

# Propheying the Demise of Egyptian Religion in Late Antiquity: The *Perfect Discourse* and Antoninus in Canopus

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## Abstract

When the demise of traditional Egyptian religion took place is much debated. Some scholars have portrayed vibrant cults continuing well beyond the 4th century, embattled by Christianity, whereas others see a marked decline in the late 2nd and early 3rd century, leaving a blank slate for Christianity in the fourth century. The present contribution interprets the apocalyptic prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus in the *Perfect Discourse* to reflect a priestly insider's perspective of the decline in temple-cult in the early 3rd century, and its projected catastrophic consequences for Egypt and indeed the cosmic order. Yet, despite the general neglect of temple-cult and literacy in the Egyptian priestly scripts, certain temples remained in use. The second part of the article is devoted to the survival and apparent rejuvenation of the temple of Osiris/Serapis in Canopus, in the second half of the 4th century. This case shows that at this late date there were still self-consciously traditionalist devotees of Egyptian gods, though our sources do not permit us to see to what degree their temple-cult corresponded to the old "standard model." The temple's alliance with the non-Egyptian Neoplatonist Antoninus suggests that the image of Egypt as the temple of the world is now championed in the language of Hellenism, and Antoninus updates the now nearly two-centuries-old prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus to predict the fall of the Serapis temples in Alexandria and Canopus after his death. Both the *Perfect Discourse* and Antoninus are testimonies of a literate elite that saw the great temples as the essence of Egyptian religion, and their demise as the end of Egypt and the world.

## Keywords

prophecy – Egyptian temples – Hermes Trismegistus – Osiris – Serapis – Canopus – Neoplatonism – Antoninus

The impression one gains from reading Christian hagiographies and homilies is that Late Antique Egypt had a still vibrant temple-cult associated with their statues, perceived as demons by the Christians for their charismatic holy men, the monks, to combat. Hence, David Frankfurter, in his seminal *Religion in Roman Egypt* (1998), portrayed a still vibrant indigenous, traditional religion in 4th-century Egypt. The book has since been subjected to criticism for taking Christian sources at face value, and for misconstruing the rhetorical construction of pagan foils for Christian holy men as historical reality (e.g., Bagnall 2008).<sup>1</sup> Most virulent has been the critique leveled by the Egyptologist Mark Smith, whose eschewal of Christian literature and proudly positivistic view of archaeological sources have yielded a different image (Smith 2017: 421–537). According to Smith, absence of archaeological evidence for traditional practices is evidence for their absence. The resulting picture is that Egyptian religion was moribund already in the 3rd century, and completely gone in most places by the 4th century.

Consequently, any theoretical consideration of how and why the demise of traditional Egyptian religion took place must first deal with the question of our sources, in order to gain a clearer picture of where and when this process took place. Even though Smith's positivism is arguably overblown, his advice for a cautious approach to investigations of religious demise is well taken (Smith 2017: 533–534), as is his insistence that the demise of Egyptian religion progressed at different paces in different localities, an insight already emphasized by Frankfurter (1998: 97–144). As is well known, in Philae to the far south of Egypt, the cult of Isis was still ongoing into the 6th century, yielding the last known hieroglyphic inscription toward the end of the 4th century, and the last demotic inscription in the mid-5th century (Dijkstra 2008). Yet we cannot be sure to what degree the cult practiced under Justinian corresponded to the “standard model” of indigenous Egyptian temple-cult that goes back to at least the second millennium BCE, since any tradition, even conservative ritual traditions, is bound to undergo transformations in the course of centuries (Finnestad 1997: 203).

The task of establishing a holistic image of the demise(s) of traditional Egyptian religion, in different localities at different times, surpasses the aims of the present contribution. Rather, we will take one source to illustrate both an insider's view of what constituted the essence of Egyptian religion, and his

1 In his latest monograph, Frankfurter (2018) eschews the perspective of struggle or pagan survivals, seeing instead practices with roots in traditional Egyptian religion as part of syncretistic Christianization. See further on the Christianization of 4th-century Egypt: Bagnall 1982, 1988; Depauw and Clarysse 2013, 2015; Dijkstra 2008, 2011, 2021; Frankfurter 2014; Kakosy 1984; Medini 2015; Rémondon 1952; Thelamon 1981; Wipszycka 1986, 1988.

perception of why this religion was failing, being on the brink of its demise. This source is the prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus in his *Perfect Discourse*, better known as the *Asclepius*, which it will be argued reflects an early 3rd-century warning against the neglect of Egyptian temple-cult. Thereafter we shall consider how this prophecy was actualized in one Egyptian locality, the temple of Osiris in Canopus, near Alexandria, at the end of the 4th century. This example will show the risks of rejecting out of hand all Christian sources of surviving pagan cults and their sometimes violent confrontation with Christians, by comparing the Christian sources with the rare occurrence of a pagan source to the demise of this cult.

### 1 Egyptian Religion and Its Demise in the Prophecy of the *Perfect Discourse* (*Asclepius*)

*The Perfect Discourse* (*PD*) of Hermes Trismegistus is a lengthy dialogue between Hermes and his disciple Asclepius that takes place in the interior of an Egyptian temple, where the disciples Tat and Ammon also listen in.<sup>2</sup> The narrative framework is thus set in hoary antiquity; a myth attributed to the 3rd-century BCE Egyptian priest and annalist, Manetho, claims that the first Hermes, whom the Egyptians call Thoth, was among the gods who ruled Egypt before the great flood, whereas the second Hermes called Trismegistus discovered the stelae of the first Hermes after the flood, and is thus the transmitter of ancient wisdom going back to the gods (Waddell 1940: 208–211; Bull 2018a: 47–87). John Malalas (6th century) in his chronography claims this second Hermes lived in the time of Sesostris, the famous world-conqueror of the twelfth dynasty (*Chron.* 2.4–6; see Litwa 2018: 215–216). Claudius Aelianus states that “the Egyptians claim that Sesostris was fully educated in legal matters by Hermes” (*Var. hist.* 12.4), and since he, like Malalas, was familiar with Manetho (*Nat. an.* 10.16), the latter was likely the source for placing the second Hermes in the time of Sesostris. Since Hermes mentions his and Asclepius’s ancestors, who carried the same names and now have temples established to them in their native cities (*Ascl.* 37), it is clear that the interlocutors are imagined to be priests living in the far past, but after the time of the gods. Their priestly status is not explicitly mentioned, but guaranteed by their presence inside the temple, off-limits to nonpriestly personnel, and I have argued that the author

2 For the Latin *Ascl.*, see Nock and Festugière 1945–1954: 257–401; for the Coptic and in general, see Mahé 1978–1982: 2:47–272. Also on the prophecy, see Krause 1969; Wigtil 1984; Fowden 1993: 38–44.

(or compiler) was himself likely a priest: the discussion of the animation of statues demonstrates knowledge of the priestly Opening of the Mouth ritual, in which the presence of the deity is made manifest in the statue, and the ideal way of life extolled corresponds to the idealized portrayal of Egyptian priests by Chaeremon, himself an Egyptian priest and philosopher (Bull 2018a: 427–455). The priestly identity of the author is not crucial for our point, the main thing is that he shows some knowledge of traditional Egyptian religion and identifies himself as a strong adherent.

The *PD* is by all accounts a compilation, and its prophecy is likely from the early 3rd century, as I will show. Our anonymous author provides us with a rare glimpse of an insider's perspective on the demise of Egyptian religion (Cancik 1998: 109), placed in the mouth of the ancient authority Hermes, to whom both Strabo (*Geo.* 17.1.46) and Iamblichus (*Myst.* 1.1), centuries apart, affirm that Egyptian priests were wont to attribute their writings. The whole text now survives only in Latin, but the prophecy is contained in an excerpt also preserved in Coptic (= *Ascl.* 21–29), which is closer to the original Greek:

Or do you not know, Asclepius, that Egypt is an image of heaven? Or rather, it is the dwelling place of heaven and all the powers that are in heaven. If we are to tell the truth, our land is the temple of the world. But you should not be ignorant that a time will come in Egypt when the Egyptians will appear to have toiled at their divine cult in vain, and all of their effort in their divine cult will be scorned. For the entire divinity will cease in Egypt, and it will flee up to heaven, and Egypt will be widowed, it will be abandoned by the gods. Indeed, the foreigners will enter Egypt and rule over it. Egypt, or rather the Egyptians, will be prevented from worshiping God, and instead they will fall into the ultimate punishment, whoever is found among them worshiping or revering God. And on that day the country that is more devout than all countries will become irreverent. No longer will it be full of temples, but it will be full of tombs; nor will it be full of gods, but of corpses. O Egypt! Egypt, your cults will become like the fables, and your divinities will no longer be believed in ... and your astounding words will be as if they were stones, and the barbarian will be better in his divine cult than you, O Egyptian, whether a Scythian or the Indians, or another one of this sort.

NHC VI 70,3–71,9 (= *ASCL.* 24. my trans. from the Coptic)

Our text shows the importance accorded the temples of Egypt, which provide dwelling places for the gods – “the powers that are in heaven” – and thus secure Egypt the status as temple of the entire world. Later in the text we are told that

the earthly gods are fabricated by calling the souls of angels and demons down from heaven,<sup>3</sup> into statues made from appropriate materials, and kept in place there by means of “constant sacrifices, hymns, glorifications, and sweet sounds in tune with the heavenly harmony” (*Ascl.* 38). This precisely corresponds to the Egyptian cult of the gods, whose *ba*-soul in heaven was made to inhabit its statue by means of the Opening of the Mouth ritual, and henceforth persuaded to stay there by means of divine services including sacrifices, hymns, and music three times a day.

The essence of Egyptian religion according to our author is thus its temple-cult, which means that he would disagree with David Frankfurter who argued that it is best understood “first as a local, collective endeavor to negotiate fertility, safety, health, misfortune, identity, and collective solidarity” (1998: 6), and that as such it is complementary to or in tension with the “ideology” of what Robert Redfield (1956) calls the great tradition, namely the temple institution binding regional and local worlds of Egypt together. This ideology of the temples is that of *Ma'at*, the principle of cosmic order and justice, which is upheld by the king who vicariously is the one who performs the daily temple ritual throughout Egypt (Finnestad 1985: 184–185; on the concept *Ma'at*, see Assmann 2006). Temples and decorations built in Roman times show that the Roman emperor could easily be accommodated into this ideology. The prophecy shows that our author was a spokesman of the temple ideology, and in his view a threat against Egyptian temple-cult was a threat against cosmic order as such, which no amount of local rites negotiating fertility and health could shore up.

The “lived religion” highlighted by Frankfurter is however not wholly absent in our text. Just before the prophecy proper, Hermes extols the creation of divine statues: by creating gods in human likenesses, the fabricators imitate God himself, who created humans in his image. When Asclepius asks if Hermes refers to statues, Hermes takes issue with this term:

Do you say about those who have soul and breath that they are statues? They who perform such great deeds! Do you say about those who give oracles that they are statues? They who cause illnesses, who heal, and who send water too.

NHC VI 69,36–70,2 = *ASCL.* 24

3 Several scholars opt to transliterate as *daimon/daemon*, to differentiate them from Christian demons. Yet, the underlying Greek or Latin word is the same, understood by pagans to refer to intermediary superhuman beings, either good or bad, and by Christians as the servants of Satan. Thus, Lactantius read *PD*'s references to *daimones* to refer to evil demons.

It is clear from the direct sequel, the quoted passage on Egypt as the temple of the world, that these statues, or rather earthly gods as it seems Hermes would prefer to call them, are the ones worshiped on a daily basis within their temples. Besides providing a divine presence on earth that upholds it as an ordered cosmos, the other boons enumerated by Hermes are prophesying the future, healing, and sending water. This does correspond to the actual services rendered by the deities of the major temples. Prophesying took place especially during the festivals, when the deities left their temples on processional barks, and worshipers could receive oracular answers to their questions (Frankfurter 1998: 145–197). Healing also took place at the shrines, through the so-called *cippi*, stelae especially featuring Horus, onto which one could pour water and then collect it again on a tray below, after which it could be used as healing amulets (Frankfurter 1998: 46–52). Some deities also had incubation chambers, in which they could appear to their worshipers in dreams to heal them, or provide instructions for how to be healed (Renberg 2017: 1:327–519). The sending of water no doubt refers to the annual god-sent flooding of the Nile, crucial for Egyptian agriculture, and this flooding was especially attributed to the god Khnum of Elephantine, but also other gods were credited, such as Osiris. Sending illness can hardly be said to be a boon desired from the gods, but it demonstrates the power of the earthly gods if they are angered, and later in the text we learn that earthly gods are prone to anger since they also consist of a material body, namely their statue (*Ascl.* 37). The statue is thus the animated body of the god of the temple, which explains why, if worship ceases, “no longer will Egypt be full of temples, but it will be full of tombs.” The functioning temple is the house of the living earthly god, whereas the abandoned temple is nothing but a tomb, void of any divine presence. The more quotidian benefits and punishments conveyed by the earthly gods are thus manifold, besides their upholding of societal and cosmic order, and popular religion is allied to temple religion (Bagnall 1993: 261).

There is also a two-tiered function of access to divine powers. Since the essential human is “omniform,” it takes the form of whatever it cleaves to, resulting in a hierarchic anthropology:

The one who has attached himself to the gods by means of a divine religion (*diuina religione*), and whose mind is joined to the gods, approaches near to the gods, while the one who has attached himself to the demons approaches them. The ones who are content with the middle position of their race are truly humans, while the rest of humankind will become similar to whatever kind of thing they have attached themselves to.

ASCL. 5

The human race is elsewhere said to occupy the “favorable middle position” (*Ascl.* 6) between gods and animals, and since humans share the irrational soul with animals, it is likely that “the rest of humankind” in fact are thought to resemble irrational beasts because they follow their urges and desires. While demons can be either good or bad in Hermetic demonology, those mentioned here must correspond to the “philanthropic demons” mentioned in the preceding passage, and the demons to which they cleave are likely those residing in their statues in the temples. As I have argued elsewhere (Bull 2018a: 431–438), the divine people are likely the priests who are able to create the earthly gods, the demonic people are either lower priests or zealous lay worshippers, whereas the median humans are likely regular humans who come to worship at the appropriate times but have no hand in the cult. The rest of humankind are naturally the godless and irreverent people, among whom the worst are the temple-thieves.<sup>4</sup>

The natural order of society is thus that a religious elite similar to the gods tends to the temple-cult by creating earthly gods and preserving the divine element residing there by means of constant worship, whereas a second tier also worships the demons residing in the statues. Regular people benefit from the temples through oracular replies, healing, and the annual inundation of the Nile. However, Hermes predicts that this ideal order will be under threat, and very likely this is a *vaticinium ex eventu*, a calamity the author perceived as very real in his own time.

The direct cause of the demise of religion is the invasion of foreigners who rule over Egypt and prevent the Egyptians from practicing true worship. These foreigners are anonymous, and there is no particular reason to identify them with the Scythians and Indians, mentioned later, as stereotypical foreigners (NHC VI 71,8 = *Ascl.* 24). No doubt the Romans are intended. Previous scholars often thought that our prophecy was made or edited in reaction to the laws against pagan cult and temples of the second half of the 4th century (e.g., Scott 1924–1936: 3:163; Nock 1944: 21; Schwartz 1982). However, the North African Christian writer Lactantius refers to our prophecy in his *Divine Institutes*, written shortly after the persecution of Diocletian in 303–304, and it can thus not have been written later than the third century, at a time when the Christians were a small minority in Egypt and the rest of the Roman Empire.<sup>5</sup> So, if our

4 NHC VI 78,15–17: ερεωλογα ρι νογῆκα εἰν ογῆτε εφε ἡαεβης; the Latin parallel in *Ascl.* 29 says that the worst criminals are those put to death by human law (*qui damnati humanis legibus uitam uiolenter amittunt*). See below.

5 Pace Lane Fox 1990; the Coptic version shows that the reference to anti-pagan legislation is not an addition reflecting the Theodosian code, *pace* Athanassiadi 1993: 15–16.

prophecy reflects actual events then what is it in reference to? The Egyptian priesthood was curtailed after the Roman conquest, with the confiscation of temple lands and regulations for priests codified in the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos*, making priesthood less lucrative (Nock 1944: 23; Bagnall 1993: 268; Monson 2012: 209–233). Still, it can hardly be said that the priests were prevented from practicing their divine services in the first two centuries of Roman control. But in the year 199, the prefect of Egypt, Q. Aemilius Saturninus promulgated a decree forbidding divination by means of written revelations or the parade of images (Parássoglou 1976). Since Hermes does mention prophecy by means of statues as one of the benefits of the earthly gods, it is likely that the decree of Saturninus lies behind the “new law” mentioned in the prophecy of Hermes:

But believe me that people of this kind, *those who devote themselves to reverence of mind*, will be in the utmost danger for their soul, and a new law will be instituted: *nothing sacred, nothing devout, nothing worthy of either heaven or the heavenly ones will any longer be heard or believed in.*

NHC VI 72,34–73,3<sup>6</sup>

The likelihood that the new law refers to the decree forbidding oracular processions is increased by the fact that both texts state that the transgressors will be handed over to the “ultimate punishment.”<sup>7</sup> Even though the decree does not seem to have had widespread effect, since we have sources for subsequent oracular activities but not for official prosecution (see Frankfurter 1998: 153n35), it would likely have been set up in several places in Egypt and been perceived as Roman hostility to traditional religion by Egyptian priests. If I am right, the decree provides a *terminus a quo* for PD in the first half of the 3rd century. This tallies well with the decline in Hieroglyphic and Greek inscriptions and papyri in this period testifying to imperial support of cult activity as outlined by Roger Bagnall (1993: 262–267).

The decree forbidding oracles along with lacking support thus made our author blame the Romans for preventing divine cult, with the result that “Egypt who loves God and is the dwelling place of the gods, the school of divinity, will

6 NHC VI 72,34–73,3: ἀλλὰ ἐπιπτετεγε ναῖ ἄε ναῖ ἡττειμινε σεναδουμλανεγε εἴη πρεε ἡσινδλγνοσ ἡτογϣχχ· ἀγω σεσναδμῆν ογνομοσ ἡβρε [*three lines missing*]. The sentences in italics are taken from the Latin, *Ascl.* 25: *Sed mihi credite: et capitale periculum constituetur in eum qui se mentis religioni dederit. Noua constituentur iura, lex noua; nihil sanctum, nihil religiosum nec caelo nec caelestibus dignum audietur aut mente credetur.*

7 τῆ ἐσχά[τ]ῃ τιμωρίᾳ{ν} παραδοθήσεται = NHC VI 70,26–27: σεναδωπε εἴη ὁε ἡτιμωρια, see also preceding note, πρεε ἡσινδλγνοσ ἡτογϣχχ.



become an image of irreverence” (NHC VI 71,31–35). In fact, Egypt is so synonymous with reverence, that its decline means that the inhabitants of the land will no longer be true Egyptians:

For Egypt will again be left behind, and when the gods renounce the land of Egypt and flee up to heaven all the Egyptians will die, and Egypt will become deprived of both gods and Egyptians. But as for you, O river, a day will come when you will flow more with blood than water, and dead bodies will rise above the riverbanks, and the dead will be less mourned for than the living. He will (only) be recognized as an Egyptian by his language, and at the second time around. Why do you weep, Asclepius? He will seem like a foreigner by his actions.

NHC VI 71,10–29 (= ASCL. 24)

The emotional language, with a weeping Asclepius, is common in the apocalyptic genre, yet it also shows how catastrophic the decline in Egyptian religion is to our author. The world is becoming disenchanted, and no longer worth living in, it is in fact better to be dead than alive. The Egyptian temples anchored the earth to the heavenly order and beauty, and with them gone everything is in flux and morals and social order collapse. The corpses polluting the sacred Nile, which Hermes addresses directly, indicates indiscriminate killing. Naturally the Nile never overflowed with blood and corpses, so this is no *ex eventu*, but again it indicates that the author sees the temple-cult as the only thing preventing humans from acting brutally toward each other, a motif also found in the *Korê kosmou*, where Isis and Osiris put an end to mutual indiscriminate killing by instituting temples to the ancestor gods (SH XXIII, 65). In this topsy-turvy world, all values are inverted in what corresponds to the “chaos-description” (*Chaosbeschreibung*; see Frankfurter 1993: 159–194) well known from classical Egyptian sources:

They will prefer darkness to light and they will prefer death to life, and no one will look up to heaven with wonder. But the godly person will be considered a madman and the irreverent man will be honored like a sage; the coward will be considered to be strong and the good man will be punished like an evil man.

NHC VI 72,16–26 (= ASCL. 26)

The inversion of values extends to contempt for the world, elsewhere called the second god and son of the first god. It is tempting to see in this negative attitude to the world an allusion to some sort of anticosmic dualism, but likely

it just contrasts irreverent people with Egyptian cosmotheism, wherein the world is the manifestation of the one god who made himself into millions.

The demise of Egyptian temple-cult leads not only to moral and societal collapse, but the resulting departure of the gods from their temples also saps the world of all its vital energies. In fact, Hermes portrays the future irreverence, reflecting the author's grim view of his present, as the end of a cosmic cycle, in which a decrepit cosmos must die and be born again:

In those days the world will not be stable and the ocean will not be sailable, nor will the stars in the sky be known. Every sacred voice of the word of God will be silent about him. The air will be diseased. This is the old age of the world: godlessness, infamy, and lack of respect for decent sayings. But when this happened, Asclepius, then the lord, who is father, god, and creator after the first and one god, saw what had come to pass and set his will, namely the good, against the disorder. And when he had called back error he cleansed away evil, flooding some places with much water, scorching other places with sharpest fire, and at times oppressing them with wars and plagues. He restored his world and brought it back to *its primordial state*.

NHC VI 73,12–74,1 (= ASCL. 25)

A rich literature in Egyptian, spanning two thousand years, describes the consequences of *Ma'at* failing in terms of such a moral, societal, and cosmic reversal of values (Krause 1969; Assmann 2006: 218–222). It is however worth pointing out that instead of a legitimate king restoring order, as in the *Chaosbeschreibungen* of the Middle and New Kingdom, our author does not see royal power as the solution, rather it is the creator who has to remake the world as it was in the beginning, starting a new time-cycle.<sup>8</sup> This likely has to do with the idea of the Great Year, the period it takes for the stars to reset as they were at the creation of the world (the *thema mundi*), which in Egypt is often connected with the so-called Sothic cycle of 1461 years. The end of the cycle is associated with disasters, before the world restarts in a new golden age (Bull 2018a: 69–84).

The idea of an “old age of the world” is highly interesting in the context of the demise of religion. Of course, the idea is not uncommon in religious

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<sup>8</sup> Note that the passage concerning the gods who are lords of the earth and will retire to a city to the far west of Egypt by the sea (NHC VI 75,26–76,1) is not part of the prophecy, but likely refers to the installation of Egyptian gods in Alexandria under the Ptolemies, *pace* van Rinsveld 1985; Fowden 1993: 40; Bowersock 1990: 59.

traditions homologizing the cosmos with a living being, having a lifespan from golden youth to gray old age (see Cancik 1998: 104–106). Yet, in view of the strong connection our prophesy makes between true religion and cosmic order, it is possible that the author alludes to a literal aging of his religion. Secure sources for the aging of the adherents of Egyptian temple-cult in the 3rd century are lacking, but the steep decline of sources in hieroglyphic and demotic script in the 3rd and 4th century indicates that the educational facilities of the temples were failing. In the Roman period both these scripts became exclusive to priests educated at the House of Life, the temple institution in charge of educating young folks destined for priesthood (Tait 1994; Finnestad 1997: 228). By the late period, the number of hieroglyphic signs had multiplied tenfold from the classical period and had become quite an arcane and demanding script to master. Even though the *Gnomon of the Idios Logos* made literacy in these scripts a prerequisite for priesthood, it seems likely that by the 3rd and 4th century many priests no longer knew Egyptian scripts, and therefore must either have been taught the rites orally or held their posts as a sinecure. This situation would contribute to the “old age” bemoaned by our author, in the age-old complaint that young people nowadays have no respect for tradition: “This is the old age of the world: godlessness, infamy, and lack of respect for decent sayings.”

The prophecy of Trismegistus thus corresponds to what Bruce Lincoln calls a “recursive apocalypse” (2018: 140–143): a contemporary, decadent “old age of the world” will be dismantled and restored to an idealized “primordial state.” Such recursive apocalypses typically represent the interests of “old elites seeking to recover privileged positions from which they were recently displaced by foreigners and/or usurpers” (142). I am of course not suggesting that the prophecy should be used as a source for historical *realia* of the early 3rd century, but that it reflects an interested insider’s perspective on the contemporary demise of his religious institution, the Egyptian temple-cult, well enough attested in other sources (or lack of such).

Of course, some young people would still be invested in keeping up the religion of their ancestors. For example, the archive of the scholasticus Ammon, in Panopolis, from the first half of the 4th century, gives us some insight into an elite priestly family in which it was still attractive for the youngsters to assume the priestly roles to which the family had a claim (Bagnall 1993: 272–273; Willis and Maresch 1997; Bull 2018b: 216–218). Unfortunately, the Greek papyri give us no clue as to the degree of knowledge the incumbent priest had of traditional scripts, culture, and rituals. Some scholars see such late pagan priesthoods as sinecures (Cameron 2011: 132–172, for Rome), yet it seems unsound to disregard the letters entirely as evidence for traditional

Egyptian religion in early 4th-century Panopolis, since the contemporary Greek letters of the chief prophet of Hermopolis testify to his continued ritual responsibilities (Matthews 2006: 20–23).<sup>9</sup> In Alexandria too we have sources for a Neoplatonic elite with a vested interest in Egyptian religion and antiquities into the 5th century, but again we cannot know how much actual knowledge they had of traditional culture; the *Hieroglyphica* of Horapollo from this milieu indicates that actual knowledge of hieroglyphs had yielded to Platonic symbolic interpretations of the signs, though even here most of the signs are given the correct meaning (Maspero 1914). It is to such an interaction between Neoplatonic philosophy and traditional Egyptian religion we shall now turn (see Hadot 2015: 1–25).

## 2 Actualized Prophecy and the Demise of the Cult of Osiris in Canopus

Canopus is located around 20 kilometers to the northeast of Alexandria, by the mouth of the Canopic branch of the Nile, though much of the site has now sunk under water in Abu Qir Bay. Osiris had a temple here that became famous in late antiquity, and his spouse Isis had one in nearby Menouthis (Goddio and Clauss 2006: 195–203; *pace* Stolz 2008). The first-rank temple of Osiris itself was built by Ptolemy III in the Egyptian fashion, and the city was sufficiently prestigious that an ecumenical council of priests met there in his ninth regnal year – that is 238 BCE – and issued the so-called Canopus decree, preserved on a stela in Hieroglyphic, Greek, and Demotic (Budge 1904: 9).

When Strabo wrote about Canopus in the first century BCE, there is no mention of a temple of Osiris, only a temple of Serapis which was famous for cures and oracles (*Geo.* 17.1.17; see Renberg 2017: 339–347), but these two were probably one and the same: the submerged temple of Canopus had the head of a monumental statue of Serapis close by (Goddio and Clauss 2006: 88–89), a dedication from Taposiris, midway between Alexandria and Canopus, is made to “Osoros [*sic*] who is also Sarapis” (Koemoth 2019: 120), and an anonymous herbarium ascribes cures to Osiris in Canopus utilizing certain plants.<sup>10</sup> The identification of Osiris with Serapis was uncontroversial in

9 Cf. Smith 2017: 429–430 on fourth century Panopolis, neglecting Ammon, 518 on latest reference to chief priest of any Egyptian cult, neglecting the letters of Anatolius, both cases indicating a disregard for Greek sources for Egyptian religion.

10 Anonymous, *Carminis de viribus herbarum fragmentum* 111–113: τὴν βοτάνην ταύτην πολυώνυμος εὔρετ’ Ὀσίρις Αἰγύπτου γαίης προκαθήμενος ἡδὲ Κανώπου, ἐξ ἀρετῆς ἕνα πρῶτον ἐφημερίων θεραπεύσας (Heitsch 1964: 23–38).

antiquity, and in Canopus they seem especially tight and likely shared a temple (Kayser 1991: 213).

Since at least the first century CE, Osiris was worshiped in Canopus in the form of a jar filled with water, the lid shaped as the human head of the god (Fraser 1972: 1:253, 2:401; Bernand 1970: 164–257; Koemoth 2019). This form was called Osiris Canopus or Hydreios, and several such statues are found. Rufinus furnishes us with an etiology claiming this aqueous Osiris was devised by a priest of his to defeat the sacred fire of the Persians in a showdown between gods (Rufinus, *E. H.* 11.26). Another widely known story claimed the place was named after Menelaus's steersman, named Canopus, who supposedly was killed by a snakebite here on the way back from the Trojan war and was buried with divine honors (Faivre 1917: 5–6). However, Aelius Aristides in the 2nd century reports that the native clergy did not put credence in this story, and knew that the original meaning of the name was “land of gold” (*Aigyptios* 359–60: χρυσσοῦν ἔδαφος = perhaps *k3h-(n)-nbw*; but cf. Malaise 1999, who proposes *g3-(n)-nbw*), “naos of gold”).

In Roman imperial times there are inscriptions registered until the time of Philip the Arab (r. 244–249). The subsequent lack of inscriptions needs not mean a decline in habitation or activity however, since it is well known that the so-called “epigraphic habit” dwindles from the mid-3rd century. Papyri are of course not found in the humid Nile delta, so we must turn to two literary sources from around the turn of the 5th century for insight into the cult of Osiris right before it was violently shut down by the patriarch Theophilus. These are the *Lives of the Sophists* by Eunapius (ca. 347/8–post 414), and the Latin continuation of Eusebius's *Ecclesiastical History* by Rufinus of Aquileia (ca. 345–410/411). The conjunction of a pagan and a Christian source to the same events gives us a rare opportunity to see the other side of Christian triumphalism. Both sources are of course ideologically slanted, and cannot be taken at face value, but it is precisely these ideologies that were at stake during the events in Canopus toward the end of the 4th century.<sup>11</sup>

Eunapius was an adherent of the Neoplatonic school in the tradition of Iamblichus of Chalcis, which employed rituals referred to as theurgy as part of spiritual formation and as a means to communicate with and have visions of divine powers. One of the Neoplatonists portrayed by Eunapius is Antoninus, whose father and teacher were both students of Iamblichus, and whose mother

11 See Cameron 2011: 33–51 for the problems of interpreting sources slanted by conflicting ideologies addressing the same event, in this case Symmachus and Ambrose on the Altar of Victory.

was also a reputable theurgist.<sup>12</sup> Though not an Egyptian himself, Antoninus traveled to Canopus and settled there sometime in the second half of the 4th century, “and devoted himself wholly to the religious rites of that place”:

He crossed to Alexandria, and then so greatly admired and preferred the mouth of the Nile at Canopus, that he wholly dedicated and applied himself to the worship of the gods there, and to their secret rites. He made rapid progress towards affinity with the divine, despised his body, freed himself from its pleasures, and embraced a wisdom that was hidden from the crowd.

EUNAPIUS, *VIT. SOPH.* 6.10<sup>13</sup>

We cannot be sure when Antoninus arrived at Canopus, but he must have lived there for quite some time before his death around 390.<sup>14</sup> The question then is whether the worship and secret rites practiced in Canopus corresponded to traditional Egyptian rites, carried out in the Egyptian tongue. When Aelius Aristides went to Canopus in the 2nd century there was still a priest present who could give the correct Egyptian etymology for the name of his hometown, but we cannot be certain if that would still be the case two centuries later. Around 335 Athanasius writes that the Egyptians were “still now” (εἰσέτι καὶ νῦν) carrying out their laments for Osiris, Horus, and Typhon (*Contra gentes* 10), which must refer to the mysteries of Osiris at Khoiak, also mentioned in the Canopus decree. Around 375 Epiphanius of Salamis complains about rites of ecstatic and lewd women in many localities in Egypt, including the neighbor of Canopus, Menouthis, where Isis had an important shrine (*De fide* 12.1). Antoninus settled in Canopus because of the divine rites carried out there and was not himself their originator (*pace* Frankfurter 2000: 186–188). In fact, he is specifically said not to have practiced theurgic rites, out of caution toward the imperial authorities (*Vit. soph.* 6.10), so he must have left the rites to the

12 There is a problem with the chronology of Eunapius. In an oracle Sospittra delivers to Eustathius, she says she will bear him three sons and that he will die in five years. Since Eustathius was part of an embassy of Constantius to Shapur in 358 (*Amm. Marc.* 17.5), that would mean the earliest date the oracle could have been delivered is 353, which would then be the earliest possible birthdate of Antoninus. However, we are told that Antoninus was taught by Aedesius, who died around 351–355, and that he was an old man when he died shortly before the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria, in 391/2. This must mean that the tradition of the oracle is somewhat confused, and Antoninus was likely born earlier, perhaps 320–330. See Penella 1990: 53–56.

13 Translation from Wright 1922: 419.

14 It is unclear why Frankfurter 2000: 186 says he arrived in the 380s. Cf. Athanassiadi 1993: 13 (2nd half of 4th century); Watts 2006: 189 (370s to ca. 390).

priests, and it is hard to imagine this Neoplatonic connoisseur would be at all impressed if the Egyptian rites of Osiris at Canopus were entirely debased or performed in Greek. The likely reason Antoninus went to Egypt in the first place is the effusive praise lavished by Iamblichus on Egyptian rituals in *The Response of Abammon*, in which Iamblichus writes in the guise of the Egyptian prophet (= *hm-ntr*, a high priest) Abammon, and demonstrates sound knowledge of Egyptian religion, despite couching it in Neoplatonic concepts.

However traditional the cult of Osiris in Canopus might or might not have been, it seems that its alliance with a famous Neoplatonic dynasty led to a revival of sorts. Antoninus's repute was such that young men in search of philosophy flocked to the place, and "the temple was full of young priests" (6.9.16–17).<sup>15</sup> As against the senescence of Egyptian religion portrayed above, Antoninus's presence leads to a rejuvenation of the cult at Canopus, and even international visitors flocked to the place after visiting the Serapeum in Alexandria. This rejuvenation would be short lived, however. Towards the end of his life Antoninus predicted that after his death the temples would be destroyed, and it seems likely that the prediction of Hermes in *PD* informed his sense of the demise of Egyptian temples (Luck 1986; Fowden 1993: 182–183; van den Broek 2000; *pace* Athanassiadi 1993: 15–16):

Though he himself still appeared to be human and he associated with human beings, he foretold to all his followers that after his death the temple would cease to be, and even the great and holy temples of Serapis would pass into formless darkness and be transformed, and that a fabulous and unseemly gloom would hold sway over the fairest things on earth.

To all these prophecies time bore witness, and in the end his prediction gained the force of an oracle ... This, then, greatly increased the reputation of Antoninus also for foresight, in that he had foretold to all that the temples would become tombs.

EUNAPIUS, *VIT. SOPH.* 6.9, 6.11<sup>16</sup>

The idea that the temples would become tombs definitely recalls the prophecy of Hermes, and the gloominess that surpasses the fair earth corresponds closely to the *Chaosbeschreibung* in which the world is no longer an object of

15 Frankfurter 2000: 187 suggests these young men supplanted any "authentic shrine-professionals," but it is equally possible that his presence simply encouraged young Egyptians to apply for priestly duty. It is also mistakenly stated that this is an Isis-temple.

16 Translation from Wright 1922: 417, 425.

wonder, but will be despised. We certainly do not have to subscribe to the idea that Antoninus had some sort of supernatural power to be able to see which way things were going in the 380s,<sup>17</sup> when Theodosius I passed laws against pagan temples, and certainly these laws would bring to his mind the “ancient” prophecy of Hermes, as it also occurred to modern scholars (Frankfurter 1998: 185–186). Thus a prophecy that likely reflects the decrepitude of Egyptian temples in the early 3rd century was reactivated towards the end of this long senescence, when there was in fact “a new law” instituted, preventing the Egyptians from practicing their traditional temple-cult altogether.

The idea of temples as tombs is again activated when Eunapius describes the role of monks and the cult of saints after the temples were destroyed: led by Theophilus, the Serapeum of both Alexandria and Canopus are destroyed, the former torn down to its foundations, whereas monks settled in the latter, and they collected bones from justly convicted criminals, the “martyrs” that are worshiped like gods, even though they are in fact phantoms carrying the marks of their punishment (*Vit. Soph.* 6.11; see Penella 1990: 141–145). Eunapius might also have been familiar with *PD*, and the passage possibly reflects an editorial change to *PD*: our Coptic version, which is closest to the Greek original, states that the worst sinners, worthy of the most terrible punishment in the afterlife, are temple thieves, who violate both human and divine laws. In the corresponding passage, the Latin *Asclepius* has made the ultimate sinners those who die violent deaths, condemned by human laws, that is executed criminals (*Ascl.* 29; see Mahé 1978–1982: 2:267–269). In light of Eunapius, it seems likely that this interpolation took place during the 4th century, as a critique against the veneration of Christian martyrs, whose violent deaths indicates to Eunapius that they are not worthy of worship, since they then become *biaiothanatoi*, a class of vengeful spirits. The transition from temples to tombs in our prophecy is thus interpreted by Eunapius as a passage from the reverent cult of the gods to the irreverent worship of vengeful specters carried out especially by monks.

Rufinus does not mention Antoninus in his additions to the *Church History* of Eusebius, but agrees with Eunapius on the vitality of the cult at Canopus (see Thelamon 1981: 225–229):

As for Canopus, who could list the outrages connected with its superstitions? There was what amounted to a state school of magic there under

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17 Cf. Augustine, *Div. daem.* 1.6.11 (PL 40): *Quid ergo mirum, si jam imminente templorum aut simulacrorum eversione, quam Prophetæ Dei summi tanto ante praedixerant, Serapis daemon alicui cultorum suorum hoc de proximo prodidit, ut suam quasi divinitatem recedens vel fugiens commendaret?*



the guise of the study of the priestly writing, for so they call the ancient writing of the Egyptians (*sacerdotalium litterarum, ita etenim appellant antiquas Aegyptiorum litteras*). The pagans revered the place as a source and origin of demons to such an extent that its popularity was far greater than that of Alexandria.

RUFINUS, *E. H.* 11.26<sup>18</sup>

According to Rufinus, then, the priests of Canopus still mastered the Egyptian script, and we should not lightly discount his testimony, ideologically biased as it might be, since he had himself visited Alexandria and its environs before the destruction of the Serapeum. It has been proposed that the likely sources of Rufinus were a volume *On the Overthrow of Serapis* by Sophronius (Jerome, *Vir. ill.* 134; see Schwartz 1966), and an account by Theophilus himself, to which Eunapius responded critically (Orlandi 1970). The passage indicates that the Canopus temple was not a largely defunct temple rebooted by Antoninus, acting as a pseudo-Egyptian high priest, but rather that the native priesthood must have collaborated with their visitor, and, as Eunapius relates, experienced a surge of interest from young people at the arrival of the international Neoplatonic celebrity.

After the passage quoted, Rufinus's account continues with the etiological myth of Osiris Hydreios, the story of the water jar and the fire of the Persians, mentioned above. The moral of the story is that though the Egyptian priest might have outsmarted his Persian competitors with his water-jar scheme, no trick was of any avail against Theophilus, who with his monastic cronies razed the temple: "For on the site of Serapis's tomb the unholy sanctuaries were leveled, and on the one side there rose a martyr's shrine, and on the other a church" (11.27). While Eunapius states the temple was taken over by monks who introduced a martyr-cult, Rufinus says several sanctuaries around Serapis's tomb were leveled, of which one became a martyr's shrine and the other a church. Since Rufinus goes on to describe the martyr relics of John the Baptist, placed by Theophilus in a martyrium in Alexandria, it is possible that this passage does not refer to Canopus but to Alexandria (Thelamon 1981: 256), or in view of the plural "sanctuaries" it might refer to both localities. Underwater archaeology at least indicates that the temple of Osiris/Serapis in Canopus was leveled down to its foundations, and a Christian structure built in its place (Goddio and Clauss 2006: 89–91). The mention of Serapis's tomb shows that Rufinus or his source conflates Osiris and Serapis. Either the tomb itself is the temple of Osiris/Serapis, or perhaps there was a secondary shrine representing the

18 Translation from Amidon 1997: 472.

tomb during the mysteries of Osiris in Khoiak, when his burial and resurrection were celebrated.

According to the Coptic *History of the Church*, it was Pachomian monks Theophilus brought in to root out idolatry in Canopus (Orlandi 1970: 12; *pace* Hahn 2004: 102), and they then formed the Metanoia convent there. In the 5th century there was another showdown with adherents of the temple of Isis in neighboring Menouthis, but that is another story (see Athanassiadi 1993: 15; Haas 1997: 169–170, 327–329; Watts 2006: 217–218).

### 3 Conclusion

According to one proponent of the minimalist approach to the persistence of organized temple-cult, downplaying the violence of pagan encounters with Christians in Canopus, Atripe, and Menouthis, “even though there is no reason to doubt that they describe real events, it is almost impossible to say what exactly happened because we do not have other types of evidence with which to confirm them” (Dijkstra 2011: 399; so also Hahn 2004: 102). This strikes me as overly pessimistic. From the accounts of Eunapius and Rufinus, from opposite poles of the ideological spectrum, we can be fairly certain that after the attack on the Serapeum in Alexandria, Theophilus sent monks to violently level the notorious temple of Canopus, and to establish a monastery and a martyrion there. Other sources bear out this picture. The story of Antoninus moreover indicates that this attack was far from unexpected by the devotees assembled around the temple of Osiris, who saw the prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus realized before their eyes.

The cult of Osiris/Serapis at Canopus gives us a rare example of a native cult that was active and seemingly rejuvenated in the second half of the 4th century, before it was violently shut down in the aftermath of the destruction of the Serapeum in Alexandria. In this case, the triumphalist narrative of Rufinus is corroborated by the pagan Eunapius, which should serve as a warning not to reject out of hand similar triumphalist narratives where we have no sources for the opposing point of view.<sup>19</sup> No doubt there was a slow decline of native cults long before the final confrontation with Christian legal shutdowns, but certain temples remained in operation, in areas where there was a local interest in upholding traditional practices, such as Canopus in the far north and Philae

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19 Of course, both of our sources here profess to be histories, whereas other genres such as hagiographies and homilies are notoriously poor sources for teasing out historical facts; see Smith 2017: 534–535.

in the far south. We cannot assume that the entire classical Egyptian culture was maintained in these localities, including knowledge of the priestly scripts and the whole gamut of arcane rituals to be practiced daily and on festival occasions. Eunapius and Rufinus indicate that at Canopus, as at Philae, the traditional scripts and arcane knowledge were preserved, but we cannot confirm this since the moist climate would have ruined any papyri, and the epigraphical habit ceased even for Greek in the mid-3rd century.

Both the writer of *PD* and Antoninus communicated their enthusiasm for Egyptian religion in the Greek language; the latter was a foreigner and likely never learned much of the local language, while the former might have been an Egyptian priest, though we will never know if he knew the priestly scripts. For both, it was Hellenism that provided the idiom with which to defend traditional Egyptian religion (see Bowersock 1990: 55–69; Frankfurter 2000). The Egyptian language would only survive as Coptic, a language used by Christians (and Manichaeans), while the last Egyptian enthusiasts of Isis and Osiris in late 5th-century Alexandria would apparently formulate themselves in Greek and through the lens of Neoplatonism. The author of *PD* saw temple religion as totally essential for the Egyptian identity, to the degree that when it ceases a person will only “be recognized as an Egyptian by his language ... [but] will seem like a foreigner by his actions.” No doubt, the last priests of Osiris at Canopus cannot have felt much kinship to the Coptic monks who attacked them.

Despite the fact that most temples had long since been abandoned, destroyed, or adapted to other uses by the time of Antoninus, it is striking how he echoes the earlier prophecy of Hermes Trismegistus in seeing the Egyptian temple as the final redoubt of the divine cosmos, portraying the demise of temple-cult as leading to a godforsaken world, whereby moral, societal, and cosmic order collapses. The temples constituted the ideological pole, or what Ramsay MacMullen calls “the upper part” (1997: 58), of traditional Egyptian religion, and perhaps it is the demise of this upper part that permitted the survival of its “lower parts” in Christian Egypt:<sup>20</sup> Popular practices concerned with healing, divination, and the rise of the Nile, described by Hermes as the boons of the earthly gods in their temples, could be accommodated in a Christian

20 See Frankfurter 1998, utilizing Robert Redfield’s (1956) distinction between the “local” or “little traditions” and their relations to literate and ideological “great traditions”; Frankfurter 2018 outlines the persistence of local religious practices in Christian Egypt, but eschews the language of “pagan survivals”. Smith 2017: 537 speaks of a “hiatus in which no single religion was dominant” in some places, but this must refer to the “upper part,” for it is extremely unlikely that any region would be left with no religion at all between the demise of traditional Egyptian religion and Christianity, despite our dearth of sources.

worldview as soon as their anchoring in the temples was loosened by the latter's demise.

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