Peopling the Past Video 10: The Cult of Isis with Katherine Blouin

Transcript

Video begins with instrumental music played over the title card which reads "Peopling the Past"

We hear Katherine Blouin speak: "Hi everyone, welcome to Peopling the Past. My name is Katherine Blouin. I am Associate Professor in Classics and Roman History at the University of Toronto and it's my very pleasure today to chat with you a little bit about a topic I'm very much interested in."

Blouin sits in front of the camera. She has long blond hair and is wearing dark rimmed glasses with a black sweater.

Blouin: "What is this topic?"

The slide now shows the Neumagen Relief, which is a late Roman tomb sculpture that shows a school scene with pupils and a teacher. The text reads "What topic are you talking about today?"

Blouin: "Well I'm going to talk to you about the cult of the goddess Isis in the Hellenistic and Roman worlds."

The slide shows two stone depictions of Isis. On the left is a stone relief where Isis appears as an anthropomorphized serpent. On the right is a marble statue that shows her in human form.

Blouin: "The goddess Isis was by far the most popular of the ancient Egyptian gods in antiquity beyond Egypt, but also it was one of the main goddesses in Egypt. She is the daughter of the earth god Geb and of the sky goddess Nut, and most importantly, she is the sister and wife of the god Osiris. The most famous story about Isis narrates how after her brother and husband Osiris was killed by their other brother Seth and dismembered, she managed to piece him back together and bring him back to life. Following that, she and Osiris conceived of a son named Horus who you can see on these, on two of the pictures on the slide. Horus would eventually avenge his

father and kick Seth out of the throne because he had taken on the throne of Egypt, and so (Horus) is known as kind of the first pharaoh. In later periods, including in the Hellenistic and Roman periods which we're going to focus on today, Horus was known as Harpocrates. Now before I move on to the next slide just a little word on the picture in the middle. You might wonder why there is a hole instead of the face of Isis—well this is a relief from the Temple of Philae which you can now visit, it's close to the city of Aswan, and in the late antiquity it was used as a church and the Christians at the time had as a practice to deface the faces of the gods that were on the wall, so that included this representation of Isis nursing Harpocrates/Horus."

The slide shows three artifacts depicting Isis. On the left is a bronze figurine showing a seated Isis sitting the child Horus in her lap being suckled. In the center is a stone relief that shows Isis suckling Horus, though her face has been destroyed by later defacement of the relief. On the right is a standing marble statue of Isis from the Greco-Roman period.

Blouin: "Now 'what sources or data do you look at?' Well today we will focus on one document—a document which I find extremely interesting and I hope you will too."

The slide shows three images. On the left is a statue in stone of a seated scribe from ancient Egypt. In the center is a cuneiform clay table from Mesopotamia. On the right is a wall painting from Pompeii known as the Sappho Tondo. Though it does not depict the famous author, it shows the portrait of a well-dressed woman with a writing utensil poised to her lip. The text on the slide reads "What sources or data do you look at?"

Blouin: "It is known as "An Invocation to Isis". This is a text written on papyrus. Now you see on the slide a part of this text. So what has come to us is about a meter long text with a lot of holes in it but still we have remains of 12 columns of text."

The slide shows an ancient text written on tattered papyrus.

Blouin: "The text was found in... on the site of an ancient town located in the southern part of Egypt. This... town is called Pemche in Egyptian and is

known as Oxyrhynchos, that was its Greek name. It is a site where a lot—thousands upon thousands—of papyri were found."

On the left of the slide is the same Greco-Roman statue of Isis from the previous slide, with a satellite image of Egypt on the right. The image has a red dot showing the location of Oxyrhynchos, which is to the south of the delta and the Fayum oasis.

Blouin: "So the papyrus was found in the rubbish mound of the city, so it was basically found because some people had thrown it away. Because of the handwriting we know that it was written around the 2nd century CE, so at a time when Egypt was part of the Roman empire. It is written in Greek—so Greek at the time is the language of the ruling elite, the official administrative language. However, let's bear in mind that at the vast majority of the inhabitants of Egypt at the time were Egyptian speakers and that Egyptian remained all the way till after the Arab conquest the language of the majority in Egypt. But this text was written in Greek, so it also tells us that Isis was of great interest for Greek speakers in the province. The beginning and the end of the Invocation are lost, so we have kind of a middle part here. On the other side of the text, the papyrus, we have another text. So you know people in antiquity were also recycling their papers or maximizing their use of it. This text is also written in Greek. It is another religious text, a praise of Imouthes-Asclepios, who is a god linked to medicine and healing, which is also a later form of the god Imhotep, who's also known as the man who invented the pyramids. So, although we don't know who wrote this text and who composed it, it seems probable—let's say quite likely—that it was used in some religious context."

The slide shows an image of Oxyrhynchos' 'rubbish mound' on the right. On the left is a list of information about the papyrus and the Invocation text. This information reads:

- 12 columns roll (1.12 m long)
- 298 lines preserved
- Beginning and end missing
- Author is unknown (priest?)
- Dating is 2nd c. CE (but probably earlier origin)
- Language is Greek
- Other side has the Praise of Imputhes-Asclepios

- Published by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt in 1915

Blouin: “The part of the role that we have includes two different sections. The first one we call, we people who study these ancient texts, call it ‘The Names of Nations.’ So, this is a type of religious text that we know from other documents as well, and it's basically a list of places where Isis was worshiped and next to each place—and sometimes it's the name of peoples or geographical features—and next to that name we have epithets, so qualifiers, qualities, or other names that are associated with the goddess. So, let's read some examples of that.”

The slide shows text that outlines the structure of the text. It reads:

- "1:1-119 'Names of nations': List of titles and other goddesses’ names used to refer to Isis in places and among peoples within and outside Egypt."

Blouin: “So, these are taken from the English translation of the papyrus which were published in 1915. ‘At Menouthis truth; at Meniouis seated before Io on whose honour’... then there's a hole in the papyrus... ‘is founded; at M...’ then there's a hole, two letters missing... ‘enestium most great, vulture-shaped, Aphrodite; at Taposiris Thauestis, Hera, giver; in the island swiftly-victorious.’ So, all these places are in Egypt. Then a little later on we moved to places outside of Egypt where Isis is worshiped. ‘At Rome warlike; in the Cyclades islands of threefold nature, Artemis; at Patmos young; at Paphos hollowed, divine, gentle; in Chios marching; at Salamis observer; in Cyprus all-bounteous.’ Then people a little later: ‘among the Amazons warlike; among the Indians Maia; among the Thessalians moon; among the Persians Latina; among the Magi Kore Thapseusis.’ So, that gives you an idea of the vast expanse of territory over which Isis was thought—at least by the people who read that hymn—to be worshipped. And now in reality we've found for instance temples to Isis in Italy in Pompeii and in Rome and, we know that she was actually worshiped way beyond Egypt at the time, so although we're not sure that all the places named in this invocation had actual temples to Isis, we know that our cult was really widespread for real at the time.”

The slide shows the text that Blouin has read out, and the Greco-Roman statue of Isis on the right beside the text.

Blouin: “The second section of the text is a prose hymn to the goddess. So, we don't have this list of places anymore, but we still have quite a bit of information about her power.”

The slide shows text that outlines the structure of the text. It has the same text for the Names of Nations, and is now followed with a second line: 2: General titles of and prose hymn to Isis (lines 119-298)."

Blouin: “So here's a little excerpt: ‘you ... ruler of the world; guardian and guide, Lady of the mouths of seas and rivers; skilled in writing and calculation, understanding; who also brings back the Nile over every country; the beautiful animal of all gods; the glad face of Lethe’—which is the river of the underworld—‘the leader of the muses; the many-eyed; the comely goddess in Olympus; ornament of the female sex and affectionate; providing sweetness in assemblies.... enmity-hating... Lady Isis, greatest of the gods, first of name, Io Sothis...’ So she was associated, in addition to being associated with many goddesses, she was also associated with the star Sothis. ‘You did make the power of women equal to that of man... Lady of the land, bring the flood of rivers... and in Egypt the Nile, in Tripolis the Eleutherus, in India the Ganges... you have dominion over winds and thunders and lightnings and snows; you, the lady of war and rule, easily destroys tyrants by trusty counsels; you make great Osiris immortal...’ So she was quite powerful, maybe she is still, who knows.”

The slide shows the text that Blouin has read out, and the Greco-Roman statue of Isis on the right beside the text.

Blouin: “So how can this document tell us about real people in the past? Well, it does so in more than one way.”

Slide shows four images. On the left is a Greek marble grave stele of a little girl holding a bird. To the right of this is a Greek vase painting scene that shows women weaving at a loom. To the right of that are model figures of bakers preparing and baking bread from ancient Egypt. On the right is a painted “mummy portrait” of a young man from the Fayum in Egypt. The text reads “How can this topic or material tell us about real people in the past?”

Blouin: “First of all we need to look at this document as an object right. So this text was written by someone, it was used, read out loud, listened to by many people, and eventually it was thrown away in the rubbish—either because it was too worn out, broken, or simply because whoever had custody of it thought it was not of any use to them, of any use to them anymore. So this is an actual object that had a life of its own in a religious context and that tells us about how the goddess was worshipped in a way and how as an object its life came to an end as well.”

On the right of the slide is a close-up image of the tattered papyrus document. Text on the slide reads, "Papyrus as object”, followed by bulleted points which read: written, used (read, recitated), thrown away."

Blouin: “It is also a text, obviously, and a text that gives us as I've said an idea of the vast expanse of territory throughout which Isis was worshipped. So, this is also backed up by archaeological evidence. And, interestingly enough, we know of other invocations of Isis that were found in Egypt, but we also know of texts related to her mysteries including the last book of a novel written by a North African author called Apuleius. Apuleius lived in the 2nd century so at the time this document was written, and the novel is called The Metamorphosis.”

The right of the side still shows the same close-up image of the papyrus. The text on the left of the slide now reads: "Papyrus as Text”, which is followed by three bullet points:

- Religious conceptions and practices (see Apuleius's Metamorphosis)
- Sacred geography
- Possible spread of the cult of Isis."

Blouin: “Now the structure of this text, so the structure that goes from upper Egypt it seems to the Delta into beyond Egypt seems to indicate that the text maybe was written a bit like a "mille-feuille" so it seems possible that there's an original that dates from before the Roman period and maybe before the Hellenistic period as well and as Egypt became officially part of broader empires new places were added to the list.”

On the right of the slide is a marble figurine image of the goddess. On the left is a globe, with a red oval highlighting Egypt and a large part of Western Asia. The text on the slide reads: "Geographical list (1–119)". This is followed by a bulletted list:

- [Upper Egypt]: ? locations
- Lower Egypt (Delta): 68-69 locations
- Outside of Egypt: 59-60 locations."

Blouin: "So in a way, it's a living document. You have an idea here of all the places in the Delta that are named that we can locate, there's a whole bunch of them which we cannot locate yet."

The slide shows a satellite image of the Nile Delta, showing the vast array of sites mentioned in the text which are marked with red dots.

Blouin: "And this is a list of all the places and peoples located outside of Egypt that are listed also in the document. So, it goes from Rome to India…"

The slide shows a screenshot of a published table that lists all the places and peoples located outside of Egypt that are listed in the document.

Blouin: "…and in the north from the shores of the Black Sea all the way to Egypt, so a very very large expanse of territory."

The slide shows a map of Europe, North Africa, and Western Asia, which highlights the route and major battles of Alexander the Great's Conquest from the Mediterranean all the way to India. The text on the slide reads: "An 'updated' Hellenistic composition based on an Egyptian model?"

Blouin: "Lastly this document also is a testimony to the fact that the goddess Isis was really conceived as a universal all-powerful divine force and a feminine all-powerful divine force—something which can seem strikingly different to many people who are more used to a monotheistic religious context where the masculine is much more prominent. However, I want to end by highlighting how the power of Isis endured and how it also made its way through to Christianity."

On the right of the slide is an image of a statue of Isis-Aphrodite from the Metropolitan Museum. The title of the slide is “Isis: Female Divine and Powerful:, while the text on the slide reads, "Female ruler of vast oecumene, Universalizing powers, Enumeration = 'Isiac dictionary', From Isis to Mary..."

Blouin: “The slide here shows on the left a fresco of Isis nursing Harpocrates or Horus. It was found in Karanis, a site in the Fayum and is dated from the same time as the Invocation, so roughly the 2nd century CE. Now this iconography of Isis was Christianized and in later periods this is frequently how the Virgin Mary and Jesus would be represented. So, you have an example of that in the middle of the slide. This is a fresco also from Egypt but from a Christian monastery which you can still visit today in the Wadi el Natrun, so a little south of Alexandria. And this iconography of Isis-turned-Mary made its way well beyond Egypt just like the cult of Isis. You can find an example on the right-hand side this is a baroque fresco in a church in Lecce, so in southern Italy.”

The slides shows three frescoes. Each shows a woman nursing a child. The left most image is of Isis from the Kelsey Museum, while the right two show the Virgin Mary of Christian tradition nursing a baby Jesus in similar poses to the Isis fresco (the middle image is from Wadi Natrun, the right from Lecce, Italy).

Blouin: “That's it for me—thank you very much for joining me today. Don't hesitate to click the subscribe button below and if you like that video there's plenty more, just go and check it out on Peopling the Past's main page. Thank you very much.”

Cut to the last slide which shows the credits for this episode:

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