SETHIAN NAMES IN MAGICAL TEXTS:
PROTOPHANES AND MEIROTHEOS

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Sethian texts display a number of mythological characters whose names and origins have so far defied efforts to give them historical and philological explanations. We are still in the dark, for example, about the provenance of such central figures as Barbelo and Yaldabaoth, despite several ingenious attempts in the past to solve the riddles of their names. This article will focus on two somewhat less prominent members of the Sethian pantheon, by exploring the possibility that their historical backgrounds may be illuminated by a small group of magical texts where their names seem to appear. It is a pleasure to dedicate this study to my friend John D. Turner, whose ground-breaking work on Sethianism has taught us so much over the years.

1. Protophanes

Protophanes, it will be recalled, appears in the four “Platonising Sethian treatises” (Zostrianos, Allogenes, the Three Steles of Seth, Marsanes), in which the aeon Barbelo is divided into three levels, or sub-aeons: Kalyptos, Protophanes and Autogenes. The names given to the levels suggest that this peculiar architecture of the Barbelo aeon has its origins in a more dynamic theory according to which Barbelo emerged from the Invisible Spirit and was consolidated as a distinct being through a process of three successive phases: after an initial pre-existence within the ultimate first principle as Kalyptos, Barbelo was then manifested as Protophanes, where what was hidden in Kalyptos unfolded as a unified multiplicity, before the emanation process eventually came to rest in Autogenes, who embodied independent and individual existence, turning towards his source and thereby acquiring unity while being at the same time composed of discrete spiritual forms that

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would be capable of interacting with the lower and corporeal levels of being in the subsequent demiurgical process.¹

The scheme has clear affinities with the Neoplatonic model of emanation through proodos and epistrophe, and is doubtlessly designed to answer the same kind of ontological problem, viz. how oneness may give rise to multiplicity and how multiplicity may remain dependent on oneness. These philosophical issues and the intricate historical relationship between Sethian and Neoplatonic schemes of ontogenesis will not be pursued here, however. Instead, I propose to take a look at Protophanes himself and the intriguing possibility that his name may appear in two magical texts that will be discussed presently.

Before that, it needs to be noted that a relationship has already been assumed to exist between the Sethian Protophanes and Phanes, the mythological figure that the ancient Orphic theogonies portrayed as the first being to be born from the primordial cosmic egg. Thus, John Turner states that the name Protophanes "seems to be inspired by the Orphic doctrine of Phanes (also called Eros, Metis and Erekepaíos) who was ‘first to appear’ from the cosmic egg."² Turner here refers to the Argonautica Orphica, lines 14–16, and further notes that not only Phanes’ role as the first being to appear, but also his characterization as “always two-formed” and “looking this way and that” are reflected in the mediating function of the Sethian Protophanes. Admittedly, the name Protophanes as such does not appear in the preserved fragments of ancient Orphica; even though Protogonos is used as another name for Phanes in the Rhhapsodies, the combination Protophanes is not attested. On the other hand Phanes is described as Πρωτόγονος φαέθων, “shining Protogonos,”³ and the fact that he carries both names is given an explanation by the statement that “he was the first who appeared in the ether” (πρῶτος ἐφάνθη),⁴ a phrase that is echoed in Arg. Orph. 16 πρῶτος γάρ ἐφάνθη. From this to the use of Protophanes as a name for the Orphic primeval figure is a small step, and one which may plausibly have been taken within the Orphic literary tradition itself before the name came to be appropriated by the Platonising Sethians.⁵ The passage in Synesius, Hymn 2.87–89, to which Turner also refers (ὑμνῶ δὲ γόνον τὸν πρωτόγονον καὶ πρωτοφαή), points in the same direction.

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³ Frg. 125 Bernabé = 73 Kern.
⁴ Frg. 126 Bernabé = 75 Kern.
⁵ Abramowski 1983, 119.