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INCUBATION FROM EPIDAUROS TO CAIRO: THE CROSS-CULTURAL CONTINUITY OF A RITUAL *

Abstract: This article aims at checking a possible historical continuity in the ritual of medical incubation as it was performed in the Eastern Mediterranean from Greek Antiquity to recent days Egypt. The Christianization of pagan practices combining medicine with popular piety is well attested in Late Antiquity and it goes beyond Hellenism *stricto sensu* as it plays an important role in Coptic tradition. More surprising is the striking similitude between Coptic practices related to medicinal incubation and a specifically Jewish Egyptian ritual of incubation that Cairene Jews used to perform in Maimonides synagogue till the massive exodus of Egyptian Jewry after 1956. In order to evaluate to which extent we can deal here with a case of cross-cultural influence from an epichoric Egyptian tradition to a local practice of Cairene Jewry, I propose to adopt a taxonomy whereby the role of the dreams as an inherent part of the incubation ritual is analyzed from ancient Greece till modern Egyptian Jewry. As a result of this typological approach that takes into account civilizations that developed in the same area, it appears that the Cairene Jewish practice is certainly closer to similar rituals in use among Copts than with the rituals of pilgrimages to the saints grave as it was practiced by North African Jews.

Keywords: incubation ritual; Epidaurus; Aelius Aristides; thaumaturgic saints in Eastern Christianity; Holy Unmercenaries; Saint Menas; Copts; Maimonides synagogue in Cairo; Egyptian Jewry; North African Jewry.

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РИТУАЛ ИНКУБАЦИИ ОТ ЭПИДАВРА ДО КАИРА: МЕЖКУЛЬТУРНАЯ ПРЕЕМСТВЕННОСТЬ РИТУАЛА

Резюме: Цель данной статьи проверить историко-культурную преемственность в ритуале медицинской инкубации в Восточном Средиземноморье между древней Грецией и современным Египтом. Христианизация языческих практик, которые сочетают в себе медицину и народные верования, наблюдается в позднеантичный период, переживает эллинизм, в узком понимании этого термина, и играет важную роль в коптской традиции. Удивительным кажется сходство между коптскими практиками медицинской инкубации и специфическим ритуалом египетских евреев, который жители Каира проводили в синагоге Маймонида до массовой эмиграции евреев из Египта после 1956 г. Для того чтобы оценить, насколько велико кросс-культурное взаимовлияние между египетской традицией и местными практиками евреев Каира, я предлагаю использовать метод, согласно которому роль снов как неотъемлемой части инкубационного ритуала будет проанализирована на примерах от древней Греции до современных египетских евреев. В результате типологического подхода и сопоставления цивилизаций, развивавшихся в данном регионе, становится очевидно, что практики каирских евреев ближе к схожему коптскому ритуалу, чем к традиции паломничества к могилам святых, которое практиковалось среди еврейского населения Северной Африки.

Ключевые слова: ритуал инкубации, Эпидавр, чудотворцы в Восточном Христианстве, бессребрники, копты, синагога Маймонидов в Каире, египетские евреи, северо-африканские евреи.

The ritual of incubation, known as ἐγκοίμησις or κατάκλισις is widespread among many civilizations in the world. However, it would be interesting to analyze some of its specific manifestations in different periods of the history of Levant and to proceed to a comparison between them in order to better grasp the role of this ritual within the more general frame of wonder cures in the geographical/ cultural area of the Eastern Mediterranean.

More specifically, it is important to stress that in many of the cases we would like to study, the people who resort to the ritual of incubation are

enlightened, well educated people who stay in blatant contrast with the extreme archaism of the practice in which they indulge. The cross-cultural comparison I wish to propose here brings together very different periods and three distinct cultural contexts in the Eastern Mediterranean : the first one is the Greek world in the second century CE as reflected by Aelius Aristides principally, the ancient writer who transmitted us the most accurate and detailed account on those rituals; the second one is connected with the Christianization of pagan rituals in Late Antiquity and their development in Eastern Christianity; lastly, the paradigm of ritual incubation seems to reappear among twentieth-century Egyptian Jews who used to practice a specific ritual of incubation in Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo.

The Jewish Egyptian ritual is apparently similar to the ancient Greek ways of performing incubation or to their continuation in Eastern Christianity. However, a closer consideration of those various case-studies reveals that the modern incubation ritual that was still in practice in the last decades among Egyptian Jews is distinguished by peculiar features that may challenge the attempt to perceive a fully-fledged continuity from ancient Greek world to a specific branch of contemporaneous oriental Judaism. And yet the ritual of incubation in Maimonides Synagogue probably differs even more from incubation rituals attested throughout Jewish history in different communities. It is clearly distinct from the rituals performed by Jews and Muslims in North Africa in the frame of the cults of the saints that is so widespread, especially in Morocco. The fundamental difference between the Jewish Egyptian ritual and analogous rituals practiced in other part of the Jewish world, as well as its resemblance with the ancient practices of Greek paganism or Greek Orthodox and Coptic Christianity, allows to view the Cairene Jewish superstition as part of a cultural horizon where different religious traditions are perpetuating practices that are not exclusively connected with this or that religion.

In order to fully understand the status of the Jewish Egyptian ritual compared with its antecedents in the ancient world and its North African parallel, I would like to cross together all the various elements that may theoretically be involved in the ritual of sacred healing: incubation; dreaming; divine or other supernatural revelations.

This study intends to illustrate through the case study of healing incubation the legitimacy of a cross-cultural approach in the *longue durée*. Moreover, it is important to stress the relevance of paradigms taken from classical Antiquity as a stable evaluation stallion in order to better appreciate the specificity of modern developments that took places in the same area (the Eastern Mediterranean) but not necessarily within the same religion. Anyway, when speaking about popular superstitions, the boundaries between religions do not really matter, especially

in the Mediterranean world, which is so familiar with religious syncretism and cultural transfers from one religious tradition to the other.

Incubation rituals in Greek antiquity and their modern Jewish Egyptian parallel

The ritual of incubation performed in the ancient Greek world was quite diversified. The classical incubation connected with the Asklepeion at Epidaurus was only one of the many manifestations of a complicated set of rituals. Whereas in Epidaurus, Pergamum and other shrines of Asclepius, the incubation is generally associated with dreaming, ancient Greek sources often describe dreams that do not necessarily appear in the context of incubation. Conversely, the modern practice of incubation performed until a recent past by Cairene Jews is a ritual of incubation that usually does not involve dreaming. This taxonomy of medical practices involving the intervention of a healing divinity would not be complete without the mention of a special case that did not involve neither incubation nor dreaming. It happened when the god allegedly appeared to a person awake in order to prescribe a cure. Such is the case in the anecdote accounted by Pausanias at the very end of his *Description of Greece*.¹ In this account, it is told that Asclepius appeared in a waking vision to the poetess Anyte and handed her over a sealed tablet to be brought to Phasylius who had lost the sight. Once the latter received the tablet, he was requested to remove the seal and against all expectation, he managed to read the content of the tablet.

A combination of dream without ἐγκοίμησις and ἐγκοίμησις without dream appears in Aelius Aristides' Ἱεροὶ λόγοι ("Sacred Tales"): Aelius dreams that he is visiting temples and that he performs the ritual of ἐγκοίμησις in the temple of Pergamum, one of the places traditionally associated with ἐγκοίμησις.² Since it is difficult to conceive that one dreams that he is dreaming (it would be a dream squared, so to say), the content of the dream is supposed to happen in a state of waking, or more exactly Aelius is dreaming that he is receiving a treatment in a temple that he allegedly visits in a state of waking.

In another place of the Ἱεροὶ λόγοι, Aelius tells that the ritual of ἐγκοίμησις was performed on his behalf by his foster-father Zosimus in the city of Colophon.³ He tells that Zosimus received a rimed oracle for him. However, it seems that there was no dream at stake in this case and that the verses were communicated to him by some priest or another sacred intermediary, as usual in the oracular practices of the ancient world. In another place of the same

¹ Pausanias. *Description of Greece*/ Ed. by W.H.S. Jones. London, 1964–1966. xxxviii. 13.

² Aelius Aristides. *The Sacred Tales*/ Ed. by C.A. Behr. Amsterdam, 1968. 1, 55.

³ Ibid. III, 12.

discourse, Aelius tells that he and Zosimus had concomitantly the same dream where they received a medical prescription from Asclepius on the preparation of a certain drug that Aelius was supposed to absorb.⁴ In the last months of Zosimus' life, Aelius dreamed of his foster-father's chances to recover from his disease.⁵ He also dreamed of an oracle addressed to Zosimus that prescribed him to abstain from beef.⁶

The communication between the dreams seen by different persons on medical matters also occurred when there were no special ties between the dreamers. Thus Aelius tells that in Smyrna, he and Philadelphus, one of the guardians of the temple of Asclepius, had almost the same dream.⁷ And in another circumstance, a perfectly unknown peasant had a dream confirming that Aelius was about to recover from his illness.⁸

The function of the dream as a mediation between the healing forces of the gods and the sick is reverberated by other authors. One of them is no other than Galen himself. Indeed, the famous physician acknowledges that his medical vocation started when his father Nicon saw Asclepius in a dream and received from the god the order to destine his son to medicine.⁹ The continuity that unites medicine with its prescientific, oracular roots is clearly acknowledged by Iamblichus in a place where he deals with collective healing inspired by oniric theophanies: διὰ δὲ τὴν τάξιν τῶν νύκτωρ ἐπιφανειῶν ἢ ἰατρικὴ τέχνη συνέστη ἀπὸ τῶν ἱερῶν ὄνειράτων "and through the order of epiphanies by night the medical technique was constituted out of the holy dreams".¹⁰

Conversely, Aelius describes the miraculous healings performed by Asclepius' sons Podalirius and Machaon as accounted in the *Iliad* as part of a ἰατρικὴ τέχνη that the god taught his sons without intermediaries: οὐκ ἐδιδάξατο ... ἀλλ' ἐδίδαξεν αὐτός "he did not have them taught..., but taught them himself".¹¹

Thus there is no solution of continuity between the divine ἰατρικὴ τέχνη and its humane prolongation. This continuity is all the more striking in that the title Ἀσκληπιιάδης bestowed to Machaon and Podalirius was extended to

⁴ Ibid. I, 66.

⁵ Ibid. 71; 76.

⁶ Ibid., III, 37.

⁷ Ibid. II, 30-35. On this place, see: *Israelowich I. Society, Medicine and Religion in the Sacred Tales of Aelius Aristides*. Leiden, 2012. Pp. 99-100.

⁸ Sacred Tales. IV, 5.

⁹ Galen. *De ordine librorum suorum ad Eugenianum*, XIX 59K/Ed. by I. V. Müller. Leipzig, 1893). On this place see: *Israelowich I. Society, Medicine and Religion in the Sacred Tales of Aelius Aristides*. P. 63.

¹⁰ Iamblichus. *On the Mysteries of the Egyptians, Chaldeans, and Assyrians*/ Ed by Édouard Des Places. Paris, 1966. P. III, 3.

¹¹ *Aelius Aristides. The Sons of Asclepius* / Ed. by C. A. Behr. Amsterdam, 1968. P. 7.

historically attested physicians like Hippocrates himself who is introduced as “one of the Asclepiads” in Plato’s *Protagoras*.¹² By the same token, the fact that the introducer of Greek medicine in Rome was called Asclepiades (124 BC-40 BC) is quite characteristic of the blurring of the boundaries between biological filiation and intellectual legacy, between the belonging to a mystical congregation and the affiliation to a professional corporation, between prescientific healing techniques and the beginning of medical science.

The fact that Galen’s vocation was motivated by a supernatural dream in the city of Pergamum, which was traditionally connected with the worship of Asclepius, has to be understood as part of this continuum that leads from the God to his descendants and worshippers, both called Ἀσκληπιάδα, the “sons of Asclepius” in a biological or spiritual meaning. Aelius Aristides himself is said to have been a priest of Asclepiades.

Aelius’ dreams are not necessarily connected in a direct way with healing. They might also contain an injunction to praise healing divinities or heroes. Thus at the beginning of the discourse dedicated to Asclepius’ sons Podalirius and Machaon, Aelius claims that the idea to compose the discourse in honor of the Asclepiads was dictated to him in a dream.¹³ More generally, Aelius presented the very endeavor of noting his dreams as Asclepius’ special request, which once again came to the fore in a dream.¹⁴

And yet, in one occasion, Aelius confronts in a conflictive way the scientific medicine with the miraculous healing of Asclepius when he tells how the physician Satyrus contradicts the prescriptions of the god. Obviously, the god had the last word and Satyrus’ prescription proved to be not only inefficient but even harmful.¹⁵ However, most of the times the miraculous dreams and the medical prescriptions complete each other as in the case when Aelius summoned the physician Theodotus to tell him the dreams he just had.¹⁶

Let us summarize the various ways of crossing the concepts of incubation and dream in order to better grasp the convergence and divergence of the modern Jewish Egyptian practice of incubation with respect to the ancient paradigm. Typologically speaking, there might have been dreams without incubation, incubations without dream, incubations with dreams¹⁷ and theophanies without incubation nor dreaming.

¹² *Plato*. *Protagoras*. 311a/ Ed. by W. Nestle. Stuttgart, 19788.

¹³ *The Sons of Asclepius*. P. 1.

¹⁴ *Sacred Tales*. II, 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* III, 8-11.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* II, 34. On this place, see: *Israelowich I.* *Society, Medicine and Religion in the Sacred Tales of Aelius Aristides*. P. 115.

¹⁷ On Aristides’ dreams in the *Sacred Tales*, see: *Stephens J. C.* *The dreams of Aelius Aristides: A Psychological Interpretation // International Journal of Dream Research*. 2012. April. (5). No 1. Pp. 76–86.

	Theophany without incubation nor dreaming	Dream without incubation	Dream with incubation	Incubation without dream
venue/ epoch	Ancient Greece (Asclepius' cult) e.g. The story of Phalysius accounted by Pausanias	Ancient Greece (Asclepius' cult) e.g. Aelius Aristides in Smyrna and other cities in Asia Minor (Second Century CE)	Epidaurus; Pergamum; Rome (cult of Asclepius)	Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo
persons involved	The sick person herself or someone on her behalf		The sick person herself	The sick person herself or someone on her behalf

At this stage of our investigation the main question is whether the modern Jewish Egyptian practice of incubation is a specification of a ritual loosely widespread in all the Eastern Mediterranean throughout the centuries, no matter to which religion it belonged.

The Christianization of a pagan paradigm: The Holy Unmercenaries from Asia Minor to Coptic Egypt

The two twin brothers Cosmas and Damian may be considered a Christianized avatar of the divine brothers Machaon and Podalirius or other wonder healers like the twins Castor and Pollux, one of which was divine and the other mortal. The mere fact that the hagiographic legends often consider Cosmas and Damian twins may be the result of the influence of the Dioscuri myths on the emergence of Christian hagiography. Indeed, the myth of the Asclepiads does not mention that those brothers were twins.

It is worth noting that in earlier versions of Cosmas' and Damian's life, they were just brothers, not twins. Since they were perceived as utterly equivalent not only to Machaon and Podalirius but also to the Dioscuri Castor and Pollux, they soon became twins in the popular imagination, as shown by the fact that their icons often present them as totally identical. In other words, a conflation of the Machaon and Podalirius myth with the cult of the Dioscuri contributed to the transformation of Cosmas and Damian into twin brothers. The role of the Dioscuri in the crystallization of the cult of the Holy Unmercenaries is further confirmed by the fact that the basilica of Santi Cosimo e Damiano in

Rome that was built by Pope Felix IV (526-530) is very close to the site of the Temple of Castor and Pollux in the Forum of Vespasian.¹⁸

The same connection with a former cult of the Dioscuri is also evident in Constantinople although in that city, there is a clear likeness between the cult of the Holy Unmercenaries and the former cult of Asclepius. Indeed, in Constantinople also, there was a practice of incubation in the church dedicated to saints Cosmas and Damian.¹⁹ Anyway, the twinship of the saints is an element that should not be underestimated. In her fieldwork study about saints Cosmas' and Damian's celebrations among North American people of Italian descent, Jacalyn Duffin has stressed that an important amount of the participants in the procession consider this twinship an important aspect of the cult.²⁰ According to the same author, there might be a psychoanalytic explanation for the connection between the healing power of the healers and their twin status.²¹

Moreover, the fact that the hagiographic traditions connected the Holy Unmercenaries with Cilicia in Asia Minor reveals one more aspect in the continuity that leads from the healing cure of Asclepius in Asia Minor (especially in Pergamum, Ephesus and Colophon) to the resurgence of similar practices and beliefs in Christian garb in another parts of Asia Minor. It is certainly not fortuitous that the other Holy Unmercenaries are also originated in Asia Minor: Zenaida and Philonella stemmed from Tarsus in Cilicia; saint Tryphon of Campsada from Phrygia; saint Pantaleon from Nicomedia in Bithynia; saint Talelaeus in Cilicia. Only saint Cyrus and John do not seem to have connection with Asia Minor but rather with Alexandria (Cyrus) and Edessa (John). Lastly, saint Thecla who is not counted among the Holy Mercenaries but whose cult is centered around her reputation as a wonder healer is connected with Iconium in south central Anatolia (Lycaonia).

The location of Cosmas' and Damian's thaumaturgic activities in a province of Asia Minor is all the more striking in that according to one of the three versions of those saints' life, the two saints were of Arab origin. This means that in the hagiographic tradition, the choice of Cilicia as the place where the Holy Unmercenaries spent most of their life is not a factual datum, but something that has to be associated with the special reputation of Asia Minor as a place where miraculous cures traditionally occurred. Another fact might have helped translate the memory of Cosmas and Damian to southern Asia

¹⁸ *Meier C. A.* *Healing Dreams and Ritual*. 4th ed. Einsiedeln, 2009. P. 57.

¹⁹ *Wittman A.* *Kosmas und Damian: Kulturausbreitung und Volksdevotion*. Berlin, 1967. Pp. 22–23.

²⁰ *Duffin J.* *Medical Saints: Cosmas and Damian in a Postmodern World*. Oxford-New York, 2013. Pp. 84–85.

²¹ *Ibid.* Pp. 51–52.

Minor, namely the legend according to which Podalirius settled in Caria after the Trojan war where he and his brother Machaon acted as physicians. In terms of Near Eastern geography, Cilicia is located approximately half way between the Syrian Desert that belongs to the historical region of Arabia and Caria or other places of southwest Asia Minor where healing cults were practiced throughout Antiquity. This may explain the choice of this province as the place where Arab wonder healers exerted their miraculous skills.

Even in the Late Antiquity Christianized version of the cult of Asclepiads we find the same continuity between supernatural thaumaturgic powers and the exercise of medicine as a technical or even scientific activity (ιατρικὴ τέχνη) as in the myth that connected the Asclepiads with medicine and not just with the ability to perform miraculous cures. The fact that the Christianized avatars of Machaon and Podalirius or of the Dioscuri did not charge their patients may be understood as part of the process that strove to adapt the ancient myth to the evangelical ideals. However, there might be another motivation at stake in this quality of anargyres, namely the *imitatio Christi*. Indeed, Jesus Christ was also a kind of unmercenary healer to the extent that in the first centuries of the Christian era he was considered a serious rival of Asclepius who received a little wage, less than professional doctors, but still more than anargyre healers.²²

One of the places where the Christianization of healing rituals was particularly obvious is Coptic Egypt. We have mentioned above the Alexandrian origin of saint Cyrus, one of the Holy Mercenaries. This and the fact that the sanctuary of saint Cyrus and John was located in Menouthis (Abukir, that is Abū Qīr “Father Cyrus”), near Alexandria, may explain why the fellow saints Cyrus and John are held in particular esteem in the Coptic Church. The foundation of such a sanctuary in Menouthis resulted from Cyril of Alexandria’s conscious transformation of an Isiac cult involving incubation into a Christian worship that superseded the Pagan one without abolishing the destination of the sanctuary as a spot of healing procedures.²³

It is also worth mentioning the cult of Saint Colluthos, an Egyptian wonder healer, who like many thaumaturgic saints was also a martyr killed during Diocletian’s great persecution.²⁴ The fact that most of the Holy Unmercenary or other wonder healers lived in the first centuries of the history of Christianity

²² Temnik O. Hippocrates in a World of Pagans and Christians. Baltimore-London, 1991. P. 83.

²³ Csepregi I. The Theological Other: Religious and Narrative Identity in Fifth to Seventh Century Byzantine Miracle Collection // Identity and Alterity in Hagiography and the Cult of the Saints/ Ed. by Ana Marinković and Trpimir Vedriš. Zagreb, 2010. Pp. 68–71.

²⁴ On this saint, see: Crum W. E. Colluthos, the Martyr and his Name// Byzantinische Zeitschrift. 1929-1930. 30. Pp. 323–327.

may explain the fact why most of them died as martyrs. However, there might be a special, non historicist connection between the status of healer and that of martyr. A parodic reflection of this link between thaumaturgic healing energy and the crown of martyrdom is found in the *Roman de Renart* with the hen Coupée, on the grave of which the hase Couart prostrates himself in order to get recovery from his fever.²⁵ The fact that many of the martyrs in general and the Unmercenaries in particular survived the tortures to which they were submitted until a final blow took their lives away is by itself an indication of a special relationship toward physical pain.

Another Egyptian wonder healer around whom an incubation ritual developed was saint Menas. His sanctuary in Abū Mīnā (“Father Menas”) near the Lake Mareotis was one of the holiest places of Coptic Egypt until his destruction during the Arab conquest of Egypt in 639-642. So great was the importance of this cult that a church in honor of saint Menas was erected in the sixth century in Old Cairo. Closer to our time a new monastery was built in 1959 near the site of the old sanctuary under the pontificate of Cyril VI, by then the Pope of the Coptic Church.

One of the characteristics of the sanctuary of Abū Mīnā was the dispatching of the oil burning in the lamps around saint Menas’ relics by means of little ampullas, a plenty of which have been discovered by archaeologists.²⁶ This aspect of the cult of saint Menas is of great importance for the purpose of our study because it shares a common point for the ritual of incubation at Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo. There, the oil that burned in the memorial candles within the synagogue was sometimes used to anoint little portraits of Maimonides dispatched to people in need of a miraculous cure. Before we try to justify how such a practice was able to cross the boundary between Coptic Christianity and Egyptian Judaism, we should investigate deeper other aspects of the Jewish Egyptian ritual.

The Jewish Egyptian incubation ritual at Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo

At first sight, the practice of incubation in Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo could be perceived as a special case of the general Jewish practice associated with the cult of the holy graves in Judaism, a practice that is partially shared with Muslims throughout North Africa in general and in Morocco in particular. Indeed, the yard of Maimonides Synagogue is said to have contained the rabbi’s tomb before the transfer of his rests to Tiberias. In other words, the

²⁵Roman de Renart/ Ed. by A. Strubel. Paris, 1998. Branch I. v. 6132–6134.

²⁶Caseau B. Parfum et guérison dans le christianisme ancien et byzantin: des huiles parfumées des médecins au myron des saints byzantins// Les Pères de l’Église face à la science médicale de leur temps /Ed. by Véronique Boudon-Millot and Bernard Pouderon. Paris, 2005. Pp. 161–162; 166–167; 189.

practice of medical incubation in this holy place could be a way to perform a pilgrimage to the adjacent cenotaph of an illustrious rabbi.

The removal of the burial place did not prevent local Jews from venerating this place as if it were containing Maimonides' grave. This paradox has something to do with the Jewish belief according to which the burial place of a saint is a *ohel*, a tent, in the deceased's journey to the afterworld.²⁷ The place where Maimonides had been provisionally buried before the transfer of his body to Tiberias is still considered a holy grave. Conversely, holy graves that are allegedly containing the remnant of a righteous are not necessarily perceived as graves, but rather as "dwelling tent" (*oholim*) on the road to the world to come. There is an obvious blurring of the boundaries between a cenotaph deemed to be a grave and a real grave, the function of which is euphemistically called a "tent". I remember that once in Meron, the alleged burial place of Rabbi Simeon Bar Yochai, I asked an ultra-orthodox where was the rabbi's grave. This man answered me with disdain, telling: "You, the university teachers, you always think, you know everything. Who told you that it was a grave?" This anecdote illustrates the paradoxical convergence between two conceptions: the skeptical one that puts in doubt that the alleged burial place of a Biblical or Rabbinical figure truly contains the remnants of that specific figure; the religious-mystical one, according to which a grave that is undoubtedly the repository of the remnants of the righteous should not be called a grave, but rather a tent pegged on the saint's symbolic road to the world to come.

The fact that Maimonides is the most illustrious representative of philosophical rationalism within the Jewish tradition did not prevent Egyptian Jews from developing superstitious cult around the synagogue that is located nearby his cenotaph. First of all, modern Egyptian Jews are not necessarily aware of the exact reasons that made Maimonides so famous all over the Jewish world. Among Egyptian Jews the Master of Fostat was known as *Reb Moshe* rather than as Ben Maimon, Rambam, or Maimonides. Now that almost all Egyptian Jews left Egypt, they may discover with amazement or pride that the rabbi whom they consider a local saint and an illustrious physician whose healing property is felt even after his death is highly respected as one of the major rabbis of Jewish history, to the extent that even non-Jewish scholars recognize his greatness (not for the same reasons of course). For them, Reb Moshe is first and foremost an Egyptian Jewish saint who had a synagogue called by his name and who was held in high honor because of his thaumaturgic virtues.

²⁷ *Aslanov C.* For Which Purpose Did Medieval Jewish Pilgrims Travel // Klaus Herbers & Hans Christian Lehner (eds.). *Pilgern als Form von Kontingenzbewältigung und Zukunftsicherung in den Weltreligionen/Pilgrimage as a Means of Coping with Contingency and Fixing the Future in the World's Major Religions.* Stuttgart, 2014. P. 69.

Furthermore, the limit between rationalism and mysticism are not necessarily so clear, especially not among Egyptian Jews at the time when Maimonides stayed in Egypt or in the aftermath of his stay. It is highly paradoxical that the biological scions of were Master, was more mystical than rationalist, as the fourteenth-century Maimonidean rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1279 – ca 1340) noted after the journey he undertake to Egypt in 1314/1315 in order to grasp some non-written testimonies of Maimonides' legacy.²⁸

A similar transformation of the memory from rationalism to mysticism is perceptible in Algiers. There, two Maimonidean rationalist rabbis, Isaac ben Sheshet (1326–1408) and Shim'on ben Tzemah Duran (1361–1444), two prominent Spanish rabbis who settled in Algiers after the 1391 anti-Jewish riots of Aragon, were highly venerated by local Jews to the extent that the practice of visiting their graves became an important practice for local Jews. While performing those pilgrimages to the tombs of the *rebbanim*, as they were traditionally called in local Judeo-Arabic, the Jews of Algiers were probably unaware of their propension to rationalistic-oriented jurisprudential erudition, with which the almost fetichistic practice consisting in using a sepulture as a healing spot was rather incompatible.

However, there is a significant difference between the Jewish Algerian practice and its Jewish Egyptian counterpart, namely the fact that in the immediate proximity of the synagogue that bears his name, Maimonides established a clinic where he used to care for the sick. Although Isaac ben Sheshet seems to have had some skills in medicine, this aspect of his biography did not come to the fore once he became the object of a special devotion.

Furthermore, there is another aspect that separates the case of the incubation in Maimonides Synagogue from the pilgrimage to a holy grave in the North African style, namely the fact that Egyptian Jewry does not really belong to Jewish North Africa and is rather a meeting point between various Jewries, only part of which are Maghrebi or Libyan. In modern times, the main bulk of Egyptian Jewry was more related to an Ottoman origin (Istanbul; Izmir; Aleppo). Actually, the indigenous part of Egyptian Jewry is quiet restricted although the location of Maimonides Synagogue in the historical Jewish quarter of Cairo allows to assume that the practice of incubation in this place has something to do with local Jewish traditions and not with customs imported from other parts of the Jewish world.

The parallel of the cult of saints in Maghrebi Jewries reveals that in Morocco also there were rituals of incubation involving dreams whereby the saint allegedly appeared to the sick or to healthy persons on behalf of their

²⁸ Menorat Kesef //Asara Kelei Kesef /Ed. by Isaac Last. Pressburg, 1903. P. 94. On Kaspi's journey to Egypt, see: *Ram Ben-Shalom*. The Unwritten Journal to the East of Joseph ibn Kaspi: Images and Orientalism // Pe'amim. 2010. No 124. Pp. 7–51 (Hebrew).

sick relatives.²⁹ The rituals described by Issachar Ben-Ami seem to go back to the Berber substrate of North African culture. The fact that those cults were common to Jews and Muslims corroborate the assumption that they reflect a common Berber substrate whether influenced or not by the Roman past of North Africa. Actually, it is likelier that the Berber substrate influenced the practices prevalent in Roman North Africa than the other way round. According to Augustine's testimony, North African Christians used to bring offerings of cakes, bread and wine to the tombs of the martyrs,³⁰ a practice that reveals how deep the roots of the cult of the saints in the North African cultural landscape are.

Compared to North African Jewish rituals, the ritual of incubation in Maimonides Synagogue display features that make it more similar to the cult of saint Cyrus and saint Menas in Abū Qīr and Abū Mīnā respectively than to the cults of the saints in a North African context. First of all, the fact that saint Cyrus was a professional physician during his life may have influenced the cult of Maimonides as a posthumous healer who performed cures after his death the way he had performed them while he was still alive and in the very same place, that is, in the synagogue that was adjacent to his clinic. Second, the use of miraculous oil as a medium of transferring the healing virtues is quite reminiscent of the aforementioned Coptic practices known as saint Menas' ampullas. Lastly, it is important to stress that the incubation ritual in Maimonides Synagogue was connected with the urban life, one more difference with the Maghrebi rituals that were performed in rural shrines usually far remote from urban centers. Even the tombs of the *rebbanim* in Algiers were initially located in the old Jewish cemetery located outside the walls of the city. Those rural or half-rural locations usually required fully-fledged pilgrimages that took the aspect of a picnic or even of a camping when we are speaking of tombs located in lost parts of the Moroccan countryside.

In Egypt, however, the fact that even emancipated Jews belonging to the enlightened Cairene bourgeoisie settled in Maadi, Zamalek or Heliopolis, were performing the ritual of incubation — though in a simplified version consisting in lying a few minutes on one of the benches of the synagogue — constitutes a striking difference with respect to the incubations practiced by North African Jews who were able to spend several nights in tents pitched next to the saint's tomb. Interestingly enough, the testimonies about the ritual of incubation at Maimonides Synagogue mostly belong to orally transmitted memory. The books dealing with Egyptian Jewry may contained detailed descriptions of the many Cairene synagogues, including Maimonides Synagogue. Those

²⁹ *Issachar Ben-Ami*. *Saint Veneration among the Jews in Morocco*. Detroit, 1998. Passim.

³⁰ *Augustine*. *Confessions*. Oxford, 1912. Vol. VI, 2.

descriptions indulge in architectural details, which transmit the prestigious image of a wealthy community proud of her own visibility in the landscape of Pre-Nasserian Egypt. However, the practice of incubation at Maimonides Synagogue is not mentioned, as if it were an embarrassing avowal that can be mentioned only orally but that by no means could be written down in books insisting on the high standard of Cairene Jewish bourgeoisie.

Another difference between the Cairene incubation ritual and its North African parallels is the fact that in North Africa the veneration of the saints' tombs was also shared by Muslims even though the Muslims were aware of the fact that the saint was Jewish and non Muslim. This symbiosis is characteristic of a place where Judaism and Islam coexisted for centuries in a kind of *tête-à-tête* since the gradual disappearance of North African Christianity in the centuries that followed the Arab conquest of North Africa in the second half of the seventh century. In Egypt, by contrast, the three monotheistic religions were all represented in the cultural horizon of the country. They did not share the same veneration neither for the same holy graves nor for the same marabouts, as Moroccan Muslims and Jews did. However, the community of practices is perceptible in the way of performing the rituals, especially as far as the use of the oil of the lamp is concerned. This practice that shares some common points with Coptic customs was totally integrated by Egyptian Jews in the specific context of the incubation performed in Maimonides Synagogue. One of the reasons for this convergence of Egyptian Jews toward the inherited practices of the Copts may be considered as the result of the symbiosis of Jews and Christians in Pre-Nasserian and colonial Egypt.

CONCLUSION

This case study of the continuity of the ritual of incubation in the same region notwithstanding the shifts from one religion to the other may be viewed as one more confirmation in favor of a comprehensive perception of the dynamics of the Eastern Mediterranean civilization throughout the ages. One of the questions that arise in view of this gradual evolution from ancient Greece to early Eastern Christianity and therefrom to Coptic Egypt and Egyptian Jewry is whether it can be considered the permanence of Greek influence in various garbs. Actually, such an assumption is receivable if one considers that Hellenism is not necessarily synonymous with rationalism. As Dodds pointed repeatedly in his celebrated book that deals among other things with the practice of medical incubation in the broader context of mantic dreams,³¹ a strong irrational dimension haunted the Greek world beyond the

³¹ Dodds E. R. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley, 1968. Pp. 102–134.

façade of classical harmony. When speaking of the legacy of Hellenism in the Eastern Mediterranean, one thinks first and foremost of the translations of Aristoteles or Galen into Syriac and Arabic. However, besides this overt continuity that mostly belongs to the cultural elites, other aspects of the Greek culture survived in the region. They were neither philosophic nor scientific and they were closer to mysticism and superstition. They survived Christianization and Islamization and in Egypt, they seem to have been integrated by local Jews.

Actually, as we stressed in the first part of this study, the boundaries between scientific rationalism and pre-scientific or para-scientific irrationalism were partly blurred, as shown by the aforementioned continuity from divine *ιατρικὴ τέχνη*, as manifested in the ritual of incubation and other practices of wonder healing, to scientific medicine. This continuity from the rational to the irrational and from Hellenism to other cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean stays in blatant contrast with practices characteristic of Maghreb where the continuity bypasses Hellenism. What is at stake in the cult of the saints in Muslim and Jewish North Africa is the common Berber substrate of both Muslims and Jews in the specific context of Maghreb, whether or not this substrate was influenced by Roman culture. Anyway, since the fall of Carthage in 146 BC, the impact of Hellenism in North Africa was abolished or all the more mediated through Roman influence. Even the reconquest of North Africa from the Vandals by Justinian in 534 and the subsequent Byzantine domination that lasted till the Arab conquest at the end of the seventh century did not allow Hellenism to take roots in the Berber world. Thus the North African practices common to Jews and Muslims in North Africa cannot be considered part of the Eastern Mediterranean continuum.

Putting in evidence the continuity of the same practice in the same region no matter whether the performers thereof were Pagan, Christian or Jewish has another methodological implication. Instead of viewing the Jewish practices of incubation as the manifold realizations of a unique essentialist Jewish paradigm we should perhaps consider each case *per se* and conclude that from the vantage point of the incubation practice, a Cairene Jew is closer to his Coptic neighbor than to his Moroccan coreligionist who in his turn shares far more common elements with his Berber surroundings than with an ideal and monolithic conception of Jewish legacy.

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