THE HELLENISTIC FACE OF ISIS: COSMIC AND SAUVIOR GODDESS

Giulia Sfameni Gasparro

The Greek who, cured of blindness by the intervention of Isis, had engraved on a marble stele in Maroneia—probably between the end of the 2nd and the early 1st century BC—a long text which aimed to immortalise the memory of the healing while at the same time being a celebratory discourse (ἐγκωμίον) on the “greatness of the beneficial action” performed by the goddess, connected his personal salvific experience to the proclamation of the divine timé. The latter takes the form of a presentation of his saviour’s identity to the community of his co-citizens, and starts with the pronouncement of her genos (daughter of Ge) and her current status, expressed in terms

---


2 The intervention of the goddess, configured as an epiphany, is perceived by the worshipper as a real action of σωτηρία. She in fact brought about the cure of her worshipper’s eyes, according to what is well known as one of Isis’s most effective forms of therapeutic action. For a brief discussion of Hellenistic-Roman sources which illustrate the medical aspects of the goddess—rooted in the ancient Egyptian terrain of her identity—I would like to mention my essay Iside salutaris: aspetti medicali e oracolari del culto isiaco tra radici egiziane e metamorfosi ellenica, in: N. Blanc & A. Buisson (eds.), Imago Antiquitatis. Religions et iconographie du monde romain. Mélanges offerts à Robert Turcan (Paris 1999) 403-415 reprinted in Oracoli Profeti Sibille. Rivelazione e salvezza nel mondo antico (Roma 2002) 327-342. On the wider significance of “salvation” connected to the figure of Isis, so frequently expressed by the attributes of σωτηρία, salutaris and similar (cf. Bricault, Myrionîme), see C.J. Bleeker, Isis as Saviour Goddess, in: S.G. F. Brandon (ed.), The Saviour God. Comparative Studies in the Concept of Salvation presented to Edwin Oliver James (Manchester 1963) 1-16. More extensively, on the wide range of meanings of the notion of salus / σωτηρία in late antiquity, with particular regard to the “oriental cults”, cf. U. Bianchi & M.J. Vermaseren (eds.), La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’Impero romano, Atti del Colloquio Internazionale su La soteriologia dei culti orientali nell’Impero Romano Roma 24 - 28 Settembre 1979, EPRO 92 (Leiden 1982). Observations on the topic can also be found in G. Sfameni Gasparro, Strategie di salvezza nel mondo ellenistico-romano. Per una tassonomia storico-religiosa, in: Pagan i e cristiani alla ricerca della salvezza (secoli I-III), XXXIV Incontro di Studiosi dell’Antichità cristiana, Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum 96 (Roma 2006) 21-53.

3 Line 15 f.: “It is said that the Earth became mother of all things: to her, the first,
of matrimonial relations according to the typical presuppositions of a polytheistic system. In a direct style, which alternates in the discourse with a descriptive form in the third person, the worshipper declares: “You took Serapis as your husband and after being joined in marriage, the world shone under your faces, you Helios and Selene, having opened your eyes”4.

After recalling the discovery of writing, together with Hermes5, there are listed the goddess’s other euremata: social justice6, lan-