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The Myth of Egypt and its Hieroglyphs

IN EUROPEAN TRADITION

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Rome at his time including 'a porphyry' near the Pantheon – called 'Notre Dame la Ronde' – an obelisk – called 'une Ésquille et Pyramide' – at the Capitol (ara coeli), and another 'pres la Minerue'⁷³. These were undoubtedly genuine Egyptian objects, while the hieroglyphs he describes as having seen on a painting in a house near the palace of Mount Jordan, and representing 'une teste de boeuf, une grenoille, ung oueil, une chaufferette pleine de feu, ung visage d'home, ung vaisseau de violettes en ung pot, ung oueil sus une sole de soulier' etc. were obviously contemporary copies of the hieroglyphic inscription found in the Hypnerotomachia fol. C I recto⁷³. (Pl. XI, 1).

Outside the 'Champfleury' Tory used 'hieroglyphic methods' for the construction of ensigns and emblems, of which his own mark 'le Pot cassé' is a typical example⁷⁴. It represents a broken vase with flowers, signifying the human body and the frail human virtues. The pot is pierced by an iron 'toret' – presumably an engraver's tool – representing fate, and placed on the closed book of life, sealed with iron chains and three locks or cadenas symbolizing the three goddesses of destiny.

The above-mentioned examples will show that Tory, in spite of his enthusiasm, was not a pioneer in hieroglyphics. He was inspired by his Italian predecessors and the currents of fashion more than by personal studies, and the practical possibilities of the art attracted him more than its theoretical and philosophic background, although he was undoubtedly fascinated by, and found great pleasure in, subtle interpretations of the signs.

Seen on the background of Tory's enthusiasm nothing demonstrates better the extent to which the hieroglyphs had become involved with the prevailing emblematic fashion, which from about the reign of Charles VIII swept all over France, than Rabelais' violent attack on the vulgarization of the literary allegory⁷⁵. He anathematized relentlessly 'ces glorieux de cour et transporteurs de noms' and their 'devices', and called their allegorical efforts 'tout ineptes, tout fades, tout rustiques et barbares, que l'on doibvrait atacher une queue de renard au collet et faire un masque d'une bouze de vache a un chascun d'iceulx qui en vouldroit dorenavant user en France'.

On the other hand, it is equally significant that he made a definite distinction between this vulgar abuse and what he considered the genuine traditions. This is clear from the conciliatory remarks following the above mentioned invectives: 'bien oultrement foisoient en temps jadis les saigne de Égypte, quand ils éscrivoient par lettres qu'ilz appeloient hiéroglyphiques, lesquelles nul n'entendoit, qui n'entendist et un chascun, entendoit qui entendist la vertu, proprieté et nature des choses par icelles figures, desquelles Orus Apollon a en grec composé deux livres, et Polyphile au Songe d'Amours en a davantaigne exposé'.

A monumental example of the tradition is found among the monuments erected in 1549 to celebrate the solemn entry of King Henry the Sccond of France and his Queen Catherine de Medici into the city of Paris. It represented 'un animal d'Éthiopie

nommé Rhinocéros', carrying an obelisk on its back, and crushing lions, bears, wolves, foxes, and other 'bestes rauissantes' under its belly. Its symbolical significance was indicated by its Greek motto ἐλεφίκακος 'the suppressor or averter of evil'. The whole design is directly inspired by the obelisk-carrying elephant from the *Hypnerotomachia*, and like this the French monument is also provided with an extensive hieroglyphic inscription containing a respectful discourse presented to the King by his Parisian subjects, and expressing the wish: Force & vigilance puissent garder vostre Royaume ... que dominez à la mer ... & par ferme paix & concorde ... longement vivez, regissez & gouvernez'. As such it is a deliberate counterpart of Dürer's text, and it represents the longest neo-hieroglyphical inscription recorded. (Pl. XIII).

As a monument it has long ago disappeared, and we do not know who originally designed it, but we know that Philibert de Lorme was in charge of all the arrangements for the entry, and a picture of the animal is preserved in an exquisite woodcut by Jean Goujon in the charming publication commemorating the event⁷⁶.

Together with the various editions of Horapollo, Poliphilo, and Valerianus already mentioned, the more serious hieroglyphical traditions were in the subsequent French literature represented by 'Discours des Hiéroglyphes' and 'LIV Tableaux Hiéroglyphiques' both by Pierre L'Anglois, and first published in Paris in 1583⁷⁷, by Pierre Dinet's 'Cinq Livres des Hiéroglyphiques' (Paris 1614)⁷⁸, which is an annotated compilation of hieroglyphs, closely related to Valerianus' collection, and by 'De symbolica Aegyptortum sapientia' (Paris 1618) by Nicolas Caussin (1585-1651)⁷⁹, containing the Greek text of Horapollo together with a Latin translation and followed by various compilations of an emblematic and symbolic nature. (Pl. XVIII, 2 b).

Examples of hieroglyphic material in the inexhaustible emblematic literature, the most monumental specimen of which is Menestrier's 'Art des emblèmes' (Lyon 1622), will be found in Volkmann⁸⁰, the emblematic tradition being too remote to occupy us seriously here.

It would seem, however, as if a latent interest in Egyptian matters was kept alive in French humanistic circles by the strong wave of Neo-Platonism which spread from Italy to France during the fifteenth century⁸¹, and it was probably more than mere coincidence that the subsequent philological revival of Coptic was to a great extent furthered by French Neo-Platonic scholars.

In England the hieroglyphic material would seem to have been introduced mainly through the emblematic literature. We have already had opportunity to quote Geoffrey Whitney (1548?-1601?) whose 'Choice of Emblemes' published by Plantin (Leyden 1586) was one of the first complete book of emblems in English⁸². It is to a great extent based on and directly translated from Alciati, but Whitney was apparently well versed in the hieroglyphic studies of his time.

In Green's facsimile reprint of the emblems, is found a reproduction of Whitney's