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# HERMAPHRODITUS AND OSIRIS-DIONYSUS: SYNCRETISM IN HELLENISTIC EGYPT

Valentina Alessia Beretta

## INTRODUCTION

Hermaphroditus is a Greek god that made his appearance in Egypt during the last decades of the IV century B. C.

Some statuettes depicting Hermaphroditus were found here; the main characteristics are an accentuated femininity and the presence of male genitalia. He is part of the cycle of Dionysus, identified with Osiris in Egypt.

Obviously, there are many differences between Osiris and Dionysus: the main one is that, while there are various representations of ithyphallic Osiris, Dionysus is never represented as ithyphallic, this aspect being entrusted to other participants of his entourage such as Hermaphroditus.

Another connection between Osiris-Dionysus and Hermaphroditus is the use of wine in religious practice: Theophrastus (*Charcaters*, XVI) mentions offerings of wine to Hermaphroditus. It is also to notice that, during the religious festivities in honour of Osiris-Dionysus, statues of the god and other participants in his cycle were carried around to wish fertility.

## AIM

The aim of this research is to understand how this god was imported to Egypt and whether his connection with Osiris-Dionysus can be used as proof of a religious syncretism of the population living in the Nile Delta during the Lagid Dynasty.

## METHODOLOGY

- collection and categorization of the Egyptian representations of Hermaphroditus;
- comparison between the statues depicting Hermaphroditus and the one depicting Dionysus
- analysis of rituals related to fertility;
- translation and analysis of the classical sources mentioning Hermaphroditus and his connection to Dionysus.



## DISCUSSION

The studies in Gender Archaeology regarding Hermaphroditus are few and mainly concerning iconography, due to the lack of textual records mentioning a specific cult in honour of this god. It is fundamental to use different approaches in order to find the real place of Hermaphroditus in Hellenistic religion. The fact that some of the Hermaphroditus' figurines come from antiquities market poses an ulterior challenge regarding the specific context of finding and the function of the statues.

## CONCLUSIONS

The presence of figurines depicting the god Hermaphroditus in funerary and religious contexts in Egypt needs to be addressed in a systematic manner. Given the fact that Hermaphroditus is a minor god and Theophrastus' mention of wine offerings, the conclusion is that his religious practices have to be linked to the ones related to Osiris-Dionysus.

Further researches should be made to understand how these deities are connected, especially considering the fact that Dionysus was used as *instrumentum regni* during the Ptolemaic Period.

Fig. 1 Perdrizet, 1911, tab. II. «Hermaphroditus *Anasyromenos*»  
Fig. 2 Breccia, 1930, tab. Q. «Dionysus or ephebe»