ISIS AT THORNBOROUGH

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In 1981 a bronze figurine was discovered by means of a metal detector on the footpath near the Romano-Celtic temple at Thornborough (NGR SP 729331) and taken to Buckinghamshire County Museum. The present location of the object is not known and it has apparently been sold by the finder.

The statuette (Plates X-XI) is of mediocre workmanship, being fairly flat in section and with the casting-flanges (evidence of the use of a two-piece mould) clearly visible. The supposition is that the figure came from an indifferent local workshop and the lack of finish may imply that the object was lost where it was made. The date of manufacture is probably 2nd-3rd century A.D.

The figurine depicts a female with long hair pulled into a knot at the nape of the neck; she wears a *stola* and *palla* and a tall diadem; she appears to carry the remains of a *cornu copiae* in her left hand; the right hand is missing from above the wrist but the position of the arm suggests that it may originally have supported an object resting on the ground beside her. The image portrayed appears to be that of the Egyptian goddess Isis, possibly equated with Fortuna, with whom she was frequently identified in the Graeco-Roman world. The deity wears the high ostrich-feather diadem of the Egyptian divinity. The missing item originally by the right side may well have been Fortuna's rudder; the presence of a *cornu copiae* would fit well into such an interpretation.

The identification of the goddess Isis is based mainly upon the distinctive headdress, symbolic of Upper and Lower Egypt. Examples of other comparable provincial figurines, thus interpreted, from the western Roman Empire are evidenced, for instance, in Germany (e.g. Menzel 1960, no. 20, Taf. 23) and Gaul (e.g. Rolland 1965, no. 43; Boucher 1973, no. 61).

The Egyptian pantheon in general, and the cult of Isis in particular, is rarely present in Romano-British contexts; this fact and the discovery of the figurine in the vicinity of a Romano-Celtic temple site makes the Thornborough figurine a find of significant interest. Eve and John Harris (1965, 74) comment that the evidence of Egyptian religion in Roman Britain is "both sparse and problematical." There are few finds attesting sanctuaries to the pantheon; one is the *serapeum* at York in the civil settlement outside the fortress *(ibid.,* 75). At least one *iseum* is recorded in London; a flagon dug up in Tooley Street, Southwark (Museum of London) and probably dating to the late 1st or early 2nd century A.D. bears an inscription apparently scratched on after the clay was dry. It reads *Londini ad Fanum Isidis* or "in London by the Temple of Isis" (Taylor and Collingwood 1923, 24ff; Green 1976, 222). The fact that the clay was already fired prior to the inscription implies that the latter could refer to the address of the tradesman who bottled the contents of the vessel rather than that of the potter, but Henig sees the preservation of the complete pot as suggestive of intentional concealment if not deliberate and sepulchral burial (Henig 1984, 113). In any case the brevity of the graffito means that the *fanum Isidis* must have been relatively well-known in Roman London. The Blackfriars altar, the other major isiac find from London, was re-used in the construction of a late Roman riverside wall; it records the restoration of a temple to the goddess by a 3rd century Governor of Britannia Superior (R.I.B. 1041).

Other isiac material from the Province is equivocal in its religious character. Steelyard-weights from Cirencester (Green 1976, 173)

Plate X The Thornborough Isis. a) front view. b) side view.
See page 139. Scale in mm.

and London *{ibid.,* 222) in the form of the head and shoulders of the goddess are not meaningful in religious terms; at best they represent the traditional association of Isis with corn fertility and prosperity. Likewise, jewellery such as the bone pin in the form of a hand holding a bust of Isis from Moorgate, London (London Museum 1930, 103-104, fig. 32.1) and the intaglios from London Wall and Wroxeter depicting the goddess (Harris and Harris 1965, 80) need be nothing more than vaguely symbolic. More interesting, in religious terms, are two model iron *sistra* from London (London Museum 1930, 108; Green 1976, pi. XXIIg) and a fragment of a larger *sistrum* of (?) faience from Exeter (Harris and Harris 1965, 90; Green 1976, 199; Exeter Museum). This last is of doubtful but possible Romano-British origin. *Sistra* were ceremonial rattles used by isiac priests in processions. Also meaningful for the cult of the goddess is the haematite amulet from Welwyn. Late in date, it was made for a woman as a talisman against a womb-affliction. Here, Isis is depicted among other divinities and images, with her *sistrum* and a portrayal of a womb accompanied by a magical inscription (Ferguson 1970, 165).

Figurines of Isis (as opposed to steelyard-busts) are extremely rare in Britain. The only example known to the writer, other than the present Buckinghamshire find, is from Dorchester (Dorset County Museum). The statuette is worn and the identification is by no means positive (Green 1976, 201; Harris and Harris 1965, 89; Anon. 1900, 96).

The paucity of evidence for the worship of Isis in Britain makes the Thornborough discovery one of extreme significance. This is further enhanced by its context, in very likely association with a Romano-Celtic temple. Not only is the Egyptian goddess rare in Britain, but nearly all the few finds are concentrated in the cosmopolitan trading centre of London, which would have been thronged with merchants and travellers from overseas. The presence of such an exotic foreign deity in a somewhat remote wayside shrine is curious and interesting, perhaps implying that the devotee was a resident and local Briton rather than an itinerant trader. The sanctuary at Thornborough was of normal Romano-Celtic design, with inner cella and an outer portico, but nearby was a crude basilical structure whose sacred character is implied by the presence of foundation deposits of horses buried under the threshold (Lewis 1966, *passim-,* Green 1976, 179; Green 1965, 356ff). If Isis was worshipped here, then her cult apparently mingled with native religious practices perhaps with their roots deep in the pre-Roman past.

It is worthwhile briefly to examine the nature of the goddess Isis. By the later first millennium B.C. the best-known and arguably the most important members of the Egyptian pantheon were Isis, her consort Osiris and her son Horus. Osiris was transformed in Hellenistic times to a new deity, Sarapis; Horus was likewise altered by Graeco-Roman times to become Harpocrates. Isis, whose main cult-centre was at Philae in southern Egypt (MacQuitty 1976), was essentially a goddess of the family, both in Egypt itself and later in the Classical world. She represented the maternal life-force (Witt 1971) and, as such, was predominantly associated with fecundity and crop growth. Isis was Queen of Heaven and was traditionally linked with the moon; she and Harpocrates are frequently depicted wearing crescent-moon headdresses (e.g. the silvered bronze Harpocrates from London; British Museum 1964, 54). By Hellenistic times Isis was established in the cosmopolitan port of Alexandria, and her consequential association with traders and sailors was a major factor in the dissemination of her worship outside Egypt (Ferguson 1970, 24). Thus by the lst-2nd century A.D. Isis had established herself all over the Roman world. If our figurine represents Isis-Fortuna, this syncretism is reflected elsewhere in the Graeco-Roman world. For instance, a Pompeian isiac wall-painting from a latrine corridor-wall depicts Isis-Fortuna with a rudder (Witt 1971, pi. 24). Another wall-painting from a bake-house in Pompeii shows the goddess Isis-Fortuna-Luna with Fortuna's globe at her feet *{ibid., 82).* An inscription from Delos indicates

that as early as the late 2nd century B.C. Isis was identified with the Greek Tyche Protogeneia (Roman Fortuna Primigenia; *ibid.,* 86). The equation between Isis and Fortuna is a natural one; chance or luck (Fortuna) and prosperity/fertility (Isis) are readily conflated, and the twinning of functions on a depiction or inscription would have served to enhance the potency of the goddess or her image. In any case, Fortuna was originally herself a fertility deity in her own right (Ferguson 1970, 85).

The character of the remains at Thornborough which now include a cremation cemetery, two barrows and a later temple, all located adjacent to a significant river crossing with a well-made ford (Johnson 1975, 31) suggests the possibility that the whole may represent a religious complex. The question of what Isis was doing at Thornborough must remain open; she could have been lost near where she was manufactured, as suggested by the state of the figurine; the image of the goddess could have belonged to a devotee of Isis living locally; the owner could have been an itinerant trader or soldier on his way north to join the frontier garrisons. We must also remember that sophisticated and well-to-do Romano-Britons were present in this area; the contents of one of the Thornborough barrows, probably constructed in the later 2nd century A.D. (Liversidge 1954, 29-32), demonstrates this. Thus the Isis-figure could have been the cult-object of a local, romanized nobleman, familiar with the Egyptian pantheon and a worshipper of the Isis cult. The only problem there is the apparently crude nature of the image.

Finally, it is perfectly possible that the original oriental nature of the goddess had been subsumed into that of an indigenous goddess of fertility. If the figurine had any real association with the Thornborough shrine, and its native religious traditions, the last explanation is perhaps the most likely.

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