

Aegyptiaca in Central Tyrrhenian Italy: Sea Routes, Traders and Ideas

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Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects always have been considered hallmarks of the wide range of contacts during the early Italian Iron Age.¹

The first imports from this period are a little group of scarabs from the Torre Galli necropolis (Calabria) belonging to tombs dating from the end of 10th century to the beginning of the 9th century BC² (fig. 1). Therefore, Torre Galli represents one of the cases of Levantine and Aegean materials that reached the Italian Peninsula before Greek colonization. Looking at the central Tyrrhenian coast in this phase, pre-colonial imports (even though not so rare) still cannot be considered evidence of established trade routes but they are relevant for tracing the following development in the Orientalizing period. For this reason, some findings from Latium and Campania may be highlighted. At Tarquinia, a late Mycenaean mirror was found in a 9th century Villanovan “pozzetto”³ (fig. 2a) and, only four years ago, a shard of Cypriot pottery (or at least its Phoenician imitation) was discovered in the inhabited area (Pian di Civita)⁴ (fig. 2b). At Capua, a so-called “ring cauldron” from Syria or Cyprus was discovered in 2005 in a 9th century princely tomb⁵ (fig. 3). As various contributions have frequently noted, Cypriots very likely played a crucial role with in trade leading to the western Mediterranean between the 2nd and the 1st millennium BC, inheriting the routes previously traced by the Mycenaean.⁶

Beyond Tarquinia and Capua, Veii can be added to these centers that anticipate the others in the mid-Tyrrhenian coast for the presence of Aegyptiaca. In fact, at Veii, scarabs firstly appeared in tombs dating from the end of the 9th to the first half of the 8th century BC.⁷

As previously stated, only after Greek colonization can we trace a more considerable exchange system. The peak of Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects occurred from 750 until 650 BC (the last 25 years of the Italian Iron Age and the first half of the Orientalizing period).⁸

In more detail, scarabs are the most frequent findings while other faience figurines (ushabtis and other talismans) are less recurrent.⁹

The contributions of Hölbl and De Salvia have already depicted a clear overview related to the provenance of the materials: these were not only Egyptian objects (or good imitations), but they also came from Syria, Phoenicia, Cyprus and the Aegean.¹⁰

In the mid-1990s, Gorton tried to classify the scarabs from the 1st millennium BC in the Mediterranean.¹¹ This typology, even though praiseworthy, suffers from some inadequacies: although it is true that the study correctly points out the main groups of scarabs (Egyptian and good imitations, Phoenician, Cypriot-Phoenician, Punic, Aegean and Naucratis productions), many types within them vary so greatly that the idea of



Fig. 1: Scarabs from Torre Galli.

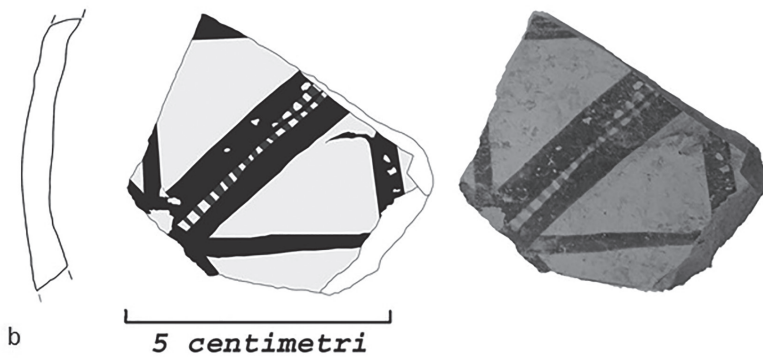


Fig. 2: a – Mycenaean mirror from Tarquinia, Poggio Selciatello; b – Cypriot shard from Tarquinia, Pian di Civita.



Fig. 3: Levantine cauldron from Capua.

'type' itself fades away because the co-existence and repetitiveness of standard elements are missing. Therefore, only the types belonging to the Aegean – i.e. Perachora-Lindos – and Naucratis workshops can be considered reliable.¹² Moreover, some scarabs that could apparently be classified as Naucratic were discovered in much earlier contexts (for example, a burial in *Ager Faliscus* dated approximately 700 BC) than the foundation of the *emporion* in the Nile Delta (620–600 BC).¹³

As discussed above, while it is generally possible to identify the main areas and centers of production of these objects (especially the mass produced ones), it can be more difficult to accurately trace their circulation in the Mediterranean. For this reason it seems more useful to look at particular groups, which are chronologically limited, such as a variety of blue paste scarabs that Hölbl already identified in 1979 and recently located with more precision.¹⁴

This group, which is not included in Gorton's work, presents peculiar features: the scarabs are quite small (around one centimeter long), they are blue-turquoise in color, the details of the beetle are almost rough and there are stylized (silhouette) vegetal and animal motifs on the cartouche (fig. 4).

In Hölbl's opinion, the workshop that made them was located in Tell Tayinat (Turkey), near the Orontes River and the Al-Mina *emporion*. Although they have been found in the Aegean area and in mainland Greece, in contexts dating from approximately 750 BC,¹⁵ the majority of them come from the southern Etruscan cities (Tarquinia,



Fig. 4: Blue paste scarabs from Tell Tayinat.

Caere, Veii and Vulci) and Campania (especially Capua), so it appears that these scarabs were more successful on the Tyrrhenian coast.¹⁶

As far as Italy is concerned, these blue paste scarabs were not the only case of well appreciated minor objects. The well-known Lyre Player seals, which originated in northern Syria or Cilicia (a workshop was probably also active in Rhodes as Martelli and Rizzo have posited¹⁷) almost seem to overlap the same route; starting from Al-Mina, firstly scarabs and seals would have reached the eastern Greek islands (mainly Rhodes), then they would have been distributed in the rest of the Mediterranean.¹⁸

Pithekoussai seem to gather the majority of the Lyre Player seals¹⁹ while the blue paste scarabs end their journey on the peninsula. This difference currently could be explained by choices of each community.²⁰

The necropolis of Pithekoussai (Lacco Ameno) is also the location with the greatest recurrence of Aegyptiaca in Italy; for this reason, it is one of the most deeply studied. The recent review by Nizzo pointed out that Aegyptiaca are a well consolidated marker for the complexity of the trade relationship on the island: the necropolis was in use for fifty years, so it was used for approximately two generations (750–700 BC). The earliest tombs provided objects from different areas of the Levant, while the second-generation burials showed a clear prevalence of Rhodian productions.²¹ This trend seems confirmed by Pontecagnano and the other indigenous centers, such as the Sarno Valley. In contrast, Capua maintained this variety for a longer period of time in a similar process that involved Etruria; only in the 7th century BC did Rhodian products become dominant.²² This difference could be attributed to the fact that at Capua and Etruria, Aegyptiaca predated Greek colonization.

Moreover, Pithekoussai showed that Aegyptiaca belonged mainly to the funerary set of women and children. As De Salvia has remarked, it is probable that their value was well known by the isle community, since in Egypt scarabs and god figurines were amulets that protected fertility and regeneration. The scholar also investigated how knowledge related to these objects was transmitted, considering whether this process was under a direct influence from Egypt to Italy or it was filtered by other communities. He noted, for example, that scarabs were frequently mounted on sickle or elliptic-shaped pendants. This kind of mount had no particular comparison in Pharaonic Egypt, but it was very popular in the Semitic areas. This sort of pendant evoked the crescent moon and had the same value as the scarab in Egypt.²³

It is very likely that the idea to join these talismans together into one object, a much more effective amulet, occurred in places where cultural hybridization was very strong, such as Al Mina, Cyprus, the eastern Greek islands and Pithekoussai itself. In these ports of trade, the Semitic presence was intense, if not permanent.

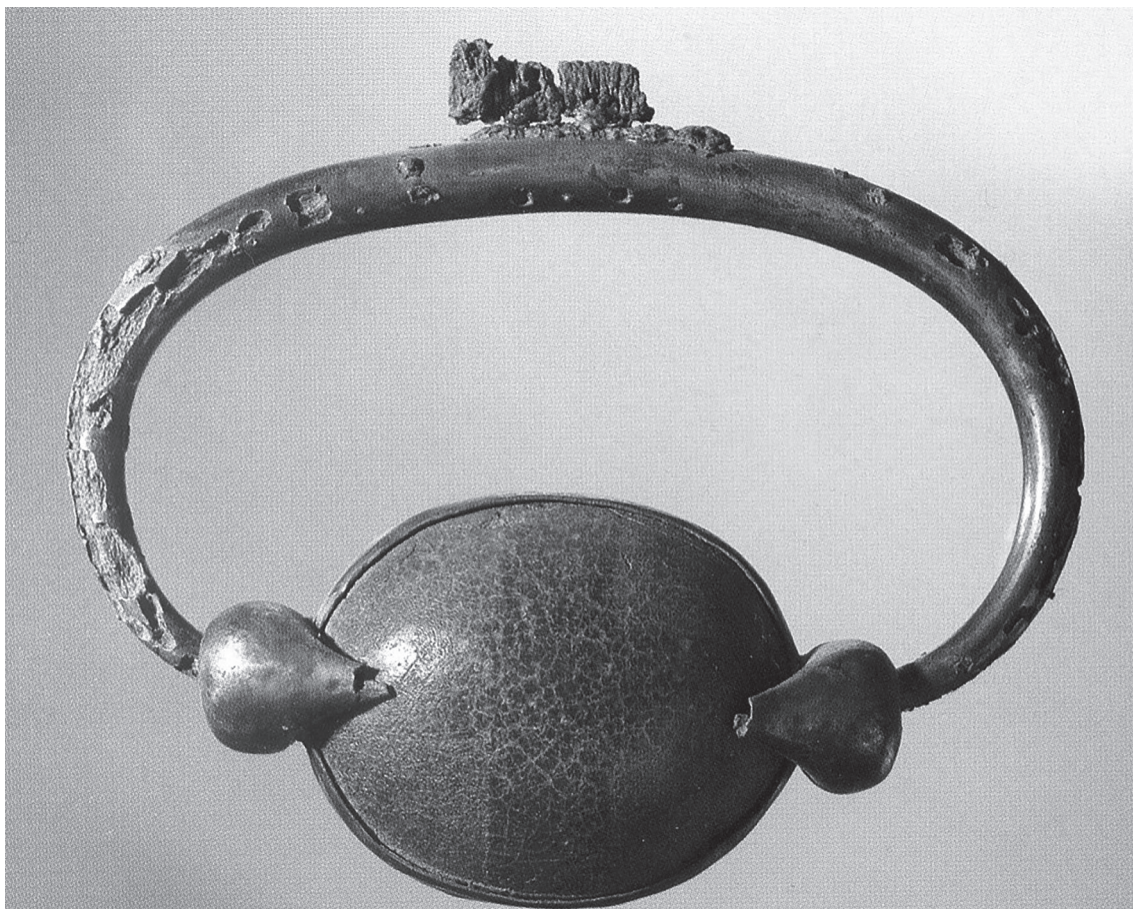


Fig. 5: Silver pendant with amber scaraboid from Calatia.

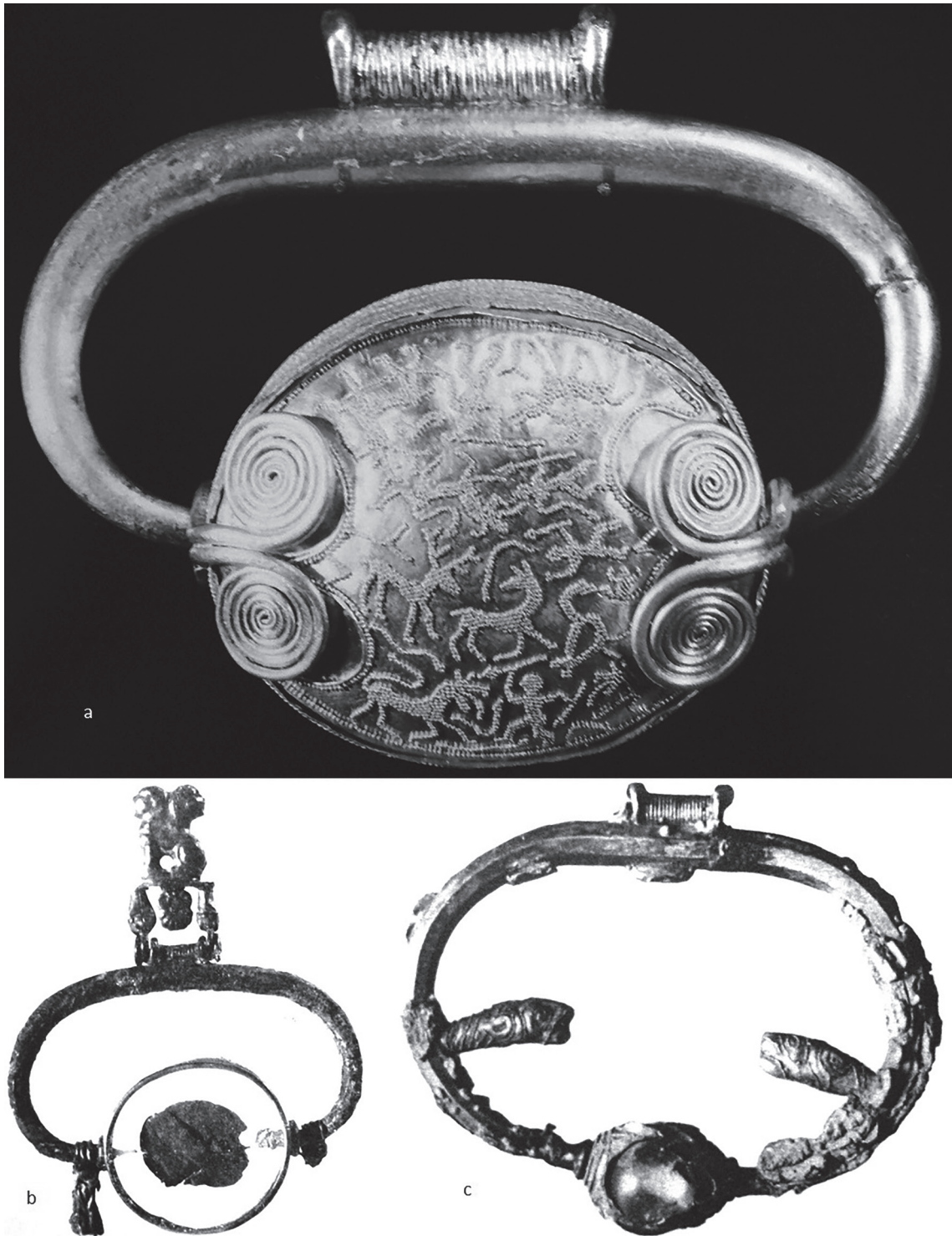


Fig. 6: a – Gold pendant and scaraboid from Vulci; b – Pendant from Colle del Forno; c – Pendant from Narce.

If we also consider that some pendants were made in Etruria, it appears that local communities immediately accepted these ideas. We can consider, for example, a scarab from Marsiliana, that was probably taken away from a foreign original gold mount, and it was inserted in a new local silver one,²⁴ or some pendants provided with an amber scaraboid instead of an imported scarab (fig. 5). In fact, there are several examples from Etruria, Latium and Campania. The full integration of this kind of object in the local jewelry is also demonstrated by three other cases: an elliptic gold pendant with a gold scaraboid from Vulci (700–650 BC), a very elaborated silver pendant with traces of a wood scaraboid from Colle del Forno and another one with a rock crystal bead from Narce (both 650–600 BC) (fig. 6a, b, c). Finally, in addition to scarabs, monkey figurines (and in one case a Ptah from Vetulonia) were produced in amber by local workshops (such as the particularly well-known ones at Veii and Vetulonia).²⁵

Looking back at the recipients of Aegyptiaca, in Etruria and Latium the situation was probably slightly different compared to Pithekoussai. Aegyptiaca, especially scarabs, are frequently found in child burials only in Campania. However, Capua again shows a different trend because the presence of scarabs in child tombs is still not recorded. In Etruria and Latium, the burials with scarabs seem to belong almost exclusively to women. However this situation must be evaluated considering that previously published data are heterogenous for every site and the presence of children in the necropolis could be highly underrated due to lack of conservation of bones.²⁶

Another main difference in terms of the reception of these minor objects is that in Egypt, at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC, they were used by the low class,²⁷ while in Italy and in the rest of the Mediterranean belonged to the elites. In Greece, even though they appeared less frequently in the burials than in Italy, they were part of the rich votive offers of the emporic sanctuaries both on the mainland and the islands, beginning from the late 8th century BC, when the new-born polis catalyzed the economic surplus of each community (this phenomenon was somewhat similar in Italy about a century later as the archaic votive depots of Veii-Portonaccio and Satricum seem to demonstrate).

Last but not least, other assets of more value must be counted amongst the Aegyptiaca. For example, we can recall the faience vases, such as the Bocchoris situla. These kinds of products are very rare and it would be difficult to include them in the same trade circuit as amulets and figurines. It is very likely that they were part of a gift-exchange amongst the elites of the Mediterranean communities.²⁸

Notes

- ¹ Hölbl 1979; Schweizer 2016; Giovanelli 2017.
- ² De Salvia 1999.
- ³ Delpino 1998/1999; Delpino 2000.
- ⁴ The fragment could be dated from around 900 BC if Cypriot otherwise approximately 100 years later if Phoenician (Bagnasco Gianni et al. 2016).
- ⁵ Melandri – Sirano 2016.
- ⁶ Botto 2016.
- ⁷ Giovanelli 2015, 400–422; Giovanelli 2017.
- ⁸ Giovanelli 2017.
- ⁹ As it has been already shown by Hölbl’s catalog (Hölbl 1979, v. 2).
- ¹⁰ Hölbl 1979; De Salvia 1993a; De Salvia 1993b.
- ¹¹ Gorton 1996.
- ¹² Giovanelli 2015, 423.
- ¹³ Giovanelli 2015, 347–348, nos. CCXXI.1–2.
- ¹⁴ Hölbl 2016.
- ¹⁵ Beyond the findings listed in Hölbl’s work, there is at least one scarab from this group in the votive depot of the Jalysos Athenaion as far as I recognized it in the local museum (Giovanelli 2017).
- ¹⁶ Giovanelli 2015; Hölbl 2016.
- ¹⁷ Martelli 1988; Rizzo 2007.
- ¹⁸ Giovanelli 2017.
- ¹⁹ The isle yielded about one hundred seals, Etruria and Ager Faliscus only 9 (Rizzo 2008/2009).
- ²⁰ Giovanelli 2017.
- ²¹ Nizzo 2007, 38–40.
- ²² Melandri 2010; Giovanelli 2015, 442–443.
- ²³ De Salvia 1978; De Salvia 1993b.
- ²⁴ Giovanelli 2016.
- ²⁵ Giovanelli 2016.
- ²⁶ Nizzo 2011, 54–56; Giovanelli 2015, 420–422.
- ²⁷ De Salvia 1978.
- ²⁸ Giovanelli 2017.

Image Credits

Fig. 1: De Salvia 1989, tav. 189A. – Fig. 2a, b: Giovanelli 2017, figs. 2–3. – Fig. 3: Melandri – Sirano 2016, fig. 2. – Fig. 4: Re-elaboration, Hölbl 2016, figs. 11, 13, 17, 18. – Fig. 5: Giovanelli 2015, 309, nr. CLXXXIII.22. – Fig. 6a: Giovanelli 2015, 149, nr. LXXIV.17. – Fig. 6b, c: Giovanelli 2016, figs. 3A–B.

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