

# Death in the Temple of Ptah: The Roman Conquest of Egypt and Conflict at Memphis

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## Abstract

This study aims to trace the possible fate of the family of the High Priest of Ptah after the Roman conquest in 30 BCE. The mysterious death of Imhotep / Padibastet IV created a clear rupture in the succession line. At first, Roman authorities seemed to hesitate to appoint a new high priest of Memphis, for various reasons, and thus waited almost three years to install Pasherienamun II, the first cousin of Imhotep / Padibastet IV, at the temple of Ptah. This occurred simultaneously with the creation of new priestly office: “prophet of the son of Caesar.” However, the embalmed body of Imhotep / Padibastet IV remained unburied until 23 BCE, which might indicate previous dysfunctional mutual relations between the primary and the secondary branches of the same family.

## Keywords

Ptolemaic Egypt – Roman Egypt – Memphis – Imhotep / Padibastet IV – Pasherienamun II – Octavian – the Apis bull

## Introduction

During the initial weeks following the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE,<sup>1</sup> Octavian was invited to visit the sacred Apis bull in his sanctuary within the

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1 Detailed analyses of various circumstances surrounding the Roman conquest of Egypt and Octavian's brief sojourn in the Nile Valley are numerous. See, for instance most recently, Capponi, *Augustan Egypt*, 5–12; Herklotz, *Prinzeps und Pharao*, 103–08 and “Aegyptio Capta,”

temenos of Ptah at Memphis,<sup>2</sup> the traditional religious capital of Egypt during the Ptolemaic era. However, Octavian allegedly declined the invitation by famously saying that he was “accustomed to worship gods, not cattle.”<sup>3</sup> The historicity of these words is indeed highly doubtful, but at present it is far more important to disclose the identity of those who invited the new ruler. Behind such an invitation most likely stood a clique centered around the traditional guardians of the Apis bulls, namely the High Priests of Ptah (traditionally, *wr ḥrp ḥmwt*, “Chief of Craftsmen”),<sup>4</sup> probably in order to receive prompt confirmation of their positions in the chaotic political situation after the arrival of the new ruler’s armies, and the drama surrounding the suicide of Cleopatra VII. Since the beginning of the Ptolemaic Period, especially from Ptolemy II (284–246 BCE) onwards, the fortunes of the native Egyptian officials and priesthood at Memphis seem to have depended largely on the royal patronage focused on the vast temple complex of Ptah,<sup>5</sup> which had already been dominating the

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12–16; Pfeiffer, “Octavian-Augustus und Ägypten”; Minas-Nerpel, “Augustus, Prinzeps und Pharaos.”

- 2 Evidence for the Apis bulls goes back to the establishment of the ancient Egyptian state around 3100 BCE, and is attested nearly continuously until the beginning of the 3rd century ACE at the latest, with an unsuccessful attempt at reviving the cult in the 4th century ACE. For more details about the development of the theology of the Apis bulls, analysis of the main cultic episodes, and possible impact of those episodes on the religious and the socio-political experience of both Egyptians and foreigners in the Memphite area, see, e.g., Otto, *Geschichte der Stierkulte*, 10–35; Bonnet, *RÄR*, 46–51; Vercoutter, *Textes biographiques du Sérapéum de Memphis*, ix–xxiii, 123–30 and “Apis”; Winter, *Der Apiskult im alten Ägypten*; Thompson, *Memphis under the Ptolemies*, 191–207; Kessler, *Die heiligen Tiere und der König*, 57–96; Vos, *The Apis Embalming Ritual*; Jansen-Winkeln, “Zu den Traueritten bei der Apisbestattung”; Dodson, “Bull Cults,” 72–91; Jurman, “Running with Apis”; Pasquali, “Un ou deux taureaux Apis”; Devauchelle, “Pas d’Apis pour Sarapis.” For the most recent contributions, see Marković, “Kult svetog bika Apisa”; Sales, “Em busca do touro Ápis”; Meyrat, “Topography-related Problems” and “The First Column of the Apis Embalming Ritual.”
- 3 Dio Cass. 51.16, 5; a similar story was also noted in Suet. *Aug.* 93, chronologically closer to the period, but without Octavian’s statement. For the analysis of the hostile nature of Dio’s text, see Dundas, “Augustus and the Egyptian kingship.”
- 4 The fundamental studies of the title’s possible readings and wider significance are Maystre, *Les grandes prêtres de Ptah*, 4–13, and Devauchelle, “Le titre du grand prêtre Memphite, with additional comments made by de Meulenaere, “Le grand-prêtre Memphite Séhétepiibré-ankh,” 183–84, who suggested rather a reading “the craftsman of the most powerful.”
- 5 Cf. Quaegebeur, “Contribution à la prosopographie des prêtres Memphites”; Crawford, “Ptolemy, Ptah and Apis in Hellenistic Memphis”; Thompson, *Memphis under the Ptolemies*, 138–46 and “The high priests of Memphis under Ptolemaic rule”; Maystre, *Les grands prêtres de Ptah*, 179–214, 389–431; Gorre, *Les relations du clergé égyptien et des lagides*, 605–22.

city's landscape for more than two millennia. Thus, the Memphite elite had remained traditionally loyal to the Ptolemaic monarchy until the very end. In the case of the High Priests of Ptah, their political and economic power was directly linked to the fate of the Ptolemaic royal family, especially under Ptolemy XII (80–58 and 55–51 BCE), Cleopatra VII's father: Pasherientah III, the High Priest of Ptah from 76 BCE until 41 BCE, received his position personally from Ptolemy XII in Alexandria, crowned the Ptolemaic ruler in Memphis, took an active role in the celebration of the ruler's *Sed*-festival and became high priest of the living king's cult.<sup>6</sup> During his career, Pasherientah III accumulated many religious functions, which gave him enormous social and economic power, as well as effective control over the most important Memphite cults and sanctuaries.

The Roman army officially marched into Alexandria on 3 August 30 BCE. Two days before, the only son of Pasherientah III, sixteen-year-old Imhotep / Padibastet IV, who was the High Priest of Ptah from 39 BCE onwards,<sup>7</sup> died suddenly at Memphis and without any known descendants. At present, details of his mysterious death cannot be reliably reconstructed from available sources. Nevertheless, further historical developments indicate that the apparent coincidence is hardly accidental.

## 1 Victim of Octavian's Assassins?

It is commonly believed that, as holder of a potentially dangerous religious office and due to the close political and personal ties of his family with the rulers of the overthrown Ptolemaic Dynasty, Imhotep / Padibastet IV might

6 According to the hieroglyphic stela BM EA 886 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 136–50, pl. x). For a thorough analysis of the close relations between the Ptolemaic dynasty and the family of the High Priests of Ptah, see further Gorre, *Les relations du clergé égyptien et des lagides*, 605–22.

7 PP III / IX 5372. His birth, life, death and funeral are described in the official funerary stela BM EA 188 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 211–21, pl. XVI; for a good quality photograph of the stela, see *Le Crépuscule des Pharaones*, 137), written in both Hieroglyphic and Demotic scripts. It was most probably set up in the deceased's tomb-chapel, location presently unknown. The tombs of the Ptolemaic High Priests of Ptah have not yet been discovered, but are certainly located somewhere in the vast necropolis of Saqqara, possibly in the area of the Sarapeion, or even further north near Abusir. For more information about the state of archaeological research of the Saqqara necropolis with emphasis on the Late and Ptolemaic periods, see Smith, "Saqqara. Late Period," 424–25 and "Uncharted Saqqara: an Essay," 389–90; Ray, "Late Period and Graeco-Roman Tombs at Saqqara," 692–93.

have been an early target of Octavian's new policy and was assassinated on his orders. Hence, Livia Capponi presumed:

Predictably, however, the high priests of Memphis did not survive the impact of Roman rule. [...] It is clear that Octavian got rid of the first high priest [Imhotep / Padibastet IV], a dangerous figure as he was the potential focus for revolution after the Roman conquest, and replaced him with a more controllable figure (the new high priest [Pasherienamun II] was only a boy).<sup>8</sup>

However, no preserved sources indicate any of above mentioned suggestions. Cassius Dio (c. 164–after 229 ACE) put the episode of Octavian's refusal to visit the Apis bull *after* his homage to the body of Alexander the Great and refusal to enter the tombs of the Ptolemies. Both latter sights were located in Alexandria, where he stayed at least until the death of Cleopatra VII (12 August 30 BCE). Thus, Octavian seems to have visited Memphis in mid-August and would have received a formal request to enter the sanctuary of Apis while there. Indeed, Suetonius (c. 70–130 ACE) suggests in his account that Octavian travelled extensively during his stay in Egypt.<sup>9</sup> In modern historiography, Octavian's declining to make offerings to the sacred bull of Memphis is usually perceived as a partial break with former traditions, especially concerning the royal patronage of sacred animals in general,<sup>10</sup> postulated by the example of Alexander the Great—whether his respectful attitude towards the Egyptian religious practices was authentic or a product of later propaganda—and persistently followed by his successors of the Ptolemaic Dynasty.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, the continuity of indigenous religious traditions and infrastructure in Roman

8 Capponi, "Priests in Augustan Egypt," 515.

9 Cf. Suet. *Aug.* 93. Otherwise, very little is known about Octavian's course of movements. Most probably he did not travel to the south of Memphis and thus remained in the region of the Delta.

10 Alexander the Great seems to be a great role model for Octavian himself. Cf. Minas-Nerpel, "Augustus, Prinzepts und Pharao," 131–32; Pfeiffer, *Der römische Kaiser und das Land am Nil*, 45–48.

11 For the benevolent policy of Alexander the Great toward the cults of the sacred animals in Egypt, see Bosch-Puche, "Alejandro Magno y los cultos a animales sagrados"; contra already in Chauveau and Thiers, "L'Égypte en transition: des Perses aux Macédoniens." For the problems of source selection and their reliability about Alexander's conquest of Egypt, see Burstein, "Alexander in Egypt: Continuity or Change?"

Egypt, especially in the context of the Apis and the Mnevis sacred bulls, is clear in both the public and private spheres, in and beyond the Memphite area.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, a chronological gap between Octavian's stay in Egypt and the appointment of the next known High Priest of Ptah is evident in preserved sources. After the death of Imhotep / Padibastet IV, his even younger first cousin Pasherenamun II was appointed as a high priest of Memphis almost three years later—in 28/27 BCE, probably sometime after the events of 16 January 27 BCE, when Pasherenamun II received, among many other gifts, the golden diadem as a symbol of his authority, most likely from the hands of the second Roman prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus.<sup>13</sup> Afterwards, this new High Priest of Ptah carried out the ritual purification of the temple complex of Ptah and all sanctuaries within,<sup>14</sup> which may indicate that something disturbing did happen within the walls of the temple enclosure.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, Pasherenamun II was appointed as a priest of the imperial cult (*ḥm kysrs*, “prophet of the son of Caesar”).<sup>16</sup> This made the High Priest of Ptah responsible for the maintenance of the imperial cult as well. Thus, there is further evidence for at least the partial continuity of the former Ptolemaic religious traditions, which is usually overlooked in modern studies: the cult of Octavian

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- 12 For example, in the material culture of the Roman necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel (Middle Egypt). Cf. Flossmann and Schütze, “Ein römerzeitliches Pyramidengrab,” 91–92. A comprehensive study of the Apis bulls during the Roman era is being prepared by the present author.
- 13 For Pasherenamun II, see PP IX 5375a. The prefect was the governor of the province and the highest civil authority in Roman Egypt, based in Alexandria, and chosen exclusively from the equestrian class as a direct appointee of the emperor himself. For a detailed overview of the extensive range of duties associated with the prefect of Alexandria and Egypt's position, see Jördens, *Studien zum praefectus Aegypti*.
- 14 BM EA 184 L11 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 230, pl. xvii).
- 15 A direct analogy for such ceremonies could be found in the purification of the enclosure of the goddess Neith at Sais sometime after the Persian conquest in c. 526 BCE and the relegation of enigmatic foreigners settled inside the enclosure walls. For the identity of these foreigners, see Thiers, “Civils et militaires dans les temples,” 499. The ritual purification was ordered by the ruling king (Cambyses II) and carried out under the supervision of his representative, Udjhorresnet. This episode is recorded on the naophorous statue of Udjhorresnet (Museo Gregoriano Egiziano no. 19), which was most likely set up inside the court of the temple of Neith at Sais and later was transported to Hadrian's villa at Tibur. It is important to note that Udjhorresnet's mortuary cult was revived at Memphis, where his shaft-tomb is located (Abusir), perhaps during the early Ptolemaic Period. Cf. Bresciani, “Ugiahorresnet a Menfi”; Bareš, *The Shaft Tomb of Udjhorresnet*, 42–43.
- 16 See BM EA 184 L11 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 230, pl. xvii); BM EA 188 L12 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 221, pl. xvi).

Augustus seems to replace the royal cults of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, at least in Memphis, and the Roman emperor himself was incorporated into the cults of Ptah and other gods within the vast temple temenos as “the associated god.”<sup>17</sup> It is important to note that Pasherenamun II’s predecessor, Imhotep / Padibastet IV, held the title *ḥm pr-ʿ3*, “prophet of Pharaoh,”<sup>18</sup> which was probably replaced with an appropriate equivalent in the titulary of the new High Priest. Further, the reconciliation of the priesthood of Ptah and the Roman ruler can be clearly seen in the full content of Octavian’s Pharaonic titulary, where both the god Ptah and the sacred Apis bull play a significant role: the Roman emperor was “chosen by Ptah” and “beloved by the living Apis, the herald of Ptah.”<sup>19</sup> Now, there can be little doubt that the main reason for Octavian’s alleged refusal to visit the sacred Apis bull, an event recorded by both Suetonius and Cassius Dio, must lay in a long postponement of the appointment of the new High Priest of Ptah, even though the most obvious candidate from the influential secondary branch of the same family already existed.<sup>20</sup> Political and economic privileges of this important Memphite priestly family apparently disappeared with the last Ptolemies. Therefore, if Octavian truly had ordered the assassination of Imhotep / Padibastet IV, which is highly doubtful, he might have hesitated to appoint his immediate successor as well. However, there may be another, more plausible, explanation.

## 2 Strife within a Family?

Indeed, there is a strong possibility of strife within the family of the High Priests of Ptah: faced with the fall of the former regime, but still important within the wider family circle, a faction around the future Pasherenamun II and his mother Taneferhor may have also been responsible for death of Imhotep / Padibastet IV, in order to receive favors from the new ruler and regain the highest position within the Memphite socio-religious hierarchy.

17 For further discussion on the case of Octavian Augustus, see Herklotz, *Prinzeps und Pharao*, 290–93.

18 See BM EA 188 I.3 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 218, pl. XVI).

19 The royal titulary of Octavian / Augustus in Egypt attained the full form by 22/21 BCE. See Grenier, “Le protocole pharaonique des Empereurs romains”; Hölbl, *Der römische Pharao und seine Tempel* I, 18–22; Herklotz, *Prinzeps und Pharao*, 117–36.

20 The most recent interpretation of the office and interrelations within the family of the High Priests of Ptah is still Thompson, *Memphis under the Ptolemies*, 138–46, with additional comments in Gorre, *Les relations du clergé égyptien et des lagides*, 605–22. The topic requires further studies.

Although a hereditary claim to the office was the rule within the family of the High Priests of Ptah, when Pasherientpah III died on 13/14 July 41 BCE, his only son Imhotep / Padibastet IV was five years old. The office most probably passed to Pasherenamun I, who was the brother of Taimhotep, the wife of Pasherientpah III and the mother of Imhotep / Padibastet IV, as well as the brother-husband of their sister Taneferhor and the father of future Pasherenamun II.<sup>21</sup> The rise to prominence of Pasherenamun I's father Khahapy,<sup>22</sup> who already held many important priestly offices at Memphis and Letopolis, took place probably after the wedding of his daughter (and Pasherenamun I's sister) Taimhotep to Pasherientpah III on 25 July 58 BCE.<sup>23</sup> Since Imhotep / Padibastet IV was too young to obtain the duties of the High Priest of Ptah after his father's death, his uncle stepped in. Unfortunately, there are no preserved monuments commemorating Pasherenamun I's office: he is known as a high priest only from the funerary stele of his sister-wife (BM EA 184),<sup>24</sup> and the statue of their brother Imhotep (Pushkin Museum I.1.a.5351).<sup>25</sup> He probably died before the accession of Imhotep / Padibastet IV on 23 July 39 BCE. His young age of only seven years and ten days may indicate that Imhotep / Padibastet IV was the oldest living male within his wider family.

On the other hand, the secondary branch around Taneferhor, the sistrum-player of Ptah,<sup>26</sup> seems to remain influential in Memphis after the death of her brother-husband Pasherenamun I, and perhaps controlled all the decisions of the young high priest, since his mother, Taimhotep,<sup>27</sup> and his oldest sister, Berenice,<sup>28</sup> were already dead. Indeed, one of Pasherenamun I's and Taneferhor's five daughters, most probably named Taibastet,<sup>29</sup> had already been holding the position of "Great God's Wife of Ptah" from 44/43 BCE

21 PP IX, 5375.

22 PP IX, 5857 = PP IX 5857a.

23 BM EA 147 I.6 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 175, pl. pl. XII).

24 Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 223–30, pl. XVII.

25 For the newest edition of the statue of Imhotep, see Panov, "Three Records of the Late Period," 89–101.

26 PP IX 5843b.

27 PP IX 7231a. She died on 15 February 42 BCE.

28 Berenice died in May 33 BCE under suspicious circumstances: she and at least two of her daughters were buried together at the same time. Cf. BM EA 392 I.14 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 202, pl. XIV). Raymond suggested some unknown political circumstances in the background. Cf. Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 53–54. Still, there is no evidence that can confirm such speculation.

29 For the proposal of her name's reading, see Панов, *Источники по истории семьи верховных жрецов Мемфиса*, 303–04.

onwards,<sup>30</sup> which strongly evoked the earlier powerful institution of the God's Wife of Amun in Thebes who surpassed in influence her male colleague.<sup>31</sup> Also, their brother Imhotep was the author of texts on the funerary stelae of Pasherientpah III (BM EA 886)<sup>32</sup> and Taimhotep (BM EA 147, BM EA 377),<sup>33</sup> the parents of Imhotep / Padibastet IV.

Thus, Octavian may have been informed about the difficult situation in Memphis even before he arrived there,<sup>34</sup> and at once seized the opportunity not to confirm the appointment of a new High Priest of Ptah. Unfortunately, at present, there is no clear evidence for such a tempting hypothesis. And yet, dysfunctional family relations may be further indicated by the fact that the embalmed body of Imhotep / Padibastet IV was buried almost seven years after his death—on 9 April 23 BCE,<sup>35</sup> when it was carried out together with the interment of his maternal aunt Taneferhor.<sup>36</sup> Both funerary ceremonies were performed by Pasherenamun II himself, which he could have done for Imhotep / Padibastet IV years before, especially after he was appointed as a high priest. The initial delay of his burial has to be seen in the context of the Roman invasion. A similar situation occurred after the Persian conquest in c. 526 BCE, when the sacred Apis bull was left unburied for year and a half.<sup>37</sup> Almost seven years is a long period of time to be left unburied. Somebody certainly has to be against it, and the Roman provincial authorities are unlikely to be blamed. The strange occurrence of the joint burial ceremonies of Imhotep /

30 BM EA 184 L10 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 228).

31 The religious, political, and economic authority of the title of God's Wife of Amun in Thebes was used for supreme rule over the Upper Egypt during the Twenty-Third to Twenty-Sixth Dynasties (c. 754–526 BCE). Unmarried daughters of Libyan, Nubian, and Saite kings were dispatched to Thebes, where they would implement the political control of their fathers. For the most recent study, see Ayad, *God's Wife, God's Servant*.

32 For BM EA 886, Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 134–50, pl. X.

33 For BM EA 147, see Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 165–77, pl. XII. For BM EA 377, see Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 178–94, pl. XIII.

34 Many Roman soldiers and officials had already been settled in Egypt before the formal conquest, and it is most likely that Octavian was visited by many members of the upper echelons of Egyptian society while residing in Alexandria. See, most recently, Legras, "Les Romains en Égypte, de Ptolémée XII à Vespasien," 272–78.

35 BM EA 188 L12 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 221, pl. XVI).

36 She died on 15 October 24 BCE. The embalming process lasted traditionally for 70 days, but the reasons for the additional five months delay of burial are unclear at the moment. Cf. BM EA 184 (= Raymond, *Records of a Priestly Family*, 223–30, pl. XVII).

37 See Devauchelle, "Le sentiment anti-perse chez les anciens Égyptiens," 69–70.



Padibastet IV and Taneferhor strongly speaks in favor of strife within the family. With Taneferhor's death, there was no one left to oppose the interment of the unfortunate Imhotep / Padibastet IV.

### Abbreviations

- BSEG* *Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie Genève*  
*EVO* *Egitto e Vicino Oriente*  
*LdÄ* E. Otto, W. Westendorf, and W. Helck, eds. *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*. 7 vols. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975–1991.  
*LingAeg* *Lingua Aegyptia. Journal of Egyptian Language Studies*  
*PP III* *Prosopographia Ptolemaica III: Le clergé, le notariat, les tribunaux, no. 4984–8040*. *Studia Hellenistica* 11. Leuven: Bibliotheca Universitatis Lovanii, 1956.  
*PP IX* *Prosopographia Ptolemaica IX: Addenda et corrigenda au volume III (1956)*. *Studia Hellenistica* 25. Leuven: Bibliotheca Universitatis Lovanii, 1985.  
*ZMSKS* *Zbornik Matice Srpske za klasične studije (Journal of Classical Studies Matica Srpska)*

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