EGYPT: TEMPLE OF ALL THE WORLD

The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West. Erik Hornung, translated by David Lorton. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001, 229 pages. (ISBN: 0-8014-3847-0)

Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt. Jeremy Naydler. Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 2005, 466 pages. (ISBN : 0-89281-755-0)

The Egyptian Mysteries. Arthur Versluis. London and New York: Arkana (Routledge - Penguin), 1988, 169 pages. (ISBN: 1-85063-087-9) *Reviewed by the staff of the Rosicrucian Digest*

ost Thou not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is the Image of Heaven; or what is truer still, the transference, or the descent of all that rule or act in Heaven? And if more truly still it must be said, —this land of ours is a Temple of all the World."¹

It was a commonplace among virtually all ancient commentators in the Greco-Roman world that Egypt was "the fountainhead of esoteric knowledge and wisdom."² Herodotus (484–ca. 425 BCE), Plutarch (46–127 CE), Chaeremon of Alexandria (1st century CE), and Iamblichus (ca. 245–ca. 325 CE) all testify to this. Pythagoras (582–ca. 507 BCE) studied in Memphis and may well have been initiated into the Mysteries himself.

Those closest to ancient Egypt in time spoke of its deep mystical and esoteric wisdom, coupled with efficacious and profound initiatory practices, a source of true power: "For that its very quality of sound, the true power of the Egyptian names have in themselves the bringing into reality that which is said."³

This view persisted during the next millennium in the literature of the Roman Empire in the East and in the Islamic world. When this legacy was rediscovered in the West during the fifteenth century Italian Renaissance, Western scholars accepted the classical commentators at their word.

Renaissance thinkers saw in the Greco-Roman mysteries and in their Egyptian sources, a connection to the *Prisca Theologia* (the underlying original world spirituality). For ensuing centuries, scholars, such as the esotericist and polymath Athanasius Kircher, S.J. (1602–1680), continued to pour over Egyptian materials seeking this wisdom.⁴



Egyptian Mystery School, by H. Spencer Lewis.

Early modern Egyptologists continued to hold traditional viewpoints of the ancient sources; however, by the end of the nineteenth century this had changed radically. Standard academic Egyptology now viewed the Egyptians as practical and materialistic, uninterested in theory or transcendence, and utterly devoid of mysticism, initiations, or any deep spirituality: "a pleasure-loving people, gay, artistic, and sharp-witted, but lacking in depth of feeling and idealism."5 While scholars agree that major rituals and public festivals (participated in by all) took place throughout the history of Pharaonic Egypt, the approach denying genuine Egyptian mysticism or esoteric initiations prior to Alexander's conquest in 332 BCE is still the mainstream view among academic Egyptologists today.

The three books reviewed here represent three aspects of the reevaluation of the mystical, esoteric, and initiatic character of

Rosicrucian Digest No. 1 2007 ancient Egypt in the academic world. Rosicrucians and others on the Hermetic path have never had any doubts as to the initiatic and mystical aspects of Pharaonic heritage. Indeed, the pioneering works of Frater Max Guilmot, Ph.D. demonstrate this admirably.⁶

Egyptology Distinguished from Egyptosophy

Erik Hornung's *The Secret Lore of Egypt* is not a revisionist work on ancient Egyptian mysticism. Hornung, Professor Emeritus of Egyptology at the University of Basel, and Jan Assmann, a German Egyptologist and Archaeologist, are arguably the two leading mainstream academic scholars of Pharaonic Egyptian religion today. Both continue to hold the view that "Egyptian religion then appears to be a matter of faith, the product of imaginative reconstruction rather than that of mystical practice."⁷

Hornung's work is a fascinating exploration of the field he terms "Egyptosophy," (the wisdom of Egypt), that is, the opinion that "the land of the Nile was the fount of all wisdom, and the stronghold of hermetic lore."⁸ He carefully contrasts Egyptosophy with Egyptology (the study of Egypt)—which in his view studies the historical record of Egypt. Egyptosophy for Hornung is still "the study of an imaginary Egypt viewed as the profound source of all esoteric lore. This Egypt is a timeless idea bearing only a loose relationship to the historical reality."⁹

Hornung is the first major Egyptologist to take the wisdom tradition connected with Egypt seriously as a pervasive phenomenon in the West, even if continuing to deny the reality of its historical source. His work complements the emerging studies in Western Esotericism by Antoine Faivre and others. However, as Dr. Jeremy Naydler points out, even these scholars of esotericism limit themselves by relying too heavily on the academic establishment's rejection of actual mysticism in pre-Hellenistic Egypt.¹⁰ Regardless of one's position on the definition of the origins of Egyptian wisdom, Hornung's *The Secret Lore* remains a valuable resource for the Egyptian mystical ideal throughout Western history.

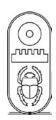
Hornung Provides a Summary of the Impact of the Idea of Egypt on the West

Written in condensed fashion, the book systematically presents movements, individuals, and ideas that have followed the wisdom of Egypt. Hornung gives the reader much substantive material to stimulate further research and reading, and each chapter provides an effective overview of a particular phase of the evolution of Egypt's impact on the Western world.

Moving from Pharaonic times, Hornung reviews the Egyptian wisdom tradition in the classical world and its influence on astrology, alchemy, Gnosticism, Hermetism, magic, and the Isis Mysteries. He then traces this through succeeding eras. The book also discusses the impact of this tradition on Rosicrucians, Freemasons, and many other groups, continuing to the present day.

While maintaining his belief in the distinction between these two approaches to Egypt, Hornung is remarkable among Egyptologists for according a valuable role to Egyptosophy. His final words ring more true today than when Hornung first penned them:

"The impending turn of the millennium nourished hopes of new spiritual light for humankind in the aspirations of many. Egypt will surely play a role in such developments in many forms: Pharaonic Egypt and the esoteric-Hermetic Egypt. There has been increasing talk of the relevance of the Hermetic Weltanschauung [worldview] as a point of view that can contribute to making sense of our modern world by seeking a direct connection with the original wisdom of the oldest cultures and with the core idea of all esoteric thought, according to which the ancient wisdom continues to be valid even in a world that has been transformed.



"All Hermetism is by its very nature tolerant. Hermes Trismegistus is a god of harmony, of reconciliation, and transformation, and he preaches no rigid dogma. He is thus an antidote to the fundamentalism that must be overcome if we desire to live in peace."¹¹

The Secret Lore is a valuable source book for the Western tradition of Egyptian Wisdom and is useful for casual readers and researchers alike.

Restoring an Acceptance of Ancient Egyptian Mysticism

Dr. Jeremy Naydler's reworking and publication of his doctoral thesis is the best example to date of why it is no longer tenable to hold the older academic viewpoint that mysticism and initiations did not exist prior to Hellenistic Egypt. In *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts*, he presents a magisterial study of both the history of viewpoints on Egyptian mystical practice and a case study in a shamanic interpretation of the texts found in the Pyramid of Unas.

A philosopher, cultural historian, and scholar of religious studies, Naydler earlier published a very valuable study of the Egyptian experience of the Sacred in *Temple of the Cosmos*,¹² which is accessible to both specialist and general reader. In *Shamanic Wisdom*, he succeeds in the same way, negotiating the difficult task of producing a work that is, at one and the same time, a serious scholarly statement and an engaging and enjoyable read.

Shamanic Wisdom has several goals. The first is to refute the academic Egyptological presupposition that Pharaonic Egypt had no tradition of mystical practice. A second is to give a case study of just how such texts can reveal their mysticism. Naydler also seeks to awaken the spiritual dimension within us and with which the Egyptians were so familiar.

How Egyptology Came to Reject Ancient Egyptian Mysticism and Initiations

The five chapters of Part One, "Mysticism in Ancient Egypt," and the last chapter of Part

Two, "The Recovery of Ancient Egyptian Mysticism," constitute an excellent introduction to the evolution of viewpoints on Egyptian mysticism from ancient times to the present. Naydler introduces the reader to the ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and modern sources on all sides of the issue. Taking a transdiciplinary approach, he argues that the sources supporting ancient Egyptian mysticism have a foundation in fact, using the tools of historical, cultural, literary, religious, and phenomenological analysis.

Naydler traces the origins and reasons for academic Egyptology's rejection of the idea that there was mysticism in ancient Egypt. One is the Western assumption that "the way to attain reliable knowledge is through science rather than through religious or mystical experience, and that science was a product of Greek, not Egyptian civilization."¹³

In parallel studies, it is interesting to note that the work on the pre-Socratic philosophers being done by Peter Kingsley also undercuts the roots of this assumption, demonstrating that these Greek "founders of logic, math, and science," were themselves initiates, and that their knowledge and wisdom were derived from their mysticism.¹⁴

A second example is the Western myth of progress in which it is vital for "our" approaches to be superior to those of the peoples of distant antiquity. Swayed by this presupposition, Egyptology and other disciplines today are guided by this mythos:

"The assumption that modern materialistic science provides the only sure path to acquiring knowledge, and that true knowledge began with the Greeks, not the Egyptians, to a large extent rests on a second deeply rooted assumption: that human history constitutes a steady progress not only of knowledge, but also of social organization and psychological and spiritual maturity. . . . Thus the idea of progress not only works to our advantage, but it also disadvantages the past, for the earlier the culture, the more primitive it must have been. This contrasts with the way ancient

Rosicrucian Digest No. 1 2007 cultures tended to view the past, which was that history involves a gradual decline from an original golden age in which human beings lived in harmony with the gods."¹⁵

Dissenting Scholars Study the Initiatic and Mystical Character of Ancient Egyptian Texts

Naydler skillfully narrates this portion of his study as a detective story of how the academic rejection of the initiatic character of Pharaonic Egypt came to be. He also traces the exceptions to this trend, including the pioneering work of Réné Schwaller de Lubicz, demonstrating the vital symbolic character of Egyptian civilization,¹⁶ and the Egyptological work of Alexandre Moret during the 1920s, which interpreted several Egyptian rituals as initiatory experiences.¹⁷

Although mainstream academics have not yet been swayed, *Shamanic Wisdom* chronicles lonely voices among modern scholars who acknowledge the place of initiations and mysticism within Egyptian life and religion, including Sotirios Mayassis¹⁸ (1950s); Walter Federn¹⁹ (1960s); Edward F. Wente,²⁰ Arthur Versluis,²¹ and François Daumas²² (1970s–1980s); and W. Brede Kristensen²³ and Alison Roberts²⁴ (1990s-2000s). Readers could hardly find a better introduction, summary, and guidebook through this vital field.

The Pyramid Texts of Unas are Examples of Shamanic Mysticism

The second task of *Shamanic Wisdom* is equally well laid out. Dr. Naydler analyzes the *Pyramid Texts* from the Pyramid of Unas (Fifth Dynasty, some 4,350 years ago).²⁵ Through transdisciplinary analysis, four chapters demonstrate the uses of these texts (over and above their funerary uses) in an initiatic, mystical, and shamanic context, revealing them to be a means to "die before you die," a pivotal purpose in shamanism.

Thoroughly referenced and illustrated, this work provides an invaluable contribution to the dialogue about the mysteries of ancient Egypt. Scholars, seekers, and all those interested in Pharaonic spirituality would be hard pressed to find a better introduction to the history of the Western view of Egypt's mysticism, and to a modern transdiciplinary approach validating the age-old view of ancient Egypt as a repository of primordial mysticism and wisdom.

This insight is not purely of academic interest. While not advocating a literal revival of Pharaonic religion, he suggests, in much the same way that the Rosicrucian Order adapts the ancient tradition to our own day, that:

". . . the study of ancient Egyptian religion may lead us to conceive of a task that we have to fulfill in the present day.

This task is to ourselves open once more to those realms of spirit that we are presented with in the mystical literature of Egypt. This could lead to the possibility o f n e w а Egyptian-inspired

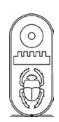


Akhenaten, by Margaret Mary Ducharme, S.R.C.; in the Johannes Kelpius Lodge, Allston, MA.

Renaissance, in which Western spiritual culture is given fresh vigor by connecting to its Egyptian roots. . . . The study of ancient Egyptian religion paradoxically points us toward our own future, which is surely to develop new capacities of consciousness that would awaken us once more to the spiritual realities of which the mystical literature of ancient Egypt speaks."²⁶

The Initiatic Message of the Egyptian Mysteries

Just what the spiritual and mystical import of such attention to the Egyptian model would be, is the subject of Arthur Versluis's 1988 volume, *The Egyptian Mysteries*. A Professor of American Studies at Michigan State University, he is a leading voice in academic esoteric studies in North



America, and has compiled an impressive bibliography on esotericism and mystical spirituality.²⁷ Currently the editor of the online journal, *Esoterica*,²⁸ he is also the founding president of the Association for the Study of Esotericism which brings together scholars and students from across North America and promotes dialogue with European esoteric scholars and institutions.

Versluis does not care to debate the question of the Egyptian source of wisdom and spirituality; rather, he chooses to begin this volume with a clear assertion of the ancient viewpoint:

"There can be little doubt that whatever traditional symbology and metaphysics remain in the West today can be traced back to ancient Egypt, that land whose people, said Herodotus, were 'scrupulous beyond all measure in matters of religion."³⁰

Seeking what might remain of the *Prisca Theologia* for us today, Versluis analyzes the major characteristics of the Egyptian spiritual viewpoint. In Part One, he looks in turn at the concepts and practices represented by: Ma'at, the Primal Ennead, Isis, Osiris, the Second Death (when one becomes an *Akh*, an Effective of Voice), Typhon, Hermanubis, Ra–the Sun, the Two Lands, Sacred Language and Hieroglyphs, the Mysteries, and Apocatastasis (the restoration of all things). Part Two then delves into Initiation—its nature and practice in ancient Egypt and today.

The Egyptian Mysteries in a World Context

The prose is spare and telegraphic. Versluis writes as an initiate, sometimes ending with the phrase, "More than this we cannot say."³¹ As he ranges through the topics of Egyptian mystical spirituality, his discussion is informed by his own considerable erudition of world esoteric and exoteric traditions, including Sufi, Hindu, Buddhist, and Judeo-Christian mysticism. Each chapter says just enough to give sufficient information and, more importantly, to inspire readers to go within for their own reflections.

That is one of the secrets of this little book. While it is scholarly and connects Egyptian themes to world spiritualities, it is also very personal and individual. In the chapter on the Great Restoration which must follow the *Kali Yuga* (the end of all things), Versluis reminds us:

"And indeed, if we succeed, if we tread that ancient path primordial, regardless of the blindness of our time, regardless of our distance from ancient Egypt, our lives can still reflect the Divine Sun, our world can still be translucent and alive —for that ancient path can never vanish, though it can for us be obscured. Yet if we enter upon it, it shall ever be the same, as it was and is, and ever shall be. And when it is so for us, each as individuals: *that*, that is the true Restoration, the true *Apocatastasis*. All else is anticlimactic."³²

The Initiatic Character of Ancient Egypt

In addition to the Mysteries of Egypt and its initiations, Versluis reveals an Egypt much nearer the *Zep Tepi* (First Times). As did Schwaller de Lubicz, he conceives of Egypt as an initiatic culture in its totality, manifested most clearly in its spirituality. His sections on initiation discuss what can be salvaged from the ancient world, moving from the nature of initiation and symbolism in Egypt and throughout the world, to the work necessary for initiation, and finally to initiatory possibilities in our current age.

Writing from the point of view of one at the end of an age, Versluis masterfully guides readers as candidates through this initiatic volume. It is the type of book that accomplishes what it is about. It is a kind of initiation into the Egyptian Mysteries it discusses. This will take place, as do all initiations, according to the mode of the readers and their times.

The Egyptian Mysteries offers in true mystical fashion, only what is necessary for others to follow the path by one who has "done the work." It is very unusual to experience such writing, at one time scholarly and mystical; however, in company with Peter Kingsley and a few others, Dr. Versluis has

Rosicrucian Digest No. 1 2007 produced a living text to introduce the Egyptian Mysteries, much as his later *Theosophia* does for the Judeo-Christian-Islamic path of the heart.³³

It seems fitting to conclude our consideration of these three works on the Initiatic and Mystical tradition of ancient Egypt, with Versluis's final invitation to his readers at the end of *The Egyptian Mysteries*.

¹ "Asclepius (The Perfect Sermon)," in *Corpus Hermeticum*, 24.1, translation adapted from G. R. S. Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, vol. 2 (1906; repr., York Beach, ME: Weiser Books, 1992), 221.

² Jeremy Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt* (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 2005), 22.

³ "The Definitions of Asclepius unto King Ammon," in *Corpus Hermeticum*, 16.2, translation adapted from Mead, *Thrice Greatest Hermes*, vol. 2, 170. See note 1.

⁴ For an excellent discussion of ancient and Renaissance attitudes toward Egypt, see Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 20-23, and accompanying bibliographical notes on 348-352. For classical sources, see also Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: its Impact on the West*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 19-25, and for Renaissance views, 83-91.

⁵ Alan Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar*, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 24c; cited in Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 36. For a survey of modern academic Egyptology's views on this subject, see Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 23-44, and accompanying bibliographical notes on 352-356.

⁶ Max Guilmot, "The Initiatory Process in Ancient Egypt," trans. Michelle Ziebel (1978; San Jose: Supreme Grand Lodge of the Ancient & Mystical Order Rosae Crucis, 1997). Dr. Guilmot also published articles on similar subjects in the *Rosicrucian Digest*, including "Ancient Egypt's Concept of Immortality," (March 1965), and "An Initiatory Drama in Ancient Egypt," (December 1971); and in French, *Connaissance et intuition: réponses de l'Egypte ancienne: énergie invisible, guérison spirituelle, dédoublement, précognition* (Bruxelles: Servranx, 1991); *Les initiés et les rites initiatiques en Égypte ancienne* (Paris: R. Laffont, 1977); and *Le message spirituel de l'Égypte ancienne* (Paris: Hachette, 1970).

⁷ Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 50. The best known works of these authors on ancient Egyptian religion are: Jan Assmann, *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001); Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: the One and the Many*, trans. John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Erik Hornung, *Akhenaten and the Religion of Light*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); and Erik Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, trans. David Lorton (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

⁸ Erik Hornung, Secret Lore, 1.

9 Ibid., 3.

¹⁰ Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 326.

¹¹ Hornung, Secret Lore, 201.

¹² Jeremy Naydler, *Temple of the Cosmos: The Ancient Egyptian Experience of the Sacred* (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 1996).

¹³ Naydler, *Shamanic Wisdom*, 29.

This is the purpose of the Mysteries for all who participate in their work and worship:

"All initiation transmutes as one passes through its transmission; tradition is a *mediatrix*. Initiate and symbol converge to reveal the immutable Origin, and every moment is initiatory, for those with eves to see.

"Let us begin."34

Endnotes:

¹⁴ Peter Kingsley, Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean tradition (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); In the Dark Places of Wisdom (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999); and Reality (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2003).

¹⁵ Naydler, Shamanic Wisdom, 32-33.

¹⁶ Rene Schwaller de Lubicz, *The Temple of Man: Apet of the South at Luxor*, trans. Deborah Lawlor and Robert Lawlor, 2 vols. (Rochester VT: Inner Traditions, 1998). An introduction to Schwaller's work may be found in John Anthony West, *The Serpent in the Sky* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 1992).

¹⁷ Alexandre Moret, *Mystères égyptiens* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1922).

¹⁸ Sotirios Mayassis, Le Livre des Morts de l'Égypte Ancienne est un Livre d'Initiation (Athens: Bibliothèque d'Archéologie Orientale d'Athènes, 1955); and Mystères et initiations de l'Égypte ancienne. (Athens: Bibliothèque d'Archéologie Orientale d'Athènes, 1957).

¹⁹ Walter Federn, "The 'Transformation' in the Coffin Texts: A New Approach," in *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 19 (1960): 241-57

²⁰ Edward F. Wente, "Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt?" Journal of Near Eastern Studies 41 (1982): 161-79

²¹ Arthur Versluis, *The Egyptian Mysteries* (London and New York: ARKANA, 1988).

²² François Daumas, "Le fonds égyptiens de l'hermétisme," in *Gnosticisme et monde hellenistique: Actes du Colloque de Louvain-la-Neuve* (11-14 March 1980), ed. J. Ries, 3-25. Louvain-la-Neuve, France, 1982; "Y eut-il des mystères en Égypte?" in Le Bulletin Annuel de "L'Atelier d'Alexandrie" 1 (1972): 37-52.

²³ W. Brede Kristensen, Life out of Death: Studies in the Religion of Egypt and of Ancient Greece (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1992).

²⁴ Alison Roberts, My Heart, My Mother: Death and Rebirth in Ancient Egypt (Totnes: Northgate Publishers, 1995).

²⁵ "The Pyramid of Unas," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/ wiki/Pyramid_of_Unas.

- ²⁶ Naydler, Shamanic Wisdom, 329.
- ²⁷ See http://www.arthurversluis.com/.
- 28 http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/.
- 29 http://www.aseweb.org/.
- ³⁰ Arthur Versluis, *Egyptian Mysteries*, 3. See note 21.
- ³¹ Ibid., 93.
- ³² Ibid., 97-98.
- ³³ Arthur Versluis, *Theosophia: Hidden Dimensions of Christianity* (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Press, 1994).
- ³⁴ Versluis, *Egyptian Mysteries*, 148. See note 21.