THE CULT OF THE IBIS IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN PERIOD*

With Special Attention to the Data from the Papyri

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For strangers visiting ancient Egypt, one of the most striking aspects of the native religion was the worship of sacred animals. Some believed that this cult contained a deep symbolism,¹ but most were inclined to mock. An example of this is the well-known passage in Juvenal's satires (Sat. 15). There is also an interesting text in Clement of Alexandria's Paedagogus, in which he compares women, who dress with great attention to their external appearance, but neglect their inner selves, and the Egyptian temples:²

'Their propylaea and outside courtyards, their sacred woods and meadows are adorned, and the inner courts are surrounded by very many pillars. The walls shine with stones from foreign parts, and in no way are they backward in the techniques of writing. The temples sparkle with gold, silver and mat gold and flash with coloured stones from India and Ethiopia. The sanctuaries are overshadowed by cloths studded with gold. If, however, you enter the interior of the enclosure, hastening towards the sight of the almighty, and look for the statue residing in the temple and if a pastophoros or another celebrant, after having solemnly looked round the sanctuary, singing a song in the language of the Egyptians, draws back the curtain a little to show the god, he will make us laugh

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¹ See, for example, Plutarch, De Iside et Osiride, c. 71-76.
² Clemens Alexandrinus, Paed. III, II.4: 2-4; S.C. 158, pp. 18ff. Specific polemics against the cult of the ibis are also attested. The Septuagint contains a clear example of Jewish polemics against this cult in its inclusion of the ibis in the list of unclean birds; see Lev. 11.17 and Deut. 14.16. Some Graeco-Roman authors characterize the bird as very dirty for the same motive; see I. Becher, Der heilige Ibisvogel der Aegypter in der Antike, in Act. Hung. 15 (1967) pp. 377-385.
aloud about the object of worship. For we shall not find the god for whom we have been looking inside, the god towards whom we have hastened, but a cat or a crocodile or a native snake or a similar animal, which should not be in a temple, but in a cleft or a den or on a dung heap. The god of the Egyptians appears on a purple couch as a wallowing animal.3

The Egyptians, however, were extremely serious in their cult of animals. This fact was discovered by a Roman who had been so unfortunate to kill a cat and had to pay for this with his own life.3 According to Herodotus (2.65), anyone who killed, even unintentionally, an ibis or a falcon had to die.4 In the later period especially, the Egyptians attached a great deal of importance to their worship of animals, possibly as a form of resistance to foreign rulers.5 One of these animals was the ibis. Like the baboon, this bird was associated with the god Thoth.6

There are four possible ways of obtaining more precise information about the cult of the ibis in the Graeco-Roman period. The archaeological finds can be examined, the Egyptian and especially the Demotic texts can be analyzed, the data contained in Greek papyri or ostraca can be investigated or texts concerned with this cult in

3 See Diodorus Siculus, I.83.
4 See, however, Diodorus Siculus, I.83.
5 See A. Wiedeman, Der Tierkult der alten Aegypter (A.O. 14), Leipzig (1910), pp. 20ff. For the Egyptian cult of animals in general, see also T. Hopfner, Der Tierkult der alten Aegypter, Vienna (1913); for the cult of the ibis in particular, see H. Bonnet, Realexicon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte, Berlin (1952), pp. 320ff.; G. Roeder, Ibis, in RE IX, c. 808-815 and A.-P. Zivie: Ibis, in LÄ, III, 1 (1977), pp. 115-121.
6 It is not surprising, since the baboon had been extinct for a long time in Egypt at this late period and the temple animals had to be imported from Central Africa (see H. S. Smith, A Visit to Ancient Egypt, Warminster, 1974, p. 42), that the Greek papyri provide no data about the cult of the baboon, but do give information about the cult of the ibis, which was present in great numbers in Egypt during the same period. In a few Demotic papyri (such as P. Ryl. Dem. 11.1 and P. Lond. Dem. 10523-10528), on the other hand, two embalmers of baboons, a father and son, from Jemeh (near Thebes) are mentioned (beginning of the third century B.C.). Baboon necropolises have been found in Tūnah el-Gebel — see the surveys in Chr. d’Égypte, especially Vol. 14 (1939), pp. 93f. and 278f., and Vol. 20 (1945), pp. 91-98; see also S. Gabra in ASAE 39 (1939), pp. 490f. — and in Saqqarah — see Smith, op. cit., pp. 41ff., and below, note 55. Because the present article is above all concerned with data from the Greek papyri, however, I left the cult of the baboon out of account.