CHAPTER THREE

THE SETTING OF THE
EGYPTIAN AND EGYPTIANIZING MONUMENTS
IN IMPERIAL ROME

1. The Iseums

When, in the second half of the first century A.D., the Isiac cults received imperial protection and favour, Rome naturally became the main European centre for the worship of Egyptian divinities (fig. 15).

The Iseum Campense

The greatest of the Roman Iseums was the Iseum Campense. There had been a cult of Isis in the Campus Martius for the last two centuries of the Republic. But the temple had been destroyed under Tiberius, after the scandal of Decius Mundus, and many of its statues had been thrown in the Tiber. The sanctuary was probably rebuilt under Caligula (A.D. 37-41), but was burnt down during the reign of Titus in A.D. 80. The temple was re-built by Domitian, improved for more than a century, and duly restored by Severus Alexander. It was still famous in the last years of the 4th century, just before the sack of Rome in 4101.

Juvenal2 mentions the temple of Isis and Serapis as standing in the immediate neighbourhood of the Saepta Iulia3, and the marble plan of Septimius Severus confirms this. As none of the main discoveries, made since the 14th century in excavations in the area of the Iseum, lay beyond the Via del Seminario and the Via di S. Ignazio, it is probable that the sacred area of the temple was limited

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to the south by the present Via Pié di Marmo and S. Stefano del Cacco, on the west by an axis following the transept of S. Maria sopra Minerva (the nave of which was built on a temple of Minerva Calcidica), to the north by the Via del Seminario, and to the east by the Via di S. Ignazio. This constitutes a long rectangular area prolonging the building indicated on the marble plan. Its axis runs north-south, from a point roughly west of the present S. Macuto, to the centre of the nave of S. Stefano del Cacco (fig. 347).

Martial\(^1\) calls the temple “memphitica”, by comparison with the Serapeum of Memphis. This seems acceptable. The temple was, indeed, surrounded by walls, like Egyptian temples, and the inner distribution of the monuments and buildings followed patterns already seen both in Egyptian and Hellenistic sanctuaries, of which the Iseum Campense seems to have been a synthesis.

If, following Martial’s suggestion, particular attention is given to a possible relation with the Serapeum of Memphis\(^2\), and if the plans of both monuments are compared, common features can be seen. The relatively clear plan of the Serapeum of Memphis (fig. 349) can help to indicate conclusions about the Iseum Campense. The main complex of buildings in the Serapeum of Memphis was composed of two temples linked by a straight dromos. The temple of Nectanebo I, at the east, faced the Serapeum proper at the west, one at each end of a paved dromos about 86 metres long. The access to the dromos was from the side, by an avenue of sphinxes which ended up on the northern side of the dromos near the temple of Nectanebo I, opposite a hemicycle. Along the dromos, on the low wall which bordered it, there was a mixture of Hellenistic and Egyptian statues. While the entrance to the temple of Nectanebo I was framed by a pair of sphinxes, the pylon of the Serapeum was guarded by two recumbent lions of Nectanebo I, similar to the ones exported to the Iseum Campense (nos. 273-274). The western wall of the dromos opened to give room to two small buildings, one Greek, the other an Egyptian chapel containing a statue of an Apis\(^3\) (figs. 18 and 19). The dromos was often used for oracles given by children in hypnotic trances\(^4\) dancing on the ground in front of the small chapels to the

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\(^3\) Lauer-Picard, op. cit., pp. 173-176, pl. 17a-b.
\(^4\) H. Wild, Les danses sacrées de l’Egypte ancienne, (1963), (Sources orientales, VI).