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THE ANASYRMA FERTILITY RITUAL IN ANCIENT EGYPT: FROM HATHOR TO HERMAPHRODITUS

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INTRODUCTION

The Anasyrma is a Mediterranean ritual in which a deity or a person lifts up their robe to expose the genitalia. It can be seen as a fecundity ritual with a double meaning: to wish fertility on someone or something or to receive fertility, usually by gods. Another hypothesis is that, in case this gesture exposes a penis, the Anasyrma is functional against the Evil Eye. In Egyptian mythology and cultic practice there are records of mostly women involved in this ritual: Hathor in Chester Beatty I Papyrus lifts up her robe to make her father Amun laugh; in Esna is recorded a ritual in which on the 29th day of Athyr, two women expose their genitals and breasts in front of a representation of Hathor to bless the Pharaoh and the land; during the journey made by boat on the river Nile to reach Bubasti for the festival of Artemis (Bastet), some women lifted their vestment to show their genitals in front of villages and fields to bless them with fertility; women lift their robes in front of the Apis Bull to be blessed by his fertility powers; many are the figurines of Isis *Anasyromenos* dating to Hellenistic Egypt. The only testimonies of an exposed penis are given by the eight Ptolemaic figurines of the god Hermaphroditus found in Lower Egypt. The aim of the research is to understand if in Egypt the Anasyrma has to be seen as either a fertility ritual or an apotropaic one.



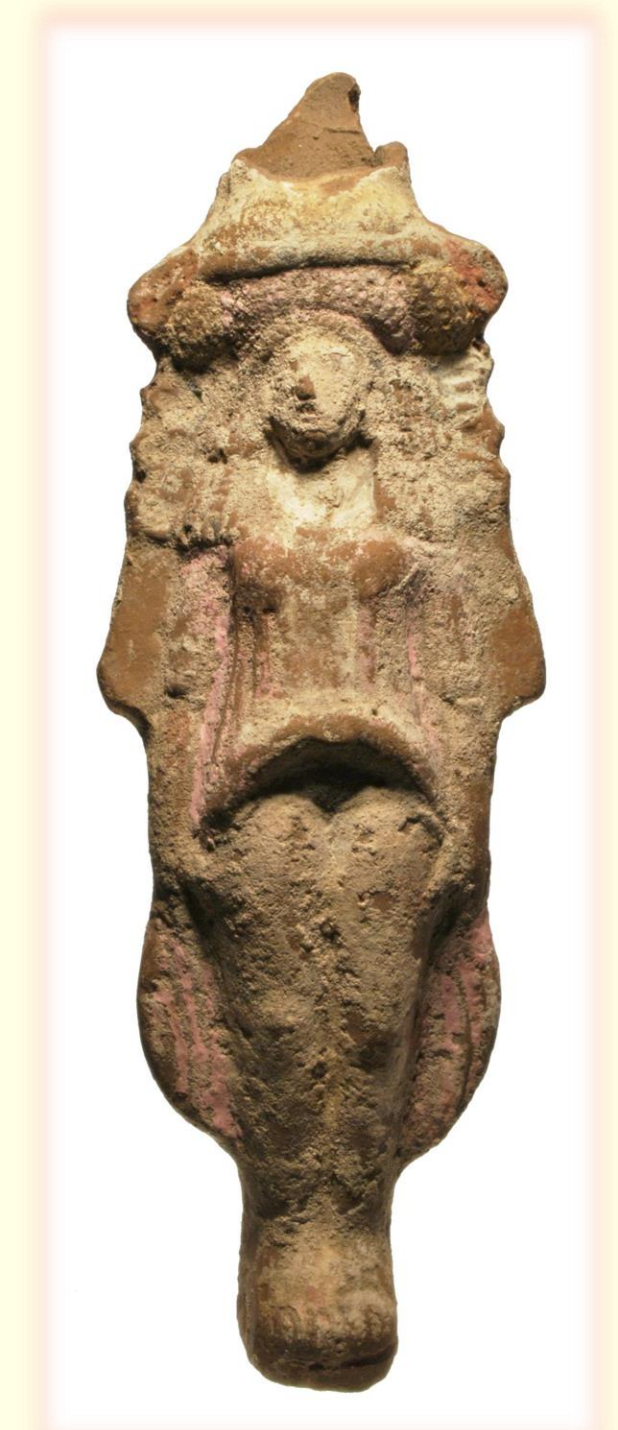
Baubo, Musée du Louvre,
NIII 3191 ; N 3191



Hermaphroditus *Anasyromenos*,
Perdrizet, 1911, p. 5



Hermaphroditus *Anasyromenos*,
Musée du Louvre MNC 915 / Br 390



Isis Aphrodite *Anasyromene* – British
Museum
1886,0401.1451

DISCUSSION

One of the main objectives of my master's dissertation regarding the figure of Hermaphroditus in Hellenistic Egypt was to understand how this god could be perceived by the indigenous part of the Ptolemaic society and how he could be integrated in the Egyptian Pantheon. The preponderance of the *Anasyromenos* iconography in the figurines found in Lower Egypt could be seen as proof of his supposed sphere of influence on marriage and fertility. Considering the Egyptian religion as welcoming to foreign deities and practice, it is possible to suppose that Hermaphroditus could be appealing to the indigenous part of society as well as to the Lagid court. In the first case, the god could have been integrated, as many before him, in existing rituals, in the second, his belonging to the *entourage* of Dionysus, in Egypt assimilated with Osiris, could have been used by the Hellenistic kings to self-promote in public festivals, such as the *Kikellia* or the Great Dionysian *Pompé* of Ptolemy II.

CONCLUSIONS

The Anasyrma ritual is known in the whole Mediterranean, especially associated with Baubo, a goddess mentioned in the myth of Demeter and Persephone. Even if we consider an apotropaic component in the expositions of the genitals, especially of a phallus, it is undoubtable that the main characterisation is its link with a fertility power. The written records mentioned above prove the fact that this practise was present in Egypt well before the Greek conquest, and that it was always connected with the fecundity of the land and of the population. Moreover, they denote a considerably chronological length in which Anasyrma was performed (XII century BC – I century AD, at least).

It is not surprising that, in a territory that was famous for its extraordinary fertility and richness in raw materials, fecundity rituals occupied a place of great importance in society and religion.

