

A Marian Odyssey

by [James Stevens Curl](#) (April 2023)



Assumption of the Virgin, Egid Quirin Asam, 1718-22
(Benedictine church at Rohr)

Introduction



Virgin Mary statue, St Mary's Church, Stamford, Lincolnshire, from 1330

Having spent a considerable part of a life immersed in ecclesiology in rural England, I could hardly be left unaware of the remaining legacy of the widespread devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary that had managed to survive the iconoclasm of the 16th and 17th centuries, not just in terms of the

enormous numbers of churches given Her name, but the evidence that remained in sculptures, symbols, glass, illuminated manuscripts, and music. Some outstandingly fine sculptures of female figures, some perhaps representing the BVM, have survived, such as the lovely 14th-century statue in the north chapel of St Mary's Church, Stamford, Lincs., and there are others in a country that was once perceived as 'Mary's Dowry,' a notion encouraged by the custodians of the great Shrine at Walsingham. And there were the Prayers or Hours, such as those found in *Horæ Eboracenses: the Prymer or Hours of the Blessed Virgin Mary according to the Use of the Illustrious Church of York*, which may be studied in the version edited by C. Wordsworth, published by the Surtees Society in 1920.

A dear friend, a fine musician, discussed with me the possibility of writing a book that would include all aspects of manifestations of the Marian Cult in late-mediæval England, especially in that area on the edge of the Fens, but unfortunately he contracted one of those horrible afflictions leading to the destruction of his nervous system, and succumbed rather quickly, so that project had to be abandoned, but not before certain themes had begun to suggest themselves to me, not unconnected with Cobbettian readings concerning the means employed by the State to dispossess the English poor, starting with the Crown's appropriation of Church Lands during the Henrician and Edwardine upheavals, shocking in their brutality, destructiveness, and cruelty. The psychological effects of this mighty attack on popular, familiar religious devotions must have been shattering.

And further musings led me to ponder how a small Jewish heresy managed to become a World Religion. Much travel, reading, archival investigations, immersion into Ancient and Church History, and a deepening understanding of European culture, especially that which had evolved around the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, led me to certain conclusions, some of which will be outlined below.

The Roman Empire

The singular importance of the Alexandrian cults within the Roman Empire has been noted by many distinguished historians. No student of taste acquainted with the great collections of antiquities in European museums (especially those of Rome itself) can fail to be aware of and impressed by the immense amount of material with an Egyptian flavour that survives today, although that must represent only part of what must have existed in the first three or four centuries of our era. Whilst many Egyptian antiquities first arrived in Europe because they were associated with the growing cults of the Nilotic deities, that was not the only reason why they were so prized. By Cicero's time (106-43BC) many fabulous villas had been built in the landscape around the Bay of Naples, and several sumptuous interiors were decorated with mural paintings, some showing Nilotic landscapes, Isiac ceremonies, and Egyptian Mysteries. However, it would be dangerous to assume that such interior décor meant the fortunate owners of such villas were devotees of Isis, Serapis, or Nilotic religions, for Roman Egyptomania had a secular side, an equivalent, perhaps, of the 18th-century European fascination for *Chinoiserie*. Like Cathay to the gentry of Rococo Europe, Egypt was exotic to Romans of the Late Republic, but perhaps a more accurate comparison would be that of India in relation to late 18th- and 19th-century Britain, for Egypt lay within Rome's sphere of influence, and was to become part of the Roman Empire after Octavian's victories in 30 BC.

Certainly, by the first century BC, Egypt, and allusions to Egypt, were implied in Roman art, and symbols and attributes connected with Egyptian cults were depicted to suggest things Nilotic and exotic without being in any way associated with worship or religious devotions. Some scholars have pointed out that not all inhabitants or owners of villas in which Isiac

symbols were used decoratively could have been adherents of that religion themselves, just as those who lived in or owned houses in which Bacchic motifs decorated the walls were not necessarily devoted to Bacchus/Dionysus any more than a Georgian gentleman, whose dwelling contained rooms featuring pagodas, magots, bamboo, and other motifs associated with China, would have been a follower of Confucius or The Buddha.

After the battle of Actium (31BC) and the incorporation of the Roman Empire of Egypt as a province, Nilotic motifs in Roman decorative schemes became more common. In the *Aula Isiaca*, a room in the imperial palace on the Palatine in Rome, the décor was Egyptianising Roman work, featuring Egyptian motifs such as the *atef* crown, the sun-disc, *uræi*, lotuses, and so on, but it should be remembered that Augustus (64BC-AD14, Emperor effectively from 27 BC) distrusted 'oriental' cults, so the Egyptianising themes were probably more associated with the absorption of Egypt than with any religious or quasi-religious rites.



Alexandrian or Roman version of Isis, photographed by the author

However, it would seem that the cult of Isis was brought to Campania from Delos, which was an important point of connection between Italy and Alexandria, and by the first century BC was well established. The Roman tendency to absorb ideas created an eclecticism in many fields, not least in religion, architecture, and decoration: this assimilation of foreign intellectual and cultural themes after the defeat of Antony and Cleopatra and the consequent annexation of Egypt encouraged the cults of Isis and Serapis, and by the middle of the first century AD they were firmly established in the Roman pantheon. Isis's cult was advanced to the status of *sacrum publicum* and was granted a site in the *Campus Martius* which eventually became the huge *Isæum Campense*. As certain Roman emperors began to adopt the ruling styles of the Ptolemies,

Isis and Serapis increased in importance, eventually becoming imperial deities.

With Publius Ælius Hadrianus (Emperor Hadrian [reigned AD 117-38]), Egypt played a more important rôle in the Roman Empire, and it shows in the many Egyptianising artefacts of that time that have survived. Hadrian was genuinely interested in Egypt, although his intellectual curiosity was fired initially by his philhellenism. It should be remembered that to the 2nd-century Roman, Alexandria was the place where the books, ideas, knowledge, and treasures of the cultural past still existed and could be studied, much as, to the early Renaissance mind, Constantinople was the city where the Classical civilisation was still alive and could be rediscovered anew. Hadrian's great complex at Tibur (the *Villa Adriana* at Tivoli) was a mnemonic of much, but it was especially a mnemonic of Alexandria and of Græco-Egyptian culture. The deification and Egyptianisation of Hadrian's companion, Antinoüs (c.AD 110-130), after the latter's death by drowning in the Nile, identified the Bithynian youth with Osiris, and, through his cult, helped to promote an Egyptianisation of taste throughout the Empire. Hadrian's interest in things Egyptian created a vogue for collecting Egyptian *objets d'art* or artefacts made in the Egyptian style among the population as a whole, and stimulated a 2nd-century Egyptomania as remarkable as was that of the early 19th century.

The threads of Egyptian influences that run through Western European civilisation are many and varied. The continuity of an Egyptian religion and the revival of the Hermetic Tradition have been admirably chronicled by many scholars who drew attention to the persistence of an Egyptianising religion, and have reminded us of the antiquity of elements in Christian liturgies and beliefs that connect our own European civilisation with something infinitely older that developed by

the banks of the Nile. This essay begins with an outline of how important aspects of Egyptian religion were absorbed into Græco-Roman culture and later into European civilisation as a whole. The richness of Marian symbolism clearly owes much to that associated with the Egyptian goddess Isis.

The Idea of Egypt in the European Mind

And yet all is not as it seems. The civilisation of the West that developed from the Græco-Roman world, from the elaborate organisation of the Christian Church and its close connections with secular power and the legitimising of that power, and from the vast cultural stew of the lands around the Mediterranean Sea, drew heavily on the religion of Ancient Egypt, a fact that is often ignored, glossed over, or claimed as 'exaggerated' by commentators. Throughout the Græco-Roman world Egyptian deities were worshipped, and they exercised an enormous influence on other faiths, notably Christianity. It may be this that has led historians (who ought to be objective) to shy away from the obvious.

It is well known that trading relations between Egypt and the Greek world were established from the second half of the second millennium BC. Homer (*fl.* 8th century BC), in the *Odyssey*, tells us of the visit to Egypt of Menelaus, and Greeks secured settlements in Egypt from around the 7th century BC. Herodotus (c.490-c.425 BC) travelled in Egypt and left us an extremely valuable account in his *Histories*, which were subsequently regarded as prime sources by later writers, including Diodorus Siculus (*fl.* c.60-30 BC) and Strabo (64 BC-after AD 24). The Greeks were aware of the antiquity of Egyptian civilisation, and were impressed by its religion, buildings, and customs: even more important, however, was the awe with which Egypt was regarded, for it was seen as the repository of all ancient wisdom. Greek intellectuals visited

Egypt at least as early as the 7th century BC: Thales of Miletus (*fl.* c.600 BC), the famous astronomer and scientist, has been credited with the organisation of geometry after studying Egyptian methods of land-measurement; there were Greek settlements in Egypt, notably at Naukratis; and it is clear from numerous Greek and Latin *graffiti* that tourists were no strangers to Egypt in Classical Antiquity.

The Egyptians themselves demonstrated an archæological approach to their own past, notably in the Saïte period (664-525 BC), when there was a conscious revival of earlier art-forms, and much restoration of existing artefacts and buildings. From 332 BC, following the overthrow of the Persian monarchy by Alexander III, 'the Great' (356-323 BC), Macedonian Greeks known as the Ptolemies ruled Egypt, and Alexandria became the most important centre of Greek culture. The key to the remarkable early spread of the Egyptianising cults was Alexander, who was closely identified with Zeus-Ammon, with Osiris, and with Dionysus, as well as himself becoming heir to the pharaohs. When Alexander conquered Egypt, the ancient deities gained a new and potent influence throughout the Hellenistic world. Unlike many conquerors, Alexander did not attempt to superimpose his own culture or to obliterate the indigenous civilisation. Like Napoléon, Alexander brought scholars with him to study and interpret the riches of the Nile Valley, and, as a result, Egypt was to contribute an enormous amount to Hellenistic culture. The founding of the great city of Alexandria was to be associated with a harbour presided over by *Isis Pharia*, and the new capital was to become a fountain-head from which an Egyptianised Hellenistic civilisation would flow.

The early death of the god-like Alexander caused the elevation of Ptolemy I Soter (332-282 BC), who transformed Alexandria into a splendid metropolis, and encouraged the cult of the Græco-Egyptian hybrid god Serapis (or Sarapis), probably in order to help unify the country after the disruptions of

conquest. It was during his reign that the cult of Isis began to spread outside Egypt, and spread in spectacular fashion. Ptolemy's son, by Berenice, Ptolemy II Philadelphus (282-246 BC), who ruled jointly with his father from 285 to 282 BC, followed the precedents of pharaonic Egypt and married his own sister, Arsinoë, who was closely identified with Isis. Under this Pharaoh, Nilotic culture and religion were exported to Italy, Asia Minor, and Greece, and fine new temples were built at Philæ dedicated to Isis and Osiris. Significantly, the architecture at Philæ was Egyptian, not Greek, and, in any case, as has been mentioned above, there had been a long history of the revival of Ancient Egyptian architecture in Egypt itself (notably under Psammeticus the Restorer of XXVI Dynasty) in which Greeks had been involved, for many Greek mercenaries joined forces with the Egyptians to restore the independence and power of Egypt, and close connections with Greece were forged. Traditional art, architecture, and religion were revived to emphasise cultural continuity as well as national identity. The Greek colony of Naukratis was founded in 610 BC, and some strange mixtures of Greek and Egyptian art have been found at Saqqara and elsewhere. A Carian grave-stele of 550-530 BC, for example, has a segmental head, and is decorated with incised carvings: at the top of the *stele*, following the line of the segmental head, are the vulture's wings with sun-disc and *uræi* above images of a man taking leave of a woman that are entirely East Greek in style. This *stele* is one of the earliest surviving instances in which a purely Egyptian motif appears with a representation of figures that are purely Greek.

Egyptian art and architecture were certainly conservative, but the conscious Egyptian Revival of the Saïte period set the precedent for what was to follow. Philæ acquired buildings in the reigns of the native Pharaohs of XXX Dynasty (378-341 BC), Nectanebo I and II, in the Ptolemaic (Hellenistic) period (332-30 BC, notably in the reign of Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysus [80-51 BC]), and in the reigns of the Roman Emperors Augustus

(27 BC-AD 14) and Trajan (AD 98-117). At Philæ additions made by the Romans showed Augustus and Tiberius (AD 14-37) offering myrrh, incense, and other gifts to Isis and her family. To a certain extent the whole group of buildings erected at Philæ must be regarded as Revivalist.

The Ptolemaic Empire forged links over a wide geographical area. In Alexandria cultural life flourished, and a great museum and library, presided over by Isis and Serapis, were established. Egyptian deities were accorded the same status as that of the Greek gods and goddesses. Gradually, however, the Greeks themselves became Egyptianised, and many deities mingled by a curious process of syncretism that was a feature of the Græco-Roman world. Greek rule came to a close after the Battle of Actium in 31 BC, after which the last Queen, Cleopatra VII, committed suicide, and Egypt was annexed by Rome in 30 BC, although its status was rather odd in that it was retained as a favoured province by Augustus, who began a process of moving monuments within Egypt, and also removing monuments (such as obelisks) to beautify Alexandria and Rome itself. Even Augustus became Egyptianised (despite his antipathy to 'oriental' cults), and his deification was yet another aspect of how potent was the theology of the ancient deities of the Nile.

Not only obelisks, jewellery, statuary, and *objets d'art* were imported by Rome: one of the most catalysts for Roman enthusiasm for things Egyptian was to be the Egyptian religion when the worship of the deities Isis and Serapis was publicly sanctioned among the *sacra publica*, and the deities were recognised as denizens of the Roman polytheistic pantheon. This momentous event only became possible when the lands of the eastern Mediterranean became politically integrated with the Empire. Once that occurred, Roman artists began to manufacture objects in the manner of Egyptian artefacts, and a Classical Egyptian Revival began. However, there had been a major catastrophe earlier when Gaius Julius Cæsar (100-44 BC)

took Alexandria in 47 BC, for the great library attached to the huge temple of Serapis (Osiris) there was burned, and many works were destroyed, including the mighty *History of Egypt* by Manetho (fl. 280 BC) which Ptolemy I Soter had commissioned. A further disaster occurred when the Emperor Theodosius I (AD 388-95) ordered the closure (389) of all non-Christian temples through the Roman Empire and two years later the Christian prelate of Alexandria, Theophilus (Patriarch AD 385-412), vigorously suppressed Egyptian paganism and was instrumental in destroying the great temple of Serapis at Alexandria, marking the end of religious toleration in the Empire (and incidentally also destroying many ancient texts stored in the library of the *Serapeion*). Earlier, Theophilus had ordered the *Serapeion* at Menouthis, north-east of Alexandria, to be destroyed, but, interestingly, the near by temple of Isis Medica was temporarily spared. However, despite the destruction of the Alexandrian *Serapeion*, part of the library (Sarapiana) building, which formed part of the temple structure, seems to have survived for a time, and was still used by pagan scholars such as Hypatia, the woman learned in astronomy, mathematics, and philosophy, and an important teacher of Neoplatonist philosophy. Hypatia was torn to pieces in AD 415 by an infuriated mob of Christian zealots at the instigation of their leader, Cyril (Bishop of Alexandria from 412 to 444), whose polemics point to a continuing vitality of the pagan cults in Egypt in the fifth century of our era. He suppressed the cult of Isis at Menouthis by translating thither the supposed relics of Sts Cyrus and John, but, as we shall see, Isis was not that easy to obliterate. After all, the Gnostics argued that Isis and the Virgin Mary shared the same characteristics, and Cyril would have been all too aware of that when he was vigorously promoting the official adoption of the Church of the dogma of *Panagia Theotokos*, the All-Holy Virgin Mother of God, at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

The Isiac Religion

No consideration of Egyptian influences in Europe can afford to ignore Isis, the Great Goddess, Mother of the God, Queen of Heaven, who was wise and cunning, infinitely patient, and life-giving, able even to resurrect the dead. Her legacy to European civilisation is immense, and her presence, in attributes and symbols, in religion and philosophy, in architecture, art, and design, and in the Christian Church, is very real. She helped to remove the particularist aspects that had survived in the Christian Church, and, by her femininity and œcumenical appeal, she became loved and revered. The devotion she inspired in ancient times throughout the Græco-Roman world was enormous, and that devotion is still obvious, even in parts of Western Europe. She is the key to an understanding of the thread that joins our own time to the distant past, and which explains a great deal within the cultural heritage of the Western European tradition.

The role that the culture of Ancient Egypt played in the development of Western civilisation is not often recognised, even though the importance of the cult of Isis in Alexandria and in Italy has long been known. There are probably two main reasons for this: first, the images of Egyptian deities look very foreign to European eyes; and, second, an acknowledgement of how remarkably complete was the absorption of the Isiac religion in the Roman Empire would seriously weaken the unique claims of Christianity. Yet, as will be seen, there were countless objects made in Europe in an Egyptianising style, while the Great Goddess herself was Europeanised in her imagery. Furthermore, the resemblances between Isis and the Virgin Mary are far too close and numerous to be accidental. There can, in fact, be no question that the Isiac cult was a profound influence on other religions, not least Christianity. The more we probe the mysterious cult of the goddess Isis, the greater that goddess appears in historical terms: Isis was a familiar deity in the cosmopolitan cities of Rome and

Alexandria, in the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, in the city-states of the Hellenistic period (c.323–end of the first century BC) in Asia Minor, and throughout Gaul, whilst there was an important Isiac temple in Roman Londinium. She cannot be ignored or wished out of existence, nor can it be assumed that one day in the 5th century of our era she simply vanished from the hearts and minds of men.

Isis was the ruler of shelter, of heaven, of life: her mighty powers included a unique knowledge of the eternal wisdom of the gods, and she was well-versed in guile. Her tears shed for her murdered brother and consort, Osiris, caused the waters of the Nile to flood, so she was associated with rebirth and with the resurrection of the dead, for the river that seemed to die, like Osiris, was 'reborn as the living water.' Every pharaoh was understood to be a reincarnation of Horus, and was therefore the offspring of Isis, the mother-goddess, who could not die, was incorruptible, and was closely involved in the resurrection and re-assembly of the dead. She was the sacred embodiment of motherhood, yet was known as the Great Virgin, an apparent contradiction that will be familiar to Christians. Isis, as the goddess of procreation, had many symbols, the most startling of which (the cow) she shared with Hathor. Enthusiasts who have pursued the Marian *cultus* of the Christian Church, and who are familiar with the works of Hippolytus Marraccius and St Alfonso Maria de' Liguori, will recognise the young heifer as a symbol of the Virgin Mary, whose crescent-moon on many paintings of the post-Counter Reformation period recalls the lunar symbol of the great Egyptian. In imagery Isis is often represented as a comely young woman with cows' horns on her head-dress, the horns usually framing the globe. The goddess often held in her hands a sceptre of flowers, or one of her breasts and her son, Horus.

To Plato (427-347 BC) and others, Egyptian culture was already very ancient. Indeed, Plato mentions the so-called

Lamentations of Isis as being of considerable antiquity in his own day. Herodotus of Halicarnassus suggested that the deities of Egypt had been adopted by the Greek city-states, and that, specifically, Demeter and Isis were one and the same. Symbols, such as the *sistrum*, or rattle, occur in Greek statues that can be identified as Isiac, and Herodotus noted clear similarities between Hellenic and Egyptian deities. Others have noted the occurrence of Isiac symbols in Cretan art, suggesting cross-currents between Crete and Egypt: the importance of the sea-routes in spreading cultural influences cannot be overstressed.

Realities of life in Egypt produced their own symbolism. The fruitful Nile Valley, renewed in its fecundity each year, was in stark contrast to the deserts that bordered it. The Valley was the beloved land of Isis, but the deserts were the domains of the appalling Seth (otherwise Typhæus or Typhon), Lord of Foreigners, enemy of Isis, and killer of Osiris. From the realms of Seth came death, disease, blight, eclipses of the sun and moon, and evil itself. That disagreeably oppressive hot South Wind, called the *Sirocco* or the *Mistral*, was sent from Seth's country to spread its menace over the fair lands by the northern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. According to Hesiod (*fl. c.700 BC*), Seth or Typhon was a giant of enormous strength, with a hundred snake-heads. Seth represented the fire and smoke within the earth, and was master of destructive forces: he was the source of hurricanes, and was the father of the fearsome dogs Orthos and Cerberus, as well as the progenitor of the Lernæan Hydra. His abode lay beneath the earth, in dark and dreadful places.

For millennia the Nile watered the lands that bore corn, palms, flax, and papyrus. The last, used for making boats and rolls on which texts could be written, was closely associated with Isis, who invented the skills of weaving and spinning, who guarded boats and their crews from all perils, and who hovered protectively over those about to die. After death, the

overseer of the embalming ritual and the guardian of the dead was Anubis, the transporter of souls, the friend and messenger of Isis. In that other Kingdom Justice was dispensed with infinite wisdom by Osiris, the god and consort-brother of Isis, just as was to be the case with the Hellenistic successor of Osiris, named Serapis.

Osiris, with his sister-wife, enjoyed the most general worship of all the Ancient Egyptian gods. His colour, as that of the god associated with life, was green, and his sacred tree was the evergreen tamarisk. The Greeks identified Osiris with Dionysus. Legend has it that Osiris had ruled as a King, and introduced agriculture, morality, and religion to the world, until his brother Seth cruelly murdered him in a wooden chest, which then was cast into the Nile. The grief-stricken Isis retrieved the chest, but Seth retaliated by cutting the body into small pieces which he then scattered. These parts were collected by Isis, and his body was duly resurrected by her, although the phallus was missing. This obliged the goddess to resort to parthenogenesis in order to conceive and bring forth Horus, avenger of Osiris, and mighty cosmic deity. Another version of the story involves Isis as a kite, fanning the breath of life into Osiris and being impregnated by her ithyphallic but dead brother. In either version the conception of Horus, like that of Jesus, was miraculous. Osiris the Resurrected, the Invincible, possessor of the All-Seeing Eye, was also Ptah, God of Fire and Architect of the Universe, identified with Amun (Ammon), Apollo, Dionysus, the real architect Imhotep, the Apis-Bull, and finally the powerful Græco-Roman Serapis.

Worship of Serapis-Osiris was first developed at Memphis, and combined in an anthropomorphic deity Egyptian and Hellenistic attributes of Osiris and Apis (Osorapis = Serapis or Sarapis). From the time of Ptolemy I Soter the centre of the cult became Alexandria, where the *Serapeion* mentioned above, a temple of unparalleled beauty and splendour, was erected by

Ptolemy III Euergetes I. At the celebrated *Serapeion* not only was there a centre of scientific and medical research of an empirical nature, but 'incubation' cures (where the patient remained within the temple precincts, even sleeping therein) were also sought, similar to those chronicled at Lourdes in recent times. The transformation of the Ptolemies into deities was not only inevitable given the longevity and potency of the Isiac religion, but in turn it assisted in the spread of the Egyptian cults. Later, when the Roman Emperors became gods (nothing less would do after Egypt and its god-like monarchs had been conquered), the precedent of Egypt was powerful, and Isis enjoyed much imperial favour.

The conception of Serapis was extended in due course to include Osiris, Apis, Dionysus, Hades (Pluto), Asclepius, Zeus, and Helios. Worship of Serapis, with the cult of Isis, spread rapidly from Egypt to the coast of Asia Minor, to the islands and mainland Greece itself, and finally to Rome and Italy: by imperial times, especially during the reign of Hadrian, the cults of Serapis and Isis extended throughout the Roman world. Incorporation of the character and attributes of Æsculapius (Asclepius) within Serapis ensured his veneration as the god of healing, and indeed serpents were particularly associated with Serapis as a beneficent deity. As Zeus-Serapis, the deity is to be seen in the celebrated and colossal bust in the Vatican, with a *modius* or corn-measure, as a symbol of the abode of the dead (or of fertility in nature) on his head. Images of Serapis, Isis, and Harpocrates once occurred on the abaci of the ornate Antique Ionic capitals in the church of Santa Maria in Trastévere in Rome: R. Lanciani, in *Bulletino della Commissione archeologica comunale di Roma* of 1883, suggested these ornate capitals originated in the *Isæum Campense* in Rome, or from the *Thermæ* of Caracalla, and indeed their ornate style would perhaps indicate they were made in the reigns of Caracalla (Emperor AD 198-217) or Domitian (Emperor AD 81-96). The strong association with Egyptian deities would point to the *Isæum*

Campense as the more likely source.

The Absorption of Egyptian Religion into the Græco-Roman World

During the extraordinary fusion of religions in the Ptolemaic period, Isis and Osiris became further merged with many deities. In particular, Isis, through the range of her powers, grew in stature to be the 'most universal of all goddesses,' and held sway over the dominions of heaven, earth, the sea, and (with Serapis) mistress of the Other World beyond. She was the arbiter of life and death, deciding the fate of mortals, and she was the dispenser of 'rewards and punishments.' During the first four centuries of our era Isiac cults became established in all parts of the Roman Empire.

Ritual worship of Isis consisted of morning and evening services; of annual festivals to celebrate the spring and the beginning of the navigation season; and of autumnal rites to prepare for winter. The spring festival was held on 5 March, and involved the *Navigium Isidis*, during which a sailing-vessel, built on Egyptian lines, and decorated in the Egyptian style, was laden with spices and cast upon the sea. This festival was partly in recognition of the goddess being patroness of navigation, inventress of sail, and protector of sailors and ships. The autumnal festival commemorated the grief of Isis and her subsequent joy on finding Osiris again. Attributes of the goddess include the serpent, the *cornucopia*, the *hydreion* (vase for holy water), ears of corn, lotus, moon with horns, crescent-moon, segmental pediment, *sistrum* (rattle), and garment with knot beneath the breast.

Development of the cults of Isis and Serapis was helped by trade, and there were certainly Isiac shrines in Rome by the beginning of the 1st century BC. Greek began to be used in the service of Isis from the 3rd century BC, and cult-statues

became Hellenised. Apart from the identification with Demeter (noted by Herodotus), Isis later became associated with Aphrodite, and was closely associated with the Ptolemaic Queen. The best-preserved shrine of Isis in Italy is in Pompeii, where wall-paintings show sphinxes, Nilotic flora and fauna, the Adoration of the ithyphallic mummy of Osiris, Isis as Fortuna, Isiac ritual, dance, and legend, and the sacred symbols of the goddess. Pedimented *ædiculæ* tombstones from Greece and Italy have survived showing priestesses of Isis holding the *sistrum* and *situla* (or *hydreion*), whilst in a Roman relief Isis herself is depicted with Serapis, a bull, Jupiter, Dolichenus, Juno, the Dioscuri, and a phœnix: the mixing of Egyptian elements with Roman motifs emphasises the syncretism of the Isiac cults.

Isis and Osiris were usually worshipped near each other, and the same was true of Isis and Serapis. There were the celebrated Ptolemaic temples of Isis and Osiris at Philæ, and there was a temple of Isis in the *Serapeion* at Delos, built by the Athenians in about 150 BC. Dedications are known to 'Isis, Mother of the God.' The Egyptian goddess, in spite of being identified with Greek deities, was refreshingly different compared with the Olympians, and her qualities appealed to civilised Greeks and Romans who were no longer enamoured of the barbarities and licentiousness of their more traditional deities. She became associated in her capacity as Mistress of the Heavens with the moon, and so became identified with Artemis/Diana. Isis was seen as Pallas Athene, as Persephone, as Demeter, as Aphrodite/Venus, and as Hera. The Egyptian goddess was Queen of earth, of heaven, and of hell. As a moon-goddess she was Artemis/Diana, goddess of chastity, and ruler of the mysteries of childbirth and/or procreative cycles. Her son, Horus, became Apollo himself. Isis, in her catholicity, was astonishing.

In terms of imagery, however, the statues of Artemis of Ephesus are rather more startling, for they incorporate a

curious necklace-like assemblage of egg-like objects that have been thought to suggest motherhood and fecundity, or even breasts. Anatomically, the many breasts are impossible, and are represented on some coins as eggs, although they reappear as breasts in Renaissance and later imagery. Breasts, fountains, and eggs have iconographical significance as symbols of rebirth and fecundity, and Artemis/Diana was identified with Isis as a mother-goddess. The cult-statues of Artemis of Ephesus were sculpted with the suggestion of a wrapping of the body, rather like the binding of an Egyptian mummified corpse, whilst the wrappings were decorated with the heads of horned animals, suggesting both the hunt and the cows' horns of Isis (later symbolised by the lotus-flower or -bud). Heads of such cult-statues had either wide-spread drapes or decorated moon-like discs suggesting halos. One of the finest surviving examples of such strange images was made in the second century AD for the Emperor Hadrian's villa at Tivoli, and is now in the Vatican.

We know that there were Oriental architects such as Apollodorus of Damascus (*fl.* AD 98-123) in Rome from Trajan's time, and Hadrian, it would appear, had both Asiatic and Egyptian artists in his service. In the early years of the Empire there seems to have been a ferment of intellectual activity as well as a widespread eclecticism in artistic matters stimulated, no doubt, by the geographical and cultural diversity under the rule of Rome. Egyptian portraits showing faces with great dark eyes painted on wooden panels and set in the mummy-wrappings during the Roman period are familiar images to haunters of museums where there are Egyptian collections: the fact that the style of these portraits is also found in primitive Christian paintings as well as in decorative themes that passed from Egypt to Rome cannot be overlooked. Oriental and Egyptian religions exerted such a powerful influence on Rome that even the appearance of the deities altered: Jupiter became horned Ammon, and Diana became the Syrian of Ephesus with her many 'breasts,' now thought to

be either eggs on threads, or the testicles of sacrificed animals.

During the Roman Republic there appears to have been a *Serapæum* in the 3rd century BC at Ostia (which was only a few days' sail from Alexandria), and there was an important cult-centre for Isiac worship in the *Campus Martius* in Rome for the last two centuries before the establishment of the Empire, so the cult of Isis was by no means confined to Egypt even then: there had been shrines of Isis in Rome at the time of Sulla (c.138-79 BC), and Isiac altars had existed on the Capitoline hill during the 1st century BC. When the Roman Empire established its ascendancy over the ancient land of Egypt, and Roman Emperors followed Hellenistic precedent by identifying with deities, Egyptian custom was absorbed and continued. The apotheosis of the Emperors to the status of gods is clearly linked with the Isiac religion, and when Octavian established the Empire Isis was already well entrenched in Italy.

Life, all life, was sacred in Ancient Egypt. Isis herself, by her reconstitution and resurrection of Osiris, and through her instructions for his worship, was the founder-teacher of Egyptian religion, and revered as such in Italy. Her association with Artemis/Diana (see the tondo of a silver *patera* from the Boscoreale treasure in which emblems of Diana and Isis appear) was strengthened by the idea that Artemis became Bast (Bastet), the cat-goddess, when she fled to Egypt. Bast was an important deity, with her chief temple at Bubastis, and, most significantly, her symbol and musical instrument was the *sistrum*. The route for pilgrimage to her shrine was the Nile itself. When Isis became Hellenised, the attributes of Bast-Artemis were taken over by her. Many Roman *sistra* are decorated with representations of cats, and many such examples have been found at Pompeii. Isiac temples in Italy were decorated with paintings and mosaics representing flora and fauna associated with Egypt, so that they, as well as architectural features associated with the Alexandrian

deities, became familiar to worshippers. The *sistrum*, of course, was well-known, as was another Egyptian symbol, the *ankh*: the Christian symbol of the Cross would seem to owe much to the *ankh* sign, with the horns on top of the *ankh* anticipating the halo around the head of Christ. Indeed, when Christian mobs destroyed the *Serapeion* at Alexandria this Isiac symbol was recognised as a Crucifixion sign, and as a prophetic emblem that looked forward to the triumph of Christianity.

The Transformation of Isis

Lucius Apuleius (c.AD 125-c.180), in Book XI of his *Metamorphoses*, in the thunderous climax of that work, set in the great Temple of Isis, the *Isæum Campense* in Rome, described the radiantly beautiful Great Goddess, revered even by the Gods, as she hearkened to his entreaties, and spoke directly to him as the natural Mother of All Things in the Universe, Mistress of all the Elements, the Initial Progeny of the Ages, Chief of the Powers Divine, Queen of the Shades, and the Principal of the Gods Celestial, representing in one shape all Deities. At her Will the shining heights of Heaven, the wholesome winds of the seas, and the mournful silences of Hell were controlled. Her Divine Name was adored throughout all the world, in divers manners, in variable customs, and in many guises, for the Phrygians called her the Mother of all the Gods; the Athenians, Minerva; the Cyprians, Venus; the Cretans, Diana; the Sicilians, Proserpina; the Eleusians, Ceres; some Juno, others Bellona, others Hecate; but principally the Ethiopians dwelling in the Orient, and the Egyptians, who excelled in all kinds of ancient Doctrine, and by their proper ceremonies were accustomed to worship Her, celled Her by her true Name, Queen Isis. She had come to take pity on his misfortunes and to favour him with Her goodwill. She urged that he should leave off his weeping and lamentation, put away all sorrow, greet the healthful day

ordained by her Providence, and be ready and attentive to Her commandments ... She informed him to know and remember with certainty that the residue of his life until the Hour of his Death should be bound and subject to Her, that he would live Blessed in this World, glorious under Her guidance and protection ... And finally he was to know that the Invincible Goddess would prolong his days above the time that the Fates had appointed and the Celestial Planets ordained: then, when he had completed his lifespan and descended to the Shades, Queen Isis, shining amidst the darkness in the secret depths of Styx, would cause him to dwell in the Elysian Fields, constantly worshipping, adoring, and venerating the Great Goddess into Eternity.

That is all quite something, and speaks to us today with clarity, moving us to the very depths, stirring memories, and suggesting allusions that are potent and very real. Art and architecture in the Eastern Empire appear to have become transmogrified into what we now call the Byzantine style with remarkable speed, in spite of the wholesale re-cycling of Classical columns and entablatures. Paradoxically, Byzantine art kept alive many aspects of Egyptian culture, and nowhere is this more clear than in the grief-stricken *Panagia-Theotokos*, or All-Holy Mother of God, the procession of whose ikon today recalls Isiac processions at Philæ and elsewhere. The Blessed Virgin, Mother of Jesus, Queen of Heaven, is abundantly merciful to those in distress, a benevolent presence in the hour of death, helper of women in childbirth, and an image of infinite compassion, pity, and love. The *Panagia-Theotokos* resembles the Græco-Roman Isis-Sophia in many ways, and it is no accident that the great church of *Hagia Sophia* in Constantinople was entrusted to the care of the Blessed Virgin.

There was a time in the history of the Church when the expressions in the Book of Canticles (*Canticum Canticorum*, the Song of Songs) were applied to the Mother of God, while in

Revelation 'there appeared a great wonder in heaven; a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet, and upon her head a crown of twelve stars'. Mary was seen as *Stella Maris*, as was Isis; Rose of Sharon (roses were important in Isiac ritual, as Lucius Apuleius makes clear); the Lily among Thorns; the Tower of David (Isis was a Tower, a lighthouse, as *Isis-Pharia*); the Mountain of Myrrh and the Hill of Frankincense (both significantly Isiac in that they are associated with the rites of the dead, and with embalming); the Garden enclosed, the Spring shut up, the Fountain sealed (springs, fountains, and gardens were also Isiac); the Palm-Tree (a significantly Egyptianising motif); and much else as well. She was Queen of Mercy, Mother of Mankind, our Life, Hope of All, Refuge, Help and Asylum, Propitiatory of the World, Queen of Heaven and of Hell, Dispenser of Graces, City of Refuge, Patroness, Protectress in Death (particularly Egyptian, and reminiscent of the connection between Seth and Isis), Ladder of Paradise, Gate of Heaven, Mediatrix, Omnipotent, Peacemaker, Intercessor, Advocate, Redeemer, and Saviour. Among the authorities for this catholicity of titles is none other than St Alfonso (or Alphonso) Maria de' Liguori (1696-1787), founder of the Redemptorists, whose *Glories of Mary* should satisfy the most curious of students of Mariolatry. St Alfonso, it seems, could resurrect the dead (as could Isis), create rain (Isis caused the Nile to flood), and fly (Isis had wings). *Maria Myrionymos* is also amply discussed in the aretology of Hippolytus Marraccius (Ippolito Marracei [1604-75]), whose *Polyanthea Mariana* appeared in no less than eighteen books in Cologne. Like Isis, *Maria Myrionymos* was *Augusta*, *Primigenia* (connected with *Fortuna* and *Tyche*), *Gubernatrix*, *Aurora*, *Exorcista*, and much else. Marraccius's *Bibliotheca Mariana alphabetico ordine digesta* is also illuminating reading for Northerners unversed in Counter Reformation literature. Serafino Montorio's *Zodiaco di Maria*, published in 1715, tells us of a couple of hundred varieties of Madonna to be found in Southern Italy alone, a region that is arranged on the principles of the Zodiac. Montorio's work

is dedicated to the *Gran Madre di Dio*, who could equally well have been the *Magna Mater*, Isis, or Artemis/Diana of Ephesus herself. Quite clearly, Isis, the Great Goddess, was alive and well in Counter-Reformation Europe. Another curiosity is *Vita del Venerabile Servo di Dio Fra Egidio da S. Giuseppe Laico Professo Alcontarino*, published in Naples in 1876, which reveals that the Venerable Fra Egidio resurrected a slaughtered and dismembered cow in a butcher's shop by the simple expedient of making the Sign of the Cross with his monkish cord: this act recalls the Isiac resurrection of the parts of Osiris, and the cow, it will be remembered, is closely associated with Isis.

There are many other obscure pamphlets dealing with the lives of various Southern Saints, clerics, monks, and nuns that were published during the last two centuries, and nearly all contain Isiac overtones, or suggest most obviously survivals of an Egyptianising religion nearly fourteen centuries after Christianity officially supplanted Isis and Serapis. Flying monks and nuns, abilities to conjure and perform good magic, the creation of rain or springs, a facility to perform the resurrection of the dead, successful battles with demons in the shape of composite zoöomorphic and anthropomorphic creatures (very Egyptian), and other remarkable happenings, recur. Miraculous images of the Madonna and Child with powers as impressive as those of Isis and Horus suggest a continuation of Egyptian ideas, while the association of the Madonna with grottoes, caves, and fountains recalls the cavernous *Serapæum* at Tivoli and many Isiac legends. For those who wish to pursue the literature, the sober Lutheran Theodor Trede's *Das Heidentum in der römischen Kirche* is a mine of information with copious scholarly notes and references (his sources are impeccable) to support his relentless account of improbable and mysterious happenings, intelligence of which he gathered while serving as a pastor in Naples.

The veneration of Mary in the early history of the Church

seems to have been regarded as heretical, or at least was discouraged, but it appears that from the 5th century her status changed, and a degree of veneration within churches seems to have been tolerated. Now this is most significant. The Blessed Virgin Mary is the Sister and Spouse of God and Sister of Christ, both of which suggest Osiris/Isis/Horus; she was the Wearer of Diadems, the Fresh Tuft, and was associated with agricultural fertility as the Cornucopia of All Our Goods, all clearly Isiac in origin. She was symbolised by a young heifer (*iuvencula*), which suggests the Apis-bull, Hathor, and the cows' horns of Isis-Hathor, and was *Medicina Mundi*, associating her most obviously with Isiac powers of healing. She was, like Isis, *Pelagus*, or the *Pharos*, shedding light in the darkness and leading us safely to harbour. She was the *Salvatrix* of sailors, like Isis, and, like her Egyptian predecessor, was an inventress and a powerful dispenser of justice. She was associated with the swallow, horned animals, and the crescent-moon, all of which are connected with Isis/Artemis of Ephesus, whose image includes horned animals, mummy-like wrappings, a halo-like disc, and allusions to the moon, as well as the symbols of fecundity in her 'many breasts,' eggs, or necklaces of testicles. She is *Nympha Dei*, and is identified with Juno, Aphrodite/Venus, Minerva, and even with Hermes/Mercury. Christian writers have seen Serapis as St Joseph, and Isis as the Wife of Joseph. St Jerome (Eusebius Hieronymus [c.347-420]) refers to the *multimammia* of the Ephesian Diana in his Preface to the *Epistle to the Ephesians*, and some commentators have naïvely (or perhaps primly) supposed that this refers to the fountains over which Diana presided, but the more correct view is undoubtedly that which treats the multiplication of 'breasts' or eggs as a symbol of the productive and nutritive powers of the goddess (and, of course, of Isis). In some contexts, however, fountains and breasts appear to be symbolically interchangeable, and some fountains have water spouting from the nipples. In due course the *Mater Dei* was installed in

Ephesus in the place of *Magna Mater*.

An absorption of the cult of Isis within the Christian Church seems to have begun around the time when the destruction of the great pagan temples (including the Alexandrian *Serapeion*) began under Theodosius. The 4th-century *Songs of Paulinus* do not appear to include references to the Madonna, whose *cultus* only begins to emerge after the time of Theodosius. An officially approved Christianity could hardly change the widespread worship of Isis that was already of considerable antiquity in the Græco-Roman world, but it could gradually ingest that worship, so that Isis became associated with Jesus, and her status as a great forerunner would be recognised. Yet we must beware of assuming some sudden change, some cataclysmic overthrow, some major alteration of sensibility and age-old custom. Over several centuries, the blending of religions took place very slowly, almost imperceptibly, so that images of Isis became to be regarded as those of the Madonna (the names of whom were identical to those of the great Egyptian), for after all the diadem, the palm, the infant, the moon, the rose, and much else were common to both. It is submitted that it is simply beyond the bounds of reason or possibility that a goddess so universally revered as Mistress of the World, whose awesome praises were beyond number, who was the goddess of goddesses, who was the first principle in which the elements were contained, who was the source of grace, truth, and life, who could resurrect the dead, who could bring forth a child by miraculous means without the agency of a living male, who was a supreme deity, who was the mother of God, and who was the Queen undisputed of Heaven, could have vanished overnight by some act of world-wide rejection. The revered figure of Isis, the greatly loved, the most universal of all goddesses, could not have been wished out of existence. Her catholicity and her essential syncretism were absorbed within the Church, and *Maria Myrionymos* appeared in the place of her Isiac forerunner. An official ending of Isiac worship did not mean that the cult of

the goddess died, for, quite apart from the iconography of the Eastern Church, mediæval legend in the West included references to Isis as the Planter or Divine Engrafter, in which rôle she was identified with the conception of Christ by the Virgin Mary by, for example, Christine de Pisan (*n.* 1364), whose version of the legend was published as *Les Cent Histoires le Troye* in Paris in 1499.

It was the policy of the Early Church to purify existing places of pagan worship and to re-dedicate them: the great number of churches dedicated to St Mary that stand on the sites of *Isæa* point to a deliberate containment and adaption of Isiac worship. St Augustine (354-430) advocated the Christianisation of holy sites, for he was aware of the danger of destroying hallowed shrines, and this policy must have permitted numbers of images of Isis to survive in churches. The merging of the Isiac cults with Christian veneration of the Virgin was a long and subtle process that enabled Isiac pictures and statues to remain *in situ* for a long time without causing eyebrows to be raised. Isiac images could become Madonnas by stealth. The *Madonna Achiropita*, as we learn from the appropriately named St Nilus, favoured purple as the colour of her garment, and was a rescuer of Mankind from plague and invasion: unlike many ikons, hers were *not* painted by St Luke (whose enormous output in this genre was miraculous), and had a strong resemblance to the ancient *Magna Mater*, whose image also had a divine origin in that it was not painted by any human agency. Byzantine images of Mary and so-called 'Black Madonnas' (signed *Lukas me pinxit* or not) are probably variations on images of Isis. It also appears that a Roman statue of Isis survived in the church of St Germain-des-Près in Paris until it was destroyed in the 16th century, suggesting a fear of the continuing power of the goddess, and a desire to purify the church of 'non-Christian' elements. There was an *Isæum* on the Cælian hill in Rome on the site of which was built the church of Santa Maria della Navicella: the association of Mary with navigation is Isiac, of course, and

the marble votive boat (a 16th-century copy) that now stands before the church makes the connection overt.

The eternal renewal of the Eucharist had its parallels too in the everlasting tears of Isis, bringing constant rebirth by the banks of the Nile. The Christian religion, it might be proposed, owes as much to the Nile as it does to the Jordan, and for the Church Alexandria should be at least as important as Jerusalem (whereas Rome absorbed influences from both cities). In both Western and Eastern iconography the attributes of Isis survived. Coptic *stelai* show the Mother and Child, identified as Christian by the Greek crosses on either side of the head, but the basic iconography of the image is that of Isis and Horus, translated into Mary and Jesus. Byzantine images owe much to Ptolemaic and Romano-Egyptianising art. In Isiac temples holy water was familiar, and the rattle of the *sistrum* was heard: indeed the *crotalus*, descendant of the *sistrum*, was used in Christian churches, especially on Maundy Thursday, and was commonly heard in the Ethiopian rites. Orthodox Christianity, it must be said, lacked a female element before the time of Theodosius, and consequently must have seemed somewhat bleak and forbidding: the Madonna supplied Christianity with an important and kindly aspect it had lacked hitherto – Isis was essential as a benevolent and gentle influence, and could take many forms and adopt many names.

Artists of the mediæval period created extraordinary beasts to adorn churches, cathedrals, sculptures, and illuminated texts. Exactly how many of these fanciful monsters were influenced by Egyptian or Egyptianising exemplars is difficult to assess, but images of composite creatures were common in imperial Rome, and many survived the end of the Empire. Yet, in St Paul's *Epistle to the Romans*, Egyptian religions were denounced for giving deities zoöomorphic shapes: Paul noted that pagans professed themselves to be wise, but that they became fools because they changed the glory of 'the

incorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man, and to birds, and fourfooted beasts, and creeping things.' Paul could hardly have avoided knowing something of the Egyptian religions, and often used words and terms associated with the Mystery Religions. Even Tarsus, Paul's birthplace, had shrines for Isiac cults, and it is perhaps worth noting that Paul's blindness and conversion have Isiac associations in that Isis could blind those who offended her with her *sistrum*, and yet could also restore sight. Decimus Junius Juvenalis (*fl.* second century AD), according to Plutarch, mentions the wrath of Isis which could cause the goddess to induce blindness by means of a blow from the *sistrum*. Both Isis and Serapis were renowned for their powers to cure blindness.

Paul's journeyings took him to places where Isiac cults were well-established: Isis-Artemis ruled in the great Ionic temple at Ephesus (one of the Wonders of the Ancient World), and devotion to her was intense; Antioch had thriving Hellenistic religions; and Philippi was not guiltless of a devotion to Isis the Great Queen. Clearly the worship of Isis (by what ever name) was widespread, and, as the goddess of a Myriad Names, Isis was dangerous to Christianity by her œcumenical and catholic nature. In the *Acts of the Apostles* the names of many personages have Isiac overtones, as might be expected in a narrative partially concerned with the conversion of followers of other faiths to Christianity. As the Christian Church developed its rituals, terms such as *eucharistia* and *ecclesiæ* would have been familiar to devotees of Isis and Serapis, so the move from the Nilotic religions to that of Christ would not have been a huge jump for an Isiac in the Græco-Roman world. With the acceptance of Egyptian deities into the Roman religious systems, a certain blurring of identities occurred (the association of Isis with Diana of Ephesus is just one example), and it was nothing extraordinary to see Isis/Diana/Hathor/Aphrodite as a prototypical Madonna. There were precedents in plenty.

This blurring continued after Christianity had become the State Religion, and the fact that Isis shares so many titles and attribute with the Madonna cannot be overlooked. Isis continued to attract her devotees, and her symbols, including the lily and the fountain, proliferated, as did her names. Significantly, the cult of the Virgin Mary dates from a time very near the period of the destruction of the Alexandrian *Serapeion* and other Nilotic shrines. The Gnostics held that Isis and the Virgin Mary shared attributes, and when the dogma of the All-Holy Virgin Mother of God was adopted in 431 at Ephesus (of all places), the theologians could not have been unaware of the importance of Isis and of Diana, the Great Goddess. Indeed, the Council of Ephesus, anxious to resolve the Nestorian controversy, first gave official recognition to the elevation of Christ's Mother, and in so doing acknowledged the position of Isis throughout the civilised world, for such an œcumenical goddess was a challenge to Christianity and its ascetic philosophies that were repugnant to many in the Empire.

The grimness of the Crucifixion and the male-dominated religion cannot have held much appeal for the devotees of Isis, and it would appear that the absorption of so many aspects of the Isiac religion by Christianity was deliberate policy, and necessary, after the closing and destruction of so many temples devoted to the Nilotic deities Christians hated so much. Isiac symbolism was taken over by the Marian *cultus*, and was to become overt on several occasions, notably in the Counter-Reformation period. It appears that the rival claims of Isis and Christ caused some friction and many difficulties that had to be resolved: in this respect the Flight into Egypt is not insignificant, for the healing powers of Jesus were ascribed to His stay in that country, the inference being that He learned his techniques from Isis herself. Indeed, so powerful was Isis that even nominal Christians were to be seen at the altar of *Isis Medica* at Menouthis, near Canopus and Alexandria, when ill, rather than rely on the less accredited

(and presumably derivative, therefore weaker) powers of Christ. Such a state of affairs could not be permitted to continue, so the *Isæum* was duly Christianised, and the relics of Christian Saints were interred within a new church that was to become important (significantly) for sailors. The properties of the hallowed place as a beacon and as a source of healing could not remain in the control of the dangerous idol of female form and many guises: *Isis Myrionymos* was a mighty goddess, and had to be absorbed by the Christian religion or she would pose a permanent threat. The Neoplatonist Eunapius (*fl.* second half of the 4th century) remained unconvinced by it all, and in his *Lives of the Sophists* defended the old traditions against upstart Christianity: one can imagine the ill-concealed scorn with which a cultivated pagan mind of Classical Antiquity viewed attempts to give legitimacy and a spurious historical continuity to sites recently claimed for Christianity. The church of *Santa Maria sopra Minerva* in Rome stands partly over the site of the once magnificent and hugely important *Isæum Campense*, and there are many examples where Christian churches were erected on sites sanctified for use by Egyptian cults. Significantly, Christian sources often cite 'dark Egyptian devils' assuming female form, and an 'odious demon' who led astray those who were ill and sought an 'incubation cure,' but they are silent about the identity of the 'idol,' the feared goddess. The great Egyptian, the all-powerful protean deity, the majestic, awesome, œcumenical Isis, could not even be mentioned by any of her myriad names. Isis was She who arose in the Beginning, and was the greatest of all magicians, after all.

As Isis was the mightiest of all sources of power and wisdom in the whole Græco-Roman world, her transformation, the re-consecration of her sacred sites to Christianity, and the absorption of her best qualities by the new religion were essential to the survival and growth of the Church. In some instances Egyptian deities are depicted with Christian angels,

notably in Græco-Roman jewellery (where Thoth and Anubis associate with Sts Michael and Gabriel), and John, the Messenger, the Bearer of Glad Tidings, was sometimes identified with Hermes and Anubis. Horus-Harpocrates is occasionally shown as a warrior on horseback, attacking Seth-Typhon, who has been transformed into a crocodile: such images obviously affected Christian iconography, with particular reference to Sts Michael and George. Horus is also depicted in catacombs in Alexandria trampling on crocodiles, and it will be remembered that both Sts Michael and George are held to have fought dragons identified with the Devil. Michael waged war against the dragon-serpent persecutor (who is clearly Seth) of a pregnant woman who fled to the wildernesses (as did Isis). A curious pamphlet, *Novena in Onore di S. Michele Arcangelo*, published in 1910, contains a Litany giving many titles of the Archangel Michael: these include Secretary of God, Liberator from Infernal Chains, Defender in the Hour of Death, Custodian of the Pope, Spirit of Light, Terror of Demons, Lash of Heresies, Wisest of Magistrates, Commander-in-Chief of the Armies of the Lord, Conductor of Mortals, and Custodian of the Holy Family. Here is a catholicity of titles with clear Egyptianising connotations: the idea of a sort of armed guard for the Holy Family might startle, but those familiar with the veneration shown to the oddest of objects in Southern Europe will scarcely be surprised. Abstractions are foreign there: attitudes to deities are positive and direct. An Isiac family is easier to comprehend than the Trinity, after all, and there are obvious parallels between Isis-Horus representations and those of the Madonna and Child. Furthermore, Ptolemaic Egypt exerted considerable influences on Byzantine religious imagery, for representations of the Mother and Son had been known for centuries before Christianity. A merging of aspects of the Nilotic cults with official Christianity ensured a longevity of Isiac emblems.

In the Græco-Roman world Isis and other Nilotic deities were familiar from temples, private houses, public buildings, and

gardens. Many *Isæa* survived, and the *Navigium Isidis* processions could still be seen, even at the end of the 4th century. Until the dawning of the 5th century many Græco-Roman families remained faithful to the Egyptian deities (especially Isis and Serapis), in spite of the advances of the new religion. Some Roman Emperors, including Caracalla, had been depicted wearing the Egyptian *nemes* head-dress, and sphinxes in pairs guarded the mausoleum of Diocletian at Spalato (Split). The great *Isæumin* Rome was probably not wholly destroyed until 1084 when the area was wrecked by Norman and Saracen invaders, but parts of the site, like other *Isæa*, were Christianised from the 12th century, when the cults of female Saints (especially that of the Virgin Mary) expanded on an awesome scale. In Southern Europe the Holy Family (and especially the Mother) became revered. One is not aware in Italy of the adult Christ in the iconography of the period to nearly the same extent as one is of the Infant in His Mother's arms. Many early Saints were Byzantines or North Africans, even in Italy, and they replaced the local Classical pagan deities, a state of affairs that was fraught with problems. The Marian *cultus* provided means of providing an attractive universal figure who would be more powerful than local male Saints, although the latter could be useful as fighters and protectors. However, the cults that had developed after the upheavals of the fourth century, and especially from the sixth century, carried forward Isiac tradition, and the image of the Virgin and Child, the tradition of Horus-Harpocrates, and the Roman *Lars Familiaris* survived and prospered. Gradually, a host of Saints was replaced by a multitude of Madonnas, especially in Southern Italy: some (like Santa Maria della Libera and Santa Maria di Constantinopoli – two war-like Madonnas of clear Egypto-Byzantine origins) were notably pugnacious, but Madonnas could multiply with bacteriological ease, yet in the process would not lose power or credibility. The very catholicity of the Madonna ensured that anything could be attributed to her, and that her histories, with their

mythopœic ramifications, could embrace a vast range of iconography and legend. Clearly Isis of the myriad names and countless forms remained alive and well.

When Egypt and so much of the old Hellenistic and Roman world fell to Islam, knowledge of Egypt, its arts, and monuments became confused and speculative. Apart from surviving Egyptian and Egyptianising artefacts in Christian Europe, and apart from descriptions in literature, Egyptian architecture and culture became inaccessible, remote, and infinitely mysterious. This fact, and the curiosity-value of obelisks and other items on view in Rome gave much food for thought.

Many early-Christian churches were constructed of materials looted from Roman temples and public buildings: pieces of the entablatures often came from several different buildings, so the continuous entablatures of, say, colonnades between the aisles and the nave can seem coarse and disjointed. Columns were quite frequently of different heights, so bases and capitals vary. The architectural results of such re-use of elements from older buildings are often uncomfortable, and the archæological and historical interest can exceed the æsthetic effects. The original church of *Santa Maria in Trastévere* was probably founded before the reign of Constantine, and completed in the 4th century. It was rebuilt by Innocent II (1130-43) in 1140, and consecrated by Innocent III (1198-1216) in 1198. Some fifty years after the sack of the mighty *Isæum Campense* in Rome, twenty-eight columns of dark reddish-brown granite, with Ionic capitals carved in marble (and decorated with heads of Nilotic deities) were set up in the nave of the basilica of *Santa Maria in Trastévere*. The re-use of capitals is commonplace in Rome, and the fact that these splendid capitals and shafts have been recycled does not point to a survival of interest in Isiac religion in the 12th century: in fact it is quite possible that the Egyptianising elements were no longer recognised as such by the builders of the church, just as it appears the Cosmati sculptors referred to below did

not recognise the sphinxes and lions they saw in Rome as having Egyptian origins at all. If the *Trastévere* capitals and columns did indeed come from the *Isæum Campense*, they were only a small part of a large number of Egyptian and Egyptianising antiquities that could be seen in Rome, including obelisks, statues, Canopic jars, lions, sphinxes, at least two pyramidal tombs, Nilotic scenes in gardens, temples, and mosaics, pavilions in the Egyptian style, and much else.

There can be no doubt that the imagery of Egyptian artefacts remained an important element during the Romanesque period. Greek terracotta *antefixa* with elementary volutes and crowned with palmettes, have their origins in archaic capitals from Larissa in Æolis. Similar compositions prepare us for the capital from the *tholos* in the precinct of Athena Pronaia at Delphi, with volutes and central anthemion motif, while early capitals from Neandria have volutes on either side of a motif derived from the stylised lotus, and similar capitals from Cyprus, Lesbos, Naukratis, and elsewhere have volutes flanking palmettes or anthemion motifs. An almost precise miniature version of this theme is repeated as a continuous frieze around the abacus of the capital of the third pier from the west in the southern nave arcade at Malmesbury Abbey in Wiltshire, where a repetitive motif featuring the palmette (here interpreted as the *fleur-de-lis*) held between two primitive volutes is continued all round the abacus. This remarkable decoration of a Romanesque building dating from c.1170, is an exact derivative of an ancient Græco-Egyptian design, and, significantly, the pier was associated with a statue of the Virgin Mary that attracted great devotion until the iconoclasm that followed the Reformation: it is probably one of the earliest examples of an Egyptianising motif in England that dates from the Middle Ages.

By the 12th century the Virgin Mary had become a figure of universal devotion throughout Christendom. One particular image recurs frequently from the 13th century, especially in

Central European wood-carving: it is of the Virgin of Mercy, depicted with her mantle (usually coloured blue) as a shield against disasters, notably plague, famine, and war (often shown as arrows shot by God at humanity as punishments for threefold concupiscence). This sheltering cloak suggests the outstretched protective wings of Isis herself.

Afterword

As a Christian and a scholar, with a deep love of liturgy, church-music, ritual, ecclesiastical art and architecture, tradition, and history, I find such longevity comforting, not a threat. As a young man, I travelled widely in Central Europe, where the wonders found in Counter Reformation Baroque and Rococo pilgrimage-churches made a huge impression on me, and where a myriad of gesticulating Saints inhabited a glorious vision of Heaven, presided over by Mary, depicted in many forms. I saw Her Assumption, an astonishingly theatrical work of vigorous sculpture, in the Benedictine church at Rohr, and at Weltenburg, St George, armed with a golfing umbrella, charged out of the sun to slay the fearsome Dragon, the alarmed Maiden fleeing to the right, a dramatic scene from a Händel opera, yet one resonant with Nilotic overtones.

And I pondered on what remains of the beauties of our own land, once the Dowry of Mary, reflecting that when George Frederick Robinson (1827-1909), 1st Marquess of Ripon, on inheriting Fountains Abbey, in Yorkshire, longed to restore it as a 'working-man's university' under the direction of an architect of genius, William Burges (1827-81), how wonderful and uplifting that would have been compared with the dreary interloper of a prosaic yet grotesquely overpraised 'Visitor Centre' of 1987-8 imposed on that glorious landscape by the National Trust. Ripon actually caused a private chapel to be built at Studley Royal dedicated to Our Lady of Fountains, so that She should 'have something of her own again,' but that,

alas!, no longer exists.

I wish She could, for so much has been lost, yet for those still not desensitised by the vulgarities, cacophonies, distractions, and wanton ugliness of so much that surrounds us today, She may still be found in unspoiled sanctuaries, in rare places of luminously intense elegiac loveliness, where kindness, compassion, civility, and beauty have managed to survive in an increasingly unpleasant and dangerous world.

7th March 2023

*(Feast of Perpetua, Felicity and their Companions,
Martyrs at Carthage 203 CE)*

*This article was previously published on [Anglicanism.org](https://www.anglicanism.org),
March 7, 2023.*

[Table of Contents](#)

Professor James Stevens Curl is the author of *Making Dystopia: the Strange Rise and Survival of Architectural Barbarism* (2018, 2019, Oxford University Press), which forensically dissects the rise and survival of architectural Modernism with devastating clarity and logic, so has been subjected to avalanches of personal abuse for daring to question what is undoubtedly a fundamentalist quasi-religious Cult of brainwashed believers.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](https://twitter.com/NERIconoclast)