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EGYPTIAN CULTS IN MAJOR ROMAN FLEETS[1]

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The Roman fleets were one of the main gateways for diffusion of Egyptian cults into the Roman world, and both merchant and war fleets had a significant role in that diffusion. The everyday life of sailors and merchants was connected with these cults. The Egyptian goddess Isis and her Hellenistic husband Serapis had a very important role in religious practice in the Roman fleet. In various rituals brought from Egypt and spread throughout the Mediterranean world Isis was worshiped as the Mother of the Pharaoh, the Mistress of Heaven, the goddess of Eternity and of Resurrection, the Life giver and from the 3rd century BC as the Ruler of the Sea (*Pelagia*). Sailors worshiped Isis as a guardian, a protector of the ship and a guide. There beliefs can been seen in various festivals of the Egyptian and the Graeco-Roman world such as *Navigium Isidis* ("Vessel of Isis") on 5 March, or Search and Discovery (*zetesis* and *heuresis*), a festival that occupied several days from the 28 October to the 3 November. It creates a cycle of grief and joy culminating in the resurrection of Osiris at the end (*Hilaria* or *Inventio Osiridis* – "Rediscovery of Osiris"). In central and southern Europe the main centers of various Egyptian and Oriental cults were based in ports such as *Forum Iulii, Ostia, Puteoli, Misenum, Brundisium, Ravenna, Aquileia* and *Salona*.

SOURCES

One of the main intentions of my research of this diffusion is to find out how these cults expanded their beliefs. In my own opinion the most important thing is to determine the groups of citizens who were involved in it. In order to do that we must find the sources from the Ptolemaic and Roman periods such as epigraphic inscriptions, literary sources, historical writings, public and private letters and various cult findings from all over the Mediterranean World. The traces of various Egyptian beliefs were diffused all around the Mediterranean World, and today all kinds of objects that prove the existence of these cults and their believers can be found in various museums (shabtis, amulets, epigraphic inscriptions, statuettes of various gods and goddesses, cultic figures etc.).

MAJOR GROUPS AND THEIR PROFESSIONS

Based on my research conducted in the last seven years I determined groups with various ethnical backgrounds, mostly Egyptians and Orientals through whom this diffusion took place. They were citizens, slaves and freedmen of various professions (sailors, merchants, soldiers, various public officials and customs officials).

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1 Some aspects of this paper were presented at *The First International Conference for Young Egyptologists – L'acqua dell'antico Egitto: vita, rigenerazione, incantesimo, medicamento*, Italy – Chianciano Terme (Siena), October 15–18 2003.

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Fig. 1 Roman ships with sailors and soldiers onboard, c. 1st century AD, wall-painting from Iseum at Pompeii (Naples – Museo Archeologico Nazionale; photo: M. Tomorad)

SAILORS AND MERCHANTS

One of the commoniest forms of communication in the Ancient world was by river or sea. In the time of the Roman Empire half of the sailors in the Imperial fleet were recruited in Egypt and in the Hellenistic East. They travelled all over the "Old world" as soldiers and sailors on merchant ships. On almost all islands and in the sea ports on the Adriatic coast a lot of Egyptian artifacts have been found. Egyptian cults diffused from the sea ports into the mainland through the big ports *Misenum*, *Ravenna* and *Aquileia* in Italy; *Senia*, *Salona* and *Narona* on the east coast of the Adriatic.

MAJOR FLEETS OF ROMAN EMPIRE

Based on their activities we can divide the Roman Imperial navy into two parts, military fleets and merchant fleets. There were two major centers of the military fleet, during the Roman Empire, in *Misenum* and *Ravenna*, and a lot of small centers for provincial fleets.



Fig. 2 The bay of Pozzuoli (ancient Puteoli) and the cape Miseno (photo: M. Tomorad)

After the sea battle at *Actium* in 31 BC the Romans became the rulers of the Mediterranean. At the beginning of the Principate the Emperor *Augustus* built two major ports for war ships in *Misenum* and *Ravenna*.[2] Historian Chester G. Starr estimated the strength of these *classis* was 15,000 men.[3]

The *Misenum* harbor was built at the end of the northern cape of the bay of Naples between 27 and 15 BC, to guard the west coast of Italy and grain routes between Egypt, Africa, Sicily and the Italian mainland. The commercial harbors were based nearby in *Ostia* on the river Tiber, and in a few towns in the bay of Naples. The headquarters of *classis Misensis* was the military camp for sailors and soldiers based in the *Misenum*. The soldiers were permitted to get married. They all settled their families, wives and children in nearby towns like *Herculaneum*,[4] *Puteoli*,[5] *Capua*,[6] *Ostia* and *Rome*.[7] *Classis*

2 The general history of these two fleets was written by STARR 1993.

3 STARR 1989, 69.

4 Until the great eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD. *CIL* 10.1402.

5 *CIL* 10.1593, 1594, 1781, 2038, 2077, 2107, 2237, 2451, 2511, 2682, 2920, 3018, 8194.

6 *CIL* 10.3800, 3852, 3882.

7 *CIL* 6.3109, 3112, 3117, 3123, 3126, 3133, 3146.

Misensis was the biggest military squadron in the Roman Empire with an imperial flagship. It had almost 10,000 men on 50 ships, mostly *triremes* but there were also some *quadriremes*, *quinquremes* and *sextemes*.[8]

The headquarters for *classis Ravennas* was based in a lagoon on the north-west coast of the Adriatic, several kilometers from the town *Ravenna*. The harbor was built during the early Principate as the major center of maritime fleet for this region. The other major stations for *classis Ravennas* were based in *Aquileia*, a major customs center for trade with mainland provinces (*Noricum*, *Raetia* and *Pannonia*), and in *Salona*, the capital of the province of *Dalmatia*. *Classis Ravennas* was much smaller than *classis Misensis* with almost 5,000 men on *triremes*.



Fig. 3 The remains of the ancient harbor in Aquileia (photo: M. Tomorad)

The commanding officer for each fleet was a *praefectus* who was usually a well known Roman citizen. Soldiers and sailors were recruited in various provinces of the great Empire who volunteered to serve for 26 years. They were not slaves as historians in the 19th century usually wrote (e. g. Mommsen). They were free man who became veterans after their services. Most of them came from Egypt, the Hellenistic East (Syria, Greece and Cilicia) and some nearby provinces (Italy, Sardinia, Corsica, Africa, Dalmatia, Pannonia, Dacia and Moesia). Epigraphic sources usually indicate where they came from (for example *natione Aegyptus* or *Aegyptii*, *natione Dalmata*, *natione Alexandrinus* etc.)(*CIL* 10; *CIL* 11). We also find a lot of prisoners, slaves and freedman in the fleet who worked as galley-rowers. They were usually from all over the Roman Empire.

More than 30% of soldiers and sailors in *classis Misensis*[9] and 15 % in *classis Ravennas*[10] were Egyptians.[11] Native Egyptians – *laoi* usually couldn't serve in Roman military service the exception being *classis Ravennas* and *classis Misenum* who played an important role.[12] Some Egyptian sailors (*natione Alexandrinus*) from *Alexandria* tried to distinguish themselves from *laoi*[13].

Classis Alexandrina was based in *Alexandria*. It was the major merchant fleet with connections with the East and the most important grain fleet of the Roman Empire.[14] The primary function for *classis Alexandrina* was to keep Egypt loyal and to defend its land from any usurper. But its secondary function was to keep open it grain route from *Alexandria* to *Puteoli* and *Ostia*. The soldiers and sailors in Alexandrian fleets were local *laoi*, *Alexandrini* or Greeks.[15]

The major centers for merchant fleets of freighters and smaller ships in Central and South Europe were based in *Ostia*, *Aquileia*, *Salona* and the area of Naples with sailors from the Hellenistic East and Egypt. These fleets carried cargo all over the Roman Empire; they sailed from east to west and from south to north of the Empire sometimes even further.[16]

Most merchantmen and sailors raised their families in the same port where they worked or in the main center with a group of like-minded citizens. They always made connection with native inhabitants, other merchants, sailors, custom officials, Roman citizens, slaves and other soldiers. Very often sailors' wives were local women (*natione Italica* in cases of the two major fleets, *classis Ravennas* and *classis Misensis*), daughters or sisters of other sailors. But sometimes the wives had been sailors' concubines. Very rarely would a sailor find a wife from his homeland.

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8 CASSON 1991, 186.

9 *CIL* 6.3096, 3109, 3117, 3127, 3133, 3146; 10.3381, 3383, 3396, 3403, 3460, 3464a, 3469, 3470, 3481, 3482, 3489, 3514, 3515, 3516, 3520, 3523, 3532, 3540, 3566, 3567, 3568, 3579, 3583, 3589, 3614, 3615, 3643, 3653, 3638, 8374; *AE* 1929, 0146; *AE* 1979, 0167; *AE* 1988, 0316.

10 *CIL* 6.3159, 3162; 11.29, 37, 94, 116

11 The numbers are based on epigraphical sources.

12 STARR 1993, 99 fn. 37

13 *CIL* 6.3112; 10.3500, 3504, 3512, 3564, 3608, 3617, 8208; 11.37, 74; *AE* 1929, 0147; 1939, 0228; 1983, 0189; 1988, 0313.

14 About the commerce of Alexandrian fleet see: ROSTOVTZEFF 1957.

15 STARR 1993, 109-114.

16 About the commerce of the Roman Empire see: ROSTOVTZEFF 1957.

THE CULTS OF ISIS AND SERAPIS IN ROMAN FLEETS

Most often recruits and sailors brought their own beliefs to the town where their ships were based. This is not strange because the Roman Empire was very cosmopolitan with a lot of different religions and cults. The sailors in the Roman navy worshipped a lot of different cults and gods. The most popular were the sea gods Neptune or Poseidon, and the Egyptian gods Isis and Serapis. The soldiers and sailors most often believed that the sea gods could protect them on their travels from famine or tempest. The ancient writer *Aelius Aristides* once said "Serapis is mighty on the sea, and both merchantmen and warcraft are guided by him".[17]

An inscription from Memphis (from first century BC or early first century AD) gave the main reason why *Isis* was worshipped by sailors. On it she said: "... I invented fishing and seafaring.... I am the mistress of rivers, winds and sea.... I am the mistress of war. I am mistress of the thunderbolt. I calm and agitate the sea.... I am the mistress of seamanship. I make the navigable unnavigable whenever I decide."[18]

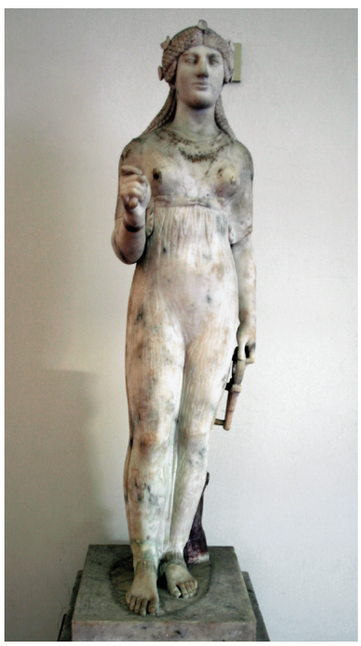


Fig. 7 Isis from Iseum at Pompeii (Naples – Museo Archeologico Nazionale; photo: M. Tomorad)

A lot of soldiers wrote letters to their folks to inform them that they were well and to thank the gods Serapis and Isis. Sadly most of them are not preserved. In one of them, a recruit in *classis Misensis*, named *Apion* wrote a letter to his father *Epimachos* in the middle of second century AD. He was in a dangerous situation at sea and he thanked the great lord Serapis for saving him.[19] Later he adopted the Latin name *Antonius Maximus*.[20]

In the bay of Naples, very near *Misenum*, lived many worshippers of Isis and Serapis. In *Pompeii* there was the great temple of Isis – *Iseum* were they celebrated *navigium Isidis* to open the sailing season.[21] Frescoes from *Herculaneum* show us what the procession looked like.[22] Not far to the north, in *Puteoli*, was another large center for Egyptian cults with a huge Egyptian population.[23] Excavations in *Puteoli* brought to sunlight the remains of the possible temple of Serapis (*Serapeum*) at the town marketplace.[24] In Lazio, Rome[25] and the nearby towns (*Portus*, *Ostia*, *Bovillae*, *Albanum*, *Aricia*, *Antium*, and *Tibur*) were also excavated and remains of temples and tombstones with dedications to Isis and Serapis and statuettes of Egyptian gods were discovered.[26] All this shows that the Egyptian gods were very popular in that region where the families of the sailors and soldiers who served in the Roman fleets lived.



Fig. 12 Serapis from the area of the bay of Naples (Naples – Museo Archeologico Nazionale; photo: M. Tomorad)

17 AELIUS ARISTIDES, 45, 23.

18 *IG* XII supp. 14; BEARD – NORTH – PRICE 1998, vol. II, 12, 4a.

19 *Select Papyri-Private affairs*, vol. I, 112; *Leben im ägyptischen Altertum*, P 7950, 62.

20 *Select Papyri*, vol. I, 112, 305-307.

21 Frescoes and statuettes from *Iseum* are today in Museo Archaeologico Nazionale – Naples.

22 Today in Museo Archaeologico Nazionale – Naples.

23 *CIL* 10.1593, 1594, 1781, 2038, 2077, 2107, 2237, 2451, 2511, 2682, 2920, 3018, 8194.

24 KATER-SIBBIS 1973, 519-523, 95, 96.

25 *Idem* 1973, 621-736, 115-134.

26 *Idem* 1973, 537-572, 99-106.



Fig. 6 The remains of Iseum at Pompeii (Naples – Museo Archeologico Nazionale; photo: M. Tomorad)

The inscriptions on the tombstones from the bay of Naples gave us a picture of their beliefs. Serapis was worshipped by the members of families as *conservator* or "keeper" ("watcher") of sailors and soldiers.[27] Isis was usually called *Regina* or "invincible queen" or *Augusta*[28] and shown with *sistrum* in her hand.[29]

The great temples of Serapis and Isis in the commercial harbor in *Ostia* proved that this Mediterranean town was one of the major centers of the Egyptian cults where Serapis was worshipped as *Iupiter Serapis*. Busts, statuettes and oil lamps with the cultic images of Serapis were also found in *Ostia* and *Puteoli*.[30] The Egyptian gods Serapis and Isis were usually worshipped with some other Oriental and Roman gods such as Silvanus, Mithras, Lari and Penati and Magna Mater.[31] Excavated tombstones show us that the sailors worshipped other Egyptian gods as well as Anubis, Horus or Harpocrates and Apis bull.[32]

Usually we can't prove the religious affiliation of the sailors and members of their families but we can make a hypothesis about it based on their theophoric names. Most of the inscriptions with these theophoric names were found in *Ostia* and *Misenum*. The most frequent were: *Serapa*[33], *Serapion*[34], *Serapias*[35], *Serapia*[36] and *Isiodorus*[37]. I will give you a few examples. We knew that one of the leaders of the squadron in *classis Misensis* was called *Isiodorus*.[38] In *Misenum* lived *Julia Serapias*, the daughter of a sailor.[39] The Egyptian woman *Tesneus Serapias* was the wife of a sailor in *classis Misensis*. She had a son *Serapion*.[40]

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27 *CIL* 10.571

28 *CIL* 10.572, 574, 351, 344, 345, 346, 347, 348, 350.

29 Excellent example are the statuettes from Pompei in Museo Archaeologico Nazionale – Naples.

30 KATER-SIBBIS 1973, 543-565, 101-104.

31 *CIL* 14.20, 123, 429. More about Oriental cults in *Ostia* see SQUARCIAPINO 1962.

32 SQUARCIAPINO 1962, 31-36.

33 *Serapa* from *Pompeii* – *CIL* 10. n. 886.

34 *Serapion* from *Puteoli* – *CIL* 10. n. 2237; *Serapion* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3574; *AE* 1910, 0036; *AE* 1929, 0146.

35 *Serapias* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3596; *Tesneus Serapias* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3638.

36 *Serapia* from *Puteoli* – *CIL* 10.2511.

37 *Isiodor* from *Pompeii* – *CIL* 10.469; *Isiodorus* from *Puteoli* – *CIL* 10.2077; *Valeria Isiodora* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3444; *Antistio Isidor* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3460; *Arrius Isiodorus* – *CIL* 10.3608; *Isiodorus* from *Ravenna* – *CIL* 11.327; *Isiodorus* from unknown site in Egypt – *AE* 1896, 0021.

38 *Isiodorus navarchus* from *Misenum* – *CIL* 10.3352.

39 *CIL* 10.3596.

40 *CIL* 10.3638.

FESTIVALS

The liturgical year in the cult of Isis and Osiris was connected with the sailing season. It usually started in May and finished in September but sometimes some skippers began to sail in early March and continue to sail up to the beginning of November.

The sailors celebrated the opening of the sailing season on 5 March with the *Navigium Isidis* which was beautifully described by the ancient writer *Apuleius*[41]. The "Vessel of Isis" has its roots in Ancient Egyptian mythology where Isis set off over the waves in search for her murdered husband Osiris. During the ceremony the sailors symbolically opened the sailing season by launching the "Vessel of Isis" into the sea.[42] Starr mentioned[43] that the Misene sailors also had a special celebration of the *Navigium Isidis*. In *Puteoli* several boat-shaped lamps with Isis in the middle were found, which were used in the ceremony of the *Navigium Isidis* which all go to prove our theory.

EGYPTIAN NAMES OF SHIPS IN ROMAN FLEETS

The sailors in the Roman times recorded the names of their ships on their tombstones, and up to now we know more than 80 names of ships[44] and most of them were part of *classis Misensis* and *classis Ravennas*. One of the most common practices was to give the names of mythological figures or some god to a ship because they believed that the same god could protect the ship and its cargo from danger. Some ships in *classis Misensis* had names connected to Egypt and their gods. The names were not inscribed on the hull as today, instead a relief of a god was carved on the bows.[45] Several inscriptions from the Misenum survived with the exact names of the triremes, as *Nilo*,[46] *Iside*[47] and *Iove et Serapion*. One of the ships in the fleet of Athens bore the name of the Egyptian god *Ammon*.[48] We know the names of a few boats used on the river of Nile; one boat of the Nile fleet was called *Serapis*[49] and one type of cargo boat was called *Isairon*. We also know the name of the merchant boat *Isopharia* ("Isis of Pharos").



Fig. 15 Merchant ship Isis Giminiana. Restored fresco of a funeral monument from Ostia (Rome – Musei Vaticani)

One of the large grain ships used on the route between *Alexandria* and Italy was called *Isis*. It was built in the second century AD. It looked like a big Roman merchantman and it was equipped as a superfighter. It was described by the ancient writer Lucian who saw it in Athens and gave its basic dimensions.[50] On one wall painting in *Ostia* a small freighter called *Isis Giminiana* that was used for transporting grain in the second or third century AD is shown. That painting is now kept in the Vatican Museums.

41 APULEIUS, *Metamorphoses*, XI, 8, 17. More about him and reflections of his work see MILLAR 1981.

42 More about the festival and it customs see: WITT 1971, 165-184; TURCAN 1996, 114, 115.

43 STARR 1993, 87, 88.

44 About the history of giving the names to the ships see: CASSON 1971, 348-360.

45 CASSON 1991, 190.

46 *CIL* 6.3578.

47 *CIL* 6.3615, 3618, 3640.

48 *P. Oxy.*, 2415.24, 2415.34, 2415.84.

49 *IG* XII, 8584.

50 About its dimensions see: CASSON 1971, 186-189; CASSON 1994, 158, 159.

SOME EXAMPLES OF THE ROLE OF LOCAL INHABITANTS FROM ILLYRICUM IN THE DIFFUSION OF EGYPTIAN CULTS

A large number of ships sailed along both coasts of the Adriatic with Egyptian sailors on board. One of the ancient sources proving this was written by *Plutarchus* at the end of the first century AD. He wrote about *Tammuz*, a steersman of the ship of the Emperor Tiberius, who sailed along the west coast of the Adriatic.

Several inscriptions with the name *Hermodorus* were found all over the Roman Empire. *Lucius Cassius Hermodorus*[51] was a well known Egyptian ship owner and a mariner who sailed between the two coasts of the Adriatic[52] and some other parts of the Mediterranean. He was a member of *collegio Serapis Salonitanum*.[53] Another *Hermodorus* was connected with the maritime tradition of *Alexandria* in Egypt.[54]

Commercial trade was very intensive all over the Mediterranean world and far north to the borders of the Roman Empire in *Britannia* and on the rivers Rhine and Danube. Merchants were very movable and they brought with them new ideas and religious beliefs throughout the Roman Empire. Most of them were originally from Egypt and the East (like *Pacatus* who lived in *Mursa*[55]). In the places where they raised their families they often formed, with other members who shared the same beliefs, religious *collegium* of Egyptian deities, usually Isis and Serapis. In *Savaria* in Pannonia there is a evidence of a merchant called *Barbarus* from *Aquileia*[56] who had the title of *pontifex* in the cult of Isis.[57]

Around 28 % of the sailors in *classis Misensis* and 43 % of the sailors in *classis Ravennas* came from Southeastern Europe[58] and with the sailors from Egypt and the Hellenistic East they made up more than 60 % of the entire number of the sailors in these two fleets.[59] In the Misene fleet inhabitants from Dalmatia, Pannonia and Egypt usually served in the same units.[60]



Fig. 16 Bronze statuette of Isis-Fortuna from Lika (Zagreb - Archaeological Museum. Inv. no. A-4633; photo: M. Tomorad)

51 Late 1st or early 2nd century AD.

52 Inscription with his name was founded in Pescara (Roman *Aternum*) on a tombstone (*CIL* 9.3337). CAMBI 1971, 106; SELEM 1972, 14, 15, 86; SELEM 1997, 2.2, 62-64.

53 *CIL* 9.3337:
L. Cassio Hermo/doro nauclero / qui erat in colleg(io)/Serapis Salon(itano). Per [5]*/ freta, per maria tra/iectus saepe per und(as)/ qui non debuerat / obitus remanere / in Atern(o), set mecum* [10]*/ coniunx si vivere /nolueras, at Styga /perpetua val rate / generae utinam / tecu(m) comitata* [15]*/ fuisse(m). Ulipa Candi/da domu Salon(itana) con(iugi)/b(ene) m(erenti) p(osuit).*

Pescara was surely one of the cult centers of Egyptian gods on the west coast of the Adriatic. Another inscriptions *Atern(i?) qui fuit in coll(egio) Isi(is)* from one tombstone can proved that; *v. CIL* 9.3338. On both tombstones was carved a merchant boat.

54 SELEM 1972, 86.

55 PINTEROVIĆ 1958, 31.

56 I can presume from his name that he was Romanized native.

57 LENGYEL – RADAN 1980, 187.

58 The numbers are based on epigraphical sources.

59 Some Egyptians, Dalmatians and Pannonias in Misene fleet: *CIL* 6.3096, 3108-3109, 3112, 3117, 3123, 3126-3127, 3133, 3146; *CIL* 10.3375, 3381, 3383, 3396, 3403, 3460, 3464a, 3465, 3469-3470, 3475, 3481-3482, 3486, 3489, 3500, 3504, 3512, 3514-3516, 3520, 3523, 3532, 3534-3535, 3540, 3545, 3564, 3566, 3568-3570, 3574, 3578-3579, 3583, 3589, 3596, 3607-3608, 3614-3615, 3617-3618, 3628, 3635, 3638-3640, 3642, 3666, 3882, 7535, 8208, 8374; Some Egyptians, Dalmatians and Pannonias in Ravenna fleet: *CIL* 6.3159, 3162; *CIL* 11.29, 37, 39, 53-54, 68-69, 71-72, 74, 76, 85, 89-90, 94, 97-98, 100, 104, 108, 116, 118.

60 *CIL* 6.3126, 3127, 3133. *Ploti Celeris* (*natione Dalmata*) served with *Ploti Maximus* and *Svlpici Artemidori* (*natione Aegyptus*). *CIL* 10.3615, 3618, 3640. *Petroni Celeris* (*natione Alexandrinus*), *Bato Scenorarbi* (*natione Dalmata*) and *Tiberio Marco* (*natione Musiaticis*) all served on on the trireme who wore the name of the Egyptian goddess Isis.

We know very little about the private lives of the sailors. Based on some epigraphic inscriptions, literary sources and private letters from other regions of the Roman Empire we may presume that they could have diffused the Egyptian cults into Central and Southeastern regions of Europe during or after their military service.

CONCLUSION

My study shows that Egyptian cults played an important role in the religious life of the Roman military and merchant fleets especially among the soldiers, sailors, and merchants. All previously mentioned connections among the sailors, soldiers and merchants in these fleets showed the way in which the Egyptian cults were diffused into the Roman world. At the same time the inhabitants of Southeastern Europe, through connections with Egyptian sailors, could easily diffuse the Egyptian cults into Illyricum.

EGIPATSKI KULTOVI U RIMSKOJ FLOTI MIZENA I RAVENE

SAŽETAK

U ovom kratkom radu autor je na osnovi epigrafskih i literarnih izvora prikazao prisutnost egipatskog kulta u rimskoj floti. Na kraju rada autor je također pokušao dati kratki osvrt na udio stanovništva Ilirika u širenju egipatskih kultova.

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