

www.otium.unipg.it

OTIVM.  
Archeologia e Cultura del Mondo Antico  
ISSN 2532-0335 -DOI 10.5281/zenodo.10283905



No. 13, Anno 2022 – Article 3

## Riding the alterity. The depiction of pygmy 'warriors' in Roman Nilotic paintings

Eleonora Voltan<sup>✉</sup>

*Departamento de Ciencias Históricas, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad de  
Málaga*

---

**Abstract:** In this paper, the focus is on the depiction of pygmies as 'warriors' in Nilotic Roman paintings. After a brief overview regarding the picta nilotica's spread and chronology, a particular attention is turned to the scenes of fighting between pygmies and Nilotic fauna. Furthermore, some aspects that mark this iconographic solution are highlighted: the varied and extravagant 'armour', tools and chargers used by the pygmies to defend themselves against the animal attacks living along the banks of the Nile.

**Keywords:** Fauna; Iconography; Nilotic; Pygmy; Roman painting

**ID-ORCID:** 0000-0003-4750-3062

---

---

<sup>✉</sup> Address: Universidad de Málaga, Departamento de Ciencias Históricas, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Campus de Teatinos, s/n - 29071 Málaga, España (E-mail: [eleonoravoltan@uma.es](mailto:eleonoravoltan@uma.es)).

---

## 1. INTRODUCTION: AN OVERVIEW ON THE ROMAN NILOTIC PAINTINGS<sup>1</sup>.

From a chronological point of view, the Roman Nilotic landscape paintings are documented between the 1st century BCE and 150 CE<sup>2</sup>. The wall fragments from the atrium of the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (80-70 BCE) represent the earliest attestation according to existing records<sup>3</sup>. However, there are some chronologically more recent examples: the wall fragments of the Baths of the Hunters in *Leptis Magna* (about 250 CE)<sup>4</sup> and the pictorial frieze of a cistern in Salamis (6th century CE)<sup>5</sup>. With regard to the geographical spread of Nilotic paintings, there are examples from: Italy, France, Libya, Cyprus, the West Bank, Greece and Spain (Fig. 1)<sup>6</sup>. The Italian peninsula certainly provides the most extensive and varied archaeological documentation. The largest number of records is held in Campania, particularly in Pompeii; other testimonies come from other nearby settlements such as Herculaneum, Gragnano and Stabia. As for Lazio, paintings from Rome, Ostia and Bolsena are documented<sup>7</sup>. Other examples with the same theme come from Lombardy and, more specifically, from Brescia (domus of Dionysus)<sup>8</sup> and Cremona (Piazza Marconi and Via

---

<sup>1</sup> Eleonora Voltan is recipient of a research contract "Ayudas para la recualificación del sistema universitario español. Modalid Margarita Salas" financed by The European Union -NextGenerationEU. I would like to thank the reviewers for their helpful feedback

<sup>2</sup> DE VOS 1980, pp. 75-95; MEYBOOM 1995, pp. 16-19; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 241-248; MERRILS 2017, pp. 131-137.

<sup>3</sup> DE VOS 1980, pp. 9-12; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 155-157.

<sup>4</sup> VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 187-189.

<sup>5</sup> BARDSWEEL, SOTIROU 1939, pp. 443-445.

<sup>6</sup> This paper contains part of the results of the author's PhD thesis aimed at the cataloguing and study of Nilotic-themed paintings attested in the provinces of the Roman Empire between the 1st century BP and the 6th century AD.

<sup>7</sup> BARBET 1982, pp. 102-114.

<sup>8</sup> VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 176-177; MARIANI 2003, pp. 45-47; SALVADORI 2012, pp. 262-263.

Colletta)<sup>9</sup>. In the Marche region there is a Nilotic frieze in a building in Ancona (Via Fanti)<sup>10</sup>. Outside the Italian borders, there are further Nilotic attestations in France (villa of Mercin-et-Vaux, Temple of Cybele in Lyon, a building called 'Clos de la Solitude' and the residential complex of Villars)<sup>11</sup>; in Libya, in addition to the already mentioned case of *Leptis Magna*, there are some pictorial fragments from Room U of the Villa of Dar Buc Ammèra in Zliten<sup>12</sup>. In Greece, some paintings with Nilotic motifs are found in the corridor of a Roman tomb near Corinth<sup>13</sup>; another attestation is found in the *Herodium* complex near Jerusalem<sup>14</sup>. Lastly, there is one pictorial panel with a Nilotic scene along the southern side of a Roman cistern discovered at Monte Sacro in Cartagena (Murcia)<sup>15</sup>.

## 2. THE DEPICTION OF THE PYGMY IN THE ROMAN NILOTIC SCENES.

In From the second half of the 1st century BCE onwards, there has been a considerable increase in the presence of dwarves and pygmies in Nilotic compositions, based on the evidence that has been preserved. 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

---

<sup>9</sup> MARIANI 2017, pp. 236-237.

<sup>10</sup> MICHELI 2014, pp. 409-413; SANTUCCI 2020, pp. 79-92.

<sup>11</sup> LECLANT 1984, pp. 441-442; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 210-212; BARBET 2008, pp. 171-173.

<sup>12</sup> AURIGEMMA 1962, pp. 57-58; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 192-195.

<sup>13</sup> VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 219-220.

<sup>14</sup> ROZENBERG 2014, pp. 120-128.

<sup>15</sup> VELASCO ESTRADA, IBORRA RODRÍGUEZ 2020, pp. 133-141.

it, particularly in the last few decades<sup>16</sup>. The earliest records have their roots in Ancient Egypt, where some fundamental proof points to the desire to have a pygmy 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'<sup>17</sup>. 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<sup>18</sup>. 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 have no physical deformities, the dwarves have clear disabilities. Indeed, the dwarfs are characterised by a genetic mutation that leads not only to a particularly short stature, but also to a physical constitution that is significantly disproportionate. In most cases, they have a large cranial vault, short, bent legs and very prominent buttocks<sup>19</sup>. As scholars have already explained, the pygmies of Ancient Egypt were fully integrated into society and were both privileged intermediaries between the world of the gods and that of mankind and the embodiment of eternal youth<sup>20</sup>. 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 adults, there is no doubt that the symbolic-sacral dimension they had

---

<sup>16</sup> JANNI 1978, pp. 19-48; DASEN 1988, pp. 253-276; BAHUCHET 1993, pp. 153-181; DASEN 1993, pp. 169-174; VERSLUYS 2002, pp. 275-277; HARARI 2004, pp. 163-188; CLARKE 2006, p. 161; DASEN 2006, pp. 95-113; MEYBOOM, VERSLUYS 2006, pp. 171-208; CLARKE 2007, pp. 75-76; MORET 2012, pp. 137-162.

<sup>17</sup> WILD 1963, pp. 77-83; EMERIT 2011, pp. 45-65.

<sup>18</sup> MURRAY 1965, pp. 72-75; BAHUCHET 1993, pp. 166-167; DASEN 2006, p. 97.

<sup>19</sup> DASEN 1988, p. 255; DASEN 1993, pp. 7-21.

<sup>20</sup> JANNI 1978, pp. 44-46; DASEN 2006, pp. 95-113.

in Egypt was lost. The pygmy, absorbing the pathological traits of the dwarfs together with certain characteristics of the figures of the satyrs and infants, becomes the incarnation of that type of 'grotesque' characterised by evident physical deformations and an emphasised phallic appearance<sup>21</sup>.

Herodotus described the pygmies as small men, lower than ordinary people<sup>22</sup>. Also interesting is Strabo's description of the way of life of these people, according to him being conditioned by their environment:

Πολλὰ δ' εἴρηται περὶ τῶν Αἰθιοπικῶν ἐν τοῖς πρότερον, ὥστε συμπεριωδευμένα ἂν εἴη τῇ Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τὰ τούτων. ὥς δ' εἰπεῖν, τὰ ἄκρα τῆς οἰκουμένης τὰ παρακεείμενα τῇ δυσκρατῶ καὶ ἀοικήτῳ διὰ καῦμα ἢ ψυχὸς ἀνάγκη ἀποτεύγματα εἶναι τῆς εὐκρατοῦ καὶ ἐλαττώματα· ταῦτα δ' ἐκ τῶν βίων δηλα καὶ τῆς πρὸς τὰς χρείας τὰς ἀνθρωπικὰς ἀπορίας. κακόβιοί τε δὴ καὶ γυμνήτες εἰσι τὰ πολλὰ καὶ νομάδες· τὰ τε βοσκήματα αὐτοῖς ἐστὶ μικρά, πρόβατα καὶ αἶγες καὶ βόες· καὶ κύνες μικροί, τραχεῖς δὲ καὶ μάχιμοι. τάχα δὲ καὶ τοὺς Πυγμαίους ἀπὸ τῆς τούτων μικροφυΐας ὑπενόησαν καὶ ἀνέπλασαν· ἑωρακῶς μὲν γὰρ οὐδεὶς ἐξηγεῖται τῶν πίστεως ἀξίων ἀνδρῶν.

<sup>21</sup> JANNI 1978, pp. 44-45; BALLABRIGA 1981, pp. 63-64; DASEN 2006, pp. 95-113. The ugliness of the pygmies already worked as a term of comparison in the Ancient World. Indeed, the Greek historian Herodotus wrote:

Ὁ μὲν δὴ τοιαῦτα πολλὰ ἐς Πέρσας τε καὶ τοὺς συμμάχους ἐξεμαίνετο, μένων ἐν Μέμφι καὶ θήκας τε παλαιὰς ἀνοίγων καὶ σκεπτόμενος τοὺς νεκρούς. Ὡς δὲ δὴ καὶ ἐς τοῦ Ἥφαίστου τὸ ἱερόν ἦλθε καὶ πολλὰ τῷ ἀγάλματι κατεγέλασε. Ἔστι γὰρ τοῦ Ἥφαίστου τῷ γάλμα τοῖσι Φοινικηίοισι Παταῖκοισι ἐμφερέστατον, τοὺς οἱ Φοίνικες ἐν τῇσι πρῶρησι τῶν τριηρέων περιάγουσι· ὅς δὲ τούτους μὴ ὁπωπε, ἐγὼ δὲ «οἶ» σημανέω· πυγμαίου ἀνδρὸς μίμησις ἐστὶ. Ἐσῆλθε δὲ καὶ ἐς τῶν Καβείρων τὸ ἱερόν, ἐς τὸ οὐ θεμιτόν ἐστι εἰσέναι ἄλλον γε ἢ τὸν ἱερέα· ταῦτα δὲ τὰ ἀγάλματα καὶ ἐνέπρησε πολλὰ κατασκώψας; *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; trad. RAWLISON 2018.

<sup>22</sup> HDT. II, 32.

In the preceding part of this work, we have spoken at length of Ethiopia, so that its description may be said to be included in that of Egypt. In general, then, the extreme parts of the habitable world adjacent to the intemperate region, which is not habitable by reason either of heat or cold, must necessarily be defective and inferior, in respect to physical advantages, to the temperate region. This is evident from the mode of life of the inhabitants, and their want of what is requisite for the use and subsistence of man. For the mode of life [of the Ethiopians] is wretched; they are for the most part naked, and wander from place to place with their flocks. Their flocks and herds are small in size, whether sheep, goats, or oxen; the dogs also, though fierce and quarrelsome, are small. It was perhaps from the diminutive size of these people, that the story of the Pygmies originated, whom no person, worthy of credit, has asserted that he himself has seen<sup>23</sup>.

For Seneca, the ardour of the Nilotic inhabitants was truly remarkable, which he even ranked among the wonders of the Nile River itself:

*Inter miracula fluminis incredibilem incolarum audaciam accepi: bini paruula nauigia conscendunt, quorum alter nauem regit, alter exhaurit; deinde multum inter rapidam insaniam Nili et reciprocos fluctus uolutati tandem tenuissimos canales tenent, per quos angusta rupium effugiunt et, cum toto flumine effusi, nauigium ruens manu temperant magnoque spectantium metu in caput missi, cum iam adploraueris mersosque atque obrutos tanta mole credideris, longe ab eo, in quem cederunt, loco nauigant tormenti modo missi; nec mergit illos cadens unda sed planis aquis tradit.*

I have heard that among the wonders of the river is the incredible audacity of the inhabitants of its banks: two of them climb into tiny boats, one steers the boat, the other empties it; then, after being tossed about for a long time in the midst of the fury of the Nile and the billows returning on themselves, they finally arrive in narrow channels through which they escape the rocky whirlpools and, hurled down with the whole river, steer the boat by hand as it falls and, plunging headlong to the great fright of which he observes, when you are already on the verge of mourning them, giving them up for drowning, swallowed up by that enormous mass of water, projected as if by a catapult, they sail away

---

<sup>23</sup> STR. XVII, 2, 1; trad. ROLLER 2014.

from the spot where they fell, and the waves do not submerge them, but entrust them to calm waters<sup>24</sup>.

The success of this artistic subject increased during the Hellenistic period, when the interest in the abnormal and the caricatured became even more marked, and consequently also strongly impacted the Roman iconographic vocabulary<sup>25</sup>. 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, the pygmy is not physically disproportionate because he is not deformed, even though he is 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<sup>26</sup>. In this regard, 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<sup>27</sup>.

This reinterpreted type of pygmy would therefore correspond to the artistic creation first attested in the Hellenistic repertoire and later in the Roman one. In this study, 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

---

<sup>24</sup> SEN. *QN*, IV, 2, 6; trad. CORCORAN 1972.

<sup>25</sup> CÈBE 1966, pp. 345-346; JANNI 1978, pp. 44-45.

<sup>26</sup> VERSLUYS 2002, p. 276; CLARKE 2006, p. 161.

<sup>27</sup> DASEN 1993, pp. 175-188; DASEN 2006, pp. 95-113; DASEN 2009, pp. 213-231.

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<sup>28</sup>.

### 3. THE REPRESENTATION OF PYGMY 'WARRIORS' IN NILOTIC PAINTINGS.

L'esercito: i Pigmei, avendo circondato Eracle, colpiscono qui in un'unica falange la mano sinistra, mentre queste due schiere combattono contro la destra, poiché è più forte; gli arcieri e una massa di frombolieri assediano i piedi, colpiti dalla grandezza della gamba; alcuni poi combattono intorno alla testa – il re si è disposto qui poiché a loro questa sembra la parte più violenta del corpo – e vi conducono sopra, come su un'acropoli, i mezzi d'assalto: fuoco sulle chiome e un bidente contro gli occhi; alcuni mettono chiusure sulla bocca e sulle narici del naso, per impedire ad Eracle di respirare, quando la testa viene conquistata<sup>29</sup>.

In general, a range of valuable considerations on the imperial-era depiction of pygmies fighting Nilotic fauna on different types of media has been raised in an interesting study by Dasen in recent years<sup>30</sup>. As far as the present paper is concerned, the focus here is specifically on the representation of 'warrior' pygmies within the Roman pictorial repertoire, as well as the development of further remarks on this specific iconographic choice. In this study, it is also useful to keep in mind an issue already explored in recent years for paintings with Egyptian-inspired motifs in the Pompeian context. These scenes are often placed far from the main visual

---

<sup>28</sup> BRAGANTINI 2006, p. 167.

<sup>29</sup> FILOST. II, 22, 3; trad. CARBONE 2008.

<sup>30</sup> DASEN 2009, pp. 213-231.



axes within domestic contexts<sup>31</sup>. In most cases, the Nilotic subjects are part of the decorative system of rooms, such as triclinium, cubiculum, peristyle and garden, areas therefore related to a limited number of visitors. The reason for this choice could also correspond to a desire for visual enjoyment of the private sphere through the evocation of a world geographically and culturally distant from the traditional Roman *modus vivendi*. Consequently, the obvious comic effect of observing these kinds of images was to amuse and ward off the 'evil eye'. Indeed, the pygmy figure itself was configured as an *apotropaia*, an amulet against the evil eye<sup>32</sup>.

Within the cataloguing of *picta nilotica*<sup>33</sup>, it was possible to identify 21 representations of pygmies engaged in fighting the animals of the Nile. To be specific, 19 come from Italian sites, particularly from Pompeii (Fig. 2), and two from France (Tab. 1; Fig. 3). As far as chronology is concerned, the evidence spans between the last quarter of the 1st century BCE and the 1st century CE (Fig. 4). The following data are specifically shown in the table below: provenance, archaeological context, chronology and iconographic type (Tab. 1).

| Provenance                       | Archaeological context      | Chronology | Pygmies vs hippopotamus | Pygmies vs crocodile | Pygmies vs crane (geranomyia) |
|----------------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|
| Pompeii, House of Ceii (I 6, 15) | <i>Viridarium</i>           | 70 CE      | X                       |                      |                               |
| Pompeii, II 9, 2                 | Garden ( <i>stibadium</i> ) | 70 CE      |                         |                      | X                             |

<sup>31</sup> BARRETT 2017, pp. 293-332; KOPONEN 2017, pp. 125-130; KOPONEN 2020, pp. 291- 297.

<sup>32</sup> LEVI 1947, pp. 28-34; SPANO 1955, p. 349; CLARKE 2006, pp. 155-169; CLARKE 2007, pp. 87-107; DASEN 2009, p. 226.

<sup>33</sup> These data are collected in the author's PhD thesis.

|   |                                    |             |   |   |   |
|---|------------------------------------|-------------|---|---|---|
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Silver Wedding<br>(V 2, i)                        | <i>Cubiculum</i>                   | 62-79<br>CE |   |   | X |
| Pompeii, VI<br>17 <i>Insula</i><br><i>Occidentalis</i> , 25                   | Unidentifie<br>d                   | 1-37<br>CE  | X | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Quadrigas (VII<br>2, 25)                          | <i>Viridarium</i><br>and peristyle | 70 CE       | X | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Ancient Hunt<br>(VII 4, 48)                       | <i>Tablinum</i><br>and peristyle   | 71-79<br>CE | X |   |   |
| Pompeii,<br>Temple of<br>Apollo<br>(VII 7, 32) <sup>34</sup>                  | Peristyle                          | 70 CE       | X | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of M.<br><i>Catricius</i> (VII 16,<br>17)                   | Room 34                            | 70 CE       | X | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>Baths of the<br>Sarno<br>(VIII 2, 17-<br>23)                      | <i>Frigidarium</i>                 | 70 CE       |   | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Mosaic Doves<br>(VIII 2, 33-<br>34) <sup>35</sup> | Terrace                            | 70 CE       |   | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Doctor<br>(VIII 5, 24)                            | Peristyle                          | 55-79<br>CE | X | X |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Sculptor<br>(VIII 7, 24)                          | Peristyle                          | 70 CE       |   |   | X |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Pygmies<br>(IX 5, 9)                              | Room I                             | 70 CE       |   | X |   |
| Pompeii,  | Atrium                             | 70 CE       | X | X |   |

<sup>34</sup> Based on Morelli's descriptions: PPM IX, pp. 113-14.

<sup>35</sup> Based on 19th century descriptions, in particular: MAU 1886, pp. 141-157.

|  |                                  |                |   |   |   |
|--|----------------------------------|----------------|---|---|---|
| IX 5, 14-16 <sup>36</sup>                  |                                  |                |   |   |   |
| Stabia, Villa of San Marco                 | Portico of the peristyle         | 70 CE          |   | X |   |
| Rome, domus of Regio VI <sup>37</sup>      | Unidentified                     | 70 CE          | X |   |   |
| Rome, Aula Isiaca <sup>38</sup>            | Apsidal wall                     | 25-20 BCE      | X |   |   |
| Rome, Columbarium of Villa Doria Pamphili  | Friezes around sepulchral niches | 25 BCE         | X | X | X |
| Brescia, domus of Dionysus                 | Courtyard                        | 1st century CE | X |   |   |
| Lyon, Temple of Cybèle                     | Cryptoporticus                   | 1st century CE |   |   | X |
| Mercin-et-Vaux, 'Le Quinconce' Roman villa | Unidentified                     | 70-80 CE       |   |   | X |

**Tab. 1.** Overview of the paintings with pygmies fighting Nilotic fauna (authors' elaboration).

As Tab. 1 highlights, the pygmies are mainly fighting against: hippopotamuses, in twelve scenarios; crocodiles, in eleven records; cranes, in six cases. Regarding the latter, according to the myth, the so-called 'geranomachy'<sup>39</sup>, the pygmies try to destroy the nests of the cranes, but they

<sup>36</sup> The painting is lost; see: SCHEFOLD 1957, pp. 259-262.

<sup>37</sup> The original frieze has been lost, but its memory is preserved through a 20th century graphic reproduction: REINACH 1922, p. 376, Fig. 1.

<sup>38</sup> The pictorial decoration, now almost completely lost, is preserved in photographs and drawings from the early 20th century: IACOPI 1997.

<sup>39</sup> The geranomachy will be mythologised by recounting the insane hate between cranes and pygmies who saw their crops destroyed and their territory ruined by their implacable enemies, finding an explanation in the legend of a maiden of exceptional beauty, *Oinoe*, who became the mother of *Mopsos*, and who in her immense pride despised Artemis and Hera. The latter goddess, offended, converted *Oinoe* into a crane, making her hateful to the pygmies. *Oinoe* did not want to leave the country for the love of her son, but the pygmies armed themselves and drove her away (OV. *Met.* VI, 90). Another version spoke instead of the P. queen called Gerana, who was so revered by the people that she became haughty, so

are usually weak and often overwhelmed by the ferocious and aggressive cranes, which enjoy the blood of their opponents: «*Pygmaeo sanguine gaudet avis*»<sup>40</sup>. In some examples, a co-presence of two or three of these types of fighting is observed in Nilotic paintings.

The categories of tools used by pygmies to defend themselves are mainly divided into: throwing weapons, impact weapons and peculiar sticks (Fig. 9). Of the first type, which is the one most frequently attested in Nilotic scenes, spears with pointed (Fig. 8) or sometimes forked ends are depicted. As for the few examples of impact weapons, one mainly observes the use of clubs (Fig. 7) or simple stones. Finally, a considerable percentage of evidence is characterised by the presence of sticks, often depicted crossed (Fig. 10). This last aspect is rather multifaceted and complex to deal in depth in this article. Hence, I consider it appropriate to highlight the probable apotropaic value of these sticks<sup>41</sup>. In almost all cases, this figurative choice is realised in dangerous situations, such as attacks by both terrestrial and aquatic Nilotic fauna<sup>42</sup>. In this sense, one can also consider a possible 'practical' use of these tools, that is, to frighten animals by banging the sticks against each other. In two fragments of the logograph Hecataeus, whose authenticity, however, is not unanimously confirmed by scholars, one would read that pygmies wear horns, beat crotales and in this way defend themselves against the enemy pygmy cranes who wrongly disrespect their

---

much so that she despised Artemis and Hera, and was therefore turned into a crane by the latter. On this topic, see: OVADIAH, MUCZNIK 2017, pp. 141-156.

<sup>40</sup> OV. *Fast.* II, 176.

<sup>41</sup> SPANO 1955, pp. 335-368; DASEN 2009, pp. 223-226; BELLUCCI, VOLTAN 2022, pp. 83-86.

<sup>42</sup> BELLUCCI, VOLTAN 2022, pp. 81-82.

size<sup>43</sup>. In mythical terms, a similar use could be found in the weapon used by the hero Heracles against the birds of Stymphalus<sup>44</sup>. Thus, the apotropaic and salvific value attributed to the sticks could correspond with the creative intention of the artisans and the consequent perceptive interpretation of the ancient Romans<sup>45</sup>.

Finally, I briefly focus on two elements that characterise the 'military equipment' of small warriors: the headgear, sometimes in the form of a helmet, and the shield. The first is recorded in the form of conical or cap-shaped headgear (Fig. 8), and reproductions of realistic helmets are particularly rare<sup>46</sup>. The shields also play on a double level between realistic and historically accurate models (Fig. 6) and others that are ridiculed, as in the case, for instance, of the reuse of an amphora neck as a makeshift shield<sup>47</sup>.

### 3.1 *The equipment and weapons of the pygmies.*

Based on the analysis of the preserved evidence, two main ways in which pygmies react to their enemies can be observed. The first way would see pygmies unarmed, thus lacking any tools or instruments to protect themselves from enemy attacks; in the second, they would gather more or less adequately armed subjects. Although there are very few examples of figures without tools to protect themselves, I find it interesting that in these cases the pygmies' reaction is to direct their excrement at their opponents.

---

<sup>43</sup> Fgr H1F, 328 a-b.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, an author such as Statius refers to Stymphalos with his clanging bronze, that is the rattler with which he disturbed the birds: Stat. *Theb.* 4.297.

<sup>45</sup> On this topic: BELLUCCI, VOLTAN 2022, pp. 77-88.

<sup>46</sup> See: House of the Coloured Capitals in Pompeii: VERSLUYS 2002, p. 464, fig. 163.

<sup>47</sup> As in the case of the frieze of the *tablinum* of the House of the Ancient Hunt (VII 4, 48) in Pompeii. In general, on this topic: Berg 2020, pp. 1-12.

A reaction based both on fear and on the symbolic purpose of warding off evil, as well as on a clear inability to react to danger, an attitude that is typical of childhood<sup>48</sup>. For example, the frieze from Pompeii VI 17 *Insula Occidentalis*, 25 (MANN, inv. 9688) depicts a pair of pygmies on board a boat. The focus here is on the pygmy balanced on the edge of the boat who is directing his excrement towards a threatening hippopotamus. The figure's head and gaze are also turned towards the menacing animal (Fig. 5).

Concerning the second counter-offensive mode, relating to pygmies with the auxiliary of fighting tools, I believe it is helpful to distinguish between naked subjects and those partially or fully clothed in various ways for the fight. In most cases, the presence of naked pygmies clearly prevails; the percentage of clothed subjects is considerably lower. The nudity, with the evident emphasis on the phallus, appears in these specific compositional solutions as a further indicator of the comic trait deliberately associated with these subjects: the increased vulnerability in the face of enemies is aimed precisely at emphasising how ridiculous and out of context the little warriors are (Fig. 6). As far as scenes with clothed characters are concerned, the iconographic variants may consist of abdominal bands that do not cover the phallus, leaving it visibly uncovered; they may instead be concealed by 'skirts' (Fig. 7) or tunics of different lengths and shapes (Fig. 8)<sup>49</sup>.

---

<sup>48</sup> BALLABRIGA 1981, pp. 63-64; DASEN 2006, pp. 95-113.

<sup>49</sup> Regarding the depiction of complete and verisimilar armour, the representation of pygmies fighting against a crane in a reproduction from the House of the Coloured Capitals in Pompeii is noteworthy: VERSLUYS 2002, p. 464, fig. 163.

### 3.2 *Standing on the edge of inversion: the 'steeds' of the pygmies.*

As already seen, the Nilotic fauna represents the main danger in the world of pygmies. However, the same animals that threaten the pygmies are also converted, in some cases, into their temporary steeds (Tab. 2). In certain examples, the characters try to ride these animals perhaps in the perspective of capturing them. An example of this is a detail from the frieze from the House of the Doctor in Pompeii (MANN, inv. 113195) in which three pygmies can be seen on the shore dragging the crocodile 'harnessed' by its riding companion towards the small island (Fig. 11)<sup>50</sup>. Also interesting is the detail of a pygmy riding a duck depicted on the south wall of tomb 22 of the Via Laurentina necropolis in Ostia (Fig. 12). In the scene, a crocodile can be seen moving among the water plants along the riverbank on the right; in the centre, a small boat with two pygmy fishermen on board can be distinguished. The pygmy on the left arrives swiftly on a duck, the character's bizarre steed. The figure wears a circular-brimmed hat similar to that of the pygmy in the boat. In his hands he holds a long stick from the end of which a bird seems to be hanging, probably a prey from the daily hunt.

| Provenance                                       | Archaeological context        | Chronology | Pygmies riding hippopotamus | Pygmies riding crocodile | Pygmies riding duck | Pygmies riding goat (?) |
|--|-------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Pompeii, <i>Praedia of Iulia Felix</i> (II 4, 2) | Summer triclinium             | 62-79 CE   |                             | X                        |                     |                         |
| Pompeii, House of the Ancient Hunt (VII 4, 48)   | <i>Tablinum</i> and peristyle | 71-79 CE   | X                           |                          |                     |                         |

<sup>50</sup> Another crocodile 'ridden' by a pygmy, with the appropriate variants, is found in a pictorial detail from the *Praedia of Iulia Felix* (II 4, 2) in Pompeii.

|  |   |                |  |   |   |   |
|--|---|----------------|--|---|---|---|
| Pompeii,<br>Temple of<br>Apollo<br>(VII 7, 32) <sup>51</sup> | Peristyle                                 | 70 CE          |  | X |   |   |
| Pompeii,<br>House of the<br>Doctor<br>(VIII 5, 24)           | Peristyle                                 | 55-79<br>CE    |  | X |   |   |
| Ostia, Via<br>Laurentina<br>necropolis<br>(tomb 22)          | Tomb<br>wall                              | 125-<br>150 CE |  |   | X |   |
| Rome,<br>Columbarium<br>of Villa Doria<br>Pamphili           | Friezes<br>around<br>sepulchral<br>niches | 25<br>BCE      |  |   |   | X |

Another remarkable detail comes from one of the pictorial panels in the Columbarium of the Villa Doria Pamphili in Rome, preserved in the Museo Nazionale Romano. In this frieze, a pygmy is seen lying on the ground with his buttocks partly raised and pecked by a crane: this detail fits fully into the well-known theme of *geranomachia*, already discussed above. In the centre of the painting there are two pygmies running to the aid of their companion in danger, equipped with shield and pointed helmet. Behind them can be glimpsed part of an unidentifiable quadruped and a figure who is riding what appears to be a black goat. I consider this detail particularly fascinating, as it could be a direct iconographic reference to the fragment of the aforementioned logographer Hecataeus, in which one would read that pygmies wear horns and either ride rams or goats<sup>52</sup>.

---

<sup>51</sup> Based on Morelli's descriptions: PPM IX, pp. 113-14.

<sup>52</sup> Fgr H1F, 328 a-b.



#### 4. CLOSING OBSERVATIONS.

Small warriors, variably equipped with defensive equipment and tools, often of dubious effectiveness, and riding undoubtedly strange steeds: these are the pygmies depicted in many of the Roman Nilotic scenes. They ride into the battlefields that are surely peculiar, where their situation appears mostly at a disadvantage compared to the fearsome adversaries of the fauna world, and they appear without order and strategy. The defence, rather than the deliberate attack, characterises their action: «[...] *entre chasse et guerre, chasseur et chassé, reflète ainsi la statut imprécis del Pygmées, entre deux mondes, humain et animal*»<sup>53</sup>. The pygmy fighters, defined by Hesiod as 'without ardour'<sup>54</sup>, are the protagonists of an overturning of the values and warlike virtues underlying the ideology of the Empire. It was a view that underpinned the battle imagery of the Roman tradition, whose literary equivalent was rooted in the tragic historiography of the Hellenistic tradition, which aimed to make readers relive history in the first person. The aim was to be able to recreate, through the art of dramatisation, some tangible events able to arouse passion and anger, fear and compassion towards the protagonists of history: the humans<sup>55</sup>. Thus, according to Aristotle, the main medium to move to *pathos* were mortal or mournful events, such as killings on an open stage, intense suffering, injuries, and things similar<sup>56</sup>. All of this was achieved through *enargheia*<sup>57</sup>, which corresponded with that detailed realism characteristic of battle pictures.

---

<sup>53</sup> DASEN 2009, p. 217.

<sup>54</sup> HES. *Cat.* III, 17-18; see also: BALLABRIGA 1981, p. 57.

<sup>55</sup> HÖLSHER 1993, pp. 21-30.

<sup>56</sup> ARIST. *Po.*, 1452b.

<sup>57</sup> PLB. VI, 15.8; see also: HÖLSHER 1993, p. 35.

Wounds, killings and violent circumstances also take shape in the pygmies' universe. However, the depiction in such paradoxical and grotesque figurative contexts makes it particularly difficult to move towards that pathos mentioned above, if not impossible. Hence, the warning of a 'feeling of the opposite', triggered by the chiaroscuro contrast between historical reality and artistic creation, inevitably leads towards the establishment of a dimension of the comic. Neither pity nor compassion can arise towards the warrior pygmies, who are proposed as the personification of an apotropaic value and a symbolism working on the social and cultural aspects of the Roman society.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY:

ANTOLINI 2004: S. Antolini *L'altare con il clupeus virtutis da Potentia*, in «Picus» XXIV, 2004, pp. 9-28.

AURIGEMMA 1962: S. Aurigemma, *L'Italia in Africa. Le scoperte archeologiche (1911-1943). Tripolitania I. I monumenti d'arte decorativa. Parte prima. Le pitture d'età romana*, Istituto Poligrafico Dello Stato, Roma 1962.

BALLABRIGA 1981: A. Ballabriga, *Le malheur des Nains. Quelques aspects du combat des grues contre les Pygmées dans la littérature grecque*, «Revue des Études Anciennes» 83/1-2, 1981, pp. 57-74.

BARBET 1982: A. Barbet, *Peintures murales trouvées dans les latrines et les boutiques près du forum de Bolsena*, in G. Hallier, M. Humbert, P. Pomey, P. (eds.), *Les abords du Forum: Le côté nord-ouest (fouilles 1971-1973). Fouilles de l'École Française de Rome à Bolsena (Poggio Moschini)*, École Française de Rome, Roma 1982, pp. 102-132.

BARBET 2008: A. Barbet, *La peinture murale en Gaule romaine*, Picard, Paris 2008.

BARDSWELL, SOTIROU 1939: M. Bardswell, G. Sotirou, *The byzantine paintings in the water cistern, Salamis, Cyprus*, «The Antiquaries Journal» 19, 1939, pp. 443-445.

BARRETT 2017: C.E. Barrett, *Recontextualizing Nilotic Scenes: Interactive Landscapes in the Garden of the Casa dell'Efebo, Pompeii*, «American Journal of Archaeology» 121/2, pp. 293-332.

BAUCHET 1993: S. Bauchet, *L'invention des Pygmées*, «Cahiers d'études africaines» 33/129, 1993, pp. 153-181.

BELLUCCI 2021: N.D. Bellucci, *I reperti e i motivi egizi ed egittizzanti a Pompei. Indagine preliminare per una loro contestualizzazione*, Archaeopress, Oxford 2021.

BELLUCCI, VOLTAN 2022: N.D. Bellucci, E. Voltan, *Pygmaei cum clava. L'iconografia dei pigmei con bastoncini nel repertorio dei Nilotica romana: alcuni spunti di riflessione*, «Rivista di Studi Pompeiani» 33, 2022, pp. 77-88.

BERG 2020: R. Berg, *Pigmei e "anfore da combattimento". Un motivo parodistico di alterità etnica*, in K. Mustakallio (ed.), *Mehr Licht - More Light - Più Luce: Studia in Honorem Arja Karivieri*, Sigillum, Milano 2020, pp. 1-12.

BRAGANTINI 2006: I. Bragantini, *Il culto di Iside e l'egittomania antica in Campania*, in S. De Caro (ed.), *Egittomania. Iside e il mistero*, Electa, Milano 2006, pp. 159-167.

BRAGANTINI, SAMPAOLO 2009: I. Bragantini, V. Sampaolo, *La pittura pompeiana*, Mondadori Electa, Milano 2009.

CARBONE 2008: A.L. Carbone, *Filostrato. Immagini*, Duepunti edizioni, Palermo 2008.

CÈBE 1966: J.P. Cébe, *La caricature et la parodie dans le monde romain antique des origines a Juvenal*, Bibliothèque des Écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, Paris 1966.

CLARKE 2003: J.R. Clarke, *Art in the lives of ordinary romans. Visual representation and non-elite viewers in Italy, 100 B.C. - A-D 315*, California University Press, Berkeley 2003.

CLARKE 2006: J.R. Clarke, *Three uses of the Pygmy and the aethiops at Pompeii: Decorating, "Othering", and warding off demons*, in L. Bricault et al. (eds.), *Nile into Tiber: Egypt in the Roman World, III International Conference of Isis Studies*, Brill, Leiden 2006, pp. 155-169.

CLARKE 2007: J.R. Clarke, *Looking at laughter. Humor, Power and Transgression in Roman Visual Culture, 100 B.C. – A.D. 250*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2007.

CORCORAN 1972: T.H. Corcoran, *Naturales Quaestions, Books 4-7*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard 1972.

DASEN 1988: V. Dasen, *Dwarfism in Egypt and classical antiquity: iconography and medical history*, «Medical History» 32, 1988, pp. 253-276.

DASEN 1993: V. Dasen, *Dwarfs in Ancient Egypt and Greece*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1993.

DASEN 2006: V. Dasen, *Nains et pygmies. Figures de l'altérité en Égypte et Grèce anciennes*, in F. Prost, J. Wilgaux (eds.), *Penser et représenter le corps dans l'Antiquité*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2006, pp. 95-113.

DASEN 2009: V. Dasen, *D'un monde à l'autre. La chasse des Pygmées dans l'iconographie impériale*, in J. Trinquier, C. Vendries (eds.), *Chasses antiques. Pratiques et représentations dans le monde gréco-romain (IIIe siècle av. - IVe siècle apr. J.-C.)*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2009, pp. 215-233.

DE VOS 1980: M. De Vos, *L'egittomania in pitture e mosaici romano-campani della prima età imperiale*, Brill, Leiden 1980.

EMERIT 2011: S. Emerit, *Un métier polyvalent de l'Égypte ancienne: le danseur instrumentiste*, in M.H. Delavaud-Roux (ed.), *Musiques et danses dans l'Antiquité*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes 2011, pp. 45-65.

HARARI 2004: M. Harari, *A short story of pygmies in Greece and Italy*, in K. Lomas (ed.), *Greek Identity in the Western Mediterranean. Papers in Honour of Brian Shefton*, Brill, Leiden 2004, pp. 163-190.

HÖLSHER 1993: T. Hölscher, *Il linguaggio dell'arte romana. Un sistema semantico*, Einaudi, Torino 1993.

IACOPI 1997: I. Iacopi, *La decorazione pittorica dell'Aula Isiaca*, Mondadori Electa, Milano 1997.

JANNI 1978: P. Janni, *Etnografia e mito. La storia dei Pigmei*, Edizioni dell'Ateneo & Bizzarri, Roma 1978.

KOPONEN 2017: A.K. Koponen, *Egyptian Motifs in Pompeian Wall Paintings in their Architectural Context*, in E. Moormann, S. Mols (eds.), *Context and Meaning, Proceedings of the XII International Congress on Ancient Wall Painting*, Babesch, Leiden 2017, pp. 125-130.

KOPONEN 2020: A.K. Koponen, *Social expectations and Egyptian Motifs in Pompeian Wall Paintings*, in P. Giulierini et al. (eds.) *Picta Fragmenta. La pittura vesuviana. Una rilettura*, Silvana Editore, Milano 2020, pp. 291-297.

LECLANT 1984: J. Leclant, *Un aspect des influences alexandrines en Gaule: les scènes nilotiques exhumées en France*, in N. Bonacasa, A. Di Vita (eds.), *Alessandria e il mondo ellenistico-romano. Studi in onore di Achille Adriani*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 1984, pp. 440-444.

LEVI 1947: D. Levi, *Antioch Mosaic Pavements*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1947.

MARIANI 2003: E. Mariani, *Le pitture*, in F. Morandini, F. Rossi, C. Stella (eds.), *Le domus dell'Ortaglia*, Skira, Losanna 2003, pp. 45-47.

MARIANI 2017: E. Mariani, *Gli intonaci dipinti di I stile*, in L. Arslan Pitcher, A.E. Arslan, P. Blockley, M. Volonté (eds.), *Amoenissimis...Aedificiis. Gli scavi di Piazza Marconi a Cremona. Lo scavo*, All'Insegna del Giglio, Firenze 2017, pp. 236-237.

MAU 1886: A. Mau, *Scavi di Pompei 1884-1885. Regio VIII, insula 7*, «Bollettino dell'Istituto Archeologico Germanico» 1, 1886, pp. 141-157.

MERRILLS 2017: A. Merrills, *Roman Geographies of the Nile. From the Late Republic to the Early Empire*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2017.

MEYBOOM 1995: P.G.P. Meyboom, *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina. Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy*, Brill, Leiden 1995.

MEYBOOM, VERSLUYS 2006: P.G.P. Meyboom, M.J. Versluys, *The meaning of dwarfs in nilotic scenes*, in L. Bricault et al. (eds.), *Nile into Tiber: Egypt in the Roman World, III International Conference of Isis Studies*, Brill, Leiden 2006, pp. 171-208.

MICHELI 2014: M.E. Micheli, *Il Nilo in Adriatico. Scene di paesaggio nilotico nel complesso edilizio di Via Fanti ad Ancona*, in N. Zimmermann (ed.), *Antike Malerei zwischen Lokalstil und Zeitstil. Akten des XI. Internationalen*

*Kolloquiums der AIPMA*, Austrian Academy of Sciences, Wien 2014, pp. 409-413.

MORET 2012: J.M. Moret, *I nani di Antonio*, in C. Bocherens (ed.), *Nani in festa. Iconografia, religione e politica a Ostia durante il secondo triumvirato*, Edipuglia, Bari 2012, pp. 137-162.

MURRAY 1965: G.W. Murray, *Harkhuf's Third Journey*, «The Geographical Journal» 131/1, 1965, pp. 72-75.

OVADIAH, MUCZNIK 2017: A. Ovadiah, S. Mucznik, Myth and Reality in the Battle between the Pygmies and the Cranes in the Greek and Roman Worlds, «Gerión» 35/1, 2017, pp. 141-156.

PPM 1990–2003: Volume XI. *La documentazione nell'opera di disegnatori e pittori dei secoli XVIII e XIX*, in G.P. Carratelli, I. Baldassarre (eds.), *Pompei. Pitture e Mosaici*. Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, Roma 1995.

RAWLINSON 2018: G. Rawlinson, *The Histories of Herodotus*, Scribe Publishing, London 2018.

REINACH 1922: S. Reinach, *Répertoire des peintures grecques et romaines*, L'Erma di Bretschneider, Roma 1922.

ROLLER 2014: D.W. Roller, *The Geography of Strabo*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2014.

ROZENBERG 2014: S. Rozenberg, *Wall painters in Herodian Judea*, «Near Eastern Archaeology» 77/2, 2014, pp. 120-128.

SALVADORI 2012: M. Salvadori, *Decorazioni ad affresco*, in F. Ghedini, M. Annibaletto (eds.), *Atria Longa Patescunt. Le forme dell'abitare nella Cisalpina Romana*, Quasar, Roma 2012, pp. 251-270.

SANTUCCI 2020: A. Santucci, *Nilotica. Architetture illusionistiche e danza di satiri: le pitture dalla domus di via Fanti ad Ancona. Dall'analisi compositiva alla percezione visiva*, in F. Donati, I. Benetti (eds.), *Sistemi decorativi della pittura antica: funzione contesto. Atti del II Colloquio AIRPA*. Quasar, Roma 2020, pp. 79-92.

SCHEFOLD 1957: K. Schefold, *Die Wände Pompejis. Topographisches Verzeichnis der Bildmotive*, De Gruyter, Berlin 1957.

SPANO 1955: G. Spano, *Paesaggio nilotico con pigmei difendentisi magicamente dai coccodrilli*, «Memorie dell' Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei» 8/6, 1955, pp. 335-368.

VELASCO ESTRADA, IBORRA RODRÍGUEZ 2020: V. Velasco, F.J. Iborra Rodríguez, *Una posible escena nilótica*, in A. Fernández Díaz, G. Castillo Alcántara (eds.), *La pintura romana en Hispania. Del estudio de campo a su puesta en valor*, Editum, Murcia 2020, pp. 133-141.

VERSLUYS 2002: M.J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana. Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt*, Brill, Leiden 2002.

WILD 1963: H. Wild, *Les Danses sacrées. Anthologie: Égypte ancienne, Israël, Islam, Asie centrale, Inde, Cambodge, Bali, Java, Chine, Japon*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1963.



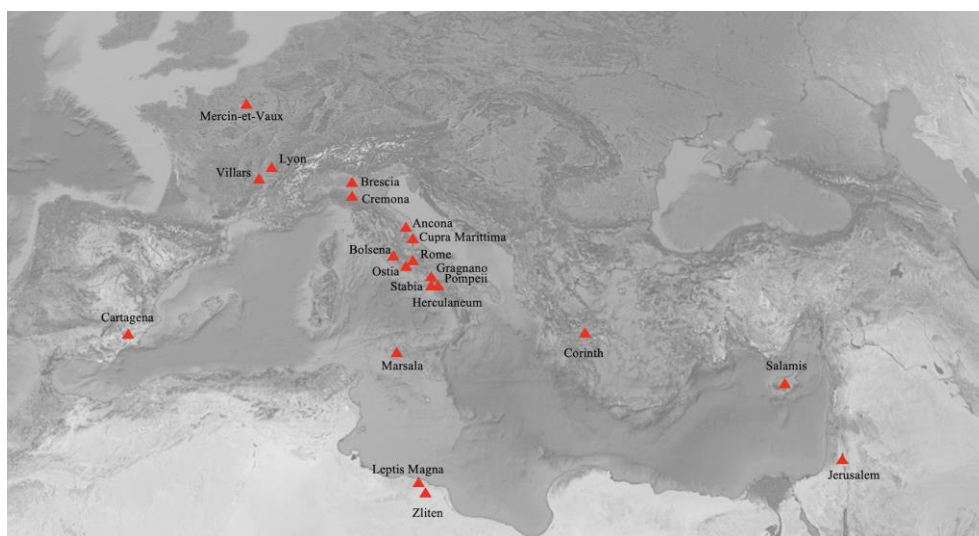


Fig. 1. Map of *picta nilotica romana* (author's elaboration).

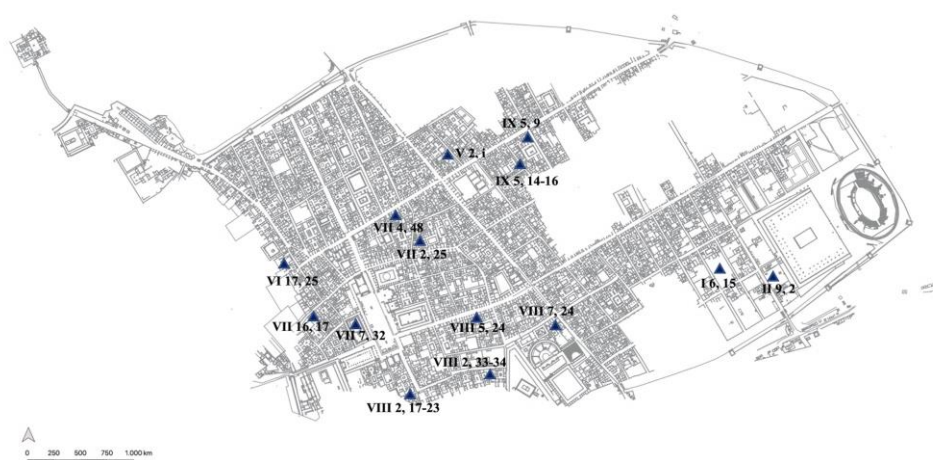
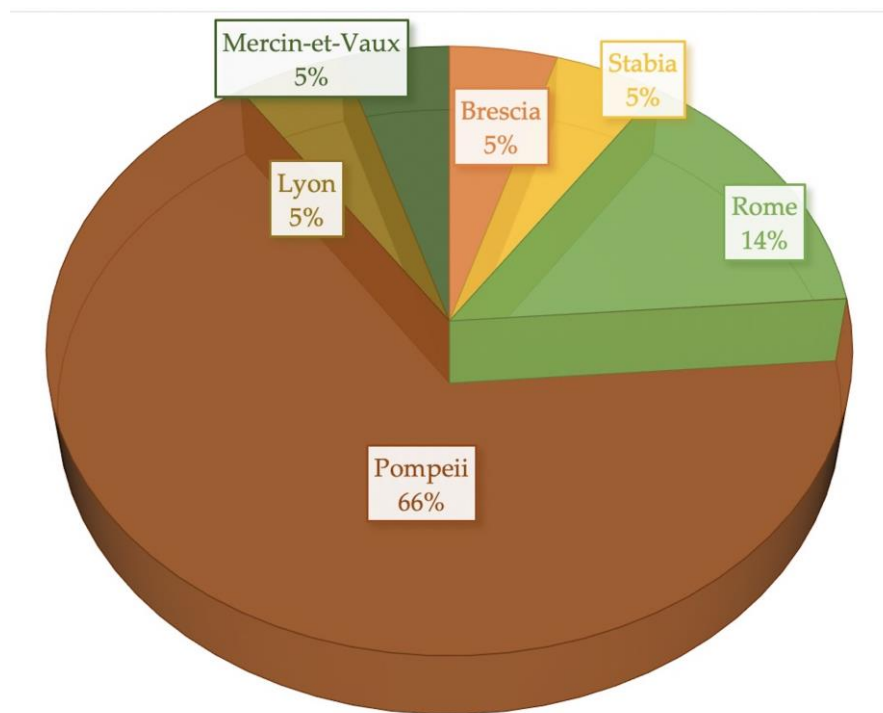
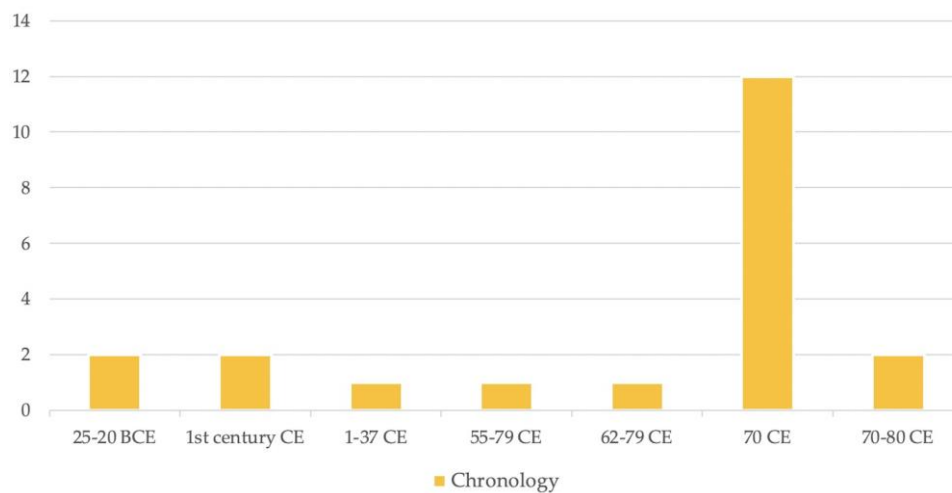


Fig. 2. Map of the contexts analysed in Pompeii (author's elaboration).



**Fig. 3.** Chart of the paintings with pygmies fighting Nilotic fauna (authors' elaboration).



**Fig. 4.** Chart of the chronology of the paintings with pygmies fighting Nilotic fauna (authors' elaboration).



**Fig. 5.** Nilotic painting detail from Pompeii VI 17, 25; MANN, inv. 9688 (BRAGANTINI, SAMPAOLO 2009, p. 143).



**Fig. 6.** Nilotic painting detail from Pompeii II 9, 2 (BELLUCCI 2021, p. 474, Tav. 1.8).

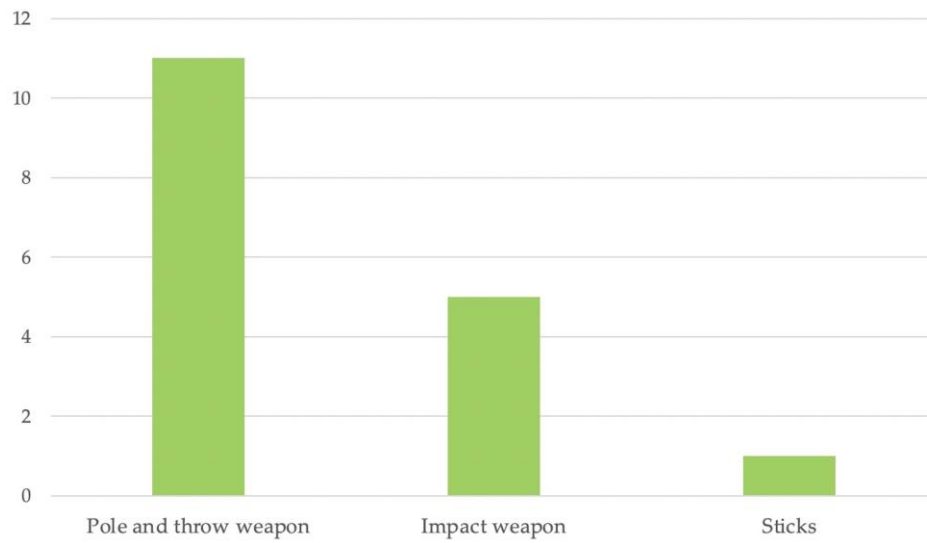


**Fig. 7.** Nilotic painting detail from Pompeii VIII 5, 24 (BELLUCCI 2021, p. 481, Tav. 1.22).



**Fig. 8.** Nilotic painting detail from Lyon, Temple of Cybèle (BARBET 2008, p. 56, Fig. 50).





**Fig. 9.** Diagram of weapons used by pygmies (author's elaboration).



**Fig. 10.** Nilotic painting detail from Pompeii IX 5, 9 (BELLUCCI, VOLTAN 2022, p. 82, fig. 11).



**Fig. 11.** Nilotic painting detail from Pompeii VIII 5, 24 (BRAGANTINI, SAMPAOLO 2009, p. 418, fig. 216).



**Fig. 12.** Nilotic painting detail from tomb 22 of the Via Laurentina necropolis in Ostia (CLARKE 2003, pl. 16).