ISIS AND REPUBLICAN POLITICS*

by Léonie Hayne

(University of Sydney)

Studies of Isis in the Roman world tend to concentrate on imperial times; understandably so, since that is the period in which the goddess achieved official recognition and approval, and which supplies most of our evidence. Investigations of her role and importance in the republic have stressed her link with popularis politics and in particular Clodius, who championed a popularis programme, especially as tribune in 58. Senatorial hostility to the cult on specific occasions in the 50s and 40s is then interpreted politically.1 The connection seems obvious. Isis was particularly popular among ex-slaves, who were a majority of Rome’s population, and it was the urban plebs whom Claudius wooed, and from whom he recruited his gangs.

However, there is a problem with this modern interpretation that does not seem to have been fully recognised. The guild of pastophori was established in Rome in Sulla’s time,2 and there is evidence of Isis worship among the adherents of the Caecilii Metelli, a family closely associated with Sulla in his dictatorship years.3 Sulla himself had reason to be grateful to Isis, for Appian tells us that Mithridates was forced to withdraw from the siege of Rhodes because the ‘sambuca’ collapsed and an apparition of Isis was seen hurling fire at it.4 The island was thus able to contribute to the fleet later put painstakingly together by Sulla’s legate Lucullus.5 At the end of the war Sulla gave Rhodes her freedom in return for this essential help, and the island publicly honoured Sulla, Murena, Lucullus and A. Terentius Varro.6 Isis could thus be held responsible for Mithridates’ failure at Rhodes. Keaveney has discussed Sulla’s interest in religion, arguing that the gods with whose promotion Sulla was particularly concerned were those who had benefited him in some way.7 Isis is not mentioned by Keaveney, perhaps because her help was indirect, but her involvement on his side must have encouraged Sulla’s belief in his ‘felicitas’ and it is therefore not surprising to find that her cult expanded during the years of his ‘dominatio’.

There is then a connection between Isis and Sulla, a staunch upholder of senatorial ‘auctoritas’. On the other hand, there is no explicit evidence linking Clodius with Isiaci, although it seems to be now almost taken for granted that Isis worshippers figured prominently in the riots instigated by Clodius, citing as partial evidence Cicero’s inclusion of foreigners and slaves
in the mobs. The danger of using Cicero’s words as an accurate description of Clodius’ supporters is obvious: take but one example, quoted by La Pianna, that the mob was composed ‘ex servis, ex conductis ex facinerosis, ex egentibus’.

Arguments from silence are also dangerous, but it is perhaps significant that nowhere, in all his tirades against Clodius, does Cicero ever refer to the Clodiani as Isis worshippers, though it would surely have been an obvious stick with which to beat Clodius. Clodius certainly used the re-created ‘collegia’, and these may well have included Isis worshippers, but, despite the voluminous and hostile evidence on Clodius’ activities, nothing links him directly with Isiaci, now or later. No Isiac activity is recorded in 52, when he was killed, or in 47, when Dolabella took Clodius as a model for his demagogy.

There is need, therefore, for a re-examination of the specific occasions in the 50s and 40s when the Senate clashed with Isis worshippers. In doing this, I hope to show that, if there is a particular politician to be identified with Isiaci, it is not Clodius but Pompey, whose early career was closely connected with Sulla and his cause.

The first hostility we hear of comes in 59, the consulship of Caesar and Bibulus. It is briefly referred to by Tertullian, as a precursor to a popular demonstration early in 58. About 59 little can be said except that the Senate ordered the destruction of altars on the Capitol, and that apparently neither consul showed any sympathy with the cult.

What happened in 58 is, however, well worth discussing, for Tertullian, quoting the contemporary Varro, tells us that the Isis worshippers approached the consul Gabinius for support on 1st January, that is, on his first day of office. In view of the ceremonies connected with the inauguration of the consuls, it is hard to see when this approach could have been made. A formal visit to Gabinius’ house after the auspices had been taken? The public sacrifice afterwards on the Capitol? Whatever the occasion, the national importance of the day would have given added publicity to the Isis worshippers. The timing also suggests that they had been waiting impatiently for Gabinius to take office. A favourable response was obviously expected, after the attack of the year before.

This is explicit in Tertullian, who tells us that Gabinius allowed their sacrifices, before deferring to senatorial opposition. It is also implied in Arnobius, who says that the worship of Isis and Serapis had been allowed since the consulship of Piso and Gabinius. This is obviously wrong, but surely reflects consular approval at some stage. There is no reason to doubt Gabinius’ initial approval. Badian has shown that the A. Gabinius who fought on Sulla’s side in the Mithridatic war in 86, and who again loyally served Sulla in the east in 81, is to be identified with the consul of 58. His Sullan background surely goes part of the way to explain his perceived sympathy for Isis.
Even more importantly, however, his sympathy might have been anticipated because of his close connection with and support of the former Sullan, Pompey, who owed his extraordinary command against the pirates in 67 to Gabinius' tribunician bill. In 66 another tribune, Manilius, in addition to introducing the bill which gave Pompey the Mithridatic command, tried to enrol freedmen in all the tribes, legislation in which a predecessor in 67, Cornelius, former quaestor to Pompey, was alleged to have been involved. There is nothing to connect Gabinius with Manilius' cancelled bill, but the three tribunes, Cornelius, Gabinius and Manilius, were all closely linked with Pompey, and two of them were sympathetic to freedmen, that class from which most Isis worshippers came. In 65 Cicero had, we are told, won popular support defending Manilius and Cornelius and in the latter case had gone out of his way to praise Pompey. In 59, Gabinius' popularity with a solidly pro-Pompeian section of the 'plebs urbana' was a cause for complaint. According to Cicero, Gabinius boasted that he escaped trial for 'ambitus' in 59 because of support from 'operae', and at a 'contio' his would-be prosecutor, C. Cato, barely escaped with his life when he called Pompey a dictator, that is a tyrant. Gabinius could well be regarded favourably by Isis worshippers among the plebs.

Senatorial opposition in 58 was a reaction to apparently spontaneous popular demands. Unfortunately, we are not told what prompted the opposition in 53 and 50. All we know of the first incident in 53 is that the senatorial decree ordering the destruction of the privately erected shrines came near the end of the year. This was the year in which there were no consuls until July, the elections having been delayed in particular by the bribery scandal involving two of the candidates and the consuls of 54, and the ensuing disorder. In July, 53 Cn. Domitius Calvinus and M. Valerius Messalla Rufus finally took office, but the elections for 52 could not be held due to even worse anarchy involving Clodius, candidate for the praetorship and Milo, candidate for the consulship. Behind all this there loomed the shadow of Pompey. In 54, rumours were rife that his appointment as dictator would be demanded. In 53 the rumours crystallised. His kinsman, Hircus, put forward the proposal but was successfully opposed by Cato. By the beginning of 52, it seemed that Pompey was encouraging the anarchy to ensure his appointment. Omens abounded, and it is in this context that Dio places the senatorial decree concerning Isis. It is very likely that Isis worshippers were among the pro-Pompeian plebs demonstrating in favour of his dictatorship.

In 50 a link between Isis and Pompey is even more likely, for this was the year in which he fell seriously ill in Naples, and when he recovered the city made sacrifices of thanksgiving. Festivals were then held throughout Italy. Now Serapis was well known as a healing god, his worship widespread in Campania. There had been a Serapeum at Puteoli since at least 105, and
Cicero specifies Puteoli as well as Naples as initiating the thanksgiving. An Isis/Serapis ceremony of some sort would surely have been held there, and also in Rome. Valerius Maximus records that workmen were reluctant to proceed with the demolition of the shrine and the consul L. Paulus carried out the task himself. He had a background of hostility to Pompey.

We come to 48, a year of violence involving pressure by the ‘praetor peregrinus’ Caelius Rufus for cancellation of debts, and his unsuccessful rebellion with the exiled Milo. Milo and Caelius were both killed, but, Dio says, bad omens still continued, including a swarm of bees that settled on the Capitol beside the temple of Hercules, where sacrifices to Isis were taking place. The soothsayers then announced that the shrines to Isis and Serapis should be demolished. It is not surprising that the Senate — or rather, those senators who had not abandoned Rome with Pompey — would once again regard unauthorised sacrifices to Isis in a time of crisis as bad omens. However, more may be involved. The people whose cause Caelius was espousing would certainly have included many Isis worshippers, for in Rome the ‘plebs urbana’ was particularly interested in debt cancellation, and Milo tried to stir up trouble in Campania, another Isis centre.

There is no need to postulate any motive for Caelius other than a bid for power, for Caesar’s debt arrangements were extremely unpopular and Dio says that Caelius set aside the laws because he thought Caesar had been defeated and killed. A change of sides is fully in keeping with Caelius’ opportunistic remark in 50, that in wartime one should follow the stronger, not the more honourable cause. What is more significant than Caelius’ motives is that both he and Milo used Pompey’s name for propaganda purposes. Caelius’ reference to the Roman plebs as Pompeian makes that clear, and Caesar tells us that Milo appealed to the municipia in Campania by saying that he was acting on Pompey’s behalf.

There is another point. The opposition to Caelius in Rome was led by the consul P. Servilius Isauricus. Did he not believe the rumour of Caesar’s defeat? Or was he simply concerned with Caelius’ attack on Trebonius and the need to restore order? It is worth pointing out that Servilius had been active in opposing Pompey during the 50s. If there was a Pompeian flavour to the violence now, then this would help to explain the rigour with which he attacked Caelius.

The future history of the Isis cult is beyond the scope of this article. I mention just one detail, namely, that in 43 the newly established triumvirs decided to erect a temple, obviously in a bid for popular support. This was particularly necessary if the cult was, as I have been suggesting, identified with the Pompeian rather than the Caesarian cause, for at the beginning of the year Sextus Pompey had been wooed by the Senate in its war against Antony, but in August Octavian, newly appointed consul, condemned him, together with Caesar’s murderers, and at the end of the year
the triumvirs proscribed him.\textsuperscript{34} We know that another victim of the proscriptions, the aedile M. Volusius, fled to Sextus Pompey in Sicily, dressed as a priest of Isis in a costume he borrowed from a friend.\textsuperscript{35} Was he, himself, a devotee? It has been argued that his family came from Picenum, the home-base of Pompey’s supporters.\textsuperscript{36} In the turmoil of the continuing civil wars, however, the temple project was abandoned. Isis had a long wait before being officially recognized.

I am not arguing that the only reason for senatorial hostility to the Isis cult was the political dimension. The Senate’s attitude to foreign cults is well known. Romans could not be allowed to find their own gods, and worship them in their own way, for both the ‘pax deorum’ and ‘mos maiorum’ were thus threatened. Foreign gods had to be officially invited to Rome, and their worship made fit for Romans.\textsuperscript{37} Unlike Cybele, who fulfilled these conditions, Isis had come to Italy of her own accord. Her cult was a ‘religio illicita’ throughout the Republic, and as such was, like Christianity later, liable to official repression at any time. Nevertheless, it is important to investigate why that repression occurred at specific times, and not at others. It seems to me that cumulatively a pattern emerges in which the original Sullan patronage of the cult led to Isiac support for Pompey and his adherents. This helps explain why senatorial opposition was not continuous. It was a reaction to outbursts by pro-Pompeian worshippers among the ‘plebs urbana’ on specific occasions.\textsuperscript{38}

NOTES

* I am grateful to R.J. Evans and an anonymous referee for their helpful comments and advice.


3. \textit{CIL} 6. 2247, \textit{ILLRP} no. 159 (an inscription found in Rome near the Ostian Gate). cf. \textit{CIL} 1. 1265 (from Macedonia), also referring to a Caecilia Polla. See also A. García y Bellona, \textit{Les religions orientales dans l’Espagne romain}, Leiden 1967, 135–136 for a Serapis temple in Castra Caecilia in Spain (camp of Q. Metellus Pius, cos. 80, procos. Hispania Ulterior 79–71). The Sullan link must also explain the inscription of Licinius Philetus and Licinia Crassi Lib(erta) (\textit{CIL} 2. 4491). No date is given but the most likely patron ofLicinia is M. Crassus (cos. 70, 55) who, during the ‘Cinnanum tempus’, fled to Spain, where his father had served, and where he had numerous clients (Plut. \textit{Crass} 4.6).


5. Appian \textit{Mith.} 56; Plut. \textit{Luc.} 2–3.

6. Appian \textit{Mith.} 61; \textit{ILS} 8772.
7. A. Keaveney, 'Sulla and the gods', Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History, (ed. C. Deroux) vol. 3, Brussels 1983, 44-79. There is no need to speculate that Sulla was hoping to please supporters like his freedman Chrysogonus (Malaise, op. cit. 364-5).

8. G. La Pianna, 'Foreign groups in Rome during the first centuries of the Empire' HThR 20 (1927) 291-392. See also Malaise, op. cit. 365-377.

9. Cic. Dom. 89. Cicero's obvious bias has invited scholarly attempts at revision. For a reanalysis of Clodius in 58 see, for example, W.M.F. Rundell, 'Cicero and Clodius; the question of credibility', Historia 28 (1979) 301-328.

10. Dio 42. 29. 2; Cic. Att. 11.23.3, cf. D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cicero's letters to Atticus 1, 233-3. I am grateful to my colleague Kathryn Welch for discussion of her forthcoming article 'The spectre of Clodius'.

11. Tertullian Ad. Nat. 1. 10.11. I am not convinced that Cic. Att. 2. 17.3 should be amended from 'Phocis' to 'Isis Curiana', thus giving a reference to the troubles of 59. See D.R. Shackleton Bailey, Cicero's letters to Atticus 1, 385.

12. Arnobius Adv. Gent. 2. 73. Tertullian Apol. 6. 8 refers to the opposition of both consuls, presumably meaning the final position of Gabinius as well as of Piso. For a summary of the demonstration, in a context of popular outbursts generally, see P.J.J. Vanderbroeck, Popular leadership and collective behaviour in the late Roman Republic (ca 80-50 B.C.), Amsterdam 1987, 239-240.


14. Ascon. 64C: 'legem, inquit' [the prosecutor] 'de libertinorum Cornelius C. Manilo dedici'. For opposition to the bill, Ascon. 45C and Dio 36. 42.

15. Comment. Pet. 51. Quintilian 4. 3. 13. See also 8. 3. 3 for a popular reaction to Cicero's defence of Cornelius.

16. Cic. Sest. 18; QFr. 1. 2. 15. For the antitriumviral context see E.S. Gruen, The last generation of the Roman Republic, Berkeley and Los Angeles 1974, 291.

17. It is worth drawing attention to an Isis priestess in the family of a freedman belonging to Rabirius Postumus, a man closely linked to Gabinius in the 50s. [CIL 6. 2246].

18. Dio 40. 47.3.

19. Cic. Att. 4. 15. 7 and 17. 2; QFr. 3. 1. 16, 2. 3. and 3. 2 for the deal made by C. Memmius and Domitius Calvinius with the consuls Domitius Ahenobarbus and Ap. Claudius Pulcher. The elections are analysed in detail by E.S. Gruen, 'The consular elections for 53 B.C.', Hommages à Marcel Renard, vol. 2, Bruxelles 1969, 311-321. For a slightly different interpretation of Calvinius see L. Hayne, 'Who went to Luca?', CP 69 (1974) 217-220.

20. Cic. QFr. 3. 4. 1; 3. 8.4; 3. 9.3; Att. 4. 18.3.

21. Cic. Fam. 8.4.3; Plut. Pomp. 54. 2-3.

22. Ascon. 31C; Appian BCiv. 2. 19; Dio 40. 45-46; Plut. Pomp. 54. P. Greenhalgh, Pompey, the republican prince, London 1981, 73-75 plays down Pompey's role in the anarchy of 54 and 53, and denies it completely for January, 52, expaining away Asconius' specific comment. This seems rather drastic, but is in keeping with Greenhalgh's overall favourable interpretation of Pompey.


24. CIL 1.2698 (Warmington, Remains of Old Latin, vol. 4, 274-79) for an inscription dated 105 referring to a Serapeum; Cic. Tusc. Disp. 86 for the thanksgiving. Is it only coincidental that Sulla had shown a particular interest in the town (Plut. Sull. 37)?
27. Dio 42. 26. 1–2.
29. Cic. *Pam.* 8. 17: Dio 42. 22. Does Dio mean *news* of Dyrrachium? There is a problem. Dio says that Caelius' opposition to Trebonius started early in the year, prompted by the fact that Trebonius, and not he, had been appointed 'praetor urbanus' — and Caelius' letter to Cicero is also far too early for Dyrrachium. Dio, however, may refer to stages in Caelius' hostility, and the actual setting aside of Caesar's laws perhaps came only when he heard of Caesar's defeat.
31. Caes. *BCiv.* 3. 22. Caesar says Caelius invited Milo to return to Italy, Dio that he came of his own accord. Either is possible.
32. Cic. *QFr.* 2. 3.2 (Pompey attacked in the Senate after Milo's trial in 56); *Att.* 4. 1.7 (prosecution in 54 of C. Memmius, who had proposed a grain command with 'maius imperium' for Pompey in 57. In 49 Cicero described Memmius as Pompey's 'familiaris' [Att. 8, 2D,2]). See E. Gruen, 'Pompey, the Roman aristocracy and the conference of Luca', *Historia* 18 (1969) 84–85, for the attitudes of both father and son during these years.
33. Dio 47. 16. The support of Cleopatra has also been suggested as a motive (M. Malaise, *op. cit.*, 378).
34. Dio 46. 48. 4; 48. 17. 3.
35. Appian *BCiv.* 4. 47; Val. Max. 7. 3. 8.
37. The suppression of the Bacchanalian cult in 186 is the obvious example (Livy 39.8–19). See also Livy 25. 1 for an earlier outbreak of unlicensed worship, in 213, and the Senate's reaction.
38. I have deliberately refrained from discussing in the body of this article M. Plaetorius Cestianus, a man about whose identity and career almost nothing can be said with certainty. Broughton has suggested he was curule aedile in 67, praetor in 64, and Crawford accepted 67 as the year when he issued a denarius depicting Isis (*MRR.* 2. 143; M. Crawford, *Roman republican coinage*, Cambridge 1974, 1, 418 and 436–437). This date has been challenged by C. Hersch and A. Walker, 'The Mesagne hoard', *ANSMN* 29 (1984) 132–133, who argue for c. 57. The figure on the coin was identified as Isis by A. Alfoldi, *Schweizer Münzblatter* 5 (1954) 30–31. If Cestianus was the son of the senator killed by Sulla in 82 (Val. Max. 9. 2.1), then he cannot be regarded as Sullan. If he was the Plaetorius referred to by Cicero in 56, he was definitely close to Pompey at that time (Pam. 1. 8.1). Shackleton Bailey, *Cicero Epistulae ad familiares* 1. 306 doubts the identity of this Cestius with the praetor of 67 but gives no reason. See S.K. Heyob, *The cult of Isis among women in the Greco-Roman World*, Leiden 1975, 16–18 for discussion; T.P. Wiseman, *New men in the Roman Senate, 139 B.C. – 14 A.D.*, Oxford 1971, 261 for stemma, and most recently *MRR.* 3. 157.
Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

For further information go to: