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# THE LANGUAGE OF ORACULAR INQUIRY IN ROMAN EGYPT

PAULINE RIPAT

AT SOME POINT BETWEEN THE LATE FIRST CENTURY B.C. and the early first century A.D., the language of popular oracular inquiry in Egypt changed from mostly Demotic, the native Egyptian language, to entirely Greek.<sup>1</sup> This observation is contentious because of its dependence upon papyrological remains, and so may simply be a function of the problem of the survival of evidence, especially since Demotic texts tend to be published at a much slower rate than Greek papyri.<sup>2</sup> But in the twenty years since the demoticist Willy Clarysse commented in print on this shift, no evidence has yet come to light to disprove him.<sup>3</sup> There is still not one published oracular inquiry that is both composed in Demotic and belongs to the Roman period in date. The shift is beginning to attract the notice of papyrologists and historians;<sup>4</sup> it is remarkable because it is unexpected. Demotic remained the language of Egyptian religion into the third century A.D. Furthermore, Egyptian priests, who held a virtual monopoly over

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<sup>1</sup>This observation is based on the collected evidence of Ptolemaic and Roman oracular inquiries from Egypt, preserved on papyri. Taken together, Brashear (1995: 3448–56, esp. 3450, n. 362, and 3453–54), Papini (1992), and Zauzich (2000) offer catalogues and bibliography of most published examples of Demotic and Greek oracular inquiries. The following entries should be added: for Demotic, *P. Ash. D.* 40–44, published by Martin (2004); for Greek, *P. Oxy.* LXV 4470; *P. Firenze Museo Egiziano inv.* 10082; and *P. Grenfell II* 12 verso. These last two are published by Messeri Savorelli and Pintaudi (1996), on which also see Litinas 1997: 210–212 and Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1071. None of the Demotic inquiries is dated later than the first century B.C. by its editor, with one possible exception: Brunsch (1982–83), suggests “ptol. oder röm.” as the date for BM 50145, an inquiry whose text is in a very poor state of preservation. No reasons are offered which would suggest a Roman date over a Ptolemaic date, and consequently this example does not, in my view, provide evidence that Demotic was used for oracular inquiries in the Roman period. See *P. Tebt.* 284 and Bagnall and Criore 2006: 382–384 for private letters that mention either planned or executed oracular consultations. See Oates *et al.*, “Checklist,” for the papyrological abbreviations used in this article (available on-line at <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>).

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, Clarysse 1984; Bowman 1991; and Lewis 1993. Note also that many oracular inquiries still await publication: for notifications of unstudied finds, see Brashear 1995: 3455; Grimal 1996: 534; Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1065 and n. 19; and Martin 2004: 414, n. 8, though Valbelle and Husson appear to refer to the same cache as Grimal. To my knowledge, none of these inquiries has yet been published, but the notifications just cited give no indication that the unpublished caches contain inquiries that are both Roman in date and Demotic in expression.

<sup>3</sup>Clarysse 1984: 1348.

<sup>4</sup>Clarysse 1993: 188; Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1069; Husson 1998: 116; Fewster 2002: 244–245.

literacy in Demotic, consistently mediated this method of divination, which had been undertaken in related forms in the native Egyptian language from the New Kingdom through the Ptolemaic period.<sup>5</sup>

Explanations offered for the demise of Demotic in official contexts in the Roman period are unsatisfactory here.<sup>6</sup> Although the Romans, unlike the Ptolemies, refused to recognize Demotic as an official language, and so caused Greek to become the only language of official communications, oracular inquiries submitted by private individuals about the minutiae of everyday life did not constitute official documents. Suggestions have been made that with increased hellenization, priests or inquirers came to prefer Greek to Demotic for the purposes of oracular inquiry.<sup>7</sup> That is, as in other provinces, the observable language shift is credited to the voluntary desire of the provincial population rather than to the insistence of the ruling administration. The proposal that the Roman administration might have been responsible, the argument that will be made below, has thus far been raised only to be dismissed without explanation.<sup>8</sup> This has left the fact that the shift occurs shortly after the Roman annexation of Egypt, a coincidence of enormous proportions. Perhaps no justification has been felt necessary, because for all that the Roman administration did not recognize languages other than Latin and Greek, it never made a habit of targeting native provincial languages either.<sup>9</sup> In addition, the Roman administrative attitude towards provincial religious practices was generally *laissez-faire*.<sup>10</sup> Roman occupation of Egypt is believed to have had an impact upon every facet of Egyptian life *except* the “religious and cultural patterns,” particularly those of the population in the villages.<sup>11</sup> Even if none of the foregoing factors was a consideration, native religious patterns and activities (such as oracular inquiry) are generally understood to be impervious to the legislation of foreign ruling powers.<sup>12</sup> And finally, no edict or other record of an official order banning the use of Demotic in the mediation of popular oracles has come to light.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Lewis 1993: 276.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis 1993; Fewster 2002: 225.

<sup>7</sup> Clarysse 1984: 1348 and 1993: 188.

<sup>8</sup> Fewster 2002: 244: “This was presumably not an official dictum but responded to some need.”

<sup>9</sup> See Adams 2003 in general.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.314 and Rives 1999 for discussion of this view. Shaw (2002: 393) observes that concern over religious practices spread to the empire as a whole by the end of the second century A.D. This is witnessed in Egypt by a prefectural demand laid upon the population in A.D. 193 to observe fifteen days of garland-wearing to celebrate the ascension of Pertinax, and in A.D. 199 to cease from forms of traditional divination (*P.Yale Inv.* 299). Note also Egyptian compliance with Decius’ mid-third century demands to sacrifice, as witnessed by the survival of sacrifice “receipts” (Rives 1999).

<sup>11</sup> Bowman 1996: 697.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Frankfurter 1998: 23–27; however, compare more recently Frankfurter 2006: 59–60 for the “perception of Roman government in Egypt . . . as, in effect, an ultimate authority in ritual matters,” at least by the end of the second century A.D.

<sup>13</sup> Katzoff (1980: 810–819) provides a list of published edicts from Roman Egypt.

But the evidence of Egyptian oracular inquiry has fallen victim to scholarly expectations based on generalized patterns elsewhere, and has not been considered in the context of the peculiar circumstances facing the Roman administration upon annexation of Egypt. Indeed, had an edict banning divination in Demotic survived, it is doubtful that modern scholars would take it more seriously than they have generally taken *P.Yale* 299, the edict banning this form of divination altogether at the end of the second century A.D.<sup>14</sup> However, if the evidence pertaining to Egyptian oracular inquiry is considered within its own unique context, the conclusions drawn could significantly affect the way we characterize the nature of Roman administration in Egypt and its relations with the Egyptian priesthoods and general population. The new Roman administration did not enjoy a situation of unrivalled authority upon removal of the Ptolemies. On the contrary, it was faced with powerful and wealthy priesthoods that exerted considerable influence over the Egyptian population. Egyptian priests maintained popular authority largely through their control of religious writings in Demotic, a language incomprehensible to the Romans. The Romans, for whom religious control and political legitimacy were traditionally and inextricably entwined, cannot have failed to recognize this state of affairs as both dangerous in a practical sense and ideologically insupportable. It is within this framework that the shift in the language of Egyptian oracles shortly after the time of annexation ought to be considered. For the Roman authorities, who were intimately familiar with the real power invested in the control of religion and religious writings, the insistence that popular divination be undertaken in a language both comprehensible to themselves and not almost exclusively controlled by Egyptian priests would have been deemed an effective strategy toward the achievement of a critical goal: increasing their own authority while undermining that of some of the only significant rivals left in Egypt in 30 B.C., the Egyptian priesthoods. The following study seeks to demonstrate the plausibility of such a scenario: first, by discussing the difficulty of accepting the explanations for the language shift offered to date; second, by elucidating the strategic benefits of enforcing a shift in the language of popular divination for the Roman administration; and finally, by considering the nature and the limits of priestly accommodations of Roman demands.

#### I. THE LANGUAGE OF EGYPTIAN ORACLES: EVIDENCE AND RECENT EXPLANATIONS

When Herodotus visited Egypt in the fifth century B.C., he reported that Egyptians made use of many methods of divination (2.83). However, only one method of popular divination is consistently documented (in slightly varying

<sup>14</sup> *P.Yale Inv.* 299 = *P.Col.Youtie* I 30. See Rea 1977 for text, translation, and commentary. For the dismissal of this edict as significant, see, for example, Bowman 1986: 190: "The effect must have been scarcely, if at all, noticeable"; Ritner 1993: 218: "As in Rome itself, the prohibition was unsuccessful." See also Lane Fox 1986: 213 and Frankfurter 1998: 26.

forms) from the New Kingdom through to the Arab conquest.<sup>15</sup> This involved presenting a deity not with a question per se, but with a set of alternatives; one of the alternatives would be selected and indicated to the inquirer, thus rendering the response. This form of oracular consultation originally took place during festival processions, when inquiries could be directed to a god's icon as it was carried on parade. By the Ptolemaic period, it had become commonplace to seek out prophetic gods at their own temples. Pairs of alternatives, one phrased positively, the other negatively, were inscribed upon two individual slips of papyrus with the help of a priest, who is assumed to have mediated the sortition process as well. The inquiries were composed according to a tripartite formula:<sup>16</sup> first, invocation of the deity; second, exposition of the matter at hand, prefaced with the word "if"; and third, the direction "give me this (slip)." *P.Mil.Vogl.* III 127, the positive half of a late third- or early second-century B.C. inquiry presented to the crocodile god Souchos at Tebtunis, provides an excellent example of the traditional formula:

Χάρης Σούχῳ	Chares to Souchos
τῷ αὐτοῦ θεῷ.	his god.
εἰ Ἔωρος Ψενταῆ-	If Horos, son of Psentaes
τος σύννοιδεν	knew about
ἢ εἴληφεν	or has taken
τῷ ἱματίῳ	the cloak
τῷ ἀπολομένῳ	that went missing
οὗ ὄικουν,	where he was living,
ἐξένεγκε τὸ σύμ-	bring out
βολον τ[οῦτο]· διὰ	this token. Through
Σούχου τ[οῦ θεο]ῦ μού.	Souchos, my god (?).

*P.Mil.Vogl.* III 127 is nevertheless something of an anomaly and a harbinger of things to come, as it is one of only four Ptolemaic examples composed in Greek.<sup>17</sup> Explanations offered thus far for the shift from Demotic to Greek essentially come down to two observations: first, Greek is easier to write than Demotic, and so might have been preferred by the priests who composed the inquiries;<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Černý (1962) offers the classic discussion. See also Frankfurter 1998: 145–197.

<sup>16</sup> Clarysse 1984: 1348; Henrichs 1973: 115–117.

<sup>17</sup> The others are *P.Firenze Museo Egiziano* inv. 10082, on which see Messeri Savorelli and Pintaudi 1996: 183–185; Litinas 1997: 210–212; and Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1071; *P.A. Fackelmann* 9, on which see Bannert and Harrauer 1980 and Gronewald and Hagedorn 1981; and *PSI* XVII 14. See also *P.Tebt.* 284, a first-century B.C. Greek letter in which the author mentions having consulted the oracle at Tebtunis. Note that there is no evidence that the Greek examples of either the Ptolemaic or Roman periods were composed first in Demotic and then translated into Greek, either in the form of anecdotes or pairs of contemporary Demotic and Greek inquiries about the same matter. However, the editors of *P.Grenfell* II 12 *verso* (see above, 304, n. 1) suggest it could be a "rough copy" of an oracular inquiry in Greek.

<sup>18</sup> Clarysse 1993: 188.

second, the population of Egypt was increasingly hellenized, and so by the Roman period, the inquirers might have preferred Greek to Egyptian as the language of oracular inquiry.<sup>19</sup> However, while both suggestions plausibly explain why there might be *more* inquiries written in Greek over time, neither satisfactorily explains why Greek supplants Demotic *entirely* as the language of oracular inquiry in the Roman period. For ease of composition to be a critical factor in the preference of Greek over Demotic, we must assume at least one of the following statements to be tenable: the Egyptian priests who composed the inquiries considered Greek an easier language to write than Demotic *in general*; the Egyptian priests found the *inquiries* easier to compose in Greek than in Demotic; ease of composition was of concern to the Egyptian priests (and one of the two previous statements is true). Yet none of these statements is well-founded.

To suppose that priests found Greek easier to write than Demotic presupposes that priests did not already feel competent writing in Demotic. It is true that priests generally learned Greek alongside Demotic by at least the first century A.D., and in some cases, earlier. Some priests, particularly those in the hellenized *metropoleis*, may even have felt quite comfortable functioning in Greek because of frequent exposure to the language. However, priestly compositional skills in Greek are described as awkward more often than not, particularly in the more remote Egyptian villages.<sup>20</sup> Soknopaiu Nesos, the provenance of approximately one-quarter of published Ptolemaic inquiries and one-third of published Roman inquiries, provides an excellent case study. This village on the north shore of Lake Moeris was little more than a temple outpost. Its inconvenient location and lack of good surrounding land ensured that Soknopaiu Nesos was, in Deborah Hobson's assessment, "astonishingly unaffected by the Roman occupation of Egypt, and only peripherally affected by its previous hellenization."<sup>21</sup> While priests continued to be literate in Demotic right up to the abandonment of the settlement in the mid-third century A.D., some priests in Soknopaiu Nesos, as elsewhere, remained illiterate in Greek as late as the second century.<sup>22</sup> At the very least, it is unlikely that Greek would be the language consistently preferred by the priests of Soknopaiu Nesos in the Roman period. Yet the oracular evidence from Soknopaiu Nesos, as elsewhere, is only in Greek.

It is also unlikely that, although the priests did not *generally* find Greek an easier language for composition, they found it to be more expedient *specifically* for the composition of oracular inquiries. The oracular inquiries tend to be very short, and are consistently composed according to a traditional formula. The creation of such a text would hardly constitute any kind of compositional difficulty for anyone trained to write Demotic. The formulaic language also

<sup>19</sup> Clarysse 1984: 1348; Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1069.

<sup>20</sup> For a dismissal of ease as a consideration, see Thompson 1994: 78; for Egyptian priests learning Greek, see Clarysse 1993 and Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1069; compare also Hanson 1991: 165.

<sup>21</sup> Samuel [= Hobson] 1981: 390.

<sup>22</sup> Fewster 2002: 227; Fowden 1986: 16.

renders the explanation sometimes offered for the lapse of Demotic in other spheres inapplicable here. It has been noted that Demotic remained a formalized language which did not regularly integrate Greek loanwords. As time passed, Demotic became increasingly unreflective of spoken Egyptian and is consequently deemed to have been generally too inflexible to express regular speech.<sup>23</sup> But as Clarysse has demonstrated, the formula of the Greek oracular inquiries is a direct translation of the Demotic counterpart, sometimes resulting in awkward or unidiomatic Greek.<sup>24</sup> In short, if Greek was substituted for Demotic for the sake of ease or convenience, it is difficult to see what ease or convenience was to be gained by so doing.

Finally, it is not clear that ease of composition was a concern for priests.<sup>25</sup> To portray the Egyptian priesthood welcoming Greek as a much-desired and convenient technology, one designed to make the accomplishment of necessary tasks easier, is surely to miss the point. While it was theoretically possible for anyone to master literacy in Greek, literacy in Demotic was largely the preserve of Egyptian priests, as was the information and knowledge it contained.<sup>26</sup> The fundamental relationship between Egyptian religion and literacy in the Egyptian language must not be underestimated on either a spiritual or a practical level. On the one hand, as the Hermetic texts indicate (ironically, in Greek), Egyptian is the only language sufficient to encapsulate the power of Egyptian religion.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, monopoly over literacy in this language granted priests the considerable authority they held within Egyptian society.<sup>28</sup> It is improbable that the priesthods would forgo the authority the mediation of popular inquiry offered—that is, to showcase to the general population the talents that set them apart—by choosing to compose the inquiries in Greek.

If the preference for Greek cannot be attributed to the priesthods, it seems at first plausible that the shift could instead reflect the preference of the inquirers. After all, the provision of oracles was something of a business for the Egyptian temples, in that it probably brought in revenue.<sup>29</sup> By the Roman period, there was

<sup>23</sup>Thompson 1994: 78; Fewster 2002: 228.

<sup>24</sup>Clarysse (1984: 1348–49) uses *P. Mil. Vogl. III* 127 (quoted above, 307) as a specific case study to demonstrate his point.

<sup>25</sup>Thompson (1994: 78–79) denies the relative ease of composition in Greek as a factor even in the proliferation of Greek documents in Egypt in official usage during the Ptolemaic period.

<sup>26</sup>Frankfurter 1994: 192–193 and 1998: 211–212; Thompson 1994: 68–69. Administrative scribes were also literate in Demotic in the Ptolemaic period. Their Roman period counterparts were far less numerous. See Bagnall 1993: 236–237 and Lewis 1993: 276 on the near disappearance of Demotic in non-religious contexts in the Roman period within the first half of the first century A.D.; both note that most of the later documentary Demotic texts derive from (to quote Lewis) a “priestly milieu.”

<sup>27</sup>*CH* 16.1–2, cited and discussed by Frankfurter (1998: 253) and Fowden (1986: 37).

<sup>28</sup>Note the observations of Bowman and Woolf (1994a: esp. 6–8) on the relations between power and control of literacy or written texts. See Frankfurter 1998: 210–214 for this phenomenon with regard to the Egyptian priesthood specifically.

<sup>29</sup>Frankfurter 1998: 178–179; Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1070.

a high degree of intermarriage and cultural mixing between native Egyptians and Greek immigrants, resulting in an increasingly hellenized society, particularly in the *metropoleis*. Perhaps Greek was therefore more and more the language in which inquirers wished to conduct oracular business. But the logic of this conclusion must be questioned from a number of angles. To begin, we should probably think of oracular inquiries less in terms of business and more in terms of genre. Businesses might be expected to conform to the wishes of their customers, while genres obey the linguistic guidelines of their traditions. A modern analogy offered by Eleanor Dickey in a recent review article on bilingualism in antiquity is instructive: the language of mottoes continues to be Latin, not because the majority of those who will read the mottoes prefers Latin as a mode of regular communication, but rather because the feeling is that the proper language for mottoes is Latin.<sup>30</sup> Egyptian oracles should similarly be viewed as a cultural package—one firmly entrenched within the religious traditions of Egypt, mediated by the guardians and transmitters of these traditions, the Egyptian priests, and traditionally expressed in the symbols which constituted priestly knowledge. In this context, we should expect that the language of Egyptian oracles would continue to be Egyptian. Nor is it plausible that the inquirers themselves, Egyptian, immigrant, or tourist, would wish it otherwise:<sup>31</sup> the cultural package would endow the oracle's response with greater authority than would a convenient customer-centered model. Egypt's carefully tended reputation for antiquity and unchanging traditionalism must also be recalled. To "update" Egypt, particularly in religious matters, does not appear to have been on anyone's agenda, not even that of the Roman administration, which dictated that by law Egyptian priests would have to continue to observe traditional forms of dress, prove priestly pedigree, practice circumcision, and interestingly, demonstrate competence in Hieratic and Demotic.<sup>32</sup> The insistence on continued competence in Demotic should not prompt the assumption that *carte blanche* would be automatically extended to the *use* of Demotic. Rather, it should highlight the fact that the Roman administration, like the population of Egypt, recognized literacy in Demotic as an integral characteristic of Egyptian priests—and plant the suspicion that to ensure the survival of Demotic while circumscribing its uses would thus be recognized as a significant act in the exertion of Roman authority over the powerful priesthoods.

But let us suppose for the moment that Greek did supplant Demotic as the language of oracular inquiry organically, as part of a natural evolution of the oracular tradition in response to the linguistic wishes of the inquirers. A number

<sup>30</sup> Dickey 2003: 300.

<sup>31</sup> Fowden (1986: 18) notes that the "desire to gain access to the world of the temples" was the only identifiable force that drove Greeks to learn Egyptian on occasion. Note also *P. Tebt.* 33 = *Sel. Pap.* II 416, a letter which testifies to a Roman senator engaging in religious tourism in Egypt in 112 B.C. Petesouchos, a crocodile deity which featured on the itinerary, was considered an oracular deity at Karanis. See Frankfurter 1998: 151.

<sup>32</sup> Gilliam 1947: 189; Bowman 1986: 180; Frankfurter 1998: 248.



of improbable scenarios must then assumed about the language preferences of the inquirers and perhaps even of the general population which the inquirers must represent. For example, we might have to suppose that all inquirers could at the very least read Greek; if inquirers were illiterate in Greek (and Egyptian), it would hardly matter which language the priests chose to compose the inquiries in, as all information would have to be communicated verbally between priest and inquirer anyway. Beyond the obvious improbability that all inquirers were comfortably literate in Greek, the evidence testifies that not all were. *P.Oxy.* L 3590, the positive half of a late second- or early third-century A.D. inquiry from Oxyrhynchus, is unusual in the fact that a second hand appears to have added *ναί* (“yes”) to the bottom of the slip.<sup>33</sup> The editor suggests that it may have been added to confirm that *this* was the positive slip—and so the answer to the inquiry was the affirmative, yes. This action would have been superfluous unless the inquirer had limited literacy in Greek—he may well have been one of the “slow-writers” so well attested in contracts and other documentary evidence.<sup>34</sup> Thus, if the language of composition mattered little to the inquirer, we should expect a significant proportion of the inquiries to be Demotic given the relative awkwardness many priests felt with Greek letters, particularly at the onset of the Roman period.

On the other hand, it might be assumed that all inquirers had *access* to someone who was literate in Greek—a much more likely proposition—instead of being uniformly literate themselves. But we must wonder to what purpose in this context: so that the literate third party could compose the inquiry or so that the literate third party could read the response? If the goal was to circumvent the Demotic which might have been preferred by the priests, recourse to Greek did not remove the necessity of a “middle man” for the illiterate inquirer. Furthermore, implicit in this scenario is the expectation that Greek was the preferred *spoken* language of inquirers: after all, it is likely that more people in Egypt spoke Greek than read it, and that more people read it than wrote it.<sup>35</sup> This was undoubtedly the case in the metropolitan centres. Had all the oracular evidence of the Roman period derived from such hellenized locales, it might be sufficient to suggest that Demotic continued to be used at oracular sites in smaller centres (whose papyri have not survived), while Greek was used to serve the Greek-speaking and Greek-literate metropolitans. But once again the evidence of Soknopaiu Nesos makes this explanation impossible. On the contrary, it appears that Greek was used for oracles even in small, relatively un-hellenized villages.

Moreover, as Penelope Fewster has recently pointed out, it is unwise to take written sources in Egypt as reflections of preferred spoken language.<sup>36</sup> The

<sup>33</sup> “Yes” is also found at the bottom of *P.Berlin* 21269, the positive half of a sixth/seventh-century A.D. inquiry from Kiman Fares. See Treu 1986.

<sup>34</sup> Hanson 1991: 168–170.

<sup>35</sup> Hanson 1991: 175–183.

<sup>36</sup> Fewster 2002.

plethora of Greek writings that survive on papyri in Egypt tend not to stem from a wide cross-section of Egyptian society, but rather from the privileged, literate, and largely hellenized stratum.<sup>37</sup> The evidence therefore gives the impression of greater Greek usage than was probably the case for the majority of the population—and as such, is tempered by the remains of Coptic, most of which date to the third century and later. As the Egyptian language which included some twenty per cent Greek loanwords and was expressed in a slightly altered Greek alphabet, Coptic can more safely be taken to indicate the language most commonly spoken by the majority of the Egyptian population.<sup>38</sup>

In any case, the corpus of oracle questions should certainly not be taken as reflective of the general language preferences of the Egyptian population. The shift from Demotic to Greek in the first century A.D. finds a counterpart in a shift from Greek to Coptic from the fifth century A.D. onwards, even in the self-consciously hellenized urban centre of Antinoöpolis, though a few Greek examples from the fifth to the seventh centuries indicate that this later transition of language was less abrupt than that from Demotic to Greek around the time of Roman annexation.<sup>39</sup> The conclusion cannot be drawn that the Egyptian population, represented by the oracular inquiries, preferred to speak Egyptian in the Ptolemaic period (and so insisted upon Demotic for composition), but Greek in the early Roman period (and so insisted upon Greek for composition), and then reverted to eighty per cent spoken Egyptian and twenty per cent spoken Greek in the later Roman period and beyond (and so insisted upon Coptic for composition). Rather, it is more likely that Egyptian remained the preferred spoken language, while the Greek alphabet gained prominence as the mode of writing.<sup>40</sup> Therefore it seems that the oracle questions, when expressed in Greek, did not reflect the language most inquirers would have preferred, nor perhaps even the language in which most inquirers would have been comfortably verbally functional, much less literate. It was probably often necessary for priests to read the response to the inquirer, and sometimes even necessary to translate it back into Egyptian for the inquirer to understand.<sup>41</sup> The benefit of composing the inquiry in Greek in the first place is not obvious, to say the least, as preference for Greek cannot be generally posited for either priest or inquirer. Thus, the only party whose preference could be served by this shift is that of the Roman administration, whose advent ushered in the transition. It remains to be seen why this would have been so.

<sup>37</sup> See also Fowden 1986: 17; compare Bowman 1991.

<sup>38</sup> Fewster 2002: 228; Schwendner 2002: 115.

<sup>39</sup> See Papini 1985 and 1992: 26–27; Husson 1997; Papaconstantinou 1994. Greek inquiries from the fifth to the seventh centuries A.D. include *P.Oxy.* VI 925; *P.Oxy.* VIII 1150; *P.Rendel Harris* 54; *P.Oxy.* XVI 1926; *PSI* XVII 20; *PSI* XVII 21; *P. Amster. Inv.* 88; and *P. Perol.* 21269.

<sup>40</sup> Hanson 1991: 165.

<sup>41</sup> Compare the evidence of a Greek missive, which contains instructions to translate the contents into Egyptian verbally in order to relay them to the intended recipients, cited and discussed in Hanson 1991: 177.

## II. ROMAN ADMINISTRATION AND THE LANGUAGE OF DIVINATION

If the negotiation of political authority between ruler and ruled can be viewed as a dialogue, then it is to be expected that divination would provide the vocabulary. The centrality of religion in Roman politics has long been recognized and so does not need detailed discussion here.<sup>42</sup> The Roman gods and the Roman political authorities were understood to share responsibility and concern for the continued success and welfare of the Roman community. Therefore the Roman gods had as their human counterparts the Roman senate in the republic and, beginning with Augustus, increasingly the *princeps*. The political legitimacy of individuals and of Rome within the Mediterranean therefore presupposed divine favoritism. Divination functioned as a kind of easily recognizable proof of divine favour. The gods spoke only to those at the pinnacle of the Roman social and political pyramid, and social and political superiority could be justified by the claim of being one of those to whom the gods spoke. The conventional self-presentation (or casting) of political insurgents as claimants to prophetic powers is testimony to the importance of divination as both an element and description of political legitimacy.<sup>43</sup> It is for this reason that the élite monopolized and controlled all official modes of divination in the Roman state: official divination was undertaken only by colleges of priests, mobilized by and answerable to the senate, with which membership overlapped. But more importantly, the ruling élite waged ideological warfare against the non-élite members of Roman society in a bid to claim the right of correct interpretation of divine signs: while it was impossible to monopolize the means or methods of divination, it was possible to control the privilege of interpretation. The success of the élite in this capacity is witnessed by the fact that women, slaves, and foreigners are often identified by male élite authors as the most “superstitious” elements of society. This description is not an insightful comment upon an objective truth, but is instead a reflection of the pervasive belief that divine favour and interest waned as one descended the social hierarchy. Any claim of divine attention by members of less elevated rungs was not to be recognized as *religio*, but contemptuously dismissed as empty *superstitio*.<sup>44</sup> On this model, it should be expected that Roman authorities would have little concern

<sup>42</sup> For example, Beard, North, and Price 1998. Bendlin (1997: 47) also provides references.

<sup>43</sup> Note Diodorus Siculus' description (34/35.2.5) of Eunus, the Syrian-born slave who was the ringleader of the first slave war in Sicily (135 B.C.): he was a μάγος καὶ τεραποουργός, and claimed to have prophetic powers. Bradley (1989: 74–76, 92–93, and 113–116) discusses this and other examples of charismatic rebels. Note also Livy's (38.8–19) description of the *graeculus* who supposedly introduced the Bacchanalian rites into Italy. Beard, North, and Price (1998: 1.134–135) remark upon the élite's internal squabbles over “privileged access to the gods.” Potter (1994: 146–182, esp. 146–149 and 162–164) provides numerous examples of emperors and members of the élite using prophecy as a means for personal advertisement.

<sup>44</sup> Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.211–244, esp. 216–218; Potter 1994: 151. Compare also Pagán 2005 for discussion of the stylized, negative portrayals of slaves, foreigners, and women in conspiracy narratives.

or use for provincial divination. In the provinces, themselves the booty of the Roman gods' favour, religious activities could be safely dismissed as superstition by those in Rome or be assumed to be cast aside in preference for superior Roman practices. Strabo, for example, reports that the oracle of Ammon at Siwa and other traditional prophetic centres had been almost entirely abandoned within ten years of Roman annexation of Egypt because of Roman preference for augury, haruspicy, and the interpretation of the Sibylline Books (17.1.43). This simple explanation for a profoundly misleading notice—Siwa and other traditional oracle sites clearly continued to be active through the second century A.D.—is eloquent in its silence about the preferences of the Egyptian population: these either were felt to deserve no comment or were imagined to mimic those of the Romans.<sup>45</sup> But perceived Roman apathy regarding provincial religion had its limits—not because provincial religious practices or figures shook Roman conviction of the natural religious pre-eminence of Rome, but rather because some religious figures or practices could be expected to exist in the minds of the provincial population as an alternative, or even greater, authority than Rome. The reduction of Druid priests by Tiberius for precisely these reasons (Plin. *HN* 30.4.13; cf. Suet. *Claud.* 25.5) and the same emperor's removal of the right of asylum from Greek temples due to the suspicion of ambitious abuses (Tac. *Ann.* 3.60–63) must be understood as examples.<sup>46</sup> Religious rivals with the power to rally the support of a population against Rome would have to be put in their place, and any related religious practices which might serve as instruments of insurgence would have to be removed or defused. Such a situation was no doubt perceived by the Roman authorities, and perhaps even by Augustus himself, in the case of the Egyptian priests upon annexation of the province or shortly thereafter. There were many good reasons for Roman concern.

Egypt had an unusually large population and one characterized as prone to insurrection. For example, Alexandria has been described as a “notorious . . . hot-bed of anti-Roman agitation” and its population as “vociferous” in its opposition to much Augustan legislation.<sup>47</sup> The first prefect of Egypt, Cornelius Gallus, had to deal with an uprising in the Thebaid.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the Egyptian temples possessed great wealth, in large part due to extensive land holdings, which

<sup>45</sup> For the continuation of Siwa, see Frankfurter 1998: 157.

<sup>46</sup> See the discussion in Goodman 1987: 239–240. See also Bowersock 1986 in general for the role provincial priests and temples could play in displays of resistance in the provinces. Compare also senatorial action in the Bacchanalian rites, as reported by Livy (39.8–19): see Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.91–96 for discussion and bibliography.

<sup>47</sup> Quotes from Reinhold 1980: 97 and Crook 1996: 144, n. 34. See also Evans 1961: 161, 170–172.

<sup>48</sup> For Gallus' self-glorifying inscription of 29 B.C., see *ILS* 8995 = *CIL* 3.14147. Compare Strab. 17.1.53 and Dio 53.23.5 on Gallus' exploits. Strabo (17.1.12–13) provides an unflattering description of all the inhabitants of Egypt, including those of Alexandria, as violent; Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984: 1926) comment that “[i]n the conception of Egypt, the Romans made little difference between Greeks in Egypt and native-born Egyptians, but in juridical affairs like taxation, a distinction was maintained.”

afforded the priesthoods considerable influence. Of more concern was the fact that priests were often identified as the ringleaders of popular uprisings, since religion appeared to function as a clarion call to violence among the Egyptian population. The revolts in the Thebaid in the first century B.C., for example, were led by priests of Ammon at Thebes, while the revolts in the Delta in Marcus Aurelius' time were led by the priest Isidorus.<sup>49</sup> For the external observer, Herodotus' description (2.27) of the Egyptians as the most excessively religious folk in the world may have found its explanation in Plutarch's suggestion (*De Is. et Os.* 380a) that the early kings of Egypt had instilled in the population religious zeal (δεισιδαιμονία) in order to have a sure method by which to manipulate and so control it. Though similar descriptions and arguments were used by Polybius (6.56.6–9) to explain Roman religious zeal, Egyptian religion was nevertheless an object of fascination to the Roman mind, as Egyptian religiosity was often expressed in a manner and degree completely alien to Roman experience. A good example is presented by Diodorus Siculus (1.83.8–9), who reports an incident he witnessed personally: a furious throng had lynched a member of a Roman delegation to Egypt in the first century B.C. because he had accidentally killed a cat, an animal of particular religious veneration.<sup>50</sup> Significantly, Diodorus states that not even fear of Rome (τῆς Ῥώμης φόβος) was sufficient to deter the crowd from its determination to inflict punishment on the guilty party. Inter-village battles over religious differences appear to have been a consistent feature of Egyptian history, to judge by papyrological evidence and anecdotal reports such as that of Plutarch (*De Is. et Os.* 380a), who specifically mentions intervention required of the Romans.<sup>51</sup> In this context, it comes as little surprise that a prefect's edict of A.D. 34 forbade the carrying of weapons, in an attempt to curb the native Egyptian tendency to revolt.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>49</sup>For Egyptian priests as ringleaders, see Frankfurter 1998: 206 (for references) and 204–210 (in general). Whitehorne (1980: 219) comments on uprisings during the earlier Ptolemaic period which had priests at their centre. Winkler (1980: 175–181) and Alston (1998) discuss the collision of myth and history in the legends of the Boukoloi, the insurgents held responsible for the revolt in A.D. 171–172. However, neither gives reason to doubt the presence or agency of the priest Isidorus in this event. See also Beard, North, and Price 1998: 1.347–348, noting that Alexandrian Greek opposition to Roman rule was often expressed in religious terms, with “appeals to the Alexandrian Serapis.”

<sup>50</sup>Compare Hdt. 2.66–67 regarding Egyptian attitudes towards cats. Although Diodorus does not specify the location of this event, Alexandria seems likely since Roman business was official; it is noteworthy that even this population could not be counted on to display the reserved Greek religious sentiment more familiar to Romans. See also Tac. *Hist.* 1.11, where Augustus' purported rationale for equestrian governors of Egypt is given, which makes clear the Roman stereotype of Egypt as a land of religious fanaticism and lawlessness: *ita visum expedire, provinciam . . . superstitione ac lascivia discordem et mobilem, insciam legum, ignaram magistratum, domi retinere*. Compare also Dio 51.17.1–2 and Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1920–23, for negative impressions of Egyptian religion amongst the Roman élite in the late republican and Augustan periods.

<sup>51</sup>For example, Wilcken *Chrest.* 11; see also Frankfurter 1998: 66–68. Compare Juv. *Sat.* 15, which exaggerates and perpetuates the stereotype of Egyptian religious extremism.

<sup>52</sup>Katzoff 1980: 810; Wilcken *Chrest.* 13.5–11; Philo *Flacc.* 11.92.

In addition to rabble-rousing priests and a population with a reputation for religious extremism, Egypt had a tradition of prophetic tracts which aimed at political subversion, and which have been viewed as one of the vehicles dissatisfied priests could have used to foment dissent in the population against political authorities. As a literary genre, this sort of prophecy stretches back at least into the Middle Kingdom; by the Ptolemaic period, the prophecies had come to serve as rallying calls to the down-trodden against the current ruling authority, as they generally promised a return to the age of justice and a renewal of religious piety.<sup>53</sup> In the Roman period, literary prophecies have also been interpreted as a means by which the traditional Egyptian priesthood managed to maintain authority.<sup>54</sup> Greek translations of Demotic oracular tracts exist in the "Oracle of the Potter" and the "Oracle of the Lamb." These have a counterpart in the "Demotic Chronicle," a "political commentary" on the prophecies of the god Harsaphes.<sup>55</sup> Though these were composed prior to the Roman annexation of Egypt, their details were vague enough to apply to most non-Egyptian regimes, and thus they were recopied through the generations—the manuscripts we possess date to the Roman period.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the manuscript of the "Oracle of the Lamb" dates to year 33 of the reign of Augustus and is interpreted by László Kákosy as the product of an Egyptian backlash against the Romans which occurred immediately after Gallus had quelled the armed insurrection in the Thebaid. Where arms had failed, prophecy might succeed.<sup>57</sup> It might be argued that the Roman authorities would not have been aware of such a tradition of prophetic tracts, or at least not in 30 B.C.; the fact that such tracts were sufficiently well-known by the mid-first century A.D. to appear in pseudo-Plutarch's *Proverbs of the Alexandrians* (21) does not mean that they were equally familiar to non-Egyptians in Augustus' time.<sup>58</sup> But even so Egyptian priests would have come under suspicion as practitioners of subversive tendencies. By the time of annexation, the Egyptian priests would certainly have been recognized for their competence in astrology, a form of "secret knowledge" for which they had been famed for centuries.<sup>59</sup> Astrology

<sup>53</sup> Kákosy 1981: 142–143.

<sup>54</sup> Frankfurter 1998: 158, 206–208, and 241–248.

<sup>55</sup> Frankfurter 1998: 150. See also Koenen 1970: 249–251; Lloyd 1982: 37; and Momigliano 1986: 112.

<sup>56</sup> For the "Oracle of the Potter," see *P.Oxy.* 2332 with Koenen 1968, 1974, and 1984; for other editions, see Gerstinger 1925: 218–219; Reitzenstein and Schaeder 1926: 38–68; and Manteuffel 1930: 99–106. See also Koenen 1970 for discussion of the significance of the prophecy.

<sup>57</sup> Kákosy 1981: 153–154. Momigliano (1986: 112–114) is uncertain whether these tracts were forms of protest against Roman rule. Compare Koenen 1970: 253–254 and Potter 1994: 199–202 for the argument that these sorts of treatises had probably lost their initial political thrust by the Roman period, rendering them "sacred guidebooks" for the apocalyptically-minded. However, it is not at all certain that the Roman authorities would have understood them as spiritual rather than as anarchist or seditious.

<sup>58</sup> See Kákosy 1981: 142–143.

<sup>59</sup> Hornung 2001: 31.

was considered both accurate and useful by members of the Roman élite and astrologers were consequently coming to be recognized as potentially dangerous. Indeed, Dio (49.43.5) reports that Agrippa had purged the city of Rome of them just three years previous to Egypt's annexation, an action which was to be repeated with increasing frequency in subsequent generations.<sup>60</sup>

It is also worth stressing here that members of the Roman élite who filled the highest administrative posts in Egypt would have had intimate understanding of the rationale which underlay priestly authority in Egypt and thus would have recognized the power of their perceived rivals very clearly. It has sometimes been suggested that the Roman authorities could not understand the purview of Egyptian priests, since Egyptian religious structures were so different from their own.<sup>61</sup> The argument follows that the Roman authorities were bound to fail in any attempt to alter Egyptian religious observances because they could not understand the extent to which religion was ingrained in Egyptian society, nor could they appreciate the reasons for the respect priests commanded. But surely such opinions underestimate *Roman* religious conviction and misunderstand the character of *Roman* priesthoods. In fact in 30 B.C., Egyptian and Roman priests had much in common. The comparison to be made between religion as a form of social control by the élite over the non-élite in both Egypt and Rome has already been drawn above.<sup>62</sup> But the comparison could be taken further: because Roman paganism has often been held up as an example of a "bookless" religion in contrast to bookish and text-rich Christianity, the centrality of the written word in Roman religious observance and the power it lent its ministers has often gone unnoticed.<sup>63</sup> However, as Mary Beard and Richard Gordon have argued, "literate forms at the heart of the Roman civic cult became, at least by the late Republic, a crucial weapon in the élite's appropriation of state cult for their own ends—that is, for the preservation of their own dominance."<sup>64</sup> Far from misunderstanding the Egyptian priests and priesthoods, I suggest that the Roman authorities on the contrary understood the power they derived from the control of texts very well indeed.

This combination of circumstances—a large population characterized as volatile, particularly in response to religious incitements; a wealthy and influential priesthood famed for arcane knowledge written in a script illegible to Romans; and a tradition of anarchist prophetic tracts—must have caused the new ruling power concern and no doubt cast the Egyptian priests as direct rivals for

<sup>60</sup> See Potter 1994: 174–176 and Cramer 1950.

<sup>61</sup> Ritner 1995: 3355; Frankfurter 1998: 26. On Roman failure to understand targeted priesthoods among other provincial populations (i.e., Druids and Jews), see Goodman 1987: 239–240.

<sup>62</sup> Compare the views of Livy (1.19) and Polybius (6.56.6–9) with the theory of Plutarch (*De Is. et Os.* 380a) that religion was developed by the Roman and Egyptian élites respectively to have a sure means of social control.

<sup>63</sup> See Lane Fox 1994 for the centrality of the written text in early Christianity.

<sup>64</sup> Quote from Beard 1991: 56. See also Gordon 1990: 184–191.

the authority necessary to govern the province. Similar apprehension was not felt in other provinces surely because Egyptian priests held a unique degree of power within Egyptian society. Had the Pythia at Delphi, for example, held similar influence over a united Greece largely because of a written language incomprehensible to Romans, Rome might have paid more attention.<sup>65</sup> Thus, for any power that wanted to maintain control of Egypt as a province, it would have been a prudent, not paranoid, policy to deflate priestly influence. This could be done in part by removing the financial autonomy of the temples. Few studies of Roman Egypt fail to comment upon Roman opportunism in the face of such a flock of golden geese: in 19 B.C., the prefect Petronius confiscated most temple lands, a portion of which was then made available to the priests to rent.<sup>66</sup> Despite Augustus' generosity to the Egyptian temples and priestly exemption from liturgies—shown, no doubt, to soften the blow and minimize antagonism—scholars generally understand this move as an example of Roman avarice rather than strategy.<sup>67</sup> But it is better to consider these actions as part of a larger plan that included ostentatious exertion of Roman power over the less economically-critical areas and specifically over the language of popular divination.

Though continued use of Demotic in other religious activities, such as commemorative inscriptions, did not challenge Roman authority, the same cannot be said for prophetic activity. As pointed out above, Roman definitions of legitimate authority included the ability to act as liaison between the human and the divine realm. Prophetic activity, particularly in the provinces, was not in and of itself subversive or threatening—once again, the logic of the Roman élite denied the possibility of real efficacy to it at all. But prophetic activity in Demotic, a language incomprehensible to Romans, lacked even a pretense of satisfying the entitlement felt by Roman authorities in this capacity in their own eyes, and in the eyes of the provincial population. The idea that Roman emperors were concerned to be recognized in such a position by Egyptians might seem unlikely. It will be recalled, for example, that Augustus refused to visit the sacred and prophetic Apis Bull while touring Egypt, claiming he had no time for cattle (Suet. *Aug.* 93; Dio Cass. 51.16.3). But such stories were clearly told for a Roman audience. Augustus was not unaware of the importance played by prophecy, and particularly the role of the prophetic Apis Bull, in the confirmation of Egyptian rulers.<sup>68</sup> Thus, though to the rest of the world Apis had been slighted by Augustus, in Egypt Apis and Augustus had a much friendlier relationship—Apis is found in at

<sup>65</sup> Alcock 1993: 213–214; compare Bowersock 1984.

<sup>66</sup> On the financial reduction of the temples, see Gilliam 1947; Evans 1961; Whitehorne 1980; Bowman 1986: 180–182; and Huzar 1988: 372.

<sup>67</sup> Bagnall 1993: 262; Evans 1961: 157–158; and Reinmuth 1935: 28.

<sup>68</sup> Apis' importance, Thompson (1988: 271–272) remarks, was not ignored by Augustus' successors. Apis is reputed to have foretold, among other things, Germanicus' demise by refusing the food that was offered to him (Plin. *HN* 8.71.185).



least two hieroglyphic texts giving favourable prophecy to Augustus.<sup>69</sup> Augustus busied himself further with the task of redirecting Egyptian religious attention to himself by creating the first *Καيسάρειον* for his worship out of a temple begun by Cleopatra and Antony, re-titling the high-priest of the Egyptian god Ptah in Memphis the Prophet of Caesar, and adopting for himself the name *Zeus eleutherios sebastos* in the guise of the new pharaoh for the benefit of the Egyptian population.<sup>70</sup> It is perhaps significant that the phrase *τοῖς συννάοις θεοῖς*, or “to the accompanying gods,” was sometimes included in the invocation of the deity in oracle questions of the Roman period, in which the “accompanying gods” are to be understood as the emperors whose statues were often placed in Egyptian temples.<sup>71</sup> In this context of competition for religious pre-eminence and legitimacy, enforcing Greek as the language of divine communication could be understood as a necessary element of Roman tactics. Although this insistence would have further allowed for the practical possibility, at least in theory, of monitoring potentially subversive prophetic activity, its real effect was more likely meant to be felt in the abstract realm of ideology and identity—where it not only aimed to define Romans as rulers, but also to redefine Egyptian priests as subjects.<sup>72</sup> Subsequent to the advent of Roman rule, provincial populations underwent cultural changes which were various, complex, and experienced at different rates. Modern scholars’ investigations of these dynamics often result in nuanced, thoughtful descriptions which contrast radically with the simple, flat accounts offered by Roman authors.<sup>73</sup> While the former category undoubtedly provides a report which reflects reality more accurately, the latter nonetheless gives us a very clear impression of Roman opinion about what *should* have been happening in the provinces. In Roman literature, it is clear that the adoption of Latin (or its corollary, the loss of a native language) was considered as significant as the donning of the toga and the adoption of Roman religious practices in the assessment of provincial acceptance of Roman rule. So eager to be Roman are

<sup>69</sup> Kákosy 1981: 144, n. 34; compare also Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1926–27.

<sup>70</sup> On the establishment of the *Καيسάρειον*, see Nock 1972: 215. This is in tension with Suet. *Aug.* 52, stating that Augustus forbade worship of himself in any of the provinces unless his name was to be found in conjunction with *Roma*, but cf. Dio Cass. 51.20.6–7, where *Roma* is not mentioned. For Prophet of Caesar, see Thompson 1988: 271–272. Huzar (1988: 352) discusses *Zeus eleutherios sebastos*. See also Wildfang 2000 for the suggestion that Augustus engineered some of the stories of omens attending his conception and birth to appeal to an Egyptian audience.

<sup>71</sup> Huzar 1995: 3112–13; Frankfurter 1998: 10. See, for example, *P.Heidelberg* IV 335 and *P.Köln* 201.

<sup>72</sup> Symbolic appropriation of religious authority by the Romans has been noticed elsewhere: see, for example, Alcock 1993: 140–141 on the symbolism of removing a Greek polis’ patron deity to Rome.

<sup>73</sup> For example, Woolf 1998 and his succinct statement summing up the complexities (11): “Becoming Roman was not a matter of acquiring a ready-made cultural package . . . so much as joining the insiders’ debate about what that package did or ought to consist of at that particular time.”

the Turdetanians, Strabo crows (3.2.15), that they have even forgotten their own language. Elsewhere, “togate” is deemed synonymous with “peaceful” (3.4.20). However, the pleasure Roman audiences must have felt in the cherished fantasy that they embodied an exclusive club others were eager to join was probably no greater than the pride imparted by the knowledge that particularly barbaric or troublesome peoples had been brought to heel by having Roman ways thrust upon them. Thus Strabo proclaims the Gauls tamed (4.4.5), as witnessed by their enforced conformity to Roman religious sensibilities (καὶ τούτων δ’ ἔπαυσαν αὐτοὺς Ῥωμαῖοι, καὶ τῶν κατὰ τὰς θυσίας καὶ μαντείας ὑπεναντίων τοῖς παρ’ ἡμῖν νομίμοις).<sup>74</sup> Similarly, and as already noted, Strabo was quick to present Egypt (falsely) as won over to Roman methods of divination at the expense of native traditions (17.1.43).

Certain details in Tacitus’ anecdote about Germanicus’ illegal tourism in Egypt (*Ann.* 2.60) must surely be understood as the linguistic counterpart for Roman readers. Tacitus portrays Germanicus, Rome’s hope for the future, having an Egyptian inscription translated for him. Germanicus may be indulging in a Herodotean moment (compare *Hdt.* 2.125), but differences in critical details render this episode less a literary echo than a statement of Roman power.<sup>75</sup> An interpreter (ἑρμηνεύς) merely led Herodotus to believe that the inscription on the side of a pyramid was a monumental grocery list. Germanicus, on the other hand, presses an aged Egyptian priest into service to translate an ancient hieroglyphic inscription on a crumbling Theban wall (*iussus . . . e senioribus sacerdotum patrium sermonem interpretari*). Tacitus implies that only the really old priests still know the language, which has become obsolete. The priest and the language are partners in the humiliation forced upon them by Germanicus, for the arcane inscription turns out to contain information as outdated as the language it is written in and as passé as the priest who reads it: it is an account of Egypt’s past power, wealth, and resources, which, Tacitus tells us, neatly describes Rome’s present.

But Roman awareness of the symbolic power of language was not confined to literature. Sensitivity to language as not only a legal but also a social descriptor is evident in the impractical insistence of Roman law that birth certificates and wills of Roman citizens living in Egypt be composed in Latin, despite the considerable inconvenience this often occasioned for the citizens in question.<sup>76</sup> Thus language could be taken both symbolically and quite literally as an indication of social status. By similar logic, prohibiting the use of Demotic for the mediation of popular divination could serve as a symbolic reminder to both the priesthood and the population of who was in charge in the province, at the same time reducing priestly claims to respect because of their sole control over Demotic in the critical area of divine communication. More specifically, we might even suspect the

<sup>74</sup> Compare Pliny *HN* 30.4.13. See also Adams 2003 on “Romanness” and language in general.

<sup>75</sup> For a different interpretation of this episode, see Potter 1994: 193.

<sup>76</sup> Adams 2003: 185–188.

Roman authorities of forcing from the priests a show of acceptance of Roman rule which would be visible to the general native population, at once stressing the subjection of the traditional sources of power to the greater new authority and offering a good example of obedience for the rest of the population to follow.

In such a scenario, we might have expected Latin rather than Greek to be the language of divination enforced by the Roman administration. But though Latin would have been the superior choice for symbolic purposes, Greek was more practical for accomplishing the necessary goals. Greek was not Latin, but it was a language recognized and understood by Romans. Ptolemaic occupation had already established Greek as the second language of Egypt, and to insist that divination be undertaken in Latin would have been in effect to ban divination in Egypt altogether: Latin was never the *lingua franca* of Egypt. At the time of annexation, at least, it would have been neither necessary nor desirable to squelch temple divination in Egypt, as this would have done little more than unduly antagonize priests and population.<sup>77</sup> On the contrary, potential ill will caused by insistence upon divination in Greek would have been eased by the fact that Greek, unlike Latin, was a language accessible not only to Romans, but to priests and population alike. Thus, divination could continue, provided it was in translation.

### III. THE LIMITS OF PRIESTLY ACCOMMODATION

There are many reasons why the Roman administration would have demanded that oracular inquiry no longer be undertaken in Demotic. Roman desires, however, are but one half of the story. The evidence demands that we must also posit priestly compliance with these instructions. Egyptian priestly compliance, especially compliance with foreigners and foreign desires, may seem something of an oxymoron. Although Plato imagined Solon meeting with affable and cooperative priests (*Ti.* 22b–24a), Egyptian priests famously begrudged requests for knowledge or information, even from the likes of Plato.<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the antiquity of Egypt and the persistence of Egyptian religion demand the conclusion that Roman occupation of Egypt was just one phase in the continuum of Egyptian history, a financially trying phase, but one of little religious consequence.<sup>79</sup> Such considerations suggest that it is pointless even to ask why Egyptian priests deigned to entertain the self-serving and petty requests of foreign rulers. But perhaps this question is posed in the wrong terms. If we ask instead why the Egyptian priesthoods would *fail* to comply with Roman demands, the answer is similarly elusive.

<sup>77</sup>Traditional divination in Egypt would be banned some two and a half centuries later; see *P.Yale Inv.* 299 and Rea 1977.

<sup>78</sup>For example, Strab. 17.12.9; Thessalos of Tralles *De virtutibus herbarum*; compare also Hdt. 2.91.

<sup>79</sup>For example, Frankfurter 1998: 5–36 and *passim*.

It is unlikely that priests would have been unaware of imperial or administrative mandates that came in the form of prefectural edicts.<sup>80</sup> Hobson, using Soknopaiu Nesos as a case study, has demonstrated that awareness of edicts was widespread throughout Egypt, even in the smaller and more remote centers.<sup>81</sup> *P. Yale Inv.* 299, the prefectural edict banning temple divination in A.D. 199, states specifically that its text is to be written in a legible hand and posted in every village (lines 14–15). Alan Bowman argues that ignorance due even to illiteracy was an unacceptable excuse for transgression of a posted order.<sup>82</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Egyptian priests would be allowed to plead lack of awareness when even the illiterate were unable to make this claim successfully.

It is similarly unlikely that the Roman administration would have been unaware of the activities of the temples. The temples were placed under the responsibility of the prefect, aided by the *idios logos*.<sup>82</sup> In 4 B.C., the prefect C. Turranius demanded that all temples submit a detailed list of all temple staff and functions.<sup>84</sup> This indication of the meticulous attention the administration planned to give the priesthoods is further borne out in the *gnomon* of the *idios logos*, a handbook of administrative guidelines for Roman officials in Egypt begun by Augustus, in which rules 71 through 96 dictate everything from the required pedigree for priests to their clothing and the economic details of their lives. Indeed, as David Frankfurter notes, “the religious infrastructure was . . . more closely monitored in Egypt than in any other province.”<sup>85</sup> The requirement for regular submission of scrupulously kept temple accounts was supplemented by unannounced personal visits to temples by Roman officials.<sup>86</sup> Nor is it probable that the details of the mediation of oracles would have gone unmonitored. Because the provision of divinatory services functioned as a source of temple income, particularly in the economically straitened circumstances of the Roman period, the official auditors would have made it their business to know what went on in the temples.<sup>87</sup>

Current scholarly consensus is that the unreturned halves of the inquiries were archived in the temples, with the result that it would have been possible to

<sup>80</sup> Katzoff (1980: 824–825) observes that unlike in other provinces, even imperial provinces, the governors of Egypt *did* exercise legislative power with their edicts on par with their Ptolemaic predecessors.

<sup>81</sup> Hobson 1993: 195–196 and *passim*; see also Potter 1994: 110–111 on the dissemination of imperial edicts.

<sup>82</sup> Rea 1977; Bowman 1991: 121–122.

<sup>82</sup> Until the time of Hadrian, at which point the position of the *archiereus* was created and took over the prefect's functions in this regard. See Evans 1961: 157–158; Stead 1981: 418; and Bowman 1986: 180.

<sup>84</sup> *BGU* IV 1199; Katzoff 1980: 810.

<sup>85</sup> Frankfurter 1998: 27.

<sup>86</sup> Whitehorne 1980; Gilliam 1947: 191–197; see also *P. Tebt.* 315 = *Sel. Pap.* I 127.

<sup>87</sup> Frankfurter 1998: 178–179; Valbelle and Husson 1998: 1070; Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984: 1925.

inspect specific examples of oracular transactions.<sup>88</sup> Furthermore, any expectation that Roman interest in the oracular services of the Egyptian temples was purely financial will be disappointed by the very existence of *P.Yale Inv. 299*, the late second-century ban on traditional forms of divination, and the intrigues in A.D. 359 surrounding the temple of Bes at Abydos.<sup>89</sup> In short, if the Roman administration demanded that popular oracular inquiry no longer be mediated in Demotic, Egyptian priests could not expect to escape the notice of Roman officials indefinitely in continuing to do so, nor could they expect to fail to comply with impunity. It is not clear what benefits there were to be had in non-compliance and what real loss in cooperation. The prescriptions in the *gnomon* of the *idios logos* concerning the details of priests' lives were testimony to the Roman administration's assumed prerogative to dictate, rather than to allow, priestly activity. The real power of Rome had been displayed in the confiscation of temple lands. When so much was dependent upon the will of the new rulers, perhaps the use of Greek as the language in which popular divination was to be mediated did not seem a particularly great sacrifice.

In any case, the reaction of the Egyptian priesthood appears to have been compliance to the extent that oracle questions were composed only in Greek henceforth. But there is evidence to suggest that priestly compliance was not absolute. Prophetic tracts such as the "Oracle of the Lamb" and "Oracle of the Potter" continued to be copied, but given their nature, these hardly qualified as forms of divine communication which would have been presented to the Roman authorities for perusal upon demand regardless of the language they were composed in:<sup>90</sup> licit and traceable prophetic activity was only recorded in Greek. However, even in the context of popular divination it is perhaps possible to detect priests taking advantage of a loophole, as the demise of Demotic in oracle questions may have been balanced by a rise in unwritten oracular forms at temples in Egypt. Archaeological evidence supports the proliferation of incubation and autophone oracles during the Roman period, that is, divine advice solicited and administered either through sleep or "talking statues"—obviously the messages could be delivered in either Greek or Egyptian.<sup>91</sup> Some scholars are wary of accepting as true the impression that the Roman period saw the development of autophone oracles as a new prophetic form in Egypt or that established incubation cults experienced increased patronage.<sup>92</sup> Their reluctance

<sup>88</sup> Erichsen 1942; Schwendner 2002: 111.

<sup>89</sup> *Amm. Marc.* 19.12.3–6.

<sup>90</sup> It is possible that such tracts might have been owned by secular members of Egyptian society; as van Minnen has demonstrated (1994: 243–244), writings unfavourable towards the Roman administration might be found in the possession of members of the local élite.

<sup>91</sup> See especially Habachi 1947; Brunton 1947; Poulsen 1945: 183–184; Bianchi 1998; Loukianoff 1936; Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004: 312; and *PGM* 3.380–385. Dio Chrysostom (32.12) speaks of the prophetic activities of Serapis in this regard in the second century.

<sup>92</sup> See Frankfurter 1998: 145–197.

may be understood as justified unwillingness to embrace the conclusion such observations invite, that is, that this period saw a rise in popular religious (that is, “superstitious”) activity. Such scholars have been concerned to demonstrate a strong Egyptian tradition of both incubation and autophone oracles prior to the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. There is, however, little compelling evidence to suggest that autophone oracles, particularly as they appear in the Roman period, were a feature of pre-Roman Egyptian divination.<sup>93</sup> While the presence of dream divination in the Egyptian tradition cannot be denied, the cults which appear to have experienced a marked increase in popularity in the Roman period are not exclusively indigenous practices (in which dream oracles were solicited usually by priests, less often popularly), but rather are strongly influenced by the hellenistic tradition of incubation oracles.<sup>94</sup> In short, it appears that the Roman period witnessed new and increasingly popular methods of divination which did not depend upon writing. However, if the “increase” in these forms of oracular consultation is considered as a reaction to, and inversely proportional with, the “decrease” of written oracular forms in Demotic during the Roman period, a model of “increased superstition” must also be discarded. Instead, when the two phenomena are considered together, we can catch a glimpse of provincial accommodation to an imperial demand in a manner which both served and preserved the priorities of each.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Modern descriptions of the voluntary adoption of the languages favoured by the Roman administration in other provinces have little relevance in the context of the shift in the language of popular oracular inquiry in Egypt. It is difficult, if not impossible, to discern any advantage for priests or inquirers that would result in the preference for Greek over Demotic in the inscription of every single oracular inquiry from the very onset of Roman rule. On the other hand, it is very easy to identify multiple reasons why the Roman administration would have desired such a change. The probability that the language shift was the result of the will of the new rulers defies the traditional characterizations of a fiscally-obsessed, but otherwise aloof, Roman administration and an unconcerned Egyptian priesthood. It challenges us to consider the limits of such descriptions and consideration of the limits may well offer a rare opportunity to observe the diverse negotiations of power between ruler and ruled in Egypt, and perhaps elsewhere. It illustrates the possibility that administrative concerns could delve deeper than the financial, that administrative and provincial interaction could take place on levels that were

<sup>93</sup> Compare Frankfurter 1998: 150–156.

<sup>94</sup> See especially Ritner 1995: 3346–51; Frankfurter 1998: 158–159, 162–163; Loukianoff 1936: 190–192; compare Poulsen 1945: 184. On the Egyptian tradition of dream oracles, see Baines 1987: 82 and n. 10; Skeat and Turner 1968: 199; and Ray 1976: *passim*; but compare the editors’ comments on *P.Oxy.* XXXI 2607.

not purely practical, that perceived challenges to authority could be resolved in part through symbolic acts, and that abstract considerations, such as questions of identity, are not necessarily mere creations of modern scholarship anachronistically projected back into discussions of Roman imperialism.

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