

NILOTIC AEGYPTIACA AND WATER FEATURES IN THE ROMAN GARDEN

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ABSTRACT

Within recent decades, scholarship on Roman art and décor has evolved to look at objects and images contextually rather than individually, and this concept has been extended to looking especially at art in the Roman home or *domus*. Roman gardens in private homes might be seen to have decorations evoking places from the far reaches of the Roman empire, and one common place might be Egypt and the Nile River. This thesis aims to examine the context and significance of these Egyptian and Nile inspired objects and images—called Nilotic Aegyptiaca by scholars—in Roman gardens throughout the empire but especially in Pompeii. Through analyzing the historical context of Egypt and the Nile in Roman thought as well as the purpose and use of Nilotic art and décor in a garden space alongside other garden features like water features, I argue that Nilotic Aegyptiaca would work in conjunction with water features in the garden to bring the faraway Nile into a Roman space, imposing Roman cultural expectations and meanings onto it.

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INTRODUCTION

In the ancient Roman world from the time of the late republic through the empire, open garden spaces within the confines of one's *domus* or home became highly desirable throughout not only Italy but the Mediterranean as a whole. Many examples of these remain in the recovered city of Pompeii, and in these spaces, it becomes apparent that a Roman of means might use the space to create their own garden oasis complete with not only trees, flowers, and other plants but elaborate water features like fountains or pools and complex decorative schemes with mosaics, frescoes, and statuary. Though these gardens were inherently Roman, neatly tucked inside a Roman home, the wider world might appear in decorations from the far reaches of the Roman empire. Egyptian decorations, especially after the annexation of Egypt in 31 BC, were especially popular, and these images and statues might work in conjunction with water features to bring the faraway Nile River of Egypt and its civilization into the garden.

As recent scholarship turns towards a more inclusive look at visual assemblages like those in gardens, the role of images and statues that evoke Egypt is thrust into the spotlight as a complex piece in a wider understanding of politics, social roles, and pleasure in the Roman garden. Contextualization by looking at the garden as a whole—rather than viewing each piece individually—has become an important new approach to understanding the purpose of these objects in Roman gardens and possible ways in which these objects were meant to affect the experience of a viewer. Part of this is inherent in the Roman concept of *decorum* or contextual appropriateness, meaning that a Roman viewer might expect art to seem appropriate for its context in its formal or stylistic features and iconographic content.¹ By putting objects in context, one may begin to see how all the objects fit together, almost like a puzzle—though this does not mean they would share a common theme but instead a common sense of fittingness for the context and what the owner wanted to communicate to their guests about the space.

By using this new approach, a fresh angle from which to understand Aegyptiaca arises. Aegyptiaca, which will herein be defined as “material culture found in Italy [or the Roman Empire] that makes emically recognizable visual references to Egypt, Egyptians, or cultural practices associated with Egypt,” might, in previous scholarship, have been limited to the

¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 15. The term “Aegyptiaca” has sometimes been criticized for being too broad or vague and possibly for applying the label “Egypt” on objects that a Roman viewer may not have even associated with Egypt: Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 13.

categories of objects or images associated with the Isis cult, with celebrating Rome's conquest of Egypt, or with the fashion for showing the exotic in a garden.² Caitlín Barrett in her article "Egypt in Roman Visual and Material Culture" addresses the shortcomings of this approach, and likewise Eva Mol's article "Object Ontology and Cultural Taxonomies: Examining the Agency of Style, Material and Objects in Classification through Egyptian Material Culture in Pompeii and Rome" problematizes the narrowness of such methods of categorization in general.³ Many scholarly classifications for ancient Roman objects are modern categories that, when imposed on ancient objects, do not take into account a Roman viewpoint.⁴ Therefore, a more holistic approach that avoids limiting objects and images to one, modern category and instead views them holistically, as working in concert with the other objects in their surroundings and having multiple meanings, is more effective for discussing how a Roman viewer might experience their surroundings.⁵

In this paper, Aegyptiaca will be looked at specifically for how it associates and interacts with water features in the garden. Water features, which can be defined as any garden fixture that employs water in its function, such as water triclinia, canals, fountains, and pools, might often appear in a garden alongside Aegyptiaca. Often, the Aegyptiaca in these contexts is related not just to Egyptian culture or figures as a whole but flora and fauna and activities related directly with the Nile River—a body of water—and its flood. The term "Nilotic" can be applied to these images, and thus the term "Nilotic Aegyptiaca" will frequently appear in this paper to refer to material culture found in Italy or the Roman Empire that makes emically recognizable visual references to the Nile and its inundation.

The topic of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in gardens has been discussed in many volumes, including Wilhelmina Jashemski's book about Pompeiian gardens: *The Gardens of Pompeii: Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius*. Pompeiian gardens provide some of the best examples of private gardens in association with private homes in the city, and likewise some of the best examples of Aegyptiaca in garden contexts appear in Pompeii. One such example in fresco appears in the garden of the Casa dell'Efebo and another in the garden of the Casa del

² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 13. The term "emically" refers to the analysis of cultural phenomena from the perspective of someone inside the culture being studied.

³ Eva Mol, "Object Ontology and Cultural Taxonomies.: Examining the Agency of Style, Material and Objects in Classification through Egyptian Material Culture in Pompeii and Rome." *Materialising Roman Histories*, eds. Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts (UK: Oxbow Books, 2017): 169-90, 169.

⁴ Mol, "Object Ontology," 171.

⁵ Mol, "Object Ontology," 172.

Medico. By looking at these images of Egyptianizing scenes in garden contexts, modern scholarship focuses on no longer viewing the images in isolation but in conjunction with other features of the garden. In the garden of the Pompeian house of the Casa di Octavius Quartio at Pompeii, sculptural assemblages have also been examined contextually, as in Francesca Tronchin's chapter "The Sculpture of the Casa di Octavius Quartio at Pompeii." Tronchin also places three dimensional Nilotic Aegyptiaca in context, often along with many items that are not related to Egypt but rather to other common garden themes like Bacchic themes, mythological themes, and associations to water contexts.

Outside of Pompeii, gardens still have Nilotic Aegyptiaca, and this sample includes Imperial gardens. For example, the garden of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli has a "Canopus" section that contains Nilotic Aegyptiaca and a specifically Egyptianizing water feature—a *nilus* (or *euripus*) canal.⁶ This space of Hadrian's garden illuminates idea about the purpose of Aegyptiaca on a bigger scale as well as the social implications and politics of an emperor employing Egyptian imagery in their garden—politics which had changed from the time of Augustus to Hadrian. The political place of Egypt, from a recently conquered new piece of the Roman Empire to a more settled one, allowed for a shift in what the political implications of such images and objects in private contexts could be. Broader social changes also influenced the shift in perception, specifically the rise of the Isis cult and greater access to water via aqueducts, which is discussed at length in Dylan Kelby Rogers' "Water Culture in Roman Society."

Outside of Imperial villas and Pompeii, many other locations and spaces in the Roman Empire also offer examples of Nilotic Aegyptiaca, and Miguel Versluys attempts to catalogue these in the book *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt*. This catalogue references the primary themes of these scenes across contexts, and one such theme is water and associations between the scenes and water elements from baths to fountains to canals. These associations often relate to the understanding of the Nile in the Roman world as both an unpredictable force of nature that could only be tamed in a garden space as well as a scholastic understanding of the dialogue around the origin of the Nile and Egyptians' dependence on it and its flood for their lives. The water of the Nile then becomes related to water in the garden, and this connection might be apparent to an ancient viewer.

⁶ Tracy L Ehrlich, "The Waterworks of Hadrian's Villa," *Journal of Garden History* 9, no. 4 (1989): pp. 161-176, 169.

To explore the connection between water features and Aegyptiaca that recalls the Nile River, scholarship about water and power in the Roman Empire begin to provide a different perspective on the issue that brings to light associations between Nilotic imagery and the symbolic meanings and associations inherent in water features. Nicholas Purcell's article "Rome and the Management of Water; Environment, Culture, and Power" specifically examine the role of water in constructing power, and his findings emphasize expressions of power, status, and wealth but also pleasure through water features. Water, as a resource, has been a staple of power from early civilizations on, and the Romans wanting to harness this power reflects a desire to control nature and civilize spaces. Hadrian's Villa illustrates the politics of harnessing water to express political power of the owner to a viewer, but on a smaller scale the gardens of private citizens could reveal what the owners might be trying to show a viewer about their social standing and power.

By looking at Nilotic Aegyptiaca in conjunction with ideas about power through water in a garden space, the following pages of this thesis will discuss how the role of water features in showing power, wealth, status, and pleasure correlate to the inclusion of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in Roman gardens. Beginning with a discussion of the historical backdrop of both Egyptian and Roman relations as well as the Roman relationship to water, chapter one will offer a comprehensive overview of Aegyptiaca and its context from the first appearance of these images and objects to their slightly different context in later times, centering on a general approach of before and after Augustus. Following this, the thesis will discuss the manner in which Romans identified with nature and taming it, including their thoughts about water and major rivers like the Nile and the Tiber. Chapter two will take this information and apply it to garden landscapes, specifically those of private homes in Pompeii. A discussion about the emergence of water features in the garden as well as the context and connections of Nilotic Aegyptiaca to other garden features, ideas about Egypt, and political and social expectations will follow.

In the final chapter, chapter three, the tie between wider social contexts outlined in the first chapter and garden contexts outlined in the second chapter will be directly applied to the experience of the garden, including what a Roman person might be doing while viewing these images and statuary and how they might apply it to their life. The chapter will end with a comprehensive putting together of the various elements that together help us understand the possible use behind Nilotic Aegyptiaca in garden contexts to the ancient Roman viewer.

CHAPTER ONE: EGYPT VERSUS ROME AND ROME VERSUS NATURE

The Nile River in Pre-empire Roman Thought and Art

The Battle of Actium and the death of Cleopatra VII in 31 BC postmarked the annexation of Egypt in the expanding Roman Empire, but Roman interaction with Egypt and Egyptian ideas existed before this event. Throughout Roman history, the term “Egypt” might have evoked many ideas about the people and landscapes of the far-away land. Specifically, Roman perceptions of Egypt could include notions of animal-headed gods, long standing tradition, and a life sustained by a river that was as mysterious as it was constant.⁷ This mysterious and constant river—the Nile—had become an object of frequent fascination in Greco-Roman philosophy, natural history, geography, and literature, and this fascination often centered on both the unknown source of the Nile and its yearly flood as well as the various flora, fauna, and imagined activities related to inundation.⁸

The Nile River and its annual flooding were key components of ancient Egyptian life across its existence. According to Egyptian belief, the river welled up “from caverns secreted beneath the earth [and] made its way downstream from Elephantine past Thebes to Memphis, spreading out from there across the Delta, until ultimately it reached the sea.”⁹ Greco-Roman authors also weighed in on the origins of the Nile; the subject was discussed by authors as early as Herodotus, and on the subject Pliny the Elder writes of the Nile beginning at the fringes of the world, in a place inhabited by strange *monstra*.¹⁰ Other authors echo similar sentiments with slight difference. For example, Seneca describes a theory that: “the river gushes of the earth and rises with water not from above but from deep within.”¹¹ He goes on to describe that this is not only something that is talked about, but that the emperor Nero has actively sent centurions to seek out the source of the Nile in hopes of finding “truth.”¹² Clearly, the question of the Nile’s

⁷ Caitlin Barrett, “Egypt in Roman Visual and Material Culture,” *Oxford Handbooks Online* (May 2017): pp. 1-42, 1.

⁸ Caitlin Barrett, *Domesticating Empire: Egyptian Landscapes in Pompeian Gardens* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 176.

⁹ Daniel L. Selden, “Inundation and Allegory,” *Environment and Religion in Ancient and Coptic Egypt: Sensing the Cosmos through the Eyes of the Divine: Proceedings of the 1st Egyptological Conference of the Hellenic Institute of Egyptology*, eds. Alicia Maravelia and Nadine Guilhou (Archeopress, 2020): pp. 415-28, 416.

¹⁰ For Herodotus’ discussion, see Herodotus: II 19-31. *On the Nile River & Plin. HN 6.195*

¹¹ Seneca, *Natural Questions*, Book VI, On Earthquakes, 8.1, 96.

¹² Seneca, *Natural Questions*, 96. Joint military-geographical ventures in search of the Nile’s source included Nero’s expedition into the upper Nile at Nubia: Robert Sherk, “Roman Geographical Exploration and Military Maps,” *Aufstieg und Niedergang Romischen Welt*, eds. W Haase and H. Tempotini (Berlin, 1974) 534-562.

source lingered in Greco-Roman imagination, and so too did an understanding of the Egypt as “the gift of the Nile.”¹³

Aside from thoughts about the origins of the Nile, Roman ideas about the Nile were also embedded with ideas about rivers and their power in general. A comparison could be drawn, for instance, between the Nile as a central component of life in Egypt and the Tiber River in the city of Rome. Like the Nile, the Tiber was also prone to flooding; however, this flooding was not desirable, and it was politically and economically advantageous to try and impose some kind of control over it.¹⁴ For example, Caesar had a plan to canalize the Tiber as part of a wider goal of expansion in the city.¹⁵ Later, in the Late Republic and Augustan period, attempts were even being made by the super-rich to capitalize on the Tiber to the extent of making it “rival the splendours of the Nile” through various public and private projects that used architecture and gardens to create a unified scenographic effect on the banks of the river.¹⁶ Pliny the Elder connects the Nile and the Tiber in writing when he remarks that the flooding of the Tiber is partially similar to that of the Nile, saying that: “flooding [of the Tiber] is nowhere more common than in the City itself. No, it is thought of as a prophet rather than a warning, and its increase is seen as a matter of religious awe rather than danger.”¹⁷ The flooding of the Nile, too, was a matter of “religious awe,” even more so than the Tiber due to its direct religious associations.¹⁸ Therefore, in ancient Roman thought, especially in Rome itself, the power of the Nile could be understood by also looking at the Tiber, and the connection between the two offers an example of understanding Egypt through a Roman perspective.

The Palestrina Mosaic

The idea of the Nile as a mysterious, foreign force with an unknown source that brought life to Egypt finds one of its earliest known Roman visual manifestations in the Nile Mosaic of Palestrina, which was called Praeneste at this time, in Italy (fig. 1). The mosaic offers “the

¹³ Herodotus: II:5 *On the Nile River*

¹⁴ Dylan Kelby Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society* (Brill, 2018), 11.

¹⁵ Nicholas Purcell, “Rome and the Management of Water: Environment, Culture, and Power,” *Human Landscapes in Classical Antiquity*, ed. John Salmon and Graham Shipley (Routledge, 1996): pp. 180-212, 190.

¹⁶ Purcell, “Rome and the Management of Water,” 190. Strabo *Geography* 5, 3, 8 comments about the scenographic effect of monuments on the banks of the river.

¹⁷ Plin. *HN* 3, 54-5.

¹⁸ Religious associations discussed in depth in ch. 2. The Nile was worshipped as a god—specifically the father of the gods—in Ancient Egypt who could receive offerings at the time of inundation: Adolf Erman, *Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (1907): 14-15.

earliest and most comprehensive example of an Egyptian scene to have survived from the Roman world,” and it decorated a nymphaeum—meaning a shrine consecrated to water nymphs that was often fashioned to look like a cave or grotto—at the Temple of Fortuna, only 36 km east of Rome (fig. 2).¹⁹ Dated to around 110 BC, the mosaic shows the Egyptian delta during the flood of the Nile with incredibly detailed flora, fauna, and people.²⁰ At 5.85 m wide at the base and up to 4.31 m high, its variously sized tesserae offer a variety of colors and tones with which to show two main scenes, including a hunting scene in Ethiopia in the upper section and a scene from Egypt specifically at the time of the inundation in the lower part.²¹

The timing of inundation for the imagery is evidenced by the great amount of water and the patches of land floating in it as well as through the activities of people in the scene that would have coincided with inundation.²² These activities include ceremonies, feasting, hunting, and fishing (fig. 3). All of these activities are related to the flood of the Nile, and through their inclusion in this early period, Roman interest in the Nile in general and especially during the period of inundation is evident. Compositionally, the scene is also remarkable for its representation of the Nile from a bird’s eye view, offering a viewer essentially a vista of the Nile and guiding their eyes up to the source of the Nile, which once more illustrates Roman interest in the Nile’s source, too.²³ Because of the Nymphaeum’s association with water and to immerse the viewer in the scene of a river, the mosaic would have been flooded over with water, allowing the viewer to observe the scene through a watery sheen.²⁴

Beyond thought about the natural phenomenon of the inundation and the mystery of the origin of the Nile, early ancient Roman conceptions of the Nile and the activities depicted in the early example of the Palestrina Mosaic reveal a conception of the inundation as a time of celebration. The beginning of the flood season and the point in the season at which a successful

¹⁹ Paul J.P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 80.

²⁰ M. J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 40. & Susan E. C. Walker, “nymphaeum,” *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2016), <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-4483>.

²¹ Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 80.

²² Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 41. For a more detailed description of the contents of the mosaic, see Meyboom, Chapter Five.

²³ Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 41.

²⁴ Susan Walker, “Carry-on at Canopus: The Nilotic Mosaic from Palestrina and Roman Attitudes to Egypt,” *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, eds. Roger Matthews and Cornelia Roemer (UCL Press, 2003): 191-202, 199.

harvest could be assured was an important event that sparked celebrations and rituals in Egypt.²⁵ This time began often in modern-day early July and peaked in October but was named “Ahket” by ancient Egyptians. It could be considered a time of *otium* or leisure, and with it came all kinds of religious festivities, some tied to the “miracle of divine fertility” associated with Isis and Osiris and their role in the myth of the Nile.²⁶

Herodotus offers a description of a ceremony in Boubastis, Egypt that would likely be similar to the Roman understanding of Nile ceremonies. His description includes dancing and music-making Egyptians who are sometimes in boats, sometimes not, and sometimes engaged in sexual acts or heavy drinking.²⁷ As a Greek writer, Herodotus’ example offers a Greco-Roman perspective of festivities at the time of inundation in Egypt.²⁸

Herodotus’ description is reflected in various scenes in the Palestrina Mosaic, which has been interpreted as possibly portraying the celebration of the Khoaik festivals of inundation at Canopus, a resort and religious center on the western Nile delta, in the foreground.²⁹ For example, in a section of the mosaic, a procession of Egyptian priests is viewable, showing a religious ceremony taking place, and the procession is followed by a group of six women wearing mantles and with wreaths on their heads (fig. 4). Some of them are playing the tambourine or double-oboe.³⁰ While they celebrate, local inhabitants watch the participants further back, and behind them more locals work to fish or farm, which is made possible because of the abundance brought by the flood.³¹ These people appear different than the people at the festival in Lower Egypt on the Delta through their different skin tones; the locals of the area are shown with darker brown skin while the inhabitants of the Delta have a more beige skin tone.³² Having local Egyptian people watching or set behind a foreground of aristocratic celebration seems to imply that Ptolemaic dominance over Egypt at the time benefited the common people, and that the activities of the Ptolemies and their observance of traditional ritual might help

²⁵ Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana*, 279.

²⁶ Daniel Seldon, “Inundation and Allegory,” 416.

²⁷ Herodotus 2.60; Strabo 17.2.16-17 also comments on festivals like this

²⁸ Because Herodotus may never have even visited Egypt and is known to have been biased, his account is less to be seen as fact or reality but instead as evidence of Greco-Roman beliefs: Thomas Harrison, “Upside Down and Back to Front: Herodotus and the Greek Encounter with Egypt,” *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, eds. Roger Matthews and Cornelia Roemer (London: UCL Press, 2003): 145-155, 146-147.

²⁹ Walker, “Carry-on at Canopus,” 198. Like Herodotus’ proposed lack of accuracy, the artists’ lack of knowledge of Egypt also skews the reality of the scene.

³⁰ Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina*, 39.

³¹ Walker, “Carry-on at Canopus,” 198.

³² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 55.

control and tame the more uncivilized elements and people of Egypt.³³ Moments of ritual celebration in the foreground of the large mosaic reveal an early emphasis on activities related to inundation that fill current and later Nilotic scenes as well as an early example of separation between Egyptian people and non-Egyptians.

The Nile River and Egypt in Augustan Era Propaganda

Though the focus on the inundation of the Nile continues in other images of the Nile post the creation of the Nile Mosaic of Palestrina, political change in the period following the end of the Republic directly correlate with changes in the social implications of Nilotic imagery. Specifically, the rise of Augustus and his defeat of Marc Antony and Cleopatra VII at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC related to the rise in a conception of Egypt as a “degenerate country whose inhabitants worshipped animals and vegetables.”³⁴

Augustus launched a propaganda campaign that attacked the “oriental” queen Cleopatra VII for her part in morally corrupting a formerly good man, Marc Antony, and many Roman writers further elaborated on her supposed negative attributes. In a rather extreme example, a poem by Propertius heaps slanderous allegations upon Cleopatra, calling her things like “lecherous Canopus’ prostitute queen” and “a woman worn among her own household slaves,” and Horace also weighs in a poem about Actium where he calls her a “deadly monster.”³⁵ Augustus’ propaganda vilified Egypt as well through its associations to Cleopatra VII, exploiting and expanding upon underlying prejudices about the corrupting influence of the “oriental” (which Egypt would be part of) in general to discredit Antony and win over Roman support.³⁶ Propertius’ poem, for example, also mentions “noxious Alexandria, land most skilled in guile,” where Alexandria can be seen to stand in for Egypt as a whole.³⁷ In consequence of this propaganda, pejorative ideas about Egypt as corrupting and its “barbarous” cult practices of worshipping “animal gods,” lingered on past Augustus’ reign.³⁸ Egypt, which was incorporated

³³ Walker, “Carry-on at Canopus,” 199, note: the Palestrina Mosaic appears to have had a more royal focus, but the royal figures have been destroyed or lost.

³⁴ Sarolta A. Takács, “Cleopatra, Isis, and the Formation of Augustan Rome,” *Cleopatra: A Sphinx Revisited*, ed. Margaret M. Miles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011): pp. 78-95, 79.

³⁵ Propertius III. 11.30, 37, trans. Shepherd 1985:114-115. Horace 1.37. 7, trans. Shepherd 1983:100-101.

³⁶ Herwig Maehler, “Roman Poets on Egypt,” *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, eds. Roger Matthews and Cornelia Roemer (London: UCL Press, 2003): 203-215, 205.

³⁷ Propertius III. 11.33. & Maehler, “Roman Poets on Egypt,” 209.

³⁸ Maehler, “Roman Poets on Egypt,” 211.

in the Roman Empire after the battle, was belittled as a conquered land with Rome as its morally superior conqueror, further expanding negative notions of Egyptians into non-Roman or “Other.”³⁹

Whereas in the Palestrina Mosaic, the inhabitants of Egypt were shown as somatically normal people, albeit with different skin tones, later Roman art influenced by the anti-Egyptian stereotypes might instead show them as pygmies, distinguished by small bodies with large heads.⁴⁰ In general, pygmies also tended to be shown with darker skin, which drew from an understanding of Egyptians by Romans as having darker skin in general and being smaller that was apparent in the Palestrina Mosaic also.⁴¹ This portrayal of Egyptians “Othered” them, though it was admittedly drawing upon older associations, like that of Herodotus, of pygmies existing at the source of the Nile and otherwise connecting specifically to ideas about the life-giving flood of the Nile through their associations with fertility.⁴² However, overall, the portrayal had negative associations that might serve to turn pygmies into figures of comedy, therefore belittling them and Egypt as a whole in the eyes of a Roman. This might be understood as a visual manifestation of negative propaganda about them as lesser than Romans that just drew inspiration from historical accounts.

In an *emblema* mosaic found in the *oecus* or open salon room of the Casa del Menandro at Pompeii from around 30 BC, a boat with a cabin sailing on a river appears with four pygmy figures on board (fig. 5).⁴³ In the foreground, another pygmy-like figure rides a papyrus canoe, and the waterscape includes detailed Nilotic plants and ducks while the background has buildings with steps to the water. The whole scene, then, is an image of life on the Nile, possibly during the flood, but it appears different from a scene like the Palestrina Mosaic through Egyptians being shown as pygmies, which seems to make the scene a little less serious. Depictions of pygmies in Nilotic scenes likewise appear in many frescoes from Pompeii and can primarily be dated to the Augustan period and after.⁴⁴

Depicting dwarves and pygmies is different from the realistic, though still differently skin-toned, figures in the Palestrina Mosaic, though “normal” figures do continue to appear

³⁹ Barrett, “Egypt in Roman Visual and Material Culture,” 3.

⁴⁰ A discussion of pygmy figures can be found in chapter 3.

⁴¹ Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana*, 276.

⁴² Herodotus II, 32. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana*, 275.

⁴³ Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana*, 108. An “*emblema*” was a central panel with an image in it.

⁴⁴ The volume of Nilotic *Aegyptiaca* able to be recovered in general from Pompeii makes it a crucial pool of examples for the subject of pygmies and other tropes, which will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3.

sometimes, even alongside pygmy-like figures.⁴⁵ Still, the rise of pygmy figures shows a different focus of Egypt as “Other” and exotic that differed from that of the Palestrina Mosaic and was likely influenced by Augustus’ propaganda about Egypt and Egyptians as uncivilized and dangerous or at least just different than regular Roman people.

The Augustan Era and the Isis Cult

While Augustus’ propaganda campaign influenced the increase of Egypt being perceived as “Other,” which bled into the art of this period and forward, Augustus’ reign was also characterized by a sharp increase in the appearance of Isis in the religious landscape of Rome.⁴⁶ The cult of Isis was growing in popularity in Rome as well as throughout the empire.⁴⁷ In Rome, despite attempts of the Roman elite to ban worship of Isis, followers of Isis still emerged; though five Isiac sanctuaries throughout the city had been destroyed, they were in this period just as soon rebuilt.⁴⁸ In Pompeii, as well, evidence of Isis’ popularity is apparent in the prevalence of images of her throughout domestic spaces as well as in the speed in which her temple was repaired following a damaging earthquake in 62 AD.⁴⁹ When it comes to images of pygmies, these even appear in Nilotic scenes in the portico of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii, which suggests that depictions of pygmies might relate to religious conceptions of Egypt related to Isis, rather than serving just a negative “Othering” purpose.⁵⁰ Likewise, even despite the lingering effects of propaganda on popular perceptions of the dangers and foreignness of Egypt, the emerging popularity of the Egyptian goddess and her cult reveal a more neutral fascination with Egypt and a co-opting of Egyptian culture for use in the everyday religious life of some Romans. In some Roman houses with Nilotic Aegyptiaca including pygmies, for example, there are figures of Isis in household lararia.⁵¹ Therefore, in this period, perceptions of Egypt cannot be reduced as simply “negative” but are far more complex.

⁴⁵ Caitlin Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 55.

⁴⁶ Takács, “Cleopatra, Isis, and the Formation of Augustan Rome,” 79.

⁴⁷ Robert A. Wortham, “Urban Networks, Deregulated Religious Markets, Cultural Continuity, and the Diffusion of the Isis Cult,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 18, no. 4 (2006): 103-23, 103.

⁴⁸ Lauren Hackworth Peterson, “The Places of Roman Isis: Between Egyptomania, Politics, and Religion,” *Oxford Handbooks Online* (2016), 0.1093/oxfordhb/9780199935390.013.128.

⁴⁹ Peterson, “The Places of Roman Isis.” & John R. Clarke, *Roman Life* (New York: Abrams, 2007), 35.

⁵⁰ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 57.

⁵¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 119.

When it comes to Nilotic imagery, Isiac themes could appear in the scenes themselves, not just in lararia nearby.⁵² For example, Isis imagery could appear in representations of the combined “Isis-Fortuna.” Already, associations between Isis, or at least Egypt, and Fortuna were apparent through Nilotic imagery appearing at the Temple of Fortuna in Palestrina. Fortuna and Isis could be easily assimilated for the combination of Fortuna’s relationship to good fortune and Isis’ to sea trade.⁵³ This combination was probably especially attractive for Pompeians, who depended on the sea, and, in the art and décor of Pompeii, Isis-Fortuna might be depicted with a cornucopia and a rudder and wearing a lotus crown, which has distinctly Egyptian associations.⁵⁴ One example appears in the Casa dell’Efebo at Pompeii, where the Nilotic frescoes include a depiction of a statue of Isis-Fortuna holding a cornucopia and a rudder (fig. 21).⁵⁵ Similarly, many Isis or Isis-Fortuna depictions appear in shrines in gardens, perhaps rendering it irrelevant to the study of imagery that directly evokes the Nile and not just Egypt but still relevant for understanding the religious context in which some Nilotic imagery could appear. Pompeians, and Romans in general, would likely have an understanding of Isis and Egyptian religion related to her (whether the religion is actually Egyptian, however, is questionable) due to the rise and importance of the Isis cult in this era. The Isis cult would become shaped by Roman ideals while also contributing to Roman views of Egypt, and this is pertinent to the study of the social context of Nilotic scenes.⁵⁶

Post Augustan Conceptions of the Nile and Egypt

Following the political propaganda campaign and spread of the Isis cult during Augustus’ reign, later eras like the Flavian era began conceiving Egypt no longer as an antagonistic state that was conquered and subdued but rather as a part of the empire, including its gods.⁵⁷ Though exoticizing and othering tropes might continue, Nilotic imagery as well would become more integrated into Roman culture because of “efforts to integrate the Nile more fully and less

⁵² Note: The appearance of Isiac themes in Nilotic scenes, unlike Isis figures in lararia, does not necessarily correlate to the owner’s status as an Isis worshipper

⁵³ Peterson, “The Places of Roman Isis.”

⁵⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 297-298.

⁵⁵ A more in-depth discussion of the Casa dell’Efebo can be found in chapter two.

⁵⁶ Peterson, “The Places of Roman Isis.”

⁵⁷ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 26.

antagonistically into Roman *imperium*.⁵⁸ Nilotic imagery would become more widespread, or, surviving imagery would—partially because Pompeii, the largest collection of these scenes, was buried in 79 AD. Nilotic imagery found there, though its date of manufacture might be earlier, can be considered as still part of current assemblages and fashions of the time.⁵⁹

The Nile River and Water Accessibility

Another possible factor in the rise of more Nilotic imagery that is separate from the various social and political factors listed above is the rise of accessibility to water and more water features. In the 30s BC, Augustus had greatly altered Rome's water systems "on a scale far grander than anything seen in the Republic."⁶⁰ Pompeii's access to water specifically was improved when the Serino branch of the Campanian aqueduct system by Augustus around 27 BC regulated and brought more water into the city than before.⁶¹ Likewise, in other places in the Empire, water distribution was changing and becoming more regulated. Though this had implications in the public sector—such as public baths—it also impacted the private sector in regard to garden design and the growth of "water features" that are often present when Nilotic Aegyptiaca is studied.⁶²

Under Augustus, Rome would see the rise of grander architectural water use through the advent of monumental water features. These drew inspiration from early imperial domestic spaces that likewise utilized water in unique ways.⁶³ Rather than conserving water and applying it to practical functions like irrigation, cooking, and washing, water could instead be used wastefully in water features that might include fountains, nymphaea, and pools that would evoke a sense of playfulness tied to luxury and pleasure.⁶⁴

The purpose and appearance of Nilotic imagery is strongly influenced by the rise of water features as well as an understanding of Roman ideology behind harnessing water, and therefore nature, in this way. Embedded in Roman 'rhetoric of control' was boasting about overcoming the

⁵⁸ E. Manolaraki, *Noscendi Nilum Cupido*. (Walter de Gruyter, 2013), 126. *Imperium* denotes the authority or power of Rome.

⁵⁹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 27.

⁶⁰ Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society*, 11.

⁶¹ Rick Jones and Damian Robinson, "Water, Wealth, and Social Status at Pompeii: The House of the Vestals in the First Century," *American Journal of Archeology* 109, no. 4 (October 2005): pp.695-710, 697.

⁶² Mantha Zarmakoupi, *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples: Villas and Landscapes (c. 100 BCE – 79CE)*(Oxford University Press, 2014), 143.

⁶³ Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society*, 47.

⁶⁴ Zarmakoupi, "Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples," 143. More on water features in chapter two.

limitations of nature.⁶⁵ Emperors in their palaces could incorporate water in impressive fountains, pools, and fishponds that decorated their gardens to show their control. For example, the garden of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, near Rome, the Canopus complex, which dates from 133-138 AD, includes a large water canal set before a large outdoor dining area that dominates the landscape (fig. 6).

The canal at the area of Hadrian's Villa called the Canopus complex today, which measures 121.4 meters long and 18 meters wide, brings to mind a branch of the Nile called Canopus that linked Alexandria to the city of Canopus named after it—a resort and religious center—and this link directly connects to evoking ideas about the Nile. One end of the canal is rounded and hosts a colonnade with architraves that once framed statuary, and the other end is flat (fig. 7, 8). The flat end faces a vast semicircular hall that houses a curving dining structure called a *stibadium* for seating up to twenty guests and a nymphaeum, with other water features also working in this section. In this area, Nilotic imagery is present; a statue of a crocodile was found alongside the canopus, and crocodiles are an animal associated with the flora and fauna of the Nile (fig. 9). The term for the canal—*nilus* (or *euripus*)—also recalls ideas about the Nile, and this type of canal had been appearing in Roman gardens as part of thought about the Nile since Republican times.⁶⁶ The Nile was being tamed in a Roman space, rendering the powerful, unpredictable Nile as a conquered object repurposed for aesthetic use in the leisure activities of Romans.⁶⁷ Therefore, Roman ideas about power and control could appear not only through control of water but control of water features associated with the Nile.

Concluding Thoughts

In summation, “aquatic displays, ranging from the small jets ringing Pompeian impluvia to the Augustan Meta Sudans in the heart of Rome, celebrated water in a manner that symbolized the bounty of the empire, as well as the political power, social status, and wealth,” and likewise these very attributes, political power, social status, and wealth, are evident in showing images of Egypt.⁶⁸ These images also tie back to Roman thought about the Nile, including its origin, power, and activities associated with it. It is through looking at Roman thought about Nile and its

⁶⁵ Purcell, “Rome and the management of water,” 25.

⁶⁶ Tracy L Ehrlich, “The Waterworks of Hadrians's Villa,” *Journal of Garden History* 9, no. 4 (1989), pp. 161-176, 169.

⁶⁷ Zarmakoupi, *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples*, 161.

⁶⁸ Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society*, 67.

waters as well as looking at Roman thought about water in general that an understanding of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in conjunction with water features in gardens can begin to be undertaken.

CHAPTER TWO: DECORATING THE GARDEN

Water Features in the Garden: Social Status and Wealth

In the settings of Roman domestic gardens, water features might have played a role similar to that of the Nilotic imagery through creating an impression of wealth and social status in the minds of visitors. Even just the ability to harness water for non-essential uses via water features would reveal a level of social influence. Water rights, meaning rights to have water piped in from the aqueduct to a private home, were granted by petition to the emperor or local civic authorities, so by showing the benefits of these new rights in the garden—i.e. through installation of water features such as fountains, pools, and canals—the owner of the house could visually display their higher status and influence.⁶⁹ In Pompeii, for example, prior to the introduction of the Serino branch of the Campanian Aqueduct in around 27 BC by Augustus, water would be collected and stored for practical purposes in atria, where *impluvia*, meaning holes in the roof with slanted rooflines, would allow rainwater to fall, and cisterns under the floor stored water.⁷⁰ After the aqueduct brought pressurized water to Pompeii, the growth of public fountains for water and public baths benefited the public as a whole, but it also allowed for private Pompeiian citizens to have water brought directly to their homes. Rather than needing to conserve water for daily uses, the pressurized water allowed for use of water in impractical ways.⁷¹

At the House of the Vestals in Pompeii in the late first century BC, the granting of water rights was so influential to the expression of luxury and status of the owner that the structure of the house and garden were altered to accommodate different water displays like fountains, pools, or even water triclinia, which would include cascading water in their structure.⁷² Indeed, water rights were so exclusive that, in the study of the areas of Pompeii that have been excavated, piped water, which would be necessary for water features, appears in only about up to 124 houses that were connected to the main supply, and this is out of approximately 1000 excavated properties in the city.⁷³ A private supply of water was available only to a certain sector of society, and the ability to use water not for practical purposes but, rather, decorative ones denotes a certain amount of wealth and status as well. Water's connection, then, to wealth and status colors interpretations of the decorative schemes related to water features in gardens.

⁶⁹ Dylan Kelby Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society* (Brill, 2018), 66.

⁷⁰ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 16.

⁷¹ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 17.

⁷² Rick Jones and Damian Robinson, "Water, Wealth, and Social Status at Pompeii: The House of the Vestals in the First Century," *American Journal of Archeology* 109, no. 4 (October 2005): pp.695-710, 695.

⁷³ Jones and Robinson, "Water, Wealth, and Social Status," 699.

Decorations like statuary, paintings, and mosaics on or around water features in gardens were pivotal to contributing not only to ideals of wealth but also to ideals of luxury in a space. In the letters of Pliny the Younger, he posits that a house is made better through the inclusion of running water, saying “only one thing is needed to complete the amenities and beauty of the house—running water.”⁷⁴ Likewise, running water might become even more enhanced aesthetically by its proximity to various decorative schemes, which were often made from expensive or exotic materials and include learned references to mythology, history, and political/imperial ideology.⁷⁵ The concept of *decorum* or contextual appropriateness appears to have dictated that decorations and imagery fit in with their surroundings, and so decorations near or on water features might frequently relate to water.⁷⁶ Themes related to water might correlate with the symbolism of water—often purity—and the prevalence of water-related mythology would also have a clear association to water features, like river gods and nymphs.⁷⁷ For example, in the shop-house garden of a house off the Via Stabiana in Pompeii (located at IX.ii.7), a painting of a nymph in white and yellow, standing among flowers, appears with a crater-shaped fountain in her hands whose falling water corresponded directly with a jet of water that passed through the opening and into a pool.⁷⁸

When it comes to Nilotic Aegyptiaca, or artwork that references the Nile, in gardens, the connection posed between the Nilotic scenes and water features is obviously apparent because the Nile is a physical body of water known most famously for its watery flood. At the Canopus Complex of Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli, the *nilus* water feature dominated the landscape and offered a stunning water-based vista that might recall the Nile. This water feature (which might also be called *euripus*) first began to appear in domestic architecture in the 1st century BC, and its long, canal form and flowing water might look like a miniaturized model of a river, like the Nile (or the Euripus) River.⁷⁹ While these features might not be directly evoking the Nile at all times, when seen in conjunction with examples of Nilotic Aegyptiaca, they might seem to reference the Nile at certain times and from certain angles only. Also, some gardens might suggest an association to the Nile more than others. Hadrian’s Villa at Tivoli is one such example, where

⁷⁴ Pliny EP, 2.17.25; trans B. Radice.

⁷⁵ Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society*, 69.

⁷⁶ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 14-15.

⁷⁷ Rogers, *Water Culture in Roman Society*, 69.

⁷⁸ Jashemeksi, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 186.

⁷⁹ Mantha Zarmakoupi, *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples: Villas and Landscapes (c. 100 BCE – 79CE)*(Oxford University Press, 2014), 143.

other Egyptianizing Nilotic imagery like the statue of the crocodile on the edge of the water more strongly references Egypt and therefore seem to draw a connection between the *nilus* water feature and the actual Nile.

Hadrian's example shows associations to the Nile occurring on a grand, imperial scale; however, private homeowners with some wealth might also try to create this style at a smaller scale. At the Casa di Octavius Quartio, for example, the garden contains a long *nilus* channel where water flowed through the entire length of the garden (fig. 10).⁸⁰ To create this water feature, it is likely that the water tower found on the northwest corner of the insula was exclusively used by this house, implying wealth in water rights allotted to this private home.⁸¹ In this example, Egyptianizing statuary also makes an appearance—which will be discussed below—therefore providing some kind of connection to the Nile. Overall, in both examples, the water feature of the *nilus* automatically connects to ideas about wealth; the non-essential use of water for creating it as well as the decorative scheme that might tie it to sophisticated works of wall painting and sculpture would elevate the space to convey a sense of luxury and pleasure.⁸² By specifically using Egyptian imagery related to water—which would relate to Nilotic elements—around a water element called after the Nile, Roman enthusiasm for Egypt and “exotic” elements is evident along with a sense of upper-class social performance of learning and knowledge that reflects a knowledge of Egypt as “the keeper not only of the tools of civilization, the arts, science, and statecraft, but also history.”⁸³

Since the Casa di Octavius Quartio appears in a garden in Pompeii, it is especially relevant to the discussion of Nilotic Aegyptiaca and water features as they appear in Pompeii specifically. The garden of this Pompeiian house comprises of an upper and lower terrace area. The upper, porticoed terrace section overlooks the lower garden and houses a biclinium from which diners might have observed the garden as they ate (fig. 11).⁸⁴ In the lower section, the landscape is dominated by the *nilus* water feature that begins from the mouth of a sculpted comic mask in a nymphaeum and is interrupted in three places: a pool with an elaborate fountain with various jets and a pergola shading it, a temple, and another pool with a pergola over it (fig. 12,

⁸⁰ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 46.

⁸¹ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 46.

⁸² Zarmakoupi, *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples*, 162.

⁸³ Zarmakoupi, *Designing for Luxury on the Bay of Naples*, 157. & G. Ferrari, *The Geography of Time: The Nile Mosaic and the Library of Praeneste*, *Ostraka* 8 (1999) 359-86, 360. & Barrett, “Recontextualizing Nilotic Landscapes,” 323.

⁸⁴ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 46.

13).⁸⁵ Passages run alongside the length of the canal, and these were likely bordered by various plants like rows of trees, shrubs, and flowers.⁸⁶

Alongside the pathways and the canal, various examples of statuary and frescoes depicting animals and mythology appeared and would have fit in with the notion of *decorum* in garden and natural spaces, such as two heads of Dionysus, a god related to gardens, and animals hunting.⁸⁷ This collection also included multiple examples of Aegyptiaca; of the twenty statuettes of marble and glazed terracotta found in the garden, there were more than seven Egyptianizing statues, according to early excavators, though the relationship to Egypt of some of them is contested.⁸⁸ These statues have been mostly broken and lost, with the exception of two: a statue of a Bes and a pharaoh-like figure (fig. 14).⁸⁹ Besides statuary, one fresco from this space also evokes Egyptian themes; an image of an Isis priest, possibly the owner of the house, holding a sistrum appears in a room that overlooks the garden (fig. 15).⁹⁰ Notably, the volume of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in the garden of the Casa di Octavius Quartio is lesser than that of the Canopus Complex at Hadrian's Villa, so it might be seen to have less association to the Nile than the larger, imperial garden, possibly due to vast economic differences. However, some association might still be apparent since the *nilus* appears in association with Nilotic imagery, and therefore is probably relevant to the study of Nilotic Aegyptiaca and its associations in Pompeii.

The statuette of Bes, an Egyptian dwarf deity often depicted as a stout, pygmy-like figure with a rounded belly and bandy legs was found in the small peristyle garden just off the reception area, like the pharaoh-like figure (fig. 16).⁹¹ The statuette—which is over a half a meter in height—was made of faience or pseudo-faience (glazed terracotta), and, though this material was available in Italy, it seems more likely that it was imported because trade with Egypt was frequent at this time and Memphis, Egypt was possibly a center for glazed terracotta goods. Wealthy citizens might then easily have acquired an Egyptian ornament for their gardens.⁹² Owning a statue that even just looked as if it is from a foreign place in the same garden with

⁸⁵ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 46.

⁸⁶ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 47.

⁸⁷ Tronchin, "Casa di Octavius Quartio," 42. For more about the whole collection of statuary in the Casa di Octavius Quartio, see source.

⁸⁸ Tronchin, "Casa di Octavius Quartio," 32, 24. [see source for debates about Egyptianizing statues]

⁸⁹ Tronchin, "Casa di Octavius Quartio," 35.

⁹⁰ Mol, "Object Ontology," 178.

⁹¹ This statue was lost in the allied bombings and no longer exists

⁹² Tronchin, "Casa di Octavius Quartio," 35-36.

multiple water features, including one especially impressive one, could dually show wealth.⁹³ Wealth would also have been apparent in the ability of the owner to show cosmopolitanism and to symbolically own multiple pieces of another culture contained in their garden, one specifically a famous river. By having a *nilus* water feature and maybe some related cultural set pieces to go with it, the owner might imply to possess, at least in model form, the mysterious and important Nile River.⁹⁴

As only one of the aforementioned properties with access to piped water and also decorations related to Nilotic imagery, the Casa di Octavius Quartio is far from alone in its use of water features to denote wealth and status. The iconographic emphasis of water and its bounty in Nilotic scenes mirrors the lush, luxurious environments created in many gardens through access to piped water and better irrigation facilities.⁹⁵ Nearly all of the gardens in Pompeii that had Nilotic Aegyptiaca also had visible water features; of the 18 excavated gardens with Nilotic scenes, 10 (55.6%) have “high-status, display-oriented” water features—meaning fountains, pools, and canals—and 15 (83.3%) just have some kind of water feature in general—such as cistern mouths or gutters—which leaves only 3 gardens (16.7%) with no water features in them (that have been discovered yet).⁹⁶ Overall, there seems to be a strong connection between Nilotic scenes or statuary and water features, and part of the explanation of this is that both relate to water, luxury, and abundance.

Mythology and Greco-Roman Culture

The theme of water, luxury, and abundance that is evident in gardens with water features combined with Nilotic themes in art has more complex associations in the social implications of both these components and how they might be connected to Greco-Roman cultural stories. Returning to the garden of the Casa di Octavius Quartio, for example, Egyptianizing themes were possibly apparent in the inclusion of the *nilus* canal alongside a figure of Bes to create some kind of ambience of the Nile.⁹⁷ However, while at first glance it might seem that a model world of the Nile was being created, the reality is more complex. The Egyptianizing statuary and

⁹³ Eva Mol, “Object Ontology and cultural taxonomies. Examining the agency of style, material and objects in classification through Egyptian material culture in Pompeii and Rome,” *Materialising Roman Histories*, eds. Astrid Van Oyen and Martin Pitts (Oxbow Books, 2017): 169-190, 181.

⁹⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 178.

⁹⁵ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 123.

⁹⁶ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 124.

⁹⁷ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 127.

a *nilus* canal were but a small part in a much more complex and eclectic decorative scheme that also included Bacchic themes and Greco-Roman myth.⁹⁸ For example, in the garden, a fresco of Narcissus gazing at his reflection in a pool appears above a biclinium that connects to the pool (fig. 17). This story might be familiar to a Roman audience as coming from their own stories, rather than foreign ones, and would have also had connections to water through Narcissus looking at water in the fresco and the story.⁹⁹ On the other side of the biclinium, a fresco depicts the story of Thisbe and Pyramus. This story, too, might remind a Greco-Roman audience of their own stories, though its setting in Mesopotamia might also offer foreignness like the Nilotic Aegyptiaca but from a different place.¹⁰⁰ Therefore, Nilotic Aegyptiaca might not stand alone in a garden but also appear alongside other imagery that more generally tie it to water and Greco-Roman themes.

Another example of the complex cultural eclecticism of Nilotic Aegyptiaca can be found in the garden of the Casa dell'Efebo in Pompeii. The garden itself occupies much of the southern half of the house, and, within this garden, there is a garden triclinium with masonry benches and four masonry columns that would have supported a vine trellis around it (fig. 18). The triclinium was specifically a water triclinium, associated with an elaborate fountain behind it whose water would have flown down the steps, into a basin, and then on through a marble-covered channel that cuts through the southern triclinium bench. Between the benches, there was also a second fountain that jutted from a table. Possibly, this could mean that the water features were so immersive that diners might actually get wet.¹⁰¹

The triclinium is decorated with some of the most detailed Nilotic scenes in Pompeii. Images of shrines and statues of Egyptian deities, drinking, music, sexual activity, and conflicts with Egyptian animals occur and decorate the interior faces of the benches as a single, continuous frieze (fig. 19, 20). The scenes on the exterior of the bench aren't physically connected to the scene on the interior of the bench but also have a theme of "Egypt."

A sanctuary encloses a statue of Isis-Fortuna holding a cornucopia and possibly a rudder on the northern face of the easternmost bench (fig. 21). The statue is surrounded by things like Egyptian *djed*-pillars or sistra, and a statue of a bird—probably a falcon, which references

⁹⁸ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 261.

⁹⁹ Peter E. Knox, "The Literary House of Octavius Quartio," *Illinois Classical Studies* vol. 40, 1(2015): pp. 171-184, 179.

¹⁰⁰ Knox, "The Literary House of Octavius Quartio," 179.

¹⁰¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 146.

Horus—perches atop the sanctuary. A Greco-Roman style colonnade surrounds the sanctuary, and two figures linger near it: a worshipper lays a cloth on the altar and a bald male figure with a staff, probably a priest, gazes at the shrine. Nearby, on the left, two figures walk next an obelisk, and, to the right, an aedicula, which is a small structure for housing statues, contains another statue. Throughout, Egyptian flora and fauna appear like ibises, palms, and cypresses.¹⁰²

The northern face of the western bench shows a scene of sex, music, and relaxation where a couple is engaging in sexual intercourse beneath a canopy in the center of the scene (fig. 22). To the immediate left, a woman is playing the aulos at them, and a bald man is approaching with an amphora from behind. On the right, a male and female figure look on, and a nearby man on the far right operates a water-screw, which is an irrigation device. This scene likewise includes Egyptian flora and fauna—palms and ducks—and possibly implies a connection between different aspects of fertility in the scene such as the couple and the man with the irrigation device using the fertilizing properties of the floodwater.¹⁰³ Both of these scenes would have been seen by someone entering the garden, whereas the continuous frieze in the inside of the triclinium would have been seen by diners.¹⁰⁴

Overall, the whole triclinium presents scenes of Nilotic Aegyptiaca that are “nearly encyclopedic” of common motifs for these scenes, but the whole of the garden plays on more varied themes related to water.¹⁰⁵ The source of the fountain that feeds the water triclinium appears as a Greco-Roman deity—probably Venus (fig. 23).¹⁰⁶ This figure, Venus, holds a fruit-filled shell from which the water spouted. Shells and Venus are commonly related to water, and Venus is also the most popular subject for sculpture and painting in the garden, especially in the area because she was the tutelary goddess of Pompeii.¹⁰⁷ In this instance, her image also seems to create the illusion of a Roman-Greco goddess being at the “source” of the Nile in the space, perhaps expressing a representation of Roman power over Egypt.¹⁰⁸ Regardless, having Venus at the source of the water that complements the illusion of the Nilotic scene shows a visual combination of multiple cultures in a kind of visual narrative. This is similar to the example of

¹⁰² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 157.

¹⁰³ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 159-160.

¹⁰⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 157.

¹⁰⁵ Barrett *Domesticating Empire*, 160.

¹⁰⁶ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 165.

¹⁰⁷ Katharine T. von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society* (Routledge, 2009), 27.

¹⁰⁸ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 166. For more information about fascination with the source of the Nile see chapter one of this thesis.

Nilotic Aegyptiaca in the Casa di Octavius Quartio combined with other images like that of Bacchus, Narcissus, and Pyramus and Thisbe.

At the Casa dell'Efebo, another Greco-Roman image related to ideas about water appears in the garden through an image of Mars and Venus that decorates a water tower next to an aedicular niche on the edge of the garden (fig. 24). In this image, the couple embraces before a column in a rural landscape while Cupid holds a sunshade to cover them. Their relationship and pose are evocative of erotic themes that, while much tamer than the more explicit sexual scene on the triclinium, seem to have a connection to their counterpart and ideas about water and fertility. The image from the westernmost bench that juxtaposes the couple engaging in intercourse and the man with a water screw to convey a connection between irrigation—which is water-based—and fertility likewise corresponds to the theme of fertility inherent in the image of Mars and Venus. They are also connected to irrigation through their location on the water tower, which would feed water to the garden and allow the water triclinium to function in the first place.¹⁰⁹ Water then links sexuality to irrigation and again forms a “connection between Greco-Roman deities and the Egyptian landscape of the Nile.”¹¹⁰

Pietas and Religion in the Garden

Aside from the more overt connection between fertility and water in the Nilotic Aegyptiaca in the garden of the Casa dell'Efebo, connections between water, Nilotic elements, and fertility are also evident in religious contexts of these scenes. Religious scenes in Nilotic Aegyptiaca had been appearing since the Nile Mosaic at Palestrina with its images of temples, statues, and processions, and they are likewise found in Pompeii.¹¹¹ At the Casa dell'Efebo, religious themed iconography appears in the aforementioned scene from the northern face of the easternmost bench where a priest gazes at a shrine of Isis-Fortuna and a worshipper lays a piece of cloth on the altar. Religious overtones are also apparent in the Casa di Octavius Quartio, wherein the small wall painting of an Isis priest might have provided some connection to the Isis cult.¹¹² The myth of Isis and Osiris was strongly associated with the flood of the Nile, because of Isis and Osiris' part in mythology about the Nile flood, and Osiris' resurrection, because this can

¹⁰⁹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 166.

¹¹⁰ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 166.

¹¹¹ For a discussion of the Nile Mosaic of Palestrina, see chapter one of this thesis.

¹¹² Mol, “Object Ontology,” 178.

be seen to “symbolize the Nile flood,” so this image is in keeping with Nilotic themes.¹¹³

Possibly, due to this connection, even the image of the sexual encounter on northern face of the westernmost bench might also have some kind of religious undertone. Therefore, religious allusions in Nilotic scenes relate to the waters of the Nile, which ties in with themes of water and its fertility.

Religious iconography in Nilotic scenes, besides relating to water in their connection to myths that tie Egyptian religion and gods to the Nile, also create a water-based landscape that both emulates and exoticizes a Roman traditional landscape of rural piety. Often, water could have religious overtones that deemed it in some way sacred, and, like wise, gardens in general could have connotations of sacred space.¹¹⁴ Both of these notions might appear in the Roman painting genre of sacro-idyllic landscapes. Vitruvius describes such scenes as including subjects of “harbors, headlands, shores, rivers springs, straits, shrines, sacred groves, hills, cattle, shepherds”—essentially a scene including various natural elements, especially water, with religious elements, often with loose brushwork and miniature scale.¹¹⁵ An example of this appears in the peristyle garden of the House of the Little Fountain in Pompeii. In this garden, the west wall was divided into three panels by two pilasters, with the central panel containing a mosaic fountain—a water feature. In the left panel, next to this, a sacro-idyllic scene appears: a seaside scene dominates the foreground with a pillared building, a square one, and a small shrine while the slopes of a mountain appear behind with pine trees and a vineyard (fig. 25). Human figures also appear in the foreground.¹¹⁶ The religious undertones of the scenes in the shrine might then be supplemented by natural associations between water, the sea, and its religious associations.

In the garden specifically, besides images of shrines, religion played its role alongside social ideals. Nature and the rural life were glorified, and, in the garden, beliefs about man’s role in taming nature can be observed.¹¹⁷ Even in tamed spaces like gardens, religious awe could still be experienced, since the cultivation of a space “epitomized beauty, civilization, and order.”¹¹⁸ Nature as contained in a garden space still retained a religious aura, and its connection to

¹¹³ M. J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt* (Brill, 2002), 278.

¹¹⁴ von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden*, 88.

¹¹⁵ Vitruvius 7.5.2. & Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 109.

¹¹⁶ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 83-84.

¹¹⁷ Louise Wickham, “Ancient Gardens as Political Expressions of Power,” *Gardens in History: A Political Perspective* (Oxbow Books, 2012): pp. 9-30, 18.

¹¹⁸ von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden*, 86.

pietas—meaning the typical Roman attitude of dutiful respect towards gods, fatherland, and parents and other kinsmen—is evidenced in décor that decorates the space and makes it more immersive of the outdoors.¹¹⁹ Looking at the seascape and vineyards at the House of the Little Fountain, then, might evoke a sense of general awe for the outdoors while the shrine in the scene might make a more specific reference to religious practices.

Since garden spaces and water already had ties to religion and sacredness, it makes sense that Nilotic Aegyptiaca would correspond with these values to tie themselves in with the space. Egyptian religious associations with water might also invariably tie in; in the Isis cult, waters from a Nilometer, which was originally an Egyptian monument in Egyptian temples used to measure water levels of the flood, could be seen as sacred and used in ritual, partially because the water might be seen as water from the Nile.¹²⁰ The temple of Isis in Pompeii had one such Nilometer within the compound, thus bringing the association possibly even closer to home.¹²¹ Therefore, a Roman understanding of water's associations in general might be colored with an understanding of water's meanings in the Isis cult in Nilotic Aegyptiaca from gardens.

When it comes to Nilotic scenes in Pompeii, the majority of the frescoes depict not only religious statues and worship but specifically scenes of rural cults.¹²² This is true of the Casa dell'Efebo, where scenes include not only the statue of Isis-Fortuna and worshippers on the northern face of the exterior bench but many scenes on the interior of the bench. For example, on the interior of the eastern bench, which is predominantly a detailed river scene, there are numerous cult installations and divine images. Two columned structures near fisherman seem to be small shrines, and a tower near the center could be a shrine since a statue outside its door has a reclining animal deity (fig. 26).¹²³ In this section, there is also a statue of the Apis bull with maybe shrines in the columned structures next to it, and, on the far right, there is an anthropomorphic statue in an aedicula with a worshipper approaching (fig. 27, 28).¹²⁴ These scenes of piety and religious structures might be seen as essentially a 'sacral-idyllic' landscape with visual displays of *pietas*, but the similarity to a familiar style of image could be underscored by difference. The scene is not a familiar Greco-Roman landscape but, rather, the riverbanks of

¹¹⁹ William Chase Green and John Scheid, "pietas," Oxford Classical Dictionary (7 Mar. 2016).

<https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-5079>.

¹²⁰ Zarmakoupi, *Designing Luxury on the Bay of Naples*, 152 & Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Nilotica*, 271.

¹²¹ Jashemski, *The Gardens of Pompeii*, 157.

¹²² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 163.

¹²³ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 158.

¹²⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 158.

the Nile in flood.¹²⁵ Thus, an exotic element is added to the imagery of a sacral-idyllic landscape, but it is domesticated by being part of a display of a water feature that is tied into Roman cultural expectations of gardens and also is specifically “originating” from a Greco-Roman goddess, Venus. In the garden, scenes of Nilotic Aegyptiaca fit into Greco-Roman cultural expectations of some religious aspects of a garden, while also providing the unique element of a water-based landscape to utilize the context of the setting that fits in with garden water features.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, wealth, social status, cultural connections, and religion all play a crucial role in understanding Nilotic Aegyptiaca. Looking at houses from Pompeii offers a case study in this, specifically two houses with remarkable Nilotic features. The appearance of water features in a garden related to the expression of wealth and social status of the owner, and, likewise, decorations of the garden like Nilotic Aegyptiaca could show a person’s status and wealth. Images of Nilotic Aegyptiaca, however, often did not stand alone but fit in with a decorative scheme that often related to the water features and water imagery from Greco-Roman culture, as well. This suggests that Roman visual references to Egypt in the garden are a piece of tendencies towards eclecticism that present a more cosmopolitan, learned space in the garden, which would be favorable for an upper-class person.¹²⁶ Likewise, religious imagery in scenes of Nilotic Aegyptiaca, like images of sacro-idyllic landscapes, would evoke a favorable sense of *pietas* in the garden that related to images about the purpose of gardens that fit in with the water-based parts of the garden.

¹²⁵ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 163.

¹²⁶ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 44.

CHAPTER THREE: LIVING IN THE GARDEN

Peopling the Garden – The Casa del Medico

Though water features and art like statuary and frescoes effectively decorate a garden space in a Roman house, they also play a more active role in the everyday lived experience of someone using the garden. Objects and images themselves have power in their own right—such as to shape and move people—and this is also true of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in the garden.¹²⁷ The cognitive associations evoked by these objects or images might then shape the way they could be experienced by an ancient person. It is relevant when discussing this influence to look at representational concepts like political power and elite status as well as historical events to

¹²⁷ Mol, “Object Ontology,” 170.

discuss how objects might be understood, and another important lens from which to view objects and images is how they are used.¹²⁸

A way to understand the use of decorative images and objects like those in the Casa di Octavius Quartio and the Casa dell'Efebo in Pompeii and the Canopus Complex at Hadrian's Villa in Tivoli is to look at what activities were occurring in the space. Actions related to the use of the garden as the "quintessential place for the experience of intelligent repose (*otium*)" might have occurred in the space, and spending time in the garden was seen as good for one's health.¹²⁹ For example, Cicero references walking around the garden of Crassus' villa as the appropriate time for philosophical discussion since it is a time of *otium*.¹³⁰ The garden also might be a place for more vigorous physical exercise; Pliny the Younger references riding along 'hippodrome' tracks as an activity in his garden space, and gardens with a *euripus* or *nilus* channel or pool might be used for swimming.¹³¹ Besides exercise, the garden was also a setting for various social activities like music, poetry recitations, and dramatic recitations often centered around the activity of dining in the garden, which might occur on outdoor or related indoor *triclinia*.¹³² With these activities in mind, ideas about the use of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in a garden space can be explored, specifically in relationship to water features in the space.

One possible use of Nilotic Aegyptiaca, i.e. Roman art and décor that possibly evoke the Nile, could be creating an experience of being in "Egypt" while also physically remaining in the safe space of the garden and seeing familiar environments. People living in a garden space might have noticed some similarities between the actions of those in Nilotic frescoes and their own experiences. For example, on the eastern inner bench of the triclinium of the Casa dell'Efebo, the temples and shrines appear built in a Greco-Roman form rather than Egyptian, and therefore a Greco-Roman person might have found a sense of familiarity in this otherwise foreign scene (fig. 20).¹³³

Outside of the gardens of Pompeii that have been previously discussed, another garden worth mentioning on this subject is at the Casa del Medico. The courtyard of this house is of a "pseudo-peristyle" style with columns on three sides that enclosed a planted garden space (fig.

¹²⁸ Mol, "Objects Ontology," 173.

¹²⁹ Von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden*, 94.

¹³⁰ Cicero, *De or.* 2.18. & Timothy M. O'Sullivan. "The Mind in Motion: Walking and Metaphorical Travel in the Roman Villa," *Classical Philology*, 101, no. 2 (April 2006): 133-152, 133.

¹³¹ Plin. *Ep.* 5.6.32. & Von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden*, 94.

¹³² Von Stackelberg, *The Roman Garden*, 95.

¹³³ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 164. For a discussion of this bench, see chapter two.

29, 30, 31). There was also a water channel that, while modest and primarily utilitarian, might have functioned as a temporary *nilus* when flooded with rainwater or water brought from public fountains.¹³⁴ Adjacent to the courtyard are two rooms architecturally identified as triclinia as well as three smaller rooms whose function has not been confirmed.¹³⁵ In the courtyard, fourth-style frescoes depict some of the most dramatic Nilotic imagery found in Pompeii, including an explicit sex scene and animal combats with violence and gore.¹³⁶ Though the frescoes today have been removed to Naples, they once would have been found on the half-wall in front of the entrances to the dining spaces.

The protagonists of the scenes from the Casa del Medico are primarily dwarves or pygmies—meaning that they appear as small people with achondroplasia or large heads, wide hips, and pronounced buttocks.¹³⁷ Their depiction in frescoes, which will be described below, becomes almost synonymous for the philosopher Lucretius’ characterization of primitive humans as naked, engaging in indiscriminate outdoor sex, and having a relationship with wild beasts where “each one was then more like to be caught and devoured alive by wild beasts, torn by their teeth.”¹³⁸ Since they are related to more primitive forms of mankind, they become dehumanized or “Othered” in such a manner that they become both humorous and apotropaic because of their nonnormative bodies and transgressive sexual behavior.¹³⁹ Alongside their sexual activities, they are also often shown ithyphallically or macro-phallically in Nilotic scenes to function not only humorously and apotropaically but also as possibly related to ideas about fertility of the Nile in Nilotic scenes.¹⁴⁰

In the Casa del Medico, the south side of the west wall of the courtyard and the north side of the west wall hosted the remaining Nilotic pygmy scenes. The fresco from the south side of the west wall shows a scene of apparent religious imagery juxtaposed against violent animal-human conflict (fig. 32). In one area, a group of shrine-like structures appear on a raised platform, like a small aedicula with vases on each side and a tall rectangular building with

¹³⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 189, 218.

¹³⁵ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 189.

¹³⁶ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 182.

¹³⁷ Though these terms refer to different things today, the two appear as primarily interchangeable in Roman art because Roman artists likely weren’t aware of the subtle differences between the two.

¹³⁸ Lucr. 5.990-993, trans. Rouse 1924: 411.

¹³⁹ John R. Clarke, *Looking at Laughter: Humor, Power, and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture*. (University of California Press, 1998), 163. Laughter/jokes were believed by the Romans to have an apotropaic function, meaning they might ward off evil: 19.

¹⁴⁰ Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana*, 275-276.

statues of winged, recumbent animals on each side. Around the shrine complex, water decorates the landscape, a stork perches on the thatched roof of a cylindrical tower, and a porticoed complex sits on the far riverbank. Though this central area of the scene paints a picture of rural piety that draws inspiration from “sacral-idyllic” landscapes, the actions of the pygmies in the scene are much different in tone. On the left of the scene, the pygmies are fighting crocodiles and a hippopotamus.¹⁴¹ One pygmy at the far left fights a crocodile alone, while to the right a group of four naked pygmies work to subdue a crocodile with ropes. More pygmies are battling a hippo above that group, and one stabs the hippo, drawing blood, while two of his companions are being capsized by the hippo and one is gruesomely swallowed by the hippo with details of blood. In front of them, a probably dead pygmy floats in the water with bloodstains across his body, and another pygmy tries to swim away. In the distance, a boat floats on the water manned by four or five pygmies.¹⁴²

In a scene similar to the one on the south side of the west wall of the courtyard, the north side of the west wall depicts a banquet scene of sex, music, and dancing alongside another gruesome pygmy-animal battle (fig. 33). The riverbank scene specifically has four reclining, banqueting pygmies—and one on the ground, probably falling off drunk—watching a sexual encounter between two other pygmies in front of them. Around them, one pygmy plays a double flute and another dances energetically with sticks, an ibis looking on nearby, much like the scene at the Casa dell’Efebo, since many themes across Nilotic scenes are reused, and a few more onlookers are present. In the same way the pleasant scene of rural piety in the other fresco is contrasted against the violent battle scene, so too does a violent pygmy-hippo battle contrast the levity of the banquet scene.¹⁴³ Another hippo devours a pygmy with blood in its mouth, and two other pygmies, one with an instrument in hand and one with a cap associated with dancers—probably alluding that they were just part of the banquet scene—are trying to help. This scene also has another boat with pygmies in the distance in the upper right.¹⁴⁴

Experiencing the Familiar

¹⁴¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 191.

¹⁴² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 192.

¹⁴³ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 194.

¹⁴⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 194-195.

In both the scene on the north and south side of the west wall, a Roman viewer might have recognized things they were also experiencing in a garden while also seeing something dangerous and foreign. Part of this effect could be inherent to the complex status of gardens as both inside and outside. On the one hand, the garden was outside; it had air-movement, wetness or dryness, and different smells, plants, and general experiences based on the season, leading to a “more fully textured multisensory experience than being indoors.”¹⁴⁵ However, the garden was also within the safety of the home, and it was even perhaps the most intimate part of the house.¹⁴⁶ Understanding this contrast colors an understanding of the ways in which Nilotic Aegyptiaca and accompanying water feature functioned in garden spaces.

By being in the house, scenes of Nilotic Aegyptiaca like those at the Casa del Medico could function as decorations in a comfortable, controlled environment. The land of the Nile in flood might be domesticated by being in this space; indeed, being within a Roman garden implied a safety from the exterior world and its dangers, like those in real nature.¹⁴⁷ The watery landscape of the Nile had then been contained and its waters tamed in the appearance of the gutter of water that had been constructed to run through the courtyard space—which required manmade control over water to create.¹⁴⁸ Seeing controlled running water alongside Nilotic scenes, which was also true of the Casa dell’Efebo and the Casa di Octavius Quartio, might have triggered the Roman viewer to peacefully imagine themselves on the banks of the Nile, or even to consider a new way of looking at the world they were viewing and their place in it.¹⁴⁹ A Roman person might also have been witnessing many familiar aspects in the seemingly foreign scene, like the images of rural piety in the fresco on the south side of the west wall and its architectural features evoking Roman rather than Egyptian styles.¹⁵⁰

Even more relevant to a person in this courtyard space might be the depictions of banqueting on the Nile that appear on the north side of the west wall. Though, unlike the Casa dell’Efebo where the Nilotic scenes appear on an outdoor triclinium, the Nilotic scenes at the Casa del Medico are not directly viewed by diners, rooms for dining do appear alongside the courtyard. This proximity might mean that diners would at least encounter these frescoes before

¹⁴⁵ Jones, “Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure,” 801.

¹⁴⁶ Jones, “Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure,” 800.

¹⁴⁷ Jones, “Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure,” 802.

¹⁴⁸ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 210.

¹⁴⁹ Jones, “Roman Gardens, Imagination, and Cognitive Structure,” 805.

¹⁵⁰ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 191. For more about rural piety, see chapter two.

entering a dining space and could view the dining triclinium while still looking at the frescoes.¹⁵¹ Thus, a Roman viewer could have drawn a connection between the scene they were viewing—rowdy pygmies banqueting alongside the Nile—and what they were about to experience—a banquet of their own alongside the courtyard and its small water feature.¹⁵²

A scene like that of banqueting, rowdy pygmies might even have evoked ideas about the way a banquet or a garden space might become a place of transgressive activities. After all, in rhetorical discourse by the likes of Cicero and many others, garden spaces could be represented as a place for gluttony, drunkenness, sloth, and sexual transgression just as much as a place of health and intellectual thought.¹⁵³ Seneca, for example, specifically expresses that “it is a pleasure for you to make your carcass sluggish with ease [...] and in your garden lair you stuff bodies pallid with sloth with food and drink.”¹⁵⁴ Regardless of how moralists might decry this behavior, its prevalence in writing shows that it was known that dining and time in gardens might be a time and place for transgressive activities. By looking at the pygmies, then, a Roman viewer might laugh at an outrageous depiction of what they themselves might be expected to do in the garden: “drink too much, dance too much, and have too much sex.”¹⁵⁵ Even laughing, too, might be a familiar activity, since Romans often expected to laugh or experience humor while dining.¹⁵⁶ Thus, looking at the banqueters in the scene from the Casa del Medico may have contained any actions familiar to Roman viewers also banqueting.

Overall, scenes of Nilotic Aegyptiaca might evoke in a Roman viewer a sense of thoughtful familiarity towards what they were already doing or feeling in the space. The scenes of rural piety as well as the scenes of banqueting and some transgressive activities might have reminded the viewer of themselves and their associations to such a space. However, for all that seeing a Nilotic scene brought the Nile into the familiar space of a Roman garden, with its waters trickling tamely at the feet of people in the garden, a Nilotic scene might equally have had elements that appeared foreign, cognitively distancing a Roman viewer from associating with the scene.

¹⁵¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 188.

¹⁵² Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 188.

¹⁵³ Von Stackelberg, “The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society,” 96, 99. See Cic. *Phil.* 2.67, 2.71, 2.109, 3.30, 8.9, 13.11)

¹⁵⁴ Sen. *Ben.* 4.13.1

¹⁵⁵ Clarke, “Looking at Laughter,” 103.

¹⁵⁶ Clarke, “Looking at Laughter,” 83.

“Othering” and Difference in Nilotic Frescoes

At the Casa del Medico, like at the Casa dell’Efebo and many other houses in Pompeii with Nilotic scenes, the people in the scenes are represented as pygmies. Though the actions of some of the pygmies may have been familiar to a Roman viewer as similar to their own actions, the “Othering” appearance of these figures could have served to create some distance between the viewer and the figure. The viewer could both relate to the figures while also seeing that they were not like themselves, thus enabling them to be enticed into incredible landscapes and then denied actual access.¹⁵⁷ Populating the scene with pygmies instead of “real” Egyptian people also further pushes the scene from reality to a fictionalized scene to engage the imagination, and it likewise might belittle the Egyptians as a formerly proud and rich people of the Mediterranean turned into lesser colonial subjects of Rome.¹⁵⁸ The image of Egypt that appeared, then, might be more about artists and geographers imagining life on the Nile without respect or concern for the real lived experience of Egyptian people.¹⁵⁹ In the same manner in which a desire to find and discuss the “mysterious” origin of the Nile appears in Roman literature—which a learned viewer might have read—so too does bringing the Nile into a garden create a mysterious, story-like effect of a people who are not fully human and a place on the fringes of the world.¹⁶⁰

In the Casa del Medico, one way the Nilotic scenes might have evoked a sense of distancing and wild stories of the Nile rather than a wholly relatable set of activities is through the battles the pygmies against wild animals. For example, the scenes of the pygmies fighting the crocodile might have reminded a viewer of Greco-Roman descriptions of crocodile hunts in the ancient Upper Egyptian city of Tentyra, such as Pliny’s description of Tentyri riding on the backs of crocodiles and creating loud noises to frighten them.¹⁶¹ In the scene on the south side of the west wall, the pygmies are doing both these things in their fight with crocodiles. Ancient authors also reference violence and death in these fights, which the scene too recalls through the bloodied body of the pygmy in the crocodile’s mouth.¹⁶² Through these references to storied accounts of activities in a far-off land and not in Pompeii, the viewer might have been able to view the water scene of the Nile as an opportunity for learned discussion, where the owner might be

¹⁵⁷ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 170.

¹⁵⁸ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 170. Clarke, “Looking at Laughter,” 83.

¹⁵⁹ Clarke, “Looking at Laughter,” 87.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of literature about the origin of the Nile, see chapter 1.

¹⁶¹ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 192. & Plin. *HN* 8.93.

¹⁶² Plin. *HN* 8.93, Sen. *QNat* 4a.2.14.

displaying some knowledge of literature or the world, even if the depiction itself does not look particularly serious or scholarly. It might be the event that was being represented, rather than the way it was being shown, that expressed an owner's desire to self-represent themselves as educated and interested specifically in this subject.¹⁶³ The frescoes, then, became part of a performance of knowledge, social status, and identity of the owner, alongside its elements that might connect with lived Roman experience of the garden.¹⁶⁴

Besides scenes of pygmies being a performance of knowledge in the courtyard and an opportunity for imagination at the Casa del Medico, pygmies were also distanced from the viewer in their physical aspects and the way their actions were treated. Unlike in the Casa dell'Efebo, where the scene is relatively peaceful and has overarching "sacral-idyllic" connotations, the frescoes at the Casa del Medico are instead primarily comical. In the violent, bloody scenes of fights with hippos and crocodiles that involve pygmy death and mutilation, the wounded pygmies are posed in undignified ways, such as the pygmy leaning over the boat, being devoured, whose pose is usually associated with sex (fig. 33, 34).¹⁶⁵ Off to the side, the pygmy musician fighting a crocodile with a musical instrument rather than playing the banquet might also be seen as a humorous, if macabre, twist on a what a musician would be expected to be doing (fig. 35). Thus, this scene might have been viewed as a comical, rather than wholly distressing, and the use of pygmies throughout the scene generally played up the humor of it more.

Another element of the scene that would encode humor and distance a Roman viewer is the bodies of the pygmies themselves. For a Roman viewer, just deformity of the body through something like dwarfism was enough to make an image amusing.¹⁶⁶ So, when paired with absurdly amusing actions like a pygmy being killed in an undignified, sexualized pose or a pygmy musician beating a hippo with an instrument, the bodies of the pygmies might be doubly encoded with humor. Even in the scene of sexual encounter between the canopy, the bodies of the pygmies, with their large heads and stocky bodies, would perhaps not be seen as a sex scene meant to encode desire through idealized figures, but, rather, as two figures with such in-ideal

¹⁶³ Von Stackelberg, "The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society," 83.

¹⁶⁴ Von Stackelberg, "The Roman Garden: Space, Sense, and Society," 83.

¹⁶⁵ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 201.

¹⁶⁶ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 104.

bodies as to appear “grotesque” and comical.¹⁶⁷ They are not two beautiful figures placed on a bed with an attendant, as is often true for sexual vignettes with somatically normal or “Roman” bodies across the city, but instead are two “deformed,” less-than-human bodies engaging in a wild act, which would make them all the more extreme and outrageous.¹⁶⁸ This outrageousness, then, possibly points to the scenes as parodies of these more idealized Roman images of sex and dining and even hunting. Thus, the Othered figures on the banks of the Nile might have been used to provoke amusement in guests that would also distance them from being immersed in relating to the river scene and its associated water feature.

The experience and use of the Nilotic frescoes in the courtyard of the Casa del Medico in relationship to the water feature there might have related to a cognitive distance between the viewer and the viewed also in the violence that appears in the frescoes. In a garden space, while ideas about safety and interiority of the space might play a role in understanding how it was perceived, there was also an element of exteriority and “danger” in the garden that mirrored the dichotomy of Rome as a safe and civilized interior surrounded by a more dangerous and perilous outer world.¹⁶⁹ Images in the scene might evoke a connection between the experience of watching animal hunts where danger might lurk within view but without direct consequences for the viewer. Likewise, looking at a scene of violence between humans and animals might remind this viewer of this distinction and that they were safe, unlike the pygmies. Even the animals themselves might evoke this correlation; after all, in Pompeii, fantasies about wild, exotic animals like those in the scene being fought by gladiators are evident in art, though they may not reflect reality.¹⁷⁰ Therefore, looking at the pygmy scenes would possibly distance a viewer by reminding them of their distance from animal fights as well as their safety in a garden space in the face of the violence of the exterior world

In the courtyard of the Casa del Medico, ideas about danger are evident in the presence of violent battles between the pygmies and wild animals and these might also distance the viewer through the animalization of the pygmies. As was mentioned before, the actions of pygmies often embody Lucretius’ description of primitive humans struggling against nature. Through depicting these actions and dehumanizing them as well as through them fighting animals, the pygmies

¹⁶⁷ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 201-202.

¹⁶⁸ Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*, 104.

¹⁶⁹ Jones, “Roman Gardens: Imagination and Cognitive Structure,” 781.

¹⁷⁰ Mary Beard, *The fires of Vesuvius: Pompeii lost and found*. (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008).

further being “Othered” besides just their humor. They might become perceived almost like animals themselves, and thus even more difficult for a Roman person to empathize with. The pygmies in the frescoes then gain a historical aspect through fitting Lucretius’ description but also a primitiveness that complements the ability for these figures to be not only de-humanized but possibly animalized.

Many aspects of the frescoes of the courtyard of the Casa del Medico encourage a sense of distance between the viewer and the figures, and the adjacent water feature also relates to a lack of total immersion in the scene. Unlike at the Casa dell’Efebo, where the water feature beneath the triclinium might nearly be against the Nilotic frescoes, perhaps even getting diners wet, at the Casa del Medico there is no evidence that the Nilotic frescoes ever directly interacted with the water. Though the channel has been hypothesized as a water feature that flooded the courtyard, so guests might sit near and put their feet in the water while looking at the frescoes nearly touching the water, it seems more likely that it was a gutter—which did not flood the whole space—and thus that the frescoes were not as near to the water.¹⁷¹ Instead, the frescoes not being in direct contact with the water might likewise have distanced the viewer from imagining the scene as a multi-dimensional reality they would want to be immersed in.¹⁷²

Concluding Thoughts

The intensity, grotesquery, and humor of the Nilotic scenes at the Casa del Medico are far more extreme than in the majority of Nilotic scenes in Pompeii, but the use of pygmies throughout these scenes in general attests to an Othering of foreigners in these spaces that might distance the viewer. However, they may also still have been relatable in the idea that looking at these figures might have offered the viewer the chance to reflect playfully and humorously about their own social circle.¹⁷³ Other features like depictions of rural piety, dining, and transgressive activities might have allowed viewers to also relate to the scenes like those at the Casa del Medico, Casa dell’Efebo, and Casa di Octavius Quartio. Overall, the Nilotic scenes offered viewers a chance to “think about the relationships between human societies and the various environments they sought to inhabit, create, or control.”¹⁷⁴

¹⁷¹ John R. Clarke, “A Compendium of Pygmy Imagery in the Casa del Medico at Pompeii,” *Circulación de temas y sistemas decorativos en la pintura mural Antigua*, ed. C. Guiral Pelegrin (Calatayud, 2007): 219-222, 219. & Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 209-210.

¹⁷² Direct contact with water is also not likely because it would damage the frescoes.

¹⁷³ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 221.

¹⁷⁴ Barrett, *Domesticating Empire*, 209.

CONCLUSION

From the stunning expanse of the Canopus Complex at Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli to the little makeshift garden space at the Casa di Medico, Nilotic Aegyptiaca comes in all shapes and sizes in the gardens of the ancient Roman world. Though the Isis cult is one factor in the proliferation of these images, there are many other complex and varied reasons for its creation: social status, wealth, politics, and pleasure, among others. The experience of images and objects related to the Nile in the garden might evoke a whole slew of ideas and associations. Lounging on the triclinium at the Casa dell'Efebo could make a viewer think of religion or literature about Egypt, in the same way a richer, more powerful viewer would feel reclining on the stibadium at the Canopus Complex. Walking into the courtyard at the Casa del Medico might instead evoke humor, or wandering down the pathways beside the Casa di Octavius Quartio might evoke cosmopolitanism.

All of these experiences would be rather different from that of entering the sanctuary at the Temple of Fortuna in Palestrina, but the root of these images would still tie them to this. From prior to the annexation of Egypt into the Roman Empire, Roman people might understand Egypt and Egyptians through their connection to the Nile, a river whose origin evoked curiosity even as far back as Herodotus' writings. Egyptian reliance on the Nile River might be understood in relationship to its annual flood, and a scene like that of the Nile Mosaic of Palestrina might show Roman perceptions of festivities and other activities related to this time. When Egypt was annexed in 31 BC, perceptions of Egypt were complicated by Augustus' propaganda campaign against Marc Antony and Cleopatra as well as by the spread of the Isis cult across the Mediterranean. Anti-Egyptian sentiment would mellow in the reigns of future emperors, causing a boom in Nilotic Aegyptiaca, but stereotypes from that era still linger in the imagery and statuary.

With the growth of aqueduct systems across the empire, wealthy Roman citizens could use their access to more water to embed in their gardens luxurious but wasteful water features like pools, canals, and fountains. These water features might appear in gardens alongside Nilotic Aegyptiaca, and their relative uncommonness in the city of Pompeii reveals that their existence could be a marker of social status and wealth. Likewise, Nilotic Aegyptiaca may also reveal wealth through its foreignness and its part in a decorative scheme that would be contextually appropriate for a garden space. Water, which held its own symbolism in Roman imagination often related to purity or various myths like that of nymphs or goddesses like Aphrodite, might then be combined with images of the Nile to evoke associations between Roman culture and conceptions of Egypt.

At the Casa di Octavius Quartio in Pompeii as well as at Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli near Rome, Egyptianizing statuary like crocodiles and statues of Egyptian deities like Bes connect one, long river-like water feature—a *nilus* or *euripus*—directly to an almost 3D conception of the Nile. At the Casa dell'Efebo, Nilotic scenes are likewise placed in conjunction with a water feature from their position painted on an outdoor water triclinium. In these examples and, it may be inferred, many examples of Nilotic Aegyptiaca in gardens, the images appear with their watery counterparts but also many other images related to the garden and water in Greco-Roman imagination. Thus, in garden spaces, especially those in houses in Pompeii, Nilotic Aegyptiaca

might appear as part of a visual eclecticism that would characterize a garden space, related often to water features.

Nilotic Aegyptiaca in garden spaces with water features may also relate to expressions of religion in the space. Already, gardens were charged with religious meaning; nature, in Roman thought, might in certain circumstances be seen as sacred, and *pietas* might be expressed in the appearance of a garden space, including one with Nilotic imagery. This is evidenced in the connections to sacro-idyllic landscapes apparent in scenes like those on the outdoor triclinium in the garden of the Casa dell'Efebo.

Aside from the associations Nilotic Aegyptiaca might create with other art and décor in the Roman garden related to stories or religion, images and statuary that evoke the Nile might directly interface with the experience of a visitor to the garden. All at once, such an image might be familiar and exotically Other. In images like those from the Casa del Medico and the Casa dell'Efebo, scenes of banqueting would seem immediately familiar to someone dining on these images or nearby, and so too would the images of music being played often relate to the reality of a diner's experience. Images of drunkenness and sexual activity, too, might be familiar to a diner's experience—or, at least, a fantasized version of it. In these regards, images of pygmies on the banks of the Nile at the Casa dell'Efebo and the Casa del Medico would remind viewers of their own life.

Though the actions of pygmies might be familiar, their very appearance is actually primarily unfamiliar or “Othering.” By choosing to depict pygmies rather than somatically “normal” humans in scenes, the figures on the banks of the Nile are treated as a lesser form of a human that was closer to an animal. Through so doing, these figures are distanced from Roman viewers in order that they might mock them and laugh at what they were seeing, even as, in the Casa del Medico, they were being brutally killed in the scenes. They might also become less real; rather than just being in-human, they are creatures of story and fantastical hypothesizing about who and what resided on the fringes of the Roman Empire.

Still, despite this difference and “Othering,” Roman viewers might still relate to pygmy scenes and their contents through their humor being a light-hearted way that they might reflect upon themselves and their social circle. Nilotic Aegyptiaca might offer a Roman viewer the chance to reflect about the world as well as to understand the variety of social, political, and symbolic contexts of the art with the garden space and its connected water features. Looking at

Nilotic Aegyptiaca in conjunction with water features then, is part of understanding the broader significance of putting images and objects within their context and then attempting to understand their significance to a Roman viewer.

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FIGURES



Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

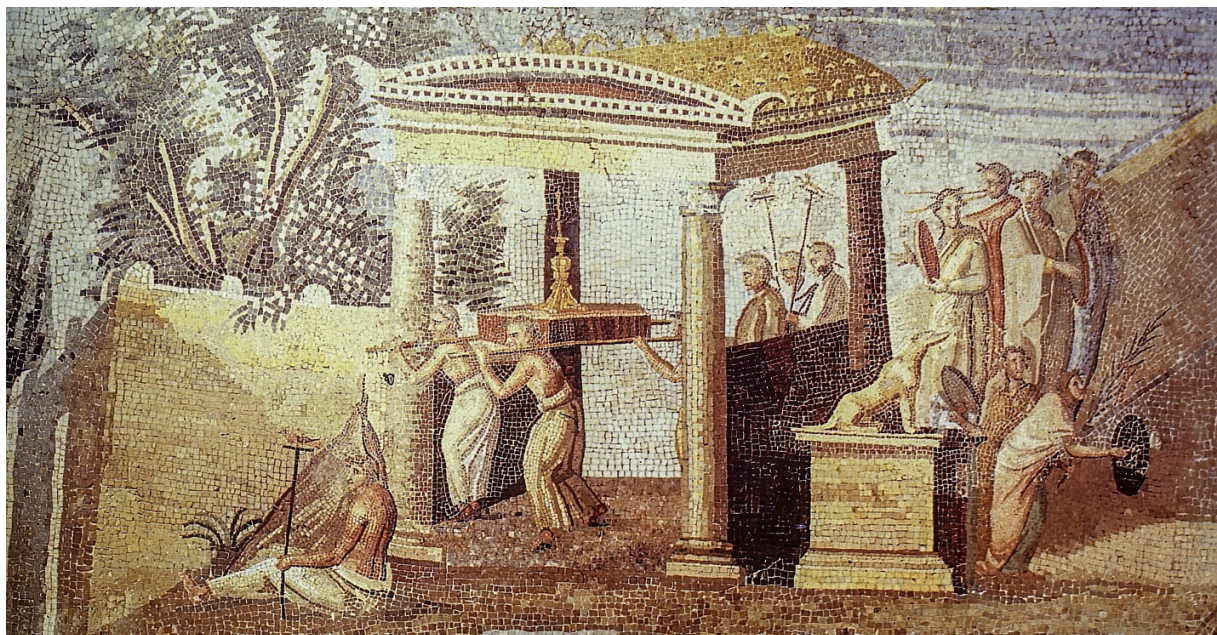


Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.



Fig 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.

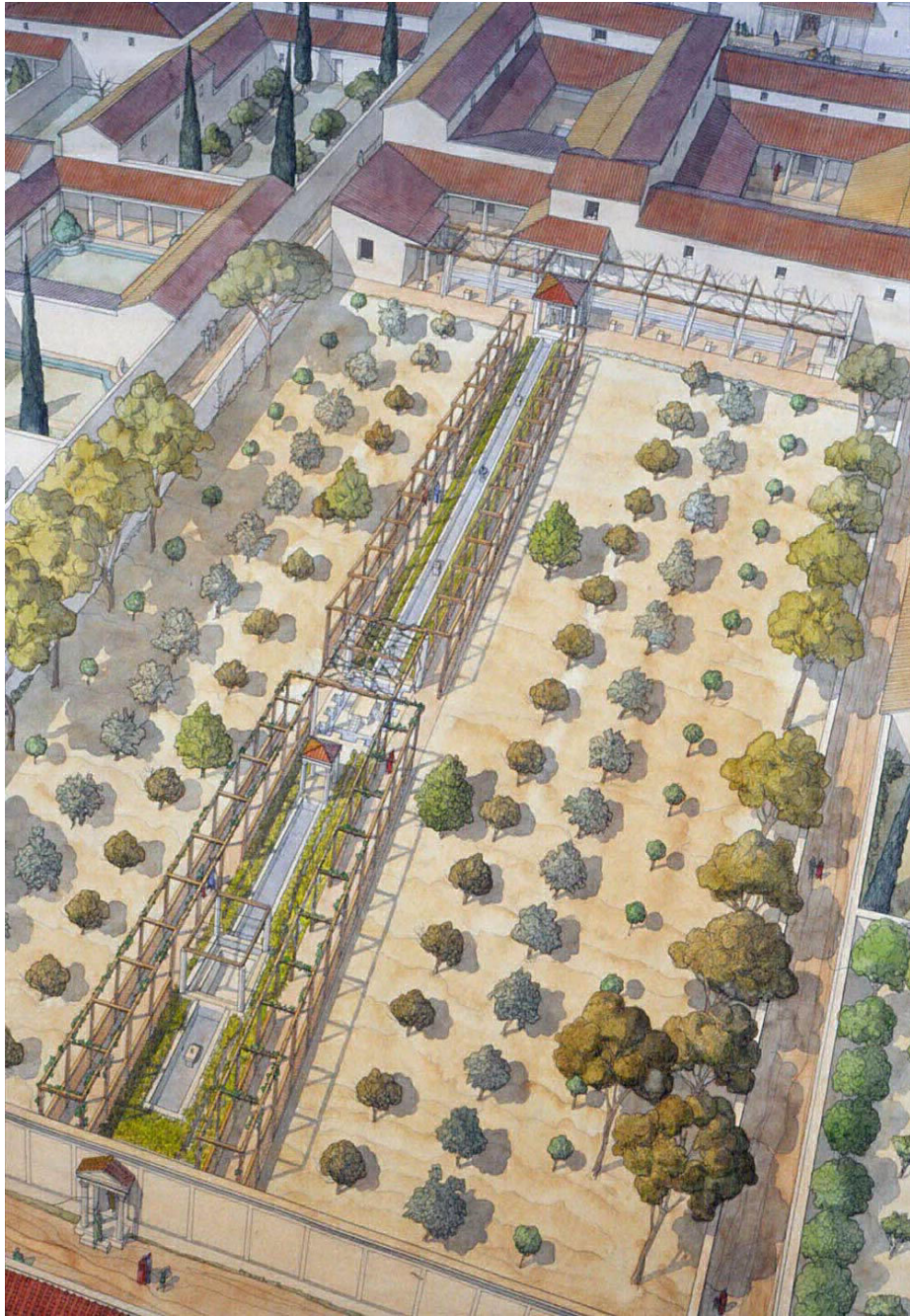


Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.



Fig. 13.



Fig. 14.



Fig. 15.



Fig. 16.



Fig. 17.

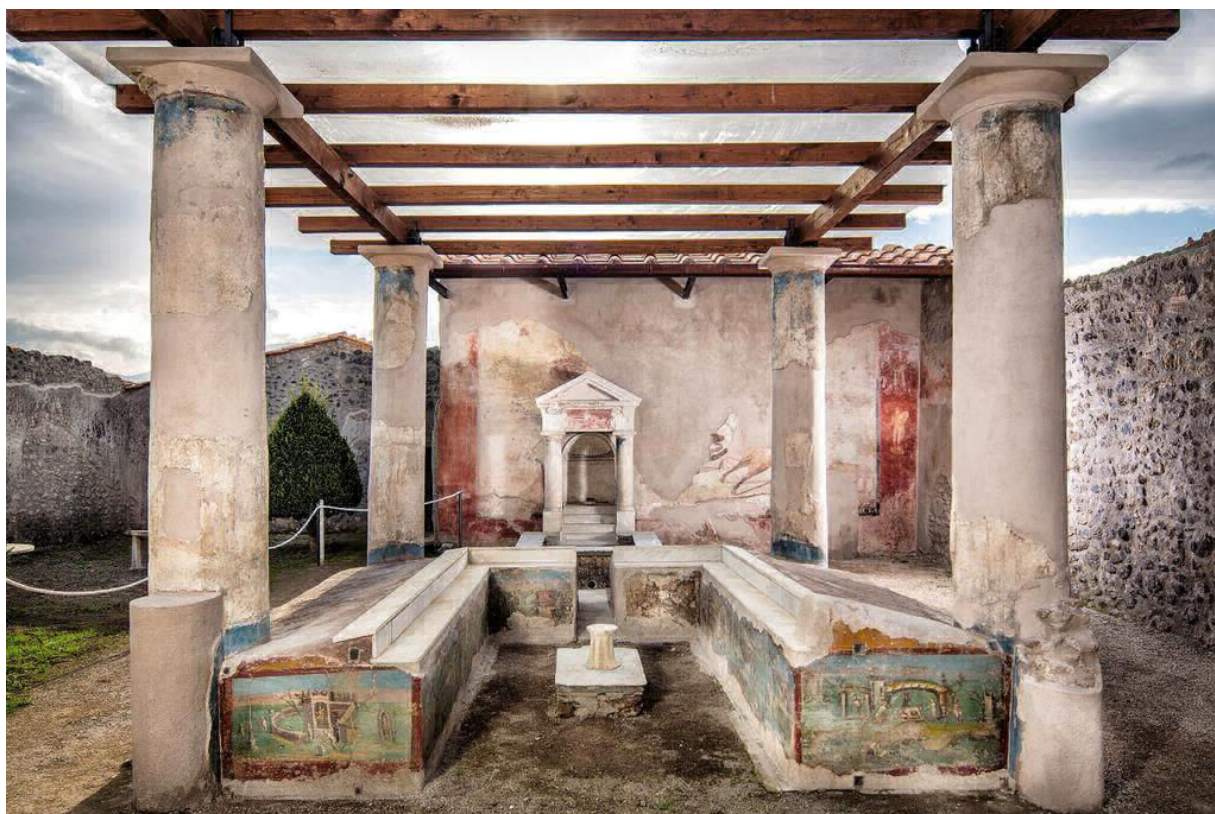


Fig. 18.





Fig. 19.





Fig. 20.



Fig. 21.



Fig. 22.



Fig. 23.



Fig. 24.



Fig. 25.



Fig. 26.



Fig. 27.



Fig. 28.



Fig. 29.

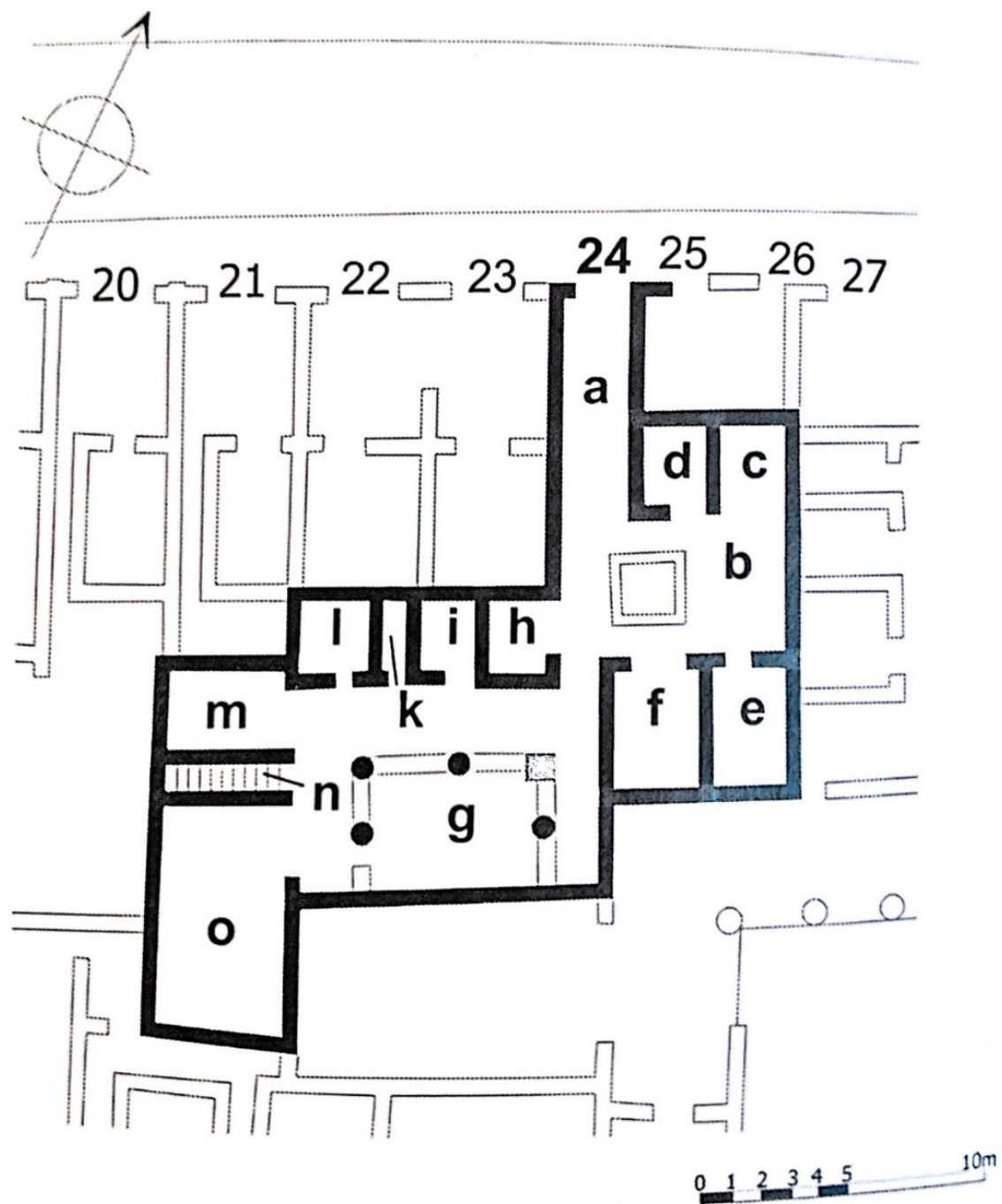


Fig. 30.



Fig. 31.



Fig. 32.



Fig. 33.



Fig. 34.



Fig. 35.