

# The Imperial Iseum in Benevento and its Zoomorphic Gods

Rosanna Pirelli

## Introduction

“Regnal year eight, under the majesty of the Horus “Strong Bull,” the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Lord of the [Two] Lands.....: a splendid sanctuary was built to Isis the Great, Lady of Benevento, and her Ennead, and a large obelisk was erected by Rutilius Lupus...”<sup>1</sup>

These are the words on the third face of one of the two obelisks in Benevento. Together with the texts on the other sides, they inform us that, in 88/89 AD, Rutilius Lupus erected a temple in the Samnite city and dedicated it to the goddess Isis to celebrate the emperor’s victorious conclusion of the Dacian wars.<sup>2</sup>

Although none of the ancient buildings found so far in Benevento can be attributed to an Iseum, the existence of such a temple is confirmed by a large number of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic statues, a few epigraphs and some architectural elements.

With the exception of one of the obelisks - now erected in Piazza Papiniano but documented in front of the Cathedral as early as 1597 - most of the remains were found in 1903 by Almerico Meomartini in a section of the foundations of the ancient city walls,<sup>3</sup> which probably date from the 4th century AD.<sup>4</sup> Other materials were brought to light between the end of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century in various sectors of the city.<sup>5</sup>

Of the nearly fifty finds, almost all of a very high quality, numerous statues represent “pharaohs”, in both human and sphinx form, two are

---

<sup>1</sup> The text here supplements the inscription on obelisk A (erected in Piazza Papiniano in Benevento) with that on obelisk B, kept in the Museo del Sannio, and is based on the recent translation by Luigi Prada 2022.

<sup>2</sup> Müller 1969: in this paper the Italian version, translated by Silvio Curto, will be used: 1971, 13-16; Prada op. cit.

<sup>3</sup> Meomartini, Marucchi, Savignoni 1904.

<sup>4</sup> Rotili 2013 and 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Müller 1971, 21-25 and 107-110.

anthropomorphic deities, three depict female worshipers, four are priests, while several sculptures represent sacred animals: four hawks, two baboons, four Apis bulls, and a number of uraei on the head of the Benevento pharaoh's "portraits".

This extraordinary set of artefacts belonging to different historical periods, from the Pharaonic to the Ptolemaic and finally Roman times, is one of the largest concentrations of Egyptian and Egyptianising materials belonging to a single cultic context of the Imperial period outside Egypt.<sup>6</sup>

In 1969, Wolfgang Müller published a thorough analysis of the Iseum of Benevento. This has long been (and still is) considered a fundamental study of this temple, being much more than a simple catalogue of "Isiac" materials. It is an exhaustive and effective overview of the introduction of the cults of Egyptian divinities to Benevento, their spread, their relationship with the original cults in Egypt, as well as their relationship with other oriental cults in the Samnite city.<sup>7</sup>

In his introductory observations, Müller emphasised the imperial character of the sanctuary, strongly arguing that Domitian was the true patron of the erection of the temple at Benevento and that the sculptural decoration expressed a clear symbolism of power based on the Pharaonic tradition.

Since 1997, a series of exhibitions<sup>8</sup> and a conference organised in 2005 in Benevento have awakened a new interest in the Samnite Iseum,<sup>9</sup> and various scholars have begun to discuss Müller's interpretation, in some cases sharing his opinion, in others challenging it. A lively debate has arisen (it is not yet concluded) and various questions have been raised about the identification of the royal statues, the provenance and cultural milieu of the artists, the

---

<sup>6</sup> Pirelli 2006a; *id.* 2007.

<sup>7</sup> From then on, materials from the Benevento Iseum have often been cited in works dealing with Isiac cults in the Roman imperial period, both in the series *Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romaine* (EPRO), published by Brill in the second half of the last century, later merged into RGRW, and in single monographs and papers, but without adding much to what Müller had already established.

<sup>8</sup> Arslan 1997: catalogue of the exhibition "Iside, il mito, il mistero, la magia"; it was followed a few years later by De Caro 2006, catalogue of the exhibition "Egittomania: Iside e il Mistero".

<sup>9</sup> The proceedings of the study day, entitled "The Temple of Isis at Beneventum. Comparative models and new studies of the Isiac collection of the Museo del Sannio", held in honour of Stefania Adamo Muscettola, have not been published, but a small volume published by Electa, *Il culto di Iside a Benevento*, contains two articles on the Iseum: Pirelli 2007; Bragantini 2007, which reproduced the essays by the two authors, published in De Caro 2006.

provenance and symbolism of the stones employed, the location of the temple, its nature and appearance, the significance of this temple in relation to Domitian's self-representation, and the relationship of this monument to other temples dedicated to Isis and scattered throughout the Empire.<sup>10</sup>

Already in 1997, in his review of the volume by Lembke on the Iseum Campense,<sup>11</sup> Versluys again drew attention to the significance of the Egyptian and Egyptianising materials within a temple dedicated to Isis outside Egypt. He stated: "There does not seem to be any special criteria in the choice of the Egyptian artefacts which seem to have been chosen on purely practical grounds.....They emphasise the foreign and exotic character: the age or original meaning was not important.", and a little further: "Sometimes even the original meaning is lost: thus sacred baboons may become monkeys."<sup>12</sup>

In 2015, Kristine Bülow Clausen devoted a completely new study to this lost "monument",<sup>13</sup> the results of her analysis being published in her PhD thesis, *The Flavian Isea in Beneventum and Rome. The Appropriation of Egyptian and Egyptianising Art in Imperial Beneventum and Rome*. As the title suggests, the volume is, however, not a monograph on the temple of Benevento, but a comparative analysis of the two Isea built during Domitian's principate. The author retraces the previous studies of the topic since Müller's publication, and then focuses on points that had been little discussed until that time, namely the relevance of some Hellenistic-style sculptures to both the Isea. The scholar's aim was to challenge the traditionally accepted reconstruction that theorises the almost exclusively Egyptian nature and visual appearance of these two Isea by laying particular emphasis on the possible dialogue between the "Egyptian/Egyptianising" and "Graeco-Roman" sculptures.

Between 2010 and 2018, Pfeiffer also contested Müller's interpretation. He based his argument on the flimsiness (as he saw it) of the data used to maintain the importance of the Egyptian element in the formulation of the imperial image of Domitian, and to demonstrate his direct involvement in the construction of the two Isea, including the choice of furnishings and texts - especially those of the three obelisks - intended to describe him as a pharaoh.

---

<sup>10</sup> Pirelli 1997, *id.* 2006, *id.* 2016; Bragantini 2006; *id.* 2018; Vergineo 2010; Pfeiffer 2010, *id.* 2018; Bülow Clausen 2012 (to cite but a few).

<sup>11</sup> Lembke 1994.

<sup>12</sup> Versluys 1997. A similar opinion had been already expressed some years before by Roulet (1972, 13).

<sup>13</sup> Bülow Clausen 2015.

He argued that the emperor's interest in Egyptian decorations can best be described as evidence of an Egyptian fashion, and “a dedication erected in honour of Domitian that presents him as a pharaoh does not mean that Domitian himself wanted to be regarded as pharaoh. It only tells us that his subjects regarded both Egyptian religion and their emperor positively and wanted to create a direct relation between the two”. Furthermore, “More conclusive evidence is needed to demonstrate that Domitian really wanted to be pharaoh; and if this is not possible, one could interpret the obelisk’s inscriptions as a representation of Domitian as expressed by Egyptian priests, who attributed [to] Domitian the power of a pharaoh.”<sup>14</sup>

I cannot address all the complex and stimulating questions that some of their theses open up, because this would take us too far from our topic.<sup>15</sup> Thus, in order to stimulate some reflections on some the issues raised, my paper will briefly present the Isiac sculptures of the Iseum of Benevento by attempting to reconstruct, at least virtually, their context, and will analyse the symbolism of the zoomorphic deities with a particular focus on their role in the representation of Domitian's imperial image.

## Materials from the temple of Benevento

Although we have not yet found the cultic context to which the numerous Isiac artefacts belonged, we can hypothesise that it would have been a building similar to other imperial Isea that are documented both from archaeological evidence in Egypt and beyond (Iseum and Sarapeum in Luxor,<sup>16</sup> Pompeii,<sup>17</sup> Carthago Nova,<sup>18</sup> to name but a few) and by coeval representations (the paintings of Pompeii and Herculaneum,<sup>19</sup> the mosaic of Palestrina,<sup>20</sup> and depictions on coins<sup>21</sup>). This means a chapel in Hellenistic

---

<sup>14</sup> Pfeiffer 2018.

<sup>15</sup> A new monograph is being prepared by the present writer, hopefully to be published in 2024, which is intended not only to update the catalogue of ‘Isiac’ materials from Benevento, but also to address in detail the issues mentioned here.

<sup>16</sup> Golvin et al. 1981.

<sup>17</sup> De Caro (ed.) 1992.

<sup>18</sup> Noguera Celdrán 2021.

<sup>19</sup> MANN inv. 8975 (Pompeii); MANN inv. 8924 e 8919 (Herculaneum).

<sup>20</sup> Meyboom 1995.

<sup>21</sup> Vespasian, AD 71: Berlin, Münzkabinett, former collection Martinetti 1748; Domitian AD 94-96, 2 coins from London BM.

style, possibly erected on a podium, in some cases prostyle tetrastyle, in others peripteral, and perhaps surrounded by a portico<sup>22</sup>.

Concerning the typology of the finds, as in many Isiac contexts of the imperial era, the sculptural furnishings of the Iseum of Benevento consisted both of Egyptianising sculptures, made in Roman times (in Italy),<sup>23</sup> and statues and materials from the Pharaonic and Ptolemaic periods, imported from Egypt. For our discussion, however, I do not think it is useful to deal separately with them following a chronological order, because it is clear that the most ancient materials were fully integrated in the figurative and textual program of the imperial temple. Hence I will proceed by presenting the finds according to the subjects represented, in increasing order of importance within a cultic context: the worshippers, the priests, the sovereign, the gods.

#### *The worshippers*

Among the most original sculptures, it is worth mentioning three marble statues of kneeling women, sculpted in a definitely 'Hellenistic' style.<sup>24</sup> The group is very unusual indeed, for more than one reason: a) their clothing, a long draped dress, characterised on the breast with the typical knot, identifies them as figures belonging to the Isiac circle. However, the lack of the heads in all three cases prevents us from being more precise about their real nature. Were they generic representations of women in the act of prayer or portraits of real Isiac worshippers?<sup>25</sup> b) Another consideration concerns the kneeling pose: in Greek and Roman art, the kneeling figure represents the vanquished or the suppliant, but it is a common attitude of statues in prayer and in adoration in Egyptian contexts.<sup>26</sup> Thus, despite the material (marble is very rare if not completely absent in Egyptian statuary) and the 'Hellenistic' style, there is no reason to doubt that they were pertinent to the Iseum; but c) it is worth mentioning that no other specimen of this type of statue is known from any other imperial temple dedicated to Isis.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> In a forthcoming paper, I will propose possible comparisons also with coeval Imperial temples in Egypt.

<sup>23</sup> On this subject, see Roulet 1972, 19.

<sup>24</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 285 (inv. 1923); 287 (inv. 1925); 290 (inv. 1928).

<sup>25</sup> As Irene Bragantini suggests (2018, 243-259).

<sup>26</sup> As is also shown in the "Egyptianising" scene from Herculaneum: MANN, inv. 8919.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Eingartner 1991.

*The priests*

1. A fragmentary block statue of the royal scribe Neferhotep is a sculpture of the Pharaonic period,<sup>28</sup> for which a range of dates from the Ramesside to the 22nd dynasty has been proposed;<sup>29</sup> originally, it was certainly set up in the temple complex dedicated to the god Ptah in the city of Memphis.
2. Three statues of priests belong to the Roman imperial period:
  - a) one, a priest with a long draped dress decorated with fringes, and originally holding a sistrum (now missing)<sup>30</sup> certainly dates from the reign of Domitian;
  - b) the other two, completely covered by a long cloak that also hides their hands holding Canopic divinities,<sup>31</sup> belonged, according to Müller, to the Hadrianic period.<sup>32</sup> I would express some doubts about this chronology, because their human scale, together with their material and technical details, could possibly associate them with two statues that we will see later, one representing Domitian and the other an anthropomorphic deity. In addition, a direct comparison can be made between the three priests' statues and a painting from Herculaneum (MANN inv. 8924) representing an Isiac ceremony and dated to the 1st century AD at the latest.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>28</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 282 (inv. 1920).

<sup>29</sup> According to Müller (1971, 86), it belongs to the 22nd dynasty; but Frood, forthcoming, re-dates it to the 19th Dynasty (Personal communication).

<sup>30</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 286 (inv. 1924).

<sup>31</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 284 (1822); 288 (inv. 1926).

<sup>32</sup> The "Canopic" divinities seem to be a creation not prior to the first century BC/beginning first century AD (for an assessment of this subject, see: Wild 1981, 113-123), while hardstone statues on a human scale holding them are attested by the imperial era and are not very numerous. As stone sculptures in the round – in addition to the pair in Benevento – we know of one example in the museum of Alexandria (inv. 4309), one in the Museo del Tesoro di Sant'Eulalia in Cagliari, and one from the underwater excavations off the Abuqir coast (National Museum Alexandria, SCA 449). In this respect, Bülow Clausen remarks that they seem to be connected only with Alexandria, Rome and Benevento (Bülow Clausen 2015, 261), stating that "these three cities seem to have played a particular role in the advent of the Flavian dynasty", but she evidently missed the specimen in Cagliari.

<sup>33</sup> Another point of doubt is whether the two statues are actually 'twins'. Some observations made by the writer might lead one to reconsider the relationship between the two sculptures, one of which could be a (later) copy of the other.

*The pharaoh*

Three anthropomorphic statues depict pharaohs.

1. The most ancient is a fragmentary statue of king Mery-shepses-ra (13th dynasty), coming from Karnak;<sup>34</sup>
2. the others belong to the Roman imperial era:
  - a) one is probably the most representative statue of the Iseum; its attribution to Domitian is today almost universally accepted;<sup>35</sup>
  - b) the last is a later “Roman pharaoh”, probably Caracalla.<sup>36</sup>

The sculpture depicting Domitian can be considered a very distinctive example of a mixed style, as it clearly points to the artist's intention to combine two very different ways of representing the human being: the Egyptian, characterised by a rigid pose and a face not marked by physiognomic features, and the Hellenistic, in which, in addition to a greater dynamism of the bodies, the features of the face and facial expressions are intended to individualise the portrait. In this sculpture, the face is characterised by irregular and marked features, the mouth is protruding and framed by expression lines, the eyes are asymmetrical, the ears very accentuated and the uraeus — also asymmetrical — is rendered in an almost “naturalistic” way.<sup>37</sup> According to Capriotti Vittozzi's convincing analysis, the sculpture could be attributed to a “coherent group” also containing the following statues, on the basis of precise stylistic and technical analogies:<sup>38</sup> a head of Amon now held in the Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich<sup>39</sup>, a royal head in Pharaonic style with double crown, now held in the Museum of Florence<sup>40</sup> and the face of one of the sphinxes from the Campo Marzio, now held in the Capitoline Museums.<sup>41</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 268 (inv. 1904).

<sup>35</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 260 (inv. 1903); although Bülow Clausen mentions it with a question mark (2015, 98).

<sup>36</sup> According to Müller 1971, cat. 264 (inv. 2165).

<sup>37</sup> This type of uraeus is considered one of the typical features of Domitianic sculpture (Barbagli 2021, 258-263). Since the complex issue of the identification of the Domitianic portraits cannot be addressed here, the reader is referred to Bergman, Zanker 1981, 317-412.

<sup>38</sup> Capriotti Vittozzi 2003, 340-346; *id.* 2014, 237-259.

<sup>39</sup> Inv. GL 68.

<sup>40</sup> Florence, Museo Egizio (inv. 8650).

<sup>41</sup> Musei Capitolini, Inv. Scu 33; Rouillet 1972, 133-134 (cat. 280);

This last sculpture gives us the opportunity to introduce another group of statues in which the sovereign takes the traditional form of the sphinx, where the lion embodies one of the sovereign's prerogatives, namely that of protecting the sacred precinct from internal and external enemies and contamination by the profane. Some sphinx heads - which unfortunately cannot be connected with any of the bodies still extant - come from Benevento, together with several headless sphinxes of different sizes and kinds of stone, of which at least 8 are of pink granite and of large dimensions.<sup>42</sup> It is likely that this ensemble of sphinxes flanked a rather long path to the temple.

#### *Anthropomorphic gods*

1. A granite head of Isis<sup>43</sup> may have belonged to one of the goddess's cult statues. On the basis of the type of granite and style, Müller suggested that the statue came from Behbeit el-Hagara, the monumental granite temple in the Delta erected for Isis by Nectanebo II and completed by Ptolemy II and III;<sup>44</sup>
2. the remains of an Isis Pelagia<sup>45</sup> is preserved only as a boat where the feet of the goddess are visible. Even in its present condition, we can tell that the sculpture must have been of refined workmanship. Since the 3rd century BC, texts described and revered Isis as the creator of navigation and the protector of sailors<sup>46</sup>. The type is known from bas-reliefs, numerous images on coins, and a group of statues, almost all dating from the 1st-2nd century AD,<sup>47</sup> and our specimen might have been from the time of Domitian or, according to Müller, even earlier.<sup>48</sup>
3. According to archival sources, a head of Sarapis may also come from Benevento, although we cannot confirm this with any certainty.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> The last one – a large fragment of a red granite sphinx - was found during excavations by the local Superintendency in the area of the cathedral in 2009 (personal communication by Simone Foresta).

<sup>43</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 261 (inv. 2166).

<sup>44</sup> Favard Meeks 1991.

<sup>45</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 279 (inv. 1917).

<sup>46</sup> Bricault 2020, 289.

<sup>47</sup> *Ivi*, 109-128.

<sup>48</sup> Müller 1971, 77-89.

<sup>49</sup> I.N. 2574, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, purchased in Rome in 1911 through Helbig from the engineer Petrucci; its provenance from Benevento was recorded by Poulsen 1951, 349. Kater-Sibbes 1973, cat. 573, 106 (personal communication by Italo Iasiello).



4. The headless statue of an anthropomorphic deity was interpreted by Müller as an image of Anubis,<sup>50</sup> one of the deities of the Isiac circle<sup>51</sup> - a god who listens to suppliants, brings victory and succour, like the other deities of the Isiac gens<sup>52</sup> - but the absence of the head raises some doubts. If the god was represented in keeping with Egyptian iconography, we would expect a canine head covered with a tripartite wig falling over the shoulders (while a fully anthropomorphic appearance is very rare). In an early Roman iconography, the god (in his Hermanubis form) still had a canine head and wore a cloak or perhaps military garb. In the first case the shoulders should have traces of hair; in the second, the god would have a different garment. Should we conjecture a hybrid image? In any case, it is interesting to remark that the first dated attestations of a fully anthropomorphic image of Hermanubis occur during the principate of Domitian. In them the god appears, with a youthful human face, with thick short hair, which does not fall over his shoulders, and surmounted by a *kalathos*, on coins from the mint of Alexandria, in year 11 of his reign (i.e. 91/2 CE).<sup>53</sup> The Egyptian style of this statue however makes it difficult to imagine such a type of head. So, at the present stage of our knowledge, we have to leave the question undecided. It should be remarked, however, that the statue seems to form a pair with that of Domitian and was probably placed symmetrically in relation to it. The Egyptian style, dimensions, and type of stone make the two sculptures somewhat complementary, an impression that is heightened - as Irene Bragantini has pointed out<sup>54</sup> - by the fact that the statue of Domitian is represented in keeping with the traditional Egyptian iconography, with the left leg advanced, while the statue of the god advances the right leg.

#### *Zoomorphic gods*

1. Four falcons are present among the Egyptian material from Benevento.<sup>55</sup> As is well known, the falcon is the earliest animal and divine power to which the Egyptian sovereign was assimilated, and its role inside the

---

<sup>50</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 281 (inv. 1919).

<sup>51</sup> For a general introduction to the god Anubis, from the Pharaonic to Roman times, see Grenier 1977; for a recent reassessment, see Malaise 2014, 73-93.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> Bragantini 2018, 243-262.

<sup>55</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 253 (inv. 1894); 254 (inv. 1895); 255 (inv. 1896); 269 (inv. 1907).

temple does not need any explanation. But the presence of four statues (two from the Pharaonic era and two from Roman times) leads us to assume that the value attributed to it in this temple was of considerable importance. The sculptures were probably placed symmetrically along a path to the temple, perhaps alternating with sphinxes and other statues. However, if we consider that Nectanebo II - the last indigenous ruler before the Second Persian dynasty and the Macedonian conquest – was the object of a particular cult as a falcon during his reign and throughout the Ptolemaic period,<sup>56</sup> one wonders whether the statues of Benevento may not be related to the popularity of the figure of Nectanebo II in the Hellenistic world. We should remember that his name means “Horus is victorious in Hebyt”, i.e. in Behbeit el-Hagara, and we know that one of the blocks of Nectanebo II found in the Iseum Campense comes from this temple, and that, according to Müller the head of Isis may also come from the same site.<sup>57</sup>

2. Like the falcon (and the uraeus, see below), the bull was linked to the royal figure from the earliest stages of Egyptian history; as a specific manifestation of Apis (one of the gods of the Isiac circle<sup>58</sup>), it has its centre of worship in Memphis. It is first identified as a son of Ptah and then assimilated to the god himself. In documents of the Graeco-Roman period, the sovereign is defined as the heir, friend or son of Apis, to whom the power of procreation and regeneration of the royal strength is attributed.<sup>59</sup> The presence of three statues of Apis bulls<sup>60</sup> (one currently standing outside the museum on a base in Viale San Lorenzo) allows us to affirm the god’s leading role in the Iseum of Benevento. This is further confirmed by another image of a bull forming part of the decoration in high-relief of a small marble fragment of a frieze.<sup>61</sup> Yet another image of a bull was hypothesised by Müller as forming part of another fragmentary wall decoration (at the time composed of two pieces, a third being lost<sup>62</sup>), whose subject the author had reconstructed by comparison

---

<sup>56</sup> Gorre 2009, 55-69.

<sup>57</sup> Müller 1971, 57-58.

<sup>58</sup> Kater-Sibbes, Vermaseren 1975.

<sup>59</sup> For its iconography and epithets, see LGG 5, 115-119; for a recent synthesis of its solar aspects in the Late and Ptolemaic periods, see Marković 2021.

<sup>60</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 270 (inv. 1908); 280 (inv. 1918).

<sup>61</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 250 (inv. 1891).

<sup>62</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 257 (inv. 1898); 258 (inv. 1899).

with a scene from a coeval tomb of Kom el Shugafa (Alexandria). This portrayed the king honouring the zoomorphic god protected by the wings of Isis.<sup>63</sup>

3. The presence of baboons in both of Domitian's Isiac monuments (two in Benevento,<sup>64</sup> three in Campo Marzio<sup>65</sup>) creates a close bond with Thoth and his city, Hermoupolis, where in the time of Domitian a temple was erected to Nehemet-away,<sup>66</sup> Thoth's wife, to be also identified with Isis. Thoth as the god of wisdom and writing was also considered the vizier of Ra. The same god in his assimilation to Hermes is connected to Isis in the Kyme aretalogy, for instance, where she says, "I was taught by Hermes and with Hermes I devised letters."<sup>67</sup> The Ariccia relief<sup>68</sup> could also be interpreted in the same way. The central female figure, to be identified with Isis, holds a roll of papyrus on her lap and is surrounded by various figures, including two pairs of baboons. Lembke connects the relief with the Iseum of Campo Marzio.<sup>69</sup> Interestingly, we have to remark that Domitian's activity was very intense in Middle Egypt, between Akhmim and Hermoupolis, the whole region being linked to Thoth, where it has also been hypothesised that local priests could have been responsible for some expressions and spellings characteristic of the titulary of the Pamphilj obelisk and of the two in Benevento.<sup>70</sup>
4. The last zoomorphic divinity that I will speak of briefly is the cobra-goddess Wadjyt placed on the forehead of the sovereign since very ancient times.<sup>71</sup> As stated above, one of the typical features of Domitian's portraits – including those in Benevento – is the so-called "naturalistic" uraeus,<sup>72</sup> characterised by striped coils, non-symmetrical volutes and a

---

<sup>63</sup> Müller 1971, 22, 50-54, fig. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Müller 1971, cat. 252 (inv. 1893); 256 (inv. 1896).

<sup>65</sup> Rouillet 1972, cat. 345, 193; cat. 366, 198.

<sup>66</sup> Snape 1989.

<sup>67</sup> Grant 1953, 131.

<sup>68</sup> Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Altemps, inv. 77255.

<sup>69</sup> Lembke 1994, 174-176; on the same subject, see also more recently, Capriotti Vittozzi 2014.

<sup>70</sup> For a wide examination of the subject, see Capriotti Vittozzi (2018) and Barbagli 2021, 186-188.

<sup>71</sup> Although there are no freestanding sculptures depicting the goddess Wadjyt among the materials in Benevento, I feel that the emphasis placed on this zoomorphic deity - demonstrated both by the peculiarities of her morphology in Domitian's portraiture and by the texts of his obelisks (see below) - deserves some consideration in this section.

<sup>72</sup> See above: note 36.

rather upright hood, which reflects the actual attack position of the cobra. The cobra is one of the natural powers depicted on Predynastic objects, and was transformed very early - in the 1st Dynasty - into a divine power associated with the king both as one of the symbols of his *nebty* title and in aggressive scenes of conquest. The snake's ability to launch sudden attacks, its aggressiveness, dangerousness and strength, made it one of the principal symbols of the sovereign in the early stages of the unification of the two lands and the conquest of foreign regions.<sup>73</sup> After a period of absence from the royal iconography - probably due to the need for a reformulation of its symbolism, then closely associated with the solar aspects of the king and his protection<sup>74</sup> - from the 4th Dynasty (reign of Djedefre), the cobra as a uraeus became a constant symbol of royalty. In the New Kingdom, when the military aspect of the pharaoh became one of the main prerogatives of the king - think for example of his Horus name constantly introduced by the expression *k3-nht*, "powerful bull" (except in the case of Hatshepsut) - the uraeus resumed its aggressive nature. It is called for instance "*The Wadjet of Pharaoh who burns the corpses of foreign enemies*"; or "*The lady of fire*" as an epithet of the eye of Ra who annihilates enemies.<sup>75</sup> Some of these expressions are also present in the Saitic period (the age of Egyptian renaissance), but if we look at the references to the goddess in Ptolemaic and Roman times, we will find her inserted above all in religious ceremonies and cultic contexts, without any reference to her aggressive nature.

Now if we turn to the textual evidence in hieroglyphic writing from the time of Domitian, some expressions from the faces of his obelisks (the two in Benevento and the one in the *Iseum Campense*) appear very distinctive, as on the whole they reflect epithets and features typical of the royal figure from the Pharaonic era with a remarkable degree of fidelity.<sup>76</sup> Domitian is

---

<sup>73</sup> Vinci 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Pirelli 2006b.

<sup>75</sup> LGG 2, 269-273.

<sup>76</sup> Domitian is one of the few emperors who had a complete Pharaonic titulary composed for him (on this point, see also Ciampini 2005). This was very rare for Roman emperors even in Egypt, although we have two cases documented in temples built during Domitian's reign: the temple of Aswan dedicated to Khnum, Satet e Anuket (Hölbl 2004, 37-39 and bibliography); and that devoted to Nehemet-Away in Hermoupolis (Snape 1989). We should also not forget that Domitian was the first emperor who certainly had original texts composed

described, for instance, as “The Horus ‘Strong Youth’, the Two Ladies ‘He Who Conquers through Might’, the Golden Falcon ‘Powerful of Years and Great of Triumph’, The King of Upper and Lower Egypt ‘Emperor Caesar’, son of Ra ‘Domi[t]jian’, ever-living, he who collects tribute from the Two Lands and the subjugated foreign countries”<sup>77</sup> (face 1 of the Benevento obelisk B); or “the Horus ‘Strong Bull’, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Lord of the [Two] Lands, the God, the Son of the God, Beloved of all the Gods, the Son of Re, the Lord of Crowns ‘Domitian’, ever-living”<sup>78</sup> (face 3 of the Benevento obelisks); while on face 2 of the Pamphilj obelisk, originally erected in the Iseum Campense, we read: “Horus: beloved by the Two Lands, ruler of the shores. The perfect god, great in strength, with a strong arm, who overthrows enemies, with a mighty arm, .....the earth trembles for fear of him, ....who sits on the throne of Horus, who saves the sanctuaries of the gods, who subdues those who oppose him, who subdues the Nubian tribes, who collects tributes in Asia, whose uraeus pursues the beduins...”<sup>79</sup>

Two features, among others, are particularly revealing: the close link with the sun god and the military aspect of the pharaoh/emperor,<sup>80</sup> both of them being connected with the nature and functions of the uraeus<sup>81</sup>, which symbolises the warlike power of the king, connects him with Ra, and protects him from all enemies.

---

and inscribed in hieroglyphics for his obelisks: uncertainties still persist about the identification of the emperor to whom the Borgia and Albani obelisks were dedicated (Prada 2022, 108-112). As for the Pincian or Barberini obelisk, erected by Hadrian, it was inscribed with original texts between 130 and 138 AD, but was mainly dedicated as a funerary monument to Usir-Antinoös after his death by drowning in the Nile (for a recent translation, see Ciampini 2004, 168-187).

<sup>77</sup> According to the recent translation by Prada 2022, 117.

<sup>78</sup> According to the recent translation by Prada 2022, 133.

<sup>79</sup> For recent translations, see Ciampini 2004, 161-163; Bülow Clausen 2015, 147-148.

<sup>80</sup> It will be useful here to recall that scholars commonly identify the occasion for the erection of the two obelisks of the Samnite Iseum with Domitian’s victorious conclusion of the Dacian wars; so already in Müller (1971, 15), but cf. also Colin, 1993; Bülow Clausen, 2015, 9; Bricault, Gasparini, 2018.

<sup>81</sup> In dealing with the text of the Pamphilj obelisk and with the role of the maternal goddesses mentioned on it, Ciampini (2005) states: “the couple Uadjet and Nekhbet, dynastic patronesses and mothers of the king ...confirm his power by means of milk: with it they suckle the young king, giving to him the divine nature of ruler ....Thus suckling is an expression of the royalty of the triumphant king”.

## Conclusion

Given the theme of this conference, the analysis of the Benevento materials has been conducted by giving a certain space to the role of the divine entities embodied by certain animals (lions/sphinxes, falcons, baboons, Apis bulls, cobras) that represented fundamental aspects of the pharaoh from the very beginning of the Egyptian history. And even from this necessarily limited perspective, I believe that the important emphasis on the symbolism conveyed by these divine images can hardly be explained as Versluys did in dealing with the Iseum Campense.<sup>82</sup>

In my opinion, on the contrary, the Pharaonic and Egyptianising monuments were not chosen for purely decorative purposes or simply to create an exotic setting,<sup>83</sup> but on the basis of a precise requirement: to create a new imperial image based on the ancient and successful model of divine sovereignty embodied by the Egyptian pharaoh and expressed by his assimilation or ties to various divine entities, traditionally represented also by sacred animals; and especially if we consider that the worship of animals was not held in high regard outside Egypt, and particularly in Rome,<sup>84</sup> their marked presence in a cultic context dedicated to an emperor merits close scrutiny. For all these reasons, not only were the age and the original meaning of those materials important, but I would go even further and suggest that their provenance was also significant. I propose, in other words, that the monuments imported from Egypt and inserted in the Iseum may have been collected from those areas which had been in some way functional to the

---

<sup>82</sup> See above.

<sup>83</sup> On the contrary, I had already argued in 1998 that the presence of the *Samtawytefnakhte* monument in the temple of Isis in Pompeii (Pirelli 1998) must be somehow connected to the content of the text engraved on it, despite the fact that the sanctuary in Pompeii is clearly 'non-imperial'. Of a similar opinion is the more recent contribution by Capriotti Vittozzi (2011), who attributes an extremely significant role to the 'dialogue' between Egypt and Rome in the decoration of Isis monuments in Italy, with particular reference to the construction of the image of the Flavian emperors, and more specifically Domitian.

<sup>84</sup> For instance, we can mention Cassius Dio (51.16.5), who says that Octavian "wished to worship gods, not cattle".

formulation of Domitian's regality: Karnak<sup>85</sup>, Hermoupolis,<sup>86</sup> Memphis,<sup>87</sup> Behbeit el-Hagara<sup>88</sup> are all regions connected to the presence – albeit not physical<sup>89</sup> – of the Emperor.

Now, to return to the objections raised by some scholars against Müller's overall interpretation of the Benevento Iseum (as well as the many scholars who agree with him<sup>90</sup>), if we go back to what we have observed, the resulting picture seems to point to specific choices in the composition of texts, symbols and materials that can hardly be attributed only to the will and initiative of a private individual,<sup>91</sup> as might result from Pfeiffer's position.<sup>92</sup> The monumentality and quality of the finds, the integration of the original

---

<sup>85</sup> At Karnak, in the eastern contra-temple of Thutmose III, a structure with an evident solar connotation, Domitian had a monumental portal built and inscribed, and two outer walls of the complex decorated with texts and images dedicated to different manifestations of the solar deity (Klotz 2008).

<sup>86</sup> On this subject, see above p. 316 and note 60.

<sup>87</sup> The statue of Neferhotep in Benevento comes from Memphis, and I suggest that at least two of the Apis bulls may also have come from there (Pirelli forthcoming).

<sup>88</sup> See above, p. 314 and notes 43 and 44.

<sup>89</sup> Unlike Vespasian and Titus, Domitian never travelled to Egypt.

<sup>90</sup> For a summary of the opinions of the proponents of two opposing views on the subject, see Pfeiffer 2018.

<sup>91</sup> Although of great interest, the role of 'private' patronage in the monumental building programmes of the Roman era is not among the aims of this paper and, given its complexity, could not be addressed here. However some short notes may be usefully presented: in Egypt for instance, during the Flavian era, there were monuments that were certainly erected by private individuals and dedicated to the emperors: a stela erected in the complex of Philae for Vespasian (Brophy 2015, 37); a chapel erected by a certain Petronia and her children to Domitian at Kom Ombo (PM VI, 200), and, to the same emperor, a temple (?) at Kom el-Sheikh Ahmed in the oasis of Bahria (Colin 2004, 103-133). However, I agree with scholars who argue that both large-scale building projects, such as those relating to large national temples (in Italy as in Egypt), and regional ones, intended to serve strategic territories for the economic and/or political interests of Rome, must have been undertaken with precise objectives, and would therefore have been approved and supported (at least in part) by the imperial administration, given the scale and complexity of the operations (Kaper 1998, 139-158) and the fundamental role they played in the representation of sovereignty. On this topic, it may be useful to cite Rosso (2010, 167-191), though her contribution deals specifically with the birth of the imperial portraiture of the Flavians and does not address the issue of "Egyptian and Egyptianising" monuments: "la diffusion à très grande échelle d'une image impériale fixe et officielle est nécessairement une opération fortement centralisée, programmée et contrôlée". This is all the more evident in the case of the economic and organisational commitment necessary for the construction of "Egyptian" monuments outside the mother country, which involved the transport of numerous original works from Egypt. On this subject, see Lembke 1994, 135; Bragantini 2007, 19-27; ead. 2018, 243-257.

<sup>92</sup> See above, p. 314, note 14.

Pharaonic materials and those made in Roman times and the dialogue between them, the specific references to royal ideology and Egyptian religious thought, all seem to be the result of a meticulous attempt to construct the image of a sacred sovereign.<sup>93</sup> The monumental manifestation of this image must have been built on a successful and firmly established model,<sup>94</sup> and its visual language and vocabulary, in my opinion, could only be that which adhered most closely to the original tradition.

## Bibliography

- N. Barbagli, 2021. *Faraoni Romani. Rappresentazioni del potere imperiale in Egitto da Augusto a Domiziano* [Unpublished PhD thesis]. Pisa.
- M. Bergman, P. Zanker, 1981. *Damnatio memoriae: Umgearbeitete Nero- und Domitiansporträts; Zur Ikonographie der flavischen Kaiser und des Nerva*, *JDAI* 96, 317-412.
- I. Bragantini, 2006. Il culto di Iside e l'Egittomania antica in Campania, in S. De Caro (ed.), *Egittomania. Iside e il mistero*, 159-167. Napoli.
- I. Bragantini, 2018. A note on the temple of Isis at Beneventum, in M. J. Versluys, K. Bülow Clausen, G. Capriotti Vittozzi (eds.), *The Iseum campense from the Roman Empire to the Modern Age. Temple – Monument – Lieu de Mémoire*, 243-262. Roma.
- L. Bricault, 2020. *Isis Pelagia: Images, Names and Cults of a Goddess of the Seas* [RGRW 190]. Leiden.
- L. Bricault, V. Gasparini, 2018. I Flavi, Roma e il culto di Isis, in C. Bonnet, Ennio Sanzi, *Roma, la città degli dèi. La capitale dell'Impero come laboratorio religioso*, 121-131.
- E. Brophy, 2015. *Royal statues in Egypt. 300BC-AD 220. Context and Function*, *Archaeopress Egyptology* 10.
- K. Bülow Clausen, 2012. Domitian between Isis and Minerva: the dialogue between the "Egyptian" and "Graeco-Roman" aspects of the sanctuary of Isis at Beneventum, *Supplemento MYTHOS* 3, n.s., 93-122.

---

<sup>93</sup> We should not forget that the Roman emperor could only be declared divine after his death by the Senate.

<sup>94</sup> On this subject, see also Ciampini 2005.



- K. Bülow Clausen, 2015. *The Flavian Isea in Beneventum and Rome. The appropriation of Egyptian and Egyptianising Art in imperial Beneventum and Rome*. København.
- G. Capriotti Vittozzi, 2003. Una testa faraonica da File al Museo di Firenze, in N. Bonacasa, P. Minà (eds.), *Faraoni come dei, Tolemei come Faraoni. Atti del V Congresso Internazionale Italo-Egiziano, Torino 8-12 dicembre 2001 (Torino – Palermo 2003)*, 340-346. Torino.
- G. Capriotti Vittozzi, 2014. The Flavians: Pharaonic Kingship between Egypt and Rome, in L. Bricault, M.J. Versluys (eds.), *Power, Politics and the Cult of Isis [RGRW 180]*, 237-259. Leiden.
- E.M. Ciampini, 2004. *Gli obelischi iscritti di Roma*, Istituto Poligrafico e Zecca dello Stato. Roma.
- E.M. Ciampini, 2005. The Pamphili Obelisk: Two Notes on Pharaonic Elements in Domitian Ideology, in M. Sanader, A.R. Miočević (eds.), *Religion and Myth as an Impetus for the Roman Provincial Culture. The Proceedings of the 8th International Colloquium on Problems of Roman Provincial Art*, 399-402. Zagreb.
- F. Colin, 1993. Domitien, Julie et Isis au pays des Hirpins (CIL IX, 1153) et l'obelisque de *Bénévent*, *CdE* 68, 247-260
- F. Colin, 2004. Un temple en activité sous Domitien au Kôm al-Cheikh Ahmad (Bahariya) d'après une dédicace grecque récemment découverte, *BIFAO* 104, 103-133.
- C. Favard-Meeks, 1991. *Le temple de Behbeit el-Hagara. Essai de reconstitution et d'interprétation [BSAK 6]*. Hamburg.
- J.C. Golvin, S.A. el-Hamid, G. Wagner, F. Dunand, 1981. Le petit Sarapeion romain de Louqsor [avec 6 planches], *BIFAO* 81, 115-148.
- G. Gorre, 2009. 'Néctanébo-le-faucon' et la dynastie lagide, *Ancient Society* 39, 55-69.
- F.C. Grant, 1953. *Hellenistic Religions: The Age of Syncretism*. Indianapolis-New York.
- J.C. Grenier, 1977. *Anubis alexandrine et romain [EPRO 57]*. Leiden.
- G. Hölbl, 2004. *Altägypten im römischen Reich. Der römische Pharao und seine Tempel, II Die Tempel des römischen Nubie*. Mainz am Rhein.

- O. Kaper, 1998. Temple building in the Egyptian deserts during the roman period, in O. Kaper (ed.), *Life on the Fringe: Living in the Southern Egyptian Deserts During the Roman and Early-Byzantine Periods*, Proceedings of a Colloquium Held on the Occasion of the 251h Anniversary of the Netherlands Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo, 9 - 12 December 1996, Research School CNWS School of Asian, African, and Amerindian Studies, Leiden, The Netherlands, 139-158.
- G.J.F. Kater-Sibbes, 1973. *Preliminary catalogue of Sarapis Monuments* [EPRO 36]. Leiden.
- G.J.F. Kater-Sibbes, M.J. Vermaseren, 1975. *Apis, I: The monuments of the Hellenistic-Roman Periods from Egypt* [EPRO 48]. Leiden.
- G.J.F. Kater-Sibbes, M.J. Vermaseren, 1975. *Apis, II: Monuments from Outside Egypt* [EPRO 48]. Leiden.
- G.J.F. Kater-Sibbes, M.J. Vermaseren, 1975. *Apis, III: Inscriptions, Coins and Adenda* [EPRO 48]. Leiden.
- D. Klotz, 2008, Domitian at the Contra-Temple of Karnak, *ZÄS* 135, 63-77; pls. XVII-XVIII.
- Ch. Leitz (Hg), 2002. *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* [Orientalia Lovaniensa Analecta]. Leuven.
- K. Lembke, 1994. *Das Iseum Campense in Rom. Studie über del Isiskult unter Domitian*, Archäologie und Geschichte 3. Heidelberg.
- M. Malaise, 1972a. *Les conditions de pénétration et de diffusion des cultes égyptiens en Italie* [EPRO 22]. Leiden.
- M. Malaise, 1972b. *Inventaire préliminaire des documents égyptiens découverts en Italie* [EPRO 21]. Leiden.
- M. Malaise, 2014. Anubis et Hermanubis à l'époque romaine. Who's who?, in L. Bricault, R. Veymiers (eds.), *Bibliotheca Isiaca* III, 73-93. Bordeaux.
- N. Marcović, 2021. « Apis is Ptah, Apis is Ra, Apis is Horus, son of Isis”: the solar aspect of the divine Apis bull and the Royal ideology of the Late period (664-332 BCE), in M. Nuzzolo, J. Krejci eds., *The rise and development of the solar cult and architecture in Ancient Egypt*, Harrassowitz, 235-251.
- A. Meomartini, O. Marucchi, L. Savignoni, 1904. *Notizie degli scavi di antichità*, Atti della Reale Accademia dei lincei, 107-131.

- P.G.P. Meyboom, 1995. *The Nile Mosaic of Palestrina: Early Evidence of Egyptian Religion in Italy* [RGRW 121]. Leiden.
- W. Müller, 1969. *Der Isiskult im antiken Benevent und Katalog der Skulpturen aus den ägyptischen Heiligtümern im Museo del Sannio zu Benevent* [MÄS XVI]. Berlin.
- W. Müller, 1971. *Il culto di Iside nell'Antica Benevento. Catalogo delle Sculture provenienti dai santuari egiziani dell'Antica Benevento nel Museo del Sannio* [Saggi e Studi del museo del Sannio, Biblioteca Storica e Archivio Storico Provinciali di Benevento, II]. Benevento.
- J.M., Noguera Celdrán, 2019. *Arqueología de los espacios sagrados en carthago nova: el Santuario isiaco del Molinete (Insula II)*, in J.M. Noguera Celdrán, C. Alcaraz M. J. Madrid Balanza, M. Peris (eds.), *Santuario De Isis y Serapis (Insula II) Molinete/Cartagena. Barrio del foro romano. Proyecto integral de recuperación y conservación*, 17-27. Murcia.
- S. Pfeiffer, 2010. Ägypten in der Selbstdarstellung der Flavier, in N. Kramer, Ch. Reitz (eds.), *Tradition und Erneuerung. Mediale Strategien in der Zeit der Flavier*, 273-288. Berlin, New York.
- S. Pfeiffer, 2018. Domitian's Iseum Campense in context, in M. J. Versluys, K. Bülow Clausen, G. Capriotti Vittozzi (eds.), *The Iseum Campense from the Roman Empire to the Modern Age. Temple – Monument – Lieu du mémoire*. Proceedings of the international conference held in Rome at the Royal Netherlands Institute in Rome (KNIR), the Accademia di Danimarca, and the Accademia d'Egitto (May 25-27 2016, Rome), 179-194. Rome.
- R. Pirelli, 1997. L'Iseo di Benevento, in E. Arslan, F. Tiradritti, M. Abbiati Brida, A. Magni (eds.), *Iside. Il Mito il Mistero e la Magia*, 598-609. Milano.
- R. Pirelli, 2006a. Il culto di Iside a Benevento, in S. De Caro (ed.), *Egittomania. Iside e il mistero*, 129-136. Napoli.
- R. Pirelli, 2006b. Il cobra e le divinità femminili nella regalità egiziana, in S. Pernigotti, M. Zecchi (eds.), *Il coccodrillo e il cobra*, 77-90. Imola.
- R. Pirelli, 2016. Il tempio di Iside a Benevento, in F. Poole (ed.), *Il Nilo a Pompei*, 89-104. Torino.
- B. Porter, R. Moss B. Porter, R. Moss, 1991 (from the original 1939). *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic texts, Reliefs and Paintings VI, Upper Egypt : Chief Temples (excluding Thebes), Abydos, Dendera, Esna, Edfu, Kom Ombo, and Philae*, Griffith Institute. Ashmolean Museum Oxford.

- L. Prada, P.D. Worsworth, 2022. "To Isis the Great, Lady of Benevento": Privately Dedicated Egyptian Obelisks in Imperial Rome and the Twin Obelisks of Benevento Reedited, in J. Spier, S.E. Cole (eds.), *Egypt and the Classical World. Cross-cultural Encounters in Antiquity*, 106-177. Los Angeles.
- E. Rosso, 2010. Entre Orient et Occident : création et diffusion de l'image impériale flavienne (69-70 après J.-C.) in I. Savalli-Lestrade, I Cogitore (eds.), *Des rois au prince. Pratiques du pouvoir monarchique dans l'Orient hellénistique et romain (IVe siècle avant J.-C. - IIe siècle après J.-C.)*, Grenoble, 169-191.
- M. Rotili, 2013. Ricerche archeologiche a Benevento - Arco del Sacramento: il contesto di rinvenimento dell'epigrafe di Fullonius, in Caruso (ed.), *Antiqua Beneventana. La storia della città romana attraverso la documentazione epigrafica*, 35-51. Benevento.
- M. Rotili, 2015. *Considerazioni su Benevento nella Tarda Antichità*, in Ebanista, Rotili, *Aristocrazie e società fra transizione romano-germanica e Alto Medioevo*, Atti del Convegno internazionale di studi Cimitile-Santa Maria Capua Vetere, 14-15 giugno 2012, 317-351. Napoli.
- A. Rouillet, 1972. *The Egyptian and Egyptianizing Monuments of Imperial Rome*, [EPRO 20]. Leiden.
- S.R. Snape, 1989. *A Temple of Domitian at El-Ashmunein* [British Museum Occasional Paper No. 68]. London.
- G. Vergineo, 2010. Il tempio di Iside a Benevento: l'architettura e gli arredi, l'architettura attraverso gli arredi, *Estrat critic* 5, 2, 62-75.
- M.-J. Versluys, 1997. The sanctuary of Isis on the Campus Martius in Rome. A Review Article (K. Lembke, *Das Iseum Campense in Rom. Studie über den Isiskult unter Domitian. Archäologie und Geschichte*, Band 3. Verlag Archäologie und Geschichte, Heidelberg), *BABESCH. Annual Papers on Mediterranean Archaeology* 72, 159-169.
- S. Vinci, 2006. Il cocodrillo e il cobra: dal naturale al divino, in S. Pernigotti, M. Zecchi (eds.), *Il cocodrillo e il cobra*, 195-208. Imola.
- R.A. Wild, 1981. *Water in the Cultic Worship of Isis and Sarapis*, [EPRO 87], Leiden.