THE TEMPLE OF ISIS AT POMPEII

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Die ägyptischen Elemente sind so dosiert, dass sie der Anlage ein leicht exotisches, interessantes Ansehen verleihen, aber einen Griechen oder Römer nicht abstossen (R. Merkelbach, Der Isiskult in Pompei, *Latomus* 24 (1965) 144-149, quotation 144).

**Introduction**

Vincent Tran tam Tinh compiled the first, important inventory of *aegyptiaca* at Pompeii in 1964. Since then, several essays have been published in which interpretations of religious aspects from Egypt as imported and/or adapted at Pompeii were taken into consideration. A focal point is the Temple of Isis, the only well preserved edifice of Egyptian nature in the area of Vesuvius. The reconstruction of the excavations records and finds in the Museo Nazionale at Naples in the early 1990s enabled visitors and scholars to get an idea of the original presentation of this building that now is entirely stripped of its decorative embellishments. Simultaneously, Peter Hoffmann presented an all-over study of the complex with interesting results, hitherto not sufficiently recognised. In the same period a French équipe tried to make clear that the rebuilding of the monument *a fundamento*, stated in the inscription of the six years old Numidius Popidius Celsinus, is rather exaggerated: elements of a previous, Augustan phase, are still recognisable. There are also remains to prove the existence of an earlier phase, viz. around 100 BC, like tufa architectonical elements (capitals of pilasters and the like).¹

My own current research on the interior decoration of shrines with mural paintings includes the Iseum at Pompeii and this paper will focus on that aspect. My main argument is that the paintings can be subdivided into different decorative programmes which go with the different parts of the monument.

Some architectonical observations

The Iseum of Pompeii consists of a podium temple surrounded by a portico, with a large open room on the west side (fig. 1). On the south side, next to the outer rim of the municipal theatre, is a set of rooms with various functions; these south rooms mostly are not open to the portico apart from doors. The temple with the portico represents an ordinary type for Roman temples, known from the middle republican era onwards and known at Pompeii in the Temple of Apollo next to the forum (fig. 2). The entrance to the Iseum from the street is small and rather insignificant, not providing an immediate view of the temple building itself but into the eastern aisle of the portico and, at its end, onto the door that gives entrance to the temple’s private living quarters (8-11).

As to the disposition of the columns in the portico it is interesting to observe that the eastern colonnade counts six columns, the western one seven and the northern and southern aisles eight columns each. The central intercolumnium on the east is much wider than the other ones, which suggests that the niche in the east wall of the precinct, with its depiction of Harpocrates, communicates with the συννύων θεός, Isis and Osiris, in the cella of the temple. The columns of this broad central intercolumnium stand against pilasters. The extra column at the west side stands in front of the niche with the statue of Dionysos in the rear of the temple, dedicated by Numerius Popidius Ampliatus, father of the young Numerius (see note 36).

The back of the temple and the front walls of the podium are bound at the north side by the penultimate column counted from the west and at the south side by the third (start of stair) and the fourth

coming book on Paintings in Greek and Roman Temples.