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# Ideograms and Hieroglyphs: The Egypto-Chinese Origins Controversy in the Enlightenment

Janine Hartman

Sphinxes lined the gardens of Versailles while Jesuits in China and French academicians debated the origins of hieroglyphs, all a century before Napoleon set sail for the Nile. Scholars religious and secular had been intrigued since the Renaissance by the remnants of non-European civilization, first in recovered Egyptian obelisks in Rome, and later from missionary accounts of China. China and Egypt had mysterious written languages, unknown histories, great accomplishments, and represented archetypes of order outside Christian or Graeco-Roman history.

Ancient Egypt and contemporary China represented an invitation to taxonomy that European thinkers, particularly in the eighteenth century, found irresistible. The universalist claims of the *philosophes*, and habit of "right reason," would deduce the nature of these societies and form a web of connections—through the compared patterns of their monuments, kings' lists, philosophies and written languages—to each other and to possible Bible chronology, or Greek history.

Indecipherable hieroglyphics and largely mythic history from Herodotus were the first images of Egypt familiar to post-Reformation Europe. Jesuit missionary priests and English East Indian Company merchants provided travel accounts at the same time as Spanish priests reported the existence of Meso-American hieroglyphs.

What was the meaning and true significance of societies and accomplishments developed apparently separately from Christian and classical Mediterranean peoples? Where were these peoples in Biblical creation accounts? Did they antedate the Bible itself? Were these languages and civilizations also separate from one another? Did their religious and philosophical beliefs complement or transcend European revealed religion?

The question about the "origins" of civilizations, about their writing and religions, was especially acute in the case of China, a living civilization of indeterminate age, and Egypt, romanticized since Homeric times. Greek writers had succumbed to orientalist glamor before Alexander's Macedonians annexed Egypt. Qing dynasty isolationist foreign policy also had made Chinese life and culture remote from eighteenth-century Europeans, who were more familiar with Chinese exported artifacts than ideas. Europe experienced chinoiserie and egyptianizing crazes in design and consumer goods as its intellectuals attempted to impose a certain coherence, indeed, direct connections upon these disparate civilizations. Though the Egyptians and Chinese represented mature societies in Africa and Asia, in the European imagination there was a need and will to connect them, and then to explain that connection. Their deductions showed a common history, religion and kings, proven by similarities between hieroglyphs

and Chinese ideograms. Egypt was synonymous with a lost order of knowledge. Contemporary China possessed apparent civil and moral order in Neo-Confucian government. It advertised its technical superiority to Europe in a tide of exported textiles and porcelains that led to a silver currency drain, and the defensive founding of French luxury industries by Colbert.

Both societies permeated the French imagination, inspiring obelisks, pagodas, sphinxes, dragons and pyramids in garden and cemetery design, as well as highly fanciful Egyptian and Chinese references in literature and on the stage. The Italian adventurer Casanova incorporated egyptianisms in his occult repertoire, while fellow Freemason Mozart did the same in his popular opera *The Magic Flute*. Classicist Mary Lefkowitz, in her recent book, *Not Out of Africa*, has traced the first Egyptian literary craze to Abbé Jean Terrasson, a classics professor whose work dominated the study of ancient history in France until his death in 1750. His novel *Sethos : histoire ou vie tirée des monuments : anecdotes de l'ancienne Égypte* (1731) influenced popular culture and Masonic lore about things Egyptian. Lefkowitz and Martin Bernal agree that Terrasson, a Diodorus translator, derived the details for this novel from Greek sources, ranging from Herodotus<sup>1</sup> to work as late as the Church fathers. But then, Europeans were responding to these, and other widely distributed images of Egypt's past and China's present which were largely accurate only by accident.

The recovery of classical Antiquity, undertaken during the Renaissance, had coincided with voyages of discovery, the Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation. In times of social turmoil and questioned intellectual and spiritual authority, along with newly forged national identities, it is perhaps inevitable that the question about language and national origins would be subsumed into the controversy over the historical and intellectual authority of the Bible and the legitimacy of truths determined by the established Church, whose monopoly on truth was challenged by the *philosophes*. News of new artifacts and newly discovered civilizations past and present flooded in from travelers, merchants and priests, particularly from the Society of Jesus.

European societies were already rocked by civil and religious wars and economic changes that ruthlessly altered prior social order and re-invented individual and corporate identity. Elites deep in contention on the validity of medieval Christian truths now had to explain, or to invent, a logical relation to Christian origin narratives for a much enlarged humanity. Egyptians, mentioned prominently in the Bible, and slightly more objectively in Greek literature (notably Herodotus and Plato) were familiar by name and characterization in European tradition. The classical Mediterranean tendency to mystify Egyptian symbols, language and religion had been imbibed by Renaissance scholars newly meeting, and widely distributing, restored Greek texts. Cosmopolitan popes had Egypto-Hellenistic sculptures excavated from the *stratæ* of pre-Christian Rome.

Obelisks bearing hieroglyphic writing emerged, posing a mystery that required explanation from savants, and a caveat to official Christian accounts of history, time, natural law. New information required investigation and interpretation, by scientists, priests, even alchemists, as each group tried to

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1. And possibly Heliodorus, according to Bernal (see Underdowne, Feuillâtre).

explain the past in a way to verify the present, and legitimate its own intellectual authority.

Both the discovery of Mexican hieroglyphic writing and the Jesuit researches into contemporary Chinese ideograms fascinated scholars. They were intrigued by the idea of an original single language, derived from the Tower of Babel tradition. Christian humanists attempted to derive archaeologies of knowledge from inscriptions and texts. This problem, knowledge, its legitimacy and privileged access, dated in the Western imagination from the story of the serpent and the apple. Christian mysticism also harbored the concept of hierarchies of spiritual initiation and insight. This mystic awareness signified grace and favor from God and would fuel curiosity to examine and to interpret the connections, especially to speculate upon the nature and power of "mystic" writing. If the prophet Daniel could interpret "mene, mene, tekem, upharsin," could not a Renaissance humanist also decipher? As Voltaire later noted, the Chinese question would come down to a dispute on the primacy of prophecy (or revelation) over law (reason).

The way that European religious and worldly scholars understood Egyptian and Chinese writing depended upon their own contemporary anxieties about the nature of truth, and the legitimacy of claims about the Bible and human history. A particular glamor attached to the Egyptians due to their later Hellenistic and Roman religious influences, and the account in Exodus of Egyptian luxury and sorcery. A culture that invested contemporary Hebrew and Arabic writing with magical associations would also assume great power in the indecipherable and ancient hieroglyphic writing. It was as well an invitation to speculate.

Eric Iversen states that humanists often saw early knowledge as precursor of God and the Christian revelation of ultimate truth. Marsilio Ficino, Hermes Trismegistus, Pico della Mirandola, Plato and the Pythagoreans represented an unbroken chain of such knowledge. To the early modern investigator, the Egyptians had served a God whose nature and name had not been revealed to them. Giordano Bruno took this so far as to show that crosses were an Egyptian symbol antedating Christ, and proof of an ur-religion, or universal revelation. He was burned for this theorizing even as the Church calmly commissioned further investigations into Egyptology (Iversen 60-61).

Ficino's translation of Hermes Trismegistus' writings, with direct Egyptian associations, went into its eighth edition before 1500, and by 1641, its twenty-second, an efficient distribution of this new writing, and an interest in Osiris, the resurrected Egyptian God-Judge of the dead. Iversen points to the Osiran connection with "the Great Mother-Goddess Isis, who undoubtedly at an earlier period had contributed [...] considerably to the development of the worship of the Virgin, and his association with his loving son Horus contained a profusion of elements which recalled the Christian passion and were considered by the humanists an imperfect and anticipated but, nevertheless, essentially true reflection of it" (62). Art historians have identified Isis images and other Egyptian elements in earlier and Renaissance European shrines and structures, which went unquestioned at the time.

The humanist fashion for "egyptianizing" may explain why Giovanni Nanni (1432-1502), known as Annius, produced an Osiris narrative which proved that

his patron, Pope Alexander VI, was descended from the Egyptian Heracles (son of Osiris). The Borgia family crest's bull was also identified with the Osiran Apis. Anniius, employed as a Borgia secretary, gave way to the medieval habit of forgery in a good cause (known to later scholars as "mythomanie") and invented twelve "ancient" texts. They were the historical works of the Chaldean Berossus and an Egyptian, Manetho, which he verified by anachronistic cross-reference to existing texts. These books, liberally assisted by Diodorus' account, present Osiris wandering through Italy in fine Dionysian-Bacchic tradition, disposing of giants, inventing agriculture and wine-making, and acting "to assign the subsequent dominion of land and sea to his Italian successors" (Iversen 62). These successors were Anniius' Borgia employers.

Annius also "discovered" Osiran columns, reported in Herodotus, conveniently in the Church of San Lorenzo, in Viterbo, his home town. Fortunately he was able to interpret the inscriptions which confirmed his earlier claims of Italian direct inheritance of Egyptian civilization. A line to power, and a lineage of greatest antiquity, was a useful political tool. No one knew the nature of Egyptian symbols and any interpretation could honestly be proposed. This information void could assist the claims of an immediate political, religious or political faction.<sup>2</sup>

Annius was poisoned by Cesare Borgia, and other scholars proposed that hieroglyphics were proof of intellectual enlightenment granted by God, a sort of shorthand from the spheres, available only to the initiates. The hermetic philosophers took an interest and suggested theories of correspondance. But Liselotte Dieckmann does not find the term "hieroglyphic" in medieval alchemy, though Kabalistic and Pythagorean numbers, with Hellenistic association, are evident. The recovery of Greek manuscripts on Egypt, and the publication of architectural engravings caused an "égyptomanie" first in Renaissance Italy and then in the North, that put genuine and fantastical recondite Egyptian symbols before the public. Greek and Latin texts and pattern books about Egypt made it the first exotic and non-Christian civilization to tease the early modern imagination. What did these radically different gods, geometric shapes and cryptic writing mean? Was theirs a cosmic significance, and what did that imply about one's own society and its philosophy and religion?<sup>3</sup>

Natural philosophers speculated on the Egyptian significance through the sixteenth century, while the wars of religion raged and the Christian revelation evolved, or degenerated, depending upon one's faction, into Roman, Lutheran, Calvinist, Anglican and Anabaptist "truth." Curl lists publications in a "proto-

2. For mythomania, and convenient histories of reassurance, see Landes who has revived Saltet's insight. Essentially, Saltet sees Adhemar's forgery (documents supporting the existence of a fictional fourteenth apostle, Saint Martial de Limoges) as a response to "decaying authority of Carolingian papacies and the millennium." The wholesale invention of documents (or in Anniius' case, of inscriptions as well) that reinforce one's interests or world view during times of chaos is not unknown.
3. See Curl who surveys the Egyptian enthusiasms of artists, architects and planners from the Renaissance to the present and details egyptianizing elements in gardens, cemeteries, public squares, and even baroque German altars.

Enlightenment," from Robert Fludd, Giordano Bruno and Michael Maier that included Egyptian title-pages. A patron of these scientists was Kaiser Rudolf II (1552-1612), who dabbled in the occult. Elizabeth I of England (1558-1603), the "Virgin-Queen"-cum-Isis, was the patron of John Dee and Edward Spenser, natural philosopher and poet, identified in Frances Yates' Rosicrucian Enlightenment. As the inadvertent cause of the Henrician Reformation that made England Protestant, Elizabeth struggled to legitimate and promote her power and a Protestant monarchy, accepting Spenser's egyptianising and occult references in *The Faerie Queene* (1582) as part of her princely public relation's presence (Curl 68).

Kings and cardinals encouraged scholarly inquiry and the acquisition of things Egyptian. Claude Nicolas Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637) was the French consul in Ottoman Egypt, charged with buying antiquities and gathering inscriptions. A specialist in Coptic, he became a hieroglyphic theorist and contended with Issac Casaubon (1559-1614), Fludd and Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618) on the Egyptian question. The consul also connected Père Athanase Kircher (1602-1659) with Cardinal Barberini, who financed the latter's career as the most noted Renaissance writer on Egypt, and China.<sup>4</sup>

Kircher, a prolific author, defined Egyptology for his age. He attempted to translate the inscriptions on the Pompilian obelisk for the Pope. From Neoplatonism, Kircher derived the insight that there was an important relation between Egyptian lore and Greek cosmic knowledge. He published treatises on monuments and mummies, but was primarily interested in matters Chinese. Kircher, a German Jesuit, is identified in Henri Cordier's *Histoire générale de la Chine* as the first to raise the Sino-Egyptian question in *Oedipus Aegypticus* in 1654, and again in *China Illustrata* (1667, French edition in 1670). Kircher compared Egyptian and Chinese inscriptions (from manuscript, he never left Europe) and concluded: "Les premiers Chinois, estant descendus des Égyptiens, ont suivi leurs façons de faire pour leurs escritures, non pas quand à la composition des lettres, mais quand aux figures tirées de diverses choses naturelles, lesquelles leur servoient pour manifester leur concept. C'est pourquoy ils avoient de choses à énoncer" (Cordier I:11).

Kircher studied Coptic while taking refuge in Avignon from the Thirty Years War. He never grasped the relation of hieroglyphs to contemporary Coptic; they were only sublime symbols for him, as Madeleine V. David says, "[qui] propose[nt] d'un seul corps à l'intelligence du sage un raisonnement complexe, des notions élevées, ou quelque mystère insigne caché dans le sein de la nature ou de la Divinité" (46). Kircher addressed the question of symbols in *La Chine illustrée* (1670). He thought that Chinese symbols were figurative, with an exterior similarity to Egyptian writing, but believed that hieroglyphs had not been in daily use "because they are superior and mysterious things, while Chinese characters are employed daily." He received his Chinese information from fellow Jesuits on mission, notably Père Michel Boym, a Pole, and Père Jean Grueber, whose Tibetan journey is also reported in *La Chine*. Acting as a

4. Curl 71. A scathing discussion of European infatuation with things Chinese appears in Peyrefitte 25-28.



synthesizing thinker, Kircher popularized the ideas of a Sino-Egyptian comparison. Henri Cordier makes it clear that Kircher's "science sinologique n'était que rudimentaire ; il y ajouta ses autres connaissances, vastes assurément, et la faculté de bâtir des théories qui suffisaient à l'esprit critique de la controverse de l'époque."<sup>5</sup>

The question took a focus appropriate for its time. In the seventeenth century, philosophers in the new royal academies of inscriptions and science were ushering in a new age of investigation. Savants were encouraged by royal courts to explain the order and working of creation. Under royal protection, academicians could speculate on natural law, physics, geography, and later, comparative religion, political economy, sociology and linguistics. Academies and journals discussed the origins and relations of peoples and nations as readily as they investigated nature. Royal academies' discourse acted as a licensing agent for creation of an official knowledge after suitable discussion and experimentation. Academies were superseding the authority of the Church, and producing a new elite, frequently clerical, that pronounced on general truths as part of the responsibilities of a new profession. The first generation of French and English academicians were educated, and often employed by state churches. Europe was recovering and recoiling from religious wars, but the writers dealing with the origins of writing, China, and Egypt, raised another question with religious implications: the validity of the Bible as an historical authority.<sup>6</sup>

Virgile Pinot shows the centrality of historical authority and religion for the French writers of the Grand Siècle, and details the ingenious analysis that the proven antiquity of China inspired:

Mais les conséquences théologiques de cette antiquité de la Chine ne sont pas négligeables, loin de là. Si cette antiquité est bien prouvée, elle risque de rendre suspecte, ou même de détruire la chronologie de la Bible, car elle la dépasse. Et si cette histoire de la Chine est bien suivie et sans interruption depuis les origines, elle s'inscrit en faux contre l'idée du Déluge universel. (191)

The best-known discussion of Chinese antiquity and relation to Christian chronology comes from Voltaire, who certainly uses Chinese comparisons to undermine Church teaching authority. But there were investigators before Voltaire, notably Nicolas Fréret (1688-1749). Fréret, the perpetual secretary of the Académie des inscriptions et belles-lettres, is credited with being the first objective French historian, writing from a secular instead of a religious

5. Cordier I:12. See also David 46, 54.

6. The disastrous Thirty Years War had recently concluded in Germany with the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The English Civil Wars over absolutism and parliamentary law were resolved by the Stuart Restoration of Charles II in 1660. Charles established a Royal Society which included many religious savants, among them Sir Issac Newton, Robert Boyle, and Bishop Sprat, the Society's first historian. A recent and useful addition to the academic debates on cultural authority and texts, in this case on the seventeenth-century disputes about the validity and importance of translations of Homer, is DeJean's book.

viewpoint. In 1718 he read a paper before the Académie ridiculing Kircher's discovered similarities of Chinese and Egyptian writing:

Les premiers inventeurs de l'écriture chinoise se sont attachés à des signes entièrement arbitraires, ou qui n'ont qu'on rapport d'institution avec les choses signifiées ; en cela ils ont suivi le génie de la nation chinoise, qui même avant Fo-hi, c'est-à-dire dans la plus profonde antiquité, se servoit de cordelettes nouées en guise d'écriture. Le nombre de nœuds de chaque corde formait un caractère, & l'assemblage de cordes tenoit lieu d'une espèce de livre qui servoit à rappeler, ou à fixer dans l'esprit des hommes le souvenir des choses, qui sans cela, s'en seroient effacées.<sup>7</sup>

Two years before, the bishop of Avranches, Pierre-Benoît Huet, had published a history of commerce arguing that China and India were colonies of Egypt, as a result of "cette expédition si célèbre d'Osiris dans les Indes où il régna pendant cinquante-deux ans, cultiva & polit cette nation, y bâtit des villes, & y répandit tant de colonies d'Égyptiens, que l'Égypte se crut suffisamment autorisée dans la suite à former une prétention sur les Indes comme son propre " (37-38, cited in Cordier I:14). Huet suggests that Chinese customs conform with those of the Egyptians in particular: "leurs doubles lettres hiéroglyphiques & profanes, quelque affinité même de leurs langues, la doctrine de la métempsycose, le culte de la vache, & ce qui me paroît fort remarquable, cette aversion constante que font paroître les Chinois à recevoir les négocians étrangers dans leurs pays, & qui les a possédez dans tous les tems, pareille à celle que Strabon attribue aux aucuns Égyptiens" (38, cited in Cordier I:14).

Huet is also aware of Chinese imperial influence through Asia and of the voyage of the Ming fleet to the straits of Ormuz. He sees China as consciously culturally superior, a society whose sense of tradition and its own perfections led to a self-isolation similar to that of ancient Egypt.<sup>8</sup> Academicians now had some direct contact with Chinese letters in Paris through Arcadius Hoang (1679-1713), a literate Chinese Christian who had been presented at court. Montesquieu's notes show that the ambassador Usbek in *Les lettres persanes* draws upon Hoang for inspiration. The first Chinese typeface would be brought to Paris in 1715, while the Vatican held the first European copy of a Chinese dictionary (David 79). Jesuit writings tended to determine French perceptions of Chinese society and religion. In the rites controversy, Europeans later accused the Jesuits of

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7. Cordier I:13. See also Huet and Premare. David reports that this work reveals to the Chinese the excellence of reinterpreting anew their ancient books, and states: "On notera surtout le transfert qui reliait aux prestiges de l'Égypte ancienne, retrospectivement « christianisée », la Chine, ainsi rapprochée de l'Orient ancien" (60).
  8. Huet was unaware, but perhaps would not have been surprised to learn, that the Ming court disavowed the voyage west, laid up the fleet, destroyed the ships' logs and undertook a foreign isolation policy.



whitewashing Chinese mores, and of radically oversimplifying Christianity into Confucianist terms to win converts.<sup>9</sup>

Jean-Jacques d'Ortous de Mairan (1678-1771) of the Académie des sciences wrote Père Parennin, in Peking, that Sesostris had gone to China, again an explanation for Egypto-Chinese similarities. But direct knowledge advanced with publication of the *Grammaire chinoise* in 1742. Students Joseph de Guignes (1721-1800) and Leroux de Hauterayes accompanied the editor Fourmont when he formally presented the volume to Louis XV, "avec une grande solennité et comme une œuvre capitale."<sup>10</sup> This Chinese controversy and competitions for orientalist language chairs would define their later careers. Guignes became an authority on barbarian invasions and the Huns. He joined the Académie in 1753, and spent much of his remaining career on the Egyptian-Chinese controversy and alphabet question. He was more of an Arabist than an oriental linguist, and drew on the work of Père Barthélémy on Coptic and Phoenician language.<sup>11</sup> Guignes derived Hebrew and Greek letters from examining Egyptian hieroglyphics,

et il ignore absolument ce qu'a montré récemment M. de Rougé, comment la dérivation s'est opérée. Il s'imagina retrouver le même système figuratif dans l'écriture chinoise et en conclut que les Chinois étaient une colonie d'Égyptiens. Cette folle idée a entaché, on peut le dire, presque tous les travaux de ce savant. (Maury 261-62)

Guignes suggested that the radicals on Chinese ideograms were similar to those of Phoenician, which were in turn based upon Egyptian. Mazzolini and Roe give an example of Guignes' analytic mode:

Je pris les trois racines du mot *Iada* qui en Phénicien signifioit *sçavoir, connoître* ; ces racines sont un *Iod*, un *Daleth* & un *Ain*. La première quant à sa denomination grammaticale signifie, comme je l'ai dit, la *main* ; la seconde une *porte*, & la troisième un *œil*. Je choisis les trois anciens caractères Chinois qui désignaient l'œil, la porte & la main; je les réunis, & je vis paroître un Hiéroglyphe en usage parmi les Chinois, & qui signifie *examiner, sçavoir*. (96-97)

Guignes' analysis excited some. Scientist Charles Bonnet (1720-1793) wrote a colleague in 1759: "Mr de Guignes vient de faire une découverte qui embarrassera davantage notre sceptique ; il a découvert que les Caractères Chinois sont composés de Caractères Égyptiens, et que les Noms des Rois des premières

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9. See Guy 1990, and Peyrefitte 26 who points out that in order to remain welcome in China, the Jesuits promulgated nothing negative about Chinese government and life, though they were not unaware of Chinese failings.
  10. Maury 261-62. I am indebted to Professor Frank Kafker, of the University of Cincinnati, for this reference.
  11. David 111. See also Barthélémy who disagreed with Guignes, but had himself documented resemblances between Egyptian (preserved in Coptic) and Phoenician vocabulary and grammar.

Dynasties de la Chine reviennent à ceux des anciens Rois de Thèbes en Égypte. Ainsi, cette antiquité si vantée de la Chine n'est qu'une fable ; & ses Inventions & ses Arts ne sont, suivant Mr de Guignes, qu'une émanation de l'ancienne Égypte" (Mazzolini and Roe 97).

Linguists, notably Deshauterayes, now occupying the Arabic language chair at the Collège Royal, were less impressed, but their careful refutations were less attractive than this symmetrical explanation. Guignes was not discouraged by Deshauterayes' 1759 pamphlet, *Doutes*, which states that Guignes, using Phoenician alphabetic similarities, is intent upon proving that Phoenicians were Egyptians, and that the first two recorded Chinese dynasties were of princes who had governed in Egypt:

M. D. établit la conformité entre ces Princes, non par un parallèle de leur histoire, ou par une ressemblance entre des faits qu'il rapprocheroit, mais par la lecture seule de noms Chinois, de ces Princes qu'il croit composés de lettres Phoeniciennes. Enfin, M. D. prétend encore prouver qu'une colonie Égyptienne alla s'établir dans la Chine, & il fixe l'époque de son entrée dans cet Empire à l'an 1212. (Deshauterayes 5-7)

John Turberville Needham (1713-1791), savant and English Catholic priest, was influenced by Guignes' linkage idea when he examined an Isis bust in the Museum at Turin in 1761.<sup>12</sup>

Needham decided that the characters incised on the bust were Chinese, and proof that there was a connection to ancient Egypt. Needham talked to a Chinese scholar and consulted the Vatican dictionary, then presented the theory that the Isis bust could be a key to deciphering ancient Egyptian by reading Chinese and noting similarities. He rushed into print a pamphlet, *De inscriptione*, which echoed Guignes' theory and cited the Isis bust as proof. Mazzolini and Roe find in Needham's correspondence a particular motive: Needham wished to explode the notion of Chinese antiquity which Voltaire had successfully used to challenge Biblical authority.<sup>13</sup> Guignes himself disavowed Needham's project, which

12. Isis images, or alleged Isis cult figures, survived all over Europe. These artifacts are discussed in Baltrusaitis.

13. In a letter to Albrecht von Haller of 28 December 1760, Needham disclosed: "What you mention concerning the materialists inclines me to confide in you, what I intend as a secret to the world in general, that I am actually employed in writing an essay against this species of mad men: as it attacks many, who have honored me in appearance with as much friendship, as such persons are capable of, my design is, that it shall be anonymous, and therefore I beg that what I say to you concerning my intentions may not be communicated. They intrench themselves first behind egyptian fables, or a far-fetched chinese chronology of no credit: and when they are drove [sic] from that, they bury themselves in the eternity of the world. I have a strong physical argument against the pretended antiquity of the Egyptians, and if your countryman Mr. Smidt's arguments [as] well as those of Mr. Guignes prove, the Chinese to be a colony of the Egyptians, there is an end of the chinese antiquity" (Mazzolini 98).

included a request that he help distribute the pamphlet in Paris, and also apparently pointed out that Needham knew no Chinese.

Nonetheless, Needham was elected an honorary Fellow of the London Society of Antiquarians on the strength of this campaign, and the Royal Society investigated his theory. Edward Wortley Montagu interviewed the curator of the University Museum of Turin, Giuseppe Bartoli, about the bust. Bartoli questioned the bust's age, Egyptian quality, its inscriptions, and even the accuracy of Needham's copy of the markings, much to Guignes' satisfaction. The bust became an attraction for English tourists, historian Edward Gibbon reported. A flurry of pamphlets and counter-charges resulted and Needham convened a jury of noted amateurs to examine the bust, producing a certificate more notable for the social prominence than academic eminence of the group. Contemporary art historians, including George Winkelman, dismissed the statue as a forgery, incapable of serving as a Chinese key to hieroglyphics. Bartoli intervened to point out that the statue was from the Savoy collection, acquired in 1739, and that the stone was Chiavenna marble and of local manufacture. Le Beau, secretary of the Académie, thanked him for clearing up an equivocal issue that could have swamped Chinese studies.<sup>14</sup> The indefatigable Needham appealed to Jesuits in Peking, and in 1763 Père Pierre Martial Cibot issued his *Lettre de Peking*, the most thorough answer to the colonization theory made by someone fluent in contemporary written Chinese (Mazzolini 98). His remarks were issued by Needham with two additional speculative articles by Guignes on Chinese grammar, myth and chronology. Cibot's remarks diplomatically affirm the antiquity of Chinese history before Christ. He points out that ancient Chinese will not look the same as contemporary ideograms available to European scholars. Guignes does compare Chinese astronomical records with those of the Greeks and Egyptians, but Chinese history is not precisely recorded in comparative chronological tables. Nor is it readily discernible from any mythology, also a question with the Greeks, from Homer to Herodotus. Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese pictograms group symbols together to form meaning, but how do we know that the meanings for the apparently same symbol are not different?

Ceux des Hiéroglyphes Égyptiens dont Orus Apollo nous a conservé signification sont-ils composés des mêmes idées ou des mêmes élémens que ceux des Chinois ? Tout le rapport qu'on se propose d'établir entre la Chine et l'Égypte dépend de l'examen de cette question. Il seroit difficile que des Peuples fort éloignés, qui n'auroient eu aucune communication entre eux, eussent employé

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14. Curto 15. Curto notes that the bust represents the science of a particular time, the only existing model of its type: the doctrine of the seeds of beauty was concerned with the identification of certain signs on the human countenance with those of the zodiac and the deduction of character and the future of the person. Cardano developed the concept in 1500, it was perfected by Richard Saunders in 1600, and popularized during that century. My thanks to Professor Nancy Cirillo, of the University of Illinois at Chicago, for interpretation.

les mêmes Caractères & sur-tout qu'ils eussent employé les mêmes métaphores. (Cibot xxvii)

The problem derives from the insistence that Chinese be the key to Egyptian writing, when one does not know the ancient pronunciation. Chinese is made up of combined signs which do resemble other systems, including Hebrew, Arabic, Syrian, systems which "peuvent être lus avec le secours d'un Alphabet, procédé qui est inconnu aux Chinois" (Cibot xxx, xxxiv).

Cibot deals quickly with these doubts and theories, though he is sympathetic to the desire for antique links and discernible patterns in knowledge. The missionary readily sees the motivation here ("quelle conquête pour la République de Lettres") but notes that Kircher abandoned the notion. Chinese is one of the most ancient languages, a living and evolving language that differs regionally, a fact that Europeans are not in a position to appreciate or understand. In addition, "on n'a pas le moindre indice qu'il y ait eu aucun commerce entre ces deux grands peuples, dans les tems si reculés des obélisques de Thèbes & de Héliopolis" (Cibot 7).

Supposing that letters were invented before the Deluge and preserved by Noah's children and descendants, and that "les Chinois & les Égyptiens [ont] puisé à la même source, il doit y avoir eu long-tems bien de la ressemblance entre la manière d'écrire des uns & des autres." But the inscriptions on the Isis bust do not support this theory.

Cibot compares the characters to Chinese writing fifteen hundred years before Christ; he consults experts:

Les Mandarins & les maîtres de langues ont dit aussi qu'ils n'avoient vu aucune écriture dans le tribunal des traductions qui y ressemblât. Moi-même je l'ai comparée à huit sortes de Caractères étrangers à la Chine, la plupart anciens, & je n'ai rien remarqué qui indiquât la moindre ressemblance. (20)

Cibot affirms that all ancient peoples believed in God and had priests and rites, but he does not connect ancient China to Christian antiquity, even though he notes idolatry in ancient Egypt and modern China. Egypt revered alligators and serpents, China has dragons, yet the "culte superstitieux des esprits" of the Chinese does not in the least resemble that of the Egyptians. Nor does Chinese architecture look like the monuments of Egypt.

Cibot does valiantly attempt to identify traces of a universal religion in China, including a respect for Divinity, and a triune pattern in sacrifice, as well as the Tao, passport to wisdom. He does not rule out the identification of a pattern between "Caractères hiéroglypho-mystiques," but sees it as a long-term project for *lumières*, not missionaries, who have a more serious and pressing purpose and "peu de loisir," given their "occupations journalières" (34).

Voltaire owned a copy of the *Lettre de Pekin* and was kept abreast of the linguistic controversy by Deshauterayes. Anglican bishop William Warburton and the German Benedictine Corneille de Pauw both published on the question. Warburton's *Divine Legislation of Moses* (1741) had been primarily concerned with proving that social order hinged upon belief in divine judgement, but he had

also speculated on Egyptian writing and the origins of Mexican hieroglyphics (Iversen 106). Daniel Huet had suggested in 1690 that Mosaic diffusion explained the transmission of Egyptian knowledge, "que Moïse est le Theuth des Phéniciens, le Hermès des Grecs, le Mercure des Romains, le Teutales des Gaulois" (Pinot 294). The need to explain laws, language or customs from the intervention of promethean or messianic figures certainly occurs often in the record, and persists after the epic phase in historiography. De Pauw looked at the problem as a philologist. He noticed that Egyptians had a demotic alphabet of twenty-five letters according to Plutarch, and only twenty letters after modern discoveries.

Or c'est une absurdité bien grande de vouloir que les Égyptiens n'ayent point porté à la Chine leur alphabet qui étoit fort simple, de soutenir qu'ils y ont porté leurs hiéroglyphes employés uniquement par les prêtres, & qui ne ressemblent point aux caractères de la Chine, comme l'ont soutenu des écrivains dont l'esprit étoit fécond en rêveries. On ne découvre d'ailleurs aucun rapport ni entre la religion de ces deux pays, ni entre les langues. (xvii-xviii)

Voltaire discussed matters Chinese frequently, in his essays, letters and historiography, but most memorably in a short essay, "Si les Égyptiens ont peuplé la Chine, et si les Chinois ont mangé des hommes." The Chinese represent a group that developed in isolation from European history and ideas, having no specific place in Christian cosmology. Neo-Confucian social order and a docile population without a Christian past or Christian teachings challenges Christian universalist claims, and suggests that different patterns of social organization are workable for humanity. China is the good example that developed alone:

Il nous a paru, par exemple, que les Chinois ne descendent pas plus d'une colonie d'Égypte que d'une colonie de Basse-Bretagne. Ceux qui ont prétendu que les Égyptiens avaient peuplé la Chine ont exercé leur esprit et celui des autres. (Voltaire VIII:233)

Voltaire continues: clearly neither the appearance of the Chinese, nor their manners, nor their language and writing, nor their customs are from ancient Egypt. Their divinities are different, and they ignore the mysteries of Isis. De Pauw has already demonstrated the absurdity of this idea, though Père Parennin has proven the colonization, but only to M. de Mairan. Two or three Frenchmen who have never left their country, advance this idea which has never been put forward by a Chinese, or an Egyptian.

Arab accounts suggest Chinese human sacrifice and cannibalism, but Voltaire dismisses these as episodes during desperate times, comparable to European contemporary riots and massacres, and no more notable. In *La philosophie de l'histoire* Voltaire dwells on Chinese astronomical observations recorded 3,300 years before Babylon and Callisthenes, and lauds the development of a social system administered by savant-magistrates. Confucianism appeals to

Voltaire with its apparent emphasis upon due process, moderation and meritocratic hierarchy. He sees Chinese civilization as dominated by law (reason) instead of prophecy (religion) and as a living reproach to a failed, priest-ridden Europe (see Guy 1963:146). He takes pains to deny that Confucian order implies atheism, and in other works cites examples of Chinese religious toleration, though he cannot resist challenging his sources' veracity: "Tout le reste dans ce goût ; conciliera qui voudra le jésuite portugais Sémédo avec le jésuite allemand Kircher" (*Lettres chinoises* [467]). As for the fantasy that some European savants made on colonization, he dismisses Huet and Mairan's theories and addresses the hieroglyph/ideogram thesis:

Ils ont commencé par établir qu'on pouvait trouver quelque ressemblance entre d'anciens caractères de la langue phénicienne ou syriaque et ceux de l'ancienne égypte, en y faisant les changements requis ; il ne leur a pas été difficile de travestir ensuite ces caractères égyptiens en chinois. Cela fait, ils ont composé des anagrammes avec les noms des premiers rois de la Chine. Par ces anagrammes ils ont reconnu que le roi chinois Yu est évidemment le roi d'Égypte Menes, en changeant seulement y en *me*, et u en *nes*. Ki est devenu Athoes ; Kang a été transformé en Diabies, et encore Diabies est-il un mot grec. (475)

The Greeks attached Greek endings to Egyptian words and publicized Egypt first. Voltaire sees the Egyptian comparison as an insult to the contemporary Chinese, since the Egyptians did not even grow wheat, dug canals from the Nile, and built pyramids which were a mere two thousand years old in Plato's time.

And what criterion should one use to rank greatness?

Enfin on ne juge pas toujours des peuples par leur grandeur et leur puissance. Athènes a été presque égale à l'empire romain, aux yeux des philosophes ; mais, malgré toute la splendeur dont l'Égypte a brillé, surtout sous la plume de l'évêque Bossuet, qu'il me soit permis de préférer un peuple adorateur pendant quatre mille ans du Dieu du ciel et de la terre, à un peuple qui se prosternait devant des bœufs, des chats et des crocodiles, et qui finit par aller dire la bonne aventure à Rome, et voler des poules au nom d'Isis. (476)<sup>15</sup>

Despite Voltaire's disdain for Egyptian religion, and most things mentioned favorably by Bossuet, Egypt was important for European narrations of origin, as was China. Martin Bernal assigns this importance to "positive examples of higher and finer civilization." Both countries were seen to have had massive material achievements, profound philosophies and superior writing systems (Bernal I:172). The French Physiocrats certainly saw the mandarins as fellow literati, rational reforming utopians. Bernal reports that mystical Freemasons preferred to invent Egyptian antecedents, linking Phoenicia with Egypt via the Bible, probably from a sixteenth-century legend. Voltaire himself, in his more

15. The author of *La Pucelle* could not pass up a reference to the seamy reputation of Roman Egypto-Hellenistic mystery cults.



meretricious mode, was not above invoking Sesostris, when a monarch was needed for worthy comparisons to Louis XIV.

The *philosophes* seem to have chosen certain antecedents and influences and discounted others, arbitrarily placing historical or mythic personalities where a coherent narrative required it. In an extreme example, Voltaire's *Curiosités* even notes a Jesuit letter placing the lost tribes of Israel in China, courtesy of Salamanazar in the year 717 before the Latin era, in the time of Romulus (477).

This speculation on origins continued with no check until Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphics in 1822. Guignes, as late as 1780, published "Observations sur quelques points concernant la religion et la philosophie des Égyptiens et des Chinois." He now argued from cultural, not philological evidence. Both religions had recognized a first cause, had initiates and hierarchies of knowledge. Pythagorean number theory, as related by Plutarch, was a system to govern the universe, like the Chinese Tao of the Tao-te-ching. The Ying-Yang dyad of Chinese imagery echoed the male-female symbol of Osiris-Isis. The Egyptian Bubastis rites are imitated in Chinese dragon-boat festivals. The emperor, son of heaven, is a nature symbol. Guignes criticizes the missionaries for not making more of the parallels between Pythagorean and Egyptian numbers, particularly threes, and accuses them of not wishing to accommodate this to the Christian religion.<sup>16</sup> Guignes now ties China to the philosophy of the first patriarchs: "En suivant le même système des nombres, je demande encore : pourquoi voyons-nous les Chinois & les Pythagoriens se réunir pour dire que le nombre 5 dédaigne la nature & premier Principe de l'univers ?" (173).

Guignes had returned to the old question, and in Greek terms. Umberto Eco would place this squarely in the tradition of European religious syncretism and mystic longings. Guignes' Chinese adventure had come full circle. "From its beginnings, Pythagoreans had regarded themselves as the keepers of a mystic form of knowledge. Their understanding of music and mathematics was presented as the fruit of a revelation obtained from the Egyptians. By the time of Pythagoreanism's second appearance however, Egypt itself had now become an enigma, no more than an incomprehensible hieroglyph" (Eco 13).

Speculation and academic theorizing took a turn toward political economy with the crisis of the Ancien Régime. *Philosophes* sought or invented new models of organization as the Bourbon monarchy became less effective, though Chinese order fell out of fashion. The legitimacy debate on biblical historical authority temporarily became less important as the French Revolution disestablished Church, absolutist king, and Académie. The Jacobins turned to classical Western antiquity in their attempts to produce constitutionalist utopias, though architects incorporated Egyptian geometric design elements into their proposals for new public spaces. The heir to the Revolution, Napoleon, emulating Alexander, invaded Egypt with savants in tow. The military part of

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16. Guignes XL:163-86. The Jesuits were expelled from France in 1764 and held in suspicion by the Vatican for over-emphasizing similarities between Chinese tradition and Christian belief in an excess of missionary zeal. They do not appear to have replied to Guignes' advice.

the expedition was an ill-considered combat with the British. The savants founded the Institut d'Égypte and began a systematic survey of Egypt, including its antiquities and ancient writing. Napoleon, though personally indifferent to the matter, inadvertently prepared the ground for modern Egyptology. The French discovered the Rosetta stone, which would prove the key to hieroglyphic writing. The Institute members produced the first comprehensive view of Egypt for the European reading public, taken directly from Egypt, in the *Description de l'Égypte*, a luxurious ten-volume study, released from 1809 through 1828, and so copiously illustrated that it required the services of four hundred copper engravers for decades (see Herrold). This inspired an "égyptomanie" in European popular culture that manifested itself in design from crocodile-footed sofas to obelisks and pyramids in cemeteries.<sup>17</sup> The true nature of the hieroglyphs as the written expression of ancient spoken Egyptian was realized by Champollion and the English physician Thomas Young, almost simultaneously, in 1822. Their resulting dispute about credit was worthy of the later Wallace-Darwin imbroglio over the idea of natural selection. Working independently, both examined the Greek and Egyptian inscriptions on rubbings from the Rosetta stone, and realized the connection to Coptic, the contemporary Egyptian language (Iversen 133).

After Champollion's accomplishment, Egyptian inscriptions were no longer possible allegories, or mystic keys, though major archaeology was not undertaken until later in the century. China continued to exercise the savants' curiosity, and Cordier lists speculative works linking China and Egypt through the nineteenth century, usually based upon interpretation of Greek evidence. European revolutions separated Church from State and sharply reduced sacred influence upon historiography, though nationalist interpretations increased. The Bible chronology faced more serious challenges than Chinese antiquity, as geologic evidence about the earth's age and biologic investigation, particularly Darwin and Wallace's work, posed serious questions to the Creation story in Genesis. Linguistics became an applied body of knowledge, and less a source for universalist theories.

The writers of the Enlightenment had applied reason to determine the nature of man and societies, and to deduce universal truths about the human race and its origins. They produced explanations that fit the evidence and Western traditions, according to their own understanding of what history meant and what human nature was. Traditionalists, from religious faith and a need for consistency, tended to interpret new wine into old bottles of Biblical history. *Philosophes*, intent upon human societies without clerical influence and censorship, seized upon evidence of different cultures, or bodies of knowledge, as possible models to reform or to renew European society. What the evidence meant depended upon the needs of the writers, who tended to derive grand origin theories from sketchy information. The missionaries held no monopoly on expedient analyses.

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17. See Curl for more information. The Romantics saw Egypt as an example of sublime decay, but Egyptian images persisted, particularly due to Freemasonry's Egyptian association. That may explain the number of obelisks, spheres, fallen columns and occasional pyramids that ornament nineteenth-century European and American cemeteries.

Hieroglyphic writing represents a deceased language and remote greatness. Chinese ideograms were equally remote from ordinary European experience. Both seem to have invoked European myth-making impulses, possibly because of an irrational allure generated by their very strangeness. Jacques Ellul wrote, about departed power: "When a civilization dies, it transmits to its heirs its material, but not its spiritual apparatus." He adds that "magical techniques, rites, formulas and sacrificial practices disappear irremediably. The new civilization will fashion its own new stock of magic, which has little in common with the old" (26).

One can understand the Egypto-Chinese colonization theory, and the many efforts made to reconcile non-Christian societies with Christian chronology in an Ellulian context. Early modern Europe, the eighteenth century emerging from the Renaissance and Reformation, through renegotiations of meaning stimulated or menaced by the discovery of other peoples and histories, alternately responded to incorporate exotic societies into its own history, or insisted on their alienness to undermine that history. The efforts to rationalize Herodotus' and Diodorus' Greek histories with new discoveries show an urge to update and revise older history, to syncretise the past to retain its familiarity. Classicists and Christians alike were not ready to understand separate civilizations on equally separate terms from their own development. Though Enlightenment universalism is often portrayed as a laudable reaction against religious and national faction, it can also be seen as a guise in which European thinkers could domesticate utterly foreign civilizations into a more familiar appearance. The *philosophes* act as agents of progress, rebuking the forces of superstition and ignorance (the Church) and calling for a modern understanding of history. At the same time, they praise and accept the Chinese, and sometimes the Egyptians as well, as fellow initiates of a higher knowledge and transcendent intellectual realm. Egyptian hieroglyphs and Chinese social order were keys to an old truth, and whoever successfully explained that truth could claim the right to pronounce upon all truth.

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