

Isis as a Commercial Goddess? An Analysis of Egyptian Imagery
in Pompeian Shops and Workshops

Since the discovery of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii (1764), scholars have tirelessly poured over the Egyptian and Egyptian-themed artwork preserved in the Roman town in what could be considered a second wave of what earlier researchers have named “Egyptomania.” Scholarship on the subject has evolved alongside centuries of excavations, which have uncovered over 200 examples of Aegyptiaca, to offer a more critical examination these images and objects. However, most scholarship has focused on domestic spaces, especially gardens, where the majority of Aegyptiaca in Pompeii were located (e.g. Barret 2019; Swetnam-Burland 2002; Mol 2015). To date little to no work has been done on Aegyptiaca in non-domestic spaces even though 34 appear in public contexts (e.g. basilica, inns, shops). Moreover, 75% of Aegyptiaca discovered in commercial spaces is related to the cult of Isis (e.g. sistra, depictions of Isis or Fortuna-Isis, and depictions of Osiris/ Serapis or Harpocrates) suggesting a link between the cult and commercial patronage, similar to how Mercury’s role in decorating shops in Pompeii has been interpreted (MacRae 2019).

Understanding how these objects and images functioned in the various contexts of their findspots can help archaeologists draw conclusions about the people who purchased and commissioned these works and about their intended audiences. Rather than draw sweeping conclusions by examining the items as a group, I intend to follow C. Barrett’s recent approach to interpreting garden Aegyptiaca within the assemblage they appear in, analyzing a few artifacts and frescoes through the lenses of their location within the space in which they were used and viewed and how they fit into the larger decorative scheme of that space (if evidence is available), their visibility within that space, and the function of the space and its location within the larger

urban landscape (2019). Though this paper focuses on a new consideration of the cult of Isis' role in commercial contexts, the larger study will also explore Aegyptiaca not related to Isis and found in other public spaces in Pompeii (religious and public buildings).

Bibliography

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