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Mikolaj Domaradzki

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The Lotus and the Boat: Plutarch and Iamblichus on Egyptian Symbols*

MIKOLAJ DOMARADZKI
Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznan

SUMMARY: The present paper examines the two different accounts of the same Egyptian symbols that appear in Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* (11.355B, 34.364C) and Iamblichus's *De mysteriis* (7.2). While both these authors interpret the lotus flower and the sun boat allegorically, this article shows that their distinct interpretations reflect not only divergent perspectives on the role of (Greek) philosophy and (Egyptian) religious practice in one's pursuit of the divine, but also contrasting conceptions of the symbol.

KEYWORDS: Plutarch, Iamblichus, *De Iside et Osiride*, *De mysteriis*, allegoresis, symbols, Egyptian symbolism, the lotus flower, the sun boat, theurgy, Platonism, Hellenization.

INTRODUCTION

PLUTARCH AND IAMBLICHUS PUT FORWARD different *interpretationes graecae* of the same Egyptian symbols. Plutarch interprets the lotus flower and the sun boat "physically," as he finds an essential similarity between these symbols and the theological doctrines of the Stoics. Iamblichus, on the other hand, interprets the lotus flower and the sun boat "metaphysically," as he uses these symbols to illustrate the basic assumptions of Neoplatonic philosophy. While both thinkers have distinct conceptions of the symbol, the contrast between

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their interpretations is usually either merely gestured at[1] or only briefly commented on.[2] Also, the relation between the two interpretations has been assessed somewhat variously.[3] Importantly, there has so far been no detailed analysis that would seek to answer the following questions: (1) why do Plutarch and Iamblichus subject the same Egyptian symbols to different allegorical treatment? and (2) what is the difference between the two interpretations indicative of? The present contribution will aim to address these issues. Let us begin, however, with a few introductory remarks.

Two centuries separate Plutarch (ca. 45–125 C.E.) and Iamblichus (ca. 245–325 C.E.). While their different biographical and philosophical backgrounds have been extensively studied, the following details are worth mentioning briefly in the context of the present considerations. First, both Plutarch and Iamblichus were primarily Platonists. Of course, they drew inspiration from other philosophical schools as well: Plutarch was influenced by Stoicism[4] and Skepticism,[5] whereas Iamblichus fused Platonism with Pythagoreanism.[6] This fact notwithstanding, there is a general consensus that both Plutarch and Iamblichus were fundamentally adherents of Plato's philosophy: Plutarch is typically classified as representing the so-called "Middle Platonism,"[7] while Iamblichus is customarily categorized as a "Neoplatonist."[8] That these Platonist philosophers put forward divergent interpretations of the same Egyptian

[1] See, e.g., des Places 1966: 190–91n1 or Froidefond 1988: 262n7.

[2] See, e.g., Hopfner 1941: 97–98, 157; Sodano 1984: 351–52 or Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: xli–xlii.

[3] Thus, for example, Hopfner 1941: 98 quotes Iamblichus's interpretation with a view to showing "wohin der Weg der allegorisch-symbolischen Deutung schließlich führen mußte," whereas Hani 1976: 206 with n6 cites Iamblichus's interpretation to illustrate "les exégèses les plus abstruses" that were put forward in Late Antiquity.

[4] On Plutarch's complex attitude toward the Stoics, see especially the monumental study by Babut 1969 or, more recently, Hershbell 1992 and Opsomer 2014 as well as 2017.

[5] On which see, e.g., Opsomer 1998 (esp. 127–221); Babut 2007 and Bonazzi 2012 as well as 2014.

[6] For a seminal discussion of Iamblichus's project to Pythagoreanize Platonic philosophy, see O'Meara 1989 (esp. 30–105). Obviously, this is not to deny the existence of Pythagorean elements in Plutarch, on which see, e.g., Dillon 2010.

[7] That Plutarch was predominantly a Platonist has already been persuasively demonstrated by Jones 1916. More recently, important work on Plutarch's (somewhat idiosyncratic) Platonism has been done by Dillon 1996: 184–230; 2002 and 2014; see also Froidefond 1987.

[8] To the best of my knowledge, no scholar has challenged this label. Thus, for example, in a recent study, Finamore 2018: 366 characterizes Iamblichus as "the third major Neoplatonic figure after Plotinus and Porphyry."

symbols is interesting in light of the fact that both Plutarch and Iamblichus were also priests.[9]

It is very well documented that Plutarch officiated as a priest of Apollo at Delphi. Apart from several passages in his works where Plutarch makes explicit references to his sacerdotal position (e.g., *An seni* 17.792F), there is also external evidence in the form of inscriptions (e.g., *Syll.*[3] 829A).[10] However, given the focus of this paper, we should also note *De Iside* 68.378C–D, where Plutarch states that "we exhort (παρεγγυῶμεν) him who comes down here (ἐνταῦθα) to the oracle to think pious thoughts (ὅσια φρονεῖν) and speak auspicious words (εὔφημα λέγειν)."[11] Plutarch shows himself here to be confident of his priestly authority to advise and berate people who come to the oracle precisely to receive such guidance. Crucially, when contrasting his sacerdotal authority with the ignorance of οἱ πολλοί, Plutarch presents himself as an expert on the theological questions raised in *De Iside*.

A strong case can be made that Iamblichus was also a priest. Eunapius (*VS* 5.1.1) reports him to have been "of illustrious descent, and from a prosperous and fortunate family" (κατὰ γένος μὲν ἐπιφανὴς καὶ τῶν ἁβρῶν καὶ τῶν εὐδαιμόνων).[12] On the other hand, Damascius (*ap*. Phot. *Bibl*. 181.126a = Athanassiadi Test. 3) traces his ancestry to Sampsigeramos and Monimos. While the former was a priest-king of Emesa (Str. 16.2.10), the latter remains unknown: it could be the Monikos, whom Stephanus of Byzantium (s.v. Χαλκίς) hails as the founder of Iamblichus's native city, or it could be the god Monimos, whom Julian, citing Iamblichus, equates (*Or*. 4.150d) with Hermes.[13] In any case, that Iamblichus came from the royal line of priests sits very well with his decision to present his views under the guise of an Egyptian

[9] For excellent discussions on how Platonists integrated the role of a philosopher with that of a priest, see, e.g., Maiullo 2010 (who examines Iamblichus, Plutarch and Numenius) or Marx-Wolf 2016 (who investigates Origen, Porphyry and Iamblichus). While both these studies highlight the crucial importance of Iamblichus, already Fowden 1982: 53 has convincingly demonstrated that it was Iamblichus who "gave new impetus to the idea that the philosopher-priest was the highest type of sage."

[10] For good discussions, see Burkert 1996 or, more recently, Casanova 2012.

[11] The text along with translation (at times modified) is that of Griffiths 1970. Occasionally, Babbitt 1936 has also been used.

[12] Where no English reference is provided, the translation is my own.

[13] This point has been made by Dillon 1973: 5 and 1987: 865 (see also Finamore and Dillon 2002: 2 with n8 as well as Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: xix–xx with n25). On the other hand, Fowden 1982: 49 with n128 suggests that Iamblichus's descent from the princely house of Emesa is likely, since "the names Sampsigeramos and Iamblichos, and perhaps Monimos too, all occur" in this house.

priest and to assume the sacerdotal role of a theurgist (see below for discussion). Interestingly, as will be seen, Plutarch's and Iamblichus's accounts of Egyptian symbols reveal that these profoundly religious thinkers somewhat differently reconciled the role of the philosopher with that of the priest. This is reflected already in the distinct aims of their treatises.

Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* has received a great deal of scholarly attention.[14] Most generally, the tract combines an exposition of Middle Platonic metaphysics with a discussion of Egyptian religion and cult practice. This is stated explicitly in the middle of the text as Plutarch declares (48.371A) that in what follows he will relate the θεολογία of the Egyptians to Plato's φιλοσοφία. While the latter provides the lens through which the former is to be evaluated,[15] the underlying assumption of the work is that ancient Egyptian culture is a treasure trove of numerous precious insights that have to be excavated from underneath various less felicitous formulations: Plutarch holds the ancient wisdom of Egypt in high esteem, but also puts it in no uncertain terms that this valuable material needs to be approached critically. Thus, for example, he famously emphasizes (3.352C) that the true *Isiakos* "examines and investigates rationally" (λόγῳ ζητῶν καὶ φιλοσοφῶν) everything that is displayed and done in the traditional cult of the gods. Towards the end of his treatise, Plutarch similarly stresses (68.378A) that it is necessary to take as a "guide into the mysteries" (μυσταγωγός) the λόγος of philosophy and to "reflect piously" (ὁσίως διανοεῖσθαι) on everything said and done in the established religious practice. Thus, as Daniel S. Richter has persuasively shown, the entire *De Iside* consistently elevates the philosophical contemplation of divinity over the Egyptian cult.[16]

Speaking from a position of a Delphic priest, Plutarch obviously does not advocate disregard for religious prescriptions and customs as such. However, he unequivocally gives theoretical understanding an ascendancy over ritual practice: the quest for knowledge of the divine—asserts Plutarch at the very beginning of his tract (2.351E)—is a task much "holier" (ὁσιώτερον) than any "ceremonial purification" (ἁγνεία) or "temple service" (νεωκορία). One

[14] The treatise is one of the most frequently discussed works by Plutarch. Major translations and commentaries include Hopfner 1940 and 1941; Cilento 1962; Griffiths 1970; Froidefond 1988 and Lelli 2017. Among the most important studies are Hani 1976; Brenk 1987: 294–303; Froidefond 1987: 211–30; Bernard 1990: 203–67; Brisson 1996: 94–100; Richter 2001 and 2011: 207–29; Hirsch-Luipold 2002: 174–224 and Roskam 2014.

[15] As Deuse 1983: 27 rightly observes: "Den wahren Schlüssel zu den Geheimnissen des ägyptischen Mythos von Isis und Osiris, …, liefert allein die platonische Philosophie."

[16] Richter 2001 (esp. 198–202) and 2011 (esp. 217–21); see also n61 below.

can safely say, then, that for Plutarch (Greek and Platonic) philosophy is the touchstone against which the (Egyptian) cult is to be constantly evaluated: reason examines myths, symbols, rites and rituals so that the valuable could be separated from the valueless. While according to Plutarch the ancient wisdom of Egypt is thus validated by philosophical scrutiny, a completely different perspective is espoused by Iamblichus.

For a long time, Iamblichus's *De mysteriis* was somewhat neglected by classicists.[17] Recent scholarship has significantly reevaluated the importance of Iamblichus and his thought,[18] but a great deal of work still needs to be done before his treatise is appreciated as much as *De Iside* has already been. In particular, we should note here that studies on the history of allegorical interpretation frequently take into account Plutarch's approach to allegoresis in *De Iside*, but disregard Iamblichus's use of allegorical interpretation in *De mysteriis*.[19] Indeed, many scholars tend to stress that Iamblichus's lack of interest in Homeric exegesis testifies to his break with the traditions of Stoic and/or Porphyrian allegoresis.[20] However, it is worth emphasizing here that (1) the practice of allegorical interpretation could be applied not just to (Homeric) poetry, and that (2) many Stoic and Platonist allegorists saw

[17] Various eminent scholars in one way or another dismissed the relevance of Iamblichus as a thinker (e.g., Cumont 1949: 371: "la crédulité aveugle de Jamblique"), but *De mysteriis* has been particularly disparaged. Thus, for example, Hopfner 1922: xvii characterized Iamblichus's purpose in the treatise as involving: "den Hokuspokus und die Blendwerke der Zauberkünstler auf einen höhern Standpunkt hinaufzuheben und die berechtigten Einwände des Porphyrius durch sophistische Spitzfindigkeiten aus dem Wege zu räumen." Dodds labelled *De mysteriis* as a "manifesto of irrationalism" (1951: 287) and a "semi-philosophical treatise" (1963: xix). Even des Places 1966: 12 categorized *De mysteriis* as a "bréviaire du paganisme à son déclin."

[18] Important work on rehabilitating Iamblichus as a philosopher has been done by Dillon 1973 and 1987; Finamore 1985 and O'Meara 1989. With regard to *De mysteriis*, particular mention should be made of Smith 1974 (esp. 81–110) and 1993b; Nasemann 1991; Athanassiadi 1993; Sheppard 1993; Shaw 1995; Clarke 2001 and Addey 2014 (esp. 127–69, 189–99, 215–82).

[19] See, e.g., the otherwise excellent studies on the development of allegoresis by Pépin 1976; Bernard 1990 and Brisson 1996. Occasionally, though, one acknowledges Iamblichus's contribution to the exegesis of Plato's dialogues, on which see, e.g., Dillon 1973: 15 or Lamberton 1992: 116–17.

[20] Thus, for example, Dalsgaard Larsen 1975: 7 asserts: "Il n'y a plus trace, chez Jamblique, d'exégèse homérique s'inscrivant dans la tradition de l'allégorie stoïcienne. Il se concentre sur l'interprétation philosophique des œuvres d'Aristote et de Platon; il rejette explicitement l'interprétation allégorique, telle que la pratiquait Porphyre" (see also Lamberton 1986: 134n141).

themselves as performing essentially the same type of activity. With regard to the first point, we should bear in mind that ancient allegoresis was by no means a merely literary activity. This has been brilliantly argued by Glenn W. Most in his seminal paper on Cornutus: Stoic allegoresis cannot be adequately understood as an activity performed exclusively upon texts, since Cornutus interprets not only poems, but also various epithets, cult practices, visual arts and so on.[21] Unsurprisingly, then, Porphyry (*ap*. Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 3.7.1 = Smith Fr. 351) can also recommend "reading from the statues exactly as from books" (καθάπερ ἐκ βίβλων τῶν ἀγαλμάτων ἀναλέγειν). While Porphyry urges here that the truths hidden in sculptures be unveiled in the same manner as are those concealed in texts,[22] this brings us to the second point: many Platonists viewed their allegoresis as a (significantly improved) continuation of the Stoics' hermeneutical efforts. Porphyry is again a prime case in point. George R. Boys-Stones has acutely pointed out that when looking back at a century of Platonist "allegorical method" (μεταληπτικὸς τρόπος), Porphyry (*ap*. Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 6.19.8 = Harnack Fr. 39) places the Stoics Chaeremon and Cornutus at the head of his list of great Platonist and Pythagorean allegorical interpreters.[23] Accordingly, in what follows, it will be shown that *De mysteriis* proves that Iamblichus did not utterly reject "l'interprétation allégorique, telle que la pratiquait Porphyre."[24]

Most generally, *De mysteriis* can be characterized as a passionate defense of theurgic rites. Iamblichus presents his views under the guise of an Egyptian priest, Abamon, who begins his exposition with an explanation (1.1.2.5) that he replies to such "questions about theology" (περὶ θεολογίας … ἐρωτήματα) as those that were raised by his student Anebo.[25] This is a reference to a polemical text by Porphyry, who composed a letter in which he apparently impugned the value of the (Egyptian) cult practice.[26] Thus, what Iamblichus

[21] Most 1989: 2023–26 (see also Domaradzki 2021: 45–46n47).

[22] See, e.g., Lamberton 1986: 110, 128n128 and Addey 2014: 63–64. Buffière 1956: 535–40 draws attention to various Stoic assumptions that surface in the preserved fragments of Περὶ ἀγαλμάτων.

[23] Boys-Stones 2001: 50 (see also ibid., 58, 73n26, 112 and Domaradzki 2021: 36n11).

[24] See n20 above.

[25] The text along with translation (at times modified) is that of Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003, which follows the edition of des Places 1966. Occasionally, Taylor 1821 and Wilder 1911 have also been consulted.

[26] For testimonies that ascribe to Porphyry the authorship of this letter to Anebo, see, e.g., Euseb. *Praep. evang.* 3.3.21, 5.7.4, 14.9.9 and August. *De civ. D.* 10.11. For a reconstruction of the letter, see Sodano 1958. Some scholars are inclined to believe the character of Anebo to be fictitious (see, e.g., Struck 2002: 389), but Sodano 1958: xxxvii

has Abamon offer in *De mysteriis* is a series of "solutions" (λύσεις) to the "problems" (ἀπορήματα) that were posed by Porphyry through his Anebo.[27] The controversy between the two successors of Plotinus revolves around the usefulness of sacred rituals in one's pursuit of spiritual ascent: Porphyry the philosopher views contemplation (θεωρία) as most important for the salvation of one's soul, whereas Iamblichus the hierophant regards performing appropriate rites (θεουργία) as an indispensable assistance in one's return to the divine.[28] Thus, for example, in the (in)famous passage, Abamon forcefully asserts (2.11.96.11–13) that it is not "thinking" (ἔννοια) that "connects" (συνάπτει) the theurgists with the gods, for if that were the case then the "contemplative philosophers" (θεωρητικῶς φιλοσοφοῦντες) would all enjoy a "theurgic union" (θεουργικὴ ἕνωσις) with the gods. Rather, what establishes such a union—continues Abamon adamantly (96.13–97.2)—is the "ritual accomplishment" (τελεσιουργία) of acts that are "not to be divulged" (ἄρρητα), "divinely performed"[29] and "beyond all understanding" (ὑπὲρ πᾶσαν νόησιν),

is somewhat cautious: "niente impedisce di pensare che Anebo sia una persona reale, un *ierogrammateus* effetivamente vissuto, uno dei tanti sacerdoti del culto egiziano, così in voga nella Roma del tempo di Plotino." Relatedly, Clarke 2001: 7 and Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: xxix n54, following Saffrey 1971: 231–33, have suggested that Anebo might have belonged to Iamblichus's circle.

[27] While the actual title of Iamblichus's treatise was *The Master Abamon's Reply to Porphyry's Letter to Anebo, and the Solutions to the Questions Contained in it* (Ἀβάμμωνος διδασκάλου πρὸς τὴν Πορφυρίου πρὸς Ἀνεβὼ ἐπιστολὴν ἀπόκρισις καὶ τῶν ἐν αὐτῇ ἀπορημάτων λύσεις), the current version derives from the Latin edition published by Ficino in 1497, which was entitled *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum, Chaldaeorum, Assyriorum* (see, e.g., Sicherl 1957: 166 and 186).

[28] Arguably, the difference between the two successors of Plotinus should not be exaggerated. In a recent study, Addey 2014: 127–69 has made the interesting argument that the exchange between Porphyry and Iamblichus should be placed within two traditional philosophical genres: "Problems and Solutions," on the one hand, and "Platonic Dialogue," on the other. More specifically, the scholar suggests that the exchange ought to be viewed as a deliberately constructed mystagogic dialogue with educational, protreptic and initiatory functions. While this perspective has the advantage that it allows for an account of Porphyry as a "bridge" between his teacher Plotinus and his student Iamblichus, also Marx-Wolf 2016: 107–12 has made a strong case that Porphyry and Iamblichus were fairly close in their understanding of philosopher-priests as superior ritual experts, even though they obviously did not see eye to eye on the soteriological scope of the priestly activities of the philosopher.

[29] The original θεοπρεπῶς has not been rendered in the otherwise excellent translation by Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: 115 (on the importance of the adverb, see the next note).

along with the "power of ineffable symbols that are understandable only to the gods" (τῶν νοουμένων τοῖς θεοῖς μόνον συμβόλων ἀφθέγκτων δύναμις). The passage stresses the insufficiency of a purely intellectual approach.[30] Indeed, throughout his treatise, Iamblichus employs the term θεουργία precisely to emphasize the deficiency of θεωρία for the re-ascent of the soul: no matter how excellent a thinker one may be, salvation cannot be achieved through human thought alone—certain special works of the gods (θεῶν ἔργα) are necessary, and these are provoked by the theurgist who, then, acts as a philosophical priest and mystagogue. Hence, Iamblichus transforms the entire Platonic tradition, as he fuses Greek philosophy with Eastern religious practices.

Prior to discussing the different *interpretationes graecae* that Plutarch and Iamblichus offer, it is advisable to briefly characterize the Egyptian symbols that these two Platonist priests allegorize.[31] The lotus is a symbol of creation, life, and light. The flower arises from the primordial waters of the dark sea known as Nun. It emerges as a luminous bud, which opens to reveal the divine child. The infant sitting on the lotus was called Nefertum and often equated with the flower itself, which the sun god Re held to his nostrils. As Nefertum represents the first rays of the rising sun, the deity was often conflated with Re, and then also with the sky god Horus, whose Hellenized name was Harpocrates (i.e., Horus the child). The solar boat, on the other hand, is a symbol of the sun traversing the sky: the god voyaging in the solar barque was usually Re, Horus or Osiris. As the god sailed across the sky in his ship, he not only brought light and life to the world but also governed it. While the Egyptians assigned two barques to the sun god (one for the day and one for the night), the moon god (Khonsu) was also believed to travel in a barque.

These symbols are interpreted "physically" by Plutarch and "metaphysically" by Iamblichus. It is now time to analyze the specifics of their accounts.

[30] In connection with this passage, Dodds 1963: xx has diagnosed that Iamblichus rejects here the Plotinian intellectual mysticism and opens the door to all sorts of superstitions of the lower culture. However, the fact that in the above passage Iamblichus specifies that the secret ritual acts are to be "performed divinely" reveals that the theurgist has to be morally and religiously qualified: an intellectual approach may be deficient but not superfluous (see Shaw 1993: 120 and 1995: 85).

[31] Useful discussions of the relevant Egyptian myths are given by Moret 1917; Hopfner 1941: 95–97, 157–59; Morenz and Schubert 1954: 13–82; Rundle Clark 1959; El-Khachab 1971 and, more recently, Wilkinson 2003; see also Griffiths 1970: 290, 427; Hani 1976: 148, 206; Sodano 1984: 350–53 and Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: xxxix–xlii.

PLUTARCH'S PHYSICAL ALLEGORESIS

The symbols that concern us here are discussed by Plutarch separately in chapters 11 and 34 of *De Iside*. The former deals with the symbolic character of Egyptian myths and the latter forms part of a much larger investigation into the value of the physical allegoresis of myths. Let us look at them briefly.

Chapter 11 begins with a general admonition (355B) that Egyptian myths should not be hastily assumed to actually have happened precisely in the manner in which they are related. To illustrate this, Plutarch adduces three interesting examples, of which the second one concerns the lotus flower. First, Plutarch explains (ibid.) that it is not "literally" (κυρίως) the dog that the Egyptians revere under the name of Hermes (i.e., Thoth),[32] for what they honor are such qualities of the animal as "guardianship" (τὸ φυλακτικόν), "vigilance" (τὸ ἄγρυπνον) and "love of wisdom" (τὸ φιλόσοφον), which they attribute to the most sagacious of the gods.[33] Then, he makes the same point (ibid.) about the lotus symbol:

> Nor do they believe that the Sun rises as a newborn baby from the lotus, but thus they represent the rising of the sun, hinting enigmatically at the enkindling of the sun from moisture (τὴν ἐξ ὑγρῶν ἡλίου γινομένην ἄναψιν αἰνιττόμενοι).

Finally, Plutarch gives the example (355B–C) of the cruel Persian king Okhus,[34] who likewise was called "sword" (μάχαιρα) only figuratively: it was his atrocious nature that warranted the name.

In the above examples, Plutarch suggests that figurative signification emerges when an image[35] represents one thing (sagacity, sunrise, cruelty) in the form of another (dog, newborn baby, sword). Thus, the qualities of the animal are used to represent the attributes of the god, so that the dog's ability to distinguish friends from foes illustrates Hermes' wisdom; the image of a child emerging from the lotus is used to represent the rising of the sun,

[32] On the coalescence of Thoth and Hermes, see Fowden 1993: 22–24.

[33] Plutarch refers here to Plato's famous description (*Resp*. 375e1–376c6) of the guardians, who are similar to dogs in that they like those whom they know (i.e., they love wisdom).

[34] Probably Artaxerxes III (see Plut. *Artax*. 30.9).

[35] On the broadness of the concept in Plutarch, see the excellent study by Hirsch-Luipold 2002 (esp. 25–39), who also offers an invaluable survey of other relevant terms (αἴνιγμα, ἀλληγορία, σύμβολον, etc.) and, tellingly, finds Plutarch to be using them interchangeably (at 144). This broad understanding of the concept of "image" will be adopted by the Neoplatonists, who likewise will indiscriminately employ such terms as εἰκών and σύμβολον, on which see the classic paper by Dillon 1976.

so that the similarity between infancy (the beginning of the life) and dawn (the beginning of the day) is brought forth; and, finally, the deadliness of the weapon is used to represent the bloodthirsty nature of the king, so that the correspondence between a murderous instrument and a murderous person is established. While Plutarch makes it clear that such symbols are frequently elaborated and woven into mythical narratives (e.g., Okhus the sword put many people to death, slaughtered the Apis, feasted on him with his friends, etc.), he also insists that an appropriate approach to Egyptian myths consists in going beyond their surface meaning and unearthing their allegorical message.

Plutarch concludes chapter 11 with the caution (355C–D) that not just myths but all religious beliefs and practices need to be investigated "piously and philosophically" (ὁσίως καὶ φιλοσόφως) so that one could attain a true "opinion"[36] about the gods without slipping into either "superstition" (δεισιδαιμονία) or "atheism" (ἀθεότης). This is consistent with what has already been said about Plutarch's perspective: myths, symbols, rites and rituals have to be examined critically lest they degenerate into false beliefs (whether irrationality or irreligiousness). While this pious and philosophical approach enables one to bring to light the hidden meaning of Egyptian theology without repudiating it altogether, it also presupposes the willingness to distinguish between the valuable and the worthless in Egyptian religion. But if this distinction underlies Plutarch's account of Egyptian symbolism, does this mean that he embraces the aforementioned allegorical interpretations?[37]

He apparently accepts the moral ones ("Hermes the dog" and "Okhus the sword"). But when Plutarch deciphers the image of a child emerging from a flower as symbolizing how the sun is enkindled from water, does he really espouse this physical explanation?[38] In other words, when Plutarch diagnoses that the Egyptians do not literally believe that Helios rises as a newborn baby from the lotus, does he himself approve of the allegory that he unveils? Unfortunately, Plutarch does not discuss the physical interpretation that he puts forward: he only mentions it very briefly, along with the two moral ones. Yet, while his discussion may *prima facie* suggest that he endorses the physical allegoresis of the lotus flower, there is good evidence that Plutarch does not in fact favor this explanation. The evidence comes from what he says about

[36] Roskam 2014: 234 aptly stresses the significance of Plato's nomenclature: when it comes to the gods what is available to us is δόξα rather than ἐπιστήμη (see also Froidefond 1988: 106).

[37] For scholars who are inclined to believe that he does, see, e.g., Griffiths 1967: 88–89 and 1970: 101; Dawson 1992: 59 and Struck 2004: 114n7.

[38] The question has been raised by Babut 1969: 146–47, 155 (see also Bernard 1990: 210).

this symbol in another treatise and from how he interprets the other symbol that is the focus of this paper.

In *De Pythiae oraculis*, the same physical allegoresis of the lotus flower is derided and dismissed as Stoic.[39] In chapter 12, Plutarch has the poet Sarapion unravel the latent meaning of the bronze palm-tree, the frogs and the water-snakes wrought in metal in the base of the Corinthians' treasure-house. When interpreting these decorations, Sarapion puts forward the explanation (400A) that the artisan thus "hinted enigmatically at the nourishment, origin and exhalation of the sun from moisture" (τὴν ἐξ ὑγρῶν ᾐνίξατο τροφὴν τοῦ ἡλίου καὶ γένεσιν καὶ ἀναθυμίασιν). This allegoresis accords with *De Iside* 11.355B in that the sun is shown to be generated from water. However, in *De Pythiae* 12.400A it is surmised that the artisan drew inspiration either from Homer's description of how "the sun sprang up, leaving behind the beautiful sea,"[40] or from the fact that the Egyptians "represent a newborn child sitting on the lotus as a symbol of the beginning of sunrise."[41] Thus, Sarapion adduces not only an Egyptian symbol but also a verse from the poet in support of his explanation that the ornaments forged in metal are an allegory of the enkindling of the sun from moisture. Importantly, Philinus, who in all probability represents here Plutarch's own views, explicitly rejects (400A–B) this physical allegoresis: the Stoics' explanations in terms of "enkindlings" (ἀνάψεις) and "exhalations" (ἀναθυμιάσεις) are repudiated because they crudely reduce the sun god to "an earthborn animal or a marsh plant" (γηγενὲς ζῷον ἢ φυτὸν ἕλειον).[42] While Philinus's criticism of Stoic materialism suggests that Plutarch actually does not embrace the allegoresis of the lotus flower that he presents in *De Iside* 11.355B, this can be further substantiated by Plutarch's account of the sun boat, which is discussed in the context of a larger examination of the value of physical allegoresis.

[39] For good discussions, see, e.g., Babut 1969: 155–57; Hani 1976: 206–7; Bernard 1990: 210–11 and, most recently, Simonetti 2017: 52–55.

[40] *Od*. 3.1 is quoted with ἀπόρουσε in lieu of ἀνόρουσε.

[41] For a justification of the conjectural σύμβολον καί, see Schröder 1990: 279–80.

[42] Opsomer 2006: 150 aptly observes that this interpretation reveals a "conception théologique teintée d'immanentisme," which is reflected in the "tendance à mêler la divinité aux réalités matérielles et terrestres." Stoic immanentism results in a theology that confuses physical images of the divine (e.g., the sun) with the divinity itself (see further Roskam 2006 and Hirsch-Luipold 2016).

Plutarch begins his discussion (32.363D) with the "simplest"[43] interpretations that have been offered by those who say something "more philosophical" (φιλοσοφώτερον), upon which he illustrates this approach with the examples of Greeks who "allegorically interpret" (ἀλληγοροῦσι) Cronos as "time" (χρόνος) and Egyptians who similarly identify Osiris with the "Nile." That Plutarch is sharply critical of such jejune equations and favors more philosophically elaborate explanations is evident already in the next chapter, where he speaks approvingly (33.364A) of the "wiser" (σοφώτεροι) of the priests who do not content themselves with merely identifying Osiris with the Nile, but more sophisticatedly interpret Osiris as the general "principle" (ἀρχή) and "power" (δύναμις) of moisture. What Plutarch appreciates about such more refined explanations is that they rise above the level of trivial equations in which the gods are simply (deified) physical objects (Osiris = the Nile). These subtler interpretations elevate the deities from the level of particular natural phenomena (the Egyptian river) to the more general level of metaphysical laws of nature (the principle of moisture). Nevertheless, this approach is still far too materialistic for a Platonist, as it remains in basic agreement with Presocratic physics. This is made clear in chapter 34, where Plutarch turns to the celestial boats and attributes (364C–D) the following view to the Egyptians:

> They say that the Sun and the Moon do not use chariots but boats as vehicles to traverse their courses, thus hinting enigmatically at their nourishment and origin from moisture (αἰνιττόμενοι τὴν ἀφ' ὑγροῦ τροφὴν αὐτῶν καὶ γένεσιν). They think also that Homer, like Thales, had learned [this] from the Egyptians when he posited water as the principle and origin of all things (ὕδωρ ἀρχὴν ἁπάντων καὶ γένεσιν τίθεσθαι); for [according to them] Oceanus is Osiris and Tethys is Isis, since she is the one nursing and nourishing everything together (ὡς τιθηνουμένην πάντα καὶ συνεκτρέφουσαν).

While in Plutarch's eyes a great deal of Egyptian theology is very much like Presocratic physics, this type of approach is here illustrated with the example of Thales. Plutarch's account of the Milesian philosopher derives presumably from Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, where the same terminology is employed (A

[43] The original ἁπλουστάτους is often taken to convey a more or less positive assessment: "most perspicuous" (Babbitt 1936: 77), "più chiari" (Cilento 1962: 59 and, recently, Lelli 2017: 679), "most lucid" (Griffiths 1970: 167), etc. However, Bernard 1990: 219 with n447 has persuasively argued that it connotes a decidedly negative evaluation, which is why he translates it as "Einfachsten" (following in this Hopfner 1941: 16). The same point has been made by Richter 2001: 204, who likewise emphasizes that Plutarch distances himself from the Stoics' "simplistic" physical allegoresis (see also Richter 2011: 222).

3.983b24–25 = DK 11 A 12) to characterize water as the principle from which all things originate.[44] Also, it is noteworthy that in his discussion of Thales' hydromonism the Stagirite provides us with the oldest testimony on the controversy over Homer's originality. Aristotle mentions further (983b27–31) the "very ancient" (παμπάλαιοι) theologians who made Oceanus and Tethys the "parents of generation" (γενέσεως πατέρες). While this is a clear reference to Homer, who describes (*Il.* 14.201) Oceanus as the "origin of the gods" (θεῶν γένεσις) and Tethys as the "mother" (μήτηρ), there has been a long tradition of allegorists deriving Thales' first principle from this Homeric passage.[45] Plutarch's Egyptians fit well in the picture: the primeval waters, which give rise to all rivers and seas, are the Egyptian Osiris, who corresponds to the Greek Oceanus.[46]

Plutarch, a convinced Platonist, brings together the first poet, the first philosopher and the Egyptian priests because from his perspective all these doctrines, for all their insights, are but a form of materialism, which assumes that the divine in one way or another originates from and/or is reducible to water (i.e., matter). The point is strengthened when somewhat later the Stoics are also included in the considerations. In chapter 40, Plutarch observes (367C = *SVF* 2.1093) that the account of the Egyptian gods as cosmic forces is "similar to the theological doctrines of the Stoics" (ὅμοια τοῖς ὑπὸ τῶν Στωικῶν θεολογουμένοις). The similarity lies in that the gods are identified with various physical objects and natural phenomena. Plutarch refers here (ibid.) to the famous Stoic doctrine that the *pneuma* "pervades" (διῆκον) the whole of the universe, adopting different names in accordance with its distinct powers (see, e.g., Alex. Aphrod. *De mixt.* 216.14–17 = *SVF* 2.473 and Diog. Laert. 7.147 = *SVF* 2.1021). From Plutarch's perspective, this materialist theology inevitably leads to atheism, for when the divine is conflated with the physical world (as "permeating" it), then the divine is contaminated by matter and, thereby, subject to change and decay. This, on the other hand, means

[44] See Hershbell 1986: 179; for a recent discussion of Aristotle's source(s), see Barney 2012.

[45] See Buffière 1956: 87.

[46] On the coalescence of Osiris and Nun, see Griffiths 1970: 428–29. The identification of Tethys with Isis, on the other hand, can be juxtaposed with the testimony of Diodorus Siculus (1.12.5), who relates that "moisture" (τὸ ὑγρόν) was called by the Egyptians Oceanê, that is, "nourishing mother" (τροφὴ μήτηρ), whereas the Greeks took moisture to be Oceanus, whom the poet presents as θεῶν γένεσις and Tethys as the μήτηρ (see above). Thus, as Hopfner 1941: 160 and Hani 1976: 148 astutely point out, Oceanê corresponds to Naunet, who is the female counterpart of Nun.

that the concept of the divine is abrogated altogether.[47] That is precisely why in chapter 66 Plutarch quotes (377D–E = *SVF* 1.547) Cleanthes' reduction of Persephone to the "*pneuma* that is carried (φερόμενον) through the crops and [then] dissolved (φονευόμενον)" as an illustration of "dreadful" (δειναί) and "atheistic" (ἄθεοι) opinions. Plutarch's point is that the divine must be clearly distinguished from all its phenomenal manifestations (the sun, earth, crops, etc.) or it is corrupted and abolished. Hence, the Stoics' physical allegoresis (gods = material realities) has preposterous and blasphemous implications: the expressions of the divine are mistaken for the divinity itself.

The divine can be found in a myriad of forms: from physical objects (e.g., the sun) to Egyptian symbols (e.g., the sun boat). What has to be borne in mind is that these are merely images or hints, for in the corporeal world the divine manifests itself symbolically. Thus, these sensible clues must not be worshipped, as through them the divine is only to be discovered. Egyptian symbols illustrate this perfectly: they can be useful if interpreted allegorically, but ultimately their value is limited. Such symbols as the lotus flower or the sun boat can guide the soul towards the divine, but they may also lead the soul astray to impiety (e.g., if interpreted according to materialist theology). From Plutarch's perspective, the entire Egyptian religion is only a partial manifestation of the truth: the "Platonic" section of the treatise (48–64) makes it clear that the philosophical approach is superior when it comes to knowledge of the divine. The non-Platonic accounts (whether Egyptian or Greek) play solely a heuristic role in our understanding of divinity, since apart from scattered half-truths and partially correct insights, they also contain misleading distortions and outright falsehoods. This is spectacularly evident in several of Plutarch's harsh criticisms of Egyptian religion. Suffice it to mention here his severe castigation of Egyptian myths for such outrageous elements as dismemberments or decapitations of the gods (20.358E), or his flat rejection of the Egyptian practice of animal worship (71.379D–72.380C). While Plutarch is very careful not to undermine the ascendancy of Greek philosophy over the Egyptian cult, a completely different approach is championed by Iamblichus.

Iamblichus's metaphysical allegoresis

The symbols that concern us here are discussed by Iamblichus in Book 7 of *De mysteriis*.[48] The discussion forms part of a much larger investigation into

[47] See, e.g., Babut 1969: 146–47, 382–88, 453–57; Hani 1976: 158–61; Froidefond 1988: 88; Bernard 1990: 221–22; Opsomer 2014: 91–92 and Hirsch-Luipold 2016: 27–28.

[48] The importance of this book for understanding Iamblichus's project has been rightly emphasized by Shaw 1995 (e.g., 21–23), who also offers an excellent discussion of Iamblichus's allegoresis of the Egyptian symbols (at 172–73).

two related questions: (1) how can fully descended souls communicate with divinity when they are imprisoned in a material body and the deity is utterly incorporeal and transcendent? (2) what kind of discourse is most appropriate for conveying the divine mysteries? Iamblichus has Abamon propose a solution (7.1.249.11–250.9) that involves having recourse to the type of theology practiced by the Egyptians:

> For these [people], imitating (μιμούμενοι) the nature of the universe and the demiurgic activity of the gods, display certain images (εἰκόνας τινάς) of mystical, arcane and invisible intellections through symbols (διὰ συμβόλων), just as nature has stamped the invisible principles in visible forms through certain symbolic mode (διὰ συμβόλων τρόπον τινά), and the demiurgic activity of the gods has indicated the truth of the forms in manifest images (διὰ τῶν φανερῶν εἰκόνων). Perceiving, then, that all superior beings rejoice in the inferiors' becoming like [them] and wish to fill them with goods, insofar as it is possible through imitation (διὰ τῆς κατὰ τὸ δυνατὸν μιμήσεως), it is reasonable that they should proffer the mode that is appropriate to the mystical doctrine concealed in symbols (ἐν τοῖς συμβόλοις).

Given the ontological chasm between the almighty gods and helpless mortals, salvation must come from a higher power and through a proper medium. The above passage suggests that the much-needed assistance can be obtained from Egyptian religion, which employs various powerful symbols.[49] While these originate with the gods, Iamblichus ascribes two functions to Egyptian symbols. First, they put the divine into terms accessible to men. This is why Abamon says that Egyptian symbols make it possible for human beings to acquire some notion of the "mystical, arcane and invisible." The idea that symbols describe for men the otherwise indescribable permeates the entire *De mysteriis*. In Book 1, for example, we read (21.65.7–9) that "through secret symbols" (διὰ συμβόλων ἀπορρήτων) the "ineffable" (ἄφθεγκτα) is expressed, the "formless" (ἀνειδέα) is given form and that which is "superior to every

[49] Saffrey 1993: 155 aptly stresses that in Book 7 Iamblichus's response to Porphyry's challenges consists in demonstrating that Egyptian theology is "une théologie symbolique." Groundbreaking work on Iamblichus's account of the symbol has been done by Struck 2004: 204–26. For other very useful analyses, see, e.g., Müri 1976: 33–34; Nasemann 1991: 129–30, 203–4; Charles-Saget 1993: 110–12; Shaw 1995: 110–11, 162–71; Finamore 1999: 92–93; Clarke 2001: 25–28, 101–2; Edwards 2006: 141–42 and Addey 2014: 30–32, 115–17. Iamblichus's account of the symbol owes a great deal to the *Chaldean Oracles* and the *Hermetica*, but this issue lies outside the scope of this paper (see, e.g., Nasemann 1991: 129–30; Shaw 1995: 162–65; Clarke 2001: 25–26 and Struck 2004: 215–17 with further references).

image" (πάσης εἰκόνος κρείττονα) is presented in images. This account of the symbol is typically Platonic: similarly to Plutarch, Iamblichus views symbols as sensible images that make knowledge of the imperceptible possible. However, Abamon also insists that symbols need to be of specific origin: symbols cannot be arbitrary or they will not fulfill their salvific function.[50] Thus, Iamblichus turns to *Egyptian* symbols and states in no uncertain terms that it is these symbols that provoke divine intervention. In the above passage, Abamon says that the "superior beings" (i.e., gods) delight in seeing the "inferior" (i.e., Egyptian priests) imitate their δημιουργία and bestow good things upon them. While the human imitation of the gods' demiurgic activity consists in performing appropriate interpretations of Egyptian symbols, Iamblichus illustrates this with what he terms (7.2.250.11) the "intellectual interpretation" (νοερὰ διερμήνευσις) of Egyptian symbolism. His interpretation ingeniously combines various Platonic, Egyptian, and Chaldean elements.

Abamon begins his exposition (250.13–14) with a discussion of "mud" or "slime" (ἰλύς), which the Egyptians identified with the primeval waters (i.e., Nun), but which he takes to represent all that is "corporeal" (σωματοειδές), "material" (ὑλικόν), "nutritive" (θρεπτικόν) and so on.[51] Thus, Iamblichus allegorizes mud as matter: the fertilizing nature of slime makes it a fitting symbol for the primordial "cause" (αἴτιον) and pre-established "foundation" (πυθμήν) of the elements (251.3–5). This is then contrasted (251.5–13) with the "transcendent" (ὑπερέχων) god who is characterized as, among other things, "immaterial" (ἄυλος), "incorporeal" (ἀσώματος), "separate" (χωριστός), and "elevated" (μετέωρος) above everything. While the ontological gulf between this intelligible divinity and the sensible world requires an intermediary, it is here that the lotus flower and the sun boat come into the picture. Abamon puts forward (251.14–252.15) the following interpretation of these two:

[50] In his pioneering study on the history of the term σύμβολον, Müri 1976: 33 has aptly emphasized the revolutionary nature of Iamblichus's view of the symbol: "Es ist nicht mehr Willkür – wie in der stoischen Allegorese –, wenn in den kultischen Riten letzte Weisheit gesucht wird. Denn wer hier deutet und versteht, geht den Weg zurück, den die symbola, vom Anfangspunkte herfließend, ihm öffnen."

[51] Hermias (*In Phdr*. 77.18–20) identified Ilium with the "generated and enmattered region" (γενητὸς καὶ ἔνυλος τόπος), deriving the name "Ilium" from "mud" (ἰλύς) and "matter" (ὕλη) (translation by Baltzly and Share 2018: 128). This interpretation must have been inspired by Iamblichus (see, e.g., Friedl 1936: 103), who, in turn, presumably alluded to Plato's "mud" (πηλός) of Hades (*Resp*. 363d6–7) and "mire" (βόρβορος) for the uninitiated (*Phd*. 69c5–6).

> For "sitting on a lotus" hints enigmatically at transcendency over the mud (ὑπεροχήν τε ὑπὲρ τὴν ἰλὺν αἰνίττεται), such as in no way touches the mud, and also indicates intellectual and empyrean leadership (ἡγεμονίαν νοερὰν καὶ ἐμπύριον ἐπιδείκνυται). For everything to do with the lotus is seen to be circular (κυκλοτερῆ), both the forms of the leaves and the appearance of the fruit, and it is the circular (κατὰ κύκλον) motion that is uniquely connatural with the activity of intellect (νοῦ ἐνέργεια), which manifests itself consistently in one order and according to one principle. And the god is established by himself (ἵδρυται καθ' ἑαυτόν), and beyond such leadership and activity (ὑπὲρ τὴν τοιαύτην ἡγεμονίαν καὶ ἐνέργειαν), venerable and holy (σεμνὸς καὶ ἅγιος), entirely simple (ὑπερηπλωμένος) and abiding in himself (μένων ἐν ἑαυτῷ), which his sitting is intended to signify (σημαίνειν). And "sailing in a boat" represents the sovereignty that governs the world (τὴν διακυβερνῶσαν τὸν κόσμον ἐπικράτειαν παρίστησιν). Just as, therefore, the helmsman, being separate (χωριστός) from the ship, presides over its rudder, so the sun separately (χωριστῶς) presides over the helm of the whole world.[52] And as the helmsman directs everything from on high (ἄνωθεν) at the stern, giving out the first minimal principle of movement from himself, thus also, but by a much greater priority, the god from on high (ἄνωθεν) gives out, indivisibly, from the first principles of nature, the primordial causes of motions.

Iamblichus identifies the god sitting on a lotus with the transcendent ruler of the physical world: the Demiurge governs the material cosmos (the "mud"), while remaining elevated above it. The god's rule is characterized as "intellectual and empyrean," which clearly echoes the *Chaldean Oracles*.[53] The lotus provides a link between this immaterial divinity and the material cosmos. Following a well-established Platonic tradition (see, e.g., Pl. *Ti.* 47b5–c4 or Plot. *Enn*. 2.2.1), Iamblichus interprets the circularity of the lotus as symbolizing the motion of the heavens and the motion of the Intellect (see also below). That the god is seated on the lotus is taken to signify various attributes of the Demiurge: supremacy, sanctity, simplicity, and immutability. While these are cast in such unmistakably Platonic terms as "abiding in himself" (see, e.g., *Ti.*

[52] Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: 295 render the sentence differently: "Just as the helmsman presides over the ship while taking charge of its rudder, so the sun is transcendently in charge of the helm of the whole world." This rendition omits the phrase χωριστὸς ὢν τῆς νεώς, which highlights the analogy between the helmsman's being separate from the ship and the sun's being separate from the world. Other translations preserve it: "being separate from the ship" (Taylor 1821: 287); "being apart from the ship" (Wilder 1911: 253); "vom Schiffe unabhängig und getrennt" (Hopfner 1922: 163); "en restant distinct du navire" (des Places 1966: 190); "restando distinto dalla nave" (Sodano 1984: 206), and so on.

[53] For ἐμπύριος, see, e.g., Fr. 2 or 165 and for νοερός, see, e.g., Fr. 3 or 37 (ed. Majercik).

42e5–6) or "being venerable and holy" (see, e.g., *Soph.* 249a1–2), a particularly important appropriation of Plato's imagery is that of the "helmsman," for it provides a smooth transition to the other symbol: the god's sailing in his boat. In *Politicus* 272d6–273e4, god is the κυβερνήτης who holds the helm of the whole world and saves the ship of the universe from destruction.[54] Iamblichus combines this Platonic image of the divine helmsman with the Egyptian symbol of the sun god riding in the boat: the solar deity is, again, the ruler of the world, the barque denotes the cosmos and the god's sailing in it is interpreted as symbolizing such qualities of the Demiurge as his leadership, sovereignty and priority. Thus, the god riding in the solar boat represents how the Demiurge governs the world, but at the same time remains separate and distinct from it.

It is noteworthy that Iamblichus associates the Demiurge with the Sun: Helios holds the helm of the whole universe and illuminates it. This divine light connects the transcendent deity with the physical world below: though elevated above all matter, Helios sheds his light upon the lower realm. This illumination awakens human souls and makes their ascent to the gods possible. The anagogical power of divine light symbolized here by the solar deity is frequently emphasized in *De mysteriis*. Thus, for example, in Book 1, Iamblichus says (12.41.4–6) that when the gods "shine [their] light" (φῶς ἐπιλάμπουσιν) upon the theurgists, they "summon up" (ἀνακαλούμενοι) their souls and "lead" (χορηγοῦντες) them to union with themselves.[55] While this idea of divine illumination underlies the entire project of theurgy, it is also relevant for understanding Abamon's emphasis on the lotus's circularity (7.2.252.2: κυκλοτερῆ and 252.4: κατὰ κύκλον).[56]

We know that Iamblichus viewed the circle (κύκλος) as an image of the Intellect (νοῦς). Proclus reports (*In Ti.* 2.72.13–19 = Dillon Fr. 49) him to have associated the soul's circularity with its assimilation to the Intellect:

> our vehicle (ὄχημα) is made spherical (σφαιρικόν), and is moved in a circle (κυκλικῶς), whenever the soul is especially assimilated to the Intellect (πρὸς

[54] Plutarch also alludes to this image (see, e.g., *De Iside* 45.369C, 66.377E, *Quaest. Plat.* 9.1008A) and Eusebius reports (*Praep. evang.* 11.18.24 = des Places Fr. 18) that Numenius employed the same image to describe the Demiurge (on which see Domaradzki 2020: 149 with n31).

[55] For excellent discussions of this "illumination downwards," see Finamore 1999: 87–88; 2013: 350–54 and 2018: 373–74. Also Nasemann 1991: 269–73 is very helpful.

[56] As has been persuasively argued by Shaw 1995: 56 and 173, who also brilliantly elucidates the correlation between the soul's circularity and noetic activity (see Shaw 1995: 89–92 and 2012: 97–98 as well as Sodano 1984: 352: "forme circolari del loto = attività intellettuale").

> τὸν νοῦν); for the intellection (νόησις) of the soul and the circular motion (κυκλοφορία) of bodies imitate the intellectual activity (τὴν νοερὰν ἐνέργειαν), even as the ascents and descents of souls motion in a straight line (κατ' εὐθεῖαν), for these are motions of bodies which are not in their proper places (ἐν τοῖς οἰκείοις τόποις).[57]

The spherical shape and circular motion of the vehicle mark the beginning of the soul's return to the pristine state prior to embodiment. Conversely, the soul's dissociation from the Intellect manifests itself in its loss of spherical shape and motion in a straight line. The linearity of ascents and descents signifies that the soul is not where it belongs (whether it is on its way to liberation from the body or to enslavement in it). In this aspect, the lotus flower symbolizes, then, the cycle of embodiment: while the mud in which the lotus grows stands for the matter in which the soul is imprisoned, it provides the foundation for the lotus to "blossom," that is, for the soul's gradual detachment from the body and its worldly concerns. Thus, the lotus's circularity hints enigmatically at the development of intellectual capacities and the soul's assimilation to the νοῦς (i.e., its liberation from the "mud" of embodiment).

Hence, according to Iamblichus's allegoresis, such Egyptian symbols as the lotus flower or the sun boat illustrate the basic tenets of Plato's philosophy. Most importantly, however, these symbols make it possible for human beings not only to comprehend the divine but also to unite with it. Throughout Book 7, Abamon consistently ascribes anagogical power to Egyptian symbols: his intellectual interpretation aims to show that these symbols elevate the soul to the gods. While this soteriological potential of barbarian sacred discourse is particularly emphasized in the celebrated discussion of "meaningless names" (ἄσημα ὀνόματα),[58] it is crucial to note that for Iamblichus mythical images like the lotus flower or the sun boat also awaken the soul to the gods.[59] Contrary to Plutarch, however, Iamblichus insists that to bring about the ascent of the soul and its union with the gods, the symbols must be of specific origin.

THE VALUE OF EGYPTIAN SYMBOLS

Although both Plutarch and Iamblichus share Plato's respect for Egypt (see, e.g., *Phdr*. 274c5–275b4, *Phlb*. 18b6–d2, *Ti*. 21c2–22b8, *Plt*. 290d6–e3, *Leg*.

[57] Translation (slightly modified) by Dillon 1973: 153. While Finamore 1985 offers the most exhaustive discussion of Iamblichus's theory of the vehicle of the soul, important work on Iamblichus's doctrine of the soul has also been done by Steel 1978: 21–75.

[58] At 7.4.256.1–2, for example, Iamblichus says that through these names "we elevate" (ἀνάγομεν) our soul to the gods and "connect" (συνάπτομεν) with them.

[59] As has been rightly noted by Finamore 1999: 92n30 and Struck 2004: 226.

656d1–657b8, 799a1–b8, 819a8–d3), their approaches to Egyptian symbols differ immensely: for Plutarch Egyptian symbols are accidental to salvation, whereas for Iamblichus they are essential to it.

Plutarch's position emerges as a curious mixture of universalism and Hellenocentrism. On the one hand, Plutarch firmly believes that all names, symbols, myths, and rites are merely sensible hints at the divine, since divinity transcends language, nation, and culture. On the other hand, however, he is also profoundly convinced that everything valuable can ultimately be traced back to the Greeks, and what cannot be assimilated into his Hellenic perspective needs to be discarded as barbaric. Thus, in an important passage of *De Iside*, Plutarch observes first (67.377F–378A) that the gods should not be thought of as different among different peoples (i.e., "barbarian" *vs* "Greek"), for just as the sun or heaven are "common to all" (κοινὰ πᾶσιν), though variously named by various nations, so the one "reason" (λόγος) and the one "providence" (πρόνοια) are differently honored and addressed among different peoples. Plutarch's idea that distinct names refer to the same theological reality is—as Robbert M. van den Berg acutely points out—highly reminiscent of *Cratylus* 389d4–390a8, where it is suggested that Greek and barbarian names may be in fact equally correct.[60] However, this—*sit venia verbo*—"ecumenical" position is immediately qualified, as Plutarch further notes (67.378A) that while different peoples use different symbols for the purpose of guiding the thought "towards the divine" (ἐπὶ τὰ θεῖα), this carries within itself the danger of either "superstition" (δεισιδαιμονία) or "atheism" (ἀθεότης). This qualification is consistent with everything that has been said above about Plutarch's approach to the entire Egyptian cult: names, symbols, myths, and rites are sensible clues that have the potential of leading the soul towards the divine, but they may also allure the soul away from it. In the latter case, the misguidance of the cult may result either in irrationality (as when individuals mistake shallow ritualism for piety and equate the cult with the divinity) or in irreligiousness (as when individuals see the emptiness of unreflective rituals but reject not only the cult but all divinity as well). This is why, to steer clear of the two extremes, one must—as Plutarch further urges (68.378A)—take the λόγος of philosophy as a "guide into the mysteries" (see above). This μυσταγωγός enables us to recognize the extent to which the Egyptian cult points to the divine and prevents us from uncritically accepting it. However, the guidance of philosophy takes not only the form of rationalization of the Egyptian cult but also of its Hellenization.

[60] Van den Berg 2008: 48.

Plutarch's appropriative agenda becomes spectacularly visible in his attempts to derive various names of the Egyptian gods from the Greek language (see, e.g., 2.351F–352A or 61.375D–376A).[61] In the course of doing so, Plutarch not only argues for the superiority of Greek culture over Egyptian but at times also completely dismisses the value and importance of barbarian nomenclature. Thus, for example, he asserts (61.376A) that "there is very little (ἥκιστα) need to indulge in rivalry (φιλοτιμεῖσθαι) with regard to these names," for ultimately both the Egyptian and Greek names refer to the same deity. This position is fiercely opposed by Iamblichus, who strongly insists that the gods have their cherished names, symbols, and rites, and that these are not Greek.[62]

In *De mysteriis* 7.4–5, Iamblichus hails the Egyptian cult as the model for all types of worship on the grounds of its antiquity. Thus, he has Abamon state (258.3–4) that since the Egyptians were the first to have been allotted "participation with the gods" (μετουσία τῶν θεῶν), the gods "rejoice" (χαίρουσι) in their rites.[63] While Abamon pleads (256.3–257.14) that the discourse of such "sacred peoples" (ἱερῶν ἐθνῶν) as the Egyptians and the Assyrians[64] be recognized as superior to that of the Greeks, his plea attests that this was a point of contention among the Platonists. Porphyry, for example, does not believe that there is a culture that has a privileged access to the divine. For him, as Iamblichus laments (257.1–2), what matters is not which particular language is used but rather that the "conception" (ἔννοια) remains the same. Thus, Porphyry, similarly to Plutarch, refuses to favor any particular nomenclature: the gods have no linguistic preferences, since the divine is elevated above all ethnic categories.[65] Abamon, on the other hand, flatly repudiates (257.3–6) the view that all names have been established "by convention" (κατὰ συνθήκην) and maintains that as the barbarian divine names "are conjoined with the nature of [real] beings" (τῇ φύσει συνήρτηται τῶν ὄντων), they are "better adapted" (μᾶλλον … προσεοικότα) and, therefore, "more dear"

[61] See the excellent discussion by Richter 2001 (esp. 195–202) and 2011 (esp. 214–21). For a recent support of Richter's account, see Roskam 2014: 233.

[62] Iamblichus's position has received substantial scholarly attention: see, e.g., the highly illuminating analyses by Shaw 1995: 3–8, 179–88; Struck 2002: 387–403 and Athanassiadi 2006: 155–62.

[63] Iamblichus's conviction of the antecedence of Egyptian wisdom underlies also Book 8, on which see, for example, Fowden 1993: 136–41; Edwards 2006: 142–44 and, especially, Clark 2008: 164–205.

[64] i.e., Chaldeans (see, e.g., Hopfner 1922: vii, 194, 254; Clarke 2001: 10 and Clarke, Dillon, and Hershbell 2003: 9n12 with further references); see also n73 below.

[65] Interestingly, van den Berg 2008: 75 has cogently argued that also Porphyry's position about etymologies of divine names "resembles that of a Middle Platonist such as Plutarch."

(προσφιλέστερα) to the gods. While *De mysteriis* glorifies barbarian discourse as the very language of the gods, from Iamblichus onwards Neoplatonic theurgists will have to answer the question whether the gods should be invoked by their Greek or foreign names.

Proclus, for example, agrees with Abamon on the indispensability of theurgy but is less committed to the superiority of barbarian sacred discourse. His *Commentary on the Cratylus*, for instance, transmits a doctrine that in this respect somewhat departs from Iamblichus.[66] Thus, at § 57 (25.13–16) the unequivocal recommendation is that "the Greeks need not (οὐ δεῖ) use Egyptian, Scythian or Persian but Greek names of the gods, for the rulers of the [various] regions (κλιματάρχαι) rejoice (χαίρουσι) when named in the languages of their proper lands." Furthermore, at § 71 (32.5–12) it is clarified that while different peoples "partake of" (μετέχουσιν) the divine names in different ways, each of such distinct names must be recognized as a "product of the gods" (ἔγγονος … τῶν θεῶν) that indicates the same "essence" (οὐσία).[67] Evidently, this position is closer to that of Plutarch and Porphyry: for all these Platonists the divine has been revealed in diverse languages, which is why it can be revered by diverse names. Iamblichus, on the other hand, impugns the equivalence of the Hellenic and barbarian sacred discourses: he has Abamon argue that the latter is far more powerful than the former.

On the whole, Iamblichus not only spurns Hellenocentrism, but also displays a fairly unique commitment to the value of barbarian culture.[68] Already the Middle Platonists had reinvigorated the old *topos* of the compatibility of ancient foreign traditions with Greek philosophy.[69] However, Iamblichus is

[66] The text is that of Pasquali 1908 and the translation (at times slightly modified) is that of Duvick 2007. It may not be superfluous to note here that Proclus's *Commentary on the Cratylus* has been preserved in the form of "useful extracts from the philosopher Proclus's scholia on Plato's *Cratylus*" (see the MSS title: ΕΚ ΤΩΝ ΤΟΥ ΦΙΛΟΣΟΦΟΥ ΠΡΟΚΛΟΥ ΣΧΟΛΙΩΝ ΕΙΣ ΤΟΝ ΚΡΑΤΥΛΟΝ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΕΚΛΟΓΑΙ ΧΡΗΣΙΜΟΙ). While this commentary is, then, a series of excerpts taken from the notes on Proclus's lecture, the identity of the student/compiler remains unknown (see, e.g., Pasquali 1908: vi; Duvick 2007: 3; van den Berg 2008: 94 and Abbate 2017: 50).

[67] For excellent discussions of Proclus's position, see, e.g., Shaw 1995: 182–83; van den Berg 2008: 154–55 and Abbate 2017: 112–13.

[68] Although occasionally he can be critical of the barbarians, on which see Burns 2014: 24.

[69] In his inspiring account of the development of the concept of *barbaros philosophia*, Stroumsa 1996: 345 rightly highlights the crucial importance of Numenius's "call to the East." It is worth noting here, though, that Numenius's "orientalism" should not be overemphasized, on which see Domaradzki 2020: 143n13 with further references.

prepared to push the argument about the priority of the barbarians quite far.[70] In *De vita Pythagorica*, for example, he has Thales reveal (2.12) to Pythagoras that the founder of Greek philosophy had received his wisdom from the priests at Memphis and Diospolis,[71] whereas Pythagoras is suggested (29.158) to owe geometry to Egypt, knowledge of numbers to Phoenicia, and astronomy to Egypt as well as Chaldea.[72] Similarly, in *De communi mathematica scientia*, Pythagorean mathematics is said (21.66.17–67.2) to have been inspired not only by Thales, but also by the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans.[73] Finally, in *De anima*, Iamblichus regularly favors the views of the ancients over those of Greek philosophers, Platonists and Pythagoreans included.[74] Suffice it to mention here his discussion (43.5–10) of the ends of purification: when criticizing those who "are not persuaded by the ancients" (οὐ πείθονται τοῖς ἀρχαιοτέροις), Iamblichus lumps together "many Platonists and Pythagoreans" (πολλοὶ Πλατωνικοὶ καὶ Πυθαγόρειοι) as erroneously emphasizing only the lower forms of purification.[75] All this shows that Iamblichus espouses a far more charitable view of barbarian wisdom than Plutarch.

It will not be an exaggeration to say that Iamblichus is a φιλοβάρβαρος in Plutarch's sense of the term (see *De Her. mal.* 12.857A). In *De mysteriis*, he has Abamon contend that the gods have chosen the Egyptians and other barbarians, to whom they have revealed their sacred names, symbols, and rites. These are not only antecedent to all others, but they also mirror the gods' δημιουργία. Iamblichus's entire project of θεουργία pivots on the assumption that there is a sacred ritual which—as Abamon clarifies in the first book of his lengthy reply to Anebo (21.65.4–5)—"imitates the order of the gods" (μιμεῖται δὲ τὴν τῶν θεῶν τάξιν). Importantly, this ritual not only employs symbols but is itself a symbol. Thus, the sacredness of barbarian (i.e., Egyptian and Assyrian/Chaldean) names, symbols, and rites derives from their unique ontological status: according to Abamon, they are extensions of the divine,

[70] On Iamblichus's systematic subordination of Greek philosophy to ancient revelation, see O'Meara 1989: 102 and 104.

[71] Staab 2002: 249n629 helpfully points out that Iamblichus's "Darstellung der Ausbildung bei Thales ist am Muster für die Lobrede orientiert." Maiullo 2010: 71, on the other hand, rightly stresses the connection between the idea that Greek philosophical knowledge begins with barbarian wisdom and the major premise of *De mysteriis*.

[72] See, e.g., Riedweg 2005: 25; Edwards 2006: 91 and Burns 2014: 24.

[73] See, e.g., Staab 2002: 252–53 and Riedweg 2005: 26. Incidentally, the phrasing παρ' αὐτοῖς (*sc.* Ἀσσυρίοις) λεγομένοις Χαλδαίοις shows that Iamblichus conflates the two (see also n64 above).

[74] See, e.g., Finamore and Dillon 2002: 14 with n33 and Burns 2014: 25.

[75] The text along with translation is that of Finamore and Dillon 2002.

which is why they are most suited for religious ceremonies and become the prototype for the salvific project of theurgy.

De mysteriis reflects an interesting shift in the concept of *askesis* in the post-classical period: away from the ideal of continual, slow and laborious progress towards virtue, and towards the notion of a more mystical, sudden revelatory experience of the divine.[76] Plutarch is very cautious about the possibility of reaching the divine in this world. Indeed, he says explicitly (78.382F) that the souls of men have no "participation with the god" (μετουσία τοῦ θεοῦ) as long as they are imprisoned in the body with all its passions. Plutarch admits the possibility of achieving some vision of the divine's presence through philosophy, but also believes that true contemplation can occur only after death.[77] Iamblichus, on the other hand, is far more optimistic, as he offers the theurgist the opportunity to rise above the merely human and become divine in the earthly realm. His soteriological project of θεουργία enables men—as Abamon famously puts it (4.2.184.1–6)—to "assume the mantle of the gods" (τὸ τῶν θεῶν σχῆμα περιτίθεσθαι). While this bridging of the rift between the human and the divine is achieved through decoding the sacred symbols,[78] Abamon specifies that these symbols must be non-Greek (see above).

Given his account of the genesis and purpose of barbarian discourse, it is understandable why Iamblichus vehemently repudiates (7.5.257.8–11) the idea of rendering any foreign names into Greek: when "translated" (μεθερμηνευόμενα) these sacred names lose not only their original "meaning" (διάνοια) but also their original "power" (δύναμις). Thus, Hellenization of barbarian discourse is wrong because its power is inextricably connected to its form. Towards the end of the book, Iamblichus similarly stresses (259.6–7) that also prayers lose their power, as they are modified through the "inventiveness" (καινοτομία) and "lawlessness" (παρανομία) of the Hellenes. As his salvific project builds on the idea that certain cultures have a privileged access to the divine, Abamon harshly condemns those philosophers who (like Plutarch or

[76] I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out to me. On Iamblichus's transformation of the philosophical practice of *askesis*, see, e.g., the classic study by Hadot 2002: 170–71. Athanassiadi 2006: 150 aptly stresses that from Iamblichus onwards the concept of divine revelation becomes "la pierre de touche de la nouvelle religiosité."

[77] See Frazier 2017: 198–200, who also helpfully compares Plutarch's position with that of the Neoplatonists.

[78] This passage is a prime example of Iamblichus's interchangeable use of the terms σύνθημα (184.4) and σύμβολον (184.9). On the synonymy of the two terms in Iamblichus, see, e.g., Müri 1976: 34; Nasemann 1991: 129 with n39 and, especially, Struck 2004: 211, 218–24, who also brilliantly discusses other passages in which Iamblichus ascribes to symbols the transformative power of bringing the theurgist on the divine plane.

Porphyry) think that names, prayers, symbols, and rites are conventional and therefore essentially interchangeable from culture to culture. Accordingly, he concludes with the diagnosis (259.7–13) that the Greeks have lost contact with the gods through the flaws of their national character: the Hellenes "by nature" (φύσει) are "innovative" (νεωτεροποιοί), which is why they remold everything "in accordance with [their] unresting linguistic ingenuity" (κατὰ τὴν ἄστατον εὑρεσιλογίαν), whereas the barbarians are "constant" (μόνιμοι) in their customs and remain "steadfastly" (βεβαίως) with the same words, which is why they are "dear" (προσφιλεῖς) to the gods.

From his Egyptophile perspective, Iamblichus castigates the Greeks for their variability and insatiable taste for novelty, which he contrasts sharply with the stability and faithfulness of the Egyptians and other barbarians. Abamon's censure of the Hellenes for their being addicted to innovation echoes Plato's criticisms of the Greeks' craving for novelties (see, e.g., *Leg*. 656d1–657b8 or 797a7–c9). Iamblichus adduces this philosophical *topos*, as he joins the common debate on the appropriateness of translating the sacred discourse (see, e.g., *Or. Chald.* Fr. 150 or Orig. *C. Cels.* 1.24–25). It is therefore important to note here that Abamon's condemnation is leveled not only against Porphyry. Indeed, Polymnia Athanassiadi has convincingly argued that Iamblichus targets rather "toute une 'école' d'intellectuels."[79] Thus, Porphyry merely personifies the broader trend of Hellenization and the sort of cultural appropriation that thinkers like Plutarch indulge in. Iamblichus has Abamon diagnose that it is precisely because of such misguided practices that Greek customs and cult have lost their power: the barbarians, on the other hand, protect their cultural foundation, which is why they are close to the gods. Although it cannot be proved that Iamblichus engages here in a direct polemic with Plutarch, it cannot be ruled out completely either.[80] Undoubtedly, Plutarch's dismissal of the significance of barbarian nomenclature and his willingness to substitute Greek names for Egyptian ones (see above) are hardly palatable for Iamblichus. Also, it is very telling that Plutarch offers a diametrically opposed assessment of the Egyptians' nature. When criticizing Egyptian zoolatry, he observes (72.380A) that the Egyptians "by nature" (φύσει) are "light-hearted" (κοῦφοι) and "easily prone to change and innovation" (πρὸς μεταβολὴν καὶ νεωτερισμὸν ὀξύρροποι). Thus, while Iamblichus considers the Greeks to be

[79] Athanassiadi 2006: 156–57.

[80] Maiullo 2010: 205 seems more confident, as he observes that Plutarch's position "certainly stuck in Iamblichus' craw" (see also ibid., 207). Athanassiadi 2006: 155–57 speaks more cautiously of "les Modernes," whom she identifies with "les hérétiques du platonisme" (at 180–81).

all too "innovative" (νεωτεροποιοί) by nature, Plutarch finds "innovation" (νεωτερισμός) to be the national flaw of the Egyptians. These divergent appraisals of the Egyptians' character sit well with the contrasting evaluations of Egyptian symbols that the two Platonist priests put forward.

CONCLUSIONS

We can now return to the two questions posed at the beginning of this paper: (1) why do Plutarch and Iamblichus subject the same Egyptian symbols to different allegorical treatment? and (2) what is the discrepancy between the two interpretations indicative of?

With regard to the first question, we should note that the two Platonists ascribe different values to Egyptian symbols. For Plutarch, symbols basically have a heuristic function: they can guide the soul towards the divine, but they can also allure away from it. Thus, Plutarch interprets the lotus flower and the sun boat "physically," as he discovers an essential similarity between these symbols and the theological doctrines of the Stoics. From his perspective, Egyptian symbols can be useful when they are examined critically and philosophically. However, they may also lead the soul astray to impiety when they are construed according to materialist theology. Iamblichus, on the other hand, interprets the lotus flower and the sun boat "metaphysically," as he reveals their basic agreement with the major tenets of Neoplatonic philosophy. For him, these symbols have an anagogical power: they can awaken the soul and elevate it to the gods because they are direct extensions of the highest reality. However, barbarian (i.e., Egyptian and Assyrian/Chaldean) symbols can unite human beings with the divine only if they are not tampered with. Thus, while Plutarch eagerly Hellenizes Egyptian sacred discourse, Abamon strongly objects to its sacredness being defiled by Hellenization. All in all, then, Plutarch views Egyptian symbols as accidental to salvation, whereas Iamblichus insists that barbarian symbols instantiate the divine discourse and are, therefore, essential to the soteriological project of theurgy.

With regard to the second question, we should observe that the discrepancy between the allegorical interpretations offered by the two Platonist priests points to a major change in the view of the role of (Greek) philosophy and (Egyptian) ritual in one's pursuit of the divine. Both Plutarch and Iamblichus highlight priestly aspects of their identity, make claims to ritual expertise and contrast their sacerdotal authority with the ignorant masses. However, Plutarch is careful not to undermine the primacy of Greek philosophy over the Egyptian cult. His position uniquely combines universalism with Hellenocentrism: on the one hand, all names, symbols, myths, and rites are merely sensible hints at the divine (as divinity transcends language, nation, and culture), but, on the

other hand, everything valuable is traced back to the Hellenes (unacceptable myths or practices are simply dismissed as barbaric). Thus, Greek and Platonic philosophy is the benchmark against which Egyptian religion is scrutinized. Contrary to this, Iamblichus is more ecumenical: he seeks to harmonize Hellenic Platonism with Eastern religious traditions because he embraces a more favorable view of barbarian wisdom than Plutarch. Iamblichus adopts the guise of an Egyptian priest because from his barbarophilic perspective Eastern ritual practices and Greek philosophy perfectly complement each other. Hence, Plutarch's and Iamblichus's contrasting accounts of Egyptian symbols reflect a shift from contemplative to theurgic Platonism.

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