

THE PERSEA TREE FROM ALEXANDER  
TO LATE ANTIQUITY  
A CONTRIBUTION TO THE CULTURAL  
AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT\*

*Abstract:* The paper sketches a cultural history of the sacred tree persea in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt with a particular focus on the patterns of continuity and transformation in comparison with the dynastic period. The persea case shows that the survival of Egyptian religious traditions was combined with their adaptation to new socio-cultural contexts and with innovative uses, such as the integration of persea within Greek agonistic traditions under the Ptolemies. The dedication of persea trees to a mixed Greco-Egyptian pantheon in *OGIS* 97 (early second century BC) sheds light on the interaction between Egyptian religion and loyalty to the Ptolemies and on its socio-political underpinnings. Moreover, personal religious commitment and legal measures meant to prevent the extinction of sacred trees in the Imperial period allow for a discussion concerning the applicability of the modern category of environmentalism to the study of ancient cultures.

In dealing with the topic of Egyptian sacred trees, this paper replaces the hitherto dominant interest in ancient and modern botanical classifications with a focus on the diachronic changes and socio-cultural contexts of use of sacred trees in Greco-Roman Egypt. The analysis focuses on the case study of the tree called *περσ(ε)ία* / *persea* in Greek and Latin sources. After drawing attention to the non-complete overlap between the name adopted by Greek and Latin authors for this plant and the Egyptian denominations *išd* and *šwʒb*, the focus will be on the patterns of continuity, innovation and re-contextualization of Egyptian religious traditions in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt and on the social actors and contexts that were involved in the use and protection of sacred plants. When approached from this perspective, the evidence on persea provides a dossier to investigate some aspects of the interaction between continuity and transformation in cultural traditions, with particular regard to cases where traditions were adapted across cultural and ethnic limits. Moreover, the persea dossier enables us to discuss ancient contexts in which, for religious reasons, nature was seen as worth of being protected

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and preserved against the risk of extinction. This will allow us to raise some preliminary questions concerning the limits of applicability of modern environmental thinking to ancient cultures, in contexts in which the preservation of vegetal species was seen as an important value for the identity of a community, thus requiring individual and institutional commitment.

## 1. TRACKING EGYPTIAN TRADITIONS BEHIND THE GREEK PERSEA

In attempting to detect the Egyptian correspondent of the Greek *περσεΐα*, modern scholars have drawn attention to plants identified in hieroglyphic texts as *išd* and *šw3b*.<sup>1</sup> Evidence of the dynastic period reveals an overlap between the religious uses associated with these two denominations, thus hampering a systematic functional distinction between them. Textual and iconographic documentation before the Hellenistic period attributes to the *išd* a strong connection with eternity and renewal, notably as regards sunlight, the destiny of the dead, and kingship.<sup>2</sup> In the iconographic evidence, *išd* trees are often depicted in scenes related to the ritual legitimation of royal power, but they also appear to frame the rising sun, thus providing a visual representation of the tree's status as "tree of the horizon".<sup>3</sup> A special association with Osiris is documented in the divine epithets *wꜣ-išd* ("Who opens / inaugurates the *išd*") or *ḥꜣj-ib ꜣꜣ išd* ("Who is in the heart of the *išd*"). The latter is paralleled by images of Osiris inside the *išd* on New Kingdom coffins.<sup>4</sup> Framing

<sup>1</sup> On Egyptian sacred plants in general, see Derchain (1975); Charpentier (1979); Baum (1988); Koemoth (1994); Malaise (1995); Amigues (2002) and the papers collected in Aufrère (1999-2005), in particular Aufrère (1999); most recently, see Waitkus (2014) and Leitz (2014), both mainly focusing on the geographical list of Edfu. On *išd*, *šw3b* and *persea*, see also Gamer-Waller (1975); Kákosy (1980); Germer (1982; 1987); Friis e.a. (1986); Amigues (1989) 205-207; Amigues (2001) 410, 429-431; Amigues (2010) 130; el-Enany (2001).

<sup>2</sup> As regards kingship, *išd* appears as a central element in the scenes where Thoht writes down the Pharaoh's regnal years and in *ḥb-sd* scenes representing the royal jubilee: cf. Gamer-Waller (1975) 658-659; Kákosy (1980); Baum (1988) 274; Koemoth (1994) 105-106; el-Enany (2001). A clear example of the link between *išd* and the durability of kingship is provided by the decoration of the Chapel of the Throne of Re in Edfu, for which see Ibrahim (1975).

<sup>3</sup> For the link between *išd* and the sun, see Baum (1988) 264-265; Koemoth (1994) 53-122; cf. the ceiling decoration of the Wabet chapel of Dendera (*Dendara* IV, pl. 315).

<sup>4</sup> Baum (1988) 274; Koemoth (1994) 102-104, 135-157, 157-163; Perdu (2012); Coulon & Masson (2012).



Fig. 1: Fragments of an offering statue with the cartouches of Ramses II inscribed on the leaves of a sacred plant; from Legrain (1909), CGC 42143 and 42143bis

the appearance of a solar god, a king, or a dead person, is a function attributed to other sacred trees as well, in particular the plant called *šwšb*. Textual sources mentioning *šwšb* are not as numerous as those concerning *išd*. Moreover, the religious functions of *šwšb* are difficult to understand except when they overlap with those of *išd*.<sup>5</sup> A fragmentary small statue preserved in Cairo is revealing of the problems that modern interpreters face when trying to disentangle the functions of the two trees. The statue depicts Pharaoh Ramses II in the act of kneeling to make an offering to Amun (Fig. 1). The frontal fragment has Ramses II holding a pedestal with a ram's head on top and the centre inscribed with the Pharaoh's cartouches surrounded by two stylized trees. Branches and leaves of this tree decorate the base of the statue as well, some of

<sup>5</sup> For evidence of *šwšb* from the New Kingdom down to the 30th dynasty, see Baum (1988) 87-90; Malaise (1995) 133-135.

which are also inscribed with cartouches. The tree has been identified with the *išd* on the grounds of analogy with temple scenes in which the pharaonic name is written on the leaves of this tree. This may be correct, yet a warning against generalization comes from a stele from Kawa, dating to the reign of Taharqa (seventh century), where the description of a similar statue is preserved and the depicted tree is named *šw3b*.<sup>6</sup>

Due to their functional similarities, some scholars have suggested that the names *išd* and *šw3b* may in fact refer to only a single type of tree, which would take alternative denominations in different religious contexts. This hypothesis has been abandoned by recent scholarship, which has reaffirmed the interpretation of *išd* and *šw3b* as indeed two distinct plants. Attempts at connecting species classified by modern botany with hieroglyphic denominations have led scholars to see the *išd* tree as the correspondent of *Balanites Aegyptiaca*, a deciduous tree cultivated in Egypt since Antiquity and today still present in some areas of the Egyptian deserts and of the Nile valley (Fig. 2).<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, *šw3b* would correspond to *Mimusops Laurifolia* Friis (= *Mimusops Schimperii* Hochst), an evergreen species endemic in the Horn of Africa and tropical Arabia, though not in Egypt (Fig. 3). Archaeobotanical surveys suggest that *Mimusops* was introduced and cultivated in Egypt from the early dynastic period onwards. Traces of this plant have been found in tombs from the Old Kingdom to Late Antiquity, confirming the use of *Mimusops* in funeral contexts.<sup>8</sup> A revealing example can be seen in the door of the first court of Hatshepsut's temple in Deir el-Bahari, on both sides of which traces of *Mimusops* have been discovered.<sup>9</sup> *Mimusops* disappeared from Egypt before the Modern Age. As argued below, the decline of Egyptian religion can be seen as a co-factor in the extinction of *Mimusops* in Egypt: protection against the usage of this tree for timber seems to have declined as a consequence of the weakening of religious scruples regarding sacred trees and the disappearance of individual benefactors committed to the cultivation of sacred flora for religious purposes.

<sup>6</sup> Baum (1988) 263-265. Statue of Ramses II: Legrain (1909) CGC 42143; Taharqa's stele: MacAdam (1949) Kawa III, line 12.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Baum (1988) 268.

<sup>8</sup> The types of traces comprise wood, roots, fruits, leaves and funeral bouquets: cf. Friis e.a. (1986); Germer (1987).

<sup>9</sup> Deir el-Bahari VI, pl. 169; Baum (1988), 264; cf. 263-264 for parallels from private funeral monuments of the New Kingdom.

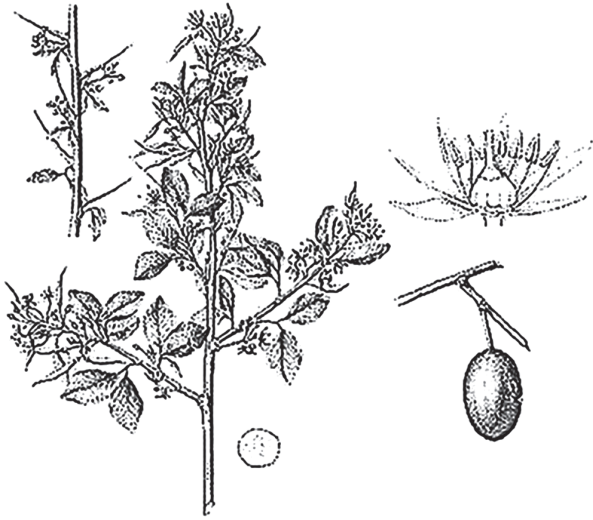


Fig. 2: *Balanites Aegyptiaca* = *išd*? From el-Enany (2001) 161

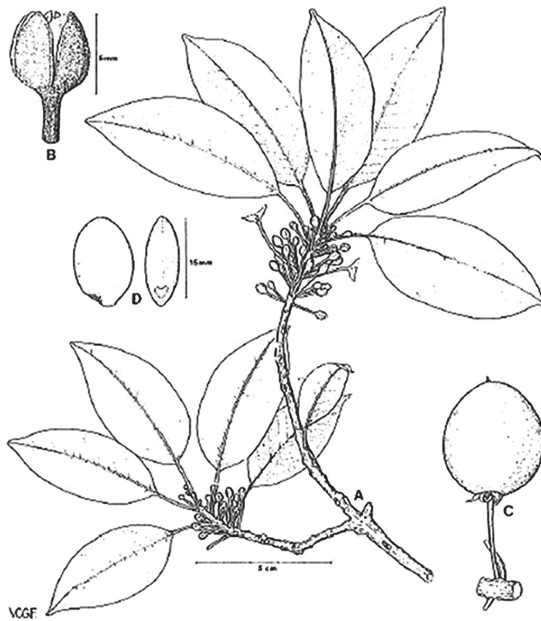


Fig. 3: *Mimusa Laurifolia* = *šwšb*? From Friis e.a. (1986) 203

When it comes to Greek and Latin sources, recent scholarship supports the identification of *περσεΐα* / *persea* with *Mimusops* – *šw3b*. This equation seems to be confirmed by a passage where Theophrastus states that the *persea* is an evergreen tree, a feature matching *Mimusops* rather than the deciduous *Balanites*.<sup>10</sup> Such a conclusion may be acceptable from a modern botanical perspective. The question arises, however, as to whether the method of botanical taxonomy — with particular regard to the opposition evergreen vs. deciduous — actually played a decisive role in a classification system, such as that of Egyptian sources, which was based on religious functions. The hypothesis of a clear-cut association between evergreen flora and the symbolization of eternity is to be rejected on the basis of the prominent role of *išd* — assumedly the deciduous *Balanites* — in relation to renewal and regeneration. We must remember that, when Theophrastus made his observation on the evergreen nature of *persea*, he was not drawing on Egyptian religious knowledge, but was superimposing the external, botanical criteria of an Aristotelian scientist concerned with the classification of plants according to their vegetal features, suitable climate conditions and economic utility. The overlap in the contexts of use of *išd* and *šw3b* in Egyptian religion of the dynastic period therefore may have caused a certain degree of ambiguity for foreigners dealing with Egyptian flora without a proper knowledge of the local religious traditions and with cultural goals other than those on which Egyptian classifications were based. Modern scholars now have access to the textual and iconographic evidence of the dynastic period and are able to use this as a reference for their attempts to distinguish the *išd* and the *šw3b* tree. Greek and Latin authors, on the other hand, had barely any access to this evidence.

Starting from these premises, we may note that Greco-Latin botanical and medical texts often confound *persea* with *persica*, the peach tree. Similarities between the names of these two exotic trees have resulted in a number of alternative etymologies, associating either denomination with Perseus, the Persians, or the region Persis. A similar confusion also affects the ancient authors' classification of the vegetal features of the *persea* and of the peach tree.<sup>11</sup> Such incertitude is typical of botanical texts written outside Egypt, whereas such a risk presumably did not exist in Egypt, where the peach tree did not belong to the traditional flora.

<sup>10</sup> Theophr., *Hist. Plant.* 4.2.5.

<sup>11</sup> Amigues (2002) 144-145.

This observation further urges us to look for sources testifying how vegetal species were listed and grouped in Egypt in the Greco-Roman period, when the Greek name *περσεία* came into use.

Toponyms related to sacred trees provide some interesting information. A demotic papyrus dated 202/1 BC mentions a place called *T3-mtn.t-n-p3-šwb* (“Village of the *šwb*”) in the Coptite nome (Upper Egypt).<sup>12</sup> The reference to *šwb* in the demotic evidence may speak in favour of the identification between this plant and the persea, which appears in Greek toponyms of the same period. The name *Περσεία* is attested in toponyms in the Arsinoite and in the Panopolite nome (Upper Egypt), in Greek papyri from the late third century BC to Late Antiquity.<sup>13</sup> This observation needs, however, to be nuanced in the light of contemporary Egyptian lists of sacred plants. In this regard, an interesting piece of evidence is the geographical list from Edfu dating to the reign of Ptolemy IV (last quarter of the third century BC).<sup>14</sup> This text mentions the provinces of Upper and Lower Egypt and associates them with local sacred trees. The study of this and other similar texts from Greco-Roman Egypt has shown that, while *išd* is one of the most common species, *šwb* never appears in such lists. This observation warns against assuming an exclusive correspondence between the Greek *περσεία*, which is often attested in the evidence from the Greco-Roman period, and *šwb*, a denomination which is absent from the major sources on contemporary Egyptian religious life.

An alternative explanation for this is the effect of a simplification caused by translation. In other words, it is possible that from the Hellenistic period onwards, the Greek name *περσεία* came into use to refer to both Egyptian denominations. Be that as it may, difficulties in superposing heterogeneous criteria between Egyptian, Greek and Latin, and modern classifications call for caution in evaluating botanical aspects of religious history. Accordingly, in the following sections, the focus will move from botany to the cultural and social role of sacred plants in Greco-Roman Egypt.

<sup>12</sup> W. Spiegelberg, *RecTrav* 35 (1913), p. 153-154. For this toponym, cf. Tm Geo ID 11986; Verreth (2011) 675.

<sup>13</sup> Tm Geo ID 1701; 1702; 13470 (Arsinoite nome); 12697 (Panopolite nome); cf. Verreth (2008) 555. Another piece of evidence in favour of the match between *šwb* and persea may be the demotic graffito from Philae (Roman period) discussed below, section 5.

<sup>14</sup> See Baum (1988) 307-327; Aufrère (1999); Waitkus (2014); Leitz (2014), with a comparison of the Edfu text with the variants transmitted by papyri.



## 2. ALEXANDER, PERSEUS AND THE PTOLEMIES: FROM MEMPHIS TO ALEXANDRIA

Greek and Latin sources assign to the hero Perseus a major role in the introduction of the perseae tree into Egypt. Evidence allows us to identify the first century of the Macedonian domination over Egypt as the cultural and political environment within which this story was conceived and spread.

According to Pliny, when Alexander held athletic games in Memphis, he used branches of perseae to crown the winners. He used this plant because it had been introduced into Egypt by his ancestor Perseus.<sup>15</sup> Historical or fictional as it may be, this episode has some internal plausibility as Alexander's propaganda drew on Perseus' precedent in relation to the journey to Siwah, and it did so through the official historian of the campaign, Kallisthenes.<sup>16</sup> According to Arrian (*An.* 3.5.1-2), moreover, Alexander held a festival in Memphis for Zeus *Basileus* after his return from Siwah. The minimalist explanation for this story is that Alexander used perseae to crown the winners of the games because it was the plant most similar to laurel, which was not available there. Conversely, the maximalist view highlights the close link between Zeus and Ammon of Siwah on the one hand, and between the royal god Amun-Re and the religious function of *išd* and *šw3b* on the other. This reading would imply that the priests of Memphis consciously welcomed Alexander as a legitimate ruler by providing him with a sacred plant traditionally associated with pharaonic kingship.

The evidence does not allow us to answer this question. Nor do we know whether the episode of the use of perseae at the Memphite games appeared in the work of Alexander's official historian Kallisthenes. What we can affirm, however, is that this story had already come into

<sup>15</sup> Plin. *NH* 15.13.46: *Eam quoque eruditiores negaverunt ex Perside propter supplicia translata, sed a Perseo Memphi satam, et ob id Alexandrum illa coronari victores ibi instituisse in honorem atavi sui.* The first hypothesis, which is rejected by Pliny, stems from a confusion between perseae and the peach tree (cf. above, n. 11)

<sup>16</sup> Bosworth (1980) 269-270; Caneva (2016), 15-16. A further possible link between Alexander and Perseus is suggested by a local numismatic issue of the period of Kleomenes, probably from Memphis, if we accept the current interpretation of the type as representing Alexander as Perseus with the Phrygian cap on the obverse and Pegasus on the reverse. See Price (1991) I 496-497, no. 3960 a; II Pl. CXLIX; cf. Stewart (1993) 173, 433, fig. 51; Dahmen (2007) 9, 111-112 (Pl. 3.2), thinking of Pegasus as a symbol of the Corinthian League, which seems less pertinent; cf. Dahmen (2012) 284 and n. 16. On the Phrygian helmet in association with Perseus, cf. Lorber (2011) 335-336.



existence at the time of Ptolemy II. An ancient scholium to Nicander's *Alexipharmaka* (Σ 100a) claims that according to Greek authors — with the exception of Nicander himself, who oddly placed Perseus' story in Mycenae — it was Perseus who introduced the perseia tree into Egypt. As proof of this claim, the scholiast quotes Callimachus, who probably refers to the perseia: “And the third [plant], bearing the name of Perseus, of which he planted a shoot in Egypt”.<sup>17</sup> This fragment belongs to an unidentified poem. The loss of the context is frustrating as the passage seems to have listed a series of trees, among which other Egyptian sacred plants might have appeared. Callimachus may have played a role in spreading the tradition associating the perseia tree with Ptolemaic Egypt, which is still attested, many centuries later, in a passage by the erudite Isidore of Seville (sixth-seventh century AD): “It is called *persicum*, because this tree would have been planted in Egypt for the first time by Perseus, from whom the Ptolemies claimed their origin”.<sup>18</sup> Isidore seems to point to the Ptolemies as the authors, or at least as the promoters of this story, which presumably allowed them to establish a link between Egypt, the land over which they ruled, and the Argead tradition, from which they derived a large part of their legitimacy.<sup>19</sup>

Callimachus is not the only Ptolemaic source mentioning the perseia tree. A passage of the work *On Alexandria* by Kallixenos of Rhodes (quoted by Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 5.198a-c), mentions a crown made from this tree in a section of the procession held by Ptolemy II in Alexandria.<sup>20</sup> More precisely, the perseia crown appears at the beginning of the section devoted to Dionysos, which opens with a number of personifications of time periods (*Eniautos* = Year; *Pentetēris* = Lustrum; *Horai* = Seasons), each represented with specific attributes. *Pentetēris* is of major

<sup>17</sup> Fr. 665 Pf.: καὶ τρίτῃ Περσηῖος ἐπόνυμος, ἧς ὀρόδαμνον Αἰγύπτῳ κατέπηξεν.

<sup>18</sup> Isid. Sev., *Etym.* 17.7.7: *Persicum vocatur, quod eam arborem primus in Aegypto severit Perseus, a quo oriundos Ptolomaei ferebant.* Again, the name *persicum* points at confusion between perseia and the peach tree. We do not know whether the same mistake was already present in Callimachus.

<sup>19</sup> From the period of archaic colonization onwards, Greek evidence provides innumerable examples of stories based on paretyymology (such as the one deriving the perseia tree from Perseus) and meant to explain a trait of a foreign culture according to Greek traditions: cf. Dougherty (1993).

<sup>20</sup> The long debate on the date of the procession and on its identification with one edition of the dynastic festival Ptolemaia goes beyond the focus of this contribution: cf. Erskine (2013); Caneva (2016), 88-89, 173-176. The festival took place on a date comprised between 280 and 260 BC, most probably between the late 270s and the early 260s.

importance for us as her attributes are a perseia crown and a palm branch.<sup>21</sup> The time lap evoked by the name *Pentetēris* has suggested to scholars that the festival opened by the procession had a four-year cycle, which was usual for major festivals within Greek tradition. The crown woven with a sacred plant and the palm branch are also the typical prizes of Greek contests, especially for the most distinguished among them, the so-called crown games.<sup>22</sup> Whereas the palm branch is common throughout Greek festivals,<sup>23</sup> the use of perseia has no parallels in Greek evidence.<sup>24</sup> The tree must therefore have been a distinctive trait of an Alexandrian festival.

The use of perseia in an agonistic context was completely new to the Egyptian tradition and points to an innovation caused by the new rulers of Egypt. Real or fictional as it may be, from a Greco-Macedonian perspective the story of Alexander using perseia crowns in honour of his ancestor Perseus provided the early Ptolemies with a foundational narrative for the adoption of perseia in an agonistic festival in Alexandria. The use of perseia also allowed the Ptolemies to stress their unique, mixed identity within the Pan-Hellenic world: Alexander and the local sacred plant highlighted the Ptolemies' special link with Egypt, while Perseus' *aition* depicted them as the legitimate continuators of a Greek and Macedonian tradition.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. PERSEIA AND EGYPTIAN RELIGION IN THE GRECO-ROMAN PERIOD: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

The use of the Egyptian perseia tree in a religious sphere was already known to Theophrastus who, in the passage cited above (*Hist. Plant.* 4.2.5), mentioned the use of perseia wood in the making of various precious objects including *agalmata*. When we move to the Egyptian side of this encounter, evidence does not allow us to understand how the Egyptians reacted to the use of perseia within the purely Greco-Macedonian

<sup>21</sup> 198A-B: ᾧ γυνὴ περικαλλεστάτη καὶ ἴση κατὰ τὸ μέγεθος εἶπετο πολλῶ χρυσῶ καὶ διαπρεπεῖ χιτῶνι κεκοσμημένη, φέρουσα τῇ μὲν μιᾷ τῶν χειρῶν στέφανον περσέας, τῇ δ' ἑτέρα ῥάβδον φοίνικος: ἔκαλειτο δὲ αὕτη Πεντετηρίς.

<sup>22</sup> On the classification of Greek athletic contests, with particular attention to crown games, see Remijsen (2011).

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *RE* s.v. *Agon*, 848.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *RE* s.v. *Kranz*, 1529-1530.

<sup>25</sup> On the Ptolemies' mixed identity, cf. Stephens (2010; 2012).

domain of agonistic festivals. Another point we cannot resolve is whether the use of persea as an agonistic crown was destined to have a long or short life in Ptolemaic Alexandria.

Conversely, two points emerge from sources of the Greco-Roman period, which merit discussion. Firstly, persea continued to play a role in Egyptian sacred landscape and rituals for centuries after Alexander's conquest, in a way that combined continuity with pre-Hellenistic functions and adaptation to new contexts and meanings. Secondly, it seems that at least during the late Roman period, persea trees were often cut down to provide timber for ships. This habit made it necessary from time to time to prohibit the cutting down of these rare trees, a tendency that urges us to consider the question of persea not only from a religious, but also from an economic point of view.<sup>26</sup>

An anonymous Greek poem preserved in a papyrus from the second century AD (*P. Oxy.* XV 1796) interprets the maturation of the persea fruits as a sign of the imminent flooding of the Nile, an event already associated with *šw3b* in Egyptian poetry of the New Kingdom.<sup>27</sup> In the same period, a passage from Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (68) associates persea with the cult of Isis on the grounds of the similarity between its fruit and leaf and the shape of a heart and of a tongue, respectively.<sup>28</sup> The theological speculation quoted by Plutarch is perhaps the result of a late process of philosophical rationalization in the Imperial period. However, the religious grounds for the association between the sacred tree and some anatomical parts are coherent with a more traditional belief in the creative powers of Isis, which are associated with the heart and the tongue.<sup>29</sup> The link between persea and Isis, although mediated by her close Greek correspondent Demeter, may date to the early Ptolemaic period: an account for bricks for building works at Philadelphieia (Fayum) testifies the existence of persea trees around the local temple of Demeter as early as 254 BC (*P. Lond.* VII 1974, cl. II, lines 29, 32).

Another case of the co-existence of old and new traditions concerning the persea is provided by Elian in the early third century AD. In *De Nat. Anim.* XI 40, Elian mentions a sacred persea wood that he was able to

<sup>26</sup> See discussion below, section 5.

<sup>27</sup> *P. Harris* 500 r° 3, 13. Cf. Derchain (1975) 82-86; Malaise (1995) 136.

<sup>28</sup> Plut., *De Is.* 68: τῶν δ' ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ φυτῶν μάλιστα τῇ θεῶ καθιερωῖσθαι λέγουσι τὴν περσεάν, ὅτι καρδία μὲν ὁ καρπὸς αὐτῆς, γλῶττι δὲ τὸ φύλλον ἔοικεν.

<sup>29</sup> Koemoth (1994) 282; cf. Malaise (1995) 132; Amigues (2001) 429-430.

see in the sanctuary of Zeus Polieus in Alexandria. The wood also hosted a portentous five-legged ox consecrated to the god.<sup>30</sup> The close link between Zeus and Sarapis in Roman Alexandria undoubtedly lies behind the extension to Zeus of a sacred tree usually associated with the Isiac divine family. Although already attested during the Hellenistic period, the link between Zeus and Serapis grew stronger during the second–third century AD, when Serapis became the patron god of Alexandria (cf. Zeus Polieus of Elian) and inscriptions testify the diffusion of the compound theonym “Zeus Helios Megas Serapis” from Upper Egypt to the Mediterranean World.<sup>31</sup> Elian (*De nat. animal.* 10.21) also sheds light on a link between the persea and Osiris in Apollonospolis Magna (Edfu), where a religious tradition required that crocodiles were hanged on persea trees and beaten to death on certain special occasions.<sup>32</sup> As Elian and Plutarch (*De Is.* 50) state, crocodiles were associated with Seth, and hanging the animals on the tree of Osiris still translated into practice a common Egyptian interpretation of blood sacrifice as the destruction of a god’s enemies.<sup>33</sup>

#### 4. CULTS IN THEIR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT: PERSEA IN *OGIS* 97

Perhaps the most interesting document concerning the interaction between tradition and innovation in the use of persea comes from the Ptolemaic period, more precisely from the first quarter of the second century BC in Taposiris Parva (El-Mandara). The inscription, which was preserved on a small white marble plaque (23 cm h x 22 cm l), is dated to the joint reign of Ptolemy V and Kleopatra I (193/2-181/0 BC) and contains the dedication of an altar and of persea trees to Osiris, Sarapis, Isis, Anubis and the other gods and goddesses in favour of the royal

<sup>30</sup> Ael., *De Nat. Anim.* 11.40: Καὶ μέντοι καὶ τετράκερω πρόβατα ἐν τῷ τοῦ Διὸς τοῦ Πολιέως ἦν καὶ τρίκερω. Ἐγὼ δὲ καὶ πεντάποδα βοῦν ἱερὸν ἐθεασάμην, ἀνάθημα τῷ θεῷ τῷδε ἐν τῇ πόλει τῇ Ἀλεξανδρέων τῇ μεγάλῃ, ἐν τῷ ἄδομένῳ τοῦ θεοῦ ἄλσει, ἐνθα περσεαὶ σύμφυτοι σκιὰν περικαλλῆ καὶ ψῦξιν ἀπεδείκνυτο.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Bricault (2005).

<sup>32</sup> Ael., *De nat. anim.* X 21: Ἀπολλωνοπολιῖται δὲ Τεντυριτῶν μοῖραι σαγηνεύουσι τοὺς κροκοδείλους, καὶ τῶν περσεῶν - φυτὰ δὲ ἐστὶν ἐπιχώρια - ἐξαρτήσαντες μετεώρουσιν μαστιγοῦσι τε πολλαῖς, καὶ ταῖς ἐξ ἀνθρώπων ξαίνουσι κνυζομένους καὶ δακρύοντας, εἴτα μέντοι κατακόπτουσιν αὐτοὺς καὶ σιτοῦνται.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Malaise (1995) 133. On the Egyptian interpretation of sacrifice as the destruction of a god’s enemy, cf. Yoyotte (1981) 42-47.

couple (*OGIS* 97).<sup>34</sup> The text, which presents a number of unique readings, was found and published in 1887 without diacritics, and the stone has regrettably been lost. Thus, by commenting on the details of this dedication, we must bear in mind that we are working on a somewhat uncertain text:

Ὑπὲρ βασιλέως | Πτολεμαίου καὶ | βασιλίσσης Κλεοπάτρας, |  
θεῶν Ἐπιφανῶν καὶ Εὐχαρίστων, ΟΣΟΡΩ τε | καὶ Σαράπιδι καὶ  
Ἴσιδι | καὶ Ἄνουβιδι,<sup>35</sup> θεοῖς | πᾶσι καὶ πάσαις, τὸμ | βωμὸν καὶ  
τὰς περσέας | Σπάρις καὶ οἱ κωμεγέται καὶ οἱ θιασεῖται.

In favour of King Ptolemy and Queen Kleopatra, Theoi Epiphaneis and Eucharistoi, to Osiris the Great as well as to Sarapis and Isis and Anubis, to all the gods and goddesses, the altar and the persea trees, Sparis and the leaders of the *kōmos* and the members of the *thiasos*.

The name Sparis has no patronymic and is otherwise unattested either in Greek, Egyptian, or Coptic evidence. P.M. Fraser suggested that the name as it appears could be the result of a mistake made by the carver, who would have duplicated the sigma of the precedent line, thus causing the Greek name Paris to become Sparis.<sup>36</sup> This has to remain a hypothesis, but assuming that the edited text is reliable, Fraser's interpretation cannot be discarded without question. The carver made indeed another mistake at lines 10-11, where κωμηγέται would be the correct form. Even if we accept Fraser's emendation, however, it remains unclear whether Paris was a Greek, or an Egyptian bearing a Greek name, in a dedication relating to the sovereigns. As we shall see below, that at least some of the donors were Egyptian is a plausible option. The denominations of the other donors seem to reproduce the internal hierarchy of a cultic association. In this regard, the term θιασεῖται is common and identifies the members of a cult association regardless of the worshipped god.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Published by Nerutsos Bey in *RA* 10 (1887) 214-215, no. 56; cf. Strack (1897) 246 no. 76; *SB* V 8873; see also Fraser (1960) 6; Fraser (1972) I 252-253 and II 401 nn. 487-488; Stambaugh (1972) 50-51; Dunand (1973) I 114-116, 181; Koemoth (1994) 279-282; Malaise (1994) 367 and (1995) 131; Iossif (2005) no. 34; Pfeiffer (2008) 392 n. 27. In the 4th century BC, the link between Taposiris and the funerary cult of Osiris appeared as self-evident to Eudoxus of Cnidus, who interpreted the toponym as *taphē Osiridos*: see Eudoxus, fr. 291 Lasserre = Plut., *De Is.* 21; cf. Vasunia (2001) 302-303.

<sup>35</sup> On the triad composed by Sarapis, Isis and Anubis in the Hellenistic period, cf. Malaise (2005) 155-157; Pfeiffer (2008) 393.

<sup>36</sup> Fraser (1972) II 429 n. 688; cf. Tm People 243776.

<sup>37</sup> See Jaccottet (2003), 24-25. For *thiasoi* in Egypt, cf. e.g. *P. Enteuxis* 21, from Kerethoeris, Fayum, third cent. BC.

Conversely, the term *κομμεγέται* (“leaders of the *kōmos*”)<sup>38</sup> is a *hapax* in Greek. It is tempting to interpret this term as the translation of a non-Greek word indicating distinguished members of a cult association. A plausible candidate is the Egyptian *mr mš'* (translated as “chef de la troupe, général” by F. de Cenival), a function documented in the demotic rules of a second-century cult association of Sobek in Tebtynis.<sup>39</sup>

That a cultic association performs an essential act of its religious activity, such as the consecration of an altar, a cultic tool or place, and that it decides to link this act with a manifestation of loyalism towards the sovereigns, is by no means a surprise. To provide a few examples, in Philae we have a phourarch and the members of a *synodos* of Herakles erect a *ἱερόν* to the god and dedicate it in honour of, or on behalf of, the sovereigns, perhaps King Ptolemy VI and Queen Kleopatra II (*I. Philae* I 11). In the last years of Philopator, a donor named Posidonios together with the members of a *thiasos* dedicated a banqueting-hall (*ἑστιατόριον*) to King Ptolemy IV, Queen Arsinoe III and their son Ptolemy (Kom el-Hisn; *I. Delta* I 1036, 2 = *SB* III 6668 = *SEG* II 867). The dative formula suggests that, in this case, the sovereigns were the direct recipients of the dedication, yet it is impossible to state whether the ruler cult was the only concern of the association, or just one of the religious activities to which it was devoted.

The deities mentioned in the dedication suggest that the donors wanted to stress the Egyptian connotation of their ritual act. Most important in this regard is the debated passage *ΟΣΟΡΩ τε | καὶ Σαράπιδι*. By reading *ἽΟΣόρω* as a dative, W. Dittenberger and many scholars after him have interpreted the dedication as being addressed to an otherwise unattested theonym “Osoros, together with Sarapis”. At the same time, the nexus *τε | καὶ*, which is extremely rare in dedicatory inscriptions listing recipient gods,<sup>40</sup> could show that the two gods are distinguished but intimately related. P.M. Fraser tried to express this relationship through the translation “Osoros, who is also Serapis”. According to this view, the two divine names could perhaps be explained as a separation of the components of the theonym Osorapis in order to restore to Osiris his role

<sup>38</sup> The editor Narutsos Bey interpreted this denomination as a synonym of *κομάρχης*, “leader of the village”. Against this interpretation, however, see the convincing remarks of Dittenberger in *OGIS* I, p. 173 n. 4.

<sup>39</sup> On Egyptian private cult associations, see de Cenival (1972); Muhs (2001); Monson (2007). On *mr mš'*, cf. de Cenival (1972) 159-162; Muhs (2001) 6-7.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Renberg & Bubelis (2011) 190 n. 46.

as an autonomous god. *Osor-* is the normal radical of Osiris in Egyptian toponyms and compound theophoric names. Moreover, in the Ptolemaic period, before Sarapis became the standard Greek theonym, the Egyptian *Wsir-Hp* was commonly transliterated into Greek as Ὅσοράπις, a form which remained in use for a long time in contexts where the Egyptian tradition was particularly strong, such as the *katochoi* archive of the Memphis Serapeum.<sup>41</sup>

Fraser's interpretation has long been accepted, although it is grammatically unsound.<sup>42</sup> It is not the place here to review at length the complex interaction between Sarapis, Osiris, and Osor-Hapi in Greco-Roman Egypt. It suffices to highlight the two arguments that make necessary a different translation and understanding of the dedication. In his review of *OGIS* I, U. Wilcken drew attention to a decisive point — rarely taken into consideration by later scholars — against Dittenberger's interpretation of ΟΣΟΡΩ. Wilcken observed that the final omega of this theonym should not be interpreted as a dative, but as an attested Greek transcription of the Egyptian adjective '3, "Great".<sup>43</sup> Interpreting Ὅσορῶ as a transcription of the Egyptian *Wsir* '3 changes the sense of the dedication: "To Osiris the Great as well as to Sarapis and Isis and Anubis, to all the gods and goddesses". This interpretation underlines the primacy

<sup>41</sup> For theophoric names based on *Osor-* / *Osorap-* / *Sarap-*, see Clarysse (2009); Clarysse & Paganini (2010). On early Greek denominations of Sarapis, cf. the late 4th-century text of Artemisia (*UPZ* I 1; the temple of the god is named Ποσεράπι, the transliteration of *Pr Wsir-Hp*). On the relationship between Hellenomemphites and Osor-Hapi before the Ptolemies, see also Fraser (1972) I 249-251; Pfeiffer (2008) 389-390 with n. 15 for the discussion of the relationship between the Egyptian name and the Greek Sarapis. For the dossier of the Memphite *katochoi*, cf. *UPZ* I 19 (163 BC); 54 (161 BC); 57 (164-161 BC); 106-109 (99/8 BC). Still in Memphis, see also *PSI* X 1128 (3rd century AD). For the coexistence of old and new names, cf. Wilcken in *UPZ* I, p. 26-29; Stambaugh (1972) 64; Borgeaud & Volokhine (2000) 71-72; Pfeiffer (2008) 390-391 with n. 20; Clarysse (2009) 214.

<sup>42</sup> Fraser (1972) I 253 and II 401 n. 488. This translation suits better two dedications from mid second-century Upper Egypt, where the nexus δ/ή και establishes correspondence between Greek and Egyptian divine names: *I. Th. Sy.* 302 (= *OGIS* 111; *I. Louvre* 14; *SB* V 8878; *SEG* XLIX 2200; from Elephantina), and 303 (= *OGIS* 330; *SB* V 8394; *SEG* XLIII 1133; *SEG* XLV 2032; from Setis), both discussed by Koemoth (2006) (cf. *SEG* LIV 1757). For the nexus δ/ή και, used to express the identity between two elements that are only apparently different, see the cases of double dates (cf. *I. Louvre* 18, line 1, "year 12, which is also year 9", with commentary by É. Bernand at *I. Louvre*, p. 58) and of double names of a singular person (cf. *I. Philae* 35, lines 1-2: *proskynema* "of King Ptolemy [X], who is also Alexander [I]).

<sup>43</sup> Wilcken, *APF* III (1903) 322; cf. Dittenberger, *OGIS* II, *Addenda et corrigenda*, p. 542; Quaegebeur (1986) 532 and n. 80; Bricault & Pezin (1993) 70 n. 32; Malaise (1995) 131.



of Osiris among the divine recipients of the dedication and the Egyptian nature of the cultic act performed by the donors. As seen above, in the Egyptian tradition, the *īšd* tree was closely related to the funerary rituals of Osiris. As in other Egyptian cultic contexts, the perseas dedicated by (S)paris and his cult companions were probably meant to stand on a sacred hillock and to play a role in the rituals related to Osiris' tomb.<sup>44</sup> On the other hand, this claim for continuity with Egyptian religious traditions does not result in an opposition against the Macedonian rule. Rather the opposite. The dedication was made in favour of, or on behalf of, the rulers Ptolemy V and Kleopatra I and constitutes therefore a manifestation of loyalism on the part of the donors.<sup>45</sup> Moreover, the special connection between Osiris and Sarapis expressed by *τε καὶ* may speak for the donors' attempt to associate the Great Osiris with the Ptolemaic god, and perhaps more extensively with the Ptolemaic triad Sarapis

<sup>44</sup> On Osiris' festivals, in particular during the month Khoiak, see recently Coulon & Masson (2012<sup>2</sup>); Yoyotte (2012<sup>2</sup>). See also Minas (2006) for a study of the cult statuettes of Sokar-Osiris mummies in wooden coffins. Some of these name Ptolemaic royal ancestors, suggesting that they were probably honoured *in situ* on the side of the Egyptian gods.

<sup>45</sup> Performing a dedication to a god (the dative) for someone else (taking “for” as a neutral translation for *hyper*) establishes a triangular relationship between donor – recipient – third person. The distinction between dedications with the dative and those with *hyper* + the genitive in Greek religion has long concerned modern scholars — see most recently Jim (2014) —, yet the nuances of their use for Hellenistic rulers are yet to be comprehensively understood. In particular, further investigation is needed as regards the kinds of relationship enacted by these dedications within their social context. Thus far, some useful insights into the problem can be found in Fraser (1972) I 226-228; Price (1984) 222-227; Iossif (2005); Gladić (2007); Kajava (2011); Fassa (2015). The loyalist purpose of performing ritual acts for someone in the form expressed by *hyper* + the genitive is evident in second and first-century petitions of Egyptian priests to the Ptolemies for the protection of Egyptian temples. Here the priests' insistence on the necessity of supporting the worship of local gods in favour of / on behalf of the royal family is a ubiquitous rhetorical *topos* used to convince the sovereigns to intervene. See e.g. *I. Prose* 22 = *I. Philae* I 19 = *OGIS* 137 (Philae; joint reign of Ptolemy VIII, Kleopatra II and Kleopatra III), lines 28-31: καὶ ἐκ τοῦ τοιοῦτου συμβαίνει ἐλαττοῦσθαι τὸ ἱερὸν καὶ ἰ κινδυνεύειν ἡμᾶς τοῦ μὴ ἔχειν τὰ νομιζόμενα πρὸς τὰς ἰ γινόμενας ὑπὲρ τε ὑμῶν καὶ τῶν τέκνων θυσίας ἰ καὶ σπονδᾶς; *I. Prose* 33 = *SB* III 6152 = *I. Fayoum* II 112 (Theadelphia, Fayum; 93 BC), lines 29-33: ὅπως πολλῶ μᾶλλον αἰ τε θυσίαι καὶ σπονδαὶ ἰ καὶ τᾶλλα τὰ νομιζόμενα ὑπὲρ τε σοῦ ἰ καὶ τῶν τέκνων καὶ τῶν προγόνων καὶ ἰσιδὶ καὶ Σαράπιδι ἐπιτελεσθῆ. Ethnic factors are also to be taken into account. For instance, the *hyper* + genitive dedications would be a suitable means for Jews to manifest their loyalism to sovereigns without breaking with their religious beliefs (cf. e.g. the dedication of a synagogue — προσευχῆ — in favour of Ptolemy VIII, Kleopatra II and Kleopatra III: *I. Delta* I 928, 3 = *SB* I 5863, from Abu el-Matamir; *I. Delta* I 960, 1 = *SB* IV 7454 = *CIJud.* II 1442, from Tell el-Barnūgi).

– Isis – Anubis. More so than the identity suggested by Fraser’s translation “who is also Sarapis”, therefore, the nexus  $\tau\epsilon\ \kappa\alpha\iota$  seems to stress a cultic and ideological interaction between the Egyptian god and the Ptolemaic ones. When considered against the tormented background of the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, which saw a violent escalation of Egyptian rebellions against Ptolemaic power, the decision to associate a dedication of perseas to Osiris together with the Ptolemaic triad and with an act of loyalism towards the ruling pair could not be without political implications.<sup>46</sup> Whether before or after the victory of the Ptolemaic forces over the Egyptian rebels in the Nile Delta, the dedication performed by (S)paris and his companions clearly placed them on the side of those in power in Alexandria.

*OGIS 97* allows us to shed light not only on the interaction between traditional Egyptian and new Ptolemaic cults, but also between local cultic groups and the central power. Regrettably, too much about (S)paris and his group remains unclear to allow us to place them in a precise social stratum of Ptolemaic society, or to understand the degree of official recognition that their *thiasos* enjoyed. As concerns the social status of the donors, the material of the dedicatory plaque (marble), the nature of the donation (an altar and sacred trees, probably destined to play a major role in the local cult) and the donors’ intention to manifest loyalism to the ruling pair suggest that the donors may have played a distinguished part in the religious and social life of Taposiris Parva. The habit of performing acts of worship to gods for the benefit of sovereigns is largely attested in Egypt and in the Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean. In most cases, such actions are documented by religious acts (especially in Egypt, through dedications to gods and *proskynemata*)<sup>47</sup> of individuals, who usually occupied a place of power as officials or priests and

<sup>46</sup> On the special link of Sarapis and Isis with the royal propaganda of Epiphanes’ father, Ptolemy IV, see Bricault (1999). On Egyptian revolts under Ptolemy V, see Veisse (2004) 7-26. Festivals in honour of Ptolemy V were decreed throughout Egypt by the Memphis decree of 196 BC (cf. Rosettana, *I. Prose* 16). It is tempting to further restrict the chronological limits for the issue of *OGIS 97* to 193/2 – 187/6 BC, before Ptolemy the son started to appear alongside his parents in dedications (as attested by e.g. *I. Fayoum* I 4, from Arsinoe; *I. Fayoum* III 150, from Magdola; *I. Philae* I 8). If this dating is correct, then *OGIS 97* would date to after Ptolemy V’s victory over Egyptian rebels in Lykopolis (Upper Egypt), yet within the period when the king was still fighting against rebels in the Delta.

<sup>47</sup> For the Egyptian documentation, see esp. Iossif (2005), with a large collection of *hyper*-style dedications. *Proskynemata* of individuals for Ptolemaic sovereigns can be added to this dossier: cf. e.g. *I. Philae* I 50 and 55 (mid-1st century BC).

performed these acts alone or together with their family or with a cultic association, of which they were members or leaders. Public institutions and official festivals were also largely involved in this trend.<sup>48</sup>

Dative and *hyper*-style dedications were complementary parts of a communication system that allowed institutions, groups and individuals to publicly manifest religious adherence and loyalism through ritual action. Cultic regulations show that citizens were often invited to take part in festivals and other ritual actions relating to sovereigns as their direct recipients (the dative) or as the party benefiting from the ritual act (*hyper* + the genitive). The public dimension of ritual acts involving sovereigns becomes particularly evident when the participation of citizens is requested through the performance of sacrifices on their family altars. These were located in the publicly visible space in front of, or above, houses, so that everybody would be able to witness the gratitude of citizens towards the ruling house. Making gratitude and loyalism publicly recognizable through an act of religious homage was at the same time a duty — because everybody could see it — and an occasion to distinguish oneself among the other members of the community.<sup>49</sup> As suggested long ago by M. Mauss, gift-exchanging is a primary element in constructing and expressing hierarchical social relationships.<sup>50</sup> By

<sup>48</sup> Several documents attest to prayers and/or sacrifices to traditional gods in favour of, or on behalf of, the sovereigns, which were decreed by civic institutions and performed at official festivals: cf. e.g. *OGIS* 219 = *RC* 22, lines 17-18 (Ilion): the *demoi* of Ilion already makes sacrifices and prayers to all the gods *hyper* King Antiochos I; line 32: sacrifices are to be made *hyper* the king and the *demoi*; *OGIS* 112 (Thera): the *demoi* of Thera dedicates an altar to Dionysos *hyper* Ptolemy V, Kleopatra I and their children; *I. Labraunda* 6 A, lines 7-8 (Mylasa): the *demoi* of Mylasa decrees a sacrifice to Zeus Osogooos, Zeus Labraundos and Zeus Eleutherios, *hyper* King Philip V and Olympichos.

<sup>49</sup> In this sense, one could interpret the prescription of small victims in the sacrifices to Arsinoe in Alexandria (Satyrus, *P. Oxy.* XXVII 2465, fr. 2) as corresponding to a concern to make the cult affordable for non-rich people. For public sacrifices on family altars, see Caneva (2014), esp. section 2 regarding the concern for visibility of the participation of individuals in public festivals celebrating the sovereigns; cf. also the evidence from priestly decrees collected in el-Masry e.a. (2012) 143-146.

<sup>50</sup> Mauss (1923/1924). Within this framework, worshipping the gods in the name of the kings or of other superiors was an effective means to strengthen the social link between the authors of the dedication and the benefiting party. On gift-exchanging and euergetism in Hellenistic societies, see, among others, Bringmann & von Steuben (2000); Ma (2002<sup>2</sup>); Domingo Gygax (2009; 2011). Cases of religious acts performed in favour of non-royal figures constitute a large and hitherto underestimated part of the documentation, which is well exemplified by Zoilos' letter to Apollonios: see *P. Cair. Zen.* I 59034, with Renberg & Bubelis (2011). In this letter, Zoilos explains that the god Sarapis has repeatedly appeared to him in dreams to request the building of a new shrine. Having no resources to accomplish this task, Zoilos asks the high-ranking administrator Apollonios

performing religious acts on behalf of, or in favour of, sovereigns, socially distinguished cult agents could further manifest their wealth and increase their prestige as they would publicly show proximity to the royal house and claim a role in the logic of euergetism which constituted, together with military success, the legitimating grounds of the social hierarchy, at the top of which stood the kings.

## 5. EGYPTIAN SACRED LANDSCAPE UP UNTIL LATE ANTIQUITY

About the same time as Elian's visit to the sacred persea wood of Zeus Polieus, Galen states that he had never seen a specimen of this tree outside Alexandria (12.569 Kühn). In fact, evidence of the Roman period proves that the tree was still being cultivated in Egypt, although it had become rare by that time. *P. Oxy.* I 53 reports a letter dated 316 AD from Aurelius Irenaeus, the chief of the carpenters' guild in Oxyrhynchus, to Valerius Ammonianus, *logistes* of the Oxyrhynchite nome, in reply to Valerius' request to report on the condition of the only extant persea in the city (lines 6-7). The envoy stated that he had "examined the persea tree and found that it had been barren for many years, and was quite dried up and unable to produce any more fruit" (lines 8-11). The prohibition against cutting down perseas in the Oxyrhynchite nome, which is documented one year later by *PSI* IV 285 (317 AD), is probably the consequence of Aurelius' report. Seven years after this report, new specimens of persea were planted in Oxyrhynchus, and the inhabitants of the

for financial support and in order to convince the possible donor, he insists on past and future intercession by the god in favour (*hyper*) of Apollonios' health and success with the king. Moreover, Zoilos argues that the god's favour will certainly increase if Apollonios agrees to support economically the foundation of the shrine. This argument is reminiscent of Ptolemaic letters whereby representatives of temples ask for the help of Ptolemaic officials and promise in return that the deity will enhance the success of the official when dealing with his patron: cf. e.g. *PSI* IV 328 (Philadelphieia, 257 BC), where the priests of Aphroditē ask Apollonios to send myrrh for the tomb of Hesis/Isis, as the king has ordered, and remind Apollonios of the divine support that he will receive from Isis as a result (line 6: αὐτῆ [= Isis] δέ σοι δοίη ἐπαφροδίσιαν πρ[ὸς τὸν βασι]λέα). Religious intercession in favour of a non-royal person is also made explicit by several 2nd and 1st-century Greek dedications and *proskynemata* from Upper Egypt as well as by the petition letter *SB* XXVI 16742, lines 5-10 (Arsinoite nome; 140-139 BC). Here the sender, the priest Petosiris, states that he prays every day that the receiver, Sarapion, may be healthy and have success with the king and queen (lines 5-10: <οὐ> παραλείπομεν καθ' ἡμέραν εὐχ[ό]μενοι τοῖς θεοῖς ὑπὲρ σοῦ | ὅπως ὑγιαίνης καὶ εὐημερῆς | τὸν πάντα χρόνον παρὰ | τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ τῇ βασιλίσση).

houses nearby were accordingly requested to swear that they would take care of the plants, watering them continuously so that they would grow and bear fruit (*P. Oxy.* XXXVI 2767; XLI 2969 and 2993; 323 AD)<sup>51</sup>.

In the same period as the documents from Oxyrhynchus were written, the emperors Arcadius and Honorius forbade the cutting and selling of persea specimens, as testified by a passage from the *Codex Iustiniani* (*CJ XI 78: De cupressis ex luco Daphnensi vel perseis per Aegyptum non excidendis vel vendendis*). This prohibition sheds light on the legal initiative of the central authorities in what was essentially an Egyptian problem. A contemporary papyrus from Hermoupolis Magna (*SB XV 15026; 322 AD*) recalls a similar prohibition (line 5: ἐκόλυσεν μὴ κόπτεσθαι τὰς περσίας), against which the local Council appealed when deliberating about the cutting down of perseas for use in a shipyard. Such prohibitions were meant to prevent sacred trees from becoming trivial timber supplies. P. van Minnen and K.A. Worp have collected sources on ship building from the early 4th century, showing that the predominant conservationist policy, which was probably meant to respect the religious sentiments of the Egyptian population, opportunistically alternated with moments in which a consumptive policy dominated for economic reasons: thus in 300 and 322 AD, urgent ship building works justified the use of persea and acacia wood from Upper Egypt, as attested by *P. Panop. Beatty 2* (lines 211-214) and *P. L. Bat. II 14*.<sup>52</sup>

As the dossier from Oxyrhynchus suggests, the dry climate of Egypt was not favourable to the persea, which could not survive unless someone took on the responsibility for cultivating it. In some cases, the religious initiative of individuals appears to have played an important role in the preservation of this tree. The intense effort necessary to cultivate a persea is confirmed by a Greek metrical dedication of the Roman (Augustan?) period, probably from the Panopolite nome (*I. Métr. Bernard 114*). The author, Ptolemaios, claims to have planted, with the help of his children, new persea trees and to have saved old ones, which risked drying up because of the arid ground (II.12-15; IV.8). Perseas might have played a role in the local festival of Pan, which is mentioned in another poem inscribed on the same monument (IV).<sup>53</sup> Confirmation

<sup>51</sup> The number of trees tended is uncertain: cf. van Minnen & Worp (1989) 142 on the problematic interpretation of *P. Oxy.* XLI 2993, line 15 ἡ περσία ἰς (“the seventeenth persea tree”).

<sup>52</sup> For evidence and discussion, cf. van Minnen & Worp (1989) esp. 141-142.

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Malaise (1995) 132-133; Thiers (1999) 110-111.

of the role of individuals in the preservation of sacred trees in the Roman period comes from a demotic graffito from Philae (*Graff. Dodec. Philae* 417 = Eide e.a. (1998), *FHN* III, 261), written by Tami, a member of the cult staff of Isis. During the three years that he spent in Philae, Tami planted four *šw3b* trees (line 6): one in the town, one upon the *dromos* of Isis at Philae, and two others outside the town.

Texts comparable with the ones discussed thus far are already known in Egypt from the late dynastic period, as suggested by a text from Athribis, dated to the 30th Dynasty, where Djed-Her claims to have installed, as an offering to the gods, two gardens (*hsp.ty*) at either side of the *dromos* of the Wabet and one inside the sanctuary, including *šw3b* trees and other vegetal species, together with a well from which to water them (Cairo JE 46341, lines 26-28, 30-36).<sup>54</sup> The commitment shown by individuals associated with temples and by institutions towards the protection of persea kept alive the Egyptian tradition of “protected” plants (*šn-hw*), as sacred trees were often defined in sources from the Hellenistic period onwards.<sup>55</sup> A Hellenistic decree forbidding the cutting down of trees in Krokodilopolis-Arsinoe (*I. Prose* 28 = *I. Fayoum* 18 = *SB* I 4626; Fayum, second–first century BC) might already reflect a religious precaution — not different in principle from prohibitions against entering sacred areas belonging to Egyptian sanctuaries<sup>56</sup> — rather than a generic concern for wood supplies.<sup>57</sup>

Leaving temporarily aside the cases where economic reasons won out, the rare traces of what we could at first sight define as an environmentalist spirit in Greco-Roman Egypt are interesting because they point to a shared engagement in preserving a species, which was still felt to be a traditional component of the sacred landscape of Egypt. However, understanding this commitment for preservation as evidence for a modern ecological mentality seems inappropriate: firstly, the uninterrupted care of sacred plants documented in Egypt corresponds, above all, to

<sup>54</sup> Jelinkova (1956) 101-104; Baum (1988) 263. For a survey of temple gardens dedicated in the late dynastic and Greco-Roman period, see Thiers (1999) esp. 110 for the evidence from Athribis.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Koemoth (1994) 69-70. As regards the social agents involved in the support of temple gardens, Thiers (1999) 115 observes that in the late dynastic and Greco-Roman periods, pharaonic initiative in this as in other religious matters was replaced by the initiative of local cult staff and individual benefactors.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. e.g. the famous ostrakon of Peukestas protecting the animal necropolis of Saqqara: Turner (1974).

<sup>57</sup> The latter interpretation is argued by A. Bernand in *I. Prose*, II p. 74-75.

religious reasons and does not speak for a socially felt need to preserve nature and bio-diversity *per se*; second, just as for the cult of sacred animals,<sup>58</sup> during the late dynastic and Greco-Roman period, the intent of preserving Egyptian identity through religion may have caused a revitalization of the importance of sacred flora. Environmentalist habits were submitted to socio-cultural goals other than the preservation of nature as a self-evident value. The latter attitude seems to be a prerogative of post-industrial, secular societies in the modern Western world.<sup>59</sup>

Despite the adaptation to new gods — from Osiris to Sarapis and Isis, from Sarapis to Zeus *Polieus* — important elements of continuity characterize the sacred trees under discussion throughout their history. Renewal of sunlight, life, and kingship as well as a link with the flooding of the Nile are the recognizable traits of a long-lasting tradition. A connection with kingship might also be recognizable in the story of Alexander and the persea, yet in this case, the most evident aspect is the transfer of the sacred plant into a sphere — that of agonistic festivals — which was extraneous to Egyptian traditions. We do not know whether persea remained in use as an agonistic prize for long under the Ptolemies or whether this was only a short-lived experiment. What is more important is that the use of this tree, and the aetiological story connected with it, point to the reinvention of a local tradition against the cultural background of the new Macedonian rulers of Egypt, who used it to express the mix of Greek and non-Greek elements composing the identity of their kingdom. The broad success of Isiac cults in the Roman Empire seems to have further enhanced the Greco-Roman interest in the sacred persea, although at least since the early fourth century AD, the decline of the religious systems in which the persea had survived for millennia may have collaborated with the growing economic use of this tree for the naval industry and with a dry climate, inappropriate for this species, in accelerating the disappearance of this tree.

<sup>58</sup> On sacred animals in late Egyptian religion, cf. Quack (2003); Bosch-Puche (2012).

<sup>59</sup> Cf. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. *environmentalism* (consulted: March 2014). Unlike other branches of post-modernist philosophy, environmentalism has not yet taken a conspicuous place in rethinking Classics and ancient history. However, a recent conference held in Cambridge, UK (*Greening the Gods: Ecology and Theology in the Ancient World*, March 18-19, 2014), shows that the question is gaining new attention, thus making a prompt reflection on the limits of applicability of modern paradigms to ancient history an urgent desideratum.



Despite these risks of extinction, however, the persea tree did not disappear from Egypt until the end of the Middle Ages, which was probably for as long as someone made the effort to cultivate it and to keep it connected to lived religious practice. In Coptic Egypt, traces of *Mimusops Laurifolia* have been discovered at the site of the monastery of Saint Phoibammon (sixth–eighth century AD, at the site of the former temple of Hatshepsut, in Deir el-Bahari).<sup>60</sup> Moreover, a papyrus from Upper Egypt contains the order from a homonymous bishop Phoibammon to carve a door (probably for a church) in persea wood (*OIM* 17245, line 2; sixth century AD).<sup>61</sup> Coptic evidence provides a new Christian religious setting for persea, the last known adaptation of a tradition that had survived three millennia of cultural and political changes in Egypt.

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<sup>60</sup> For the archaeobotanical evidence of persea in Coptic Deir el-Bahari, see Täckholm & Bachatly (1961) 27-28; cf. Baum (1988) 88 n. 443; more generally in Coptic Egypt, see Rutschowscaya (1986) 14-16.

<sup>61</sup> See Hickey (1996) esp. 131 on persea and 128-129 on the possible identity of this bishop.

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