CHAPTER FOUR

THE PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN
IN THE CULT OF ISIS

The frequent mention by scholars, and, more especially by the ancient authors, of the participation of women in the Egyptian cults should not lead one to believe that women formed the majority of the participants of the cults or that it was only because of women that the Egyptian cults gained such popularity. While there were several reasons why women were more attracted to Isis than to other deities, they were involved in the cults less frequently than might be imagined and than has, indeed, been implied in some instances. This may be illustrated by the use of a few statistics based on the inscriptions relating to the cult as collected by Vidman in his *Sylloge inscriptionum religionis Isiacaet Sarapiacaet*. The catalogue contains 1099 inscriptions.⁴ Of these 1099 inscriptions, according to my calculations, 200 or 18.2% mention women who were priestesses, members of cult associations, or ordinary devotees of the Egyptian cults, as indicated by dedications they made or dedications made on their behalf. In this number are not included queens or empresses for whom dedications were made to Isis or other women whose names appear in inscriptions relating to the cult but concerning whom there is no indication of having been affiliated with the cult themselves. This percentage seems rather low when the emphasis given by the elegiac poets, for example, to women’s devotion to Isis is considered, and, in any case, is not great enough to warrant the assumption that the female element gave the cult its great popularity. A breakdown of these inscriptions according to the localities from which they originate also yield interesting results. Of the major cult centers Athens and Rome seem to have produced the greatest number of female adherents, in fact, far more than any other cult centers. Of the 35 inscriptions from Athens 17 or 48.6% concern female devotees, while from Rome 36 of 97

¹ Although Vidman’s numbering only goes to 810, some inscriptions have the same number but are further qualified by a lower case letter, for example, 450a is an inscription distinct from 450. In addition, on the same basis, 247 inscriptions from Delos are included and are numbered according to P. Roussel, *Les cultes égyptiens à Délos du IIIe au Ier siècle av. J.-C.* (Paris-Nancy 1916), abbreviated as CE.
inscriptions or 37.1% speak of women in this connection. From the other major cult centers the percentages are much smaller. Of the 75 inscriptions from the island of Rhodes not one mentions a woman devotee. This could in part be due to the fact that Rhodes figured as a cult center at a very early period, from the third to the first century B.C., as the inscriptions reveal, when Isis, though she had outstripped Sarapis in favor, had not yet reached the peak of her popularity which came only with the empire. Here it should be pointed out that even at Athens only 5 of the 17 inscriptions relating to women originated in the centuries before Christ. Although Isis and the whole family of Egyptian gods were almost always connected with Sarapis in the Graeco-Roman world and although a priest of Sarapis was also a priest of Isis, the more frequent and primary mention of Sarapis in the inscriptions of the Hellenistic period reveals greater interest in him as representative of the family. Of the 75 inscriptions from Rhodes 62 name Sarapis, a priest of Sarapis, or an association of Sarapis devotees, 5 mention Isis or Isiac associations, and 8 name Isis and Sarapis or their associations together. Moreover, the majority of inscriptions from Rhodes are merely lists of priests wherein it would be unusual to find a woman named, since Isis priestesses are not known elsewhere until the empire.

Women, likewise, played a very minor part in the thriving cult center of Delos. Of the 247 inscriptions from Delos only 28 or 11.3% concern women adherents. Again, there is no evidence at all of an Isis priestess from Delos. The primary role played by women at Delos was that of canephor, a secondary priestess in the processions. The number of women admitted into the cult societies was severely limited, as was true all over the Greek world in all periods. At Delos there is one female mentioned among the 20 therapeutai and 7 women out of 16 dekadistai; in one instance one woman is named out of 19 contributors, in another,

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2 In large cult centers Isis and Sarapis each had their own temples and priests, but in less important towns they were rendered a common cult. Malaise, *Les conditions de pénétration* 135.