

Notes :

1. I had presented part of the contents of this paper during a meeting with colleagues and students at Al-Azhar University in November 1999.
2. Lefkowitz 2007.
3. Pugliese Carratelli 2008.
4. Coarelli 2008.
5. Fraser 1972.
6. Lo Sardo 2008 (many contributions). A very interesting perspective is offered by Said 1978.
7. O. Fayez Riad, *Quelques éléments égyptiens dans la poésie alexandrine*, in The Proceeding of the International Symposion, *The Poetics of Comparative Literature*, 12-13 apr. 2006 (ed, Ahmed Etman), Cairo 2007, pp. 117-145. The article is in Arabic and I owe a French abstract to the kindness of the Author.
8. She very aptly orders the material into four categories: nature, folklore (mainly magic), art, religion and its relationship to politics.
9. I offer only an extremely selectif choice, being the subject so widely treated.

BIBLIOGRAPHY⁽⁹⁾

- F. Coarelli, *Roma e Alessandria*, in Lo Sardo, pp. 37-47
- P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford 1972
- F. Hartog, *Lo specchio di Erodoto*
- M. Lefkowitz, *Visits to Egypt in thr Biographical Tradition*, in *Die griechische Biographie in hellenistischer Zeit. Akten des internationalen Kongress vom 26.-29. Juli 2006 in Würzburg*. Hsg. von Michael Erler u. Stefan Schorn, Berlin-New York 2007, 101-113
- E. Lo Sardo (a cura di), *La Lupa e la Sfinge. Roma e l'Egitto dalla storia al mito*, Milano (Electa) 2008
- G. Pugliese Carratelli, *La "imitatio Alexandri" nel mondo romano*, in Lo Sardo, pp. 29-35
- E. Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978

≡ What Ancient Egypt meant and means to Mankind

Greek at school and university met with very strong opposition: it was even difficult at that time to find teachers, since the whole education system had more or less the same imprint as an exclusively Latin kind of Humanism, promoted, among others, by the Jesuits. Casati was clever enough to win the battle: and Turin, at the time the capital of Italy (since Rome remained under the Pope until 1870), became leader in the teaching of Greek.

An important change in the organization of didactics came in 1923 with the law signed by another Minister of Education, Giovanni Gentile, the philosopher client of an idealist and classicist Germany: he was an assertive supporter of the importance of classical antiquity both in the school and in the university. He was inspired by the creation of Humboldt University at Berlin: there, at the beginning of the 19th century, with what was to all effects a great innovation, scientific research was to pass from the academies to the seminars held in university structures. I feel myself to be the son of this kind of institution, since I have been holding a seminar myself for forty years.

Gentile had given much importance to the Greek and Roman worlds. Nowadays Classics are in great decline, and not only in Italy. We can only hope that our rulers will be able to change this universal trend, since it would be foolish to ignore or even cancel the great legacy of Greece and Rome.

the royal ceremonial, the marriage between brother and sister (incest: quite un-Greek!), the divine nature of the Pharaohs, etc. But this depended on a political plan that had to respect local conservatism, so as not to give trouble to the vast Egyptian world. One must not forget that Egypt was a Hellenized country; that the Greeks were extremely interested in that country because it was the one they admired most; and finally, that they not only had never ruled on a whole foreign country before, but also had never had to deal with such an enormous geographical surface and with so many people. Apparently, however, Egypt interested them in the same measure both before and after Alexander; and only as far as a few elitist cultural aspects were concerned. I am especially struck by the example of Theocritus: when he wanted to represent the countryside (in his bucolic idylls), he chose his own agricultural culture; and when he wanted to describe a religious festival, he chose a Greek one in Alexandria (idyll XV).

In many other cases the sources quote the Egyptian world, as Ophelia Fayezi Riad shows⁽⁸⁾: we should also add authors like Strabo and Philo. But in my opinion the importance, the function of that material cannot be compared with what Egypt traditionally meant to the Greeks. When they got so close as to have a common borderline, the two worlds were separated just by that borderline: the inner core of Egyptian culture was foreign to them. I would like to see this topic to be treated in full detail.

5. The Ancient World in Italy

My congratulations for the present meeting, with which you are celebrating one hundred years of teaching Greek at Cairo University. Egypt and Italy both have a great historical tradition behind them, that has been many times intertwined. Both our people have a good reason for teaching the Greek language and Greek literature.

Allow me to sketch a short history of teaching Greek both at school and at university in my country. Italy became a modern unitarian state as late as 1859: before that date it was divided into many smaller states. So the first national law was passed only in 1859, and was due to the intelligence of the Marchese Casati, then Minister for Education. The introduction of teaching

■ What Ancient Egypt meant and means to Mankind

day is felt by everybody to be ancient Egyptian. But the music of ancient Egypt is totally unknown: he simply invented chords, intervals, harmonies, rhythms that gave, and still give, the impression of something ancient and exotic. Think only of the Nile scene in the third act and of the sinuous melodic phrases rendered with the various wind instruments. He did not achieve what every historian and philologist would like to achieve, that is to restore an old document, but succeeded instead in producing a brilliant forgery. *Aida* was one of the most impressive achievements of his long and successful career, and this was possible because he had been brought into contact with the magic of Egypt.

To sum up: Herodotus, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Augustus, Antonius, many Roman emperors, Napoleon, Giuseppe Verdi. With these illustrious predecessors, it will not seem strange if Egypt drives me mad as well. I used to consider myself well-balanced and self-ironic enough, but you are wholly entitled to think that, in adding my name to that illustrious list I have become more seriously deranged than any other; which would mean that the dangerous curse of the pharaohs is still lingering in this country.

4. *Egypt in Greek literature*

It would be useless to list here all the references to Egypt to be found in the literature composed up to the IV century b. C. Let's see in detail what happens in Hellenistic culture.

For the following remarks I owe much information to an article by Ophelia Fayez Riad⁽⁷⁾, which is a very useful list of literary references to Egypt in Alexandrian literature. It has always seemed quite strange to me that, compared with the previous periods, Greek literature of the Hellenistic age, when the two cultures came into closer contact, does not show any increased interest in Egypt. I find this remarkable. As we have just seen, Egypt was much admired by the Greeks, and, after Alexander the Great, the Egyptian world was, so-to-say, right next door to the Greeks, but it does not seem that they took any special notice of this. Right outside the gates of Alexandria, which was a truly Greek city, the vast Egyptian world began, with its agriculture and its peasants, its technical devices, its maritime tradition, its sociological relationships, its religion etc. The only thing that became really dominating in politics, and consequently in literature, was the organization of political power, since this was taken totally from Egypt: 14

centeredness had rather important consequences for the history of mankind, as we all know very well.

Egypt also drove Julius Caesar mad. In this instance, there was a very serious case of falling in love with a very beautiful woman, Cleopatra, who has been considered the most beautiful woman on earth, a kind of Helen of Troy, although perhaps she was not. But that falling in love soon became a formidable political-cultural plan: Caesar, had he not been killed by Brutus and Cassius, would have displaced the centre of the world from Rome, the West, to Egypt, the East. His successor was more well-balanced, but Egypt went on being what Octavian Augustus had made of the country, namely a province not of the Roman state but a personal one of the emperor. And in the same line was his great rival, Antonius.

I can only mention a well known trend that had so much success in Rome, viz. the so-called 'imitatio Alexandri' on the part of the Roman emperors⁽³⁾: Augustus, Vespasian, Septimius Severus, Caracalla, Constantine. Political influence was obviously exercised by Rome on Egypt⁽⁴⁾, but cultural and religious influence went the other way round, from Egypt to Rome⁽⁵⁾. Not to speak of the wide-spread imitation of Egyptian art not only in the Roman world, but in Renaissance and modern Europe as well⁽⁶⁾.

Egypt has also driven Napoleon mad. He was first a soldier, then a corporal, than a general and finally an emperor. His job was to make war, many wars, all the wars of his time (he got the habit of winning them all) and after the wars he ruled the areas he had conquered. At the very beginning of his career he became one of the most effective cultural organizers there ever were, and he went on having the same function in the various countries he conquered. But only Egypt could make of him a scholar, an Egyptologist: modern Europe owes to him the invention of Egyptology, a discipline that, at the time, was brand new.

Being Italian I have to mention our great musician Giuseppe Verdi. He did not go mad, but he did an extraordinary thing: when he was appointed to compose an opera with an Egyptian topic for the opening of the Suez Channel, he composed *Aida* with a music that both then and to-

■ What Ancient Egypt meant and means to Mankind

prosecuted of all kinds, proving himself to be a great bore because of the monotony of such a role. Now, on the contrary, what does Herodotus do in Egypt, as he tells us in his second book? He speaks with the priests and he believes all that they tell him, so that he becomes humble because of the alleged enormous antiquity of their culture and religion. It is needless to remind you with how much love he speaks of the habits of the Egyptians, even the most outlandish and alien to the Greek way of life. In other words, he falls in love with this country, and his behaviour is the same as those who are madly in love: just as they forget themselves in front of the object of their love, so too does he forget himself to be a proud Greek.

A century and a half before Herodotus, the great Athenian politician Solon behaved in a similar way: he gave his people new laws and, in order to avoid being involved in civic unrest, he decided to go for a long time abroad. And where did he go? Of course to Egypt, where he would feel better than anywhere else. And another admirer of Egypt was Herodotus' forerunner Hecataeus of Miletus.

Between Solon and Herodotus lived Pythagoras, whose importance can scarcely be overvalued: he is said to have gone both to Babylon and to Egypt. What Egyptian culture meant to Plato and to the whole of the fourth century can only be alluded to here.

Notwithstanding the claims of some later biographers, Plato never visited Egypt. Mary Lefkowitz⁽²⁾ has recently discussed this kind of biographical invention: very frequently, from the Hellenistic period onwards, great men of the past were credited with what was necessary in order to become a great man, that is to say the voyage of instruction to Egypt, the 'Bildungsreise' of German culture.

3. *Hellenistic Greece, Rome and our modern world coming in touch with Egypt*

Egypt has driven more than one great man mad. Think of Alexander the Great, who was more arrogant than anyone else. He was in fact no ordinary man, so he could think himself superior to all others, but where did he get the idea of being nothing less than a god, the son of Zeus? During his stay in Egypt, of course, in the temple of Ammon-Zeus in the desert. He convinced himself of his own divine nature, an essential condition in order to convince the others. This kind of self-12

especially in the South of Egypt I am always struck by the swift passing from darkness to light and vice-versa.

Still, the most important and exceptional feature seems to me to be the richness of historical stratification: think of a country where, in history, different peoples left in succession so many traces: the pre-Egyptians, the Egyptians, the Hyksos, the Hebrews, the Assyrians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Romans, the Byzantine Christians, the Arabs, the Turks; and one must not neglect the recent colonial experience of France and Britain. I am surely forgetting something. The visitor is often at a loss when he tries to understand what he has in front of him, in trying to untwine the ropes of history. This can be an exciting exercise, provided you have a competent friend to warn you at all times.

2. The Greeks who so much admired Egypt

The first voice to speak extensively to us about Egypt was Herodotus, a Greek historian of the second half of the fifth century b. C. He wrote in prose, but his prose, unlike what Aristotle said (51 b 2 ff.), was in my opinion sheer poetry. Add that he superbly defined Egypt a "gift of the Nile" (Hdt. 2.5). I would like to know if there is evidence of this definition in the Egyptian sources: that Egypt owes its existence to the Nile is obvious, but if the precise word "gift" is Herodotean, I shall go on considering him a creator and a poet.

But Herodotus with respect to Egypt was not only a poet. Egypt drove him mad: it even made him forget that he was a Greek, a man who belonged to a people so proud they hardly have an equivalent. Not even the Romans, with their boasting that they were grand, that they had conquered everybody while acting generously to the submitted, were so unbearable ("We the Romans are not discouraged in misfortune and we are not arrogant in good luck"). The Greeks were more insufferable yet: one need only think that they considered their mother tongue to be the language of mankind, while all other peoples, whom they called "barbarians", spoke in their opinion with the twittering of swallows. The Athenians, if we trust Pericles in Thucydides' second book, were even worst in boasting their excellence and add that Theseus in many Attic tragedies opens the gates of Athens for

■ What Ancient Egypt meant and means to Mankind

organization of space. The river, exactly oriented North-South, is a kind of meridian, and as such it was treated by Eratosthenes, the Greek scholar who, towards the end of the third century b. C., on June 21st (the day of the solstice) calculated with near precision the circumference of the earth; to do so, he compared the inclination of a shadow at Alexandria and the absence of any shadow at Assuan, being Assuan nearly at the tropic. Simply: he treated the Nile as a meridian, a very useful one indeed.

Add to this the neat borderline between desert and cultivated, tilled, land, which you do not only cross as you do anywhere else in the world, but which you can also follow step by step for more than 1200 kilometres along the course of the great river, seeing that borderline in all its length. In this respect, seen on a map or even from the plane, Egypt has no parallel.

Secondly, I must turn to the aspect of *d i m e n s i o n s* : this ancient world of yours is the first and last one to be able to give elegance, that is to say beauty, to things enormous, colossal. Think of the pyramids and of their size compared to, for instance, the Parthenon: Cheop's Pyramid has closed to its base a building for the archaeologists, and that is, I think, just a little smaller than the Parthenon. Think of the Sphinx, think of the size of the columns in the temple at Karnak. I never saw similar dimensions in my life, dimensions that, although gigantic, have not lost the grace of proportions.

And then there is *t i m e* : ancient Egyptian culture, as far as we can trace it back, existed for at least three thousand years (if not much more) before the Christian Era (31 b. C., when Egypt became a Roman Province, is the conventional date). If you add the further two thousand year span you have five thousand years, meaning that you go back in time much further than our Greco-Roman world does. Three thousand years mean that ancient Egyptian culture was far longer lived than the Church of Rome, which has now reached about two thousand. What a shock for someone born in Rome, the city called *eternal* , to discover that this city, only two millennia and three quarters old (founded in 753 b. C.), is relatively new! Time, in Egypt, has an extremely slow and steady pace.

But at the same time there is a regular *a c c e l e r a t i o n i n t i m e* : think of the speed of the all too brief dawns and sunsets, due to the proximity of the Tropic. In Italy we are used to more *gradual* changes in our own sky:

What Ancient Egypt meant and means to Mankind

Luigi Enrico Rossi
Università di Roma "La Sapienza"

Thank you very much, dear Colleagues of Cairo University, for the invitation, which I have accepted with enthusiasm. In my paper I shall formulate some thoughts on Egypt, then I shall consider the relationship of Egypt with Greece and Rome. After that, since this meeting celebrates the Centenary of teaching Ancient Greek at Cairo University, I shall briefly sketch the history of Italian didactics in this field⁽¹⁾.

1. *My personal experience of Egypt and a new perception of space, of dimensions, of time and of historical stratification*

I am very happy to be here. It is my fourth stay since 1997, when I first came as a tourist, and visited the usual 'must see' sights, namely the Egyptian Museum, the Pyramids, Luxor, Thebes, Assuan and Abu Simbel. On my ensuing trips, I gathered many roses left unpicked, to use an Italian saying. After the first trip, for I was professionally active and, with the help of many good friends I came to know the country from the inside.

At the outset, I feared I would go crazy: I did not expect to be so emotionally vulnerable. I suddenly realized that I was taking this trip too late in life, since I learned here to measure four important factors in a totally new way, viz. *s p a c e*, *d i m e n s i o n s*, *t i m e* and *i t s s l o w n e s s*, *s p e e d*.

Let us start with *s p a c e*. Egypt is a country absolutely unique, with a river running in the rigorous North-South direction as if it were following a compass: it cleaves the country into two parts, dividing the living, towards the East (the rising sun), from the dead, towards the West (the setting sun): I am thinking, of course, of Luxor-Thebes, the most impressively preserved