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HOW DOES A GODDESS OF THE EARTH BECAME THE MISTRESS OF THE SEA?

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Abstract: With the coming of the Ptolemaic dynasty to the Egyptian throne, the goddess Isis goes through a series of changes that will turn her into a very different divinity. This new Hellenistic or Greco-Roman Isis not only stands out for the degree of expansion attained throughout the Mediterranean world but also for displaying a series of attributes, among which we highlight one in particular: Her role as goddess of the Sea. This not only changed the attitude of her devotees but also entailed deeper ritual implications, festivities and iconographic motifs. There are innumerable variations that brought about her “metamorphosis” into a maritime deity, especially since this was one of the most popular facets of Isis that penetrated the Roman Empire.

Keywords: Cult of Isis, Ancient Egypt, Roman Empire, Mediterranean Sea, Maritime Religion

Introduction:¹

The goddess Isis emerged around the third millennium BC as a local divinity² without reaching success in the entire country.³ At first, she appeared as a defying representation of what was required of idealized women in Ancient Egypt, that is, to be exemplary wives and mothers, something that she put into practice along with her assimilation of Osiris and Horus, respectively. Although in Hellenistic and Imperial times she became the protective deity of navigators,⁴ among many other things, at first there was nothing to presage that this would be one of her multiple spheres of influence. And the same could be said about her expansion throughout the Mediterranean world,⁵ something that would only have been possible thanks to a previous link with maritime trade via the port (and the famous lighthouse) of Alexandria, also to a capacity of adaptation that allowed her to enjoy a warm welcome in the most disparate territories.

¹ I would like to thank Professor Stefan Pfeiffer for the help he lent to me.

² She appears documented for the first time in the *Texts of the Pyramids*, 1153-1154, dated to the middle of the third millennium. However, the possibility of an earlier emergence in time cannot be ruled out, even going back to Neolithic times, as some researchers think.

³ In fact, at first she was not even involved with her divine family, of Osiris, Horus, Set, Nephthys, etc. This was the result of a later process whose evolution we will completely ignore.

⁴ Essential works about this are in Bricault 2006 and Muñiz Grijalvo 2012, 145-153.

⁵ For more information about this expansion, see Bricault 2001.

The Origins of Isis in Ancient Egypt

Her geographical origins place her birth in Lower Egypt, although she did not acquire a certain entity until she was integrated into the famous Ennead through the mediation of heliopolitan theology. With greater or lesser success, she continued to be worshiped for centuries, although never as a lone deity. In this context, it is totally meaningless to speak about “Isiac worship”,⁶ as we will understand it later. What does seem to be clear is the fact that, at least from an early stage, Isis was linked to the structures of pharaonic power. The hieroglyph representing her name (Ast) is none other than that of the throne, symbol of political stability in a state where the pharaoh was literally a god. She was both the wife of the deceased pharaoh (Osiris) and the mother of the living pharaoh (Horus), whom she protected by placing him on her lap (the throne).

On the other hand, she achieved a remarkable success from the first millennium BC onwards. Herodotus, one of the denominated Fathers of History, who lived in the fifth century BC, tells us⁷ that Isis and Osiris were the only divinities venerated in every place in Egyptian territory. In consequence, the rise of this goddess was an accepted fact even before the advent of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. But, despite this, it is known that Isis and Osiris were not yet the main deities in their native land. Why do we say this? Among other reasons, we can argue that Herodotus identified Isis and Osiris with Demeter and Dionysus respectively, while Zeus, the ruler of the Olympic Pantheon, was associated with Amun,⁸ patron of Thebes and national god of the New Kingdom. And to whom did Alexander the Great go to legitimize himself in front of his new Egyptian people? Amun, not Isis or Osiris.

Isis was not a static deity, but one that evolves and adapts with time and who did not reach the extreme level that was later unleashed, during the Hellenistic period. One of the first divinities that fell “victim” to her “voracity” was Hathor, from whom she would “borrow” elements of her characteristic image such as the horns of cows and the solar disk, which will later become closely linked with iconographic representations of our goddess. Other Egyptian deities who experienced the same fate were Nephthys (sister of Isis and Osiris and sister-wife of

⁶ We are aware that, even in Hellenistic and Roman times, by “Isiac cult” is not understood the veneration of Isis exclusively, but a set of Egyptian deities that we group under the name of *Isis gens*, which would not only include Isis, Osiris/Serapis and Horus/Harpocrates, but others like Anubis, Thot, Sobek, Bes, the bull Apis, etc. For more information, see Malaise 2010.

⁷ Hdt. II, 42.

⁸ About Amun we can say that he was a god who served as protector of sailors long before Isis did. Amun was a god who could control the winds, something essential for a good cruise on the sea, something that will also control our goddess when she becomes a maritime goddess. Later we will discuss a festivity that involves Amun and his family.

Set, a kind of Isiac counterpart), Maat (the goddess of justice) or Renenutet (a chthonic deity linked with the vegetation), among others.⁹ So much about the religious evolution of Isis in Ancient Egypt was carried out over the centuries, which we only know through isolated episodes, not always related to one another. The main goal is to check whether there was any space for her rule of navigation in this process.

Precedents of the Egyptian religion linked with navigation

There was one precedent in Ancient Egypt of Isis's later connection with the field of navigation: the worship of the Nile River.¹⁰ Although this worship was more focused on the fertility of the fields, a domain that fell within the Isiacs' prerogatives before the Ptolemies, it is the fluvial condition which links her with the field of navigation. Moreover, the Nile continued to be venerated in Hellenistic and Imperial times, and in several of the sanctuaries excavated are found containers of sacred water, probably imported from Egypt, which allows us to talk about possible pilgrimages in search of sacred water or even of a business.¹¹ The River Nile not only conditioned the economic, social and cultural development of Ancient Egypt, but it was Egypt's "heart" or its "soul", and therefore it was implicated from a very early stage in Egypt's religious framework¹² as a setting for mythical geography and as a god (or gods) in itself.

Regarding a possible maritime aspect of Isis prior to the Hellenistic-Roman transformation, there are several possibilities: in Ancient Egypt, Osiris represented the Nile River¹³ (although he was already deified as a single deity as we said before), while Isis was the land fertilized by his waters. The sacred pair would symbolize their union with the flood process of the river, with the consequent fertilization of the fields that, after the descent, would make possible the much-needed harvest. On the contrary, we also find Osiris as a chthonic deity

⁹ Dunand 2008, 42-70, offers a very valuable and well-summarized overview, not only about the different attributes that Isis was monopolizing of other goddesses, but also of the regional variants of her "person", among other interesting data about her evolution in Pharaonic Egypt.

¹⁰ As the god Nile or as personified in other gods, such as Osiris himself, or others such as Hapi, also closely related to the fertility and flooding of the river.

¹¹ For more information about this, see Wild 1981.

¹² Bolaños Bonzález 2003, 75.

¹³ In one of the *Texts of the Pyramids* this union of concepts is more than established: "Your two sisters, Isis and Nephthys, come to you. They heal you, complete and great, in your name of Great Black, fresh and great, in your name of Great Green!" (*Texts of the Pyramids*, 366-628). With "Great Black" is what is linked to Osiris with the Nile, since black is the color of the silt deposited after floods of the river that allow the fertility of the fields. For more information, Arroyo de la Fuente 2017, 81-82.

and, in this case, the flow of the Nile¹⁴ is increased due to the weeping of Isis over the loss of her husband. Therefore, we can find different interpretations of the same event, something that should not be a surprise. But, in both versions, it would be Osiris and not Isis, who would have a previous relationship with navigation, even if it were fluvial and not maritime.¹⁵

Although this conception is more cosmic than navigable, the boat is one of the most distinctive symbols of Ancient Egypt, and standing out above the rest is the solar boat of the god Ra.¹⁶ On board, the heliopolitan demiurge fights daily against the snake Apophis, and so the sun continues to revolve around the Earth, an allegorical confrontation of the eternal return, as well as the statism that characterized the Egyptian society during Antiquity. It also represents a *post mortem* reward for all those “pure of heart” who manage to overcome the Judgment of Osiris. It is quite logical that the Egyptian gods used the boat as a means of transport for their own gods, even though they moved through the sky and the infernal depths instead of the waters of the Nile, since it was a basic element in the development of their civilization.¹⁷ Did this solar boat have maritime-fluvial connotations? Almost certainly not, but it is further evidence that the supposed Egyptian aversion to the field of navigation reveals strong exceptions.

Why would the civilization that placed in a boat the father of the gods and creator of all life show disgust or aversion to the maritime trade or the sailor? Why would they despise those devices who made feasible the mobility through the water of the River Nile? Do we not preserve texts where navigation is spoken of in a good way?¹⁸ These are just some of the questions we can ask. Although the debate will remain open, it can be seen how the Egyptians were already familiar with this area and, on occasion, even they could talk about it in terms of praise. The boat also appears as the central element of many Egyptian festivals

¹⁴ The Nile itself, as the “articulator” of Egyptian geography, also has a cosmic as well as an eschatological aspect, and so we can see how “the life of the gods and the dead takes place between water and wetlands, just like in the *real* world they live around a source of the cosmic and eternal Nile”, as Díez de Velasco, Molinero Polo 1994, 76 tells us.

¹⁵ Discovered signs invite us to think that, when Isis becomes a goddess of the sea in Greco-Roman times, it will also include the control of the rivers between her maritime prerogatives.

¹⁶ Benito Goerlich 2009, 33-50.

¹⁷ In the words of Benito Goerlich, the geography of the Country of the Nile favored the use of these boats as the main means of transport, even preferring the displacement by the waters of the river more than by land. This is due to the intrinsic difficulties that entails moving through the sands of the desert. That could even be the cause of the late appearance of the wheel in Egypt, which even after its appearance (probably in the time of the Hyksos) never became very important.

¹⁸ For example, in the Satire of the trades (XII Dynasty) it says “Look, there is nothing better than books; they are like a ship in the water”, although it may seem like an isolated sample, it summarizes quite well that the vision of navigation was not as negative as we usually think.

and processions, as they would do centuries later with the *Ploaiphesia* or *Navigium Isidis*, although for very different reasons.¹⁹ And going back to Isis, was she not related to Ra's solar boat? Of course she was, as some literary and ritual compositions reveal to us.²⁰ It can be seen a lot of gods and goddess represented on board.

Curiously, Philippe Bruneau²¹ also alludes to Horus on several occasions,²² and to Isis by extension, with this same scope. She appears in several inscriptions of the Temple of Edfu, curiously, as a protector of the warship of Horus;²³ this is logical since, if the Pharaoh is the living incarnation of Horus, and Isis the throne for the monarch, the same monarch whom she protects from the moment of his birth, why she would not exercise the same prerogative among his boats, whether or not they were dedicated to war usage? In Hellenistic and Imperial times, Horus (or Harpocrates) will also appear in this same context, linked to crocodiles and other Nilotic fauna,²⁴ although he will never reach the degree of involvement of his mother in this and other tasks.²⁵ In fact, his most well-known role is that of a breastfed baby that accompanies the representations of Isis Lactans.²⁶

¹⁹ In the Egyptian case nothing seems to indicate that the opening of the sailing season was celebrated, if they had something similar to the concept of *Mare Clausum*, nor the request to the divinity of a safe passage both at sea and in the daily routine, but they could have another motivation.

²⁰ "Ascend and descend, descend with Nephthys, immerse yourself in the darkness with the boat of the night. Ascend and descend, ascend with Isis, soar with the morning boat", (*Texts of the Pyramids*, 204-213). As can be seen at a glance, in this case Isis would be the day and Nephthys the night.

²¹ Bruneau 1963, 307-308.

²² Consecrated to both Horus and Hathor, we know of several pilgrimages and processions where boats are used, for example in Edfu. Coppens 2009, 7.

²³ 1) - IV 18, 11, about Horus: "his mother takes the form of a galley" under him to protect his limbs (or limbs). "2) - IV 213, 1:" I (Isis) went up to your boat to be able to protect you and save your bodies in the lake of Horus. "3) - VI 9, 6-7:" We touch the sistrum for his mother, who makes his protection, in the bow of his boat, while he kill (or beat) his enemies. "4) - VI 59, 6-7:" His mother is his safeguard, his statue is or is in (the boat) of combat or war that leads, she protects her bodies over the lake of Horus".

²⁴ Saura Zorrilla 2009.

²⁵ Bruneau also tells us that Maurice Elliot, in *Le culte d'Horus à Edfou sous les Ptolémés*, studied the ritual of the worship of Horus in Edfu during the Ptolemaic period, relating how during the Festival of Mechir a ship was "deposited during the ceremony in the water of the lake"; "On the bridge, a wooden statuette depicts Horus the harpooner... and in front of him, in the prow, another statuette was that of his mother Isis, who protects him while he fights".

²⁶ About this advocacy, see Tram Tan Tinh 1973.

Another relationship that also comes from afar is the relationship between Isis and the dog Sothis, also known as Sirius:²⁷ This canid, which should not be confused with Anubis (although some parallels can be traced between them), is used by the goddess as a mount, and this is one of the characteristic images that we find in coins and other archaeological pieces from Hellenistic and Imperial times. Sothis has a very marked cosmic side, something logical, not only because we are talking about a constellation, but also in Ancient Egypt it had a prerogative that, without doubt, also served as a maritime antecedent (rather fluvial): it exerted its sovereignty over the waters of the River Nile.²⁸ On the back of Sothis, Isis could exercise the domain that would later extend to the Mediterranean Sea, although in this case Sothis seems to be relegated to the background, since the ship will become the means of transport by excellence to represent some of the different “types” of Isis Navigans, while Sothis or Isis-Sothis would be more focused on the astral or celestial sphere, although without losing sight of the use of the stars to guide the ships.

Precedents of the Egyptian festivities linked with navigation:

Although it is not related to our goddess, we are struck by a festival that José Ramón Aja Sánchez talks about: the beautiful festival of the Valley.²⁹ Held apparently from the Middle Kingdom and consecrated to Amun-Ra, it included a procession of boats along the Nile channel that departed from the Karnak Temple,³⁰ on the eastern bank of Thebes. Honors were paid to the god Amun-Ra, to both the wife of the god (Mut, the mother), and the son of both (Khonsu), a divine triad of Thebes that recalls the heliopolitan version composed of Osiris-Isis-Horus. Are we implying that this tradition was a kind of antecedent of the *Ploaiphesia*? Not at all. To begin with, we do not know most of its meaning, and finally because we would be forcing the situation in our own interest. The only thing that we can indicate as a parallelism, or even antecedent, is the need for Egyptians

²⁷ Frazer 1944, 439-441, said that the maritime side of the goddess Isis could only be due to the Greek sailors of the port of Alexandria, since these features are strange to a people like the Egyptian who doesn't like the sea. On the other hand, for him Sothis or Sirius was the star that illuminated the sky to the sailors, even qualifying it in an excess of enthusiasm of *Stella Maris* or *Star of the Seas* (epithet of the Virgin Mary). Of course Frazer and his postulates are today more than overcome, we are aware of this, but we thought it would be interesting to include the position of a classic on a subject that, certainly and despite the time passed, is not entirely closed.

²⁸ Bruneau 1963, 306-307.

²⁹ Aja Sánchez 2006, 39.

³⁰ In Karnak we can find important remains of isiac worship, as it says Coulon 2010, 121-148.

who were not part of the Lagid domain to carry out a celebration of such characteristics.

Reinhold Merkelbach³¹ long ago pointed towards an Egyptian origin of the *Navigium Isidis*. He connected the Isiac festival with another, much older Osirian festival called *Kikellia*. Held on the 29th of the month of Choiak (fourth month of the Egyptian calendar), the body of Osiris was apparently commemorated, in a ceremony quite similar to what we call the Hellenistic-Roman *Inventio Osiridis* (between October 26th and November 3th). One of the strongest ideas against this option, which, as was objected to by Françoise Dunand,³² among others, there is no coincidence between them, neither chronological (one would be held around our month of December and the other on March 5th) nor thematic (a festival of sadness for the death of Osiris, preceding one of joy with the ship sailing the waters as a symbol of hope). We share the position of Stefan Pfeiffer³³ in relation to this point: the *Ploaiphesia* was surely a Greek invention of the Hellenistic period.

The information included in an article by Kornelija A. Giunio is particularly shocking.³⁴ There he states that, according to some authors,³⁵ the *Navigium Isidis* was being celebrated at least since the reign of Tutankhamun, something that seems impossible since most researchers have been more inclined to consider this festival a new creation or, perhaps, an adaptation to Isis of a previous festival to commemorate the opening of the sailing season. Without falling into gratuitous controversies, this seems to us an unprovable idea that, in addition, would link Isis with the field of navigation several centuries before the earliest dates accepted by the scientific community. In addition, she would be established as the patron saint of sailors in a turbulent period (just after the events of Akhenaten and Tell el-Amarna) when Amun was at the peak, and this was a god who could fulfill this function (see note 8).

A Phoenician version of Isis before the Ptolemies?

In another classical study, Philippe Bruneau³⁶ pointed out that nothing seems to indicate that the Ancient Egyptian Religion established some kind of

³¹ Merkelbach 1963.

³² Dunand 1973, 229-230.

³³ In an article not yet published by this author: Comments on the Egyptian background of the priests' procession during the *Navigium Isidis*.

³⁴ Giunio 2013, 432.

³⁵ In particular Bonneau 1964, 396; Desroches-Noblecourt 1965, 139; Witt 1997, 165.

³⁶ Bruneau 1961, 435-446.

Isiac precedent linked to navigation. The problem is that we are suddenly reducing more than two thousand years to a single category with more dark points than we could afford. In the same article, Bruneau mentions another author, Godwinus Vandebeek,³⁷ who was already against the argument, repeated even today in many of our universities, that the Egyptians had a kind of chronic phobia towards the sea. Obviously, they would show a lower vocation towards the Mediterranean Sea than other people like Phoenicians, Greeks or Romans.³⁸ However, at least with Phoenicians and Greeks,³⁹ they maintained commercial contacts from long ago, and the links between Isis and other foreign goddesses like Aphrodite⁴⁰ and Astarte⁴¹ could germinate, if only on a microscopic scale, sooner than we think, at least, long before the Lagid queen Arsinoe II.

It is necessary to banish certain topics such as the idea that Egypt was a hermetic country, without any contact with things that took place in the Mediterranean World. The presence of Egyptian styles, symbols and motifs beyond its borders ceased to be a rarity long ago. The Phoenicians were the first to promote this diffusion in a systematic way,⁴² both in their cities of origin and in distant territories, for example, on the Iberian Peninsula.⁴³ And the Phoenicians could also play a very important role in the evolution of Isis as goddess of the sea, although this is only a possibility. Why do we say this? Mainly for the following reasons: 1) the goddess Astarte, with a maritime factor quite accentuated, was equated with the Egyptian Hathor (and therefore Isis), 2) the introduction of the Egyptian god Bes in the Phoenician pantheon, and 3) the port city of Byblos.⁴⁴

³⁷ Vandebeek 1946, 52.

³⁸ An overview of Egyptian navigation can be found in Presedo Velo 1994, 37-54.

³⁹ Stefan Pfeiffer 2013 has placed the contacts between Egyptians and Greeks before the arrival of Alexander the Great in two well-differentiated phases: 1) Between Egyptians and Minoan-Mycenaean, and 2) Between Egyptian and Hellenic (or Greeks). Also, this author says that it is quite possible that Egyptian merchants were established in Greece by the classical period, since the cult of Isis is dated in Athens from at least the fifth century BC.

⁴⁰ More information in Pirenne-Delforge 1994 and Romero Recio 2012, 116-117.

⁴¹ More information in Marín Ceballos 1996, 109-122.

⁴² Versluys 2010, 7.

⁴³ Indeed, several Egyptian or Egyptizing pieces attributed to Phoenician trade have been documented. However, as Jaime Alvar has stated on numerous occasions, there is no relationship between these elements and those who will later witness the already Romanized Isiac cult, without links between them. The presence of objects with Nilotic motifs cannot be explained as the direct consequence of a collective or individual religious devotion. For more information about this, see Alvar 2012.

⁴⁴ The contacts between Egypt and the city of Byblos are documented from the Ancient Kingdom, and the same can be said of those who maintained with that historiographical enigma called Land of Punt.

Concerning Byblos, the link between this Phoenician city and our goddess, most documented from the Hellenistic period forward, is more striking.⁴⁵ From the point of view of the myth, Byblos was the destination for Isis when she embarked on the waters of the Mediterranean Sea in search of her beloved Osiris. Thus the relationship Isis-the Sea-Phoenicians is established in one of the best-known episodes of Egyptian mythology.⁴⁶ The main stumbling problem is the next: no Egyptian source is found in which the Osirian sarcophagus appears in Byblos; Plutarch, a late author, was the first transmitter of this location.⁴⁷ Apart from the aforementioned link between Astarte and Hathor, Osiris was assimilated with Adonis and, at least since the New Kingdom for the case of Osiris⁴⁸ and the seventh century B.C. for Isis,⁴⁹ we have witnessed the celebration of Egyptian cults in those areas. In this case, the possibility of a pre-Plutarchian link between these concepts cannot be ruled out.

A Greek version of Isis before the Ptolemies?

In addition to the Egyptian links with navigation, we will focus also on what the goddess Isis could show before her “metamorphosis”, since there are several ideas that we can take into account. It has been argued on numerous occasions that the crossing to Byblos in search of her husband is a later addition that cannot be found before Plutarch. On the other hand, in the Egyptian variants of the myth (unfortunately incomplete) the goddess also embarks on a dangerous journey with the same objective, so that the main fact, the Isiac connection with navigation, remains unchanged. Yes, long before the Ptolemies, Alexandria, Aphrodite Euploia, Pelagia or Pharia, etc., we can consider sailing indispensable for Isis.⁵⁰

The myth of Io should have been known in Egypt from contacts with Greek colonies, at least since the seventh century BC. In the New Empire, the Egyptians identified Epaphus (son of Zeus and Io) with the sacred bull Apis, which later would be linked with Serapis.⁵¹ A previous identification of Isis and Io could suppose a first approach, even if only partial, to the vision of her as goddess of the sea, since Io crossed both the Ionian Sea and the Bosphorus Strait, to which she gave her name, according to tradition (“Sea of Io” and “Passage of the cows”,

⁴⁵ For more information about Isis Navigans coins coming from Byblos in Hellenistic and Imperial times, vid. Bricault 2008, 157-158.

⁴⁶ This and another myths can be found in Armour 2006.

⁴⁷ Alvar 2008, 42.

⁴⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁹ Baltrusaitis 1985, 13.

⁵⁰ She had already done so, as we saw before: in Ra’s solar boat with his sister Nephthys.

⁵¹ Veymiers 2011, 111.

respectively). Also, she made the trip converted into a cow, which facilitates the parallelism with Hathor and, by extension, with Isis. In fact, our question is whether or not this link arose prior to the arrival of the Ptolemies, because it is very clear that it played an important role in the Isiac cult of the Hellenistic and Imperial eras.⁵²

In fact, Isis was already established in Piraeus,⁵³ although in the proper Egyptian form, and not in the version that would end up expanding in most of the lands in the geography of the Roman Empire. Sarolta Takács⁵⁴ tells us, based on an inscription from 333 B.C., that the devotees established there had to be native Egyptians who had maintained economic relations of certain magnitude with the Athenians. Does that mean that the population turned their back on this new form of devotion? Not at all, and in fact in the third century BC we already find the cult settled in Athens,⁵⁵ and even an Athenian citizen established there as a priest, which is an unequivocal sign that Isis ended up winning local followers.⁵⁶ The question is this: if, at this time, we still cannot speak about an Isiac cult, but rather that a standard veneration like it was carried out in Ancient Egypt, why was it successful (a success that we should not exaggerate, either) in a territory with such a different cultural horizon? Can we speak about some process of adaptation that could be prior to the establishment of this cult focused in the middle of Attica? Or is this too much to be assumed?

Conclusion

Now, absolutely everything we have said so far remains meaningless if we compare it with what will happen after the fourth century BC, especially with the

⁵² Only on a literary scale, we can find this equivalence between Isis and Io in authors as diverse as Ovid (*Ov., Trist.* II 298-299), Lucanus (*Luc.* VI 360-365) or Apollodorus (*Apollod.* 3), among others. The expression “Veal of Pharos”, used by Ovid, is key to understand that Io, daughter of Inachus, was a necessary link in the chain of events that made Isis a maritime deity through various invocations such as, for example, Isis Pharia.

⁵³ Herodotus also informs us that Isis was already venerated in Cyrene (in modern Libya), although the territorial proximity with Egypt does not make so striking this circumstance.

⁵⁴ Takács 2005, 27-70.

⁵⁵ Plácido Suárez 1996, 2-11, Muñoz Grijalvo 2009, 325-342.

⁵⁶ Through epigraphy we know the case of an Athenian marriage wherein one of the daughters was consecrated to the goddess Isis, which is symptomatic of the fact that, at least among the local elite, there was a marked interest in being favorable to this god. Putting the offspring under the protection of a certain deity, and even ruling that the offspring will dedicate one’s life to the service of this higher being, is a universal maxim that can be found in creeds of any time and place.

establishment in Egypt of the Lagid or Ptolemaic Dynasty. Although sometimes we tend to simplify this process of adaptation that, in the end, will give birth to that Hellenistic or Greco-Roman Isis, the same one that will make her way across the Mediterranean world⁵⁷ (and part of the Atlantic, for example in Britain), we can point out several milestones along the way: 1) the religious revolution promoted by Ptolemy I Soter, which involved both the Greek Timothy and the Egyptian Manetho;⁵⁸ 2) the connection of Isis and her “new husband”, Serapis,⁵⁹ with pharaonic marriage;⁶⁰ 3) Intimately related to the last milestone, the role played by several Ptolemaic queens, especially Arsinoe II;⁶¹ and 4) The impulse provided by maritime trade, probably due to the link between the goddess and the lighthouse of Alexandria, and the cultural influence of Egypt itself.⁶²

We have to ask several questions at this point: was it not possible that Isis began to “mutate”, of which we already have proof on an iconographic and symbolic scale, before the Ptolemies needed to unite the Egyptian and Greco-Macedonian tradition to satisfy their heterogeneous population? Bear in mind that, as we have already said, Herodotus mentions the assimilation between Isis and Demeter,⁶³ and for that reason we have to draw hasty conclusions when relating our goddess to the Eleusinian Mysteries. On the other hand, it would not make any sense to think that, when Isis arrives at Attica, the Athenians who ended up becoming involved in their worship were simply worshiping Demeter with another name, because they already had multiple possibilities to do this without Egyptian mediation. For Isis to be attractive to them, some change must have occurred, although in general terms it still retained both her symbols and her physiognomy. At least, this is our interpretation.

Finally, Isis would end up expanding her importance throughout the Mediterranean world in a new form, which we define as Hellenistic or Greco-Roman. In this phase other factors will come into play, such as the importance of maritime

⁵⁷ Wolf, 2013, 126-143.

⁵⁸ Gasparini 2011, 716, states that the Greek restructuring of the Isiac cult was only one aspect of this phenomenon of Hellenistic reworking. In fact, the pillars of the religious tradition remained deeply rooted in the pharaonic cultural background: during ancient Egypt both Osiris (at least from the Middle Kingdom) and Isis (after) were already considered supreme deities, so we cannot think that absolutely everything was due to the Ptolemaic revolution.

⁵⁹ For example, Kyriakos Savvopoulos says that the Serapeion were used by the Ptolemies as a propaganda and ideological medium among their subjects. Savvopoulos 2010, 79.

⁶⁰ Arroyo de la Fuente 1999, 157-174.

⁶¹ As Bricault says in many of his works.

⁶² For a general idea of how Egypt has been influencing the western world until now, see Curl 2006.

⁶³ More information about this topic in Pakkanen 1996, Pachis 2004, 163-208, and Geissen 2010, 181-196.

aspects in her worship⁶⁴ (Arsinoe II and Afrodita Euploia are key elements for this), the loss of magical powers,⁶⁵ or her presence in important ports such as Delos or Ostia,⁶⁶ among others. The texts of Roman times provide much information on this subject, both aretalogies⁶⁷ and common literature,⁶⁸ as well as the archaeological sources that, unfortunately, are not so abundant for the Egyptian period that we have examined here. Meanwhile, we should not deny the possibility that there was a prior link between Isis and the maritime sphere, because it is quite possible that the field of navigation, even if only on a fluvial scale, would not be as strange as we think.

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⁶⁴ Bricault 2006 and Romero Recio 2000

⁶⁵ The magical aspect of this goddess would be very diminished, or we could almost say excluded, when the Isiac cult expanded through the Mediterranean world, as can be read in Gordon, Gasparini 2014, 39-53.

⁶⁶ Van Haepere 2017, 259-275.

⁶⁷ It cannot be concluded that Isis' aretalogies are a genuinely Hellenistic creation, comparable to the creation of Serapis, in which the Greek element dominates regardless of Egyptian contributions, something that can be found in some authors, such as Versnel 1990, 39-51.

⁶⁸ Santamaría Canales 2015, 231-248.

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