

## ISIS THERMOUTHIS IN THE ROMAN WORLD: SOME DATA FROM THE ITALIAN PENINSULA

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This paper constitutes an attempt to consider Isis Thermouthis<sup>1</sup> in the Roman world starting by the images of the goddess coming from the Italian peninsula from the late Republican period through the Roman Imperial age. Despite many images of this goddess have been preserved in Egypt, they are very rare in other areas during the Roman Imperial period.

Thermouthis, an Hellenistic deity, is represented snake-legged or snake-bodied with the face of a woman. She was created in the city of Narmouthis during the Ptolemaic age, combining Isis and Renenutet<sup>2</sup>, the ancient goddess known from the Old Kingdom, depicted as a cobra snake wearing the crown of Hator. Renenutet was closely linked with wheat and harvest, granaries and generally food and her cult naturally spread in Egypt, where the grain growth was at the very base of the inland economy. During the Pharaonic age, beyond be linked to the harvest, she was especially the royal cobra feeding and protecting the Pharaoh, as evidenced by inscriptions placed in the vestibule of the great sanctuary at Medinet Madi<sup>3</sup>. Here, the inscriptions glorify the two sanctuary's founders Pharaohs calling, everyone, "beloved of Uto-Renenutet, the living Cobra of Gia". The place of birth of the cult of Renenutet was situated in the rich oasis of Fayum, a real source of water and agriculture for the Egypt from the Middle Kingdom, when Amenemhat III, Pharaoh of the 12th dynasty, brought Egypt to the golden age and promoted a reclaim of the entire area of the Fayum.

A cult of a cobra-goddess, guardian of the harvest, became therefore clear in an area where cobra had the primary function in preserving grain from mice and other noxious insect as destroyers of cornfields and grain. The main places of worship were situated in the Fayum: Terenuthis and Narmouthis. The former is on the western side of the Delta and became famous for being the most important place of the cult of Renenutet during the Pharaonic ages; the second centre, current Medinet Madi, was the place in which Renenutet was worshipped with Sobek and Horus<sup>4</sup> in a great sanctuary from the reign of Amenemhat III. The temple lives a renovate prestige during the Ptolemaic age, precisely under Ptolemy IX Soter II, and another renovation was made during the Roman period at least until the end of 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Although not sources and ruins of others temples are known, the spread of this cult was largely in Egypt and worshipped in little shrines as demonstrate also by the engraved images of the goddess on votive stele.

During the Hellenistic period Thermouthis assumes a different aspect from that previously known in Egypt. The Hellenistic culture, in fact, elaborates a new image for her: she is now portrayed frontally, not yet in profile as in the conventional Pharaonic depictions, with a cloak tight on the chest in the typical knot of Isis. The goddess could also be shown seating on a throne in the act of nursing Sobek, the crocodile-god, sometimes identified with Horus. Her attributes are the *sistrum* and the *situla*, as request from Isis' cult, but also the torch as for the Greek Demeter. A confirmation of a close relation with this last goddess could also be found in the Greek text of the Four Hymns of Isidorus, engraved on the columns of the entrance to the great sanctuary of Thermouthis at Medinet Madi by an isiac priest during the 22<sup>th</sup> year of Ptolemy IX reign (96 BC): the goddess is prayed as Demeter and together with other Egyptian and Greco-Oriental gods.

After the Roman conquest of Egypt, the cult of Thermouthis continued to have large approval<sup>5</sup>.

1 Opelt 1959; Deschênes 1978; Deschênes 1980; Vázquez Hoys and Poyato Holgado 1994; Bommas 2006.

2 Leibovitch 1953; Dunand 1969; Broekhuis 1971.

3 *SEG* 8: 548-51; Vanderlip 1972.

4 The cult and the temple of Renenutet at Narmouthis is well discussed by E. Bresciani (1997, 37-41 with previous bibliography).

5 Deschênes 1978, 314-15.

It is believed that the period of maximum diffusion of this cult was during the reign of Hadrian, in particular between the 10<sup>th</sup> and the 11<sup>th</sup> year of his reign<sup>6</sup>. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD, especially between Trajan and Antoninus Pius reigns, many coins representing Thermouthis alone or with Serapis-Agathodaimon were minted by the mint of Alexandria under the name of emperors and their wives<sup>7</sup>. Among the many deities incorporated in the Roman “pantheon”, Isis certainly had an important role. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium BC her cult spread throughout the Mediterranean basin and in many inland regions, becoming the goddess of Eternity and of Resurrection, Mistress of Heaven and of Earth, Ruler of the Sea, goddess of the living and of the dead. She arrived in Rome through the main harbours of the peninsula like *Puteoli* and Ostia between the late 2<sup>nd</sup> and early 1<sup>st</sup> c. BC, gaining immediately a large number of devotees in the lower and middle class of the Roman society as several epithets indicate; nothing clearly testifies the same diffusion for Isis Thermouthis. In some scholars' opinion<sup>8</sup> this is due to a cultural rejection, probably related to the characteristic anguiform aspect of Isis Thermouthis as rejection of idolatry of theriomorphic deities.

In the Greek and Roman religion the snake has different meanings depending on the quality of the god whom it is referred to. It can, in fact, represent a large number of gods, including those normally human-shaped, is always connected with the earth and symbolizes its qualities: death, evil, power, terror, fertility and healing. Deities connected with fertility and the image of a snake are Demeter, Kore, Dionysos and Kybele.

In the ancient world also many deities can have the aspect of this animal. For example, Zeus Ktesios<sup>9</sup> worshipped in Greece in Thebes, Piraeus, Phyla and Panamara, Zeus Philios<sup>10</sup> the god of the friendship worshipped in Athens, Zeus Meilichios<sup>11</sup> the god of the individual prosperity and of purification worshipped in Greece, Kyrene, Egypt and Italy, Agathodaimon<sup>12</sup> the “Good Spirit” that was originally the male ancestor of the family and responsible for fertility and wealth, his consort Agathe Tyche, Dionysos<sup>13</sup> and for the last Glycon<sup>14</sup> worshipped during the 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD<sup>15</sup>.

6 The first known coin representations of Agathodaimon and Thermouthis as sacred snakes in partnership date from the tenth year of Hadrian.

7 Vogt 1924; *LIMC* 5:788 n. 341, s.v. “Isis”. The first image of Thermouthis alone on coins appeared during the reign of Domitian.

8 Iside 1997, 23-4.

9 Unfortunately, there is only one relief inscribed to Zeus *Ktesios* preserved in Thebes Museum (Inv. n. 330) found in 1891 at the Kastro at Thespieae in Beotia, dated in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. We know that this god was worshipped in Piraeus but unfortunately the reliefs representing snakes don't bear any inscriptions (Nilsson 1908).

10 Mitropoulou 1977, 97-112.

11 Mitropoulou 1977, 112-55; Giuman 2008.

12 Pietrzykowski 1978, 959 at footnote 1 with previous bibliography.

13 There is a small marble stele from Naukratis preserved in the collection of British Museum depicting a snake-legged Dionysos (Bailey 2007).

14 The particular story of the creation of this cult is told in detail by Lucian of Samosata in his essay entitled “*Alexander the False Magician*”, in which the author outlines with rhetorical skills a more reliable character to expose his deception. Maybe Lucian may have met Alexander in person, probably about 162 AD. (Robert 1980; *LIMC* 4:279-83, s.v. “Glycon”; Flinterman 1997, 282).

According to the Greek author (*Alex.*, 10.21) Alexander, assistant of a magician, buried some bronze tablets on which was written the prophecy forecasting the coming of Asclepius and his father Apollo in Abonoteichus, in the area of the temple of Apollo in Chalcedon. The inhabitants of the small town were informed about the prophecy, were impressed and they decided the construction of a temple dedicated to the god. After the temple foundation, Alexander moved to the town of Abonoteichus and there buried the egg of a goose filled with a new-born snake: the next day he publicly unburied the egg showing the truthfulness of the prophecy concerning the coming of Asclepius under the aspect of the snake named Glycon.

Lucian (*Alex.*, 12; 16; 18; 26) also describes how Alexander the prophet - as he liked to be called - deceived people while making the oracles: to represent the head of the snake, he used a kind of animal face (dog or sheep) made of cloth, human ears and hairpieces; the god showed himself appearing in a dark and hidden place, from which the voice of an assistant told the oracular responses. (*Alex.*, 35.17) In order to obtain more credit on the cult, Alexander also said that Glycon ordered him to give the daughter born by his union with the goddess Selene in marriage to the governor of the province of Upper Moesia *Publius Mummius Sisenna Rutilianus*.

15 The image of Glycon is documented by the famous well-preserved statue found at Tomis and by some small bronze amulets conserved in Ankara and Athens (Burr Thompson 1962, n. 79; Bordenache 1964, pls. 6-7; Robert 1981; Rusu 1981-1982).

In the light of the success of Isis in the Roman world, obtained at the end of a long political rather than religious opposition, it must be asked what do we know about Thermouthis outside Egypt in Roman times and which kind of evidences were yielded by the sites of the Italian peninsula in concrete terms. The scholars of the oriental religions in the Roman world paid little attention to these questions and in general to those objects not made by Egyptian artisans found in other regions of the Roman empire.

The present study aims to provide an overview of the cult of Isis Thermouthis in Italian peninsula in particular during the Imperial age, making a review of the archaeological evidences, certain and probably, regarding this snake-bodied deity<sup>16</sup>. Archaeological data coming from Egypt always show Thermouthis alone or with Serapis-Agathodaimon, while in the images from Italy Thermouthis is never alone and always in couple with Serapis-Agathodaimon.

Looking at the present documentation about this topic, we can first said that almost the whole documents are sculptural objects, as the following list shows:

1) Egyptianizing relief in Italic white marble, almost entirely reconstructed from 18 fragments<sup>17</sup>. Rome, Antiquarium of St. John Lateran (Spinola 2001). The relief was yielded by the excavations in the area of St. John Lateran, precisely the Lateran Baptistery, between 1963-1967. The relief can be dated to the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, probably 20-10 BC, and can be considered a remarkable artistic product of the Augustan age. In this period during which the Egyptian cults seem not to enjoyed a particular popularity, if looking at the contemporary political context<sup>18</sup>.

The relief is profusely decorated with a vegetal motif. In the main part it generates a *basileion*, composed of a solar disk between two horns; above, from a calyx is growing up a vegetable shrine characterized of two little horns decorated with isiac crowns and on the top a pine cone. On each side of the shrine are two snakes, the most important attributes of the scene: on the left one is a beard-snake wearing a double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt, on the right is a cobra crowning with solar disk.

The two snakes can be differently explained: they can be a divine couple Osiris and cobra-goddess Renenutet, or the “Good Spirit” Agathodaimon with Isis Thermouthis. This uncertainty is due to the various forms that the snakes may have, so prudently I can support that the snakes recall through their attributes all these deities. At Rome during the Augustan period, in fact, sometimes we do not have a precise correspondence between the Egyptian deities and their attributes. In any case, the two snakes depicting on the sides of a small shrine and above the pine cone are a quite common iconographic motif in the Roman world: they are represented in the private *lararia* and within the worship places, as depictions in the *lararia* of Pompei<sup>19</sup> and on the fresco from Herculaneum<sup>20</sup> demonstrate. Furthermore a marble relief preserved at the Egyptian Museum of Turin shows Thermouthis and Agathodaimon on sides of a shrine with cone<sup>21</sup>.

The relief deserves particular attention, considering its great historical and artistic value. It shows attributes of Egyptian cults as *interpretatio graeca* of Ptolemaic syncretistic theology and therefore it cannot be considered an expression of the so-called “Egyptomania”, which satisfied the exotic and archaic taste of late-republican and imperial ruling class. It could be a mistake, in fact, made by local artisans just like an answer to an exotic taste and ignore the cultural background which consists of a long and well-structured system of commercial exchange<sup>22</sup>.

The architectural element in question was the coating of a corner pilaster of a portal. For the

16 In this paper I did not take into account the certain images of crowned *uraei*.

17 Spinola 1998, 82 n. 415; 2001.

18 Malaise 2011 with previous bibliography and see also Mazzuca 2014a.

19 Boyce 1942; Laforge 2009.

20 Gasparini 2006.

21 From Drovetti Collection, unknown provenience maybe from the Egypt (Inv. n. 7149) (Tran Tam Tinh 1972, pl. VII, fig. 8).

22 In 273 BC Ptolemy II Philadelphus initiated diplomatic relations with Romans by sending ambassadors to Rome.

richness of the decoration belonging to the world of Isis, it has been therefore suggested that it has to be referred to the architectural decoration of a place of worship dedicated to the Egyptian gods. The building did not have to be exactly in the Lateran, but we can assumed in its vicinity: if considering this element, we can therefore think at the *Iseum Metellinum*; the structure, whose position has been much discussed<sup>23</sup>, was probably restored for the direct intervention of Augustus - just following the aforementioned order of 28 BC - since the *gens* of *Caecilius Metellus*, founder of *Iseum*, was extinct.

2) Bone handle of mirror or knife, from Cerveteri, Bruxelles Musée Royal (Inv. n. R 1515).<sup>24</sup> The handle has a triangular base and on each face there is a deity on a podium. There are Serapis, Isis and Isis-Thermouthis in a fully-snake version crowned with *basileion* and resting on a pillow of a seat. The manufacturing seems to date during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD.

3) A funerary altar of *C. Cornelius Cladus* founded in 1927 at *Turris Libisonis* (Porto Torres), Sassari “G. Sanna” Museum.<sup>25</sup>

The altar was decorated on a side with the image of Thermouthis crowned with lotus and voted to this Goddess maybe after *C. Cornelius Cladus* survived a shipwreck. This altar is dated to 1-125 AD. In Italy we find other four members of the *gens Cornelia* devoted to the Isiac cults<sup>26</sup>. Furthermore, it must be remembered also an *Aulo Cornelio therapeutes* at Serapeum C<sup>27</sup>, contributor of the sanctuary for the religious practices living at Delos during 1<sup>st</sup> century BC.

4) A statuette maybe from Carinola (Campania) representing Isis *lactans* (nursing Isis) sitting on a throne decorated on the back with the couple Isis Thermouthis and Serapis-Agathodaimon, Berlin Ägyptisches Museum (Inv. n. 20004) (Malaise 1972).<sup>28</sup>

On the back of the throne are depicted a snake and an *uraeus*. The snake has a poppy and wears the crown of Lower Egypt, while the *uraeus* has a crown of Hator and two grain's ears. The former snake represent certainly Agathodaimon, the second may represent Isis Thermouthis. The presence of symbols linked to fertility, as a grain's ears, might in fact suggest that is indeed an image of Thermouthis. On the base of the stylistic elements the statuette seems to be of Hadrianic date.

5) A small marble relief from Rome depicting Serapis-Agathodaimon and Isis-Demeter, Rome inside the garden of “Istituto Massimiliano Massimo dei PP. Gesuiti” (Gallo 1982).<sup>29</sup>

At the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century this relief was inside Vigna Palombara. It is very interesting because shows a rare image of Isis – Demeter in couple with Serapis-Agathodaimon. The presence

23 Some scholars identified the *Iseum Metellinum* on the Caelius: near the church of SS. Pietro e Marcellino (Colini 1944, 310-11; Mazzuca 2014b), in the lower area of *vicus Capitis Africae* (Coarelli 1982) or in the upper area of *vicus Capitis Africae* (Pavolini 2006). A second hypothesis identified Iseum with the structures of via Pasquale Villari on the Oppius (De Vos 1997; Ensoli 1997, 308-9; 2000, 268-9; Gasparini 2008, 69; Carandini 2012, pl. 108; Häuber 2014).

24 Tran Tam Tinh 1983, 108-9 n. IB 7, fig. 33 a,b,c; *LIMC* 5:771 n. 135, s.v. “Isis”; Iside 1997, 283 n. IV. 326; Malaise 2004, 20.

25 *AÉpigr* 1932, 63 = *SIRIS* 521 = *RICIS* 519/0301; Taramelli 1931; Gavini 2008, footnote 33 with previous bibliography; 2014.

26 *CIL* 6 3880; *CIL* 6 707; *CIL* 14 4290; *CIL* 14 343 (Gavini 2008).

27 Mora 1990, 78 n. 596.

28 Malaise 1972, 250 pls. 30-4; Tran Tam Tinh 1972, 78-80; 1973, 57-8; *LIMC* 5:778 n. 229, s.v. “Isis”; Iside 1997, 521 n. V. 219.

29 Grossi Gondi 1910; Kater-Sibbes 1973, n. 686, pl. XIX; Pietrzykowski 1978, 960; Gallo 1982.

of Agathodaimon could allow us to connect the figure of Isis-Demeter with Isis Thermouthis, usually depicted with Serapis-Agathodaimon. The representation could be viewed as an attempt of Roman syncretism. The relief dates to the Hadrianic period.

6) Ivory sandaled right foot, unknown provenience probably from Rome, New York Metropolitan Museum of Art (N. 25.78.43 gift of John Marshall).<sup>30</sup>

The foot comes from an half-life size statue. The wide *lingula* bears a personification of the river Nile holding a reed and a cornucopia while seated on a sphinx; at the top there is a part of a curled tail maybe representing Serapis-Agathodaimon or Isis Thermouthis.

The chronology is uncertain, it is dated from Augustan period to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.

7) Three inscriptions from Rome using the words: *Thermutario*, *Thermuthis* and *Thermitarion* (*CIL* 6 4169 – *CIL* 6 23253 – *AÉpigr* 1916, 57).

The first says *Livia Augustae l(iberta) Thermutario*. It is referred to a *liberta* of Livia Augusta, buried in the *columbarium* of the freedmen of Livia on the via Appia and is dated to 14-50 AD. From this context come also three copper sheets representing Isis, an *uraeus*, Sobek and Harpocrates. All these deities may allude to Isis Thermouthis.

The second says *D(is) M(anibus) M(arco) Oct(avio) Chrysantho coniugi pientissimo Oct(avio) Thermuthis b(ene) m(erenti) f(ecit)*.

The third says *Thermitarion Alexandrin(i) vix(it) ann(is) XXIII*. It is a *columbarium* inscription, dated between 1-100 AD and coming from Rome, probably from via Po.<sup>31</sup>

In all these three examples, the names made by the word Thermouthis could be referred to the place of birth of those persons; it must be also remembered that these are very common names in the Greco-Roman Egypt, especially in the region of Fayum.

In conclusion, according to our documentation therefore no literary sources nor archaeological evidences seem to testify for Thermouthis a well-structured cult with worship places, priests and rituals, despite the numerous places dedicated to Isis known in the Italian peninsula, Sicily and Sardinia.

In this study nine documents have been collected (six images and three inscriptions), but only three (no. 2-3-4) can be attributed to image of Thermouthis for sure. One (no. 1) can be recognized also as images of Agathe Tyche or an *uraeus*, one (no. 5) representing Isis-Demeter could allude to Isis Thermouthis and the other (no. 6) is incomplete.

Three documents can be attributed to unknown worship places (no. 1-3-5) and two documents (no. 2-4) can be considered decorative objects. Finally, if terms using in our inscriptions (no. 7) can be referred to the place of birth of people and they cannot be considered as certain expression of devotion to Thermouthis. The first one (*CIL* 6 4169) found in association with three copper sheets representing Isis, an *uraeus*, Sobek and Harpocrates could therefore allude to Thermouthis. Despite this poor documentation some observations can be done. The first interesting note is that we do not have images of Thermouthis in the two main forms attested during the Ptolemaic and Roman period in Egypt, the first human-bodied with a snake's tail and the second snake-bodied with human head. In our data the deity is always represented in the fully-snake version in couple with Serapis-Agathodaimon, so she is never alone as in the Egyptian documents.

This should not to be surprising: the Romans created some new images of deity, as Isis Sothis

30 Richter and Alexander 1939, 26, fig. 62 and see also Lapatin 2001, 130-2, 150 n. 47 with previous bibliography.

31 NSc 1915, 49 n. 43.

shows<sup>32</sup>, rather misleadingly considered an expression of the so-called Egyptianizing style. This goddess – riding a dog carrying a star on its head – became widely popular in Rome and found solid basis in Egyptian mythology where Isis had for long been assimilated to Sothis, but not in Egypt where her representations are rare if not practically absent certainly none including a dog. Inside the Isis cult, Thermouthis seems to represent an aspect of the personality of Isis. She symbolized the protection and the fertility of the earth. In addition to Ceres-Demeter the Romans already had many local deities linked to the earth, harvest and fertility: although linked to Isis the cult of Thermouthis, therefore, was never locally worshipped in Rome and the few images coming from the Italian peninsula seems to be consistent with this. The poor documentation could not be due to a cultural rejection related to the characteristic anguiform aspect of Isis Thermouthis; it seems more reasonable and simply to explain it considering how traditional and local was her cult, so deeply settled in the Fayum area. Her presence in the Italian peninsula would be therefore appeared very unusual.

All these evidences points to the conclusion that in the Imperial period in the Italian peninsula Thermouthis is represented only in her fully-snake version and always in couple with Serapis-Agathodaimon, reproduced with no more than small changes in most of the monuments listed. In these representations she recalls the figures of home<sup>33</sup> and funerary guardian snakes<sup>34</sup>, in this perspective being closer to the images of Agathe Tyche rather than Thermouthis.

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32 Clerc 1978.

33 See footnote 14.

34 See the decoration of the pediment of the so-called “Grotta della vipera” at Cagliari. It was mausoleum of a roman matrona *Atilia Pomptilla* and was decorated on the pediment with two snakes. In this case the snakes seem to have a chthonic function. The tomb is dated, thanks to an inscription founded inside, between 131-171 AD. (Pesce 1978, 86).

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