



Restoration of the Temple of Isis at Pompeii (CIL X, 846)

Dedication of the Temple of Isis



[1]

Building inscription honouring Numerius Popidius Celsinus for rebuilding the Temple of Isis at Pompeii, through private benefaction, following an earthquake in 62 BCE.

Typology (Honorific / Funerary / etc.): Dedication.

Original Location/Place: Above the entrance to the Temple of Isis complex, Pompeii.

Actual Location (Collection/Museum): Naples Archaeological Museum (inventory no. 3765).

Date: 62 CE to 79 CE

Physical Characteristics:

Inscribed marble plaque set above the entrance to the Temple of Isis complex at Pompeii. The inscription was discovered in 1766, in 37 fragments.

Material: Marble

Language: Latin

Category: Roman

Publications: *CIL X, 846 (ILS 6367)*

Commentary: This inscription records and honours the rebuilding of the Temple of Isis in Pompeii, following the severe damage it sustained during the earthquake of 62 CE. The archaeological evidence at Pompeii indicates that a variety of foreign influences were incorporated into the religious life of Pompeii from the relatively early date of the end of the second century BCE (Cooley, *Pompeii and Herculaneum*, p. 117). As well as temples dedicated to gods of the Roman state, such as Jupiter and Venus, whose public temples were built in the area around and near to the Forum, sanctuaries and shrines to Greek and Egyptian deities were also prevalent. The Temple of Isis is the best preserved of all the temple complexes and shrines at Pompeii; the sanctuary itself survived in good condition with even the remains of sacrificial offerings – ash and small fragments of bone – identified on its main altar when excavated in 1765, indicating that it had been in use right up to the day of Vesuvius' eruption (Berry, *The Complete Pompeii*, p. 204). Unlike many of the religious buildings and household shrines, which received little restoration work following the earthquake of 62 CE, the rebuilding of the Temple of Isis had been prioritised and completed long before the eruption of Vesuvius seventeen years later.

Public benefaction, or euergetism, was not unusual in Roman urban centres; the donation of private funds to support public buildings or the giving of games was a way of demonstrating civic responsibility and was used by prominent citizens as a way of ensuring their position and status amongst the local elite. However, in the case of this inscription, the donation is not straightforward, and has been given by a Numerius Popidius Celsinus, whose age is given as just six years old. In reward for his generosity, the *ordo decurionum* – town council – has given him membership, even in spite of his extremely young age. This is clearly unusual; as Willem Jongman has stated, membership to these councils was, in principal, open only to former city magistrates who were elected into the council only once their tenure in office was complete (Jongman, "The Loss of Innocence", p. 511). Even if extraordinarily wealthy, membership in the *ordo* should not have been possible for a child. The matter becomes clearer when the identity of the father is considered, however. The discovery of other inscriptions (*CIL X, 847, 848 and 921*) has shown that Celsinus' father was Numerius Popidius Ampliatus, a *libertus* from the wealthy Popidii family who had served the town as a *minister*, or local neighbourhood official, possibly with some connection to the imperial cult (Castrén, *Ordo populusque*, p. 207-8). As a former slave, Numerius Popidius Ampliatus was not



eligible for any kind of public magistracy, but the freeborn status of his son Celsinus – which is indicated from the proper filiation of his name – meant that he was. The father therefore invested his own ambitions in the future of his son; by supporting the restoration of the temple, Celsinus was prematurely promoted and able to enter the *ordo* through the process of *adlectio* (promotion to higher office), which negated the necessary tenure of a previous office (Jongman, “The Loss of Innocence”, p. 511). Although a Roman citizen through manumission, the former status of slave generally precluded a freedman from standing for election to political office, irrespective of how successful he became in future. This produced, as Henrik Mouritsen has identified, a ‘glaring case of ‘status dissonance’, a clash between different parameters of social standing’; in order to bypass this tension, Numerius Popidius Ampliatus invested in the social advancement of his son, contributing as a benefactor to the town and exercising proper civic responsibility (Mouritsen, *The Freedman in the Roman World*, p. 248). The success of freedmen and their descendants, as is demonstrated here, also supported the continued stability of the aristocratic *ordo*; Jongman has shown that mortality rates meant that the small number of elite and free families in Pompeii could not alone sustain the numbers required, and so new members must continually be sought. The freeborn status of N. Popidius Ampliatus’s son Celsinus, combined with his own wealth, was perhaps adequate reason for his inclusion in the *ordo*; the council’s numbers were renewed in a way that did not threaten the political and social capital of the leading citizens of the town, and which did not obviously challenge the social order and legitimacy of its administrative power.

Although the inscription appears to reveal that the primary motivation of the rebuilding of the temple by Numerius Popidius Celsinus and his father was political, there is also a religious aspect to their benefaction that should not be ignored. The Egyptian cult of Isis, along with several other Egyptian deities, had been introduced into Italy in the 2nd century BCE; her followers believed that her cult promised eternal life after death, and by the Roman period in Pompeii she had become associated with ideas of resurrection and as a Mother Goddess (Berry, *The Complete Pompeii*, p. 204). The cult of Isis found particularly strong support in the Campanian region, with many private homes containing references to it within their own household shrines, or *lararia*. It is clear that the cult was of particular significance to this servile branch of the Popidii family; the father also dedicated a statue that was excavated from the temple, and their names appear in the floor mosaic of the court of the temple, the *ekklēsiasterion*. It is perhaps striking that such an obviously foreign religious cult found such prominence amongst Roman citizens in Italy, especially given the early ban by the Senate of the active worship of cults such as that of Bacchus, which had been outlawed in Italy in 186 BCE. However, Isis appears to have appealed to the entire social spectrum of Pompeii. The statuettes of Dionysus and Venus that were excavated from the temple complex also ‘point to the syncretism of the Isis cult with Graeco-Roman cults connected with fertility and regeneration,’ and perhaps therefore explain her popularity (Small, “Religion in the Roman period”, p. 188). Although public euergetism and benefaction might more commonly be seen in public buildings of more obviously ‘Roman’ culture, the approach demonstrated by the father of Numerius Popidius Celsinus here establishes the extent to which the individual might attempt to better one’s status according to the expectations and limits set by the Roman state; although foreign, the Temple of Isis was still a public temple, on public land, and therefore ‘as plausible a vehicle for social advancement as that of Fortuna Augusta’ (Beard, *Pompeii*, p. 307). The temple was also situated within a local context, and its activity governed by the town council, not directly by the Senate in Rome, meaning that the application of regulations may have been less stringently, or perhaps variously applied. The contribution of the Popidii to the rebuilding of the temple communicated the core civic values and ambition of good Roman citizens, and their devotion to the cult of Isis was indicative of the strength of their piety and commitment. The cult did not need to be more visibly ‘Roman’ for their benefaction to communicate a message of familial and municipal responsibility.

Keywords in the original language:

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- [aedes](#) [3]
- [ordo decurionem](#) [4]
- [Popidii](#) [5]
- [liberalitas](#) [6]

Thematic keywords:



- [euergetism](#) [7]
- [benefaction](#) [8]
- [temple](#) [9]
- [magistracy](#) [10]
- [freedman](#) [11]
- [cult of Isis](#) [12]
- [foreign gods](#) [13]
- [Pompeii](#) [14]
- [ancestry](#) [15]
- [descendants](#) [16]
- [piety](#) [17]
- [social order](#) [18]

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