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Negotiating the body: Between religious investment and narratological strategies. Paulina, Decius Mundus and the priests of Anubis

According to Josephus’ *Antiquities of the Jews* (18.65–80), Decius Mundus, a man of equestrian rank, seduced a noble woman (Paulina) in an Isiac temple-complex at Rome during the reign of Tiberius by bribing the priests and pretending to be Anubis in person. Against a recent suggestion that the encounter is to be understood as an example of an institutionalised ritual involving actual sexual intercourse between a priest wearing a jackal-mask and a female worshipper, this paper argues that the entire story is probably a fiction, one not necessarily invented by Josephus, but at any rate used by him mainly as a ploy to discredit the new cult of Christ. Just as in the case of the claimed resurrection of the latter, Josephus fixes on the body (in this case female) as his focus in this vignette of the exploitation of the gullible in the name of religion. The choice of Anubis is explained on the basis of his visual prominence in the Egyptian cults, which was an easily available ‘index’ both of Isiac identity and of the deviant ‘otherness’ represented by the trope of ‘demented Egypt’.

There are very few literary accounts of episodes occurring between the end of the Republic and the beginning of the Empire whose protagonists are priests of Anubis. There are even fewer accounts of such priests who, by deviating from established ritual patterns or mis-appropriating priestly attributes, intentionally used the body as a means of religious and social power, in pursuit of a private goal. My concern in this paper lies with the sharp contrast between the moral depravity shown by the religious specialists on these occasions and the paradigm of bodily purity, chastity, asceticism and virtue, which seems else-

¹ The following article forms part of my project *Embodiment, Experience and Communication in Everyday Isiac Cultic Practice*, in the context of *Lived Ancient Religion: Questioning ‘Cults’ and ‘Polis Religion’*, organised at Erfurt by Jörg Rüpke and funded by the European Union Seventh Framework Programme (FP7/2013, no. 295555). I would like to thank the editors most warmly for their help in improving this contribution, for whose remaining errors I am of course solely responsible.

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where to be a recurrent feature of the Isiac cults and to have contributed materially to their wide success. This contrast invites questions relating to the political and authorial interests served by these rather special literary accounts.

What is probably the earliest story of this kind concerns Marcus Volusius, a plebeian aedile proscribed by the Triumvirs in 43 BCE (after Caesar’s assassination), who escaped from Rome by wearing an Isiac linen garment and a mask in the form of an Anubis-head, items lent him by friend who was a member of the cult.² This story however I must defer to another occasion.³ My concern here is with the much more famous story told by Josephus in his Antiquitates Iudaicae (18.65–80).⁴ The protagonists of the story, set in Rome during the reign of Tiberius, are the young, rich and virtuous Paulina, her husband Saturninus, and the eques Decius Mundus.

1. Plot, Setting and Chronology of the Story

Josephus’ account can be summarised as follows. Decius Mundus fell so heavily in love with Paulina that, when she refused point-blank to consider his proposal (despite the promise of 200,000 Attic drachmae for a single night’s sex), he vowed to starve himself to death. In order to prevent this, and (on the model of the clever stage-slave) at the same time help him out, Mundus’ freedwoman Ide devised a plan. With 50,000 drachmae from Mundus, she bribed the priests (ἱερεῖς) of Isis, to whose worship Paulina was highly devoted, and gave them careful instructions.

It was the eldest priest who set the trap, persuading Paulina that Anubis himself had fallen in love with her and wanted her to share supper and his own bed (εὐνή). Paulina’s husband gave his consent and the trap was sprung. After Paulina had eaten her dinner inside the temple and the doors been closed, Decius Mundus stepped out of hiding and, in the guise of Anubis, enjoyed Paulina’s favours (ὁμιλία) all night long. Not all the Isiac priests were involved in the conspiracy, so Mundus left early the following morning before anyone stirred, while Paulina went back home to her husband and her friends, proudly proclaiming to everyone her nocturnal encounter with a god. These friends were evidently puzzled (which itself says something about contemporary attitudes to such a claim), but it seems that Paulina’s account was studiously vague about

² Val. Max. 7.3.8. See also the later account by App. B. civ. 4.47.
³ Bricault and Gasparini (forthcoming).
⁴ Cf. also Zonar. Epit. 6.5 Dindorf.
what actually happened inside the temple, the event being represented as a divine epiphany (ἐπιφάνεια).

But truth will out. After a couple of days, Mundus happened to meet Paulina and boasted of his subterfuge. Once aware of the real identity of the person with whom she had spent the night, Paulina immediately confessed to her husband. Here Josephus gives the impression that she told him not only about Mundus but about the real (amorous) nature of his ‘epiphany’. Saturninus immediately reported the episode to Tiberius, who, after careful investigation, pronounced Ide and the Isiac priests guilty. Whereupon the priests were crucified, while Decius Mundus, in consideration of his legal status, was simply banished. The Emperor also gave orders to demolish the temple (ναός) and to throw the statue (ἀγάλμα) of Isis into the Tiber.

Josephus identifies the temple simply as τὸ ἱερὸν τῆς Ἰσίδου τὸ ἐν Ὄρῳ, which suggests that it was the largest of the at least four Isiac sanctuaries that were in use at Rome under Tiberius, namely the Iseum Campense (fig. 1). This temple was probably built after a Triumviral decision in 43 BCE and dedicated in the 30s. Thanks to its location in the Campus Martius, the building did not suffer the consequences of the decrees of 28 and 21 BCE that allowed the Isiac cults to establish themselves only half a mile beyond the pomerium. Moreover, Josephus himself refers to the sanctuary as τὸ ἱερὸν τῆς Ἰσίδου in the context of the overnight stay of Vespasian and Titus before their triumph in June 71 CE. We are surely justified in assuming that the Iseum Campense was considered the

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5 The other three sanctuaries were: 1) the Iseum Capitolinum, which was built on the Arx probably in the Sullan period (Apul. Met. 11.30); 2) the Iseum Metellinum (SHA Tyr. trig. 25), which was probably built on the Caelian by Q. Caecilius Metellus Pius in 71–64 BCE (Coarelli 1982, 55–57), if not already by Q. Caecilius Metellus Balearicus a little before 123 BCE (Fontana 2010, 21–31); 3) the temple of Isis Pelagia, which is attested in the mid first century CE (RICIS 501/0132), but may well date from before the year 1 CE, when the cult of Isis Pelagia is first attested in Rome (RICIS 501/0137). On all this, see Gasparini (2007, 68–74 and 2008); Malaise (2011, 188–198) with further references.

6 Dio Cass. 40.47.3–4 and 47.16.1. In my view, it is highly unlikely that the triumviral decision was never enforced, which is the argument used by those who wish to postpone the chronology of the Iseum Campense to the period 21 BCE – 19 CE (Malaise 1972a, 212) or even to the reign of Vespasian (Scheid 2004; 2009).


8 Dio Cass. 53.2.4 and 54.6.6.

9 BJ 7.123. The sanctuary is located by Juvenal (6.528–529), the Regional Catalogues and the Forma Urbis next to the Saepta. The overnight stay was celebrated in three sestertius issues in 71 CE: RIC II², p. 67, nos. 116–117; p. 73, no. 204. Cf. Gasparini (2007, 73 nn. 10–11; 2008, 102; 2009, 349 with references). These very small early issues by the mint of Rome were evidently commemorative.
main Isiac sanctuary of early Imperial Rome, and that the episode of Paulina and Decius Mundus was supposed to have taken place there.¹⁰

The Tiber is not particularly close to that temple (or to any of the other known Isiac temples of the period, for that matter), a point that further underlines the symbolism of throwing the cult-statue into the river. Isis evidently suffered the damnatio or deletio memoriae sporadically applied in particularly serious cases under the Republic (e.g. Tiberius and Caius Gracchus) and into the late Empire (Elagabalus, Maximinus Thrax, etc.).¹¹ In effect, Tiberius declared Isis a public enemy.¹² In this context, it is worth remembering that crucifixion was a punishment reserved for enemies of the state (such as brigands and pirates), per-egrini, liberti and slaves, and that Roman citizens were usually exempt from it.¹³ The clear implication is that the Isiac priests of the Iseum Campense were peregrini as well as public enemies.¹⁴

There is a general consensus that the Paulina incident took place in 19 CE. Immediately after his account of Paulina and Decius Mundus, Josephus tells a similar story about an event that occurred “about the same time”, concerning a Jew (Ant. Jud. 18.81–84). There was a wicked man in Rome who “professed to instruct men in the wisdom of the laws of Moses”, the same laws that he had himself previously transgressed in Judaea, as a result of which he had been banished.¹⁵ With the complicity of a couple of friends of like character, he persuaded Fulvia (a woman of great dignity and fervent Jewish devotion) to entrust him with a quantity of purple stuffs and gold, to be brought to the temple of Jerusalem, whereupon they simply appropriated both goods and money. Fulvia’s husband, a man named Saturninus (like the husband of Paulina), promptly informed Tiberius, who ordered all Jews to be banished from Rome.¹⁶ The consuls drew up a list of four thousand men, and packed them off to Sardinia. Many were, however, punished for refusing to become soldiers on the grounds that this was against their religion.

¹⁰ Apuleius, in the last third of the 2nd century, refers to Isis Regina as quae de templi situ sump-to nomine Campensis summa cum veneratione propitiatur: Met. 11.26.
¹² The Iseum Campense was probably rebuilt soon after Tiberius’ death, already under Caligula: see Gasparini (2007, 73).
¹⁴ Cook (2014, 182).
¹⁵ Tr. W. Whiston.
¹⁶ This is also attested by Dio Cass. 58.18.5a, who simply states that most of the Jews, who were arriving in Rome in great numbers and converting many of the natives, were banished. On this incident, see e.g. Marasco (1991) and Rochette (2001).
The measures taken against the Isiac cults and the Jews are, however, assigned a quite different context by both Suetonius and Tacitus. Suetonius (Tib. 36) says that in the year 19 CE the Emperor:

[...] abolished foreign cults, especially the Egyptian and the Jewish rites, compelling all who were addicted to such superstitions to burn their religious vestments and all their paraphernalia. Those of the Jews who were of military age he assigned to provinces of less healthy climate, ostensibly to serve in the army; the others of that same race or of similar beliefs he banished from the city, on pain of slavery for life if they did not obey (transl. J.C. Rolfe).

According to Tacitus (Ann. 2.85.5):

[...] another debate dealt with the proscription of the Egyptian and Jewish rites, and a senatorial edict directed that four thousand descendants of enfranchised slaves, tainted with that superstition and suitable in point of age, were to be shipped to Sardinia and there employed in suppressing brigandage: ‘if they succumbed to the pestilential climate, it was a cheap loss’. The rest had orders to leave Italy, unless they had renounced their impious ceremonial by a given date (transl. J Jackson)

It is probably this episode to which Seneca (4 BCE – 65 CE) refers when he states that “[t]he days of my youth coincided with the early part of the reign of Tiberius Caesar. Some foreign rites (sacra alienigena) were at that time being inaugurated, and abstinence from certain kinds of animal food was set down as a proof of interest in the strange cult (superstitio)”.

2. Interpreting the source

2.1. The amorous affair as a recurring ritual?

Before proceeding further, it is perhaps necessary to say a few words about the recent interpretation of the Paulina episode by David Klotz, who claims that Josephus’ account is based on actual ritual events. The sole item of evidence he can adduce is part of a wall-painting found by Friedrich von Bissing in the Roman-period ‘Tomb of 1897’ at Akhmim (Panopolis/Chemmis) in upper Egypt, which was rediscovered in the 1980s (fig. 2). On the left side of the fresco, there is a man facing left, with upraised hands, adoring a falcon-headed Horus,

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18 Klotz (2012).
who holds the feather of Ma’at. On the right, there is a scene described by Marjorie S. Venit in the following terms:

A violent encounter between a demon and a human figure […]. The demon pushes the human figure backward with his left hand and thrusts it further off balance by grasping its right foot with his right hand, as he leans forward to kneel on the altar. Though the image is badly damaged, based on the grey, intestine-like coil that he seems to suck into his mouth, the demon appears to be eviscerating his victim.¹⁹

Klotz, however, completely ignoring the left-hand scene, interprets the scene as a sexual encounter between Anubis and a woman on a Graeco-Roman style klinê.²⁰ Combining it with the episode of Paulina in Rome, he takes it as evidence for an authentic religious practice, widespread in Rome and Roman Egypt,²¹ whereby priests wearing an Anubis mask had sexual intercourse with women inside temples.²² I find this interpretation both sensationalist and extremely implausible. I also think we need to look closer at the episode and re-contextualise it properly.

Klotz attempts to justify his interpretation by emphasising the jackal’s reputation in ancient Egypt for promiscuity and Anubis’ involvement in ritual banquets.²³ Nonetheless, this leads us nowhere. Equally feeble is the idea, for which there is no evidence whatsoever and can only be described as voyeuristic, that the priests wearing the Anubis-mask, who are usually represented as dressed in an all-enveloping cloak covering body and hands (fig. 3), “should be understood to be naked under their robes, ready to perform a ritual hieros gamos”.²⁴ Even more so are the two Latin literary parallels invoked to support the hypothesis. The first is Tertullian’s allusion (Apol. 15.1) to adulterous Anubis (moechus Anubis):

The rest of your licentious wits also work for your pleasures through the dishonour of the gods. Examine the farces of the Lentuli and Hostilii, and consider whether it is the buffoons or your gods whose jokes and tricks you are laughing at; such subjects as an adulterous Anubis, a masculine Moon, Diana scourged, the will of the deceased Jupiter read aloud, and three starving Herculeses held up to ridicule (tr. A. Souter).

¹⁹ Venit (2010, 116).
²⁰ Klotz (2012, 386).
²¹ Klotz (2012, 388).
²² Klotz (2012, 396).
All the references in this passage are of course to ‘Atellan’ farces, whose plots were deliberately burlesque, a fact which in turn implies that Anubis ordinarily was not at all perceived as adulterous.

The second is a passage by Juvenal (6.532–541):

It’s Anubis, therefore, who receives the best and highest honour, / Running along, mocking the lamentations of the crowd for Osiris, / Surrounded by his shaven-headed creatures, in their linen robes. / He’s the one who petitions on your wife’s behalf, when she fails / To refrain from sex on the holy days, owing a fine for violation / Of the bed. After the silver asp has been seen to raise its head, / It’s his tears and professional muttering that guarantees Osiris / Won’t refuse to pardon her transgression, provided, of course, / He’s bribed, with a fat goose and a large slice of sacrificial cake (tr. A.S. Kline).

But again this is satire (cf. 9.22–26), fusing the sexual abstinence imposed on women at the Isia with Anubis’ role in the Inventio Osiridis. Its historical accuracy can be gauged from the representation of a sacrifice as a ‘bribe’ (ansere magno ... et tenui popano corruptus Osiris).²⁵

These are not the only passages that Klotz misrepresents. He also claims that “[a]lthough inconceivable to modern readers, neither Paulina, her husband, nor any of her friends were surprised by her encounter with Anubis. In other words, the scandal arose not from the fact that Anubis (or an official priest dressed as Anubis) seduced a noble woman in a temple setting, but because this event transpired under deceitful pretences”.²⁶ But this is not exactly what Josephus says. In fact, we are told that Paulina’s friends were inclined to disbelieve her story but were at the same time surprised, given her modesty and virtue (§ 76). Evidently, the reason why at least some of them, to say nothing of her husband, accepted the story was her stainless reputation. But the detail that she stayed in the temple all night ‘at the service’ of Anubis (the term here employed is διακονέω) was perhaps suspicious; we may not be too far off the mark in thinking rather of adultery.

The incredulity of some of Paulina’s friends had good grounds. The practice of sexual abstinence preceding the festival of the Isia and the representation of the Isiac deities as paradigms of marital love and fidelity were well-known at Rome. Moreover, as Herodotus already pointed out, “the Egyptians were the first who made it a point of religion not to lie with women in temples, nor to

²⁵ Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984, 1965) suggested that Juvenal’s scorn for Egyptian religion (note also Sat. 15, whose theme is Egyptian animal-worship) may have been connected to his putative exile to Egypt by Domitian. Though 15.45 shows that Juvenal had visited Egypt, a satirist’s denunciation of Egyptian religion requires no such special explanation.
²⁶ Klotz (2012, 384).
enter into temples after going away from women without first bathing” (2.64).
Similarly, Chaeremon (ap. Porphyry, De abst. 4.7.6), Plutarch (De Is. et Os. 2, 351f and 8, 354a-b) and Apuleius (Met. 11.6; 11.19) all stress the chastity of the Egyptian priests and their abstinence from the lusts of the flesh. In view of all this, the idea of an actual institution of ‘sacred marriage’ in the context of an Isiac cult is entirely implausible.

It is, thus, frankly impossible to agree with Klotz’ claim that “by identifying the progenitor [sic] with Anubis, an otherwise taboo extramarital coupling could have been elevated to a morally acceptable religious experience. Such an arrangement would explain the Decius Mundus affair, and account for the popularity and surprising efficacy [sic] of incubation sessions”.
²⁷ As he himself recognises, “the role of paramour is unexpected for Anubis, who is otherwise almost exclusively associated with mortuary functions, such as mummification, guarding the netherworld, and directing the deceased as a psychopomp”.
²⁸ If Klotz’ hyper-realist reading of the Decius Mundus affair is unacceptable, what alternatives are there? To my mind, the most promising strategy is precisely to re-embed Josephus’ narrative in its rightful narratological context.

2.2. Josephus’ narratological strategy

Irrespective of the historicity of the Paulina incident, the evidence of Suetonius and Tacitus surely confirms that the measures against Isiac and Jewish superstitiones are historical. For his part, Josephus links them to specific instances of deception practised on high-status Roman women (Fulvia, Paulina) by unscrupulous men. These men took advantage of the women’s genuine religious devotion to serve private ends (money; sex), using a religious script.

Now, the passage that immediately precedes these two incidents (Ant.Jud. 18.63–64) is the well-known, albeit controversial, description of Jesus’ wonderful works and the community of Jesus-followers that grew up after his resurrection, the so-called ‘testimonium Flavium’ or ‘Flavianum’:

About this time, there lived Jesus, a wise man, if indeed one ought to call him a man. For he was one who wrought surprising feats and was a teacher of such people as accept the truth gladly. He won over many Jews and many of the Greeks. He was the Messiah. When Pilate,
upon hearing him accused by men of the highest standing amongst us, had condemned
him to be crucified, those who had in the first place come to love him did not give up
their affection for him. On the third day, he appeared to them restored to life, for the proph-
ets of God had prophesied these and countless other marvellous things about him. And
the tribe of the Christians, so called after him, has still to this day not disappeared (tr. L.H. Feld-
man).

At this point, it is essential to say a few words about the scholarly reception of
these passages. Many scholars have had strong doubts about the authenticity of
the testimoniunm Flaviiunm.²⁹ Some maintain that the entire passage is authentic,³⁰
a few would excise it completely as a Christian interpolation,³¹ while most schol-
ars think it is original but interspersed with later (Eusebian?) interpolations.³²
Similarly, some scholars have dismissed Paulina’s story as mere invention or
street gossip,³³ while others have been more inclined to accept its historicity.
Alfred Grimm even suggested that some sculptural fragments found in the
Tiber (now in Munich) might be the remains of the cult-statue of Isis that was
thrown into the river.³⁴ Very few scholars, however, have viewed the Jewish
and Isiac episodes in conjunction with the Christian passage quoted above
(and vice versa).

I remain confident that the Christ-passage is for the most part original (al-
though perhaps subsequently altered), and that, despite the differences,³⁵ the
three episodes are clearly related and needed to be understood as a single nar-
rative block. In terms of narratological strategy, Josephus sets up an implicit
comparison between Jesus and the Isiac and Jewish examples of misuse of reli-
gious belief. The suggestion is that Jesus was no true religious prophet, but a
fraud like Decius Mundus (who, as a man, pretended to be a god) or like the
anonymous Jew (who was banished from Judaea for transgressing the same re-
ligious laws he should have upheld).³⁶ Consequently, Josephus’ argument is that

²⁹ There is an enormous bibliography. I need only refer to Feldman (1989, 430 – 435), who found
at least 87 articles dedicated to this topic in the period 1937 to 1980; and Whealey (2003), who
³⁰ See for example the abundant bibliography in Evans (1998, 466 – 467 n.57).
³¹ E.g. the authors mentioned in Evans (1998, 467 n.58) and, more recently, in Carrier (2012,
489 – 490 n.1). See now also Feldman (2012) and Olson (2013).
³² E.g. Meier (1991, 56 – 111); Paget (2001); Bardet (2002); Dunn (2003, 141); van Voorst (2003);
³³ E.g. Malaise (1972b, 88; 391); Heyob (1975, 117 – 119).
³⁵ On the Isiac and Jewish episodes, see Moehring (1959) and van Unnik (1979, 254 – 258).
³⁶ If we press the comparison a bit further, Mary Magdalene might be thought of as the
wronged woman, just like Paulina and Fulvia: see Pharr (1927, 143 – 145) and Klotz (2012, 373 n.3).
Jesus-followers are to be condemned, exactly as Jesus himself was by Pilate and the Isiac priests and the Jews were by Tiberius. Further, we may note the rather ironic and sceptical tone of the passage, and especially the derogatory reference to “the tribe (φῶλον) of Christians”. In all likelihood, this represents Josephus’ hostility to the idea of humans assuming or acquiring divine identities or qualities. Intending to discredit the figure of Jesus, \textsuperscript{37} Josephus likens Christ-proselytism to the misuse or perversion of ‘noble’ religions, such as that of the Jews (embraced by Josephus himself) and the cult of Isis (embraced by the Flavian dynasty at Rome). Such narratives enabled Josephus to place the rising numbers of Jesus-followers’ within the framework of the historical episode of the expulsion of the ‘foreign’ cults in 19 CE, as described by Suetonius and Tacitus. Regardless of whether they are historical or fictional (on balance I incline to the latter view), these anecdotal accounts recast Christ-proselytism in terms of what Seneca himself described as \textit{sacra alienigena} and \textit{superstitiones}.\textsuperscript{38} And this brings us back once again to the issue of Roman reception of ‘foreign’ and specifically Isiac cults.\textsuperscript{39}

Examining closer Josephus’ narratological strategy gives us a much more plausible reading of the Paulina and Decius episode than that proposed by Klotz, and suggests to go on in this direction. Let us start our analysis by pinpointing the literary \textit{topoi} of the story.

\section*{3. Roman reception of Isiac cults}

\subsection*{3.1 Women and dogs: between fidelity and untrustworthiness}

As I have already pointed out, there is no serious evidence to support the hypothesis that the Paulina episode could reflect an authentic religious practice taking place inside temples of Isis in Rome. On the contrary, the story is full of literary \textit{topoi}, which surely supports the idea that the episode is entirely or largely fictitious.

There is first the \textit{topos} of the resourceful but unscrupulous slave or freedman, which is deployed twice, in the figure of Ide the clever freedwoman, and that of the senior Isiac priest, who actually convinces Paulina that Anubis has

\textsuperscript{37} Josephus also alludes to the ‘so-called Christ’ at \textit{AJ} 20.200, whose authenticity most scholars accept, e.g. Evans (1998, 469–477); Dunn (2003, 141); van Voorst (2003); and Painter (2004, 132–133). Contra, Rajak (2002, 131 n.73) and Carrier (2012).

\textsuperscript{38} See p. 389 above.

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. Esther Eidinow’s contribution to this volume (Chapter 10).
fallen in love with her. The figure of Paulina on the other hand draws on the *topos* of the virtuous innocent abroad. She is depicted as very beautiful, aristocratic, young, rich yet modest: Josephus twice stresses her σωφροσύνη, prudence, and discretion. Chastity, marital love and fidelity are a constant feature of the depiction in Latin elegy of women devoted to the cult of Isis.⁴⁰ Tibullus (1.3.23–32), around 26–25 BCE, laments the ritual lustrations and the sexual abstinence which his beloved Delia periodically underwent. Around the same time, Propertius (2.33.1–6) complains that his muse, Cynthia, is busy celebrating Isis’ *tristia sollemnia* – an ironic allusion to the *Hilaria*, which evidently involved a ten-day period of sexual abstinence.⁴¹ In his amatory poetry Ovid too repeatedly complains about the absence of Corinna, leaving him in an empty bed while she is busy with her rituals.⁴² A variant of the *topos*, Isis as protector of women’s chastity, is found in the Greek novels.⁴³

The story however also draws on a quite different *topos*, which can be traced throughout Greek and Latin literature.⁴⁴ Female adultery was of course morally quite unacceptable; already in Homer an unfaithful wife was associated with the fawning bitch.⁴⁵ The bitch symbolises women’s untrustworthiness and inability to control bodily impulses, thus naturalising the subordinate position of women in a male-centred society.⁴⁶ One epithet for an adulterous wife, notably Helen of Troy, who abandoned her husband Menelaus for Paris, thus provoking the Trojan War, was thus ‘bitch-eyed’ (κυνῶπις).⁴⁷ “As the paradigmatically seducible figure – the wife who abandons her husband and gives her companionship to another man – Helen is well suited to don the mask of traitorous dog [...]. Whatever the means by which the woman is seduced – whether love or riches or power – the mask of the dog traitor is a spectre of uncontrolled feminine mobility”.⁴⁸ Rather than Klotz’ idea of a ritual *hieros gamos*,⁴⁹ the narrative implies

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⁴¹ The motif recurs at Prop. 4.5.33–34 (20–16 BCE).
⁴² Am. 1.8.73–74; 2.2.25; 2.13.7–18; 3.9.33–34 (written between 23 and 14 BCE).
⁴⁵ Franco (2014, 104).
⁴⁸ Franco (2014, 103 and 106). It is not at all clear to me why Franco’s American translator prefers the word ‘dog’ here to ‘bitch’; but the quality of the translation will be apparent even from this brief excerpt.
that, for all her modesty, Paulina is incomprehensibly foolish or, worse still, misusing the Isiac ‘ethical code’ in order to commit adultery.

But what of Anubis? Strictly speaking, Josephus says that Decius Mundus simply pretended to be Anubis: no dressing-up is actually mentioned, he just appeared in the temple when all was dark and enjoyed the girl. We must be reminded of the (apocryphal) story of Tyrannus, priest of ‘Saturn’ at Alexandria, who supposedly made a habit of entering the temple by a secret passage and making a strange ‘divine’ noise while hiding behind the bronze statue of the god; when the lamps were extinguished, he would have sex with the woman he had appointed to meet.\(^{50}\) Nothing suggests that Decius Mundus was wearing an Anubis-mask while he was with Paulina: darkness was disguise enough. Darkness represented a perfect setting for erotic epiphanies,\(^{51}\) and female rites in honour of male deities during a pannychis were widely perceived as closely linked to illicit sex and, consequently, to illegitimate pregnancies.\(^{52}\)

Whether Mundus was actually disguised as Anubis during the sexual encounter is however of little importance here. But the idea of someone impersonating Anubis, with the complicity of Isiac priests, must surely have evoked the role of anubophori, persons wearing jackal-masks, in the Roman cult of Isis.

### 3.2. The epigraphic and iconographical evidence: Anubis, anubophori and jackal-masks

The early Egyptian iconography of Anubis represented him as a black-skinned, jackal-like canid.\(^{53}\) The process of anthropomorphisation that set in with the New Kingdom created a new form, with the jackal-head being superimposed onto a human body. It was this type that was carried over into the Graeco-Roman iconography, though the Pharaonic tunic was abandoned in favour of a long himation, often worn under a chlamys. In addition, Graeco-Roman Anubis usually carries Hermes’ caduceus (symbol of the communication between heaven, earth and underworld), and sometimes his winged sandals.

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52 See Petridou (2015, 237–238 with n.65).

53 See on this and the following topics Malaise (2014) and Sfameni Gasparro (2017), with extensive bibliographical references.
At the two major Isiac festivals celebrated outside Egypt, the Navigium Isidis⁵⁴ (5 March) and the Isia, culminating in the Inventio Osiridis – Hilaria (3 November),⁵⁵ it was the custom to stage more or less elaborate public processions.⁵⁶ It was for these processions that some privileged initiates of Anubis, named anubiaci,⁵⁷ and in some cases professional actors,⁵⁸ were chosen to dress up as the god and wear a mask in the form of a jackal’s head (figs. 4a–c). In this role, they were termed anubophori, which was not a fixed position or status but a term for a specific, temporary role.⁵⁹

An indication of the visual prominence of these anubophori in the annual processions is provided by some of the images employed in calendars to represent the month of November. In the mosaic of the ‘Calendar of Thysdrus’ (early 3rd cent. CE) the month is signified by two pterophoroi and a priest dressed as Anubis (fig. 5).⁶⁰ The images preserved in the various copies of the ‘Calendar of 354’ (‘of Philocalus’) show a shaven Isiac priest holding a sistrum and a tray with an asp raising its head,⁶¹ and standing next to a pedestal bearing an

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⁵⁴ See Apul. Met. 11.11.
⁵⁵ Bricault and Gasparini (forthcoming).
⁵⁶ Commodus himself is supposed to have participated in these processions – marked by stations – as anubophorus: see SHA Comm. 9.4 and 6 (this biography is notoriously unreliable); Nigr. 6.9; M. Ant. 9.11. Cf. Bricault (2000–2001, 29–30).
⁵⁷ Mentioned in RICIS 605/0107 (3rd cent. CE, Nîmes). See the analogous cases of the bubasticae (RICIS 501/0169 and 503/1113) and of the more common isiaci/isiacae (RICIS 501/0210; 503/1115; 503/1118–1119; 504/0209–2010; *504/0212). Neither sarapiaci nor osiriaci are attested. The main evidence for thinking that these terms refer to initiates is CIL VI 1780 = ILS 1260 = RICIS 501/0210 (384 CE, Rome), where Fabia Aconia Paulina, the wife of Vettius Agorius Praetextatus, is said to be sacrata apud Eleusinam deo Iaccho, Cere et Corae, sacrata apud Laernam deo Libero et Cere et Corae, sacrata apud Aeginam de usu, tauroboliata, isiaca, hierophanta deae Hecatae, Graecosacrae deae Ceres (I have turned the original datives into nominatives) As for anubiaci, the most interesting inscription comes from Ostia and is dated 16 March (?): 251 CE: Flavius Moschylus (isiacus) honours Decimus Fabius Florus Veranus, who was priest of the Holy Queen (sacerdos sanctae reginae, i.e. Isis) and electo anubiaco by decision of her Majesty (iudicio maiestatis eius): CIL XIV 352 = ILS 6149 = RICIS 503/1115. This supplementary consecration is evidently closely linked to – but distinct from – that of isiacus, as another inscription from Ostia attests, referring to P. Cornelius Victorinus who was at the same time both isiacus and anubiacus (CIL XIV 4290 = ILS 4369 = RICIS 503/1118, 2nd–3rd cent. CE).
⁶⁰ Stern (1968); Grenier (1977, 157 no. 250); Foucher (2000); Deschamps (2005).
⁶¹ As in Juvenal’s account (see p. 389 above).
Anubis-mask (figs. 6a–c).\textsuperscript{62} The Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim possesses a somewhat similar late-Egyptian Anubis-mask weighing 8 kg (6$^{th}$–4$^{th}$ cent. BCE) (fig. 7).\textsuperscript{63}

It is surely this visual prominence in processions of followers of Isis impersonating Anubis, the deity who more than any other stood in the Graeco-Roman world for the unacceptable face of ‘demented Egypt’, that explains how a scandalous story involving such priests could find such ready acceptance. And this brings us to the third, and final, requirement for a good interpretation of the Paulina episode.

\textbf{3.3. The historico-religious context: animal worship and Egyptian religious ‘indexicality’}

A proper socio-historical contextualisation of these topoi requires at least a few words devoted to the Roman reception of ‘Egyptian’ cults under the Julio-Claudians, the period at which the Paulina episode supposedly took place.

Firstly, the story needs to be considered in the light of the social context of 19 CE, that is at the very end of a period marked by Augustus’ legislation against bribery and adultery, viz. the \textit{lex Iulia de ambitu} (18 BCE), the \textit{lex Iulia de maritandis ordinibus} (18 BCE), the \textit{lex Iulia de adulteriis coercendis} (17 BCE), and, finally, the \textit{lex Papia Poppaea} (9 CE). This legislation in fact represented a continuation of the late Republican process of ‘democratisation’ of elite ethics that effected a gradual moralisation of social and sexual conduct. The complaints of the Augustan elegists (26–14 BCE), immediately after the years when the \textit{Iseum Campense} was dedicated, seem to confirm the willingness of elite women to undergo voluntary periodic sexual abstinence in the protective context of the cult of Isis.

Secondly, and parallel to the first process, Augustus was very concerned to separate Roman from ‘foreign’ cultic traditions.\textsuperscript{64} This concern also required the banishment of some religious specialists in order to combat ‘subversive’ behaviour that was evidently perceived as a source of danger to political stability.\textsuperscript{65} And the cult of the ‘Egyptian’ deities was not only widely perceived as \textit{superstitio}

\textsuperscript{62} Grenier (1977, 165–166, no. 274); Koemoth (2008).
\textsuperscript{64} See e.g. Orlin (2008) and Malaise (2011).
or *deisidaimonia* (i.e. a non-traditional, unsanctioned, improper religious action),  but also as religiously deviant.  

Among the features of Egyptian religiosity which were regarded with suspicion, animal worship in the Graeco-Roman world was perceived not just as inappropriate, but as outlandish, despicable, monstrous. Roman abhorrence of Egyptian theriomorphic deities made these *omnigenumque deum monstra et latrator Anubis* stereotypical Egyptian bestial deities that appealed greatly to the Roman imagination (*Quis nescit ... qualia demens / Aegyptos portent colat?*). However, it also perpetuated the idea of Egypt as a land of deceitful, licentious, and lustful behaviour. And this clearly influenced the modern scholarly belief that “in the eyes of the Roman public, Egyptian religion was bound up with corruption and licentiousness”, thus supporting Klotz’ idea.

Thus the (at least partial) theriomorphism of Anubis and his *anubophori* represented a very peculiar religious ‘index’ (in Peirce’s terminology), which points to the cultural otherness of the god’s homeland Egypt. As Giulia Sfameni Gasparro argues,

> for Roman authors and later Christian polemicists, the dog-headed god is the most obvious ‘identity mark’ *ad extra* of the Isiac cults, in all their mythical, theological and ritual aspects... The god appeared as the most immediate and specific expression within the Roman religious landscape of Egyptian cultic identity. This feature then became the main target of Christian polemicists in their condemnation of the pagan cults. In this documentation... the active role of the performer who played Anubis within the ritual reconstructing the dramatic quest and the joyful *inventio Osiridis*, was seen as the most representative sign of Egyptian religious identity ...

Given all this background, it becomes plausible to suppose that the Decius Mundus story was adroitly constructed on the basis of such stereotypes. Presumably the earliest form of the story considerably antedates Josephus, though he himself was perfectly capable of elaborating the details. For elsewhere, in his attack upon Apion, the head of the Alexandrian library, he easily rallied Greek, Roman and Judean prejudices against animal worship by arguing that Apion “has been gifted

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66 Cf. Gordon (2008, 75) with further bibliographical references.
67 Rüpke (2014, 18; 89).
69 Juv. 15.1–2.
with the mind of an ass and the impudence of the dog, which his countrymen are wont to worship”.

4. Conclusion

It is time now to sum up the results of this brief analysis of the story of Paulina and Decius Mundus.

Josephus – a Jew operating under the aegis of the Flavian dynasty, protected in its turn by the Isiac deities – chose two episodes involving the moral depravity of Jewish and Isiac priests and devotees during the reign of Tiberius, around 19 CE. The probable setting of the story is the Iseum Campense in the Campus Martius, built in 43 BCE and in all likelihood dedicated just before the Augustan decrees of 28 and 21 BCE (which excluded the Isiac cults from the area of the pomerium). It was here that Vespasian and Titus spent the night before their triumph in June 71 CE, thus invoking the protection of Isis and Serapis for the new dynasty. The conclusion of the story of Decius Mundus, by contrast, features Tiberius, the Julio-Claudian, declaring Isis a public enemy and throwing her statue into the Tiber.

In Josephus’ version, the story draws heavily on literary (comic and satirical) topoi (the cunning freedman, the devious old man, the credulous woman, the faithless wife). The story also shows knowledge of the requirements of sexual abstinence and marital fidelity demanded by the Isiac cults, and of deep-rooted Roman beliefs and anxieties about Egyptian religious practices.

We can dismiss out of hand the idea that priests wearing an Anubis mask had sexual intercourse with women inside Isiac temples. The plausibility of the story derives rather from the familiarity at Rome of Anubis and the anubophori, which acted as an ambivalent indexical sign both of Isiac identity and of the deviant ‘otherness’ represented by the trope of ‘demented Egypt’. It is probably no coincidence that the story is set in 19 CE, when Germanicus was visiting Egypt but failed to ask permission beforehand, thus arousing Tiberius’ suspicions (Tac. Ann. 2.59).

Both of Josephus’ stories, of Paulina and of Fulvia, were generated in the force-field between the moral programme of the early Principate on the one hand and the forced dichotomy between ‘foreign’ and ‘Roman’ religion on the other. Foreign priests exploit helpless Roman women. Beyond that, however, I

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73 Joseph. Contra Apionem 2.85 (but see also 1.224 and 2.139), cf. Smelik and Hemelrijk (1984, 1912).
have suggested that the context within which Josephus develops the story of Paulina implies that the real target here is the gullibility of people in the face of religious trickery, and in particular the Judeans who are attracted by the figure of Jesus and his supposed martyrdom and resurrection. Paulina yields her chaste body to Decius Mundus thanks to priestly trickery; Jews have defrauded Fulvia of her wealth; then what are the Judean sectarians up to with the body of Jesus?

References


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Fig. 1: Conjectural plan of the Iseum Campense in Rome (adapted by V. Gasparini).
Fig. 2: Wall-painting from the Roman ‘Tomb of 1897’ at Akhmim (after Klotz 2012, 385, fig. 1).
Fig. 3: Pompeii, 62–79 CE. Wall-painting from the portico of the Temple of Isis representing an *anubophoros*. National Archaeological Museum of Naples, inv. no. 8920 (after De Caro 2006, 58, fig. 65).
Fig. 4a: Samos. Hellenistic stela with a representation of two Isisac priests, one of them an anubophorus. Vathi Archaeological Museum, Samos. After Robert 1938, pl. X.
Fig. 4b: Siscia/Sisak (Pannonia Superior), late 2rd – early 3rd cent. CE. Altar with representation of an anubophorus (?) © National Museum of Slovenia, inv. no. L 146. Photo Tomaž Lauko.
**Fig. 4c:** *Arausio/Orange* (Gallia Narbonensis), late 2nd – early 3rd cent. CE. Three-handled jug decorated with three moulded appliqué discs, one of which shows a procession with the cult statue of Isis being paraded in a cart and an *anubophorus* leading the cortège (© Metropolitan Museum of New York, inv. no. 17.194.870).
Fig. 5: The ‘Calendar of Thysdrus’ (El-Djem). Month of November (after Archeo 357 November 2014, 104).
Fig. 6a: The ‘Calendar of Philocalus’ (354 CE). Month of November, drawn from a Carolingian ms in Luxembourg at the behest of the learned antiquarian Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580–1637). The original ms disappeared after 1620. Vatican, Biblioteca Vaticana, ms. Barb. lat. 2154, f.22 (after Stern 1953, pl. XII.1).
Fig. 6b: The ‘Calendar of Philocalus’ (354 CE). Month of November, likewise copied from the Carolingian ms. Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale ms. 7543–7549 (after Stern 1953, pl. XVII.2).
Fig. 6c: The ‘Calendar of Philocalus’ (354 CE). Month of November, again from the Carolingian ms. Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, ms. 3416 [written between 1500 and 1510] (after Stern 1953, pl. XIX.1).
Fig. 7: Egypt, 6th–4th cent. BCE. Terracotta mask of Anubis (Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, inv. no. 1585) (after Eggebrecht 1993, 87).