

## **HERAISCUS**

An Alexandrian Neoplatonic philosopher of the late fifth century and a [pagan](#) priest. He came from an Egyptian family that owned an ancestral estate at Phenebythis in the nome Panopolis. Three primary sources mention him: Damascius' *Life of Isidore*, composed in the early sixth century, offers fragmentary information about Heraiscus' role as a pagan religious figure; the Syriac *Life of Severus*, written by Zachariah of Mitylene, numbers him as one of six Neoplatonists connected with an outbreak of religious violence near Alexandria in 485; a papyrus letter composed in [Greek](#) by Flavius [Horapollon](#) and found at Kom Ishqaw has been translated and studied by J. Maspero (1914), who demonstrated that Heraiscus, although not named in the letter, was both the uncle and the father-in-law of HORAPOLLON and the brother of ASCLEPIADES, two famous professors at the Alexandrian Museon.

What interested Damascius about Heraiscus was that he, along with his older brother Asclepiades, was using native religious concepts to address philosophical issues. In his commentary *On First Principles* (ed. Ruelle, chap. 125), Damascius claimed that they found truths hidden in Egyptian myths, such as the tradition that Unknown Darkness was the beginning of all creation. In an exegetical tract composed by Heraiscus and sent to Proclus, head of the Athenian philosophical school, the brothers' views were found to diverge concerning the nature of the intelligible cosmos. The conflict of opinion prompted Damascius to remark that even Egyptians disputed over concepts and to acknowledge a distinction between Coptic and [Greek](#) philosophers.

A few fragments from the *Life of Isidore* allude to Heraiscus' priestly activity. He spent much of his time in temples tending to the paternal cult in Egypt and elsewhere. By simple observation, while approaching a sacred image, he was said to sense whether it was divinely animated, for he would experience a leaping sensation in his soul as if possessed by a god. At Heraiscus' death, his brother Asclepiades tended to the funeral

rites and prepared to hand over to the priests the customary [funerary](#) objects, which included the bandages of Osiris in which the body was to be wrapped. It is noteworthy that Heraiscus' religious behavior conforms to the principles of theurgy as explained by the fourth-century Syrian Neoplatonist Iamblichus in his tract *On the Egyptian Mysteries*.

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