

Proposal for FIEC

a) Name, Address, Affiliation

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Present through June 15, 2008:
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b) preferred panel, any of the following

'Cultural Encounters and Fusions in the Roman Empire'
'Religion in Society'
'Images, Texts, Reality'

c) **title:** Authenticity and Ethnicity: Egyptian art-works, made in Italy

d) **length of talk:** 20 minutes

e) abstract (300 words)

Even before Octavian's victory at Actium, Romans in Italy were fascinated with Egypt. After annexation, increased contact engendered a taste for the Egyptian in Italy, evidenced by imported Egyptian artworks, so-called Egyptianizing artworks, and the widespread popularity of the cult of Isis. Despite long-standing interest in the phenomenon, one aspect of Roman Egyptomania has received little attention: the local production of artworks in traditional Egyptian forms. Who were the craftsmen responsible for these works of art? This paper considers two cases in which it is possible to identify the artists and to say something of their backgrounds: two obelisks from Beneventum and a sculptural dedication from Rome. The text of the first is written in hieroglyphs, thus requiring a specialist in Egyptian language. The second was signed by the artists, who identify themselves in Greek as Phidias and Ammonios. Close examination of both cases requires that we recalibrate our sense of what made an Egyptian-looking artwork 'authentic' for its Roman viewers. Authenticity was not solely tied to a work's style, place of origin, or to the ethnicity of the artisan who made it. Instead, these examples reveal a rich relationship among artist, dedicator, and community: despite their overtly Egyptian forms, they displayed adaptations of function suited to Italian sanctuaries of Isis and the Roman context. Though these artworks sometimes displayed specialized knowledge of Egypt (*e.g.*, hieroglyphic writing), they displayed equally specialized knowledge of Italian artistic, epigraphic, and religious conventions. Moreover, the available evidence and recent work on ethnic identity in the ancient Mediterranean undermine any attempt to correlate an object's Egyptian-ness with an Egyptian-born artist. Despite their 'Egyptian' appearance, these works showcased the prestige of their dedicators in ways that Italian viewers, whether initiates in the cult of Isis or members of the broader community, would have understood and appreciated.