EGYPTIAN CULTS AND LOCAL ELITES IN BOIOTIA

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Although I shall be going through the evidence for Egyptian cults in Boiotia in a more or less systematic way, it is not my purpose to provide a catalogue. This has already been done efficiently and with great thoroughness by Laurent Bricault.\(^1\) What I aim to do is to examine the worship of the Egyptian gods within the social and political context of the region, to try to see how this foreign cult was absorbed and adapted, and to show how and where it took on a local colour to make its acceptance more easy. Egyptian elements were blended with local ones to create something which could only have flourished on the spot.

Part of the appeal of the Egyptian cults, at least under the Empire, was that they filled a need for belonging to a community, which mattered more than the now meaningless rituals attached to old cults which depended for their existence on a vanished society, the foundations of which had been the independent polis and ethnos. Here I am referring not to so-called “ordinary” people but rather to the social elite, the upper classes of Boiotia under the Empire. Not only did they dabble in the revival and restoration of old Boiotian cults and ritual, they were also active in supporting and worshipped the so-called Egyptian gods, whose rituals they did not fully understand but which they did their best to re-enact. Having little notion of how Egyptians would have worshipped these gods—and indeed Sarapis was hardly Egyptian at all—they patched their rituals together with elements familiar from those of other gods, as we shall see.

Evidence for the worship of the Egyptian gods in Boiotia runs from the second half of the third century BC to the third century AD, and comes mostly from Chaironeia and Orchomenos in the west, Thespiai in the centre, and Tanagra in the east.\(^2\) For the second and third

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\(^1\) I am grateful to Dr. Bricault for making available to me an advance copy of the relevant section of his Recueil des Inscriptions concernant les Cultes isiaques (RICIS). A concordance of the inscriptions referred to in this paper is given as an appendix hereto.

\(^2\) Although most of the evidence for the worship of Egyptian gods in Boiotia comes
centuries AD my enquiry will also include evidence from Tithorea and Hyampolis. This is because the so-called “Boiotoi” of that time were members of a social and political elite who lived not only in Boiotia itself, but also in adjacent regions. So, for example, there were Boiotarchs in Eastern Phokis and Lokris, as well as at Megara, and a woman of Chaironeia who was priestess of both the Boiotian and the Phokian peoples. As we shall see later on, the connections were strongest between Chaironeia and Tithorea.3

from the Hellenistic period and later, there were two earlier encounters with Egypt and its deities. The first is the Sphinx, the winged monster with the face of a woman and the body of a lion, which preyed upon the Kadmeians of Thebes from the top of the mountain which bore her name, and which lowers over the western edge of the Theban χώρα. We do not know what name she bore among the Egyptians and Mesopotamians who provided the model for her iconography. Hesiod called her Phix (Theogony 326). Later writers from Aischylos on, call her Sphinx, and this is the name subsequently given to all examples of this creature, Greek and otherwise. The Boiotian Phix is intimately linked to the mountain, which, as one looks at it from the west, has the shape of a crouching beast. Its association with the Egyptian and Near Eastern divine guardian is probably the responsibility of artists looking for a model, rather than of any cultural connection: see A. Schachter, Sphinx, in: S. Hornblower & A. J. Spawforth (eds.), The Oxford Classical Dictionary (Oxford 1996) 1435. Something similar may be behind the supposed presence of Ammon in fifth century Thebes. When Pausanias visited Thebes early in the second half of the second century AD, he was shown a temple of Ammon, with a cult image by Kalamis and dedicated by Pindar, who had written a hymn to Ammon for the Ammonians of Libya (9.16.1, cf. Schol. Pindar, Pythian 9.90c = Pindar, fr. 36 S-M). It is more likely that the statue by Kalamis was of Zeus Karaios, one of the gods of the Boiotian ethnos. Karaios/Keraios—a variant of Akraios—means god of the mountain tops, but the form Karaios might easily be taken as describing his appearance—that is, the god with horns --, and would have given the artist a welcome clue as to how to depict a god of regional rather than panhellenic interest for whom no canonical image existed: see Schachter, Cults of Boiotia III 146-147.