

**PRIESTS CARRYING ‘OSIRIS-CANOPUS/HYDREIOS’:
FROM ALEXANDRIA TO THE IMPERIAL ISEA OUTSIDE EGYPT
PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS**

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Abstract

The Arcos Museum in Benevento holds a collection of about fifty stone artefacts related to a temple of Isis, erected by Marcus Rutilius Lupus on the occasion of Domitian's victorious return from the Dacian wars, in the eighth year of his reign. Among the finds of particular interest are two almost life-size statues of priests holding a canopic deity or Hydreios, dated by Müller (1969) to the Hadrianic period. Subsequent literature has followed Müller's chronology for these sculptures and has placed similar statues between the mid- 1st and the beginning of the 2nd century AD, without dwelling on the (sometimes) profound differences, especially stylistic, between the various specimens. In order to provide new insights on the subject, the article will present some concise observations on canopic deities, and then make a comparative analysis of the few stone sculptures of 'priests with Hydreios' known so far.

PREMISE

I am very pleased and honoured to dedicate these pages to a dear friend and scholar whose contribution to Egyptology spanned so many areas, always with great insight and a very personal touch. I hope that these considerations, albeit preliminary, on such a special category of statues may be of some interest to her.

The Arcos Museum in Benevento holds a collection of around fifty stone artefacts pertaining to a temple of Isis erected by M. Rutilius Lupus on the occasion of Domitian's victorious return from the Dacian Wars, in the eighth year of his reign, as the texts of two obelisks in the name of the emperor state. The temple must have been rather monumental if we consider the quantity, nature, and quality of the artefacts, including also: statues representing 'pharaohs', in both human and sphinx form; two anthropomorphic deities, four priests,

several zoomorphic gods, a *cista mystica*, and a few epigraphs.¹

Among the finds of particular interest are two almost life-size statues of priests holding a canopic deity,² which were dated by Müller to the Hadrianic period.³

Subsequent literature has aligned itself with Müller's chronology for these sculptures and has placed three other similar statues between the mid-1st⁴ and early 2nd century AD,⁵ without, however, dwelling on the, sometimes, profound stylistic differences between the various specimens and without addressing the question of the contexts in which these sculptures were produced and employed.

The need for brevity does not allow me to address all the issues here, so I will limit myself to presenting the entire group of statues, and comparing the different specimens with each other,⁶

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¹ MÜLLER 1971; and lastly PIRELLI 2023, 311-30.

² Although Osiris is the one most frequently represented in this form, other deities could also manifest themselves as canopic deities, as shown, for instance, by the figures in relief on the *columnae coelatae* in the Capitoline Museums: ENSOLI VITTOZZI 1990, 59-70.

³ MÜLLER 1971, cat. no. 284 (1922), 88-91; 288 (inv. no. 1926), 98.

⁴ The date attributed by Müller himself to a similar one in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (*ibid.*, 90).

⁵ WILD 1981, 115; DUNAND 2008, 160-2; GAVINI 2014, 33; BÜLOW CLAUSEN 2015, 262.

⁶ For the same reason of brevity, it is not possible to include the entries for the statues with the detailed descriptions from which the present observations derive; these, together with more general considerations on the role and significance of such

while also considering a newly identified type of canopus, which I suggest placing chronologically between type A and type B. Finally, I also will provide some external data, including a few short notes on their contexts of origin, useful at least for a more concrete discussion of their chronological placement.

The analysis of the statues will be preceded by a brief presentation of the peculiar divine hypostases known as ‘canopic deities’.

OSIRIS HYDREIOS: A SYNTHESIS

The form of Osiris Hydreios⁷ appears to be a creation no earlier than the late 1st century BC/early 1st century AD,⁸ and is documented by a considerable number of specimens (more than 200) in various forms:⁹ stone sculptures, images on coins and other objects; small bronzes or clay figures depicting priests holding a canopic jar in their veiled hands; and a group of five almost life-size sculptures depicting the same type of priests, forming the subject of this article.

Weber had already established an initial classification of the ‘canopic jars’ in 1911,¹⁰ distinguishing: a type A, characterised by a surface decorated in bas-relief with divine figures and elements related to the funerary world; from a type B whose

surface is covered with a *wsh* necklace¹¹ surmounting a solar disc with uraei, and with a draped cloth attached to either side of the vessel’s shoulder. A third type, B’, whose surface is decorated with spiral grooves covering the entire surface of the vessel, was later identified by Wild, who considers it a variant developed from type B.¹²

Most of the Osiris-Hydreios images belong to type A, the oldest of the three, followed by the other two, which, to the best of our knowledge, are not attested on coins before the eleventh year of Trajan (109 AD).¹³ The contexts of provenance are mostly cult places dedicated to Isis and/or Serapis, or alternatively related to the funerary sphere, in no case predating the late Hellenistic period.

A fourth type (A’) has just been identified by the writer, through a close analysis recently carried out on the canopus of a statue of a priest from Karales;¹⁴ on the basis of its characteristics, I think it may be an intermediate model between type A and type B: the acephalous canopus is decorated with a *wsh* necklace with rounded ends and a sun disc whose wings embrace the body of the vessel; in my opinion, the drapery of type B could be an evolution of this element.

type of statues in an Isiac temple, will be published in a fuller contribution by the writer in a forthcoming article. For each of the samples, however, basic technical data are provided in ns 15-8.

⁷ WILD 1981, 102, following the terminology indicated by GRIFFITHS 1975, 227-32, prefers to avoid the expression Osiris Canopus, and uses instead Osiris-Hydreios or Osiris in Hydria. In these pages, the term ‘canopus’ will mainly be used to refer to the ‘container’, while Hydreios will be used in relation to the divine entity evoked by the vase.

⁸ WILD 1981, 115.

⁹ For an almost complete list of materials referable to images of Osiris Hydreios, see WEBER 1911, 29-48 and WILD 1981, 113-20; a list to which must be added the statue of a priest with Hydreios found in the waters of Antirrhodos in the late 1990s (DUNAND 1998, 189-94).

¹⁰ WEBER 1911, 32.

¹¹ Although without defining it a *wsh*, WEBER (1911, 32) correctly identifies the represented object with a necklace “Auf der Vorderseite hängt ein grosses Perlen- oder Kugelcollier herab”; while MÜLLER 1971, 90 describes it as “un oggetto in forma di scala a pioli che con le due liste laterali allungate verso l’alto era collegato al collo della testa umana.” WILD 1981, 120 defines it as a ‘U-neck garment’. However, that it is a ‘modern’ and stylised version of the *wsh* necklace is demonstrated, for example, by a scene, accompanied by its caption, depicting Nectanebo I offering the *wsh* necklace to Osiris, engraved on one of the screen walls of his kiosk in Philae (for the image, see LOMBARDI 2013, fig. 19). The appearance of this necklace is, in my opinion, at an intermediate stage between the traditional form of the Pharaonic era and that of later periods.

¹² WILD 1981, 120-1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ A general survey carried out in Cagliari (28 March-2 April 2024) was aimed at personally documenting the Isiac materials from ancient Karales, only partially published (cf. Gavini 2014 and bibliography). I would like to thank the *Soprintendenza Archeologia, belle arti e paesaggio per la città metropolitana di Cagliari e le province di Oristano e Sud Sardegna*, and the *Direzione Generale Musei - Musei Nazionali di Cagliari* for the authorisations granted to me; I am also grateful to the staff of the Superintendente Depots, the *Corte dei Conti di Cagliari* and the Associazione Sant’Eulalia for their generous availability and support during my work; and to Donatella Mureddu, formerly in charge of excavations in the archaeological area of Sant’Eulalia, for her interest and the information given to me.

THE MATERIALS

The group of statues I am about to illustrate includes: the two statues from Benevento (Figs 1-2),¹⁵ a fragmentary specimen now in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria (Fig. 3),¹⁶ an almost complete specimen (with only the feet missing) from underwater excavations off the coast of Alexandria, near the islet of Antirhodos, now in the National Museum of Alexandria (Fig. 4),¹⁷ and another fragmentary specimen, held in the Museo del Tesoro di Sant'Eulalia in Cagliari (Fig. 5).¹⁸

Despite their different conditions of preservation, the five specimens clearly refer to the same type of iconography, which portrays a priest wrapped in a large cloak, the faps of which are held by the hands resting on his waist/chest; the hands, also cloaked, hold a canopic deity, who is not centred in relation to the human figure, but shifted to the left; the vase sometimes rests on a cushion/wreath, which reproduces in a highly stylised form the garlands of roses associated with the Isiac cult.¹⁹ All priests are presented as striding figures with the left leg advanced.

Beyond these common elements, a closer look reveals certain differences – in some cases not at all negligible – both between individual specimens and between groups of them.

The Alexandrian statues share a great naturalness of movement, softness of drapery and a similar surface treatment,²⁰ and both of them lack the back pillar. In their regard, Paolo Gallo argued that, given their stylistic similarities and comparable sizes, "... les deux oeuvres sortent du même atelier de sculpteur..." and that "elles forment un couple (comme celles découvertes à Bénévent¹⁵) sculpté pour prendre place symétriquement dans un bâtiment sacré".²¹ Some differences should however be remarked: the cloak of the statue in the Greco-Roman Museum is broader and not symmetrically arranged around the figure (on the

right side, being less adherent to the priest's body); moreover, the fall of the cloak immediately under the hands does not show the thickening of the fabric that can be observed in the National Museum specimen; finally, the (missing) canopic jar rested on a cushion/wreath that is absent under the vase of the Antirhodos statue (see Figs 3 and 4).

The two Benevento statues are also very similar to each other, perhaps even more so (see Figs 1 and 2); some features however suggest that they were not made by the same sculptor and that one of the two was the model for the other: the priest inv. no. 1926 is slightly smaller, its base is asymmetrical, and some of the details of the clothing and of the back pillar differ, as do the cushions/wreaths on which the two vases rest, and the heads of the deities depicted must have been different (one with a beard, the other without). The intervention of two different hands is also evidenced by the modelling of the bodies and the drapery of the cloaks, which, in the smaller specimen (inv. no. 1926), appear in some places as lacking plasticity and definition, whereas in the larger one the drapery is much more rigid and sharp-edged.

If we move now to a comparison of the Samnite statues with the one from Karales, although this latter is very poorly preserved and its quality looks more modest (see Fig. 5), we cannot fail to notice for all three sculptures a certain standardisation and stiffening of forms compared to those in Alexandria: for instance, the arms are rigidly arranged in an almost straight plane at the height of the priest's waist, drawing a clear separation between the torso and the lower part of the body, whereas the position of the arms of the Alexandrian statues appears more natural, with the elbows lower than the hands and the jar supported almost at the height of the priest's face. The different position of the canopus also entails another significant difference: judging by the statue in the National

¹⁵ Held in the Arcos Museum in Benevento: inv. no. 1922, diorite, acephalous, some slight scratches, h 139 cm; w 50 cm, back pillar with square top; inv. no. 1926, diorite, acephalous, some slight scratches, h 133 cm; w 45 cm; back pillar with bevelled top.

¹⁶ Inv. no. 4309. BÜLOW CLAUSEN corrects (2015, 260, n. 236) the inventory number given by MÜLLER (inv. no. 20274): granite, missing head, 'canopus' and legs; surfaces extensively corroded; lower right side badly damaged, h pres. 89 cm; w 46 cm.

¹⁷ Inv. no. SCA 449: grano-diorite, surfaces extensively corroded, with irregularities especially on the upper right side of the head of the man and god: h 133 cm; w 46 cm.

¹⁸ Inv. no. 18004 (probably to be corrected as 18064): granite, only the torso is preserved; widely corroded surfaces, h cons. 67.5 cm; w cons. 40.5 cm (originally 43 cm?).

¹⁹ WILD 1981, 113, 121; MALAISE 1972, 126. Such garlands sometimes also characterise images of the goddess: cf., e.g., the statue of Isis-Tyche from the Praetorium of Gortyna (DUNAND 1973, 205, pl. 26).

²⁰ Also considering that the statue of Antirhodos spent a long time underwater.

²¹ GALLO 2002, 21-4.



Fig. 1 - Priest from Benevento – inv. no. 1922 (Photo Trotta – Courtesy of the Museo del Sannio, Provincia di Benevento).



Fig. 2 - Priest from Benevento – inv. no. 1926 (Photo Trotta – Courtesy of the Museo del Sannio, Provincia di Benevento).



Fig. 3 - Priest from Alexandria (Greco-Roman Museum) – inv. no. 4309 (According to GALLO 2002, processed by Trotta).

Museum, we should suppose that both the heads of the Alexandrian priests were turned to the right, with the left cheek resting against the vase, which was held higher than that of the Italian statues; these latter instead appear to turn their head (now missing) towards the vase. While the two canopic jars of the Benevento statues belong with certainty to Weber's type B, the identification of the canopus of the Alexandrian statue in the National Museum raises some uncertainties, although now, comparing it with the jar of the Karales statue, I think it might be attributed to type A'.²² Finally, unlike the statues of Alexandria, the statues of Benevento and Cagliari rest on a back pillar,²³ but this one differs from the Egyptian tradition by being slightly tapered as it rises and follows the progression of the advanced leg. The movement of

the leg also causes an asymmetrical arrangement of the hips in the back of the figure, the supporting hip being higher than the other one. Although, also in Egypt, attention to these anatomical details recurs in Hellenistic and Roman statuary, Egyptian-style statues with back pillar do not seem to present this feature.²⁴

A few more elements must be considered when comparing the three Italian statues: the Karales statue and the larger one from Benevento share the rendering of the clavicles and a tunic beneath the cloak, which are absent in the smaller Benevento specimen; while the garlands on which the vase rests are different in the three cases: smooth in the smaller Benevento statue; double-ringed and with punctiform incisions in the larger one; with spikes in the Karales statue. Finally, this latter sculpture

²² Recently, during a study visit to Alexandria (December 2023), I had the opportunity to take a close look at the canopus of Antirrhodos and was able to detect on the vase the presence of only a circular element, with no other figures in relief, the surface however being highly corroded.

²³ Such a feature, absent from the Alexandrian statues, could be explained with the desire to emphasise the link with an original Egyptian model, not so much with reference to the statues of priests with canopic jars, but to statuary of Egyptian tradition 'tout court'.

²⁴ It is rare to be able to observe these details because most of the statues are displayed with their backs against the walls, but see, e.g., a colossal statue of Ptolemy II in Rome, Museo Greg. Egidio (n. 27), and the colossal statue of Augustus in the Egyptian Museum of Tahrir.



Fig. 4 - Priest from Alexandria (National Museum) – inv. no. SCA 449 (According to DUNAND 2006, processed by Trotta).

shows a different surface treatment and a more rigid arrangement of the drapery.

The Sardinian priest has been dated, by analogy with the Samnite ones, to the Hadrianic age,²⁵ but – also considering the newly identified type of vase – I think a few further considerations will be useful in this regard.

The statue comes from the Marina district near Sant’Eulalia, where the presence of an Iseum is hypothesised, to which a series of black marble columns, found in fragments in the area, also seem to belong. Furthermore, from an area delimited between the church of Sant’Eulalia itself, the amphitheatre, the cathedral and the church of San Mauro come four pink granite sphinxes,²⁶ a fragmentary ‘canopus’ of type A in grey granite, and a double crown with a Latin inscription (from the Flavian period, after AD 69) in green steatite, probably pertaining to the head of a falcon. Finally, from the *sinus calaritanus* come two lead anchor logs bearing the name of the goddess in relief.²⁷

We cannot say much more about the temple and its dating, nor can we be sure that these finds, scattered over an area of about 0.3 km², all belonged to the same cult place. On the other hand, it would be rash to suppose that two temples dedicated to the same deity, and a ‘foreign’ one at that, could be located in a relatively limited area.

DISCUSSION

On the basis of the reported observations, one cannot but note a considerable variability between the five specimens analysed, whose reasons cannot be addressed here;²⁸ however, there is no doubt that a clear distinction can be drawn between the Alexandrian statues and the Italian specimens: the stylistic characteristics and the lack of the back pillar of the two Alexandrian statues make them appear firmly rooted in the mixed-art tradition of Greco-Roman Egypt, and (slightly?) older than the Italian ones, for which, however, they were evidently the model. On the other hand, I believe that the Benevento and Karales statues were made in Italy,²⁹ both because of their modelling and the type of their back pillars and because of the anatomical details that we have observed above and that are shared by other examples of Egyptianising statues from Italy.³⁰ Considering their similarities, I also think that the three Italian statues are chron-

²⁵ GAVINI 2014, 33.

²⁶ A fragmentary fifth sphinx, heavily integrated in modern times, was seen by the writer during the recent survey in Cagliari, its provenance being unknown.

²⁷ In other areas of the city, a few other Egyptianising materials have also been found, including a colossal statue of the goddess Isis, now dispersed, and a series of sculptures of more uncertain Isiac attribution. For a concise report on the Isiac materials from Cagliari, see GAVINI 2014, 21-37.

²⁸ See above, n. 6.

²⁹ Contrary to what was suggested by MÜLLER, who considered them as the production of an Alexandrian workshop (1971, 90). On the production of Egyptianizing sculptures in Italy, see also ROULLET 1972, 19.

³⁰ Cf. two other anthropomorphic statues from Benevento (see below n. 31) and most of the statues from the Hadrian’s villa at Tivoli.



Fig. 5 - Priest from Karales – inv. no. 18004 (Photo Pirelli processed by Trotta – Courtesy of the Ministero della Cultura – Musei Nazionali di Cagliari).

ologically quite close to each other, and, given their provenance, do not predate the Flavian dynasty, but there are no concrete reasons to attribute them to Hadrian's time.

In a recent article on the Samnite Iseum, I have already posed the question of the dating of the two statues of priests with canopic jars,³¹ on that occasion comparing them above all in size and materials with the Domitian statue and the supposed statue of Anubis, from the same cultic context.³² Although these latter are more clearly based on the original Egyptian tradition, the anatomical details and the distinctive feature of the back pillar make the four statues appear a rather homogeneous group,³³ while the absence of the heads, except in the case of the Domitian statue, does not allow us to add any more concrete elements to the comparison.

Indeed, it is even not easy to find other fixed points: there are no inscriptions or names that can direct us, and the examples of Egyptianising statues from Italy, suitable for comparison on a stylistic ground with our works, are very few, essentially limited to some anthropomorphic sculptures from Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli,³⁴ most of them pertaining to the same chronology attributed by Müller to the Benevento priests.

Even to a preliminary observation, however, the Tivoli statues appear decidedly more rigid, both in the modelling of the body and especially of the drapery and in their attitude, as well as in the form (rectangular and perpendicular) and dimensions (broader) of the back pillars; and they are made of materials and with a surface treatment³⁵ that differ considerably from the Samnite statues.

³¹ PIRELLI 2023, 316.

³² MÜLLER 1971, respectively: cat. 281 (inv. no. 1919); cat. 260 (inv. no. 1903).

³³ Although I also expressed a doubt as to whether the two statues of priests are actually 'twins', due to their remarkable differences, and suggested the hypothesis that one of them could be a (later) copy of the other (PIRELLI 2023, n. 32).

³⁴ And some few other smaller specimens from different places in Rome. For an exhaustive catalogue of these statues, see ROULLET 1972.

³⁵ In this regard, however, we must remember that most of the statues from Tivoli have been substantially integrated and treated in modern times; one must therefore be very careful when dealing with them.

I would therefore raise some doubts about the contemporaneity of the two groups of sculptures.

Given these difficulties, and in order to add some more useful information, we can try to introduce some historical and archaeological data external to the sculptures into the discussion.

We should, for instance, consider that, from the very beginning, the Flavians had established and sought to propagate close ties with Egypt,³⁶ which also resulted in monumental works dedicated to Egyptian deities not only in Egypt³⁷ but also in numerous sites in the empire,³⁸ and we must not forget that most of the materials from the Benevento Iseum are dated to Domitian, and that the materials from Karales point to a possible Flavian chronology of the local Iseum.

Add to this the fact that the great proliferation of the figure of Osiris Hydreios began in the time of Vespasian and Domitian especially on coinage,³⁹ and that a large specimen of a stone ‘canopus’ comes from Domitian’s residence at Monte Circeo.⁴⁰

These are only indirect clues, and it is clear that the statues from Benevento will have to be included in the broader discourse of the reconstruction of the archaeological context of the Samnite Iseum, which will also entail a thorough analysis of the rest of the relevant materials, and that an equally thorough investigation is needed for the materials from Karales.⁴¹ However, even at the preliminary stage of these considerations, I would not dismiss the hypothesis that the presence of priests with canopic jars in Italy could be linked in the first instance to the Flavians and to this important phase of dialogue between Egypt and the centre of the empire.

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³⁶ See for all CAPRIOTTI VITTOZZI 2014, 237-59, and, more recently, BRICAULT, GASPARINI 2018, 121-36. On the political and economic aspects underpinning the Flavian dynasty’s ties with Egypt, see also the comprehensive synthesis by HÖLBL 2000, 29-36 (also in relation to the phases immediately preceding, during the reign of Nero), and BELLUCCI, LONGO 2020.

³⁷ For an extensive survey of imperial monuments in Egypt, see HÖLBL 2000, *id.* 2004, *id.* 2005.

³⁸ As for Flavian-era Isea in the empire, see ARSLAN *et al.* 1997, and, for recent acquisitions: Isea of Sybaris (GRECO, GASPARINI 2014), and Carthago Nova (NOGUERA CELDRAN *et al.* 2019).

³⁹ WILD 1981, cap. 6, n. 89.

⁴⁰ ROULLET 1972, 97, cat. no. 144a. A canopus was also found in fragments during the excavations of the Iseum in Pompeii: PAH I, 172.

⁴¹ During my recent visit to Cagliari, I was able to collect various data on the Isiac materials of ancient Karales, which will be the subject of a forthcoming study.

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