

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS AND ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN STUDIES

ISIAC WORSHIP IN THE ANCIENT MEDITERRANEAN: THE IMPLICATIONS OF
LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS ON RELIGIOUS TRANSMISSION

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SPRING 2014

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for baccalaureate degrees
in Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and Anthropology
with honors in Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies

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ABSTRACT

Religious syncretism across the borders of nations begs the question of causation and origins. In the case of the Ancient Egyptian goddess Isis, her cult adapted to be relevant in an increasingly globalized Mediterranean through either language or cultural necessities, be it a conscious alteration or not. The shift of language from the Egyptian hymns to Isis at Philae and the Greek hymns of Isidorus in the Fayum are a central part to the argument of causation. Through analyzing the hymns, language differences and inaccurate translations become less and less of a driving force of her change. The barriers between the Oriental and Near Eastern religion of the Egyptians and the Graeco-Roman World lead to the metamorphosis of Isis' portrayal allowing her to endure through the centuries.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BOD: Book of the Dead

CT: Coffin Texts

De Iside: Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride

Eph.: Xenophon's Ephesian Tale

Hist.: Herodotus' Histories

Lib.: Diodorus Siculus' Library of History

Met.: Apuleius' Metamorphoses

PT: Pyramid Texts

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to thank Dr. Don Redford and Dr. Mary Lou Munn for all their help and input on my thesis throughout the entire process. Also, I am grateful to the whole CAMS department for their part in fostering my love for the Ancient Mediterranean World. I give much gratitude to Mitchell and Lili for keeping me sane in this last semester through healthy doses of *Legos: Lord of the Rings* and Papa John's. Lastly, a huge thank you to my mom for all her love and support throughout my entire academic career, without her I would not be where I am today.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Isis, Mother of Horus, Sister-spouse of Osiris, Daughter of Nut and Geb, these titles and many others are used to recognize Egypt's most prominent female deity. She captured the hearts of the Egyptians, slowly gaining popularity amongst every class, males and females alike. Isis' cult spread to the far reaches of the Mediterranean into Asia Minor and even Northern England. The Egyptian goddess was beloved by the people; regardless of the short-lived persecutions of Rome and the Christians, her following persisted and grew. Throughout the duration of Isis' worship she and her powers evolved, molded by the needs of her worshipers. Perhaps through her flexibility, she was able to remain relevant to those who sought divine counseling and aid. She was never forgotten; as the world changed around her, she changed with it.

The evolution of her cult can be seen in the subtle alterations of her depiction in art as well as literature. Even within Egypt she experienced substantial change due to her syncretization with other goddesses. With her passage into Greek and Roman cultures, different aspects of her divine power and character are emphasized, transforming her cult further from that of Egypt. How are these initiations of change manifested? Is it seen through art, literature, misinterpretation or *interpretatio greaca* or *romana* – the interpretation of foreign cults in the context of their own native deities, myths and religious culture? To answer these questions I will first discuss the migration and consequential evolution of Isis' cult throughout Egypt and into the Mediterranean. Second, I will examine my translations of the eight hymns to Isis at her temple in Philae and Isidorus' four Greek hymns to Isis in the Fayum. I hope to understand whether

mistranslation due to a lack of an adequate equivalence in Greek or the need to employ *interpretatio greaca/romana* caused the subsequent changes of Isis' cult in its transmission outside of Egypt.

Chapter 2

Isis in Pre-Ptolemaic Egypt

Isis was the longest enduring Egyptian female deity in both Egypt and beyond her native soil. Taken into perspective, Egyptian deities were worshiped for two-thirds of human history.¹ Before she was the wife of Osiris and mother of Horus, she was worshipped independently in Sebennytos. Isis then was brought to Heliopolis where she began to absorb the powers of other Egyptian deities.² Certainly her omnipotence and flexibility in her functions allowed her to remain prevalent in the minds of the Ancient Egyptians. Throughout her reign as the supreme deity, Isis underwent significant changes and assumed many different powers. In part, this is due to her syncretization with other older important goddesses, such as Nut, the sky goddess and mother of all the gods; Hathor, the solar bovine goddess; Neith, the warrior lioness goddess; and Mut, the mother goddess. Emerging in the Old Kingdom, her sponge-like ability to absorb powers when required enabled her following to increase exponentially and endure beyond the Ptolemaic Period.

Spread of Isis' Cult Within Egypt

In the Old Kingdom, Isis was a funeral deity seen in the early Pyramid Texts. She was a symbol of motherhood, however her motherly role would be emphasized in the later Pyramid texts with her part in the Osiris legend. After the death of her husband at the hand of Seth, Isis

¹ Barbara S. Lesko, *The Great Goddesses of Egypt* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 202.

² Veronica Ions, *Egyptian Mythology* (Middlesex: Hamlyn Publishing Group Ltd., 1968), 58.

and her sister Nephthys lament and re-member their brother Osiris. Isis created a replica phallus, the only body part of Osiris not found, so that the newly resurrected Osiris was able to conceive Horus; “You have put [Isis] on your phallus so that your seed might emerge into her” (*PT Teti* 198). Isis was then charged with raising her child in the Delta marshes and protecting him from Seth, who would wish to kill the rightful king. The protective nature of Isis leads to her personification of the throne upon which the king, her son, sits. Isis’ name itself is indicative of her association, for the hieroglyph for throne is transliterated as “aset” or “iset”³ Milk also became important in nurturing and giving life as seen in the Pyramid Texts, “Isis will nurture him, Nephthys will suckle him” (*PT Unis* 175). The Egyptians believed the Nile inundation to be the tears, which Isis shed upon the death of her husband. This association led to her identification with the Egyptian New Year brought on by the appearance of the Dog-star, Sothis, which signaled the arrival of the Nile flood.⁴

Due to the instability after the Old Kingdom in the First Intermediate period, there was a heightened interest in the afterlife and the worship of the gods of the West. The cult of Osiris began to rise in importance with Isis’ standing as his sister-wife and protector ascending proportionately.⁵ As seen in the Pyramid Texts, Isis has become a protector of the deceased when taking care of her husband after his dismemberment. She and Nephthys preserved Osiris in linen wrappings and unguents so as to ensure his eternal life when Isis unwraps the mummy in the afterlife.⁶ “They will prevent [you] from decomposing... they will prevent your decay from oozing to the ground” (*PT Pepi* 480). Isis’ connection to the mummification wrapping as well as

³ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 58.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 21

⁵ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 166.

⁶ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 59.

her time spent in the Delta where flax plant, from which linen is made, grew, leading to her recognition as the inventor of weaving.⁷ During the 12th Dynasty, she began to emerge from her partnering with Osiris, and was worshipped in her own right, gaining a place as a distinguished deity in Heliopolis.⁸

By the Middle Kingdom, Isis' cult was established in Lower Egypt in places such as, Busiris, Pe, Dep, Wepwawer and Rosetau, possibly due to the prominence of her role in the Osiris myth, which took place in the Delta. Her cult was then introduced into Egypt in Hierakonpolis, Edfu, Ahkmim and Koptos. The latter two are cult centers of Min, the fertility god with whom Isis also became associated with in her relationship to the rising Nile and subsequent reviving of soil.⁹ Isis' popularity progressed as she was increasingly illustrated as a devoted wife and tender mother.¹⁰ However, the New Kingdom saw a much larger surge in her celebrity.

As Isis' importance grew, she took part in fostering the role of the queen and even possibly led the way for the female pharaoh, Hatshepsut. The 18th Dynasty further ushered Isis to her increasingly prominent position in the Egyptian pantheon. During Hatshepsut's reign, she venerated very highly Hathor, the solar cow goddesses. At Deir el-Bahari, the Hatshepsut dedicated an entire chapel to the goddess. However, in his attempt to disassociate himself from his aunt, Thutmose III drew power and importance from Hathor, and shifted his attention to Isis.¹¹ Adding to her popularity were the numerous myths developing centered on Isis; this is not

⁷ Dimitri Meeks and Christine Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life of the Egyptian Gods* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 196), 106.

⁸ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 168.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 168-9.

¹⁰ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 62-63.

¹¹ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 169-170.

seen to the same extent with other goddesses. Isis begins to develop a personality, strengthening her appeal as a more humane and relatable deity.¹²

Isis' Increasing Powers

Isis, throughout her prominence in Egypt, accrues powers through these myths and hymns. These powers became more exaggerated and evolved into many diverse powers leading to her interpretation as a supreme universal goddess. She begins as simply a mother and wife, roles which extend to her portrayal as aggressive, deceitful and clever. Isis' role as a mother encompasses capacities associated with creation and fertility. Isis became great of magic, ruthlessly protective of her family while appearing also as a merciful savior of the living and deceased. Egyptian gods are known for their fluidity and ability to alleviate the needs of the worshipper. Her capacity for variegated strengths is exemplified and increased in the proliferating flexibility of Isis' powers.

In the *Contendings of Seth and Horus*, Isis protects the rightful place of Horus as heir to Osiris' kingdom. Disguised as a young beautiful widow, Isis tells the story of her son, who is stripped of rights to his father's flock by his uncle. Ignorant of the equation of himself to the uncle, Seth agrees that the actions of the uncle are unjust and the flock should be returned to the son. Isis reveals herself, causing Seth to concede to Isis' wishes that the kingdom be given to Horus.¹³ She protects the place of her son and ensures the respect due to both her husband and son. In her role as mother, she becomes important as the throne and giver of power to the king

¹² Ibid., 175.

¹³ George Hart, *A Dictionary of Egyptian Gods and Goddesses* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1986), 104.

through her milk.¹⁴ In this way, all pharaohs descend from her and owe their status as King of Egypt to her.

Isis is depicted as a creator and the essence of fertility. The Nile flood, in her association with Sothis and the Egyptian New Year, is attributed to her, as the water rises due to her tears upon the death of Osiris.¹⁵ It is clear that with her causation of the annual flood that she is endowed with fertility, and through this fertility, she is associated with creation and giving life. She is said to give breath through the nostril, “I have let your throat breathe” (*BOD* 151), an indication of giving life.¹⁶

The power of great magic is also bestowed upon Isis; most evident is the conception of Horus. Having located all but Osiris’ phallus, Isis creates a phallus to take its place.¹⁷ Her magical power is clearly manifest early in her history. Her powers were first learned from Thoth, sometimes thought to be her father.¹⁸ He, in the name of Re, was able to remove the snake venom, which almost killed young Horus while hiding in the delta marshes.¹⁹ Isis sought to surpass Thoth by obtaining the magnificent power of Re for herself. Re, weary of immortality, grew old and from his dripping saliva Isis created a snake, which bit Re. Isis claimed to require his name to have enough power to save his life. Reluctantly he revealed his name, granting Isis enormous magical power.²⁰ Names bear immense power, allowing one to worship and invoke great strength from a name of a god, such as Re.²¹ Isis’ followers enlisted this power from her

¹⁴ R. E. Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 19; Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 110.

¹⁶ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 17.

¹⁷ Ions, *Mythology*, 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50, 85.

¹⁹ Meeks and Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life*, 82.

²⁰ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 179.

²¹ David P. Silverman, “Divinities and Divinity in Ancient Egypt,” in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 28.

magic for the use of magic charms and amulets for healing, hope of conceiving a child, catching the eye of an unrequited lover, etc.²²

Isis' magical power gave her the ability to cure illnesses and eventually be designated as a savior goddesses. Her image as a savior propelled her image as a more humane goddess. When she, accompanied by scorpions, had been wandering seeking shelter after her husband's death and the birth of Horus, many women refused. One scorpion went back to the home of one of the women and stung her child. Rather than continue on and see this as vengeful justice, Isis returned and healed the son.²³ In addition, Isis and Thoth had taught the knowledge of medicine to allow for humans to heal themselves.²⁴ During one's life, Isis takes steps to ensure the longevity of humans, but after death she also assumes the role of protector. In order to save the soul of the deceased, the body must be kept from decaying.²⁵ Isis, with Nephthys and Anubis, performed embalming rites, the first occurrence of such rites, on Osiris to ensure the continuity of his soul eternally in the underworld.²⁶ As mentioned above, Isis is seen as a patroness of weavers, and by extension is linked with the linen used to wrap the deceased and preserve the body. Isis, with Nephthys, Neith, and Selket, was a guardian on the sarcophagi of the deceased to continue protection in the afterlife. Each of these guardians was also associated with a canopic jar, Isis specifically with the liver.²⁷

Due to myths and narratives associated with the actions and powers of Isis, she becomes more tangible and relatable for her human worshippers. She seems genuinely concerned for their

²² Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 179.

²³ *Ibid.*, 181-182.

²⁴ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ Meeks and Favard-Meeks, *Daily Life*, 166.

²⁷ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 177; Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 118.

wellbeing in her healing powers and assurance of a life after death. Isis has the capacity to feel emotions, such as grief over the loss of a husband; her protection and love of her husband and son are easy points with which to identify oneself. Isis as a beneficial, benevolent, powerful, and omnipotent goddess helped to increase the numbers of her followers.

Isis' Syncretization Within Egypt

As has already been indicated by the previous section, Isis was not always an omnipotent supreme goddess. Her powers continually grew along with her popularity. In order to be accepted by the whole of Upper and Lower Egypt, Isis was melded with other goddesses and eventually replaced many deities. Prominent deities, such as Hathor, Nut, Mut, Neith, Sekhmet, and Bastet, experienced repercussions of the vacuum of power called Isis. These deities lost their positions of importance when assimilated and joined under the umbrella of Isis. Combining herself with the powers of other goddesses, Isis was able to reach the status of universal goddess in Egypt.

The most pronounced syncretism is of Isis and Hathor, the solar bovine goddess who was prominent in the 4th century B.C..²⁸ The importance of dairy in Ancient Egypt introduces the image of the cow as a nurturing mother goddess.²⁹ Isis' milk as a source of life is a clear connection between Isis and Hathor in her form of a cow; milk also ties to the role of Isis as a mother. Hathor is also a goddess of love and followers sought Hathor for aid in conceiving a child. However, Hathor's territory in the realm of love is mostly attributed to sexual love, while

²⁸ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8, 17.

Isis is more concerned with the love of a married couple and their child.³⁰ A more explicit example of Isis' replacement of Hathor is seen in the Horus myth. Horus, angered by his mother releasing Seth, decapitates her. To remedy this act, Thoth gives Isis the head of Hathor. From this point she is depicted with the cow headdress of Hathor, indicating the shift of Hathor's powers onto Isis.³¹

Isis assimilates with other important mother goddesses besides Hathor, namely Mut and Nut. With Mut's symbol, the vulture, as the hieroglyphic symbol for mother, the maternal connotation is very apparent. Although, Mut's role as mother has a more political role, she is associated with the kingship and administration as a symbolic mother of the pharaoh.³² Her involvement and identification with the kingship meshes with Isis' place as the mother of the king. Nut is the sky goddess and mother of all the gods; her creative and motherly elements associate her with Isis, who gains the title of Mother of the gods in the hymns below.³³

Isis' syncretism to other Egyptian goddesses is not solely based on her role as a mother, but also her protective aspect in warfare, childbirth and afterlife. Neith was initially the goddess of war as the Mistress of the bow and Ruler of arrows.³⁴ Her role as protector was enhanced as her more violent and fierce aspect was given to Sekhmet, who herself was a healer goddess.³⁵ Neith was a patroness of weavers as Isis became in her association with the cloth of mummy wrappings.³⁶ Bastet, another cat goddess, was associated with nurturing and protection

³⁰ Hart, *Dictionary*, 80.

³¹ J. Gwyn Griffiths, "Isis," in *Ancient Gods Speak*, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 171.

³² Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 134; Hart, *Dictionary*, 128.

³³ *Ibid.*, 145.

³⁴ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 103.

³⁵ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 55-56; Hart, *Dictionary*, 89.

³⁶ Ions, *Egyptian Mythology*, 104.

concerning childbearing.³⁷ Isis later became the deity which women prayed to concerning childbirth and conceiving children.

Aspects of Isis are seen within all these goddesses. No doubt these goddesses themselves had taken powers of previous deities, for a new goddess to become more easily accessible to a previously established religion, powers would be transferred from the older and powerful goddess onto the newly arrived goddess. This is evidence to the fluidity and flexibility of the Egyptian religion. In particular, Isis changed her image in many ways so as to be accepted by the local population. This ability to be molded to certain functions and her range of powers is precisely what aided Isis' transfer into the other Mediterranean civilizations of Greece and Rome.

³⁷ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 151.

Chapter 3

Isis Outside of Egypt

Greeks adopted Isis even before her cult reached beyond Egyptian borders. Her cult was at the height of her popularity when she was transported abroad to Greece and Rome. Her popularity amongst the Greeks in Egypt was due in part to the Ptolemies' investment in her cult. As a way for their foreign rule to be accepted, the Ptolemies attempted to assimilate to native gods and traditional Egyptian kingship.³⁸ In attempts to placate the natives, temples were built from Alexandria to Philae dedicated to Egyptian gods and goddesses.

Isis began to be more Hellenized under the Ptolemaic reign.³⁹ Hymns were written to Isis in Greek so that her cult was able to become more accessible to local Greeks living in Egypt. However, the most important repercussion of the Ptolemies on Isis' cult was its launch through the enormous trade network of the Mediterranean. The Ptolemies made the eastern Mediterranean mostly Egyptian and with the material goods followed aspects of Egyptian culture and religion.⁴⁰ At trade posts along the Mediterranean coast numerous Isis cults appeared. Her cult can be traced beginning at the port at Alexandria travelling to Phoenicia to Carthage then to Spain, as well as from Greece to Rome, the Rhine Valley, all the way to Britain.⁴¹ Travellers and migrations of families also transmitted Isis' cult. Greeks living in or visiting Egypt would have brought back with them Isis and the practices of her cult.

³⁸ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 48.

³⁹ Sharon Kelly Heyob, *The Cult of Isis Among Women in the Graeco-Roman World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975), 9.

⁴⁰ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 48.

⁴¹ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 186-187.

Isis' popularity led to the extensive geographical range of her cult. As seen with other Oriental cults, Isis was able to satisfy the needs of the Graeco-Roman people where their gods had failed.⁴² She held powers, which allowed for extreme flexibility to mold herself to aid any suppliant.⁴³ Unlike Greek and Roman gods, Osiris had experienced death, but Isis was able to overcome this with her power as a creator. This knowledge of death led to a confidence of what lies beyond death. Graeco-Roman religion was vague and led to uncertainty on life after death, leading to the attraction of Egyptian cults.⁴⁴ Isis' rejuvenation of Osiris depicts her defiance of destiny and fate, a trait not possible for the Graeco-Roman gods.⁴⁵ Isis was also popular among women as a promoter of marriage and close family ties. Her eternal love and fidelity of her marriage with Osiris was a trait that made her more humanlike and approachable.⁴⁶ Greeks and Romans were to fear their gods, while Isis was more of a mother figure.⁴⁷ She was tangible and appealing to all levels of society, for her cult did not recognize social ranks. The locations of her temples in marketplaces, rather than upon hills and mountains, made her cult more accepting of lower rank.⁴⁸ The readiness to accept worshippers of any class, race and sex, led to the vast net of her worship that covered the Mediterranean world.

⁴² Ibid., 194.

⁴³ Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves: Women in Classical Antiquity* (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), 218.

⁴⁴ Jamie Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods: Myth, Salvation and Ethics in the Cults of Cybele, Isis and Mithras* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 34.

⁴⁵ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 194.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁷ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 221.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 223; Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 136.

Migration into Greece

The appeal of Egyptian religion and the importance of Alexandria drove the transmission of Isis' cult into Greece. The earliest mention of Isis' cult was at the end of the 4th century, beginning of the 3rd.⁴⁹ Her cult took hold of Greek centers such as Delos, Delphi and Eleusis. With the loss of independence of Delos to Athens, the cult spread to Athens.⁵⁰ Temples, shrines, and inscriptions are found throughout Greece. There were temples to Isis in the Peloponnese and Gulf of Corinth as well as a Serapeum in Athens; an inscription of a virgin vowing herself to Isis in Chaeronea; a shrine at Tithorea; and a statue at Aegina.⁵¹ While there was great expansion with the navigational ties such as, Therme and Neapolis, there is evidence of the introduction of Egyptian cults through ordinary priests from Egypt, not sent by the Ptolemies as missionaries.⁵² For example, a priest named Apollonius brought the Isiac cult from Memphis and another priest, Demetrius Telesarchides, built a temple to Isis.⁵³

Literary Receptions

Isis and the Egyptian religion was also suspect to Greek aretalogies, literature and histories from Herodotus, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus and Xenophon of Ephesus. During his travels to Egypt, Herodotus was introduced to the religion of the Egyptians. Rather than seeking to distinguish Greek religion from Egypt's, Herodotus observed similarities. Herodotus was so bold as to suggest Egyptian origins in Greek religion. Heracles was said to be one of the 12

⁴⁹ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵¹ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 65-67.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 68; Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 8.

⁵³ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 49.

Egyptian gods, rather than just a deified demi god as in Greece (*Hist.* II.43.3). With the exception of Poseidon, Dioscuri, Hera, Hestia, Themis, the Graces and the Nereids, the names of Greek gods originated from Egypt (*Hist.* II.50.1-2). Isis was noted specifically as being “the Egyptian equivalent of Demeter” (*Hist.* I.59.2). Plutarch, in an effort similar to Herodotus, wished to bring to the Greeks information about the Egyptian religion. Plutarch attempts to explain aspects of Egyptian religion, such as the use of the sistrum to indicate “that the things which exist should be shaken” (*De Iside* 376C5-6). He clearly had access to traditional Egyptian stories as his presentations of the Osirian myths appear very similar in sequence. However, his work attempted to eliminate inconsistencies from existing versions, and as a consequence severely treated the cult of Isis with *interpretatio graeca*.⁵⁴ To make the religion of the Egyptians understood and accepted, he made connections of Isis to Demeter in addition to altering Egyptian myths established centuries before. Namely, rather than Horus cutting off his mother’s head after she had set free Typhon/Seth, her husband’s murderer, Plutarch wrote that “laying hands on his mother [Horus] ripped off the crown from her head” (*De Iside* 358d14-16). Diodorus Siculus also discusses the religion of the Egyptians as well as their culture. With regards to Isis, he identifies her with Demeter more so than other Greek goddesses (*Lib.* I.13.5). He names her as the discoverer of wheat, barley, and laws, attributes to be discussed later (*Lib.* I.14.1-3). In Xenophon of Ephesus’ novel, *An Ephesian Tale*, he tells the story of two lovers, Anthia and Habrocomes. This novel showcases the importance of the fluidity of ancient gods; their worship changes from Artemis to Isis, both similar goddesses easily allowing for Anthia and Habrocomes to worship them depending on whose native land they stand. They embark on a sea adventure,

⁵⁴ Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 39.; J. Gwyn Griffiths, ed., *De Iside et Osiride*, by Plutarch (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1970), 30.

throughout which Isis inspires chastity, and marital fidelity and loyalty.⁵⁵ To save herself from marrying Psammis, Anthia claims she was dedicated to Isis at birth (*Eph* 3.11); taking refuge in the temple of Isis, Anthia asks for help saying, “Mistress of Egypt, who have helped me often, save me yet again. Let Polyidus spare me as well since I am keeping myself chaste for Habrocomes” (*Eph* 5.4). In all of these novels, Isis is syncretized with Hellenistic goddesses as well as Greek virtues, a matter which will be discussed below. From Greece, the cult of Isis migrates into Rome, taking on further changes and making appearances in contemporaneous literature.

Migration into Rome

Throughout her time in Rome, Isis has an unstable relationship with those in power. However, regardless of their diverse population, the people found her to meet their needs while the Roman religion was far too politicized and stratified.⁵⁶ Isis’ cult made its way to Rome through both trade and travel, as was the case in Greece. The earliest evidence of an Egyptian cult in Rome is found in an ordinance from Puteoli declaring the construction of a wall in front of the Serapis Temple.⁵⁷ The trade post in Sicily was another vehicle through which her cult was brought to Italy, as well as Italians settled in Delos, who brought back Egyptian religion to Campania.⁵⁸ Around the 2nd century B.C., Isis’ cult had infiltrated Italy, but having established itself in Greece and been Hellenized by Alexandria, her cult had accumulated customs from

⁵⁵ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 243-249; Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 195.

⁵⁶ Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 141.

⁵⁷ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 12.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 11; Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 190.

many different areas of Isiac worship.⁵⁹ When Isis' cult began spreading throughout the Roman empire into Western provinces through merchants, soldiers and officials, her cult was not spread from an Egyptian Isis, but now from a Romanized form.⁶⁰ By this time, the cult of Isis has become detached from the traditional Egyptian cult but attempt to keep up appearances by retaining Egyptian accouterments in her iconography.

The attractions to Isis' cult were significant and various, reaching out to females, slaves and soldiers.⁶¹ Evidence of practice of her cult is seen at Pompeii and Herculaneum in frescos, which reveal the worship and ritual of Isiac followers as well as the varying demographic, who desired to devote themselves to Isis. These images also indicate the way that Isis was portrayed and imagined by the Roman people; she was seen with both Graeco-Roman attributes and native Egyptian. The Iseum was situated near the Forum, indicating its importance for the life of the city.⁶² Pompeii and Herculaneum give a unique look into the worship of Isis that cannot be seen elsewhere.

Reception in the Republic and Roman Empire

With the Senate, and later Emperors, there were many ups and downs in its relationship with the cult of Isis. Sulla, in the 1st cent B.C., repaired the Isis temple and established an Isiac guild.⁶³ In the 50s B.C., Consuls Piso and Gabinius ordered the destruction of Isis altars; Consul

⁵⁹ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 217.

⁶⁰ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 22.

⁶¹ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 190.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 191; Wit, *Isis in Ancient Egypt*, 71.

⁶³ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 192; Wit, *Isis in Ancient Egypt*, 222.

C. Aemilius Paulus even had to take up an axe to destroy the Serapeum when workers refused.⁶⁴ With a clear pro-Isis sentiment of the populous, the Second Triumvirate in 43 B.C. decided to build a new temple for Serapis and Isis.⁶⁵ It can be assumed that with the refusal to tear down the Serapeum, the following of Isis was strong regardless of destruction of shrines and temples associated with her and the Egyptian religion.

During the Roman Empire, attitudes towards Isis were still variable. Augustus felt that foreign religions were undermining the new moral foundations of his empire.⁶⁶ In 28 B.C., he decreed that there be no Egyptian shrines within the pomerium, which eventually extended in 21 B.C. to a one-mile radius beyond after troubles in the outskirts of Rome.⁶⁷ Initially, Tiberius was tolerant of Egyptian worship, until 19 A.D., when Isis priests were paid by an equestrian, Decius Mundus to tell Paulina, a woman of higher standing, to meet with Anubis in the temple of Isis.⁶⁸ When it was revealed, the cult was punished severely; priests were crucified, followers were deported and the rites of Isis were banned.⁶⁹ On the other hand, Caligula took a liking to Isis and emphasized the cult of the emperor. He built a palace of Isis on the Palatine, married his sister, consulted Egyptian soothsayers, and adorned Rome with obelisks.⁷⁰ Caligula was so involved in the cult that when his wife died he reenacted the wanderings of Isis when Osiris had died.⁷¹ Claudius, also interested in Isis' cult, wished to bring the Eleusinian mysteries, which were

⁶⁴ Ibid., 222-223.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 223.

⁶⁶ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 224.

⁶⁷ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 223; Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 22.

⁶⁸ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 223; Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 22; Shelly Matthews, *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 12.

⁶⁹ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whore, Wives and Slaves*, 224.

⁷⁰ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 223-224.

⁷¹ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 28.

already associated with Isis, to Rome.⁷² The last Julio-Claudian, Nero, was not as accepting of Isis, for he was intolerant of exotic cults.⁷³ However, the year of the four emperors saw a renewal of Isis' cult.

In the reigns of the four emperors, Ortho was known to take part fully in Isiac ceremonies.⁷⁴ Vespasian continued this into the Flavian dynasty completing the link with Isis to the Imperial cult. The Flavians tied Isis to military concerns;⁷⁵ Titus and Vespasian held a vigil in the Iseum before holding the triumph of Jerusalem. Domitian depicted himself as an Egyptian pharaoh in the expansion of Beneventum. He was known to have taken religion more seriously than his father, Vespasian, due to his salvation during the struggle of power between Vitellius and Primus; Domitian had escaped notice, disguising himself as a priest of Isis.⁷⁶ The Nerva-Antonine dynasty also followed with the tolerance and support of Egyptian religion. On Trajan's triumphal arch he stands before Isis and Horus offering wine. Hadrian, although not as serious with religion, built a miniature Canopus at his palace in Tivoli.⁷⁷ Commodus had removed the ban on Egyptian practices within the pomerium and was devoted to the worship of Isis.⁷⁸

Septimius Severus' worship of Egyptian gods went to the extent that he iconographically associated himself with Serapis, the consort of Isis; the Arch of Severus links the image of Severus with Jupiter-Serapis.⁷⁹ Caracalla also identified himself with Serapis as cosmocrator and

⁷² Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 224.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 224, 233.

⁷⁵ Matthews, *First Converts*, 18.

⁷⁶ Sarolta A. Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1995), 99.

⁷⁷ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 235-236.

⁷⁸ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 32; Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 237.

⁷⁹ A. M. McCann, *The Portraits of Septimius Severus: Memoirs of the American Academy in Rome*, vol 30 (Rome: American Academy in Rome, 1968), 53.

universal savior. He even linked his mother, Julia Domna, with Isis.⁸⁰ In 311 A.D., Constantine ordered the edict to destroy pagan temples.⁸¹ This began the decline of favor towards non-Christian cults. However, the sphere of interest in Egyptian cults was too large to be smothered by this decree, as seen before in the actions of Consul Paulus.⁸² The Serapeum was not destroyed until one-third of a century later.⁸³

Literary Receptions

Roman literature reflects a society, which already had accepted Isiac worship within Rome. However, the poetry and novels illuminate the differing opinions concerning the cult as well as perceptions of insiders and outsiders of the cult. Propertius and Juvenal take the stand against the strange Egyptian cult. Juvenal likens the Isiac temple to a brothel, or a rendezvous for adulterous women and their lovers (*Satires* VI.488-489). Propertius complains of the Isiac rights keeping him from Cynthia, “for ten nights Cynthia’s at the sacrifice” at the “ceremony I brought from Egypt for Roman women” (*Elegies* II.30.1-4). However, Apuleius differs in his attitudes towards Isis. In his *Metamorphoses*, Lucius is freed from his form as an ass due to the intervention and deliverance of Isis. She tells him in his dream that she “will prolong thy daies above the time that the fates have appointed, and the celestial Planets ordained” (*Met.* XI.6), addressing her powers of divination via dreams as well as powers over fate. Lucius describes her as one who “bearest a great affection to the adversities of the miserable, as a loving mother thou takest not rest” (*Met.* VI.25). These authors also illustrate the organization of the Isis cult in the

⁸⁰ Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*, 117; Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 237-238.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 240.

⁸² Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 217.

⁸³ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 240.

Roman World. Her cult is made up of devotees, initiates, and priests all taking part in festivals and ceremonies, such as the Navigum Isidis in *Metamorphoses*; this structure is reminiscent of the Eleusinian Mysteries. In addition to depicting the episcopal organization, this literature echoes the range of positions toward Isis and her cult as seen in the timeline of Isis' cult in the Roman Empire.

Attributes

Isis' cult, having been transferred from Egypt to Greece and Rome added to her arsenal of powers and attributes. She was already seen as the protective mother, creator, fertility deity, and one great of magic. Some of these aspects were further enhanced, others she absorbed were completely new. Many of these new powers and associations are due to her assimilation and syncretization with other Greek and Roman gods, however that will be discussed later.

As her label as creator was carried through the Mediterranean, her function as creator turned into inventor and discoverer. She was said to have founded religion, marriage, divination, law and pharmacology.⁸⁴ In conjunction, Isis' reputation for her magic and savior led to her title of Isis-Hygieia, the personification of health and curing.⁸⁵ She was also believed to have discovered the elixir of immortality as well as many helpful drugs, most likely linked to her revitalizing of Osiris.⁸⁶

Being a mother and wife, Isis lives with compassion, kindness and love. As mentioned above, her own experiences of her husband's death make her more humane. She is ready to save

⁸⁴ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 23, 59, 189, 196.

⁸⁵ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 199.

⁸⁶ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 189.

and redeem her worshippers as if they were her own children, detectable in her aid given to Lucius. Isis brought men and women together in sexual relationships, making sexual love acceptable within the context of family.⁸⁷ Isis also promoted chastity, as Anthia and Habrocomes contest to in Xenophon's tale, and abstinence, in terms of both food and sex for initiates and devotees.⁸⁸ While there are the contrasting aspects of her cult, chastity and sexuality, these can be reconciled with her love for her husband, engaging in acceptable marital intercourse, followed by her vow to remain chaste and to not marry another.⁸⁹

Her role as protector is emphasized in her assimilation to Isis-Victoria; she is seen to have control over warfare and victory.⁹⁰ While goddesses may commonly be associated with war, i.e. Bast, Athena, Sekhmet, it is scarcer for a goddess to acquire the powers of male deities of the Greek and Roman worlds. Isis became associated with the sky, creation, navigation and commerce, roles traditionally ascribed to male deities.⁹¹ In this respect, some have seen Isis as one who has increased the standing of women in Greek and Roman society and to have made the power of men equal to that of women, as some aretalogies have claimed.⁹²

Syncretization with Hellenistic and Roman Gods and Goddesses

Writers, such as Herodotus, Plutarch and Diodorus Siculus, made attempts to transport the religion of Egypt to Greece and Rome, although to differing degrees of objectivity. Two priests, one Greek and the other Egyptian, Timotheus and Manetho respectively, also attempted

⁸⁷ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 200.

⁸⁸ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 222.

⁸⁹ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 85; Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 43.

⁹⁰ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 122.

⁹¹ Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*, 218.

⁹² Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 191.

to bring together the two polytheisms, to reach out to a wider religious audience.⁹³ As Isis made her way further away from Egypt, she was subject to *interpretatio graeca*, which Wit describes as “ruthless.”⁹⁴ These changes allowed for Isis, and other Egyptian cults to be more easily accepted by Greek and Romans. She responded to the concerns and desires of the locals, at times leading to her identification and syncretization with Greek and Roman deities.

The strongest resemblance is between Isis and Demeter/Ceres. Many authors made the connection in the past due to similar powers, mythology and cultic practices. As mentioned previously, Isis is credited with the discovery of grain, a similar feature of Demeter.⁹⁵ Diodorus identified the origin of the Eleusinian mysteries from Egypt by the Athenian king Erechtheus (*Lib. I.29.2*). Demeter’s search for Persephone and days of mourning mirror that of Isis after Osiris’ death. In Rome, Isis was shown with the symbols of cornucopia and an ear of wheat, the latter in association with Ceres.⁹⁶ Although Isis becomes identified with Demeter as can be said of other deities, they are independent goddesses with Demeter not be victim to Isis’ replacement.⁹⁷

Through Isis’ association with Bastet, Isis assimilates to the powers of Artemis. All three are protectors of childbirth, motherhood and take part in growth and nature.⁹⁸ Isis takes on lunar powers due to Artemis’ association with Hecate, the magic goddess, again relating to another of the many aspects of Isis, magic.⁹⁹ As seen in Xenophon’s *Ephesian Tale*, Isis is easily associated with Artemis in their protection of chastity and martial loyalty.

⁹³ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*,

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁵ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 187.

⁹⁶ Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis*, 39.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹⁸ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 146.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

Athena, Minerva, and Bellona are able to make connections with Isis through Neith of Sais. Isis' wisdom and cleverness easily make the first step in relating to Athena/Minerva, however through Neith, Isis is able to embrace the bellicose side of her powers. Isis has been labeled as Isis-Victoria, a simple progression towards the powers of Bellona. Isis more easily assimilated to Minerva, for Isis was never fully accepted in Athens.¹⁰⁰ Minerva's appearance on an arch near the Iseum Campensa on Campus Martius shows the close relationship between the two goddesses.¹⁰¹

While it can be claimed that Isis has connections with Aphrodite or Venus, I would attribute her function as a love goddess more in the realm of Hera. Isis promotes martial sexual relationships, not erotic love as of Aphrodite. However, if a connection was to be made with Aphrodite, it would be through her relations with Hathor. Isis' connections to Hera go beyond marital loyalty. Both Isis and Hera attempted to create children non-traditionally. Although under very different circumstances, for Isis created the missing phallus of Osiris and Hera attempted this out of spite of Zeus, the two Queens produced lame children, Harpocrates and Hephaestus, respectively.¹⁰² Also, in the Coffin Texts, Isis was said to have been impregnated by lightening, an easy allusion to the power of Zeus, Hera's husband.¹⁰³

Wit mentions that links could not be created with Poseidon, Dioscuri, and Hera, leading to all powers being associated with Isis;¹⁰⁴ however, I believe this is not the case, there are legitimate similarities allowing her to be assimilated with them. Isis, as a protector and

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 122.

¹⁰¹ Takacs, *Isis and Sarapis*, 101.

¹⁰² Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 37.

¹⁰³ R.O. Faulkner, "The Pregnancy of Isis," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 54 (August 1968): 40. <http://www.jstor.org/ezaccess.libraries.psu.edu/stable/3855901>.

¹⁰⁴ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 126.

navigation, began to become associated with sailors, being named Isis-Pelagia, Isis- Euploia, and Isis-Pharia.¹⁰⁵ From here a link may be drawn to Leucothea, another protector of sailors, and by extension Poseidon and Dioscuri. Even further, Isis' power over fate allows for her to be associated with Fortuna/Tyche as seen in Apuleius and images in Pompeii, for she is able to change one's fate, an ability not seen in other Greek and Roman deities.¹⁰⁶

Much of Isis' assimilations with other Mediterranean goddesses is because of her syncretization before ever leaving Egypt; i.e. Athena, Minerva, Bellona via Neith; Artemis via Bast; Aphrodite via Hathor. The absorption of powers of other deities allowed for her to transform according to the need and desire of her worshippers. In the hymns following, the myriad of Isis' powers are portrayed, from which the discussion of what fueled the changes of Isis' cult and Isis' portrayal throughout her migration into the Mediterranean civilizations is made.

¹⁰⁵ Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 239.

¹⁰⁶ James Tatum, *Apuleius and the Golden Ass* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 32; Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 82.

Chapter 4

Philae Hymns

Philae is an island in the southern extreme of Egypt. It contains many shrines and temples dedicated to many different gods and goddesses. In the 26th dynasty, Philae was a prominent place of religious life and Isis was dominant.¹⁰⁷ The hymns to Isis were a part of the building program set up by Ptolemy II, as mentioned in Chapter 3. Although the hymns are from the Ptolemaic period, due to the need of acceptance of the foreign rulers, the hymns are genuinely Egyptian. The hymns show themes of divine motherhood, Isis' relation to the royal house and family, Isis' role as supreme universal deity and a bellicose protector, and her association with cult centers and other goddesses. Below are my translations of the eight hymns to Isis at Philae, aided by the commentary and translation of Louis Zabkar.

Translation

Hymn I.

Praise the crown of Isis, Hathor, Mother of the god, Mistress of the sky, Commander of Isis' priests and Queen of gods.
 You, Mother of the god, King Horus, Victorious Bull, Protector of his father, he causes the over throwing of rebels.
 You, the Crown,¹⁰⁸ Mother of the god, Horus, Min-Horus, the Skillful One,¹⁰⁹ beating the enemy thereby.

¹⁰⁷Louis V. Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis in Her Temple at Philae* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1988), 1.

¹⁰⁸ Zabkar omits "crown" as it appears in the hieroglyphics by translating just "you;" this happens in the rest of the hymns with several titles. Crown, as others, help to characterize Isis, therefore I chose to translate them as well.

You, Mother of the divine god, powerful Khonsu, royal son of eternity, Lord of Nubia, Ruler of foreign lands.

You, Sovereign, Mother of the god, Horus, Victorious Bull, Support of the sky, Administrator of the temple of the Ennead, creating the lordly image.¹¹⁰

You, Mother of Horus, Victorious Bull, Protector of Egypt, Lord of the nome forever.

Hymn II.

Praise to you, Queen Isis, your greatness, Mother of the god, Mistress of the sky, Sovereign of the gods.

You, the Crown, First majesty of Onnophris, Overseer of the *Ombi* in the administrative temple, Eldest son, First of Geb.

You, the Crown, First majesty of Onnophris, Victorious Bull, Lion, overturning his enemy, Lord governing for eternity.

You, the Head choice of Onnophris, beautiful child slaughtering the disaffected persons of the two lands.

You, Head mistress of Onnophris, protecting her brother and watching over the bad hearted.

You, the Crown, the First mistress of Onnophris, million times young, raised to eternity, you are together with him at Biggeh.

Hymn III.

Isis, Great Mother of the gods, Mistress of Philae, Wife of god, God's adorer, God's hand, Mother of god, Great Wife of the king, Adornment and Lady of ornaments¹¹¹ of the palace.

Mistress and Desire of green land, filling the palace with her beauty, Fragrance of the palace, Lady of joy, Leader of the course in the divine seat.

Cloud anointing the land falling downwards, Ewe of love, commanding Upper and Lower Egypt, making the resting place of the Ennead, guiding according to her command.

Princess,¹¹² Great of praise, Lady of charm, her face smells that of fresh myrrh.

¹⁰⁹ Zabkar translates as "hero," however I saw fit to keep it closer to the meaning "dexterous."

¹¹⁰ In Zabkar, he translate this as "and fashions every divine image." This is reference to the god as a builder and creator, in this case, building statues. 24.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 42.

¹¹² Ibid.

Hymn IV.

The crown, Isis, giving life in the midst of the sacred mound, Satis,
Leader of Biggeh.

She pours inundation in order to give life to the people and create
green plants, giving godly peace to the gods and prayers and
offerings to the sufferers

She is the Lady of sky, her husband is Lord of *Duwat*, her son is
the Lord of the land, her husband is the water, youthful in
Biggeh at his time.

She is the Lady of sky, land, and *Duwat*, having created them
having appeared of her heart and made with her hands, she is
the *ba*, which is in every city watching over her son Horus and
her brother Osiris.

Hymn V.

The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usikare Meramun, praise his
mother, Isis, Mistress of the sky.

May she come to her house to join her image, her radiance¹¹³ is
inundating the faces, as Re himself gives in the morning.

Female Horus, beloved of mighty Horus, Mother of Horus, created
by Atum, Great Wife, joined with Re, observing over her
brother Osiris.

She took the two lands, Ruler of the gods and goddesses, attacking
the strong, braver than brave, stronger than the strong, beating
millions, cutting heads, Great Slaughterer of her enemies.

Mistress of the flame attacking the rebels, rounds Apopis in an
instant, Chief uraeus of Re, coiled upon his head, giving
instructions in the sacred barque of the two lands.

Isis, the Great, Mother of the god, Mistress of Philae, Mother of
Horus, Daughter of Re, beloved of his own heart, the mistress'
form in sacred shrine paid honor to in sanctuaries.

Enduring the year of the Son of Re, Lord of crown, Ptolemy,
established like Horus up top the Serekh, appearing in glory as
King of Upper and Lower Egypt on the throne of Horus, like
Re, eternally.

¹¹³ Ibid., 58.

Hymn VI.

King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the two lands Usikare Meramun, praises upon his mother, Isis, Lady Wosret.

Come to the palace, you making gods and men live, to whose Ka Heh stretches,¹¹⁴ whom Re lifts up over his head, shines as ureaus on forehead.

Rising and subduing darkness, you shine, traveling in the water of the primeval waters, Brilliant One in the waters,¹¹⁵ sailing in the barque of Re.

East Horus, gives you offerings and the seat in Heliopolis as appearing in glory; offerings are set down for you, in Heliopolis; there are great glorious feasts with many festivals made to you, mighty offerings at Biggeh, forever for your Ka, eternally.

Be at peace in the rich great palace, come to the palace at the time of perfect offerings,¹¹⁶ Fine Gold One, Re, Sovereign of two lands, never far from you, so that the rich one may circle¹¹⁷ in the realm of the dead with her brother Osiris.

Isis, protect the son of Re, glorious Ptolemy, his majesty Horus, upon the throne of the child, forever and eternally.

Hymn VII

He comes, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Usikare Meramun, Son of Re, Ptolemy, before you, Isis, Great Mother of the god, bringing to you the sistra to please you therewith him, he says:

I play the sistra before beautiful you, Isis, Giver of life upon the heart of sacred mound, Eye of Re, you whom none resemble in the sky or on earth.

Great of love, Mistress of women, filling the sky and earth with her beauty, Divine Mother of Kamutef, Great Spouse of Onnophris.

Noble, Great Lady in the temple of noblemen, strong in the temple of the benben stone, Lady who strides in the sacred barque of millions, governing in the divine barque.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 84-85.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 80.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 174.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

Great goddess of Hikuptah, Mistress of Ta-anekh, Ruler of Thebes, Lady of Ishru, Great Appearance of glory in Biggeh, Great Goddess in front of Upper Egypt, Mistress of Lower Egypt. May your beautiful head be gracious to your son, Horus, Ptolemy.

Hail, Lady, Daughter of Menhyt, Lady of Buto, Lady of Re, Mistress of Dep, Great White Crown of El-Kab, Lady of the sacred mound, Mistress of Philae, to whom Imu belongs, great in Sais, Neith, Lady of inebriation¹¹⁸ in inundation water, joy in Pe, rejuvenated in Dep, protect the son of Re, Ptolemy, eternally.

Hymn VIII.

Ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt, Userkare Meramun, praises his mother. He says:

Hail to you, Isis, Great Ruler, Elder in womb of her mother, Nut, mighty in the sky, before Re.

Adoration to you in the night barque, praise to you in the day barque, having birthed all gods.

Son of Re, Ptolemy has come before you, Lady of life, on this beautiful day therein you rose beautifully, he ties onto you the uraeus, supports onto you the strong one, Userkare Meramun, son Horus.

May your *ka* be in peace, Lady of life, having risen on this beautiful day therein the gods pleased her after her rage.

Beloved of Re, you are within his sacred barque, driving off Apopis with effectiveness¹¹⁹ of your utterances, behold Ptolemy, coming before you, he, purified, praises your beauty.

Evil of past years departs having perpetuated to him, evil this year went away, her son is turned from them, he had made offerings to her on account of them. He turns to the lady, you are welcome anew.

He has not done evil to the god of the town, he has not done evil. Nothing is counted against him among assessors¹²⁰ and scribes

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 107.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

of two lands, those who inflict injuries as a yearly share
dragging herds to gods' slaughter block.¹²¹

He is protected from this year, her spells together with it in peace,
in peace, beautiful year, he fills your *ka* with offerings, his face
is with life.

¹²¹ Ibid., 182.

Chapter 5

Isidorus' Fayum Hymns

A set of four hymns to Isis written by a priest or cult member, Isidorus, were discovered in a temple complex in the southernmost extreme of the Fayum at Medinet Madi. These hymns are one of 12 extant Greek aretalogies; Isidorus' hymns are believed to be the earliest dating to the 1st century B.C. when the temple was erected by Ptolemy IX Soter II.¹²² Although there is conflicting evidence on when the hymns were written,¹²³ it can be safely said that it was in the early 1st century. Below is my translation of the hymns, aided by Vera Vanderlip's commentary and translation, followed in the next chapter with a discussion of the two sets of Isis hymns and what influence language may have had on the spread of Isis' cult to Greece and Rome.

Translation

Hymn I.

Wealth giver, Queen of gods, Hermouthis, Lady,
 All powerful, Agathe Tyche, much praised Isis,
 Standing above gods, Inventor of all life,
 To you all kinds of works were a care, so that you might give forth
 Life to man and order to all.
 And you made known laws in order that justice rules above,
 You delivered skills in order that life be graceful,
 You founded blooming plants producing all fruits.
 For your sake, the heaven and all the earth settle,

¹²² Vera Frederika Vanderlip, *The Four Greek Hymns of Isidorus and the Cult of Isis* (Toronto: A.M. Hakkert Ltd., 1972), 3-9.

¹²³ Ptolemy IX was absent from Egypt from 107 B.C. until 88 B.C., but the dedication at Medinat Madi was after 96 B.C. Ibid., 13-14.

And the blowings of winds and sun of sweet light.
 Your power fills all rivers of the Nile
 At harvest season and pours most rapid water
 Upon the whole earth, in order that the unfailing harvest might rule
 over.

As many men living on unlimited earth,
 The Thracans, Greeks and as many foreigners there are,
 They call your name, much honored among all
 They speak ones own language in one's own fatherland.
 Syrians praise you Astarte, Artemis, Nanaia;
 And Lycian tribe calls you Leto, the Lady;
 Mother of the gods the Thracian men also praise you;
 Greeks, Hera, Great Throne, Aphrodite,
 And good Hestia and Rheia and Demeter;
 The Egyptians, Thiouis, because you are one, as you are all
 Other goddesses named by the tribes.

Ruler, I will not abate singing your great power,
 Immortal Savior, Many Named, most great Isis,
 Savior from war and cities and all citizens,
 Men, wives, property and beloved children.
 As great the number contained in prison by part of death.
 And as great the number disturbed by painful great sleeplessness,
 And men wandering in foreign countries,
 And as great the number sailing on the great high sea in winter,
 With men having been destroyed and ships broken down.
 They are all saved, praying that you be present.
 Hear my wishes, whose name bears great power
 Be merciless to me, release me of all sorrow.

Isidorus wrote this.

Hymn II.

Rejoice, Tyche Agathe, Isis the greatest, giving glory,
 Hermouthis; all cities rejoice in you,
 Founder of life and fruits, in which all
 Moral men cheer on account of your graces.
 As many pray to you to assist their commerce,
 Pious, they are wealthy in all time;

And as many bear death-bringing sickness in the grip of death,¹²⁴
 Praying to you, quickly they acquire your life.
 O truly, Good of gods, strong Sokonopis,
 Dwelling in same temple, Good Giver of wealth.
 Founder of earth and star-like heaven
 And of all rivers and swift streams,
 And Anchoes your son, who dwells in heavenly sky,
 Is the rising sun, who shows light.
 As many wish to have offspring of children,
 Praying to you, they acquire the blessing of children.
 Persuading the Golden Nile, you lead down in appropriate time
 Upon the land of Egypt as blessing for men.
 Then blooms all fruit and allocation for all,
 For whom you are willing, a life of all sorts of goodness.
 Remembering your gifts to whom you granted wealth
 And your great graces to have always,¹²⁵
 All assign a 10th part of these to you
 Rejoicing with the year for your Panegyris,¹²⁶
 Next you allow, with the anniversary coming around,
 For all to rejoice in the month of Pachon.
 Returning home and celebrating they walk
 Piously full of cheer from you.
 Giving a share of your gifts to me, Queen Hermouthis,
 Your suppliant, bliss and the blessing of children.
 Isidorus wrote this.
 The gods, hearing my pleasant hymns and prayers,
 Rewarded me happiness and grace.

Hymn III.

Ruler of greatest gods, Hermouthis, Lady,
 Pure Isis, devoted to the gods, giving glory, Deo,
 Most holy giver of good things to all pious men
 You give great graces and wealth to the pious,
 And to have a sweet life and the best cheer,
 Wealth, success and prudence without pain.
 As many live greatly, the best of men,

¹²⁴ Ibid., 37

¹²⁵ Ibid., 46.

¹²⁶ Panegyris, the festival in which wares are exchanged. Ibid.

Scepter bearing kings and as many kings there are,
 They depend on you to be lord, ruling until old age,
 Bequeathing bright, shining and much wealth
 To sons, and sons' sons and such men afterwards.
 The one whom the queen held most beloved of lords
 He is lord of both Asia and Europe,
 Leading peace, the fruits prevail for him
 Of all sorts of good things, bearing the best fruits.
 Whenever there are wars, slaughters of men and greatness
 Of numerous crowds and your strength, your power,
 Destroys the crowd, but gives courage to the few.
 Hear me, Agathe Tyche, when seeking your aid, lady,
 Whether you go about into Libya or to South wind,
 Or dwell in the regions of the North wind ever-sweet,
 Or breezes of East wind where there are risings of the sun,
 Or you go to Olympus where the heavenly ones are,
 Or aloft in heaven you judge with the immortals,
 Or having mounted the chariot of swift running sun,
 Carrying through the whole universe, watching over all,
 Looking down on the deeds of impious and pious men,
 If thus you are here, overseeing individual virtue,
 Delight in victims, libations and sacrifices
 Of men dwelling in the nome Suchos, Arsinoeites,
 Mingled tribes of races, who were present yearly
 On the 20th day of Pachon and Thoth, bringing the 10th day for
 you¹²⁷
 And for Anchoes and Sokonopis, for the sacred gods, a festival.
 Listener of prayers, Black-robed Isis of graciousness,
 And you, great gods sharing a temple with her,
 Send to me Paeon, doctor of all illnesses.
 Isidorus wrote this.

Hymn IV

Who constructed this holy temple to greatest Hermouthis?
 What god remembered the all holy of the blessed?
 He marked the high and sacred shrine Olympus
 For the highest Deo, Isis Thesmophorus,

¹²⁷ Vanderlip, taking Toth and Pachon 20 as one date, mentions the presence of the date Pachon 20 at Medinet Madi. However, there is no mention of what sort of festival this must have been. *Ibid.*, 61.

And for Anchoes, the son, and Great Divine Sochonophis,
 He found the most just haven for the immortals.
 They say such a man was born a divine lord of Egypt,
 He was revealed as the authority of all country,
 Wealthy, righteous, and all great powerful
 He had glory and virtue as high as heaven.
 For to him earth and sea harkened
 And streams of all beautiful flowing rivers,
 And blasts of winds and sun, which is sweet light,
 With glory, rising he appears to all.
 And races of those flying creatures with one accord they listened to
 him
 And he taught all listening to him.
 It is clear that the birds heard him
 Because they had read the words of the temple
 They say some time that they were sent to this crow,
 It is said she came bearing that which was written;
 For he was not a mortal man nor born from a mortal man,
 But born of a great eternal god,
 Of Souchos, all powerful, great, great, and greatest
 And divine and great he appeared, the son, as a lord.
 Mother's father of this one is the distributor of life,
 Amun, who is Zeus of Greece and Asia.
 Therefore all listen to him, those upon earth
 The beasts and race of those heavenly creatures.
 What once was the name of this one? And who,
 King or ruler or who of the gods established this?
 The one nurturing, Sesosis, who reached western heaven,
 He instituted the name "Beautiful of Bright Sun."
 Egyptians, interpreting his name,
 Celebrate in song Porramanes, the great, the immortal.
 I heard from others the wonders and incredible thing of deeds,
 As he sailed in the desert with axels and sails.
 Steadfastly learning from men inquiring into
 All things, I myself, recording all,
 Publically record for Greeks the power of the god and lord,
 Because he holds power equal to no other mortal man.
 Isidorus wrote this.

Chapter 6

Discussion

The two sets of hymns have very important differences, which need to be addressed before concentrating on the effects of the hymns on the transmission of Isis' cult. It is important to note that Isidorus' hymns have no direct relationship with the hymns at Philae, however whatever impacts which the latter may have had will be discussed later. The hymns contain structural and contextual differences that would possibly render any linguistic similarities, or even differences, useless in the argument of causation and influence.

In the author's conscious effort to make the hymns as traditionally Egyptian as possible, the hymns at Philae give an example of "pure" Egyptian laudatory temple hymns. These hymns most likely would have been part of a daily or festival ritual.¹²⁸ On the other hand, the Fayum hymns are written in hexameter and elegiac couplets with vocabulary reminiscent of epic poems and Orphic hymns.¹²⁹ Rather than be used in ritual, the hymns of Isidorus seem to be more dedicatory, especially Hymn IV due to the focus on the one who built the temple.

The Philae hymns, written at the time when Isis' powers were vast, portray the variety in her powers as well as the width and breadth of her worship throughout Egypt.¹³⁰ In Hymn I and III, Isis is seen in relation to kingship, her role as a mother and her role as a wife; she is "Mother of god, King Horus" and "Wife of god." She is also associated with fertility through the Nile and water in general, pouring "inundation in order to give life to the people and create green plants"

¹²⁸ Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 138.

¹²⁹ Vanderlip, *Hymns of Isidorus*, 87.

¹³⁰ In hymn VII, Isis is identified with cult centers spread throughout Egypt, for example "Mistress of T-anhk... Lady of Ishru... Lady of Buto... Great in Sais."

(Hymn IV) and a “cloud anointing the land” (Hymn III). Isis is portrayed as a bellicose and protective; “she took the two lands... attacking the strong, braver than brave, stronger than the strong, beating millions, cutting heads, great slaughterer of her enemies” (Hymn V). Her powers throughout the Philae hymns exemplified the multiplicity of the goddess in terms of her powers, but also in the spread of her cult throughout Egypt. She has the universal power as “the lady of the sky, land and Duwat” (Hymn IV).

Isidorus’ hymns do hold similarities with those of Philae and other Egyptian depictions of Isis. She is a creator; holds power of the Nile; named Thious,¹³¹ the unique one; savior and protector over childbirth and motherhood; and a queen among the gods. However, there are many differences in the portrayal of Isis. She has become associated with wealth and commerce as the “wealth giver” (Hymn I) and is prayed to in order “to assist their commerce” (Hymn II); themes seen above in her expansion into the Greek and Roman worlds. Her role as savior has expanded to specifically sailors; “as great the number sailing on the great high sea,/ With men having been destroyed and ships broke down./ They are all saved” (Hymn I). More importantly is her direct link to Demeter; she becomes assimilated to Hermouthis/Renenutet, the Egyptian nurse and goddess of the harvest.¹³² As with Demeter, Isis is the “founder of life and fruits” (Hymn II); the titles of Founder, Discoverer, and Inventor are similar to those of Demeter. Isis is also named “Deo” (Hymn III) and “Deo, Isis Thesmophorus” (Hymn IV), titles also given to Demeter. The role of Isis in Isidorus’ hymns seems to narrow as is seen in her infiltration of Greece and Rome. She is less bellicose, and more motherly; she becomes associated more with fertility and food than she had been previously in Egypt. Isis only assimilates to Demeter through

¹³¹ An Egyptian title used of Isis, she is “the one.” Ibid., 31.

¹³² Ibid., 19; Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 76.

a later gain of Hermouthis/Renenutet's powers. These differences between the hymns aid in disseminating the relationship of the hymns and the role which language played in the transmission of Isis' cult opposed to that of cultural mechanisms.

Philae Hymns, Isidorus' Hymns and Other Greek Aretalogies

The relationship between the hymns and other Greek aretalogies must be recognized to understand whether direct translation or just influences of themes might be classified as causes for the transformation of Isis' cult in its transmission. There are 12 extant aretalogies and many different scholars have tried to discover the links between them as well as a possible common source translated from an Egyptian hymn, named "M.," presumed to have come from a stela at Memphis.¹³³ Cyme and a hymn, which Diodorus Siculus mentions, are both written in prose, which Vanderlip states that Harder believes to be translations. However, Vanderlip speculates that opposed to the Cyme, Diodorus, and others aretalogies, Ios, Saloniki, and Andros, the hymns of Isidorus are not derived from this "M." text, but may have been influenced by it.¹³⁴ These hymns were most likely attempts to popularize Isis with Greeks, written by Greek Isiac priests with the aid of a fellow Egyptian Isiac priest or Egyptian documents.¹³⁵ The hymns contain many phrases borrowed from Egyptian texts and others of Greek origins; a clear mixture of the influence of Egyptian influence.¹³⁶

¹³³ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 106.

¹³⁴ Vanderlip, *Hymns of Isidorus*, 85.

¹³⁵ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 46-47.

¹³⁶ Zabkar, *Hymns to Isis*, 135.

Language versus Cultural Barriers

The question of what influenced the evolution of Isis' cult leans more toward differences in the cultures of the Egyptians and Greek and Romans versus differences in languages. As mentioned before, these authors of Greek aretalogies began to use both Greek and Egyptian phraseology; this was an attempt to bring her cult to the Greeks by incorporating known Greek titles.¹³⁷ Hence why much of the themes seen within the Philae hymns are not replicated in the hymns of Isidorus; to increase the likelihood of Isis' acceptance in the rest of the Mediterranean, the aspects of Isis to be portrayed would be those most familiar to a Greek audience.

The argument of the part which language played in the changes in Isis' cult is not as strong as cultural barriers needing to be overcome. Earlier, it was discussed how Isidorus' hymns were not translations, but rather Hellenistic style hymns. Rather than worry about attempting to preserve native Egyptian phraseology, Isidorus was more concerned with keeping Greek hexameter formula.¹³⁸ Grammatical differences can be attributed to trying to fit the meter, such as the use of participles to lengthen sentences.¹³⁹ With the exception of Isidorus' hymns, instead it seems more likely that these hymns were for the transmission of Isis' cult.¹⁴⁰ However Isidorus' hymns are more adapted just for her local cult in the Fayum, not for the promotion of Isis' cult outside of Egypt. These hymns are evidence of mixed Egyptian and Greek residents creating a religious syncretism special to their region.

The Greek aretalogies may have originated from the early translation from Egyptian, the "M." text, however the Greek cultural and religious references show an influence of the need for

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Although it is clear that traditional Egyptian attributes and titles are used, such as "Thious" and the concept of Isis being many-named.

¹³⁹ Vanderlip, *Hymns of Isidorus*, 87.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 92.

cultural acceptance. As Alvar states, the aretaologies are “products of a complex process of cultural translation and symbiosis that affected both sides.”¹⁴¹ Isis’ cult saw the shift in her powers towards those of Demeter’s and morph into what was vital for her Hellenistic worshippers. As seen in Isidorus’ hymns, due to an increasing Greek population within Egypt, Isis became assimilated to Hermouthis/Renenutet; a process which was not likely to have taken place without the intervention of Greek religious beliefs. Isis’ cult fortified its importance because it survived by identifying with other deities, such as Demeter, leading to the growth of her power and its flexibility, which was needed to satisfy worshipers from all stations in life.¹⁴²

It is clear that the differences between the hymns are not due to the language and grammatical differences. The phrases and types of grammatical concepts were selected to fit the hexameter desired for the hymns. I believe that the Greek culture demanded to see such hymns in this form, leading to the pressure to fit within hexameter through whatever means necessary. The Greek and Roman cultures caused for Isis’ cult to change in its assimilation to familiar gods as well as the need to adapt to the needs of those worshipping her. While certain aspects of her cult changed and emphasis shifted to more motherly and protective, causing her to seem less like her original Egyptian deity, these changes allowed for her to endure much longer than any other deity in the Ancient Mediterranean.

¹⁴¹ Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 187.

¹⁴² P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 672.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

End of Isis' Cult

As Christianity began to reign as the main religion in the Roman Empire, Isis' cult still remained. In response to Isis' ongoing competition with Christianity, it is thought that the Virgin Mary became the Christian version of Isis, the Holy Mother, and Roman churches were also built in the vicinity of Isis temple sites.¹⁴³ Although in 331 B.C. Constantine had decreed that pagan temples be shut, it took until 391 for the Alexandrian Serapeum to be destroyed in conjunction with the prohibition of sacrificing to pagan gods.¹⁴⁴ It is clear that this attempt to end pagan worship was met with opposition; Isis was too popular to be discarded so quickly. It wasn't until 491 B.C. when Rutilius Namatinnus made the last mention of an Isis festival in Faleni.¹⁴⁵

Persistence of Isis and Pagan Cults After Christianity's Dominance

Even up until the 17th century, Ancient Egyptian religious beliefs were feared by Christians. Giordano Bruno, an excommunicated Dominican friar, was burned at the stake in the 1600s for his denial of Christianity's uniqueness. The Sistine chapel was decorated with frescos depicting Io, and the Apis bull was identified with the Borgias bull.¹⁴⁶ Isis' titles were shared

¹⁴³ Lesko, *Great Goddesses*, 200.

¹⁴⁴ Heyob, *The Cult of Isis*, 35.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

¹⁴⁶ Wit, *Isis in the Ancient World*, 265.

with Virgin Mary; Joseph was identified with Serapis, Mary with Isis; Madonna was associated with fertility and cornucopia, symbols previously attributed to Isis;¹⁴⁷ the cross and ankh are visibly and symbolically similar as well as the Sanctus bell and sistrum.¹⁴⁸ Even the concept of Isiac purification and initiation by water is identified with baptism.¹⁴⁹

Legacy of Isis

Isis was an omnipresent entity in the Ancient Mediterranean. She was associated with every stage of a person's life: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. Her cult was accessible to all walks of life, male or female, slave or emperor. Her powers were malleable, causing her cult to shift so as to be pertinent to whoever was in need of Isis' aid. Isis' attributes were exaggerated in her cult's migration into the Mediterranean while traditional Egyptian characteristics may have dissolved. This led to her popularity and the perpetuation of her cult throughout history. It is possible that the Virgin Mary is a reflection and alternative aspect of Isis, continuing her worship into the modern world. Isis was capable of changing to fit the needs of the locals and adapting to fit other religions. She needed to adapt to the new rising religion of Christianity or else risk the loss of her cult. Isis' cult changed from her worship in Sebennytos to its spread into the far reaches of the Roman Empire. Cultural differences and barriers caused the Isiac cult to change to allow for her to continue on in the mind of the Ancient Mediterranean societies. Isis' cult's adaptations elongated her prominence in the Ancient World and led to such popularity that

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 272

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 280.

¹⁴⁹ Alvar, *Romanizing Oriental Gods*, 413.

she is still recognized in the modern world, while other Egyptian goddesses have faded from memory.

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