Interest in all kinds of interactions between Egypt and Rome has grown considerably over the last decade. This debate has not only altered our views on the impact of Rome on Alexandria and Egypt, and of the Romanity of Egypt in the imperial period, but also strongly put to the fore the reverse direction of this cultural interaction: Egyptian influences on the Roman world. It is this topic, *Egypt in the Roman world*, that was central to the IIIrd international conference of Isis studies, held in Leiden in May 2005.

In this introduction to a selection of the papers delivered at the conference I would like to (1) give a short overview of the debate as it has developed in recent years, (2) explain the content of these proceedings and the stand it takes in the discussion by presenting an overview of the topics discussed and their interpretations, and (3) indicate some future lines of inquiry that might be worthwhile.

*From ‘cultuel’ to ‘culturel’ and from ‘Isissohnsucht’ to ‘Realpolitik’*

Already from the Renaissance onwards, the goddess Isis has been, directly or indirectly, central to the study of Egyptian influences and artefacts found in the Roman Empire. This logical point of departure was reinforced by, for instance, Franz Cumont’s authoritative and compelling overview of 1929 and the efforts by Jean Leclant and Maarten J. Vermaseren starting a few decades later to come to an overview of primary sources, resulting in the *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l’empire romain* (EPRO).1 As a result many things

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Egyptian were automatically associated with Isis, while the phenomenon of the cult of Isis and her popularity itself was almost solemnly studied within the realm of the history of religions alone.

A ‘revival’ of the Isis studies seems to have begun in the 1990’s with the (re)publication of some important temple complexes, a large scale exhibition and a first international conference (Poitiers 1999). It has intensified in recent years through, most importantly, the publication of overviews of source material; more international conferences (Aegyptus et Pannonia from 2000 onwards, Caen 2002, Lyon 2002, Bergama 2003) and the publication of monographs challenging former frameworks of interpretation.

One of the results of the recent discussions is the recognition that earlier studies generally tend to isolate the religious aspect. Where Isis and other Egyptian gods used to be an only logical point of departure in studying the relations between Egypt and Rome, it is now often emphasized that the religious aspect perhaps first and foremost has to be studied as part of a much broader, cultural process of interaction. This shift in emphasis has also made clear that aegyptiaca romana should preferably not be studied in isolation of other Oriental influences. Two recent conferences held in Frankfurt, published in 2004 under the title Fremdheit—Eigenheit. Ägypten, Griechenland und Rom. Austausch und Verständnis, clearly illustrate the point.


2 Alla ricerca di Iside and Lembke, *Iseum Campense*.

3 *Iside* and *De Memphis à Rome*.

4 Bricault, *Atlas and RICIS*.


