Incubation at Saqqâra¹
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Few sites in the Greco-Roman world provide a more richly varied set of documents attesting to the importance of dreams in personal religion than the cluster of religious complexes situated on the Saqqâra bluff west of Memphis.² The area consists primarily of temples and sacred animal necropoleis linked to several cults, most notably the famous Sarapeum complex,³ and has produced inscriptions, papyri and ostraka that cite or even recount dreams received by various individuals, while literary sources preserved on papyrus likewise contain descriptions of god-sent dreams received there.⁴ The abundant evidence for dreams and dreamers at Saqqâra, as well as the evidence for at least one conventional oracle at the site,⁵ has led to the understandable assumption that incubation was commonly practiced there.⁶ However,

¹ Acknowledgements: In addition to those who attended the presentation of this paper at the Congress of Papyrology, I would like to thank Dorothy J. Thompson and Richard Jasnow for sharing their insights on this subject.

² The subject discussed in this article will be dealt with more fully in a book now in preparation, tentatively entitled Where Dreams May Come: Incubation Sanctuaries in the Greco-Roman World.

³ On Saqqâra and its religious life, see especially UPZ I, pp. 7–95 and Thompson 1988 (with references to earlier studies); cf. LexAg V.3 (1983) 412–428. For the sacred animal necropoleis, see the various volumes of the Egyptian Exploration Society cited below, as well as Kessler 1989, 56–150 and Davies and Smith 1997. The term ”Sarapeum” here refers not only to the catacombs and religious structures associated with the burial of the Apis bulls and their subsequent worship as Osorapis (i.e., Osiris-Apis, a divinized form of the Apis bulls), but also the complexes devoted to the worship of the divinized Mother-of-Apis cows associated with Isis, Horus’s falcons, and Thoth’s sacred ibises and baboons, as well as shrines of other deities such as Astarte. This area appears to have been known in Demotic as the ”House-of-Osiris-Apis” (Pr-WsIr-Hp), in recognition of that god’s predominance, and did not include the large temple complexes at the eastern edge of the bluff, among which would have been the Asklepieion (see below) and Anoubieion. Throughout this study I am using ”Sarapeum” to refer to the broad zone of complexes, i.e. the ”House-of-Osiris-Apis,” and ”Sarapieion” to refer specifically to the complex devoted to Osorapis.

⁴ To these sources can now be added P.Cair.Zen. I 59034, the well known letter from the Zenon Archive in which an otherwise unknown individual named Zoilos wrote to the dioiketes Apollonios to report a series of dreams from Sarapis concerning the need to establish a new Sarapeum. As convincingly argued by Kent J. Rigsby, this Sarapeum was most likely intended for the Greek quarter of Memphis, which would mean that the dreams were received at Saqqâra (see Rigsby 2001). However, there is no compelling reason to conclude that Zoilos had been engaging in incubation.

⁵ This oracular function is partly attested by the discovery of three Demotic papyri with oracle questions for Osiris-Apis, Osiris-Apis and Isis, and Isis, respectively (see Smith 1992). In addition, an ostrakon from the Hor Archive records that he had made an inquiry of Osorapis regarding the ibis cult and received three ”utterances” (ḥt-mdt), a very broad term that in this context either refers to an oracle or the pronouncement of cult authorities (O.Hor 33; cf. O.Hor, p. 133 and Ray 1987, 86; for other examples of this term in the Hor Archive, see below). For the oracular nature of the Sarapeum in Greek imagination, see Borgeaud and Volokhine 2000, 74.

⁶ Though not the first to discuss the apparent importance of incubation at Saqqâra, Ulrich Wilcken was the most influential, doing so in the prefatory chapters of his corpus of Ptolemaic papyri from the Memphis area (UPZ I, pp. 31–35). While Wilcken properly used cautious language and pointed out the scantiness of evidence, others have made much bolder assertions about the importance of incubation at Saqqâra (e.g., Dunand 2006, 10–11 and Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 135–136, most recently).
careful analysis of the surviving Greek and Demotic documents shows that while we can be certain that incubation was indeed practiced at Saqqâra, it is far from clear who would engage in this ritual, which gods they might try to consult, and what they hoped to achieve – i.e., whether they were engaging in therapeutic or divinatory incubation.⁷

That incubation was practiced at Saqqâra has been known for a long time, but too often scholars concluding that this was the case have emphasized unreliable sources, and nowhere is this clearer than in the claims regarding Sarapis – even though the sources actually provide no clear evidence that visitors to the Sarapeum could solicit dreams from this god. The long-held conclusion that Sarapis healed through incubation at Memphis – as occurred at his Alexandrian and Canopus sanctuaries – has been based in no small part on a badly damaged dedicatory inscription from a small building once occupied by lighters of sacred lamps (λυχνάπται).⁸ Those using the inscription as evidence of this, however, were depending on restorations by earlier editors such as Wilcken, who proposed language related to dreams and healing (e.g., [ύγια] | [σθεῖς ύ]πὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, [θεραπευ] | [θεῖς ύ]πὸ τοῦ θεοῦ, [ιστρείας χρωμένος τοῖς πε[ρί ναόν] | [ονείροις]). In the most recent edition of this early Ptolemaic text by Étienne Bernand these unreliable restoration attempts have rightly been stripped out of the text – as has its validity as a source of evidence for therapeutic incubation involving Sarapis:


diακεί(μενος ---) | ---[ΠΕΙΛΙΣ] χρωμένος τοῖς Π[---] | --- ύκ
νησσαμήν υγιείας [τυχείν?] ---) | --- Υ.

Without it, there remains no document of any sort from Saqqâra that clearly shows a link between Sarapis and incubation.⁹

The other document repeatedly cited in this context is an artifact without known parallel, a stele that appears to have been the storefront sign of a professional dream-interpreter who was plying his craft at Saqqâra during the second century BC. This stele was carved as an aedicula with a painted scene showing a bull approaching a horned altar, and just below the architrave it bore a painted text advertising this individual’s services:

ένυπνια κρίνω, | τοῦ θεοῦ πρόσταγ | μα ἔχων
τὺχ’ ἄγα | θαί | Κρής ἐστιν ὦ | κρίνων τάδε.

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⁷ The bibliography of studies devoted partly or entirely to incubation would be too great to cite here. For the most detailed overview currently available, see Wacht 1997. The terms "therapeutic incubation" and "divinatory incubation" are my own – though comparable terms have been employed in other languages – and are intended to emphasize the fact that there were two very different reasons to solicit dreams from the gods at their sanctuaries, and that some gods tended to be consulted for one of these reasons but not the other.

⁸ IGrÉ Louvre 11 + Pl. 10 (with apparatus criticus). For Wilcken’s treatment, see UPZ I, pp. 34–35.

⁹ The text itself does refer to a medical recovery – perhaps even a healing miracle – credited to a god, but miraculous recoveries were routinely obtained from the gods without recourse to incubation. Moreover, the god is not identified, and since there is a possibility that it was found being reused it is not out of the question for Imouthes or another god worshiped in the vicinity to have been intended.
I judge dreams, having the mandate of the god.
To good fortune! The one judging these is a Cretan.10

This inscription certainly shows the importance of dreams to those frequenting the area, but a dream-interpreter who has set up shop in the busy commercial zone along the "Sarapieion Way" leading from the Sarapieion to the Anoubieion is not necessarily proof of incubation: after all, one would expect a cult official, not a private individual working for profit, to be involved in deciphering dreams received through incubation. Instead, this individual would seem to be an ordinary professional diviner drawn to a site rich in potential customers.11 Therefore, neither this Cretan nor the dream-interpreter briefly mentioned in one of the Ptolemaios papyri represents evidence for incubation at the Sarapeum.12

The painting on this stele raises a question that is at the very heart of the issue of incubation and the cult of Sarapis at Memphis: if "Sarapis" was indeed asked for oracular or therapeutic dreams there, which god was this? The Cretan dream-interpreter does not name the god who had given him his "mandate," but he does appear to provide an image — and that image is of the Apis bull, not the god whose origin was linked to Apis and who by then had become instantly recognizable throughout the Hellenic world in a bearded, anthropomorphic form.13 The ambiguity here is indicative of a complicated, ongoing debate over the origins of the god known as "Sarapis."14 At the very least, it can be said that Sarapis developed from an association of Apis and Osiris, perhaps one retaining Apis' oracular function, and that in Ptolemaic times there was still a perceived distinction between the Hellenized god "Sarapis" worshiped by the Greeks and the purely Egyptian god Osorapis.15 Of similar importance is the related question of where did the Hellenized god Sarapis first emerge? The recent study by Philippe Borgeaud and Youri Volokhine has persuasively argued that while the worship of Apis gave rise to this new deity at Memphis under foreign influence, it was at Ptolemaic Alexandria that the god became fully Hellenized. Most likely, it was also at Alexandria (or perhaps nearby Canopus), undoubtedly under further Greek influence, that Sarapis became a god who healed and issued oracles to those engaging in incubation, perhaps as early as the reign of Ptolemy I.16 As the cult of Sarapis spread both within Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean

10 IMetrEg 112, most recently cited as evidence of incubation by Dunand 2006, 11.
11 For a parallel situation elsewhere in the Greek world, see Plutarch's statement about deceitful soothsayers setting up shop near sanctuaries of Sarapis and the Mother of Gods (Plut. De Pyth. or. 25 [= Mor. 407C]). On the presence of small businesses at the Sarapeum, see Thompson 1988, 26–27, 279. It is also possible that this individual served in an official capacity, presumably pastophoros, but when not on duty would earn income by interpreting dreams. Whether his Cretan origin disqualified him from serving as a pastophoros is not made clear by the sources on these low-level functionaries.
12 UPZ 184.79. For the Ptolemaios Archive, see below.
13 In an article on horned altars in Egypt, Jan Quaegebeur argued that the lack of a solar disk indicates that this is a sacrificial bull rather than the Apis bull, but then cast doubt on this conclusion by speculating that the image might represent a Hellenized version of the Apis bull (Quaegebeur 1993, 334–335). Therefore, although it has been considered the Apis bull by generations of scholars, this identification should not be accepted as certain.
15 On Osorapis at Saqqâra, see n. 3. For the phenomenon of a "coexistence" of Greek and Egyptian gods under a single name rather than a complete syncretism, see Dunand 1999.
16 Incubation, especially by ordinary individuals rather than kings and priests, might not have been a native Egyptian religious phenomenon, but rather one adopted from the Greeks. Since the earliest reported instance of Sarapis functioning as a
world, the practice of incubation continued to be an element of his worship to some extent (though probably at not nearly as many sites as is commonly believed).\textsuperscript{17}

At Saqqâra there is no reliable evidence for dreams being sought from Sarapis by Greek worshipers, but his local Egyptian counterpart Osorapis could be consulted in this manner – though perhaps not by ordinary individuals, and not necessarily at his own temple complex. The only document that clearly records a dream being sought from Osorapis at Saqqâra is hardly evidence of incubation being practiced by ordinary worshipers: in one of the Demotic documents penned by Ḥor of Sebennytos, a native Egyptian who served the god Thoth as a scribe or secretary and who left an invaluable archive of Demotic and Greek ostraka in the South Ibis Galleries,\textsuperscript{18} he records an oracular dream that came after he spent two days in one of Thoth's sacred ibis galleries supplicating not only the divinized ibises, but also Osorapis and Osormnevis:

(1.) Year 26, Mekheir, day 11: the house of rest (of) the Ibis, the day after spending two days
(2.) (in) making supplication, saying [........] before [........]
(3.) "Come to me my lord Osorapis and Osormnevis:
(4.) <come to me> my great lord Osorapis, the great god, and the gods who rest (in the)
 necropolis of the Sarapeum
(5.) and (the) necropolis of Ἡερνεβ, together with those who rest upon the sleeping-place (ʂtrt)
 [or, shety.t ("shrine") (of) the House of Thoth
(6.) (in) Memphis: hear my voice my lord Osormnevis(?) and the gods who rest in
(7.) the necropolis of Djedit, together with those who rest (in) the eastern desert of Heliopolis."\textsuperscript{19}

What we have here, then, is not incubation within the cult of Osorapis (or Sarapis), but rather incubation by a cult official of Thoth who invoked multiple divinities worshiped in the area, among them Osorapis and a god linked to the Heliopolitan bull-god Mnevis.

This episode of incubation set in a sacred animal necropolis, it should be noted, has an echo in a Demotic school text that tells of an unnamed pharaoh who enters the Apis bull catacombs in order to engage miraculous healer – the report that Demetrios of Phaleron had his eyesight restored by the god in an unspecified manner (Diog. Laert. 5.5.76) – pertains to Alexandria, and there is much other literary evidence that points to Sarapis issuing therapeutic and prophetic dreams there and at Canopus, it stands to reason that incubation became a feature of the cult of Sarapis in the Delta region rather than Memphis, despite the latter’s Greek population. (Most notably, see Strabo 17.1.17 on Canopus.)

\textsuperscript{17} Incubation is known to have been practiced at few sanctuaries of Sarapis outside of Egypt. The best evidence for therapeutic incubation involving the god is to be found in a lost Menippean Satire of Varro set in Athens, the Eumenides, in which there are unambiguous references to Sarapis healing or issuing prescriptions through dreams (Varro, Sat. Men., Eumenides frags. 144, 145, 147, ed. Cèbe (= frags. 152, 128, 138 Krenkel). Divinatory incubation, on the other hand, may be attested in a lengthy inscription from the Thessalonika Sarapeum narrating the establishment of the god’s cult at Oopus as the result of a worshiper receiving two dreams from Sarapis while sleeping in an oikos at Thessalonika, which could be a private home, lodgings at the sanctuary, or perhaps even a small structure devoted to incubation (IG X 2.1.255 [= Bricault 2000, 113/0536 + Pl. 26]).


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in incubation and receives a dream in which an apparition instructs him how to demonstrate his piety better.20 Though most likely fictional, this story at least suggests the possibility that dreams could be sought from Osorapis by sleeping in theApis catacombs at the Sarapieion, just as Ḫor had slept in Thoth’s ibis galleries.21 The question this raises, of course, is who would have been permitted to sleep in the small shrines located among the mummified remains of animals sacred to the gods of the Saqqâra bluff.22 In one case, we have a cult official; in the other, we have a king. And this in turn raises the possibility that incubation in the cults of Thoth and Osorapis was limited to cult officials (and perhaps the occasional monarch). If so, the masses of ordinary worshipers who were excluded, as happened at certain other incubation sanctuaries in the Greek East, would still have been able to seek dream-oracles from the gods – only, it would have had to be a cult official who engaged in incubation on their behalf.23 Such a conclusion is supported by other ostraka from the Ḫor Archive that appear to show him incubating on behalf of others, seeking dreams not only from Thoth, but from Isis as well.

While we have good evidence for native Egyptian gods being consulted through incubation at Saqqâra – though only by cult officials such as Ḫor, according to our limited sources – there is no clear evidence that the Greco-Egyptian god Sarapis was consulted in this manner for the purpose of obtaining either oracles or cures. But this is not to say that visitors to Saqqâra could not engage in incubation: there is, in fact, good evidence for ordinary individuals doing so, but the likelihood is that it was another god, Imhotep (or Imouthes to the Greeks), who was consulted in this manner there.24 Indeed, it is quite possible that the god’s availability to ailing worshipers through incubation eliminated the need for Osorapis/Sarapis to provide these services there.25 A god who had long been venerated for his healing powers, the Egyptian Imhotep was understandably associated with Asklepios by the Greeks in Egypt – and this association may even have led to the emergence of incubation as an element of Imhotep’s cult. The exact role of incubation in his worship, however, is difficult to determine: while the general assumption that ailing individuals could visit this god’s "Asklepieion" at Saqqâra, located somewhere in the vicinity of the Sarapeum, and receive dreams that would lead to cures is reasonable, the evidence for this is not altogether reliable.26 The source that is most commonly cited is a Greek Oxyrhynchus papyrus preserving the odd, almost certainly fictional first-person account of a man who, like his mother, received therapeutic

20 See Spiegelberg 1912; cf. Borgeaud and Volokhine 2000, 74. Another work of fiction, the Dream of Nektanebo, begins with the pharaoh Nektanebo II soliciting a prophetic dream from “the gods” while at Memphis in 343 BC and receiving one in which he saw Isis and the other gods of Egypt, and this episode may also have been set at Saqqâra (see Koenen 1985; cf. Gauger 2002 and Ryholt 2002).

21 The point was made by Wilcken, who appears nonplussed by the text’s unreliable nature (UPZ I, p. 32).

22 There have been a wealth of publications concerning the different animal catacombs since the excavations in the 1960’s, including four final excavation reports: Martin 1981, Davies and Smith 2005, Davies et al. 2006a; Davies et al. 2006b.

23 Incubation by proxy appears to have been a more widespread practice than has previously been recognized, as will be detailed in my book on incubation sanctuaries (above, n. 2).


25 An unpublished papyrus might have shed light on this issue, but appears unlikely to: according to Davies and Smith 1997, 124, an accounts list found at Saqqâra makes repeated references to "the sick" in such a way that it must be alluding to one or more temples at which the sick were present as suppliants, perhaps even engaging in incubation. While such a document would be most reasonably associated with the Asklepieion, it might also have pertained to other cults.

dreams from Imouthes at an unidentified sanctuary. 27 The common belief that this sanctuary was the Saqqâra Asklepieion is reasonable, if unproven. However, the account itself, being part of a larger aretalogical narrative that appears to have served as the introduction to a Hermetic text or some other religious treatise, 28 seems no more credible than the brief tale told by Thessalos of Tralles to introduce and legitimize the astro-botanical treatise On the Virtues of Herbs. 29 Still, even if completely fabricated, the fact that this fragmentary narrative apparently describes two individuals traveling to the Asklepieion and engaging in incubation suggests that it was a common practice there by the Roman period. 30

While this papyrus does seem to indicate that individuals could themselves engage in incubation at the as yet undiscovered sanctuary of Imhotep, the documentary sources, as is the case with Osorapis, only pertain to cult officials seeking dreams from him. Moreover, if one excludes the funerary stele of Taimhotep/Taimouthes, the wife of the high priest of Ptah, and its account of this priest receiving a fertility-related dream from the Imhotep/Imouthes that may or may not have been solicited through incubation, the sources only record prophetic dreams rather than therapeutic. 31 Therefore, the issue of by whom and for what purpose incubation might have been practiced at Saqqâra’s Asklepieion is a lot more open than usually recognized. Even so, there is good evidence for ancient worshipers believing that Imhotep issued dream- oracles at Saqqâra and elsewhere, as well as evidence for some of his cult officials being expert dream-interpreters. 32

Once again, the best source of information for this is the Ḥor Archive. Not only does Ḥor attest to having solicited a dream from Imhotep on at least one occasion (though whether he did so at the god’s temple rather than an animal catacomb is unclear), but he also refers to consulting one of Imhotep’s official dream-interpreters himself. In one ostrakon, Ḥor records a lengthy invocation of Imhotep and other gods, the point of which is a request for an oracular dream from the god:

(1.) I call upon thee [in heaven, in earth(?)],
(2.) Imhotep, creation of south-of-his-wall,
(3.) (in) the peak, lord of ’Ankhtawy [(in) Memphis]

28 See Garth Fowden’s statement that the ”aretalogy emanated from a milieu similar to that of Hermetism” (Fowden 1986, 50–52, 147, at 52).
30 The practice of incubation by ordinary individuals at the Asklepieion may be supported by a graffito found at the nearby Sarapieion (see below).
32 It is unlikely that Saqqâra was the only place where dream- oracles could be sought from Imhotep, since if a Demotic ostrakon from Ptolemaic Thebes has been read correctly, a temple of Imhotep somewhere in the area – perhaps one associated with Ptah’s temple at Karnak – had fifty-six pastophoroi ”explaining (?) dreams” to those who consulted them (nṣ wnw n Pr- ḫy-m-htp / mḥ-56 iw.w gdl rsrw(?) ) (O. Leid. Dem. 365, col. II, 5–7; cf. Ray 1987, 91 [with corrections]). It also appears that visitors to the sanctuary that Amenhotep/Amennothes shared with Imhotep at Deir el-Bahari could solicit dreams from him there, too, but the issue is clouded by the fact that Greek visitors to the site appear to have equated Imhotep with the Greek Asklepios rather than the Greco-Egyptian fusion “Imouthes” worshiped at Saqqâra (see Lajtar 2006, 47).
(18.) ...come for a dream of ḫrwrt(?), come forth...\textsuperscript{33}

This document, however, does not state where he hoped to receive this dream, raising the possibility that Ḫr or was sleeping among mummified sacred animals rather than at the Asklepieion. In another ostrakon, Ḫr indicates that he received a dream at the temple of Imhotep while "serving in the dromos" in an unknown capacity, and goes on to recount an oracular dream pertaining to the cult of that god:

(1.) [--- I was] situated in
(2.) the temple of the Peak (of the) Lord of 'Ankh[tawy] [i.e., the sanctuary of Imhotep].
(3.) I was told a dream while I was serving (in the) dromos
(4.) (in) Year 26, Mekhir [= March, 155 BC], the night of the [---]. It happened (that)
(5.) I dreamt (that) a priest came into the sanctuaries.
(6.) Priests offered incense. They said "Imhotep, son of Ptah, the <divine> [scribe],
(7.) thou shalt place him at our head(?)." It is written.\textsuperscript{34}

And, on a different occasion, Ḫr consulted a "magician of Imhotep" – some type of cult official or priest – regarding an "utterance" of Thoth that he had received but could not interpret with confidence (despite himself apparently being trained at dream-interpretation):

(1.) No matter is ever forgotten which concerns
(2.) the Ibis in (any) way on earth.
(3.) I petitioned four magicians (ḥr-tb)
(4.) ūntil Phamenoth, day 16, (in) Memphis;
(5.) (but) not one of them gave judgment on the utter-
(6.) ance (ḥt-mdt) which concerns these things until
(7.) Phamenoth, day 16, except
(8.) the magician (ḥr-tb) of Imhotep, son of Ptah,
(9.) to whom they call (throughout) the entire two lands
(10.) because of his magic-making(?).
(11.) The god himself was the one who
(12.) recorded [= "interpreted"?] (ḏl'-mdt) in connection with this.\textsuperscript{35}

Undoubtedly, Ḫr had received an oracular dream – perhaps through incubation – and resorted to an official dream-interpreter with greater expertise than he himself had. The fact that an expert at interpreting oracular dreams was available for consultation at Imhotep's sanctuary almost certainly shows that

\textsuperscript{33} \textit{O.Hor} 18, verso, 1–3, 18 (trans. J.D. Ray).

\textsuperscript{34} \textit{O.Hor} 59.1–7 (trans. J.D. Ray). This passage is followed by a second dream account, perhaps also pertaining to the cult of Imhotep.

\textsuperscript{35} \textit{O.Hor} 17A (trans. J.D. Ray); cf. \textit{O.Hor}, p. 135.
Imhotep at Saqqâra issued dream-oracles in addition to healing people. When this evidence is combined with a Demotic source from the Late Period, it appears that Imhotep, at least at this site, was like Sarapis at Alexandria, Bes at Abydos and Amenhotep at Deir el-Bahari – a god who issued therapeutic dreams and provided oracles through perhaps both dreams and a more conventional medium.

This ostrakon concerning the "utterance" from Thoth is not the only one in the Ḥor Archive that shows the role of oracular dreams and incubation in this god's cult at Saqqâra. While oracles of Thoth are known elsewhere in Egypt, only at Saqqâra is there evidence for dream-oracles being solicited through incubation. This evidence, however, at best shows that a cult official such as Ḥor could engage in the practice, and that such consultations took place not in a structure designed for the purpose (like the enkoiometerion discussed below), but among the mummified remains of the sacred ibises. While the evidence for therapeutic incubation is limited to a severely damaged text that appears to refer to Ḥor's consultation of Thoth on behalf of a sick individual but does not mention a dream, the archive clearly reveals Ḥor's repeated engagement in divinatory incubation. The clearest evidence for this is the ostrakon in which Ḥor reports having spent more than two days in the "house of rest (of) the Ibis" invoking Osorapis and Osormnevis as well as Thoth's divinized ibises, though damage to the text where Ḥor appears to have been describing a dream prevents us from knowing whether he received a dream-oracle from these bull-gods rather than Thoth.

Other documents from this archive clearly refer to dream-oracles that Ḥor obtained from Thoth – in at least one case on behalf of someone else – but either do not specify that they were received through incubation or do not indicate where incubation had occurred, so it is impossible to reach any firm conclusions regarding the extent to which the Ḥor Archive is evidence for incubation in the cult of Thoth. A religious treatise, however, appears to shed further light on the issues raised by these documents. While there is no reason to conclude that ordinary worshipers could solicit dreams from Thoth in the manner and place that Ḥor did, there is excellent reason to conclude that Ḥor's propensity for engaging in incubation was typical of those serving the god: in one of the unplaced fragments of the

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36 Additional support for this possibility can be found in a Greek Magical Papyrus that features a ritual for summoning "Asklepios of Memphis" (τὸν ἐν Μέμφις Ἀσκληπιόν) in a dream, further suggesting that Imhotep was known for issuing dream-oracles there (Pap.Graec.Mag. VII 630).

37 A Demotic letter from northern Saqqâra seems to indicate that Imhotep's oracle had been consulted about burial for sacred animals (or else residents of Memphis's Greek quarter), and since this predates the earliest reliable evidence for incubation in Egypt it is more likely to refer to a more traditionally Egyptian mode of divination (Wildung 1977b, 55, §32, citing Smith 1974, 16); as suggested by Mark Depauw, this letter that was dated to the 30th Dynasty (380–343 BC) appears to be the same one published as P.Turner 15 and dated c. 350–275 BC (Depauw 2006, 46, 49). For the evidence that at certain sites Sarapis, Bes and Amenhotep issued conventional oracles as well as therapeutic or oracular dreams (or both), see my study of incubation sanctuaries (above, n. 2).

38 For Thoth as an oracular god, see Volokhine 2004, 148–150.

39 O.Hor 32. Another ostrakon from the archive appears to refer to a remedy that Isis, not Thoth, had prescribed to Ḥor for the queen of Egypt – representing the only evidence from Saqqâra for therapeutic incubation in Isis’ cult (O.Hor 28.15–17).

40 See the comment by Ray suggesting that "the ibis-gallery is incidental as a setting," in which case Thoth's role in this incubation session would have been marginal (O.Hor 56).

41 O.Hor 1–3, 8, 11, 12–12A, and Greek Texts A–E. See also O.Hor 22–23, which refer to "utterances" almost certainly issued through dreams.
Demotic *Book of Thoth*, reference is made to "the place of dreaming" (*s.t rswy*), and the context suggests that certain types of priests or cult officials of Thoth would solicit dreams at a specific shrine designated for this purpose.42 This passage, along with two related fragments,43 raises the possibility that divinatory incubation may have been a somewhat widespread feature of Thoth’s cult, though one limited to those who, like Ḥor, served the god in an official capacity.44

What is perhaps the best evidence for ordinary worshipers engaging in incubation at Saqqâra was only published relatively recently, and thus has not been included in previous discussions of the subject: a graffito written on the left forepaw of a stone sphinx in the *dromos* around 275–225 BC that states, "There are countless mischievous ones in the sleeping chamber" ([ε]ν ἕκομητηρι [ωι | μύριοι σινα-μ[ωροι]).45 This represents the clearest proof that ordinary worshipers engaged in incubation at Saqqâra, since the reference to "countless mischievous ones" either alludes to a mixture of male and female worshipers who were not exactly trying to fall asleep like they were supposed to, or else to a more sinister element causing trouble for others trying to take advantage of the facility.46 Unfortunately, this graffito does not tell us which god these "mischievous ones" – and those to whom this characterization did not apply – were trying to consult, nor does it tell us whether they were hoping for therapeutic dreams or oracular dreams, or both. Since the graffito was found within the *Sarapieion* proper, it might reveal incubation linked to Sarapis (or Osorapis).47 However, since the sanctuary of Imhotep was just a short walk from the *dromos*, and worshipers appear to have circulated freely among the different cult sites at Saqqâra, it is just as likely that the graffito pertained to the cult of this god, especially since the Imouthes aretalogy from Oxyrhynchus suggests the existence of a structure in which multiple worshipers could

43 See Jasnow and Zauzich 2005, 12.
44 Since the dialogue between Thoth and "The-one-who-praises-knowledge" (*mr-r*) to which the *Book of Thoth* is devoted appears to be set in Hermopolis, it may be that incubation in Thoth’s cult was only practiced at his major cult centers. One of the Setne Khamwas tales, in which the magician Horus-son-of-Paneshe sleeps in Thoth’s temple at Hermopolis and receives a dream, may provide further evidence for incubation there, though a work of fiction (translated in Lichtheim 1973–1980, III 146–147).
45 *SEG* 49, 2292.
46 As noted by Georges Nachtergael, the *lex sacra* from the Oropos *Amphiareion* that mandates separate sleeping areas for men and women might explain the meaning of the term in this graffito (Nachtergael 1999, 354–355, citing *IOropos* 277, ll. 43–47). Whether this unidentified incubation chamber had a rule similar to that at Oropos is uncertain, but if so it may have been a rule more honored in the breach.
47 Such a conclusion might find support in the fact that several other Greek graffiti from the *dromos* are by worshipers of Sarapis and Isis (*SEG* 49, 2260, 2261, 2301, 2314, 2315, and possibly 2313), but no other gods are named. For a discussion of these other texts, see Nachtergael 1999.
engage in incubation. Like so many of the other sources from Saqqâra, then, this graffito reveals that incubation was a prominent feature of the religious life there, but raises more questions than it answers.48

The remaining evidence for dreams and dreamers at Saqqâra comes from the voluminous Ptolemaios Archive, the papers of a so-called "recluse" (κάτοχος) who, along with his brother Apollonios and two twin girls whose guardian he became, lived at the Sarapeum for many years around the same time that Ḥor was serving there.49 Along with the Sacred Tales of Aelius Aristides and the Ḥor Archive, a small group of the documents in this archive represents the richest collection of first-person accounts of dreams to survive from the ancient world, since all four individuals recorded their dreams with great diligence, usually noting the date as well as providing a detailed narrative. This is also true of another individual whose dreams are preserved in the archive, an Egyptian associate named Nektembēs.50 These documents, however, are not a good source for incubation. Some of the dreams they relate were prophetic in nature, at least raising the possibility of divinatory incubation, but none pertains to health matters. More importantly, with the possible exception of the eight dreams shared with Ptolemaios by Nektembēs, none of these accounts betray a sign of having been solicited through incubation; instead, they appear to have been received under ordinary circumstances (or, to be more precise, circumstances that were "ordinary" for those whose life’s path had led them to become long-term residents of the Sarapeum). Therefore, while attesting a profound interest in dreams on the part of these individuals – and, no doubt, many

48 A similarly ambiguous situation from roughly the same period can be seen in a short letter from the Zenon Archive that could allude to therapeutic incubation but does not indicate which god was involved. Addressed to Zenon by an individual named Dromon, the letter conveys a request that he purchase Attica honey that had been prescribed by an unnamed god for an eye ailment: "When you are about to sail up-river in good health, order one of those in your company to purchase a kotyle of Attic honey, since I have need of it for my eyes, according to the god’s command" (ὡς δ’ ἂν ἀναπληρῆς ύπαινών, σύνταξόν τιν τῶν παρὰ σοῦ | ἀγοράσαί μελίτος Ἀττικῶν κοτύλην χρειάζομαι γάρ ἐξόμ πρός | τοῦ ὀρθάλιου κατὰ πρόστασιμα τοῦ θεοῦ) (P.Cair.Zen. III 59426.5–7). It is likely that Zenon was in Alexandria, where imported goods of this sort would have been readily available, whereas Dromon was at Memphis, anticipating his arrival. The identity of the god was assumed by Dromon to be obvious to his recipient, and has been assumed by scholars to have been Sarapis or Imhotep/Imouthes. In either case, to receive this prescription Dromon very likely had to trek up to the Saqqâra bluff and either engage in incubation himself or engage a cult official to do so on his behalf.

49 Ptolemaios Archive papyri providing detailed accounts of one or more dreams: UPZ I 77, 78, 79; P.Dem.Bologna 3171, 3173 (re-edited in Bresciani 1978, cf. BLDem, p. 629; contra Bresciani see Goudriaan 1988, 44–46); O.Dem.Hermitage 1126, 1127, 1128, 1129, 1131. Papyri referring to or summarizing unrecorded dreams: UPZ I 68 (recto, ll. 5–6), 69 (recto, l. 6), 70 (recto, ll. 11, 29–30), 80(?). Papyri possibly alluding to dreams: UPZ I 18 (l. 30, τοῦ θεοῦ ἐπειτάξαντος), 20 (l. 27, κατὰ πρόστασιμα δὲ τοῦ θεοῦ). This group’s preoccupation with dreams can also be inferred from the fact that when Apollonios was copying from the fictional Dream of Nektanebo (UPZ I 81) he stopped after the description of the pharaoh’s dream, indicating that he did not care about the tale as a whole (noted by Koenen 1985, 193). In addition to the extensive commentaries by Wilcken in UPZ I, see Thompson 1988, 212–265 et pass. and, more recently, Ray 2002, 130–147 and Ray 2006 (both focusing extensively on the dream texts), Legras 2007 and Veïsse 2007 (for linguistic and ethnic issues, respectively).

50 UPZ I 79.

51 Although the context of this individual’s eight dreams is not recorded, it is perhaps significant that four of them were received on the night of May 4, 159 BC and the other four on May 23 of that year, since elsewhere in Ptolemaic Egypt dating dreams was linked with incubation (O. Nicholson R. 98, on which see Ray 1999). Thus Wilcken’s suspicion that the dreams were linked to incubation may well be correct (UPZ I, pp. 349–350).
other unrecorded residents and visitors – the documents of the Ptolemaios Archive cannot be considered certain evidence for incubation at Saqqâra.52

As a careful examination of the sources reveals, the evidence for incubation at Saqqâra is less abundant and more complex than previously recognized. The Ἅρω archive represents unambiguous proof that incubation was indeed practiced there, but since the pertinent documents show a cult official engaging in incubation it is not advisable to extrapolate from them that ordinary worshipers could do so as well. Similarly, it is clear that dreams and dream-interpretation played a role at the Asklepieion where Imhotep/Imouthes was worshiped, but the evidence for incubation being practiced there by ordinary worshipers is not altogether reliable. Indeed, the most reliable source for an incubation dormitory that was open to the masses is the graffito that cannot be linked with a particular divinity, let alone a known structure. Furthermore, the regularly repeated claim that Sarapis aided his worshipers at his Sarapieion through incubation, especially in terms of health matters, must be seen as highly suspect. It is, of course, quite possible that one could solicit dreams from Sarapis (or Osorapis) in this manner, and that Imhotep/Imouthes and other gods worshiped on the Saqqâra bluff likewise were commonly called upon for prophetic or therapeutic dreams.53 However, until more definitive evidence is discovered or becomes available, it would be advisable to recognize the limited, complex and unreliable nature of the sources that heretofore have too often been cited as proof that popular incubation was a prominent feature of worship at Saqqâra.54

Works Cited


52 The point was pithily made by Wilcken (UPZ I, p. 34), but nonetheless the dreams of Ptolemaios and his contemporaries are occasionally linked to incubation, most recently in Weber 1998, 30 and Dunand 2006, 11.

53 It is also possible that the role and nature of incubation in the religious life of Saqqâra changed over time, but since most of the evidence is Ptolemaic a diachronic study is not possible. This appears to have been the case in Egyptian religion in general, since in Roman times revelation rituals for summoning a god (phr-ngr) were no longer solely performed by priests, as the magical papyri attest (see Ritner 1993, 99, 214–220 and Frankfurter 2000, 180–181). Thus just as such sources reveal a democratization of revelation rituals, the practice of incubation at Saqqâra may have shifted into the popular sphere in Roman times as well. (Whether such a pattern occurred at Egyptian sanctuaries elsewhere is impossible to determine from the limited sources, which provide evidence both for and against concluding that this was the case.)

54 Two volumes currently being prepared for publication by J.D. Ray, Demotic, Hieroglyphic and Greek Inscriptions from the Sacred Animal Necropolis, North Saqqara and Demotic Ostraca from North Saqqara, have the potential to provide new insights into these matters.


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