

# Graeco-Egyptian religion

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## Graeco-Egyptian Religion

*By Sir Harold I. Bell, Aberystwyth*

The Egyptians, Herodotus remarks, "are exceedingly religious, beyond all other men", and five centuries later Juvenal mocks at the fierceness of their religious dissensions. It was in fact the religiosity of the Egyptians which most especially struck visitors to the country; that and the antiquity of Egyptian civilization. There were in Asia, in Mesopotamia for example, civilizations as old, but in no country were the relics of immemorial antiquity so obvious and so arresting as in Egypt. And religion and antiquity were closely connected, since the buildings which most attracted attention were of a religious nature. Everywhere, indeed, the visitor to Egypt found the national religion impressed upon him. The vast temples, so much larger than any that Greece could show, their elaborate and mysterious ritual, the pyramids, themselves a species of temple, the powerful priesthoods, with their many grades and the distinctive garb of the priests, the wealth of the temples and the part they played in the economic life of the country, the fine linen woven in their workshops, their breweries and oil presses—all these things must at once have struck the Greeks who settled in Egypt or who came thither as traders or sightseers. Much of the land was sacred land. The monarchy itself was divine, and a shrewd, tough soldier like Ptolemy I, on assuming the crown of the Pharaohs, found himself worshipped as the living image of Amen-Rē. The native writing—and the Egyptians were pre-eminently a writing people—was a virtual monopoly of the priests, as the word "hieroglyphic" indicates. Even those features of Egyptian religion which might seem most alien from Greek customs, like the animal cults and the practice of mummification, had the attraction of strangeness. A Roman like Octavian, invited to visit the Apis bull, might remark contemptuously, "My custom is to worship gods, not cattle"<sup>1</sup>, a Roman poet like Juvenal might make merry over the fanaticism which led nome to quarrel with nome over the sacred animals<sup>2</sup>, but the Greeks in general do not appear to have found these cults specially disturbing. After all, they were themselves not so very far from their period of animal worship. Pallas Athene herself had begun life as a Mycenaean snake goddess, and sacred snakes and animals were familiar enough in classical Greece. If people credited with such ancient wisdom as the Egyptians venerated animals there must be some mystical significance in the practice; and the Greeks, as Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*, for example, shows us, were only too ready to find a mystical meaning in the crudest Egyptian myths.

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<sup>1</sup> Dio 51, 16, 5.    <sup>2</sup> *Sat.* XV, 33–38.

It is likely that many of the Greeks who settled in Egypt after the conquest were naturally receptive to the influence of Egyptian religion. The Greeks shared with more primitive peoples the feeling that the power of a deity was, not perhaps geographically circumscribed, but at least more potent in the locality with which he was specially associated; the feeling which had led Akhenaten when he was instituting the Aten cult, to found his new capital of Akhetaten, where the hostile influence of Amen would be less formidable. On visiting a foreign country or another city one of the first things to be done was, so to say, to introduce oneself to the deities of the neighbourhood. "Remain then and implore in prayer the local gods for the things you desire to have", says the king to the suppliant maidens in the *Suppliques* of Aeschylus<sup>3</sup>, and the letter-writers of a later age who began a letter with some such formula as "before all things I pray for your health and I make supplication for you before the local gods"<sup>4</sup> were following an old tradition. When Alexander the Great, on arriving at Memphis, sacrificed to the Egyptian gods he was not just trying to ingratiate himself with his new subjects and to point a contrast between himself and a conqueror like Cambyses, though some such motive may have played its part as well; he was doing what any Greek visitor to a country with which he desired to be on friendly terms might have done. With no body of dogmatic theology and no sacred book in which such a theology was formulated (the Homeric poems, for all their religious importance, can hardly be so regarded) Greek religion was very fluid and adaptable, and it was natural, as we see in Herodotus and others, for a Greek to identify foreign deities with his own.

The Greeks who settled in Ptolemaic Egypt must have been particularly accessible to Egyptian influences. The Olympian religion, with its panhellenic and very human gods, and its conception of a gloomy underworld where the souls of the dead passed a shadowy wraith-like existence, had been given a rather artificial vitality by the popularity of the Homeric poems. It was the Olympians who as a rule were the gods of the city-states, to whom the larger temples were erected, in whose honour many of the great festivals were held, who were the patrons of the games, and who were celebrated in literature and art. But though the Olympian religion had overlaid and obscured, it had not obliterated an earlier and very different religion. No doubt it entered largely into the conscious life of classical Greece and influenced the outlook of the Greeks, but it may be questioned how deeply it had penetrated into the innermost being of the average man. The Olympians were the objects of the state cults, and received the collective worship of the community, but how often did the ordinary citizen, when personal sorrow or need touched him deeply, turn to Zeus, for example, or Hera or (apart from consultation of his oracle) Apollo, or even to Athene, for help and comfort? Would it not rather be the minor local deities, often of very ancient cults, and little regarded in our literary sources, whom he would invoke? And though the Homeric conception of the next world largely coloured the thought of classical Greece there were

<sup>3</sup> *Suppl.* 520f.    <sup>4</sup> *P Oxy.* VI, 936.

other cults, that of Dionysos, the mysteries of Demeter, and Orphism, which promised a very different future and enjoyed no small degree of popularity.

Now, whereas the panhellenic cults could be and were transplanted to Asiatic or Egyptian settlements it was less easy to carry abroad those of the local shrines, or rites like the Eleusinian mysteries; and as I have said the Olympian gods were probably too remote from the life of the ordinary man to offer much help when, leaving his native city, with its communal religious rites, he settled, as an isolated individual, in a foreign land. In the Seleucid Empire, indeed, he might become a citizen of a new city, which would gradually form its own communal cults and religious traditions, but in Egypt, outside Alexandria and Ptolemais, the settler was isolated among native Egyptians; and he found himself far removed from the familiar shrines and the local cults to which he was accustomed. It was, then, to be expected that he would before very long adapt himself to the religious climate of Egypt, especially since he had probably come with preconceived notions about the wisdom of the Egyptians and their genius for religion. Unlike the settlers in the Seleucid empire the majority of the Greeks in Egypt were living not in Greek cities, little enclaves of Hellenic culture, but in the nomes, among Egyptians, intermarriage with whom, prevented by the law of the city, was open to them. Thus, mixed marriages must have been not infrequent, and a mixed culture inevitably resulted. An early example is an inscription contained in Wilcken's *Chrestomathie*<sup>5</sup> in which, during the reign of Ptolemy III, we find the daughters of a Greek from Cyrene and an Egyptian woman, Irene and Theoxena, "whose Egyptian names are Nephersouchos and Thauēs", making a dedication to Thoeiris on behalf of the royal family. Equally striking is a Goodspeed papyrus of the third century B.C.<sup>6</sup> in which a man named Ptolemaios, writing to a friend called Achilleus, about a dream he had had, adds a description of it "in Egyptian", presumably because the interpretation of dreams was a peculiarly Egyptian art. Either, then, we have here two Greeks who have learned Egyptian or two Egyptians so hellenized that they have taken Greek names and correspond in Greek; in either case, a striking example of cultural assimilation.

No doubt misunderstandings of Egyptian rites and customs would sometimes occur. It has been suggested that the presence of the roll containing the *Persai* of Timotheos in the tomb where it was found was due to such a misunderstanding of the Egyptian custom by which the Book of the Dead was buried with a mummy. And it must sometimes have been necessary to explain to Greek settlers the complications of Egyptian theology, as the priests of Aphrodite, that is, Hathor, do when, asking Apollonios for an allowance of myrrh to embalm the Hesis, they add, for his information, "you must know that the Hesis is Isis"<sup>7</sup>.

There was already, even before the conquest, a racial and religious mixture at Memphis and probably elsewhere, as is shown by such a name as that of the Hellenomemphites. The curse of Artemisia<sup>8</sup>, which may well be the earliest non-

<sup>5</sup> Wilcken, *Chr.* 51.

<sup>6</sup> Wilcken, *Chr.* 50.

<sup>7</sup> PSI IV, 328.

<sup>8</sup> UPZ I, 1.



literary Greek papyrus yet found, provides an excellent illustration of this mixture. The antecedents of a woman with the name Artemisia and writing in Ionic Greek must have been mainly Greek, but her father, if Wilcken's reading is correct, bore the Egyptian name Amasis, she deposited the document in the shrine of an Egyptian god, Oserapis, and, what is more significant than either nomenclature or choice of shrine, the whole background and conception are, as Wilcken has shown, Egyptian. Greeks and Egyptians were not the only elements in the amalgam. Herodotus tells us<sup>9</sup> that there were at Memphis "Phœnician Tyrians" and a temple of "the foreign Aphrodite", that is, no doubt, Astarte; and this is confirmed by a Zenon papyrus in which "the priests of Astarte the goddess of the Phœnician-Egyptians at Memphis" ask for an allowance of oil "like that given already to the temples of the Carians and Hellenomemphites at Memphis"<sup>10</sup>. The Carians have left other traces in the Zenon papyri, where the Carian god identified with Zeus as Zeus Labrandaïos receives an allowance from the land of Apollonios<sup>11</sup>. It is significant of the cultural mixture that other grants were made to the new composite deity Sarapis and to Asklepios, in whom we must see the deified Egyptian Imouthes. Astarte was not only identified for purposes of nomenclature with Aphrodite; the Egyptians transformed her into an Egyptian goddess, represented now as the daughter, now as the wife of Ptah, in which latter capacity she was identified with the lion-headed Sechmet. Another foreign deity quite popular in Egypt was Atargatis, a form of Astarte identified with Isis. In the year 222 B.C. a woman with the significant name Asia complains to the King that the *stathmouchos*, who bears the Egyptian name Pooris, has prevented her from completing a boundary wall begun by her late husband, who had built a shrine "of the Syrian goddess and Aphrodite Berenice"<sup>12</sup>. This "Syrian goddess" is Atargatis. Here, as with the dedication to Thoreris already mentioned, it was the foreign wife, in the one case Egyptian, in the other Syrian, who no doubt brought the foreign deity into the family of a Greek settler. The cult of Atargatis can be traced down to the third century of our era, when Atargatis is found at Oxyrhynchus sharing a temple with Zeus, Hera, and Core<sup>13</sup>. The Babylonian Nana, identified with Isis as Isis Nanaia, was another foreign deity worshipped in Egypt, and the cult of the Thracian rider god, Heron, seems to have been popular there, at least in the Fayyûm.

The Zenon papyri reveal something of the atmosphere in which a Greek settler at Philadelphia would find himself. There must have been many Greeks in the town, but there were also Egyptians, as agricultural labourers, as artisans, and in minor official posts, and the religious needs of both races were provided for. A memorandum on the construction of a palisade<sup>14</sup> contains a sketch map, which shows a temple of Poremanres, the deified Egyptian king Ammenemes III, next to it a Hermaion, which may more probably be a shrine of Thoth than of the Greek

<sup>9</sup> II 112.<sup>10</sup> PSI V 531.<sup>11</sup> *P Mich. Zenon* 31, 6.<sup>12</sup> *P Enteux.* 13.<sup>13</sup> *P Oxy.* XII, 1449, 5.<sup>14</sup> *P Mich. Zenon* 84.

Hermes, and next to that the house of the Greek physician Artemidoros. There was at Philadelphia also a temple of the new god Sarapis, adjoining one of Isis and near one of the Dioscouroi<sup>15</sup>. The cult of the latter, purely Greek it seems, was long popular in Egypt, and its popularity was perhaps helped by the common identification of these twins with the Kabeiroi, or Samothracian gods, who were venerated by Arsinoe Philadelphos, and who also seem to have been worshipped at Philadelphia<sup>16</sup>. The Egyptian goddess Thoeiris had another temple<sup>17</sup>, and that of Zeus Labrandaos may also have been situated at Philadelphia. Finally, we hear of temples of Demeter<sup>18</sup>, no doubt the Greek goddess, and of Arsinoe Philadelphos<sup>19</sup>.

Hellenistic Egypt was indeed a melting pot of religion and culture, one of the great nodal points of the ancient world not only commercially and economically but also in religious and philosophic speculation. In the Greek and other foreign temples the forms of cult might go on with little change, but the beliefs of the worshippers, their conceptions and general attitude, could not but be modified by external influences. Syncretism, assimilating deity to deity, was a common phenomenon in ancient religion, in Greece as in Egypt; but in the latter country the influence of the Egyptian religious literature, with its dogmatic theology, and the elaborate temple ritual gave it definite and stereotyped formulation to a degree not known in Greece. In the struggle, if struggle there was, between Greek and Egyptian religion, the native cults were favoured both by the reputation of Egypt as a land of ancient wisdom and by the fact that the Greeks, however superior might be their political, social, and economic position, were an immigrant minority. Greek religion in Egypt was fighting a losing battle; and when we read in papyri such names as Hermes, Aphrodite, Athène, Apollo, and even Zeus we have always to ask ourselves whether the deities concerned are Greek or Egyptian. In the majority of cases, at least after the third century B.C., the answer is: Egyptian.

Of course the influence was not entirely one-sided; it was to some extent mutual. Though the Greeks might regard the ancient cults of Egypt with an awed wonder which disposed them to acceptance of usages and beliefs alien to them, the Egyptians on their side, despite their tendency to national self-conceit, could hardly help being impressed by the practical efficiency of the Greeks and by the achievements of Greek art, Greek science, and Greek speculation. The tomb of Petosiris, which dates from the reign of Ptolemy I, shows Greek influence in its decoration. Egyptian officials adopted Greek dress, took Greek names, learned Greek, and many were connected in one way or another with the court. Greek influences would hardly end with these externals; we may be sure that a certain mental assimilation took place also. The attitude to Hellenism of the priests in the Thebaid was prob-

<sup>15</sup> *P. Cair. Zenon* II, 59168.

<sup>16</sup> *P. Cair. Zenon* II, 59296, 32.

<sup>17</sup> *P. Cair. Zenon* II, 59308.

<sup>18</sup> *P. Lond. Inv.* 2654.

<sup>19</sup> *P. Col. Zenon* I, 39, 14, 15; *P. Cair. Zenon* IV, 59745, 32.

ably, in general, reserved or hostile, though in course of time many of them learned to speak and write Greek, but those of Memphis and other centres in Lower Egypt were, many of them, on friendly enough terms with the court and became partially hellenized. Thus Greek customs made some intrusion even into Egyptian religion, as in the formation of religious clubs or *σύνοδοι*, an institution which appears to have been new to Egypt. I may cite in illustration, admittedly from the later Ptolemaic period, the inscription *Sammelbuch* 5022, which records the existence of a *σύνδοξ νεανίσκων ἐκ τοῦ Ὀσιριείου*, a society which looks like an Egyptian adaptation or imitation of the Greek ephebate. The installation of altars and shrines in private houses was a Greek, not an Egyptian, custom, and the altars we read of in papyri of the third century B.C. were no doubt those of Greek gods. Apollonia and Eupous, who in a papyrus letter at Athens<sup>20</sup> write to their sisters Rhasion and Demarion asking them to "light a lamp for the shrines and spread cushions" were also presumably Greeks, and Asia, whom I have mentioned as petitioning the king about a shrine of Atargatis, was a Syrian; but this case of a Greek settler erecting a shrine to the deity of his foreign wife shows how easily the custom would spread in the mixed population of Hellenistic Egypt. A good many houses of the Roman period at Karanis have wall niches, apparently intended for the reception of a cult image<sup>21</sup>, and it is unlikely that the occupants of these houses were always, or often, of mainly Greek blood. At Soknopaiou Nesos, though I do not know whether such niches have been discovered there, Prof. Boak records wall paintings of a religious nature in private houses, including one which apparently represents the owner and his wife making an offering to Soknopaios<sup>22</sup>. As Prof. Boak says, "if this interpretation is correct, we may have evidence here for a domestic cult of the crocodile god".

No doubt the process of assimilation was gradual and in some circles slow. This is particularly true of the upper classes in Alexandria. In the correspondence of Zenon we find clear evidence of the active continuance of Greek cults, for example, allusions to the celebration of the Demetria<sup>23</sup> and to the sacrifice of a pig at the "Mourning of Demeter"<sup>24</sup>, the second day of the Thesmophoria. Dionysos was a popular deity in Egypt, helped both by the alleged descent from him of the Lagids and by his identification with Osiris; the well-known decree generally attributed to Ptolemy IV<sup>25</sup> shows that his cult was widespread in Egypt. High officials were bound to pay nominal homage to Egyptian deities, as in the year 256 we find the dioiketes Apollonios celebrating the four-day Isis festival at Memphis and worshipping at dawn in the great Serapeum<sup>26</sup>, but it may be doubted whether the veneration was much more than formal. The court poets are singularly free from any Egyptian influence. The festival so vividly presented to us in the fifteenth

<sup>20</sup> *P Athens* 60.

<sup>21</sup> A. E. R. Boak and E. E. Peterson, *Karanis* (1931) 29–32, plates ix, x, xxxix.

<sup>22</sup> Boak, *Soknopaiou Nesos* (1935) 9–10, plate iv, fig. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *P Cair. Zenon* I, 59028, 7.      <sup>24</sup> *P Cair. Zenon* III, 59350, 5.

<sup>25</sup> BGU VI, 1211.      <sup>26</sup> *P Col.* 1, 79.

idyll of Theocritus, though Adonis was of Asiatic origin, is thoroughly Greek in spirit, and so was the pageant staged by Ptolemy II at Alexandria. The magic in the second idyll of Theocritus is purely Greek and shows not a trace of Egyptian elements; yet Egypt was pre-eminently the land of magic.

These circles, however, were not typical. In the *chora* the Greeks from quite early, and increasingly as time went on, were influenced by their environment; and Ptolemy I, when he transformed the Egyptian god Oserapis into the new composite deity Sarapis, was only doing, consciously and as a measure of policy, what the mere pressure of circumstances was perforce accomplishing all the time. How far he succeeded in his policy of making Sarapis a real bond of union between Greek and Egyptian is somewhat doubtful. Sarapis certainly conquered the outside world, not indeed at once, and not universally before the Roman period; he became the patron god of Alexandria and the protector of sailors; the great Serapeum at Memphis enjoyed immense prestige and was a place of pilgrimage; and many references in papyri to cult meals and to Serapea in various places show that the worship of Sarapis was fairly widespread in Middle and Upper Egypt; but it is to be doubted whether among the mass of the less hellenized Egyptians, certainly in the Thebaid and very likely in Middle Egypt, the new god really established much hold. In the Roman period, even among the Greeks and hellenized inhabitants, there was some revival of Osiris and Horos as against Sarapis and Harpokrates. Nevertheless it was through the latter two, with Isis, that Egyptian religion made its widest and most powerful appeal to the Græco-Roman world.

From the second century B.C. we have in the Serapeum papyri and particularly in the papers of Ptolemaios excellent illustrations of the degree to which religious and cultural assimilation had gone. A Macedonian in blood and with a Greek education, Ptolemaios not only spent years as a recluse in the Serapeum but was charged with some liturgical functions there; and the ritual at that temple, unlike the Serapeum at Alexandria, where Greek elements seem to have been strong, was purely Egyptian. Ptolemaios was profoundly affected by his Egyptian environment. Striking in this connexion is his petition to the king in UPZ 16, which he concludes by invoking the Egyptian deities of Herakleopolis; "May Isis and Sarapis and the twelve gods that are in Herakleopolis grant you the lordship over every land upon which Helios looks down, and to your children for all time". So might any Egyptian have addressed Pharaoh; there is nothing Greek here, despite the fact that Ptolemaios always speaks of himself as a Greek, and indeed complains that he was attacked by the priests because of his Greek blood. Yet, on the other hand, he was on friendly terms with many Egyptians, notably the father of the twins, and his whole outlook was coloured by Egyptian conceptions and beliefs. The art of dream interpretation was one for which Egypt was famous, and Ptolemaios was a firm believer in the significance of dreams. He carefully recorded his own dreams and those of others, and he was himself a practitioner of the art; this was the point of the ironic address, "To those who give true interpretations",



on the letter in which his brother, Apollonios, declares that "we have given ourselves away and been deluded, misled by the gods and trusting in dreams"<sup>27</sup>. The dreams of Ptolemaios have a distinctly Egyptian background. In one he invokes Ammon<sup>28</sup>, in another Sarapis and Isis, and he has a vision of the daimon Knephis<sup>29</sup>, an Alexandrian deity, it is true, but clearly of Egyptian origin.

Ptolemaios was far from being the only Greek to be deeply involved in the religious life which centred in the Serapeum. His brothers clearly had connexions with it; Apollonios was himself for some months a recluse there and occupied a pastophorion in the temple of Astarte<sup>30</sup>. And Hephaistion, to whom two letters have survived among the Serapeum papyri<sup>31</sup>, was almost certainly a Greek and an ex-soldier, though, if Wilcken is right, he had married his own sister, following a custom which, whatever its origin, was certainly not Greek. A Greek too, presumably was Diphilos, the therapeutes, *τινα τῶν παρακατεχομένων ὑπὸ τοῦ Σαράπιος*<sup>32</sup>, as Ptolemaios describes him; and Nikanor, who in another papyrus states that *ἐν τῷ Σεραπείῳ θεραπεύω* and who lived in the *κατάλυμα* of Protarchos<sup>33</sup>, was probably also a Greek. The king and queen not infrequently visited the great Serapeum; so did high officials, like the strategos, of whom Apollonios says that he "goes up to-morrow to the Serapeum and spends two days in the Anubieion, drinking"<sup>34</sup>. The Serapeum was, indeed, so often visited by officials that it was a convenient place in which to present petitions to them; thus the priests of "Astarte of the Phœnician Egyptians at Memphis" refer to a petition given to Zenon there<sup>35</sup>.

In fact, wherever we look in the papyri and inscriptions of the later Ptolemaic and still more the Roman period we find evidence of the extent to which Egyptian or Græco-Egyptian cults were replacing for the Greek settlers the veneration of the Greek deities. "Your life", say the priests of Soknopaios and Isis Nephorses to Apollonios, of the first friends, strategos, and superintendent of the revenues, "has been saved in sickness by the great god Soknopaios and Isis Nephorses the most great goddess and the associated gods"<sup>36</sup>. In one inscription of the second century B.C. Theagenes, of the first friends and an usher at court, makes a dedication in honour of his deceased father, a high official, to Harbaithos, a form of Horos, and the gods who share his temple<sup>37</sup>. Another is made to Bast by a couple with Greek names, Stasinikos and Philotera<sup>38</sup>; and from Theadelphia we have dedications to Pnephros "the great, great god" by Agathodoros, an Alexandrian, of the second hipparchy, and his wife Isidora daughter of Dionysios in the year 137 B.C.<sup>39</sup> So again in two well-known inscriptions of 98 and 95 B.C., former ephebes in the Fayyûm dedicate a sacred site to "Souchos the great great god"<sup>40</sup>.

The amalgam became more complete in the Roman period. The papers of Apollonios, the strategos of Apollonopolis Heptakomia, furnish good illustrations

<sup>27</sup> UPZ I, 70.

<sup>30</sup> UPZ I, p. 114.

<sup>33</sup> UPZ I, 120.

<sup>36</sup> *PAmh.* II, 35.

<sup>39</sup> SB III, 6252, 6253.

<sup>28</sup> UPZ I, 77, 24.

<sup>31</sup> UPZ I, 59, 60.

<sup>34</sup> UPZ I, 70.

<sup>37</sup> SB I, 5021.

<sup>40</sup> Wilcken, *Chr.* 141, 142.

<sup>29</sup> UPZ I, 78.

<sup>32</sup> UPZ I, 8, 18ff.

<sup>35</sup> PSI V, 531.

<sup>38</sup> SB I, 1162.



of this fact. A man of considerable wealth, of high rank, and educated in the gymnasium, with its thoroughly Hellenic atmosphere, he had, like Hephaestion, married his sister, and the religious outlook of the family is more Egyptian than Greek. True, he built a shrine to the Dioskouroi, whose cult remained Greek, largely perhaps because there was no pair of Egyptian deities with whom they could readily be identified; but the Hermes who is invoked in letters of the family circle is obviously Thoth, and the mother of the strategos in a letter to her daughter seems to invoke Aphrodite Tazbes, that is, Hathor, Lady of Sbeht<sup>41</sup>, while elsewhere she expresses that attitude towards the gods, that habit of trying to extort favours from them by threats, which Porphyry regarded as typically Egyptian<sup>42</sup>. Apart from the domestic worship of the Dioskouroi, it seems likely that Greek religious ideas and Greek cults played hardly any part in the life of this family; even less so, then, we may conclude, in that of humbler folk.

It was particularly in the cult of the healing and oracular gods that the two races met; indeed it was round them that, as the ritual of the temples, especially those of the major deities, Greek and Egyptian alike, became increasingly formal and lifeless, ancient piety more and more crystallized. Here the Greeks, with their cult of Asklepios, had more to contribute than elsewhere. The Greek Asklepios and the Egyptian Imhotep melted indistinguishably into a single deity, who was not just the Egyptian god under a Greek name, but a composite figure, both Greek and Egyptian, like Sarapis himself. As M. Bataille has well said, "Of all the attempts made to bring together the two civilizations in the sphere of religion, this was one of the happiest; the Greeks had recourse to Imhotep, under the name of Asklepios, and the hellenized Egyptians found no difficulty in giving to the composite god his Greek name"<sup>43</sup>. In the Thebaid, on the other hand, where Greek influence was less potent, Imhotep never acquired the popularity of Amenotes, son of Hapu, who remained uncompromisingly Egyptian. That the latter should have appealed to native Egyptians is natural enough; but it is strange that in the Thebaid Greeks also, as seems clear, should have been attracted to him rather than to Asklepios-Imouthes. As early as the year 261-260 B.C. a Greek called Polyaratos was recording on an ostrakon his miraculous cure from an obstinate sickness, and informing us that "I learned from many people that the miracles of Amenotes are many, that he is compassionate, and that many who had quite given up hope had found deliverance through him"<sup>44</sup>. Many Greek inscriptions at Dêr el-Bahari bear witness to the gratitude of sufferers who had received healing from him; and though some of these were no doubt Egyptians writing in Greek, like Athenodoros son of Phthomonthes, who makes a dedication for himself and others, mostly with Egyptian names<sup>45</sup>, others were no less certainly Greeks. One of them, Athenodoros, *tesserarius* of the first vexillatio of Coptos, has left an inter-

<sup>41</sup> *P Giss.* 23.

<sup>42</sup> *P Bremen* 63.

<sup>43</sup> A. Bataille, *Les inscriptions grecques du temple de Hatshepsout à Deir el-Bahari* (1951) X.

<sup>44</sup> Ed. A. Bataille, *Et. de Papyrologie*, iv, 1938, p. 125-31.

<sup>45</sup> Bataille, *Inscriptions grecques*, no. 81, p. 56.

esting but unfortunately much damaged account of how he was cured, apparently not by incubation but after forcing his way into the holy of holies, perhaps through a vision of the god<sup>46</sup>, like the writer of the Imouthes aretology in P. Oxy. 1381. His appeal, however, was to the triad Asklepios, Amenotnes, and Hygieia.

As I have said, despite the survival of one or two Greek cults like that of the Dioskouroi, despite the evolution of a composite figure like Imouthes-Asklepios, it was the Egyptian rather than the Greek contribution to the syncretism which was the larger and the more prevailing. It is true that even Egyptian priests might learn Greek, might actually write in that language hymns to Egyptian deities, like those found by Prof. Vogliano at Madînet Mâdî<sup>47</sup>, but such things as this were externals; in the exchanges between the two religious worlds, it was most often the Greeks who received, the Egyptians who gave. From the beginning the Greeks adopted the practice of mummification; they took over the worship of Egyptian deities and the veneration of the sacred animals; they took over the funerary cults familiar in Egypt; they seem to have accepted the Egyptian habit of deifying persons drowned in the Nile; and, most important of all, they gradually absorbed Egyptian habits of thought; as M. Bataille has put it, "the clear and fine Hellenic genius, thus transplanted, ended by adopting the mental habits of the country"<sup>48</sup>.

Thus was evolved the syncretistic religion characteristic of later paganism, a religion which one might describe paradoxically as a monotheistic polytheism, or alternatively as a polytheistic monotheism; a religion with a great variety of gods and daimones, who, however, were conceived of rather as various manifestations, or perhaps as the instruments and creations, of a single divine principle, than as self-existing deities; a religion in which one might speak indifferently of "God" or of "the gods". It is found everywhere in this period, in the lofty speculations of Neoplatonism, at a lower level in the more popular Hermetic philosophy, in Gnosticism, whether pagan or Christian, in magic of all kinds, from elaborate handbooks like the great Paris papyrus to the coarsest and most perfunctory amulets, and even in expressions of popular piety, like the precepts of Sansnos, which Wilcken republished in his *Chrestomathie*<sup>49</sup>; "Reverence the divine power. Sacrifice to all the gods. Go on pilgrimage to worship at every shrine. Hold in highest esteem the paternal gods and reverence Isis and Sarapis, the greatest of the gods, saviours, good, kindly, benefactors". No doubt the growth of this monotheistic tendency had been greatly helped by syncretism. If Hathor is Aphrodite and Thoth Hermes, if Isis is both herself and at the same time a dozen other goddesses and also a deified mortal like Arsinoe Philadelphos, if Imouthes and Asklepios can melt into a single composite deity, it is not a very long step to supposing that all the gods are no more than specialized manifestations of one undifferentiated

<sup>46</sup> Bataille, *Inscr. gr.* no. 126, p. 85 ff.

<sup>47</sup> A. Vogliano, *Primo rapporto degli scavi ... di Madînet Mâdî* (1936)

<sup>48</sup> *Les Memnonia* (1952) 286.

<sup>49</sup> Wilcken, *Chr.* 116.

divine essence, which was the origin of all of them. Syncretism was, of course, by no means a new phenomenon in the Hellenistic age. It was by this process that the multiplicity of local cults in the Nile valley was organized into a more or less coherent system. The same may be said of Greek religion, but in Greece, lacking alike political unity and a recognized theological literature, the process did not issue in such a schematic theology as was attained in Egypt. In the latter country a monotheistic conception was attained surprisingly early among the worshippers of Ptah, and we find even in early dynastic texts the idea, in which ancient paganism ended, that the individual gods were created by the one God. At a later time there are frequent claims, not only in Akhenaten's hymns to the Aten, but in some of the Amen hymns and elsewhere, that this or that god was the One God. In the syncretistic religion of the second and third centuries it is commoner to speak of the ultimate Power as "God" simply than to identify him with any god of the existing pantheon, though it is no doubt true, as Nilsson has said, that "all the various gods were represented as Powers of the sun-god"<sup>50</sup>.

The elements of this religion were drawn from many sources, from Greece, Egypt, Judaea, Iran, and Asia Minor. The Egyptian contribution was considerable, though it was neither so large nor so important as outward appearances might suggest. It was Greek philosophic thought, supplemented by conceptions derived from Asia, especially Iran, which supplied the inner spirit, the cohesive force giving system and unity to the whole. What Egypt furnished, apart from a few details, was in the main the façade and the framework. The Egyptian mind had no natural aptitude for abstract speculation. It could furnish a dogmatic formulation of traditional doctrines and a rather mechanical arrangement and organization of many disparate and at times mutually inconsistent myths and beliefs, but it required the Greek intellect to reduce them to a philosophic form and give to often very crude notions spiritual depth and significance. Yet the Egyptian element in the religious system was very substantial; how substantial, may be judged from the fact that the authors of the Hermetic treatises, expressing ideas which, more often than not, were fundamentally Greek, thought it necessary to give them an Egyptian setting. Hermes Trismegistos himself, though he bears a Greek name, is the Egyptian Thoth. Tat, another of the interlocutors, is a variant form of Thoth. Asklepios is not the Greek god but the composite Asklepios-Imouthes of Egypt. To them, in the *Asclepius*, is added Ammon; and in other treatises, partially preserved for us by Stobaeus, we find also Isis and Horos. Not only so, but there is an elaborate pretence that these treatises, or some of them, are a translation from the Egyptian. In the ostensible letter of Asklepios to Ammon the former declares: "My teacher Hermes, frequently conversing with me, both privately and sometimes in the presence of Tat, used to say that those who consult my books will think their composition most simple and clear, but that on the contrary it is obscure and conceals the true significance of the words, and will even be ex-

<sup>50</sup> M. P. Nilsson, *Greek Piety* (1948) 107.

tremely obscure when the Greeks at a later time attempt to interpret our tongue into their own, which will prove to be the greatest distortion and obscuring of what is written. But the discourse, when interpreted in the paternal tongue, preserves in all clearness the sense of the words; for in fact the very quality of the utterance and the [effect] of the Egyptian vocables preserve in themselves the full force of what is said.”<sup>51</sup> And he goes on to warn Ammon against allowing the treatise to be translated into Greek; “for the Greeks, O King, have merely empty words efficacious for the purpose of demonstration, and this is the philosophy of the Greeks, a jingle of words; but we use, not words, but utterances potent for effect”. In the *Asclepius* we have a laudation of Egypt: “Are you ignorant, Asclepius, that Egypt is the image of heaven or, which is a more accurate way of putting it, is a translation or descent of all the things which are ordered and effected in heaven?”<sup>52</sup> Later in the dialogue we find a further accentuation of its alleged Egyptian origin:<sup>53</sup> “Your grandfather, Asclepius, the first discoverer of medicine, to whom a temple is consecrated in the mountain of Libya near the shore of crocodiles, in which lies so much of him as was mortal man, that is, the body (for the remainder—or rather the whole, if the whole man resides in the consciousness of life—the better part, returned to heaven), still, even now, affords to men who are sick, by his own divine power, the help which formerly he gave by the art of medicine. Hermes, too, my grandfather, whose name I bear, does he not, residing in the city which bears his name, help and preserve all mortals who, from anywhere on earth, resort to him?”

All these elaborate pretences would not have been resorted to if an Egyptian origin had not been considered essential. Egyptian elements are not less obvious elsewhere. Prof. Bonner, in his great work on amulets, emphasizes the importance of Egyptian influences there. These influences were specially strong in amulets of the Roman period: “now, indeed”, says Pliny in a passage quoted by Bonner, “men also are beginning to wear on their fingers Harpocrates and figures of Egyptian deities”, the words *viri quoque* implying, as Bonner remarks, that women had adopted the custom at an earlier time<sup>54</sup>. At least some Egyptian phrases have been detected in the gibberish found on amulets; Egyptian deities are represented on them; Egyptian symbols, like the *ankh* and the scarabaeus, occasionally occur. Bonner sums up his discussion of this point by saying, “But the predominance of Egyptian over all non-Greek elements is abundantly proved not only by the close relation that exists between papyrus amulets and magical gems, but even more by the longer magical papyri, really handbooks of magic, which virtually offer us commentaries upon certain designs and inscriptions found on the stones”<sup>55</sup>.

<sup>51</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum: Hermès Trismégiste*, ed. A. D. Nock and A. J. Festugière (Paris, 1945), xvi, 1–2.

<sup>52</sup> *Asclepius* 24 (*Hermès Trismégiste* 326).

<sup>53</sup> 37 (*Hermès Trismégiste* 347f.).

<sup>54</sup> Campbell Bonner, *Studies in Magical Amulets* 7.

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.* 8.



That Egyptian elements are found everywhere in the magical papyri is of course only what might be expected, since these texts were written in Egypt. It is of more interest to notice how such elements are mingled with others from non-Egyptian sources. The background of the magical literature was not so much Egyptian mythology as the syncretistic religion, made up of many diverse strands, of which I have spoken. It was this, not the religion of any one race or country, which in the Roman period formed the framework of men's religious impulses and perceptions, and in the magical texts Greek, Egyptian, and Asiatic deities and daimones, the sacred names of Jewish religion, angels like Michael and Gabriel, Moses and the Patriarchs, even Jesus himself, are invoked, with complete impartiality. The world was full of gods, of spirits and daimones; God was *πολύμορφος*, manifesting himself in many shapes and operating through a hierarchy of divine beings.

Another great movement of thought in the Roman Empire which showed strong Egyptian influence was Gnosticism. Some Gnostic doctrines were derived from Egyptian religion. The twelve Gnostic hells reproduced in part the Egyptian Duat, and the ship of the moon came from the bark of Thoth, the moon god. But here again the inner substance of the creed was Greek rather than Egyptian; what Egypt supplied was the machinery and the general colouring. Gnosticism was widely spread in the Græco-Roman world, but its peculiar home was Egypt. It was in Egypt that several of the leading Gnostics lived and taught, in Egypt that many Gnostic treatises were written, in Egypt that Gnostics and Gnostic sects were specially numerous, and it is, appropriately, from Egypt that we derive most of our first-hand evidence for Gnostic doctrines. Early Christianity in Egypt seems to have been steeped in Gnostic ideas; indeed it has been suggested that the obscurity which invests the earlier history of the Egyptian Church is due to a deliberate suppression of what a later age felt to be a discreditable past<sup>56</sup>. Clement and Origen were both deeply influenced by Gnostic thought, and Clement was at pains to defend the true *gnosis* as against heretical aberrations.

Though in some forms it developed a pronounced antinomianism, Gnosticism in the main had a strong ascetic bias, and it was from this source that Egyptian Christianity derived the encratite leanings to which Eusebius refers<sup>57</sup>, and which seem to have characterized the Gospel according to the Egyptians. A similar tendency, with a distrust of the body and of the sex relationship, appears in some treatises of the Hermetic philosophy, which, as we have seen, was much influenced by Egyptian religion: "Let the man who has understanding recognize that he is immortal, and that the cause of death is love"<sup>58</sup>, says the first treatise in the Hermetic corpus; though elsewhere we find a different point of view, and in the *Asclepius* a mystical, almost a sacramental, view of the sexual union is expressed.

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<sup>56</sup> See J. M. Creed, in *The Legacy of Egypt* (1942) 312.

<sup>57</sup> *HE* II, 16.

<sup>58</sup> *Corp. Herm.* I, 18.



Egypt was the birthplace of Christian monasticism; but that monasticism was not the first phenomenon of the kind in the Nile valley. The Jewish Therapeutai described by Philo anticipated in a remarkable way the leading features of monasticism, and both monks and Therapeutai have been compared with the recluses of Sarapis. Attempts to link these three movements together, to represent monasticism as suggested by the Therapeutai and both as inspired by the Sarapis cult, have not found much acceptance and do not seem to be supported by the evidence, but it is certainly remarkable that monastic or semi-monastic movements should so persistently recur on Egyptian soil, and that Gnosticism, the Hermetic philosophy, and the orthodox Christianity of Egypt should all exhibit encratite tendencies. Is all this to be traced to some abiding characteristic of the Egyptian temperament? Egyptian religion was on the whole of a non-mystical and very material character. The life of the "dwellers in the West" was a reproduction of life on earth, with beer and bread and meat and other sensual satisfactions; the Egyptian Wisdom literature, fine as much of it is, reveals most often a prudential and this-worldly morality. How can we reconcile with such a temperament the recurrent ascetic movements observable in Egypt? I will not venture to answer that question except by tentatively suggesting a further one. Was there in the Egyptian character, or did the Egyptian climate produce (for we must remember that the Therapeutai were Jews), a tendency to extremes, the opposite of the Greek *μετρίότης*, which accounts for this phenomenon? As the Egyptian peasant, so remarkably submissive through centuries of exploitation, is subject, when he revolts at last against oppression, to sudden outbreaks of savage fury, may we suppose that under the influence of religious devotion he would develop an impulse towards a sometimes extreme asceticism? Certainly it is significant that the earliest hermits, St. Paul of Thebes and St. Anthony, were Egyptians, that the monastic movement began in the Thebaid, where the Egyptian element was specially strong, and that the characteristic tongue of Egyptian monasticism was Coptic.

I have tried, with indifferent success, I fear, and on the basis of far too scanty knowledge, to sketch the process by which, from the mingling of the native Egyptian religion with that of the Greeks and other immigrants, was evolved the syncretistic religion which, with the addition of elements from elsewhere, formed the mental background of later paganism. It remains only to sum up, or rather to enquire what it was that gave to the religion of Egypt its remarkable appeal, and what was the special contribution made by Egypt to the resulting amalgam.

I would begin by specifying the two factors which I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, the reputation of Egypt for religious wisdom and the antiquity of her civilization. These predisposed the minds of the Greeks to absorb Egyptian influences in the religious sphere. They provided a motive for the elaborate pretence of translation from Egyptian which we have seen in the Hermetic philosophy. To assign an Egyptian origin to the conclusions of Greek religious speculation gave to these a certain prestige, a *cachet*, which they would otherwise have lacked.

Just as Gnostic and other heretics, in various apocryphal Gospels, fathered their opinions on one of the Apostles, or on Christ himself, so the Hermetic philosopher, the Gnostic, the magician, alike found it useful to claim as their authority the ancient wisdom of Egypt.

Secondly, Egyptian religion had a great asset in its elaborate organization, both practical and theoretical. Outwardly, it may appear to a modern observer a strange jumble of primitive myths, magical practices, crude beliefs, stereotyped ritual, and sometimes lofty moral and religious conceptions; but through centuries of experiment and adaptation it had attained a degree of formal exposition, a capacity for assimilating deity to deity and for reconciling conflicting beliefs and practices, in fact a system of theology, which had no parallel in Greece. The Greeks possessed no body of sacred writings generally accepted as authoritative. The Orphics, it is true, had their "*hieroi logoi*", which Guthrie has described as being "a 'Bible' in a very real sense"<sup>59</sup>, and the Dionysos decree to which I have already referred speaks of the *hieros logos* which was to be handed in under seal; but these were confined to particular sects and cults, which had only a limited influence in classical Greece. Greek religion as a whole was un-dogmatic and unorganized, a matter of state or local cults, traditional rites, and individual beliefs. It was in the sphere of philosophy that the Greek genius for ordered thought and systematic construction found expression; and apart from such movements as Orphism and Pythagoreanism, which did not become generally influential till a later age, religion and philosophy followed different, and sometimes mutually hostile, roads. Egyptian religion, with its more crystallized forms, offered precisely what that of Greece lacked, a system of theological formulæ, and the flexible Greek mind, working upon the material which Egypt offered, produced momentous results.

Another Egyptian asset was its doctrine of immortality. As I have said, the popularity of the Homeric poems had spread widely the conception of the next world as a shadowy place where the souls of the departed passed a strengthless half-life; and as the older faith faded so did the expectation of any survival whatever. In the confident morning of Greek civilization there seems to have been no pressing sense of any need for a second life; this life was all that was hoped for or desired, and it was not the burden of life but its brevity the thought of which nursed the melancholy moods of writers like Mimnermus or Anacreon. But there were always sects and groups which, in Orphism, in the Dionysos cult, or in the Eleusinian mysteries, fostered a hope of personal immortality, and as the bright dawn faded and, under the shadow of defeat, social disintegration, and economic crisis, a mood of disillusion and apprehension grew, and particularly as more and more of the Greeks left their homes and ancestral cults to settle among strangers in the conquered provinces of the Persian Empire, the desire for a life beyond the grave which would redress the inequities of this world, for a redemptive religion promising purification now and salvation hereafter, became ever greater. And for

<sup>59</sup> W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods* (1950) 313.

the settlers in Egypt it found an answer in the Egyptian funerary cults. Plato had tried through intellectual reasoning to arrive at an assurance of survival after death; in Egypt this survival was taken for granted, and the Egyptian cults offered a way, open to all men, to the attainment of immortality. It was as a redeeming god, the god of the resurrection, whose rites secured a passage to the next world, that Sarapis made his victorious progress through Græco-Roman lands.

Finally, another advantage which Egyptian religion enjoyed was the magical element which permeated it. As the Hellenistic age proceeded there was noticeable a marked drift away from strictly intellectual speculation, comparable to that flight from reason which we have witnessed in our own time. The confident hopes of the early philosophers had not been fulfilled; truth, like the rainbow, seemed ever to recede as the searcher pursued. Thus a mood of disillusionment set in; the sceptics who questioned the possibility of finding truth seemed to have only too much justification, and those who still felt the urge to philosophic enquiry either narrowed their range to the more accessible fields, like the Stoics and Epicureans on the one side or the scientific thinkers on the other, or looked for some new method of discovery. A contemporary British scholar has spoken of a failure of nerve; perhaps it would be juster to refer to what happened as a realization of the limitations to which purely intellectual enquiry is subject. There was a craving for revelation, for some occult truth, to be arrived at mystically by means of prescribed formulæ, ascetic practices, magical rites, or what not, a desire in fact for *gnosis* in the later sense. Now magic, which among the better minds in Greece was always under suspicion, figured prominently in Egyptian religion; that religion gave it a respectability of status which it lacked in Greece. The interpretation of dreams, incubation in temples in order to obtain healing or a divine revelation, and various forms of divination, familiar enough, no doubt, in Greece, had in Egypt been carried to a perfection which gave Egypt a special reputation in these matters. Thus the cults of Egypt, in which magic played so important a part, had a powerful appeal; and thus semi-magical practices established a place in popular religion, while on the other hand magic itself developed a religious side, so that in the extant texts we find, along with the search for more mundane and tangible objects, attempts to attain by magical incantations the knowledge of the deity, immortality, or ecstatic experience. One spell even ends with the fine prayer which concludes the Hermetic treatise, *Asclepius*<sup>60</sup>.

I hope I have succeeded in expressing at least some of the interest to be found in the study of Græco-Egyptian religion—its interest and its importance. For great as was the part which Egypt played in many aspects of the life of Hellenistic and Roman times, I doubt if in any sphere its influence was so far-reaching and so permanent as in that of religion.

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<sup>60</sup> *P. Mag.* 3, 591ff. = *Asclepius* 41.