MUCH OF THE HISTORY, moral doctrine, natural science, and theology concealed by Homer in the lines of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* had been learned during his student years in Egypt. But he was not the only Greek to owe matter and method to the Egyptians. Solon, Thales, Plato, Eudoxus, and Pythagoras had travelled to the Nile to hear the lectures of Chonu­­phis of Memphis, Sonchis of Sais, and Oenuphis of Heliopolis; in fact, if Plutarch is right, Pythagoras, whose precepts are “not unlike the writings called hieroglyphs,” was particularly admired by his teachers and imitated “their symbolism and occult teachings.”1 But for Christians Moses was more important and ancient than Homer; he, depending on the authority consulted, was instructed by the Egyptians or instructed them.

The historian Diodorus Siculus2 and the geographer Strabo associate the Hebrew lawgiver with Mercurius, Minos, Lycurgus, Amphiarus, Orpheus, Musaeus, Zamolxis, and other leaders and prophets of various shades of respectability. Strabo talks like a premature Father of the Church when he describes Moses as a priest who held part of lower Egypt before he migrated to Judea with others who worshiped a god not represented in “Egyptian fashion” as an animal or in “Greek fashion” as a man. The disciples of Moses defined God as “one thing alone encompassing us all, the land and sea, the thing we call sky, or cosmos,

---

2 Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1. 94.
THE SYMBOLIC WISDOM OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

or the nature of all.” Leaving Egypt, they settled in Jerusalem, a place selected for its unattractive and, consequently, unenvied natural situation. There they lived righteous lives of self-restraint in hopes of blessing and observed a ritual that oppressed none with “expense, divine obsessions, or absurd troubles.” The testimony of this pagan Greek was pleasing, but Jewish evidence was naturally surer and better.

Acts 7:22 relates that Moses was “instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians,” and St. Paul’s contemporary, Philo Judaeus, clarifies the Scripture by listing the subjects in which Moses was tutored and by adding that he also learned “the philosophy conveyed in symbols and displayed in the so-called holy inscriptions.” The Chaldeans taught him astrology, and from the Greeks, says Philo remembering his own Alexandrian education, he had the regular school courses. Philo’s coreligionist Joseph ben Matthias, also known as Flavius Josephus, would probably blame Hellenistic superficiality for Philo’s higher regard for style than for historical accuracy. In his controversy with the grammarian Apion, a learned anti-Semite, Josephus demolishes the factually erroneous biographies of Moses by Manetho, Chaeremon, and Lysimachus, turns his critic’s scandalous anecdotes against him and the Greeks, and offers historical proof that Moses was the eldest of philosophers, the one from whom later thinkers derive their systems. Even the Egyptians, he pauses to observe, regard “the man as divine and wish to claim him as one of themselves.”

The testimony of pagan and Jew was gladly accepted by Clement of Alexandria, who abridges Philo’s Life of Moses, embellishing it with a lengthy hexameter extract from Exodus, a play by the Hebrew tragic poet Ezekiel. Origen, admitting that Moses may have heard “a somewhat ancient doctrine and transmitted it to the Hebrews,” insists that he lived before Inachus and was acknowledged by the Egyptians to be “a man of great antiquity.” Celsus had objected to the allegories read by Christians into the Pentateuch, so Origen informs him that Moses “carefully introduces in every part of his five books language of two-fold meaning.” The venerability of Moses is substantiated by Eusebius, who turns to the history of Artabanus for true biography. Moses was

---

3 Strabo, Geography XVI. 35–39.
6 Clement, Stromateis I. 23.
7 Origen, Contra Celsum, PG XI, 696–97.
8 Ibid., col. 1040–41; see Cyrilus of Alexandria, Contra Julianum, PG LXXVI, 524–25.
9 Origen, PG XI, 692–93.
adopted, not found in the bulrushes, by Merris, wife of Chenepres—Epiphanius has it as Thermuthin, daughter of Amenophis—who named him Mousos, or Musaeus as the Greeks render the name. Mousos not only instructed Orpheus but was the inventor of many things. "For these reasons Moses was beloved of the multitudes, and having discovered the hieroglyphics he was deemed worthy of divine honors and given the name of Hermes." As Eusebius notices, Moses' linguistic improvisation was also reported by the historian Eupolemus.

The evolution of the alphabet was a matter of national contention in antiquity, but the Renaissance, with some dissent, was inclined to agree that Hebrew, the pure language of the Hereafter, was not only the mother of tongues but also the first to be written. Although many men of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could read Hebrew, no one could fathom its Egyptian daughter set down in symbolic pictures. Nevertheless, the obelisks brought to Imperial Rome had always claimed the attention of the curious. Since they could not be deciphered these needles of stone were assumed to be documents deep in secret. Diodorus Siculus, who lived in the first century before Christ, informed his contemporaries and later on men of the Renaissance that Egypt had a sacred as well as a demotic script. This script did not express concepts by joined syllables "but by means of the significance of the objects which had been copied out and by the figurative meaning which practice had

10 Epiphanius, *Adversus haeres, PG* XLII, 735.
11 Eusebius, *Evangelicae praeparationis libri XV*, 431; see also 87-95, 419-20. Joseph, Moses' great precursor in Egypt, is also the subject of inquiry. Firmicus Maternus (De errore XIII, 1-3) relates that temples were erected to him so that the children of Egypt could be taught distributive justice; to make his worship more effective, he was given a name, which "being dead he could not prevent." The name was Serapis and was etymologically based on his descent from Sara or "Sarras pais." Isidore of Seville (Etymologiae VIII, 84-86) thinks that Apis was a King of Argos, who died in Egypt and whose remains were placed in a "soros"; hence "Soros apis." Augustine goes into this problem in *De civitate*, XVIII. 5. In the *Historia Ecclesiastica PL* XXI, 532, Rufinus, relating the destruction of the Temple of Serapis at Alexandria, ascribes its origin to the worship of Joseph.
12 Various heroes and heroines were honored as inventors of the alphabet. Plato (Phaedrus 274e-275b) says that Theuth, an old god of Naucratis to whom the ibis is sacred, discovered letters; Tertullian (De coronis, PL II, 87) attributes them to Mercury; Pliny the Elder mentions Mercury as a surmise of Aulus Gellius, and adds Menos of Egypt on the authority of Anticlidès (Naturalis historia VII. 56). Hyginus (Fabulae 277), Quintilian (Institutio oratoria III. 7, 8), and Cassiodorus (Variae VIII. 12) endorse the claims of Mercury, who got the idea of letters from watching flying flocks of cranes over the river Strymon. Augustine (De civitate XVIII. 37) writes, "Moses learned Egyptian wisdom... yet not even the wisdom of the Egyptians could be antecedent in time to the wisdom of our prophets, because even Abraham was a prophet, and what wisdom could there be in Egypt before Isis had given them letters."
13 D. C. Allen, "Some Theories of the Growth and Origin of Languages in Milton's Age," *PQ* XXVIII (1949), 5-16.
14 Diodorus, *Bibliotheca* II. 81.
impressed on the memory.” To men of the Nile a hawk stood for “swiftness” and a crocodile for “evil.” Tacitus adds to this information by describing the Egyptians as preserving the most ancient of human records in “thought symbols” represented by animal figures; Apuleius’ romantic hero, visiting in Alexandria, is shown a priestly book written in unknown letters, “wholly strange and impossible to be read by the profane.”

What Greek and Latin historians had to say about the hieroglyphics sacred to the Egyptians was given emphasis when the battered old general Ammianus Marcellinus described the obelisks covered with birds and beasts, “some not of this world,” as preserving the memory of Egyptian achievements and registering the vows of kings, “either promised or performed.” Individual characters, he stated, stood for nouns, verbs, and whole phrases. “By a vulture they represent the word nature, because no males are found among these birds . . . and under the figure of a honey-making bee they indicate a king because he should have both sweetness and acuteness.” Ammianus describes the obelisk brought to Rome by Constantine, which the Renaissance could see in the forecourt of St. Peter’s; but even more teasingly he supplies a Greek translation made by Hermaphion of the hieroglyphics on another obelisk which had been moved and placed before the Lateran in 1586 by Pope Sixtus V. These pagan elucidations of the symbolic inscriptions of the Egyptians stirred the imagination of scholars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but the most impressive explanation, and one closer to truth, was furnished by Clement of Alexandria.

In the sixth book of the *Stromateis*, Clement describes a hieratic procession in which hieroglyphic symbols are ceremoniously displayed, but his reader is prepared to watch this parade by a description of the modes of Egyptian symbolism in Book Four, the longest essay on the sacred writing known before the rediscovery of the *Hieroglyphica* of Hor Apollo. “The truly holy Word,” Clement writes, was hidden to the Egyptians, veiled to the Hebrews. “Only the consecrated were allowed access.”

Now those instructed among the Egyptians first learned that form of Egyptian letters which they called Epistolographic; second the Hieratic practised by sacred

17 Ovid, *Metamorphoseon* XI. 22.
18 Ammianus, *Rerum gestarum libri* XVII. 4. 6–11, 14–23.
19 Clement, *Stromateis* VI. 4. 35.

110
scribes; and lastly, the Hieroglyphic, of which one kind is literal by the first elements and the other symbolic.

Clement supplies examples to illustrate his classifications. The sun is represented by a circle, a hawk, or a beetle; the moon by an ibis; the other planets by bodies of serpents. The lion means “strength”; the ox, “husbandry” and “food”; the horse, “fortitude” and “confidence”; and the sphinx, “strength” plus “intelligence.” These symbols could be formed into expressions like one in the temple Pylon at Diospolis, where a boy, an old man, a hawk, a fish, and a crocodile could be translated as “Oh, you who are born and die, God hates impudence.” The conclusion is apparent.

All then, in a word, who have spoken of divine things, both Barbarian and Greeks, have veiled the first principle of things, and delivered the truth in enigmas, and symbols, and allegories, and metaphors, and similar tropes.20

But the probable Christian tone half-heard in Clement’s excursus is made more clear when Rufinus subsequently discovered a cross in the alphabet of Egyptian symbols and learned that it meant “vita ventura.”21

Knowledge of the history and religious philosophies of Egypt, which were undoubtedly extensively concealed in the unfathomable hieroglyphic, increased as men of the Renaissance read the allusive passages in Herodotus, Pliny, Lucian, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, and Strabo and picked up crumbs of information from Latin men of letters like Tibullus, Propertius, Ovid, Claudian, and Apuleius. Raleigh’s chapters on the history, religion, and customs of Egypt, drawn partly from Annio, whom he knew to be spurious,22 or second-handly from Cedranus or Glycas, who were quoted in the Chronicles of Krentzheim, Angelocra­tor, Buenting, and others, seem practically fictional when compared with the early eighteenth-century Origines mundi of Nicolas Gurtler or the fantastically learned Aegyptiarum originum et temporum antiquissimorum investigatio of Jacques Voorbroek. But Raleigh lived far away from Rome, the true center of the new excitement.

In October, 1587, the obelisk which had been restored and placed before the Vatican was crowned with a cross, and the occasion was marked with a great religious ceremony and the reading of poems by forty-five poets.23 The elegant Latin poet Pietro Angelio Barga not only

20 Ibid., V. 4. 19–21, 7. 41–42.
21 Rufinus, Historia, PL XXI, 537.
22 Raleigh, History II, 59–60.
23 For a description of the occasion see P. Galesini, Ordo dedicationis obelisci quem S.D.N. Sixtus V. Pont. Max. in foro Vaticano ad limina Apostolorum erexit (Rome, 1586);
composed verse for the event but also wrote a *Commentarius de obelisco* in which he talked about the making and makers of obelisks, their religious significance, and, drawing on pagan and Christian sources, the rationale of the hieroglyphics.\(^{24}\) Michele Mercati seconded Barga's account by publishing in 1589 in Rome a solid study of Egyptian learning and religion, the *De gli obelischi di Roma*. He declared that God had imparted both language and writing to Adam, who transmitted this skill to his descendants. Writing was, consequently, not invented by Moses because Abraham certainly knew how to write, and Mercati had seen Mexican inscriptions in the Vatican Library as inscrutable as Egyptian hierograms. If Moses was instructed in Egyptian lore, Egypt must have had written records before the Hebrews came into the land. Mercati draws heavily on Clement's description of Egyptian symbolism, which he sees revived in his own day by the *Emblemata* of Signor Alciati; but his ultimate authority is "Horò Egitto," whose book had been the cherished lexicon of Renaissance symbolists for more than eighty years.\(^{25}\)

The *Hieroglyphica* of Hor Apollo, a supposed priest of Egypt, was found in 1419 in the Levant by an associate of the antiquary Niccolò Niccoli. Copies of this manuscript had a wide circulation among the learned. In his annotation on *Ennead* V. 8, where the hieroglyphs are explained, Ficino reveals he has read "Horus'" book which supports Plotinus' conjecture that hieroglyphs were pictures of the Platonic ideas. This curious dictionary of symbols was printed in Greek in 1505, and there were at least thirty reprints with Latin, French, Italian, and German parallel versions before the century ended. Six further editions, each more scholarly than its predecessor, were finished before the mid-seventeenth century. The vogue of this work was certainly promoted by the bronze enameled tablet adorned with hieroglyphs and embossed silver figures that Cardinal Bembo purchased from the locksmith who secured it during the sack of Rome in 1525. The relic known as the Bembine Table was subjected to several attempts at an interpretation before it was stolen again in 1630.\(^{26}\) But the *Hieroglyphica* of Hor

---

\(^{24}\) Barga, *op. cit.* (Rome, 1586), p. 27.


Apollo was a principle stimulus to the renewed interest of the Renaissance in symbol and allegory.

The *Hieroglyphica* not only reinforced the belief that hidden meanings or lost secrets and histories were to be found in the records of the ancients but also presented the Christian world with an Egyptian Book of Creatures. The hexameral commentaries of the Church from the time of St. Basil and St. Ambrose had expounded the inner significances of each creature as it emerged from God’s mind during the divine week. St. Augustine, in spite of his half-affection for the literal, had supported this symbolic methodology even for sacramental use.

Moreover, if for the administration of the sacraments, certain symbolisms are drawn, not only from the heavens and stars, but also from all the lower creation, the intention is to provide the doctrine of Salvation with a sort of eloquence, adapted to raise the affections of those to whom it is presented, from the visible to the invisible, from the corporeal to the spiritual, from the spiritual to the eternal.27

Not too long after St. Augustine voiced this opinion, St. Eucherius, following the advice offered by Cassian in his collation with Nestros,28 produced in his *Liber Formularum Spiritualis* a work that is the ancestor of the symbolic books of creatures written by St. Isidore, Bishop Marbode, St. Hildegard, Rabanus Maurus, Vincent of Beauvais, all medieval bestiaries and lapidaries, and books of a similar nature that flooded the Renaissance.

St. Eucherius’ *Liber*, which has been described as “a dull and desultory dictionary of metaphors,” is composed of eleven fascicles providing the Christian meanings of divine names, the members of God’s body, heavenly creatures, earthly creatures, animals, appellatives, human organs, words, Jerusalem, and numbers. By scanning its registers a reader learned that the eagle represents a saint; the ostrich, a heretic; the raven, a demon; the pelican, Christ; and the dove, the Holy Spirit. The cock, master of doorways, is a holy preacher, “who among the shadows of this our life looks toward the coming light.”29 Eucherius always shored up his analogues with Bible references, but because of

28 Cassianus, *Collationes*, PL XLIX, 962–63. Cassian actually lays down the principles of the later four-fold interpretation. Theoretical knowledge can be divided into historical and spiritual knowledge; and spiritual knowledge can be subdivided into tropology, allegory, and anagogics. Historical knowledge concerns things completed and visible; allegorical is predictive; anagogical relates to the secret mysteries of Heaven; and tropological is moral. St. Eucherius, who made a digest of some of Cassian’s writings, mentions these divisions but does not follow them in his own speculations.
long usage he was able to define an emblematic creature as a lexicographer defines a word. For Augustine, Christ's exhortation, "Come with me and I shall make you fishers of men," implied that the world was a wild ocean swarming with sinful fish. Somewhat earlier, St. Martin of Tours, pausing by a river bank and watching birds diving for fish, observed to his disciples that the birds were demons "lying in wait for the feckless, taking the ignorant, and devouring them."

As a result of this custom of comparisons, Eucherius can be dogmatic in his equation: "Fish are sinners." Christian metaphors of this nature, known to the Renaissance through the good offices of the Middle Ages, were clearly at home in ancient Egypt, thanks to Moses, instructor or instructed.

The Hieroglyphica of Hor Apollo, rendered into Greek by Philip, demonstrated in its 189 entries the similarity between pagan and Christian interpretation of the book of creatures. Some of the paragraphs give the sign and its hidden meaning. A pig symbolizes a pernicious man; a weasel represents a weak man; a swan stands for a musical old man. In most cases, the philosophical undermeaning is supplied with its natural symbol: death is an owl; love, a snare; work, a bull's horn; a king, a serpent; and a great king, a snake biting its tail. Few of these equivalents could be found in the Bible by interpreters who maintained that all material symbols should have scriptural authority, but some of them had a Christian coloration. In the first century Clement of Rome pointed to the phoenix as the sign of the resurrection of Christ and, hence, of human immortality. This first of Christian symbols was accepted by later allegorists, who saw a connection between it and the fact that the Virgin, during the Flight into Egypt, took refuge in the Temple of Heliopolis.

The Egyptians, according to the Hieroglyphica, used the phoenix in their inscriptions to represent the soul and the eternal renewal and restoration of all things. Be this as it may, the influence of Hor Apollo

---

30 Sulpius, Epistolae, PL XX, 181-82.
31 Clement of Rome, Epistola I ad Corinthios, PG I, 260-65. By the twelfth century this belief is firmly encysted in the minds of men; hence, Hugo of St. Victor, a master of symbolism, can write: "The whole visible world is almost a book written by the hand of God; it was created by Divine Power and each single creature is almost a letter not invented by human agreement but established by the Divine Will for the manifestation of the invisible wisdom of God. If an illiterate looks on an open book, he sees the forms of the letters, but he cannot read. The man who sees only the outside of the creatures and does not realize what there is of God in them is as dull as an animal; he knows the outside but not the inner meaning. The spiritually gifted man, who understands all things, considers the beauty of the outward form, but also perceives in the inner nature the marvellous wisdom of God." Didascalia, PL CLXXVI, 814.
32 I have followed the edition of Francesco Sbordone, Hieroglyphica, Naples, 1940. There is an excellent English version by George Boas in the Bollingen Series, XXII, New York, 1950.
THE SYMBOLIC WISDOM OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

on Renaissance art and letters was both immediate and intense. It established the vogue of the emblem-book and is one of the stimulating forces behind the universal passion of these centuries for symbolic representations. The obsession with these arcane devices is found on all sides and is institutionally represented by the establishment of the Academy of Inscriptions, originally founded to supply by its researches learned ornamentations for the pleasure of the Sun King and his court.

One of the immediate effects of the enormous popularity of the Hieroglyphica of Hor Apollo was the compiling of symbolic lexicons, which attempted to bring together a world of interpreted representations. The first dictionary of this nature was the Hieroglyphica sive de sacris Aegyptiorum literis commentarii of Piero Valeriano Bolzani, classical scholar, local historian, and defender of priestly beards, the virtues of lightning, and the discomforts of the literary life. Valeriano’s compendium, which brought together the hidden meanings of almost all things beneath the sun, was collected from Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and Christian origins. Though it was the work of a lifetime, it was more distinguished by its scholarship than by its good sense. It was, however, immediately popular, and there were at least seven editions—the latter ones fattened by editorial annexes—before the final printing of 1678. The Latin of the original version was turned into French in 1576 and 1615 and into Italian in 1602. So that the original folio of almost one thousand pages could be always consulted by eager mystagogues, it was reduced to nearly pocket size by Heinrich Schwalenberg in 1592 and later reprinted in this form.

In his dedication to Cosimo de’Medici, Valeriano describes his joyous labors in collecting and discovering these mysterious, lost meanings from the writings of Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and barbarians. He remembers his dinner conversations with Cardinal Bembo about the obelisks at Rome and the current movement among Roman leaders to rescue from the lime-burners’ kilns ancient monuments no more worthy to be destroyed than the statues of Michelangelo Buonarroti in St. Lorenzo. He imagines a connection between the form of writing used by

---

the Egyptians and that employed by antediluvian men, who inscribed figures of animals or other things on columns of brick or stone in order to preserve the occult wisdom of poets, philosophers, and historians. The fame of the wise Egyptian priests gained them clients like Pythagoras, Plato, and Moses; oddly enough, the modus interpretationis of the hieroglyphics in which the hierarchs concealed their learning was not unlike that of the allegories used by Moses, David, the Prophets, and Christ. The same type of metaphoric expression was also employed by the Apostles, lest God's word be scattered before dogs and hogs. "Antiquity concealed science both human and divine, wrapped as it were in things which the most skillful among them used by custom in enigmas." Valeriano admits to no blame for attempting to decipher the messages of the past; he regrets only that his interpretive learning is inferior to that of his predecessors, Poliziano, Crinito, and Beroaldo.

This dedicatory letter to the great Duke of Florence is succeeded by eighty-three sections in which the significances of animals, birds, fish, insects, plants, metals, types of men, parts of the human body, human creations or ceremonies, and other phenomena are mystically read with authoritative quotations and footnotes. More than two hundred authors, ranging alphabetically from "Absinis rhetor" to Zoroaster and chronologically from the Bible to Jacob Ziegler, are wrung out to provide these references and allusions. Each specific section is individually dedicated in a head note proclaiming the special secret virtues of the creature under discussion. The lion begins the book, and a letter tells Cosimo that no one has written about this animal better than the priests of Egypt. "Few men have been more learned in the secrets of nature than they and have more diligently explored the essential being of creatures." Cosimo is reminded that lions or lion heads are frequently seen in antique monuments or in hieroglyphics and that lions are the symbols of magnanimity, bodily and mental power, the sun and the earth, reverence for parents, courage, petulance, lust in love, eloquence, vigilance, domination, clemency, vengeance, the flooding of the Nile, and "many other things." Homer, Lucretius, Aristophanes, Pausanias, Eucherius, Dio Chrysostom, Callimachus, Euripides, as well as the reverses of coins of the Antonines and Trajan, are among the documents providing the authority.

34 Poliziano's interest in symbolism has been recognized in the chapter on Homer. Crinito, author of the popular De honesta disciplina, inserted several papers on symbolism in this gathering and an essay on Egyptian hieroglyphics that might be the first on this subject.

35 Filippo Beroaldo, an associate of Poliziano, wrote the frequently reprinted Symbola Pythagorae moraliter explicata.
By swallowing Hor Apollo and every discernible interpretive metaphor or symbolic implication in hundreds of Greek and Latin texts, Valeriano fills his volume with a menagerie of hieroglyphic creatures from land, sea, and air. The second part of the Hieroglyphica begins with an address to J. J. Fugger, "maecenas of the learned, comparable only to Cosimo of Florence." The German merchant prince is rewarded with flattery for gathering a fantastic library and subsidizing the studies of men like Jerome Wolf. Valeriano also gives him "an explanation of what the priests of Egypt meant by their hieroglyphics of the human body . . . so that he will know they were not just superstitiously given to the veneration of animals . . . Man also furnished them with . . . hieroglyphics and sacred letters since each part of him is mysterious." Hence, after Fugger knew that one head meant "prince," "divinity," "providence," "posterity," and "Rome," he was provided with the Valerianian interpretation of two heads, three heads, four heads, five heads, and seven heads. Valeriano then descends slowly but symbolically down the body to the fingers and to the things the fingers make and carry. The hieroglyphic dictionary ends in a kitchen garden, where a final cabbage is turned, on the counsel of Pliny, Cicero, Beritius, Varro, and Nestor, into an arcane sign standing for "confused pleasure." But Valeriano had immediate imitators.

The Hieroglyphica of Celio Agostini Curio, editor of Bembo and historian of the Saracens, was appended to the 1567 edition of Valeriano. It is a modest collection of about ninety hieroglyphs missed by Valeriano, who had seen the hidden meaning in Isis, but overlooked Eneph, plumed god of Egypt, Pan, Osiris, Pluto, Silenus, Hercules, Prometheus, Mercury, Argus, Endymion, Fidus, Hecate, Diana,

Some of the letters in Valeriano's alphabet, besides the lion, are the elephant, rhinoceros, bull, horse, dog, ape, monkey, deer, ant, beetle, hedgehog, pig, goat, sheep, ram, wolf, hyena, lynx, bear, panther, tiger, ass, mule, camel, rabbit, weasel, beaver, fox, mouse, cat, serpent, basilisk, viper, salamander, dipasas, hydra, stork, crane, ibis, vulture, eagle, phoenix, pelican, owl, crow, sparrow, pigeon, dove, swallow, goose, peacock, partridge, nightingale, ostrich, wasp, bee, dolphin, crocodile, tortoise. The generic category of fish, for example, provides the following meanings: profane and abominable, flesh and spirit, purification, loss and gain, silence, hate, divine versus human, carnal desires, sound friendship, an uncultured man, a cookshop, souls, innocence, demons, pagans, ignorance, waters, the Goddesses Facelitis and Atargatis. An obelisk before the temple of Sais, or Minerva, displayed an infant, an old man, a falcon, a fish, and a hippopotamus all in descending order. The translation is, given Valeriano's lexicon as guide, simple, for here is "demonstrated the fragility of human life, which turns from childhood into age and again into childhood. The falcon is God and, consequently, love and vital life, divine in us. The fish is hate and death together, for the sea has branded them with ruin and destruction. The hippopotamus that kills its father to enjoy its mother is impudent violence. This is the concordia discors of the bodily complexions, so that when disuniting, one displants and destroys the other with violence and death follows" (Valeriano, Hieroglyphica, p. 219v).
Astrea, and other gods and goddesses, besides girls with "their hair standing upright" and girls with "shaved heads." Books of this sort did not satisfy the hieroglyphic hunger of the century but stimulated it. J. Van Gorp, an odd scholar of Holland, proposed in his *Hieroglyphica libri XVI*, published in 1580, that Dutch was the matrix of all languages and that hieroglyphics were the alphabet of all primitive societies. The professional heralds were delighted by the discovery of a new form of metaphorical thinking, one which put a certain amount of backbone in their habitual tasks. One of them, Pierre L'Anglois, happily expanded the hint of the Egyptologists in his 1584 *Discours des Hiéroglyphes Aegyptiens*, which took the whole art of symbolic representation back to the Pharaohs. Stimulated by the attempt of Pignoria to translate the so-called Bembine Tables, Michael Maier wrote an *Arcana arcanissima; hoc est hieroglyphica Aegyptio-Graeca* in 1614 in which he conjectured that these signs, incorporating both ethical and physical lore occultly expressed, were invented at the moment when the world of civility was undergoing catastrophic religious and political change. Those entrusted with the preservation of the esoteric wisdom of their age, he imagined, were probably threatened with death if they revealed it; hence, they wrote it down in symbols that only a few could read. These students of the hieroglyphics reflect the symbolic trend of the later sixteenth century, which made it almost impossible to discuss the things of this world without alluding to their symbolic meanings. Authors of books like Simone Maioli's *Dies caniculares* or the series of encyclopedic natural histories which began to appear in 1602 from the editorial rooms of Ulisse Aldrovandi would not think of omitting the symbolic values of the creatures any more than an heraldic expert like Reusner or Typoest avoided the evidence of ancient Egypt or Greece in recording and expounding their truly medieval art. But one of the largest accumulations of hieroglyphic material after Valeriano's primary effort was the *Electorum symbolorum et parabolum historicarum syntagma* of Nicolaus Caussin, which appeared in Paris in 1618.

Father Caussin's publication contained the texts of Hor Apollo, a summary of Valeriano's definitions, the hieroglyphic documents from Diodorus Siculus and Clement of Alexandria, the symbolic *Physiologus* then ascribed to Epiphanius, the *Aenigmata* of Symposius, and about one thousand new symbolic equivalents to be added to those found in Valeriano's *Hieroglyphica*. At the turn of the century the witty Tommaso

Garzoni in his treatise on the professions of the world had given a chapter to the "professors of Hieroglyphics," an open indication that the passion for this matter was by no means limited to a minority of scholars. Caussin's original contribution to this book carries the modest title of Polyhistor Symbolicus and brings together protases and substantiating apodoses from the world of Greek and Latin literature. Following this conventional rhetorical practice, the hieroglyphical meaning of the universe and its parts flows from page to page, encompassing the ancient gods, men both good and bad, human rites, birds, animals, fish, serpents, insects, plants, minerals, and manufactured items. According to Aelian the sick peacock, symbolic bird of pride, feeds on the healing flax root, thus lending meaning to the former wearing of linen by penitents. Just as linen root cures the peacock, so penitence brings health to the proud. One example of this nature hardly suggests the overwhelming conviction of Caussin's torrent of quotation and commentary.

In addition to practical symbolic equations Caussin put together some prefatory essays on the hieroglyphic art. He admits that Moses was instructed by the Egyptians in mathematics and music but assumes he could write because Abraham, who learned astrology in Egypt, wrote; in fact, writing was a gift of the Divine Light to Adam, and hieroglyphics, often cabalistic in nature, are found even in septentrional regions. After running through the usual classical accounts of the broken coin or the tessera, Caussin defines a symbol as a sign somewhat obscure but figuratively significant because of the natural relation of its terms. The term is for him the generic cover for enigmas, emblems, parables, and hieroglyphs, but he understands the last to be artificially agreed upon signs. Caussin's attempt to rival or complete Valeriano was followed by Marcus Wendelin's emblematic rifling of 385 authors and by similar symbolic compendia compiled by Jacques Masen and Filippo Picinelli; but these "professors of hieroglyphs" were children, hardly knee-high to Athanasius Kircher, whose assault on the translation of the hieroglyphic inscriptions of Egypt began in 1636.

Garzoni, La piazza universale di tutte le professioni del mondo (Venice, 1601), pp. 243-45.

Wendelin called his book, printed at Frankfort in 1623, Admiranda Nili, commentatio philologica, geographica, historica, physica, et hieroglyphica ex 318 autoribus. Masen's Speculum imaginum veritatis occultae (Cologne, 1664), contains classifications and explanations of various categories of symbols with numerous examples in each group. Picinelli's Mondo simbolico (Milan, 1635), is drawn mainly from emblem-writers, who are each carefully acknowledged. The compiler bows to the great symbolographers like Govio, the Tasso, and others and writes one of the fullest theoretical accounts of emblems. He proceeds, after the manner of Valeriano and Caussin, to provide a symbolic dictionary, beginning at the top of the chain of being and descending link by link.
Kircher, whose studies of Egyptian history, religion, and culture and whose translations of all known Egyptian documents appeared in magnificently printed and illustrated folios during the middle years of the seventeenth century, had a modest predecessor in Lorenzo Pignoria, who published the Bembine Tabula in 1605. This impressive objet d’art, then in the museum of the Duke of Mantua, had been copied in a series of copperplates by Vico of Parma and published in Venice in 1600. The plates had caused some stir, and Marcus Velser, discoverer and publisher of part of the celebrated Peutinger Tabula, had urged Pignoria to reprint the Vico plates with an explanatory text. Pignoria was a poet in both Latin and Italian. He would later annotate Alciati’s Emblemata and Tasso’s Jerusalem Delivered as well as write the first study of the Magna Mater, letters on symbolism, and an account of the ancient murals at Rome. The Vetustissimae tabulae aenae sacris Aegyptiorum simulachris coelatae accurata explicatio, in qua antiquissimarum superstitionum originis . . . enarratur, which appeared in Venice in 1605, was his first work and it won him immediate acclaim.40 Pignoria, who would eventually own a widely admired museum, had already learned the value of antiquarian objects as illustrative and explanatory documents; hence, the services of the artist brothers Johannes Theodore and Johannes Israel de Bry were engaged to furnish his text with helpful engravings.

Pignoria did not share the symbolic passion of Valeriano, Caussin, or Kircher; his method in examining the tabula, he stated, would be “non allegorikos,” meaning by this expression that he would write no interpretations which could not be supported by classical texts, carved gems, coins, statuettes, and inscriptions. There is no twisting of evidence, no unsustained and uncritical use of the interpreter’s bare intuition. Although he cannot at times separate the representation from the hieroglyphic inscription, Pignoria managed to identify most of the Egyptian gods and goddesses on the tabula, supply their histories or accounts of their cults, and indicate their symbolic creatures or signs. He has no farfetched theories about the philosophical meaning of the tabula, but his learned moderation, rare in his time, was not adopted by other “professors of hieroglyphics.”

40 The Frankfort edition of 1609 was titled Characteres Aegyptii, and the Amsterdam reprint of 1669, which included other writings of Pignoria and an account of his life by J. P. Tomasini, was named, probably thanks to Kircher, Mensa Iesiaca.
The modest approach of Pignoria can be fully appreciated by turning to the first syntagma of the third folio of Athanasius Kircher's *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, where the greatest of seventeenth-century polymaths puts his imagination and immense erudition to work on the *Bembine Tabula*. By 1652, when this vast study was available, the original *tabula* had disappeared from the Duke of Mantua's museum and Kircher had only the Vico copper plates to read. He assumes that the *tabula* is anterior to the time of Cambyses and contain the summation of Egyptian theology as set down by the "hieromants." Like Pignoria, Kircher agrees that it is a *mensa sacra*, but unlike Pignoria, he does not conclude with this fairly sound idea. The *Mensa Isiaca*, as Kircher names this *tabula*, can be divided into suites of triads based on the central Egyptian theosophy of Father, Power, and Mind, or faith, truth, and love, with their presiding daemons. Kircher, by this time long practised in reading hieroglyphs, searches out in the course of a hundred pages the various trinities—those of Hecate, Serapis, Osiris, Horus, or East, Fontana, or West, Pandochea, or North, and Thaustica, or South—that spring from the Egyptian theories of the nature of the *Anima Mundi*. He is able by this means to discourse on each square inch in the *tabula* as he follows the chain of ideas from God down to matter. But this is Kircher in mid-course and at the peak of his renown; naturally there was a beginning.

Kircher took the whole world of knowledge as his province, but his interest in the hieroglyphics and in matters Egyptian was stimulated by his youthful study of the Coptic language, a tongue hardly known in Europe until Fabri de Peiresc, the generous French patron of scholars, became interested in that language and promoted its understanding by securing manuscripts from Egypt and subsidizing their study. He gathered from North Africa Coptic versions of the Evangels, the Psalms, and the liturgies of Basil, Gregory, and Cyril;\(^{41}\) when another shipment of similar manuscripts was captured by pirates, he negotiated directly with the Pasha of Tripoli for its recovery.\(^{42}\) In 1650 he employed Claude Saumaise, Milton's Salmasius, to study the language;\(^{43}\) shortly after this date, Pietro della Valle bought a Coptic-Arabic dictionary manuscript, invaluable to a student of this unknown language, and brought it to Rome. But Peiresc could not obtain the use of this dictionary for Saumaise, who was both Protestant and anti-Roman, so it was turned over

---

\(^{41}\) P. Gassendi, *De vita Peireskii* (Hague, 1655), pp. 152, 186.


\(^{43}\) Saumaise, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-33, 156-62.
to Father Kircher, who was twenty-eight and at that time ignorant of this language. The Pietro della Valle manuscript became the basis of Kircher's first important publication, the *Prodromus Coptus* of 1636.

The *Prodromus Coptus* is a sometimes incorrect but not unimportant grammar and vocabulary preceded by a preface which is five times larger than the book it introduces. In this introduction Kircher states his belief that Coptic is a degenerate form of Egyptian demotic and announces his program as an intending Egyptologist. He proposes to reconstruct the earliest form of Coptic, compile a thesaurus of the language, and translate all the Roman obelisks. He must first demonstrate that old Coptic and Egyptian demotic—the hieratic could not degenerate—are the same. The proof is plain enough. Coptus, a city known to Pliny, Pausanias, and Plutarch but now “hardly found in ruins,” gave its name to the language. At first its inhabitants—it was second only to Thebes—worshiped animals as the Egyptians did, but they were converted to Christianity. As a consequence of this change of religion, the original Egyptian language, corrupted elsewhere by the inroads of Islam, was immaculately preserved in Coptic monasteries, which became centers of culture and the originating places of Christian missions to India and China.

Kircher's linguistic demonstration of his thesis is based on the uniqueness of Coptic, which he proves at great length by showing that words shared by other oriental languages are not to be found in it. On the other hand, the one authentic old Egyptian phrase, the “Tsaphnath phanehh” of Genesis 41:45 is clearly the same as Coptic “Psontom phanech.” Admitting that he is not yet perfect in the old language of Egypt, Kircher reveals that he is already studying Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions about which he has a definite theory. He regards these inscriptions “not so much as writing but rather as symbolic representations of sublime theosophy expressed through signs universally intelligible.” With this announcement Kircher falls into line with the symbolistic conviction of the seventeenth century, that mystery inhabits anything that is ancient and that a learned interpreter can explain, or at least half-explain, whatever lies beneath the surface of things. So that men of his age could be prepared for his later efforts, Kircher provides them with “a specimen of hieroglyphic interpretation.”

44 Kircher, *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus* (Rome, 1636), p. 5. Saumaise, whose writings after 1630 indicate that he had made progress in learning Coptic, lost out to Kircher with a grace that was unusual for him: see Saumaise, *op. cit.*, pp. 177–78.

45 Kircher, *Prodromus*, pp. 7–16.
In order to have an available text Kircher selects a figure from the published Bembine Tabula (Fig. 1), which Pignoria had temperately described as “a scarab with the head of Osiris.” This man-bug, accompanied by a winged sphere, has a crescent enclosing a $t$ on its head, an epaulet of concentric circles on its shoulder, and an inscribed tablet in its foreclaws. Studying this figure, Kircher finds six “universally intelligential” symbols: the scarab, or “the world”; the head of Horus, or “the reason or sun governing the world”; the concentric circles, or “the superior heavens”; the crescent, or “the moon of Isis”; the cross within the crescent, or “flux and reflux, generation and corruption, the mixing of elements, the disunited universe held together by love.” Love is also expressed by the inscription on the tablet in the scarab’s claws, which Kircher reads as the Coptic word “philo.” The supreme symbol in the motif is the winged sphere, which as sphere symbolizes the universe but as a winged sphere “the union through ‘philo’ of the upper and lower worlds.” Since the Copts were Christian, it is not difficult for Kircher to assume that ancient Egyptians had some awareness of the Christian revelation; hence, he associates the beetle with Christ, the winged sphere with God, and the “philo” with the Holy Spirit. The transliteration established, the door to Egyptian metaphysics opens. The winged sphere is the Anima Mundi or “Hemephta,” the supreme intellect. The body of the scarab is “the world machine,” or Osiris. The concentric circles are “the celestial spheres” and “the heavenly genii.” The head remains the sun, or Horus, and the crescent, the moon, or Isis. The cross and “philo”
are the elements, the higher world joined to the lower by love or by the daemons who unwind the chain of being. This foretaste of Kircher's allegorical approach must have whetted the appetite of Renaissance men intrigued by symbolic analysis.46

Kircher's second contribution to the art of Egyptology was the _Lingua Aegyptiaca_ published in 1644, which is della Valle's Coptic-Arabic lexicon with an appendix of ten essays on Egyptian subjects.47 This work, however, shrinks before the first of Kircher's great compendia of symbolic interpretations, the _Obeliscus Pamphilii_ of 1650.48 In this work the varied erudition of the author is spread over an area vast in time and space, and it is clear from the style that Kircher triumphs in a

46 _Ibid._, pp. 238-77.

47 The titles of the essays are: On the Egyptian Language and Alphabet, On the Coptic Church, Coptic names of God, The years and months in Coptic, The numerals and ordinals with some Coptic mathematical propositions, Egyptian astronomy, Egyptian weights and measures, Egyptian animals, Egyptian herbs and plants, Egyptian city names in Coptic, Egyptian philosophical terms. These essays are followed by an inventory of Arabic and Egyptian manuscripts brought to Rome by Raymondo. This same year of 1644 saw the first printing of J. B. Casalio's _De veteribus Aegyptiorum ritibus_ at Rome. Casalio admits he lacks Kircher's Egyptian learning and relies heavily on his _Prodromus Coptus_. He writes sections on Egyptian idolatry and its dissemination, on the various gods and customs of Egypt, and on hieroglyphs and Egyptian symbolism. There is a chapter on obelisks, which are thought (p. 8) to be astrological in purpose. All that he knows about hieroglyphs, he garners from Clement, Diódorus, or Porphyry; hence, this matter probably came to him through Van Gorp or Kircher. He states there were three languages in Egypt: Coptic or demotic, hieratic for sacred matters, and hieroglyphics, which express things in characters (pp. 31-43). He publishes, probably for the first time, a number of antiquarian objects of Egyptian provenience.

48 Though it is not explicitly stated, the fact that Kircher's introduction to this volume is followed by letters from Angeloni, Casalio, and Agostini, famous Roman antiquarians, all certifying that the obelisk is carefully published, suggests that Kircher had been subject to voiced criticism. This suspicion is supported by the fact that a series of well known orientalists and two Maronites from Lebanon also testify that his Hebrew, Arabic, and other Semitic quotations are correct. The great outcry against Kircher came in the next century when he was attacked for various faults. Louis Picques said Kircher knew only a little Latin and Greek besides his mother tongue (an obvious slander); see C. E. Jordan, _Histoire de la vie et ouvrages de M. la Crenze_ (Amsterdam, 1741), pp. 291-92. The great antiquarian, Abbé Bernard de Montfaucon, who gives a full account of the _Bembine Tabula_ (op. cit., II, 331-42), complains Kircher is halted by no enigma; "he explains all". In his supplementary second volume (pp. 196-98) he accepts Kircher's suggestion that Coptic is a corrupt form of the ancient spoken language of which the written form has been lost. In an almost prophetic fashion for 1724, he thinks that the hieroglyphics will not be deciphered until one discovers a parallel inscription in Greek. As late as 1763, Abbé Barthélemy complains of Kircher's useless and boring erudition, which has made men doubt his plain wisdom. He observes that Kircher's translations of hieroglyphic documents have succeeded only in delaying their decipherment; see Barthélemy, "Sur la langue Copte," _Mémoires de l'Académie des Inscriptions_, LVII (1773), 388-89. For other comments on Kircher as an Egyptologist see: C. G. Blumberg, _Fundamenta linguae Copticae_ (Leipzig, 1716), p. 29; P. E. Jablonski, _Panthem Aegyptorum_ (Frankfort, 1750), I, 274; C. H. Tromler, _Bibliothecae Copto-Jacobiticae specimen_ (Leipzig, 1767), p. 22; G. W. Leibnitz, _Opera_ (Geneva, 1768), V, 296; and, of course, J. B. Mencken, _De charlataneria eruditorum_ (Leipzig, 1715), pp. 38-39.
sure success. He begins by dating this obelisk, recently removed from the Coliseum of Caracalla to the Agonale Forum, in the reign of Soth, son of Menuphta, or in 1366 B.C.49 The subject of the inscription on the obelisk is sun-worship, and the obelisk was dedicated to Hemephta, one of Kircher's favorite Egyptian deities. He describes all the obelisks at Rome, dates them, discourses on their substance, transportation, and erection. Their inscriptions are all in hieroglyphs, which were invented by Hermes Trismegistus, who lived after the Flood and instructed the Egyptian Misraim in priestly duties and in making inscriptions on stone. The later priests of Egypt intended to keep the meaning of the hieroglyphs a secret, but by the time of Joseph's Potiphar (who was, by the way, a priest) revelation had lost its former sanctity. The cult of the true God, based on Noah's sermons, had been replaced by myths like those about Osiris and Horus. Then magic, demon-worship, oracles, and idol-adoration took the place of religion, and the theological doctrines promulgated by Hermes were totally obscured.50

Kircher now feels required to write about the nature of the hieroglyphic symbols prescribed by Hermes in order to prevent his pristine religious knowledge from being debased. To this end he combs the ancients and moderns for definitions of symbols because the priesthood has always hidden its divine knowledge under rhetorical clouds. Moses, Pythagoras, Plato, Dionysius the Areopagite, St. Augustine, and other Fathers of the Church used symbols because an open exposition of the nature of things is always unpleasing to God. Rabbi Ibn Ezra, who is supported by Rabbis Eliezer and Juda ben Levi, held that Adam was tutored in the use of symbols by the angel Raziel, who lessoned him in both the natural and supernatural. Kircher agrees with Valeriano and earlier authorities that the Egyptians based their alphabet on the postures of animals. When Hermes saw a crane cross its knock-kneed legs with its neck and bill to preen its tail feathers, he saw the original form of the alpha, or A. But the wise priests of the Nile used other types of letters besides those derived from creatures; there are, as well, the symbolic or gnomic letters of Hor Apollo, the mixture of simple and symbolic letters, and the purely symbolic alphabet.51

Having reminded his readers that they almost innately recognize a bare sword as "danger," a lyre as "harmony," or a set of scales as "justice," Kircher proceeds to inform them about the meaning of definite

49 Kircher, Obeliscus Pamphilius, pp. 65, 103.
50 Ibid., pp. 93-100.
51 Ibid., pp. 104-32.
hieroglyphs. In some inscriptions from Egypt there are characters resembling the profile of a bird's head; this is, of course, the representation of the lowercase sigma (σ) and should be read as such. A twisting serpent is, therefore, a zeta; when the same serpent coils and crosses the coil with its tail, it becomes a theta and also stands for "Toth." After these linguistic premises, Kircher pauses to discuss at great length the physical and metaphysical mysteries concealed under the divine veil of Egyptian mythology, a digression followed by "hierogrammatisimi," of twenty creatures such as dogs, cats, scarabs, and hawks, commonly observed as signs in Egyptian inscriptions with the keys to how they should be translated. The crocodile, for example, stands for the ineffable nature of God because it is without a tongue; the crocodile also represents solar movement from east to west (especially when it is found bearing on its back a boat containing the sun), the land of Egypt, the river Nile, and, as in the Bembine Tabula, the humid property in substance or the lunar genii of humidity necessary in the generation of things. Once he has established the meaningful equivalents of these frequently observed hierograms, Kircher is ready to make a line for line translation of the obelisk.

Kircher's confidence in his readings of hieroglyphic inscriptions is as robust as his findings are profoundly wrong and foolish. It never occurred to him or to any other seventeenth-century man that the Egyptian inscriptions on stone were as mundane as any contemporary monuments. For example, a cartouche on one face of this obelisk actually transliterates as Greek "autokrator," but Kircher renders it, "Osiris is the source
of all fecundity and vegetation; the holy Mophta draws this power of generation from the sky into his realm." A second example transliterates into Greek as "Kaisar Domitianos Sebastos," and goes on to indicate that Domitian ordered the obelisk and had the inscription cut at Rome. With his mind intent only on higher matters, Kircher reads a noble but somewhat confused Egyptian pronouncement: "The four-powered beneficial guardian of celestial generation, dominator of air, through Mophta commits benign aerial humor to Ammon, most powerful of inferiors, so that by images and fitting ceremonies it is potently expressed." The monumental mass of religious philosophy that Kircher read into these inscriptions undoubtedly gave him the courage to continue his unswerving effort to unveil the primal doctrines, known to Adam and Moses, in these antique symbolic inscriptions.

Two years after the publication of the Obeliscus Pamphilius, the Oedipus Aegyptiacus; hoc est universalis hieroglyphicae veterum doctrinae temporum iniuria abolitae instauratio appeared in four folios of more than two thousand pages. This paper edifice was dedicated to Ferdinand III of Austria, whose praises are proclaimed in poems and eulogies written in twenty-six different languages. The twenty-sixth encomium is a hieroglyphic inscription written by Kircher and engraved on an obelisk erected in Volume One at signature ********* 3r. Kircher compares, without repeating a symbol, the Austrian Osiris with Hermes Trismegistus, Horus, Mophta, "the archetype of mental operations, the divine legislator, and the Genius Agatha." This feast of praise is followed by a "Propylaeum Agonisticum" addressed to critics who have complained that Kircher is laboring at an impossible task, scanted by ancients and shunned by moderns. Admitting that there are difficulties, Kircher announces his intention of employing his God-given talents in order to explain the symbolical inscriptions and the allegorical representations of the ancient Egyptians. He denies that linguistic changes make the task of decipherment and interpretation impossible; the same process did not hinder those scholars who rediscovered the ancient literary glories of Greece. Having dismissed his louder critics as either obscurantists or anti-intellectuals, Kircher writes a full history of the religion, culture, and politics of Egypt.

Deeply versed in the lore of the Arabs and the Jewish rabbis, Kircher has better success at describing the withering away of the original theology than had most of his predecessors. Adam, according to

---

53 Kircher, Obeliscus Pamphilus, p. 557.
54 Ibid., p. 559.
Rabbi Moses of Egypt, was born of parents descended from the moon and was himself a priest and prophet of the moon, urging men to worship the planet until corrected and shown the true way by Seth. Nonetheless, men continued to worship the stars, and in time Adam, Eve, the serpent, Cain, and Seth were transformed into gods, a theology carried by Cham into Egypt where there was a continual fragmentation of the idolatrous pantheon attended by constant ritualistic degeneration. Kircher delights in unwinding the holy confusions to demonstrate how Eve became Tellus, Niobe, Vesta, and Isis and how Adam was transfigured into the consorts of these goddesses. He describes, and in this he anticipates the eighteenth-century scholar Caspar Hartzheim, the penetration of Egyptian idolatry into the surrounding world; the Hebrews first took over the adoration of fire, then that of Theraphim, Baalim, Baelphegor, Beelzebub, Beelsephon, Baalgad, Thammuz, Apis or the Golden Calf, Astarte, Chemos, Moloch, Dagon, and numerous other gods of Egypt in their neighborly manifestations. The religious world, Kircher thinks, was “Egypt’s ape”; hence, the gods of the Greeks and the barbarians can all be traced to Cham’s version of Adam’s heresy.

The second part of this masterwork is first given over to a larger account of symbolism than Kircher had written before. After recording five standard ancient definitions of symbol, Kircher supplies “the true, the strict definition.” A symbol is “the significant sign of a hidden mystery,” and its nature is “to lead our minds through meditation on certain similarities to the comprehension of something much different from the thing presented to the external senses, the nature of which can be said to be transcendent or hidden as obscured by a veil.” Perhaps this formula is made clear when in succeeding essays Kircher discusses emblems, impreses, enigmas, riddles, parables, and other rhetorical phenomena. These discussions bring Kircher to a history of the spoken and written language, and, after presenting the claims of the inventors of various races nominated by a score of ancient and Renaissance experts, he assigns the primacy to the kind of Hebrew that was divinely taught to Adam while he was being angelically instructed in theology, philosophy, medicine, astrology, chemistry, mathematics, and law. All languages are descended from Hebrew, the essential tongue in which each noun contains in its very letters the distinguishing qualities of the

55 Hartzheim turned through the Bible and discovered exactly one hundred places where paganism had crept into the text and had to be extirpated by allegory. He published his results at Padua in 1731 under the title Explicatio gentilium fabularum et superstitionum quarum in sacris scripturis fit mentio; vario hinc inde sensu, praeter literalem, ut allegorico, morali, anagogico exornata.
66 Kircher, Obeliscus Aegyptiacus, II, 6.
thing it designates. The Hebrew alphabet known to the Renaissance is, of course, modern; but Kircher, who reprints the famous altar inscription from the base of Mt. Horeb, 'does not have much difficulty in reconstructing some of the letters of the original alphabet.' When technical problems of this nature have been resolved, Kircher composes a "Sphynx Mystagogia," a title he found pleasing, in which he stores, as he puts it, "the enigmatic speaking of Chaldeans, Egyptians, Hebrews, and Greeks as well as the allegorical knots, as presented to Oedipus, of the fables of Orpheus, Homer, the Pythagoreans, and the Platonists loosened by mystical, physical, ethical, and anagogical interpretation."

The first peoples to use mysterious utterance were the Egyptians; but the Greeks learned the art from them, and Kircher summons Palaeephatus and Diodorus Siculus to reveal the history behind the myths of Homer and the Greek stories of the gods and heroes. The cryptic statements of Zoroaster, the Orphists, the Pythagoreans, and, of course, Hor Apollo are turned over on their backs for the wisdom they conceal—which is sometimes Christian. The disturbing moments in Homer's epics, like the conflict of the gods or the assault of the Titans on Olympus, are conventionally expounded; the interpretive advice of Proclus about the proper reading of celestial fornication and animal metamorphosis is seriously restated. To Kircher's mind these shadowing allegories were as divinely granted to the poets as they were to the Hebrew prophets. To demonstrate this supposition properly, he concludes this discourse with mystical, physical, and anagogical readings of the Cronus-Zeus myth, the rape of Proserpine, and the story and nature of Apollo.

Kircher's massive account of ancient symbol and allegory wanders into a dissertation on the Hebrew and Arabic cabalas and is followed by a treatise on Egyptian cosmology based once again on the Horus-headed scarab of the Bembine Tabula. Kircher, it may be remarked, never refrained from repeating himself. The Oedipus then supplies the Renaissance symbolist with accounts of the hieroglyphic mathematics, mechanics, medicine, chemistry, magic, and theology of the ancient world and particularly of Egypt. With the learning of three folios soundly digested, the reader is prepared for the ultimate volume in which all the obelisks, besides the Pamphilian, plus the inscriptions on mummy cases, canopic jars, lamps, amulets, and other Egyptian objects are patiently

---

57 Ibid., II, 42-122.
58 Ibid., II, 124-7.
59 Ibid., II, 129-80.
60 Ibid., II, 189-93.
translated. Unexhausted by this tremendous effort, Kircher returned to his task in 1661 with the *Obelisci Aegyptiaci nuper inter Isaei Romani rudera effossi interpretatio hieroglyphica*. It is clear from this contribution to learning that whatever archaeologists dug up, Kircher immediately transcribed. In 1676 the *Sphinx mystagogus*, interpreting all inscriptions seen after 1661, was added to Kircher’s Egyptian shelf. This two-foot row of volumes, profusely illustrated, not only emphasized the common theory that pagan as well as Christian documents yielded concealed meanings but suggested once again that the true religion was more widely spread than men had supposed.

In the first volume of the *Oedipus*, Kircher pointed to parallels between the customs of China and those of ancient Egypt. Both civilizations were supported by a caste system, and in each the upper caste, Egyptian priests and Chinese literati, employed hieroglyphics to shield the precious wisdom that they alone possessed. The Chinese hieroglyphs differed from those of the Egyptians in that the Chinese symbol for “sun” meant “sun,” whereas the Egyptian scarab symbol does not mean “sun” but rather “those secret and mysterious operations of that planet which foster growth and generation.” Kircher returned to this Egypto-Sinological theory and enlarged it in 1667 when he retired from his linguistic, historical, mathematical, and physical studies long enough to write his impressive *China illustrata*.

Kircher does not pretend to be a Sinologist; he is only writing a book about China. He claims no proficiency in the Chinese language but relies on Father Michel Boym, an indefatigable Jesuit missionary, who became an eminent authority on Chinese and had earlier contributed the Chinese eulogies of the Austrian Emperor to the *Oedipus*. Since he was no authority (in fact, he had never been east of the Danube), Kircher did not hesitate to propose that ancient China was instructed by ancient Egypt. His hypothesis is based on that sound historian Herodotus. When Cambyses invaded Egypt he smashed the images of the gods and cast down the obelisks. He killed the bull Apis with his own hands and drove the priesthood, wise with the learning of a thousand years, into exile. As the priests fled eastward, Kircher tracks them in their wanderings through the Arabian desert, into the plains of India, and finally to the far, far land of China. His imaginative pursuit of the Egyptian priests as they crossed the borders of China was aided by the little he knew about the Chinese language, for, as might be logically expected, many of its ideograms seemed to him to be rough forms of the Egyptian

---

hieroglyphs. Kircher wisely made no attempts to find linguistic connections between the two languages about which he knew nothing; nonetheless, he was firmly convinced that China was culturally influenced by Egypt.\footnote{Kircher, \textit{China illustrata} (Amsterdam, 1667), pp. 151–54, 233–35.}

When Kircher advanced this theory that China was the heir of Egypt, he was stepping squarely into the raging seventeenth-century chronological controversy about the age of civilizations. His theory was promptly attacked by an English heretic, John Webb, who argued in \textit{An Historical Essay Endeavouring a Probability that the Language of the Empire of China is the Primitive Language} (London, 1669), that China had a high culture before the confusion at Babel; in fact, he eventually argued that Noah built the ark in China and settled in that country after the Flood subsided. As a result of this fortunate postdiluvian event, the Chinese speak a language that is as close to the primitive language of Adam as is likely to be found.\footnote{Webb held that the Egyptians invented their symbols for concealment, the Chinese theirs for communication (pp. 151–52). See also D’Assigny’s essay in his translation of P. Gautruche, \textit{The Poetical Histories} (London, 1671), pp. 154–83 and John Marsham, \textit{Chronicus Canon} (London, 1672), pp. 38–39. In his \textit{Essay towards a Real Character} (London, 1668), p. 12, Bishop Wilkins doubts whether or not the contents of hieroglyphic inscriptions are even worth knowing.}

Webb’s arguments are almost as scholarly as Kircher's and nearly as sound. Kircher’s binding of Egyptian symbols, each of which is supplied with one or more equivalents authorized by other pagan or Christian texts, into philosophical allegories of a confused but esoteric nature was in keeping with the Renaissance’s faith in the hidden meaning. There were some objectors to his methods and results, but for the majority of concerned people he had solved the riddle of the Sphinx. In 1704, for example, when the antiquarian J. P. Rigord published the hieroglyphics found on an Egyptian ceinture, he had no difficulty in making out the meaning of the mythical representations because he had Kircher’s discoveries to help him; but he invited other Egyptologists to advise him on the inscriptions, which were “not Punic, Coptic, or like those on the Bembine Tabula.”\footnote{“Lettre de Monsieur Rigord Commissaire de la Marine aux Journalistes de Trévoux sur une Ceinture de Toile trouvée en Égypte autour d’une momie,” \textit{Mémoires pour l’Histoire des Sciences et des Beaux Arts} (Trévoux, 1704) pp. 978–1000.}

Some years later, Melchior à Briga made a Kircherian rendering of some hierograms on an Egyptian statue at Rome and praised the brilliance of the Jesuit master’s theories of interpretation, which should be taught in the better universities.\footnote{Briga, \textit{Fascia Isiaca statuae Capitolinae nunc primum in lucem edita} (Rome, 1716).} Briga had hardly printed this suggestion when Pierre D. Huet restated Kircher’s Sino-Egyp-
tian hypothesis in his book on ancient commerce. He added other comparative details of religion and culture to Kircher’s proofs but agreed that the common use of a symbolic language was the best indication of the colonization of China by Egyptians. The truly eminent orientalist Etienne Fourmont came to the support of the Kircherian notion with his thesis that the nongods Hermes and Osiris carried the pure, original religion to India, a country which was only a stone’s throw from China. Although expert orientalists—Renaudot, Freret, and Du Halde—were making discoveries that undermined Kircher’s theories, he had many disciples; in fact, William Warburton, who had to prove Kircher wrong in order to establish his own hypotheses about the influence of the Egyptians on the Jews, was among his first serious critics.

Various studies of Egypt’s symbolic language and occult theosophy preceded Warburton’s attempt to explain the hieroglyphic writings. Thomas Burnet, who recorded a jaunty conversation in Eden between Eve and Satan, presumed that all orientals—Egyptians, Babylonians, Ethiopians, Brahmins, and Chinese—wrote symbolically about “physiology, theology, ethics, history, and politics” in “animal forms, parts of the body, and mechanical implements.” Protestant Herman Wits, no partisan of Catholic Athanasius Kircher but even more restrained in his esteem for the anti-Hebraists Spencer and Marsham, is ready to believe in Egyptian symbolism even though he fiercely denies that the Jews learned anything from them. Other experts wrote on special aspects of Egyptian religion and its relation to that of the Jews and the Greeks.

70 Kircher is attacked as “bewildered” and his works as “visionary.” He “steered at large,” Warburton writes, through a half dozen folios with the writings of the later Greek Platonists and the forged books of Hermes, which contain a philosophy not Egyptian, “to explain monuments not philosophical”; *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated*, ed. R. Hurd (London, 1837), II, 44.
72 Wits, *Aegyptiaca et Dekaphulon; sive de Aegyptiorum sacrorum cum Hebraicis collatione libri tres* (Amsterdam, 1696), pp. 87–92.
73 There were numerous special treatises such as Matthias Bax, *De Busiride* (Leyden, 1700), which attempts to identify this villain after refusing to accept him as the Mosaic Pharaoh because he lived at the time of Joshua or Amos. Bax decides that since the Nile was
but the old view that the Greeks learned their Judaism in Egypt was changing. When William Jameson, lecturer in history at Glasgow, wrote his *Spicilegia antiquitatum Aegypti atque vicinarum gentium*, he took up the question of Homer's Egyptian education and pointed out there was no evidence supporting it at all. When he talks about Egypt in the *Odyssey*—the allusion to the Pharos in Book Four, for instance—Homer shows himself ignorant of things Egyptian. There are those who think that he learned about the Hereafter, its rewards and punishments, from his years in Egypt, but what ancient does not speak of this matter. “In truth no one save a man flatly stupid or without hope would deny that after death there were rewards and punishments.” But this statement was made in 1720, and even at this late date not every man had the common sense of a learned Scot.

Once called the Sirin, the name is “Bos Siris” or “Nile Bull,” which is, of course, the crocodile. A similar special study of the Magna Mater which supplanted that of Pignoria was Heinrich van Bashuysen’s *De Iside magna deorum mater* (Zerbst, 1719).

The question of Joseph as Apis is the subject of Peter Schroer’s *De Serapide Aegyptiorum Deo Maximo* (Bratislava, 1666), which attacks the theory of Firmicus Maternus, Cornelius à Lapide, De Sponde, and Kircher that Serapis is from the Greek *Saras + apo*. The name really means “bull face,” and bull figures have a different symbolism from that associated with Joseph. Schroer is forced to explain why the oracle of Serapis, according to Suidas, once told an Egyptian king, “First God, then the Word and Spirit with him are all one,” an utterance his predecessors thought more worthy of Joseph than Serapis. “The devil,” says Schroer, “has often spoken pious oracles.” He agrees with Macrobius that Serapis is the sun. The matter now seems to have rested as the subject of a special study until 1694 when Johannes Cnoblach wrote his Wittenberg study, *De Api de bove atque idolo Aegyptiorum*, which is mainly about the god and his cult and expresses doubts about a connection with Joseph; however, the doubts are not pressed.

In 1700, the Dutch scholar Jacob Trigland published his *De Josepho Patriarcha in sacris bovis hieroglyphico* at Leyden, and once again the fat was in the fire. Trigland mentions the general knowledge of the major Jewish heroes among the Gentiles; Trogus, Strabo, and other authorities have heard of Gideon, Joshua, and Moses. He feels that Joseph was equally known. In Egypt the symbol of Apis is a scarab rolling a ball of earth containing a seed, which is a way of stating that Joseph by word of mouth rolled round Jewish doctrines. The descent of this doctrine to the Greeks and then to the Romans is evidenced when Ovid puts the Hebrew account of Creation, the patriarchal tradition, and the Mosaic history in his *Metamorphoses*. Apis with the sun and the moon between his horns and a hawk on his back is clearly the emblem of Joseph, whose father and mother were the sun and moon, who wore the horns of wisdom, and whose name “by the laws of hieroglyphics” is expressed by a hawk. Apis, Trigland discovered by reading in Herodotus, had thicker hair than other bulls, and full hair is an old symbol of those who differ from others in righteous thoughts and actions. Other classical authorities support this assumption. Ammianus Marcellinus reports that Apis could predict future events, a talent which links him with Joseph. Tacitus associates the Egyptian god with Aesculapius, and medicine is associated with Joseph in the biblical account. Actually, the Joseph-Apis relationship is plainly signified when the Israelites worshiped the golden calf.

74 Jameson, *Spicilegia* (Glasgow, 1720), pp. 452–58.