Introduction

Jeffrey Spier and Sara E. Cole

In 2018 the J. Paul Getty Museum presented the exhibition *Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World*, curated by Jeffrey Spier, Timothy Potts, and Sara E. Cole. This was the first in a series of exhibitions and publications seeking to explore how Greece and Rome influenced and were influenced by neighboring cultures and civilizations in the Mediterranean and Near East over a period spanning nearly twenty-five hundred years. Providing an assemblage of objects rarely, if ever, displayed together, the exhibition invited viewers to move beyond a common perception of Egypt, Greece, and Rome as monolithic, static cultures; to think about the “classical world” beyond the confines of its traditional definition; and to contemplate the interconnectedness of the ancient Mediterranean.

*Egypt and the Classical World: Cross-Cultural Encounters in Antiquity* contains the proceedings of a scholars’ conference held at the Getty on August 25–26, 2018, in association with *Beyond the Nile*. The symposium brought together an international group of scholars whose work relates to the cross-cultural themes of the exhibition. A number of the contributors (Bommas, Kaper, Kelder, Minas-Nerpel) had previously been in residence at the Getty Villa as part of the Getty Research Institute’s Scholars Program with the theme of “The Classical World in Context: Egypt” during the 2015–16 and 2017–18 fellowship years. Others were contributors to the exhibition’s catalogue (Prada, Villing) or collaborated on the organization of the exhibition (Spyropoulos). All made valuable intellectual contributions to the shaping of *Beyond the Nile*.

The exhibition catalogue includes sixteen essays synthesizing the current state of knowledge in the field, as well as illustrations and discussions of the nearly two hundred objects in the exhibition. While the catalogue serves as an important reference work for scholars, students, and all interested members of the general public, the present collection of essays focuses more closely on current research projects and should be of value to specialists in the fields of classics, Egyptology, archaeology, art history, ancient history, and philology. The two publications—exhibition catalogue and conference proceedings—complement each other by providing both a wider lens through which to view Egypt’s interactions with Greece and Rome over millennia and a focused look at the highly specialized, ongoing scholarship that is contributing to our understanding of that broader narrative.

Our seven authors present new, unpublished research on Egypt’s interactions with ancient Greece and Rome during four major time periods: the Bronze Age (ca. 2000–1200 BC), Egypt’s Late Period (ca. 664–332 BC), the Ptolemaic period (323–30 BC), and the Roman Empire (beginning in AD 30). The papers cover a variety of materials—including archaeological finds, artworks, and inscriptions—and add to a rapidly growing body of scholarship on cross-cultural exchange between Egypt and its Mediterranean neighbors in antiquity. For those who served as Getty scholars, these symposium proceedings are an opportunity to publish the research projects they developed while on fellowship in Los Angeles. Additionally, several essays in this volume present in-depth analyses of objects that were highlights of *Beyond the Nile* (Kelder, Villing, and Prada).

Jorrit Kelder examines an underexplored aspect of the Bronze Age Mediterranean: the role of mercenaries in cross-cultural exchange. While numerous studies have focused on various aspects of the late Bronze Age “world system” (such as the exchange of objects, raw materials, animals, and plants; the migration of specialist craftsmen and artists; and even diplomatic marriages), the role of the military in the exchange of technologies and ideas has remained remarkably neglected. By highlighting a number of artifacts that have been found throughout the eastern Mediterranean, including a remarkable wooden ship cart model that was displayed in the exhibition, this paper shows how soldiers were a conduit of knowledge and ideas in the late Bronze Age eastern Mediterranean and beyond.

In the Late Period, Greeks and Carians resident in Egypt continued to fuel various forms of exchange and interaction. Alexandra Villing discusses case studies relating to three key sites (Memphis, Naukratis, and Alexandria) that provide evidence for cross-cultural encounters from the sixth to the third century BC. Her first case study presents exciting new analysis of a “hybrid” grave stela from Memphis (displayed in the exhibition) combining Egyptian, Greek, and Carian elements in its carved figured decoration. Thanks to recent scientific examination, the painted patterns and color schemes now evident on the stela emphasize how Egyptian and foreign traditions were intertwined in the lives of foreign mercenaries and their families in Egypt. Villing’s other case studies look at a fourth-century BC Athenian vase found in a burial at the Greek trading hub of Naukratis and a group of Ptolemaic period cat sculptures also from Naukratis that appear to be associated with a sanctuary to the cat goddess Bastet/Boubastis. This deity was identified with the Ptolemaic queens Arsinoe II and Berenike II, and the sanctuary had a close counterpart in Alexandria. Taken together, the case studies paint a picture of a relationship in which religion and its expression in material culture constituted an important and fertile arena for cross-cultural negotiation—in the private as well as the public sphere, across social classes, and over many centuries.

Religion served as one of the major loci of cultural exchange, as seen in the case of the Egyptian goddess Isis, who came to function as a “hearing and healing” deity in the Hellenistic and Roman periods and whose various roles are the subject of Martin Bommas’s essay. While the Late Period saw Isis transformed into a goddess “Great of Magic,” earlier periods had reduced her to a deity who communicated with other gods, including the dead transformed into Osiris. Within personal religious practice, however, Isis rarely was a recipient of prayers. It was after the increased focus on her role as maternal deity from the sixth century BC onward that she became a mediator between the living and the gods. Her popularity as a healing goddess would eventually be embraced by Hellenistic Greek and Roman religion. Supported by written and visual evidence, Bommas’s contribution traces the development of Isis’s sphere from exclusivity during the pharaonic period to popular accessibility and cult worship both in Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean, even into the Christian period.

Martina Minas-Nerpel continues her groundbreaking work on the role of Ptolemaic queens, particularly in connection with Isis and other Egyptian and Greek goddesses. When the Ptolemies gained sovereignty over Egypt (ca. 305 BC), they found themselves ruling not only as kings and queens of a Hellenic population but also as pharaohs of the Egyptian people. They faced the immense task of constructing an identity for their empire and their rule, for which they employed the ancient Egyptian past to create a powerful dynastic ideology. Together with their advisers, both Egyptian and Hellenic, they created spaces in which theological and political concepts could be imaginatively united. Minas-Nerpel focuses on the hybridizing exchange that resulted in new semantic dimensions and “cultural codes” in royal ideology. The dynamic interactions of the powerful Ptolemaic queens, especially Arsinoe II and Cleopatra VII, with Isis and other goddesses created new modes of self-representation in both Egyptian and Hellenic textual and visual sources of the ruler cult.

Many of the syncretic religious processes that began under the Ptolemies continued in Egypt under Roman rule. Olaf Kaper analyzes the unique sequence of Roman-era wall paintings discovered in a chapel in Egypt’s Dakhla Oasis. The second-century AD temple of the god Tutu in Ismant el-Kharab (ancient Kellis) comprises a small and badly preserved stone temple and a much larger mud-brick chapel with wall paintings. This chapel was a mammisi, or birth house, celebrating the periodic renewal of the god’s powers. Its wall paintings have been fully recovered and reconstructed, and they are unparalleled in Egyptian temple decoration. Kaper here presents some of these images for the first time. Half of the shrine is decorated with panel paintings in Roman fashion, while the other half is in Egyptian style, with images of more than four hundred deities and hieroglyphic inscriptions. The mammisi shows how the perceptions of ancient Egyptian religion were changing under Roman domination and how practices might have further developed if the site had lived on.

The Egyptian imagery that was so popularly used throughout the Roman Empire, including in the domestic sphere, presents a rather different picture from what is found in Egypt itself. George Spyropoulos considers the villa of Herodes Atticus in Greece, a lavish residence built in the Arcadian countryside, which not only created a space of peace and solemnity but also displayed a wide array of cultural influences in a “New Style” based on the appropriation of the conquered world, carefully organized into a cultural hierarchy. In the time of Augustus these eclectic inspirations—from Egypt, Classical and Hellenistic Greece, and Imperial Rome—penetrated the private sphere. Spyropoulos focuses on this syncretic blending in the second-century AD villa, where this cultural mixing of decorative Egyptianizing motifs alongside carefully selected traditional Greek and Roman themes resulted in a new visual language of empire. Such a cultural mixing reflected and supported not only the status but also the persona in general of the homeowner. The villa of Herodes Atticus provides an avenue for understanding representations of ancient Egypt and their meaning in the domestic settings of the Roman elite.

Roman appropriation of Egyptian artworks and iconography, particularly the iconic form of the obelisk, has long intrigued scholars but has not been fully understood. Luigi Prada’s essay sheds new light on one of the exhibition’s most remarkable objects: a Romano-Egyptian obelisk from Benevento (ancient Beneventum), Italy, now in the collection of the Museo del Sannio, and its twin, which stands in the city’s Piazza Papiniano. It is striking that the emperor or individuals honoring him commissioned obelisks made of Egyptian granite and carved with hieroglyphic inscriptions and had them erected in Italy. Hieroglyphs were incomprehensible to virtually everybody in Rome, and even in Egypt only the most learned among the intelligentsia—typically priests—would have been able to read and write the archaic language and script. Why did the Romans choose such an esoteric writing system for some of their most splendid public monuments? Why record a message in an inaccessible script? Prada tackles these and related issues while also looking at the identity of those who composed and inscribed such “silent” hieroglyphic inscriptions. His study includes a definitive critical reedition of the inscriptions on both obelisks in Benevento, updating all previous scholarship.