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URNULA FABERRIME CAVATA
Observations on a Vessel used in the Cult of Isis

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URNULA FABERRIME CAVATA

Observations on a Vessel used in the Cult of Isis†

The *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius provides one of the best literary descriptions of the cult of Isis. One passage refers to a piece of liturgical equipment, a spouted vessel that the author calls *urnula*.¹ Visual evidence for this type of jug exists, too. Numerous representations in Roman art beginning at the time of Augustus and produced specifically in northern Egypt and in Central and southern Italy document the variants in shape. The illustrations included here (figg. 1 and 2) come from the newly restored frescoes of the

† Shorter versions of this study were read on December 9, 1992 at the *Oriental Club* of Philadelphia and on December 11, 1993 during a four day colloquium on *Archaeological Research in Roman Egypt*, organized by Donald Bailey of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities of the British Museum in London. I am grateful to Joan Mertens for her constructive reading of the manuscript of this monograph and to Reinhold Merkelbach for accepting it for the *Beiträge zur Altertumskunde*.

¹ Apuleius of Madauros, *The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)*, Edited with an Introduction, Translation and Commentary by J. Gwyn Griffiths (Leiden, 1975) XI,11, pp. 82-85. - For the term *urnula* see Werner Hilgers, *Lateinische Gefäßnamen. Bezeichnung, Funktion und Form römischer Gefäße nach den antiken Schriftquellen* (Düsseldorf, 1969), cat. no. 381, p. 304f.

temple of Isis in Pompeii now on exhibition in Naples.² Valuable recent studies have clarified the complex interrelation of religious beliefs and archaeological evidence. They have contributed to elucidating the vessel's shape, its symbolism and its relationship with other artifacts essential to the cult.³ Yet, much remains unexplained. I make no claim to present solutions. It

² See Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta, *Alla ricerca di Iside. Analisi, studi e restauri dell'Iseo pompeiano nel Museo di Napoli* (Rome, 1992) pls. XV; XVI. The temple was freshly decorated about ten years before the catastrophe of A.D. 79. Excavated in 1764-66, the wall paintings were removed to the Museum in Portici and, early in this century to the National Museum. They disappeared from view in the 1970s and are now, after professional cleaning, to be seen again in their ancient splendor. - A number of recent publications that postdate the work of Wild (see next note) are noteworthy for their fine reproductions of such vessels: pitcher perched on the gable of a shrine in a Nilotic scene in the Casa dei Pigmei (IX 5,9) - not listed by Wild - , see *Pompejanische Wandmalerei*, G. Cerulli Irelli ed. (Stuttgart/Zurich, 1990) pl. 90, and *Rediscovering Pompeii*: Exhibition by IBM-Italia, New York City, IBM Gallery of Science and Art, 12 July - 15 September 1990 (Rome, 1990) p. 141. Pitcher with a wreath of roses on a marble stand in an Egyptianizing garden scene of room 12 in the Casa del Frutteto, see Jacqueline and Maurice Guillaud, *Frescoes in the Time of Pompeii* (Paris/New York, 1990) fig. 193. V

³ The literature is vast. But it was Robert A. Wild's *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis* (Leiden, 1981) that achieved a real breakthrough in the interpretation of the vessel and of its religious and ritual context, especially chapter VI (see the review by J. Gwyn Griffiths in *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 72 [1986] p. 209). Wild rounded out his research with "The Known Isis-Sarapis Sanctuaries of the Roman Period", *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt* II 17,4 (1984) pp. 1789-1851.

is rather a string of observations which might lead to a more complete understanding.

While scanning the literature, it was with relief that I chanced on a remark by Erwin Panofsky in one of his habitually erudite yet entertaining articles, called "'Canopus Deus'. The Iconography of a non-existent God". He deplores an astounding scholarly oversight, for which he blames "the lack of liaison between egyptology, classical archaeology and the history of religion, on the one hand, and the history of art on the other."⁴ Although I am not an Egyptologist I shall, with all possible caution, attempt such a liaison.

My point of departure is a splendidly illustrated and argued recent book by Dieter Kurth with the title of *Der Sarg der Teüris. Eine Studie zum Totenglauben im römerzeitlichen Ägypten*.⁵ In it I read with surprise that "the present state of the publication of Egyptian private monuments of the Roman period is unsatisfactory...because they have so far rarely been comprehensively published and interpreted, be it in monographs on the artifacts themselves or in studies on the history of culture or religion, where, in the end, the objects mostly just serve to document the decay of Pharaonic civilization..."⁶

4 *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* LVII, Avril 1961, pp. 193-216, the quote on p. 205.

5 *Aegyptiaca Treverensia*, vol. 6 (Mainz, 1990), especially pls. A-D and 1-4,1. See the review by Robert S. Bianchi, *AJA* 96 (1992) p. 561f. References to comparative material will be given only if post-dating or adding to Kurth's book. - For a recent general introduction into Egyptian funerary beliefs see Gabriella Scandone Matthiae, "L'aldilà nell'antico Egitto", *Archeologia dell'inferno* (Verona, 1987) pp. 11-47.

6 This summarizes remarks in his introduction.

Let me introduce you to the sarcophagus. It comes from the necropolis at Tuna el-Gebel, near Hermoupolis Magna, and it entered the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam from the collection of the German egyptologist Friedrich Wilhelm Freiherr von Bissing (fig. 3). Head, breasts, and the bejewelled hands of the deceased woman are worked in high relief, the material is stucco (fig. 4). Her eyes are wide open and with her right hand she clutches a garland of roses.⁷ Her pink dress with two green stripes or *clavi* and her neatly folded mantle, under her head, with *gammadia* ("Winkelclavi") have parallels in Coptic garments. Her hairdo helps to establish the date of the casket's manufacture: it is that of ladies of the Antonine dynasty after the

⁷ See color plate D 2, Kurth (above, note 5) and p. 15¹⁸⁸. This is a common accessory in the funerary arts of Roman Egypt, cf. Funerary Cartonnage of a Lady of Means, of the 1st century A.D. in the Brooklyn Museum, *Cleopatra's Egypt; Age of the Ptolemies*, Richard A. Fazzini, Robert S. Bianchi et al. edd. (Brooklyn Museum, 1989) cat no. 82, where it is maintained that the garland's significance has not been established. Since the Brooklyn lady is outfitted with accoutrements of Isis, it can be inferred that the garland may be an essential item in the cult of Isis and Osiris as deities of resurrection. A rich bibliography attesting to it can be found in Gwyn Griffith (above, note 1) pp. 159-161; see also below, note 44. For more about roses see the catalogue "*Anch*" - *Blumen für das Leben - Pflanzen im Alten Ägypten*, Sylvia Schoske et al., edd. (Munich, 1992), of an exhibition of samples from the Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich and shown in Hannover and Berlin in the spring of 1993. Roses are not indigenous to Egypt and were adopted from Asia Minor and Palestine during the 18th Dynasty, p. 62f. With the Greeks and Romans, new plants and new techniques to assemble the flowers into dense wreaths (especially of *Rosa richardii*) were introduced. See also H. Walter Lack, "Blütenkränze für die Pharaonen. Eine Sonderausstellung im Botanischen Museum Berlin-Dahlem", *Antike Welt* 24,2 (1993) p. 150f.