

Molly Swetnam-Burland, *Egypt in Italy: Visions of Egypt in Roman Imperial Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. Pp. xii, 249. ISBN 978-1-107-04048-9. Hardback. \$110.00.

Swetnam-Burland's book opens with the grand claim that it is the 'first work of scholarship that takes as its express goal the integration of exotica into the intellectual and social history of Roman art' (2). This is slightly disingenuous: the lie of the land has changed already, with scholars such as Jas Elsner, Penelope Davies, Miguel-John Versluys and his doctoral students (in the Leiden project 'Cultural innovation in a globalising society: Egypt in the Roman world') arguing for the integration of Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts into the imagery of empire or, slightly differently, into classicism. Yet there is a real sense in which articles by Swetnam-Burland have themselves been a driver of this change, helping us to see that the 'exotic' and the 'Roman', the 'religious' and the 'decorative' and the 'Egyptian' and 'Egyptianising' need not be opposites.¹ By ditching the clichés, and putting 'Nilotic scenes' and obelisks back into their Roman context, each of them re-emerges with individual motivation and meaning, demanding to be treated as sensitively as 'Greek art' in Roman Italy.

Swetnam-Burland's book, which binds together and expands on her articles, is divided into four chapters, an introduction and a short conclusion. It is understandable, perhaps, given the author's archaeological focus, that any sustained engagement with ancient literary attitudes to Egypt should be left to the last of these main chapters. But it reads rather oddly to have it (or rather its unpacking of Juvenal 15, the text of which is only in English) explicitly carry the 'what did the Romans in Italy think about the place and people of Egypt' question, when we have already had three chapters on material culture, much of it from the late Republic/early empire. Swetnam-Burland would no doubt counter that this is because each piece of this material culture has an agency of its own which is restricted neither by textual tradition nor by the precise politics of the time (Actium being an event that she rightly identifies as having been over-played). But even in a polysemous world, history matters, knowledge matters, and the semantic field shifts. It is not only that the objects discussed in previous chapters are shaped by, and contributory to, the answer. It is that the Juvenal poem and the Vatican Nile and Louvre Tiber sculptures earlier in the same chapter are the only post-first-century CE examples discussed at length in the book. If Egypt is to have a place in Roman aesthetics akin to that accorded to Greece, then one might see that place differently located in the Second Sophistic, especially under Hadrian who makes Wanderlust and Hellenism imperial virtues.

Swetnam-Burland takes an avowedly case-study approach but her decision to focus on the first century BCE/CE and on objects that have an archaeological

¹ See e.g. P. Davies (2011) 'Aegyptiaca in Rome: Adventus and Romanitas', in E. S. Gruen (ed.) *Cultural Identity in the Ancient Mediterranean*. Los Angeles: 354-72 and M. E. J. J. van Aerde (2013) 'Concepts of Egypt in Augustan Rome: Two Case Studies of Cameo Glass from The British Museum', *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 20: 1-23, both of these too recent to be included in the bibliography of the book under discussion.

context inevitably limits her reach. Chapter One makes the biggest contribution to scholarship, looking hard at imported Egyptian, and at Roman-crafted objects, some of them made to look Egyptian and others referential in a looser way (of, as she calls it, 'Egyptian mien'). Careful discussion of Rome's trade in Egyptian goods more broadly, and of function, raises, for example, important doubts about how far the appeal of an alabaster vessel of the ninth or eighth century BCE reused in Rome as a cinerary urn lay primarily in its Egyptian-ness, and draws attention to the ways in which it and other imports, and their hieroglyphs, were adapted to serve new settings and a range of new viewers, and inspired the making of further objects. Once this latter fact is recognized, the division between Egyptian and Egyptianising dissolves: all of them are Roman. Or perhaps better, they are part of a classical *koine* that had under the Ptolemies signed up Egyptian style to the Greek cause. Swetnam-Burland makes a lot of a baboon sculpture associated with the Iseum on the Campus Martius and signed by two sculptors, one of them 'Phidias' (62-3): 'While the work undoubtedly suited its particular context in visual style, it proclaimed its excellence *qua* artwork by drawing on altogether different cultural traditions, through the association between the artists who crafted it and the legacy of Classical Greece'.

Chapter Two looks again at obelisks—in particular at the two Egyptian obelisks now in Piazza del Popolo and in front of Palazzo Montecitorio, which were brought to Rome by Augustus in 10/9 BCE. Although right to want to nuance the response that makes them symbols of conquest and only symbols of conquest (there is, we are reminded, quite a time lag between Antony's defeat and their erection), and fairly sophisticated in its use of Pliny and Ammianus, in the end the discussion moves the debate on rather little. Sure, they are as much about kingship (especially the relation of the king, his subjects and the gods), about an autocrat's ambition for the future, and about establishing Rome as the centre of the world, as they are about the past and some sort of 'Egyptian symbolism'. But were they not still 'matter out of place' compared, for example, to the white marble columns of Athens' Olympieion, reused on the Capitoline, or the fifth-century Greek figures in the Temple of Apollo Sosianus' pediment?

We will never know. But raising the question raises important issues with regard to Swetnam-Burland's choice of case-studies, for, whatever they have become by being shipped to Rome, the obelisks are a different beast from Chapter Four's Tiber sculpture, or indeed from the Egyptian elements incorporated into the Roman wall paintings touched on in chapter one; and they are different again from the focus of Chapter Three, the dedications and décor of Pompeii's Sanctuary of Isis. If there is integration in Chapter Three, it is the integration of the worshippers into the community at large, and, with the help of Io and Ovid, of Isis into Roman narrative structures. The ekklesiasterion's two paintings which trigger this analysis (and I use 'trigger' because despite Swetnam-Burland's claim to be exploring 'the relationship between visual and textual narration, treating neither as authoritative but as partners in a powerful dialectic that reveals the many associations of Roman viewers and reading audiences' (125), she writes that one of the paintings (131) 'draws upon the story as imagined in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*'

and that it includes ‘a number of elements inspired by the poem’) are not Egyptian in style or even ‘mien’ anymore than the Tiber sculpture is Egyptian ‘in mien’. They are Egyptian in subject matter and setting (in the Isis sanctuary) and make this setting fit by replicating panels popular in non-cultic contexts in Italy. The issue of fitting Egyptian cult into Roman culture is a different issue from fitting Egyptian style into the visual repertoire.

Swetnam-Burland embraces this kind of variation with open arms: ‘there was no single “image of Egypt” but many’ (180). But if we are going to deepen our understanding of any one of these ‘images’, we need to do more than explore how complicated a category ‘Egypt in Rome’ can be. We need to divide the figurative from the monumental from the ornamental from what we now misleadingly call ‘landscape painting’, and try these different kinds of ‘Egyptian’ imagery in alternative categories, however problematic these might also be, visual categories such as the ‘sacro-idyllic’, ‘grotesque’, spoils of war, or different again, ‘spolia’. Even ‘Egyptian in mien’ refers to too many variables (figure-type, friezes, perspective...), while ‘figure-type’ may refer to the figure’s identity (whether as Isis or, more obviously alien, as the crocodile-headed Sobek), its costume, its ideogrammatic appearance, or all of these. Images of Isis might be better served being discussed next to images of Mithras and Cybele, and obelisks next to other granite objects. There is, after all, more than one way of creating archaeological context. In the meantime, Swetnam-Burland’s book ensures that the problems created and still posed by nineteenth-century ‘Egyptomania’ remain on the scholarly agenda.

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