

Egyptian Hieroglyphs in Classical Works, between Pride and Prejudice

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Egyptian Hieroglyphs as Symbols

Although the last hieroglyphic inscription known in Egypt dates back to 394 AD,¹ Greek and Roman commentaries about the Ancient Egyptian writing system(s) seem to appear in the fifth century BC.² One of the first authors dealing with this issue is Herodotus – as often with Ancient Egypt – in his *Histories*,³ where he explains that:⁴

[...] where he (*Sesostris*) annexed cities without a fight and without effort, he engraved inscriptions (*γραμμάτων*) on *stelae* with the same content as with people who had behaved bravely and he engraved besides the image of feminine genitals; thus, he wanted to convey that these people were without bravery [...].

Through this evocation of hieroglyphs, we understand that Herodotus ascribes to it a metaphorical functioning with indirect meanings. Even though metaphor is usual in Egyptian⁵, Herodotus' text implies that hieroglyphs possess a symbolic

¹ Inscribed on the Hadrian's door in the Philae temple.

² In this paper, we will not mention every author who wrote about Egyptian hieroglyphs because it represents a far too large documentary mass. However, through bibliographical references, the reader can find every document (s)he requires.

³ Herodotus *Histories* II, 102.

⁴ The translations are based on the edition of the different classical works in *Les Belles Lettres*, modified by the present author.

⁵ See, among others: Orly Goldwasser, "The Narmer Palette and the 'Triumph of Metaphor'", *LingAeg* 2 (1992): 67-85; Mark Collier, "Grounding, Cognition and Metaphor in the Grammar of Middle Egyptian: the Role of Human Experience in Grammar as an Alternative to the Standard Theory Notion of Paradigmatic Substitution", *LingAeg* 4 (1994): 57-87; Orly Goldwasser, *From Icon to Metaphor: Studies in the Semiotics of the Hieroglyphs*, (OBO 142, Freiburg: University Press, 1995); Rune Nyord, "Prototype Structure and Conceptual metaphor: Cognitive Approaches to Lexical Semantics in Ancient Egyptian", in *Lexical Semantics in Ancient Egyptian*, ed. Eitan Grossman, Stéphane Polis, Jean Winand (*LingAeg* SM 9, Hamburg: Widmaier, 2012), 141-174.

nature, an idea that was held until the decipherment of this writing system more than two millennia after.⁶ Thus, around four centuries after Herodotus' stay in Egypt, we read in Diodorus Siculus' work:⁷

Nevertheless, we must talk about this kind of writing which Egyptians call sacred (i.e. hieroglyphs, ἱερογλυφικῶν) [...] Indeed, in their writing, this is not the arrangement of syllables (συλλαβῶν) which conveys the idea (λόγον) to express but a metaphorical meaning (μεταφορᾶς) linked to objects that are copied and a transposition etched in memory by a long exercising.

Likewise, Tacitus wrote at the beginning of the second century AD:⁸

The first ones, Egyptians, used animal figures (figures animalium) to represent ideas (sensus mentis). These monuments, the oldest of human history, still can be seen engraved on stone.

We can also quote Plotinus (third century),⁹ Iamblichus (fourth century),¹⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus (fourth century)¹¹ and Cosmas Indicopleustes (sixth century):¹²

⁶ Even after the discovery of J.-Fr. Champollion in 1822, some authors continued to pretend that Egyptian hieroglyphs had to be considered as symbols without any phonetic value. It is the case, for example, for H. de Balzac. See Daniel Lançon, "L'imaginaire des hiéroglyphes chez les écrivains français au XIX^e s.: égyptosophie, cratyliste et analyse de la psyche" (2013): [reference](#); Jean Winand, "Les auteurs classiques et les écritures égyptiennes: quelques questions de terminologie", in *La langue dans tous ses états. Michel Malaise in honorem*, ed. Christian Cannuyer (*AOB XVIII*, Liège, 2005), 98-103.

⁷ Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* III, §IV, 1. Roughly at the same time, Plutarch shares this idea in his treatise *Isis and Osiris* (§10 in particular): "In it (*temples*), Egyptians refers to Osiris, their lord and king, with an eye and a sceptre. His name, following some interpreters, signifies *who got many eyes*. In their language, *bone* means *a lot* and *iris* (means) *eye*. The sky, which never grows old because it is eternal, is figured by a heart placed on an intense blaze".

⁸ Tacitus *Annals* XI, §XIV. We will comment later the idea that Egyptians were an ancestral people and the first ones to use writing.

⁹ Plotinus *The Enneads* V, 8, §6.

¹⁰ Iamblichus *On the Egyptian Mysteries* VII, 1.

¹¹ Ammianus Marcellinus *History* XVII, IV, 8. We usually consider that the author quotes Hermapion, historian of the fourth century.

¹² John Watson McCrindle, trans., *Cosmas Indicopleustes Christian Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1897) 93f. (III, 6).

I think that this is what Egyptian wise men have understood [...]: to refer to things with wisdom, they don't use drawn letters (τύποις γραμμάτων) which develop themselves in discourse and clauses and which represent sounds and spoken words; they draw images (ἀγάλματα), each one being the picture of a distinct thing; [...] each engraved sign (ἄγαλμα ἐντυπώσαντες) is a science, a wisdom, a real thing, understood in a single time.

I want to explain the theological mode of Egyptians; indeed, they imitate the universal nature and the divine creation when they produce symbolical copies (εἰκόνας τινὰς διὰ συμβόλων) of mystical and intellectual things, hidden and invisible (μυστικῶν καὶ ἀποκεκρυμμένων καὶ ἀφανῶν νοήσεων), in the same way the nature expressed in a symbolical manner the invisible reasons by apparent Forms (ἐμφανέσιν εἶδει τοὺς ἀφανεῖς λόγους διὰ συμβόλων τρόπον τινὰ ἀπετυπώσατο), and that divine creation sketches the truth of Ideas by visible copies (φανερῶν εικόνων).

As for the countless symbolical figures (*formarum notas*) called hieroglyphs (*hieroglyphicas*) [...] it is the ancient authority of the original wisdom which made them knowable.

While the Israelites were still sojourning in Egypt Moses was born, and being reared in the palace of the Egyptian king was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians. Having also from his own observations accepted the sphere and made himself acquainted with astronomy, or even with magic and hieroglyphic letters (ἱερογλυφικὰ γράμματα) - or as I should rather say, the symbols of letters (μᾶλλον δὲ σύμβολα γραμμάτων), for as yet letters were unknown [...].

To sum up, it is easy to notice that the figurative nature of Egyptian hieroglyphs led authors, during many centuries, to see this writing system as composed of symbols to the detriment of any phonetic value. This regard is obviously tinged with Hermeticism¹³ and (Neo-)Platonism¹⁴, the theory of "Ideas" feeding this

¹³ Hermeticism is a philosophical doctrine whose name derives from works edited under the name of Hermes Trismegistus (a fictive character combining features of the Greek god Hermes and the Egyptian god Thot). This trend includes texts treating many different topics: alchemy, mysticism, astrology, the relationship between science and religion, etc. One of the major elements of this philosophical tendency is the need for a divine revelation to acquire knowledge (whatever it be – mostly esoteric knowledge). The *Corpus Hermeticum* is probably the most famous compilation of Hermetic texts. Often quoted during the Middle Ages, it is during the Renaissance that the Hermeticism gains popularity, in religious spheres as well as in philosophic or occultist societies.

¹⁴ Neo-Platonism, with its revealing name, is a philosophical trend aligning with Platonic thought. Starting with Plotinus during the third century AD, this tendency was

“hieroglyphist prejudice” (*infra*).¹⁵ Chairemon of Alexandria¹⁶ (first century), Plotinus and Iamblichus wrote about the access to “Ideas” and to the “intelligible” through Egyptian hieroglyphs. The latter explains:¹⁷

Listen, you too, according to the Egyptians’ intelligence, the intellectual interpretation of symbols (συμβόλων) in abandoning the image of symbolic elements (εἰδῶλον αὐτῶν τῶν συμβολικῶν) that comes from imagination and hearing, to raise yourself to the intellectual truth.

The notion that the Egyptian writing allows one to reach the intelligible realm partly comes from another classical *cliché* about the Egyptian civilisation: its primacy in human history. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato explains that Egyptians, as a millenary people, were the first ones to have at their disposal the scriptural

particularly important during Late Antiquity and still present at least until the seventeenth century. Taking over – among others – the dialectic structure of Plato’s *Parmenides*, the Neo-Platonists offer profound ontological reflections: is the Being unique or multiple? Is it everything or nothing? Is there a “Nonbeing”?

¹⁵ Expression taken from Madeleine David, *Le débat sur les écritures et l’hieroglyphe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles et l’application de la notion de déchiffrement aux écritures mortes* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1965). About the absence of every phonetic nature of hieroglyphs in the Greek thought, see also M. Broze, “La réinterprétation du modèle hiéroglyphique chez les philosophes de langue grecque”, in *Philosophers and Hieroglyphs*, ed. Lucia Morra, Carla Bazzanella (Turin: Rosenberg & Sellier, 2003): 35-49. Finally, about Platonic Ideas, read for example the contributions in Jean-François Pradeau, *Platon, les formes intelligibles* (Paris: PUF, 2001).

¹⁶ The work of Chairemon is known only in an indirect way, through quotations like the one of the *Suda* (tenth century) or the one of J. Tzetzes *Exegesis in Illiadem* I, 97 (12th cent.): “Da nämlich die älteren der Hierogrammateis die Erklärung über die Natur der Götter verheimlichen wollten, überlieferten sie dies mit Hilfe solcher Allegorien, Symbole und Schriftzeichen ihren Kindern, wie der Hierogrammteus Chairemon sagt” (translation by Heinz Josef Thissen, “Zum Hieroglyphen-Buch des Chairemon”, in *jn.t dr.w – Festschrift für Friedrich Junge – Band II*, ed. Gerald Moers, Heike Behlmer, Katja Demuß, Kai Widmaier (Göttingen: Seminar für Ägyptologie und Koptologie, 2006), 626). Clement of Alexandria says of Chairemon that he is a scribe by profession and, so, a specialist of the hieroglyphic writing (see Jean Vergote, “Clément d’Alexandrie et l’écriture égyptienne”, *ChronEg* XVI/31 (1941): 37-38). About Chairemon and his work, see the compilation and comments of Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Chaeremon. Egyptian priest and stoic philosopher* (EPRO 101, Leiden – New York – København – Köln: E.J. Brill, 1987).

¹⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, VII, 2.

practice that they got from the gods.¹⁸ Thoth (*Theuth* in Plato's work) offered the art of writing to the king Thamus (a fictive sovereign) so that Egyptians get "more knowledge, more science and more memory".¹⁹ Even if Plato takes this legend as an opportunity to criticise the exacerbated use of writing by humans to the detriment of oral tradition, the Academician reveals some "admiration and revulsion" against Egypt – like elsewhere in his works.²⁰

The Egyptian Hieroglyphs as a medium for Platonic Ideas

The classical view of Egyptian hieroglyphs can also be linked to such ontological considerations as the Platonic one, which was during many centuries one of the major theories of being and of relations between words and things, between language and reality.²¹ Once again, we need to talk about the theory of "Ideas" (or "Forms")²² to create a direct link between the diverse elements of our thought. Indeed, because Egyptian hieroglyphs are considered signs possessing a peculiar

¹⁸ Plato *Phaedrus*, 274c-275b. This primacy is also present in Tacitus' work but the author holds an uncertainty about the appearance of writing in Egypt: "The Egyptians say that they invented writing and claim that it passed in Greece by the Phoenicians who were lords of seas" (*Annals* XI, 13). Idem in Diodorus Siculus: "By the way, Egyptians claim that writing and the observation of stars were invented in their country" (*Library of History* I, LXIX, 5).

¹⁹ Luc Brisson, "L'Égypte de Platon", *Les études philosophiques* 2/3 (1987): 153-168. B. Mathieu recently highlighted that this section of the Academician's work takes back some Egyptian literary codes (for instance the *incipit*). Mathieu also gives many references about the authenticity of Plato's journey to Egypt: Bernard Mathieu, "En ce temps-là... Voyage d'un *incipit* narratif égyptien des bords du Nil à l'Agora (Platon, *Phèdre*, 274d)", in *Ex Aegypto lux et sapientia. Homenatge al prof. J. Padró Parcerisa*, ed. Nuria Castellano, Maite Mascort, Concepcio Piedrafita, Jaume Vivó (*Nova Studia Aegyptiaca* IX, Barcelona, 2015), 388-391.

²⁰ Luc Brisson, "L'Égypte de Platon", *Les études philosophiques* 2/3 (1987): 167.

²¹ Neo-Platonism offered to the Platonic ontology a renewal and an extended longevity.

²² Terminology, in particular about the word εἶδος, is studied in the paper of Jean-François Pradeau, "Les formes et les réalités intelligibles: l'usage platonicien du terme εἶδος", in J.-Fr. Pradeau (coord.), *Platon, les formes intelligibles*, 2001: 17-54. To summarise, the εἶδος of an entity includes its physical appearance and its abstract nature in order to link it to every other related entity with which it forms a category. The εἶδος is thus close to the "species" and different than the γένος (*genus*). In short, all the entities sharing an εἶδος (for example "being human" or "being blue") can be gathered to establish a category, a species. Thus, in the previous examples, the Platonic Ideas/Forms could be "humanness" and "blueness".

connection with the intelligible, and since this intelligible realm is supposed to explain the existence and characteristics of things, a relationship between hieroglyphs, Ideas and being can be supposed.

In Plato's thought, every "sensible" (perceptible) thing owes its existence to an "intelligible" element which is its cause and which give to it its qualities.²³ So, every sensible entity is *de facto* an assembly of diverse qualities extracted from the Ideas/Forms. Our perception of this entity is only due to these Ideas/Forms, with no characteristic existing *per se*. Thus, words – in particular when they are written – are only the (sensible) linguistic reproduction of (sensible) things that are the concrete and perceptible application of intelligible Forms.²⁴

Language, and in particular its scriptural aspect, has an illusory aspect. And since Plato considers every kind of writing to be dangerous²⁵ – even that written in alphabetical script – we can imagine that his distrust of a graphic system based on images can be more pronounced. Of course, Plato admits that the Egyptians have better understood the Ideas than any other people because they were the first men and that this is the reason why they put it in their sacred writing system. However, his works leave no place for ambiguity as to his warning against any "distortion"²⁶ of thought by writing, not only alphabetical, but more so symbolic and mysterious, as he sees the Egyptian one.

W.J.T. Mitchell sums up this thought in explaining that:²⁷

We imagine that the abyss between words and images is as large as the one which separates words and things or (in the largest sense) culture and nature.

²³ Among many other studies, see J.-Fr. Pradeau (coord.), *Platon, les formes intelligibles*, 2001, Introduction (7-8 in particular).

²⁴ Plato offers an ambivalent speech about language as he does often in his works: on one side he tells us that language is essential if we want to reach the intelligible (because senses are not sufficient), but on the other side language can lead to many illusions if it is used badly. See Walter Gabriele Leszl, "Pourquoi les formes? Sur quelques-unes des raisons pour lesquelles Platon a conçu l'hypothèse des formes intelligibles", in J.-Fr. Pradeau (coord.), *Platon, les formes intelligibles*, 2001: 87-128.

²⁵ Plato *Phaedrus*, 275a-d. See the analysis of this excerpt *infra*, "Opposition between Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the alphabet".

²⁶ Taking back the expression of F. de Saussure in his *Cours de Linguistique générale* (Paris, 1972: 51-52): "Le résultat évident de tout cela, c'est que l'écriture voile la vue de la langue: elle n'est pas un vêtement, mais un travestissement". After, the author talks about "usurpation" of oral power by writing (*ibid.*: 53).

²⁷ William J.T. Mitchell, *Iconologie: image, texte, idéologie* (Paris: Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2009), 91.

Despite the questionable – and questioned – essence of the opposition between “nature” and “culture”, this quotation is interesting because it underlines the gap between images, things and concepts.²⁸ Thus, with this distinction, the traditional view of hieroglyphs as symbols finds a part of explanation: if they are “images”, how could they be “words”? Images used in graphic communicational systems are considered as carrying symbolic values that we have to apprehend (often thanks to a knowledge *a priori* and a learning of underlying concepts),²⁹ so it is then difficult to imagine that hieroglyphs can convey a peculiar phonetic value rather than a notion (the link between the notion and the sign representing it being conventional and symbolic).³⁰

The Egyptian Hieroglyphs as a priests’ prerogative

Another *cliché* about Egyptian hieroglyphs can be seen in other authors’ works: the idea that hieroglyphs would be a prerogative of a small part of the population, namely the priests jealously keeping their secret(s).³¹ Thus, Apuleius talks about rituals and books keeping the magical mysteries of the priests from “uninitiated” persons:³²

There, after having celebrated in the established form the ritual of temple opening and having executed the morning sacrifice, he (the priest) pulls from a hiding place at the bottom of the sanctuary some books where were drawn unknown characters (*litteris ignorabilibus*): on the first ones, animal figures (*figures modi animalium*) of every kind were the abridged expression of liturgical formulas; on others, knobbly or rounded lines in the shape of wheel, or retracting like vines’ tendrils, shielded the lecture of the text from the curiosity of the non-initiated.

²⁸ About this subject, see among others the essential book by Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966).

²⁹ Again we find two elements usually linked to the imaginary concerning hieroglyphs and those who knew its functioning and/or its meaning.

³⁰ In a Peircian way: see Gérard Deledalle, *Charles S. Peirce. Écrits sur le signe* (Paris: Seuil, 1978).

³¹ In the same way that only priests can celebrate initiations and mysterious rituals: Françoise Dunand, “Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand *et al.*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 22-23. We will come back later to mysteries and their link to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

³² Apuleius *The Metamorphoses* XI, 22. The mention of rituals and initiation in Apuleius’ work is studied, for instance, by Jan Assmann, “Pythagoras und Lucius: zwei Formen ‘ägyptischer Mysterien’”, in *Ägyptische Mysterien?*, ed. Jan Assmann, Martin Bommas (Munich: Fink, 2002): 59-75.

In a same way, Diodorus Siculus explains that:³³

Egyptians have two particular kinds of writing; the first one, called common, learned by everybody; the other one, called sacred, only known by the priests and taught to them from father to son among secret things (ἀπορρήτοις).

After, he adds:³⁴

Thus, in according a detailed attention to symbolic meanings present in every object and in exercising their mind by a long practice and memorising, they read in a row what is written.

Through these lines, we understand that only a long “practice” and an intense intellectual training allow knowledge of the key for reading hieroglyphs. Consequently, it seems obvious that the “memorising” in Diodorus’ text was reserved for an elite, given the time required for the realisation of this learning process. Moreover, as Fr. Dunand explains:³⁵

la notion de secret joue un grand rôle dans la pensée religieuse et dans le culte égyptien; les dieux eux-mêmes sont dits « cachés », « secrets », et le service quotidien, qui est un élément essentiel de la liturgie, se déroule loin du public dans le saint des saints auxquels seuls les prêtres les plus élevés dans la hiérarchie ont accès.

The magical and sacred aspects of Egyptians hieroglyphs also appear, among others, in Iamblichus³⁶ and Lucan:³⁷

As gods taught us that the whole language of sacred people (ιερώων ἔθνῶν) like Assyrians and Egyptians fits sacred rituals (διάλεκτον ἱεροπρεπή κατέδειξαν), I think that we must address to gods the chosen formulas in their connatural language (λέξει).

If we follow the reputation, the former – the Phoenicians – dared represent by rough figures (rudibus uocem signare figuris) and set the words. Memphis didn’t

³³ Diodorus Siculus *Library of History* III, §III, 5.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, §IV, 4.

³⁵ Françoise Dunand, “Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand *et al.*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 26.

³⁶ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, VII, 4. About this initiation to hieroglyphic *arcanae*, Iamblichus talks of “mystagogy” allowing reaching the intelligible Ideas through sensible elements figured in writing.

³⁷ Lucan *Civil War (Pharsalia)* III, 220. See also the excerpt of Cosmas Indicopleustes *Christian Topography* where the author talks of “magic” and “symbols” (*supra*).

know yet how to weave the river's papyrus and, engraved on stone, the birds, wild beasts and every being kept the magical language (seruabant magicas animalia linguas).

The relation between “secret” and “magic” is inherent to Egyptian rituals:³⁸

Cette obligation purement formelle du secret s'explique dans le contexte bien particulier où elle apparaît: celui d'une littérature qui est en fait essentiellement magique, et qui le sera de plus en plus.

The “Horapollonian” interpretations

One of the most famous classical works about Egyptian hieroglyphs is that of Horapollon, Alexandrian author of the fifth century who wrote *Hieroglyphica* which was rediscovered in the 15th century. In this treatise, Horapollon describes dozens of hieroglyphs (real or fantasised), their implicit meaning tinged with Hermeticism and extreme symbolism.³⁹ For example, Horapollon says, about the hieroglyph figuring a cynocephalus (𓆎):⁴⁰

How they write the moonrise. When they want to write the moonrise, they depict a cynocephalus in the following attitude: standing, the paws raised toward the sky and wearing a royal insignia on the head. Thus they represent the attitude adopted by the cynocephalus during the rising (of the Moon), so to speak worshipping the goddess, because the light radiates from both.

Likewise, about the swallow sign (𓆏):⁴¹


³⁸ Françoise Dunand, “Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand *et al.*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 27. The author adds (p. 24): “Porphyre nous apprend qu'une des menaces employées par les magiciens égyptiens dans leurs conjurations était de ‘dévoiler les mystères d'Isis, révéler les secrets d'Abydos’ – c'est à dire ceux du culte osirien ; or un papyrus magique rapporte effectivement des menaces comparables [...] Que les magiciens invoquent les mystères me paraît indiquer que ces derniers représentaient, dans l'Égypte de basse époque tout au moins, une réalité bien connue”.

³⁹ See the (French) translation and edition of Baudouin van de Walle and Jean Vergote, “Traduction des *Hieroglyphica* d'Horapollon”, *ChronEg* XVIII (1943): 39-89 and 199-239. See also the more recent German translation of Heinz Josef Thissen, *Des Niloten Horapollon. Band I: Text und Übersetzung* (Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2001).

⁴⁰ Adapted from Heinz Josef Thissen, *Des Niloten Horapollon. Band I: Text und Übersetzung* (Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2001): 15-16 (n°15).

⁴¹ Adapted from *ibid.*, 51 (n°31).

What they represent in drawing a swallow. When they want to indicate the whole parental properties bequeathed to children, they draw a swallow; because it rolls (itself) in the mud and builds a nest for its young when it is about to die.

Nevertheless, despite their allegorical nature, most of the explanations are based on the real use of the hieroglyph in the Egyptian writing system. So, it is probable that Horapollo wrote his treatise with direct testimonies of scribes, even if he gives fanciful commentaries. This is the case of the falcon sign ():⁴²

When they want to indicate a god [...] they draw a falcon. A god because it is a fecund animal with a long life; moreover, because it seemingly is the representation of the sun and because it can look at the sunrays sharper than any (other) bird; this is why physicians use “falcon’s herb” for eyes healing and this is why one sometimes depicts a hieracomorphic (ἱερακόμορφον) Sun as the Lord of visual acuity.

Even though these meanings are obviously exaggerated regarding the Egyptian hieroglyphic system, the falcon is indeed employed to “figure a god”: this sign can be used to note some words like *Hr*, “Horus”, *R*, “Ra”, *ntr*, “god” (more precisely “ritualised entity”), etc. We observe a correct grammatological essence in Horapollo’s work but the author absolutely wants to develop the meanings through symbolic explanations.

We might describe these interpretations as “Horapollonians”, this kind of descriptions being present in many classical works. For example, Diodorus Siculus says that:⁴³

Thus, the falcon means for them (the Egyptians) everything that goes fast, because this animal probably is the fastest bird. This idea (λόγος) is then transposed, via a metaphorical transfer (μεταφέρεται μεταφοραῖς), to everything fast and to everything linked to speed as if we had used words (εἰρημένους).

In a same way, Clement of Alexandria talks about the “fish as a sign of hate”,⁴⁴ thus extending the classical thought that fish were taboo in Ancient Egypt, at

⁴² Adapted from *ibid.*, 5-6 (n°6).

⁴³ Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, III, §IV, 2.

⁴⁴ Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* V, IV, 20, 3-5 and 21, 1-3. See also Albert Deiber, *Clément d’Alexandrie et l’Égypte* (MIFAO X, Cairo: IFAO, 1904): 40-42, and Jean Vergote, “Clément d’Alexandrie et l’écriture égyptienne”, *ChronEg* XVI/31 (1941): 21-38.

least for priests and important persons.⁴⁵ But if this idea is still debated in Egyptological literature, it finds an origin in the fact that the fish hieroglyphs are absent from some *corpora* like the Pyramid Texts.⁴⁶ Likewise, the barbel hieroglyph (𓆎) is sometimes used as classifier in the word 𓆎𓆏𓆎 *bw.t*, “aversion”, “abomination”. Thus, as for Horapollo, this part of Clement’s work shows that the author had some knowledge about hieroglyphs or has had a direct testimony from someone mastering the hieroglyphic writing system. However, the final meaning given to each hieroglyph is not attested as such in the Egyptian thought and seems to stem from the author’s culture.

For his part, Iamblichus suggested – some decades before Horapollo – diverse interpretations of Egyptian hieroglyphs. According to him, the silt (𓆏) represents the “nourishing and generating element or every material species of the nature that the troubled flood of matter takes”;⁴⁷ the lotus flower (𓆏) “indicates an intellectual reign in the empyrean”⁴⁸; the boat (𓆏 or 𓆏) is described as follows: “as for the one who sails on a small boat, he suggests sovereignty that governs the world”.⁴⁹ In these three cases, an Egyptian cultural substratum can be found. The “silt” came from the annual flood and was indeed considered one of the essential elements of agriculture and, by extension, of (re)generation in general. The lotus flower is one of the major representatives of the idea of resurrection. Finally, the boat is sometimes used to evoke the celestial sailing of the dead king. In short, the “Horapollonian” interpretations often have their origin in Egyptian thought and in the true use of the hieroglyphs; but the commentaries made to explain these come from symbolic and fantasist considerations.

⁴⁵ About the supposed taboo associated to fish in Egypt, see for example Ingrid Gamer-Wallert, *Fische und Fischkulte im Alten Ägypten* (*ÄgAbh* 21, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1970): 66; Madeleine Peters-Destéact, *Pain, bière, et toutes bonnes choses... L'alimentation dans l'Égypte ancienne* (Monaco: Champollion, 2005): 304-305; Pascal Vernus, Jean Yoyotte, *Bestiaire des pharaons* (Paris: A. Viénot, 2005): 199; Youri Volokhine, “À propos des « interdits alimentaires » en Égypte ancienne”, in *Regards sur l'interculturalité. Un parcours interdisciplinaire*, dir. Patrick Suter, Nadine Bordessoule-Gilliéron, Corinne Fournier-Kiss (Genève: Métis Press, 2016): 93-103 in particular.

⁴⁶ Inscriptions covering the pyramids walls from the end of the fifth dynasty (*ca.* 2470-2330 BC). This corpus is composed of many ritual formulas and is sometimes described as the “most ancient religious corpus of humanity”.


⁴⁷ Iamblichus, *On the Egyptian Mysteries*, VII, 2.

⁴⁸ *Idem.*

⁴⁹ *Idem.*

We can also quote Ammianus Marcellinus who explains that:⁵⁰

With the image (*speciem*) of the bee making honey they refer to the king, showing with this symbol (*signis*) that a chief must have, by birth, gentleness and the prickling of sting.

The bee ()⁵¹ is indeed usually employed to note the word *bj.tj*, “king of Lower Egypt” and its derivatives. Nonetheless, nothing indicates that there is any link between the sovereign and the “gentleness” or the “prickliness”.

Some rare authors didn’t take part in the “prejudice” about which we discuss. This is the case for Plutarch, who relates an experience that he lived in the “Corinthian Treasure” where one of his companions tried to read the hieroglyphic inscriptions as a succession of symbols.⁵² This acolyte suggested that:

He (*the artist in charge of the inscriptions*) knew that the Egyptians take as a symbol (*σύμβολον*) of the origin and the rise of the sun a newborn child sitting on a lotus flower. I (*Plutarch*) started to laugh: “[...] you figure this sun as a living being originated from earth or as a swamp plant in inscribing it in the land of frogs and of water snakes! Leave this to the Stoics’ melodramatic jumble; and what artists made which is accessory, we must consider it like an accessory (*τὰ δὲ τῶν χειροτεχνῶν πάρεργα παρέργως ἐξετάσωμεν*).

What is interesting here is that Plutarch makes fun of the supposed allegorical aspect of Egyptian hieroglyphs. But we can also consider that Plutarch laughs at the Egyptian mind and at the supposed way of using hieroglyphs to relay several ideas in a metaphorical way.

As for Clement of Alexandria he is often considered one of the first classical authors to have correctly analysed the major part of the functioning of the hieroglyphic writing system. Despite some Horapollonian interpretations in his work, his view of the Egyptian hieroglyphs include phonetic signs and “symbolic” signs, the latter being the ideograms (or logograms):⁵³ the sun (☉) for “sun” or the

⁵⁰ Ammianus Marcellinus, *History* XVII, IV, 11.

⁵¹ Sometimes identified to a wasp due to the double abdomen.

⁵² Plutarch *On the Pythian Responses*, 400a.

⁵³ Albert Deiber, *Clément d’Alexandrie et l’Égypte* (MIFAO X, Cairo: IFAO, 1904): 25-27; Jean Vergote, “Clément d’Alexandrie et l’écriture égyptienne”, *ChronEg* XVI/31 (1941): 31-32. The examples given here are attested in Egyptian texts. The third category of symbolic signs described by Clement is the one of “allegorical” signs, that is to say the hieroglyphs whose interpretation can’t be supported.

eye (𐀀) for “eye” (“imitation” principle); the vulture (𐀁) for “mother” (“tropes”); etc.

But in spite of these rare contradictory writings, the hieroglyphist prejudice linked to the supposed symbolic value of these signs was the dominant opinion until the decipherment of this writing system. As J. Winand underlines it in a brilliant terminological analysis of the classical view of Egyptian hieroglyphs:⁵⁴

Le symbolisme de l'écriture égyptienne est donc largement admis chez les auteurs classiques. Il n'est pas rare de trouver des exemples tendant à expliquer le lien qu'il y a entre les choses représentées et leurs représentations, ou, si l'on préfère, entre le signifié et le signifiant.

Many medieval scholars of different periods have prolonged this consideration⁵⁵ and the modern epoch didn't depart from this rule⁵⁶, as the major part of J.-Fr. Champollion's predecessors.⁵⁷ Champollion himself held over some years a

⁵⁴ Jean Winand, “Les auteurs classiques et les écritures égyptiennes: quelques questions de terminologie”, in *La langue dans tous ses états. Michel Malaise in honorem*, ed. Christian Cannuyer (*AOB* XVIII, Liège, 2005), 99.

⁵⁵ About medieval authors, see Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961), 59 sq. in particular; Jean Winand, *ibid.*, 98; *id.*, *Décoder les hiéroglyphes. De l'Antiquité tardive à l'Expédition d'Égypte* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 2014): 35-66; Stéphane Pasquali, “Les hiéroglyphes égyptiens vus par les auteurs arabes du Moyen Âge ou L'aura du passé pharaonique”, in *À l'école des scribes. Les écritures de l'Égypte ancienne*, ed. Laure Bazin-Rizzo, Annie Gasse, Frédéric Servajean (*CENiM* 15, Montpellier, 2016): 213-225.

⁵⁶ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961): 64-83; Madeleine David, *Le débat sur les écritures et l'hiéroglyphe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles et l'application de la notion de déchiffrement aux écritures mortes* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1965); Jean Winand, *Décoder les hiéroglyphes. De l'Antiquité tardive à l'Expédition d'Égypte* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 2014): 35-66; Magali Charreire, “La place des hiéroglyphes en Europe de la Renaissance au début du XIX^e siècle. Entre signes déchus et écriture ressuscitée”, in *À l'école des scribes. Les écritures de l'Égypte ancienne*, ed. Laure Bazin-Rizzo, Annie Gasse, Frédéric Servajean (*CENiM* 15, Montpellier, 2016), 227-247. See also the different contributions in the part II. “Renaissance” of the book of Aleida Assmann et Jan Assmann (ed.), *Hieroglyphen. Stationen einer anderen abendländlichen Grammatologie. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation VIII* (Munich, 2003), 9-36.

⁵⁷ Even some chronologically close scholars: Alexandre Lenoir, *Nouvelle explication des hiéroglyphes ou des anciennes allégories sacrées des Égyptiens; utile à l'intelligence des*

symbolic view of hieroglyphs,⁵⁸ and even after the publication of his work, many authors have continued to support the symbolic view of Egyptian hieroglyphs – sometimes with virulence.⁵⁹ The consideration upon hieroglyphs as symbols with secret meanings continue to be spread today, as in this article of the French newspaper *Le Monde*, in 2015:⁶⁰

Ce groupe d'experts bénévoles et passionnés tente de faire parler ces données plus sibyllines que des hiéroglyphes.

The link between Egyptian Hieroglyphs and Mysteries

As we highlighted previously, the symbolist consideration in classical works is linked to a magical and sacred view of the hieroglyphic writing system (see the excerpts of Apuleius, Iamblichus, Lucan etc.).⁶¹ In fact, this mystical aspect intensively fed the hieroglyphist prejudice, some commentators seem to accuse the Egyptian scribes and priests for jealously keeping their secrets in hiding them behind mysterious figures. The non-initiated and the foreigner were removed from this ancient knowledge which, in the Greeks' mind, originated from more ancestral times (Platonic view).

This idea of secret and mystery recalls the Greek initiations like the Eleusinian ones. These mysteries were dedicated to Demeter and Persephone in first place and aimed to grant the enlightened one access to the divine grace and, *in fine*, to

monuments mythologiques des autres peuples (Paris: Musée des monuments français, 1809). See also Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann (ed.), *Hieroglyphen. Stationen einer anderen abendländlichen Grammatologie. Archäologie der literarischen Kommunikation VIII* (Munich, 2003), part III. "Romantik und Moderne", 261-366; and Jan Assmann, *L'Égypte ancienne, entre mémoire et science* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2009), chapter III.1.

⁵⁸ Among others, see the preface of Henri Sottas for the famous *Lettre à M. Dacier* republished in 1922 for the centenary of its reading in the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres: *Lettre à M. Dacier relative à l'alphabet des hiéroglyphes phonétiques – Édition du centenaire précédée d'une étude sur le déchiffrement par Henri Sottas* (Paris, 1922): 8-37.

⁵⁹ Daniel Lançon, "L'imaginaire des hiéroglyphes chez les écrivains français au XIX^e s.: égyptosophie, cratylisme et analyse de la psyche" (2013): [reference](#); Jean Winand, *Décoder les hiéroglyphes. De l'Antiquité tardive à l'Expédition d'Égypte* (Bruxelles: Académie royale de Belgique, 2014): 98-103.

⁶⁰ Paper published in *Le Monde* on Friday 6th March 2015 and entitled "L'improbable 'accident' du MH370".

⁶¹ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961): 44-45.

salvation and eternal life.⁶² The initiated persons mustn't reveal anything about these eschatological rituals, the priesthood being the ultimate level of knowledge of the mysteries. The link with Egypt is clear, for example through the relation with priests and the keeping of secrets that a simple person can't comprehend. From Antiquity, some authors wanted to see in Egypt the land of origin for Eleusinian mysteries,⁶³ highlighting (among others) the identification of Demeter with Isis: this is the case, for example, of Herodotus⁶⁴ and Apuleius⁶⁵. The fact that Isis is associated with Demeter – and because of it to Eleusinian rituals and to resurrection – can also be linked to the Osirian myth where Isis regenerates her husband, Osiris. Due to that, Isis is considered one of the major goddesses in relation to life after death.⁶⁶

⁶² See for example Jean-Claude Belfiore, *Grand dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* (Paris: Larousse, 2010), entry “Eleusis”: “Les mystères posent les questions ignorées par la religion officielle et tentent d’apporter les réponses: quel sens donner à l’existence humaine ? Quel salut pour l’individu?”. Likewise, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* (480-483): “Happy among men is the one who assisted to these rituals! Because the one who is not initiated to mysteries, the excluded one, will not have the same destiny under the moist earth, even if he is dead”.

⁶³ Hypothesis perpetuated until the end of the 20th century but now disproved. See Michael B. Cosmopoulos, *Bronze Age Eleusis and the origins of the Eleusinian mysteries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015): 155-156. See also the commentaries of Laurent Bricault who talks about a possible transformation of original Isiac rituals to initiatory rites after the trip of a Greek mystagog to Egypt: Laurent Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013): 430-431. However, we don't deny the possible existence of some “Egyptian mysteries”: see Françoise Dunand, “Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand et al., (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 17-30 in particular.

⁶⁴ Herodotus, *Histories* II, 59: “Isis [...] that is called Demeter”.

⁶⁵ Apuleius, *The Metamorphoses* XI, 5, 3: “Egyptians, powerful thanks to their ancient knowledge, honour me with a personal cult and call me with my true name, the queen Isis”. See other references and explanations in Françoise Dunand, “Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand et al., (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 29-30.

⁶⁶ Upon this subject, see the commentaries of Friedrich Junge, “Isis und die ägyptischen Mysterien”, in *Aspekte der spätägyptischen Religion*, ed. W. Westendorf (*GOF* IV RÄ 9, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1979), 93-115. Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History* I, XXII, 6-7) explains that the genitals of Osiris were “thrown into the river” by Typhon, that Isis “gave the order to honour these parts” and that “this is why Greeks, who borrowed orgies and Dionisos' feasts from Egypt, honour these genitals in mysteries (μυστηρίοις), initiations (τελεταῖς) and sacrifices devoted to this god (*Osiris*) under the name of

Eleusinian mysteries were also linked to symbols and emblems that some authors connected with Platonic Ideas that were supposed to rationalise the world.⁶⁷ We already emphasised the relation between these Ideas and the Egyptian hieroglyphs (*supra*) and we will come back to it later. Moreover, Isis was considered Hermes' daughter,⁶⁸ Hermes being identified to Thoth by the Greeks. Isis is sometimes regarded as the creator of writing with Thoth.⁶⁹ This connection between Isis and Hermes/Thoth implies her link to the hieroglyphs and to the secrets of which they are supposed to keep the *arcanae*. Finally, the mysteries of Isis are also mentioned in relation to one of the ancient scholars we already quoted: Chairemon of Alexandria.⁷⁰

To sum up, mysteries and hieroglyphs were adorned with the same hermetic fineries and supposed to enable the initiated persons access to the salvation in divine grace thanks to some esoteric knowledge. The relationship between Platonic philosophy and Orphic theories emphasises that the Eleusinian rituals and the hieroglyphic writing were considered access to the ultimate knowledge: the one of the world and the one of life in general.

phallus". See other excerpts and other references in Françoise Dunand, *Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine*", in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise Dunand *et al.*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1975), 15 *sq.*

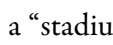
⁶⁷ Plato's philosophy (like the Pythagorean one) is also linked to Eleusis and its mysteries through Orphism, a doctrine supposed to assure an eternal life and for which Herodotus and Plutarch imagine an Egyptian (Isiac) origin. Following Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History* IV, XXV, 2 *sq.* and 64, 4), Orpheus travelled to Egypt and taught the mysteries to the Greeks after this. Because of this, Orphism was linked to the Eleusinian rituals and picked up by the Neo-Platonists, like the hieroglyphist prejudice that they propagated. See for example Jean-Claude Belfiore, *Grand dictionnaire de la mythologie grecque et romaine* (Paris: Larousse, 2010), entry "Orphisme".

⁶⁸ Plutarch *Isis and Osiris*, 355, 12d *sq.* It's here that Plutarch mentions the "wisdom" of Isis and her keeping of mysteries that she reveals only to the worthy, the ones who "protect it (*the divine doctrine*) behind symbols sometimes obscure and dark, sometimes clear and bright".

⁶⁹ Aretalogy of Isis of the Maronée (*RICIS* 114/0202), translated and commented by Luc Bricault, *Les cultes isiaques dans le monde gréco-romain* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2013): 429: "She (*Isis*) discovered with Hermes the writings and, among these, sacred writings for mystagog and public writings for everyone".

⁷⁰ He is mentioned by St Augustinus *The City of God* X, 11, 1-2. See Pieter Willem van der Horst, *Chairemon. Egyptian priest and stoic philosopher* (*EPRO* 101, Leiden – New York – København – Köln: E.J. Brill, 1987): 54.

Fanciful and mixed ornaments

Since the Roman period, the symbolist prejudice led to the creation of monuments decorated à l'égyptienne, mixing true Egyptian elements and a global Roman style. This is the case with the Domitian obelisk whose text associates Roman and Egyptian parts. The former mention especially the imperial families (e.g. the Flavians) and some Roman titles as “Imperator Caesar Domitian Augustus (*Sebastos*)”, phonetically inscribed *zwtqrtr q'srs tmydjns Sbsts* [Fig. 1]. The latter can be found in epithets that are typically Egyptian.⁷¹ *Idem* with the Hadrian's obelisk dedicated to Antinoüs and whose texts are written in hieroglyphs while including some elements of the Graeco-Roman world.⁷² This is the case with the passage where a “stadium” ( *hgzw*)⁷³ is mentioned with athletes supposed to participate in games for Antinoüs. J.-Cl. Grenier has shown that “dans tout ce passage voué à l'évocation des *Antinoeia* et dont le contenu est totalement étranger aux réalités égyptiennes le rédacteur du texte a dû « transposer »”.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961): 54. The author explains that the obelisk is dedicated to Horakhty, a solely Egyptian god.

⁷² About this obelisk, see the studies of Alfred Grimm, Dieter Kessler, Hugo Meyer, *Der Obelisk des Antinoos* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994) and Jean-Claude Grenier, *L'Osiris Antinoos* (CENiM 1, Montpellier, 2008). The latter explains that “on soulignera l'exploit d'érudition de ce prêtre lettré [*the one in charge of the monument inscriptions*] qui, entre les années 130 et 135 de notre ère, composa ces textes hiéroglyphiques en égyptien « classique » (depuis longtemps devenue langue morte) en devant traduire ou transposer (sans doute à partir d'un texte rédigé en grec) de nombreux passages exposant des réalités étrangères au vocabulaire de l'égyptien” (p. 2).

⁷³ Translated by “*Kampfplatz*” by Alfred Grimm in Hugo Meyer (ed.), *Der Obelisk des Antinoos* (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1994): 53 (with commentaries and references in p. 78, note 129). This word is related to the demotic *hgy* (CDD 09.1: 286), usually translated by “place for combat”. It appears in pKrall relating the story of Inaros' cuirass and has surely been adapted by the hierogrammat of the Antinoüs obelisk (this is why J.-Cl. Grenier talks about “transposition”). About *hgy/hgzw*, see Friedhelm Hoffmann (ed.), *Der Kampf um den Panzer des Inaros. Studien zum P. Krall und seiner Stellung innerhalb des Inaros-Petubastis-Zyklus* (MPER XXVI, Vienna: Brüder Hollinek, 1996): 284 and n.1579 (see also *Wortregister*, “übrige Wörter”, *hky/hgy*).

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.



Figure 1: Cartouches from the “Pamphylian” Obelisk (Domitian)
Source: Nestor L’Hôte, *Notice historique sur les obélisques égyptiens* (Paris, 1836), 71 (1)

The European Renaissance was a very productive epoch concerning *Egyptionising* patterns [Fig. 2]. However, conversely to Roman monuments, modern elements don’t have any reflection in Egyptian documents and are purely decorative creations derived from the supposed symbolism of the hieroglyphic writing system.⁷⁵



Figure 2: Pseudo-Obelisk covered of imaginary hieroglyphs
Source: J. van der Noot, *Lofsang van Brabant*, 1580, 36

⁷⁵ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961): 64-67. See also Madeleine David, *Le débat sur les écritures et l’hieroglyphe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles et l’application de la notion de déchiffrement aux écritures mortes* (Paris: SEVPEN, 1965): 22 sq. in particular.

Opposition between Egyptian Hieroglyphs and the alphabet

Through these elements, we understand that the classical authors saw the hieroglyphic writing system both in a pejorative way (abstruse system of symbols whose use and comprehension are tough), a fearful way (divine and magical essence) but also in an appreciative way (primordial writing, access to the intelligible and to a deep knowledge of the world). The fact that hieroglyphs are images and opposed to the alphabet contributed to the heightening of the classical prejudice. Even when the symbolism doesn't appear directly – but is still present – the belief in the pre-eminence of the alphabet over every figurative writing is obvious, as in Ammianus Marcellinus:⁷⁶

The Ancient Egyptians didn't write, like today, with a determined and accommodating (*facilis*) number of letters (*litterarum*) that can express everything the human mind can conceive; but the characters (*litterae*) are used to express a name or a particular verb; sometimes they even signify complete sentences.

Even if the author talks about “name” (*nominibus*) and “verb” (*uerbis*) in this passage, the symbolic interpretation (explicitly mentioned in the next sentence) is obvious, for example when he mentions some “characters” that have to be read as “complete sentences” (*integros sensus*). Moreover, the application of a peculiar name or verb to each sign corresponds to the negation of any phonetic essence of the hieroglyphs in favour of a crude reading, notion after notion. In this way, each image wouldn't correspond to a phoneme or a row of phonemes but to a word or a concept linked to the sign in a conventional way.

It is true that Plutarch talks about an Egyptian alphabet in his treatise *Isis and Osiris*,⁷⁷ but he mentions it parallel to metaphorical interpretations and symbolic explanations of signs and texts (*supra*). Thus, it is not an “alphabet” (note that the word itself doesn't appear) in the sense of the Greek or Latin one.

Erik Iversen proposed to see in the classical view of hieroglyphs a consequence of the authors' inability to read these signs and of their global ignorance to this writing system:⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Ammianus Marcellinus *History* XVII, IV, 10.

⁷⁷ Plutarch, *Isis and Osiris*, 374, §56: “Moreover, 5 multiplied by itself gives a square equal to the number of the Egyptian letters (τῶν γραμμάτων παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις) and to the that of years the Apis bull used to live”.

⁷⁸ Erik Iversen, *The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs in European Tradition* (Copenhagen: Gec Gad Publishers, 1961): 41. Françoise Dunand (“Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine”, in *Mystères et syncrétismes*, ed. Françoise

As a general rule it may be said that none of the classical authors knew what they were writing about as far as the hieroglyphs were concerned, although most of them, may be more or less unconsciously, tried to cover their ignorance with the pompous cloak of a learned “philosophic” terminology.

Perhaps this statement is in some cases exaggerated: we have seen that many ancient scholars have had access to testimonies from Egyptians who mastered the hieroglyphic writing – or at least knew the true meaning of several signs.⁷⁹ But it is true that most of these authors didn’t have any peculiar knowledge about the functioning of this writing system. Thus, it is possible that thanks to some rhetorical methods, this ignorance was turned into a declared criticism of the Egyptian writing system. *De facto*, classical authors pointed out the defects of the Egyptian graphic system compared to their own scriptural practice. More, they imputed their ignorance of hieroglyphs’ meaning to the Egyptian priests who “jealously” guarded the secrets of these signs: if the *arcanae* of the hieroglyphic writing can’t be grasped, it is both because of their enigmatic essence and because of the priests who refuse to surrender their knowledge that they guard for selfish reasons.

The excerpt of Plato’s *Phaedrus* already mentioned highlights another criticism: the one of the scriptural practice in general that the Academician considers as an

Dunand *et al.*, (Paris: Geuthner, 1975): 27-28) thinks that the “notion de « doctrine secrète », réservée aux prêtres, peut s’expliquer en partie du fait que la complexité des textes théologiques, surtout à l’époque ptolémaïque, devait les rendre peu accessibles aux voyageurs grecs, quelle que soit la qualité de leurs informateurs [...] Ainsi, le « mystère » ou le « secret » n’est peut-être pas autre chose, dans certains cas, que le « non-communicable », ou le « difficilement communicable »”.

⁷⁹ For example Clement of Alexandria and Horapollon (*supra*). The latter, in his *Hieroglyphica*, gives indeed several good meanings but false explanations. Among the correct meanings are the hare linked to the idea of “opening” (𓆎 *wn*, “open”), the goose (χηναλώπεκα) for “son” (𓆎 *s3*, “son” – the word is originally written with a duck but in hieratic and in some hieroglyphic writings the fowl is hardly identifiable), the beetle for “become” (𓆎 *hpr*, “become, occur”), etc. See the commentaries of Baudouin van de Walle and Jean Vergote, “Traduction des *Hieroglyphica* d’Horapollon”, *ChronEg* XVIII (1943): 39-89 and 199-239, and of Heinz Josef Thissen, *Vom Bild zum Buchstaben – vom Buchstaben zum Bild. Von der Arbeit an Horapollons Hieroglyphika* (JAWLM 3, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1998). Thissen describes Horapollon as a “Grammatiker und Philosoph [...] in Alexandria” (p. 10), his Egyptian origin and his grammarian training explaining his relative knowledge of the Egyptian writing system.

enemy of memory. Even if he puts these words in the mouth of Thamus, an Egyptian king who has received the writing from the hands of Thoth, Plato says:⁸⁰

Unrivalled master of arts, o Theuth, there are men able to give birth to the institution of arts; and there are men able to appreciate what this art possesses of harm or utility for humans who have to use it. Now, as the father of writing characters (πατήρ ὧν γραμμάτων) and because of your kindness for these, you pretend that they got the contrary of their real effects! This knowledge will have as consequence for those who will acquire it to make their soul forgetful because they will stop using their memory: in having faith in writings (γραφής), it is from outside – thanks to foreign traces (ἀλλοτριῶν τύπων) – and not from inside thanks to themselves that they will remember things. So, this is not for memory but for recalling that you found a solution. As for instruction, it is a semblance and not the reality that you give to your students: when, with your help, they will be packed with knowledge without having received any teaching, they will seem to be able to judge thousands of things despite the fact that they are deprived of judgement; and they will be insufferable because they will be falsely educated men instead of being educated men!

Moreover, following Plato, writing is distant from thought and doesn't allow transcribing of it.⁸¹ Orality itself can't do it despite that it is considered as directly related to thought. Thus, writing is used to the detriment of thought and memory, and it is possible that Plato indirectly blames Egyptians – who are the first men to use writing after Thoth's gift – for having led people to adopt dubious practices.

Conclusion

Over the preceding pages, we have seen four major perspectives on Egyptian hieroglyphs in classical works: 1) these hieroglyphs are symbols (as opposed to letters) linked to concepts, "Ideas"; 2) only the initiated persons (in the first place the priests) can claim to the read and interpret of inscriptions, thus to knowledge

⁸⁰ Plato *Phaedrus*, 275a-b.

⁸¹ "the one who thinks that in writing characters (γράμμασι) he can put in it a technical knowledge, and the one who takes it with the idea that writing characters (γράμματα) will produce something sure and solid, these ones surely have a great naivety and surely they don't know the real prediction of Ammon: they think that a written treatise is more than a way, for the one who knows, to remember the things concerning writing!" (§275c-d).

in general; 3) the hieroglyphic writing possesses a deep magical essence due to the sacred nature of its signs,⁸² this writing system being considered a divine one; 4) Egyptians, as the first people in history, have access to the intelligible world reproduced in a sensible way in their graphic system, the understanding of the signs being the way to reach the final consciousness.

Classical authors interested in Egyptian traditions were numerous, the hieroglyphic writing being one of the most intriguing in their view. This supposed using of symbols, as opposed to the alphabet, could only arouse curiosity and diverse analyses in these scholars' works. From more or less direct testimonies to commentaries of ancient works, Greek and Roman analysts invented an imaginary view of the Egyptian hieroglyphs that was spread till the 19th century – and sometimes still today. This image of the most famous scriptural system of Ancient Egypt was then tinted with mockery, fear and admiration, giving birth to diverse interpretations that were more or less justified. From Herodotus to Horapollo through Plutarch and Clement of Alexandria, hieroglyphic writing, and through it the Egyptian culture in general, has held in the classical world a picture halfway between occidental pride, ignorant prejudice and philosophical envy.

⁸² See Diodorus Siculus (*Library of History* I, LV, 7): “These stelas (*of Sesostris* (?)) bear the following inscription in Egyptian characters that we call sacred” (εἶχον Αἰγυπτίους γράμμασι τοῖς ἱεροῖς λεγομένοις).