

THE HIPPOPOTAMUS OF *POxy.* 9.1220 (THIRD CENTURY AD)¹

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This article discusses the content of the private letter *POxy.* 9.1220, which provides information about the behaviour of hippopotamuses in the Nile region. The existence of the wild mammal in Oxyrhynchus is probably related to Thoeris' cult in that city, while its occurrence in the text relates to its habit of raiding farm crops. This interpretation is supported by literary sources, but also by the sense of the verb ἀφάνιζω, used to describe the animal's behaviour, in current lexica of ancient Greek. Additionally, an examination of textual variants of the fragment dealing with the hippopotamus' behaviour supports this interpretation and provides insights into animal-human interrelationship in Roman Egypt.

Key words: hippopotamus, Graeco-Roman Egypt, wild animals.

POxy. 9.1220,² a steward's letter enclosing some accounts and asking for supplies, was edited by Arthur S. Hunt (1912) in the ninth volume of the Oxyrhynchus Papyri series. Twenty years later, (1932), the text was re-edited by the same editor in *Sel.Pap.* I 139, while a third edition was published by Hengstl (1978:324). Among the issues dealt with by the author of the fragment³ is the brief reference to an incident with a hippopotamus in ll. 20–22. The text is as follows:

20 οὐδὲν ἠφάνισεν
ὁ ἵπποποτάμις,⁴ ἥ τι γάρ ἐστιν
περιέργου, ἐφίσταμε αὐτῶν

¹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers for their enlightening comments. Translations are mine unless otherwise noted.

² Abbreviations not included in the *OCD* or *LSJ* are: *CGL* = Diggle et al. 2021; *Sel.Pap.* = Hunt 1932; *DGE* = Adrados 1980–2019; *GMP* = Andorlini 2001, 2009; *Cosm. Ind. Top.* = Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Topographia christiana*; *WB* = Preisigke 1925.

³ The issues, which will not be further discussed in this article, are the following: (a) the journal of expenditure (ll. 3–5); (b) money for harvesting (ll. 5–9); (c) collection of wine (ll. 9–12); (d) preparation of the boat for the wine transportation (ll. 12–15); (e) the nails and a jar of gum for the tools of the machines (ll. 15–20); (f) the condition of the fields (ll. 23–25).

⁴ The first editor regarded the term ἵπποποτάμις as a combination of the alternative forms ἵππος ποτάμιος and ἵπποπόταμιος (Hunt 1912:264–265, n. on l. 21). See, however, Georgacas 1948:243–260 and Gignac 1976:25, 28–29, 115, according to whom the endings in -ις, -ιν are not regarded merely as phonetic simplifications of -ιος, -ιον, but as new declensional forms.

21. *leg.* εἰ 22. ἐφίσταμαι αὐτῶν Hunt : ἐφίσταμαι αὐτῷ BL 7.136

The hippopotamus has destroyed nothing, for if there is any superfluity, I watch over the place (trans. Hunt).

Hunt (Hunt 1912:264) pointed out that ‘a curious reference to a hippopotamus’ is made in the passage. An apparently appropriate answer to the editor’s remark is given in the *LSJ* lexicon (s.v. ἀφανίζω as ‘destroy’)⁵ and more specifically in Adrados’ *Diccionario griego-español* (*DGE* 3.613, s.v.), according to which the hippopotamus mentioned in *POxy.* 9.1220 caused damage to the crops of that area (‘destruir ... de campos y cosechas’), an interpretation already found in *LSJ*, s.v. The aim of this article is to discuss the ‘curious reference’ to the hippopotamus by examining the interpretation of the terms ἀφανίζω, περιέρχου and the variant readings of the l. 22. Certain passages from ancient Greek and Latin literary texts dealing with hippopotamuses in Egypt will enhance the interpretation of the aforementioned lines of the papyrus and so contribute to our knowledge about the existence of hippopotamuses and the ways the inhabitants treated them in the Nile country.⁶

The river Nile, with its deep muddy waters and the abundant vegetation on its banks, constitutes the ideal environment for hippopotamuses to live and breed.⁷ Ancient Greek and Latin authors described the animal in unfavourable terms: not only are they large, but also ferocious in behaviour and fearful to see.⁸ Literary and archaeological sources reveal that the ancient Egyptians were afraid of hippopotamuses, avoided deliberate contact, and attempted to hunt them to be killed.⁹ Despite the hippopotamus’ ugliness and ferocity, the Egyptians worshiped it as a sacred animal.¹⁰ It was identified with many deities but most importantly

⁵ Cf. Montanari 2015:351–352, s.v.; *CGL*, 1.251–253, s.v.

⁶ A first attempt to gather papyrological evidence on hippopotamus in Graeco-Roman Egypt was by Chouliara-Raños 1981:81–83. On the hippopotamus in antiquity in general, see Kitchell Jr. 2014:87–88, but see already Anderson 1902:356–358.

⁷ Hdt. 2.71; Diod. Sic. 1.35.1, 2.51.4; Str. 15.1.13; Plin. *HN* 8.39.95 (3.68 Rackham), 28.31.121 (8.84 Jones); Arr. *Anab.* 8 (Indica); Onesicritus *apud* Philostr. *VA* 2.19 (*FGrH* 7 [II B Jacoby]).

⁸ Diod. Sic. 1.35.8. Plut. *De Is. et Os.* 371C. Cosm. Ind. *Top.* 11.9. On hippopotamus attacks against humans see Man. fr. 6 (Waddell); Philo *De praem.* 90; ps-Callisth. *Hist. Alex. Magn.* 3.17.14.

⁹ I refer here to Diod. Sic. 1.35.10, Achilles Tatius’ narration of a hippopotamus hunting in 4.2–3, and the Nile Mosaic of Palestrina which depicts a hunting scene. Cf. MacDonald 2014:453; Toynbee 1973:128–130; Meyboom 1995:70.

¹⁰ On the common practice in the cults of theriomorphic gods and consequently of animals themselves both in Pharaonic and in Graeco-Roman Egypt, see Kees 1977; Pfeiffer 2008:373–393, with previous bibliography; Aglan 2013.

with Thoeiris (Tawaret), the hippopotamus goddess of fertility, conception, and maternity.¹¹ Hunt (1912:265, n. on l. 21) links the occurrence of the mammal in Oxyrhynchus with Thoeiris' local cult in that city, which led Chouliara-Raios to conjecture that the survival of the hippopotamus, already endangered in Egypt during the 3rd century AD,¹² was due to its link to the Thoeiris cult in Oxyrhynchus.¹³

It must be this known ferociousness and aggression of the hippopotamus which the writer of *POxy.* 9.1220 implied when referring to the 'curious' incident involving the animal. Given that the author wrote to the recipient about agricultural activities, *i.e.* crop yield (l. 8: κοφορίας; *leg.* χωφορίας), water works (ll. 15–18: πέμψις μοι τοὺς / ἐκχυσιαίους ἤλους καὶ γλυοῦ / κεράμιον α εἰς τὰ ἐργαλῖα / τῶν μηχανῶν; *leg.* πέμψεις, γλοιοῦ, ἐργαλεῖα), and crop conditions (l. 23: περὶ τῶν χωρίων), it seems probable that he wrote about the possible damage which the animal could cause to the cultivated fields of the area. According to the steward, the hippopotamus must have left its usual habitat, the river, and the sender's or recipient's crops were now at risk of being raided. (ll. 20–21: οὐδὲν ἠφάνισεν / ὁ ἵπποποτάμης). This interpretation, as in the *LSJ* and Adrados' dictionary, is also supported by other papyrus documents. The term ἀφανίζω used here by the papyrus author, refers elsewhere to crop damage by sheep (*PRyl.* 2152 (42 AD, Euhemeria), ll. 13–16: κατενέμησαν καὶ κατέφαγαν καὶ τοῖς ὅλοις ἠφάνισαν καὶ βλάβος ἐποίη(σαν) / οὐκ ὀλίγον) and gazelles (*PAbinn.* 6 (c. 346, Philadelphia (?)), ll. 14–15: ἐπιδὴ τὰ δορκά/δι[α] ἀφανίζουσιν τὸ σπόριμα (*leg.* ἐπειδὴ, ἀφανίζουσιν, τά)).

Literary texts provide ample evidence of the damage caused hippopotamuses. Diodorus Siculus 1.35.9 warns of hippopotamuses' devastating effects on cultivated land:

τὰς δὲ νύκτας ἐπὶ τῆς χώρας κατανέμεται τὸν τε σῖτον καὶ τὸν χόρτον, ὥστε εἰ πολύτεκνον ἦν τοῦτο τὸ ζῷον καὶ κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν ἔτικτεν, ἐλυμαίνετ' ἂν ὅλοσχερῶς τὰς γεωργίας τὰς κατ' Αἴγυπτον. Text incomplete

...at night it forages about the countryside on the grain and hay, so that, if this animal were prolific and reproduced each year, it would entirely destroy the farms of Egypt (trans. Oldfather).

Aelian *NA* 5.53 gives a similar description of hippos' grazing habits:

...ὅταν δὲ τὰ λήια ἐνακμάζη καὶ ὧσιν οἱ στάχυες ξανθοί, οὐκ ἄρχονται παραχρῆμα κείρειν αὐτοὺς καὶ ἐσθίειν, ἀλλὰ παραμείβοντες ἔξωθεν τὸ

¹¹ Kees 1977:12–14, 355–356; Krüger 1990:101–105; Frankfurter 1998:121. For the papyrological documentation on Thoeiris' cult in Egypt see Koenen 1967:123–124; Quaegebeur, Clarysse, van Maele 1985:224–230; Frankfurter 1998:122, 131; Turner 2007:142, 145.

¹² MacDonald 2014:441.

¹³ Chouliara-Raios 1981:83.

λήιον στοχάζονται πόσον αὐτοὺς ἐμπλήσει μέτρον, εἶτα λογισάμενοι τὸ ἀποχρῆσον σφίσιν ἐμπίπτουσι καὶ ἀναχωροῦσιν ἐπὶ πόδα ἐμπιπλάμενοι, τὸ ρεῦμα τοῦ ποταμοῦ κατὰ νότου λαβόντες.

...when the crops are ripe and the ears are yellow, they do not forthwith begin to graze and eat them but pass along outside the crop and calculate what area will satisfy them; and then, having reckoned how much will be enough, they fall to, and as they fill themselves they withdraw backwards, keeping the river behind them (trans. Scholfield).

Achilles Tatius is even more elaborate on the damage done by these animals. Apart from a detailed description of the mammal itself (4.2), he goes on (4.3 Heinemann) to describe the hippopotamus' voracious appetite and that it can devour even whole fields of grain:

ὥς ἐστι μὲν ἀδηφαγώτατον καὶ ποιεῖται τροφήν ὅλον λήϊον.¹⁴

Finally, according to the Life of Abba Be in the *Historia monachorum in Aegypto* 3 (Festugière), the anchorite rescued the area from a hippopotamus that was razing the fields:

Οὗτος ἵπποποτάμου λυμνηαμένου τὴν γείτονα χώραν ἐπιστὰς τῷ τόπῳ ὑπὸ τῶν γεωργῶν παρακληθεὶς καὶ ἰδὼν τὸ θηρίον μέγεθος ἐξαισίον ἔχον πρᾶξία φωνῇ ἐνετείλατο αὐτῷ λέγων· «Παραγγέλλω σοι ἐν ὀνόματι Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μηκέτι λυμήνασθαι τὴν χώραν».

Once, when a certain wild animal called a hippopotamus was ravaging the neighboring territory, he went there at the urging of its farmers. After laying eyes on the savage beast, he said to it: 'In the name of Jesus Christ, I order you not to ravage this land anymore' (trans. Cain).

The reference in *POxy.* 9.1220 may be further elucidated by two additional issues: textual variants of the passage, and its possible interpretations.

Firstly, it should be noted that, according to the author of *POxy.* 9.1220, the hippopotamus has not actually destroyed anything yet. It seems likely that the animal did not manage to cause damage due to the intervention of the steward, who supposedly has been monitoring the cultivated area and was ready to step in to protect the crops in case of any 'strange incident'. The latter phrase stems from ll. 21–22, εἴ τι γὰρ ἐστὶν / περιέρχον ἐφίσταμαι αὐτῷ. Hunt's translation of the term *περίεργον* as 'superfluity' seems unsuitable to the context. One possibility is that it should be used here in the more general sense of 'curious', 'strange', 'unusual', as

¹⁴ *Ach. Tat.* 4.2–3, also influenced Ps.-Eustathius (4th /5th cent.), who makes a similar observation about the behaviour of the hippo in his *Commentary on the Hexaemeron*, Migne, PG 725.

in Modern Greek.¹⁵ Another option for this context might be to understand the term as ‘inquisitive’, referring to the nature of the hippopotamus; this meaning is supported by several ancient Greek dictionaries.¹⁶

The variant αὐτῷ (or rather, αὐτῷ {v}), because the reading αὐτῶν is clearly attested) suggested by Preisigke’s *WB* and accepted by Hengstl,¹⁷ could refer either to the hippopotamus, or to the field in danger of being damaged. In the Preisigke/Hengstl reading, the text could be translated as:

The hippopotamus has destroyed nothing, for if anything strange happens /
if there is any curiosity (on the part of the hippo), I watch over the animal /
the place.

If the first editor’s reading αὐτῶν is accepted,¹⁸ the pronoun can refer only to the crops:

The hippopotamus has destroyed nothing, for if anything strange happens /
if there is any curiosity (on the part of the hippo), I watch over the
fields/crops.

Secondly, how is the attitude towards hippos in Egypt to be reconciled with their status in Oxyrhynchus? Hippos were evidently considered as unwelcome pests and needed to be contained or exterminated, but they were nonetheless venerated in the local the cult of Thoeris. On the one hand, it was their very ferocity and destructiveness which made the local people worship them: they aroused in the worshippers the instinct for self-preservation, which led to their efforts to appease the beast.¹⁹ It is not unthinkable that the hippo mentioned in *POxy.* 9.1220 could have been bred at the cult of Thoeris itself in order to meet the needs of the goddess’ worship. One could even think in terms of an organised breeding programme at Thoeris’ cult, particularly at Oxyrhynchus. Excessive hunting of the animals, which lead to their near-extinction in the area by the 3rd century AD, may indeed have made such breeding imperative for the continued existence of the cult.

POxy. 9.1220 would not be the only papyrus document alluding to purposeful rearing activities of deified wild animals in the Nile region and the damages caused by such animals. Several documentary papyri or inscriptions attest to crocodile breeding at the Sobek’s cult center in Tebtunis,²⁰ jackal rearing at

¹⁵ See *LSJ*, s.v.; Dimitrakos 1964:11:5685–5686, s.v.; Babiniotis 2010:1085, s.v.

¹⁶ *LSJ*, s.v. ‘περίεργος’; O’Sullivan 1980:349, s.v.; Montanari 2015:1625, s.v.

¹⁷ *WB* 1.633; Hengstl 1978:324.

¹⁸ While ἐπίσταμαι is usually used with the dative (probably the reason why Preisigke and Hengstl omit -v), case usage in Hellenistic Greek is fluid; see Stolk 2017:182–212 with bibliography.

¹⁹ Lloyd 1994:311.

²⁰ Chouliara-Raïos 1981:83–88; Dunand 1986:59–84; Molcho 2014:181–193.

Cynopolis, where Anubis was held in honour,²¹ cat rearing for the Boubastis' cult,²² and ibis breeding for the cults of Thoth in various Egyptian cities.²³ These sacred animals – usually the more ferocious among them, such as crocodiles and jackals – often caused problems, some of them in places where they were being bred for cultic purposes.²⁴

Such an interpretation does not contradict the steward's attitude towards the animal in *POxy.* 9.1220. This particular hippopotamus could have escaped from its usual habitat and roamed to the threatened area with its still unharvested crops. The bailiff would no doubt have been familiar with hippos' tendency to ravage the fields, perhaps due to similar incidents in the recent or the distant past. Such familiarity would have prompted him not only to be vigilant but also to inform his lord that the crops were (still) safe.

To sum up: despite its brevity, *POxy.* 9.1220 gives some interesting insights into the occurrence and the behaviour of hippopotamuses in the Nile region. Their continued presence in Oxyrhynchus may be linked to the Thoeris cult in that city, while the reference to the animal in the papyrus fragment can be associated with the species' habit of grazing on nearby farm crops. This interpretation is supported by (a) literary sources referring to its nature and typical behaviour; (b) the probable meaning in context of the verb ἀφανίζω, here used to describe the damage caused by the animal's habit of raiding crops, and (c) the probable meanings of the term περιέργου, which could point to either extraordinary behaviour on the part of the animal, or to its natural 'inquisitiveness' in searching for food. The textual variants may lead to different translations, but the context as a whole suggests that the people of Oxyrhynchus as a whole had ambivalent feelings towards these animals, both fearing and venerating them; both hunting them and breeding them for cultic purposes.

²¹ See *IFay.* I 98 (3rd cent., Philadelphia?), ll. 3–4: Πασῶς κυνοβοσκὸς / Ἀνοῦβι εὐχήν. Cf. Str. 17.1.40. For jackals in Egypt see Str. 17.1.40. Otto 1908:14; Aglan 2013:34–38; Kitchell Jr. 2004:181–182, s.v. 'Thōs'.

²² *PCairZen.* III 59451 (= *PSI* IV 440; 3rd cent. BC, Sophthis), ll. 1–2: οἱ ἱερόδουλοι τῆς Βου/βάστιος ὄντες αἰλουροβοσκοί. Cf. *PKöln.* XV 594 (3rd–2nd cent. BC, Tanis).

²³ Smelik 1979:225–243.

²⁴ Crocodile: *PTebt.* III 793 (183 BC, Tebtunis), col. VIII, l. 25: συν[έβ]η μίαν ἀπὸ τῶν γ βοῶν ὑπὸ τοῦ κροκοδ[ίλου] θανεῖν; *PCairZen.* III 59443 (3rd cent. BC, Philadelphia), ll. 4–5: ἴνα] μὴ διασπᾶσθαι κροκόδ[υλος]; *PCairZen.* III 59379 (c. 254–251 BC, Philadelphia), recto, l. 5; *PCairZen.* IV 59648 (3rd cent. BC, Philadelphia), ll. 1–2: ἴνα / [μὴ ὑπὸ] κορκοδῖλου [leg. κροκοδειλου] ἀλῶι ναύτης. *GMP* II 5 (= *PTebt.* II 273; 2nd cent. CE) constitutes a medical prescription for κροκοδειλόπληκτοι, that is, humans bitten by crocodile (col. IV, l. 27). Jackal: *UPZ* II 187 (= *PSurvey* 23 descr.; 127–126 BC, Thebes), ll. 17–21: συνέβη δὲ καὶ / διὰ τὸ ἀχα[νῆ] τὴν θύραν / ἀφεθῆνα[ι] ὑπὸ λύκων / λυμανθῆ[ναι] ἄταφα / σώματα κ[ατ]αβρωθέντα.

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