

DEIFIED HUMANS

البشر المؤلهيين

Alexandra von Lieven

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Alexandra von Lieven

Vergöttlichte Menschen

Personnes divinisés

In ancient Egypt, humans were occasionally the recipients of cult as saints or even deities after their death. Such deified humans could be private persons as well as royalty, men as well as women. The cults were usually of local significance, but in certain cases, they rose to national prominence. The phenomenon of human deification is well attested in ancient Egypt and appears to have become more prominent and diversified over time. There existed a hierarchy within the group of deified humans. Local patrons and “wise” scribes seem to have been favored objects of deification. Nevertheless, it remains virtually impossible in most cases to determine why one individual was deified and another was not.

كانت العقيدة في مصر القديمة تبجل أحيانا بعض الأشخاص بعد وفاتهم كقديسين أو حتى كآلهة. وكان من الممكن أن يكون هؤلاء البشر المؤلهيين أشخاص عاديين أو ملوك، رجال أو نساء، على حد سواء. كانت تلك العبادات عادة ذات طابعا محليا، ولكن في حالات معينة ازدهرت تلك العبادات واتخذت شهرة قومية. ظاهرة تأليه البشر لها شواهد عديدة في مصر القديمة، ويبدو أنها أصبحت أكثر أهمية وتنوعا عبر العصور. كان يوجد تدرجا بين مجموعة البشر المؤلهيين، فعلى ما يبدو كانت الشخصيات المحلية الهامة والحكام من الكتابة هم المفضلين للتأليه. إلا أنه لا يزال من المستحيل تحديد أسباب تأليه شخص دون آخر.



Among the supernatural entities venerated in ancient Egypt, there were also deified humans (Quaegbeur 1977; von Lieven 2007; Wildung 1977a). The closest analogy in contemporary religions are saints. However, as ancient Egyptian religion was polytheistic, some of these persons were called “gods” or even “great gods” just like the other “real” deities. Nevertheless, there was a hierarchy within the group of deified humans. In some cases, it is quite evident that individuals rose within the hierarchy with the elapse of time after their death. At the beginning, the particular individual only received a slightly more elevated rank than the normal dead. In the

New Kingdom, such persons were called *ḥjkr n Rʿ*, “efficient spirit of Ra” (Demarée 1983, 1986). In the Late Period, they were called *ḥrj*, “superior,” or *ḥsj*, “praised one” (el Amir 1951). These terms already seem to convey a notion of sainthood. In many cases, the cult never evolved further. However, in more than a few cases it did. The saint developed into a lesser category of god, who was venerated as a local patron. These cults are usually very much connected to a single village or region. More rarely, they developed even further to supraregional and even national scope. The latter was only possible with royal patronage, while the smaller cults seldom attracted any royal attention. The

most prominent of these deified persons, who in the end was considered almost on a par with the real gods, was Imhotep—coincidentally, historically the oldest example (Hurry 1928; Wildung 1977b).

With this hierarchical development, the historical evolution of deification itself somehow correlates. True deification is first attested in the Middle Kingdom, with Heqaib of Elephantine (Franke 1994; Habachi 1985) and Isi of Edfu (Böwe 2004; Weill 1940) as prominent examples. While, for example, Isi is called *ntr nh*, “living god,” it seems that there was still some reluctance to call non-royal deified persons *ntr ʕ*, “great god.” Later, however, there is no clearly established hierarchical differentiation in terminology. Thus a *hsj* can at the same time be called a *ntr ʕ*.

Deification becomes more and more widespread until in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods nearly every village seems to have had its deified human (or several of them). In this period, it is not unusual to call a deified human *ntr ʕ* or in Greek *theos megistos*. Therefore, it has been proposed that deification of humans increased in later periods. The phenomenon has been compared to the increase in animal cults.

In fact, the indigenous terminology shows a clear development. However, there is a certain danger that the seeming dramatic increase in importance and number is somewhat misleading. This is due to the type of sources, which typically survive in larger quantities from the later periods. Unless a cult secured royal patronage, impressive stone monuments are not to be expected. Most temples and shrines of deified humans consisted only of mud-bricks and did not survive into the present. A relatively well-preserved example is the temple of Piyris in Ain Labakha from the Roman Period (Hussein 2000). Most temples are only attested textually. Again, the textual sources are often not religious documents but administrative texts like inventories of temples or sale contracts of land plots, which mention a temple to pinpoint the location of the sold plot in relation to its neighboring plots.

Another major source for deified humans is onomastics. Many such cults can only be deduced from theophoric personal names where the theophoric element is again a proper personal name. The careful study of all the sources suggests that also in the earlier periods, deification of persons was much more widespread than hitherto known.

While often being inconspicuous in the preserved records, these cults were nevertheless of major social importance and appeal to the respective local population. Deified humans had their own rituals and feasts like other gods and provided help in everyday affairs of their adherents. There is, for example, evidence for processional feasts with barks and palanquins from the New Kingdom. Such processions must have been an important setting for oracles, one of the main functions of deified humans (Černý 1927). They decided, for instance, who had stolen a chisel, who rightfully possessed a tomb, or whether a mummification had been performed correctly. They were also called upon to heal and provide children. In the case of Amenhotep I, a sort of mystery play seems to have been celebrated possibly focusing on his death during the feast Preparing the Bed for Amenhotep in the New Kingdom (von Lieven 2006: 25 - 26). A list of feast data related to incidents in the life and around the death of Imhotep is attested from the Ptolemaic Period (Vittmann 1984). The reference to beds in a temple inventory (Dousa et al. 2004: 148, 193 - 196; von Lieven 2007: see *Hrw-pyt*) in connection with another deified figure speaks in favor of a more widespread prominence of such rites. Equally widespread seems to have been the custom to light torches or lamps in front of a deified person, i.e., his or her statue. A fragmentary calendar from Elephantine gives the dates for “the days of illumination in front of Osiris (of) Nespameti” (Hoffmann 2009; Hughes 2005: 56 - 57, no. 147, pl. 33d), archaeological evidence comes from the temple of Piyris in Ain Labakha.

Statues of deified humans as well as two-dimensional representations can show them

either as normal human beings, a good example being the statues of Satabous and Tesenouphis from the Fayum (Bernard 1975: pls. 58 - 60; von Lieven 2007), or with special regalia demonstrating their divine status, for example, the depictions of Petese and Pihor of Dendur in their temple (Blackman 1911). A third possibility is the depiction of a deified human as another normal deity. This is an iconographic expression of a theological construct clearly attested in a few cases and quite probable in a few others. A good example of this tendency to identify a local deified human with a deity from the established pantheon is the god's wife of Neferhotep Wedjarenes (Collombert 1995). Textually well-dated, it is possible to understand how she evolved from a local saint to a hypostasis of Isis within barely 150 years. One might see in such identifications the absorption of the Little Traditions by the Great Tradition (Frankfurter 1998: 34 - 36; Redfield 1956).

A major question is who was deified by whom and why. At least in the earlier periods, it seems that the deification of a person was a grassroots movement with no higher central authority regulating the process. However, in the Ptolemaic Period, a decree by Ptolemy VIII specifies that deified humans were to be buried at the cost of the state treasury (Lenger 1980: 136, 154). This implies certain rules according to which one could be sanctified.

As to the types of persons concerned and the reasons for their deification, there is a major problem. Of many of the attested deified persons nothing or at least not enough is known about them as individuals. Furthermore, only one text ever gives an explicit reason for the deification, thus one can only speculate. Interestingly, the text in question (Bernard 1969: 635 - 650, pls. CV - CVIII), a hymn to Pramarrēs (i.e., Amenemhat III; cf. Widmer 2002) inscribed on a temple door in Medinet Madi, is written in Greek. One of the reasons given is Pramarrēs' ability to talk to animals. Clearly, this is not something one would have expected. It must be a reference to a historical

romance like those well attested in Demotic from contemporary temple libraries from Tebtunis and Soknopaiou Nesos, respectively.

At least for the social groups concerned, it is possible to give some rough indications. Apart from royalty, they were typically wise people, for example, authors of wisdom literature and the like or local leaders like nomarchs. The special deification of individual kings and queens like Amenhotep I and Ahmose-Nefertari (Černý 1927; Hollender 2009; Lupo de Ferriol 1997; von Lieven 2000, 2001) is not to be confused with the general idea of a semi-divine status of the king or his *ka* as part of the royal ideology.

Finally, persons who died a special death by "divine agency," for example, by drowning (Rowe 1940) or being killed by a snake or crocodile, could also be deified. The latter category is the one labeled "praised ones" (*hsj.w*) by the Egyptians themselves. It seems that death by a divine creature like a crocodile was regarded as a special grace. In that respect, the cult of Antinoos was not an anomaly, but indeed keeping within Egyptian tradition.

Apart from a few rare royal cases of self-deification during lifetime (Habachi 1969), deification is usually conferred only as a posthumous honor. While the majority of deified humans are men, a certain number of women, both royal as well as private persons, are attested. In a few exceptional cases, even small children seem to have been deified, for example, the New Kingdom prince Ahmose Sapair (Vandersleyen 2005), or possibly also Nespameti from Elephantine, who is labeled "the child born in Elephantine" in Papyrus Dodgson (Martin 1994, 1996). However, in the latter case, it is not exactly clear whether this really indicates death as a child or just local derivation.

At any rate, deified humans were often provided with divine parents. For example, Imhotep and his sister Renpetneferet were regarded as children of Ptah; Amenhotep I was a son of Amun and Mut, Amaunet, or his earthly, but similarly deified mother Ahmose-

Nefertari (Gitton 1981), respectively; Nespameti was considered a son of Khnum and Satet. In that respect, even an adult like Amenhotep I could be represented as a small child in relation to his divine parents.

In one way or another, the Egyptian cults of deified humans may have influenced

subsequent ideas of and practices related to Coptic Christian saints and later Muslim sheiks in Egypt. Even relic veneration seems to have occasionally been part of such cults at least in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods (von Lieven 2007).

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