



NILOTIC SCENES, EGYPTIAN RELIGION, AND ROMAN PERCEPTIONS

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In a previous *JAEI* research report,¹ I announced the beginning of a new research project on “Nilotic scenes” – that is, representations of the inundating Nile – in Roman art, focusing on frescoes and mosaics from first century BCE through first century CE Campania. In addition to the river itself with its characteristic flora and fauna, such scenes often depict human figures, frequently pygmy-like in appearance, engaging in a range of behaviors including fighting with riverine beasts, sexual acts, drinking alcohol, fishing and fowling, and playing music. Modern interpretations of this iconography are varied; some scholars see the pygmies as embodiments of derogatory stereotypes about Egyptians,² while others argue for authentic Egyptian origins for certain Nilotic motifs.³ In a forthcoming study of Nilotic iconography, I argue for parallels between the Roman imagery and Egyptian festivals celebrating the return of the wandering Eye of the Sun at the time of the Inundation.⁴ Moving beyond iconographic analysis, however, my larger research project aims to contextualize individual Campanian Nilotic scenes more deeply within their specific architectural and decorative programs,⁵ examining the ways in which different settings would have shaped viewers’ perceptions of Nilotic imagery.

Previous work on the architectural settings of Nilotic scenes includes, *inter alia*, Versluys’ catalog of Nilotic scenes⁶ and Versluys and Meyboom’s statistical study of the frequency with which Nilotic scenes appear in different building and room types.⁷ However, more work still remains to be done on the contextualization of Nilotic scenes. Productive avenues for examination include the types of imagery that appear in close association with – or in the same range of contexts as – Nilotic scenes; the association of Nilotic scenes with certain specific architectural features, such as outdoor dining structures and water installations; and the artifact assemblages from rooms and structures containing Nilotic scenes.

To illustrate the impact of architectural and decorative settings on Roman viewers’ potential responses to Nilotic imagery, I will cite here three examples from Pompeii, namely Nilotic frescoes from (1) a garden-triclinium in the house of P. Cornelius Tages; (2) the portico of the Temple of Isis; and (3) the tomb of C. Vestorius Priscus. In each case, the scene’s specific context would have shaped the message that the iconography conveyed,

suggesting some of the ways that ancient producers and consumers might reinterpret these multivalent images.

In the house of Publius Cornelius Tages,⁸ a complex Nilotic scene appears painted on the benches of a triclinium in an outdoor garden area. Among other things, this painting features groups of pygmy-figures drinking and carousing at outdoor benches on the banks of the Nile. This scene is in fact directly paralleled in the architecture of the structure on which it appears. Between the painted benches of the triclinium flowed a small artificial canal, creating the illusion that the painted riverbanks were actual riverbanks decorating the “shoreline” of a Nile in miniature. Just as the real water flowing around the benches enlivens the painted Nile depicted on their sides, so too would the householder and his friends – gathered, like the painted pygmies, on outdoor benches to drink or dine on the banks of this model river – have effectively become real-life representations of the scenes’ protagonists. Accordingly, this particular Nilotic scene does not serve primarily to represent Egyptians as “other” from Roman viewers; quite the opposite, the image playfully presents an Egyptian scene as a model for those Roman viewers’ own behavior.

Nilotic scenes appear in a very different context in the portico of the Temple of Isis,⁹ where Nilotic vignettes comprise part of a larger decorative program that also includes representations of priests and cultic functionaries, marine imagery, alimentary abundance, and Egyptianizing sacro-idyllic landscapes.¹⁰ Many of these motifs are common in the decoration of private houses;¹¹ but in the context of a temple, the same themes may serve to emphasize different aspects of the worshipped deity. The depictions of priests suggest a festival procession, as Swetnam-Burland has recently noted: “the experience of a viewer moving through the space, passing each figure in turn, replicated the experience of a procession”.¹² This evocation of festival activity in the context of Isis cult would have reinforced the nearby Nilotic frescoes’ allusions to Egyptian inundation festivals, encouraging viewers to view the scenes as references to festivals in honor of Isis as Eye of the Sun and bringer of the Nile flood. Nilotic scenes in the Pompeiian temple of Isis thus provide a Roman, pictorial counterpart to the Egyptian texts in Isis’ temple at Philae, where a hymn praises Isis as “the one who pours out the Inundation.”¹³ Images of the inundating Nile – the cause of Egypt’s agricultural

productivity – further complement the nearby still lives of food, which suggest Isis’s ability to bestow bounty and prosperity¹⁴ and thus serve a function similar to the cornucopia so often held by the Greco-Roman Isis. The aquatic and sacro-idyllic themes of other vignettes from the portico further reinforce this theme of divine beneficence, with representations of sea battles and marine creatures evoking Isis’ role in the Greco-Roman world as a marine deity and patron of sailors and merchants.¹⁵

Nilotic scenes appear in yet a third type of context in the tomb of Gaius Vestorius Priscus, an aedile at Pompeii.¹⁶ His tomb is decorated with stuccoes and paintings depicting Dionysiac figures as well as motifs relating to the life and social role of the deceased (including, *inter alia*, representations of the deceased both as *paterfamilias* and as aedile performing public duties; a symposium; a display of expensive dining equipment; a painted garden; a gladiatorial combat; and a wild animal hunt).¹⁷ Painted directly below the symposium scene is a Nilotic scene depicting pygmies cavorting in a riverboat and on the banks of the Nile. Previous publications have suggested that this scene evoked the banquets Priscus hosted during life, as such festivities might have incorporated dwarf performers.¹⁸ While dwarf performers may

indeed have been present at Priscus’ banquets, this explanation does not address the fact that the figures in the painting are shown boating on the Nile, rather than dancing or performing for an audience. However, representations of the Nile inundation do make sense in a burial context for another reason: the association of such imagery with the renewal and regeneration of the deceased. Many funerary inscriptions from the Egypt and the Greco-Roman world speak of offering the “cool water” of Osiris to the deceased – an adaptation of the Egyptian idea that the Nile originated in the efflux of Osiris’ corpse, and thus embodied both the death and subsequent rebirth of the god.¹⁹

As these three examples demonstrate, the specific contexts of Nilotic scenes were crucial in shaping the varied meanings that their iconography conveyed to ancient viewers. A detailed study of the archaeological, architectural, and decorative settings of specific scenes thus facilitates further investigation of the varied ways that people adapted these multivalent images to individual settings and individual needs. This spectrum of adaptations and transformations will accordingly be the subject of subsequent studies.²⁰

NOTES

¹ Barrett 2012.

² E.g., Ling 1991: 165-166; Cappel 1994; Versluys 2002: 436-437; Walker 2003: 191-202; Clarke 2007a: 87-107, 2007b: 155-169.

³ Meyboom 1995; Assmann 2000: 72-82; Meyboom and Versluys 2007: 89, 152, 182-202.

⁴ Barrett, in preparation (a). I have also published some brief comments on Nilotic scenes in a recent museum catalogue (Barrett 2013; see also Barrett and Manassa 2013).

⁵ Barrett, in preparation (b).

⁶ Versluys 2002.

⁷ Versluys and Meyboom 2000: 111-127.

⁸ Versluys 2002: no. 035.

⁹ Versluys 2002: no. 061. Nilotic scenes also appear in the temple’s ekklesiasterion, and the larger study on which

these remarks are based will include a discussion of the scenes there as well: Barrett, in preparation (b).

¹⁰ De Caro 2006: 41-68. On the Egyptianizing character of many of the landscapes: Sampaolo 1992: 36.

¹¹ Sampaolo 1992: 36; Moormann 2007: 147-148.

¹² Swetnam-Burland 2011: 341.

¹³ Žabkar 1988, p. 51.

¹⁴ On the food depictions as evocations of Isis’ association with prosperity and abundance, cf. Moormann 2007: 150-151.

¹⁵ Moormann 2007: 150-151.

¹⁶ Versluys 2002: no. 069.

¹⁷ See the detailed analysis of Mols and Moormann 1993.

¹⁸ Mols and Moormann 1993: 42-43; Versluys 2002: 160.

¹⁹ See references collected in Barrett 2011: 134-135, n. 427, 429. On “cool water” inscriptions, see Delia 1992.

²⁰ Barrett, in preparation (a), in preparation (b).

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