

# SURVIVALS OF THE ANCIENT RELIGION IN EGYPT

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A religion with a past of about four thousand years does not disappear suddenly as a result of state interdictory orders. In Egypt it was the year 391 when the decree of Emperor Theodosius put an end to the official forms of ancient religions (Kákosy 1984a). The long conflict between the Christian Church and paganism came to a dramatic conclusion with the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria. The suppression of the cults in the temples did not lead, however, to a radical change in the mind of the former pagan population. The heathen gods, regarded by the Christians as frightful demons, did not vanish from the folk-religion with the closing of their temples.

The study of the survivals of the ancient Pharaonic religion raises the question, how far can the gods of the past be recognized or identified in the sources of Coptic and Arabic Egypt<sup>1</sup>. Coptic magical texts (Kropp 1930-31) are of prime importance in the study of the rests of Egyptian mythology in the Christian period. Apart from the names of the gods numerous mythological elements are preserved in these texts (the illness of the child Horus, the healing power of her mother, Isis, etc.). The names of the forbidden gods were obviously believed to possess some sort of mysterious power. It is a well-known feature of Egyptian magic since the Old Kingdom that its practitioners thought to enhance the efficacy of their spells by narrative mythological elements taken from the world of the gods. These mythological introductory parts were frequently used also by Coptic magicians and they were believed to bring about the same effect for the client of the magician which was described in them with regard of the gods in a critical situation.

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<sup>1</sup> For the problem of survivals cf. Kákosy 1984b (with older literature).

The mythological precedence was only one of the motives taken over from Pharaonic magic. Another element, the practice of threatening of the gods<sup>2</sup>, came to the Coptic texts probably by way of the Graeco-Egyptian magical texts which comprised also some sections written in Coptic language. Usually the magician threatened to cause a cosmic disorder, if his wishes were not fulfilled by the gods. This feature of Egyptian magic, grotesque enough to cause perplexity, became widely known in the Roman Period even outside the borders of Egypt, and was discussed in the late Neo-Platonic philosophy by Porphyrius and Iamblichus (*De mysteriis*, VI.5 ff.).

The ancient Egyptian pantheon was widely represented in Coptic spells until as late as the 8th cent. A.D. Isis kept her role of the good mother who would do anything for her physically weak son, who suffers either from poor health or the passion of unrequited love. In one of the mythological stories the news of the stomach ailment of Horus is brought to his mother by a demon of marvellously quick march (Kropp 1930-31 II, 9 ff.).

Isis is not only the mother goddess protecting her son, she is also the wife who guards Osiris against his arch-enemy, Seth and when he finally falls victim to the conspiracy of Seth, it is Isis who takes care of his burial conforming to the sacred rituals. In one of the Coptic magical texts which speaks of the consecration of the holy oil, it is said that this is the holy oil "that flows under the throne of Sabaoth, the oil with which Isis anointed the bones of Osiris" (Worrell, 1935:184, 186). The Osiris-Isis pair plays a prominent part both in the Coptic part of the Greek Magical Papyrus in Paris (*PGM* no. IV) and the Coptic Pap. Schmidt (Satzinger 1975:37-50). In both cases the texts were used as love charms.

Besides the family of Osiris, other Egyptian gods appear as well in Coptic magical literature. We find in the spells the name of Anubis, Thoth, Nephthys (Kropp 1930-31, *passim*), and the late-Egyptian Petbe, personification of divine retribution. The latter reappears as a com-

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<sup>2</sup> *LÄ* II, 664-669 (s.v. "Götterbedrohung", H. Altenmüller).

pound being in a Coptic magical text (Lange 1932:161 ff.) which includes numerous names of Greek gods as well. He is described as a god with the face of a lion, while the back of his face is that of a bear. Petbe must have been a well-known name, since it is mentioned also in a letter of Shenute. Even the syncretistic identification of Petbe with the Greek Kronus was familiar to him (Erman 1895:47). In addition, we learn from Shenute that the ancient Egyptian Shai, the personified Fate enjoyed veneration as the demon of the house and the village (Zoega 1810:457; Quaegebeur 1975:39, 161).

The story of a haunted temple at Abydos is characteristic of the mentality of the village people in the transition period of dying paganism. In the Coptic life of Apa Moyses the god Bes figured as a wicked spirit. The villagers came to the saint and implored him for help, because the demon knocked down those who were passing by the temple. Some of these people became blind on one of their eyes, others were made dumb or deaf by the demon. The saint entered the temple with some monks and began to exorcise the demon who tried to frighten away him and his companions by making a terrible roaring and causing an earthquake. Although the text breaks away just at the most thrilling part, there is no doubt that the struggle ended with the victory of the saint (Kákosy 1966).

This incident is a clear proof, how much the mind of the new Christians was imprinted with terror of the vanquished deities of the past. Though dispossessed of their temples, their cult and priesthoods, the gods were still living realities endowed with dreadful power.

The foregoing cases of survival are nothing more than examples taken at random. It is common in all of them that the gods appear by name, and there is no doubt as to their identity. I suggest to designate this type of texts as direct survivals as opposed to another body of evidence in which the ancient mythological elements appear in an indistinct or distorted form. We can use these latter data as secondary evidence.

By way of illustration I refer to a well-known group of early Christian lamps<sup>3</sup> decorated with a frog and bearing the inscription "I am the resurrection". In Pharaonic religion the goddess Heqet (*Hq.t*) as a frog is a symbol of rejuvenation and resurrection. In the hieroglyphic writing the word *wḥm nḥ* "resurrection" is written with the frog-determinative (*Wb.* I, 344.4). While the goddess Heqet is not attested by name in Coptic texts, the lamps speak clearly for the continuity of a popular form of the cult of the frog.

A frequently quoted relief in the Louvre (probably 5th cent.) of a falcon-headed equestrian spearing a crocodile may be interpreted either as Horus killing Seth in crocodile-form or else as an equestrian saint, probably Saint Theodor the general, subjugating the dragon (Vandier 1973 pl. XXVIII). The picture may have had an ambiguous meaning even to the contemporary mind.

The representations showing Christ as treading on hostile animals originate directly in Psalm 91,13 ("thou shalt tread upon the lion and the adder: the young lion and the dragon shalt thou trample under feet"). In case of a representation in Dongola (Sudan) Christ is depicted as treading upon a snake and a lion (Godlewski 1982). In this case one can assume besides the text of the Psalm an additional influence of the Horus stelae representing the young Egyptian god trampling crocodiles underfoot.

It is interesting to note that the falcon-god representations seem to have given rise to associations even with Christ. In one of the chapels of the temple of Medinet Habu in the so-called slaughterhouse a cross was engraved on the figure of the god Khonsu-Noferhotep and beside his figure there is the abbreviation of the name of Jesus-Christ (IC XC)<sup>4</sup>. In the same temple in the second court a cross was incised in the solar disks on the heads of the figures of Horus-Behdet.

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. e.g. Wrede 1968-69:83 ff. The inscription is taken from the Evangel of John XI,25.

<sup>4</sup> I express my best thanks to Mr. J. Kárpáti who drew my attention to this relief.

The name of the god of the flood of the Nile, Hapy (*Hḥpy*), does not occur in Coptic literature, but a remarkable report about a miracle in 600 A.D. testifies to the deep roots of the cult of the Nile in the folk-religion. Two gigantic creatures, one resembling a man, the other a woman, (i.e. the Nile god and his female counterpart Euthenia) emerged from the Nile (Theophylactos Simocattes, *Oic. Hist.* VII. 16). This wonder caused a great excitement all over Egypt.

The persistence of ancient beliefs in folk religion is well exemplified by the cult of the trees. The most famous of them, the Virgin's Tree at Matarieh, the ancient Heliopolis (Iunu) was in the Middle Ages a destination of many pilgrims who visited the Holy Land, because it was associated with the visit of the Holy Family to Egypt. In Pharaonic times here was the place of the sacred Ished tree, the symbol of divine Kingship, and also the goddess Iusaas (*Jws-ḥs*) had a sacred tree in Heliopolis<sup>5</sup>. This is a typical case of secondary, indirect survival. The name of the tree did not survive, and the religious background of the cult changed as well. In spite of the new features the continuity is fairly sure, and all the more so since the cult of the Ished tree is attested as late as the Roman period<sup>6</sup>.

A similar case of secondary survival can be seen each year in Luxor on the occasion of the *mūlid* of Abu l-Haggāg, the Muslim patron saint of the town. The barque processions in his honour, during which three boats are carried around Luxor, represent a survival of the festivals of Amun, the lord of the Luxor temple (Biegman 1990:96).

Evidence of different kinds of survivals is practically limitless and we could go on indefinitely in adducing examples. In spite of the abundance of the material, there are, however, several fields within this complex phenomenon in which our documentation is rather scanty, and further data are badly needed. Accordingly, future research has to meet two main desiderata.

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<sup>5</sup> Sacred trees at Heliopolis, *LÄ* II, 1112 (s.v. "Heliopolis", L. Kákosy).

<sup>6</sup> *LÄ* III 183 (s.v. "Ischedbaum", L. Kákosy).

1/ Intensive research work first of all in villages in Upper-Egypt in which, despite the rapidly changing life style of the *fellahs* traditional folk customs and beliefs are still alive.

2/ Practical ways of methodology must be elaborated. A clear distinction must be made on one hand between different kinds of survivals, such as folk customs, magical practices, making of talismans, divination, etc., and the phenomenon of survivals in different ages on the other. Quite different specialization and methods are required if one studies e.g. ancient Egyptian religious motifs in Coptic hagiographic literature or else if one tries to trace back magical prescriptions in the Picatrix to late-Egyptian magic.

Obviously, there is not a single scholar in the world who could cope with the requirements of a wide field of research like this. Some sort of international co-operation would be needed between Egyptologists, specialists of Arabic Egypt, social anthropologists and scholars working in comparative religion. The fields should be divided and the results collected in data bases.

As a matter of course, I do not cherish illusions as to an early realization of this dream. At any rate, here in Hungary, such an interdisciplinary co-operation (between the author of this article and Prof. A. Fodor) has been working well over the past twenty years and there are also plans of common works for the future.

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