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CHAPTER ONE

EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND THE PROBLEM OF GREEKNESS

ISIS IN GREECE: FRAMING THE QUESTION

When Greeks and Romans thought of Egypt, what images came to mind? In a floor mosaic from a house in Thysdrus in Africa Proconsularis, six provincial personifications are grouped around the central figure of Roma, producing an allegory of Rome's Mediterranean-wide power (Plate 1).[1] The province of Egypt wears a yellow short-sleeved chiton with a blue mantle tied diagonally across the chest, a variation on Isis' signature knotted mantle costume (Plate 2). Like Isis, she has her hair arranged in tight corkscrew curls or locks, and an Isiac *sistrum*, a rattle used to make music during Egyptian rites, leans against her left shoulder. What is remarkable here is the collapse between religious and ethnic iconography: Egypt is Isis, and her defining feature is her cult.

The eclectic combination of geographic personification, ethnic identity, and religious iconography in the mosaic is consistent with personifications of Egypt from elsewhere in the empire. In a frieze depicting Roman provinces on the Temple of the Deified Hadrian in Rome's Campus Martius,[2] Sapelli identifies one personification, which wears a crown with rosettes and a long, fringed mantle, as Egypt (Figure 1). Similarly, a relief depicting the *Ethnous Aigyption* ("the Egyptian people") from the Julio-Claudian Sebasteion at Aphrodisias also uses cult-specific dress and iconography to epitomize Egypt.[3]

These three personifications of Egypt rely on the assumption that religion could serve as an effective and legible symbol of Egypt writ large (Figure 2).[4]

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1. Relief from the Hadrianeum in Rome depicting the province of Egypt, later Antonine period. Rome: Palazzo Massimo alle Terme inv. 428497. By concession of the Ministerio per i beni e le attività culturali e per il turismo – Museo Nazionale Romano.

Greek and Roman peoples would have encountered Egyptian migrants and diaspora communities, and in practice the boundaries between ethnicities are never as clear-cut as they are in theory. But the presence of Egyptians in Greece does not mean that exoticizing and imaginative Greco-Roman stereotypes about Egypt disappeared.[5] Cultural anxieties informed how people saw the world constructed in the edges and shadows of the Hellenistic and Roman Empires. Violence and tension often result from migration. Ethnic and cultural boundaries persist, even if only as human constructs. Proximity does not always breed tolerance or cultural competency, and in many cases the opposite is true.

Noticing these connections opens up a challenging question for the study of Greece, a region where nearly every city had a sanctuary to the Egyptian gods: What does it mean for a Greek under the Roman Empire to become a devotee of an Egyptian religion? Many scholars who have worked on Roman Greece, particularly those who have focused on the Second Sophistic,[6] have high-lighted the resurging importance of Classical Greek culture in this period. In these works, which form the core of previous studies on Greekness in the

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2. Statue of Isis in diagonally draped *diplax* costume, thought to be from Rome, Hadrianic period. London: British Museum inv. 1805,0703.11. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Roman Empire, Greek ethnicity was founded on a collapsed temporality that brought an idealized and supposed pure version of the golden age of Athens into the Roman present.[7] Given the ethnic connotations attached to the Egyptian gods, why was the cult so popular and successful? More importantly, how did Egyptian religion impact the Greek devotees' understanding of their position in the Mediterranean world?

This book explores the worship of Egyptian deities in Roman-ruled Greece and the impacts of those cults on ideas of Greek ethnicity. Through their participation in these cults, I argue, Isis devotees constructed a variant form of Greekness, one that broke open Greece's purportedly closed cultural system and located Isis and Sarapis in Greek mythologies, places, and cultures.[8] I consider this new idea of Greekness dissonant but not discrete. That is, devotees probably considered themselves Greeks, even if their translations of Isis and Sarapis produced a variant form of Greek ethnicity embedded in the cults' ideas about Greece, Egypt, and cultural primacy in the Roman Empire.[9]

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This form of Greekness was divided by other intersecting factors, including gender, origins, and economic status. Though dissonant, the group was probably large: nearly a quarter of known Athenian funerary reliefs from the Roman period depict at least one person in Isiac cult costume.[10] There is no way to know if this sample is representative, but it does suggest the existence of a large, vibrant community of Isis devotees.

Despite the cults' popularity, no study of Imperial-period Greece has incorporated Isiac difference or other forms of discrepant experience or intersectionality into their analyses.[11] This book offers a new perspective on the formation and expression of minority forms of ethnicity in the Roman Empire. In contrast with these earlier, inward-looking approaches to Greek ethnicity, I suggest that some Greeks also looked out to the rest of the Mediterranean world to define themselves. Through a careful interdisciplinary study of Isiac cult, I challenge the notion of a singular Greekness in Roman Achaia and Macedonia by highlighting an understudied group that inflected its version of Greek ethnicity with foreign practices and ideas. The wealth of epigraphic, literary, artistic, and archaeological evidence associated with the cults in Greece allows for a fine-grained investigation of how local and regional communities adapted and remade globalizing phenomena.

My approach is grounded in the idea that identities are not monolithic or static but rather form over time and rely on continual processes of self-fashioning and self-location to produce ethnic forms of self-understanding. I organize my discussion around key concepts derived from Brubaker's critiques of ethnicity and identity. In his *Ethnicity without Groups* (2004), Brubaker advocates an approach founded on processes of identification that he calls group-making, self-understanding, self-fashioning, and self-location. These concepts are defined more fully at the end of this chapter and in Chapters 2, 4, 5, and 6, where they are applied to the analysis of case studies, but they are inherently interrelated and contribute jointly to the production of identity and, I argue, to the impact on the textual and material products that result from these communities.

Within the discipline of Isiac studies, excellent studies of Egyptianizing material culture from Italy have appeared, but comparable studies of Greece and other provinces have been largely overlooked.[12] Recent work by Versluys, Swetnam-Burland, Barrett, and Mol has brought more holistic and theoretical approaches to the study of Egyptianizing material culture in Italy, raising questions about the cults' relationships to globalization, power, viewership, and geography.[13] This innovative research has advanced the discipline by integrating the subject of Isiac cults into more prominent dialogues concerning imperialism and cultural change in the disciplines of Roman archaeology and history. But this focus on Italy leaves open the question of how the Egyptian cults interacted with provincial identities and experiences. By looking at Greek material produced under the Roman Empire, my work directs attention to a new geographic area: the provinces.[14]

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Though my focus is material culture from religious contexts, particularly sculpture and architecture, this is not a work of religious history. Rather, this book is a work of materially oriented ethnic history: it examines the ways in which cultural and religious changes impacted traditional narratives of Greekness, and how material and textual objects intervened in these shifts. I work from the assumption that objects play an active and constitutive role in culture's formation and change – that objects have the power to affect human ideas and behavior.[15] My interpretations of material culture, however, require a careful study of the epigraphic and literary evidence. For this reason, the first half of the book focuses on texts related to Isaic cults, as they are critical for establishing the circular and dynamic ways in which, I argue, devotees would have understood and used the objects under discussion in the later chapters.

In terms of geography, I focus on the provinces of Achaia and Macedonia, but I also engage with evidence from the Aegean and Mediterranean islands, particularly with the sanctuaries, inscriptions, and sculptures of Kos, Crete, and Rhodes (Figure 3). My decision to omit Asia Minor reflects my opinion

3. Map of Greece. Ancient World Mapping Center © 2022 (awmc.unc.edu). Used by permission.

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that the region's long and close political connections with Egypt, dating back well into the Bronze Age, may have resulted in a different kind of familiarity with and understanding of Egyptian religion and culture. I expect that the history of Asia Minor's understanding of Greekness in the Roman Empire, as complicated by Isiac cult and local identities fashioned at the city and provincial levels, merits its own study.

In order to construct a narrative that is as textured as possible, I include material from the Hellenistic period through the 3rd century CE. Most examples date to the 1st century through the late 2nd century CE, when the cults were at their height. Wherever possible, I have privileged material with archaeological context over better-known objects. In describing the sanctuaries, I retain the original scholarly nomenclature of the sites, which depends on the language used in early 20th-century academic publications. Consequently, French-excavated Delos has a Sarapieion while German- and Greek-studied Thessaloniki has a Sarapeum.

I focus primarily on material excavated in sanctuaries in order to ensure a heightened focus on the intersection of religion and culture. The funerary portraits that are the subject of Chapter 5 are the exception, but they, I argue, depict the subject in cultic dress connected to specific rituals and consequently emphasize a religious identity. Determining whether an object is religious or not is a difficult task,[16] and I work from the assumption that most monumental architecture and sculpture from a sanctuary site are at least partly religious in nature. This is not to draw a sharp line between the world of cult and the rest of human experience. Recent work by Swetnam-Burland, Mol, and Pearson highlights the fact that not all Egyptianizing material culture is connected with the cult,[17] but my view of the ancient world relies, in part, on the assumption that cult and other aspects of daily life are inseparable.[18] Objects used for ritual could have more prosaic uses in other spatial or even temporal contexts. Ritual activities have an impact on devotees' view of the world around them while also informing their use of Egyptianizing iconography and symbols.

Instead of treating cultural entities like Greekness, Romanness, and Egyptianness as bounded groups whose meanings persist over the long term, I argue that Greek devotees of Isis, through their participation in Egyptian cult, constructed a transcultural form of Greekness that met the challenges of an increasingly connected Roman Empire.[19] I will use the term "Greek" to refer to a commonly held cultural ideal to which a person living in the provinces of Achaia and Macedonia under the Roman Empire could reasonably ascribe. This term is not meant to obscure the existence of migrants and others who might identify with different ethnicities, but to describe those who have chosen, consciously or unconsciously, to participate in the practices of Greekness.[20] I use this term not absolutely, for I do not believe there existed a single, stable, reified group of Greeks. Rather, I keep the term for ease of expression, and ask the reader to grant me this shorthand.

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SETTING THE SCENE: GREECE UNDER ROMAN RULE

The period under discussion is one in which Roman Imperial power impacted day-to-day life in unpredictable and sporadic ways.[21] Roman power first appeared in the region in the 3rd century BCE, and the intensification of Roman control in the 1st century BCE reshaped Greek identity profoundly. Throughout the Hellenistic/Republican period, Greece was a battleground on which Roman troops fought their wars. As their control increased, Roman administrators plundered Greece's artistic and cultural wealth and left cities like Corinth and Athens in disrepair. During the reign of Augustus, tensions flared into small, sporadic rebellions. At the same time, Roman administrators began to use the language of continuity and memory, often expressed through material culture, to build a new narrative of Roman rule as the logical outcome of the Greek past. But Greek communities had agency in the construction of these memories as well. Local communities could come up with their own framing narratives about Roman institutions, power, and people and their relationships with Greek culture and history. As I argue throughout this book, those narratives most often centered Greek culture, ranking it above other provinces in cultural value.

As a corrective to the often halcyon discussions of Roman control in Achaia and Macedonia, in this work I highlight aspects of violence, power, and domination in Greece's colonial experience. Other histories might minimize this violence,[22] but it is important to my argument to place Isiac cults in this context of conquest and foreign rule. While Greece probably had an easier transition to Roman rule than many other provinces, the violence inherent in Roman colonization should not be overlooked.

As early as the 3rd century BCE, the Mithridatic, Syrian, Macedonian, and Achaean Wars placed Roman soldiers in Greece intermittently and resulted in Rome's conquest of Greece. The brutality of these conflicts, sporadic though they were, had major consequences for particular communities. For example, during the Fourth Macedonian War, Corinth sided with Philip VI, the pretender to the Macedonian throne.[23] Strabo disparagingly describes Corinthian conduct in the war, claiming that the city's inhabitants threw mud at passing Roman envoys. Perhaps as a consequence of such behavior, the Roman general Lucius Mummius razed the city of Corinth in 146 BCE and subsequently bestowed the land upon the Sikyonians.[24] Corinth's famous paintings were destroyed, its monumental inscriptions were smashed, and its men were killed.[25] Cicero visited the city sometime between 79 and 77 BCE and described the Corinthians as living among the ruins of their once great city.[26] James demonstrates that after many public buildings in the city, including the North Stoa and the theater, were damaged, along with several public inscriptions, a small, loosely organized community of around 500–1,000

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people remained in Corinth during the period between the sack and 44 BCE, when Julius Caesar refounded the city as a Roman colony.[27]

Similarly, Athens suffered a devastating sack at the hands of Sulla, and throughout the 1st century BCE suffered repeated ravages at the hands of Roman administrators. Verres removed gold from the Parthenon, L. Calpurnius Piso stole more treasures, and the damage from this constant pillaging by Republican officials was not adequately remedied until the end of the reign of Augustus.[28] Elsewhere during the Republican period, Rome intervened in interstate and even some minor intrastate affairs, including the matter of Athenian control over private sanctuaries on Delos, which suggests that Roman rule could extend to day-to-day operations within the Aegean.[29] This control was scattered and disorganized, however, and Greek cities continued to support Rome's dissidents and rivals, including Brutus and Marc Antony, during the civil wars at the end of the Republic.[30] During these wars, many battles were fought on Greek soil, including the Battle of Pharsalus in 48 BCE, the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE, and the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE. These conflicts would have brought soldiers and bloodshed into the Greek countryside and damaged nearby cities and farms.

During the Imperial period, the Roman army maintained a small but mobile presence in Greece. The Legio IV Macedonia was based in the province of Macedonia during Augustus' reign, though it often traveled to the west to aid with Imperial campaigns. Many *coloniae* filled with veterans or Italian migrants were established in important cities like Corinth, Patras, and Dion, and these new arrivals often supplanted Greek elite families in political hierarchies.[31] Troops were stationed in Macedonia intermittently throughout the Julio-Claudian and Flavian periods, but the epigraphic evidence confirms that the Cohors I Flavia Bessorum was stationed in Macedonia sometime in ca. 100–120 CE. More troops were stationed there during Marcus Aurelius' war with the Costoboci, which must have signaled to later emperors that it was necessary to station at least two auxiliary cohorts in the province to protect the Via Egnatia.[32]

Even without a permanent base in Attica, the Roman army was still a visible part of life. Many soldiers appear in Roman-period Athenian inscriptions, which attests to frequent troop movements through the port.[33] Roman military and administrative control coincides with other cultural interventions in the region that shifted the balance of local power. Agrippa and Augustus organized a Panhellenic assembly and granted the majority of votes to Nikopolis, a city Augustus founded to commemorate his victory over Marc Antony and Cleopatra. This new institution shifted the intraregional power balance away from Thessaly, its historical and symbolic center, placing it instead in the hands of a new city filled with migrants.[34]

Throughout the late Julio-Claudian and the Flavian periods, emperors and wealthy elites continued to visit Greece and dedicate buildings and sculptures.

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Many of their artistic and architectural activities reveal a desire to rewrite historical and material narratives to introduce Roman rule at earlier periods of Greek history. Caligula was said to have taken the Phidian statue of Zeus from Olympia for reuse in a new cult dedicated to himself at Rome,[35] and Nero famously inscribed his name on the Parthenon and caused all of the Panhellenic festivals to be held in the same year.[36]

These interventions were part of a broader pattern of reinventing the Greek past to suit contemporary needs.[37] Many monuments were reconstructed to strengthen Roman claims to membership in local Greek communities. Shear has identified a series of sixteen Classical and Hellenistic bronze portrait statues from the Athenian Akropolis that were refashioned to depict Roman consuls and elites, and Platt has identified two more from Oropos that were rededicated as Appius Claudius Pulcher and Marcus Agrippa.[38] These monuments are early examples of a revisionist cultural strategy used by Roman elites and emperors in the city throughout the Imperial period. Among the Athenian statue bases, seven had the name of the Classical-era subject erased, and nine contain a dedication to a Roman carved underneath or alongside the original Classical inscription, constructing an analogy between the two subjects.[39] The monuments were selected for their artists' signatures, including those of famous Classical sculptors like Praxiteles and Kritios and Nesiotes, which placed the monuments at an early date and established epigraphic connections to prominent 5th- and 4th-century BCE Athenians like Hegelochos, a veteran of the Persian Wars.[40] These statues, then, offered their Roman subjects an opportunity to insert themselves into earlier historical narratives and to claim equivalence with the Greek heroes whose portraits remained on the statue bases.

This retrospective approach became especially useful during the early Imperial period, when much of the city needed repairs after Sulla's sack and the neglect of the Late Republican era. Toward the end of his reign, Augustus, with Marcus Agrippa, rebuilt Athens in historically significant areas. In the Agora, they dedicated several new temples atop old sanctuaries, often bringing in Classical architectural elements from sites in the Attic countryside, enriching Athens while leaving the rest of Attica depleted.[41] Though earlier scholars saw these monuments as an infilling effort aimed at curtailing Athenian democracy, more recent work has documented the continuity between these new Roman monuments and the temples that preceded them.[42] These monuments, then, glossed over the history of Roman conquest and violence; instead, they support the argument that Romans played a constructive role in the creation of these touchstones of the Athenian landscape.

Some revisionist monuments, however, broke with the past entirely. Among the most intrusive was a monument to Augustus and Roma erected on the Akropolis. This small monopteral temple was probably dedicated by an elite Greek man from Marathon. It stood just a few meters to the east of and

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directly in line with the Parthenon's main entrance.[43] The dedication of this temple, one of the first dedicated to Augustus, might have been unpopular because of Augustus' punitive actions against the city early in his reign.[44] Scholars have compared the somewhat unusual monopteral design with representations of an unexecuted temple at Rome that would have commemorated Augustus' victory over the Parthians.[45] The effect of these monuments is thus twofold. It set Augustus and Rome among the city's most venerated Classical cults in the city and served as a constant reminder of Rome's conquest and control over the city.

Though the evidence suggests that local elites adapted quickly to Roman rule, these material interventions were remarkable enough to provoke occasional small acts of resistance.[46] In an evocative passage from the 2nd–3rd century CE historian Cassius Dio (54.7.2–4), a statue of Athena on the Akropolis responds to Augustus' decision to free Aegina from Athenian control in 22/21 BCE by turning to the west and spitting blood.[47] The passage clearly refers to Athena's displeasure at Roman colonial control, and by extension that of Athens – but the act of spitting blood suggests a grave and perhaps even a mortal injury. Hoff interprets Dio's account literally and suggests that the Athenians, who were angry at the loss of territory and tax revenue, moved the image and defaced it in protest.[48] Given the long history of active statues in Greek literature and thought, I argue that the passage is metaphorical and alludes to a conquered and weakened Athens.[49] As the residents of a city that was the site of repeated warfare throughout the 1st century BCE and the victims of restrictive Augustan regulation, many Athenians may have seen themselves as battered and broken, just like Athena's statue.

As Roman power over Greece solidified, such material narratives of historical continuity and the Romanness of the Greek past intensified. Elites and intellectuals in the Antonine period cultivated the definition of the boundaries of Greekness at both the institutional and individual levels. During his reign, the emperor Hadrian devoted special attention to Athens and invested in building and political projects that integrated the city's Classical past with the ideologies of the Roman present, including an arch that represented him as a founder of Athens by comparing him to the mythological hero Theseus (Figure 4).[50] Hadrian's Arch follows contemporary styles of monumental architecture in Greece and Asia Minor and features a theatral façade, which must have held at least three portrait statues above a single-bay arch. A mirrored pair of inscriptions, one on either side, divided Athens in two. On the western face of his arch, Hadrian inscribed: "This is the city of Hadrian, and not of Theseus." On the eastern side: "This is Athens, the ancient city of Theseus."[51] The pairing of Hadrian and Theseus creates an equivalence between the two. More importantly, it suggests that Hadrian belongs among

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