

## Periergia: Egyptian reactions to Greek Curiosity

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In this paper I want to show that the discourse about curiosity which holds such a prominent place in Greek and Latin literature might reflect, however distantly, something of the attitude the ancient Egyptians held toward their Greek visitors and occupants and of their reaction to the scientific, ethnographic curiosity with which the Greeks approached the civilization of the ancient Egyptians. The problem for this argument lies in the fact that it is based solely on Greek (and Latin) texts. There are scarcely any Egyptian texts that deal explicitly with the Greeks and that record Egyptian views of them. Therefore, the remarks that follow cannot be conclusive; at best, they are suggestive.

The Latin word *curiositas* translates the Greek word *periergia*, meaning curiosity, inquisitiveness. There is no Egyptian equivalent. The whole discourse on *periergia* or curiosity is a Greek phenomenon, taken over by Latin authors such as Apuleius. St. Augustine transmitted the concept to the Christian occident and gave it such normative status that scientific research was henceforth regarded as a manifestation of curiosity and was virtually banned from intellectual life or, at least, severely restricted for more than a thousand years, until its partial liberation from clerical (catholic) control beginning with the Renaissance. Contrary to what one might expect, however, the ban on curiosity was not a Christian invention and not just another form of rejecting paganism. We find a similar attitude toward curiosity more than two centuries before Augustine in *The Golden Ass* by Apuleius of Madauros, written around the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. In this text, the confrontation between a bold young Greek or Roman, driven by curiosity, and Egyptian priests full of reserve, wisdom and self-control, finds its classical expression.

Lucius is a young Roman who, after dabbling in magic, has been transformed into an ass. His various adventures and tribulations are told in a picaresque and frivolous manner in the first ten books of the novel which are more or less a Latin version of a Hellenistic Greek original. With the eleventh book, the tone changes completely. Lucius gets in touch with the priests of Isis and approaches his redemption in the form of a retransformation into his former human shape and, what is more, in the form of an initiation into the mysteries of Isis. Before this happens, however, he has to confront and repent his sin which for the time being precludes his initiation. His sin is curiosity. His great knowledge (*doctrina*) is of no avail to him, because it is acquired by the wrong means. His transformation into an ass is the punishment for his curiosity. Whoever aspires to higher knowledge must be free of this particular vice. In this text, we meet with the narrative construction of an opposition: the antagonism between the world to which Lucius

belongs, which is characterized by curiosity and haste, *curiositas improspera*, (Apul., Met. XI 15) and the world of Isis and her priests, in which patient waiting, pious attention to the signs of the deity, discretion, silence and awe are the fundamental principles. This opposition between Lucius the ass and the priests of Isis symbolizes the encounter between two different intellectual cultures, the Greek and the Egyptian. Even the shape of an ass into which Lucius is transformed and from which he is redeemed by becoming a follower of Isis has, as will be shown later, a symbolic meaning.

Before we explore further the meaning of curiosity, we have to admit that the topic had a history of its own before it became a central theme in the context of the Greek-Egyptian encounter. In the 13<sup>th</sup> of his *charakteres*, Theophrastus, a disciple of Aristotle, draws a portrait of the *perierges*, the curious one. Such a man has good intentions but fails because of the headlong rush in pursuit of his goals. He does not take the long way of experience but seeks shortcuts that lead him into failure. Several centuries later, Plutarch devoted one of his essays to *polypragmosyne*, bustling curiosity, which he denounces as a grievous vice. Unlike Theophrastus, he does ascribe evil intentions to the curious. The curious busy-body spies on his neighbors out of envy and malice. Moreover, he is driven by a desire for the sensational and the spectacular and could not live in a place where there are no theatres and arenas. Every secret draws him with irresistible force. *Polypragmosyne*, according to Plutarch, is a disease, the very disease from which Lucius, the hero of *The Golden Ass*, suffers. Apuleius' novel tells the case history from the first infection until the final healing.<sup>1</sup> Also the story of Amor and Psyche which is embedded in the novel has curiosity as its central theme. Psyche is visited every night by Amor and enjoys his love on the condition that she renounces seeing him forever. In the long run, however, she proves unable to resist this temptation. With Apuleius, curiosity acquires religious overtones that are missing in Theophrastus. Between Theophrastus and Plutarch, curiosity undergoes a process of religious indictment. For Theophrastus, curiosity is not a vice but a kind of misadaptation to the contexts of life that is punished just by failure; for Plutarch, however, it is an offense that leads to guilt and punishment. This development culminates with Augustine. His condemnation of curiosity as *concupiscentia oculorum*, ocular desire, combines the biblical story of original sin and the Greek tradition of *periergia*, thus setting the tone for the Christian construction of guilt and knowledge which is still present in Schiller's ballad on the "veiled image at Sais" which brings it back to Egypt.<sup>2</sup>

The theme of curiosity holds the most prominent place in a group of texts which are situated at the convergence of Greek and Egyptian civilizations: the *Corpus Hermeticum*. It is hard to tell whether these treatises are Greek texts saturated with oriental wisdom, theology and mysticism, or Egyptian texts in the Greek language saturated with Neoplatonic philosophy. In any event, these texts belong to the intermediate space. They reflect mutual perception. It is perhaps

<sup>1</sup> See Merkelbach, 1995, 417–434 (Lucius' curiosity and his transformation), 266–303 (his redemption and initiation).

<sup>2</sup> See Assmann, 1999.



not so important to decide whether we are dealing with the Egyptian image of the Greeks or the Greek apprehension of that image, but to realize that the theme of curiosity or *periergia* has its proper place in this confrontation. The central text for this particular conception of the Greek, or of humankind in general, is the treatise *Kore Kosmou*.<sup>3</sup> It presents an image of the inquisitive spirit who is unable to leave a secret undiscovered and a secluded space untrodden. It is tempting to see in these descriptions a reflection of the Egyptian experience of having served for centuries as the object of Greek Egyptology and of having been exposed to the Greek thirst for knowledge.

In fragment 23 from Stobaeus, Isis tells her son Horus the story of creation. At the beginning reigned ἡσυχία τῶν ὄντων, total inertia. (9). To this the creator put an end by saying: There shall be Nature (physis) (φύσιν εἶναι – *fiat natura*). A beautiful female being is born, receives the name “Physis” and the commission to be fertile. Physis in her turn produces Heuresis “invention”. Sky, air and ether begin to fill with “all things” (10–13). The creator in his turn mixes *pneuma* and fire to form „Psychosis“ who produces myriads of souls (14–17).<sup>4</sup> The souls are allotted fixed stations and tasks in the *kosmos* which they must by no means abandon. Out of a blend of the remaining elements, water and earth, the creator forms, among other things, the zodiacal signs. The rest of this substance he leaves to the souls who are allowed to try their creativity on it (18–21). From the slowly cooling material they create birds, quadrupeds, fish and reptiles. However, their creativity makes them boisterous. They “arm themselves with bold curiosity” (περίεργον ὀπλίζοντο τόλμαν), transgress the prohibition, abandon their stations and fall into restless motion (22–24). For a punishment, they are put into human bodies (ἐνσωματισθῆναι). Before that can happen, however, the world which the embodied souls are to inhabit has to be created. The gods are called to promise their gifts to this new world of men. (27) The sun will shine even brighter; the moon will contribute fear, silence, sleep and memory; Kronos will give justice and necessity; Zeus will give fortune, hope, and peace; Ares contributes struggle, wrath, and strife; Aphrodite gives desire, bliss, and laughter; and Hermes gives prudence, wisdom, persuasiveness, and truth, and will work with invention. Now the souls are ready to be embodied, a process that brings about much lamentation because it means parting with divine presence. (34–37). The “monarch” appoints Eros and Ananke to rule over the souls. They thus get the chance to win back, by a perfect life, their heavenly abode after death, but if they commit worse sins, they will then take on animal shape forever. (38–42).

Momos, the god of reproach and criticism comments on these events saying: “This is a bold undertaking, to create man, this being with the curious eyes and the loquacious tongue, who will listen to what does not concern him, with the snooping nose, who will use his sense of touch excessively. These people will uproot the plants in order to examine their juices. They will investigate the nature of the minerals and dissect the animals and even their own kind in order to find

<sup>3</sup> Festugière, 1954, XXIII, 1–50.

<sup>4</sup> Even in the oldest cosmogony (Coffin Texts 75–82) the “Million Kas” emerge before heaven and earth, see Assmann, 1984, 677–690.

out how they are formed. They will stretch their unscrupulous hands as far as the ocean and cut the forests to let themselves be carried from shore to shore. They will even investigate what is hidden in the inaccessible holy of holies in the sanctuaries. They will do their research in the heights as well, because they want to find out about the regularities of the heavenly motions. But this is still the beginning. Nothing will be left uninvestigated up to the extreme borders of the universe, and even from there they will want to penetrate into total darkness. Shall there be no impediment to these people, shall they be able to pursue their life in all arrogance, without sorrow and fear? Will they then stop at the gate of heaven, will they not extend their enquiring and unscrupulous minds as far as the stars? Momos pleads for installing passion, desire, fear, and delusory hopes in their souls in order to frustrate and restrain them. Their shameless actions must have consequences. Hermes takes remedial action by installing Adrasteia who sees all as a supervisor of the universe and by constructing a "secret mechanism" (κρυπτον οργανον), "to whose coercive necessity everything on earth will be enslaved" (48). This is the principle of causality which will link effects to causes and by this means keep the unbridled curiosity of humans under control.

In this myth, humans are characterized by *periergia* = curiosity, rashness, inquisitiveness, indiscretion, thirst for knowledge. The text reads like an anticipation of modern science – botany, anatomy, astronomy, etc. They will stop at nothing, they will unveil even the most sacred mystery. To be sure, the text does not speak of Greeks but of humans. However, the scientific mind which it denounces is a typically Greek achievement. Maybe this is a piece of Greek self-criticism, but it seems equally plausible to see in this reviling of scientific curiosity the expression of an Egyptian reaction to the Greeks and their scientific mind.

*Asclepius*, another treatise of the *Corpus Hermeticum*,<sup>5</sup> prophesies the advent of a new race of humans who will, "seduced by the sophistry of the Sophists", reject the "true, pure and sacred philosophy" of the Egyptians, which is free of any "importunate curiosity of the mind" (*animi importuna curiositas*). In these texts, we are very close to Apuleius' and Augustine's assessment of curiosity as a malady of the mind.

It is not surprising that the Egyptians should react in this fashion to the scientific mind of the Greeks or that they should resent its activities as importunate curiosity. No civilization in the ancient world served the Greeks to such a degree as an object of investigation. The "Egyptology" of the Greeks<sup>6</sup> is not matched by any other comparable field of knowledge. In their fascination with Egypt, the Greeks have without any doubt attributed many things to Egypt that in reality belong to Babylonia. For them, Egypt was the epitome of everything primordial and original in terms of culture. I do not postulate that everything they ascribe to the Egyptians belongs there; rather that it is Egypt more than any other country that was the object of their investigation. No less than 6 monographs on Egypt are preserved:

<sup>5</sup> Nock, 1960, 259–401.

<sup>6</sup> Hartog, 1986, 953–967.



- The second book of Herodotus, *Euterpe*
- The first book of Diodorus Siculus, *Bibl. Hist.* I
- The seventeenth book of Strabon, *Geographica*
- Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*
- Iamblichos, *De Mysteriis Aegyptiorum*
- Horapollon Nilotes, *Hieroglyphika*

These preserved books are doubtless only the tip of an iceberg. Of others, fragments survive as, e.g., those of Hecataeus of Miletos and, above all, those of Hecataeus of Abdera. Most important is the fact that even members of the Egyptian priestly elite such as Manetho, Apion, and Chaeremon participated in this discourse. Although writing in Greek, they had full access to the hieroglyphic, hieratic and demotic sources and were thereby able to provide first hand knowledge. Horapollon is, of course, also an Egyptian, writing in Greek. The literature on Egypt in Greek forms not only a literary tradition, but a whole field of knowledge, a kind of Egyptology.

Two phases may be distinguished within the history of these studies. During the first phase to which Herodotus, Diodorus and Strabo belong, Egypt is dealt with in a comprehensive way, including constitutional and political history, religion and culture, manners and customs, economy and geography. The studies belonging to the second phase such as those of Chaeremon, Plutarch, Iamblichus and Horapollon are of a more limited scope and focus on religion, philosophy and grammarology. The turn from the first to the second phase coincides with the loss of political sovereignty when Egypt was reduced to the status of a Roman province. From then on, Egyptian history and politics lost all importance, whereas Egyptian religion and philosophy gained enormously in interest.<sup>7</sup>

The relation between Greeks and Egyptians is marked by a striking asymmetry. Whereas the Greeks showed an eager interest in the culture and the land of Egypt without, however, making the effort to study the language, the Egyptians learned Greek without getting interested in Greek culture and geography. Greek Egyptology was not matched by any Greek studies on the part of the Egyptians. Only the distaste seems to have been mutual. The Greeks were fascinated by Egyptian culture but disliked the people. *Aigyptiazein*, to behave in the Egyptian way, is an pejorative term, connoting a mixture of deceitfulness and servility.<sup>8</sup> The Egyptians, on the other hand, had many reasons to dislike the Greeks, especially during the later years of Ptolemaic rule when it came to be regarded as oppressive, occasioning many riots and rebellions. But early travellers had already complained of the reticence of their Egyptian interlocutors who reacted with obvious suspicion and discomfiture to the Greek thirst for knowledge and to their own role as the object of ethnographical research. They did not even care to designate the Greeks with a precise term. In the hieroglyphic texts they are called *h3.w-nb.w*, "those who squat in the swamp holes", a half-mythical name for the inhabitants of the extreme north, such as "ultima Thule" or "Hyperboreans."

<sup>7</sup> See Assmann, 2001, 401–469.

<sup>8</sup> Smelik and Hemelrijk, 1984, 1869–1879.

Eventually, the Greeks even came to play, in the imagination of the Egyptians, the unrewarding role of the religious foe. This concept seems to have emerged in the aftermath of the Hyksos' occupation, during the 16<sup>th</sup> through 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, and to have developed into a full-grown mythology in reaction to the Assyrian invasions and the Persian occupation when the god Seth, the murderer of Osiris, received the epithet "the Mede". In the course of the Greek domination of Egypt, it was applied to the Greeks who had at first presented themselves as liberators from Persian oppression. The Egyptians imagined their country to be the victim of a murderous attack which had to be overcome year after year by means of ritual performance. The great victory festival of Horus of Edfu enacts the myth as an incursion from the North by Seth that is repulsed from the South by Horus. The topic of invasion from the North and salvation from the South also plays a central role in other Late Period mythologies. The central ritual performed in all the major temples of Egypt represents the restoration of the body of Osiris which had been torn apart by Seth and dispersed over all the nomes of Egypt. In this sacred representation, the political theology of an occupied and oppressed country finds its most poignant expression.<sup>9</sup>

The festal period begins with the discovery and the embalming of the 42 scattered pieces of the murdered Osiris; they are reassembled from the 42 nomes of the country, ritually reunited, and revived. The rituals end with the burial of Osiris and accession to the throne by Horus, his son and avenger.<sup>10</sup> The festival has its roots in the cult of the dead, the embalming ritual. Not until the Late Period did it acquire a political meaning.

The spells recited during the ritual interpret the body-parts as representations of the nomes or nome capitals, so that the ritual restoration of Osiris' physical and spiritual integrity also symbolizes the reunification of the entire land:

I bring you the capitals of the nomes: they are your limbs, they are your *ka*, which is with you.

I bring you the main gods of Lower Egypt joined together.

All are the members of your body, they are united.<sup>11</sup>

In the Greco-Roman period the integrity of Egyptian civilization as a coherent system of meaning was increasingly threatened by disintegration and cultural amnesia. At that point the ancient myth about the death of Osiris and the triumph of Horus became a predominantly political myth. The god Seth came to personify not only the natural, but also the political powers of chaos, first the Assyrians and Persians, then the Greeks and Romans. Seth's murderous assault took on a new political meaning. It stood for the constant danger by which Egypt felt threatened. And the source of that danger was invariably located in the North. The Khoiak rituals sought to avert the demise of Egyptian culture, not only by uniting the 42 nomes in analogy to the reconstitution of Osiris' torn limbs, but also by compiling lists and liturgies to preserve the immense fund of cultural knowledge that

<sup>9</sup> See Assmann, 2002, 409–420.

<sup>10</sup> See Beinlich, 1984.

<sup>11</sup> Beinlich, 1984, 208f.



had accumulated in and around those 42 nomes. The semantics of disintegration and reintegration determined, in the Late Period, virtually all of the major feasts and rituals.

The Greeks and Romans were deeply impressed by these images and rituals. Lukian and several church fathers mention the cult of the bodily members. Diodorus deals in great detail with the traditions about the dismemberment of Osiris and the quest of Isis. Plutarch interprets the myth philosophically, Martianus Capella grammatically. The political meaning of these images, however, seems to have escaped the Greeks. This shows that the Egyptians did not tell the Greeks everything. How could they have explained to them, after all, that Greeks belonged, in their eyes, to the sphere of Typhon?

Seth-Typhon personifies, in the late Egyptian ritual texts, the very quality that *Kore Kosmou* and other Hermetic texts understand by *periergia* or curiosity. Moreover, the animal of Seth is the ass, the animal into which Lucius was transformed in punishment of his vicious *curiositas*. Seth is the incarnation of irreverence, brutality and reckless inquisitiveness, of "importunate curiosity". He breaks every taboo, desecrates everything sacred, lays bare every secret, betrays every mystery.

The rites must fend him off<sup>12</sup>

that the upstream and downstream voyaging of the sun be not known,  
 so rich in ways when crossing the heavens,  
 that the ark be not opened in Heliopolis  
 and its contents revealed,  
 that the garment be not loosened in Memphis,  
 and the arm of "such-and-such" [a name too holy to be uttered, possibly Osiris] be espied,  
 that the lamp go not out in the night of evil,  
 at that time that hopefully will never occur,  
 that the four sayings be not known in Heliopolis  
 and the heavens fall down when they hear them,  
 that the seal of Anubis be not removed  
 and the clay of Ptah broken,  
 that the bushes that serve as a hiding-place be not cut away,  
 to drive out him who has concealed himself in it, etc.

A myth transmitted by Ovid, Diodorus and Nicandros also deals with this criminal curiosity of Seth. It tells of the flight of the gods who, out of fear of Seth-Typhon's curiosity, disguised themselves in the shape of animals.<sup>13</sup> This tale is certainly not Egyptian, for the Egyptians did not require etiological myths to explain the animal shape of some of their gods, but it shows how curiosity became a central part of Seth's character inside and outside Egyptian tradition.<sup>14</sup> For the Egyptians, the myths and rites surrounding the god Seth were always transparent in view of the actual political situation. Through these rites they expressed their anxieties regarding the destructive powers by which they felt threat-

<sup>12</sup> Pap.Louvre 3129,J, 38–57; Pap.BM 10252, 11,3–34 Schott, 1939, 120–129.

<sup>13</sup> Störk, 1996, 105–108.

<sup>14</sup> Diod. I.86, in his rendering of the story, replaces "Seth" with "humans", claiming to have heard it this way in Egypt.

ened, powers which, since the end of the 3rd c. BC, predominantly represented Greeks.

In the temple inscriptions, the Greeks are put on a par with Bedouins and other objectionable intruders. An inscription in Dendara may serve as an example for many similar ones:

The hidden place of the mighty in the Sistrum House,  
in the event that the destroyers invade Egypt.  
The Asiatics enter not there,  
the Bedouins harm it not,  
the profane go not around within it.  
Whoever recites a spell [?] against it,  
may the milk of Sekhmet be in his body.

The place whose secret is concealed,  
in the event that the Asiatics penetrate into the fortress.  
The Phoenicians approach it not,  
the Aegeans enter it not,  
the sand-treaders go not around within it.  
Let no magician perform his rites there.  
Its gates open not to the unauthorized.<sup>15</sup> (Waitkus 1997, 87)

In a book of rituals from the Late Period, the “House of Life,” with its four-fold function of library, scriptorium, school for the priests, and sanctuary, is referred to thus:

It shall be very, very well concealed.  
No one shall know it, no one see it  
except the disk of the sun, that looks into its secret.  
Those officiating ... shall enter in silence, their bodies covered,  
so as to be protected against sudden death.  
The Asiatic must not enter, he must see nothing.<sup>16</sup>

Similar secrecy commandments abound in the *Corpus Hermeticum*. One of these forbids translation into Greek (although the text handed down to us is itself in Greek):

Leave this text untranslated, so that these secrets remain hidden from the Greeks and their irreverent, feeble, and orotund speech does not undermine the dignity and vigor of our language and the energy of the names. For the discourse of the Greeks, though outwardly impressive, is empty, and their philosophy is nothing but verbose noise. We by contrast, we employ not words but sounds full of energy.<sup>17</sup>

This passage confronts not Greeks and Egyptians, but the Greek and Egyptian language, though in a way that treats language as expressive of national character. To be sure, the Egyptians’ attitude to foreigners had nothing to do with racism or nationalism; rather, it reflected their concern that foreigners might act in an irreverent or even blasphemous way toward the gods, who, offended, might then turn away from Egypt. The same notion of Egyptian as a sacred language which

<sup>15</sup> Waitkus, 1997, 87.

<sup>16</sup> Pap. Salt 825, VII.5: Derchain, 1965.

<sup>17</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* XVI: Nock 1960, 230; Fowden, 1986, 37.



must not be translated into Greek occurs also in Iamblichos' treatise *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians*,<sup>18</sup> in which Iamblichos combines language criticism with collective psychology. The Greeks, he writes, are addicted to innovation and even in their communication with the gods are constantly composing new invocations, whereas the Egyptians and the Assyrians regarded their ancient and venerable prayer texts as "sacred asylums" and brooked no change to them. The gods themselves preferred the ancient languages because they are themselves eternal and changeless. For this reason, Iamblichos explains, the ancient texts must be preserved always the same without changing, subtracting, or adding anything that comes from elsewhere.<sup>19</sup> This is, of course, a commentary on a passage in Plato's *Laws*, written six hundred years earlier, where Plato also contrasts Greek restlessness and innovativeness with Egyptian conservatism. Whereas the Greek artists are constantly inventing new concepts of beauty, the Egyptians had right from the start decreed what was to be considered beautiful and had fixed their canon of beauty on the walls of the temple. Any deviation from this canon was strictly prohibited.<sup>20</sup> In the encounter with Egyptian culture, the Greeks became aware of a difference which they described as innovativeness vs. conservatism and curiosity vs. self control and submission.

In another context, the difference between Greek and Egyptian mentality is explained in terms of thirst for knowledge vs. lack of interest and curiosity. This is the discourse on the sources of the Nile and the nature of the inundation. In that context, the Greeks express their perplexity about the naiveté of the Egyptians who content themselves with childish theories instead of inquiring about the truth. We find here the same opposition of curiosity and non-curiosity, but here, curiosity is valued positively. The Greeks are characterized as *philomathes*, the Egyptians as *philochrematos*. The Greeks, that is, are interested in truth, the Egyptians in profit. In this paper, I leave this otherwise highly interesting discourse aside, because it obviously reflects an exclusively Greek point of view. The non-curiosity of the Egyptians is interpreted here not in terms of wisdom and piety, but of backwardness and stupidity, whereas the curiosity of the Greeks has a positive connotation. But it is important to realize that the same difference between Greek and Egyptian may be interpreted both in self-critical and in self-congratulatory ways.<sup>21</sup>

Among the texts dealing with this difference, however, are some which may not be classified as self-critical, but which can only be interpreted as expressions of Egyptian hellenophobia. Ironically, even these texts which give vent to the Egyptian hatred of the Greeks are transmitted only in the Greek language. One of them is a political prophecy, the *Oracle of a Potter*.<sup>22</sup> Amenophis III visits Hermopolis, where he encounters a potter whose wheel has been shattered and whose wares have been confiscated. The potter interprets his misfortune as a sign of

<sup>18</sup> Des Places, 1989.

<sup>19</sup> VII.5.

<sup>20</sup> Platon, *Legg.* 656d–657a.

<sup>21</sup> Assmann, 2001, 446–449.

<sup>22</sup> Koenen, 2002, 139–187.

future disaster: a time will come when the “girdle-bearers” will rule over Egypt; they worship Typhon (Seth) and will destroy the Egyptian temples; law and order will disappear from the land; siblings and spouses will wage war on each other and internecine strife will dominate the land. As in the *Prophecies of Neferti*, 2,000 years earlier, all Nature is drawn into the general misery:

The Nile will be low, the earth barren,  
the sun will darken, because it does not want to see the misfortune in Egypt.  
The winds will wreak harm on the earth<sup>23</sup>

Later, however, the “girdle-bearers” will “fall from the tree of Egypt like autumn leaves” and the divine images will return. The sun-god himself will send a savior-king, who will be enthroned by Isis and reign for 55 years. The land will thrive, the Nile risings will be high, summer and winter will follow a regular rhythm, the winds will be mild, and the sun will shine, exposing all wrongdoing and turning over miscreants to justice. In this text, the *zonophoroi*, i.e. the Greeks, are explicitly associated with Typhon.

In closing, I would like to examine briefly a poem by Schiller which concerns the same confrontation of bold curiosity and religious awe that we have met with in the ancient texts, especially in the Hermetic tradition. I am thinking of Schiller’s famous ballad on the “veiled image at Sais”.<sup>24</sup>

A youth, presumably a Greek, has traveled to Sais in order to get initiated into the “secret wisdom” of the Egyptian priests. He succeeds in being admitted to the veiled image of truth whose veil, the inscription warns, no mortal will draw aside. This prohibition he fails to understand. He cannot grasp why the priests did not long ago lift the light veil that covers truth. What happens, he asks, to him who reveals the image? Well, the priest answers, he sees the truth. The punishment, therefore, consists of nothing else than the fulfillment of his passionate desire. “A strange oracle” answers the youth. “Why did you never lift the veil yourself? “Certainly not, says the priest, nor was I ever tempted to lift it. Not only the veil, but a divine law separates us from the sight of truth. This thin texture may weigh lightly on your hand, but heavily on your conscience.” The priest speaks of law and conscience which control his ocular desire. The youth, in contrast, will see the truth.

...schauen.

Schauen! Gellt ihm ein langes Echo spottend nach.

The youth eventually uncovers the statue and falls, for the rest of his life, into deep depression.

This ballad is the clearest elaboration of the confrontation of curiosity and pious wisdom, which I have interpreted as reflecting the Egyptian reaction to the Greek mentality. It seems as if Schiller’s ballad is based on a Greek story. In reality, however, it is concocted out of several sources which make the case even more interesting. The motif of the veiled image he took from Plutarch. In chapter

<sup>23</sup> Koenen, 2002, 144.

<sup>24</sup> See Assmann, 1999.



9 of *De Iside et Osiride* Plutarch deals with the importance of mystery and initiation in Egyptian religion and adduces three examples: the sphinxes at the door of the temples, showing that “their theology contains enigmatic wisdom”, the veiled image at Sais, and the name of their god, Amun, meaning “The Hidden one” (to *kekrymmenon*).

The veiled image at Sais, according to Plutarch, is a seated statue of Athena-Isis bearing the inscription “I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle (*tòn emòn péplon*).”<sup>26</sup> Proclus quotes the same inscription in a different version. He places it in the *aduton* of the temple, calls the garment of the goddess *chitōn* instead of *péplos*, replaces Plutarch’s “no mortal” by “no one” (which includes the gods) and adds a sentence which gives the motif quite a different turn:

the fruit of my womb is the sun<sup>26</sup>

In Proclus’ version, the sentence has a different meaning. It refers not to an epistemological dilemma, the absolute unattainability of truth, but to the parthenogenesis of the sun out of the womb of a maternal All-Goddess. Schiller, therefore, took the sentence from Plutarch, not from Proclus, but with an important alteration. He changed “Isis” or “Athena” to “truth”. This detail he may have found in Clement of Alexandria who writes of a sanctuary of Truth in a famous passage which Schiller knew well:

“The Egyptians indicated the really sacred *logos* which they kept in the innermost sanctuary of Truth by what they called *Adyta*, and the Hebrews (indicated it) by means of the curtain (in the temple). Therefore, as far as concealment is concerned, the secrets (*ainigmata*) of both the Hebrews and the Egyptians are very similar to each other.”<sup>27</sup>

But Plutarch’s passage about the veiled image at Sais provides only a motif, not a story. He says nothing about a youth who had tried to lift the veil. The motif of curiosity is missing. For this, Schiller seems to have had recourse to an anecdote transmitted by Pausanias about a young man named Eurypylos, who went mad after having forced open the *cista mystica*.<sup>28</sup> Yet Pausanias says nothing about curiosity, boldness or importunity. This motif could come from another story in Pausanias which is connected significantly to Isis. An uninitiated, Pausanias tells, had once entered, “out of curiosity and boldness” (ὕπὸ πολυπραγμοσύνης τε καὶ τόλμης) the *adyton* of the sanctuary of Isis at Tithorea in Phokis, which appeared

<sup>25</sup> Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, IX.9–10 (354C) = Griffiths, 1970, 130f., 283f. Hani, 1976, 244f.; Harrauer, 1994/95, 337–355, esp. 337–339.

<sup>26</sup> Proclus, *In Tim.* 30, see Festugière, 1966, 140; Griffiths, 1970, 283. Proclus quotes the image at Sais and its inscription in his commentary on Timaeus and in the context of Solon’s visit to the priests of Sais, cf. Harrauer, 1994/95, 339.

<sup>27</sup> Schiller found the quote not in Clement, but in a book by his friend, Carl Leonhard Reinhold, *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey*, Leipzig 1787, p. 83. Reinhold, in his turn, took it from John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus*, Cambridge 1685. Spencer combines two distant passages from Clem. Al. *Strom.* V.3.19.3 and VI.41.2; see Stählin, 1985, 338 and 354.

<sup>28</sup> Pausanias, IX.19.7.

to him full of *eidola*. When he told of his adventures after his return home, he fell dead.<sup>29</sup>

Curiosity, boldness, irreverence, and guilt are the key concepts of this poem and at the same time of the ancient discourse about curiosity.<sup>30</sup> Schiller's poem makes this basic confrontation of importunate curiosity (of the Greeks) on the one hand and the devout observance of the divine secret (by the Egyptians) on the other hand immortal, giving it both a timeless and – in the context of the Enlightenment – an immediate significance. Schiller, too, exemplifies his critique of modernity and its reckless quest of knowledge by contrasting Hellas and Egypt with one another. Maybe this Egypt is just a Greek construction, maybe it reflects a genuine Egyptian reaction to Greek curiosity. In any event, it is this demonization of curiosity which Augustine transmitted to the West. Schiller's poem sets the youths of his time, the representatives of modern science, against this image of Egypt and its reverent respect for the secrets of nature.

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<sup>29</sup> Pausanias, X.32.17.

<sup>30</sup> See Tasinato, 1999. Mette, 1956, 227–235; Labhardt, 1960, 206–224.



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