Exploring Aegyptiaca and their Material Agency throughout Global History[1]

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Abstract

Objects instigate and get things going. Material culture, therefore, is as much catalyst and protagonist of cultural change as an expression of such processes. Taking this material agency perspective as its point of departure, this essay explores the role and function of Aegyptiaca in world history. Emanating from the Nile valley in northeast Africa originally, Aegyptiaca (i.e. objects that express stylistically and materially a distinctively ancient Egyptian-ness), soon became part of many different cultural contexts and networks through processes of globalization. In all those (new) contexts and networks Aegyptiaca had considerable agency, thus constituting and determining processes of cultural innovation. Combining a material agency perspective with the network perspective of globalization allows us to see how Aegyptiaca shaped and shape global history. Moreover, it brings to the fore the important question how to account for the power and agency of Aegyptiaca in a global and long-term perspective. Why is it that, from 2500 BCE onwards, Egypt and Aegyptiaca seem to spread like a virus and are to be found everywhere? What, in other words, is their fitness for survival or 'evolutionary strength' about?

Introduction: Aegyptiaca in Africa

'Meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless.'[2]

When excavated at the beginning of the twentieth century, the largest tumulus in the city of Kerma in Nubia (dated to the period of 1700-1550 BCE) was discovered to contain a life-size seated statue of an Egyptian woman named Sennuwy, together with part of the statue of her husband Djefaihapy (Figure 1). This led the excavator, George Reisner, to believe that Djefaihapy was the

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2 Jonathan Culler, *Literary theory. A very short introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 67.

Egyptian governor at Kerma and to interpret the site as a trading post run by Egyptians. Evidence found later and elsewhere proved him wrong. Kerma was the capital of a powerful and independent state that arose in competition with Egypt, and it turned out that Djefaihapy was the provincial governor of Asyut (in Middle Egypt) during the reign of the 12th dynasty pharaoh Sesostris I (around 1971-1926 BCE). Both statues were thus re-used in the Kerma tomb when they were already antique, and had been brought to Nubia from a far-away tomb or temple in the Nile valley.[3]

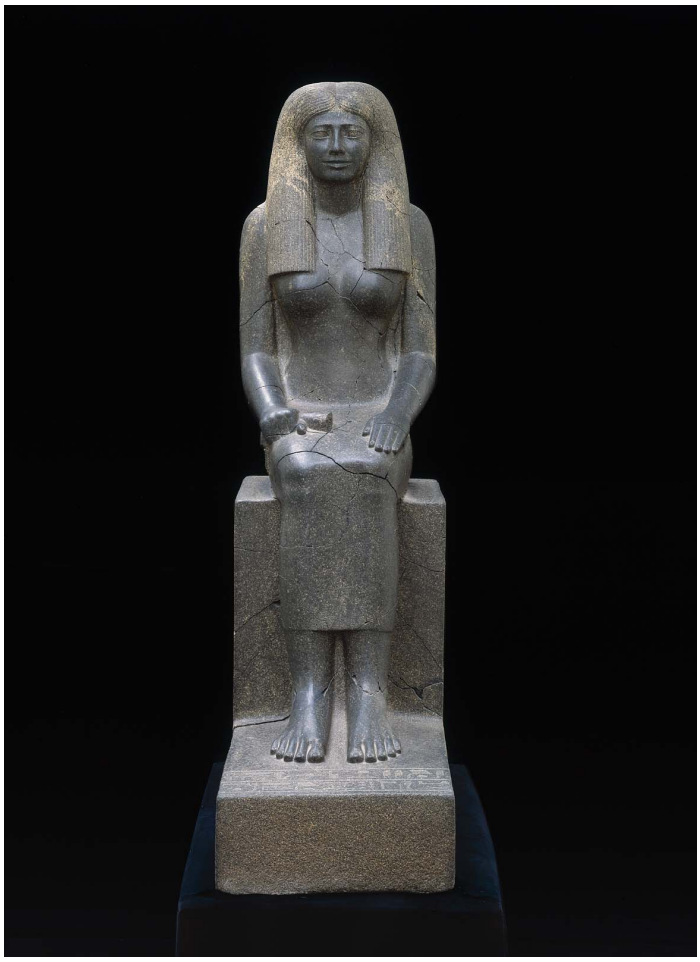

Figure 1: Statue of Lady Sennuwy, Egyptian, Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12 (1971–1926 BCE), found in Nubia, Kerma, Tumulus K III, hall A. Made from granodiorite. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 14.720. Harvard University – Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition

[3] Kathryn Bard, *Introduction to the archaeology of ancient Egypt* (Malden: Blackwell, 2008), 199-205.

Situated at the lower Nile that meanders through northeast Africa, the mid-second millennium BCE kingdom of Kerma made extensive use of Aegyptiaca: *objects that can be characterized as distinctly Egyptian through their stylistics and the materials from which they were made*. Kerma is well known for its large and impressive royal tumuli, dating roughly between 1750 and 1500 BCE, the so-called *Kerma classique* period.[4] Many Egyptian statues dating from the period of the twelfth and thirteenth dynasties (c. 1991-1663 BCE) have been found in those burial mounds, like those of Sennuwy and Djefaihapy, as well as in temples from that period. But also more mundane Kerma grave goods may consist of Egyptian artefacts that were robbed from earlier Egyptian graves in Lower Nubia.[5] Appropriating (ancient) Aegyptiaca apparently mattered a lot within Kerma at the time.

During later periods of the region's history, the importance of Aegyptiaca would also remain paramount. During the (early and mid-first century BCE) Kushite period, for instance, Nubian material culture often looks so distinctly Egyptian that scholars have talked about *Egyptianisation* to account for what was understood by many as the Egyptian face of Nubian civilisation.[6] In that period, these kinds of 'Egyptianisms' were visible everywhere in northeast Africa. The famous pyramid field at Jebel Barkal (Napata) constitutes a remarkable example (Figure 2). But also in Alexandria − traditionally considered to be a distinctly Greek city that just happened to be located *ad Aegyptum* − Aegyptiaca strongly determined its (out)look and cultural character, as recent research continues to show.[7]

[4] Charles Bonnet, "The Kerma culture," in *Sudan. Ancient treasures,* ed. Derek A. Welsby and Julie R. Anderson (London: The British Museum Press, 2004).

[5] Dominique Valbelle, "The cultural significance of iconographic and epigraphic data found in the kingdom of Kerma," in *Proceedings of the IXth International Conference of Nubian Studies (Boston, 21-26 August 1998)*, ed. Timothy Kendall (Boston, Mass: Dept. of African-American Studies, Northeastern University, 2004).

[6] David, Edwards, "Ancient Egypt in the Sudanese Middle Nile: a case of mistaken identity," in *Ancient Egypt in Africa,* ed. David O'Connor and Andrew Reid (London: UCL Press, 2003); and László Török, *Hellenizing Art in Ancient Nubia 300 BC – AD 250 and its Egyptian models. A study in "Acculturation"* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2011), provide an overview of the debate and illustrate different views.

[7] Kyriakos Savvopoulos, "*Alexandria in Aegypto*. The use and meaning of Egyptian elements in Hellenistic and Roman Alexandria," in *Isis on the Nile. Egyptian gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, ed. Laurent Bricault and Miguel John Versluys (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).

Figure 2: The pyramid field at Jebel Barkal, Napata. Maurice Chédel via Wikimedia

That we deal here with *intra-cultural connectivity* rather than with *inter-cultural connectivity*[8] is underlined by the observation that these different forms of African Egyptianisms might even have been 'talking' to one another. Baud has argued that Nubian Egyptianism is heavily influenced by Napata and its archaising tendencies on the one hand and, on the other, by the Hellenizing forms of Egyptianism emanating from the Ptolemaic court.[9] Be that as it may, we can conclude that the impact and agency of Aegyptiaca was strong and pervasive in (north-eastern) Africa, and that apparently only few (historical) contexts were unshaped by them.

Archaeology and globalization

This brief and selective overview of Aegyptiaca and their agency in northeast Africa served to introduce the central research questions of this essay and to suggest the need for a combination of archaeology and globalization to answer them. The questions central to this essay revolve around understanding Ancient Egypt's global impact and agency and are the following: Why are Aegyptiaca and

[8] Or acculturation; see Miguel John Versluys, "Understanding objects in motion. An archaeological dialogue on Romanisation," *Archaeological Dialogues* 21(1) (2014).
[9] Michel Baud, "Culture d'Afrique, modèles Égyptiens et influences méditerranéennes," in *Méroé. Un empire sur le Nil*, ed. Michel Baud (Paris: Musée de Louvre Éditions, 2010).

Egypt visible in so many contexts, to be found in such a great variety of places throughout world history? How exactly are Aegyptiaca able to influence those contexts? And is there some kind of consistency in their agency over time that might explain their fitness for survival or 'evolutionary success'?

These are, of course, very big questions. The present essay is distinctly explorative and serves in the first place to establish the relevance of these questions and to develop a hypothesis to tackle them, rather than to provide direct answers. It explores the consequences of taking the combination of material agency (archaeology) and complex connectivity (globalization) seriously, and will consider different models of the agency of material culture in various places enmeshed in global networks over time.[10]

Archaeology is the discipline of things and is therefore characterized by what could be called a material-cultural perspective.[11] Human life unfolds from our interaction with both other human beings and with things: it is therefore not fixed and static, but constantly *in the making*.[12] One can focus on the human side of this engagement and see human agency as the motor of history. From that perspective, people determine what objects look like, do, and represent. But, as we are increasingly discovering, focusing on human agency alone tells us only part of the story, as material culture equally has its own causally determinant position. Together with people and in a continuous entanglement with them, therefore, things make society.[13] Saying that archaeology is the discipline of things is meant to indicate that in our analysis of this 'society-making' we focus on objects as actants in the first place; while realising, of course, that the outcome we call (world) history is a matter of human-thing entanglement.[14] We need this focus on objects as history makers, however, because from the Enlightenment

[10] Arjun Appadurai, "Introduction: commodities and the politics of value," in *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Robert J. Foster, "Tracking globalization. Commodities and value in motion," in *Handbook of material culture*, ed. Chris Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006); and Carl Knappett and Lambros Malafouris, eds., *Material agency. Towards a non-anthropocentric approach* (New York: Springer, 2008).

[11] Bjørnar Olsen et al., *Archaeology. The discipline of things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

[12] Tim Ingold, *Making. Anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture* (London & New York: Routledge, 2013).

[13] Chris Gosden, "What do objects want?" *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 12(3) (2005); Chris Gosden, "Material culture and long-term change" in *Handbook of material culture*, ed. Chris Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006).

[14] Ian Hodder, *Entangled. An archaeology of the relationships between humans and things* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

onwards it has been mainly *people* with their *ideas* that have been regarded as causally determinant; the category *goods* has routinely been seen as the outcome of people and their ideas. Without wanting to deny the intimate relations that exist between people, goods, and ideas, a truly archaeological perspective starts with focussing on the goods as actants without automatically reducing their meaning and agency to the people and ideas that they are often made to indicate.[15] A material-cultural perspective, therefore, should start by asking the radical question: what do objects want?[16]

The concept of globalization is, at present, the best way to discuss the functioning and impact of complex connectivity and networks.[17] It can never be used simply as *explanans,* but should always be explained in itself. Saying that a particular historical context is globalized (or not) is saying very little in interpretative terms: we need to account for the specific form, intensity, and functioning of a particular kind of globalization. Stephane Palmié has recently made the same point with regard to a notion that is very much related to globalization, that of hybridity.[18] Just as every context can be called globalized in one way or other, every social fact or object can be called hybrid. Because connectivity existed from the very first day of humankind onwards, it follows that borrowing cultural and material traits existed from that same first day.[19] This means that purity is as much a fiction as the fantasy that 'once upon a time there were settled, coherent and perfectly integrated national or ethnic communities'.[20] Therefore, we should not ask the question *what* is a hybrid, as Palmié argues,[21] but *when* is a hybrid. I argue that the same is true for globalization.

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15 Miguel John Versluys, "Roman visual material culture as globalising koine." in *Globalisation and the Roman world. World history, connectivity and material culture*, ed. Martin Pitts and Miguel John Versluys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Miguel John Versluys, "Haunting traditions. The (material) presence of Egypt in the Roman world," in *Reinventing* The invention of tradition*? Indigenous pasts and the Roman present*, ed. Dietrich Boschung, Alexandra Busch and Miguel John Versluys (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2015).

16 Gosden, "What do objects want?".

17 Martin pitts and Miguel John Versluys, eds., *Globalisation and the Roman world. World history, connectivity and material culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

18 Stefan Palmié, "Mixed blessings and sorrowful mysteries: second thoughts about "Hybridity"," *Current Anthropology* 54 (2013).

19 Maurice Bloch, *Essays on cultural transmission* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005), 7.

20 Stephen Greenblatt, *Cultural mobility. A manifesto* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 2.

21 Palmié, "Hybridity," 5.

A combination of globalization and archaeology should focus on the role that objects and their agency play in processes of cultural change through connectivity; time-space compression being one of those. An archaeological approach to globalization is therefore not so much about how objects spread across the world through the intensifying processes of human connectivity. An archaeological approach to globalization, in my opinion, should be about *how world history is made up of object diasporas* and, of course, the thing-human entanglements resulting from those. In an important article from 2006, Gosden, talking about long-term change instead of globalization, argued similarly when he stated 'cultural and material forms existing over long spans of time form a channelling for human beings that helps orient and shape short-term processes and events'.[22] This essay will chart and analyse Aegyptiaca from such a perspective. The introduction has already shown that the impact of Egyptian-looking objects on the people and history of northeast Africa was profound; and this was not the case for northeast Africa alone. In antiquity, Aegyptiaca are to be found almost everywhere in (the history of) the Nile valley, the Mediterranean, and the Near East and from very early periods onwards. Post-antique globalization processes also brought Egypt and Aegyptiaca to a great variety of places around the world in a literal way. The Aegyptiaca that were obtained, in 1911, by the Chinese government from Duan Fang, ambassador to the Chinese emperor in Europe, and now on display in Beijing, are but one example of this practice.[23] In many of those cases the circulation and subsequent contextualization of Aegyptiaca resulted, through the agency they were able to exert, in profound cultural changes.

The following section discusses the relations between circulating objects, their agency and cultural change in more depth, advancing *china* and China as a useful parallel.[24] I then offer a brief overview of the occurrence of Aegyptiaca in world history, followed by a short case study elaborating on one particular context - ancient Rome in the last decades of the first century BCE - and the human-thing entanglement of Emperor Augustus and an obelisk. Finally, the theoretical and other consequences of this approach will be discussed. If global history is really made up of diasporas of objects and peoples and the thing-human entanglements resulting from those, we should be able to not only chart the

[22] Gosden, "Material culture," 425.

[23] Willy Clarysse and Huan Yan, "Aegypten in der verbotenen Stadt." *Antike Welt* 37 (2006).

[24] Robert Finlay, *The pilgrim art. Cultures of porcelain in world history* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010); Versluys, "Roman visual material culture".

many forms of Egyptianisms through time and space, but also to think about their relation to one another.

Objects, agency, circulation, and cultural change

Objects instigate and put things in motion. Material culture, therefore, is as much an *expression* of cultural change, as it should be considered a *catalyst* or *protagonist* in these processes. The public auction, in Amsterdam in 1602, of the cargo from the captured Portuguese vessel *San Jago*, which had such a huge influence on Dutch seventeenth century *Chinoiserie*, serves as a good example. For the first time, *china* was now available on a large scale and not just for elite consumption. This would have major implications for Dutch society in practical and social terms: drinking habits, for instance, would change significantly. But the availability of *china* also had a large impact in more conceptual terms. The Oriental Other was now available at one's own table; and this resulted in shifting views on Europe's place in the great chain of being and world history.[25] The large amount of *china* aboard the *San Jago* can thus usefully be described and understood as an important protagonist in various stories of cultural change.

Such processes of cultural innovation have recently been analysed in even wider terms for eighteenth century England.[26] During that period both China and *china* had come to matter greatly to the English economy and consumerism, constituting an important part of the economic and cultural make-up of society. But the intensified trade with the East Indies would also significantly change English discourses of virtue. The English understanding of morals like taste, subjectivity, piety and patriotism were profoundly transformed through Eastern values, emanating, or so the English thought, from the Eastern objects that they now had around them. At the very same time, the imagery on *china* and comparable trade goods got other things going as well. Liu has argued that it played a major role in transferring Chinese gardening ideas towards England, culminating in the English landscaping revolution of the early eighteenth century.[27] More indirectly then, this imagery would impact on new theories about

[25] Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert* (München: Beck, 1998).

[26] Chi-Ming Yang, *Performing China. Virtue, commerce, and Orientalism in Eighteenth-Century England, 1660-1760* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2011); Eugenia Zuroski Jenkins, *A taste for China. English subjectivity and the prehistory of Orientalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[27] Yu Liu, *Seeds of a different Eden. Chinese gardening ideas and a new English aesthetic ideal* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008).

art and aesthetics, such as they have been canonized by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). To phrase this perspective radically: there would have been no *Critique of Judgement*, this foundation of a European philosophical tradition, without, amongst many other things, the circulation of china and its *Chinoiserie*-style in a European context.

Figure 3: The so-called zodiac of Denderah: a sandstone slab from the temple of Hathor with a bas-relief representing a map of the sky. Brought to Paris in 1821 and now in the Louvre

Even a single object could have such a profound and long-lasting influence on European intellectual discourse, as the so-called zodiac of Paris illustrates

(Figure 3).[28] These two large sandstone blocks, now in the Louvre, were brought to Paris from Egypt in 1821. It was thought that their depiction represented an ancient Egyptian constellation, and that the zodiac therefore might be able to prove that Egyptian history went back to the period before the Bible. Scientists and intellectuals seized upon the zodiac immediately to discredit Christianity and support their views on the age of the world. Likewise, the royalist and religious parts of French society aimed at discrediting what they called 'an infernal stone from a pagan temple'.[29] The Enlightenment debate between Science and Religion thus was very much shaped by an Egyptian artefact. The influence of Aegyptiaca on (ideas about) France and Frenchmen became even more paramount in the wake of Napoleon Bonaparte's expedition to the Nile, when Egyptian objects began flooding (western) Europe as commodities. Europeans had long been fascinated by Egypt and questions of how to understand their own position vis-à-vis this old, wise and mysterious culture.[30] It was only through the (massive) availability of *things* Egyptian that this fascination developed much more generally and widely in society at large. This process is often described as Egyptomania.[31] The term Egyptomania is, however, very inappropriate as it describes as *mania* what is actually a most important process of cultural transference and innovation. This article will not deal with this criticism in depth, but has a very different perspective as it presents Aegyptiaca and Egypt as an important, enduring, and ever-successful 'global commodity'. This essay, therefore, argues very much *against Egyptomania*.

Cultural responses towards Egypt resulted, amongst many other things, in the obelisk at the *Place de la Concorde* becoming a Parisian hallmark.[32] But things Egyptian were major players in the foundation of other (European) traditions as well. Their presence on such a large scale instigated the need to understand them in relation to one another (chronologically) and towards other cultures (geographically) – like we saw happening with the mass availability of *china* and its consequences for Europe's self-definition in the context of world history. The building of museums is intimately linked to these new questions that now

[28] Jed D. Buchwald and Diane Greco Josefowicz, *The zodiac of Paris. How the improbable controversy over an ancient Egyptian artifact provoked a modern debate between religion and science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

[29] Buchwald and Josefowicz, *The zodiac of Paris,* 111.

[30] Thomas Glück and Ludwig Morenz, eds., *Exotisch, weisheitlich und uralt. Europäische Konstruktionen Altägyptens* (Hamburg: LIT Verlag, 2007).

[31] Jean-Michel Humbert, *L'Égyptomanie dans l'art Occidental* (Paris: ACR Editions, 1989).

[32] Robert Solé, *Le grand voyage de l'obélisque* (Paris: Seuil, 2004)

emerge about one's own position in the world.[33] And in those museums, like the *Musée Charles X* in Paris, the Aegyptiaca often literally dictated their own surroundings. All this had major implications for Paris, France, Europe, and Egypt itself; the conceptual change from 'Egypt' as part of European cultural memory towards 'Egypt' as a true science called Egyptology is only one of them.[34] As with the capture of the *San Jago* in the seventeenth century and European consumerism of *china* in the eighteenth century, those major effects were often brought about and made to work by objects and their impact on people and society.

Aegyptiaca throughout world history: a longue-durée sketch

The agency of Aegyptiaca was strong and pervasive in many more contexts than northeast Africa in Antiquity or Napoleonic Europe alone. From their canonization in the Old Kingdom (from c. 2686-2181 BCE) onwards, Aegyptiaca would play a major role in world history. At first only along the Nile itself − dominating the image of Egypt until the present day − but through processes of increasing connectivity Aegyptiaca would soon go global. In the mid-second millennium BCE, for instance, not only did the kingdom of Kerma depend on Aegyptiaca in the construction of its self-image (see above), but so did the elites of the Mediterranean, Levantine, and Eurasian Bronze Age, with their 'international style' prominently displaying Egyptian (stylistic) elements.[35] And, wherever Aegyptiaca spread through the linking or integration of networks, they had an impact; it seems that only very few contexts were immune to the agency of Aegyptiaca.

We can reconstruct these processes rather well for various 'punctuations of connectivity' distinguishable in Western Eurasia and the Mediterranean in the first millennium BCE.[36] During the Bronze Age it concerned 'networks of exchange', in which Aegyptiaca played an important role. In their new contexts Aegyptiaca often changed local practices.[37] During the Iron Age, these

[33] Alain Schnapp et al., eds., *World antiquarianism. Comparative perspectives* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2013).

[34] Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in western monotheism,* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Jan Assmann, *L'Egypte ancienne entre mémoire et science* (Paris: Hazan, 2009).

[35] Marian H. Feldman, *Diplomacy by design. Luxury arts and an "international style" in the Ancient Near East, 1400-1200 BCE* (Chicago: The university of Chicago Press, 2006).

[36] Versluys, "Roman visual material culture."

[37] Jorit M. Kelder, "Royal gift exchange between Mycenae and Egypt." *American Jounal of Archaeology* 113 (2009).

connections seem to develop into what Knappett and Nikolakopoulou have called 'networks of affiliation'.[38] Their term is intended to indicate that the ties that were originally established by objects had intensified and developed through both more objects and more people. This resulted in pronounced social effects through the significant changes in the frequency, strength, content, and directionality of the ties making up the network. The overview provided by the recent exhibition *Assyria to Iberia at the dawn of the Classical Age* shows at a glance how Aegyptiaca were at work as the network's most frequently used global commodity everywhere in Iron Age western Eurasia and the Mediterranean.[39] This was no less true for north-eastern Africa during that period, as has been discussed above. It is against this background that, for instance, the profound civilising process that Egypt would have on the self-fashioning of Greece in the fifth century BCE becomes only logical. As the network's leading global cultural commodity, Egypt mattered as no other cultural form or concept did. Therefore, it was with good reason that Herodotus devoted a separate book to Egypt alone in his world history. Similar to early modern Europe using China and *china* for its self-definition, the Iron Age Mediterranean used Egypt and Aegyptiaca. This would change in the second part of the first millennium BCE, when, especially after Alexander the Great, Greece and things Greek would develop into one of the major *exempla*. Egyptianisms were now often replaced by Hellenisms, which was also related to changes in the frequency, strength, content, and directionality of the ties within the network that we call the Hellenistic world. But although Hellenisms had now become fierce competitors for Egyptianisms, the agency of the latter continued unabated. This is well illustrated by another specific punctuation of connectivity: the Roman world. Hellenism mattered greatly to the Romans, and through the Roman Empire things Greek and Greek-looking spread from present day Scotland to Afghanistan. But Egypt came a close second after Greece in terms of inspiration and aspirations, as is testified by the many *Aegyptiaca Romana*.[40]

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[38] Carl Knappett and Irene Nikolakopoulou. "Exchange and affiliation networks in the MBA southern Aegean: Crete, Akrotiri and Miletus," in *Emporia: Aegeans in the East and West Mediterranean*, ed. Robert Laffineur and Emanuele Greco (Liège: Université de Liège, 2005).

[39] Joan Aruz, Sarah B. Graff and Yelena Rakic. *Assyria to Iberia at the dawn of the classical age* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2015).

[40] Miguel John Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana. Nilotic scenes and the Roman views of Egypt* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2002); Caroline Vout, "Embracing Egypt." in *Rome the Cosmopolis*, ed. Catherine Edwards and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); and Penelope J.E. Davies, "*Aegyptiaca* in Rome. *Adventus* and *Romanitas*,"

Figure 4: The so-called Hylas panel from the *basilica* of Iunius Bassus in Rome, fourth century CE, currently at Palazzo Massimo, Rome. Note the Egyptian figures on the border of the mantle

During Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, so it seems, there were fewer things Egyptian around.[41] The fourth century CE Hylas panel from the basilica of

in *Cultural identity in the ancient Mediterranean*, ed. Erich S. Gruen (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2011).

[41] Charles Burnett, "Images of ancient Egypt in the Latin Middle Ages," in *The wisdom of Egypt: changing visions thought the ages*, ed. Peter Ucko and Timothy Champion (London: UCL Press, 2003).

Iunius Bassus in Rome, composed from an *opus sectile* of coloured marbles, glass paste, and mother of pearl, which ingeniously mixes Egyptiana with Hellenica is a rare late Antique specimen (Figure 4). Overviews of Roman Aegyptiaca usually jump to sphinxes decorating medieval cloister gardens immediately after that example. From an archaeological perspective, this period remains underexplored. Recent research has made clear that the eastern, Islamic part of the spectrum needs much more attention, as well.[42] In intellectual debates on philosophy and religion in the West, Egypt continued to play an important role. Ebeling has distinguished two strands of tradition here.[43] One came from Greco-Roman Antiquity and had a largely positive image of Egypt as a cradle of wisdom and civilization. The other tradition came from Jewish culture and was rather negatively coloured through the *Exodus* story in the Jewish bible, where Egypt serves as a kind of negative self-definition for Jewish culture and religion. Both forms of cultural semantics continue to play a role until the present day.

Egypt moved centre stage again during the European Renaissance.[44] During this period of rebirth, objects often played a crucial role in getting things going. This started with the discovery of a manuscript on the island of Andros in 1422, which became very popular among later fifteenth century humanist historians: Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*. Around the same period, the sculpted supports in the form of an Egyptian Antinous from the *Villa Hadriana* were discovered. Renaissance debates on Egypt often focused on hieroglyphs and, through them, on questions regarding the nature of Egyptian civilization in terms of antiquity, religion, and magic. These debates mainly took place in Italy. One of the reasons for that, I propose, is that it was in Rome that, especially from the sixteenth century onwards, the largest amount of Aegyptiaca was available − the country of the Nile itself still being rather inaccessible. From this moment onwards, cultural semantics seem to explode, with both the Hebrew tradition and the Classical, Greco-Roman tradition playing an important role. The seventeenth century attention given to the figure of Joseph[45] is an example of the former; the

[42] Kevin Van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

[43] Florian Ebeling, "Ägypten als Tempel der Welt und Hort des Aberglaubens," in *Philosophie et langage ordinaire de l' Antiquité à la Renaissance*, ed. Jean-Michel Counet (Leuven: Peeters, 2014).

[44] Brian Curran, *The Egyptian renaissance. The afterlife of ancient Egypt in early modern Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[45] Bernard Lang, *Joseph in Egypt. A cultural icon from Grotius to Goethe* (Yale: Yale University Press, 2010).

eighteenth century idea that Egypt equates with mysteries,[46] an example of the latter. Aegyptiaca constantly play an important role with this, especially because, unlike during the Renaissance, in the early modern period no new literary source material, such as the *Hieroglyphica* or the *Corpus Hermeticum*, became available.
It has already been briefly illustrated above that Egypt helped shape nineteenth century France, and how objects were central to those processes. In England, very similar developments are visible.[47] Acquiring Aegyptiaca mattered immensely to these and other nineteenth century nation-states, as is testified by the collection-building of the Louvre and the British Museum. The inundation of European capitals with Aegyptiaca had a profound influence on their self-fashioning, also in practical terms. For Paris and France more widely, some examples have been given above.[48] For London and Great Britain, one could think of the construction of the Egyptian Hall in London in 1812, the Egyptian Court in Crystal Palace from 1854, and the immense public interest, in 1862 in London, for an exhibition showing newly excavated Pharaonic jewellery, culminating in the erection of Cleopatra's needle in 1877.[49] One could even see all these objects and the human-thing entanglements they instigated as playing a part, although rather more indirectly, in the English decision to 'occupy' Egypt in 1882. Be that as it may, the twentieth century Tutankhamun exhibitions in Paris (1967) and London (1972) were able to mobilize people in a way few other exhibitions have been able to do.[50] The agency of these Aegyptiaca is even so strong that, still in 2012-2015, people all over the world were lining up for a travelling exhibition entitled 'Tutankhamun, his tomb and treasures' showing replicas.

Aegyptiaca and material agency: a case study

The necessarily brief overview above has indicated that Aegyptiaca were present in many contexts of world history; and that they often were important to 'putting things in motion'. To investigate how Aegyptiaca are able to determine their context and local *habitus* in this way, I now focus on one particular context,

46 Jan Assmann and Florian Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien. Reisen in die Unterwelt in Aufklärung und Romantik* (München: Beck, 2011).
47 David Gange, *Dialogues with the dead. Egyptology in British culture and religion (1822-1922)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
48 Humbert, *L'Égyptomanie dans l'art Occidental,* provides an overview.
49 Gange, *Dialogues with the dead.*
50 Elliott Colla, *Conflicted antiquities. Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

Augustan Rome, to try to better understand the human-thing entanglement of an Egyptian obelisk and a Roman emperor (Augustus).

Figure 5: Obelisk from Heliopolis, placed in the *Circus* by Augustus and re-erected again on Piazza del Popolo, its current location, in 1589 by Sixtus V. Photo by Marike van Aerde

In 10 BCE, emperor Augustus inaugurated an obelisk from Pharaonic Heliopolis on the *spina* of the *Circus Maximus* in Rome (Figure 5). At that time, the obelisk was about 1250 years old and it carried inscriptions from both pharaohs Sethi I and Ramses II. Augustus had an inscription added to the base declaring that he dedicated this obelisk to the Sun, now that Egypt was brought

under dominance of Rome. As such, Augustus made a lot of meaning with and through this obelisk. He celebrated his newly founded Empire and created a lasting memory for his victory over Mark Antony and Cleopatra, but he also used an Egyptian religious symbol to serve in and innovate an appropriate Roman context. Not only was the *spina* perceived as a microcosmos − with race chariots circling around the sun as planets − but also the obelisk, as a symbol of the sun, clearly referred to Augustus' tutelary deity Apollo. Thus Augustus was transferring Egypt to the banks of the Tiber. Rome inscribed itself in the deep historical time of the East and consequently looked as a legitimate successor to all the older and important cultures that came before Roman civilization. It is therefore understandable that Augustus included another obelisk (the so-called *Solare*) in his newly created centre of Rome on the Campus Martius. There the obelisk probably served as a sundial, also in order to underline its associations with time and historical memory.[51]

But where then is the agency of the obelisk in its entanglement with Augustus? How, as an object, did it get things going? Viewer responses would be good source material to investigate those questions from a short-term, contextual perspective; but unfortunately we lack direct viewer responses from the period itself. There are, however, Roman authors from later periods that write about obelisks more generally and probably do reflect viewer responses.[52] Such sources can help us answering questions like: How did the very distinct stylistic and material properties of the obelisk affect Roman viewers? What did its material agency look like in comparison to other monuments and objects in the Roman cityscape? And what were the results of its performance created by Augustus for the city of Rome?

A starting point for answering these questions is the observation that the object-form 'obelisk' soon becomes popular in wider circles; at least, so it seems, among the elites. We see obelisks now being depicted in cameos and luxury tableware; and there are even (literal) copies made, probably to be displayed in *horti*.[53] As far as we can tell, the obelisks in these cases refer to the Augustan performance, and as such the obelisk would steadily develop into one of the main symbols of

[51] For interpretations of these obelisks and their erection by Augustus see Molly Swetnam-Burland, "*Aegyptus Redacta*. The Egyptian obelisk in the Augustan Campus Martius," *The Art Bulletin* 91(3) (2010); Davies, "*Aegyptiaca* in Rome"; Versluys, "Haunting traditions"; and Marike van Aerde, "Egypt and the Augustan cultural revolution. An interpretative archaeological overview" (Unpublished PhD diss., University of Leiden, 2015).

[52] Swetnam-Burland, "*Aegyptus Redacta*."

[53] Van Aerde, "Augustan cultural revolution," 222-60.

the Roman imperial dynasty. Through its history, however, the obelisk did much more than signal 'Augustan Empire' alone. Their material and stylistic properties also had the cultural memory of Egypt as part of their agency; and therefore they were able to signal ideas about Egypt as 'old', 'religious', 'wise', and 'exotic'. This becomes clear from both literary accounts and performances of obelisks in other contexts beyond the Augustan period. In sanctuaries for Isis (and related cults) from the Flavian period (69-96 CE), for instance, we see both aspects of the material agency of obelisks (their dynastic character on the one hand and their 'Egyptian' characteristics on the other) coming together. The Flavian emperors made obelisks part of sanctuaries, like the *Iseum Campense* in Rome or the sanctuary in Beneventum, where they helped create a strong religious experience. This was an important asset of the Roman cults of the Egyptian gods. At the same time, we find obelisks mainly in temples that were strongly related to the imperial house and much less so in ordinary cult places. In terms of design and stylistic properties, the obelisk was clearly recognizable and stood out. As monoliths, obelisks added significantly to the developing Roman taste for monumentality as an expression of power.[54] But also their material properties mattered: an inscription on Domitian's obelisk from Rome mentions that it was made from 'real granite'.[55]

The material agency of the Augustan *Circus Maximus* obelisk becomes even clearer, perhaps, when another moment of performance from its cultural biography—its re-erection by Sixtus V on Piazza del Popolo, its current position, in 1589—is taken into account.[56] Sixtus clearly did this to present himself as a new emperor, and with it, Renaissance Rome as the new imperial Rome. As soon as the obelisk was standing, however, it triggered all kinds of other responses that revolved around another part of its cultural semantics: the cultural memory of 'Egypt'.[57] As such, the obelisk now became a symbol of 'Egypt' again, and played an important role in constituting the cultural climate of Renaissance Europe. In terms of cultural innovation, therefore, we must conclude that the obelisk became one of the constituents of both Augustan Rome and Renaissance Italy. And it is through this phase in their cultural biography, I suggest, that obelisks can now also be found in Paris, London, and New York: otherwise they might well have 'died out' in Egypt itself. Obelisks thus seem to have generated agency through the specific power of their combined stylistic and material

[54] Davies, "*Aegyptiaca* in Rome."
[55] Versluys, "Haunting traditions," 145.
[56] Brian Curran et al., *Obelisk. A history* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
[57] Curran et al., *Obelisk. A history*, chapter 6.

characteristics; constituting, always in combination with human agency, their own network.

Beyond context: accounting for the longue-durée

That the use, meaning, and agency of objects change over time and that we can document those changes in biographical terms is well known.[58] But the question *how* we can explain the different life spans in relation to one another, is much less researched. This might be due to the fact that, for many scholars, 'context' is key to all archaeological interpretation.[59] In that view an object can, in principle, mean anything to anyone, and central to its understanding should therefore be its contextual use.[60] This is very much true for things Egyptian as well: outside Egypt, but also on the Nile itself, Egyptian objects are often not what they were meant to be originally, at all.[61] At the same time, however, there are clearly limits to the manipulation of objects by people: taking material agency seriously implies this from the start. This seems to apply to Aegyptiaca as well, as we have seen above. On the one hand, therefore, the category Aegyptiaca as such does not seem to exist: Egyptian (looking) objects can mean anything to anyone with contextual understanding being the key to their interpretation. On the other hand, however, things Egyptian often seem to affect people in rather similar ways over long time spans and large geographical distances. For many contexts, Egypt seems to be something of a 'haunting tradition'.[62] Therefore, there is a case to be made for what one could call 'the value of de-contextualized objects'. This critical tension surrounding the notion of context as used in archaeology is expressed well in Culler's observation that 'meaning is context-bound, but context is boundless'.[63] If context is boundless – and I would agree

[58] Janet Hoskins, "Agency, biography and objects. In *Handbook of material culture*, ed. Chris Tilley et al. (London: Sage, 2006).
[59] Dimitrios Papaconstantinou, ed., *Deconstructing context. A critical approach to archaeological practice* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2006).
[60] For examples: Hans Peter Hahn and Hadas Weiss, *Mobility, meaning and the transformation of things. Shifting contexts of material culture through time and space* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2013).
[61] Miguel John Versluys, "Understanding Egypt in Egypt and beyond," in *Isis on the Nile. Egyptian gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*, ed. Laurent Bricault and Miguel John Versluys (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2010).
[62] Versluys, "Haunting traditions."
[63] Culler, *Literary theory,* 67.

that it often is through processes of globalization[64] – objects have a large role to play in determining and formulating contexts: this is also entanglement. Context is therefore not alone in determining the meaning and agency of an object; its inherent 'de-contextualized' value has a role to play, as well.[65]

Can we define an inherent, de-contextualized value of Aegyptiaca, then? When we look at the 'cultural biography of Egypt and Aegyptiaca', summarized above, we may try to define its core on the basis of what Aegyptiaca did in those many historical instances. Of course, Aegyptiaca did many different things in many different contexts. But can we, prudently, try to come to some kind of definition with regard to their material agency throughout global history?

In the second half of the first millennium BCE, the concept of Egypt had as its main traits:

1. a specific, Pharaonic form of state formation; 2. a differentiated writing culture; 3. a so-called double religion (*religio duplex*) that combined an exotic polytheism with an esoteric Monotheism; and, 4. an obsession with death and the afterlife.[66]

We see all these traits developing throughout later historical periods, and they continue to form the core of the definition of the concept of Egypt. We could summarize this core with four key-words: pharaohs (state formation), hieroglyphs (writing culture), mysteries (*religio duplex*), and mummies (death and the afterlife). In some way or other, Egypt apparently was always about one of these. But how did that concept, so to speak, communicate its characteristics to the world? It did so by being part of the (intellectual) repertoire and processes of cultural formation. This is how 'Egypt' haunted Europe;[67] and this is what Jan Assmann calls Egypt's *mnemohistory*.[68] But it certainly communicated also, as this essay has shown, through objects with distinct materials and styles. A definition of Egyptian material culture would, probably, consist at least of pyramids, sphinxes, obelisks, statues, *stelae*, and sarcophagi. In their specific form or by

[64] See Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity At Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 48, on what he calls 'the global ethnoscape'.

[65] See Caroline Van Eck, Miguel John Versluys and Pieter Ter Keurs, "The biography of cultures: style, objects and agency. Proposal for an interdisciplinary approach," *Cahiers de l'École du Louvre. Recherches en histoire de l'art, histoire des civilisations, archéologie, anthropologie et muséologie* [online] 7 (2015).

[66] Jan Assmann, *Ägypten. Eine Sinngeschichte* (München: Hanser, 1996); Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in western monotheism* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[67] Versluys, "Haunting traditions."

[68] Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*.

their specific materiality, these all refer to the four key words of the concept: pharaohs, hieroglyphs, mysteries, and mummies. Egyptian-style material culture, therefore, was loaded with connotations, so it seems, because it was able to make concepts of Egypt tangible. Through the strong connections with the concepts of Egypt that it could capitalize upon, Egyptian material culture was thus a very special category of material culture. Its characteristics underline this: in terms of both style (rigid and compact forms) and material (hard and colourful stone) Egypt stands out. Moreover, concept and materiality were able to enforce one another.

It is as such that we can talk about the de-contextualized value of Aegyptiaca. They could be manipulated by human actors in a given (historical) context, but only to a certain extent, because they brought with them material agency of their own. With regard to antiquarianism in the Baroque, Ingrid Rowland writes about Aegyptiaca and their impact that:

'*no scholarly attack could possibly have dispelled the aura of wisdom and mystery that surrounded the Egyptians and Etruscans,* not when their artefacts came forth from the earth *inscribed in strange, incomprehensible scripts, carved, molded and cast in shapes of odd, compelling beauty*' (my emphasis).[69] This observation very well illustrates the agency of Aegyptiaca and shows how this agency is both related to the *mnemohistory* of Egypt and functioned separately.

How to explain this descent with modification within the cultural sphere? This essay has suggested that objects and their agency should be central to finding an answer to the question why, throughout history, the 'Egyptian style' is retaken time and again. The continuing Renaissances of Egypt are globalizing human-thing entanglements. Objects survive usually much longer than people, and are therefore much more important in transposing cultural memory and shared practices. Taking such a perspective on board has all kinds of interesting implications. One of the things it suggests is that we can try to study Aegyptiaca in relation to one another by means of vertical transmission, which functions, so it seems, like descent with modification as it is explored in phylogenetic studies.[70] The *longue durée* sketch above might indeed suggest such a parallel.

We might also think about meme-theory and argue that, with their distinct stylistic and material properties, Aegyptiaca apparently were better equipped for self-reproduction than were other styles and materials. Style and materiality then

[69] Ingrid D. Rowland, "Baroque." in *A companion to the classical tradition*, ed. Craig W. Kallendorf (Malden & Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 48.

[70] Ruth Mace, Clare J. Holden, and Stephen Shennan, eds. *The evolution of cultural diversity. A phylogenetic approach* (London: UCL Press, 2005).

function as, what memetics would call, the extended phenotypes of the meme Aegyptiaca. In her introduction to memetics, Susan Blackmore explains how 'successful memes are the ones that get copied and spread, while unsuccessful ones do not'.[71] And as we have seen, Aegyptiaca are very good at getting replicated. But obviously, establishing a relation between the idea of vertical transmission and phylogenetics or memetics needs much more background and in-depth research. The objective of this chapter was not to provide that but rather to show that Aegyptiaca are a worthwhile category to be analysed along those lines.[72]

Let us briefly return to Africa. African Renaissances are often substantiated by claims about the glories of ancient Egypt.[73] Pixley Seme, a Black public intellectual and the founder of the African National Congress, did so in one of the first of these public claims in 1905, as did Cheikh Anta Diop in 1991, when he wrote, 'The return to Egypt in all domains is the necessary condition for reconciling African civilizations with history, in order to be able to construct a body of modern human sciences, in order to renovate African culture. Far from being a revelling in the past, a look toward the Egypt of Antiquity is the best way to conceive and build our cultural future. In reconceived and renewed African culture, Egypt will play the same role that Greco-Roman Antiquity plays in western culture.'[74]

Egypt is evoked here as a cultural force that is able to instigate innovation; to bring things to life again. I am unaware of the material-cultural aspects of this twentieth century African *Leitmotiv*; were Aegyptiaca needed to back up this claim?

Although understandable against the background of African (socio-political) history, the theme of Egypt as instigator has a much wider resonance, as has become clear. Many examples throughout this essay have shown how Egypt and Aegyptiaca function as catalysts that 'get things going'. In this sense, it seems, Egypt was always perceived as a culture that could add to the *status quo*. Being Self and Other at the same time, it was often regarded as having the potential to

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71 Susan Blackmore, *The meme machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

72 See Stephen Shennan, *Genes, memes and human history: Darwinian archaeology and cultural evolution* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2002).

73 See David O'Connor and Andrew Reid, eds. *Ancient Egypt in Africa* (London: UCL Press, 2003).

74 For these examples and the following quote see Daniel Orrells, Gurminder K. Bhambra, and Tessa Roynon, eds. *African Athena. New Agendas*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5-8.

act and transform. Objects and their material agency are crucial to understanding both the functioning of those processes and their globalization.

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