The following paper consists of a few preliminary notes on Isidorus’ hexameter hymns. Section 1 is a brief overview of the texts, looking at issues of structure and encomiastic technique; section 2. attempts to compare them with Isiac aretalogies as we know them from the Greco-Roman world, with particular attention to hexameter hymns; section 3. sets out to locate Isidorus’ hymns within the history of Greek hexameter hymnography; and section 4. compares and contrasts the poems with another group of hymns and prayers from Roman Egypt, namely the hymns to the deity Mandoulis at Kalabsha-Talmis.

1. Reading Isidorus’ Hexameter Hymns

Hymn 1 and Hymn 3 are both exactly the same length 36 lines, but otherwise rather different in their structures. Hymn 1 falls into three parts. It starts with an invocation of the goddess under seven titles:

πλουτοδότε βασίλεια θεών, Ἑρμοθύ άνασσα,
παντοχράτειρα, τύχη ἄγαθη, μεγαλόνυμε Ἰσι,
Δηο υψίτη, ζωὴς εὐφέρτημα πάσης...
and not otherwise attested before Isidorus. The last title, εὐγέτοια, segues into a five line description of Isis’ benefactions to mankind – her inventions and discoveries - (4-9), rounded off by a ring-completing “you discovered” (ἐὗρεο). There follow five more lines describing her role in the cosmic order: “for your sake” the sky, earth, wind and sun (corresponding to the four elements) came into being, and “by your power” the Nile floods to the benefit of all the land.

The reference to the land seems to be the cue for the second section: all who live on the limitless land, non-Egyptians (Greeks, Thracians and barbarians) invoke her by different names, and the Greeks in particular have five names for her, but Egyptians call her “one” because the underlying divinity is the same. Isidorus must have realised that the Egyptians had many names for Isis as well, but his point is that one Egyptian name for her – “The One” (“Thiouis”) – captures her nature exactly.

The third section is introduced by a reference to final section the Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo (177): “I shall not cease (οὐ λήξω) singing your power”, followed by an invocation of Isis as “saviour” (οὐρτειος) and “having many names” (πολυνύμιε), the latter perhaps the most frequent epithet in later Greek hymns. There follows a list of specific forms of plight which Isis “saves” people: war, prison, sleeplessness, exile, storms at sea, the last a rare reference to Isis’ role in helping navigation, which is so important in the aretalogies. The list is summed up by a line that repeats the idea of “saving” (34), another ring. The concluding two lines of the third section, and of the poem, are a personal prayer (35-6); in the second line of this, εὐεὐλατος ἐμοὶ τε γείνου, λύπης μ’ ἀνάπαυοσον ἀπάσης, Isidorus’ piety is so intense that he included too many syllables.

Hymn 3 seems to fall into two main sections. The first section begins with an account of Isis’ benefactions to mankind; then it shifts to her role in supporting σκαπτροφόρουι/sceptre-bearing kings (the Doric form seems normal in Egyptian poems), who thanks to her enjoy prosperity which is λαμπρὸν καὶ λιπαρὸν. A king

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1 On the epithet, Kruse.1949.
2 Dousa.2002.
3 Keydell.1953 suggests that he ran together two clauses which on their own could have been part of a normal hexameters.
4 Cf. IMEGR 5.12 and 166, 21
supported by her conquerors both Asia and Europe. Isis also gives victory in war. Marco Fantuzzi and Richard Hunter have recently suggested that Isidorus might have passages of Hesiod or Homer in mind here, but I suspect this is one thing that can be explained in terms of Egyptian attitudes to Isis as the “throne” behind the pharaoh.

The second section begins abruptly with a long prayer (19-20), which references the famous prayer to Apollo in the First Book of the Iliad (II.1.37-41).

κλήθι μεν ἀργυρότοξ’, ὡς Χρύσην ἀμφιβέβηρας
Κῆλλαν τε ζαθέην Τενέδοιο τε ἢ φι ἀνάσσεις,
Σμυνθεὶ τι ποτὲ τοι χαρίειντ’ ἐπ’ ηδὸν ἔρευσα,
ἡ εἰ δὴ ποτὲ τοι κατὰ πίνα μυρί’ ἔχει,
ταῦρον ἢ’ αἰγόν, τὸ δὲ μοι κρήνην ἔέλδωρ

The speaking subject asks Isis to listen, whether she is in either of seven locations: Libya in the West, South, North, East, and then up to Mt. Olympus, “where the children of Ouranos are”, the symbol of Greek religion and panhellenism, then even further up to Ouranos itself, the ancestor of the Greek gods, and then into the chariot of the Sun, where she tours the whole cosmos (apparently treated as a neuter noun here, κόσμον), monitoring the behaviour of her subjects. Isis is literally above Greek religion. Her viewing the peoples of the earth forms the transition to a reference to a final location, the here and now: “If you are present here (ὡδὲ), witnessing the “special virtue” of the people there” and enjoying the local festival . . .

The hymn ends with a prayer to Isis the “black robed” (μελανηφόρε; she has a palla nigerrima in Apuleius, Met 11.3), asking her and her sunnaoi theoi to send the healing god Paian.

The position of the reference to the deity Paian, at the end of the poem, seems to continue a common formal pattern found in Greek poetry, where a song ends with a communal appeal to Paian, or a “paean refrain”. It’s not quite conventional in so far as prayers are usually directed to Paian (ie Paian) rather than to another god to send

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5 Fantuzzi and Hunter.2004
7 This could be the start of a new sentence, completed by the prayer in the last three lines, or it could possibly carry on the same sentence, though that would entail reading εἰτέ rather than εἰ δὲ as was suggested by Keydell.1953 who suggested that this type of mistake is symptomatic of bilingual Egyptian speakers.
him. On the principle that the defining feature of the genre paean is a refrain or prayer invoking the god Paian, it would be possible to interpret Hymn 3 as a paean, or at least as morphing into one towards the end. The hexameter form is no obstacle to this view, since there are other examples of hexameter paeans from this period, both poems on stone and hymns from the magic papyri.

The hypothesis that the poem is a paean might even give us a clue about who the performers may have been. We know that in some towns in Roman Egypt (Oxyrhynchus and Panopolis) there were guilds of singers with the Greek title paianistai, literally paeanists, usually associated with the cult of Sarapis and that of the Roman Emperor. Could an early version of such a group have performed Hymn 3 or indeed all these poems?

Isidorus’ poetic technique is not ambitious or demanding, but simple and repetitive: seven lines of Hymn 1 end with a form of πᾶς or ἄπας. The language is pretty straightforward: sequences of epithets, none of them recherché, lots of parallel clauses, and the boundaries of the sense units generally coincide with metrical ones. Literary poets would have avoided such obvious jangles as (Hymn 3, 23-4): ἦ καὶ Ὄλυμπον ἵκανες ὑπ’ ὄλυνζεν <εν ὄρει> / ἦ καὶ ἐν ὄρει / . . . δικάζεις. Isidorus occasionally borrows from Homer, but the effect is that of an awkward cut and paste job. Some of his choices of words do not look very poetic, such as υπάρχῃ used in the sense of “be”, and his metrical scansion is haphazard, at least judged by the standards of literary poetry.

For historians of Greek literature, there is a strong temptation to write these poems off as “subliterary”, “decadent”, and generally not up to the standards of technical finesse we find in Callimachus. But it could be argued that that is no less arbitrary than writing of the pantheon of Medinet Madi as “subreligious” because the

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8 See most recently Ford.2006.
9 IGUR I 148 IG2.2.4533 (first poem);
10 See Palmer.1993, Rutherford.2001
11 Thus line 12 of Hymn 1: . . . ὧρην ὑπωρινήν, καὶ λαβρότατον χεῖθ’ ὕδωρ . . . is based on II.16.385: . . . ἥματ’ ὑπωρινῷ, ὃτε λαβρότατον χεῖθ’ ὕδωρ / Ζεῦς . . . Cf. also the misuse of ἀμφιβέθρηκα[ς] at Hymn 3, 20 in the sense of “visit”.
12 Hymn 1.6, 13
13 Keydell.1953
names of the gods are not *echt*-Greek. This is a different world, and poetic conventions are different as well.

Chris Faraone’s work on the internal structure of elegiac hymns prompts us to ask whether the structure of the hexametrical hymns conceals a hidden pattern. In Hymn 3 there is a clear break of sense exactly half way through, dividing the poem into two clear sections, the first comprising description, the second prayer. Maybe it is significant that the first section of 18 lines are arranged in sections of decreasing length: six lines, five lines, four lines and three lines \(6 + 5 + 4 + 3 = 18\). The second half could be arranged in two sections of nine lines, assuming sentence end at line 27. Hymn 1 does not have a break in the middle, but it seems to fall into three sections of roughly the same length: the description of powers (1-3), the list of names (14-24), and the description of her saving power (25-34) with the closing prayer (35-6) \(13 + 11 + 13 \ [11+2]\).

The two hexameter hymns have something in common with respect to thematic structure. They both begin with an invocation and they both end with a prayer. In both, the perspective broadens out in a central section: all races sing Isis under different names (Hymn 1), Isis wanders all over the world (Hymn 3), but then narrows again: the name the Egyptians give Isis is the best, and she Isis saves men ways who pray for her to “be present” (Hymn 1), and Isis attends this festival at Narmouthis (Hymn 3). However, although both poems juxtapose universal and narrower religious horizons, the perspective of each is, as Ian Moyer shows in his piece, quite different. Hymn 3 celebrates Isis’ involvement in the local cult of Narmouthis, presenting this as the climax of a list of alternative places the goddess could be located. Hymn 1 contrasts the Egyptians’ name for Isis with the names for her used by other ethnic groups, but, apart from the name “Hermouthis” in the first line of the poem, there’s nothing to link the poem to Narmouthis in particular.

3* Isidorus and the Greek Aretalogies to Isis
Isidorus’ Hymns have usually, and rightly, been approached as part of the corpus of Greek hymns and aretalogies to Isis, Sarapis and other Egyptian deities that survive from the Hellenistic and Roman periods.\(^\text{14}\) Some of these are in prose, such as the standard Hellenistic Isis-aretalogy in which the goddess addresses her worshippers: “I am Isis”, attested in almost identical versions from Kyme, Ios and Thassalonica, which purports to go back to a model in Memphis (hence known as “M”). In this, Isis’ powers are presented as a list of something over fifty propositions. This is radically different from traditional Greek hymnography in terms of form and subject matter: in terms of form, in so far as the deity speaks in the first person, and the structure is basically a list, without such primary features as opening invocation and closing prayer; and in terms of subject matter, in so far as there is no myth, and no references to local cult, although Isis mentions distant Memphis, Bubastis and the Nile. The last point is particularly significant: Isis is presented as a universal goddess of foreign origin, lacking ancient connections to the Greek world.

Of the other prose aretalogies,\(^\text{15}\) the most significant is the long and complex example from Oxyrhynchus, P.Oxy.1380 (“O”), which first enumerates the avatars that Isis takes in a large number of cities in Egypt and the world, and then develops into a more general encomium of her powers. The list is superficially similar to the central section of Isidorus, Hymn 1, although there she has different names in different locations within Egypt as well, and the text does not privilege the Egyptian language, at least in the extant parts.\(^\text{16}\)

Poetry is also a common medium for praising Isis. There’s a fragmentary aretalogy in iambics from Roman Cyrene, also in the first person, that in part adapts M (Totti.4), and begins:

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\text{ἐγὼ τύραννος Εἰσις αἰώνος μόνη}
\]

\[
\text{πόντου τε καὶ γῆς τέμονάς τ` ἐπιθέμω}
\]

\(^{14}\) For the texts, see Totti.1985
\(^{15}\) I omit the prose aretalogy from Maroneia in Thrace, this time addressing Isis (2nd-1st BCE; Totti.19), and another in honour of Karpokrates from Chalcis, once again in the first person (3rd CE, Totti.6).
\(^{16}\) For that the idea that Egyptian language is truer, cf. the introduction to the 16th Hermetic treatise. On translation from Egyptian to Greek in the context of religion, Préaux.197, Rochette.1995.
και σκηπτη’ ἔχουσα και μι’ οὐσ’ ἐπιβλέπω.

The reference here to “being one” remind us of Isidorus, Hymn 1, 23-4. Around the same time Mesomedes of Crete (early 2nd century CE) wrote a charming hymn in cretics, in the “er-Stil” (Totti.25). But the most common poetic metre is the hexameter. Apart from the hymns of Isidorus, we have the aretalogy in honour of Sarapis by Maiistas from Hellenistic Delos, describing the local history of the cult there (Totti.11). From Kios in Bithynia comes the beginning of an hexameter hymn to Anubis, which is partly concerned with Isis (1st CE?; Totti.5). 17

The rest is lost. In the description of Isis the usual hymnic topics are dealt with rapidly: her name (πολυωνυμος), genealogy and upbringing, her powers, and her benefactions. Here, as in Isidorus, Isis is “all seeing” (πανδε[ρκ]η). Apart from this, a papyrus preserves part of a hexameter hymn or prayer to Sarapis. 18 Other later hexameter hymns are addressed to the Nile (Heitsch.39), and to Hermes Trismegistos (Heitsch.24; Heitsch.59.8).

However, the most elaborate hexameter hymn to Isis is, without a doubt, the hymn on stone from Andros (Totti.2; abbreviated to “A”), probably from the 1st century CE. 19 As far as we can see (the second and third of the four columns are badly damaged), this follows the model of M for the most part. It is in Doric, and the style is highly literary and somewhat obscure: if we didn’t have M to compare it with, it’s

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17 Corsten.1985, n.21
18 A fragmentary hymn preserved on another papyrus was identified as a hymn to Isis by Heitsch.1960 (cf. Heitsch.48), but as far as I can make out this is not certain.
19 Peek.1930 is the standard commentary; the poem is much neglected.
likely that in places we would not know what was going on, and even with M., it’s not always easy.

The act of turning M. into verse has the effect of making it superficially at least more like a traditional Greek hymn. Consider the opening, for example. In M this is the austere:

τάδε ἐγράφη ἐκ τῆς στήλης τῆς ἐν Μέμφει, ἢτις ἔστηκεν πρὸς τῷ Ἑφαστιήῳ· Εἰσὶς ἐγὼ εἰμί ἡ τύραννος πάσης χώρας.

(“This was written on the stele in Memphis, which stood by the Hephaisteion: I am Isis, the tyrant of the whole world”),

while in A. this comes out as (ll.1ff.):

Αἰγύπτου βασίλεια λινόστολε, τάι γονοέσσας
αὐλακος ἀρχαία μέλται πολύπυρος ἅγια,  
σευστροφόφος Βούβαστος, ἀμαλλοτόχωι τε Μέμφις
γαθομένα πεδίουσιν, ὅπα στάλαν ἀσάλευτον
εἰς φιλοθέοσον ἱερός νόμος ἐκ βασιλῆων,  
σάμα τεῖς, δέσποινα, μοναρχεῖς, ἵκεταις
λαοῖς ἀπόωσαν· ἐγὼ χρυσόθρονος Εἰσὶς
φωμάλεα σκάπτροισιν, ὅσαν πυριλαμπέος ἀκτεῖς
αἰείω σελάγεεσκ βολαῖς φορβίμονα γαίαν.

“Linen-clad queen of Egypt, for whom the ancient city of the fertile furrow, rich in wheat, is a concern, sistrum-carrying Boubastis, and Memphis, rejoicing with its sheaf-bearing plains, where the sacred law from devout kings set up an unshaken stele, the sign, lady, of your monarchy, speaking to suppliant peoples: “I am golden-throned Isis, strong with the sceptre, as far as the beam of the fire-bright sun shines on the nurturing land with its rays. . .”

A rich style, stuffed with epithets, some of them traditional ones, like “λινόστολος”, which Bacchylides applies to Egypt, some more recent, like ἀμαλλοτόχος, which otherwise turns up only in Nonnus.

The next clause in M. is about Hermes: “I was educated by Hermes, and I discovered letters with Hermes”. A. talks about Hermes as well, but calls him “δειφαλέος”, a hapax, apparently meaning “searching”. After this M has: “I am the
eldest daughter of Kronos. I am wife and brother of king Osiris”, which comes out in A. as:

I am the eldest daughter of tyrant Kronos, Isis, envied wife of the wide-ruling Osiris with whom I loosed the same womb of birth, heavy with rushing flowers of locks, like vine-tendrils (ἐλινότροπος), by the law of the high-minded king, the son whom Ouranos feared.

So she makes a birth epiphany complete with her famous flowing locks, which are compared to vine-tendrills, the same locks, incidentally, that were later cut off by her in mourning when Osiris was killed and were preserved at Coptos as a relic.20

Later on the author of A. expands some sections of M. into mini-ekphrases. For example, his version of the claim: “I made the unnavigable navigable” is turned into an account of the first sea voyage, with the Nereids looking on in wonder (which reminded Wilamowitz of Catullus 64) (ll.148-158). And in some places A makes Isis a little more Greek than M, for example in associating her with the vine (86, 169). But A. remains true to its model - a list of the aretai of Isis - and in the end it is far from being traditional Greek hymn.

Isidorus’ hymns cover many of the same basic themes as A. and M, though there’s nothing about Osiris or Sarapis, presumably because Hermouthis’ consort is Sokonopis, not Sarapis. There’s also nothing about marriage or women (though begetting children comes up) and little about the sea - major strands in the aretalogies. On the other hand, Isidorus includes references to local cult, which is alien to the universalising aretalogies (Hymn 1 is the exception there). Finally, a broader contrast can be made in terms of encomiastic technique: if the Isiac aretalogy is a new way of praising a deity, purporting to be based on a foreign textual model, Isidorus’ hymns can surely be considered a continuation of a traditional Greek mode of divine

20 Hair of Isis: Bonneau.1964, 258-9; Youtie.1946.
encomium. The paradox is that the newer, purportedly Egyptian form is found in Greece, and the older Greek form is found in Egypt.

3* Isidorus and the Greek Hexameter Hymn

Isidorus’ choice of the hexameter for Hymns 1 and 3 sets him directly in the mainstream tradition of Greek poetry, for which hexameter was probably the most important medium for hymns with the exception of choral lyric. Isidorus’ date is a little anomalous, however. Most hexameter hymns come from two periods: the 7th-5th centuries BCE, when the Homeric Hymns were composed, and the Roman Empire, which gave us the Orphic Hymns, the philosophical hymns of Proclus, and hexameter hymns and prayers preserved in the Greek Magical Papyri. From the imperial period we also have a few cult hymns preserved on stone, e.g. the great Hymn to Zeus from Pergamum (IvP II 323), and hexameter hymns or paeans to Asclepius and Telesphorus from the Athenian Asclepieion. A few other hexameter poems survive in papyri, and some hexameter oracles from Roman Claros resemble hymns as well (it may be significant that the Pergamene Hymn to Zeus mentioned above is a response to an extant oracle from Claros which itself is in hexameters).

In between this, say between the 4th-1st centuries BCE, there seems to be less evidence for hexameter hymns. The major exception are the technically brilliant hymns of Callimachus, which are sometimes thought to purely literary works without significance for religious realities, and sometimes believed (rightly in my view) to be intended for choral performance. Another exception is Hymn to Zeus by the Stoic philosopher Cleanthes. But the hymns which survive from this period tend to be either in the form of lyric – e.g. the poems on stone from Epidauros (PMG935-7; a less common form after the 4th century BC) or in unusual stichic metres, such as the

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21 In Presidanz; also in Heitsch
22 Heitsch 43-56, 59.1-14
23 Cameron.1995
24 See now Thom.2005.
choriambs of Philicus’ Hymn to Demeter (SH680). A hymn to the Sun (under the name “Mara”) from Susa ascribed to certain Herodorus, which is about the same date as Isidorus and in may ways a good comparandum for his Hymn 1, is in the rare Priapeian metre (glyconic +pherecratean).

On the basis of the survival evidence, a reasonable reconstruction would be that hexameter hymnography, having gone out of fashion in the Hellenistic period, is revived in the Roman Empire and becomes the normal medium, now that choral lyric is no longer practiced.

There also seems to be reason for positing a change in the nature of hexameter hymns, and of the hymn in general, between the earlier and later periods. Hymns from the later period generally lack a mythological narrative, which is a regular feature in the longer Homeric Hymns and the fragmentary cult hymns of the lyric poets. Another difference is the absence of references to festival contexts and local cult, which is usual in Pindar’s cult poems, and occurs in a few of the Homeric Hymns (as in lines 146ff. of the Hymn to Delian Apollo, with the account of the Delian festival and the long-robed Ionians who attended it with their families).

Instead of myth, later hexameter hymns tend to focus on the powers and benefactions of the deity praised, and instead of aetiologies of local festivals, they present the deities as universal, often with a greater or lesser degree of syncretism. Both myth and festival deixis are still key features of Callimachus’ Hymns, and they are also found in the two melic Paian to Apollo inscribed on the wall of the Treasury of the Athenians at Delphi (late 2nd century BCE).

Set against this background, Isidorus’ hymns could be said to look back to the Homeric Hymns (deixis of a local festival in Hymn 3) and forward to the hexameter poetry of the Empire (the universal Hymn 1). But they are also anomalous because we have so little evidence for other hexameter hymns in this period. The closest

25 MS 12/03/01. The climax is in the same spirit as Isidorus Hymn 1 τοι γαρ ἔθνεια καί πόλεις ποι[ν]όνημο[ν ὄμ]ιμα / Ὁμόωσον, ἐπεі σέβας μ[ο]ύνοι]ς ἐσπερ[ζ] ὀλόντων.
26 e.g. “Paean 14, 32-3”; end of Paean 3 others: Paean 2, 1ff.; Paean 6, 1-7 and 62-3; fr.94b 6ff.
27 Menander Rhetor too in his account of the Smynthiakos Logos recommends focussing on the local cult and festival in the final part of the prose hymn: 445.18ff., Russell and Wilson.1981, 220.
comparandum chronologically would be the far more technically accomplished hymns of Callimachus, composed about 150 years before, and there has been some speculation that Isidorus might have drawn on these poems.  

However, the idea that Isidorus' poems are an isolated phenomenon may well be an erroneous impression given by the uneven distribution of the surviving data. Elite, literary poetry probably had a much better chance of being recorded than any popular, subliterary hymns that may have been used at the local level. This argument can be made for the Hellenistic Greek world in general; for example, although honorific inscriptions tell us about numerous “poeti vaganti” who made traveling round Greece and writing poems for local audiences, we know virtually nothing about the poems they composed, except that their favorite form was “ἔπη”, i.e. hexameters; would such poets not have written hexameter hymns?  

Similarly for Hellenistic Egypt I would suggest that Isidorus’ hymns are the tip of a hidden iceberg of a tradition of subliterary poetic production, which would perhaps have turned out hymns for any town that wanted them. Religious specialists and poets who moved around the Egypt and beyond would have established a common poetic idiom. That might explain why some of Isidorus’ epithets have parallels in poems about Isis known from elsewhere.  

There might also be links to the hexameter hymns preserved in the Magical Papyri. I remarked above on Isidorus’ adaptation of Iliad 1.37 (κλύθι μευ . . . ἀμφιβεβηκας) at Hymn 3, 19-20 and it is worth observing that the same Homeric passage is used as a sort of frame for a hexameter prayer in PMG 6, 22-8. 

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29 Cameron.1995 on 4.18; for further connections, see Fantuzzi and Hunter, 2004, 361
30 A decree from Knossos (late 2nd century BC) thanks a poet called Dioscouriides of Tarsus for composing “an enkomion in the manner of the poet about our race”, i.e. a hexameter city encomium (IC8.12); would he have composed hymns in the manner of Homer as well?
31 The epithet πλουτόδοτι in Hymn 1.1, for example, has a sort of parallel in πλουτοδότεις, used of Isis in a Hellenistic dedicatory epigram from Crete IC 4.244 = SEG 28:737 (Martinez Fernandez, 2006, n.7). Again, the epithet “παντοκράτεις” in line 2 of Hymn 1, which is clearly equivalent to ἡ τύμπανος πάσης χώρας in M., also occurs in later Isiac texts, in O and in a 2nd century CE epitaph. For the Isiac epithets, see Bricault.1996.
32 Hymn 10 in PGM 2.2: κλύθι μεν ἄφωνοτοσε, δε χρύσην ἀμφιβεβηκας / Κύλλαν τα σαβεν 
Τενεδοιο τε τα ἁνάσσεις, /χρυσοφα, λατιν και Πυθολέτα μεσεικριφ, / Λατώε, Σιαώθ, 
Σαβασώθ, μελιούξε, τύραννα, /πειρη, νυκτερόφιοιτε, σεσεγγεν βαρφαραγγυς, / Αρβηθω πολύσωρος, φιλάρμιτα, Αρβαθιαο, /Σιμινθευ, ει ποτε τοι χρηστεν επι βωμιου ἐρεωσ, /η ει δε ποτε 
τοι κατα πίσω μηρι έκηα / ταύρων ηδ' αιγιων, τόδε μοι κρήνην ἐλλιδωρ
The reason Isidorus and other Greco-Egyptian poets like him chose to use hexameters may have been that, from their vantage point, it seemed to be the form that conveyed a sense of Greek cultural identity. The main factor here must have been the Homeric epics, though the additional model of Callimachus’ *Hymns* can only have reinforced it.

A link between the hexameter and Greek identity seems to be made also in an extraordinary poem inscribed on the wall of a temple much further up the Nile than Medinet Madi, at Kalabsha-Talmis in Nubia, probably dating from the end of the 1st century CE. The writer was Paccius Maximus, a Roman soldier stationed there, and the poem was in honour of the local god Mandoulis (IMEGR 168). Maximus gives an almost Callimachean account of his poetic awakening – he dreamt he was transported home to a pastoral *locus amoenus* – and he imagines Mandoulis arriving from Olympos and “charming the barbarian diction away from the Ethiopians”, and then he delivers a short hymn to the god. The description of the poetic initiation is in Sotadeans, while the hymn is in hexameters, with one pentameter thrown in. It looks like hexameters are the appropriate medium for a deity whose preferred language is Greek.  

4. Isidorus and the Mandoulis Hymns from Kalabsha-Talmis

I want to end by comparing Isidorus’ hymns to other inscribed poetry from Greco-Roman Egypt. The volume of such poetry that survives is very great. Étienne Bernand’s volume on the metrical inscriptions (1969) includes 176 texts, but it deliberately omits the poems from the colossus of Memnon, and also the numerous dedications from the temple of Isis at Philai (both of which are the subject of other studies by the Bernands). The metrical inscription are also very diverse: there are funerary epigrams, as elsewhere in the Greco-Roman world, but also “proskynema” inscriptions, where someone commemorates a visit to a place and expresses his

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34 Bernand and Bernand.1960, Bernand and Bernand.1969
adoration of the local gods. The metrical proskynemata are usually in elegiacs or hexameters (e.g. IMEGR 127 and 130 for proskynemata written on the Sphinx at Giza in these two metres), and some of them amount to extensive prayers to the deity. There are also several exotic items: for example, the “Moskhion-stele” from the 2nd century CE (IMEGR 108) in which Moschion records how Sarapis healed his foot, dedicating several poems in both Demotic and Greek, the Greek ones being in several different metres, though not hexameters; and the so-called Agrios-monument from the 1st century CE, a dedication by a certain Agrios of Ptolemais in honour of four Greek gods but designed primarily to commemorate himself. The four sides of the monument have poetic texts, three of them in hexameters, one in elegiacs, and they cite lines and passages from Homer (IMEGR 114).

I’d like to focus on a group of texts that make a particularly interesting intertext for Isidorus’ Hymns, namely the five poems in honor of the deity Mandoulis from Kalabsha-Talmis. One of them (IMEGR 166) – the subject of Arthur Darby Nock’s 1934 paper “A vision of Mandoulis Aion” - seems to be in prose, while the others are mostly in hexameters, IMEGR167 (anonymous), IMEGR168 (the Somnium of Maximus), IMEGR169 (a proskynema by the same author), and IMEGR170 (by a certain Herodes, fragmentary). Maximus was a Roman soldier (something which is revealed in an acrostic in IMEGR 168), and the authors of the others were probably soldiers as well.

Mandoulis was a Nubian god, apparently associated with the sun and credited with oracular powers. The surviving Greek hymns assimilate him to Pythian Apollo and Paian (IMEGR167, 169). IMEGR167 describes a dream in which Mandoulis reveals to the pilgrim that he is the Sun, and at the end the poem addresses him as “Aion”, while IMEGR170, 7 may imply that the god is Horus.

IMEGR170 also says that Mandoulis makes oracles “imitating the barbarian voice”, i.e. adopting the language of the locals:

φωνή βαρβαρ<ν>ήν μεμοέμ[ε]νος ε<Δ>' ἀπὸ σημαν
αὐτός, ἀνέξ, βούλοιο προσάκημεν ἥδις ἀναφήναι
15 σήματα πάσι βροτοῖσι{ν} τὰ κεν μέλή σφι γενέσθαι.
This presupposes that he thought that Mandoulis’ native tongue was Greek. It all sounds reminiscent of the Delian maidens imitating the language of the visitors in the Homeric hymn to Apollo. So too in Maximus’ Somnium poem (IMEGR168), Mandoulis comes from Olympus, charming barbarian language from the Ethiopians and stimulating Maximus to write in Greek.

λαμπρὸς τότε Μάνδουλες ἔβη μέγας ἀπ’ Ὄλυμπου,
θέλγων βαβαρικὴν λέξιν ἀπ’ Αἰθιόπων,
25 καὶ γλυκερὴν ἐσπευσεν ἐφ’ Ἑλλάδα μοῦσαν ἀείσαι,
λαμπρὰ παρεία φέρων καὶ δεξιὸς Ἰσιδι βαίνων,
Ῥωμαίων μεγέθει δόξαν ἀγαλλόμενος,
μαντικὰ ποθιών ἀτε δὴ θεὸς Ὄυλύμποιο-

Line 26 sounds a little like the image of Isis in the chariot of the Sun, as we know it from Isidorus Hymn 3, and also from the aretalogies (although the path Mandoulis and Isis take – South from Olympus – cannot be identical to the East-West axis of the sun). The same line occurs, apparently out of place, in IMEGR167 11, and there is another reference to Isis earlier in that poem (l.3). The link with Isis is confirmed in IMEGR169, 6, where Mandoulis and Isis are treated as sunnai, and in IMEGR166, 19-21: “blessed is Talmis, which Mandoulis the Sun loves, which is under the sceptre of rich haired Isis of a thousand names.”

The encomiastic strategy here has something in common with Isidorus’s treatment of Hermouthis, and also some differences. Maximus and his friends were aiming to praise the epichoric Mandoulis by identifying him with a divinity with a broader appeal. They go for Pythian Apollo, not just because he is the most famous god of oracles, but also because he is Greek; they also link him to Isis, the most universal of all deities, and they evoke the image of Isis riding in the sun-chariot. What distinguishes this from the case of Isidorus is that the writers of the poems inscribed at Kalabsha are not natives of Egypt or Nubia, so that for them Egypt and Nubia are not the centre of the universe. Whereas for Isidorus, the Egyptian epithet Thiouis is the true name of Isis-Hermouthis, for Maximus and Herodas the true language of Mandoulis is Greek, and the locals are barbarians.
Abbreviations
A = Andrian Hymn to Isis, Totti, n.2
PGM = Preisendanz.1973-4
Heitsch = Heitsch.1961-4
IMEGR = Bernand.1969
M = the standard Isis aretalogy, Totti n.1
MS = Merkelbach and Stauber.1998-2004
O = the Oxyrhynchus Aretalogy, P.Oxy.1380
Totti = Totti.1985

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