

University of Groningen

## Religious encounters on the southern Egyptian frontier in Late Antiquity (AD 298-642)

Dijkstra, Jitse Harm Fokke

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

*Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

*Publication date:*

2005

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*

Dijkstra, J. H. F. (2005). *Religious encounters on the southern Egyptian frontier in Late Antiquity (AD 298-642)*. s.n.

### Copyright

Other than for strictly personal use, it is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

The publication may also be distributed here under the terms of Article 25fa of the Dutch Copyright Act, indicated by the "Taverne" license. More information can be found on the University of Groningen website: <https://www.rug.nl/library/open-access/self-archiving-pure/taverne-amendment>.

### Take-down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Downloaded from the University of Groningen/UMCG research database (Pure): <http://www.rug.nl/research/portal>. For technical reasons the number of authors shown on this cover page is limited to 10 maximum.

## 4. The Last Priests of Philae

Who were these priests? In this chapter, we will examine who the last priests of Philae were, what functions they had, and how they dramatically disappeared from the scene. As these priests dedicated most of the Late Antique inscriptions, they provide us with a lively picture of the ritual practices and festivals they performed. However, the inscriptions commemorating them end abruptly in 456/457, and we will try to find an explanation for this sudden end to the inscriptional evidence.

### Priests and Workmen

Almost a century ago, Walter Otto (1878-1941) published a comprehensive book on priests and temples in Graeco-Roman Egypt.<sup>297</sup> Unfortunately, his standard work has never been followed up regarding the subject of priests.<sup>298</sup> Although detailed studies on specialised topics abound, a systematic, coherent and up-to-date account of this aspect of Egyptian religion in the Graeco-Roman period is still a desideratum.<sup>299</sup> To take the case of Philae, although the material discussed thus far demonstrates that the combination of Greek and demotic inscriptions can add considerably to our understanding of priesthood, many texts from Philae, spanning the whole Graeco-Roman period, still remain to be studied. It is therefore necessary to pay some attention to priesthood in the Graeco-Roman period before we concentrate on the priests of fourth and fifth-century Philae.

Otto divides Egyptian priests of the Graeco-Roman period into two groups according to Greek terminology by comparing famous bilingual or trilingual documents like the Ptolemaic Rosetta stone and the decree of Canopus. He subdivides the higher priest class (ιερείς) into five subclasses (φυλαί). The 'high priests' (ἀρχιερείς) come first, then the 'prophets' (προφήται), followed by the *stolistai* (στολισταί), and finally the *pterophorai* (πτεροφόροι; singular πτεροφόρος) and *hierogrammateis* (ιερογραμματεῖς), who are more or less equal in status. Unfortunately, Otto's approach is one-sided and analyses from a Greek perspective. Consequently, he does not take into account the many different nuances in Egyptian terminology which exclude a one-to-one equivalence of Greek and Egyptian titles. Moreover, one priest could have several titles, both administrative and religious, and these titles varied from time to time and place to place.

The complexity of the Egyptian priesthood can be illustrated by listing the several functions of the different kinds of priests. High priests and prophets were in charge of the rituals of the temple. The *stolistai* were concerned with the garments of the deity, but also with various other aspects of the temple cult, such as prayers, hymns, inspection of sacrificial animals and offerings. The *hierogrammateus* had to find and inspect holy animals, take part in synods of priests and temple administration, compose priestly decrees and, finally, to test potential priests on cultic purity and writing skills. His titles are in hieroglyphs *rh-h*, 'savant', or *ty(?) pr-<sup>c</sup>nh*, 'member of the House of Life', and in demotic *sh pr-<sup>c</sup>nh*, 'scribe of the House of Life'. Although the exact difference with a *hierogrammateus* is still open to debate, it is generally accepted that a *pterophoras* designates a priest whose main concern was

<sup>297</sup> W. Otto, *Priester und Tempel im hellenistischen Ägypten. Ein Beitrag zur Kulturgeschichte des Hellenismus* 2 vols (Leipzig and Berlin 1905-8).

<sup>298</sup> Cf. J.A.S. Evans, 'A Social and Economic History of an Egyptian Temple in the Greco-Roman Period', *YCIS* 17 (1961) 143-283.

<sup>299</sup> Cf. J. Quaegebeur, 'Priester(tum) (griech.-röm.)', *LÄ* IV (1982) 1098-1100. About the sources in Greek, demotic and hieroglyphic: 'elles sont toutes les trois insuffisamment exploitées' (p. 1098). About the need of a new work on Graeco-Roman priests: 'l'élaboration d'études de détail permettront d'écrire un jour une synthèse nouvelle' (p. 1100).

writing. His title is in hieroglyphic *sšw mdz.t-ntr*, and in demotic *sh md-ntr*, ‘scribe of the divine book’.<sup>300</sup>

In general, we can say that the higher priests were divided into *hm-ntr* (‘prophets’) and *w<sup>c</sup>b* (‘priests’). According to Greek terminology, the ‘high priests’, ‘prophets’ and *stolistai* belonged to the ‘prophets’ (*hm-ntr*), but the *pterophorai* and *hierogrammateis* to the ‘priests’ (*w<sup>c</sup>b*). The Greek term ‘prophet’ (προφήτης) could therefore denote both a specific function and a general designation of the highest priestly offices (Egyptian *hm-ntr*). Moreover, in addition to being a designation of the priestly offices lower than the ‘prophets’ (Egyptian *w<sup>c</sup>b*), the Greek term ‘priest’ (ἱερεύς) was also a general term for higher priests (both *hm-ntr* and *w<sup>c</sup>b*).

In addition to the priests who were paid by the temple, other people also worked in the temple, earning a living from private consultation, who were not strictly regarded as ‘priests’ (ἱερεῖς) by the Egyptians themselves. However, as we generally refer to Egyptian temple personnel as ‘priests’, we will call them ‘lower priests’ to discriminate them from the ‘higher priests’.<sup>301</sup> The most important of these ‘priestly’ people were the *pastophoroi* (Greek παστοφόροι, Egyptian *wn*) whose precise functions remain as yet obscure.<sup>302</sup> What we do know is that they were responsible for guarding the temple area, and that they interpreted dreams.<sup>303</sup> Besides these lower priests, there were a number of workmen (ἐργάται) involved in the temple cult.<sup>304</sup>

Several of these functions, particularly the higher ones, reappear among the fourth and fifth-century priests of Philae, and of these functions the name Smet (demotic Esmet) is most popular.<sup>305</sup> On 17 December 373, a certain Smet dedicated a pilgrimage inscription, while his father, Smet the Elder, was a first prophet of Isis.<sup>306</sup> On 24 August 394 another Smet, surnamed Akhom, dedicated the last hieroglyphic/demotic inscription of Egypt as *hierogrammateus* and in a pilgrimage inscription calls himself a banker (*Shyene* (?)) of Isis.<sup>307</sup> We can trace back three generations of this family of Smets. Smet’s father was another Smet, surnamed Panekhate and second prophet of Isis, who was married to Eswere and whose father was Pakhom, first prophet of Isis.<sup>308</sup> Finally, a very late Greek inscription (454/455) mentions a Smet-Achates, son of Smet the Elder and Tsaouel.<sup>309</sup>

Lower priests are harder to find. For example, a certain Sensnaw was ‘the chief baker of Isis’ (*p mre ‘o n ‘S.t*). He recorded the names of his father, mother and grandfather.<sup>310</sup> In a pilgrimage inscription of 11 (?) November 373 we hear of a

<sup>300</sup> Otto, *Priester* 1, 75-94; K.-T. Zauzich, ‘Hierogrammat’, *LÄ* II (1977) 1199-1201; H.-J. Thissen, ‘Pterophoren’, *LÄ* IV (1982) 1182-3; S. Sauneron, *Les prêtres de l’ancienne Égypte* (Paris, 1988<sup>2</sup>; Eng. tr. *The Priests of Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 2000) 63-71; R.B. Finnestad, ‘Temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods: Ancient Traditions in New Contexts’, in B.E. Shafer (ed.), *Temples of Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 1997) 185-237 at 227-8. But cf. K. Ryholt, ‘A Parallel to the Inaros Story of P.Krall (P.Carlsberg 456+P.CtYBR 4513): Demotic Narratives from the Tebtunis Temple Library (I)’, *JEA* 84 (1998) 151-69 at 168-9, who equates *rh-ht* with πτεροφόρος and *sšw mdz.t-ntr* with ἱερογραμματεὺς.

<sup>301</sup> Otto, *Priester* 1, 94-8; Sauneron, *Prêtres* 76-7.

<sup>302</sup> H.-B. Schönborn, *Die Pastophoren im Kult der ägyptischen Götter* (Meisenheim, 1976); J.G. Griffiths, ‘Pastophoren’, *LÄ* IV (1982) 914; B.P. Muhs, ‘Of Priests and Pastophoroi’, forthcoming.

<sup>303</sup> J.D. Ray, *The Archive of Hor* (London, 1976) 136, and ‘Phrases used in Dream-Texts’, in S.P. Vleeming (ed.), *Aspects of Demotic Lexicography* (Leuven, 1987) 85-93 at 89-91.

<sup>304</sup> Otto, *Priester* 1, 98; Sauneron, *Prêtres* 78-9.

<sup>305</sup> For a Smetkhem, son of Pheos and Tsensnos, see an undated Greek inscription from the island of Salib, not far from Philae, *IThSy* 304.

<sup>306</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 369.1-2.

<sup>307</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 159.2, 436.1-3 = *FHN* III 306. Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.* 237.1-2.

<sup>308</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 159.2-5, 351.1-2, 436.4-7 = *FHN* III 306. The name Akhom may derive from Egyptian *‘hm* ‘falcon’, see W. Spiegelberg, ‘Die Falkenbezeichnung des Verstorbenen in der Spätzeit’, *ZAS* 62 (1927) 27-37. On the name Panekhate ‘he of the *ht* demons’, see *NB Dem.* s.v. *p-n3-ht.w* (pp. 382-3).

<sup>309</sup> *I.Philae* II 198.1-3.

<sup>310</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 372.1-3; *I.Philae* II 186.

Patsinamre, whose father was Pge (?), ‘the great pharmacist (?) of the workshop (?)’ (*p nte ʿo n p wʿb*).<sup>311</sup> This function may have had something to do with the ritual of embalming, which supports the suggestion that Patsinamre was a lower priest.<sup>312</sup> In any case, his son could not write demotic, for Petesenufe, who certainly belonged to the higher priests, wrote the inscription.<sup>313</sup> This Petesenufe had the same function as his father Harentyotf, *pterophoras*, and was ‘the (chief) of secrets of Isis’ (*p (hry) sšt n ’S.t*) in 407/408.<sup>314</sup> Another potential higher priest was Petamanopet, who was ‘the librarian (?) of Isis’ (*p md (?) n ’S.t*), with the same function as his father Harentyotf in 404/405.<sup>315</sup>

It is equally difficult to decide whether a person is a lower priest or a workman, because nearly every occupation on the island had some connection with the temple. When we look at all the titles in the demotic graffiti on Philae, the major lower priests, the *pastophoroi*, are not often mentioned and all dated testimonies come from the first century.<sup>316</sup> Most priests of the dated inscriptions of the fourth and fifth centuries, then, were higher priests, which is again a symptom that the Ancient Egyptian cults contracted considerably during these centuries.

Except for these functions, can we say any more about these priests? Since priestly offices were hereditary, it is likely that they were Egyptian, as they probably had been for centuries.<sup>317</sup> It is more probable, then, that Priscus was right that they considered themselves as Egyptians, rather than that they were of mixed ethnic origins, as Procopius suggests. In a classic essay, the papyrologist Ulrich Wilcken (1862-1944) suggested that the priests resided among the Blemmyes. This suggestion is based upon a single Greek inscription, which we will quote in full below, in which the priest Smet the Younger says that ‘he came here’ (ἦλθα ἐνταῦθα), that is, to Philae.<sup>318</sup> According to Wilcken this means that Smet resided among the Blemmyes and came from the Dodekaschoinos to Philae. He does not even exclude the possibility that all priests of Philae were in this position.<sup>319</sup> However, Smet could just as well have taken a short trip and afterwards dedicated the inscription. There is, then, no reason to assume that the last priests of Philae did not reside at Philae.

Besides knowing how to write Greek and demotic, there is a possibility that the priests could write Meroitic. On the roof of the Birthhouse, near a barely legible demotic inscription, three Meroitic inscriptions have been found, which are dedications of feet by the same person, and which have been translated as ‘the pilgrim (?) Shakhiye (?)’.<sup>320</sup> However, it has recently been proposed that ‘Esmet the Younger’ (Meroitic *šri* = Egyptian *hm*) should be read. Now, we may well ask whether Smet (demotic Esmet) the Younger is also mentioned in the demotic inscription, which has been translated as: ‘The feet (?) of Esmet (?) ..... of [Isis (?) son of (?) Pakho]m the prophet of Isis (?)’.<sup>321</sup> Although its reading is by no means unproblematic, the demotic inscription may well belong to the Meroitic inscriptions: consequently, a Smet the Younger is mentioned here too. Combined with a similar graffito on the roof of the Isis temple, which is dated to 408/409, Smet may be identified as belonging to the last-

<sup>311</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 371.1 = *FHN* III 302.

<sup>312</sup> Cf. the remark in *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 105.

<sup>313</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 103, suggests that *I.Philae.Dem.* 369-72 were all written by Petesenufe, since they were found in the same place, were written by the same hand, and were dedicated in the months Hathyr and Choiak (November-December) 373.

<sup>314</sup> *LBij.Dem.* 3.1; *I.Philae.Dem.* 211.1-3, 236.1-2, 364.1-3, 370.1-2, 371.5 = *FHN* III 302.

<sup>315</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 259.1-3.

<sup>316</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 37.5, 7, 8, 11, 12, 61.7, 64.8, 263.1.

<sup>317</sup> Otto, *Priester* 1, 203-4.

<sup>318</sup> *I.Philae* II 197.9.

<sup>319</sup> Wilcken, ‘Heidnisches und Christliches’, 404-7; Otto, *Priester und Tempel* 1, 210 (n. 8); *I.Philae* II, pp. 242-5; Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 229-30; Rutherford, ‘Island’, 249.

<sup>320</sup> Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* nos. 114, 116-7 = *REM* 0114, 0116-7.

<sup>321</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 237.

known priestly family in Egypt.<sup>322</sup> If the identification is correct, this fifth-century priestly family was trilingual.<sup>323</sup>

Although the priests might have known how to write perhaps a bit of hieroglyphic, demotic, possibly Meroitic and Greek, the ways these scripts were written display an increasingly isolated position. The only hieroglyphic text that has come down to us from this period is used as an introduction to a demotic pilgrimage inscription and is full of mistakes.<sup>324</sup> Demotic graffiti decrease significantly after the third century and are poorly written.<sup>325</sup> Ironically, of all the fourth and fifth-century priests of Philae, we are best informed about the family of Smet the Younger, the last-known priestly family of Egypt.

### A Fifth-Century Priestly Family

Although most Greek pilgrimage inscriptions are not detailed in religious matters, one inscription does give us more information:

The *proskynema* of Smetkhem (Smet the Younger), the *protostolistes* (born out) of his father Pachoumios, prophet, (and) of his mother Tsensmet. I became *protostolistes* in the 165th year of Diocletian (448/449). I came here and did my duty together with my brother Smeto (Smet the Elder), the successor of the prophet Smet, a son of Pachoumios, prophet. We render thanks to our mistress Isis and our lord Osiris, for the good, today, 23 Choiak, the 169th year of Diocletian (20 December 452).<sup>326</sup>

The text is one of the last testimonies of the Ancient Egyptian cults. It mentions two brothers, Smet the Younger and Smet the Elder, who together dedicate a *proskynema* before the gods Isis and Osiris in the year 452. Smet the Younger has evidently taken the opportunity to celebrate his appointment as *protostolistes* four years earlier.<sup>327</sup> Smet the Elder is the 'successor of the prophet Smet'. The third Smet is also mentioned in the last-known inscription testifying to the Ancient Egyptian cults, four or five years later, where he has the function of high priest (ἀρχιερωφότης).<sup>328</sup> If they are one and the same person, it is likely that Smet had become high priest and Smet the Elder prophet not long before the inscription was written, perhaps still in December 452.

The parents of Smet the Younger and Elder were Pachoumios (demotic Pakhom) and Tsensmet. It cannot be a coincidence that the third Smet's father has the same name and function as the father of Smet the Younger and Elder. Obviously, we have three sons and a father holding the highest priestly functions in the Isis cult in the first half of the fifth century. Pachoumios was a first prophet of Isis at least from 408/409 until 20 December 452. Again, the Greek of these inscriptions is incomplete in religious terminology, for the demotic ones differentiate between a first and second prophet of Isis, whereas the Greek only speaks of a prophet.<sup>329</sup> Pachoumios' wife

---

<sup>322</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 376.

<sup>323</sup> A. Burkhardt, 'Zu späten heidnischen Priestern in Philae', in Nagel, *Graeco-Coptica*, 77-83.

<sup>324</sup> Cf. the remark in *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 126: 'The name and titles of the sculptor would be unintelligible without the key given by the demotic'.

<sup>325</sup> Zauzich, 'Demotische Texte', 77; Hoffmann, *Ägypten*, 242. Cf. the remark in *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 71, on *I.Philae.Dem.* 159: 'The writing and orthography are peculiar and probably not free from sheer mistakes due to want of practice at this late date'.

<sup>326</sup> *I.Philae* II 197 (tr. after É. Bernand). Smetkhem (Σμητκήμη) and Smeto (Σμητό) are Greek transliterations of the Egyptian names meaning 'Smet the Younger' and 'Smet the Elder', respectively.

<sup>327</sup> *I.Philae* II 193, dated to 448/9.

<sup>328</sup> *I.Philae* II 199.1-2. Cf. an undated inscription from Biga, *IThSy* 306, in which a Smet, son of Pakoui and Tsensmet, is mentioned. If Pakoui is a variant of Pachoumios, just as Pachomios or Pakomios, this may be our Smet.

<sup>329</sup> *I.Bij.Dem.* 6.2-3; *I.Philae.Dem.* 237.2 (?), 240.2, 332.2, 343.1-2, 365.1-2, 366.1-2, 376.2-3; *I.Philae* II 188.2-3, 193.2, 196.2, 197.4-5, 15-6. For second prophets: Otto, *Priester* 1, 81 (n. 2); 209-10 (n. 4).

Tsensmet did not have a priestly function, but she was ‘the daughter of a main priest of Isis’ (*t šr.t n wꜥb ꜥon ’S.t*).<sup>330</sup>

Their youngest son, Smet the Younger, was *protostolistes* from 448 until at least 452.<sup>331</sup> If the Meroitic texts on the roof of the Birthhouse are his, he was also a prophet at one time.<sup>332</sup> Smet the Elder was prophet of Isis in 452, but before that ‘scribe of the divine book’ or *pterophoras* (*sh md ntr*), in any case between 27 November 435 and 25 February 439.<sup>333</sup> In one graffito he is called *wꜥb* priest of Isis, a general title used for higher priests, such as the *pterophorai*, but lower than prophets.<sup>334</sup> The last brother, Smet, was probably the oldest and the most successful: he was prophet of Isis before December 452 and was high priest in 456/457.<sup>335</sup>

We can even reconstruct a third generation of this ‘Smet family’, namely two sons of Smet the Elder by his wife Tsenwer.<sup>336</sup> The first son, Harpaese, was a ‘scribe of the House of Record (?) of Isis’ (*sh pr-sh* (?)), possibly a *hierogrammateus*.<sup>337</sup> For his brother Harmaiese, no function is known.<sup>338</sup> It is generally accepted that there was even a fourth and fifth generation of the Smet family.<sup>339</sup> This hypothesis is based on the last dated demotic inscription:

Esmet the Elder, son of Pakhom, the first prophet of Isis, his mother’s name Tsensmet, the daughter of a chief priest of Isis. Esmet the Younger, the second prophet of Isis, son of Harentyotf. Today, 6 Choiak, year 169 (2 December 452).<sup>340</sup>

It was thought that Smet the Younger was the father of Tsensmet and, consequently, Harentyotf her grandfather, but this cannot be true. Firstly, the function of the father of Tsensmet is not specified (‘a chief priest of Isis’).<sup>341</sup> Secondly, in the demotic graffiti the titles are never written before the name of a person. Thirdly, the handcopy of the inscription makes it clear that the handwriting of the fourth line, which starts with the name Smet the Younger, is different from the preceding three lines (Fig. 4). We may conclude that Smet the Younger was somebody else, a priest who dedicated a pilgrimage inscription with Smet the Elder or independently, and that he was contemporaneous with Smet the Elder.<sup>342</sup>

<sup>330</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 343.2, 366.2; *I.Philae* II 197.5-6. ‘Daughter of a main priest of Isis’: *I.Philae.Dem.* 365.3.

<sup>331</sup> *I.Philae* II 193.1, 196.1, 197.2-3, 6-8. No title: *I.Philae.Dem.* 237.1 (?), 376.1; *I.Philae* II 188.1. Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 227, 234, who equates *protostolistes* with first prophet, referring to *I.Philae* II, pp. 235-6 (n. 108), but no such identification can be found there.

<sup>332</sup> Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* nos. 114, 116-7 = *REM* 0114, 0116-7.

<sup>333</sup> Prophet: *I.Philae* II 197.13-5. *Pterophoras* *I.Bij.Dem.* 6.1-2; *I.Philae.Dem.* 240.1, 258.3-4, 332.1, 343.1, 355.1, 366.1. Without title: *I.Philae.Dem.* 365.1

<sup>334</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 96.2.

<sup>335</sup> Prophet: *I.Philae* II 197.14-5. High priest: *I.Philae* II 199.1-2. Without title: *I.Philae* II 194.1.

<sup>336</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 258.4-5, 450.3-4. *I.Philae* II, p. 241 (n. 9) falsely includes *I.Philae.Dem.* 355.

<sup>337</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 258.3, 355. *Hierogrammateus* *I.Philae.Dem.* 450.2.

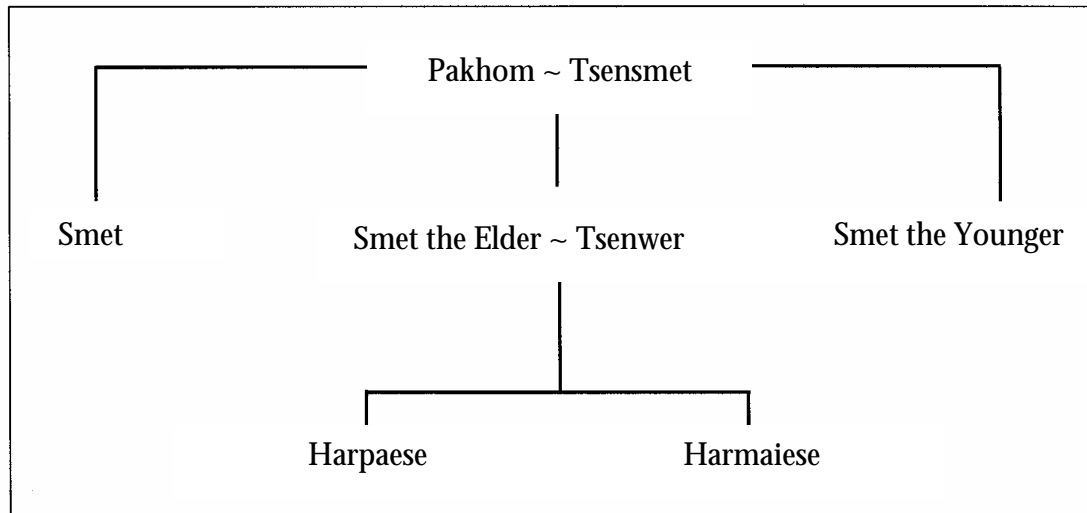
<sup>338</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 96.1.

<sup>339</sup> Otto, *Priester* 1, 208-9; *I.Philae* II, pp. 239-42; Burkhardt, ‘Späten Priestern’, 79, and *Ägypter*, 36-7.

<sup>340</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 365 (tr. Griffith, adapted). Cf. the translation by Spiegelberg in *SBI* 1170b: ‘Der Name seiner Mutter (ist) Tsen-es-mêt. (Sie ist) die Tochter des großen Priesters der Isis Es-mêt, des Jüngeren, des zweiten Propheten der Isis des Gottesvaters (?) des (Gottes) Harendotes (?)’.

<sup>341</sup> Cf. for a parallel *I.Philae.Dem.* 159.4 of 26 November (?) 394, in which an Eswere is mentioned, ‘the daughter of a priest of Isis’ (*t šr.t wꜥb n ’S.t*), also without adding her father’s name.

<sup>342</sup> Smet the Younger, the second prophet of Isis, is probably also mentioned in *I.Philae.Dem.* 375.



### The Smet Family

The Egyptian names of the members of the Smet family are revealing. Pakhom, or in Greek Pachomios, Pakomios or Pachoumios, means 'he of the holy falcon', the symbol of one of the main gods worshipped at Philae, Horus.<sup>343</sup> The names of the two sons of Smet the Elder are both composed with the name of the falcon god: Harpaese means 'Horus is the son of Isis' and Harmaiese 'Horus is the beloved of Isis'.<sup>344</sup>

The other names are derived from Egyptian *mdw*, a holy staff ending in a ram's head and carried round in processions of Khnum. The god Khnum was worshipped at Elephantine, and the developed form of this word, *mtr*, is found in a series of names from the First Cataract area.<sup>345</sup> One of these names is Esmet (Greek Smet), 'he of the holy staff' (from *ns-p3-mtr*). Like Pakhom (Greek Pachoumios and variations), the name is very common at Philae, especially in the demotic graffiti.<sup>346</sup> Other members of the Smet family, Tsensmet 'daughter of Smet' and Tsenwer 'Daughter of the great (?)', also have regional names.<sup>347</sup> Apparently, the Smet family consisted of priests with traditional Egyptian, regional names, which supports the hypothesis that the priests of Philae were Egyptian and came from the region. Although the family can only be followed for three, and not five, generations, it is striking that in almost all inscriptions of the fifth century the members of this family are mentioned. It seems that the last priests of Philae kept the highest priestly offices within the family.

### Rituals and Festivals

The most important of the cults at Philae was that of Isis. To understand the cult of Isis at Philae properly, we have to know one of the most famous Egyptian myths: the murder of Osiris.<sup>348</sup> In the version of Plutarch:

<sup>343</sup> *LPhilae* II, p. 241; *NB Dem.* s.v. *P3-ḥm* (pp. 165-7). For this name see further Spiegelberg, 'Falkenbezeichnung'.

<sup>344</sup> *NB Dem.* s.v. *hr-p3-is.t* (pp. 807-8); *hr-mr-is.t* (p. 819).

<sup>345</sup> H. de Meulenaere, 'L'enseigne sacrée du dieu Khnoum dans l'ononastique gréco-égyptienne', *CdE* 75 (2000) 235-40.

<sup>346</sup> *NB Dem.* s.v. *ns-p3-mtr* (pp. 664-6). See further S. Sauneron, 'À propos d'Éléphantine', *BIFAO* 58 (1959) 35-8 at 36-8; *LPhilae* II, pp. 241-2; H. Satzinger, 'Der heilige Stab als Kraftquelle des Königs', *Jahrbuch der kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien* 77 (1981) 9-43 at 20; De Meulenaere, 'Enseigne sacrée', 236-7.

<sup>347</sup> *NB Dem.* s.v. *t3-šr.t- ns-mtr* (p. 1136), and *t3-šr.t-wr* (p. 1093).

<sup>348</sup> Le Corsu, *Isis* 7-13; R. Merkelbach, *Isisfeste in griechisch-römischer Zeit. Daten und Riten* (Meisenheim, 1963) 12-3; J. Assmann, *Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur*

Having journeyed to her son Horus who was being brought up in Buto (in the Delta), Isis put the box aside, and Typhon (the Egyptian god Seth), when he was hunting by night in the moonlight, came upon it. He recognised the body, and having cut it into fourteen parts, he scattered them. When she heard of this, Isis searched for them in a papyrus boat, sailing through the marshes. That is why people who sail in papyrus skiffs are not harmed by crocodiles, which show either fear or veneration because of the goddess. From this circumstance arises the fact that many tombs of Osiris are said to exist in Egypt, for the goddess, as she came upon each part, held a burial ceremony.<sup>349</sup>

One of those places that possessed a tomb of Osiris was the First Cataract area. As in all nomes worshipping relics of the dead Osiris, this region within the first Upper Egyptian nome also worshipped a relic, viz. the deity's leg. Every nome in Egypt formed, as it were, part of the body of Osiris. The leg of Osiris was traditionally associated with the source of the Nile, since Osiris was seen as a personification of the river: just as Osiris had died, the water level dropped, and just as Osiris was revived, the Nile water rose again.<sup>350</sup>

We should not imagine these relics in the same way as we do modern relic worship.<sup>351</sup> Modern relics are worshipped because they allegedly belonged to a deceased holy person. For the Egyptians, the leg was a symbol of Osiris that could not have been part of the deity himself, because the gods were invulnerable and immortal. Moreover, if Osiris' members had been spread out over all of Egypt permanently, Isis could not have assembled and revived her husband. In one of the variants of the myth, Isis therefore left behind dummies of Osiris' members to confuse Seth.<sup>352</sup>

The tomb of Osiris in the First Cataract area was situated on the island in front of Philae, Biga Island, called in Greek the Abaton ("Αβατον), 'Untrodden Place', for it was forbidden for anybody except a priest to set foot on the island.<sup>353</sup> Philae was closely linked with the Abaton: Isis was the deity on whose shoulders lay the burden of reviving Osiris, she was the giver of life, the protectress of Osiris, as she was the visible, active deity who could be worshipped in order to expect a good yield in return. Or, in the words of a hymn on the temple walls: 'She is the one who pours out the inundation'.<sup>354</sup> The close link Isis had with the inundation of the Nile and the Osiriac myth explains the popularity of the cult at Philae. Just as their son, Horus, was the lord of Egypt, Isis was the medium between the upper and the lower world, between life and death, between the now and the hereafter.<sup>355</sup>

In the gateway of Hadrian on Philae, two Ptolemaic decrees have been recorded in hieroglyphs which give us a clear impression of the cult.<sup>356</sup> One of the most important rituals was the ferrying of Isis across the Nile from the gateway to the Abaton every ten days (the Egyptian week) to unite her symbolically with her husband and to perform the customary rites.<sup>357</sup> Milk and water libations were poured and food

---

(Stuttgart, 1984; Eng. tr. *The Search for God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca and London, 2001) 149-77; Merkelbach, *Isis regina*, 3-22; Dunand, *Isis*, 15-20.

<sup>349</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 357f-358a (tr. J.G. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff, 1970) 145).

<sup>350</sup> D. Bonneau, *La crue du Nil. Divinité égyptienne à travers mille ans d'histoire (332 av.-641 ap. J.-C.)* (Paris, 1964) 243-74; H. Beinlich, *Die "Osirisreliquien". Zum Motiv der Körperzergliederung in der altägyptischen Religion* (Wiesbaden, 1984) 209-13; D. Delia, 'The Refreshing Water of Osiris', *JARCE* 29 (1992) 181-190 at 182-5; Locher, *Nilkatarakt*, 104-13.

<sup>351</sup> See, generally, A. Angenendt, *Heilige und Reliquien. Die Geschichte ihres Kultes vom frühen Christentum bis zur Gegenwart* (Munich, 1997<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>352</sup> H. Beinlich, 'Reliquie', *LÄV* (1984) 230-2, and "*Osirisreliquien*", 305-10.

<sup>353</sup> The actual location of the tomb of Osiris was probably in a valley between the islands of el-Hesa and Biga, which has now disappeared under water, see Locher, *Nilkatarakt*, 171-3.

<sup>354</sup> L.V. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover NH, 1988) 51.

<sup>355</sup> Winter, 'Philae', 1025-6.

<sup>356</sup> H. Junker, *Das Götterdekret über das Abaton* (Vienna, 1913) 32-6, 80; Locher, *Nilkatarakt*, 165-74.

<sup>357</sup> Junker, *Götterdekret*, 55-7.



was laid down for the dead deity.<sup>358</sup> Although access to the Abaton was prohibited for pilgrims, they could watch the scene of the crossing of Isis from the colonnade that had been built in the reign of Augustus.<sup>359</sup>

In addition to this weekly crossing, there was also an annual crossing which celebrated the funeral of Osiris. The funeral was part of the festival which took place during the month of Choiak (27 November – 26 December), when the Nile inundation had ended, and lasted from 12 until 30 Choiak. The culmination point of the Choiak festival was the ferrying of Isis to the Abaton on 22 Choiak to bury her husband. Osiris was revived eight days later and this victory over death was celebrated with the ceremonial erecting of the *dd* pillar, a symbol of eternity.<sup>360</sup>

In symbolising the eternity of the cosmos through Osiris' death and renewal, the Choiak festival also had an agricultural aspect. The month of Choiak was generally the month of the completion of sowing new crops after the flood season, which started in July and ended in November.<sup>361</sup> To symbolise this, an image of Osiris was made from sand and corn, the so-called 'Corn Osiris', which was watered daily until the crops inside the sand had grown.<sup>362</sup> The victory over death on 30 Choiak therefore also symbolised the flooding of the Nile, and during the Choiak festival priests made offerings to Isis so that Osiris might produce a good harvest.<sup>363</sup>

In contrast with the Greek inscriptions, the majority of the dated demotic inscriptions of Philae are dedicated in this month of Choiak.<sup>364</sup> They confirm that the Osiris festival was the most popular one at Philae. The same preponderance is seen in the demotic inscriptions of the fourth and fifth centuries. Of the twenty-four graffiti, thirteen contain an indication of the month, seven of which mention the month of Choiak. It therefore seems likely that the Choiak festival at Philae was still practised in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>365</sup>

However, these demotic inscriptions only rarely detail the ritual practices during the Choiak festival. Yet, an inscription in the Osiris Chamber on the roof of the Isis temple reports:

I am anointed for the cleansing festival (?), doing the services of Osiris for ever, in the year 90 of Diocletian (373). May I perform a great and good *proskynema*, and I will do for you (Isis) services according to their kind, like (?) as in the year named. I overlaid the statue of Cleopatra with gold. That the cool water of my father Harentyotf, scribe of the divine book (*pterophoras*), may live.<sup>366</sup>

---

<sup>358</sup> Junker, *Götterdekret*, 12-7, and J.W. Yellin, 'Abaton-style Milk Libation at Meroe', in Millet and Kelley, *Meroitic Studies*, 151-5, emphasise the iconographical resemblance between depictions of milk libations at Philae and in Nubia, but milk libation was a general feature of Ancient Egyptian religion. Cf. e.g. R.O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969) § 734a-b: 'Raise yourself, O King! You have your water, you have your inundation, you have your milk which is from the breasts of Mother Isis'.

<sup>359</sup> Jaritz, 'Westkolonnade'.

<sup>360</sup> H. Altenmüller, 'Djed-Pfeiler', *LÄ I* (1975) 1100-5.

<sup>361</sup> Bagnall, *Egypt*, 20-3.

<sup>362</sup> C. Seeber, 'Kornosiris', *LÄ III* (1980) 744-6.

<sup>363</sup> H. Junker, *Die Stundenwachen in den Osirisnysterien nach den Inschriften von Dendera, Edfu und Philae* (Vienna, 1910); Junker, *Götterdekret*, 57-8; Merkelbach, *Isisfeste*, 33-6; Bonneau, *Crue du Nil*, 368-70; D. Bonneau, 'Les fêtes de la Crue du Nil', *RdE* 23 (1971) 49-65; F. Daumas, 'Choiakfeste', *LÄ I* (1975) 958-60; F. Dunand, 'Les mystères égyptiens aux époques hellénistique et romaine', in F. Dunand *et al.* (eds), *Mystères et syncrétismes* (Paris, 1975) 11-62 at 21-5; Perpillou-Thomas, *Fêtes*, 129-36. Cf. É. Chassinat, *Le mystère d'Osiris au mois de Khoiak*, 2 vols (Cairo, 1966-8), who emphasises only the funerary character of the festival, on which see Dunand, 'Mystères', 21-2 (n. 43).

<sup>364</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 196.

<sup>365</sup> Cf. *I.Philae* II, p. 27, and Rutherford, 'Island', 238, who base their observations on Greek *proskynemata* only.

<sup>366</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 370.4-9. Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.* 369.5-6, 372.4-7. I would like to thank B.P. Muhs for helping me translate this passage. Griffith's translation of the last sentence is as follows: 'A true word, by the refreshment of Harentyotf, the *pterophoras* my father!' Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 227, who

for a negative answer.<sup>377</sup> Even then, however, the statue probably remained hidden from sight by a cloth or curtain, as we know happened with the statue of Amon that was transported from Thebes to Medinet Habu every tenth day.<sup>378</sup> A well-known bark transport was the *hb shn* festival, in which Hathor of Dendara went to Edfu to be united with Horus.<sup>379</sup> The bark transport to the Dodekaschoinos was possibly of a similar character.<sup>380</sup>

Is there evidence for a bark transport to the Dodekaschoinos in the inscriptions from this region? In an inscription from Dakka of 25 September 57, the *strategos* Abla decrees:

As regards the offering, everything that comes to the *wrk* will come to Philae and the people of Korte (a small temple nearby) (shall be caused to give?) two flagons (to?) the *wrk* of (?) Isis of Philae.<sup>381</sup>

The word *wrk* has the determinatives for silver and stone, and seems to refer to some cultic object.<sup>382</sup> It may therefore well have been a statue of Isis that was brought in procession to the temple of Dakka. If this interpretation is correct, the procession may have been accompanied by a payment to Isis of Philae.

Another graffito from Dakka, from the third century, is a combined hieroglyphic-demotic pilgrimage inscription of the high priest of Thoth of Pnubs (from Egyptian *pr nbs*, 'house of the *nbs* tree'), a deity of Upper Nubia worshipped at Dakka.<sup>383</sup> It mentions a procession of this god 'on the twenty-second of Epiphi, the crossing of Isis, the great goddess'.<sup>384</sup> Although it is not entirely certain whether with Isis, Isis of Philae is meant, it is likely that the crossing of Isis of Philae is mentioned here in connection with the procession of the god Thoth of Pnubs on 16 July.

On the basis of this admittedly scanty evidence, it may be suggested that in the Roman period a statue of Isis was carried along the main temples of the Dodekaschoinos every year, possibly in July.<sup>385</sup> The statue was undoubtedly carried by priests from Philae. A recent article argues on the basis of demotic ostraka that in the second century the priests of Renenutet of Narmuthis (Faiyum) provided the temples in the neighbourhood not only with ritual materials but also performed certain rituals themselves.<sup>386</sup> The same may have been true at Philae, and the priests probably not only accompanied the statue, but also performed rituals in the temples of the Dodekaschoinos. The temples and bark stations at Maharraqa, Dendur, Tafa and Qertassi, built in Augustan times, of which we spoke in Ch. 2, may well have served this purpose. In return, the temples of the Dodekaschoinos seem to have supported

<sup>377</sup> W. Barta, 'Kult', *LÄ* III (1980) 839-48 at 846; Sauneron, *Prêtres* 103-4.

<sup>378</sup> M. Doresse, 'Le dieu voilé dans sa châsse et la fête du début de la décade', *RdE* 23 (1971) 113-36, 25 (1973) 92-135, 31 (1979) 36-65. Cf. D. van der Plas, 'The Veiled Image of Amenapet', in D. van der Plas (ed.), *Effigies dei. Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden, 1987) 1-12, and "'Voir" dieu', 18-24.

<sup>379</sup> See, most recently, H. Altenmüller, 'Die Fahrt des Hathor nach Edfu und die "heilige Hochzeit"', in W. Clarysse, A. Schoors, H. Willems (eds), *Egyptian Religion, The Last Thousand Years: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*; 2 vols (Leuven, 1998) 2.753-65.

<sup>380</sup> Cf. Rutherford, 'Island', 235: 'There is little evidence for this sort of practice in the sacred texts of Philae'.

<sup>381</sup> *LDak.Dem.* 12.8-10 (tr. Griffith, adapted, with thanks to B.P. Muhs, cf. Griffith's translation of lines 8-9: '(as to) each [festiv]al (?) which is held (?) the *wrk* shall come to Philae for his share (?)...').

<sup>382</sup> Cf. *LDak.Dem.*, p. 21, who suggests that the *wrk* is a treasurer.

<sup>383</sup> H. Jacquet-Gordon, 'Pnubs', *LÄ* IV (1982) 1067-8.

<sup>384</sup> *LDak.Dem.* 30.6 = *FHN* III 251. The procession is also mentioned in *LDak.Dem.* 33.5 = *FHN* III 245.

<sup>385</sup> L.A. Christophe, 'Sanctuaires nubiens disparus', *CdE* 38 (1963) 17-29 at 28-9; C. Desroches-Noblecourt, 'Dieux et temples voyageurs de Dakka en Nubie perdue', *Archeologia. Fouilles et découvertes* 1 (1964) 8-16 at 14; Rutherford, 'Island', 242-3. Cf. the inscription, possibly from the reign of Augustus, which mentions the carrying of Nubian gods to Philae, *LPhilae* II 158 = *FHN* II 170.

<sup>386</sup> P. Gallo, 'The Wandering Personnel of the Temple of Narmuthis in the Faiyum and Some Toponyms of the Meris of Polemon', in Johnson, *Life* 119-31.

Firstly, the name Cleopatra (demotic *Glpire*) attracts the eye. It was a common feature of the Ptolemies to identify themselves with Egyptian deities.<sup>367</sup> Cleopatra III was the first to call herself 'Isis, great mother of the gods'. As appears from several literary and other sources, the most famous Cleopatra, Cleopatra VII, also identified herself with Isis.<sup>368</sup> Furthermore, the so-called 'Alchemical Corpus', which contains quotations and short treatises from the first to third centuries claims that it was written by, among others, Cleopatra.<sup>369</sup> This attribution would imply a semi-divine status for Cleopatra as late as the third century, and seems to support the identification of the statue with none other than the famous Ptolemaic queen.

Secondly, the acts of anointing and purifying were essential for the Osiris festival. People washed themselves ritually with Nile water in order to purify their bodies. Starting as part of the lustration of the deceased Pharaoh in the Old Kingdom, Nile water became associated with rejuvenation and immortality. The formula at the end of the inscription returns in Greek funerary inscriptions of the first to third centuries: 'may Osiris give the cool water to you', in other words, may he offer immortality to you.<sup>370</sup> The dead needed life-giving water and water was poured for the dead, as this 'cool water' was associated with Osiris.<sup>371</sup> The dedicant therefore seems to pray to Osiris that his deceased father and brother may have eternal life.<sup>372</sup>

One decree gives the impression that more festivals in which Isis was ferried across the Nile were celebrated during the year.<sup>373</sup> Priscus, too, mentions the transport in connection with the carrying of the holy bark to the land of the Blemmyes and Noubades, the Dodekaschoinos:

For at a stated time the barbarians bring the wooden statue to their own country and, after having consulted it, return it safely to the island.<sup>374</sup>

Bark transports, viz. of statues in processional boats, were common in Ancient Egypt.<sup>375</sup> Because most of the rituals performed by priests took place inside the temple, processions like bark transports gave laymen the opportunity to communicate directly with the gods.<sup>376</sup> During transport, people could see the statue being carried round by priests and consult it. The bark moved forward for a positive answer and backwards

---

refers to the figure of Cleopatra as 'perhaps a low-relief sculpture', although Griffith explicitly states that *Glpire* has the determinative of wood, and this cannot be a low-relief sculpture.

<sup>367</sup> Dunand, *Culte d'Isis* 1, 27-45.

<sup>368</sup> Dunand, *Culte d'Isis* 1, 42-5; M. Chauveau, *L'Égypte au temps de Cléopâtre, 180-30 av. J.-C.* (Paris, 1997; Eng. tr. *Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra* (Ithaca and London, 2000) 48. See now F. Muccioli, 'La titolatura di Cleopatra VII in una nuova iscrizione cipriota e la genesi dell'epiteto Thea Neotera', *ZPE* 146 (2004) 105-14.

<sup>369</sup> M. Mertens, 'Alchemy, Hermetism and Gnosticism at Panopolis c. 300 AD. The Evidence of Zosimus', in Egberts, Muhs and Van der Vliet, *Perspectives on Panopolis* 165-75 at 166-7.

<sup>370</sup> Cf. Delia, 'Refreshing Water', who gives a list of all texts with the Greek formula (δοίη σοι ὁ Ὄσειρις τὸ ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ). Other 'cool water' inscriptions from Philae are: *I.Philae.Dem.* 290.5-6, 301.2-3, and 372.5-7.

<sup>371</sup> R.A. Wild, *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Osiris* (Leiden, 1981) 97-9, 123-6; E. Graefe, 'Die "Sonnenuntergang" zwischen den Pylontürmen', *OLP* 14 (1983) 55-79 at 68; P. Paminger, 'Das Trinken von Überschwemmungswasser – eine Form der jährlichen Regeneration des Verstorbenen', *GM* 122 (1991) 71-5; C. Spieser, 'L'eau et la régénération des morts d'après les représentations des tombes thébaines du Nouvel Empire', *CdE* 72 (1997) 211-28.

<sup>372</sup> Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 226, who interprets these formulae as petitions for fertility. Commemorations for the deceased are found more often in Egyptian temples, cf. e.g. Hoffmann, *Ägypten*, 228, with an example in demotic from Medinet Habu.

<sup>373</sup> Junker, *Götterdekret*, 58.

<sup>374</sup> Prisc. F 27 Blockley (= *FHN* III 318).

<sup>375</sup> Sauneron, *Prêtres*, 98-104.

<sup>376</sup> D. van der Plas, "'Voir" dieu. Quelques observations au sujet de la fonction des sens dans le culte et la dévotion de l'Égypte ancienne', *BSFE* 115 (1989) 4-35 at 11-6.

the priests financially, thus continuing the traditional donations to the Isis temple at Philae.

It is as obscure what happened after 298. One of the few sources we have is Priscus, and his text is far from clear concerning the bark transport to the Dodekaschoinos. It seems that with the phrase 'Egyptians having charge of the river boat in which the statue of the goddess is placed and ferried across the river' the weekly, yearly or other transports from Philae to the Abaton are meant. Apparently, for part of the year the statue (ξόανον seems to be a variant of ἄγαλμα, and presumably refers to the same statue) was away from Philae and kept among the Blemmyes and Noubades.

This perhaps explains the statement in a demotic graffito from Philae of 373, also mentioned in Ch. 2, that the bark of Isis was away from Philae for two years because of a conflict between the Blemmyes and Nubians: without the bark, the cult of Isis was heavily disturbed.<sup>387</sup> The transport alluded to by Priscus may have consisted of a journey to the other temples in the Dodekaschoinos, as was probably the case in the preceding period. Such a carrying around of the statue of Isis could have been accompanied by priests of Philae, and payments for its temples. Extra money from the Dodekaschoinos might have extended priestly life on the island considerably. Smet the Younger was perhaps returning from just such a visit when he dedicated his inscription on Philae with his brother in 452.

Other important festivals at Philae were the birth festivals of Isis and Osiris, which, traditionally, opened the new year. These festivals took place during the 'epagomenal days', which consisted of five days complementing the Egyptian calendar of twelve months with thirty days each. The gods were brought from the Birthhouse into the sunlight, which thereby symbolised their birth.<sup>388</sup> The birthday of Osiris fell on the first epagomenal day (24 August), and that of Isis on the fourth epagomenal day (27 August), but over time, much variation in dates was possible.<sup>389</sup> At Philae, we hear of the Birth Festival of Osiris in the combined demotic-hieroglyphic graffito of 394.<sup>390</sup> The above-mentioned, third-century graffito from Dakka tells us that the high priest of Thoth of Pnubs visited the Birth Festival of Isis:

The year I was high priest I went to Philae ... on the fourth of Thoth, the Birth of Isis, there being a beautiful festival that we celebrated in the presence of the great mistress of the whole country, Isis, the great goddess, upon the court (*dromos*) ...<sup>391</sup>

Some festivals that postdate the third century do not refer to the Birth Festival of Isis, but to other festivals (demotic *ϣq*).<sup>392</sup> However, like the Birth Festival of Osiris, the Birth Festival of Isis undoubtedly continued to be celebrated at Philae during the fourth and fifth centuries.

The son of Osiris and Isis, Horus, completed the triad of Philae. In a variation of the Osiris myth, also known at Philae, the crocodile, in Plutarch's version favourable to Isis, was Isis' own son, Horus, who helped his mother to collect together

<sup>387</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 371 = *FHN* III 302.

<sup>388</sup> For New Year's Day/1 Thoth, see F. Daumas, 'Neujahr', *LÄ* IV (1982) 466-72; Perpillou-Thomas, *Fêtes* 144-6.

<sup>389</sup> G. Poethke, 'Epagomenen', *LÄ* I (1975) 1231-2; P. Kaplony, 'Geburtstage (Götter)', *LÄ* II (1977) 477-9; Le Corsu, *Isis* 136-7; D. Bonneau, 'Les fêtes Amesysia et les jours épagomènes', *ASAE* 70 (1984-5) 365-70; Perpillou-Thomas, *Fêtes* 66-71.

<sup>390</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 436.13-4 = *FHN* III 306.

<sup>391</sup> *I.Dak.Dem.* 30.7 = *FHN* III 251 (slightly adapted).

<sup>392</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 207.5-6 (this festival is dated to 24-5 April), 411.4 = *FHN* III 253, 421.12 = *FHN* III 245 (mentioned in connection with the ferrying of Isis). Besides the meaning of 'dedication festival', with which Griffith translates *ϣq*, the term also has the wider meaning of 'festival', which seems more appropriate here. Cf. W. Erichsen, *Demotisches Glossar* (Copenhagen, 1954) s.v. (p. 56).

her dismembered brother and husband.<sup>393</sup> Horus thus played an important role in the Isis cult, in which he was worshipped in the form of the falcon, his holy bird. The worship of sacred animals is already known from the New Kingdom, but was most popular in Graeco-Roman Egypt. In this period, it was common practice to keep sacred animals in temples. Like bark processions, the animals made worship more tangible for the devotees.<sup>394</sup> The falcon was also worshipped at Edfu and Athribis (Tell Atrib). It was seen as the soul (the *bꜣ*) of Ra and as such connected with divine kingship: Horus was the successor of his father on earth.<sup>395</sup>

At Philae, both aspects of Horus, as protector and successor of his father Osiris, were incorporated into the falcon worship, as witness the hieroglyphs on the first pylon:

Horus the protector of his father, the great god on Biga, the wonderful falcon with sharp claws, who stands on his throne, on the seat of his father.<sup>396</sup>

The throne of the falcon (*srh*) has to be imagined literally, for the hieroglyphic texts inform us that when a falcon died, a new specimen was set on a throne in the same way as in royal ceremonies.

The place of this 'throne' of Horus can be exactly located. In his aspect of the soul of Ra, Horus had the horizon as symbol. The hieroglyph for horizon, *ꜣht*, consists of two mountains with a rising (or setting) sun in between. Since the Egyptians considered the temple to be a microcosm of the world, it is not surprising that they expressed the symbolism of the rising and setting sun in the pylon.<sup>397</sup> The towers of the pylon represented the mountains with Horus of the Horizon (*Hr ꜣhty*), the rising and setting sun, in between. Indeed, in reliefs on the walls in between the two towers of the first pylon at Philae, gods are shown offering to the holy falcon. On this balcony, the falcon had its throne. Because there were walls on the balcony, the bird must have been shown on some sort of construction, called the 'Window of Appearance' (*sšd n hꜣ*). Just as at Edfu, the most important holy place of Horus, the falcon was probably carried in procession to the Window of Appearance every year on the first of Tybi (27 December), after the burial of his father Osiris and the erection of the *ḏd* pillar. Here the new king was ceremonially crowned and shown to the pilgrims.<sup>398</sup>

At the beginning of the first century AD, Strabo describes the holy falcon of Philae:

Here, also, a bird is held in honour, which they call a falcon, though to me it appeared to be in no respect like the falcons in our country and in Egypt, but was both greater in size and far different in the varied colouring of its plumage. They said that it was an Ethiopian bird, and that another was brought from Ethiopia whenever the one at hand died, or before. And in fact the bird shown to us at the time mentioned was nearly dead because of disease.<sup>399</sup>

<sup>393</sup> Junker, *Götterdekret*, 37-45, 79-80. Cf. Chassinat, *Khoiak* 1, 187, about the holy falcon of Athribis for a parallel.

<sup>394</sup> Van der Plas, "'Voir" dieu', 25-6.

<sup>395</sup> L. Kákósy, 'Götter, Tier-', *LÄ* II (1977) 660-4; D. Kessler, *Die heiligen Tiere und der König I. Beiträge zu Organisation, Kult und Theogonie der spätzeitlichen Tierfriedhöfe* (Wiesbaden, 1989); P. Dils, 'Les cultes des animaux', in Willems and Clarysse, *Empereurs du Nil*, 119-22.

<sup>396</sup> Tr. after H. Junker, *Der grosse Pylon des Tempels der Isis in Philä* (Vienna, 1958) 77 (lines 12-4).

<sup>397</sup> Finnestad, 'Temples', 203-4.

<sup>398</sup> H. Junker, 'Der Bericht Strabos über den heiligen Falken von Philae im Lichte der ägyptischen Quellen', *WZKM* 26 (1912) 42-62 at 56-62, and *Grosse Pylon*, 73-5, 77-8; Graefe, "'Sonnenaufgang'", 68-9; Finnestad, 'Temples', 223. See now J.H.F. Dijkstra, 'Horus on His Throne. The Holy Falcon of Philae in His Demonic Cage', *GM* 189 (2002) 7-10.

<sup>399</sup> Str.17.1.49 (tr. H.L. Jones, Loeb, slightly adapted).

At first sight, two of Strabo's statements seem to be supported by hieroglyphic texts. Firstly, its multicolouredness is often referred to in hieroglyphs which mention that the falcon has 'a beautiful face', 'a lapis lazuli-coloured head', that it is 'multicoloured' and 'malachite-coloured'.<sup>400</sup> Secondly, that it was 'Ethiopian' (Nubian) may appear from a sentence such as: 'The living soul of Ra comes from Punt'.<sup>401</sup> From the Egyptian perspective, the mythical land of Punt was situated somewhere south of Egypt, and Nubia for that area was the general name.<sup>402</sup> However, epithets like 'multi-coloured' are standard formulas for falcon deities in Egyptian religion and need not necessarily indicate a different, Nubian falcon specimen.<sup>403</sup> Strabo's explanation comes so close to the Ancient Egyptian symbolism attached to the falcon cult that he probably heard an 'official version' from Egyptian priests, out of which he moulded his own story.

Did the falcon cult continue into the fourth and fifth centuries? It certainly continued well after 298, for the probably sixth-century Coptic *Life of Aaron* that is the subject of Chs. 6 and 7 includes the story of how the early fourth-century Bishop Macedonius saw people 'worshipping a bird, which they called the falcon, inside some demonic cage' (ΜΑΓΚΑΝΟΝ).<sup>404</sup> With this 'demonic cage' could well have been meant the Window of Appearance where the falcon was shown between the two towers of the first pylon. It thus seems that the falcon cult was still alive in the first half of the fourth century.<sup>405</sup> Perhaps there is evidence that the cult continued for even longer.

At the back of the east colonnade between the two pylons, there are three Greek pilgrimage inscriptions that have long puzzled scholars since they mention persons with curious names such as Bereos (Βερός) and Tabolbolos (Ταβολβόλος), whose function is described as 'prophets of Ptireus'.<sup>406</sup> One of the inscriptions is dated to 5 November 434 and the other two must also date to around 434 on the basis of the great similarity in handwriting and phrasing.<sup>407</sup> The inscriptions are flanked by three drawings of falcon-headed deities, which may well be connected with the inscriptions. One of these represents a falcon-headed deity with a crocodile's tail, a palm branch in its claws, a lotus-flower at its back and a sun disk on its head. It rests on a pedestal.<sup>408</sup>

The picture betrays Nubian influence. To start with, the palm branch is typically Meroitic. Moreover, there are two falcon pictures from Nubia which are identical with the pictures from Philae, except for some minor variations. The first falcon-headed crocodile is found on the walls of the Meroitic Lion Temple at Naqa, the second example on a silver plaque, which originates from the 'royal' tombs at Qustul. Some scholars have connected the pictures and the inscriptions with the Blemmyes. In their view, the passage by Olympiodorus, in which prophets of the Blemmyes are mentioned, can be related to the prophets of Ptireus, and the pictures are so un-Egyptian that they must belong to the 'barbarian' Blemmyes.<sup>409</sup>

<sup>400</sup> Junker, *Grosse Pylon*, 73 (lines 12, 15), 74 (line 17), 77 (lines 9, 15)

<sup>401</sup> Junker, *Grosse Pylon*, 77 (line 6), cf. 73 (line 12).

<sup>402</sup> Junker, 'Bericht Strabos', 58-61.

<sup>403</sup> See, most recently, J. Kenning, 'Zum Begriff *šꜥb šwt* – ein Zugang aus der Falknerie', *ZÄS* 129 (2002) 43-8.

<sup>404</sup> Tr. Dijkstra, 'Horus on His Throne', 8, and for the translation of ΜΑΓΚΑΝΟΝ with 'demonic cage', see pp. 8-9.

<sup>405</sup> W. Spiegelberg, 'Ägyptologische Beiträge III. Der Falkenkult auf der Insel Philae in christlicher Zeit', *AFP* 7 (1924) 186-9; Dijkstra, 'Horus on His Throne', 9.

<sup>406</sup> Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions*, 48; *L.Philae.Dem.*, p. 59; *L.Philae* II, pp. 221-6; Zabkar, 'Hieracocephalous Deity' (= *Apedemak*, 106-17); *FHN* III, pp. 1143-4. The genitive Πτιρεως should refer back to a nominative \*Πτιρεως, not to \*Πτιρις, as *L.Philae.Dem.*, p. 59, suggested. See H.-J. Thissen, 'Varia Onomastica', *GM* 141 (1994) 89-95 at 93-5; *FHN* III, pp. 1142-3.

<sup>407</sup> *L.Philae* II 190-1 = *FHN* III 315, *L.Philae* II 192.

<sup>408</sup> See *L.Philae* II, Pl. 40.

<sup>409</sup> *L.Philae* II, pp. 222, 225-6, followed by Frankfurter, *Religion*, 110.

The latter argument, however, is easy to refute for representations of falcon-headed hybrids are well attested in Egyptian art.<sup>410</sup> As regards the former argument, that the Blemmyes had prophets does not prove that the prophets of Ptireus were Blemmyan. Moreover, the names of three of the priests, Pasnous (Πάσνους), Pamet (Παμητ) and Panouchem (Πανουχημ) seem Egyptian, although Panouchem is not otherwise attested.<sup>411</sup> Indeed, the name Pasnous is known from Philae and Elephantine only, and Pamet is one of the regional names derived from Egyptian *mdw*.<sup>412</sup> Perhaps Panouchem was also a regional name. Thus, although the names indicate that they may have come from the region, it remains obscure who these prophets of Ptireus were.<sup>413</sup>

Nonetheless, no scholar has yet connected these pictures and inscriptions with the falcon cult of Philae, in spite of the fact that the pedestal probably represents the throne of the falcon and the crocodile body reminds us of the version of the myth of the killing of Osiris in which Horus is transformed into a crocodile. Furthermore, the sun disc seems to point to Horus' aspect as the soul of Ra. In Egypt, the falcon-headed god most frequently represented is 'Horus who is in Shenwet', a protective god, but other falcon-crocodile hybrids are also attested.<sup>414</sup> The aspect of protection, however, is reminiscent of how Horus was worshipped at Philae. It therefore seems likely that the falcon picture portrays Horus of Philae, even though clearly inspired by Nubian iconography. The pictures and inscriptions suggest that the falcon cult at Philae, whatever form it may have taken, was still practised in the second quarter of the fifth century.

There were also religious associations at Philae until a late date. Although demotic and Greek inscriptions only provide evidence for associations from the first century BC until the first century AD,<sup>415</sup> one Greek inscription dealing with an association at Philae betrays a later date. In fact, it is the latest evidence for Ancient Egyptian cultic activities at Philae, for it is dated to 456/457. The beginning of the inscription is as follows:

When Smet was high priest, Pasnous, son of Pachoumios, in the year 173 of Diocletian (456/457) (dedicated this inscription): I am the *protoklinarchos*...<sup>416</sup>

The title *protoklinarchos* (πρωτοκλίναρχος), 'first president of the association', probably refers to a religious association.<sup>417</sup> The tradition of Egyptian religious associations goes back to the sixth century BC, but even if the practices still remained largely Egyptian, the terminology of these associations and their social roles were

<sup>410</sup> Zabkar, 'Hieracocephalous Deity', 150-3. Nevertheless, Zabkar maintains that the prophets were Blemmyan.

<sup>411</sup> *NB* s.v.

<sup>412</sup> Pasnous: *I.Philae* II 190.1 (434), 199.2 (456/7); *P.Münch.* I 16.12 (c. 493). Pamet: *I.Philae* II 191.1 (c. 434); *P.Lond.* V 1722.60 (530). See *NB Dem.* s.v. *P3-mtr* (p. 375); De Meulenaere, 'Enseigne sacré', 236.

<sup>413</sup> Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions*, 48, 75, and *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 59, connect the pictures and inscriptions with a demotic graffito on a nearby stone (*I.Philae.Dem.* 77), which mentions a certain Petearhensnufek, and suggest that Ptiris (sic) is a shortened form of this deity. However, Zabkar, 'Hieracocephalous Deity', 145-6, 149-50, already convincingly argued against this suggestion. Griffith's first reading seems more probable: 'Petearhensnufe (son of?) Bek'. See Thissen, 'Varia Onomastica', 94-5, for the suggestion of a Meroitic origin for the god Ptireus.

<sup>414</sup> Zabkar, 'Hieracocephalous Deity', 150-2, for an overview.

<sup>415</sup> *I.Philae* II 139 (13 BC); *I.Philae.Dem.* 36.5 (AD 46), 443.1 (AD 72). On the demotic graffiti, see G.R. Hughes, 'The Sixth Day of the Lunar Month and the Demotic Word for "Cult Guild"', *MDAIK* 16 (1958) 147-60 at 152-3.

<sup>416</sup> *I.Philae* II 199.1-5 (tr. after É. Bernard).

<sup>417</sup> Wilcken, 'Heidnisches und Christliches', 411-9; Otto, *Tempel und Priester* 1, 125-33; *I.Philae* II, pp. 250-1.

similar to other associations (συνόδοι) in the Graeco-Roman world.<sup>418</sup> In Ch. 2, we have already seen that religious associations were still active at Tafa at the end of the fourth century and at Kalabsha in the fifth century.<sup>419</sup> It therefore seems probable that Philae was building on a strong regional tradition. But whether Pasnous just bore the title or was actually presiding over a cult association, and if so what such a cult association looked like, must remain unclear. As the last sign of the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae, we must now try to explain why the cults disappeared after 456/457, although Procopius claims that the temple of Isis was closed much later, in 535-537.

### The Last Priests of Philae: A Mystery?

We have seen that the sources confirm the established picture of ongoing Nubia-oriented, Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae. They show that the cults were still alive and not only consisted of a hierarchy of priests, but also of rituals, festivals and religious associations. There are some possible indications that the cults continued even after 456/457. If we accept that the person mentioned in the Meroitic inscriptions on the roof of the Birthhouse was Smet the Younger, he is recorded as being a prophet in one of them.<sup>420</sup> In view of the *cursus honorum* of a higher priest, Smet the Younger, who was *protostolistes* in 452, must then have been a prophet after 452.<sup>421</sup>

Earlier it was argued that another Smet the Younger, the one who was not Smet the Elder's brother, probably lived at the same time.<sup>422</sup> A Smet the Younger with the same function and father is mentioned in a demotic graffito, the end of which has been translated as follows: 'Today, 10 Choiak, birth of Isis (?)'.<sup>423</sup> Yet, the reading of the last group of signs is suspect, because a specification of the year would be expected after the date. Moreover, the writing of *ms*, 'birth', is unusual compared to the other occurrences in the demotic inscriptions from Philae,<sup>424</sup> and the writing of 'S (?)', 'Isis' (?), does not resemble the writings of Isis in the preceding lines of the same inscription. On the basis of the facsimile provided by the first edition, it may read instead *h3 t-sp 90* 'regnal year 90' (373/374), a year date that is well attested at Philae.<sup>425</sup> Alternatively, based on an earlier facsimile, the reading 'on 10 (or 30) Choiak of year 190' was suggested, which is 6 December 473.<sup>426</sup> This reading has been rejected, but unfortunately we do not know on what grounds.<sup>427</sup> The reading of the last line of the inscription has therefore to remain open and can only be solved by being checked on the temple walls of Philae.<sup>428</sup>

Finally, there may be literary evidence for a continuity of the Isis cult after 456/457. In 485, the fifth-century Alexandrian philosopher Marinus mentions 'Isis

<sup>418</sup> For cult associations in general: O.M. van Nijf, *The Civic World of Professional Associations in the Roman East* (Amsterdam, 1997). Cult associations in Graeco-Roman Egypt: F. de Cenival, *Les associations religieuses en Égypte d'après les documents démotiques* (Paris, 1972); M. Muszynski, 'Les "Associations religieuses" en Égypte', *OLP* 8 (1977) 145-74; B.P. Muhs, 'Membership in Private Associations in Ptolemaic Tebtunis', *JESHO* 44 (2001) 1-21.

<sup>419</sup> The title κλίναρχος is mentioned in the inscription from Tafa, *SB* I 5099.2 = *FHN* III 312, and several times in the inscription from Kalabsha, *SB* V 8697.2-5, 7, 11, 13 = *FHN* 313. Cf. the similar dating formula at the beginning of the latter inscription.

<sup>420</sup> Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* no. 117 = *REM* 0117. Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.* 237, 376; Griffith, *Meroitic Inscriptions* nos. 114, 116 = *REM* 0114, 0116.

<sup>421</sup> Although it is not certain whether he held the function after 456/7.

<sup>422</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 365.4-5.

<sup>423</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 375.4.

<sup>424</sup> Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 153.

<sup>425</sup> Cf. *I.Philae.Dem.* 369.6, 370.5, 371.7 = *FHN* III 302, 372.7. Thanks are due to B.P. Muhs for this suggestion. In this case, the Smet the Younger of *I.Philae.Dem.* 365 and 375 may not have been the same person.

<sup>426</sup> K.H. Brugsch, *Thesaurus inscriptionum aegyptiacarum*, 6 vols (Berlin, 1883-91) 5.1008.

<sup>427</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.*, p. 105: 'But this is not possible'.

<sup>428</sup> Cf., however, the remark by Griffith: 'The graffito is now badly injured by modern names'.



who is still honoured at Philae'.<sup>429</sup> However, this may well have been a rumour or description of an earlier situation. All in all, then, the suggestion of ongoing cult activities after 456/457 is not supported by conclusive evidence. So what happened to the Isiac cult over the next eighty years?

In a study on the 'Christianisation' of the Roman Empire, it has been suggested that the edicts against 'paganism' collected in the Theodosian Code of 438 may have affected the Ancient Egyptian cults at Philae. To support this hypothesis, a demotic graffito from Philae is cited to which the phrase 'the year of the evil command' has been added, and which dates to 25 February 439.<sup>430</sup> These words have been interpreted as implicitly referring to the Theodosian Code.<sup>431</sup> However, the imperial edicts promulgated in the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century did not have such a direct impact and were ideological rather than practical.<sup>432</sup> It is hardly likely that the effects of these edicts were ever felt at Philae, certainly in view of its special status where the Romans tolerated the Ancient Egyptian cults. 'The year of the evil command' therefore more probably refers to some local incident.

We should therefore not overestimate the dimensions of the Ancient Egyptian cults on Late Antique Philae. Pilgrims, once coming from far away, now probably came from the region. Only a small circle of priests occupied the highest priestly offices, performed the cultic activities and dedicated most of the inscriptions, which, moreover, decreased in number and were poorly written. The Late Antique cults had clearly considerably contracted.<sup>433</sup> These features also indicate a weak position of the Egyptian scripts, and comparisons with similar situations elsewhere suggest that the knowledge of such isolated scripts may have ended abruptly.<sup>434</sup> Amongst few others, the priests of the Smet family were the last to record their names on the sacred stones of their Isis temple. If the temple cults had still been alive after this date, we would certainly have heard more of them.<sup>435</sup>

The evidence thus points to a slow languishing of the last extant, major Ancient Egyptian cults in Egypt. This process did not start in 456/457, but its symptoms were already felt after Meroe declined as a driving force behind the temple cults. Consequently, Procopius' report of the destruction of the temples at Philae, somewhere between 535 and 537, on the Emperor Justinian's orders, could not have had the effect it claims:

Accordingly, Narses, (...) who was in command of the troops there, destroyed (καθεῖλε) the sanctuaries on the emperor's orders, held the priests under guard, and sent the images (ἀγάλματα) to Byzantium.<sup>436</sup>

Since there was not much to 'destroy', this event was more probably a symbolic closure than a religious turning point, enforced by the emperor. Nevertheless, Philae is the last-known site where Ancient Egyptian religion as an institution was still alive,

---

<sup>429</sup> Marin. *Procl.* 19 (Ἦσιν τὴν κατὰ τὰς Φίλας ἔτι τιμωμένην; tr. M. Edwards, *Neoplatonic Saints. The Lives of Plotinus and Proclus by Their Students* (Liverpool, 2000) 88, and 114 (n. 395) on the date).

<sup>430</sup> *I.Philae.Dem.* 332.2-3.

<sup>431</sup> Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 232-3.

<sup>432</sup> D. Hunt, 'Christianising the Roman Empire. The Evidence of the Code', in J. Harries, I. Wood (eds), *The Theodosian Code* (London, 1993) 143-58; Frankfurter, *Religion*, 23-7; D.E. Trout, 'Lex and Iussio in the Theodosian Age', in R.W. Mathisen (ed.), *Law, Society, and Authority in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2001) 162-78. Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 1, 1-97.

<sup>433</sup> Cf. Trombley, *Hellenic Religion* 2, 226.

<sup>434</sup> Houston, Baines and Cooper, 'Last Writing', 434.

<sup>435</sup> Cf. Cruz-Urbe, 'Death of Demotic', 164, 181-4, who connects the 'death of demotic' to the destruction of the temples at Philae in 535-7, but ignores the question of why at that time no demotic graffiti had been written for 80 years.

<sup>436</sup> Procop. *Pers.* 1.19.37 = *FHN* III 328 (slightly adapted).

and where the cults were openly tolerated. It was not a Byzantine general, it was the Smets who witnessed its end.

