The Illumination of Lamps (Lychnokaia) for Neith in Sais/Esna in Greco-Roman Egypt

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ملخص

يُقسم البحث إلى ثلاثة أجزاء، يتناول الجزء الأول الأدلة المختلفة التي تتحدث عن احتفال المشاعل في التصوص المصرية القديمة واليونانية بدءًا من هيرودت في القرن الخامس قبل الميلاد؛ حيث ورد ذكر احتفال المشاعل لأول مرة في النصوص اليونانية، ثم الأدلة المختلفة التي تؤكد استمرار احتفال المشاعل في العصر اليوناني-الروماني. وهي البردية رقم 17 من برديات الحيبة في الجزء الأول، وكذا أحد نصوص سجل احتفالات عبد إسنا المؤرخة بعصور تراجان. ومن الجدير بالذكر أنه لا يوجد في النصوص المصرية القديمة ما يمكن أن تطلق عليه حرفيًا "احتفال المشاعل" للإلهة نيت؛ فهو أحد الطقوس الهامة، المرتبطة باللهة نيت فقط وكذلك باللهة أوزيري. أما الجزء الثاني من البحث، فتناول رمزية المشاعل في الديانة المصرية القديمة وفي السحر؛ حيث يظهر مدى ارتباطها باللهة أوزيري، ثم يأتي الحديث عن رمزية الاحتفال وارتباطه الوثيق باحتفال البعث الخاص باللهة أوزيري في شهر كيهاك. أما الجزء الأخير من البحث فهو يؤكد صحة الروابط بين احتفال محدد وجماعة معينة من السكان؛ فالاحتفالات في مصر في العصر اليوناني-الروماني أصبحت مناسبات دينية أو اجتماعية مدعومةً فيها كافة فنات المجتمع بغض النظر عن اتنامها العرقي أو وضعها القانوني.
The Festival of Lamps in Herodotus’ Histories

The performance of ritual activities around or within the domestic space was an important feature of religious and social life of the Egyptian society since the Pharaonic period. The space in front of the main gate of the house was the locus of domestic and religious practices. Domestic activities as spinning and weaving sometimes occurred before the main entrance of the house. Certain ceremonies were also celebrated at the main gate of the house. The house depicted on the funerary papyrus of Nakht, now at the British Museum (EA 1047/72), for example, has been described as ‘the home from the door of which he (Nakht) pays adoration to the gods’. Similarly, ‘on the ninth day of the first month (Thoth), when every one of the other Egyptians eats a broiled fish in front of the outer door of his house, the priests do not even taste the fish, but burn them up in front of their doors’. Equally importantly, the sacrifice of pigs to Osiris on 15 Pachon, the first month of harvest (Shemu) and the ninth of the year, was also performed at the front door of the house.

Writing in the fifth century BCE, Herodotus was the first classical author to mention, although in passing, a festival of lamps for Neith in Sais. At Sais, on the night of the sacrifice, they (the Egyptians) all keep lamps burning in the open air around the houses. These lamps are flat dishes full of salt and oil, with a floating wick which keep burning all night. This is called the Festival of Lamps (Heortes lychnokaies) and even the Egyptians who do not come to this assemblage mark the night of sacrifice by burning their own lamps at home, so that on that night lamps are burning not only at Sais but throughout all Egypt. A sacred tale is told showing why this night is thus lit up and honored.

The illumination of lamps took place at night before a certain sacrifice, presumably for Osiris. In this festival lamps were illuminated at night on 13 Epeiph (Julian: 24 June), the third month of harvest and the eleventh of the year, around and within Egyptian houses in commemoration of Osiris’ death and resurrection. According to Herodotus, it was a representative celebration, in which all Egyptians participated not only at Sais, but throughout the country. Since this nocturnal ceremony was performed within and outside domestic properties, it probably linked the living space with religious rites and thus reflected a profound connection and integration between the private and public spheres on the one hand and religious rituals on the other. In his commentary on the second book of Herodotus, Alan Lloyd identified the flat dish lamp as Alan Gardiner’s sign (R7), however, the sign does not represent a dish and Gardiner himself interpreted it as an incense bowl with smoke rising from it.

Sais was probably the most important site where lamps illuminated for Neith. Herodotus writes that ‘the Egyptians do not hold a single solemn assembly, but several in the course of the year…there is a third great festival (Illumination of Lamps) in Sais to Athena (Neith).’ The reason for particularly associating the Illumination of Lamps with Sais can also be found in Herodotus ‘Histories: ‘The grave of Osiris was located at Sais and the sufferings of the god were displayed as a mystery by night on an adjacent lake’. Sais was the main venue for the performance of the Illumination of Lamps for another claim to fame of Sais was the nearby “grave of Osiris” and the passion-play of Osiris (mysteries) enacted on an adjacent lake.

Sais was one of the mythological destinations of funerary rituals for the deceased. The body of Osiris, it is known, was dismembered by his brother Seth into fourteen pieces. Aided by Anubis, however, Isis collected and buried the dispersed body of Osiris in different places, notably Abydos, Busiris, and Sais.