

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

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In 1993 Françoise Perpillou-Thomas has systematically collected papyrological references to festivities, official and private, which survived or were celebrated in Graeco-Roman Egypt. Among the festivities attested in Greek papyri is the so-called festival of lamps (Lychnokaia) for the goddess Neith in Sais, which has not been properly covered so far. This paper deals with the Illumination of Lamps for Neith attested from the Pharaonic to the Roman period. The illumination of lamps for Neith is referred to in Herodotus' Histories as a festival. However, there is no expression in ancient Egyptian texts meaning the festival of lamps. The ceremony of the illumination of lamps appears as an important part of a spectacular festival for Neith in Sais, Esna, and countrywide. This paper first addresses the nature of this rite in the Pharaonic period and evidence for its maintenance in the Graeco-Roman period. The symbolism of the illumination of lamps will then be considered in order to highlight the religious and social significance of ritual activities performed around or within the domestic space. The ceremony will then be considered from an ethnic perspective to better understand the complexity of associating ritual activities with ethnic/ legal groups in Graeco-Roman Egypt.