MISCELLANEA

PLOTINUS THE EGYPTIAN?

... that great square negro head reverberating with a concept of God conceived in the spirit of pure intellectual play—Plotinus.

Durrell was not anticipating Black Athena: he was writing out of his 1940s-Egypt association of ‘Sa’idis’, people from Upper Egypt, with dark skin, in a context of the unique, and uniquely determinative, landscape-atmosphere of Alexandria. It was accepted wisdom at that time that Plotinus had come from Lykopolis, the modern Assiut in southern Egypt. This has recently been questioned. Was Plotinus really a third-century Egyptian, nearly a contemporary of St Antony of the Desert?

Porphyry in his Life of Plotinus does not record Plotinus’ place of origin. Our source for its having been ‘Lyko’ is Eunapius’ brief account, which I translate (from Boissonade ap. Westermann, Paris 1878) as follows: ‘Plotinus was a philosopher from Egypt. As I now write ‘from Egypt’, I shall proffer his fatherland as well. They call it Lyko; however, the divine philosopher Porphyry did not write this down, though he said he became his student and devoted all, or most, of his life to him’. Based on Schwyzer’s suspicion of this report have come further doubts. However, the most recent introduction to the matter restates ‘... though we know that he was born in Lycopolis, Egypt in A.D. 205, we cannot be certain that he was a Greek rather than a member of a Hellenized Egyptian family’. This last is a good point, which I propose to explore on the basis of two little-noticed passages of the Life. Schwyzer’s and Armstrong’s doubts may be unjustified.

First let us notice from VP 8: ‘He wrote neither forming the letters with regard to beauty, nor dividing the syllables with regard to proper signification (εὑσῆμος), nor taking care for orthography’. In his Loeb translation Armstrong renders εὑσῆμος simply as ‘correctly’. This does not bring out the root force of the expression. By the third century the Egyptian language was being written in the Greek alphabet, i.e. ‘Coptic’. If Plotinus had been from Lykopolis in Upper Egypt, he would have been exposed to Coptic, in particular to the Lykopolitan dialect of Coptic. In this dialect as in others, however one may deal with the practice of scriptio continua in writing, the ‘agglutinative’ visual aspect of Coptic word-forms leaps to the eye. It takes familiar control of Coptic to separate out, for example, hitnprôme ‘from the man’ into hitn-p-rôme ‘from-the-man’. The boundaries of the concept ‘word’ in Coptic are fluid, and hence syllabification
and syllable-counting are concepts harder to pin down.\textsuperscript{13} Someone writing Greek whose mind had been formed (and hand trained) in a milieu that also used Coptic might well appear, especially to the eye and ear of a Greek-speaker from another region such as Porphyry of Tyre, not to be paying attention to what was signified in Greek syllabification. When he was writing Greek he did not have to do mentally what a Coptic-writer would do.

The mention of ‘orthography’ leads us, secondly, to a sentence from \textit{VP} 13, a report of a Plotinian trick of speech: ‘He did not say \textipa{\textalpha\nu\omicron\mu\eta\nu\omicron\eta\beta\kappa\varepsilon\tau\alpha}, but rather \textipa{\textalpha\nu\omicron\mu\nu\eta\omicron\mu\beta\kappa\varepsilon\tau\alpha}'.\textsuperscript{14} The metathesis has remained uninvestigated: Miller\textsuperscript{15} simply calls the phenomenon ‘a grammatical mistake’. In point of fact this newly variant form of the reduplication is amply recorded in documentary papyri from second- and third-century Egypt.\textsuperscript{16} It might well have been found in Plotinus’ mouth had he been of Egyptian origin.

Why might Eunapius in the fourth century, unless drawing from other information we do not know of, have attributed such an origin, specifically a Lykopolitan origin, to Plotinus? (other than as a conclusion from the fact that he, like so many, studied at Alexandria, which Eunapius does not mention).\textsuperscript{17} Eunapius’ overriding motivation was, like Porphyry’s earlier, a strong opposition to Christianity and Christians.\textsuperscript{18} Although Eunapius never travelled to Egypt, he would have known of the city of Lykopolis, well documented for both the Roman\textsuperscript{19} and the Christian periods.\textsuperscript{20} In fact the Platonic tradition was strong in the nome metropolis of Lykopolis, as is manifest in the work of the third-century philosophical polemicist Alexander of Lykopolis,\textsuperscript{21} who wrote against the Manichaeism well entrenched in his locality and expressing itself in the Lykoponian dialect of Coptic.\textsuperscript{22} Plotinus had been a pupil of (the Christian) Ammonius Saccas at Alexandria;\textsuperscript{23} Plotinus then went off to Rome.\textsuperscript{24} It was the holy man John of Lykopolis who, according to legend, predicted that the future Theodosius I would become emperor;\textsuperscript{25} in 388 the city supported Maximus’ revolt against that same emperor.\textsuperscript{26} In his bitter opposition to the Christian Empire Eunapius may well have wanted to bring into the open the pagan, Neoplatonic city of Lykopolis as Plotinus’ place of origin.

For Proclus in the fifth century through David in the late sixth Plotinus was an Egyptian;\textsuperscript{27} the Souda duly expanded ‘Lyko’ to ‘Lykopolis’, and so the tradition solidified. The \textipa{\textalpha\i\gamma\upsilon\sigma\tau\iota\omega\ì\varepsilon\omicron\upsilon\zeta\varsigma} who visited Plotinus in Rome and conducted the famous ‘seance in the Iseum’ (\textit{VP} 10) was duly concerned with questions of ritual purity in that foreign spot, questions that would not have been unfamiliar even to the most assimilated upper-class Hellenophone.\textsuperscript{28} Plotinus’ familiarity with Gnostic texts (\textit{VP} 16) that have actually turned up in the Nag Hammadi ‘library’ (not far from the Lykopolite nome) also fills out our picture of the thought-world of his origins.\textsuperscript{29} These Coptic-language Gnostic works, for the most part translations of Greek-language originals that would have circulated among readers