

## LOST IN TRANSLATION?

### ON »AEGYPTIACA« IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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As is well known, the historiographic concept of »Middle Ages« belongs to cultural temporalities and represents a classic case of *a posteriori* cultural construct, looking backward in order to bridge – or emphasize – the gap between »classical« antiquity and »Renaissance« as the birth of the so-called modernity. But in the context of the reception of ancient Egypt and the history of »Aegyptiaca« in western traditions, it actually appears quite relevant. As Charles Burnett put it in the incipit of a fundamental article on the »Images of Ancient Egypt in the Latin Middle Ages«, »It is commonly thought that the Latin Middle Ages was a barren period for knowledge of and interest in Egypt – between the enthusiasms of the late Hellenistic Neoplatonists and the rediscovery of *Horapollo* and the *Corpus Hermeticum* in the 15<sup>th</sup> century.«<sup>1</sup> This new »intermediate period« for Egypt and pseudo *terra incognita* or – better – *deserta* has therefore indeed often been deserted or at least neglected by modern Egyptology and Ägyptenrezeption studies. In the latter's perspective and from the vantage point of the present book, it seems nevertheless very important to assess what did change and thus bridge the alleged gap between the perception of Egypt through its »Aegyptiaca« in the Greco-Roman era and its offspring in early modern times.

### VISUAL AND PHYSICAL CONTACT WITH »AEGYPTIACA«

With the conquest of Egypt by the Arab general 'Amr Ibn el-'As and his troops from 639 to 642 and the consequent collapse of Byzantine dominion over the country (despite many counterattacks), the rest of the ex-Greco-Roman world and the territories of future

Christian Europe lost direct physical and visual contact with ancient Egypt as a land, a culture and a monumental landscape and (re)source.<sup>2</sup> Hence it very quickly became extremely difficult to visit the country and its time-honored monuments as, for instance, Germanicus did in early 19, or, a century later, Emperor Adrian (in 117 and again in 129–130), as well as many of their fellow citizens who left graffiti on the lower part of the so-called »colossus of Memnon« (actually one of a pair of gigantic statues of pharaoh Amenhotep III, of the 14<sup>th</sup> c. BCE), substantiating the strong appeal – including on a touristic level – of such imposing pieces of statuary.<sup>3</sup> From a Eurocentric point of view, Egypt was then rejected to the borders of the – then shrunk – known world, to the alien.<sup>4</sup>

In terms of material culture and representation, of objects as supports, vessels and agents of cultural visualization, this historic and geopolitical seclusion of the land of Pharaohs dramatically – and for a long period of time – enhanced the impact and importance of *aegyptiaca romana*. Indeed, with actually very few – and rather insignificant – exceptions in early Modern Times, until the *Expédition de l'Égypte*, the only objects available to imagine or construct a visual representation of ancient Egypt in Europe for more than a millennium were those imported or created by the so-called Roman Egyptomania.<sup>5</sup> It is worth noticing here that the overwhelming majority of the genuine »Aegyptiaca« imported by Romans come from Lower Egypt (when it's not from Alexandria itself) and, maybe more importantly (though it is not without any link), date to what is usually designated as the Late Period of Egyptian history, or, for some of them, to the Ptolemaic era.<sup>6</sup> This selection seems to correspond to the most accessible pieces both in time and space;<sup>7</sup> but, because of the strong archaizing trends that characterized the evolution of ancient Egyptian art since the 25<sup>th</sup> dynasty (from the mid-8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE onward), it also promoted some sort of a caricatural vision of Pharaonic art. That this kind of archaeological and, hence, art-historical »filter« suited well Roman tastes or at least Roman expectations regarding the art of ancient Egypt – and thus also denotes a cultural »filter« – is strongly suggested by the fact that most of the imitations or recreations of Egyptian art made in Rome and its cultural world share exactly the same characteristics, the same over-Egyptian-ness, with, of course, diagnostic iconographic features (e.g. the *nemes*-headdress, *shendjyt*-loincloth, anthropo-zoomorphic hybridity, etc.), but also forms and morphological types playing – almost obsessively – on compacity and geometrism, and dark or variegated stones (such as granodiorite and greywacke, or granite and porphyry) or other similar materials. Such material properties, i.e. both style and materiality itself, define(d) those objects as some sort of an antithesis of Greek and Roman art of the time, a visual definition of Egypt as the embodiment of otherness or alterity, in line with the well-known logos of Herodotus about this culture (in which, according to the Greek »historian«, people »in most of their manners and customs, exactly reverse the common practice of mankind« [II, 35]). Roman artists and patrons were undoubtedly conscious of those different signs of artistic Egyptian-ness (iconography, style and materiality) for they obviously played with them according to the impression of otherness and the message they wanted to convey.<sup>8</sup>

Within the history of non-Egyptian »Aegyptiaca« or objects produced to look Egyptian-like, this properly material aspect or consideration, in addition to purely iconographic signs or markers, reveals itself as a quite specifically Roman innovation – or at least characteristic – when compared with earlier forms and manifestations of the adoption of Egyptian style in the Levant and Mesopotamia. This is undoubtedly related to the aesthetic contrast that was perceived between this so old and exotic art of ancient Egypt and classical and post-classical artistic tradition and developments in the Roman sphere.<sup>9</sup> And in this sense, there seems to be an evolution toward an increasing – felt – distance (nevertheless, as always, source of attraction), from the appropriation of or assimilation to the Pharaonic model by Near-Eastern rulers of the Bronze Age through the production of an Egyptian-like material and visual culture, to the contrastive vision of Egyptian art as the materialization of – tamed and integrated – otherness in Roman and post-classic perception, and, after that, the alienness of remote – in space, time, but also cultural representation – pagan Egypt in medieval monotheisms, i. e. in Christianity, but also in Islam and Judaism, as we will see here below.

As a matter of fact, this caricatural projection of ancient Egyptian art filtered through Roman approach to Pharaonic Egypt and its material culture was to have, with the transition from antiquity to Middle Ages, a strong and long-lasting effect on subsequent periods of European history, up until Johann Joachim Winckelmann and the vision he promoted about this art in his so influential *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums* (1764), and, for some aspects, even until today.<sup>10</sup>

## THE MULTIPLICATION OF DISCOURSES ABOUT ANCIENT EGYPT

As Charles Burnett, again, perfectly summarizes, in the Latin Middle Ages, »the information and legends concerning Egypt in preceding centuries were sufficiently rich to allow us to say that images of that civilization remained alive and creative. This richness was a combination of the motifs that were inherited from classical sources with those taken from Hebrew sacred history, to which were added the direct experiences of travellers to the Orient, and, from the late 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the texts and the images of the Arabs.«<sup>11</sup> Because of this cultural – or actually cross-cultural – situation, the sources and discourses about ancient Egypt indeed became – even more – polymorph, diverse and sometimes contradictory, for they could aim at opposite objectives. Among the most important and significant ones, one certainly has to pinpoint:

1. The Christian Bible narratives that set some crucial events of the Old and New Testaments in Egypt, as »the house of slavery« in the Exodus, on the one hand, but also, on the other hand, as a shelter or the cradle that allowed and led to the revelation of both Moses and Jesus Christ, or, to use the felicitous expression of Jan Assmann, as the past of Israel and, hence, of the Christian world.<sup>12</sup>

2. The vision of Early Church Fathers, rejecting ancient Egypt as the epitome of *daemones* idolatry.<sup>13</sup>
3. Pharaonic survivals through Coptic beliefs and practices, variably understood and even identified, since ancient Egyptian paganism was quite violently discarded.<sup>14</sup>
4. Classical sources, which broadly conveyed a more positive appraisal, with the recurrent idea of Egypt as the other *par excellence*.
5. An esoteric approach of ancient Egypt as the paragon – if not the actual source – of pagan but nonetheless respectable wisdom, including astronomy, astrology, arts, medicine, alchemy but also magics, building on classical, biblical and hermetic traditions, with Hermes Trismegistus, the »Moses aegyptiacus«, as a central figure, who defined his homeland as »the temple of the whole world«.<sup>15</sup>
6. The Islamic look on ancient Egypt, mixing and often reinterpreting the aforementioned sources and discourses, complemented by a direct contact with the land and its monuments and enhancing their esoteric and mysterious aura.<sup>16</sup>

Without even mentioning popular traditions, such as the ones on the »Gypsies«, these various scholarly interpretations of ancient Egypt created an extremely diversified but also ambiguous vision of Pharaonic culture and its monuments. And Burnett to conclude:

»The medieval west received different images of Ancient Egypt, depending to a large extent on the status and profession of the recipient. For the common people the predominant image of Egypt would have been as the antithesis of Israel and the epitome of idol-worship. For the scholar educated in classical literature, it was a land of myths and exotic gods, that provided a rich fund of metaphors. For the doctor, it was the source of medicines – including the *mumia* from preserved corpses – and the land of Cleopatra, whose beauty had qualified her to write on women's cosmetics. For the philosopher and theologian, it was the home of Hermes Trismegistus, who, although a pagan, had a profound understanding of the nature of gods and men [...]. For the magician and alchemist, it was a land of wonders, and the fount and conduit of ancient wisdom. Most of these images were based on classical, biblical and Arabic sources, and first-hand experience of Egypt and its monuments had, to all appearances, little effect. In this respect the period of the Middle Ages in the west could be said to differ not only from the periods that preceded and followed, but also from the contemporary Arabic situation. Nevertheless, the images of Ancient Egypt formed a significant part of western medieval culture, and deserve to be taken into account.«<sup>17</sup>

This complex situation inevitably engendered a lot of misunderstandings and misconstructions about ancient Egyptian monuments and the culture that created them. A very well-known example is the identification of the great pyramids of Giza as the granaries of Joseph referred to in the *Genesis*, a conception that can be traced back at least to the end of

the fourth century, with, among others sources, the Spanish nun Egeria, who, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, visited Egypt in the winter 381–382, i.e. a little bit more than a decade before the last preserved dated hieroglyphic inscription, in the name of a certain Nesmeterakhem, in the temple of Philae, on the 24<sup>th</sup> of August 394, so at a time when the ancient Egyptian culture was clearly not already completely lost or forgotten.<sup>18</sup> But the Christian reading filter, what could be called the *interpretatio christiana*, was obviously much stronger.

Furthermore, in such a context, one may assume that, just like in the Renaissance, the depth and subtlety of knowledge, understanding and interpretation of »Aegyptiaca« could be extremely variable depending on the educational level of the beholder. So, for instance, the Italian multi-talented artist Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), archetype – and inventor – of the concept of the *pictor doctus* in Florence of the Quattrocento, gathered so much information about ancient Egyptian culture and monuments through his reading of classical authors that he was able to write on pharaonic construction techniques (not without some mistakes), hieroglyphic writing, statues of Ramses or Sesostris, and refer to Kheops and Mykerinos as authors of Giza pyramids, but such was clearly not the case for most – if not any other – of his contemporaries. A century later, the scholar painter Lambert Lombard (1505/6–1566) in Liège, who had an unusual interest in ancient Egypt, identified as an Egyptian object a broken statue of the goddess Sekhmet that he saw in Rome, in 1537–1538, in the collection of Cardinal Cesi, and graphically restored it with typically pharaonic iconographic elements; but, again, he was certainly one of the very few who had the required knowledge to do so to the North of Italy in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>19</sup> Because of the physical and visual rupture with Egypt, whose understanding and representation then relied almost exclusively on very diversified textual sources, this must have been quite the same in Medieval Europe, engendering a multitude of more or less individualized visions, that makes any general attempt to build a broader picture very difficult, almost impossible.

## **THE ISSUE OF THE LOSS OF STYLE:**

### **»EKPHRASIS« AND STYLISTIC TRANSLATION**

The very nature of the material used in the Middle Ages to keep a memory of ancient Egypt and construct a cultural representation of it, a fundamentally – and almost exclusively – textual material, implied a significant – and, within the history recounted in the present book, an unusual – reduction of the agentive power of »Aegyptiaca« as objects and images, engendering a nearly complete loss of the so characteristic style of ancient Egyptian art.<sup>20</sup> Once again, the phenomenon can be easily illustrated by later parallels. This is the case, for instance, of the so-called neo-hieroglyphs, created in the Renaissance on the basis of purely textual references and devoid of any feature that would visually connect them with true ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs or imagery, until scholars involved in their study and produc-

tion decided to consider the shape and style of actual writing characters on »Aegyptiaca« excavated from the archaeological ground of Rome, usually more than a century earlier.<sup>21</sup> And the same stylistic rupture applies to the depictions of Isis in the Osiris cycle painted by Bernardino di Betto, d. Il Pinturricchio (1454–1513), and his workshop in the Borgia apartments of the Vatican, around 1492–1494,<sup>22</sup> or in the various illustrated versions of the *De claris mulieribus* (1361–1362) of Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). So, clearly, the use of *ekphras(e)is*, i.e. textual description(s), of images or motifs in order to recreate them without any further support of a visual nature induces a loss of style, or at least a serious danger of it, and hence a translation of the depicted theme into another style. But the phenomenon is actually a little bit more complex, for it may involve and combine conscious as well as unconscious stimuli.

## THE FILTERING PERCEPTION OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MONUMENTS

First of all, as cognitive sciences have now perfectly established, we look less with our eyes that with our brain, since the latter interprets what we can see and even determines what is relevant to our eyes and perception, directing the selection of visual information made through them. For this reason, there is an inextricable link between training or experience and visual perception.<sup>23</sup> The history of »Aegyptiaca« in Western tradition provides us with excellent examples of this unavoidable cognitive fact. For instance, although the draughtsmen of the *Expédition de l'Égypte* copied pharaonic monuments *in situ* and *de visu*, because of their own artistic education and probably under the influence of the vision of ancient Egyptian art promoted by Winckelmann, they very often produced drawing records stylistically contaminated by classical imagery.<sup>24</sup> The same holds true for some Roman copies of genuine »Aegyptiaca«, such as the so-called *Obelisco Sallustiano*, a duplicate of the Heliopolitan obelisk of Seti I and Ramesses II (re-)erected on the orders of Emperor Augustus on the spina of the *Circus Maximus* in Rome in 10 BCE, and now in the centre of the Piazza del Popolo (*Obelisco Flaminio*). The style of its decoration, especially when compared to the original Ramesside model, is to the eyes – and visual brain – of an Egyptologist very awkward, to say the least, revealing a sculptor who certainly did not understand all of what he was copying (fig. 1).<sup>25</sup> So copying is always an interpretation and the faithfulness of the copy – especially on a stylistic level – inevitably depends on the copyist's knowledge and understanding of the model and its cultural context.<sup>26</sup> Without any possible doubt, a medieval artist who would have wished to copy »Aegyptiaca« could not escape from this cognitive rule. But what if the goal were not a copy, but, instead, an inspiration or creative borrowing, an allusion, a reinterpretation, or any other intericonic option?

In the context of art history and the history of the discipline, this inescapably reminds the real aims of the seminal *Studies in Iconology* of Erwin Panofsky, who wanted to promote an analytical dissociation of form and content, a methodological posture that led him to the



1 Lower part of the southern side of the *Obelisco Sallustiano*, a Roman copy of the *Obelisco Flaminio* (the shaded part is an early Modern restoration), now in front of the Trinita dei Monti, in Rome

conclusion of a fundamental distinction to be made between Middle Ages and Renaissance iconographical practices toward the art(s) of antiquity, differentiating the re-use of form with another meaning and the re-use of theme with another form. And in this respect, it is worth referring to one of Panofsky's friends and exact contemporary, Erich Auerbach, and his most important book: *Mimesis. The representation of reality in western literature*.<sup>27</sup> In this brilliant study, E. Auerbach suggested to designate »the view of reality expressed in the Christian works of late antiquity and the Middle Ages« as »figural« (a use derived from his »investigation of the semantic history of the word *figura*«), with the following explanation: »In this conception, an occurrence on earth signifies not only itself but at the same time

another, which it predicts or confirms, without prejudice to the power of its concrete reality here and now.<sup>28</sup> His interpretation is perfectly well substantiated by the discourses – and debates – about time and God’s vision of it throughout the Middle Ages up until the early Modern Times.<sup>29</sup> As Augustine summarized, »for God, nothing is absent, neither the past nor the future, but everything is present to God«, so that his sight encompasses and merges past, present and future at the same time, in his divine eternity.<sup>30</sup> Of course, what Auerbach designated as the »figural« representation of reality is meant to reproduce, just like the figurative arts of the time, the vantage point of Heaven. This is why in the imagery of the Middle Ages, Roman soldiers at the Crucifixion are portrayed like contemporary knights, the adoption of Moses by Pharaoh’s daughter in Santa Maria Maggiore’s mosaics (made between 432 and 440 CE) looks like a scene that is taking place at the imperial court of Theodosius II in the mid-fifth century, or Joseph giving his instructions to store grains in the pyramidal granaries built under his command for the king of Egypt appears as a medieval lord in the decoration of the narthex of the Basilica of San Marco in Venice, around 1240.<sup>31</sup>

So, to sum up the artistic context and its determining factors: with, firstly, the almost total inaccessibility of Egyptian monumental landscape from the middle of the seventh century onward, except for the already imported and quite specific *aegyptiaca romana*, secondly, the Christian broad rejection of pagan past, notably embodied by ancient Egyptian polytheism and idolatry, thirdly, the fundamentally thematic and hence textual references to this culture through the principle of the *ekphrasis*, engendering a severe neutralization of the agency of »Aegyptiaca« in general, and, fourthly, to use Auerbach’s vocabulary, the »figural« conception of the depiction of the past into the – eternal – present (or the neutralization of time), it is definitely no surprise that the Middle Ages, in addition to »freezing« the rather caricatural Roman vision of ancient Egyptian art for a very long period of time, did not produce many objects that express stylistically or materially a distinctively ancient Egyptian-ness. There is nevertheless one notable exception that needs to be mentioned and examined in this contribution. Though apparently quite unique, it suffices to show that, at least in and around Rome, where quite a number of »Aegyptiaca« archaeologically survived throughout the medieval period.<sup>32</sup> it was still possible to have access to plainly Egyptian models, identifiable as such – a fact that also confirms the intentionality of the otherwise general avoidance of the use of the Egyptian style or of the various artistic signs of Egyptian-ness in the rest of the Middle Ages, and especially in the vicinity and cultural sphere of Rome.



## AN EXCEPTIONAL CASE STUDY: THE EGYPTIAN-LOOKING SPHINXES AND LIONS OF THE »ARTE COSMATESCA« IN ROME OF THE 13<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

As Anne Roullet perfectly recounts, in the eternal city of Rome:

»The 12<sup>th</sup> century displayed an increasing interest in antiquities and the *Mirabilia* of the time« (i.e. lists or guidebooks describing the wonders for pilgrims and travellers to visit) »emphatically stress the pagan monuments of the city. This was the result of both political and cultural trends, leading to a pre-Renaissance, a »*Renovatio Romae*«. The Marcus-Aurelius column was restored, statues were moved around, tombs were excavated. [...] The most remarkable illustration of this pre-Renaissance survives in the works of the Cosmati, a group of marble-cutters established at Rome in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and working on the materials and models provided by the ruins of the ancient city. Most of the churches, built or restored in and around Rome during this time, were decorated by the Cosmati.«<sup>33</sup>

Within their vast antiquity-oriented production, the so-called Cosmati workshop(s) (actually a group of families, but also individuals, involved in marble and mosaic work gathered under this designation by modern scholarship on the basis of their stylistic consistency)<sup>34</sup> created a series of sphinxes and lions definitely inspired by Roman »Aegyptiaca« – a series that has already elicited a certain amount of interest and research, notably by Karl Noehles, and more recently by Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi and Manuella Gianandrea.<sup>35</sup> Thirteen statues or groups of statues, usually in pairs, have been recorded as belonging to this category, and among them, four can be securely attributed on an epigraphic basis to a prominent family of sculptors, who named themselves »Vassal(l)ectus« (»Bassallectus«) or »Vassallet(t)o«, and seem to have played a major role in the conception, production and diffusion of those statue types.<sup>36</sup>

The Egyptian-ness of these sculptures, even if they are made of local marble, is plainly detectable and the allusion, or at least their otherness, was very likely also quite explicit for medieval beholders. First of all, they adopt and display the typical posture of the recumbent feline creatures of ancient Egyptian art (figs. 2–6), which stands in neat contrast with the more varied attitudes given to lions and sphinxes in artistic traditions of the Middle Ages, often less static or simply standing (sometimes on their forepaws), and with iconographic details, such as wings for the sphinxes, that connect them with Greek or Near-Eastern prototypes.<sup>37</sup> The stylistic treatment of the animal's anatomy, with a flat, vertical and very geometrical chest, clearly marked ribs, sharp-edged skin-folds at the junctions of the limbs to the body, and an overall very symmetrical composition of the latter, equally points to the millenary uses of the art of ancient Egypt. As Anne Roullet perfectly noted, the »rounded ›beard‹ for a mane, the drooping ears and eyebrows, the highly accentuated chin and the



2 Head of lion statues of the *arte cosmatesca* in the Cathedrals of Anagni and Ferentino, and in San Lorenzo fuori le mura, in Rome

rounded profile are all characteristic of Egyptian lions and of their Cosmati copies.<sup>38</sup> As for the sphinxes, with but one exception (the Viterbo piece, discussed below, plate 27), they systematically wear the distinctive *nemes*-headgear, or, to be more precise, a more or less faithful – or, rather, fanciful – Cosmatesque reinterpretation of it.

Regarding their sources of inspiration, as all previous commentators highlighted, the Egyptian-looking lions of the *arte cosmatesca* are clearly derived from ancient prototypes, late Egyptian ones or Roman imitations, still visible in medieval Rome.<sup>39</sup> In some cases, it is even possible to follow the precise transformation from the model to its »copy«. Among the *aegyptiaca romana* that made their way in the monumental landscape of the City throughout the Middle Ages, the pair of lions of Nectanebo I appears exceptional – and seems to have been perceived as such – because of their unusual pose (slightly lying on one side, with the head turned at right angle, the paws crossed on one another, and the tale down along the base and not raised on the hindquarters), but also of their reinstallation, from the Iseum Campense, to the front of the Pantheon of Agrippa, at the latest in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>40</sup> As Anne Roullet explains:

»A close copy of this type of lion was executed by one of the Cosmati for a church near the old Iseum Campense and the Pantheon, SS. Apostoli. Under the porch, on the right hand side, there lies a lion, badly damaged: unmistakable details, nevertheless, point to an affiliation with the Pantheon models. [...] The head, with its characteristic round »beard«, is at right angles to the axis of the body; [...] the tail runs along the base and, on the space left free on this base, in place of the hieroglyphs on the model, the sculptor has engraved his own signature: *BASSALLECTVS*.«<sup>41</sup>



3 Egyptianizing lion statue in marble in the entrance of Santi Apostoli, c. 1220, compared to one of its prototypes, in granodiorite, now in the Museo Gregoriano of the Vatican, Rome (380–362 BCE)

Similitudes or points of convergence are indeed unmistakable (see fig. 3); but so are the differences, such as the position of both pairs of paws, uncrossed and parallel to the body, like more »classical« Egyptian lions and sphinxes, or the rendering of the fur of the mane, rather in line with medieval stylistic habits of the time. So, this is by no means a faithful, uninspired and slavish duplication; the »Bassallectus« lion is, to the contrary, a definitely



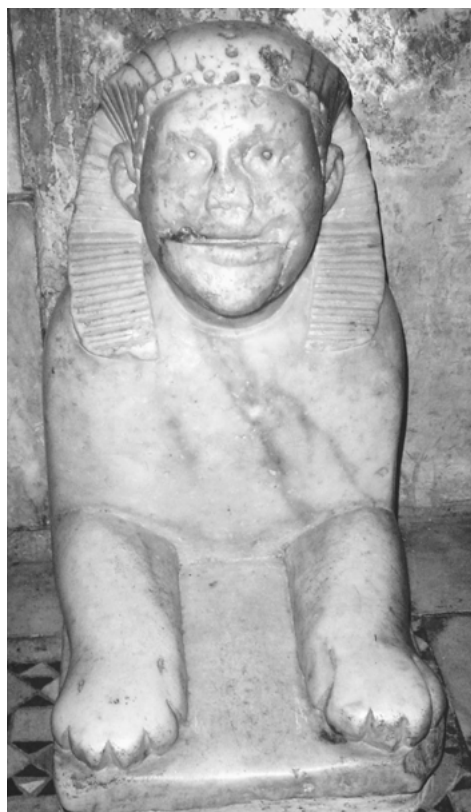
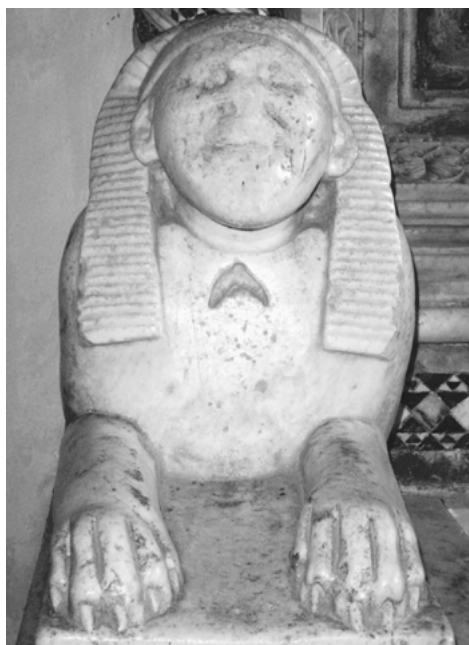
4 Columniferous protome of a lion statue of the *arte cosmatesca* protecting a baby, in the porch of San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome

creative copy, inspired from Nectanebo's prototypes through an intericonical process of creative borrowing. And the same holds true for the statues of the lions' portal at San Lorenzo in Lucina, whose pose and stylistic treatment again undoubtedly remind the felines of ancient Egyptian art, though with an adaptation in order to depict them as protectors of babies (or the young Christ?), with the figure of an infant between their forepaws (see fig. 4), on the model of an iconographic formula also attested in a similar porch of San Lorenzo fuori le Mura.<sup>42</sup>

As for the prototypes of the so-called Cosmatesque sphinxes, Brian Curran wrote: »Since the sources do not mention any sphinxes in Rome before the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, the specific models for these 13<sup>th</sup> century creations cannot be identified with certainty. But it seems likely, given their repeated appearance in pairs, that they were inspired by a pair of antique sphinxes like the ones installed on the Campidoglio in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century.«<sup>43</sup> Anne Roullet was more optimistic when she – rightly – noted that »from the copies, one can define the originals. The sphinxes used as models were some of the many late Egyptian ones brought

to Rome or copied during the Roman Empire. Most of them had the enigmatic smile characteristic of that period. The Cosmati made this into a broad smile and introduced wrinkles of laughter around the eyes« (see figs. 5–6).<sup>44</sup> Addressing the issue, Manuella Gianandrea gathered some serious clues on the accessibility to ancient sphinxes in the abandoned – and plundered – pagan temples of Rome during the Middle Ages and pointed out that the famous statue of the allegory of river Nile, known for sure in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, is leaning on a sphinx, Roman symbol of ancient Egypt.<sup>45</sup> In any case, different sources might have been and were probably combined since many of those pairs of marble sphinxes of the 13<sup>th</sup> century are actually also recreations or reinterpretations of Roman »Aegyptiaca«. This is plain to see, for instance, on the sphinxes of the cloisters of San Giovanni in Laterano, whose *nemes*-headdress has been re-designed in the so-called Cosmati style, with alignments of carved dots between two lines or incised motifs structured around small drilled holes, echoing mosaic effects (see fig. 6). Besides, and even more strikingly, one has a large – and absolutely un-Egyptian – beard and a serious expression while his mate is devoid of any pilosity – except for the eyebrows – and seems to smile or even laugh. According to Anne Rouillet: »Together they form the first example of a pair of male and female Egyptianizing sphinxes, a theme definitely non-Egyptian, but which was to develop steadily from the Renaissance onwards.«<sup>46</sup> Another patent invention by creative borrowing from Egyptian or Egyptianizing sphinxes is the weird and unique sphinx of Viterbo, signed – again – on the side of the basis by »Fr. Paschalis romanus«, along with the date of 1286 (plate 27).<sup>47</sup> Its posture is clearly inspired from »Aegyptiaca«, though the rendering of the anatomy has been largely reinterpreted in a more medieval manner, with a belly detached from the basis and a more naturalistic treatment of the hairs at the tip of the tale or under the forepaws, but also a rather awkward understanding of some Egyptian artistic formulae, such as the position and dimensions of the articulated elements of the limbs or the skin-folds that connect the latter to the rest of the body. Yet, again, the most innovative and astonishing feature is the head, without any *nemes* but, instead, a bandeau holding long curled human hair on the back of the animal, and displaying an enigmatic face with once more an open mouth, that was certainly meaningful for a local audience,<sup>48</sup> but completely alien to ancient Egyptian art. That those creations had a strong agency on patrons, artists and beholders of the time is demonstrated by this sole sphinx, which seems to be the last – datable – one of the series, obviously alluding to earlier *aegyptiaca cosmatesca*, many of them issued two generations before.<sup>49</sup>

But what was the meaning of these appropriations of Egyptian style? As Brian Curran put forward, »Whatever their sources [...], it seems that these creatures were intended to lend an atmosphere of antiquity and imperial – and possibly pagan – power to these »modern« constructions.«<sup>50</sup> Giuseppina Capriotti Vittozzi went a step further, arguing that some Egyptian (or one could call it Egyptological) knowledge might have been transmitted to medieval Europe, notably through the Copts, and could account for the creation and use of those Egyptian-looking lions and sphinxes.<sup>51</sup> All scholars who discussed these statues agree



5 Front view of sphinxes of the *arte cosmatesca* in the Cathedrals of Civita Castellana, Ferentino and Anagni, and in Sant'Antonio Abate all'Esquilino, in Rome



6 Side and front views of the sphinxes of the southern aisle of the cloisters of San Giovanni in Laterano, Rome, made by two Vassalletti, 1215–1232

on the fact that they were used in a manner consistent with ancient Egyptian art since they often appear in pairs, as guardians of passageways leading to places endowed with sacredness, such as a church, the sacristy, a presbyteral enclosure, cloisters or sepulchers, or as adornments on the sides of a throne, in the case of the famous episcopal throne of the cathedral of Anagni (see fig. 2, left lion).<sup>52</sup> However, as is well-known, this functional usage of feline sculptures, though nowadays still strongly evocative of pharaonic culture, is actu-

ally far from being exclusively Egyptian and, in a certain way, had already been integrated in Christian display long before *arte cosmatesca*. Hence these kinds of dispositions certainly constitute an interesting clue regarding the models that might have inspired the so-called Cosmati sculptors but it does not suffice to allow us to conclude positively on their understanding of the Egyptian-ness of these models. Other elements may nevertheless be added to the inquiry. First of all, as a premise, we have to keep in mind the socio-educational level of these artists: they were obviously renowned in their time, to the point that they could sign their own work,<sup>53</sup> and known as *magistri doctissimi romani*, i.e. they were recognized as experts *es antiquities* and developed their own artistic identity on this self-definition, as continuators and emulators of the arts of antiquity.<sup>54</sup> In this perspective, the signature of »Bassallectus« on the side of the base of the lion statue of Santi Apostoli, just below the turned head of the animal looking face to face at the beholder and in front of the feline's tail around the base, i.e. exactly at the same position as the royal titulary on the lions of Nectanebo I (see fig. 3), shows without any possible doubt that our inspired sculptor (probably to be identified with the so-called Vassalletto III in nowadays Cosmati studies) could not have missed the presence of those hieroglyphs on this genuine Egyptian prototype.<sup>55</sup> Considering his status as a scholar sculptor, we may quite confidently assume that he knew something about this »writing of birds« and was very likely able to connect it to ancient Egypt.<sup>56</sup> A similar reasoning applies about the sphinx iconographically associated to the gigantic river Nile statue on which Manuela Gianandrea has drawn attention in her study of *aegyptiaca cosmatesca*, highlighting that it was accessible and known since the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>57</sup> The association of the river Nile and the sphinx was probably unavoidable for a learned mind of the Middle Ages. Therefore, the very materiality of *aegyptiaca romana* used as sources of inspiration by Roman sculptors of the 13<sup>th</sup> century must in all likelihood have induced the acknowledgement of their Egyptian nature and origin (or point of reference).

Still in terms of agentivity, it is also very important to notice that these new »Aegyptiaca«, thus most probably recognized as such (at least by their producers and commissioning authorities) and, in any case, utilized in a functional setting in line with ancient Egyptian art uses, were significantly integrated into a Christian discourse and staging. The sacredness they seem to protect is of course always Christian. Furthermore, if some of them were adapted to signify the specific safe keeping of babies (or the Christ child; see fig. 4), the majority of the *aegyptiaca cosmatesca* are symptomatically columniferous.<sup>58</sup> They have been used in a composition in order to support a column, a symbol that has a long history in the discourse about the victory of Christianity over paganism and was undoubtedly very meaningful for a Christian medieval audience (fig. 7), especially in Rome, where this tradition of the column of victory was still well attested and visible in monuments of Roman times.<sup>59</sup> And, as a matter of fact, they generated a new and very productive iconographic tradition of Egyptian or Egypt-connected animals supporting a column or a similar object, from the obeliscoferous elephant of the *Hypnerotomachia Polifili* (first printed edition in 1499 in Venice), materialized by Gian Lorenzo Bernini and his assistant Ercole Ferrata in their sculpture incorpo-





7 Depiction of the Christ stepping on a lion and an evil dragoon as an illustration of the iconographic type of the triumphant Christ-column, at Amiens Cathedral, c. 1225

rating a genuine ancient Egyptian obelisk in the name of king Apries (589–570 BCE) in the middle of the Piazza della Minerva in Rome (just next to the site of the Iseum Campense), in 1667, to the *Fontaine des éléphants*, made by the French sculptor Victor Sappey in 1838, in Chambéry, France, to commemorate the victories of general Benoît de Boigne.<sup>60</sup>

So, to conclude, in spite of very constraining negative circumstances, it seems that »Aegyptiaca« and the Egyptian style were not completely lost in the artistic translation of the past that characterizes the Middle Ages, at least for some enlightened minds of the time, who had the opportunity of keeping a visual contact with those Egyptian or Egyptian-looking objects.

