

Motivations for the Worship of Isis in Rome
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I plan to use primary sources who mention the worship of Isis, such as Apuleius, Ovid and Propertius, along with modern scholars' analyses to show that three main reasons exist to explain the popularity of the cult of Isis in Rome. Isis was originally an ancient Egyptian mother goddess, who was the wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus. She is commonly depicted in Egyptian art wearing a throne on her head and was seen as the symbolic mother of the king. Even as Egypt's empire began to decline and was overcome by external forces, the worship of Isis remained strong. During the rise of the Roman Empire, worship of Isis spread to Rome and became quite popular among the empire's citizens. In Rome, Isis continued to be worshipped as a mother goddess, but gained many other attributes and was identified with many existing Roman deities.

The cult of Isis appealed to a wide range of Roman citizens for three main reasons. The first is the simple fact that many Roman citizens were deeply intrigued by mystery and magic. Egypt was seen as a very mystical and supernatural land and this led people to be drawn toward many aspects of Egyptian culture and religion. Of course, the mystery surrounding Isis and her cult was not enough in itself to sustain a large following.

In addition to the mysterious nature of Isis, many women became members of the cult, not only because they were able to identify with her as a wife and mother, but also since the cult afforded them certain rights and privileges that the traditional state cults did not grant to women. Women were allowed to join in the ritual processions of Isis and often performed the same priestly duties as their male counterparts.

The third, and perhaps most important, reason that ancient Roman citizens were attracted to the cult of Isis is due to the personal nature of the cult. The cult of Isis allowed its followers to gain a personal connection with the deity rather than being dependent on a pater familias or pontifex in order to obtain a spiritual voice. This aspect of the cult appealed to many members of Roman society from all economic and social backgrounds. Absent from traditional Roman religion was the ability to achieve individual salvation for oneself.

I will carefully examine and discuss relevant primary sources in order to show that while the mystical nature of the cult of Isis, along with fewer restrictions upon female initiates attracted many Romans to worship the Egyptian goddess, the third reason was the most compelling. With the adoption of the cult of Isis, Roman citizens were finally able to pray for their own individual salvation.

Works Cited

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