

EGYPT AND GREECE: CULTURAL COOPERATION

General Plan for a Series of Connected Projects and Conferences on GRECO-EGYPTIAN INTERACTION IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

The relations between the Aegean world and North Africa were always significant and extended back to the Bronze Age. Archaeological finds testify to trade and political connections down to about the end of the 2nd millennium B.C., that is to the period of the commotions associated in Egyptian history with the “People of the Sea” or “of the Islands in the midst of the Sea”, and in Greek History with the great upheaval that signaled the end of the Mycenaean order. Legends like the Argonautic expedition and historical origins as the Theran colonization of Cyrene register in various ways such real relationships. And if there seems to be a discontinuation of the previous ties (at least on the same level) in the Dark Ages of Greece, it is because the ebb and flow of the relationships appear to follow the decline and rise of the Aegean system’s dynamism in successive periods.

With the emergence and solidification of the new and proper Hellenic system during the first half of the 1st millennium B.C., closer connections again started to be established and intensified. The dissolving and formative processes of the post-mycenaean and geometric ages in Greek history were paralleled by the centuries of near anarchy in Egypt subsequent to the collapse of the New Empire. The 7th century B.C. marked for both areas a new period of ascending dynamics. The creative Archaic age in Greece corresponded to the reaffirmation of Egyptian unity and independence under Psammetichus and the Saitic Dynasty.

Investigation of such parallelisms in these better known regions can be the topic of a conference that will tackle the difficult (and yet to be thoroughly pursued) subject of a general historical rhythm in Eastern Mediterranean during the period from c. 1500 to 500 B.C.

We may further concentrate on two particular areas of interconnection and mutual influence.

One is the trade developed between the two regions, especially typified by the foundation of Naukratis in the Nilotic Delta. Commercial relationships brought also about a more general familiarization that promoted broader cooperation on the military level: the presence of Greek

and Carian “mercenaries” in Egyptian service is an issue of manifold importance, not least because of the difficulty of adequately conceptualizing their actual status.

Thirdly, it is remarkable how much the ancient Greeks respected Egyptian lore in their pursuit of wisdom. The origins of Greek monumental art was ascribed to Egyptian prototypes. Philosophers were reported to visit Egypt in order to learn from the priesthood there the secrets of existence. Most significantly, the entire Greek religion, (even, or preeminently, mystery cults,) was considered to reflect Egyptian divine structures and articulations to the point of an astonishing virtual identity (as according to Herodotus). It will amply repay attention a fresh inquiry bestowed on the subject of the similarities and differences in the Greek and Egyptian ways of thinking concerning the origin and nature of the divine, cosmic and human order.

One bigger conference and/or three more specialized symposia could be accordingly envisaged under the following thematic titles:

1) The Rhythm of History in an Age of Transformations: Egyptian and Greek Responses to the Collapse of Old Systems and the Emergence of New Orders (1500-500 B.C.).

2) Greece and Egypt in the Archaic Age: Political Developments, Trade, Mercenaries and Settlements.

3) Religion, Wisdom and Philosophy: Cultural Analogies between Greece and Egypt in the Archaic Era.

The predominance of an apparent influence of Egypt on Greece in the formative period of the Hellenic spirit was equilibrated and then reversed in the centuries following Alexander the Great's globalization of universal history. As paradeigmatic example of these counterinfluences we may take the Hermetic corpus.

Furthermore, both Greece (once) and Egypt (twice) underwent the definitive impact of Middle Eastern religious fervour. In the context of the new Christian religion of the Roman Ecumenical Empire, it is highly significant to investigate the cultural reasons and religious experiences that created and sustained the schism between Orthodox and Monophysitic tendencies, between Chalcedonianism and Antichalcedonianism, examining also the role of Rome and the West in the divide.

And finally, just as it is a crucial point to inquire the complex relationships between the formation of Christian Dogma and ancient Greek Philosophy (specifically, in particular, of the last phase of ancient Greek thought, namely Neoplatonic philosophy), so it is equally important to examine the positive and negative impact, and related attitudes on the other side, of Greek Philosophy on the development of the highly sophisticated Muslim theology. In this connection, the specific role of the Alexandrian Neoplatonic School in these developments has not been adequately investigated – a role analogous to that of the earlier Alexandrian School (and the Catechetic Christian School established there) in the formation of Alexandrine Theology, which itself was decisively implicated in the Monophysitic controversies.

We thus may schedule another triptych of scholarly meetings and broader cultural conference:

4) Greek Logos on Egyptian Soil: Hermetism.

5) The Christological Controversies: the Role of Alexandrian Theology.

6) Aristotle, Neoplatonism and the Development of Muslim Theology: the Position of the Alexandrian School.

5 and 6 may be also combined to provide the fertile ground of another meeting

7) The Encounter of Greek Logos and Egyptian Culture with Middle Eastern Religiosity: A Comparative Study of the Influence of Ancient Philosophy on the Development of Christian and Moslem Theology.

To complement the cultural inquiries there is need to focus as well on the social, political and economic factors that evidence the GrecoEgyptian interconnection and cross-fertilization in the ancient times and early Middle Age. In this context, it is high time to explore anew and in-depth the phenomenon “Alexandria” in all its many facets. Hellenistic Alexandria can supply the material to understand the transformation from a Greek city to the capital of a big State. In a broader perspective, the existing abundant documentary material (still much of it unpublished) on the administrative, fiscal and economic life of Egypt during the Roman and early Byzantine Empires, provides the basis for an improved understanding of ancient society in its parameters of material culture.

We have consequently two more thematic mills to grind profitably:

8) The Birth of Capital Megalopolism: Hellenistic Alexandria as Metropolis.

9) Regional Society and Economy in a Globalized System: Egypt in an Ecumenical Empire.

This series of conferences should be scheduled as part of a coherent plan and design. They may be supplemented in the sequel by others, in connection with the results of the inquiries presented in them. The project is thus self-expandable, according to the opportunities and possibilities at hand in the course of time. The project can become a permanent feature and enhance Greek-Egyptian relationships. It ought to be carried out on the highest standards of scholarship in order to attract international recognition.

One or more of these thematic unities should be chosen as objects of an exhaustive study. Such a major project can be undertaken by the Institute.

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