

Domitian's Iseum Campense in context*

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Abstract: Sarapis and Isis were without any doubt highly important for Vespasian, as Sarapis played a key role in legitimizing the Roman general's rise to power. The present paper focuses on his son Domitian and tries to evaluate the importance of the Egyptian cults for his rule. There are two main interpretations of this issue: One view of research argues that the Egyptian cults were highly important for Domitian. The second line of research is more sceptical without at the same time denying the importance of Egypt. In defending the latter view the paper in a first step presents the main arguments for an "Isiac" Domitian and afterwards confronts these arguments with an alternative, non-Isiac interpretation. As Isiac cults nevertheless played a special albeit minor role in Domitian's self-representation, the paper is concluded by a discussion of the possible reasons for the being of the Iseum Campense in its wider Roman context.

Sarapis and Isis were undoubtedly highly important to Vespasian, as Sarapis played a key role in the Roman general's legitimation to become Roman Emperor. Vespasian perhaps even chose Isis and Sarapis as the patrons of his victory.¹ Although this is generally disputed, it at least appears likely that the Isis-religion belonged to the *sacra publica* from the time of Vespasian onwards.² Considering the importance of the Egyptian cults in Rome, which had followers in every social layer of society, it is quite astonishing that they are not mentioned more frequently, e.g. in Boyle's and Dominik's volume on Flavian Rome or, most recently, in Leithof's PhD-thesis on the legitimation of Flavian rule, published in 2014. This negligence absolutely justifies the following statement by Bricault and Versluys in their edited volume *Power, Politics and the Cults of Isis*:

Much has been written about the socio-cultural embeddedness of Hellenistic and Roman religion in terms of power and politics, but most often the cults of Isis, Sarapis and their consort are absent from those discussions. Apparently they are perceived as exotic, Egyptian outsiders to a quintessentially Mediterranean Hellenistic and Roman system. This book will show that such a view is mistaken and that 'the Egyptian gods' played an important role for [...] many Roman Emperors.³

The following remarks focus on the last Flavian Emperor Domitian and attempt to evaluate the importance of the Egyptian cults for his rule. Scholarship so far offers two main interpretations of this issue. One line of research, put forth especially by the group of 'Isiac' scholars,

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¹ Cf. Adamo Muscettola 1994, 87; Versluys 2016, 282: "It could be well argued [...] that the Flavian dynasty was invented in the East and that, consequently, the Iseum Campense served as an important constituent of this dynastic construction"; maybe the *Isis triumphalis* (*CIL VI 1 335 = ILS 4360: sacerdos Isidis triumphalis*)

can be related to the Flavian Iseum Campense; Scheid 2009, 183; on Isis triumphalis: Bricault 2007, 267; Gasparini 2009, 348.

² Takács 1995b, 274; Scheid 2009, 182–84. *Contra*: Coarelli 2005, 85–89; Malaise 2011, 185–99; normally *sacra peregrina* should have been introduced by *senatus consultum* and reference to the Sibylline books (*sacra peregrina accepta*): Cancik and Cancik-Lindemaier 1994.

³ Bricault and Versluys 2014, 5.

assumes that the Egyptian cults were highly important for Domitian, or, as Versluys suggests: “One can think of the massive investment of Domitian in the Iseum Campense, of the Beneventum temple, or of the role Sarapis and Isis are given in coinage. As a result, Sarapis developed into one of the main symbols of the Roman Emperor and Roman imperial power.”⁴ The second line of research, which Versluys explicitly argues against, is more skeptical, albeit without denying the importance of Egypt. I belong to the latter category and have argued elsewhere: “Ägypten und Ägyptisches (waren) [...] insgesamt eher als Randerscheinungen in der allgegenwärtigen domitianischen Repräsentation zu werten.”⁵ Both views are based on the same sources, which include ancient literature, inscriptions, numismatic, and archaeological evidence. This fact alone hints to the wide scope of interpretations that these sources invite.

To defend my interpretation, the first step is to collect recent studies’ main arguments for the assumption that Egypt was very important to Domitian. The second step is to formulate the methodological principles with which I interpret the material and, as a third step, to apply these principles to those arguments from recent research in order to show that alternative interpretations are at least possible. Based on my view that the Isiac cults played a special but minor role in Domitian’s self-representation, as way of conclusion I offer an interpretation for the Iseum Campense in its Roman context.

1. Domitian, an Isiac?

This section examines researchers’ main arguments for suggesting a special relationship between Domitian and the Egyptian cults. However, first it is important to note that it is not possible to separate the points that seem to prove Domitian’s personal relation to Isis from those that are regarded as proof for their more political-religious relation. For that reason, the arguments are listed together here in order of importance, beginning with the weakest arguments that point to personal interests and ending with the strongest ones that relate to the political-religious representation of Domitian:

1. *Aegyptiaca* were found in the *domus Flavia*, which should have belonged to an Isiac shrine in Domitian’s palace.⁶ One may also interpret the *aegyptiaca* found at the villa of Domitian in Monte Circeo in the same way.⁷
2. Domitian wanted to be venerated as *dominus et deus*.⁸ For this reason, he considered an adaption of Egyptian ideology of kingship to be beneficial, as the pharaoh was the “son of Ra”.⁹

⁴ Versluys 2013, 256; similar Capriotti Vittozzi 2014, 257: “The case of Domitian, as well as the data we have for Vespasian and Titus, clearly demonstrate how a pharaonic inspiration went hand in hand with specific Flavian choices.”; Lembke 1994, 92: “Neue Tendenzen, den Kult ägyptischer Götter – insbesondere der Isis – zu unterstützen, lassen sich unter Domitian beobachten.”; Vergineo 2011, 62, Domitian “era molto legato al culto degli dèi egizi.”

⁵ Pfeiffer 2010b, 285; similar Takács 1995a, 101: “Domitian was not an Isiac.”; Darwall-Smith 1996, 153: “However, one should not let Isis and Serapis take

too high a place in Domitian’s religious life.”

⁶ Malaise 1972b, 222; Turcan 1996, 90; Gasparini 2009, 351.

⁷ Rouillet 1972, 3 and 51.

⁸ Suet., *Dom.* 13.1-2; Cass. Dio 67.4.7

⁹ Lembke 1994, 94; Darwall-Smith 1996, 152-53: Domitian “combined an interest in Egyptian cult with a desire for self-deification”; Pirelli 2006, 136: “la volontà di Domiziano, manifestata anche nell’Iseo del Campo Marzio, die raggiungere, attraverso un linguaggio mutuato dall’ideologia reale egiziana, la divinizzazione non solo della propria funzione regale, ma anche

3. In Egypt, Domitian built parts of temples at important religious sites, like Karnak and Hermopolis, which shows his interest in the Egyptian solar cult.¹⁰
4. Domitian disguised himself as an Isis priest when he escaped the siege of the Capitolium. Because of this, he attributed his rescue to Isis and declared her as his goddess of protection, equalized with Minerva.¹¹
5. The *Iseum* of Beneventum was built in the time of Domitian. This hints at Domitian's interest in the Egyptian cults because many scholars assume that he built the temple himself,¹² or that he was at least involved in its construction.¹³ He chose Beneventum because he and his father first met there, when Vespasian returned from Egypt after the defeat of Vitellius.¹⁴
6. Hence, we arrive at the most important lines of reasoning:
 - a) Domitian restored the *Iseum* and *Serapeum* on the *Campus Martius*, which became one of the largest precincts in the area.¹⁵
 - b) Domitian contextualized the *Iseum* with his newly built temple of Vespasian and Titus (the *Divorum*) and the temple of Minerva Chalcidica, and transformed these three monuments into a "coherent building complex",¹⁶ which incorporated the Egyptian goddess into imperial representative architecture,¹⁷ or which created a shared religious district for the deified predecessors of Domitian, his tutelary goddess Minerva and the Egyptian gods.¹⁸
 - c) Inside the Isis precinct, Domitian was represented as pharaoh in the form of a statue. Furthermore, the well-known Pamphili obelisk, which probably belonged to the *Iseum Campense*, shows that he deliberately wanted to be regarded as pharaoh.¹⁹

Having collected these main scholarly arguments, I do not intend to prove them wrong. Instead, I attempt to approach the same material from another perspective. To that purpose, the following section first explains my two methodological premises for interpreting these materials in search of the significance of the Egyptian cults for Domitian's self-understanding and representation.

1. The principle *difference between self-presentation and representation*. In my view, we have to distinguish clearly between Domitian's self-presentation and the representation of the emperor by his subjects.²⁰ We can grasp his self-presentation, e.g. by means of the imperial

e soprattutto della propria persona, quale Dominus et deus."

¹⁰ Capriotti Vittozzi 2014, 257: "The interest in particular Egyptian sites during the Domitian's rule may even reveal some specific features of his religious vision and imperial ideology. The area of Karnak expresses the interest of the Emperor in the solar cult. In addition, the area of Hermopolis Magna is significant for revealing some religious perspectives that may be seen reflected in the Ariccia relief."

¹¹ Lembke 1994, 92: "persönlichen Bindung"; the same: Albers 2013, 153.

¹² Müller 1969, 23; Pirelli 2006, 136; similar Lembke 1994, 94 n. 456: "der Princeps selbst (ist) als Initiator des Neubaus zu postulieren."; Versluys 1997, 162; Bri-cault 2010, 275; Bülow Clausen 2014, 95.

¹³ Pirelli 2006, 134; Müller 1969, 22-23.

¹⁴ Cass. Dio 65.9.3-10.1.

¹⁵ Capriotti Vittozzi 2014, 239.

¹⁶ Egelhaaf-Gaiser 2000, 177; cf. now Bülow Clausen 2014, 118.

¹⁷ Ensoli 1998, S. 427-28; Francocci 2005, 198; Malaise 1972b, 416.

¹⁸ Lembke 1994, 93: "gemeinsamen Kultbezirk für seine vergöttlichten Familienangehörigen und seine persönliche Schutzgöttin Minerva und die ägyptischen Gottheiten"; Ensoli 1998, 427-28; Francocci 2005, 198; Albers 2013, 158

¹⁹ Cf. Lembke 1994, 93.

²⁰ Cf. Hose and Fuhrer 2014, 15. cf. Weber and Zimmermann 2003, 36: "Repräsentation ist ... die symbolische, in Text und/oder Bild übersetzte Wiedergabe der Position, die eine Person oder Gruppe innerhalb der sozialen Schichtung der Gesellschaft einnimmt."

mint that developed the design of Roman coins in close contact with the emperor. Furthermore, we can detect his self-presentation in imperial inscriptions, e.g. his titularies.²¹ However, many more representations of the emperor were – at least officially – initiated by his subjects, e.g. in dedicatory inscriptions, statues of the emperor, poetic praises, and so on. Both these forms of representations are closely correlated in a dialogical way, and subjects' statements about the living emperor Domitian were nearly always intended to flatter him and present him in the best possible way. In my view, however, it is naive to consider both representations as always congruent. A letter by Arrian to emperor Hadrian presents a striking example. The *legatus Augusti pro praetore* visited Trapzunt in A.D. 131 and gave the following account to Hadrian: “Your statue, which stands there, has merit in the idea of the figure, and of the design, as it represents you pointing towards the sea; but it bears no resemblance to the Original, and the execution is in other respects but indifferent!”²² Hence, when we consider the difference between self-presentation and representation, 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. For example, in Egypt, every Roman emperor from the 1st and 2nd c. A.D. is depicted as pharaoh performing sacred rites in front of the Egyptian gods. Nevertheless, this does not automatically imply that every emperor wanted to be a pharaoh.

2. The second principle concerns the *difference between correlation and causality*. I am of the opinion that pairing two things that look similar does not presuppose a causal link between them. For example, this means that we should be careful to deduce from Domitian's devotion to Minerva that he equated Minerva with Isis based only on the fact that *interpretatio Romana* of foreign gods was possible in the Roman world.

To sum up: if we want to establish an undisputable link between Domitian and the Egyptian cults, we have to focus on explicit evidence of imperial self-presentation. In my view, the Flavians *were* very explicit and *had to be* very explicit in the propagation of their different *personae*, ideas, and self-understanding to the different so-called groups of acceptance within their empire, namely, the senate, the military, and the *plebs urbana*.²³ In line with these principles, the following section focuses on the fact that many of the alleged clues for Domitian's special relation to the Egyptian cults are in some way problematic and do not always need to be interpreted as such or that they are only valid if one presupposes that Domitian had a special interest in the Egyptian cults. Subsequently, we turn to the main clue for Domitian's interest in the Egyptian cults, namely, the restoration of the Iseum Campense, in order to propose a new interpretation: the Iseum can be interpreted without supposing that the Egyptian cults were key to Domitian's self-presentation.

1.1. *Aegyptiaca* in the *domus Flavia*

The eleven fragments of Egyptian-styled statues and reliefs found in or near the *domus Flavia* cannot be dated to a specific reign, nor is their specific archaeological context known.²⁴ Furthermore,

²¹ Cf. Wolters 1999, 290–308.

²² Arr. Peripl. M. Eux. 1.3.

²³ Cf. on this the seminal book of Flaig 1992.

²⁴ Cf. Müskens 2014, 107: “The above outlined characterisation of the Domus Flavia and its sculptural decoration leads to the inevitable conclusion that at present

they can only be attributed to a cult chapel of Domitian²⁵ if one presupposes that he was an Isiac, which presents a circular argument. In addition, it is not clear whether *aegyptiaca* found on the Palatine were only part of decorations or symbols of the abundance of the Roman empire, as was the case with the Egyptian decoration of the Augustan rooms.²⁶

1.2. Egyptian ideology of kingship and Domitians appellation as *dominus et deus*

Domitian was called *dominus et deus* by poets such as Statius and Martial.²⁷ Later authors, including Sueton, Cassius Dio, and Dion of Prusa, criticize Domitian for wanting to be called god and lord.²⁸ It is important to note that no single inscription or other official document is known²⁹ in which the emperor himself adopts these titles, which were a total neglect of tradition in Roman eyes and would be considered as *hybris* towards the Roman understanding of a *princeps*. For this reason, Domitian may have tolerated this attribution³⁰ and he might even have created a climate that encouraged subjects to call him *dominus et deus*,³¹ but it does not seem plausible that he himself adopted these titles in his imperial self-presentation. According to this view, scholars who argue that the Egyptian ideology of kingship was attractive to Domitian should prove their assumption with concrete evidence, especially since there is no evidence that Domitian was attributed a special Egyptian cult as pharaoh in Egypt itself. If Domitian appreciated the appellation as god, he could have simply taken the precedence of Hellenistic ruler cult. There was no need for him to turn to Egyptian traditions. Therefore, one can best conclude with Malaise: “cette hypothèse nous paraît trop hardie.”³²

1.3. Domitian's alleged dedicatory practice in Egyptian temples

The assumption that it was Domitian's own initiative to build or decorate Egyptian temples simply because his hieroglyphic names were written on the newly built parts of certain temples is rather implausible. According to Egyptian ideology, a temple is always built by the reigning pharaoh – even when there was no pharaoh, the temples featured cartouches for the ruler of Egypt, be that a Persian king or Roman emperor. In Ptolemaic and Roman times, temples were usually built by local elites or soldiers.³³ As the financiers of temples could not mention their own contributions in the hieroglyphic inscriptions, which only speak of the pharaoh honoring the gods, they often added Greek building inscriptions in which they represented themselves as the building's dedicators. One example is a stela from the time of Domitian that mentions a temple of Isis that was built by a certain Nemesion, son of Anebotion.³⁴ Another example is the chapel of Hathor built by Petronia Magna on behalf of Domitian in Kom Ombo.³⁵ We

there is no archaeological evidence whatsoever for the existence of a cult place for the Egyptian gods in the Domus Flavia.”

²⁵ Malaise 1972a, 219–22, nos. 396–406; Versluys 2002, 360–61.

²⁶ Cf. Takács 1995a, 102–3.

²⁷ Stat., *Silv.* 1.4.4; 4.3.128; Mart., *Spect.* 7.2.6; 7.5.3 and 5; Claus 1999, 119–32.

²⁸ Suet., *Dom.* 13.1–2; Cass. Dio 67.4.7; Dio Chrys., *Or.* 45.1.

²⁹ Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 120–23; in the East the intitulation of a Roman emperor as theos or kyrios was usual, cf. Gering 2012, 130–39; Scott 1936, 102–12.

³⁰ Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 119–20

³¹ Leberl 2004, 56–57.

³² Malaise 1972b, 415.

³³ Cf. e.g. Kockelmann and Pfeiffer 2009.

³⁴ *SEG* 47, 2147 = I.Varsovie 61.

³⁵ *OGIS* II 678 = Rowlandson 1998, no. 43.

can only deduce from the “extensive temple construction and decoration projects in Egypt”³⁶ during the reign of Domitian that Egyptian priests and elites had sufficient means to finance such projects.

1.4. Domitian’s so-called preference of the Egyptian cults

If one closely examines the relation between Domitian’s escape from the Capitolium and his preference for Isis, it becomes evident that only Suetonius reports Domitian’s disguise as Isis priest. Tacitus merely relates that Domitian hid himself in the house of a custodian of a temple and escaped from there in a priest’s linen mantle which at least insinuates that it was the dress of an Egyptian priest.³⁷ However, if Domitian really attributed his salvation to Isis in later times, the question remains why, according to the sources, Domitian attributed this specific salvation to Iuppiter, as Martial relates, and that he even fought “for his Iuppiter” like a young Heracles during the siege of Rome. Moreover, Domitian erected a small chapel dedicated to the supreme Roman god at the place of his rescue:³⁸

When his father came to power, Domitian tore down the lodging of the temple attendant and built a small chapel to Jupiter the Preserver with an altar on which his escape was represented in a marble relief. Later, when he had himself gained the imperial throne, he dedicated a great temple of Jupiter the Guardian, with his own effigy in the lap of the god.³⁹

Furthermore, Iuppiter played a preeminent role in imperial self-presentation.⁴⁰ The supreme god in his acclamation as Iuppiter Conservator or Custos was minted on Roman coins from the years A.D. 82 and 84 onwards.⁴¹

Then, what can we derive from the equation of Isis with Minerva, who was the most important goddess for Domitian?⁴² The latter was “near-ubiquitous on coins, as the principal reverse figure on bronze in A.D. 81-82, and afterwards dominating denarii, and occasionally figuring on aurei too,” as Hekster remarks, who subsequently concludes: “the goddess seems to have been his superhuman supporter: his divine companion”.⁴³ There is no conclusive explanation for why Domitian chose Minerva as his special goddess, but he chose “the virgin queen of battle, the goddess Minerva”, as Statius wrote in his *Silvae* (IV 5.22-24), undoubtedly because of her military function.⁴⁴ In later times, there was a rumor that Domitian wanted to be regarded as a son of Minerva, as transferred by Apollonius of Tyana.⁴⁵

Researchers who argue that Domitian had a special relation with the Isiac cults explain the preeminence of Minerva in Domitian’s representation by pointing to the fact that Minerva could be the *interpretatio Romana* of Isis⁴⁶, or as Bülow Clausen put it: “Nevertheless, as part of the wi-

³⁶ Klotz 2008, 64.

³⁷ Suet., *Dom.* 1.4: *mane Isiaci celatus*; Tac., *Hist.* 3.74.1: *lineo amictu*.

³⁸ Pfeiffer 2010a, 125; Fears 1981, 74-82.

³⁹ Tac., *Hist.* 3.74.2.

⁴⁰ Cf. Clauss 1999, 125-26; Bergmann 1998, 95.

⁴¹ *BMC* II, Domitian 48 = *BNCMER* III, Domitian 49 = *RIC* II-12, Domitian 143. *BNCMER* III, Domitian 439.

⁴² Suet., *Dom.* 4.4; 15.3 and 7; Cass. Dio 55.24; 67.1.1; 67.16.1-2; Quint., *Inst.* 10.1.91; Philostr., *V. A.* 8.25; Mart., *Spect.* 6.10.9-12; 7.1; 8.1; 9.3.10; 14.179; *RCI*² Dom. 761-64; cf. Girard 1981a, 226; id. 1981b, 244;

Hekster 2010, 604-8.

⁴³ Hekster 2015, 253 and 255, with references to the sources and further literature; cf. Wolters 1999, 299; Girard 1981b, 233-44; on the discussion in research: Gering 2012, 125-27.

⁴⁴ Hardie 2003, 139, n. 70.

⁴⁵ Philostr., *V. A.* 7.24; but cf. Hekster 2015, 252: “It still seems unlikely that Domitian presented himself as Minerva’s son.”

⁴⁶ Malaise 1972b, 416: “Domitien nourrit encore un culte particulier pour Minerve qu’il rapprocha peut-être d’Isis.”; Turcan 1996, 90.

der political-religious ideology of Domitian and the Flavian emperors in general, a juxtaposition of Isis and Minerva is entirely appropriate.⁴⁷

It is difficult to counter this argument, as Isis Panthea could indeed refer to every goddess in the world. Subsequently, this enables scholars to easily find examples that equate Isis with Minerva, as Isis is called “mistress of war” in her aretalogies, which was also one of the main competences of Minerva.⁴⁸ Ultimately, however, the equation of Domitian's Minerva with Isis is based on another circular argument, which presupposes that Isis played an important role in Domitian's political-religious ideology and therefore connects Minerva with Isis. Apart from that fact that we should avoid such hermeneutic circles, one should also take the principle of *correlation does not mean causality* into consideration. The fact that Isis could be a mistress of war does not automatically imply that Domitian regarded Minerva as Isis. It is likewise possible that Domitian chose Minerva, a goddess especially venerated in his Sabine homeland,⁴⁹ because of his preference for Greek culture. For example, he introduced the *Quinquatria Minervae*, which was celebrated at his Albanian villa.⁵⁰ This festival can be understood in evident correlation with the Panathenaic festivals of Athens.⁵¹ Moreover, one should bear in mind that Minerva was honored together with Iuppiter and Iuno at the newly introduced Greek games of the *Capitolia*.⁵²

The visual representations of Minerva in Domitian's time often depict the goddess dressed in military habit,⁵³ without any doubt a hint of the Greek form of Minerva. The difference between the Roman Minerva and Isis also may be evident in the *Arcus ad Isis*, an arch built in front of the Iseum Campense by Vespasian or Domitian. It contains three passages: the middle passage depicts Minerva in military garment,⁵⁴ the right passage shows Isis with a *calathos* (?), and the left passage depicts Anubis (?).⁵⁵

Furthermore, it should be noted that there is no single depiction of Isis on coins minted in Rome, and only one series of Denars, minted from A.D. 94 to 96, shows the Iseum Campense and the Serapeum.⁵⁶ In my view, these coins were not minted because of Domitian's special relation to the Egyptian gods, but are instead to be regarded in the context of other contemporaneous minted coins that depict temples built by Domitian, such as the temple of Minerva, the temple of Iuppiter Capitolinus, and the temple of Iuppiter Victor.⁵⁷

So, if we reserve the argument, we should first of all suppose that coins transmit deeds, virtues, and moral concepts to a broader public⁵⁸ and that, according to Carradice, “of all the Flavian coinages, the issues of Domitian's reign have in their designs the most direct references to the emperor, his interests, and his achievements.”⁵⁹ If Isis and Sarapis were indeed so important for Domitian under these circumstances, why were they not minted?

Based on the above, it seems hardly plausible that Domitian used the image of Minerva in order to refer to Isis, because he had no reason whatsoever to hide his supposed veneration of

⁴⁷ Bülow Clausen 2013, 104.

⁴⁸ Cf. the sources cited by *ibid.*, 105.

⁴⁹ Varr., *Ling.* 5,74; Dio. Hal., *Or.* 1.14.3; cf. Girard 1981b, 240.

⁵⁰ Cf. Leberl 2004, 76–77; Gmyrek 1998, 65–66.

⁵¹ Cass. Dio 62.1.2.

⁵² Suet., Dom. 4.4.

⁵³ Cf. Gmyrek 1998, 59–61.

⁵⁴ If it is not a representation of Mars; Schipporeit 2010, 154–55, with literature on the topic.

⁵⁵ Lembke 1994, Kat. C. no. 3, 178–79; identification of

the gods according to Malaise 1972a, 191–92; Castagnoli 1941, 65.

⁵⁶ RIC II², 325, n. 812 and 813; BMCR II, n. 238, pl. 67,4; it is disputed if Serapis was really worshipped already in the 1st century at this place: Wild 1984, 1812–13; BMCR II, nos. 239–40 and 345 (temple of Isis), no. 238 (temple of Sarapis); Lembke 1994, 181; cf. Bülow Clausen 2014, 141–42.

⁵⁷ Bricault 2005, 93.

⁵⁸ Wolters and Ziegert 2014, 44.

⁵⁹ Carradice 1998, 97.

the Egyptian goddess. Since the time of Vespasian, or even earlier, the Isiac cults were considered respectable in Rome. Then, why should Domitian not have depicted Isis herself on those coins if he truly wanted to show that he venerated her more than other gods?

1.5. The Iseum in Beneventum

The Isis temple in Beneventum⁶⁰ was built in A.D. 88/89 to honor Domitian's victories over the Dacians and Chatti. Little is known about it or its site, but many Egyptian and Egyptianizing objects were found at Beneventum. We cannot tell whether those were installed at the time the Iseum was built or whether they accumulated over a longer period of time. We also do not know who was responsible for the installation of these objects. Nevertheless, we do know for certain when the Iseum itself was built, as it contained two very interesting obelisks with important dedicatory inscriptions in hieroglyphs. Front face II reads:

To Great Isis, mother of the God, Sothis, Ruler of the gods, Lord of heaven and earth and the underworld. The legate of the Augustus with the beautiful name of the immortal Domitian, *Rutilius Lupus erected for her and the gods of his city of Beneventum, this obelisk*, that long life in happiness may be granted him.⁶¹

And face III reads:

In the eighth year of Horus: Strong Bull; King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands: Horus, son of the God, whom all the gods love; Son of Re, Lord of diadems; Domitianus, the immortal, *a noble temple was built for Great Isis, Lady of Beneventum, and her Ennead, by Rutilius Lupus, legate of the Augustus.*

These inscriptions are extraordinary because not the pharaoh himself is named as dedicator of the precinct and the obelisk, as would be expected for an Egyptian temple, but a Roman citizen.⁶² Although one cannot exclude that Domitian himself wanted Rutilius Lupus to erect the temple, these inscriptions nevertheless stress my concerns about modern scholarship's assumption that Domitian built the temple. Would one expect that an emperor who, according to Suetonius, inscribed his own name on temples that he had only restored, while neglecting the memory of the original builder,⁶³ would neglect to inscribe his name on a temple that he had built himself? On what basis can one assume that a temple explicitly built in dedication of Domitian and his victory was also built by Domitian in reality?⁶⁴ The only evidence that might hint at this is weak: namely, the fact that Domitian met his father, who had just returned from Egypt, in Beneventum and that the town was quite important for imperial self-presentation, as the arch of Trajan suggests. However, it is unknown whether the emperor ever returned to Beneventum. Therefore, an alternative solution seems much more probable. The Isis cult took up a new position in the Roman empire since the time of Vespasian. Vespasian attributed his victory in the civil and Judean wars to

⁶⁰ Cf. the overview given by Pirelli 2006; Bülow Clausen 2014, 82–95.

⁶¹ Iversen 1973, 26–27; Colin 1993.

⁶² Cf. also Quack 2005, 402; on Rutilius Lupus cf. Torelli

2002, 187–88.

⁶³ Suet., Dom. 5.

⁶⁴ Cf. Erman 1896, 158.

Sarapis. It seems likely that, from that time onwards, the local elites faced no problems financing cults that had been popular since a long time – as evident from the Iseum of Pompeii. It is possible that Marcus Rutilius Lupus wanted to increase his own status and that of his hometown in the eyes of the emperor by equating Domitian's victory over the Germans with Vespasian's victory over the Jews, and that he attributed it to Isis for that reason.⁶⁵ If Domitian had ever visited the temple, furthermore, he would most likely have been embarrassed by the statue of the pharaoh, which featured his own portrait, because it was executed in a rather dilettant way,⁶⁶ at least according to Müller. In my view, this statue was not dedicated by the emperor himself,⁶⁷ but is instead reminiscent of Arrian's above-quoted statement on the badly executed statue of Hadrian.

1.6. The Iseum Campense

The most important argument for Domitian's close relationship with the Egyptian cults is the fact that he rebuilt the Iseum Campense after the great fire of Rome.⁶⁸ The Iseum was one of the largest temple precincts on the *Campus Martius* (70 x 220 m),⁶⁹ but it is not certain whether the *Forma Urbis* presents the dimensions of its Flavian outlines.⁷⁰ To understand the significance of the temple itself, we also have to consider that it was only one of many buildings that Domitian erected anew or rebuilt on the *Campus Martius*.⁷¹ These included the Stadion, the *Divorum*, the temple of Minerva Chalcidica, the Pantheon, and the Odeon.⁷² Takács concludes that, by restoring the Iseum, Domitian “displayed the same concern for the capital's representational image as other emperors had done before him.”⁷³ Therefore, in my view, the fact of the Iseum's restoration alone does not suffice as evidence of Domitian's Egyptophilia.⁷⁴ The act itself seems to have been an act of *pietas* towards his two ancestors especially, for whom Isis and Sarapis played such an important role. Furthermore, this act of piety helped in the legitimization of Domitian's own right to rule, as it bound him to his father and brother.⁷⁵

In addition, I am skeptical that the Iseum formed a cult complex together with the *Divorum* temple and the building of Minerva Chalcidica, because there are no visual axes apart from the fact that these three precincts were built side by side. Nevertheless, Domitian had a good reason to build the porticus for the two temples of his father and brother and that of his tutelary goddess Minerva at that exact location: the Roman triumphal processions began there and, by connecting the veneration of Vespasian and Titus to his own tutelary goddess Minerva, he could attach his own victory to the victories of his family.

⁶⁵ Cf. Gasparini 2009, 351.

⁶⁶ Müller 1969, 55–56: “Das königliche Antlitz offenbart vollends die unbeholfene Arbeit.”

⁶⁷ Cf. Hotje 2005, 167.

⁶⁸ On the destructions due to the the great fire of Rome: Cass. Dio 66.24.1–2.

⁶⁹ Martial, Spec. 2.14.7, 10.48.1; Juv. 9.22, Eutr. 7.23; Rouillet 1972, 23–36; Albers 2013, 245; Martin 1982, 149, n. 10; Sist 1997; Lembke 1994; Adamo Muscetto 1994; Versluys 1997; Versluys 2002, 353–55; Brenk 1999; Brenk 2003; Gasparini 2009, 348–35.

⁷⁰ Cf. Bülow Clausen 2014, 135–36.

⁷¹ Eutr., Brev. 7.23.5: *Romae quoque multa opera fecit in his Capitolium et forum Transitorium, divorum porticus*

et Isium ac Serapium.

⁷² Cf. Albers 2013, 143–57; the Giano accanto alla Minerva, that connected the Iseum with the Saepta Julia is according to the brick stamps from Hadrianic times: Gatti 1943–44, 144.

⁷³ Takács 1995a, 101; Lembke 1994, 92: “Daß er den Isistempel auf dem Marsfeld [...] erneuern ließ, ist allein kaum als Beweis seiner Anhängerschaft für Isis zu bewerten, da Domitian das gesamte mittlere Marsfeld restaurierte.”

⁷⁴ Cf. Panzram 2008, 91: “Sein Wiederaufbau erstaunt insofern nicht; um diese Entscheidung zu treffen, bedurfte Domitian keiner ägyptophilen Einstellung.”

⁷⁵ Cf. Griffin 2000, 46–9; 56–60.

Last but not least, the most important object connected with Domitian's affinity to Egyptian religion is the Pamphili obelisk, which was eventually erected in front of the temple of Isis.⁷⁶ Its inscriptions and depictions present Domitian as Egyptian pharaoh, beloved and elected by Isis and other Egyptian gods.⁷⁷ Even the dynasty itself is mentioned.⁷⁸ It is possible that Domitian knew the meaning of the inscriptions and was informed about the pictorial representations on the pyramidion, which only could be seen from a bird's eye view.⁷⁹ However, it would be premature to conclude that Domitian had a religious policy in mind to make himself pharaoh in Rome, based only on this singular representation. Furthermore, neither Egyptians nor Romans could read these hieroglyphic inscriptions.⁸⁰ 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 Domitian the power of a pharaoh.

2. The themes of Domitian's self-presentation

When taking all evidence of Domitian's Egyptian face into consideration, only the Iseum Campense can be clearly linked to his own declared intention. There is no evidence that Domitian built another temple for the Egyptian cults and there is no proof that he himself initiated his representation as pharaoh. Naturally, absence of evidence is not evidence of absence. Perhaps Domitian did have a personal relation to the Egyptian cults, but in my view it is astonishing that the self-presentation of the emperor, as evident from Greek and Latin inscriptions and his titulature, does not even hint at Egypt. When considering the so-called unofficial titulature, like *Zeus eleutheros* or *theos aniketos*, which was given to him by certain subjects, one arrives at the same conclusion.⁸¹ Poetry, panegyric, and later critical senatorial historiography are silent about Domitian's Egyptian interests. In contrast, Martial styles the usurper Saturninus as Marc Antony, comparing the victory of the emperor to the victory of Octavian and equating the river Rhine with the Nile.⁸² Martial furthermore states that Rome is much more prosperous than Egypt:

Anxious to pay her court to you, the land of the Nile had sent to you, Caesar, as new gifts, some winter roses. The Memphian sailor felt little respect for the gardens of Egypt, after he had crossed the threshold of your city; such was the splendour of the spring, and the beauty of balmy Flora; and such the glory of the Paestan rose-beds. [...] But do you, O Nile, since you are compelled to yield to Roman winters, send us your harvests, and receive our roses.⁸³

This was the function of Egypt according to Martial's view and possibly even for Domitian himself.

⁷⁶ Lembke 1994, 40; attribution to the *templum gentis Flaviae*: e.g. Grenier 1999, 229 (does not appear in the bibliography); Coarelli 2009, 94 (does not appear in the bibliography).

⁷⁷ Erman 1917, 4-10; Darwall-Smith 1996, 145f. (English translation); Lembke 1994, 37-39, D55; Parker 2007; Grenier 1987; *RICIS* 501/0124.

⁷⁸ Grenier 1987, 939; English translation: Darwall-Smith 1996, 146.

⁷⁹ Brenk 1999, 138.

⁸⁰ Cf. Heksters 2015, 270.

⁸¹ Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 123-148.

⁸² Mart., *Spect.* 4.11.6-8: "Did the anger of the Actian waves elude you? Or did the Rhine promise you what the Nile did not give him?" (*obruit Actiaci quod grauis ira freti? / an tibi promisit Rhenus quod non dedit illi / Nilus*); cf. Moreno Soldevila 2006, 158-63.

⁸³ Mart., *Spect.* 6.80.

Therefore, if we wish to present a “Sitz im Leben” for the Iseum Campense and the growing interest of the Roman elite for the Egyptian cults, we have to widen our focus and consider what was truly important for Domitian's self-presentation,⁸⁴ and how the Iseum Campense was connected to his motives of self-presentation. The imperial self-presentation can be compiled from titulatures in inscriptions, pictorial representations of coins, and buildings initiated by Domitian. From these sources we learn the following:

1. It was a key issue for Domitian to show his *virtus militaris* and victoriousness,⁸⁵ as evident from 22 imperial acclamations,⁸⁶ his epithet Germanus,⁸⁷ the coins depicting *Germania capta*, and the frequent representation of Minerva in military dress. His victories over the Chatti, Dacians, and Sarmatians were of utmost importance to Domitian,⁸⁸ as clearly evident from the gigantic *equus Domitiani* on the Forum Romanum⁸⁹ and the several triumphal arches that he erected.⁹⁰ Domitian's victoriousness was also expressed by the adulations of his subjects. The poets praise him for his victories⁹¹ and in his unofficial titulature he is called *theos aniketos* and *Zeus eleutheros*.⁹²
2. Domitian had a special interest in showing his close connection to his dynasty, which legitimized his rule.⁹³ He erected several buildings that were related to Vespasian and Titus: the *templum gentis Flaviae*,⁹⁴ the *porticus Divorum*, the *templum Divi Vespasiani*, and the arch of Titus.
3. Domitian's attempt to improve Roman morality, the *correctio morum*, which he fostered by taking *contra mores* the censorship for lifetime, became almost equally important as *virtus militaris*.⁹⁵ As *pontifex maximus*, he took harsh measures against obscene Vestal virgins.⁹⁶
4. Domitian tried to establish a symbolic relation to Augustus, as evident from his *correctio morum* and the saecular games he held.⁹⁷
5. In contrast to his attempt to foster ancient Roman traditions, Domitian's building program – the Stadion and the Odeon – also shows his interest in Greek culture: he hosted the *agon Capitolinus* and carried it out in a *purpurea toga Graecina*.⁹⁸

When taking all these partly contradictory themes of imperial self-presentation into consideration, it becomes clear that there was no singular overall imperial propaganda, but rather that different images of the emperor were distributed, which he used as communication to his different groups of acceptance. In my view, the Egyptian cults were of minor interest in this respect. Minerva and Iuppiter were much more important to Domitian than Sarapis and Isis.

⁸⁴ Cf. Hose and Fuhrer 2014, 14–15.

⁸⁵ Cf. Wolsfeld 2014, 200–3; Leithoff 2014, 67–75; 215–16.

⁸⁶ Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 114–17.

⁸⁷ Cf. Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 110–14, with further literature.

⁸⁸ Suet., *Dom.* 6.1; Cass. Dio 67.3.5–4.1; 6–7; 8.1; Tac., *Agr.* 39.1; Tac., *Germ.* 37.5; Eutr. 7.23.4; Aur. Vict., *Caes.* 11.4; Jer. Ab Abr. 2106; Oros. 7.10.3–4.

⁸⁹ Stat., *Silv.* I 1; *RIC² Dom.* 797; pl. 157.

⁹⁰ Suet., *Dom.* 13.2; Mart., *Spect.* 8.65; *RIC² Dom.* 796; DeMaria 1988, 119–22; 289–94.

⁹¹ Mart., *Spect.* 8.2; 9.1; 5; Stat., *Silv.* 1.1.5–7; 25–28; 50–

51; 79–81; 3.3.167–71; 4.1.39–43; Sil. 3.597–617; cf. Taisne 1973.

⁹² Bönisch-Meyer and Witschel 2014, 133.

⁹³ Vgl. Gering 2012, 62–116; this is also shown by the mint in Rome: Gering 2012, 143–51; Heskster 2015, 57.

⁹⁴ Leithoff 2014, 187–97.

⁹⁵ Cass. Dio 67.4.3; Suet., *Dom.* 8.3–4; Grelle 1980, 345–46; Buttrey 1975; Leithoff 2014, 169–73.

⁹⁶ Suet., *Dom.* 8,3; Plin. *epist.* 4.11.

⁹⁷ Suet., *Dom.* 3.4; cf. Leithoff 2014, 173f.; Grunow Sobocinski 2006; Carradice 1983, 123.

⁹⁸ Suet., *Dom.* 4,4.

However, the Egyptian cults were important for Domitian's subjects. In Beneventum, it seems that one such subject attributed the emperor's victoriousness to Isis,⁹⁹ by considering Minerva as one aspect of *Isis triumphalis*. Hence, the special veneration of Minerva may be the only critical point in my assumption that Domitian had no special relation to the Egyptian cults, because it is highly exceptional that Minerva played such an important role in Domitian's life. But is it really plausible that he chose this goddess because he wanted to venerate Isis? Was Minerva more acceptable for the senatorial elite? I do not believe this to be the case, because Isis could openly play her own role from the time of Vespasian onwards, hence there would have been no obstacle for an autocratic emperor like Domitian to turn to Isis if he really wanted to venerate her in a special way.

3. The Iseum Campense in context

If one attempts to interpret Domitian's Iseum in a more holistic way, one has to regard it in the context of his imperial building policy as well as the topography of Rome. Undoubtedly, the Iseum first of all constituted an integral part of Domitian's endeavour to attach himself to his *gens*, it is also evident from the inscriptions of the obelisk.¹⁰⁰ As mentioned above, the restoration of the temple was above all an act of *pietas*.

Secondly, Domitian placed this temple into the general context of his own victoriousness, and this concept is exactly what can explain the relevance of the temple. In my view, it played an important part in Domitian's topography of triumph, because the central buildings of Domitian's self-presentation were built along the *Via Triumphalis*, as Sven Schipporeit has shown.¹⁰¹ Vespasian began his triumphal procession from the Iseum, and one may assume that Domitian did the same. His triumphal route was marked by allusions to his father and brother's victory over the Jews.¹⁰² The *Arcus ad Isis*, either built by Vespasian or Domitian,¹⁰³ presented this victory, as evident from the image of the palm with the bound Jew on the left and right sides of the quadriga, which is recognizable as the *Iudaea capta* motive of Flavian coinage.¹⁰⁴ According to Richardson, the attached *Divorum* might have been erected near the *villa publica*, the place where Vespasian and Titus spent the night before their triumph.¹⁰⁵ After passing the theatre of Marcellus, the triumphal procession entered the *Circus Maximus* by traversing the arch erected in honor of Titus' victories over the Jews. Turning to left, the procession then went on to the Colosseum, which was erected from the spoils of the Judaean war¹⁰⁶ and also featured a triumphal quadriga depicting Vespasian and captured Jews.¹⁰⁷ Subsequently, on the Velia, the procession would reach the Arch of Titus with its well-known decoration memorizing the Judean victory,¹⁰⁸ the *Templum Pacis*

⁹⁹ Cf. Malaise 1972b, 415.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. Lembke 1994, 40-41; 212; Bülow-Clausen 2014, 150.

¹⁰¹ Schipporeit 2010, 151-61; Leithoff 2014, 70-71.

¹⁰² Cf. Schipporeit 2010, 157: "Es scheint aber, dass auch Domitian noch nach so langer Zeit im jüdischen Triumph, an dem er selbst nur in einer Nebenrolle teilgenommen hatte, als ideologisches Mittel der Herrschaftslegitimation nutzte."; Leithoff 2014, 75: "Erstaunlicher ist, dass Domitian diese Tradition fortführte und den Triumph über die Juden im Sinne einer dynastischen Legitimation weiterhin ostentativ in Szene setzte."

¹⁰³ It is disputed if it was erected by Vespasian or Domitian; Vespasian: Kähler 1939, 400-1, no. 45; Sesler 1953, 83-93; Lembke 1994, 28 and 67-69; Domitian: Castagnoli 1941, 65-66 and 69; De Maria 1988, 292-94, no. 77; Ensoli 1998, 427, n. 54.

¹⁰⁴ Künzl 1988, 45; Kleiner 1990, 131-34.

¹⁰⁵ Richardson 1976, 161-63; Darwall-Smith 1996, 158,

¹⁰⁶ Alföldy 1995, 195-226 (does not appear in the bibliography).

¹⁰⁷ *BMCR* II 262, no. 190. 191; *RIC* II 1² 210, no. 184-186; cf. Elkins 2006; Pfeiffer 2012, 24-25.

¹⁰⁸ Schipporeit 2010, 157; Pfanner 1983.

built with its spoils,¹⁰⁹ and the *equus Domitiani*, which memorized Domitian's own victories over northern tribes. At the end of the route, the procession passed the temple of *divus Vespasianus* to reach the temple of Iuppiter, which was financed by the *fiscus Iudaicus*. Isis thus played a functional role in the presentation of imperial victoriousness because she was Vespasian's victory goddess, not because she was Domitian's – and Domitian himself, in turn, attached his own victoriousness to that of Vespasian by means of Minerva and the Dacian and German victories.

In conclusion, I am fully aware that the views expressed here amount to interpretation only – and most likely will not persuade those that regard the Isiac religion as much more important to Domitian. Nevertheless, I hope to have shown that alternative interpretations of the available Isiac evidence is at least possible, and that researchers who suggest that Egypt and Egyptian cults played a minor role in Domitian's self-presentation have their reasons to do so.

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¹⁰⁹Cass. Dio 65.15.1; Suet., *Vesp.* 9; Joseph., *BJ.* 158–162; Aur. Vict., *Caes.* 9.7.

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