

The Soucheia of the Arsinoite Nome in Graeco-Roman Egypt

Youssri E. H. Abdelwahed

Tourist Guidance Department, Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, Minia University

Abstract

Scholars have highlighted religious diversity in the Arsinoite nome (modern Fayum) in the Graeco-Roman period through consideration of Egyptian and Graeco-Roman deities worshiped in the region.¹ The most popular cult in the Fayum district was that of the crocodile god Sobek or Souchos.² Some economic, administrative, and religious aspects of the cult of Souchos and his local incarnations in the Fayum were points of research interest.³ Yet the festival of the god Souchos referred to in Greek papyri as Soucheia has not been covered so far.⁴ This paper attempts to reconstruct the Soucheia in the light of Greek papyrological evidence. The festival is only associated with the villages of Tebtynis and Soknopaiou Nesos, and appears as a joyful celebration with a banquet. The Soucheia reflects the complexity of religious life and practices in the Arsinoite nome, a highly Hellenised part of Egypt in Graeco-Roman times, being celebrated by Egyptian villagers, Greeks, and Persians of the epigone.

Keywords: Sobek/Souchos, Soucheia, the Arsinoite, Graeco-Roman Egypt

In Roman times, the region of Egypt which now forms the Fayum was called in official documents the Arsinoite nome with Arsinoe as its metropolis. It was under Ptolemy Philadelphos after his marriage to his sister Arsinoe, therefore between 270 BC the date of his marriage and 246 BC when he died, that the names of the Arsinoite nome and Arsinoe replaced the previous names of the Krokodilopolite nome and Krokodilopolis.⁵ The name of Krokodilopolis clearly indicates that the divine animal especially worshiped in the prefecture and its metropolis

¹ Rübsam 1974.

² Toutain 1915.

³ Clarysse 2002; Monson 2006; Capron 2008.

⁴ Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 140.

⁵ Strabo 17.1.38. On the poorly preserved monuments of the ancient metropolis of Krokodilopolis: Davoli 2011, 71-2.

was the crocodile.⁶ The cult of the crocodile god Sobek, who was depicted either as a man with a crocodile's head or as a crocodile (figs. 1-2), is also evident at Ombos and Akoris.⁷ The deity also had temples at Gebel el-Silsileh and Gebelein.⁸ However, the Fayum remained the main cult centre of the divinity.⁹ Many theophoric names in these areas belonged to the god Sobek, such as Petesouchos, Petesous, and Tasouchis. There are also several people called Korkodilos.¹⁰ This name, apart from Egypt, was unknown in the ancient anthroponomy.¹¹



Figure 1. Relief of an anthropomorphic Sobek and a Ptolemy (?) (Crawford 1971, frontispiece)

⁶ Toutain 1915, 171.

⁷ Kom Ombo: Wagner 1995, 124. Akoris: Kawanishi 1999; Holthoer and Ahlquist 1974.

⁸ Bunson 2002, 378-9.

⁹ Strabo 17.1.38; Diod. Sic. 1.89; Damascius, *Vita Isidori* 99.

¹⁰ Wagner 1995, 124.

¹¹ On the possibility of an occurrence of the name in a document from Rome (*CIL* VI.33968): Solin 1995, 77-80.



Figure 2. Bronze statuette of Sobek as a crocodile, c. 200 BC, British Museum (Hart 2005, 148)

Sobek kept his Egyptian names in Greek documents of the Fayum; he had many local incarnations under diverse names, including Pnepheros and Petesouchos at Karanis, Soknebtynis at Tebtynis, Soknopaios at Soknopaiou Nesos, Soknokonnis at Bakchias, Souchos at Arsinoe, and Sokmetis in Syron kome.¹² In the Graeco-Roman period, many Egyptian deities had Greek or Roman counterparts. For instance, Thoth was assimilated with Hermes, Amun with Jupiter, Horus with Apollo, Neith with Athena, Hathor with Aphrodite, and so on.¹³ Yet Sobek had no Greek or Roman duplicate. The cult of the god Sobek in the Fayum probably kept its indigenous character.¹⁴

The Soucheia is the name of the festival of the crocodile god Souchos in the Fayum. It occurs six times in papyrological documents dating from the second century BC to the second century AD.¹⁵ Surviving papyrological references to the Soucheia come from the villages of Tebtynis and Soknopaiou Nesos, suggesting that the festival was only associated with the Fayum district, though the cult of the god is evident elsewhere.¹⁶ The earliest surviving mention of the Soucheia occurs in 173 BC in an account of an oil merchant from Tebtynis in relation with expenditures on a number of festivals held in the village.¹⁷ In AD 138, the

¹² Burkhalter 1985, 123-8; Clarysse 2002, 201-2; Rübsam 1974, 174.

¹³ E.g. Quaegebeur, Clarysse, and Van Maele 1985; Fowden 1986.

¹⁴ Hart 2005, 148.

¹⁵ Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 140.

¹⁶ Wagner 1995; Kawanishi 1999; Holthoer and Ahlquist 1974.

¹⁷ *P.Tebt.* III.887.49.

Soucheia appears in a list of expenses by the priests of Soknopaios at Soknopaiou Nesos as one celebration in a long list of festivals in honour of the god Soknopaios (Table 1).¹⁸

Date	Name of the festival	Duration	Consumption	Reference
7 Athyr	Birthday of the Great God Soknopaios	19 days	76 artabas of wheat	<i>SPP</i> XXII.183.iii.6 8-9
8 Tybi	Foundation of the Temple of the God Soknopaios	7 days	28 artabas of wheat	<i>SPP</i> XXII.183.iv.7 3-4
2 Phamenoth	Foundation of the Enclosure of the Great God Soknopaios	7 days	28 artabas of wheat	<i>SPP</i> XXII.183.iv.7 7-8
21 Pauni	Foundation of the Temple of the God Soknopaios	7 days	28 artabas of wheat	<i>SPP</i> XXII.183.iv.8 3-4
20 Epeiph	Soucheia	7 days	28 artabas of wheat	<i>SPP</i> XXII.183.iv.8 5-6

(Table 1) List of the Festivals of the God Soknopaios in *SPP* XXII.183

The papyrus indicates that five festivals were assigned for different occasions associated with the god Soknopaios. To these, one should add the ‘festival of the foundation of the sanctuary of the great god Soknopaios’ on 26 Mesore, which lasted for 8 days with the total consumption of 32 artabas of wheat.¹⁹ The series of festivals of Soknopaios thus began with the birthday of the god on 7 Athyr (Julian: 4 November) and ended with the foundation of the sanctuary of the god on 26 Mesore (Julian: 20 August). The longest duration, 19 days, was allocated for the festival of the birthday of Soknopaios. Next comes the 8-day festival of the foundation of the sanctuary of Soknopaios. Each one of the remaining festivities, including the Soucheia on 20 Epeiph (Julian: 14 July), lasted for 7 days. Four artabas of wheat were consumed in each day of the festivals of Soknopaios, making 76 artabas of wheat for the whole duration of the birthday of Soknopaios, 32 for the foundation of his sanctuary, and 28 artabas of wheat for each of the remaining festivals.

¹⁸ *SPP* XXII.183; Capron 2008, 133-60.

¹⁹ *P.Louvre* I.4.iii.69-70.

SPP.XXII.183 dates back to the first half of the second century AD, when the median price of wheat in Roman Egypt was 12 drachmas per artaba, 10 drachmas as the minimum price, and 20 drachmas for the maximum price.²⁰ Totally, this means that the minimum sum of the 28 artabas of wheat consumed in the Soucheia was 280 drachmas, 336 drachmas for the median price, and 560 drachmas for the maximum sum. The different interpretation of papyrological, literary, and metrological documents encouraged debate among scholars over the artaba as a dry measure in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Richard Duncan-Jones argues that the artaba equals 48 choenices with metric size of 38.78 liters.²¹ John Shelton, however, argues that the artaba equals 40 choenices with metric size of 38.80 liters.²²

Given that the weight of the Egyptian artaba of wheat is roughly estimated as 30.29 kg, it follows that the 28 artabas of wheat mentioned in SPP.XXII.183 would provide 848 kg of flour.²³ Many officiates and other participants took part in the Soucheia, for which a banquet is confirmed in papyri.²⁴ The inhabitants of the village probably played an important role in the festival, yet visitors from nearby villages were expected to come to Soknopaiou Nesos and leave the village at the end of the day. This may suggest a large number of people with an interest in the Soucheia, though the exact number of the participants cannot be determined.²⁵

The festival of the foundation of the temple of the god Soknopaios in 21 Pauni rather than 8 Tybi was an opportunity for the dedication of crocodile images for the god Souchos and his local manifestations in the Fayum. A crocodile statue from Arsinoe was dedicated to the god Petesouchos in 18 Pauni (Julian: 21 June).²⁶ The base of a crocodile statue similarly found at Arsinoe carries the following text: Πετεσοῦχον τὸν μέγαν τὸν ἐπ' αὐτοῦ φανέντα Παῦνι ιη κα' ἔτους Ἀπολλώνιος

²⁰ Duncan-Jones 1990, 144.

²¹ Duncan-Jones 1976, 43-52.

²² Shelton 1977, 55-67.

²³ Rathbone 1983, 266; Bagnall 2009, 187. In the mean, 250 g of flour would suffice one person per day. In other words, 1 kg of flour would meet the daily nutritional requirement of four persons. This simply means that the 28 artabas of wheat, or the 848 kg of flour, would be consumed by 3393 individuals during the 7-days of the Soucheia at Soknopaiou Nesos.

²⁴ *P.Ross.Georg.* II.41.89-96.

²⁵ Herodotus, *Histories* 2.59, states that 700000 individuals participated in the countrywide festival of the cat-goddess Bastet at Bubastis (modern Tell Basta in the Egyptian Delta) during the fifth century BC. This festival survived into the Ptolemaic and Roman period (*P.Hib.* I.27.x.145).

²⁶ Mitteis and Wilcken 1912, 105. For a review of this work: Ferguson 1913.

Ἀπολλωνίου Ταλεσ(ε)ως.²⁷ It should be noticed that the dedication date of the statue is 16 Pauni (Julian: 19 June). Jean Toutain rightly suggested that the word φανέντα indicates an epiphany of the god. The crocodile, in his view, was not only the living incarnation of the god, but the god himself.²⁸

The reason for the dedication of crocodile images in Pauni can be explained by suggesting that the Soucheia probably marked the reappearance of crocodiles after aestivation during the dry season period and hence the announcement of the beginning of the flood.²⁹ This symbolic connection should come as no surprise given the deeply rooted association between the god Souchos and the Nile flood (Haapy) in the cosmological myths of the Fayum.³⁰ It should also be remembered that the Egyptian equivalent for the Greek Σοκνοπαίος in Demotic papyri of the Fayum is Sbk=ḥꜥpy (Souchos as the Nile flood).³¹ The name of the god Sbk=ḥꜥpy written in hieroglyphs has been identified on an inscribed block from the temple of Soknebtynis at Tebtynis.³² The cache of papyri uncovered from priests' rooms along the western side of the enclosure wall of the temple of Soknebtynis included a hieratic document, written in AD 135, of the 'Glorification of Sobek', an account of the Fayum lake as the epicentre of creation by the god Sobek.³³

Sobek is also associated with the creator mother-goddess Neith, whose titles included 'the nurse of the crocodile'.³⁴ The goddess Neith is shown in traditional imagery suckling the twin crocodiles.³⁵ Since the Pyramid Texts, Sobek was one of the beings that emerged from the watery chaos at the moment of the creation of the world.³⁶ At Tebtynis, Sobek was closely linked with Geb, the primeval creator god, whom Greeks identified with their Kronos. Hence villagers of Tebtynis were often named Kronion (he of Kronos), Pakebkis (he of Geb), or Petesouchos (gift of Souchos).³⁷

²⁷ *IG Fay.* I.12 (58 BC).

²⁸ Toutain 1915, 183-4.

²⁹ Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 142.

³⁰ Rondot 2004, 76 no. 30.

³¹ Monson 2006, 209.

³² Rondot 2004, 76.

³³ Rathbone 2003, 11-12. This reference is available online at <http://tebtunis.berkeley.edu/lecture/townfull> (last access on 13 December 2016).

³⁴ Hart 2005, 148.

³⁵ Maspero 1915, 475.

³⁶ Bunson 2002, 378.

³⁷ Rathbone 2003, 7.

In aestivation, the inactive crocodiles used to go into a kind of burrow in the banks of rivers.³⁸ When the crocodiles reappear after aestivation, one of them replaced the sacred dead crocodile.³⁹ A painting relief uncovered from Theadelphia shows a funeral procession, where a mummified crocodile is being carried on a litter on the shoulders of priests (fig. 3).⁴⁰ There was a Demotic religious association of crocodile-mummy bearers operating at Tebtynis from the second century BC.⁴¹ The diet supplied to Petesouchos and the crocodiles in the Fayum,⁴² which consisted of a kind of cookie and some roasted meat and a pitcher of wine mixed with honey,⁴³ was, in Gilbert Bagnani's view, 'singularly unsuitable, and therefore, presumably, the life expectancy of a sacred crocodile must have been very low'.⁴⁴ Upon their death, the sacred animal was embalmed and buried in sacred coffins,⁴⁵ which were placed in special cemeteries sometimes in the vicinity of temples, such as those uncovered from Theadelphia and Tebtynis.⁴⁶

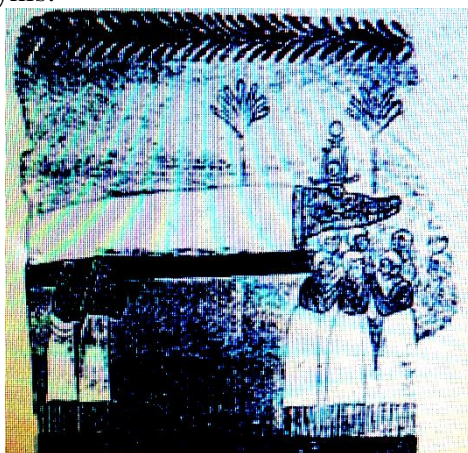


Figure 3. A funeral procession of the crocodile-god Souchos (Breccia 1922, 153)

³⁸ Dufaure 1986, 905.

³⁹ Strabo 17.38.

⁴⁰ Breccia 1922, 153.

⁴¹ Muhs 2001, 3-4, 6-19.

⁴² *P.Tebt.* I.33.13. This papyrus deals with preparations made for the visit of a Roman senator, Lucius Memmius, to the Arsinoite nome in 112 BC.

⁴³ Strabo 17.1.38.

⁴⁴ Bagnani 1952, 77.

⁴⁵ Hdt. 2.69; Dils 1990.

⁴⁶ Toutain 1915, 186; Bagnani 1952, 76-8; Merola, M. 2007. 'Letters to the Crocodile God', *Archaeology* 60:6, 24. The burial places of the sacred mummies of the crocodiles are known as 'resting-places' (Demotic: $\epsilon\omega\gamma=\text{h}\tau\text{p}$, Greek: $\tau\acute{\alpha}\phi\omicron\varsigma$): Ray 1976, 139-40; Pestman 1977, 76-8.

The Egyptian character of the cult of the god Souchos is unquestionable; however, one cannot assume that the participants in the festival are all Egyptian-born inhabitants. In AD 75-6, one Chairemon sent a letter to Apollonius:

God willing, I will visit you in all circumstances after the Soucheia. I swear by the Dioskouri, which we worship together [...], that I want to enjoy your change; however, it is to be completely regarding our guild (?) when the fate allows... Be so good, most esteemed, and send me by Sabinus 20 drachmas, because I need them to necessary expenses ... so I can borrow a donkey and a tricoros of wine and pay for the imports that we may have for the Soucheia so we can amuse us herein by your help.⁴⁷

Chairemon and Apollonius worshipped Greek deities, the Dioskouroi, Castor and Polydeuces, but they also took preparations for participating in the Soucheia and apparently the banquet of the god Souchos, which was an occasion for amusement for both of them. This should come as no surprise given that Greek and Egyptian cult cannot be separated in Egypt. An oracle question to the Dioskouroi was found in the Egyptian temple of the god Souchos in Bakchias.⁴⁸ Equally, the shrine of the Dioskouroi at Kerkeosiris was under the control of individuals in the same way as the Egyptian shrines.⁴⁹

The use of the donkey in relation to the festival is unclear, but they probably used it as a ride during a procession of the god through the village. Public processions (*komasiai*) were frequently associated with religious festivals, such as that of Souchos Pnepheros at Theadelphia, Serapis in Alexandria and the *chora*, and Thoth-Hermes at Hermopolis Magna.⁵⁰ The sacred enclosure of the god Soknopaios at Soknopaiou Nesos also had a paved processional way (*dromos*), 6 metres wide and 410 metres long, leading from the gateway of the *temenos* to the gate of

⁴⁷ BGU I.248. 11-16, 22-24, 26-29.

⁴⁸ Claryesse 2009, 579.

⁴⁹ *P.Tebt.* I.14.17-18 (114 BC). This papyrus is an official letter from Menches, village scribe of Kerkeosiris, to Horos, royal scribe of Kerkeosiris, informing him that he has taken measures regarding a judicial inquiry for murder and seizure of property against Heras, son of Petalos, inhabitant of Kerkeosiris, who owns the sixth part of the shrine of the Dioskouroi in the village, of which the total value is one talent of copper.

⁵⁰ Souchos Pnepheros: *P.Berl.Leihg.* II.44.10-11; Serapis: Ach. Tat. 5.2.1-2; *SB* IV.7336.42; Abdelwahed 2016; Thoth-Hermes: *P.Herm.* 2.19-25 = Rees 1964, no. 2, 2-5. On the Komasterion or procession-house at Hermopolis Magna: Bailey 1986.

Soknopaios.⁵¹ The gate of Soknopaios was ‘the regular entrance to the village for merchants and their wares and possibly for religious processions going to and from the lake share’ to the south of Soknopaiou Nesos.⁵² Since the *dromos* was built on top of a foundation structure more than 3 metres higher than the two parallel streets, which ran on both sides of it and were connected with the street network by means of tunnels under the *dromos* and stairways, the *dromos* was used only as a monumental processional way (figs. 4-5).⁵³ Similarly, the *dromos* of the temple of Soknebtynis at Tebtynis, 210 metres long, was a centre for communal festivals and private celebrations in the Graeco-Roman period. The god regularly came out of his temple for a *komasia* along the *dromos*, perhaps also through the village. The processions were mounted at major festivals like the *Soucheia* each year, when the god was carried on a bier by *pastophoroi* and is accompanied by priests in full regalia, with incense, flowers, and hymns.⁵⁴



Figure 4. The *dromos* of the temple at Soknopaiou Nesos (Davoli 2011, 77, fig. 7)

⁵¹ Davoli 2005, 30.

⁵² Peterson 1935, 4.

⁵³ Davoli 2011, 74.

⁵⁴ Rathbone 2003, 8, 16.

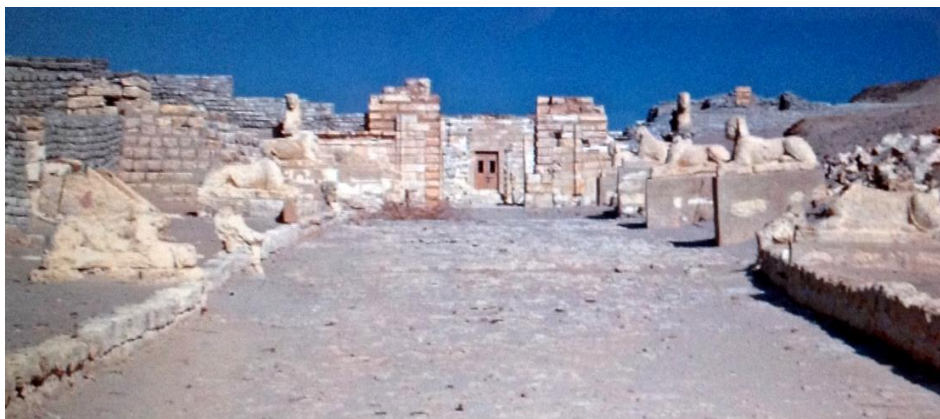


Figure 5. The *dromos* of the temple at Narmuthis (Davoli 2011, 79, fig. 10)

The nomenclature involved in the Soucheia shows a mixed cultural milieu. In *BGU* I.248 Chairemon is a popular Egyptian name in the Fayum, but the recipient of the letter, Apollonius, has a Greek name.⁵⁵ In *P.Tebt.* III.887 Apollonius bears a Greek name, but his father, Kabathas, has an Egyptian name.⁵⁶ In *P.Mil.Vogl.* III.145 the tenant of a goose farm in the Fayum was called Gemenos Hormos, a Persian of the epigone who lived in the metropolis and presented two geese as a gift for the Soucheia at Tebtynis.⁵⁷ There has been much discussion as to the meaning of the problematic term Persians of the epigone. Some argue that it signifies the descendant of a non-Egyptian soldier, himself born in Egypt and liable to military service. Members of the epigone were the sons of cleruchs, colonist settlers who were imported to serve in the Ptolemaic army. On the death of the father, the allotted land regularly passed to the son, who thereby became obligated to military service.⁵⁸

While Persians of the epigone might have originally designated descendants of Persian soldiers, they could be applied to the families of all non-Hellenic mercenaries of the Ptolemaic kings, who were descended not only from Persians of the Achaemenidic and Hellenistic time, but also from Egyptian soldiers, Graeco-Egyptian half-breeds, Arabs, negroes, Nubians, Libyans, and Jews.⁵⁹ The katoikoi of the second century BC in the Fayum were merely successors to cleruchs or a sub-division of

⁵⁵ Dornseiff and Hansen 1957, 116; Thomas 1977, 233-40.

⁵⁶ *P.Tebt.* III.887.49.

⁵⁷ *P.Mil.Vogl.* III.145.13 = *SB* VI.9465.

⁵⁸ Mitteis and Wilcken 1912, 384-5.

⁵⁹ Tscherikower and Heichelheim 1942, 26.

them.⁶⁰ Persians of the epigone frequently appear in papyri of the Graeco-Roman period, especially on legal documents. In Ptolemaic Egypt, the term Persian of the epigone probably acquired juridical significance and occurred in transactions, where the contracting party was answerable to an obligation before the law.⁶¹ In Roman Egypt, however, the title lost its military and racial connotation, but the juridical force might still be applicable.⁶² In all cases, there is evidence of a Persian of the epigone presenting geese for the Soucheia at Tebtynis, which was undoubtedly a joyful event.

The importance of the Soucheia can be inferred from its long duration, 7 days at Soknopaiou Nesos in the second century AD,⁶³ and from the relatively expensive budget of its banquet: 116 drachmas spent on wine from Memphis, salted fish, pork, and cake.⁶⁴ The expensiveness of the meal is clear when compared to those of the Demetria (104 drachmas), the Serapia (124 drachmas), and the Amesysia (212 drachmas).⁶⁵ There is nothing specific in the menu of the banquet of the Soucheia.⁶⁶ The consumption of wine rather than beer in the banquet is insufficient in itself to suppose the Hellenisation or Romanisation of the festival. Salted fish was also a common diet in the Fayum and elsewhere in Graeco-Roman Egypt.⁶⁷

Similarly, pigs were among the most common domesticated animals since the Pharaonic period.⁶⁸ In Graeco-Roman Egypt, pig-breeding continued to be a relatively important economic activity.⁶⁹ Pigs were reared alongside other domesticated animals in the courtyards of houses in both towns and villages.⁷⁰ This activity led to the emergence of a 'pig tax'

⁶⁰ Grenfell and Hunt 1902, appendix 1, 556-8.

⁶¹ Segré 1944, 384.

⁶² Westermann and Kraemer 1926, 47.

⁶³ *SPP* III.183.iv.85.

⁶⁴ *P.Ross.Georg.* II.41.89-96.

⁶⁵ On the Serapia: Abdelwahed 2016. On the Demetria and Amesysia: Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 78-81 and 66-71 respectively.

⁶⁶ Henne 1933.

⁶⁷ Arsinoite: *P.Ryl.* II.229.11, 21 (AD 38). Oxyrhynchus: *P.Oxy.* VI.928.11 (the second century AD); *P.Oxy.* VII.1067.28 (the third century AD); *P.Oxy.* XVII.2148.13 (the first century AD); *SB* I.1974.1 (the third century AD). Perithebes: *BGU* IV.1095.17 (AD 75). Cf. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 7; Wegner 2008.

⁶⁸ On textual, pictorial and zooarchaeological evidence for pigs in ancient Egypt: Hdt. 2.14; Newberry 1928; Houlihan 1996, 25-8.

⁶⁹ *P.Ryl.* II.229.12, 19. Cf. *BGU* III.949.8 (AD 300, Herakleopolis).

⁷⁰ Bowman 1986, 102.

levied from those breeding or trading on pigs⁷¹ and even from those sacrificing pigs.⁷² Pigs played a role in the diet of the inhabitants⁷³ and were consumed at least by the lower classes.⁷⁴ Pigs were closely associated in ancient Egyptian religion and mythology with the god Seth, lord of chaos.⁷⁵ Together with hippopotami and donkeys, pigs were only associated with the god Seth.⁷⁶ No Egyptian god, however, took the form of a pig.⁷⁷ Due to their connection with Seth, pigs had an ambiguous status in ancient Egyptian religion and culture.⁷⁸ Pork was never used in traditional temple offerings. Yet pigs were included in lists of temple properties.⁷⁹ On the night of 15 Pachon, Egyptians sacrificed pigs before the front door of their houses for the god Osiris.⁸⁰

Greek inhabitants undoubtedly showed interest in ancient Egyptian cult, yet there is no evidence that the Soucheia was exclusively Hellenic or Egyptian in character. Three stelae from the first century AD record the consecration of a certain area of land in the Fayum to the god Souchos by former epebes.⁸¹ Equally, the propylon of the temple of Pnepheros at Theadelphia is a private initiative of an Alexandrian citizen.⁸² Under Commodus, the north propylon in the precinct of Petesouchos and Pnepheros at Karanis was restored at the sole charge of the sitologos Apollonius, who bore a Greek name.⁸³ Marsisouchos, a former high priest of the temple of Hadrian in Arsinoe, left instructions in his will that if certain terms were not executed properly his estate should go to the temple of Serapis at Alexandria.⁸⁴

In AD 58, the temple of Souchos in Arsinoe could demand pious contributions from Romans, Alexandrians, and other inhabitants of the whole nome.⁸⁵ In AD 215, a festival of Souchos alias Kronos was held in

⁷¹ *P.Oxy.* IV.733 (171).

⁷² *P.Giss.Bibl.* I.2 (the second century BC).

⁷³ Pedding 1991, 20-30.

⁷⁴ Hecker 1982, 59-71.

⁷⁵ Bonnet 1952, 112.

⁷⁶ Dieleman 2005, 130-8.

⁷⁷ Houlihan 1996, 26.

⁷⁸ Helck 1984, 764.

⁷⁹ Newberry 1928, 211.

⁸⁰ *Hdt.* 2.47-48, *Plut. De Is. et Os.* 8; *Ael. NA* 10.16. For a full discussion of this festival: Abdelwahed 2015, 88-91.

⁸¹ *IG Fay.* III.200 (AD 98); *IG Fay.* III.201 (AD 95); *IG Fay.* III.202 (AD 94).

⁸² *IG Fay.* II.107 (AD 137).

⁸³ Grenfell, Hunt, and Hogarth 1900, 34.

⁸⁴ *P.Tebt.* II.407.10-11 (AD 199).

⁸⁵ *P.Mert.* II.63.7-10.

the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus at Ptolemais Euergetis and was called for by the gymnasial and bouletic elites, reflecting the incorporation of traditional festivals into imperial civic temples.⁸⁶ This melting-pot cultural milieu such as the Arsinoite suggests that the Soucheia, like many other religious festivals, was not associated with a certain group in the Fayum in Graeco-Roman times. In AD 157, the inhabitants of the village of Theadelphia, regardless of their ethnic origin or legal status, could celebrate an annual festival of the god Souchos Pnepheros, which included a public procession, where the sacred images of the god were carried by bearers.⁸⁷

The god Souchos and his local incarnations in the Fayum received financial support from different guilds operating in the district. In the second century BC, the corporation of gooseherd (χηνόβοσκοι) dedicated a column in the open court of the temple of the god Souchos Pnepheros at Theadelphia.⁸⁸ This reminds of the dedication of the *peribolos* of the temple of Soknopaios by the sheep farmers (προβατοκτηνοτρόφοι) of the village of Nilopolis in the Fayum in AD 24.⁸⁹ Similarly, in a papyrus of AD 152 that concerns the lease of a *chenoboscion* by Gemenos Hormos, a Persian of the epigone, two fine geese are given as gift for the Soucheia at Tebtynis.⁹⁰ It is a reasonable assumption that the geese were consumed at the banquet of the Soucheia.⁹¹

Individuals and members of various guilds engaged in banquets and drinking assemblies held in association with religious festivals. Many invitations to dine at Oxyrhynchus, for example, are connected with the *kline* of Serapis in the Serapeion⁹² or in the *oikos* of the Serapeion.⁹³ Some of the regular monthly banquets of corporations (*sunodoi*) appear to have been organised in dining rooms owned by temples (fig. 6).⁹⁴ Temple dining rooms were probably hired out to families, holding dinners to mark social occasions like the coming of age (*mallokouria*), marriage, and

⁸⁶ *BGU* II.362.vi.22-4 = *Sel.Pap.* II.404.

⁸⁷ *P.Berl.Leihg.* II.44.10-11: κωμαστικάῖς ἡμέραις.

⁸⁸ *IG Fay.* II.107/108 (116 BC).

⁸⁹ Toutain 1915, 177.

⁹⁰ *P.Mil.Vogl.* III.145.13-14: Σουχίοις χῆν[ας] ἀρ[εστοῦ]ς δύ[ο].

⁹¹ Pork and fish: *P.Ross.Georg.* II.41.89-96.

⁹² *P.Oxy.* I.181 (the third century); *P.Coll.Youtie* I.51 (the second or third century).

⁹³ *P.Oxy.* XIV.1755 (the second or third century); *P.Coll.Youtie* I.52; *SB* XX.14503 (the third century).

⁹⁴ *P.Mich.* V.243.1; *P.Mich.* V.244.14-5; *P.Mich.* V.245.34-5; Boak 1937, 216; Alston 2001, 208-9, 212.

birthdays.⁹⁵ Based on the presence of a stone altar in front of each room and architectural similarities to dining rooms in other sanctuaries of the Fayum, four dining rooms (*deipneteria*) have been identified along the *dromos* of the temple of Soknebtynis at Tebtynis.⁹⁶



Figure 6. Peristyle building above *dromos* of the temple at Tebtynis, perhaps clubhouse of a *sunodos* (Rathbone 2009, 19)

Under Vespasian, a mud-brick *deipneterion* with a stone portal carrying a Greek dedicatory inscription is built within the sacred precinct of the south temple of Petesouchos and Pnepheros at Karanis.⁹⁷ Seats and tables were essential physical features of such *deipneteria*. The *deipneterion* in the temple at Karanis apparently had thirteen tables⁹⁸ and a social club at Tebtynis could meet in a dining hall that accommodated 22 persons, of whom 18 were members and 4 were guests.⁹⁹ Banquets were sometimes organised by religious as well as trade clubs. Although dinner invitations organised by clubs were nominally held for sacrifices, drinking remained a distinctive feature of the gathering, as is the case of the banquet of the Soucheia.¹⁰⁰

SPP XXII.117 records payments made to the praktores of Soknopaiou Nesos by Panephremmis, presumably the village scribe, for the *merismos* of the Soucheion in AD 148/9: μερισ[μοῦ] Σουχιε[ρίου].¹⁰¹ It appears that the *merismos* was a head tax paid equally by all members of the rural

⁹⁵ Rathbone 2003, 18.

⁹⁶ Anti 1931, 389; Rondot 2004.

⁹⁷ *SB* VIII.10167. On the north temple at Karanis: Yeivin 1934.

⁹⁸ *IGRR* I.1120.

⁹⁹ *P.Tebt.* I.118.3-4 (112/111 BC).

¹⁰⁰ *P.Ross.Georg.* II.41.89-96. Cf. *P.Tebt.* I.118.

¹⁰¹ *SPP* XXII.117.23.

community to pay for the expenses of the temple of the local crocodile god.¹⁰² At Soknopaiou Nesos, the *merismos* would help to cover the costs of the temple of the god Soknopaios and probably his festivals, including the Soucheia.¹⁰³ This recalls the tax contributions (*epimerismos*) of calves and young pigs provided by each village in the division of Herakleides in the Fayum for the festival of the god Serapis in the late second century AD.¹⁰⁴ In AD 177/8, villagers of Theadelphia similarly paid one drachma and three obols to the praktores for the μερισμοῦ Σουχιεῖου.¹⁰⁵ This may indicate a similar amount for the *merismos* collected for the Soucheion at Soknopaiou Nesos.¹⁰⁶

In the Ptolemaic period, it is unclear whether the *merismos* had direct connection with the cult of the god Souchos in the Arsinoite. In an official letter of 111 BC, the sender informs the addressee about official business regarding village scribes, where ‘the *merismos* of the 1600 artabas has been drawn up and given to Malas’.¹⁰⁷ Similarly, in 110 BC Petesouchos, a *komogrammateus* of Kerkeosiris, petitions the *chrematistai* for postponement of a trial against him, because he has impending ‘the payment of the *merismos* and items of grain-dues for which his office is responsible’.¹⁰⁸

In the Roman period, the *merismou Soucheiou* was intended to pay expenses related to the temple of the god Souchos.¹⁰⁹ Similarly in AD 148, the μερισμοῦ Καίσαρείου designates taxations of 25 drachmas and 3 obols imposed in Arsinoite possessions of land to cover the costs of the temple consecrated to the imperial cult.¹¹⁰ Since the Soucheion may also designate the funerary temple and burial place of the sacred crocodile of Souchos,¹¹¹ it is possible that the *merismos* for the Soucheion was also meant to cover the costs of the embalmment and interment of these sacred animals, which were presumably left by pilgrims as offerings to Sobek.¹¹² At Tebtynis, the Soucheion and burial place of crocodiles (Σουχιεῖου καὶ

¹⁰² Perpillou-Thomas 1993, 143. The temple of Souchos (Soucheion) is mentioned in field-by-field register of land in Arsinoe in the second century BC (*P.Tebt.* I.86.35).

¹⁰³ *SPP XXII*.183.

¹⁰⁴ *P.Petaus* 40 (AD 183/4).

¹⁰⁵ *P.Lond.* III.1235.15.

¹⁰⁶ *SPP XXII*.117.23.

¹⁰⁷ *P.Tebt.* I.58.38-40.

¹⁰⁸ *P.Tebt.* I.29.15-16.

¹⁰⁹ Gallazzi 1980, 49-50.

¹¹⁰ *P.Mil.Vogl.* III.183.7 = *P.Kronion* 34; Hagedorn and Shelton 1974, 41-3.

¹¹¹ Bagnani 1952, 77.

¹¹² Merola 2007, 24.

κορκοδιλοταφείου) came under the heading of second-class temples.¹¹³ In the same village, another *dromos* led off west from the main *dromos* of the temple of Soknebtynis into the desert to the Soucheion, the funerary temple for Sobek.¹¹⁴ A couple of thousand crocodiles had been buried in the necropolis at Tebtynis, where the bodies were ‘elaborately mummified, with hundreds of yards of linen bandages wound round and round so as to form at times an intricate yet attractive pattern’ (fig. 7).¹¹⁵



Figure 7. Two crocodile mummies uncovered from Tebtynis (Bagnani 1952, 76)

Although the last documentary reference to the Soucheia from Tebtynis is of 152 AD, it seems untenable that the festival ceased by the mid-second century AD for many reasons. First, the priests of the temple of Soknebtynis are last mentioned in a document of AD 211, and archaeological evidence confirms that the village was occupied until the eleventh century AD, when it was abandoned during the Fatimid period.¹¹⁶ Second, the *merismos* associated with the temple and cult of the god Souchos in the Arsinoite is confirmed in AD 177/8, that is 25 years after the festival was last mentioned.¹¹⁷ Thirdly, datable papyri and coins from Soknopaiou Nesos confirm that the village continued in use from the mid-second century BC to the mid-third century AD.¹¹⁸ From the first century BC to the first half of the third century AD, the village reached

¹¹³ *P.Tebt.* I.88.4 = *W.Chrest.* 67 (115 BC).

¹¹⁴ Rathbone 2003, 8.

¹¹⁵ Bagnani 1952, 78.

¹¹⁶ *P.Mil.Vogl.* III.145.13 = *SB* VI.9465; Rathbone 2003, 1, 24.

¹¹⁷ *P.Lond.* III.1235.15.

¹¹⁸ Peterson 1935, 14, 19. Soknopaiou Nesos began as a Ptolemaic settlement under Ptolemy Philadelphos in 241 BC (*P.Lille* 3.20). The last datable papyrus comes from the site dates back to Caracalla in AD 215, and there was no numismatic evidence of such late date (Peterson 1935, 14).

the height of its material prosperity, which was reflected in an extension of the area occupied by dwelling houses¹¹⁹ and the enlargement of the sacred precinct of the god Soknopaios with a new Egyptian-style temple at the back of the earlier Ptolemaic temple.¹²⁰ The development of the local community and the religious complex of Soknopaios would guarantee the continuity of the Soucheia in the village, probably until the mid-third century AD when the village was finally abandoned. Similarly, the entirely lacking of Christian material evidence in the village means that Soknopaiou Nesos remained a pagan community until the close of its history around AD 250.¹²¹

Conclusion

The Soucheia is the name given in papyri for the festival of the crocodile god Sobek and his local incarnations in the Arsinoite. The celebration began in 20 Epeiph and lasted for seven days with the total consumption of 28 artabas of wheat. It symbolically commemorates the reappearance of crocodiles after aestivation as well as the rise of the Nile flood. The Soucheia was associated with the villages of Tebtynis and Soknopaiou Nesos from the second century BC to the second century AD. Yet it is possible that the festival survived into the mid-third century AD, when the village of Soknopaiou Nesos was finally abandoned. The *merismos* collected by the *praktores* from villagers at Soknopaiou Nesos and Theadelphia in the second century AD probably covered the costs of the temple of Souchos and the embalmment and interment of the sacred crocodiles. The Soucheia was an occasion for social gathering and amusement for the rural inhabitants as well as members of corporations, including gooseherds, who found it an opportunity for dining and drinking together. The temple dining-halls at Tebtynis and elsewhere in the Fayum probably provided fitting arenas for such religious and social banquets. Egyptian villagers, Greek inhabitants, and the controversial Persians of the epigone took part in the Soucheia, reflecting the malleability of religious practices in the Arsinoite during the Graeco-Roman period.

¹¹⁹ Peterson 1935, 21.

¹²⁰ Davoli 2005, 35.

¹²¹ Peterson 1935, 21.

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