CHAPTER THREE

AN ELUSIVE MODEL:
IMAGES OF EGYPT’S MULTICULTURAL IDENTITY
IN THE PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS

Insgesamt wird man jedoch sagen dürfen, dass Fremde und Ägypter eher aufeinander-zugegangen sind, als dass sie immer mehr auseinander gedriffet wären.¹

1. The Arts of the Ptolemaic Period

1.1. Cultural Apartheid or Cultural Symbiosis?

Any overview of the Hellenistic imprint on Nubia has to be started by noting that Hellenistic concepts, forms, styles and objects arrived in Meroe exclusively from, or by the mediation of, Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. Consequently, our image of Hellenistic Nubia greatly depends on how we see the culture of Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt.

In this chapter I shall raise the question: to what extent can we agree with either of the two current scholarly scenarios describing Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt in the terms of a “cultural apartheid” or a “cultural symbiosis”, respectively. On this question I shall give an eclectic answer based on such pieces of evidence as indicating an increasing cultural interaction between Egyptians and Greeks.² The evidence to be discussed in the following chapters is intended to present arguments against rather than for Jean Bingen’s conclusion, according to whom

among the classic parameters of cultural interactions, language, education, literature, religion and the like, in most respects what prevailed was several centuries of relative opaqueness, impossibility or refusal of excessively visible cultural borrowings.3

At the same time, however, we shall keep in sight the fact too that this interaction could not lead to an absolute synthesis of the two cultures or to the creation of an all-embracing new system of representation that would blend the disparate Egyptian and Greek systems of visual representation, because it was determined by contradictory, difficult and uneven processes of political, social, and ethnic integration.

From the publication of Theodor Schreiber’s first article on Alexandrian sculpture in 1885,4 the scholarly image of Ptolemaic art was determined by the—usually extremist—answers given to three questions. The first: was there such a thing as a distinctive Alexandrian style.5 The second: was there such a thing as a “mixed style” (“Mischstil”),6 and if yes what was its significance. The third, more recently formulated, question is: should we describe,7 as suggested by László Castiglione,8 the artistic production of Ptolemaic Egypt in the terms of a dualité du style or should we rather try to trace in it processes of inventing “new idiom[s] that creatively combined disparate cultural elements”, as suggested by Paul Stanwick in his splendid book on the portraits of the Ptolemies.9

---

4 Schreiber 1885.—For the “Alexandrian style” in Hellenistic sculpture, see also W. Amelung: Dell’arte alessandrina a proposito di due teste rivenute in Roma. Bullettino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma 25 (1897) 110–142; A. Adriani: Testimonianze e monumenti di scultura alessandrina. Roma 1948.
5 F. Poulsen: Gab es eine alexandrinische Kunst? From the Collections of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 2 (1939) 1–52; A. Stewart 1996 239.
6 Recently, Paul Stanwick distinguishes the “hellenized style combining Egyptian and Greek ideas” from a “mezzo” style which “evinces a familiarity with Greek sculptures. Instead of duplicating the Greek visages, however, the ‘mezzo’ style takes an interpretative Egyptian approach to evoking them and incorporates more native ideas”. In his view, examples of the ‘mezzo’ style are known only from the Fayoum. Stanwick 2004 402, 406.
7 Cf. Riggs 2002; Riggs 2005 6 ff. and passim.
8 Castiglione 1961.
9 Stanwick 2002 88.