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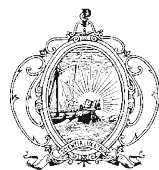
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# CONTEXT AND MEANING

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# Egyptian Motifs in Pompeian Wall Paintings in their Architectural Context

Anu Kaisa Koponen

## Abstract

*This statistical study on Egyptian motifs in Pompeian wall paintings aims to answer three questions: 1) What was the spectrum of various images alluding to Egypt in Pompeian wall paintings?, 2) how were these diverse images distributed in Pompeian architecture?, and 3) how many of these images were connected to the worship of Isis? It defines seven Egyptian image groups and investigates them in their context. According to this research Egyptian motifs were spread sparsely and homogenously among Pompeian buildings while images of Egyptian deities were adapted to the Roman religious pantheon.*

This statistical study on Egyptian motifs in Pompeian wall paintings aims to answer three questions: 1) What was the spectrum of various images alluding to Egypt in Pompeian wall paintings?, 2) how were these diverse images distributed in Pompeian architecture?, and 3) how many of these images were connected to the worship of Isis? After analysing all Egyptian motifs in their architectural context it is possible to deduce how the Pompeians used diverse Egyptian motifs as a part of their interior decoration and what messages they communicated with these exotic images.

Egyptian themes in Roman art have always been at the centre of both scholars' and the general public's attention. Even so, our knowledge of these finds is quite fragmentary, since there is a lack of updated catalogs of Egyptian motifs in frescoes, as well as of Egyptian-style object finds.<sup>1</sup> Only Nilotic scenes are collected together in a catalog by Miguel John Vesluys.<sup>2</sup> As a result, Vesluys, Paul G. P. Meyboom and John R. Clarke have engaged in an interesting discussion of multi-faceted interpretations of Nilotic scenes. They explain how these watery landscapes filled with funny pygmies and exotic animals performed multiple functions: they were both exotic decorations and religious images alluding to the inundation of the Nile and symbols of abundance. Simultaneously they were protective apotropaic images as well as representations of the colonial Other.<sup>3</sup>

Nowhere else do we find such a variety and quantity of information on ancient life as in Pompeii. However, it is important to keep in mind that each ancient centre had its own special characteristics. The catalog *Pompeii: Pitture e Mosaici*

(1990–2003) together with the index of subjects in the *Pitture e Pavimenti di Pompei* (1981–1992) were effective tools for tracing Egyptian motifs prior to my field work sessions. This testifies that there is still a lot of work to do in organizing and interpreting the information available from Pompeii.

## THE SPECTRUM OF EGYPTIAN IMAGES

Egyptian images of Pompeian wall paintings can be divided into seven groups:

1. *Nilotic scenes* represent pygmies and exotic animals in the Nile Delta;
2. *Egyptian decorative details* - such as caryatides, human and divine figures, objects of the Isis cult, as well as Egyptian flora and fauna - are flexibly combined with other decorative motifs;
3. *Egyptian cult images* are reminiscent of Pompeian *lararium* paintings, and both testify to the worship of deities in a specific space;
4. *Egyptian landscape vignettes* depict Egyptian architecture such as the pyramid or pylon (the gateway to an Egyptian temple);
5. *Mythological pictures of the myth of Io* are pendants: in the first scene Io is depicted with cow horns on her head while she is guarded by many-eyed Argos. In the second scene Io has arrived in the Canopus and is received by Isis;
6. *Painted garden rooms with Egyptian details* are otherwise reminiscent of a garden room of the Villa of Livia but they are embellished with Egyptian motifs;
7. *The personification of Egypt* (or Africa) is a female figure with an elephant headdress.