

Pulling the Strings of Isis and Serapis

Though Rome is often praised for its inclination of assimilating foreign gods into its pantheon, the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis were subject to the whims of the emperors. Some emperors, such as Domitian and Hadrian, embraced the foreign deities. By allowing the people to freely worship and build monuments to Isis and Serapis, these emperors supported the under-represented classes, such as women and the poor, thus gaining their favor. Other emperors, such as Augustus and Tiberius, preferred the old Roman ideals. By turning away from the vast plebian population, alienating them by rejecting the foreign deities, and attempting to destroy the religion through persecutory actions, they gained the favor of the Roman elite.

Though some of the early emperors were threatened by the cults of Isis and Serapis, the later rulers of Rome appreciated the aesthetic beauty of the cult and did not take measures to wipe it from the face of history. Today, evidence of the cult is found in words scattered throughout ancient literature and marble pieces scattered throughout the city. Many do not even realize that some of Rome's more famous ancient decorations were, in fact, parts of great monuments to Isis and Serapis that had been stripped, mutilated, or otherwise desecrated, such as the sandaled foot on the Via del Piè Marmo and the "speaking statue" known as Madama Lucrezia.

This presentation will offer a topographical survey of the locations of the various temples, the decrees surrounding the erection or destruction of these temples, and the reasons that leaders of Rome had for promoting or banning the religious monuments.

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