

IMAGES OF FEMALE PYGMIES IN POMPEIAN NILOTIC PAINTINGS: A PRELIMINARY OVERVIEW ABOUT THEIR ROLES AND REPRESENTATIONS

LAS IMÁGENES DE PIGMEAS EN LAS PINTURAS NILÓTICAS POMPEYANAS: REFLEXIONES PRELIMINARES SOBRE SUS ROLES Y REPRESENTACIONES

ABSTRACT

At the dawn of the 3rd century BCE, the flourishing yet ambivalent relationship between Egypt and Rome starts to become clearer. The agreement of the 273 BCE triggered the beginning of an overhaul of the political, cultural, economic and religious settings in Italy, particularly visible in the artistic production originated from the clash and the interweaving between the Roman and the Egyptian worlds.

Following a general overview regarding the historical and cultural background of relationships between Egypt and Rome, this paper explores the figurative development of the *picta nilotica* in the Roman repertoire. The focus is on the figures of female pygmies and the spread of this subject in relation to both chronology and contexts in Pompeii. Finally, the aim is to provide a preliminary analysis of these female figures, attempting to explore how they are depicted and their roles in the social environment in which they are portrayed.

Keywords: Egypt, Nilotic landscape, pygmy woman, Roman painting

RESUMEN

A principios del siglo III a.C., la próspera, aunque ambivalente, relación entre Egipto y Roma empieza a ser más clara. El acuerdo del 273 a.C. desencadenó el inicio de una transformación del entorno político, cultural, económico y religioso en Italia, particularmente visible en la producción artística originada por el enfrentamiento y la interrelación entre el mundo romano y el egipcio.

Tras una panorámica general sobre el marco histórico y cultural de las relaciones entre Egipto y Roma, este trabajo explora el desarrollo figurativo de los *picta nilotica* en el repertorio romano. La atención se centra en las figuras de pigmeas y en la difusión de estos sujetos en relación tanto con la cronología como con los contextos en Pompeya. Finalmente, el objetivo es proporcionar un análisis preliminar de estas figuras femeninas, intentando explorar su iconografía y su papel en el entorno social en el que son representadas.

Palabras clave: Egipto, paisaje nilótico, pigmea, pintura romana

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1. Introduction

Relations between Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt can be traced as far back as 273 BCE as recorded in the summary of the lost book XIV of Livy («*cum Ptolomaeus, Aegypti regi, societas iuncta est*»). However, the exact date appears in another late author who depends on Livy, Eutropius: «*C. Fabricius Luscinus et C. Claudius Cinna coss., anno urbis conditae CCCCLXI, legati Alexandrini, a Ptolomaeus missi, Romam venire, et a Romanis amicitiam, quam petierant, obtinuerunt*» (Evtr. 2.15)². This agreement (*amicitia*), which made possible the beginning of growing contacts between Egypt and the Republic, is the essential background in order to clarify the history of political, economic and cultural relations between the Ptolemaic and Roman worlds (Bellucci, 2021, pp. 42-44; Coarelli, 2019, pp. 125-128). Moreover, the simultaneous introduction of the Egyptian religion into Republican Rome is also significant. In the private sphere, the presence of Egyptian cults is attested at least from the second half of the 2nd century BCE. These private cults were most probably introduced by Alexandrian traders and sailors who travelled along the coasts of Campania and Latium and they preceded the later religious acceptance in the public sphere, as demonstrated by the well-known *Lex Parieti Faciendo* of Pozzuoli, in which there is information about the building work in front of the temple of Serapis, venerated already before 105 BCE, and about the Pompeian Iseum built in the same years (Bricault, 2001, pp. 120-124; Capriotti Vittozzi, 2020, pp. 7-14; Gasparini, 2008, pp. 65-87). With regard to figurative culture, the earliest reference dates back to the first half of the 2nd century BCE. A fragment by Diodorus Siculus (*Bibl. Hist.*, xxxi, 18, 2) reports an episode that occurred in 164 BCE, when Ptolemy IV, expelled from Egypt by his younger brother, came to Rome in order to request the Senate to reinstate his powers. In Rome he was hosted by Demetrius, his fellow-citizen, who was already known for his work as a painter, as confirmed in a passage by Valerius Maximus (5.1.1f), who describes him as an «Alexandrian painter». This episode provides good evidence that Egyptian artists were already active in Rome in the first half of the 2nd century BCE. It is equally important to consider the nickname of the painter Demetrius, whom Diodorus refers to as «the topographer», which in this case is most probably to be understood as a landscape painter (Merrillis, 2017, p. 152; Meyboom, 1995, p. 123; Versluys, 2002, pp. 421-422). Consequently, this inevitably suggests the mosaicists, presumably of Alexandrian origin, who a few decades later produced the renowned Nilotic mosaic of Palestrina.

Hence, there are multiple and articulated threads running through relations between Rome and Egypt. As part of this reconstructive path, it is undoubtedly helpful to dwell on the visual record that documents the introduction of Egyptian representations into the Italic environment, more than any other: the floor mosaic discovered in the sanctuary of *Fortuna Primigenia* in Palestrina (120-110 BCE). This

2 Evtr. 2.15: «In the consulship of Caius Fabricius Licinus and Caius Claudius Canina, in the four hundred and sixty-first year from the foundation of the city, ambassadors, from Alexandria, despatched by Ptolemy, arrived at Rome, and obtained from the Romans the friendship which they solicited» (translation of Selby Watson, 2010).

work is the result of the cartography knowledge that reached their climax in the most developed Alexandrian works, and, at the same time, the earliest preserved reference model of the *nilotica*, a genre that, although flourishing in the Roman figurative lexicon, was irremediably destined to an increasingly standardised production (Pearson, 2021, pp. 151-155), as Balty has already pointed out:

Ainsi donc, comptés depuis longtemps parmi les modèles hérités de l'époque hellénistique, les thèmes nilotiques ont perdu peu à peu leur signification première d'hommage au dieu Nil ou de glorification du paysage égyptien ; en quelque sorte usés sur le plan du message qu'ils portaient, ils ont été dès lors limités à leur valeur décorative: on n'en voudra pour preuve que le morcellement extrême qui les affecte dans la dernière phase de cette évolution. Devenus désormais de simples motifs dépourvus de sens précis, ils étaient susceptibles de se charger ou non, selon les cas, d'une signification qui a pu varier. Et c'est là précisément la raison profonde de leur extraordinaire permanence. (Balty, 1995, p. 254)

2. Nilotic paintings in the Roman world: chronology, spread and characteristics

Before exploring the topic of female pygmies in Nilotic paintings, a geographical and chronological *status quo* of these Roman records is provided, based on data collected by my PhD research³ (Voltan, *forthcoming*). From a chronological point of view, the earliest attestation of pictorial compositions based on the Egyptian landscape dates to the 1st century BCE with the fragments from the atrium of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii, dated 80-70 BCE, which is the most ancient document based on existing material (Clarke, 1991, p. 94; De Vos, 1980, pp. 9-12; Versluys, 2002, pp. 155-157). Other evidence is continuously known until around the mid-2nd century CE (Capriotti Vittozzi, 2006, pp. 37-44; De Vos, 1980, pp. 75-78; Merrills, 2017, pp. 131-137; Meyboom, 1995, pp. 241-248). However, there are examples that are chronologically more recent, such as the wall fragments of the Baths of the Hunters in Leptis Magna, dated to the mid-3rd century CE (Versluys, 2002, pp. 187-189), and the pictorial frieze of a cistern from Salamis dated to the 6th century CE (Versluys 2002, pp. 476-477; **Fig. 1**). However, most of the Nilotic paintings come from the Italian peninsula and in particular from the archaeological site of Pompeii (**Fig. 2**).

Regarding the figurative characteristics of the Nilotic typology, firstly the recurrence of specific elements in the preserved pictorial documentation can be observed. These elements, that I would define as «Nilotic markers», shape the spatial field and semantically configure this peculiar figurative typology. Three main categories can be recognized in the attestations (Voltan 2022, pp. 261-270). The first, in which elements related to the world of flora converge, includes: palm trees (Voltan, Valtierra, 2020, pp. 606-607), lotus flowers and aquatic plants of

3 This paper contains part of the results of my PhD thesis aimed at the cataloguing and study of Nilotic-themed paintings attested in the provinces of the Roman Empire between the 1st century BCE and the 6th century CE.

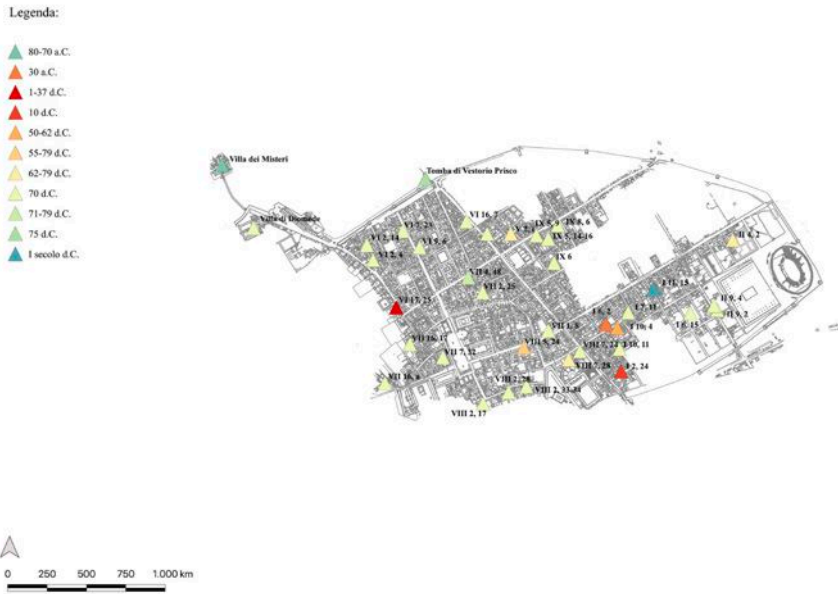


Figure 1: Geo-chronological map of the Nilotic paintings in the Roman provinces by the author

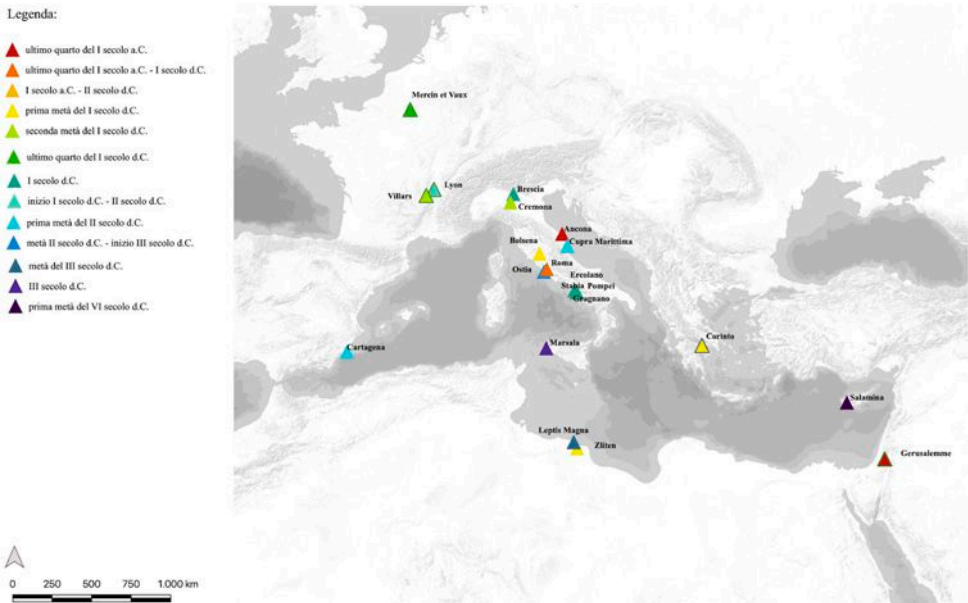


Figure 2: Geo-chronological map of the Nilotic paintings in Pompeii by the author

various types, which enrich the Nilotic landscape with traits of realism⁴. These details stand out as essential components in the landscape recreation of Egypt, but also have significant value in the compositional choice itself. The second category of Nilotic markers is related to the depiction of the fauna living along the banks of the Nile. Ducks, crocodiles and hippopotami predominate in Nilotic-themed compositions, followed by less frequent depictions of ibis, snakes, cranes, fish and birds in general⁵. Lastly, the representation of pygmies, which inhabit the Egyptian scenario in different ways, is an integral element in the compositional and evocative structuring of the Nilotic scenario.

Concerning the human subjects included in Nilotic paintings, there is a significant increase in the presence of dwarves and pygmies in Nilotic compositions from the second half of the 1st century CE onwards, according to surviving records.⁶ At this point I would like to briefly consider the meaning of the term «pygmy» and the use of this subject in Roman Nilotic iconography. The literature has been wide-ranging on this subject and there has been considerable debate about it, particularly in the last few decades (Bahuchet, 1993, pp. 178-181; Clarke, 2006, p. 161; Clarke, 2007, pp. 75-76; Dasen, 1988, pp. 273-276; Dasen, 1993, pp. 169-174; Dasen, 2006, pp. 95-99; Harari, 2004, pp. 182-188; Janni, 1978, pp. 19-22; Meyboom and Versluys, 2006, pp. 201-208; Moret, 2012, pp. 157-162; Versluys, 2002, pp. 275-277). The earliest records have their roots in Ancient Egypt, where some fundamental proof points to the desire to have a pygmy in order to devote it to the «dances of the god». Based on some sources from the 2nd millennium BCE, the Egyptians define pygmies as «dancers of the gods» (Cazeneuve, Wild and Caquot, 1963, pp. 81-83; Emerit, 2011, pp. 62-65). At the grave of the Egyptian 6th dynasty governor Harkhuf, there is a letter «engraved» on the stone from the young pharaoh Pepi II (2246-2152 BCE) requesting the governor to quickly hand over the captured pygmy (*dng*) to admire him during sacred dances (Bahuchet, 1993, pp. 166-167; Dasen, 2006, pp. 97-97; Murray, 1965, pp. 72-75). This role, and therefore this ability associated with the pygmy people, also corresponds to the dwarf figures. However, unlike the pygmies, who are small in stature but present a normative body, dwarves have clearly different body proportions and characteristics. Indeed, dwarves are characterized by a genetic mutation that leads not only to a particularly short stature, but also to a different physical constitution. In most cases, they have a large cranial vault, short, bent legs and very prominent buttocks (Dasen, 1988, p. 255; Dasen, 1993, p. 7-21).⁷ As scholars have already explained, the pygmies of Ancient Egypt were fully integrated into society and were both privileged intermediaries between the world

4 For a more detailed overview on the floral elements, see: *Digital Atlas of Economic Plants in Archaeology* (<https://www.plantatlas.eu/>).

5 As in the case of flora, the analysis of the fauna in the Roman Nilotic paintings is discussed generally. For specific literature on the subject, see the following papers: Belozerskaya, 2006, pp. 77-126; Miziur, 2012-2013, pp. 451-465; Trinquier, 2022, pp. 861-919; Trinquier, 2007, pp. 23-60.

6 These data are among the results of my PhD thesis.

7 In this case, an explicit reference is being made to the most common type of dwarfism, which corresponds to the type depicted in Nilotic-themed compositions, called «achondroplasia» (Dasen, 1988, pp. 255).

of the gods and that of humankind and the embodiment of eternal youth (Dasen, 2006, pp. 95-98; Janni, 1978, pp. 44-46). However, the situation changes in the Greek world. Although in the archaic Greek period the depiction of these subjects was still without physical disproportions, as small adults⁸, there is no doubt that the symbolic-sacral dimension they had in Egypt was lost (Dasen, 2006, pp. 95-98). The pygmy, absorbing the pathological traits of dwarfs together with certain characteristics of the figures of the satyrs and infants, becomes the incarnation of that type of «grotesque» characterized by evident physical deformations and an emphasized phallic appearance (Dasen, 2006, pp. 95-98; Janni, 1978, pp. 44-45). In this sense, an ugliness that already worked as a term of comparison in the ancient world, as demonstrated by the Greek historian Herodotus:

Many such mad deeds did Cambyses to the Persians and his allies; he abodes at Memphis, and there opened ancient coffins and examined the dead bodies. Thus, too he entered the temple of Hephaestus and made much mockery of the image there. This image of Hephaestus is most like to the Phoenician Pataici, which the Phoenicians carry on the prows of their triremes. I will describe it for him who has not seen these figures: it is in the likeness of a dwarf. Also, he entered the temple of the Cabeiri, into which none may enter save the priest; the images here he even burnt, with bitter mockery. These also are like the images of Hephaestus and are said to be his sons. (Hdt. III, 37)⁹

The success of this artistic subject increased during the Hellenistic period, when the interest in the non-normative and the caricatured became even more marked, and consequently also strongly impacted the Roman iconographic vocabulary (Cèbe, 1966, pp. 345-346; Janni, 1978, pp. 44-45). At this point, it is important to underline a fundamental step in the study of this subject: the misunderstanding in interpreting as pygmies or dwarfs the specific subjects of the Roman Nilotic repertoire. As previously mentioned, pygmies are not physically disproportionate, even though they are small in stature. On the other hand, the physical deformations are the characteristics that most clearly distinguish the figures in Nilotic contexts where the categories of dwarf and pygmy are not consciously portrayed, except in rare cases (Clarke, 2006, pp. 161; Versluys, 2002, p. 276). In this respect, the literature's conclusion is therefore enlightening: the visual representation of the subject that the Greeks defined as «pygmy» combines the pathology of dwarfism with the ancient pseudo-ethnography, which states that the pygmy race originated in Egypt (Dasen, 1993, pp. 175-178; Dasen, 2006, pp. 95-98; Dasen, 2009, pp. 227-231). This union would give rise to a hybrid form corresponding to a dimension of otherness and a status outside the limits of human time and space. This reinterpreted type of pygmy would therefore correspond to the artistic creation

8 For example, in the «geranomachy» depicted on the foot of the François Vase the pygmies are represented as small, well-proportioned men (Ovadia and Mucznik, 2017, pp. 155-156), such as in the cup, dated 550 BCE, preserved in Von Wagner Museum der Universität Würzburg, L 414 (Dasen, 1988, Pl. 4 a).

9 Translation and edition by Rawlinson, 2018.

first attested in the Hellenistic repertoire and later in the Roman one. In this paper, I believe that the term «pygmy» should be used to refer to the characters depicted in Nilotic settings, whether they are pygmies in the sense of non-disproportionate beings of which there is very little evidence or dwarfs, which are found in most of the case studies. As a matter of fact, the use of this word is more suitable to create a closer connection with the ideology and the cultural system underlying the Roman productions. Hence, a culture system made up of elements that became part of the imagery of the time and influenced the choices of clients and artists as soon as they appeared in the communication network (Bragantini, 2006, pp. 166-167)¹⁰.

3. The female pygmies in Pompeii's Nilotic paintings

On the topic of pygmies women in Roman Nilotic paintings, it should be pointed out that the depiction of female figures with clear deformities and small stature is hardly attested in Greek art production¹¹. Indeed, as already highlighted:

The absence of dwarf women in Greek imagery suggests that the notion of female physical abnormality was not acceptable in Athens. Male dwarfs were symbolically made acceptable by their integration within the Dionysiac cult. Their physical anomaly seems to have been regarded as the sign of an immediate relationship with the world of Dionysos and made them a human counterpart of satyrs. This absence of women may also bear witness to some sympathetic feelings; their representation would have implied making them objects of popular derision. (Dasen, 1988, p. 276)

Although in this case the scholar is referring specifically to the figures of female dwarfs, I believe that it is also legitimate to include female pygmy figures, in the semantic meaning outlined above. Consequently, after her almost total absence in the Greek figurative repertoire, the figure of the pygmy woman would seem to find a certain role in the Nilotic compositions of the Roman world.

As regards the Pompeian context specifically, twelve pictorial records with female pygmies can be identified out of a total of thirty-nine Nilotic paintings attested in Pompeii.¹² Of these twelve records, all of them are dated within the

10 A cultural system of elements that, once entered into «[...] circuito della comunicazione [...]» divengono parte dell'immaginario dell'epoca e indirizzano le scelte di committenti e artigiani» (Bragantini, 2006, p. 167). For some interesting and recent observations on the inclusion of Egyptian motifs in Roman wall and architectural contexts, see: Koponen, 2020, pp. 291-297. On the topic in general, see: Hölscher, 1993; Wallace-Hadrill, 1994.

11 Examples of female pygmy figures in the Greek world are hardly traceable. However, the case of the *skyphos*, dated 430-420 BCE, preserved at the Staatliche Antikensammlungen und Glyptothek (8934) in Munich (Dasen, 1988, Pl. 5 b), is outstanding. This depiction shows a female figure with a cup in her hands. The woman is portrayed short in stature and with the recurring traits of achondroplasia: short, stubby legs, exaggerated bust, arms and hands; prominent buttocks; very large head.

12 In this paper, the information regarding the number of Nilotic paintings, chronology and contexts of provenance come from the research carried out in my PhD thesis and they are based on the preserved archaeological evidence.

chronological span of the 1st century CE. In detail: one painting is dated 50-62 CE, one 55-79 CE, one 62-79 CE, eight paintings are dated to 70 CE, and a last one belongs to the 1st century CE (Fig. 3). Furthermore, paying attention to the archaeological contexts of provenance is paramount. In nine cases, these paintings are located in private residences¹³, while in three cases they are found in public buildings, that is the Stabian Baths (VII 1, 8), Sarno Baths (VIII 2, 17-23) and Suburban Baths. Inside the domus, the distribution mainly concerns the rooms of the garden (along the perimeter of the *stibadium*), the *atrium*, the summer triclinium, the peristyle, the *viridarium*, the *cubiculum* and the balcony of the balustrade of a first floor (Fig. 4). Within the *thermae*, Nilotic paintings with female pygmies are placed in two cases in the frigidarium (Sarno Baths and Suburban Baths) and in one case in the nymphaeum (Stabian Baths).¹⁴

Exploring these depictions in more detail, it takes into consideration the activities in which these female characters are involved, and thus depicted. In most scenes, specifically in eight cases, female pygmies are involved in sexual acts, often at a symposium and with music and dance (House of the Ephebe, I 7, 11; House of the First Floor, I 11, 15; *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix*, II 4, 2; House, II 9, 2; House of Quadrigas, VII 2, 25; House of Doctor, VIII 5, 24; Figs. 5-10). Equally numerous (in five cases) are the scenes in which these figures appear with offerings to the deity before an altar near a sanctuary (House of Ephebus, I 7, 11; House of Menander, I 10, 4; *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix*, II 4, 2; House of the Pygmies, IX 5, 9; Suburban Baths; Figs. 11-15). In

13 The private Pompeian contexts analysed in this paper are: House of Ephebe (I 7, 11); House of Menander (I 10, 4); House of the First Floor (I 11, 15); *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix* (II 4, 2); II 9, 2; House of Quadrigas (VII 2, 25); House of Doctor (VIII 5, 24); House of Pygmies (IX 5, 9); IX 5, 14-16.

14 On a general level, an important point to emphasise is the close connection between the Nilotic paintings and water. In fact, the establishment of a spectacular play of cross-references between the tangibility of water flowing or gushing within gardens or in baths, and instead the immateriality of water running through Nilotic scenes lead towards the evocation of an exotic atmosphere both through the iconographic choice and, in some cases, through the presence of a *nilus* in the domestic space (Grimal, 1990, p. 296; see also: Cic. *Tusc.*, v, 74; Cic. *Q. Fr.* 3.9.7: «Quid? Si caementum bonum non haberem, deturbem aedificium? quod quidem mihi quotidie magis placet, in primisque inferior porticus et eius conclavia fiunt recte. De Arcano, Caesaris opus est vel mehercule etiam elegantioris alicuius; imagines enim istae et palaestra et piscina et Nilus multorum Philotimorum est, non Diphilorum; sed et ipsi ea adibimus et mittemus et mandabimus»). Furthermore, Wild's studies have also demonstrated the need to create the flooding of the Nile outside Egypt: «Just as in Egypt, the flood water must have been viewed as a sign of beneficent power of Egyptian deities. In fact, one time this life-giving substance had been generally available only to inhabitants of the Nile valley, now all devotees of Isis and Sarapis could share in it even if they lived many hundreds of miles from Egypt» (Wild, 1981, p. 50). These considerations can also be applied to thermal contexts and water-related structures, with the necessary adjustments. An emblematic example of this is the Stabian Baths, in which a cross-reference network was established between the iconographic choices, which included, in addition to Nilotic references, depictions of nymphs, dolphins and sea monsters, and the context in which they were placed. The water plays of the fountains inside the baths were thus characterised by a close interaction with the images, as Minervini pointed out: «[...] per quanto riguarda il compreso, di che ragioniamo, tutti gli ornati accennano all'elemento dell'acqua. Le acquatiche piante e gli acquatici augelli, le Ninfe della fontana, i marini mostri fra' delfini, il Nilo finalmente, sono cose che richiamano sempre alla idea dell'acqua: o che si vogliono credere io allusione alle acque della fontana, che ivi zampillavano; ovvero alle vicine terme ed alle acque de' bagni che vi erano contenute» (Minervini, 1856, p. 35).

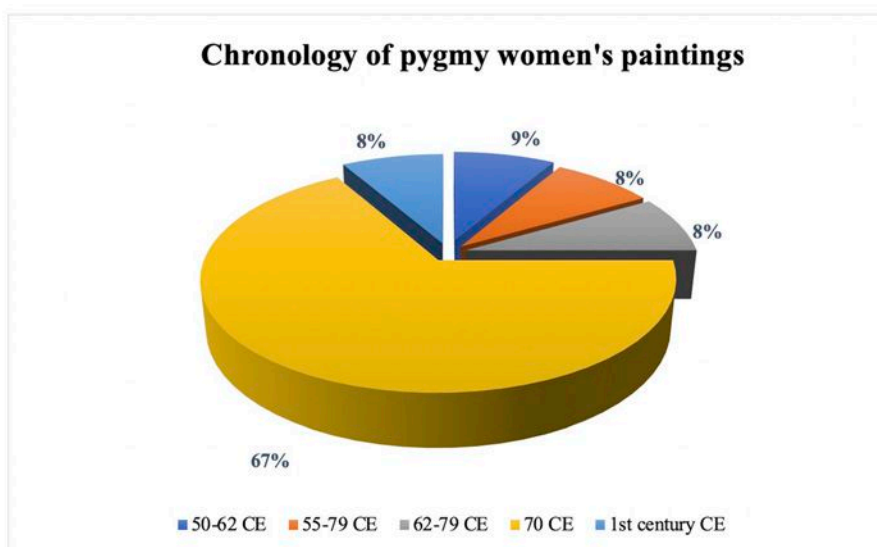


Figure 3: The chronology of records of female pygmies' figures in Pompeii's Nilotic paintings by the author

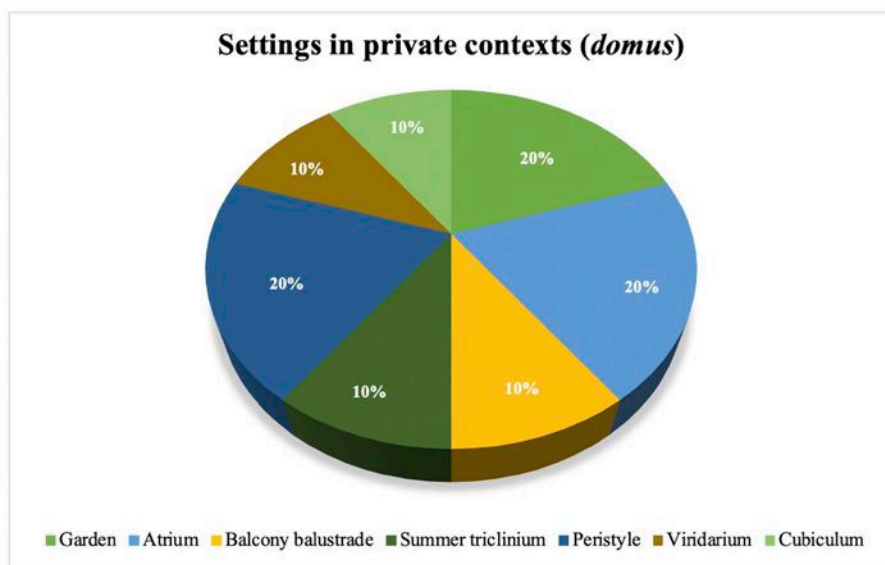


Figure 4: The rooms of the Pompeian domus with records of female pygmies' figures in the Nilotic paintings by the author

three cases, however, these figures are depicted during a conversation (House of the Doctor, VIII 5, 24; House of the Pygmies, IX 5, 9; **Figs. 16-17**); in two scenes they are standing near the banks of the river Nile (House of Quadrigas, VII 2, 25; Baths of Sarno; **Fig. 18**). On the other hand, in one scene, a pygmy woman is depicted seated under a pavilion (House of the Ephebus, I 7, 11; **Fig. 19**). Finally, in two cases it is not possible to identify the activity carried out by the characters (Stabian Baths; House, IX 5, 14-16).¹⁵

15 Concerning the lost Nilotic paintings in the Stabian Baths, an extract from Minervini's description is given here: «Nel mezzo è una complicala rappresentazione composta di varie scene e di numerose figure relative forse all' Abissinia od oli' Egitto, o a confinanti regioni nelle quali non può non ravvisarsi quel carattere di scherzo e di caricatura, che altra volta mostrossi in altri dipintidi tal genere provenienti dalle slesse pompejane scavazioni. Vedi prima un rialto, indicante un laghetto ed allo stesso si accosta un uccello acquatico di bianco e di nero. Segue un edilizio con tetto, una specie di capanna, presso il quale siede un uomo con peculiare e bassa copertura di testa, ed appoggiasi ad un bastone. Dopo l'edificio scorgesi un uomo barbato e coronato, di cui, essendo nudo, apparisce il grosso fallo pendente; come suole osservarsi in simili scherzi, ove uomini di sconce fattezze sono messi in rapporto con scene dell'Egitto, o di altre vicine regioni: il nostro mostruoso personaggio si dirige verso la descritta capanna recando un grosso ramo di albero, ed ha sulle spalle la clamide, o altro panno ravvolto, eutro di cui avviluppa qualche cosa: colla destra si appoggia al bastone. Segue una donna col capo coronato, che reca con ambe le mani un timpano. Dopo un altro edificio o capanna, con camino nella superior parte, vedesi una grotta, sotto la quale è un osceno concubito di un uomo barbato con una donna. Intorno alla grotta, e seguendone la curvatura, quasi prendendo parte a quel turpe fallo sono un uomo barbato sdraiato che innalza la destra, ed altre quattro figure, di cui appariscono le sole leste, e parte del busto. Intanto ivi presso una virile figura siede presso altro piccolo edificio vicino, suonando la duplice tibia. Conseguita a questa oscena rappresentanza un altro soggetto, ove sono alcune figure in rapporto col coccodrillo. Vedi un fabbricato, ed ivi presso una donna, che si allontana impaurita. Subito apparisce la causa di un tale spavento; giacché di sotto ad un ponte mirasi un coccodrillo che si volge adirato, forse per le ricevute ferite. Fuori del ponte sono due uomini intenti a prendere o ad uccidere il terribile animale. Uno di essi ha lo scudo e l'asta, ed è nell'atto di lanciarla contra il vicino anfibio, l'altro notabile egualmente per l'enorme fallo, è più lontano, e curvando la persona par che cerchi in altro modo offendere il coccodrillo. É chiaro che volle qui figurarsi la caccia del coccodrillo, che facevasi come narra Erodoto, da quei di Elefantina e de' luoghi vicini, con un particolare metodo diverso da quello usato da' personaggi del pompejano dipinto; sebbene lo stesso storico annunzii esser molli i modi di far quella caccia [...]. Presso di un altro privato edificio, o capanna, vedesi una edicola, o tempietto dipinto di rosso, con arco poggiate sopra due colonne nel suo principale aspetto: sotto di questo tempietto è la immagine di una divinità virile avviluppata in ampio panno, e col capo coronato innanzi è un'ara rotonda, alla quale un uomo nudo si approssima tenendo un piattello con offerte; mentre una donna curvasi alquanto sull'ara, mettendovi qualche altro oggetto di culto o sacre offerte. Difficile sarebbe determinare di quale divinità sia l'effigie sotto la edicola; giacché non pare che presenti alcuna particolarità, che possa farlo considerare siccome un idolo della egizia religione» (Minervini, 1856, pp. 34-35).



Figure 5: Copulation scene, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of the Ephebe (I 7, 11), *in situ*. (Bellucci, 2021, p. 190)



Figure 6: Copulation scene, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of the First Floor (I 11, 15). (Stefani, 2010, p. 259)



(a)



(b)

Figure 7: Two copulation scenes, details of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, Praedia of Iulia Felix (II 4, 2). (a) *in situ*; photo by the author. (Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei); b) Sampaolo, 2020, p. 24).



(a)



(b)

Figure 8: Two copulation scenes, details of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Quadrigas (VII 2, 25). (a) inv. MANN: 27702; photo by the author); b) inv. MANN: 27698; photo by the author) (Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli)



(a)



(b)

Figure 9: Two copulation scenes, details of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Doctor (m 5, 24). (Inv. MANN: 113196; photo by the author) (Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli)



Figure 10: Copulation scene, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House (II 9, 2), *in situ*. (Bellucci, 2021, p. 474)



Figure 11: Female pygmies as offerors in front of an altar, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of the Ephebe (I 7, 11), *in situ*. (photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)



Figure 12: Female pygmy as offeror in front of an altar, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Menander (I 10, 4), *in situ*. (Photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei).



Figure 13: Female pygmy as offeror in front of an altar, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, *Praedia of Iulia Felix* (II 4, 2). (Sampaolo, 2020, p. 24).



Figure 14: Female pygmies as offerors in front of an altar, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Pygmies (XI 5, 9), *in situ*. (Photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)



Figure 15: Female pygmy as offeror in front of an altar, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, Suburban Baths, *in situ*. (Photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)



Figure 16: Two female pygmies talking, details of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Doctor (VIII 5, 24). (Inv. MANN: 113196; photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli)



(a)



(b)

Figure 17: a) A woman pygmy talking with a wayfarer; b) two female pygmies talking, details of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of Pygmies (XI 5, 9), in situ. (Photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

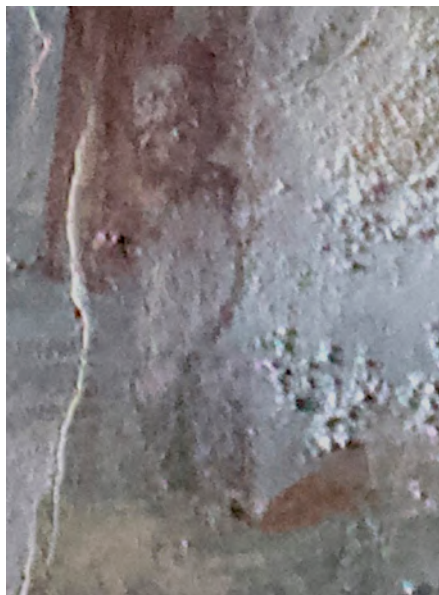


Figure 18: Pygmy woman near the bank of the Nile, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, Sarno Baths, *in situ*. (Salvadori *et al.* 2018, p. 213)



Figure 19: Pygmy woman seated under a pavilion, detail of Nilotic painting, Pompeii, House of the Ephebe (I 7, 11), *in situ*. (Photo by the author - Per gentile concessione del Ministero della Cultura – Parco Archeologico di Pompei)

Below there is an overview chart, with relative percentages of the activities in which female pygmies are involved in the Pompeian Nilotic scenes (Fig. 20), and a summary scheme with the main data from the above catalogue.

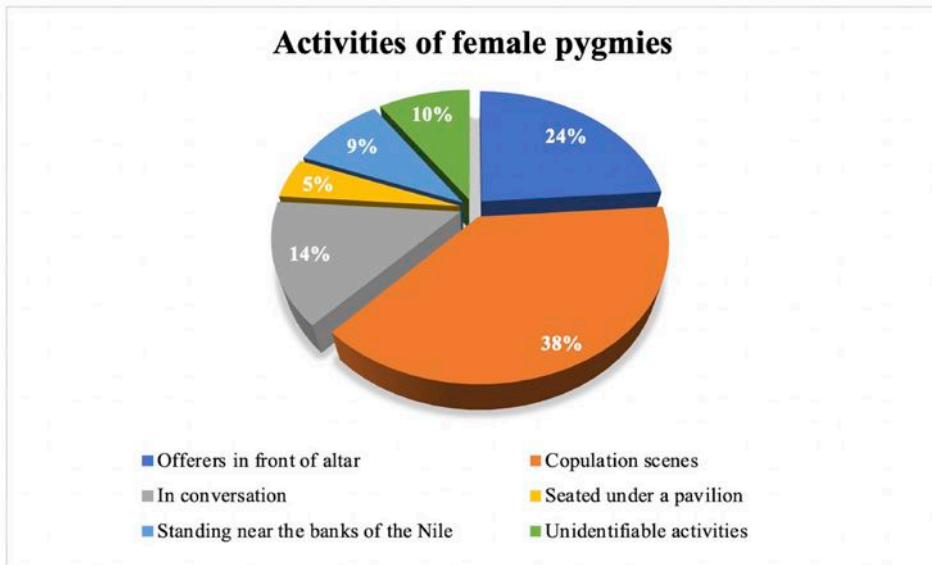


Figure 20: Chart about the activities in which female pygmies are involved in Pompeii’s Nilotic paintings by the author.

Figure	Chronology	Provenance	Context	Description	Currently preserved
19 11 5	70 CE	Pompeii, I 7, 11 House of the Epherbe	<i>Stibadium</i> (garden)	1. Female pygmy under pavilion 2. Female pygmies as offerors in front of an altar 3. Copulation scene: pygmy woman involved in sexual act; two female pygmies encouraging sexual union (one playing a wind instrument)	X
12	50-62 CE	Pompeii, I 10, 4 House of Menander	<i>Atrium</i>	Female pygmy as offeror in front of an altar	X
6	1st century CE	Pompeii, I 11, 15 House of the First Floor	Balcony balustrade	Copulation scene: pygmy woman involved in sexual act (during a symposium)	X
7a, 7b 13	62-79 CE	Pompeii, II 4, 2 <i>Praedia of Iulia Felix</i>	Summer <i>triclinium</i>	1. Two copulation scenes: pygmies women involved in sexual acts 2. Female pygmy as offeror	X
10	70 CE	Pompeii, II 9, 2	<i>Stibadium</i> (garden)	Copulation scene: pygmy woman involved in sexual act	X
	70 CE	Pompeii, VII 1, 8 Stabian Baths	Nymphaeum	Two female pygmies ¹⁶	No
8a, 8b	70 CE	Pompeii, VII 2, 25 House of Quadrigas	<i>Viridarium</i> and peristyle	1. Two copulation scenes: pygmies women involved in sexual acts 2. Pygmy woman near the bank of the Nile	X No
18	70 CE	Pompeii, VIII 2, 17-23 Sarno Baths	<i>Frigidarium</i>	Pygmy woman near the bank of the Nile	X

16 For the description, see: Minervini, 1856, p. 34-35.

9a, 9b 16	55-79 CE	Pompeii, VIII 5, 24, House of Doctor	Peristyle	1. Two copulation scenes: pygmies women involved in sexual acts (during a symposium) 2. Two female pygmies talking	X
17a 17b 14	70 CE	Pompeii, IX 5, 9 House of Pygmies	<i>Cubiculum</i>	1. A woman pygmy talking with a wayfarer 2. Two female pygmies talking 3. Two female pygmies as offerors in front of an altar	X
	70 CE	Pompeii, IX 5, 14-16	<i>Atrium</i>	Pygmy woman	No
15	70 CE	Pompeii, Suburban Baths	<i>Frigidarium</i>	Female pygmy as offeror in front of an altar	X

Based on the catalogue of images and the data provided, the scenes in which female pygmies are most frequently depicted are those of intercourse¹⁷. First of all, the female characters actively involved in the sexual act are totally nude without any kind of clothing or accessory, except for a crown above the head, as in the detail from the House of Doctor (Fig. 9a) and perhaps in the House of the First Floor (Fig. 6). Moreover, it is interesting to note that the sexual act occurs mainly in two scenarios, based on the preserved and still visible Pompeian documentation. These scenes occur during the setting of a symposium together with the presence of other

17 The annual flooding of the Nile was the most important cyclical event for the inhabitants of Egypt, and was explained by the mythological passion of Osiris. The pharaoh, killed by his brother Seth had, according to some traditions, been dismembered, and after a long search, after Isis had reassembled his parts, she discovered that his phallus still contained vital powers. Having thus assumed the guise of a falcon, she united herself to the pharaoh's member by positioning herself on it, and from the union Horus was conceived. It remains to be repeated, however, that although the conjectures of activity and passivity of the relationship remain, in the representations Isis-hawk assumes more of a converse attitude towards Osiri (the reliefs from the mortuary temple of Seti I, XIII century BCE; the reliefs from the Osiri chapel, temple of Hathor, Dendara, I century BCE). The presence of pygmies (species with erotic complexes) in Nilotic scenes would therefore generally seem to be associated with symbols of fertility, rebirth and abundance. Indeed, they are linked to deities such as Bes, Hathor, Ptah and Osiri, gods of fertility and creation. Depictions of such complexes or ejaculations would therefore seem to relate to this aspect (Meyboom, Versluys, 2006, p. 208).

characters inciting intercourse, playing an instrument and dancing (Figs. 5, 6, 9a).¹⁸ In these records, the pygmy couple involved in the sexual act is not in a situation of reserved intimacy, but rather appear to be part of a spectacle for those observing the scene. The other scenario concerns scenes of intercourse taking place between two or three characters on a simple boat, possibly made of papyrus and often with an animal's head stern (Figs. 7a, 7b, 8a, 8b, 9b).¹⁹

From a general point of view, the erotic scenes found in the Pompeian context can be summarised into three types: mythological scenes, i.e., representations of sexual activities between divine couples or mythical creatures; realistic scenes, representing encounters in various poses between anonymous couples; erotic scenes between pygmies in a Nilotic environment. It therefore seems clear from the outset that these typologies had different value to the inhabitants of the Vesuvian city. The upper classes of the Romans must have been particularly appreciative of the erotic mythological paintings, represented in mosaic paintings or *emblemata* and frequently located in *cubicula*, *exedras*, *tablina* and *peristyles* (Myerowitz, 1992, pp. 131-157). On the other hand, the most realistic love scenes often took place inside alcoves, in association with the finest domestic comfort.²⁰ The erotic scenes with pygmies, unlike the other erotic depictions, appear most often in the open air, among reeds, under curtains, on boats and often in the presence of spectators, as seen in the paintings analysed. In addition to a purely decorative intent, i.e., responding to the specific functions of the room in which they were located (triclinium, bedroom), it seems clear that such representations had an additional purpose. The characters depicted in erotic paintings in most cases, not those located in *lupanares* or *cauponae*, would not have had as protagonists female professionals of pleasure, but anonymous couples performing rather standardised actions.²¹ Therefore, since such erotic tables were in rather conventional use within the domestic sphere, it seems that the attitude of noble women was basically of imperturbability, as testified by a passage from the Ovidian *Tristia* in which the author, exonerating himself from the accuse of lasciviousness pointed at his *Ars*,

18 The contexts mentioned are: House of Ephebus (I 7, 11) with a scene of amorous intercourse *venus pendula aversa* between a couple under a curtain (or pergola); there are also subjects such as cochlea; spectator characters; double oboe player; sacred amphora; wine amphora; House of the First Floor (I 11, 15) with a scene of amorous intercourse *venus pendula* in front of a group of characters at a banquet under a pergola; House of Doctor (VIII 5, 24): in front of the *stibadium* one sees a pygmy in a cloak and tunic who playing a double oboe while in the centre a symplegma is taking place between a man lying down and a kneeling woman (*venus pendula aversa*) wearing a crown.

19 The contexts involved in this study are: *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix* (II 4, 2); House of Quadrigas (VII 2, 25); House of Doctor (VIII 5, 24).

20 On the topic in general, see: Varone, 1994; Varone, 2000.

21 Suetonius (Suet., *De Vit. Horat.*, 10) wrote about the Horace's mirrored bedroom, which would seem to suggest how various high Roman classes took pleasure in seeing themselves reflected during their amorous acts. Hence, according to the author, the erotic painting of Parrasius, which Tiberius exhibited in his bedroom on Capri, also had the same excitatory function (Suet., *Tib.*, 44). The stimulating role of the image was strongly debated in the literature. Consider that Propertius believed that lasciviousness had spread from the moment erotic pictures had been introduced into homes (Prop., 2, 6).

claimed that matrons often saw such scenes without being perturbed by them²². In any case, while there must have been a comic-parodistic intent in the erotic scenes of the *nilotica*, in contrast to the other mythological-realistic representations just mentioned, the context of which cannot always be deduced, these would instead have decorated triclinia or triclinia podiums in particular (e.g., 1, 7, 11; II, 9, 2).²³

Focusing again on the figures of female pygmies in the Pompeian Nilotic paintings, the representations of these figures as offerors in front of an altar are also quite numerous. In three cases (House of Menander, **Fig. 12**; *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix*, **Fig. 13**; Suburban Baths, **Fig. 15**) the figure is depicted solitary in the act of offering to the deity in front of the altar. In the other two cases (House of Ephebus, **Fig. 11**; House of Pygmies, **Fig. 14**) a pair of female pygmies is depicted intent in the same action. Although not clearly visible in all of the mentioned scenes²⁴, it is possible to detect the clothing of these characters: more elegant long robes, as in the details of the House of Ephebus (**Fig. 11**), House of Menander (**Fig. 12**), *Praedia* of *Iulia Felix* (**Fig. 13**) and Suburban Baths (**Fig. 15**); instead, the clothing in the detail of the House of Pygmies is simpler (**Fig. 14**). However, in all contexts the use of a ponytail by the offerors seems to be common: in the case of the House of Pygmies, there is both the ponytail of one of the two figures and a sort of cap worn by the pygmy woman in front of the altar (**Fig. 14**). As regards the sets with female pygmies engaged in conversation, the three scenes are of considerable interest. In the detail from the House of Doctor (**Fig. 16**), the scene seems to capture a moment of genuine everyday life within a setting, the Nilotic one, in which the comic-parodistic element is predominant. The two figures are depicted engaged in conversation as they move towards the center of the scene, where a *symposium* and amorous intercourse are taking place. Both are wearing long robes and one also wears a kind of bandana to cover her head. In the two details from the House of the Pygmies, attention is drawn to: a scene of conversation between a female pygmy, dressed in a long robe and wearing a sort of cap on her head, and a pygmy figure, perhaps identifiable as a wayfarer (**Fig. 17a**); a pair of female pygmies talking next to a pygmy child (**Fig. 17b**). Both figures are wearing a long robe and one figure is also wearing the recurring cap²⁵. Finally, attention is focused on the figure of a pygmy woman seated under a curtain, a detail from the painting of the House of Ephebus (**Fig. 19**). Despite the fact that it is not optimally preserved in some sections, the careful treatment of details on this figure seems undoubted. Still remarkable are the highlights used on the face, hair and yellow dress to emphasize and add realism to the woman. A true fashion accessory is the straw hat that protects her from sun exposure. Also attractive is the object she holds in one hand that is not easy to identify: perhaps a small mirror, a symbol of femininity that spans the centuries. With her other hand and part of her forearm she seems to be wrapping a basket,

22 «*Saepe supercilii nudas matrona severi / et veneris stantis ad genus omne videt*»; Ov., *Trist.*, 2, 309-310)

23 Although in the triclinia there could still find erotic scenes of the realistic type, often with non-explicit sex (Clarke, 1991, pp. 275-277).

24 As in the poorly preserved paintings in the Suburban Baths and the House of Menander.

25 In this scene, it is interesting to note the intentional depiction of the characters' shadows.

the contents of which are not clear. She is seated on a small bench from which the figure's legs dangle, giving it a touch of authentic spontaneity.

4. Conclusion

In the catalogue of images of this paper, there is some discrepancy in the types of scenes in which female pygmies appear. On one side, sexuality emerges in one of its most explicit versions. In these contexts, the female figures would appear to act as active subjects; in fact, even for the sexual positions in which they are involved, they would not appear to be submissive figures or forced into the sexual act, but rather protagonists of the action. In this sense, the gaze of the female pygmies in the paintings of the House of the Quadrigas (**Fig. 8a, 8b**) can also be interpreted. A look in which there is no shame or embarrassment about the action taking place, in which the eyes are not lowered or turned away from the observer. Rather, it is a fully satisfied and complacent gaze, directed towards the spectator. Apart from the nudity and extremely explicit poses, what is perhaps most impressive about these figures is their visual power based on the full awareness of the pleasure of the sexual act summarised in that satisfied gaze. Besides this figurative theme, the other scenes with female pygmies mainly concern their role as offerers in front of an altar often near a sacred building. An atmosphere that is in some ways sacred and that contrasts strongly with the scenes of intercourse: from the complete nudity we move on to long, sober robes that do not reveal the female shape; from banquets in which sexual voluptuousness, music and dance predominate, we switch to the austerity of an action relating to religious practice. The figures of offerers are depicted composed and solemn as they walk towards the altar to lay their libations.

A quiet measured composure stands completely in contrast to the «bacchanalian» wildness of the erotic scenes. From the explosive sexuality to the sober religious act, we turn our attention to those scenes with representations of pygmy women in conversation. A sort of window into an everyday life inside the depiction of a world, the Nilotic one, that in the Roman imagination represents a boundary between the known and the unknown, between the ordered universe and chaotic otherness: a sort of borderland where adhesion to the *mos maiorum* coexists in the «*horrida sane Aegyptos*» (Juv. *Sat.* XV, 44).

Another important point that should be considered concerns the physical features of female pygmies. In general, these figures have a pale skin tone and, although the pygmy's typical physical characteristics remain visible²⁶, the deformity traits seem to be more attenuated than in the male figures. Undoubtedly the stature is small, the legs are short and stubby, the head is somewhat disproportionate in size, but a less grotesque appearance would seem to appear in these figures. For example, in the female pygmy from the Baths of Sarno, a certain meticulousness in the female depiction is evident: the white dress is quite tight and the band in her hair gives her a certain graciousness (**Fig. 18**). However, the face would appear

26 In the semantic sense described above in the paper.

to be characterised by a certain ungainliness, from what can be observed in the current state of preservation of the painting.

The data presented so far aims to be a preliminary study of the figure of the female pygmy in Roman Nilotic paintings. In the Pompeian examples, an attempt is made to point out some of the aspects related to the iconography, roles and actions in which these figures are involved. This is a first step in a field that is still too little investigated, in which future research will be able to contribute significantly in order to give renewed emphasis to the female figures, protagonists of this artistic expression.

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