

ANCIENT EGYPT GODS IN ROMAN LITERATURE

BY

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Owing to geographical factors, the Greeks had earlier stronger ties with the Egyptians than those which the Romans had. For Greece lies nearer to Egypt than Italy. Economic conditions in Greece, among many other factors, forced the Greeks to look out for earning their living.

Nevertheless, Italy and its surrounding islands did not lag behind in finding their way to Egypt. For ancient Egyptian records reveal that as early as the Nineteenth Dynasty (1309-1194 B.C.) during the New Kingdom, sea-pirates, better known in history as sea-peoples, roamed the Mediterranean, tried to plunder Egypt, but they were repelled by the well-known Pharaoh Merneptah. Among these sea-peoples were mentioned the Sherdani (i.e. Sardinians) the Shicels (i.e. Sicilians) and the Turshi (the Etruscans).

From the eighth century BC onwards, large numbers of Greeks from all parts of the Greek world flocked to Italy and inhabited the southern half and parts of the islands around. These new comers replaced the indigenous Italians in establishing strong ties with the Egyptians.

In the third century before Christ and in the reign of King Ptolemy the second Philadelphos, started the third phase of relations between Egypt and Italy. These relations covered almost all aspects of life, political, military, economical and cultural. Nearly all along the Ptolemaic era relations between the two countries were generally cordial and friendly.

Thus we find a Senior Roman while visiting Egypt receiving a warm welcome and great hospitality. In a papyrus official letter (P. Tebt. 33 "Select Pap. 416" dated 112 BC, we read the following:

"To Asclepiades Lucius Memmius, a Roman Senator, who occupies a position of great dignity and honour, is sailing up from Alexandria to the Arsinoite nome to see the sights. Let him be received with special magnificence, and take care that at proper spots the guest chambers be prepared and the landing-places to them be completed, and that the gifts mentioned below be presented to him at the landing-places, and that the furniture of the guest-chamber, the titbits for Petesouchos and the crocodiles, the conveniences for viewing the Labyrinthos, and the offerings and sacrifices be provided."

Only at the end of the Ptolemaic era in Egypt did these cordial relations begin to deteriorate owing to the strong involvement of the Romans in the internal affairs of Egypt, particularly during the Civil strife among the members of the Ptolemaic Dynast. In this present paper I shall leave aside all writings in Greek whether before or after

the Roman conquest of Egypt by Octavianus in 30 BC and I shall only concern myself with information procured from Latin literature.

Before the first Century BC, very little was written about Egypt by Latin authors. But the strong involvement of the Romans in the internal affairs of Egypt began in the second half of the same century. Civil strife in Italy reflected itself on the Egyptian scene. Thus Lucretius¹, the unidentified author of the "de Bello Alexandrino"², Cicero³, Propertius⁴, Vergilius⁵, Horatius⁶ and Ovidius⁷ all mentioned Egypt in some way or another. Leaving aside Lucretius who was only concerned with the River Nile and phenomena connected with it and also the writer of the "de Bello Alexandrino", the remaining authors were almost hostile towards Egypt and its people. This hostile attitude in my view, stemmed from various reasons. First there was a great deal of misunderstanding on the part of Latin authors of Egypt and the nature of its people.

Secondly, literature, which corresponds now to the mass media was exploited extensively by the Roman leaders, especially by Augustus, against Egypt. This marred to a great extent the real situation in Egypt. This propaganda gained momentum by the feeling that queen

Cleopatra tried more than once to become the queen of the whole Roman empire. (8) Cleopatra's relations with Julius Caesar and after him with Marcus Antonius strengthened that feeling.

Hostile propaganda coloured Latin Literature of the late republic and the Augustan era because of misunderstanding and for political reasons. This hostility had to a certain extent subsided in the post-Augustan writers with the exception of few writers who continued that trend. These included Tacitus (Hist. I. II), who described Egypt as divided and unsettled by strange cults and irresponsible excesses, indifferent to law and ignorant of civil government; and Juvenalis, who, for personal reasons and reflecting the attitudes of certain Roman narrow-minded chauvinists, drew a very black picture of Upper Egypt, where he had been sent to spend his military service. (Juvenalis, Sat. XV 1-13).

Dio Cassius, too joined his predecessors in heaping insults against the Alexandrians and the Egyptians, recalling the words of Octavianus who was addressing his soldiers in Alexandria.

Dio described (Dio Cassius, Roman History BK L. 24) them as worshippers of reptiles and beasts as gods; embalming their bodies to give them the semblance of immortality, as most reckless in effrontery but most feeble in courage, and worst they were slaves to a woman (i.e. Cleopatra) and to a man (i.e. M. Antonius).

But after Octavianus had conquered Egypt, he changed his attitude towards the Egyptians and treated them well (Dio Cassius "Roman History BK LI. 16, 17")

Relations between the Romans and the Egyptians generally speaking, seemed to have continued to be good and cordial under successive Roman emperors, despite a few revolts taking place here and there especially in Alexandria and in Upper Egypt.

Egyptian Religion in the Eyes of the Romans before the first century before Christ:

We have very little evidence in Latin literature referring to Egyptian religion. It seemed that the Romans were completely in darkness about Egyptians and their way of life. But a Greek papyrus letter dated 112 B.C. throws light on these relations. This letter was sent by a certain official to another in Tebtynis in the Fayoum province. He instructed him to welcome a Roman dignitary, who intended to visit the nome to see the sights among which were the gods Petesouchos and the crocodiles which were consecrated there, and also to provide offerings and sacrifices, presumably for the Roman guest to offer to these gods⁹.

As far as that incident, we have to wait until the first century before Christ when civil war in Rome was at its peak.

In the first century B.C. during the civil war in Rome, Egyptian and its affairs began to come to light in Latin literature. We have already mentioned some of these writings such as the "De Rebus

Natura" of Lucretius, the "De Bello Alexandrino" and the statements of Cicero. These had nothing to say about Egyptian religion and gods. The Augustan poets such as Propertius, Vergilius and others all took part in waging hostile propaganda against the Egyptian gods.

Thus Propertius deriding Cleopatra and all that belongs to her country Egypt, said (111.11.41-43) that she dared to put her barking Anubis against the Roman Jove and to force the Tiber to bear the threats of the Nile and to drive the Roman trumpet with the rattling sistrum.

Vergilius, though quite decent towards Cleopatra and Egypt, was hostile and sarcastic as regards Egyptian religion. In this respect, he described (Aen. VIII. 696-699) the queen as calling up in the midst of her hosts with national sistrum. And that monstrous gods of every form and barking Anubis were wielding weapons against Neptunus and Venus and against Minerva.

Pliny the Elder, in his colossal work, "Naturalis Historia", (N.H. VIII. xxi.184) gave an excellent and a detailed account of the god Apis, whom the Egyptians worshipped in a form of an ox, describing his characteristics. He did not tell us, however, of the human form of the god in which it was worshipped in Alexandria and abroad by the Greeks and others. The origin of Serapis was described by Tacitus (Historiae, IV. 83, 84). Tacitus besides, stated that Egypt,

when Augustus invaded it, was divided and unsettled by strange cult and irresponsible excesses.

The satirist poet, Juvenalis, out of personal hatred to and owing to a hard personal experience in Egypt and perhaps reflecting the feeling of a certain section of the Roman society of his time¹⁰, used all sorts of insults and derision against the Egyptians and their beliefs (Sat. VI 527-541; and Sat. XV. 1-13)

Suetonius, (Titus V.3) in reference to Titus's tolerance to Egyptian religion, related that the emperor attended the consecration of the Apis bull at Memphis on his way to Alexandria. The writer, however remarked that this deed had been a gross slander on his conduct.

Finally, Dio Cassius (C.A.D. 150-235) reiterating the words of the Greek historian, Herodotus, (II.37.) stated that (Roman History BK. XLII. 34) the Egyptians were the most religious people on earth and here also the writer repeated the words of the Roman Satirist, Juvenalis (Sat. XV.27-83) who claimed that the Egyptians waged wars against one another on account of their beliefs, since they were not all agreed in their worship, but were diametrically opposed to each other in some matters.

Dio Cassius also informed us (BK. LI. 16,17) that Augustus while respecting the Egyptian god Serapis and the deified Alexander the Great showed his disregard to the remains of the Ptolemies, describing them as mere corpses and he also refused to see Apis saying

that he was accustomed to worship gods, not cattle. In a third statement Dio Cassius reported the view of Augustus who (BK.L.24) derided the Alexandrians and the Egyptians as worshipping reptiles and beast as gods and embalming their own bodies to give them the semblance of immortality.

Roman Attitude towards Egyptian religion inside Egypt:-

Part of what had already been mentioned about the Roman view of Egyptian gods and rituals connected with them can be applied to the attitude of the Romans towards these gods both inside and outside Egypt.

As already mentioned no Latin literature dealt with religion and religious life of the Egyptians before the first century BC but we have a great deal of that in Greek literature and papyri. In the Tebtynis papyrus already quoted, the Roman senator, who visited the Fayoum, clearly appeared tolerant when he did not hesitate to see Petesouchos, the incarnated crocodile god of the Fayoum nome and to make offerings and sacrifices to it.

When Augustus conquered Egypt and made it a province of the Roman, Empire he curtailed the power of the Egyptian priests through annexing the temple lands (20-19 BC) to the imperial domain and only

a part of these former lands, was left to the priests to cultivate in lieu of receiving a stipend.¹¹

In doing so, Augustus aimed at limiting the power of the priesthood, in Egypt. Dio Cassius referred (Roman History, BK. XLI, 11.34) to the discontent felt by the Egyptians at the levies of money and their indignation because not even their temples had been left untouched. But Augustus on the other hand though despising the Egyptians' adoration of animals,¹² and their deification of the Ptolemies as mentioned before, did not interfere with their religious practices. Besides, he showed respect to their god Serapis, presumably in his human form, in which it appeared in Alexandria and abroad. He also allowed temples to be built everywhere in Egypt.¹³

Germanicus Caesar, nephew of Tiberius and his adopted son, showed respect to Egyptian gods, when he visited the Shrine of the Apis bull at Memphis and tried to consult the god.¹⁴

Titus was also tolerant towards the Egyptian gods. Suetonius (Titus, V.3) reported that Titus had worn a diadem while attending the consecration of the Apis bull at Memphis on his way to Alexandria. Vespasian too did almost the same thing when he entered the temple of Serapis in Alexandria to consult the auspices and discover how long he would last as Emperor.¹⁵

The Romans and Egyptian Gods in Italy:

As we know well the Romans from the beginning of their history were opposed to foreign influences, and foreign religions came in the forefront. But through the Greeks, who occupied the Southern half of Italy and some of the adjacent islands, infiltration of these influences proved irresistible. For Isis-cult was introduced into Greece by Greek merchants and seamen from the fourth century BC together with her consort Serapis.¹⁶

Then it reached Rome during the second century BC if not before.¹⁷ And this was accomplished by Greeks either coming from Egypt or from regions adjacent to Italy such as Greece, the Aegean islands, Sicily and even Campania itself.¹⁸

Most of the followers of Isis in Rome, however, were normally foreigners, slaves, freedmen and poor Romans. Even though appeared among them oftentimes some bodies of both old and new aristocratic classes¹⁹. Isis also became popular with the women of the demimonde who were celebrated by the Elegiac poets²⁰. In a later date 168 BC owing to the growing numbers of the followers of these alien gods one of the consuls ordered the temples of Isis and Serapis to be demolished. But the Roman government allowed Isis's adherents to perform their rituals outside the walls of Rome (extra Romerium)²¹. ; Under Sulla, well-known for his tolerance and fondness of

superstitions, Isis grew popular and her followers became stronger. But the cult of Isis later during the civil disturbances suffered persecution several times until Julius Caesar became the sole leader of Rome in 47, when through the influence of Queen Cleopatra, the worship of Isis flourished especially if we know that Caesar was the leader of the democratic or popular party, the vast majority of whose members were of lower classes, which were most inclined to worship foreign gods. Under the "triumvirate" Isis gained more ground until its cult was officially recognized²². During the conflict between Octavianus and Antonius, a decree was issued in 28 BC prohibiting Egyptian cults inside Rome. But in Augustus's absence in the east the followers of Isis infiltrated in Rome during disturbance there in 21 BC. Once more a decree was issued pushing her outside Rome. Tiberius followed the same policy of Augustus. But later almost all emperors were fond of Egyptian religion, and some of them even built temples for Isis and for other Egyptian gods. Besides, some distinguished Romans dressed themselves in the attire of Isis's priests²³ and others were embalmed after death in the Egyptian manner. Coins were also minted to glorify the invincible Isis²⁴.

NOTES:

- 1- Ovidius, *Metam.* xv. 826-828
 - 2- *De Bello Alexandrino*, 3 (incerti auctoris)
 - 3- Cicero, *Ad Att.* xv. 15
 - 4- Propertius, III II, 27-54
 - 5- Vergilius, *Aen.* VIII 686-688.
 - 6- Horatius, *od.* I. 37
 - 7- Lucretius, *de Rerum Natura*;
 - 8- PROPERTIUS III 30-31
 See also *A History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*,
 Edwyn.R. Bevan, Chicago, 1968, p. 368
 - 9- cf. also, Strabo, *Geogr.* XVII.i.38, who also witnessed such a
 performance by visitors.
 - 10- cf. A.A.Aly, *Egypt and the Roman Empire, in the light of Papyri*
 (in Arabic, Cairo, 1960, PP.160-167)
 - 11- cf. J.G.Milne, *A History of Egypt under Roman Rule*, pp.11.12.33
 - 12- Dio Cassius, *Roman History*, Bk LI.16,17.
 - 13- Cf. Milne, *loc. cit.*
 - 14- Plinius, *N.H.* VIII. IXXI, 185
 - 15- Suetonius, *Vesp.* 7)
 - 16- cf. *Greek and Egyptian Mythologies*, compiled by Yves Bonnefy
 the Univ. of Chicago press. Chicago and London, 1992, P. 246.
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- 17- Ibid, and M.S. Salem "The cult of Isis in Italy " (unpubl. PH.D. diss. Liverpool) , 1937 p.42.
- 18- cf. A.A.Aly "Egypt and the Roman Empire", in the light of Papy (In Arabic Cairo. 1968) P. 148 also M.P. Nilsson, "Geschichte d Griechischen Religion", Bd, 11. München (1950) P.P.115-125.
- 19 - A.A.Aly loc. cit.
- 20- Greek and Egyptian Mythologies (loc.cit)
- 21- Valerius Maximus. 1,3,4 cf. Salem, op.cit. P.P. 42.56F.
- 22- Dio Cassius, XLVII, 15,6.
- 23- Suetonius, otto XII 1 "sacra etiam Isidis saepe in lintea religiosaque veste propalam celebrass " cf A.A.Aly, op cit PP'151, 152
- 24- cf. A.A.Aly op cit 151