

## PRIESTS AND SUPPORT TEMPLE STAFF IN THE FAYUM OASIS IN THE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD\*

by

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In antiquity, religion was an essential sphere of human life. Over the years it has therefore been of great interest to historians. The majority of publications devoted to religion in ancient Egypt are focused primarily on myths, beliefs, cult, and especially on funerary rituals and mummies (of both men and animals) that were discovered *en masse* during archaeological excavations. Additionally, there is particular interest in the art and architecture of the greatest and most impressive monuments of ancient Egypt such as the Great Pyramids at Giza, the necropolis complex at Thebes and famous sanctuaries of Medinet Habu, Abu Simbel, Karnak and Luxor, and so forth<sup>1</sup>. However, among the most significant works on religious life in ancient Egypt, there is a lack of up-to-date and

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<sup>1</sup> It is sufficient to mention several relatively recent works, e.g. F. KAMPP, *Die thebanische Nekropole: zum Wandel des Grabgedankens von der XVIII. bis zur XX. Dynastie*, Mainz 1996; D. ARNOLD, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, New York–Oxford 1999; R.H. WILKINSON, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt*, New York 2000; N. KANAWATI, *The Tomb and Beyond: Burial Customs of Ancient Egyptian Officials*, Warminster 2001; R.A. DAVID, *Religion and Magic in Ancient Egypt*, London–New York 2002; R.A. DAVID (ed.), *Egyptian Mummies and Modern Science*, Cambridge 2008; A. DODSON, *The Pyramids of Ancient Egypt*, London 2003; F. DUNAND, Ch. ZIVIE-COCHE, *Gods and Men in Egypt 3000 BC to 395 CE*, transl. by D. LORTON, Ithaca–London 2004; M. VAN DE MIEROOP, *The Eastern Mediterranean in the Age of Ramesses II*, Malden, MA–Oxford 2007; A. DODSON, S. IKRAM, *The Tomb in Ancient Egypt. Royal and Private Sepulchres from the Early Dynastic Period to the Romans*, London 2008; C. GRAVES-BROWN, *Dancer for Hathor. Women in Ancient Egypt*, London 2010; S. SNAPE, *Ancient Egyptian Tombs: The Culture of Life and Death*, Malden, MA–Oxford 2011; S. IKRAM, *Death and Burial in Ancient Egypt*, New York 2015.

comprehensive studies devoted to the activity of temples and temple personnel and this dissertation aims to fill this gap in the research on Egyptian religion.

Priests were one of the most important groups in ancient Egyptian society and a close investigation of temple personnel is essential for the study of ancient Egyptian history, society, and culture. They were responsible for performing religious rituals, but they also played a pivotal political, social, and economic role within the Egyptian State. In the face of social and political changes in Egypt, temples and their functionaries invariably acted as wardens of old traditions and customs. Over the centuries, priests continued to perform sacred rituals, guard knowledge, and cultivate old customs. Thanks to them native Egyptian religion, beliefs, culture and even scripts, such as the sacred hieroglyphs, were able to survive through the centuries.

The most important work devoted to priests and temples in Hellenistic Egypt was published by Walter OTTO at the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century: volume 1 in 1905 and volume 2 in 1908<sup>2</sup>. This work constituted an extended version of OTTO's dissertation, defended in 1904 at the Königliche Universität zu Breslau – Universitas litterarum Vratislaviensis in Wrocław. Although the aforementioned publication is considered as a fundamental study concerning priests and temples in the Hellenistic period, the considerable number of papyrological documents published during the past century made OTTO's work outdated. Therefore, the dissertation entitled *Priests and Support Temple Staff in the Fayum Oasis in the Ptolemaic Period* may be seen as a continuation of the research undertaken by OTTO over a century ago.

The scope of this thesis has been limited to the Fayum Oasis under the Ptolemies for two main reasons: (a) the significance of this area in the Ptolemaic monarchy, and (b) a uniquely rich source basis that originated from this region. In the Ptolemaic period, the Fayum was a principal centre of Greek and Macedonian settlement. The first immigrants that were brought to the area were military settlers, and in the mid-third century BC they constituted the majority of newcomers in the Fayum<sup>3</sup>. The process of settlement probably began under Ptolemy I Soter, but the evidence for this period remains obscure. Documented phases of the Ptolemaic settlement took place in the second half of the third century BC and in the second century BC<sup>4</sup>. Remarkably, the Fayum was intensively developed in the Ptolemaic period. The Ptolemies exploited the natural potential of this region: a favourable environment, good irrigation, and fertile

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<sup>2</sup> W. OTTO, *Priester und Tempel im Hellenistischen Ägypten*, vols. I–II, Leipzig–Berlin 1905–1908.

<sup>3</sup> R.S. BAGNALL, *The Origin of Ptolemaic Cleruchs*, BASP XXI 1984, p. 10.

<sup>4</sup> J.G. MANNING, *Land and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt. The Structure of Land Tenure*, Cambridge 2003, p. 108; K. MUELLER, *Settlement of the Ptolemies. City Foundation and New Settlement in the Hellenistic World*, Leuven 2006, p. 149.

soils. Rulers of the new dynasty undertook a large-scale irrigation project that consisted in improving drainage and irrigations system, building up a network of canals, and constructing new dykes. Consequently, previously uncultivated parts of the region were transformed into arable land, which led to a significant extension of the land under cultivation in the Fayum<sup>5</sup>. This impressive reclamation project, carried out primarily by Ptolemy II Philadelphus and Ptolemy III Euergetes, led to an increase in agricultural production, making the Fayum a significant and wealthy region within the Ptolemaic monarchy. Therefore, apart from military veterans, people seeking new economic opportunities offered by the region also came to the Fayum. Newcomers brought their own culture and religion, facilitating the investigation of the activity of priests engaged in different cults and beliefs; for example, material collected from the Ptolemaic Fayum provides us with information about the personnel engaged in the native Egyptian religion, Greek and Asian cults, and Jewish synagogues.

The unique character of the Fayum has been determined also by its extraordinarily rich source material. The most idiosyncratic sources for Egypt are papyri and ostraca which (with several exceptions) were not preserved outside Egypt. It is estimated that approximately 30% (19,232 documents out of 65,130) of all surviving papyri and ostraca found in Egypt originates from the Fayum area and the majority of these documents (ca. 16,396) are dated to the Graeco-Roman period (332 BC–AD 395)<sup>6</sup>. At least 5,682 papyri are dated to the Hellenistic period, which makes the Fayum the best-documented region in Egypt under the Ptolemies, while other significant places in Egypt are less well represented by the source material. For comparison, the damper coastal climate meant that only 252 papyri dated to the Ptolemaic period have survived from the capital city, Alexandria.

Another important feature of the source material from the Fayum is its variety and the fact that it consists of different types and categories of evidence. Although epigraphic material from the Fayum region is significantly less numerous than papyrological evidence, inscriptions served as another source of information for this study<sup>7</sup>. Papyri and inscriptions constitute the primary types

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<sup>5</sup> D. RATHBONE, *Villages, Land and Population in Graeco-Roman Egypt*, PCPhS XXVI 1990, pp. 110–115; D.J. THOMPSON, *Irrigation and Drainage in the Early Ptolemaic Fayyum*, in: A.K. BOWMAN, E. ROGAN (eds.), *Agriculture in Egypt: From Pharaonic to Modern Times*, Oxford 1999 (Proceedings of the British Academy 96), p. 109.

<sup>6</sup> All the data that refer to a number of documents is based on the Trismegistos database, [www.trismegistos.org](http://www.trismegistos.org) (accessed in June 2019); see M. DEPAUW, T. GHELDOLF, *Trismegistos. An Interdisciplinary Platform for Ancient World Texts and Related Information*, in: Ł. BOLIKOWSKI *et al.* (eds.), *Theory and Practice of Digital Libraries – TPD 2013 Selected Workshops*, Cham 2014, pp. 40–52.

<sup>7</sup> The total number of inscriptions from the Fayum is 747, and they are dated between 2000 BC and AD 800.

of evidence for this research and together they amount to a minimum of 7,863 texts that have been analysed within the thesis. Additionally, papyrological and epigraphic texts that provide us with information about the activity of temple personnel are written in Greek and in Demotic and (to a lesser degree) there are hieroglyphic scripts in the Egyptian language. The Fayum under the Ptolemies was strongly influenced by Greek speaking people; therefore the majority of the texts from the Fayum are written in Greek (around 7,056 texts), while “only” 901 texts have been preserved in Demotic script. This unequal distribution of Greek and Egyptian material is due to the fact that official documents generated by the Ptolemaic bureaucracy were written primarily in Greek. Consequently, much more texts in the Ptolemaic Fayum were produced in Greek than in Egyptian. Additionally, Greek is more commonly known among modern scholars and in general Greek is considered easier to learn than Egyptian and its scripts. For this reason, over the past decades scholars have edited and published mostly Greek documents, which has resulted in the disproportion between the number of Greek and Egyptian texts available for research. Hence, scholars of antiquity have at their disposal a considerably greater number of texts inscribed in Greek than in Egyptian scripts.

On the other hand, the number of documents given above includes mostly texts that have been already published<sup>8</sup>. Many Greek and Egyptian documents are still waiting to be read and edited. The number of newly published or re-edited Demotic texts in particular has gradually increased in the past few decades, a fact related to the development of Demotic studies. To date, due to the wider availability of Greek texts, many older publications concerning the activity of temples and their personnel in ancient Egypt were based for the most part on Greek sources, showing the Greek perspective on how the temples functioned. For research on temple personnel, it is crucial to include Demotic texts, which enable us to also consider the Egyptian point of view. As has been already noted, Greek was used primarily by lay bureaucracy and Greek papyri concerning priests and temple workers primarily provide information about relations between temples and the government. Demotic papyri that provide us with information about temple functionaries were inscribed mostly by or for temple personnel; for example the archive of the temple at Soknopaiou Nesos and the archive of the Hawara undertakers<sup>9</sup>. Based on Demotic documents, it is possible to identify the original

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<sup>8</sup> The Trismegistos database also occasionally includes unpublished texts.

<sup>9</sup> Demotic texts from the temple archive at Soknopaiou Nesos: *P.Oxf.Griffith* 1–75; some Greek texts from this archive were published in *P.Amh.Gr.* 2. Documents of the undertakers archive at Hawara were published primarily in *P.Ashm.*, *P.Chic.Haw.*, *P.Hawara*. Papyri and ostraca editions in this paper are abbreviated according to J.F. OATES *et al.* (eds.), *Checklist of Editions of Greek, Latin, Demotic and Coptic Papyri, Ostraca and Tablets*, <http://scriptorium.lib.duke.edu/papyrus/texts/clist.html>, accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> May 2018. For a comprehensive description of the archive of the Hawara undertakers, see I. UYTTERHOEVEN, *Hawara in the Graeco-Roman Period*.

Egyptian titles of priestly functions and categories of temple workers. Moreover, Demotic texts provide us with crucial information about the functioning and organisation of the temples, as well as about many aspects of priestly life; in addition, they show the temple hierarchy and, finally, they provide information about the property of priests.

The significant development of Demotic studies which has been taking place over the past few decades has triggered a gradual growth in the number of publications of Demotic texts. Demotic documents have contributed to broadening the range of knowledge about the organisation and activity of temple personnel and specific functions carried out in the sacred space. Temple functionaries that have been investigated in this research were engaged primarily in cults of the native Egyptian deities such as Sobek, Osiris, Isis, Anubis and Bastet. Remarkably, the majority of titles and functions analysed in this dissertation are known from Demotic texts. The great significance of Demotic material is also reflected by the fact that without Demotic texts it would not be possible to explore the activity of workers engaged in the funerary business because almost all functions linked to the funerary cult in the Fayum area are mentioned only in Demotic texts.

This research also involves other types of evidence, mainly narrative sources and archaeological findings, that serve as a support for the information provided by papyrological and epigraphic material. Although the works of ancient historians – Herodotus, Strabo and Diodorus of Sicily – offer primarily a non-Egyptian point of view, they nevertheless present a general description of the native Egyptian religion, its beliefs, tradition, sacred rituals and the daily habits of the priesthood. Finally, archaeological material has occasionally been used in this study in order to get the full picture of temple workers in the Ptolemaic Fayum. This study refers to information concerning temples, which may shed light on temple organisation and especially on the location and appearance of temple buildings, objects in everyday use, sculptures, statues and reliefs.

All types of sources used in this research: papyri, inscriptions, narrative texts, and archaeological findings, provide us with different information as well as complementing one another, thus shedding light on various aspects of temple organisation. More significantly, thanks to the variety and abundance of sources in the Fayum, it was possible to identify many priestly titles and the functions performed in temples belonging to different cults and beliefs. Undeniably, the source material of the Fayum is exceptionally unique and evidence from outside the Fayum is not as varied and numerous as the material that comes from this area. Sources that originate from other regions of Egypt usually provide us with information that is restricted to a single priestly group and category of temple workers, and they mostly give us details related to the organisation of a single sanctuary.

While most publications concerning temples and priests in Egypt are devoted mainly to the cults and beliefs of the ancient Egyptian religion, this dissertation had other goals to achieve. It aimed to explore the activity of temple personnel, focusing primarily on the non-religious aspects of temple life. Extant sources mostly of an official nature, such as population registers, tax records and all sorts of agreements, official notes and petitions, allowed for an investigation of the social and economic role of temple functionaries within the society and the state. Hence, this dissertation explores both the non-religious functions fulfilled in temples by priests who simultaneously performed sacred rituals, and lay functions carried out by them outside temples, which were not related to their regular religious duties and their activity in the temple. As evidence shows, agricultural production constituted an additional source of income for temple workers. Priests whose main task was to perform cult rituals in temples, were sometimes also involved in the cultivation of temple land, which constituted a part of their regular duties. They also leased and farmed royal land, which provided them with an additional source of income<sup>10</sup>. Moreover, documents from the Ptolemaic Fayum attest that priests also acted on behalf of the royal administration by controlling the temple finances in the region. For example, texts from the temple archive at Soknopaiou Nesos mention a prophet of Bastet who probably carried out religious duties and at the same time was in charge of the financial condition of temples in the Fayum area<sup>11</sup>. Finally, the most prominent priests in the Fayumic temples are attested as members of the army, for example a certain prophet of Sobek named Apollonios, son of Hermias, who was also a cavalryman<sup>12</sup>. The presence of priests in the Ptolemaic army was related to the Ptolemaic strategy aimed at integrating society on the one hand by recruiting new soldiers from the priesthood, and, on the other, granting priestly offices to Greek soldiers<sup>13</sup>.

The major goal of this dissertation was also to collect all the functions and titles of temple functionaries attested in Greek and Demotic sources. As evidence shows, temples employed an army of functionaries who carried out various functions and duties. Among them it is possible to distinguish priests who served a deity by performing the most crucial religious functions, minor priests who fulfilled subsidiary religious functions (usually on a part time basis), and lay workers such as artisans who were not related to the cult. Sources from the Ptolemaic Fayum attest a minimum of 64 different titles used to describe temple functions, out of which 35 are preserved in Demotic texts, while 29 come from

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<sup>10</sup> For priests as land cultivators, see for example *P.Amh.Gr* II 35 = *Chrest.Wilck.* 68 = *Sel. Pap.* II 274 (132 BC), or *P.Tebt.* I 62 (119–118 BC).

<sup>11</sup> *P.Oxf.Griffith* I 39 (156 BC).

<sup>12</sup> *P.Berlin Dem.* 13683 (146 BC).

<sup>13</sup> This phenomenon has been investigated by Ch. FISCHER-BOVET, *Army and Society in Ptolemaic Egypt*, New York 2014, pp. 303–328.



Greek documents. It was possible to indicate a Greek equivalent of a Demotic title in ten cases. For example, the Greek title θεαγός corresponds to the Demotic *t3y ntr.w*, and both titles were used to designate a temple official who was in charge of carrying an image of a god during religious festivals and processions.

This dissertation consists of six chapters. In the first two, a broader context for the subject under discussion is provided. The first chapter entitled “The Fayum and Its Sources” gives a brief overview of the Fayum oasis, its natural conditions and its history, with a particular focus on this area under the Ptolemies. More significantly, in the second part of the chapter evidence is presented relating to temple personnel, their functions and activities in the Fayum. The second chapter, “Temples under the Ptolemies”, offers an insight into the condition of temples in the Ptolemaic period, with particular emphasis on places of cult in the Fayum area. In this chapter the main aspects of the political and socio-economic role within the society and the state are presented along with crucial spheres of non-religious activities undertaken by sanctuaries, such as agriculture and animal husbandry, trade and craft. Moreover, it briefly considers the role of temples as places of learning and local courts.

The occupations of temple officials have been divided into four categories in this study: (a) clergy and higher ranking temple personnel, (b) subaltern temple staff, (c) workers of the animal cult, and (d) undertakers. The next four chapters constitute the main part of the dissertation and the content of subsequent chapters corresponds to the aforementioned priestly categories. The third chapter “The Clergy and the Higher Rank Temple Staff” explores the activity of temple officials who fulfilled the most significant religious duties. This chapter considers the priest who was in charge of the daily rituals performed in the inner sanctuary of the temple, such as the prophet and the *w<sup>c</sup>b*-priest. Additionally, priests who held high administrative offices in temples are included in this chapter, for example the *lesonis*, the sacred scribe and the *epistates*.

The fourth chapter, „Subaltern Temple Personnel”, is devoted to the temple support staff and considers minor priests involved in religious rituals and lay workers as well as people whose position within the sanctuaries was uncertain. Among the priests who fulfilled a subsidiary role during sacred rituals, it was possible to distinguish dancers, singers and various attendants at religious ceremonies, such as *pastophoroi*, bearers of the gods, and so forth. These functionaries were usually not allowed to enter the inner sanctuary of the temple, and they often performed their duties only temporarily during temple festivals and processions, for example priests whose main task was to carry images of the gods or shrines or priests who waved palm-fronds. However, as this study shows, for example *pastophoroi* or *isionomoi*, who nominally belonged to the cultic personnel, were frequently also engaged in non-religious activities in the temple and presumably carried out the role of temple caretakers or custodians. Additionally, this chapter investigates temple occupations that were not directly related to religious

activities, such as builders, potters, bakers, sculptors, and so forth. Finally, this chapter also discusses religious titles whose relation to temples and cults were unclear, trying to reveal the real character of these functions. It explores the role of people who are described in documents by the Greek term *ιερόδουλος*, which probably corresponds to the Demotic title of *b3k* of a god, with both of these terms being translated as a “servant” or “slave of a god”. However, as evidence from the Fayum and recent research show, these people were not employed in temples and it is highly probable that they acted as volunteers.

The next two chapters comprise functions related to specific aspects of the native Egyptian religion. The cult of sacred animals such as crocodiles, ibises, falcons, scarabs, cats, dogs, baboons, and so forth, flourished, especially in the Graeco-Roman period. Selected individual specimens, for example the Apis bull and the sacred crocodiles in the Fayumic temples, were often worshipped in sanctuaries; they took part in religious rituals and most of them were considered as the living incarnation of a deity. Additionally, sacred animals were bred in special temples and after their death (which was usually violent), were embalmed by the relevant personnel, after which the animal mummies were sold to believers and served them as votive offerings. Hence, the fifth chapter aims to explore workers engaged in the animal cult, who can be divided into two main groups according to the duties they performed. The first group comprised functionaries responsible for keeping animals alive (primarily by providing them with food), while the second group consisted of people who were in charge of animals after their death, which practically meant that their basic task was to carry out the mummification process and interment.

The cult of the dead was the most idiosyncratic aspect of ancient Egyptian religion. According to the ancient Egyptians, preserving the body after death was an essential condition for eternal life. Beliefs in the afterlife led to the development of the art of mummification practiced from the Predynastic period onwards. Complicated funerary rituals required an army of workers responsible for different phases of preparing the deceased for life in the next world. The sixth chapter of this dissertation entitled “The Undertakers and Other Funerary Priests” is devoted to embalmers and various funerary workers in the Fayum area. As evidence shows, the majority of them were attached to the great necropolis of the village of Hawara and only a few texts inform us about the activity of undertakers from outside this site. Generally, funerary workers occupied a low position among the priesthood and society, and, because they had contact with dead bodies, they were considered as unclean. For example, they lived outside villages and usually were not allowed to enter temples. On the other hand, because the funeral industry was a quite lucrative business, mortuary workers earned a large salary. Hence, although undertakers belonged to religious personnel of a lower rank, they were quite a wealthy group. Remarkably, they guarded their domains jealously, a fact which is reflected by a number of disputes that took place between



certain undertakers over their rights to perform mortuary practices and to derive income from this activity.

Finally, this dissertation includes two appendices. Appendix 1 is a catalogue of temple functionaries attested by Greek and Egyptian texts originating from the Ptolemaic Fayum and it constitutes the most essential element of this dissertation. The list comprises 636 records and involves both individuals and groups of temple workers whose titles and functions were mentioned by the sources. Appendix 2 is devoted to acts of benefaction toward temples in the Ptolemaic Fayum and is mostly based on my recently published article<sup>14</sup>. This appendix discusses the special character of euergetism in Graeco-Roman Egypt and explores the amount of financial support benefactors contributed to temples, which had a significant impact on the financial situation of temples and the priesthood. However, the chief aim of this appendix was to collect and present all attestations of acts of euergetism toward temples of various cults in the Fayum and, remarkably, it included texts that had not been taken into consideration by previous studies.

In conclusion, this dissertation provides a fresh perspective on the study of temples and priests in Ptolemaic Egypt. It took under consideration sources published relatively recently, as well as integrating and examining information given both by Greek and Demotic material, which offers a valuable insight into many aspects of temple life. This study, based on material coming from one of the most important regions of Egypt, opens a discussion on the socio-economic position of temple personnel.

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<sup>14</sup> This appendix has already been published as a separate paper: J. WILIMOWSKA, *Benefactions toward Temples in the Ptolemaic Fayum*, JARCE LIV 2018, pp. 103–118.