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Imag(in)ing Livia and Cleopatra in Augustan Rome

Whether or not she actually possessed the positive qualities for which she is credited in Julio-Claudian art and propaganda, in the Roman imagination the images of Livia, the wife of Augustus, stand in marked contrast to those of Cleopatra VII, the last Ptolemaic ruler of Egypt. Livia exemplifies traditional matronly virtue and marital respectability, whereas Cleopatra exemplifies the excesses of extravagance, drunkenness, and sexual impropriety. And yet, the visual language employed in the praise of Livia at Rome is nearly identical to that used by Cleopatra in her own propaganda in Egypt. This paper is a study in how the praise of Livia and the vilification of Cleopatra in Augustan propaganda emerged from the same source, conditioned by their unique socio-historical contexts.

The examples of Cleopatra VII's extravagance which appear in Roman literature, (e.g., Propertius 3.11 and Horace 1.37) highlight the Roman xenophobic frustration with Cleopatra both as a woman and as an alien. The invective and fantastic stories of ribald carousing expressed anxieties about the corrupting influence of Egyptian practices on the conservative *mos maiorum* - the effeminizing influence of wealth and luxury, alien animal deities supplanting traditional Roman religion, the potential for corruption on the social level - incest and drunkenness, as well as the potentially demoralizing effect of being ruled by a woman.

However, the contrast presented by representations of Livia, whether by her public statues, by evidence of her public benefactions, or by Augustan literary accounts, focus on the positive qualities of her fertility and fecundity; she can control those creative impulses and material resources in such a way that she only benefitted the public good and contributed to the well-being of the Roman people. When in public statuary she adopts the guises of various goddesses, such as Ceres, Fortuna, and even Venus Genetrix, the emphasis of such representation is on her role as wife and mother, and the material prosperity at Rome engendered by Augustus' conquest of Egypt, rather than on any erotic aspects of such assimilations. Her public benefactions (e.g., Porticus Liviae and Macellum Liviae) highlight her use of wealth for civic welfare (ready accessibility to the nutrition provided by agricultural produce, etc.) and erudition rather than obvious self-aggrandizement through expenditure on her own personal adornment.

And yet, the visual language employed in communicating these messages is borrowed from Hellenistic Egypt. For example, the image of the cornucopia is deployed with considerable frequency in Augustan art as a symbol of Livia's fertility and beneficence, in particular with statues of Livia as Ceres or Fortuna. This symbol was a common attribute of Hellenistic queens beginning with Arsinoe II. Cleopatra VII, for instance, often used this device on her coins. The practice of public benefactions arranged by women, too, originated in the East. And the emphasis on fertility for perpetuating dynastic succession, as well, sprang from the same source (Rose 1997, 5).