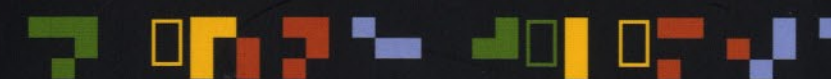




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HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2007 SPRING SUMMER AUTUMN WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

REPRESENTATIONS OF HERMES AND THOTH FROM ROMAN EGYPT

IN MEMORIAM LÁSZLÓ KÁKOSY (1932–2003)

After Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt in 332 BC, the Macedonian Ptolemies ruled the country for the next three hundred years, followed by the Romans, who dominated Egypt for several centuries. Never again did an Egyptian pharaoh sit on the throne of the country, and after Augustus' conquest even its independence was lost: it became a mere province of the Roman empire. The arrival of Greek, Macedonian, and Roman settlers brought social and cultural changes. The Ptolemaic settlers did not live in isolation: they began to intermarry with Egyptians, "the most noble among the Barbarians", some even bore Egyptian names, and enriched the decoration of their tombs with Egyptian motifs. In turn, many Egyptians learned Greek and used the Greek form of their names alongside the Egyptian. The "globalized" world of the Hellenistic and Roman periods did not impose the culture of the conquerors onto the Eastern Mediterranean basin, but gave free play to encounters and mutual influence between different cultures. The new gods of the Hellenistic period appear alongside the old Egyptian deities, and members of the Egyptian pantheon were identified ever more often with their Greek and Roman equivalents. The artistic and iconographic forms of the Hellenic and Egyptian traditions were preserved and even merged, and this blending bore fruit in new forms of an innovative character. Representations frequently drew on elements taken from both artistic traditions; hence their meaning could also be double, with a message both to Egyptians and Greeks, and later to Romans. This cultural duality is exemplified in a small, unique limestone relief dating to the Roman period, which came to the Antiquities Collection from the estate of László Kákósy, the late doyen of Hungarian Egyptology. The small stele is decorated with the image of the Egyptian deity Thoth in a sanctuary, and bears the name of Hermes in Greek. Thoth was one of the most complex figures of the Egyptian pantheon. He was worshipped as the god of knowledge and wisdom, as the inventor of writing, as an interpreter. As the lord and protector of truth he was considered a great judge; as a magician he came to the aid of people. He was the messenger of the gods and the guide of the dead in the afterlife. As a lunar deity he symbolized perpetual renewal. Hermes boasted many similar characteristics. The Greeks regarded him as the messenger of Zeus, and as an interpreter. He connected heaven and earth,



and the everyday world with the beyond. He was an ingenious inventor; a guide to the living on earth, and to the dead in the realm of Hades.

It is not difficult to see the common features which unite these two gods, and which led to their identification in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Apart from the functional similarities, however, their traditional iconography was essentially different. Thoth was represented in the form of his sacred animals, the ibis or the baboon, or as an ibis-headed man, while Hermes was usually depicted as a youth wearing a winged hat or winged sandals symbolizing his swiftness, with a herald's staff, or—in his Roman persona

as Mercury, the god of merchants—with a purse in hand.

Next to the small stele, terracotta statuettes of Thoth and Hermes from Roman Egypt illustrate the many different ways in which the encounter between Egyptian and Graeco-Roman religion and art expressed itself. Terracotta figurines of gods began to spread in Egypt under Greek influence in the Ptolemaic period, and the genre preserved its popularity also in the Roman era. The two standing statuettes of Hermes-Thoth follow the deity's Greek iconography, their only Egyptian attribute being the lotus-leaf between the wings on the deity's forehead. The lotus was a symbol of rebirth, fertility, and abundance, alluding to Thoth's power of renewal. The herald's staff in the left hand of the intact statuette is an attribute of the Greek Hermes, while the purse in his right hand follows the iconography of the Roman god Mercury. The baboon statuettes, on the other hand, are typically Egyptian. The figure of a baboon squatting on a pedestal, with a pectoral on his chest and a lunar disc or the feather of Maat as a symbol of truth on his head, had been a popular representation of Thoth for millennia. The small limestone relief which forms the centre of the display is exceptional for the organic way in which it combines Egyptian and Greek iconographic forms and inscriptions. The composition is framed by a Greek-type sanctuary, with lines imitating branches incised on its outer walls. Inside the sanctuary, Thoth is shown in one of his Egyptian forms, as a statue of an ibis perched on the pedestal of Maat, the symbol of truth, with votive offerings in front. In reality, the cult statue was surely not positioned in the plane of the sanctuary entrance, but sat at a right angle to it, as if looking out of the edifice. On the stele, however, it is shown in profile, following the Egyptian principles of representation, which aimed at emphasizing the most characteristic surfaces. Below the ibis-figure runs a Greek inscription: EPMHC, the name of the god Hermes. This, however, is not the only inscription on the stele, for the representation of the ibis on a pedestal can be read not only as an image, but also as a hieroglyphic inscription.



Hieroglyphic writing was in essence a consonantal script, whose signs expressed both single sounds and complex syllables. Its pictorial character, however, offered an excellent possibility for creating rebus puzzles. The pedestal reads *maat*, which the ibis—*Djehuty*, i.e. Thoth—rests on (*hotep her*). The small composition thus spells out an ancient title of the Egyptian deity: *Djehuty hotep her Maat*—"Thoth who rests in Maat". The title refers to the strong connection between the deity and Truth, and to Thoth's role in securing the order of the world. The relief was thus open to interpretation from the perspectives of Egyptian and Greek religion and art: it bore a selection of the iconographic elements of both cultures, and while the Greek inscription identified the deity as Hermes, the image of the

ibis and the hidden epithet marked him as Thoth. For Egyptians, it was natural to include the name of the deity next to his image; the inscription confirmed the identity of Hermes and the deity in ibis form in the eyes of Greeks also.

The Greek inscription may reflect practical concerns, too. In the later Roman period, when the relief was made, only a small circle of Egyptian priests knew hieroglyphs, and the majority of Egyptians—until the spread of Coptic in the 3rd century AD—wrote Greek. The maker of the relief might simply have taken an iconographic form of Thoth known for millennia (perhaps even without being aware of its exact meaning), and added the name of the deity below the composition in the only written language he knew: Greek. The result—be it a conscious composition of a priest well-versed in hieroglyphs and Egyptian theology, or the fabrication of a humble believer from traditional elements—enabled its creator to invoke two gods in a simultaneous and complementary way: besides the Greek name, we find the preservation of the Egyptian form, hidden but still legible. In Roman Egypt it was this very versatility, the power to invoke gods through many names and in many ways, which guaranteed the success of prayer.

Greek magical papyri found in Egypt sometimes even prescribe this kind of dual representation. The success of a prayer to Hermes for wealth, beauty, and all earthly goods was, for example, secured by writing the secret name of the deity on a piece of papyrus, placing this inside the statuette of a baboon wearing the winged hat of Hermes, and then making an offering in front of it. Terracotta statuettes of deities were most often left as votive gifts in sanctuaries and domestic shrines with the purpose of invoking the gods and transmitting prayers to them. The same might also have been the function of the ibis image in its small sanctuary.

KATA ENDREFFY

