

5 Esoteric Egypt

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"Esoteric Egypt" here denotes the vision of an ancient Egypt replete with arcane knowledge and significance. This view has been elaborated at odds with scholarly Egyptology by people who believe that they can see a great deal more hidden inside the Egyptian heritage than the scholars do, by virtue of their openness to mystic, symbolist or some other highly complicated avenue of interpretation. How far the ancient Egyptian culture may or may not itself have tended towards esoteric expression needs brief discussion, since that question stands at the start of the long line of esoteric speculations about Egypt that predates the enterprise of Egyptology.

It is true that the state religion of the Egyptians was conducted by initiated priests in the dark seclusion of their temples, away from the sight and participation of the people at large. Some rituals were reserved for kings alone, themselves credited with a semi-divine standing. But the priests were not an exclusive fraternity cut off from the everyday life of the community. Priesthood was a largely hereditary business, with the top ranks assigned to relatives of the king and lower orders handed down from father to son as a secondary profession to be followed on a rotational basis. As the long history of pharaonic Egypt unfolded, the career attractions of the priestly life led to the purchase of positions. It was all conducted with a pragmatism characteristic of Egyptian civilization.

This is not to say that the religion these priests served was not a complex and sometimes profound affair. It was also an evolving system that saw some major innovations during its history of more than 3,000 years; the rise of Amun from Thebes as the prime god of the New Kingdom is a case in point. Amun was indeed the "hidden" god who worked his works invisibly like the wind, but his invisibility did not make him an inherently esoteric proposition. Neither was the resurrection god Osiris, whose cult arose in Middle Kingdom times and maintained its popularity through the rest of Egyptian history: the Osirian rituals were a good deal less esoteric than the Eleusinian mysteries of the Greeks. *The Book of What is in the Underworld*, known as *The Book of the Dead* and in fact a composite from inscriptions and papyri of different (but not early) periods, may be obscure and fantastic, but it is not an esoteric production.

What we know of the religious beliefs of the Egyptians in their own words comes from inscribed texts in temples and tombs and from papyrus writings found mostly in tombs. Among the oldest materials are the Pyramid Texts from late Old Kingdom pyramids (*c.* 2400 BC), while the papyri come more from New Kingdom (*c.* 1570–1070 BC) and later sources. The older texts tend to display obscurities arising from what we may call their primitive origins at the dawn of Egyptian civilization, and the later ones are loaded with the complexities that arrive in mature and backward-looking cultures. But however obscure and complex the beliefs they express, the Egyptian texts are *not* esoteric in the sense that they set out to convey by cryptic and symbolic methods a whole lot of deep meaning quite different from their surface meanings, of significance only to a select band of initiates.

The same can be said of the practices of popular magic and superstition in ancient Egypt. There are magical wands and figurines, prophylactic amulets and spells to protect and heal and bring back from the dead in the afterlife. But there is no sign in this material of the esoteric knowledge and deep wisdom of the ages that some people would like to see hidden in the Egyptian legacy. There is not even any sign, until Greek times, of an everyday astrology of planetary influences. The medical writings of the Egyptians are a mixture of practical good sense and magical procedures, not characterized by any real knowledge of anatomy (despite the semi-dissection involved in mummification). Egyptian mathematics really got no further than trial and error and approximation, while their geometry was practical and untheoretical (Wilson 1951). Their astronomy could assist them to highly accurate alignments of monuments but resulted only in garbled star maps on coffins and on tomb and temple ceilings: they only became acquainted with the constellations as we know them today (through classical times back to the Babylonians) in the last few centuries BC.

From the evidence we have from them, the Egyptians were not, then, a noticeably esoterically minded people. But they stand in the front rank of candidates for retrospective esoteric interpretation by some enthusiasts in the world today. How did this situation come about? The answer lies in certain of their cultural traits and in the particular relationship of their civilization with influential successor civilizations that had close dealings with them in the ancient world.

The roots of esoteric Egypt

To begin with, that relationship had an important geographical aspect. Egypt is a very unusual country in its topography, and other ancient cultures could only interact with one end of it, as it were. Away from the Delta region of Lower Egypt, Egyptian civilization stretched along a narrow filament of cultivated land a thousand miles into Africa through mostly bleak desert on both sides. The Bronze Age Canaanites communicated with ancient Egypt

in its eastern Delta region; the early Israelites (whatever the precise nature of their experiences at the hands of the Egyptians) likewise encountered Egypt via the eastern Delta; the Cretans and Phoenicians sailed their ships into Delta ports; the Greeks, who were to play such a part in conveying acquaintance with ancient Egypt into Western culture, established their trading relations in the Delta, where by their time the seat of Egyptian power was established; Alexander's successors in Egypt ruled from their great Greek city on the western Delta coast, which the Romans took over, and Jews and Christians congregated there; the Arabs invaded Egypt through the eastern Delta.

For all these peoples, Egypt presented itself as a fairly adjacent and familiar Delta world, full of antique wonders but with an even more wonderful, and mysterious, world stretching beyond it along the fabled Nile, whose sources bubbled up in the totally unknown African interior. Memphis, at the southern apex of the Delta, where only the single stream of the Nile continued into Upper Egypt, was already mysterious enough with its prodigious pyramids and temples of exotic gods.

The Bible would contribute to the picture, but it was really the Greeks who first handled the matter of Egypt in a way that still influences our modern outlook. It is not simply that the Greeks transmitted a certain view of ancient Egypt into later times: the very presence of the Greeks, especially after the establishment of Greek rule under the Ptolemies with a large Greek-speaking population in Lower Egypt, itself influenced the character of latterday Egyptian belief.

The Homeric poems have some references to Egypt, but it was only when the Greeks established a regular trading presence at Naucratis on the most westerly branch of the Nile in the Delta, in the late seventh century BC, that real acquaintance with Egyptian culture began – and then it was with an already very old and arguably decadent version of that culture. Thales, the pioneer natural philosopher, is said to have visited Egypt in the first half of the sixth century and to have introduced the study of geometry from there to the Greek world. Plato's ancestor Solon would have been there at about the same time. The Egypt into which Greek merchants and travelers were venturing was not the aloof and mighty Egypt (centered on Memphis) of the Old Kingdom, terminated 1,500 years before, nor the imperial power of the New Kingdom (centered up-river at Thebes), that had declined several centuries previously. After difficult times, power had now been established at the Delta town of Sais, after which this era is named. It was a backward-looking epoch, when nostalgia for Egypt's past greatness and self-confidence generated a fancied renewal of old Egyptian ways and forms in art, religion, and language.

An example of the anachronistic impulse of Saite times is furnished by the so-called Inventory Stela, found at Giza in 1858. It records, along with a list of temple possessions, the claim that Khufu built his great pyramid beside a pre-existing temple of Isis and the giant carving of the Sphinx that he found already in place at Giza. Enthusiasts for a vast age of the Sphinx and of the Isis doctrine have always made much of the Inventory Stela. But

this Saite relic is in fact a badly executed piece of work that any Old Kingdom carver would have been ashamed of, and its language is replete with anachronisms. It is a sort of pious fraud whereby a Saite ruler tries to cloak his "renovations" at Giza in the mantle of Khufu's reputation and at the same time promote the latter-day veneration of Isis.

In the same spirit and at about the same time, the Egyptian priests of Sais began the long process of turning their old ibis-headed god Thoth – messenger and scribe of the gods – into the distinctly more esoteric entity that the Greeks would call Hermes Trismegistos. By the third century BC, identified with the Greek messenger-god and endowed with the "thrice Greatest" epithet, there was a new god and a new set of religious writings to do with him, some of them of an occult and astrological character. Thoth was now the chief god of magic and spell making, whose name was never to be directly spoken; and, in fact, his adherents were not above employing hieroglyphic signs in a freshly devised symbolic fashion in the writings woven around him (which was to set a disastrous precedent for future attempts to translate the hieroglyphs). However, the point is that all this farrago of Thoth and Hermes was a Hellenistic concoction, in Greek, that had very little to do with its Egyptian antecedents: the Hermetic literature is no guide to the beliefs of old Egypt.

Meanwhile, Herodotus had famously visited Egypt in the mid-fifth century BC and written up a good deal of anecdotal and unreliable material about it. However, he did point up the notion of Egypt's vast antiquity and the unique continuity of its long history. Plato in the early fourth century, whether or not he actually visited Egypt himself, made some use of Egypt in his written works and crucially credited the Egyptians with historical records – as shown to his ancestor Solon – that told the story of a long ago war between Athens and Atlantis and the cataclysmic demise of the latter. In general, Plato, following Herodotus and in keeping with his countrymen as a whole, extends to the ancient Egyptian civilization a far greater antiquity than modern Egyptology assigns to it. In the *Laws*, the anonymous Athenian asserts that the Egyptians' art of 10,000 years before was just as good as it is in his day "and I am not talking loosely, I mean literally 10,000 years" (Plato *Laws* 2.65E). This awed and excessive overestimate of the longevity of ancient Egypt is still with us in some quarters. Very likely Plato believed in it, but Egypt's antiquity and general venerability were really artistic devices to color the exposition of his philosophy.

Plato was interested in the Egyptians' Thoth, but he was not interested in learning more of the language that this god was supposed to have personally devised – the language of the very Egyptians themselves, written down in the hieroglyphic signs to be seen on their monuments and in the cursive "longhand" version of the hieroglyphs we call "hieratic" that tended to be used on papyrus (until the even more everyday "demotic" script was developed). This failure of interest in the language and writing of the Egyptians was by no means confined to Plato – nobody in the classical world of the

Greeks and Romans concerned himself to create an account of the Egyptian tongue and the various ways of writing it. If someone had done so and his work had come down to us, much of the mystery-mongering about ancient Egypt might never have got going at all.

As it was, it fell to a full-blooded Egyptian of Ptolemaic times to try to make the history and religious customs of his people accessible to the wider world by writing his *Egyptian Memoirs* in Greek in the first half of the third century BC. Manetho set out his material in a chronological framework of ruling dynasties, which Egyptologists still employ. He was writing late in the day as far as his own country's history was concerned, but he spoke the language and could read the old records, which clearly survived in his time in better shape than we have them now. Unfortunately, Manetho's own work has not survived as such, being known only in excerpts quoted by later writers. We do have writings by first-century BC and first-century AD authors like Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Pliny, which take on the casually unreliable approach of Herodotus. Diodorus leaned on Herodotus and also developed the Hermes theme by comparing this god to Moses of the Jews and Zoroaster of the Persians (Hornung 2001). Strabo scoffed at Herodotus but has left us little to improve on him. Pliny has some sensible things to say about the pyramids and the Sphinx, although he gets its measurements wrong (Jordan 1998). The account of the Egyptians' Osiris and Isis cycle of religious beliefs in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (= *Moralia* 351C–384C) is fatally contaminated with mystical themes from late classical philosophy: it is significant that its title puts Isis before Osiris, at a time (Plutarch was born in the reign of Claudius) when even the resurrectional promise of this god had been eclipsed by his consort's starring role as the mother of all goddesses. It was at about this time that the idea began to gain ground that the striking and frequently beautiful hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt (some of them now to be seen on genuine monuments brought to Rome) were not a mundane means of writing down an everyday spoken language but rather a symbolic apparatus for communicating ineffable mysteries to initiates in the know – highly esoteric, in fact.

Plotinus, a Greek from Egypt who studied in Alexandria early in the third century AD and then went to live in Rome, interpreted the hieroglyphs symbolically in terms of his neo-Platonic philosophy, which centered on the return of the individual soul to the Great Good. Horapollon, another Egyptian Greek, wrote a work in the fifth century devoted to *Hieroglyphica*, but they were all symbols to him too. When this book resurfaced in Florence in 1422 (Greener 1966), it put Renaissance inquiry into the subject on the wrong track for centuries.

Meanwhile, life went on in Roman Egypt in what sounds like one of the most agreeable episodes in all human history. The Romans regarded Egypt as an ideal tourist venue, and the tourism could conduct you through a colourful religious landscape as well as the vivid geographical one around you. In this situation, Hellenistically derived esotericism luxuriated into

areas like astrology and alchemy. Indeed, alchemy takes its name (through Arabic) from the Egyptians' own name for their unusual country: "Kemet" – the Black Land (a reference to the rich alluvial mud that made farming possible along the Nile). The art of embalming may have taught the Egyptians a thing or two about chemistry, but there are no ancient Egyptian alchemical texts, only Greek ones.

The esoteric tradition centered on Thoth/Hermes gave birth (around AD 200) to the belief that further sacred texts by Thoth had been buried in the by then lost tomb of Alexander the Great, somewhere in Alexandria (Hornung 2001). Ammianus Marcellinus, a Greek from Antioch who wrote his *History* in Rome at the end of the fourth century, mentions in one of his many digressions that there were underground galleries at Giza built to save the wisdom of the ancients from being lost in a great flood (Ammianus Marcellinus 22.15.28–30). Such notions enlarged the lurking suspicion that wonderful works of ancient wisdom were cached away in certain long-lost but once pivotal locations, which might be rediscovered by people "in the know" who could somehow initiate themselves into the old mysteries by acquiring the necessary arcane knowledge. This, too, is an idea that has never gone away and constitutes a staple element of modern pseudo-Egyptology.

Esoteric Egypt in Christianity and Islam

When Christianity became the compulsory religion of the Roman Empire, the temples at the Siwa Oasis west of the Nile and at Philae in the south were probably the last places where the old religion of Egypt was observed before final closure under Justinian in the sixth century. For the Christians, Egypt had resonance in both the Old Testament and the New. The powerful story of the Israelites' career in Egypt attached to the Egyptians an aura of despotic persecution made all the more sinister by the appellation of "Pharaoh" without a personal name. Moreover, Moses and Aaron strove with Pharaoh's magicians in the Bible, reinforcing the growing reputation of the ancient Egyptians as exponents of magic powers.

In the New Testament, St Matthew's gospel sent Joseph and Mary out of Herod's way into Egypt, and the Coptic Church could claim that the Holy Family's refuge had been the very site of one of its most famous monasteries; legend even suggested that Jesus learned Egyptian magic there (Hornung 2001). Both the Jews and the Christians – especially the Gnostic heretics among them – were impressed with the esoteric potential of Hermes Trismegistos, and strands of Christian and Jewish esotericism were to travel into Europe and be taken into Renaissance speculation about the mysteries of ancient Egypt. In the meantime, the Arab conquest of AD 640–1 took esoteric Egypt into the Islamic orbit. By the time the Arabs came to Egypt, all familiarity with the ancient writings that so visibly covered the walls and columns of temples and tombs was gone. The language that those writings

recorded was still in use among the non-Greek-speaking part of the population, in the form of its descendant tongue called Coptic, which was now written with a modified Greek alphabet. But, for the incoming Arabs, the hieroglyphs were an even more complete mystery than they were for the Greeks and Romans and the Copts themselves.

The Arabs were thus well set up to view the ancient Egyptians, whose relics were all around them, as very mysterious and magical people. Stories of fabulous treasure behind magically opened doors, like those of the *Arabian Nights*, go back to robbing expeditions into Egyptian tombs, where the treasure deposited with the dead might still sometimes be found in place behind the "false doors" carved with mysterious hieroglyphs that were a common feature of the ancient Egyptians' burial places. The Arabic accounts of al-Mamun's forced entry into the Great Pyramid in the ninth century AD picture him encouraging his men with the promise of vast treasure inside and, in some versions (Tompkins 1971), disguising the absence of any such reward for their labors by smuggling in an amount of loot sufficient to pay their wages, if no more.

But the accounts also credit al-Mamun himself with a less greedy interest in the Great Pyramid: his intelligence network had told him that the pyramid also contained a secret chamber with charts of the heavens and the Earth of great antiquity and accuracy. His interest in these things would not be surprising, since we know him to have made his Dar-al-Salaam ("City of Peace" – Baghdad) into a great seat of learning with a library and astronomical observatory. He is said to have had terrestrial and celestial maps made as a result of Aristotle's appearing to him in a dream, which reminds us that the Arab world maintained a far greater acquaintance with the Greek heritage than Dark Age Europe did.

In Europe before the Renaissance, the Christian tradition was inclined to spiritual allegory as opposed to straightforward assessment in the interpretation of such classical texts as came to its attention. Besides, it was chiefly interested in the Biblical association of anything to do with the ancient world, including Egypt, and many misassociations were entertained: for example, that the pyramids were in reality the granaries set up by Joseph during his successful years with Pharaoh. This idea was sagely countered by the Patriarch of Antioch in the ninth century, who declared "they are astounding mausolea, built on the tombs of ancient kings" (Greener 1966: 55). A twelfth-century rabbi who traveled by the pyramids was sure they were built by witchcraft, but the otherwise bogus travel book ascribed to Sir John Mandeville of the fourteenth century at least took the view that the pyramids were tombs.

The renaissance of esoteric Egypt

The Renaissance in Europe witnessed the dawning realization that behind the Roman heritage lay an older Greek one that needed to be recovered by

reading it up in its original language; and one of the sources for such a re-education of the West lay in the Muslim world's preservation of many Greek works. With the Venetians trading to Alexandria, it became possible, if far from safe (there were so many pirates in the Mediterranean), for merchants and then pilgrims to visit Egypt. The pilgrims went out of Biblical inspiration but could not help bringing back information (and much misinformation) about the antique wonders of Egypt. Very interestingly, in the early sixteenth century the Milanese Girolamo Cardano took his cue from the Renaissance rediscovery of Greece to suggest that behind the science of the Greeks themselves there lay an older body of knowledge that had to be looked for in Egypt, where it seemed that Pythagoras thought the world's system of measures had first been taken directly from nature itself (Tompkins 1971). Later in the sixteenth century, Johannes Helferich brought back to Europe an account of Giza that mixed circumstantial information with fantasy uncritically culled from the locals (like priests getting into the head of the Sphinx to awe the ancient Egyptian populace) and includes a woodcut of a well-endowed female Sphinx, which Helferich took to be a representation of Isis.

When George Sandys published his *Relation of a Journey Begun in 1610*, he was able to furnish an impressively accurate picture of the Sphinx and pyramids at Giza, but he was pessimistic about ever understanding the ancient Egyptians' inscriptions. For him, the hieroglyphics "which consist of significant figures, are hardly to be interpreted" (Greener 1966: 49). This sobering conclusion did not stop him offering a "translation" of an inscription so fancifully rendered in a woodcut in his book that Egyptologists can make nothing of it, as "Oh you that enter the world, and go out of it; God hateth injustice." He obviously thought that he was dealing with some sort of picture writing, since he claimed that "by a Sphinx the Egyptians in their Hieroglyphicks presented a Harlot" (*ibid.*: 52).

John Greaves, who would one day be professor of astronomy in Oxford, set out for Egypt in 1638. He was not in search of Isis or any arcane secret of the hieroglyphs but rather of the ancient system of measure and what we would now call geodesy (literally, "Earth division") thought to underlie all latterday metrical units. He did a lot of useful work at the pyramids, although seriously hampered by the general dilapidation at Giza. Greaves concluded that the pyramids themselves were the product of the ancient Egyptian theology that counted on the preservation of the body to preserve the soul: a notably unesoteric conclusion (*ibid.*).

Greaves left his measuring gear in Egypt, to an Italian who had been sponsored to go there by the Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher in a similar search for the supposed ancient and universal units of measure behind cubits and feet and stadia, miles and leagues. For his part, Newton used the data that Greaves brought home to devise a scheme of profane and sacred cubits that expressed the size of his gravity-laden Earth.

It was widely assumed that the pyramids had been built in keeping with some such ancient system: and the notion could not be far away that they

also, in particular the Great Pyramid, embodied and enshrined that system as a demonstration for all time. This line of thought would be developed in the nineteenth century into time as well as space, so that the Great Pyramid could be seen as not just a spatial reckoner but a temporal one too, with predictive as well as retrospective force.

Meanwhile, Kircher was as interested in the hieroglyphs as he was in the cubits. The rediscovery of Horapollon's work in Florence in the fifteenth century had revived attempts to understand the ancient Egyptians' writings. The very word used since classical times to name the ancient Egyptians' inscriptional signs, "hieroglyphs," means "holy carvings" in Greek – a concept that predisposed the Renaissance to view them as something more than just a way of writing an old language. Moreover, they were found on the walls of sacred temples and religious monuments, and there is about them, by their very nature as vivid pictorial imagery, something suggestive of symbolic mysteries: even when they have been translated, this air of mystery is apt to cling. Horapollon's symbolist interpretation was readily accepted, and his rather wild "font" of hieroglyphs (which could have been checked against real Egyptian monuments brought to Rome from Egypt) was copied by artists and architects in Renaissance times. Kircher himself published six works on the hieroglyphs between 1643 and 1676. He had the advantage of some familiarity with the Coptic language and guessed (correctly) that the hieroglyphs might have been used to write an earlier form of Coptic, the language in other words of the ancient Egyptians. He even conjectured that the hieroglyphs represented sounds and constituted a real alphabet, in which he went too far since, though many of them have a phonetic value, it is not always a single letter in our sense that they stand for, while others do have a sort of indicative picture meaning (though not esoteric). For all these reasonable conclusions, Kircher persisted in the notion that any rendering of an everyday language that the hieroglyphs might carry was really subordinate to a deeper, symbolic meaning at the same time. Before the Egyptian writings were understood, there was always scope for the symbolic interpretation of the hieroglyphs: since we came into possession of a detailed knowledge of the full range of the Egyptian records, there has been rather less excuse for it.

Kircher's misapprehensions about the hieroglyphs did not hamper him from producing some translations of his own. According to Sir Alan Gardiner (Greener 1966), Kircher managed to persuade a group of signs on a Roman-period obelisk rendering the Greek title "Autocrator" (of the Roman emperors) to really mean "the originator of all moisture and all vegetation is Osiris, whose creative power was brought to this kingdom by the holy Moptha." Sir Alan dryly commented that "the holy Moptha still remains a mystery to Egyptologists." In the eighteenth century, there were several attempts to tie up the Egyptian hieroglyphs with the Chinese signs that were becoming more familiar with trade and exploration. There was a suggestion that China might have been a colony of ancient Egypt: this idea

of the cultural colonization of the world, born in the dawn of European empire building, has also never gone away and is a constant feature of what I have called the Atlantis syndrome (Jordan 2001), only Egypt is now itself usually seen as a colony of some pre-existing but vanished super-civilization.

Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, and the cracking of the code

Eighteenth-century interest in ancient Egypt from the Hermetic standpoint contributed greatly to the development of Freemasonry in Europe, and to the movement called Rosicrucianism, which promoted the idea of a highly secret brotherhood devoted to a body of "ancient wisdom." Here we encounter another strand of pseudoarchaeological esotericism that shows no signs of going away: modern presenters of the Atlantis syndrome make much of such a long-lasting line of brothers in pursuit of some sort of more or less "magical" science. These brothers, especially in the form of a lineage of Egyptian priests unknown to Egyptologists (they had their American and Far Eastern equivalents, too), are credited with preserving the ancient wisdom of Atlantis (or wherever) into Egyptian historical times and beyond. The Rosicrucians claimed Egyptian origins for their order, and Egyptian motifs are prominent in Freemasonry's iconography. Cagliostro founded a specifically Egyptian Masonry in 1784 on a claimed basis of secret knowledge learned in the subterranean vaults of the Egyptian pyramids (Hornung 2001). This "secret knowledge" line of speculation ran on into the musings of Madame Blavatsky and her Theosophy and its offshoots in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: the writings of this school are full of the most bizarre and brazen assertions, meriting no consideration here, and Blavatsky and her successors rather gave over Egypt in favour of Tibet and worlds less real altogether, where we have no need to follow them. But Theosophist ideas have undoubtedly influenced strains of esoteric "Egyptology" in the works of other writers, as we shall see; and while she was on the subject of Egypt, Blavatsky did pioneer the view of the Great Pyramid as a temple of initiation and its stone sarcophagus as a baptismal font upon emerging from which the neophyte was born again and became an adept (Blavatsky 1931).

The results of the intense scrutiny and recording of Egypt's remains by the team of savants that accompanied Napoleon there at the end of the eighteenth century made, when they were published in the early nineteenth century, for the greatest advance in Europe's knowledge of ancient Egypt before the decipherment of the hieroglyphs. Measurement and mapping of the pyramids at Giza further promoted the idea that an ancient system of mensuration might well be enshrined in them, including degrees of arc with implications for latitude and longitude. Moreover, the pyramids were seen to be very accurately aligned on the points of the compass: the scene was set for a century of fantastic metrological speculation at Giza.

Thanks to the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by Napoleon's men, hopeful attention was turned again on the problem of the ancient Egyptians' writings. The Rosetta Stone carried hieroglyphic and demotic inscriptions as well as an easily readable Greek text (it was a summary of religious benefactions by Ptolemy V just after 200 BC). Some people thought that the hieroglyphs would soon be revealed as a symbolically expressed version of the rather mundane meaning of the Greek text; not surprisingly, no progress was made in that direction. However, Thomas Young managed tentative identifications of individual signs in the hieroglyphic text enclosed in oval "cartouches," which evidently "spelled out" the names of Ptolemy and Berenice. Jean-François Champollion thought at first that the hieroglyphs had only been used phonetically to record foreign names like that. His breakthrough came when he recognized, on the basis of his knowledge of Coptic, that a text copied from the monument at Abu Simbel in the far south of Egypt recorded the name of the native Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses (known from Manetho): "Re" still meant "sun" in Coptic, and "mss" meant "son of." This pharaoh was the "son of the Sun God," and the way was open to identifying other hieroglyphs as sounds representing a language directly ancestral to Coptic. The hieratic and demotic scripts demanded much study to tease out their way of rendering the language; the complex interaction of phonetic and ideographic elements in the scripts had to be explored; and the whole grammar of this ancient part-Semitic and part-African language needed to be established. But from the 1830s onwards, the tongue of the ancient Egyptians came to be well understood and the writings of ancient Egypt to be read. The symbolist interpretation of the hieroglyphs was now untenable without the sort of mental gymnastics that Kircher had employed to regard them as both literal and symbolic at the same time.

Pyramidiocy and other esoteric eccentricities

The Great Pyramid at Giza carries no formal inscriptions at all of ancient Egyptian origin – there are workmen's markings on some of the hidden blocks of the weight-relieving chambers above the king's burial chamber that very usefully certify that this pyramid was built for King Khufu (and some have come to light only in recent years, disposing of insinuations of nineteenth-century fraud). Perhaps the very lack of any inscriptions that might have made this pyramid's purpose clear to one and all has always recommended it to the lunatic fringe; that, and the matter of its unequalled interior complexity of passages and chambers, which can be measured to the heart's content to produce masses of figures to manipulate. The exploration and clearing of these passages gathered pace in the first half of the nineteenth century, along with some clearance of debris around the exteriors of the Great Pyramid and its companion pieces at Giza. John Taylor, in his *The Great Pyramid: Why Was It Built? And Who Built It?* (1864) was able to manipulate improved measurements very ambitiously. He determined that

the perimeter circle of the Great Pyramid's base divided by twice its height produced a figure close to π at 3.144; he thought that the perimeter might represent the circumference of the Earth, and the height might represent the distance from the Earth's centre to the North Pole. He arrived at his "pyramid inch" by dividing the perimeter of the pyramid by 366 (the number of days in the year rounded up) and concluded that Newton's sacred cubit was twenty-five of these pyramid inches. Happily, the English inch turned out to vary from this old ideal by only one-thousandth part. Taylor fostered the notion that the Great Pyramid was planned and built to pass on the knowledge of the ancients to the future; and that the "Lost Tribes of Israel" were the means by which the English had come by their inch with so little deviation from the original.

Taylor influenced the Astronomer Royal of Scotland, Charles Piazzi Smyth, to venture to Egypt at the end of 1864 with an imposing array of special measuring rods and instruments and even an intriguingly miniature camera that took plates only one inch square (we trust it was a pyramid inch). The object was to verify and refine the ideas that he shared with Taylor and had already aired in *Our Inheritance in the Great Pyramid* (Smyth 1864). Smyth satisfied himself that π was in the height/periphery ratio of the Great Pyramid and speculated that the precise length of the year at 365.24 days was in there too. He was keen to date the Great Pyramid by means of the celestial alignments of the Descending Passage, which leads down from the outside into its deepest depths. He plumped for an alignment of this passage on Alpha Draconis, which was calculated to have been at the north celestial pole at the autumn equinox of 2170 BC. (This approach to pyramid dating, with various shafts in view, has produced several noteworthy theories to date, some useful and some not.) All in all, Smyth was certain that the Great Pyramid had been designed and built with an astounding exactitude, in line with its divine inspiration.

When Piazzi Smyth published his *Life and Work at the Great Pyramid* (1867) it met with detraction, chiefly in light of its espousal of the theme of divine revelation. The year 1867 also saw the published claim of Robert Menzies that the entire interior disposition of the Great Pyramid was a retrospective and prophetic world chronology of Biblical bent, with one pyramid inch to the year (Tompkins 1971). Smyth himself went on to multiply the height of the Great Pyramid (newly ascertained by him) by 10^9 (because he thought that for every 10 of height there were 9 of width in the structure), which came out in English miles at 91,840,000, more or less the distance of the Earth from the Sun. The wonderfulness of this arbitrary calculation still exercises modern writers on Atlantological themes, like Erich von Däniken (1971).

An engineer called William Petrie got caught up in Piazzi Smyth's speculations and longed to measure the Great Pyramid with even better instruments. His son William Flinders Petrie was keen to find out if it all really stood up by determining the still part-observed basal dimensions of

the monument and measuring not just the one pyramid but its companions and indeed the whole surrounding topography. Flinders Petrie satisfied himself as to the claimed extreme accuracy of the Great Pyramid's layout, but he also noticed those signs of slightly botched execution and unfinishedness that always dog the Egyptian monuments (like most things human). He accepted that there were ancient units of measurement to be discerned in the structure, but not the sacred cubit in place of the traditional royal cubit of about 21 inches. His base measurements did not match Smyth's, partly because he differed as to what to measure, and although he thought π was there, he could not see the days of the year. His *The Pyramids and Temples of Gizeh* (Petrie 1883) found him wryly amused to realize that when he had started his work fifteen years before he could little know it would be himself who "would reach the ugly little fact which killed the beautiful theory."

A near contemporary called David Davidson rather reversed Flinders Petrie's progress from entertainer of the esoteric to rational archaeologist by starting skeptical about it all and ending up a believer who thought pyramid study establishes the Bible as the inspired work of God (Davidson 1932). For example, he was able to square Petrie with Smyth by noting Petrie's discovery of the inward curve (and so lengthening) of the sides of the Great Pyramid, thereby restoring the sacred cubit. He came to think that the Great Pyramid demonstrated its builders' acquaintance with the specific gravity of the Earth and Sun, the solar parallax, the precession of the equinoxes, and even the speed of light. Davidson pushed the idea that the monument had been constructed to function as a prompt to future generations to rediscover such knowledge by enshrining all these details in its complex fabric. Such *tour de force* of super-interpretation of the dimensions of the Great Pyramid prompted an American naval officer of the day, who was also an amateur Egyptologist, to remark that "If a suitable unit of measure is found – say versts, hands or cables – an exact equivalent to the distance of Timbuctoo is certain to be found in the roof girder work of the Crystal Palace, or in the number of street lamps in Bond Street, or the specific gravity of mud, or the mean weight of an adult goldfish" (Tompkins 1971: 111).

In the twentieth century, the esoteric came to the fore at the pyramids, with various speculators teasing out the most extraordinary truths from their own private insights into the meaning of its features. Morton Edgar (1924) and others of his ilk elaborated the prophetic chronology business to great lengths: the Great Pyramid's Descending Passage was the Fall of Man; the Ascending Passage was the Christian dispensation; the Grand Gallery was spiritual enlightenment; the "Great Step" at the top of the Grand Gallery led into the "Antechamber of Chaos," which was the Great War; the King's Chamber was 1953 (or at least its south wall was) for what that has turned out to be worth; and human perfection will arrive all round in 2914. Along the way, it will come as no surprise to hear, the Exodus, the Crucifixion, and the Second Coming are flagged up in the Great Pyramid (Rutherford 1957). *The Great Pyramid: Your Personal Guide* (Lemesurier 1987) dates the entrance

of the Great Pyramid at 2623 BC, follows the Descending Passage downward as the "Path of Rationalistic Materialism," reaches 1914 with the Underground Chamber and 2004 ± 3 as the "Pit of Physical Destruction," ending up in 2569 in the dead end of the short passage leading away from the Underground Chamber; on the other hand, the Ascending Passage rises via the "Path of Physical Ritual" to AD 33, followed by a sudden explosion of "Enlightenment" in the Grand Gallery, itself topped by some sort of "Consciousness Transformer" in 1999 (the book was published in 1987, remember) and an age of "Psychic Reintegration" in the King's Chamber, lasting until 3989, with the relieving chambers above pointing to "Unknown Dimensions of Consciousness." Lemesurier then turns to the Queen's Chamber as presaging "Hyperconsciousness," most likely between 7276 and 8276. As if that were not enough, the Great Pyramid's layout simultaneously sets forth the spiritual progress of the individual life, with initiation conducted through the monument's passages and chambers as the means to achieve the wisdom of a man of 70 while still young, and indeed to tap into all the wisdom of the ages. Lemesurier thinks that the Great Pyramid may also have been a giant theodolite and astronomical observatory. What it absolutely was not, apparently, is what Egyptologists conclude it quite clearly was – a tomb.

Richard Proctor at the end of the nineteenth century thought it both a tomb and an observatory, its Descending Passage serving first to observe the polar region of the night sky and then its Ascending Passage taking over as the pyramid grew under construction – with a mirror of water at the junction of the two passages to allow observation to be maintained. It would have continued very well as the long slot of the Grand Gallery was built up, until the top closure of the King's Chamber turned the pyramid over from observatory to astronomically aligned tomb (Proctor 1883). The Grand Gallery, with its lines of corbeling, would evidently have served as a scale for detecting the phenomenon of precession (which conventional science history attributes to Hipparchus in the second century BC). *The Dawn of Astronomy* (Lockyer 1894) extended ideas like this to all the temples of Egypt (and Stonehenge): Sir Norman Lockyer believed, for example, that the Ptolemaic Temple of Dendera with its late zodiac was really the third build on the site, the original having been erected by King Pepi I in 3233 BC (about a thousand years earlier than modern Egyptology would place him). He thought that the Sphinx was a half-lion, half-virgin hybrid that had been carved in the fourth millennium to symbolize the conjunction of the zodiac signs of Leo and Virgo at the summer solstice: it is worth emphasizing that there is nothing to indicate that the ancient Egyptians knew of our zodiacal constellations before just a few centuries BC.

The Alsatian René Schwaller, who liked to add de Lubicz to his name and sometimes to be known more timelessly as "Aor," took on Lockyer's ideas of astronomical alignment and precessional observation at the Egyptian monuments, working mostly at Luxor and Karnak. He was also influenced by

Theosophy and alchemical speculation. He managed to maintain in the twentieth century Kircher's belief in the simultaneously mundane and symbolic meaning of the hieroglyphs. For him, the ancient Egyptians were endowed with a symbolist sort of consciousness, altogether more harmonious with nature than that of us moderns with our scientifically analytical outlook, which was seamlessly expressed in their language, art, religion, social organization, and "sacred science": π and ϕ (the ratio of the golden section) were everywhere in their works, even in the folds of their pharaohs' loincloths (Schwaller 1998 [1958]; Tompkins 1971). Schwaller died in 1961, but his labors live on in the popularizing zeal of John Anthony West, whose *Serpent in the Sky* (1993) is a study of Schwaller's ideas. West has also published *The Case for Astrology* (1973), and he leads "Magical Egypt Tours": he believes that if you don't see Egypt through symbolist eyes, you don't see it at all.

The idea that the Egyptians knew about the 26,000-year cycle of the precession of the equinoxes has been espoused by various writers – it was even noted among them that the sum of the diagonals of the square base of the Great Pyramid came to 25,826.68 pyramid inches (astonishing precision of measurement!), which was close to the number of years of the cycle (Tompkins 1971). But the people who really put precession on the map of "alternative archaeology" were unlikely candidates for this distinction, being *bona fide* historians of science who published a book called *Hamlet's Mill* (de Santillana and von Dechend 1969) in which the phenomenon of precession (which arises from the Earth's slow rocking on its axis like a spinning top and shifts the field of the stars through time) was chased through the myths and iconography of the whole ancient world, including Egypt. Much has been made of the idea and its alleged evidence by subsequent practitioners of Atlantology, Graham Hancock in particular. The notion suffers from the immediate difficulty that precession is nowhere described as such, let alone explained (it took Newton to do that) in any ancient text that predates what we know of Hipparchus; it is only by cunning interpretation of ancient myths and images, which are ostensibly about something else, that precession can be discerned in them, aided by some pretty esoteric numerological speculation involving the 72 years that mark one degree of shift in the zodiacal system and any number of permutations by multiplication, division, and addition.

Along with precession, the concept of ancient geodesy and the ancient establishment of geodetic markers around the world has developed from its nineteenth-century basis. Tompkins' useful but uncritical *Secrets of the Great Pyramid* includes a long appendix by Livio Catullo Stecchini that develops the idea of the Egyptians' use of their geodetic knowledge to place their cities and temples at points on a system of meridians and latitudes of significance to them. Their primacy in these matters (or that of their Atlantean teachers) saw to it that the rest of the ancient world took up the system. This idea has not gone away either and has been extended by von Däniken

and Hancock. Again, the thought seems to be that these marker positions were designed to enshrine and perpetuate the geodetic knowledge of the ancient wisdom, to be rediscovered in later times. Whether they were supposed to serve some esoteric purpose of their own, as ley lines or foci of "Earth energy" or something of the sort, is not always clear. Chiefly, one suspects, it is the fun of poring over maps with a lot of precessional number crunching to guide your ruler that has summoned these markers into pseudo-existence.

Egypt and the Atlantis Syndrome

The dubious credit for inventing the Atlantis Syndrome as we know it goes to the American writer Ignatius Donnelly in the 1880s. He leaned heavily on ancient Egypt to elaborate his speculations, but his intentions were entirely unesoteric. He took Plato at face value about Atlantis, ignoring entirely both his artistry and his philosophical purpose. Donnelly believed there to be sound geological, faunal, floral, linguistic, and cultural evidence to support the view that a seminal ancient civilization – but not one with occult powers or an especially advanced technology – had flourished on a large island in the North Atlantic until flooded over about 11,500 years ago as a result of a natural disaster (with none of Plato's suggestion of divine retribution). Before its demise, Donnelly's Atlantis had seeded the ancient world with colonies in which its brand of universal and essentially Bronze Age culture had thrived. He thought that Egypt was the oldest of the colonies of Atlantis, in which he diverged from Plato. Consequently, to know what that Atlantean culture was like, we may turn to ancient Egypt as the nearest thing available to us (Donnelly 1882).

Donnelly considered that in the mythology of Egypt (and that of Peru, whither the Atlanteans had also extended their empire) might be discerned the original religion of Atlantis, which he took to be Sun worship, and also a record of its history and general cultural legacy. Donnelly was really the first of a long line of myth interpreters who have trawled the world's folktales and more sophisticated mythologies to divine real history and real science in stories that are ostensibly (and frequently grotesquely) at odds with the interpretations they put upon them (Jordan 2001). But without meaning to be esoteric, Donnelly had promoted a method of alternative inquiry into the past that is full of esoteric potential. The idea that myths contain disguised data about history and science opens the way to ingenious interpretation by people who think they are in possession of special insights into them. The next step is to believe that the original devisers of the myths deliberately set out to transmit real knowledge by means of their stories, however unreliable and inevitably misleading it might seem to use the colorful vagaries of mythology in that way. And the next stage is to elevate those myth makers into an elite of priests-cum-astronomers endowed with the high purpose of passing their vast body of profound knowledge down to future ages. To be

able to tap into those priests' messages makes the modern myth interpreters feel part of the exclusive elite themselves, and a real esotericism is created (see Chapter 4).

Donnelly in the nineteenth century also contributed an idea to crank Egyptology that has come to the fore in recent years: the belief that Egyptian civilization appeared very suddenly in the world, without any local background development. Donnelly knew nothing of predynastic Egypt for the simple reason that very little of it had then been turned up and recognized. The sparse and unspectacular beginnings of things, both in human cultural processes and in biological evolution, are necessarily harder to track than the striking and profuse examples from established cultures and large biological populations, especially in the early years of their study. When Donnelly was writing, the apparent lack of background development for Old Kingdom Egypt allowed him to conclude that the Egyptian civilization had appeared in full fig overnight – which could only mean that it had been brought to Egypt fully formed from elsewhere, from lost Atlantis, in just the same way that the European powers were planting their version of civilization in their colonies around the world in Donnelly's day. How old Atlantis had come by its own civilization was not something that Donnelly felt compelled to look into.

The early Egyptologists were not immune to the notion of superior invaders as the mainspring of cultural progress (it was in the air of empire), but they discounted Atlantis, preferring to conjecture sometimes about superior races coming in, with a superior intelligence that could develop a superior civilization in due course. The Australian Elliot Smith, professor of anatomy in Cairo and then Manchester and London, was a sort of Donnelly without Atlantis, who thought there had indeed been a seminal ancient civilization to which all the rest of the world's civilizations owed their inspiration: it was Egypt itself, without benefit of any prior example (Daniel 1981). Smith's Manchester School of skewed Egyptology thrived between the world wars and was rivaled by Lord Raglan's variation on the theme, which saw Sumer substituted for Egypt. Both were quite incapable, like Donnelly, of crediting the generality of the human race (except in the one unexplained case of Atlantis, Egypt or Sumer) with any powers of cultural invention at all: their descendants like von Däniken and Hancock show exactly the same incapacity. On a perhaps lower level of intellectual interest, the interwar years also saw the popularization of the "Curse of the Pharaohs" thanks to the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb. In fact, no royal tomb of ancient Egypt has ever been found with esoteric imprecations against despoilment, although private tombs could run to not very blood-curdling warnings like "Any man who harms this tomb will be judged with me by the great god" (Greener 1966: 7). Still, the "Curse of the Pharaohs" considerably boosted the public's association of the esoteric and sensational with Egyptian culture.

An interwar visionary from Virginia called Edgar Cayce ("the Sleeping Prophet") went one better than paltry curses by actually claiming to have

been an Egyptian sort of priest in Atlantean times. Cayce painted a picture of old Atlantis quite at variance with Donnelly's (or, needless to say, Plato's): his version rejoiced in about 10,500 BC in all the high technology of the 1930s (e.g. aircraft, elevators, radio, photography – but not the Internet). Yet all this had not saved the Atlanteans from destruction as a result of meddling (obscurely) with the forces of nature. Cayce believed that Atlantis had split into fragments before vanishing altogether – the piece he called "Poseidia" would, he prophesied, rise again in 1968–69. It did not. Nor did we get the Egyptian Hall of Records, which was supposed to come to light by the Sphinx before the end of the millennium (Cayce 1997). Cayce's prophecies have, incredibly, inspired and funded well-equipped investigations to try to find, among other things, long-rumored underground chambers by the Sphinx, using the latest methods of remote sensing. Where it has been possible to follow up the indications of subterranean anomalies, only natural geological features – fissures and porosities – have been found; but not all have been followed up since the early 1990s, allowing enthusiasts for Cayce's ideas to imagine themselves as victims of professional Egyptological obstruction. For "obstruction," the Egyptian authorities would no doubt read "responsible restriction."

Alleged secret chambers under the Sphinx go hand in hand with repeated efforts to date the Sphinx itself as much earlier than the fourth dynasty of the Old Kingdom of ancient Egypt, around 2500 BC. Very recent attempts have been made, on geological grounds to do with erosion by running water, to date the Sphinx to several thousand years before this date but have been robustly countered with a geological interpretation involving evaporation and flaking that does not conflict with the Egyptological dating (Jordan 1998). Any dating of the Sphinx (and the nearby temples) to a period thousands of years before the beginnings of the ancient Egyptian civilization is itself an exercise in the esoteric, broadly speaking, since no known human group has been archaeologically demonstrated to have existed at the time that was capable of making these things or culturally disposed to want to. You have to fall back on survivors from Atlantis and that secret lineage of astronomer-priests to "explain" how the early Sphinx could have been conceived and created. John Anthony West – in line with his mentor Schwaller – wants to backdate this monument, both as one in the eye for modern science and as part of his conviction, memorialized at his website, that "Egyptian civilization was not a development, it was a legacy." Geologist Robert Schoch, who first made his case for the great age of the Sphinx in the 1990s, now attributes the Giza monuments to the persistent constructional tendencies of the survivors of the comet-induced destruction of what we might call "Atlantis in Indonesia" (Schoch 2003).

Secret chambers meet up with ancient astronomy in recent attempts to bolster Cayce's 10,500 BC dating of Atlantis and its colonies by reconstructing the night skies of that remote epoch and relating them to various monuments and groups of monuments around the world. The pyramid

fields at and around Giza in Egypt were for a while the favorite place to make such a match between monuments on the ground and stars in the skies. Robert Bauval and Graham Hancock, together and on their own, have been at the forefront of this line of inquiry in our day (e.g. Hancock and Bauval 1996). Starting with the not very striking "match" between the three stars of Orion's belt and the three pyramids at Giza (neither trio is quite in a straight line, and in both cases two items are more prominent than the third), the theory was elaborated that the rest of Orion was also matched by further pyramids and other monuments arranged beside the Nile just as Orion lies by the Milky Way. The "faultless precision" of the match was talked up. Furthermore, a super-match was advertised for 10,500 BC, when a gaze up at the night sky could be turned down to Earth to find heaven's pattern perfectly mirrored on Earth. It all unraveled very quickly when it was pointed out that many stars had no terrestrial equivalents at all and that what there were in the way of identifications were hopelessly misaligned away from the central three points. Even the match of the Giza pyramids and the belt stars is not as good as was claimed. Hancock and Bauval make little of it all nowadays, sticking only to an idea of a general similarity (in their eyes) between Earth and heaven at Giza in ancient days. Further computer-generated views of the night skies of 10,500 BC, as they would have looked behind the Sphinx before sunrise at the vernal equinox, were supposed to show that the ancient astronomer-priests had left us a powerful indicator of a secret chamber under the rump of the Sphinx, which no doubt we could penetrate forthwith but for the obstruction of the Egyptian authorities (just as they obstruct attempts, according to the esoterically minded, to find secret chambers in the Great Pyramid by sending little robots up the narrow airshafts of the King's Chamber.)

It should always be remembered that these people also thought there was a giant face and a pyramid field to be seen in photographs of the surface of the planet Mars in the region of Cydonia: a whole scenario of a 20,000-year-old civilization on Mars, destroyed by cometary impact, was contrived (Hancock 1998b). Better photographs demolished the whole fantasy in short order. But the recklessness of the proposition should be noted as a guide to the likely reliability of all speculations about anything whatever from such sources. Its simply never needed hindsight and better photographs to know that faces and pyramids on Mars were balderdash. When Hancock nowadays discerns ancient underwater cities off the Indian coast or anywhere else, the pyramids and face on Mars should give even his most enthusiastic followers pause.

Hancock appears not to be as interested in ancient Egypt as he was; he seems to have exhausted its possibilities for his purpose, which is now to search for evidence of an ancient, lost seafaring civilization of uncommon accomplishment that lay behind the rise of the early civilizations we do know about in the Old and New Worlds. He does try to get something going in his *Underworld* for the Delta coast of Egypt, with fishermen's stories

of massive edifices submerged out to sea, but nothing comes of it: one that got away, then (Hancock 2002a). But his earlier work (*Fingerprints of the Gods* and *Heaven's Mirror*) has featured Egypt extensively. In continuity with Donnelly, he makes much of what he takes to be the sudden appearance of the ancient Egyptian civilization, without Donnelly's excuse for doing so: there is none now for imagining that Egyptian civilization "emerged all at once and fully formed" (Hancock 1995: 135).

Conclusion

There is never really anything all that new under the sun of "alternative archaeology" and its Egyptian subsidiary, just ingenious permutations of old hat for the most part, with eager seizures on anything new (or new to the speculators) that seems to throw a spanner in the works of the professional study. All things Egyptian remain a perennial attraction for the public at large (as the television programs show) and for that section of the public that revels in the "ancient mysteries" (as the sales of authors like Hancock demonstrate). It has to be faced that there is just something about the ancient Egyptian heritage of monuments and writings – sunlit but sometimes subterranean, vivid but sometimes obscure, beautiful but sometimes grotesque, everyday but sometimes mysterious – that will always continue to fascinate: and to tickle the palate of everyone with a taste for the esoteric. The themes will remain: the huge antiquity of Egyptian civilization and even some of its existing monuments, beyond the wildest dreams of the Egyptologists; the suddenness of its inception, without local antecedence; its possession from the first of preternatural knowledge, especially in the astronomical sphere; the presence in its midst of an invisible brotherhood of prodigiously wise men bent on transmitting its heritage of knowledge to future generations; its inveterate recourse to abstruse symbolism in myth and number to enshrine that vital knowledge; its bequest of complex constructions with hidden passages and chambers ever awaiting our discovery, full of ancient lore; its being, quite simply, something altogether more mysterious than it plainly appears to be.