CHAPTER SIX

WHY NILE WATER?
3. THE OSIRIS EVIDENCE

Of the three groups of objects I wish to examine in this chapter, one in particular, the cultic pitcher (Pl. XI), has received extensive attention during the last hundred years. Scholars perceived it to be a very important utensil in Isis-Sarapis liturgical practice and were able to draw upon descriptions found in several ancient writers for help in interpreting it. The most famous of these is a vivid passage set toward the end of Apuleius' account of a Navigium Isidis procession at Cenchreae, the southern port of Corinth. Almost at the end of the line, just before the great priest, marched a cult official bearing such a pitcher:

Another bore in his blessed bosom the venerable image of the highest deity, an image not like that of any bovine animal nor like that of a bird nor like that of a wild beast nor even like that of man himself, but, having resulted from an ingenious discovery, even in its newness it is an image which should be reverenced as the ineffable sign of a somehow higher worship, one which must be hidden in a great silence. This image was fashioned in shining gold entirely in accord with the following pattern: a small vessel hollowed out with considerable craftsmanship, with a quite round bottom portion. On the outside it was adorned with marvellous images of Egyptian objects. Its mouth was not raised very high but in extending forth to form a channel, it jutted out in a long spout. On its other side was fastened a handle which goes out some distance from the vessel in a sweeping curve. On top of this sat, entwined like a knot, a uraeus serpent with his scaly neck lifted high with a streaked swelling.¹

In the face of such a detailed description and with several other ancient accounts as corroborative evidence,² modern scholars have found it easy down almost to the present day to assume that Apuleius is describing a cultic usage found wherever Isis-Sarapis worship had taken root.³ Only within the last few years have Ladislav Vidman and Françoise Dunand advanced the view that the Graeco-Roman Navigium Isidis festival probably originated no earlier than the first century BC.⁴ However, this hypothesis says
nothing directly about the origin of the cultic pitcher since, as Dunand indicates, it served also in contexts other than this annual festal procession. It is my intention to demonstrate that the use of such a vessel can be verified only within a restricted geographical area and only from about the first century BC onwards.

A second assemblage of materials is closely related to this first group. I refer to those images of Osiris which consist of a decorated jar upon which the head of the god has been placed and which have very often been called Osiris-Canopus figures (Pls. XV, XVI and XVII). This traditional designation or an older variant, "Canopus figure," is based upon a misunderstanding of long duration and is quite misleading since there is no known god named "Canopus," there is no such title of Osiris, and, as far as can be determined, this image had no special connection with the Egyptian seaside town of Canopus. I propose, therefore, to employ instead the nomenclature adopted by J. G. Griffiths and to refer to this iconographic type as an "Osiris Hydreios," that is, as an "Osiris-in-a-jar" or "Osiris in hydria." Perhaps the best studies of this rather curious image remain those done by Wilhelm Weber in the years immediately preceding World War I, although certain later investigations are also quite helpful. These studies have succeeded in clearing away a variety of misconceptions and have produced an intelligible explanation of the nature of this object. It now appears quite probable, as will be discussed below, that the Osiris Hydreios statue had its origin about the first century BC and that it is related in form and in significance to the cultic pitcher. What has not been previously observed is that both objects share a rather similar geographical distribution.

A group of about a dozen funerary inscriptions bearing the formula "May Osiris give you cool water" or a variant will constitute the third and final collection of objects pertinent to the present context. These have been the subject of a few specialized studies and are frequently referred to in general works on Isis-Sarapis worship. References to this formula do occur in some of the studies of the cultic pitcher and of the Osiris Hydreios figure, but almost never is the point made that a special relationship might have existed between these latter two items and the "cool water" texts. I intend to clarify and highlight this relationship since I believe it to be