

## Recuperating the Philosopher-Priest

### *Embracing a Mixed Intellectual Authority*

Depending on whom you ask, Egyptian priests are either the font of all philosophical wisdom or complete hucksters. As soon as Greeks began to reconstruct the origins of something called “philosophy,” a set biography emerged that connected Greek philosophers with trips to Egypt. Thales, the first Milesian philosopher, traveled to Egypt and borrowed from its priests the cosmogonic primacy of water. Ditto Anaximander. Scanning Herodotus, or Plutarch, or Diogenes Laertius, there is a path of intellectual transmission from Egypt to Greece time and time and time again.<sup>1</sup> It is an origin story that lasted well into the Hellenistic and imperial periods.

But as time went on, a very different narrative around Egyptian priests emerged. To many Romans living in the early-imperial period, Isis priests scammed people out of their money and got paid to help adulterers cheat on their spouses. Juvenal at least thinks so. In his sprawling diatribe against women, the cult of Isis is the regular site of trysts and bribery.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Josephus blames Isis priests for enabling Decius Mundus’s sexual assault of the Isis devotee Paulina. The episode segues directly to Tiberius’s destruction of Rome’s Isis temple to underline the social danger posed by Isiac religion.<sup>3</sup>

1. Froidefond (1971, 192–96) traces Egyptian influence on early philosophy. For the thorny issue of early Greek philosophy’s origins, see the important, if controversial, work of Frankfort and Groenewegen-Frankfort (1949), West (1971), and Burkert (1995). Thales’s intellectual debt to Egypt is outlined by Kirk, Raven, and Schofield (1983, 92–93).

2. Juv. 6.533–41, where this sex and bribery criticism intersects with the “barker Anubis” (see chapter 3).

3. Joseph. *AJ* 18.65–80 and Gasparini (2017), with Malaise (1972b, 389–95) on the historical aftermath.

These two narratives of priestly wisdom and moral degeneracy take divergent perspectives on the same issue. Movement around the Mediterranean brought Egyptian, Greek, and Roman traditions into contact. No matter what view one takes about Greece's cultural debt to Egypt, an interconnected Mediterranean requires us to position different knowledge traditions against each other.<sup>4</sup> It is easy to populate ancient texts with contemporary concerns about how Greek and Roman intellectual practices fit into the wider Mediterranean. To some, Greeks and Romans of the imperial period were animated by a desire to reestablish the priority of philosophy over Egyptian or Babylonian or Indian religious traditions.<sup>5</sup> To others, it is important to clarify the cultural hegemony inbuilt to *interpretatio Graeca*, Greeks' projection of their own religious and philosophical apparatus onto others' traditions.<sup>6</sup> To yet others, there is a need to define the patterns of thought—symbol, enigma, allegoresis—that individuate Greco-Roman intellectual history from other wisdom traditions of the ancient Mediterranean world.<sup>7</sup> That need to individuate Greco-Roman philosophy can itself be animated by very different motivations. It might help push back against a false sense that Greek and Roman intellectual history is the only Mediterranean knowledge tradition worth talking about. But it might also work to opposite effect, touting Greeks' and Romans' exclusive control of rationalist inquiry as the preamble of a Greek miracle narrative.<sup>8</sup>

Much of this disciplinary baggage hinges on the ambiguity around the labels philosopher and priest.<sup>9</sup> Mixed philosopher-priests trouble all these issues. They make clear that the Egyptian priest and Greek philosopher were interconnected and co-constituted in the imperial world; that labeling a priest a philosopher is sometimes, to quote David Frankfurter, Egyptians' own "stereotype appropriation" rather than Greeks' cultural projection;<sup>10</sup> and that the broad tradition of the

4. This has been argued most famously, albeit controversially, by Bernal (1987–2006) (with the response of Lefkowitz and Rogers 1996 and the re-response of Bernal 2001). I am deliberately postponing a fuller discussion to the Conclusion.

5. Richter (2011, 183, 205) proposes this argument and emphasizes Plutarch's self-conscious contraposition against the longstanding narrative of the reverse, Greek philosophy's non-Greek origins.

6. Görgemanns (2017, 11–13) reads the opening of the *DIO* in this way, as a projection of philosophical inquiry onto indigenous religious traditions. This becomes a mainstay in later imperial Greek literature. For example, visits to Brahmans and Naked Sages in Philostratus's *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* offer a teleological narrative of Greek philosophy's origins steeped in *interpretatio Graeca*, as Flinterman (1995, 101–6) and Swain (1996, 386–87) make clear.

7. This is more a corollary to than a central premise of Struck (2004), who notes (182, 203) moments of equivalence-drawing between Greek and non-Greek symbolic traditions.

8. Laks (2018, particularly 53–67, on rationality) and Burkert (2008, 60–62) summarize this nineteenth-century narrative.

9. Laks (2018, 35–36) has called attention to this ambiguity.

10. Frankfurter (1998, 225) for the term "stereotype appropriation." He cites Chaereon as a chief example. Besides philosophical wisdom (223–24), Frankfurter also notes priests' self-positioning as magicians (cf. Dickie 2001, 205).

symbol has meaningful antecedents in both priestly and philosophical expertise in both Egypt and Greece.

To be sure, this requires a broader view of just what work a word like “symbolism” is meant to accomplish. But the core semantics of symbol-qua-“casting together,” where the two halves of a token are reunited, justify this broader view.<sup>11</sup> As a result, symbolism can meaningfully span its Greek-philosophical and literary-critical applications, Egyptian traditions of figurative language, and the authors of *Aegyptiaca* who “symbolically” juxtaposed these two different traditions.<sup>12</sup> The philosopher-priest poses essential questions of how to square two different knowledge traditions that were, in the eyes of Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans alike, interconnected.

Partly, this is to recuperate the label “philosophy” as a frame for Egyptian religious traditions; to insist that Egyptians who position Egyptian culture in the conceptual language of philosophy can still call themselves scribal priests. But it is also to reemphasize the points of connection that Greeks and Romans promoted between imperial philosophy and the cult of Isis. The cultic and religious aspect of philosophy is particularly well exemplified by Pythagoras, a figure whose importance and popularity in the imperial world is hard to understate.<sup>13</sup> As I will go on to discuss, Pythagoras and his very-cultic-leaning followers occupied a paradigmatic position in the Greek philosophical tradition. That position is as well attested in ancient texts as it is tiptoed around by some scholars of ancient philosophy.

I have already hinted at this muddying of priestly and philosophical labels. Chaeremon was called both a Stoic philosopher and an Egyptian scribal priest. As I discussed in chapter 2, Pancrates was a Pythagorean philosopher or a magician or a panegyrist. This chapter takes up and fleshes out that theme. With the philosopher-priest as a frame, it becomes clear that authors of *Aegyptiaca* were constantly navigating a bifurcated vision of how to label their own authority. They wrote at a time of canon formation. Imperial biographers like Diogenes Laertius and Iamblichus fossilized a narrative of cultural transmission from Egyptian priests to Greek philosophers whose antecedents appear already in Herodotus.<sup>14</sup> This narrative of

11. Struck (2004, 78–80). Struck 2004 well notes the development of a broader semantics of symbolism that I will be further underlining in this chapter—particularly the role of symbol as shibboleth and symbolic interpretation as a religio-philosophical mainstay.

12. For symbolism’s utility and limitations when applied to Egyptian religion, see Finnestad (1985, 127); for cryptographic hieroglyphic as a form of “symbolic writing,” Morenz (2002, 83). Wilkinson (1994) uses a much wider, more loosely defined, sense of “symbolism.” See too Derchain (1976), defending “symbolism” as a designation of Egyptian-language play, and Baines (1976), for architectural symbolism. For Egyptian figurative language, see Griffiths (1967, 1969) and Pries (2016, 2017).

13. Kahn (2001) gives an historical overview of Pythagoras. Cornelli et al. (2013) and Huffman (2014) provide a good coverage of core Pythagorean themes and authors. On the distance between Pythagoreans and Pythagoras, see Zhmud (2012, 169–205).

14. I use “fossilization” and “harden” to make clear that, while these narratives were well-developed much earlier—as Herodotus’s (2.123) anecdote on Empedocles’s and Pythagoras’s debts to Egypt make

cultural influence, as it came to be told via post hoc biographies, provides essential background for the decisions that authors of *Aegyptiaca* made about navigating these different labels. But this also runs in the other direction. Authors of *Aegyptiaca* synthesized philosophical and priestly roles in ways that helped the imperial narrative of philosophy's priestly origins harden, particularly as it pertained to the world-traveling philosopher Pythagoras.

Authors of *Aegyptiaca* and their fluid use of Greek and Egyptian traditions of indirect signification puts paid to any narrative of Greeks' and Romans' exclusive ownership of symbolism and enigma. Manetho and later authors of *Aegyptiaca* played a major role in the story of philosophy's origins as it came to be told in the Hellenistic and imperial periods. *Aegyptiaca* sits between imperial Greeks like Plutarch and Diogenes and the no-longer-extant early philosophers who became the archetypes of Greek philosophy's debt to Egypt.<sup>15</sup> In what follows, I underline the equivalence-drawing between philosophical and priestly wisdom one sees across imperial Greek literature, *Aegyptiaca*, and Egyptian-language literature.

#### PYTHAGORAS AND THE ORIGINS OF PHILOSOPHY

##### *Plutarch's Philosophers and Priests: Replacing Priority with Parallelism*

As both a Platonist and priest of Apollo, Plutarch sought to draw parallels between philosophical and religious inquiry.<sup>16</sup> This runs to the core of the *On Isis and Osiris* (*DIO*), a text that seeks to align the Osiris myth with Platonic philosophy. The reasons why Plutarch does so have been contentious.<sup>17</sup> The *DIO* has been a Rorschach test in which different visions of multicultural intellectual history of the Mediterranean world take shape. I have frequently alluded to these different visions, but have deferred offering my own until now, when I can use it as a springboard to a broader discussion about culturally mixed intellectual authority.

One popular reading of the *DIO*, promoted by Daniel Richter, emphasizes Plutarch's arguments for Greek philosophy's temporal priority and ecumenical ubiquity.<sup>18</sup> Philosophy was prior to, and suffused into, non-Greek wisdom traditions. In another reading, the philosopher-priest provides a way for Plutarch

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clear—they took on a more central role in the Hellenistic and imperial periods, when a biographical canonization (in Pythagoras's case, those offered by Diogenes Laertius, Porphyry, and Iamblichus) of philosophers' intellectual development intensified.

15. I use "early philosophers" in place of "presocratic," a term whose modern origins are laid out by Laks (2018, 1–18).

16. For Plutarch's priesthood, see Casanova (2012). For Plutarch's Platonism, see Dillon (1997, 184–230). For his pursuit of religio-philosophical truth, Brenk (1987, 294–303).

17. Brenk (2017, 59–60) reviews different scholars' arguments around Plutarch's interest in Egyptian religion.

18. Richter (2001) focuses exclusively on the *DIO* and its argument for Greek philosophy's priority. This is incorporated into Richter (2011, 207–29), which continues this argument for Greece's philosophical priority (and thus superiority) in the *DIO*.

to layer onto the Osiris myth a thick impasto of Platonic metaphysics. Egyptologists have often tried to scrape away the layers of Middle Platonism to recover an Osiris/Isis narrative that is only available in snatches in Egyptian-language evidence.<sup>19</sup> To scholars like Ellen Finkelpearl and Joseph DeFilippo, Plutarch's philosopher-priest is yet another example of the contiguity between Isis religion and Platonic philosophy on display in the final book of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, C. Urs Wohlthat has emphasized that Plutarch's attempts to integrate cult worship of Isis with Middle Platonic philosophy is only legible against the background of the Second Sophistic and its system of values.<sup>21</sup>

It is not my place to wrestle a multifaceted text into one exclusive shape. But I still take it as significant that Plutarch sets up the *DIO* with an introduction that binds together divine and philosophical inquiry into one indissociable form. It is the opening salvo on which the rest of the *DIO* depends. In other words, I would like to prioritize a more intuitive reading of the *DIO*, one that takes the programmatic opening as actually programmatic. To reemphasize this equivalence-drawing impulse is a first step in the larger argument of this chapter: that what matters is that Greek, Egyptian, and Greco-Egyptian authors sought above all to underline the parallelism of Egyptian and Greek, priestly and philosophical, knowledge traditions.

Before diving into the Osiris myth, Plutarch first articulates a vision of the contemplative life that is shot through with language of religious initiation. Cult initiation, as a step toward divine *theoria*, helps Plutarch connect the *DIO*'s presentation of the Osiris myth with his overarching philosophical worldview, in which the pursuit of the divine looms large.<sup>22</sup> The coordination of religious and philosophical contemplation animates the *DIO* from its first sentence: "Men of good sense must seek all good things from the gods, and especially we pray to acquire from them knowledge of them—insofar as it is humanly possible."<sup>23</sup> To Plutarch, philosophical inquiry is necessarily a consideration of sacred subjects. The proof of the overlap of sacred and philosophical inquiry, and the key pivot to the Isis/

19. For example, see Parmentier (1913) and Hani (1979). This archaeological approach is certainly worthwhile, even as I am suggesting it promotes a false dichotomy.

20. DeFilippo (1990, 483–89), Finkelpearl (2012), and Van der Stockt (2012, 175–79) underline the Platonic themes of *Met.* Book 11 through reference to the *DIO*.

21. Wohlthat (2021, 111–49), who notes especially that the wide-ranging social backgrounds of Isiac initiates help explain Plutarch's pains to individuate circumspect striving for divine truth—that practiced by initiates with elite habitus—from the mechanistic and unconsidered worship (so-called habitude) of other adherents.

22. Plutarch's conceptualization of the search for the divine is presented by Alt (1993, 185–204) and Roskam (2017). For this pursuit as a mixture of philosophical and religious contemplation, see Opsomer (1998, 171–86).

23. *DIO* 1, 351d: Πάντα μὲν, ὦ Κλέα, δεῖ τὰγαθὰ τοὺς νοῦν ἔχοντας αἰτεῖσθαι παρὰ τῶν θεῶν, μάλιστα δὲ τῆς περὶ αὐτῶν ἐπιστήμης ὅσον ἐφικτόν ἐστιν ἀνθρώποις μετιόντες εὐχόμεθα τυγχάνειν παρ' αὐτῶν ἐκείνων.

Osiris myth, is Plutarch's description of a philosophical Isis. Plutarch exploits his addressee Clea's worship of Isis to link together cult and philosophy into one coherent form: "Above all else, [the consideration of sacred matters] is pleasing to this goddess whom you worship, *a goddess singularly wise and a philosopher*. As her name Isis seems to suggest, knowledge and understanding belong to her above all. For Isis is a Greek word."<sup>24</sup> The Greek etymology—which Daniel Richter and Herwig Görgemanns read as a bid for Greece's priority and universality—is certainly significant; imperial Greek authors like Philostratus try to position Greek wisdom as the *lingua franca* of all religious traditions.<sup>25</sup> But I think it is also important not to lose the forest for the trees. Plutarch sets up the text and addresses it to an Isis devotee because he wants to paint philosophical inquiry in the colors of mystery cult, and to paint Isis cult in the colors of philosophical inquiry.

Readings that emphasize cultural priority miss the way that Plutarch leverages a term for "initiation," *epopteia*, to solidify this mixture of cult and philosophy. *Epopteia* is a term rooted in the semantics of religious initiation that Plutarch repurposes to describe privileged philosophical wisdom.<sup>26</sup> In essence, it denotes a "vision" or "contemplation" reserved for a select few. First used to describe a particularly high rank in the Eleusinian Mysteries, it became a wider term for religious initiation in the imperial world. Plutarch still uses it in this vein to describe the tyrant Demetrius's desire to be initiated into the inner ranks of the Eleusinian Mysteries. Plutarch's philosophical repackaging is noteworthy, both as a heuristic for the *DIO* and as a sign of the cultic turn philosophy takes in the imperial period. Plutarch is the first extant author to use *epopteia* to denote philosophical initiation into a privileged vision of the world as it really is.<sup>27</sup> He does so retrospectively, to characterize Aristotle's and Plato's ability to enter into the rarefied domain of unmediated philosophical vision. Plutarch reads that philosophical initiation into

24. *DIO* 2, 351e–f: οὐχ ἥκιστα δὲ τῇ θεῷ ταύτῃ κεχαρισμένοι, ἦν σὺ θεραπεύεις ἑξαιρέτως σοφὴν καὶ φιλόσοφον οὖσαν, ὡς τοῦνομά γε φράζειν ἔοικε παντὸς μᾶλλον αὐτῇ τὸ εἰδέναί και τὴν ἐπιστήμην προσήκουσαν. Ἑλληνικὸν γὰρ ἡ Ἴσις ἔστι.

25. Flinterman (1995, 101–6) and Swain (1996, 386–87) note Philostratus's world-wide vision of Greek culture. See Richter (2011, 207–29) and Görgemanns (2017, 11–12) (cf. Brenk 1999) for the etymology's role in rivalrous and universalizing readings of the *DIO*.

26. The term is a felicitous analog to the more widely used *theoria*, which also denotes philosophical contemplation, but has a much longer pedigree, going back to Aristotle (as summarized by Adkins 1978). Plutarch uses *epopteia* in the sense of initiation (a technical term, per Mylonas 1961, 274–78) at *Dem.* 26, 900.3. Clement (*Strom.* 1.28.176.2, 4.1.3.2) picks up on this mixed initiatory and philosophical usage.

27. Though *epopteia* does not occur before Plutarch, Plato (unlike Aristotle) does use the related adjective ἐποπτικός (*Symp.* 210a) and verb ἐποπτεύω (*Phdr.* 250c, cf. *Leg.* 951d for a different usage) to liken philosophical contemplation to religious initiation. Note too the related agentive variant *epoptēs*, "overseer/watcher/witness," a term used more widely and by earlier authors, through which Plutarch (*Plut. Alc.* 22, 202.3) denotes an Eleusinian initiate.

the care that Isis-devotees take with Osiris's cloak, whose inaccessibility and stylistic simplicity Plutarch associates with the world of the Forms:

For this reason they put on the robe of Osiris only once and then take it off, preserving it unseen and untouched, whereas they use the Isiac robes many times. For the things that are perceptible and near at hand are in use and afford many revelations and glimpses of themselves as they are variously interchanged at various times. But the understanding of what is spiritually intelligible and pure and holy, having shone through the soul like lightning, affords only one chance to touch and to behold it. *For this reason both Plato and Aristotle call this branch of philosophy the 'epoptic part,' since those who have passed beyond these conjectural, confused, and widely varied matters spring up by force of reason to that primal, simple, and immaterial element; and having directly grasped the pure truth attached to it, they believe that they hold the ultimate end of philosophy in the manner of a mystic revelation.*<sup>28</sup>

This interconnection of Egyptian priestly knowledge and philosophical inquiry into the world's true form is fundamental to Plutarch's philosophical program, both within and without the *DIO*.<sup>29</sup> There are certainly dynamics of cultural priority that one can read into the text; but one should not minimize the value that Plutarch attaches to the mixed religio-philosophical path to wisdom connoted by *epopteia*.

#### *Pythagoras on Vacation*

A comparison of Osiris's cloak and Plato's initiation helps Plutarch align Platonic philosophy and Egyptian religion. That impulse is also on display in imperial biographies that suggested that Plato had traveled to Egypt.<sup>30</sup> Apuleius's lesser-read biography of Plato, *On Plato and His Doctrine*, repeats just that datum: "And, because Plato felt that the Pythagorean way of thinking was aided by other schools, . . . he went all the way to Egypt to pursue astrology, and also in order to learn the rites of the soothsayers from that same source."<sup>31</sup> Plato's visit to Egypt is itself dependent, at least according to Apuleius, on Plato's mentor Pythagoras. Already

28. *DIO* 77–8, 382d–e: διὸ καὶ Πλάτων καὶ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐποπτικὸν τοῦτο τὸ μέρος τῆς φιλοσοφίας καλοῦσιν, ὡς οἱ τὰ δοξαστὰ καὶ μεικτὰ καὶ παντοδαπὰ ταῦτα παραμειψάμενοι τῷ λόγῳ πρὸς τὸ πρῶτον ἐκεῖνο καὶ ἀπλοῦν καὶ αἴalon ἐξάλλονται. . . . Translation adapted from Griffiths (1970).

29. The same term reappears in the *On the Failure of Oracles* (22, 422c), where a philosophical "initiation" (τῆς ἐποπτείας) into seeing the world "as it is" is explicitly compared to cultic initiation—"as if in a mystic initiation" (καθάπερ ἐν τελετῇ καὶ μυσίῃ). For this robe metaphor and its role in Plutarch's conceptualization of philosophical "searching," see Roskam (2017, 211–14).

30. I take this visit as a datum of heuristic value for imperial Platonists, while leaving aside its historicity.

31. *De Plat.* 1.3: et, quod Pythagoreorum ingenium adiutum disciplinis aliis sentiebat, . . . astrologiam adusque Aegyptum ivit petitem, ut inde prophetarum etiam ritus addisceret. Text from Beaujeu (1973).

in Cicero, Plato's purported trip to Egypt was motivated by Pythagoras's.<sup>32</sup> These authors—Cicero, Apuleius, and Plutarch—wrote at a time when authors saw a good deal of overlap between Middle Platonism and Neo-Pythagoreanism.<sup>33</sup> They inherited a narrative of Plato's debt to Pythagoras that was already taking hold in the fourth century BCE.<sup>34</sup> As a result, an interest in Egyptian wisdom cements the links between Platonism and Pythagoreanism that imperial Platonists like Plutarch and Apuleius were keen to strengthen.

There were many philosophers who reputedly visited Egypt, but few loomed larger than Pythagoras. Plutarch invokes these philosophers' visits as proof of the widely accepted value of Egyptian religious wisdom:

Egyptians' reverence for wisdom in divine matters was so great. Proof to this are also the wisest of the Greeks, Solon, Thales, Plato, Eudoxus, and Pythagoras, and, according to some, Lycurgus too, all of whom came to Egypt and consulted with priests . . . Pythagoras especially, it appears, marveling at and a marvel to Egyptian priests. . . .<sup>35</sup>

The who's-who list of philosophers serves to underline the thoroughgoing impact of Egyptian religious wisdom on Greek political, natural, and ethical philosophy. Plutarch pivots from this general list, through the specific priests with whom each philosopher studies (omitted above), to the particular importance ("especially this person") of Pythagoras in this model of philosophical debt to Egypt.<sup>36</sup>

Pythagoras's place of honor at the end of Plutarch's list of philosophical visitors to Egypt speaks to his vaunted role as the semi-mythologized inventor of philosophy.<sup>37</sup> The issue is not just Pythagoras's influence on Plato and the way it was reflected in successive visits to Egypt. It is also a matter of Pythagoras's influence on philosophy, plain and simple. The canonization of philosophy's debt to Egypt

32. Cic. *De Rep.* 1.16 (cf. Beaujeu 1973, 251) says that Plato follows in Pythagoras's footsteps by visiting Egypt.

33. The Neopythagorean Numenius (F 24, l. 57, ed. de Places) uses "Pythagorize" (Πυθαγορίζω) to evoke Plato's debt to Pythagoreanism. For an overview of Pythagoras's impact on Middle Platonism in particular, see Dillon (1988, 111–13; 1997, 341–83).

34. Plato's intellectual debt to Pythagoras was apparently widespread; Pythagorean influence was detectable in the forms, the cosmos, and the mathematization of dialectic. For an overview, see Palmer (2014), and for "mathematical" Pythagoreanism see Horkey (2013). This influence was prosopographically reconstructed through Plato's connections to the Pythagoreans Archytas (Schofield 2014) and Philolaus (Graham 2014, *pace* Brisson 2007). Plato's successors (especially Speusippus and Xenocrates, but see Zhmud 2013, 331–42 for Aristotle) canonized Plato's Pythagoreanism. This became further entrenched in Eudorus of Alexandria (on which Dillon 2019, 2, 53; Chiaradonna 2009, 89–93; Moreschini 2015, 22) and the anonymous Pythagorean texts of the Hellenistic period (collected by Thesleff 1961, 1965).

35. Plut. *DIO* 9–10, 354d–e: ἡ μὲν οὖν εὐλάβεια τῆς περὶ τὰ θεῖα σοφίας Αἰγυπτίων τοσαύτη ἦν. μαρτυροῦσι δὲ καὶ τῶν Ἑλλήνων οἱ σοφώτατοι, Σόλων Ἐαλῆς Πλάτων Εὐδοξος Πυθαγόρας, ὡς δ' ἔνωί φασι, καὶ Λυκούργος, εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἀφικόμενοι καὶ συγγενόμενοι τοῖς ἱερεῦσιν. I pick up the quote below.

36. Plut. *DIO* 10, 354f: μάλιστα δ' οὗτος.

37. For Pythagoras's foundational role see Laks (2018, 10–11, 43–44).

passes through Pythagoras. It is for that reason that, by the fourth century BCE, he comes to be the very inventor of the category philosophy. This claim to fame is already on display in the rhetorician Isocrates. In his playful rhetorical exercise on the cruel Egyptian king Busiris, Isocrates stitches together Pythagoras's visit to Egypt and invention of philosophy. Among the general admirers of Egyptian piety, Pythagoras is notable: "Pythagoras came to Egypt and became a student of the Egyptians, and besides he was the first person to bring philosophy to Greece. . . ." <sup>38</sup> Isocrates imagines philosophy as an object of movement. Through parataxis, Isocrates implies that Pythagoras's trip to Egypt and introduction of philosophy to Greece are logically connected. <sup>39</sup> The soundbite—Pythagoras visited Egypt and introduced philosophy to Greece—was a durative one. It was also productively malleable. <sup>40</sup> Isocrates molds it to his purposes, using Pythagoras's adoption of Egyptian vows of silence to make a droll joke that stacks Isocrates's own eloquence unfavorably with Pythagoreans who keep their mouths shut. <sup>41</sup> But even in a ludic rhetorical exercise, Pythagoras's biographical data are well established.

Even more importantly than Isocrates, Diogenes Laertius also calls Pythagoras the first person to invent philosophy. That is significant. Diogenes Laertius's *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* is the canon of a Greek philosophical tradition. It is as essential as it is badmouthed by scholars for its all-too-credulous acceptance of doxography. <sup>42</sup> Even if it is to many a necessary evil for the history of philosophy, its importance still stands. Both ideologically and practically, it fossilized the narrative of Greek philosophy's birth and remains the key citing authority for now-lost early Greek philosophers.

Diogenes's prologue is so rich because it approaches the same narrative of philosophical debt to non-Greek traditions from the opposite direction. The opening of the text uses a broadly constructed, anonymized and pluralized straw man to reject arguments for the non-Greek origins of philosophy: "Some say that the work of philosophy began with barbarians." <sup>43</sup> Diogenes then sets out to reject this

38. Isoc. *Bus.* 11.28: . . . ὡν καὶ Πυθαγόρας ὁ Σάμιός ἐστιν· ὃς ἀφικόμενος εἰς Αἴγυπτον καὶ μαθητῆς ἐκείνων γενόμενος τὴν τ' ἄλλην φιλοσοφίαν πρῶτος εἰς τοὺς Ἕλληνας ἐκόμισεν. . . . Text from Brémond and Mathieu (1963). On Pythagoras and the *Busiris*, see Livingstone (2001, 155–62).

39. This plays into the much larger (and still debated) question of Greek philosophy's non-Greek precursors. For overview of early Greek accounts of philosophy's origins, see most recently Cantor (2022, 730–31 on Pythagoras and Egypt), and also West (1971).

40. Horky (2013, 90–94) emphasizes this section's particular interest in political philosophy as an object of translation from Egypt to Pythagoras's Southern-Italian political communities.

41. Apuleius's *Florida* (15.26) makes a similar joke. Pythagoreans' forced silence is laid out in Diog. Laert. 8.10 and Iamb. *VPyth.* 17.72.

42. Graham (2010, 9) is representative. He calls Diogenes Laertius "more a cut-and-paste hack than a scholar," but then admits that "he preserves priceless information." For ad hoc criticisms of Diogenes's treatment of a given philosopher see, among others, Moraux (1955) and Janda (1969).

43. Diog. Laert. 1.1: Τὸ τῆς φιλοσοφίας ἔργον ἔνιοι φασιν ἀπὸ βαρβάρων ἄρξαι. Text from Dorandi (2013). For this tradition of philosophy's non-Greek origins, see the synopsis provided by Burkert (2008, 60–62).

argument and elevate Greek philosophy as an autochthonous tradition. The only problem is that, as the prologue continues to describe non-Greek religious traditions, Diogenes makes these anonymous others' case a bit too forcefully. By the time the prologue's catalogue of foreign religious traditions reaches its last stop, Egypt, it is all too easy for readers to lose track of its stated goal: to prove that humankind and philosophy alike arose with Greeks. This is all the more apparent when Diogenes segues immediately from Egyptians' invention of geometry, astronomy, and arithmetic to Pythagoras, who is given pride of place in the birth of philosophy: "Pythagoras was the first person to come up with the name 'philosophy' and to call himself a philosopher."<sup>44</sup>

In other words, Diogenes might try to disprove the path of transmission from Egyptian religion to Greek philosophy, but the actual narrative flow of the prologue goes a long way in making the opposite case. His direct transition from Egyptian wisdom to Pythagoras's invention of the term philosophy is deeply ambivalent. On the surface, it makes a case for Greeks' invention of the term philosophy. But the specific emphasis on arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy as Egyptian wisdom traditions echoes the standard catalogue of knowledge traditions that Pythagoras learned in Egypt.<sup>45</sup> When Diogenes credits Egypt with the creation of geometry, he signals the common datum repeated by Cicero and Apuleius, among others: that Pythagorean number theory developed out of Egyptian geometry.<sup>46</sup> Diogenes's own biography of Pythagoras in the *Lives* repeats these same claims. His opening of Pythagoras's biography emphasizes Egypt's constitutive role in Pythagoreanism, so much so that Pythagoras even learned hieroglyphic! Later in the biography, Diogenes doubles back to geometry and makes explicit what was only implicit in the prologue—that Pythagoras learned geometry in Egypt.<sup>47</sup> It is as if the biography finally splices the two threads that had already been lined up in the prologue: the mythological Egyptian king Moeris invented geometry; Pythagoras brought it to Greece and then invented the idea of a philosopher.

### *Riddle Me This: Translating Symbolism*

There are good reasons why Pythagoras was the liminal figure bridging Egyptian religious wisdom and Greek philosophy. Pythagoreanism was hard for many Greeks and Romans to get their heads around, which is precisely why it was aetiologized through Egypt. This is particularly true for the so-called "acousmatic" branch of Pythagoreanism, whose emphasis on oral teachings and secret knowledge makes

44. Diog. Laert. 1.12: φιλοσοφίαν δὲ πρῶτος ὠνόμασε Πυθαγόρας καὶ ἑαυτὸν φιλόσοφον.

45. This is developed most fully in Iamblichus's biography (*VPyth.* 158), and arises already in Hecataeus of Abdera (*BNJ* 264 F 25 = Diod. Sic. 1.69.4), on which see Riedweg (2005, 26).

46. Cic. *Fin.* 5.87, *Apul. Fl.* 15.15. On this Pythagorean lineage, see Lévi (2014, 300).

47. Diog. Laert. 8.11 (see 8.3 for the hieroglyphic anecdote) casts Pythagoras as the perfecter of geometry, and the Egyptian Moeris as its inventor. For Diogenes's particular portrait of Pythagoras—which emphasizes the Pythagorean way of life and the cultic—see Laks (2014).

its practitioners outré figures in the history of philosophy. Scholars of ancient philosophy often strive to separate out the cult practices of “acousmatic” Pythagoreans—where the contiguity with Egypt is particularly prevalent—to recuperate the historical, Capital-P philosopher Pythagoras lionized by the “mathematic” tradition.<sup>48</sup> But for present purposes, I would like to broach a typical division between Pythagoras and Pythagoreans from the opposite direction. Where the division normally allows ancient and modern philosophers alike to recuperate the original Pythagoras from the wacky cult practices associated with later Pythagoreans, I would like to put imperial Pythagoreanism, with all its cultic and mystic baggage, center stage without the burden of recovering an original, pure Pythagoras that can justify his role as first founder of philosophy.<sup>49</sup>

Plutarch and other imperial Platonists saw in Pythagoras two fundamental dynamics of philosophical inquiry. First, knowledge of Pythagoras’s oral teachings functioned as a password that cordoned off the initiated and in-the-know from the uninformed. Symbols, of which Pythagoras’s oral teachings were a prime example, were important as a tool for community formation. The coherence of the Pythagorean community depended on the privileged knowledge to which they—and they alone—had access. Second, and interrelated, was a belief that the path from the superficial world of perception to a profound and divine truth was necessarily wending. Only an adept knowledge of symbol and enigma could help a person traverse this gap between superficial and profound. Pythagoras’s famous sayings bound together symbol as a form of gatekeeping and as an index of philosophical authority. Pythagoras’s role as first philosopher was built, in large part, on his successful translation of these two facets of symbolism from Egypt to Greece.

As the symbol par excellence, hieroglyphic signs had a major role in the larger narrative of the Egyptian origins of Greek philosophy.<sup>50</sup> Plutarch’s above-quoted list of philosophers who visited Egypt gives way to a path of cultural translation that begins with hieroglyphs and ends with Pythagoras’s enigmatic sayings:

*It seems Pythagoras especially, marveling at and a marvel to Egyptian priests, copied their symbolism and mysterious rites, mingling his doctrines in with enigmas. Most of the Pythagorean sayings do not at all fall short of the so-called hieroglyphic letters, such*

48. Barnes (1982, 78–79) (cf. the more neutrally wisdom-oriented approach of Burkert 1972, 2008) broaches the same dynamic from the opposite direction, claiming that the “Newtonian Pythagoras” masks a real Pythagoras “more reminiscent of Joseph Smith.” He underlines the centrality of the acousmatic branch and deduces from that fact Pythagoras’s relative unimportance to Greek philosophy.

49. In this regard, Dickie (2001, 200–12) notes well a contiguity I too am trying to underline: imperial Pythagoreans and their interest in occult wisdom were closely connected to the religio-magical expertise of authors of Aegyptiaca, most notably Pancrates.

50. Chaeremon’s philosophical exposition of the hieroglyphic script had already pointed in this direction. The same goes for the description of hieroglyphs in Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*, as I discussed in chapter 5.

as: 'do not eat upon a stool,' 'do not sit upon a bag of grain,' 'do not trim a palm tree's shoots,' 'Do not stir a fire with a dagger within the house.'<sup>51</sup>

The reciprocity embedded in the phrase "marveling at and a marvel to" (θαυμασθεῖς καὶ θαυμάσας) is easy to miss, but encapsulates this chapter's overarching argument. The active and passive participles promise a mutual intelligibility and respect that enriches the story of cultural transmission from Egyptian priests to Greek philosophers. The passage also shows how Plutarch's occasional penchant for cultural rivalry can coexist with a general narrative of parallel wisdoms. Plutarch is proud to note that the Pythagorean "sayings"—the ancient corpus collected under the title *Acousmata* or *Symbola*—do not "fall short" of the hieroglyphic script.<sup>52</sup> The distance traveled from superficial meaning to underlying significance is as great in the *Acousmata* as in hieroglyphic. There is a hometown pride that can trumpet Greek patterns of enigma even as the *DIO* is set up to mark the parallel paths that Isis cult and imperial philosophy follow. These rivalrous moments do not dislodge the centrality of parallelism.

To Plutarch, symbolism itself is an object of cultural translation from Egypt to Greece. Pythagoras's intellectual admiration for Egypt leads him to imitate Egyptians priests' "symbolic logic" and "mysteriousness."<sup>53</sup> The dual roles of the symbol—as path to the profound and as a form of gatekeeping—help show that a mixed cult/philosophy applies not only to its destination in Greece, but also its origins in Egypt. Symbolism's combination of community formation and exclusionary initiation was already on display in Plato's and Aristotle's mystery-cult-adjacent form of philosophical contemplation. But Plutarch's—and Apuleius's—insistence on the symbolic function of hieroglyphic makes clear that the symbol's translation from Egypt to Greece relies on the mixture of cult and philosophy in both Pythagoreanism and Isis cult.<sup>54</sup>

This tale of Pythagoras's general debt to Egyptian symbolism soon gives way to a comparison of hieroglyphic signs and Pythagorean *Acousmata*. Plutarch's pivot to language is telling. It introduces hieroglyphic as an object of translation through which a core technique of encoding wisdom enters the Greek world via Pythagoreanism. This offers a different perspective on the same phenomenon at play in Chaeremon's *Hieroglyphica*, which also set out to position hieroglyphic as a set of philosophically rich signs whose exegesis guaranteed Chaeremon his religio-philosophical authority. The Pythagorean *Acousmata* operated in the same way.

51. Plut. *DIO* 10, 354e–f: μάλιστα δ' οὗτος, ὡς ἔοικε, θαυμασθεῖς καὶ θαυμάσας τοὺς ἄνδρας ἀπεμμήσατο τὸ συμβολικὸν αὐτῶν καὶ μυστηριῶδες, ἀναμίξας αἰνίγμασι τὰ δόγματα. τῶν γὰρ καλουμένων ἱερογλυφικῶν γραμμάτων οὐθὲν ἀπολείπει τὰ πολλὰ τῶν Πυθαγορικῶν παραγγεμάτων. . . .

52. Plut. *DIO* 10, 354f: ἀπολείπει. For an overview of the *Acousmata* see Thom (2013).

53. Plut. *DIO* 10, 354f: τὸ συμβολικὸν and μυστηριῶδες, respectively.

54. At *Met.* 11.22.7–8.

As Plutarch puts it, the *Acousmata* are a way “to encode doctrines in enigmas.”<sup>55</sup> Before the *Acousmata* are even introduced, their general function and contiguity with hieroglyphic are clear. Hieroglyphs and the *Acousmata* are both an object of expertise whose general inscrutability defines priests’ and Pythagoreans’ community and substantiates their authority.

Pythagoras’s *Acousmata* were a tool of community formation that were as important as they were divisive. The *Acousmata* were short quotations that ranged from precepts and prohibitions (“One should not use the public baths”) to cosmological and numerological tenets (“what is wisest?—Number”). The *Acousmata* were a foundation of the Pythagorean tradition. They were collected, published, and commented on by Aristotle, Alexander Polyhistor, Iamblichus, and many others. While the original function of the *Acousmata* has been debated, these short sayings cemented a later association between Pythagoreanism and symbolism.<sup>56</sup> The hiddenness inbuilt into the *Acousmata* both added an air of exclusivity to Pythagorean initiation and elevated the metaphysical truths that such sayings contained. What is to others laughable incomprehensibility (“Do not poke a fire with a sword inside the house”) is to Plutarch proof of their efficacy as enigmas. Plutarch’s enthusiasm for Pythagoreanism’s deliberately arcane sayings—“don’t sit on a stool”—is a double-edged sword. Plutarch sees the latent profundity of sayings that are to others patently absurd.<sup>57</sup> That double-edged sword is in many ways constitutive of the divisions that ran through the Pythagorean tradition, where the “acousmatic” and “mathematic” branches took divergent approaches to this corpus of *Acousmata*. The same goes for modernity, where debates about the function of the *Acousmata* reflect a much larger question—whether Pythagoreanism belongs within or without the normative definition of philosophy.<sup>58</sup> For now, it is worth following Plutarch’s lead. He presents the *Acousmata*’s cultic and symbolic associations as definitive of, rather than a later accretion onto, Pythagoras’s original philosophical mission.

55. *DIO* 10, 354f: ἀναμειξίας αἰνίγμασι τὰ δόγματα. As Struck (2004, 96–107) makes clear, the *Acousmata* (as riddling speech) are similar in kind to the enigma, which also tethers a password function to a technique of interpretation honed through philosophical inquiry.

56. The origins of the *Acousmata* remain the object of debate. Burkert (1972, 166–92) traces an evolution from literal to symbolic interpretation; Zhmud (1997, 169–205) positions the cosmological and numerological question-and-answer type as the kernel of the collection; Thom (2013) offers a middle position.

57. This mixed reaction applies particularly to the “Sayings” that pertained to diet, which were a regular object of derisive humor, in *Juv.* 15.171–4 (McKim 1986, 69–70) and the Greek comic fragments (Battezzato 2008).

58. This partially maps onto the division between those who endorse and those who reject the shamanistic Pythagoras presented by Burkert (1972, 121–65). Barnes (1982, 79) sees the proscriptive and cultic quality of the “Sayings” as proof of the real Pythagoreanism’s religious rather than philosophical character.

Plutarch is similarly enthusiastic about Pythagorean number theory, which he compares favorably to Egyptian representations of the divine: "For my part I believe that people calling the monad Apollo, the dyad Artemis, the hebdomad Athena, and the first cube Poseidon is similar to the dedications, sacrifices, and inscriptions of [Egyptians'] sacred rites."<sup>59</sup> Pythagorean numerology and Egyptian religious practices are mirror images. Statues, inscriptions, and numerology are similar strategies of appropriately representing the divine. The ambiguity of antecedents in the above quote (which people? whose sacred rites?) partially elides the distinction between Egyptians and Pythagoreans to further underline their parallelism. This reemphasizes the inextricability of cross-cultural conversations around language and image. How to denote the divine in language and how to represent the divine iconographically are interconnected. Once again, this runs to the heart of Plutarch's enthusiasm for esoteric symbolisms that divide the religio-philosophically initiated from the broader public.<sup>60</sup> To see in the number "two" the goddess Artemis is kindred to seeing a falcon—whether as hieroglyphic sign or as sacred animal—and imagining Horus.

To Plutarch, it is a matter of common sense to align Egyptian priests' and Greek philosophers' entrance into privileged knowledge. But in our collective quest to recover an original Pythagoras, Plutarch's common sense is no longer common. During the wrangling over the historicity of early philosophers' visits with Egyptian priests, the archetypal (versus historical) import of these visits has exited the conversation. But by the imperial period, Pythagoras was the image of a mixed religious and philosophical expertise. To recenter the place of a Pythagorean version of imperial philosophy—with all its messy cultic and enigmatic associations—is to help naturalize the path of cultural translation through which the philosopher-priest gained social prestige both in Egypt and in Rome. It is to create a web of divine symbolism implicating numbers, shapes, riddles, language, and animals. That symbolism, in the interconnected world of the imperial period, constructed an overarching suite of indirect signification that bridged Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The philosophers-visits *topos* is at its most productive when viewed as an etiology for precisely this kind of symbolically rich, mixed religio-philosophical contemplation endorsed by Plutarch and associated with Pythagoras.

#### AEGYPTIACA AND THE PHILOSOPHER-PRIEST

Hieroglyphic signs and the *Acousmata* are kindred objects of symbolic interpretation, with the former discussed in *Aegyptiaca*, the latter by Pythagoreans. That

59. *DIO* 10, 354f: δοκῶ δ' ἔγωγε καὶ τὸ τὴν μονάδα τοὺς ἀνδρας ὀνομάζειν Ἀπόλλωνα καὶ τὴν δυάδα Ἄρτεμιν, Ἀθηνᾶν δὲ τὴν ἑβδομάδα, Ποσειδάνα δὲ τὸν πρῶτον κύβον εὐοκῆναι τοῖς ἐπὶ τῶν ἱερῶν ἰδρυμένοις καὶ δρωμένοις νῆ Δία καὶ γραφομένοις.

60. This is a facet of the *Acousmata* well discussed by Struck (2004, 96–107), who notes the role of the "Sayings" in the development of an "ideology of exclusiveness" essential to the gestation of symbol and enigma alike.

alignment of Aegyptiaca and Pythagoreanism is the structure around which the passages of Plutarch (*DIO* 9–10, 354c–e) and Diogenes (1.10–12) discussed above take shape. The two authors approach Greek philosophy’s antecedents from different angles. But they both take time to underline Pythagoras’ essential contributions to the philosophical tradition. Even as both doff their caps at the Milesian school and Thales’s purported debt to Egyptian wisdom, Pythagoras becomes a point of origin for philosophy precisely because of his reputation as a traveler and the points of alignment between Pythagorean and Egyptian arcana.<sup>61</sup>

### *Manetho and Pythagoras as Binary Stars*

Both Plutarch and Diogenes only pivot to Pythagoras after they have introduced a version of Egyptian wisdom indebted explicitly to Aegyptiaca. Concretely, both authors cite Manetho before transitioning to Pythagoras. That is a shared join between Aegyptiaca and Pythagoras of real significance. In both Diogenes and Plutarch, Manetho exemplifies a symbolic explanation of Egyptian religion that paves the way for Pythagoras’s own importance as a philosopher. Immediately before describing Egyptian geometry and naming Pythagoras as philosophy’s founder, Diogenes presents Manetho as a representative authority on, to use his term, “the philosophy of the Egyptians:”

The philosophy of the Egyptians concerning the gods and justice is as follows: they state that matter was the first principle, then the four elements were separated out from it, and thus all living things were made; that the sun and moon are gods, called Osiris and Isis respectively. *They enigmatically represent these through the scarab and snake and hawk and others, as Manetho says in the epitome of On Natural Things and Hecataeus in his first book On the Philosophy of the Egyptians.*<sup>62</sup>

Diogenes’s portrait of Egyptian wisdom relies on Manetho to emphasize the systems of enigma that connect animals like the hawk and gods like Horus. The assignation of enigma to Egyptian zoomorphism bolsters the phrases “Egyptian philosophy,” “matter,” “elements,” and “separation,” which themselves underline the contiguity of Greek and Egyptian physics. That contiguity is only visible when animals are seen as indirect signs of a coherent underlying cosmogony. Diogenes comfortably uses the concept of enigmatic representation to describe the way that Manetho and Hecataeus connect animal and god. In the process, he is a surprising source of support for the argument that sustained the previous section—that authors of Aegyptiaca sought to translate the systems of significance that surrounded Egyptian zoomorphism, in ways hidden by a cultural

61. This is a mainstay of the Middle Platonic Pythagoras, one visible in the Greek historians (Schorn 2014) and in his biography in Diogenes (Laks 2014) and Porphyry (Macris 2014). For the historical development of these themes, see Riedweg (2005, 7–8, 55–60).

62. Diog. Laert. 1.10 = *BNJ* 264 F 1 = *BNJ* 609 F 17: αἰνίττεσθαι τε αὐτοὺς διὰ τε καθάρου καὶ δράκοντος καὶ ἰέρακος καὶ ἄλλων, ὡς φησι Μανέθως ἐν τῇ Τῶν Φυσικῶν ἐπιτομῇ καὶ Ἐκαταῖος ἐν τῇ πρώτῃ Περὶ τῆς τῶν Αἰγυπτίων φιλοσοφίας.

representation template.<sup>63</sup> Diogenes might stump for the Greek exclusivity of the term philosophy, but in the Egypt section he claims that authors of *Aegyptiaca* use the specific concept of enigma to frame Egyptian zoomorphic iconography.

Plutarch too uses philosophy as a hinge that connects Egyptian and Greek modes of signification around the divine. The flow of Plutarch's line of thinking begins with the etymological significance of the god Amun discussed in the previous chapter, continues with a claim that that significance proves Egyptians' philosophical profundity, and bolsters that profundity by citing Greek philosophers'—and Pythagoras's particular—intellectual debt to Egyptian priests. A key fragment of Manetho I discussed in chapter 5 contains Pythagoras at its margins. Plutarch seeks to underline the philosophical significance of the name Amun by citing Manetho, who claims that the name Amun means "concealed" or "concealment." This attribution to Manetho of theological etymologizing—one concordant with earlier Egyptian-language texts—paves the way for the conclusion that Plutarch deduces from Amun's etymological connections to concealment: "Egyptians' reverence for wisdom in divine matters was so great. Proof to this are also the wisest of the Greeks. . . ."<sup>64</sup>

Both passages make clear that one needs to see *Aegyptiaca* as a key frame for Pythagoras, and Pythagoras as a key frame for *Aegyptiaca*. Chapter 2's discussion of Pancrates, a latter-day author of *Aegyptiaca* associated with Pythagoreanism by the author Lucian, made that much clear. But the *Aegyptiaca*/Pythagoras pairing was also applied to Manetho, around whose extant fragments Pythagoras hovers just outside of frame.<sup>65</sup> There are benign reasons why Pythagoras has been cropped out of *Aegyptiaca*'s picture. It is unwieldy to quote huge gobs of text. This is an honest but admittedly lame apology—both for my own and my predecessors' discussion of these two Manetho fragments.<sup>66</sup> But word counts notwithstanding, the interconnection of Manetho and Pythagoras is important. The train of thought of Diogenes and Plutarch stitches together threads I have been laying out across this book. Plutarch and Diogenes cite Manetho's engagement with Egypt's language (Plutarch) and its sacred animals (Diogenes) to describe an Egyptian wisdom on whose basis philosophy was then founded.

63. Kindt (2019, 2021b) do not mention the passage. Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984, 1895n270) only allude to the passage in passing to justify their exclusion of indirectly transmitted texts. Where the dual citation of Manetho and Hecataeus poses problems for those trying to reconstruct each individual author's work, it supports rather than undermines this chapter's argument: that *Aegyptiaca* was a multi-author tradition central to Diogenes's narrative of Pythagoras's debt to Egypt and invention of philosophy.

64. Plut. *DIO* 9, 354d: ἡ μὲν οὖν εὐλάβεια τῆς περὶ τὰ θεῖα σοφίας Αἰγυπτίων τοσαύτη ἦν. The quote is picked up by the passage quoted above.

65. In addition to these two fragments, Pythagoras also appears in Syncellus's quotation of Manetho's annalistic history (*BNJ* 609 F 28, p. 170).

66. As an example, Lang (2014) makes no mention of Pythagoras in her discussion of these two fragments.

Both Plutarch and Diogenes introduce a temporal circularity in which the culturally mixed explanations of Egyptian religion one sees in *Aegyptiaca* exemplify the Egyptian religious symbolism that retroactively forms the origin story for Greek philosophy. An already-underway cultural mixture inbuilt into *Aegyptiaca* forms the Egyptian wisdom that Pythagoras brings to Greece and founds philosophy around. Within the progression of the Plutarch passage, Manetho's is the Egyptian symbolism that Pythagoras translates from Egypt to Greece. Authors of *Aegyptiaca* (here collapsed into the genre's paradigmatic founder) thus help crystallize the larger issue of aligning philosophical and priestly authority. A Hellenistic and imperial literary tradition of *Aegyptiaca* and its mixed philosopher-priest define the Egyptian religious symbolism that priests teach philosophers. That circularity is an essential part of the narrative of philosophy's origins that took root in the imperial period.

*Chaeremon and the Semantics of the Philosopher-Priest*

To many, *Aegyptiaca*'s mixed "philosopher-priest" is one among many projections of Greek concepts onto Egyptian religious traditions. Diogenes's use of the term "Egyptian philosophy" has come into precisely this kind of criticism. When viewed in this light, Diogenes's representation of Manetho changes hue. His assignation of "enigmatically represent" to Manetho's coordination of animal and god is an act of cultural projection, not cross-cultural alignment. The language of enigma forces Manetho's text into a constrictive and inappropriate Greek-philosophical guise that was not of its own choosing. This charge of cultural projection is even more frequently applied to Chaeremon, who more than any other author of *Aegyptiaca* worked to synthesize the expertise of philosopher and priest.

Chaeremon is so valuable because he shows that, while sometimes useful, this anxiety around the presence of "philosophy" in the extant fragments of *Aegyptiaca* can be counterproductive. In the case of Chaeremon, it is clear that "philosopher" is a perfectly felicitous label for his culturally mixed authority. Restricting oneself to professional labels (should we call Chaeremon a priest, scribe, or philosopher?) better facilitates a cross-cultural conversation around professional wisdom-seeking.<sup>67</sup> By presenting the issue in these terms, I hope to recuperate imperial authors of *Aegyptiaca*, whose authority over and contact with a nebulously defined real or unmixed or pharaonic-looking Egyptian culture is on a much shakier foundation than Manetho's.

So, what was Chaeremon called? It is a basic question, but an important one. It returns to the "where the rubber hits the road" aspect of identity labels with which I opened. As with Apion, the answers are revealing. In addition to the label "Stoic"

67. Derchain (2000, 22–24) notes the mixed Greek and Egyptian cultural milieu in which many scribal priests operated.

or "philosopher," Chaeremon is twice called a "sacred scribe" (*hierogrammateus*).<sup>68</sup> As bilingual inscriptions make clear, *hierogrammateus* is a Greek translation of the Egyptian "scribe of the House of Life" (*sh pr-'nh*), an upper-level position in Ptolemaic and then Roman Egyptian temple administration.<sup>69</sup>

It is worth pausing to call attention to the cultural framework that surrounds Chaeremon's two different professional identities, philosopher and sacred scribe. When called a *hierogrammateus*, Chaeremon is connected to the constellation of literary and religious training that is inbuilt into the Egyptian scribal tradition generally, and the institution of the House of Life specifically. These paired Greek (*hierogrammateus*) and Egyptian (*sh pr-'nh*) terms for upper-level scribal priests gesture toward a much larger process of cultural translation, one that illustrates for a non-Egyptian audience just how important Houses of Life were as libraries, repositories of knowledge, and mechanisms for cultural transmission. Houses of Life were located in the broad confines of Egypt's temples and as such were tied to religious practice generally, and Osiris cult specifically.<sup>70</sup> But they housed a wide range of textual traditions and connoted knowledge writ large, not just magical arcana.<sup>71</sup> The *hierogrammateus*- "scribe of the House of Life" pairing is only one node in a larger web of translations for mixed priestly and scribal expertise. This includes the "feather-bearer" (*pterophoros*), which translates the Egyptian "scribe of the sacred book" (*sh md-ntr*), a position associated with magic, wisdom, and esoteric priestly knowledge.<sup>72</sup> Even more broadly, scribal priests fell into the overarching category of Egyptian "sage" (*rh-ht*, literally "the one who knows things").

It is, then, important to see the *hierogrammateus* as a translation both of a specific scribal position and of the wider Egyptian semantics of learnedness. Bilingual texts like the Rosetta Stone can make this coordination of Greek and Egyptian terms seem automatic or assured, a match game between two identical categories denoted in two different languages. But there is much more variability and fluidity

68. He is called a sacred scribe in T 6, F 4, F 12, F 13, on which see van der Horst (1984, x, 61), Legras (2019, 145), and Escolano-Poveda (2020, 105–6). Note that in Josephus's recapitulation of Chaeremon's Exodus account, Joseph and Moses are called *hierogrammateis*, which is meant to connote magical and prophetic expertise, on which see Catastini (2010).

69. For Greek and Egyptian terms for Egyptian priestly positions, see the helpful chart offered by Vanderpe and Clarysse (2019, 417).

70. Gardiner (1938) remains an authoritative overview of Egyptian mentions of the House of Life, though see more recently Ryholt (2019, 444–48) and Hagen (2019, 252–62).

71. Hagen (2019, 254–55) (cf. Ryholt 2019, who emphasizes their more narrowly cultic function) presents the House of Life as a "culturally prestigious institution" associated with a broad, encyclopedic kind of wisdom and learning.

72. For example, *pterophoros* and *hierogrammateus* are close pairs in the Canopus and Rosetta decrees. Ryholt (1998, 168–69) argues persuasively that the two terms, both in Demotic and in Greek, were overlapping, as Diodorus's (1.87) mention of a feather-wearing *hierogrammateus* attests. As Ryholt (168n128) points out, the variation of order in a Demotic variant of the Canopus Decree even more closely aligns the *hierogrammateus* with the magical associations of the scribe of the sacred book.

at play. To provide one example of the inextricability of the narrow and broad semantics of the *hierogrammateus*: the Canopus and Rosetta Decrees coordinate the Greek *hierogrammateus* alternatively with the more generic Egyptian term “wise one” (*rh-ht*, Canopus l. 3) and with the more technical “staff of the House of Life” (*ty.(t) pr-‘nh*, Rosetta l. 7).<sup>73</sup>

When we keep in view the cultural associations made with the scribe of the House of Life, Chaeremon’s different identities gain some coherence. It is far from surprising that authors citing Chaeremon, in his authority as culturally mixed scribal priest, reach both for a technical equivalent (*hierogrammateus*) and the less technical, but no less accurate, label philosopher. The Egyptian *rh-ht* (“one who knows things”) and Greek *philosophos* (“lover of knowledge”) both define a person through their pursuit of knowledge, providing a broad frame of reference that complements, rather than undercuts, stricter professional terms in Greek (*hierogrammateus*) and Egyptian (*sh pr-‘nh*).

The strategies of translation at play in Chaeremon’s professional identities reveal the wide-ranging labels for learned elite in both Egyptian and Greek.<sup>74</sup> The centrality of wisdom in the different scribal positions which collectively constitute “those who know things” is best preserved when translated into a Greek frame of reference similarly focused on knowledge. It is wrong-headed to claim that philosopher is an unwarranted Greek projection that disqualifies Chaeremon (or Pancrates, another *hierogrammateus*-cum-philosopher) from an Egyptian identity label. Chaeremon’s mixture of philosophical, scribal, and priestly labels translates knowledge, as a fundament of learned elite, between Egyptian, Greek, and Roman idioms.<sup>75</sup> For Chaeremon, one needs a theoretical lens that does not assume, a priori, that Greek cultural frames of interpretation (such as Stoicism) prove that Chaeremon can no longer be an Egyptian scribal priest. The label philosopher is just as reasonable a translation for Egyptian conceptions of priestly wisdom as more technical labels like sacred scribe.

This specific pairing of identity labels distills issues that run to the heart of Chaeremon’s intellectual program. Chaeremon blended Egyptian-religious and Greek-philosophical life into a mixture on which his authority resided. An example shows this process at work:

73. For texts, see Sharpe (1870, plate 1) and Budge (1904, 189), with Gardiner (1938, 170) for the observation. See also Daumas (1952), who compares the Egyptian and Greek passages of the decrees, and Jasnow (2016, 244–45), who notes the strategies of translation around “scribes of the house of life.”

74. Ryholt (1998, 169) makes a similar argument about the denotation of Egyptian wisdom figures in the Inaros cycle.

75. Jasnow and Zauzich (2021, 18) note the way that wisdom-seeking in the *Book of Thoth* entails a desire for social respectability. It is important to realize that this translation between labels is necessarily filtered through the citing authorities who choose them. I assume, based on variety of citing authorities, that Chaeremon actively arrogated the label philosopher. I also find it likely that, in Alexandria, he claimed the label sacred scribe (*hierogrammateus*), in the tradition of Hellenized Egyptians, as Frede (1989, 2068) lays out.

Chaeremon the Stoic, a most eloquent man, says about the life of the ancient Egyptian priests that, laying aside all the business and cares of the world, they were always in the temple and they surveyed the nature and causes of things, and also the calculations of the stars.<sup>76</sup>

Chaeremon's portrait of Egyptian religion draws readers' attention to the common ground between Egyptian and Greek accounts of nature. In this regard, Chaeremon's description of Egyptian religion is similar to that which Diogenes attributed to Manetho and Hecataeus. The natural-philosophical buzzwords *rerum naturas causasque* redirect Greek and Roman associations with Egyptian priests away from the world of cult and toward philosophical inquiry into the world's origins and constitution. This is certainly a rosy-hued portrait of priestly life. But it is not exactly, as is sometimes claimed, "philosophizing" Egyptian religion. That would suggest that emphasis on knowledge of the world's origins is an external layer that is easily peeled off to reveal an authentic, non-philosophical Egyptian substrate. The very existence of the label sage in Egyptian should caution against viewing Chaeremon's philosophical persona as a superficiality entirely indebted to his Greek education.

These general superficial metaphors have undergirded the phrase *interpretatio Graeca*. The concept certainly has heuristic value: Plutarch refers to the Egyptian god Seth by the Greek name Typhon, a way of translating one culture's gods into a Greek frame of reference.<sup>77</sup> But often *interpretatio Graeca* balloons in size into all acts of aligning Greek and non-Greek wisdom traditions.<sup>78</sup> This approach espouses a zero-sum game, where Chaeremon's embrace of Greek philosophical vocabulary proves either his divestment of or ignorance about Egyptian knowledge traditions. As soon as one sees philosophical language like *rerum naturas*, there is a red flag that proves that Chaeremon has entered the world of Greek philosophy and left behind authoritative views of Egyptian religion on display in Houses of Life.<sup>79</sup> That approach ends up cutting Egypt out of the picture. It denies

76. Jerome *Jov.* 2.13 = F 11: Chaeremon stoicus, vir eloquentissimus, narrat de vita antiquorum Aegypti sacerdotum, quod omnibus mundi negotiis curisque postpositis semper in templo fuerint et rerum naturas causasque ac rationes siderum contemplati sint.

77. On the creativity of Egypt-originating *interpretationes Graecae*, see Henri (2017). Note that many use the term in a more limited sense, to refer to the practice of using a Greek name for Egyptian gods—for example, von Lieven (2016). Conversely, Dillery (1998) understands *interpretatio Graeca* broadly.

78. This reliance on an *interpretatio Graeca* heuristic extends to Egypt in visual culture. Per Mazurek (2022, 119), Isis devotees in Greece preferred a Greek visual paradigm because they "wanted to portray a version of the Egyptian gods that had always been part of the Greek pantheon." As with Richter (see n5, above), I find that this unnecessarily bakes a framework of priority (cf. Mazurek 2022, 87) into processes of cultural equivalence-drawing.

79. Both Fowden (1986, 65) and Burstein (1996, 603) have characterized Chaeremon's presentation of Egyptian priests in this way, seeing in Chaeremon a canary-in-the-coal-mine signal of the transition toward Hermeticism and the exoticization of Egyptian priests' secret lore.

any possibility that Egyptian religious life includes a pursuit of knowledge that can be reasonably denoted in Greek philosophical terms. To return to an anthropological lens, as soon as one turns to Greek, the perspective has turned from insider and emic to outsider and etic. It is much more productive to see in Chaeremon and his alignment of priest and philosopher larger processes of creolization through which these two knowledge traditions have become interconnected.

#### WHAT'S EGYPTIAN FOR "PHILOSOPHER"?

##### *The Book of Thoth: Translating the Philosopher*

Turning to Egyptian-language evidence makes it absolutely clear that Chaeremon's mixture of priest and philosopher reflects wider Egyptian priestly practice. It is easy to write off Chaeremon as a Greek projectionist out of touch with Egyptian religion. It is harder, but more important, to see how Chaeremon mirrors the changes that were occurring in scribal texts of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. The Egyptian priestly culture over which Chaeremon—and even the unimpeachably Egyptian Manetho!—claimed authority is indebted to, but not consubstantial with, its pharaonic antecedents.

The Demotic and Hieratic manuscripts that the Demotists Richard Jasnow and Karl-Theodor Zauzich have called the *Book of Thoth* provide an Egyptian-language perspective on the philosopher/priest.<sup>80</sup> The *Book of Thoth* has only entered into scholarly discussion (relatively) recently, thanks to the herculean activity of Jasnow, Zauzich, and Joachim Quack.<sup>81</sup> There have long been hints of the potential for a *Book of Thoth*. Clement of Alexandria tantalizingly describes a procession of priests who carried "all the necessary books" written by Thoth. In addition to Clement's list of titles, the walls of the House of Life at the Temple of Horus at Edfu also include a catalog of texts for scribes that were ranged under the title *Books of Thoth*, in acknowledgment of Thoth's role as patron of scribal learning.<sup>82</sup>

But until 2005, the actual contents of a text associated specifically with the imperial-era House of Life were out of view.<sup>83</sup> The outline of the narrative runs

80. For a larger review of priests in Demotic literature, see Escolano-Poveda (2020, 13–83; see too 108–9, connecting the philosopher/priest in Chaeremon to the *Book of Thoth*).

81. Jasnow and Zauzich (2005), the slimmer retranslation Jasnow and Zauzich (2014), the edits suggested by Quack (2007a, 2007b), and the reedition of Jasnow and Zauzich (2021).

82. Fowden (1986, 58–59), Clem. *Strom.* 6.4.35–7. Titles cited by Clement include one book of hymns, four books on astrology, ten books on hieroglyphic, ten books on education and sacrifice, and several others. Aufrère and Marganne (2019, 514) argue that Chaeremon was likely the source of Clement's information. The House of Life inscription mentions two texts on the rising stars (which must resemble the discussion of deacon stars in Chaeremon) and a book "on the threatening," a text typically taken as "on the threatening of Seth," which would connect it with the Seth-animal-hunting texts in the rest of the temple, which I discussed in chapter 4.

83. Fowden (1986) certainly made good use of the material he had, but the new textual evidence makes clear that it is not the obvious precursor to Hermeticism he would have wanted.

something like this: in format, the *Book of Thoth* is a question-and-answer conversation between master and disciple. The latter ("the-one-who-loves-knowledge") is a scribal initiate; the former (referred to alternatively as "He-of-Heseret" and "He-who-praises-knowledge") is either the god Thoth, a mortal ritually arrogating the role of Thoth, or an anonymous mentor.<sup>84</sup> The text describes priestly and scribal information that the disciple must learn to be initiated into privileged knowledge that Thoth made available for the scribes of the House of Life.<sup>85</sup> Different versions of the text contained different elements, depending on the local needs of a temple. But a mainstay of the text is the symbolic association of the House of Life, as a setting to which the scribe hopes to gain access, and the underworld.

The *Book of Thoth* recurrently presents linguistic training in symbolic terms. Thus, the "sacred words" (hieroglyphs in Greek, *mdw ntr* in Egyptian) that the initiate is to learn metamorphose into the animals through which said words are denoted.<sup>86</sup> Often, this occurs on the level of individual signs. When the text catalogues a list of animals—"these dogs, these jackals, these bulls"—it is in fact self-consciously individuating the signs that constitute the hieroglyphic script.<sup>87</sup> In addition to an iconographic substitution of animal for animal-shaped hieroglyph, the text also plays with hieroglyphic signs through homophony. The author repeatedly uses sound play to (literally) recharacterize the way that linguistic expertise is framed: "The-one-who-loves-knowledge, he says: 'I desire to be a bird-catcher of the hieroglyphic signs of Thoth.'"<sup>88</sup> This reflects a thoroughgoing identification of scribal books as the bas of Re, and, by extension, birds. In this metaphorical framework, bird-catching stands in for learning sacred texts, based in no small part on the homophony of "document" (𓄏𓄏𓄏𓄏, sš) and "nest" (𓄏𓄏𓄏, sš). Animals and hieroglyphic signs are interconnected systems of significance. They jointly constitute the web of meaning which the scribal initiate must traverse on his way to the sacred teachings safeguarded by Thoth, the patron of scribes.

This elevation of hieroglyphic as a self-conscious object of symbolic significance is a critical point of reference for the discussions of hieroglyphic and sacred animals one sees in *Aegyptiaca*. The *Book of Thoth's* sign-by-sign glossing of hieroglyphic's animals is consonant with the approach of Chaeremon and the sources that Plutarch drew on, who also made a match-pair of animal and concept. With the *Book of Thoth* in view, Chaeremon's hieroglyphic catalogue seems a good deal less out of touch. Chaeremon's animal-heavy approach to sacred characters is

84. Jasnow and Zauzich (2021, 11–14) review the issue, both by hedging their own initial identification of the master with Thoth and by rejecting Quack's preference for an anonymous mentor.

85. For the importance of initiation as a theme of the *Book of Thoth*, see Quack (2007a).

86. I am indebted here to the discussion of the *Book of Thoth's* metaphoric language in Jasnow (2011).

87. 613 = Lo1 (V.T.), x+4/15: n'y jwfw.w n'y wns.w n'y k'.w. For this passage in particular, see Quack (2007b).

88. 245 = Vo1, 2/16–17: Mr-rh d-f twsy wh' jr why r n' tw'.w n jstn mtwzy grg [n'y'ef] b'.w.

kindred with the *Book of Thoth's* unimpeachably authoritative presentation of the hieroglyphic script's significance to Egyptian scribal priests (*hierogrammateis*) of the imperial period.<sup>89</sup>

The *Book of Thoth* is so helpful because it reemphasizes that authors of *Aegyptiaca* were cultural ambassadors of Egyptian religious traditions that were themselves operating in a creolizing world. Authors of *Aegyptiaca* leveraged language of symbolism and underlined the interconnection of philosophical and priestly knowledge because the same was occurring in Egyptian-language scribal literature. The very features—the philosopher/priest and the use of enigma/symbol—that many have seen as proof of the illegitimacy of Chaeremon's Egyptian bona fides in fact reflect his success, and not failure, in presenting the systems of significance laced throughout scribal and priestly literature of the early-imperial period.<sup>90</sup>

The title of the *Book of Thoth's* protagonist, like Chaeremon's professional labels, grounds broad processes of cultural translation in discrete formulations for wisdom-seeking in Greek and Egyptian. The main character is the initiate who hopes to be inducted by Thoth into the knowledge to which a scribal priest has access. It makes sense, then, that he is called “he-who-loves-knowledge” (*mr-rh*). It is a title that provides an Egyptian correlative to the portrait of philosophical inquiry that Plutarch had offered in the opening of the *On Isis and Osiris*. As in that text, the pursuit of knowledge is bound up in the pursuit of the divine and is located in a temple setting. This returns to the constitutive importance of knowledge, on a lexical level, for the social position of these scribal priests. That was already on display in the *hierogrammateus* title leveraged by Chaeremon. It was a Greek title that translated both technical (“scribe of the House of Life”) and generic (“one who knows things”) identity labels for Egyptian scribal priests. The broad learnedness denoted by “one who knows things” (*rh-ht*) is essential to the self-fashioning seen in *Aegyptiaca* and Egyptian-language texts alike. The intersection of wisdom-seeking labels speaks to a creolizing mixture of expertise that is ill-served by a dichotomous view of philosophical and Greek, versus Egyptian and priestly, authority.

The interconnection of the philosopher's and scribe's pursuit of knowledge helps explain why the *Book of Thoth's* protagonist matches the word philosopher so closely. While there is some overlap with the Ptolemaic title *rh-ht*, the precise wording of the disciple's name, “he-who-loves-knowledge” (*mr-rh*), is a neologism. Jasnow and Zauzich tentatively connect the *mr-rh* to the Greek term

89. For the religious and symbolic power of the hieroglyphic script, see Derchain (1976) and te Velde (1986); on the interplay between phonology and iconography in hieroglyphic, see Vernus (1986) and Morenz (2008).

90. Jasnow and Zauzich (2005, 13n36; cf. Jasnow and Zauzich 2021, 19) cite Chaeremon as an example of the alignment of priest and philosopher one sees in the *mr-rh/φιλόσοφος* pairing.

"philosopher," another "knowledge-lover."<sup>91</sup> The connection between *mr-rh* and *philosophos* is both wholly commonsense and a striking proof of cultural mixture. The dramatic equivalence of these two languages' "knowledge-lover" speaks to the synthesis of Greek and Egyptian ideas of scribal learning and philosophical training. It points, with real clarity, to the faulty definition of cultural authority that so often ignores a world in creolization. To present the priest as a wisdom-loving and wisdom-seeking figure is authoritatively Egyptian. It is tempting to write off Diogenes's use of the phrase "Egyptian philosophy" and separate it out from Manetho's original presentation of this material. But to unilaterally chalk up the presence of philosophical language in Manetho to Diogenes's or Plutarch's *interpretatio Graeca* is to sidestep essential conversations about how Egyptian culture remained Egyptian even as it incorporated Greek concepts.<sup>92</sup> The connections drawn between Egyptian- and Greek-language wisdom-seeking are better taken as a sign of Egyptian culture's vibrancy in the imperial period than as proof that Egyptian traditions were slowly dying.

The *Book of Thoth's* protagonist, like Chaeremon's different titles, show that large processes of cultural translation of knowledge traditions hinge on minute translations of Greek and Egyptian terms. These processes of translation run in both directions simultaneously: Pythagoras first coined "philosopher" because of his visits with Egyptian priests. The scribal priest of the imperial period was defined in terms consonant with the concept "philosophy." Chaeremon's position was the product of multiple modalities of translation between knowledge-expertise in Greek and Egyptian idioms, whether the *hierogrammateus*, the sage, or the philosopher.

### *Juxtaposing Greek and Egyptian Wisdoms: Recuperating Lower-Case-S Symbolism*

Symbolism can be similarly multimodal. It is a term of tripartite heuristic value. To be sure, its roots in a Greek literary-critical and philosophical tradition are important to put boundaries around. But as many scholars of Egyptology have

91. Jasnow and Zauzich (2005, 13n36) offer potential *comparanda* for the *mr-rh/φιλόσοφος* pairing. Their enthusiasm for the potential derivation of "he who loves knowledge" from *philosophos* in Jasnow and Zauzich (2005, 13) (cf. the elliptical reference to the derivation in Jasnow 2016, 325) is tempered in the retranslation (Jasnow and Zauzich 2014, 31), and dropped in the final edition (Jasnow and Zauzich 2021). But my own interest here, as in the larger chapter, is in emphasizing an equivalence-drawing impulse amply demonstrated by the parallelism of *mr-rh* and *φιλόσοφος* around themes of "love" (of wisdom), of the wisdom-seeking path, and of social respectability of the wisdom-seeker that are noted by Jasnow and Zauzich (2021, 17–20).

92. My own recuperative argument for Aegyptiaca's Greek translations of Egyptian concepts—and pushback against the overextension of the *interpretatio Graeca* dynamic—builds on Henri (2017), who also underlines the value of creative translations of Egyptian gods' names into Greek in inscriptions and papyri.

made clear, the animal-for-hieroglyph substitution one sees in the *Book of Thoth* speaks to a symbolic impulse in Egyptian literary and material culture that is equally vibrant and equally worthy of attention.<sup>93</sup> *Aegyptiaca* represents a third, no less important but much less frequently discussed, mode of lower-case-s symbolism. This is a symbolism in which Greek and Egyptian symbolic traditions are juxtaposed to show the points of connection that they shared. In making space for this third kind of symbolism, I am trying to return symbol to its etymological roots, as a technique of “association” and “juxtaposition.” This is a more diffuse symbolism to be sure, but one fundamental to the creolization of wisdom-seeking one sees across Plutarch’s *DIO*, Chaeremon’s *Aegyptiaca*, and scribal texts like the *Book of Thoth*.

The very materiality of the *Book of Thoth* exemplifies this cross-cultural symbolism of wisdom traditions. Several witnesses of the *Book of Thoth* are on papyri that also contain Greek texts, either as a palimpsest or on their reverse. One such manuscript, the “Vienna Papyrus,” contains the *Book of Thoth* on one side and a Greek-language astronomical text on the other.<sup>94</sup> That text, written during the reigns of Caligula and Nero, is in the wheelhouse of *Aegyptiaca*, whose authors so regularly used astronomy to bolster their Egyptian intellectual bona fides. That is particularly true for Chaeremon, Thrasylus, and Tiberius Claudius Balbillus, authors of *Aegyptiaca* writing in that period on that subject. To many Egyptologists and papyrologists, this kind of pairing is ho-hum. But I want to recentralize the theoretical potential of these interconnected knowledge traditions. It is a concrete, material product of a world in creolization.

The two-sided papyrus is an ideal apogetic for the cultural authority of post-Manetho authors of *Aegyptiaca*. On one side, the *Book of Thoth*: its translation of the “knowledge-lover” between Greek and Egyptian, its figurative presentation of language via animals, its initiatory approach to the sacred knowledge contained within the House of Life. On the other, astronomy: a text that demonstrates another join where philosophical and priestly expertise coalesced. All of this, in one way or another, seeps into Chaeremon’s extant fragments, which range between the language-animal pairing, the astronomical expertise of Egyptian priests, and the natural-philosophical inquiry practiced in Egypt’s temples.<sup>95</sup> That papyrological background is what makes *Aegyptiaca* as a creolizing intellectual tradition so valuable. Authors of *Aegyptiaca* were the media through which the cultural mixture happening on the ground in the Houses of Life was broadcast outward to authors like Plutarch and Diogenes. They help explain why knowledge-seekers of

93. For symbolism in Egyptian religious thinking, see n12.

94. For the status of the papyri, see Jasnow and Zauzich (2005, 77–88, with orthographic and grammatical observations at 88–109).

95. Jasnow (2011, 315) cites Chaeremon when discussing the *Book of Thoth*’s representation of scribes’ way of life.

different backgrounds remade their own knowledge traditions in ways that made space for those practiced by others.

CONCLUSION: AEGYPTIACA, AUTHORIAL AGENCY,  
AND THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT

Through the *Book of Thoth*, I am asking to give authors of Aegyptiaca the benefit of the doubt. There are good reasons why they used the mixed philosopher-priest as a springboard into a conversation about the joins between Egyptian and Greek modes of inquiry. Those joins are legitimated on a material level: astronomy, as a culturally mixed, Greek-language, natural-philosophical tradition is the very literal flipside of Egyptian-language scribal initiation. The imperial period saw a movement toward a mixed philosopher-priest detectable in Egyptian-language texts, etiologies of Pythagoreanism's debt to Egypt, and authors of Aegyptiaca who integrated philosophical and religious wisdom. To underline unduly one direction of cultural influence, to focus unilaterally on the cultural hegemony of Diogenes's and Plutarch's philosophification of Egyptian religion, is to mischaracterize the processes of cultural contact and mixture that encouraged imperial authors to see the philosopher and priest as interconnected categories. It is also to wholly erase the historical context that paved the way for authors of Aegyptiaca to arrogate authority as experts in this increasingly blurry picture of the philosopher-priest. Apion and his mixed authority in scarabs and Homer encompass three different types of symbolic exegesis: Greek literary criticism, scarab ideology, and the coordination of Egyptian and Greek symbolic traditions into a newly mixed form.

The messiness of the philosopher/priest is what makes an intellectual history of the imperial period so worthwhile. It is a time when Pythagoras's world-traveling took on new proportions. The cultic, fringe-y, and rampantly symbolized philosophy of imperial Pythagoreans, their interest in animals, arithmetic, and enigmatic *Acousmata*, were retroactively aetiologized through Egypt-visits.<sup>96</sup> This is one among many imperial narratives in which Greek philosophers were meant to visit Egypt. Often, that fact has led to conversations about whether early Greek thought was or was not indebted to Egypt.<sup>97</sup> I have suggested here that, regardless of historicity, these narratives have a different value. They reflect their imperial context, a time when a widely practiced mixture of philosophical and religious traditions was projected back into, and thus circularly naturalized through, a story of Greek philosophy's non-Greek origins.

96. Kahn (2001, 94–138) well notes the general inability of the term “Neopythagorean” to capture this rise of a semi-religious Pythagoras (discussed on 139–72), rather than to denote imperial philosophers (like Eudorus, Nichomachus, and Numenius) who stressed Plato's debt to Pythagoras.

97. Lefkowitz (2012) surveys these visits generally, and de Vogel (1966) those of Pythagoras specifically. Most recently, Riedweg (2005, 42–97) has tried to recover from these later accretions a historical Pythagoras.

The coordination of Manetho and Pythagoras one sees in Plutarch and Diogenes is a commonplace of the imperial period that has fallen out of view. We need Pythagoras to make sense of Aegyptiaca and the popularity of its authors, and we need Aegyptiaca to make sense of Pythagoras's popularity in the imperial period. There are several reasons why this association has yet to be fully recognized. To some extent, it is because of the realities of publishing fragmentary texts, where Pythagoras lurks on the margins of Manetho, and Aegyptiaca lurks on the margins of Pythagoras. But that cannot wholly explain things. The Manetho/Pythagoras pairing and its creative rearticulation of the "origins of philosophy" narrative depend on a logic that is necessarily "mythological" and retrospective. That logic remakes a classical past into a myth-time that prefigures and thus makes meaningful what was happening, on the ground, in the imperial period. In the domains of both Roman-Egyptian scribal wisdom and imperial Platonism-cum-Pythagoreanism, new interconnections abounded. Philosophical and religious authority blurred into a new form over which authors of Aegyptiaca, scribal priests, and Pythagoras himself could all claim authority. As I head toward the Conclusion, I want to individuate this imperial-era mythologization of Egypt's influence on Greece and underline Aegyptiaca's central role in it. In doing so, I hope to push back against models of cultural influence (like Martin Bernal's) that by vaunting Egypt's place out ahead of, and prior to, Greece and Rome end up erasing the vibrancy of Aegyptiaca specifically, and Ptolemaic- and Roman-Egyptian cultural mixture more broadly.