CHAPTER TWO
THE LATE REPUBLIC

1) Introduction

Isis, the sister and wife of Osiris, the mother of Horus, and, finally, the companion of the syncretic Sarapis, belongs to the gods of the Egyptian pantheon that represent a switch from cosmic to anthropomorphic entities, from the mythless Urzeit to the time of myths, when history is perceived as the manifestation of the divine will. The struggle for supreme power between the brothers Osiris and Seth, the murder of the former, Isis' search for the pieces of her brother's/husband's body, the putting together of the mutilated body, and the son's revenge and consequent accession to the celestial throne represent the etiology of Egyptian dynastic ritual which furnished the structure for Egypt's religious and daily life. The mythos of Isis also shaped the perception of the ruler who was the embodiment of Horus and so the living myth.

The Macedonian Ptolemies retained this Egyptian perception of the ruler, as did the Romans after them, since it provided a reliable and effective mechanism of political control that guaranteed social stability, which, in turn, secured the production of Egypt's main cash crop: cereal. Greeks, however, had encountered Egyptian gods long before the appearance of the Macedonian rulers and quickly discovered common characteristics between the familiar Greek and the new Egyptian gods. This led to an equation but not a fusion of the deities. Herodotus confirms this when he equates Isis with Demeter, Osiris with Dionysos, and Horus with Apollo. These equations show the human mind at work. The unknown can only become known if it contains identifiable elements. Thus, Isis can be identified as Demeter, but, and this is important, she is not Demeter. A complete

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According to the Heliopolite theology, Isis, possibly the personification of the throne, and Osiris, god of the dead, are the children of Nut, the sky-goddess who daily devours the heavenly bodies and bears them again, and Geb, the Earth-god.

fusion, one that would have turned Isis into Demeter, could only have taken place had the cultural framework, in this case Egypt, ceased to exist.

The Ptolemaic rule over Egypt brought a state-induced Hellenization of the country’s main gods. Among them, the syncretic god Sarapis, the patron deity of Egypt’s new dynasty, stands out. Sarapis is an inexact Greek transliteration ("Osirôpios") of the Egyptian ‘Wsir-Hp,’ the abstraction of all dead, in Egyptian terms, Osirified Apis-bulls. The linguistic misunderstanding of ‘Wsir-Hp’ inspired the story, which Tacitus and Plutarch relate, that Ptolemy I Soter had Sarapis brought from Sinope, a city on the south shore of the Black Sea. The fact that the latter part of Sarapis’ name (-apis) could also be linked to the Greek king Apis, who died in Egypt, must have been a welcome and exploitable coincidence. This ambiguity helped the first Ptolemies. It facilitated an acceptance of the Egyptian state gods and bound Macedonians and Greeks, most of them in the royal service and located in Alexandria, to their new country and the Ptolemaic ruling family that claimed its right of succession in accordance with the old and established pharaonic system. Sarapis, the great god of Alexandria, took on attributes of Isis’ original consort Osiris. Although Sarapis became the addressee of prayers and recipient of votive offerings, appeared together with Isis on monuments, and was named in connection with the royal family, he did not dislodge Osiris in the context of myth and ritual. Osiris’ central position in the mysteries of Isis remained. This modified continuation of the old Egyptian religious and political system under the Ptolemies successfully integrated the new while...

3 Apuleius lets Isis say to the ass-shaped Lucius (Met. 11.5): “(...) cuius nomen unicam multiformi specie, ritu uario, nomine multiiugo totus ueneratur orbis. inde primigenii Phryges Pessinuntiam deum Matrem (...) sed qui nascentis dei Soli inchoantibus inlustrantur radiis Aethiopes Arique priscaque doctrina pollentes Aegyptii, caerimoniiis me propriiis percolentes, appellant uero nomine reginam Isidem.”

4 I will employ the older term Sarapis. I will, however, retain the spelling Serapis when translating a document that uses this form.


6 Hist. 4.83-4 and Mor. 361f-362e.

7 Stambaugh (1972), 45.