

Cult of the Egyptian Gods at Demetrias

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Demetrias was an important port city for the Macedonians and during the period of around 217-168 BCE, Demetrias grew as a commercial and political centre, with the port of Demetrias becoming very "international" with many peoples from around the Mediterranean world coming to Demetrias. Starting from the 3rd c. BCE Demetrias became the home to many Egyptian deities (such as Isis, Serapis, Anubis, and Harpokrates). Maria Stamatopoulou suggests worship of the Egyptian gods probably started as private among Egyptian migrants, or possibly Macedonian soldiers who had served in Egypt, but that worship became public during the 2nd century BCE. The worship of the Egyptian gods in Demetrias is known primarily from inscriptions and funerary stelae. No cult sites, however, have yet been identified archaeologically and it is still impossible to determine the material characteristics of their sacred spaces. A Serapeion is attested from an honorific inscription, although a location is still unknown. Apostolos Arvanitopoulos also identified a sanctuary to Harpokrates, but this identification is heavily debated. Sofia Kravaritou mentions that intermarriages between Egyptian and non-Egyptian inhabitants of Demetrias could have been a factor in the growth of the cult, as Hellenised Egyptian names can be found on Demetrian painted grave stelae. By the Roman period it appears that the cults of the Egyptian gods were firmly entrenched with the society of Demetrias.



Date Range: 294 BCE - 14 CE

Region: Demetrias

Region tags: Europe, Southeastern Europe, Southern Europe, Eastern Mediterranean, Greece, Aegean, Balkans, Thessaly

Demetrias proper was placed between the two ancient settlements of Pagasai and Neleia, on the west shore of the Gulf of Pagasai, 1.5 km southeast of modern Volos.

Status of Participants:

✓ Elite ✓ Religious Specialists ✓ Non-elite (common people, general populace)

Sources

Print sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1: Kravaritou, S. (2016). "Isiac Cults, Civic Priesthood and Social Elite in Hellenistic Demetrias (Thessaly): Notes on RICIS 112/0703 and beyond." *Tekmeria* 12: 203-233.
- Source 2: Decourt, J-Cl. and Tziafalias, A. 2007: "Cultes et divinités isiaques en Thessalie: Identité et urbanisation", in L. Bricault, M.J. Versluys, P.G.P. Meyboom (eds.), *Nile into Tiber. Egypt in the Roman World. Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Isis Studies*, Faculty of Archaeology, Leiden University, May 11-14 2005 (Religions of the Graeco-Roman World 159), Leiden - Boston, 329-363.
- Source 3: Batziou-Efstathiou, A. 2002. *Demetrias*. Athens:30.

- Source 1: Stamatopoulou, M. 2018. "Demetrias: The Archaeology of a Cosmopolitan Macedonian Harbour." In M. Kalaitzi, P. Paschidis, C. Antonetti, and A.-M. Guimier-Sorbets (eds.) Βορειοελλαδικά: Tales from the lands of the ethne. Essays in honour of Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos, Athens: 343-376.
- Source 2: Stamatopoulou, M. 2008. "Ouaphres Horou, an Egyptian priest of Isis from Demetrias" In M. Kalaitzi, P. Paschidis, C. Antonetti, and A.-M. Guimier-Sorbets (Eds.), Βορειοελλαδικά: Tales from the lands of the ethne. Essays in honour of Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos, 1977-2007, Oxford, 249-257.
- Source 3: Kravaritou, S. 2016. "Sacred space and the politics of multiculturalism in Demetrias (Thessaly)." In Hellenistic Sanctuaries: Between Greece and Rome. Eds. M. Melfi and O. Bobou. Oxford: 128-151.

Online sources for understanding this subject:

- Source 1 URL: <https://topostext.org/place/393229UDem>
- Source 1 Description: Collection of texts and maps related to Demetrias. Includes many texts related to the Egyptian gods at Demetrias

Relevant online primary textual corpora (original languages and/or translations):

- Source 1 URL: <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/regions/899>
- Source 1 Description: Includes inscriptions from many different publications and has many of the inscriptions relating to the Egyptian gods at Demetrias
- Source 2 URL: <http://ricis.huma-num.fr/carte.html>
- Source 2 Description: Isis and Sarapis inscriptions from the ancient world
- Source 3 URL: <https://topostext.org/place/393229UDem>
- Source 3 Description: Literary texts associated with Demetrias

General Variables

Membership/Group Interactions

Are other religious groups in cultural contact with target religion:

– Yes

↳ Is the cultural contact competitive:

– No

↳ Is the cultural contact accommodating/pluralistic:

– Yes

Notes: The cult of the Egyptian gods in Demetrias appears to have been welcome to foreign people such as Greeks, but especially Macedonian soldiers who had served in Egypt. Grave stelae show that Egyptians also took on Greek names, and Greeks sometimes would adopt Egyptian names. Demetrias was a multicultural harbour city with people from around the Mediterranean living there, so in the case of the cult of the Egyptian gods, Egyptians and Greeks participated together in cult. An honorary inscription from 117 BCE (IG IX2 1107b, ll. 3-5)

mentions that a Serapeion was built for the cult of the Egyptian gods, although it has yet to be uncovered archaeologically.

↳ Is the cultural contact neutral:

– Yes

Notes: The cultural contact appears to be very accommodating in Demetrias, although as it was a multicultural city not everyone would have participated in the cult of the Egyptian gods. The contact however was most likely not violent.

↳ Is there violent conflict (within sample region):

– No

↳ Is there violent conflict (with groups outside the sample region):

– No

Does the religious group have a general process/system for assigning religious affiliation:

– No

Does the religious group actively proselytize and recruit new members:

– No

Does the religion have official political support

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The cult of the Egyptian gods probably started as a private cult, but by the 2nd c. BCE had become public. Decrees are seen honouring the priest of Sarapis in 117 BCE. This indicates that the city of Demetrias was honouring these priests involved with the cult of the Egyptian gods, but it is not known whether the civic government officially offered support such as monetary payment.

Is there a conception of apostasy in the religious group:

– No

Size and Structure

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (estimated population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It's unknown how many people participated in the cult of the Egyptian gods. However, it appears that popularity for the cult grew during the Hellenistic period to a much higher number than it started with. The cult may have begun among Egyptians in Demetrias, but by the end of the Hellenistic period, local Greeks were also very involved in the cult to the point that at one time a Greek

held the office of priest in the cult.

Number of adherents of religious group within sample region (% of sample region population, numerical):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Although we do not know the exact percentage of people practicing in the cult, Egyptians were a foreign people in Demetrias and they were not the largest body of foreigners (Phoenicians were the largest percentage of foreigners in Demetrias). Based on this it is likely that less than 50% of the population of Demetrias were part of the cult of the Egyptian gods, but this is merely conjecture.

Scripture

Does the religious group have scriptures:

Scripture is a generic term used to designate revered texts that are considered particularly authoritative and sacred relative to other texts. Strictly speaking, it refers to written texts, but there are also “oral scriptures” (e.g. the Vedas of India).

– No

Architecture, Geography

Is monumental religious architecture present:

– No

Notes: An honorary inscription from 117 BCE (IG IX2 1107b, ll. 3-5) mentions that a Serapeion was built for the cult of the Egyptian gods, but it has yet to be uncovered archaeologically. Given what we know about the architecture in Demetrias and Thessaly the Serapeion would probably not have been "monumental". A sanctuary was identified by Apostolos Arvanitopoulos as a sanctuary to Harpokrates, but this identification is contentious given the lack of material evidence. In addition this structure was identified by Arvanitopoulos as small, not monumental.

Are there different types of religious monumental architecture:

– No

Is iconography present:

– Yes



Where is iconography present [select all that apply]:

– Only religious public space

– Some public spaces

Notes: A marble statuette depicting Isis holding a child Horus/ Harpokrates was found in the area Arvanitopoulos identified as the sanctuary of Harpokrates. In addition there are a few painted grave stelae at Demetrias identifying individuals as Egyptian. Although they don't

depict the Egyptian gods, the grave stelae are painted with typical Egyptian iconography.



Are there distinct features in the religious group's iconography:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It can be assumed that the iconography in Demetrias was similar to elsewhere (depictions of Isis, Harpokrates, etc.) but with the limited evidence available in Demetrias it is difficult to know for certain if there were distinct features seen in the city.

Beliefs

Burial and Afterlife

Is a spirit-body distinction present:

Answer "no" only if personhood (or consciousness) is extinguished with death of the physical body. Answering yes does not necessarily imply the existence of Cartesian mind/body dualism, merely that some element of personhood (or consciousness) survives the death of the body.

– Field doesn't know

Belief in afterlife:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It can be assumed that the cult of the Egyptian gods at Demetrias had similar beliefs to other Egyptian cults in which case they would have believed in an afterlife where all the Egyptian gods resided. However, there is no evidence present at Demetrias indicating what beliefs they may have had there.

Reincarnation in this world:

– No

Are there special treatments for adherents' corpses:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is unknown which graves at Demetrias corresponded to members of the cult of the Egyptian gods so it is impossible to know if there were special treatments.

Are co-sacrifices present in tomb/burial:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The grave stelae we have indicating an Egyptian burial are all out of context and we cannot determine which graves corresponded to these burials.

Are grave goods present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Many of the grave stelai from Demetrias were removed from their original context. The stelae are believed to have been incorporated into the walls and towers of Demetrias about 88 BC when Mithridates VI left Attica to capture the coasts of Magnesia and Euboea; the walls of Demetrias had been destroyed by the Romans in 168 BC. This means that it is impossible to know which grave stelae correspond to which graves, but as far as we know, no graves from Demetrias contained grave goods relating to the cult of the Egyptian gods.

Are formal burials present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There are three painted grave stelae from Demetrias indicating the interred individuals were Egyptian, but we do not know if these were formal burials associated with the cult of the Egyptian gods.

Supernatural Beings

Are supernatural beings present:

– Yes

↳ A supreme high god is present:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is possible Isis would have been viewed as the high god but it is unknown

↳ Previously human spirits are present:

– No

↳ Non-human supernatural beings are present:

– Field doesn't know

↳ Does the religious group possess a variety of supernatural beings:

– Yes

↳ Organized by kinship based on a family model:

– No

↳ Organized hierarchically:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The Egyptian gods were organized hierarchically, but it is unknown which gods exactly were worshipped in Demetrias as well as how the citizens of Demetrias viewed them

↳ Power of beings is domain specific:

– Yes

Notes: Isis at least was the protector of sailors and seafare and was usually worshipped in areas close to the sea.

↳ Other organization for pantheon:

– I don't know

Supernatural Monitoring

Is supernatural monitoring present:

This refers to surveillance by supernatural beings of humans' behaviour and/or thought particularly as it relates to social norms or potential norm violations.

– Field doesn't know

Do supernatural beings mete out punishment:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no reference in Demetrias of gods punishing humans, but this does not mean it couldn't happen as is seen with the Greek gods.

Do supernatural beings bestow rewards:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no reference to this happening in Demetrias, although in the case of Isis watching over sailors and the sea, people most likely gave offerings so Isis would bestow a good voyage.

Messianism/Eschatology

Are messianic beliefs present:

– No

Norms and Moral Realism

Are general social norms prescribed by the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It appears that the cult of the Egyptian gods was very adaptive in Demetrias as many cultures lived in the area. Often times gods were syncretized. This could indicate that social norms changed as the population changed.

Is there a conventional vs. moral distinction in the religious group:

– I don't know

Practices

Membership Costs and Practices

Does membership in this religious group require celibacy (full sexual abstinence):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no reference to this happening.

Does membership in this religious group require constraints on sexual activity (partial sexual abstinence):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no reference to this being a requirement to be involved in the cult.

Does membership in this religious group require castration:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require fasting:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require forgone food opportunities (taboos on desired foods):

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no reference to taboos on food among members of the cult

Does membership in this religious group require permanent scarring or painful bodily alterations:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require painful physical positions or transitory painful wounds:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of adults:

"Adults" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition of a human who is 18-years-old or older and who is legally responsible for his/her actions, then please specify that difference in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of children:

"Children" here referring to an emic or indigenous category; if that category is different from the popular Western definition, please specify that different in the Comments/Sources: box below.

– No

Does membership in this religious group require self-sacrifice (suicide):

– No

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of property/valuable items:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Offerings were given to the Egyptian gods, but these were in the form of statuettes as far as we known. It is not likely it was a requirement to sacrifice valuable property.

Does membership in this religious group require sacrifice of time (e.g., attendance at meetings or services, regular prayer, etc.):

– No

Notes: It is likely individuals could make offerings when they were in need, not because they were required to take part in regular prayers.

Does membership in this religious group require physical risk taking:

– Field doesn't know

Does membership in this religious group require accepting ethical precepts:

– I don't know

Does membership in this religious group require marginalization by out-group members:

– No

Does membership in this religious group require participation in small-scale rituals (private, household):

– Yes



What is the average interval of time between performances (in hours):

Performances here refers to small-scale rituals.

– Field doesn't know

Notes: It is not known if it was "required" to take part in private rituals, but it is likely people performed rituals when they were in need.

Does membership in this religious group require participation in large-scale rituals:

I.e. involving two or more households; includes large-scale “ceremonies” and “festivals.”

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Not much is known about the cult of the Egyptian gods, but it is likely there would have been a festival involving processions and sacrifices, probably yearly. However, there is no indication of this for certain, this assertion is based on what happened in other Greek cults.

Are extra-ritual in-group markers present:

E.g. special changes to appearance such as circumcision, tattoos, scarification, etc.

– No

Does the group employ fictive kinship terminology:

– Field doesn't know

Society and Institutions

Levels of Social Complexity

The society to which the religious group belongs is best characterized as (please choose one):

– A state

Welfare

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized famine relief:

– No

Is famine relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized poverty relief:

– Field doesn't know

Is poverty relief available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Members of the cult of the Egyptian gods were citizens of Demetrias and therefore would have been looked after by the city.

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm:

– Field doesn't know

Is institutionalized care for the elderly and infirm available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: The city of Demetrias would have been responsible for the people in the cult from the city.

Education

Does the religious group provide formal education to its adherents:

– Field doesn't know

Is formal education available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group:

– Field doesn't know

Bureaucracy

Do the group's adherents interact with a formal bureaucracy within their group:

– Yes

Notes: There were priests involved within the cult (specifically a priest of Isis) who would have been higher up than the average person.

Do the group's adherents interact with other institutional bureaucracies:

– Yes

Notes: The cult in Demetrias would have had to abide by the laws in place for Demetrias and its citizens.

Public Works

Does the religious group in question provide public food storage:

– No

Is public food storage provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: People who lived in Demetrias would have had availability to food the same as other citizens

Does the religious group in question provide water management (irrigation, flood control):

– No

Is water management provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Does the religious group in question provide transportation infrastructure:

– No

Is transportation infrastructure provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Taxation

Does the religious group in question levy taxes or tithes:

– No

Are taxes levied on the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Presumably all citizens of Demetrias would have had to pay taxes which would have included those members of the cult of the Egyptian gods

Enforcement

Does the religious group in question provide an institutionalized police force:

– No

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized police force provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question provide institutionalized judges:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Priests from the cult could have acted as a form of judge within the cult, but most likely there were no institutionalized judges

Do the group's adherents interact with an institutionalized judicial system provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Does the religious group in question enforce institutionalized punishment:

– Field doesn't know

Are the group's adherents subject to institutionalized punishment enforced by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: Many people in the cult would have been citizens of Demetrias and would have been subject to the same punishments as any normal citizen

Does the religious group in question have a formal legal code:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no surviving evidence of a legal code for the cult of the Egyptian gods at Demetrias

Are the group's adherents subject to a formal legal code provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: As the cult was situated in Demetrias, the members would have been subject to the same legal code as all citizens of Demetrias

Warfare

Does religious group in question possess an institutionalized military:

– No

Do the group's adherents participate in an institutionalized military provided by institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: People from the Macedonian army who had been in Egypt were members of the cult in Demetrias

Are the group's adherents protected by or subject to an institutionalized military provided by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Yes

Notes: The cult was in Demetrias so all citizens of Demetrias would have been protected

Written Language

Does the religious group in question possess its own distinct written language:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language available to the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Is a non-religion-specific written language used by the group's adherents through an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– No

Calendar

Does the religious group in question possess a formal calendar:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: There is no evidence the cult had its own calendar that it used. The cult was part of the multicultural society of Demetrias and appears to have used the calendar that the people of Demetrias used.

Is a formal calendar provided for the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Notes: A common calendar was of use in Demetrias. It can be assumed that this same calendar was used by the cult of the Egyptian gods.

Food Production

Does the religious group in question provide food for themselves:

– Field doesn't know

Is food provided to the group's adherents by an institution(s) other than the religious group in question:

– Field doesn't know

Bibliography

General References

Reference: Maria Stamatopoulou. Demetrias: The Archaeology of a Cosmopolitan Macedonian Harbour. (Myrina Kalaitzi , Paschalis Paschidis , Claudia Antonetti , Anne-Marie Guimier-Sorbets), Βορειοελλαδικά: Tales from the lands of the ethne. Essays in honour of Miltiades B. Hatzopoulos. Athens: National Hellenic Research Foundation/ Institute of Historical Research. isbn: 978-960-9538-71-8.

Reference: Sofia Kravaritou. Isiac Cults, Civic Priesthood and Social Elite in Hellenistic Demetrias (Thessaly): Notes on IG IX 2, 1107b (RICIS 112/0703) and beyond. doi: <https://doi.org/10.12681/tekmeria.305>.

Reference: Sofia Kravaritou. Synoecism and religious interface in Demetrias (Thessaly). Kernos, 24(1) issn: 2034-7871. doi: 10.4000/kernos.1942.