

AN INITIATORY DRAMA IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Part I Esoteric Filiation

We frequently hear it said that since the most remote antiquity, an uninterrupted succession of initiatory organizations has transmitted its secret knowledge to the people of today. Under such circumstances, our contemporaries would be assured of possessing doctrines, rites, and symbols, the worth of which would be guaranteed by a reliable "tradition."

The problem of esoteric filiation is capital. In fact, if a secret knowledge has truly been preserved from generation to generation, if the original legacy has truly survived the fall of empires, then, with the same costumes and in the same settings, we still perform the effectual acts of old—we are the keepers of a tested knowledge; we are the links in a chain that spans centuries, from the dawn of civilization to the present day, which guarantees the amazing worth of our knowledge.

The Gaps of History

However, the study of the history of the Mediterranean world does not at first suggest this ideal continuity. The famous Egyptian "wisdom" especially—the remains of which were gathered by the Greeks, the Copts, the Byzantines, and finally by the medieval West—has suffered such deformations that one wonders what authentic souvenirs of a great knowledge our modern world was really able to salvage from the land of the Pharaohs.

Most assuredly, the four millenniums of Egyptian civilization did not disappear without leaving any vestiges behind. Rome still exhibits the obelisks that the Caesars had transported there. The astrology of the Nile Valley, through the medium of Byzantine works, has reached medieval Europe.

The magical practices, through the intermediary of the Greeks and the Arabs, have penetrated the West. It is almost certain that the great Pharaonic myth regarding the creation of the world by the Word has influenced the Judeo-Christian theology of the Logos — the creative Word; and that Christian baptism has imitated the aspersions of vivifying water practiced by the priests of Egypt.

However, such survivals do not necessarily imply the transmission of an esoteric knowledge. It was most natural, for example, that early Christianity borrowed, where it was born, certain Egyptian myths and rites indispensable to its rapid development. Nevertheless, later these borrowed forms were assigned a complete new meaning, and one wonders what is left, in this transfer of legacy, of the ancient mystical Egyptian meaning?

Despite all, it is still affirmed, without any really valid proofs, that Egypt was the main cradle of contemporary esotericism. We invoke an uninterrupted spiritual tradition without providing any conclusive evidence of such. To recover such evidence would mean to renew with the past, to restore the authority of a lost filiation, and to add an immense prestige to our present teachings and techniques.

Reestablishing A Broken Tradition

Among the secret techniques, the more stable are those practiced during initiations.



From century to century, words and symbols may vary, but the initiatory process—a long journey through darkness accompanied with trials and followed by a sudden illumination—remains unchanged. It cannot vary in its general scheme since it always intends to regenerate the human being and to lead one to supreme Knowledge. It must always evoke a step toward Light.

Consequently, if we intend to discern the most stable and also the best part of the secret heritage that Egypt has supposedly bequeathed to the world, and to give a solid historical foundation to our teachings, we must start with initiatory techniques. Their ground is firm, since the fundamental idea of progression toward Light remains the same throughout the ages.

Nevertheless, here arise various difficulties, since the Egyptian texts pertaining to initiations are, by definition, secret; that is, they are concealed. In addition, up to now, no Egyptologist has pursued such matter exhaustively [at the time of this writing in 1971.—Ed.]. These documents go unnoticed, drowned in heavy funerary compilations; and even if they were discovered, their interpretation would escape the too rationalistic mind of today.

Therefore, the question remains to bring these writings to light, to decipher them, to translate them, and to attempt their synthesis—a solitary work of long duration—from which a book that will try to reestablish the broken tradition will finally come out.¹

The Papyrus of Leiden

This work has been started for a long time, and rather than waiting to finish it, here is one of these fascinating documents, among the texts already worked upon, the correct interpretation of which has never been attempted before and which will be studied here without its philological commentary.

It concerns a papyrus dating back to Roman times and preserved in Leiden.² It was written about thirty years after the

Crucifixion of Jesus on behalf of a certain *Horsiesis*, priest of Amon-Ra and “Master of Secrets” (Egyptian: *hry. Sst*²).

In a pacified Egypt conquered by Rome, this important figure was probably neither aware of the events that were then happening in Palestine, nor of their immediate and formidable repercussions throughout the Greco-Roman world. Remaining faithful to his ancestral religion, *Horsiesis* had deposited in his tomb, among other scrolls, this papyrus that a recent trip to Leiden allowed us to examine thoroughly.



A page from the Leiden Papyrus.

Its hieratic writing is neat but very small and sometimes difficult to decipher.³ The text relates all the sacred ceremonies in which the deceased had participated while on earth; it is an inventory, if you wish, of his pious actions—a sort of complete “biography,” likely destined to justify his entrance into the Hereafter.

However, in this enumeration of memoirs evoked without any apparent order, a passage more coherent than the others mentions a visit of *Horsiesis* to the temple of Osiris,

located at Busiris, a city built in the heart of the Nile Delta. The deceased relates his arrival at the sanctuary, what he saw there, what the officiating priests told him, and what was finally revealed to him.

As we can see, here is no ordinary ritual performed for a god, but a ceremony organized for the benefit of only one man by several actors qualified to celebrate it. The readings of the translation of this most important text will soon reveal that, at that particular passage, the papyrus retains the memory of an initiation.⁴

Nevertheless, here is a very strange fact: this initiatory account was not transcribed for Horsiesis only! There exist other Egyptian texts⁵ that relate almost word for word the same ceremony.

What should we think? That there existed in Egypt “model biographies”—the papyrus of Leiden being but one copy—used by the dead as testimonials to their piety. By having a scribe transcribe this “attestation of holiness,” Horsiesis probably followed a common funerary custom.

It does not matter much, moreover, whether he had actually participated in all the ceremonies described in his scroll or whether these ceremonies had been to him only an imaginary tale. As we shall see, the vicissitudes of the initiation at Busiris are so concrete and the scenario—performed by plain mortals and not by gods—progresses so precisely that we cannot doubt that at one time its staging really took place. The fact that later the scene became a stereotyped story does not authorize us at all to doubt its effective utilization as an initiatory booklet.

Busiris, Sacred See of Osirian Initiation

Before progressing with the initiate on the path of illumination, we must first imagine the famous site of Osirian esotericism—Busiris (Egyptian: *Per Ousir* = the sanctuary of Osiris), a large city now destroyed. Fortunately we have a description of Bubastis, a city near Busiris and probably

very similar, written by the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century BCE.⁶

Without too much difficulty, we can consequently imagine the wide canals shaded with trees that divided Busiris—the Holy—into squares. There the body of Osiris⁷ rested, the god of Good, assassinated by Seth and resurrected by Isis, the great magician. We can picture the flagstone avenues, seventy meters wide, leading to the various palaces of the city and its ancient temples, the foundations of which preceded the historical era. We can mingle with the huge crowds—tens of thousands of people—who, during processions or pilgrimage, walked toward the pylons of the Osirian sanctuary to watch the staging of the god’s Passion.⁸

Part II The Initiatory Progress

Today nothing remains of this famous sanctuary [Busiris] or of the city itself. However, by virtue of the conservative spirit that pervaded all sacred architecture in Egypt, the plan of this sanctuary could not have been much different from that of the other temples built around the same time. The one at Edfu, for example, built by stages in two centuries (237 to 57 BCE), is still perfectly preserved today. Therefore, to visit Edfu means the same—within a trifle—as to follow the steps of Horsiesis going through the sanctuary of Busiris to be initiated.

The papyrus of Leiden mentions clearly each step of his journey.⁹ As it progresses, particular gestures are made, ritual words are uttered, and sacred objects are revealed. However, in the present study we shall abstain—as we should—from commenting upon the states of consciousness aroused by these acts, words, and revelations. As Herodotus already stated, “Regarding these Mysteries let my mouth keep a religious silence.”¹⁰ Let each reader recall the initiatory trials they have undergone themselves, and then they will easily appreciate what ascent of consciousness the text hints at.



Here, therefore, are the steps of this ascent, as described in the papyrus of Leiden:

I. Horsiesis arrives at Busiris. Right away he traverses the necropolis of the city, in the center of which stands the sanctuary of Osiris, the god of the dead.

II. After having crossed the vast esplanade in front of the temple, the postulant, strengthened with all spirituality (the Ka), passes through the two entrance pylons, the imposing mass of which reminds humanity of its frailty in the presence of divine power. Here one is alone, in the large courtyard of the sanctuary flooded with light. No one stops the progression. Here, all is silence.

III. In the back of the courtyard, a thick wall with a single portal announces to the visitor the holy character of the place that it conceals. The cool penumbra of the pronaos and the dimness of the hypostyle room admit only the members of the clergy. Horsiesis belongs to the priesthood; therefore, he enters the portal of Osiris. Safe from all profane eyes, he proceeds amidst a forest of columns; the copper, silver, and gold incrustations that overlay the walls diffuse dark reflections and immerse the soul in a supernatural atmosphere. It is here that one comprehends the ineffable grandeur of divinity.

At that moment, the servants of the temple suddenly appear. The postulant, coming from the broad daylight of the courtyard and abruptly plunged into the obscurity of the forbidden chambers, feels alone and helpless. But the presence of the servants of the temple is comforting. Let one proceed, therefore, to meet the great god!

IV. Slowly the procession traverses the hypostyle. The door to the holy of holies half-opens; it is the most secret place in the depths of the sanctuary, the mysterious place sheltering the statue of Osiris, gorgeously attired, crowned and adorned, loaded with precious stones.

The neophyte is introduced, accompanied by guides. Into Maat, the Truth, one is going

to be initiated. The sarcophagus, where the effigy of the assassinated god lies, is there, all resplendent with gold. Horsiesis bows down. Piously one gives the ritual kiss to the One who showed to all humanity the way to salvation, through his resurrection.

V. And the journey resumes, for the crucial test has not yet occurred. Such is not to take place in the temple, but with the dead, underground, in the kingdom of Osiris Himself, whose sanctuary holds only his effigy.

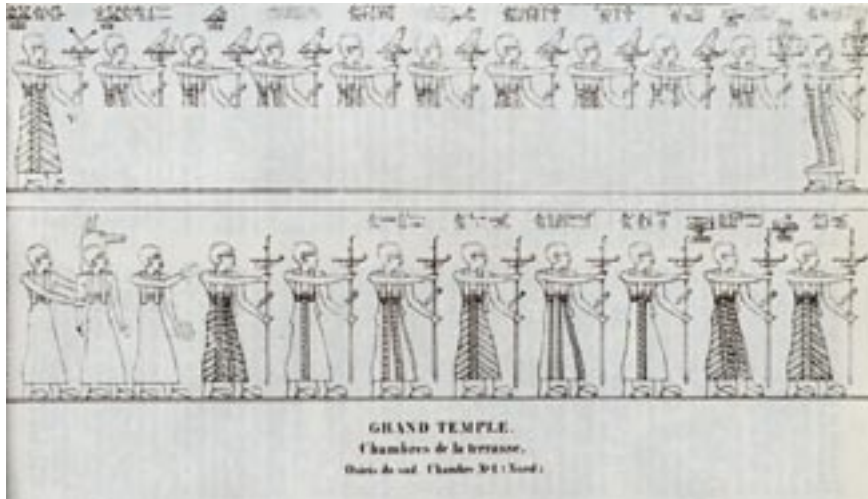
It is a very important fact that the God has two “tombs.” A text—miraculously preserved on the walls of the temple to the goddess Hathor in Dendera—gives a clear description of those: “As to the upper tomb (in Busiris) . . . the great god dwells (there) in the tomb . . . where the Master of Silence (Osiris) is, in His form (in the form of a statue). As to the crypt (planted with) perseas, which is in the divine cemetery (the necropolis of Busiris), . . . it is made of stone. Its height is sixteen cubits (8.32 meters); its width, 12 cubits (6.24 meters). It has seven doors. . . . There is one door in the West through which one enters; one door in the East through which one exits. It contains (a heap of) sand of seven cubits (3.64 meters) upon which the god is resting inside the sarcophagus.”¹¹

Thus the text of Dendera completes the story of the papyrus of Leiden: Horsiesis has kissed in the holy of holies the “form”—(the statue) of the god—and not the god himself. Now, the door to a subterranean passage descending to the dead opens, underneath the necropolis, and leads to a spacious crypt where Osiris rests in person.

VI. However, before seeing the god face to face, the postulant must go through greater ordeals. On the obscure way, officiating priests appear. One is named Master of the Throne.

“Thou art welcome!” he says to the neophyte.

It is worthy of notice that this greeting be uttered so late, and underground, after



Procession of Officiating Priests from Dendera.

Horsiesis has given the Osirian statue the ritual kiss. This binding kiss—followed by the words of welcome—therefore seems to be only a solemn prelude to the true initiation.

Another priest appears, an *Archivist* who knows the books of Thoth—the god of Wisdom—and who therefore can accompany Horsiesis—“smooth his path”—until supreme knowledge is attained. It is this priest—perhaps wearing the jackal-headed mask of Anubis—that will guide the neophyte toward Illuminations¹² while several guardians of the Portals grasp the arm of the neophyte. What gesture, under such circumstances, could be more significant?

In the dark corridors, the procession proceeds. At each portal that Horsiesis goes through, some guardians utter an “appeal” (Egyptian: *nīs*). Do they require some passwords? Or do they sound some warnings regarding the dangers of the itinerary? The text at this point is, alas, very brief!

VII. The fact remains that at the end of the passage, after that long night of the soul, the holy crypt finally comes into view—the famous Sepulcher with seven doors likely bathed in light. In the center, on a sandy knoll,¹³ a mysterious catafalque covers the divine body.

Horsiesis perambulates in the subterranean chamber, likely accompanied by

the Guardians of the Portals who hold the neophyte’s arm, preceded by the Archivist. Has this coming and going (Egyptian: *umwn*) of the neophyte a hidden meaning? Does it perhaps evoke the long walks of Isis, the disconsolate widow, in search of the assassinated Osiris?

VIII. Here comes a pause, it seems. The voice of Horsiesis is heard. His hymn of praise fills the holy Sepulcher. We can easily imagine the contents of his prayers directed to the god now found anew and brought back to life by the skill of Isis.

An officiating priest approaches the venerated coffin. Osiris, mummified and forever being reborn through the power of the rites, is going to appear in all His glory. The catafalque opens. Upon its funeral bed the divine body lies in its spotless wrappings.

Supreme moment: Horsiesis sees Him. At last he sees The One, the conqueror of death, who led humanity upon the path of Eternity. Through the unveiling of the sublime Thing, the initiate knows more than other humans; through the initiation, the initiate experiences a transition from human being to a being more than human.



INITIATION AT BUSIRIS

Translation of the Papyrus T32 of Leiden.
I, lines 16-26:

I. Entrance into the necropolis of Busiris

Thou reachest the shore
of the city of Busiris;
(now) thou arrivest
on the site (?) of Hapounebes
(the necropolis).

II. Crossing of the sacred domain

Thou settest out on thy journey
on the large esplanade (of the
sacred domain)
and thy Ka then crosses
the upper¹⁴ portal.
Freely thou goest on
in the domain of Silence,
and thou goest on thy way,
toward the place that awaits thee (?).¹⁵

III. In the sanctuary of Osiris

Thou goest away
and crossest the Portal of Osiris.
In haste thou traversest
the "Room of the two Maat."¹⁶
The servants (?) (of the temple)
let thee progress
so that thou seest the great god.

IV. The apparition of the statue of Osiris and the embrace of the God

The Guides introduce thee
into the most holy place.
Thou enterest the holy of holies
without thy steps being led astray.
To Maat (the Truth)
thou art initiated,
without being impeded (to do so) :
thou givest the kiss
to Osiris (lying) in the great

(sacred) Hall,
(all resplendent) with gold,
(to the god) Khenty-Imentiou¹⁷
(lying) in (his) sarcophagus.

V. Descent underground

Thou goest through the portal
of the gods of the infernal caverns.¹⁸
Thou joinest the (deceased)
who (in this place) rest.

VI. The priests greet the new postulant

"Thou art welcome!
Thou art welcome!"
says the Master of the Throne;
and the Pure Archivist
smooths thy path.
The Guardians of the Portals
grasp thine arm.
Those who dwell at the Threshold
Utter (their) call.

VII. Entrance into the holy sepulchre

Here and there thou perambulest¹⁹
upon this subterranean site
of the Tomb of Osiris,
and thou tramplest the earth²⁰
in Arek-Heh, (the sacred place)²¹

VIII. Apparition of the divine body

Then thou glorifiest
Ounen-nefer,²² with a just voice,
(who rests) in his mysterious catafalque...
and thou clearest (thy) way
in the divine crypt.
Thou seest the sacred Body,
lying on its funeral bed,
(yes), the noble Mummy
on its bed exposed!

Brought face to face with the redeeming god, the initiate is saved. We shall not proceed with the analysis of the intense emotion one must have experienced when, on its funerary bed, appeared the Redeemer, Osiris.

Each initiate reading these lines knows perfectly well that the metamorphoses of the soul—felt with strength and clarity—escape all explanation. Thus this study—fragment of a long work now in process—will have fulfilled its purpose if it succeeded, through

its comparisons with ancient Egypt, in strengthening our tradition. Our task will not have been in vain if it was able to demonstrate that underneath the surface waves of history, beneath the destructive storms unleashed by humanity, there exist calm currents of deep memory, transmitting from generation to generation secret techniques which, in spite of the perils of darkness, have penetrated intact the light of our temples.



Endnotes:

¹ Its title will be *L'Initiation aux Mystères en Egypte ancienne* (Initiation into the Mysteries of Ancient Egypt), likely to be published in 1974. [Editor's note: Dr. Guilmot's work was published in 1977: Guilmot, Max. *Les Initiés et les Rites Initiatiques en Egypte Ancienne*. (Paris: R. Laffont, 1977)].

² Papyrus T32 of Leiden, 1st ed., with good illustrations, by B. H. Stricker, in *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen uit het Rijksmuseum van Oudheden te Leiden*, vols. 31 (1950), 34 (1953), and 37 (1956), Leiden.

³ See reproduction in this article; it represents Column I of the Papyrus T32 of Leiden.

⁴ See the translation at the end of Part II of this article. The initiation at Busiris comprises lines 16 to 26 on our cliché (to be read from right to left).

⁵ For example, stele 128a, in the Vatican (published by W. Wreszinski in *Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache*, 45 [1908], pp. 111ff), and a stele from Hawara (studied by G. Daressy in the *Recueil de Travaux*, 36 [1914], pp. 74-75).

⁶ Herodotus, *Stories*, II, 138.

⁷ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 21, 359 BCE.

⁸ Regarding this subject, consult the monumental work of J. Pirenne, *Histoire de la Civilisation de l'Egypte Ancienne* (History of the Civilization of Ancient Egypt), Neuchâtel, especially vol. 3 [1963], pp. 192-193).

⁹ The subdivisions in Roman numbers that are to follow correspond to the ones introduced for greater clarity in the translation of the document at the end of this article.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *Stories*, II, 171.

¹¹ E. Chassinat, *Le Mystère d'Osiris au mois de Khoiak* (The Mystery of Osiris in the month of Khoiak), Cairo, 1966, Columns 78ff, pp. 618 and 625.

¹² In Egyptian literature there exist numerous texts mentioning the role of "conductor" played by Anubis. It is possible that a scene pictured on the walls of the temple of Dendera shows this important phase of the initiatory journey:

the postulant is led by Anubis and a group of officiating priests (see photograph in this article by A. Mariette, Denderah, Paris, 1870-1880, vol. 4, Plate 31).

¹³ See the text in the temple of Dendera, quoted in note 11.

¹⁴ In an Egyptian temple, as one progresses toward the holy of holies, the ground slowly rises; whence, perhaps, the adjective "upper" given to the portal situated higher than the esplanade.

¹⁵ Very difficult passage. If our interpretation is correct, the papyrus of Leiden would allude to the end of the journey, to the ultimate stage where the initiation will take place.

¹⁶ It is the name of the great Hall of the Hereafter reserved for the judgment of the dead. In the papyrus of Leiden, the scene takes place on earth in the hypostyle of the sanctuary of Osiris, at Busiris.

¹⁷ Common title given to Osiris. Literally: "The Chief of the Western dwellers," that is, of the deceased who rest in the West.

¹⁸ The postulant passes through a door—perhaps one of those leading to the crypts of the sanctuary—and sets on a long subterranean journey with the "gods of the caverns"; at the end of this journey in the Kingdom of the Dead, strewn with grottoes where dwell the infernal gods, the neophyte will discover their supreme Master—Osiris mummified.

¹⁹ The initiatory journey preceding the ultimate revelation is traditional in the Mystery Schools of the past and today.

²⁰ Unless we consider this phrase to be a useless repetition, we must understand: now, here thou art, within the bowels of the earth, that is, at the deepest and most secret point of the necropolis.

²¹ Term well known, designating a necropolis, especially the one in Abydos. Here, in Busiris, Arek-Heh seems to designate, at the end of the neophyte's journey, the subterranean and secret center of the funerary domain.

²² Common title of Osiris. It likely signifies: "the Being (always) reborn," as an allusion to the constant regeneration of the god through the rites.

