CHAPTER 5

Hieroglyphic Studies in the Italian Cinquecento

Angelo Poliziano and the study of Hieroglyphs in Florence at the close of the Quattrocento

The study of hieroglyphics which continued to develop in Florence helped reinforce this trend. After the fruitful start Colonna had had with Niccolò, he took up these studies again in the last decade of the fifteenth century. It has already been mentioned that he had made extensive use of Marsilio Ficino for the development of his mystical philosophy and that Giovanni Pico della Mirandola had inspired him in his theological speculation on Egyptian wisdom; his interest in hieroglyphics, however, was not limited to philosophy, but also involved poetry which he studied as a result of discussions about these symbols in Florence.

As his predecessors in the study of hieroglyphics in Florence, Pierio Valeriano records the names of Angelo Poliziano and Pietro Crinito. Both enjoyed a reputation at the time as excellent poets, a reputation maintained later only by Poliziano, Crinito’s teacher. According to the statement of Valeriano the two poets, together with Filippo Beroaldo of Bologna, were actually the first to have studied aspects of the science of hieroglyphics. But as evidenced by the examples of Niccolò, Ciriaco, Alberti, Colonna and others, Valeriano is incorrect, even if one should not doubt what he tells us in respect of the things that were of interest to these two scholars. As we have seen and as far as Beroaldo is concerned this remark is confirmed in the commentaries quoted above. At this point it is appropriate therefore to dwell on Poliziano and Crinito in their roles as hieroglyphic scholars.

Given that Poliziano only mentions ancient symbols occasionally in his works in print without pursuing a comprehensive discussion of hieroglyphics, we must suppose that Valeriano, Hieroglyphica cit., written at the end of the “epistola nuncupatoria.” “Mihi igitur vitio verti non debet, si omnem operam et studium ad harum rerum explicationem contulerim, quas tanto in pretio a praestantis-simis quibusque semper habitats novimus. Angelo Politiano, Petro Crinito, Filippo Beroaldo summae laudi datum, quod primi unum vel alterum ex his locum interpretati sint”.

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2 See above, p. 57.
ano had in mind some other unedited works. And this can also be assumed from Crinito’s letters to Alexandro Sarto, where he mentions the great mass of writings that Poliziano left unedited. In this correspondence they talk of the continuation of a Miscellany published in Florence in 1489, in which Poliziano, in the style of the στρώματα of Clement of Alexandria, had collected criticism, mythology, antiques and coins and in which the humanist had compiled a treatise on Osiris. Since, from the greetings sent by Crinito from Sarto to Aldus one can assume that, after the death of Poliziano, the Venetian publisher had in mind a fuller edition of the works of the poet than had been undertaken in 1498, and since, at Aldus’ request that he should send to Venice all the works of Poliziano that were in the Medicean Library, Crinito had indeed for this purpose sent the printer some manuscripts, it is possible that Valeriano, who had been in contact with Aldus through his uncle Fra Urbano, had taken from these the information about Poliziano’s study of the hieroglyphs. As Valeriano had later had the opportunity to use the Medicean library, which was transferred to Rome in 1508 and then finally established in Florence in 1527, it may be that this is how he obtained a complete picture of Poliziano’s literary heritage.

A source that could have provided very interesting information concerning the treatment of hieroglyphs by the Platonic Academy is therefore lost, or at least dispersed. One can therefore only get an indirect indication of what were the ideas of Poliziano in this respect. A starting point is represented by his contacts with Alberti. In fact, it was Poliziano who wrote the preface for the publication in 1485 of the De re Aedificatoria in which he expressed an extraordinary admiration for the universality of the author’s genius. Again you might believe that the personal interests of Poliziano, even before reading this treatise, had already led him to the study of hieroglyphics in the spirit of Alberti.

But the breadth of his interests in this field can also be inferred from his work on Harpocrates contained in the Miscellanea cited earlier. In this, Poliziano tells of having given in Venice and Verona in the early eighties lectures on this son of

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