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The *Anasyrma* Fertility Ritual in Ancient Egypt: from Hathor to Hermaphroditus

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Abstract

The *Anasyrma* is a fertility ritual in which a person or a divinity lifts up their skirt to show their genitals. The first Egyptian attestation is noted in the Chester Beatty I papyrus: Hathor lifts up her robe in front of the god Ra to make him laugh after he was offended by the god Bebon. In one hymn in Esna temple there is a sacred ritual linked to Hathor: on the twenty-ninth day of Athyr, two women expose their genitals and breasts in front of a representation of the goddess to bless the Pharaoh and the land. Herodotus (*Historiae*, II, 59-61) describes the festival of the goddess Artemis (Bastet) in Bubastis. He reports that, during the journey made by boat on the river Nile to reach Bubastis, some women lifted their vestment to show their genitals in front of villages and fields to bless them with fertility. This ritual can also be performed to be blessed by a god: Diodorus Siculus (*Biblioteca Historica* I, 84-85) writes that women went in front of the Apis bull lifting their robes to be blessed by his fertility powers. At the present moment, sixteen figurines depicting the god Hermaphroditus were found in Lower Egypt, all dating to the Graeco-Roman period, and eight of them show Hermaphroditus *Anasyromenos*. This god was believed to be the inventor of marriage and to be part of the sacred cycles of Aphrodite and Dionysus, associated in Egypt with Hathor, the goddess of sexuality, and Osiris in his aspect of god of fertility. Even if we consider *Anasyrma* as an apotropaic ritual, in Egypt it has a strong link with fertility. In a time when having an abundance of resources was vital for the progress of the society and the survival of people, it was of great importance to assure a copious harvest also through religious practices.

Keywords

Anasyrma, Egypt, Fertility, Religion, Apotropaic, Hathor, Hermaphroditus

Introduction

Starting from the end of the Late Period and, in particular, during the Ptolemaic rule of the land, Egypt sees the rise of a particular kind of terracotta figurines representing women self-exposing their genitals by lifting up their skirts. This iconographical type is called the “Isis-Aphrodite *Anasyr(o)mene*”, but, as it will be explained in this paper, the identification of the subject represented with the goddess Isis is still debated. This iconography is also not exclusive to female beings: the majority of the Egyptian testimonies of the Greek intersexual god Hermaphroditus depict him while performing the same gesture.¹ The name of this peculiar style of representation comes from the Greek substantive *Ἀνάσυρμα*, a word made of the preposition *ἀνά* (up/above) and the substantive *σῶμα* (skirt/robe). The name is self-explanatory for the actual nature of the gesture: the *anasyrma* is a well attested ritual in Egypt and in the wider Mediterranean basin, in which a deity or a person lifts up their robe to expose their genitalia. The first recorded mention of the rite comes actually from an Egyptian source and is reported in the Chester Beatty I Papyrus, particularly in the tale of the *Contendings of Horus and Seth*, dating to the reign of Ramesses V (c. 1149 – 1145 BC) in the Twentieth Dynasty.

Using clues from both archaeological and textual references two hypotheses concerning the nature and the cultic significance of the *anasyrma* ritual were formulated by the author of this article: a fertility/fecundity connotation and an apotropaic power appointed by the exposure of the genitalia. Using both kind of sources, the aim of this article is, using both kinds of sources, to try to understand the reasons and the meaning of the *anasyrma* ritual in the ancient Egyptian context.

All the translations in the text are under the responsibility of the author of this article.

Methodological Premise

The category of study now called “gender archaeology” is rather recent and has to be included in the field of post-processual archaeology.² With specific regard to the focus of this article, i.e. the *anasyrma* as a ritual with a fertility connotation, especially when analysing archaeological and iconographical evidences, it is necessary to proceed with this analysis bearing in mind that it should not be assumed that any female figurine is a fertility figurine, equivalence born after 1827.³ Even in the study of this ritual, its fertility component is very often taken for granted, without bringing concrete evidence and focusing solely on texts or solely on the archaeological record. That’s the reason why my interest in pursuing a preliminary study that would consider both aspects arose. I also do believe that the study of antiquity must be approached without starting from modern preconceptions that may distort our interpretation, especially when approaching the subject of gender and what is interconnected with it, but it is the sources we receive from the ancients that must be the basis of our method of study.⁴

When investigating the theme of the exposure of genitalia in a ritual or apotropaic context, it is fundamental to acknowledge the connection genitalia-obscenity as a modern construct, that didn’t

¹ Beretta, 2021: 119-120

² Pere-nouges, 2022: 15-16.

³ Budin, 2015: 30

⁴ Conkey-Spector, 1984: 1-3

exist in antiquity in these particular instances. This modern perception can lead to difficulties in various aspects of the analysis and communication of the scientific research in the domain of religion, especially in cases in which the researcher aims to reach the general public. As expressed by Morris while writing about an aura of “censorship” that still seems to hover over publications when discussing sexuality or gender studies:

while such censure has eroded markedly in the wake of the western sexual revolution and gay rights movement, it still persists in many of the visions of ancient Egypt conjured up for public consumption.⁵

It is important to bear in mind that there is no subject, approached with scientific rigour, that has to be considered estranged from academical research. Egyptian religion (public or private), everyday life and, also the afterlife were pervaded by what could be perceived today as almost an “obsession” with fertility and protection against nefarious events. To understand the reasons behind these behaviours, we have to shift from our modern experiences to the ones of an individual living several millennia ago in ancient times:⁶ the perils of famine, of the destruction of the harvest and of illnesses were constantly present. These are factors which obviously meant that people did everything in their power to prevent these misfortunes. But we can witness a similar kind of behaviour also today in our modern world, in the field of agriculture there are some relics of millenarian rituals to promote fecundity and many people use lucky charms in everyday life.⁷

Evidences of the Presence of the *Anasyrma* Ritual in Ancient Egypt

The *Anasyrma* ritual is well attested in Egypt both in archaeological and literary sources. As previously mentioned in the introduction, the earliest attestation, from a chronological point of view, is the Chester Beatty I Papyrus.⁸ Given the origin of this text and the fact that the *Anasyrma* isn't recorded in any Greek literary sources and archaeological contexts until the Hellenistic Period, Olender believes that this particular kind of religious gesture could have an Egyptian origin.⁹ This hypothesis should still be taken into consideration with caution, though it is true that the practice of the *anasyrma* is recorder in Egypt in periods that are antecedent to the Ptolemaic Dynasty and the Hellenistic Period and is completely related to the Egyptian culture. The following paragraphs are devoted to the analysis of the Egyptian records and characterisation of the ritual.

Archaeological Records

The firsts archaeological representations of the *anasyr(o)mene* iconography in proper fashion date to the end of the Late Period, but it is necessary to look at previous examples of nude feminine figures in clay to understand whether this iconography could have evolved from older models. It is supposed that the *anasyr(o)mene* type could derive from the typical iconography, already existing in the Second Intermediate Period, of female goddesses represented naked, with their arms along the body, the hands resting on the thighs and wearing a complicated and extravagant coiffure. Female nude figurines are present in the material culture from the Second Intermediate Period and continue

⁵ Morris, 2007: 197.

⁶ Johns, 1982: 29.

⁷ Johns, 1982: 29.

⁸ Gardiner, 1931.

⁹ Olender 1990: 93.

to exist up until the third/fourth century AD and are part of a consistent iconographical system, despite the evolution of iconographic categories and production techniques.¹⁰ But who are these deities? There are various interpretations of their probable identification, but three are the main theories considered most valid and they are all connected with the concept of the awakening of generative forces. The naked female figurines in clay found in various archaeological contexts (domestic, religious, funerary) are profoundly linked with the expression of fertility since the New Kingdom.¹¹ The first hypothesis was postulated by F. Dunand, who considers these naked figures to be a sort of iconographic “evolution” of the wrongly called “concubines of the dead” that should be interpreted as a sort of funerary Hathor.¹² The second hypothesis was formulated always by Dunand, who thinks that the goddess is a form of a naked Isis with jewellery and the characteristic hairstyle, an iconographical type that could be derived from the “Oriental Aphrodite” iconography.¹³ D. M. Bailey believes, instead, that these images represent Hathor of the West (a funerary Hathor), that should be connected with the syncretic goddess Hathor-Aphrodite.¹⁴ The correspondence between Hathor and Aphrodite is recorded also by Herodotus and other Greek authors with the mechanism of the *interpretaatio graeca*.¹⁵ Meaning that the idea of an overlapping between Hathor and Aphrodite was elaborated by an observatory of the Egyptian society before the Ptolemaic conquest and, later, became part of Egyptian culture during the Greek ruling of the land, in which religion and the correspondences between Egyptian and Greek gods, especially between Osiris and Dionysus, were used as an *instrumentum regni* to appeal to the indigenous part of the population.¹⁶

It is also debated which goddess is represented in the *anasyr(o)mene* type in Egyptian clay work. For examples see BM 1888,0601.111, BM 1886,578,26, Musée du Louvre E 20739. There are three major hypothesis and it is not believed that, at the present time, it can be possible to postulate a certain identification. Dunand, basing her supposition on the Herodotean record of the festival in honour of Artemis-Bastet (explained further in the paper), believes that this goddess is a particular form of Isis-Bubastis, patron of women and maternity, a Ptolemaic transposition of the fertility goddess Bastet that was often confused with Hathor.¹⁷ She also thinks that it could simply be an Isis-Aphrodite,¹⁸ but it is important to remember that correspondence between Isis and Aphrodite it is purely Egyptian, and it is unmatched in other areas of the Mediterranean basin, meaning that it could be of difficult comprehension outside of Egypt, where both goddesses were also worshipped.¹⁹ Boutanin follows this interpretation but specifies the Hathoric component of this representation: the goddess holds what could be a sistrum and has on her head the crown of Hathor, linked with fertility because it seems that, on the top, what was believed to be a lotus flower bud is to be identified as the top of a phallus,²⁰ a common *ex-voto* in honour of this goddess. Bailey supposes that the goddess is to be identified with Hathor-Aphrodite or simply as a peculiar depiction of Aphrodite worshipped in

¹⁰ Donnat & Weygand, 2020: 14.

¹¹ Ballet, 2020: 22.

¹² Dunand, 1973: 84-85.

¹³ Dunand, 1990: 28.

¹⁴ Bailey, 2008: 9.

¹⁵ The *Interpaetatio Graeca/Romana* is a mechanism used firstly by the Greeks and, in later times, by the Romans. It consists in not using the translation of the names of the deities in Greek/Latin, but in the creation of a correspondence between an indigenous god and his Greek/Roman counterpart, ex. Osiris-Dionysus, Isis-Demeter, Hathor-Aphrodite, Horus-Apollon and so on (Von Lieven, 2016: 61).

¹⁶ Coulon, 2013: 177-181.

¹⁷ Dunand, 1973: 85-86 and Von Lieven, 2016: 63.

¹⁸ Dunand, 1990: 28.

¹⁹ Dunand, 1973: 84.

²⁰ Boutanin, 2014: 60.

Egypt.²¹ A peculiar wooden mechanical figurine depicting a naked goddess with an heavy wig that should be identified with Hathor had moving arms that could be possibly used to show or hide the vulva and is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Reeves argues that they were used in official or cultic practice to reenact the *anasyrma* performed by Hathor in front of her father in Papyrus Chester Beatty I.²² Moreover, a Late Period bowl, now in the British Museum, shows a ritual dance, considered to be performed in honour of Hathor. One of the women represented in this choreography lifts up her skirt in an iconography coherent with the *anasyrma* ritual (see BM47992).²³ Considering all of these hypotheses and a possible link with Isis, it is nevertheless clear the preponderance of the Hathoric component in the *anasyrma* ritual in Egypt, and this could be probably linked with her epithet of “mistress/lady of the vulva” (Nebethetepet).²⁴ Since the New Kingdom, there are some instances where Hathor and Isis are interchangeable in their religious patronages (as in the Sallier and the Jumilhac Papyri), reaching a point in which the two goddesses are inseparable and complementary.²⁵ This fact could, therefore, explain the seemingly impossibility to identify with certainty the goddess depicted in the act of performing the *anasyrma* ritual. These connections lead to the formulation of the hypothesis that the *anasyr(o)mene* model for goddesses represents a combined form of Isis-Hathor to make explicit the power of both goddesses and to arouse the generative forces of both mankind and nature.

The *anasyrma* gesture is not specific to female beings. In Egypt, and in general in the whole Mediterranean basin, figurines depicting Hermaphroditus *Anasyromenos* are well attested from the Fourth century BC onwards, with a spike in production during the Second century BC.²⁶ Hermaphroditus is an intersexual god, son of Hermes and Aphrodite, originated in Halicarnassus and is first attested in Egypt date at the end of the fourth century BC. The *Anasyromenos* type is the stylistic representation in which Hermaphroditus is mostly represented in Egypt, making up almost the 50% of the representations that are known at the moment,²⁷ it is not excluded that further researches could lead to the discovery of a major use of other styles. This iconography is first recorded in Nelson Island, dating to the end of the fourth century,²⁸ and experienced its greatest fortune during the second century BC. The figurines of Hermaphroditus are mostly found in two different archaeological contexts: religious and funerary. Moreover, all of the *anasyr(o)mene* feminine representation are made from clay, while for Hermaphroditus *anasyromenos* statuettes or vases *appliques* have been found made in clay, bronze and bone/ivory.²⁹ It is not clear why there is this variety of materials, but it is possible that, since Hermaphroditus is not an Egyptian god but has Greek origin, his representation doesn't need to follow a specific pattern connected with fertility or this variation could be a result of his possible apotropaic value. The fact that many of the statuettes are of unknown context makes difficult to perform a complete analysis. In his case we see the exposure of the penis, that could be erected or not and in the majority of instances, it doesn't show signs of priapism or *megalophallia*.³⁰ The moment in which Hermaphroditus shows his phallus should be

²¹ Bailey, 2008: 8-10.

²² Reeves, 2015: 55.

²³ Reeves, 2015: 52.

²⁴ Reeves, 2015: 48.

²⁵ Broze, 1997: 235.

²⁶ Oehmke, 2004: 72

²⁷ Beretta, 2021: 119-120.

²⁸ Gallo, 2017: 86.

²⁹ See Oehmke, 2004: 116 and 129; Adriani, 1952: 30.

³⁰ For an almost complete compendium of the representation of Hermaphroditus see Ajootian, 1988 and Oehmke, 2004.

deemed as a positive revelation, a religious epiphany of fertility or could have the power to protect against the Evil-Eye.³¹

Textual Records

There are four textual records mentioning the *Anasyrma* fertility ritual in ancient Egypt: the Chester Beatty I Papyrus; Herodotus, *Historiae*, II, 59-61, Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, I, 84-85, and an epigraphical inscription on a column in Esna Temple, dating to the Hadrian's reign in within the Roman period (117-138 AD).

The Chester Beatty I Papyrus, as previously stated, dates to the time of Ramesses V. However, it is necessary to mention the fact that some scholars believe that the composition of the tale of the *Contendings of Horus and Seth* dates back to the Middle Kingdom.³² The edition of the text used as base of this article is the one by Sir Alan Gardiner, cited in bibliography. The part of the text is section 4, lines 1-3³³ that are found on the *recto* of the papyrus. After many years of discussion amongst the members of the Ennead regarding who deserves to inherit the throne of Osiris between Horus and Seth, the god Re leaves the court after the god Bebon insults him and hides in his tent (4,1). Hathor goes in front of her father (and also husband?³⁴) and lifts up her robe. The god of the sun bursts into laughter and goes back to the tribunal after his demiurgic power and his role of king are restored by Hathor's gesture (4, 2-3).

*Nnmw m^cw hr pst=f m pzy=f sh jw ib=f r dw ʕ wr jw=f w^ct w=f hr ir sʕ wnn in hwt-hr nbt
nhʕ rsi hr iʕi(=i) jw=s hr h^c m bʕh it=s nb hr dr iw=s k=f ʕ tw.kʕt h^c n pʕ ntr ʕ sbjʕ jw=s
wn jw=f hr dny=f jw=f hmsi r hn^ct ʕ psdt ʕt*

(Amon) was laying on his back in his tent and his heart was greatly distressed, he was alone. After a lot of time³⁵, Hathor, Lady of the Southern Sycamore, arrived and she placed herself in front of her father, Lord of the Universe, and showed her nakedness before his face and the Great God laughed for/with³⁶ her. He got up and sat down with the great Ennead.

Broze defines the *anasyrma*, in this instance, as a humiliation ritual that Hathor undergoes to give back the demiurgic power to her father.³⁷ However, I do not believe that this can be a correct interpretation as the stimulation of the generative forces of the sun god can be considered a consequence of the fertility connotation of the *anasyrma*: Re doesn't laugh *at* Hathor, but *for* and *with* Hathor. He rejoices in seeing the symbol of her vital forces and, in exchange, obtains again his powers of king of the gods and demiurgic lord.³⁸ This function can also be seen as connected to the Pharaoh himself, since she was prayed in the rituals for the symbolic rebirth and revitalization of the king in

³¹ Groves, 2016: 328.

³² Bresciani, 1969: 343

³³ Gardiner, 1931: 16

³⁴ In Thebes, Amon was married to Mut, while in Heliopolis, he was married wi Hathor and they had a son called Harmakys.

³⁵ Lit. "a lot of space".

³⁶ The literal translation is "laughed at her", but, for the reasons explained further in the paragraph, I decided to translate with for/with to express the meaning of Hathor's gesture.

³⁷ Broze, 1997: 237-238.

³⁸ Morris, 2007: 201.

his jubilee.³⁹ It must be remembered, also, that the laughter, in his anthropological aspect, can be seen as a magical means to bring back life.⁴⁰

The second source is Herodotus II,60. The festivities in honour of Bastet are considered by Herodotus the second most important festival in the Egyptian liturgical year.⁴¹ It is possible that this should be identified with the festival celebrated on the eighteenth day of the second month of the season Smw, in which the goddess Bastet was accompanied by the cultic image of Hathor of Dendera.⁴² The Greek author says that some women lift up their skirt (αἱ δὲ ἀνασύρονται ἀνιστάμεναι) when passing by the villages during their voyage by boat to reach Bubastis.

Historiai, II, 60: ἐπεὶ δὲ πλεόντες κατὰ τινα πόλιν ἄλλην γένωνται, ἐγχεύσαντες τὴν βάρην τῇ γῇ ποιεῦσι τοιάδε: αἱ μὲν τινὲς τῶν γυναικῶν ποιεῦσι τὰ περ εἴρηκα, αἱ δὲ τωθάζουσι βοῶσαι τὰς ἐν τῇ πόλει ταύτῃ γυναικάς, αἱ δὲ ὀρχέονται, αἱ δὲ ἀνασύρονται ἀνιστάμεναι. ταῦτα παρὰ πᾶσαν πόλιν παραποταμὴν ποιεῦσι.⁴³

Herodotus also writes that Bastet is to be identified with Artemis, but, as Legrand states in his edition of the text of the second book of the *Historiae*, this ritual doesn't seem appropriate if associated with a *parthenos* goddess, while this gesture and the fecundity nature of the festival would be completely coherent connected with a deity such as Aphrodite.⁴⁴ This hypothesis should not be immediately dismissed but deserves a deeper analysis. The oldest and the latest literary mentions of the *anasyrma* ritual are related to Hathor and also the archaeological records show a deep hathoric component, linked with an explicit sexual undertone that is not possible to refer to Artemis. Moreover, if we take into account the hypothesis made by Dunand of the existence of a peculiar form of Isis-Bubastis with the characteristics already mentioned and the cultic image reported by Alliot, we have to admit that it seems possible that this festival had an Hathoric and a fertility component, explained by the association of Hathor and Isis previously mentioned, that is coherent with the *anasyrma* gesture. Bastet presents an aspect of fertility more related to motherhood and childbirth, a reason supposedly connected to her identification with the *parthenos* goddess Artemis, while Hathor is more related to fertility concerning the sexual sphere. This festival could thus be interpreted as the union of these two spheres of influence: the *anasyrma*, in this circumstance, would thus be assumed to be related to the hathoric component of the Bubastis' festival, but with an understanding more directed towards fertility that produces life through the birth of new individuals, animals, and crops from the fields.

Diodorus Siculus, a Sicilian historian, devoted various part of his monumental work, the *Bibliotheca Historica*, to Egyptian traditions, since he visited the land during the CLXXX Olympiad (60-56 BC). While writing about the cult of the animals in Egypt, he mentions a particular religious practice in honour of the Apis Bull. After the death of the old Apis, his priests travel all over Egypt to find his successor. Once he was found, the bull and the priests travel back to Memphis stopping in some cities and villages during their journey. Diodorus reports that, some women, go in front of the enclosure where the bull was kept during his 40 days of sacred retreat in Nilopolis and lift up their skirts (ἀνασυράμεναι τὰ ἑαυτῶν γεννητικά).

Bibliotheca Historica, I,85: προσθετέον δὲ τοῖς εἰρημένοις τὰ λειπόμενα τῶν γινομένων περὶ τὸν ἱερὸν ταῦρον τὸν ὀνομαζόμενον Ἄπιν. ὅταν γὰρ τελευτήσας ταφῇ μεγαλοπρεπῶς,

³⁹ Pinch, 1993: 222.

⁴⁰ Bonafin; 2005: 37.

⁴¹ Volokhine, 1998: 69.

⁴² Alliot, 1949: 232-233, see also the twentieth column of the calendar of the festivities in honour of Hathor in Edfu.

⁴³ When those who sail come near some inhabited place, they bring the boat closer to the bank and do like this: some women continue like before, others scream and make joke against the women of the village, other dance, other go to the front and lift up their skirts. They do like this every time they pass by a village.

⁴⁴ Legrand, Hérodote, 1963: 59, note 5.

ζητοῦσιν οἱ περὶ ταῦτ' ὄντες ἱερεῖς μόσχον ἔχοντα κατὰ τὸ σῶμα παράσημα τὰ παραπλήσια τῷ προϋπάρχαντι: ὅταν δ' εὑρεθῇ, τὰ μὲν πλήθη τοῦ πένθους ἀπολύεται, τῶν δ' ἱερέων οἷς ἐστὶν ἐπιμελὲς ἄγουσι τὸν μόσχον τὸ μὲν πρῶτον εἰς Νείλου πόλιν, ἐν ᾗ τρέφουσιν αὐτὸν ἐφ' ἡμέρας τετταράκοντα, ἔπειτ' εἰς θαλαμηγὸν ναῦν οἶκημα κεχυρωμένον ἔχουσαν ἐμβιβάσαντες ὡς θεὸν ἀνάγουσιν εἰς Μέμφιν εἰς τὸ τοῦ Ἡφαίστου τέμενος. ἐν δὲ ταῖς προειρημέναις τετταράκονθ' ἡμέραις μόνον ὁρῶσιν αὐτὸν αἱ γυναῖκες κατὰ πρόσωπον ἰστάμεναι καὶ δεικνύουσιν ἀνασυράμεναι τὰ ἐαυτῶν γεννητικά.⁴⁵

This record suggests that the *anasyrma* has a deep connection with deities that are purely Egyptian and don't have a correspondence in the *interpretatio graeca*, such as the Apis Bull. Mariette reports that, upon the discovery of a statue of the Apis Bull during the nineteenth century AD, some women that lived in villages near the Serapeum went in front of the statue lifting up their skirt to be blessed by the fertility powers of the god.⁴⁶ It seems possible to postulate that the *anasyrma* has been part of the Egyptian folklore and popular religion for a great chronological length and, even at Mariette's time, a reminiscence of the ritual was still a component in personal piety and religious tradition. The aim of the gesture in this peculiar practice in honour of Apis is uncertain, but its significance seems to be in the realm of fertility. Two hypotheses can be formulated: the women lift up their skirt to be blessed by the fertility powers of the bull *or* they perform the *anasyrma* to bless the bull himself with their generative forces. Considering the fact that, basing on Diodorus' report, the Apis, at that moment, wasn't an adult bull, it also may be that both of these hypotheses can be considered valid.

Serge Sauneron, in the third volume of his work in which he published all of the epigraphical evidence preserved in the temple of Esna, reports the following inscription, dating to the reign of Emperor Hadrian, situated on the fourteenth column of the hypostyle hall. It describes the recommended religious practices to follow to honour the goddess Hathor during the festival celebrated on the twenty-ninth day of the month of Athyr⁴⁷ (the modern eight of December):

wt̃s rd m-bʒh-s hmt ms mndwy m-bʒh hmt ^{SD}

The ritual celebrated during this festivity seems to be a sort of variation of the classic *anasyrma*. It is performed by two women, possibly priestesses, one of whom is said explicitly to show her breasts, while the other one is written that has to lift up one of her legs. But I believe this to be a periphrasis to indicate the exposition of the genitalia in a more subtle and chaste way, without using in an explicit manner the name of the genitalia. If we read the following lines of the text, it is possible to see that the ritual is performed for two main purposes: to protect the god Re and the Pharaoh from “all bad things” and to wish fecundity and fertility upon humans, animals and fields (this is made explicit by the epithet of Hathor Ermouthis⁴⁹). It seems possible, in this instance, to postulate that the *anasyrma* doesn't have only a fertility *or* an apotropaic power that exclude one-another, but it could be performed with a double meaning in the same context. It is also evident that in Egypt, this religious gesture has an extremely long history: if we consider the Chester Beatty I Papyrus' composition at the same time of the literary transcription and this inscription from Esna to describe a ritual celebrated

⁴⁵ It is now also necessary to say other reports about what happens in honour of the sacred bull called Apis. When he dies, after being buried with great ceremonies, the priests in charge to do so, search for a veal that has on his body some distinctive signs, like the ones of the bull before him. After he has been found, the people suspend their mourning, and the priests bring the veal firstly to Nilopolis, where he is kept for forty days and, after having taken him on a boat with a golden cabin like he is a god, they bring him to Memphis in the sanctuary of Hephaistos. During the forty days previously mentioned, only women can see him, they go in front of him and lift up their skirts to show the genitalia.

⁴⁶ Myśliwiec, 2000: 60.

⁴⁷ Sauneron, 1968: 286.

⁴⁸ Lifting up a leg by a woman in front of her (Hathor n.d.a.) and showing the breasts by another woman.

⁴⁹ Serpentine deity associated with the fertility of all creation.

during the Roman Period, the *anasyrma* seems to have been known in Egypt for, at least, c. 1500-1600 years. Moreover, the testimonies written by Herodotus and Diodorus show actual instances in which this ritual was effectively performed in popular cult and in two periods of time that, while close, have at least 300 years of distance. Although we cannot be certain, at the moment, of the actual performance of this ritual throughout the time span in which we see it mentioned/reported, beginning with the Chester Beatty I, the fact that its textual records have such a long tradition suggests its great importance in Egyptian worship.

The Origins of the *Anasyrma* Ritual

The geographical origin of the *anasyrma* ritual is still debated to the present day by scholars. The places taken in account are two: Egypt and Greece. The uncertainty comes from the fact that the exposition of genitalia is also present in Greek mythology in connection with the tale of Demeter and Baubo/Iambe, in order to arouse laughter. According to the Homeric *Hymn to Demeter*⁵⁰ (c. seventh-sixth century BC), the goddess stopped at the home of a woman named Iambe during her journey in search of Persephone and Iambe made her laugh for the first time in a long period with fiddles and jokes, but without mentioning the exposure of the vulva. The first mention of the exposition of the genitals, however, was written by Clement of Alexandria in his book *Cohortatio ad Grecos* 2, 17-18 (c. end of the second century – beginning of the third century AD) and he calls Baubo the old woman that welcomed Demetra.⁵¹ Even if Clement of Alexandria reports that this version of the myth of Demeter contains the rituals celebrated in occasion of the Eleusinian Mysteries, it is not completely sure if he refers to the mysteries celebrated at Eleusi⁵² in Greece, because there is still no certainty of the presence of Baubo in Greek mysteries or the ones celebrated in Alexandria.⁵³ There is still debate around the iconography of Baubo, defined as the goddess of Mirth.⁵⁴ The only certain iconography is firstly found in Priene, dating from the third-second century BC and is a depiction of a female figure with a very small head and a big belly with a face represented doing the *anasyrma* gesture.⁵⁵ There is a peculiar typology of terracotta figures, previously attributed to Baubo, that were greatly distributed⁵⁶ in Egypt since the end of the Late Period, representing female figurines spreading their legs and pointing to their vulva. Currently these are no longer believed to depict Baubo.⁵⁷ It is considered more plausible that these figurines, found in various contexts (funerary, domestic, religious) should be identified as *ex voto* dedicated to Isis, Bastet or Hathor.⁵⁸ The sexual characterisation of these terracotta allows us to believe that these figurines can be considered as depicting good demons with prophylactic and apotropaic nature.⁵⁹ The exposure of the female genitalia and the fact that these figurines are represented while in the act to point to them suggests the intentions to ward off the Evil Eye, more than a fertility ritual. Moreover, when the *anasyrma* is mentioned in texts, of both Egyptian and Greek origin, the constant is a robe/skirt that has to be lifted up, coherent with the etymology of

⁵⁰ Anonymous in Evelyn-White, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica*.

⁵¹ Clement OF Alexandria, *Cohoratio ad Garecos*, 2, 17-18.

⁵² The historian Psellus records the *anasyrma* as part of the festivals in Eleusi (Morris, 2007: 216), but he lived during the eleventh century AD, hence it is not believed to be a completely reliable source.

⁵³ Morris, 2007: 215.

⁵⁴ Mirth in Greece is used as a periphrasis to indicate female genitalia, in particular the clitoris (Kleus, 1985: 30).

⁵⁵ Karaghiorga-Stathacopoulou, 1986: 89.

⁵⁶ Boutanin, 2014: 57 writes that we have 47 terracotta of this iconographical type preserved in various museums in the world.

⁵⁷ Dunand, 1990: 179, Bailey, 2008: 46.

⁵⁸ Karaghiorga-Stathacopoulou, 1986: 89.

⁵⁹ Boutanin, 2014: 61.

the word *anasyrma* explained at the beginning of this article. Olender argues in favour of the Egyptian origins of this pose basing his hypothesis mainly on the Chester Beatty I Papyrus.⁶⁰ Even if we consider the gesture made by Hathor from this text an isolated case, it is true that the Bubastis festival mentioned by Herodotus, records instances of an effective *anasyrma* ritual celebrated by Egyptian women in a period that was antecedent to the Greek conquest, and in which the influence of Greek culture on Egypt was still barely existent in the religious sphere⁶¹, moreover, the Apis Bull, object of the ritual reported by Diodorus, is a god of pure Egyptian origin and not a god whose cult was imported from Greece. What is interesting to note is that there are similarities between the *anasyrma* performed in the Egyptian and Greek myth: the gesture of the *anasyrma* has the function to solve a problematic situation with laughter. The Hymn to Demeter is a prayer with a mythological recite that has the purpose to explain the sphere of action of the goddess, while the Chester Beatty I is a tale that is supposed to have a diffusion in a popular context, both for the language that presents various errors and imperfection and for the explicit content of various passages of the tale⁶², moreover, various sections of the text, such as the one that we are investigating, are characterized by an humoristic undertone.⁶³ It is also important to underline the fact the both Re and Demeter are in a state of renunciation of their divine powers. This literary *topos* is also present in Japanese literature in the Shinto myth of the Sun: Susa-no-wo, god of the storm, offended his sister Ama-Terasu, goddess of the sun. The goddess hid in a cave, where all of the gods tried to convince her to come out. It was only with the intervention of Ame-no-uzume-no-mik, that opened her robe to show the breasts and the genitals, provoking the laughter of all gods, that the goddess of the sun went out of the cave and gave the sunlight back to humanity.⁶⁴ These connections could lead to the formulation of a hypothesis: that the *anasyrma* gesture, in a context connected with a crisis situation that is resolved with laughter has to be considered as a literary *escamotage* that embraces various cultures. Moreover, all of the myths are connected with the disappearance of the sun, since in the myth of Demeter the goddess curses the Earth with an endless winter.

Although it is not possible to dispel the doubt surrounding the geographical origins of the *anasyrma* at the present time, it is true that the hypothesis of an Egyptian origin seems particularly appealing, considering the literary and archaeological evidence discussed above.

Conclusions

Having looked at all of this evidence, it is necessary to consider the cultural significance of the exposure of the vulva and the phallus and to comprehend if they have a different meaning. As already stated, we must approach this subject without the modern associations between genitalia and obscenity and consider the cultural *milieu* in which this iconographical type developed. The phallus has a great connotation of fertility and apotropaic powers and is often used in rituals linked with the

⁶⁰ Olender, 1990: 93.

⁶¹ Even if the presence of Greek immigrants in Egypt is attested since the Fifth century BC, the Olympian gods were prayed only in domestic context, the normalisation of the Greek cult in Egyptian religion has to be dated to the Third Century BC with the *Ptolemaia* Pompé under king Ptolemy Philadelphus (271-270 BC) (BALLET, 2020: 103). Moreover, Herodotus himself believe that some Greek cultic traditions, especially the ones connected with the cult of the phallus od Dionysos, were of Egyptian origin (*Historiai*, II, 49). Even if it is not true, this statement tells us that at that time, it was the Egyptian religion that had a dominant cultural role.

⁶² Gardiner, 1931: 10-11.

⁶³ Houlihan, 2001: 1.

⁶⁴ Morris, 2007: 199-200.

sowing of the fields or against the Evil Eye.⁶⁵ The exposure of the vulva could be linked to the power of fertility and of sexual provocative act,⁶⁶ but could also have an apotropaic meaning capable of warding off evil and pain and generating life.⁶⁷ As previously expressed, while analysing the epigraphical evidence from Esna temple, it is not possible to determine if the *anasyrma* is performed with a fertility or an apotropaic meaning in every occasion, though there are instances where both are present at the same time. The apotropaic component can be expressed by the fact that this ritual is sometimes accompanied with humoristic expressions (as stated by Herodotus) and can be used to protect someone, like is reported in Esna for the protection of the Pharaoh. This gesture has to be considered as primarily linked with the arousing of vital forces firstly by supernatural beings and, later, by mortals. The fact that Hermaphroditus is depicted while showing his phallus is also to refer to the realm of fecundity: he is believed to be protector of marriages and puberty. The apotropaic significance is not the main objective of the *anasyrma*, but it is a consequence of the exposition of the genitalia, as the organs linked with a generative powers were not completely understood in ancient times.⁶⁸ This aura of mystery can lead to that their power being able to frighten nefarious forces and envious thoughts, from which the Evil Eye has origin. The fact that the apotropaic function is not the main scope of the *anasyrma* is supported by the fact that neither the female *anasyr(o)mene* figurines nor Hermaphroditus are represented as deformed or scary and both Hathor and Hermaphroditus are deities that have fertility as their sphere of action.

It should also be noted that the identification of the goddess represented in *ansyr(o)mene* terracotta figure should be reconsidered or, at least, redefined. The archetype seems to be Egyptian and derives from earlier naked female figurines with elaborated hairstyles. It is true that the deities represented in this iconography wear Greek clothes (usually a chiton and a himation), but it is also true that this iconographical type is typically Egyptian and, so, it should be considered as associated with the representation of Egyptian goddesses. These two reasons, together with the hypothesis of an Egyptian origin for the *anasyrma* ritual, lead to the possibility that these goddesses should be considered a representation of Isis/Hathor in Greek fashion and that the identification with Aphrodite, according to the dictates of *interpretaatio graeca*, follows the birth of this stylistic typology.

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⁶⁵ Johns, 1982: 42.

⁶⁶ Ballet, 2020: 31.

⁶⁷ Bonafin, 2005: 41.

⁶⁸ Laqueur, 135: 1990.

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