INDUCTION INTO THE MYSTERY
OF “STAR-TALK”:
The Case of the Isis Cult During the Graeco-Roman Age

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THE DISCOURSE OF “STAR-TALK” IN THE MYSTERY CULT OF ISIS
DURING THE GRAECO-ROMAN AGE

Cognitive sciences can provide new and previously unnoticed possibilities for framing historical investigations, so that historians can identify relevant real-world variables that have escaped the simplifying and “presentist” biases of contemporary experimentalists. Recent advances in cognitive sciences have highlighted how the very processes through which people acquire a sense of themselves and shape their identity are determined by specific, universal cognitive principles and operations.² The investigation of these processes could help us understand both the way of thinking and the attitude of the adherents of the Isis cult during the Graeco-Roman oecumene, always based on the data of this particular theoretical approach.

Thus, combining readings from Plutarch and Apuleius based on the methodology suggested by Roger Beck,³ it is possible to reconceptualize the study and

¹ I would like to thank R. Beck, L. H. Martin, Y. Papadoyannakis and the editor of this volume A. Chalupa for their extremely helpful suggestions and criticisms.

² The importance of this innovative theoretical proposal for the study of religions of Antiquity can be better understood, if we take into consideration Luther H. Martin, “The Ecology of Threat Detection and Precautionary Response From the Perspectives of Evolutionary Psychology, Cognitive Science and Historiography: The Case of the Roman Cults of Mithras” (paper presented at the workshop on “The Ecology of Threat Detection,” sponsored by the University of South Africa and held at Tilodi game park, January 2011), who so aptly says: “the work of cognitive scientists and that of historians must be complementary. As Simon Baron-Cohen has counseled, any scientific search for valid generalizations must ‘step out of time’ since, ‘at a minimum’, those which ‘have been confirmed to occur in the present’ also ‘must have occurred in the past’” (p. 3). See also Harvey Whitehouse and Luther H. Martin, eds. Theorizing Religions Past: Archaeology, History and Cognition (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2004); Luther H. Martin and Jesper Sørensen, eds. Past Minds: Studies in Cognitive Historiography (London: Equinox, 2011).

understanding of this particular cult, which will contribute to the overcoming of obstacles regarding the understanding of the other “alternative cults” of the Graeco-Roman oecumene.

Key to the above-mentioned approach to the Isis cult is Plutarch’s 2nd century AD text *De Iside et Osiride,* where we read:

[N]or did she (i.e. Isis) allow the contests and struggles which she had undertaken, her wanderings and her many deeds of wisdom and bravery, to be engulfed in oblivion and silence, but into the most sacred rites (teletais) she infused images (eikonas), suggestions (hyponoias) (underthoughts, according to Beck) and representations (mimēmata) of her experience at that time, and so consecrated at once a pattern (didagma) of piety and an encouragement (paramythion) to men and women overtaken by similar misfortunes.⁵

In light of Beck’s cognitive approach to the study of the Mithras cult, Plutarch’s text can be the key to a redefinition of the Isis cult. Beck’s insight may form the basis of our own approach to the cult of Isis during the so-called Imperial Age. As a consequence of the specific Graeco-Roman religious and intellectual milieu which was infused with cosmic symbolism, amply manifested in the cosmic environment that is described in the cosmology of Claudius Ptolemy (mid-2nd century AD), the Isis cult is invested with a symbolic dimension and cosmic symbolism.⁶

Unlike the Mithras cult where information of decisive importance is given by Porphyry in his *De antro nympharum,*⁷ we must extrapolate for the Isis cult this information from indirect sources and the way these sources relate to the Graeco-Roman view of the oecumene. The description of Apuleius, in his novel *Metamorphoses* regarding Lucius’ process of initiation into the Isis cult can supplement Plutarch’s account and can help fill in the incomplete cosmological information relevant to the environment of the Isis cult.⁸ After all, both writers are known for their common philosophical and devotional preferences; at the same time, as contemporaries, they naturally shared a common way of viewing the world.⁹

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Thus Plutarch’s text, as well as that of Apuleius, are of particular importance for the study of the Isis cult during the Graeco-Roman era, because it is through these that the mystery form, which the structure of this cult acquired during the 1st century AD, is manifest. This transformation of the worship of Isis into a mystery cult is an element of vital importance as it shapes the form of the cult during the Imperial Age. Moreover, this mystery form not only constituted an essential component of and complement to the overall structure of this cult, but it was also related to the actualization of certain rituals, participation in which was not confined just to those who were part of the Isis’ original Egyptian devotional cultic environment.

This form, however, constitutes one side of the overall structure of the cult, which is related to its rituals and festivals. This element differentiates this particular cult from the cult of Mithras, which constitutes the example par excellence of mystery cult of the Graeco-Roman oecumene.

An important characteristic of the context of the Isis cult during the Imperial Age is the goddess’s transformation into a cosmic deity who controls, with her absolute and determinative power, the movement of the whole heavenly firmament.


12 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 3.

This very idea is further amplified during this time, when perceptions about the representatives of the divine world undergo a change generally. These deities, Isis being among them, become transformed from protectors of nature and the production of earthly goods into cosmic and omnipotent supernatural beings. Thus Apuleius characterizes her as *regina caeli*. This particular cosmic image of the goddess is presented throughout the eleventh Book of his *Metamorphoses* which could be considered as the “chronotropic template of the Isis’ book.” The tactic applied by Apuleius in adjusting the way of expression of his age could be deemed supplementary to the so-called “adventure” and “everyday time” that usually dominates in the various novels of the time. In this way he adjusts the overall narration and the cult of Isis as well to the overall way of expression during the Imperial Age.

In the same spirit, the text of the Aretalogies of Cyme, Thessaloniki (1st–2nd century AD), Casandrea (Nea Potidea, Chalkidiki) (2nd century AD) and Ios (2nd–3rd century AD) reads: “I [Isis] appointed the paths of the stars. I regulated the passage of sun and moon.”

These testimonies are further supported by Isis’ representations of this age in which she appears as a cosmic deity and more specifically as the “Heavenly Panthea Goddess” (*Ourania Panthea thea*). This further supports Apuleius’ characterization of Isis as *elementorum omnium domina*. Such a representation of Isis as a cosmic


14 Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5 = Griffiths, *IB*, 74–75, 141. The same theme is also found in the so-called magical astrological gems during the Late Antiquity, see about Doro Levi, “*Aion.*** Hesperia 13 (1944); Ennio Sanzi and Carla Sfameni, eds. *Magia e culti orientali per la storia religiosa della tarda antichità* (Cosenza: Edizioni L. Giordano, 2009), 166–169.


18 RICIS 202/1101: Ἐγὼ ἀστρων ὁδοὺς ἔδειξα.

19 About the connection of Isis with the stars see Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.25 = Griffiths, *IB*, 322.

20 According to this data, Isis is considered to be the indisputable *elementorum omnium domina*. See Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* 11.5, 7 and 25 = Griffiths, *IB*, 320–325. See also Pachis, *Religion and Politics*, 184–187.
deity comes from a fresco in Pompei, Italy, in which she is represented stepping with one of her feet on the heavenly sphere. Next to her one can see the steering wheel of a ship, through which her absolute dominance, not only on the cosmic firmament but also on the whole earth and sea is implied. Her absolute dominance is thus indisputable. The same idea is also portrayed on an altar in Confinium, South Italy, where the goddess is represented as Isis-Fortune and Victory, standing again on the heavenly sphere. The presence of this particular notion is directly connected with the image of Isis as Fortune (Tychē) on inscriptions coming from the West part of the Empire. On them, Isis is referred to as “thea epēkoos Isidi Tychē”; in this way she is honored as the absolute regulator of people’s life and of the whole cosmic firmament. This perception acquires particular significance especially when we take into account Apuleius’ characterization of the goddess as “elementorum omnium domina, sæculorum progenies initialis,” a fact that implies her connection to time.

One should not forget to mention at this point the statues of Osiris coming from Rome, where the Egyptian god of the underworld is portrayed as the ruler of time, obviously connected to eternity. The Figure of Osiris from the sanctuary of the Syrian deities (2nd century AD) and on a gem from the Janiculum Hill (2nd–3rd century AD) are also characteristic of this. Of importance is another headless figurine of Osiris Chronocrator in Rome where the god is represented with a human trunk. A snake entwines his body as many as seven times, another symbol of eternal time. These representations of time are related to the fact that Isis is considered to be the goddess who arranges the eternal and harmonic movement of the cosmos. The transformation of chthonic Isis into an almighty cosmic


23 See RICIS 113/0531, 113/0566, 113/0514, 113/0515; SIRIS, 634 = RICIS 515/1001: Εἰσιτύχη Ἐρως.


26 According to this data, Isis is considered to be the indisputable elementorum omnium domina. See Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.5 and 7: orbisque totius dominar; 11.25 = Griffiths,
Deity during the Late Antiquity becomes even more important since Isis is a deity known for her omnipotent as well as philanthropic nature, as expressed in her providence for the entire firmament, a representation related to the dominant trends and ideas of this era. Thus, the concept of "providence," originating from the domain of Stoic discourse, finds its ideal expression in the powerful personage of Isis. Besides, divine providence is the primary presupposition for the prevalence of order and harmony over chaos.


See JNRIS, no. 03 (Asia Minor, Lydia, Blaudus, Juda II, 20–25 AD); no. 03b (Asia Minor, Lydia, Blaudus, Juda II, 20–25 AD); no. 03c (Asia Minor, Lydia, Blaudus, Juda II, 20–25 AD); no. 04 (Asia Minor, Lydia, Blaudus, Juda I, 20–25 AD); no. 02 (Asia Minor, Lydia, Traleis, 134–136 AD); no. 03 (Asia Minor, Lydia, Traleis, 134–136 AD); no. 03a (Asia minor, Caria, Iasos, 151–200 AD ?); no. 02 (Mauretania); no. 07 (Mauretania).

Philo, *Legatio ad Gaium*, 147.2–3: ὁ τὴν ἀταξίαν εἰς τάξιν ἀγαγών, τὰ ἔθνη καὶ θηριώδη πάντα ἡμερώσας. In this work, written in 41 AD, Philo praises Augustus not only as the main factor of the restoration of order and harmony in the entire state, but also as a factor of harmony in the entire nature, against the forces of chaos. Regarding the emperor as a factor of providence for the citizens, see Martin P. Charlesworth, “The Virtues of a Roman Emperor: Propaganda and the Creation of Beliefs,” in *Ideologie und Herrschaft in der Antike*, ed. Hans Kloft (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1979), 373–378.
Analogous ideas are also mentioned in the hymn that comes from the ancient Thessalic city of Gomphoi, today in the Museum of Volos. Isis is presented in this hymn not only as the goddess of blossoming fields but also, in a unique way, as the ruler of the entire vegetation. It should not escape our notice that this area is the major source of grains for the Greek mainland and therefore are heavily dependent on the absolute will of the dominant nature deities. People offer to their gods everyday oblations and prayers in order to gain their support and absolute and determinative interference.

The text of Mesomedes, dating back to the reign of Hadrian, constitutes another characteristic testimony about the Isis cult. In this text she is characterized as the Lady of Nature as well as the absolute regulator of the eternal succession of the seasons. This is the reason why the goddess is also characterized by her cosmic nature during this period. This text describes the intense and ceaseless cosmic movement in the cyclical dance of the seasons in honour of Isis. That intense rhythm of the cosmic dance is implied by the presence of the Curetes, the madding escorts of Rhea. The presence of these goddesses as well as of Cronus, deities of earth and vegetation, constitutes an evidential element for the content of this text.

The respective image that one can find in the representations of the patera of Parabiago that dates from the 4th century AD reinforces our position. In this

33 See Peek, *Der Isishymnus von Andros*, 143–147.
35 See Robert Turcan, “Isis gréco-romaine.”
image, Rhea-Cybele, an analogous nature deity, is depicted on her chariot which is dragged by lions in the cosmic environment. This space is delineated by the presence of the dancing Curetes, and of Aeon-Cronus surrounded by the Zodiac cycle. This image of the Aeon-Cronus, whose body is surrounded by a snake, constitutes the reflection of the Eternal Time in accordance with the ideas of the Late Antiquity.  

The characterization of Isis as bathykerós in this hymn also associates her with the devotional epithet of Isis-Moon. This divine epithet and the whole affinity


of the text supports her absolute cosmic character.\(^{41}\) The goddess is not only the goddess of rural fertility and Lady of Nature (according to the hymn of Gomphoi); she is actually represented as a dominant cosmic deity. This image of the goddess is further amplified by the usage, in this text, of the term \textit{diprēlatai}.\(^{42}\) This term, in combination with the above characterization of the goddess, corresponds to relevant representations of the Moon, which leads her celestial chariot. According to the same text, the goddess is portrayed riding on her cosmic chariot around the eternal cycle of the seasons.\(^{43}\) For a start, Isis-Moon constitutes, according to the teachings and ideology of this period, the necessary complement to Sarapis (Osiris)-Sun.\(^{44}\) In addition, the term \textit{pyrigenēs} is relevant to the characterization of Isis found in the text of her Hymn from the Oxyrhynchus Papyri.\(^{45}\) Furthermore, the terms \textit{ploutodoreira}\(^{46}\) and \textit{karpophoros}\(^{47}\) could constitute characteristic features of her fecundity. Finally, the reference to the succession of the seasons is a typical idea of this period and implies the Zodiac cycle, a route that the Moon and the Sun follow daily in their celestial journey. We also find this kind of representations

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[43] See Panayotis Pachis, \textit{Δήμητρα Καρποφόρος. Θρησκεία και αγροτική οικονομία του αρχαιοελληνικού κόσμου} (Athens: Hellinica Grammata, 1998), 19, 32, 67; Pachis, \textit{Religion and Politics}, 309. A similar image, this time about the route of the Sun, is found in a passage of Euripides (frg. 941, 3–946 = Nauck, \textit{Fragmenta Euripidea}, 663–665 = TrGF V2 937–938, 1022) where τόνδ’ ἦγοι θεόν … πυριγενῆς δὲ δράκων ὅδον ἤγειται [ταῖς] τετραμόρφοις όραις ξευγνὸς ἀρμονία πολύκαρπον ὣχημα καὶ Γάια μήτερ Ἑστίαν δὲ σ’ οἱ σοφοὶ βροτῶν καλούσιν ἤμενην ἐν αἰθέρι ἀεί τι καινὸν θύῃ θεός. We believe that the relevant terminology Euripides uses in this passage can perfectly fit the image of Isis.
\item[44] The above mentioned ideas find their ideal expression in the connection of the goddess with the Moon and Tyche. For this reason the goddess is characterized as ταυρῶπις, πολυώνυμος and σώτειρα. See Lydus, \textit{De mensibus} 4.46, who informs us that: τὴν Τύχην οἱ Ἐλλήνες γράφουσι βουπρόσωπον εἶναι.
\item[46] \textit{SIRIS} 165 = \textit{RICIS} 203/0602.
\item[47] \textit{SIRIS} 317 = \textit{RICIS} *301/0601.
\end{enumerate}
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of the Moon in the depictions of the Mithraic iconography, where the goddess is portrayed on a chariot that is going around the cosmic firmament.\textsuperscript{48}

All the references cited above provide us with the opportunity to approach the Isis cult, and especially the ritual of initiation into this cult, in an innovative way, i.e. “in the mode of cognition.” Initiation, as a “turning point,” offered initiates a chance to acquire a personal relationship with Isis, who as the \textit{elementorum omnium domina} had the power to save them from the revulsions of the impious \textit{Tychē (Fortuna)}, manifesting to them a new dynamic strategy of being. In this way the cult’s adherents come to acquire mystical knowledge about the cosmic order as a result of their personal choice and actually transform their whole existence and orientation in life; all of which signified a possibility for them to overcome the apparent chaos that dominated the world. It should not escape our notice that the overall way of preparation and realization of Lucius’ initiation, the hero of Apuleius’ narration, is articulated as “mystagogy.” The meaning of this term, according to Beck, is “inducing in a mystery”\textsuperscript{49} (\textit{mystagogēin}), and in this way “the initiate gets to know his [or her] mysteries in the context of the life and physical environment.”\textsuperscript{50}

It is apparent that the personal bonds between the initiator and the initiate are reinforced, a fact of decisive importance for the life of the adherent. Plutarch’s text leads us to understand that just as the “underthoughts” (\textit{hyponoias}), “mental representations,” and their visual realization (\textit{eikonas}) include but are not limited to material icons, so the realization of the ritual (\textit{mimēmata}) include but are not limited to mimetic rituals. Therefore, according to Beck, this “mode of cognition,” which constitutes a “doctrine” for this cult gives the initiator the opportunity “to recapture and express this knowledge, in a propositional language,” which he defines as “star talk” and which is directly related to Hellenistic astronomy.

This “language, if language it is, is the idiom of the mysteries, not just of the icons”\textsuperscript{51} “it is [a] medium.”\textsuperscript{52} In this way, the manifestation of this knowledge should not be regarded as an esoteric reading restricted to a learned minority, but rather as readily accessible to a general audience. This opinion is further amplified by Boll’s position,\textsuperscript{53} who wrote:

It presupposes a learned education neither with the writer nor the readers: a person knew the twelve signs of the zodiac and the most important constellations of the sky as well as the twelve months that are known today. He can have reckoned on

\textsuperscript{48} See CIMRM, index, s.v. \textit{Luna}.
\textsuperscript{49} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 42, 62, 65, 128, 129.
\textsuperscript{50} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 2.
\textsuperscript{51} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 161.
\textsuperscript{52} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 8.
\textsuperscript{53} Franz Boll, \textit{Aus der Offenbarung Johannis} (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1914), 103.
what for a reader would also be the true, no less advanced, indeed childish cosmology.\textsuperscript{54}

This particular view of the symbols of the Mithras and Isis cults, which are directly connected to the world-view of the Graeco-Roman \textit{oeumene}, finds its best expression in Dan Sperber’s theoretical approach, which Beck follows in his study of the Mithraic cult. According to Sperber, the cultural phenomena which religion is directly related to, constitute a complex of mental as well as public representations. The former pertain to the stellar world and the latter to the expressions of mental representations in the common world: the observable ritual. “[A] ‘pairing’ of sign and meaning ‘in a code structure’ is the key criterion: [the] language [of star talk] meets it.”\textsuperscript{55} This theoretical approach finds its application in Plutarch’s testimony, following Beck’s redefining view. As he so aptly concludes: “[o]nly by metaphoric licence do symbols mean,”\textsuperscript{56} or to be more accurate, the “symbols evoke. And to say that symbols evoke is really just another way of speaking of the apprehension of symbols by the cognizing agent when the object of cognition is made the grammatical subject.”\textsuperscript{57} In this way: “the initiate apprehends whatever the symbols evoke,” or intimate.\textsuperscript{58}

So, the ritual of initiation, as described in Apuleius’ account, can be incorporated into the framework of “star-talk”; it can also be directly connected with the “underthoughts” (\textit{hyponoias}) that are mentioned in Plutarch’s text and are related to the overall cosmological world-view, that is used, according to Mastrocinque, as the “esperando” of the Graeco-Roman age.\textsuperscript{59} Therefore, this tactic of Apuleius could be directly connected to a kind of evocation, through which the character of Lucius, as a representation of every initiate of this period, could comprehend the symbols, as those are expressed throughout the “mystagogy.”

It should be noted here that the space where the adherents’ initiation takes place can be identified with the “image of the world” in which the adherent actualizes his (her) cosmic journey. Initially, he (she) goes down – always according to Apuleius’ narration – to the Underworld, the realm of Osiris, and then ascends through the planets (\textit{elementa}), according to the dominant cosmological view of

\textsuperscript{54} Hegedus, \textit{Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology}, 252 (whose translation we follow). About the importance of astrology during the Graeco-Roman age see also Bert Selter, “\textit{Eadem spectamus astra}: Immortality as Common Ground Between Pagan and Christina Monotheism,” in \textit{Monotheism Between Pagans and Christians in Late Antiquity}, eds. Stephen Mitchell and Peter Van Nuffelen (Leuven: Peters, 2010).

\textsuperscript{55} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 157.

\textsuperscript{56} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 158.

\textsuperscript{57} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 159.

\textsuperscript{58} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 159.

In this ascent he (she) reaches the space of the fixed stars, the realm of Sarapis (=Helios/Horus) and of Isis, who is considered as the elementorum omnium domina and regina caeli.

The whole initiation process was accompanied by several sensory stimuli (visual, auditory, olfactory) amplifying the adherents’ experience moving within the cosmic space. After all, the communicative practices of human societies, just like rituals and visual arts, are based on mental representations that intentionally or not, convey a meaning. The means through which the meaning of a representation is conveyed is not restricted to the natural environment; it also includes the “representational environment” that symbolic systems generate within human minds, which can transform the perceived world. In this light, both symbolic systems and their representational relationships are not independent; they are dependent on the cosmic and cultural context in which they have developed.

In the symbolic mental mappings that are found in Apuleius’ account, we also find experiences of the symbolic transition of the initiate from the microcosm to the cosmic macrocosm, where he will eventually gain salvation from his mortal nature. Moreover, Isis is the goddess who “guides the errant stars of heaven” and gives *hominibus vagis vitam*.

As a matter of fact, this journey was taking place symbolically at a vertical level, with intermediate stops on the seven planets that surround the earth, as well physically within the environment of the cults’ temples. The metaphorical conception of movement in space and time is, according to the cognitive approach, largely reliant on the basic structures of the human body and brain and, by extension, on the special nature of the human somatic experience.

Lucius appears after his initiation to the other members of the cult dressed in a cloak that bears the symbols of the cosmic environment in which Isis prevails.

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62 Claudianus, *De consulatu Stilichonis* 1.63. This text refers to the cult of Mithras but it could also be used, *mutatis mutandis*, for the cult of Isis.

He is now dressed in all the symbols that characterize the space of the goddess’ dominion, a fact that proves the relationship of their acquired kinship. In this way Lucius’ ritual appearance could in fact be equated with Isis’ theophany according to Apuleius who writes that “around the embroidered hem and on the surface of the (goddess’) cloak twinkling stars were scattered, and in their center a full moon was breathing, fiery flames.”

This system of symbols mentioned in the above two cases, i.e. in Lucius’ as well as in Isis’ appearance, can be deemed to be a “star-talk” that is understood not only by the initiate but also by all members of this cult. Finally, his full integration into the cultic community and amplification of his communication with its members take place during a common meal. These practices, along with the initiation, constitute tactics of “ritualized stabilization,” through which his entrance to the “safe site” of the Isis cult is accomplished.

The astrological descriptions that are related to the “horotropic template of the Isis cult” could be considered, mutatis mutandis, equivalent to the cave of the Mithraic cult as an “image of the world.” Furthermore, what is created within the “liturgical environment” of those cults – which is equivalent to the material world – is the appropriate conditions for the creation of a cognized environment,” according to Beck, or “a ‘mental’ or ‘cognitive map’,” according to Martin. As Martin argues, “these maps could be considered as ‘cognitive navigation’ and as such, have been largely accepted for humans as memory-related firings of hippocampal neuronal ensembles, even for highly abstracted representations of space, i.e., representations independent of sensory input.”

The existence of “a cognized environment” within the cult of Isis during Graeco-Roman times may find application not only in the process of mystery rites but

64 Apuleius, Metamorphoses, 11.4: per intextam extremitatem et in ipsa eius planitie stellae dispersae coruscabatur earum media semenstris luna flammeos spiribat ignes. = Griffiths, IB, 72–75, 130–132. Cf. also Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.3: et ece pelago medio venerandos diis etiam vultus attollens emergit divina facies; ac debinc paulatim toto corpore perlucidum simulacrum exculo pelago ante me costituisse visum est. = Griffiths, IB, 72–73. See also Wilhelm Gundel, “Zodiakos,” RE X.A.19 (1972), 603–604; Hegedus, Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology, 235 (whose translation we follow in the above mentioned text of Apuleius).


also in daily cultic life. The latter form of this cult is part of a rich ritual framework that completes the complex system of this cult with a number of feasts. This can be seen in textual and epigraphical testimonies as well as in archaeological monuments.

The elaborate ritual of the cult that takes place daily or at regular intervals can be integrated into the context “of an ability to apprehend a culture’s artefacts and structural activities.” At the same time, this ability can be understood, according to Plutarch’s testimony, as a visual realization in the iconography (eikonas) as well as in their performative realization in the rituals (mimēmata) of this cult. So, as Beck so aptly suggests, “one might think of the central term hyponoiai (literally ‘underthoughts’) as the realization of the mysteries in the mode of cognition, just as their visual realization is the icon (eikonas) and their performative realization the ritual (mimēmata). The latter two are public representations, the former private representations of the thinking and experiencing mind.”

In this way, “[d]octrine, we might say, is that central term hyponoia, the ‘under-thought’ which is the realization of the mysteries in the mode of cognition, just as their visual realization is the icon and their performative realization the ritual.”

Participation in the rituals of the cult acquires meaning with an “assimilation of the believer to the holy symbols by habituation by re-cognition.” As Beck maintains, “[m]inds wander, and in the ritual context the acceptance of a set of conventions (‘let this be so’) is what matters, not belief (‘this really, really is so’), however strongly held. The sense of access to some alterative representation of space afforded by ritual is temporary, provisional, and intermittent. This is not intended as a religious statement about humanity’s limitations in approaching the divine. Rather, it is meant as a factual, verifiable statement about the experiencing of ritual. Neurocognitively, the altered mental of the participant in ritual is indeed intermittent and inchoate.”

In this way, all these symbols would be made by “the ritual . . . ‘visible and actual’. And that is a matter of commitment to the symbols and what they symbolize.”

We should not of course forget that the overall structure of all those sanctuaries of the cult and especially their iconography is directly connected

70 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 62.  
72 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 151.  
73 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 152.
to the existence of symbols through which the basic principles of the teachings are being imprinted, usually through a polysemical and a metaphorical way of thinking.\textsuperscript{74} This is better understood when we take into consideration Beck’s position who mentions: “we should bear in mind that ‘doctrine’, formulated as a set of propositions, is sometimes just a proxy – a necessary scholar’s proxy – for describing what is apprehended by the initiates not as information imparted in propositional form, but in other modes altogether. Truly to comprehend the ‘meaning’ of the Mysteries was to experience them by sight, hearing, and action . . . and its ritual. Only thus would that extraordinary array of visual symbols ‘make sense’.\textsuperscript{75} All these can be considered to be a complete system of symbols, which constitute “a language of instruction” and a distribution of the basic teachings that impinge decisively on the way of thinking and living of the believers of this specific cult.\textsuperscript{76}

The sanctuary of Isis in Dion constitutes a characteristic example for the meaning of symbols.\textsuperscript{77} This particular sanctuary is part of a complex of sanctuaries found in the eastern part of the archaeological site and near the river Daphiras. It holds a central position between the two nearby sanctuaries of Aphrodite Hypolympidia and Tyche, and, according to the testimonies found in the site (\textit{in situ}) is dedicated to the cult of Isis Lochia. This sanctuary is a four column Ionian temple, built on a tall podium which seems to follow the usual architectural models of the goddess’ sanctuaries found throughout the Graeco-Roman world. We can compare this specific temple with, for example, the one found at the archaeological site of Pompei.\textsuperscript{78}

\textsuperscript{74} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 57–58, 99, 143, 151, 158, 163. For the use of “metaphor” see also Edward Slingerland, \textit{What Science Offers to Humanities: Integrating Body and Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), passim.

\textsuperscript{75} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 62.


\textsuperscript{78} About the temple of Isis in Pompei see Robert A. Wild, \textit{Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis} (Leiden: Brill, 1981), 44–47, 71, 76–84; Wild, “The Known Isis-Sarapis Sanctuaries,” 1809–1810; [Anonymous], \textit{Alla ricerca di Iside: analisi, studi e restauri}
At the forefront of this temple was a carved screen that portrays the goddess in a frontal pose that enhances her gallant and omnipotent figure. This carved screen dates back to the second century BCE. On the upper right of the carved screen we find the following inscription:

Σαράπιδι Ἰσιδί To Sarapis, Isis
Ἀνούβιδι and Anubis
Καλλίμαχος Callimachus
καὶ Κλήτα [.] and Cleta [.]
χαριστήριον for thanks-offering
τῆς πλανητέας to the wandering (deity).

The element that makes both the inscription and the carved screen especially important is Isis’ designation as planetea. This devotional adjective is an hapax legomenon, with respect to the Isis cult during the Graeco-Roman oecumene. The importance of this specific adjective is supported by the fact that it underlines the henotheistic yet syncretistic figure of the goddess as Isis – Luna (vaga).

In the beginning of the eleventh book of the Metamorphoses, Apuleius describes the prayer of Lucius – the protagonist – to the Moon. It is a supplication of a hero, who is in despair, to the Moon, by calling her by the names of all the fertility deities of the Mediterranean area.\(^{79}\) The fertility deities are directly connected to the Moon, already since the early Neolithic era. The succession of the phases of the Moon (waxing and waning) could be connected to the everlasting cycle of life and death. It is possible that the writer, at this point in his account, follows the spirit of such ideas that dominated the Roman world, which reached their peak with the influence of the Stoic worldview.\(^{80}\) After all, Apuleius is a clear-cut example of this cultural tradition, which he respects and follows.

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\(^{79}\) See about Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.2 = Griffiths, IB, 70–73,114–123.

If we take into consideration the identification of Isis with the Moon,\textsuperscript{81} a matter known already since the time of Hecataeus of Abdera,\textsuperscript{82} then the above-mentioned connection becomes clear and is reinforced until Late Antiquity, when the goddess is transformed into an almighty cosmic deity.\textsuperscript{83} In this way her almighty cosmic form is manifested, since with her decisive influence she adjusts the course not only of nature but also of the whole cosmic firmament. Isis’ majestic henotheistic form is stressed, a form that dominates the whole Graeco-Roman world already since the beginning of the imperial age. Her multi-faceted character contributes to her characterization as \textit{myrionymos} in the imperial texts, as it becomes clear from the terminology that Apuleius uses in describing the goddess.\textsuperscript{84}

An expression of this multi-faceted character that Isis acquires during the Graeco-Roman age is her connection to Sirius, the constellation of Dog. This results in her worship as Isis-Sothis, according to contemporary testimonies. In the Egyptian tradition of the goddess’ cult, Isis is for the first time connected to this particular star, which is located near Orion; in Egypt the star is known as Sōthis, while in Greek it is known as \textit{Seirios} (Sirius in Latin).\textsuperscript{85} The Greeks also ascribe to this star the name \textit{astrokyōn}, according to Horapollo, an Egyptian writer


\textsuperscript{82} See about Diogenes Laertius, \textit{De vita et moribus philosophorum} 1.10, 4–5 = \textit{FHG} \textit{II} 7 = Hopfner, \textit{Fontes I}, 60: \textit{θεοῦς ἀ’ ἠναι ἡμας και σελήνην, τὸν μὲν Ὄσιριν, τὴν δ’ Ἶσιν καλωμένην.} Cf. also \textit{FHG} \textit{II} 80 = Hopfner, \textit{Fontes I}, 73.


of the 5th century AD from Nicopolis of Egypt, while the Romans also call it Canicula. According to astronomical measurements, this star can be seen in the sky between 17–19 of July. These ideas can be found in the age of the Middle Kingdom, during which the astral calendars are invented. In those calendars the “decans” hold a dominant position and they are connected to the astral deities. These particular deities were rising and traveling in the sky for a period of ten days. Among them Sōthis (Sirius) holds an important position.

In the Pyramids Texts, we find for the first time that the goddess acts decisively on the emergence of Sōthis. Sources of Late Antiquity deem the star Sōthis as decan of the constellation of Cancer. The appearance of Sōthis is the main


cause for the beginning of the annual Nile floods, according to ideas in Memphis already since the age of the 1st Dynasty.91 In some texts coming from Entfou, Dendera and Assuan, Isis is addressed as “the heavenly Sōthis that causes Nile’s tide in the first day of the year.” The first day of the month Thoth (19th July) is distinct for its sacredness and it is considered to be the New Year’s Day for the Egyptians.92 The connection of the river’s flooding with the beginning of the New Year declares a fact of cosmogonic significance. The same ideas prevail during the reign of the Ptolemaic dynasty.93

The Isis-Sōthis cult acquires wide popularity throughout the Roman Empire, especially during the Imperial Age.94 The Isis-Sōthis relationship to the star of Sirius could be deemed as a kind of “catasterism.”95 As proof, we can mention her depictions on coins and amulets dated from this period, as well as the central depiction of the goddess’ drum in Rome’s Campus Martius.96 A carved representation (end of 2nd century AD) coming from the area Savaria in Pannonia

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91 The Nile is part of Nun, i.e. of the primordial ocean. The Nile’s tide is the par excellence present of the goddess because it creates the ideal conditions for the growth of grains. Pyramid Texts §632 = Kurt Sethe, Die altägyptische Pyramidentexte, 341.

92 Porphyrius (De antro nympharum 24 [Nauck 72 = Arethusa 22–24]) informs us regarding this important fact of the Egyptian country as follows: Αἰγυπτίοις δὲ ἀρχὴ ἔτους οὐχ ὁ υδροχόος, ὡς Ρωμαίοις ἀλλὰ καρκίνος. πρὸς γὰρ τῷ καρκίνῳ ἡ Σῶθις, ἣν κυνὸς ἀστέρα Ἕλληνες φασί. νουμηνία δ᾿ αὐτοῖς ἡ Σώθεως ἀνατολή γενέσεως κατάρχουσα τῆς εἰς τὸν κόσμον. See also Porphyrius, De antro nympharum 22.11–14 [Nauck 71 = Arethusa 22]: καὶ ἔχουσί γε ἐφεξῆς αἱ θέσεις τῶν ζῳδίων. ἀπὸ μὲν καρκίνου εἰς αἰγόκερων … Σελήνης (sc. οἶκον) λοιπὸν καρκίνον.

93 Decisive role for the final identification of Isis with this particular constellation plays Ptolemy III and his wife Berenice. In the Decree of Kanopos, enacted by Ptolemy and Berenice, this constellation is characterized as the “Isis’ star.” Pachis, Ισις Καρποτόκος, 204–205, n. 78 (where relevant bibliography), 280, n. 83–84.


(Hungary) indicates the dissemination of Isis-Sothis cult in the northern districts of the Roman Empire. 97 This is also, well documented by the hymn to the goddess that comes from the area of Oxyrhynchus, where we read: κυρία Ἰσι, μεγίστη θεᾶν, πρῶτον ὄνομα Ἰοῖ Σῶθι. 98

In the Aretalogies of Diodorus Siculus, 99 of Ios, Kyme, Thessaloniki (1st century AD), Cassandrea (Nea Potidea, Chalkidiki) (2nd century AD), Telmessos (Lycia, Asia Minor), the goddess declares “I am (i.e. Isis) she who rises in the Dog Star.” 100 The use of the term epiteleisthai (i.e. rise of a star), according to the Aretalogies’ texts, is another concrete reference to Isis’ connection to the emergence of the star. It should be noted here that the terms epiteleisthai and epitolē (rising of a star) belong to the special terminology used by the writers of this period in order to declare the rising of the stars in the heavens. 101 The goddess’ connection to this terminology and especially in the context of one of her Aretalogies, can constitute one further proof for her very important role in determining the year; which also implies her omnipotent imposition onto Destiny/Fate. 102


98 See about Papyrus Oxyrhynchus XI 1380, 8–10 = Grenfell and Hunt, The Oxyrhynchus Papyri, 196, 203–204 = Totti, Ausgewählte Texte, 69, no. 20.

99 Diodorus Siculus 1.27: ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ἣ ἐν τῷ ἄστρῳ τὸ ἐν τῷ κυνὶ ἐπιτέλλουσα.

100 (...) ἐγὼ εἰμὶ ἣ ἐν τῷ τοῦ Κυνὸς ἄστρῳ ἐπιτέλλουσα. See about RICIS, 302/0204; RICIS, 113/054 = Totti, Ausgewählte Texte, no. 1, v. 2; Bricault, Bibliotheca isica I, 105–107, no. 113/201; RICIS 306/0201. Cf. also the Aretalogy of Andros (1st century AD), RICIS 202/1801 = Totti, Ausgewählte Texte, 5, no. 2, v. 6, where Isis declares: Αστροφόρης λάμπω σὺ[ν][μό][δ][ρομος ἐν Κυνὸς κύκλοις].


The identification of Isis-Sothis with Sirius, as (Pseudo) Eratosthenes (3rd century BC) informs us, contributes to the identification of the goddess with the constellation of Virgo during the Graeco-Roman era.\textsuperscript{103} We should keep in mind that this identification is related to the beginning of the New Year and Sirius’ consideration as the first decan of Cancer.\textsuperscript{104} This particular identification of Isis with Sirius is implied on representations of the goddess, such as in that in the Dion relief, on which we find her holding wheat. This symbol implies the fruits of the earth and Lise Hannestad (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 1997); Sfameni Gaparro, “The Hellenistic Face of Isis,” 52, 57; Pachis, Ίσις Καρποτόκος, 22, 56–57, 317–324, 336, 348. See also Isis’ epithet, Ἰσιώτη in RICIS 113/0216, 114/1902, 501/0139, 504/0216; RICIS 515/1001 = SIRIS, 634. Vladislav Vidman, Isis und Sarapis bei den Griechen und Römern (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1970), 98; Françoise Dunand, Le culte d’Isis dans le bassin oriental de la Méditérannée (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1973), I.92, n. 3, I.93, II.57, II.78, II.81 and n. 7, II.142 and n. 3, II.179, II.206, III.16–17, III.102, III.104, III.271–272 and n. 2, III.334 and n. 1; Malaise, Inventaire Prélimumaire, 16, no. I (MAMMA); 17,1 ; 28, no. II.4; 95, no. I.1 (PRAENESTE [Palestrina]); Michel Malaise, Pour une terminologie et une analyse des cultes isiaques (Bruxelles: Académie Royale de Belgique, 2005), 143–144, 147, 168, 175–176, 186, 214; Turcan, “Isis gréco-romaine,” 77. See also Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.12 and 15 = Griffiths, IB, 233,241–244. Regarding the representations of Isis as Fortuna see also Tram tan Tinh, “Isis,” LIMC V.1 (1990): 784–786, no. 303–318, and LIMC V2 (1990): 520–523, fig. 303–319a; Malaise, Inventaire Prélimumaire, 7–8, no. 6, 17, no. 1, 28, no. 4, 33, no. 9–10, 34–35, no. 2–6, 40, no. 2, 255, 10bis, and 10ter, 273; pl. 39; Merkelbach, Isis regina-Zeus Sarapis, 573–576, figs. 95–98; Arslan, Iside, 113–114, figs. III 30–32, 265–269, figs. IV 293–299, 441, fig. V 67, 442, fig. V 68, 446, fig. V 76, 489, fig. V 147, 499, fig. V 182, 553, fig. VI 4, 584, fig. VI 47. De Caro, Egittomania, 127, fig. II 86, 176, figs. III 28 and 30; 177, fig. III 31, 180, fig. III 40, 185, fig. III 51; Pachis, Religion and Politics, 191–193, 262–268, Luca Graveneri, “Prudentia and Providentia, Book XI in Context,” in Aspects of Apuleius Golden Ass III: The Isis Book. A Collection of Original Papers, eds. Wythe H. Keulen and Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012); Friedmann Drews, “ASINUS PHILOSHPHANS: Allegory’s Fate and Isis’ Providence,” in Aspects of Apuleius Golden Ass III: The Isis Book, eds. Wythe H. Keulen and Ulrike Egelhaaf-Gaiser (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2012).


and, at the same time, constitutes one of the most distinct characteristic symbols of Virgo, since wheat (spica) is the brightest star of this constellation.105 This fact reinforces the idea regarding the polysemy of the symbols in her iconography and is of decisive importance for the formation of both the overall way of thinking and the devotional life of the people. After all, we should not forget the various representations of the goddess as Isis lactans, in which a star is located above the goddess’ head, while her son Horus holds wheat.106

All the above-mentioned elements are of great importance for the overall spirit of this era. “Star-talk” is becoming a frame of reference, through which the people shape, by a symbolic polyvalence, both the monuments and the performances of this time, but also their overall way of thinking and their religious expression.107 A characteristic example of this case could be the presence of an iconographical element in the representation of Isis at Dion, namely her hat (petassos) which Isis wears as the planetea goddess. In addition, her hat may represent the heavenly firmament, in which she enforces her omnipotence.108 This position may be further amplified if we take into account the representation of Isis as the Moon and the Sun who emerges from the heavenly dome. This particular moment of the Sun’s emergence could be associated to the term epiteleisthai and epitolē (i.e. rising of a star) that we find in the Aretalogy of Isis from Kyme and Thessaloniki.109 This element can amplify the integration of the representation from Dion within the context of concepts relevant to the horoscope of the particular period. This view is supported if we take into account Beck’s argument, that the “horoscope is a determination (a) of the positions of each of the planets (Sun and Moon included), both in celestial longitude (i.e. zodiacal sign and degree

105 See (Pseudo) Eratosthenes in his work Catasterismoi 1.4.24: παρανατέλλουσι δὲ καὶ Στάχυς. Hegedus, Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology, 237, 244.


107 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 162.

108 See about Turcan, “Isis gréco-romaine.”

of sign) and relative to the local horizon, at a particular moment in (quotidian) time; and (b) of the longitudes (as above) of the points of the ecliptic then (i) rising, (ii) culminating, (iii) setting, (iv) at ‘lower culmination’.

In this way the simultaneous depiction of the Moon and of the Sun in the Dion relief could imply their meeting on the cusp of Cancer and Leo at the northern point of the sky. This can be confirmed by Porphyrius who wrote that “Numenius and his pupil Cronius assert that there are two extremities in the heavens: the winter tropic than which nothing is more southern, and the summer tropic than which nothing is more northern. The summer tropic is in Cancer...since Cancer happens to be closest to us upon earth, it has, with good reason, been assigned to the Moon, which is nearest to the earth,” who also mentions that “from Cancer to Capricorn we have first of all, which is the house of Leo.”

The cusp of Cancer and Leo is a cardinal point in “star-talk” during the Graeco-Roman age. The interpretation of the emergence of the constellation of Dog in the firmament is considered to be one of the most important indexes of seasonal and astronomical time. This is the reason it is directly related to the beginning of the New Year (or, more particularly, of theso-called Sothic year). This fact is confirmed by Porphyrius who writes that: “[b]ut for the Egyptians the beginning of the year is not Aquarius as it is for the Romans, but Cancer. For near Cancer is Sothis, which the Greeks call the dog star. And for them, the tendency of Sothis, which makes a beginning of genesis to the Cosmos, is the New Year.” According to Manilius, this declares the Moon’s position (in what “house”) at the moment of Sirius’ emergence. This always depends on the

112 Porphyrius, De antro nympharum 21.5 (Nau 71 = Arethusa 22): Νουμήνιος καὶ ὁ τοῦτου ἔταιρος Κρόνιος δύο εἶναι ἐν σύμφωνῳ ἄκρᾳ, ὅν οὔτε νοτιότερὸν ἔστι τοῦ χειμερινοῦ τροπικοῦ οὔτε βορείωτερὸν τοῦ θερινοῦ. Ἐστὶ δὲ ὁ μὲν θερινὸς κατὰ καρκίνον, ὁ δὲ χειμερινὸς κατ’ αἰγόκερον. καὶ προσγειότατος μὲν ὄν ήμιν ὁ καρκίνος εὐλόγως τῇ προσγειοτῇ Σελήνη ἀπεδόθη. See also Beck, Planetary Gods, 42, n. 91, 93; Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 86.
113 Porphyrius, De antro nympharum 22 (Nau 71 = Arethusa 22): ἀπὸ μὲν καρκίνον εἰς αἰγόκερον. πρῶτα μὲν λέοντα ὅλον Ἡλίου.
115 Porphyrius, De antro nympharum 24 (Nau 72 = Arethusa 22–24): Αἰγυπτίοις δὲ ἀρχὴ ἔτους οὐχ ὁ ὕδροχος ὡς Ρωμαίοις, ἀλλὰ καρκίνος. πρὸς γὰρ τῷ καρκίνῳ ἡ Σῶθης, ἣν κυνὸς ἀστέρα Ἐλλήνης φασί. νουμηνία δὲ αὐτοῖς ἡ Σῶθεος ἀνατολή, γενέσεως κατάρχουσα τῆς εἰς τὸν κόσμον.
observer’s latitude. The peak of the star’s appearance coincides with the first days of August, when it can be seen in all klimata.

The presence of the Sun however, can be of great importance with decisive consequences for the people. After all, each symbol that we find in the domain of the devotional world, as well as in the everyday life, is always surrounded by manifold interpretations. Hence, the position of the Sun-Sarapis at the highest point of the goddess’ head can also be connected to the period of the year that is characterized as hopōra (late July – early September). It is for this reason that Sirius is characterized as the star of hopōras, which is associated with the dominion of its creative powers on earth. In the calendar of the agricultural areas of the ancient world, this period coincides with the Sun’s entrance in the constellation of Leo and the appearance of Sirius, which constitutes one of the paranatellonta of Leo. It is for this reason that, according to the prevailing “star-talk” of the Graeco-Roman period, their emergence is closely associated. Manilius mentions that Sirius is closely associated with the high temperatures of summer, when the star makes its appearance. During this period rising of the Nile’s level is being observed and, thus, the star is deemed forerunner of the river’s flood, and it is for this reason that Plutarch calls the star “hydragōgos.”

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117 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 255.
118 Beck, Planetary Gods, 78, n. 187; Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 253; Klimata, according to Beck, Planetary Gods, 78, n. 187, are: “astronomically…latitudes; hence, in the symbolic context of the mithraeum, stations from north to south – perhaps from the miming of a progress from the gate of descent in Cancer at the universe’s far north to the gate of accent in Capricorn at the south.” See also Beck, Ancient Astrology, 31–33, 104–107, 139, 147; von Stuckrad, Geschichte der Astrologie, 95, 179.
120 According to Beck, Planetary Gods, 20, n. 46, “[t]he paranatellonta are those constellations which lie to the north or south of the zodiac … and which ‘rise alongside’ the signs of the zodiac. They are hence, in a sense, surrogates of the zodiac signs or constellations.” About the “southern paranatellonta to the summer quadrant of the zodiac,” see Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 197, fig. 7. See also Aratus, Phaenomena 559–732; Manilius, Astronomica 5.32–709; Beck, Planetary Gods, 20, 22, 28, 40, n. 84; Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 161, 197, 203, 255–256.
122 See Plutarchus, De Iside et Osiride, 38, 366c = Griffiths, PDUO, 176–177, 444–445: τῶν δὲ ἀστρῶν τὸν σέριον Ὀσύριδος νομίζουσιν ὕδραγωγόν ὄντα καὶ τὸν λέοντα τιμᾶσι καὶ χάσμασι λεοντείος τὰ τῶν ἱερῶν θυρῶματα κοσμοῦσιν, ὅτι πλημμυρεῖ Νεῖλος ὡς δὲ Νεῖλον Ὀσύριδος ἀπορροήν, σύνῳ τῷ ὸσύριδος σῶμα γῆν ἔχουσι καὶ νομίζουσιν ὅπως πάσαν, ἀλλ’ ὡς δὲ Νεῖλος ἐπίβαινε σπερμαίνων καὶ μιγνύμενος.
notice that, as the same author mentions, Sirius is one of the adjectives that characterize the Sun and in many cases it is identified with Osiris. After all, the representation of the Sun is one more symbol that declares the beginning of the Nile flooding, which is usually depicted along with a lion and a star, as the sun enters the constellation of Leo during this period.

It is the position held by the “all-seeing” Sun in the entire cosmic firmament with beneficent results for the people’s lives. Its presence is justified, in this case, by the identification with Osiris and, later, with Sarapis, who after all constitutes one of the most honored deities in the Dion relief. The interrelation between Sarapis and the Sun is one of the most dominant concepts of this period, which acquires great popularity especially during the Late Antiquity. This feature of the Sun is another loan from Osiris, whom Sarapis succeeds during the dissemination of the Egyptian deities’ cults in the Graeco-Roman world. It is in this capacity that he affects the fructification of the whole nature. The beneficent effect of the Sun’s vivifying rays is of great importance for the smooth growth of the crops. They lead to the success of the annual harvest by making the fields full of mature fruit that constitute the par excellence example of the dominion of powers of life and harmony. This period coincides with the summer’s peak, during which the harvest has been concluded and the fruits have been accumulated in the warehouses. The results of the divine donation and blessing are now obvious to people, a fact that fills them with joy and strength to continue the hard struggle for their everyday survival.

In one of the representations on the floor of the mithraeum of Felicissimus in Ostia, Italy, which is related to the Mithraic hierarchic grade of Leo, we see the depiction of a sistrum, a necessary component of the liturgical equipment.

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123 Plutarchus, De Iside et Osiride 52.372d = Griffiths, PDIO, 202–203, 500: εἰσὶ γὰρ οἱ τὸν Ὄσιριν ἀντικρὺς ἢλιον εἶναι καὶ ὀνομάζεσθαι Σείριον ὑπ’ Ἕλληνων λέγοντες.
125 Diodorus Siculus 1.11.5 refers to the role of Isis and Osiris over the seasons and nature. See also Hegedus, Early Christianity and Ancient Astrology, 245, n. 123. Cf. also Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.5 = Griffiths, IB, 74–75, 140–141: natura pares; and Proclus, Commentary on Timaeus 21e = Diehl, ed. Procli Diadochi Platonis Timaeum commentaria, 1.98: ὅν καρπὸν ἔτεκον, ἥλιος ἐγένετο.
126 See about CIMRM 299; Giovanni Becatti, ed. Scavi di Ostia II: I Mitrei (Roma: La Libreria dello Stato, 1954), 107, fig. 22; Reinhold Merkelbach, Mithras (Königstein/Ts.: Hain, 1984), 295, fig. 38.
of Isis priesthood.\textsuperscript{127} Therefore, the presence of the sistrum in the context of this specific Mithraic grade is not without reason. According to the astrological ideas that hold a very important position in the Mithraic cult, the day of this star’s emergence is characterized as the “Day of Leo” and constitutes the most important celebration of Mithraism, since it is on this day that the tauroctony is taking place, the most important and salvific event of the cult. After all, the grade of Leo, which is characterized by his fiery nature, is connected with the solar character of Mithras and with the act of tauroctony, which has salvific results for the whole nature and for the people and their lives.\textsuperscript{128}

The appearance of Sirius, according to the prevailing astrological ideas of this period, constitutes evidence for the restoration of regularity from the irregularity in the overall cosmic rhythm.\textsuperscript{129} This process allows us to understand the importance of Dion relief and of the overall space of the goddess’ sanctuary for the believers of this cult. The beginning of Nile’s flooding, which is connected to the prevalence of fertility and harmony as the dominant element in contrast to drought and chaos, is implied. All these constitute symbolic signs in the integration of this particular sanctuary, as well as of the overall chronotropic template of Isis cult in the context of a special cosmic space/time.

Returning to the space of the central sanctuary of Isis at Dion it is worth mentioning some more elements that are directly connected to the devotional life of Isis’ devotees, as well as of the other Egyptian deities. The findings from this area and mainly the epigraphical testimonies show the special importance of their cult in this area. Of course, in order to understand some elements of the liturgical life of the cult in this city of Macedonia, we should mention that in front of the altar, which is situated in the frontal part of the sanctuary (\textit{sub divo}), a corridor (\textit{dromos}) is created that represents the Nile. The symbolic importance of the river Daphiras in Dion implies the singificance of the Nile and its flooding in the cult of the goddess. They are signs of the victory of the powers of life

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\textsuperscript{127} Plutarchus, \textit{De Iside et Osiride} 63.376cd = Griffiths, \textit{PDIO}, 218–219, 525–527: ἐμφαίνει καὶ τὸ σεῖστρον, ὅτι σεῖεσθαι δεῖ τὰ ὄντα καὶ μηδέποτε παύεσθαι φορὰς, ἀλλ’οἶν εξεγείρεσθαι καὶ κλονεῖσθαι καταδαρθάνοντα καὶ μαραινόμενα. Τὸν γὰρ Τυφῶνα φασὶ τοῖς σεῖστροις ἀποτρέπειν καὶ ἀποκρούεσθαι δηλοῦντες, ὅτι τῆς φθορᾶς συνδεούσης καὶ ἱστάσης αὐθέν ἀνάλοι τὴν φύσιν καὶ ἀνίστησι διὰ τῆς κινήσεως τῆς γένεσις. We find an analogous image in Apuleius’ narration (\textit{Metamorphoses} 11.6 = Griffiths, \textit{IB}, 76–77) according to which Isis warns Lucius as follows: \textit{Nam meo monitu sacerdos in ipso procinctu pompae roseam manu dextera sistro ciha eurentem gestabit coronam. Incunctanter ergo dimotis turbulis alacer continuare pompam mea volentia fretus et de proximo clementer velut manum sacerdotis osculabundus rosis decerptis pessimae mihique iam dudum detestabilis beluae istius corio te protinus exue}. See also Merkelbach, \textit{Isis regina–Zeus Sarapis}, 262.

\textsuperscript{128} Beck, “In the Place of the Lion;” Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 214, 216, 254–255.

\textsuperscript{129} Beck, \textit{The Religion of the Mithras Cult}, 254, n. 21.
\end{flushleft}
and harmony against those associated with drought and disorder. This is confirmed by the various findings that are associated with the measuring of the river’s level, as well as counting the number of the underground crypts that are located within the goddess’ sanctuaries. Its importance, in this case, is further reinforced by the location of the sanctuary, which is placed by the river Daphiras. The priests of the cult took advantage of the natural environment of this sanctuary and managed to bring the water of the river, through plumbing installations, into this area as well as into water-tanks (perirrhanteria) that are situated in the areas of the sanctuaries dedicated to Isis-Tyche and Aphrodite. Thus, every time the climatic conditions allowed it, the water level of “dromos”-Nile could rise. Archaeologists who study this part of the sanctuary believe that the river’s level exceeded, in these cases, the height of the altar.

It is well known that the Nile had great importance for both the economic and the religious life of Egypt. The Nile was identified with Osiris and, later, with Sarapis, who were considered to be a “source of life.” The connection of Osiris (Nile) with Isis (earth), being accomplished exactly when the flood occurs, gains great importance because it is the only way for the creation of “new life.” This is particularly significant for the teaching of this cult in the local environment of Egypt, as well as in the ecumenical environment of the Graeco-Roman world. The floods occurred during the summer and constituted a period of feasts in honor of the god, as well as of great joy and happiness for the people. In this way, the appropriate conditions are created for the generation of feelings of security, since this vital element was a constant guarantee for the earth’s fertility and the well-being of people. This happens because the Nile’s floods constituted the most explicit expression of Osiris’ imposition on the powers of drought and death, leading to the creation of life.


131 This is better understood particularly when we take into consideration Plutarch (De Iside et Osiride 39.366f = Griffiths, PDIO, 448–453) who mentions that the discovery of Osiris (Nile) by Isis brings joy to all people in Egypt. Cf. also Firmicus Maternus, De errore profanarum religionum 2.9 = Robert Turcan, Firmicus Maternus, L’erreur des religions païennes (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1982), 80, 81, 188: et cum veram viam salutis inveneris gaude et tunc erecta sermonis liberate procama: ευρήκαμεν συγχαίρομεν, cum ab his calamitatis post paenitentiam tuam summi dei fueris indulgentia liberatus. See also Merkelbach, Isis regina-Zeus Sarapis, 157–158.
Isis connexion with earth fertility conduces to her identification as the “main source of life and blissfulness” for the whole mankind. In this context Apuleius characterizes her as omnipotens rerum parens as she is represented holding the horn of abundance, a symbol that brings her closer to earthly fertility and the affluence coming from the Nile’s flood. Her omnipotence ability could be understood if we take into consideration the text of the Papyrus of Oxyrhynchus, where Isis “allows the Nile to rise and flood the whole country (i.e. Egypt).” Therefore, the usage of the term anagō, according to the text of this hymn, declares the goddess’ ability to restore the river’s flood, which Plutarch associates with the Egyptian myth, by saying that the word kyōn is connected to birth: “the power in charge of the earth is called Sirius by some, and by others, in Egyptian, Sothis. It (Sothis) means pregnancy (kyēsis) or to be pregnant (kyein); and so, with a modification of the word, the star which they regard as peculiar to Isis is called dog (kyōn) in Greek.”

We read in the references that come from the text of the Oxyrhynchus Papyrus (early 2nd AD) that the city of Boubastis is considered to be the center of worship and the place where the ritual takes place on this particular day, which denotes the beginning of the New Year. The connection of Isis with nature and the seasonal cycle, according to the text of the above Hymn, shows her absolute domination


133 Apuleius, Metamorphoses 11.5 = Griffiths, JB, 74–75, 140–141.


135 Plutarchus, De Iside et Osiride 61.375f–61.376a = Griffiths, PDIO, 216–217, 521: τὴν μὲν γῆν οἱ μὲν Σείριον οἰ δὲ Σῶθιν Αἰγυπτιστί. σημαίνει δὲ κύησιν ἢ τὸ κύειν. δὶὸ καὶ παράτροπης γενομένης τοῦ ὄνοματος Ἑλληνιστί κύων κέκληται τὸ ἄστρον, ὅπερ ἰδίῳ τῆς Ἱσιδος νομίζουσιν. See also Porphyrius, De antro nympharum 24 (Nauck 72 = Arethusa 22–24): Ἀγυπτίως δὲ ἀρχή ἔτους σὺν ὑδροχόος, ὡς Ῥωμαίοις, ἀλλὰ καρκίνος, πρὸς γὰρ τὸ καρκίνον ἢ Σῶθις, ἢ κυνός ἀστέρα Ἑλληνικάς φασί. Νομημαί δ’ αὐτοῖς ἢ Σῶθεως ἀνατολή, γενέσθαι κατάρχουσα τῆς εἰς τὸν κόσμον. See also Aratus, Phaenomena 329–335. Cf. also Beck, Planetary Gods, 98, n. 234. In this context see also Plutarch, De Iside et Osiride 21.359cd = Griffiths, PDIO, 150–151: καλεῖσθαι κάνει μὲν τὴν Ἱσιδος ὡς Ἑλληνόν, ὡς Ἀγυπτίως ἢ Σῶθιν. About the connection of Isis with the Constellation of Dog (Sirius) see the Arethalogy of Andros (1st century AD) RICIS, 202/1801 = Totti, Ausgewählte Texte, no 2, v. 6, where she characteristically says: ἀστροφόρος λάμπω, συνομόδρομος ἐν Κυνὶ κύκλως.

over nature as well as over the cosmic firmament and highlights the fact that she is the one who guarantees people’s well-being and good fortune throughout the year.\footnote{137}{It is her (i.e. Isis) who τὰ νόμιμα καὶ ἔνιαυτὸν τέλειον παρέδωκας, according to the believer who praises the omnipotence of Isis in the above text. See about \textit{Papyrus Oxyrhynchus} XI 1380, 204–205 = Grenfell and Hunt, \textit{The Oxyrhynchus Papyri}, 199, 219 = Totti, \textit{Ausgewählte Texte}, 72, no. 20. Cf. also \textit{Papyrus Oxyrhynchus} XI 1380, 194–196 = Grenfell and Hunt, \textit{The Oxyrhynchus Papyri}, 199, 219 = Totti, \textit{Ausgewählte Texte}, 71, no. 20. Cf. also Reinhold Merkelbach, \textit{Isisfeste in griechisch-römischer Zeit: Daten und Riten} (Meisenheim am Glan: Hain, 1963), 19.}

\section*{Conclusion}


According to the presentation of Apuleius, Isis is the indisputable \textit{“orbisque totius domina,”}\footnote{140}{Apuleius, \textit{Metamorphoses} 11.7 = Griffiths, IB, 170. Cf. also 11.5: \textit{elementorum omnium domina}. See also the text of Aretalogy of Kyme, I.3: ἔγω εἰμὶ ἡ τύραννος πάσης χώρας, cf. Totti, \textit{Ausgewählte Texte}, 1, no. 1; Henk S. Versnel, \textit{Inconsistencies in Greek and Roman Religion I: Ter Unus. Isis, Dionysos, Hermes. Three Studies in Henotheism} (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1990), 50–83.} and dominant over the “malevolent” and “blind”

Fortuna, that was every individual’s nightmare. This fact further reinforces her omnipotent and regulative power. This can also be found in other similar deities of the time, such as Mithras, who was considered a cosmic ruler (kosmokrator) “capable of seizing control of just those fundamental structures of space and time.” This is another means of attracting people of the time to the environment of these cults, with the promise of overcoming all difficulties, thus leading to a state of mundane prosperity and, above all, posthumous blessedness. It is within this context that the “star-talk,” suggested by R. Beck, is integrated, and this constitutes a special way of approaching the concepts of those cults. This way of expression does not advocate something recondite addressed only to the wise and selected experts but it is a common way of expression during this period. The symbolism of this language is distinct for its evocative power. In this framework, the symbols of those cults, and in this case, the cult of Isis, are distinguished for their polyvalence, evocative or intimate feelings for the people of the Graeco-Roman oecumen.  


143 Beck, The Religion of the Mithras Cult, 159.
**ABBREVIATIONS USED**


**REFERENCES**


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SUMMARY

Roger Beck’s proposition that promoted modern cognitive theories in the case of Mithraism, opened new horizons in the study of the Graeco-Roman period cults. Following Beck’s example, we will present the cognitive paths that were followed by Isis’ cult during its dissemination in the Graeco-Roman oecumene. Plutarch’s and Apuleius testimonies could serve as a starting-point for the interpretation of the Isis’ cult representations in the monumental and iconographic remains, which served as a kind of language, i.e. a “star-talk.” These particular ideas according to Plutarch’s testimony – and, by extension, their projection to the external world – could be considered as “images” and “thoughts” of the general astrological world view at that time. The followers’ overall ritualistic activity can be considered, in this case, as a set of “imitations,” which conform to the symbolic way of thinking of the participants not only in the process of mystery rites but also in the daily cultic life of the Isis cult. In this way, the liturgical context of this cult created cult the appropriate conditions for a “cognized environment.” Therefore, the participants could apprehend the evocation, through the production of cognitive and underlying neuronic processes, of all the symbols and representations of Isis cult.

KEYWORDS

star-talk, Isis cult, Plutarch, Apuleius, astrology, cognition, cognized environment, evocation, Isis-Sélēne, Isis-Sōthis, Dog-Star, Day of Leo, constellation of Cancer, Nile, Osiris

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