

CHAPTER 3

What is a Priest of Ēse, of Wusa, and of Isis in the Egyptian and Nubian World?

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1 The Different Phonetic Realizations of the Name of Isis

Since the title of my contribution might leave most readers baffled as to what is going on here, I have to start with some explanations about the phonetic development of the name of the goddess whom we nowadays generally label as Isis.¹

The most original form of the name is probably something like **ūsāt*. The sound transcribed by Egyptologists as *ʾ* is likely to have had an original pronunciation as *r* or *l*, but it had a tendency to weaken, and by the New Kingdom, normally it would either disappear completely or, especially at the beginning of words, leave just a glottal stop.² A word-final *t*, especially the feminine ending, also disappeared in actual pronunciation by the New Kingdom. Taken together, this means that the pronunciation of the goddess in New Kingdom Egypt was something like *Usa*. This form of the name was taken over into the Meroitic (Nubian) language, where we have a number of Egyptian loanwords, generally showing the state of pronunciation of the New Kingdom.³ Probably word-initial *ū* had some further inner-Nubian (perhaps purely graphical) development, because the attested Meroitic form of the name of the goddess is *Wusa*.⁴

An important sound-change of the Egyptian language during the early 1st millennium BCE led to a shift of original *ū* to *ē*. This, together with a development of unstressed final vowels to either *ě* or *i*, produced the form *Ēse* or *Ēsi* which can be considered as the normal pronunciation of the goddess' name in late Egypt; cuneiform renderings in Neo-Assyrian and Babylonian texts confirm this. When the Greeks integrated the name into their language, on the one hand, they added a final *s* in order to produce a case-ending; on the other hand, they introduced a slight change in the first vowel. It should be noted that, while

1 For what follows, see Peust 1999. Specifically for the name of Isis, see Osing 1974, 102–107.

2 In some cases, it developed into *y*, but that is not relevant for the name of the goddess.

3 Hintze 1973b, 332.

4 See Rilly & De Voogt 2012, 36, and Meyrat 2012, 50.

the name of the goddess has initial *i* in Greek, renderings of Egyptian personal names stay closer to the Egyptian pronunciation.⁵ They show normally η , only very exceptionally ι or $\epsilon\iota$.⁶ This means that synchronically, we can demonstrate a different phonetic treatment of the Greek and the Egyptian Isis in the Ptolemaic and Roman period.⁷

The outcome of these phonetic developments is that we have during the late 1st millennium BCE (and the first centuries CE) three substantially differentiated sound-forms of the goddess' name corresponding to three different forms of veneration:⁸

- The Nubian-Meroitic Isis (Wusa), going back to New Kingdom Egyptian impact on Nubia, but clearly established as a non-foreign cult in the Late Period;⁹
- The Egyptian Isis (Ēse), coming from a continuous indigenous tradition (and substantially gaining in importance in the Late Period);¹⁰
- The Greek Isis, developing a new iconography as well as a slightly different form of the name, and successfully expanding her cult through the Mediterranean basin and the Roman empire, partly even beyond it.

We should, on the basis of this differentiation, also consider in a slightly different light the claim by Plutarch that Isis is a Greek word, and his proposal to derive it from the Greek verb εἰδέναι "to know".¹¹ While not "correct" in the sense we would use for historical etymological derivation, it aptly reflects the

⁵ See the contribution by W. Clarysse, *infra*, 198–220, in this book.

⁶ See the lists in *DNB* I, 228 and 290.

⁷ However, Vleeming 2001, 69, no. 99, 152, no. 163, shows the equivalence of Greek and Egyptian Isis in bilingual inscriptions.

⁸ This is by no means an isolated case; different pronunciations linked with different religious traditions can be established also for Amun, Osiris and Seth. I will treat this in more detail in a future study.

⁹ Herodotus (II, 29) indicates only Zeus and Dionysus (*i.e.* Amun and Osiris) as venerated by the Ethiopians; Strabo (xvii, 2, 3) gives specifically for the inhabitants of Meroe a barbaric god, Heracles, Pan and Isis, while Diodorus Siculus (III, 9, 2) indicates that the Ethiopians venerate Isis, Pan, Heracles and Zeus. Regardless of the inherent problems of these indications (see the commentary by Bommelaer 2002 [1989], 125–126), they clearly show Isis as an important element of Nubian cult. Concerning the question of how to interpret the cultural contacts between Egypt and Nubia, see Török 2009 and Török 2011. In Meroitic funerary texts, Isis appears regularly in the invocation together with Osiris and is even the more important of the two, being almost always named first, and sometimes as the only one, see Rilly & De Voogt 2012, 10–11. For Isis in Nubia globally, see Leclant 1981–1982.

¹⁰ For the rise in importance of Isis, see a sketch of the most important points in Quack (forthcoming b).

¹¹ Plut., *De Is. et Os.* 2 (351F). See also Gwyn Griffiths 1970, 257–259; Richter 2001, 195; Richter 2011, 214–215.

fact that the name and the goddess herself were no longer felt as foreign by the Greeks, but were fully integrated into their language.

However, in order to be not too unfamiliar to the readers, in what follows I will use “Isis” as the default term unless there is a clear need to differentiate between the three categories. We should also note that Apuleius indicates that the Ethiopians, Africans and Egyptians use “Isis” as the name of the deity.¹²

2 Priesthood in Graeco-Roman Egypt

In order to make this presentation more accessible to non-Egyptologists, I will briefly explain some basic facts about priests in Graeco-Roman Egypt.¹³ It has to be stressed that being a priest in Egypt was quite different from being a priest in Greece or Rome. People were not elected on a temporal basis for priesthood; it normally was a lifetime-occupation – or, more precisely, a life-long part-time occupation. This is due to the basic structuring of the clergy. A priest was member of one of the groups (called *phylae* in Greek texts) serving in the temple, and the religious affiliations typically were passed down from generation to generation. In older Egypt, for most periods there had been four *phylae*, but by the decree of Canopus (238 BCE), their number was augmented to five.¹⁴ The *phylae* served in monthly rotations, so a normal priest would be on temple-duty for three months per year. During the rest of the time, he would be free to pursue quite different work; *e.g.* we know that the priests of Sobek of Soknopaiou Nesos were much involved in camel-breeding. Often, it is difficult to relate those activities to a priestly status of the persons in question, given that especially Greek economic documents would tend to omit Egyptian priestly titles. Only some few specialists would serve in the temple on a permanent basis. The number of actual members per *phyle* could vary, but there was an upper limit to the number of priests who would be financed by state subsidies (the so-called “syntaxis”).

During the Graeco-Roman period, admittance to the priestly class was based on descent from priestly families on the sides of both parents. From the Roman period, there are documents demonstrating that this was checked by

12 Apul., *Met.* XI, 2. See Gwyn Griffiths 1975, 74–75.

13 There is no up-to-date synthesis. The “classical” study by Otto 1905 relied primarily on Greek-language documents and is by now much outdated. Sauneron 1988 (1957) uses sources from all periods of Egyptian history and is rather sparse in his indications of scholarly discussions. For a short summary, see Quack 2004, 289–292; more extensive Clarysse 2010.

14 Pfeiffer 2004, 101–121.

public authority when it came to the granting of permission for boys being circumcised (which was mandatory for priests but otherwise banned in the Roman Empire since the time of Hadrian).¹⁵

Within the body of “priests”, there were not only the ordinary ones but also a high number of specialized members with individual titles. The highest rank in a temple was the so-called “Prophet” (who is not to be confused with the biblical prophets who had completely different roles). In charge of economic questions was the “Lesonis” (*im̄-r'-šn̄*). Below those, the ordinary priests tended to be grouped together in most documentary texts in spite of their considerable differences in specific duties. Furthermore, there were other temple employees who did not enjoy priestly status. The most important group among them was that of the door-guardians, who are to be equated with the term “Pastophoros” frequent in Greek texts.¹⁶ Given the great diversity within the priesthood, they were far from being a homogenous group.

Participation in the priestly service was certainly wide-spread among the upper layers of the society and probably far down the middle class. We know that the number of people having ties to a temple (and often explicit priestly status) was relatively high.¹⁷ The large role of the temple and the priests in the society and economy means that the temple staff had to cope with many questions of a not strictly religious nature. Perhaps we can describe this as a two-sided process. On the one hand, the religious element represented by temple and priests spread into the world at large. On the other hand, by this very process, the mundane could not fail to enter the sphere of the religious; and while strict rules of purity and limited access could keep it out of the inner sanctuaries, there was a large area of contact where religious and mundane affairs intermingled in Egypt.

So we should also be careful not to build up a misconceived image of Egyptian priests. Too easily, when we hear “priest”, we tend to associate ultra-conservative, backward mindsets, fighting against progress and modernity. Such conceptions owe much to modern European history, with its Reformation and Anti-Catholic movements, the Age of Enlightenment and its anti-clerical stance, as well as the “cultural war” between government and church in the later 19th century and in recent times, perhaps to the situation of Iran after the revolution. They are hardly appropriate for Egyptian priests.¹⁸

¹⁵ See Quack 2012, 597–598.

¹⁶ Hoffmann & Quack 2014.

¹⁷ An analysis based on tax lists of the Ptolemaic period arrives at the conclusion that about 10% of the population worked in the religious domain, see Clarysse & Thompson 2006.

¹⁸ See Jackson 2008, even if his case seems partly overstated.

3 Isis' Priests

Priests of Isis in Egypt have up to now been studied only to a limited degree. The most obvious point to be gained from the material assembled in an overarching study¹⁹ is that the attestations increase in the Late Period. Obviously, this is concomitant with the growth in importance of Isis which can be documented also in other textual genres.²⁰ Different cult-forms of Isis can be documented by the titles of priests of the Theban region.²¹

The *Prosopographia Ptolemaica* has, among the lists of attested priests,²² certainly included those of Isis, but the usage of that work for the current question is quite inconvenient since the entries are sorted according to the alphabetical order of the personal names, and there is no index of the deities in whose service the priests stood. This makes it difficult and time-consuming to assemble information pertaining specifically to the cult of Isis in Egypt. Also, cases where only the title, but no name, is attested are excluded from the *Prosopographia Ptolemaica*.

While assembling all attestations of titles related to Isis can ultimately tell us quite a bit, most sources are not all that relevant for the question what it really means to be a priest of this particular deity. For that reason, and also given the limited amount of space at my disposal, I prefer to do case studies on a few selected groups of material more likely to yield specific information. I will start with attestations in literary texts.

In demotic literature, one narrative centers on Setne Khaemwese, the son of Ramses II, concerning his meeting with a ghost who asks him to right several wrongs done to him and his family.²³ The culprit is Petese, a prophet of Isis of Abydos. He has committed crimes, and the prophet of Sokar-Osiris has discovered them. That prophet wants to reveal them to the king, but before he can do so, he and his family are killed at a feast. Now he appears as a ghost and asks Setne to revenge him. With royal permission, that is effectively done, and Petese, the evil prophet of Isis, and his family are killed. This is currently the only case of a prophet of Isis playing a substantial role in demotic narrative literature, and it should not be assumed to be characteristic for their behavior.

19 Forgeau 1984. That article does not include the demotic documentation which is at the center of this study.

20 Dousa 2002 and Quack 2003b, 328.

21 Coulon 2010b.

22 *PP* III, with additions in *PP* IX.

23 For the text, see Tait 1991 and Quack & Ryholt 2000.

Another category potentially relevant for priests of Isis is attested in the Anosis story,²⁴ namely the so-called “Iasionomos”.²⁵ They appear probably in connection with a lament for Osiris; in a prayer to Isis, the goddess is asked to look out for them, but the details are not very clear, due to bad preservation of the manuscript. So, it is better to pass over to the documentary attestations, which offer substantial evidence for people in the service of Isis.

There is one specific title which seems to be related almost²⁶ exclusively to Isis, namely the *in̄i-ww*, called in Greek “Iasionomos”.²⁷ The correspondence between the Greek and the Egyptian term is assured, but the etymology remains problematic.²⁸ Concerning the Egyptian form, crucial evidence might be provided by the fact that there is also a personal name attested in a few demotic documents as *Hr-in̄i-ww(y)*.²⁹ There is also a rare form of a deity called *Hr-ȩ̄i-wꜣw*³⁰ which is phonetically remarkably similar to that personal name, as well as *ȩ̄i m wꜣw* “the one who has come from far away” as a divine epithet.³¹ Combining these points, I propose the following scenario: Originally, the form meant *ȩ̄i wꜣw* “the one who has come, being from afar”, evolving into *ȩ̄i m/n wꜣw* “the one who has come from far away”,³² and finally being written phonetically as *in̄i-ww*, which, at least in papyrus Harkness, was written with the determinative of the dying men as if meaning “the one who has brought woe” and indeed used in the context of funeral lamentation³³ (as seems to be the case in the Anosis story mentioned above). Among the attestations,³⁴ two show an *isionomos* in the act of performing offerings and libations,³⁵ and another one as owner of an Isis-shrine;³⁶ also one document attests that *isionomoi* make a collection for Isis.³⁷ Otherwise, the documentation allows few insights into their profession-specific activities. For that reason, in what follows, I will focus on other titles.

24 Sérida 2016. For additional remarks, see Quack 2018.

25 See *infra*, n. 27.

26 At least *O.BM* 25894 shows that there were also *isionomoi* of Neith.

27 For that title, see Depauw 1998.

28 See the discussion in Depauw 1998, 1143–1151.

29 *DNB* I, 791.

30 *LGG* V, 243.

31 *LGG* I, 118–119.

32 For *in̄i* as writing for *ȩ̄i.n*, compare Smith 2013.

33 See Smith 2005, 132–133.

34 For a list of them see Depauw 1998, 1132–1139.

35 *P.Enteux*. 80 and *P.Tebt.* 111.1 797.

36 *P.Enteux*. 6.

37 *O.BM* 12581.

A particularly well-attested person is a certain Parthenios, son of Pamin, agent (Egyptian *rt*; Greek προστάτης) of Isis at Coptos who participated in the building program during the early Roman period between Tiberius and Nero.³⁸ Obviously, he was the local one responsible for carrying out state-financed work on the temple. For that reason, his name appears on a number of stelae which otherwise figure the Roman emperor in Egyptian guise offering before deities. While the inscriptions are numerous, most are fairly stereotypical and don't provide much information beyond the involvement of Parthenios in the program of constructing temple parts or renewing cultic equipment. Only one inscription seems more personal.³⁹ It is fairly long but unfortunately quite fragmentary. In it, Parthenios stresses his care and his thoughts for the good fortune of the goddess, and the text concludes with prayers on his behalf.

The title "agent" is attested in connection with other Egyptian deities as well, and we encounter some cases where the participation of agents in the economic and administrative life of temples can be documented.⁴⁰ It should be noted that this title does not form part of the older Egyptian set of priestly titles. In the New Kingdom, the title is attested in temple contexts especially for people controlling and supervising the cultivators of temple land, as well as for a lot of non-temple affiliations.⁴¹ Obviously, this office was conceived from the outset not for cultic service but for administrative duties.

3.1 *Soknopaïou Nesos*

A good local case concerning priests of Isis can be made of Soknopaïou Nesos in the North of the Fayum.⁴² This place has conserved a substantial documentation in demotic Egyptian as well as Greek papyri. Among them, we have a number of Ptolemaic-period (mainly 2nd cent. BCE) demotic documents which mention priests of Isis.⁴³ More precisely, they mention the priests of Sobek lord of Pai as well as Isis Neferses, the specific local form of "Isis of the beautiful place",⁴⁴ plus occasionally the "lesonis" of Sobek lord of Pai and Isis

38 Farid 1995 and Vleeming 2001, 170–197.

39 Stela Strasbourg 1932. See Vleeming 2001, 189–194.

40 Van't Dack *et al.* 1989, 46–47, and Thissen 1989, 43–44; and additionally *e.g.* the examples in *P.Oxf.Griffith*.

41 Kruchten 1986, 153–154.

42 See for that place the contributions in Lippert & Schentuleit 2005, as well as Zecchi 2001, 225–228.

43 Publication (not always reliable) in Bresciani 1975; see the collection of corrections to that edition in Den Brinker, Muhs & Vleeming 2005, 291–297.

44 For her, see Bricault 1998; and for the different cults of Isis at this place Rübsam 1974.

Neferses.⁴⁵ The correspondence in question consists of a letter to the *dioiketes* (a sort of secretary of finances of the state)⁴⁶ as well as references to economic transactions (especially payments of money),⁴⁷ probably juridical procedures (temple oath?)⁴⁸ and general administrative questions.⁴⁹

Some other cases concern memoranda written by the priests of Sobek and Isis.⁵⁰ They concern chests (*thy.w*), probably as cultic objects⁵¹ and loss of money in the offertory.⁵² One memorandum is addressed to the lesonis of Sobek and Isis Neferses,⁵³ and the lesonis is serving both deities on another occasion, when acknowledgment of payment is necessary.⁵⁴

There are also bids for cultic installations or economic assets like a ferry which seem to go to the highest bidder. They are addressed to the priests of Sobek and Isis Neferses.⁵⁵ They are either addressed globally to the priests of both deities even if they concern specifically installations of Isis,⁵⁶ or to the priests of Sobek alone.⁵⁷

Finally, we have contracts and obligations involving the priests as one involved party. Here again, the priests of Sobek and of Isis (or simply the deities themselves)⁵⁸ are usually set together jointly.⁵⁹ Also receipts are acknowledged by the priests of both deities.⁶⁰ In one case, a prophet specifically of Isis is mentioned,⁶¹ but he is the addressee of the letter, so we cannot be sure if he is a prophet of Isis of Soknopiaiou Nesos or some other place. Also Roman-period demotic accounts often mention side by side priests of Sobek as well as two forms of Isis (Neferses "she of the beautiful place" and Neferemmis "she of the beautiful character").⁶²

45 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 13, ll. 1 and 3; 14, rt. ll. 3, 4, 8, vs. ll. 3 and 9; 15, ll. 1-2; 16, l. 3; 17, l. 1; 22, l. 2; 25, ll. 2-3.

46 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 13. See Yoyotte 1989 and Vittmann 1998.

47 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 14, 15, 17.

48 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 16.

49 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 22, 25.

50 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 37, 40.

51 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 37.

52 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 40.

53 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 38.

54 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 72.

55 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 55.

56 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 42, 43, 44, 48, 50.

57 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 49, 51.

58 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 57.

59 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 57, 58, 59, 60 (perhaps also 56).

60 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 63.

61 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 17, ll. 3, 16, 21.

62 Lippert & Schentuleit 2006, 15-18.

Looking a bit beyond the question of priests, we can gain somewhat more information concerning the respective relevance of Sobek and Isis at Soknopaiou Nesos. There is a substantial amount of preserved oracular questions from that site. Many are addressed to Sobek alone,⁶³ some to both Sobek and Isis Neferses,⁶⁴ but none exclusively to Isis Neferses.

There are also letters exclusively addressed to the priests of Sobek,⁶⁵ or only the priests of Sobek and the lesonis of Sobek and Isis,⁶⁶ as well as memoranda written only by the priests of Sobek.⁶⁷ Bids for cultic installations can be addressed exclusively to priests of Sobek,⁶⁸ even in cases where the cultic installation is one of Isis.⁶⁹ Also a prophet of Bastet can be involved;⁷⁰ one person is at the same time agent of Marres (the divinized king Amenemhet III) as well as prophet of Bastet.⁷¹

Summing up, this provides quite good evidence for how Egyptian priests were involved in often rather mundane affairs. Of course, they also had cultic activities, but those are less likely to appear in the paperwork generated by the bureaucracy. The priests of Isis normally acted together with those of Sobek; indeed it can be asked to which degree they were different at all. Probably the normal situation at Soknopaiou Nesos was that a priest would be priest of Sobek and priest of Isis because they were both venerated in the temple of the city. Sobek was the main deity, thus he is more prominent. Either he takes the first place, or he is the default entity to which the indications can be reduced. Under those conditions, certainly being a priest of Isis was not something so special that it kept you apart from priests of any other Egyptian deity.

The status of the deities can perhaps also be guessed from the architecture of the site. Within the *temenos*, there is the main temple as well as a few smaller chapels.⁷² Lacking clear inscriptional evidence, it is not certain which of the buildings was attributed to which deity. In any case, the fact that they are within the same *temenos* shows clearly that they were not that independent of each other. Furthermore, there is no other building to rival the size of the main temple, so the preponderant position of Sobek is borne out by the architecture.

63 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9; *P.Ashm. D* 40, 41, 44. The *P.Ashm. D* oracular questions have been edited by Martin 2004. For the oracular questions in general, see Naether 2010.

64 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 10, 11, 12; *P.Ashm. D* 42, 43.

65 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27, 28, 30.

66 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 20.

67 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 41.

68 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 47, 49.

69 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 49.

70 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 13, 18, 38, 39, 50, 51, 54, 69.

71 *P.Oxf.Griffith* 50, 51, 54, 69.

72 See Davoli 2012.

At least, the presence of Isis among the deities specifically venerated at Soknopaiou Nesos means that there are remnants of some religious texts preserved which concern Isis. We have remnants of cultic texts for Isis and Osiris,⁷³ and especially one hymn which is highly remarkable for presenting Isis as a universal deity not only equivalent to all goddesses within Egypt, but also to those of foreign countries like Greek Athena or Persian Anahita.⁷⁴

3.2 *Tebtunis*

Somewhat similar is the situation at Tebtunis at the southern border of the Fayum. Unfortunately, our record as far as administrative Egyptian texts are concerned is much more limited than for Soknopaiou Nesos.⁷⁵ Still, some remnants of the wall decoration⁷⁶ as well as Greek papyri⁷⁷ provide indications that Isis was among the deities venerated at that place.⁷⁸ This fits in nicely with the textual evidence. There is an important composition, preserved in two or three demotic manuscripts, of which only parts of one⁷⁹ and another one probably also pertaining⁸⁰ have been published up to now; at least two come from Tebtunis.⁸¹ This composition exalts the importance of Isis, invites people in all situations, and even animals, to call to her and no other deity if they have problems, and also equates Isis with the female deities of all the Egyptian nomes in geographical sequence.

3.3 *Tehne*

More independent of other gods, priests of Isis appear in a group of demotic letters from Tehne in Middle Egypt which date to the Argead period (about the time of Alexander IV).⁸² The letters concern mainly agricultural matters:

⁷³ One of them presented by Widmer 1998 and now edited in Widmer 2015; more globally von Lieven 2015. I know of several other relevant compositions.

⁷⁴ Stadler 2017.

⁷⁵ Some are presented by Ryholt 2004. All of them concern only priests of Sobek, not of Isis.

⁷⁶ Rondot 2004, 194, § 176.

⁷⁷ *P.Tebt.* II 298, l. 7, 299, l. 11, 302, l. 3; *P.Mil.Vogl.* II 81, l. 5; *P.Bad.* II, 169, l. 7; *PSI* X 1146, l. 6, 1147, l. 4. See Rübsam 1974, 177–178. *P.Tebt.* II 301, l. 3, does not count for Tebtunis itself because the priest of Isis mentioned there is officiating in Sobthis in the Heracleopolitan nome.

⁷⁸ In the papyri, she is regularly associated with Sarapis and Harpocrates.

⁷⁹ *P.Tebt.Tait* 14.

⁸⁰ *P.Hamb.* 33 vs.

⁸¹ *P.Tebt.Tait* 14 and *P.Carlsb.* 652 vs. First edition Tait 1977; new study in Kockelmann 2008, 31–36. I am preparing an edition of all fragments currently known in Quack (forthcoming b).

⁸² Published by Spiegelberg 1931. I am preparing a new edition together with Andrew Monson.

deciding who is to cultivate certain fields, and sometimes also with which crops. The prophets of Isis appear in them in an altogether mundane setting – they have authority concerning economic decisions. In *P.Loeb* 8, ll. 47f., 16, ll. 18f. and l. 21, 17, *passim*; probably also *P.Loeb* 19,⁸³ a prophet of Isis named Inaros, son of Sobekkhuy, appears, and he is likely to be identical to an Inaros (with the same father, but without explicit title) who is the sender of *P.Loeb* 11 (addressed to a prophet of Osiris) and the writer of *P.Loeb* 23 and *P.Loeb* 30. In *P.Loeb* 27, ll. 2f. and ll. 33f., a prophet of Isis called Sobekkhuy appears; he might be the father of the above-mentioned Inaros. In the same correspondence, prophets of other gods turn up, and they are often no less concerned with economic questions.

Obviously, priests of Isis are, in this dossier of letters, in no way different from priests of any other Egyptian cult, and their power is based on the fact that a temple of Isis happens to be of importance in the region. In any case, we have again priests of an Egyptian temple concerned with rather mundane affairs.

3.4 *Elephantine*

Among the correspondence of the priests of Khnum at Elephantine, Isis is not attested in titles.⁸⁴ Still, she appears from time to time, and mainly in two functions. On the one hand, she is the provider of oracles;⁸⁵ on the other hand, persons writing from Abydos include her among the (local) gods to whom they pray for the well-being of the recipient of the letter.⁸⁶ Besides, she is attested in the royal oath,⁸⁷ which is super-regionally formed with the inclusion of Isis and Osiris (or Sarapis).⁸⁸ One attestation is in a broken context.⁸⁹ Perhaps the most remarkable point is that even for people related to the temple of Khnum at Elephantine, the Isis temple of Philae was the relevant source for oracular decisions. But it should be stressed that most of the letters in question date probably to the 4th cent. BCE,⁹⁰ and thus predate the rivalry between the two temples over the Dodekaschoenus area of Northern Nubia.⁹¹

83 Read in the edition Spiegelberg 1931, 48, as Hatres, but see the remarks of Spiegelberg 1931, 36–37, n. 1 (it should be noted that, due to its posthumous nature, this book is not fully integrated in itself).

84 Published by Zauzich 1978 and Zauzich 1993.

85 *P.Berl.Dem.* 13538, vs. 1; 15607, x+2; 15687, x+2.

86 *P.Berl.Dem.* 13587, x+2; 13564, 2.

87 *P.Berl.Dem.* 13535, x+4.

88 Minas-Nerpel 2000 and Quack 2013b, 240–242.

89 *P.Berl.Dem.* 15622, x+1.

90 Thus Zauzich 1993, p. v.

91 For that, see Locher 1997 and Locher 1999.

3.5 *Assuan*

More on their own,⁹² the priests of Isis of Assuan appear in a juridical question,⁹³ where they intend to sell a vineyard to two private persons, and the royal permission for the transaction is delayed while they had already ceded the use of the property to the buyers. So they ask if the harvest of the current year can be withheld because they fear that as still official owners of the vineyard they will have to pay the taxes without getting the income from it.⁹⁴

3.6 *Dendara*

Prophets of Isis are attested quite often as being at the same time prophets of other deities, especially at Dendara where it is usual to combine the titles of prophet of Horus, of Hathor, of Ihy (a child-god, son of Horus and Hathor), and of Isis.⁹⁵ In that case, Isis is obviously far from being the most important deity at the place, since she appears typically in the last position in the sequence of titles.

3.7 *Dakke and Philae*

My final case study concerns the border region between Egypt and Nubia. There, we have a substantial documentation of demotic graffiti and dipinti.⁹⁶ A considerable part of them was left by priests of Isis, including the last demotic Egyptian texts at all left behind by a family of priests of Isis.⁹⁷ Philae has also left us many Greek graffiti, but those normally do not concern priests of Isis (who visibly preferred to communicate in the Egyptian language).⁹⁸

Several important points set this material apart from the cases I have studied up to now. Firstly, the support of the writing is quite different, and that is correlated with different functions within the society. While some of the inscriptions are still of a more administrative matter, many are commemorative, or even clear expressions of religious feelings. Finally, in the border region in question, we have a mixture of locals and pilgrims, and most especially

⁹² But still, the gods which rest together with Isis are mentioned globally.

⁹³ This is treated in a note on the verso of *P.Brit.Mus.* 10591, col. I–III.

⁹⁴ Edition Thompson 1934, 49–53, pls. XI–XII. See lastly Quack 2011.

⁹⁵ Vleeming 2001, 43–44, no. 53, l. 3, and 54, l. 2, 113, no. 148, l. 1, 147, no. 161, l. 4, 150, no. 162, l. 5, 153, no. 163, l. 4, 160, no. 168, l. 4, 162, no. 169, l. 5. Somewhat similar graffito Griffith 1937, Philae 244.

⁹⁶ The basic publication is Griffith 1937. An adequate commentary on the content is still lacking, especially one integrating the information of the Greek and the Egyptian texts.

⁹⁷ See Dijkstra 2008 and Cruz-Urbe 2010.

⁹⁸ For the Greek graffiti, see *I.Philae* I 53, noting that only one priest of Isis, Eraton, is mentioned in two Greek inscriptions (*I.Philae* I 14 and 23).

Egyptians and Nubians.⁹⁹ At least one priestly title frequently appearing in the text, namely *qereñ*, is clearly of non-Egyptian origin and relevant for the specifically Nubian cult of *Wusa*.

A small group of the graffiti contains contractual regulations and obligations,¹⁰⁰ some of them explicitly relevant for the cult and the staff of Isis.¹⁰¹ They are mainly located in the outward, more accessible parts of the temple,¹⁰² especially the gate area where oaths were sworn and judgment took place.¹⁰³ Dakke 12¹⁰⁴ is a copy of an oath¹⁰⁵ made by the priests and *pastophoroi* of Isis of the Abaton and of Philae, concerning regulations with the staff of Korte. In Philae 54, a general¹⁰⁶ and agent of Isis declares that he cedes claims upon the tithe for some expenses. Philae 55 also involves a general and agent of Isis, but the details are not very clear. In the oath Philae 57, the overseers of singing of Isis are one party. The oath Philae 60 is sworn by a *horoscopos* (*im²-wnw.t*) of Isis and concerns rights upon meat-parts of animals offered. Also in the oath Philae 61 a *horoscopos* is involved concerning regulations for claims on metal objects and food. Philae 65 is another oath involving a *horoscopos* of Isis.

There is a group of three important Greek inscriptions recording a request made by the priests of Isis to the king Ptolemy VIII concerning the economic situation of the temple and permission to publicize the royal decision on a stela.¹⁰⁷

Some short inscriptions do not provide enough specific information as they mainly give the name and title of the person plus some standard formulation, but do not help to elucidate what those people were really doing.¹⁰⁸

99 See the special study by Burkhardt 1985; as well as the remarks and selected translations of passages in Hoffmann 2000, 233–240.

100 Burkhardt 1985, 29–30.

101 Others, like the regulations (*hn.w*) in Griffith 1937, Philae 25, are more connected to the cult of Arensnouphis.

102 Compare the demotic graffiti with accounts in the temple of Medinet Habu, see Thissen 1989, 220.

103 Traunecker 1992; Quaegebeur 1993; Derchain 1995; Traunecker 1997; see further Cannuyer 1998.

104 Griffith 1937, 21–22, pl. IV.

105 Perhaps to be read *h.t n¹ n^h iw urj s*; in any case the presence of the resumptive element *s* excludes it that the relative form is used here.

106 Perhaps head of a cultic association.

107 *I.Philae* I 19.

108 *E.g.* Griffith 1937, Philae 75, 85, 86, 89, 93, 94, 95, 96, 98, 99, 100, 105, 106, 107, 109, 113, 114, 117, 121, 122, 123, 125, 131, 134, 136, 137, 138, 139, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 153, 154, 156, 158, 159, 161, 164, 169, 170, 171, 174, 175, 178, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184, 185, 186, 190, 191, 192, 196, 197, 198, 199, 200, 201, 203, 204, 205, 206, 207, 208, 210, 211, 214, 215, 216, 217, 218, 221, 230, 233, 234.

An inscription left by a prophet of Hathor of Dendara records how he provided craftsmen for decorating parts of the temple of Philae.¹⁰⁹ In some graffiti, typically in the inner area of the temple complex, it is noted that a priest purified himself (*thb*)¹¹⁰ for the temple service.¹¹¹ A historical note indicates that the barque (*w*)¹¹² of Isis was away (?)¹¹³ for two years.¹¹⁴

A group of graffiti at Dakke and Philae commemorates persons of one family.¹¹⁵ They are *qereñ*-priests of Isis, or rather the Nubian *Wusa*, and also agents of Isis of Philae. At the same time, they are intellectual specialists, as evidenced by other titles, namely “prince (*ꜥꜣ*) of the foreign country of Takompso, chief ritualist (*hri-tp*)¹¹⁶ of the king of Nubia, great knowledge specialist in the cities, great (...) of the falcon of Horus for regnal year 3,¹¹⁷ overseer of (...), prophet of Sothis, general of the moon, priest of the five planets, who knows the time when sun or moon will make an eclipse”.¹¹⁸ In another graffiti left by a *qereñ* of Isis belonging to that family,¹¹⁹ we read that he prayed before Isis that she might give him strength in the service of the king, and also favor and love before the king. Similar, even longer prayers precede a report on the cultic activities performed in the service of Isis, especially new buildings and the transport across the river, in another graffiti.¹²⁰ One graffiti records work done for statues of Isis and Osiris.¹²¹ One text records a prayer of a general and agent of Isis: “You shall bring me to your feast of entry each year that I may

237, 240, 242, 248, 249, 251, 252, 253, 258, 259, 263, 269, 274, 283, 286, 309, 315, 319, 324, 327, 328, 332, 343, 348, 349, 351, 357, 358, 359, 362, 364, 365, 366, 368, 369, 375, 376 (with Greek version *I.Philae* II 188), 384, 386, 388, 393, 396, 399, 401, 403, 405, 415, 418, 422, 426, 427, 429, 430, 434, 435, 436, 448, 450; *I.Philae* II 193, 196, 197, 199.

¹⁰⁹ Griffith 1937, Philae 244.

¹¹⁰ For the verb, see Menchetti 2005, 50.

¹¹¹ Griffith 1937, Philae 273, 289, 290, 300, 310, 312, 369, 370, 372. See Griffith 1937, 190, Philae 389.

¹¹² For the reading, see Hoffmann 1996.

¹¹³ The reading of the verb is quite uncertain, but given the determinative, it is certainly something negative.

¹¹⁴ Griffith 1937, Philae 371.

¹¹⁵ Griffith 1937, Dakke 30, Philae 254, 255, 256, 257, 290, 314, 409, 410, 421, 427. See Török 2009, 459–461 (already based on my improved readings).

¹¹⁶ While this is certainly a title implying magical competence (see Quack [forthcoming c]), it would narrow our conception if we translate it as “magician”, as Griffith 1937, 28, has done.

¹¹⁷ For the problems of the reading of this passage, see Quack 2002, 457–458.

¹¹⁸ Most complete in Griffith 1937, Dakke 30.

¹¹⁹ Griffith 1937, Philae 120.

¹²⁰ Griffith 1937, Philae 421.

¹²¹ Griffith 1937, Philae 254, similar 290.

salute you with my brothers and my people and perform your beautiful¹²² (?) services¹²³ and to offer my burned offerings and my (...) ¹²⁴ in exchange for the breath of life of the kings, my lords, and you shall give them a million-fold lifetime in your blessings and (...), and your beautiful temple may rejoice¹²⁵ in them".¹²⁶ This text is quite typical for the graffiti of the Nubians who come yearly to Philae for the celebration of feasts,¹²⁷ and it allows more insights into the religious part of the life of a priest of Isis than most texts I have cited here.

Interesting but badly preserved is a graffito which seems to tell that the dedicant and his family came in sadness, made a banquet and paid large amounts, asking for reconciliation and the forgiving of his sins. It seems quite certain that he promises to perform his services and asks that Isis gives strength, perhaps in connection with an important office.¹²⁸

The longest graffito at Philae (and indeed in Egypt at all) is an inscription by a certain Sasan, son of Paese, written down in 253 CE.¹²⁹ He left it while on diplomatic mission to Rome, and in it he recounts his different works for Isis. Inter alia, he was ordered to convey money (10 talents) to the temple and the priests of Isis (ll. 4f.) and did so effectively (ll. 8f.).¹³⁰ Furthermore, the king ordered him to go to Philae together with the king's son and the *qereñ*-priests of Isis so that they should perform the festivals and banquets in the temple of Isis (l. 6). He himself together with his company made contributions for golden cultic vessels as well as to the expenses of the festival (ll. 9–16). Finally, we have

122 For the problem of this word, see the discussion by Pope 2008–2009.

123 The word read hesitantly by Griffith 1937, 113f. as *smn* is to be read as *šsm*. See Smith 1987, 71.

124 The word read *wꜥ-mrwe.w* by Griffith 1937, 113 (with a proposal at translating "hail-Meroe's") is not clear. Might it be a miswriting of *wtn.w* "offering litanies"?

125 To be read *tyt*; see Erichsen 1954, 608 and 640, for the orthography.

126 Griffith 1937, Philae 411, ll. 3–6.

127 Similar motives also in Graffito Griffith 1937, Philae 410, 416, 421.

128 Griffith 1937, Philae 448. See Griffith 1937, 129, and Burkhardt 1985, 120–121.

129 Special study by Pope 2008–2009.

130 I seriously doubt that it is possible to understand the verb *tkr* as loan-word from Aramaic *tkl* "to weigh out", as proposed by Griffith 1937, 117. As he himself admits, the k-sounds do not really fit. Furthermore, his argument that the use of the auxiliary verb *iri* is an indication that we have to do with a foreign word overlooks the very late date of the inscription. In late Roman demotic, the construction with the auxiliary would be regular for all verbs which had not developed a specific semantic development comparable to the Coptic t-causatives, see Quack 2006, 198–203. The construction *čꜥ.t šm* (l. 10) corresponds to ⲬⲐ , *čꜥ.t iri=w* (ll. 11, 12, 16) corresponds to ⲬⲐⲛⲟ , *čꜥ.t wꜥꜥ* (ll. 17, 21) to ⲬⲐⲬⲐ , so all examples of direct constructions in the inscription would conform to this rule. A clear case of the periphrastic construction used even in obviously Egyptian expressions in this corpus is *bn-p=y čꜥ.t iri=f iri hb n pꜥ tꜥ* "I did not let him do any work" (Griffith 1937, Philae 417, l. 7).

a direct invocation of the writer to Isis. He prays for success in his diplomatic mission to Rome (which seems also to involve matters of direct concern for the cult of Isis) and a safe return to Meroe.

Very detailed in the indication of actual activities is Philae 417 which I will cite in full.¹³¹ "The obeisance of Tami, the *artebetanki* of Isis before Isis of Philae and of the Abaton, the great goddess, the good noble lady, the good refreshment of this year of amassing riches, the mistress of the heaven, the earth and the netherworld. I spent ten years as *arebetanki* measuring¹³² (grain) for the temple of Isis with the large bushel without changing measure, while making contributions (?) of cattle (?) and geese (?)¹³³ each year. In the tenth year Bekemete, the *qereñ*-priest, the general of the water sent me northward while the Persiminans held the Abaton and the men of Elephantine had come up. I went northwards towards them the next day, to the place of the *Dux*. He came southward to Assuan with me. He inspected me and performed the customary rituals of Isis. He hastened after the men of Elephantine and told them: 'Do not go to the Abaton'.

I spent three years in Philae on that same situation. The way of going southward did not come about. I spent these three years measuring oil for the illumination of Isis, as well as pure *kakeis*-bread, fat¹³⁴ (?) and rations¹³⁵ (?) for the festival. I planted four persea(?) -trees, one in Philae, one upon the dromos of Isis of Philae, and two others outside the town. The *Archiereus* came southward and I went before him in Assuan and went upwards with him. I did not let him do any work in the temple, having bought pitch for a great anointing of the barque of Isis. I soaked it on the inside and outside in pitch.

Isis, my mistress, I am praying to you that you will grant me the way from today onwards, and I will do your beautiful services, and I will cover expenses¹³⁶ for them again, and you will give me favour and love before every great man in a northern or a southern court (?), and you will do what is in my heart.

The one who will erase these writings, his name is cut off for all eternity."

¹³¹ See Griffith 1937, 119–121, and Burkhardt 1985, 118–119.

¹³² Reading with Mattha in Griffith 1937, 120.

¹³³ I propose to read *iny ih im ipt.w*. For the form of *ipt.w*, compare Amazons (*P.Vindob.* D 6165) 6, x+26, with the note by Smith 1984, 390–391.

¹³⁴ I propose to read *˙t* rather than the *˙k* read by Griffith; the group for *˙k* is written very differently in Roman demotic.

¹³⁵ Here, I propose to recognize the same group as that in Philae 55, l. 7, read *s˙* by Griffith, but rather being a form of *˙k* attested elsewhere in Roman demotic, see Quack (forthcoming a).

¹³⁶ The word written *he* is more likely to be for ancient *he* than for *hw* with which it was identified by Griffith.

Taken as a whole, the inscription provides a number of insights into the economic reality of the cult of Isis, as well as religious feelings going into it – and it offers an interesting case of a foreigner cut off from his home and stranded at the temple of Isis. Still, he seems to manage quite well to get integrated into the cultic framework at Philae; we can suppose that he was no complete stranger to the place but had gone there before and was well known to the local priests.

Obviously, these Roman-period Meroitic worshippers did not have any problem recognizing their deity in the Ēse of Philae, and perhaps this was helped by their bilingual ability (they used the demotic Egyptian language and script for their graffiti) as well as the fact that the Egyptian name of Isis was written in a historical way which did not indicate the actual pronunciation. It would be more interesting to know if this cultural translatability was working in both directions, *i.e.* if Egyptians would recognize the Nubian Wusa as their own goddess when they travelled south. There are no direct Egyptian sources allowing to decide this, but the fact that Meroitic temple decoration still used the Egyptian language and hieroglyphic script, as well as depictions close to the Egyptian iconography, would probably have made their goddess recognizable as Ēse to the Egyptians; furthermore, the fact that classical authors speak of intense veneration of Isis by the Aethiopians goes in the same direction.

Also, the Greek inscriptions from Philae so uniformly use ‘Isis’ that clearly there was no substantial distance seen between the Egyptian Ēse and this Greek form of her name.¹³⁷ A particularly striking case is constituted by *I.Philae* II 168 where the writer states that he has been raised by the Isis of Pharos and has come to venerate the Isis of Philae.¹³⁸ Equally, *I.Philae* II 158, l. 2, identifies the Isis of Philae with the daughter of Inachos (Io).

One important question remains which I cannot really answer from my source material. What I have presented concerns priests of the Egyptian Ēse and the Meroitic Wusa. But we have some attestations that temples of Isis with architecture and imagery in Greek style, belonging to the “Alexandrian” Isis, existed also in the Egyptian *chora*.¹³⁹ They certainly had priests, but I do not yet see any source which would tell us in detail what that meant and if there was a substantial difference between a priest of Ēse and a priest of Isis.

137 The best cases are Griffith 1937, Philae 14 and 23, which explicitly mention an archiereus and prophet of Isis of Philae.

138 Concerning the poet in question, Catilius, who belonged to the retinue of the prefect of Alexandria, see *I.Philae* II 10–11.

139 Many contributions in Bricault & Versluys 2010 study this phenomenon.

4 Conclusion

Summing up the evidence I have mustered, the most obvious point is that the information about what it means to be a priest of Isis varies considerably according to the nature of the sources used. If we take up administrative documents, obviously the administrative work of the priests comes to the fore, and we see their occupation with many quite mundane points, especially economic aspects. The graffiti left in a temple of Isis do by no means exclude such duties, but they enrich the picture by providing some glimpses of the actual performance of rituals and service for the goddess.

Obviously, all these facets have to be acknowledged in order to get a complete picture. The description of highly philosophically minded priests in Egypt, withdrawn from mundane affairs and disinclined for social contacts, only occupied with religious practice and scholarly research, so depicted by Chaeremon as transmitted in Porphyry,¹⁴⁰ has to be considered one-sided,¹⁴¹ although many details indicated by him are vindicated by Egyptian sources.¹⁴² Perhaps some of the most glaring discrepancies can be explained if we recognize that Chaeremon referred mainly to on-duty priests, while the documentary texts discussed here do not necessarily concern this time-period. In any case, deciding about *e.g.* agricultural matters does not mean getting dirty hands and doing menial work personally. Thus the oath sworn by Egyptian priests, as transmitted in the Book of the Temple,¹⁴³ that they would not till the land, would not be violated.

One important question in the framework of these congress acts is perhaps whether there was anything special about Isis which set her priests apart from those of other deities. For Egypt during the Ptolemaic and much of the Roman period, the answer is certainly no. Being a priest of Isis (or rather, the Egyptian Ēse) was not in any way structurally different from being a priest of any other deity. The important question would not be if you were a priest of Isis or any other deity, but rather which sort of priest or temple employee you were. Here, a fairly important point comes to the fore. In Egypt, temples and priestly service were organized quite differently from Greece and Rome. There were many

¹⁴⁰ Porph., *Abst.* iv, 6–8 = Chaerem.Hist. (Fr. 10; ed. Horst 1987, 16–23, and the commentary 56–61 and 84).

¹⁴¹ We have, of course, to reckon with the possibility that Porphyry distorted his source in order to bring it better in line with his own argumentation in favor of vegetarianism. See for that problem Bouffartigue & Patillon 1977, xxv–xxxvii, and Patillon, Segonds & Brisson 1995, xv–xix.

¹⁴² See *e.g.* for purity questions, Quack 2013a, especially 118–128.

¹⁴³ Quack 2016.

more priests, and with a more complex hierarchy. The simple term "priest" is insufficient to describe this reality, and temple service could imply quite different duties as well as quite different economic benefits, according to which rank was held. Also, the size and economic assets of the specific temple would be of major relevance. These, and not participation in the cult of any particular deity, would be the defining factors for what it actually meant to be in temple service.

Still, there is another important factor to be considered, namely chronological development. During the later Roman period, the temples declined in importance and financial backing.¹⁴⁴ Also, increasing conversion of the population to Christianity brought the "pagan" cults into a situation of concurrence and finally minority. This also had a major impact on what it meant to be a priest. Being a priest of Isis of Philae at a time when Egypt was largely Christian meant something very different from being a priest of Isis in Ptolemaic Memphis or early Roman Soknopaiou Nesos.

144 See e.g. the summary by Gallo 1997, XXI–XXV.