IMAGES OF ISIS AND HER CULTIC SHRINES RECONSIDERED. TOWARDS AN EGYPTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE INTERPRETATIO GRAECA

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This essay examines three shrines, dated to the second century AD, which are located at Ras el-Soda and Luxor in Egypt and at Gortyn on Crete, with regard to their architectural plans and sculptural programs together with aspects of the Iseum at Pompeii and passages from Apuleius. Its objectives are (1) to suggest the possible origins of their architectural plans, (2) to describe the function of the cult praxis in terms of those plans, and (3) to test the validity of the hypothesis positing the existence of an archetypal cult statue of Isis with an inquiry into the nature of her cork screw or so-called “Libyan locks” and her knotted costume. The discussion ends with an analysis of the “Reception of Io” from the Iseum at Pompeii in order to consider whether an interpretatio aegyptiaca or interpretatio graeca is warranted when regarding images modernly identified as depictions of Isis with demonstrable pharaonic antecedents.

I would like to begin by examining the architectural plans of the shrines at Ras el-Soda, Luxor, and Gortyn. The plan of Ras el-Soda is both prostyle and tetrastyle. The shrine at Luxor, although peripteral, is likewise tetrastyle. It is difficult to determine the pre-
cise architectural plan of Shrine B at Gortyn, but it is, nevertheless, evident that the façade of the sanctuary proper was, likewise, tetrastyle.3 Tetrastyle as well is the plan of the Iseum at Pompeii.4 One could argue that the tetrastyle plan of these four shrines mitigates in favor of accepting Michael Sabottka’s proposed reconstruction for a temple of Serapis at Alexandria as a prostyle, tetrastyle building,5 the plan of which may very well have served as the model for that of the shrines under discussion.6 This tetrastyle design is fundamentally different from that of some of the pharaonic birth houses, or mammisis, of the Egyptian Late Period as comparisons with the plans of those at Armant, Dendera, Edfu, and Kom Ombo demonstrate.7 In fact, the architectural plan of these shrines under discussion is fundamentally Greek. It is, therefore, significant to note in this regard that the Greek architectural practice of corner contraction, whereby the central intercolumniation of the façade is wider than the narrower intercolumniation on the left and right hand sides, is present in the placement of the second and third columns at both Ras el-Soda and at Luxor, and that this feature is likewise present in the design of the tetrastyle plan of the Iseum in Pompeii.

The shrine at Luxor was provided with a lateral entrance8 as was the Iseum at Pompeii. Whether there was lateral access at Ras el-Soda

3 A. di Vita, A Special Water Spout with a Crocodile Head and the Egyptian Temple (or Temples) of the Egyptian Deities in Gortys, in: A. KARETSOU (ed.), KRHTH—AIGUPTOS (Athens 2000) 232-243, particularly 24, and figures 11-13, for the suggested plans and elevation of this architectural complex.
4 O. Elia, Monumenti della pittura antica scoperti in Italia. Sezione Terza. La pittura ellenistico-romana. Pompei. Fasc. III-IV. Le pitture del Tempio di Iside (Rome 1941) 2 and figure 2; and for an up-to-date bibliography, see the contribution in this volume by E. M. Moormann.
8 On more detail on this topic, see the contribution by F. Naerebout in this volume.