Seeing Egypt in Italy:

Considering the Egyptian and Roman Aspects of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii

The grandeur and mystery of ancient Egypt has fascinated people for millennia. Just as tourists today go to Egypt to see pyramids, temples, tombs, and mummies, Romans visited Egypt for sight-seeing and religious pilgrimage and brought Egyptian souvenirs back to Italy from their journeys. In the Roman view, Egypt was an enigmatic land associated with fertility, the deeds of Alexander the Great, ancient customs of pharaohs, and the home of the popular cult of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. To associate themselves with Egypt, Romans adopted Egyptian motifs into their art and architecture in Roman towns like Pompeii where Egyptian influences can be seen in domestic wall paintings of nilotic landscapes and pygmies and public temples dedicated to Isis. This paper considers the Temple of Isis in Pompeii as part of this tradition and proposes that certain architectural features of the Roman temple in Pompeii were inspired by the Egyptian temple of Isis at Philae.

Romans traveled to Egypt for a number of reasons including business, sight-seeing, employment in the military and religious pilgrimage; graffiti survives from tourist trips to Egypt even in the 2nd century BCE, a full century before Egypt was annexed into the Roman Empire under the first emperor Augustus.1 Graffiti inscribed on Egyptian monuments shows that tourists often traveled on the Nile, and Victoria Foertmeyer has demonstrated that tourist itineraries usually culminated at the temple of Isis at Philae.2 Philae was a popular tourist site for three

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2 V. Foertmeyer, “Tourism in Graeco-Roman Egypt” (Ph.diss., Princeton University, 1989), 33-34. See also Beness and Hillard, “The First Romans,” 205. Numerous inscriptions at Philae reference ‘acts of adoration,’ which
reasons: its location at the southernmost border between Egypt and Nubia, its temple to Isis was considered the most sacred in Egypt, and the vibrant rituals and festivals held within the temple precinct. Romans, along with Egyptians, Greeks, and Nubians, participated in religious festivals for Isis and her brother/husband Osiris such as the ‘looking for Osiris’ festival, which enacted the myth of Osiris, in which Isis looked for the dismembered body parts of Osiris so that she could magically heal him. As part of the international festival environment at Philae, specialized industries produced votive objects for religious pilgrims to dedicate in festivals. In addition to participating in religious festivals, second- and first-century-BCE Roman tourists would have seen the impressive temples of Philae being built before them, alive with craftsmen and priests, newly constructed buildings, freshly carved relief decorations, and brilliant paint. Roman visitors to the temple complex of Philae would have seen a typical Ptolemaic temple and sacred precinct with standard and new temple forms such as the pylon, enclosed courtyard, and birth house complete with screen walls and broken-door lintels. The temple of Isis at Philae would surely have made an impression on any Roman visitor.

When traveling Romans returned to Italy, they brought with them knowledge of the temple art and architecture at Philae and from this incorporated Egyptian motifs into their own civic and domestic architecture such as at the Temple of Isis at Pompeii. In addition, Romans


Plutarch described vivid local festivals and processions in De Osiride et Iside, and although his philosophical treatise focused on the cults of Isis and Osiris in the pharaonic period and it is not known whether he had first-hand knowledge of Egypt, his descriptions are valuable in that they show the active participation of the local populations and festival-goers. See David Frankfurter, Religion in Roman Egypt: Assimilation and Resistance (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998), 53; and Daniel S. Richter, “Plutarch on Isis and Osiris: Text, Cult, and Cultural Appropriation,” Transactions of the American Philological Association 131 (2001): 192.

Foerstmeyer, “Tourism,” 214.

Swetnam-Burland, “Egypt,” 43.
brought back Egyptian objects such as small statuettes, papyri scrolls, canopic jars, and shabti figurines as souvenirs to remind them of their experiences. At Pompeii’s Temple of Isis, a Ptolemaic inscription from Herakleopolis in Egypt was attached to the outer cella wall and canopic jars and statuettes from Egypt were found within the temple’s precinct. Modern scholars call such objects of Egyptian manufacture found in Italy or Roman manufacture that employ Egyptian themes *aegyptiaca.*\(^7\) Scholars nominally reserve the term *aegyptiaca* for sculptures and wall paintings, and temple architecture has yet to be added to this dialogue. These objects were especially popular in the late Republic and early Empire and have been found in abundance throughout the Roman Empire. Some modern scholars have characterized this as a kind of Egyptomania similar to that seen in Europe and the modern world from the Italian Renaissance to the present day.\(^8\) To see Roman fascination with Egypt as a mere mania does not show that reasons for the adoption and adaptation of Egyptian motifs and influences in the art and architecture of Italy were complex and multivalent. Scholars have recently identified three main reasons that Romans collected Egyptian objects and adopted Egyptian imagery into their art: to remind them of the vast sprawl of empire and their place in it; to establish connections to the imperial court and to Augustus’s victory at Actium in 31 BCE; and to reference the cult of Isis.\(^9\)

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\(^7\) Catalogues of Egyptian-themed material in Italy include: Anne Roullet, *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments of Imperial Rome* (Leiden: Brill, 1972); and the more recent, M.J. Versluys, *Aegyptiaca Romana: Nilotic Scenes and the Roman Views of Egypt* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).


Egyptian elements and motifs were incorporated into an Italian artistic vernacular that was intended for an Italian audience.

When considering the possible Egyptian sources for inspiration for *aegyptiaca*, and particularly for Egyptianizing Third Style wall paintings, Molly Swetnam-Burland has concluded that it is possible that Romans were looking to paintings in New Kingdom tombs in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt, Ptolemaic Alexandrian tombs, illustrated papyri, and cartonnage mummy cases that were imported to Italy from Egypt. Following this example, it would be constructive to attempt to find possible Egyptian sources for inspiration for Italian temples to Isis. This paper considers the Temple of Isis at Pompeii as an example of *aegyptiaca*, and suggests that certain unusual architectural features of the Pompeian temple such as the treatment of space and decoration in the portico and so-called Nilometer were inspired by the Temple of Isis at Philae.

The temple complex of Isis in Pompeii is located in Region VIII near the Triangular Forum, the Large Theater, and the Samnite Palaestra (Figure 1). The sanctuary was surrounded by an enclosure wall and was entered through a small entrance on the north side from the Via del Tempio di Iside. A secondary entrance was located on the south side that led to a grouping of three subsidiary rooms that may have been either living quarters of priests or working areas (rooms 7-9). The main sanctuary area was surrounded by a colonnaded portico, within which a grouping of structures including the main temple, a so-called Nilometer, the main altar, and a sacrificial pit were discovered (Figure 1). Two rooms modern scholars call the *ekklesiasterion* (room 6) and the *sacrarium* (room 5) are located off of the portico and were likely used for

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10 Swetnam-Burland, “Egypt,” 76-82.
rituals and events associated with the cult’s initiates. The complex’s portico, *ekklesiasterion*, and *sacrarium* were painted with frescoes.\textsuperscript{13}

In Egypt, temples built during the reigns of the Ptolemies who ruled after Alexander’s conquest in 332 BCE, and Roman emperors beginning with Augustus, expanded on the form and function of traditional pharaonic temples.\textsuperscript{14} As seen at Philae, these temple complexes usually consisted of a main temple and numerous subsidiary structures set within a high enclosure wall (Figure 2). The most sacred part of the main temple was the sanctuary or *naos* towards the back of the structure; this held the cult statue and was the home of the god (Figure 3). This sanctuary was surrounded by a number of rooms, and preceded by an inner and outer hypostyle hall. An open colonnaded court came before the sequence of hypostyle halls, and it, in turn was fronted by a monumental gateway or pylon. The pylon controlled movement in the temple by which priests and parishioners were guided through increasingly sacred space (Figure 2). Pylons were especially important during festivals where participants were expected to process along the central axes of the temple as pylons were monumental markers of these axes. Pylons, along with the inner and outer walls of the temple, were carved with relief scenes and brilliantly painted with imagery from ceremonies and festivals that occurred in the temple. These reliefs reminded festival participants of their roles in cultic ritual and ceremonies.

\textsuperscript{13} The cult statues of Isis and Osiris are no longer extant. It is likely that statues of Serapis and Anubis were placed in the wing niches of the temple and a statue of Harpocrates was placed in the wall niche of the portico, however, these no longer survive. Frederick Brenck, “‘Great Royal Spouse Who Protects Her Brother Osiris’: Isis in the Isaeum at Pompeii,” in *Mystic Cults in Magna Graecia*, ed. Giovanni Casadio and Patricia A. Johnston (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009), 231n18.

The building form of the birth house is particularly striking as a subsidiary structure typical in Greco-Roman Egyptian temple precincts. As a Greco-Roman building form, it honored the birth of the child god of the site’s main deity; here, the birth of Isis’s son Horus is celebrated. These structures are usually considerably smaller than the main temple and consist of fewer than five rooms. At Philae, the birth house mimics the form of the main temple on a smaller scale, with three rooms and an enclosure wall (Figure 2). It is fronted by four exterior columns which are connected by screen walls and the entrance is emphasized by a broken-door lintel, mimicking the pylon of the main temple (Figure 4).

The Temple of Isis in Pompeii is a traditional Roman temple in form, in which a main cella sits at the back of a high podium, behind a deep colonnaded porch. The porch is accessible from a set of stairs, and topped with a pediment (Figure 5). However, there are a number of elements that also compare to Egyptian temple forms. For instance, although an enclosure wall is a traditional element in Roman temples, the sacred space of the temple precinct is surrounded by an enclosure wall and this, combined with the wide intercolumniation of the columns in the portico in front of the temple’s central axis are reminiscent of Egyptian temples. This space is framed by square pillars with engaged columns, which were surely meant to draw attention to the central axis of the temple complex (Figure 1). The columns in the portico are free standing and are placed at regular intervals around the colonnaded space. The wide intercolumniation and monumentality of the square pillars and engaged columns mark the central axis as distinct from the surrounding portico. Stefano De Caro has suggested that the planners of the sanctuary positioned the main entranceway to force visitors to walk through the portico through the pillared

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entrance in a “processional or ceremonial” manner before viewing the temple fully.\textsuperscript{16} Although not a pylon shape, it is possible that the framing of space by square pillars with engaged columns was meant to act in a similar way, as pylons of Egyptian temples also functioned to control movements during processions. Similarly, it is possible that the inclusion of numerous structures, especially the so-called Nilometer, within the temple precinct was meant to mimic the many-structured Egyptian temple complexes.

Scholars have debated the purpose of the so-called Nilometer (Figure 6).\textsuperscript{17} The roofless structure, which emulates the form of the main temple, enclosed a subterranean basin for water which was an essential element in the cultic activities of Isis. Lauren Petersen calls this structure one of the “features signaling that this sanctuary was dedicated to an Egyptian deity…”\textsuperscript{18} The Egyptian Nilometer measured the level of water of the annual inundation of the Nile River. If the structure at Pompeii was indeed a Nilometer and measured water, as Peter Hoffman has concluded, this would recall Egyptian temples, as numerous Egyptian temple precincts, including Philae, had a Nilometer on temple lands. It is also possible that the builders of the Pompeian sanctuary meant the Nilometer to recall the grouping of buildings within the sacred space of Egyptian temples, in which the birth house is also a smaller version of the main temple form. The Nilometer’s structure has numerous elements that could relate to the birth house form of Greco-Roman Egyptian temples. These include corner pillars and solid exterior walls that look similar to the screen walls popular in Greco-Roman temples and visible on the birth house at Philae. And although the Nilometer’s façade is topped with a pediment, the two central pillars and arch form could evoke the broken-door lintel of the Greco-Roman Egyptian temples (Figure

\textsuperscript{17} Hoffmann, “Isis-Tempel,” 207-208. See also, Moorman, “Temple,” 149n29.
\textsuperscript{18} Lauren Petersen, The Freedman in Roman Art and Art History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 29.
4). The architectural form of the Nilometer may have been meant to recall Egyptian sacred structures.

Furthermore, it is possible that the wall decorations of the Pompeian Iseum evoke Philae. The portico of the temple is decorated in Fourth Style wall paintings and has the general pattern of red color fields that are separated by aediculae. A small sacryl-idyllic scene alternates with a single figure of an Isiac priest or priestess in the middle panel of each section (Figure 7). The figures recall those of Isiac procession, and one might imagine the initiates “following these standing figures, as though in processional order, into the temple precinct.”¹⁹ Reliefs and painted scenes of ritual and procession on Egyptian temple walls also serve a similar purpose, as can be seen in relief carvings of priests shown on the pylon of the complex at Philae (Figure 8). Furthermore, the Isiac priest in the south portico shares similar form to the priests on the pylon at Philae. Like the Egyptian priests, the Pompeian priest has a similar stance— he walks with his right foot extended before his left. The Pompeian priest wears similar long robes as the Egyptian priests and the drapery conforms to his stance, forming a triangular shape, like in the reliefs at Philae. It is possible that Pompeian builders and artists looked to Egyptian temple imagery for the creation of these figures.

Because Romans traveled to Egypt and to the Temple of Isis at Philae at least by the 2nd century BCE and continually throughout the Augustan period, and because the temple at Philae was known in the Roman world as the goddess’ greatest Egyptian temple, it would be surprising if the builders of the Pompeian Iseum did not seek inspiration at Philae. This paper has compared the architectural form and wall decoration of the Temples of Isis at Philae and Pompeii and concluded that possible inspiration for the atypical elements of the otherwise typical Roman structure at Pompeii was Isis’s most famous Egyptian temple. First, elements in the temple

¹⁹ Brenck, “Isis,” 223.
precinct, such as wide intercolumniation and use of square pillars with engaged columns in the portico suggest that the Pompeians were controlling space in a similar way as the Egyptians with the pylon form. Second, it is possible that the Nilometer in the Pompeian temple precinct was meant to emulate the architectural symbiosis of the Egyptian main temple and birth house. Third, the decoration of the portico could be referencing Egyptian temple reliefs and paintings which also depicted priests in cultic rituals and procession. It can be concluded that although “the sanctuary [at Pompeii] projects an image of being first and foremost a Roman temple, [and] images of Isis and her entourage seem almost secondary because they are literally absorbed within the familiar vernacular of Roman architecture and decoration,”\(^\text{20}\) it is possible that Egyptian temple forms were also at the base of the Temple of Isis at Pompeii. As such, Roman temples to Isis can be considered a form of aegyptiaca and should be inserted into modern scholarly dialogue. This conclusion invites further investigations into the complexity of Roman adoption of Egyptian influences in Italy suggesting that future comparisons of Italian and Egyptian monuments will allow for a more nuanced understanding of Romans’ fascination with Egypt.

\[^{20}\text{Petersen, Freedman, 37.}\]
Selected Bibliography


Figures

Figure 1. Temple of Isis, Pompeii; ca. Augustan Period. Plan. Lauren Hackworth of Ancient Egypt (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 213.


Figure 3. Typical Egyptian temple plan of the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Judith MacKenzie, The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt c. 300 BC to AD 700 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), figure 200.

Figure 4. Hathor Temple, Philae; Ptolemaic. Broken-door Lintel. Eleni Vassilika, Ptolemaic Philae, (Leuven: Peeters, 1989), Plate XXV.B.
Figure 5. Temple of Isis, Pompeii; ca. Augustan Period. Reconstruction Drawing. Augustan Digital Image Database, The University of Iowa.


Figure 7. Isiac Priest, Portico, wall painting from the Temple of Isis, Pompeii; ca. 62 AD. National Museum, Naples. Carratelli, *Pompei*, 775.

Figure 8. Temple of Isis, Philae; Ptolemaic. Pylon Relief. Vassilika, *Ptolemaic Philae*, Plate XIII.D.