

ZOSIMOS AIGYPTIAKOS. IDENTIFYING THE IMAGERY
OF THE “VISIONS” AND LOCATING ZOSIMOS OF
PANOPOLIS IN HIS EGYPTIAN CONTEXT

ZOSIMOS AIGYPTIAKOS. IDENTIFICANDO LAS IMÁGENES
DE LAS “VISIONES” Y LOCALIZANDO A ZÓSIMO DE
PANÓPOLIS EN SU CONTEXTO EGIPCIO

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ABSTRACT

The first alchemist for whom we have biographical data, Zosimos, lived in the Panopolis (current Akhmim) of the late 3rd – early 4th cent. CE, a region in which evidence of the practice of traditional Egyptian religion is attested well into Late Antiquity. The images that Zosimos employed in his presentation of alchemical procedures and apparatus offer us an insight into his cultural context. This paper will examine a series of passages from the works of Zosi-

RESUMEN

El primer alquimista para quien tenemos datos biográficos, Zósimo, vivió en la Panópolis (actual Akhmim) de finales del siglo III y comienzos del IV d.C., una región en la que se atestiguan evidencias de la práctica de la religión egipcia tradicional bien entrada la Antigüedad Tardía. Las imágenes que Zósimo empleó en su presentación de procedimientos e instrumental alquímicos nos abren una ventana a su contexto cultural. Este artículo examinará una serie de pasajes de las obras de

mos of Panopolis from an Egyptological perspective, contrasting them with textual and iconographic sources from the Egyptian temple milieu of Graeco-Roman Egypt. The results of this inquiry will be used to elaborate a more nuanced presentation of Zosimos' identity.

Zósimo de Panópolis desde una perspectiva egiptológica, contrastándolos con fuentes textuales e iconográficas del entorno de los templos egipcios del Egipto grecorromano. Los resultados de esta indagación serán usados para elaborar una presentación más matizada de la identidad de Zósimo.

KEYWORDS

Dendera; Egyptian Iconography; Graeco-Egyptian alchemy; Hermetica; Khoiak Festival; Lunar Cycle; Mummification; Mysteries of Osiris; Visions; Zosimos of Panopolis.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Alquimia grecoegipcia; Ciclo lunar; Dendera; Festival de Khoiak; Iconografía egipcia; Misterios de Osiris; Momificación; Textos herméticos; Visiones; Zósimo de Panópolis.

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1. SEARCHING FOR THE ORIGINS OF ALCHEMY¹

The student of the origins of alchemy is faced by two main challenges. The first one derives from the nature of the early alchemical sources, and the second one from the modern scholarly tradition that has undertaken their study. The earliest alchemical sources that have come down to us give very few insights about their historical context.² They are collections of recipes written in Greek and preserved on a series of papyri, as well as copies of treatises in later manuscripts.³ These papyri were created in Egypt, and the treatises contain a wealth of references to Egyptian elements. While their Egyptian context was acknowledged by the scholarly community early

1. The research and writing of the present paper were completed during a Research Fellowship from the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Institut für die Kulturen des Alten Orients (IANES) of the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen between the years 2019 and 2021. I want to wholeheartedly thank my host, Prof. Dr. Christian Leitz, for providing me with excellent research resources as well as for his expert advice and encouragement, and my colleagues at IANES, and especially Dr. Carolina Teotino-Tattko, for a friendly and stimulating research environment. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers from ARYS for their very useful comments.

2. The only two alchemical manuscripts that have come down to us from Graeco-Roman Egypt are the so-called Leiden (*P.Leiden I 397*) and Stockholm (*P.Holm*) papyri, which are two codices dating to the 4th cent. CE. For a recent edition, cf. Halleux, 2002. The fact that both these manuscripts and the first 21 pages of *PGM XIII* were written by the same hand shows that the practice of alchemy and that of the procedures recorded in the spells of the Graeco-Egyptian magical formularies took place in the same context and was done by the same people.

3. On the transmission of alchemical treatises in Byzantine manuscripts, cf. Martelli, 2019, pp. 11-43, with references.

on,⁴ these texts have not received much attention from Egyptologists.⁵ They have been studied mainly from a Classics point of view, and thus framed in a Hellenic rather than Egyptian context. In this paper, I examine one of the main works by the first alchemist for whom we have some reliable biographical information: Zosimos of Panopolis.⁶ While we have few details about his life, a close analysis of his works may reveal interesting aspects of his historical and cultural context. One of the difficulties of this task lies in the fact that Zosimos employed an allegorical language to describe his procedures, and delighted in the use of *Decknamen*, secret names, which later would become common in alchemical literature. However, as Lawrence Principe has noted, “Zosimos surely drew upon his own experience and knowledge of contemporaneous religious rites for imagery to use in this allegorical sequence. His language of altars, dismemberment, and sacrifice surely reflects something of late Greco-Egyptian temple practices.”⁷

2. ON ZOSIMOS AND THE “VISIONS”

According to most sources, Zosimos was born in the city of Panopolis, present Akhmim, in Middle Egypt,⁸ and seems to have later lived in Alexandria. He also

4. Festugière already located the early recipes in the context of the Egyptian temples, cf. Festugière, 2014, p. 220.

5. Some attempts have been made at identifying and interpreting the Egyptian elements in alchemical texts, cf. especially Dumas, 1983, and Derchain, 1990, and some sections of Fowden, 1986. Lindsay, 1970 takes a more Classics-focused approach (I discuss this work in more detail in section 2). Quack, 2006a, pp. 280-281 analyzes some of the Egyptian elements and context in Pseudo-Demokritos' *Physika kai mystika* (on which cf. excursus in section 5 in the present paper). For an analysis of Grimes, 2018, and Roberts, 2019, cf. section 2, below.

6. For introductions about Zosimos of Panopolis, cf. Fowden, 1986, pp. 120-126; Mertens, 2002; Principe, 2013, pp. 15-24; Dufault, 2019, pp. 93-117; Martelli, 2019, pp. 73-86. For the latest edition and translation of his *Authentic Memoirs*, cf. Mertens, 1995. Martelli is currently preparing a complete edition of the Syriac Zosimos. For the Arabic Zosimos, cf. Hallum, 2008a.

7. Principe, 2013, p. 19.

8. On the available information about Zosimos' life, cf. Mertens, 1995, pp. xii-xix. Akhmim is located close to Nag Hammadi, where Gnostic and Hermetic treatises were copied and hidden between 340 and 370 CE. The orthography of some Greek words has led Mahé to propose a dating of the second half of the 3rd century or the beginning of the 4th cent. CE for their composition, which would make them contemporary of Zosimos (Mahé, 1978, p. 11). On the context of the Nag Hammadi codices, and potential connections between the circle of Zosimos and those who produced the codices, cf. Bull, 2020, esp. pp. 142-143.

appears to have taken a trip to Memphis in order to inspect a furnace in a temple.⁹ He lived around the end of the 3rd and beginning of the 4th cent. CE, and thus was roughly contemporary with authors such as Iamblichos, and probably part of the same philosophical environment.¹⁰ He appears to have written twenty-eight books about alchemy, some of which he addressed to Theosebeia, who may have been a disciple of his and perhaps his patron;¹¹ this may also be just a literary device common to the dialogical character of these texts.¹² They are preserved in Greek Byzantine copies and one Syriac manuscript.¹³ These works, in contrast to the previous recipe collections, “witness a coherent program of research that draws on both material and intellectual sources”.¹⁴ Zosimos’ works describe diverse instruments and techniques, crediting their origin to their creators, and present the process and results of his experiments incorporating his thoughts and impressions.

The focus of this paper will be the so-called “Visions” of Zosimos, which are contained in a treatise entitled *Περὶ ἀρετῆς. Περὶ συνθέσεως ὑδάτων* (“On Virtue. On the Composition of the Waters”).¹⁵ This treatise presents a series of alchemical procedures in an allegorical way, employing imagery that has been the object of discussion by scholars from many different perspectives. Michèle Mertens, author of the most recent edition and translation of the text, has summarized in her commentary the main two interpretative approaches originally taken on it.¹⁶ One approach was mainly represented by Marcellin Berthelot and Charles-Émile Ruelle, who considered the text purely as a description of various chemical procedures (distillation, sublima-

9. Cf. Fowden, 1986, p. 120. Fowden notes here that a visit to Rome that appears in the so-called *Book of Zosimos* (Zos. Pan., fr. syr. 299-302) is actually a translation of Galen, the identification of which some scholars have failed to make, attributing it to Zosimos.

10. For the Hermetic and Gnostic context of Zosimos, cf. Mertens, 2002, and Fraser, 2007. On the possibility of Zosimos’ being Christian, cf. Dufault in this volume, 135-170. For an Egyptological approach to Iamblichos’ *De mysteriis*, cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 225-236, and bibliography there, esp. Quack, 2017.

11. Cf. Dufault, 2019, pp. 118-141.

12. Zosimos’ address to Theosebeia is reminiscent of Plutarch’s address to Klea in his *De Iside et Osiride*. On Theosebeia cf. Hallum, 2008b.

13. For the manuscript tradition of Zosimos, cf. Mertens, 1995, pp. xx-lxxxvi.

14. Principe, 2013, p. 15.

15. In this analysis I use Michèle Mertens edition of Zosimos’ *Mémoires authentiques* (Mertens, 1995).

16. Mertens also lists in her commentary to *Mém. auth.*, X a series of editions of the text apart from that of Berthelot and Ruelle (CAAG I, II, III), and discusses its presentation as a series of revelatory dreams in the context of the first centuries of the current era, connecting it with other compositions such as *Corpus Hermeticum* I or Thessalos’ *De virtutibus herbarum*. Cf. Mertens, 1995, pp. 207-211.

tion, cupellation) in mystical terms.¹⁷ The second approach was that of Carl G. Jung, who published several works on the “Visions”, considering them as real dreams, and interpreting their images as archetypes (“mythologemes”).¹⁸ As Mertens has noted, this approach is not tenable for a proper understanding of Zosimos’ treatises, since it draws parallels not only from historical periods much later than Zosimos’ time, but also from many different places and context, with no connection to the Egypt of the end of the 3rd cent. CE.¹⁹ Mertens suggests that a middle point, that considers both the technical character of the texts, but also explores their symbolic elements, is possible. In her commentary, she discusses both aspects, connecting Zosimos’ text to literary parallels.²⁰ These parallels, however, are only derived from sources written in classical languages. Other authors have also approached the “Visions”, analyzing them in the light of the religious and philosophical context of Zosimos’ time. Dufault explores how the procedures described in them may represent Zosimos’ soteriological conceptions, connecting the “Visions” and other works by Zosimos with Gnostic and Christian ideas of transformation and salvation.²¹ Knipe has examined the images of sacrifice and punishment in Zosimos against the historical context of the debate around the legitimacy of sacrifice, which divided Neoplatonists at the time.²²

One area that has been generally neglected in the aforementioned publications is the Egyptian context in which Zosimos lived. Jack Lindsay’s book *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (1970), which from its title and cover illustration would seem to have tackled the Egyptian elements in early alchemical texts, exclusively focuses, with very few exceptions, on classical sources. Lindsay devotes two chapters to Zosimos,²³ in which he considers the “Visions” a text of great importance for alchemy.²⁴ He interprets its contents as descriptions of chemical procedures. He brings into his discussion a reference to the Edwin Smith Papyrus²⁵ and to Chapter 20 of the *Book of the Dead*, although the fragment he quotes actually belongs to

17. Mertens, 1995, p. 209, referring to CAAG III, p. 117, n. 3.

18. Cf. e.g. Jung, 1983. This approach is also discussed in Fowden, 1986, p. 120.

19. Mertens, 1995, p. 210.

20. Mertens, 1995, p. 207-231.

21. Dufault, 2019, pp. 104-115.

22. Knipe, 2011.

23. Lindsay, 1970, pp. 323-357.

24. Lindsay, 1970, p. 343.

25. Lindsay, 1970, p. 347. The Edwin Smith Papyrus is a magico-medical text with a series of treatments for forty-eight different types of wounds, eight magical spells, and five prescriptions for different illnesses. The manuscript in which it has been preserved dates to Dynasties 16-17, ca. 1600 BCE. For a recent translation, and excellent images of the text, cf. Allen, 2005, pp. 70-115.

Chapter 77.²⁶ However, there is no connection between the contents of both texts and Zosimos' "Visions". The illustrations used in both chapters show Egyptian motifs that have no link to Lindsay's discussion, and are not mentioned in the text.

More recently, two monograph-length studies on the Egyptian background of early alchemy have been published. Unfortunately, both present serious problems. The first one is Shannon Grimes' *Becoming Gold. Zosimos of Panopolis and the Alchemical Arts in Roman Egypt* (2018). This book emphasizes the roots of alchemy, and in particular of Zosimos, in Egypt by highlighting his connection with the tradition of statue-making, which goes back to early Pharaonic history. This premise, which is promising, is unfortunately developed by means of a rather misguided examination of a few Egyptological studies, and no direct analysis of any Egyptian primary sources. This is not the place for a thorough review of the book, but the following notes should provide a general idea of the significance of these issues.²⁷ The main thesis of Grimes concerning Zosimos is that he was "a scribal priest who was responsible for preserving and translating ancient Egyptian recipes, and that he was a high-ranking craftsman – a goldsmith – who supervised other temple metallurgists".²⁸ This interpretation is taken even further in the conclusion: "Zosimos identifies himself as a priest of Hermes, and evidence from his writings indicates that he worked as a scribe in a House of Life".²⁹ She derives her notion of "scribal priest" who is also a craftsman from a brief encyclopedia article by Joachim Quack on Egyptian religious personnel.³⁰ Grimes states that "These scribal priests were master craftsmen who, according to Zosimos and other alchemical texts, held the rank of 'prophet'".³¹ While Quack indicates that some senior artisans could also have priestly rank, he does not say that they were prophets, which was the highest priestly rank. Furthermore, as I will discuss later in this paper, the Egyptian texts that detail the types of temple personnel connected with the manufacture of statues distinguish clearly between non-initiated temple personnel, which comprises the artisans who fabricated the statues, and initiated (priestly) personnel, who were in charge of their

26. Lindsay, 1970, p. 354-355. He interprets the text as a "shamanist initiation-ritual of sky-ascent and underworld-descent".

27. Since Grimes has no Egyptological training, the book would have significantly benefitted from having an Egyptologist amongst its peer reviewers, which has clearly not been the case.

28. Grimes, 2018, p. 25.

29. Grimes, 2018, p. 246.

30. Quack, 2004, reference, for instance, on Grimes, 2018, p. 46.

31. Grimes, 2018, p. 46.

consecration.³² There is no evidence in Zosimos' writings that would indicate that he had knowledge of any Egyptian script, which seems to have been a requisite for the access to the priesthood at least in the Roman period,³³ and thus that he was trained as an Egyptian scribe, and while he discusses other individuals who are priests, he never claims to be one himself. There is also no proof that he engaged directly with Egyptian funerary texts in writing, or that he copied them. Therefore, Grimes' identification of Zosimos as a priest, and in particular as a priest of Hermes, has no basis in the actual evidence.

The second book is Alison Roberts' *Hathor's Alchemy. The Ancient Egyptian Roots of the Hermetic Art* (2019).³⁴ In this book, Zosimos' identity is not a topic of analysis. Rather, his works are mentioned as part of an argument that intends to explain Egyptian religious iconography in alchemical terms.³⁵ In this case, Roberts does have an Egyptological training, which is immediately evident in the wealth of references located in the endnotes. However, while the Egyptological bibliography cited is extensive and in most cases of the highest quality, there is also a reliance on more questionable works that verge on the esoteric.³⁶ The discussion, in Jungian

32. See section 7, below, on the texts of the Chamber of Gold. While Grimes refers to Derchain's article on this text (pp. 84-86), she does not seem to have understood its contents.

33. The Greek papyrus *P.Tebtunis* II 291 Fr. b 2.41-43 records the existence of a requirement of knowledge of hieratic and perhaps hieroglyphs for accessing the priestly office, tested by means of an exam: [ἀπ]όδειξιν δούς τοῦ ἐπίστασθαι [ιε]ρατικά [καί] Αἰγύπτια γράμ[ματ]α ἐξ ἧς οἱ ἱερογραμματεῖς προήνεκαν βιβλοῦ ἱερατικῆς "having given proof of knowledge of hieratic and Egyptian writing from a hieratic book presented by the hierogrammateis" (edition in Grenfell, Hunt & Goodspeed, 1907, pp. 57-58). Quack has discussed this document, indicating that the knowledge test of the candidate seems to have been an alternative test for those who could not prove their priestly descent otherwise, cf. Quack 2005, p. 101.

34. This book has been reviewed by Matteo Martelli (Martelli, 2021) and Marco Beretta (Beretta, 2021). Their main critique is the lack of connection of the alchemical imagery discussed by Roberts with chemical practices, as well as lack of citation of authors such as Daumas and Aufrère. I have not been able to find any reviews written by Egyptologists.

35. The main Egyptian monuments analyzed in the book are temple of Nefertari at Abu Simbel, the temple of Hathor at Dendera, and the New Kingdom Netherworld books depicted in the royal tombs of the Ramesside kings.

36. For example, the works of the mystic Schwaller de Lubicz, inspired by esoteric and theosophical ideas, proponent of fanciful interpretations such as the idea of divine geometry, and creator of the so-called "Egyptian Tarot". Another often cited author is Jeremy Naydler (who is prominently thanked in the acknowledgments and was Roberts' PhD student). He follows the tradition of Schwaller de Lubicz, and proposes a non-Egyptological approximation to the Egyptian temples and more recently to the Pyramid Texts as "shamanic wisdom". Cf. Joshua Roberson's review of Naydler's book *Shamanic Wisdom in the Pyramid Texts: The Mystical Tradition of Ancient Egypt* (2005) in the *Journal of the American Research Center Egypt*, 42, 2005-2006, pp. 166-167.

fashion, combines Egyptian evidence from every historical period and context, with evidence from other cultures, time periods, and geographical locations unrelated to ancient Egypt, similarly to what Jung had done earlier. The main thesis of the book revolves around the idea of the divine feminine, a concept Roberts has explored in previous books, represented in the goddess Hathor, and her connection to alchemy through what Roberts calls “Hathor’s copper love”.³⁷ While the book deploys many references to Egyptian sources, both textual and iconographic, these are generally cherry-picked and on many occasions manipulated and inserted into an extremely convoluted argument, in which the clear identification of each reference becomes hard to follow even to the specialist. Some statements are extremely fanciful, or directly have no actual basis on real evidence.³⁸ All the arguments that contradict or somewhat question Roberts’ main thesis are either omitted or relegated without much discussion to the endnotes. Once more, a complete review of the many issues that this book presents is outside of the scope of this paper, but the analysis of the section in which Zosimos’ “Visions” are mentioned will suffice. The main argument of the book revolves around the importance of copper, associated with a feminine divine element, in Graeco-Egyptian alchemy and in the later alchemical tradition. Roberts bases her discussion on the assumption that the Egyptian word *biʿ* means “copper”. Despite indicating that the translation of this word is uncertain and has been the object of inconclusive debate amongst Egyptologists, she disregards any other options, and briefly summarizes them in an endnote. She thus proceeds with the assumption that every instance of *biʿ* should be interpreted as “copper”.³⁹ Most Egyptologists, however, consider that this word should, in most cases, be translated as “iron”.⁴⁰ Roberts also discusses the N41/42 hieroglyphic sign (𓆎, a vessel with water), which appears as part of the word *biʿ*, as a connection of copper with water and with the feminine, since the sign also appears, as the biliteral *hm*, in the word *hmt* “woman/wife”. However, M. Victoria Almansa-Villatoro has argued that all the instances of *biʿ* with

37. Roberts, 2019, p. 158 *inter alia*.

38. Cf. e.g.: “Ramesses needs his sistrum-shaking queen, otherwise he might remain forever caught and crystallized in the youthful zest of dawn leadership, which, powerful though this may be, nevertheless stops short of midday rule and maturity” (Roberts, 2019, p. 39); or the following statement, for which no reference is provided: “It is sometimes claimed that Ramesses was a secret admirer of the radical 18th-Dynasty ruler Akhenaten” (Roberts, 2019, p. 74).

39. Roberts, 2019, 285: endnote 4 to chapter 13. The discussion of *biʿ* as copper starts on p. 149.

40. For a summary of the discussion, including references, cf. Almansa-Villatoro, 2019. Scholars like John R. Harris and Sydney Aufrère, in their respective monographs of the conception of metals in ancient Egypt, consider the Egyptian word for copper to be *hmt.y* not *biʿ*. Cf. Harris, 1961, pp. 61-62; Aufrère, 1991, pp. 449-540.

the N41/42 sign are to be understood as iron, and not copper, since the sign refers to the material of the container of the water of the sky, which would be iron.⁴¹ This alone would undermine the very basis of Roberts' copper argument. In support of the association of copper with water, Roberts does not offer any Egyptian evidence, only references to "Kotoko mythology" and the "Kuba copper myth" (which she never locates geographically or chronologically), and a designation for molten copper by "a Burundi smith", without further context.⁴² Roberts then associates copper with Hathor by means of an image from the *Book of the Earth* in the burial chamber of Ramesses VI, in which a red disk is surmounted by a head of Hathor, from which the head and the tail of a snake emerge as arms, which are held by two human figures identified as Atum and the "Seizer".⁴³ She connects this image with scenes of metal smelting from the tomb of Rekhmire,⁴⁴ with which the resemblance is not evident, and confirms her identification between Hathor and copper stating that the red disk correspond to the womb of a figure in the first hour of the *Book of Day*, depicted on the ceiling of the same chamber, in which there is a small child figure that represents the Sun, which Roberts argues "comes forth in copper", referring the reader back to fig. 8 in the book (the image of the pregnant woman in the first hour of the *Book of Day* on the ceiling of the burial chamber of Ramesses VI). However, the quoted text – "(he) comes forth in copper" –, which seems to identify the disk in which the solar child is with copper, does not exist as part of the first hour of the *Book of Day*, and can be found neither in the image indicated by Roberts, nor in the edition of the *Book of Day*.⁴⁵ It is in this context where Roberts inserts her analysis of Zosimos' "Visions", in which she focuses on the image of the Man of Copper, indicating that the transformations described by Zosimos already appear in the tomb of Ramesses VI. However, we have seen that her argument of the disk surmounted by Hathor as copper is invalid. It would just represent the Sun itself. Her idea of "the copper 'tying' everything together in this (*scil.* the alchemical) animation process"⁴⁶ derives from her interpretation of

41. Almansa-Villatoro, 2019, esp. p. 77, also about N41/42 in connection with words related to women.

42. Roberts, 2019, p. 165. She concludes there that: "In light of these African associations, quite possibly the *bi3* hieroglyph's varied meanings reflect the highly coded metallurgical language surrounding ancient Egyptian copper-working, which was never simply a 'technical' operation". This conclusion is, as we have seen, not based on actual Egyptian evidence.

43. Roberts, 2019, p. 165, fig. 141.

44. Roberts, 2019, p. 146, fig. 128.

45. For the edition of the first hour of the *Book of Day*, cf. Müller-Roth, 2008, pp. 98-107. For the analysis of the pregnant figure, in which no reference to copper can be found, cf. pp. 70-77.

46. Roberts, 2019, p. 165.


bi3 as copper in Utterance 669 of the *Pyramid Texts*, in which the limbs of Horus are joined with *bi3*. Once more, this derives from an assumption, since most translations of the text translate *bi3* as “metal”,⁴⁷ and according to Almansa-Villatoro it may be translated as “iron”, as discussed above. This is the basis for Roberts’ argument that “Hathor’s copper love is the ‘glue’ binding everything together in the heart of the earth, ‘tying together’ this cosmos through the heartbeat of her love”, which apart from sounding quite New Age-y, is not fully supported by the evidence. Surprisingly, most of Roberts’ focus on Zosimos is placed on this “copper” element, and not on his other imagery. In an endnote to her first mention of Zosimos, Roberts briefly refers to the connection between the lunar staircases (“moon steps”) and Zosimos’ “15 steps leading up to the altar”,⁴⁸ first identified by Alexandra von Lieven, and which I discuss in detail in section 3, below. Even though the image of the lunar staircase of the pronaos of the temple of Dendera appears several times illustrated in Roberts’ book, including on the back cover, she dismisses this connection, and does not explore the actual iconography of the temple of Dendera in connection with Zosimos’ “Visions”. Much more could be discussed, but this example encapsulates the general methodology employed in this book, which bends and fabricates evidence in order to support a pre-established thesis around a divine feminine alchemical tradition tied to copper, which Roberts follows towards the end of the book up until the Renaissance, with equally dubious connections.⁴⁹

The previous review confirms that a proper Egyptological analysis of Zosimos’ “Visions” is still necessary. Zosimos lived and worked in Roman Egypt, and so the meaning of his imagery should not be searched in an atemporal and abstract pool of archetypes, but in Zosimos’ own historical and cultural context. A series of caveats need to be acknowledged before this analysis is undertaken:

- The ultimate goal of Zosimos’ “Visions” is the description of alchemical procedures, and thus the images employed in them will primarily serve this purpose.

47. For example, cf. Allen, 2015, p. 262.

48. Roberts, 2019, p. 288, endnote 15 to chapter 15.

49. Another brief example of manipulation of Egyptian evidence appears on p. 152, in which Roberts analyzes the Second Intermediate Period stela of Sobekhotep. She takes the orthography of the verb *h3p* “to be hidden” (*Wb.* III, 30.6-19) and forces it to mean “to adorn, adornment” for the sake of her general argument, because it is written with the sign S28 , a strip of cloth with a fringe used as determinative. However, the presence of this determinative has no connection with the idea of “adornment”, but rather represents the notion of being veiled and thus concealed.

- The treatise has a complicated history of transmission and is almost certainly incomplete. Its original form is lost to us, and centuries of alterations and selection of which sections would be ultimately copied and transmitted may have obscured its original structure and contents.
- Zosimos' perception of the images he employs in the treatise would ultimately have depended on his degree of access to their original meaning, which is directly connected to Zosimos' place in his historical context. As a result of this, a close reading of these images may offer a more nuanced understanding of Zosimos' *Sitz-im-Leben*.

I will articulate my analysis in the following pages around four main thematic areas. Firstly, I will discuss what I identify as the main image of the treatise, the staircases and altars, and will connect them to the lunar staircases of the Egyptian temples dating to the Graeco-Roman Period. Secondly, I will explore the associations between Zosimos' presentation of sacrifices and the Osirian myth. Thirdly, I will examine the description of the *ναός* in Zosimos' allegories of transmutation in the context of the architecture of the Egyptian temples. My fourth point will go back to the introduction of the treatise, in order to identify Zosimos' presentation of his own imagery, and to propose a potential reconstruction of the structure of the treatise. Finally, I will use the clues provided by the "Visions" to present some conclusions concerning Zosimos' identity and cultural context.

3. LUNAR IMAGERY. STAIRCASES AND ALTARS⁵⁰

Of all the imagery in Zosimos' "Visions", the lunar staircases with sacrificing altars are the most memorable. In the first dream, Zosimos sees a *ἱερουργός*, a "sacrificing priest", standing above an altar in the shape of a *φιάλη*, a bowl (*ἐπάνω βωμοῦ φιαλοειδοῦς*, *Mém. auth.*, X 2, l. 18.; also called *φιαλοβωμός*, a word invented by Zosimos).⁵¹ Inside this altar stands a priest.⁵² The altar is located on top of a staircase

50. Part of the discussion in section 3 was first presented in my book (Escolano-Poveda, 2020a). It is included here for the sake of the integrity of the argument, and to make it accessible to a non-Egyptological audience.

51. Mertens, 1995, p. 36.

52. The sacrificial priest and the priest in the bowl-shaped altar could be considered as different figures, or be conflated as one. The text is ambiguous, perhaps on purpose, allowing the interpretation of the scene also as a self-sacrifice by the alchemist who performs the procedure. In fact, later the text says that the man of copper, the first transformation of the priest, is *ὁ ἱερουργῶν καὶ ἱερουργούμενος* "*celui*

of fifteen steps, although some versions indicate seven steps.⁵³ The priest residing inside the bowl-shaped altar talks to Zosimos and tells him that he has descended the fifteen steps of darkness and ascended those of light (Πεπλήρωκα τὸ κατιέναι με ταύτας τὰς δεκαπέντε σκοτοφεγγεῖς κλίμακας καὶ ἀνιέναι με τὰς φωτολαμπεῖς κλίμακας, *Mém. auth.*, X 2, ll. 21-23). This most certainly refers to the complete cycle of the waning and waxing Moon.⁵⁴ The image of the staircase of fifteen steps, with the bowl-shaped altar on top and the priest in it, about to experience a transformation/transmutation, connects Zosimos' description with an important scene found in many Graeco-Roman period Egyptian temples: the lunar staircases.⁵⁵ The most notorious examples are located on the ceiling of the pronaos of the Hathor Temple at Dendera, and on the external south wall of this same pronaos, overlooking the roof of the temple and giving access to the roof of the pronaos. We find them also in the temples of Edfu, Esna, and Philae, either as staircases or as processions of deities.

Taking the representation on the ceiling of the pronaos in Dendera as the most complete and lavish example (Fig. 1), we can enumerate the most distinctive elements of the scene: a staircase of fifteen steps, which on top has a depiction of the *wedjat*-eye inside of a disk with a lunar crescent in its lower part, sometimes standing on a papyriform column, and being revered by Thoth. On each one of the fourteen steps that lead to the top a deity stands. This staircase depicts the cycle from the new to the full Moon, which is represented in the *wedjat*-eye inside the disk. The depiction of the Moon as a disk with a crescent on its lower part is definitely reminiscent of the shape of a bowl,⁵⁶ particularly as it appears in the representations of alchemical

qui sacrifie et celui qui est sacrifié" (*Mém. auth.*, X 3, ll. 71-72). Cf. Lindsay, 1970, pp. 344-345; Fowden, 1986, p. 121; Mertens, 1995, pp. 34-35.

53. Another staircase of seven steps is mentioned later on in the third and fifth dreams. I will discuss it at the end of this section.

54. As Mertens noted in her commentary, cf. Mertens, 1995, p. 216.

55. The lunar staircases have been analyzed in depth in Victoria Altmann-Wendling's recent monograph on lunar concepts in the Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2018, pp. 85-133. Further on the concept of the lunar staircases, cf. also Altmann-Wendling, 2017a, and Altmann-Wendling, forthcoming. For knowledge of the Moon in Graeco-Roman Egypt, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2019; and for the connections between lunar concepts and kingship in ancient Egypt, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2021. For a brief analysis of the lunar staircase in the pronaos of Dendera, cf. Cauville, 2013, pp. 430-432.

56. Egyptian art represented the three-dimensional world in two dimensions without incorporating depth. For the representation of objects on a surface, or of the contents located inside a recipient, the container was represented in lateral view, with its contents placed on top, in their more characteristic and recognizable view. This form of representation is known in art as "aspective", in opposition to "per-

apparatus in the Byzantine manuscripts, such as the representation of a *dibikos* in *Marc. gr.* 299, fol. 188v (Fig. 2).⁵⁷

The procession of deities leading to the *wedjat*-eye, which can be depicted standing on the staircase and also on a horizontal base line without the staircase but with the same meaning, represents the days of the waxing section of the Moon cycle, leading to the full Moon. They are found in different locations of the Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period. In several of these lunar divine processions in Dendera, Edfu, and Philae, the gods appear carrying a series of substances that are used to fill the *wedjat*-eye until it is complete in the full Moon day. These substances are described as plants and minerals. On the northern wall of the First Western Osirian chapel on the roof of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, the gods are listed carrying a plant and a mineral each.⁵⁸ Both minerals and plants were used in the creation of the Osiris-Khentiamentiou and Sokar figurines fashioned during the mysteries of Osiris (cf. section 4, below). This aspect of the lunar processions brings to mind alchemical procedures and recipes.

The connection between the image of the lunar staircases and Zosimos' description was first identified by von Lieven in her analysis of the ceiling of the pronaos at Esna.⁵⁹ She pointed out that these lunar staircases must have been prominent still in Late Antiquity, in order to be known by someone like Zosimos, and notes that he must have been able to see these representations somewhere, perhaps in the now disappeared temple of Akhmim.⁶⁰ She also connected these representations of the Moon

spective". In the case of the disk with the lunar crescent and the *wedjat*-eye inside, an observer accustomed to these conventions could definitely have interpreted the disk as depicting the contents of the bowl (the *wedjat*-eye) as seen from above. For the principles of Egyptian art, cf. Schäfer, 1974, especially § 4.3.6 and fig. 161.

57. It should be noted that the earliest illustrations of alchemical apparatus that have come down to us appear in Byzantine manuscripts, and thus are removed from Zosimos' time by at least six centuries. The illustrations that may have been included in Zosimos' original manuscripts are thus lost to us. For line drawings of the apparatus in these manuscripts, and a discussion of them, cf. CAAG I, pp. 127-173; Mertens, 2002, cxii-clix; and Martelli, 2011, who also discusses the relationship between Egyptian workshops with alchemical laboratories.

58. On the filling of the *wedjat*-eye with plants and minerals, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2018, pp. 158-169 and 733-734, which includes a transliteration, translation, and commentary of the above-mentioned text. For the hieroglyphic text, cf. Cauville, 1997a, pp. 300-302 (= *Dend.* X, 300-302).

59. Lieven, 2000, pp. 131-132. Being unaware that von Lieven had made this connection, I proposed it independently in my 2017 Ph.D. dissertation (published in an expanded and updated version as Escolano-Poveda, 2020a).

60. On the archaeological remains of the ancient Akhmim, cf. Kuhlmann, 1983. A comprehensive volume on Akhmim in the Graeco-Roman and Late Antique periods is Egberts, Muhs & van der Vliet,

and their link with the myth of the death and dismemberment of Osiris with the fate of the priest in the bowl and the description by Plutarch in *De Iside* 41-44, 367d-368e. Her discussion, however, is quite brief and does not go into more detail.

Apart from the staircase and the altar, further elements that connect Zosimos' description and the Egyptian lunar staircases can be highlighted. The priest in the bowl tells Zosimos that the sacrificial priest will make him anew (ὁ ἱερουργῶν καινουργῶν με, *Mém. auth.* X 2, ll. 23-24), separating his body from his soul. Reading these lines in the light of the representations from Dendera allows the identification of Thoth with the ἱερουργός performing the sacrifice. The *wedjat*-eye, labelled in the hieroglyphic text above and around the disk as Osiris in the form of the Moon,⁶¹ would correspond to the priest inside the bowl, who is to be reborn.⁶² The word *wedjat* (*wḏj.t*⁶³) literally means “the one that is complete”, from the verb *wḏj*, “to be complete, to be intact”.⁶⁴ The column on which the disk with the *wedjat*-eye rests can be read as *wḏj*, “to be green, fresh, new”.⁶⁵ Both images convey the notion of regeneration and renewal, and the complete depiction, with the *wedjat*-eye inside the lunar disk, located on the papyriform column, could thus be read as the complete and renewed Moon, which resonates with the words of the priest in the bowl: καινουργῶν με. This also creates a connection between the alchemical process described by Zosimos and the mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak,⁶⁶ which were performed in the Osirian chapels on the roof of the temple in Dendera. In this set of rituals, the death and resurrection of Osiris were ritually reenacted. When Zosimos questions the priest about his identity, the priest says that he is Ἴων, ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων, “*Ion*,⁶⁷ *le prêtre des endroits inaccessibles*” (*Mém. auth.* X 2, ll. 28-29). This priest is mentioned again in the fifth dream.⁶⁸

2002. For a new accessible review of Akhmim, cf. the catalogue of the exhibition “Akhmim – Egypt’s Forgotten City”: El-Sayed *et al.*, 2021.

61. *Dend.* XV, 30. Translation in Cauville, 2012, pp. 42-43.

62. The word *wḏj.t* (*Wb.* I, 401.12-402.2) literally means “the one that is complete”, from the verb *wḏj* “to be complete, to be intact” (*Wb.* I, 399.14-401.2). The column on which the disk with the *wedjat*-eye rests can be read as *wḏj* “to be green, fresh, new” (*Wb.* I, 263.12-266.9). Both images convey the notion of regeneration and renewal.

63. *Wb.* I, 401.12-402.2.

64. *Wb.* I, 399.14-401.2.

65. *Wb.* I, 264.12-266.9. For a study of this term, cf. Escolano-Poveda, forthcoming.

66. For the mysteries of Osiris cf. Junker, 1910; Chassinat, 1966-1968; Pries, 2011.

67. On the identity of Ion cf. Mertens, 1995, p. 36 note to 14; on Aion in the Hermetic literature, cf. Festugière, 2014, pp. 1602-1625. Altmann-Wendling (2018, p. 125), commenting on von Lieven’s connection between the lunar staircases and Zosimos’ description, suggests that Ion may be identified with Ἰων or Ἰων(-ἡς).

68. I will discuss his possible identity in the following section on the mysteries of Osiris.

The tomb of Osiris was always considered an inaccessible and hidden place that had to be protected, and thus the chapels of the mysteries of Osiris on the roof of Dendera are protected by myriads of deities armed with knives and arrows.⁶⁹ The imagery related to the mysteries of Osiris will be discussed in detail in section 4.

The image of the lunar disk on top of the papyriform column may have had further resonances in another work by Zosimos. This image is also suggestive of the shape of a mirror. One of the words for mirror in Egyptian was *wn.t-ḥr*,⁷⁰ from *wn-ḥr*, “to reveal” (literally “to open the face”).⁷¹ Through the alchemical process performed here, the new nature of the metal/priest/Osiris is revealed. This idea can be found in the Graeco-Egyptian magical formularies as well. PDM XIV 695-700 is a vessel-divination involving the Moon (*r šn wb³ i^cḥ*, “to inquire opposite the Moon”: *P.London-Leiden* 23.21).⁷² The incantation is to be done on a full Moon, which was the fifteenth day of the lunar cycle: *i.īr=k sdy wb³ i^cḥ iw=f mḥ wd³.t n 15.nt*, “You should speak to the Moon when it fills the sound-eye on the 15th day” (*P.London-Leiden* 23.22–23). The sound-eye is the *wedjat*-eye (*wd³.t*). The words to be pronounced are *wnḥ=k r.rⁱ*, “Reveal yourself to me!” (*P.London-Leiden* 23.25). The verb plus its preposition, *wnḥ r*, “reveal to”, would have sounded in a very similar way to the word for mirror, *wn.t-ḥr*. While the ritual in the magical formulary is to be performed with a vessel, which would provide a reflection, it would also be possible to do it by means of a mirror. Connecting all this to Zosimos, the identification of the image of the disk over the column as a mirror by Zosimos may be found in his works preserved in Syriac. In a manuscript now at Cambridge (*Mm.* 6.29),⁷³ Zosimos discusses in several instances the making of mirrors from different metals. In Book 12 of this treatise, he discusses the mirrors of silver and electrum, and describes them as being magical. I quote the relevant text here in Berthelot and Duval’s translation:

“Le miroir fut apporté ensuite chez les prêtres, dans le temple appelé Les sept portes. Ces miroirs étaient fabriqués à la taille des hommes et leur montraient qu’ils devaient se purifier. Tout cela était exposé en forme de mystère, comme je te l’ai fait connaître (à toi, femme !) dans le livre qui est appelé Cercle des prêtres. [...] Ce miroir est placé au-dessus des Sept portes, du côté de l’Occident, de telle sorte que celui qui y regarde voit l’Orient, là où brille

69. Cf. Cauville 1997a, plate X 7.

70. *Wb.* I, 313.7; *PL* 230-231.

71. *Wb.* I, 313.6; *PL* 230. On *wn-ḥr* as part of the daily ritual and as a festival, cf. chapter 2, section 1.2.2. From *wn-ḥr* we find in Demotic the verb *wnḥ*, “to reveal” (Erichsen, 1954, p. 92).

72. For the Demotic text, cf. Griffith & Thompson, 1904-1909, II, pl. 23-24.


73. Translated in Berthelot & Duval, 1893.

la lumière intellectuelle, qui est au-dessus du voile. C'est pourquoi il est placé aussi du côté sud, au-dessus de toutes les portes qui répondent aux Sept cieus, au-dessus de ce monde visible, au-dessus des Douze maisons et des Pléiades, qui sont le monde des treize. Au-dessus d'eux existe cet Œil des sens invisibles, cet Œil de l'esprit, qui est présent là et en tous lieux. On y voit cet esprit parfait, en la puissance duquel tout se trouve, dès maintenant et jusqu'à la mort".⁷⁴

Right before this passage, Zosimos says that Alexander had a mirror in his house that protected him from all evils, which was inherited by his inferior successors. They treated it as a talisman, since when a man looked at himself in it, it suggested that he had to purify himself completely. In the above-cited passage, the mirror is taken to a temple called the "Seven doors". This brings to mind the different gates that lead from the outside of the precinct to the inner sanctuary in an Egyptian temple. The text says that the mirror is of the size of a man, and that it was to be located above the gates. The most interesting part is that over the mirror there is an eye, which is described as the "Eye of the invisible senses" and the "Eye of the spirit". The eye is described as all powerful from the present to the moment of death. This description brings to mind the *wedjat*-eye of the lunar staircases, located inside the mirror-shaped lunar disk over the papyrus column. It is relevant to note that these representations are generally found on ceilings or in higher parts of the walls of the temples. On the southern external wall of the pronaos of the Hathor temple at Dendera it even appears in architectural form, being an actual staircase leading to the roof of the pronaos, and which could be thus used in the performance of rituals (Fig. 3). Therefore, its location above the seven gates in Zosimos' description agrees with the real placement of these images in the Egyptian temples. We do not know which temple Zosimos is referring to. If we consider that this could be a representation located at the temple of Min at Panopolis (modern Akhmim), where Zosimos was from, it may indicate that the image was placed somewhere facing the rising sun (on the west, facing east, perhaps). If this was an actual architectural feature of the temple, we may be able to connect it with representations of the lunar staircase such as the one on the southern external wall of the pronaos at Dendera. The block in which the lunar disk had been represented on top of the staircase in this location has been severely damaged, and only a small portion of the lunar crescent in its lower part is still visible. This disk, which would probably have contained a *wedjat*-eye, may have also been plated with silver or electrum, with the current damage resulting, at least partially, from the removal of

74. Berthelot & Duval, 1893, pp. 262-263.

the metal.⁷⁵ Nothing remains from the temple of Akhmim, but we may hypothesize that a similar image, described by Zosimos, could have given origin to the story that he conveys in the treatise.

In the second dream, Zosimos sees again the same altar in the shape of a bowl, with water boiling in it and an innumerable crowd of people (πολὸν λαὸν εἰς αὐτὸν ἄπειρον ὄντα, *Mém. auth.* X 3, ll. 45-46). On the ceiling of the pronaos of the temple of Hathor at Dendera, another scene, located to the right of the lunar staircase in the same band, may be connected to the imagery described by Zosimos (Fig. 4). In it we see the lunar boat carrying a large white disk, which contains in its center a *wedjat*-eye. In the iris of the eye, where the pupil would be, is a seated child with his index finger touching his mouth . Above and below the eye there are two groups of seven seated figures holding *was*-scepters.

There is no agreement amongst Egyptologists on the meaning of this scene. Altmann-Wendling has collected different interpretations.⁷⁶ In her own view, this is a representation of the full Moon, and is connected to the lunar staircase scene to its left on the same band of the ceiling of the pronaos. She suggests that it could even be the Moon in the morning of the 16th lunar-month day, following the Moon in the shape of a mirror in the previous scene, which represents the 15th lunar-month day. The boat carrying Osiris to the left of the lunar staircase would then represent the new Moon (Fig. 5).

An alternative view is presented by Cauville, who understands this scene as the pregnant Moon (“*Lune en gestation*”), with the fourteen figures depicting fetuses.⁷⁷ The scene would thus represent the new Moon, and the whole band of the ceiling in which it is located would be read from right to left, with the lunar staircase as the waxing part of the cycle, culminating in the boat with Osiris as the full Moon. Both approaches can actually be reconciled. The elements in this scene condense all the phases of the waxing section of the lunar cycle, from the new Moon to the full Moon. The new Moon is presented in an embryonic way, with the child inside the iris as in an egg,⁷⁸ and the fourteen figures depicting the elements to be added for the completion of the lunar disk on each day until the full Moon. This image is present in other temples, such as in the pronaos of Edfu,⁷⁹ in connection to the more widely

75. This damage may also have been the result of the deliberate destruction of the image, as in the case of the face of Hathor on the back wall of the temple.

76. Altmann-Wendling, 2018, pp. 38-39.

77. Cauville, 2013, pp. 508-525.

78. The word for embryo in Egyptian is the same as that for egg: *swḥ.t* (*Wb.* IV, 73.1-74.1).

79. Cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2018, plate 8b.

represented lunar staircases. Since Zosimos appears to have been able to see the lunar staircases, he may have also had access to this scene, using it as inspiration for the image in the beginning of his second dream. His interpretation of the scene further supports this idea. When Zosimos approaches the altar, he sees a homunculus with white hair and a knife,⁸⁰ and asks him about the contents of the altar. He tells Zosimos that what he sees is “the entrance, the exit, and the transformation” (εἴσοδος ἐστὶν καὶ ἔξοδος καὶ μεταβολή, *Mém. auth.* X 3, ll. 52-53). This expression condenses quite nicely the elements present in the scene at Dendera, which shows, in the image of the child, the beginning (or *entrance*) of the lunar cycle with the embryo of the new Moon, the *transformation* with the fourteen figures corresponding to the days of the waxing part of the lunar cycle, and the end (or *exit*) of this part of the cycle, with the *wedjat*-eye, the complete eye that represents the full Moon. The connection with the lunar cycle and the mysteries of Osiris is further strengthened in Zosimos’ text. Zosimos asks for clarification on the meaning of μεταβολή, “transformation”. His interlocutor tells him that the place where this transformation takes place is identified as ταριχεία, “embalming”, which is the process by which the body of Osiris was regenerated during the mysteries.

Apart from the staircase of fifteen steps, another staircase of seven steps is mentioned in the third and fifth dreams. The steps are introduced by a definite article (τὰς ἑπτὰ κλίμακας, *Mém. auth.* XI 1, ll. 1-2), which may indicate that this is the same staircase of the first dream, or that this staircase has been mentioned before in a section of the treatise that has not come down to us. In the third, fourth, and fifth dreams, Zosimos describes his ascent of the seven-step staircase. He first says that one time he had accomplished this ascent in just one day, and that, having undertaken this path several times, he set out again, but this time he got lost. Mertens notes that this may indicate that the alchemical preparation described was meant to be done in seven days, and could not be achieved in a shorter time.⁸¹ Zosimos needs to ask for directions in order to find his way up, which takes place at a slower pace, with stops on each step. In *Mém. auth.* XI 2, l. 26, Zosimos climbs the third step (τὴν τρίτην κλίμακα) of this seven-step staircase, and in *Mém. auth.* XII 2, ll. 9-10, which corresponds to the fifth dream, he climbs the fourth step (τὴν τετάρτην κλίμακα). A series of images are connected to each one of these steps. There are no references to the first and second

80. I discuss these homunculi in the next section.

81. Mertens, 1995, p. 226.

steps, or to further ones after the fourth. Their frame within the seven-step staircase seems to indicate that the treatise is incomplete here.⁸²

Several interpretations have been proposed for this staircase.⁸³ The number seven has been associated with the five planets and the two luminaries.⁸⁴ Mertens relates this staircase to the one in the mysteries of Mithras, which also has seven steps, but notes that this is such a common number that other possibilities are also feasible.⁸⁵ Alternatively, and in connection with the fifteen-step staircase of the first dream, seven could also refer to a quarter of the lunar cycle. In the mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak, part of the ritual is performed on the 12th of Khoiak, which is equated with the feast of the quarter Moon. This corresponded to the seventh lunar-month day, called *dn.t*, “part”.⁸⁶ The 12th of Khoiak was also the festival of *hbs-t*, “Breaking up the earth”,⁸⁷ which symbolized the burial of Osiris. If Zosimos was taking the mysteries of Osiris, and their correlation with the lunar cycle as his reference for the creation of the images in this part of his treatise, the staircase of seven-steps leading to the seventh lunar-month day, and the celebration in it of the burial of Osiris, may have represented the fragmentation and collection of the fragments of the body of Osiris. The elements described in dreams three to five focus especially on the dismemberment and punishment of a series of characters that have in common

82. On the structure of the treatise, cf. section 6.

83. In the Demotic narrative of *Setne II*, the Netherworld is presented as having seven chambers. The section corresponding to the first three chambers is not preserved, but in the fourth and fifth, Setne and his son Si-Osiris encounter different individuals being punished in ways that are reminiscent of those described in Greek literature. The punishments described in the fourth hall remind one of those of Oknos as told by Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 10.29.1, and Tantalos in the *Odyssey* XI 582-593. This conception of the Netherworld as a series of seven chambers, in which punishments occur, may have still existed in Zosimos’ time (the conception of punishments in the Netherworld is present in earlier Egyptian funerary literature, cf. Zandee, 1960, esp. pp. 20-24; Zandee also analyzes the representation of the Netherworld in *Setne II*, cf. Zandee, 1960, pp. 297-302). The Setne cycle is part of the Demotic narratives that were being composed by Egyptian priests in the Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period (Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 48-71), and while their readership would have comprised those literate in Demotic, these narratives may have circulated orally as well (on orality in Demotic literature, cf. Jay, 2016). As I will discuss at the end of this paper, the Egyptian images present in Zosimos’ “Visions” locate him in the temple milieu, but he does not seem to have had access to Egyptian theological treatises. He would have been able to access this iconography, as well as part of its meaning, as a non-initiated member of the temple personnel. This could have also included narratives such as *Setne II*.

84. Fraser, 2007, p. 49.

85. Mertens, 1995, p. 226.

86. Parker, 1950, p. 11; Altmann-Wendling, 2018, p. 822.

87. *Mysteries of Osiris*, col. 42, cf. Cauville, 1997b, pp. 24-25. On *hbs-t*, *PL* 717.

the color red. Here we may see a conflation between the dismemberment of Osiris, and the punishment of Seth, as I will discuss presently.

4. MYSTERIES OF OSIRIS AND THE OPENING OF THE MOUTH. MUMMIFICATION AND PUNISHMENT

The connection between Zosimos' images and the death and resurrection of Osiris is made even clearer in the passage from the first dream in which the priest located inside the bowl-shaped altar describes his dismemberment. The priest says that someone has come running at dawn, and has cut him with a knife according to the structure of his joints (κατὰ σύστασιν ἄμυονίας, *Mém. auth.* X 2, l. 31), and has taken the skin from his whole head. One of the most prominent elements of the myth of the death of Osiris was his dismemberment by Seth.⁸⁸ In Zosimos' dream the priest's bones and flesh are then combined and burnt in order to transform his body and become a soul, a detail that is not present in the Osiris myth. While we should not forget that the procedures described here are alchemical, and thus not every detail will fit the original myth, here there may be a conflation between the procedures performed on Osiris during the mysteries, and those inflicted against Seth. In the mysteries of Osiris, part of the ritual consists in the defeat, dismemberment, and sacrificial offering of Seth before Osiris. The representation of this ritual appears in the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera. By including the dismemberment of Seth in a ritual space dedicated to Osiris, the death and dismemberment of Osiris was avenged, and the ritual acted as an apotropaic measure against his enemies. A further, less evident role of these scenes can be proposed as well. The representation of the death and dismemberment of Osiris was avoided as taboo and was substituted by the death and dismemberment of Seth as a bull. This is similar to a device found in the Demotic literature of this period. In order to avoid stating that Pharaoh was sick/injured/dead, the texts used the euphemistic expression "the enemy of Pharaoh" as the object of the injury, instead of "Pharaoh".⁸⁹ Interestingly enough, in Zosimos' text there is an intentional conflation between the figures of the sacrificing priest and the one being sacrificed. At the end of the second dream, a character called "master of the house" (οἰκοδεσπότης) tells Zosimos that the man of copper,⁹⁰ which seems

88. This dismemberment ultimately represented the dissociation of the constituent parts of the body at the moment of death of each individual. On death as dismemberment, cf. Assmann, 2005, pp. 23-38.

89. For an analysis of this expression, cf. Quack, 1989; Prada, 2017.

90. On the man of copper, cf. discussion below, in this section.

to be identical to the priest sacrificed in the altar during the first dream, is at the same time “the one who sacrifices and the one being sacrificed” (ὁ ἱερούργων καὶ ἱερούργουμενος, *Mém. auth.* X 3, ll. 71-72).

Going back to the dismemberment in Zosimos’ text and its connection with the punishment of Seth, the concept of dismemberment “according to the structure of the joints” is reminiscent of the way an animal is orderly butchered. On the Eastern wall of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera, where the text of the mysteries of Osiris is located, we also find a depiction of the sacrifice and dismemberment of the red bull, which is a representation of Seth.⁹¹ This is part of the scenes 23-24 and 43-44 of the Opening of the Mouth and the Eyes ceremony, in which a bull is dismembered, and a foreleg and its heart are presented as offerings, in this case before Osiris.⁹² This ceremony ritually infused life into human-form elements such as statues, coffins, mummies of individuals, but was also employed in the consecration of other sacred objects and even complete temples.⁹³ The rest of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony is described in the second Western Osirian chapel at Dendera,⁹⁴ and it was integrated within the rites of the mysteries of Osiris, being read during the night from the 23rd to the 24th of Khoiak. The scenes represented on the first Eastern Osirian chapel show, on the first register starting from the bottom, the bull tied with chains on a sort of butchering block, being held in place by Isis and Nephthys (Fig. 6). To the left, the butcher is dismembering the bull’s parts, which appear piled up. The text that accompanies this section says: “*il est dépecé membre par membre, sa tête est tranchée, ses pattes sont découpées, [son cœur] jeté à terre*” (*Dend.* X, 51-52, cols. 17-18). The second register presents again the dismemberment of the body of the bull, which is here described as a red bull (*ih dšr*, *Dend.* X, 53, col. 10), and the offering of its parts to Osiris (Figs. 7 and 8). Concerning this offering, the text indicates that “*Les acolytes d’Horus se délectent de ses viscères, ses os sont sur l’autel, le fumet de sa graisse atteint le ciel*” (*Dend.* X, 52, col. 20). The dismemberment is thus followed by the burning of the remains on an altar, which parallels the treatment given to the priest in Zosimos’ dream. The bull in the mysteries depicts Seth, identified with the red color of the

91. Cauville, 1997b, plate X, 5. Detail in X, 15.

92. For a commentary of this scene at Dendera, cf. Cauville, 1997c, pp. 20-23.

93. This ceremony, as I will discuss in section 7, was performed in the Chamber of Gold. On the Opening of the Mouth and the Eyes, cf. Otto, 1960. Additional analyses in Assmann, 2005, pp. 310-317; and Quack, 2006b, who rearranges Otto’s episode division and order.

94. *Dend.* X, 339-343. Cf. Cauville, 1997a, plates X 188-191. Translation in Cauville, 1997b, pp. 183-185, and commentary in Cauville, 1997c, pp. 164-165. The scenes in this chapel also include the sacrifice of the bull.

desert. An interesting detail here is the designation of the foreleg of the bull placed before Osiris, labelled as *msh.t* (*Dend.* X, 54, col. 26), instead of the usual *hps*, “foreleg”. This is the designation of the adze used in the ceremony of the Opening of the Mouth and the Eyes. It was also the name of the Big Dipper. This constellation was associated to Seth, which was tied to the north pole in order to avoid its going under the horizon, into the Netherworld, the kingdom of Osiris, represented celestially in the constellation of Orion.⁹⁵

Another connection with the punishment of Seth may be found in the fifth dream. After falling asleep, Zosimos climbs the fourth step of the staircase,⁹⁶ and sees in the east someone approaching him, bringing a knife in his hand. Following this figure there is another one, which is described as having his arms tied in the back,⁹⁷ dressed in white and with graceful appearance, whose name is “culmination of cinnabar” (μεσουράνισμα κινναβάρεως). This figure is to be sacrificed, and the character with the knife tells Zosimos: Περίτεμε αὐτοῦ τὴν κεφαλὴν καὶ τὰ κρέατα αὐτοῦ θῦσον ἀνὰ μέρος καὶ τὰς σάρκας αὐτοῦ ἀνὰ μέρος ὅπως αἱ σάρκες αὐτοῦ πρῶτον ἐψηθῶσιν ὀργανικῶς καὶ τότε τῇ κολάσει παραπορευθῶσιν (*Mém. auth.* XII 2, ll. 15-18) “*Coupez-lui la tête tout autour; et ses viandes, offrez-les en sacrifice une à une et ses chairs une à une afin que ses chairs soient d’abord cuites par l’appareil et qu’ensuite elles passent par le châtimeur*”. This text is similar to the one describing the dismemberment of the red bull in the Osirian chapels, quoted in the previous paragraph. Both the bull and the tied-up figure in Zosimos’ dream are described as red, since cinnabar is a red-colored mercury sulfide (HgS) often used as pigment in antiquity.⁹⁸ An interesting connection between Zosimos’ description and the punishment of Seth can also be found in the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera. On the northern wall of the chapel, to the right of the door that leads to the second chapel, we find a scene corresponding to the tenth hour of the night in the Hour Vigil of Osiris.⁹⁹ The scene shows the image of Seth as a donkey,¹⁰⁰ tied up to a post in the manner of an Egyptian enemy, with his arms on the back, pierced by knives at different parts of his

95. Lieven, 2000, pp. 24-29. Cf. also Cauville, 1997c, pp. 20-23.

96. On these steps, cf. discussion above, in section 3.

97. I follow Mertens’ interpretation, which emends περιηκονισμένον to περιηγκωνισμένον (perfect participle of περιηγκωνίζω) according to *LSJ*’s correction. She notes that Berthelot and Ruelle kept the reading of the manuscripts and translated it as “a circular object”. Cf. Mertens, 1995, p. 47, note to 10.

98. On the ancient use of cinnabar, cf. Halleux, 1974, pp. 179-188.

99. *Dend.* X, 126-150. Translation in Cauville, 1997b, pp. 69-79; commentary in Cauville, 1997c, pp. 70-72. For a new analysis of the Hour Vigil of Osiris, cf. Pries, 2011.

100. On Seth as a donkey, cf. Altmann, 2010, pp. 58-59 and references there.

body¹⁰¹ (Fig. 9). Facing him is Horus son of Isis and Osiris holding a knife. Behind Seth stands Osiris, wearing a long robe and holding a series of scepters. If we compare this scene with Zosimos' description, both figures, Osiris and Seth, seem to be conflated in the one called "culmination of cinnabar", who is described as a graceful figure dressed in white, like Osiris in the relief, but has his arms on the back and is about to be sacrificed, like Seth. Once again, sacrificial priest and victim appear to be conflated in Zosimos' imagery.

The notion of punishment is quite prevalent in Zosimos' treatise. In the second dream, the altar where the alchemical procedures are taking place is identified in the plural as κολάσεις "punishments", which also appear in the third dream. The seven steps of the staircase mentioned there are correlated to seven punishments. Like the steps, the punishments are also mentioned in a definite way (τὰς ἑπτὰ κολάσεις, *Mém. auth.* XI 1, l. 2). This may indicate that the punishments described in the first two dreams are being included here. Interestingly enough, the place where Seth is being dismembered and burned is called in the mysteries of Osiris *hb.t* (*Wb.* II, 486.10; *PL* 604), "place of punishment/execution".¹⁰²

Apart from the connection with Seth's punishment, Zosimos' treatise has many references to elements that remind one of the mummification of Osiris. After the process of dismemberment in the first dream, the sacrificed priest is described as an ἀνθρωπάριον κολοβόν (*Mém. auth.* X 2, l. 39), a "mutilated homunculus/mannequin". The designation as ἀνθρωπάριον is suggestive of the Osiris-Khentiamentiu and Sokar figurines created during the mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak. This procedure was described in the text of the mysteries that covers the walls of the first Eastern Osirian chapel on the roof of the temple of Dendera. Accompanying the text, which gives detailed instructions on the ingredients, instruments, and times that should be employed at each phase of the creation of the figurine, a representation of the figurine gives its measurements, as well as those of the basin in which it is meant to be placed (Fig. 10). The appearance of the ἀνθρωπάριον concludes the first dream. Another, or perhaps the same ἀνθρωπάριον is mentioned in the second dream, in the boiling altar full of people that I discussed in the previous section. This one is described as white-haired and holding a knife. After describing the contents of the altar, the ἀνθρωπάριον tells Zosimos that the place where they

101. Cauville, 1997b, plate X, 6. Detail in plate X, 51.

102. Attested in the Osirian chapels in *Dend.* X, 102, 297, 298, 314 (cf. Cauville, 1997d, p. 335).

are is called ταριχία, the place for preserving,¹⁰³ this is, the embalming place. In connection to the discussion of the lunar boat on the previous section, it is relevant to emphasize that the reintegration of the dismembered limbs of Osiris and his embalming process are identified with the waxing Moon. Lunar cycle and embalming process always go hand in hand in this imagery.

The text of the mysteries shows that the process of fabrication of the figurines of Osiris-Khentiamentiu and Sokar is called *k3.t* “work” (*Wb.* V, 98.2-101.8), which reminds one of the designation of alchemical procedures as the “Great Work”.¹⁰⁴ This “work” is presented in the second Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera in a form that would be recognizable to an alchemist like Zosimos. On the north-eastern and north-western walls (plates *Dend.* X, 39 and 41, text in *Dend.* X, 81-89), the goddess Shentayt (“the Widow”), represented with the attributes of both Isis and Nephthys, appears seated on a lion-shaped bed, weighing grain on a set of scales, and images of Khnum and Ptah, the main gods of craftsmanship, are located before her (Fig. 11). The texts that accompany the scene say: “*Paroles à dire par Chentayt la vénérable, la souveraine du Sanctuaire-de-Chentayt, qui fait croître l’orge par son travail, qui, du crépuscule jusqu’à l’aube, transmue l’orge–mise à sa place dans le Temple-de-l’or–au pouvoir magique rendu grand par les dieux, qui rend jeune son frère, momifié, dans le Temple-de-l’or*” (*Dend.* X, 71).¹⁰⁵ The word that Cauville translates as “to transmute” is *s3h*, a causative verb that means “to cause to become an *akh*” (*Wb.* IV, 22.11-23.20). An *akh* was a status that was reached after death, when the deceased had successfully passed the judgement of the dead. It is sometimes translated as “glorified spirit”, “trans-

103. The term ταριχία is also discussed in the first paragraphs of Olympiodoros’ commentary on Zosimos’ “On action” (cf. CAAG II, pp. 69-73 [Greek text], CAAG III, pp. 75-79 [French translation]). In the second paragraph, Olympiodoros discusses the following quote from Zosimos: Γίνεται δὲ ἡ ταριχία περὶ τῆς πηλώδους γῆς “*La macération s’effectue au moyen de la terre limoneuse*” (CAAG II, p. 71, and CAAG III, p. 76). Viano, in her discussion of the identity of this Olympiodoros, discusses briefly the term ταριχία in this passage, indicating that, while its primary meaning is to desiccate and preserve by means of salt (which corresponds to one of the stages of the Egyptian mummification process), in this text it appears to describe the operation of levigation of the gold mineral, in which it is ground to dust and separated from other components by means of water. As a second step, Viano notes that the mineral is put in a vase of fired clay and heated up. Thus, she notes: “*Le mot « macération » est bien choisi pour traduire tarikheia parce qu’il signifie à la fois « laver » (séparer par le liquide) et « conserver »*” (Viano, 2021, p. 202 fn. 1). While this explains the alchemical operation, the use of ταριχία is interesting in this context in its sense of embalming in connection with the figurines created during the mysteries of Osiris, which were made of earth and incorporated, in the case of the Sokar figurine, ground minerals.

104. Noted by Cauville, 1981, p. 25.

105. Cauville, 1997b, pp. 39-40.

figured spirit” or even as “ghost”.¹⁰⁶ In this scene, a series of gods bring to Shentayt the different parts of the body of Osiris, as well as materials for his embalming.

A further clear reference to the embalming process is located in the preamble of the fifth dream (*Mém. auth.* XII 1). Here Zosimos appears to be in a state between sleep and vigil, in which he sees again the altar in the shape of a phiale of the first dream. He also sees a man of sacred appearance, dressed in a long white robe up to his feet, performing scary mysteries (φοβερὰ ἐκεῖνα μυστήρια, l. 3). Zosimos asks him about another character that has not been mentioned before, and the man replies that it is the priest of the inaccessible places (ὁ ἱερεὺς τῶν ἀδύτων, l. 5). The description that he gives of his activities is quite interesting. He indicates that the priest wants three things (ll. 6-7): αἱματώσαι τὰ σώματα, “*il veut ensanglanter les corps*”, ὀμματώσαι τὰ ἄομματα, “*donner des yeux à ce qui n’en a pas*”, and τὰ νενεκρωμένα ἀναστῆσαι, “*ressusciter ce qui est mort*”. These three steps correlate very well with the procedures for the resurrection of Osiris: he needs to receive his fluids back, which had been removed in the mummification process, have his eyes open again, which is part of the ceremony of the Opening of the Mouth and Eyes,¹⁰⁷ and finally, rise again from the dead. This brings us back to the realm of mummification and the mysteries of Osiris. The priest of the inaccessible places could perhaps be equated with the Egyptian *hr.y-sštʔ*, “privy to the secret(s)” (*Wb.* IV, 298.22-299.13). In the inscriptions of the Chamber of Gold at Dendera, one of the locations where the mysteries of Osiris are said to take place, we find a list of the personnel involved in the creation and consecration of divine statues. The *hr.y-sštʔ* appears in charge of all the initiated personnel who are to perform the secret rites on the statues: “*Quand on en vient à L’Œuvre secret en toute chose, c’est l’affaire des officiants initiés auprès du dieu, qui sont membres du clergé, lavés par la purification de la grande ablution, qui agiront sans qu’aucun œil les observe, sous l’autorité du préposé aux rites secrets (𓆎 hr.y-sštʔ)*” (*Dend.* VIII, 131).¹⁰⁸ One of these ceremonies was, as in the case of the mummies, the Opening of the Mouth and Eyes, as we have seen.

The process of transmutation is represented in Zosimos’ treatise in the form of a man of copper. He is mentioned at various points.¹⁰⁹ In the second dream, he appears in

106. Assmann, 2005, p. 15. More specifically on the concept of *akh*, cf. Englund, 1978.

107. Edition and German translation of the text of the ritual in Otto, 1960.

108. Translation from Cauville & Ibrahim Ali, 2015, p. 213. For a discussion of the complete passage, cf. section 7.

109. Apart from the ones discussed here, he is also mentioned in the explanations of the second dream, where Zosimos states: Δίδωσι ὁ χαλκάνθρωπος καὶ λαμβάνει ὁ ὑγρόλιθος, “*L’homme-cuivre donne et la pierre liquide reçoit*” (*Mém. auth.* X 4, ll. 81-82).

the altar-bowl holding a lead tablet and giving commands to everyone in the punishments. He is described as the one who sacrifices and is sacrificed. In the allegories of transmutation between the second and the third dreams, Zosimos explains: “*Car le prêtre, l’homme-cuivre, que vous voyez assis dans la source et rassemblant la chose, celui-là vous ne le voyez (plus) homme-cuivre; car il a quitté sa couleur naturelle et est devenu un homme-argent; après peu de temps, si vous le voulez, vous aurez un homme-or*” (*Mém. auth.* X 5, ll. 113-118). In the fourth dream a man of lead is also mentioned. All these figures have been understood as descriptions of different alchemical processes, most certainly correctly.¹¹⁰ The man of copper is clearly identified as a priest in this passage (Τὸν γὰρ ἱερέα τὸν χαλκάνθρωπον, ll. 113-114), and seems to correspond to the priests in the first dream. The image of this man of copper holding a tablet, who has previously been described as a priest, reminds one of the representations of the chief lector priest on the staircases that lead to the roof at Dendera.¹¹¹ The priest is shown wearing a long robe and holding between his hands a stela-shaped tablet. We may also see reflections of the process of fabrication of statues in these sections, as well as of the figurines of Osiris-Khentiaentiu and Sokar in the mysteries. As I will discuss in more detail in section 7, Zosimos may have been involved in the fabrication of statues in the temple of Min at Akhmim. This process took place in the Chamber of Gold (*hwt-nbw*), which at Dendera was located on the mezzanine of the western staircase. In this chamber, craftsmen and priests performed different roles in the creation and consecration of statues, under the supervision of the gods Khnum and Ptah.¹¹² The walls of this chamber are engraved with a series of inscriptions that were initially identified as belonging to a manual for the fabrication and consecration of statues and cult objects,¹¹³ but may have actually been part of the *Book of the Temple*.¹¹⁴ A section of the texts in this chamber, located in the wall space between the

110. Mertens (1995) discusses different hypotheses in her commentary to each of these instances.


111. Cf. e.g. *Dend.* VIII, 108; XIV; and plates DCCLII and DCCLIII.

112. While the symbolic space for the fabrication of statues is designated as the Chamber of Gold in the texts, the actual manufacturing would have had to take place elsewhere, since the chamber at Dendera is not well suited, in terms of space and ventilation, for this work. This was probably the space in which the last, mainly ritual, parts of the process would have taken place, such as the Opening of the Mouth ceremony.

113. Hieroglyphic text and plates in *Dend.* VIII, 127-145, plates DCCCII-DCCCXIV. Translation and original interpretation in Derchain, 1990, p. 221. The presence of the Chamber of Gold as the place where divine statues and cult objects were produced and consecrated has been identified among the constructions of Thutmose III at Karnak, cf. Traunecker, 1980.

114. The *Book of the Temple* is a priestly manual that describes the ideal Egyptian temple. It is introduced by a fictional historical frame, followed by two parts, one devoted to the architecture of the ideal temple, and a second one that describes the rules for each type of priest, including actions considered

windows that overlook the Court of the New Year, provides the names of a series of materials for the fabrication of statues in a sort of code. Using conditional clauses, it presents the designation that would be used in the texts as the protasis (“if he says..”), and the real equivalent of the material that was meant in the apodosis (“he means..”): “*S’il dit d’un dieu que la matière en est la pierre véritable, il veut dire que c’est la magnétite (bqs-^cnh). S’il dit d’un dieu que la matière en est le cuivre, il veut dire que c’est du bronze noir. S’il dit d’un dieu que la matière en est l’électrum (d^cm), il veut dire que c’est du bois – ce bois, c’est le jujubier – plaqué d’or fin. S’il dit d’un dieu que la matière en est l’or fin, il veut dire que l’intérieur en est d’argent et, pareillement (à la notice précédente), le placage d’or fin*”.¹¹⁵ The man of copper, silver, and gold, may be seen as statues created in the Chamber of Gold. Depictions of these statues appear in the crypts of the temples, which I will discuss in the following section.

Concerning the figurines of Osiris-Khentiamentiou and Sokar, Cauville has noted that the grain that is incorporated to the figurine of Osiris in the mysteries is called *nbw*, which would sound in a very similar way as the word for gold, *nbw*, and was written with the same sign: .¹¹⁶ Osiris’ regeneration in the mysteries could thus be seen as a transmutation of the grain into gold, which may have inspired Zosimos’ idea to use the imagery of the mysteries in his description of alchemical transmutation. The connection between Zosimos’ procedures and the iconography of the Egyptian temples may be further strengthened if we look at the section describing the allegories of transmutation in more detail.

as sins, and the duties of the temple personnel. The interpretation of the texts in the Chamber of Gold as part of the *Book of the Temple* and not as a treatise for the fabrication of statues has been proposed by Alexandra von Lieven, cf. Lieven, 2007, p. 150. This is also Joachim Quack’s view, who is preparing the text of the *Book of the Temple* for publication [personal communication, email of 04/07/2020]. For a summary of the unpublished *Book of the Temple*, cf. Quack, 2000, and for a more up to date bibliography, cf. Quack, 2010, p. 9, fn. 1. Fragments of the text are also attested in Greek, cf. Quack, 1997.

115. The translated text corresponds to *Dend.* VIII, 140-141 (plate DCCCIX). Translation from Derchain, 1990, p. 235. Derchain already noticed that this practice, although it does not concern symbolic designations, is similar to the use of alternative names or *Decknamen* for substances in later alchemy (Derchain, 1990, p. 223). On secrecy in the early alchemical literature, Principe notes that: “The moderate level of secrecy encountered in the earlier recipe literature thus becomes more intense and more self-conscious with Zosimos. Such secrecy would wax and wane in intensity but never disappear for the rest of alchemy’s history” (Principe, 2013, pp. 17-18). The use of alternative names is a traditional feature of Egyptian religious literature, which originated probably in the creative power inherent in words according to Egyptian thought (cf. Baines, 1990, p. 16). Jasnow & Zauzich, 2005, p. 58 remark this feature also for the *Book of Thoth*.

116. Cf. Cauville, 1981, p. 25; *PL* 503-505, s.v. *nbw*.

5. ALLEGORIES OF TRANSMUTATION. THE TEMPLE/BASIN

The space in which Zosimos' dreams take place is not described in detail, beyond a few elements such as the staircases and altars. These, together with the presence of priests, set the scene in a temple context. Some more temple imagery can be found at the end of the second dream, in the description of a series of allegories of transmutation. In this section (*Mém. auth.* X 5), Zosimos addresses an unnamed masculine interlocutor (φιλιτατε, l. 100), giving him instructions. This nicely parallels the format of the text of the mysteries of Osiris, in the sections that describe the instruments and the preparation of the figurines of Osiris-Khentiamentiou and Sokar.¹¹⁷ Zosimos tells his reader to make a ναός out of one single stone (ναὸν μονόλιθον, l. 101). While Mertens has translated the word ναός as “temple”, it could also be understood, since it is made of one block, as a shrine similar to the *naoi* that contain the statues of the deities in the Egyptian temples. In the description given by Zosimos, the ναός is to be made of alabaster with a stream of very pure water and very bright solar light (πηγὴν δὲ ἔσωθεν ἔχοντα ὕδατος καθαρωτάτου καὶ φῶς ἔξαστράπτου ἡλιακόν, ll. 103-104). Mertens has linked the description of this ναός with an egg, noting that this could be the origin of the idea of the philosophical egg.¹¹⁸ The context of the mysteries of Osiris also brings to mind the tub in which the figurines of Osiris-Khentiamentiou and Sokar are placed during the rituals. This tub is called *hsp* in the text of the mysteries of Osiris, a designation attached to the garden where Min grows his lettuces. Min was the main god of Panopolis, Zosimos' hometown. In the text and the illustrations that accompany it on the walls of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (*Dend.* X, 28, cols. 14-16), this tub is described as being made of *inr n bhn*, “graywacke”, its measurements are given, and it is indicated that there is a basin underneath to collect the water that runs from a hole in its center. This basin is made of *inr n mʒt*, “pink granite”. It is decorated with the representation of the work done in it, presumably the fabrication of the figurine of Osiris, and the protector gods of Osiris. The reference in Zosimos' description to the stream of water and solar light reminds one of the hole and basin for the evacuation of water in the tub from the mysteries of Osiris, and the location of the text in an open-air Osirian chapel, which

117. The text of the mysteries of Osiris at Dendera is divided into seven books, which describe the locations where the rites take place, and the different implements used in them, including their materials and measurements. The creation of the two figurines of Osiris-Khentiamentiou and Sokar is presented in a way similar to the recipes present in the alchemical papyri. For a brief presentation of the titles and contents of each one of the seven books, cf. Chassinat, 1966-1968, pp. 4-7. On the composition and transmission of the text, cf. Quack, 1998.

118. Mertens, 1995, p. 223.

would allow access to direct solar light during the performance of the rituals. While the tub of the mysteries is made of a dark stone, the reference to alabaster in Zosimos also brings to mind the large calcite embalming tables for the Apis bulls found at Memphis.¹¹⁹ These tables have a conduct for the evacuation of fluids, which were collected on a basin on one end.

In order to access the ναός, Zosimos tells his reader to take a sword (ξίφος, l. 105) in his hands, and to search for the entrance with it. He notes that the access is narrow, and it is guarded by a snake (Στενόστομος γάρ ὁ τόπος ὅθεν ἐστὶν ἡ ἄνοιξις τῆς ὁδοῦ καὶ δράκων παράκειται τῇ εισόδῳ, φυλάττων τὸν ναόν, ll. 106-108). This snake has to be sacrificed, and with its remains a stool is to be made in order to climb up and observe the man of copper, who will turn into a man of silver, and with time, into a man of gold. While the snake is a clear Egyptian image,¹²⁰ the rest of the description of the access to the ναός is quite enigmatic. The specific reference of the use of a sword to open a ναός made of one single stone, together with the description of its access as narrow, brings to mind, in the context of the Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period, the access to the crypts. These are spaces located within the masonry of the temples, attested from the New Kingdom on.¹²¹ These crypts had different functions, depending on their location.¹²² Some of them were used to store statues and ritual implements used in different ceremonies, and others were connected to the performance of certain rituals, such as the New Year festival and the mysteries of Osiris at Dendera.¹²³ The latter thus fit within the themes used by Zosimos in his treatise. Access to these crypts was located in different chambers of the temples, and at different positions. At Dendera there were eleven crypts, distributed in three levels:¹²⁴ those located underground

119. For a photograph of one of these tables, cf. Ikram, 2005b, p. 19, fig. 2.2.

120. Mertens already noted that snakes had a reputation as guardians both in Egypt and Greece (Mertens, 1995, p. 40, n. 41). We find snakes guarding the access to an object or the entrance to a space, for example, in *Setne I*, where an infinite snake guards the book of Thoth (*hfn d.t.*, *Setne I* 3, 20 and 3, 32), or in the Netherworld books, such as the *Book of the Amduat*, where a snake protects Ra in his boat, or the snakes that guard the doors in the *Book of Gates*. On the Netherworld books, cf. Darnell & Darnell, 2018.

121. For a general introduction to the crypts, cf. Traunecker, 1980 and 1994. The crypts of Dendera are published in Chassinat, 1947 and 1952; Chassinat & Dumas, 1965; translations in Cauville, 2004. Cf. also Waitkus, 1997.

122. Cauville classifies the function of the crypts at Dendera as follows: the subterranean crypts have a ferial role, the intermediate ones a theological role, and the upper ones are conservatories of statue and of the texts of the past (Cauville, 2004, pp. 5-6). The crypts also feature in the *Book of the Temple*, cf. Quack, 2000, p. 4.

123. Traunecker, 1994, pp. 38-39.

124. For a general presentation of the crypts at Dendera, cf. Cauville, 2004, pp. 3-6.

were accessed through openings on the floor; those at floor level of the temple had openings on the lower part of the walls; and the ones located on the upper level had their access higher up on the walls of different chambers. Various systems were used to block these entrances, such as stone slabs or blocks, in some cases placed on some kind of rolling mechanism.¹²⁵ These are described in Dendera in a series of protective formulas, which emphasize their secret character.¹²⁶ At Dendera and Edfu, these entrances were carefully concealed, with the decoration of the walls continuing on the closure blocks seamlessly.¹²⁷ Traunecker notes that in some cases, fake stone joints were carved on the blocks to make them less discoverable.¹²⁸ In these cases, the use of a sharp instrument such as a knife or a sword would help in the identification of these entrances, which would explain why Zosimos advised his reader to use a sword to find the entrance to the *vaóc*. Access to these crypts is narrow,¹²⁹ perhaps determined by the size of the objects that had to be placed in and out of them.¹³⁰ Zosimos indicates that a stool – made out of the remains of the snake – is necessary to access the *vaóc*, which may indicate that the entrance was located higher up, as in the case of the third level crypts at Dendera.¹³¹ Inside the *vaóc*, the reader will be able to see the man of copper. It is interesting to remark that the decoration of the crypts at Dendera shows that statues were kept in them,

125. Traunecker, 1994, p. 40. An example of one such mechanism for Dendera, in which a block slides on two grooves, can be seen in the diagram of the access to the first western crypt, cf. Chassinat & Dumas, 1965, plate DXI. Some more of these mechanisms have been discovered in the crypts of the temple of Repit at Athribis. For an analysis and excellent diagrams and photographic record of them, as well as reconstructions of how they would have worked, cf. Baumann, 2019.

126. For the different designations of the crypts at Dendera, cf. Cauville, 2004, p. 4. Cauville (2004, pp. 68-69) has collected these formulas. The first Eastern crypt contains the following texts: “*Chambre protectrice des puissances du temple-de-Somtous, réparée dans sa construction, solidement fondée dans ses murs ; sa clôture est un bloc de pierre et est construite comme une barrière, d’un travail accompli bien venu et sans défaut*”; “*Chambre dissimulée des dieux du temple-de-Somtous, en une belle réalisation en matière de protection, si bien gardée par sa construction que son existence ne peut être décelée et que ses ennemis sont réduits à néant*” (*Dend.* V, 41 and 45, translation Cauville, 2004, p. 68).

127. On the closure of the crypts, cf. Cauville, 2004, pp. 4-5. For good photographs of the closure of the crypts at Dendera and Edfu, cf. Baumann, 2019, figs. 122-126 in plate 151.

128. Traunecker, 1994, p. 39.

129. See for example Chassinat, 1947, plates CCCXXX, CCCXXXI, for photographs of the staircases of access to the first Eastern crypt at Dendera; and especially plates CCCLIX and CCCLX, which show the entrance to the second eastern crypt, from the outside in room G, and the inside, respectively.

130. Traunecker, 1994, p. 42.

131. The level at which the entrances to the third level crypts are located at Dendera can be seen in fig. 2.24 from Zignani’s architectural analysis of the temple (cf. Zignani, 2008, p. 52). At the end of the temple, on the left in the diagram, the three levels of southern crypts can be seen.

for which their material and size are detailed in the inscriptions that accompany them.¹³² As it will be discussed in the last section of this paper, Zosimos may have been part of the personnel of the temple devoted to the creation of statues, and thus, although access to these crypts was restricted, he would have known of their existence and contents.

EXCURSUS. CRYPTS IN PSEUDO-DEMOKRITOS' *PHYSIKA KAI MYSTIKA*

Awareness of the existence of these crypts in alchemical literature may also be found in Pseudo-Demokritos' *Physika kai mystika*. Apart from the recipes, the *Physika kai mystika* also includes a narrative section in the first person in which the author of the treatise, Demokritos, tells how he was initiated into the knowledge presented in the text. This section, *Physika kai mystika* 3, seems to start *in medias res* the way it is preserved, with a reference to things having been learnt from an "abovementioned-master" (προειρημένου διδασκάλου, l. 35). This master is said to have died before completing the writer's and other disciples' initiation (μηδέπω ἡμῶν τελειωθέντων, ll. 37-38).¹³³ In order to complete his education and that of his fellow disciples, the writer performs a necromantic rite by which he conjures his teacher, who after several attempts says that he is not allowed to speak because of his daemon.¹³⁴ The dead master points out that the books that will provide the writer with the culmination of his education are in the temple, without more specification. These books seem to have been a secret during the master's life. However, the text says that: Ἦν δὲ πρὸ τῆς τελευτῆς ἀσφαλισάμενος μόνον τῷ υἱῷ φανήσεσθαι τὰς βίβλους, εἰ τὴν πρώτην ὑπερβῆ ἡλικίαν, "before dying he made sure that the books would have been shown only to his son after he had passed his first age" (*Physika kai mystika* 3, ll. 49-51). The people in charge of this task must have been priests of the temple in question. It is not stated in the text, but the master's son should probably be under-

132. For example, on the north wall of chamber A in the first Southern crypt (*Dend.* V, plate CCCCXIX) we see a statue of Isis in human form, a statue of Isis in falcon form, and a Hathoric column. The inscriptions give their material and size. The statue of Isis in human form is described as follows: "(Ses) os sont en argent, ses chairs en or. Or, une coudéee, c'est sa représentation secrète". The statue of Isis in falcon form just indicates that it is made of gold, of one cubit, but the Hathoric column gives some more detail: "Cuivre noir plaqué d'or, yeux incrustés de lapis-lazuli" (*Dend.* V, 123, translation in Cauville, 2004, p. 217).

133. For a more detailed analysis of these characters, cf. Martelli, 2013, pp. 69-73; Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 137-140.

134. For the performance of necromantic rituals in Demotic and Graeco-Roman literature, cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020b.

stood as a member of the group of disciples. During a feast in the temple, in which a banquet takes place in the naos (ἐν τῷ ναῷ, l. 56), a stela (στήλη, l. 56) breaks by itself (ἐξ αὐτομάτου ... διαρρήγνυται, ll. 56-57), revealing, apparently only to the master's son initially, the books preserved inside of it. Although Martelli translates στήλη as "column", it can also be interpreted as a slab of stone that broke on itself. This could then refer to the slab covering access to one of the crypts in the temple, as described above. The third Western crypt at Dendera, known as the "crypt of the archives", seems to have contained documents, perhaps the library of the temple. On its walls, among the texts inscribed, is the history of the temple, mentioning a series of kings, going back to Khufu (*Dend.* VI, 158-159 and 173).¹³⁵ Thus, ritual books and other kinds of manuscripts could also be kept in these spaces.

These narratives, in which manuscripts are found in secret spaces in the temple, are also attested in Egyptian texts, demonstrating the authenticity of their Egyptian character. The introduction to the astrological manual preserved in *P.CtYBR* inv. 422 vo. and *P.Lund* inv. 2058 vo. says that an astrological treatise composed by Imhotep was found in the temple of Heliopolis after "a fragment(?) of stone fell from the wall to the ground" (*h3y w^c nyq n 3ny (n) p3 sbty r p3 itnw*, *P.CtYBR* inv. 422 vo., l. 5).¹³⁶ This event revealed a "shrine of stone" (*tbjyt (n) iny*, *P.CtYBR* inv. 422 vo., l. 5), in which the book is located: "I found that it was a book that was resting within it (lit. inside its middle) with the name of Imhotep the Great, son of Ptah, the great god" (*gmzy s r w^c dm^c p3 nty htp hn t3y3f mtly r rn 3y-m-htp wr s3 Pth p3 ntr 3*, *P.CtYBR* inv. 422 vo., l. 5). The similarity of this narrative and that in Pseudo-Demokritos, with the events taking place in a temple and the falling of a stone slab to reveal a hidden book written by a revered wise figure, is indeed remarkable.

6. A NEW LOOK AT THE INTRODUCTION AND THE STRUCTURE OF THE TREATISE

In the introduction to Zosimos' treatise we can identify references to the images that he will use in his description of alchemical procedures, and a close reading of it may also reveal clues about the origin of these images. Both the title and introduction to the treatise center its topic around "waters" and their changes, and their separation and union from and to the bodies that contain them. This process is equated in the text to the separation of a spirit from the body that contains it. It is described as

135. On these texts, cf. Cauville, 2004, pp. 64-65, 462-463 and 480-481.

136. Quack & Ryholt, 2019b, pp. 163-164 for this and the following quotations from the text.

happening within the body according to nature, with nothing foreign intervening, and as being the same for metals and plants. The terminology employed is quite reminiscent of the processes that take place during mummification, in which fluids are removed from the body, and returned to it during the performance of the ceremonies for its return to life. As I have discussed above, the word *ταριχεία* is specifically used within the treatise to describe the processes taking place in the bowl-altar in the second dream. The second section of the introduction contains a complicated passage that has come down to us in two versions:¹³⁷ (M', B, A, L) Καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μονοειδεῖ τῷ πολυχρώμῳ σχηματίζεται ἡ τοῦ παντός πολυύλεκτος παμποικιλία καὶ ζήτησις. (M) Καὶ ἐν τούτῳ τῷ μονοειδεῖ καὶ πολυχρώμῳ σχήματι σῶζεται ἡ τῶν πάντων πολυέλεκτος καὶ πανποίκιλος ζήτησις (*Mém. auth.* X 1, ll. 7-16) “*Dans cette unité de formes aux nombreuses couleurs, s’esquisse la bigarrure diversement matérialisée du tout ainsi que la quête*”; “*Et dans cette manière d’être à la forme unique et aux nombreuses couleurs est préservée la quête de toutes choses avec ses nombreuses mentions et sa totale bigarrure*”.¹³⁸ Both versions mention a search (ζήτησις), which Mertens notes that either refers to the effort of Nature herself or to the investigation of the operator who attempts to reproduce Nature’s actions: the alchemist. This search is influenced by the cycle of the Moon: σεληνιαζομένης τῆς φύσεως τῷ μέτρῳ τῷ χρονικῷ (*Mém. auth.* X 1, ll. 12-13). The passage indicates that the search appears represented (σχηματίζεται, “sketched”) or preserved (σῶζεται) with many colors (πολυχρώμῳ) and a variety and intricacy of forms (πολύλεκτος καὶ πανποίκιλος). The concept of variegated multicolor forms reminds the scholar of Graeco-Roman Egypt of the almost overwhelming abundance of figures and texts that cover the walls of the temples of this period, and I would thus like to propose that Zosimos was here identifying the source of his imagery. The mention of the cycle of the Moon indicates the subject matter of this iconography, which I have identified in the previous sections as the representations of the lunar cycle in locations such as the ceiling of the pronaos at the temple of Hathor in Dendera. This interpretation can be further supported by another statement that occurs towards the end of the second dream. There, a character called οἰκοδεσπότης, “master of the house” addresses Zosimos, telling him that he has observed by extending the neck upwards, and has seen what is done: Ἐθεώρησας, ἐξέτεινας τὸν αὐχένα σου ἄνω καὶ εἶδες τὸ πραχθέν (*Mém. auth.* X 3, ll. 68-69). This locates the images that Zosimos is seeing in an upper region, and may identify the location of the iconography from which these images are derived.

137. Discussed in Mertens, 1995, pp. 215-216.

138. Mertens, 1995, p. 35.

As I discussed in section 3, the lunar staircases are always located on ceilings, upper parts of walls, or the roof of the temples. Zosimos, in his introduction to the treatise, would thus have included a vital clue to the identification of his imagery, albeit in the convoluted and rather obscure way that would become one of the characteristics of the presentation of alchemical procedures later on.

The introduction also provides a clue that may help us reconstruct what the complete treatise would have looked like. The text indicates that the cycle of the Moon influences the nature of the “search”, and throughout the treatise we see the staircases as prominent elements in Zosimos’ pursuits. In the first dream the lunar cycle is presented as a descent of fifteen steps in darkness, and an ascent of fifteen illuminated steps. Another staircase of seven steps is mentioned in the third and fifth dreams. However, Zosimos is only explicitly described as climbing the third and fourth of these steps. If we consider these staircases as a representation of the different stages of the alchemical procedures, we may be missing the sections corresponding to steps five to seven in the case of the seven-step staircase, and perhaps an entire section leading to the fifteenth step, which would correspond to the full Moon and the completion of the procedure. The abundance of imagery connected to mummification may also be indicative that this structure reflected not just the lunar cycle, but its representation in the mysteries of Osiris. These, as we have seen, are described in a technical way on the walls of the Osirian chapels of Dendera and are closely associated to the fabrication of figurines and statues in the Chamber of Gold, an activity in which Zosimos may have been involved, as I will discuss in the next and final section of this paper.

7. LOCATING ZOSIMOS IN HIS HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The identification of Zosimos’ imagery with the iconography connected to the death and resurrection of Osiris in the Egyptian temples of the Graeco-Roman period has interesting consequences for our study of his historical and cultural context. In order to locate Zosimos correctly in this context, it is necessary to examine where the iconography can be found in the temples of the period, who had access to these areas, and the status of Egyptian religion and the native temples in the area of Akhmim at the end of the 3rd century CE.

The lunar staircases are attested in two Egyptian temples from the Graeco-Roman period: Dendera and Edfu. At the temple of Hathor at Dendera, we find them three times: on the ceiling of the pronaos, on the ceiling of one of the Osirian chapels located on the roof of the temple, and on the southern exterior wall of the pronaos

in the form of the architectural staircase. In Edfu there is one lunar staircase, on the frieze of the north wall of the pronaos.¹³⁹ The same concept is represented in other locations within these temples as well as others as a procession of fourteen gods bringing different components for the reconstitution of the body of Osiris, but in our case, the presence of the staircase is key to the imagery of Zosimos.

Who had access to these areas? The issue of the accessibility of each area of the temple, at each particular point, is a complicated one. It is logical to think that the more secluded an area is, the least accessible it would be. The temples of this period include a series of recommendations to the temple personnel on purity requirements, located in access ways to different areas of the temple.¹⁴⁰ These have been dated from the end of the Late Period to the early Ptolemaic period.¹⁴¹ The texts list the different types of priests that could access each area, and in which conditions they could do so. These texts refer specifically to priestly personnel. Another relevant text, which offers a more diverse picture of the kinds of people who could access different areas of the temple, is the aforementioned one found in the Chamber of Gold at Dendera. It presents the different types of personnel related to the manufacture and consecration of the statues of the gods. I provide the complete translation here:¹⁴²

“En ce qui concerne la chambre de l’or où sont parachevées les images divines, liste des artisans : Sculpteurs : deux hommes ; fondeurs : deux hommes ; incrusteurs : deux hommes ; ciseleurs : deux hommes ; maîtres sculpteurs : deux hommes ; orfèvres : deux hommes. En tout, douze hommes de service mensuel, soit quarante-huit qui ne sont pas initiés. Ce sont eux qui fabriquent les idoles mystérieuses, ainsi que les statues de chaque dieu qui est dans le temple, les Hathor-Isis, le roi, l’épouse royale, la mère royale, les enfants royaux, en argent, or, bois et toutes pierres fines. Ce sont eux qui couleront tous les bijoux d’or, d’argent, de pierre véritable qui doivent toucher le corps divin. Quand on en vient à L’Œuvre secret en toute chose, c’est l’affaire des officiants initiés auprès du dieu, qui sont membres du clergé, lavés par la purification de la grande ablution, qui agiront sans qu’aucun œil les observe, sous l’autorité du préposé aux rites secrets, scribe du livre sacré, chancelier, père

139. Type D in Altmann-Wendling’s classification, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2018, p. 733.

140. Cf. Leroux, 2018.

141. Leroux, 2018, pp. 307-312. The origin of some sections may be older, cf. the discussion on the negative confession of the great pure priest in comparison with Chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*, and its connection with the *Book of the Temple*, in Leroux, 2018, pp. 320-324.

142. *Dend.* VIII, 128.15-131.6. For the text, cf. Dumas, 1980, pp. 112-114. This translation is from Cauville & Ibrahim Ali, 2015, p. 213. The italics are mine. On the personnel who worked in the Chamber of Gold, and on secrecy and initiation into the craftsmanship of sacred images, cf. Lieven, 2007.

divin, ritualiste en chef. Ils iront dans chaque chapelle où cela doit être fait, et d' image en image ... selon tout ce qui est écrit dans le livre sacré comme prescription de Thoth".

The text clearly distinguishes two types of temple personnel: first, those artisans who are involved in the actual manufacturing of the statues, who are described as non-initiated; and second, all those involved in the “secret work” (*k3.t št3(.t)*),¹⁴³ who are described as having been initiated, as being members of the prophethood (*wnn m hm.w ntr*), and as being purified. They are placed under the authority of the “privy to the secret(s)” (*hr.y-sšt3*), the scribe of the divine book, the chancellor, the divine father, and the chief lector priest.

From these texts, we see that not only initiated priests had access to internal areas of the temple such as the Chamber of Gold, but also some other members of the temple personnel were allowed into certain areas in particular occasions. Von Lieven has noted that even those who had not been initiated must have been subjected to a level of secrecy due to their being involved with the fabrication of the divine statues.¹⁴⁴ As I have noted above, those in charge of manufacturing the statues may also have been involved in their placement in the crypts of the temple at particular times of the year, and thus would also have access to these spaces. Some of them may also have had access to the roof of the temple, where the Osirian rituals such as the mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak would take place, although this remains hypothetical.

Another important question concerns the actual existence of an organized cult in the temples of the region of Akhmim at the time Zosimos lived in the region. Mark Smith has explored the persistence of the practice of ancient Egyptian religion in

143. While the “work” (*k3.t*) or “secret work” (*k3.t št3(.t)*) is the designation given to the process of creation of the figurines of Osiris-Khentiamenti and Sokar in the mysteries, as seen above, in this text it seems to refer to the consecration of the statues by initiated priests, after they have been manufactured by the non-initiated artisans listed in the first section.

144. Lieven, 2007, pp. 150-151. On the stela Leiden V.1, lines 8-10, belonging to the chief sculptor Hatiay, we find the following text, which may indicate a certain degree of initiation for some specific workers of the Chamber of Gold: “...il me promut à la direction des travaux alors que j'étais (encore) simple particulier, parce qu'il m'avait trouvé à son gré, en sorte que je fus introduit au 'Château de l'or pour achever les statues et les images de tous les dieux, sans qu'il en demeurât de cache à mes yeux. Je fus donc un 'préposé au mystère', qui voit Rê dans Ses manifestations et Atoum lors de Son (ré)enfantement” (Kruchten, 1989, pp. 192-193). In this text, a particular (*nmh.w*) becomes a *hr.y sšt3* through initiation into the Chamber of Gold (*bs.kw3 r hw.t nbw*, “I was initiated into the Chamber of Gold”) and is able to see the Sun in all his manifestations.

Panopolis.¹⁴⁵ He concludes that there is evidence for the practice of traditional cults in the region dating to the early 4th cent. CE, but the cult of Osiris seems to have disappeared towards the end of the 3rd cent. CE.¹⁴⁶ This is exactly the time during which Zosimos would have been active.

Considering the evidence provided in Zosimos' works, as well as the information presented in the previous paragraphs on temple personnel and the situation of native cults in the region of Akhmim, is it possible to propose a hypothesis for Zosimos' identity? Different scholars have approached this question with contradictory conclusions. As I discussed in section 2, Shannon Grimes, in a monograph in which she analyzes the identity and historical context of Zosimos,¹⁴⁷ concludes that he was both a "scribal priest" and a supervisor of metalworkers in an Egyptian temple. As I have shown, this interpretation derives from a rather shallow knowledge of the Egyptian priesthood and the Egyptian textual sources of the period. In a recent article, Matteo Martelli has examined different passages from Zosimos' works, showing how he displays a critical attitude towards the priests, whom Martelli assumes to be Egyptian priests from Panopolis, and in particular against the priest Neilos.¹⁴⁸ Zosimos presents these priests as having let *daimones* dominate their art, instead of relying on real expertise, and distinguishes himself from them. He makes the point that reliance on *daimones* had replaced for these priests the consultation of books, and criticizes them for not paying attention to the texts of the ancients.¹⁴⁹ This is an interesting statement, since Egyptian priestly expertise was focused very prominently on books.¹⁵⁰ Christian Bull has engaged with the religious and philosophical context of the Panopolitan region, and in particular with Zosimos' sources and influences, in various recent articles.¹⁵¹ Bull, disagreeing with Grimes' conclusion, considers that it is unlikely that Zosimos would have belonged to the Egyptian priesthood, but had close contact with its members. He proposes different possibilities for Zosimos' identity:¹⁵² a

145. Cf. especially Smith, 2002 and 2017, pp. 423-447. Cf. also Bull 2018a, pp. 216-218 and references there.

146. Smith, 2017, p. 430.

147. Grimes, 2018.

148. Cf. Martelli, 2017. I thank Matteo Martelli for sharing a copy of this article with me.

149. Martelli, 2017, p. 213.

150. Cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 248-250.

151. Of special interest for my discussion is Bull, 2018a, esp. pp. 218-225. Cf. also Bull, 2018b, where he discusses the works of Zosimos in order to reconstruct the contents of the *Physika* of Hermes; and Bull, 2020, esp. pp. 142-143, in which he considers the potential connections of Zosimos and his disciples, or people from the same milieu, with those who produced the Nag Hammadi codices.

152. Bull, 2018a, pp. 223-225.

low-ranking priest or craftsman connected to the temple “who did not have access to the books of the prophets and eventually became resentful of their reticence”; a former priest who lost his job after the closure of the temples and eventually converted to Christianity; and a member of a Hermetic ritual community. The evidence discussed in this paper can cast some light onto this issue.

A possible explanation for Zosimos’ critique of the priests is that it may reflect a time in which the boundaries between the two types of temple personnel presented in the Chamber of Gold were becoming blurred, and tensions were building up between them. Zosimos clearly had access to specialized treatises from earlier alchemists,¹⁵³ as well as to Hermetic treatises.¹⁵⁴ As Fowden has pointed out, the phenomenon of Hermetism was not known outside of Egypt before the 3rd cent. CE,¹⁵⁵ which reinforces the idea that this was an internal Egyptian phenomenon, and probably one that was created within the native Egyptian temples as a combination of Egyptian theological thought and Greek philosophy.¹⁵⁶ With the decline of the temples in the 3rd cent. CE, this specialized wisdom started to circulate outside of the temples, and to be incorporated to other religious and belief systems in the 4th and 5th cent. CE. It progressively became detached from its sources, and evidence for its origin in the native Egyptian temples was only preserved in the references to priests, temples and rituals within the texts themselves.¹⁵⁷ Zosimos may have lived at this juncture, being one of the figures who participated in the circulation of works initially restricted to the libraries and workshops of the temples, taking them outside of the temple precincts. As the frequent references to secrecy in later alchemy show, this does not mean that they were now made accessible to a wider audience, but to a non-priestly one.

This brings up the question of Zosimos’ place within the temple personnel. Zosimos never describes himself as a priest. However, his awareness of some temple iconography, as well as his specialization as an alchemist, may allow us to place him as part of the non-initiated personnel listed in the texts inscribed on the walls of the Chamber of Gold at Dendera, and thus as a member of a temple workshop. He

153. Mertens, 2002, p. 169.

154. Fowden determined that Zosimos must have read at least the Hermetic treatises *Poimandrês*, *The mixing-bowl*, and *On the inner life* (Fowden, 1986, p. 124). On Zosimos’ access to the *Physika* of Hermes, cf. Bull, 2018b. Bull has also discussed Zosimos’ potential access to some of the treatises present in the Nag Hammadi codices, cf. Bull, 2020, pp. 142-143.

155. Fowden, 1986, p. 198.

156. For my proposal of the *Hermetica* as a native Egyptian phenomenon, cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 115-158.

157. Fowden notes that “direct contact with the sources of philosophical Hermetism was being lost by the later fifth century” (Fowden, 1986, p. 211).

may have had access to at least part of the books kept in the library of the temple, particularly those related to this area of expertise, but also to Hermetic treatises. The references in his works to the rivalry with certain groups of priests, and in particular with Neilos, may thus indicate some tensions between different types of temple personnel at this point. A further reference to this conflict may be found in Iamblichos' *De mysteriis*.¹⁵⁸ Iamblichos, presenting himself as the Egyptian high priest Abamon, criticizes the image-maker (εἰδωλοποιός, *De mysteriis* III 28) for not using astrology properly, and for only employing technical skills instead of theurgic skills. This is the opposite situation to that presented by Zosimos, who was criticizing the priests for relying on *daimones* rather than on technical skills. In Iamblichos' case, he includes himself in the group of the priests, in opposition to the craftsmen who make the statues of the gods. The rivalry may have originated in the intrusion of this non-initiated personnel in areas previously only restricted to the priests. Zosimos was contemporary or almost contemporary with Iamblichos, as well as with Heliodoros, who also presented in his *Aithiopika* a distinction between two types of Egyptian wisdom based on the requirement of initiation.¹⁵⁹ What has been considered in the case of Zosimos as a dispute between rival schools of practitioners of alchemy, may instead be interpreted as a phenomenon connected to the dissolution of the native Egyptian temple hierarchies, and as a change in the transmission and practice of wisdom that had until that moment been restricted to initiated temple personnel.

Going back to Bull's three proposals, the evidence presented here would identify Zosimos as a high-ranking craftsman belonging to the uninitiated (non-priestly) personnel of a temple, perhaps that of Min at Akhmim. This position would have granted him certain access to some restricted areas of the temple connected to his practice, as well as to some treatises kept in the library. If we consider, as I have proposed,¹⁶⁰ that the so-called Hermetic ritual communities were originally groups of bilingual high-ranking Egyptian priests, who merged traditional Egyptian theology and technical knowledge with Greek philosophy in their treatises, Zosimos would not have been part of these groups, but would, as noted, have had access to these works, and contributed to their distribution outside the temple milieu at a moment in which the native temples of the region may have been dissolving. Within this inter-

158. On Iamblichos' use of an Egyptian priestly identity in the *De mysteriis*, cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020a, pp. 225-236. For a recent English translation of *De mysteriis*, cf. Clarke, Dillon, & Hershbell, 2003.

159. For an analysis of this aspect of Heliodoros' *Aithiopika*, cf. Escolano-Poveda, 2020b.

160. Cf. n. 156, above.

pretation, it is perfectly plausible that Zosimos could have been a Christian or converted to Christianity at some point in his life.

In conclusion, a closer look at Zosimos' imagery allows us to locate the first alchemist for whom we have biographical information in the midst of a moment of intense intellectual and social transformation at the Panopolis of the end of the 3rd cent. CE. While we do not know to which temple in the area he may have been connected, there is evidence for the survival of the great Temple of Min at Panopolis in awe-inspiring condition until its destruction in the fourteenth century.¹⁶¹ This temple, about which not much is known, contained astronomical representations,¹⁶² and perhaps also lunar staircases, as Min was a lunar god.¹⁶³ On the roof of the temple, Osirian chapels may have existed, although the twelfth-century testimony of Ibn Jubayr does not refer to them. During Zosimos' life, some form of ritual connected to the resurrection of Osiris as described in the mysteries of Osiris in the month of Khoiak may have still been practiced in some form at the temple, and he may have been involved somehow in it as a specialized craftsman. In his practice, as someone deeply interested and well-read in the origins of his discipline, he may have come into conflict with priests in the area. This could have been connected to the transmission of his knowledge to people outside the temple sphere, evidenced in his address of part of his work to Theosebeia, who may have been his patron.¹⁶⁴ All the statements that refer to Zosimos' life have to be carefully framed as conjectures, but I hope that this paper will have provided some firmer ground for our knowledge of the identity of this key figure in the development of early alchemy.

161. Sauneron translates Ibn Jubayr's description of the temple, dating to the 12th cent., in Sauneron, 1951.

162. Sketches of a block from the temple, dating to the 1820s, show the presence of a zodiac (Wilkinson Ms. I, 89; Burton MSS. 25636, 28; and Burton MSS. 25634, 130), collected in Neugebauer & Parker, 1969, pp. 86-89, and plate 45.

163. On Min as lunar god in the temple of Athribis, which is very close to where the great Temple of Min would have stood, cf. Altmann-Wendling, 2017b. For a general introduction to the god Min, cf. Olette-Pelletier, 2021.

164. Cf. Dufault, 2019, and my review in Escolano-Poveda, 2020c.

IMAGES



Fig. 1: Lunar staircase on the ceiling of the *pronaos* of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (private photo).

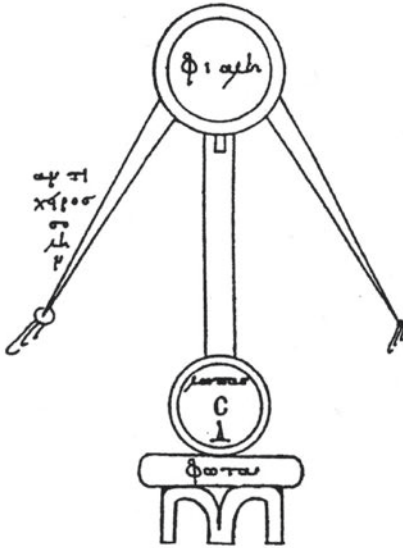


Fig. 2: *Dibikos* in *Marc. gr.* 299, fol. 188v (after CAAG I, p. 132, fig. 11).



Fig. 3: Architectural staircase on the roof of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (Photo: Francisco Vivas).



Fig. 4: Lunar boat on the ceiling of the pronaos of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 5: Complete band showing the Moon cycle on the ceiling of the pronaos of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 6: Seth as a bull in chains, held in place by Isis and Nephthys. Eastern wall of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 7: Dismemberment of the body of the bull. Eastern wall of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 8: Offering of the parts of the bull to Osiris. Eastern wall of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 9: Seth as a donkey. Northern wall of the first Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (Photo: Marina Escolano-Poveda).



Fig. 10: Osiris figurine in the tub. First Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (private photo).



Fig. 11: Shentayt weighing grain on a set of scales. Second Eastern Osirian chapel at Dendera (private photo).

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