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Egyptomania and religion in James Burnett, Lord Monboddo's 'History of Man'

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ABSTRACT

The Scottish judge and 'eccentric' philosopher James Burnett, Lord Monboddo's (1714–1799) significance within Enlightenment thought is usually seen as stemming from his *Origin and Progress of Language* (6 vols., 1773–1792). The *OPL* was a major contribution to the Enlightenment's debate over the philosophy of language, and established Monboddo's reputation as an innovative and influential, yet controversial and credulous proto-anthropologist. In the following I explore Monboddo's Egyptomania and the role it plays in his account of the origins and development of religion within his larger 'History of Man'. Monboddo's idiosyncratic and untimely fusion of conjectural history, Buffon-inspired natural history, Christian theology, Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy and credulous interest in Egyptology, especially in *Antient Metaphysics* (6 vols., 1779–1799), make him extremely difficult to place within the Scottish Enlightenment. I want to bring Monboddo back into our conversation about the Scottish Enlightenment, shed light in the process on his highly idiosyncratic combination of enlightened and unenlightened thought and, using Monboddo's example, emphasize some interesting if unexpected aspects of the Scottish Enlightenment's application of the 'science of human nature' to the study of religion. For Monboddo, human civilization and religious knowledge owes their existence to Egyptian daemon-kings.

KEYWORDS

Monboddo; science of human nature; Scottish Enlightenment; religion; Egypt

The Scottish judge and 'eccentric' philosopher James Burnett, Lord Monboddo's (1714–1799) significance within Enlightenment thought is usually seen as stemming from his *Origin and Progress of Language* (6 vols., 1773–1792; hereafter, *OPL*).¹ The *OPL* was a major contribution to the Enlightenment's debate over the philosophy of language, and established Monboddo's reputation as an innovative, influential and controversial natural historian of man.² His outlandish claims about the existence of mermaids and men with tails provoked infamy and mockery.³ Monboddo's untimely

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¹E. L. Cloyd, *James Burnett: Lord Monboddo* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972); Antonio Verri, *Lord Monboddo dalla metafisica all'antropologia* (Ravenna: Longo, 1975); and Nadja Noldin, *Lord Monboddo im Kontext der Sprachursprungsdebatte und Naturgeschichte des Menschen im 18. Jahrhundert* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2013).

²Particularly useful are Patrice Bergheaud, 'Autour de l'œuvre de Monboddo: Réflexions sur les tensions dans le theories l'origine du langage en Grande Bretagne dans le dernier tiers du 18e siècle', in *Theorien vom Ursprung der Sprache*, ed. Joachim Gessinger and Wolfert von Rahden (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989), 241–86; and Lia Formigari, 'Language and society in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35, no. 2 (1974): 275–92.

³See especially Robert Wokler, 'Apes and Races in the Scottish Enlightenment: Monboddo and Kames on the Nature of Man', in *Philosophy and Science in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Peter Jones (Edinburgh, 1988), 145–68; and Silvia Sebastiani, 'Challenging Boundaries: Apes and Savages in Enlightenment', in *Simianization: Apes, Gender, Class, and Race*, ed. Wulf D. Hund, Charles W. Mills and Silvia Sebastiani (Zürich: LIT, 2015), 105–37. For a more sympathetic view on Monboddo's 'eccentricity' see Laura Brown, *Homeless Dogs & Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* (Cornell UP, 2010), 53–8.

fusion of conjectural history, Buffon-inspired natural history, idiosyncratic Christian theology, ancient Greek philosophy, and credulous Egyptology make him extremely difficult to place within the Scottish Enlightenment. This fusion is most in evidence in his other major work, the *Antient Metaphysics* (6 vols., 1779–1799; hereafter, *AM*).⁴ The following discusses how Monboddo's Egyptomania came to play an overriding role in his account of the origins and development of religion within his larger 'History of Man'. Doing so aims to bring Monboddo back into our conversation about Scottish Enlightenment social theory through shedding light on his combination of enlightened and unenlightened thought. Using Monboddo's example – an enlightened social theorist equally happy to appeal to the direct divine intervention through intermediary beings as he was the findings of the natural history of man – we can raise some important points about the Scottish Enlightenment's application of the 'science of human nature' to the study of religion. The stark differences in approach between Monboddo and Kames or Hume or Robertson on the question of religious change calls into question recent attempts to characterize enlightened Scottish social theory as much a stage of late humanism as incipient modernity. Monboddo embodies this combination, but the mainstream literati's modernity is even more prominent when read alongside the *Antient Metaphysics*.

In a way unique amongst the *literati*, Monboddo combined the questions and methods of the conjectural history of religion and the philological interests of mythography. The consensus view is that the Scottish Enlightenment's natural histories of the origin and progress of religion are characterized more by what they share than how they are different. The Scots chartered this progress as a development from primitive polytheism emerging out of conditions of scarcity and violence to a refined monotheism in conditions of political and economic stability and the progress of the arts and sciences.⁵ The enlightened Scots explained human institutions and belief systems, including religious ones, as resulting from many interlocking causes, both moral and physical. This rendered the Scots' accounts strikingly different from both contemporary histories of idolatry and the *philosophes'* anticlerical conspiratorial histories of priestcraft. Monboddo developed his own version of this Scottish story of religious change, but he situated it firmly in the early epochs of ancient Egyptian history.

As Kidd has shown, mythography retained its vitality and prominence in eighteenth-century British scholarship.⁶ Mythographers undertook antiquarian studies interested in what pagan mythology could inform the Christian reader about sacred history and whether heathenism could be understood in ways that supported Christianity's truth. However superficial Monboddo's endeavours seem in comparison to the tedious philologists gallantly analysed by Kidd, those studies were central to Monboddo's thought. Egypt was the cradle of true religion. Egyptian religious wisdom took the form of a pristine theistic theology known by an elite priest class, but which was hidden from the multitude's view by a polytheism framed for popular consumption. This wisdom was transmitted from Egypt to ancient Greece, India and China. Yet his arguments were very different from contemporary Christian mythography. He viewed Egyptian religion as the providentially appointed precursor preparing the world for Christianity. For most mythographers, if the Egyptian theologues knew true religion it was ultimately sourced from Noah. For Monboddo, by contrast, the Egyptian priests were recipients of revelation from their daemon-kings. He rejected biblical chronology in favour of the Egyptian which he believed, on the authority of Herodotus, exceeded it by thousands of years. He aimed to prove the truth of Christianity's central doctrines but not the historical truth of Scripture. The

⁴On the *Antient Metaphysics* see Francesco Bottin, 'The Scottish Enlightenment and "Philosophical History"', in *Models of the History of Philosophy: Vol. III: The Second Enlightenment and the Kantian Age*, ed. Gregorio Piaia and Giovanni Santinello (Springer, 2015), 383–472 (428–37).

⁵See especially Christopher J. Berry, 'Rude Religion: The Psychology of Polytheism in the Scottish Enlightenment', in J. Berry Christopher, *Essays on Hume, Smith and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 88–108; and Colin Kidd, 'Subscription, the Scottish Enlightenment and the Moderate Interpretation of History', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 55no. 3 (2004), 502–19.

⁶Colin Kidd, *The World of Mr Casaubon: Britain's Wars of Mythography, 1700–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

Old Testament was reclassified as just another reliable ancient text about the earliest eras of the ‘History of Man’.⁷

Scottish intellectual history has been going through its own version of wider Enlightenment studies’ wider ‘classic turn’. The continued interest in antiquity is seen to counterbalance an emphasis on the Enlightenment’s modernity.⁸ Those arguing for the enlightened Scots’ modernity have never ignored their deep interest in ancient philosophy, but stressed that the *literati* were rarely in thrall to or supplicated their ideas to ancient authority.⁹ Monboddo, however, was and did. He pitted antiquity against modernity. Similarly, Monboddo’s Egyptomania set him apart from many of his enlightened Scottish peers who, believing the historical record was unreliable, were uninterested or unwilling to discuss ancient Egypt. Yet alongside all these backward-looking elements to his thinking, Monboddo’s thoughtfulness about the methodological underpinnings of the natural history of man epitomized so much of the essence of Scottish Enlightenment’s ‘science of human nature’. His thought is fascinatingly paradoxical.

Monboddo’s Egyptomania was unparalleled amongst the High Scottish Enlightenment’s *literati*. Ancient Egypt was the cradle of philosophy, religion, civil society, and humanity itself. The story of human civilization since then had been one of vice, disease and war. All resulted from a move away from the Egyptian model of living and towards unnatural living. To avoid the literal end of the human species, the Egyptian examples set – in diet, dress, housing, exercise, politics, philosophy – should be followed as much as possible.¹⁰ In the case of religion, the Egyptian model was a *religio duplex* in which theologian-governors, serving under a monarch, practice a secret theism but administer a public form of popular superstition encouraging virtue amongst the multitude.¹¹ This was the best political-religious arrangement in human history and should be imitated by late eighteenth-century Europeans. To an earlier generation of more philologically inclined scholars, such as Thomas Blackwell and David Fordyce, ancient Egypt was a fascinating but largely unknown society whose potential to offer the key to the origins of idolatry was fatally hindered by the limited character of existent historical records. Amongst the practitioners of the post-1740 ‘science of human nature’ discussion of ancient Egypt was strikingly limited. Egyptian civilization was commented on for its unexpected combination of political stability and superstitious religion and for its tremendous prosperity despite its abandonment of commerce. But ancient Egypt played no significant role in the natural histories of society authored by Hume, Smith, Kames, Ferguson, Robertson, and Dunbar. For Monboddo, by contrast, Egypt was the absolute centre of the ‘History of Man’.

1. Monboddo’s anti-modern, credulous yet oddly enlightened ‘History of Man’

After decades of principally legal and Scottish historical study, in the mid-1760s Monboddo decided that his remaining intellectual energies would be directed to producing a comprehensive ‘History of Man’.¹² *OPL* formed a part of this unfinished project, as did volumes III–V of *AM*. Monboddo wished to resurrect the ancient understanding of man. He was provoked by the failures of Buffon’s natural history and contemporary materialist philosophy, epitomized by David Hume. Monboddo’s aims were anti-modern and, initially, pro-Greek. The inspiration came from exchanges with James Harris (1709–1780), who ‘first introduced me to the Greek philosophy’.¹³ Under Harris’

⁷E.g. *AM* V:252–55.

⁸Kidd, ‘The Scottish Enlightenment and the Matter of Troy’, *Journal of the British Academy* 6 (2018): 97–130; and *Antiquity and Enlightenment Culture*, ed. Felicity Loughlin and Alexandre Johnston (Leiden: Brill, 2020). See also Kelsey Jackson Williams, *The First Scottish Enlightenment: Rebels, Priests, and History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁹E.g. Berry, ‘The Study of the Scottish Enlightenment’, in Berry, *Essays*, 1–26.

¹⁰See *AM* III, IV and V, *passim*.

¹¹Monboddo’s positive assessment was not uncommon. See Jan Assmann’s fascinating if piecemeal *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment Reinvented Egyptian Religion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

¹²[N]ational [L]ibrary of [S]cotland [M]onboddo [P]apers MS 24501 Monboddo to James Harris 26 March 1766; *idem.*, Monboddo to James Harris 31 December 1772.

¹³NLS MP MS 24501 Monboddo to Harris 26 March 1766.

tutelage, Monboddo came to believe that philosophy had taken a wrong turn when it abandoned, with its post-Lockean adherence to strict empiricism, ancient Greek philosophy's doctrine of immaterial spirits inhabiting the universe. Monboddo started his writing career in the 1760s attempting to restore Greek philosophy to its rightful place in European thought. He ended it three decades later viewing Egypt as the font of true philosophy.

Monboddo wished to learn the 'purest theology' from the ancients and to establish 'upon their principles ... not only the great truths of natural religion, but some of the fundamental doctrines of Christianity'.¹⁴ Such study would demonstrate the social utility of religion; that it was the 'great tamer and civilizer of men' which enabled society to exist.¹⁵ The study would also demonstrate to materialist empiricists that reason alone is not sufficient for understanding man and the universe. To be happy, humans required the 'counsel and assistance of superior powers'.¹⁶ In doing so, Monboddo would demonstrate the necessity of understanding Greek philosophy, which stemmed from the Egyptian, for understanding true religion.¹⁷

What has been said so far might confirm the validity of Monboddo's reputation as an intellectual outsider who does not need to be incorporated into our understanding of the Scottish Enlightenment's science of man. But as well as being a credulous Egyptomaniac, Monboddo was also a 'scientist of human nature' both keenly aware of issues of evidence and method and interested in the same questions as his fellow *litterati*. Monboddo pursued the study of the human species 'through the various stages of [man's] progression'.¹⁸ The 'History of Man' did not have as its subject the 'history of any particular nation' – the realm of civil history – but that of 'the whole species'.¹⁹ Similarly, Monboddo adhered to the enlightened mantra that he was 'discovering the nature of man from fact and experience', claimed he rejected the resort to philosophical systems and hypotheses, and collected facts 'in the same manner as we collect the history of any other animal'.²⁰ Like other enlightened natural historians of the progress of society, Monboddo examined the 'operation of [man's] intellectual faculty', humanity's unique species-characteristic, as it developed in response to exogenous and endogenous factors.²¹

Monboddo believed, however, that his methods were derived from the ancient Greeks and not from modern thinking.²² With good reason, accounts of the Scottish 'science of human nature' point to the examples of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, John Locke and Montesquieu in inspiring the *litterati*. The 'science of man' involved the extension of the methods of experimental natural philosophy into the study of human nature and society. Monboddo imbibed this ethos, but he viewed its associations with contemporary materialism as requiring correction. His principal methodological model was Aristotle's *Historia animalium* which, Monboddo claimed, examined not only animal bodies but also their 'affections and dispositions'. Through imitating Aristotle's natural history of animals when studying man, Monboddo believe we can learn 'what sort of animal we ourselves are'.²³ Aristotle was not fashionable amongst eighteenth-century European thinkers, Monboddo opined (though arguably incorrectly), but offered the best means for writing a proper natural history of humankind.²⁴

Monboddo stressed that an authoritative account of human nature had to rely on: a mixture of experimental induction resulting from the accumulation of facts; rational deduction of axiomatic claims that are the consequence of earlier induction; and appeals to arguments from legitimate

¹⁴AM I:xxxix.

¹⁵AM IV:95. See also AM II:iv.

¹⁶AM II:301. See also AM I:307–309, I:414–415, II:294, II:301–302, IV:102, IV:152.

¹⁷AM VI:51–52.

¹⁸AM III:2. See also NLS MP MS 24501 Monboddo to James Harris 26 March 1766.

¹⁹AM III:ii. See also OPL I:144–146, IV:397.

²⁰OPL I:144, 445–45; AM III:ii–iii.

²¹AM IV:401, IV:350. See also AM III:2.

²²NLS MP MS 24501 Monboddo to John Pringle 21 June 1776.

²³AM IV:81.

²⁴OPL I:iv; AM IV:i–ii, AM IV:8.

authority. The facts of the natural history of man are built upon experience – both that of the natural historian themselves and from the testimony of others. Key to Monboddo's 'History of Man' was his approach to testimony. He took 'facts as I find them': 'if the author is credible, I believe them without supposing them to be exaggerated'.²⁵

Establishing credibility involved, Monboddo claimed, four steps: assessing whether the witness was well informed about what they described; judging the witness's character; comparing their testimony with others more credible than them; judging their account against anything that was 'by the nature of things, impossible to be true'.²⁶ Monboddo's application of these rules was not strict. He used hearsay evidence and was strikingly unsuspecting about the motives or capabilities of observation of explorers. He valued certain ancient authorities – especially Herodotus – to the extent that they offered untarnished anthropological insights. Indeed, he complained of the 'spirit of incredulity' towards natural historical studies of man, and especially those composed by the ancients.²⁷ Monboddo's credulity, however grounded in enlightened methodological thinking, allowed him to side-step much of the anxiety about what counted as historical evidence amongst his peers.²⁸

It is a characteristic of the Scottish Enlightenment's post-1740 'science of man' that it did not rely upon or frequently cite the sources upon which it was based. Monboddo, by contrast, relied upon the extensive citation of authorities and testimony. He claimed citing his sources was an act of authorial good faith.²⁹ Monboddo's citation practice was one aspect of his thought that, at first blush, appear to align him more with eighteenth-century British antiquarianism and late humanism. He was, however, providing corroborating evidence to support claims being made about the history of the human species and not specific claims about ancient history. Monboddo's approach to testimonial evidence and corroboration instead reflects his legal standing and training. When he could, he interrogated potential sources of information and recorded these conversations in extensive manuscripts that eventually found their way into his published writings.³⁰ He relied upon testimonial evidence – both published and derived from conversation – when he trusted the source. He especially did so when the testimony was made by oath, by a respectable member of society, by a philosopher of standing or by someone whose expertise meant their views were authoritative. When attempting to prove his more outlandish views – such that there were men with tails or that kraken existed – Monboddo arranged or offered to arrange publication of signed affidavits supporting his claims.³¹ To reject such evidence was tantamount to privileging one's philosophical system over the facts.³²

Monboddo was arguably the most proactive enlightened Scottish scientist of human nature. Certainly, he was an armchair anthropologist much of the time.³³ But he also utilized a network of primarily London-based contacts who provided him with a wealth of anthropological testimony from across the extra-European world.³⁴ Most importantly, Monboddo undertook and oversaw his own specific research projects. The results of these underpinned the central tenets of the 'History of Man'. Monboddo studied, 'with mine own eyes' and through delegated research, the wild humans Peter the Wild Boy, Marie-Angélique Leblanc the 'Wild Gild of Champagne' and orangutans. From his proto-anthropology, Monboddo averred that Peter the Wild Boy, when discovered in the woods

²⁵AM II:132.

²⁶AM II:133.

²⁷AM III:251.

²⁸On scepticism towards the reliability of ancient historical sources see Kidd, 'Matter of Troy'; Dmitri Levitin, 'Egyptology, the Limits of Antiquarianism, and the Origins of Conjectural History, c. 1680–1740: New Sources and Perspectives', *History of European Ideas* 41, no. 6 (2015): 699–727.

²⁹AM IV:131.

³⁰For example, NLS MP MS 24536 "Of the Indians in North America", 1769, based on an account by the Jesuit missionary, P J A Roubaud, fols. 36–55.

³¹OPL I:262. NLS MP MS 24501 Letter from Robert Jamieson to Monboddo [August 1773]; NLS MP MS 24537 Letter from a Bristol Merchant, neither signed nor dated, fol. 15.

³²I am grateful to Silvia Sebastiani for the hint to explore Monboddo's legalistic approach to natural historical evidence.

³³On this criticism of enlightened Scottish social theory see Caroline Winterer, *American Enlightenment: Pursuing Happiness in the Age of Reason* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), 73–109.

³⁴This network included, for example, Sir Joseph Banks, Daniel Solander, Charles Wilkins, William Hastings, and James Bruce.

of Hanover, existed as the ‘original state of men upon this earth’; the Ourang Outang lived in the ‘herding state’, meaning living together in a group, which was the ‘first step in the progression of man towards the civil life’; and finally the ‘Savage Girl’ had lived in the ‘very first state of civil society’ and, as part of this process, learnt to ‘speak a language the most rude and imperfect that can be imagined’.³⁵ Each case-study characterized a ‘stage’ in the ‘several steps of the human progression from the Brute to the Man’.³⁶ Monboddo has been described as being at the forefront of the utilization of observations of wild children in the formation of the naturalized human sciences and played a leading role in the accumulation of information on his two wild children.³⁷ Monboddo concluded from his case studies that the original of human nature could not be understood solely through examining purportedly primordial societies detailed in ancient history and recent travel literature. Monboddo’s personal researches informed his theory of the origin and development of religion. The pre-civilized Peter and the Orangutan demonstrated not religious belief; the partially socialized Leblanc, by contrast, converted to Catholicism. Atheism was man’s natural state, in the sense that religion was not innate, while religion was artificial and, in later works, adventitious.

Monboddo was more credulous than his contemporaries. This may have been an ironic consequence of his legalism, but it was also a consequence of Monboddo’s ancient metaphysics. Underpinning his ‘History of Man’ were the Platonic and Aristotle accounts of ‘mind’. Monboddo understood ‘mind’ to mean reason, vitality and the principle producing motion in passive matter.³⁸ Mind did more than setting the universe in motion, with subsequent movement being the ‘operation of matter and mechanism merely’, as Monboddo believed the Newtonians claimed, but acted constantly.³⁹ Only in the writings of the ancient Greeks could we find a metaphysics that explained how this motivating principle functioned. As Monboddo became more strident in his rejection of materialism, his belief in the great chain of being increasingly allowed for gradations of mind and the belief in the possibility of intelligences existing in between the human and the supreme intelligence.⁴⁰ As part of this, Monboddo accepted Aristotle’s maxim that ‘everything that can possibly exist does actually exist’. This was combined with the notion that a benevolent and omnipotent being would create ‘every sentient being that is capable of pleasure [and] whose existence is possible’ otherwise ‘there would be something wanting in the system of nature’.⁴¹ From this vantage point, corroborated reports of mermaids, kraken and – important for understanding ancient Egypt – daemon-kings could be accepted.

2. Monboddo and eighteenth-century Egyptian mythology

Unlike his enlightened peers, Monboddo was enthralled by early modern European Egyptology. European knowledge of ancient Egypt expanded following the expansion of Greek studies from the fifteenth century onwards and the dissemination of accounts of ancient Egypt including those of Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus Siculus.⁴² The number of travel accounts, archaeological observations and detailed drawings on Egypt published in western Europe expanded greatly from the early eighteenth-century onwards. While he emphasized his reliance on the ancient sources of Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and Plutarch, Monboddo heavily utilized influential recent texts such as Professor of Astronomy at the University of Oxford John Greaves’s *Pyramidographia, or a Discourse*

³⁵AM VI:164–65.

³⁶AM IV:25–34 (25).

³⁷E.g. Adriana S. Benzaquén, *Encounters with Wild Children: Temptation and Disappointment in the Study of Human Nature* (Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006); and Julia Douthwaite, *The Wild Girl, Natural Man, and the Monster: Dangerous Experiments in the Age of Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

³⁸NLS MP MS 24501 Monboddo to John Pringle 21 June 1776.

³⁹AM I:i

⁴⁰AM IV:160–161. See also AM IV:18–19, IV:162.

⁴¹AM IV:261–62. See also Bergheaud, ‘Autour de l’œuvre de Monboddo’, 266–67.

⁴²See Assmann, *Religio Duplex*, 9–34 for a discussion of the misunderstandings and deliberate distortions of Greek accounts of Egyptian religion.

of the Pyramids in *Ægypt* (1646), Benoît de Maillet's *Description de l'Égypte* (2 vols., 1740), Richard Pococke's *A Description of the East and Some Other Countries* (1743) and the Comte de Caylus' *Recueil d'antiquités, égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques et romaines* (7 vols., 1752–1767). Maillet's *Description de l'Égypte* offered Monboddo unprecedentedly detailed and accurate descriptions of the pyramids and related discussions of the religious motivations behind the construction of these and other temples – though Monboddo, characteristically, chided Maillet for having failed to consult Herodotus more closely.⁴³ The first volume of Pococke's *Description* supplied Monboddo with a tremendously detailed account of early-eighteenth-century Egypt, both in terms of its natural history and descriptions of its archaeology, which informed his understanding of early Egypt.⁴⁴

The two other fields concerned with Egyptology were important for Monboddo: mythography and linguistics.⁴⁵ Much energy was spent by European theologians and antiquarians concerned with showing the relationship between the historical truth of Christianity and Egyptian civilization and religion. Monboddo ranged freely through this literature, though he was uninterested in the earlier debate over whether Moses' gained his religious wisdom from the Egyptians (Acts 7:22), taking it as a given that Moses adopted Egyptian learning.⁴⁶ He purloined facts about ancient Egypt from Jacob Bryant's painfully exhaustive *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (3 vols., 1774–1776), though he had no interest in Bryant's aims of better understanding the bible's contents and of aligning pagan and sacred chronology.⁴⁷ Monboddo relied upon Athanasius Kircher's famous account, in *Œdipus Ægyptiacus* (3 vols., 1652–1654), that the Egyptian priests knew true religion but hid their wisdom from the multitude behind the emblematic language of the hieroglyphs and that this wisdom was transmitted on in subsequent theosophical systems of the ancients Greeks, Persians and Hebrews.⁴⁸ Similarly, Monboddo adopted Samuel Shuckford's claim in *Sacred and Profane History of the World Connected* (1728) that Egyptian wisdom indicated the revelation of religious knowledge at the beginning of the world.⁴⁹ Monboddo was more interested in what these texts told him about Egypt and the transmission of Egyptian wisdom than the mythographer's concern with idolatry. He was especially interested in Ralph Cudworth's discussion of Egypt in the latter's *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678). Monboddo admired Cudworth's philosophy, not least for its claims about immaterial spirits.⁵⁰ In Cudworth he found an account of Egyptian 'polytheism' being a system of theism involving worship of 'one and the same God, under many different names and notions', alongside useful detail about Egypt's religious institutions and the claim that Egypt theology maintained the doctrine of the trinity.⁵¹

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, mythographical studies were increasingly marked by a new scepticism about the extent and reliability of ancient sources. This encouraged innovative

⁴³Benoît de Maillet, *Description de l'Égypte* (2 vols, 1740), I:271–328, II:154–157. AM III:144, IV:256. See also NLS MP MS 24535 Lord Monboddo 'Notes from Maillet's Account of Egypt, 7th Sept. 1766', esp. fols. 8r–9r. Maillet wrote admiringly of Egyptian religion: *l'Égypte* II:142–166.

⁴⁴E.g. AM III:143–144.

⁴⁵On eighteenth-century Egyptology: John Gascoigne, "The Wisdom of the Egyptians" and the Secularisation of History in the Age of Newton', in *The Uses of Antiquity*, ed. Stephen Gaukroger (1991), 171–212; David Boyd Haycock, *William Stukeley: Science, Religion and Archaeology in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002); *ibid.*, 'Ancient Egypt in 17th and 18th Century England', in *The Wisdom of Egypt: Changing Visions through the Ages*, ed. Peter Ucko and Timothy Champion (London: UCL Press, 2003), 133–60; Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt: Its Impact on the West*, trans. David Lorton (London: Cornell University Press, 2001).

⁴⁶See AM IV:135–36. On this topic: Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 91–143.

⁴⁷Jacob Bryant, *A New System, or, An Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774–1776). See AM IV: 42, 43, 307.

⁴⁸Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegyptiacus*, 3 vols. (Rome, 1652–1654). On Kircher, Daniel Stolzenberg, *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity* (London: Chicago University Press, 2013).

⁴⁹R. J. Arnold, "Learned Lumber": The Unlikely Survival of Sacred History in the Eighteenth Century', *The English Historical Review* 125, no. 516 (2010): 1139–1172. See also [Dominique Révérend], *Lettres à Monsieur H*** sur l'origine des anciens dieux ou rois d'Égypte*, 2nd ed. (Paris 1733); Antoine Banier's influential *La mythologie et les fables expliquées par l'histoire* (3 vols., 1738–1740).

⁵⁰AM I:liii, I:234. See also NLS MP MS 24526 Lord Monboddo Notes from R Cudworth, (n.d. but c. 1795), fols 58–61 and NLS MP MS 24502 Lord Monboddo to Richard Price 15 September 1780.

⁵¹Ralph Cudworth, *True Intellectual System of the Universe* (London, 1678), 308–355 (352–53); NLS MP MS 24526 Lord Monboddo, 'Notes from Cudworth', fol. 58r–60v.

approaches including the emergence of mythography's own earlier version of conjectural history.⁵² In his *Histoire du ciel* (1739), Noël-Antoine Pluche offered a highly conjectural but sophisticated linguistic theory of the origins of idolatry. The primordial Noahite religion was forgotten with time and replaced by a religion based on the deliberate misinterpretation of the hieroglyphs by Egyptian priests. The hieroglyphs were originally developed by Egypt's politico-religious elite as memory aids to ensure the communal pursuit of the tasks of the agricultural year. The Egyptian priest class seized the opportunity posed by the gradual forgetting of the original intention behind the emblems, and instead encouraged the Egyptian multitude to view the hieroglyphs as representing actually existing gods to worship.⁵³ Monboddo imbibed Pluche's findings. He did not use, however, one of the most intriguingly experimental Egyptological texts of the early eighteenth century: the Oxford don Nathaniel Forster's short *Reflections on the Natural Foundation of the High Antiquity of Government, Arts, and Sciences in Egypt* (1743). In this largely unknown work, Forster offered a conjectural history explaining ancient Egypt's role as the cradle of civilization that emphasized the role of its uniquely fixed agricultural practices surrounding the Nile leading to the creation of civil society and with it the arts and sciences, philosophy and religion.

The study of idolatry was intimately bound up with Monboddo's other key focus in his sprawling projected 'History of Man': the origin and progress of language. Monboddo's linguistic researches provided him with ample information about the development of Egyptian culture and its transmission to other civilizations. Unlike his enlightened counterparts, Monboddo was explicit about his immersion in contemporary Anglo-French antiquarian studies. He made extensive use of the volumes of the *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres avec les Mémoires de Littérature* (1710–). Monboddo's notebooks show him reading avidly the *Histoire's* many antiquarian articles on comparative linguistics, Egyptian culture, Egyptian connections with China, ancient Indian philosophy, the influence of Pythagorean thought on Chinese philosophy and religion amongst many other topics. Monboddo studied with especial attention Nicholas Fréret's arguments delivered to the *Académie* in 1718 arguing against the Egyptian origins of Chinese language and writing.⁵⁴ He used the discussion of the purported Egyptian influences on Ancient China in Charles de Brosses's *Traité de la formation mécanique des langues* (2 vols., 1765), which Monboddo had likely read in manuscript while in Paris in 1765.⁵⁵ Most importantly for his later Egyptomania, reading Antoine Court de Gébelin's *Le Monde primitif, analyse et compare avec le monde moderne* (9 vols., 1773–184) encouraged Monboddo to abandon his initial linguistic polygeneticism of the first volume of *OPL* for a monogenetic and ultimately supernatural account in the latter volumes of both *OPL* and *AM* of language originating by an act of divine intervention in ancient Egypt.

The most important eighteenth-century text for Monboddo's understanding of Egypt combined both linguistics and mythography: William Warburton's mammoth *Divine Legation of Moses* (3 vols., 1738–1741). Monboddo's manuscript essays on the origin and development of religion penned from the 1760s onwards, as well as frequent mention in both *OPL* and *AM*, demonstrated that his thinking was built on sustained rumination about Warburton's accounts of idolatry and of ancient Egypt.⁵⁶ In a disparate fashion, Warburton offered his own theory about the origin and progress of idolatry beginning with the worship of celestial bodies common to all primitive nations, followed by the emergence of hero-worship developed for utilitarian reasons by theologian-legislators and soon taking the form of local tutelary deities, before intersociety contact leads to a principle of religious

⁵²Levitin, 'Egyptology'.

⁵³Noël-Antoine Pluche, *Histoire du ciel considéré selon des idées des poètes, des philosophes, et de Moïse*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1739–40). See especially I:335–36, I: 363, I:365.

⁵⁴Nicolas Fréret, 'Réflexions sur les principes généraux de l'art d'écrire, and en particulier sur les fondemens de l'écriture Chinoise', *Histoire de l'Académie Royale des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres avec les Mémoires de Littérature*, vol. 6 (1729), 609–63.

⁵⁵See Iain Maxwell Hammett, 'Lord Monboddo's *The Origin and Progress of Language: Its Sources, Genesis and Background*' (Doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1985), 295–305.

⁵⁶William Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses*, 3 vols. (London, 1738–41). Warburton is regularly cited in the Monboddo Papers. See, for example, NLS MP MS 24527 'Of Greek Mythology', fol. 11–56 and NLS MP MS 45234 Pocketbook 34 Notes on Warburton's 'Divine Legation of Moses', fols. 7–9.

inter-communality in which all local gods were shared in common.⁵⁷ This was mapped onto an understanding of politico-cultural change moving from savage society (celestial worship) to the establishment of civil policy (and the use of hero-worship of local deities to manage the multitude) and the refinement of arts, sciences and manners (and an awareness of religious commonality with other societies).⁵⁸

Monboddo shared Warburton's view that the Egyptians were, in the latter's words, the 'first people that perfected civil policy, and established religion'.⁵⁹ The Egyptians initiated the combining of priestly, judicial and legal authority and used this to care for the multitude. The worship of tutelary deities was an act of political theology intended to best ensure social stability. Religion was effectively identified with the state: by worshipping the national god, the pagan multitude were worshipping the national power.⁶⁰ The Egyptian priest-magistrates secreted their wisdom into mysteries revealed subsequently only to initiates into the ruling political order – these truths related to monotheistic religion and the workings of Egyptian political theology.⁶¹ The practice of secret worship was first established in Egypt, and subsequently passed to the Greeks and Persians.⁶²

3. Egypt in Scottish Enlightenment thought

Monboddo's interest in ancient Egypt was not shared by his fellow *literati*. Ancient Egypt had no privileged position within their natural histories of social progress. Only scattered and brief commentary can be found. Egypt was mentioned occasionally when exploring the relationship between climate, agriculture, political stability and learning. The 'extremely fertile' Nile delta, Lord Kames averred, allowed for both enduring government and the leisure time which mean the 'arts flourished early in Egypt'.⁶³ Kames and Adam Ferguson both mentioned in passing that the Greeks, and via them the Romans, got their useful learning, such as knowledge of husbandry, from the Egyptians.⁶⁴ James Dunbar, likewise, claimed that philosophy and theology first developed in the fertile zones of Chaldea, India and Egypt.⁶⁵ Dunbar noted that ancient Egypt was a nation initially characterized by 'freedom and prosperity', good policy and highly developed arts and sciences until the end of the reign of Sesostris.⁶⁶ William Robertson, drawing on Strabo, noted that Egypt was a fascinating case-study of an unusually productive society abandoning commerce due to its immense agricultural fertility.⁶⁷ The limited historical record may have prevented sustained enlightened Scottish interest in Egypt. David Fordyce lectured his students at Marischal College in the early 1740s that with the absence of any reliable historical evidence and the Egyptians' use of mysteries, the extent of their religious learning would remain unknown.⁶⁸

Still, the *literati* disagreed amongst themselves about the character and significance of Egyptian religion. George Turnbull explicitly repeated Pluche's claim in *Histoire du ciel* that one of the first origins of idolatry was, in Turnbull's phrasing, the 'misinterpretation of the symbolic language in practice amongst the Egyptians'.⁶⁹ John Millar used ancient Egypt as an example of how religion's

⁵⁷Warburton, *DL*, II:239.

⁵⁸Warburton, *DL*, II:281.

⁵⁹Warburton, *DL*, I:94. See also I:90.

⁶⁰Warburton, *DL*, I:282. See also I:101, I:109, I:131.

⁶¹Warburton, *DL*, II:344 with Monboddo, *OPL* I:374; Warburton, *DL* I:148 and Monboddo, *AM* IV:380.

⁶²Warburton, *DL* I:132, I:338.

⁶³Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Sketches of the History of Man*, ed. James Harris, 3 vols. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, [1788] 2007), I:92. See also Adam Smith *The Wealth of Nations* (London, 1776), Bk. 1 Ch. 3.

⁶⁴Kames, *Sketches* I:97; Adam Ferguson, *An Essay on the History of Civil Society* (Edinburgh, 1767), §7.

⁶⁵James Dunbar, *Essays on the History of Mankind* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1780), 261.

⁶⁶James Dunbar, *Essays on the History of Mankind* (London: Strahan and Cadell, 1780), 261.

⁶⁷William Robertson, *The History of America*, 3 vols. (London, 1777), I:4–5; Strabo, *Geographia*, Book 3.

⁶⁸David Fordyce, 'Brief Account of the Nature, Progress, and Origin of Philosophy', in *ibid.*, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Thomas D. Kennedy (Indianapolis, IN, [1740] 2003), 165–200 (170).

⁶⁹George Turnbull, *The Principles of Moral and Christian Philosophy*, ed. Alexander Broadie, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, IN [1740], 2005), I:343–44.

great influence within society leads to the creation of a caste system with a ‘great body of ecclesiastics’ at the summit.⁷⁰ Kames was puzzled by the extent of ancient Egyptian superstition given that Egyptian’s stability and location in a temperate climate. He offered three explanations scattered throughout his *Sketches of the History of Man* (1774): the region’s fertility enervated Egyptian minds and bodies, making them timid and prone to superstition; the vulgar misinterpreted the symbolic religious figures of the hieroglyphics as actual gods; and that gratitude to the inventors of the useful arts spilled over into fabulous tales of superhuman exploits.⁷¹ Hume used Egyptian religion as evidence of the ridiculousness of pagan worship and for ribbing comments about the great similarities between absurd Egyptian superstitions and Jewish rites and ceremonies.⁷²

In no sense was ancient Egypt a key focus of Scottish natural histories of religion. The picture is different if we look at the preceding generation of enlightened Scots at the very end of the ‘First Scottish Enlightenment’. In the thought of Andrew Ramsay and Monboddo’s old tutor Thomas Blackwell we find ‘enlightened’ Scots exhibiting the more traditional interests of early modern Egyptology. In his novel *Travels of Cyrus* (English edition, 1728), Ramsay’s eponymous protagonist is informed of the three eras of ancient Egyptian religious history. In an original golden age Egyptian priests, led by the first Hermes Trismegistus, ‘penetrated into all the secrets of nature and of divinity’, practiced the ‘sublime and occult sciences’, and taught man to live ‘subject to the immutable laws of reason’ found in the natural world.⁷³ The second age witnessed Egypt overwhelmed by the shepherd-kings of Arabia who switched attention to the sensual arts of sculpture, painting and poetry, and with it the practice of idol worship. True religion was sustained by the priests’ secretion of their mysteries beneath ‘symbols, hieroglyphs, and allegories’ and by the departure of Egyptian colonies eastwards and westwards.⁷⁴ The third age of ancient Egyptian history saw the conquest of Egypt by Sesostris, the establishment of despotism and a new ‘reign of superstition’.⁷⁵ In his ‘Discourse on the Theology of the Pagans’, attached to *Travels of Cyrus*, Ramsay discussed, like Cudworth, how the Egyptian philosophers religion contained glimmers of the ‘universal tradition’ of true religion.⁷⁶

Monboddo does not appear to have read Ramsay, but he knew Aberdonian scholar Blackwell’s discussion of Egyptian learning. Blackwell was a formative influence on the young Monboddo’s early philhellenism.⁷⁷ Blackwell, like Monboddo subsequently, viewed Egypt as the ‘parent of sacred and civil institutions’. He was particularly interested in the two-fold nature of Egyptian religion and its transmission to ancient Greece.⁷⁸ The Egyptian priests’ allegorical approach to philosophy and religion, hidden behind their secretive hieroglyphics, was primarily a means to maintain their privileged socio-political position.⁷⁹ The ‘allegorical religion’ found a ‘very proper soil’ amongst the ‘grossly ignorant’ ancient Greeks.⁸⁰ Blackwell defended the thesis that Homer had learnt his mythology from the Egyptians, both directly, and via Egypt-educated sages.⁸¹ Ancient Greece and other societies were civilized first by sages like Orpheus and, subsequently, by the spread of philosophy.⁸²

⁷⁰John Millar *An Historical View of the English Government*, ed. Dale R. Smith (Indianapolis, IN [1803], 2006), 168.

⁷¹Kames, *Sketches*, I:254, III:851.

⁷²David Hume, ‘Natural History of Religion’, *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757), 1–116 (25, 72, 77, 80). On this, see Richard Serjeantson, ‘Hume’s “Natural History of Religion” and the Demise of Modern Eusebianism’, in *The Intellectual Consequences of Religious Heterodoxy*, ed. John Robertson and Sarah Mortimer (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 267–95.

⁷³The Chevalier Ramsay, *The Travels of Cyrus*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (London: Woodward and Peele, 1727–1728), I:164, I:189.

⁷⁴Ramsay, *Travels of Cyrus*, I:197.

⁷⁵Ramsay, *Travels of Cyrus*, I:170.

⁷⁶Ramsay, ‘Discourse Upon the Theology & Mythology of the Pagans’, in *ibid.*, *Travels of Cyrus*, separate pagination, 68, II:143.

⁷⁷See John Ramsay of Ochteryre, *Scotland and Scotsmen in the Eighteenth Century*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1888), I:291–4, 351.

⁷⁸Thomas Blackwell, *An Enquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (London, 1735), 49–50; *ibid.*, *Letters Concerning Mythology* (London, 1748), 362. See also Felicity Loughlin, ‘The Study of Pagan Religions in Enlightenment Scotland: The Case of Thomas Blackwell (1701–1757)’, *Records of the Scottish Church History Society* 45 (2016): 82–98.

⁷⁹Blackwell, *Mythology*, 196, see also 285–86; *ibid.*, *Homer*, 83–84, see also 163.

⁸⁰Blackwell, *Homer*, 51; see also 168.

⁸¹Blackwell, *Homer*, 173.

⁸²Blackwell, *Homer*, 84. See also Blackwell, *Mythology*, 290–91.

4. Ancient Egypt in the mind of Monboddo

Monboddo's contemporary literati, then, were restrained in their commentary on Egypt. By contrast, Monboddo's Egyptomania became all-consuming in the volumes of both *AM* and *OPL* published in the 1780s and 1790s. Egypt was a 'great kingdom, flourishing in arts and sciences, religion, and polity'.⁸³ Egypt was the cradle not only of civilization – all elements of which 'came originally from Egypt' – but 'even the race of man' itself.⁸⁴ Due to its combination of religious and political authority, the 'Egyptian polity' was the 'most perfect of any that ever existed'. To Monboddo, Egypt had been given the 'gift of science and philosophy' by providence to disseminate these and aide the worldwide development of civilization in preparation for the eventual coming of Christ.⁸⁵ Late eighteenth-century European cultural and political degeneracy, Monboddo averred, could be overturned by imitating the Egyptian 'government of religion and philosophy'.⁸⁶ Egypt was the greatest civilization on record and not least for its standing as the origin of true religious wisdom.

Monboddo's initial studies in the origin and development of religion were not characterized by this Egyptomania. During the commencement of his 'History of Man' in the decade after the mid-1760s, Monboddo penned several manuscript essays on the stages of humanity's early religious development. These shared much of their argument with the mythographies of Warburton, Banier and Pluche. The first phase of religious belief was the worship of immaterial spirits analogous to humans in motivation, requiring appeasement and supplication, and who were believed to communicate to humans through priests using the art of divination.⁸⁷ The earliest theology, 'simple and unornamented', would have involved worship of the sun and moon, and the elements.⁸⁸ This would have been supplemented by hero worship.⁸⁹ The worship of men could only happen once societies had developed to point where there were men capable of doing things worth worshipping, such as inventing arts and sciences. The first society on historical record to do this was the Egyptian. This second stage of hero-worship was an age of 'lustre and pomp, having all the decorations of temples, statues, altars, sacrifices and various rites and ceremonies, together with an established priesthood of great power and influence'.⁹⁰ A third stage followed, that of 'brute worship', or what Monboddo preferred to describe as 'symbolic religion, which was the worship of dead men, but under certain symbols or representations, such symbols being commonly the figure of some brute animal'.⁹¹ The 'last stage of religion is the religion of philosophers, which must be different in all countries from the religion of the vulgar'.⁹²

The account was not tied to Egypt, but rather served as a heuristic reflecting the expected development of the human species. In Monboddo's later works, however, his account of religious development was tied more strongly to the historical context of ancient Egypt – it was now the cradle of both religion and philosophy. Egypt's singular role in human history stemmed from two incontestable facts. Firstly, Egypt was the first society to move from nomadic life to being a 'people living by agriculture in cities' in which there was the rule of law and the arts and sciences.⁹³ Because Egypt was the first 'regular polity' it was also the 'first country of religion'.⁹⁴ As with the other literati, Monboddo held that the central development 'absolutely necessary for introduction religion among men', was the transition from savage to 'well regulated society'.⁹⁵ All of Monboddo's

⁸³OPL I:442.

⁸⁴OPL I:445; see also *AM* IV:373–74.

⁸⁵*AM* III:vi; see also *AM* IV:212, VI, 224.

⁸⁶*AM* IV:213 see also *OPL* I:442, *AM* V:89.

⁸⁷NLS MP 24527 'Natural Religion, and its Progress', pp. 1–12.

⁸⁸See NLS MP MS 24527 'Natural Religion, and its Progress', esp. 8–9; NLS MP MS 24527 'History of Religion', 5–8, 16.

⁸⁹NLS MP MS 24527 'Of the Origin and Progress of Religion', 12.

⁹⁰NLS MP MS 24527 'Origin and Progress of Religion', 13; see also MS 24527 'History of Religion', 14–15.

⁹¹NLS MP MS 24527 'Origin and Progress of Religion', 14.

⁹²NLS MP MS 24527 'Natural Religion and its Progress', 31 and 'Of the Origin and Progress of Religion', 42–43.

⁹³*AM* III:iv.

⁹⁴*AM* IV:373.

⁹⁵*AM* IV:367.

proactive anthropological research had taught him that unsocialized humans were, unavoidably, atheists – they did not have the ‘intellectual capabilities’ necessary for religious belief.⁹⁶ Similarly, Monboddo agreed with his fellow *literati* that the first theologians appeared in societies able to produce leisure time for privileged groups. Egypt’s great fertility enabled the development of a caste system atop of which was a hereditary priest-philosopher class ‘were set apart for the duties of religion, and the cultivation of sciences’.⁹⁷ Monboddo noted happily that the expected chain between prosperity, luxury and superstition did not develop in Egypt. The region’s natural abundance meant Egypt was self-sufficient and did not need to trade, while the prodigious size of the population prevented outsized accumulations of wealth by the few.⁹⁸ Monboddo’s account of Egypt’s role in the ‘History of Man’ was not that of the traditional Christian mythology: Egypt was neither the recipient nor the corruptor of an earlier revelation, but the first civilization to develop religious wisdom.

The second fact underpinning Egypt’s central role in the ‘History of Man’ was that it was a civilization of tremendous antiquity.⁹⁹ As he had discussed in the early volumes of *OPL*, Monboddo believed that most human behaviours – language, philosophy, theology – were the consequence of activity over many years. Only Egyptian civilization was of a sufficient age to allow for such developments. Monboddo believed that ‘Egyptian chronology, however extraordinary it may appear, is supported, as much as any chronology can be, by human monuments’, such as the statues of the high priests of Jupiter in Thebes.¹⁰⁰ Feeling no need to align sacred and profane chronologies, Monboddo accepted Herodotus’ claim that Egyptian historical records went back eleven thousand years.¹⁰¹ In an early letter to John Pringle he expressed his hope that biblical literalists would be happy to take his writings’ apparent challenge to sacred chronology as merely an ‘interesting intellectual exercise’.¹⁰² In the 1790s Monboddo was excitedly plotting a history of Egypt proving its chronology far exceeded the boundaries of any other known civilization.

Monboddo stressed humanity’s cognitive abilities central to framing religious belief could only have developed ‘in the process of time’ within the settings of civil society.¹⁰³ As he put in a letter to Richard Price in 1780, it was in the Egyptian College of Priests and by a ‘long succession of philosophers from father to son [that] all sciences had been cultivated for thousands of years’.¹⁰⁴ The ‘idea of the Supreme Intelligence’ was a notion only arrived at after sustained investigation: highly complicated ideas such as ‘mind’ and ‘immateriality’ had to come first.¹⁰⁵ As Monboddo phrased it in one of his early manuscript essays, it was ‘as impossible that men should become theologians at once, as that they should become geometers or astronomers’.¹⁰⁶

In *AM* Monboddo provided a parallel account to his mythographical one described above, that charted the development of religion in primordial human society and which resembled the sort of psychological analysis common to the enlightened Scots. Like Hume, Smith, Ferguson, Robertson, Dunbar, and Hutton, Monboddo averred that the first religious notions to develop would be an unsophisticated polytheism characterized by the attribution of power to natural phenomena upon which the individual’s ‘happiness or misery must depend’. This attribution would result from the natural propensity to anthropomorphic analogical reasoning that perceived unknown powers will be ‘moved, as he himself is, by supplications and entreaties’.¹⁰⁷ The improvement of religious notions would run concurrently with progress in civility and the arts and sciences, with priest-philosophers

⁹⁶See *AM* III:374, IV:151, IV:154.

⁹⁷*AM* III:iv. See also *OPL* II:288, II:491, IV:186; *AM* IV:214–215.

⁹⁸*AM* III:iv.

⁹⁹*AM* I:xxx.

¹⁰⁰*AM* IV:134. See also *OPL* I:627–28.

¹⁰¹*OPL* I:444.

¹⁰²NLS MP MS 24501 Monboddo to John Pringle 16 June 1773. See also *OPL* I:192.

¹⁰³*AM* IV:151, IV:367.

¹⁰⁴NLS MP MS 24502 Monboddo to Richard Price 15 September 1780.

¹⁰⁵*AM* IV:152.

¹⁰⁶NLS MP MS 24527 ‘Of Natural Religion, and its Progress’, 3.

¹⁰⁷*AM* IV:99.

gradually getting closer to the truths of monotheism. Where Monboddo strikes an original note in this familiar account is his stress that such changed could only take place over an extremely lengthy period. This was not least because so many of the concepts and thinking practices that formed the component parts of religions notions had to develop first. The ‘idea of cause and effect’ and the intellectual practices of ‘abstraction and generalization’ were neither instinctive nor easily achieved.¹⁰⁸ The actual move to the notion of immaterial substance required ‘great effort’ by the ‘human intellect’ – it involved the ‘abstracting from body all its qualities of shape and figure, of solidity and resistance, and even of parts’.¹⁰⁹ This involved not the ‘knowledge of external things’ but the sustained practice of ‘knowing ourselves’.¹¹⁰ Once the notion of ‘mind’ developed, so too with the notion of an infinitely superior mind would follow. Only Egyptian civilization fitted the bill for the necessary socio-political context for the slow development of religion.

5. The character of ancient Egyptian religion

Monboddo’s conjectural understanding of the origin and development of religion within ancient Egypt in *Antient Metaphysics* was followed by detailed discussion of that religion once established. The Egyptian *religio duplex* – consisting of a secret theism and a popular polytheism – was central to Egypt’s success as a polity and the ability of its priest-philosophers to develop knowledge of the foundational truths of religion. The Egyptian priests developed rarefied ideas of immaterial substances and lived ‘in the world of spirits’ as much as is humanly possible.¹¹¹ They oversaw a popular religion which inculcated piety and morals by appealing to the senses of the unphilosophical multitude who were ‘only conversant’ with material objects. (Nearly all the *litterati* agreed that philosophical theism was beyond the intellectual capacities of the vast majority of humans). The multitude were only able to understand the transcendental truths of religion through the guided use of anthropomorphically-framed ‘signs and symbols, rites and ceremonies’.¹¹² Like Maillet’s *Description de l’Egypte*, Monboddo was full of praise for Egyptian popular religion’s ‘pomp and processes’ which were ‘wonderfully attended by the people’.¹¹³ Egypt’s *religio duplex* unified society’s vulgar and philosophical elements, serving as a model of religious peace and stability.¹¹⁴

Monboddo’s praise of the Egyptian priesthood in *AM* contrasted with his earlier position. In his manuscript essays he had argued, like Pluche and his old tutor Blackwell, that use of mystery, allegory and the development of hieroglyphics had been acts of priestcraft to subordinate the people. Indeed, the Egyptian priests were the source of the two great corruptions of natural religion: the symbolic religion bound up in the Egyptian mysteries and hieroglyphics, and the deification of mortal men.¹¹⁵ In the second volume of *OPL*, Monboddo offered a more neutral account to what appeared subsequently in *AM*. Egyptian priests used a secret language to convey their religious wisdom. Following Warburton’s *Divine Legation* and Caylus’s *Recueil d’antiquités*, Monboddo held that this was language was distinct not only from language of the multitude but from the hieroglyphs as well.¹¹⁶ While the hieroglyphs were ‘symbolic representations’ containing the ‘deep mysteries of religion and morality’, the priests had a another, separate, primary sacred language via which were communicated amongst the inner sanctums of the Egyptian priesthood.¹¹⁷ Initiates into the priests’ ‘higher

¹⁰⁸ *AM* III:x, IV:64–68.

¹⁰⁹ *AM* IV:369.

¹¹⁰ *AM* IV:100.

¹¹¹ *AM* IV:172.

¹¹² *AM* IV:382–83.

¹¹³ *AM* IV:166.

¹¹⁴ *AM* IV:157.

¹¹⁵ NLS MP MS 24527 ‘History of Religion’, 16–19.

¹¹⁶ *OPL* II:246 see also II:250, II:255. Warburton, *DL*, II:66, II:132; Comte de Caylus, *Recueil d’antiquités, égyptiennes, étrusques, grecques et romaines* 7 vols. (1752–1767), I:66–76.

¹¹⁷ *OPL* II:248–49, II:252.

mysteries' could enjoy 'the beatific vision of the universal nature, and the first principles of all things'.¹¹⁸

The Egyptian priests had come to discern the foundational truths of religion. They believed in the existence of one supreme being; of the immortal, immaterial soul; the great chain of being; and the doctrine of the trinity. The latter concept Monboddo viewed as key to true philosophy because it explained both the great chain of being and man as microcosm of the universe. Following the Aristotelian understanding of the soul, Monboddo claimed that man was a trinity made up of intellectual, animal and vegetable minds. From analogy from ourselves to god, we infer that the deity is similarly constituted of being, intelligence and vitality. The trinity was one of the doctrines that made up the Egyptian greater mysteries.¹¹⁹ Monboddo, however, did not think the trinity was a mystery. He was particularly interested in Lafitau's claim that, not only was there a common origin to all ancient religions, but that the doctrine of the trinity was present in the religions of Egypt, China, Japan as well as in the Americas.¹²⁰ This latter assertion encouraged Monboddo's belief that, regardless of the role of ancient Egypt in transmitting the doctrine to other civilizations, that the trinity was 'so generally believed by all nations having an establish religion, that it may be said to be the religion of nature'.¹²¹ Here the Christian mystery of the trinity was reclassified as a restatement of a truth of philosophy understood first by the Egyptians but common to all theological traditions.

Monboddo's view that Egypt was the cradle of all human civilization involved another factor which sets him apart from all other *litterati*. The first era of the Egyptian monarchy involved rule by daemon-kings, whom Monboddo understood as beings who were 'intermediaries betwixt Gods and men'.¹²² In his earlier manuscript essays on the development of religion Monboddo was scornful of claims about the reality of the Egyptian 'reign of gods'.¹²³ But in his later published work, Monboddo described Egyptian religion as a 'genuine system of theism' established with real daemonic support.¹²⁴ This belief in the actuality of daemons and their role in disseminating true religion sets Monboddo apart from all his peers, both enlightened social scientists and mythographers. Monboddo believed in an initial revelation of a *prisca theologia* but not from the God of Genesis, not the Noahite religion, but via the daemon-kings of Egypt.¹²⁵ Bergheaud suggested Monboddo's belief in daemons stemmed his initiation into freemasonry, given the similarity of his views on the Egyptian priesthood with the masonic account.¹²⁶ Monboddo had been a member of the Lodge Canongate Kilwinning since 1757 and had also made notes on freemasonry.¹²⁷ Cloyd, by contrast, suggested that out-of-body experiences and visions Monboddo suffered during a period of severe illness in 1778 fundamentally altered his outlook on the world, making him open to the reality of intermediary spiritual beings.¹²⁸ Given his membership of the Edinburgh Lodge long predated his earlier religious essays, any affinity with masonic ideas does not explain the striking shift in Monboddo's position from the late 1770s onwards. Cloyd's claim, plausible given it aligns chronologically, is impossible to substantiate.

We can argue that three factors informed Monboddo's change of position. Firstly, from the late 1770s Monboddo placed the doctrine of the great chain of being at the centre of his thought, which made it philosophically possible that daemonic beings existed. Monboddo's stated reason for his shift was his growing realization of the damaging implications of contemporary mechanical philosophy

¹¹⁸OPL II:252–53.

¹¹⁹AM, IV:382–83.

¹²⁰Joseph-François Lafitau, *Moeurs des sauvages américains comparées aux mœurs des premiers*, 2 vols. (Paris, 1724), I:9.

¹²¹AM VI:48; see also AM IV:291–92; OPL V:339–40.

¹²²AM IV:159.

¹²³e.g. NLS MS 24527 'History of Religion', quote at 4, see also 8; 'Natural Religion and its Progress', 18, 31–32.

¹²⁴OPL V:115.

¹²⁵Monboddo here writes in anticipation of the mid-twentieth-century pseudoscientific theory, and now popular internet conspiracy, of ancient Egypt being peopled by ancient alien astronauts. See, for example, William H. Stiebing, *Ancient Astronauts, Cosmic Collisions and Other Popular Theories About Man's Past* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1994).

¹²⁶Bergheaud, 'Autour de l'œuvre de Monboddo', 267–68.

¹²⁷NLS MP 24549 Lord Monboddo Pocketbook 3 pp. 1–7.

¹²⁸Cloyd, *Burnett*, 90; NLS MP MS 45055 'Speculations upon the Original Residence of Man', fol. 23. Cf. 'History of Religion', 26–27.

and the need to return to ancient Greek philosophy. Secondly, Monboddo believed that the existence of daemons was taught by the natural history of man: he found corroborating evidence in works on Chinese and Peruvian traditions, testifying to the existence of daemons, which confirmed reports found in Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Plutarch.¹²⁹ Thirdly, the existence of intermediary beings between god and man was ‘doctrine of our scripture as well as of philosophy’.¹³⁰

The rule by daemon-kings ensured ancient Egypt was both a perfect polity and ‘most religious of all nations’.¹³¹ This was because the Egyptians ‘lived with their Gods’ and thus knew exactly what their gods wanted. The Egyptian oracles provided direct communication with God.¹³² The Egyptians therefore avoided all the failings of subsequent religions – human sacrifices, persecutions, religious conflicts – that stemmed from attempting to appease the guessed-at wants of non-present deities.¹³³ When the era of daemon-kings and oracles came to an end, they left in place the ‘most perfect system of natural religion that ever was among men’.¹³⁴ There is an unresolved tension in Monboddo’s thought between his conjectural account of the development of religion over the very long-term and his appeal, in the same volume of *AM*, to Egypt’s daemon-king’s initial establishment of religion. One possible pathway out of this confusion is that Monboddo viewed the conjectural account of religious development as occurring in the years prior to the first Egyptian monarchy, but it remains the case that both accounts depend on different trajectories of religious development.

Monboddo also appealed to daemonic intervention to explain the origin of language. He read closely William Jones’s analysis of the similarities of Sanskrit and Greek, Jean-Baptiste Bullet’s *Memoires sur la langue Celtique* (3 vols., 1754–1760) and G ebelin’s *Monde Primitif*. Together, these texts caused Monboddo to abandon his belief in linguistic polygeneticism and adopt the view that there was ‘one original language of which all the other languages on earth are derivates’.¹³⁵ Of central importance G ebelin’s work, which a ‘great discovery in the history of man’: linguistic monogeneticism.¹³⁶ G ebelin stressed, however, the impossibility of identifying which was the first language given the limitations of the ancient historical record. Monboddo was all too happy to claim Egyptian primacy.¹³⁷ We come across the same unresolved tension between incremental improvement and the involvement of superior intelligences. Only Egypt was of sufficient antiquity to enable the necessarily slow development of language but, likewise, only Egypt benefitted from the ‘supernatural assistance’ of the ‘intervention of the daemon kings’.¹³⁸ Monboddo’s initial account of the origin of language in *OPL* discussed the possibility of an original divine language subsequently lost and also stressed that the development of the rudiments of language required humans of superior intellectual calibre to teach people to ‘speak according to the rules of art’.¹³⁹ In his later writings, Monboddo combined these two elements in the figures of the Egyptian daemon-kings.

6. The transmission of Egyptian learning

Defending his thesis of Egypt’s providentially framed role as the cradle of civilization, Monboddo engaged with the prominent debate amongst European mythographers and orientalisists about the global transmission of religious wisdom. For Monboddo, the story of the spread of Egyptian religion was one of post-transmission decline and corruption, but with a providential aim. Egypt’s role was to

¹²⁹*AM* IV:161–162.

¹³⁰*OPL* V:115.

¹³¹*AM* IV:157. Cf. NLS MP MS 24527 ‘History of Religion’, 31.

¹³²*AM* IV:168. Cf. NLS MP MS 24527 ‘History of Religion’, 22–26.

¹³³*AM* IV:158. Cf. NLS MP MS 24527 ‘History of Religion’, 34–35.

¹³⁴*AM* IV:165.

¹³⁵*AM* IV:337. For Monboddo’s initial position see the last three chapters of *OPL* I.

¹³⁶*AM* IV:345.

¹³⁷Antoine Court de G ebelin, *Le Monde primitif, analyse et compare avec le monde modern*, 9 vols. (Paris, 1773–84), III:65–66; *AM* IV:340.

¹³⁸*AM* IV:357. Cf. G ebelin, *Monde Primitif*, III:67–68.

¹³⁹*OPL* II:500. See also Bergheaud, ‘Autour de l’œuvre de Monboddo’, 265–68’ and Noldin, *Lord Monboddo im Kontext*, 267–273.

act as the starting point of a process laying the ground for the eventual establishment of Christianity. Egyptian religion had degenerated amongst the Greeks and Romans into hero-worship and animal sacrifice. The emergence of non-symbolic hero-worship – that is, not worshipping heroes as emblems of the attributes of the supreme being but as actual deities – was the moment when religion degenerated into the idolatry of worshipping man as a god. Corrupt Greco-Roman religion meant a ‘better popular religion, therefore, was of absolute necessity for the happiness of man’.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, improvements in philosophy had filtered down to the multitude, meaning they would be receptive to a more philosophical religion. This is what Monboddo understood Christianity to be: a ‘most philosophical religion’ entirely in line with ‘the established order of nature and the system of the universe’ yet able to appeal to the vulgar through its doctrines of love, charity and future rewards and punishments.¹⁴¹ Through the new doctrine of a future state of rewards and punishments, which further reformed the behaviour of the multitude, Christianity combined the philosophers’ and popular religion. In Monboddo’s own idiosyncratic providentialist story, Christianity perfected Egyptian, rather than Jewish, religion.

Monboddo maintained had maintained from the opening two volumes of *OPL* that Egyptian learning and religious wisdom spread to Europe and Asia.¹⁴² Egyptian religion reached Europe first ‘by the Phoenicians by sea, and the Pelasgi by land’.¹⁴³ The process was driven forward first by mystagogs, with Orpheus the ‘first civilizer of men’ in Europe, and then by Egyptian-educated philosophers including Pythagoras, Homer, Plato, Thales, and Aristotle.¹⁴⁴ Monboddo made similar claims about the spread of Egyptian wisdom into Chaldean, Babylonian, Chinese, Indian and even Peruvian civilization.¹⁴⁵ Monboddo responded to Sir William Jones’ accounts of Indian religion and of the similarities of various world religions (Greek, Roman, Indian, Egyptian) by averring that the only plausible means of interpreting these similarities was to identify an original religion which informed all the others.¹⁴⁶ While Jones eventually claimed this honour for ancient Persia, to Monboddo’s mind this could only ever be the ancient Egyptian and he marshalled a variety of recent French antiquarian publications in support of his position.¹⁴⁷ Increased knowledge of Indian and especially Chinese civilization had shaken eighteenth-century European scholars’ confidence that ancient Egypt was the oldest civilization on record, but Monboddo remained convinced of the chronological primacy of Egypt.

Monboddo spent most attention on establishing the transmission of Egyptian wisdom to Indian civilization. British orientalists, from the 1760s onwards, had enthusiastically investigated the antiquity of Indian civilization, linguistic links between Europe and India, and the possibility that Hinduism might provide knowledge of ancient religious wisdom.¹⁴⁸ As Halhed noted in his *Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778), burgeoning Indology was identifying texts describing the existence of ‘communication formerly subsisting between India and Egypt’.¹⁴⁹ Monboddo appealed to ancient Greek authorities – Arrian, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo and especially Herodotus – to prove the flow of civilization from Egypt to India. But he supplemented this with references to recent works in the burgeoning field of eighteenth-century Anglo-French comparative religious studies stressing

¹⁴⁰AM IV:385.

¹⁴¹AM IV:386, IV:396.

¹⁴²*OPL* I:472. See also NLS MP MS 24527 ‘Natural Religion, and its Progress’, 23–32.

¹⁴³*OPL* I:445. See also *OPL* I:426, I:448–49.

¹⁴⁴AM I:xxxii, *OPL* I:260. See also *OPL* II:252, II:287–88, III:150; AM III:ix–x.

¹⁴⁵*OPL* I:464–65, II:438.

¹⁴⁶AM IV:311–12. Sir William Jones, ‘The Third Anniversary Discourse, Delivered 2 February 1786’, *Asiatick Researches* 1 (1788), 415–431 (424–25).

¹⁴⁷Such as Pierre-Daniel Huet’s *Histoire sommaire du commerce et de la navigation des Anciens* (Paris: Fournier et Coustelier, 1716); Eusèbe Renaudot, *Anciennes relations des Indes et de la Chine* (Paris: Coignard, 1718); and Joseph de Gugins, *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve, que les Chinois son tune colonie égyptienne* (Paris, 1760). See also Janine Hartman, ‘Ideograms and Hieroglyphs: the Egypto-Chinese Origins Controversy in the Enlightenment’, *Dalhousie French Studies* 43 (1998): 101–118.

¹⁴⁸Thomas R. Trautmann, *Aryans and British India* (London: University of California Press, 1997), 28–98, with Monboddo discussed on 80–84.

¹⁴⁹Halhed, *Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778), v.

the similarity between Egyptian and Brahminic theology.¹⁵⁰ Monboddo extracted a wealth of facts about Egyptian and Indian religion from pioneering English Indology¹⁵¹ and also cited his conversations about Indian civilization with William Hastings, governor of India and Charles Wilkins, translator of the *Bhagavad Gītā*.¹⁵²

In the first volume of *OPL*, Monboddo averred that the ‘conformity betwixt the two nations is so great’ that there must have been one-way cultural transmission.¹⁵³ He found great similarities in the caste systems, the division of the calendar into years and months, and shared beliefs about metempsychosis, dual religion, the trinity, and bovine reverence.¹⁵⁴ By the fourth volume of *AM*, Monboddo was clear about Egyptian primacy. He believed Buddha was a ‘successor of Osiris in India’ and that Egyptian wisdom spread throughout the eastern world initially via the conduit of Buddhism.¹⁵⁵ The Brahmins were, obviously, the Indian equivalent of the Egyptian priests atop a comparable caste system.¹⁵⁶ Given his belief in the unique antiquity of ancient Egypt, for Monboddo, these similarities clearly indicated that India had received a colony from Egypt.¹⁵⁷ Monboddo’s selective inferences from his reading and conversations was predicated on the ‘fact’ that the Egyptian civilization was the source of all other civilizations. He often used information to argue precisely the opposite of its author’s original intention. Egyptian religious primacy became Monboddo’s equivalent of Mr Causabon’s ‘key’ to explain all mythologies.¹⁵⁸

7. Conclusion

Putting it mildly, Monboddo’s discussion of religion is peculiar. Monboddo changed his mind on several issues in the final volumes of both *OPL* and *AM*. Similarly, his volumes published in the 1790s exhibit an oddness not sufficiently acknowledged in existing historiography. It is tempting to dismiss a man who exercised naked on his estate regardless of weather, argued for the life-preserving qualities of ‘scotch broth’, believed in men with tails, kraken, and mermaids and held that human civilization had its origins in the tutelary actions of daemon-kings as an ‘eccentric’. But the sheer strangeness of Monboddo’s thought – especially when read alongside mainstream enlightened Scottish thinking – makes him fascinating. His ‘History of Man’ was built upon a curious amalgamation of appeals to divine intervention alongside conjectural history, skilful sifting through accumulated corroborating evidence alongside strikingly credulous acceptance of unbelievable claims, ‘enlightened’ empiricism and poor quality late humanistic philology. He studied Egypt outside of the biblical chronological framework, but his Egyptology was directed towards the truth and necessity of Christianity’s theological tenets if not its story. He offered a developmental history of religion, but one that placed most of this development in the primordial epochs of ancient Egypt. Once religious wisdom had been discerned, Monboddo shifted method and discussed its transmission, supported by evidence stemming from comparative linguistics and anthropology, to the rest of the world. Moreover, if Monboddo is in thrall to the ancients then, by the final years of his life, it is not to Aristotelianism and Platonism but to the Egyptian wisdom inherent in Greek

¹⁵⁰ *AM* III:lIX, IV:242–43; Jean François Pons, ‘Lettre du Pere Pons, missionnaire de la compagnie de Jesus, au. P. Du Halde, de la même compagnie’, *Lettres édifiantes et curieuses* 26 (1743): 218–56; Mathurin Veyssière de la Croze, *Histoire du Christianisme des Indes*, 2 vols. (La Haye, 1758), II:217–359. See also NLS MP MS 24557 Lord Monboddo Pocketbook 12, 85–90 and NLS MP MS 24526 References on Egypt and India in Published Works, fols. 55–57.

¹⁵¹ John Zephanian Holwells *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal* (3 vols., 1765–1771); Alexander Dow’s *History of Hindostan* (1768), translated from Firishtah’s (1560–1620) Persian original (c. 1593); and Nathaniel Brassey Halhed’s translation *A Code of Gentoo Laws* (1776).

¹⁵² *AM* IV:242–243, IV:323, IV:329–332. See also *OPL* VI:149.

¹⁵³ *OPL* I:655.

¹⁵⁴ *AM* III:liX, IV:289–293.

¹⁵⁵ *AM* IV:309–10.

¹⁵⁶ *AM* IV:242.

¹⁵⁷ See especially *AM* IV: 288–317.

¹⁵⁸ Kidd, *Mythology*.

philosophy. By the time he turned his 'History of Man' to the study of religion, Monboddo was an Egyptomaniac, and not a philhellene.

Monboddo's account exhibits many of the characteristics of the wider Scottish Enlightenment discussion of the origin and development of religion. He shared with Kames and Hume a detailed socio-psychological account of religious change. This form of explanation was not prominent in eighteenth-century mythography which, while it utilized comparable notions of shifts to from savage to civil society, did not think of religious change in the teleological terms of the maturation of the inherent propensities of human nature charted along a trajectory of theological improvement.¹⁵⁹ It is this difference, illuminated by reading Monboddo in the dual contexts of the science of man and contemporary mythography, that warrants scepticism about recent claims by historians of scholarship about the extent to which later High Enlightenment thought is dependent upon earlier anti-quarianism. Monboddo's most philosophically significant contribution to the Scottish Enlightenment's study of the natural history of religion was his emphasis on just how long such developments would have taken and the necessity to reconsider the extent of human history to make them comprehensible. When viewed from the vantage point of Monboddo's understanding of slow evolution and the immensity of historical time, much enlightened Scottish social theory seems compact in its temporalisation, especially in the stress by Smith, Kames, Robertson and others on the transformative impact on religious belief resulting from the one-off shift from savage to civil society.

Monboddo's Egyptomania sat in the noticeably small overlap between eighteenth-century Europe's competing social scientific and mythological explanations of religious change. But we must remain deeply sceptical about Monboddo's position as an enlightened Scot given his reliance upon supernatural explanations involving intermediary intelligences. Most *litterati* abandoned the sustained appeal to acts of direct providence, though the theologian William Robertson utilized the singular instance of God sending his son Jesus Christ to redeem mankind and perfect an otherwise incomplete worldly theism. None explained change away through appeal to daemonic action. Similarly, Monboddo's credulity when it came to accepting the claims of ancient texts and travel reports surely failed the standards of his enlightened contemporaries. Quite whether Monboddo warrants being described as 'enlightened' obviously depends on the particular definer's chosen emphasis and criteria, but so much of his later writing strikes the reader as beyond the enlightened pale.

Monboddo's strangeness, likewise, precludes any sense that his example should overturn our existing understanding of the Scottish Enlightenment's 'science of human nature'. Yet, given his methodological commitment to this science, his inclusion into the picture might encourage us to loosen any stringency in fixing the absolute contours of that science's methods, central themes and purported modernity. Similarly, Monboddo might be said to be an instance of the continued if neglected importance of antiquarianism and classicism in eighteenth-century Scottish thought. It is noticeable, however, that he positions his writings as being in debate with principally English and French scholars, with few Scots positioned as interlocutors. Reading Monboddo alongside the mainstream enlightened Scots, finally, illustrates some key aspects of the latter's approach to the social scientific study of religion: the lack of sustained interest in ancient Egypt; the tension of composing heuristic models while using evidence from actual history; the parsimonious approach to citation; and, most importantly, the sociological-cum-psychological, secular, non-philological, non-antiquarian, non-humanistic character of most High Scottish Enlightenment studies of religious development. The stark differences in approach between Monboddo and Kames or Hume or Robertson on the question of religious change calls into question recent attempts to characterize enlightened Scottish social theory as much a stage of late humanism as incipient modernity. Monboddo embodies this combination, but the mainstream *litterati*'s modernity is brought out even more vividly when read alongside *OPL* and especially *AM*.

¹⁵⁹On the latter see Kidd, *Mythography*.

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