecting private shrines. But not all Romans welcomed the influx of Egyptian beliefs and lifestyles. Gradually, negative views about the Egyptians spread among the Roman authorities who, from 70 BCE to 20 BCE, constantly issued decrees to suppress the practice of Egyptian religion in the city of Rome. As this was happening in Rome, the Roman cities of Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, continued viewing Egyptian culture positively, and no measures were taken against it.

While many scholars have discussed the way that the Romans had both negative and positive attitudes towards Egyptian culture, not much emphasis has been put on the striking differences between the city of Rome, which was overtly hostile to Egyptian culture, and other Roman cities, which were generally more open to and welcoming.

In her article “Mutual Cultural Exchange: Egyptian Artefacts in the Roman Landscape,” Sanda Heinz analyzes the Roman cities of Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, reporting that each of them had a center dedicated to the worship of Egyptian deities.¹ The author also states that, outside the cult context, archaeologists have discovered small and affordable Egyptian objects, meaning that they may have been owned both by the elite and ordinary people. She argues that these small Egyptian objects were found mainly in private contexts, such as houses and shops, suggesting that they became part of the daily lives of people. Heinz notices that the capital city of Rome displayed only monumental Egyptian objects, which she hypothesizes was due to the great amount of wealthy people. She also believes that wealthy Romans in the capital commissioned Egyptian structures to show off their prestige and power (because Egypt was now a Roman colony) and concludes that Rome may represent a distorted version of the true Roman treatment of Egyptian culture. The article shows that Egyptian culture made inroads into the private lives of people and was not limited to a religious context. Heinz’s explanation of the way that Egyptian culture was received in different cities of the Empire points to what seems to be yet a further distinction between the two.

In her article “Egyptian objects, Roman contexts: A Taste for Aegyptiaca in Italy,” Molly Swetnam-Burland analyzes the types of Egyptian objects found on the Italian peninsula.² She affirms that Roman artists started replicating Egyptian objects, but oftentimes replicas were not accurate. Nonetheless, they were still considered to be Egyptian by the Romans. Swetnam-Burland reports that small Egyptian objects were popular among ordinary people. She maintains

¹ Sanda Heinz, “Mutual Exchange: Egyptian Artefacts in Roman Landscape,” *Bolletino di Archeologia on line* 1 (2010): 24-33.

² Molly Swetnam-Burland, “Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts: A taste for Aegyptiaca in Italy,” in *Nile into Tiber: Egypt in the Roman World: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Isis Studies, Leiden, May 11-14 2005*, edited by Laurent Bricault, Miguel John Versluys, and Paul G.P. Meyboom, (Leiden: Brill, 2007), <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=232435&site=ehost-live>.

that it is difficult to understand the real use of Egyptian objects outside of the cult context. These objects depicted important religious symbols, such as the beetle, but did not have any specific connection to the worship of a particular god: they could have been used for religious purposes or they might have been brought by some wealthy Romans as souvenirs. Alternatively, they may have been used as a way to celebrate Rome's supremacy over Egypt or for protection against evil spirits. This article demonstrates again that small and affordable Egyptian objects were widespread in Roman provinces and suggests some possible uses of those objects.

While Heinz and Swetnam-Burland focus their analysis on the objects found in Roman territories, Diana Kleiner focuses on the city of Rome.³ Kleiner argues that after Augustus brought two Egyptian obelisks to Rome in 10 BCE, wealthy Roman citizens were caught by a sort of mania for Egyptian style monuments, which scholars would later call Egyptomania. As Kleiner argues, wealthy families competed against each other by showing off their wealth with majestic and monumental artifacts. Moreover, since Egyptian art was so fashionable, many Egyptian-style monuments were erected in Rome: for example, the Roman magistrate Gaius Celsus, who did not believe in the Egyptian religion, erected his tomb in the shape of a pyramid to show off his family's wealth. Kleiner goes on to say that emperor Augustus was not a fan of Eastern cults, yet parts of his private house show paintings recalling Egyptian motifs. She believes that these paintings were probably made to represent his victory over Cleopatra and Egypt as the symbols of Egyptian culture were now an important part of his conquest. This article also suggests that Rome was at least welcoming of Egyptian monumental art. We already see a notable contrast between what used to occur in the city of Rome, where Egyptian culture made its way into everyday life merely as proof of one's social status, and other Roman

³ Diana Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), 2005.

provinces, where Egyptian culture was present even in its most modest forms, becoming an intimate part of people's lives.

In her article "Egyptomania in Antiquity and in Modern World Literature," Renata Tatomir focuses on the city of Rome and the prominently negative views about Egypt and Egyptian culture in the capital.⁴ She argues that the Romans were "Egyptomaniacs," as they started importing Egyptian objects and artefacts to Rome as soon as they conquered Egypt. The wealthy elite was so obsessed with Egypt that they started commissioning Egyptian-style works; however, the author notices that this enthusiasm was exclusive Egyptian monumental art, and, by the last century BCE, Romans developed very negative views of Egyptian culture. Tatomir further demonstrates that the Senate was strongly against Egyptian culture, and constantly issued decrees against its proliferation in Rome. Tatomir reports that the Senate did not fear the Egyptian gods as such, but rather the followers of cults who might have caused turmoil. What is particularly interesting, though, is that the Senate did not repress Egyptian culture in Roman provinces, so people outside of Rome were free to worship Egyptian gods, which, according to the author, suggests that the Senate only feared the Egyptian religion when it was close to Rome. She continues by saying that negative views about the Egyptians spread around the capital, and that Roman authors stressed negative clichés in their works. Overall, this article shows the contrasting views about Egyptian culture at the end of the first century BCE, identifying the Senate as the possible cause of Rome's hostility against Egyptian culture.

⁴ Renata Tatomir, "Egyptomania in Antiquity and in Modern World Literature. Imaginary, Intercultural Context and Mentality," in *Discourse As A Form Of Multiculturalism In Literature And Communication*, edited by Iulian Boldea, (Tîrgu Mureş: Arhipelag XXI Press, 2015).

In the article “I santuari isiaci di età repubblicana a Roma,” Vito Mazzuca focuses on Egyptian influences on the city of Rome.⁵ His arguments are similar to those made in the previous article, but it adds some more details regarding the Senate position on Egyptian culture. Mazzuca argues that Egyptian culture was already present in Rome by the beginning of the first century BCE. This theory is supported by the remains of two private shrines dedicated to the goddess Isis found by archeologists: the first located on the Capitoline Hill, and the second, called Isis *Metellinum*, near the current Via Labicana. Mazzuca explains that around 70 BCE, a group of plebeians, called *populares*, decided to adopt Egyptian gods as an act of rebellion against the *nobilitas* (the nobles), who had total political and religious control of Rome. However, the nobles were supported by the Senate, which was almost exclusively composed by nobles, and, from 70 BCE on, the Senate constantly issued decrees to repress the worship of Egyptian culture in Rome. However, Mazzuca notices that the Senate only took minor action and did not eradicate Egyptian gods from the city entirely, probably due to their great popularity. The Senate only decided to ban the Egyptian gods from the *pomerium*, the sacred boundary of the city. As shown in the article, Roman authority became increasingly harsher towards Egyptian culture. In addition, the article gives us another reason why the Senate was so suspicious of Egyptian culture, namely the fear that the plebeians could escape the traditional religious control by embracing a new cult.

In “Octavian and Egyptian Cults,” Eric Orlin focuses on Rome and Octavian (later known as emperor Augustus), giving us new ideas about why Egyptian culture encountered some

⁵ Vito Mazzuca, “I santuari isiaci di età repubblicana a Roma, l’Iseo Capitolino, l’Iseo Metellino e l’Iseo della *Regio III*: rilettura delle fonti scritte e archeologiche. Nuove riflessioni,” *Bollettino della Commissione Archeologica Comunale di Roma* 115 (2014), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26311221>.

hostility in the capital.⁶ He argues that Augustus was not against Egyptian gods as such, but rather he wanted to revive traditional Roman values. Orlin notices that Augustus led a strong propaganda campaign against Egypt before and during the war against Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, a move that unexpectedly worsened the Romans' opinions of Egyptians and their culture. However, Orlin believes that Augustus did so to promote and revive Roman identity: the capital had just faced fifty years of civil war, and the values of the Republic were eroded by internal conflict. Augustus thus wanted to present himself as the defender of Italy and the Roman way of life, as proven by his ban on Egyptian gods from the *pomerium* in 28 BCE, an attempt to reinforce Roman identity. On the other hand, Orlin also claims that Augustus was not against Egyptian cults because he renovated the private Egyptian shrines outside the *pomerium*, and he began restoring all the foreign cultures and gods in the Italian peninsula. Orlin believes that, by doing so, the emperor's intent was to clearly distinguish the Roman gods from foreign deities, though conveying that the latter would be welcomed to the Empire. This article suggests that Augustus and his political stances were one of the reasons why especially the city of Rome was hostile to Egyptian culture.

The above-mentioned articles show that, outside of Rome, Egyptian culture was widespread, welcomed and enjoyed, while in the city of Rome, instead, the Senate and, later, Augustus were against Egyptian culture, fostering a negative view of it. However, the above-mentioned articles do not always distinguish nor explain the different ways Egyptian culture was received in Rome compared to other Roman cities, such as Delos, Pompeii and Aquileia, between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire.

⁶ Eric M. Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults: Redrawing the Boundaries of Romanness," *The American Journal of Philology* 129, no. 2 (2008), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2756670>.

The thesis will address exactly this issue, highlighting the ways that the historical and archaeological evidence demonstrate that citizens of smaller Roman cities were not just tolerant of Egyptian culture but celebrated it, while these same sources show that the city of Rome pushed for very different policies. In the period between the end of the Republic and the establishment of Augustus's Empire, Rome maintained a generally negative attitude towards Egypt for three main reasons: the hostility of the Senate towards the Plebeians' interest for Egyptian religious practices, regarded as cultish and threatening to the order; Augustus's military campaign in Egypt and the anti-Egyptian propaganda that followed; the post-Civil War need to reconstruct an exclusively Roman identity unadulterated by foreign influences.

The first chapter of this thesis will give an historical background of the relationships between Rome and Egypt, which shows that the influence of Egypt in Roman affairs concretized during the end of the Republic, setting an unfavorable environment for the reception of Egyptian culture in Rome.

The second chapter will analyze, from an historical and archeological perspective, the Roman cities of Delos, Aquileia and Pompeii, selected because they were very different from one another. However, they all accepted and absorbed Egyptian culture in the same peaceful and respectful way, as the large quantity of small Egyptian artifacts that were found in both religious and private contexts shows. The analysis of these objects proves that Egyptian culture became a positive part of the inhabitants' lives; at the same time, historical evidence shows that the Roman Senate never tried to repress nor limit this positive integration of Egyptian culture in Roman cities.

The third chapter will explain how Rome's approach to this same culture was widely different compared to other cities of the Empire, which will be examined from a literary,

historical, archeological, and artistic point of view. The literary works from some Roman authors report that Rome was very prejudiced against Egyptian culture, while historical sources record the decrees that were issued by the Roman Senate to repress Egyptian culture and its followers in Rome. In addition, the approach of the Senate toward Egyptian culture will be compared to how other Eastern gods were treated in legislation, showing that Roman authorities wanted to eradicate Egyptian culture in Rome. The artistic and archeological evidence shows that wealthy Romans accepted Egyptian monumental art merely to show off their prestige and power, not to show their respect for this culture.

The fourth chapter will offer some possible explanations on why Egyptian culture was received so differently in the city of Rome compared to other Roman cities by analyzing the political and historical relationships between Rome and Egypt and studying the writings of major Roman authors.

The chapters are divided to distinguish these two different approaches to Egyptian culture, to clarify whether it was actually accepted or rejected by the Romans between the end of the Republic and beginning of the Empire.

2. The Historical Relations between Rome and Egypt

Understanding how and when the relations between Egypt and Rome originated is a necessary preliminary to understanding how Egyptian culture was received in early imperial Roman cities. When the Romans first encountered Egypt at the beginning of the third century BCE, it was no longer a sovereign state, that is to say, the leaders with which the Romans dealt were not native Egyptians, even though they claimed some continuity with the ancient Pharaonic heritage. In fact, after the Persian king Cambyses defeated Pharaoh Psamtek III in 525 BCE, Persians intermittently ruled Egypt until Alexander the Great definitely conquered it in 332 BCE. Alexander founded Alexandria as his capital city and was declared the “pharaoh” of Egypt.⁷ Alexander, however, left Egypt the following year, and died in Babylon (in modern-day Iraq) in 323 BCE. At the time of his death, the Macedonian Empire included Greece, Macedonia, Egypt, Syria, and Persia. Alexander’s generals decided to divide his vast empire among themselves and thus gave birth to three powerful dynasties: the Seleucids in Syria and Persia, the Antigonids in Greece and Macedonia, and the Ptolemies in Egypt. These dynasties frequently fought against one another for territorial control, but shared the same Greek culture, which is why they are known as Hellenistic kingdoms.⁸

Ptolemaic Egypt

The Ptolemaic dynasty began in 305 BCE when Ptolemy I declared himself the independent ruler of Egypt. The dynasty retained the Egyptian throne for some three centuries

⁷ Mary Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 103.

⁸ J. B. Campbell, *The Romans and Their World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 31.

until the Romans deposed the last in the line of rulers, Cleopatra.⁹ When the Ptolemies settled in Egypt, many Greek immigrants arrived in Egypt with them and went on to form a privileged administrative and governing class. The Egyptians became considered to be second-class citizens in their own country, separated from the Greek elite. However, the first generations of Ptolemies, being efficient administrators, wanted to keep the Egyptian people satisfied to prevent revolts, and therefore extended privileges to the Egyptian priests, members of the ousted ruling class. These now became intermediators between the Greek elite and the Egyptian people. In this way, the Ptolemies were able to learn about the people and land they ruled.¹⁰ They understood that to be seen as legitimate and to be accepted by the people, they had to adopt the role and habits of the pharaohs, which also means they wanted to be depicted in conventional Egyptian ways. They also embraced the Egyptian custom of royal incest to maintain the purity of the royal dynasty.¹¹ The Ptolemies supported the traditional Egyptian religious institutions and customs, such as burying sacred animals. Conversely, they also encouraged the Greek elite to integrate Egyptian culture into their lives. Greek and Egyptian culture were not inimical to one another, but, on the contrary, interpreted and engaged with the other. Egyptian culture retained strong bonds of continuity with its ancient traditions, but also interacted with the Greek culture. The union of the two cultures led to the art and culture that displayed a blend of Greek and Egyptian characteristics, and thus formed something new.¹² The exchange of cultural and artistic ideas, and the mixing of Egyptian and Greek styles in the arts became quite common. Unlike previous

⁹ Alan B. Lloyd, "Nationalist Propaganda in Ptolemaic Egypt," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 31 (1982): 36, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4435787>.

¹⁰ H. Idris Bell, "Hellenic Culture in Egypt," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 8, no. 3/4 (1922): 143, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3853691>.

¹¹ Sheila L. Ager, "The Power of Excess: Royal Incest and the Ptolemaic Dynasty," *Anthropologica* 48, no. 2 (2006): 166, <https://doi.org/10.2307/25605309>.

¹² Marsha Hill, "Egypt in the Ptolemaic Period," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2016), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/ptol/hd_ptol.htm.

foreign rulers, the Ptolemies pursued a policy of cultural mixing as well as cultural appropriation.¹³

The god Serapis is one of the most notable results of the union of Egyptian and Greek religious and cultural elements. The god Serapis was created by Ptolemy to enforce his power and to create a god who brought together the very different religious beliefs of the Egyptians and Greeks.¹⁴ The name of the god derives from Apis, the bull of Memphis, that became associated in the afterlife with the god Osiris, and thus became known as called Osiris-Apis, which was Hellenized to “Serapis.”¹⁵ The Graeco-Egyptian name meant that the Egyptians would still recognize the god as having an original Egyptian name.¹⁶ The ancient Egyptian Apis/Osiris-Apis was worshipped in Egypt, particularly in Memphis, from the 7th century BCE. On the other hand, the appearance of the god as well as his attributes were Greek. For example, he bears certain similarities to the Greek god Zeus or Hades. He is normally depicted as a seated man with a beard, wearing a *kalathos* on his head, which is a Greek symbol of fertility.¹⁷ Serapis sometimes wears the traditional Egyptian *atef* crown, the crown of Osiris, instead of a *kalathos*.¹⁸ With his right hand, he is normally clasping the three-headed dog Cerberus, which, according to Greek mythology, was the guardian of the gate of the underworld, while his left is holding a scepter, which recalls the scepter of the Greek god of medicine Asclepius. With his Egyptian

¹³ Jaromir Malek, *Egyptian Art* (New York: Phaidon, 2002), 381-383.

¹⁴ His son, Ptolemy II, made even fuller and more effective use of the new god for political ends than his father had done. In fact, recognizing the popularity of the cult of Serapis, especially among the Greeks, Ptolemy II saw his chance to be elevated as a living ruler by strengthening the identification between himself and the god. J. G. Manning, *The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC*, (Princeton University Press, 2010), 45, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7tckm.8>; S. Pfeiffer, “The God Serapis, his Cult and the Beginnings of the Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Egypt,” in *Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World*, edited by P. McKechnie and Ph. Guillaume, 398, (Leiden, 2008).

¹⁵ Timothy Howe, *Ptolemy I Soter: A Self-Made Man* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2018), 97, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110223934>.

¹⁶ Pfeiffer, “The God Serapis, his Cult,” 390.

¹⁷ Rivka Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009), 233-236.

¹⁸ Lauren Murphy, “Beware Greeks Bearing Gods: Serapis as a Cross-cultural Deity,” *Amphora Journal*, no. 2, (2021): 39, <https://doi.org/10.26181/60763e74b9b81>.

name and Greek appearance, the god also enjoyed a mix of powers.¹⁹ Serapis was a father-god, connected with Zeus, as well as a god of the underworld, connected with Hades.²⁰ Not only, he was also connected also with god of the sun, Helios, with the Greek god of medicine Asclepius (who could heal the sick by having them sleep overnight in one of his sanctuaries), and with the fertility god Dionysus.²¹ Above all, he was especially considered a god of salvation in the afterlife, much like Apis. In fact, the bull Apis symbolized the entire life cycle and more besides: from birth to death and resurrection; from Apis to Osiris-Apis.²² The god embodied both Egyptian and Greek culture so well that the Greeks, and, later, the Romans, believed that he was fully Egyptian and the Egyptians that he was fully Greek.²³ Even after the Ptolemy dynasty came to an end in 30 BCE, Serapis was worshipped in the Roman Empire by the Egyptians as well as by other peoples. Later, in the Roman Empire, Serapis became one of the most popular Egyptian gods who did not disappear until Christianity became the religion of the Roman Empire.²⁴ In short, under the Ptolemaic dynasty, there was a fusion between the ancient Egyptian culture and the new imported Greek culture, which led to the creation of new elements, motifs, and deities.

¹⁹ The amalgam of Greek and Egyptian elements was also present in the foundation myth of Serapis as told both by Plutarch, a Greek, and by Tacitus, a Roman. Tacitus tells us that Serapis appeared to Ptolemy I in a dream. The god, unrecognized by Ptolemy, charges the king with the task of bringing his statue from Sinope on the Black Sea, where the god was worshipped under the name of Pluto, to Alexandria. The god promises Ptolemy that in reward for carrying out the task, his kingdom will enjoy many benefits and the city of Alexandria would become great and famous. Ptolemy describes his dream-vision to Egyptian priests. Later, he is informed by the Egyptian priest Manetho and an Athenian priest named Timotheus, a member of the Eumolpidae sect, which performed the Eleusinian Mysteries (rituals for the cult of Demeter and Persephone) that the unknown god is Serapis. Ptolemy brings the statue to Alexandria, where he founds a new cult and builds sites of worship. Through this myth, Ptolemy I probably wanted to create a foundation story which united the Greek and Egyptian religious traditions. Cornelius Tacitus, "Histories IV-V," *Histories*, edited by M. Hutton and R.M. Ogilvie, v. 3, 163-167, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914).

²⁰ Pfeiffer, 392.

²¹ C. A. Meier, *Ancient Incubation and Modern Psychotherapy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1967), 46.

²² Ulmer, *Egyptian Cultural Icons in Midrash*, 233-234.

²³ Murphy, "Beware Greeks Bearing Gods: Serapis as a Cross-cultural Deity," 33.

²⁴ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 102.

So the Egyptian culture that was welcomed in Roman territories was in fact a Hellenized version of Egyptian culture.

Early Roman Republic and Ptolemaic Egypt

The Romans first came into contact with Ptolemaic Egypt in 273 BCE when they entered a treaty of friendship with Ptolemy II, their first with a Hellenistic kingdom. In the third century BCE, official relations between Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt remained friendly. Rome and Egypt did not fight any wars against each other, in which respect Egypt's rulers differed from their Hellenistic cousins.²⁵ The other Hellenistic kingdoms, the Seleucids and the Antigonids, had expansionistic aims, while the Ptolemaic kingdom, after the first strong Ptolemaic rulers, suffered from internecine conflict, so they did not have the power to expand. In fact, while Rome was fighting against the Carthaginians, Philip V, king of Macedon (who belonged to the Antigonid dynasty, rulers of Macedonia and Greece) made an alliance with the commander of the Carthaginians, Hannibal, because he saw Rome as a potential rival in the eastern Mediterranean. Philip further entered into a pact with the Seleucid king, Antiochus III, to fight the Ptolemaic kingdom. So Rome, after defeating Carthage in 202 BCE, attacked Philip V, and defeated him at the battle of Cynoscephalae in 197 BCE. Later, Rome defeated the last ruler of the Antigonids dynasty, the son and successor of Philipp V, Perseus, in 168 BCE at Pydna. So not only did Rome have good relations with Ptolemaic Egypt, it also defeated one of its major enemies.

From the second century BCE, Egypt, though an independent kingdom, was under the protection of Rome. In the early 180s BCE, the Seleucid dynasty was pursuing its ambitions to

²⁵ Boatwright, 105.

conquer Egypt. In 167 BCE, Antiochus IV, ruler of the Hellenistic kingdom of Syria and Persia, attacked Egypt and besieged Alexandria. So, the following year, Rome sent envoys to Egypt and ordered Antiochus to withdraw his troops or suffer attack by Rome. The king agreed to withdraw his troops.²⁶

From the Roman intervention in 168 BCE, Rome began to intervene directly in the internal politics of Egypt. In fact, several royal claimants to the Ptolemaic throne went to Rome asking for support.²⁷ One of the most famous cases was when Rome helped Ptolemy VIII, who was fighting his older brother for the kingship of Egypt. The Roman intervened in the dispute between the brothers and divided the kingdom, so that Ptolemy VIII got to rule Cyrenaica (today's Eastern Libya). In 155 BCE, Ptolemy VIII even wrote in his will that, if he had not had any heirs to the throne, he would have left his part of the Egyptian kingdom to the Romans.²⁸ So Rome and Egypt, which had always had regular and friendly political relations, increased their cultural interactions in the second century BCE. These earlier relations had already brought Hellenized Egyptian religions, such as the cults of Serapis and Isis (the Egyptian goddess of fertility and motherhood), to Roman territories in the second century BCE.²⁹

Roman Late Republic and Ptolemaic Egypt

The relations between Egypt and Rome began to escalate during the end of the Roman Republic. After 100 years of diplomatic support to several Ptolemaic rulers, the Romans engaged militarily with Egypt in 55 BCE to help Ptolemy XII Auletes, father of Cleopatra, in his

²⁶ Campbell, *The Romans and Their World*, 33-37.

²⁷ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 105.

²⁸ Campbell, *The Romans and Their World*, 38.

²⁹ Susan Sorek, *The Emperors' Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome*, (Liverpool University Press, 2010), 37-44.

successful struggle for power.³⁰ In fact, Julius Caesar and Gabinius, the Roman proconsul of Syria, lent three legions to Ptolemy XII by way of compensation. Thanks to the military support of Rome, Ptolemy XII prevailed and, after his death in 51BCE, his daughter Cleopatra VII inherited the throne. Following the ancient Egyptian custom, Cleopatra had to marry her brother Ptolemy XIII.³¹ However, when she discovered that her brother was planning to kill her, she fled to Syria, where she organized an army in order to return in Egypt and reclaim the throne.³²

At the same time, Julius Caesar was at war with Pompey the Great for control of Rome and defeated him at Pharsalus in 48BCE. Pompey thought that he would find asylum in Alexandria of Egypt in return for his earlier support to Ptolemy Auletes. However, Auletes' son, Ptolemy XIII, decided to arrest and decapitate Pompey as he thought that killing Pompey would please Caesar. When Caesar came to Egypt, however, he was horrified by Ptolemy's murder of Pompey. Pompey, was, in fact, Caesar's boyhood friend, son-in-law and, above all, a Roman citizen. Caesar executed Pothius, Ptolemy's advisor who first suggested killing Pompey.³³

Furthermore, Caesar learned that Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII were fighting for the throne of Egypt, so he set up a meeting and ordered them appear before him. However, Ptolemy's was still in control of Alexandria and ordered his troops to kill Cleopatra on sight. To avoid being caught, it seems that Cleopatra was delivered to Caesar's palace inside a rolled rug. When the rug was unrolled, she fell out. Cleopatra, with her spirt, charisma, and sensuality, fascinated Caesar. When Ptolemy arrived at Caesar's palace, he found that Cleopatra had already convinced

³⁰ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 105

³¹ Duane W. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 52-54.

³² Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography*, 59.

³³ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 106.

Caesar to give her the throne. Ptolemy was outraged, and launched an unsuccessful attack on the Romans on Pharos Island, where he drowned.³⁴

Once again, Cleopatra had to marry her young brother Ptolemy XIV to keep the throne. Nonetheless, she remained Caesar's mistress and gave him a son, Ptolemy XV Caesarion. Later, Cleopatra moved in one of Caesar's palaces in Rome, where she lived for several years. At the same time, the Roman Senate feared that Caesarion, an illegitimate yet royal son of Caesar, would lay claim to Rome. In the meantime, Caesar rehabilitated Brutus, who had served as the general of Pompey in Egypt. However, Caesar did not know that Brutus secretly opposed his rule. On 15th March 44 BCE, Brutus, together with a group of Roman senators, murdered Caesar.³⁵ Cleopatra fled to Egypt, fearing that Brutus and the senators would come for her. The plan of Cleopatra to restore the glory of the Ptolemaic dynasty with the support of Caesar failed.

The influence of Egypt in Roman affairs concretized especially during the last civil war of the Republic, and the Roman public opinion grew actively hostile toward Egypt and Egyptians.³⁶ After the assassination of Caesar, Mark Antony, Octavian (the adopted son of Caesar), and Lepidus formed the Second Triumvirate in 43 BCE, in which they defeated all the conspirators of Caesar. Later, Lepidus supported the army of Sextus Pompeius, son of Pompey the Great, in a battle against Octavian. In 36 BCE, Octavian prevailed, and Lepidus was removed

³⁴ Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography*, 60-64. During the attack to Ptolemy XIII, Caesar accidentally burned the Great Library of Alexandria. Some authors said that hundreds of thousands books were destroyed, while other said the entire collection. The Library of Alexandria was the most famous library of Classical antiquity and formed part of the research institute of Alexandria (also known as the Mouseion). We cannot know how many books were kept in the library, but estimates have been made of 500,000. Ancient stories declare that, after the burning of the library, Mark Antony gave Cleopatra 200,000 books for it, but this claim was doubted even in antiquity, and it is probably apocryphal. The idea of a universal library like that of Alexandria arose only after the Greek mind began to imagine and embrace a broader worldview. Roller, *Cleopatra: A Biography*, 63.

³⁵ Mary Boatwright, Daniel J. Gargola, and Richard J. A. Talbert, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 265.

³⁶ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 115.

from power.³⁷ The contest to control the entire Roman Empire was now between Octavian and Mark Antony. They decided that the best way to work together was to informally split the administration of the Roman territories. Octavian took charge of Western territories and Mark Antony of the eastern ones. Mark Antony, however, remained in the east and never came back to Rome because he became the consort of Cleopatra. Mark Antony and Cleopatra married and had three children, named Cleopatra Selene, Alexander Helios, and Ptolemy Philadelphus. This union offended both the Roman Senate and Octavian, who completely disagreed Anthony's action also considering that his sister Octavia was Mark Antony's wife. Octavian therefore fuelled negative public opinion against him. The Romans started regarding Antony as a man corrupted by an exotic woman and seeing him as a traitor. In 33 BCE, the Senate issued a declaration of war against Cleopatra, not Mark Antony.³⁸

The decisive naval battle occurred at Actium, a small promontory on the western coast of Greece, on September 2, 31 BCE. Octavian with his best friend and advisor, the general Agrippa, defeated Mark Antony, Cleopatra and, therefore, all Egypt. In 30 BCE, Cleopatra and Anthony, pursued by the Romans, retreated to Egypt. In Alexandria, Mark Anthony realized defeat was imminent and decided to take his own life. Nine days later, Cleopatra did the same by allowing a poisonous snake to bite her.³⁹ With the death of Cleopatra and the murder of Caesar and Cleopatra's son Ptolemy XV Caesarion, probably by order of Octavian, the Ptolemaic dynasty came to an end. Egypt was thus left without a ruler and vulnerable to Roman takeover.⁴⁰

Octavian formally brought Egypt under Roman rule in 30 BCE, and the children of Cleopatra

³⁷ Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 271-272.

³⁸ Steven Tuck, *A History of Roman Art* (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 114.

³⁹ Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 288. It is fair to say that this may have been a tale invented by the Romans for propaganda purposes.

⁴⁰ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 114.

and Mark Anthony were brought to Rome as booty of war. In 27 BCE, Octavian became the first emperor of Rome and took a new name *Augustus*, and Egypt became a province of the new-born Roman Empire.⁴¹

⁴¹ Boatwright, *The Romans: From Village to Empire*, 291.

3. Reception of Egyptian Culture in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia

At the beginning of the third century BCE, Egyptian cults arrived in the Greek city of Delos, on the homonymous island, which had prospered before the Roman imperial period thanks to its trade ties in the Mediterranean. Delos was culturally influenced by its relative proximity to Egypt, and became the most important Egyptian religious center outside Egypt itself.⁴² Thanks to its commercial importance in the second century BCE, Delos was frequently visited by Roman merchants who brought Egyptian cults to the Roman port of Pozzuoli, located near Naples, from where Egyptian culture began spreading to the nearby city of Pompeii and the Northern Italian city of Aquileia. Egyptian cults in Pompeii and Aquileia immediately gained many followers, who were free to practice their faith as Roman authorities never issued decrees to repress or limit the Egyptian religion.⁴³ The total integration of Egyptian culture in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, is further attested by the presence of many small Egyptian artifacts, suggesting that Egyptian culture was both tolerated and widespread.

As noted above, the Roman cities covered in this chapter are: Delos, located on the homonymous island, which was the first city to come under Egyptian cultural influence; Pompeii, which was the first city on the Italian peninsula to do so; and Aquileia, which was one of the first cities in the north-east of Italy to come under the influence of Egyptian culture. These three cities have been selected because, despite being very different, they all accepted and absorbed Egyptian culture in the same peaceful way: as a matter of fact, Delos, Pompeii and Aquileia were relatively far from each other, and they had been influenced by different cultures

⁴² Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28-29.

⁴³ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 575-576.

before becoming Roman, which occurred in different periods and under different circumstances. The acceptance of Egyptian culture in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia would be demonstrated through the analysis of some of the many Egyptian objects found both in public and private contexts in those cities, suggesting that the inhabitants remained not only tolerant but even celebratory of Egyptian culture.

Delos

The city of Delos is located on the homonymous island in the Aegean Sea at the center of the Cyclades. Delos was first inhabited by pre-Greek peoples in the third millennium BCE. By 1000 BCE, Greeks from the mainland occupied the island.⁴⁴ Between 700 and 550 BCE, Delos apparently belonged to the island of Naxos, and, after this period, it formally went under the control of Athens.⁴⁵ Therefore, Greek culture was present in Delos since 1000 BCE. Subsequently, the conquests of Alexander the Great caused a shift in trade routes from Greece to Asia so that Delos, situated in an excellent location in the Aegean Sea, became an important commercial center, second only to Rhodes. The change of status enabled Delos to declare its freedom from Athenian control in 315 BCE.⁴⁶ This independence lasted 150 years, during which Delos reached its height of prosperity until the Romans put it back under Athenian control in 167 BCE.⁴⁷ In 146 BCE, following the Roman conquest, Delos was formally incorporated into the

⁴⁴ Julian Worker, *Travels Through History: Nine Greek Islands*, (Luton, UK: Andrews, 2018), 37, <https://search-ebscohost-com.jcu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1839247&site=ehost-live>.

⁴⁵ Liena Kukoba, "Ionian Factor and Delos (IX-IV Centuries BC)," *Scientific Journal of Polonia University* 45, no. 2 (2021): 87-88, <https://doi.org/10.23856/4509>.

⁴⁶ Eleanor G. Huzar, "Roman-Egyptian Relations in Delos," *The Classical Journal* 57, no. 4 (1962): 169, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3293859>

⁴⁷ Delos remained a prosperous city under the administration of Athens, which sent its authorities to settle on the island. The chief magistrate on Delos was called *epimeletes*, which means governor, and was chosen annually from the wealthy Athenian families. Harriet I. Flower, *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden: Religion at the Roman Street Corner*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 175, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1vwmh7f.24>.

new Roman province of Achaëa (corresponding to the south of modern-day Greece, including the islands).⁴⁸

Delos and Egyptian Culture

Delos's adoption of Egyptian culture really began when the island joined a League of the Islands, established in 308 BCE by Ptolemy I, ruler of Egypt. His successor, Ptolemy II (the most powerful and prosperous Pharaoh of the new dynasty) viewed Delos as an important political and economic base that complemented and enhanced the economic life and wealth of the capital, Alexandria. So, in order to win over the island, he acted as its protector. The city of Delos thus hosted annual Egyptian religious festivals to honor the generosity of the Ptolemies. Egypt and Delos thus began to forge long-lasting relations, and Egyptian culture made inroads into Delian society. In fact, Egyptians soon began to settle in Delos, which became the most important center of Egyptian worship outside Egypt.⁴⁹

Delos was originally Greek in culture and its major temple was dedicated to the god Apollo, but Egyptian culture gradually penetrated the city until its identity, at least from a theological perspective, was quite changed.⁵⁰ From 220 BCE on, many people in Delos honored Isis, Serapis, Anubis, and Harpocrates. By 179 BCE, the worship of Egyptian gods had grown so much that the temple dedicated to the Greek-Egyptian god Serapis (the "Serapeum") was just as important as the ancient temple of Apollo. By 167 BCE, Delos boasted various Egyptian temples: three were dedicated to Serapis, and several more to Isis. In fact, the oldest Egyptian

⁴⁸ R. C. Jebb, "Delos," *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 1 (1880): 32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/623613>.

⁴⁹ Eleanor G. Huzar, "Roman-Egyptian Relations in Delos," *The Classical Journal* 57, no. 4 (1962): 169-170. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3293859>

⁵⁰ According to the Homeric Hymn to Apollo, Delos was the birthplace of Apollo, so the island became sacred to him. The temple dedicated to Apollo in Delos became the second most important temple for the worship of Apollo after the temple of Delphi. Mark Morford, et al., *Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 247.

religious inscription in Delos, dating back to the early third century BCE, is dedicated to Isis. The Egyptians thus became so influential in Delos that eventually even their forms of worship were officially recognized by Athens itself.⁵¹

The Cultural Exchange between the Romans and the Egyptians in Delos

From the early third century BCE on, Rome began to establish a power base in the Mediterranean, and a large number of Roman merchants started settling in Delos. The first evidence of a Roman inscription on the city dates back to 259 BCE and refers to a Roman juggler who had taken part in one of the Dionysiac festivals. Around the end of the second century BCE, the Romans took over from the Egyptians as the largest and most influential group in Delos.⁵²

Both the Romans and the Egyptians had their own temples and forms of religious celebration on Delos. Whereas the Egyptians never accepted Roman gods, the Romans came increasingly to worship Egyptian gods already in the second century BCE.⁵³ In fact, dedications and offerings made by Romans at temples dedicated to Egyptian gods indicate that the Romans, although they still worshipped their own gods, were also intense followers of Egyptian religion. From the Delian temples, the Romans carried their new beliefs to Roman ports.⁵⁴

Egyptian culture found favor not only with the Roman merchants in Delos but also, to a certain extent, with the Roman Senate. In fact, it was in Delos that the first known official action of the Roman Senate regarding Egyptian cults occurred. In 164 BCE, Demetrius, who was a

⁵¹ Huzar, "Roman-Egyptian Relations in Delos," 173.

⁵² In addition to the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, the island was a base for Syrians, Phoenicians, Judeans, Samaritans and other people from Palestine. Flower, *The Dancing Lares and the Serpent in the Garden: Religion at the Roman Street Corner*, 176.

⁵³ Huzar, "Roman-Egyptian Relations in Delos," 173.

⁵⁴ Huzar, 176.

descendant of the priest who had carried the cult of Serapis to Delos, complained to Rome that the Athenians had closed his temple. The Roman Senate responded by sending a *senatus consultum* to Delos, which authorized Demetrius to reopen and resume the activities of the temple. Rome thus pronounced herself in favor of, or at least not hostile to, Egyptian religion.⁵⁵

Archeological Finds: Private Context

The substantial influence of Egypt on the city has provided a large quantity of archeological remains, which helps us understand how profoundly Egyptian culture was embedded in Delos. In fact, outside the area of the city dedicated to Egyptian cults, archeologists have found no large Egyptian statues or Egyptianizing mosaics. What they have found, however, are small Egyptian terracotta figurines in the streets, houses, and workshops.⁵⁶

The small Egyptian terracotta figurines found in Delos can vary both in shape and depictions: for example, in a public street of Delos, archeologists have found a terracotta figurine representing Isis or a Ptolemaic queen. The figure has a crown with a solar disc, bovine horns, ears of wheat, and radiate rays.⁵⁷ Another example of these artifacts is the head of the Egyptian god Harpocrates, found in a workshop in Delos: the subject wears two wreaths and a double crown flanked by lotus buds (one of which is missing), and has his finger to his lips.⁵⁸

The Egyptian terracotta figurines in the houses at Delos sometimes reveal details about their owners. Although archeologists cannot place these figurines in their exact location, they can still draw conclusions from their sheer ubiquity. Delos was home to different peoples -- Greeks, Egyptians, and Romans -- and archaeologists initially thought that Delos was, like the other cities

⁵⁵ Huzar, 173-174.

⁵⁶ Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28.

⁵⁷ Caitlín Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos: A Study in Hellenistic Religion*, (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 521.

⁵⁸ Barrett, *Egyptianizing Figurines from Delos*, 527.

of the Mediterranean area, divided into ethnic districts (i.e., populated with people from the same background). If Delos was like other cities, then the figurines should have been found in what was the Egyptian quarter of the city, yet they crop up almost everywhere, a fact that seems to confirm the archeological records that show that there were no ethnic districts in Delos and that all peoples lived together.

But even if this were not the case, these Egyptian figurines have also been found in houses that -- to judge from the ornaments, wall-paintings, and other objects -- must have been inhabited by Greeks and Romans.⁵⁹ In other words, the fact that the figurines have been found all over Delos, including in houses probably inhabited by different ethnicities, strongly suggests that these Egyptian objects were universally popular, regardless of the culture or origin of their owners.

Egyptian terracotta figurines did not belong exclusively to the poor, as they are found in the graves of rich and poor alike. Epigraphic evidence, grave goods and simple house size can tell us a great deal about a person's social status and background, and whether the person was an adherent of Egyptian cults, but no direct correspondence seems to exist between wealth, status and the presence of Egyptian relics, which have been found in houses of widely varying size and luxury. This suggests that the whole community worshiped Egyptian gods without distinction of social status or origin.⁶⁰

The discovery of Egyptian figurines in these domestic contexts indicates that they may have been used in household shrines, which were well established in Pharaonic and Greco-Roman Egypt. Archeological examinations of private houses at Amarna, dating back to the period of the New Kingdom, often reveal areas decorated with reliefs and inscriptions referring

⁵⁹ Barrett, 331.

⁶⁰ Barrett, 346.

to the worship of deities. Houses at Deir El-Medina, Amarna, and other Egyptian sites have also been found to contain domestic altars, and it is reasonable to assume that some of the terracotta figurines found in Delos may have been placed in private domestic shrines.⁶¹

Archeologists have also found a large quantity of Egyptianizing figurines on the streets of Delos, for which there are several possible explanations. First, some figurines may have been part of the discarded refuse of the houses and shops along the streets. It may be that people tossed broken pieces of pottery, including figurines, into gutters and sewers. Second, some of these figurines may have come from outdoor domestic altars placed at the doors of the house. Third, Delos was sacked in 88 BCE by Mithridates VI, the king of Pontus (an enemy of Rome), and, later, in 69 BCE by the pirates of Athenodoros, an ally of Mithridates, which led to massive looting.⁶² This could have caused the contents (such as religious objects) of houses and stores to be thrown onto the streets.⁶³

As noted above, the Egyptianizing figurines in Delos come from several discrete contexts, ranging from homes to temples. The iconography of these figurines corresponds to reliefs on Egyptian temples and descriptions in theological texts. The presence of this imagery in private houses, graves, shops, streets, and other areas frequented by a wide range of people suggest that the Delians were familiar with Egyptian theology, while the fact that similar

⁶¹ Barrett, 342.

⁶² Barrett, 349.

⁶³ It is important to say that these remains were preserved in their almost original position because, after the sacks of Delos, the commercial power of the city ended and its population dramatically declined. From 31 BCE to the 7th century CE, the population of Delos was really small and many houses were abandoned. When people fled, they left many of their belongings that were then found by archaeologists, like the Egyptian figurines. Then, from the 7th century CE Delos was abandoned and became gradually covered by sand, which preserved both its buildings and small objects. The excavations of Delos started in 1873 and are still in progress. Frederic Will, "Delos as Myth and Experience," *The Antioch Review* 25, (1965): 99, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4610662>; Emlyn Dodd, "Population Decline and Wine Industry: Societal Transformation on Late Antique Delos (Greece)," in *The Resilience of the Roman Empire. Regional Case Studies on the Relationship between Population and Food Resources*, edited by D. Van Limbergen, S. Maréchal and W. De Clercq, 109-112, (Oxford: BAR Publishing, 2020).

imagery appears both in private houses and in sanctuaries suggests a close relationship between domestic and temple-based forms of religious practice.⁶⁴

Summary and Conclusion

The wide presence of Egyptianizing figurines all over the city of Delos indicates that they were not exclusive to any one group. Whatever the origins or social status of the owners of these small Egyptian figurines may have been, they seem to have treated Egyptian cultic practices as an aspect of their own daily lives. So Egyptian culture and its practices were fully integrated into the larger, multiethnic Delian community, including the Romans, who did not reject Egyptian religion, but, on the contrary, fully embraced and absorbed it. Neither when they put Delos under the control of Athens, nor when they conquered the city of Delos (and made it part of the province of Achaëa) did the Romans ever repress or otherwise limit Egyptian religion. The diverse sources show us that their positive acceptance and adoption of Egyptian culture lasted for the entire duration of their control of the city.

Pompeii

Pompeii is a city located in southwest Italy on the Bay of Naples. Pompeii was founded sometime in the ninth or eighth century BCE by Oscans, prehistoric inhabitants of southern Italy.⁶⁵ It is believed that the Oscan farmers founded Pompeii because they needed a marketplace and seaport. Because Pompeii was located in a strategic position, the city soon came to the attention of Italic tribes and the Etruscans from central Italy that were expanding southwards,

⁶⁴ Barrett, 416.

⁶⁵ Pamela Bradley, *Cities of Vesuvius: Pompeii and Herculaneum*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 11-12.

and the Greeks, who were also expanding their presence in southern Italy. In fact, in the seventh and sixth century BCE, Pompeii came under Greek and Etruscan influence, and there are clear traces of both in its urban architecture. Subsequently, toward the end of the fifth century BCE, the Samnites, an Italic people from the central-south, took Campania from the Etruscans, and Pompeii thus became an Italic city.⁶⁶ Eventually Rome became the rising power in central Italy, and, around 290 BCE, Pompeii, like other cities before it, entered an alliance with her.⁶⁷ In 91 BCE, however, Pompeii, seeking greater autonomy, rebelled against Roman dominance. Following a long siege, Pompeii was finally captured by the Roman army led by Sulla, and formally became a Roman city in 80 BCE.⁶⁸

The Relations between Pompeii and Rome

Roman Pompeii was not a major metropolis, but a medium-sized provincial city of about 20,000 inhabitants. The physical structures and civic institutions of Pompeii show that the city was well-managed. As it became ever more Roman, it acquired the typical layout of a Roman city, with a forum, temples and public buildings. The city had two theaters, an amphitheater, and two palestrae (i.e., gymnasiums). Pompeii also had three large public baths, located at usefully accessible sites, that were an important part of city life (as in Roman cities in general). As was usual in Roman cities, Pompeii had a regular grid-form street network, with public fountains at every intersection.

⁶⁶Amedeo Maiuri, "Pompeii," *Scientific American* 198, no. 4 (1958): 70-71, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24940972>.

⁶⁷ Clive Stannard, "Small Change in Campania from the Fourth to the First Century BC, and the Newly Discovered Second Punic War Roman Mint of Minturnae," in *Merchants, Measures and Money. Understanding Technologies of Early Trade in a Comparative Perspective*, edited by Lorenz Rahmstorf, Gojko Barjamovic and Nicola Ialongo, 262, (Kiel/Hamburg: Wachholtz Verlag, 2021).

⁶⁸ Pompeii became the Roman colony called *Colonia Veneria Cornelia Pompeianorum*. Andrew L. Slayman, "The New Pompeii," *Archaeology* 50, no. 6 (1997): 28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41771320>.

The forum contains temples dedicated to Roman gods and goddesses: on the north side was the *capitolium*, dedicated to Jove, Juno, and Minerva; on the west was the temple of Apollo; and right outside the forum, to the west, was the temple of Venus, the protectress of the city. In other words, Pompeii was reorganized according to the Roman model of a city. Yet even Romanized Pompeii conserved some of its Etruscan and Italic features (such as Oscans, and Samnites) as well as some of its Greek characteristics.

Pompeii was not only a city of important personages or great events. Although the city included wealthy patricians, the majority of its citizens were ordinary people and were generally landowners, manufacturers, merchants, tradesmen, craftsmen, artisans and slaves. The city was governed by a Council of Notables, who were elected annually. The city's citizens enjoyed reasonably good class relations, while the city itself enjoyed good relations with the central Roman authorities, which did not interfere much in its governance.⁶⁹

Pompeii and Egyptian Culture

Roman merchants brought Egyptian culture to the Italian peninsula at the port city of Pozzuoli, near Naples, and Pompeii, being close to Pozzuoli, was one of the first Italian cities to fall under the influence of Egyptian culture. Already by the middle of the second century BCE, the people of Pompeii, who were not yet under Roman rule, had been influenced rapidly with Egyptian culture that they built a temple dedicated to the goddess Isis, which was one of the most important temples dedicated to an Egyptian goddess on the Italian peninsula. Centuries later, as the Republic was ending and the Empire coming into being, the people of Pompeii remained as

⁶⁹ Maiuri, "Pompeii," 69-72.

fascinated as ever by Egyptian culture. Indeed, this was the time of a “second wave” of Egyptian cultural influence.⁷⁰

After Egypt formally became a Roman province, Augustus began to transport large-scale objects, including obelisks and statuary, from there to Rome. Pompeii received no such large objects, but it did receive a large quantity of small Egyptian artifacts (such as statuettes and amulets). Those objects would have taken up little of the precious space in the grain cargoes in which they traveled. The objects would either have been brought back by the grain merchants for sale in Italy or brought back as souvenirs by tourists, who also traveled with the grain fleet.⁷¹ The objects are modest, were mostly for personal use, and were clearly never intended to dominate public spaces. Pompeian followers of Egyptian cults, who were many and from all classes, were free to practice their religion, and Egyptian objects thus became part of the daily life of Pompeians regardless of social status.⁷²

The above-mentioned Egyptian objects found in Pompeii include: canopic jars, *ushabty* figurines (funerary figures buried with the deceased), amulets, table supports in Egyptian iconography, small sphinxes, scarab beetles, and small statues of Egyptian gods, such as Isis, Horus and Harpocrates.

The Temple of Isis

The Temple of Isis, originally built around the second century BCE and, as been noted, one the most important influenced by Egyptian religion on the Italian peninsula, was rebuilt at the end of the first century BCE following several earthquakes.

⁷⁰ The first wave being in the mid second century, around 150 BCE. Tatomir, “Egyptomania,” 575.

⁷¹ Swetnam-Burland, “Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts,” 124.

⁷² Heinz, “Mutual Exchange,” 28.

Although relatively small but nevertheless monumental, the temple contained a remarkable collection of imported Egyptian objects, including a sphinx, the feet from a statue, two statues of divinities, a canopic urn (only nine of which survive today), an *ushabty* figure from the 26th dynasty, a small faience Ptolemaic statue of a male divinity, and an early Ptolemaic inscription from Herkleopolis, which includes both a dedication to the god Herishef and a rare testimony of the situation in Egypt just after the conquest of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE.⁷³ Interestingly, the decoration of the temple shows the combination of Egyptian motifs and gods, such as the Egyptian deities Isis and Osiris, and Greek mythology. In fact, the decorations depict stories and motifs of Greek mythology, which are not apparently connected with Egypt. This combination of Egyptian and Greek imagery shows us the re-contextualization of Egyptian culture in the pre-existent (and dominant) Greek culture in Pompeii.⁷⁴ It could be equally possible that this combination of Egyptian and Greek culture was a product of the Hellenization of Egypt, which took place after Ptolemy I took control of Egypt in the 4th century BCE. This would explain how these objects might have arrived Hellenized in Pompeii.

The placement of these imported objects in the temple suggests that the chief priests of the Isis cult in Pompeii may have belonged to a high social class. In fact, the Ptolemaic inscription was prominently displayed in the temple, and although the text (written in hieroglyphics) does not relate specifically to the worship of Isis, it nevertheless deals with religious matters. Clearly, the members of the cult in Pompeii viewed the text as sacred, which

⁷³ Swetnam-Burland, "Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts," 126.

⁷⁴ Eric M. Moormann, "The Temple of Isis at Pompeii," in *Nile into Tiber: Egypt in the Roman World: Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference of Isis Studies, Leiden, May 11-14 2005*, edited by Laurent Bricault, Miguel John Versluys, and Paul G.P. Meyboom, 137-154, (Leiden: Brill, 2007).
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=232435&site=ehost-live>.

naturally suggests that they could read it. Even if only a small number of worshippers could read the hieroglyphics, they would no doubt still have seemed sacred to the rest.⁷⁵

Archeological Finds: Private Context

Apart from this important temple dedicated to Isis, Egyptian religious buildings of such a size were rare, although plenty of modest Egyptianizing artifacts were to be found all over the city.⁷⁶ Many of the Egyptian objects were found in private houses during the early excavations of the city around the second half of the 1900s. Unfortunately, the excavations coincided with what would later be called Egyptomania, and these objects were so popular among collectors and visitors to the site that they were often robbed. Consequently, the exact location of many objects is no longer known, which means that it is difficult to determine where the Egyptian objects in the Pompeian houses were originally placed.⁷⁷ At the very least, archaeological finds in well-preserved domestic structures show that the use of small Egyptian or Egyptianizing objects was commonplace. For example, Egyptian figurines were found in various private houses, including Casa del Peristilio, Casa di D. Octavius Quartio, Casa dell'Ara Massima, Casa del Fauno, Casa degli Amorini Dorati, and Casa del Doppio Larario.

The ash of Vesuvius perfectly preserved the detailed structure and decorations of houses of different social classes, so well, in fact, that it is even possible to track the evolution of home styles across three or four centuries. Our best evidence for the display of imported Egyptianizing

⁷⁵ Swetnam-Burland, "Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts," 128.

⁷⁶ Many of these objects were small statuettes of Egyptian gods. Eva M. Mol, "The Perception of Egypt in Networks of Being and Becoming: A Thing Theory Approach to Egyptianising Objects in Roman Domestic Contexts," in *TRAC 2012: Proceedings of the Twenty-Second Annual Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference, Frankfurt 2012*, edited by Annabel Bokern, Marion Bolder-Boos, Stefan Krmnicek, Dominik Maschek, and Sven Page, 126, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvh1dhxh.12>.

⁷⁷ Swetnam-Burland, "Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts," 124.

works in Pompeian houses comes from their representations in domestic frescoes, which, unlike the objects themselves, survived the volcanic ash.⁷⁸

The way the small domestic Egyptian objects were used varied according to the tastes and habits of the householder. Some imported objects from Pompeii were clearly treated as sacred, such as those in the Isis temple. An example of sacred objects in a private setting is the Casa degli Amorini Dorati, a house owned by a wealthy Roman. The house contains a shrine dedicated to the goddess Isis. This shrine, obviously used for private worship, contained a statuette of the Egyptian eagle-like god Horus, which recalls the *ushaby* found in the *sacrarium* of the Temple of Isis. This statuette would have been the focus of family veneration. In addition, the shrine is decorated with a ritual scene, which includes representations of Isis, Anubis, Serapis, and Harpocrates. This scene shows what seems to be an Isiac procession taking place in a domestic setting. In short, the evidence from the shrine in the Casa degli Amorini Dorati strongly suggests that at least some of the Egyptianizing objects were incorporated into domestic rituals more for reasons of religious affiliation than for reasons of mere taste.⁷⁹

The display of Egyptianizing objects could also have an apotropaic purpose. For instance, a so-called *mensa sacra* (which means sacred table) was re-used for the threshold of the Casa del Doppio Larario. The *mensa sacra* was placed at the critical juncture where the house exterior meets the interior. This confined threshold space was particularly important for the Romans, who normally invoked at least three deities to safeguard it. In other words, the householder who placed the object in this special space clearly attributed to this object the power of protecting the home and its members.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28.

⁷⁹ Swetnam-Burland, "Egyptian Objects, Roman contexts," 132-134.

⁸⁰ Swetnam-Burland, 131.

Another clear use of Egyptianizing objects is that they became fashionable.

Archaeological remains of Egyptian style objects and paintings show that Egyptian art was also used as a means of decoration: for instance, marble and painted sphinxes were often displayed in the gardens of wealthy homes, suggesting that Egyptian art was becoming fashionable among the patricians. Two specific examples of this are the painting of a marble sphinx in Casa del Peristilio, and a small marble sphinx in Casa di D. Octavius Quartio.⁸¹ The presence of such pieces, especially in a garden context, should not be taken to reflect the religious affiliation of their owners. Rather, the pieces may have been cherished because they contained images of Egypt, which conjured up multiple symbolic associations.⁸²

Rome and Pompeii

Pompeii was not only inhabited by wealthy people, but it was also close to many Patrician villas. In fact, the Bay of Naples, near Pompeii, was one of the principal meeting points of wealthy Romans. In addition, Augustus himself began a plan of reconstruction of the city around 30 BCE. So both the wealthy Romans and Augustus would have been familiar with any non-Roman religious practices, beliefs and activities, but never took any action against Egyptian culture. It had its own and imported cultures before it adopted Roman practices, and perhaps this earlier history is what made it so amenable to Egyptian culture.⁸³ At any rate, it never repressed Egyptian culture, either at the end of the Republic or even after the beginning of Empire.

⁸¹ Eva Mol, "Object Ontology and Cultural Taxonomies. Examining the Agency of Style, Material, and Objects in Classification through Egyptian Material Culture in Pompeii and Rome," in *Materialising Roman Histories*, edited by Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts, 178, (Oxford; Philadelphia: Oxbow Books, 2017).

⁸² Mol, "The Perception of Egypt in Networks of Being and Becoming," 117-132.

⁸³ Joseph V. Frankl, "Whose Forum? Imperial and Elite Patronage in the Forum of Pompeii," *Studies in Mediterranean Antiquity and Classics* 3, no. 1, 4.

Summary and Conclusion

The examples illustrated above show us the multivalence of Egyptian-themed art for the Pompeians, who, depending on their political affiliation, religious belief, or class, may have attributed to those Egyptian objects different and, at times, even conflicting meanings.

What is important is that these objects did not lose their religious power in the move to Italy from Egypt, but, interestingly, they were re-conceptualized by their new owners in order to fit into existing and familiar religious traditions. For example, each of the imported objects displayed in the temple of Isis was, in a sense, reinvented by its Roman owners. In fact, as already mentioned, the hieroglyphic inscription was displayed to convey religious significance. However, the text of the inscription does not actually have any religious meaning connected to the worship of Isis, but because most Pompeians could not read hieroglyphic, it was still considered sacred and related to Isis and Egypt. Clearly, the inscription took a new meaning in Pompeii, which was different from the original version located in Egypt. So these objects suggest the existence of a positive and even privileged view of Egypt in the Roman mind.

Archeologists have found many statues of Egyptian gods in Pompeii, most of them with other gods rather than on their own. People did not find any need to separate Isis and other Egyptian gods such as Serapis, Anubis, and Harpocrates, from the Roman gods. So Egyptian gods, as well as Egyptian objects, were just placed in a harmonic position within the pre-existing Etruscan, Italic (Oscan and Samnite), Roman, and Greek cultures.

Aquileia

A New Roman City

Aquileia, located on the upper Adriatic Sea, was originally settled as early as the end of the ninth century BCE. The village, which was made up of wooden huts, contained structures for the production of pottery that was very similar to what was being produced in the villages near what would become Venice. The name of the city, ‘Aquileia’ seems to come from the language spoken by the Veneti people. The indigenous settlement lasted until the second century BCE.⁸⁴

In 186 BCE, a group of 12,000 Transalpine Gauls forced by overpopulation and famine flowed into the area around modern-day Venice, their ultimate goal being to settle in the low plains of modern-day Friuli. To repel the invaders, the Romans, sent 3,000 soldiers under the command of the consul Marcellus, who beat them in battle in 183 BCE. Following this victory, the Romans took advantage of their increased presence in the province and, in 181 BCE, established Aquileia as a strategic garrison city.⁸⁵

Shortly after the founding of this new city, the Roman Senate gathered a group of three thousand foot soldiers and an unknown number of centurions and knights, who were granted unprecedented amounts of farmland: twelve and a half, twenty-five and thirty-five hectares, respectively.⁸⁶ The large amounts of farmland created a relatively wealthy class of small-landowner soldiers who invested not only in their tracts of land, but also in commercial enterprises, which created a dynamic and productive economy. Aquileia therefore became Romanized quickly and was soon included in main road network connecting it to other Roman

⁸⁴ Alviano Scarel, *Aquileia a Border City*, (Aquileia: Fondazione Aquileia).

⁸⁵ R. Liz, “Aquileia,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, edited by G. W. Bowersock, Peter Robert Lamont Brown, and Oleg Grabar, (Harvard University Press, 1999).

⁸⁶ Scarel, *Aquileia*.

territories. In 187 BCE, even before Aquileia was officially founded, the Via Aemilia had already been extended to reach it. In 148 and 147 BCE, Aquileia became the terminal point of the Via Postumia, the road running between the Tyrrhenian Sea and the Adriatic. In 132-131 BCE, Adria was connected to Aquileia by the Via Annia, which was a continuation of the Via Popillia between Rimini and Adria.

In 169 BCE, the authorities of Aquileia summoned an additional 1,500 Roman soldiers to help defend the city against Histri and Illyri. So from the very beginning, Aquileia's growth reflects its increasing strategic importance as the strongest point of defence against the threats posed by the many easy passes through the Alps. The new city provided protection to the territories along the borders of the lands controlled by the Veneti (allies of the Romans) to the west, the Alpine Gauls to the north, and the Histri to the east.⁸⁷

Aquileia was a key Roman trading center with a major fluvial port on the Adriatic Sea. Between the end of the Republic and the early imperial period, the port of Aquileia became the Roman gateway for goods from Egypt, Greece, and the Near East. Aquileia therefore soon became a commercial and cultural hub, a point of convergence of Roman military roads in the northeast of the peninsula, and one of the most important and biggest Roman cities.

Aquileia in Early Roman Empire

In the early Roman Empire, Aquileia was one of the two most important cities in northern Italy, the other being Mediolanum (modern-day Milan). Aquileia was built from scratch following the layout of a typical Roman city. It was constructed with a network of internal streets formed by the intersection of *decumani* and *cardines*, and an orderly distribution of blocks

⁸⁷ Liz, "Aquileia."

formed by houses, and other buildings. As a fair-sized Roman city, Aquileia boasted government offices, a temple, a basilica, warehouses, and important public buildings and facilities, namely a theater, an amphitheater, some gyms, thermae, latrines, and a market. Like other Roman cities, Aquileia was served by an aqueduct, a sewer system, and a drinking water distribution network with fountains at street intersections and connections into buildings. In addition, Aquileia was encircled by a brick wall with walkways, monumental gates, and defensive towers. The wall was built around the middle of the second century BCE to protect the city from attack. Aquileia thus served also as a garrison town that impeded the possibility of military invasions of the Italian peninsula from the east.⁸⁸

A Multi-ethnic City

Between the end of the Republic and the early days of the Empire, Aquileia grew quickly in size and population. It was settled by tens of thousands of people, namely the Veneti, Celts, Illyrians, Etruscans, Italics from the center-south of the Peninsula, Greeks, Levantines and Middle-Eastern peoples. The typical citizens of Aquileia were merchants, artisans, construction and transport operators, farmers and landowners, land laborers, garrison soldiers, and troops passing through. Not surprisingly, Aquileia was multi-ethnic and broad-based society, whose members spoke different languages and dressed either according to the Roman and Italic fashion, or according to the clothing culture of their place of origin. The outsiders who settled in Aquileia were free to introduce their own traditions, customs, and religious beliefs to the city. The central

⁸⁸ The town enjoyed such a long period of peace during the imperial era that it allowed its defensive walls to deteriorate. Natale Barca, *Roman Aquileia: The Impenetrable City-Fortress, a Sentry of the Alps*, (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2022).

authorities of the city, though representing the Roman state, did not force any kind of *Romanitas* on the inhabitants of the city.

Despite their cultural differences, the people of Aquileia formed a cohesive and integrated community. It embodied certain ideal Roman civic virtues such as tolerance, social cohesion, meticulous compliance with all aspects of the law. Animated by the spirit of free trade, the city also allowed its citizens ample freedom of choice and action. The port area of Aquileia best encapsulated the cohesive spirit of this community. Because the port was the heart of the economy and home to workers and merchants of all types, it was densely populated by people of different rank and ethnicity whose cultural differences were no barrier to their working together every day.⁸⁹

Aquileia and Egyptian Culture

Egyptian culture and religion easily found their own place in the multi-ethnic city of Aquileia. In fact, after reaching the south of Italy at the end of the second century BCE, Egyptian culture finally penetrated even the north-eastern part of Italy toward the end of the Roman Republic. Aquileia was one of the first cities in the north-east of Italy to come under the influence of Egyptian culture. In addition, the trade relations between Aquileia and Alexandria of Egypt were well established, so it is no surprise that archaeologists should find many Egyptian objects left behind by the many Egyptians who once inhabited the city.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Barca, *Roman Aquileia*.

⁹⁰ Federica Fontana, "Sacerdoti egizi ad Aquileia: una riconsiderazione," in *Studia Archaeologica Monika Verzár Bass Dicata*, edited by Bruno Callegher, 59, (Trieste: Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2016).

Temple of Isis and Serapis

The Egyptian cults of Isis and Serapis were officially introduced to Aquileia during the Flavian age (69-96 CE), and, in fact, temples to them were probably built during this time.⁹¹ The area dedicated to Isiac cults in the city was located in what is now the Monastero area in north-east of city, near the port. We can assume that the temple of Isis was relatively large because it was actually formed by two buildings, one dedicated Isis (*Iseum*), but the other to Serapis (*Serepeum*). Like other temples dedicated to Isis and Serapis elsewhere in the Empire, the *Iseum* and *Serepeum* were located next to the port, its warehouses and trading floors, and therefore were located in a vital part of the urban complex.⁹²

The Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia displays an Egyptian stele with the inscription *theà epiphanés*, which means, “the goddess that manifests herself,” a clear reference to Isis. The stele was probably dedicated to the goddess between 168 and 171 CE by someone called Terentios Preiskos.⁹³ Another stele, again, at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia has an inscription made by the “stolist” (a kind of temple priest) that explains how to prepare the statue of goddess for the daily liturgy.⁹⁴

The temples dedicated to Isis and Serapis were built after our period of interest, but they are convincing evidence that Egyptian culture was favorably received in Roman cities. In fact, the temples were built less than one hundred years after Egyptian culture reached Aquileia. From

⁹¹ The people of the time seemed to have used several alternative names, such as Pelagia, Augusta and Regina, to refer to Isis, who was often also associated with Serapis or Anubis. Claudia Dolzani, “Presenze di origine egiziana nell’ambiente aquileiese e nell’alto Adriatico,” in *Antichità altoadriatiche XII (1976). Aquileia e L’Oriente Mediterraneo*, edited by Mario Mirabella Roberti, 127, (Udine: Arti Grafiche Friulane, 1977).

⁹² Federica Fontana, “Isis and Mater Magna in Aquileia,” *Revue Belge de Philologie et d’Histoire* 95, (2017): 137, <https://doi.org/10.3406/rbph.2017.8992>.

⁹³ Fontana, “Isis and Mater Magna in Aquileia,” 138.

⁹⁴ A stolist was a priest who embellished the statue of the goddess Isis and prepared it for daily liturgy. Fontana, “Isis and Mater Magna in Aquileia,” 139.

the end of the first century BCE, Aquileians traded widely in small Egyptian objects that they kept in their own houses until an area dedicated to Egyptian cults was built at the end of the first century CE. Egyptian culture was never repressed, but was allowed to flourish, eventually leading to the construction of a quarter for Egyptian religion.

Archaeological Finds: Private Context

As in Delos and Pompeii, archaeologists in Aquileia have unearthed various Egyptian objects, most of them small, which were widely traded among the townspeople.⁹⁵ Unlike in Delos, however, archaeologists cannot work out exactly where these Egyptian objects might have been placed in private houses because the city was burned to the ground in 452 CE by the Huns under the command of Attila.⁹⁶ Even so, some of the Egyptianizing objects to be found today in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia hint at their purpose and use.

The most important Egyptian objects in Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Aquileia are two headless male torsos, an epigraphic fragment, a base fragment of a statue, a fragment of an inventory tablet from a temple, eleven small bronzes, and small Egyptian gems. Most of these objects came directly from Egypt and date to between 600 and 300 BCE, with the exception of one of the two torsos, which was made in Aquileia according to an Egyptian template, and dates to around the second century CE.⁹⁷

Some of these objects were used in Aquileia because they were considered fashionable. One of the Egyptian objects probably used for its fashionable appeal is the fragment of the

⁹⁵ Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28.

⁹⁶ Many of the Aquileians who did survive later succumbed to malaria. Aquileia was rebuilt and rose once again almost to its previous status, but, during the terrorizing Hun period, many inhabitants moved to the Venetian lagoons (site of modern Venice). Helen Parry Eden, "Aquileia," *Blackfriars* 7, no. 70 (1926): 11, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43810577>.

⁹⁷ Dolzani, "Presenze di origine egiziana," 127.

inventory tablet in black basalt. The tablet depicts the lioness-like Egyptian goddess Bastet with some hieroglyphic inscriptions. The inscription carries descriptive details (materials used and measurements) of two statues of the goddess Bastet that were located in a sanctuary to the goddess, probably at Bubasti, in lower Egypt. The tablet enumerates and records which statues of a given god were present in which temple. In other words, the purpose of this object had a specific, almost administrative, function, and, outside its original context, would have very little meaning (or usefulness). What is more, the goddess Bastet was not worshipped in Aquileia. So when it arrived in Aquileia, this object would have been recontextualized, both physically and psychically, by its new owners, who, in fact, seemed to have no compunction about changing it. The corner of the tablet was altered to make room for new images and inscriptions.⁹⁸ In short, this object shows us that its use was more aesthetic than religious. Nevertheless, the fact that it is preserved in a recognizably Egyptian style also shows that it fitted into its new context well enough not to need much changing.

On the other hand, some Egyptian objects were used for religious purposes. Egyptian culture and religion had already arrived in Aquileia at the end of the Republic, which suggests that even before the construction of temples dedicated to Egyptian deities, people nevertheless used Egyptianizing objects in their private house for private worship. For example, the eleven small bronzes all depict Egyptian gods and goddess and were probably connected with private worship.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ Dolzani, 128-129.

⁹⁹ Dolzani, 127.

Rome and Aquileia

Most people in ancient Aquileia were not of patrician stock, but this certainly does not imply that it was some sort of outlaw settlement. On the contrary, it was under the control of the central Roman authorities and deeply enmeshed in the system of transport and trade of the Roman world, and occupied an important defensive position on the peninsula. In fact, Aquileia was one of the few cities outside Rome, in which Augustus had a private residence.¹⁰⁰ In addition, Aquileia was one of his preferred observation posts from which he kept himself up to date about events in the provinces. The authorities in Rome were perfectly aware that Egyptian culture had profoundly penetrated Aquileia, and the literary evidence suggests that they never tried to repress or even limit its influence. In fact, this influence finally culminated in its being official recognized by the town.

Summary and Conclusion

Aquileia was built from scratch by the Romans, who designed it following the typical layout of a Roman settlement. Like Delos and Pompeii, Aquileia perfectly exemplified the features of a multi-ethnic Roman city: Its citizens belonged to different cultures and religions, yet still lived together harmoniously. The heart of the city was its port, which fostered interactions between people of various cultures. So it is not a surprise that Egyptian culture (as well as other cultures from the eastern provinces) should have found its place in Aquileia. The sheer number of Egyptian objects in Aquileia gives some idea of how widely traded they were among its inhabitants, who placed them in their houses and modified them to make them fit into

¹⁰⁰ Liz, "Aquileia."

their new Roman context. In other words, both the quantity of Egyptian objects in Aquileia and the scarcity of hostile literary references to Egyptian culture are indicative of total integration.

Chapter Conclusion

Both archaeological and literary evidence show that, between the end of the Republic and beginning of Empire, Egyptian culture was permitted, widely adopted, and cherished in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia. Egyptian culture clearly had an enormous influence on and presence in these cities, which played a key role in Rome's continuing prosperity and control. Given their importance, the Roman authorities would have been aware of their cultural affairs, including a large popular following of Egyptian culture. However, neither the central nor the local Roman authorities took any formal or informal action to repress or even limit Egyptian culture. Interestingly, the approach of Roman authorities in respect of Egyptian culture is coherent with the historical Roman approach, which was to integrate rather than suppress the cultures of the peoples they encountered.

Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia were very different from one another (different location, foundation, development), but they all embodied the typical features of an established Roman society: tolerant, cohesive, and inclusive. It may have been the fact that all three cities were tolerant, cohesive, and inclusive that led them to accept and absorb Egyptian culture in the same peaceable way. In fact, this survey of the Egyptian objects in the cities of Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, suggests that imported religious artifacts lived happily side by side with "native" artifacts, without seeming to cause too many disputes over doctrinal purity or cultural compatibility. It is as if the various artifacts from the Egyptian and pre-existing cultures were reinforcing and reinterpreting one another. The "dialogue" between Egyptian religious objects

and their counterparts flourished in both public and private contexts. People in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia combined familiar imagery with Egyptianizing imagery seemingly without encountering cultural or political objections, which is the opposite of what happened in Rome. Simply put, Egyptian culture coexisted peacefully and fruitfully with other cultures.

The evidence from Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, shows us that many citizens, from a wide range of social classes, would have encountered Egyptian objects, artifacts, signs, symbols and so forth in their everyday life. They would have seen them in the homes of their peers, in public temples, and in shrines in the heart of the city. Egyptian culture conquered the heights of society but without bringing about a revolutionary change. Egyptian culture neither replaced nor sought to replace pre-existing cultures, but instead carved out its own space. It slipped into the existing social order of these three provincial Roman cities and became simply part of everyday life.

4. The Reception of Egyptian Culture in Rome

As shown in the previous chapter, Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia accepted and absorbed Egyptian culture in the same peaceful way despite being very different cities, and their inhabitants were never forbidden from worshipping their culture by the Roman authorities. However, in the years between the end of the Republic and the beginning of Empire, negative views about the Egyptians and Egypt spread among the Roman authorities, especially in the city of Rome itself. In fact, if Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, were generally open and welcoming of Egyptian culture, the same cannot be said for Rome, the capital, which remained generally hostile to Egyptian culture. Proof of Rome's hostility to Egyptianizing cultural trends is to be found in literary sources, the historical record and monumental art.

Literary Sources

Between the End of the Republic and the Beginning of the Empire

The hostility to Egyptian culture is evident in several literary sources from the Augustan period, which repeat some of the negative clichés and opinions about Egyptians and Egypt that were particularly prevalent in the capital. In Rome, negative opinions about the Egyptians circulated widely, helped by events such as the faithless murder of Pompey by the hand of Ptolemy XIII and the destructive attack on the Roman state by Cleopatra.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 576.

One of the practices of the Egyptians that was the source of many Romans attacks during this period was their belief in sacred animals. In the eyes of many contemporary political commentators, the representation of the gods in an animal form was inappropriate. The Egyptian worship of animals might have allowed the Roman propaganda to view the Egyptians as inferior, or, at the very least, strange, because the Romans did not divinize or pray to animals but rather used them as sacrificial gifts to their gods. In fact, when Augustus was in Egypt, he refused to see and visit the bull of Memphis and the incarnation of Apis. Beliefs in the sacredness of certain animals persisted through the period of Roman rule in Egypt, and vanished only with the appearance of the Christians. Roman emperors continued to politically honor the gods of Egypt until the reign of Decius (201-251 CE) and Diocletian (244-311 CE), and Egyptian sacred animals were represented on the coins along with Roman emperors. Clearly, the Roman Emperors did not worship the animals, but allowed their representation on coins for political purposes. For instance, the Romans considered Egypt a difficult province to govern, so they tried to gain local favor by representing sacred animals on coins.¹⁰²

Between the end of the Republic and the beginning of Empire, Roman authors such as Ovid, Livy, Virgil, and Horace frequently censured Egyptian culture. The works of Ovid, Livy, Virgil, and Horace, for example, offer cogent proof that Egyptian culture was poorly received in Rome, as they either directly attack Egyptian culture or report on prejudice against Egypt, or both. Ovid, Livy, Virgil, and Horace were among the most popular authors of their time, so they strongly influenced even the opinions of later Roman authors, who repeated the same negative anti-Egyptian clichés. Ovid, Livy, Virgil, and Horace did not write much about the Egyptians

¹⁰² Hisham Elsaued Abdelazim Aglan, "The Aspects of Animal Sanctification in the Graeco-Roman Monuments in Egypt," PhD thesis, (Universität zu Köln, April 2013).

because their major focus was Rome and its glory, and the few times they do mention the Egyptians, it is unfavorable.

Ovid

Ovid (43 BCE-18 CE) was one of the most prominent poets in Rome.¹⁰³ Ovid's best-known work, *Metamorphoses*, is a collection of myths and folk-tales written between 2 BCE and 8 CE.¹⁰⁴ In Book XV of *Metamorphoses*, Ovid praises Julius Caesar and his adoptive son, Augustus. Ovid claims that Augustus will take revenge on those who killed Caesar, and that he will carry on and win every war started by Caesar. Afterwards, Ovid claims, Augustus will conquer the Etruscan city of Mutina, before turning his energies to defeating Egypt and Cleopatra. Ovid claims that Cleopatra is threatening Roman power, but in vain, for she will be deposed by Augustus. Continuing in this vein, Ovid depicts the Egyptians as barbarians, "Why should I list for you the barbarity and the peoples lying on both sides of the sea?" (an allusion to Egypt).¹⁰⁵ He concludes by saying that Augustus will in any case conquer everywhere including Egypt. So, for Ovid, Egypt was not deserving of praise. It was a barbaric place to be conquered and a state whose mad queen needed to be deposed.

Livy

The Roman historian Titus Livy (59 BCE-17 CE) was born at Patavium (modern-day Padua) and spent his life in Rome, where he became a friend of Augustus. Livy wrote the history of Rome in his work *Ab urbe condita* ('From the Founding of the City') in 142 books between 27

¹⁰³ Sara Mack, *Ovid*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), 1-2, <https://search-ebscohostcom.jcu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=53040&site=ehost-live>.

¹⁰⁴ Alan Griffin, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 2009, doi:10.1017/S001738350001963X.

¹⁰⁵ Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.827 [my translation].

BCE and 14 CE.¹⁰⁶ Typically for a Roman author of the time, he portrays Egyptians in a negative light: “The Macedonians, who possess Alexandria in Egypt, who possess Seleucia and Babylonia, and other colonies strewn through the world, degenerated into Syrians, Parthians, and Egyptians.”¹⁰⁷

Livy evidently believes (as attested by the word “degenerated”) that the Macedonians/Greeks were superior to the Egyptians. Building on this theme, he goes on to claim that, “Whatever grows in its own soil, has greater excellence; transplanted to a soil alien to it, its nature changes and it degenerates towards that in which it is nurtured.”¹⁰⁸ Livy seems to be saying that it would be better just to govern Egypt than to settle or colonize it, lest Roman citizens experience the same fate as the Macedonians.

Virgil

The poet Virgil (70 BCE-19 CE) was born near Mantua and spent his adult life in Rome, where he became part of the literary circle patronized by Augustus and his minister of propaganda Maecenas. The most famous work of Virgil is the epic poem *Aeneis* (the Aeneid) written between 29 and 19 BCE.¹⁰⁹ The work is a celebration and mythologized account of Rome’s semi-divine origins. Virgil’s epic poem, which is important because it is designed to function as a founding myth not just for the Augustan dynasty, but for Rome itself and its civilization, recounts the journey of a hero, the Trojan prince Aeneas who has arrived in Italy after escaping the fall of Troy, which had been besieged and conquered by the Greeks. Virgil, the

¹⁰⁶ Ronald Mellor, *The Roman Historians*, (London: Routledge, 1999), 48-49.

¹⁰⁷ Livy, *Ab urbe condita*, 38.17.11 [my translation].

¹⁰⁸ Livy, “Books 38-39,” *History of Rome*, edited by B. D Hoyos, John Briscoe, and John Yardley, v.11, 59, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2017).

¹⁰⁹ H. M. Gass, “Roman Virgil,” *The Sewanee Review* 38, no. 4 (1930): 424, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27534570>; Charles Martindale, *The Cambridge Companion to Virgil*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997), 169.

court poet *par excellence* chose to draw mythic parallels between the Roman, Trojan and Greek worlds. Egypt and other eastern regions are notably absent. Most of the events of the poem are inventions, no doubt based also on local Roman traditions, but the Greek attack on the city of Troy seems to be a real historical event, which gives the foundation myth at least the veneer of historical truth, even though the siege of Troy was so far back in the mists of time (around 12-11th centuries BCE) that it may as well be a legend. Virgil chose Aeneas as the starting point of the mythical Roman lineage because the character of Aeneas embodies “Roman virtues,” i.e., devotion to family, loyalty to the state, and piety. Aeneas is also a demi-god, being the son of the Greek goddess Venus, who, in Book XIII, gives him new armor made by Hephaestus (the god of fire and the husband of Venus).¹¹⁰ The armor would help Aeneas in his victory against Latin tribes in Latium, a victory that will eventually lead Aeneas to establish a new city called *Lavinium* (near the site where Rome will be founded). Aeneas’ demigod status is also important from a propagandistic perspective in that it “anticipates” and in a certain sense legitimates the idea that the leader of the Romans (i.e. the emperor Augustus) is a semi-divine being.

On the face of the shield he forges for Aeneas, Hephaestus includes images showing moments from the future of Rome. The shield shows Romulus, the founder of Rome, being nursed by the she-wolf, the defeat of the Gauls, and Augustus gloriously defeating Antony and Cleopatra at the battle of Actium.¹¹¹ In this section of the *Aeneid*, Virgil’s suspicion and hostility of Egyptian culture and religious beliefs is very apparent, and the Egyptian army of Mark

¹¹⁰ In the *Aeneid*, Virgil uses the Greek name Hephaestus instead of the Latin name, Vulcan, because he wants to connect his work with the Greek Poet Homer.

¹¹¹ Here, Virgil uses the same narrative of Homer’s *Iliad*. In fact, in the *Iliad*, Homer describes Themis, mother of Achilles, who asks Hephaestus to make a new armor for her son, as Venus did. Also, Hephaestus in both cases depicts the glory of the two cultures on the shield of the heroes. While the shield of Aeneas displays the glorious future of the Romans, the shield of Achilles displays with the glory of the Mycenaeans. Virgil makes this parallel because he wants again to connect the *Aeneid* and Rome directly with the Greek civilization.

Anthony is referred to as “barbarians.”¹¹² Most notable of all, however, is how Virgil divinizes the battle, which involves not only Augustus, Anthony, and Cleopatra, but also the Roman gods, who enter into the fray against their Egyptian counterparts. Virgil writes: “In the midst, the queen summons with the native sistrum her minions, nor yet can she notice the twin snakes behind. Monsters generated by all kinds of gods and barking Anubis point their weapons at Neptune and Venus, and at Minerva.”¹¹³ Virgil condemns the Egyptian gods on the grounds that they are monstrous beings: part human and part animal. He also makes a clear distinction between the Roman and the Egyptian gods, who are so different that they can only fight one another. In other words, Virgil believes that the Egyptian gods are too alien to be accepted into the Roman pantheon. Clearly, the Roman gods are superior to the Egyptian gods, which is why, like Augustus, they vanquish their adversaries.

Horace

The poet Horace (65 BCE-8 CE) was born in Venusia, in the south of Italy, but lived in Rome, where he became a friend of Maecenas and Augustus. Horace, who was one of the greatest lyric poets of his age, gives us a clear picture of contemporary Roman society in his poetic works. He is seen as epitomizing the spirit of the Augustan Age. He, too, was part of the imperial propaganda machine, and therefore continues the tradition of representing Egypt unfavorably. One of the most famous of his works is the *Carmina* (Odes), which included three books written in 24 BCE.¹¹⁴ In the “Ode I”, Horace censures the Egyptians, whom he accuses of

¹¹² Virgil, *Aeneis*, 8.695: “On the other side comes Antony with barbaric might and motley arms, victorious over the nations of the dawn and the ruddy sea, brining in his train Egypt and the strength of the East and farthest Bactra; and there follows him (oh the shame of it!) his Egyptian wife.” Virgil, “Aeneid 7-12,” *Aeneid*, edited by H. Rushton Fairclough and G. P. Goold, v. 2, 109, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹¹³ Virgil, *Aeneis*, 8.696 [my translation].

¹¹⁴ Peter Levi, *Horace: A Life*, (London, IB Tauris, 2012).

being intent on the destruction of Rome: “On the Capitol, the queen was preparing fierce ruin and destruction for [Roman] power with her impure and foul crew.”¹¹⁵ He goes on to say that Cleopatra is “shamed by disease and vice, drunk on sweet fortune, out of control, she hoped to gain all she wanted.”¹¹⁶ Here, Horace describes the typical qualities with which Cleopatra was normally associated: a seductive woman without any (Roman) virtues who is willing to obtain what she wants by any means. He adds: “Caesar compels her mind to true fear, her mind frenzied by Mareotic wine. Caesar closely pursues her by ship as she flees from Italy, just as a hawk pursues a soft dove, or as a swift tracker hunts a hare on the snowy plains of Thessaly. He pursues her, to put a deadly monster in chains.”¹¹⁷ Horace thus celebrates the power of Augustus and his victory at the battle of Actium against Cleopatra. He glories in the action of Augustus, who has liberated world by killing a “monster.”

Strabo

Between the end of the Republic and beginning of the Empire, there were also few writers, such as the Greek geographer and historian Strabo (63 BCE-23 CE), who positively mentioned the Egyptian culture. In one of his major works, *Geography*, Strabo described different peoples and countries, including Egypt, during the reign of Augustus.¹¹⁸ Strabo gave an extensive account of Egypt, its people and history. In fact, he writes that “from the beginning, the Egyptians have lived in a civil and cultured manner and have dwelled in well-known lands, thus

¹¹⁵ Horace, *Carmina*, 1.37 [my translation].

¹¹⁶ Horace, “Odes,” in *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*, edited by Rebecca F. Kennedy, 128, (Hackett Pub. Company, 2013).

¹¹⁷ Horace, “Odes,” 128.

¹¹⁸ Daniela Dueck, “The Date and Method of Composition of Strabo’s ‘Geography,’” *Hermes* 127, no. 4 (1999): 467-478, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4477333>.

allowing their system of organization to be remembered.”¹¹⁹ He goes on to praise their organization, particularly in agriculture, “they are worthy of respect, at any rate, for how well they seemed to utilize the good fortune their land provided them and for having properly distributed and tended the land.”¹²⁰

Strabo also merely pointed out that the Egyptian worshipped animals, and, in fact, he did not blame them but only analyzed meticulously their culture. Moreover, he tried to dispel false myths created by other authors disparaging the Egyptians, such as Eratosthenes, a Greek mathematician, geographer, and poet, who said that, “...the expulsion of foreigners is common for all barbarians, and the Egyptians in particular are accused of this based on stories told about Busiris in the Busiritic nome, because later people wished to charge the Egyptians with being xenophobic.”¹²¹ However, Strabo firmly replies, “by Zeus, there was never a king or tyrant named Busiris.”¹²² He goes on to defend Egypt against the disrespectful affirmation of Eratosthenes:

That Egypt was harborless aided this view. Not even its harbor at Pharos was accessible since it was guarded by shepherd-pirates who attacked any who came to anchor there. The Carthaginians also used to throw into the sea any foreigners who were sailing to Sardo or the Pillars. On account of this, many tales of the west are doubted. Even the Persians maliciously led ambassadors by roundabout roads and impoverished lands.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Strabo, “Geography,” in *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*, edited by Rebecca F. Kennedy, 123, (Hackett Pub. Company, 2013).

¹²⁰ From this passage, we can also realize the importance that agriculture had for the Romans, which they inherited from the Greeks. In fact, the Romans and the Greeks were devoted to the land, and the Egyptians used it in such an admirable way that they were worthy of respect and admiration. Strabo, “Geography,” 123.

¹²¹ Strabo, 124.

¹²² Strabo, 124.

¹²³ Strabo, 124.

To sum up, although there are also few positive literary sources, such as the *Geography*, that defend Egyptian culture, the majority of Roman literary sources clearly condemned it. The positive remarks by Strabo in his work are insignificant with respect to the large negative views widely spread in the capital during this period. Surely, we can understand how conflicted the views about the culture of ancient Egypt were, and how perhaps negative propaganda converted the few positive views on them into negative ones.

Early Empire: Pomponius Mela

Another author who was highly suspicious about the Egyptians was Pomponius Mela (d. after 43 CE), one of the earliest Roman geographers. His work is an important reference because Pomponius Mela, who wrote around 50 years after our period of interest, repeated the same negative opinions and prejudices that were present in Rome between the end of the Republic and the early Empire, and were recorded in the works of Ovid, Livy, Virgil, and Horace.

Around 43 CE, he wrote a treatise on geography called *De situ orbis* (“A Description of the World”), which is the earliest surviving geographical work in Latin.¹²⁴ Here, Pomponius Mela discussed the Egyptians describing as strange and bizarre, “The inhabitants of Egypt live very differently from others. They mourn the dead while smeared with manure and think it sacrilege to cremate or bury the dead. Indeed, they place the dead in enclosed chambers after they have been preserved by medical arts. They write their letters in the wrong direction.”¹²⁵ Continuing in this vein, he criticized their practice of mummification, their views on death, and even their way of writing. Again, Pomponius Mela rejected the worship of animals, “They

¹²⁴ F.E. Romer, *Pomponius Mela's Description of the World*, (Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1998), 3-5.

¹²⁵ Pomponius Mela, “Description of the World,” in *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*, edited by Rebecca F. Kennedy, 127, (Hackett Pub. Company, 2013).

worship representations of numerous animals, and even more so the animals themselves, though different people worship different animals. They even go so far in their worship as to make it a crime punishable by death to kill certain animals, even by accident.”¹²⁶ In short, by analyzing the text, we can apprehend how the differences between Rome and Egypt were regarded by Roman commentators. Writers, such as Pomponius Mela, instead of trying to understand it, considered Egyptian culture detrimental.

Middle Empire: Tacitus and Juvenal

Again, Tacitus and Juvenal wrote c. 100 years after our period of interest, but they recounted the same skepticism and hostile views on Egyptians. The Roman historian and politician Tacitus (56-120 CE), considered Egypt to be a difficult province. He believed that although Egypt was a productive land, it would always suffer from unpredictable civil strife and disturbances because Egyptians, he claimed, were superstitious fanatics who were ignorant and careless of civil law.¹²⁷ One of the strongest attacks to the Egyptians was made by the satirical poet Juvenal (50/60-127 CE), who went to Egypt as a soldier under Emperor Hadrian. In his 15th satire, he expressed his indignation at a supposed case of Egyptian cannibalism.¹²⁸ Juvenal was a satirist, not a historian. However, he still is convincing evidence that Egyptian culture was poorly received in Rome. In fact, although Juvenal exaggerated and took opinions to extremes, he is

¹²⁶ Pomponius Mela, “Description of the World,” 127.

¹²⁷ Tacitus, *Historiae*, 1.11: “It had seemed wise to keep thus under the direct control of the imperial house a province which is difficult of access, productive of great harvests, but given to civil strife and sudden disturbances because of the fanaticism and superstition of its inhabitants, ignorant as they are of laws and unacquainted with civil magistrates.” Cornelius Tacitus, “Histories I-III,” *Histories*, edited by M. Hutton and R.M. Ogilvie, v. 2, 21, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1914).

¹²⁸ Juvenal, *Satura XV*, 5.15: “Their tables abstain completely from woolly animals, and there it’s a sin to slaughter a goat’s young. But feeding on animal flesh is allowed. When Ulysses told the story of a crime like this over dinner to an astonished Alcinous, he provoked anger or perhaps laughter in some of his listeners- they thought him a lying raconteur.” Juvenal and Persius, *Juvenal and Persius*, edited by Susanna Morton Braund, 489, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

unlikely to have completely invented the anti-Egyptian atmosphere in the capital that he described so vividly. While we can never know whether the Egyptians really committed an act of cannibalism (Christians would be accused of the same thing), we can at least surmise that Egyptian worship and all its trappings were not appreciated in Rome.

Late Empire: Athenaeus

Another author who strongly censured Egyptian culture was Athenaeus. He was a Greek grammarian and author, who flourished under the Roman Empire around the late second century and early third century CE. Again, Athenaeus was writing after our period of interest, but he still offers further cogent proof that Egyptian culture was poorly received in the capital during the two previous centuries before his time. In fact, the works of Athenaeus presents the same negative opinions, views, and clichés that had taken shape and become prevalent in Rome in the early years of Empire. Athenaeus and his contemporaries did not find anything new about the Egyptians to criticize. Rather, they were influenced by the major authors of the Augustan age, such as Ovid, Virgil, and Horace. The fact that later authors are still repeating the same negative clichés is indicative of the intensity and power of the propaganda of the earlier age.

His major work is the *Deipnosophistai* (“The Gastronomers”), whose great value lies both in significant quotations from lost works of antiquity and in important information on all aspects of life in the ancient Greco-Roman world, including the Roman view on ancient Egypt.¹²⁹ The *Deipnosophistai* describes a banquet held among educated aristocrats, some of whom were real people, who discuss food and other subjects. While at dinner, the conversation turns to the animals worshiped in Egypt, and how this tradition profoundly differentiates the

¹²⁹ Douglas S. Olson, “Athenaeus,” in *The Oxford Companion to Sugar and Sweets*, edited by Darra Goldstein, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

Egyptian culture from the Roman one. In a specific passage of this work, a man, called Anaxandrides, speaks scoffingly of the Egyptians, “They say that the Egyptians are clever at other things, like how they consider eels equal to the gods since they are more honored by far than the gods. We can pray to the gods, for certain, but some people pay as much as twelve drachma or even more just to catch the scent of an eel, so holy is this creature to them.”¹³⁰

Anaxandrides then extends the conversions on the Egyptians who are present in the cities of the Roman Empire, “I would not be able to ally with you. Neither are our manners similar nor are our customs. They are really very far apart. You worship a cow, I sacrifice mine to the gods. You think the eel is the greatest of divinities, while I find it to be by far the most delectable of dishes.”¹³¹ In other words, through his work, Athenaeus strongly supported the early Roman view that the worship of animals profoundly alienated the Roman people from the Egyptians, so much so that the Romans were not even able to ally with them.

Historical Record

Unlike Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, the city of Rome strictly controlled and restricted Egyptian culture and cults. Egyptian cults already present in the Roman cities from the second century BCE expanded their reach across the Empire, and made inroads into Rome.¹³² Even before the annexation of Egypt, two private sanctuaries were erected in Rome dedicated to the Egyptian goddess Isis: one was built on the Capitol Hill around 100-90 BCE, while the second

¹³⁰ Athenaeus, “Deipnosophists,” in *Race and Ethnicity in the Classical World: An Anthology of Primary Sources in Translation*, edited by Rebecca F. Kennedy, 136, (Hackett Pub. Company, 2013).

¹³¹ Athenaeus, “Deipnosophists,” 136.

¹³² Sorek, *The Emperors’ Needles: Egyptian Obelisks and Rome* 38.

one, called *Isium Metellinum*, was built next to the current Via Labicana in 75 BCE.¹³³ At that time, the Roman authorities were not so intolerant of the Egyptian gods.

The Roman Senate

From 70 BCE on, the Roman authorities began actively repressing Egyptian forms of worship. In fact, the Senate issued decrees with the aim of repressing Egyptian culture in Rome, but held back from a total ban because of its great popularity. Literary sources report that the Senate issued decrees against Egyptian culture in the years 64, 58, 53, and 48 BCE.¹³⁴

Interestingly, these decrees are sometimes compared to the so-called *Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus* of 186 BCE, which similarly had aimed to limit the cult of Bacchus in Rome. However, earlier action to repress the cult of Bacchus differs from the later actions of the Senate against Egyptian culture because the worship of Bacchus was a recognized cult, albeit a strictly regulated one. The cult of Bacchus was already present and recognized in Italy and in Rome, and had been part of a tradition dating back to the beginning of the Republic, or, according to some sources, from the beginning of the sixth century BCE. Egyptian culture never enjoyed such status, and never qualified as a religion as such. Although it was present from the early first century BCE, the Roman authorities never officially recognized it (until the end of the first century CE). The Senate did not want to ban the traditional cult of Bacchus as such, but wanted to regulate and control the new and popular practices that it was engendering, and that the Senate

¹³³ M. Bommas, "The Iseum Campense as a Memory Site," in *Memory and Urban Religion in the Ancient World*, edited by M. Bommas, J. Harrison, P. Roy and E. Theodorakopolus (London; New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 180; Richard L. Gordon, "Egyptian deities," in *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, edited by Simon Hornblower, Antony Spawforth, and Esther Eidinow, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, Inc., 2014), https://jcu.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/oupoccc/egyptian_deities/0?institutionId=6224.

¹³⁴ Mazzuca, "I santuari isiaci," 26.

regarded as religiously and politically suspect.¹³⁵ Bacchus could fit into the political framework of Rome, Isis and other Egyptian gods could not. The Senate ban aimed at the perpetual repression of Egyptian culture in general.

The Senate took its first action against Egyptian culture in 64 BCE and decreed the elimination of all *collegia* and other associations created under Sulla (c. early first century BCE). The *collegium* was an association that decided its own admission criteria and was governed by its own statute, called the *lex collegii*, which declared its object and instituted its bodies. They existed also thanks to the Law of the XII Tables, a foundational Roman law sanctioning the absolute freedom of association. During the late stages of the Republic, the *collegia* became highly politicized and increasingly in favor of the plebeian class, which was sympathetic to Egyptian cults, such as those around Isis, Serapis, and Anubis. So the Senate decided to eliminate the associations to give itself a free hand to repress Egyptian culture.¹³⁶

As the Roman writer Tertullian (155-220 CE) records in 58 BCE the Senate ordered the destruction of various statues and altars dedicated to Egyptian deities, such as Serapis, Isis, Harpocrates, and Anubis, that had previously been erected on the Capitoline Hill.¹³⁷ The Senate prohibited altars dedicated to Egyptian gods from being placed on the Capitoline Hill, but the altars, along with shrines and statues, were soon rebuilt in response to strong popular demand, probably with the help of the Tribune of the Plebs. Tertullian also records that when the consul Aulus Gabinius came to approve the sacrifices to make to the gods, he turned down the popular

¹³⁵ J. J. Tierney, "The Senatus Consultum de Bacchanalibus," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy. Section C: Archaeology, Celtic Studies, History, Linguistics, Literature* 51 (1945): 90-95, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25505991>.

¹³⁶ Mazzuca, "I santuari isiaci," 26.

¹³⁷ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 1.10.17: "But Varro recalls that Serapis, and Isis, and Arpocrates, and Anubis had been prohibited from the Capitoline Hill, and that their altars had been thrown down by the senate until they had been rebuilt by means of the members of Popular party" [my translation]. See also Sorek, *The Emperors' Needles*, 38.

request to include Egyptian gods.¹³⁸ The people wanted Egyptian gods just to be officially recognized, but the Roman authorities flatly rejected their request. Egyptian religion was, of course, officially recognized in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, without any trouble.

Between 53 and 52 BCE, as the Roman historian Cassius Dio (155-235 CE) reports, the Senate took a harder line.¹³⁹ This time, it ordered the demolition of all private shrines dedicated to Egyptian gods in Rome. As a consequence, the two private sanctuaries, the one on the Capitoline Hill and the *Isium Metellinum* were pulled down by order of the Senate.¹⁴⁰ Cassius Dio emphasizes that for a long time the Roman authorities were highly suspicious of Egyptian gods.¹⁴¹

Cassius Dio records that in 48 BCE, the Senate once again ordered the demolition of all the shrines dedicated to Serapis and Isis that had previously been rebuilt in Rome between 52 and 48 BCE. Because Egyptian culture was so popular, the Senate felt compelled to explain its actions. The pretext it came up with was that Destiny, or the Fates, did not want Egyptian cults in Rome. As it turns out, a swarm of bees had made its hive on the Capitoline Hill, beside the statue of Hercules, to which a prayer to Isis was attached. Some Isis worshippers had made (illegal) sacrifices in her honor in the vicinity of the statue. Roman soothsayers declared that the hive was an ill omen, so the Senate immediately ordered the destruction of both the prayer to Isis and all

¹³⁸ Tertullian, *Ad Nationes*, 1.10.18: “But, on the first day of January, the consul Gabinius was approving the sacrifices (for the gods) in front of the assembly of the countrymen, he decided not to include any (sacrifice) for Serapis and Isis. However, because he had more power than the attack of the people, he forbade the construction of altars (for Egyptian gods)” [my translation].

¹³⁹ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 47. 3-4: “But it seems to me that that decree passed the previous year, near its close, with regard to Serapis and Isis, was a portent equal to any; for the senate had decided to tear down their temples, which some individuals had built on their own account.” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, “Books 36-40,” *Dio’s Roman History*, edited by Earnest Cary and Herbert Baldwin Foster, v. 3, 477-479, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁴⁰ Gordon, “Egyptian deities.”

¹⁴¹ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 47. 3-4: “Indeed, for a long time they did not believe in these gods.” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, “Books 36-40,” *Dio’s Roman History*, edited by Earnest Cary and Herbert Baldwin Foster, v. 3, 479, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

shrines and statues dedicated to Isis and Serapis in Rome.¹⁴² During the destruction of the temples and statues dedicated to Isis and Serapis, the Romans also accidentally destroyed the sanctuary dedicated to the Roman goddess of war Bellona.¹⁴³ This accident tells us that the Roman authorities were so inflamed by their desire to eradicate Egyptian culture from Rome that they did not even take care not to destroy the temples dedicated to their own deities.

Later, in 28 BCE, Augustus decided that no citizen could worship Egyptian gods within the *pomerium*, namely the sacred boundary of the city.¹⁴⁴ The *pomerium* was strictly reserved for the traditional Roman gods. In 21 BCE, when Augustus was in Sicily, disturbances broke out in Rome and were quickly dealt with by Augustus' son-in-law, Marcus Agrippa, who restored order, and blamed the disturbances on the Egyptian deities.¹⁴⁵ As Cassius Dio records, Agrippa banned Egyptian cults for a radius of seven and a half stadia (1.33 km) from the center on the grounds that the Egyptian cults “were again invading the city.”¹⁴⁶ The sources clearly show that Rome gradually became less tolerant of Egyptian deities, which were eventually held responsible for causing social disturbances. At the same time, the sources show that Egyptian culture had a great appeal on ordinary people in Rome. For example, the Egyptian goddess Isis was very

¹⁴² Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 26. 1-2: “Bees settled on the Capitol beside the statue of Hercules. Sacrifices to Isis chanced to be going on there at the time, and the soothsayers gave their opinion to the effect that all precincts of that goddess and of Serapis should be razed to the ground once more.” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, “Books 41-45,” *Dio’s Roman History*, edited by Earnest Cary and Herbert Baldwin Foster, v.4, 155, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁴³ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 26. 2-3: “In the course of their demolition a shrine of Bellona was unwittingly destroyed and in it were found jars full of human flesh.” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, “Books 41-45,” *Dio’s Roman History*, edited by Earnest Cary, and Herbert Baldwin Foster, v. 4, 155, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

¹⁴⁴ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 2.4.: “As for religious matters, he did not allow the Egyptian rites to be celebrated inside the pomerium.” Cassius Dio Cocceianus, “Books 51-55,” *Dio’s Roman History*, edited by Earnest Cary, and Herbert Baldwin Foster, v. 6, 197, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970). See also Orlin, “Octavian and Egyptian Cults,” 23.

¹⁴⁵ Eric M. Orlin, “Octavian and Egyptian Cults: Redrawing the Boundaries of Romanness,” *The American Journal of Philology* 129, no. 2 (2008): 23, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2756670>.

¹⁴⁶ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 54.6.6: “Then, he controlled whatever other things he found still bad, and even limited the Egyptian holy rites, which were again invading the city, forbidding that these things should not be perform within a half-stade of the city” [referred to Agrippa; my translation].

popular especially among the poor probably because she impersonated the beneficent mother goddess, the bringer of new life after death, and the hope for salvation for everyone. So she was considered to grant more salvation than the traditional Roman gods.¹⁴⁷

It is important to notice that even though the Senate continued to increase its ordinances against the practice of Egyptian religion, the members of the second Roman triumvirate, namely Antony, Augustus and Lepidus, were well aware that it had a large popular following. In a bid to gain popular favor, in October 43 BCE, the *triumvirs* voted to build a double temple dedicated to Isis and Serapes, in the Campus Martius in Rome.¹⁴⁸ This double temple was the first public Egyptian temple built in Rome.¹⁴⁹ The exact date of construction is unknown, but was probably some time around 20-10 BCE. Together, these two temples were known as the *Iseum Campense* and *Serapeum*.¹⁵⁰ Despite the triumvirs' concession, the Roman authorities continued to take a generally dim view of Egyptian culture.¹⁵¹ Perhaps the only reason that the Senate decided not to destroy the double temple was that it had been built by Augustus. The temple was later destroyed by a fire in 80 CE.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Reginald Eldred Witt, *Isis in the Graeco-Roman World* (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 1971).

¹⁴⁸ Kleiner, *Cleopatra and Rome*, 166-167.

¹⁴⁹ Gordon, "Egyptian deities." The floorplan of *Iseum* and *Serapeum* is known primarily from its representation on the Severan Marble Plan. The preserved sections of the Plan suggest the *Iseum* and *Serapeum* was a vast place, roughly 70 m wide and nearly 200 m long, laid out on a north-south axis with an east-west transept and immense apse beyond, punctuated by niches for the display of statues. Molly Swetnam-Burland, "Egypt Embodied: The Vatican Nile," *American Journal of Archaeology* 113, no. 3 (2009): 443, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20627596>.

¹⁵⁰ Bommas, "The Iseum Campense as a Memory Site," 180.

¹⁵¹ In fact, despite this public temple, Egyptian culture was still not officially recognized in Rome.

¹⁵² The double temple was rebuilt by Domitian who ruled from 81 to 96 CE. Swetnam-Burland, "Egypt Embodied: The Vatican Nile," 444.

The Different Approach of the Roman Senate: The Instance of the Phrygian Goddess Cybele vs the Egyptian Goddess Isis

Roman religion was widely inclusive as it included gods, rituals, traditions, and cults from other cultures. In fact, the Romans worshipped not only their own traditional Latin gods and associated divinities imported from the Greek world, but also acknowledged the gods of the peoples they conquered, such as the Phoenician goddess of fertility *Tanit*, whose original name was changed by the Romans into *Caelestis*.

The Romans even embraced cults belonging to people they had yet not conquered. For example, in 204 BCE, the Romans introduced the cult of Cybele also known as Magna Mater (the Great Mother), who came from Pessinus in Phrygia in the still autonomous Anatolia peninsula in modern-day Turkey. In 204 BCE, Rome was fighting the second Punic War, during which they consulted the Sibylline Books, a collection of oracles. The oracles prophesized that the Romans would win the war if they brought the cult of Cybele from Anatolia to Rome, to which the Senate therefore agreed. A Roman embassy was sent to bring back the black-stone cult statue of Cybele.¹⁵³ The Senate later ordered the construction of a temple to house the statue of Cybele, which was erected in 191 BCE on the Palatine Hill so, inside the *pomerium*, near the ancient hut of Romulus, the mythical founder of Rome.¹⁵⁴ So the Romans chose one of their most important and iconic sites for Cybele's temple.

The Roman Senate even established and financed games in honor of Cybele, called *Megalesian Games*, which took place from 4 to 10 April every year. The establishment of the

¹⁵³ Lynn E. Roller, *In Search of God the Mother: The Cult of Anatolian Cybele*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 264.

¹⁵⁴ Robert McKay Wilhelm, "Cybele: The Great Mother of Augustan Order," *Vergilius (1959)* 34 (1988): 80-81, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41592353>.

Megalensian Games and the construction of the temple of Cybele within the *pomerium* gave orthodox recognition to the goddess, just thirteen years after the arrival of the cult in Rome. As opposed to the restrictions imposed on the followers of Egyptian cults, the followers of Cybele were free to put up private shrines in Rome. For example, they built a private sanctuary, called *collegium dendrophorum Matris deum magnae et Attidis*, dedicated to Cybele and her lover, Attis, on the Caelian Hill.¹⁵⁵ This public temple and sanctuary did not, of course, share the same fate of the Egyptian shrines and temples that the Senate ordered destroyed. Even more interestingly, when public temple to Cybele was destroyed by fire in 3 CE, Augustus with the endorsement of the Senate immediately rebuilt it.¹⁵⁶

Some years after the introduction of the cult of Cybele, the Roman authorities felt some misgivings when her priests began to conduct orgiastic and bloody ceremonies in Rome. The Senate therefore prohibited citizens from direct physical participation in the public rites of this sort, but allowed them still to worship Cybele on the Palatine and build private shrines in her honor (as long as they were outside the *pomerium*).¹⁵⁷ During the Republican period, the Roman authorities also made it illegal for Roman men to become priests of the goddess. In fact, the priests of Cybele, called *Galli*, had to castrate themselves, which was forbidden for Roman citizens.¹⁵⁸ So only men from Anatolia could become priests of Cybele. Certainly, the self-castration dictate for priests provided Roman writers in the Republican period with a very good

¹⁵⁵ Claudia Moser, "Eastern Religions in the Roman World," Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007), http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/errw/hd_errw.htm.

¹⁵⁶ Paul J. Burton, "The Summoning of the Magna Mater to Rome (205 B.C.)," *Historia: Zeitschrift für alte Geschichte* 45 (1996): 54, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4436406>.

¹⁵⁷ A. von Domaszewski, "Magna Mater in Latin Inscriptions," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 1 (1911): 50, <https://doi.org/10.2307/295847>.

¹⁵⁸ Cybele was born as a bisexual deity until other gods turned her into a female through castration. Cybele was in love with Attis, who, however, loved someone else. Cybele therefore drove Attis crazy, who eventually castrated himself and died. Later, Cybele asked Zeus to ensure that the body of Attis never decayed. This myth is the basis for the practice of self-mutilation by the priests of Cybele. Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 200.

reason to attack the cult and its practices. However, during the Empire, the Roman authorities allowed freedmen (ex-slaves) to become Cybele priests of the goddess, but, because they were still Roman citizens, they had to find alternatives to self-castration.¹⁵⁹ One alternative was that the initiate stood in a pit under a bull, which was killed, so that its blood poured down upon him. The rite of initiation, which was called *taurobolium*, symbolized purification, the washing away of the old life, and resurrection into a new one.¹⁶⁰ Therefore, during the Empire, the ban was no longer in use, and Roman citizens could take part in the rituals of Cybele.

The Roman authorities were always suspicious of foreign cults, but they normally put up with them. As noted above, the treatment used with respect to the cult of Cybele is not even comparable to the one reserved for the Egyptian gods, considering that the cult of Cybele was more inimical than any Egyptian form of worship to what the Romans considered their virtues. As we also saw above, while the Romans were quick to officially recognize the cult of Cybele, (even building a public temple to the goddess inside the *pomerium* only 13 years after she made her appearance in the city), they did not extend the same courtesy to Isis and her followers. Isis was recognized by Caligula (37-41 CE), but it was not until 68 CE, in the reign of Vespasian, that the goddess was officially welcomed (along with other Egyptian gods, such as Serapis) into the Roman pantheon. Only after 170 years of protests, decrees, repression and destruction did the Roman authorities finally allow the construction a public temple within the *pomerium*.¹⁶¹ Cybele and Isis had similar characteristics but were treated quite differently.

¹⁵⁹ Michael P. Carroll, "Mater Deum Magna," *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 98, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv17ppcnm.9>.

¹⁶⁰ Morford, *Classical Mythology*, 394.

¹⁶¹ Moser, "Eastern Religions in the Roman World."

Monumental Egyptian Art in Rome

Although opposed to Egyptian culture, Rome fully embraced monumental Egyptian art. The people of Rome became fascinated by Egypt, the Nile, and Egyptian art, a trend that later scholars dubbed Egyptomania.¹⁶² Augustus was one of the first to adopt Egyptian art. He even used Egyptian motifs as his own symbols. For example, the sphinx, which was considered a symbol of hope, was part of his seal. Augustus also decorated his own house on the Palatine Hill with Egyptian motifs. Some of the multi-colored rooms were decorated with images of large plants, amongst which were set *uraei* (rearing cobras) and Egyptian crowns. The *uraei* were powerful Egyptian symbols that stood for the supreme power of the pharaoh. Furthermore, when Augustus added to his house a temple dedicated to his patron god, Apollo, he also had terracotta plaques showing Isis between two sphinxes included. In the house of his wife, Livia, were wall paintings with Egyptian crowns and solar disks.¹⁶³

In 10 BCE, Augustus had two Egyptian obelisks brought to Rome and ordered them to be erected at prominent sites in the city. The first one had initially been erected by the Pharaoh Sethos and is now in Piazza del Popolo, while the other one, dating from the reign of Pharaoh Psammetichus II (the early sixth century BCE), is now in Piazza Montecitorio. Augustus had them placed close to many of his own most significant monuments such as the *Ara Pacis Augustae* and his own tomb.¹⁶⁴ The emplacement of these impressive monoliths fuelled the desire for Egyptian objects among wealthy Roman aristocrats, who, according to contemporary sources, also began organizing Egyptian-themed parties.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² Egyptomania means the fascination for ancient Egypt and its culture. Ronald Fritze, *Egyptomania: A History of Fascination, Obsession and Fantasy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016).

¹⁶³ Kleiner, "Egyptomania," 172.

¹⁶⁴ Kleiner, 163-168.

¹⁶⁵ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 575.

The elite began to use Egyptian adornments and architectural styles around Rome and in different contexts, such as cemeteries, villas, houses, and gardens. For example, the “Aula Isiaca” (Hall of Isis) was a wealthy house on the Palatine that was redecorated in the Egyptian style around 25 BCE. It contains wall paintings alluding to the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis. Another monumental example is the famous villa of the emperor Hadrian (76-138 CE) at Tibur (modern Tivoli). The villa incorporated many statues and other artifacts evoking Egypt.¹⁶⁶

One of the most famous examples of Egyptian art among the elite is the “Pyramid of Cestius,” a monumental tomb built during the reign of Augustus between the years 18 BCE and 12 BCE. Gaius Cestius (d. around 15 BCE), a Roman magistrate, decided to erect a family tomb in the shape of a pyramid outside the city walls.¹⁶⁷ This pyramid is close in size and style to the pyramids built as one-person tombs in the south of Egypt during the New Kingdom.¹⁶⁸ In Cestius’ day, this type of pyramid was especially associated with the Nubian pyramids of Meroë (Sudan), and, in fact, Cestius probably served in the province of Sudan, which was annexed by Rome in 24 BCE.¹⁶⁹ Although this monument is more Nubian than Egyptian in style, it nonetheless belongs to the period of Egyptomania that arrived in Rome after the annexation. Subsequently, in the late third century CE, the emperor Aurelian commissioned the construction of new city walls which incorporated the Pyramid of Cestius and repurposed it as a sort of triangular bastion.¹⁷⁰

Cestius was not the only aristocrat who decided to erect an Egyptian-style tomb. In fact, other similar funerary structures were built along the Via Appia and the Via Flaminia. One of

¹⁶⁶ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 109-110.

¹⁶⁷ Tatomir, “Egyptomania,” 575.

¹⁶⁸ Norman Neuerburg, “Greek and Roman Pyramids,” *Archaeology* 22, no. 2 (1969): 106-115.

¹⁶⁹ Andrew Leach, “Architecture, imperial,” in *Encyclopedia of Empire*, edited by John Mackenzie, (Wiley, 2016).

¹⁷⁰ Amanda Claridge, *Rome*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 401.

them was misidentified in the Middle Ages as the tomb of Marcellus, nephew of Augustus. As it happens, Marcellus was entombed in the Mausoleum of Augustus, but the fact that such an association was even possible tells us that monuments in the Egyptian style were considered appropriate for imperial family members.¹⁷¹

The fact that Roman authorities allowed Egyptian art in the capital should not be taken as implying a wholehearted espousal of Egyptian culture. On the contrary, Augustus' obelisks were a show of strength and dominance. Augustus wanted to put the Egyptian obelisks in Rome, not as objects of veneration, but as permanent monuments to his conquest of Egypt and the defeat of Cleopatra. He also wanted the people who saw the obelisks to connect him in their minds with the Egyptian royal kings. He therefore placed the monoliths in significant locations around Rome to make them highly noticeable not only for the aristocracy but also for the ordinary people. As we saw above, Augustus decorated part of his house with Egyptian symbols, but now we can also understand them as representing his triumph over Cleopatra. Now Egypt belonged to him, and the rooms in his house will have reminded him of that fact every day. In other words, Augustus adopted Egyptian symbols and imagery as form of propaganda and to vaunt his power, not to celebrate Egyptian culture for its own sake. If there was celebration, it was of his triumph over the Egyptians.¹⁷²

Egyptian art in the capital became a kind of status symbol. Emperors and wealthy Romans who lived in the capital displayed monumental Egyptian structures largely to show off their wealth, prestige, and power.¹⁷³ For example, Cestius probably knew the stories of ancient Egyptian culture, and probably also saw the paintings of the monumental and glorious pyramids

¹⁷¹ Kleiner, "Egyptomania," 168-170.

¹⁷² Kleiner, 164-168.

¹⁷³ Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28.

in which the Egyptian pharaohs rested for eternity. An elite family such the Cestius's, could hardly find a better place or type of tomb to make other elite families envious.¹⁷⁴

The Pyramid of Cestius and the other pyramid structures in Rome show that the imperial family and the wealthy Romans were perfectly happy to appropriate Egyptian imagery. But they were by no means necessarily sympathetic to Egyptian culture. In fact, most of them supported the Roman Senate in its repression of Egyptian culture. An additional observation to be made is that small Egyptian objects, which were extensively found in Roman cities, were not particularly common in Rome.¹⁷⁵ The scarce presence of small Egyptian objects in Rome suggests that ordinary people were liable to run into difficulties when they tried to worship Egyptian gods, or just enjoy Egyptian culture. Given that even private shrines dedicated to Egyptian gods in Rome were destroyed by order of the Senate, it is hardly surprising that so few small-sized Egyptian objects have been found in the city.

Chapter Conclusion

Historically, the Romans had tended to integrate rather than suppress the cultures of the peoples they vanquished, but, between the end of the Republic and the early stage of the Empire, Rome seemed to break with its earlier Republican tradition of cultural tolerance. In fact, the Roman Senate constantly issued decrees against Egyptian culture, and the followers of Egyptian cults were not free to build private shrines. The followers of Egyptian cults insistently asked for official recognition, but the Roman authorities gave no sign of relenting. The situation in Rome was not even close to the peaceful atmosphere that we find in the Roman cities of Delos,

¹⁷⁴ Kleiner, "Egyptomania," 168.

¹⁷⁵ Heinz, "Mutual Exchange," 28.

Pompeii, and Aquileia. The negative attitude to Egyptians and Egypt was also fostered by many authors of the day, whose highly politicized works stigmatized Egypt and its culture. Few authors were in favor of Egyptian culture.

So, the presence of monumental Egyptian art in Rome can be misleading, and should not be interpreted as implying acceptance of the corresponding culture and religion. Some monuments are the result of the desire of wealthy families to flaunt their power rather than being the result of any desire to embrace Egyptian art and culture. Unlike some of its own provincial cities, and in spite of the obelisks and other majestic Egyptian-style constructions, Rome remained hostile to Egyptian culture.

5. The Reasons for the Different Reception of Egyptian Culture in Early Imperial Rome

The previous two chapters considered the way that, in the years between the end of the Republic and the beginning of Empire, Egyptian culture was received very differently in Rome, which was generally hostile to it, from the way it was received in the Roman cities of Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia, which were generally open and welcoming. There are three main factors behind the fear of Egypt and the consequent disparity of treatment between the Roman cities and Rome, namely: the Senate, Augustus' campaign against Egypt, and the need to reconstruct a specifically Roman identity, unadulterated by foreign influences. It was a combination of all these three factors that caused Rome to be more hostile than the rest of the Empire to Egyptian culture and religion.

The Roman Senate

From the early first century BCE, the Senate promoted fears of Egypt in Rome because the authorities were suspicious of and even hostile toward all "Eastern" cults, no matter if they were from Greece or the Orient, including Egypt. The Roman authorities saw these cults as incompatible with the conservative, rational, juridical, and religious traditions of Rome, which were among the pillars of its political establishment. The authorities feared that foreign cults might foster instability and internal conflict. They also feared the irrational elements of foreign cult practices, and the possibility that foreign cults might encourage political opposition and subversion. The Senate repeatedly tried to forbid Egyptian forms of worship in Rome, but not in

other parts of the Empire, which suggests that they feared anything that they could not control and regulate close to home. The Senate did not fear the Egyptian deities as such, but rather the followers of foreign cults who could create disturbances in the city. This attitude of fear and suspicion led to persistent repression, continuing into the Augustan period.¹⁷⁶

However, as seen in the previous chapter, the Senate took a harder line on Egyptian culture than on other cultures such as the cult of the goddess Cybele. The Senate's increasing intolerance of Egyptian practices and beliefs was symptomatic of a deeper fear that went beyond its concern at the possibility of internal disturbance. In fact, ancient Egyptian deities were popular among the plebeians, as evidenced by archaeological relics and artefacts both from around the Empire and from the city of Rome, as well as by the literature of the time.¹⁷⁷ Around 70 BCE, a group of plebeians, called *populares*, decided to adopt Egyptian deities as a sign of rebellion against the patricians and their enduring political power. For example, the leader of the *populares* was Claudius Pulcher, who, with the help of some powerful supporters, was able to issue the first Roman coin representing Isis.¹⁷⁸ The *populares* used Egyptian symbols to challenge Roman gods in order to break the traditional political rules. On the contrary, the patricians were backed by the patrician-dominated Senate, which, from c. 65 BCE to 45 BCE, constantly promulgated legislative measures against Egyptian cults, yet, conscious of the strength of popular support, limited itself to minor actions without definitively banning the cults from Rome.¹⁷⁹ The Senate may have wanted to reassert its authority over the plebeians as well as its prerogative to decide on matters of religion. In the last days of the Republic, the Senate

¹⁷⁶ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 576.

¹⁷⁷ Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults," 237.

¹⁷⁸ Claudius Pulcher was born in a patrician family but supported the cause of the plebeians. W. Jeffrey Tatum, *The Patrician Tribune: Publius Clodius Pulcher*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

¹⁷⁹ Mazzuca, "I santuari isiaci," 26.

became harsher than it had been earlier in the Republican period and, even before the outbreak of conflict between Augustus and Mark Anthony and Cleopatra, whipped up public opinion against even the minimal presence of Egyptian gods in Rome.¹⁸⁰

Augustus' Campaign Against Egypt

The fact that the city of Rome was the seat of government is one reason for the Roman Senate's particular hostility to Egyptian cultish practices. Another is Augustus himself, who played an important anti-Egyptian role. The "Terror of Egypt" was a major theme in Augustus's propaganda, which was later adopted by his successors.¹⁸¹ Augustus's propaganda in Rome fomented and promoted fears of Egypt both for political and for economic reasons.

The Political Reason

The political reason for Augustus's propaganda was that he wanted to gain the favor of the people and the Senate to win support against Mark Anthony. In fact, Mark Anthony was the only person who could contrast Augustus in his rise to power. However, Augustus did not just gain the support against Mark Antony, but also found a common enemy, Egypt, which allowed him to portray himself as the one who would save Rome. He wanted to gain the favor of the Senate because he learned from the mistake of his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, that just the favor of people is not enough. He wanted the Senate to believe that Egypt, Cleopatra and Mark Anthony were treating the life, religion, and value of Rome. So he could defeat Egypt and

¹⁸⁰ Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults," 238.

¹⁸¹ Livia Capponi, "The Roman Period," in *A Companion to Ancient Egypt*, edited by Alan Lloyd, (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 186.

became a hero and thus win the favor of both the people and the Senate. His subsequent rise to power suggests that his propaganda was effective.

In 33 BCE, Augustus declared war not on Mark Antony but on Cleopatra because he did not want to set off another civil war.¹⁸² He claimed that he wanted to defend Rome and the Italian peninsula from a foreign aggressor. During the ensuing military campaign, Augustus continuously stressed the difference between Italy and Egypt, and presented himself as the defender of the Roman way of life, which naturally entailed the use of religion as an important tool of propaganda. He characterized Cleopatra as Isis, which was a characterization that Cleopatra herself willingly embraced as a mark of favor among her people.¹⁸³ As the Roman historian Cassius Dio reports, Augustus explicitly used Cleopatra's identification with Isis in a speech urging his army to fight for the motherland against the enemy.¹⁸⁴ Cleopatra's self-identification with Isis and the consequent association of her name with that of the goddess may explain why the Roman Senate took far longer to recognize Isis than other non-Roman deities. The recognition of Isis in Rome would have been like accepting the triumphant entrance of "Cleopatra" into the city. So this is one possible reason why the Senate took 170 years to formally accept Isis in the Roman pantheon.

Augustus thus portrayed himself not just as the defender of the *patria*, but as the defender of ancient Roman traditions and values, and therefore also of ancient Roman deities. In another strategic move, he read out Antony's will and testament before a Roman crowd, which thus came to hear of the Antony's perverse wish to be buried at Alexandria in Egypt.¹⁸⁵ In short, Augustus's

¹⁸² Tuck, *A History of Roman Art*, 114.

¹⁸³ Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults," 238.

¹⁸⁴ Cassius Dio, *Ρωμαϊκή Ιστορία*, 50.25.3: "He does not respect our laws or the gods of our ancestors but he prostrates himself to that girl as if she were Isis or Selene" [referred to Mark Antony; my translation].

¹⁸⁵ Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults," 245.

propaganda against Egypt portrayed him as the defender of ancient Roman traditions but also stigmatized Egypt in Rome. This allowed him to gain popular favor for his subsequent rise to power.

The Economic Reason

The economic reason for Augustus's propaganda against Egypt was that Egypt lay in a strategic geographical position.¹⁸⁶ Egypt was the leading exporter of grain to Italy, and its capital, Alexandria, was an extremely wealthy international financial and commercial center that linked Egypt both to the Roman West and, through the Red Sea, to India. As a result, whoever managed to obtain military control of Egypt, whether a Roman or a foreign leader, would become a critical threat and menace to the stability of the Roman Empire.¹⁸⁷ So Augustus, who was keen to conquer Egypt and turn it into a province, created a negative image of Egypt in order to dissuade foreign powers from invading it. The economic importance of Egypt was demonstrated by the fact that after the official Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, Augustus made it not just a province but his own personal property. He also lavishly commemorated the capture of Egypt, including the fabricating of coins showing crocodiles. Egypt became immediately essential to the new-born Roman Empire because, from the time of Augustus, grain exported from Alexandria supplied most of the food for Rome, and from the early third century CE, Egypt also provided Rome with many legions in the East.¹⁸⁸ So Roman emperors upheld the negative image of Egypt even after the time of Augustus to dissuade possible contenders. In

¹⁸⁶ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 570.

¹⁸⁷ Capponi, "The Roman Period," 186.

¹⁸⁸ Boatwright, *Peoples of the Roman World*, 115-117.

short, the propaganda war, as well as the actual war with Antony and Cleopatra, inflamed public resentment against Egypt and all things Egyptian.

The Need to Reconstruct a Specifically Roman Identity and the Unsuitability of Egyptian Culture

Augustus was not opposed to Egyptian culture and religion as such. After the repression of previous years, he later started programs to restore some Egyptian shrines in Rome (outside the *pomerium*). Augustus's earlier political hostility to Egyptian cults was a function of his awareness that Rome was going through a moment of transition.¹⁸⁹ After all, Rome had just gone through fifty years of civil strife, and the collapse of the Roman Republic and many of its values and certainties was a traumatic and critical moment. Roman identity had been gradually eroded and undermined by long civil wars. Knowing that Rome needed to reassert its sense of mission and identity, Augustus drew a clear line between Roman and foreign gods, embracing the former and "othering" the latter. He wanted to set clear boundaries between being Roman and non-Roman, and thus reconstruct a strong sense of Roman cohesion and unity. Rome, the city, was to be the face of the true Roman identity. This is why Rome, while it could happily accept foreign art to show off its power and prestige, could not allow foreign cults to become too widespread in the city lest it compromise its identity.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Orlin, "Octavian and Egyptian Cults," 231.

¹⁹⁰ Orlin, 243-246.

Egyptian Culture did not fit in with the Plan of Augustus

In his plan for the reaffirmation of the ancient religious traditions of Rome, Augustus did not separate Greek from Roman culture because it had been fully absorbed by the Romans. By contrast, Egyptian culture seemed naturally inimical to his plan, for three main reasons.¹⁹¹ First of all, Egyptian religion was in many ways the opposite of Roman beliefs and practices. As we have already seen, Egyptian culture was based on a set of religious beliefs different from those of the Roman and Greek world. The Egyptians worshipped gods who were part human and part animal, while the Romans and Greeks worshipped only gods in anthropomorphic form. Further, the Egyptians considered animals sacred and forbade everyone from killing them, while the most important religious practice in the Roman and Greek world was the sacrifice of animals to the gods. Augustus drew a sharp distinction between the Egyptian and the Greco-Roman religions because they were, in effect, very distinct, too distinct to blend easily. Egyptian gods could not fit in with the austere traditional belief system of Rome.

Second, Egyptian culture repudiated the Roman ideal of humility (although the Roman wealthy elite did not seem very humble). Roman humility was an important point in Augustus' propaganda messaging, and was touted as one of the core values of a true Roman. In fact, Augustus made a point of not living in a royal palace but in a standard house. Augustus saw in Egyptian culture, which was full of precious materials, rich pharaohs, and majestic temples, a possible threat to his political doctrine. Similarly, the traditional Roman moralists were against ostentatious display and often mentioned Egyptian jewelry, emeralds, and pearls as symbols of wasteful extravagance.¹⁹²

¹⁹¹ Tatomir, "Egyptomania," 576.

¹⁹² Interestingly, Egyptian culture nevertheless influenced the Romans through the export from Egypt to Rome of gems and luxury objects. In fact, after the conquest of Egypt, Romans began importing large volumes of gems and

Third, Egyptian culture challenged one of the most important pillars of Roman society: the *pater familias*. In fact, the Roman writer Pomponius Mela (referenced in the previous chapter) strongly censured Egyptian women because they could conduct business, perform physical tasks, and took care of the elders, whereas Egyptian men could tend to the home and raise their children. As Pomponius Mela asserted, “Women tend to the forum and business, while men take care of the spinning and the home. Women carry heavy burdens on their shoulders. Men carry them upon their heads. Parents in need must be taken care of by the women. The men are required to raise the children.”¹⁹³ All in all, the Egyptian social system was a huge scandal in the very patriarchal Roman society. Differently from the Egyptian culture, in Rome, the *pater familias*, the father of the family, was the oldest living male in a household, and he exercised absolute power over his entire family. He held total control over the members of his family and economic goods, took care of the elders, and even had the right of life and death on the members of his own family. Roman women took care of all domestic affairs, managed the household, and did not work. Only lower-class Roman women had a public life because they had to work to support themselves economically.¹⁹⁴ According to the Roman frame of mind, Egyptian women enjoyed too much freedom, independence, and autonomy, which were outlandish conditions for the rigorous and rigid Roman society. In short, Augustus may have feared that Egyptian culture, so popular among the plebeians, would change the minds of the people of Rome. In fact, Egyptian ideas seemed to challenge the religion, value-system, and the religious-political

luxury objects from Egypt. The export of gems and other extravagances from Egypt greatly affected Roman tastes and sensibilities at all levels of society. The Roman suspicion of eastern mysticism and luxury yielded in the face of the extravagance that accompanied the growth of the Empire. Heinz, “Mutual Exchange,” 29.

¹⁹³ Pomponius Mela, “Description of the World,” 127.

¹⁹⁴ Richard P. Saller, “Pater Familias, Mater Familias, and the Gendered Semantics of the Roman Household,” *Classical Philology* 94, no. 2 (1999): 182-197, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/270558>.

institutions of Rome. It therefore posed a real threat at a crucial moment for Augustus, who wanted conformity and social peace so that he might build his Empire.

Chapter Conclusion

In conclusion, by all contemporary accounts, the Romans maintained a generally negative and hostile attitude to Egypt, which was based on political calculation and fuelled by negative propaganda. The Romans were obviously fascinated by Egyptian culture but did not want to see Egyptian religious beliefs become too prevalent. The Roman authorities were more severe in Rome because it was under tighter political control than Delos, Pompeii and Aquileia.

6. Conclusion

The archaeological and literary evidence reveals that, between the end of the Republic and beginning of the Empire, Egyptian culture was widely adopted and enjoyed in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia. The survey of the objects found in these cities suggests that the newly imported Egyptian artifacts coexisted with other cultures' artifacts that were already present. For example, Egyptian style objects were found close to Greek and Etruscan style objects. Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia were key cities for the prosperity and control of the Roman Empire, so, given their importance, Roman authorities were certainly aware of the interest in Egyptian culture in these areas. However, neither the central nor the local authorities took any formal or informal action to repress or limit Egyptian culture.

On the other hand, the situation in Rome was not even close to the peaceful atmosphere that we find in Delos, Pompeii, and Aquileia. Indeed, the negative reception of Egyptian culture in the capital city is clearly reported by many authors of the day, such as Virgil, Ovid, Horace and Livy, whose works reflect the political situation of their time, when the Roman Senate constantly issued decrees against Egyptian culture. Unlike the followers of other gods, such as the Phrygian goddess Cybele, the followers of Egyptian cults were not free to build private shrines. Even after the followers of Egyptian cults firmly asked for official recognition, Roman authorities gave no sign of giving up. This approach is not coherent with the historical approach of Roman authorities towards foreign cultures. Lastly, the fact that the Roman authorities allowed Egyptian art in the capital should not imply an espousal of Egyptian culture: some monuments resulted from the desire of elite families to vaunt their power rather than embrace

Egyptian art and culture. The problem was that, unlike some smaller cities that were still part of the Empire, Rome remained essentially hostile to Egyptian culture.

The reasons for this disparity are multiple. First, Rome was under tighter political control than Delos, Pompeii and Aquileia. It was the seat of the Senate, an institution that had always viewed foreign cultures suspiciously. In addition, between the end of the Republic and the beginning of Empire, the plebeians adopted Egyptian religion as a sign of protest and dissent, which gave the Senate, which was mostly made up of members of the patrician class, yet another reason to repress it. Second, in the same period, Augustus promulgated highly negative anti-Egyptian propaganda with the clear intent of inflaming public resentment. By whipping up hatred and fear, he sought to obtain the support of the Senate. Third, standing as the symbol and root of Roman identity, the city had to exemplify what it meant to be a Roman. Rome thus needed to affirm its ancient religious traditions more assertively than other cities of the Empire. All these reasons, namely the Senate, Augustus' campaign against Egypt, and the need to reconstruct a specifically Roman identity, explain why Rome was more hostile than the rest of Roman cities to Egyptian culture.

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