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# Reviews

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ISIS, SARAPIS AND THE WAVES OF THE BLACK SEA. V. Atanassova, L. Bricault (eds.), *Egyptian Cults on the Black Sea Coast / Египетските култове по крайбрежието на Черно море*, Institute of Balkan Studies with Center of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences / École française d’Athènes Sofia, ISBN 978-619-7179-45-3; ISBN 978-2-86958-630-7, “Paradigma” Publishing House, 2024, 194 p.

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EGYPTIAN CULTS  
ON THE BLACK SEA COAST  
ЕГИПЕТСКИТЕ КУЛТОВЕ  
ПО КРАЙБРЕЖИЕТО  
НА ЧЕРНО МОРЕ

EDITORS:      СЪСТАВИТЕЛИ:  
VESSELA ATANASSOVA      ВЕСЕЛА АТАНАСОВА  
LAURENT BRICAULT      ЛОРАН БРИКО



Sometime in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD, in the city of Sinope in Paphlagonia, a certain Stratoneikos, son of Euarestos, citizen of Tium in Bithynia, and of Tomis in Moesia Inferior, consecrated a limestone altar to Zeus Helios Sarapis and Isis *myrionyma*.<sup>1</sup> All of these cities are located on the shores of the Black Sea, and evidence of Isism is present in all of them.<sup>2</sup> Nothing transpires beyond the text in terms of the circumstances through which Stratoneikos appropriated the deities of the Isiac circle. In any case, one cannot help but wonder how Isism flourished all around the Black Sea *poleis* through men like Stratoneikos. And indeed, the material evidence, the instantiations of stone monuments put on display as well as pieces of evidence from the ‘small finds’

<sup>1</sup> RICIS 309/0102. For this monument, see also BRICAULT 2013, 465 and most recently BRICAULT 2024.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. PODVIN 2012, esp. 208 for Sinope; BRICAULT *et alii* 2008, *passim* for Tium and DEAC 2025 for Tomis.

category demonstrate the strong foothold that this religious phenomenon had from the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity in this region. The book reviewed here gathers a very diverse number of studies of high scholarly value dealing with this subject authored by important scholars in the field. In the following, we will review these contributions.

The volume publishes the proceedings of the international conference organized by Dr. Vessela Atanassova, Stefan Yanakiev and Victoria Videvska, Institute for Balkan Studies and Center of Thracology, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and Plovdiv University, named *Egyptian Cults on the Black Sea Coast*, which took place between the 1<sup>st</sup> and the 5<sup>th</sup> of June 2022, in the wonderful seaside town of Varna (ancient Odessos), Bulgaria. The conference itself was organized in connection with the project *Egyptian Cults in Thrace during the Hellenistic and Roman periods – Diffusion, Extent and Interaction*, whose principal investigator Dr. Atanassova is.

The book consists of a foreword, an introduction, and eight papers written in English or French submitted by part of the participants at the conference, to which an additional last paper was added. It should be stated, however, that this is not the first collaboration of the editors, as a previous volume of utmost importance for the study of the Isiac cults in the Balkan region was edited by V. Atanassova and L. Bricault in 2020.<sup>3</sup>

The book starts with a bilingual foreword, both in English and Bulgarian, signed by one of the leading Bulgarian Egyptologists, Sergei Ignatov, entitled *Doing things in Egyptian Way / Защо и днес постъпваме като египтяни* (p. 6–13), which offers the reader a general introduction to the connections of Egypt with the outside world, with a particular focus on the wider Greek world, connections that started with the island of Crete, dated from around 3000 BC (p. 7), also briefly mentioning the impact of Alexander the Great and his campaigns and the subsequent Roman domination of the Mediterranean.

Laurent Bricault, who is also one of the editors of the book, is perhaps the leading world scholar nowadays in the field of research that we prefer to denominate as 'Isiac Cults' or 'Isism', based on the definition put forward some years ago by Jörg Rüpke.<sup>4</sup> Through this paper, L. Bricault introduces the reader in his *The Cults of Isis, from 'Oriental' to 'Global'* (p. 14–25) to the major historiographic landmarks of the field, paying tribute to the extraordinary scholars who paved the way of the Isiac studies since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from Georges Lafaye, to Peter Marshall Fraser, Jean Leclant, Ladislav Vidman or Michel Malaise (to name just a few), not overlooking also Bulgarian scholars like Margarita Tacheva-Hitova, and the major bibliographic references.

The other editor of the book and, as pointed above, the leading organizer of the conference whose proceedings are reviewed, Vessela Atanassova, in her *Egyptian Cults on the Black Sea Coast* (p. 26–51) gives an insight into the Isiac cults on the Black Sea coasts, outlining especially the small finds but also emphasizing the epigraphic finds of the Hellenistic period from the north-western shores of the Black Sea (Tyras, Chersonesos, Tomis, Odessos, Messambria) and the

very interesting phenomenon of the change from Anubis to Harpocrates in the Alexandrian Triad from the Hellenistic to the Roman period in the region mentioned above (p. 36–40). Since the author mentions among other small finds the pseudo-shabti from Dionysopolis (p. 49), we would add that this type of artifacts found in Roman contexts in the Danubian provinces of Pannonia, Dacia and Moesia were thoroughly analyzed.<sup>5</sup>

Mikhail Treister, in his paper *Ptolemaic Finger Rings in North Pontic Area: New Finds and Hypotheses* (p. 52–75), deals with a very interesting subject, namely the portraiture of the early Ptolemaic queens discovered in the northern part of the Black Sea region, on the former territory of the USSR, as well as other regions around the Black Sea. Although he presents new hypotheses on the reasons behind the presence of artifacts bearing these Ptolemaic royal images which we will not summarize here, Treister favors his earlier hypothesis put forward since he first tackled the subject back in the 1980's (pointed out in the notes), namely the visit of the ship 'Isis' as rendered by the sgraffito on the walls of the sanctuary of Aphrodite from Nymphaion dated approximately during the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC (a summary with bibliographic references is given by Treister on p. 74–75).<sup>6</sup> An important feature which may be underestimated by some readers is that Treister introduces many bibliographic references written mainly in Russian that are overlooked in western scholarly endeavors dealing with this subject.

The first of the two papers written in French is authored by Jean-Louis Podvin and entitled *Isiaca du Bosphore cimmérien* (p. 76–87), focusing on the Crimeean and Taman peninsulas, and the Kerch Strait. Undoubtedly, the sgraffito of the 'Isis' ship is mentioned, as well as other important finds. Among the Hellenistic finds is a bone astragal bearing the Greek inscription *Σάραπις* – which seems to be previously unpublished – discovered in Chersonesos, which could be connected according to the author to a local Isiac association (p. 78, fig. 2). Further, Podvin goes on and offers an overview of the small finds from the Roman period discovered at Panticapaeum, Chersonesos, Gorgippia and Cepi, concluding that these (especially terracotta statuettes or lamps), created locally, were designed for a not so exigent Isiac audience, if this existed at all (p. 87). It should also be noted that Podvin also presents the gems depicting Isis from Panticapaeum and the difficulties that lie behind their dating (p. 80–81). This aspect once more begs for the creation of a corpus of gems portraying Isis, similar to the one created by Richard Veymiers in 2009 on Sarapis.<sup>7</sup>

Natia Phipia deals with *Isis and Serapis in Ancient Colchis in the Greco-Roman period* (p. 88–97) in trying to contextualize the hoard discovered next to the altar of the sanctuary of Vani, which bears the *basileion* of Isis on the obverse, during the brief control by Mithridates Iunior of Colchis (p. 93–95).<sup>8</sup> Except for this instance, a bronze bust of

<sup>5</sup> DEAC 2017.

<sup>6</sup> None of the papers dealing with this sgraffito in this book cite the reference from the monumental corpus by L. Bricault on the religious instantiations connected to Isis, Sarapis and the other deities of the Isiac circle: RICIS 115/0401.

<sup>7</sup> VEYMIERS 2009 and the subsequent additions and corrections in the *Bibliotheca Isiaca* series.

<sup>8</sup> See also BRICAULT 2008, 220–221.

<sup>3</sup> ATANASSOVA/BRICAULT 2020.

<sup>4</sup> RÜPKE 2018, 72.

Sarapis (not a statuette!) was found at Apsaros, near the south gates of the fortress in an archaeological layer dated to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD (p. 91, fig. 3). Other finds are a bronze finger ring with a mounted nicolo or onyx gem on which the bust of Sarapis facing left was carved (p. 92, fig. 4) for which Phipia draws correct parallels in the works of R. Veymiers cited above. Finally, the coins minted at Trapezus bearing Isiac motifs and deities are mentioned. Perhaps a more detailed analysis of the Isiac imagery of these coins by Phipia would have been needed.<sup>9</sup> Also, it should be noted that Phipia offers a map of 'ancient Georgia' (p. 89, fig. 1) but we would like to draw attention that most of the locations discussed above are not pointed out on that map, a feature that might be difficult to grasp by a reader not familiar with the region of ancient Colchis.

Vassil Tenekedjiev analyzes a previously unpublished epigraphic monument discovered as *spolia* in a Late Antique or early Byzantine edifice from Odessos, in his *Recently Discovered Hellenistic Dedication to Serapis, Isis and Anubis from Odessos* (p. 98–113) which was previously briefly presented.<sup>10</sup> The Greek text which has been transcribed and translated by one of the leading epigraphists from Bulgaria, Nikolay Sharankov (p. 103, 108), mentions some *dekatistai* who dedicated the sanctuary of Sarapis, Isis and Anubis at Odessos sometime during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC. Tenekedjiev focuses, for his part, primarily on the archaeological context of the find, the function of the monument, and the possible location of the sanctuary dedicated to Sarapis in Hellenistic Odessos. We will not analyze the importance of the inscription here in detail, as the historical aspects regarding this text will be published shortly.<sup>11</sup>

Mina Tasseva-Bencheva authored the second and last French paper entitled *Ce que le séjour d'Ovide à Tomes nous apprend sur le culte d'Isis au début de l'Empire* (p. 114–125). Tasseva-Bencheva offers a contextualization of Ovid's passages referring to Isis at Tomis – Pont. 1. 1. 51–54 (p. 118–120), drawing a brief parallel with the religious practices and strategies, agency and pieces of communication of Isism at Tomis and Isism during the Augustan Age, concluding that there is no certainty that the perception of Isism by Ovid was inspired by the actual situation of the Isiac cults at Tomis.<sup>12</sup>

Ștefana Cristea analyzes the situation of Isism at Tomis in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD in a paper entitled *Isis and Sarapis in the Context of the Civic Religion (3<sup>rd</sup> Century CE). Case Study – Moesia Inferior (Tomis)* (p. 126–141). We should specify early on that we have studied firsthand and in detail most of the instantiations of religious communication discussed in this paper related to Isism from Tomis that have survived until now,<sup>13</sup> the results revealing in many instances fresh new readings of the texts, new interpretations and many other scholarly dimensions regarding Isism at Tomis and in the wider region. Reappraising the situation here would necessitate considerable space, necessitate considerable space,

<sup>9</sup> Trapezus is included in the monumental corpus of Isiac coins in the Pontus region (BRICAULT *et alii* 2008, 105 for illustrations of some coin types from Tium).

<sup>10</sup> TENEKEDJIEV 2022.

<sup>11</sup> BRICAULT/TENEKEDJIEV 2024, forthcoming.

<sup>12</sup> For a contextualization of Ovid's passage and Isism at Tomis during, before and after the Augustan period, see also DEAC 2025.

<sup>13</sup> DEAC 2025, *passim*.

and reproducing the end results already in print would make such an effort superfluous.

In her *Orpheus in Egypt* (p. 142–155), Vanya Lozanova Stancheva studies the perception people from Antiquity had about Orpheus as revealed by the literary and papyrological sources from Egypt, whose worship was linked with the Dionysiac cults, especially at Alexandria.

The last contribution is that of Viktoriia Kotenko, called *The Egyptian Veil of the Hellenistic Olbia* (p. 156–167), which focuses on the Egyptian imports found in this important *polis* off the coast of the Black Sea. Perhaps it should be mentioned that one of the (if not the) latest attestations of consecrations of sanctuaries involving the deities of the Isiac circle known outside Rome comes from Olbia, and is dated much later, during the reign of Alexander Severus.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the book ends with a collective list of the bibliographic references used by the authors (p. 168–192).

To conclude, the book edited by Atanassova and Bricault promises early on to be a major contributor to the scholarship regarding Isism in the Black Sea region, helping scholars and other readers alike interested in this field of research to better understand the magnitude of the religious ideas behind the deities of the Isiac circle in Antiquity.

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