
This small but important monograph is an extension of the Heidelberg Professor’s interest in cultural memory, memnohistory, and the interactions between the Greeks and the Egyptians. It continues the epoch-making study in his remarkable Moses the Egyptian on the persistence of cultural icons and topoi (Cambridge MA, 1997). The reader is also directed to my review in this journal of Assmann’s intriguing study of the ‘Veiled Image of Sais’, Vol. 32, 2000, 56-7). The uninitiated should be forewarned that this latest essay is one of many that reflect the author’s fascination with cultural dynamics such as religion, philosophy and art.

Assmann commences here with a useful though brief overview of the history of Egypt from the Saite Period (Dynasty XXVI) to the early Roman Empire. Thereupon he begins to examine the texts. Assmann lays great emphasis upon the varying cultural and political backgrounds of the Greek visitors (e.g., he contrasts Hekataeus of Miletus with Herodotus; both with Hekataeus of Abdera). Frequently the sociological underpinnings of these writers have been ignored, resulting in the traditional (indeed almost canonical) listing of bare names, dates, and few often unsympathetic comments by these men. This Assmann eschews. To put it more precisely if not fairly, he is too great a Wissenschafiler to allow himself to descend into nineteenth century historiography or a practice à la Eduard Meyer.

Quite to the contrary, Assmann marches into the forest with a perspicacity that others lack. For example, I relished his suggestion concerning the work of Hekataeus of Abdera for Ptolemy I (‘eine Art Fürstenspiegel’). In like manner there is a keen differentiation between the two major epochs of cultural interaction between the Greeks and Egypt. According to Assmann, the first concentrated upon history, geography, and cultural-historical and political questions whereas the second was concerned with religious themes. Hence, the third chapter proceeds to this ‘great theme’, Theology. One can see immediately the use in Egypt of ‘political theology’, a dynamic not present in Classical
Greece. (In this vein I consider Assmann's earlier work, *Politische Theologie zwischen Ägypten und Israel*, Munich, 1995.) The typically Egyptian preoccupation with secrecy and *mysterium* is, in fact, one of many *nexus* upon which Assmann focuses. But, as he is quick to clarify (37), this secrecy does not imply a 'mystery' in the Greek sense. Once more, then, the basic differences between cultures must not be sought from an elemental and superficial viewpoint. Herodotus is a classical example of how an amateur with great intelligence but bulging eyes can be fooled into almost anything by charlatans and benefactors alike.

The dual conception of law and right, order and politics are discerningly explored. Assmann highlights diverse ideas about infinity and religion, and how they formed the diametrically opposed viewpoints of historical writing; that is, what it was deemed necessary to preserve, what *tendency* lay behind the account, and how the differing religious-theological-political norms influenced the orientation. (Clearly, all peoples of the world have historical consciousness, so Assmann did not need to refute any cultural-chauvinistic beliefs of modern scholars.)

In this study, then, the reader will find a new approach which, although neither debunking nor revisionist, is nevertheless compelling. The reason is his vantage point: Assmann has worked in the arena of theology and religion for over thirty years and his perspectives span modern literary as well as philosophical foundations.

For example, the question of 'grammatology' has yet to be discussed in any great detail. But it is Assmann who now for the first time juxtaposes thoughts about writing, especially the invention of writing, with the conservative wisdom of the Egyptians (66). He places the symbolic nature of the hieroglyphs in the context of late Platonist philosophy.

A final section of the essay is devoted to the opposite vector; namely, the way the Egyptians regarded the Greeks. 'Greek Egyptomania is a literary problem' according to Assmann (75) whereas the Nile valley saw things in a very different medium and light, as exemplified by the famous Oracle of the Potter as well as portions of the Corpus Hermeticum (tractate 16 in particular). Similarly, Assmann covers a part
of a late Greek tractate, the *kore kosmou*, one that reflects a pessimistic anthropology.

All in all, this short volume by Assmann is another major contribution to the ever-widening search for the cross-cultural dynamics between Egypt and the Greeks. What I found most refreshing was the author’s continual references to the mental, economic, and political background of the Greek authors. This aspect has rarely been mentioned, let alone examined, by other scholars. Another merit of this intellectual approach is, to an Egyptologist, an obvious one; namely, Assmann’s strength with regard to any facet of religion, religious thought, theology and philosophy.

This short work is not a repetition of the standard themes of Greek-Egyptian interaction; nor is it yet another historical overview. Indeed, it is not even an introduction to the topic but rather a fully-developed and systematized thematic survey. We are once more in debt to the wide-ranging intellect of Jan Assmann, who has successfully navigated his cultural-religious ship of state between bland historicism and simple-minded literary analysis.

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