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An Interior View: Osiris and Serapis in ca. 2nd-Century Rome

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Abstract
This paper examines the Egyptian god Osiris and his Hellenized counterpart Serapis in ca. 2nd-century Rome. Written in this period were two of the most important texts utilized by modern scholars to elucidate the Egyptian cults: Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* ("The Golden Ass"). In both texts, Osiris appears as the more important deity of the two. This situation is at odds with what we find in the epigraphic record from this same period, where Osiris rarely appears. The author suggests that this possible discrepancy can be explicated by adopting as heuristic whereby the evidence is seen as reflecting various levels of "interiority" within the cult.

Introduction

In the final book of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, Lucius undergoes a twofold transformation: he is both restored to his human form and initiated into the cult of Isis. Indeed, it is here that Isis makes her most striking appearance in extant Roman literature: "Behold, I am here, moved by your prayers, Lucius," (*En adsum tuis commota, Luci, precibus*) she says when first encountering the asinine creature (11.5.1).[1] This has granted Book 11 a reputation as the "Isis Book."[2] However, this reputation may obscure a significant feature of Lucius's transformation: the initiation into the cult of Osiris. In fact, when the novel ends, we leave Lucius not in the company of Isis but of Osiris (11.28–30). This initiation occurred at Rome, which the novel calls "that sacrosanct city" (*sacrosanctam istam civitatem* 11.26.2).[3] When we consider the time of Apuleius's writing (mid-2nd century CE), we should not be surprised about this fate of the author's self-fashioned protagonist.[4] In this phase of the cult, which M. Bommas calls "*Die zweite Hochphase der Verbreitung*," there was a conspicuous increase in the importance of Osiris.[5] Why, then, is Osiris so little represented in the Roman epigraphic record during this period? This relative absence is even more striking when considered alongside the numerous inscriptions for Serapis (Sarapis), Osiris's Hellenized counterpart. I suggest that this disparity can be explained if we consider the dynamism with which individuals could engage with the Egyptian

cults[6] and if we employ a heuristic that places the evidence into the respective categories of "interior" *vis-à-vis* the levels of intimacy with the cult and its initiates.

While we are limited to a few literary texts (principally, Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* and Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride*), the literary evidence from the ca. 2nd century CE would lead us to see Osiris as perhaps a fundamental aspect of the cult for those with greater, interior, familiarity with the mysteries. On the other hand, Serapis had become more integrated into established Roman religious practices, particularly because of the connection to the emperor in the post-Flavian era.[7] As Takács suggests, after Domitian, "Isis and Sarapis had acquired the status of imperial deities."[8] For this reason, the religious practices surrounding Serapis align more with those of other "traditional" Roman gods. This includes receiving votive and/or dedicatory inscriptions. Conversely, the nature of Osiris, as expressed in the cults, was perhaps such that an epigraphic act might be at odds with common forms of his worship during this period. Some understanding of this nature may be located within the specific myth that is retold in Plutarch and ties Osiris to Isis. That central myth concerning death and revival was not transferred to Serapis. As Merkelbach suggests, Serapis was a "*Gott ohne Mythen*."[9]

Recent important work has complicated the categorization of participants in the Egyptian cults in the Roman Empire and expanded how we understand religious agency in this regard.[10] Even the meaning of the term *Isiacus* (Ἰσιακός) is uncertain.[11] As Veymiers relates, "The documentation brings to our attention many individual situations, firmly rooted in particular contexts, which reveal various degrees of personal investment, sometimes reflecting a worshipper's will to establish a direct and privileged relationship with the divine powers."[12] Similarly, Barrett, in her study of Egyptian scenes at Pompeii, makes the critical point that we should distinguish between practices related to worship, beliefs and attitudes toward the gods, and religious identities.[13] Engagement with the Egyptian cults was dynamic. I argue that one hermeneutic that is useful in assessing these different levels of engagement with the Egyptian gods, as well as the rituals and communities associated with them, is an examination of relative "interiority." For instance, we might consider those most interior to be "priests,"[14] followed by initiates. From there exists a gradient of religious actors (the categories of which are not well defined) all the way to individuals who had no engagement with—and perhaps no knowledge of—the Egyptian gods. Certainly, the persistence of syncretizing tendencies in this period, the formulations of which are often difficult to elucidate, further complicates the matter.[15] For some, such as Plutarch, considered Osiris and Serapis "both as being of one god and one power" (ἄμφω δ᾽ ἑνὸς θεοῦ καὶ μιᾶς δυνάμεως ἡγούμενος; *De Iside et Osiride* 376 A). Even in this case, each god occupied different mythological and ritual realms. I suggest that a recognition of Osiris's dominance—or the "Osirian" aspects of the god—reflects an *interior* perspective.

It is also necessary to keep in mind the regional variations of cult practices. For that reason, this study will focus on the city of Rome. The decision to examine Rome has been informed largely, again, by the ending of the *Metamorphoses*. On the reasoning that Apuleius represents some "real" aspects of the Isis cults (a point discussed below), the novel makes clear that Rome was an important locus of cult activity—including initiation. What is more, the presence of the Isis cult was well attested at Rome during this period, particularly centered at the *Iseum Campense*. Rebuilt by Domitian, this Isis temple would have been in use by around 85 CE.[16] Alongside this temple was a serapeum. Similarly, although its identity is contested, there was also a serapeum on the Quirinal Hill, likely built under Hadrian.[17]

Osiris, Serapis, and the Literary Sources

Much of the discussion surrounding the Egyptian cults in the 2nd century has revolved around two texts: Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*. The works share certain features.[18] They were both composed in the 2nd century, likely within about fifty years of each other.[19] Both works were informed by middle-Platonist ideas.[20] Indeed, in the *Metamorphoses*, Lucius claims to be a descendant of Plutarch (1.2.1), which may be a reference to the authors' shared philosophical concerns.[21] Most importantly, for the present discussion, Osiris figures prominently in both. While the reasons for this Osirian presence is unique to each author, I will argue that they are both informed by internal ("interior") perspectives of the Egyptian cults.

Why is it Osiris and not Serapis who is paired with Isis in Plutarch's treatise? A few explanations present

themselves, and they need not be mutually exclusive. First are the philosophical concerns. The central myth concerning the death and revitalization of Osiris fits well the larger Platonic aims of the author. As Alston succinctly states, "in Plutarch's hands, the myth [of Osiris] becomes a complex Platonic allegory where the dismembered Osiris is the logos which Isis has to restore."[22] As mentioned, although Serapis took on aspects of a chthonic deity—largely by subsuming aspects of Hades/Pluto—he does not appear to be associated with this "mummification" myth. Richter has proposed another reason for the choice to use (older) Egyptian myth to elucidate Plutarch's philosophical ideas. He writes, "I believe that Plutarch chose to explicate his middle-Platonic metaphysics via an allegorical interpretation of the cult and myth of the Egyptian goddess Isis in an effort to renegotiate the traditional, derivative status of Greek cult. On my reading, the *de Iside* is an appropriative text that has as one of its central aims the demonstration of the priority of Greek philosophy over Egyptian cult."[23] Importantly, Plutarch considers the name "Osiris" to be Greek, while Serapis is "foreign" and is a name that the author "concedes" to the Egyptians (376 A). Griffiths thinks it "strange" that Osiris, and not Isis, is the dominant god in *De Iside et Osiride*. He proposes that this must be due to the sources Plutarch used; they were early Hellenistic authors, particularly Manetho, whose concern was primarily for Egypt before the Ptolemies.[24]

However, Brenck makes the case that Plutarch's "resurrection of Osiris" reflects an intentional engagement with contemporaneous religious trends, primarily an increase in the importance of Osiris within the Isaic cult.[25] While Plutarch was writing in Greek and at Delphi,[26] he is reflecting on aspects of the Egyptian cults from a broader imperial perspective, and that certainly includes Rome.[27] Indeed, there are portions of *De Iside et Osiride* that would seem to indicate that Plutarch relates cultic practice as it was in his own time. For instance, he implies a familiarity with certain ritual aspects of the cult, as when he states, "I treat as sacred the cutting of wood, the ripping of linen and the pouring of libations, because much about the mysteries is concealed in these things" (αἰνῶ δὲ τομὴν ξύλου καὶ σχίσιν λίνου καὶ χοὰς χεομένας διὰ τὸ πολλὰ τῶν μυστικῶν ἀναμεμῖχθαι τούτοις; 359 C). Griffiths thought that there was a "clear suggestion" from Plutarch that he was, himself, an initiate into the cult.[28] This point cannot be confirmed, and it need not be the case for Plutarch to present an "interior" view of cultic practice, including Osiris's centrality in understanding the mysteries, as I suggest below.

De Iside et Osiride was dedicated to Clea, a priestess of Dionysus at Delphi (364 E).[29] Plutarch also suggest that she was a follower (and initiate?) of Isis (351 E, 352 B–C) and states that she had been consecrated into the rites of Osiris by her parents (364 E).[30] Certainly, then, Clea would possess an interior view of the cult and the mysteries. At the beginning of the work, Plutarch implores Clea not only to acquire a "knowledge of sacred things" (ἱερῶν τὴν μάθησιν) concerning the gods, but to approach it with the proper philosophical understanding. Indeed, to do so is a more pious task than all purifications and temple service (351 E). Plutarch goes on to claim that the garments worn by deceased devotees of Isis (he uses the term Ἰσιακός[31]) "is a sign that they carry with them this knowledge" (σύμβολόν ἐστι τοῦτον τὸν λόγον εἶναι μετ᾽ αὐτῶν; 352 C).[32] Later in the text, Plutarch again warns Clea to approach the Egyptian mythology (μυθολογοῦσιν Αἰγύπτιοι) concerning, for instance, the mutilation of the gods (i.e., the story of Osiris) with the proper allegorical understanding (355 B). In this same section, the author makes an explicit connection between those who properly apply the knowledge about the gods—especially Osiris—and those who "*always* perform and observe the customary rites" (καὶ δρῶσα μὲν ἀεὶ καὶ διαφυλάττουσα τῶν ἱερῶν τὰ νενομισμένα; 355 D). The mythology of Osiris, which is central to Plutarch's treatise, is also essential to those most interior to the cult. As Plutarch indicates explicitly, aspects of the stories told about Osiris (among several other gods) can be understood by an enlightened initiate, but they are "cloaked in silence by the mystic rites and rituals and secret to the multitude" (μυστικοῖς ἱεροῖς περικαλυπτόμενα καὶ τελεταῖς ἄρρητα διασῴζεται καὶ ἀθέατα πρὸς τοὺς πολλούς; 360 F).

In chapter 361, Plutarch recounts the same story of the arrival of Serapis's cult image from Sinope under Ptolemy Soter that appears in Tacitus's *Histories* (4.83–84). Plutarch states that in a dream Ptolemy saw a colossus of Pluto at Sinope that ordered the king to transport the god to Alexandria. Importantly, once the statue had arrived in Egypt, the king and his advisors noticed that its physical form had changed; the statue now appeared to be Serapis, "which is the Egyptian name for Pluto"

(Αἰγυπτίοις ὄνομα τοῦ Πλούτωνος ἐκτήσατο τὸν Σάραπιν; 362 A). Finally, Plutarch ends the section with an explicit statement about the significance of Osiris from an interior perspective: "It is better to identify Osiris with Dionysus, and Serapis with Osiris, because he received this name when he changed his nature. For this reason, Serapis is common to all, and this is also true of Osiris—as the initiates know" (βέλτιον δὲ τὸν Ὄσιριν εἰς ταὐτὸ συνάγειν τῷ Διονύσῳ τῷ τ' Ὀσίριδι τὸν Σάραπιν, ὅτε τὴν φύσιν μετέβαλε, ταύτης τυχόντι τῆς προσηγορίας. διὸ πᾶσι κοινὸς ὁ Σάραπίς ἐστιν, ὡς δὴ τὸν Ὄσιριν οἱ τῶν ἱερῶν μεταλαβόντες ἴσασιν; 362 B). The meaning here is somewhat ambiguous. What does Plutarch mean when he says that Serapis is "common" (κοινός) to all? This may be an allusion to the fact that Serapis had spread so far throughout the empire, as Griffiths suggests.[33] Put another way, Serapis received the usual trappings of a deity in Roman (and Greek) religion: temple, cult statue, votives, etc. Outside of Egypt, this is not true for Osiris. Serapis is in fact common to all because, as we will see with Apuleius, Osiris is representative of the "highest Platonic god,"[34] the importance of which is revealed to the initiates—those among the most internal.

If Plutarch reveals the "mythological" significance of Osiris within the Egyptian cults, Apuleius makes known the ritual importance of the god. The view of the cult we receive from Apuleius is almost certainly an internal one. Some scholars have asserted that Apuleius was himself an initiate into the Egyptian cult. Most vocal among these are Griffiths and Merkelbach. That the *Metamorphoses* contains large elements of autobiography is for Griffiths almost certain.[35] More striking is the contention of Merkelbach, who argues that the *Metamorphoses* was, in essence, an encoded mystery text fully intelligible only to the initiates.[36] While Merkelbach's view is in the extreme, there is good reason to believe that Apuleius had a great personal interest in the cult. In his work *Apology*, Apuleius states plainly that he has been initiated into a number of cults (55.8). What is more, I am in agreement with scholars, such as Alvar and Harrison, who suggest that if the intention of the novel was primarily literary—even, perhaps, satirical— rather than "religious" or "philosophical," this does not preclude the information regarding the Egyptian cult from being largely reflective of actual practice.[37] As Harrison states, "The commentary of Griffiths 1975 makes it clear that *Met*.11 shows considerable learning in Isiac religion. Apuleius was certainly initiated into some Greek cults (*Apol*.55,8); whether he was also an Isiac initiate is unclear, though the knowledge shown in *Met*.11 might suggest that he was. This, of course, need in no way entail that *Met*.11 is 'sincere' or 'autobiographical.'"[38]

As mentioned, Book 11 of the *Metamorphoses* underscores the significance of Osiris within at least some forms of the Egyptian cults in the 2nd century CE. After his initiation into the Isis cult, Lucius realizes that his transformation was incomplete:

> ... although I had been imbued with such sacred rites of the goddess, nevertheless I had not yet been enlightened by the mysteries of the great god and supreme father of the gods, unconquered Osiris. Although the nature of the deity himself and of his cult was associated, and indeed was at one with that of Isis, nevertheless there was a great distinction in rites of initiation.
>
> *... deae quidem me tantum sacris imbutum, at magni dei deumque summi parentis invicti Osiris necdum sacris inlustratum; quanquam enim conexa, immo vero unita ratio numinis religionisque esset, tamen teletae discrimen interesse maximum* (11.27.2).

As this statement makes clear, it is Osiris who primarily shares the cult with Isis. Indeed, Serapis's role in the novel is strikingly limited. The god appears only once. In the procession of Isiacs that Lucius witnesses prior to his transformation, he notes that: "There came also flute players dedicated to the great Serapis, who repeated through their instruments held sideways towards the right ear, a tune traditional to the temple and its deity" (*Ibant et dicati magno Sarapi tibicines, qui per oblicum calamum, ad aurem porrectum dexteram, familiarem templi deique modulum frequentabant*; 11.9.16). Furthermore, as these passages reveal, both deities had some place in the cult—but they did not occupy the same position.[39]

Compared to Lucius's initiation into the cult of Isis, the initiation rites of Osiris are rather lacking in detail. As Keulen et al. suggest, this may be "motivated by the abstract nature of Osiris."[40] Here Apuleius may be in concert with Plutarch in viewing Osiris as (at least the representation of) the greatest Platonic god—one that is "abstract."[41] One of the

most enigmatic aspects of Lucius's initiation into the Egyptian cults is the final "third" initiation (11.30.3). This ritual was even more abbreviated than the previous initiation into the cult of Osiris; the actual rituals involved are not even mentioned. In fact, a number of scholars think that the text is incomplete.[42] Importantly, once again, the focus here is on Osiris:

> Then, after a few days, Osiris, the god greater than the great gods, greatest among the highest, lord of the greatest, appeared to me in a dream, not changed into some other form, but face to face, but he seemed to address me in his own revered voice, urging me to continue to deliver revered law defenses in the forum without fear of the disseminators of envy, provoked by my diligent study of the laws. Furthermore, so that I not be mixed with the rest of the flock when performing devotion to his sacred rites, he selected me for a member of his *pastophori* and of the quinquennial decurions.
>
> *Denique post dies admodum pauculos deus deum magnorum potior, et maiorum summus, et summorum maximus, et maximorum regnator Osiris, non alienam quampiam personam reformatus, sed coram suo illo venerando me dignatus affamine per quietem praecipere visus est, quam nunc incunctanter gloriosa in foro redderem patrocinia, nec extimescerem malevolorum disseminationes, quas studiorum meorum laboriosa doctrina ibi differebat. Ac ne sacris suis gregi cetero permixtus deservirem, in collegium me pastophorum suorum, immo inter ipsos decurionum quinquennalem allegit.*

There are two important points to note in this passage. First, the more involved that Lucius becomes within the cult, the closer his personal relationship with Osiris. The god appears to him face to face. As the passage mentions, Lucius is to become—at the god's behest—a member of the *pastophori* and the quinquennial decurions. As implied by the passage, both are "priests" within the Egyptian cult. The quinquennial decurions is otherwise unknown.[43] The *pastophorus* ("shine-bearer") was likely responsible for carrying the sacred possessions in ritual activity.[44] In fact, Lucius is specifically to be separated from the rest of the "flock" so that he can perform the god's rites. At the same time, the reader is left rather more in the dark. As mentioned, there is no actual discussion of ritual activity. The more "interior" Lucius becomes within the cult, the greater the role of Osiris becomes apparent. The supremacy of the god is made clear in the opening sentence; Osiris is "greatest of the gods, highest among the greatest, mightiest among the highest, lord of the mightiest." As one comes to know the god more, the more abstract he becomes. As Wlosok characterizes the ending of the *Metamorphoses*, "The end is constituted by the highest revelation of the divine, epiphany of Osiris, which is not described because it is indescribable, and whose loftiness can only be denoted by stammering and ever greater attributes."[45]

Osiris, Serapis, and the Epigraphic Evidence

As I have argued, Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* reflect interior perspectives of the Egyptian cult from the ca. 2nd century CE, and they both reveal the significance of Osiris from that interior view. This interiority, as well as the supposed ineffability of Osiris within the cult, may inform our understanding of the epigraphic situation regarding that same god in 2nd-century Rome. Serapis, often paired with Isis, received a number of votive and dedicatory inscriptions.[46] Only one dedicatory building inscription is extant for Osiris.[47] Again, this should not be surprising; this disparity may be a function of the innate character of the epigraphic habit in general and the nature of the gods respectively. I suggest that here too we see manifest the interior/exterior divide. The inscribing of a text was almost always an inherently public act. The aim of such a text is to make some declaration that is meant to be seen, and understood, by the larger social body.[48] With this in mind, it seems natural that the god whose significance in the Egyptian cults was primarily seen through an "interior" lens—Osiris—should appear rarely in a genre of text that aims to be conspicuous and public. Similarly, as seen in the *Metamorphose*s, there was something perhaps more "abstract" about Osiris, and this abstraction increased the more interior one's perspective. This lack of epigraphic dedications corresponds with the similar lack of temples and cult statues for the god.

There are three inscriptions from ca. 2nd-century Rome that contain a direct reference to Osiris.[49] One

is an inscription dedicating a *mansio* ("stopping place"), and the other two are funerary (as distinct from votive or dedicatory inscriptions). I suggest that, in all three cases, the monuments reflect an interior view of the cult and were likely set up by or for members of the cult. None of them are direct dedications or votives to Osiris.

Although the *mansio* was built for ritual involving Osiris and Isis, the actual dedicatee was the "well-being" of the imperial household:

> For the wellbeing of the house of Augustus
> We, from the body of *pausarii* and
> moneychangers (?)
> have built this *mansio* for Isis and Osiris.[50]
>
> *Pro salute domus Augustae*
> *ex corpore pausariorum et*
> *argentariorum Isidi*
> *et Osiri(di) mansionem*
> *aedificavimus.*

The *pausarius* was a priest in the cult of Isis whose duties, broadly defined, involved the "pauses" that occurred during the religious processions. The title appears in an honorific inscription (*CIL* 12.734). Similarly, the *Historia Augusta* mentions that the emperor Commodus, in his practice of the rites of Isis, carried out these "pauses" himself.[51] It appears then that this inscription, and the building for which the dedication was made, had some explicit part in the Egyptian cult at Rome.

The other two inscriptions that reference Osiris from ca. 2nd-century Rome are funerary. In both cases, the epitaphs reflect an interior perspective—and the deceased were most probably initiates into the Egyptian cults. The funerary inscription of Flavia Servanda alludes to the idea that the deceased will, in some fashion, be with Osiris in the afterlife:[52]

> Flavia Servanda,
> also known as Agrippina—full of
> excellence
> be of good spirit in the company of Osiris.
>
> Φλαουία Σερουάνδα ἡ καὶ
> Ἀγριππεῖνα, πανάρετε,
> εὐψύχι[53] μετὰ τοῦ Ὀσείριδος.

There may be implicit here the soteriological aspects of Osiris within the cult. To be with Osiris—and especially, as I suggest below, to receive from him the "cool waters"—"offered an agreeable eternity where the initiate became part of the god's company."[54]

The second funerary inscription from ca. 2nd-century Rome that references Osiris is more securely rooted within the Egyptian cults. Indeed, here a funerary formula, normally found in Greek, has been transliterated into Latin characters:[55]

> To the Divine Shades.
> Julia Politike,
> may Osiris
> grant you
> cool water.
>
> *D*(*is*) *M*(*anibus*).
> *Iulia Politice*
> *doe se*
> *Osiris*
> *to psycron*
> *hydor*

These "cool water" inscriptions have a precedent in earlier Egyptian texts, such as the Pyramid Texts.[56] Alvar posits possible similarities in between this specific inscription—predicated on the notion of Osiris being connected to salvation—with the salvation of Lucius in *Metamorphoses* 11.21.6: "That ritual is celebrated in the manner of a voluntary death and salvation through prayer (*ipsamque traditionem ad instar voluntariae mortis et precariae salutis celebrari*)."[57]

The connection between water and Osiris appears to be a significant feature within the Egyptian cult. In a study of the use of water in the Egyptian cult, Wild has concluded that the Osiris *hydreios* (water pitchers) by and large replaced the nilometer water features that were often found in Isis temples during the Hellenistic period.[58] This type of vessel is known from reliefs from Isis temples, as well as certain literary attestations, including Apuleius's description of the use of such a vessel in the Isis procession in Book 11. The great detail with which Apuleius describes the object is indicative of its importance as a cult implement. The author does not tell us, however, what the contents of the vessel were or which deity's image is included. Thus, they constitute an inherently "interior" element of the cult. However, on the basis of other evidence, we can assert that the contents were almost certainly "Nile

water," and the god whom Apuleius references here is Osiris.[59] Plutarch provides us with the clearest evidence in this regard and notes that not only the Nile, but all moisture was an emanation of Osiris. Similarly, he relates that the *hydreios* (water container) in honor of the god always goes in procession ahead of the other sacred objects. Here, Plutarch gives these objects primacy of place within the cult (*De Iside et Osiride* 365 B). The connection between these *hydria* and Osiris is poignantly expressed in those forms of the cultic vessel that take the shape of the god himself. The use of "Osiris-Canopus vases" (ritual vessels shaped like a canopic jar with the face of Osiris) presumably carried water in ritual to ensure the "*présence réelle du dieu*" and demonstrate "*la nature hydriaque d'Osiris*" in the cult.[60] Likewise, when one employed the "cool water" formula in epitaphs they were expressing a desire for the essential life force of the deity; they were anticipating that same power that allowed Osiris to be resurrected.[61] We perhaps see this anticipation with Antinous, who drowned in 130 CE while on a visit to Egypt with Hadrian; the Bithynian youth was the benefactor of apotheosis and syncretism with Osiris. What followed was the foundation of a new cult and cult center at Antinoöpolis.

Once again, following Plutarch's recounting of the mythic death of Osiris, there emerges an understanding of the importance of water in the Egyptian cult, and it underscores the important connection between myth and ritual. Osiris and Isis were brother and sister as well as husband and wife—a relationship that was consummated *in utero*. The seminal story in the mythology relates the following: Osiris was entrapped within a coffin and thrown into the Nile by his brother Seth (Typhon). The coffin was found by Isis but regained once again by Seth, who cut the body of Osiris into several pieces and scattered them throughout Egypt. Isis recovered the segmented body—except for the penis, which had been consumed by a fish—and restored Osiris to life, fashioning him new genitalia of gold. Alvar argues, "Triumph over destiny and admission to eternal felicity were however only possible through divine suffering. That is why the mysteries needed divinities who had some experience of something like the human condition... so that they could function as models."[62] It is the suffering revealed in the myth—and the victory over that suffering—that enhanced the efficacy of the god as a divine aid.

The myth also reveals the restorative powers of Isis; she was the one responsible for Osiris's restoration of life. This restorative power was almost certainly a fundamental aspect of the mysteries and the efficacy of Isis in this regard was only made possible through Osiris. Thus, the relationship between Osiris and Isis, as it played out in myth and ritual, must be understood as an essential aspect of the "interior" cult, as argued above. Indeed, the interweaving of myth and ritual was acutely expressed in the *Navigium Isidis*, which forms the backdrop for the transformation of Lucius in the *Metamorphoses*. The festival "recalled Isis' voyage in search of her husband/brother Osiris."[63]

There are at least five times as many inscriptions that refer to Serapis than refer to Osiris from ca. 2nd-century Rome.[64] It should be noted that this disparity in numbers is observable across the empire.[65] The one category shared between Osiris and Serapis are building-dedicatory inscriptions. Importantly, even in this case, the nature of the inscriptions is rather disparate. For instance, *CIL* 6. 573 is a dedicatory inscription that invokes Serapis as "defender" of the house where the text was inscribed: "To Serapis defender [—]. To the god under whose protections this house is placed" (*Serapi conservatori... Deo [i]n cuius tutela domus* est).[66] Compares this, again, to the building dedication to Osiris above. There, the god is not being invoked and the dedication is not to Osiris.

Indeed, the most striking difference in the types of inscriptions for Serapis—absent among those inscriptions for Osiris—are direct dedications. It is, I suggest, the internal and "abstract" nature of Osiris within the cult that is largely responsible for this absence. Dedicatory inscriptions are open declarations of worship or *pietas*. Similarly, there may be a disconnect between the ephemerality of Osiris in the cult and the materiality of an inscribed text, especially since these are often on monuments such as altars (see below). There are a number of dedicatory and votive inscriptions offered to Serapis (sometimes along with Isis). These are expressions of the relative exteriority of Serapis. Also reflected in these select inscriptions are two phenomena that point to this exteriority: the inclusion of multiple gods (syncretized together?) and the appearance of the god in dedications.

CIL 6.572 is a dedication to Serapis offered *ex visu.* That is, after the dedicator, Onesimus, had seen a vision of the god, likely in a dream. It is on a small marble altar (height, 50 cm; width, 28 cm; depth, 18

cm). A human foot surmounts the inscription. Around the foot a serpent is coiled. The foot is framed by two sphinxes. On the right side, Isis holds a sistrum in her right hand and a situla in her left hand. On the left lateral side, Serapis enthroned, wearing the *calathus*. He holds a scepter from the left and extends the right above Cerberus seated at his feet.[67]

To the god Serapis
M. Vibius
Onesimus [made this]
after a vision (dream).

Deo Serapi
M. Vibius
Onesimus
ex visu.

These types of inscriptions that celebrate an instance of a particular deity appearing to the dedicator in a dream have a long history in the Mediterranean and specifically among the Egyptian cults in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, as Renberg has demonstrated.[68]

Other inscriptions mark gifts given—perhaps as votives—to Serapis.[69] One Greek inscription on a fragmentary marble block found in the atrium of Vesta (but possibly originally from the nearby Palatine) reads:

To the [god] who hears the prayers Serapis,
[—],
lictor [dec]urial,
with his wife [—] and [his son?]
Aphran[ios],
set up this dedication.

[Θεῷ ἐπ]ηκόῳ Σεράπιδ[ι —]
[δεκο]υριᾶλις ῥαβδοῦχ[ος σὺν —]
[—] συμβίῳ καὶ Ἀφρανί[ῳ —]
ἀνέθηκε[ν].[70]

Similarly, a Latin inscription on a cylindrical marble base (height, 33.5 cm; width, 24 cm) found in the Domus Flavia on the Palatine mentions the offering of a gift to the god:[71]

Aurelius
Mithres,
imperial freedman, *strator*
offered this gift to Serapis.

[Aurel]ius
Mithres
Aug(usti) l(ibertus) strator
Serapi d(onum) d(edit).

This is a very simple dedicatory inscription. The use of the term *donum dedit* ("he offers [this] gift") seems to have been particularly concentrated at Rome.[72] What is more, the language employed here is not unique to the Egyptian gods. There are over 150 gods who received such dedications, with the majority being offered to Silvanus and Jupiter.[73] This inscription does not contain any explicit cultic language, and here Serapis is being honored in the same manner as many other gods at Rome. This does not mean, of course, that Aurelius Mithres was not intimate with the Egyptian cults or that he was not an initiate. However, it may demonstrate the differences in how Serapis and Osiris were venerated. As argued, it was in part the interiority of Osiris that was a sort of prophylactic that kept him from receiving the same religious trappings common to many other gods. A similar inscription stone sign with fixing holes in the upper part (height, 14 cm; depth, 22.5 cm):

To the invincible Sarapis,
Publius Aelius Polydeuces,
freedman of Publius Aelius
He gave this offering.[74]

Invict(o) Sarapei
P. Ael(ius) Polydeuces
P. Aeli(i) Semni leb(ertus) (sic)
d(ono) d(edit).

As with the previous inscription, here too the dedication is made from a freedman. Another example of the "*donum dedit*" formula is found on a small marble altar. The dedication is made to a number of gods, among whom Serapis is only one:[75]

Dedicated to Sol Serapis Jupiter,
Liber Pater
and Mercury
and Silvanus. Caius Cornelius Honoratus
offered (this) as a gift and dedicated it.
Berna and Anthus,
his sons
and Decimus Valerius Neophitus
(paid for this) 4,360 sesterces(?)

Sol(i) Serapi Iovi,
Libero patri
et Mercurio
et Silvan(o) sacr(um).
C. Corneli(us) Hon-
oratus d(ono) d(edit) d(edicavit).
Berna et An-
thus fili,
D. Valeri(us) Neo-
phitus IIIICCCLX

Here, not only is Serapis receiving this dedication alongside other gods, but it is also possible that Sol-Serapis-Jupiter are a single, syncretized god.[76] The fact that Serapis is listed alongside other gods is an indication of the fact, as argued above, that he is—unlike Osiris—often venerated in manner similar to other gods in the Roman pantheon. A number of dedicatory inscriptions include Serapis in some syncretized form. Examples of other such dedicatory inscriptions include: a dedication to "Zeus Helios Great Sarapis";[77] a dedication to "Jupiter Optimus Maximus Dolichenus Serapis and Isis Juno";[78] a graffito to the "one god Zeus Serapis";[79] and a graffito to "the one God Zeus Sarapis! The Great Isis, the sovereign."[80]

Interiority and the Egyptian Gods: A Conclusion

In this study, I have offered one heuristic by which we might better understand elements of the dynamic Egyptian cults— "interiority"—and I have used this heuristic to examine Osiris and Serapis in ca. 2nd-century Rome. Specifically, I suggest that Osiris within the Egyptian cults is best understood from an interior perspective. That is, the more intimate one's relationship with the mysteries, the greater the significance of Osiris became. Like Lucius in Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*, the deeper within the mysteries one goes—after, for instance, three initiation rituals—the closer one's relationship with Osiris. We perhaps find this parallel in those funerary epitaphs, discussed above, that wish for the dead to be "with Osiris" or to receive from him the "cooling waters." At the same time, this proximity to the cultic Osiris reveals the fundamental nature of Osiris; he is abstract and fundamental. I have compared Osiris to his Hellenized counterpart Serapis. In those literary works that informs much scholarship on the Egyptian cults (Plutarch's *De Iside et Osiride* and Apuleius's *Metamorphoses*), Serapis is less significant than Osiris. As argued, this is because these authors are presenting an interior view of the cult. On the other hand, as demonstrated, Osiris appears only rarely in the Roman epigraphic record from this time. This too, I have suggested, is a function of both the god's interiority and his abstract nature. Serapis, conversely, appears in a number of inscriptions, ones that are much more typical of other gods—particularly dedications. As Plutarch explains, "Serapis is common to all, and this is also true of Osiris—as the initiates know."

Abbreviations

CIL	*Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum;* arachne.dainst.org/project/cilopac
DIO	Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*
IG	*Inscriptiones Graecae*; telota.bbaw.de/ig/
IGUR	Moretti, Luigi. 1968–1990. *Inscriptiones Graecae Urbis Romae*. Rome: Istituto italiano per la storia antica.
Met.	Apuleius, *Metamorphoses*
PT	Pyramid Text
RICIS	*Recueil des inscriptions concernant les cultes isiaques* (Bricault 2022)
SHA,Pesc. Nig.	*Scriptores Historiae Augustae, Pescennis Niger)*

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Notes

1 All translations are my own. On the significance of Isis's speech, see Bommas 2022.

2 Most famously by Griffiths (1970). See also Keulen et al. 2015.

3 See Keulen et al. 2015, 445–446.

4 This confounding of author-protagonist can be located within the text itself. As Harrison (2000, 227) indicates, "… there are several occasions in the novel when the author's Roman identity is indicated in a way which compels the reader to look to Apuleius rather than Lucius." Perhaps most compelling in this regard comes in the context of Lucius's initiation into the rites of Osiris. As we learn in the text, the *pastophorus*, Asinius Marcellus, had a dream in which the god spoke to him, telling him that an individual from Madauros would come to him and he was to administer the rites to the individual (11.27.9–11.28.1). Madauros was (most likely) the origin place of Apuleius himself. It is not until this point in the novel that Lucius's hometown is made known. Some editors attributed this mention of Madauros to an error, either by Apuleius or a later scribe. See Smith 2012; Millar 1981; Veyne 1965.

5 Bommas 2005; cf. Bommas 2020; Leclant 1968,

95–96.

6 On the problem of definitions (e.g., "Isis cult," "Egyptian religion," etc.), see Dunand 2010.

7 See Vittozzi 2014. See also Takács 1995.

8 Takács 1995, 127.

9 Merkelbach 1995, 83.

10 See Gasparini and Veymiers 2019, 294-316.

11 On the term *Isiacus*, see particularly Veymiers 2019, 5–15; Barret 2019, 309–313; Malaise 2005.

12 Veymiers 2018, 34.

13 Barrett 2019, 302.

14 Bricault 2018.

15 The bibliography on syncretism in the Roman world, and in the Egyptian cults specifically, is quite large. On some of the nuances of the phenomenon, see Shaw 1994; cf. Clack 2011.

16 Lembke 1994.

17 Taylor 2004.

18 On comparative approaches to the two texts, see (e.g.) Finkelpearl 2012 and Van der Stockt 2012.

19 See Griffiths 1970, 16–18, and Harrison 2004, 9–10.

20 Keulen et al. 2015, 517–528; Brenk 1999.

21 On the meaning and interpretation, see Van der Stockt 2012, 169–171.

22 Alston 1996, 103; cf. Finkelpearl 2012, 184–185.

23 Richter 2001, 194.

24 Griffiths 1970, 253.

25 Brenk 2002, 73–92. Here, Brenk's argument concerns the rising importance of Osiris over Isis, not over Serapis (whom the author largely takes as syncretized with Osiris). However, the author similarly recognizes that "Sarapis is usually represented as different from Osiris" in the Hellenistic period. These distinctions were certainly present in the 2nd century CE as well.

26 Griffiths 1970, 18.

27 Brenk 2002, 73–92. This trend toward Osiris may have begun, in elite literary circles, as early as the Late Republic. In the birthday poem that Tibullus (1.7) composed for his patron, Messalla Corvinus, there contains distinct praise for the god Osiris. This Osiris is a civilizer and rather more like Dionysus than this later abstract god from the internal 2nd-century perspective. See Merkelbach 1995, 133–134, and Putnam 1973, 118–119.

28 Griffiths 1970, 96–98.

29 Clea was very likely a real person. She is also the dedicatee Plutarch's *Mulierum Virtutes* (*Concerning the Virtues of Women*). There even appears one "Flavia Clea" in inscriptions from Delphi. It is not possible to say for certain that this is the same Clea from the *De Iside et Osiride*, but it adds credence to the likelihood of her not simply being a literary invention. See Griffiths 1970, 17; Kapetanopoulos 1966.

30 Griffiths 1970, 253.

31 On the use here, see Griffiths 1970, 269.

32 Here, I have translated λόγος (*logos*) as "knowledge." Famously, the term has a multitude of meaning depending on context. Plutarch may simply mean here "the narrative" or "the account."

33 Griffiths 1970, 401.

34 Keulen et al. 2015, 499.

35 Griffith 1975, 2ff.

36 Merkelbach 1962. See, in contrast, the "reader-response" approach to the novel outlined in Winkler 2019.

37 Alvar 2008, 115 n. 278, 336–337.

38 Harrison 2002, 255.

39 The contention from Keulen et al. (2015, 450) that "Surely [Apuleius] did not sharply distinguish between the two gods…" does not seem supported by the text itself.

40 Keulen et al. 2015 498.

41 Keulen et al. 2015 499.

42 See the discussion in Keulen et al. 2105, 499.

43 See Keulen et al. 2105, 512.

44 Keulen et al. 2105, 512.

45 Wlosok 1999, 154.

46 Dedicatory inscriptions are those "inscriptions on dedicated monumental objects such as temples, altars, vases, etc. or referring to these things.... They informed the reader to which god or goddess the object had been consecrated and by whom" (Haensch 2007). Votive inscriptions are those "set up *ex voto*, i.e., in fulfillment of a

promise made to the divinity in exchange for the granting of a specific favour" (Lloris 2015a).

47 This is based on the *RICIS* database, and I have used those dates.

48 On the Roman "epigraphic habit," see Lloris 2015b

49 The inscriptions dates are all approximates but range from perhaps the late 1st century CE to the beginning of the 3rd century CE.

50 *RICIS* 501/0136.

51 SHA, *Pesc. Nig* 6.9: "To those (rites of Isis) was Commodus so devoted that he would shave his head, carry around the Anubis and complete all of the pauses" (*quibus Commodus adeo deditus fuit ut et caput raderet et Anubin portaret et omnis pausas expleret*).

52 *RICIS* 501/0196; *IG* 14.2098; cf. Gasparini 2016, 125–128.

53 This is a form of εὐψυχεῖν.

54 Alvar 2008, 132. We must also consider that Flavia Servanda might have been from Egypt—a possibility increased by the fact that the text is in Greek. There is no other information about her. If this were the case, we might see this reference to Osiris as less a reflection of Egyptian cult at Rome and more the product of "traditional" or "native" religious expression by Servanda and/or those responsible for the funerary monument.

55 *RICIS* 501/0198; *CIL* 6. 20616.

56 E.g., PT 423 and PT 460; cf. Delia 1992.

57 Alvar 2008, 133–134. He does note that the use of the term εὐψυχεῖν ("to be in good spirit or courageous") is a standard "farewell" in a funerary context and it cannot on its own be taken to mean that the deceased expects some eternal afterlife "in a strong sense."

58 Wild 1981, 86–128.

59 Wild 1981, 101.

60 Malaise, 2007, 25.

61 Delia 1992, 187.

62 Alvar 2008, 133.

63 Alvar 2008, 297.

64 *RICIS* 501/0155, 501/0108,501/0143, 501/0143, 501/0103, 501/0120, 501/0216, 501/0107, 501/0126, 501/0125, 501/0128, 501/0222, 501/0224, 501/0225, 501/0147, 501/0113.

65 A survey of the inscriptions from the first three centuries CE—from across the Roman Empire (Egypt excluded)—indicates that inscribed texts that mention Osiris were relatively rare. The precise number is difficult to determine, as some of the inscriptions contain lacunae in that part of the text where the name of the god was likely inscribed. However, there are likely fewer than twenty-five texts from across the provinces that securely contain the name Osiris. By contrast, there are over 150 inscriptions from this period that contain the name Serapis (or Sarapis).

66 *RICIS* 501/0108; *CIL* 6.573 = 30797. The inscription is in two parts. See *RICIS* for the diplomatic transcription.

67 *RICIS* 501/0155.

68 Renberg 2018; Renberg 2019.

69 I have not included here *RICIS* 501/0222, the authenticity of which the editors of the *RICIS* question and the provenance of which is also uncertain.

70 *RICIS* 501/0113; *IG* 14. 1027

71 *RICIS* 501/0125 (*CIL* 6.571)

72 See also *RICIS* 501/0130 (*CIL* 6.30996): A small marble base found near Monte Testaccio (now lost) *Deo invicto Serapi et Isidi Hermes d(onum) d(at*). "To the god Unconquerable Serapis and Isis Hermes offers this gift."

73 On these inscriptions and their use, see Ehmig 2017.

74 *RICIS* 501/0147. The editors of *RICIS* note that "Ce poids a dû servir de base pour une statuette. L. 1 et 3 les formes Sarapei et leb(ertus) indiquent lepeu de familiarité de cet affranchi probablement hellénophone avec la langue latine."

75 *RICIS* 501/0143; *CIL* 6. 707.

76 This assumption is based on the fact that each of the other gods receives a single line on the stone. The inscription is lost, so this assumption relies on the original edition published in *CIL*.

77 *RICIS* 501/0120; *IG* 14.1031

78 *RICIS* 501/0128. The object was a marble bas relief (h. 68 cm; w. 133 cm) found in the Jupiter

Dolichenus of the Aventine, room A. The iconography is worth brief description: On the left, Jupiter Dolichenus, battleship, standing on a bull, brandishing in his right hand the double ax and holding lightning in his left hand; on the right, Juno Dolichena standing on a doe, brandishing a mirror in her right hand and holding a scepter in her left. The two face each other. In the center, between them, a garlanded and flaming altar, above which is posed an eagle with outstretched wings, thunderbolt in its claws. Between its wings, on the left, the bust of Serapis wearing the modius, and on the right, that of Isis, wearing the basileion. In the two upper angles appear the busts of Castor on the left and Pollux on the right.

79 *RICIS* 501/0216; *IGUR* 4. 1662.

80 *RICIS* 501/0224.