

DISSERTATION ABSTRACTS

THE APPROPRIATION OF THE HELLENISTIC-EGYPTIAN CULT OF SERAPIS: A MULTI-DISCIPLINARY STUDY FOCUSING ON AUGUSTUS, NERO, HADRIAN, THEIR COINAGE, AND VILLAS

Name of researcher: Vivian A. Laughlin
Name of faculty adviser: Sarolta A. Takács, PhD
Date completed: March 2019

Problem

Augustus, Nero, and Hadrian harnessed the religious influence of the Hellenistic-Egyptian cult of Serapis within their imperial designs as intentional measures to increase their power, influence people, and expand the imperial cult. However, archaeological studies only refer to Egyptian iconography as “imperial art” or “exotic art” forms. A connection from the Egyptian iconography to the Hellenistic-Egyptian cult of Serapis for the emperor’s political gains has not been provided. Using historiography, numismatics, and material culture located within the imperial villas (i.e., House of Augustus, *Domus Aurea*, and Hadrian’s Villa), this study provides an interpretive analysis of how Augustus, Nero, and Hadrian effectively employed the cult of Serapis.

Method

To understand the Hellenistic-Egyptian cult of Serapis’ influence and function within ancient Roman society, an amalgamated multi-disciplinary analytical approach was implemented to include: empirical, qualitative, structuration, historical theory, and practice methodologies with various perspectives drawn from archaeology, ethnoarchaeology, anthropology, history, ethnohistory, sociology, economics, and religion. Of particular interest was the structuration model, because it allowed the agent to be elucidated from the villas. A multi-faceted approach was essential to engage and reevaluate prior scholarship that may or may not have expanded its findings to include the Hellenistic-Egyptian cultural background and origins embodied within certain ancient Roman material culture.

Results

The research exhibits that Augustus, Nero, and Hadrian, like the Ptolemies, used motifs stemming from the Hellenistic-Egyptian cult of Serapis within their coinage and material culture from their villas. By appropriating Egyptian

deities and its cultural philosophies, the Emperors created a hybrid form of the cult that extended to them being viewed as divine beings.

Conclusion

The research ultimately indicated the Romanization of the Hellenistic-Egyptian cult of Serapis (i.e., it resulted in a hybrid form of the cult), which consequently created the hybrid cultic material culture that embodied subtle to bold Egyptian iconography in order to serve within the religious and political activities of the Roman Emperors.