

WHAT JUVENAL SAW:  
EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND  
ANTHROPOPHAGY IN *SATIRE* 15

Juvenal has endured the charge of rhetorical excess<sup>1</sup>), and even senility<sup>2</sup>), for describing with vituperative zest an incident of cannibalism that he claims to have witnessed in Egypt<sup>3</sup>). But modern anthropological evidence<sup>4</sup>), and parallels adduced from antiquity itself<sup>5</sup>), would appear to confirm the veracity of his account, as the early critical dispute about the location of Om-bos<sup>6</sup>), now decided in the poet's favor<sup>7</sup>), has enhanced the poem's verisimilitude in general<sup>8</sup>). Let Juvenal describe what his eyes reported: nevertheless, we can not conclude that he understood what he saw. If certainty is not possible, the probability is good that the celebrated barbarity, not quite the exemplar of unregenerate humanity that Juvenal would make it<sup>9</sup>), took place within the sphere of the world's oldest religion, and perhaps was motivated by it.

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1) J. De Decker, *Juvenalis declamans. Étude sur la rhétorique déclamatoire dans les satires de Juvenal* (Gand, 1913), pp. 50-4. All Latin citations in this paper are from the OCT edition of W.V. Clausen.

2) See the edition of Friedländer (Leipzig, 1895), p. 574.

3) 15. 72-83; 90-2.

4) See J. Moreau, "Une scène d'anthropophagie en Égypte en l'an 127 de notre ère," *Chronique d'Égypte* 15 (1940), pp. 279-85; G. Highet, "A Fight in the Desert: Juvenal XV and a Modern Parallel," *CJ* 45 (1949-50), pp. 94-6.

5) Dio 68. 32; 71. 4.

6) Ombos, quite naturally, was thought to be Kom Ombo, 100 miles south of Dendera and on the right bank. Since 100 miles hardly justifies *inter finitimos* (33) or *numina vicinorum* (36), here, at least, critics argued, Juvenal mispoke himself. Cf. J.E.B. Mayor, *Thirteen Satires of Juvenal*, vol. II (London, 1900), p. 369, for this early view.

7) See G. Highet, *Juvenal the Satirist* (New York, 1961), p. 264.

8) Nor does *oppida tota canem uenerantur, nemo Dianam* (8) record a mistake in fact (cf. the objections raised by C. Kempf in *De satira quinta decima quae sub nomine Juvenalis circumfertur*, Berlin, 1843), but is a rhetorical flourish. Juvenal means, "In their degenerate perversity, the Egyptians worship the abject animal, not the sublime spirit which the animal identifies." The inversion sets up the *Wundererzählung* to come, for "In Egypt you can't eat sheep - but human flesh is fine" (11-13).

9) Cf. 15. 159ff.

Earlier criticism, at any rate, while noticing that ancient Nubt, Juvenal's Ombos, was a cult center of the strange god Seth<sup>10</sup>), has omitted to spell out that fact's meaning. Actually we have a fair amount of information about the religious and mythological associations that attach to Ombos and neighboring Dendera; and we can to some extent, therefore, reconstruct the terms of these villages' ancient feud.

Ombos was not just a cult center of Seth, but the most important location of his cult in all Egypt<sup>11</sup>). From this village the god derived his epithet "Ombite"<sup>12</sup>), and from his importance there the Greeks called this part of Egypt *ta typhônia*<sup>13</sup>). Denderah<sup>14</sup>), on the other hand, was the sight of the principal cult given to the goddess Hathor<sup>15</sup>), who long before Juvenal's day was associated and even identified with Isis<sup>16</sup>): her husband Osiris, according to the famous tale<sup>17</sup>), Seth murdered, then, as the Ombites treated the Tentyrite in Juvenal's story, cut him into small pieces.

Hathor herself typifies primeval creative power. She promotes fertility and abundance<sup>18</sup>). She is therefore a deity naturally antithetical to the god of storm, desert, and confusion<sup>19</sup>) who even before Ptolemaic times came to represent every terrible thing in the world. Hathor's intimate connection with Horus, Seth's inveterate enemy<sup>20</sup>), and with the Osirian mythological cycle, moreover, will have given explicit motive to the assault upon the Sethites that Juvenal describes. Her name means

10) Hight (above, note 7), p. 149. Nubti, "He-of-Gold," was actually an epithet of Seth.

11) W. M. F. Petrie and J. E. Quibell, *Naqada and Ballas*; 1895 (London, 1896) pp. 65 ff.

12) H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der Ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952) (hereafter *RAR*), p. 702.

13) Strabo 17. 815.

14) Juvenal's "Tentyra" (15. 75) is a Greek corruption of the Egyptian Iwnw Ta Ntrt: "Iunu of the Goddess [i. e. Hathor]."

15) The Greeks customarily identified Hathor with Aphrodite.

16) C. J. Bleeker, *Hathor and Thoth* (Leiden, 1973), p. 25.

17) Plut. *de Isid.* 18.

18) See Bleeker (above, note 16), pp. 102-3.

19) To simplify, admittedly, a good deal. See H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion* (Leiden, 1967), for a full treatment of this curious being.

20) Horus' enmity towards Seth may be older than his attraction into the Osirian myth as the posthumous son and avenger of the murdered Osiris; but it is through this ancient enmity that this attraction was both easy and permanent.

“House of Horus”<sup>21</sup>), and by some accounts she was Horus’ mother<sup>22</sup>). In the course of a popular festival she travelled upstream from Dendera to Edfu, sanctuary *par excellence* of Horus the Behdetite, where she may have celebrated a *hieros gamos* with him<sup>23</sup>): Horus the Behdetite was noted above all as Seth’s destroyer. The Ptolemaic temple contains an apparently dramatic text that glorifies this god’s victory over Seth<sup>24</sup>), and the ancient Egyptian form of “Edfu” (Dba) perhaps signifies “Place of Revenge”<sup>25</sup>). Hathor of Dendera’s close ritual association with Horus as destroyer of Seth is even formalized in the dedication of the temple at Edfu, which she shares with the Behdetite and, to the point, with Harsiesis<sup>26</sup>), as her ritual association with the Osirian myth is explicit in the presence of a sanctuary to Osiris on the roof of her temple at Dendera and in a nearby temple to Isis erected by Augustus. Mysteries to Osiris were celebrated in the sanctuary on the roof, and from the Augustan temple priests conducted a regular procession to a local sanctuary of Horus the Behdetite to the east of the Hathor temple<sup>27</sup>). The mythology and religious practice surrounding the conflict between Horus and Seth is exceedingly complicated<sup>28</sup>), but it is sufficient to remember here that the powerful theme of their enmity, older than dynastic Egypt, is well suited to stir the emotions of those who saw themselves reenacting the terms of an

antiqua simultas,  
immortale odium et numquam sanabile vulnus (15.33-4).

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21) Even if this is Haroueris, “Horus the Elder,” the sky and sun god, rather than Harsiesis, “Horus the Son of Isis” (cf. Bleeker, above, note 16, p. 25), the two gods are barely distinguished and are, in any event, most probably in origin a single divinity. Cf. Bonnet, *RAR*, s. v. “Horus.”

22) E. Naville, *Das ägyptische Totenbuch der XVII.-XX Dynastie* (Leipzig, 1886), pp. 1, 166 (pl. 185).

23) H. W. Fairman, “Worship and Festivals in an Egyptian Temple,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, vol. 37 (1954-5), pp. 196 ff.

24) In which Seth takes the form of a hippopotamus, as often. For translation and commentary, see H. W. Fairman, *The Triumph of Horus* (London, 1974).

25) Bonnet, *RAR*, p. 51.

26) Also to Re-Harachte, another form of Horus. See Bonnet, *loc. cit.* For Harsiesis, see above, note 21.

27) Bonnet, *RAR*, p. 155.

28) A stimulating review of the problem in J. Gwyn Griffiths, *The Conflict between Horus and Seth* (Liverpool, 1960).

In the light of this information it seems to me probable that Juvenal witnessed some kind of religious celebration whose significance the dyspeptic and xenophobic Roman did not understand. Even though our information about Egyptian festivals is limited, many details of Juvenal's account will support this view.

The feast that he describes, for one thing, was certainly religious in nature, although Juvenal does not say so and, in attributing the festival's excesses to the Egyptian's taste for *luxuria* (15.44-6), at least suggests its secular character. But the drunkenness of the Ombites (15.47-8) accords strictly with Herodotus' description of a festival at Bubastis<sup>29</sup>, as it is an appropriate manner in which to celebrate a god whose nature the Egyptian identified with the intoxicating power of beer<sup>30</sup>. Herodotus, too, mentions an Osirian festival<sup>31</sup> which lasts all night<sup>32</sup> (cf. *per-vigilique toro* 15.43). And the battle waged before the temple at Papremis<sup>33</sup> begins like that in Juvenal, suggesting to some commentators that Herodotus witnessed a combat that ritually reenacted the fight between Horus and Seth<sup>34</sup>. If the Egyptians maintain that no one is killed, although heads break in the hard fight with clubs<sup>35</sup>, Herodotus has his doubts; and we know that in another Egyptian festival men were killed<sup>36</sup>. In fact Egyptian representations of combat with sticks are common<sup>37</sup>; the stela of Ikhernofret describes such a combat staged within an Osirian ritual<sup>38</sup>, and a Theban tomb from the New Kingdom portrays a similar fight in connection with the raising of the Djed pillar<sup>39</sup>, a symbol at this time identified closely with Osiris<sup>40</sup>.

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29) How and Wells (*A Commentary on Herodotus*, Oxford, 1936, *ad loc.*) compare this festival to one held at Denderah.

30) See te Velde, *Seth*, p. 6-7.

31) At least How and Wells (*Commentary, ad loc.*) take it as such.

32) Herod. 2. 62.

33) Herod. 2. 63.

34) For example, A. W. Lawrence (*The History of Herodotus of Halicarnassus*, London, 1935, p. 178) who calls the sacred fight "a regular feature of Egyptian religious dramas."

35) Herod. 2. 63.

36) In the festivals at Buto. See E. Drioton, "Les Fêtes de Bouto," *Bull. Inst. D'Ég.*, vol. 25 (1943), pp. 1-19.

37) J. A. Wilson, "Ceremonial Games in the New Kingdom," *JEA* 17 (1931), pp. 211-20.

38) G. D. Hornblower, "Osiris and His Rites," *Man* (1937), p. 174.

39) A. Fakhry, *Ann. Serv.* 42 (1943), pls. 39 ff.

40) Bonnet, *RAR*, p. 150.

We may be free to doubt that Juvenal's opinion of Egyptians, or mankind, would have softened, had he appreciated more finely what he himself implied in writing:

summus utrimque  
inde furor uolgo, quod numina uicinorum  
odit uterque locus, cum solos credat habendos  
esse deos quos ipse colit. (15.35-8)

Nevertheless, while establishing, I think, on firmer ground than before the truthfulness of Juvenal's report, we can reject Juvenal's implication that the 'Tentyrites' motive in attacking the Ombites was to create mischief as such (*rapienda occasio... ne/laetum hilareremque diem, ne magnae gaudia cenae/sentirent* 15.39-42). More likely the attack was a cultic act that arose from a mythical conception: which may elucidate the poet's sardonic remark -

ludere se credunt ipsi tamen et puerilis  
exercere acies quod nulla cadauera calcent. (15.59-60)

Nor can we disunite from Egyptian religious myth the dismembering and eating of the cadaver by the followers of Seth, the god who dismembered Osiris and wounded the Eye of Horus, both gods with intimate ties to Dendera. Whatever the truth in detail might be, Juvenal does miss the point in complaining that:

aspicimus populos quorum non sufficit irae  
occidisse aliquem, sed pectora, brachia, uoltum  
crediderint genus esse cibi. (15.169-71)

I would guess that *Satire 15* does not work very well because the vice around which Juvenal structures his attack is too idiosyncratic, too much a special case, recalcitrant to the sort of generalization that he would put it to: *sed iam serpentum maior concordia. parcit/cognatis maculis similis fera* (15.159-60); *ast homini ferrum letale incude nefanda/produxisse parum est* (15.165-6). Much past criticism, sensing this, has taken the poet on for making up or grossly exaggerating what he claims to have seen. Certainly it is ironic that, proving the poet no liar, we must still fault him for misapprehension of the deed he witnessed in a strange land long ago.