Augustus as Emperor and Pharaoh: Pluralism in Augustan Art from Roman Egypt

After defeating Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt, and annexing Egypt into the Roman Empire in 30 BCE, Augustus was depicted in the province not only as Roman emperor in sculpture and coinage but also as Egyptian pharaoh in statues and temple reliefs. These co-existing and contrasting styles of portraiture for the ruler raise issues about how Augustus’s identity as pharaoh of Egypt related to his identity as the first emperor of the Roman Empire. This paper will explore this issue by comparing three Roman-style heads of Augustus that were found in Egypt with two Egyptian-style statues that were also found in Egypt. Through the comparison of style, context, and material, this paper will demonstrate that a new style of art emerged in Augustan Egypt that was influenced by Egyptian, Ptolemaic, and Roman traditions. This new style, which included both classical and Egyptian aspects, should be recognized as a multi-causal and multi-cultural art form. The artists working in Augustan Egypt, even from the earliest decades after annexation, successfully combined seemingly disparate artistic traditions to create a new image of the ruler that showed Augustus as Roman emperor, pharaoh, and the inheritor of the Ptolemaic state.

Rome’s influence was present in Egypt long before Augustus made it a province, as Egypt was a friend and ally of Rome already in 168 BCE during the Ptolemaic period.1 Similar to rulers of other Hellenistic kingdoms, the Ptolemites built on existing governmental, political, economic, and artistic traditions in their new kingdom when establishing rule of Egypt in 305 BCE under Ptolemy I. These traditions included the institution and artistic representation of the Egyptian king – the Ptolemites positioned themselves as legitimate successors of the pharaohs of

millennia past. After annexation, Augustus also adopted the tradition of Egyptian kingship for the preservation of Egypt as a Roman province.

Augustus’s identity as pharaoh of Egypt is a vivid example that there is more to Roman provincial culture than the spread of Roman traditions from center to periphery. In the wake of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, and the surge in post-colonial theory, scholars of antiquity have questioned the usefulness of the modern concept of Romanization, which emphasizes the monolithic spread of Roman culture from Rome to the provinces. For instance, John Barrett has argued that cultures of the ancient Mediterranean were “in reality unstable internally and multifaceted.” This is true for Rome in the time of Augustus: to be Roman meant to embrace a broader Mediterranean identity as well as a local Roman one. Similarly, Egypt was affected by centuries of interactions with other cultures in the Mediterranean and in Africa itself. There were complex borrowings in both countries, as well as complex cultures in both countries, and this was not limited to Italy and Egypt, but widespread throughout other parts of the empire including Greece, North Africa, Spain, Gaul, and Britain. The Roman Empire cannot be considered a homogenous entity; however, a common feature throughout the ancient Mediterranean was the shared complexity of cultural exchange. To appreciate the complexity of this exchange, I assert that the post-colonial concept of hybridity can be adopted into studies of ancient art and culture to emphasize that cultures shape each other through exchange and are mixtures of different equally important components and traditions.

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In contrast, much current scholarship on ancient art separates the artistic traditions of the complex cultures living in Egypt at the time of Augustus’s annexation. A number of scholars conclude that classical style art made in materials such as bronze and marble was created by Greek or Roman artists and intended for Greek or Roman audiences in Egypt. In addition, scholars that support this line of thinking conclude that Egyptian-style art made in materials found in Egypt was created by Egyptian artists for Egyptian audiences. Furthermore, much scholarship has concluded that classical style art in Egypt was concentrated in major cities in the north, such as Alexandria, that had the highest populations of Greeks and Romans, and that Egyptian-style art was reserved for more rural areas in the south, which had the highest populations of Egyptians. Moreover, it is often assumed that Augustan art is a simple continuation of Ptolemaic royal art and that changes were not noticeable until later in the period around the Second Century CE. The implication here is that Augustus was unconcerned with his manner of representation and reputation in Egypt. In recent years, this view of Augustan art as a simple continuation of Ptolemaic art has started to change. In 2002, Gregory Dundas suggested that Augustus “took an active part in creating his own image [in Egypt], through negotiation with Egyptian priests and leaders.” Also in 2002, Paul Stanwick suggested that “sculptors of the Ptolemaic [and Roman] Periods culled many of the strongest elements from their country’s tradition[s] of … portraiture and transformed them with new ideas drawn from the turbulent

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7 In contrast, Stanwick concludes that “there is strong evidence that Egyptian-style, Ptolemaic royal sculptures were set up in Hellenistic Alexandria.” See Paul Edmund Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies: Greek Kings as Egyptian Pharaohs* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2002), 20.

context of the Mediterranean world in the closing centuries before the Common Era.” 9 Stanwick rightly calls these artists “a generation of innovators,” as will be shown in the following discussion of images of Augustus from Egypt.

Three marble busts found at Arsinoe in the Fayum depict Augustus, Livia, and Tiberius in the Roman style (Figure 1). 10 Augustus’s portrait features are present here – such as the pincer-like locks of hair, broad cranium, sharp brow-ridge, narrow chin, and small mouth. Although no inscriptions are extant and the dedicator of the group is unknown, the busts may have been set up in the amphitheater by the local community or a local elite seeking to establish ties of support to the imperial family in Rome. Large and varied audiences from the surrounding communities would have been drawn to spectacles and events held at the amphitheater, and so it is likely that Egyptians and Romans, as well as people of other ethnicities, would have come in contact with this portrait group of the imperial family. As Livia Capponi notes, “imperial portrait-statues…were put up in strategic public places, where everyone could see them.” 11

A small blue-green faience head of Augustus in the Roman-style, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, demonstrates that form and material are not markers of ethnicity of the artist (Figure 2). The head was found at Memphis, near Saqqara and Giza, and away from Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast. Although the head is damaged, it is unmistakably a portrait of Augustus, likely of Augustus’s latest portrait-type, the so-called Ara Pacis type, 12 assumed by many scholars to be disseminated from Rome to the provinces. Meriwether Stuart concludes that the head is of the Ara Pacis type because of the treatment of the hair, and because

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there are delicate lines across the brow and on either side of the nose.\textsuperscript{13} The earlier portrait types of Augustus show no signs of age, and it is not until this latest type that some markers of age show in the emperor’s portraits.\textsuperscript{14}

The material of the faience portrait is of particular interest to the current study. The head is made of Egyptian faience—a non-clay glazed ceramic material—that was often used as a cheaper substitute for semi-precious stones such as turquoise or lapis-lazuli in Egypt.\textsuperscript{15} The blue-green color was symbolic in Egypt, and referenced prosperity and rejuvenation of the life-giving waters of the Nile. Based on the material of the head, Stuart has concluded that the artist was an Egyptian.\textsuperscript{16} However, this is in opposition to scholars such as Bert Smith, Andrew Stewart, Jerome Pollitt, Robert Bianchi, and Sally-Ann Ashton, who conclude that Egyptian artists would not have had the knowledge to work in the Roman style.\textsuperscript{17} And so, according to this line of thinking, a Roman artist is also plausible. But then the material is a problem, as according to these scholars, a Roman artist would not know how to work with native Egyptian materials such as hard stone like granite or Egyptian faience in this early period. Bert Smith notes that it is not until later in the period, by the Second Century CE, that “specialist workshops located probably in Alexandria” could work in hard stones such as greywacke in the Egyptian-style, classical style, or “mixed Greek-Egyptian style.”\textsuperscript{18} Importantly, Miguel Versluys responds, “this conclusion – devoid of any ethnic categories in maker or clientele whatsoever – might thus perhaps be valid for earlier periods as well as, for that matter, not be restricted to

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Stuart, “Augustus,” 175.
\textsuperscript{17} See for instance Sally-Ann Ashton, \textit{Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture from Egypt: The Interaction Between Greek and Egyptian Traditions} (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2001), 12.
\textsuperscript{18} R.R.R. Smith in Franck Goddio and Manfred Clauss, eds. \textit{Egypt’s Sunken Treasures} (New York: Prestel, 2006), 41.
Alexandrian ateliers alone.”19 As is evident from this portrait, either a Roman artist could work with Egyptian materials in the Roman-style or an Egyptian artist could work in the Roman-style with Egyptian materials even from the earliest years after annexation. Thus, form and material cannot be an indicator of ethnicity of the artist of a portrait. That examples such as these are often termed “anomalies” in scholarship on art from Roman Egypt means that the story is only partly told.20 These previously sidelined examples are essential to our understanding of the multi-dimensional art from Roman Egypt and indeed, the whole of the Roman Empire.

Similarly, an over-life size red granite statue in the Egyptian-style found at Karnak of Augustus as pharaoh adds to our understanding of a multi-dimensional Roman Egypt (Figures 3-4).21 Located in the southern lands known as Upper Egypt, Karnak is home to one the largest and most venerated temples in Egypt: the Great Temple of Amun. Although the specific find spot in Karnak is unknown, it is possible that the statue was set up in the courtyard of the temple, and would have been seen by the multi-cultural public there.22 This multi-cultural public included members of the local population, who worshipped the Egyptian gods and king at the temple, and Roman tourists, who visited Egypt and participated in religious festivals along with the native populations.23 Vibrant rituals and festivals were held within numerous temples

20 “Problem Pieces” are relegated to an appendix in Ashton’s study that comprises four pages in her 121-page dissertation. See Ashton, Ptolemaic Royal Sculpture, 63-67.
22 Stanwick, Portraits, 25.
23 Romans traveled to Egypt for a number of reasons including business, sight-seeing, employment in the military, and religious pilgrimage. As Molly Swetnam-Burland states, “even before Egypt became a province of the empire, Roman citizens (and non-citizens) who resided in Italy visited its cities and sanctuaries… [and] after Egypt became a Roman province under Augustus, such visits became even more frequent.” See Maria Swetnam-Burland, “Egypt in the Roman Imagination: A Study of Aegyptiaca from Pompeii” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2002), 37.
precincts in Egypt, including Karnak, during the Roman period. Additionally, reliefs in the
temple complex at Karnak show Augustus as pharaoh. Moreover, images of Augustus as
pharaoh also survive from Alexandria, and are not limited to the south, as illustrated by an
Egyptian granite head of Augustus found in the Alexandrian harbor (Figure 5). It follows then,
that Augustus’s identity as pharaoh was known to those living throughout Roman Egypt and
Romans from Italy.

The statue is crafted with numerous Egyptian elements that show the king would rule in
perpetuity. The statue is carved of durable Egyptian granite. The king stands solid against a back
pillar, and in the stable striding pose with arms held stiffly at his sides, familiar in Egyptian art.
Augustus wears the garb worn by the Egyptian king, including the nemes headdress, uraeus
cobra, and shendyt kilt. Along with these Egyptian influences, the artist of this statue
successfully included Roman influences. Roman influences can be seen in the portrait features
of Augustus, such that the hair under the nemes headdress is organized in pincer-like locks, and
the narrow chin and small mouth are similar to Augustus’s other portraits, like the famed head
from Meroe in ancient Nubia (Figure 6). If the Meroe head is one of the statues of Augustus
that the ancient historian Strabo wrote were pulled down at the Temple of Isis at Philae and then
taken to Nubia by the Kushites, as Derek Welsby concludes, a complex connection is

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24 V. Foertmeyer, “Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1989), 30-31; 208-256.
25 Stanwick concludes that “the colossal granite head with nemes and hair recently found in the Alexandrian harbor
may represent Augustus. The forehead locks are worn, but there appears to be a pincer over the right eye and a part
over the outer corner of the left eye.” Stanwick, Portraits, 61. Sally Ann-Ashton concludes that the head may
represent Caesarion, while Kiss concludes the “we believe this head can be attributed to Augustus. It is perfectly
plausible that a colossal effigy was sculpted in Alexandria for the new ruler…” See Sally-Ann Ashton, “Identifying
the Egyptian-style Ptolemaic Queens,” in Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth, ed. S. Walker and P. Higgs
Robert B. Jackson, At Empire’s Edge: Exploring Rome’s Egyptian Frontier (New Haven: Yale University Press,
2002), 126-127.
27 Strabo, Geography 17.1.54.
apparent from the installation of a Roman-style bust of Augustus as emperor at an Egyptian
sanctuary that was currently being expanded and decorated with reliefs depicting Augustus as
pharaoh. In addition, I believe it is possible that artists creating the Egyptian granite statue of
Augustus may have looked to the Meroe head, or one like it, for inspiration of Augustus’s
portrait features, as these images are remarkably similar. One can see corresponding features in
the shape of the face, forehead, nose, mouth, length of the neck, size of the ears, and emphasis on
the eyes. The inlaid eyes of the Meroe head highlight this feature, and may explain the
exaggerated and unusually shaped eyes of the granite statue. If artists of the granite statue did
look to the bronze bust found at Meroe, a dynamic interplay between Augustus’s identities as
pharaoh and Roman emperor becomes evident.

The aim of Egyptian kingly imagery was to communicate the durability and survival of
the divine institution of kingship through a conventionalized ideal image.29 To create a
conventionalized ideal image for Augustus, the artist who created this granite statue built on
established pharaonic Egyptian, Ptolemaic, and Roman traditions. Pharaonic influences, such as
the *nemes* headdress, *shendyt* kilt, back pillar, and hard stone of this image of Augustus
communicated that he was pharaoh—the semi-divine intermediary between the people and the
gods. Ptolemaic characteristics, such as hair under the *nemes* headdress and portrait features of
the king, similar to an Egyptian-style statue of Ptolemy VI, communicated that Augustus was
inheritor of the Ptolemaic state because of the continuation of Ptolemaic royal statue conventions
(Figure 7). The statue’s individualized portrait features built on Roman traditions of portraiture
and communicated that he was Augustus, the first emperor of the Roman Empire. As such, this
statue shows that artists in Roman Egypt were familiar with seemingly contrasting forms and

29 Jan Assmann, “Preservation and Presentation of Self in Ancient Egyptian Portraiture,” in Studies in Honor of
William Kelly Simpson, ed. P. der Manuelian (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1996), 64. See also Whitney Davis,
conventions and that these artists were capable of working in a number of different artistic modes. The product was a new style appropriate for Roman Egypt.

I have argued from the study of Augustus’s imagery in Egypt that a new, complex art emerged in Augustan Egypt. As it has been shown by the study of the Egyptian faience head of Augustus from Memphis, style and material are not markers of an artist’s or audience’s ethnicity. From the study of the audience for the marble dynastic group of Augustus, Livia, and Tiberius found at Arsinoe, it is evident that a multi-cultural population interacted and reacted with Augustus’s images as emperor and pharaoh. Augustus’s identity was not delineated between emperor and pharaoh in terms of installation location either, as can be concluded from the study of the granite statue of Augustus as pharaoh from Karnak and the bronze bust found at Meroe.

Furthermore, the current scholarly trend to conclude that classical style art was concentrated in the northern cities, such as Alexandria, and Egyptian-style art was relegated to areas in the south is problematic. Images of Augustus in the Roman-style and Egyptian-style have been found at varying spots throughout Egypt. For instance, the Egyptian faience head was found at Memphis, the marble bust at Arsinoe, the granite statue of Augustus as pharaoh at Karnak, the bronze bust in the Roman-style was likely set up at Philae and found at Meroe in the south, and the granite statue of Augustus as pharaoh in the Alexandrian harbor. It is possible that function determined the style that was used for Augustus’s imagery, as most Egyptian-style images were found within an Egyptian religious context. However, the find spot of the Egyptian-style granite head of Augustus found in the Alexandrian harbor is particularly interesting, as it was discovered close to the Alexandrian Caesareum, a Ptolemaic and Roman building honoring Caesar and the Roman imperial cult. Cultural exchange between Egyptian and Roman traditions is evident here and is further confirmed if the bronze Meroe head was

30 Stanwick, Ptolemies, 127.
originally set up at the Temple of Isis at Philae. These examples show that more complex investigations are due for art from Augustan Egypt.

From the study of Augustan imagery from Egypt, I contend that all art from Roman Egypt can be considered a new style of art beyond the categories of Roman and Egyptian imposed on it by modern scholarship. Such scholarship nominally concludes that those living in Roman Egypt did not understand earlier traditions of pharaonic art when adopting Egyptian influences, thus advancing a decline in Egyptian art.\textsuperscript{31} This conclusion does not leave room for the possibility that people of various ethnicities in Roman Egypt successfully chose elements from various artistic traditions available to them to form an art that was appropriate for their intentions and purposes. As such, I assert that art from Roman Egypt was created not with a \textit{lack} of understanding, but instead with a \textit{new} understanding, and that this new understanding should be the focus of future studies of art from Roman Egypt.

Roman Egypt can be seen as part of a hybrid global ancient world, as cultures interacted and shaped each other through exchange. Through exchange between Egyptian, Ptolemaic, and Roman traditions, artists in Augustan Egypt successfully created a new image of the ruler that showed Augustus as pharaoh of Egypt, inheritor of the Ptolemaic state, and Roman emperor. This conclusion validates my assertion that current scholarly traditions to append Augustan art to studies of Ptolemaic art in Egypt and to separate between complex artistic modes of expression need to be revised. Future studies of Augustan art should seek to acknowledge shared Ptolemaic traditions, and yet also recognize the new style of art that emerged in the Augustan period in Egypt, thus recognizing Egypt as a vital part of the Augustan world.

Selected Bibliography


Figures


Figure 2. Head of Augustus, Memphis; Augustan. Egyptian Faience. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/26.7.1428

Figure 3. Statue of Augustus as pharaoh, Karnak; Augustan. Granite. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Stanwick, *Ptolemies*, Figure 196.

Figure 4. Statue of Augustus as pharaoh Karnak; Augustan. Granite. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Stanwick, *Ptolemies*, Figure 194.
Figure 5. Head of Augustus, Alexandria; Augustan. Granite. Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria. Goddio, *Alexandria*, Figure 80.
