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The Journal of Juristic Papyrology 20, 25-30

1990

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LOCAL CULTS AND RESISTANCE TO CHRISTIANITY

The fourth century witnessed one of the most important changes that differentiate what we call late antiquity from the foregoing periods. Religious uniformity of the Empire had been achieved, and the religion that prevailed was Christianity. Less than 70 years separate the Edict of Milan from the times of Theodosius who imposed orthodoxy and broke down the resistance of paganism. Within these dates Christianity rose from its state-tolerated position to the position of the state religion. The rapidity of the process by which Christianity attained its supremacy was the result of preceding developments about which we are largely ignorant. We know even less about the pagan resistance to this process because of its personal nature.*

It is generally agreed that the pagan resistance to Christianity arose from two different cultural and social factors: 1) the intellectual paganism of the upper classes rooted in tradition, philosophy, and the classical Greek and Latin education; and 2) the paganism of the lowest social classes which were largely illiterate and often spoke their own native languages. I want, however, to draw attention to a third, intermediary group: the municipal aristocracy which was hellenized, subject to the Greek education, and attached to the municipal institutions and traditions. In Egypt this was the bouletic class, i.e. those who were liable to the bouletic liturgies.¹ Some of them were probably bilingual, other illiterate.² Their social position separated them from the lower classes of the Egyptian peasantry and the Egyptian town-dwellers; thus they were closer to the Alexandrians who possessed estates in the vicinity of their native towns and also to the local Roman officials who usually came from the same social stratum.³ On the other hand, it was precisely this bouletic

* This paper was read at the XVIth International Congress of Papyrology in 1980 in New York and was to be published in the Proceedings. For several reasons it failed to reach the Editors on time. I wish to thank Miss S. Bonycastle and Prof. L. Koenen for correcting my English. To Prof. Koenen I have a debt of gratitude for his criticism on various points.

¹ A. K. B o w m a n, *The Town Councils of Roman Egypt*, Toronto 1971, pp. 27 ff.

² N. L e w i s, *Inventory*, s.v. ἀπαλτησις, ἀπαλιτητής (revised page of 1975). Id., *The Compulsory Public Services of Roman Egypt*, Firenze 1982.

³ B o w m a n, op. cit. (cf. n. 1), pp. 27–32. Whether the bouletic class formed an *ordo* is of no importance for the present discussion. For the convenience of the argument I count those who served in the cities' archontic offices without having been members of the Councils as members of the bouletic class.

class which developed an adherence to local cults of Egyptian fashion in the same way, though in a provincial style, as Symmachos and his circle in the Rome of the fourth century emphasized their attachment to the Roman civic traditions.

Before the evidence will be presented, the obvious may be stated: the Roman empire, which since the *Constitutio Antoniniana* was unified in the Roman citizenship, lacked any unifying cult which, at the same time, corresponded to the religious needs of the individual. The cult of the emperor could not fill this gap any better than the state cults in the former poleis. This fact rendered the state vulnerable to Christianity, a religion which, at the same time, was a movement of cosmopolitan dimensions and geared towards the individual. In this situation the resistance of the bouletic class to Christianity must have become particularly important. The autonomy of the Egyptian metropoleis was newly established, and soon the ambitions of their inhabitants were satisfied, when the local games and honorary titles were granted by the emperor to the cities.⁴ Local patriotism had to fulfil the function of national patriotism, and therefore local cults had to supply the strength of religion. It was hardly a match for Christian universalism. Egypt became quickly one of the most widely Christianized provinces of the Roman empire, reputed for its innovations in the religious life, particularly its spreading monasticism.

The evidence for the new attraction of the Egyptian cults is provided by P. Beatty Panop. Diocletian visited Egypt in 298 A.D., after he had crushed the rebellion of Domitius Domitianus. In September he was expected in Panopolis, and in preparation for his visit extraordinary appointments to liturgic services were arranged.⁵ Both the strategus and the Town Council were charged with the extra work. More than one hundred officials were appointed for performing extraordinary duties in all the six toparchies of the nome. The Council president found it difficult to find suitable men. Hence he was thrice admonished by the strategus.⁶ Certainly, there were already regularly appointed liturgical officials to collect the normal annona.⁷ We do not know how numerous they were but to select one hundred more collectors from among those who were eligible, would require the appointment of many who normally would have been free from any charge during that particular year. Thus the relatives of those serving are likely to have been called upon. We find, indeed, two sons of a certain Apollonios with the same name: Besas the Elder and Besas

⁴ The title λαμπρά appears in Oxyrhynchos in 269 A. D. See D. Hagedorn, ΟΕΥΡΥΤΧΩΝ ΠΟΛΙΣ und Η ΟΕΥΡΥΤΧΙΤΩΝ ΠΟΛΙΣ, ZPE 12 (1973), pp. 277-292. For the local games see M. N. Tod, *An Ephebic Inscription from Memphis*, JEA 37 (1951), pp. 86-99 (The text comes from Leontopolis: J. et L. Robert, Bull. Epigr., REG 45 (1952), N° 180), and also nn. 21-22 below. For the long standing tradition of local games see L. Koenen, *Eine agonistische Inschrift aus Ägypten und frühptolemäische Königsfeste*, Meisenheim 1977.

⁵ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 168 f., 221 f., 241 f., 244 f., 249 f., 256 f., 259 f., 262, 263, 276-331, 374 f., 381 f., 384 f.

⁶ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 53 f., 109 f.

⁷ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 86, 120, 131, 160, 351-352, 392.

the Younger; also the second son of Hieracion and, in two cases, even the third sons were compelled to collect the *annona*.⁸

This seems to indicate that the service was restricted to a limited group of persons, and a letter of the strategus to the procurator *rei privatae* supports this view. The president refused to appoint liturgists to a service for the Treasury estates, claiming that it was forbidden to nominate people from among those belonging to the *bouleutikon axioma* to the Treasury liturgies.⁹ Whether the *bouleutikon axioma* means *ordo curialis* remains questionable (cf. n. 3), and the response given by the procurator *rei privatae* to appoint others, i.e. from outside the *bouleutikon axioma*, does not help us to understand the proper meaning of the words.¹⁰ It seems, however, to show that at least usually the appointees for specific liturgies were drawn from a corresponding group of people. If needed people who did not live in the metropolis could be nominated. In the case of lower ranking liturgies — like the *hyperetai* — it was the nominators (*systatai*) and not the Boule, who were required to find and nominate them.¹¹

It seems likely that the majority of those who were appointed to bouletic liturgies were liable to it, and that the lists of such liturgists named members of the bouletic class. Consequently the group of super-numerary collectors of *annona* must have possessed the same *poros* as the ordinary collectors and both groups were socially and culturally uniform.

Our Panopolis papyrus offers the names of 111 men who were newly appointed to collect provisions and to organize transport and bedding (cf. n. 5). In addition about 10 other men are mentioned who either were presently serving or had previously performed similar duties (cf. n. 7). Together with the names of 4 officials of the Boule (presidents, the keeper of records and the accountant of city funds¹²) this amounts to a total of 125 members of the bouletic class. Each of these persons is identified by two or three names. Though the full nomenclature included the names of the father and grandfather, the latter was omitted when not needed. For example, in cases where the liturgist himself or his father had an alias name, the name of the grandfather became superfluous and was omitted, and the liturgist who was currently serving was frequently referred to by personal name and title only.¹³ In total, the 125 men provide us with a body of 316 names. Many people, of course, had the same personal names. This fact reduces our body to 123 different names. One hundred twenty of these names are Latin, Greek or Greco-Egyptian. The last is the case with theophoric names derived from an Egyptian divinity by

⁸ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 289, 309, 323, 241, 318.

⁹ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 369–373.

¹⁰ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 400–404.

¹¹ Liturgists from among the country dwellers: P. Beatty Panop. 1, 180–183; Hyperetae: P. Beatty Panop. 1, 338–341.

¹² P. Beatty Panop. 1, 169 and passim, 202, 378.

¹³ E. g. P. Beatty Panop. 1, 86, 120, 202, 378.

simply adding a Greek ending or element: Anoubas, Anoubion, Apion, Besas, Besarion, Isidoros etc. There remain 3 Egyptian names which contain two meaningful Egyptian elements (plus Greek ending): Pamouthes, Petempos, and Petetriphis. The statistics confirm our expectations. Members of the bouletic class avoided names which sounded distinctively Egyptian.

The names Pamouthes and Petempos occur each only once, and at that they are the names of grandfathers. Six men, however, were named Petetriphis, i.e. "Given by Triphis", the local goddess:

- Petetriphis son of Besas, grandson of Hierax
- Petetriphis son of Heron, grandson of Pelops
- Petetriphis son of Paniskos, grandson of Protas
- Petetriphis also called Heron, son of Demetrios
- Polykrates also called Petetriphis, son of Triadelphos
- Theotimos son of Petetriphis Moros (or Petetriphis son of Moros).¹⁴

All the ancestral names are either Greek or Greco-Egyptian, and only in one case is the name of Petetriphis found among the fathers' names.

How old were the people nominated to these liturgies? According to P. Thead. 50 *apaitetai* were 20 to 32 years old.¹⁵ While other age groups remain possible, relatively young people seem usually to have served in this liturgy. In any case, at the very end of the third century the majority of liturgists were drawn from those born about the middle of the century. In the case of Petetriphis the father, it is noteworthy that his name appeared only once among more than one hundred and fifty other names of fathers. If he was about 50, he could have been born within the same time span. The fashion among bouletic families of giving their sons the name Petetriphis with its both local and native Egyptian character dates from the second half of the third century.¹⁶

The local patriotism of members of the bouletic class is also evidenced in a famous letter from the archonts and the Council of Hermopolis to one of their fellow-citizens, at that time, in 266–267, a high imperial official.¹⁷ It contains expressions which reflect what G. Méautis calls "amour-propre municipal suraigu": *patris, oikeia* and also the "god of our town"—πατρῶος ἡμῶν θεός. This god is Hermes Trismegistos and the letter contains even a quotation from the hermetic book of

¹⁴ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 325, 281, 310, 281, 184, 322.

¹⁵ Lewis, Inventory, s.v.; id., *Compulsory Public Services*.

¹⁶ An interesting example of the same tendency from outside Egypt is that of Heliodorus, the fourth-century author of the *Aethiopia*. He says that he is a Phoenician from Emesa, son of Theodosius of the race of the Sun (Helios), thus stressing that in spite of his Hellenic culture and undoubted Roman citizenship, he is a pagan, Oriental in origin, and particularly devoted to his native god. O.C.D. s.v. Heliodorus.

¹⁷ G. Méautis, *Hermopolis-La-Grande*, Lausanne 1918, pp. 175 f. The document is C. P. Herm. 125 II (= Wilcken, Chr. 40) and C. P. Herm. 124 R.

Poimandres.¹⁸ In the next century we learn of a circle of intellectuals in Hermopolis dedicated to the worship of Hermes Trismegistos.¹⁹

In designating the Hermetic Scripts as Egyptian we should remember that they are "Egyptian in the sense of being produced in Egypt by men of Greek speech and ... contain little or nothing of native Egyptian doctrine or custom". This character "is a result of the then prevalent enthusiasm for the supposed ancient wisdom of Egypt and of the older Oriental cultures generally".²⁰ This is a warning that what seems, for good reasons, genuine Egyptian might have been more local than native.

What took place in Egyptian towns was not necessarily native Egyptian. In Panopolis, where local Min was identified with the Greek Pan as is reflected by the town's name, and by numerous Panodoroi (10 in our text) and Paniskoi (11 examples) among its inhabitants, there existed another tradition identifying Egyptian Min with Perseus. Herodotus says that the inhabitants of Chemmis worshipped Perseus and as the only Egyptians celebrated an agon of Greek style in his honour.²¹ We may doubt whether this agon continued through the centuries, but it is obviously for this reason that the local games created in the third century A.D. were named the "Sacred Agon of Perseus".²² In the group of names which we are considering the name of Perseus occurs twice.²³

Was the phenomenon of giving children born in the second half of the third century theophoric names connected with the local goddess Triphis simply a fashion of that time or was it a revival of genuine Egyptian tradition and creeds? We cannot answer this question with certainty. We know nothing about the Egyptian cult of Triphis. Her sanctuary, Triphieion, was situated on the left bank of the Nile facing Panopolis.²⁴ It was important and big enough to include a *palatium* (which was being prepared for the impending visit of Diocletian).²⁵ It was certainly well-known also outside the nome and its fame contributed to the glory of the town. Devotion to the goddess is well attested in our document since in addition to 6 Petetripheis we find here a record of 10 Triphiodoroi.²⁶ The last name is an exact Greek translation of Petetripheis, "Given by Triphis". The fact that both appear side by side in

¹⁸ Ibid., note to lines 8-9.

¹⁹ P. Herm. Rees 2-6. Esp. nos 2, 11; 3, 22 f.

²⁰ O.C.D., s.v. Hermes Trismegistus.

²¹ II, 91. Cf. L. Castiglione, *Herodote II 91, Mélanges Michalowski*, pp. 41-49 and A. B. Lloyd, *Perseus and Chemmis*, JHS 89 (1969), pp. 79-86.

²² P. Oxy. XXVII, 2476 (289 A.D.) and Iconomopoulos, *Les jeux gymniques de Panopolis*, REG 2 (1889), pp. 164-168.

²³ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 282, 292.

²⁴ P. Beatty Panop. p. XXXIV and H. Gauthier, *Notes sur le nome Panopolite*, BIFAO 10 (1912), p. 116.

²⁵ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 260.

²⁶ P. Beatty Panop. 1, 241, 256, 276, 280, 290, 299, 309, 392.

our text shows that giving a child a manifestly Egyptian name was a matter of choice.

It might be tempting to consider these facts together with the rise of the Coptic movement in the area. The local Akhmimic dialect was to flourish in early Christian literature, and the Triphiclion itself was soon to be converted into one of the most important Coptic monasteries—the White Monastery famous for its great Prior Shenute. On the other hand, the last generation of Greek pagan epic writers also came from this region: Triphiodoros, Nonnos, Kyros, and further the last pagan philosophers and scholars: Horapollon and his sons Horapollon the Younger and Heraiskos.²⁷

The situation was very complex. Hence we cannot even speculate whether our Petetripheis represented the lower ranks of the bouleutic class and thus were closer to the native, Coptic element. One of them, Petetripheis son of Moros, appears to have been appointed a gymnasiarch before he died early in the fourth century.²⁸ Nevertheless, there certainly were some new ideas and currents in the third century and they must have been present in the final stage of the struggle between paganism and Christianity in the fourth century. The Hellenism of the bouleutic class was the result of its privileged position. It is important that some of its members were no longer ashamed to bear Egyptian names. But the name itself was a particular one, it was the only Egyptian name they dared to bear.

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²⁷ J. Maspero, *Horapollon et la fin du paganisme égyptien*, BIFAO 11 (1914), pp. 164–195 and R. Rémondon, *L'Égypte et la suprême résistance au Christianisme (V^e–VII^e siècles)*, BIFAO 51 (1952), pp. 63–78.

²⁸ P. Berl. Bork., Col. X, 6.