Concepts of Egypt in Augustan Rome: Two case studies of cameo glass from The British Museum

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The British Museum in London has a remarkable collection of Roman cameo glass.¹ By examining two fragments of cameo glass with Egyptian decorative elements from this collection, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing exploration of Egypt in the Roman world. These two case studies are among the first to place Egyptian elements in Roman cameo glass in the light of Augustan visual culture.² The first examines how Egyptian elements feature in a specific cameo glass fragment and the second explores another fragment as part of the spread of a certain Egyptian visual concept throughout the material culture of Augustan Rome.

Cameo glass

Cameo glass represents a relatively small percentage of Roman vessels and tableware. Formed of translucent blue or purple glass with opaque white glass relief decorations, cameo glass was a type of fine tableware unique to Roman material culture.³ Recent studies by Paul Roberts, William Gudenrath, Veronica Tatton-Brown and David Whitehouse of the British Museum, published in 2010, have dated this specific glass technique to 15 BC–AD 25 with a specific concentration of workshops in the city of Rome related to the rise of mould-blown glass techniques and the development of Arretine pottery in Rome.⁴ The rise of mould-blown and enamelled glass production circa AD 20–25 coincided with the collapse of the Arretine pottery workshops in central Italy. This was a time of change in terms of technical

¹ I had the pleasure of meeting Paul Roberts at the British Museum in the summer of 2011. His advice and assistance with regard to the appearance of Egyptian elements on Roman cameo glass have been most helpful for my on-going PhD research. I also wish to convey my thanks to Richard Parkinson, who introduced me to the research facilities at the British Museum in 2009, and helped me to acquaint myself with the Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan.

² These case studies are part of my doctoral research on Egyptian elements in the material culture, both public and private, of the city of Rome during the Augustan period. This dissertation is part of the research group founded by Miguel John Versluys at Leiden University in 2010, ‘Cultural innovation in a globalising society: Egypt in the Roman world,’ which takes Egypt as case study for studying cultural interaction and innovation in the Roman world.

³ The best-known example of this type is the Portland Vase, now at the British Museum, London (G&R 1945,0927.1). See Walters 1926, 376–78, no. 4036; Painter and Whitehouse 1990, 24–84; Walker 2004, 47; Whitehouse 2007, 116–17, 121–33; Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 844; and Roberts et al. 2010, 34–43. There are myriad interpretations of the Portland Vase, including references to the love affair between Marc Antony and Cleopatra (Walker 2004), and to Augustus’ own rise to power (Painter and Whitehouse 1990).

⁴ Arretine pottery is of a red-slip type with glazed surface produced circa 30 BC to AD 100 at Arretium (modern Arezzo in central Italy). Arretine pottery, from either plain or decorated moulds, was exported throughout the Roman world. See Roberts et al. 2010, 22, 100; Kenrick 2000; Paturzo 1996, 174–75; Brown 1968, 8; and Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 844.
development and fashion taste in Roman glasswork, and these developments probably also affected the production of cameo glass. As suggested by the British Museum studies noted above, these arguments imply that ‘the cameo glass industry began in about 15 BC with a cessation of the major workshop(s) in about 25 AD’ (Roberts et al. 2010, 23). This places the peak of cameo glass production during the reign of Augustus.

The manufacturing process of cameo glass combined two significantly different techniques, namely lapidary work and glassblowing, at a time when core-forming and casting were the routine practice in glass workshops (Roberts et al. 2010, 25–31). The historical significance of cameo glass therefore lies in the innovative nature of its production techniques, as well as in its particular stylistic characteristics. As such, cameo glass presents a remarkable case study of the so-called ‘cultural revolution’ that marked Augustan Rome on a large scale.

‘I found Rome a city of bricks and left it a city of marble.’ This famous statement was attributed to Augustus by Cassius Dio (56.30.3) and Suetonius (28.1) and, in view of the material culture surviving from Augustan Rome, it is clear that it is more than merely a literary topos. The Augustan ‘cultural revolution’ did not simply revolve around brick or marble; rather it heralded the development of Imperial Rome as a complex cultural system encompassing most of the Mediterranean world. The reign of Augustus marked a historical turning point for the Roman world, namely the end of the Roman civil war, which in turn led to the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire. Augustus’ political transition and programme gave rise to a socio-economic flourishing throughout the Roman world, as is evident from the material culture of this period. Visual language played a vital role in Augustus’ propaganda programme: political messages of peace and prosperity were conveyed with great efficiency through public monuments, such as the Ara Pacis and Augustus’ Palatine residence. These, in turn, left their mark on the development of material culture and visual styles in the private spheres of Augustan Rome. Cameo glass is an interesting—and so far underexplored—example of such material culture.

The original contexts of the currently known cameo glass vessels and fragments are difficult to reconstruct. The surviving pieces are scattered around the globe in museums and private collections, and, in the majority of cases, information regarding findspots and archaeological contexts is lacking. Nevertheless, by means of comparative studies some

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7 For extensive studies on Augustan visual language, see Zanker 1990, La Follette et al. 1994 and Pensabene 1997. For the Augustan Palatine, see Carettoni 1983; Hoffman and Wulff-Rheidt 2004; and Zink and Pienig 2009, 109–22. For the Ara Pacis of Augustus, see Davies 2011, 354–72.

8 For a recently published study of the Egyptianising iconography of the cameo glass flask at the J. Paul Getty Museum, see Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010.

9 In most cases museum registers hold no record beyond the acquisition of pieces at 19th century European auctions or donations from private collections of mainly Renaissance Italian, Imperial British or American provenance. At present, some of the best available historical records are at the British Museum, London, the Gorga collection (Università la Sapienza), Rome, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Corn-
clarity can be obtained even when records of fragments are missing entirely. An example of this is the recent comparisons made between Roman cameo glass fragments from the British Museum in London and pieces from the Gorga collection in Rome and the Corning Museum of Glass in New York. The findspot of the latter fragment is securely documented as the Horti Sallustiani in Rome, and the acute similarities in material properties and stylistic characteristics strongly suggest that the other two fragments likewise date from the same period and a similar Roman context (Roberts et al. 2010, 33; Roberts 2011 pers. comm.). Moreover, the context of elite private gardens such as the Horti Sallustiani support the argument that Roman cameo glass held a high market status in the city of Rome and would have been popular among the upper classes of the early Imperial period.\(^{10}\)

The total number of known Roman cameo glass fragments and vessels amounts to 377, with the majority of forms divided among open vessels (cups, bowls), closed vessels (amphorae, bottles) and plaques, and with a variety of decorative themes of which so-called floral and Bacchic scenes have been identified as the most frequent (Painter and Whitehouse 1990, 154–60; Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 839; Roberts et al. 2010, 12, 97–99). However, another prominent theme that we find recurring on cameo glass fragments is Egypt (Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 839–46; Roberts et al. 2010, 54–55, 64, 77–79).

Egypt played a significant role in Augustus’ political programme: most famously referring to his victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII, and secondly to the incorporation of Egypt as a Roman province at that point in time. From Augustus’ reign onwards, we see that Egypt came to influence the material culture of Rome in many different ways, for many different reasons, and according to many different ‘concepts of Egypt’ that arose and developed within the Roman world (Versluys 2002; Swetnam-Burland 2007, 113–36; Bricault and Versluys 2010). We encounter Egypt in Roman wall paintings, sculpture, architecture, jewellery—and as a decorative theme on fragments of Roman cameo glass.\(^{11}\)

The total number of known examples of Roman cameo glass with Egyptian decorative elements amounts to 26, of which half are held by the British Museum (13 objects).\(^{12}\) The British Museum fragments are divided between the Department of Greece and Rome (G&R) and Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan (AES). This group presents an iconographical variety \textit{an sich}. Six fragments are made of either translucent blue or purple glass overlaid with opaque white glass (Fig. 1). Four fragments are of the blue glass type, with decorative scenes representing 1) two figures on a Nilotic reed boat (G&R 1999,0927.1),\(^{13}\) 2) a figure wearing...
an Egyptian ceremonial *wesekh* collar (EA 16600), 14 3) an obelisk on a base engraved with hieroglyphs, also interpreted as a Nilometer (G&R 1982,0404.1),15 and 4) a kneeling figure in Egyptian clothing performing an offering (G&R 1999,0803.1).16 Two fragments are of the purple glass type with decorative scenes representing 1) a head wearing an Egyptian wig and lotus diadem (G&R 1868,0501.8)17 and 2) a fragment of a cameo glass plaque showing a human figure walking beside a sacrificial bull wearing a lotus garland (EA 16630).18 The other seven fragments are of the layered-colour glass type, usually consisting of three different layers of coloured glass of which opaque green, opaque yellow and opaque cobalt blue are the most prominent (Roberts et al. 2010, 77). Depictions on all of these fragments evoke Nilotic landscape scenes, including figures at the waterside and possibly a reed boat, as well as palm, acanthus and lotus foliage (Simon 1957, pls 17–19; Roberts et al. 2010, 77–79, nos 77–81).19 Two fragments of the blue glass type will be further explored below.

**Case study 1: Glass Isis (EA 16600)**

This case study will examine fragment EA 16600 (Figs 2a and b), which depicts a figure wearing an Egyptian ceremonial *wesekh* collar (note 15). The fragment measures 1.9cm in height, 2.8cm in width, with a 0.4cm thickness, and its curved shape suggests that it originally was the wall of a round vessel, most likely a cup (Roberts et al. 2010, 55). The surviving white glass relief shows the neck, shoulders and parts of the arms and torso of a human figure portrayed in profile. The figure wears what appears to be a ceremonial garment with a broad circular collar decorated with rosettes and beads. The garment falls down in vertical folds from the collar. On the right wrist a tight-fitted bracelet with an even pattern of either small beads or a carved relief can be seen. While the collar evokes a visual connection with Egyptian ceremonial *wesekh* collars, the garment itself has the appearance of a Greek *chiton*, especially in regard to the way the folds on the sleeves are attached with knots at regular intervals.

It is remarkable to note that this particular fragment is the only example of the blue glass type in the British Museum’s Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan collection; other fragments of this type are kept in its Department of Greece and Rome collection. This appears to be due to Cooney’s original interpretation of the piece as Ptolemaic, describing the costume as ‘elaborate and unusual’ and belonging to a scene of a Ptolemaic king making

records for this fragment and all other British Museum objects can be viewed on the Collections On-line Database: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection](http://www.britishmuseum.org/collection) (last accessed November 2012).

15 Simon 1957, pl. 18; and Roberts et al. 2010, 54, no. 20.
16 This fragment is a rare example of incuse decoration on cameo glass. See Sangiorgi 1914, 48, no. 156; Bailey 2007; Christie’s New York 1999, 61, lot no. 137; and Roberts et al. 2010, 54–55, no. 22.
17 Slade 1871, 3, no. 8; and Roberts et al. 2010, 54, no. 21.
18 Cooney 1976, 36, no. 33; Tatton-Brown 1991, 65, fig. 78; Weiss and Schüssler 2001, 223, no. 93; and Roberts et al. 2010, 64, no. 41.
19 For Nilotic landscape scenes, see Versluis 2002.

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmaes/issue_20/van_aerde.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmaes/issue_20/van_aerde.aspx)
a sacrifice (Cooney 1976, 36, no. 330). But as Roberts points out, the material and deduced manufacturing method of this fragment is identical to the other blue glass type fragments with suggested a 15 BC–AD 25 date and Roman origin; moreover, the visual identification of the costume as a chiton makes a sacrificial scene with a king highly unlikely and instead suggests a Hellenised depiction of a female figure (Roberts et al. 2010, 55). Another argument for the Roman origin and dating of this fragment is the fact that a similar wesekh collar appears on an early Imperial period glass fragment found at Karlsruhe depicting a female figure interpreted as Hathor or Isis (Simon 1957, 46, no. 4, pl. 14.1; Roberts et al. 2010, 55). Moreover, wesekh collars are found on several other blue cameo glass fragments that have been dated to the Augustan period.20 The ceremonial wesekh collar is a highly recognisable feature of pharaonic iconography: a well-known example of both Isis and Osiris wearing a wesekh is provided by the Book of the Dead of Hunefer papyrus from the British Museum’s Department of Ancient Egypt and Sudan collection (Fig. 3).21 An Isis-parallel from Roman times, on the other hand, is found in a wall painting depicting an Isiac figure in chiton dress in the House of Livia, a building interpreted as the residence of Augustus’ wife on the Palatine Hill (Fig. 4).22 The chiton is regarded as typical of Hellenistic and Roman portrayals of the goddess Isis and is often recognised as a characteristic component of Roman Isiac iconography from the early Imperial period onwards.23 For example, an Isis sculpture from Rome dated to the 2nd century AD and now in the Termi di Dioeleziano also wears a Hellenic-style chiton with folds on the sleeves that are attached with knots at regular intervals similar to those on the cameo fragment (Fig. 5).24

The above comparisons demonstrate the complexity of multiple cultural influences gathered into one object, in this case, one small glass fragment. In order to gain more insight into this complexity, it is important to focus on the material and stylistic properties of the object in addition to its subject-matter and socio-historical context.

In terms of its material form, we see a fragment of translucent blue glass with opaque white glass relief decorations created in a Roman workshop and today considered typical of the Roman glassware genre. In terms of the fragment’s style, we can make out a somewhat static figure in profile, arms held in a position reminiscent of ‘pharaonic’ Egyptian iconography. Moreover, the decorative collar the figure is wearing can be recognised as a wesekh, an ancient Egyptian ceremonial collar. The figure’s gown, however, can be recognised as a Greek-style

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20 Two examples are BM G&R 1999,0803.1 and blue cameo glass fragment now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Met. 17.194.2296a) depicting a figure in Egyptian clothing (nemes headdress and wesekh collar) making an offering.

21 BM EA 9901/3: Frame 3 of the Book of the Dead of Hunefer (Hu-nfr) features the judgment of the dead in the presence of Osiris. See Faulkner 1985; Quirke and Spencer 1992; Parkinson 1995; and Taylor 2011.

22 Wall painting of Isis as a caryatid in an early 3rd style decorative wall design, generally dated to the last two decades BC. See Rizzo 1936; Caretonni 1957, 70–119; Bastet and De Vos 1979, 19–22; Bragantini and De Vos 1982, 22–24; and Söldner 2000, 383–93. The fresco fragment is currently at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli.

23 A similar configuration of the dress on the upper arm can be found in an Isis-statue at the Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (inv. 6370), also dated to the 2nd century AD. On Isiac iconography in the Roman world, see Eingartner 1991, 121–22; Bricault 2001, 167; and Sfameni Gasparro 2007, 40–72.

24 The statue is currently at the Termi di Dioeleziano, Rome, inv. 125412. See Malaise 2004, 29, no. 433d.
In terms of theme, we have seen above that the fragment has been interpreted as part of an Egyptian ceremonial scene, as a depiction of the goddess Isis, and even as an unidentified Ptolemaic ruler. Regardless of the specific identity of the figure, the decorative scene is clearly evocative of an ‘atmosphere of Egypt’ that would have been immediately recognisable to its Roman owners. In terms of its direct context, this cameo vessel was an elite object by virtue of the exclusive nature of the workshops it originated from, and it would have been owned and used by members of the upper circles of Augustan Rome.

To summarise, this particular cameo glass vessel fragment demonstrates a combination of a typical Roman material type, both Hellenistic and Egyptian stylistic elements, and a specifically Augustan Roman context. Interpretative studies of such ‘foreign elements’ in Roman material culture originated from the Kopienkritik paradigm, which focused on Greek-Hellenistic influences. Tonio Hölscher was the first to explore and analyse the incorporation of foreign elements as a typical Roman semantic system in his 1987 book Römische Bildsprache als semantische System. Within this system, themes and styles from foreign cultures could be used to evoke specific associations in certain Roman contexts. Hölscher regarded these styles and themes as taken from a ‘repertoire’ of stylistic and thematic possibilities available to the Romans, by which they could express their own—contemporary Roman—concepts and associations:

In such conditions, what mattered was not necessarily the origins of the forms, in terms of the history of style. … The received forms were allowed to become value-free elements in a language of imagery, which [the Romans] simply used (Hölscher 1987/2004, 125–26).

Hölscher’s studies focussed exclusively on Greek-Hellenistic elements in Roman material culture, and it is remarkable that his system has not yet been explored with regard to non-Greek cultural influences. In the case of Egyptian elements in Augustan Rome, the incorporation of Egyptian styles and themes for deliberate communicative purposes in Augustus’ politically charged visual language certainly fits this semantic system. However, for the cameo glass fragment from this case study, the interpretation of a strictly deliberate and political visual language does not suffice.

In response to Hölscher’s visual semantics, the theory of creative emulation supplements a contextual approach to the incorporation of foreign elements in Roman material culture.26

25 Kopienkritik traditionally followed the concept of an evolution of style and form, observing a process of Aufstieg, Höhepunkt and Niedergang whereby Roman copies of Greek original works were considered a step down in terms of artistic value. Current studies in copy criticism, especially in continental academia, explore a wider range of foreign influences with a more contextual approach to the paradigm. See most recently: Barbanera 2008, 35–62; Junker, Stähli and Kunze (eds) 2008; and forthcoming papers presented at the session ‘Roman copies and Greek originals: Theories, methods, perspectives,’ at the 22nd Theoretical Roman Archaeology Conference (TRAC) at Frankfurt am Main in 2012 (chair: A. Anguissola).

26 The emphasis of this approach lies on the emulation and/or fusion of elements from different cultural origins within Roman material culture, as well as the contextual significance of the resulting Roman visual language. So far, creative emulation theory has paid little attention to foreign elements other than Greek. See
After observing the fusion of foreign elements in the cameo glass fragment of this case study, the next step is to hypothesise how that object would have functioned on a wider socio-historical scale within the context of Augustan Rome. Egypt was indeed an important theme used by Augustus for his political propaganda, and visual references to Egypt featured in public monuments throughout the city of Rome. It seems that, as a result of Augustus’ politically motivated choice, visual references to Egypt came into favour among the Roman elite. Often this phenomenon is described as ‘Egyptomania’ in scholarship, a term that implies an interest of the Roman elite in ‘exotica,’ under which especially ‘Egyptianising’ objects are categorised. In my opinion, however, this categorisation greatly limits our interpretation of Egypt as a visual concept in Roman material culture. According to this view of ‘Egyptomania,’ objects that combine Roman forms and styles with Egyptian elements are mere imitations of Egypt to suit a Roman fashion trend. While we must not neglect the fact that fashion trends are certainly discernible in Roman material culture, we must also not forget that Ptolemaic Egypt had already become part of the wider Hellenistic world by the time that world became, in turn, part of the Roman Mediterranean. The appearance of Egyptian visual elements deliberately used in public contexts, such as Augustan propaganda, would have encouraged the spread of Egyptian elements—some of which may have been newly introduced by Augustus, while others may have already been part of the available repertoire—to the private sector of Roman material culture as a result. This process is illustrated by the cameo glass fragment in this case study. Its Egyptian decorative scene appears to have been created to portray a recognizable image of Egypt for the Roman elite. Its pharaonic elements should therefore not be interpreted as a direct link with Egypt and Egyptian style, but as an evocation of a certain ‘concept of Egypt’ that was already incorporated in the context of Augustan Rome. In fact, we could even say that instead of imitating Egyptian styles to create an ‘Egyptianising’ object, the Romans gave their own typically Roman glass type an ‘Egyptian twist’ to fit the market demands of Augustan Rome at the time—that is, to create an object that was decidedly Roman and evocative of a certain ‘concept of Egypt’ as part of Rome, at the same time.


27 There is much debate about the determination of the appearance of Egyptian elements in Roman material culture. Generally two categories are considered: ‘Egyptian’ (original objects from pharaonic or Ptolemaic Egypt in the Nile Valley and therefore considered authentic) and ‘Egyptianising’ (objects created outside of the Nile Valley to resemble Egyptian styles and therefore considered less authentic). This approach keeps Egypt and Rome consistently separated as two different entities. The ‘Egyptianising’ Roman objects are then regarded as examples of ‘Egyptomania’ among the Roman elite: imitations of Egypt in Rome to suit a fashion trend. The ‘nation-state’ perspective underlying determinations such as ‘Egyptianising’ objects and ‘Egyptomania’ date from 19th century (colonial) archaeology. Plainly put, this perspective reflects its own 19th century theoretical origin, and subsequently has superimposed it upon the Roman Mediterranean. See Swetnam-Burland 2007, 113–36; Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 843; and Versluys forthcoming.

28 For a recent overview and critique of ‘Egyptomania,’ see Curran, 1996. See also De Vos, who uses the term ‘Egyptomania,’ but does not define its significance or implications (1980; 1983, 59–71).

29 In other words, Egyptian and Hellenistic styles had already become part of a material culture repertoire that was known to the Roman world and had become part of Roman material culture. See Hölscher 1987/2004, 125; Perry 2005, 49; and Versluys forthcoming.
Case study 2: Exiled obelisk? (G&R 1982,0404.1)

This second case study explores the movements throughout material culture of an Egyptian visual concept initiated by the arrival of the obelisk at the Circus Maximus in Rome.

Even in their exile, when uprooted and deposed as guardians of the temples of Egypt, when dragged as booty or trophies of war to distant regions by foreign conquerors as monuments of their vanity or their gods, the obelisks never lost their Egyptian identity (Iversen 1968, 11).

Erik Iversen’s statement illustrates the perspective that has long dominated academic treatment of the obelisks of Rome and still remains the starting point for the majority of research concerning obelisks in Rome and beyond (Parker 2007, 209; D’Onofrio 1965; Iversen 1968). In approaching the layers of meaning carried and developed by obelisks taken out of Egypt, to regard them solely as objects in exile or proofs of conquest is too simplistic a starting point. One thing seems certain: obelisks have always connoted some very special sort of power (Curran 2009, 7). In Egypt, obelisks were traditionally dedicated to deities associated with the sun. They were erected to mark temple complexes, but also to allude to important historical events related to reigning pharaohs (Shaw 2003, 561–64; Curran 2009, 14). Since 10 BC, when Augustus imported obelisks from Egypt to his seat of authority in Rome, obelisks have been used outside of Egypt as symbols of power in cities of power from Constantinople to New York. The feat of transporting these colossal monoliths was a demonstration of might, and, once erected, they must certainly have been a remarkable and unusual sight in the urban landscape of Rome. The obelisk that Augustus erected on the spina of the Circus Maximus in particular seems to have been meant to impress the thousands of Roman citizens who attended the horse races on a regular basis (Fig. 6). Made entirely of Aswan granite and measuring 24 metres tall, this obelisk was used by Augustus as a powerful political tool. First of all, he had it placed in the direct vicinity and sightline of his own house complex on the Palatine Hill, a topographical connection that visually emphasised the obelisk’s political significance. Secondly, Augustus commissioned a new dedication on the obelisk’s base to the deity Sol and had a golden solar disc or sphere placed on its top (D’Onofrio 1965, 177; Tertullian 7.1; Ammianus Marcellinus 17.4.17). These references can be linked to the god Apollo, Augustus’ protector deity, to whom he erected a temple on the Palatine Hill right beside his own house, directly facing the Circus Maximus and the obelisk (Carettoni 1973, 75–87; Lugli 1946; Zanker 1983, 21–40; Tomei 2000, 7–36; Pensabene 1997, 149–92). Recent

30 Along with his descriptions of the Augustan obelisks, Pliny the Elder emphasises the importance of the technical achievement associated with the transport of the obelisk from Heliopolis to Alexandria and to Rome by ship (35.14.70).

31 The obelisk was dedicated in Heliopolis to Seti I and Ramses II, and its hieroglyphs and figurative scene follow the style of Dynasty 19 (1298–1187 BC). After standing in the Circus Maximus for centuries, the obelisk was restored under the reign of Pope Sixtus V and re-erected at Piazza del Popolo in 1587, where it still stands today. See Iversen 1968, 65–75; Versleys 2002, 6–7, 362–63; 2004, 244–53; D’Onofrio 1965, 173–77; and Parker 2007, 209–22.
data studies of this Apollo Palatinus temple point towards a strong solar component in the portrayal of the deity. The analysis of golden pigment recovered from the columns of the Apollo Palatinus temple has for the first time presented a material basis for Augustus’ innovative use of gold in the decoration of this temple (Zink and Pienig 2009, 109–22; figs 5–10 for digital reconstruction), which likewise aligns with hypothetical reconstructions—based on literary sources and depictions of the southern Palatine on Roman coins—of a golden statue of Apollo in his solar chariot that would have topped the temple roof. Thus, Augustus turned the Heliopolis obelisk into a powerful visual message. It marked the Roman conquest of Egypt by incorporating Egypt directly into the very heart of Augustus’ Rome. The Circus Maximus was the largest gathering place of the Roman people, and now also faced Augustus’ own Palatine residence. As a political landmark the obelisk must have been impossible to ignore; this is probably one of the reasons why it began to appear as a visual topos in the material culture of Rome very soon after its erection at the Circus.

The first example of an actual copy of the obelisk has been recovered from the Horti Sallustiani. The dating of this copy remains a challenge; nothing is known about a possible pre-Roman history for this obelisk, and there appears to be no reason to assume that it was carved in Egypt. The generally preferred post-Augustan dating for this obelisk cannot be assumed as it is based solely on its mention—or lack thereof—in literary sources. However, its direct connection with the Circus Maximus obelisk is instantly recognisable. Although smaller in size (14 metres), its hieroglyphs and figurative scenes appear to attempt a direct imitation of the Circus Maximus obelisk; but the execution of these, as well as the dressing of the granite, is remarkably crude in comparison to the Heliopolis original (Fig. 7). Some of the hieroglyphs can be read as genuine characters, but certainly not all. In the case of many characters it would appear that the sculptor simply copied them without understanding them (Malaise 1972, 182–83; Coarelli 1984, 463). If the obelisk was already part of a private elite garden pavilion at the Horti Sallustiani during the Augustan period, it could be regarded as a political statement as a direct link to Augustus, while simultaneously aligning with the then current Egyptian fashion trends introduced to Rome through the Egyptian components of

32 Literary sources that describe the Apollo Palatinus temple: Propertius 2.31; Pliny the Elder 36.4; Suetonius 51; Res Gestae 24. For the depiction of the Apollo Palatinus temple and solar chariot on coinage, see Ritter 1982, 365–70; and Richter 1998, 463–64. See also Sengelin 1983; and Hekster 2006.


34 ‘In many respects curious and enigmatical, we know absolutely nothing [about this obelisk], except that it undoubtedly was quarried in Egypt’ (Iversen 1968, 128).

35 The hypothetical dating is generally placed between AD 79 (the death of Pliny the Elder, who does not mention the Horti Sallustiani obelisk in his treatment on Egyptian obelisks in Rome) and AD 360, when Ammianus Marcellinus is the first source to mention the obelisk (Amm. Marc. 18.4.16.). However, the fact that Pliny did not mention the obelisk may likewise be due to the possibility that it was not regarded as an originally Egyptian obelisk because it was made in Rome from Aswan granite imported from Egypt. Another reason for its absence in Pliny could be that the obelisk, unlike the others described by Pliny, was not publically accessible but part of a private elite (if Augustan) or private Imperial (if early 1st century AD) garden pavilion. See D’Onofrio 1965, 268–69; Iversen 1968, 128–29; Roullet 1972, 71–72; and Curran 2009, 195–96.
Augustus’ propaganda. If the obelisk were part of a later Imperial pavilion, whether late Julian-Claudian or post-Severan (D’Onofrio 1965, 268–79; Iversen 1968, 128–29), the political reference to the obelisk that Augustus brought to the Circus Maximus would have remained strong. Instead of directly referring to Augustus’ contemporary political programme, the obelisk would have referred to Augustus’ status as the first emperor of Rome. Moreover, especially in later Imperial times, the obelisk at the Circus Maximus would have been a known visual concept as part of the Roman urban landscape, and would have been recognisable as a specifically Roman visual reference in the equally Roman context of an Imperial garden pavilion on the Pincio Hill.

Another Roman reference to an Egyptian obelisk is found in cameo glass. Fragment G&R 1982,0404.1 is of the blue and opaque white glass type, and depicts an obelisk on a base (Fig 8). The fragment measures 4cm in height, 2.5cm in width, and is 0.5cm thick. The fragment’s shape suggests that it was part of the body of a small *modiolus*, a cylindrical drinking vessel similar to a mug (Roberts et al. 2010, 54, no. 20). The surviving fragment is almost entirely covered by the decorative white glass relief; only around the left edge and bottom is the blue glass underground visible on the front exterior side. The relief shows part of a vertical, decorated rectangular pillar standing on a large square base. Under the base indeterminate lines are visible, perhaps representing part of a plinth or indicating some type of surface. The decorations on the pillar are generally interpreted as hieroglyphs on an obelisk (Simon 1957, no. 18; Whitehouse 2007, 120, fig. 30). On the other hand, Roberts, Gudenrath, Tatton-Brown and Whitehouse have also suggested that the pillar could represent a Nilometer, an instrument used to measure changes in the water levels of the Nile by means of horizontal lines on a vertical column, which could explain the markings on the cameo pillar’s lower end (Roberts et al. 2010, 54). However, the appearance of its base does not resemble any specific part of a Nilometer, but is instead remarkably similar to the column bases constructed by Augustus for both of the obelisks that he brought to Rome (Meyboom 1995, 244; Hachili 2009, 102). Therefore, the interpretation that this fragment depicts an obelisk still seems the most likely.

Another argument for this interpretation can be made from a comparison with the cameo glass perfume flask at the J. Paul Getty Museum in California (Figs 9a–b). This is one of the few intact Roman cameo glass vessels and is generally dated between 25 BC and AD 25, with the city of Rome as the most likely place of origin.36 Despite the fact that the flask measures only 7.6cm in height and 4.2cm in width, the hieroglyphs on the opaque white obelisk are clearly visible and recognisable as genuine hieroglyphs; although they do not represent any readable words, they are ‘actual, and not fanciful, characters [that] appear to have been selected to be legible on a symbolic level’ (Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 841). On the base of the Getty obelisk we can also make out markings that seem rather similar to the horizontal lines on the lower part of the pillar of the British Museum fragment G&R 1982,0404.1, discussed above. Another argument in favour of interpreting the fragment as depicting an obelisk is the fact that the image of an obelisk would have been widely known, especially in the context of Augustan Rome, because of the two Heliopolis obelisks imported by Augustus, whereas the

36 Inv. no. JPGM 85.AF.84. at The J. Paul Getty Museum. For the most recent overview and analysis of this flask, see Wight and Swetnam-Burland 2010, 839–46. See also Whitehouse 2007, 120.
visual notion of a Nilometer is less likely to have been so widely recognisable.\textsuperscript{37}

In terms of the spread of the Augustan obelisk as a visual concept in Rome, we have so far moved from large public political landmarks, to a likely Roman-manufactured copy in an either private elite or Imperial garden pavilion, to typical Roman cameo glass vessels used in exclusive private spheres that depict obelisks with hieroglyphs.

This trend seems to continue with another example from the private sphere, namely, a sardonyx gem from the British Museum collection that has so far remained unexplored in scholarship (Fig. 10).\textsuperscript{38} It measures 1.6cm in length and 1.3cm in width, and is part of the Charles Townley collection. The gem was mounted into a golden ring in the 19th century. Its original Roman context is unknown, but previously it may also have been part of a ring, or perhaps a pendant or part of an earring. The few existing records for this gem generally estimate its date between the early 1st and 3rd century AD, without any certain provenance, although Imperial Rome is suggested as an origin. The engraved decoration of the gem depicts an obelisk that is remarkably similar to the one on the Getty flask, which would imply a stylistic similarity with the Augustan cameo glass genre. Although very small in size, the characters on the obelisk are clearly visible and recognisable as (from the top) a sistrum rattle, a snake and an ibis. As on the Getty flask, these images appear to convey the traditional hieroglyphic inscription of an obelisk and seem to be presented as such, legible in a ‘symbolic’ manner.

The most remarkable element of this gem’s decoration, however, is the fact that the obelisk is surrounded by three clearly distinguishable figures of race chariots, each with a charioteer holding a whip and pulled by two galloping horses. The figures are shown circling the obelisk, creating the illusion of a continuing chariot race around the monument. This instantly brings to mind the Heliopolis obelisk that Augustus erected on the Circus Maximus spina, around which charioteers and horses would have raced on a regular basis. This particular visual image, of chariots racing around an obelisk, had become a distinct element of the urban landscape of Rome from Augustus’ reign onwards.

The visual concept of the Egyptian obelisk entered Roman material culture via its introduction by Augustus as a public monument with prominent political significance (the Circus Maximus). Its image was most likely copied by Roman manufacturers during the Imperial period, either early or late, when the visual concept of the obelisk was already well-known as part of the urban context of Rome (Horti Sallustiani). The concept was incorporated, rather than directly copied, into the genre of Augustan Roman glass tableware (cameo glass fragments). Similarly, with the example of the sardonyx gem, the visual concept of the obelisk was incorporated into Roman jewellery as a representation of the specifically Roman phenomenon of the Circus Maximus chariot races.

From the original erection of the Heliopolis obelisk at the Circus Maximus—and

\textsuperscript{37} This is mainly because Nilometers tend to be depicted in many different ways throughout the Hellenistic and Roman world. Also, Nilometers became more widely known in Rome with the rise of the Isis cult in the 1st century AD, at which time cameo glass was no longer produced in Rome. See Meyboom 1995, 244–45 notes 77, 78; and Hachili 2009, 102–3.

\textsuperscript{38} BM G&R 1814,0704.1541 (gem 2129). This gem has not featured in any publications so far. It is only known to have been purchased by the British Museum from Charles Townley’s collection in 1814.
no doubt encouraged by the power and efficiency of Augustus’ visual propaganda—the Egyptian obelisk as a visual concept in Roman material culture appears to have been adopted into many different spheres and contexts, within which it could express ‘concepts of Egypt,’ both political and decorative. Iversen speaks of obelisks in exile. Yet, despite the transposition of the Heliopolis obelisk from Egypt, from the moment of its arrival in Rome the image of this monument became such an integral part of the city’s urban landscape and a significant visual concept in Roman material culture that it would rather suggest the opposite.

Conclusion

The above case studies demonstrate how Egyptian elements were incorporated into the visual language of Augustan Rome. In the first case, Egypt is evoked in a typical Roman cameo glass vessel by the fusion of Egyptian stylistic and thematic elements with Greek stylistic components and Roman materials. The Egyptian component in such vessels’ decorative scenes seems intended to convey a concept of Egypt that would have been recognised as such by the contemporary Roman elite. The ‘pharaonic’ elements should therefore not be seen as intended copies of Egyptian style, but rather as an emulation of it; as an evocation of Egypt in the context of Augustan Rome. The Romans ‘Egyptianised’ a specifically Roman glass type to fit the demand of this Augustan context wherein Egypt was politically significant in public material culture and subsequently came into favour within the private circles of the Roman elite.

The second case study illustrates how the politically charged arrival of an obelisk from Egypt to Augustan Rome initiated the proliferation of different visual concepts of that monument throughout the material culture of Rome, varying from actual copies of the monolith to its portrayal as part of the Circus Maximus on cameo glass vessels and gemstones of Roman manufacture. Thus, through such objects, the progression of the visual concept of the obelisk through different spheres and periods of Roman material culture can be recognised. Roman cameo glass constitutes only one example of how Egyptian elements could be incorporated into and emulated within Roman material culture—and how such resulting objects could evoke different concepts of Egypt within different Roman contexts. It appears that Egypt played a range of dynamic roles within the Roman world, expressed in the equally diverse range of Roman material culture that contained Egyptian elements.

Bibliography


http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_journals/bmsaes/issue_20/van_erde.aspx


Fig. 1: Selection of blue and purple cameo glass fragments with Egyptian decorative elements at The British Museum, clockwise from bottom: G&R 1999,0927.1, EA 16600, G&R 1982,0404.1, G&R 1999,0803.1, G&R 1868,0501.8 and EA 16630 (Photo: M. E. J. J. van Aerde, courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).
Fig. 2a: Fragment EA 16600, depicting a figure wearing an Egyptian ceremonial *wesekh* collar (photo: R. I. Thomas, Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).

Fig. 2b: Drawing of fragment EA 16600, depicting a figure wearing an Egyptian ceremonial *wesekh* collar (Roberts et al. 2010, 86 drawing 23, courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).
Fig. 3: Detail of the Book of the Dead of Hunefer (BM EA 9901/3), featuring the judgment of the dead in the presence of Osiris (left, seated) and Isis (right, front), both wearing the ceremonial *wesekh* collar (Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).
Fig. 4: Isis figure depicted in *chiton* dress on a wall painting from the House of Augustus’ wife Livia on the Palatine Hill. Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli (Copyright Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Napoli e Pompei).

Fig. 5: Statue of Isis (inv. 125412), Terme di Diocleziano, Rome (Photo: Sander Müskens, copyright Soprintendenza Speciale per I Beni Archeologici di Roma).
Fig. 6: Obelisk erected at Circus Maximus by Augustus in 10 BC, currently at Piazza del Popolo, Rome (Photo: M. E. J. J. van Aerde).

Fig. 7: Comparison of the Circus Maximus obelisk (left, currently at Piazza del Popolo) and the Horti Sallustiani obelisk (right, currently at Trinità dei Monti). Note the difference in quality of execution of the stone and hieroglyphs (Photos: M. E. J. J. van Aerde).
Fig. 8: Fragment BM G&R 1982,0404,1, depicting an obelisk on a base (Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).

Fig. 9a (left): Cameo glass perfume flask depicting an Egyptian figure and obelisk with hieroglyphs now in the J. Paul Getty Museum in California (JPGM 85AF.84); 9b (right): Detail of hieroglyphic characters (Copyright J. Paul Getty Trust).
Fig. 10: Sardonyx gem depicting an obelisk with hieroglyphs surrounded by race chariots (BM G&R 1814.0704.1541). Note that the golden ring surrounding the gem is a 19th century addition (Courtesy of the Trustees of The British Museum).