

ANCIENT HISTORY

Essay on the Temple of Isis in Pompeii

On 15 December 1764, while attempting to measure the circumference of Pompeii's Large Theatre, Spanish archaeologist Pietro La Vega made a discovery that would make Pompeii famous throughout the world. At first, he did not know what he had found: a few small antechambers with mysterious objects, then a magnificent frieze with painted spirals. Finally, an inscription was found identifying the site as the Temple of Isis. The preserved Pompeian temple is actually the second structure, as the original building was damaged in the earthquake of AD 62. Seventeen years later with the massive volcanic eruption, the Iseum alone was the sole temple in Pompeii to be completely rebuilt.

The temple was situated in the theatre and gymnasium district of Pompeii, to the southeast of the Forum. It was to the north of the Large Theatre, between the Samnite Palaestra and the Temple of Jupiter Meilichio. When completed, the temple was on a raised platform and facing east to illuminate its interior from the rising sun. The temple was entered from the north side, from the road named after it (Via del Tempio di Iside). From outside, it appeared to be completely isolated by a high wall that was decorated with a red plinth (a structure on which a pedestal was rested on) and a white upper part, framed to imitate an isodomic work – that composed of stones. The simplest entrance was closed by a door with three panels, of which only the middle one could be opened, as demonstrated by the hinges found on the door remains.

The architectural forms and the workmanship of these remains point to a time just after the founding of the Roman colony. Nevertheless, the dimensions of the colonnade, approximately fifty by sixty Oscan feet, reduce to the pre-Roman standard of measurement, and imply that the building may have commenced earlier. In later times, the increasing number of worshippers of Isis made necessary an enlargement of the sanctuary. The two rooms at the west end were added at the expense of the Palaestra, probably at the time of the rebuilding. Though the rebuilding of the temple was 'from the foundation', remains of the old temple were utilised, such as the shafts of columns and Corinthian capitals coated with white stucco; and the plan of the new building was very nearly the same as that of the old. The stylobate (base platform) of the colonnade belongs to the earlier structure, but the columns originally stood nearer together, eight instead of seven at the ends, and ten on the sides.

The Popidii were an old, established family at Pompeii, infamously known as the people who reconstructed the Temple of Isis following the catastrophic earthquake in AD 79. However, Celsinus was almost certainly the son of one of the family's freedmen (Popidius Ampliatus) rather than descended from the distinguished family itself. As an ex-slave, his father was barred from becoming a member of the local council, but by rebuilding the temple in the name of his young son, Ampliatus ensured promotion up the social hierarchy for the next generation. The following building inscription was set over the main entrance to the sanctuary:

"Numerius Popidius Celsinus, the son of Popidius, restored with his own money the Temple of Isis from its foundations, after it had collapsed in the earthquake. On account of his generosity, the decurions co-opted him onto the town council, without fee, although he was only six years old."

Much of the sanctuary's decoration emphasised the foreignness of the goddess. For instance, a tablet inscribed with genuine hieroglyphs was discovered in front of the temple itself, along with paintings depicting Egyptian gods, and Egyptian landscapes coupled with foreign creatures, such as the crocodile, ibis and pygmies. Modern historian Moormann agrees with this notion, stating that the temple was the "only well preserved edifice of Egyptian nature in the area of Vesuvius". The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley further perceives this sense of exoticism from her description of the temple in 1818:

“The Temple of Isis is more perfect. It is surrounded by a portico of fluted-columns, and in the area around it are two altars, and many ceppi for statues; and a little chapel of white stucco, as hard as stone, of the most exquisite proportion; its panels are adorned with figures in bas-relief, slightly indicated, but of a workmanship the most delicate and perfect that can be conceived. They are Egyptian subjects, executed by a Greek artist, who has harmonised all the unnatural extravagances of the original conception into the Supernatural loveliness of his country’s genius. The temple in the midst, raised on a high platform, and approached by steps, was decorated with exquisite paintings. It is small, of the same materials as the chapel, with a pavement of mosaic, and fluted Ionic columns of white stucco, so white that it dazzles you to look at it.”

The temple as a whole was constructed of brick and stonemason work; that is the Popidii family would have built the temple by hand from individual units laid in and bound together by mortar. It was decorated on the outside with white stucco panels and a polychrome frieze of volutes (spiral scroll-like ornaments). The walls of the portico were painted with a pattern of red panels, at the centre of which were priests of Isis, framed by architectural elements and small landscape scenes. The entrance to the courtyard, flanked by two piers with engaged half-columns, was at the centre of the east side. Statues were placed around the courtyard – its walls covered in frescoes – and in niches on the temple building itself. To the sides of the entrance to this building, outside, were two small altars of soft stone, and in front of these was another larger one, on which there were still ash and small pieces of burnt bones of sacrificial victims. The *Telesterion* in the west of the courtyard was an additional area for performance of sacred dramas, meetings and ritual banquets.

A high wall with a colonnaded quadriporticus inside bounded the sacred temple, paved with tuff slabs, which may have come from the consolidated volcanic ash ejected from vents during the two volcanic eruptions. The walls of the temple, which was of the Italic type, were almost entirely made of brick covered with plaster, while the podium was made of *opus incertum* (tuff blocks). In the decoration of this temple, extravagant stucco ornaments corresponding more with the prevailing taste replaced the simple and chaste forms of the Greek architecture. As both plaster and stucco consist of the same primary materials, lime and sand, it is safe to conclude that these materials would have originated from the same area, most probably the surrounding districts of Pompeii, making it easily accessible for the constructors. Thus, the temple differed markedly from the Greco-Roman norms, and was clearly designed to suit the theatrical requirements of the cult. In fact, the ground plan was so unique, as if the builders, erecting a structure for the worship of foreign gods, strove with a set purpose to produce a bizarre effect.

The oblong *cella* was set on a tall podium and preceded by a *pronaos* with four columns on the front and two on the sides. The *pronaos* was reached from a staircase situated at the central intercolumniation, which was wider than the side ones. The columns, Corinthian pilaster strips with triangular pediments, supported an entablature (superstructure of mouldings and bands) with a projecting cornice. Six moulded grey tuff shelves supported religious statuettes on the side walls, which were decorated in geometrical patterned reliefs.

A base of masonry about six feet high extends across the rear of the *cella*, on which were two pedestals of tufa, about sixteen inches square, for the statues of Isis and Osiris. A similar pillar, which formerly stood at the right, had thin slabs of stone on three sides. On the exterior wall of the back of the temple, there was a third niche, where a statue of Dionysus with a panther was found. At the sides of the niche, two large relief stucco ears indicated that the deities were listening to worshippers’ prayers. However, little is known of the roof, which must have been a saddle roof with clay decorations.

The Temple of Isis has a mixture of Egyptian, Greek, and Roman architectural features. This was not surprising since Roman architecture of this period was very elaborate, often used bright colours, and borrowed and mixed styles from many eras. As such, the walls of the colonnade were painted in bright colours on a deep red ground. The lower part of the columns was red, but above they were white. The temple was also white, the purpose evidently being to give the appearance of marble. Further, the same decorative framework appears both in the white stucco of the temple and the

painted decoration of the colonnade. In the colonnade there was a yellow bade, treated as a projecting architectural member. Above it, large red panels alternated with light, having incredible architectural designs in yellow on a red ground. The frieze was black, with garlands in strong contrast – green, blue and yellow – bordered at the top by a continuous frieze of plant colutes on a black background, with characters and animals associated with Isis. In the middle of each of the large panels was a priest of Isis, and in the lower part of the prevailing architectural designs were marine pictures including galleys manoeuvring and naval battles.

The portico is most unusual; the north and south colonnades consisted of eight columns, while the west colonnade had seven and the east colonnade six. There was no central column in the east colonnade, and two pillars with engaged half-columns, which were almost certainly taller than the other columns, framed the wider intercolumniation. The brick columns had no base, but rested directly on the original stylobate. From this and other observations, modern historian Moormann concludes that “the architecture of the temple and its portico have been laid out precisely” although “the various altars and bases seem to have been set out more haphazardly”. The column shafts were covered with a thick layer of red plaster in the lower third and white plaster in the fluted upper part. The capitals, of the composite Tuscan type, supported a wooden architrave and a pitched roof with eight rows of tiles ending in *antefixae* (vertical blocks) of gorgon masks with wings on their foreheads. Also between the columns were six smaller altars, possibly for votive offerings.

Against the west wall of the colonnade, five arched doorways led into a large rectangular room. This room, which was practically intact when excavated, was richly decorated: the black mosaic floor in the north sector was inlaid, in white tesserae, with the names of Numerius Popidius Celsinus, his father Ampliatus and his mother Corelia Celsa, to further commemorate their generosity. The walls, exquisitely frescoed in the fourth style, featured seven large panels, portraying Nile landscapes and mythological scenes. Near the corners of the room were two pedestals with marble statues of female divinities about one half life-size. The remains of the female acrolith in archaic Greek costume, probably Isis herself (the naked parts – a left hand, a right hand and arm, the front of two feet – were made of marble, while the drapery was sculpted in wood) were found in this large room. The statue depicted the goddess holding a *sistrum* (the rattle used in her worship) in her right hand, about four inches long, and the key of the Nile in her left. This *sistrum* was eleven inches tall with its handle, with four attachments, at the top of which is an animal that resembles a cat, and two flowers on the two sides. Traces of gilding can still be seen on the marble; its inscription is as follows:

“Lucius Caecilius Phoebus erected (this statue); space granted by decree of the town councillors.”

Behind the temple, there were several large rooms, the biggest of which was the *ekklēsiasterion* (assembly room and hall) for the secret meetings of the initiates and a storeroom for cult objects, added as part of Celsinus’ restoration. The walls of this room and of the *sacrarium* beside it were decorated with frescoes of cult motifs referring to Isis, Serapis and Osiris, marking them both as different from the rest. The *sacrarium* was even more Egyptianesque with a mural of snakes guarding a wicker basket adorned with lunar symbols. There were few uniquely Egyptian religious scenes in the decoration of the courtyard, but much of it seemed to have had no particular relevance to the temple’s cult or Isiac myth. The room originally included at least two large mythological panels. One was an ideal motif to greet new initiates, depicting the Greek heroine Io in flight from the goddess Hera, being welcomed to Egypt by Isis herself. The walls were frescoed with five panels of sacred subjects in Egyptian style and representations of ten in Egypt and ten in Argos. This room itself appears to be the most formal with its role in ritual banquets, the reunion of initiates, the safe-keeping of sacred objects as well as the room where the new converts were tested on their catechism.

Found in the same room were a *sistrum*, two pots of terracotta, three small glass bottles, and a glass cup. A vase of terracotta was also found, lacking almost completely its lip, one foot and ten inches tall and one foot and four inches in diameter. A marble table supported by a pillar and foot was also found here, the whole thing two feet and eleven inches tall, three feet and eight inches long, and one foot and eight inches wide. Next to the table there was a man’s skeleton, and beneath

the table various chicken bones. It may therefore be concluded that here the common meals were served, of which the devotees of the cult partook. In connection with the great festivals, when the cult was celebrated with a presentation of the myth of Isis and Osiris, this large room was also well adapted for sacred exhibitions.

The small building at the southeast corner of the court, known as the *purgatorium*, was open to the sky. It resembled a miniature temple with pediments and pilasters at the entrance coated with stucco, 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 led 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, its purpose suggested by 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 is of Egyptian priests and priestesses with their faces turned toward the vessel, worshipping the sacred water in the vase. Moreover, 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. Further, the outer walls were elaborately decorated in stucco 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, and on the left is Perseus rescuing Andromeda.

A kitchen was also discovered in the Temple of Isis that contained an iron tripod, an iron axe, two earthenware frying pans, a bowl, two plates, and a lamp of earthenware. This lamp provides a single flame, and in its upper part is a youth in low relief, who is carrying on its shoulders a stick from which two baskets are hanging. Further, two rectangular pits in the northeast corner of the temple were used as vessels for the refuse of sacrifices, which must have had a saddle roof. It was near the large altar, and contained remains of burnt figs, pine kernels and cones, nuts, some pieces of walnut and hazelnut-shells, two dates, and what seemed to be some chestnuts. The wall about the other side, when excavated, was built up at each end in the form of a gable, and evidently once supported a wooden roof. Apart from the *ekklesiasterion*, this may have been an additional room in which meals were served, although most probably for the priests and priestesses rather than the general cult.

Similar to the Temple of Isis, the Temple of Apollo also shows architectural features of both Italic and Greek derivation. The temple was surrounded on all four sides by a wide series of forty eight tuff columns from the city of Nocera, originally grooved and with Ionic capitals, that were replaced with stucco columns and Corinthian capitals painted in yellow, red and dark blue. The Doric architrave of metopes and triglyphs (vertically channelled tablets) resting on the columns was transformed into a continuous frieze with griffins, flowers and fruit. Although these depictions of an exotic air may differ to that of the Temple of Isis, they do still portray foreign aspects and hence contain many similarities. Today the remains of the arcade appear as they originally did, since almost all of this transformation in plaster has disappeared. Some statues of a deity have also been recovered, facing the columns of the portico. These are now in the National Archaeological Museum of Naples, though copies of two of them – one representing Apollo, the other a bust of Diana – have been placed where the originals were found. Thus, the majority of the materials, colours and architectural designs used in the Temple of Apollo are reminiscent of the Temple of Isis, and therefore parallel in their design characteristics, albeit being the places of worship of deities from different countries.

However, contrasting to the Temple of Apollo and other temples of ancient Italy, the Temple of Isis had a much smaller precinct, intended to serve a more intimate community of initiates. The ritual washings were performed in the rear of the court, where there was a cylindrical vessel, adorned with Egyptian figures in relief. During celebrations, incense would be burned in the small brazier of bronze found in the court in front of the temple. Modern historian Peterson describes the temple as “the locus of rituals which were not only foreign, but somewhat fantastic”. She comments that this perception was encouraged by the eighteenth century reconstructions of the temple: “a veritable spectacle at a larger-than-life sanctuary with swirling dark clouds” when, in fact, a surviving

depiction of a ritual to Isis shows that they took place “in the calm of daylight”. The aim was, apparently, to emphasise that Isis worship was “exotic and un-Roman”.

In general, little is known about the cult since its ceremonies and initiations rituals were secret. However, it is known that priests led two services daily: at sunrise, to glorify the risen Osiris, and another at two o'clock in the afternoon to sanctify the water of life. The image of the goddess was presented to the gaze of her worshippers, who greeted her with prayers and shook the *sistrum*, a musical rattle. For a time, they remained seated, engaged in prayer and in the contemplation of the divinity. Then, an hour after daybreak the service was closed with an invocation to the newly risen sun. This description demonstrates the purpose of the bench in front of the shrine of Harpocrates.

Specific use of the temple was also held on the 5th of March every year, when Isis' devotees were involved in a grand spectacle known as the *navigium Isisdis*, or the Procession of the Boat. As the patron of sailors, it was appropriate that Isis should be honoured at a time of year when they were beginning to set sail once more, after the winter. Women in white robes, wearing assortments of flowers, scattering herbs and carrying lamps, led the procession. They were followed by musicians, singers, the guardian of the goddess' clothes and jewels, the sacred scribe, the guardian of the keys of the temple, the astrologer and the numerous semi-priestly associates. Completing the procession were priests and priestesses carrying cult objects, including a box containing 'the secret things' and a bark over their heads. Once at the water's edge, the priests launched their holy vessel – an Egyptian style boat with the symbolic sarcophagus of Osiris. This was a symbol of the craft that, according to Egyptian myth, ferries the sun on its nightly underworld voyage to the dawn – and hence, rebirth. The boat was purified with water and sulphur and the priests prayed for the protection of all sailors. The ceremony was based on the resurrection parable of Isis, and her mate, Osiris. According to the myth, after the god of darkness dismembered Osiris, Isis searched for his remains that were then reassembled and resurrected. Worshipers re-enacted this event during the ceremony through elaborate rituals, striving to capture such immortality for themselves.

Later on in the year from the 12th until the 14th of November, during the Festival of the Finding of Osiris – the *inventio Osiridis* – followers of the Isis cult commemorated Osiris' death and Isis' sorrowful search for him, and the eventual discovery of his body. According to modern historian Pamela Bradley, although the cult was open to men and had a professional body of priests, 'nearly one-third of worshippers mentioned in the inscriptions [of the temple] are female'. Their significant role is exemplified in this description of women participating in the procession, as illustrated by second century orator and author Apuleius:

Women glowing in their white vestments moved with symbolic gestures of delight. They scattered flowerets out of the aprons of their dresses. Others, who bore polished mirrors on their backs, walked before [the statue of] the Goddess and reflected all the people coming-after as if they were advancing towards the image. Others, again, carrying combs of ivory, went through the various caressive motions of combing and dressing the queenly tresses of their Lady; or they sprinkled the street with drops of unguent [perfumed oil]. Then there came walking a great band of men and women of all classes and ages, who had been initiated into the Mysteries of the Goddess and who were all clad in linen garments of the purest white.

As a result, even though the design of the temple might have differed somewhat from those dedicated to Greek deities, the 'strange and exotic' aspects that later Europeans noted would probably not have been particularly 'peculiar' to the Pompeians themselves. Not only was their religious experience diverse and eclectic, it is evident that Isis was a popular deity, more so than might be assumed from the small size of the temple itself. Conclusively, from the high quality of the paintings, decorations and furniture found in the Temple of Isis, it is clear to deduce that the cult of Isis held a great importance in Pompeii, which governed the daily lives of the city's people.