

Immortality Rituals in Late Antiquity

R. Merkelbach

Immortality is one of the themes of this issue, and thus I would like to talk about two Graeco-Egyptian ceremonies promising the overthrow of death, one of them actually bearing the title *apathanatismos*, to render immortal. The detailed texts of both ceremonies can be found among the Greek papyri. The standard edition is Karl Preisendanz' *Papyri Magicae Graecae*, and they are thus clearly regarded as magical.

The ecclesiastical historian Rufinus gives us a good idea of what magic was considered to be. Recording that the victorious Christians completely destroyed the pagan temple of Canopus near Alexandria, Rufinus defends this act by pointing out that there had been for all intents and purposes a public school of magic there (*magicae artis erat paene publica schola*), under the pretext of studying the script of the priests (*sub praetextu sacerdotium litterarum*), "script of the priests" signifying the ancient Egyptian writing system (*ita enim appellant antiquas Aegyptiorum litteras*).

In other words, the hieroglyphs were taught in the Canopus temple. Learning the hieroglyphs also meant absorbing the religious traditions of the Egyptians, and thus teaching the hieroglyphs was a substitute for religious instruction, and whoever studied such terrible things was studying magic, according to Rufinus.

Many of the so-called magical papyri are in fact nothing other than pagan religious texts, but for the Christians they were damnable magic. The biography of Bishop Porphyrius of Gaza, who lived around A.D. 400 relates how this man demolished the pagan temples, destroyed the divine statues, and converted the natives to Christianity by force. He even had the houses searched and burned the idols. In the course of this work, the biography recalls that many books full of sorcery were also found, which the pagans claimed

were sacred, according to which the idol worshippers carried out their ceremonies of initiation and other forbidden rites.

It is from such sacred pagan books that we have the two texts under consideration here. They contain rituals, according to which a single person should be initiated. Called "rites of passage", they lead a person into another existence, changing the old into the new.

Both ceremonies were performed in the cult of the Alexandrian god of Eternity, Aeon. The initiation was accomplished through an oracle decision made by the Sun-god during the night. The rituals come from Alexandria, the capital of Graeco-Roman Egypt.

Rituals are very important in understanding religion. These rituals are, however, so foreign that I will have to ask for patience and forbearance on the reader's part, all ceremonies being strange to those who do not grow up with them, and who do not necessarily understand the point of the acts performed. Even a Protestant finds the Catholic mass strange, ceremonies performed two thousand years ago are only that much more alien.

Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews lived side by side in Alexandria, each group contributing to the development of a special culture combining their various beliefs. The city had two principle deities, the first being Serapis, originally derived from an abbreviated form of the name of the Apis Steer of Memphis, once the capital of Egypt. This steer god was called Osiris-Apis, in short form Oserapis or Serapis. The god's cult was transferred to the new capital, where Serapis became a Universal God, uniting all the gods of the Greeks and the Egyptians. He was identified with Zeus and Apollo, Helios and Pluto, Asclepius, Osiris, and the great Sun-god of the Egyptians. He encompassed the entire universe. His head, as a famous oracle puts it, is heaven, his body the sea, the earth his feet, his ears are in the air, and his far-seeing eye is the sun.

This contrasts considerably with the gods of the ancient Greeks, each of whom was a living person, with an individual corporeal form and personality; Serapis adumbrates the henotheism of late antiquity, when everything divine coalesced into a single philosophically conceived deity. Serapis maintained however an external appearance to a certain degree, through the cult statue sculpted by

Bryaxis around 300 B.C. for the Serapaeum of Alexandria, numerous copies of which are preserved. Bryaxis portrayed the god in precisely the same seated position as Pheidias had once used for the Zeus statue in Olympia. Various attributes demonstrate however that Serapis was far mightier than Zeus.

At the feet of the god is the three-headed hound of Hades, Cerberus, the pet of Pluto, god of the netherworld, the three heads being those of a wolf, a lion, and a dog. The wolf symbolizes the past, as he tears everything away; the lion signifies the present, which is always powerfully and overwhelmingly dominant; the hound flatters with a hopeful future. Serapis as the ruler of past, present, and future became the god of eternity, and he was thus also called Aeon.

But all the god's names were merely transitory. Even the ancient Egyptian texts reveal that the supreme god of the universe is concealed behind the visible disk of the sun. He cannot be seen, and his true name remains secret and unknown. Should anyone, without knowledge of the name, accidentally utter its sound aloud, the unfortunate individual would drop dead with terror.

This recalls Yahweh, the god of the Jews, whose name could similarly not be pronounced. In Alexandria, where two-fifths of the population was Jewish, Iao (as the Greeks pronounced the name) was considered to be one of the aspects of Serapis-Aeon-Helios.

The god was also called Abraxas or Abrasax. We associate this name with the senseless and meaningless Abracadabra. But the name has a proper meaning, specially designed to refer to the annual circuit of the sun. The Greeks wrote numbers using letters rather than digits, and if the corresponding values to the letters of Abrasax, are added together, the sum is 365. Abrasax was also the name of the Sun-god, when one desired to address him as the god of the year.

The second principal deity of the city of Alexandria was the "good Demon", Agathodaemon. He could appear as the "young god", and was also a solar deity. One of the manifestations of the Egyptian Sun-god Horus (Har) was "Horus-the Child", Harpocrates, and Agathodaemon and Harpocrates merged into one another. But Agathodaemon could also appear as a serpent, called "Dracon". The ancients regarded snakes as friendly animals for the most

part. And, the Egyptians with their visual field of thought conceived of the Nile as a giant snake, winding its way through the land and bringing the life-giving water, upon which Egypt depends. That branch of the Nile that entered the sea by Alexandria was called "Dracon", and the neighbouring Canopic branch was named "Agathodaemon". The Egyptian name of the Agathodaemon was Pshai, where the p is simply the masculine article, and shai signifies "he who apportions", and what "Pshai" apportioned was fate.

When the Greeks sought an equivalent word in their language for Shai, they used Daimôn, as it was supposed in the Hellenistic period that daimôn was derived from dasasthai, "to distribute". Adding the adjective agathos ("good"), the Greeks expressed their hope that if he had been given the name of "good", then he what he apportioned would be good as well.

In the two ceremonies under consideration, several gods appear, but there are also playful, indeed theatrical, elements, which have the effect of rendering the contrast between the intention and its form of expression slightly ridiculous, at least to outside observers. But the problem is more profound; it is not merely that the step from the noble intention to the absurd is somewhat short, but that the ancients were quite conscious of this. They were not opposed to the presence of comic episodes in their solemn ceremonies, and this remained true in medieval Europe as well. I am thus obliged to repeat that a hawk says "hi hi" and "tip tip" while a goose cackles "tak tak" and a god laughs "ha ha" seven times. Most extraordinary is however the materialization of the divine breath, the pneûma, usually rendered "inspiration" (in the sense of Holy Spirit or Ghost) in Christian contexts. This word is important in the stoic philosophy, where it signifies the divine breath of life permeating the universe and becoming god himself for the stoic philosopher. Both texts that I will be discussing give instructions on how the initiated is to fill himself with the pneûma. He must breathe deeply, inhaling as much as he can, and exhaling exhaustively, compressing his sides, and the exhaling must be done through the nose with a clear "hmmmm", which has a specific purpose in the context of the ceremony.

We thus have two initiation ceremonies that may be termed sacred theater, each for a single individual. Such individual initia-

tions were frequent in Egyptian temple cult during the Graeco-Roman period. At the climax of the ceremony, the Sun-god appears in the form of a priest who delivers the oracle.

The association of initiation and oracle is surprising for us, but it was characteristic for Egypt. Around 1000 B.C. Thebes was ruled by a divine state where all the important decisions were made by divine oracle. Questions were formulated so that the god could respond with a simple "yes" or "no" through the mouth of a priest. It is evident that this allowed wide room for manipulation. Every appointment to high office, every promotion, and every initiation depended upon a divine oracle. Oracles were also widely used in Greece, where a priest responded similarly to a question posed to the god.

Astronomic-astrological conceptions play a role in both papyri, but these are of Greek rather than Egyptian origin. In each, the Candidate and placer of the Oracle must submit a table giving the position of the stars at the time of his birth. This implies that the stars have a determining influence on the individual's fate, but the supreme deity to whom one turned in this case, was beyond the power of the stars and could apportion a new fate to the initiated.

The first ceremony is preserved on a papyrus in Leiden bearing the title, "Eighth Book of Moses", combining Egyptian, Greek, and Jewish elements. The day of the event is set precisely on the same day on which the Jews celebrate Passover and the early Christians Easter. I hold this papyrus to be of no little significance for the early history of Easter, but to delve into this would lead us far from our initiatory ceremonies, so I will restrict myself to a simple diagram showing the relationships.

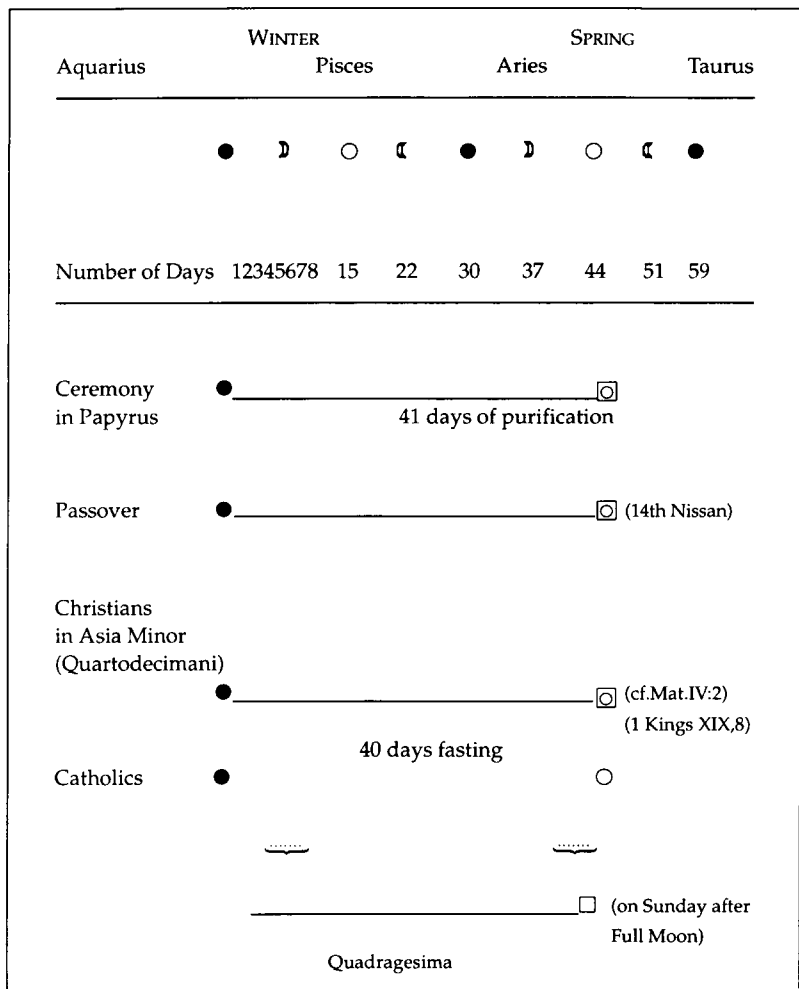


Fig. 1 The dates of the ceremony in the Leiden Papyrus, and the Jewish Passover, and the Easter of the Quartodecimani = Holiday.

It is thus the period when the sun stands in the months of pisces and capra. For these two periods the phases of the moon have been entered from the new moon in pisces to the new moon when the sun is moving from capra to taurus. Beneath the full moon in capra, on the 44th day of the row for the "Ceremony in the

Papyrus", you will note the full moon enclosed with the holiday box. In the Leiden papyrus, the holiday is on the day of the full moon in capra, which is the equinoctial full moon. Jewish Passover is set on the same day, the 14th of Nisan. It is not preserved, but it is virtually certain that the early Christians in Jerusalem celebrated their Easter on the same day. The Christians in Asia Minor certainly did, and they are called Quartodecimani because their Easter was on the 14th. While the church deliberately distanced itself from the Jews, Easter ceased to be on the day of the New Moon, and was set on a Sunday, the Sunday following the spring full moon. The sign of the full moon is thus no longer in the holiday box on the diagram.

Jews and Christians, and the pagan ceremony on this papyrus, demand the observance of a preparatory period in the 40 or 41 days preceding the event. On the diagram, from the holiday of the 44th day, a line has been traced to the left leading to the day of the new moon in pisces. Just as the dates for the holiday are similar, the periods of preparation are roughly the same. The Leiden papyrus stipulates that 41 days are to be counted backwards from the day of the capra full moon, and that on the date arrived at, the purification rites are to commence. A 40-day fast precedes the Christian Easter not counting the final day. If the preparatory period of the Leiden papyrus includes that day as well, they correspond exactly. The start of the preparatory and fasting period follows closely on the day of the new moon in the solar transition from aquarius to pisces. It is that day on which the sliver of the rising crescent moon is seen for the first time.

A connection between the date on the Leiden papyrus, Passover, and the Easter holiday of the Quartodecimani is clear. The Jews did not possess remarkable astronomical knowledge in the Hellenistic period, and the Book of Enoch reckons a year of 364 days. Alexandria was however one of the great centres of Greek astronomy, where seasons were identified according to equinoxes and solstices, and indeed an elaborate lunisolar calendar was in use. The dates in the Leiden papyrus are those calculated by Alexandrian astronomers. One thus concludes that the Jews of Palestine acquired their astronomical understanding from their coreligionists in Alexandria.

I will now turn to the ceremony described in the Leiden papyrus. Preparations begin six weeks before the day of the new moon in

the month of Spring. The candidate is to remain pure throughout this period, probably meaning that he should abstain from both meat and love for the duration. He must prepare seven varieties of incense for offerings to the seven planets, who are the gods of the seven days of the week, whence the names of the days of the week today. Every god of a day of the week received a sympathy flower, marjoram, lily, lotus, etc. The candidate is to pick and dry these flowers, pulverize them and dissolve them in ink, with which he is to draw a figure, such as the one here, depicting a god with nine heads, where the human head is surmounted by the profiles of eight sacred animals.



Figure 2. The Nine-Headed One. Mr. Brodbeck prepared the drawing.

The god is standing on a hawk-headed crocodile, and the whole scene is encircled by a serpent biting its own tail. In the foreground are the seven vowels of the Greek alphabet, which symbolize the seven planets of the Ptolemaic system, and the serpent demonstrates that beginning and end meet, that "one and all" fall together (*en kai pan*), as one can read on another sketch. The serpent also symbolizes eternity (Aeon). The Nine-Headed-One is the Sun-god, as can be seen from another text, where he is addressed as World Ruler: "Thou who art ruler over earth and water, who shaketh the world, Nine-Headed-One, wreathed in black clouds, who pierceth the ether". This is the Egyptian Sun-god, who traverses the heavens in his bark, piercing the damp ether. His nine forms signify his infinite capacity for transformation. The three is the Egyptian plural, and nine is the three-fold three, the plural of plurals, Infinity.

The crocodile symbolizes at once the watery element and time itself, as can be seen in passages from Clemens of Alexandria and Porphyry. The figure of the Nine-Headed-One above the crocodile portrays the Sun-god in his bark, crossing the heavenly sea, and creating time.

Our text notes that the crocodile signifies the sound *p*, and the Nine-Headed-One the sound *sh*. The figures are also to be understood as hieroglyphs, which together can be read as *P-Sh*, meaning *Pshai-Agathodaemon*. The hieroglyphs were originally conceived primarily as a system of phonetic transcription, with recognizable figures representing sounds, rather than what was visually depicted. But it also happened that these figures were employed as pictorial symbols, and it is not a large step from the use of pictorial symbols to the rebus. In the Late period and the Graeco-Roman period efforts were made to take advantage of the possibility of employing hieroglyphs in this sense, so that the signs emancipated themselves from being mere letters, taking on lives of their own. Our text thus states that the crocodile and the Nine-Headed-One produce a sound four times a year: the crocodile making *p* and the Nine-Headed-One responds with *sh*, again suggesting *Pshai*. These sounds are emitted at the winter solstice, which our text calls the "birth of the world" (*kosmou génnai*), at the spring equinox, the summer solstice and the autumn equinox.

The two figures, the crocodile and Nine-Headed-One, thus belong together and divide the year into four seasons. The winter solstice is the date upon which calendrical reckoning is based. One should not forget that this day was once celebrated as Helios's birthday, that it was most probably a sacred date in the *Mitras Mysteries*, and that our Christmas is also related to it.

One can inquire just how the author of our text presumed to claim that the Nine-Headed-One and the crocodile emitted their sounds at these dates, which designate the commencement of the seasons. I believe that the reason will be best sought in mechanical installations at Alexandria by which the seasons were audially indicated. Alexandria was the leading city for all sciences and thus also mechanics, including mechanical devices used in the cult of the gods. We will return to this point later.

A remarkable ceremony is known from the Serapaeum, where a window in the roof was placed such that on a specific calendrical date a ray of sunlight entered the sanctuary, striking the face and lips of the Serapis statue: the Sun-god kissed the statue and brought it to life.

We also know that the Greek engineer Ktesibios constructed a mechanical trumpeter who played the melody of a song sung by

the *mystae* at the occurrence of the inundation. The trumpeter depicted the Egyptian god Bes as a masked musician, and was displayed in the temple of Arsinoe Philadelphos. We thus have two references for the employment of mechanical devices in temples, and the Nine Headed-One on the crocodile in our text must have been similar: a group of figures which, when manipulated mechanically, emitted the *p* and *sh* sounds four times annually.

The world is ritually created anew in the actual ceremony of initiation. The ancients did not regard cosmogony as an historical event that had once been accomplished, and especially the Egyptians believed that the cosmogony was renewed daily, when the sun rose, separating light and dark. When the Sun-god appears in nocturnal ceremonies of initiation, people living with mythical and ritual conceptions understood this as signifying a sunrise in the middle of the night. In order to represent this situation in the ritual, the cosmogony was recited at sunrise, and then played out. Before I try to explain this, I will add a few remarks about Egyptian ideas concerning the cosmogony.

One of the symbols for the rising of the sun and the emergence of the world was the scarab-beetle or dung ball roller, called *kantharos* in Greek, which I call the "solar beetle". The scarab-beetle lays its eggs in earth or sand, and rolls the egg in the sand until a small ball is formed, from which the new scarab-beetle is born. It was thus just as the small scarab-beetle pushes the ball before it, from which a new scarab-beetle will emerge, that the invisible god behind the sun rolled the radiant disk into and across the heavens, enabling the daily renewal of the world.



The Egyptian word for scarab-beetle is *Khepri* and the verb *khepri* means, "to become". In our text the phonetically similar form *Kh(e)puri* appears. *Khepri* thus symbolizes eternal renewal.

The bark in which the Egyptian Sun-god traversed the heavens was manned by a number of gods who all greeted the sun at its rising.

Even the animals awakened at the advent of the sun, and especially the baboons were reputed to have acclaimed the god's rising. Then the primeval goose flew over and cackled. From the waters that then covered the entire earth, the primeval hill emerged.



Figure 4. The Bark of the Sun God (p. 94).

The goose dropped its primeval egg onto the hill, and all life on earth came forth from this egg.

The Sun-god created the gods with his word – the Creation by word is known from Egyptian texts that are far older than Genesis. One might be surprised to hear that the primeval god created the gods, who were in fact already in his bark. In an historically intended cosmogony this would be improbable, but in a ritual theatrical cosmogony the actors had to be there before the piece began. The great god then created the humans (Egyptian *rome*) who emerged from his tears (Egyptian *rime*).

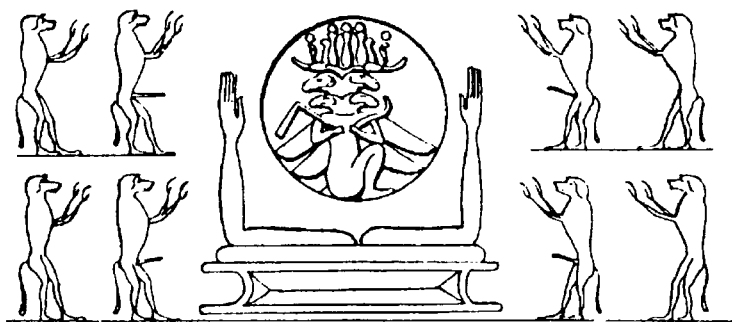


Figure 5. Baboons acclaiming the Sun's rise (p. 94).

These myths were thus recited in the ceremony known from the Leiden papyrus. The text gives precise instructions for the candidate – who was informed in advance – concerning the entire course of the ceremony.

The actual ritual begins on the previous evening, when the candidate enters a carefully prepared subsidiary chamber of a temple. Having made offerings and addressed the gods of the planets, he pronounces an evocatory prayer, entitled either “Solar beetle” or “Becoming”:

I address thee, thou who art the greatest,
who hast founded the world
Thou, who begattest thyself,
thou who beholdest everything with thine eyes and ears, unseen.
Thou hast awarded Helios the glory and all his might,
thou causeth the Luna to wax and wane and to follow its prepared path.
At thy appearance, the cosmos came into being
and light appeared,
and thou hast ordered the world as thou wilt.
All is thus delivered unto thee,
thou, whose true form no god may behold,
who changeth himself in the perception,
eternal god of eternity (Aeon)

This is the beginning of the prayer.

Parallels for virtually every part can be produced from the Egyptian hymns to the sun. Characteristically Egyptian are those sentences in which it is said that the Sun-god begat himself and that he mirrors and changes himself in the eyes of men.

The sun has thus ritually risen, and this was perhaps symbolically enacted using theatrical means. The candidate was then to recite the text of the "Creation of the World", saying:

I address thee, all comprehending, in every voice and in every language
[meaning the voices of the animals and the languages of mankind].
I sing unto thee, as that god once sang unto thee, whose place is
beneath thy own, and to whom all authentic names are known,
Helios, fire and ray of the sun disk,
whose glory is unbounded.
You awarded him glory
as in glorious form, he radiantly fixed the stars
and with light created the world
separating out each thing.

The following passage recites how the gods on the solar bark, called *angeloi*, messengers greeted the sun. The first cries in the language of the birds, *arai*, meaning "woe my friend". The pictorial representations permit one to conclude that this is the god holding the raised spear at the bow of the solar bark.

The second messenger greets the sun first in the language of the hieroglyphs (in the ancient language, in which the Egyptian

hymns were written), then in Hebrew, and finally in colloquial Egyptian.

The third god on the solar bark is a baboon representing Thoth, the god of math and the calendar. He speaks to the Sun-god in the language of the baboons: "Thou art the cipher of the year, Abrasax." Abrasax adds up to 365 and symbolizes the year, which is defined by the solar cycle. According to the Egyptians, the baboons greeted the rising of the Sun-god in a secret form.

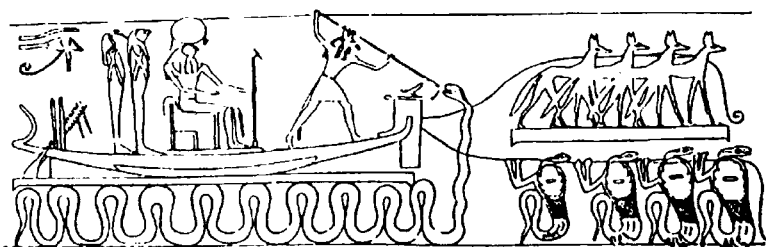


Figure 6. The Bark drawn by mythical animals.

The fourth god is a hawk representing Horus and speaking the language of the hawks. He cries "hi hi" and "tip tip" seven times, as he craves his food. Sacred hawks were kept in many temples, and these would have called attention to their presence at the rising of the sun, demanding their food. What happened each morning in the temples is projected back to the days of the cosmogony.

And finally, the Nine-Headed god greets the rising sun in the hieratic language, that used by the Egyptian priests. Then the primeval goose flies by cackling "tak tak tak". Then the Sun-god laughs "ha ha ha ha ha ha ha" seven times, creating seven other gods. As mentioned earlier, a cosmogony by word occurs in a number of texts, and I will mention only that well-preserved myth carved in Roman times on the walls of the temple at Esna-Latopolis, explaining that the world came forth from seven words uttered by the goddess Methyer.

The seven gods of the Leiden text are perhaps the seven planets of the Ptolemaic cosmos, but there are difficulties in detail that I do not want to go into here; I will merely mention that at the seventh laugh, the goddess Psyche was born. With this last laugh, the

god also wept, and one recalls that according to Egyptian belief, mankind emerged from the god's tears.

When these seven gods were created, the god made a mighty loud p and then an sh, from which was born the new, eighth god, Pshai-Agathodaemon. Somewhat confusingly for us, this eighth god appears in two forms, living hieroglyphs as it were, the Leiden papyrus relating that the p became a P(h)obos, apparently P(h)hoibos Apollo, and the sh became a "Pythian dragon". But Phobos-Phoibos and the dragon are one, identifying a single divine person, the Pshai, who is addressed with the Egyptian word "Lilu" (child). The god also said "Iao", naming the Jewish god Yahweh. He thus established that Pshai and Iao should share sovereignty.

After this cosmogony had been recited as a story, the candidate was to stand and pronounce the words of greeting with which the gods on the solar bark greeted the primeval god. He should call *arai*, and then speaking in the language of the hieroglyphs, in Hebrew and Egyptian, say "Abrasax" as the baboon did, "hi hi" as the hawk did, and finally speak in the sacred language of the Egyptians. He was then to assume the role of the primeval goose, saying "tak tak", followed by the repetition of the seven-fold laughing ("ha ha ha") from which the seven gods came forth, and the p and the Sh, in other words, culminating in the creation of "Pshai". He was then to address another prayer to the god.

Then the text relates that a messenger (*angelos*) appears. The candidate is to present him with a table giving his nativity, and bid that the god grant him an audience the following night revealing what fate has decreed for him. Should his constellation be unfavorable, the god should erase the disagreeable fate and thus present him with a new nativity. I cite a few sentences from this prayer:

May thy good form appear to me. I call to thee, World ruler Serapis!
Behold my nativity and turn not away from me, as I know thy true
and real name: Khepri. Protect me from any power of the stars which
could strike me, efface my vile fate, assign me good in my nativity,
Lord of Fate, Assigner Serapis.

Thus the ceremony of the first night came to a close. The messenger will have departed and the table with the constellation

have been brought to the priests in the temple, who now had a day to consider the oracular judgment to be awarded to the candidate, in the following night.

A number of various prayers and ceremonies were again to take place on the great day. Above all, the candidate was to carve a figure of the Pythian Apollo (P) and the serpent (Sh), and to wear it as an amulet. Again, the Assigner "Pshai" is being called upon.

In the evening, the candidate is to recite first the prayer "Solar Beetle" ("Becoming") and then the cosmogony. Then the god will appear. The instructions read thus:

Thou shalt lie on a reed mat, spread upon the earth. When the god enters, look not into his face, but rather look only at thy own feet and thank him, that he holdeth thee not in contempt, but hath deigned to examine the words intended to straighten thy life. Thou shalt ask: "Ruler, what fate hath been decreed for me?" He shalt then provide that thou understandest thy star and thy demon. Shouldst thou hear dreadful things, then thou art not to moan or wail, but bid that he efface it, or direct it on another path; for this god can accomplish all.

The god's oracle is intended "for the straightening of life" (*pros diorthôsin biou*). This magic is unusually moralistic and these particular words will be found in Epictetus's stoic philosophy as well.

Serapis-Aeon or his priests also had the possibility of predicting something dreadful. The candidate should not moan, but rather bid that the god put his life on another track. As a precondition the candidate will have most certainly had to examine himself. The god could then have awarded him with a new star of birth and a new "Demon". This will have meant the constellation of that very hour in which the initiation took place.

The new Demon that the god gives can be explained from an astrological tradition on the "Lot of the Demon" and the "Lot of Tyche (Fortuna)". Following clear rules, the astrologists extract these lots from the nativity and set them in relation to the heavenly constellations at the moment of the creation of the earth, which they purportedly knew. As the Creation is re-enacted in the ritual of the Leiden papyrus, we are in the same theoretical region, where association replaces logical thought. We are in that peculiar zone where science and superstition, theater, religion and mysticism meet, but we are not permitted to forget that poetry also has a share, as even

Goethe returned to the tradition of Demon and Tyche when writing the poem "*Urworte. Orphisch*". The first verse is titled "Demon" and begins: "As on that day / when given the world / the sun stood to greet the planets / thou prosperest even now / following the law / since thou exercisest thy office." This illustrates the poetic component of the Leiden cosmogony.

It remains to pose the question of just why the whole ceremony took place. The text itself gives no hint. One can imagine that this ritual was for the initiation of a priest into a higher office; it is however not impossible that it was a royal ceremony. We have virtually no idea of Ptolemaic royal rites. It is once mentioned that at the coronation in Memphis, a sacred drama was enacted, where the evil demon Seth-Typhon was killed, evidently an Egyptian myth as in the Leiden cosmogony. Such a ritual could have been used later for other purposes.

The second ritual comes from a papyrus book (today in the *Bibliothèque nationale* in Paris), seventy pages in length, containing numerous other texts in Greek and Egyptian. Again, it gives precise instructions for the initiatory ceremony of a single person, together with an oracle. The ceremony is specifically titled, "to render immortal" (*apathanatismos*). It involves the theatrical representation of the candidate's spiritual part climbing through the planetary spheres to the North Star, where he leaves the spheres of the fixed stars and enters the realm of the gods in the Beyond for a brief moment. There, the supreme god in radiant splendor appears to him. The candidate asks that he be born again, and the god delivers his oracular judgment. Before going on, we will have to take a brief look at the cosmic understanding of Late Antiquity.

The earth stood at the center of the universe enveloped in the regions of the winds. Above it were the seven invisible spheres supporting the planets: Luna, Mercury, Venus, Sol, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn. Above this was the eighth sphere of the starry heavens. At the North Star, it was explained that there was a hole in which a tendon holding the axis of the universe was fixed. A similar arrangement was presumed for the South Pole. The universe turned on this axis (since Copernicus we know that this was the revolution of the earth itself). The revolutions remain constant, and the turning axis of the world was a symbol of unalterable

necessity. For the ancients, this conception was thus closely united with the destiny of the human soul and the question of free will as opposed to the necessity of predestination.

The stoics taught that everything in human life could be understood in terms of cause and effect, so that mankind was subordinated to necessity as the celestial bodies were. As it is evident that the sun and the moon influence life on earth, it was assumed that the same was also true of the other planets. And thus emerged the system of astrology. It was assumed that the stars in their unalterable course ruled all things on earth, and that even the constellations at the time of birth laid tracks for the course of an entire life. The nativities were simply called "birth" (*genesis*). The latin poet Manilius says: "*nascentes morimur, finisque ab origine pendet* – "At birth, our day of death is certain, it all depends on our origin." Everything is subordinated to necessity (or constraint, *anankē*).

The Stoics were satisfied with this. If the heavens revolved around the axis of necessity, should not the little man be content that he is likewise subject to the same necessity? But only a few hardy souls possessed the Stoics' steadfast fortitude. Other conceptual models offering an acceptable orientation were sought out. One was the belief that one could escape the bounds of necessity by leaving its domain, climbing through the spheres to the starry heavens, and break through the last layer. Then one reached a realm where necessity did not rule.

Concepts were drawn from platonic philosophy to support this belief. Plato thought that the soul (*psukhē*) returned to the stars whence it came. In *Symposium* he discussed the progressive ascent to the idea of beauty, and in the *Phaedrus* the chariot drive of the philosopher's soul up to the celestial heavens. Beyond this begins the realm of eternity. According to Plato the task of the soul climbing to heaven in its chariot is to pierce the final boundary and view the region beyond the heavens, the realm of the eternal and the gods.

The concept of the soul's upward flight was adopted and adapted so that it was joined to the idea of liberation from necessity. Whoever stood up there, above the sphere of the fixed stars and the planetary spheres and the signs of the zodiac, which determined the nativities, had departed from the realm of stars visible

from Earth and viewed the world of the gods in the Beyond. Such a person had a new nativity, a new genesis, which, being the same word for "birth" in Greek, meant that the initiated one had been born anew. And this new nativity was beyond the sphere of the fixed stars, in the realm of eternity: it was a constellation of immortality.

Combining these ideas with those of the Stoic doctrine of *pneuma*, the word soul (*psukhē*) was discarded, emphasizing the breath of life – the basic meaning of *pneuma* and *psukhē* is practically the same, both meaning "breath". The Stoics regarded *pneuma*, the breath of life, as pervading the entire cosmos, filling everything: mankind, animals and plants, even the elements, the air, and the celestial bodies. Respiration is merely a part of the universal breath which comprehends everything and is practically god himself. In this Stoic doctrine of breath, Jewish and Egyptian ideas flowed together. The Egyptian god Amun has been interpreted as "the breath of air, which remains in all things and through which one lives forever."

Only *pneûma* enables life. Although everything on earth and in the skies was made of the four elements of the ancient world, without the divine fifth element, the breath of life, all would be dead. It is present in every living creature. The *pneûma* is immortal, while all the other elements of a living creature are destroyed at death.

These are the thoughts upon which this text is based. They are transposed in a ritual in which two gods appear, first a younger god, who is to announce the candidate to the supreme god, who himself delivers the oracular decision. These are the same gods as in the first text, Pshai and Serapis-Aeon. It should not be forgotten that all divine names are purely transitory, that all gods are in the end various manifestations of the Sun-god, the invisible Egyptian god behind the Solar disk, who was not named. The younger god betrays his identity by greeting the candidate by saying *p* once and repeating *sh* thrice, familiar to us from the first ceremony.

Pshai-Agathodaemon can also be identified with the young solar god, named Harpocrates, literally "Horus the Child", who was depicted as a youth holding a finger in his mouth. This gesture originally signified the sucking child, but in Graeco-Roman times it was understood as meaning "silence!". Thus our text contains repeated admonitions to silence: "ssst".

The supreme god is Serapis-Aeon, the god of eternity who was also Yahweh-Iao in Alexandria. This god was believed to be above fate. This was the most important aspect of the god in Late Antiquity.

Our ceremony enacts the pious hope of an ascent of the breath of life, the *pneuma*, to the sphere of the fixed stars and the realm beyond the heavens. The candidate fills himself with the divine breath, by breathing deeply and humming “hmmm”. He then uses a flying machine to ascend. The route through the planetary spheres to the North Pole is represented with theatrical props.

Even the Attic theater had witnessed the most diverse devices. Perseus flew through the air when he freed the bound Andromeda from the sea-monster. In the Bacchae an earthquake shakes Pentheus' palace, followed by a lightning bolt from the heavens, accompanied by thunder and the apparent burning of the place. In Greek temples there were doors that opened by themselves, and in a closed temple one could transform water into wine, if one had previously installed a pipe system, which could be governed from without.

The writings of the geometer, Heron of Alexandria, include many directions for achieving surprising effects, such as presenting the entire drama *Nauplius* using marionettes. In five acts, the Greeks are portrayed constructing their fleet after the conquest of Troy and setting sail only to sink beneath thunder and lightning before the cliffs of the Greek coast.

The Christian writer Hippolytus of Rome consecrates fourteen chapters of a work against heretics to the tricks of the Egyptian priests, by which the innocent believers are deceived. These include earthquakes, thunder, and the creation of falling stars. These artifices also included projections using mirrors which will have been used in our text as well. Properly combining lamps and mirrors enabled the imitation of the heavens and the celestial lights, and the ceiling of the chamber could be previously prepared with phosphorescent pigments. Asclepius, the god of healing, was made to appear as a blazing light: the god's silhouette was prepared in an inflammable substance on the wall, and then lit in the darkened chamber. A god could appear with a head of fire: the shaven head of the Egyptian priests made this possible by

the application of protective pigments; a metal ring covered with alcohol was worn on the head and then set afire. This enabled them to appear in the role of a god complete with halo. The list of theatrical gimmicks is long, and it suffices here to remark that many of these were employed in the sacred theater.

The Paris text includes many background effects that were easily accomplished using well-tested theatrical means. The candidate receives the instructions for the ceremony of re-birth where he will be granted a new nativity.

Imagine a pitch black room, where a single light is burning, symbolizing the solar disk. The candidate is standing on a pedestal that will subsequently be raised into the air either by a rope or a hydraulic construction. In prayer, the candidate then describes how the four constitutive elements of his body depart, so that only breath, the *pneuma*, remains – He recites: “First nativity of my birth”, and then lists the positions of the seven planets at the time of his birth. Continuing, he says, “first beginning for my beginning”, thrice repeating *p* and *sh*, meaning that he is addressing the god Pshai-Agathodaemon, who has given him life.

He then addresses the elements: air, fire, water and earth, which make up his body: “First breath of life of the living breath in me while strongly exhaling through the nose, “hmmm” signifying that he is expelling the earlier mortal breath of life, in order to take in a second immortal breath of life. Then there are the three other elements: “Fire, which god has given to the mixture of the mixture which is within me.”

This “mixture” of elements is a central part of the stoic doctrine:

First water of the water within me
first earthy substance of the earthy substance within me
thou my, [candidate’s name], complete body [consisting of the elements],
made by the glorious arm and the imperishable right hand in that cosmos
which is transparent without light, soulless endowed with soul, [in
other words, in the transcendental where contradictions unite.]
If ye have decided to give unto me a nativity which is immortal,
that after pressing need, I may behold the beginning which I face,
leading to immortality,
in the immortal breath of life,
in immortal water.
in an air which is firm [another *coincidenta oppositorum*, joining of
opposites]

that I may be spiritually re-born.
that a sacred breath blow within me
that I may gaze at the sacred fire,
that I may behold the terrible primeval waters
and that the all-bearing and all-encompassing ether listen to me,
as of today, I, a mortal born from a mortal womb, through the powerful
might and the imperishable right hand shall be set higher, behold-
ing, in the immortal breath of life, with immortal eyes the immortal
Aeon,
whereby the strength of the human soul shall briefly leave me
which the inalterable decision of the god after the bitter need which I
face will render unto me, that I need nevermore bear necessity.
remain here, mortal human existence, and receive me hale again after
the inalienable [unavoidable] need which I shall face...

We must imagine that “the power of the human soul” now leaves the candidate briefly. The divine breath, which ranks higher than the *psukhē* remains with him.

Following the prayer is the instruction: “Now inhale from the rays, three times the breath of life, as deeply as thou canst, and thou shalt remark that thou art become light and riseth up, that thou thinkest thou art in the midst of the air.” The pedestal upon which the candidate stands is then raised. It is likewise conceivable that this pedestal was not at all necessary, and that the candidate merely made an imaginary journey through the air, induced by meditation.

Thou shalt hear nothing, neither man nor animal; thou shalt behold no mortal thing of this world in that hour, but all that thou shalt behold shall be immortal;
As thou [shalt behold] the positions of the gods [stars] for that day and that hour, how the heavenly rulers rise, while others set, and the path of the visible gods [planets] shall be revealed.

The candidate is then to see a wind sail indicating the region of air beneath the moon. This vision will then disappear, and he will see that the gods (the planets) gaze on him and move towards him. This effect was presumably achieved using mirrors.

Then thou must hold thy right index finger to thy mouth [the symbol of the young Sun-god Harpokrates mentioned earlier] and say: ‘Ssst, sssst, sssst’ [this signifies the living imperishable god], ‘protect me, sssst.’
Then hiss a long sh-sh-sh,

and then say 'p – p – p '

Then thou shalt see how these gods gaze benignly on thee, and ceaseth to approach thee, resuming their paths, and following the prescribed order of the world.

If thou shalt see that the cosmos above thee is clear and noisy, then be prepared to hear the sound of a mighty thunderbolt.

Then thou shalt say, 'ssst, ssst protect me, ssst, I am a planet as ye, I rise shining from the depths.'

When thou hast uttered the spell, then hiss twice sh sh and say p – p twice, and then thou shalt see how many five-finger-long stars fall from the solar disk.

Then shalt thou repeat 'ssst ssst'.

Then the solar disk will open and thou shalt see a ring that is not fiery, but containing fiery doors which are closed.

There are different ways in which this was done. For example, the solar disk may have been mounted on a sort of window which was then opened, revealing another backdrop with the flaming doors which were in turn opened: "Then thou shalt instantly say the following prayer with closed eyes."

This is the opportunity for a complete change of scenery. When the candidate re-opens his eyes, the doors will be open, and beyond them he will see the world of the gods. The candidate prays with closed eyes: "Hear me, Lord, Progenitor of Light" among the many names and epithets that follow are, Aeon, Iao, Yahweh. The candidate then asks: "Open for me, Bright Blazing One, since I appeal to Thee because of my pressing, bitter need with the immortal living names which have never yet been uttered by the human tongue." Now he names the secret names of the seven planetary gods. Then it goes on:

Say all this with fire and the breath of life. When thou art finished, thou shalt hear thunder and thou shalt remark that thou thyself art overcome with excitement and confusion. Then thou shalt repeat: "sst, sst, protect me, sst." Then open thine eyes, and thou shalt behold the doors open and the world of the gods beyond, so that the breath of life within thee shall be moved with bliss and joy, that it riseth. Stand up, gaze at the gods and take their breath of life in thyself. When thy soul has been returned [the candidate's soul has now returned to his body] then say 'Go forth, Lord.' When thou hast said this, the rays will be directed at thee, and thou shalt gaze into their center.

When that thou doth, thou shalt behold a fair young god with fiery hair clad in white, with a red cloak, bearing a fiery wreath. [This god

may either be portrayed by an actor or depicted by a projection of light.] Thou must greet him instantly with the prayer of greeting for fire: Lord, Greetings, thou with powerful might and powerful strength, Helios – If it is thy wish, pray announce me to the supreme god [and say] ‘A Person [namely myself, named such and such] born of the mortal womb of [such and such] and the flowing seed, who has been newly begotten today by thyself and [alone] raised to immortality from so many tens of thousands according to the decision of that extraordinarily goodly god bids that he be permitted to pray to thee.’

The young god then rises to the heavenly orb; the candidate is to inhale deeply and fill himself with the breath of life. The doors will then be thrown open, and seven maidens in silk garments will come forth, each with a serpent on her forehead; they are called “Tyches” (Fortunas) of heaven and bear golden victors’ wreaths. They represent the stars of the Ursus major and are represented either by dancers or projected light. The candidate greets each with a personal prayer.

Then the candidate ascends to the Ursus minor constellation, and thus to the North star. Seven other gods appear, wearing the masks of black bulls; they wear white garments and golden wreaths. They are called the “Lords above the Heavenly Pole”. These are likewise either actors or projected using light. The candidate prays to them:

Greetings, ye guardians of the heavenly tenon (the North star on which the heavens turn), ye strong young men who turn the axis of the heavenly circle, who cast thunder, lightning, earthquakes and thunderbolts on the impious;

to me, who art pious and god-fearing, pray give health and inviolability of the body, full power of hearing and seeing, steadfastness in the good hours which await me on this day.

He then greets each with his own name.

The candidate has risen to the North star, to the tenon of the world axis and that hole in the heavens in which the tenon turns: he can now reach beyond the heavenly sphere and behold the Beyond with the god of the worlds. He is no longer subject to the planetary gods and the force of the inalterable revolution of the world; his nativity is no longer his.

The representations of the two Ursus constellations, minor and major, now align themselves to the left and right. The directions state:

When they are standing so, then look into the air and thou shalt see how lightning and glimmers of light descend, how the earth quakes and an enormous god with shining face descendeth, of youthful appearance, with golden hair, clad in a white garment, with a golden wreath and [Persian] trousers.

This Sun-god is here depicted as the Persian Sun-god Mithras. In his right hand he reputedly held the golden shoulder of a bull. This bull shoulder can be made out in the round zodiac in the temple of Dendera where one otherwise expects the smaller wain, or ursus minor. Our text states concisely: "This signifies the bear constellation, which moves the heavens and revolves." The belief was that the supreme god standing above the sphere of the fixed stars held the constellation Ursus minor in his hand like a lever with which he turned the heavens. Of this god it is then stated: "Then thou shalt see how lightning bolts come forth from his eyes as stars fall from his sides." This was simple to manage. The candidate was then to inhale deeply and fill himself with the divine breath of life, and then to exhale again, humming "hmmm". He was then to ask that his soul (*puskhē*) not leave him and to greet the god:

Greetings, Lord, Lord of the waters,
Greetings, Creator of the earth
Greetings, Prince of the breath of life
clear bright light. . .Re. . .[the Egyptian name of the Sun-god]
give me a decision...
Lord, in that I am born again, and go there,
in that I grow and become larger, I die,
in that I was absolved from non-existence from a life-giving nativity,
I proceed,
as thou hast founded and ordered it, as thou hast established by law
and created as a secret initiation.

There follows the instruction:

When thou has so spoken, he shall render unto thee the oracular decision; thou shalt however feel that thy soul becomes weak and dissolved, so that thou shalt no longer be in possession of thy senses when he answers.

He will relate thy oracle in verse, and when he has finished, he will go.

That is the close of the ritual of *apathanatismos*, "rendering immortal".

A few closing remarks are in order. This ceremony transposes a concept of Stoic philosophy into a cultic play. The idea is itself logical: The corporeal components of a person are mortal and dissolved with death; the breath of life, the *pneûma*, which man has received from god and is a part of the god rises to the god again and unites with him. The thought of a corporeal resurrection would have been rejected by the Stoics; only the divine breath of life is immortal, according to their doctrine, not the other elements.

A pious Stoic would not have required a specific ceremony to render the breath of life immortal; philosophically the immortality of the *pneuma* was itself evident without a ceremony. But earlier, people had a completely different need to theatrically portray their thoughts and aspirations. It was not sufficient to pronounce their beliefs with words, which were merely theoretical and intangible. They expressed their thoughts with action. Tangible and visible representations in a sacred play were real.