

LYCOPHRON ON IO AND ISIS

The Hellenistic poet Lycophron, who wrote tragedies and assembled the texts of comedy under Ptolemy Philadelphus for the Library at Alexandria, was probably also the author of the long poem *Alexandra*, which deals mainly with the theme of Troy.¹ Recent studies by Stephanie West² have appreciably advanced our understanding of this rather difficult poet. For the passages where Lycophron surprisingly presents phases of Roman history she cogently adduces a later poet, a ‘Deutero-Lycophron, ... to be sought among the artists of Dionysus in southern Italy’.³ A theme in Graeco-Egyptian mythology is the subject of the present paper; and one of my main points is that recent Egyptological research has a clear bearing on one of the problems.

I. THE ‘BULL-MAID GIRL’

Verses 1291–5 of the *Alexandra* give Cassandra’s account of how Io was kidnapped; and I append Dr West’s translation:

*Ολοιντο ναῦται πρῶτα Καρνῖται κύνες,
οἷ τὴν βοῶπιν ταυροπάρθενον κόρην
Λέρνης ἀνηρείψαντο, φορτηγοὶ λύκοι,
πλάτνι πορεύσαι κῆρα Μεμφίτη πρόμῳ,
ἔχθρας δὲ πυρρὸν ἦραν ὑπείροις διπλαῖς.

Ruin seize first the Carnite (Phoenician) sailor hounds, the merchant wolves, who carried off the ox-eyed bull-maid girl from Lerna to bring her as a fatal bride to the lord of Memphis, and raised the torch of hatred between the two continents.

In verse 1291 the adjective *βοῶπις* is Homeric; it is used of Hera (*Il.* 1.551), to whom cows were offered in Argos,⁴ as ‘cow-eyed’.⁵ Aeschylus, *PV* 588, calls Io *βούκερως παρθένος*, ‘the cow-horned maid’, and it is true that in both literature and art Io is often represented as a ‘cow-maid’ rather than as simply a cow,⁶ although Mark Griffith⁷ would date the mixed form ‘from the second half of the fifth century’. However, ‘cow-eyed and ‘cow-horned’ are perfectly understandable of a female who is either all cow or part-cow. To call her *ταυροπάρθενος* (Lycophron’s v. 1292), ‘bull-maid’, is a very different matter. Dr West refers to it as a ‘unique epithet’ and notes the censure of the scholiasts. Her explanation, if Io is still being referred to, is that Io is being characterized as a ‘virago’; but if Isis is now in the poet’s mind,

¹ See P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford, 1972), i.449–50; ii.1065–7 n. 331. Several matters are still debated.

² ‘Notes on the Text of Lycophron’, *CQ* 33 (1983), 114–35; ‘Lycophron Italicised’, *JHS* 104 (1984), 127–51; ‘Lycophron on Isis’, *JEA* 70 (1984), 151–4. Cf. also her remarks on ‘Io and the Dark Stranger’, *CQ* 34 (1984), 292–302, esp. 297.

³ *JHS* 104 (1984), 146.

⁴ Cf. Ruth I. Hicks, in *TAPA* 93 (1962), 93.

⁵ G. S. Kirk ad *Il.* 1.551 (Cambridge, 1985), 110f. rejects the theriomorphic suggestion, plain as it is, in favour of ‘with placid gaze, like that of a cow’ – evidently a blow in the cause of keeping the Greeks refined.

⁶ Ruth I. Hicks, op. cit. 95.

⁷ *Prometheus Vincit* (Cambridge, 1983), ad loc. p. 198. For her rare form as a bull see below n. 35.

another explanation becomes preferable, she argues, 'recalling the goddess's part in the procreation of Harpocrates'. Certainly there is an Egyptian text⁸ which portrays Isis as maintaining *I have played the part of a man though I am a woman*. Ingenious as this idea is, it seems doubtful whether in itself it can justify a switch from Io to Isis. The strange compound 'bull-maid', with its nexus of incompatibles, is not entirely without parallel. Debrunner⁹ refers to *ἀνδρόγυνος* with its meanings of 'hermaphrodite' or 'coward'. Even more relevant, perhaps, are the instances where the first of two substantives has a genitival force and form, as in *Διόσκουροι* and *ἄλοσάχνη* 'Meerschäum'.¹⁰ Debrunner shows that the genitival force can be present even when the first substantive has the form of the word's stem, as in the Homeric compounds *πατροκασίγνητος*, 'father's brother', *μητροπάτωρ*, 'mother's father', and *ἰστοπέδη*, 'mast's holder'. Whereas the equation and coexistence of the pair is more common, as in *ιατρόμαντις*, 'physician-seer' (i.e. a seer who is also a physician) and in *θεόταυρος*, 'god-bull', used by Moschus (2.135) of Zeus as a bull carrying Europa,¹¹ the genitival examples suffice to justify 'bull's maid' as the meaning of Lycophron's *ταυροπάρθεος*. His style has archaistic features,¹² and in this verse the compound has another Homeric compound – *βοῶπις* – immediately adjacent. Further, the revised sense is admirably suitable. Just as Zeus is the bull who impregnates Europa, he is also the bull who pursues Io. According to Aeschylus (*Supp.* 301 ed. D. L. Page) Zeus approached the horned cow (Io) 'in the fit likeness of a cow-mating bull'; yet when Io reaches Memphis, Zeus impregnates her with a touch of the hand (313), so that both bull and cow are now human in form although their offspring, Epaphus, is a young bull. Clearly an etymology of Epaphus is thus being served. Essentially Io in the form of a cow is his mother: she is the 'bull's maid'. It is also true of the late doctrine concerning Isis, though it is not included in Plutarch's myth: she becomes the mother of the bull Apis. Lycophron, if this is so, is still talking about Io, but Isis could also be in his mind.

II. ISIS AS THE MOTHER OF APIS

Apis and Epaphus seem both therefore to be implied by the myth invoked. Whereas Herodotus, a writer who much influenced Lycophron, is content (2.41) to equate the iconography of Isis and Io, he roundly declares (2.153) that 'Apis in Greek is Epaphus'. This identification is implied also in his description of the Apis bulls (2.38)¹³ and in further details given by him (3.28) about their distinctive qualities; here he uses the pointed expression *ὁ δὲ Ἀπὶς οὗτος ὁ Ἐπαφος*.

Jan Bergman¹⁴ remarked in 1968, in the course of a discussion of 'Isis and Apis', that the goddess's cow-form would make her an 'ideale Apismutter'. His idea has

⁸ P. Louvre 3079. For this and other references see my *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride* (Cardiff, 1970), 353; after reviving the dead Osiris, Isis is seen as activating sexual procreation. In Egyptian art she is shown as a falcon on the body of the dead god, reviving his male member; see my remarks, *ibid.* 495 and E. Otto (tr. K. B. Griffiths), *Egyptian Art and the Cults of Osiris and Amon* (London, 1968), pls. 17–20.

⁹ A. Debrunner, *Griechische Wortbildungslehre* (Heidelberg, 1917), 40, §82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 42, §85 and 34, §67.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 46, §94. The text has been queried: see W. Bühler, *Die Europa des Moschos* (Wiesbaden, 1960), 177–8, but the compound form was ably defended by Hans Herter in *Rh.M.* 100 (1957), 108.

¹² In *CQ* 33 (1983), 114 Dr West describes it as 'a sustained tribute to Aeschylus'.

¹³ On this divine equation see Alan B. Lloyd, *Herodotus Book II* (Leiden, 1976; EPRO 43), ii.171–2.

¹⁴ *Ich bin Isis* (Uppsala, 1968), 251.

been massively confirmed in recent years by excavations in North Saqqâra conducted by W. B. Emery and H. S. Smith. Many references were found, in relation to cow-burials, to *'Ist t' mwt n Hp*, 'Isis the Mother of Apis'.¹⁵ The inscriptions range in date from 393 to 41 B.C., beginning with the second year of the Pharaoh Hakoris (XXIXth Dynasty) and including short prayers to 'Isis the Mother of Apis'.¹⁶ The fullest discussion is that of H. S. Smith,¹⁷ who shows that the burial of the Isis-cows broadly followed the pattern observed in the burial of the Apis-bulls.¹⁸ In each case what was involved was the particular cow who was the mother of a particular Apis-bull.¹⁹ Every deceased Apis-bull was called an 'Osiris-Apis', and the question arises whether the appellation 'Isis Mother of Apis' had a similar force in indicating merely that the cow in question was dead.²⁰ The cases are not, however, strictly parallel since Osiris is never mentioned as the father of Apis. Moreover, each Mother of Apis, while alive, was given an individual name; Isis appears in some of these names, as in *'Ist-ršy*, 'Isis is joyful', from the time of Amasis (533 B.C.), although the names of other deities occur too.²¹

It follows that a writer who lived in Alexandria in the third century B.C. could hardly escape the impact of the cult of the bull Apis and his mother Isis; and Dr West might well seem justified, therefore, in reading Lycophron's account of Io and Epaphus as really reflecting their Egyptian prototypes.

III. THE ELUSIVE FATHER AND THE MEMPHITE LORD

Apis belongs to the oldest stratum of Egyptian deities, and yet we are never told in a clear mythological context who his father was. He has close associations with the god Ptah of Memphis and also with Osiris, but neither is usually represented as his father. His connection with Memphis is always paramount, and it is significant that Lycophron describes the mother of the bull being brought as a bride to the 'Memphite lord' (1294). Here the word *πρόμος* has a Homeric pedigree in the sense of *πρόμαχος*, but Sophocles, *OT* 660, leaves the military ambience when he talks of the sun as *πάντων θεῶν θεός πρόμος*. J. C. Kamerbeek (1967) remarks, 'of a god, an exceptional use'; but it is enough to keep the possibility open that the Memphite figure is not a king or military champion. In an Egyptian context, admittedly, the Pharaoh is divine, but the scholia prefer to think simply of the god Osiris – *ἐκόμισαν εἰς Αἴγυπτον τῷ Ὀσίριδι* – and both Carl von Holzinger and Stephanie West are prepared to settle for this, the latter not without a patient perusal of other possibilities. Further, the Greek myth has a god as the father of Epaphus – Zeus himself.

In the Egyptian tradition the 'Memphite lord', if a deity is intended, is undoubtedly Ptah, the anthropomorphic creator-god who presided over the royal residence in Memphis in the periods when it was a capital city. By the XXIIInd Dynasty he is

¹⁵ The first discoveries were made in 1966. See W. B. Emery and H. S. Smith in *JEA* 57 (1971), 3–13, esp. 9–12.

¹⁶ John D. Ray in *JEA* 57 (1971), 1.

¹⁷ 'Dates of the Obsequies of the Mothers of Apis', *Revue d'Égyptologie* 24 (1972), 176–87.

¹⁸ See Jean Vercoutter, *Textes Biographiques du Sérapéum de Memphis* (Paris, 1962); id. with M. Malinine and G. Posener, *Cat. des Stèles du Sérapéum de Memphis* (Paris, 1968).

¹⁹ Vercoutter gives details of the Apis-burials in *Lexikon der Ägyptologie* (1975), i.338–50. Cf. H. S. Smith, *A Visit to Ancient Egypt* (Warminster, 1974), 37–41; J. Gwyn Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros, The Isis-Book* (Leiden, 1975; EPRO 39), 208 and 220.

²⁰ H. S. Smith, *Revue d'Égyptologie* 24 (1972), 177 n. 5.

²¹ Ibid. 'Table of Cow Obsequies' (at end). Cf. id. *A Visit to Ancient Egypt*, 92: 'burial of the Cow Taese in years 3–5 of Alexander the Great', where the name means 'She of Isis'.

referred to as the father of Apis,²² although some of the allusions call for caution. When a scribe refers to the burial of Apis in the Serapeum 'at the side of his father and mother',²³ he is referring to the bull and cow that engendered this particular Apis-bull without any theological reference. Phrases which call Apis the manifestation (*ba*) or herald (*whm*) of Ptah might suggest sonship;²⁴ and a text of the XXIIInd Dynasty states of the dead Apis, 'He was brought to Memphis to his father Ptah'.²⁵ A close relationship with Osiris is likewise indicated by the phrases which designate Apis as the *ba* of Osiris²⁶ and those which link the two gods as Osiris-Apis and Apis-Osiris. But Osiris is not called the father of Apis.

If Apis and Epaphus are clearly the offspring of the 'bull's maid', it is not surprising that both Aeschylus and Herodotus, who are known to have influenced Lycophron, give prominence to this bull-deity. In his *Supplices* 260–70 Aeschylus presents King Pelasgus of Argos speaking about the 'Apian land' of which his territory is a part; its name, he says, comes from Apis, the physician and prophet, son of Apollo, who healed the land of many ills. There may be an echo here, however indirectly, of the tradition concerning Apis-Epaphus, son of Zeus and Io, of whom the suppliants are daughters.²⁷ The 'mere identity of name' was enough to establish a link between Argos and Egypt.²⁸ Aeschylus was of course very much absorbed with the whole saga of Io in the *Prometheus Vincitus* also, where Prometheus prophesies that the heifer-maid will end her roaming in Egypt; here she will bear to Zeus a son named Epaphus. In the *Supplices* 311 we are told how Io, when she arrived in Egypt, came to Canobus and to Memphis; in the *Prometheus*, however, 846ff., Canobus and not Memphis is the place at which Io is finally to arrive, giving birth there to Epaphus.²⁹ Lycophron follows the sequence of the *Supplices*.

Memphis is emphasized in Herodotus also. He refers (2.153) not only to Apis-Epaphus but also to the temple of Hephaestus (= Ptah) in that city; he describes too (3.27) the festival of the epiphany of Apis-Epaphus in Memphis at the time of the arrival of Cambyses, and in the following chapter (3.28; cf. 2.38) gives details of the distinctive marks of the Apis-bull. It is here that the rather elusive identity of the father of Apis becomes again apparent, for Herodotus tells of the strange tradition of a 'virgin birth': 'The Egyptians say that a light from heaven comes down upon the cow and that she gives birth to the Apis through this'; cf. Pomponius Mela, 1.9, *divinitus et caelesti igne conceptus*. According to Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 43, 368c, it was a light from the moon; cf. id. *Quaest. conv.* 8.1.3, 718a–b, 'by a touch of the moon'. Whereas Bonnet³⁰ describes all this as a late fiction, R. O. Faulkner³¹ believed that he could trace the idea back to an Egyptian text of the Middle Kingdom – two millennia

²² Maj Sandman Holmberg, *The God Ptah* (Lund, 1946), 197–8. E. Otto, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der Stierkulte in Ägypten* (Leipzig, 1938, repr. Hildesheim, 1964), 26, gives examples of the expression 'Apis, living son and herald of Ptah' from the XIXth Dynasty, but takes 'son' here as essentially a wrong interpretation of a determinative.

²³ Vercoutter, *Textes Biographiques du Sérapéum*, 110, R 4.

²⁴ H. Bonnet, *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (Berlin, 1952), 47.

²⁵ Sandman Holmberg, op. cit. 198.

²⁶ See my *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, 363–4 (on the Egyptian background) and 462–3 (on the reports by classical authors).

²⁷ Cf. J. T. Sheppard, in *CQ* 5 (1911), 227–8; A. F. Garvie, ad loc. (Cambridge, 1969), 71.

²⁸ Much later Clement of Alexandria gives Apis as the name of an Egyptian physician who went to Greece and also of an Argive king who settled in Memphis: see H. Friis Johansen and E. W. Whittle, *Aeschylus, The Suppliants* (Copenhagen, 1980), 211.

²⁹ See further, ibid. 253.

³⁰ Bonnet op. cit. (n. 24), 50.

³¹ *JEA* 54 (1968), 40–4, quoting *Coffin Texts*, ii.209a ff.

earlier. I have argued³² against his interpretation of this early text, which includes the statement that Isis is 'pregnant with the seed of her brother Osiris', thus envisaging a natural process and referring to the future birth of Harpocrates rather than Apis.

Lycophron clearly has Apis-Epaphus in mind, and his 'Memphite lord' must be a form of Ptah-Hephaestus. I therefore disagree with Dr West when she sees a reference in *ταυροπάρθεος* to 'the procreation of Harpocrates' – a god who has nothing to do with bulls. It is the procreation of Apis-Epaphus that is meant. Isis can now be regarded, as I have shown, as the Mother of Apis. I agree with Dr West, at the same time, that the expression 'fatal bride' may perhaps refer in some way to the death of Osiris, and the problem here is to explain how Ptah-Hephaestus is now supplanted by Osiris. The answer, surely, is in the tritheistic figure of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris which became very popular in Memphis from the XXIst Dynasty onwards (from c. 1070 B.C.). In this composite figure both Sokar and Osiris have funerary significance, and by the Ptolemaic era its iconography is dominantly Osirian. Forms in the New Kingdom exhibit some variety, giving emphasis now to Ptah, now to Sokar; but the Ptolemaic-Roman temples show Osiris as the basic figure.³³ Yet it is the Ptah component that supplies the father of Apis,³⁴ although it throws no light on the 'fatal bride'. In fact both Ptah himself and the developed Ptah-Sokar-Osiris are figures peculiarly immune to mythological accretion. If there is a missing myth lurking in the background, as Dr West suggests, it may well be of Greek rather than Egyptian origin and may concern Io rather than Isis. It seems that Lycophron is still holding on to the double reference.

IV. A RARE ARTISTIC PHASE

A recent study³⁵ of a group of vase-paintings depicting Io might be explained, at first sight, as supporting the meaning 'bull-maid' for *ταυροπάρθεος*, with reference to Io only. Erika Simon deals there with four vase-paintings which she dates to the first quarter of the fifth century B.C.; they all depict the death of Argos, and three of them represent Io, whom Argos has been vainly guarding, as a bull. These three paintings form a very small, albeit remarkable, minority, for before and after this the artistic tradition shows a degree of consistency in depicting Io either as a cow or as a maiden with the horns and ears of a cow. In the myth it is Zeus who is the bull, and Erika Simon propounds the view that in the period of the Persian Wars the Greek artists were eager to focus attention on Zeus, and by showing Io as a bull marked her out as the 'property of Zeus'. It is a curious phenomenon and one of the paintings in question, on the Hamburg Amphora of the Eucharides painter (Simon's Figures 50–2), although it shows Io as a bull, writes *Καλή*, '(the) beautiful (maid)', above.

³² J. Gwyn Griffiths in *JEA* 56 (1970), 194–5. For a rejoinder see Faulkner in *JEA* 59 (1973), 218–19.

³³ Sandman Holmberg, *The God Ptah*, 144–6; cf. my *Apuleius, The Isis-Book*, 36, citing a study by Gaballa and Kitchen. See further E. A. W. Budge, *The Gods of the Egyptians* (London, 1904, repr. N. York, 1969), i.507–8; K. Bosse-Griffiths, 'Problems with Ptah-Sokar-Osiris Figures', in *Abstracts of Papers*, 4th International Congress of Egyptology, ed. S. Schoske (Munich, 1985), 26 and the study by M. J. Raven there cited.

³⁴ Ptah is also the father of Nefertem in the Memphite triad with Sakhmet as mother. But Egyptian mythology revels in confusion. Indeed there was another Memphite triad (Ptah-Tefnut-Shu): see L. Kákossy in *JEA* 66 (1980), 48–53; here the two other deities are regarded as aspects of Ptah.

³⁵ Erika Simon, 'Zeus und Io auf einer Kalpis des Eucharidesmalers', *Arch. Anz.* 1985, Heft 2, 265–80. I am grateful to an editorial Reader for calling my attention to this work.

Literary evidence for the idea is very sparse;³⁶ usually both literature and art³⁷ present Io in the form of a cow. What is particularly relevant to Lycophron is the artistic tradition of Alexandria; here Io is always given a human form, but with small horns to indicate a cow.³⁸

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³⁶ She cites Pliny, *HN* 16.239, *Io in taurum mutata*, where editors have often given either *tauram* or *vaccam*.

³⁷ See esp. Karl Schefold, *Götter- und Heldensagen der Griechen in der spätarchaischen Kunst* (Munich, 1978), 27–8; id. *Die Göttersage in der klassischen und hellenistischen Kunst* (Munich, 1981), 135–6, with allusions also to the few exceptions.

³⁸ Brigitte Freyer-Schauenburg, 'Io in Alexandria', *MDAIR* 90 (1983), 35–49 with Taf. 23–9. On p. 42 she compares the depictions of Io in Pompeian wall-paintings, for which see Schefold, *Pompejanische Malerei* (Basel, 1952), 60ff. and 65ff. with Pl. 43.