CHAPTER 8

THE HIEROGLYPHICS OF THE GERMAN AND FRENCH HUMANISTS

Since the beginning of the study of hieroglyphics, the inexhaustible quantities of Egyptian antiquities, real or alleged, available in Italy, had given to the humanists who lived there a prominent role. There were the Roman obelisks to give initial form and life to the information provided by the recently rediscovered classics. At the same time Cyriaco brought copies of his famous hieroglyphs to his friend Niccolò. Not only that. The comparison between Egyptian hieroglyphs and other ancient symbols that were preserved gave support to Alberti’s supposition of a common origin as a result of which he recommended hieroglyphs to Colonna, Valturio and Mantegna as a model for the universal script. Annius devised his fictitious version of the history of their European origin based on the characters of a Roman relief that pretended to be Egyptian. Colonna composed his hieroglyphic inscriptions thanks to a careful study of all the ancient remains known in his day, and the same knowledge was the basis of research conducted by the Medicean and Aldine academies. Fasanini referred to them in his lectures on hieroglyphs, which indeed formed the starting point of the emblems of Alciato. This Italian supremacy lasted until modern times. It was not until the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt that scholars were directed to the innumerable treasures which had been preserved in the fatherland of the obelisks and were stimulated by the wish to compete in collecting such wealth. So, independently of the Italian tradition, modern Egyptology could develop in France.

In an era in which the most learned among the Italian humanists had toiled assiduously to interpret the hieroglyphs, north of the Alps the majority of readers of Macrobius, Ammianus, Diodorus, and so on, did not even possess a clear idea of the nature of the hieroglyph. Only the elite, those who had the privilege of a visit to Italy, had the opportunity to bring back to their own country images of the obelisks and at best also the symbols that were inscribed on them. But such knowledge quickly vanished, and for a long time there was even confusion as to how to understand the difference between obelisks, pyramids and columns. And since it was difficult to obtain these representations from Italy or even the Italian works on hieroglyphs described by the ancients they could not find fer-
tile ground although they were read with increasing curiosity.

It was only the *Hypnerotomachia* of Colonna, with its rich choice of obelisks and hieroglyphs, which provided the humanists beyond the Alps a clear idea of the hieroglyphic studies undertaken by their more fortunate colleagues who resided in Italy. The illustrations of Colonna also allowed the Germans and French to examine them from their desks and later to fully engage in this field of study. While for the Italians the work of Colonna constituted a novelty to be admired for the systematic exposition of Egyptian ideographs, beyond the Alps it provided the majority of scholars and artists the first ever images of hieroglyphic script. So do not be surprised if before the publication of the *Hypnerotomachia* the taste for medieval allegories and symbols was enjoyed without any hieroglyphic references. And we should not even be surprised if the diffusion of the *Hypnerotomachia* was said to confer a tendency everywhere to write Egyptian images precisely with those characteristics that it had introduced.

This special attention that Colonna’s *Hypnerotomachia* was accorded outside Italy was due to the fact that it was the only available source for the knowledge of these developments in the field of hieroglyphics, a fact confirmed by the breadth and depth of the descriptions of its contents contained in the preceding sections, although this, in view of their relative brevity, might at first sight seem strange. But you have to imagine what questions Renaissance scholars had for hieroglyphics and how the humanists, not doubting the ancient Egyptian nature of Colonna’s inventions, appreciated the importance of the text as the only readily accessible document of this admired sacred script for contemporary allegory in France and Germany. It also prepared the ground for the growth of interest in the wonders of the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo.

As the remaining presentation will also show, the cult of Egyptian studies based on the *Hypnerotomachia* and the *Horapollo* developed remarkably rapidly. This is connected to the fact that at the end of the fifteenth century hieroglyphic material flowed frequently from Italy to the Nordic countries, although the absence of Egyptian monuments had prevented any deeper appreciation of it. This material certainly influenced increasingly wider circles in latter years and one cannot ignore the growing number of students of this revitalized discipline which, after the publication of the works of Horapollo and Colonna, was received and diffused in a manner which reflected individual national characteristics.