

CHILD DEITIES

الآلهة على هيئة الطفل

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Kindgötter
Dieux enfants

Child deities constitute a unique class of divinities in Egyptian religion. A child deity is the child member (usually male) in a divine triad, constituting a family of father, mother, and child. The theology of child deities centered on fertility, abundance, and the legitimation of royal and hereditary succession. Child deities grew in importance in temple cult and popular worship in the first millennium BCE and became particularly prominent in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods.

تشكل الآلهة على هيئة الطفل طائفة متفردة بين الآلهة في الديانة المصرية القديمة. فالإله الطفل هو عضو صغير في الثالوث الإلهي وعادة ما يكون من الذكور، فيشكلون أسرة مكونة من أب وأم وطفل. ركزت النظرية اللاهوتية للآلهة على هيئة الطفل على الخصوبة والشرعية الملكية والخلافة الوراثية. تحظى الآلهة الأطفال بالأهمية في شعائر المعابد والعبادات الشعبية وذلك في الألف الأولى ق.م، بينما أصبحت هامة وبارزة خلال العصور البطلمية والرومانية.



Child deities are the child members of divine families, which usually consist of a father, mother, and son (fig. 1). They are represented in human form. Certain other deities occur occasionally in child-form outside family constellations; in these cases, the child imagery serves to emphasize the deity's potential for cyclical regeneration.

Child deities were depicted (in text and in visual representation) as infants, toddlers, children, and adolescents. Their birth was believed to secure legitimate royal and hereditary succession, and their subsequent thriving, to manifest a period of prosperity and well-being, in which abundance and continual renewal were guaranteed. A Roman Period ritual scene from Esna, in which the king receives the symbols of regnal years, captures these ideas in the epithets of the local child deity Heka-pa-khered (“Heka-the-child”): “The perfect youth, sweet of love,

who repeats the births again and again.” Heka-pa-khered promises the king a long reign and physical regeneration (fig. 2; Sauneron 1963: no. 51). Thus, despite their child status, these deities became the object of cult, which manifested itself—no earlier than the end of the New Kingdom and particularly in the late Ptolemaic and Roman Periods—in temples dedicated to them, priesthoods, theophoric personal names, ritual and other learned texts, stelae, bronzes, terracotta figurines, scarabs, gems, and other small objects.

The life-cycle of the sun god provides the basis for the concept of young deities: Ra ages into an old man by day, traverses the nightly darkness in the body of the sky goddess, and is reborn from her body as a child at dawn. Accordingly, a divine child appears sitting on the horns of the Heavenly Cow or, according to other cosmogonies, in the lotus flower (fig. 3).



Figure 1. The royal couple, at left, in front of the divine-family triad of Edfu.

In principle, all deities that appear as, or are likened to, children can be linked with such religious imagery. For example, a text in the Roman Period mammisi at Dendara describes the small Ihi-Horus as “perfect lotus flower of gold in the morning, whose sight is as pleasing as that of Ra” (fig. 4; Daumas 1959: 254, 4 - 5). Likewise, Khnum-Ra of Elephantine is characterized in a Roman Period text as a solar child auguring fertility, at whose appearance vegetation and all life come into being (Jenni 1998: 153; Laskowska-Kusztal 2005). However, in contrast to Ihi-Horus, Khnum-Ra is here depicted visually as an adult deity, lacking all markers of childhood.

Daughters, unlike mothers, played no distinctive role in these conceptualizations (Verhoeven 2002: 120). Even if Hathor acquired power as daughter of Ra and could be addressed as “girl” (*hwnt, sdtjt*), she is not to be considered a child goddess. Depictions of goddesses in child form are very rare and in temple relief apparently restricted to Tefnut, who appears in these cases together with her brother Shu in almost identical iconography (Chassinat and Daumas *Dendara VI*: 163, 6, pl. 579; Davies 1953: pl. 2, VI; Thiers 2003: no. 284 II, 38); both are designated as *tꜣtj*, “the two children” (Schenkel 1985). In Greco-Egyptian sculpture, there occurs comparatively more often a “sister” of a child god (Abdalla 1991; Malaise 1994: 379 - 380).



Figure 2. The child deity Heka-pa-khered in a ritual scene in the temple of Esna.

Iconography

The most significant iconographic markers of child deities are the index finger held to the

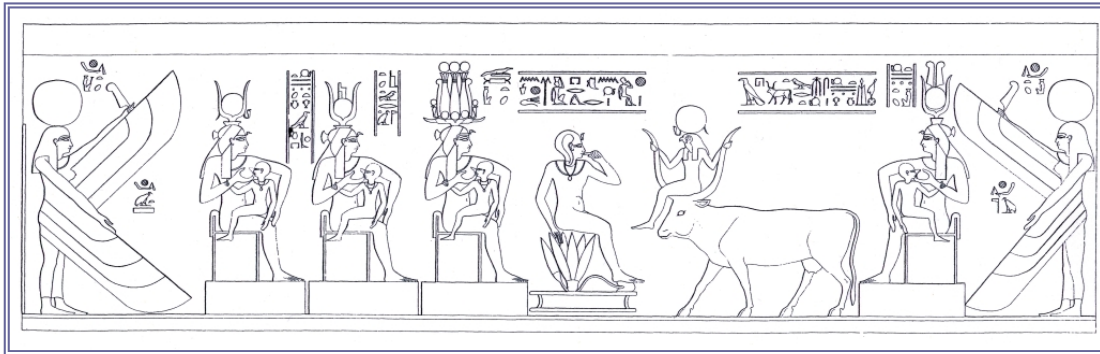


Figure 3. Scenes in the “mammisi” of Armant, showing the divine child sitting in the horns of the Heavenly Cow and, at left, perched on a lotus flower.



Figure 4. Ihi-Horus in the Roman Period *mammisi*, Dendara.

mouth (which Plutarch interprets as a gesture of silence; cf. Tran Tam Tinh et al. 1988a: 416) and the side lock (usually pleated into a braid) at the temple of the head (Tassie 2005). As a hieroglyphic sign, this lock represents the sound *hrd* (“child,” “being young,” “to rejuvenate”), but can by association also be read as *mpj* (“to regenerate”) and thus refer again to the principle of cyclical regeneration,

which child deities guarantee. Further markers are nudity, possibly symbolizing renewal and fertility (Derricks 2001: 61 - 67; Goelet 1993: 22 - 25), and rolls of belly fat to denote abundance. The child hieroglyph, attested since the Old Kingdom, combines these markers with the seated posture (fig. 5).

Various crowns identify child deities as legitimate heirs, providers of food and fertility, and cosmic deities. Most frequently occurring are the double crown, the double-feather crown, the *hembem* crown, the *nemes* head-cloth, the *atef* crown, as well as sun- and moon-disk and skullcap (Ballet 1982; Budde 2002: 76 - 98; 2003: 53 - 56; Meeks 2009; Sandri 2006a: 104 - 118; Yoyotte and Chuvin 1988: 171 - 178), a uraeus often protruding from the forehead. In the Roman Period, a long, open mantle lies frequently over the shoulders. It occasionally appears to be made of feathers and covers the juvenile body only partially. Some child deities wear a heart amulet that identifies them as heirs and protects them (Malaise 1975: 122 - 129; Sandri 2006a: 102 - 103). In their hands they hold the life sign, scepters, musical instruments, or, like human children, a lapwing.

In sculpture, especially in the Greco-Egyptian terracotta figurines, appear further attributes, often adopted from the Greek cultural sphere (Schmidt 2003), such as cornucopia (Fischer 2003), grapes, a vessel (Malaise 1991; Györy 2003), or amphora. Like the texts and scenes on temple walls, the attributes of the terracotta figurines express functions and characteristics of the child



Figure 5. Inscription containing child hieroglyph, west side of outer wall of naos, Hathor Temple, Dendara.



Figure 6. Hathor suckling a child deity in the papyrus thicket of Khemnis. Mammisi of Edfu, west side of outer wall of sanctuary.

deities (Budde and Sandri 2005).

The child deity appears in a tremendous array of configurations and motifs, the following being particularly popular in relief and sculpture: drinking from mother's breast and sitting on her lap (see fig. 3; Feucht 1995: 149ff.; Tran Tam Tinh and Labrecque 1973); on a lotus flower (see fig. 3; Meeks 2009: 5 –

6); between marsh plants (fig. 6; Junker and Winter 1965: 12; Meeks 2009: 6); as a musician (figs. 7 and 8); on a block throne or a lion bier (cf. Budzanowski 2001); between the horns of the Heavenly Cow (see fig. 3; Verhoeven 2007; Meeks 2009: 9); between a pair of snakes (Dunand 1969); on a potter's wheel (fig. 9; Davies 1953: pl. 27; Junker and Winter 1965: 180, 290, 376); on the emblem of Uniting the Two Lands (see fig. 8); as restrainer of dangerous animals (Sternberg-el Hotabi 1999); in the *ouroboros* ("the snake that bites its tail") (Piankoff and Rambova 1957: 22); in the solar disk, carried in a bark (e.g., Chassinat and Daumas *Dendara IV*: pl. 816); in a bark (Sandri 2006b); riding horseback (Fischer 1994: 277 - 281); riding an elephant (Budde and Sandri 2005); in the temple (ibid.). Many types and motifs are inventions of the Late and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. With a few exceptions, they have their equivalent in the contemporary hieroglyphic repertoire.

Functions

The functions of child deities were diverse. Apart from their above-mentioned roles—modeled on solar mythology—as providers of life and food and as guarantors of fertility, eternal renewal, and the continuity of legitimate royal and hereditary succession, they also vouchsafed protection against enemies, diseases, and other dangers. They guaranteed a successful birth, regeneration, and, by extension, victory over death. Accordingly, they were popular in afterlife imagery and funerary art—in particular the image of the newborn child on the lotus flower, due to its symbolism of regeneration. They were also believed to possess wisdom and have the power of foresight, because of which they were consulted in oracular procedures (Stadler 2004: 207 - 214; Budde 2005).

In temple cult and private devotion, child deities were a source of joy. A Roman Period text in the temple of Esna refers to Heka-pakhered as "[one] over whom all people rejoice, when they see him; at whose sight all gods and goddesses exult" (fig. 10; Sauneron

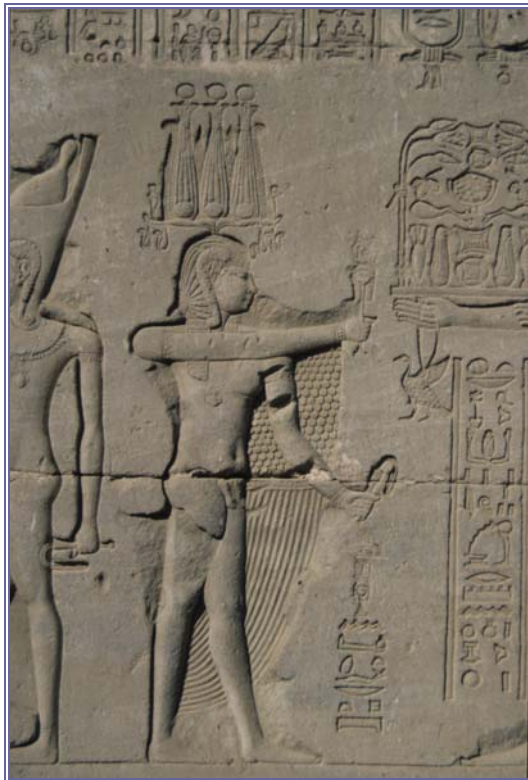


Figure 7. Harsomtus-pa-khered holding a sistrum and menit in the Hathor Temple, Dendara.

and Hallof 2009: no. 579). The goddess Hathor was particularly appeased by the sight of her child Ihi playing music (see fig. 8).

Epithets

Epithets bestowed on child deities describe their functions and are furthermore concerned with genealogies, cult places, and iconography (Forgeau 1994; Leitz 2003). Most epithets consist of an Egyptian term for “child,” such as *jnꜣw*, *jd*, *ꜥdd*, *wnw*, *wꜥh*, *ms*, *nww/nm*, *nmꜥw*, *nꜥn*, *hꜥz*, *hwn*, *h*, *hrd*, *sz*, *sff*, *sdꜥj*, or *šꜣj*, often qualified by adjectives like *šps* (“venerable”), *nfr* (“good, beautiful”), or *wꜣ* (“great”), and followed by the name of one of the parents. The epithet formula *ꜥz wr ꜥꜣj* (“the great, eminent, and first one”) signals the deity’s first position in the hereditary succession. “He with the beautiful braid” refers to the deity’s iconography, while descriptions like “lord of the throne” and “lord of sustenance” refer to the divine child’s qualities as heir and food-provider,

respectively. The deity’s functions in cult, particularly in appeasement rituals, are addressed in epithets like “he with sweet lips.” Such epithets are characteristic for Ihi, the musician and dancer, who is also often designated as “the great god” (Preys 2001). For the moon child Khons-pa-khered, temple scribes composed epithets such as “who repeats the births of Horus as regenerated boy (*hwn rꜣꜣ*)” (Sauneron 1963: no. 25), while the solar child could be described poetically as the offspring of Ra, “towards whose sight all plants turn upward” (Daumas 1959: 116, 1 - 2).

The designation *pa khered* (“the child”) functions as epithet, but also as component in name formations such as, for example, Horus-pa-khered, Khons-pa-khered, and Heka-pa-khered. In the case of Horus-pa-khered (“Horus-the-child”)—the mythical model and most prominent of child deities—the Egyptian name was transcribed in Greek as *Harpokrates* (Koenig 1987: 257; Sandri 2006a: 23). It is important to note that this Graecized name has often been understood by modern scholars, and probably by classical authors, as a generic term for child deities (Meeks 2009: 1). The use of the Late Egyptian definite article *pꜣ* signals that the designation was coined relatively late, which demonstrates that Horus-pa-khered (Harpokrates), like the other child deities, did not develop into an independent deity before the end of the New Kingdom (Meeks 1977: 1003 - 1004; Bonhême and Forgeau 2001: 78 - 82; Sandri 2006a).

Theological Development

Already in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, Horus is described as the “young boy with his finger in his mouth” (PT Spell 378: §663; Allen 2005: 88). Here the Horus child defeats the dangers posed by snakes and, in order to benefit from these protective powers in the afterlife, the deceased king identifies with him (§664a; Meurer 2002: 290ff.). Contemporary inscriptions mention a child god from Buto (*Nb-Jmt*, *Jmtj*), the writing of whose name includes, as a determinative,

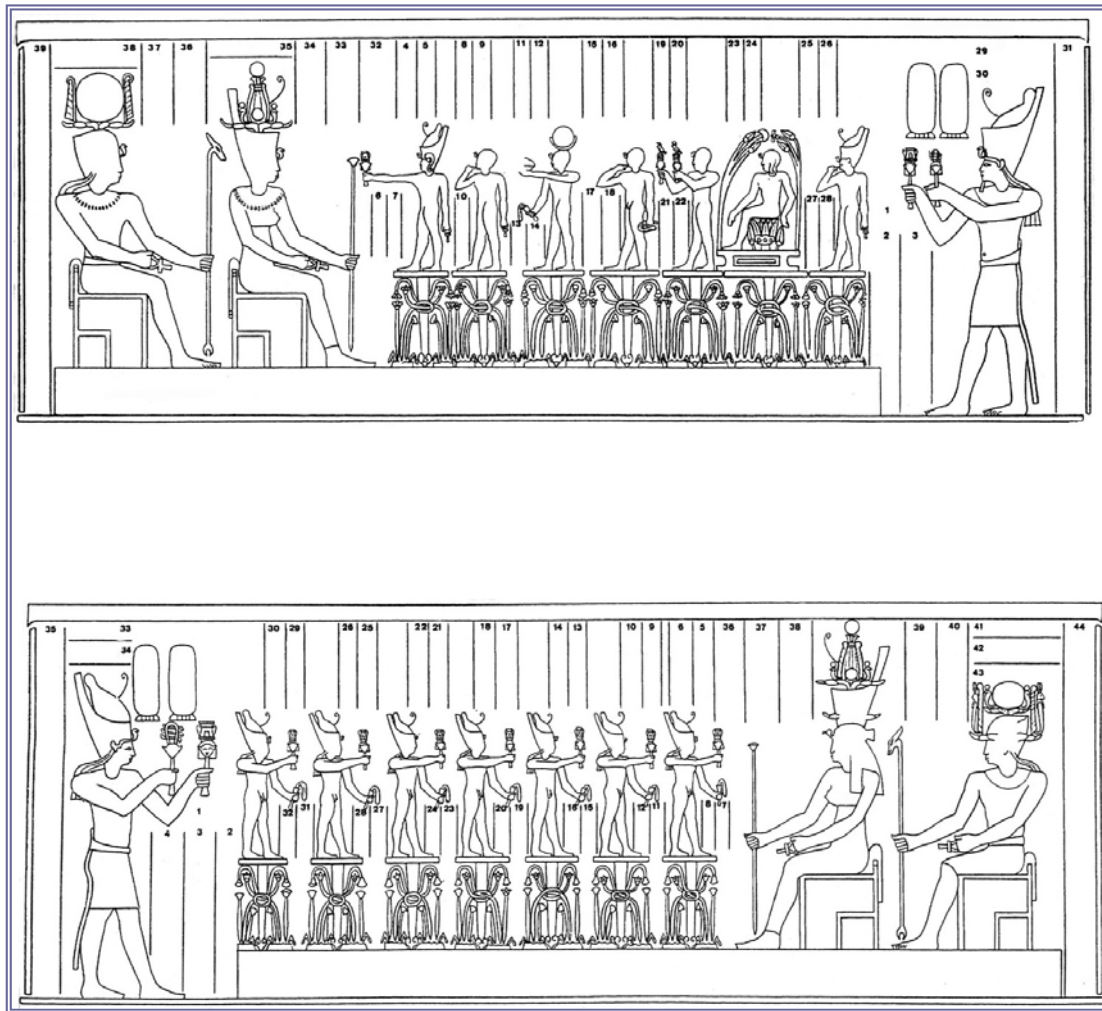


Figure 8. Groups of child deities holding sistra, and placed on the emblem of unification, in the Hathor Temple, Dendara.

the hieroglyph of the seated child wearing the Red Crown of Lower Egypt (Brunner 1977: 648).

Ihi is already mentioned in the Coffin Texts, which begin to appear at the end of the Old Kingdom (Hoenes 1980; Altenmüller 1991). His iconography as a child holding musical instruments is first attested at Deir el-Bahri, in the reign of Queen Hatshepsut (Neville 1901: pl. 104). He acquired significance at Dendara as the child of Hathor (in addition to Harsomtus-pa-khered) and, cross-regionally, as divine musician and solar child. In accordance with the Egyptian principle of duality (Servejean 2008), the notion of moon

child was conceived in opposition to that of solar child; it was first associated with Khonsu-pa-khered (Dégardin 2000). The young Heka was invoked in the Judgment after Death and became the child member in the divine triads of Memphis and especially Esna. He is occasionally depicted with the characteristics of a child on stelae of the Libyan and Kushite Periods (Berlandini 1978; Yoyotte and Chuvion 1988: 173 - 174), but it is not before the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods that he is called Heka-pa-khered in inscriptions (Leitz 2002, V: 555).

Religious texts testify that the concept of the child deity goes back as early as the Old

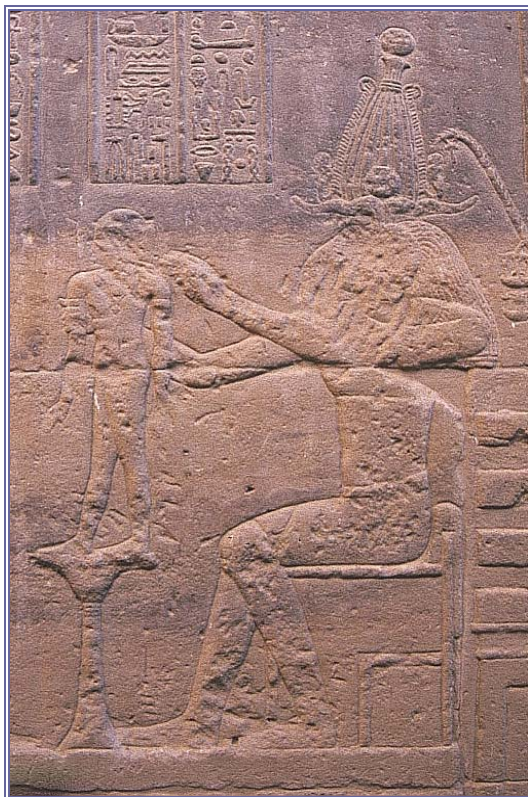


Figure 9. Khnum models the divine child on the potter's wheel. Mammisi of Philae.



Figure 10. Heka-pa-khered receiving offerings in the temple of Esna.

Kingdom. Nonetheless, the worship of child deities did not become prominent in temple cult and private devotion before the Third Intermediate Period. The first developments in their theology can be observed at Thebes, where Khons in particular, but also child forms of Horus, such as Horus-pa-khered and

Harpara-pa-khered, were worshipped as sons of Amun. Apart from Harpokrates, Ihi, Khons, Heka and Harpara, the following child deities are known: Harsomtus, Somtus, Horus-oudja, Horus-hekenu, Horus-Shu, Ra, Kolanthes, Neferhotep, Shemanefer, Panebtawy, Mandulis, and Tutu. In all these cases, *pa-khered* (“the child”) can occur as a name component. As an epithet, it is attested for Harsiese, Horus-nefer, and Neper. Ad hoc formations are Sa-menekh-pa-khered and Horakhty-pa-khered (Yoyotte and Chuvin 1988: 172 - 173; Leitz 2002, V: 241, VI: 80 - 81). The name component is not attested for Nefertem, the son in the divine triad of Memphis. Moreover, although Nefertem is associated with the lotus, he is never provided with the attributes of a child deity. He is therefore not to be considered a child deity.

No child deity possessed an iconography unique to that deity alone, but several acquired certain specialized spheres of activity. For example, Harpara-pa-khered, as the child of Rat-tawy and either Amun or Montu, was associated with the sun, and because of his additional association with Thoth, he was, by extension, associated with wisdom as well (Budde 2003). Horus-Shed, who is properly to be regarded as an outlier, was particularly popular as vanquisher of ailments and other dangers (Sternberg-el Hotabi 1999). In ritual scenes on temple walls, child deities appear as companions to their parents, or by themselves as recipients of offerings—especially food offerings, such as milk, as we see in a libation scene in Esna (see fig. 10). Their complexity and popularity is underscored by the existence of groups of seven child-deities, as in the mammisi in Armant (Lepsius *Denkmaeler IV*: pl. 63c) and similarly in Dendara, where seven emanations of a single deity, Ihi, occur (see fig. 8). In the major temples, particularly in the mammisis, hymns are addressed to them (e.g., Chassinat 1939: 1 - 2; Sauneron 1968: no. 242).

Mammisi and Cult

Decisive factors in the development and spread of child-deity theology may have been

the pursuit of legitimacy by Egypt's foreign rulers of the first millennium BCE (Budde 2010; Dumas 1958: 500 - 504; Jenni 1998: 17), and also the hope for blessings (perhaps that of rejuvenation in particular), which private individuals projected onto them (Budde 2008). The birth legend provided an important point of departure: whereas in the New Kingdom it was the queen who, by the god Amun, conceived the crown prince, it was, in the first millennium BCE, a goddess who gave birth to a divine child, in whom hope for an ordered cosmos and society was placed (1982a: 265; Assmann 1982b; Bonhême and Forgeau 2001: 70 - 82; Dumas 1958; Kügler 1997; Meeks and Favard-Meeks 1993: 239 - 243; Schneider 2004). His birth was celebrated every year in the *mammisi* (his identity depending on the local theology), with the local populace participating in the

festivities and revelry (Budde 2008; Frankfurter 1998: 37 - 60, 133 - 134). The texts and wall scenes in these buildings concern the modeling of the divine child on the potter's wheel by Khnum (see fig. 9) and the young deity's subsequent enthronement and procession, thus providing insight into the theology of conception, birth, and transfer of rule of child deities and the practices associated with their cults. Priestly titles such as "prophet of the diapers of Khons-pakhered" (Budde 2003: 45 - 46; Forgeau 1982; Laurent 1984; Sandri 2006a: 77 - 82) and terracotta figurines showing the child deity carried on the shoulders by priests also evoke a general idea of the cultic practices performed in the sanctuaries.

—Translated from the German by Jacco Dieleman

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Figure 1. The royal couple, at left, in front of the divine-family triad of Edfu. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. The child deity Heka-pa-khered in a ritual scene in the temple of Esna. Photograph by the author.

Figure 3. Scenes in the “mammisi” of Armant, showing the divine child sitting in the horns of the Heavenly Cow and, at left, perched on a lotus flower. After Lepsius *Denkmaeler IV*: pl. 61g.

Figure 4. Ihi-Horus in the Roman Period mammisi, Dendara. Photograph by the author.

Figure 5. Inscription containing child hieroglyph, west side of outer wall of naos, Hathor Temple, Dendara. Photograph by the author.

Figure 6. Hathor suckling a child deity in the papyrus thicket of Khemnis. Mammisi of Edfu, west side of outer wall of sanctuary. Photograph by the author.

Figure 7. Harsomtus-pa-khered holding a sistrum and menit in the Hathor Temple, Dendara. Photograph by the author.

Figure 8. Groups of child deities holding sistra, and placed on the emblem of unification, in the Hathor Temple, Dendara. After Chassinat and Daumas *Dendara VII*: pl. 617.

Figure 9. Khnum models the divine child on the potter's wheel. Mammisi of Philae. Photograph by the author.

Figure 10. Heka-pa-khered receiving offerings in the temple of Esna. Photograph by the author.