

16. Egyptian Rite for Gathering Herbs (*PGM IV.2967-3006*)

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One of the most traditional Egyptian rites in all the *PGM*, this elaborate method for harvesting and empowering plants for ritual use draws on the ancient Egyptian tradition of *Gliedervergottung* (“limb-divinization”) rituals, which are attested for most periods of Egyptian history beginning already in the Pyramid Texts.¹ Most of the earliest examples come from a funerary context, in which the limbs of the deceased are each identified with a different god or goddess, as in the following New Kingdom text:

My hair is that of Nūn. My face is that of the Aten. My eyes are those of Hathor. My ears are those of Wepwawet. My nose is that of the Foremost of Khasu. My lips are those of Anubis. My teeth are those of Serqet. My neck is that of Isis the goddess. My arms are those of the Ba-Lord of Djedet. My front is that of Nēith, the Lady of Saïs. My back is that of Seth. My phallus is that of Baba. My flesh is that of the lords of Kheraha. My chest is that of the god Great of Dignity.² My stomach and spine are those of Sekhmet. My buttocks are those of the Eye of Horus. My thighs and flanks are those of Nūt. My legs are those of Ptah. My toes are those of living falcons. There is no limb of mine without a god, and Thoth is the protection of all my flesh.³

Later texts attest the adaptability of this kind of rite for other uses, e.g., to remove the toxins from a poisoned human being or cat, or even to protect a house by identifying the protection over its various parts with different gods.⁴ The present rite identifies the parts and activities of the soon-to-be-harvested plant with important Greco-Egyptian gods in order to empower the plant for ritual use. This empowerment is reinforced through the use of incense (lines 4-6), which in ancient Egyptian thought has a divinizing function.⁵

Although there is no explicit mention of cosmic sympathy in this rite, the ideas presented in lines 7-8 and 35 – “the divinity to whom the herb is being dedicated” in an “auspicious hour and day” – suggest that the planetary hours may have been employed to harvest herbs related to the seven planets during the opportune time (καίρως) for each. On planetary cosmic sympathy and the planetary hours, see the **Introduction 0.7.3**.

¹ On the *Gliedervergottung* genre of ancient Egyptian rituals, see Alt (2020) 177-85; Nyord (2009) 481-523; Quack (1995); Ritner (1993) 40.

² The god “Great of Dignity” (𓆎 𓆏𓆑𓆒) is Osiris; compare line 19 (with note) below.

³ BD 42, translation (here modified) in Quirke (2013) 119, who offers a helpful line-by-line transliteration and translation of the Egyptian text.

⁴ Funerary examples include PT 215; CT 531, 761, 945; BD 42. For a rite to remove the poison from a human being, see Papyrus BM EA 10309 I,11-II,18, translated in Leitz (1999) 26-27; and from a cat, see the Metternich Stela (front and base), translated in Allen (2005b) 54 and Borghouts (1978) 56-58 (spell 87). For the protection of a house, see Borghouts (1978) 10-11 (spell 11).

⁵ The Egyptian word for incense (*sntr*) is formed by adding the *s*-causative prefix to the word *ntr* (“god, divinity; divine”); thus incense (*sntr*) analyzed as *s-ntr* is that which “makes divine” or “causes divinity.” See the **Introduction 0.6.1**.

Many of the gods in the present rite can be understood as Egyptian gods under a thin veil of *interpretatio Graeca*. In the English translation below, the Egyptian gods referred to by their Greek names are noted in parentheses, but these parenthetical notes are not part of the original ritual-text See the **Introduction 0.3.3** for the rationale behind these identifications.

English Translation:

Among the Egyptians, plants are always gathered in this way:

The root-cutter first cleanses his or her own body. Then, after sprinkling the herb with natron and censuring it with pine resin, one should circle it three times while carrying the censer. Then, after burning *kuphi* and pouring a drink-offering of milk along with the prayers, one should pull up the plant while invoking the name of the divinity to whom the herb is being dedicated, for which purpose it is harvested, calling upon it to become more effective for its purpose. And the general invocation, which the root-cutter speaks over any herb at the moment of its harvesting, is thus:

“You were sown by Kronos (Gēb). You were gathered together by Hera (Mūt). You were watched over by Amūn. You were brought forth by Isis. You were nourished by rainy Zeus. You were grown by the Sun and dew. You are the dew of all the gods.

“You are the heart of Hermes (Thoth). You are the seed of the firstborn gods. You are the Eye of the Sun. You are the light of the Moon. You are the esteem of Osiris. You are the beauty and the glory of Heaven (Nūt). You are the soul of the daimon of Osiris. You are the breath of Amūn.

“Just as you have lifted up Osiris, so too lift yourself up and stretch out, just as the Sun also rises every day. Your height is equal to the zenith of the Sun, your roots are of the Abyss (Nūn), and your powers are in the heart of Hermes (Thoth). Your fibers are the bones of Mnevis, and your flowers are the eye of Horus. Your seed is the seed of Pan (Min).

“I am cleansing you with resin just as I would the gods, and even for my own health. Be cleansed also by prayer, and give us power, just as Ares (Horakhty) and Athena (Nēith) do.

“I am Hermes (Thoth). I am gathering you with Good Fortune and Good Daimon, in an auspicious hour and on an auspicious day, which is also effective for all things.”

After saying these things, the root-cutter rolls the harvested herb into a clean linen cloth. (In the place of the root, the Egyptians deposited seven grains of wheat and an equal amount of barley, after mixing them with honey.) And after heaping up over the hole the earth that had been dug up, the root-cutter departs.

Interlinear Translation:

1. Παρ' Αἰγυπτίοις ἀεὶ βοτάναι λαμβάνονται οὕτως·
Among the Egyptians always plants are gathered in this way:
2. ὁ ρίζοτόμος καθαίρει πρότερον τὸ ἴδιον σῶμα,
The root-cutter cleanses first (his/her) own body,
3. πρότερον νίτρῳ περι<ρ>άνας
first having sprinkled (it) with natron
4. καὶ τὴν βοτάνην θυμιάσας ῥητίνη ἐκ πίτυος
and having censed the herb with resin from a pine tree
5. εἰς γ' περιενέγκας τὸν τόπον,
for three (times) having carried (it) around the place,⁶
6. εἶτα κῦφι θυμιάσας καὶ τὴν διὰ τοῦ γάλακτος σπονδὴν χεάμενος
then, after burning *kuphi*⁷ and pouring a drink-offering of milk
7. μετ' εὐχῶν ἀνασπᾶ τὸ φυτὸν ἐξ ὀνόματος ἐπικαλούμενος τὸν δαίμονα,
along with prayers, he should pull up the plant while invoking the divinity⁸ by name,
8. ᾧ ἢ βοτάνη ἀνιέρωται, πρὸς ἣν λαμβάνεται χρεῖαν,
to whom the herb has been dedicated, for which need/use it is gathered,
9. παρακαλῶν ἐνεργεστέραν γενέσθαι πρὸς αὐτήν.
calling upon (it) to become more effective for it (i.e., the need/use).
10. ἐπίκλησις δ' αὐτῷ ἐπὶ πάσης βοτάνης καθ' ὅλον ἐν ἄρσει,
And the invocation for him over any herb generally at the moment of picking,
11. ἣν λέγει, ἐστὶν ἥδε·
which he speaks, is thus:

⁶ On the Egyptian background of “encircling” behavior in this rite, see Ritner (1993) 57-67; cf. 39-40.

⁷ On the compound incense *kuphi* (κῦφι), see the **Introduction 0.6.1**.

⁸ The ancient Greek word *daimon* (δαίμων) has a much broader semantic range than the English “demon.” In the present context, it can mean a god, goddess, or other divine or semidivine power to whom the herb is being dedicated.

12. ἔσπαρης ὑπὸ τοῦ Κρόνου, συνελήμφθης ὑπὸ τῆς Ἥρας,
“You were sown by Kronos, you were gathered together by Hera,
13. διετηρήθης ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἄμμωνος, ἐτέχθης ὑπὸ τῆς Ἴσιδος,
you were watched over by Amūn, you were brought forth by Isis,
14. ἐτράφης <ὑπ’> ὀμβρίου Διός,
you were nourished by rainy Zeus,
15. ηὔξηθης ὑπὸ τοῦ Ἡλίου καὶ τῆς δρόσου.
you were grown by the Sun and dew.
16. σὺ <εἶ> ἢ δρόσος ἢ τῶν θεῶν πάντων,
You are the dew of all the gods,
17. σὺ <εἶ> ἢ καρδία τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ,
you are the heart of Hermes,⁹
18. σὺ εἶ τὸ σπέρμα τῶν προγόνων θεῶν, σὺ εἶ ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς τοῦ Ἡλίου,
You are the seed of the firstborn gods, you are the Eye of the Sun,¹⁰
19. σὺ εἶ τὸ φῶς τῆς Σελήνης, σὺ εἶ ἡ σπουδὴ τοῦ Ὄσιρεως,
you are the light of the Moon, you are the esteem¹¹ of Osiris,

⁹ The epithet “heart of Rē” (*ib n r*) is well attested for Thoth; see Bortolani (2019) 298 with n. 24; Klotz (2006) 27 with n. 112; Boylan (1922) 180. Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphics* 1.36 notes, “When they (i.e., the Egyptians) wish to denote a heart, they draw an ibis. For this animal corresponds (ὑκείωται) to Hermes, the ruler of every heart (καρδία) and reasoning (λογισμός), since the ibis also is like a heart in itself. Concerning this, the talk is great among the Egyptians.” The Egyptian word for heart (*ib*) is similar to the word “ibis” (Greek ἴβις, a borrowing from Egyptian *hb*), and the Egyptian word “heart” (*ib*) is indeed sometimes written with the ibis hieroglyph, e.g., at the temple of Esna; see Bortolani (2019) 299 with n. 27; Klotz (2006) 28 with n. 115; Beekes (2010) s.v. ἴβις; *Wörterbuch* II.487. The Greek epithet ἐγκάρδιος, “in the heart,” occurs in three parallel instances of the hymn to Hermes-Thoth in *PGM* V.304-69 (at line 399), *PGM* XVIIb (at line 1), and **Rite-37** (line 6: *PGM* VII.669). The most elaborate of these three rites (*PGM* V.304-69) specifies a kind of laurel (δάφνη) described as ἐγκάρδιος (*GMPT* renders this as “pithy”), which hardly seems coincidental. On the Greek hymn and epithet, see especially Bortolani (2019) 298-99.

¹⁰ The Eye of the Sun in Egyptian myth could refer to several lion-goddesses, including Hathor, Sekhmet, Tefnut, and Bastet; see the commentary on the lion in **Rite-7**.

¹¹ It seems likely that the word “esteem” (σπουδή) here translates an important Egyptian concept often associated with Osiris, *ššf.t*: “dignity, reputation, respect, awe.” For example, in the hymn to Osiris on the “Stele of Sobekhotep and Sobekiry” (Louvre C 30), Osiris is described as the one “whose esteem (*ššf.t*) Atum created in the hearts of men, gods, spirits, and the dead.” See also the excerpt from BD 42 quoted above, in which the chest of the deceased is identified with that of the god “Great of Dignity” (ἱ ἔσφ.τ), a common epithet of Osiris.

20. σὺ εἶ τὸ κάλλος καὶ ἡ δόξα τοῦ Οὐρανοῦ,
you are the beauty and the glory of Heaven (Nūt),
21. σὺ εἶ ἡ ψυχὴ τοῦ δαίμονος τοῦ Ὀσίρεως, ἡ κωμάζουσα ἐν παντὶ τόπῳ,
you are the soul of the daimon of Osiris, the one that revels in every place,
22. σὺ εἶ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ Ἄμμωνος.
you are the breath of Amūn.
23. ὡς τὸν Ὀσίριν ὑψώσας, οὕτως ὑψώσον σεαυτὴν καὶ ἀνατεῖλον,
Just as you have lifted up Osiris, so too lift up yourself and stretch out,¹²
24. ὡς καὶ ὁ Ἥλιος ἀνατέλλει καθ' ἐκάστην ἡμέραν·
just as the Sun also rises every day.
25. τὸ μῆκος σου ἴσον ἐστὶ τῷ τοῦ Ἥλιου μεσουρανήματι,
Your height is equal to the mid-heaven point of the Sun,
26. αἱ δὲ ρίζαι τοῦ βυθοῦ,
and your roots (are) of the depth/abyss,
27. αἱ δὲ δυνάμεις σου ἐν τῇ καρδίᾳ τοῦ Ἑρμοῦ εἰσιν,
and your powers are in the heart of Hermes.
28. τὰ ξύλα σου τὰ ὀστέα τοῦ Μνεύεως,
Your fibers are the bones of Mnevis,
29. καὶ σου τὰ ἄνθη ἐστὶν ὁ ὀφθαλμὸς τοῦ Ὄρου,
and your flowers are the eye of Horus,
30. τὸ σὸν σπέρμα τοῦ Πᾶνός ἐστι σπέρμα.
Your seed is the seed of Pan.
31. ἐγὼ νίζω σε ῥητίνῃ ὡς καὶ τοὺς θεοὺς, καὶ ἐπὶ ὑγείᾳ ἐμαυτοῦ.
I am cleansing you with resin just as (I would) the gods, even for my own health.

¹² On the notion that Osiris is the power of generation (or “seed”) within plants, see Plutarch *On Isis and Osiris* 33.364a, translation (here modified) in Griffiths (1970) 169: “The wiser of the priests not only call the Nile Osiris and the sea Typhon, but apply the name Osiris simply to the general principle and power of moisture-production (ὕγρασιον ἀρχὴν καὶ δύναμιν), regarding it as the cause of generation (αἰτίαν γενέσεως) and the essence of seed (σπέρματος οὐσίαν).”

32. καὶ συναγνίσθητι ἐπευχῆ καὶ δὸς ἡμῖν δύναμιν ὡς ὁ Ἄρης καὶ ἡ Ἀθηνᾶ.
Be cleansed also by prayer and give us power, just as Ares and Athena (do).
33. ἐγὼ εἰμι Ἑρμῆς.
I am Hermes.¹³
34. λαμβάνω σε σὺν Ἀγαθῇ Τύχῃ καὶ Ἀγαθῷ Δαίμονι
I am gathering you with Good Fortune and Good Daimon
35. καὶ ἐν καλῇ ὥρᾳ καὶ ἐν καλῇ ἡμέρᾳ
and in an auspicious hour and on an auspicious day,
36. καὶ ἐπιτευκτικῆ πρὸς πάντα.’
(which is) also effective for all things.”
37. ταῦτ' εἰπὼν τὴν μὲν τρυγηθεῖσαν πόαν εἰς καθαρὸν ἐλίσσε<ι> ὀθόνιον
After saying these things, he rolls the harvested herb into a clean linen cloth
38. (τῆς δὲ ῥίζης <εἰς> τὸν τόπον ἑπτὰ μὲν πυροῦ κόκκους,
(but in the place of the root, they threw in¹⁴ seven grains of wheat
39. τοὺς δὲ ἴσους κριθῆς μέλιτι δεύσαντες ἐνέβαλον)
and an equal amount of barley, after mixing them with honey)
40. καὶ τὴν ἀνασκαφεῖσαν γῆν ἐνχώσας ἀπαλλάσσεται.
and after heaping up (i.e. filling the hole with) the earth that had been dug up, he departs.

¹³ For the self-identification of the practitioner with Hermes-Thoth, see also **Rite-8** (lines 42-43 and 57).

¹⁴ The words “they threw in” are a translation of ἐνέβαλον at the end of the following line (line 39).