



Libation for Osiris: A custom of veneration in funerary spaces of Ancient Alexandria

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INTRODUCTION

Libation is an indispensable funerary practice that involves pouring liquid such as water, wine, or olive oil as an offering to a deity or a spirit, or as a tribute to those who passed away. This ritual is believed to be vital for reviving the deceased and restoring their bodily fluids. The pouring of "cool water" is crucial as it serves to rehydrate the "dry and shriveled" corpse.

Water was always a crucial aspect of ancient religious practices with many deities associated with it. The Egyptian god Osiris was one such deity, revered for his connection to water, fertility, and agriculture, as well as for his importance in the Nile's inundation.

Osiris' worship was popular among both Egyptians and Greeks, and his influence continued to grow during the Ptolemaic period. It's fascinating to consider how water played such a vital role in the ancient world's spiritual beliefs and rituals.

Aims

The primary aim of this study is to thoroughly investigate the diverse ways in which various social classes in both Egyptian and Greek cultures developed unique and distinctive methods to commemorate and venerate the deceased, in connection with the Egyptian god Osiris. This poster aims to provide concrete answers to questions related to the when, how, and why of libation practice, and to establish a clear understanding of the cultural significance and implications.

Mythology

Several depictions of libation practice (paintings, funerary objects architectural elements etc.) will be highlighted in this poster along with displaying the formulas of freshwater mentioned in epitaphs from Alexandrian tombs that bear the name of the ancient Egyptian god Osiris. The origin of these formulas can be traced to the Pyramid text (436) and the Book of the Dead.

This will be done through an analysis of the standing examples of Alexandria's Tombs, and the possible similarities with the Ancient Egyptian tombs.

Libation practices in Ancient Egypt & Greece

Pure water as a stage of purity rituals for the deceased's preparation to reach the kingdom of the dead and to stand before Osiris. Water was intended to give life to the dead during the ceremonies of the opening of the mouth to guarantee his pledge of survival.



Funerary papyrus BN 38/45 20th dynasty, after NAVILLE 1886 fig. p. 73

The connections between Osiris and water are in an early Pyramid Text -Old Kingdom (1748a) a command to: "Wash your hands in this Freshwater which your father Osiris has given you".

This "freshwater" was a popular expression referring to the fresh water of the Nile. Other Pyramid Texts describe it as the efflux of Osiris, cooling, purifying, and life-giving.

Water also had a dominant role in ancient Greek religion as well as in their society, which was strongly represented in Greek Mythology.

The rites consist of: purification ablutions, the act of drinking some diluted wine, the swill of the floor and to have some meals to be eaten on site;

"I do not have the assurance for that, nor do I know what I should say as I pour this libation onto my father's tomb. Or shall I speak the words that men are accustomed to use" Aesch. Lib. 90



Libation procession Scene from Hagia Triada Sarcophagus After: L. W. Mays & A. N. Angelakis, 2012, fig.1.3, p.5

The parallel of such ceremonies was depicted on Hagia Triada Sarcophagus that presenting the libation procession and bull sacrifice.

Offering has been usual to Hermes as a god of the lower world for being the conductor of souls committed to him by his father Zeus the Saviour.



Fig 1. (A) Man and woman making a libation at an altar, Attic red figure amphora, c. 430 BCE Photo: © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (B) the libation scene, a wall painting on a frieze, facing the courtyard of Early Hellenistic Tomb 1, Mostafa Kamel Necropolis, Alexandria



Fig 2. (A) Water libation vases (Hes) of king Amenhotep II New Kingdom - XVIII Dynasty -inv. E. 2247a Bruxelles, Musées royaux d'Art et d'Histoire (B) A wall-painting, presenting a purification process of deceased to lead him to afterworld, with presence of Egyptian god Horus Tomb 2 1st century B.C, Necropolis of Anfoushi, Alexandria



Fig 3. Funerary objects El Abd Site 2013 Greco-Roman Necropolis Eastern district of Alexandria **Fig 4.** Funerary ritual pot Greco-Roman Necropolis Eastern district of Alexandria



Fig 5. Funerary stele with an Epitaph of Galatianos Discovered in 1877 during the excavation Of the foundations of the Minet el-Bassal Stock Exchange Greco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (inv./no. 286 After: Delia. 1992, "The refreshing Water of Osiris", p. 182, Fig.1



Fig 6. Inscription for Ammōnios engraved on a small funerary altar from the necropolis of the district of Gabbari now in the Greco-Roman Museum of Alexandria (No. 157a) transcription and translation : BOTTI 1900, p. 503 & BRECCIA 1911, p. 170



Fig 7. Epitaph for Taësi on a funerary stele found by Mariette in Saqqara at 19th century preserved in the Greco-Roman Museum of Alexandria .No. 183, After: BRECCIA 1911, pl. 55, fig. 133

Libation in Greco-Roman Alexandria

In ancient Alexandria, a Libation ritual was held in the city's funeral spaces to commemorate the deceased. The discovery of altars in tombs indicates that both sacrifices and libations were also performed in their honor.

The earlier immigrants to Alexandria may have kept certain artifacts which were associated with those activities (hence the types of "drinking vessels" and "libation vessels" phialai which were essential for their funerary practices and this could explain its presences into earlier tombs in Alexandria (Mostafa Kamel Tomb , Fig.1).

The Hellenistic Era was a remarkable time when the rich and diverse cultures of Greece and ancient Egypt fused together and created something truly unique. The exchange of ideas, art, and knowledge between the two great civilizations led to the emergence of new philosophies in religion.

Osiris was assimilated with the gods of the underground and became important in funerary rituals. His myth promised life after death for every individual who received the proper rites

The act of libation was performed by pouring water during purification rituals for the deceased as part of preparation to reach the kingdom of the dead and to stand before Osiris (Wall painting, Anfoushi tomb, Fig.2).

Libation may have been made by using various types of libation vessels according to their usage: A vessel was used to pour a liquid and was often specific to ritual contexts (such as askoi), vessels which are primarily used in drinking contexts (such as oinochoai) and a pitcher to lift water from a basin to pour over an altar (Figs.3-4)

The depictions of Egyptian Hes or Hestet along the presentation of Osiris in the Alexandrian funerary wall painting might explain the adoption of Greek culture to the Egyptian traditions Hes is blue faience vessel was used in everyday life and for ritual purpose to make libations of pure water during the ceremonies of opening of the mouth of the mummified deceased for his pledge of survival.

The Libation Formulas

The presence of altars in Necropolis of Alexandria could propose a comparison (the open spaces in the monumental tombs of the Theban Necropolis with the central courtyards of the hypogeum of Alexandria dating from Greek and Roman times).

The presence of offering tables in some large tombs built at the Assasif near Deir el-Bahri- Luxor (the 25th - 26th Dynasties) could present the same desire to develop an interior space for the commemoration of the deceased, and suggesting an Egyptian influence on the Greek styled tomb in Alexandria

some of Altars and Offering tables were inscribed by the desire of the deceased to obtain water in the underworld which was expressed through the formula of fresh water, included the name of god Osiris as an essential guarantee of prosperity in the afterlife :

"May Osiris, provide you with fresh water"

δοῖ σοι (ὁ) Ὅσειρις τὸ ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ

There are seventeen parallels of the cool water (τὸ ψυχρὸν ὕδωρ) formulas have been published, seven of them are found in Egypt six in Alexandria or its environs and one at Saqqara near ancient Memphis, and thirteen were from other sites in Egypt, Carthage and Italy (Figs .6-7-5).

The requested water from Osiris in the prayer formula was "cool water" which was similarly used in the Greco-Roman Alexandria funerary traditions. It would mean that the formula is fundamentally Egyptian in its origin due to its repeatedly mentioning in Pyramid text (Old Kingdom) and book of dead (New Kingdom).

Conclusion

During the Hellenistic period, Egyptian society witnessed fascinating mutual cultural interaction. Despite the city being home to two necropolises - one for the Greeks in the east and the other for the Egyptians in the west, the Greeks gradually began incorporating Egyptian rituals into their own traditions.

The practice of praising the Egyptian gods began with Alexander the Great and was later adopted by the new settlers in Alexandria, who particularly revered Osiris. This was expressed through the widespread use of funerary formulae, which revealed how Osiris emphasized his watery aspect as a symbol of life beyond the grave. The use of water in the funerary context can be linked to the legend of Osiris, who was the first mummified deceased to rule over the afterlife.

The idea of life-giving power of the water and quenching the thirst of the dead was prevalent in the Greco-Roman world, and the theme of "thirst for the dead" became more widespread, and it emphasized the desire to offer fresh water to the dead through a formula that wished for Osiris to provide it.

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