



THE IDENTIFICATION OF THE PELOPONNESIAN APIS WITH THE EGYPTIAN SERAPIS IN ARNOBIUS, *ADVERSUS NATIONES* 1.36.6

ABSTRACT

*This article examines a brief mention of the Egyptian gods Apis and Serapis in the *Aduersus nationes* by Arnobius of Sicca. This reference is situated within the context of several traditions dealing with the origin and connections of both of these mythical figures transmitted with some variations until Late Antiquity. It is proposed that the Peloponnesian Apis is identified with the Egyptian Serapis through a tradition already attested in Classical Greek authors, though without it being possible to determine which author is the specific reference for the Arnobian text.*

Keywords: Arnobius; *Aduersus nationes*; Apis; Serapis; ancient Egyptian religion

Reports on Egyptian religion are frequent in Greek and Latin literary sources,¹ especially regarding the ancient animal cults in the Nile valley.² This information, which can be found in authors not professing beliefs in the Egyptian native tradition, varies both in the extent of its detail and in its purpose, which in relation to customs not regarded as valid may be considered either mere ethnographic interest or fierce criticism—or both. This is why it is of particular interest to approach these texts—written by authors of different periods with contrasting convictions—with a view to understanding how Egyptian beliefs were judged outside their original context and how they were incorporated into works belonging to different genres.

One of the authors who confronted the unconventional customs of the ancient Egyptians was Arnobius of Sicca, who wrote during the period between the third and fourth centuries A.D., and was teacher of Lactantius³ and a Christian convert.⁴ Arnobius shows much belligerence, for example, towards the dumb animals⁵ to whom

¹ See T. Hopfner, *Fontes historiae religionis aegyptiacae* (Bonn, 1922–5). A relatively recent survey of Christian sources, with an updated bibliography, can be found at H. Juliussen-Stevenson, ‘Egyptian pagans through Christian eyes’ (Diss., The University of Maryland, College Park, 2016).

² F. Zimmermann, *Der ägyptische Tierkult nach der Darstellung der Kirchenschriftsteller und die ägyptischen Denkmäler* (Kirchhain N.-L., 1912); T. Hopfner, *Der Tierkult der alten Ägypter nach den griechisch-römischen Berichten und den wichtigeren Denkmälern* (Vienna, 1913); Hopfner (n. 1); K.A.D. Smelik and E.A. Hemelrijk, ‘“Who knows not what monsters demented Egypt worships?”: opinions on Egyptian animal worship in antiquity as part of the ancient conception of Egypt’, *ANRW* 2.17.4 (1984), 1852–2000. On the animal cults of the ancient Egyptians, see E. Otto, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Stierkulte in Ägypten* (Hildesheim, 1964); D. Kessler, *Die heiligen Tiere und der König* (Wiesbaden, 1989); M. Fitzenreiter, *Tierkulte im pharaonischen Ägypten* (Munich and Paderborn, 2013); A. Colonna, *Religious Practice and Cultural Construction of Animal Worship in Egypt from the Early Dynastic to the New Kingdom: Ritual Forms, Material Display, Historical Development* (Oxford, 2021).

³ Jer. *De uir. ill.* 80; *Ep.* 80.

⁴ Jer. *Chron.* 1.39, 3.24.

⁵ Arn. *Adu. nat.* 3.15.3.

the Egyptians consecrated temples;⁶ this was a common subject among pagan and Christian writers.⁷

The present article focusses on a question concerning the reception and transmission of a specific piece of information about Egyptian religion that appears in the *Aduersus nationes*, a work written by Arnobius between A.D. 302 and 305,⁸ intending to show to the bishop of Sicca the true conviction of his conversion to Christianity.⁹ It is precisely in this text that, in the context of a list of pagan divinities, we find the following phrase: 'Is it Apis, born in the Peloponnese, and in Egypt called Serapis?'¹⁰ This is a brief but interesting reference that has not been commented on so far.

In this sentence Arnobius refers to a mythical figure of Peloponnesian origin, Apis, who, as with other divinities of the Greek pantheon, is assimilated to an Egyptian god, in this case, Serapis, a Hellenistic construct characteristic of the Nilotic pantheon until Late Antiquity.¹¹ In another section of the *Aduersus nationes* an Apis appears again, in this case as a deity buried in a secret place that cannot be revealed at the risk of being punished.¹² It is tempting, in view of both of these references to an Egyptian god with the same name, to think that it may be the same sacred bull that was the object of special and ancient veneration,¹³ already found in Herodotus¹⁴ and moreover mentioned in authors after Arnobius.¹⁵ However, this is not the case here, or, at least, not entirely so.

This sacred animal named Apis is widely mentioned in Graeco-Roman literature,¹⁶ and was even compared to the golden calf of Moses' cycle,¹⁷ but has been linked by textual and archaeological sources to Memphis in Egypt, its place of worship.¹⁸ Apis, incarnation of the Memphite god Ptah, was the most important sacred animal for the

⁶ Arn. *Adu. nat.* 1.28.

⁷ See Zimmermann (n. 2); Hopfner (n. 2); Hopfner (n. 1); Smelik and Hemelrijk (n. 2); E. Manolaraki, *Noscendi Nilum cupido: Imagining Egypt from Lucan to Philostratus* (Berlin, 2013); Juliussen-Stevenson (n. 1).

⁸ M.B. Simmons, *Arnobius of Sicca: Religious Conflict and Competition in the Age of Diocletian* (Oxford, 1995), 47–93. J. Quasten, *Patrologia. I. Hasta el concilio de Nicea* (Madrid, 1978), 677 observes that the work was written before A.D. 311.

⁹ Jer. *Chron.* 1.39, 3.24.

¹⁰ Arn. *Adu. nat.* 1.36.6 *Apis Peloponensi proditus et in Aegypto Serapis nuncupatus.*

¹¹ There is an abundant bibliography on the god Serapis that it would be out of place to cite in full here. One of the latest approaches to his origins can be found in P. Borgeaud and Y. Volokhine, 'La formation de la légende de Sarapis: une approche transculturelle', *Archiv für Religionsgeschichte* 2 (2000), 37–76.

¹² Arn. *Adu. nat.* 6.6.8 *quamvis poenam constituerit Aegyptus in eum qui publicasset quibus Apis iaceret absconditus, polyandria illa Varronis quibus templis contegantur quasque in se habeant superlati ponderis moles.*

¹³ W.K. Simpson, 'A running of the Apis in the reign of 'Aha and passages in Manetho and Aelian', *Orientalia* 26 (1957), 139–42; J. Vercoutter, 'Apis', in W. Helck, E. Otto and W. Westendorf (edd.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie. Band 1: A–Ernte* (Wiesbaden, 1975), 338–50.

¹⁴ Hdt. 2.153, 3.27–9.

¹⁵ Smelik and Hemelrijk (n. 1), 1955–81.

¹⁶ See Hopfner (n. 1), 813–15.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Tert. *Scorp.* 3; Lact. *Diu. inst.* 4.10; Chrys. *In Ps.* 105.3; Jer. *Adu. Iouinian.* 11.15.

¹⁸ Hdt. 2.153; Diod. Sic. 1.84–5. An example of a late antique text mentioning the Memphite location of Apis is Macrobius. *Sat.* 1.21.20. About the archaeological evidence for the Serapeum, see A. Mariette, *Le Sérapéum de Memphis* (Paris, 1857); Vercoutter (n. 13); A. Dodson, 'Bull cults', in S. Ikram (ed.), *Divine Creatures: Animal Mummies in Ancient Egypt* (Cairo, 2005), 72–91; A. Dodson, 'Rituals related to animal cults', in J. Dieleman and W. Wendrich (edd.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, 2009), 1–3 (<http://digital2.library.ucla.edu/viewItem.do?ark=21198/zz001nf7d0>).

Egyptians.¹⁹ His cult is attested until the fourth century A.D.²⁰ Nevertheless, the Peloponnesian origin of the first Apis cited by Arnobius must be sought not only in these more purely Egyptian references but also in other mythological traditions preceding Arnobius. Clement of Alexandria, who lived between the second and third centuries A.D.,²¹ puts us on the right track in his *Stromata*, where this whole question is developed:

(4) Apis, king of Argos, founded Memphis, says Aristippus in volume one of his *History of Arcadia*. (5) Aristaeas of Argos says that he was named Sarapis and it is he whom the Egyptians worship. (6) Nymphodorus of Amphipolis in volume three of his *Practices of Asia* says that Apis is the bull who dies and is embalmed and placed in a grave (*sōros*) within the temple of the divinity honored, and from this is called Soroapis and later Sarapis by local habit. Apis is the third generation from Inachus.²²

This is one of the traditions appearing in the Greek and Latin literary sources on the origin of Serapis. It is an account that, according to authors such as Clement, can be found in earlier texts. We can also quote a fragment from the *Bibliotheca* of Apollodorus (Early Imperial period) which briefly mentions both the place of the Peloponnesian king Apis among the descendants of Inachus and some aspects of his life and death:²³

Ocean and Tethys had a son, Inachus, after whom a river in Argos is called Inachus. He and Melia, daughter of Ocean, had sons, Phoroneus and Aegialeus. Aegialeus having died childless, the whole country was called Aegialia; and Phoroneus, reigning over the whole land afterwards named Peloponnesian, begat Apis and Niobe by a nymph Teledice. Apis converted his power into a tyranny and named the Peloponnesian after himself Apia; but being a stern tyrant he was

¹⁹ For recent works, see N. Marković and M. Ilić, ‘Between tradition and transformation: the Apis cult under Cambyses II and Darius I (c. 526–486 BC)’, in A. Kahlbacher and E. Priglinger (edd.), *Tradition and Transformation in Ancient Egypt. Proceedings of the Fifth International Congress for Young Egyptologists, 15–19 September, 2015* (Vienna, 2018), 87–103; S.H. Aufrère, ‘Les taureaux Apis et Mnévis dans l’œuvre de Manéthon de Sebennytos: quelques hypothèses’, in S.H. Aufrère (ed.), *Les taureaux de l’Égypte ancienne: publication éditée à l’occasion de la 14e rencontre d’égyptologie de Nîmes* (Nîmes, 2020), 131–63; A. Charron, ‘Les premières «momies» de taureaux Apis’, in S.H. Aufrère (ed.), *Les taureaux de l’Égypte ancienne: publication éditée à l’occasion de la 14e rencontre d’égyptologie de Nîmes* (Nîmes, 2020), 197–214; D. Devauchelle, ‘Quel taureau pour Apis?’, in S.H. Aufrère (ed.), *Les taureaux de l’Égypte ancienne: publication éditée à l’occasion de la 14e rencontre d’égyptologie de Nîmes* (Nîmes, 2020), 165–96; Colonna (n. 2), 111–28; N. Marković, ‘“Apis is Ptah, Apis is Ra, Apis is Horus, son of Isis”: the solar aspects of the divine Apis bull and the royal ideology of the Late Period (664–332 BCE)’, in M. Nuzzolo and J. Krejčí (edd.), *The Rise and Development of the Solar Cult and Architecture in Ancient Egypt* (Wiesbaden, 2021), 235–51; K. Weiß, ‘Krieg und Kulturkontakt: fremde Söldner im spätzeitlichen Ägypten und der Apis’, in S.J. Wimmer and W. Zwickel (edd.), *Egypt and the Hebrew Bible. Proceedings of the Conference Celebrating 40 Years ÄAT, Munich, 6–7 Dec. 2019 / Ägypten und Altes Testament: Fachtagung „40 Jahre ÄAT“*, München, 6.–7. Dez. 2019 (Münster, 2022), 283–9; J. Ortiz-García, ‘“Bos soli sacratur”: el toro Sagrado Mnevis y la transmisión de la religión egipcia hasta la Tardoantigüedad’, *Maia* 74 (2022), 227–37.

²⁰ Amm. Marc. 22.14.6; A. Hermann, ‘Der letzte Apisstier’, *JbAC* 3 (1960), 34–50.

²¹ On Clement of Alexandria, see P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria. A Project of Christian Perfection* (London and New York, 2008); P. Ashwin-Siejkowski, *Clement of Alexandria on Trial. The Evidence of ‘Heresy’ from Photius’ Bibliotheca* (Leiden and Boston, 2010); H.F. Hägg, *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Apophaticism* (Oxford, 2006); E. Osborn, *Clement of Alexandria* (Cambridge, 2008).

²² Clem. Al. *Strom.* 1.106.4–6 (Eng. transl. J. Ferguson [ed.], The Catholic University of America Press).

²³ On Apollodorus and his *Bibliotheca*, see S.M. Trzaskoma, ‘Apollodorus the mythographer, *Bibliotheca*’, in R.S. Smith and S.M. Trzaskoma, *The Oxford Handbook of Greek and Roman Mythography* (Oxford, 2022), 151–62 (with updated discussion and references).

conspired against and slain by Thelxion and Telchis. He left no child, and being deemed a god was called Sarapis.²⁴

The connection between the Memphite bull and the Argive king that leads to the account of Arnobius, including Serapis as well, is the result of the transmission in the Greek and Latin literary sources of the assimilation of the bulls Apis and Epaphus. The latter was the son of the Argive princess Io (a complex mythological figure transformed into a cow²⁵ who, according to different traditions, was said to be the daughter of Inachus or the daughter/sister of Phoroneus, both of them Argive kings)²⁶ and of Zeus, who had assumed the form of a bull in Memphis when he begot him. As cows, Io and Isis are assimilated, and the same may be said about their bovine offspring.²⁷

All of this explains Arnobius' brief reference to the Peloponnesian origin of Apis and his assimilation with the Memphite god Serapis at his death.²⁸ It is information whose brevity is due not to the loss of knowledge of this mythical tradition about Apis–Serapis²⁹ but to Arnobius' choice to quote it in this way as part of an enumeration of certain pagan beliefs. In fact, this same Greek–Egyptian mythological theme is found again in later authors such as Augustine of Hippo, who transmits the same story, although in a more extended form, within the framework of his aetiological and etymological explanation of the figure and name of the Egyptian god Serapis:

In those days Apis, king of the Argives, sailed to Egypt with a fleet, and when he died there he became Serapis, the chief god of all the Egyptians. Moreover, Varro gave a very simple explanation of his name, that is, why he was not still called Apis after his death, but rather Serapis.³⁰

Although this testimony comes after Arnobius, it too indicates that, like Augustine, Arnobius may have used the same source for his brief reference to Apis and Serapis: Varro.³¹ However, this question is more difficult to determine in the case of Arnobius, because we are dealing with evidence attested in several works and authors.³²

²⁴ Apollod. *Bibl.* 2.1.1 (Eng. transl. J.G. Frazer, Loeb Classical Library): Ὀκεανοῦ καὶ Τηθύος γίνεται παῖς Ἴναχος, ἄφ' οὗ ποταμὸς ἐν Ἄργει Ἴναχος καλεῖται. τούτου καὶ Μελίας (2) τῆς Ὀκεανοῦ Φορωνεύς τε καὶ Αἰγιαλέυς παῖδες ἐγένοντο. Αἰγιαλέως μὲν οὖν ἀπαιδὸς ἀποθανόντος ἡ χώρα ἅπασα Αἰγιάλεια ἐκλήθη, Φορωνεύς δὲ ἀπάσης τῆς ὕστερον Πελοποννήσου προσαγορευθεῖσης δυναστεύων ἐκ Τηλεδίκης (3) νύμφης Ἴαριν καὶ Νιόβην ἐγέννησεν. Ἴαρις μὲν οὖν εἰς τυραννίδα τὴν ἑαυτοῦ μεταστήσας δύναμιν καὶ βίαιος ὢν τύραννος, ὀνομάσας (4) ἄφ' ἑαυτοῦ τὴν Πελοπόννησον Ἀπῖαν, ὑπὸ Θελεξίου καὶ Τελχίνου ἐπιβουλευθεὶς ἅπαις ἀπέθανε, καὶ νομισθεὶς θεὸς ἐκλήθη Σάραπις. In Apollod. *Bibl.* 1.7.6 there is another mention of this Apis of Argos, although anecdotal and only indicating that he was the son of Phoroneus and that his death was due to Aetolus, son of Endymion and a Naiad (or Iphianassa, according to another version of the myth).

²⁵ Aesch. *Supp.* 299–300.

²⁶ On the mythical figure of Io, see F. Kudlien, 'Io', *RE* IX.2 (2016), 1732–43.

²⁷ Isis is even referred to as *phoronea* by Statius (*Silu.* 3.2.100–1). On the identifications of Io, Isis and their offspring, which are already attested in Aeschylus (see above) or Herodotus (3.27–8), see J.G. Griffiths, 'Lycophron on Io and Isis', *CQ* 36 (1986), 472–7.

²⁸ This conversion into Serapis of the bull Apis at his death (Osiris–Apis) is attested earlier in Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 29.

²⁹ In fact, there are other traditions in which Apis is not even Argive but Cappadocian (see Epiph. Salam. *Ancorat.* 104).

³⁰ *De civ. D.* 18.5 (Eng. transl. E.M. Sanford and W.M. Green, Loeb Classical Library).

³¹ On Augustine and Varro, see D. Hadas, 'St Augustine and the disappearance of Varro', *BICS* 60 (2017), 76–91.

³² See J. Hani, *La religion égyptienne dans la pensée de Plutarque* (Paris, 1976), 186–90.

Therefore, the Arnobian identification of the figure of Apis, Argive king, with the Egyptian god Serapis—closely linked to the sacred bull Apis—has its origin in a mythological story attested in various versions, which begins in Pre-Hellenistic Greek authors. In that tradition, Apis, the Egyptian bull, son of Isis in these stories, is associated with Epaphus and with his mother, the Argive Io (identified with Isis), who ends up in Egypt in the myth.³³ The origin of this association may be found in the identification of the cow-goddesses Io and Isis, an identification that is reinforced by figures with the same name such as Apis (king in one case, sacred bull in another). Another question is the reason for the identification of the Egyptian Serapis with the Peloponnesian Apis; this identification logically starts at least in the Hellenistic period, and derives from hypotheses on the origin of the figure of Serapis that can be found in Greek and Latin texts. The reason why Arnobius included that specific reference in his work was probably because Serapis and Isis were the most well-known and recognizable Egyptian gods at the time.

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³³ On the connection between Isis/Io and Apis/Epaphus, see Griffiths (n. 27).