Interest in the influence of ancient Egypt in the Renaissance is too often treated as merely the prelude to the Egyptomania of the late eighteenth century. In this impressive new publication Brian Curran seeks to redress the balance and treat “in a systematic and comprehensive way” (10) the role of Egyptian antiquity in Italian Renaissance thought and culture. Drawing upon his remarkable knowledge of Egyptian antiquities, Curran provides an extensive review of the Egyptian objects brought to Rome during the imperial period and charts their gradual rediscovery, recognition, and reinterpretation in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. In so doing Curran expands the vision of Renaissance history beyond the Greco-Roman tradition of the western Mediterranean. This book is essential reading for anyone interested in the Renaissance in its broadest sense, and in particular for those interested in reception studies.

That the title of this book could be misconstrued is acknowledged by the author himself who states at the very outset that “the subject of this book has relatively little to do with the country of Egypt. . . . What it has everything to do with, however, is the construction of an early modern or Renaissance culture that sought legitimacy and authority through the appeal to antiquity” (2). This, in many ways, is disappointing, especially as Curran admits that there was “always a hint of what we now call Orientalist exoticism” in this Renaissance vision (2). A number of Italian powers had mercantile interests in Egypt and courted the Mamluk sultans, who also controlled the Holy Land, to balance the power of the Turkish Ottomans. The defeat of the Mamluk kingdom by Selim I in 1517, a rule that had never posed a threat to the West, caused consternation across Europe, and a crusade was declared. Curran never addresses the idea that perhaps the two Egyptians—ancient and contemporary—were not separated in Renaissance thought and that the appropriated Egyptian motifs (sphinxes, obelisks, and pyramids par excellence), adopted in the face of the rising Ottoman presence in the eastern Mediterranean, were surrogate trophies for the failure of the Christian powers to launch a crusade. Meaning and interpretation are thus confined to a single layer by the antiquarian stance that Curran adopts.

There are eleven chapters, plus a conclusion, covering the period between about 1450 and 1550, arranged in roughly chronological order, the first five chapters providing the historical and intellectual context for the case studies that follow. Chapter one outlines the major ancient literary sources that informed Renaissance ideas about ancient Egypt, while chapter two reviews the physical remains visible in Rome. How this material was collected and interpreted by the early humanists forms the basis of chapter three. Particularly useful in chapter four is Curran’s review of Egyptian references in Renaissance architectural treatises, especially the Trattato of Filarete, which Curran concludes, “appears to mark a transition from the early humanist interest in Egypt to the more elaborate Egyptian revival that found its exemplary expression in the Bor- gia Apartment (chapter 6) and the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili (chapter 7) at the end of the century” (87). Chapter five deals with the enigmatic figure of Hermes Trismegistus, and chapter six argues for infamous fraudster Annio da Viterbo as the guiding force behind Pinturicchio’s work in the Borgia apartments.

Chapter seven looks at Egypt in Venice and the celebrated “antiquarian romance,” the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, published by the Aldine press in Venice in 1499. Curran notes that this volume is “one of the most complex and controversial areas in Renaissance scholarship” (133). He sensibly ignores the “unending search for its elusive author” by stating categorically that he accepts “the traditional argument that the work is of Venetian origin, and was almost certainly written by the Dominican friar Francesco Colonna of SS. Giovanni e Paolo” (133–34). He thereby sidesteps direct engagement with the work of Maurizio Calvesi and his followers, who argue for a Roman provenance. Instead Curran focuses more usefully upon the fantastic “ancient” monuments and inscriptions of the woodcut illustrations of this problematic text and their contribution to the dissemination of a pseudo-Egyptian culture.

Chapter eight deals with the reign of Julius II and the statue court he initiated in the Belvedere courtyard of the Vatican palace. Curran emphasizes how Julius, who was often represented as a second Julius Caesar, was keen to acquire the statue of Cleopatra, now identified as Sleeping Ariadne. He catalogues the poetic effusions of humanists who frequented the papal court and emphasizes how their sympathetic portrayal of the Egyptian queen balanced the harsh criti-
icism of the Augustan poets and in so doing contributed to the Cleopatra myth.

Although Julius II seemed to be indifferent to the Egyptian monuments around Rome, Curran notes that detailed study of the obelisks and their hieroglyphs “not only continued but probably expanded considerably during his pontificate” (183), as leading architects such as Sangallo and Peruzzi measured and recorded the remains in meticulous drawings (all reproduced).

The results of these studies would find full expression in the commissions brought to fruition during the reign of the Medici pope Leo X (chapter nine). The patronage of the Sienese banker Agostino Chigi and the work of the studio of Raphael constitutes what Curran calls “the emergence of a more complex and sustained appropriation of Egyptian monumental forms that is very much in keeping with the antiquarian culture of Leonine Rome” (216). Curran offers a close reading of the Chigi Chapel in S. Maria del Popolo and the Cesi Chapel in S. Maria della Pace and argues that the appropriation of Egyptian motifs in both cases contributed to the agrandizement of the families, although the author acknowledges that the interpretation of Egyptian architectural forms and details is often “complex and ambiguous” (225). This is not helped by the confusion of the names Agostino and Agnolo, which make the concluding paragraphs of the section on the monuments in the Cesi chapel at Santa Maria della Pace incomprehensible (219).2

Chapter ten looks at “Hieroglyphic Studies in the High Renaissance,” while chapter eleven presents a detailed discussion and eloquent interpretation of the Egyptian motifs on two folios from the Missal of Cardinal Pompeo Colonna. It is difficult to believe that a decorative scheme to which there was restricted access could have had the importance Curran claims, a problem that also besets his treatment of the Borgia apartments. One swallow does not a summer make. And as Sabine Poeschel has shown, the decoration of the Borgia apartments can be explained without recourse to the ever-serviceable Annio,1 and the folios of the Colonna Missal, whenever and for whomsoever they were made, were never intended for public display.

Reducing the important contribution of the main excavator of Hadrian’s Villa, Pirro Ligorio, to one paragraph (281), the conclusion jumps to the end of the century and briefly reviews the Egyptomania of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, including the role of the re-erected obelisks in the urban program of Sixtus V and the encyclopedic work of the Jesuit polymath Athanasius Kircher.

“The fruit of nearly two decades of writing and research” (xi), Curran’s book is derived in large part from his previous articles and reviews. These have made a significant contribution to the reception of ancient Egypt in the Renaissance and beyond. In these pieces Curran is at his best, tracing the minutiae of correspondences between Egyptian objects and Renaissance reception and interpretation. The essential problem with The Egyptian Renaissance is that the meticulous detail of the author’s previous research is strung together in a loose and uneven narrative. While Curran is to be lauded for pulling together a wealth of detailed information on the history of the individual monuments and projects, the disparate nature of the material, the variety of possible interpretation, and paucity of grand public commissions somewhat undercuts his thesis of a great and coherent Egyptian revival. Although the volume is generously illustrated, a map of Rome with the sites and find spots of the more important Egyptian monuments would have assisted those readers with little or no knowledge of Roman topography. Yet these are minor criticisms. The Egyptian Renaissance is the most comprehensive and accessible treatment of the subject yet published and will inevitably become the standard reference work.

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Notes
1. The catalogue of a recent exhibition at Castel Sant’Angelo, The She-Wolf and the Sphinx, ed. Eugenio Lo Sardo (Milan: Electa, 2008), available in both English and Italian, covers much of the same material as Curran’s book (albeit briefly) and contains a series of short essays. These include an angry outburst by Maurizio Calzoni himself against “the erroneous and stubborn convictions of backward scholars” (57) who refuse to accept his hypotheses concerning the early discovery of the Nile mosaic and identification of the author of the Hymenomachia Poliphili as Roman.
2. Here we have Agostino Chigi signing a document four years after his death.

Giuseppe Dardanello, Susan Klaiber, and Henry A. Millon, editors
Guarino Guarini
Turin and New York: Umberto Allemandi for the Centro Internazionale di Studi d’Architettura Andrea Palladio, 2006, 563 pp., 209 color and numerous b/w illus., €65 (cloth), ISBN 884221471X

Few seventeenth-century architects have a story as compelling as Guarino Guarini, the Theatine “cleric regular” who traveled widely, wrote broadly on subjects ranging from mathematics and world systems to architecture, and conceived buildings of astonishing originality for places as far-flung as Modena, Messina, Paris, Prague, Lisbon, and, of course, Turin. Add to this the fact that only seven of the fifteen marvelous churches he designed were built, and of these, only five survive— with the most famous, the chapel of the Holy Shroud in Turin, in precarious condition following a devastating fire in 1997—and one has the makings of a gripping tale. Yet the man himself, like his architecture and the contexts in which he worked, has been difficult to penetrate. Alternately considered an esoteric geometer or a prototypical “modern,” the specifics of his life as a priest-architect have been elusive. Aside from Harold Meek’s monograph of 1988 and John Beldon Scott’s close reading of the chapel of the Holy Shroud of 2003, no book-length studies are available in English to clarify the many questions that remain about Guarini’s life and works.1

The volume under review is neither written in English nor is it a complete monograph, yet it goes far in placing Guarini’s work in the contexts that are rightfully his. Beautifully produced, with thirty-eight contributions by twenty-four authors, it deploys the prismatic lenses that the architect and his works demand. Conceived as the outgrowth of a seminar sponsored by the Centro Internazionale di