

**Egyptian Mysteries and Secret Societies in the Age of Enlightenment.  
A ‘mnemo-historical’ study**

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There are two modes of access to the past, one ‘historical’ and one ‘mnemo-historical’. The historical way aims at investigating and reconstructing past events, conditions, situations as they “really” were or happened exploring all kinds of contemporary sources. The ‘mnemohistorical’ approach, on the other hand, asks for the past, not ‘as it really happened’ but as it was and is remembered, addressing the same questions to tradition that Cicero put in a famous hexameter:<sup>1</sup>

Quís, quid, ubí, quibus auxiliís, cur, quómo, cuándo?

Who?, what?, where?, by what means?, why?, how? and when?

Who, when, why, for whom, remembers the past and by what means? When I first applied the ‘mnemohistorical’ method, I was dealing with apocryphal traditions about the Exodus of Israel from Egypt. In this case, there are no sources that would give an access to the event “as it really happened”. All we are left with are codifications of memory. Outside the Bible, these come – to name only the most important sources – from the Egyptian historiographer Manetho (third century BCE) and his Jewish excerptor Josephus Flavius (first century): two historians, who ‘remembered’ the event for completely different reasons, in different form, at different times. Manetho wrote for the Greek court to introduce the new rulers of Egypt into the history and culture of their kingdom, Josephus wrote for the Greek-speaking intellectual class with the apologetic interest to defend the Jews against the calumnies about Jewish history circulating in Hellenistic historiography. This bias led him to mistake a passage in Manetho for an Egyptian account of the Exodus tradition, whereas it dealt as a matter of fact with legendary memories of the Amarna age.<sup>2</sup> In my book *Moses the Egyptian*,<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The hexameter appears first in Cicero’s *De Inventione* in the context of rhetoric and the art of invention: Cic. *De inv.* 1, 34-1, 43.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus Flavius, *Contra Apionem*, after Menachem Stern, ed., *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* (Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities), 1: 78-86.

<sup>3</sup> Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997); German: Jan Assmann, *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (München: Fischer, 1998).

I asked primarily the “why” question. What was the agenda of those, who stressed the Egyptian descent or education of Moses? My interest was not to correct them, stressing the Hebrewness or Jewishness of Moses, but to understand their agenda, especially concerning those writing in the eighteenth century who wanted to overcome the distinction between “natural” and “positive” religion, religion based on the study and worship of nature and religion based on revelation.

Mnemohistory is the history of memory. Here too, however, an important distinction has to be made. The past is not only ‘remembered’ by later generations, it also exerts by itself an influence on later times. When Manetho, e.g. wrote his excursus about the Heliopolitan priest “Osarsiph” who led a group of lepers and adopted the name “Moyses” after having given them laws, he stood under the impression of legends circulating in Egypt at his time, in which an Egyptologist easily recognizes a distorted memory of Akhenaten.<sup>4</sup> Josephus, on the other hand, read Manetho’s text as a malicious account of the Exodus. The German terminology distinguishes between “Rezeptionsgeschichte” (history of reception) and “Wirkungsgeschichte”, for which term, interestingly enough, there does not seem to exist an English equivalent.<sup>5</sup> Manetho’s excursus testifies to the “Wirkungsgeschichte”, the legendary reverberations of the Amarna experience that in spite of the destruction of all tangible testimonies still existed in Egypt after more than 1000 years.<sup>6</sup> Josephus’ reading of Manetho, on the other hand, is a case of “Rezeptionsgeschichte”; he studies Manetho’s text as a sample of anti-Jewish propaganda.

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<sup>4</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 23-54; cf. Dimitri Laboury, *Akhenaton* (Paris: Pygmalion 2010), 362-364.

<sup>5</sup> Aleida Assmann distinguishes in this sense between “afterlife” and “aftermath”. See Aleida Assmann, “Cultural Memory and the Concept of ‘Afterlife’”, in *Afterlife of Events. Perspectives on Mnemohistory*, ed. Marek Tamm (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 79-94.

<sup>6</sup> Further evidence for the presence of the Amarna experience in Late Egyptian collective memory is presented by Diodorus Siculus. In chapter 64 of the first book of his *Bibliotheca historica*, he speaks of the three great pyramids and reports two different traditions about their builders (I, 64: 13). The first ascribes them to Khufu (Cheops), Khafre (Chephren) and Menkaure (Mycerinus). But there is another tradition ascribing them to Harmaios (Horemheb), Amasis (Ahmose) and Inaros (Inaros I), respectively. That can only refer to the three most traumatic periods in Egyptian history and the pharaohs who are credited with putting them to an end: Horemheb put an end to the Amarna revolt, Ahmose drove out the Hyksos, and Inaros I heroically led the resistance against the Assyrians; cf. Kim Ryholt: “Egyptian historical literature from the Greco-Roman Period”, in *Das Ereignis. Geschichtsschreibung zwischen Vorfall und Befund*, ed. Martin Fitzenreiter (London: Golden House Publications, 2009), 709-731, esp. 236f.

Originally, both terms derive from the literary discourse and refer to different ways of dealing with “classical” texts. Wirkungsgeschichte attributes their “afterlife” wholly to the texts themselves. That a text such as Homer’s *Iliad* is still read by readers of our time is not due to the interest of modern readers in Greek epic poetry but to the enormous intrinsic qualities of the text that did and do not fail to impress readers of all times. The philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer, the most prominent theorist of Wirkungsgeschichte, calls this property of classical texts their “unmittelbare Sagkraft” (immediate communicative power).<sup>7</sup> Immediacy means independence from any mediating institutions such as schools, teachers, literary critics, commentaries etc. “Rezeptionsgeschichte”, on the other hand, is connected with the “School of Constance” (Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser and others) that attributed the “afterlife” of classical texts to the reader and mediating institutions, without whom there would not be any afterlife at all. The same distinction may also apply to the past in general. That an event or a period is remembered for centuries to come may be due to its lasting importance – examples are the Reformation, the Age of Enlightenment or the French Revolution (Kant: “ein solches Phänomen vergisst sich nicht mehr”),<sup>8</sup> or to the keen interest of scholars that unearth from the archives persons, events and institutions that possibly never existed. Examples for this kind of remembering the past are Moses or Wilhelm Tell. To this last category belongs the case of the “Egyptian Mysteries”, which I want to study in the following pages. Here we are confronted with a highly imaginative construction of the past that has some foundation in the sources of Egyptian and Greek antiquity, but owes its enormous influential elaboration exclusively to the needs and interests of the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century was not only the Age of Enlightenment but also the age of secret societies - two apparently opposed tendencies, for we would normally associate light with publicity and secrecy with darkness and occultism. A missing link, however, is provided by a contemporary and at that time novel theory about the ancient, especially the Egyptian mysteries that was first expounded by William Warburton in about 1740,<sup>9</sup> but won its wide acceptance and domineering influence only one generation later, after its German translation by Johann

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<sup>7</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode*, 4th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975), 274f.

<sup>8</sup> “Such a phenomenon cannot be forgotten anymore”, Immanuel Kant, *Der Streit der Fakultäten* (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1798), §7.

<sup>9</sup> William Warburton, *The divine legation of Moses demonstrated on the principles of a religious deist, from the omission of the doctrine of a future state of reward and punishment in the Jewish dispensation* (London: Fletcher Gyles, 1738-1741), book 2.

Christian Schmidt, Frankfurt and Leipzig 1751-1753 and its reception by leading historians as well as prominent members and founders of secret societies after 1776.

The English theologian, classicist and Shakespeare scholar William Warburton published his monumental *Divine Legation of Moses* in several volumes between 1738 and 1741, the second book of which was dedicated to the ancient mysteries. The German philosopher and historian Christoph Meiners adopted Warburton's theory in his book on *die Mysterien der Alten, besonders die Eleusinischen Geheimnisse*,<sup>10</sup> (on the mysteries of the ancients, especially the Eleusinian Secrets) Göttingen 1776 which, in its turn, was used as a blueprint by Adam Weishaupt for the establishment of his new order of the Illuminati.<sup>11</sup>

Between 1775 and 1800, there appeared several dozens of scholarly dissertations on the ancient mysteries, as well as a similar number of novels, stories, plays and operas dealing with the Egyptian or other mysteries, initiations and secret communities,<sup>12</sup> among them as the most prominent representatives of this preoccupation Mozart's and Schikaneder's *Magic Flute*,<sup>13</sup> Schiller's ballad *The Veiled Image at Sais*<sup>14</sup> and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*.<sup>15</sup>

In which respect can this novel theory about the ancient mysteries pass for a missing link between enlightenment and secrecy? And what, in the first place, is it all about, what is the novelty of it? The first question is easily answered: it is the obvious parallel between enlightenment and initiation. In the process of initiation, the candidate is enlightened about things he previously ignored. This analogy may explain the enormous boom of "Bildungsromane" (education novels) in the eighteenth century, starting with *Les aventures de Télémaque* by Fénelon (1699), many of which integrate into the educational career of their hero

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<sup>10</sup> Christoph Meiners, "Über die Mysterien der Alten, besonders die Eleusinischen Geheimnisse", in *Vermischte philosophische Schriften*, ed. Christoph Meiners (Leipzig: Weygandschen Buchhandlung, 1776), 164-342.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Weishaupt, Professor of Canonical Law in Ingolstadt, founded the order in 1776.

<sup>12</sup> I owe most of the pertinent bibliography to Florian Ebeling.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Zauberflöte. Oper und Mysterium* (München: Carl Hanser, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais. Schillers Ballade und ihre griechischen und ägyptischen Hintergründe* (Stuttgart und Leipzig: Teubner 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Hans Jürgen Schings, *Die Brüder des Marquis Posa. Schiller und der Geheimbund der Illuminaten* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1996); Linda Simonis, *Die Kunst des Geheimen. Esoterische Kommunikation und ästhetische Darstellung im 18. Jahrhundert* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2002).

an initiation into a secret community.<sup>16</sup> The second question requires a more detailed answer.

The innovative and enormously successful and influential element of the new theory about the ancient mysteries was the political interpretation it presented concerning their genesis and function. Warburton argued that the mysteries were co-emergent with the state. In its original form, before the emergence of the state, religion consisted in the worship of nature as the sole deity. With the creation of the state, this original monotheism of nature had to be turned into a mystery religion and practiced in clandestinity, because the state had to be founded on a quite different religious system. Egypt, which was held to be the first state in the sense of a large-scale political organization in the history of mankind, presented the model for this double religion which was followed by all the other nations: an official, public polytheism and a mystery religion with secret rites and an arcane mono- or pantheistic theology which then became the matrix of all other mystery cults.<sup>17</sup>

Warburton's argument ran like this: the original religion of nature was incapable of supporting the new political institution. A state and civil society cannot be based on natural theology; instead, they need personal gods to protect the laws and to express national identity. People would not respect the laws without any fear of punishing and rewarding gods, nor would they have any sense of moral and political orientation without city-gods and national gods. Any society aiming at social order and political power is therefore bound to invent a pantheon of tutelary deities, turning meritorious law-givers, culture-founders, heroes, chiefs and kings into gods and assigning them functions in the supervision of the laws and the symbolization of political and social identities. These deities are but fiction, but a legitimate fiction, because they are indispensable in serving their purpose of providing justice and social order.

The original religion however, the monotheism of nature, could not be discarded, because it was known to be true and sanctified by tradition. Since it could not possibly coexist side by side with the newly established political religion of personal deities, because it would expose their purely fictional character, it had to be preserved, practiced and transmitted in clandestinity. The

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<sup>16</sup> Rosemarie Nicolai-Haas, "Die Anfänge des deutschen Geheimbundromans", in *Geheime Gesellschaften*, ed. Peter Christian Ludz (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider, 1979), 267-292.

<sup>17</sup> See Jan Assmann, *Religio Duplex. Ägyptische Mysterien und Europäische Aufklärung* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen im Insel Verlag, 2010); English: *Religio Duplex. How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion*, trans. Robert Savage (London: Polity 2014).

solution that the Egyptians found to that problem was twofold: they invented two scripts, one public, one secret, in order to separate the everyday communication from the codification and transmission of the arcane rituals and theology, and they developed two forms of architecture, one above and one below ground, one for the monumental representation of the state and its public religion and one for the secret continuation of the natural religion which only now was turned into a mystery religion requiring long phases of initiation, instruction and probation.

Warburton built his theory on two ancient traditions. One is Varro's concept of the tripartite theology (*theologia tripertita*) with its distinction between natural, political and poetical theology, which appeared already in the seventeenth century in the form of a dichotomy of natural and political theology,<sup>18</sup> the other is the Platonic distinction between the masses that are unfit for abstract thinking and need fables and allegories to catch a glimpse of the truth and the philosophers who leave the cave of popular illusions and seek the light of true knowledge. Both traditions were already fused in the seventeenth century with scholars such as John Selden, Ralph Cudworth and John Spencer into the concept of a split culture or *religio duplex* with a popular, polytheistic and exoteric outside and an arcane, mono- or pantheistic and esoteric inside.<sup>19</sup> Alexander Ross even, in his book *Pansebeia* (1652), a work of comparative religion, interpreted the pagan religions as political theology, opposing it, however, not to the natural theology of the mystery religions but to the truth of biblical religion. "All false Religions," Ross wrote, "are grounded upon humane Policy to keep people in obedience and awe of their superiours."<sup>20</sup> It was only Warburton's ground-breaking innovation to give the traditional concept of double religion and split culture a political interpretation and to concede a kind of truth even to the esoteric side of pagan religion. Moreover, he acquitted the popular religion and political theology of any charge of conscious fraud (as most notoriously raised by Bernard de Fontenelle in his *Histoire des oracles* (1687), arguing that we are dealing here with fictions, it is true, but with legitimate fictions because they are indispensable for any civil society and lawful political organization.

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<sup>18</sup> Albrecht Dihle, "Die Theologia tripertita bei Augustin", in *Geschichte – Tradition – Reflexion. Festschrift für Martin Hengel*, ed. Hubert Cancik et al. (Tübingen 1996) 2: 183-202; Godo Lieberg, "Die theologia tripertita als Formprinzip antiken Denkens", *Rheinisches Museum* 125 (1982): 25-53.

<sup>19</sup> See Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, chapter 2 and 3 (English edition).

<sup>20</sup> Alexander Ross, *Pansebeia, or, a View of all the Religions of the World* (London: Gillyflower and Freeman, 1696), 362.

Before entering any further into Warburton's and his followers' theory on ancient mysteries, let it be absolutely clear that it is of no real historical interest whatsoever as far as ancient Egypt and antiquity in general is concerned. It cannot tell us anything about the historical mystery cults in antiquity but only the more about the intellectual situation of the eighteenth century with its political, social and religious tensions, the cultural context in which the secret societies mushroomed and flourished and in which the topics of initiation and mystery played such an important role in literature and the arts. The fact that Warburton, Meiners and all the others associated the state and the sphere of politics in general with the imaginary, with fictional institutions, and the sphere of mystery, esotericism and concealment with truth and enlightenment is rather absurd if applied to ancient history, but it is highly important and revealing if applied to the social and intellectual history of the eighteenth century. The image that the eighteenth century formed of ancient Egypt as a split civilization, divided into an exoteric and an esoteric culture, is interesting, not because it contained any authentic knowledge about Egypt but because it served as a mirror of contemporary society and culture. The less important this literature is for the historical approach to the past, the more it serves the interests of mnemohistory. Why has this element of the past, the Egyptian mysteries, been 'remembered', i.e. studied and discussed with such intensity in the last quarter of the eighteenth century? Because it provided a model for a society suffering under political and religious control and censorship. "The call", wrote Henri Bergson, "to which memory responds, emanates from the present".<sup>21</sup>

The interest, even fascination of the eighteenth century with ancient Egypt was focussed on initiation. It was not only the idea of a split culture but also and above all the way leading from the exoteric to the esoteric side and the transformation that the initiate had to undergo in pursuing this way that formed the central object of research. The ancient sources presented the Egyptian initiation in two aspects: a grammatological and a topological one. The grammatological aspect pointed to the fact that in Egypt there were two different scripts in use, one open, one secret, the topological aspect highlighted the wealth and extension of subterranean constructions and held that the buildings above ground served the official popular religion, the constructions underground, by contrast, the secret religion. Both were based on severe misunderstandings of the Egyptian evidence.

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<sup>21</sup> "c'est du présent que part l'appel auquel le souvenir répond", Henri Bergson, *Matière et Mémoire, Essai sur la relation de corps à l'esprit* (Paris: Alcan, 1939), 91.

I shall only very briefly touch upon the well-known grammatological theories about hieroglyphs. Knowledge about hieroglyphs died out in Egypt during the fourth century CE but a wealth of information concerning the Egyptian script persisted in Greek literature. The Greeks were fascinated by hieroglyphic writing for two reasons: one is the iconic character of the signs and their apparent reference to things and concepts rather than to words and sounds, and the other is the fact that there existed, alongside with hieroglyphic writing, another completely different and non-iconic script that was understood by the Greeks as being alphabetic. Both reasons were wrong but enormously influential for the image of Egypt in European memory. Of the various authors highlighting the iconic, non-discursive and purely conceptual character of the hieroglyphs, I mention only a passage from Diodorus that insists on three points: the non-discursivity (the hieroglyphs do not render the order of speech), the metaphorical character of the meanings of depicted objects and the emphasis on knowledge and memory.

1. Non-discursivity:

The hieroglyphic writing does not aim at rendering speech (logos) by the connection of syllables but at metaphorically expressing the meaning of the objects depicted which are stored in the memory.

2. Iconicity:

In this way, they draw, e.g., a hawk, a crocodile, a serpent, a part of the human body such as an eye, a hand, a face or something similar. The hawk signifies speed, since it is the fastest of all birds; this may be applied to everything speedy. The crocodile signifies malice. The eye means the guardian of justice and of the body. The hand with outstretched fingers means the necessity to earn one's living, the closed left hand means the preservation of goods. All the other signs in form of body parts, tools and other things work the same way.

3. Memory:

By making efforts to find out the hidden meanings of things they arrive through long practice and training of memory at writing and reading everything they want.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* III, 3-4, quoting Hecataeus of Abdera (ca. 310 BCE) after Pierre Marestaing, *Les écritures égyptiennes et l'antiquité classique* (Paris: Geuthner, 1913), 48f.

The mastery of the script requires a vast knowledge about the hidden meaning of things. Learning to read and write amounts to an initiation into the secrets of nature.

The distinction between two scripts goes back to Herodotus who visited Egypt in the middle of the fifth century BCE and is most clearly expressed by Diodorus in the introduction to his passage on hieroglyphs quoted above:

The Egyptians use two different scripts: one, called “demotic”, is learned by all; the other one is called “sacred”. This one is understood among the Egyptians exclusively by the priests who learn them from their fathers in the mysteries.<sup>23</sup>

The existence of two different scripts is explained by the distinction between the sacred and the profane, priests and laymen, secrecy and publicity. Later sources, especially Clement of Alexandria and Porphyry,<sup>24</sup> explicitly declare that the various steps in the acquisition of literacy, leading from the demotic to the sacred cursive and from there to the most accomplished script, the hieroglyphic cryptography, amounted to a veritable initiation. Pythagoras, e.g., according to Porphyry, spent twenty years in Egypt entering into the various secrets of the different Egyptian scripts. This grammatological interpretation of Egyptian split culture forms the basis of the curious theory of dual religion or society. The use of two apparently different scripts reflected, in the eyes of the ancients, a split in Egyptian society, between the initiated priests on the one hand, and the rest of the literate society on the other. This situation was a perfect confirmation of what Heliodorus and other ancient authors described as the Egyptian “duplex philosophy”, a vulgar or exoteric and an exclusive or esoteric one, one for the priests and one for the people.<sup>25</sup>

Hieroglyphic writing, therefore, was held to be not only a system of communication but also, and above all, to be a codification of sacred knowledge and divine wisdom. It was both natural and cryptic, whereas alphabetic writing was held to be both conventional and clear. The non-iconic, demotic script was believed to be an alphabet invented by the Egyptians for the purposes of communication, administration and documentation, whereas Hieroglyphs were invented for the purposes of mystery, for the transmission of esoteric knowledge. Needless to stress that all this is pure imagination. Its importance lies not in what it has to say about ancient Egypt but about western concepts of secrecy, its religious and cultural functions.

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<sup>23</sup> Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica* III, 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 24-26 (English edition).

<sup>25</sup> See also Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).

The most important source in early modernity concerning the Egyptian hieroglyphs was the first book on Hieroglyphs by Horapollon Nilotes, which dates from the fifth century and was discovered in 1418 by an Italian merchant in a Greek monastery.<sup>26</sup> For seventy hieroglyphs, it gives not only the meaning, which is mostly correct, but also the motivation, which is rather fantastic. The sign for “to open” is said to be written with the image of a hare because this animal never closes its eyes, and the image of a goose writes the word “son”, because this bird has a peculiar sense of family. Obviously, the lost knowledge about the phonetic meaning of the signs – the words for “to open” and “son” are nearly homonymous with the words for “hare” and “goose” – has been replaced with that moralizing zoology that is known to us by Aelianus, Plinius and the *Physiologus*.

Another discovery of the fifteenth century opened a window on the content of Egyptian esoteric knowledge believed to have been committed to hieroglyphs. This was the *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was brought to Florence after the fall of Constantinople and put on the desk of Marsilio Ficino: a collection of theosophical treatises attributed to Hermes Trismegistus, a fabulous Egyptian sage of highest antiquity.<sup>27</sup> The quintessence of the Hermetic doctrine can be summarized in the motto “Hen kai pan”, One-and-All, the equation of God and the world, a kind of mystical pantheism.<sup>28</sup> Within this theological framework, cosmology becomes theology and scientific knowledge acquires theurgical or magical aspects since it operates on the divine powers immanent in nature. This is the practical branch of Hermetism known as “alchemy”.<sup>29</sup> Giordano Bruno stressed the magical and mnemonic potentials of hieroglyphs as compared to alphabetic writing:

[...] the sacred letters used among the Egyptians were called hieroglyphs  
[...] which were images ... taken from the things of nature, or their parts.  
By using such writings and voices, the Egyptians used to capture with

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<sup>26</sup> Horapollon, *Hori Apollonis Hieroglyphica*, ed. Francesco Sbordone (Neapel: Loffredo, 1940).

<sup>27</sup> Hermes Trismegistus, *Corpus Hermeticum*, ed. and trans. Arthur Darby Nock and André-Jean Festugière (Paris: Collection Budé. Les Belles Lettres, 1945-1954), 4 vol. There is a more recent translation by Brian P. Copenhaver, *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>28</sup> Ralph Cudworth, *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London: Richard Royston, 1678), see Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 80-90.

<sup>29</sup> Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes. A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

marvellous skill the language of the gods. Afterwards when letters of the kind which we use now with another kind of industry were invented by Theuth or some other, this brought about a great rift both in memory and in the divine and magical sciences.<sup>30</sup>

Warburton will later follow Bruno in this reconstruction of the history of Egyptian written culture. Hieroglyphs came first, the aniconic writing was a later invention. However, Warburton corrected Bruno, Athanasius Kircher and others in rightly stating that hieroglyphs were originally a quite normal script serving the normal purposes of written communication and data storage. Only later, when together with the state the mysteries were founded, the Hieroglyphic script was turned into a cryptography, whereas the aniconic and seemingly alphabetic script was created for profane use.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the connection between hieroglyphs and Hermeticism, the study of Egyptian hieroglyphs had, in addition to its grammatological, semiotic and artistic implications, strong and far-reaching theological consequences. These became particularly obvious in the context of the debate about pantheism, atheism and monotheism (all these terms were coined in this context) following the publication of Spinoza's *Ethica* and the rise of English Deism which lent fresh colour to the image of ancient Egypt and its mysteries. The arcane theology of Egypt was now interpreted as a kind of Spinozism ante Spinozam, and since Spinozism was anathema to official religion, the parallel between ancient Egypt and modern Europe became even closer.<sup>32</sup>

The topological aspect of the Egyptian initiation to which we will turn now is much less prominently presented in the ancient (Greek and Latin) sources than

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<sup>30</sup> Giordano Bruno, *De Magia* (Opera Latina III, 411-412), quoted after Frances Amelia Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 263. The connection between hieroglyphics and magic is provided by the church historian Rufinus who reports that the temple at Canopus has been destroyed by the Christians because there existed a school of magic arts under the pretext of teaching the "sacerdotal" characters of the Egyptians ("ubi praetextu sacerdotium litterarum (ita etenim appellant antiquas Aegyptiorum litteras) magicae artis erat paene publica schola" Rufinus, *Historia ecclesiastica* XI 26).

<sup>31</sup> Warburton, *Moses*, book 4, sect.4, vol. 2, 387-491. This section appeared separately in a French translation by Léonard des Malpeines, *Essai sur les hiéroglyphes des Égyptiens, où l'on voit l'origine et le progrès du langage et de l'écriture, l'antiquité des sciences en Égypte et l'origine du culte des animaux. Traduit de l'anglais de M. Warburton. Avec des observations sur l'antiquité des hiéroglyphes scientifiques et des remarques sur la chronologie et sur la première écriture des Chinois*, 2 vols. (Paris: Guerin, 1744).

<sup>32</sup> See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 115-143, esp. 139-143.

the grammatological one but plays a much greater role in the imagination of the eighteenth century. This is certainly due to the wealth of new information by travelers' reports and picture books about the archaeology of ancient Egypt.<sup>33</sup> In its topological aspect, the Egyptian initiation assumes the form of a descent into the depth of the earth. The most prominent ancient travelers into the netherworld, Orpheus and Aeneas, play a certain role in the reconstruction of the Egyptian initiation, Orpheus because he is associated with the Orphic hymns, some of which proclaim the theology of the One-and-All, and Aeneas, because his descent is explicitly associated with the Eleusinian initiation when Vergil has Hecate cry "procul, o procul este, profani!" - keep off, keep off, ye profane - the traditional Eleusinian warning (thyras d'epitheste bebeloi).<sup>34</sup> The most important source, however, is the encrypted report that, in the *Golden Ass* by Apuleius,<sup>35</sup> Lucius gives of his initiation into the mysteries of Isis. Let us have a brief look at the famous lines:<sup>36</sup>

Accessi confinium mortis	I approached the border of death
et calcato Proserpinae limine	and set my foot on the threshold of Proserpina.
per omnia vectus elementa	After having traversed all of the
remeavi	elements I returned.
nocte media vidi solem	In the middle of the night I saw the sun
candido coruscantem lumine	sparkling in white light.
deos inferos et deos superos	the infernal and the supernal gods
accessi coram	I approached face to face
et adoravi de proxumo.	and adored in close proximity.

Three motives shall return in the eighteenth century: the association of initiation and death, the travel through the four elements and the vision of the gods.

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<sup>33</sup> Such as, e.g. Jean-Baptiste Le Mascrier, *Description de l'Égypte, composée sur les mémoires de Maillet* (Paris: Genneau et Rollin, 1735) ; Frederik Ludvig Norden, *Voyage d'Égypte et de Nubie* (Copenhagen: Maison Royale des Orphelins, 1755) 2 vol.; Bernard de Montfaucon, *L'Antiquité expliquée et représentée en figures* (Paris: Delaulne et al., 1722–1724) 15 vol.; Richard Pococke, *A Description of the East and Some Other Countries* (London: Knapton et al., 1743).

<sup>34</sup> Christoph Riedweg, *Jüdisch-hellenistische Imitation eines orphischen hieros logos* (Tübingen: Narr, 1993), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Jan Assmann and Florian Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien. Reisen in die Unterwelt in Aufklärung und Romantik* (München: C. H. Beck, 2011), 29-47.

<sup>36</sup> Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*, 36, 44f.

The first modern author to transform these scant allusions into a detailed narrative of the Egyptian initiation was the Abbé Jean Terrasson, professor of Greek at the Collège de France and renowned editor of Diodorus of Sicily, who, in his novel *Séthos*, published 1731, dedicated almost 100 pages to the description of the initiation of his hero into the mysteries of Isis.<sup>37</sup> Sethos is the legitimate heir to the throne of Egypt who is, however, suppressed by his evil stepmother queen Daluca. When he turned sixteen, his mentor Amédès decides to concede to his ardent wish to be initiated into the mysteries. We meet here already with the contrast of public corrupt government and truthful secret religion. Sethos and Amédès enter the Great Pyramid at the North side and climb down a very deep pit. Below, they traverse some passages and arrive at a portal with an inscription that will return verbatim in the *Magic Flute*.<sup>38</sup> Amédès is to stay behind and Sethos must pursue his path alone. He is received not by two but by three armed men, who warn him that there will be no return if he continues further, and he is secretly guided and watched in a way that will be the role of the three boys in the *Magic Flute*. After several turns and passages he has to cross a room full of fire and to swim through a channel of water. The last trial involves the air: he has to catch rings that will transport him with enormous noise through the air into the temple of Ptah and in front of the veiled image of Isis. The high priest greets him with a prayer that will also almost verbatim reappear in the *Magic Flute*.<sup>39</sup> Sethos is given a drink that will cause him to forget all false ideas that he has formed during his former life and to remember all the instructions that he is going to receive during his following initiation. Terrasson presented his novel as the translation of an ancient Greek manuscript which he even equipped with scholarly footnotes, and due to his high reputation as a scholar his account of the Egyptian initiation was almost generally received as authentic. The ideas of ancient Egypt being completely undermined by subterranean constructions serving the functions of the arcane religion of nature, of the initiation as a transition from the upper world of illusions into the underworld of truth, and especially the idea of the Hermetic cave in which Hermes Trismegistos has stored the pillars inscribed with the primal, antediluvian wisdom of Adam became fixed stereotypes in the prolific literary production in the wake of Terrasson's *Séthos*.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*, 48-65.

<sup>38</sup> Assmann, *Zauberflöte*, 237f.

<sup>39</sup> Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*, 65; Assmann, *Zauberflöte*, 175f.

<sup>40</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 131-134; Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 104-107 (English edition).

Ancient Egypt was now viewed not only as the origin of all ancient states and religions including biblical monotheism but also as the mirror of modern society with its exterior face of church and absolutism and its interior of deism and enlightened philosophy. The masons viewed themselves as the heirs of the Egyptian priests and of the ancient mystery religions and the Egyptian mysteries were now studied as a model of modern freemasonry. The most prolific center for this kind of research and literature was the lodge “Zur Wahren Eintracht” (True Concord) at Vienna which made the systematic exploration of the ancient mysteries its central project and published during the years 1784 and 1787 no less than fourteen articles and longer dissertations in its *Journal für Freymäurer*.<sup>41</sup> One of the most interesting of these is an anonymous essay on the question of Scientific Freemasonry.<sup>42</sup> The essay is generally attributed to Ignaz von Born, the master of the lodge, but the protocol certifies that a certain Anton Kreil presented two lectures on the same topic - the question of scientific freemasonry - at the sessions of April 16 and 22, 1785, and it is beyond any doubt that he is the author of the published article.<sup>43</sup> Kreil was a highly educated philosopher and philologist who contributed several particularly interesting articles to the Journal and who created the term ‘scientific freemasonry’ as the opposite of ‘religious freemasonry’, the first being the stronghold and promotor of enlightenment, the other of spiritual conservatism.<sup>44</sup> The most interesting aspect of his lectures is the date of their delivery, for the protocol states these were the sessions during which Leopold Mozart was elevated to the rank of fellow and master respectively, Wolfgang being present.<sup>45</sup> If anybody doubts that Mozart could have had any contact with the scholarly theories about the Egyptian mysteries, here is the definite proof to the contrary. Kreil’s lectures turn out to be the most impressive and colorful description of the Egyptian mysteries in their topological aspect, because he is among the first to take into account the archeological evidence. Confronting these reports with the theory of ancient Egypt’s dual philosophy, he concludes that the extended subterranean structures with which

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<sup>41</sup> Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 243-350 (German Edition).

<sup>42</sup> [Anton Kreil], “Ueber die wissenschaftliche Maurerey”, *Journal für Freymäurer* 7 (1785), 49-78, cf. Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*, 114-140.

<sup>43</sup> Hans-Josef Irmen, *Die Protokolle der Wiener Freimaurerloge “Zur Wahren Eintracht” (1781-1785)* (Frankfurt am Main et al.: Lang, 1994).

<sup>44</sup> Jan A. M. Snoek, “What does the word ‘religious’ mean in Reinhold’s ‘religious freemasonry?’”, in *Egypt – Temple of the Whole World*, ed. Sibylle Meyer (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 409-420.

<sup>45</sup> Irmen, *Protokolle*, 271, no. 374, and 272, no. 376. Irmen attributes the oration to Ignaz von Born, 26.

the whole of Egypt is undermined, passages, corridors, pillared halls, sunken courtyards, rooms and staircases, all of them inscribed with hieroglyphs from floor to ceiling could serve but one purpose: to accommodate the libraries, laboratories, cult places and ritual installations for the performance and transmission of the secret religion with its esoteric natural theology. The Egyptian priestly order, Kreil writes, was in possession of the collected wisdom of the ancients and the Greeks such as Pythagoras, Plato and Eudoxos went to study the true philosophy. The priests spent the majority of their life underground studying the secrets of nature and theology and shrouded their knowledge in the impenetrable veils of hieroglyphs and hidden architecture. They were so successful in this that their tradition of wisdom persists in certain lodges until this day. It is on this occasion that Mozart may have received his first inkling of the idea to bring the Egyptian mysteries to the stage and to translate the concept of dual religion into the form of a ‘dual opera’ with a popular exterior and a philosophical interior. When six years later he finally realised this project together with Emanuel Schikaneder, the result became the most prominent example of the new genre of mystery travels into the Egyptian underworld and the most convincing aesthetic representation of the Egyptian initiation.<sup>46</sup>

Mozart entered the lodge “Zur Wohlthätigkeit” (Beneficence) in 1784 and remained a dedicated mason until his death, even in times when freemasonry was no longer fashionable and membership in lodges became suspicious. That the *Magic Flute* is a masonic opera is well known and becomes particularly obvious in the light of Warburton’s political interpretation of mystery religion which the masons fully adopted. Warburton distinguished not only between the official, exoteric and the secret, esoteric religion, but within the esoteric religion again between the lesser and the greater mysteries.<sup>47</sup> This distinction was practiced in the Eleusinian mysteries which Warburton, following Diodorus, held to be just a copy of the Egyptian mysteries. In a dual society, the way of initiation leads from the illusions of popular religion through the darkness of disillusionment, probation, instruction and trial finally to the full light of the truth. The masonic theory reconstructs this passage per aspera ad astra, from darkness to light, in three stages: the purification or disillusionment, the lesser mysteries and the greater mysteries. The lesser mysteries consist of probation and instruction. Here, everybody is admitted who shows a sincere interest and who is innocent of any severe crimes. By contrast, only the very few who have

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<sup>46</sup> Assmann and Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*, 162-205.

<sup>47</sup> Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 63-66.

a vocation to rulership and who excel through virtue and wisdom are admitted to the greater mysteries.<sup>48</sup> The greater mysteries confront the candidate with imminent death and send him into a state of utmost fear and horror. This is how Plutarch describes the greater mysteries in a passage much quoted in the masonic literature:

“Here on earth the soul is without knowledge except at the moment of death. Then it suffers an experience similar to those who celebrate the Greater Mysteries. For this reason both the word “to die” (τελευταν) and the action which it denotes are the same as the word “to be initiated” (τελεισθαι) and the action denoted. The first stage is wandering astray, tiresome walking in circles, some frightening paths in darkness that lead nowhere. Then, immediately before the end, one is seized by every kind of terror, all is horror, shudder, trembling, sweat and amazement. At the end, however, a wonderful divine light comes to meet you; pure regions and blossoming meadows are there to greet you with sounds and dances and solemn sacred words and holy views. And there, the initiate, perfect by now, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other sacred and pure people, and he looks down on the uninitiated, unpurified crowd in this world in mud and fog beneath his feet.”<sup>49</sup>

If we apply this scheme to Mozart’s opera, we get a perfect fit.<sup>50</sup> The division into lesser and greater mysteries corresponds to the first and the second part of the second act. The opera is divided into two acts, each of which is again divided into a first part with airs and dialogues and a second part with a long continuous finale without any dialogues. Each part is of approximately equal length and ends in the key in which it started, which is E flat for the first, C for the second, F for the third and again E flat for the fourth part. The third part which is the first part of the second act contains the probations and instructions characteristic of the lesser mysteries; here, even Papageno is present though his behaviour in the trial gives a rather poor performance. The theme here is self control: the initiates must learn to resist their drive towards communication, and while Papageno fails to abstain from talking to Papagena, Tamino keeps silent before his beloved

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<sup>48</sup> Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 64f. Assmann, *Zauberflöte*, 209-230.

<sup>49</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, Tome 15: Fragments, ed. F. H. Sandbach (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1969), fragment 178.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, *Die Zauberflöte – eine Oper mit zwei Gesichtern*, (Wien: Picus, 2015), 54-64.

Pamina even in the face of her professions of pain and despair. The fourth part contains the greater mysteries; here, Papageno is absent, but Pamina joins Tamino before the trial of water and fire and attains the light of truth when the theater, as Schikaneder has it in his stage direction, “changes into a sun”. The word “death” is indeed the key-word in this part, which begins with Pamina’s attempted suicide, then shows Tamino before the “gates of dead, which threaten me with danger and death”. “If he is able to overcome the horrors of death”, the inscription above the portal reads, “he will ascend from earth to heaven”. “By the power of music”, they sing, “we happily walk through death’s dark night.” The point of the greater mysteries is to transform the personality of the initiate by exposing him to the fear of death, i.e. to an experience of the “sublime”.

After attributing the two parts of the second act to the lesser and greater mysteries, it is easy to recognize the stages of illusionment and disillusionment in the first act. Tamino (and with him the audience) is first lured into the Queen of the Night’s story of the abducted princess and has then, in the second part, to undergo a thorough reorientation which frees him from false presumptions but leaves him in the dark as to the truth. It seems obvious, that the opera attempts at staging the Egyptian mysteries in their various contrasts and oppositions, from folk religion and esoteric wisdom, superstition and truth, the world of illusions above and the subterranean realm of true cognition.

Judging from the early stage designs, the action of the *Magic Flute* does not at all take place in ancient Egypt but in some exotic region or masonic park where the mysteries of Isis are still performed.<sup>51</sup> Not ancient Egypt, but the Egyptian mysteries which were believed to be still alive among the masons forms the theme of the opera. It was only after the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt and after the appearance of the lavish volumes of the *Description de l’Égypte* that the opera was staged in an ancient Egyptian scenery.

Another member of the lodge “True Concord”, who took a leading part in the lodge’s research project on the ancient mysteries, left Vienna just before Mozart joined the lodge, went to Leipzig and Weimar, then was offered a chair of philosophy at Jena and was influential in getting Schiller, whom he admired, appointed to a chair of history there. This was the young philosopher Carl Leonhard Reinhold, a leading figure both of Illuminism and of German idealism. Reinhold, asked to contribute a study on the Hebrew mysteries for the Viennese project, read Warburton and especially Spencer and delivered an astonishing

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<sup>51</sup> Assmann, *Zauberflöte*, 95-100; Annette Frese, “‘Das Theater verwandelt sich’. Bühnenbilder, Figurinen und Illustrationen zur Zauberflöte”, in *Theater um Mozart*, ed. Bärbel Pelker (Heidelberg: Winter 2006), 143-205.

update of Spencer's thesis about the Egyptian origin of Mosaic monotheism.<sup>52</sup> Schiller was so fascinated by Reinhold's findings that he published an essay on the same subject: *Die Sendung Moses* (The legation of Moses), which is just an epitome of Reinhold's book.<sup>53</sup>

The thesis is that Moses learned everything about true religion in the Egyptian mysteries and that the religion which he gave the Hebrews is but a popularized version of Egyptian esoteric Deism. The Egyptian deity is the All-One, the veiled goddess of the image at Sais, whose inscription reads "I am all that was, is and will be. No mortal has lifted my veil". This sublime deity, as Schiller stresses, has no name, because he/she is unique, is one-and-all, so that he/she should be named by every name or no name. Moses translates this idea into his concept of "Jehova" which is equally not a name but the withholding of a name meaning "I am that I am". Reinhold and Schiller follow the Septuagint's version in reading this as "I am the essential Being" which in their eyes says the same as "I am all that is."

However, since a state and civil society cannot be founded upon natural theology, Moses had to accommodate this sublime idea to the capacities of his people and to turn the god of the philosophers into a national god and into the fabulous "god of the fathers," to turn, in other words, natural theology into political and mythical theology, according to Varro's concept of *theologia tripertita*. Beethoven was so impressed by Schiller's essay that he copied some key sentences such as "I am all that is" on a sheet of paper and put it in a frame on his desk.<sup>54</sup> Deism was the religion of enlightenment and it was believed to date back to the arcane theology of the Egyptian mysteries.

The secret, in its masonic construction, was twofold. On the one hand, it was a secret, shut away from general knowledge because its becoming public would have destroyed the fictions that supported the state and civil institutions. This was the political interpretation, which Warburton had promoted and which goes back to ancient and early modern religious critique. In this interpretation, the secret is principally knowable and actually known by the elite among the initiated. The secret is essentially negative: it consists in the fictional and illusionary character of religion. On the other hand, the secret enshrouds an unfathomable

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<sup>52</sup> Carl Leonhard Reinhold, *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey*, Leipzig: Göschen, 1788), reprint Neckargemünd: Edition Mnemosyne, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Friedrich Schiller, "Die Sendung Moses", in Friedrich Schiller, *Werke und Briefe*, ed. Otto Dann, vol. 6: *Historische Schriften und Erzählungen*, (Frankfurt/Main: DKV 2000) 451-474.

<sup>54</sup> Friederike Grigat, *Beethovens Glaubensbekenntnis: Drei Denksprüche aus Friedrich Schillers Aufsatz "Die Sendung Moses"* (Bonn: Beethoven-Haus, 2008).

mystery. Its secrecy is not the result of political and social exclusivism, but of natural transcendence in that it transcends human capacities of cognition, understanding, articulation and communication. This is the positive aspect of the secret. There is something behind the veil which is more than fiction and illusion, but is beyond human understanding and even more than normal human beings can stand.

As the great French historian of philosophy Pierre Hadot has shown in his marvellous book *Le voile d'Isis*, the concept of the veiled image at Sais played a great role in eighteenth century thought.<sup>55</sup> The mystery behind the veil was identified with the Egyptian goddess Isis and she, in turn, was interpreted as “nature”, not in its physical and phenomenal aspect as *natura naturata* but in its invisible, supernatural aspect as *natura naturans*, a mysterious transcendent power behind the phenomena which in turn were associated with the veil that simultaneously hides and manifests the deity. In frontispieces to works of natural science, the act of removing the veil of nature was used as a favorite allegory of scientific discovery. Even Heinrich Füssli reverted in 1808 to the iconography of unveiling Isis when he designed the frontispiece to the *Temple of Nature* by Erasmus Darwin, the grand-father of Charles Darwin.

The tradition goes back to Plutarch and his treatise *On Isis and Osiris* who mentions the strange inscription in order to prove the enigmatic, mysterious character of Egyptian religion. “At Sais”, he writes, “the seated statue (τὸ ἕδος) of Athena, whom they consider to be Isis also bore the following inscription: ‘I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my garment (τὸν ἐμὸν πέπλον)’.”<sup>56</sup> Since Marsilio Ficino, Plutarch’s ‘peplos’ became generally translated as ‘veil’. The initiated priests in Egypt who pursued their worship underground performed the mysteries of Isis or nature. This was the true religion which had to be kept secret and Isis-Nature was the goddess behind the veil. This idea appealed to the free-masons many of whom practiced alchemy or were mineralogists like Goethe or Ignaz von Born, the master of “True Concord”. In his dissertation on the Egyptian mysteries, von Born lets a priest summarize the ultimate aim of the Egyptian mysteries in the following words:<sup>57</sup>

The knowledge of nature is the ultimate purpose of our application. We worship this progenitor, nourisher and preserver of all creation in the

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<sup>55</sup> Pierre Hadot, *Le voile d'Isis*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2004).

<sup>56</sup> “ἐγώ εἰμι πᾶν τὸ γεγονὸς καὶ ὄν καὶ ἐσόμενον”, Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, ch. 9 (354C) 9-10, cf. John Gwyn Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, 130f., 283f.

<sup>57</sup> Ignaz von Born, “Über die Mysterien der Aegyptier” *Journal für Freymaurer* 1 (1784), 15-132, quote 22, where he quotes Plutarch as his source.

image of Isis. Only he who knows the whole extent of her power and force will be able to uncover her veil without punishment.

The first-person plural in this quote could equally well apply to the masons themselves.

Schiller treated this topos in his ballad *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais*.<sup>58</sup> Driven by an insatiable thirst of knowledge, a youth, presumably Greek, travels to Sais in Egypt in order to get initiated into the mysteries and to look behind the veil that hides the image of truth or Isis in the innermost sanctuary of the temple. He is guided by a priest who has himself never enjoyed this view nor felt tempted to seek after it. Epopteia, the view of truth, is something reserved for the very very few. The youth, however, cannot master his curiosity. The following night, he enters the temple and removes the veil. In the morning, he is found prostrate on the floor. He was never able to tell of his experience, lost all his good spirits and died soon afterwards. It is clear that he saw something, but Schiller does not tell us what. From his other writings of that period, one may assume that he was exposed to a confrontation with the sublime. The sublime was defined as the absolutely overpowering experience that defies man's either physical or intellectual capacities. Kant, in his third critique, distinguished these two expressions of the sublime as the dynamic and the mathematical sublime, Schiller proposed the distinction between the theoretical sublime transcending human imagination and the practical sublime threatening with death the human drive for self-preservation. Both Kant and Schiller saw in the veiled image at Sais and its inscription the quintessential expression of the sublime. "There is" wrote Kant in his third critique "no thought more sublime or more sublimely expressed than the famous inscription on the veiled image of Isis, i.e. mother nature, in her temple at Sais: I am all that was, is and will be. No mortal has lifted my veil."<sup>59</sup>

In one of its latest applications, the motif of unveiling Isis was used as an allegory not of natural science but of the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt. The Napoleonic expedition was not only a military but also and above all a scholarly raid on ancient Egypt. Napoleon's army was accompanied by a legion of scholars, artists and engineers with the commission to record everything concerning modern and especially ancient Egypt the personification of which has to be seen in the recumbent lady whom the French soldier in Roman attire is unveiling. The inscription reads "GALLIA VICTRICE AEGYPTUS REDIVIVA 1798 1826" (Egypt revived through victorious France 1798

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<sup>58</sup> Assmann, *Sais*.

<sup>59</sup> Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian*, 128-131.

1826). The medal was issued in 1826 in commemoration of the publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* which laid the foundations of modern Egyptology.<sup>60</sup> In 1822, exactly 400 years after the arrival of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica* in Florence, Jean Francois Champollion succeeded in deciphering the hieroglyphs. With this achievement, ancient Egypt has lost its mysteries. There is no monotheism, no arcane theology, no antagonism between a popular religion and a religion of the sages and initiates. The hieroglyphs were shown not to be a cryptography but the normal writing used for stone inscriptions and basically the same system as the cursive writings, and the subterranean structures were identified as tombs. Egyptology did in fact unveil and demystify ancient Egypt. Ancient Egypt lost her mystery which after this definitive unveiling lives on only in the imagination of occultism. The rise of the bourgeoisie and the historical sciences marked the end of the alliance of secrecy and enlightenment, as well as of the ideal of a double philosophy.

After having found the access to the original sources, historians of Ancient Egypt dismissed the “Egyptian Mysteries” as pure fantasy. The whole traditional image of Ancient Egypt, as it was based on Greek and Latin sources, was discarded as “Egyptomania” and disposed of as an accumulation of misunderstandings. The hieroglyphs were shown not to be a cryptography encoding esoteric wisdom in symbols, but a normal phonographic script, the subterranean constructions were identified as tombs and the whole concept of a dual culture, religion or philosophy was exploded. In a mnemohistorical perspective, however, these same concepts can be shown to be of highest influence and interest. The hieroglyphic theory, erroneous as it was, fuelled a heated debate on grammatology that culminated in the philosophy of Jacques Derrida. Not less influential proved the theory for emblematic traditions in Western art.<sup>61</sup> The image of ancient Egypt as a dual culture informed not only the secret societies of the eighteenth century but led also, in the writings of Lessing and Mendelssohn, to ideas of double membership that are still important for our time.<sup>62</sup>

But even in a historical perspective, the verdict of ‘misunderstanding’ begins to appear not wholly justified. At least does it seem plausible now to recognize in the Greek image of ancient Egyptian writing and religion a reflection of Late Egypt's self-image, i.e. the form in which it wanted to present itself to the Greek

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<sup>60</sup> Cf. Jan Assmann, *L'Égypte ancienne entre mémoire et science*, Paris 2009, fig. 2.

<sup>61</sup> See Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, ed., *Hieroglyphen. Stationen einer anderen abendländischen Grammatologie* (München: Fink, 2003).

<sup>62</sup> Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 114-148 (English Edition).

visitors, settlers and officials. With the high increase of knowledge about Greco-Roman Egypt in the last years it becomes more and more evident that many of these alleged misunderstandings were shared by Greeks and Egyptians alike.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cf. Assmann, *Égypte*.