Isidorus at the Gates of the Temple

In the present era of globalization, diaspora, and transnational flows of people and ideas, old terms such as syncretism, creolization, and hybridity have been pressed into service to describe the vital and creative results of all kinds of human mixing. These new and generally positive reappropriations have not always succeeded in cutting the tethers of less edifying etymologies anchored in the modern colonial and imperial past. Earlier pejorative views of syncretisms, hybrids, or creoles as impure or inauthentic, as well as implicit assumptions about the prior purity of the combined elements and relations of power between them have all contributed to a methodological unease with these terms. Some have advocated abandoning them completely.¹

But at least for “syncretism,” scholarly disputes over the value of the term have provided a potentially productive path to rehabilitation. As Charles Stewart has argued, debates over whether syncretism has occurred, views on the process, and judgments of its results, are not extrinsic to the societies in which anthropologists or historians of religion have studied it:

Ultimately, the anthropology of syncretism is not concerned with pronouncing whether Buddhism, or any other religion, is or is not syncretic, but rather with studying the various arguments made for or against the notion of religious mixing. It should be concerned with competing discourses over mixture, whether syncretic or antisyncretic. Wherever syncretism occurs or has occurred, it is usually accompanied by a parallel discourse that might be termed metasyncretic: the commentary and registered perceptions of actors as to whether amalgamation has occurred, and whether this is good or bad. A strictly objectivist view could never be sufficient.²

An anthropology of syncretism, reconstituted on these terms, would investigate the positions, strategies, and discourses of various actors in a given social field, or in multiple overlapping fields, as they try to define religious ideas and practices as mixtures of different traditions – or

¹ For discussion of these terms and debates surrounding them, see Stewart and Shaw 1994, Stewart 1999, Stewart 2007. Lincoln 2001, for example, makes a well-reasoned case that “syncretism” is unredeemable.
² Stewart 1999, 58. See also Stewart and Shaw 1994.
not, as the case may be. Such a study of syncretism would also inquire into the ongoing conflicts and efforts at reconciliation between differing perspectives within or outside syncretic traditions. A similar approach can help to make a silk purse from the sow’s ear of “Graeco-Egyptian” syncretism.\(^3\) As students of ancient religious texts and other evidence, we find it useful to posit various analytical and descriptive categories of mixed traditions, but we would do well to ask whether any of our notions about “Graeco-Egyptian” phenomena correspond to the perceptions, distinctions and discourses of the historical actors we study - in short, whether there is any evidence of the kind of metasyncretic discourse that Stewart describes.

I propose to explore this question through a series of four hymns composed in Greek by a certain Isidorus and inscribed in the early first century BCE on the southernmost gates of the temple of Hermouthis and Isis in Narmouthis (modern Medinet Madi), a small town in the Fayyum region of Egypt.\(^4\) These texts have long been studied as part of a group of Hellenistic or “Graeco-Egyptian” Isis aretalogies, which all share a central divine subject and certain characteristic motifs related to her universality and benevolent power. The hymns from Narmouthis, however, have even more to offer when read in their particular local context rather than in this universalizing generic frame, since they were the creations of a writer in the multi-ethnic, multi-lingual Ptolemaic Egyptian countryside who consciously mediated between differing literary and religious traditions. In his hymns, Isidorus positioned himself, his poetical discourse, his formal addressees and the other referents of his discourse in this Fayyumic context – or rather, in its multiple contexts. Isidorus’ poetry was not determined solely by the generic

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\(^3\) And indeed, such an effort has already been made in the excellent study by Borgeaud and Volokhine 2000.

\(^4\) The important study of F. Dunand (1973) recognized the significance of Isidorus’ hymns for the study of syncretism, and took Isidorus’ first hymn as the starting point for an insightful discussion of the diversity of phenomena embraced under the term - including the Egyptian tradition of syncretic divinities that shaped later Graeco-Roman syncretisms.
expectations of Graeco-Egyptian Isis hymns, but was the result of his own innovative practice within a range of poetical forms and styles as well as genres of discourse.

Particularly important to interpreting these complexities of Isidorus’ hymns is what William F. Hanks has called the “indexical ground” or the “deictic field” of any discursive practice: the context of discourse that is embedded in linguistic expression itself through various pronouns, demonstratives, and other expressions that relate utterances to their speakers, addressees, other referents, and the place and time of occurrence. Though in three of his four creations Isidorus followed a well-established hymnic convention by addressing the goddess in the second person, other aspects of the indexical ground shift from hymn to hymn. In the fourth hymn, moreover, Isidorus no longer addresses the goddess but celebrates the founder of the temple at Narmouthis. In this hymn, his reference to himself and to his physical and literary milieu becomes more immediate and direct. As a series, the hymns elaborate a complex picture of overlapping and interrelating discursive contexts. The indexical ground also relates Isidorus’ discourse to a tangible, but no less complex, spatial context. The inscriptions were placed at the gates of the temple and arranged so that they flowed through them from the outside to within. From this liminal position, Isidorus engaged with widespread, universalizing “syncretic” traditions but also with the traditions of a local Egyptian temple, a temple that had origins deep in the Pharaonic past, but that was now situated in a Ptolemaic present. These shifting positions reveal an author with an acute awareness of the multiple and sometimes conflicting frames of interpretation that can converge at one site around one “syncretic” goddess.

\[5\] For definitions and detailed discussion, see Hanks 1987, 682-687 and Hanks 2005; other important studies are also collected in Hanks 2000.
The hymns and their physical context

The physical context in which the hymns are located and to which they refer is an essential aspect of the indexical ground of Isidorus’ discourse. The hymns on occasion do, in fact, refer directly to the “here” of the temple and to its location in the Arsinoite nome of Ptolemaic Egypt. Equally important is the imagined “copresence” of the reader as the poet recited his hymns to the goddess. As normally defined, copresence involves a certain spatial proximity of verbal interactants and a level of mutual orientation, but in the hymns of Isidorus an imagined copresence is possible because the written texts representing the discourse were fixed in the particular place to which they refer. The reader could, therefore, directly comprehend the indexical ground of Isidorus’ discourse and share in its orientation. While reading the hymns, moreover, visitors to the temple would have had to shift position slightly as they moved from one text to another, all the while oriented by the hymns to the physical space of the temple or to its divine inhabitants. It is essential, therefore, to read these hymns together with the physical context for which they were composed.

The hymns were inscribed on the pilasters of a gateway to the southernmost forecourt of the temple of Hermouthis and Isis (see fig. 1). The innermost part of this temple was built almost 1800 years before Isidorus’ day under the pharaohs Amenemhat III and Amenemhat IV of the XIIth Dynasty. This original temple was oriented on an axis that ran roughly south-southeast to north-northwest, so that the entrance to the sanctuary would be approached from the south-southeast. Hieroglyphic inscriptions and images indicate that the original temple was dedicated to Renenutet, a goddess of the harvest, birth, and fortune. She shared the temple with

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her consort, Sobek, the crocodile-god prominent in the Fayum who was also associated with fertility. In the Ptolemaic period, Renenutet usually appeared in Greek texts as Hermouthis or Thermouthis, and Sobek as Souchos or other variant forms of this name. At this temple, Sobek appeared under the Greek name Sokonopis. The XIIth-Dynasty temple underwent significant expansion and restoration in the Ptolemaic period. The additions included the outermost of the two hypostyle halls of the temple proper and most of the structures from that point southwards. These consisted of a series of forecourts, gates and vestibules that extend approximately 75m beyond the outer hypostyle hall along the line of the main axis of the temple. Isidorus’ hymns were inscribed on the gates to the outermost vestibule in this series of preliminary spaces. Dual dedicatory inscriptions on the pillars date the construction of the forecourt to the 22nd year of the reign of Ptolemy IX Soter II, or 96 BCE. The hymns were probably inscribed on the gate of the forecourt not long after this date. A processional way flanked by sphinxes, and aligned with the central axis of the temple, then proceeded from the outer gates toward the south-southeast. Toward the north or back of the XIIth-Dynasty sanctuary a “contra-temple” dedicated to the goddess Isis was also added in the Ptolemaic period. The contra-temple, a tradition dating back to the New Kingdom in Egypt, was a shrine erected in close proximity to the sacred images located in the inner sanctum (usually at the back of the temple). These were often intended for the religious use of non-priests who were not permitted to enter the temple proper. In the Late Period of Egyptian history, traditional restrictions on access to sacred space continued and were perhaps given added physical emphasis by the elaboration of enclosing structures in temple

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8 The inscriptions of the XIIth Dynasty temple, published by Donadoni 1947, consistently invoke the primary deities as Renenutet, the living goddess of Dja (Rmn-w.t.t ‘nh.t n.t ∆) and Sobek of Shedet (Shk Śdt). Dja was the Egyptian name of Narmouthis at this early period. The later name means “Town of Hermouthis”. Shedet was the earlier name of Crocodilopolis.

9 The name is derived from Egyptian Shk-m-ḥb “Sobek is in festival.” See Quack 2006/7.


architecture, so that the Ptolemaic Egyptian temple is sometimes imagined as an isolated, “Hermetically sealed” world.\textsuperscript{12} On the other hand, monumental pylons, forecourts and processional ways had long provided points of partial or peripheral access to the temple for the broader populace, and these spatial and architectural practices continued into the Ptolemaic period.\textsuperscript{13} The gate of the vestibule at which Isidorus inscribed his hymns was part of this intermediate zone between the outside world and the ancient religious traditions within.

The central axis of the temple complex, its series of portals and especially its outermost gate provided the architectural mise-en-scène for Isidorus’ hymns, but the hymns were also arranged on the posts of the gate in a manner that one commentator has described as “oddly asymmetrical.”\textsuperscript{14} Though there were two hymns on each post of the gate, the pairs of hymns were arranged differently. Hymn 1 (according to the conventional numbering) was on the south side of the western pier of the gate. An individual approaching the outer vestibule of the temple complex, would find it on the left pier directly facing him or her. Hymn 2 was adjacent to Hymn 1, but on the inside or eastern surface of the same pier. Hymn 3 was on the opposite pier of the gate, also on the inside (in this case, the western) surface. So in addition to dividing the hymns by pilasters, Hymns 2 and 3 formed a pair that faced each other on either side of the entry to the vestibule. Hymn 4 was on the north side of the eastern pier, facing inwards toward the vestibule and the temple.

The hymns on the gate’s pillars were also arranged according to their formal poetical characteristics. Each pillar bore one hymn in dactylic hexameters, and another in elegaic

\textsuperscript{12} Assmann 1992, 11.
\textsuperscript{13} See the brief discussion of such architectural features in Arnold 1999, 277-285. In the Ptolemaic period, there could be a cross-cultural dimension to these points of access - this is, for example, where trilingual decrees like the Rosetta stone would have been placed, as well as most Greek inscriptions, and certain types of late Ptolemaic sculpture that combined Egyptian and Greek elements.
\textsuperscript{14} Vanderlip 1972, 10.
couplets. Hymns 1 and 3 were in hexameters, the typical convention for Greek hymns that went at least as far back as the earliest of the so-called Homeric hymns (7th-6th centuries BCE). Both of these hymns are 36 verses long, and followed by a brief prose subscription: “Isidorus wrote (this)” (Ἰσίδωρος ἔγραψε). Hymns 2 and 4, on the other hand, are in elegiac couplets. This was a much more unusual verse form for hymnic compositions, although Isidorus may have had a significant model in the Alexandrian poet Callimachus, who composed his *Hymn to Athena* in the same meter.\textsuperscript{15} Chris Faraone has shown that in his elegaic hymns, Isidorus, like Callimachus, revived the archaic practice of arranging the verses into five-couplet stanzas.\textsuperscript{16} Hymn 2 consists of 3 stanzas (30 lines) and, like the other hymns, is followed by the simple subscription identifying the author. This hymn, however, is unique in having a further subscription: an elegaic couplet in which the author records the blessings he has received from the gods who have heard his hymns and prayers. Hymn 4, the longest of the hymns, has 4 stanzas (40 lines) and is also followed by Isidorus’ usual signature. The formal alternation of the hymns reinforces the spatial pairings described above: Hymns 1 and 2 on the western pillar were a hexametrical-elegaic pair, as were Hymns 2 and 3 facing one another on the interior surfaces of the pillars, and Hymns 3 and 4 on adjacent sides of the eastern pillar.

**Isidorus at the Gates**

The one constant through these formal and spatial shifts is the figure of Isidorus himself, the author of the hymns. But as I have mentioned, little is known about him beyond a few facts that can be gleaned from his inscriptions. The name Isidorus is ostensibly Greek, even if it is derived from the name of the Egyptian goddess Isis. A Greek name, however, is not at all a

\textsuperscript{15} Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, 32.
\textsuperscript{16} Faraone (unpublished).
reliable indication of Greek ethnicity, especially at this late point in the Ptolemaic period.\textsuperscript{17} Some scholars have suggested that he was an Egyptian, perhaps even an Egyptian priest,\textsuperscript{18} but the few references that Isidorus makes to himself tell us little more than that he was devoted to the divinities of the temple, and that he believed that they had granted him blessings in return for his prayers and hymns. Isidorus’ most explicit and significant autobiographical statement comes in the last lines of the last hymn (following the spatial sequence outlined above). There he claims to have investigated the history of the temple and its founder, to have translated his findings for the Greeks, and to have set them up as inscriptions (Hymn 4.37-40). Isidorus thus identified himself as an intermediary between the traditions of ancient Egypt and the Greeks, but on its own this statement does not clearly indicate whether he considered himself more at home in one language and its literary traditions or the other.\textsuperscript{19} To trace out more clearly Isidorus’ position on his literary, cultural and religious affiliations, it will be productive to reconsider his final statement after passing through the shifting sequence of indexical grounds that his hymnic discourses create as he leads up to that point.

In the hexametrical composition that first confronted any visitor passing through the gates of the temple’s outer vestibule, Isidorus addressed Hermouthis in the second person and invoked a particular vision of this goddess through a long series of descriptive phrases that defined the goddess as omnipotent and universal. He begins as follows:

\begin{quote}
πλουτοδότι βασίλεια θεών, Ἑρµοῦθι ἄνασσα, παντοκράτειρα, τύχη ἀγαθή, μεγαλώνουµε ἵσι, Δηοῖ υψίστη, ζωῆς εὑρέτρια πάσης . . .
\end{quote}

O wealth-giving queen of the gods, lady Hermouthis, Almighty, Agathe Tyche, Isis of the great name,

\textsuperscript{17} Peremans 1970, Clarysse 1985. Individuals with dual names (Greek and Egyptian) do occur as early as the third century, but the phenomenon is much more prominent in evidence from the second and first centuries BCE.
\textsuperscript{18} See e.g. Vandoni 1952, 107-108 who considered Isidorus an Egyptian as does Dunand 1973, 92; on the other hand, Fowden 1986, 49-50 considers him a Greek.
\textsuperscript{19} Though note Fowden 1986, 49-50, who argues that since Isidorus does not claim to be able to read Egyptian texts himself, he was probably not an Egyptian priest. On the other hand, Frankfurter 1998, 100 describes him as a priest.
The local goddess Hermouthis is here explicitly assimilated to the “Hellenistic” Isis whose power and fame extended far beyond Egypt. And of the four hymns, this one most resembles other aretalogical compositions in Greek that celebrated the universal power of Isis and the many names under which she was known. In its discursive form, it is closer to those texts such as the invocation to Isis in *P. Oxy.* 1380 and the aretalogy of Maroneia that address the goddess in the second person, rather than the so-called Memphite Isis aretalogies in which the goddess reveals herself in a series of first-person self-predications. The content, however, shares similarities with both groups. Isidorus addressed Hermouthis-Isis as the founder of civilized life, the creator of laws and agriculture (1.4-8), and also as the power behind the natural, fructifying rhythms of the Nile (Hymn 1.9-13):

σοῦ τε χάριν συνέστηχ ὁ πόλος καὶ γαῖα ἀπασα καὶ πνοιὰς ἀνέων καὶ ἡλίος ὁ γλυκυφεγγής. 
δυνάμει Νείλου ποταμοί πληροῦνται ἀπαντες, ὥρη ὀπωρινῆ, καὶ λαβρότατον χεῖθ ὕδωρ γαίαν πάσαν ἐπι, ἵν' ἀνέγλιπος καρπὸς ὑπάρχῃ.

Because of you, heaven and the whole earth have their being; 
And the gusts of the winds and the sun its sweet light. 
By your power the channels of the Nile are filled, every one, 
in the late summer season, and the most turbulent water is poured 
On the whole land, so that produce may be unfailing.

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20 Hymn 1.1-3. Translations are adapted from Vanderlip 1972, but adjusted when the sense and the occasionally archaic style of the English misrepresents the Greek. 
21 The most famous of these are the so-called Memphite group of inscriptions, i.e. the Kyme aretalogy (*IKyme* 41; *IG* XII Suppl. 14, pp. 98-9) and three other partial versions: inscriptions from Thessaloniki (*IG* X(2).1.254) and Ios (*IG* XII Suppl. 14, p. 98), and a passage from Diodorus Siculus’ account of Egypt (1.27.3-4). Other important Isis aretalogies include the inscriptions from Andros (*IG* XII(5).739 = Totti 1985, no. 2) and Maroneia (Grandjean 1975) that are similar in content but differ in poetical and discursive form. The bibliography on these texts is enormous and cannot be cited in extenso, but some key studies are: Harder 1944, Žabkar 1988, Quack 2003. Brief overviews may be found in Grandjean 1975, 12-15; Fowden 1986, 46-48; Versnel 1998, 41-44; Dousa 2002, 149-151. 
22 Though in Latin, the Lucius’ prayers to Isis in Apuleius *Metamorphoses* 11.2 and 11.25 could also be compared to these other second-person addresses. 
23 Žabkar 1988, 137-140 focused on this hymn as a comparandum to other Greek and Latin aretalogies and to their precedents in Egyptian hymns. Various parallels are also adduced in the commentary on this hymn by Vanderlip 1972.
Isidorus invokes and continually emphasizes the goddess as the object of his address with the partial anaphora, "Because of you . . . By your power . . .", but he describes her exalted power through simple predications concerning the heavens, the earth, the landscape – that is, place at the broadest level. Hermouthis-Isis is initially correlated with the entire natural world, but then the frame narrows as Isidorus connects the goddess to the Nile’s annual flood, the indispensible and determinant natural phenomenon of life in Egypt.

In the subsequent lines (1.14–24), Isidorus repeats the pattern of a universal frame that becomes centered on Egypt – but this time in terms of human geography. The sequence begins with a typically Greek division between the Greeks and everyone else:

δόσσοι δὲ ξώουσι βροτοί ἐπ’ ἀπέρωνι γαῖῃ,
Θρᾷκες καὶ Ἑλληνες, καὶ δόσσοι βάρβαροι εἰσι,
οὖνομά σου τὸ καλὸν, πολυτίμητον παρὰ πᾶσι,
φωναῖοι φράζουσι ἰδίαις, ἰδίαι ἐνὶ πάτρῃ.

However many mortals live on the boundless earth,
Thracians and Hellenes, and however many are barbarians,
They all pronounce your beautiful name, much honored among all peoples,
In their own languages, and in their own native lands.

This totalizing dichotomy implies a Greek “we” as the center point of orientation for the discourse, but the novel inclusion of Thracians with the Hellenes suggests that Isidorus may have had in mind a Ptolemaic version of the dichotomy. At its height, the dynasty had Thracian connections through Arsinoe II (the former wife of Lysimachus). The Ptolemaic empire at that time extended to Thrace, and Thracians were among those soldiers of the Ptolemaic army settled as cleruchs in the Fayyum.24 In the next few lines, Isidorus centers his discourse on Egypt much

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24 Vanderlip 1972, 27 notes that according to Alexandrian epitaphs, Thracians were the largest ethnic group in Ptolemaic armies after Macedonians, and that Thrace had been part of the Ptolemaic empire under Ptolemy III and IV [also check Launey Recherches - esp. ii, pp. 1194, 1200]. Thracians (along with some other ethnic groups) in the Arsinoite nome in the third century BCE could and did enjoy privileged tax-status as Hellenes (see Clarysse and Thompson 2006, 322 n. 11 and the examples in P. Count cited there (e.g. 26.110). There were perhaps also specific royal connections to Thrace and to the kingdom of Lysimachus that were relevant here: Arsinoe II (the sister and later queen of Ptolemy II) had been married to Lysimachus, and thus queen of Thrace; Ptolemy’s first marriage was to Arsinoe I (daughter of Lysimachus). Arsinoe II is, of course, the Arsinoe after whom the Arsinoite nome was named. (note also the mythical connection between Proteus and Thrace; like Arsinoe, he spent some time in Thrace
more clearly. He lists the various names by which Hermouthis-Isis is known in Syria, Lycia, Thrace, and Greece, and then declares that “Egyptians (call you) Thiouis, since you alone are all the other goddesses named by the nations” (1.23-24: Αἰγύπτιοι δὲ Θιοῦιν, ὅτι μούνη εἶ σὺ ἄπασαι | αἱ ὑπὸ τῶν ἔθνων ὀνομαζόμεναι θεαι ἄλλαι). The name Thiouis is actually more a divine epithet than a proper name; it transliterates into Greek the Egyptian tꜣ wꜣ.t, “the one,” “the sole,” “the unique”. This was indeed an epithet of Isis in Egyptian texts, but Isidorus uses it in a novel way to explain a trans-cultural synthesis of divinities who are all subsumed under the one Egyptian goddess. Though “Egyptians” are referred to in the third person like all the other ἔθνη, they take on a greater prominence as Isidorus demonstrates a basic competence in the Egyptian language by using the name Thiouis and then explaining to the goddess why his usage is correct. Since this explanation (at least within the logic of Isidorus’ hymn) could hardly have been news to the goddess, it functioned as a kind of phatic utterance through which Isidorus affiliated himself with Egyptians, their language and their goddess, however cosmic and international her reach. This centering of Isidorus’ discourse on Egypt is reinforced by the spatial arrangement of references to the names of Isis among different peoples. They form a roughly circular itinerary starting with the Syrians in the east, moving north and west to the Lycians and then on to the Thracians, before turning south and west to the Greeks and finally returning to the Egypt.

before returning to his Egyptian home (Lycophron, Alexandra 115-127; note also the discussion of Posidippus 115 in Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, 387-388 which makes a connection between Arsinoe II and Proteus). [The dynasty also claimed descent from Dionysus, who was given a Thracian origin at times].

25 On the epithet Tꜣ wꜣ.t applied to Isis and parallels in the archive of Ἱorum and elsewhere see Dousa 2002, 169-175, who points out that despite this linguistic connection, the epithet is not used in Egyptian texts in this “quasi-pantheistic” or universal syncretic sense. This connotation of the concept of oneness or uniqueness seems to be much more prominent in the Greek hymns and texts. This is not, of course, to say that syncretism was alien to Egyptian religion; it was simply expressed in different ways. Vanderlip 1972, 96 contrasts the Memphite texts which “hide Isis’ syncretistic nature” with Isidorus’ emphasis on syncretism through references to the multiple names under which the goddess is known. In this respect, Isidorus is again closer to the invocations in P. Oxy. 1380 and the Maroneia aretalogy.
Only after establishing Hermouthis-Isis in a universal context centered on Egypt does the poet refer to himself and to his discourse. In a phrase reminiscent of the *Homeric Hymns*, he promises the goddess that he will never stop singing her praises (1.25-26):

δεσπότι, οὕν  λήξω  μεγάλην  δύναμίν  σου  ἀείδων,
οὐδέτερ' ἀθανάτι, πολυώνυμε, ἵσι  μεγίστη . . .

Mistress, I shall not cease singing of your great power,
Immortal savior, many-named, mightiest Isis . . .

In the verses that follow this explicit reference to his praise, Isidorus takes up the goddess’ epithet of “savior,” and expatiates on this theme in relation to general categories of human suffering, but without connecting them to the contingent suffering of any particular person: Hermouthis-Isis saves cities and their inhabitants from war; she saves those who are in prison, those in pain or facing death, those wandering in foreign lands, or in danger at sea. “Therefore,” Isidorus implores the goddess, “hear my prayers, be merciful to me, and put an end to all my grief.” This may have been a genuine *cri de coeur* (who can say?), but in this relatively formal hymn, the rhetoric of the prayer is generic. Its appeal unfolds strictly within the logic of this hymnic genre of discourse: in exchange for praising the saving power of the goddess, Isidorus asks for her to save him. Isidorus, moreover, locates himself and his address to the goddess in no more precise a context than the wide world centered on Egypt that he has evoked through his description of the power and universality of Hermouthis-Isis. With the exception of the name Hermouthis, there is nothing in this first hymn that connects it to its immediate spatial or temporal context. The indexical ground is broad, diffuse, and minimally defined.

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26 Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, 350. See, e.g., the Homeric Hymn to Apollo 177-178 (αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν οὕν λήξω ἐκμὴδολον Ἀπόλλων οἰ µενέων ἄργυρότοξον ὃν ἡμὐκομοσ τέκε Λητώ.), as well as the closing line of hymns to Demeter (III.495), Apollo (V.546), Hermes (XI.580) and Aphrodite (XIII.21, XV.6), etc.: αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ καὶ σεῖο καὶ ἄλλης μνήσμος ἀοιδῆς. See also the hymns to the Muses and Apollo (XVII.7), Hestia (XX.14), etc.: αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν ὑμέων τε καὶ ἄλλης μνήσμος ἀοιδῆς.
But the ground shifts in the second hymn. As our putative reader moves to the adjacent text on the inner surface of the western pillar of the gate, Isidorus’ discourse becomes more localized, and the discursive context becomes more critical to the rhetoric of his appeal to the goddess. The form also switches from dactylic hexameters to elegaic couplets, which, as Chris Faraone has argued, are generically better suited to his assumption of a more personal and urgent voice in this poem.\textsuperscript{27} Initially, he appears to resume his address from the previous hymn to Hermouthis-Isis as a goddess of agriculture and temporal salvation, but the scale of reference announced in the first couplet is less cosmic, and in the final lines of the first stanza Isidorus’ local milieu comes into focus:

χαῖρε, Τύχη Ἀγαθή, μεγαλώνυμε ᾗοι μεγίστη,
Ἐρμοῦθι ἐπὶ σοι πᾶσα γέγηθε πόλις,
ζωῆς καὶ καρπῶν εὐρέτρια, οἰαὶ τε πάντες
τέρπονται τε βροτοί σῶν χαρίτων ἕνεκα.
όσοι σοι εὑχονται ἐπ’ ἐμπορίῃν τε παρεῖναι,
πλουτούοι εὐσεβεῖς εἰς τὸν ἄπαντα χρόνον·
καὶ ὅσοι ἐν νοῦσοις βανατῶδεις μοῖρῃ ἔχονται,
σοὶ εὐξάμενοι ταχέως σής\textsuperscript{28} ζωῆς ἔτυχον.
ὡς ἑτύμως ὁ ἅγαθὸς δαίμων, Σοκονῶπις κραταιός,
σύνναος ναίει, πλουτοδότης ἅγαθός . . .

Hail, Agathe Tyche, greatly renowned Isis, mightiest Hermouthis, in you every city rejoices.
O discoverer of life and of crops wherein all mortals delight because of your blessings.
All who pray to you to assist their commerce, prosper in their piety forever;
And all who are bound by fate in the grip of mortal illness, if they pray to you, quickly attain your life.
How truly the Agathos Daimon, mighty Sokonopis dwells as your temple-mate, that goodly bestower of wealth . . .

By invoking Sokonopis as a σύνναος θεός, Isidorus refers to the divine pair inhabiting the local temple at Narmouthis: Sobek and the goddess Renenutet. As noted earlier, this couple is attested in the figural decorations and hieroglyphic inscriptions of the original XIIth-Dynasty temple. In the second stanza (ll. 11-20), however, Isidorus expands the pair into a triad by mentioning a son,

\textsuperscript{27} Faraone (unpublished), 18.
\textsuperscript{28} Wilhelm reads {σ} ἦς.
Anchoes (Ἀγχόης). The root of the name is probably the Egyptian 'nh “life”, but the exact identity of this god is unclear, and he is not attested elsewhere. Isidorus locates him in the heavens and identifies him with the rising sun (ll. 13-14). In this respect, he could easily have assimilated Anchoes to Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, in order to reinforce the identification of Hermouthis with Isis. But the frame of reference is resolutely local here, and the universal Hermouthis-Isis of the first hymn scarcely appears. To the extent that Isidorus portrays the goddess as “syncretic” at all, local and intra-Egyptian patterns of syncretism come to the fore: the re-configuration of a local pair into the triad pattern of divinities which was so widespread in Egypt; the identification of Hermouthis-Isis with Agathe Tyche and Sokonopis with Agathos Daimon, which refer to well-attested connections between Renenutet (Hermouthis) and Shaï, the Egyptian concept of fortune or fate; and, of course, the syncretism of a local goddess with Isis, the great transregional goddess of Egypt, is not solely a “Hellenistic” phenomenon but one with a long history within Egypt. The latter assimilation was formalized in the local architecture through the addition of the contra-temple of Isis. Isidorus also directly addresses the triad of local divinities at Narmouthis for a brief moment. In the middle of the second stanza, the local triad of the temple becomes the collective addressee of the hymn, rather than Hermouthis-Isis alone: “All who wish to beget offspring, if they pray to you (ὑμῖν - the plural), obtain the blessing of children” (ll. 15-16). Through all these references, Isidorus constructs an indexical ground for his discourse that is much closer than the expansive world of the first hymn.

29 Vandoni 1952, 117; Vanderlip 1972, 41-42. Anchoes is also mentioned at 3.33 and 4.5.
31 Vanderlip 1972, 4, 6, 20, 38, 94-95. See also Quaegebeur 1975, 122-143.
33 ὅσοι δὴ ἔθελοι γονὴν παῖδων τε ποιῆσαι, | εὐξάµενοι ὑµῖν εὐτεκνίης ἔτυχον.
This localized discursive context is not only spatial but also temporal. In the final two couplets of the second stanza, Isidorus juxtaposes the human desire for offspring to the natural cycles of fertility in Egypt:

Neïlou χρυσορρόαν πείθουσ' ἀνάγεις κατὰ [κ]αι[ρό]ν
Αἰγύπτου ἐπὶ γῆν ἀνδράσιν εὐτερπίην,
εὐανθεῖ τότε καρπὸς ἅπας καὶ πᾶσι μερὶς,
οἶς θέλεις, ζωὴν παντοδαπῶν ἀγαθῶν.

Persuading the gold-flowing Nile, you lead him at the right moment over the land of Egypt as a blessing for men. Then all fruit flourishes, and you share it out to all whom you wish - a life of manifold good.

This shift to the Nile and the resumption of the second person singular address to Hermouthis-Isis seems rather abrupt, unless one recalls that the crocodile god Sobek was often connected with the Nile flood (as Sobek-Hapy) and the name Sokonopis was sometimes written in Demotic in order to reflect that connection. The rising flood of the Nile comes at the right time (καιρός) because Hermouthis-Isis persuades her consort Sokonopis, and leads him over the land. Starting with his reference to the opportune moment of the flood and that happy time (“then” - τότε) when the earth’s produce grows, Isidorus uses a series of temporal expressions and deictics to ground his own prayers for fertility in the rhythms of Egyptian agriculture, specifically at Narmouthis. In the third and final stanza of the hymn, the poet shifts from natural cycles to the socio-religious cycles of reciprocity that were enacted each year at the temple (lines 21-30):

σῶν δῶρων μυηθέντες, ὅσοις πλούτόν τ’ ἀνέδωκας
καὶ χάριτας μεγάλας σάς τε ἔχειν δι’ ὀλοῦ,
τούτων σοι μοίραν δεκτήν ἀπένειμαν <δὲ>παντες,
χαίροντες κατ’ ἔτος σή τε πανηγυρίηι,
εἶτα ἐδωρήσασε περιτελλομένου ἐνιαυτοῦ
αὐτοῖς μην Παχών πάσιν ἐς εὐφροσύνην.
τερφθέντες δ’ εἰς οἶκόν τε πανηγυρίσαντες ἔβησαν

34 See Monson 2006, 209 and Quack 2006/7. The latter points out that although the original form of the name transliterated in Greek as Σοκονώπις was Sbk-m-hb “Sobek-in-festival,” the name was often written in Demotic as Sbk-H’py (Sobek-Hapy – i.e. Sobek as the Flood) or Sbk-<in>-H’py (Sobek-in/of?-the Flood). Demotic scribes considered either etymology of the name Sokonopis possible.
35 κατά [κ]αι[ρό]ν is read κατά [ὥρας] by Hondius (SEG VIII), but these are similar temporal expressions. The others are: τότε (line 19); δι’ ὀλοῦ (line 22); κατ’ ἔτος (line 24); εἶτα (line 25); περιτελλομένου ἐνιαυτοῦ (line 25); μην Παχών (line 26).
Remembering your gifts, those to whom you have given wealth
and your great favors to possess forever,
All set aside a tenth portion of these things for you,
rejoicing each year at your festival,
Then as the year comes around you grant
to them all to be of good cheer in the month of Pachon.
Joyful after celebrating your festival, they go back to their homes
with propitious words, filled with abundance from you.
Grant a share of your gifts to me as well, Mistress Hermouthis,
your suppliant: riches and also the blessing of children.

Isidorus describes a festival of Hermouthis-Isis in the Egyptian month of Pachons. The festival appears to have been a local celebration of the goddess’ beneficence that coincided with the end of the harvest season. Those with homes near enough came to bring a tithe of their produce to the goddess, gratefully returning to her a portion of what she had given them in a cycle that rolled on year after year. It is tempting to imagine the celebrants passing through the very gates on which the hymn was inscribed as they brought their offerings to the goddess each year.

Evocative though it may be, this reference to the socio-religious temporality of Narmouthis and surrounds is not just local color. The precise indexical ground of Isidorus’ discourse was essential to his rhetorical strategy. One could say that it was the ground he stood on in seeking blessings from the goddess. In the closing couplet of the hymn, Isidorus aligned his own prayers as a suppliant to the goddess (ικέτης) with the yearly cycle of her festival. He begins with the phrase “Grant a share of your gifts to me as well,” (σῶν δῶρων κάμοι μετάδος . . .) echoing the beginning of the third stanza (σῶν δῶρων μνησθέντες . . .) and thereby connecting his request for wealth and children with the enduring local pattern of divine generosity and human

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36 It is also possible to construe this passage as referring to two festivals (cf. the two festivals mentioned at the end of Hymn 3). In that case, the first two couplets of the hymn would refer to the festival of Hermouthis-Isis to which the people bring a tithe of their produce. The next two couplets would refer to another festival in the month of Pachon, at which the emphasis is on the goddesses granting “good cheer” to the people.

37 See Lewis 1983, 115-116 for a brief overview of the Egyptian agricultural cycle. A festival of Sokonopis is attested on 22 Pachons in Narmouthis on a papyrus dated 137 BCE (P. Cairo 30619; see de Cenival 1972, 94, pl. VII).
gratitude he has just described. In this closing request, moreover, Isidorus addresses the goddess by her local name alone (Ἐρμοοθί άνασσα). He apparently believed that his localized appeal was successful, since he later added a couplet after his signature, claiming that the gods—from presumably the triad of Hermouthis, Sokonopis and Anchoes in the temple at Narmouthis—heard his prayers and hymns and granted him “kind favor” in return.38

If the differing formal genres and discourses of the first and second hymns unfold on maps of distinct scale and orientation, the third hymn mixes characteristics of the previous two. Though a traditional hexametrical hymn like the first, it addresses the goddess with a more personal appeal, and also makes more direct reference to the local context than the first hymn. Both of these elements are especially apparent in the second half of the hymn. The hymn begins, however, with an invocation to Hermouthis-Isis as a universal queen of the gods (lines 1-4) that is very similar to the opening lines of the first hexametrical hymn:39

ὑψίστων μεδέουσα θεών, Ἐρμοοθί άνασσα, ήι άγιή, άγια, μεγάλη, μεγαλόνυμη Δηοί, σεμιστή δώτειρ' άγαθών μερόπεσοι ἀπασι εὐσεβέσιν μεγάλας χάριτας και πλούτου εδώκας . . .

O ruler of the highest gods, lady Hermouthis.
Isis, pure, most sacred, great, Deo of the great name,
Most hallowed bestower of good things, to all men
who are pious you give great favors and wealth . . .

Many of the same names and epithets appear in both invocations, but the third hymn treats the benevolence of Hermouthis-Isis as more contingent: the goddess grants her blessings to those who are pious (εὐσεβής), and particularly to those kings who are mindful of her.40 Rather than the divine queen of Hymn 1, who bestows civilization, justice, and agriculture on humanity

38 εὐχῶν Ἰδη ὑμοίοι τε θεοί κλύοντες ἐμεῖο, | ἀνταπεδώκαν ἐμοί εὐθυμίαν χάριτα (lines 33-34 of the inscription).
39 Compare Hymn 1, lines 1-5: πλουτοδότι βασίλεια θεών, Ἐρμοοθί άνασσα, | παντοκράτειρα, τύχη άγαθή, μεγαλόνυμε Ἰς, | Δηοί υψίστη, ζωῆς ἐφέτεια πάσης, | παντοίων ἐργῶν ἐμέλησο σοι, δηφ' ἀναδόης | ἀνθρώπωσι βίου τε καὶ κυνομήν τε ἀπασι . . . And also contrast the opening lines of Hymn 2 (see above).
40 This reverence echoes the piety and prayers of those who obtain the favor of Hermouthis-Isis in the opening stanza of the second hymn.
directly, the blessings of Hermouthis-Isis are mediated through worldly representatives of an ideal kingship:

ὅσσοι δὲ ζώουσι μακάρτατοι, ἄνδρες ἄριστοι,
πατριοφόροι βασιλεῖς τε καὶ ὁσῖν κοίραιν εἴσι,
οὗτοι οἱ ἐπέχοντες ἅμμεσου ἄριστοι,
λαμπρὸν καὶ λιπαρὸν καταλεῖποντες πολὺν ἀλβοῦ
ὑδαίτ' ὑψωτοί καὶ ἄνδρας τοῖς μεταύτίσι.

Whosoever live lives most blessed, the best of men: scepter-bearing kings and those who are rulers,
These, if they attend to you, rule until old age,
leaving shining and splendid wealth in abundance
to their sons and grandsons, and to men who come after.

In guaranteeing long life to the pious king and successful inheritance to his descendants, the goddess acts as the protector of legitimate kingship, one of the most prominent roles of Isis in Egyptian tradition.\textsuperscript{41} It is also a role that is entirely absent from the hymns and aretalogies of Isis that have been found outside of Egypt. Isis, in these texts, is a universal divine queen, but she does not support temporal kingship or any particular regime or form of polity\textsuperscript{42} – that is, she appears exactly as she does in Isidorus’ first hymn. In the third hymn, by contrast, Isidorus evokes an ideal king of Egypt, who, with the help of the goddess, extends his power to Asia and Europe, and brings peace and prosperity:

ὅν δὲ κε φιλτατον ἐσκε ἀνάκτων ἡ βασιλεία,
οὕτως καὶ Ασίας τε καὶ Εὐρώπης τε ἀνάκτων,
ἐρήμηνεν τε άγαθών, καρποὶ βριθοῦσιν ἐπὶ αὐτῶν,
πανοίκων ἀγαθῶν, καρποὶ τοῖς φέρουσι ἀριστίσι.
ὅππου δὲ πόλεμοι τε ἀνδροκτασίαι τε καὶ ἀλισταὶ,
μυριάδων ὀχλοι τοῦ σῶν ἅγαθος, ἀλλὰ μῖσι σου,
πλῆθος ἀπημαύρωσα, ὀλίγοισι δὲ θάρσος εἴδωκε.

But he whom the queen holds dearest among kings,
This one rules Asia and Europe,
bringing peace; the harvests grow heavy for him,
with all sorts of good things, bearing the best fruit.
And wherever there are wars and the slaughter of countless throngs, your wealth, your power

\textsuperscript{41} Compare the principles of legitimate kingship outlined in the Demotic Chronicle, as discussed by Johnson 1983.
\textsuperscript{42} Dousa 2002, 159-168 provides extensive background to the Egyptian pattern of Isis as patron and protector of legitimate kingship and explains the discontinuity between texts within and outside Egypt in terms of the differing geographical and political contexts. The first hymn of Isidorus is a significant and interesting exception to this general pattern.
Isidorus’ picture of peace and prosperity and expansive rule over Europe and Asia is difficult to reconcile with the much-diminished Ptolemaic kingdom of the early first century BCE with its dynastic struggles between Ptolemy IX Soter II and his brother, Ptolemy X Alexander. On the other hand, the anonymity of the ideal king was perhaps a discrete reference to the circumstances Isidorus’ world, and a nostalgic glance backward to the days of Ptolemy Philadelphus, who oversaw the massive agricultural development of the Fayyum and also projected Ptolemaic power into both Europe and Asia.\(^{43}\) In any case, the kingship that Isidorus evokes locates his discourse in a particular political-religious system, and implicates his divine addressee in a contingent relationship of royal piety and benefaction to the land of Egypt. This relationship, in which the right actions of the king guarantee peace and prosperity, provides the rhetorical context for his appeal to the goddess.

Immediately following his sketch of divine favor to the good king, Isidorus calls on the goddess to hear him as a suppliant (κλῦθι ἐμοῦ . . . ἵκέτου σου), wherever she may be. The subsequent lines cast about to all the far-off places where she may dwell. Isidorus begins with the cardinal directions, and then addresses the goddess as though she were on high, surveying the world below:

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{ἡ που ἐς Λιβύην ἢ ἐς Νότον ἄμφιβεβηκα[ς],} \\
&\text{ἡ Βορέου πέρατα ναίει ἵππυνόν αἰεί,} \\
&\text{ἡ Εὔρου πνοιάς, ὥθη ἀντολαὶ ἦλιοι,} \\
&\text{ἡ καὶ Ὀλυμποῦ ἱκανεῖς ὅπου οὐρανίον ἔνες ἔλεσεν(?)}, \\
&\text{ἡ καὶ ἐν οὐρανοίῳ ὑψι ὅποι ἄνθανατοίς δικάζεις,} \\
&\text{ἡ καὶ ἦλιοι ἐκείρλοι ἄρματα βάσα,} \\
&\text{κόσμον ἄπαν διάγοινα, κατοπτεύουσα ἀπάντα} \\
&\text{ἐργὰ ἀνδρῶν ἄσεβῶν τε καὶ εὐσεβῶν καθορῶσα,} \\
\end{align*}\]

Whether you have journeyed around to Libya or to the South,  
Or you dwell at the limits of the North Wind, ever sweetly blowing,  
Or at the gusts of the East Wind, where are the risings of the sun,  
Or you have gone to Olympos, where the celestial ones are,  
Or you pass judgments in heaven above with the immortals,

\(^{43}\) For an overview of the development of the Fayyum under Ptolemy II, see Manning 2003, 99-125.
Or you have mounted the chariot of the swift-driving sun, 
and are crossing over the world, gazing down 
and observing all the deeds of men, both impious and pious.

The geographical coordinates that Isidorus uses are, at first, centered on Egypt: Libya is the west, 
and the North Wind blows sweetly into Egypt with its cooling breath.\textsuperscript{44} Then in his address to 
the distant, roving goddess, Isidorus mentions places that would be familiar to anyone versed in 
Greek literary and mythical traditions: Mt. Olympos, the heavens, and the course of the sun’s 
chariot.\textsuperscript{45} The latter heights offer the goddess a vantage point from which she may view and 
judge the deeds of kings and men, and (he implies) dispense her favor accordingly.

But, Isidorus points out, the far-off heavens are not the only such vantage point. In the 
final verses of this hexametrical hymn, he returns to the same palpable local context that he 
evoked in the elegaic hymn inscribed on the opposite gate post:

\begin{quote}
εἰ δὲ καὶ ᾧδε πάτη, ἰδίαι ἄρετήν ἐφορώσα, 
tερπόμενη θύμασιν, λοιβασίοι τε ἔδε θυμλατ[ισ],
ἀνδρῶν ναόντων Σῦχοχν νομόν Ἀραυοεῖτῶν
παμφύλων ἔθνων, ὁσσοί κατ’ ἐκδε τε πάρεισι
εἰκάδι μὴν Παχών καὶ Θωτὴ δεκάτην σοι ἄγον[τ]ε[ισ],
kαὶ Ἀγχόη, Σοκουστὶ, θεοὶ {α} ἁγίοισιν, ἑορτήν.
\end{quote}

And if you are also present here, you behold private virtue, 
delighting in the sacrifices, libations, and offerings 
of the men who dwell in the nome of Souchos, the Arsinoïtes, 
peoples of all tribes, who each year are present 
on the twentieth of the month of Pachon and Thoth, bringing a tithe to you, 
and to Anchoes, and to Sokonopis, the sacred gods, during your festival.

The deictic ᾧδε “here”, emphatically indicates the goddess’ close presence. That presence is 
imagined in the time of the festival of the goddess, at which she judges not royal virtue, but the 
private virtue of the people of the Fayyum who remember her festival and bring their offerings to 
the temple. This image of the goddess evokes a contemporary judicial practice that took place in

\textsuperscript{44} Vanderlip 1972, 55 notes an inscription at Edfu (VII 243b) that asks Renenutet to come in a “good north wind”. 
The north wind is also called sweet (\textit{ndm}) in another inscription (IV 126,2 - See Wilson 1997, 453-454). Elsewhere, 
Hathor is called “the good north wind” (\textit{mHy.t nfr.t}) who makes the field grow (VII 86, 15). For further parallels and 
discussion, see Vandoni 1952, 118.

\textsuperscript{45} This is not to say that these references were all incomprehensible from an Egyptian literary perspective. The 
heavens are a place for the gods in Egyptian texts, and Isis riding the chariot of the sun is not so dissimilar to Isis in 
the boat of the sun-god Re. See Vanderlip 1972, 55-57.
the approximate spatial context of the hymns. In the forecourts of temples of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, officials continued to conduct judicial oaths and hear petitions and cases at law just as they had in previous eras.\textsuperscript{46} Here at the outermost gates of the temple, Isidorus addresses the goddess as she judges the merit of the people of the Arsinoite nome. Isidorus’ shift from a distant goddess who passes judgment from on high to one who is at the temple during her festival puts the local populace in the presence of Hermouthis-Isis. These diverse people (παµφυλων ἐθνῶν) are located in the space of Egypt and the Ptolemaic state through a dual reference. Isidorus describes them as those who dwell in the nome of Souchos, hearkening back to earlier Egyptian names and to the predominance of the crocodile-god Sobek in the Fayyum. But they are also called Arsinoïtes, residents of the Arsinoite nome, one of the administrative districts of Ptolemaic Egypt. This was the usual designation of the nome in Greek and (less consistently) Demotic texts, ever since Ptolemy II renamed it following the death of his sister and wife Arsinoe II in 270 BCE.\textsuperscript{47} The name is the only explicit link to the ruling dynasty, but it does nevertheless connect the Ptolemies to the ideal kingship of earlier verses. Isidorus presumably counts himself among the Arsinoïtes, and (fortified by the image of their “private virtue”) he concludes his hymn with a personal appeal to Isis and to the great gods who dwell with her in her temple (μεγάλοι τε θεοι συνναοι ἀυτῆι), asking them to send him the healing god Paean.\textsuperscript{48} The rhetoric of this appeal parallels and recapitulates on a smaller scale the virtue of the “most beloved” king whom the goddess favored in the first half of the poem. Through the alternations of scale in the third hymn, the universal and international goddess of the


\textsuperscript{47} The name of the Fayyum from the Middle Kingdom onwards was τη-ςυ (the land of the lake) or τη-ςυ Σbk (the land of the lake of Sobek). In documentary Demotic texts up to the 2nd century BCE, the name became pτς n pτς ym (the nome of the lake), but later the name pτς n 3ρυς (the nome of Arsinoe) was adopted. Nevertheless the old associations persisted. For a brief period during the invasion of Antiochus IV in 168 BCE, the nome was renamed Krokodilopolites. See Clarysse 1998-2002 [references there and elsewhere].

\textsuperscript{48} Vanderlip 1972, 62-63 suggests that Paean here may represent a conflation of Imouthes-Apollo-Asclepios.
first hymn becomes the local Egyptian goddess of the second. While Isidorus addresses the
goddess as Hermouthis at the end of his second hymn, he only addresses her as “Isis” in his
appeal to the goddess at the end of the third hymn. The distance of a transcendant Isis who is all
goddesses to all peoples is overcome by placing her in a very particular location.  

Isidorus’ fourth hymn, which is on the north side of the eastern pillar, facing inward
toward the temple of Hermouthis-Isis, differs significantly from the previous three. It is often
left out of discussion of the so-called “Isis aretalogies”, since it is not a hymn to Hermouthis-Isis
at all, but a poem in praise of Amenemhat III (referred to as Porramanres), the builder of the
original temple of Renenutet at Narmouthis. In contrast to the other hymns, Isidorus does not
directly address the object of his praise. Rather, the hymn unfolds in a dialogical manner:
Isidorus responds to an unknown interlocutor who inquires about the founder of the temple at the
beginning of the first stanza and at the end of the third (4.1-2, 29-30). The poem also
encapsulates a dialogue between languages and traditions. Isidorus explicitly cites Egyptian
sources, written and oral, and claims to translate them for Greeks. Despite these departures, the
hymn to Amenemhat III is a coherent part of the series of four texts Isidorus inscribed at the
gates of the temple. He wrote the poem in Greek, and in elegaic couplets and stanzas. As in the
second hymn, Isidorus uses this elegaic genre for a discourse that is very much embedded in the
local context with which he appears to have a personal connection. The subject of the fourth
hymn also resumes themes from the adjacent third hymn. Indeed, the third and fourth hymns
constitute a kind of diptych on kingship. The distant, ideal king of the hexametrical hymn,
perhaps a past Ptolemy who ruled over Asia and Europe, is juxtaposed to a native king of Egypt.
Though temporally remote, this king is more clearly defined, and more present in the indexical

49 It is perhaps worth noting that in the closing lines of the first hymn, no name at all is given. The goddess is just
“the one who has a powerful name” (μεγαλοσθενὲς ο nrows. ἕχουσα).
ground of Isidorus’ discourse. This effect is in part created through Isidorus’ repeated use of proximate deictics (ὅδε, οὗτος) in the fourth hymn to refer both to the temple and to the ancient king who built it.\textsuperscript{50} The temple was right there for the reader to see, and in the physical and spatial context at the temple and in the Fayyum, the repeated references to Amenemhat served as more than just references to an antecedent topic. The popularity of the cult of the pharaoh Amenemhat III in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods shows that his memory was very much alive in Isidorus’ day, and he also had a physical presence in various temple structures in the Fayyum.\textsuperscript{51} At Narmouthis, his image appeared in the decorations of the original Middle Kingdom temple; he is shown conducting the foundation rites, making offerings to the gods Renenutet and Sobek, and receiving benefactions from them in turn.\textsuperscript{52}

Isidorus indicates the proximate physical context as soon as the poem begins (4.1-6):

\begin{quote}

τίς τόδε ἁγνὸν ἔδει ἱερὸν Ἑρμοῦθι µεγίστη; \\
ποίς θεὸς ἐµνήσθη πανιεροῦ µακάρων; \\
ὡς αἰπὺν καὶ ἀδυτον ἐσηώσατ Ὄλυµπον \\
Δηοὶ ὑψίστη Ἰαοὶ ἀθανάτοις Ὀλυµποι
καὶ Ἀγχόηι ὠξί ὑἱῶι καὶ δαίµονι ἀγαθῶι Σοκονώπι,
καὶ Ἀθανάτοις ὄρµον εὑρί δικαιότατον.

Who built this holy temple to greatest Hermouthis? 
What god remembered the all-holy place of the immortals?
As a lofty Olympus he marked out the innermost sanctuary 
for highest Deo, Isis Thesmophorus, 
And for Anchoes the son and for the Agathos Daimon, Sokonopsis, 
he devised a most just haven.
\end{quote}

In the first line, a voice asks who built this temple, immediately orienting the discourse between Isidorus and his interlocutor toward the temple, and also to the as yet unknown founder. The temple is first identified as belonging to Hermouthis, but the picture is then filled out with references to the syncretic side of the goddess (Deo, Isis Thesmophorus), and in a moment of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[50] Lines 1, 11, 19, 25, 29, 33.
\item[52] Donadoni 1947.
\end{footnotes}
poetic hyperbole the inner sanctuary is likened to Mt. Olympus.\textsuperscript{53} Isidorus also includes the other members of the local triad, Anchoes and Sokonopis, among the denizens of the temple. He thus encapsulates the local and the transcultural aspects of the site in the opening of the hymn. Isidorus’ response to the question “Who built this temple?” is a story, the subject of which is introduced in the remainder of the first elegaic stanza (4.7-10):

Αἰγύπτου τινά φασὶ γενέσθαι θείον ἄνακτα,  
δὲ πᾶσις χώρας κύριος ἐξεφάνη  
πλούσιον, εὐσεβέα, δυναμὴν τε μεγίστην,  
δὲ κλέος καὶ ἁρετὴν ἔσχεν ἰσουρανίον.

They say that there came to be a divine king of Egypt, who appeared as the lord of the entire land, wealthy, pious, and with the greatest universal power, who had glory and virtue equal to the heavens.

In the style of a Herodotean source citation, the brief narrative about the royal founder is introduced in reported speech: “They say . . .” The indexical ground therefore includes not only Isidorus and the anonymous interlocutor, but other individuals who bear witness to the truthfulness of Isidorus’ account of the founder-king. Though Isidorus’ sources are at first anonymous, and suggest orally transmitted folk-tale, he provides a much more specific citation at the end of the second stanza. His story is supported by “those who read the sacred letters . . .” (οἱ τῶν ἱερῶν γράμματα ἄναλεξάμενοι), in other words, the priestly bearers of Egyptian literary tradition. This citation is important not just as an indication of the sources of Isidorus’ story about Amenemhat, but also because it documents the expected or intended reception of the reported speech\textsuperscript{54} (4.17-20):

δῆλον τοῦτ’ ἐστὶν ὅτι ὄρνεα ἐκλυεῖν αὐτοῦ,  
ὡς ὁ τῶν ἱερῶν γράμματα ἄναλεξάμενοι  
φάσκουσιν ποτὲ τούτον ἐπιστείλαντα κορώνην,  
σὺν τε ἐπιστολῖς ἤλθε φέρουσα φάσιν.

This fact is clear: that birds listened to him, since those who read the sacred letters

\textsuperscript{53} This may refer to the raised level of the inner sanctuary of the temple as Vanderlip 1972, 66 points out.
\textsuperscript{54} Hanks 1987, 678-680 (= Hanks 2000, 147-149).
are always saying that this man once gave orders to a crow, and with a letter she went off, bearing his utterance.

Isidorus himself believes the truth of the Egyptian priests’ story, and expects that his unknown interlocutor will as well, since he makes it the basis of a claim about the “clear” or “manifest” powers of the ancient pharaoh. The incorporated speech thereby lends its authority to Isidorus’ own discourse. Since they are described as “readers of sacred letters,” his sources also derive their reliability from written texts. This textual tradition supports not only Isidorus’ discourse but also its graphic representation. In the closing couplets of the final stanza, he sets forth the process by which the inscribed text of his hymn came to be: he learned the traditions about king Amenemhat III, translated them into Greek, and inscribed them at the temple gates:

\begin{quote}
\small
\begin{verbatim}
ἀσφαλέως δὲ μαθὼν τε παρ’ ἀνδρῶν τῶν ἱστορούντων
ταῦτα καὶ αὐτὸς ἐγώ πάντ᾽ ἀναγραφάμενος
ἡρμήνευσ᾽ Ἐλληνὶς θεοῦ δύναμιν τε ἀνακτος,
ὡς βροτὸς οὐδετέρος ἐσχεν ἵσην δύναμιν.
\end{verbatim}
\end{quote}

Having learned with certainty from men who conduct researches into these things, I myself also recorded everything in an inscription, having translated for Greeks the power of the divine king, since no other mortal possessed equal power.

In this discursive context and in such close physical proximity to the temple and its personnel, Isidorus’ gesture indicating the written form of his hymn invites comparison of his text with those written in “sacred letters,” and of his person with those who are versed in such traditions.\textsuperscript{55}

This was not an entirely illusory rhetoric. The very story that Isidorus tells includes recognizable motifs that occurred in Egyptian narrative genres that circulated among the villages of the Fayyum, villages whose caches of papyri have revealed a surprisingly active bilingual literary culture.\textsuperscript{56} The particular anecdote of the crow who carried messages appears in Aelian’s

\textsuperscript{55} I owe this observation to Chris Faraone (unpublished), 16.
\textsuperscript{56} van Minnen 1998.
According to Aelian, Egyptians told this story in relation to a tomb and funerary stela with which Amenemhat III (Mares) had honored his crow at Crocodilopolis (i.e. the capital of the Arsinoite nome). A couple of fragmentary Demotic texts from Tebtynis attest to narrative literature connected with Amenemhat, although there is no mention of a crow. Nevertheless, the broader motif of Amenemhat’s ability to command not only the birds of the sky, but the earth, the sea, rivers, winds, the sun, and “all creatures that crawl on the earth” recalls the Demotic narrative of Setna Khaemuas, the son of Rameses the Great, and the magical powers he obtained through spells from a book of Thoth. The first spell gave him the power to “enchant heaven, the earth, the underworld, the mountains and the seas,” and also to “find out what all the birds of the heaven and all the reptiles [elsewhere, herds] will say.” The second spell gave him the ability to behold the sun-god with his divine ennead and the risings of the moon. The parallels between Setna’s powers over nature and those attributed to Amenemhat III are remarkably close, and suggest that the story Isidorus told originally belonged to a well-attested genre of Demotic narratives about the magical powers of great figures from the pharaonic past. In the third stanza of the hymn, Isidorus adduces other traditions that may have come from his Egyptian sources. He explains

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57 Aelian, *de natura animalium* 6.7: Ἐν τῇ Διούπτῳ περὶ τὴν βασιλείαν τῆς τοῦ Αἰγύπτου Μαρίας, ὁποῖον Κροκοδείλων πόλις, κορώνης τάφος δείκνυται, καὶ τὴν αἰτίαν ἐκείνην Ἀιγύπτιοι φασὶ. τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων (Μάρης δὲ οὗτος ἐκάλετο) ἦν κορώνης θρέμματος, καὶ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἃς ἐβούλετο οἱ κομισθηναὶ τοῦ Βασιλείας αὐτῆς, καὶ άκουσας ἔδει ὑπεύθυναι χρῆ τὸ πτέρω. τῷ Βασιλεῖ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων (Μάρης δὲ οὗτος ἐκάλετο) ἦν κορώνης θρέμματος, καὶ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἃς ἐβούλετο οἱ κομισθηναὶ τοῦ Βασιλείας αὐτῆς, καὶ άκουσας ἔδει ὑπεύθυναι χρῆ τὸ πτέρω. τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων (Μάρης δὲ οὗτος ἐκάλετο) ἦν κορώνης θρέμματος, καὶ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἃς ἐβούλετο οἱ κομισθηναὶ τοῦ Βασιλείας αὐτῆς, καὶ άκουσας ἔδει ὑπεύθυναι χρῆ τὸ πτέρω. τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Αἰγυπτίων (Μάρης δὲ οὗτος ἐκάλετο) ἦν κορώνης θρέμματος, καὶ τῶν ἐπιστολῶν ἃς ἐβούλετο οἱ κομισθηναὶ τοῦ Βασιλείας αὐτῆς, καὶ άκουσας ἔδει ὑπεύθυναι χρῆ τὸ πτέρω.

58 P. Carlsberg 411 and 412, discussed by Widmer 2002, 387-393.

59 P. Cairo CG 30646, 3/12-14 (and elsewhere). For an English translation, see Ritner in Simpson et al. 2003, 456. Though this manuscript was from in Thebes, texts with narratives of Setne and Naneferkasokar were found in the Fayyum town of Tebtunis (van Minnen 1998, 173-174).
that the king’s magical abilities are the result of his ancestry; Amenemhat is the son of the god Sobek:

οὐ γὰρ ἐν βροτῷ ἀνήρ, οὐδ’ ἐκ βρότου ἦν ἄνα[κτος],
ἀλλὰ θεού μεγάλου ἐκγονος ἀειναῦ,
Σούχου παγκράτορος μεγάλου μεγάλου τε μεγίστου,
δαίμονος τοῦ ἁγαθοῦ υἱὸς ἅναξ ἐφάνη.

For he was not a mortal man, nor was born of a mortal king but he was the offspring of a great, everlasting god Souchos, the all powerful, the great, great and greatest; he appeared as the king and the son of Agathos Daimon.

This king’s divine paternity reflects a tradition inscribed in the temple itself. On the back wall of the central niche of the inner sanctuary, the divine pair of Renenutet and Sobek greet Amenemhat III as Sobek’s son. The grandiloquent phrases used to describe Sobek include the triple expression μεγάλου μεγάλου τε μεγίστου, a pattern of magnified praise that is well attested in Ptolemaic Egyptian texts (such as the archive of Ḫor), and is a forerunner of the Greek τρισμέγιστος.

Other expressions in Isidorus’ hymn also suggest that he was indeed conveying knowledge about Amenemhat that came from his indigenous Egyptian context. In response to his interlocutor’s further questions about the identity of the founder of the temple, Isidorus elaborates on his human parentage and his name:

οὔνομα δ’ ἦν ποταπὸν τούτωι καὶ τὸς τόδ’ ἐβηκε
κόιρανος ἢ βασιλεὺς ἢ τίς ἀβανάτων:
ὁ θρέψας Σεσοῶσις, ὃς οὐρανοῦ ἐσπερ’ ἀφεῖκται,
οὔνομ’ ἐβηκε καλὸν ἡλίου εὐφεγγέος.

62 Donadoni 1947, 518-519, Vandoni 1952, 119. The tradition concerning the paternity of this pharaoh was restricted to the temple, as evidenced by the name Μαρεσισοῦχος “Marres son of Sobek” (Widmer 2002, 379). In relation to Isidorus’ claims regarding Amenemhat’s powers, it is also worth noting that in the temple’s hieroglyphic inscriptions and images, all the lands and all the mountains are given to the king by Sobek, Renenutet and Anubis (Donadoni 1947, 341, 506-507, 512). Isidorus also identifies the maternal grandfather of Amenemhat as Zeus-Ammon: μητροπάτωρ τούτου δ’ ἐστιν ξωῆς ὁ μερ[ιστής]. | Ἀμμον, δὲ καὶ Ζεὺς Ἑλλάδος ἦδ’ Ἀσίας. “The maternal grandfather of this man is the distributor of life, | Ammon, who is also Zeus of Hellas and Asia.” I have been unable to discover any explanation for this except perhaps the name Amenemhat (“Amon in Front”) itself.

63 See e.g. Ḫor, Text 2 verso, line 15, Text 19 recto, line 5 (Ḏhwy pꜣ’ꜣ pꜣ’ꜣ pꜣ’ꜣ) ( with discussion in Ray 1976, 15, 19-20, 74, 77-8). See also the contemporary Greek ostraca from Saqqara with the phrase μεγίστου καὶ μεγίστου θεοῦ μεγάλου Ἑρμοῦ published by Skeat and Turner 1968.
Behind the transliteration Sesoösis, lies a correct identification of Amenemhat’s human, historical father as one of the pharaohs named Senusret, also known in Herodotus’ *Histories* and elsewhere as Sesostris. The brief description of Sesoösis, however, alludes to none of the military conquests so widely discussed in Greek literature. Rather, it describes Amenemhat’s deceased father as having “gone to the western heaven,” translating the assimilation of the deceased to the setting sun as he enters the heavenly afterlife, and the general association of the West with the realm of the dead in Egyptian funerary beliefs. Sesoösis is also credited with giving Amenemhat his “beautiful name of the brilliant sun.” Of the ancient names in the fivefold titulary of a pharaoh, this most plausibly refers to Amenemhat’s *nomen*, which was introduced by the title “son of Ra,” and was indeed the name given to a king at birth, in this case by his father Senusret III. As Isidorus points out, however, the Egyptians called him Porramanres, a transliteration of “Pharaoh” (*Pr*-*) + Maâ-Re, which is derived from Amenemhat’s throne name (*Ny-M*-*) + R*. As with other pharaohs, the throne name was indeed the one more commonly used by Egyptians. Together with the hymn’s narrative motifs, these expressions show that Isidorus was truly a poet of the Ptolemaic Fayyum, a writer who had at his disposal not only

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64 For the varying transliterations of this figure’s name, see the discussion in Vanderlip 1972, 71.
65 Noted in Vanderlip 1972, 72. For a brief discussion of Egyptian cosmology and the solar symbolism of funerary beliefs, see Lesko 1991, 117-121.
66 Brief overview of the titulary in Shaw 2000, 8-9; Conveniently, Allen 2000, 64-66 uses the example of Amenemhat III in his discussion of the pharaoh’s five names.
Greek verse genres and poetical language, but also local tales, religious lore, and even idioms and styles of expression.

The hymn on the founder of the temple, then, is the most localized of Isidorus’ four hymns. Through the opening gesture of deixis in the first line, the indexical ground is explicitly and strongly oriented toward local topography and the temple at Narmouthis in particular. The discursive structure of the hymn, moreover, frames local traditions as both authoritative and at least partly inaccessible to Greeks. Isidorus openly states that he must translate and promote the subject of his hymn for outsiders unfamiliar with the local traditions. In these respects, the fourth hymn could be described as assuming a “nativist” position. And yet, in terms of discourse and formal genre, this hymn is also the most hybrid, and most clearly reveals the novelty of Isidorus’ practice within the persistent structures or habitus of genres and literary traditions, both Greek and Egyptian. His use of the elegaic form is critical to this, since it both perpetuates and transforms a Greek poetical genre in the act of translating motifs and habits of expression that are “at home” in Egyptian narrative genres. As Chris Faraone has convincingly argued, Isidorus, in his choice of elegaic form, followed the example of the great Alexandrian poet Callimachus, famed as one of the finest of all Greek elegists. Callimachus’ Aetia, and especially the first two books, with their dialogical format, and their learned treatment of local religious traditions, provided Isidorus with a model that he could adapt to his own needs in

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67 In this formulation, I am continuing to pursue the insights revealed in W. F. Hanks’s analysis of novel discourse genres in 16th-century colonial Maya society as “part of the emergence of new, hybrid forms of action” (Hanks 1987 = Hanks 2000, 133-164).

68 By identifying and labeling these traditions, I am by no means asserting that each was entirely separate, unchanging, essential, or culturally “pure.” But despite the fact that change and mixture are, to a greater or lesser degree in different historical circumstances, an existential condition of “culture,” socially constructed differences (of ethnicity, class, etc.) often entail the persistence and even maintenance of differentiated cultural fields. The phenomena of these differentiated fields include, for example, persistent patterns of language and script, and the generic expectations of discourse and written literature.

presenting the local story behind the founder of the temple at Narmouthis.\textsuperscript{70} The difference, of course, is that the ultimate sources of the learning displayed in Isidorus’ text are not the Heliconian Muses, nor the poet’s own erudition, nor local Greek historians, but Egyptians and especially the readers of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Isidorus adapted the discursive structure of Callimachus’ aetiological elegy in order to integrate Egyptian literary voices. When read against the model of Callimachus’ \textit{Aetia}, and indeed Callimachean poetics in general, the local and nativistic features of Isidorus’ hybrid poetry are even more striking. Callimachus’ work has been described, by Dan Selden, for example, as a poetry of displacement, conditioned by the migration of Greeks from diverse places to the multi-ethnic milieu of Alexandria. All homelands in this diasporic space are elsewhere, as are the multiple sources and referents of its poetry.\textsuperscript{71} This dislocation is central to the structure of the \textit{Aetia}, which is framed in the first two books by Callimachus’ dream that he has been transported from his North African home to Mt. Helicon in Boeotia (central Greece) to converse with the Muses about other far-flung places in the Greek world.\textsuperscript{72} The discourse of Isidorus’ fourth hymn, by contrast, is firmly rooted in its locale; it is a poetry not of diaspora or dislocation, but of place.

\textsuperscript{70} A 2nd-century BCE papyrus containing parts of the proemium to book 3 of the \textit{Aetia} was found in the Fayyum town of Magdola (Lille, Université P. 76 d + 78 a-c + 79 + 82 + 84; Mertens-Pack 0207.3). Though they come from the second century CE, it is worth noting that fragments of Callimachus’ \textit{Aetia} were discovered at Karanis (van Minnen 1998, 123-124; note also the famous article by Youtie (1970)). At Tebtynis, there were discovered fragments of Callimachus’ \textit{Diegeseis} (P. Mil. Vogl. I 18, 1st-2nd centuries CE) along with elegaic distichs possibly by Callimachus on papyri that date to the 3rd to 2nd century BCE (\textit{Studi Calderini-Paribeni} 2, 127; \textit{Marcotte M-P} 236; see van Minnen 1998, 156). Cribiore 2001, 201-202 notes that Callimachus played a role in more advanced levels of instruction by grammarians.

\textsuperscript{71} Selden 1998.

\textsuperscript{72} Fr. 3-4; see the discussion in Fantuzzi and Hunter 2004, 44-45. Even if the process of collecting, sorting and judging the various \textit{aitia} constitutes a centripetal process of revising and reinventing a canon of traditions, Callimachus’ language, themes, and narratives, are informed by Selden’s “order of the alibi.” When Egyptian mythical and cultural elements occur, they tend to converge and cohabit with Greek forms in stories and motifs that can be read from multiple vantage points or as variant traditions.
Conclusions

From the place articulated by Isidorus in his fourth hymn, and from the physical space in which the written text was inscribed, it was and is possible to look back at the three preceding hymns to the goddess Hermouthis-Isis. From this vantage point, one can see that Isidorus arranged for different literary and religious traditions to meet each other, coming and going at the gates of the temple. But it was not only differing traditions that met, it was also differing orientations to cultural mixture, syncretism, hybridity – whatever we wish to call it. In his first hymn, Isidorus addressed Hermouthis-Isis from a relatively unspecified position. The discourse is centered on the land of the Nile, but only in as much as the overtly syncretic Isis, who is all divinities to all peoples, has her true origin and identity in Egypt. In its metrical form and discursive pattern, the poem adopts the genre of the Homeric hymns, but it also incorporates aspects of the style and content of the Isis aretalogies in Greek. With the slight exception of the name Hermouthis, the discursive characteristics, content, and form that Isidorus chose for this hymn appear to assume an “international” or at least trans-regional reader, who is versed in the forms and conventions of Greek literature, and perhaps familiar with the goddess Isis as she appeared in texts that circulated beyond Egypt. Were the inscribed text of the first hymn taken away from the temple gates, a reader, ancient or modern, would be hard pressed to return it to Narmouthis, or even to the Fayyum. The first hymn, in short, could not be further from the fourth.

Taking into account their spatial arrangement, the two texts embody a meeting between a well-established and well-travelled syncretism that returns to Egypt only to be confronted by a newly discovered nativism, albeit in a translated and hybrid literary form. The second and third hymns, appropriately enough, form a middle ground. Both, in different ways, domesticate the
transnational Isis into the local temple at Narmouthis and its traditions. In the second hymn, Isidorus’ strategy is not as overtly dialogical or aetiological as in its elegaic counterpart (the fourth), but he does describe local ritual practices, such as prayers for fertility and festival offerings, through which the multi-ethnic people of the Fayyum interacted with the great goddess Hermouthis-Isis and the divine family that shared her temple. In aligning the rhetoric of his discourse with these practices, he embeds himself and the goddess in the local context. Isidorus returns to the more traditional hexametrical form in the third hymn, but the goddess to whom he addresses himself is less clearly transnational, and her beneficent role is mediated, in part, through Egyptian and possibly Ptolemaic structures of kingship. The rhetoric of Isidorus’ prayer relies on Isis’ support for the pious king, and also her support for the pious private individual who dutifully brings offerings to her temple. In both the second and third hymns, the indexical ground of Isidorus’ discourse is crucial to integrating the great goddess into the local world of Narmouthis.

But where does Isidorus himself stand? Do any of these shifting grounds represent Isidorus’ “true” position? At first blush, the more emphatic self-reference in Isidorus’ fourth hymn, his explicit marshalling of Egyptian authorities within his own discourse, and the physical position of the hymn closer to the privileged space of the temple all suggest that Isidorus, whatever his ethnical or cultural background may have been, sided with the local and the native. On the other hand, this was not an oppositional “anti-syncretic” stance. In each of the hymns to Hermouthis-Isis, Isidorus adopts a coherent rhetorical and discursive practice to persuade the goddess to bestow benefits on him. Rather than an opposition between “syncretic” and “nativist” positions, what stands out most is the complexity of Isidorus’ practice in mediating between both religious syncretism and nativism, and between the various discursive and literary genres
through which he articulates those positions. Isidorus’ poetry, humble though it may be in comparison with the greats of Alexandrian literature, exhibits sophisticated local innovations that drew from both a persistent Greek literary *habitus* and also the Egyptian literary modes to which he had indirect access. From a religious perspective, Isidorus’ work is grounded in his specific situation at Narmouthis, but it also engages with diasporic and “mixed” representations of his local divinity. His “syncretism” - both literary and religious - emerges as an ongoing and active process that not only re-inscribes and perpetuates received traditions but is also capable of generating novel forms of practice.

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References


