PERICULOSAE PLENUM OPUS ALEAE

THE »MENSA ISIACA«, LORENZO PIGNORIA AND THE PERILS OF CULTURAL TRANSLATION

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Egypt and America came together in the year 1724 in at least two places: in Zacatecas, the third city of importance in New Spain (Mexico), where an obelisk of Kircherian inspiration was erected to mark the coronation of Luís I of Spain; and in Paris with the publication of the ambitious cross-cultural comparisons contained in *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps* by Joseph François Lafitau, a Jesuit who had spent five years in Canada among the Algonquin, Huron and Iroquois.[1]

Many of the forty-one plates in Lafitau's two volumes display a binary structure, in which artefacts from the New World and artefacts from the Old World are compared and contrasted. For instance, the eighth plate depicts »the musical instruments of the first times, compared with those of the Americans«, where the reader can observe an Egyptian rattle of Anubis, a Brazilian *maraka*, and a North American *chichikoué*, as well as a comparison of the North American tortoise shell with the lyre of the Greek god Apollo.[2]

This idea of a mutual translatability between the Old World and the New can be found long before Lafitau. That it was not without its perils is shown by a passage in the *Descripción geográfica de la América setentrional* (Mexico, 1674), in which the historian of the Dominican Order in Mexico fray Francisco de Burgoa expressed his displeasure at the translations of many edifying spiritual works into Mixtec, one of the native languages of Oaxaca, because of their introduction of »improper language in the explanation of some mysteries«. As a member of the Spanish Inquisition, he was bound to order these translations not to be used in order to avoid lending credibility to traditional native religious beliefs. In this connection he singles out for special mention a translation of the *Metamorphoses* or *Golden Ass* by Apuleius.[3] It is unlikely that the unidentified translator had translated the explicitly

pornographic passages in this racy second century Latin novel, but it was above all the final book of the work that aroused interest and fray Francisco's ire because of its description of the process of initiation into the mysteries of the goddess Isis.

There was nothing new about the idea of translating works from the Old World for consumption in the New. For instance, the animal fables attributed to the Phrygian slave Aesop were among the works translated into Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec empire, around the middle of the 16th century.[4] Still, Aesop's fables were tales with a moral message; the string of stories narrated by Apuleius are decidedly amoral and immoral. Yet although the idea that Apuleius in translation could possibly further missionary activities in New Spain might seem as strange to us today as it did to fray Francisco, the unidentified translator was not the only one to imagine that knowledge of the world of antiquity might be useful in conveying knowledge of the true faith to the unenlightened.

Another personality from the 17th century who engaged in comparison between an ancient culture – that of Egypt – and the native cultures of the Americas is Lorenzo Pignoria, who faced the task of explaining the images and signs depicted on an object known today as the Mensa Isiaca. Unlike Nicolas Caussin, Athanasius Kircher and others who subsequently proposed bold decipherments of the Egyptian hieroglyphs – though ultimately all rendered redundant by Champollion's deciphering of the Rosetta Stone in 1822 – Lorenzo Pignoria (1571–1631) adopted a cautious if not sceptical position. Perhaps this down-to-earth approach is due to the fact that, like Peiresc, Cassiano dal Pozzo, Francesco Gualdi and many other antiquaries of the 16th and 17th centuries, Pignoria had probably first come into contact with the classical world through the study of Roman law.[5] He was able to examine the monuments of antiquity at first hand in Rome during his two years there in 1605–1606, and he was the owner of a large collection in Padua, which included paintings and prints, portraits of famous men, statues, coins, seals, ancient utensils, units of weight and measure, keys, clasps, rings, lamps, amulets, shells, stones, crystals and exotic objects from India and China.[6] Collections of small items of this kind were especially popular at the time for the light that they could throw on everyday Roman life.[7] Some idea of that collection can be obtained from the description of the museum and library of Pignoria by Jacobo Filippo Tomasini.[8] Since that inventory is by no means complete, however, it would be rash to conclude that it was not a *Kunst- und Wunderkammer*, as Pomian has done.[9] Indeed, items in the inventory such as »conchyliorum variæ species, in quibus multa lapidea naturæ lusu«, »exotica non pauca, veluti legumina ex India« and »chartae et sericum ex regione Sinarum« suggest that typical *Wunderkammer* elements were not lacking either, and this supposition is confirmed by the definition of the museum given by Tomasini: »Amphitheatridium artis & naturæ unico conclavi concluditur«.[10] At any rate, it is clear that his interest lay in the study of material objects rather than in the pursuit of abstract and abstruse theories.[11]

The implicit contrast here is, of course, with the famous polymath Athanasius Kircher. The latter was certainly interested in material artefacts: when he visited Peiresc in Avignon in the 1630s he was given some (no longer identifiable) items for his collection in Rome by

the French scholar. The fragmentation of that collection in 1913 makes it very difficult to reconstitute its precise composition, but references in the text of Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* indicate that it contained at least a fragment of a clepsydra and the torso of a magical statue.[12]

Particularly relevant for present purposes are the Jesuit's exchanges with correspondents in New Spain.[13] From Puebla de los Ángeles, the second most important city in Mexico – an obelisk dedicated to Carlos III was erected beside the fountain of San Miguel in the Plaza Mayor in 1763 –,[14] the *criollo* priest Alejandro Favián sent Kircher chocolate, precious metals, items of featherwork craftsmanship,[15] and tableware made from local onyx (*tecali*). The painted gourd listed in the catalogue of the Kircherianum may have been a present from Favián, and as he mentions in a letter his intention of sending examples of local fauna and flora, it is possible that Favián may also have been responsible for the presence of the armadillo and iguana mentioned in the same catalogue.[16] Another likely source of *americana* for the incipient collection in the Collegio Romano is the Chilean Jesuit Alonso de Ovalle (1603–1651).[17] Both he and Kircher were in Rome for the Eighth General Congregation of the Company of Jesus (1645–1646), and Kircher mentions their meeting in his *Mundus subterraneus*.[18] Perhaps the large bezoar (weighing thirty-two ounces) of a South American guanaco, which Ovalle compared for its intricate structure to the work of a woodturner, entered Kircher's collection on such an occasion.[19]

Nevertheless, in spite of the complementarity of Kircher's writings and the material objects in the Kircherianum, the latter were subservient to the grand intellectual and speculative design of the former. Kircher offered a comprehensive interpretation of the Mensa Isiaca that attempted to account for every detail in it; that his ambitious interpretation lacked a foundation in Egyptian archaeology was beside the point. Pignoria, on the other hand, was much more circumspect and may be said to have displayed a greater interest in material culture as such, even though, as we shall see, it too was deployed within the context of a comparative method that was entirely in line with the cultural horizons of his time.

THE MATERIAL OBJECT: A CHAPTER IN THE HISTORY OF COLLECTIONS

The Mensa Isiaca, a bronze tablet measuring 128 × 75 cm and inlaid with silver and niello, shows a repetitive series of scenes of offerings to Egyptian deities (plate 28). It was found in Rome during or soon after the first quarter of the 16th century. However, neither the exact date of discovery nor the process by which the Mensa Isiaca itself came into the hands of Cardinal Pietro Bembo is unambiguous. Pignoria himself wavered between two versions: either it had been given to Bembo by Pope Paul III, or Bembo had purchased it from a smith in Rome who had acquired it after the sack of Rome.[20] The former would therefore place the date of acquisition by Bembo after the accession of Alessandro Farnese

to the papal throne as Paul III in 1534 (unless we assume that Pignoria is using the term proleptically and referring to the future Pope), the latter at some time after the sack of Rome in 1527. Indeed, in his biography of Bembo, Lodovico Beccadelli claims to have seen it in the cardinal's collection not long after 1527; he describes it as a »tavola di rame assai ben grande lavorata d'argento a figure egittie«.[21] Many years earlier, however, Bembo had been secretary to Pope Leo X who, like his predecessor Julius II, had shown a keen interest in matters Egyptian. It has therefore been suggested that the date of its transfer into Bembo's hands should be placed considerably earlier, before he left Rome in 1521. If the copy of the »tabulae cuiusdam ob antiquitatem admirabilis exemplum« that was the object of a discussion of hieroglyphics in the Venetian residence of Urbano Bolzanio can be identified with the Mensa Isiaca, then the table must have been known to Bembo prior to the death of Bolzanio in 1524.[22] Bolzanio was the uncle of Pierio Valeriano, whose study *Hieroglyphica* would be published in 1556; not only had Bolzanio travelled in Egypt, but he had also tutored the young Giovanni de'Medici before the latter became Pope Leo X. Indeed, the strong interest shown in matters Egyptian by the Curia in Rome in the first two decades of the century, and particularly during the papacy of Leo X, lends support to this hypothesis of an early date for the transfer of the Mensa to Bembo.[23] It was the same Medici Pope who planned to erect the pieces of an obelisk found outside the mausoleum of Augustus in 1519 in an elaborate monument mounted on four tortoise astragals in the Piazza del Popolo.[24]

The discovery of the object soon aroused the interest of antiquaries and artists. This must have been particularly the case in Padua, to which Bembo had moved from Rome in 1521: it was in Padua that Piero Valeriano advised Alvise Cornaro on the programme of the decoration of the octagonal music room in the (recently restored) Odeo around 1540, and the same years witnessed the construction, near Bembo's home, of the new residence of the jurist and antiquarian Marco Mantova Benavides with an entrance decorated with paintings that, »like hieroglyphics, denote various things«, as a later testimony records.[25] In 1546 Juan Páez de Castro, a member of the retinue of the imperial envoy to the Council of Trent, recorded a visit to the house of Bembo in which he observed »a bronze tablet with certain paintings of animals, which are said to be hieroglyphics«.[26] Further afield, a drawing commissioned by Fulvio Orsini for Francesco de'Medici has been lost, but borrowing from the Mensa Isiaca has been detected in the so-called »Egyptian page« of the Mass of St John the Baptist, attributed to the Croatian miniaturist Giulio Clovio, in the Colonna Missal from the 1530s.[27] We find a sketch in the album of Stephanus Vinandus Pighius from the following decade, and an engraving by Enea Vico from 1559.[28]

The next stage in the transmission history of the object is less shrouded in mystery and better documented.[29] When Pietro Bembo died in Rome in 1547, his son Torquato was strictly enjoined to maintain the collection and library intact. He did so for a while, admitting Enea Vico and others to the collection as he thought fit, but by 1567 he was already selling off items to meet his mounting debts, and after the death of his sister Elena in 1574, he felt free to press on with the sales. When in Rome for this purpose in 1581, the items

that he advertised included »una tavola di bronzo antichissima di piu di tre mila anni«. He offered the Mensa Isiaca to Grand Duke Francesco de'Medici for the price of 1,000 gold scudi, but that sale did not go through.[30]

Another of those in pursuit of the remains of the collection of Pietro Bembo was Vincenzo Gonzaga I. Soon after becoming Duke of Mantua in 1587, he engaged in a large-scale campaign to collect not only paintings and sculptures, but also rare or unique antiquities.[31] Four years later his agents in Verona (Mario Bevilacqua and Count Girolamo Canossa) informed him that the cardinal's son Torquato had already disposed of everything worthwhile from his father's *studio* except »la tavola di bronzo, qual certo è rarissima et unica«. Vincenzo hesitated six months before finally making the purchase in January 1592 for 480 Venetian *scudi*.[32]

Though the date of entry of the Mensa Isiaca into the Gonzaga collection is thus well documented, there is uncertainty regarding the date when it left that collection. It does not appear in the 1627 inventory, although that is not decisive since the inventory was not exhaustive. The Mensa Isiaca may have left the collection during its break-up in 1627, but it is also possible that its departure was not until after the conclusion of the war over the Mantuan succession with the sack of Mantua in 1630. At any rate, by the time Athanasius Kircher mentioned it in 1666, it was in the collection of the Savoia in Turin, the city where it is still preserved in what is now the Museo Egizio di Torino.[33] Like the popes from the first two decades of the 16th century, the Savoia were very interested in Egyptian material, among other things because, according to a legend, Turin was an Egyptian foundation. The discovery of the base of a statue dedicated to Isis in 1567, followed ten years later by the publication of the *Augusta Taurinorum* by the local historian Filiberto Pingone, fanned this speculation. The Turinese Egyptomania was heightened even more by the discussion of a female bust given to the museum in 1739 and known as the »bust of Isis«. The arrival of the Mensa Isiaca prompted the Duke of Savoy to send the Paduan archaeologist and botanist Vitaliano Donati to Egypt in 1759.[34] His mission was to bring back articles that would prove suitable to accompany the tablet, including a statue of Isis purchased in Koptos and today, like the Mensa itself, in the Museo Egizio.

A NON-ALLEGORICAL INTERPRETATION

It was during the stay of the well-travelled Mensa Isiaca in Mantua that Lorenzo Pignoria saw the artefact itself, while the engraving by Enea Vico published in Venice in 1559 served as the basis of his explanatory comments. In the opening page of his treatise on the Mensa Isiaca, Pignoria states that the request to write a description and interpretation of the object, which had already been for some time in the collection of Vincenzo Gonzaga (*jam diu domi habet*), came from Marcus Welser. This German banker,[35] an expert in the history and antiquities of Rome and Germany who was admitted to the Accademia dei Lincei in 1612,

could count among his best-known publications the first edition of the *Tabula Peutingerana*, a map of the road network of the Roman Empire, as well as a collection of the ancient inscriptions of his native Augsburg.[36] The close ties between Welser and Pignoria are shown in the epitaph that Pignoria wrote upon the death of his friend in 1614.[37]

The result of Welser's gentle pressure was the treatise *Vetustissimae Tabulae Aeneae Sacris Aegyptiorum Simulachris coelatae accurata Explicatio, in qua antiquissimarum superstitionum Origines, Progressiones, Ritus ad Barbaram, Graecam, Romanamque Historiam illustrandam enarrantur, & multa Scriptorum veterum loca qua explanantur, qua emendantur: Auctore Laurentio Pignorio Patavino,* first published by Giovanni Antonio Rampazetto in Venice in 1605 with a frontispiece containing a vedutà of the Piazza di San Marco, a dedication to Cardinal Cesare Baronio, and a reproduction of the Vico engraving (fig. 1).[38]

There were those who cited Apuleius as their authority to express the belief that the Mensa Isiaca was inexplicable. So at the start of his commentary on the Mensa, Pignoria cites a passage from the *Metamorphoses* to support his own case.[39] As a prelude to his initiation, the protagonist of *The Golden Ass* is led to the doors of a vast temple and shown various books written in unfamiliar characters that were brought from the inner sanctuary: »Some of animals of every kind furnishing abbreviations of formulaic speech; while others had the tips of their signs knotted, coiled, and interwoven like vine-tendrils to hide their meaning from the curiosity of the uninitiated.«[40] In spite of the tortuous nature of Apuleius' Latin, it seems likely that the former is a reference to hieroglyphs, here interpreted as ideograms, while the latter might be a reference to the cursive hieratic script. However that may be, Pignoria takes the words to mean that the script was not inherently inexplicable; it had a meaning. But the phrase »Periculosae plenum opus aleae«, taken from the Horatian *Ode* to Asinius Pollio, implies that the task of interpretation is as perilous as walking on ashes beneath which fire continues to blaze.[41]

Pignoria does not appear to doubt the Mensa Isiaca's antiquity, calling it »an outstanding monument of the purest antiquity« (»Tabulam illam puræ putæ antiquitatis insigne monumentum«), though he adds that, whether it is Egyptian or done in an Egyptian style, its maker was not particularly learned.[42] It departs in many respects from traditional Egyptian canons of representation, and the mirror symmetry of the composition excludes the dynamic succession of episodes that can be found in Egyptian original works from the Pharaonic period. The scholarly consensus today is that it is an Egyptianising work, probably produced in Rome in the mid-first century CE, though there is a possibility that it might date from the reigns of Diocletian or Hadrian in the following century. A close stylistic parallel can be found in Roman mosaic pavements from the first and second centuries.[43]

When it comes to interpretation of the work, Pignoria is resolutely anti-allegorical:

> »I will describe to the best of my abilities the figures of this Tablet, and not allegorically but rather based upon the ancient accounts. Indeed, I detest more than anyone the far-


VETVSTISSIMÆ
TABVLAE AENEAE
Sacris Ægyptiorum Simulachris cœlatæ accurata Explicatio, in qua antiquiſſimarum ſuperſtitionum Origines, Progreſſiones, Ritus ad Barbaram, Græcam, Romanamque Hiſtoriam illuſtrandam enarrantur, & multa Scriptorum veterum loca qua explanantur, qua emendantur:
AVCTORE LAVRENTIO PIGNORIO PATAVINO.
Acceſſit ab eodem AVCTARIVM, in quo ex antiquis Sigillis, Gemmisque ſelectiora quædam eius generis, & veterum Hæreticorum amuleta exhibentur.
Venetijs Apud Io: Anto: Rampazettum. 1605. Sumptibus Iacobi Franco. Cum Priuilegio.

1 Frontispiece, Lorenzo Pignoria, *Vetvstissimæ Tabvlae Aeneae. . .*, Venice: Giovanni Antonio Rampazetto, 1605

fetched interpretations of the Platonists, based on tenuous tales and almost ignoring the teachings of their master. And I have chosen to confess my ignorance rather than offend the erudite reader any longer.«[44]

This confession of ignorance recurs a number of times in his account. For instance, at one point in his interpretation he states: »That is my conjecture, but I will not raise any objection if someone has a better suggestion.«[45] Fifteen years later, he would display a similar modesty in a letter to Andrea Chiocco, one of the two Veronese physicians who compiled the second, greatly augmented catalogue of the museum of their fellow townsman Francesco Calzolari in 1622.[46] Asked to comment on a basalt stone in that collection that was engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphics, Pignoria prefaced his comments with the remark that no one had so far managed to decipher the hieroglyphs; the most he could offer, drawing on his earlier experience with the Mensa Isiaca (which was by now in the collection of Ferdinando Gonzaga in Mantua, to whom the catalogue is dedicated), were some brief remarks on the figures of Isis and Osiris.[47]

In his treatise on the Mensa Isiaca, Pignoria cites two types of aid in his researches: the contributions of other scholars of his day; and the light thrown on some of the images in the Mensa Isiaca by similar objects in private collections. Among the former, headed by Marcus Welser, he lists Federico Contarini, Procuratore of San Marco, owner of a large collection of ancient statues and coins as well as paintings by the Venetian school and curator of the famous Grimani collection of antiquities in the newly created Museo archeologico in Venice;[48] Lelio Pasqualini, whom Welser tried – in vain – to persuade to have prints made from his drawings of the antique, and who was credited with having a *studiolo* with the finest antiquities of all Rome in his house near the Campidoglio;[49] and the great French antiquarian Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc, who called Contarini's collection a *Musaeum instructissimum*. Peiresc's interest in Pignoria's work on the Mensa Isiaca is shown by a letter in which he expresses his concern to obtain a complete exemplar of Pignoria's 1608 edition because one of the plates is missing from the one he already has.[50] Later, in a letter to Cassiano dal Pozzo of February 1629, Peiresc – who had written a discourse on the greater flamingo in 1609[51] – wrote that he had requested his painter to show the different parts and views of a flamingo »that could be compared with the hieroglyphic figures of the Tavola Bembina by Signor Pignoria«.[52] These are presumably the two watercolours on vellum that were acquired by Cassiano, owner of a fine collection of antiquities and natural curiosities on the via dei Chiavari in Rome.[53] Cassiano was also on cordial terms with Pignoria, from whom he commissioned a study of the Roman painting conventionally known as the Nozze Aldobrandini.[54] Discovered on the Esquiline in 1601, the painting was taken to the urban villa at Magnanapoli that the Cardinal Nephew Pietro Aldobrandini had just had built on land near the Quirinal acquired only three years earlier.

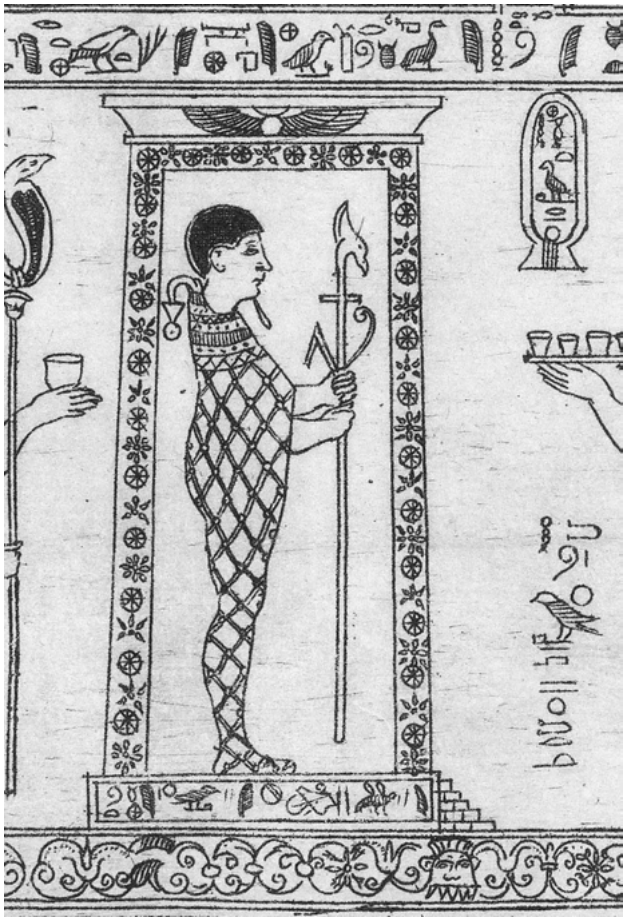
In an age when objects did not travel as easily as they do today, the demand for eye-witness observation often had to be met with images of the objects themselves, representations

of what was absent. This was as true of the field of natural history as it was of the world of the antiquarians.[55] The reliability of such images depended on the reputation of those who supplied them. For instance, in response to a request from Peiresc for sketches of the antiquities in his collection in Antwerp, Peter Paul Rubens sent the French scholar a large sheet on which one of his assistants had drawn Rubens' Egyptian mummy and case, together with some little bronze Egyptian statuettes that had presumably been found inside the case.[56] The high reputation of both correspondents as scholars guaranteed the reliability of the textual and visual material that they exchanged. From the description of the museum and library of Pignoria by Jacobo Filippo Tomasini, we know that Pignoria was able to match some items from his own collection,[57] whose composition closely mirrored his own cultural itinerary. The Paduan scholar could also count on the support of some of the best scholars of his day, such as the erudite Rome-based printer and dealer Pietro Stefanoni, whom Pignoria called »antiquario della prima classe, e galantuomo«.[58] At the start of his examination of the Mensa Isiaca, to interpret a cross like that of the Egyptian *ankh* symbol he draws both on the evidence of obelisks (six of which he would have been able to observe at first hand during his two years in Rome) and on that of an ancient gem from the collection of fellow Paduan Giovanni Vincenzo Pinelli.[59] In his discussion of Horus he refers to a gem from the Peiresc collection which he interprets as representing the god reclining in a divine bark.[60] Further on in his treatise he borrows the image of a lion-headed marble figure from Girolamo Aleandro, »eruditissimo adolescente«.[61] If Pignoria's interpretation was not allegorical, it may certainly be called archaeological.

IDENTIFYING HORUS-PTAH

Pignoria ran up against the greatest difficulty in trying to interpret the second figure from the left on the bottom row of the Mensa Isiaca (fig. 2). He comments that he has reflected on it time and again, so many difficulties to interpretation does it raise, proffers his own view as highly provisional, and invites more learned interpreters to take up the challenge.[62]

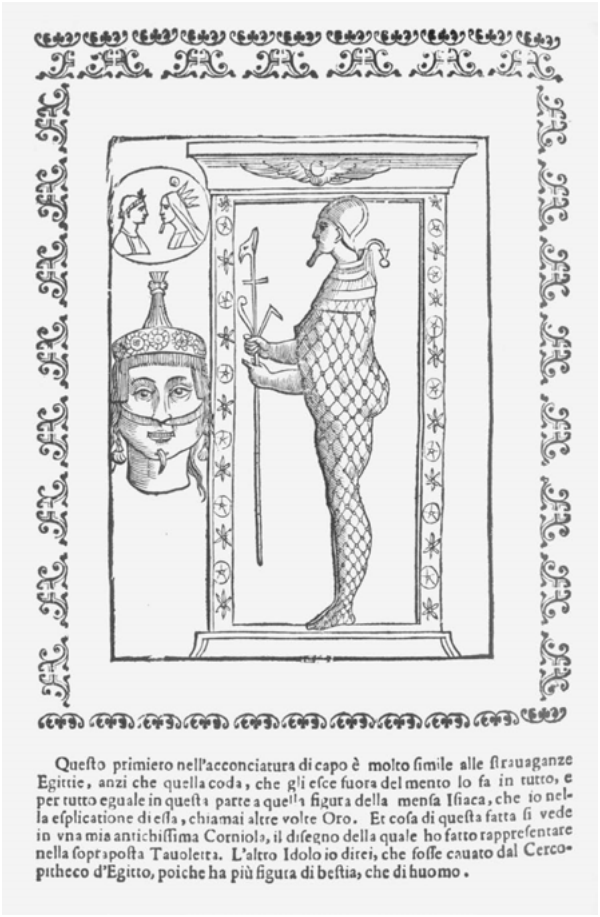
The figure, whom he identifies as Horus, is now regarded as representing Ptah, the creator god of Memphis. The use of niello on the head may be intended to represent the skullcap covering the god's shaven head. Ptah is usually represented holding a staff that combines the *djed* pillar, *was* sceptre and an *ankh*.[63] The *djed* was usually represented as »a roughly cruciform symbol with at least three cross-bars«, while the *was* sceptre consisted of »a straight shaft with its handle in the form of the head of a canine animal, and its base ending in two prongs«.[64] It can readily be seen that these do not correspond to the attributes held by the figure of Ptah in the Mensa Isiaca.[65] As Leospo sums up her discussion: »It is once again evident [...] that the author himself did not have a more exact understanding of the meaning of the images«.[66] We might add that, in the light of the knowledge of Egyptian



2 Horus-Ptah, from Lorenzo Pignoria, *Vetvstissimæ Tabvlae Aeneae. . .*, Venice: Giovanni Antonio Rampazetto, 1605

hieroglyphics of his day, he *could* not have had a more exact understanding of the meaning of the images either. The meaningless inscriptions that run around the border of the tablet point in the same direction – they are as decorative as the accurate reproductions of hieroglyphs that frame several Egyptian and non-Egyptian subjects, commissioned from Giulio Romano in the 1520s by Federico II Gonzaga for the vault of the Loggia of the Muses in Palazzo Te, Mantua.

The figure of Ptah must have intrigued Lorenzo Pignoria, for he returned to it in compiling an appendix to Vicenzo Cartari's *Imagini delli dei de gl'antichi* (fig. 3).[67] The first (1566) edition of Cartari's iconographical manual did not have any illustrations at all; the first edition to include illustrations, by Bolognino Zaltieri, was published five years later.[68] Even so, those illustrations had an equally bookish source:



Queſto primiero nell'acconciatura di capo è molto ſimile alle ſtrauaganze Egittie, anzi che quella coda, che gli eſce fuora del mento lo fa in tutto, e per tutto eguale in queſta parte a quella figura della menſa Iſiaca, che io nella eſplicatione di eſſa, chiamai altre volte Oro. Et coſa di queſta fatta ſi vede in vna mia antichiſſima Corniola, il diſegno della quale ho fatto rappreſentare nella ſopraposta Tauoletta. L'altro Idolo io direi, che foſſe cauato dal Cercopitheco d'Egitto, poiche ha più figura di beſtia, che di huomo.

3 Horus-Ptah, from *Seconda parte delle imagini de gli dei indiani. Aggionta al Cartari da Lorenzo Pignoria*, Padua: Pietro Paolo Tozzi, 1615

> »Cartari sometimes boasts [...] that he has utilized marbles and medals as part of his documentation, but actually it is in books, and only there, that he has seen them. His illustrator follows the same method. He copies, not the objects themselves, but engravings from contemporary works.«[69]

As the title suggests, Cartari's compilation was concerned with the gods of Greece and Rome. However, when a new edition with freshly produced woodcuts by Filippo Ferroverde was issued in 1615, it included two appendices. In the first, Pignoria included additional material to supplement that provided by Cartari. In the second, however, on »the gods of the Indians« (a term which at this time could refer to the Orient or to America), Pignoria widened the scope of the work to include material from Japan, India and the East

Indies as well as the Americas, taken from a bewildering variety of sources.[70] For instance, the illustrator combined reports from two different Jesuit sources in India to produce the image of a three-armed and three-headed elephant god, and later editions offered four views of the grip of a *kris* from the East Indies (Java or Madura) attributed to the collection of Peiresc.[71]

The Asian images are printed without further ado, but in the case of those illustrating figures from the Americas, Pignoria adds comparative material taken from – Egypt. When seen against the strategy of Cartari and his illustrator, this creates a remarkable discontinuity in the work as a whole, because his strategy is to print the image of a deity from Mesoamerica as the main figure on the page, and to accompany it by small figures in medallions taken from works of ancient Egypt. Thus the woodcut of the god Homoyoca, taken from a colonial Mexican manuscript made by an indigenous painter,[72] is accompanied by the insets of two figures taken directly from the border decoration of the Mensa Isiaca: a jackal-headed figure (who is facing a baboon in the Mensa), and a figure holding a pointed object in one hand and a beaker in the other (who is facing a ram in the Mensa).[73]

The same technique is at work in the woodcut of a New World *zemi* or idol. Francisco Ruiz, a Franciscan friar, brought a number of such objects to Spain in the first years of the 16th century; though some of these were housed in the University of Alcalá, at least one reached the Munich *Kunstkammer* of Albrecht V.[74] This time Pignoria's image is not taken from a codex, but from an image sent to Pignoria by fellow Egyptologist Hans Georg Herwarth of what was listed in the 1598 inventory of the collection of the Duke of Bavaria in Munich as »An Indian idol on the outside covered with small white and red interlocking rings, with big eyes of blue glass.«[75] And this time too we find it accompanied by a smaller inset of a Cercopithecus with a lunar crescent and a solar disc above its head, once again taken (in reverse) from the Mensa Isiaca, where it faces the figure of Isis labelled G.[76]

Pignoria's strategy is clear: in focusing on images of deities from the New World and drawing parallels with the ancient world of Egypt, he is combining the comparative method with a strong dependence on the evidence of material culture. In the words of the first scholar to draw attention to the dependence of Pignoria's images on a Mexican codex, Jean Seznec, with the arrival of this new method »Olympus, overrun from all sides, became sheer pandemonium«.[77] When Pignoria discusses snake worship in ancient Egypt, he compares it not only with the practices of the Amerindians, but also with »some of our heretics« (»e nostris hæretici quidam«), implicitly drawing a parallel between the exotic cultures of the Amerindians and the practices of what have been termed »Europe's inner Indians« and anticipating Aby Warburg's study of serpent images of the Pueblo Indians of North America by more than two hundred years.[78]

Pignoria was by no means alone in this assimilation of ancient Egyptian and Amerindian practices. Many a European collector regarded the signs inscribed on Mesoamerican codices as hieroglyphs: this is how they are described, for example, in the oldest record of the presence of Mexican codices in the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, compiled by members

of the Rainaldi family in the last decade of the 16th century;[79] the publication of the collection of the famous Danish collector Olaus Worm in the *Museum Wormianum* referred to the Mixtec *Codex Vindobonensis* as a »Mexican hieroglyphic«;[80] and the same codex was listed in the 1598 inventory of the Bavarian *Kunstkammer* in Munich as »Ein buech, das hinden und vornen aufgeht, mit allerlay Indianischen figurn, der Hyerogliphischen schrifft nit ungleich«.[81] Likewise, the Franciscan missionary Diego Valadés, a native of Tlaxcala who will thus have been familiar with native culture as well as that of the Spanish colonial rule in which he was educated, compared Amerindian script with Egyptian hieroglyphics in his *Rhetorica Christiana*:

> »There is a remarkable instance of this in the trade and contracts of the Indians. Even lacking letters (as we have mentioned above), yet they expressed what they wanted in certain forms and images, which they usually keep in silk wrappings, absorbent papyrus from the leaves of trees.[82] This custom has been preserved down to the present in their calculations, not only by the ignorant but also by those capable of reading and writing properly. They had that in common with the Egyptians [...].«[83]

In one of those ironical twists by which the New World and the Old World seem to echo one another in an endless play of mirror reflections, »conversion hieroglyphics« was the term that the Franciscan Fray Juan Bautista applied to his use of prints and drawings to teach the indigenous peoples of Mexico to abhor sin and to desire the sovereign good attainable only in heaven.[84]

In the 18th century, the natural philosopher and member of the Royal Society John Turberville Needham (1713–1781), better known for his experiments on spontaneous generation by boiling gravy and tainted wheat, published a treatise on a so-called bust of Isis from the Gonzaga collection donated to the Turin museum and inscribed with thirty-two strange characters. He identified them as archaic Chinese hieroglyphs, taking this to be evidence for a relation between Chinese and Egyptian. In the process, he compared them with the pictographic language of the Mexicans for the use of symbols instead of letters.[85] So once again we find the explicit equation between Egyptian and Mexican scripts, though this time mediated by a supposed affinity with Chinese.

At first sight, the woodcut in the appendix to Cartari that includes the figure of Horus-Ptah seems to fit the same pattern: a large protagonist, accompanied by two insets in medallions. However, the roles have been reversed: instead of highlighting an American deity and adducing visual parallels from ancient Egypt, Pignoria here highlights the Egyptian deity Horus-Ptah. As for the insets, Pignoria calls the upper one »a very ancient cornelian«. He does not even mention the lower one, but, following the lead from the Munich inventory, it may be identified with the »wooden head of an idol of Florida« listed there, and so is presumably based on an image sent to Pignoria of an object in that collection, though there is no other known image of that particular object.[86]

There is a partial visual parallel for the lower inset in the image of »Their Idol Kivvasa« taken from Volume I of the multi-volume work *Americae* produced by the De Bry family in Frankfurt, although that idol does not include the beard that is the main point in Pignoria's comparison. The first volume of *Americæ*, published in 1590, includes an unsigned engraving that presumably goes back to the British artist John White, who travelled with the voyage that set out in 1585 to plant a colony in Virginia.[87] There is a complication, however: while John White sailed for Virginia, the idol in question is attributed to Florida in the Munich inventory. Perhaps we should not make too much of such terminological niceties around the end of the 16th century, but there are parallels for the idol's headgear in the *Second* Volume of *Americæ*, which deals with Florida. As if this Virginia/Florida confusion were not enough, other aspects of the engraving have been regarded as suspicious too: »[…] the round hut which would have no place in the charnel house, the highly decorated tops of the moccasins, the beads round the thighs, and the naturalistic treatment of the image which has nothing in common with archaeological examples or Indian work in general.«[88]

Pignoria's decision – no doubt motivated by his ease of access to the images of the Mensa Isiaca and to the intellectual capital that he had put into interpreting it – to give prominence to the Egyptian figure in this plate rather than to the American one has led to confusion on the part of more than one scholar.[89] It is, after all, a compound confusion: the image of an Egyptian idol is taken from a work that is not a product of ancient Egypt but is an Egyptianising one made in or near Rome, the primary source of archaeological information about Egypt at this time; and the American image that is presented for comparison seems to represent a fusion of Virginian and Floridan ethnography that corresponds to neither. Seznec's »sheer pandemonium« is not far off.

But that is not all. Another victim who fell prey to the confusion induced by Pignoria's image is the artist of several coloured copies of the engravings from Pignoria's appendix.[90] These coloured drawings on transparent paper are in the Biblioteca Angelica, Rome, where they form part of MS 1551 entitled *Icones coloribus ornatae idolorum Mexicanorum*. The artist took the main subject of the engraving to be American like the other examples discussed above, which explains how he managed to add the highly confused and confusing annotation: »Egyptian idol worshipped by the Mexicans who called it Maheiz« (plate 29).[91]

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In a positive review of the first volume of the *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, Walter Benjamin noted how much an inquiry based on the most inconspicuous data of an object could wrest from even the most worn-out things. He continued: »And thus, because of the focus on materiality in such a work, the precursor of this new type of art scholar is not Wölfflin but Riegl«.[92] Benjamin considered Alois Riegl's *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie* of 1901 to be a seminal work – in a curriculum vitæ written towards the end of his life, he

even listed it as one of the three works that decisively influenced his thinking in the course of his studies[93] – and at a time when there is once again talk of the material turn, it may be profitable to (re)consider a theoretician who explicitly deployed the opposition between haptic and optic, since the former clearly depends on materiality in a way in which the optic does not. If the recent turn towards materiality might have led some to hope that the era of representations and their interpretation, especially at the hands of the literary historians, was over, Riegl's study demonstrates, *inter alia*, that no account of an object, however material that object may be, can be starkly neutral.[94] Time and again in his work, Riegl draws parallels and contrasts between late Roman works and those of his own era. For example, fragments of a late antique hollow-cut intaglio glass bowl found in Rome display a style that he characterises as »impressionistic and optical« but that, at least in part, recalls modern Impressionist pastels.[95] Elsewhere in the same work he notes how the *Kunstwollen* of the Constantine era appears almost identical to the contemporary (i.e. 1901) one in respect of the appeal of both to the optical sense, despite the felt differences between them. For Riegl is intelligent enough not to make them coincide completely: »Certain ancient works correspond, *although never completely*, to the *Kunstwollen* of modern art. It is precisely the appearance of these correspondences against the background of the differences that confers on the ancient work an effect on us that no modern work that lacks this basis could ever exert.«[96]

Sometimes the temporal leap is in the opposite direction, as when an ivory diptych from 428 CE recreates the tranquillity and rigidity of archaic oriental art.[97] In Benjamin's formulation: »The reader who reads Riegl's major work today [...] will recognise retrospectively how forces that were already stirring subterraneously in *Die spätrömische Kunst-Industrie* will surface a decade later in Expressionism«.[98] Like Riegl, concerned as he was with *Stilfragen*, Pignoria presents an analysis of a *style*: the Egyptian style, albeit one based primarily on artefacts found in Rome.

Pignoria and his contemporaries were grappling with the problem of interpretation of ancient artefacts that we would today call iconography. As Peter Burke has written:

> »The early history of iconography still remains to be written. It might reasonably include attempts to solve iconographical problems such as Stephanus Pighius' analysis of a bas-relief of the seasons belonging to cardinal Granvelle; Lorenzo Pignoria's study of a bronze tablet of Isis and his interpretation of a Roman fresco discovered in 1606, the Aldobrandini Wedding; Girolamo Aleandro's ›explanation‹ of an ancient marble tablet; Bosio's study of the paintings in the catacombs; Claude Menestrier's study of the symbolism of the many-breasted goddess Diana of Ephesus; and Lukas Holstein's study of a picture of a nymphaeum.«[99]

We could add »Baron« d'Hancarville, interpreter of the vase collection of Sir William Hamilton, to the list, for whom »every image must signify something, and every part of that image must contribute to the overall message«.[100]

4 Frontispiece, Joseph François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains, comparées aux moeurs des premiers temps*, Paris: Saugrain l'aîné & Charles Estienne Hochereau, 1724

But while, at least since Panofsky, the study of iconography has generally been taken to comprise the patient comparison of one image with another, the iconography of Pignoria and his friends is firmly rooted at the micro-level in his own collection of material objects and in those of his learned friends.[101] At the macro-level, however, his work bears witness to a comparative endeavour that spans millennia and continents: ancient Egypt compared with the recently discovered cultures of America.

It is an endeavour with a long history. Immediately after the European discovery of America, observers drew parallels between the Amerindian cultures and various cultures of the ancient world (Scythians, Thracians, Egyptians, etc.) on the basis of language, customs, dress, appearance, and a host of other factors, but these comparisons were not systematic. In fact, this practice continued down to the late 19th century.[102] Naturally, there were exceptions: in connection with the bust of an Aztec priestess that features on the first plates of his *Vues des Cordillères, et monumens des peuples indigènes de l'Amérique,* Alexander von Humboldt pointed out that a certain resemblance between the veil found on heads of Isis and Mexica headdresses, pyramids and hieroglyphs was among the similarities that fade once the facts are examined in isolation.[103] Thirty years later the explorer John Stephens, who had been in Egypt before travelling in Central America, was to deny the existence of parallels between Egypt and Central America in the field of architecture and sculpture.[104]

Pignoria was one of the first to propose a *systematic* comparison between the images inscribed on a material artefact that he believed to come from, or at least to represent, the culture of ancient Egypt, on the one hand, and the images of American artefacts, whether images taken from codices or images based on tangible three-dimensional objects, that reached him via intermediaries in Europe, on the other hand.

To conclude, let us return to Lafitau's *Moeurs des sauvages amériquains comparées* (fig. 4). The frontispiece of that work includes what is clearly a copy of the Ptah-Horus from the Mensa Isiaca among the various Egyptian objects scattered in the writer's study, although the lack of a beard indicates that he took his image not from Pignoria's original publication, but from Montfaucon's *L'Antiquité expliquée et representée en figures,* in which the beard is absent.[105] Given the links between Montfaucon's work and the king's cabinet of curiosities in Turin in which the Mensa Isiaca was displayed, we seem to have come full circle.[106]

Lafitau's aim was to compare and contrast material objects from the Old and New Worlds. In drawing a parallel between the Egyptian *sistrum* and an Amerindian rattle made from a tortoise shell, he, like his 17th century predecessor, was comparing material objects. Lafitau's endeavour is entirely in the spirit of Pignoria. And the basis of that comparison in material objects moves it light years away from the grandiose comparative projects of, say, Georges Dumézil or Claude Lévi-Strauss, in which structure may be said to have replaced material.