

THE EGYPTIAN LEGEND OF NECTANEBUS

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Nectanebus II was the last native king of Egypt, the last of the Pharaohs. He was driven from his throne by an invasion of the Persians under Artaxerxes III, Ochus, in 343 B.C. Diodorus tells us that on the approach of the Persian army Nectanebus, because he realized the trend of the Egyptian cities toward treason, instead of meeting the enemy in battle at Memphis, as he had intended to do, gave up and fled into Ethiopia, taking with him all the money that he could. This account by Diodorus is the nearest thing to history that we have concerning Nectanebus.¹ The rest is native Egyptian patriotic folk-legend, concerning which the principal sources of our knowledge are these: (1) the well-known "Alexander Romance" of Ps.-Callisthenes; (2) the so-called *Demotic Chronicle*, which is a series of very obscure oracles, each followed by an explanation, and dating from the third century B.C.;² and (3) a papyrus text of some 68 fairly well preserved lines written in Greek in the early second century B.C., commonly entitled by modern editors, but inadequately, *The Dream of Nectanebus*.

¹ Diod. 16.51.1. In what precedes (16.48.6 ff.) Diodorus has described the prolonged siege of Pelusium in the Delta and its final capture by the invading Persians, then how the third Persian army under Mentor, by promise of good treatment, induced the defenders of many fortified Egyptian towns, including Bubastis, to surrender without fighting.

All spellings of the name Nectanebus, including the latinized form which I have adopted, are purely arbitrary, both in Greek manuscripts and with modern commentators. In Greek manuscripts the vowel in the first syllable is always ϵ and that in the last syllable always $\acute{\omega}$ (oxytone); but the two medial vowels vary greatly with different scribes and even with the same scribe in different places. — $\beta\acute{\omega}$ in the genitive and dative is constant, but the nominative may end in — $\acute{\omega}$, $\acute{\omega}s$, or $\acute{\omega}\nu$, and the accusative in — $\acute{\omega}\nu$ or $\acute{\omega}$.

² Edited by the veteran Egyptologist Wm. Spiegelberg, *Die sogenannte Demotische Chronik = Demotische Studien* 7 (Leipzig 1914). On the meaning of this document as a whole and its interpretation, see below, note 5.

It is with the substance and interpretation of this papyrus fragment, considered as the beginning part of an Egyptian Nectanebus-romance, so to speak, that I am here concerned.

The papyrus text includes, besides the description of the dream that came to Nectanebus at Memphis, some actions taken by Nectanebus afterwards in consequence of what he had seen in his dream. The Greek text is commonly believed to have been translated more or less literally from an Egyptian demotic original; in any case, the substance of the narrative is of Egyptian origin and invention. That much is beyond all doubt.³ The Greek fragment was first published in 1843, and since then it has been re-edited critically by several scholars, including Ulrich Wilcken and Bruno Lavagnini; but nobody as yet seems to have stated explicitly what seems to me to be the only true interpretation of this document, and the meaning of the Greek text as we have it near the end is grossly misrepresented by M. Pieper's

³ This papyrus, found along with others about 1839 in the Serapeum at Memphis, is in the Museum at Leiden catalogued as "Pap. d'Anastasy 67." It was first published, with a Latin translation, by C. Leemans in 1843 in *Papyri Graeci Musaei Antiquarii Publici Lugduni Batavi* 1.122-129. Leeman's transcription of the text was defective and erroneous on some important readings (below, note 4). The text, although still grammatically corrupt or uncertain in a few places, was edited definitively, after a thorough examination of the papyrus itself, by Ulrich Wilcken in *Mélanges Nicole* (Geneva 1905) 579-96, and later with some exegetical notes on the text but no new readings, in *Urkunden der Ptolemäerzeit* 1 (1927) 369 ff. The most convenient and satisfactory edition of the text since 1905, with a full critical apparatus, is that of Bruno Lavagnini in *Eroticorum Scriptorum Fragmenta Papyracea* (Leipzig [Teubner] 1922) 37-42. The text is also well edited by G. Manteuffel, *De Opusculis Graecis Aegypti e Papyris, Ostracis Lapidibusque Collectis* (Warsaw 1930) 112-16. The bibliography described above is conveniently listed in Roger Pack's *Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt*² (Ann Arbor 1965).

On the dating of the papyrus in the early second century B.C., which is well established on the basis of both internal and external evidence, see Wilcken, *Mélanges* 580-81, and M. Pieper in *RE* 16 (1935) 2238, s.v. "Nektanebos II."

There is really very little doubt, in view of both the language and the thought of the Greek text, that it is a translation of an Egyptian original; see Wilcken, *Mélanges* 592, and Pieper, *loc. cit.* Wilcken, *UPZ* 1.369 ff., identifies the copyist of the text as a certain Apollonius and maintains that he cannot have been the original translator, because he makes far too many orthographical and grammatical errors indicative of the garbling of a written Greek text in transcribing it. The first seven lines, written in a careless cursive hand, cannot be deciphered, and the first two legible lines that precede the text, by way of a title—*Πετήσιος ἱερογλύφου πρὸς Νεκτοναβῶν τὸν βασιλέα*—falsely represent the following text as a letter from Petesis to Nectanebus (cols. II-V), which is simply not the case. If the original Greek translation was prefaced by a title we cannot know what that title was. The genuine text begins with col. II.

summary of it in his article on "Nektanebos II" in *RE* 16 (1935) 2238.⁴

When, after the flight of Nectanebus, the hated Persians once more took over in Egypt, the heart of the people was crushed, and only hope and fond memory could sustain their spirits. They thought of Nectanebus with sorrow and affection as the last of their native Pharaohs, and in him all their hopes for the future came to be focused. He had gone, no one knew where. Perhaps he was only sleeping for the present, like Frederic Barbarossa in the great Kyffhäuserberg; but, like Frederic and other famous champions of old, he was destined—yea, the prophets and the oracles had declared it—to return again in the person of a younger and more vigorous king, who would drive out the enemies of Egypt and liberate the people. This much of the

⁴ Pieper's article is very learned, informative, and reliable on everything that relates to Egyptian style, customs, and ideas, and to the un-Egyptian caricature of King Nectanebus as a magician in Ps.-Callisthenes 1.1-2; but his summary of the meaning of the last few lines in the papyrus text depends totally, whether directly or indirectly, upon a few erroneous and impossible readings given by Leemans in 1843 and translated with false inferences by Maspéro in 1882 (*Les Contes Populaires de l'Egypte Ancienne*). Leemans accidentally omitted line 21 in col. IV (καὶ ἔδοξεν αὐτῷ φύσει ὄντι οἰνοπότῃ) and read σὺν βασιλ[ι]εῖ in v 1 in place of the indubitably correct reading συνβαίνει, which was restored by S. Witkowski in 1897 and printed by Wilcken (1905 and 1927) and by Lavagnini (1922). Leemans also erred in reading Ἀθὺρ ἐὸς φέ in place of μυρεψε (emended by Wilcken to ---ψοῖ) in the papyrus. Depending on Leemans' text, Maspéro translates as follows in IV 20-v 3: "Pétisis, après avoir reçu beaucoup d'argent, se rendit à Sebennytos afin de se divertir avant de se mettre à l'oeuvre. Or le roi se promenant dans la partie méridionale du temple, selon . . . , le 5 d'Athyr vit une fille, la plus belle des quatorze qui étaient au service. . . ." Pieper's summary of this passage, which he probably made on the basis of Maspéro's translation rather than the Greek text of Leemans, reproduces the totally mistaken interpretation of both scholars, as follows: "Bei einer Unterhaltung im Tempel mit Petisis sieht der König ein schönes Mädchen, die Tochter eines Tempelbeamten." In the genuine text of the papyrus as restored by later critics and editors after 1897, Petesis did not go with the king from Memphis to Sebennytos, in order to enjoy himself, but journeyed there alone for the purpose of carving the hieroglyphics in the temple, as he had promised the king he would do quickly within a few days; the king remained behind in Memphis; and it was not he who saw the pretty girl in or near the temple, but Petesis alone, fond of wine and his pockets full of money. The dramatic substance of the genuine text throughout is related below near the end of this article.

Pieper, without consulting Wilcken's text or any later edition, naturally did not, as he confesses, understand how Eduard Meyer (*Kleine Schriften* 2.78 = p. 294 in his original article) could assume off hand, in briefly alluding to it, that the papyrus text led on to the downfall of Nectanebus in Egypt. As we shall point out below, Meyer's inference was quite right, although he did not stop to explain the probable means by which it came about.

popular legend may be learned from the *Demotic Chronicle* to which reference was made above;⁵ but the course of events that led to the flight of Nectanebus from Egypt and his reincarnation in the person of his son Alexander, whom he sired by Olympias, the wife of King Philip of Macedon, is related at length and in detail only in the account by Ps.-Callisthenes. There it is said, absurdly and contrary to Egyptian tradition, that Nectanebus had been accustomed in years past, whenever a foreign invader came against Egypt, to destroy the enemy's armada without military action by means of magical arts, in which he, as an Egyptian, was highly skilled. It is only Ps.-Callisthenes who tells us that Nectanebus was that kind of magician; no other ancient testimony so represents him. On this occasion, according to Ps.-Callisthenes, when Nectanebus learned from his scouts that a huge Persian naval armament was bearing down on Egypt, he was not at all worried but retired to the privacy of his palace and set about to destroy the

⁵ Spiegelberg's edition of the text with explanations (above, note 2) is not accessible to me at present, but reliable accounts of its contents and meaning, after Spiegelberg's work, are given by Eduard Meyer in an article entitled "Eine eschatologische Profetie über die Geschichte Ägyptens in persischer und griechischer Zeit" (*Kleine Schriften* 2.69-91) and by M. Pieper (*RE* 16.2236-37). The oracles themselves, which Meyer likens to "Hexenformel," are unintelligible it seems even for the Egyptologist, but each is followed by an explanatory statement which is intelligible, if somewhat vague in its implications. The first oracles refer to the overlordship of the Medes and the calamity that will come upon Egypt from them, and the explanations of the oracles that follow, relating to Nectanebus, are thus quoted in translation by Pieper: "'Ich erscheine mit der goldenen Königskrone, man wird sie nicht von meinem Haupte nehmen.' Damit meint er den Pharao Nektanebos . . . 'Das Sichelschwert ist in meiner Hand' . . . Das Siegeschwert wird es genannt . . . 'Die Herden des Bergwils sind nach Ägypten gezogen,' es sind die Meder . . . 'O Gärtner, tu deine Arbeit'. Das wird erklärt, 'O Pharao, tu deine Arbeit.' Damit meint er Pharao Nektanebos."

All scholars and historians who have studied this document agree in understanding it as a hopeful prophecy that Nectanebus would return in later time to rule over Egypt; and this patriotic legend in the *Demotic Chronicle* is confirmed as Egyptian and Alexandrian by the explicit statement about it in Ps.-Callisthenes 1.3, which reads as follows in Miss Haight's translation of Kroll's text (E. H. Haight, *The Life of Alexander of Macedon by Pseudo-Callisthenes* [New York 1955]): "In Egypt, when Nectanebos had disappeared, the Egyptians decided to consult the ancestor of their gods, Hephaistos, as to what had happened to the king of Egypt. He sent them an oracle: 'The king who has fled from Egypt, the mighty, the strong, the aged ruler, will return to the plain of Egypt a young man, having thrown off the aspect of old age; and having travelled over the whole world, he will give you victory over your enemies.' When this oracle was uttered, they did not understand its meaning, so they wrote down on the pedestal of the statue of Nectanebos the verses for a record when some time, somewhere, the oracle should be fulfilled."

enemy's fleet by his customary magical operations. These were as follows: he would fill a large basin with spring water, mold miniature ships and men of wax, and set them afloat in the basin. Then, after he had called upon the gods and pronounced an incantation, the little waxen men on the ships would come to life and he would sink them and their ships with his own hand; in consequence of which, by the mysterious power of sympathetic magic, the real ships and soldiers of the invading army off the shores of Egypt would perish in the same way. On this final occasion, however, Nectanebus, on gazing into his water basin, saw to his dismay that the gods of Egypt themselves were piloting the ships of the Persian invaders. Since he could not and would not fight against the gods, he disguised himself and fled from Egypt; and, after traveling through many nations, he arrived finally in Macedonia. There he seduced Olympias, the wife of King Philip, by appearing to her in the form of the god Ammon, and thus became the father of Alexander the Great, his successor in the rule of Egypt. So goes the story in Ps.-Callisthenes.

The legendary Egyptian source on which this story must have been based is best represented, though only in part, by the Greek papyrus text commonly known as the *Dream of Nectanebus*. This relates that when King Nectanebus was in Memphis, after completing a sacrifice and having asked the gods to reveal to him what things were about to happen, he had a dream in which he saw a boat made of papyrus coming to anchor at Memphis. On the boat was a great throne, and on the throne sat the giver of mighty blessings, Isis the queen of the gods. On her right and on her left there stood all the other gods of Egypt. Then one of the gods, who is called Onouris by the Egyptians but Ares the war god by the Greeks, prostrated himself before Isis and, begging her to be propitious, complained to her as follows: "In accordance with your commands, I have so far guarded the land of Egypt without fault; and although I have up to this time taken good care of Nectanebus the king, yet he, whom you established in the kingdom, has neglected my sanctuary and has gone contrary to my directions concerning it. I am now outside my own temple, and the inner sanctuary is only half finished." The queen of the gods listened to these representations but answered not a word. Thereupon Nectanebus awoke from his dream and immediately summoned from

Sebennytus the high priest and the prophet of Onouris. When they arrived at court in Memphis he asked them what was lacking in the temple of Onouris, and they replied that everything about it was finished except for the carving of the hieroglyphics. Thereupon Nectanebus, anxious to make good this deficiency as quickly as possible, sent for all the best carvers of hieroglyphics in the realm, and when they had come to Memphis he found upon investigation that the master craftsman among them all was a man named Petesis, who agreed to complete the work at Sebennytus within a few days. In consideration of this, Nectanebus paid him a large sum of money in advance, and Petesis, taking it, went away to Sebennytus. But since he was by nature fond of wine, he decided to take things easy and have a good time before he went to work. And as he was walking near the temple, he caught sight of a perfumer's daughter,⁶ who was the most beautiful girl he had seen. . . .

Right here the papyrus text breaks off. No doubt Petesis had a very good time with that pretty girl and his pockets full of money; but, however that may have been, one thing (hitherto unnoted) is certain and more important: the work on the temple was never completed and the war god Onouris was further offended. This may well have been what caused the gods of Egypt, or at least Onouris, to desert Nectanebus; for that is what happens in Ps.-Callisthenes without any apparent reason or motivation. From this point on the original story must have told how Nectanebus discovered that the gods were against him, not by any magical *lakanomanteia* as in Ps.-Callisthenes, but by means of prayer and direct entreaty, to which the gods would have responded as they did in his dream, or through a priestly oracle. In their response the gods may have comforted Nectanebus with the assurance, foretold in the *Demotic Chronicle*, that he would be reincarnated and return to rule over Egypt in the person of a younger king; and for that purpose they may have directed him to go to Macedon. He must have fled from Memphis into Ethiopia at first, as Diodorus

⁶ The papyrus reads *μυρεψε θυγατερα*, which Wilcken emended to *μυρεψου θ*. Cf. note 4 above. Some critics, doubting that -ε would be written or read erroneously for -ου, have suspected that the word conceals a proper name; but, if so, it cannot be matched beyond the first syllable in Egyptian names. On the whole, it does not matter for the main point of the story who the father or his daughter was, either by name or profession.

records;⁷ but where he travelled thereafter on his way to Macedonia is nowhere told and is of no consequence.

Such in broad outline, allowing for substantial variation in detail from the account of the hero's intrigues in Macedon as given by Ps.-Callisthenes, was the Egyptian legend about the last days of Nectanebus II, the last of the Pharaohs.⁸

⁷ Ps.-Callisthenes wrongly says that Nectanebus fled northeast by way of Pelusium; since the Persians held that port at the time, Nectanebus would not dare to go through the enemy's camp and there was no need of his doing so. He would naturally flee into Ethiopia by way of Upper Egypt.

⁸ The romantic Egyptian story of Nectanebus, of which the fragmentary papyrus text of the *Somnium* was only the beginning part, may have gone on to relate how Nectanebus in the guise of the god Ammon mated with Olympias, the wife of King Philip in Macedon, and so begot Alexander as his successor. Pieper (*RE* 16.2238-39) points out that such a legend is typically Egyptian in character and comments as follows: "Ist der 'Traum des N.' eine Übersetzung ins Griechische, so ist der schon erwähnte 'Trug des N.' [his deception of Olympias], den wir in dem sog. Alexanderroman haben (1.1-14) eine griechische Umarbeitung eines ägyptischen Stoffes. Es ist eine uralte ägyptische Legende, dass ein Gott im Tempel zu Der el Bahri Amon sich der regierenden Königin naht und mit ihr den künftigen König zeugt." The complete text of the *Somnium Nectanebi*, the "Romance of Nectanebus," may not have included a detailed account of the actions of Nectanebus in Macedon; but if it did, the representation of those actions probably differed from the account given in Ps.-Callisthenes by being less obvious and discreditable in recording the trickeries of the Egyptian king.

That the conquering Alexander was the son of the native king Nectanebus is certainly an Egyptian legend. That much is clearly implied both by the *Demotic Chronicle* and by the oracle factually reported by Ps.-Callisthenes (above, note 5 at end) as having been written by the Egyptians on the pedestal of the statue of Nectanebus. This legend, like others, was invented by way of apology for accepting or welcoming the rule of a foreign invader, in this case Alexander who had freed the Egyptians from their worst enemies, the Persians. That fact made it much easier for them to claim the invading foreigner Alexander as the son of their native Pharaoh than it had been to claim, as some Egyptians had done centuries earlier (*Hdt.* 3.2), that even the hated Cambyses was the son of an Egyptian princess. Remnants of both these apologetic legends, surviving in Coptic and Ethiopic texts of a much later time, are described in an article by J. Schwartz entitled "Les conquérants perses et la littérature égyptienne" in *Bulletin de l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale* 48 (1948) 65-80, of which a short summary is given in *REA* 50 (1948) 417-18. It is probable that many similar legends have been invented in the course of world history by conquered peoples other than Egyptians, nationals who have claimed that the foreign invader and ruler of their land was in reality the son of a man or woman of their own royal family. So it was, for example, when the Achaean Perseus invaded and conquered Danian Argos; the claim was made that he was the son of their native princess Danaë, sired by the god Zeus. And the Jews in the Persian Empire, according to Masūdi (*Les Prairies d'Or*, ch. xxi, French translation by Barbieri de Meynard, vol. 2, pp. 127-28), made out that Cyrus the Great of Persia was the son of a Jewess, although his father was presumably a Persian.