

The Mystery Cult of Isis

The rites, liturgy, and mythology surrounding the deity

This paper will address the mystery cult of Isis and examine its spread from Egypt into the polytheistic Greco Roman world. I will investigate her historical beginnings and trace her diverse popularity as she metamorphosed from her original Egyptian attributes into assuming the characteristics of the local goddess of love, motherhood and magic. Her mythology is important to understand as the trials and tribulations she underwent form the basis of her religious appeal to a huge number of worshippers. Her rites and mysteries also offered adherents access to esoteric knowledge and wisdom regarding death and renewal. The cult of Isis became one of the most popular mystery religions of the Hellenized Roman era. Let us look at her story.



In tracing Isis back through history there is evidence of her existence for many thousands of years before the time of Christ. Forrest¹ writes of the inscription on one of the great pylons at her temple in Philae, an island in the River Nile, which says of Isis “...*the one who was in the beginning; the one who first came into existence on earth.*” Other epithets that attest to her ancient nature include “*Great goddess existing from the beginning*”, “*Great One who initiated existence*” and “*Great One who is from the beginning*”. Forrest² refers to the work of Archeologist Marija Gimbutas who has researched the Egyptian Neolithic deity goddesses back to 6,500 BCE and has identified a prototype of the Bird of Prey Goddess which she conjectures developed into Isis. The Bird of Prey Goddess was symbolised by the vulture, the owl and other birds of prey and carrion eaters (as these birds would ‘tend to the dead’ eating corpses). The connection is also made to these birds of prey in relation to their keen eyesight, used to hunt and catch prey, as well as their lofty perspective which is ‘all-seeing’.

According to Gimbutas³ the Bird of Prey Goddess is associated with the characteristics of not only death and dismemberment, but also the attributes of regeneration. She is the bringer of life, and specifically the bringer of renewed life after death. In this context, her symbols of regeneration include the serpent, the spiral and the labyrinth. The snake sheds its skin bringing forth new life, and both the spiral and labyrinth are symbols of change and renewal. The journey into and out of the labyrinth is transformative and life changing while the path of the spiral suggest return.

¹ Forrest, M.I. (2001) *Isis Magic – Cultivating a Relationship with the Goddess of 10,000 Names*, p 23

² Forrest, M.I. (2001) *Isis Magic – Cultivating a Relationship with the Goddess of 10,000 Names*, p 25-26

³ *Cultivating a Relationship with the Goddess of 10,000 Names* p 25

The myth of Isis and Osiris sees Isis bringing life back into the dismembered corpse of her husband. This act of resurrection is in keeping with the attributes described by Gimbutas as the Bird of Prey Goddess. She is also often depicted as the winged goddess, and in many instances wears the symbol of the snake at her forehead. Whether the conclusions Gimbutas draws are in fact true, there is no doubt that Isis has existed as one of the most ancient recognisable goddess deities throughout history. Her mythology follows.

Mythology

The mythology surrounding Isis and Osiris is well known. Forrest⁴ cites Ploutarchos, (45-120 CE) a Greek Priest and philosopher gives his Hellenized version of the myth, which extended account includes details not commonly known. An edited version follows:

Isis and Osiris, brother and sister of parents Nuet and Geb, had a great love for each other. So great was their love, it is said that they made love within their mother's womb. They married and Osiris became king and Isis the Queen of all the land of Egypt. So greatly was Osiris loved by the people and so great his civilization of the land, that his brother Set coveted his brother's kingdom and planned his demise.

Set's plot to overthrow the King saw him devise a plan where Osiris' body measurements were taken and a most beautiful sarcophagus built. So great was its beauty that Set explained to a group of visiting guests that whosoever shall fit its dimensions perfectly, it shall belong to them. As all the guest found no fit, Osiris was asked to take a turn which he begrudgingly did, only to have the lid slammed shut, bolted in place and sealed with molten lead. The coffin was then thrown into the Nile and floated out to sea.

When Isis heard of the tragic news, she went in search of him.



After three days afloat, the sarcophagus washed up in Byblos and came to rest in a tamarisk tree. Magically the tree grew up around the chest, hiding it from view. One day the King of Byblos saw the wondrous tree and decided to cut it down and use it as a support pillar for his palace. Isis had been tipped off about the tree in Byblos and came in search of it. The King and Queen handed over the chest and Isis opened it to find the body of her drowned husband. She journeyed home to Egypt and hid the sarcophagus but Set found it and in an enraged state, slashed the body of Osiris into fourteen parts and scattered them far and wide across the kingdom.

⁴ Forrest, M.I. (2001) *Isis Magic – Cultivating a Relationship with the Goddess of 10,000 Names*, p 17-21

On hearing of the desecration of her husband's body, Isis once again set out to retrieve the parts of Osiris' body. She reassembled his body once again, except for the penis which it is said was devoured by fish. So Isis fashioned a golden likeness of the phallus of Osiris, consecrated it in his honour and attached it to his body. Breathing life into his nostrils, he returned from the underworld and began to instruct their son Horus to seek his revenge. Then the battle between Horus and Set began. This war raged for many days and nights, but ultimately Horus was victorious and Set was placed in chains. But when Isis saw her brother thus chained, she felt great pity for him and let him go, enraging her son. Horus ripped the crown from his mother's head, but Thoth replaced it with a headdress of cow's horns.

The original Egyptian myths in the Pyramid Texts vary from this story in a number of ways, with the main difference being that Isis inseminates herself with the newly fashioned phallus of Osiris and gives birth to Horus to continue the royal bloodline. This Hellenized version asserts that Horus is already a grown man ready to avenge his father's death.

While the details of the various myths change, it is the character of the Goddess herself that is consistent. She is loving, loyal, fertile and magically powerful. It is these traits and her trials of suffering that all those who worship her, whether they be Egyptian, Greco Roman or any other culture, can identify with.

The spread of her worship

It is difficult to identify a definitive time period when Isis first began to infiltrate the Roman pantheon because her entry into the Hellenistic world came from many cultures, not just the Egyptian. Witt⁵ explores the political, commercial and trade links that were occurring around 270 BCE when the Pharaoh Ptolemy Philadelphus established formal networks between Alexandria and Rome. The huge granary associated with the rich soil of the Nile provided commercial trade opportunities between Egypt and Rome and along with the merchants, came the worship of their ancient gods and goddesses. Isis was immediately recognized and connected to Ceres as a fertility goddess and her new worship in the Roman Empire had begun.

The pagan Roman pantheon of the time assimilated faiths from many other cultures beside Egypt. Isis also found her way into Italy from the eastern Mediterranean through various trade links where she was known as Cybele from Phrygia, Atargatis from Syria and Tanit from Carthage. Likewise her consort Osiris was identified as Mithras and then Sarapis '*serene Zeus of Egypt*'⁶. Being the Lady of Ten Thousand Names she evolved and blended into the Hellenistic pantheon where she took on the overarching archetype of great mother, fertility goddess, being worshipped through local deities such as Demeter, Persephone and Aphrodite.

In the *Golden Ass*⁷ when Lucias first encounters Isis she speaks to him, saying:

⁵ Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* p70, 73

⁶ Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* p72

⁷ Apuleius, L. *The Golden Ass*, p.228

*“I am nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of the dead, queen also of the immortals, the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are. Though I am worshipped in many aspects, known by countless names and propitiated with all manner of different rites, yet the whole round earth venerates me. The primeval Phrgians call me Pessinuntica, the Athenians call me Cecropian Artemis; to the islanders of Cyprus I am Paphian Aphrodite, for the archers of Crete I am Dictynna...
...and the Egyptians who excel in ancient learning and worship me with ceremonies proper to my godhead, call me by my true name, namely Queen Isis.”*

This attests to the universality of the veneration of Isis. At the time of Lucius’ writing, Isis in the form of the universal mother had been adopted by a great many more cultures than just the Greco Romans.

Worship of the cult of Isis/Kore is evidenced by Jodi Magness⁸ from the shrine or temple attached to the acropolis which has been archaeologically dated back to mid-first century BCE. A small 2nd century CE statue of the goddess Kore found there, depicts her as “*veiled, holding a torch in her right hand, a pomegranate and ears of wheat in her left*”⁹. It can be seen that Isis has transformed by this time from her Egyptian symbology of wings and serpent into Kore, bearing pomegranate and ears of wheat, symbols more representative of the Roman fertility goddesses of Persephone and Demeter.

Mysteries and rites of Isis

As the worship of Isis took hold within Greco Roman religious life, it was natural that the Egyptian mysteries and rites also gained popularity. Takacs¹⁰ explains that in a period when Roman religious life was in decay, the existing Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries provided the basic structure and model for a new cult to enter onto the scene. He explains the appeal that the new religion had on the socially and politically underprivileged classes - mysteries offering salvation and an afterlife from a goddess who knew what suffering meant.

Witt¹¹ elaborates as he speaks of the writings of Herodotus who explains that initiation into the rites “*always meant gaining esoteric wisdom after the endurance of ordeals, some of which might be painful*”. ...he must wait for enlightenment in a



⁸ Magness, J. *the Cults of Isis and Kore at Samaria-Sebaste in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods* p 159, 163, 164

⁹ Magness, J. p 162

¹⁰ Takacs, S.A. *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World* p 2, 4

¹¹ Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* p153-154

state of darkness and undergo the training of silence, patience and perseverance.” Whilst not just attracting the common people, Witt sees the rites of Isis as appealing to the ruling classes where he speaks of Emperors such as Otho and Commodus openly taking part¹², but then also refers to the writings of Ploutarchos who explains the appeal the Isiac mysteries held for the ordinary man and woman, who deeply related to the trials and tribulations that Isis herself endured. No doubt different rites and mysteries were available to all classes of citizens as the cult of Isis took hold.

In trying to get clear on what actually happened in the mystery rites, Witt turns to the writings of Herodotus who speaks of a nocturnal rite of Passion (of Osiris) which the Greeks call ‘thesmophoria’ which takes place on a lake. Whilst wishing to preserve the secrecy of the mystery, all that Herodotus will say is that in undergoing an initiation, “*Isis leads the initiate through the holy mysteries which portray the trials and tribulations she had herself endured, the deep distress which had humanized her soul*”.¹³ It appears that what happened in the mystery cults of Isis remains a mystery.

Links to Freemasonry

Witt¹⁴ calls into comparison the rites of Isis and Osiris with the similar secret rites and code of the Freemasons saying “...*it is entitled to be called the direct descendant of the mysteries of later antiquity.*” He cites common themes of allegory, symbolism, brotherly love and initiation together with superintending architects and stone masons in the building of temples and pyramids.

In comparing the initiation of Lucias Apuleius into the mysteries of Isis in *The Golden Ass*, to the initiation undertaken in Freemasonry, Witt¹⁵ describes the three degrees taken and the swearing of common oaths of secrecy. Each receive passwords which open gates to hidden truths and both undergo a passing from darkness to light, where they gain a symbolic victory of life over death. There are also the commonalities of wearing certain ritual garments or regalia and undergoing ritual cleansing and feasting afterwards.

Witt¹⁶ explains that while the rites were accorded the highest secrecy, over time the details have become known, mainly through the Egyptian traditions where the rites (or some aspects at least) were enacted in the public arena. The ‘Seeking and Finding’ of the body of Osiris was an annually celebrated festival held for a week at the end of October. Certain ceremonies were conducted by the Priests in the privacy of the temple, such as the shrouding of a golden calf with a black veil to represent the mourning of Isis, but on the final night, they came out of the temple, bearing the sacred ark down to the sea shouting ‘Osiris has been found’.

Rites

¹² Witt, R.E. *Isis in the Greco-Roman World* p152

¹³ Witt p153

¹⁴ Witt p158

¹⁵ Witt 158

¹⁶ Witt p 162

In looking deeper at the rites performed in the actual temples of Isis, these were undertaken by the Priests and Priestesses. Whilst the number of festivals and rituals accredited to Isis is numerous to say the least, the Rite of Ascent and the Rite of Descent are two of the magical rituals of high significance undertaken to achieve sacred knowledge. As Isis was also associated with healing and the Greek physician-god Asclepius¹⁷, dream incubation was also a practise commonly undertaken in the temples.

The Rite of Ascent, as the name suggests is about the temple and its significant physical location in relation to the placement of the sun and the stars in the night sky. Ford¹⁸ explains that the rite is about linking the self with the sun or a particular star and is undertaken to achieve personal renewal of consciousness. Done as an annual rite enacted for the benefit of the whole society, it is seen as a powerful interplay between the three realms of the celestial, terrestrial and ancestral with the sky mirroring the land, with the aim of achieving revitalization for the earth.

The Rite of Descent, as the name suggests follows the sun setting in the west into the underworld of the night. Ford¹⁹ explains the metaphor of the journey of the sun into the dark, as paralleled by the individual as they journey into the subconscious. Many journeys to the underworld or otherworld can be found in myths such as Persephone's capture by Hades, Arthur's journey to Avalon and Isis' own descent to resurrect the body of Osiris. All these archetypal journeys involve the initiate to undergo great hardships and challenges so that on their return they will be reborn with great knowledge or having achieved some goal. Performed as an annual rite for the people, this ensured the renewal of the life of society in general.

The practise of dream incubation in the temple was offered as a cure to someone suffering from a malady which had resisted conventional treatment. DeTraci Regula²⁰ outlines the practise offered in the Roman healing temples of Isis where the priests or priestesses had specific training in the healing arts. The patient would sleep in the temple with the expectation of receiving a dream from Isis which would reveal a specific cure for the ailment. The great success of these cures further attested to Isis' popularity and communities like commonly known healing spas would spring up in the vicinity of the temples.

Conclusion

Isis was indeed an ancient Egyptian goddess held in great esteem and veneration not only by the Egyptians and the Greco Romans, but innumerable other cultures for many thousands of years. Her departure from Egypt and assimilation into a diverse number of cultures bore witness to her ability to win great appeal in the local pantheon, most often retaining the archetype of the great mother fertility goddess. Her appeal within Hellenistic Rome saw her mysteries and rites become one of the most popular religions, appealing to all levels of society. So revered were the rites of Isis (and Osiris) and the esoteric knowledge belonging to the ancient mystery schools, it is believed that they formed the basis for the establishment of the order of the Freemasons.

¹⁷ Regula, DeTraci *The Mysteries of Isis her Worship and her Magic* p116

¹⁸ Ford, A. *Isis – Afrikan Queen* p140

¹⁹ Ford p154

²⁰ Regula, DeTraci p117

The mysteries and rites of Isis have come down through time to the present day where they are still practised and she is still venerated as an ancient font of wisdom, compassion and esoteric knowledge.



References:

Apuleius, L (1950) *The Golden Ass (The transformation of Lucius Apuleius of Madaura)*
Penguin Classic, London, England

Ford, A. (1999) *Isis – Afrikan Queen*, Capall Bann Publishing, Berkshire, England

Forrest, M.I. (2001) *Isis Magic – Cultivating a Relationship with the Goddess of 10,000 Names*,
Llewellyn Publications, Minnesota, USA

Magness, J. *the Cults of Isis and Kore at Samaria-Sebaste in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods*
Harvard Theological Review, Tufts University

Regula, DeTraci (1996) *The Mysteries of Isis her Worship and her Magic*, Llewellyn
Publications, Minnesota, USA

Takacs, S. (1994) *Isis and Sarapis in the Roman World*, University of Groningen, The
Netherlands

Witt, R.E. (1971) *Isis in the Greco-Roman World*, Camelot Press, London