

Religion on the Ground: Lived Religion in Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*

What we call 'religion' is at the center of Heliodorus' *Aethiopica*. From implicit theological formulae to explicit statements concerning fate and divinity, scholars have long recognized the philosophical-religious substance of this latest of ancient Greek novels (Sandy 1982; Jones 2006). More recently, Svetla Slaveva-Griffin has both explored the possibility of Heliodorus' knowledge of Christianity (Slaveva-Griffin 2015) and has explored the relationship between the *hoi polloi* and the *pepaideumenoi* in the religious vocabulary of the *Aethiopica* (Slaveva-Griffin 2014). This latter paper is representative of more recent approaches to the novel that ask questions of social import about topics such as race and ethnicity, gender, body, and identity (e.g. Shalev 2006; Whitmarsh 2011; Lye 2016). What naturally follows from such 'social' approaches, and a subject which has yet to be broached by scholars of Heliodorus, is the question of lived religion in the *Aethiopica*.

Recent approaches to religion interested in 'material-', 'embodied-', or 'lived-religion'—approaches interested in religion 'on the ground'—take as the center of religious experience not doctrine, but rather the everyday action performed in 'religious' settings (e.g. Vasquez 2011). Heliodorus has much to say on this topic. Within the *Aethiopica* lived religion appears ubiquitously. From the benign rituals of pouring libations, holding processions, saying prayers, and singing hymns to the quite bizarre eccentricities of magically conjuring the dead and sacrificing humans (!), religion 'on the ground' comprises part of the warp and woof of this novel. In fact, much can be said concerning the way that Heliodorus chooses to portray certain forms of religious practice in his novel.

One interesting component of the *Aethiopica*'s lived religion is its multicultural nature. The 'religious heroes' of the novel—Calasiris and Charikleia, among others—are Egyptian and

Ethiopian respectively; yet, their religious scruples appear quite Greek. Calasiris eschews other characters' attempts to cast Egyptian religion as 'hocus-pocus,' yet he does have his idiosyncrasies (he pours only water libations) and is sure that real truth comes from Egypt. Charikleia, on the other, becomes instrumental in the banning of human sacrifice among her native people in Ethiopia. Beyond ethnic borders, one notes within the novel a clear strain of what constitutes 'right' religion and what constitutes 'wrong' religion. This trend ends up reinscribing norms of Greek religion—norms like pious libations and festivals, devout prayers, and sincere devotion to the gods—while condemning oddities such as magic and human sacrifice. Overall, in reading the *Aethiopica* the reader is presented with a much closer look at religion than scholarship has heretofore realized. Religion on the ground matters, and there are right and wrong ways to do it. This paper presents Heliodorus' narrative account of lived religion in its many norms and forms as it appears in the *Aethiopica*.

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