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# Social Expectations and Egyptian Motifs in Pompeian Wall Paintings

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This study focuses on Egyptian motifs of Pompeian wall paintings in their architectural context, in order to deduce how Pompeian families played with their multiple roles and identities through their domestic decoration. By collecting all Egyptian motifs of Pompeian frescoes in my catalog, I aim to trace unwritten social norms as well as boundaries of the patron's and artist's freedom.

In this article 'Egyptian motifs' are clearly identifiable figures alluding to Egypt in Roman wall paintings<sup>1</sup>. They are always surrounded by abundance of images representing Greek myths and deities as well as Hellenistic architecture, artworks, and luxury items. I have included in my statistical study only images which clearly evoke Egypt in their visual form or subject choice<sup>2</sup>. This does not mean that these motifs only alluded to Egypt in Roman eyes. Egyptian motifs and Egyptianizing objects derived from the imagery of Hellenistic koiné, especially its multicultural hotspot Alexandria.<sup>3</sup> Alexandrian imagery was created to be meaningful for diverse ethnic groups simultaneously and therefore it was designed to be open for interpretations of various kinds.

Egyptian motifs catch the eye to such a degree

that they are well recorded in the catalogs of Pompeian wall paintings and mosaics (*PPP* and *PPM*) used as a backbone of my statistical study.<sup>4</sup> Egyptian motifs are easy to notice for a researcher among the abundant pictorial world referring mainly to Greek culture. There is no doubt that their Egyptian allusions were noticed by Pompeians as well, even though their interpretations varied. On one hand these images offered glimpses to the exotic and luxurious fantasy world composed of Roman stereotypes of Egypt and Egyptians. On the other hand Egyptianizing decoration of houses was sometimes connected with the Isis cult. Pompeians restored their temple of Isis soon after the earthquake of the year AD 62. This testifies to the importance of the Isis cult for the Pompeians during the last decades of the city. Even so Pompeian tomb inscriptions do not reveal any Isiac follower or priest and only four graffiti refer to them.<sup>5</sup>

Roman public art visualized above all political interests but Roman domestic imagery is much more difficult to interpret.<sup>6</sup> P. Zanker notes that the visual imagery celebrating the emperor in the public sphere was excluded from the domestic imagery almost totally.<sup>7</sup> Recently numerous scholars have discussed the multifaceted role

1 Pompeian wall paintings are local products including their 'Egyptian motifs'. In this study 'Egyptianizing decoration' refers to decoration composed of Egyptian-style objects and painted Egyptian motifs produced outside Egypt, whereas the term *Aegyptiaca* refers to objects that are originally imported from Egypt. This terminology is influenced by definitions of Nikola D. Bellucci. He will propose in his research project *Indagini sui reperti e i motivi egizi ed egittizzanti nel contesto pompeiano* that for historical and etymological reasons the term '*Aegyptiaca*' should be used to describe products imported originally from Egypt (and made by or for Egyptians), whereas artworks evoking Egyptian style or form but produced outside Egypt are 'Egyptianizing'.

2 A lotus-flower as a decorative pattern and a figure of a sphinx were widespread in Classical Greek decoration and thus excluded from my statistical research.

3 SAVVOPOULOS 2011; POLLIT 1986.

4 The table of my statistical study is in the poster "Social Expectations and Egyptian Motives in Pompeian Wall Painting" and can be downloaded in my website ([anukaisakoponen.altervista.org](http://anukaisakoponen.altervista.org)) and the website of the University of Bologna, Programma Picta Fragmenta: <http://www.disci.unibo.it/it/ricerca/archeologia/progetti-ricerca/programma-picta-fragmenta-1/picta-fragmenta-rileggendo-la-pittura-vesuviana-sessione-poster>

5 CIL IV, 787: *Cn(aeum) Helvium / Sabinum aed(ilem) Isiaci / universi rog(ant)*; CIL IV, 3141: *Isi[acis] - - - Jis ubique*; CIL IV, 1011: *Cuspium Pansam aed(ilem) / Popidius Natalis cliens cum Isiacis rog(at)*; CIL IV, 4189: ἐμνήσθη Θεόφιλος Βεροῦς ἐπ' ἀγαθῆ παρὰ τῆ κυρία "Theophilus has remembered Beroe wishing her well before the mistress (Isis)", transl. by H. SOLIN (2012, p. 102).

6 ZANKER 1988.

7 ZANKER 2002, p. 2014.

of Egyptian and Egyptianizing decoration concluding that very same images were interpreted differently by diverse viewers as well as depending on the context and assemblage.<sup>8</sup>

Social norms defined actions connected to status, prestige and maintenance of traditions. Variations of Pompeian domestic decoration reveal both social and religious strategies of diverse Pompeian families to adapt and enlarge the boundaries of their roles and identities. Each family had its own individual agency when they selectively borrowed, adopted and appropriated both decorative fashions and religious choices in their homes. By observing how decorative solutions varied from house to house I have traced diverse categories of images and distribution types of Egyptian motifs. The original location of Pompeian objects finds is often unclear.<sup>9</sup> In contrast most wall painting finds are faded but still *in situ* making these frescoes an invaluable source of Pompeian domestic life. My statistical material is presented in the table "Egyptian motives in Pompeian houses according to room types".<sup>10</sup> From this table it is possible to notice patterns reflecting unwritten norms and traditions as well as trace borderlines of individual freedom.

### 1. New Religious Boundaries and Decorative Fashion of the Augustan Era

Near the beginning of the Imperial era developed new wall painting genres such as monochromatic panels with thin columns, two-dimensional Pharaonic figures and Nilotic scenes with funny pygmies. Augustan architectural writer Vitruvius criticizes the new wall painting fashion depicting '*monstra*'.<sup>11</sup> According to finds such paintings were filled with Egyptian motifs in much larger scale in Rome than in any Pompeian house.<sup>12</sup> Vergil uses the same word '*monstra*' as Vitruvius. In his poem they are Egyptian monsters that attack, together with the barking Anubis, the

Roman deities Neptunus, Venus and Minerva. These monsters fight against Octavian and for Cleopatra, who is calling for her people with the *sistrum*.<sup>13</sup> Also this poem has influenced in the currently widespread idea of Augustus hostility to the Egyptian cults. According to I. Bragantini, Pharaonic and Nilotic images were without cultic implications and possibly political in their character.<sup>14</sup> She and M. De Vos assume that these Egyptian motifs spread rapidly in Roman art in order to celebrate Augustus' victory over Egypt.<sup>15</sup> However, the dynamics between these new wall painting genres and Augustan visual imagery was more complex.

Several Senate degrees passed against the worship of Egyptian deities during the Late Republic ordering the demolition of the shrines of Egyptian deities in the Capitol during the years 58, 54 and 50 BC.<sup>16</sup> The new order to demolish all the sacred areas dedicated to Isis and Serapis followed in 48 BC. These repetitive orders testify that the Egyptian cults were popular in Rome and the Senate did not manage to put their restrictions into force. Eric Orlin has pointed out how Augustan reforms of the 20's BC defined Roman religious boundaries in a new way by allowing Egyptian cults to be practiced, but only outside the *pomerium*. At the same period Augustus ordered descendants to restore private Egyptian shrines, and the rest he restored himself.<sup>17</sup> Thus, Augustus encouraged the worship of Egyptian deities outside the *pomerium*. Orlin argues that Augustus and Agrippa aimed to define clear boundaries in order to establish and maintain group identity after the Civil Wars and they used the *pomerium* to differentiate Roman from non-Roman religious rites.<sup>18</sup> Their strategy was to present Roman power as a heir of Classical Greek culture.

In the beginning of his rule Augustus participated in the mysteries of Eleusis and his architects copied caryatides of the *Erechtheion* in his forum

8 ZANKER 2002; VERSLUYS 2002; KOPONEN 2009; HACKWORTH PETERSEN 2012; MOL 2016; BARRETT 2017.

9 According to BERG (2014, pp. 1029-1032) Pompeians kept their objects often in storerooms.

10 See note 4.

11 VITR., VII, 5, 3-4.

12 KOPONEN 2009, pp. 130-146.

13 VERG., A. 8.696-670.

14 BRAGANTINI 2012b, pp. 28, 31.

15 DE VOS 1980.

16 TERT., *Ad Nat.* 1.10.17; DIO CASS., 40.47; VAL. MAX., 1.3.4; DIO CASS., 42.26.

17 DIO CASS., 53.2.4.

18 ORLIN 2008, pp. 243 and 249.



1. Pompeii, Casa dei Pigmei (IX 5, 9), a large Nilotic scene with funny pygmies covers the whole wall in a small *cubiculum*



2. Pompeii, Casa di Octavius Quartio (II 2, 2), room f: a small decorative figure of a devotee of Isis holds a *situla* in the left hand and a *sistrum* in the right hand



3. Pompeii, Casa di Octavius Quartius (II 2, 2) room f: the devotee of Isis is a tiny figure amongst this elaborated decoration, but placed on a white background he attracts attention



4. Pompeii, Casa degli Amorini dorati (VI 16, 7.38), peristylum, south-east corner: the shrine of Egyptian deities decorates the corner of the peristyle



5. Napoli, Museo Archeologico Nazionale. In an enigmatic *ex votum*-cult image are depicted a winged Isis-Fortuna, a riding young man with a radiant crown and Hesperos holding a torch (MANN 8836). It was detached from the *insula* IX 3, but the exact original location of this painting remains unknown. Most likely it belonged either to a small house (IX 3, 15) or a bakery (IX 3, 10.12)

in Rome.<sup>19</sup> Both the Greek cults and decorative elements started to look more like Roman when they were compared to the cult of Isis and Egyptian decor. In this sense the Egyptian cults practiced outside the *pomerium* and Egyptianizing fashion of the Roman private sphere were useful for Augustus' strategy to define clear boundaries of Romanness while incorporating foreign elements in the Roman culture.

19 KOPONEN 2015, pp. 22-25.

## 2. The Whole Spectrum of Egyptian Images

Egyptian images of Pompeian wall paintings can be divided into seven groups:<sup>20</sup>

- 1) Nilotic scenes with pygmies and exotic animals (fig. 1).
- 2) Egyptian decorative details as caryatides, human and divine figures, objects of the Isis cult, as well as Egyptian flora and fauna (figs. 2, 3).
- 3) Egyptian cult images in Pompeian *lararium* paintings. (figs. 4, 5)
- 4) Egyptian landscape vignettes with Egyptian architecture.
- 5) Mythological pictures of the myth of Io as pendants: 'Io guarded by many-eyed Argos' and 'Io in the Canopus received by Isis'.
- 6) Painted garden rooms with Egyptian details (figs. 6, 7, 8).
- 7) The personification of Egypt (or Africa) as a female figure with an elephant headdress.

According to my study, Egyptian images were depicted in wall paintings of 62 Pompeian buildings homogeneously in the whole urban texture of Pompeii<sup>21</sup>. Of these 52 were houses two were bars and one a bakery. Egyptian subjects could be found in five public buildings: Temple of Isis, Temple of Apollo, Macellum, Baths of Sarno and Suburban Baths. Egyptian images were also painted in the suburban Villa of the Mysteries and in the Tomb of Vestorius Priscus.

I have found a total of 79 rooms in these 52 Pompeian houses decorated with Egyptian details.<sup>22</sup> This amount of evidence makes it possible to search for decorative patterns and strategies favored by Pompeian patrons and painters. I am interested in tracing unwritten social codes that are reflected in subject choice and arrangement of wall decoration in different room types.

20 For a more detailed discussion of these seven image groups, KOPONEN 2017.

21 I have calculated only images that are *in situ* or visually documented and left out images of unknown context. My study is mainly based on *PPP* and *PPM* catalogs. I have crosschecked my results with the catalog of Nilotic scenes by Versluys (2002) and article of Egyptian cult images in Pompeii by BRAGANTINI (2012) as well as the catalog of cult images of Egyptian cults by BEAUREN (2013).

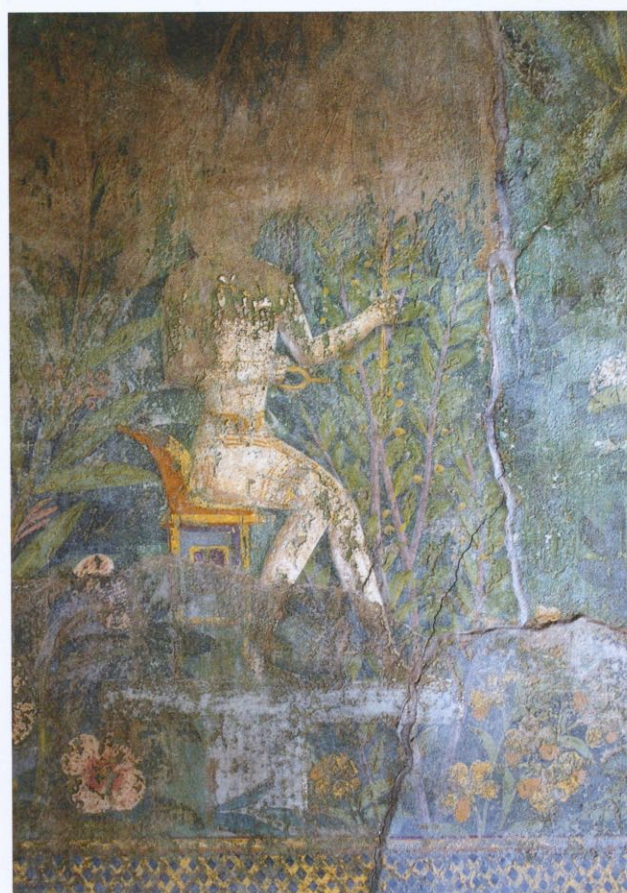
22 See the note 4.



6. Pompeii, Casa del Frutteto (I 9, 5), *cubiculum* 8: the garden painting with numerous Egyptian motifs covers all the walls

### 3. Allusions to the Cult of Isis in Pompeian Houses

Eight Pompeian houses included Egyptian cult images, which confirm that in specific houses the goddess Isis had an important role. In three large houses images of Egyptian deities (Isis, Harpokrates, Anubis, Osiris or Serapis) were venerated in their own shrine near the garden, but there was also a traditional Roman *lararium* in the vicinity.<sup>23</sup> In contrast to these exotic figures of rich houses three modest houses had a syncretic Isis-Fortuna painted on the wall. She presents attributes of the goddess Fortuna: a cornucopia, rudder and a globe. Only a tiny *modius* or lotus blossom as a headdress reveals that she is most likely Isis-Fortuna similar to bronze statuettes of Pompeian *lararia*.<sup>24</sup> Statuettes of Isis-Fortuna were often placed together with more traditional



7. Pompeii, Casa del Frutteto (I 9, 5), *cubiculum* 8, south wall: a seated pharaonic figure holding an *ankh* (a key of life) in the hand

<sup>23</sup> Praedia Iuliae Felicis (II 4) whose *Sacellum* of Egyptian deities is now in the upper floor of the MANN; Casa delle Amazzoni (VI 2, 14); and Casa degli Amorini Dorati (VI 16, 7.38).

<sup>24</sup> Casa con l'affresco di Isis-Fortuna (V 4, 9); Casa di Acceptus e Euhodia (VIII 5, 39); and House IX 7, 21.22.



8. Pompeii, Casa del Frutteto (I 9, 5), *cubiculum* 8, upper south wall: the Apis bull

Roman deities such as Venus, Jupiter, Hercules, and Mercury.<sup>25</sup>

In this homogenous distribution of Egyptian motifs in the city plan we can see three districts with a higher density of Egyptian motifs: The first location is the *insula* (VI 9), the second area is the *insula* of Marcus Lucretius (IX 3) and the third site is the Casa del Centenario (IX 8, 3.6.a).<sup>26</sup>

### 3.1. *Insula* VI 9

Three lavish houses of the *insula* (Casa di Meleagro, VI 9, 2.13; Casa del Duca d'Aumale, VI 9, 1; and Casa dei Dioscuri, VI 9, 6.9) were decorated with mythological central images referring to the myth of Argos and Io. Perhaps these three families were closely related, since there were only six such scenes in total in Pompeian houses. In addition this theme decorated two public buildings: the Temple of Isis and Macellum.

### 3.2. *Insula* IX 3

The Casa di Marcus Lucretius (IX 3, 5) was the largest house of the *insula*. It had three rooms around *atrium* decorated with Egyptian figures: a caryatide of an Isiac follower with a *sistrum* in *triclinium* 14, a personification of Egypt (or Africa) with her elephant headdress in *cubiculum* 5, a small Isiac figure in *cubiculum* 6. In the room 8, attached to the kitchen, was found a small faience statue of Bes (MANN 22589)<sup>27</sup>. Behind the *tablinum*, in the upper level there was a miniature garden with a *nymphaeum* and 18 marble sculptures including two Ibises and an Egyptian goose.

The southern corn of this *insula* was occupied by a bakery with a mill (IX 3, 10.12). On the south wall there was a *lararium* niche, surrounded by a painting representing a green winged Isis-Fortuna, Luna (or Semele) riding a horse, Eros, and, below them, two snakes. In the pillar close to western wall was painted two figures with cornucopia; one of them was on a boat, while the other was a *genius* offering in the altar surrounded by an *agathodaemon* and two trees.<sup>28</sup>

25 BEAURIN 2013, pp. 451-454; DE CARO 2006, pp. 174-181.

26 The number of the Casa del Centenario is IX 8, 3.7 according to the PPM, but IX 8, 3.6.a according to CORALINI 2017b, pp. 101-140.

27 PIETILÄ-CASTRÉN 2008, pp. 138-46, fig. 10.1.

28 YNNILÄ 2012, p. 126; FRÖHLICH 1991, L 102.

An enigmatic *ex votum*-painting of the winged Isis-Fortuna underlines the Egyptian character of the deity (MANN 8836; *CIL* IV, 882) (fig. 5). She has a crescent moon on her head, with *sistrum* and cornucopia in her hands. Near her foot was a globe with a rudder. She was flanked by a winged boy with a torch and a man on horseback with a radiant crown and a double-axe. The exact original location of this painting remains unknown, but it is either from the room 87 of the modest house (IX 3, 15) or from the backroom 68 of the bakery (IX 3, 10.12).<sup>29</sup>

### 3.3. Casa del Centenario (IX 8, 3.6.a)

The large Casa del Centenario is an exception. When most of 52 houses of my catalog had only one room decorated with Egyptian motifs, at least four rooms of this house were painted with Egyptian motives<sup>30</sup>. In the center of black panels of the elegant Third-Style decoration of the *triclinium* 41 were depicted 24 participants of the procession of the Isis cult. When the Third-Style decoration was remodeled during the last decades of the city, three central images representing Greek myths were added in the middle of each wall, but Isiac figures were preserved.<sup>31</sup> In the small and modest white *cubiculum* b adjacent to the *atrium* 2 were depicted statuettes of Isiac figures such as a babuino and a kneeling female worshiper.<sup>32</sup> In this *cubiculum* were found a *sistrum* (MANN 118250) and a bronze part of a furniture representing personification of Egypt or Africa (MANN 118192).<sup>33</sup>

A statuette of Harpocrates also was possibly found in this house. In the lower part of the colorful *viridarium* 33 was painted a frieze of a Nilotic scene with ducks, which enlarged the water element of the *nymphaeum* to the pictorial world. In the bath complex above the *frigidarium* 44 was painted a large Nilotic scene. But also in this lavish house

Egyptian images were hardly visible near the main visual axis. The elegant *triclinium* 41 was located in a hidden complex separated from the *atrium* and *peristylum*. Taking into account the large size of this house, its painted Egyptian motifs and their distribution, the owners of this house did not manifest their interest in the cult of Isis through their wall paintings differently compared to other Pompeians. A *sistrum* was found in this house similarly as in many other Pompeian houses. Maybe the graffiti “Isi[acis - - - ]is ubique” (*CIL* IV, 3141) is correct and *Isiaci* were everywhere. But they did not form a separate religious sect. Instead Pompeians venerated Isis together with other gods in their domestic shrine.

## 4. Conclusions

As a summary, Egyptian images are spread sparsely and homogeneously among Pompeian houses: most of houses had only one room decorated with some Egyptian theme, and generally Egyptian images were depicted far away from the main visual axis. The domestic political arena in the *atrium* and *tablinum* rarely included Egyptian subjects. Pompeians used Egyptian decorative motives moderately, but each Pompeian home needed a small hint of Egyptian flavour. Highly visible spaces used during the *salutatio*-ritual were embellished rarely with Egyptian imagery (4 in the *atria* and 5 in the *tablinum*). Instead, 20 gardens and *peristylia* were decorated with Egyptian themes. Most of them were Nilotic scenes. Images of 15 *triclinia* and 15 *cubicula* alluded to Egypt. These images were mostly small decorative details, but also three mythological central pictures of Argos and Io were located in the *triclinium*.

The strategy of Augustus to keep the Egyptian cults outside the *pomerium* reminds of the decorative strategies of Pompeians one hundred years later: Egyptian motifs were located away from the most traditional, public, and visible area composed of the *fauces*, *atrium* and *tablinum*. In both cases the reason is probably connected with the need of the society to define its religious and cultural boundaries when it is bombarded with and fascinated by foreign influence.

29 YNNILÄ 2012, pp. 134 and 136-37.

30 CORALINI (2017b, pp. 99-100) and VERSLUYS (2002, pp. 150-153) count that Egyptian motifs were painted in five or more rooms. According to my research, however, a landscape vignette of a black *oculus* 8 and scenes of pygmies in *praedella* of a white *oculus* 7 do not include Egyptian motifs.

31 MAU 1882, pp. 383-385; DE VOS 1980, pp. 35-49; CORALINI, SCAGLIARINI 2016, pp. 264-268; CORALINI 2017b, pp. 99-100.

32 DE VOS 1980, pp. 49-60; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 150-53.

33 CORALINI 2017b, pp. 260-263.