



REVIEW

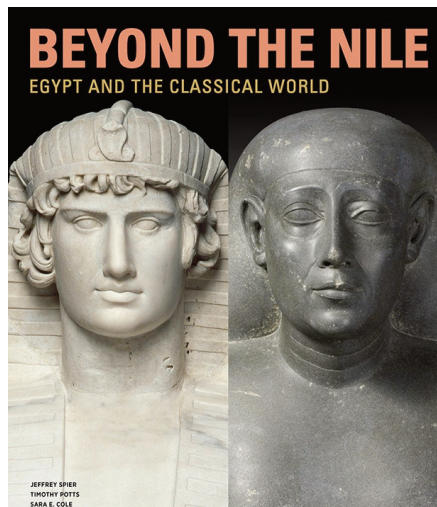
**BEYOND THE NILE:
EGYPT AND THE CLASSICAL WORLD**

edited by Jeffrey Spier, Timothy Potts, and Sara E. Cole
Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018

Reviewed by Paul Edmund Stanwick,
New York University,

The J. Paul Getty Museum has launched an ambitious exhibition series under the direction of Timothy Potts that will trace the interactions of ancient Greece and Rome with other cultures. It began with *Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World*, which closed in September 2018 and gathered together almost 200 objects, including coins, sculpture, painting, jewelry, and ceramics, from the Bronze Age through Roman times. The full-color, extensively illustrated catalog that accompanied the exhibition was divided approximately half and half into essays by prominent scholars and catalog entries. As the latest in a long history of exhibitions on the interactions of Egypt, Greece and Rome, the Getty effort stands out in its expansive scope, which starts in the 2nd millennium BCE. Other exhibitions—such as the recent *Sunken Cities: Egypt's Lost Worlds*¹—tend to begin in the mid-1st millennium BCE, when the story of Egypt and the Mediterranean world is more amply documented.

The Getty catalog takes a traditional, scholarly, and highly pedagogical approach. The book carefully considers prior scholarship, gently pushes the



boundaries of current research, and, most prominently, illuminates the “bigger picture” contexts. The style is approachable and readable. The essays have argumentative punch. The catalog entries often contain useful descriptions and summaries of older research.

Beyond the Nile has four, chronologically arranged sections: the Middle and New Kingdoms, the Saïte and Persian Periods, the Ptolemaic Period, and the Roman Period. The book recounts how diplomacy, trade, and war, as well as religious and

cultural interactions, gradually bind Egypt, Greece, and ultimately Rome closer together to create a legacy that we today describe as Western civilization. In the process, traditional Egyptian culture falls into decline and Classical pagan culture eventually gives way to Christian times (the latter beyond the scope of the book).

Historical contextualization is one of the book's strengths. The narrative begins with some justifiable murkiness in the Bronze Age because of the sporadic and incomplete nature of the evidence of the contacts between Middle and New Kingdom Egypt and the Mycenaean and Minoan cultures. The authors

often present several alternative arguments or simply leave open questions. How did the balance of cooperative coexistence vs. armed conflict affect cultural and economic flows in the eastern Mediterranean? What explains the rise of the so-called Sea Peoples, whose movements are generally seen as the cause of the economic and political collapse of the Bronze Age civilizations? Why are Egyptian (or Egyptian-inspired) objects found in Aegean contexts and vice versa? For the lattermost question, some answers offered are: diplomatic exchange, trade, immigration, perceived ritual value, and traveling artisans and mercenaries. The Bronze Age section also overviews the latest thinking on the remarkable Minoan-style frescoes unexpectedly found at Tell el-Dab'a (Avaris) in the Egyptian Delta in the late 20th century (Cat. 44).

By the timeframe of the book's next, and shortest, section—Saïte and Persian Egypt—the more numerous and varied sources of information permit deeper storytelling about the royal and elite actors in Egypt and the Aegean world. Alexandra Villing and Henry P. Colburn describe the significant Greek population living in Egypt as mercenaries and traders under the sponsorship of the Saïte pharaohs. A notable loan is a huge basalt sarcophagus (Cat. 58) whose hieroglyphic inscription records the transliterated names of the high official's Greek parents; the undoubtedly expensive burial testifies to the wealth and status that Greeks could achieve in Egypt at this time. This dovetails nicely with Villing's and Coburn's discussions of the foundation of Naukratis, the Greek settlement in the Nile Delta, as a major trading emporium and the consequent opportunities afforded to Greek settlers.

Unlike other sections of the book, the third one, centered on the Ptolemaic Period, features the internal workings of Egypt and de-emphasizes external impacts. The history is a familiar one, starting with Egypt's conquest by Alexander and concluding with the death of Cleopatra the Great. The essays enumerate the successes of the Ptolemaic dynasty, such as their cultural achievements, revenue-producing economic systems, popular ruler cult and contributions to Alexandria's envied predominance. The Getty borrowed an impressive array of royal and elite portraits, in the round, in relief, and on glyptic, and they are accompanied by an essay by Robert Steven Bianchi (pp. 141-147). The Ptolemaic section illustrates a British Museum statue (Fig. 35)—not included in the exhibition—that often has been attributed to Ptolemy I after the statue

appeared in the 2001 exhibition *Cleopatra of Egypt*.² Caution is advisable because the sculpture has anomalous renderings and a forger has claimed the work as his own.³

The fourth and final section—Egypt as part of the Roman Empire—looks mostly outward to Egypt's presence abroad. The essays describe Egypt's relations with pre-Imperial Italy, Egypt's reception in Imperial Rome, the cults of Isis in the Roman Empire, and Romans' interpretations of Egyptian objects. Christina Riggs's essay (pp. 218–223) alone focuses inward and details societal shifts in Roman Egypt, as well as developments in funerary and other art forms. Of note in this section is an almost 10-foot-high fragment of a hieroglyph-inscribed granite obelisk found in Benevento, Italy (Cat. 164)—restored during its Getty visit—that a Roman erected to honor the Emperor Domitian and Isis and that perhaps stood before a local Isis temple. It must have been quite an accomplishment to successfully commission (in Italy or Egypt?) a sizable monument for display high on the hill of Benevento and skillfully cover it with a well-conceived hieroglyphic text composed by the educated few. Are we to expect that a local or visiting priest would have been able to read the obelisk, at least as a part of dedicatory ceremony, or was its unreadable Egyptian essence part of the monument's power and appeal?

The life of Egyptian-made objects abroad is a frequent theme. The book wades into the latest scholarly debates about how the transfer retained or changed the artifacts' meaning via new inscriptions, alterations, or new contexts. An understated current here is the extent to which artifacts were forcibly or peaceably removed from their original tomb and temple settings in Egypt or, alternatively, specifically commissioned for export.

The Middle Kingdom statuette of an elite man called User (Cat. 10)—probably originating from a tomb in Memphis, Egypt, but famously discovered by Arthur Evans at Knossos, Crete—illustrates uncertainties about how Egyptian objects arrived in Bronze Age Aegean contexts. The statuette, originally interpreted as a diplomatic gift, has more recently been seen as a looted object taken to Crete as a curiosity. This newer idea is probably closer to the mark. The funerary inscription on the statuette, its elite subject, its attractive (but not precious) stone material, and its small scale are more easily explained in the context of elite trade and travel than royal diplomacy. Do we see here an early version of the antiquities trade where Egyptian tomb and

temple objects were taken or traded and then traveled abroad where they acquired new contexts and meanings?

An intriguing stone statuette from about a millennium later (Cat. 73) is another instance of foreigners' interest in things Egyptian. Only the knees and lap with flat, palm-down hands of a seated Egyptian-style figure are preserved, but they provide rich fodder for discussion. As the catalog notes, the Greek text on the fragment and its discovery in an Athena sanctuary on the island of Rhodes suggest that the Greek-speaking dedicant Smyrdes was a trader or mercenary in Egypt under the Saïte pharaohs. Smyrdes may have commissioned the small, portable statue in Egypt for dedication abroad, just as the Saïte kings made votive offerings in Aegean sanctuaries (p. 75). Though the catalog identifies the fragmentary figure as male, it was very possibly female instead, given that the tight garment covering the lap and knees may be the sheath dress worn by women. Might the original statuette have depicted the Egyptian goddess Neith, who would have been an appropriate subject for dedication in a sanctuary of Athena, Neith's Greek equivalent?

A final example of Egyptian objects abroad is the sphinx of the Saïte king Amasis (Cat. 167), probably originally from the Temple of Neith in Sais, but excavated in a much later context in Rome and associated with that city's famous Isis temple, the Iseum Campense. Unlike the above statues, this is a bulky, extremely heavy sculpture that would have required significant effort to transport to Italy, hundreds of years after the sphinx's creation. We might hear quite a tale if the statue could speak: the royal titulary on the chest is selectively hammered away (a *damnatio memoriae* in Egypt after the pharaoh's death?); the uraeus and nose areas are cut for the insertion of repairs (when the sphinx came to Rome?); and the front paws and base are hacked away (the destructions of post-pagan Rome?). The catalog associates the sculpture with Romans' massive acquisition of Egyptian antiquities, which could be compared to their earlier aggressive collecting of Greek antiquities. Romans' views and understanding of Egyptian material remain a hotly contested topic (p. 230). Would the Amasis sphinx have prompted Romans to think much more than "Egyptian" and "*Aegypto capta*," especially with the sphinx sitting in a much later, alien context and bearing an unreadable inscription? There is not a simple, single response to this question, but the

Roman physical context is one good tool for suggesting nuanced answers (p. 235).

Beyond the Nile provides many ideas about Egypt's contributions to the Classical world, of which a few can be highlighted.

A familiar case is the sculptural "spark" that Egypt provided to Greece's famed Archaic Period. The rise of monumental statuary in Greece is contemporary with Egypt's Saïte Period, when many Greeks visited Egypt or settled there and encountered the plentiful and often large-scale statuary. An Egyptian male statue (Cat. 76) is compared with a Greek kouros (Cat. 78) to show the clear similarity in their frontal standing poses with arms and closed fists at the sides and left leg forward. What could be explored further is the possible Egyptian contribution beyond the formal resemblance. There was a highly visible, active Egyptian religious culture that Greeks witnessed, replete with belief systems, ancient wisdom, colorful displays, popular festivals, and impressive visual arts. Thus, one could examine, for example, whether the memorializing qualities of Egyptian statues and the rituals surrounding them might have affected how the kouros developed.

Egypt's influence was perhaps more dramatic during the Ptolemaic Period when there was a "quasi-epidemic" spread of the cults of Egyptian gods in the Classical world, carried through trade and religious channels (p. 225). A striking Hellenistic relief of Isis from her sanctuary in Dion, at the foot of Mount Olympus in Greece, makes this point (Cat. 118). As with the kouros above, Egyptian ideas have been adapted for Classical consumption: the Egyptian Isis is re-envisioned as a Greek goddess. Her youthful visage, curly Isis locks, scepter, and bust format all resemble those found on coin images of Ptolemaic queens and goddesses,⁴ though here Isis faces front and the Ptolemaic parallels appear in profile. Alexandria is one of the probable main sources for such religious ideas and imagery that began to proliferate throughout the Mediterranean world under the Ptolemies and then grew exponentially under Roman sponsorship.

Beyond the Nile provides plenty of food for thought and conversation on the intersections of Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Much care and investment are evident in the composition of the catalog and in the object restoration work completed in conjunction with the exhibition. For the future, one area that similar broad-stroke exhibitions could explore more fully is how existing and emerging technologies can

bolster research leading up to an exhibition (e.g., data mining) or enhance its presentation (e.g., digital reconstruction). The next generation of scholars is aggressively embracing new technologies, and it is a good time to investigate the implications for exhibitions. Used judiciously, technology can provide a greater contextual richness that can help scholars and more casual observers understand and visualize the past.

REFERENCES

- Dunbabin, Katherine. 1999. *Mosaics of the Greek and Roman World*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Goddio, Frank, and Aurelia Masson-Berghoff (eds.). 2016. *The BP Exhibition: Sunken Cities: Egypt's Lost Worlds*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- Hardwick, Tom. 2010. "Recent Developments in the Forgery of Ancient Egyptian Art: A Review Article." *Imago Aegypti* 3: 31–41.

Walker, Susan, and Peter Higgs (eds.). 2001. *Cleopatra of Egypt: from History to Myth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

NOTES

- ¹ Goddio and Masson-Berghoff 2016.
- ² Walker and Higgs 2001, 40–41.
- ³ Hardwick 2010, 32–33.
- ⁴ The format of the Dion relief's Isis also has broad similarities to the female bust in the Hellenistic mosaic by Sophilos from Thmuis, Egypt; see Dunbabin 1999, 25–26, fig. 25. Both busts face front, wear elaborate headdresses and carry a standard or scepter. The attributes are not identical, however.