

The Cult of Isis and Other Mystery Religions in Pompeii and the Roman World

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The town of Pompeii was essentially encapsulated that day Vesuvius erupted in 79 CE. Buildings, roads, artifacts and even people were preserved under layers of volcanic ash. Now the ancient site is approximately two-thirds excavated and a myriad of information has been gleaned as a result. With the combination of literary sources, epigraphic evidence and archaeological record, the social and religious attitude of Pompeii and the Roman world in general can be fairly understood. The Romans had their own pantheon of gods and were known for assimilating foreign deities into their culture. Why, then, did foreign cults appeal to many different people and for what reasons? Why was the cult of Isis so popular, particularly to women? What did mystery religion offer to its adherents that traditional Roman religion perhaps could not? My aim in this paper is to analyze the mystery cults in Pompeii and the Roman world – with special attention to the cult of Isis – and to bring to light the appeal that this type of religion had to the people.

Religion in the Roman world was a polytheistic one and provided a multitude of gods for many different purposes. There was the king of the gods, Jupiter/Jove and his queen Juno, goddess of marriage, Neptune, god of the sea and horses, Venus, goddess of love, and many, many more. Appeals and worship would take place in temples, either to celebrate the god in festival or to ask for fortune pertaining to that god or goddess' realm. Author Sarolta Takacs explains that, "...the primary purpose of the traditional Roman religion was not to satisfy emotional needs...but the maintenance of a favorable reciprocal relationship between gods and humans," (Takacs 1995, 13). It was an "I give, so that you give" exchange.

Evidence of temples in Pompeii expand back all the way to the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE, built by Greek and/or Oscan settlers that were living in the town. The oldest temples include the Doric temple located in the triangular Forum (named so for its architectural style) and the temple of Apollo

located in the main Forum, later rebuilt in the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. BCE. By the time the reign of Augustus was in effect, Pompeii had several temples to boast of, including the Temple to the Capitoline Triad, the Temple of Venus, the Temple of Fortuna Augusta, and the Temple of Isis, which shall be explicitly focused on later.

The gods were worshipped by all peoples alike, from the low classes of prostitutes and freedmen to the upper classes of the Roman elites; Roman religion had little social boundaries. However there were certain attributes that citizens, especially women, would identify with. Women in Roman society were expected to be mannerly, virtuous, to be faithful wives and to produce children. Therefore, religious rituals for women focused on marriage and childbirth (Hammer 2000, 38). Divinities such as Juno, Venus and Diana may have been actively worshipped by all women alike.

Yet there was more than just the traditional pantheon available to Roman citizens and it came in the form of mystery religion and foreign cults<sup>1</sup> that were incorporated into Roman life. Evidence at Pompeii shows that among the most popular foreign deities were Bacchus and Isis, which will be discussed later. First an introduction to mystery cults themselves must be addressed.

Some scholars argue that the popularity of mystery religion was on the rise due to a failing acceptance of the traditional Roman pantheon. Sarolta Takacs (1995, 2) addresses this misconception that foreign cults were introduced when typical Roman religion was falling into recession, having been superseded by other religions from abroad. His argument is that the Romans were polytheistic and could worship more than just one god, and certainly at the same

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that I will use mystery religion and mystery cult interchangeably; foreign cult, while part of mystery religion, will mostly reference non-Greek deities that were introduced into Roman religion.

time. Deities offered different things to different people and Takacs argues that “any religion with elaborate rituals and mysteries promising salvation and an afterlife would naturally help the politically and socially underprivileged escape the miseries of daily life.” (1995, 4).

Bacchus – who is also identified with the Greek god Dionysius<sup>2</sup> and the Roman god Liber – was the god of wine, revelry, fertility and madness. He was worshipped for almost a thousand years, from the 6<sup>th</sup> c. BCE to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE (Casadio and Johnston 2009, 33) and the earliest evidence of worship in Campania dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. BCE from epigraphical evidence found at Cumae (Wilburn 2000, 51). While he is sometimes depicted as a bearded man, usually holding a thyrsus and shown with grapes, Bacchus in Pompeii is shown as a young man, beard-free and partially nude (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 59).

A temple dedicated to Bacchus was located outside of the city walls of Pompeii to the southwest (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 59). There were no roads leading to the temple and its location in the countryside likely stressed the sacred space of the country as well as privacy (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 60-61). Evidence of Bacchic worship within Pompeii included a small bust found within a building in Region 9, a statue in the temple of Isis<sup>3</sup> portraying Bacchus as Osiris, and the well-known wall painting of Dionysus standing before Mt. Vesuvius, which was found in the House of the Centenary (Berry 2007, 191). Images of Bacchus also appear on four entrances to *tabernae*, indicating that his worship was widespread among houses and shops (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 62). Considering that Pompeii produced a fair amount of wine, it is safe to assume that as the god of grapes Bacchus was an influential god in the city.

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<sup>2</sup> Bacchus and Dionysus will be used interchangeably at this point.

<sup>3</sup> The cult of Isis and her temple will be discussed in more detail.

While the evidence for the worship of Bacchus at Pompeii is present, it is the Villa of the Mysteries found just outside the Herculaneum Gate that discloses the most interesting indications for the worship of the god of revelry. Inside what excavators have called Room 5 is a great Dionysiac Frieze that covers most of the walls. The extended mural shows scenes of different stages of initiation into the cult of Bacchus, with the drunken god being the focal point. Yet it is the question of why the murals are there which is the source of debate. The room has been argued to be a dining room, part of the apartments of the matron of the house, or even the actual room in which initiations took place if they ever did occur in the villa (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 68-69). Swetnam-Burland argues against this last interpretation and believes the room to be a space where the "...Bacchic imagery was meant to evoke associations of piety and the mythological world," (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 59). Whatever the room was used for, the frieze gives us insight into the Bacchic cult with its detailed images and female inclusion. Inscriptions from a statue base of Agrippinilla lists more than forty names of women who participated in the cult of Bacchus at Rome, which "...conveys a vivid impression of the very strong presence of women within the hierarchy of the Bacchic cult." (Hammer 2000, 46). As Bacchus was also a god of fertility, women may have appealed to his cult for this aspect and epigraphic evidence reveals a high number of priestesses involved in his cult.

Not everywhere was the god of wine so readily-accepted. In 186 BCE, Livy gives his account for a Roman decree that came to be known as the Bacchanalian Conspiracy. This opposition called for banning the practice of Bacchic worship, eradication of the shrines, and execution of priests and priestesses. Wilburn points out that this may have been the result of the Romans using "...the worship of Bacchus as a scapegoat in their quest to establish complete hegemony over Italy and to bring the increasingly powerful mystery cult under the control of the

state,” (Wilburn 2000, 55). In the case of Pompeii, they failed to do so, as care for the temple of Bacchus near Pompeii was upheld despite the resistance of the Senate and even damage from the earthquake of 62 CE (Swetnam-Burland 2000, 61). The inclusion of women as priests, the devotion to fertility and procreation and the intrigue of the initiation rites proved to be attractive qualities to the female citizens of Pompeii.

Still more evidence survives of other foreign cults in Pompeii and the surrounding Roman area. Statues of Near-Eastern deities Sabazius and Lakshimi have been found in Pompeii, and there is even evidence that may indicate early Judaism and Christianity (Berry 2007, 200-201). Yet it was the cult of Cybele, or Magna Mater<sup>4</sup>, that exhibited a multi-faceted appeal to the people of the Roman world. Cybele was an ancient Phrygian mother goddess whose cult was brought to Rome in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE and who had her own temple on Palatine Hill in Rome (Casadio and Johnston 2009, 252). Her popularity reached Campania and was maintained through the centuries, as a temple was rebuilt in Cybele’s honor at Herculaneum by the emperor Vespasian after the 62 CE earthquake (Potts 2009, 63). The cult of Magna Mater would have been enticing to Roman citizens and to those colonized by Roman citizens. In Deborah F. Sawyer’s book, *Women and Religion in the First Christian Centuries*, she discusses Cybele’s ancestral roots in Phrygia and how the Romans linked this association with their claim of having Trojan descendants (119). For the Roman citizens who colonized the towns of Campania, Pompeii being one of them, it may have been appealing to practice the worship of Cybele as she was the original mother goddess to whom all true-born Roman elites could trace their lineage. On the contrary, elements of Cybele’s cults were very anti-Roman. Participants of the cult known as *galli* practiced self-castration and cross-dressing, likewise crossing the gender

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<sup>4</sup> I will use Cybele and Magna Mater interchangeably.

lines of Roman masculinity (Sawyer 2002, 121-123). Thus, Sawyer describes the cult of Cybele to have “functioned on two fronts; first as an attractive alternative to the traditional Roman cults, offering a liberating change of attitude and order particularly for the ‘non-elite’, and, second, as an alternative expression of what was not ‘Roman’. It performed the role of the ‘other’ to Roman religion, culture and society, and, implicitly, politics.” (2002, 124).

Although there is minimal evidence of the cult of Cybele in Pompeii, it does exist. A painted façade located at XI.7.1-2 depicts a processional scene of Cybele, along with Dionysus and Venus Pompeiana, indicating she was worshipped even after the colonization of Pompeii by Sulla (Potts 2009, 60). Several interpretations of the relationship of the iconography and the building have been put forth. While most believe the façade to be on the wall of a shop, some believe it may have been “a meeting place for a religious group, the home of a priest of Cybele, or a small temple to Cybele,” (Potts 2009, 60). Others who still argue that the building was indeed a shop interpret the façade as a reflection of the owner’s religious views (Potts 2009, 60). Because of Cybele’s association as an apotropaic goddess, the entire scene could be seen as averting bad fortune to whatever function the space possessed (Potts 2009, 62).

Arguably the most significant foreign cult in Pompeii and perhaps in the Roman world was the cult of Isis. The earliest evidence for the cult of Isis in Campania is in Puteoli from the start of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Her mystery cult involved “ritual initiation, baptism, and service,” (Hammer 2000, 44). Isis was a truly versatile goddess: she was Queen of the gods, protector and mother of pharaohs, goddess of agriculture, rain, wind, spinning and weaving, and goddess of magic and healing (Heyob 1975, 1). Isis was widely worshipped in the Roman world due to her many attractive qualities as a goddess and there is significant evidence of her cult at Pompeii.

The most notable piece of evidence for the worship of Isis at Pompeii was her temple. The temple was located in the Theater District, just behind what is called the Large Theater. It was built in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE before Pompeii became a Roman colony, though her worship did not decline in the years to come as the temple was completely rebuilt after the earthquake in 62 CE. Epigraphic evidence shows that the rebuilding expenses came from one Numerius Popidius Celsinus, a six year old child who was the son of a wealthy freedman. The fact that many civic buildings in the Forum were still in disrepair when excavators uncovered them and that the temple of Isis was wholly repaired speaks to her popularity.

To the temple's description, Beard writes that, "The door opened to a colonnaded courtyard. In the centre stood a small temple, with other structures round about and further rooms off the courtyard. The temple was constructed of brick and stone, its outside stuccoed and painted." She also indicates that the *Ekklesiasterion* to the west may have been the building reserved for initiates (Beard 2008, 304-305). A few wall paintings survive on the inside of the temple. Two scenes are present, one depicting Io, Mercury and Argos, another showing Io, Isis, Nephthys, Hermanubis and Harpokrates. The second scene depicts the reception of Io by Isis and both paintings are said to have themes of salvation and liberation (Casadio and Johnston 2009, 220). Also within the temple is a mural showing a scene of a woman playing the part of Isis. A similar wall painting found in the *House of the Wedding of Hercules* "...illustrates that priestesses of Isis were significant representatives of the hierarchy." (Heyob 1975, 98).

Evidence for the worship of Isis is also numerous outside of her temple. More wall paintings, frescoes, statues and other items, whether commercial or religious, were found during excavations (Hammer 2000, 44). Propaganda for the cult of Isis began appearing on coins around 80 BCE with images of scorpions, lotus flowers, crocodiles, ibises, pyramids and



sistrums (Heyob 1975, 15), all of these objects seen as sacred images to Isis and Egyptian deities. There is evidence at Herculaneum that indicates the participation of Isiac festivals and a wall painting found in the triclinium of the House of the Centennial at Pompeii shows mythical representations of figures dressed in Greek fashion but having Egyptian characteristics (Heyob 1975, 84/98). It seems that not only did the cult of Isis grow in popularity but Egyptian trends did as well. Whether the cult of Isis grew more popular because of Egyptian trends or vice versa is not clear. However this disposition to Egyptian culture was not always linked with religious attitudes, as many Roman villas had murals of Egyptian and Isiac themes and were only following the latest Roman styles (Takacs 1995, 33).

When considering the time that Isis came to Italy and what was happening in the Roman world, it is not hard to imagine why there would be increased attention to Egyptian fashions and deities. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE, Julius Caesar frequently made trips to Egypt to assist the queen Cleopatra and eventually became her lover. Egyptian and Roman cultures were consistently crossing and continued to do so under Mark Antony who also had affairs with the Egyptian queen. Shortly after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra, the soon-to-be emperor Augustus put a prohibition on all sacred objects within Rome's *promerium* in 28 BCE (Takacs 1995, 75). This was not the first time higher authorities had stepped in to oppose Egyptian religion. In 54 BCE a decree from the Roman Senate was put forth to suppress the cult of Isis and to destroy sanctuaries of Isis and Serapis (Hammer 2000, 44). Just before the ban Augustus put forth, another decree by the Roman senate in 30 BCE ordered that the temples of Isis and Serapis all be destroyed. Yet whether from fear of divine retribution or other reasons, no one stepped forward to begin the task (Heyob 1975, 18). Still the worst abuse to Isiac adherents "was to come under the reign of Tiberius in 19 AD following a scandal in which a noble matron, Paulina, was

seduced by a knight, Decius Mundus, under the guise of Anubis in the temple of Isis.” It was discovered that the priests of the temple had been bribed to aid the knight, who were then crucified, and thousands of freedmen who adhered to Egyptian religions were exiled (Heyob 1975, 22).

Despite all its opposition, the cult of Isis offered much to the ancient Romans and could be well-liked by women. Takacs discusses some misconceptions surrounding the cult of Isis: one being that only the lower class and prostitutes worshipped Isis and that the majority of people did not have the tact and scholarship to recognize her as an “un-Roman goddess.” (Takacs 1995, 1-2). However, this is simply not the case, and the worship of Isis fit into the lives of many. Epigraphic and literary sources show that “women, children, slaves, freedmen, traders, veterans, soldiers, officers, low and high municipal officials, and members of the imperial family” all adhered to the cult of Isis (Takacs 1995, 6). Fourteen inscriptions from Pompeii mention involvement in the cult of Isis (Heyob 1975, 83).

It is then clear that there was indeed participation of the cult of Isis in Pompeii and the Roman world, but what specifically could the worship of Isis bring to women? Isis represented human emotions that many women could relate to – love, loyalty, sorrow and compassion. (Heyob 1995, 44). As a mother goddess she connected with women on their most basic function in society. When especially considering her role as wife to Osiris, she encapsulates the ideal loving wife. The well-known myth of Osiris’ death and resurrection involves the aid of his wife Isis. First she must mourn her husband, and Heyob points out that women could relate the lamentation for a lost husband, son or brother (1995, 64). Though a woman’s status was connected to the men in her life, Isis personified the model wife in loyalty and devotion, one to

which all women could aspire. Heyob also says that “In this way women could practice religion on an equal basis with men.” (1975, 52).

In both religious and civic aspects could women gain prestige in adhering to the cult of Isis. As discussed previously, there were many paintings and other evidence confirming the involvement of women in Isis festivals and rites, and “while the hierarchy within the cult of Isis is not well known, women seem to have enjoyed a higher degree of active participation than in many other Roman state cults.” (Hammer 2000, 45). This participation likely gave women more purpose in their life and would certainly have brought them into the public eye of their fellow citizens, as a role of priestess or other cultic role was a sure way to increase one’s reputation.

Of the most appealing quality of the worship of Isis was initiation into the cult and the promise of salvation. Author Jaimie Alvar writes that the initiation “was performed in a manner of voluntary death and salvation obtained by favor,” (2008, 133). Apuleius, a 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE Latin author, writes on the cult of Isis in his *Metamorphoses*. In Book 11, Isis says to the protagonist Lucius, “But if you deserve to win my divine approval by diligent service, you will come to know that I alone can prolong your life even here on earth beyond the years appointed by your destiny,” (trans. P.G. Walsh, 2008, 222). Traditional Roman religion did not necessarily have a clear indication of what occurs after death. Surely there was the belief that the dead travelled to the underworld to reside in the realm of Pluto, but this seemed to have a rather dreary perspective and a place like the Elysian field was perhaps only set aside for legendary heroes and the like. While the salvation offered here may not equate with the sense of salvation in Christianity, the concept is striking in a pagan religion. The cult of Isis then offered redemption by initiation of her mysteries (Heyob 1975, 60). This would have spoken volumes to the poor and elite simultaneously. Any faults, violations or offenses committed in one’s life would be

cleared if a participant would devote themselves to the goddess and learn the secrets of the religion. Isis offered protection in a world strife with civil war, earthquakes and maniacal emperors.

Mystery religion and foreign cults all the same did not simply replace traditional Roman religion. It offered something different, something more. Takacs writes, "Foreign cults found adherents among the Roman and non-Roman inhabitants of the empire not because the religious attitude of the people had changed and they were 'in search of higher spirituality,' but because the sociopolitical conditions made it possible to find acceptable alternatives." (1995, 17).

Perhaps for the people of Pompeii, the cult of Isis and other mystery religions offered the original settlers sanctification that was separate from the dominating Roman colonists. Whatever the reasons the Pompeians and others of the Roman world had in the worship of foreign deities, it is clear that these cults aided those searching for a place in the world and seeking other options outside of the normal Roman pantheon.

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