FOREWORD (1993)

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Egypt—like the other countries of the ancient Near East—has played a paradoxical role in Western thought. Greek writers often represented Egyptians, like Ethiopians and other non-Greeks, as "barbarians," swarthy, cunning, and prone to ungovernable anger.[1] Even the Greek-speaking Egypt of the Hellenistic period seemed Oriental, a place of alluring scents, strong spices, and strange magical practices. The temptations of Cleopatra's Egypt, according to Roman writers, explained the failures of Mark Antony and dramatized the incorrupt military virtues of Caesar and Augustus.

Stereotypes reigned, but they were very ambiguous. Many of Greece's most original intellectuals respected Egypt as the source and repository of profound learning about gods, the universe, and humanity. The powers of traditional Egyptian culture fascinated Western historians, philosophers, and scientists, who admired what they saw as the millenial continuity of Egyptian life. In particular, Egyptian philosophy seemed to them older and deeper than their own. They liked to tell stories about the philosophical journeys to Egypt in the course of which Solon, Plato, Eudoxus, and even Julius Caesar had learned the mysteries of being, the stars, and the calendar. Greek historians and ethnographers informed their readers of the wonders of Egypt's great buildings and strange customs. The rulers of imperial Rome imported the grandest and most mysterious

of Egyptian relics, the obelisks, to Rome and Constantinople, where they gave dramatic emphasis to sections of the empire's capital cities and provided tangible evidence of Rome's dominance of the world.[2] Meanwhile the cult of Isis, which spread throughout the Roman world, gave Egypt a final victory in the realm of the spirit. A vision of Egypt—as at once a captive and a powerful civilization—became solidly built into the fabric of Western culture.[3]

In the first centuries of the Christian era, Greek writers working with scraps of information and Egyptian thinkers scrambling to assemble the barely recognizable fragments of their shattered ancestral culture richly elaborated the myth of Egyptian wisdom. The process was complex and protracted. Many of those who took part in it were liminal figures, like Chaeremon—the strange Alexandrian scholar, a Stoic and anti-Semite, who rose to become Nero's teacher in Rome. The surviving fragments of his work on the hieroglyphs emphasize the austere wisdom of the ancient Egyptian priests. He portrayed them as ideal barbarian sages, disciplined and self-denying. Unfortunately he drew his adjectives not from experience but from the stock of commonplace terms applied by Hellenistic writers to a gaggle of exotic clerisies, all of whom they imagined as leading the lives of Greek philosophers. Chaeremon's Egyptian sages could as well have been Indian gymnosophists, Gallic Druids, or Zoroastrian priests as Egyptian *hierogrammateis*. But he also insisted on the uniqueness of Egypt's traditions, and provided glimpses of real Egyptian rituals and explications of genuine Egyptian hieroglyphs. His work became a complex tapestry in which genuine and spurious threads, native traditions, and foreign stereotypes were inextricably interwoven.[4] The authors of the Greek works ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus—those strange Greek dialogues that

describe supposedly Egyptian doctrines on the creation of the universe and the human soul, and which circulated widely in the third and fourth centuries A.D.—similarly mixed real Egyptian traditions and unfounded Greek prejudices into one heady textual cocktail. Almost all readers accepted them as genuinely Egyptian until the end of the sixteenth century, and took them as proving the Egyptian origin of the Platonic doctrines that they state more baldly than Plato himself.[5]

No facet of traditional Egyptian culture occupied a more prominent place—or a less accurate one—in scholars' mental panoramas of the ancient world than hieroglyphs. By early in the Christian era few scholars, even in Egypt, could still write or read a hieroglyphic text, much less explain the ideographic and phonetic nature of Egyptian script to foreigners. No Greek whose work is preserved ever learned to read hieroglyphs. But culture, like nature, hates a vacuum. Historians, philosophers, and fathers of the church wove a new tale about Egyptian writing, ably summarized by George Boas in the introduction that follows. The priests of Egypt, they decided, had created a written language perhaps older than, and certainly different from, any other: one in which each image expressed each concept with matchless clarity, because it was a natural, not a conventional, sign. "For not as nowadays," said the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus, "did the ancient Egyptians write a set and easily learned number of letters to express whatever the human mind might conceive, but one character stood for a single name or word, and sometimes signified an entire thought. . . . By the picture of a bee making honey, they indicate a king, showing by this symbol that a ruler must have both sweetness and yet a sharp sting."[6] Egyptian inscriptions thus amounted to symbolic or alle-

gorical messages that wise readers from any nation could decode simply by working out the meaning of each sign in order.[7] The uniquely profound message of Egyptian philosophy had been cast in a uniquely profound medium.

This misleading, foreign viewpoint inspires not only scattered comments in Diodorus Siculus, Ammianus, and other texts but the entire text of Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica*—the one surviving ancient work that concentrates on and explains a large number of Egyptian hieroglyphs. The book seems to have been written in Egypt by Horapollo, the son of Asclepiades. Asclepiades and his brother Heraiscus, the sons of an older Horapollo, were cultivated Hellenists who lived in Alexandria in the fifth century A.D. Both men studied the native traditions and gods of Egypt as well as Greek philosophy. Heraiscus wrote hymns to the gods of Egypt and tried to prove the basic concord of all theologies.[8] The younger Horapollo's work, as Boas shows, takes a Greek point of view and seems to have been written in Greek, but it also offers a number of glosses that the decipherment of hieroglyphics in modern times has confirmed, at least in part.[9] In its combination of the fraudulent and the genuine, in its effort to reconstitute a lost tradition from fragile and partly spurious ingredients, the *Hieroglyphica* typifies the whole world of syncretistic late-antique philosophy and erudition that Garth Fowden has recently called back to life.[10]

Boas emphasizes the fraudulence of the text's framework and outlook more strongly than the genuineness of bits of its content. More recent interpretations, like Fowden's, would differ from Boas's more in tone than in substance. They would compare Horapollo to those American intellectuals of mixed culture, like Garcilaso de la Vega, who tried to preserve and explain to Western readers the shat-

tered native religious and cultural traditions of the New World, and who necessarily forced their materials to fit alien molds even as they saved them from oblivion. The fact that Horapollo lacked the philological equipment to carry out his task reveals not gross foolishness but the desperate pathos that his nostalgia for an irrecoverable past inspired in him. The text gives a sense of the way many late-antique intellectuals—including the great neo-Platonist Plotinus—read meanings into visual symbols and tried to combine Oriental wisdom with Greek philosophy. Horapollo's personal fate is especially revealing; in the end, he became an apostate, converting to Christianity. Syncretism, evidently, could go no further. The work of Horapollo and his family marks "the fizzling out" of the "long interaction between Greek and Egyptian paganism."[11]

The *Hieroglyphica*, then, opens a window into the intellectual life of late antiquity. But as Boas also shows, it sheds more light on a later period—the Renaissance, when the rediscovery of this text did much to fuel what became a widespread fascination, almost an outbreak of Egyptomania, among artists and intellectuals. In that age of obsessive interest in heraldry of all sorts, late-antique genealogies of wisdom flourished wildly. Most orations on the history of the arts and sciences, histories of philosophy, and reference books celebrated the half-imaginary achievements of ancient Egypt more volubly than the real ones of ancient Greece and Rome. Many philosophers and scientists believed that the preserved texts of Plato and Aristotle, Archimedes and Ptolemy contained no more than a shadow of the lost, ideal learning of the Egyptian temples.[12]

True, the craze for things Egyptian did not entirely depend on Horapollo. Egyptian relics in accessible places—such as Rome's obelisks, one of which still stood at the end

of the Middle Ages, as did others in Alexandria and Istanbul—fascinated the antiquaries of the early Renaissance. So did the pyramids of Memphis and other antiquities of Egypt itself, which the pioneer archaeologist Cyriac of Ancona visited and vividly described in 1435.[13] The texts of the Hermetic works, translated by Ficino early in the 1460s, did much to revive the notion that ancient Egypt had been a center of profound theology and powerful natural magic.[14] So did the text of Plotinus's *Enneads*, as Boas explains. And notorious forged histories of ancient Babylon and Egypt, published in 1498 by the Dominican theologian Giovanni Nanni da Viterbo, provided the program for the Renaissance's most stunning single example of artistic Egyptomania: Pinturicchio's frescoes for the Appartamento Borgia in the Vatican.[15]

But the *Hieroglyphica* itself did more than any other single text to shape the Renaissance's view of Egyptian symbols. The intrepid traveller and archaeologist Cristoforo Bundelmonti, who wrote a marvellous account of the Greek islands, acquired a copy on Andros in 1419. The text soon found copyists and translators. Cyriac of Ancona, for example, made extracts from book 1 as part of his preparation for his Egyptian voyage. The text matched and supplemented the information on hieroglyphs that appeared in Ammianus Marcellinus, a text discovered by Poggio Bracciolini. He learned from the two works that the figures of animals and birds that he saw on a broken obelisk on the Appian Way (later reerected by Bernini in the Piazza Navona) were the letters of the ancient Egyptians, though he could not read them. A reading of Horapollo probably inspired Leon Battista Alberti to analyze the hieroglyphs as a universal symbolic language—one that could not be lost, because all men could decode it—in his treatise on archi-

tecture. He used hieroglyphs himself, choosing the winged eye as his own emblem and inscribing a hieroglyphic message of his own about the power of fortune on the Rucellai loggia and the facade of S. Maria Novella. The curved sails that scud across both buildings were presumably intended to speak to all future generations about the compelling force of chance, in which Alberti's patron Giovanni Rucellai believed. Hieroglyphs decorated Mantegna's *Triumph of Caesar*, adorned the most eerily beautiful of early printed books, Francesco Colonna's *Hypnerotomachia Polifi*, and ran in a frieze around the loveliest of high Renaissance buildings, Bramante's Tempietto.

The fascination with hieroglyphs, like other humanist tastes, soon passed beyond Italy's borders. In the circle of German humanists who advised the Holy Roman Emperor Maximilian in the years around 1500, Horapollo carried great authority. Maximilian was deeply impressed by the notion of ancient symbolic writing conveyed to him by the Nuremberg scholar Willibald Pirckheimer, who provided him with a manuscript translation of Horapollo illustrated by Dürer (some of his hieroglyphs are here reproduced by Boas). The magnificent *Ehrenpforte* or *Triumphal Arch* that Dürer created for Maximilian, the largest woodcut ever made and perhaps the most ambitious of the printed images through which the emperor tried to project his authority to a wide public, includes an elaborate hieroglyphic message about kingship, cobbled together, image by image, from Horapollo.[16]

As this case suggests, the *Hieroglyphica* served as a manual not only for the interpretation of symbols but for their creation. In the later fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, European intellectuals were possessed by a taste for condensed, vivid statements and images of what they took as

profound moral and metaphysical truths. Ancient precedents were eagerly sought, ranging from the *Symbola* ascribed to Pythagoras and the oracles ascribed to Zoroaster to the hieroglyphs. Horapollo's translator, Filippo Fasanini, carefully assembled the ancient testimonies about hieroglyphs in his discourse on the sacred writing of the Egyptians. He made clear how meticulously the Egyptians had adapted their style of writing to a specific pedagogical program:

> [The hieroglyphs] were enigmatic and symbolic engravings, which were much used in ancient times and preceding centuries, especially among Egyptian prophets and teachers of religion, who considered it unlawful to expose the mysteries of wisdom in ordinary writing to lay people, as we do. And if they judged something to be a worthy piece of knowledge, they represented it in plain drawings of animals and other things in such a way that it was not easy for anyone to guess. But if anyone had learned and studied thoroughly from Aristotle and others the properties of each thing, the particular nature and essence of each animal, he would at length, by putting together his conjectures about these symbols, grasp the enigma of the meaning and, because of this knowledge, be honored above the uninitiated crowd."[17]

Erasmus's *Adagia* and Alciato's *Emblemata* were perhaps the most original and influential of the period's efforts to crystallise great truths in lapidary form, inaccessible to the wicked and slothful but incomparably moving to those with eyes and spirits capable of receiving them. As Fasanini's account, with its easy juxtaposition of Egyptian wisdom and Greek philosophy, suggests, they drew on Horapollo for both material and inspiration, in full confidence that Egyptian wisdom must basically match Greek—the very assumption that, as we have seen, the text's original author had also made.

The scholars and artists of High Renaissance Rome loved to interpret hieroglyphs. One of the most erudite and creative of them, Pierio Valeriano, embedded Horapollo's modest glosses in a magnificent commentary, assembling every parallel and supplement he could from Greek and Roman literature and imagery. Painters and poets freely used and adapted his material. Hieroglyphs became fashionable, even omnipresent, and Horapollo, both alone and as supplemented by Valeriano, remained for the next century and a half the most coherent and accessible—if also the most suspect—source for both the symbols and their meanings. Even the discovery that the text contained words and symbols from Greek and Latin sources did not fatally undermine its authority. Thirty editions, after the *editio princeps* of the Greek text in 1505, attest to its appeal.[18] This austere and brittle little book, in other words, became the foundation on which ambitious works of poetry and philosophy, art and architecture rested. Boas's translation, accordingly, is indispensable to the serious modern student of literally dozens of Renaissance and baroque texts and images.

Readers should bear in mind Boas's own caution about the nature of his edition. He set out to provide a translation of the text as it circulated in Latin in the early modern period, showing "how Horapollo sounded to men of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries." His text, accordingly, does not always correspond to the critical edition of the original Greek by F. Sbordone (1940), which remains standard. Those in search of help with the detailed interpretation of the original will find the French translation by B. van de Walle and J. Vergote more helpful.[19] But Boas's version remains the only generally accessible one in English, and his introduction is erudite and perceptive. Anyone who

seeks to understand why what now seem banal symbols and allegories once fascinated some of the West's most original thinkers, artists, and writers will learn much from the material Boas assembled, as well as from Horapollo himself.

NOTES

1. E. Hall, *Inventing the Barbarian* (Oxford, 1989).

2. See E. Iversen, *Obelisks in Exile*, vol. 1: *The Obelisks of Rome* (Copenhagen, 1968).

3. See in general S. Morenz, *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* (Zürich and Stuttgart, 1969).

4. See *Chaeremon, Egyptian Priest and Stoic Philosopher: The Fragments Collected and Translated with Explanatory Notes*, ed. P. W. van der Horst (Leiden, 1984); M. Frede, "Chaeremon der Stoiker," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, ed. W. Haase and H. Temporini (Berlin, 1972–), 2.36.3: 2067–2103.

5. See G. Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes* (Cambridge, 1986; Princeton, 1993); *Hermetica*, ed. and trans. B. P. Copenhaver (Cambridge, 1992).

6. Translated in Boas's appendix, p. 103 below; this contains the main classical testimonies about hieroglyphs in translation.

7. See in general E. Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and Its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen, 1961; Princeton, 1993); Iversen, "The Hieroglyphic Tradition," in *The Legacy of Egypt*, 2d ed., ed. J. R. Harris (Oxford, 1971).

8. Damascius, *Vitae Isidori reliquiae*, ed. C. Zintzen (Hildesheim, 1967), frag. 164; see G. Fowden, "The Pagan Holy Man in Late Antique Society," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1982): 46–47.

9. For a nice case in point, see E. Iversen, "Horapollo and the Egyptian Conception of Eternity," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 38 (1963): 177–86.

10. See above all Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes*.

11. Ibid., 185–86.

12. See in general F. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London, 1964); D. P. Walker, *The Ancient Theology* (London, 1972).

13. P. W. Lehmann, *Cyriacus of Ancona's Egyptian Visit and Its Reflections in Gentile Bellini and Hieronymus Bosch* (Locust Valley, N.Y., 1977).

14. For contrasting accounts see the excellent introduction to *Hermetica*, ed. and trans. Copenhaver, and the fine essay by C. Dempsey, "Renaissance Hieroglyphic Studies and Gentile Bellini's *Saint Mark Preaching in Alexandria*," *Hermeticism and the Renaissance*, ed. I. Merkel and A. G. Debus (Washington, London, and Toronto, 1988), 342–65.

15. F. Saxl, "The Appartamento Borgia," *Lectures* (London, 1957), 1:174–88.

16. See in general R. Wittkower, "Hieroglyphics in the Early Renaissance," *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London, 1977), 114-28; S. Sider, "Horapollo," *Catalogus translationum et commentariorum*, ed. F. E. Cranz, V. Brown and P. O. Kristeller (Washington, D.C., 1960–), 6:15–29. The magnificent old article by Giehlow, cited by Boas on p. 33 below, remains by far the most profound study of the whole subject.

17. D. L. Drysdall, "Filippo Fasanini and his 'Explanation of Sacred Writing' (text and translation)," *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 13 (1983): 127–55, at 137; for the original Latin see 136.

18. See in general J. Seznec, *The Survival of the Pagan Gods*, trans. B. F. Sessions (New York, 1953); E. Wind, *Pagan Mysteries in the Renaissance*, new ed. (London, 1967); E. Panofsky, *The Iconography of Correggio's Camera di San Paolo* (London, 1961); D. C. Allen, *Mysteriously Meant* (Baltimore and London, 1970).

19. Published in *Chronique d'Égypte* 18 (1943): 39–89, 199–239; addenda ibid., 22 (1947): 251–59. For a review of some of the more recent work see B. van de Walle, "Informations complémentaires au sujet des Hieroglyphica d'Horapollon," *Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica* 6/7 (1975–1976): 543–54.