CHAPTER SIX

THE CULT OF THOTH

A) Cultic locations

According to their Greek names, two places were centres of the cult of Thoth, namely Hermopolis parva in the Delta and Hermopolis magna in the Nile Valley half way between Cairo and Thebes. Undoubtedly there once stood in both places imposing temples where Thoth was worshipped with elaborate ritual. Little has remained of these edifices. The museum in Cairo has a naos dedicated to Thoth which represents the meagre remnant of the temple in the former city. ¹ At El-Ashmunên where once Hermopolis magna lay, a few remnants of the original temple can be found. ² The same can be said of the temple of Thoth at Zifta ³ in the Delta and at El-Kab ⁴ in Upper Egypt. Finally remains of a Thoth sanctuary have been found to the south of Medinet Habu at a place called Qasr-el-Agüz. ⁵ Further details about the cultic sites of Thoth are entirely lacking. It may safely be assumed that in earliest times Thoth was venerated and had sanctuaries throughout all Egypt. This assumption is based on data concerning the worship of Thoth in the Greco-Roman age, when Thoth still appears to have been popular. Then he was honoured as legislator and wise magician who combats noxious animals, especially the snake. He was thought to be the father of the ibis, and as a result ibis graveyards were apparently a common phenomenon. ⁶ Although these facts pertain more to the private worship of Thoth than to the official cult, the conclusion which may be drawn from them is that there were considerably more cultic sites of Thoth in the classical period of Egyptian religion than the above-mentioned temple ruins would suggest.

Unfortunately no rituals of the Thoth cult have been handed down to us. The worship may be assumed to have followed the pattern known

⁶ L. KÁKOSY, Problems of the Thoth-Cult in Roman Egypt, 1963.
to us from the text describing the programme of the daily service. For the rest our knowledge of the staff of priests who served Thoth is minimal. The name of the high priest of Hermopolis is interesting: He is called ‘the great one of the five’. These five are said to be Thoth and four other gods. The later ogdoad is said to have been formed by the duplication of these four. The clerks can be considered the unofficial servants of Thoth. They were deeply attached to their patron and paid homage to him in songs in which they and Thoth himself praise highly the office of secretary to Re.

The statements about the festivals celebrated in Thoth’s honour are not very colourful. These festivals must date from the earliest days, for already in the Pyramid Texts mention is made of a festival of Thoth (pyr. 2218). In the festival calendar studied by S. Schott, there is a Thoth festival on the 26th of the first month of the year, the month named after Thoth. At Esna these festivals in honour of Thoth were celebrated in this month on the 4th, 19th and the 21st. The calendar notes for the 19th: “festival for Thoth, the very great, in the whole country”, and for the 21st: “celebrate ‘the triumph of Thoth’ in the presence of Re”. These annotations lift a corner of the veil enfolding these festivities. The first statement confirms the assumption expressed above that Thoth was honoured throughout all of Egypt. 19 Thoth would then be a general holiday for Thoth. The second annotation suggests that on 21 Thoth a cultic performance was held which dramatised Thoth’s victory over his enemies. Since Re’s presence is mentioned, the obvious conclusion is that this play enacted Thoth’s defeat of Re’s opponents.

B) Personal veneration

Strangely enough we are better informed about the personal worship of Thoth than about his official cult. Generally it is the other way round in Egyptological studies: there is an abundance of information about the state religion, but nothing whatsoever about the belief of the individual. An exception to this rule is formed by the texts on the memorial stones from the Theban necropolis, which reveal the religious feelings

1 A. Moret, *Le rituel du culte divin journalier en Égypte.*
3 S. Schott, *Althägyptische Festdaten,* 1950, p. 82.