

EGYPT IN ROMAN IMPERIAL LITERATURE: TACITUS' ANN. 2.59-61

Lina Girdvainytė

Faculty of Classics
University of Oxford

Abstract. *The article analyses Tacitus' account of Germanicus' Egyptian voyage (Ann. 2.59-61) in the context of anti-Egyptian discourse met with in the Roman imperial literature. After a brief discussion of Egypt's place in the Greek and Roman imagination, the article goes on to examine Tacitus' use of Egypt by considering the role of Germanicus in the Egyptian setting, as well as questioning the presence of prevalent (Graeco-) Roman stereotypes in the given passage. Throughout the paper, it is argued that the use of Egypt in Tacitus' account is far more complex than the notion of general anti-Egyptian sentiment allows, and that the Tacitean representation of Egypt does not entirely fit into the paradigm of Graeco-Roman 'Othering'. Rather than describing Egypt for its own sake, the account is carefully and artistically arranged in order to convey Tacitus' own anti-imperialist views, implicit in his other works, such as the Histories and Agricola.*

Keywords: *Egypt, Tacitus, Roman imperialism, literary representation, intertextuality.*

1. Introductory notes

Egypt has occupied a special place in Greek and Roman thought or, rather, imagination since their very first encounters with Egypt's long-lived civilization. The magnificence of Pharaonic architecture, the breath-taking landscape of the river Nile, and the strangeness of Egyptian religion and customs were the main elements which contributed to the creation of Egypt's twofold perception: it was the land of exoticism and fascination on the one hand, and the ultimate manifestation of 'Otherness' on the other. The Graeco-Roman perceptions of Egypt, as they appear in literary sources and visual arts, have received substantial treatment in scholarly

literature: a good summary of a variety of attitudes towards Egypt and its inhabitants is offered by B. Isaac (2004) in *The invention of racism in classical antiquity*, while E.S. Gruen (2011) dedicates a chapter to 'Egypt in the Classical imagination' in his *Rethinking the Other in Antiquity*. Some of the works, such as M.-J. Versluys' (2002) *Aegyptiaca Romana*, have conveniently aimed at bringing together both literary and visual representations of Egypt in Roman art and literature.

The scholarship has often attempted to combine and compare Greek and Roman conceptualizations of Egypt, in the hope of discerning certain common patterns and tracing the most prevalent stereotypes. In-

deed, to quote Gruen, the mysterious people of Egypt “embodied practices, beliefs, and traditions remote from and even unintelligible to Greek and Roman inquirers” (Gruen 2011, 76). Egypt was, therefore, treated similarly to the other territories along the fringes of the Hellenocentric world, such as Ethiopia, Libya, India or Scythia¹. Yet Gruen has justly noted on the tendency of modern scholars to collect isolated bits and pieces from Aristophanes to Juvenal and “parade them as sampling of Greek and Roman evaluations of Egypt”, the tendency which is “not only methodologically flawed but also downright misleading”². Rather than generalizing, he suggests, one should take a closer look at separate authors and employ an in-depth analysis of single representations, as these may then appear less uniform and carry a wider range of meanings³.

Following Gruen’s suggestion, this paper will, after a short discussion of Egypt’s place in the Roman world, focus on the representation of Egypt in Tacitus’ *Annales* 2.59-61. The analysis of the passage will be divided into three sections, each dedicated to one of the recurring themes in Egypt’s discussions by the Graeco-Roman authors. The paper will aim at examining the use of Egypt in the Tacitean narrative by considering the role of the main cha-

racter Germanicus in the Egyptian setting, as well as questioning the presence of prevalent stereotypes in the given passage. Throughout this paper I will argue that the use of Egypt in Tacitus’ account is far more complex than the notion of general anti-Egyptian discourse would allow, and that the Tacitean representation of Egypt does not entirely fit into the paradigm of Graeco-Roman ‘Othering’.

2. Egypt in (Graeco-) Roman antiquity

To the majority of Greek and Roman authors, Egypt was more than merely an intriguing land. Herodotus’ representation of Egypt, largely ethnographic as it is, appears to be used to both contrast its landscape and customs to those of the Greeks (or, in fact, of all other peoples), and to argue that in Egypt lay the roots of his own Greek civilization⁴. Nevertheless, we discern the stereotyping of ethnic traits, such as Egyptian fraudulence, greed or arrogance since Aeschylus and the Old Comedy (Isaac 2004, 358; 369). The Roman conceptualization of Egypt was inevitably influenced by the prevalent Greek representations and stereotypes. We see early Roman authors largely following the footsteps of Herodotus and Polybius, and focusing on the same peculiarities that have both fascinated and disturbed the Greeks: the annual flood and cultivation of the Nile, administration of Egypt, or religious institution of animal worship⁵.

¹ Cf. Karttunen (2002, 457-474).

² Gruen (2011, 101), noting on the assembling of anti-Egyptian attitudes of Roman authors in Balsdon (1979, 68-69), Reinhold (1980, 97-103), Sonnabend (1986, 49-62; 96-108), Isaac (2004, 356-369) *et al.*

³ Similarly, Versluys (2002, 434): “in an investigation of specific authors [...] the conclusion may be less stereotypical and more nuanced”. However, Versluys’ insists that no surviving author of the first centuries CE gives his own impression or attempts to nuance the negative perception of Egypt by emphasizing other aspects (*ibid.*).

⁴ Cf. Lloyd (2002, 426): “Egyptian history is mostly used to illustrate and confirm fundamentally Greek perceptions of the world”.

⁵ Admittedly, the Greek image of Egypt was largely positive, and in the third and second centuries BCE “there is no author with a consistently negative connota-

However, the political situation of the late Republic and early Principate introduced some significant changes to the paradigm. The role that Egypt and, most importantly, Alexandria have played in Caesar's war with Pompey and, later on, in that of Octavian and Mark Antony seemingly transformed the perceptions of Egypt in Rome. The land of exotic attraction became the embodiment of a variety of negative vices: excess, superstition, rashness, untrustworthiness and so on. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, Cicero was the first Roman author to negatively express himself about Egypt and, in particular, Alexandria. His views, although not at all times consistent and heavily dependent on a preconceived argument, have influenced later authors, especially with regards to Egypt's inhabitants and their odd religious practices⁶. The majority of negative stereotypes and imagery, however, were coined slightly later by the Augustan poets of what may be called the (immediate) post-Actian period: Alexandria took blame for the assassination of Pompey, Cleopatra became a symbol of deceptive seductions of the East, while references to animal worship and a *cliché* image of Egyptians as coward barbarians were repeated throughout literary texts⁷. The anti-Egyptian propaganda of Augustan poets permeated history writing too, as Strabo's *Geography* provides a canonical view of Rome civilizing Egypt (2.5.12, 11.11.5, 17.1.29, 17.1.46, 17.1.50), thus in line with the Augustan ideology⁸.

The so-called post-Augustan conceptualization of Egypt is generally thought to have followed the Actian vein as well⁹. While some of the stereotypes and negative *clichés* (animal worship, Egyptian untrustworthiness) continued to be used more frequently than the others, new political and cultural circumstances determined a shift in the Roman discourse on Egypt. With the Augustan ideology gradually fading, and Roman imperialism growing to absorb newly acquired territories, Egypt received a new range of significations¹⁰. Manolaraki draws one's attention to Vespasian's (r. 69-79 CE) seizure of power with support of the Eastern legions, as well as the Flavians' patronage of Egyptian cults, all of which seemingly provided an altered historical context for Egypt (Manolaraki 2013, 13). As Smelik and Hemelrijk noted, conceptualization between peoples in contact "gains a special dimension, if contacts are of potentially hostile nature, e.g. situations of impending war, of domination, occupation, colonization or resistance to a dominating power" (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, 1856). The contact between Rome as an ever-growing imperial power and Egypt as one of its recent acquisitions thus created a wide spectrum of significations which could be employed towards a variety of different ends. The representation of Egypt in Roman writing became ever more dependent on the context, genre and the aims of an author.

tion of Egypt and Egyptians", Versluys (2002), 426.

⁶ Cf. Cicero *Rab. Post.* 12.35, and *Nat. D.* 1.16.43. See also discussion of Egyptian religion in *Nat. D.* 1.81-82, 1.101, and 3.47.

⁷ For a fuller treatment, see Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984), Nimis (2004) and Manolaraki (2013).

⁸ Manolaraki (2013), 31. Strabo, nevertheless, does not add much new to the negative representation of Egypt.

⁹ Manolaraki (2013) claims this to be the reason why post-Augustan conceptualization of Egypt has received far less treatment in modern scholarship than that of the Augustan times. The author, therefore, chooses to discuss the texts of Lucan, Valerius, Statius, Pliny the Younger, Fronto, Plutarch and Philostratus, relating to the 'imaginings' of Egypt and, specifically, of the Nile.

¹⁰ Manolaraki (2013), 16 calls this process a 'redefinition of Augustan imprint'.

There were three main topics pertinent to the land which happened to recur in the Roman literature throughout centuries: the *antiquities*, *religion*, and *people* of Egypt. These were the main triggers that made people in Rome talk about Egypt: the fascination with country's history, landscape and monuments was diluted with contempt and disdain for religious practices and loose lifestyle of Egypt's population. Such divergent conceptualizations are already found in the Augustan poets: Vergil praises the fertility of Egypt in *Georg.* 4.287-294, yet bashes the 'Egyptian wife' of Mark Antony in *Aen.* 8.688 (cf. *coniunx Aegyptia* in Ovid's *Met.* 185.826), and contrasts traditional Roman divinities to Cleopatra's 'monster-gods' and 'barking Anubis'¹¹. Similarly, in Tibullus we encounter both reverence for the river Nile and the assessment of Egyptians as barbarian worshipers of the Apis bull, all in the course of a few lines (1.7.23-28)¹². Stereotypes and general ideas that one nation had about another could, as it seems, be self-contradictory, as they were intended to function only in a specific context¹³. The aforementioned pattern of general focus on Egypt's *antiquities*, *religion* and *people* will further on be used in the analysis of the account of Germanicus' visit to Egypt in Tacitus' *Ann.* 2.59-61. A closer look at how these three key elements are presented or, perhaps, unrepresented in the account should

allow us to trace the continuity and rigidity of some images, and the flexibility or relativity of the others.

3. Tacitus' *Annales* 2.59-61

Tacitus' *Annals*, written sometime between 100-110 CE, is the history of the city of Rome, which examines the reigns of Tiberius, Claudius, Nero, and those who reigned in the so-called Year of the Four Emperors, thus covering years 14-68 CE. It has long been noticed that in the *Annals*, much like in the *Histories*, Tacitus is critical of almost everyone and everything he chooses to discuss: the senators, the soldiers, even the emperors are full of weaknesses and vices. Tacitus' treatment of Germanicus in the first two books of the *Annals*, nevertheless, appears of a somewhat more complex nature. Germanicus is, undoubtedly, a character of major importance in Tacitus' work. First of all, he was a member of Julio-Claudian dynasty: grandson-in-law and great-nephew of Augustus, nephew and adoptive son of Tiberius, father of Caligula, as well as brother of Claudius, and the maternal grandfather of Nero. Apart from his familial ties, Germanicus was a prominent general himself, and was widely perceived by the Romans as the only hope of restitution of the Republic¹⁴. Precisely this duality of Germanicus' character may have enabled Tacitus to use him in a variety of ways in order to convey one or another message¹⁵. For instance, Germanicus is not infrequently perceived as a foil to Tiberius in Tacitus' accounts, due to historian's emphasis on

¹¹ *Aen.* 8.698-700: *omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis contra Neptunum et Venerem contraque Minervam tela tenent*. Cf. Gruen (2011, 108).

¹² These and more examples in Manolaraki (2013, 34-5).

¹³ Such stereotypes, according to Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984, 1856), "are not product of purposive thinking, but can more aptly be considered as irrational and non-verifiable opinions which have been adopted by the group because of their tried practicability".

¹⁴ Germanicus as hope in Tacitus: *Ann.* 1.33.1-2; 3.4.1; 2.49.2.

¹⁵ For Tacitus' treatment of Germanicus throughout the *Annals*, see Shotter (1968) and O'Gorman (2000).

their reversed values. Furthermore, as O’Gorman asserts, Germanicus’ position in the history of the Principate raises crucial questions about how meaning is created in the interplay between past and present (O’Gorman 2000, 46). In other words, Germanicus often appears to be ‘out of place’ in the Tiberian regime, as he acquires historical significance retrospectively, thus acting as a symbol of the past in the Tacitean narrative (O’Gorman 2000, 47)¹⁶. Similarly, Luce and Woodman take note of the lack of consistency in Tacitus’ treatment of the young general (Luce and Woodman 1993, 60). The question worth asking here is from whose perspective is the account of Germanicus’ visit to Egypt actually written: from that of Germanicus’ or Tacitus’ own? Is the digression on Germanicus’ voyage intended to say something about the past (or perhaps present) of Egypt, the character and sentiments of Germanicus toward the land, or is it rather constructed and employed to convey certain views of Tacitus regarding both matters?

While the account has been called the prime evidence for Egypt’s strategic role in the empire by Manolaraki, Kelly observes that *Ann.* 2.59-61 is a rather odd passage, in that it is the most detailed account of Germanicus’ sightseeing activities (Kelly 2010, 221).

Egypt stands alongside the other places that Germanicus sets out to see, yet the representation of the land and the artistic arrangement of the account, together with Germanicus’ own portrayal, demand a meticulous treatment. Germanicus’ itinerary appears as follows: he starts with Alexan-

dria, then continues on to Canopus, visits the ruins of ancient Thebes, the colossus of Memnon, the pyramids near Memphis, the lake Moeri, the abyss or the so-called ‘source’ of the Nile and, finally, pays a visit to Syene and Elephantine¹⁷.

3.1 *Antiquitates*

At the outset of his account, Tacitus clearly states what Germanicus’ real and assumed reasons for his Egyptian voyage were: the young general set out for Egypt in order to learn of its antiquities (*cognoscendae antiquitatis*), yet the pretended reason was concern for the province (*cura provinciae praetendebatur*)¹⁸. The only activity of Germanicus, pertinent to *cura provinciae*, that Tacitus informs us of is the lowering of the price of corn by opening the state granaries (*levavitque apertis horreis pretia frugum, Ann.* 2.59.1). The historian further elaborates on Germanicus’ popular behaviour: “he adopted many habits welcome to the public – walking around without soldiery, his feet uncovered, and in an attire identical with that of the Greeks” (*multaque in vulgus grata usurpavit: sine milite incedere, pedibus intectis et pari cum Graecis amictu*)¹⁹. Consequently, Tacitus invokes Germanicus’ *civilitas* by comparing him to a Republican hero P. Scipio, and contrasting Germanicus’ conduct in Alexandria with the reaction of Tiberius, who criticized the young general’s behaviour and his neglect of the Augustan pro-

¹⁷ Interestingly and, perhaps, not incidentally, Alexandria, Canopus and Memphis are often portrayed as symbols of various vices in Roman literary texts.

¹⁸ Cf. *cognoscendae vetustatis* in Curtius Rufus’ *Historia Alexandri Magni* 4.8.3 on Alexander’s visit to Egypt.

¹⁹ Here and further, translation by A.J. Woodman.

¹⁶ See discussion on pp. 8-9 below.

hibition on Roman senators or equestrians of higher rank to enter Egypt without the imperial consent (*Tiberius ... acerrime increpuit, quod contra instituta Augusti non sponte principis Alexandriam introisset, Ann. 2.59.2*)²⁰. In a few lines, thus, Tacitus both demonstrates the typical fascination that the Romans had with Egypt, and alludes to Augustus' imperialist policy and fear of opposition (*Ann. 2.59.3*). Having revealed the actual reason for his visit to Egypt, Tacitus uses Germanicus' fascination with the Egyptian antiquities and manoeuvres the general's voyage to show his readers what was left of the country's past glory. The author seems to employ the *antiquitates* of Egypt to communicate his own anti-imperialist views in the hope of appealing to his reader of a similar mind.

In the following paragraph (2.60) Tacitus elaborates on the sites which Germanicus goes on to see. Each of the ancient sites that he visits is represented in a way evoking a certain tyrant or hero and, consequently, his failure or misfortune: the town of Canopus is related to Menelaus, the river-mouths to Hercules, Thebes to Pharaoh Rhamses *etc.*²¹. Furthermore, Germanicus' itinerary creates allusions to the tyrants of a more recent day: parallels with Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar are markedly present displays of

the Tacitean irony²². One of the sites that Germanicus visits is granted exclusively elaborate treatment by Tacitus, namely, the inscription of King Rhamses in Thebes:

et manebant structis molibus litterae Aegyptiae, priorem opulentiam complexae: iussusque e senioribus sacerdotum patrium sermonem interpretari referebat habitasse quondam septingenta milia aetate militari, atque eo cum exercitu regem Rhamsen Libya Aethiopia Medisque et Persis et Bactriano ac Scythia potitum quasque terras Suri Armeniique et contigui Cappadoeces colunt, inde Bithynum, hinc Lycium ad mare imperio tenuisse. legebantur et indicta gentibus tributa, pondus argenti et auri, numerus armorum equorumque et dona templis ebur atque odores, quasque copias frumenti et omnium utensilium quaeque natio penderet, haud minus magna quam nunc vi Parthorum aut potentia Romana iubentur (*Ann. 2.60*).

“And on the massive structures there remained Egyptian letters, summarizing its former wealthiness: one of the priests' elders, ordered to interpret his native language, reported that seven hundred thousand men of military age had once lived there and that with that army King Rhamses – having gained control of Libya, Ethiopia, and the Medes and Persians, the Bactrian and Scythian, and the lands which the Syrians, Armenians, and adjacent Cappadocians inhabit – had held under his command the area from the Bithynian sea on the one side to the Lycian on the other. Also read out were the taxes imposed on various peoples, the weight of silver and gold, the number of weapons and horses, and gifts of ivory and perfumes to the temples, and the amounts of grain and of all the comestibles which each nation paid – contributions no less magnificent than those that are now at the bidding of the Parthians' might or Roman powerfulness”.

²⁰ Kelly (2010, 223-4). Cf. Cass. Dio 51.17. See also Suetonius' *Tib.* 52 on Tiberius' lack of affection toward Germanicus, illustrated by his reaction to Germanicus' unsanctioned trip to Alexandria. Suetonius, nevertheless, vindicates Germanicus' deed by saying his trip was due to the severe famine. Josephus *Ap.* 2.5 also mentions Germanicus' presence in Alexandria in the context of corn distribution in a time of major deficiency.

²¹ This is argued throughout Kelly (2010), esp. 227-230.

²² Cf. Lucan *B.C.* 10.189-93, 268-282; see p. 9 below.

It is unconvincing, Kelly aptly argues, to interpret this passage as a triumphal statement of the Roman power, especially given Tacitus' anti-imperialist views expressed elsewhere²³. Rather, one should perceive the comparison of the former success of Rhamses' rule to that of imperial Rome as a warning about the transience of kingly achievement (Kelly 2010, 226). Rhamses' inscription evokes monarchical power and vainglory, thus possibly alluding to Augustus' *Res Gestae* as well as later emperors' taste for displaying their deeds on inscriptions, at times hieroglyphic, in the city of Rome²⁴. Thus, to a Roman of Tacitus' day, the inscription of Rhamses' encountered by Germanicus would have evoked the "epigraphic self-aggrandizement of later Roman 'tyrants'", as well as the fascination that some of the Roman emperors had overtly demonstrated toward the hieroglyphic monuments or Egypt at large (Kelly 2010, 227). Furthermore, Romans viewed hieroglyphics as a mysterious and sacred script, which has led to them occasionally creating pseudo-hieroglyphics in the city of Rome or elsewhere in the Empire in order to legitimize the Egyptian character of a piece of art (O'Gorman 2000, 122; Swetnam-Burland 2007).

By the end of the first century BCE Rome herself was already full of Egyptian-themed material, so Tacitus' readers would

have known exactly what Tacitus was referring to.

O'Gorman also notes that the comparison of Rhamses' Egypt with Parthia and Rome acquires the status of an inscription itself: the comparative comment develops syntactically out of the translated inscription in such a way that it is not clear whether it is part of the story or the narrative, in other words, it remains obscure whether it is the priest, Germanicus, or Tacitus who makes the comparison. In this way, the comment "transcends the immediate time of reading" (O'Gorman 2000, 114). Germanicus, just as the reader of Tacitus' day, has the advantage of knowing the history: Rhamses' inscription is being rendered to him as a memory of what has been there once but no longer exists. O'Gorman seemingly agrees with Kelly in perceiving the inscription as a tool to evoke the image of the fall of Rhamses' realm, which in itself constitutes a warning to Germanicus and, simultaneously, to Tacitus' reader. Thus, the relationship between past and present, communicated through Germanicus' interest in Egypt's antiquities, presupposes "a cyclical narrative of successive empires" (O'Gorman 2000, 113).

The following kind of *antiquitates* that Germanicus views while in Egypt has to do with royal building activities, called *miracula* by Tacitus: in *Ann.* 2.61 we are presented with the colossus of King Memnon and the pyramids. Herodotus and Aristotle had already interpreted some pieces of Egyptian architecture as monuments to autocratic excess and tyranny (Hdt. 2.126-8, 136; Arist. *Pol.* 1313b), a perception later on adopted by Roman moralist writers (e.g. Pliny *H.N.* 36.75-82) (Kelly 2010, 228). Similarly, Martial employed

²³ Cf. *Agricola* 16, 21, 30-32.

²⁴ Cf. Hdt. 4.87 on kingly inscriptions. A good example of Roman *aemulatio* provided by Kelly (2010) is Domitian's (r. 81-96 CE) *Obeliscus Pamphylius* in Rome, a hieroglyphic inscription with traditional pharaonic traits attributed to Domitian: military strength, foreign conquests, extraction of taxes from Asia, as well as the same honorific names as those assigned to Rhamses II.

a denigrating comparison between Egyptian pyramids and the new Flavian palace on the Palatine in Rome (*Ep.* 8.36.2). In a similar vein, manipulation of nature is evoked, as Germanicus visits an excavated lake and the supposed sources of the river Nile (*lacusque effossa humo, superfluentis Nili receptacula; atque alibi angustiae et profunda altitudo, nullis inquirentium spatiis penetrabilis*, *Ann.* 2.61.1). Here, more clearly than ever, we see the important part that intertextuality plays in the Tacitean narrative, as the given passage resembles closely Lucan's account (*B.C.* 10.268-282) on Sesostrius, Cambyses, Alexander and Caesar all attempting to find the beginnings of the Nile, and all equally failing to do so. Tacitus' reader is thus invited to recall earlier – both Greek and Roman – authors who touched upon similar themes, and to follow the same train of thought.

The royal building, manipulation of nature and vain attempts at exploration are all integral parts of the Egyptian *antiquitates* that still fascinated the Romans of Tacitus' day. In this case, however, we observe something other than the typical fascination and admiration of Egypt's landscape. Rather, as Kelly argues, the *antiquitates* that Germanicus visits are all related to the transiency of royal achievement and, as such, likely reflect Tacitus' own attitude toward Roman imperialism. The invocation of such images, and the very use of Egypt as a historical *exemplum*, was still relevant to the audience of Tacitus' day. *Ann.* 2.59-61 is, as it seems, an 'Egyptian voyage' in which an alien viewer is not genuinely interested in describing Egypt for its own sake but rather for what it says about the viewer and his own world" (Kelly 2010,

236)²⁵. Similarly, Juvenal's celebrated fifteenth Satire may well be a ridicule of a typical stereotype-driven Roman rather than that of a stereotypical Egyptian²⁶. One should also consider Tacitus' use of irony when discussing these passages²⁷. As Gruen notes in his analysis of *Germania*, an indirect skewering of Romans is Tacitus' favourite pastime²⁸. The political situation in Rome and its dependence on the provinces (Egypt being one of the most important grain suppliers), the overarching whims of Emperors and the weakening of the Senate are all subject to ironical treatment in Tacitus, as he selects, arranges and manipulates his material in order to make his reader take a critical look.

3.2 Religion

Tacitus' selectivity manifests clearly in his choice of the sites that Germanicus visits. Much of this has to do with what the author intends to say or, rather, refrains from saying of Egypt's religion: for instance, Tacitus deliberately omits from his account Germanicus' visit to Memphis (the place of special contempt for the Romans, mainly due to its religious importance) and consulting the Apis bull. We read of Germanicus' visit to Memphis in other authors, and may safely assume Tacitus to have

²⁵ Kelly compares Herodotus' view on Egypt in the context of a democratic Greek polis, and that of Tacitus, who seemingly saw it as an opportunity to discuss cycles of power, domination and liberty of Rome.

²⁶ For a discussion of Juvenal's *Sat.* 15, see Singleton (1983) and McKim (1986).

²⁷ Cf. Gruen (2011, 161): "Irony is a Tacitean stock in trade", or Syme (1958, 206): "Irony is all-pervasive". For broader treatment of irony in Tacitus, see Köhnken (1973) and Robin (1973).

²⁸ Gruen (2011, 167), admitting that "the historian's irony applies as much to the *Germani*, as to the *Romani*".

known about it²⁹. The choice to suppress this immediately suggests Tacitus' unwillingness to portray the young general in the light of animal worship – the most despicable practice of Egyptian religion in the eyes of the Romans. Indeed, the absence of any reference to the notorious practice which had long stimulated people in Rome to talk about Egypt signals that painting a negative and stereotypical picture of the land was not amongst the primary aims of the account. In a similar vein, although referring to a different passage, Goodyear maintained that “Tacitus favours Germanicus by refraining from comment where comment was called for” (Goodyear 1972, 81). In fact, the same applies for Tacitus' treatment of Vespasian with regards to his patronage of the Egyptian cult of Isis and the night he had allegedly spent with Titus at the Serapeion (*Hist.* 4.81-82)³⁰.

The peculiar religious practices had long been marking the ‘outlandishness’ of Egypt, while the inhabitants of the land were called the most pious of all people by Herodotus (2.37, 2.65-76). Similarly, Cassius Dio declared the Egyptians to be the most religious people on earth (42.34.1-2), albeit elsewhere naming the easy and unpredictable character of the Egyptians as one of the reasons for Augustus' special treatment of the province (51.17.1-2)³¹. Alongside the material *Aegyptiaca*, Egypt's religion also found its way to Rome during the first century CE. Perhaps unsurprisingly,

ly, then, the Egyptian cults in Rome were, to quote Isaac, “a subject of ever recurring tension between those who fiercely disapproved of them and their adherents among the city populace” (Isaac 2004, 362). Tacitus is likely to be placed within the former grouping: it suffices to make note of a comment the historian makes elsewhere in the *Annals*, when speaking of the four thousand freedmen who adhered to Egyptian and Jewish rites, being shipped to Sardinia and employed there to suppress banditry: “if they died owing to the oppressiveness of the climate, it was a cheap loss” (*si ob gravitatem caeli interissent, vile damnum, Ann.* 2.85.4). Furthermore, the Roman discourse on Egypt's religion was largely aligned with the prevalent stereotype of Egyptian superstition. Lucian refers to Egyptians not so much as the most religious, but rather the most superstitious of all people (δεισιδαιμονέστατοί εἰσιν πάντων, *Pro imag.* 27), as opposed to θεοσεβέες in Herodotus (2.37). Similarly, in the *Histories*, Tacitus calls the Egyptians a nation devoted to superstition (*dedita superstitionibus gens, Hist.* 4.81)³².

Interestingly, the only reference to Egypt's religious life in the account of Germanicus' voyage is the presence of an Egyptian high priest interpreting Rhamses' inscription. The priest here appears as a key figure in representing the old Egypt together with its religious institutions: through him Germanicus learns of Rhamses' achievements and Egypt's former heyday. O'Gorman maintains that the figure of priest as an interpreter in Tac-

²⁹ Cf. Pliny *H.N.* 8.185 or, much later, Ammianus Marcellinus 22.14.8.

³⁰ Cf. Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984), 1933: “Tacitus attempts to minimize the role of Serapis in his report of the events of Alexandria. Tacitus seems to consider too close an association with this Egyptian god less commendable for Vespasian”.

³¹ Cf. Isaac (2004, 365).

³² Note the shift in the stereotyping of non-Roman peoples in Apuleius' *Florida* 6, wherein superstition is attributed to the Jews: *super Aegyptios eruditos et Iudaeos superstitiosos et Nabathaeos mercatores.*

itus' account is a sign of historical tradition evoking memory of similar figures in earlier historical narratives (cf. Egyptian priests in Hdt. 2.100-6 and Strab. 17.1.46) (O'Gorman 2000, 114). It is through such construction of narrative that in the Egyptian account, as well as the overall description of his sightseeing activities, Germanicus is portrayed as the reader of history. Indeed, Tacitus plays with the relationship between the reader, *i.e.* Germanicus, and the Pharaonic past as it is transmitted to him through the agency of the priest. It is also by means of this transmission, including the comparison of Egypt's past to Rome's contemporary might, that the story becomes available to the reader of Tacitus' narrative. The Egyptian high priest is thus the pivotal agent in the creation of historical significance and historical continuity, in that he acts as a story-teller and an interpreter between Egyptian and Latin, otherwise mutually incomprehensible (O'Gorman 2000, 49; 112-113).

By employing the figure of an Egyptian priest, Tacitus evokes the image of old Egyptian religious institution, essentially making the representative of that institution communicate to the Roman general the same message conveyed by references to royal building activities. It becomes fairly clear from Tacitus' account that he was not fond of Egyptian religion, nor was he in favour of Egyptian-themed monuments erected in Rome. We may interpret the absence of Germanicus' adherence to Egyptian religion in *Ann.* 2.59-61 as Tacitus' own sentiment toward Germanicus, for this way the general escapes negative light. Thus, what Tacitus does *not* say is of no lesser importance for the understanding of the Tacitean narrative.

3.3 People

Similarly to his omission of Germanicus' visit to Memphis, Tacitus leaves out Germanicus' enthusiastic reception by the Alexandrians, of which we read in the papyrological evidence³³. This may also have to do with Tacitus' desire to maintain critical distance between Germanicus and the immediate Egyptian surroundings: Germanicus remains more of a viewer from the outside world than an active participant throughout the account. Alongside Egyptian religion, the country's inhabitants were largely perceived and portrayed in a negative light by the Romans. Isaac goes as far as to conclude that "there was no other people that so irritated many Greeks and Romans as Egyptians" (Isaac 2004, 370). Notably, a great number of anti-Egyptian comments present in the Roman authors in fact refer to the people of Alexandria: for instance, a fairly harsh remark by Cicero in his *Rab. Post.* 34-36 refers to Alexandrians, and not native Egyptians. Similarly, Alexandrians are portrayed as a deceitful folk (*gens fallax*) in the *Bellum Alexandrinum* 24³⁴.

These were the people who welcomed Germanicus in Alexandria with their arms

³³ Cf. Germanicus' edict, wherein he rejects divine honours accorded to him by the Alexandrians upon his arrival (*S.B.* 1.3924, ll. 31-45), and semi-literary *P.Oxy.* 25.2435r, which may also be referring to Germanicus' visit.

³⁴ Meanwhile, the Alexandrians themselves had equally negative views about the native Egyptian folk, cf. Achilles Tatius, an Alexandrian-born, who writes: "For the Egyptian is subject to the most slavish cowardice when he is afraid and the most fool-hardy rashness when encouraged by his position; in neither case has he moderation – he either bows to the fortune with overgreat pusillanimity, or displays in success more than idiotic temerity" (*Leucippe and Clitophon* IV.14, transl. by B. Isaac).

wide open, and this is precisely what Tacitus fails to mention at all. Admittedly, the author notes on the general's popular behaviour while in Alexandria (*multaque in vulgus grata usurpavit*, 2.59.1), yet his invocation of Germanicus' Greek-like dress reminds more of Strabo's narrative, wherein the historian reiterates Polybius' contention that the Alexandrians, although a disorderly and mixed race, were still better than the natives, as they retained the customs common to the Greeks (ἐμμένηντο τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν Ἑλλήνων ἔθους, Strab. 17.1.12-13). Once again, we may speculate that it was not in Tacitus' interest, at least not in that of the present account, to invoke and elaborate on Egypt's inhabitants. Germanicus' fascination with the country and the purpose of his journey were perhaps found less affirmative and more neutral having left the cheering crowds of Alexandrians outside the picture.

Indeed, Egypt is largely portrayed by Tacitus as an ancient country nearly empty of people: it almost stands as a monument itself to the faded glory of the Pharaonic past. The only person to appear alongside Germanicus is the Egyptian high priest; yet even he, as discussed in the previous section, is assigned a specific role to play. This notion is only reaffirmed by the fact that Tacitus does not refrain from negative comment toward Egyptians elsewhere in his works. In fact, Egypt is the only province in the introductory passage of the *Historiae* to deserve a separate treatment with regards to its native inhabitants:

ita visum expedire, provinciam aditu difficilem, annonae fecundam, superstitione ac lascivia discordem et mobilem, insciam legum, ignaram magistratuum, domi retinere (Hist. 1.1.11).

"It had seemed wise to keep thus under the direct control of the imperial house a

province which is difficult of access, productive of great harvests, but given to civil strife and sudden disturbances because of the fanaticism and superstition of its inhabitants, ignorant as they are of laws and unacquainted with civil magistrates"³⁵.

Isaac describes this explanatory comment as "a majority of the standard slurs against Egypt as encountered in the sources, expressed with typical Tacitean brevity" (Isaac 2004, 362).

Similarly incongruent treatment of a foreign people is observed in Tacitus' *Germania*. As Gruen convincingly argues, Tacitus is as much interested in the Romans, as he is in the Germans. So, at the same time, much like Germanicus' Egyptian voyage, the treatise on Germans constitutes a reflection on Tacitus' own countrymen (Gruen 2011, 160). Due to the nuance, complexity, ambiguity and irony, all of which are typical of the Tacitean narrative, both accounts seem to be constructed to convey a specific message no less than to describe a foreign land and its peculiarities. What Gruen maintains of Tacitus' *Germania*, namely, that it offers more than a simplistic contrast between the Germans and the Romans, may thus be extended to the Egyptian account too, only that the descriptive function of the latter is hardly at all there, for there are almost no locals to be compared and evaluated.

Although Versluys notes that the inhabitants of Egypt are generally characterized by the Roman authors as complete opposites of the ideal Roman, this notion does not fully fit the case of Tacitus³⁶. The

³⁵ Transl. by C.H. Moore. Cf. also the aforementioned *Hist.* 4.81: *dedita superstitionibus gens*.

³⁶ Versluys 2002, 437. Versluys may also be too assertive in his claim that "both literary sources and Nilotic scenes are (in general) purely negative about Egypt and her culture", *ibid.* 439.

historian is far too complex and constructive in his treatment of Egypt, his narrative heavily dependent on the purpose it is meant to fulfil within each account. It is, nevertheless, evident from Tacitus' choice to employ certain themes and images while restraining from explicit treatment of Egypt's inhabitants and their religion, that there was a tendency among the Roman authors to separate Egypt's landscape and its *antiquitates* from its people.

4. Conclusions

Contrary to the widely assumed existence of a purely negative image, reverence to Egypt's past and the antiquities of the land seems to coexist in the Roman discourse with disdain to its present situation, its customs and decadence. From the first century CE onward, the Roman representation of Egypt goes beyond mere ethnographic stereotyping of the 'Other'. While the focal points in Roman literary representations of Egypt remain largely the same – *antiquitates*, religion, and people – there seems to be increasingly more space for interpretation and, perhaps, imagination in using Egypt in order to convey a variety of meanings. The pejorative stereotypes and conceptualizations of Egypt remain markedly varied throughout the Graeco-Roman antiquity.

Similarly to Hellenocentric Greek writers, Romans also viewed Egyptians through their own Roman lens³⁷. While the general prejudice towards Egypt and its long-lived traditions, such as animal worship, remains vital in the mentality of its foreign Graeco-Roman counterparts, stereotypes adopted from the Greek tradi-

tion appear to be somewhat modified by the Roman imperial discourse. The conflicting conceptualizations of Egypt in Roman literary sources may be reconciled by the notion of an apparent gap between the Roman understanding of Egypt's material culture (its landscape and *antiquitates*), and the nature and customs of its inhabitants. Some of the stereotypes remain fairly more fixed than the others: while one may describe Egypt's *antiquitates* or religion (e.g. cults of Isis or Serapis) on a positive note, the Egyptian religious practice of animal worship or certain traits of native inhabitants remain negative throughout the period discussed and beyond. This notion may only be confirmed by the absence of the latter two elements in Tacitus' *Ann.* 2.59-61.

In his account of Germanicus' visit to Egypt, Tacitus is less interested in describing Egypt for its own sake, and focuses instead on constructing the narrative in such a way that it would serve his overall aim. Egypt's state at the time of Germanicus' visit is likely meant to remind Tacitus' reader of the transience and fragility of monarchical rule. The country appears to be desolate and empty of people, thus almost acquiring the status of an ancient monument itself. Germanicus' figure in Egypt is primarily that of an observer from the outside world: critical distance is maintained and propagated by the author. The only person to appear in the Egyptian account alongside Germanicus is an Egyptian high priest, who embodies the antiquity of Egypt's religious institutions and acts as a medium or, rather, a communicator of Tacitus' message to Germanicus and, simultaneously, to his reader.

Tacitus' portrayal of the country in the present account has to do less with

³⁷ Cf. Isaac 2004, 369.

the representation of Egypt and more with its potential to serve as a source of comparison in Roman moralist writing. One of the fiercest portrayals of Egypt found in Juvenal's *Fifteenth Satire*, when seen in the ramifications of its genre and context, may equally be interpreted as an expression of "a more general lament about the decline of morals and nostalgia for an earlier day when men's better nature still

prevailed"³⁸. For both authors, Egypt may have merely provided a dramatic setting rather than evoked the story told. At the time of their writing, Egypt was very much present in Rome. It remained the land of multiple, both positive and negative significations. The material was there to be collected, tailored and employed as it guaranteed readers' attention; one only had to decide how and to what ends to use it.

³⁸ Gruen 2011, 110 on *Juv. Sat.* 15.131-74.

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EGIPTAS ROMOS IMPERIJOS LITERATŪROJE: TACITO ANN. 2.59-61

Lina Girdvainytė

S a n t r a u k a

Straipsnyje detaliai analizuojamas Tacito pasakojimas apie Germaniko kelionę po Egiptą (*Ann.* 2.59-60) bei siūloma pažvelgti į šį tekstą platesniame Romos imperijos literatūros, kurioje neretai Egiptas vaizduojamas nepalankiai, kontekste. Po trumpos Egipto vietos graikų ir romėnų literatūroje apžvalgos autorė nagrinėja, kaip Egiptas pristatomas veikalo ištraukoje, atsižvelgdama į tai, koks pasakojimo santykis su vyraujančiais stereotipais bei kokį vaidmenį Egipto aplinkoje atlieka pagrindinis veikėjas Germanikas. Egipto kultūros paminklai (*antiquitates*), šalies gyventojai bei jų religija buvo dažnai senovės autorių gvildenamos temos, audrinusios skaitytojų vaizduotę. Susižavėjimas šalies istorija, kraštovaizdžiu ir monumentais buvo sumišęs su panieka ir pasibaisėjimu Egipto gyventojų religiniais papročiais bei charakterio bruožais. Straipsnis siūlo pažvelgti į tai, kaip šie trys elementai pateikiami arba, priešingai, ignoruojami Tacito pasakojime, ir šitokiu būdu

suteikia galimybę nustatyti, kurie įvaizdžiai gajūs ir tvirti, o kurie lengvai transformuojami.

Šiuo straipsniu siekiama parodyti, kad Tacito pasakojime Egiptas vaizduojamas kur kas įvairia-lypiškesnis ir šis vaizdavimas neatitinka tradicinės graikų bei romėnų priešiško egiptiečių bei kitoms tautoms paradigmos. Istoriko kruopščiai atrinkta medžiaga ir pasakojimo eiga, susilaikant nuo įprastų neigiamų pastabų, kokių randama kituose autoriaus darbuose, įrodo, kad šiuo pasakojimu siekiama ne sukurti etnografinį šalies paveikslą, o įgyvendinti autoriaus tikslus. Tacito pasakojimas apie Germaniko kelionę po Egiptą iliustruoja, kaip šalies aprašymas gali būti panaudotas siekiant perteikti autoriaus antiimperialistines nuotaikas bei paskatinti skaitytoją kritiškiesiems žvilgsniui. Panaši tendencija būdinga keletui kitų to paties laikotarpio autorių, tad galima teigti, jog šitoks naujų reikšmių suteikimas seniems įvaizdžiams yra būdingas Romos imperijos literatūrai.

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Autorės adresas:
Lady Margaret Hall
Norham Gardens
Oxford
OX2 6QA
United Kingdom

El. paštas: lina.girdvainyte@classics.ox.ac.uk