CHAPTER XXV

THE TEMPLE OF ISIS

The loftiest and purest religious conceptions of the ancient Egyptians were embodied in the myth of Isis and Osiris, which in the third millennium B.C. had already become the basis of a firmly established cult. These conceptions approached the monotheistic idea of an omnipresent god, and with them was associated a belief in a blessed immortality. Isis was the goddess of heaven, and Osiris was the Sun-god, her brother and husband, who is slain at evening by his brother Set,—the Greek Typhon,—ruler of darkness. Their child Horus, also called Harpocrates, born after the father's death, is the fresh sun of the new day, the successor and avenger of his father, the conqueror of Set; he becomes a new Osiris, while the father, ever blessed, rules in the realm of the dead, the kingdom of the West. Man, the followers of Isis taught, is an incarnation of deity, whose destiny is also his. He is himself an Osiris, and will enter upon a better state of existence beyond the grave if a favorable judgment is passed upon him in the trial given to the dead.

The worship of Isis, associated with Mysteries from an early period, was reorganized by the first Ptolemy with the help of Manetho, an Egyptian priest, and Timotheus, a Greek skilled in the Eleusinian Mysteries. The purpose of the king was to unite his Egyptian and Greek subjects in one faith, and the effort was more successful than might have been anticipated. In its new Alexandrian form the worship of Isis and Osiris, or Serapis, as the latter divinity was now called, spread, not only over all Egypt, but also over the other countries in the East into which Greek culture had penetrated, and soon made its way to Italy and the West.

Various causes contributed to the rapid extension of the cult.

It had the charm of something foreign and full of mystery. Its doctrine, supported by the prestige of immemorial antiquity, successfully opposed the mutually destructive opinions of the philosophers, while at the same time its conception of deity was by no means inconsistent with philosophic thought; and it brought to the initiated that expectation of a future life to which the Eleusinian Mysteries owed their attractive power. The ascetic side of the worship, too, with its fastings and abstinence from the pleasures of sense, that the soul might lose itself in the mystical contemplation of deity, had a fascination for natures that were religiously susceptible; and the celebration of the Mysteries, the representation of the myth of Isis in pantomime with a musical accompaniment, appealed powerfully to the imagination. The cult also possessed elements that brought it nearer to the needs of the multitude. The activities of the Egyptian divinities were not confined to the other world; their help might be sought in the concerns of this life. Thus the chief priest could say to Apuleius that Isis summoned her elect to consecrate themselves to her service only when the term of life allotted to them had really expired, and that she lengthened their tale of years, so that all of life remaining was a direct gift from the hands of the goddess. The priests of Isis were looked upon as experts in astrology, the interpretation of dreams, and the conjuring of spirits.

A college of the Servants of Isis, Pastophori, was founded in Rome in the time of Sulla, about 80 B.C. In vain the authorities tried to drive out the worship of the Egyptian gods. Three times their temple, in the midst of the city, was destroyed by order of the consuls, in 58, 50, and 48 B.C. But after Caesar's death, in 44 B.C., the triumvirs built a temple in honor of Isis and Osiris; and a few decades later, perhaps in the reign of Caligula, their festival was recognized in the public Calendar. In Campania the Alexandrian cult gained a foothold earlier than in Rome. An inscription of the year 105 B.C., found at Puteoli, proves that a temple of Serapis was then standing in that enterprising city, which had close commercial relations with Egypt and the East. Soon after this date the earlier temple of Isis at Pompeii must have been built.
The entrance to the court of the temple (Fig. 78) is from the north. Above the door is an inscription which informs us that after an earthquake (that of the year 63) Numerius Popidius Celsinus, at his own expense, rebuilt the temple of Isis from the foundation, and that in recognition of his generosity, though he was only six years of age, the members of the city council, the decurions, admitted him without cost to their rank: N[umerius] Popidius N[uerrit] f[ilius] Celsinus aedem Isidis terrae motu conlapsam a fundamento r[ecun]s[na] restituit; hunc decuriones ob liberalitatem, cum esset anno rum sex, ordinis suo gratis ad legentur. The temple evidently belonged to the city; and the places for statues in the court, as the inscriptions show, were assigned by vote of the city council.

Other inscriptions give information in regard to the family of the child Celsinus. His father was Numerius Popidius Ampliatus, his mother Corelia Celsa; a brother bore the same name as the father. The real rebuilders were of course the parents; by associating their munificence with the name of their son, they opened the way for him to the city offices, for which the father, a freedman, was not eligible. Ampliatus perpetuated his own name by setting up a statue of Bacchus in a niche in the outside of the rear wall of the temple (at c on the plan), with the inscription: N. Popidius Ampliatus pater p. s., 'Numerius Popidius Ampliatus the father (set up this statue) at his own expense.' The names of the two sons appear with that of their mother in the mosaic floor of the large room (6) behind the colonnade at the rear.

Though the rebuilding of Celsinus was 'from the founda-
the simple and chaste forms of the Greek architecture were
replaced by gaudy stucco ornaments more in harmony with
the prevailing taste.

Besides the broad flight of steps in front, a narrow stairway
at the left of the temple led to a side door opening into the
cella. A base of masonry about six feet high extends across
the rear of the cela, on which were two pedestals of tufa, about
sixteen inches square, for the statues of Isis and Osiris. In the

![Fig. 79.—View of the temple of Isis.](image1)

two large niches outside other divinities stood, perhaps Anubis
and Harpocrates. The latter was apparently worshipped also
at the shrine in the wall on the east side of the court (3), facing
the doorway of the cela. A painting from this shrine, now in
the Naples Museum, represents a statue of Harpocrates of the
familiar type—a boy with his finger in his mouth holding a
cornucopia, with a lotus blossom resting on his forehead; before
him stands a priest in a long white robe, holding a candlestick
in each hand, while in the background is a temple surrounded
by a colonnade, evidently intended for a free representation

![Fig. 80.—The temple of Isis, restored. In the background, the Large Theatre.](image2)
of the temple before us. In front of the shrine were the
charred remains of a wooden bench.

No statue was found in the cela or in the two niches in front.
We may suppose that the images of the four divinities, being
of relatively small size, were carried off by the priests at the
time of the eruption; had they been removed afterwards, the
evacuators would have taken also the other objects in the cela
used in the services of the temple. Among these were two
skulls, probably made use of in the ceremonies attending ini-
tiation into the Mysteries, and a marble hand, about four inches
long, but whether a right or a left hand, the journal of the
excavations does not say. A left hand was carried in the pro-
cession in honor of Isis, described by Apuleius; as the weaker
of the two, and so less ready to do evil, it symbolized the even
justice (aequitas) with which the deity governs the world.
There were also two wooden caskets, one of which contained
a diminutive gold cup, measuring less than an inch across the
top, a glass vessel a trifle over an inch and a half in height, and
a statuette of a god about half as high; in the other were two
bronzé candlesticks about ten inches high, the use of which may be inferred from the painting described above, and a bronze lamp with places for two wicks.

The walls of the colonnade were painted in bright colors on a deep red ground. The lower part of the columns was red, but above they were white; the temple also was white, the purpose obviously being to give the appearance of marble. Nevertheless the same decorative framework appears both in the white stucco of the temple and the painted decoration of the colonnade: a division of the body of the wall into large panels, with a continuous garland of conventional plant forms above. In the colonnade there was a yellow base, treated as a projecting architectural member; above it large red panels alternated with light, fantastic architectural designs in yellow on a red ground. The frieze was black, with garlands in strong contrast — green, blue, and yellow — enlivened with all sorts of animal forms. In the middle of each of the large panels was a priest of Isis; in the lower part of the intervening architectural designs were marine pictures,—galleys manoeuvring, and sea-fights. Similar pictures are found in other buildings, as the Macellum, but marine views were especially appropriate here, because Isis was a patron divinity of seamen. Apuleius gives an interesting description of the spring festival, by which the navigation of the opening season was committed to her guardian care.

Opposite the entrance of the temple the colonnade presents an interesting peculiarity of construction, which is found also in other buildings at Pompeii, as the Stabian Baths. The place of the three middle columns on that side is taken by two large pillars, higher than the rest of the colonnade, each of which is backed by an attached half-column. This arrangement made the approach to the temple more imposing, and also furnished an appropriate setting for the shrine of Harpocrates against the wall.

The principal altar, on which sacrifice was offered to the divinities worshipped in the temple, is that near the foot of the steps in front (c). The officiating priest stood on a block of stone at the side of it, with the temple at his right; on this altar were found ashes and fragments of calcined bones. The two smaller altars near by were probably consecrated to the gods whose images were placed in the exterior niches.

Two rectangular pits were used as receptacles for the refuse of sacrifices. One was quite small, and no trace of it can now be found; it was near the large altar, and contained remains of burnt figs, pine kernels and cones, nuts, and dates, with fragments of two statuettes representing divinities. The wall about the other (d), when excavated, was built up at each end in the form of a gable, and evidently once supported a wooden roof; in this pit also were charred remains of fruits. What divinities were worshipped at the altars between the columns, it is impossible to determine. The small base standing against the corner column near the entrance (seen in Fig. 79) was probably a pedestal, not an altar.

At the left of the steps leading up to the temple, and facing the large altar, is a small pillar of masonry fifteen inches square and nearly two and a half feet high. A similar pillar, which formerly stood at the right, had thin slabs of stone on three sides. One of these, that on the front of the pillar (now in the Naples Museum), was covered with hieroglyphics. It is a memorial tablet, which Hat, 'the writer of the divine word,' hierogrammateus, set up in honor of his parents and grandparents; it contains symbolic representations in three divisions, one above the other. In the upper division Hat, his brother and colleague Meran, their father and grandfather, are praying to Osiris, 'Lord of the Kingdom of the Dead'; below, Hat is bringing to his parents and grandparents offerings for the dead, while in the lower division Meran and two sisters unite with him in prayer to Osiris. The tablet could hardly have been designed for a temple, but still, by reason of its contents, it was considered appropriate for this place. It was doubtless intended that a similar tablet should be affixed to the pillar at the left, but perhaps none happened to be available; statuettes of divinities were probably placed on the pillars.

The presence of a statue of Bacchus in the niche in the rear wall of the cella is easily explained; this divinity was identified with Osiris. Two ears are moulded in the stucco beside the niche,
symbolic of the listening of the god to the prayers of his worshippers.

Against the west wall of the colonnade, near the corners, were two pedestals, with statues of female divinities about one half life size. At the right was Isis, in archaic Greek costume, with the inscription: L. Caecilius Phoebus posuit [locus] d'ater d'eceretum, 'Set up by Lucius Caecilius Phoebus, in a place granted by a decree of the city council'; the name indicates that the donor was a freedman. The other statue, at the left, represents Venus drying her hair after the bath; it is of a common type and possesses small value as a work of art, yet is of interest because of the well preserved painting and gilding. Venus, as many other goddesses, was identified with Isis.

In the same corner with the statue of Venus, against the south wall, stood the herm of Gaius Norbanus Sorex, a marble pillar with a bronze head. According to the inscription, he was an actor who played the second part (secundarum, sc. partium), and was also magister of the suburb Lagus Augustus Felix. He was probably a generous supporter of the temple. A duplicate of the herm is found in the Eumachia building, to which also he may have made a contribution. The low social standing of the various benefactors of the temple is noteworthy; it indicates in what circles the worship of the Egyptian divinities found its adherents. As yet this was by no means an aristocratic cult, although it became such later, especially after the time of Hadrian.

While the Greek and Roman gods were honored chiefly at their festivals, the Egyptian divinities demanded worship every day, indeed several times a day. The early service, the 'opening of the temple,' is described by Apuleius, who was probably admitted to the college of the Servants of Isis in Rome in the time of the Antonines, and wrote about 160 A.D. Before daybreak the priest went into the temple by the side entrance and threw back the great doors, which were fastened on the inside. White linen curtains were hung across the doorway, shielding the interior from view. Now the street gate of the court was opened; the thronging multitude of the devout streamed in and took their places in front of the temple. The curtains were drawn aside and the image of the goddess was presented to the gaze of her worshippers, who greeted her with prayers and shaking of the sistrum, a musical rattle, the use of which was characteristic of the worship of the Egyptian gods. For a time

Fig. 81.—Scene from the worship of Isis—the adoration of the holy water. Wall painting from Herculaneum.

they remained sitting, engaged in prayer and in the contemplation of the divinity; an hour after daybreak the service was closed with an invocation to the newly risen sun. This description throws light on the purpose of the bench in front of the shrine of Harpocrates.

The second service was held at two o'clock in the afternoon, but we do not possess exact information in regard to it. It is,
perhaps, depicted in a fresco painting from Herculanenum (Fig. 81), the subject of which is a solemn act in the worship of Isis, the adoration of the holy water. In the portico of the temple, above the steps, two priests and a priestess are standing. The priest in the middle holds in front of him, in the folds of his robe, a vessel containing the holy water, which was supposed to be from the Nile; his two associates are shaking the sistrum. There is an altar at the foot of the steps; a priest is fanning the fire into flame. On the right and the left of the altar are the worshippers, with other priests, part of whom are shaking the sistrum, while a fluteplayer sits in the foreground at the right.

Another painting, the counterpart of that just described, seems to portray the celebration of a festival; the surroundings correspond fairly well with those of our temple. The doors are thrown back; a dark-visaged man, wearing a wreath, is dancing in the doorway. Behind him, within the temple, are the musicians, among whom can be distinguished a girl striking the cymbals and a woman with a tambourine. About the steps are priests and other worshippers, shaking the sistrum and offering prayer; in front stands a burning altar. An important festival of Isis occurred in November. It commenced with an impassioned lamentation over the death of Osiris and the search for his body. On the third day, November 12, the finding of the body by Isis was celebrated with great rejoicing. So, perhaps, in this painting the dance is a manifestation of the joy with which the festival ended, the whole picture being a scene from the observance of the Egyptian Easter.

In such celebrations use would be made of the small brazier of bronze found in the court in front of our temple, on which incense could be burned. The ablutions, which played so important a part in Egyptian rites, were performed in the rear of the court, where stood a cylindrical leaden vessel, adorned with Egyptian figures in relief; a jet fell into it from a lead pipe connected with the city aqueduct.

The small building at the southeast corner of the court, which is known as the Purgatorium, was open to the sky. It was made to look like a roofed structure by the addition of gables at the ends. On the inside, at the rear, a flight of steps leads down toward the right to a vaulted underground chamber, about five feet wide and six and a half feet long. The inner part of the chamber, divided off by a low wall, was evidently intended for a tank. In one of the corners in the front part is a low base, on which a jar could be set while it was being filled. Here the holy Nile water—more or less genuine—was kept for use in the sacred rites.

The purpose of the tank is suggested by certain of the stucco reliefs on the outside of the enclosing wall. In the gable, above the entrance, is a vase, standing out from a blue ground, with a kneeling figure on either side. The frieze contains Egyptian priests and priestesses, also on a blue ground, with their faces turned toward the vessel (Fig. 82). The figures are all worshipping the sacred water in the vase.

Of the other figures in relief, only the two goddesses in the panels at the sides of the entrance have an Egyptian character. Under each of them was a small altar of tufa, attached to the wall; the figure at the left (Fig. 82) is plainly Isis.

The side walls are decorated with reliefs in Greco-Roman style. They are divided into a large middle panel, containing two figures, and two side panels, each with a Cupid. In the middle panel, on the right side, Mars and Venus are represented; in that at the left, Perseus rescuing Andromeda (Fig. 83).

The dwelling back of the colonnade, on the south side, consists of a kitchen (8), a dining room (7), a sleeping apartment (9),
and two small rooms at the rear, under the stairway leading to the highest seats of the Large Theatre. The ritual of the Egyptian gods was so exacting, and the services of worship were so numerous, that it was necessary for one or more priests to reside within the precincts of the temple. These rooms were the habitation of a priest.

One of the rooms on the west side (6) is oblong in shape, with five broad, arched entrances opening from the colonnade. The walls were richly decorated in the last Pompeian style. There were seven large paintings, five of which were landscapes with shrines, part being Egyptian landscapes; the other two represent Io watched by Argus, with Hermes coming to rescue her, and Io in Egypt, received by Isis. Against the rear wall was a pedestal, on which probably stood the female figure, above life size, the remains of which were found in one of the entrances. Only the head, the hands, and the front parts of the feet were of marble; the rest was of wood, no doubt concealed by drapery. The priests seemingly had started to carry the statue with them when they fled, but abandoned the attempt at the doorway. In the same room a marble table, a sistrum, two pots of terra cotta, three small glass bottles, and a glass cup were found. We may safely conclude that here the common meals were served, of which, as we learn from Apuleius, the devotees of the cult partook. And when, in connection with the great festivals, the Mysteries were celebrated with a presentation of the myth of Isis and Osiris in pantomime, this large room was well adapted for the sacred exhibitions.

The adjoining room, at the southwest corner of the colonnade (5), is irregular in shape and of an entirely different character. It seems to have been regarded as a sacred place, and to have been used for secret ceremonies. It was entered from the colonnade by a narrow door, which could be securely fastened. Large, sketchy pictures of gods were painted on the walls on a white ground. — Isis, Osiris, Typhon, — with sacred animals and symbols relating to the myth which to us are unintelligible. The excavators found here the remains of four wooden statues with marble heads, hands, and feet, one of a male figure, the other three female; there were besides a statuette of an Egyptian god made of green stone, on which were hieroglyphics; a statuette of white clay, covered with a green glaze; a sphinx of terra cotta, fragments of terra cotta statuettes of Egyptian figures, different kinds of vessels of clay, glass, and lead, and a bronze knife, evidently intended for use in sacrifices. At the left near the entrance is a small reservoir, reached by three steps. On the north side is a niche that apparently formed part of a small shrine.

A kind of alcove opens off from the southeast corner of this room, the entrance to which could be closed by a curtain. From this a few steps and a door led into a storeroom, in which were found about three dozen vessels of various shapes, an iron tripod, and no less than fifty-eight earthen lamps. The lamps were in part provided with iron rings, so that they could be suspended; there were also iron rods, which the excavators supposed to be lamp holders. A rear door connected the storeroom with the small area of irregular shape between the Palaestra and the Theatre.

These arrangements suggest the celebration of secret rites by night; we may well believe that novices were here initiated into the order of the Servants of Isis. Obscure hints in regard to the ceremonies connected with the consecration to the ser-
vice of the goddess are thrown out by Apuleius. 'The initiation,' said the priest to him, 'is conducted under the image of a voluntary death, with the renewing of life as a gift from the deity.' Of his own experience he says merely: 'I came to the borders of death, I trod the threshold of Proserpina, then came back through all the stages to life. In the middle of the night I saw the sun shine brightly; I entered into the immediate presence of the gods above and the gods below, and worshipped them face to face.'

Renunciation of past life, and a second birth to a new and purified existence, were the main ideas underlying the ceremonies, which as presented here must have been far less splendid and impressive than in Rome, where they were witnessed by Apuleius.