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## OSWALD SPENGLER AND HIS INTERPRETATION OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CIVILISATION

**ABSTRACT** Spengler's *Decline of the West* is generally read in view of his bleak prophecies concerning the future of the West. This somewhat obscures his contribution to comparative history and his interest not only in Classical Antiquity and the West, but also in the Ancient Near East. In this paper, we will first present and critically analyze the outlines of Spengler's interpretation of Ancient Egyptian History in the field of art history, politics and religion, before venturing some conclusions and personal remarks about the important question whether Spengler's endeavor must be considered helplessly outdated and refuted by modern research, or whether it still has a potential to serve as the basis of a new, up-to-date morphology of history.

**Keywords:** Spengler, Weimar, historiography, ancient Egypt, philosophy of history, cultural pessimism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Childhood speaks to us also – and in the same tones – out of early-Homeric Doric, out of early-Christian (which is really early-Arabian) art and out of the works of the Old Kingdom in Egypt that began with the Fourth Dynasty. There a mythic world-consciousness is fighting like a harassed debtor against all the dark and daemonic in itself and in Nature, while slowly ripening itself for the pure, day-bright expression of the existence that it will at last achieve and know. The more nearly a Culture approaches the noon culmination of its being, the more virile, austere, controlled, intense the form-language it has secured for itself, the more assured its sense of its own power, the clearer its lineaments. In the spring all this had still been dim and confused, tentative, filled with childish yearning and fears – witness the ornament of Romanesque Gothic church porches of Saxony and southern France, the early-Christian catacombs, the Dipylon vases. But there is now the full consciousness of ripened creative power that we see in the time of the early Middle Kingdom of Egypt, in the Athens of the Pisistratides, in the age of Justinian, in that of the Counter-Reformation, and we find every individual trait of expression deliberate, strict, measured, marvellous in its ease and self-confidence. And we find, too, that everywhere, at moments, the coming fulfilment suggested itself; in such moments were created the head of Amenemhet III (the so-called ‘Hyksos Sphinx’ of Tanis), the domes of Hagia Sophia, the paintings of Titian. Still later, tender to the point of fragility, fragrant with the sweetness of late October days, come the Cnidian Aphrodite and the Hall of the Maidens in the Erechtheum, the arabesques on Saracen horseshoe-arches, the Zwinger of Dresden, Watteau, Mozart<sup>1</sup> – this small quotation from Oswald Spengler’s *The Decline of the West* is enough to show the enormous importance Ancient Egypt had for Spengler’s endeavor to prove that all High Civilizations followed a similar development from the Ancient Near East until the modern era, and that technological ‘progress’ is by no means a decisive factor when it comes to assessing the different stages each and every civilization has to go through until it comes to its natural end.*

But let us start from the beginning, Oswald Spengler, one of the key thinkers of the Weimar period and, arguably, one of the most important philosophers of history in the 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>2</sup> was convinced that civilizations followed through similar developmental

<sup>1</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline of the West. Outlines of a Morphology of World History*, transl. by Ch.F. Atkinson, New York 1927. Originally published as: *Der Untergang des Abendlandes: Umrisse einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* (vol. 1: Wien 1918, rev. ed. München 1923; vol. 2: München 1922), pp. 1,107-108; see simil. p. 1,111.

<sup>2</sup> Concerning Spengler’s life and time, see, in general A.M. Koktanek, *Oswald Spengler in seiner Zeit*, München 1968; G. Merlio, *Oswald Spengler. Témoin de son temps*, Stuttgart 1982; D. Felken, *Oswald Spengler. Konservativer Denker zwischen Kaiserreich und Diktatur*, München 1988. See in general K.P. Fischer, *History and Prophecy. Oswald Spengler and the Decline of the West*, New York 1989; A. Demandt, J. Farrenkopf (eds.), *Der Fall Spengler. Eine kritische Bilanz*, Köln 1994; J. Farrenkopf, *Prophet of Decline: Spengler on World History and Politics*, Baton Rouge 2001; D. Conte, *Oswald Spengler – Eine Einführung*, Leipzig 2004; M. Guerri, M. Ophälders (eds.), *Oswald Spengler. Tramonto e metamorfosi dell’Occidente*, Milano 2004; S. Osmancevic, *Oswald Spengler und das Ende der*

steps as biological entities (though with a lifespan of ca. 1000 years) and thus had their birth, growth, adulthood, old age and death: *Cultures are organisms, and world-history is their collective biography. Morphologically, the immense history of the Chinese or of the Classical Culture is the exact equivalent of the petty history of the individual man, or of the animal, or the tree, or the flower.*<sup>3</sup>

This idea was not new, of course – it goes back to the biblical and, most of all, Greco-Roman literature<sup>4</sup> – but Spengler applied it with such a thoroughness unto the scholarly evidence at his disposal, and it clashed so provocatively with the belief in progress and freedom that characterized European historiography since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, that his book instantly became a best-seller, even more so as it predicted that the West had entered the final stage of its evolution and was about to decline and fossilize. Another important factor of Spengler's thought was the idea that all civilizations were characterized by their unique mindset, a leading *Ursymbol* that was at the root of all their artistic, political or spiritual creations, and whose gradual evolution was the true driving force behind the entire history of the given civilization.

As we already alluded to, in reading *The Decline of the West* it is noticeable that Spengler only touches on the cultures of ancient Mesopotamia very superficially,<sup>5</sup> while giving considerably more space to Pharaonic Egypt. We can only speculate about the reasons for this. First, after the great discoveries of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the decipherment of hieroglyphs, Egyptomania<sup>6</sup> was still raging everywhere in Europe, and Spengler obviously did not escape this fascination. Another point may be that the dating of the Mesopotamian culture with its numerous city states was still in its infancy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, while the chronological classification and political development of Egypt and its generally quite straightforward succession of rulers (the Intermediate Periods excluded) was already somewhat more precise. A further reason may have been that Egypt's history, due to its mostly centralized political structure, can be more easily traced back to a uniform cultural development than the polycentric and chronologically highly uncertain Mesopotamian state world. A fourth and final reason can be

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*Geschichte*, Wien 2007; M. Gangl, G. Merlio, M. Ophälders (eds.), *Spengler – Ein Denker der Zeitenwende*, Frankfurt am Main 2009; G. Merlio, D. Meyer (eds.), *Spengler ohne Ende*, Frankfurt am Main 2014; A. De Winde et al. (eds.), *Tektonik der Systeme. Neulektüren von Oswald Spengler*, Heidelberg 2016; A. Demandt, *Untergänge des Abendlandes. Studien zu Oswald Spengler*, Köln 2017; S. Fink, R. Rollinger (eds.), *Oswald Spenglers Kulturmorphologie*, Berlin 2018; D. Engels, M. Otte, M. Thöndl (eds.), *Der lange Schatten Oswald Spenglers. 100 Jahre Untergang des Abendlandes*, Waltrop–Berlin 2018; D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler. Werk, Deutung, Rezeption*, Stuttgart 2021.

<sup>3</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1, 104.

<sup>4</sup> See in general D. Engels (ed.), *Von Platon bis Fukuyama. Biologistische und zyklische Konzepte in der Geschichtsphilosophie der Antike und des Abendlandes*, Brussels 2015.

<sup>5</sup> See my paper on the role of Babylonia, India, Mexico, and China in Spengler's work: D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler...*, pp. 190-204.

<sup>6</sup> On Egyptomania, see B. Brier, *Egyptomania*, Brookville, NY 1992; J. St. Curl, *Egyptomania. The Egyptian Revival. A Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*, Manchester 1994; W. Seipel (ed.), *Ägyptomanie. Europäische Ägyptenimagination von der Antike bis heute*, Wien 2000.

seen in the fact that Eduard Meyer's<sup>7</sup> *Geschichte des Altertums* (History of Antiquity), which had a tremendous influence on Spengler,<sup>8</sup> treated Egypt in considerably greater detail than the other ancient Oriental cultures,<sup>9</sup> thus providing him with a ready-made analytical blueprint. As a result, we also find a considerably greater bibliographical density in the footnotes of the *Decline* with regard to ancient Egypt than with regard to ancient Mesopotamia, though Spengler's somewhat erratic quotation habits<sup>10</sup> – placing footnotes mostly to justify anecdotal or statistic evidence – makes it difficult to assume that he only read those books he quoted.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, it is not impossible for some of his references to have been merely taken over from other volumes.<sup>12</sup>

However, Spengler's attempt at a quasi-monistic synthetization of Egyptian cultural history did not go unchallenged. As early as the years following the publication of the first volume of the *Decline*, individual Egyptologists were critical of the cultural morphological approach, most importantly Wilhelm Spiegelberg,<sup>13</sup> and though his position was presented (and largely refuted) in Manfred Schröter's *Streit um Spengler*, who summarized the early reception of Spengler and largely defended the latter,<sup>14</sup> the later Egyptological reception of Spengler remained quite limited. This was not only due to

<sup>7</sup> On Eduard Meyer, see W.M. Calder III, A. Demandt (eds.), *Eduard Meyer. Leben und Leistung eines Universalhistorikers*, Leiden 1990.

<sup>8</sup> E. Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums* (5 vols.), 1884–1902 (many reprints and revisions). See A. Demandt, "Eduard Meyer und Oswald Spengler. Läßt sich Geschichte voraussagen?", in W.M. Calder III, A. Demandt (eds.), *Eduard Meyer...*, pp. 159–181.

<sup>9</sup> Meyer devotes 300 pages to Ancient Egypt up to the Hyksos period in volume 1.2. of his work of history, as well as 600 more pages of volume 2, which is devoted entirely to the New Kingdom, while the Sumerian city-states have to make do with little more than 200 pages of volume 1.1.

<sup>10</sup> On Spengler and his sources, see M. Ferrari Zumbini, "Macht und Dekadenz. Der 'Streit um Spengler' und die Frage nach den Quellen zum Untergang des Abendlandes", in A. Demandt, J. Farrenkopf (eds.), *Der Fall Spengler*, pp. 75–96.

<sup>11</sup> In an Egyptological context, Spengler refers to: F.W. von Bissing, L. Borchardt, H. Kees, *Das Re-Heiligtum des Königs Ne-Woser-Re (Rathures)* (2 vols.), Berlin 1905; L. Borchardt, *Das Grabdenkmal des Königs S'a'u-Re* (2 vols.), Leipzig 1910 and 1913; L. Borchardt, *Die Annalen und die zeitliche Festlegung des Alten Reiches*, Berlin 1919; L. Curtius, *Die Antike Kunst*, Berlin 1913; A. Erman, "Ein Denkmal memphitischer Theologie", *Sitzungsberichte der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, no. 43 (1911), p. 916–950; idem, "Die Mahnworte eines ägyptischen Propheten", *Sitzungsberichte der Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, no. 42 (1919), pp. 804–815; D. Fimmen, *Die kretisch-mykenische Kultur*, Leipzig–Berlin 1921; U. Hölscher, *Grabdenkmal des Königs Chephren*, Leipzig 1912; W.M. Müller, *Asien und Europa nach altägyptischen Denkmälern*, Leipzig 1893; F. Preisigke, *Girwesen im griechischen Aegypten*, Straßburg 1910; H. Schäfer, *Von Aegyptischer Kunst*, Leipzig 1919; R. Weill, *La fin du moyen empire égyptien*, Paris 1918.

<sup>12</sup> Which seems almost certain in the case of von Bissing, Borchardt, Kees, "Das Re-Heiligtum...", which Spengler mentions only twice as "Borchardt, Re-Heiligtum des Newoserri I, 1905", which corresponds exactly to how Meyer, *Geschichte des Altertums...* 1.1, §250 quotes this work in the same context.

<sup>13</sup> M. Spiegelberg, "Aegyptologische Kritik an Spenglers Untergang des Abendlandes", *Logos*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1920–1921), pp. 188–194. On Spiegelberg, see E. Seidl, "Wilhelm Spiegelberg (Necrologio)", *Aegyptus*, no. 11 (1931), pp. 195–201, and M.L. Bierbrier, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, London 1995, pp. 400–401.

<sup>14</sup> M. Schröter, *Der Streit um Spengler. Kritik seiner Kritiker*, München 1922, pp. 36–45.

the consequences of Spiegelberg's influential review, but also to the second volume of the *Decline*, centered much more around political questions than the previous volume, largely dedicated to the evolution of science and art. And as Spengler did not only limit his research to showing the parallels between past civilizations, but also ventured to predict the future history of the West on the basis of this comparison, it is no wonder that many scholars must have thought the subject much too dangerous and politicized to comment upon (positively or negatively),<sup>15</sup> as Spengler predicted social strife, the rise of Caesarism and then the advent of a fossilized, stagnating final empire<sup>16</sup> which, at best, could protect its citizens for some generations from total inner decay and outer aggression such as in the Roman Empire, the Chinese Han Dynasty or the 19<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Dynasty.

In the following, we will first present and critically analyze the outlines of Spengler's interpretation of Ancient Egyptian history in terms of art, politics and religion, before venturing some conclusions and personal remarks about the important question to what extent Spengler's endeavor must be considered helplessly outdated and refuted by modern research, or whether it still has a potential to serve as the basis of a new, up-to-date morphology of history.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. SPENGLER AND ANCIENT EGYPT

### 2.1. Art History

The special care accorded by Spengler to ancient Egypt is already obvious when we consider his quite extensive description of the Egyptian *Ursymbol*<sup>18</sup> which contrasts markedly with the absence of any reflection on the *Ursymbol* of the Babylonian, the Indian or the Mexican civilization. Thus we read:

*The Egyptian soul saw itself as moving down a narrow and inexorably-prescribed life-path to come at the end before the judges of the dead. That was its Destiny-idea. The Egyptian's existence is that of the traveller who follows one unchanging direction, and the whole form-language of his Culture is a translation into the sensible of this one theme. And as we have taken endless space as the prime symbol of the North and body as that of the Classical, so we may take the word way as most intelligibly expressing that of the Egyptians. Strangely, and for Western thought almost incomprehensibly, the one element in extension*

<sup>15</sup> On the reception of Spengler, see Z. Gasimov, C.A. Lemke Duque (eds.), *Oswald Spengler als europäisches Phänomen*, Göttingen 2013; Chr. Völler, G. Schnödl, J. Walter (eds.), *Spenglers Nachleben. Studien zu einer verdeckten Wirkungsgeschichte*, Springe 2018.

<sup>16</sup> See also D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler...*, pp. 225-248.

<sup>17</sup> Let us also stress that the following study will be based on Spengler's analysis of Egypt in the two volumes of the "Decline of the West", as it would lead us too far to systematically refer to the very fragmentary and contradicting remarks on Egypt in the posthumously edited fragments: O. Spengler, *Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte*, ed. by A.M. Kocktanek, München 1966, pp. 248-272.

<sup>18</sup> On the *Ursymbol*, see I. Kaiserreiner, *Kunst und Weltgefühl*, Frankfurt am Main 1995.

that they emphasize is that of direction in depth. The tomb temples of the Old Kingdom and especially the mighty pyramid-temples of the Fourth Dynasty represent, not a purposed organization of space such as we find in the mosque and the cathedral, but a rhythmically ordered sequence of spaces. The sacred way leads from the gate-building on the Nile through passages, halls, arcaded courts and pillared rooms that grow ever narrower and narrower, to the chamber of the dead, and similarly the Sun-temples of the Fifth Dynasty are not 'buildings' but a path enclosed by mighty masonry. The reliefs and the paintings appear always as rows which with an impressive compulsion lead the beholder in a definite direction. The ram and sphinx avenues of the New Empire have the same object. For the Egyptian, the depth-experience which governed his world-form was so emphatically directional that he comprehended space more or less as a continuous process of actualization. (...) Thus the Egyptian experienced space, we may say, in and by the processional march along its distinct elements, whereas the Greek who sacrificed outside the temple did not feel it and the man of our Gothic centuries praying in the cathedral let himself be immersed in the quiet infinity of it (...).<sup>19</sup>

Unsurprisingly, this broad simplification of Egyptian as well as Greco-Roman and European art was early on criticized by many commentators, who regularly pointed to cases where the categories set up by Spengler did not seem to match or where one type of art was not perceived as original creation, but rather as a mere result of the influences of a preceding or neighboring civilization. However, this criticism, most openly displayed by Spiegelberg,<sup>20</sup> failed at singling out any fundamental errors committed by Spengler (indeed, it would be difficult to find in Egyptian art anything even remotely resembling the typically Chinese ideal of 'meandering' through landscape or in Classical architecture anything akin to the obsession of the West with heights or perspectives) and it emanated from an ideological rather than a purely scholarly choice. This was already predicted by Spengler in his own work and was also stressed by Manfred Schröter,<sup>21</sup> for the assessment of the trends and tendencies of history as being either

<sup>19</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, pp. 1,188-1,190. See similarly pp. 112-113 and p. 1,174.

<sup>20</sup> M. Spiegelberg, "Aegyptologische Kritik...", pp. 189-191 (p. 189: *Ich muß gestehen, daß ich dieses Wanderbild am allerletzten hinter der ägyptischen Psyche suchen würde. Man könnte es bei einem Nomadenvolk wie den Arabern verstehen, aber nicht bei dem seßhaften ägyptischen Bauernvolk, dem das Wandern gewiß nicht im Blut lag.* – Spiegelberg obviously mistakes Spengler's idea of a teleological procession with that of a mere meandering.)

<sup>21</sup> M. Schröter, *Streit um Spengler...*, pp. 37-38: *Aus dem Symbol des Lebenspfades aber, jenem Kristallisationszentrum all der versuchten Deutungen wird hier ein harmloses ‚Wandermotiv‘, das wohl in jeder anderen Kultur und Kunst ebenso häufig sei (...). Das ist denn ein Niveau und Maß des flachen Mißverstehens und Unverständnisses, das jede weitere Diskussion erübrigt. Aber niemand wird sich wundern, wenn empfänglichen und empfindenden Lesern Spenglers eine derartige wissenschaftliche Kritik ihrem Objekt denn doch noch nicht gewachsen scheint. Mag sie im Einzelnen Richtiges sehen, im Ganzen wird hier stets die Macht und Tiefe der urteilenden Persönlichkeit entscheiden, und damit ist ein meist groteskes Mißverhältnis zwischen der Kritik und den hier wenn noch nicht gestalteten, so doch empfundenen und gedeuteten Werten gegeben, für das der naive wie der allgemein gebildete Leser ein instinktives, richtiges Gefühl hat. Diese Gefühl läßt sich vielleicht bis zu der extremen Behauptung steigern, daß für den die Kulturinhalte Empfindenden die Deutung Spenglers, weil zu Lebenstiefen führend, schließlich wertvoller*

‘typical’ or ‘accidental’ lies largely in the eye of the beholder, and the specialist is often less able to see general lines of evolution than the neophyte.

The consequence of this Egyptian focus on a one-directional space is not only the frontality of Egyptian art,<sup>22</sup> but also the primacy of stone<sup>23</sup> architecture in order to embody this *Ursymbol* and express the wish to represent and guarantee the immortality that underpins this symbol:

*The Egyptian style was purely architectural, and remained so till the Egyptian soul was extinguished. It is the only one in which Ornamentation as a decorative supplement to architecture is entirely absent. It allowed of no divergence into arts of entertainment, no display-painting, no busts, no secular music.*<sup>24</sup>

This is an interesting reflection, which is not entirely true to the facts,<sup>25</sup> but which nevertheless sheds intriguing light on more recent findings of artistic works with a more secular character – one may think about the depictions of reversals of traditional hierarchy in the satirical ostraca, our increasing knowledge of Egyptian music or the erotic scenes of the Turin papyrus and the Hatshepsut graffito. On the one hand, these evidences clearly document the existence of artistic activities discordant with the official art, while, on the other hand, their accidental preservation shows that in classical Egyptian civilization, there was indeed no place for their development, refinement, and long-term conservation, which proves the gist of Spengler’s argument to be right.<sup>26</sup>

As for Spengler, there is no fundamental disparity between artistic, political, economic or social history, as they all are mere manifestations of the same underlying evolution. A large part of the first volume of the *Decline of the West* is thus devoted to showing the parallels in the development of art history, as we already saw in the initial quotation of this paper. Thus, after the “Carolingian” origins of Egyptian art in the

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*sei als die bloßen Resultate der exakten Ägyptologie – selbst angenommen, daß die Deutungen historisch nicht ganz richtig wären.*

<sup>22</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,225: *Yet in reality this statue-art, the art of the naked body standing free upon its footing and appreciable from all sides alike, existed in the Classical and the Classical only, for it was that Culture alone which quite decisively refused to transcend sense-limits in favour of space. The Egyptian statue is always meant to be seen from the front – it is a variant of plane-relief. And the seemingly Classically-conceived statues of the Renaissance (we are astounded, as soon as it occurs to us to count them, to find how few of them there are are nothing but a semi-Gothic reminiscence. On the importance of facade architecture, e.g. in the Pylon, see *ibid.*, pp. 1,224 n. 1; 1,243; 1,262.*

<sup>23</sup> On the fundamental difference between the ‘dematerialising’ polish of the Egyptian stone and the translucent use of the Greek marble, see O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,248 n. 1.

<sup>24</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,202, see also p. 1,188 and p. 1,203

<sup>25</sup> See also M. Spiegelberg, *Aegyptologische Kritik...*, p. 192, stressing that the polishing was “only” meant to protect the stone (which would, incidentally, rather confirm Spengler’s remarks on the Egyptian focus on eternity) and that many Egyptian monuments and statues were painted, at least on eyes and mouth; a criticism which, of course, eludes the fact that the stone artefacts mentioned by Spengler were generally left bare so that the costly material could be admired, and as some painting on eyes or lips can hardly be considered as a full-fledged covering.

<sup>26</sup> See also *ibid.*, p. 193, stressing the discovery of dramatic poetry.

Third Dynasty,<sup>27</sup> the true beginning of the Egyptian civilization proper coincides with the Fourth Dynasty, while the apex is reached under the Twelfth Dynasty, in particular during the reign of Sesostri III:

*In the beginning there is the timid, despondent, naked expression of a newly-awakened soul which is still seeking for a relation between itself and the world that, though its proper creation, yet is presented as alien and unfriendly. There is the child's fearfulness in Bishop Bernward's building at Hildesheim, in the Early-Christian catacomb-painting, and in the pillar-halls of the Egyptian Fourth Dynasty. A February of art, a deep presentiment of a coming wealth of forms, an immense suppressed tension, lies over the landscape that, still wholly rustic, is adorning itself with the first strongholds and townlets. Then follows the joyous mounting into the high Gothic, into the Constantinian age with its pillared basilicas and its domical churches, into the relief-ornament of the Fifth-Dynasty temple. Being is understood, a sacred form-language has been completely mastered and radiates its glory, and the Style ripens into a majestic symbolism of directional depth and of Destiny. But fervent youth comes to an end, and contradictions arise within the soul itself. The Renaissance, the Dionysiac-musical hostility to Apollinian Doric, the Byzantine of 450 that looks to Alexandria and away from the overjoyed art of Antioch, indicate a moment of resistance, of effective or ineffective impulse to destroy what has been acquired. (...) And now it is the manhood of the style-history that comes on. The Culture is changing into the intellectuality of the great cities that will now dominate the country-side, and pari passu the style is becoming intellectualized also. The grand symbolism withers; the riot of superhuman forms dies down; milder and more worldly arts drive out the great art of developed stone. Even in Egypt sculpture and fresco are emboldened to lighter movement. The artist appears, and 'plans' what formerly grew out of the soil. Once more existence becomes self-conscious and now, detached from the land and the dream and the mystery, stands questioning, and wrestles for an expression of its new duty – as at the beginning of Baroque when Michelangelo, in wild discontent and kicking against the limitations of his art, piles up the dome of St. Peter's – in the age of Justinian I which built Hagia Sophia and the mosaic-decked domed basilicas of Ravenna – at the beginning of that Twelfth Dynasty in Egypt which the Greeks condensed under the name of Sesostri – and at the decisive epoch in Hellas (c. 600) whose architecture probably, nay certainly, expressed that which is echoed for us in its grandchild Aeschylus. Then comes the gleaming autumn of the style. Once more the soul depicts its happiness, this time conscious of self-completion. The 'return to Nature' which already thinkers and poets – Rousseau, Gorgias and their 'contemporaries' in the other Cultures – begin to feel and to proclaim, reveals itself in the form-world of the arts as a sensitive longing and presentiment of the end. A perfectly clear intellect, joyous urbanity, the sorrow of a parting – these are the colours of these last Culture-decades of which Talleyrand was to remark later: 'Qui n'a pas vécu avant 1789 ne connaît pas la douceur de vivre.' So it was, too, with the free, sunny and superfine art of Egypt under Sesostri III (c. 1850 BC) and the brief moments of satiated happiness that produced the varied splendour of Pericles's Acropolis and the works of Zeuxis and Phidias.<sup>28</sup>*

<sup>27</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,200.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1,206-207. See simil. pp. 1,58 and 1,201-202. Even Spiegelberg has to admit the suggestiveness

After this nearly autumnal moment follows 'modernism' and thus the winter of Egyptian civilization, characterized by the rise of artificial and inorganic 'styles' craving for 'novelty'<sup>29</sup> and the transformation of quality into quantity; a "*swaggering in specious dimensions (...) common to all nascent Civilizations – we find it in the Zeus altar of Pergamum, the Helios of Chares called the 'Colossus of Rhodes,' the architecture of the Roman Imperial Age, the New Empire work in Egypt, the American skyscraper of to-day.*"<sup>30</sup> Thus, we read:

*The relief of the XLXth Dynasty – the modern age in the Egyptian Culture – that covered the monstrous, meaningless, in-organic walls, statues and columns, seems like a sheer parody of the art of the Old Kingdom. The Ptolemaic Horus-temple of Edfu is quite unsurpassed in the way of vacuous eclecticism – so far, for we are only at the beginning of our own development in this line, showy and assertive as the style of our streets and squares already is. In due course, even the strength to wish for change fades out. Rameses the Great – so soon – appropriated to himself buildings of his predecessors by cutting out their names and inserting his own in the inscriptions. It was the same consciousness of artistic impotence that led Constantine to adorn his triumphal arch in Rome with sculptures taken from other buildings.*<sup>31</sup>

While very suggestive in its conflation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and the Ptolemaic period nearly a millennium later, this passage betrays a certain chronological vagueness, which we will have to discuss in more detail below. Indeed, if Sesostris III (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century BC) corresponds to the last phase of the 'ancien régime,' while the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty starts in 1292 BC, this leads (even allowing for some imprecision due to the chronological uncertainties of early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholarship) to an enormous chronological gap of more than a half millennium between periods that should be contiguous. The identification of Ramesses II as Egyptian 'Constantine' does not make this problem any easier, but stretches this gap for some centuries more. Also, we should notice the contradiction with Spengler's 'comparative tables,' where it is rather the Hyksos who inaugurate the 'modern' period of Ancient Egypt, while the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty is placed at its end (in parallel with Trajan and Aurelian).<sup>32</sup>

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of Spengler's discussion of the Old Kingdom art: "Aegyptologische Kritik..." p. 193: *Er hat sich offenbar nur näher mit der Kunst des alten Reiches (der Pyramidenzeit) beschäftigt und zwar so genau, daß er in der Kunst der 4., 5. und 6. Dynastie das Gras wachsen hört.*

<sup>29</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,298: *Rossini was asked once what he thought of the music of the 'Huguenots'; 'Music?' he replied. 'I heard nothing resembling it.' Many a time must this judgment have been passed at Athens on the new painting of the Asiatic and Sicyonian schools, and opinions not very different must have been current in Egyptian Thebes with regard to the art of Cnossus and Tell-el-Amarna.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1,291.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1,294. See also p. 1,44 and p. 1,358 n. 2. On this motive, see also D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler...*, pp. 317-342.

<sup>32</sup> On the reception of Egyptian art, see e.g. O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 1,166: *Follow out the destiny of the Column, from the Egyptian tomb-temple in which columns are ranked to mark the path for the traveller, through the Doric peripteros in which they are held together by the body of the building, and the Early-Arabian basilica where they support the interior, to the facades of the Renaissance in which they provide the upward-striving element.*

## 2.2. Political History

The chronological and morphological structure sketched above sets the stage for Spengler's analysis of Egyptian political history. Here too, the Old Kingdom is seen in parallel with the European Middle Ages:

*About 3000, after a long 'Merovingian' period, which is still distinctly perceptible in Egypt, the two oldest Cultures began, in exceedingly limited areas on the lower Nile and the lower Euphrates. In these cases the distinctions between early and late periods have long ago been labelled as Old and Middle Kingdom, Sumer and Akkad. The outcome of the Egyptian feudal period marked by the establishment of a hereditary nobility and the decline (from Dynasty VI) of the older Kingship, presents so astounding a similarity with the course of events in the Chinese springtime from I-Wang (934-909) and that in the Western from the Emperor Henry IV (1056-1106) that a unified comparative study of all three might well be risked.*<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Spengler devotes a considerable attention to underlining the feudal traits of the late Old Kingdom, relying heavily on references to Meyer's *Geschichte des Altertums*,<sup>34</sup> which have to be considered quite accurate still today in their general analysis:

*Out of the officialdom of a highly civilized administration came a minor nobility of decurions, village knights, and town politicians, who were responsible to the sovereign in body and goods for all outgoing – a feudalism formed backwards – and gradually made their positions heritable, just as happened under the Egyptian Vth Dynasty and the first Chou centuries and the Europe of the Crusades.*<sup>35</sup>

This leads to the decline of pharaonic power and, ultimately, to a period of complete fragmentation as during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Egyptian Dynasties:

*In Egypt feudalism was fully developed by about the middle of the Vth Dynasty. The Pharaoh Asosi gave away his domains literally piece by piece to the vassals, and, further, the rich fiefs of the priesthood were (exactly as in the West) free of taxation and gradually became the permanent property ('mortmain' as we should say) of the great temples. With the Vth Dynasty (c. 1530 b.c.) the 'Hohenstaufen' age comes to an end. Under the shadow-kingship of the shortlived VIth Dynasty the princes (rpati) and counts (hetio) become independent; the high offices are all hereditary and the tomb-inscriptions show us more and more proud stress upon ancient lineage. That which later Egyptian historians have hidden under the reputed VIIth and VIIIth Dynasties is really half a century of anarchy and lawless conflicts between princes for each other's domains or for the Pharaoh-title.*<sup>36</sup>

After these troubles the Middle Kingdom ushers in what would be called 'absolutism' in European history, once again described on the basis of Meyer:<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 2,39.

<sup>34</sup> This is most obvious in the numerous bibliographical references to Meyer placed e.g. on O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,350 n. 5 (where Meyer himself – *Geschichte des Altertums...* 1 §222 – tried to draw a comparison between Egyptian and European nobiliary titles) and p. 2375.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 2,349; see simil. p. 2,335.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., p. 2,375.

<sup>37</sup> Spengler refers particularly to §280ff. and 286 of Meyer's *Geschichte des Altertums*.

*In Egypt, too, the period between Fronde and Revolution is hall-marked. It is the Middle Kingdom. The XIIth Dynasty (2.000-1788) – in particular Amenemhet I and Sesostri I – had established the absolute State in severe conflicts with the baronage. The first of these rulers, as a famous poem of the time relates, barely escaped from a court conspiracy, and the biography of Sinuhet shows us that after his death, which was kept secret for a time, rebellion threatened. The third was murdered by palace officials. We learn from the inscriptions in the family grave of the earl Chmenotep that the cities had become rich and almost independent, and warred with each other. Certainly they cannot have been smaller at that time than the Greek cities at the time of the Persian Wars. It was on them and on a certain number of loyal magnates that the dynasty rested. Finally, Sesostri III (1887-1850) succeeded in completely abolishing feudal nobility. Thenceforward there was only a court-nobility and a single, admirably ordered bureau-State; but already some lamented that people of standing were reduced to misery and that the 'sons of nobodies' enjoyed rank and consideration. Democracy was beginning and the great social evolution of the Hyksos period was brewing.<sup>38</sup>*

It is unfortunate but not untypical that Spengler attributes only a passing attention to the Middle Kingdom, which he considers nonetheless as the heyday of classical Egyptian civilization: When it comes to the assessment of the other civilizations too, his focus lies mostly either on their early stages or on their final, 'modern' period, which is of course most interesting to him in order to prognosticate the future of the Western civilization.

The last remarks of the above-mentioned quote already refer to a pivotal phase in Spengler's analysis of Egyptian political history: the Hyksos period. In classical Egyptian historiography, this period has been presented as a time when Egypt lost its independence to a host of foreign invaders who divided up the realm into numerous semi-autonomous states and brought with them social turmoil before they were expelled by the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Spengler, however, saw this period as a natural step in the development of the Egyptian civilization and stressed that the Hyksos were just an instrument of inner conflicts and not outer disrupters; traces of this being discernible in the evolution of the contemporary Egyptian 'outpost' on Minoan Crete.<sup>39</sup>

*This is the phase, too, which in Egypt is concealed under the name of the 'Hyksos.' Between the XIIth and the XVIIIth Dynasties lay two centuries, which began with the collapse of the ancien regime which had culminated with Sesostri III, and ended with the beginning of the New Empire. The numbering of the dynasties itself suffices to disclose something catastrophic. In the lists of kings the names appear successive or parallel, usurpers*

<sup>38</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,387.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2,88-89: *It is surely no accident that the peak of this Minoan luxury coincides with the period of the great Egyptian revolution, and particularly the Hyksos time (1780-15 80 BC). The Egyptian craftsmen may well have fled in those days to the peaceful islands and even as far as the strongholds of the mainland, as in a later instance the Byzantine scholars fled to Italy. For it is axiomatic that the Minoan Culture is a part of the Egyptian, and we should be able to see this more fully were it not that the part of Egypt's art-store which would have been decisive in this connexion – viz.: what was produced in the Western Delta – has perished from damp.*

*of obscurest origin, generals, people with strange titles, often reigning only a few days. (...) It is the time out of which the Leiden Papyrus portrays the great social revolution: 'The higher officials are displaced, the land robbed of its royalty by a few madmen, and the counsellors of the old state pay their court to upstarts; administration has ceased, documents are destroyed, all social differences abolished, the courts fallen into the hands of the mob. The noble classes go hungry and in rags, their children are battered on the wall, and their mummies torn from the grave. Mean fellows become rich and swagger in the palaces on the strength of the herds and ships that they have taken from their rightful owners. Former slave-girls become insolent and aliens lord it. Robbery and murder rule, cities are laid waste, public buildings burned down. The harvest diminishes, no one thinks now of cleanliness, births are few – and oh, that mankind might cease!' Here is the very picture of the megalopolitan and Late revolution, as it was enacted in the Hellenistic and in 1789 and 1871 in Paris. It is the world-city masses, will-less tools of the ambition of leaders who demolish every remnant of order, who desire to see in the outer world the same chaos as reigns within their own selves. Whether these cynical and hopeless attempts start from alien intruders like the Hyksos or the Turks, or from slaves as in the case of Spartacus and Ali; whether the division of property is shouted for as at Syracuse or has a book for banner like Marxism – all this is superficial. It is wholly immaterial what slogans scream to the wind while the gates and the skulls are being beaten in. Destruction is the true and only impulse, and Caesarism the only issue. The world-city, the land-devouring demon, has set its rootless and futureless men in motion; and in destroying they die. (...) These Hyksos, there can be no doubt whatever, played the part that the Armenians played in Byzantium; and in the Classical world too, the destinies of the Cimbri and Teutones, would have gone the same way had they defeated Marius and his legions of city canaille. (...)*<sup>40</sup>

Once again, Spengler frequently refers to Meyer<sup>41</sup> here, who seems to have agreed with most of Spengler's positions as is suggested by his review of the *Decline*,<sup>42</sup> but the main argument is based on the idea of Raymond Weill<sup>43</sup>, who saw in the Hyksos local sub-kings whose fights covered up inner social conflicts between the Egyptians themselves. Also, Spengler refers here as elsewhere<sup>44</sup> several times to the "Leiden papyrus" (1,344) in its translation by Erman, whom he (quite unusually) quotes extensively.<sup>45</sup> As the text is rather vague and composed of many topoi, and as the only surviving testimony comes from the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and seems to have been edited and transformed numerous times since its original composition, it is difficult to date the text. While writing the *Decline*, Spengler saw the Leiden papyrus as an illustration of the events of the Hyksos period; modern scholarship, however, sees it as pre-dating the Hyksos invasion

<sup>40</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,427f. See simil. pp. 2,38, 2,41, 2,50.

<sup>41</sup> More precisely, in n. 3 on *ibid.*, p. 2427, he refers to §298ff.

<sup>42</sup> See E. Meyer, *Spenglers Untergang des Abendlandes*, Berlin 1925, p. 12.

<sup>43</sup> R. Weill, *La fin du Moyen Empire Égyptien...* See also his posthumous publication: *Douzième Dynastie, royauté de Haute-Égypte et domination Hyksos dans le nord*, Paris 1953.

<sup>44</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,387.

<sup>45</sup> A. Erman, "Die Mahnworte..."

and reflecting the royal propaganda of the Twelfth Dynasty in its attempt to glorify its overcoming of the First Intermediate Period. Of course, this does not exclude the possibility of successive editors including allusions to their own contemporary issues, so that the text, indeed, may refer to a series of social crises of the late Twelfth Dynasty. Interestingly, it seems from the content of Spengler's treatise on the war chariot and his (unfinished) 'Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte'<sup>46</sup> that, in his later work, he planned to slightly revise his interpretation of the Hyksos invasion, which he saw no more as contemporary to the social revolutions transforming Egypt from a culture into a civilization, but rather as their consequence.<sup>47</sup>

The social revolution of the Hyksos period is then followed by the 'modern' period of Egyptian history, though, as we have already seen above, the precise chronological analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasties remains somewhat vague and malleable, as Spengler seems to shift much of the social and political tendencies of the early New Kingdom into the Hyksos period while presenting an analysis of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasties that seems to apply to much later tendencies.<sup>48</sup> Thus, Spengler qualifies the kings of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty as 'Caesars'<sup>49</sup> and stresses parallels between Ahmose I and Augustus:

*By the term 'Caesarism' I mean that kind of government which, irrespective of any constitutional formulation that it may have, is in its inward self a return to thorough formlessness. It does not matter that Augustus in Rome, and Hwang-ti in China, Amasis in Egypt and Alp Arslan in Baghdad disguised their position under antique forms. The spirit of these forms was dead, and so all institutions, however carefully maintained, were thenceforth destitute of all meaning and weight.*<sup>50</sup>

Spengler also reflects upon the parallels between the ideology of the New Kingdom, Stoicism and Socialism,<sup>51</sup> the problems of the concentration of power in a single metropolis such as Thebes,<sup>52</sup> the domination of financial economy<sup>53</sup> and depopulation:

<sup>46</sup> See O. Spengler, "Der Streitwagen und seine Bedeutung für den Gang der Weltgeschichte", *Reden und Aufsätze*, München 1937, pp. 148-152; idem, *Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte...*, pp. 273-421.

<sup>47</sup> It would lead us too far to go into the details of how Spengler links the Hyksos invasion to the different "barbarian" invasions of highly mobile tribes throughout world history.

<sup>48</sup> M. Spiegelberg, "Aegyptologische Kritik...", p. 193 states, not entirely erroneously: *Von dieser letzten Periode hat nun Spengler nur die alleroberflächlichste Kenntnis.*

<sup>49</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,353: *The New Empire witnessed, immediately after its great Caesars, the political autocracy of the Amen priesthood, Thebes, and then again the revolution of the 'heretic' king Amenophis IV (Akhenaton).*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2,431; see simil. on the parallels between Hatshepsut and the Julian-Claudian house p. 2,434.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1,359: *It is this late-appearing mass and not 'mankind' that is the object of Stoic and Socialist propaganda, and one could match it with equivalent phenomena in the Egyptian New Empire, Buddhist India and Confucian China.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2,95 and p. 2,99.

<sup>53</sup> E.g. *ibid.*, pp. 2,484, 2,486 and 2,491 n. 3 (*In old Egypt (whose money-thought is astoundingly like the Western) there was nothing resembling the coin even under the New Empire. The written transfer was entirely sufficient, and the Classical coins that filtered in from 650 to the founding of Alexandria and the Hellenistic regime were usually cut to pieces and reckoned by weight as a ware.*)

*Depopulation can be distinctly traced in the background of the Egyptian New Empire, especially from the XIX Dynasty onwards. Street widths like those to Amenophis IV at Tell-el-Amarna – of fifty yards – would have been unthinkable with the denser population of the old days. The onset of the ‘Sea-peoples,’ too, was only barely repulsed – their chances of obtaining possession of the realm were certainly not less promising than those of the Germans of the fourth century vis-à-vis the Roman world. And finally the incessant infiltration of Libyans into the Delta culminated when one of their leaders seized the power, in 945 BC – precisely as Odoacer seized it in AD 476.<sup>54</sup>*

From this perspective, Egyptian civilization ceases to be a living organism since the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (which is somewhat inconsistent with his claim that the European 19<sup>th</sup> century corresponds to ‘modernity,’ as, in his morphological tables, Sethos I is paralleled with events happening ‘after 2200’ in the West):

*That which we see in the Egyptian Civilization after Seti I (1300) and in the Chinese, the Indian, the Arabian to this day is – notwithstanding all the cleverness of the religious, philosophical and, especially, political forms in which it is wrapped – just the old zoological up-and-down of the primitive age again. Whether the lords sitting in Babylon were wild war-hordes like the Kassites or refined inheritors like the Persians, when, for how long, and with what success they kept their seats, signified nothing from the standpoint of Babylon. The comfort of the population was affected by such things, naturally, but they made no difference either way to the fact that the soul of this world was extinct and its events, therefore, void of any deep meaning. A new dynasty, native or foreign, in Egypt, a revolution or a conquest in China, a new Germanic people in the Roman Empire, were elements in the history of the landscape like a change in the fauna or the migration of a flock of birds.<sup>55</sup>*

Thus, for Spengler, since the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt becomes a ‘post-historic’ society (a situation for which Spengler coined the term of ‘Fellah’ state<sup>56</sup>) – passing from one conqueror’s hand to the next, being exploited by empire after empire<sup>57</sup> and slowly forgetting its own identity, until another civilization manages, at least partly, to impose its worldview on the last remnants of its predecessor:

*The Pax Romana had for the later soldier-emperors and Germanic band-kings only the one practical significance that it made a formless population of a hundred millions a mere object for the will-to-power of small warrior groups. This peace cost the peaceful sacrifices beside which the losses of Cannae seem vanishingly small. The Babylonian, Chinese,*

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 2,106.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., pp. 2,48-49.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 2,105: *At this level all Civilizations enter upon a stage, which lasts for centuries, of appalling depopulation. The whole pyramid of cultural man vanishes. It crumbles from the summit, first the world-cities, then the provincial forms, and finally the land itself, whose best blood has incontinently poured into the towns, merely to bolster them up awhile. At the last, only the primitive blood remains, alive, but robbed of its strongest and most promising elements. This residue is the Fellah type.* On the link to Egypt, see p. 2,169.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 2,484f.: *Imperial Rome would have gone down in ruin had it not been fortunate enough to possess in old Egypt a Civilization that had for a thousand years thought of nothing but the organization of its economy.* – another passage heavily criticised by Spiegelberg.

*Indian, Egyptian worlds pass from one conqueror's hands to another's, and it is their own blood that pays for the contest. That is their – peace.*<sup>58</sup>

This under-evaluation of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty is probably one of the greatest flaws of Spengler's analysis of the Egyptian civilization. Indeed, quite dissimilarly from the Roman Empire, the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty was far from an omnipotence of the ruler and a passivity of the masses, as, on the one hand, we observe the gradual rise to power of the Amun clergy which should be considered as a major capitalist and oligarchical power whose conflict with the pharaoh would culminate in the Amarna-crisis, while, on the other hand, the obvious involvement of the masses in Akhenaton's endeavor to transform radically the established religion resembles much more the events of the Late Republic (or the socialist revolutions of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) than the dynamics of the Later Roman Empire.

### 2.3. Religious History

Though somewhat less detailed than his remarks on artistic and political history, we should not overlook Spengler's analysis of the religious evolution of the Egyptian civilization. Spengler gives a quite detailed account of the transition from the initial cult of the royal falcon to the new solar cult linked to the Fifth Dynasty, drawing, as it seems, some inspiration from studies by Borchardt and Erman:<sup>59</sup>

*In the Vth Dynasty of Egypt (1680-1540), which followed that of the great pyramid-builders, the cult of the Horus-falcon, whose ka dwelt in the reigning monarch, faded. The old local cults and even the profound Thot religion of Hermopolis fell into the background. The sun-religion of Re appears. Out from his palace westward every king erects a Re-sanctuary by his tomb temple, the latter a symbol of a life directional from birth to sarcophagus chamber, the former a symbol of grand and eternal nature. Time and Space, being and waking-being, Destiny and sacred Causality are set face to face in this mighty twin-creation as in no other architecture in the world. To both a covered way leads up; that to the Re is accompanied by reliefs figuring the power of the sun-god over the plant and animal worlds and the changings of seasons. No god-image, no temple, but only an altar of alabaster adorns the mighty terrace on which at day-break, high above the land, the Pharaoh advances out of the darkness to greet the great god who is rising up in the East. (The Pharaoh is no longer an incarnation of godhead, and not yet, as the theology of the Middle Kingdom was to make him, the son of Re; notwithstanding all earthly greatness, he is small, a servant, as he stands before.) This youthful inwardness proceeds always out of a townless countryside, out of villages, hovels, sanctuaries, solitary cloisters, and hermitages. Here is formed the community of high awareness, of the spiritual elect, which inwardly is separated by a whole world from the great being-currents of the heroic and the knightly. The two prime estates, priesthood and nobility – contemplation in the cathedral and deeds before the castles, askesis and Mime, ecstasy and high-bred custom – begin their special histories*

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 2,186. See simil. pp. 2,164, 2,169, 2,333.

<sup>59</sup> F.W. von Bissing, L. Borchardt, H. Kees, *Das Re-Heiligtum...*; A. Erman, "Ein Denkmal..."

*from this point (...). Out of the strong young religion of saintly groups, scholasticism and mysticism develop in the early towns; reformation, philosophy, and worldly learning in the increasing tumult of streets and squares; enlightenment and irreligion in the stone masses of the late megalopolis. The beliefs of the peasant outside remain "eternal" and always the same. The Egyptian mind understood nothing of this Re. He heard the name, but while a grand chapter of religious history was passing over his head in the cities, he went on worshipping the old Thinite beast-gods, until with the XXVIth Dynasty and its fellah-religion they regained supremacy. The Italian peasant prayed in Augustus's time just as he had done long before Homer and as he does to-day.*<sup>60</sup>

While Spengler rightly points to the fundamental ideological and spiritual transformation happening during the second half of the Old Kingdom, he seems to conflate the emergence of the Re-theology with the Middle Kingdom rise of Amun, which indeed seems to have been a rather intellectual creation by the temple elite, and, above all, underestimates the evolution of personal piety. Thus, Spengler not only omits the famous 'democratization of the afterworld,' where many of the theological privileges of the kings of old became shared by the common people, but also seems to neglect the popularity of the fairly new cult of Osiris,<sup>61</sup> which was in many respects an antithesis to the solar ideology of Amun-Re. However, to do justice to Spengler, he once again seems more interested in the origins and the end of the old Egyptian civilization than in its middle period, so the relative disinterest with which he treats the religious evolution of the Middle Kingdom may be due to this.

Hence, Spengler's interest in the Egyptian religion – apart from a passing glance on the philosophical thought of the Middle Kingdom<sup>62</sup> – skips many centuries only to emerge again in the context of the Hyksos and the New Kingdom, characterized by a steady decline of established religion and culminating, during Caesarism, in a new cult entirely dedicated to the ruler, soon to be replaced by the priestly religious autocracy<sup>63</sup> against which Akhenaton – the 'Egyptian Julian the Apostate'<sup>64</sup> – tried to fight in vain:

*The New Empire witnessed, immediately after its great Caesars, the political autocracy of the Amen priesthood, Thebes, and then again the revolution of the 'heretic' king Amenophis IV (Akhenaton) – in which one feels unmistakably a political as well as a religious*

<sup>60</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, pp. 2,279-280; see also 2,281.

<sup>61</sup> Osiris is mentioned only once in *ibid.* (p. 2,212).

<sup>62</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 2,300: *The (shall we say) profane causality of human life, the world-around, the process and meaning of cognition, become a problem. Thus, the Egyptian philosophy of the Middle Kingdom measured up the value of life in this sense; and akin to it, in all probability, was the late pre-Confucian philosophy of China from 800 to 500 BC. Only the book ascribed to Kwan-tse (d. 645) remains to give us some dim idea of this philosophy, but the indications, slight though they be, are that epistemological and biological problems occupied the centre of the one genuine philosophy of China, now utterly.*

<sup>63</sup> See above for the fact that Spengler's assumption of such a 'priestly autocracy' is somewhat inconsistent with his general theory, as it has no real parallel in the other late civilisations.

<sup>64</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,101 n. 4: *The Egyptian Julian the Apostate, Amenophis IV (Akhenaton), built himself in Tell-el-Amarna had streets up to 45 m. [149 ft.] wide.*

*side – and so on until after interminable conflicts between warrior and priestly-castes, the Egyptian world ended in foreign domination.*<sup>65</sup>

Though a suggestive parallel at first view, this comparison involves serious chronological inconsistencies,<sup>66</sup> as Spengler had previously identified Ramesses II, reigning long after Akhenaton, with Constantine the Great, who himself reigned long before Julian. A similar chronological issue can be found in Spengler's assertion that the theocratic state of the Theban priests of the Third Intermediate Period somehow mirrors the Augustan reforms.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, this restoration was only superficial: the large mass of the people, the 'fellahin,' would revert to their ancestral religion as it existed before the advent of their civilization:

*There always are and always will be a handful of superlatively intellectual, thoughtful, and perfectly self-sufficing people, like the Brahmins in India, the Mandarins in China, and the Egyptian priests who amazed Herodotus. But the fellah-religion itself is once more primitive through and through – the animal-cults of the Egyptian XXVIth Dynasty; the composite of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism that constitutes the state religion of China; the Islam of the present-day East.*<sup>68</sup>

### 3. OUTLOOK

As emphasized in some earlier contributions,<sup>69</sup> it would be sterile to limit our discussion of Spengler to a mere annotated presentation: After all, as every great philosopher since times immemorial, Spengler has presented us with a very specific intellectual challenge that cannot be simply ignored or reduced to a mere outdated testimony of a forgotten age, of interest only to modern antiquarians. Either, Spengler's claim that all civilizations go through similar stages is true, and then, we should urgently start to apply this knowledge to apprehend our own future better,<sup>70</sup> or, it is possible to disprove Spengler's allegations by showing where and how he erred in his presentation and

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 2,353.

<sup>66</sup> This becomes equally clear when Spengler parallels Akhenaton with Ashoka, whom he identifies as the "Indian Caesar". Ibid., p. 2,313: *There are still in such times a few high intellects like Nero's tutor Seneca and his antitype Psellus the philosopher, royal tutor and politician of Byzantium's Caesarism-phase; like Marcus Aurelius the Stoic and Asoka the Buddhist, who were themselves the Caesars; like the Pharaoh Amenhotep IV (Akhenaton), whose deeply significant experiment was treated as heresy and brought to naught by the powerful Amen-priesthood – a risk that Asoka, too, had, no doubt, to face from the Brahmins.* On the place of India in Spengler's "Decline", see also D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler...*, pp. 190-204.

<sup>67</sup> O. Spengler, *The Decline...*, p. 2,314: *There are signs of the tendency even in the Augustan reforms, with their artificial revival of long-dead city-cults, such as the rites of the Fratres Arvales, but it is only with the Hellenistic mystery-religions, or even with Mithraism, that community or Church organization proper begins, and its development is broken off in the ensuing downfall of the Classical. The corresponding feature in Egypt is the theocratic state set up by the priest-kings of Thebes in the eleventh century.*

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 2,315.

<sup>69</sup> See D. Engels, *Oswald Spengler...*, pp. 141-204.

<sup>70</sup> As I tried in *ibid.*, pp. 375-434.

analysis of the material, and only then, we can dismiss the consequences of his thought with good conscience.

During the course of the preceding pages, we saw how, some minor points set aside, the essential problem with Spengler's presentation of Ancient Egypt is its relative vagueness when it comes to understanding the Middle Kingdom (quite absent from the *Decline* apart from some very general comments), to assessing the role of the Second Intermediate Phase and, most of all, to understanding the New Kingdom, generally covered with a somewhat indistinct mass of critical remarks concerning its 'modernity.' It would stray us too far away to go into precise details, but let it be said that, as I have attempted to show elsewhere,<sup>71</sup> Egyptian 'Caesarism' does not start with the Middle Kingdom, but rather with the fall of the Amarna Regime, the takeover of Haremhab and, ultimately, the rise to power of Sethos I, who, in many respects, should be considered as Egypt's 'Augustus.' This makes it possible to shed a new light on the entire evolution of the New Kingdom and the Hyksos-period. The latter, at least at the beginning, would not appear to have been the vector of a social revolution comparable to the French Revolution, but would rather correspond to the late period of the 'ancien regime,' not dissimilarly to the Georgian era in England, when the power of the king became more and more circumscribed by local 'bourgeois' elites. Indeed, the disappearance of the Twelfth Dynasty and the decentralized reorganization of the Hyksos period brought with them an astonishing economic blossoming for Lower Egypt (Hutwaret alone tripled in size and everywhere in the Delta we find new settlements and necropolises) and saw the emergence of a new, rich commercial oligarchy. This is probably also one of the reasons for the increasing transition from the planned economy of the scribes to a freer, pseudo-monetary economic system in which the weight measures of *deben* and *shat*, based on precious metals, served as units of account and allowed greater flexibility in trade. The new, upper middle-class oligarchy in the small local states of Lower Egypt, which were only loosely supervised by the Hyksos, probably also benefited from the removal of the inhibiting bureaucratic trade and customs barriers of the Middle Kingdom and the competition of its state buyers. Once this new oligarchy had consolidated, however, the limitations of the political influence of the small Lower Egyptian vassal kingdoms and the great temples on distant trading partners must have become increasingly annoying, so that there was soon widespread support for the reunification of Egypt by the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasties and for their imperialist foreign policy, not dissimilarly from the growing support of the European oligarchy for the colonialist expansion of the European powers, the involvement of the rich Greek merchants in the Macedonian expansion to the East or the systematic colonization of the Szechuan basin by the Qin-dynasty during the Warring States period.

Under the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, Egypt entered thus its 'Hellenistic' or 'Modern' age and saw a fundamental reorganization of the state-power under the auspices of the plutocratic temple economy and the new military kingship, both of which were inseparable

<sup>71</sup> D. Engels, "The Revolution of 1917 from the Perspective of the Morphology of History", in A. Máthé (ed.), *1917-2017. Memory and Legacy. Perception of Communism in Europe*, Budapest 2018, pp. 27-44.

from Egypt's unprecedented imperial expansion and its rising nationalism. The New Kingdom strove to streamline the official structures of the distributive state, which was increasingly supplemented by private-sector components, and to promote the interests of the main supporters of the new regime, first and foremost the new state elite and the lords of the large temple estates. These temples functioned as independent economic and administrative units only theoretically subordinate to the pharaoh; true states within the State, whose power was based not only on land ownership, but also on their function as a bank of natural resources and holder of a wide variety of oligopolies: thus, the slimmed-down central state of the initial phase increasingly dissolved in favor of competing corporations, whose efficient cooperation depended more and more on the pressure by the army, exactly as during the liberal 19<sup>th</sup> century the interests of large trusts and corporations increasingly dominated the Western states and were in turn dominated by the military. Thus, the Amun priesthood from Thebes, originally a pillar of power of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, was to become a true second government, so that it was even able to interfere in the succession of several pharaohs (for example, Thutmosis III and Hatshepsut). The pharaoh gradually tried to resist this pressure by nominating officers or social outsiders to high command posts within the civil service, by attempting to subvert the priestly hierarchy and by relocating the capital from Thebes to Memphis. Similarly, the theological significance of the ruler shifted: the 'caesaro-papist' Old Kingdom had developed the idea of god-kingdom between consubstantiality and sonship with God; the 'absolutist' Middle Kingdom brought forth the idea of the king as a fatherly administrator on behalf of the deity; and the New Kingdom witnessed an increasing military and charismatic legitimation of the pharaoh, explaining not only the reliance on endogamy, even incest, and the increasing status of the royal wife ('God's Wife of Amun'), but also the rise of private instead of formalized depictions of the ruler. Thus, the inscriptions no longer used stereotyped descriptions of military conflicts, but described actual historical military feats; since Amenhotep, the motif of the 'sporting king' increasingly came to the fore; and the Amarna period then finally saw the apotheosis of the (apparently) 'private.' This becomes also obvious in the attempt to replace Amun by other tutelary deities: Already Amenhotep II and even more so Thutmosis IV in his *Dream Stele* regarded the Sphinx (as a representation of the sun god Harmachis, "Horus in the horizon") as a special protector, while under Amenhotep III, we find a shift from Horus to Re, often accompanied by the construction of cultic 'solar courts' and the veneration of the solar disc Aton as the god's visible, material facet, leading thus up to the Amarna-crisis which corresponds to the ideological and social upheavals of Late Hellenism or the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Indeed, Egypt was in turmoil. As the late Roman Republic, the Nile valley of the late 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty was dominated by a self-secluded ruling class, to which the large population must have appeared more than ever as a dependent and powerless mass made subservient through tax pressure and indentured service, ethnically divided because of mass-immigration and only superficially contented by lavish religious festivals. Although the social and political system as a whole, thanks to the military and the civil service, remained in theory open for 'homines novi,' it can be assumed that

the de facto hereditary nature of the priestly ranks made them extremely impermeable to disagreeable candidates. These were ideal conditions for the re-assertion of royal power through popular support, and thus, the background of the religious, social and political reforms of Amenophis IV-Akhenaton were not that dissimilar from the program of the social movements of the late Roman Republic, the Mazdakites in the Late Sassanian Empire or the authoritarian socialist movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The gradual closing or rededication of the temples, above all the Amun sanctuaries, would have had a massive impact on the social equilibrium of Egypt and would have, at least originally, benefited the poorer population. However, it can be assumed that the increasing tax burden of those crisis-ridden years, as well as the maladministration of the empire and the sabotage by the priesthood itself, had a negative impact on the perception of the reforms, explaining why their apparent initial popularity (reflected in the conscientious implementation of the religious decrees even in the private sphere) gradually decreased. The radicalism with which Akhenaten emphasized the equality of his wife, placed his daughters in the foreground of his propaganda, preached a collectivist and unattractive image of the afterlife, surrounded himself with numerous officials of non-Egyptian origin and demanded unconditional religious obedience, would have caused increasing incomprehension, not only among the common people, but also among the loyal elites, who must have found it unattractive to abandon their proud self-representation, previously well attested on stelae, to the benefit of a constant praise of the king as sole mediator between Aton and humanity. This explains the ease with which the old structures were restored after the death of the king, though a durable social pacification could only be achieved, as shows the seizure of power by Haremhab, not by peaceful consensus, but rather massive military pressure and the confiscation and plundering of the estates of the ousted Amarna officials, not dissimilarly from the Roman proscriptions.

In his decrees, Haremhab had already posed as a 'restitutor' fighting against 'sin and lies' and 'renewing the laws of Egypt;' the military coup was thus glossed over as a 'return' to the orderly conditions of the past, exactly as during the last years of the Late Roman Republic. Sethos', the Egyptian 'Augustus,' showcased his desire to mark a new beginning even more. Thus, he not only chose the title Menmaatre and the name 'Renewal of Creation,' but also benefitted from the coincidence of the Egyptian New Year with the early rising of Sirius (observed every 1460 years) – a very obvious attempt to declare the previous cycle of Egyptian history complete and the dawn of a new, 'golden,' 'Augustan' age like that of the Old Kingdom, though its wealth and glory was no longer based on a collective transcendental consensus, but on the exploitation of the Asian and Nubian colonies conquered by the new emperors and their enormous armies. It may even be possible that the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty was initiated as an adoptive monarchy, as Sethos' intended successor may not have been his son Ramesses II, making the new regime resemble even more to the Roman principate. With Ramesses II, a new stage was reached in the consolidation of the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty: Not only did the cult of personality take on unimagined and unprecedented proportions, but Ramesses II also began to entrust his numerous sons with government offices, which had not been practiced since

the Old Kingdom. Significant of the conquering position the pharaoh had attained was the revolutionizing of the Theban storage system by surrounding the mortuary temple built by Ramesses with granaries that could fill 350 shiploads and feed Thebes for a year, thus arguably removing an important part of the city's economic planning from the direct grasp of the temple of Amun – a measure that would later be repeated by Ramesses III. The foundation of the new capital Pi-Ramesse in the Delta, with its massive bronze smelting works, garrison and pantheon, also underlined royal sovereignty, which however was to disintegrate rapidly after the death of the long-lived monarch. It was not until the military coup of Sethnacht, who founded the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, that the empire was stabilized and made a last restoration of its former glory by Ramesses III, who significantly (like his successors) adopted the royal names of Ramesses II as if they were a fixed title like that of Augustus, and even gave his own sons identical names and offices as under Ramesses II, but the naval invasion by the Sea-people and the gradual loss of the colonies deprived the empire of important sources of strength. Thus, the partly economically, partly antiquarian motivated inventory of the empire, led by the chief archivist of the royal treasury and resembling the antiquarian movement of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, appears as a final consolidation before the ultimate decline under the later Ramessides, while the construction of large fortifications at the frontiers, the intrusion of Libyan mercenaries and settlers, and the disintegration of the Empire during the Third Intermediate Period all closely recall the last centuries of the Roman Empire and constitute the real end of Classical Egyptian history.

It would lead us much too far to integrate into this rough overview the spiritual and cultural evolution of the Middle and New Kingdom, but the numerous comparatist allusions outlined above should enable the reader to fill in the blank spaces and see how, while adopting basically Spengler's morphological approach, it can be possible to update his analysis of Ancient Egypt in order to overcome its occasional shortcomings. All in all, as I have attempted to show in previous studies, it seems to be obvious that, far from being outdated and irrelevant, Spengler's theoretical approach to the phenomenon of civilization continues to display numerous features that can help us to make a better sense of history, to perceive the course of a civilization not as a sequence of haphazard events, but as a logical progression, and, most of all, to better understand the dynamics at work during our own lifetime – and perhaps catch a glimpse of the future that may await us.

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