



Œdipus Aegyptiacus: Ippolito Desideri on the sins of the Sixth Dalai Lama

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I propose to trace the influence of Renaissance and Baroque ideas of Egypt on Ippolito Desideri's characterization of the sixth Dalai Lama Blo-bzang rin-chen tshangs-dbyangs rgya-mtsho (1683–1706). Scholars have long known that the Jesuit missionary was familiar with works such as Athanasius Kircher's *China illustrata*, since he himself criticizes the work for perpetuating false myths about the Dalai Lama's character and office. Scholars have been less attentive, however, to way that Desideri used such works positively to construct his own myth of Tibet. After showing how the Italian missionary subtly portrays Tibetan religion as a genealogical descendent of Egyptian idolatry, I shall offer some tentative conclusions about Desideri's sources and their implications for future studies of the history of European fascination with Tibet. My presentation will proceed in three sections: (1) a brief description of the role of the sixth Dalai Lama in the political arena in which the young Jesuit missionary wrote his refutation of reincarnation; (2) a discussion of Desideri's dependence on classical sources for his notions of reincarnation and an explanation of the frequent allusions to Egypt in the *Notizie istoriche*; and (3) a final argument that Desideri meant his allusions to Egypt to further his own political and economic agenda. I thus hope to show that the Jesuit missionary described the sixth Dalai Lama in terms redolent of the cursed mysteries of Egyptian in order to frighten readers into supporting him in his battle against the Capuchin fathers for the legal rights to the Tibetan mission.

Few characters in the *Notizie istoriche* are so roundly criticized as the sixth Dalai Lama. While the Jesuit missionary praised the moral and intellectual virtues of ordinary Tibetans, he seems to have harbored a particular dislike for the sixth Dalai Lama. For the Jesuit missionary, the sixth Dalai Lama was a symbol of the doctrine of reincarnation that he believed to be the chief impediment to the conversion of Tibetans to Catholicism. The immensity of Desideri's refutation of reincarnation, however, bespeaks a vehemence that goes beyond a mere dispute between Buddhist and Christian scholastics. Having fled the sack of Lhasa in December 1717, the young missionary blamed the political use of rein-

carnation for the atrocities during the Dzungar invasion and the Manchu takeover in 1720. The theological and philosophical motives for the missionary's refutation of the doctrine, however, are more complex – and less obviously apparent. I should like to demonstrate that their roots can be found in Renaissance literature about Egypt. When Desideri describes the Bsam-yas oracle reading the “hieroglyphics” that form in the sky or the “obelisks” that dot the Tibetan landscape, he betrays a common Renaissance belief that all pagan religions have their origins in the “idolatry” of the Egyptians. This association is furthered by his description of Tibetans as “Pythagoreans,” an allusion to Xenophanes' attribution of the doctrine of transmigration to Pythagoras and the often-cited and often parodied testimony that Pythagoras remembered four of his previous incarnations. This allusion would have quickly pricked his readers' ears, for Pythagoras was still widely believed to have been the disciple of the mythical harbinger of Egyptian wisdom Hermes Trismegistus. By identifying Tibetan doctrine of reincarnation with the Egyptian wisdom of Hermes, Desideri thus took advantage of the Roman fascination for all things Egyptian in order to wage his own battle for the rights to the Tibetan mission. In the Jesuit's account then, Lha-bzang Khan's war with the Dzungars becomes a tragedy set in motion by the Tibetans' devotion to the sixth Dalai Lama and the “sad error of metempsychosis.” In this way, the Jesuit could call attention to his own skills as a student of Tibetan language and scholasticism and skills that his Capuchin rivals lacked while contrasting the sins of the sixth Dalai Lama with the natural virtues of Tibetans. The manuscript of Desideri's refutation of reincarnation itself could then play the role of witness in Desideri's legal battle to the Tibetan mission, becoming the sole key that might turn the Tibetans from Egyptian necromancy using the very scholasticism they used to support the office of the Dalai Lama.