

THE CHARMOSYNA (FESTIVAL OF REJOICING) IN GRAECO-ROMAN EGYPT

Youssri Abdelwahed & Doaa Abdel-Motaal

Tour Guiding Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Minia University

---

**Abstract:**

This article deals with the Charmosyna or “the Festival of Rejoicing” in the light of Greek papyri uncovered from Graeco-Roman Egypt and other textual evidence. It discusses the different associations of the Charmosyna with the Apis of Memphis, the god Osiris, the god Serapis, and the goddess Isis. During the Late Period, the Charmosyna is first confirmed in Herodotus’ *Histories* in connection with the birth of a new Apis at Memphis. In the late Hellenistic Period, textual evidence from Kios (Bithynia, Asia Minor) associated the Charmosyna with the goddess Isis, suggesting that the festival was more than a local Egyptian celebration. In the early second century AD, Plutarch associated the Charmosyna with the god Serapis, who was a fusion of Osiris-Apis. In the mid-second century AD, the Festival of Rejoicing is last mentioned in the festival calendar of Soknopaiou Nesos, which gives eight days from the 16th to the 23rd of Phaophi (Julian: 13th-20th of October) for the festival.

**Keywords:** Charmosyna, Apis, Serapis, Osiris, Isis, Graeco-Roman Egypt.

---

Unfortunately, the Charmosyna is one of the least documented festivals in textual evidence, whether papyrological or literary. The earliest surviving textual reference to the Charmosyna is found in Herodotus’ *Histories*, where the Greek historian and traveller attributed the Festival of Rejoicing to the birth of a new Apis at Memphis:

When Cambyses arrived at Memphis, *Apis appeared to the Egyptians*, whom the Hellenes call Epaphus: and when he had appeared, forthwith the Egyptians began to wear their fairest garments and to have festivities... the Egyptians ... said that a god had appeared to them, who was wont to appear at intervals of long time, and that whenever he appeared, *then all the Egyptians rejoiced and kept festival*... Cambyses bade the priests bring Apis away into his presence: so they went to bring him. Now this Apis-Epaphus is a calf born of a cow that after this is not permitted to conceive any other offspring; and the Egyptians say that a flash of light comes down from

heaven upon this cow, and of this she produces Apis. This calf which is called Apis is black and has the following signs, namely a white square upon the forehead, and on the back the likeness of an eagle, and in the tail the hairs are double, and on the tongue there is a mark like a beetle... Cambyses ... ordered those whose duty it was to do such things to scourge the priests without mercy and to put to death any one of the other Egyptians whom they should find keeping the festival. Thus the festival of the Egyptians had been brought to an end, and the priests were being chastised, and Apis wounded by the stroke in his thigh lay dying in the temple.<sup>1</sup>

The reconciliation of Herodotus' term (Charmosyna) with the Egyptian festival survived in later textual evidence mentioning the Festival of Joy. For Herodotus, the Charmosyna was associated with the discovery of a new Apis at Memphis, a critical momentum for the Egyptians that announced the commencement of their joyful celebrations. Cambyses misinterpreted the Egyptians' celebrations of the birth of a new Apis as a sign of their rejoicings of the loss of his soldiers. Hence, he gave his orders to chastise the priests and murdered those who celebrated the Charmosyna. Cambyses therefore put an end to the Charmosyna.

Herodotus' passage clearly indicates that the Charmosyna was held in the late period of Dynastic Egypt as an expression of joy due to the birth of a new Apis at Memphis. It is well-known that the Apis was thought of the living incarnation of Osiris, whose soul (*psyche*) was believed to have transferred into the Apis upon the death of Osiris. Throughout the Hellenistic Period, the Charmosyna perhaps continued as a joyful festival, which, according to F. Dunand, was probably related to the discovery of the body of Osiris in the form of a new Apis bull, which in turn encompassed the soul of Osiris.<sup>2</sup> By the end of the Hellenistic Period, however, the Charmosyna was associated with the goddess Isis, the consort of Osiris and the finder of his body. This association is evidenced from an inscription, datable to 1 BC-AD 1 and uncovered under a fountain on the road behind the modern market of Kios, where a devotee of the Isiac cult "has received the Charmosyna of Isis":

The society members honoured Anubion son of Nikostratos, who equipped the ship with three sets of oars (trireme) in a sacred and glory-loving manner, with two full-sized painted images and another painting. They honoured the same Anubion, who was also benevolent, with a painted portrait image. They honoured the same

---

<sup>1</sup> Hdt. 3.27-29.

<sup>2</sup> Dunand 1973: 67.

Anubion, who also served as monthly officer, (10) with a painted ... image (?) ... They honoured the same Anubion, who took on the Joyful Festival of Isis in a sacred and glory-loving manner (Xa[r]mo/suna th=j IIsidoj i9e[ro]prepw=j), with two life-sized painted images, with another painted image on a shield, with a stone slab, and with a proclamation of these honours each month through the year (20) ... during the Isis celebrations (?), during the other ... festivals of the (?) ... members of the society, and during the regular common assemblies.<sup>3</sup>

At Nicea's port of Kios, the Festival of Rejoicing (Charmosyna) was likewise held in honour of Isis in the late Hellenistic Period.<sup>4</sup> At Nicea, it is known, Isis and Serapis were worshipped together and coins often display their busts in a jugate (overlapping) position. In an outdated article, F. Bräuninger dealt very briefly with the Charmosyna. He hesitantly suggested that the Charmosyna was a celebration of the resurrection of Osiris, a hypothesis which has not been accepted by F. Perpillou-Thomas, since the date of the Charmosyna at Soknopaiou Nesos (Phaophi/October), which Bräuninger did not know, is not compatible with an Osirian festival.<sup>5</sup>

Given that most Isiac rites were marked with both sorrow and joy deriving from the sufferings and triumphs of Osiris, one is inclined to think that the Charmosyna was associated with the Isiac rites because of their connection with the sufferings and triumphs of Osiris. Through her endeavours, Isis searched and assembled the dispersed body of her husband, and thus played a significant role in the triumph of Osiris over his archenemy, Seth. This interpretation nevertheless raises a chronological problem: according to Plutarch, the Egyptians began to celebrate the ceremonies of mourning in honor of Osiris from 17 Athyr, that is to say on 13 November. On 19 Athyr, the keepers of the robes and the priests 'go down to the sea at night-time and bring forth the sacred chest containing a small golden coffer, into which they pour some portable water which they have taken up, and a great shout arises from the company for joy that Osiris is found'.<sup>6</sup> While the interment and resurrection of Osiris occurred in Egypt through the month of Khoiak, the sacrifices offered to Osiris at Athens were fixed on 24 October. It is possible that the calendar of the Athenian association celebrating the worship of Osiris is not strictly identical to the Egyptian liturgical calendar: it

---

<sup>3</sup> Ascough, Philip, and Kloppenborg 2012: 97.

<sup>4</sup> Magie 1953: 176.

<sup>5</sup> Bräuninger 1928; Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 76, note 44.

<sup>6</sup> Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 39.

could have been modified in contact with the local calendar of the *deme* in order to integrate cults celebrated in Athens, such as the cult of Demeter or that of infernal deities.<sup>7</sup>

Writing in the early second century AD, Plutarch equally connected the Charmosyna with the god Serapis:

The priests indeed, at least the greatest part of them, tell us, that Serapis is none other than the mere union of Osiris and Apis into one word; declarative as it were of that opinion, which they are perpetually explaining and inculcating, that the Apis ought ever to be regarded by us, as a fair and beautiful image of the soul of Osiris. For my part, I cannot but think that if this word be of Egyptian extraction, it ought to be interpreted so as to express joy and gladness, seeing that festival, which we Grecians call Charmosyna, or the feast of joy, is by the Egyptians expressly termed *sarei*.<sup>8</sup>

The Apis, Osiris, and Serapis are closely interconnected in the Graeco-Roman Period. The god Serapis was no more than the blending of Osiris and Apis of Memphis. In other words, Serapis was initially Osiris-Apis, a funerary deity mainly honoured at Memphis. He was particularly associated with Osiris, the Egyptian god of the underworld and fertility. Even the festival of Serapis (Serapia in Greek papyri) held in Khoiak is only a commemorative celebration of the sufferings of the god Osiris.<sup>9</sup> In Plutarch's opinion, if the name Serapis is Egyptian, it denotes cheerfulness and rejoicing. He based his argument on the fact that the Egyptians call their Festival of Rejoicing *sairei* (ο3ti th\n e9roth\n Ai0guptioi ta\ xarmo/suna sai/rei kalou=sin), a word from which the name Serapis was probably stemmed.<sup>10</sup> Based on the equivalence of the words *xara/* and *sairei*, L. Parmentier attributed Plutarch's etymological connection between Charmosyna, Serapis, and *sairei* to Hecataeus of Abdera.<sup>11</sup>

The Charmosyna at least survived into the mid-second century AD, when it is very briefly mentioned in a list of expenses associated with the temples of Soknopaiou Nesos.<sup>12</sup> In AD 138, the festival calendar of Soknopaiou Nesos similarly gives eight days from the 16th to the 23rd of Phaophi for the Charmosyna (13th-20th October), during which 4 artabas of

---

<sup>7</sup> Thomas 2011: 285-6.

<sup>8</sup> Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 29.

<sup>9</sup> Abdelwahed 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 29.

<sup>11</sup> Parmentier 1913: 69-70.

<sup>12</sup> *SB* VI.9199.9.

wheat were consumed every day, giving a total of 32 artabas.<sup>13</sup> Based on the relatively large wheat consumption, a banquet can probably be linked to the Charmosyna, as do many other public festivals at Soknopaiou Nesos and elsewhere.

In the Graeco-Roman Period, Plutarch and many other classical writers gave the myth of Osiris a rationalising twist by linking the search for his dismembered body directly with the natural cycle. The sufferings and triumphs of Osiris are clearly bound up with the cycle of Egyptian agriculture. Before the building of the modern dams, the Nile began to rise around the summer solstice in June and reached its maximum height at the end of August/early September.<sup>14</sup> Pausanias was told by a Phoenician that the search for Osiris and Isis' lamentation took place as the Nile flooded, and that 'many of the indigenous Egyptians' say that the flood is caused by her tears. By the middle to end of October (the time of the Charmosyna), the river had returned to its bed; the redistribution of land and the sowing took place as it subsided. In this wider context, the Charmosyna perhaps marked the Egyptians' rejoicing by the sowing of land due to the recession of the Nile water, which symbolised the discharge of the body of Osiris. Additionally, the Charmosyna are celebrations celebrated in Egypt, marking the resurrection of the god Osiris and giving rise to festive celebrations, which were part of undoubtedly in the larger context of the autumn festivals, commemorating the death of Osiris as well that mourning and the quest for Isis.<sup>15</sup> Given the heat of Egypt, the new growing season for olives and vines began in January, which meant that the first shoots would have appeared about the time of the Athyr festival. Plutarch offers an account that associates the disappearance of Osiris with a series of analogous 'disappearances': the fall of the Nile, the cessation of the Etesian winds, the lengthening of the nights after the equinox, and the trees' loss of leaves. The appearance of Osiris was also associated with a series of appearances: the Nile flood, the sowing of land, and the sprout of seeds and trees' leaves.

### **Conclusion:**

The Charmosyna, or "the Festival of Rejoicing", is one of the least documented celebrations in papyriological and literary evidence. Writing in the fifth century BC, Herodotus was the earliest classical writer to mention the Charmosyna, which was associated with the birth or discovery of a new Apis at Memphis. Cambyses ended

---

<sup>13</sup> *Stud.Pal.* XXII.183.iii.68.

<sup>14</sup> Alvar 2008: 302-303.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas 2011: 285.

the Charmosyna because of his misinterpretation of the cheerful celebrations of the epiphany of Apis as a sign of the Egyptians' happiness due to Cambyses' loss of his soldiers. Since then, the Charmosyna did not appear in the textual evidence throughout the Hellenistic Period. It was only in 1 BC-AD 1 at Kios of Asia Minor that the Charmosyna appears in an inscription carved by an association of the devotees of Isis. This time, and for unclear reasons, the Charmosyna was associated with the goddess Isis, the consort of Osiris and the searcher of his body. In the early second century AD, Plutarch similarly connected the Charmosyna with the god Serapis, who was utterly the fusion of Osiris and the Apis of Memphis. In his view, the name Serapis is Egyptian since the Egyptians call the Charmosyna, "the Festival of Joy", *sairei*. In the mid-second century AD, the Charmosyna last appears in two papyri in connection with Soknopaiou Nesos. However, no much information is given in these documents about the Charmosyna. No certain deity is associated with the Charmosyna in the festival calendar of Soknopaiou Nesos. Yet there is no room to doubt that it was connected with the god Serapis (Osiris-Apis) or the goddess Isis, as earlier literary and other contemporary textual evidence suggest.

#### **Bibliography:**

Abdelwahed, Y. 2016: 'Two Festivals of the God Serapis in Greek Papyri', *Rosetta* 18, 1-15.

Alvar, J. 2008: *Romanising Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation, and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis, and Mithras*, Religions in the Graeco-Roman World 165, Leiden.

Ascough, R. S., Philip. A. H., and Kloppenborg, J. S. 2012: *Associations in the Greco-Roman World: A Sourcebook*, Berlin.

Bräuninger, F. 1928: 'XARMOSUNA', *Hermes* LXIII, 484-5.

Dunand, F. 1973: *Le cult d'Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditerranéenne* II, Leiden.

Magie, D. 1953: 'Egyptian Deities in Asia Minor in Inscriptions and on Coins', *AJA* 57:3, 163-87.

Parmentier, L. 1913: *Recherches sur le traits d'Isis et Osiris de Plutarque*, Bruxelles.

Perpillou-Thomas, F. 1993. *Fêtes d'Égypte ptolémaïque et romaine d'après la documentation papyrologique grecque*, *Studia Hellenistica* 31, Leuven.

Thomas, E. M. 2011: *Recherches sur les cultes orientaux à Athènes, du V<sup>e</sup> siècle avant J.-C. au IV<sup>e</sup> siècle après J.-C.*, Religions en contact dans la cité athénienne 2, Soutenance.

### الخارمسونية (إحتفال المرح) في مصر اليونانية الرومانية:

#### الملخص العربي:

تتناول هذه الدراسة إحتفال المرح الذى كان يعرف بالخارموسنية فى مصر فى العصر اليونانى الرومانى، وذلك من خلال بردية يونانية وبعض الأدلة النصية التى توضح إرتباط وظهور هذا الإحتفال ببعض الآلهة المختلفة كأبيس فى منفيس، الإله أوزيريس، سيرابيس و إيزيس. وبالرغم من قلة المصادر التى تحدثت عن هذا الإحتفال، إلا أن المؤرخ اليونانى هيروdot قد أشار إليه فى كتابته وربطه بوجود العجل أبيس مع وصول قمبيز إلى منفيس و إحتفال المصريين بالعجل أبيس الذى عرف خلال العصر المتأخر. كما نجد ظهور الإحتفال مرة أخرى مرتبطا بإيزيس فى أواخر العصر الهيلينستى من خلال نص يشير إلى أهمية الأحتفال لدى المصريين. كما ذكره بلوتارخ فى أوائل القرن الثانى بعد الميلاد وإرتباطه بالإله سيرابيس. ويتضح لنا من خلال البحث أن آخر ظهور لإحتفال المرح كان فى منتصف القرن الثانى بعد الميلاد.