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THE EARLIEST KNOWN USES OF "*L'ÉGYPTOMANIE*"/"EGYPTOMANIA" IN FRENCH AND ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

The word "l'égyptomanie" *seems to have debuted in a German book of 1808, followed by a French translation in 1809; its English equivalent, "Egyptomania," appeared the next year in a review of the latter. But the coinage predates all of these publications by more than a decade and may be credited to an English bishop.*

The origin of the word "Egyptomania" has been traced back[1] to the phrase "Egyptian mania," employed by Sir John Soane (1753–1837) in his lectures on architecture, c. 1806–1809:

> If I have been correct in describing the characteristic and essential features of Egyptian architecture, what can be more puerile and unsuccessful than the paltry attempt to imitate the character and form of their works in small and confined spaces? [...] The Egyptian mania has spread further: even our furniture is decorated with the symbolical forms of the religious and other customs of Egypt.[2]

Soon thereafter, in 1810, an anonymous writer lodged a similar complaint:

> His Lordship travelled with the Countess over many parts of Italy, and invited her to join him and take a voyage up the Nile in a *spronaro*, having then acquired that *Egyptomania* which afterward became so general, and threatened at one time to replunge our chairs and tables into barbarism.[3]

This seems to be the first published appearance of the word in English, in italics that mark it as still foreign or at least as worthy of emphasis. Despite the timing of the publication, the occurrence of the word here[4] likely owes no debt to Soane.

The 1810 excerpt comes from a lengthy anonymous review of a memoir by Wilhelmine Encke (1752/53–1820), countess of Lichtenau.[5] The French equivalent of "Egyptomania," "*l'égyptomanie*," appeared a year earlier in the French edition of the countess's autobiography,[6] having debuted in the German original published in 1808 (Figure 1).[7] The German edition may contain the very first occurrence of the word in *publication*, but *use* of the word predates this by at least eleven years.

Within the memoir, its context is that of a letter dated 20 March 1797.[8] This letter, apparently composed in French (the German edition publishes it thus), begins:

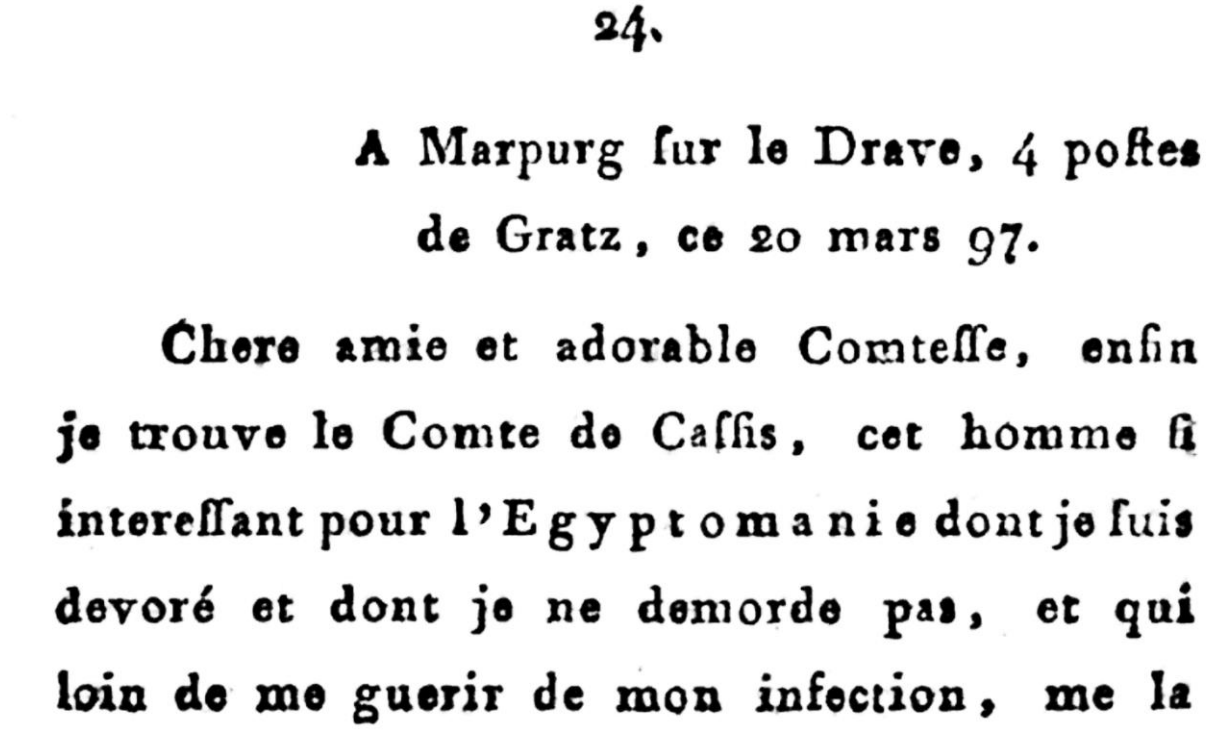
> *Chere amie et adorable Comtesse, enfin je trouve le comte de Cassis, cet homme si interessant pour l'Egyptomanie dont je suis devoré et dont je ne demords pas, et qui, loin de me guerir de mon affection, me la fait prendre pour medecine et non pour maladie.*[9]

The countess received this letter from Frederick Augustus Hervey (1730–1803), Fourth Earl of Bristol and Bishop of Derry, who proposed a trip to Egypt with her and several others. Inspired in this plan by his acquaintance Claude Etienne de Savary (1750–1788),[10] whose three-year stay in Egypt (1776–1779) had resulted in *Lettres sur l'Égypte*,[11] Hervey visited the Count of Cassis, a *"millionaire"* who had spent thirty-five years in Cairo and thus could help with the arrangements.[12] But the countess's arrest in 1797[13] precluded her participation, and the following year the Egyptian campaign of Napoleon Bonaparte (1798–1801) spoiled Hervey's ambitions entirely.[14]

Others in Hervey's circle of acquaintances had antiquarian—including Egyptian—interests. One of these was Charles Heathcote Tatham (1772–1842), an architect who would become known for his influential Egyptianizing designs.[15] Another was John Soane. Despite his criticism of the "Egyptian mania" that he saw manifesting, Soane had designed Egyptian revival monuments in his youth[16] and would, later in life (1824), purchase the sarcophagus of Seti I, which Giovanni Belzoni (1778–1823) had brought back to England.[17] Soane and Hervey met in Rome in about 1778, and until 1780 Hervey was Soane's patron, a relationship that did not end well for Soane.[18] Might Hervey himself have coined *"l'égyptomanie"*/"Egyptomania," and if so, did Soane encounter it through him or his circle (Tatham?) and eventually present it in his lecture as "Egyptian mania"? And if this was the case, might Soane's experience with that man of "splendid delusions,"[19] which left him "keenly wounded,"[20] have tinted his connotation?

Another anonymous writer of 1810, reviewing a novel in verse, might in fact covertly credit Hervey with the word, although this possibility is not evident without awareness of Hervey's letter of 1797. This author writes, "Leaving Platonism for another folly, the *Egyptomania* introduced into this country by a reverend bishop...."[21] If Hervey is indeed the "reverend bishop,"[22] the writer makes a curious allegation. Although Hervey's estate included a handful of Egyptian revival pieces and perhaps Roman Egyptian(izing) antiquities,[23] he played a negligible role in the introduction of Egyptomania into England.[24] Perhaps this anonymous author, who had read the review of the countess's memoir if not the memoir itself,[25] mistook the extent of Hervey's influence, or, perhaps instead, the author might have been referring to the word rather than the phenomenon.

Regardless of whether Hervey coined the term or merely used it, the irrationality of a fascination with Egypt that "mania" implies[26] reveals itself plainly in his letter. Nonetheless, and although the context seems confessional, the word here is not quite pejorative; it lacks the intent of accusation for which Soane and the two anonymous reviewers would deploy it about a decade later. Of course, by then, thanks in no small part to the Napoleonic campaign and its company of savants, Egyptomania was proliferating with fresh vigor throughout every conceivable genre of Western artistic expression. For Hervey, unknowingly on the eve of the French expedition to Egypt, *l'égyptomanie* was simply an excuse, an affliction[27] that he could hardly resist. If the Earl Bishop was the first person to confess to Egyptomania by name, he was certainly not the last.



24.

A Marpurg ſur le Drave, 4 poſtes
de Gratz, ce 20 mars 97.

Chere amie et adorable Comteſſe, enfin
je trouve le Comte de Caſſis, cet homme ſi
intereſſant pour l'Egyptomanie dont je ſuis
devoré et dont je ne demorde pas, et qui
loin de me guerir de mon infection, me la

Figure 1: The first published appearance of *"l'égyptomanie."* Wilhelmine Encke, *Apologie der Gräfin Lichtenau gegen die Beschuldigungen mehrerer Schriftsteller: Von ihr selbst entworfen; Nebst einer Auswahl von Briefen an sie Zweite Abtheilung* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Heinsius, 1808), 281.

NOTES

[1] E.g., Brian A. Curran, review of *Egyptomania in Western Art, 1730–1930*, edited by Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *The Art Bulletin* 78.4 (1996): 739; cf. Brian A. Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance: The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 10.

[2] Sir John Soane, "Lecture 1," in David Watkin (ed.), *Sir John Soane: The Royal Academy Lectures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 37.

[3] Anonymous, review of *Mémoires de la Comtesse de Lichtenau, &c.*, (Paris, 1809), *The Monthly Review; or Literary Journal, Enlarged* 61 (January–April 1810): 470.

[4] My observation that other scholars have overlooked the occurrences of the word and its French antecedent discussed here was kindly confirmed to me by Jean-Marcel Humbert (personal communication, February 2016).

[5] For a brief biography and overview of sources, see Waltraud Maierhofer, "Wilhelmine Encke-Ritz-Lichtenau: Writing and Reading the Life of a Prussian Royal Mistress," *Biography* 27.3 (2004): 575–596.

[6] Wilhelmine Encke, *Mémoires de la Comtesse de Lichtenau, écrits par elle-même en 1808; suivis d'une correspondance relative a ses mémoires et tirée de son portefeuille* (Paris: Buisson et Delaunay, 1809).

[7] Wilhelmine Encke, *Apologie der Gräfin Lichtenau gegen die Beschuldigungen mehrerer Schriftsteller: Von ihr selbst entworfen; Nebst einer Auswahl von Briefen an sie Zweite Abtheilung* (Leipzig: Wilhelm Heinsius, 1808). This (along with its French translation, Encke 1809) was her authentic autobiography, not to be confused with a number of forged "memoirs" published at the time (Maierhofer 2004, 581–582).

[8] No. 24: Encke 1808, 66–73; Encke 1809, 281–286.

[9] Encke 1808, 66–67; Encke 1809, 281. The letter also appears in its entirety—as a point of particular interest for its discussion of a trip to Egypt—in an anonymous review of Encke 1808 published in *The Critical Review* 19.4 (April 1810): 527–528.

[10] Letter No. 23: Encke 1808, 63–64; Encke 1809, 278–279; cf. Rebecca Margaret Ricardo Campion, *Reconstructing an Ascendency World: The Material Culture of Frederick Hervey, the Earl Bishop of Derry (1730–1803)*, 2 volumes, PhD dissertation (National University of Ireland Maynooth, 2012), vol. 1, [250].

[11] Claude Etienne de Savary, *Lettres sur l'Égypte, où l'on offre le parallèle des mœurs anciennes & modernes de ses habitans, où l'on décrit l'état, le commerce, l'agriculture, le gouvernement, l'ancienne religion du pays, & la descente de S. Louis à Damiette, tirée de Joinville & des auteurs arabes, avec des cartes géographiques I–III* (Paris: Em. Flon, 1786).

[12] Encke 1808, 63, 67; Encke 1809, 278, 281; Campion 2012, vol. 1, [250].

[13] Maierhofer 2004, 579.

[14] Campion 2012, vol. 1, [250].

[15] James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival: A Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 111; Campion 2012, vol. 1, [119–121].

[16] Patrick Conner (ed.), *The Inspiration of Egypt: Its Influences on British Artists, Travellers and Designers*, 1700–1900 (Brighton: Brighton Borough Council, 1983), 16.

[17] E.g., Curl 1994, 122–126; Gillian Darley, *John Soane: An Accidental Romantic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 274.

[18] Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey, "*'Je n'oublieray jamais'*: John Soane and Downhill," *Quarterly Bulletin of the Irish Georgian Society* 21.3–4 (1978): 17–40.

[19] Du Prey 1978, 17, quoting Soane.

[20] Du Prey 1978, 37, quoting Soane.

[21] Anonymous, review of *The Maid of Renmore, or Platonic Love; a Mock-heroic Romance in Verse; with Burlesque Notes, in Humble Imitation of Modern Annotators* (Dean, 1810), *The Monthly Mirror* (October 1810): 284.

[22] An alternative possibility is that the author was looking back half a century to Richard Pococke (1704–1765), Bishop of Ossory and Meath (Curl 1994, 144). His *A Description of the East, and Some Other Countries, Volume the First: Observations on Egypt* (London: Bowyer, 1743) conveyed views of the ancient Egyptian monuments to Britain. While its engravings "were not of high quality, they contained much that was new and startlingly grand" (Conner 1983, 7). A less likely candidate is Robert Huntington (1637–1701), Bishop of Raphoe, who donated three Egyptian antiquities to Oxford University in 1683 and commissioned drawings of obelisks in Alexandria (Conner 1983, 8, 11).

[23] "[T]wo Egyptian side-tables" (Campion 2012, vol. 1, [132]); engravings of "an Egyptian column trussed up (perhaps for restoration or carriage) and an obelisk in pieces, both with inscriptions to Emperor Antoninus Pius (who was born in Nîmes) [figs 3.24-3.25]. Their inclusion in this form suggests that these items may have been bought by Hervey for display at Downhill" (i.e, Downhill Castle, Londonderry, one of Hervey's country houses) (Campion 2012, vol. 1, [151], vol. 2, figs. 3.24–25).

[24] There is, for example, no mention of him in Conner 1983, and he appears only incidentally, as an acquaintance of Tatham, in Curl 1994, 111. Had he succeeded in visiting

Egypt and returning with *"des colonnes, des obelisques, et des sphynx"* (Encke 1808, 70; Encke 1809, 284), his influence might have been assessed quite otherwise.

[25] That the reviewer of *The Maid of Renmore* had read the review of the countess's memoir is certain: on page 285 he or she quotes (without credit) the phrase "threatened at one time to replunge our chairs and tables into barbarism."

[26] Curran 2007, 10–11. For a recent overview of the development of the reception of Egypt in the modern world and an extensive bibliography, see Stephanie Moser, "Reconstructing Ancient Worlds: Reception Studies, Archaeological Representation and the Interpretation of Ancient Egypt," *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 22.4 (2015): 1263–1308.

[27] The metaphor of Egyptomania as ailment recurred from time to time: "He [Edward L. Clark, author of *Israel in Egypt: Egypt's Place among the Ancient Monarchies*] is himself, evidently, smitten with the new [!] disease of Egyptomania, and has brought together the materials for his book and worked them into shape with the ardor of a lover" (Anonymous, "Notes," *The Christian Union* 9.10 [11 March 1874]: 188); "The magazines seem to be inoculated with a mild form of Egyptomania. Perhaps this is a wave from the discussion of the mummy of Ramesis [*sic*] II. last September" (Anonymous, "Magazine Briefs," *Book Chat* 2 [January–December 1887]: 94).