

27

CHILDREN, RELIGION AND RITUAL IN GRECO-ROMAN EGYPT

Ada Nifolsi

This chapter will consider children in Greco-Roman Egypt (3rd century BC–4th century AD) in the context of religion and rituals using a range of literary, papyrological and archaeological sources. The evidence for children in religion and rituals in this period is very scarce and only partially studied (Hopfner 1926; Rowlandson 1998; Johnston 2001). Terracottas, amulets and spells suggest that child-deities such as Harpocrates and female deities such as Isis Aphrodite and Thokeris (Taweret) were particularly associated with the protection of juveniles. However, children were not just vulnerable beings in need of protection, they were also active participants in rituals, employed as cult assistants in temples, performers in festivals and intermediaries between men and gods.

I will start with an overview of Greco-Egyptian spells and also supernatural beings, such as child-gods, dwarf demons and ithyphallic deities who were associated with the protection of children. I will then investigate the role of children as cult assistants in temples, mediums in divination and participants in festivals. The chapter will also show that children's cultic roles varied depending on their gender and age.

This subject is rich and multifaceted and it is not possible to do it justice in such a short chapter, so my contribution will only offer a short overview: I intend to look in more detail at this topic in the future.

The protection of children

Amulets and spells

Numerous terracotta figurines, amulets and spells show that the protection of children was a very common concern for families in Greco-Roman Egypt. Magic provided protection from the bites of animals, illness, evil forces and even nightmares (Szpakowska 2003; Pinch 2010). Greco-Roman Egyptian protective spells and amulets have some degree of continuity with Egyptian dynastic religion (see Szpakowska, this volume), but there are many influences from Greco-Roman and Jewish customs. The myth of Isis defending her son Horus from the attacks of his uncle Seth resonated in the minds of ancient Egyptians. The protection that Isis could give to her child was supernatural and powerful, but every Egyptian mother could hope to achieve the same effect by reading a spell that identified her with Isis and her child with Horus

(Marshall 2015). The tradition of spells based on Isis' safeguarding of her son continued in the Greco-Roman period in Demotic spells that cured children and adults from ailments (*PLondon-Leiden* V20/1–5; PDM xiv. 1219–27).

When children were very young, prayers were recited for them by their parents or possibly by lector priests or priestesses (Ritner 2008: 231). The tradition of spells for children was also known in Rome as in his first *Liber Logistoricus*, Varro complains that women preferred to ask for the help of *praecantrices* (female singers of incantations) rather than taking their children to a doctor (Varro *Log.* 1; Riese 1865: 249, n. 15). Parents either bought amulets or crafted very simple ones and tied them around the neck and the wrists of their children. Older children were certainly able to craft their own amulets, in the same way that they were able to create some of their own toys and dolls. In the 4th century AD, Athanasius of Alexandria described with horror that Greco-Egyptian parents from various villages outside Alexandria were anointing children with 'evil' oil, making them wear pendant amulets, uttering protective spells (including some to repel the evil eye), breaking pots near their heads and immersing them in 'dirty' water (Dickie 2012: 293).

Most of the amulets for children were used by adults as well: for instance, talismans of the ithyphallic dwarf demon Bes protected all people in a vulnerable state (Dasen 1993). The association of Bes with mothers and children continued from the dynastic period and is shown in his frequent depictions on the walls of *mammisis*. The latter, also called 'birth houses', were small temples celebrating the birth of a divine male child from a local triad of gods: in Late Dynastic and Greco-Roman Egyptian temple complexes, the parents of the triad were worshipped in the main temples while the birth house was a subsidiary building (Daumas 1958: 143–144; Kockelmann 2011: 1–3). The ubiquitous presence of Bes in houses and temples shows that this protector god was very popular both in official and domestic religion. Another popular goddess who was associated with child-protection from the Greco-Roman period was Taweret/Thoeris, a pregnant hippopotamus with human arms and sagging breasts, leonine legs and paws, and the back and tail of a crocodile (von Lieven 2006). Thoeris was represented on amulets worn as pendants and also worshipped in at least one temple in Oxyrhynchos in the 2nd–3rd century AD, where she was interpreted as the Greek goddess Athena, but it is likely that this deity also received shrines elsewhere (Roberts 1934: 23–24).

Cylindrical pendants containing magical spells for the protection of children were produced from the dynastic period, for example the hieratic text on a strip of a papyrus that wished a girl a 'happy childhood' (Montserrat 1993: 224). In the Greco-Roman period, such cylinders were still produced and contained very thin sheets of silver or gold (*lamellae*) engraved with protective spells similar to the ones in the Papyri Graecae Magicae (Faraone and Obbink 1991: 114–115. See date of the PGM below). These amulets are represented in many Fayyum portraits of women and children (Faraone and Obbink 1991: 11).

Terracottas representing non-divine children may also be associated with their protection. Unfortunately, as their precise archaeological context is not known, they could be votive offerings for a temple, domestic figurines and/or part of someone's funerary equipment. Despite the lack of context, a concern for the subject represented is evident regardless. Particularly realistic are a child in a decorated high chair who gently strokes his dog's ear (Fjeldhagen 1995: *ÆIN* 401) and a toddler with an elaborate hairstyle who wanders around with a wheeled walking aid (Bailey 2008: n. 3533; Tulloch 2012: fig. 2).

Harpocrates in the Late Dynastic and Greco-Roman period

Child-deities such as Harpocrates played a particularly important role in the protection of children in the Greco-Roman period. This section will discuss the cult of the god and his

connection with other protective deities such as Baubo and Bes. Divine triads comprised of mother, father and male child were a common feature of Egyptian religion, but during the Late Period child-deities became particularly popular (Budde 2010) and kings commissioned new *mammisis* (Daumas 1958; Kockelmann 2011). There were many local cults of child-deities and each one had several functions such as protection, human fertility and fertility of crops, regeneration and rebirth in the afterlife (Budde 2010: 4–5). In the Late Period, Horus was not only represented on the walls of *mammisis* but also on amulets, votive statues and on healing stelae known as Horus cippi (Sternberg-el Hotabi 1999).

A version of Horus, Harpokrates (~~Harp3-ima~~: Horus the child), known since the Third Intermediate Period, became particularly popular in the Greco-Roman period (Meeks 1977 and 2010; Witt 1997: 210–221; Sandri 2006) and was represented as a toddler or as a baby, often wearing the side-lock of youth. He was still the son of Isis and Osiris even though he was also identified with the rising sun (Betz 1986: 336). The god can be identified by his forefinger-to-mouth pose that was associated with childhood in Egypt, but this was mistaken by Ovid as a gesture for silence (Ov. *Met.* 9.68 8 and 692). Other common attributes of Harpocrates include the royal double crown, the crook and a flail held in his left hand, symbols of his position as the son of the king and the queen of Egypt and heir to their throne (Budde 2010: 3).

The side-lock of youth was a typically Egyptian hairstyle for both boys and girls from the dynastic period onwards: the head of children was shaven and only a lock of hair was left until they reached puberty (Janssen and Janssen 1996: 37–41; Pudsey 2017; see also Harrington this volume). The shaven hair was mixed with clay and shaped into protective ‘hair balls’ that have been found both in houses, tombs and temples (Tassie 1996; Ikram 2003: 250). Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus suggested that in every town the hair of children was shaven by their parents as part of a vow for the local god, and was weighed on scales in order to give an equal amount of silver to the female priest who looked after the sacred animals of the god’s temple (Hdt. II.65.4; D.S. I.83). In the Greco-Roman period the side-lock was no longer as common as before and the hair surrounding the lock was often not shaven (Witt 1997: 221). Possibly this was now because only the Greek and the Egyptian elites adopted this hairstyle to indicate that their children belonged to privileged social groups (Montserrat 1991: 46; Legras 1993) or because the side-lock indicated a protective and specific affiliation with the cult of Isis and Harpocrates (Ikram 2003: 250). An attestation of ritualised cutting of the side-lock in the Greco-Roman period can be found in a 3rd century AD ritual from Oxyrhynchos called *μαλλοκούρια*. This took place in the temple of Thooris, Sarapis and Isis (Montserrat 1991: 45; *P.Oxy.* 12 1484; *P.Oxy.* 49 3463.6–9).

The cult of Harpocrates was certainly shared by both Egyptians and Greeks and was represented both in Greek and in traditional Egyptian artistic style. The Ptolemies constructed a *mammisis* for Harpocrates as son of Isis and Osiris in Philae but they also associated him with the cult of the newly created deity Sarapis. Ptolemy IV enlarged the Serapeion of Alexandria by adding a smaller shrine to Harpocrates (Stambaugh 1972: 7, 91). Terracottas of the child-god leaning against a pillar and holding a cornucopia could reflect in miniature the lost statue of Harpocrates at his temple in Alexandria (Fjeldhagen 1995: 34–35). He was also represented on reliefs, statues, gems and jewels in a triad with Sarapis and Isis both in human and serpent form (Dunand 1969; Fluck, Helmecke and O’Connell 2015: 64).

Some figurines represent a grotesque version of Harpocrates with an ugly face, plump body and large phallus. The grotesque in terracottas was not exclusively associated with illness or intended to meet the humour and preferences of lower social classes (Török 1995: 20), but also had a religious meaning deriving from the associations of the god with other deities, especially childish and dwarf-like ones. For instance, Harpocrates is clearly associated with ‘Baubo’, a



Figure 27.1 Harpocrates. Egyptian terracotta sculpture, 1st–2nd century CE. Height: 12.7 cm
Source: Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Gift of Robert Blaugrund (M.82.77.7). <http://collections.lacma.org/node/243796>

naked childbearing woman who often has the attributes of Isis Aphrodite and Demeter (Nifosi 2019: 99). Like Harpocrates, Baubo has a plump, child-like body and sometimes wears a bulla, a round amulet that protected children (Fjeldhagen 1995: 3, 9, 33). The grotesque representation of Harpocrates also derives from his close association with terracottas of Bes. Similarly to Bes, he is represented holding loaves of bread and libation vases (Bailey 2008: 3049, 3053–3054), both of which were likely to be part of local festivals in honour of the two gods. In addition, Harpocrates in Ptolemaic temples was defined as the ‘lord of bread and supplier of food’ (Fjeldhagen 1995: 26–27), showing his important function as protector of the fertility of crops.

In the Roman period, the figure of Harpocrates is also represented on Greco-Egyptian magical gems and pendants dating between the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD (CBd 95, 80, 94, 99, 102; el-Khachab 1971; Fig. 27.1). A 4th-century AD Greek spell (PGM IV 930.1071–1085) for good health and protection prescribed the use of a ‘strip of linen ... taken from a marble statue of Harpocrates in any temple’ (Betz 1986: 59). This late source suggests not only that this god was still very popular, both in his Greco-Egyptian version and in his new Gnostic blending with the figure of Christ, but also that the god still received lavishly clothed marble statues in his honour in more than one Egyptian temple.

Children in temples, rituals and festivals

Children in temples

Children attended the precincts of temples as performers of cults as well as for their education. Greco-Egyptian temples had a library (called Per-Ankh as in the dynastic period) where scribes were educated from childhood and taught Demotic and Hieratic scripts (Greek was studied

from the Roman period). Didactic texts in Demotic are also preserved (Criore 2001: 22–23), for example the Tale of Setne Khamwas (1st century AD: Setne II: *P. British Museum* 604; Lichtheim 2006: 125–142). In this story, Prince Setne Khamwas (fourth son of Ramesses II) has his son, Sa-Osiris, educated at the Per-Ankh of the temple of Ptah in Memphis where Setne himself was a priest. In the school, Sa-Osiris was taught by scribes and quickly learnt by heart Egyptian spells and magical rituals. By the age of 12, the child had already surpassed every other scribe, showing that the education of priests and scribes usually required a much longer period of training.

The evidence of priestly roles for children is still very limited and not systematically studied (Dunand 1978; Clarysse and Van der Veken 1983; Pomeroy 1990; Rowlandson 1998; Budin 2010). Although temporary ritual roles for children are documented in both Egyptian and Greek religious practice, it is rarely clear at what age children could inherit permanent priestly titles from their parents (Dunand 1978: 361).

In the 3rd–2nd century BC there are records of girls who served the cult of deified Ptolemaic queens, such as the trilingual Decree of Canopus (238 BC). Girls serving the deified Queen Berenice bore the priestly title ‘virgin maidens’ (ἱεραὶ παρθένοι) in the Greek version and the traditional Egyptian priestly titles of ‘musicians’ (*sm* ‘*γῳτ*) and ‘pure priestesses’ (*w*‘*bwt*) in the Egyptian version (Dunand 1978: 355). The decree also shows that the cult of Berenice included a ceremony related to the passion of Osiris: this according to Dunand shows that the cult performed by the ἱεραὶ παρθένοι in this context had a very strong Egyptian element (Dunand 1978: 372).

Unlike the virgin maidens of Berenice, the basket bearers of Arsinoe Philadelphos (see LSJ: 874, ‘*κωνηφόρος*’) performed a fully Greek cult which was taken by the Ptolemies from the Greek Panathenaic procession (Pomeroy 1990: 56–57; Bailey 1999: 157). Like the girls from Athens, these girls presumably had to be pubescent (Ar. *Lys.* 641–47) and with an immaculate reputation (Thuc. 6.56; Arist. *Ath. Pol.* 18.2). In a 3rd-century BC terracotta (Bailey 1999: 160) a young basket bearer is represented dressed with a long chiton with short sleeves (Bailey 2008: n. 3165), whereas during the Late Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, the *κωνηφόροι* were represented naked, and sometimes together with a boy playing the double flute. It is uncertain whether the Ptolemaic ritual was changed to the point that the maidens performed naked (Bailey 1999).

The temple complex of the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis in Memphis has preserved numerous papyri dating to the mid-2nd century BC which deal with the life of the people who lived there. From these archives we learn that people of any age could decide to live in religious seclusion in the temple and in exchange they were financially maintained and protected. Ptolemaios and his younger brother Apollonios, sons of a Greek father and an Egyptian mother, chose to be recluses in the Astarteion (the shrine to Astarte) of the Serapeum complex. Apollonios was less committed to this life choice and decided to leave the Serapeum to start a military career (Rowlandson 1998: 98ff.). As far as we know, Ptolemaios remained in the temple for the rest of his life and although he could not leave the precinct, he had friends visiting him there. One of his father’s friends suffered much trouble from a hostile wife and eventually died, leaving his twin daughters and their older sister without a place to stay. Ptolemaios welcomed the twins in the Serapeum and the papyri reveal that both girls served as mourners of the god Apis (UPZ 1.18). The twins’ older sister Tathemis lived in the Astarteion with Ptolemaios and did a more ‘secular’ service, collecting gifts and money in order to pay for her maintenance, dowry and circumcision (UPZ 1. 2. Rowlandson 1998: 78; Heubner 2009).

The role of Tathemis at the Serapeum as ‘receiver of gifts’ could lead to the interpretation that she was a sacred prostitute. However, this has been explicitly ruled out in recent times (Scholl 2009: 191). Budin showed conclusively that there is no explicit evidence of sacred

prostitution of young men or women in any temple in Egypt (Budin 2010: 9). Diodorus Siculus (1.47.1) and Strabo (17.1.46) mention groups of women serving Zeus in the Thebaid, Upper Egypt. Diodorus, who visited Egypt in the 1st century BC, claimed that the tombs of the ‘concubines of Zeus’, τὰς παλλακίδας τοῦ Διὸς, were approximately 10 *stades* (about one mile) from the monument of the king called Ozymandias (Ramesses II). Burton (1972: 147) argued that the tombs of the concubines of Zeus were the ones in the Valley of the Queens, while Budin suggested that Zeus was a Greek version of the god Amun and his ‘concubines’ were the ‘god’s wives of Amun’ (Budin 2010: 196–197). In the New Kingdom (c. 1550–1077 BC) the title of ‘god’s wife of Amun’ was a non-inheritable position for a celibate princess who served at the temple of Amun in Karnak (Robins 1996: 149–156). The title is attested until the Saite Period (664–525 BC) but seems to have disappeared by the time of the first Persian domination (525 BC). It is therefore likely that Diodorus was not describing tombs contemporary to his time but the earlier tombs of priestesses located by the Ramesseum, as well as within the complex of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu (Li 2017: 84ff). Unlike Diodorus, Strabo who visited Egypt in the second half of the 1st century BC, describes an existing group of young, unmarried priestesses serving Zeus (Amun?) in the Theban Area:

But for Zeus, whom they [the Thebans] honour most, a most beautiful maiden of most illustrious family serves as priestess, [girls] whom the Greeks call *pallades*; and she serves as a functionary and accompanies whomever/attends whatever [rites?] she wishes until the natural cleansing of her body; and after her cleansing she is given to a man/husband; but before she is given, a rite of mourning is celebrated for her after the time of her religious service.

Budin 2010: 199

The identification of these girls is not straightforward. An Egyptian title for a Theban high priestess still attested in various Demotic documents dating to the second century BC is ‘Prophetess of Jeme’, ~~hmt ntr n Dm3~~ (Rowlandson 1998: n. 32; O’ Brien 2002: 274). The Prophetess was probably serving in the small temple of Amun in Jeme (or Memnoneia in Greek), the village founded in the mortuary complex of Ramesses III in Medinet Habu (el-Aguizy 1996: 3, n. 11) where the god’s wives of Amun were buried. If the role of the Prophetess derived from the Late Dynastic role of god’s wife of Amun, then it is possible to argue that she was a celibate girl from the Greco-Egyptian elite who served as cult functionary. However, there are no clear indications about the age and the marital status of the Ptolemaic Prophetess so it is difficult to identify her unequivocally with the prepubescent maiden priestess mentioned by Strabo.

A virgin priestess (ἱερά παρθένο) from a Greco-Egyptian background is attested in the temple of Thoeiris-Athena at Oxyrhynchos (*PMerton* 2.73, 163–164 AD). These girls were involved in the performance of cults of the temple and supervised by high Roman officials (Rowlandson 1998: n. 35). The age of the virgin priestess mentioned is not specified: Rowlandson argues that the lack of a patronymic might indicate either a permanent separation from the original family or that the girl was the daughter of the priest who was writing the document. If we consider that she left her family permanently, it is likely that she lived in the temple and maintained her celibacy for her whole life like the recluse of the Serapeum. However, another papyrus mentions the same temple of Athena-Thoeiris in Oxyrhynchos and two generations of ἱεραὶ παρθένοι, mother and daughter (*P.Oxy.* 44 3177, 2–3. 247 AD). This source suggests that the role was inheritable through the maternal line like other priestly titles (Rowlandson 1998: 55) and it was not permanent.

In 3rd century AD Oxyrhynchos, some maidens were celebrated with a ritual called *θεραπευτήρια* (Montserrat 1991; Heubner 2009). Three papyri attest that this celebration involved a meal with several guests in the house of the girl's father. Elsewhere, I argue that this celebration could be interpreted as the end of a religious service during which pre-marital purity was consecrated to Isis. The end of this service might have corresponded to the girl's betrothal ceremony (Nifosi 2019: 23–24), and be similar in nature to the Theban events described by Strabo: a 'rite of mourning' which marked the end of the girl's religious service and the beginning of her married life. Perhaps the *θεραπευτήρια* was not limited to Oxyrhynchos but also celebrated in other parts of Egypt. The three papyri mentioning it all come from Oxyrhynchos so it is likely that this temple service took place in the temple of Athena-Thoeris, Isis and Sarapis. ~~In my opinion, the virgin priestesses (ἑραὶ παρθέναι) of Thoeris-Athena attested in this temple between the 2nd and the 3rd century AD could well be the same unmarried maidens involved in the *θεραπευτήρια* in this temple to mark the end of their religious service.~~

Cultic service for young boys is scarcely attested in Greek and Egyptian cults for the Greco-Roman period and this would deserve more in-depth study. ~~Faraone (1991: 193) notes that 'only virgins' rather than 'unspoilt boys' were used as cult attendants in Greek temples in Greece. However, this could have been different in Egyptian and Greco-Egyptian cults. For instance, it is possible that boys served in temples dedicated to Isis and Harpocrates. This might be suggested by a Late Ptolemaic terracotta from the Munich Glyptotek (Æ.I.N. 497) which represents a 'temple-boy', dressed with a long garment and crowned with a wreath of flowers, pouring libations over a horned altar from a 'rounded oblong jar' and a 'breast-shaped *situla* used in the cult of Isis' (Fjeldhagen 1995: n. 95).~~

Children as mediums

While there is little evidence of boys working in temples, there is a range of evidence for the use of boys as mediums in private magical rituals in the Papyri Graecae Magicae (PGM) and Papyri Demoticae Magicae (PDM). These corpora of papyri are dated mainly to the 3rd–4th century AD, with some earlier ones dating to the 1st–2nd century AD and a few later ones dating to the 5th–7th century AD (Betz 1986: xxiii–xviii). Some papyri are written in Greek, others in Demotic and again others are multilingual. For instance, the Magical Papyrus of London and Leiden which includes many of the rituals involving child mediums and dates to the 3rd century AD is written in Greek, Demotic, Hieratic and Old Coptic, probably in an Egyptian temple in the Thebaid (PDM xvi; Dieleman 2006: 71–72). The rituals of the magical papyri are culturally Greco-Egyptian because they combine Greek magical tradition with Egyptian priestly tradition. They also have elements from the Jewish tradition (PGM IV.850–829; Dieleman 2006: 278–279). The methods of child divination were varied (see Table 27.1) but they all required the child to look at the sunlight, or into a lamp, a bowl of water or a mirror in order to catch a flash that could be interpreted by the medium as the apparition of a god. Johnston (2001: 105–106) points out that Greco-Egyptian mediumism was different from its Greek counterpart because children were not possessed by the gods: they remained separated, had a conversation with them and sometimes forced the gods to do things for them (e.g. PDM xiv.528–53). Not all children were considered suitable mediums. The ideal characteristics of children were that they were 'sexually uncorrupted and pure' (PGM VII.540–78; PDM xiv.1–92; PDM xiv.750–71; PDM xiv.856–75); and that they had 'good ears' (PDM xiv.68–69, 73–78, 287). According to Apuleius, they had to be 'attractive and unharmed in body, quick of mind and articulate' (Apul. *Apol.* 43.12–20; Ogden 2002: 172–173).

Table 27.1 Magical Greek and Demotic papyri mentioning child mediums and methods of divination

<i>Magical papyri mentioning Method of divination using a child medium children</i>	
PGM III.633–731	Fragmentary. Spell for a direct vision which involves a child
PGM IV.850–929	‘Charm of Solomon’, whispered in the ear of a boy (or adult medium) and producing a prophetic trance. The medium is crowned with wormwood
PGMV.1–53	‘Oracle of Sarapis’ which uses a boy as a medium, and a lamp, a saucer and a bench for the vision
PGMVII.540–78	Lamp divination using a boy medium
PDM xiv.1–92	Vessel divination involving a boy medium bending over the vessel (with either water or oil), opening and closing his eyes at command
PDM xiv.150–231	An inquiry of the lamp: a youth is brought to a dark room and closes his eyes until the formula is recited, then he opens his eyes and should see the shadow of the god near the lamp
PDM xiv.239–95	The vessel inquiry of Khonsu: a vessel divination involving a boy medium bending over the vessel (with either water or oil). The child sits on a brick, keeps the eyes closed when the spell is recited and then the adult covers his ears
PDM xiv.395–427	An oil vessel divination: the child medium has to lie on his stomach and put his chin on the brick where the vessel stands
PDM xiv.459–75	Lamp divination
PDM xiv.489–515	Lamp divination: the child sits on a brick and is asked to look at the lamp all the time. Fear is driven away from the child in order to keep him focused
PDM xiv.516–27	Lamp divination
PDM xiv.528–53	Divination over a bowl of water: Anubis is called and then sent to bring another group of gods for whom he is asked to prepare a table with food
PDM xiv.627–35	Vessel divination of Osiris: the child’s face is oriented to the east
PDM xiv.750–71	Lamp divination: similar to PDM xiv.150–231. Sexual purity of the boy is a specified requirement
PDM xiv.805–40	Vessel inquiry: the child needs to stand up before the lamp
PGM LXII.24–46	Saucer divination: the saucer is filled with oil and with the afterbirth of a dog. The adult writes a magical word on the child’s chest
PGM IV.88–93	Inquiry of the sun: the child is asked to look at the sun and then sees the gods
PDM xiv.856–75	Inquiry of the sun
PDM xiv.875–85	Inquiry of the sun
PGMVII.348–58	Unclear. Maybe the child is observing a lamp or a bowl of water. The vision is a dark-coloured boy, possibly a ghost
PGM XIII.734–1077	Technique for child divination not specified
PDM xiv.695–700	Vessel divination
PDM xiv.701–05	Vessel divination

The requirement of sexual purity might suggest that boys from lower social classes or even slaves, more exposed to potential sexual abuse, could not be used as mediums. Johnston, however, observes that children could have been chosen not so much for their physical purity but for their suggestible mind and their inexperience of life which made them ‘highly likely to provide the desired results’ in divination (Johnston 2001: 114–115).

Children in religious festivals

Boys and girls certainly took part in domestic cults and urban festivals in honour of gods. Various terracottas of Harpocrates show the god playing musical instruments such as the lyre, the tambourine or the triangular harp. It is possible that these and other representations of Harpocrates reflect some festival activities carried out by children. The figure of an adolescent boy is painted on the door of a cabinet whose exact provenance is unknown (Cambridge Fitzwilliam Museum inv.E.GA.4332.1943; Ashton 2004: 144–145). The youth, dressed with a simple tunic with a belt knotted twice, is playing cymbals with both his hands while dancing with bare feet. His interpretation as a young festival attendant rather than a priest is due to his hair which is not shaven.

The bishop of Salamis Epiphanius, who lived in Egypt as a monk in the mid-4th century AD, in his sermon, *De Fide*, gave a colourful account of the activities of citizens of all ages, including girls and boys, participating in the festival of Harpocrates at Buto in the Nile Delta:

But each citizen – —even an elder already far along in years, together with young women of the same persuasion, and other ages from youth up – are supposedly priests of this Horus, and of Harpocrates. Their heads are shaved and they shamelessly carry the slavish, as well as accursed and childish emblem, willingly taking part in the games of the daemon's initiates laughing madly and foolishly, and cast off all restraint. First they smear their faces with porridge, flour and other vulgarities, and then they dip their faces in a boiling cauldron and deceitfully madden the crowds with their faces, for a supposed miracle; and they wipe the stuff off their faces with their hands, and give some to anyone who asks, to partake of for their health's sake and as a remedy for their ills.

Epiph. De Fide, 11.4–5; Williams 2013: 669

Later in the sermon, Epiphanius also describes groups of dancing girls performing with women musicians in Memphis and Heliopolis (*Epiph. De Fide* 12.1).

Conclusions

Every Greco-Egyptian child was protected by the god Harpocrates. The cult of the child-god was very popular because it protected all the children and the vulnerable people who could identify with him in spells. Harpocrates was elevated by the Ptolemies to be the son of the rulers' god Sarapis but the description of Epiphanius suggests that the festival of the child-god in Buto was very inclusive, being performed by people of all ages and both sexes.

Archaeological and literary sources show that since the dynastic period, the hair of children had been shaven off for important occasions and used in domestic, funerary and temple protective rituals. Children's hair offerings in temples marked the end of their vows, which were believed to ensure the gods' protection in dangerous or crucial moments of their life (e.g. illness, coming of age).

The ritualization of children's puberty played a key role in their participation in temple services and rituals. The evidence from Alexandria, Oxyrhynchos and the Thebaid show that young virgin priestesses were appointed for temporary roles which either ended after a pre-established period of time (e.g. mourners of the bull Apis, *kanephoros* of Arsinoe Philadelphos) or when they reached puberty (e.g. the maiden priestesses of Strabo and the virgin priestesses of Athena-Thoeris). The evidence for boys' public cultic roles, which ended when they reached

puberty, is scarce but by contrast it is widely attested that virgin boys were used as mediums in private rituals. Therefore, the maidens' pre-pubertal purity was considered more valuable in the context of temple rituals while boys' virginity was valued in the context of divination.

Children participated fully in rituals and religion with varying degrees of agency. They were active performers of rituals in temples and urban festivals and passive recipients of protective spells and amulets. More difficult to define is these children's level of agency as mediums: children were active performers but at the same time they were 'objectified': they became, in a sense, magical speaking tools. The contradictory way in which these juveniles were viewed and treated exemplifies the range of contrasting feelings of adults towards the young in cults and rituals: they were appreciated and empowered but at the same time diminished and exploited. Children were considered trustworthy and gullible, innocent and vulnerable, sacred and pure – but not forever.

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