In Egyptian mythology, wife and sister of Osiris, and mother of Horus. After Osiris’ murder, Isis put together the separate parts of Osiris’s body and magically revived him.

Isis was one of the most important goddesses of ancient Egypt. She was the daughter of Nut, the sky goddess, and Geb, the earth god, and the sister and consort of Osiris, the chief deity of death. Isis and Osiris’s son, Horus, became the ruler of Egypt.

The name Isis is a Greek form of the Egyptian aset, meaning "throne." In many images, the goddess is seen wearing a headdress on top of which is a steplike hieroglyph in the shape of a throne. Isis is also a queen, and hence she is sometimes depicted wearing a crown that incorporates a cap in the shape of a vulture, with a cobra at the brow, as well as horns and a sun disk. Some statues of Isis show her as a kite (a bird of prey), usually shading Osiris beneath her wings. The feathering that appears on some Egyptian coffins is also a reference to Isis the hunting bird. Another special symbol of Isis was an amulet known as the tjet. This was a girdle with a loop or knot at the front, similar to the ankh, the symbol of life.

Isis and Osiris

Nut and Geb had four children: Osiris, Isis, Nepthys, and Seth. Isis married Osiris, and Nepthys married Seth. Osiris, the eldest, became king, and brought civilization to Egypt, introducing agriculture, law, and religion. Seth, consumed with jealousy, killed his brother and hacked his body into 14 pieces, which he scattered throughout Egypt.

According to the Pyramid Texts—a collection of prayers, hymns, and spells for the dead—Isis foresaw the murder of her brother-husband and mourned for him before the event. After his death, Isis set out to find his body; she was accompanied on her quest by Anubis, the jackal-headed son of Nepthys. When she had found 13 of the parts, she used her magical powers to reassemble them and bring Osiris back to life. The missing part was his phallus, which had been thrown into the river and eaten by fish. Isis created a replacement, and the reunited couple then conceived a child, Horus. After that, Osiris could no longer remain on earth, because he had been killed, so he went down to the underworld, where he became king and judge of the dead. Isis was left to look after the earthly interests of their son on her own.

Horus and Seth

Isis is often depicted with the baby Horus on her lap. She was considered to be the ideal mother, who protected her son from all dangers. The greatest of these was Seth, who wanted to be rid of his nephew. To escape his attentions, Isis hid with the child in the marshes of the Nile River delta. When Horus became an adult, Isis went to the court of the gods to fight for his inheritance, which had passed
to Seth in accordance with the laws of the time. Although Seth had banished Isis from the island on which the court was located, she managed to get to the court by using various disguises. She then tricked Seth into agreeing before the judges that a dead man's property should go to his son, rather than to the nearest surviving male relative.

Horus and Seth fought each other for the throne of Egypt. During the first contest, they turned themselves into hippopotamuses and fought in the river. Attempting to help her son, Isis accidentally speared him. Horrified, she then successfully speared Seth. However, Seth pleaded with her to withdraw the spear because he was her brother. When she relented, Horus became angry and cut off her head. Isis then turned herself into a statue until restored to life by the sun god. Finally, after 80 years of fighting, the gods ruled that Horus was the rightful heir to the kingdom.

**The Secret Name of Re**

Isis was determined to gain supreme power from Re, the sun god. She created a venomous creature—either a snake or a scorpion—from dust mixed with Re's spittle. As Re passed by, she cast a spell to make the creature bite him. When Re was on the point of death, Isis forced him to tell her his most secret name—the source of his power—before she would heal him. Her spell then drove the poison out of his limbs, and Re recovered. With the words of power, Isis was able to compel all creatures to obey her commands.

There are many sources for the story of Isis and Osiris, but the most famous are a version by Greek writer Plutarch (c. 46–120 CE) and the much earlier Egyptian story entitled "The Contendings of Horus and Seth." The latter is one of the few Egyptian myths in which the gods are described as behaving like humans: cheating, sulking, and hurling insults at each other. Isis also features in many other documents, including the Books of the Dead (collections of mortuary texts made up of spells or magic formulas, placed in tombs and believed to protect and aid the deceased in the hereafter). A text now known as "The Secret Name of Re" relates how Isis gained supreme power through deviousness and cunning. Ancient scribes described her as "more clever than a million gods."

**Changing roles**

The earliest existing reference to Isis dates from about 2400 BCE, when she was known as "the Great One" and associated with the star Sirius. Egyptians originally named this star Sepdet, but it later became known to them by its Greek name, Sothis. Because the star always appeared at dawn during the time of the annual Nile flood, it was believed to bring fertility and prosperity. Later, Isis's role as the grieving widow of Osiris made her the symbolic chief mourner, with her sister Nepthys, for all the dead. Ancient Egyptians believed that Isis could use her powers as a magician to cure the sick and bring the dead back to life. As the queen mother of the first king of Egypt, she was also the protectress of the royal succession.

Over time, Egyptian religion tended to combine the attributes of similar, or even dissimilar, gods and goddesses to form new, composite divinities. Alternatively, sometimes a less well known deity would be absorbed into the personality of a more prominent one. By around 1050 BCE Isis had assimilated Renenutet, a serpent-goddess connected with the harvest. Renenutet was known as Thermouthis by the Greeks, who were now beginning to immigrate to Egypt. At about the same time, Isis also began
to merge with Hathor, who was herself in the process of absorbing Bastet, the cat-goddess. Hathor was the patron of music, dance, and love. She was closely connected with both the kingship and the role of the queen; she was also a funerary goddess. These aspects of her personality were very similar to those of Isis, so it is not surprising that the Egyptians came to associate the two goddesses.

After Alexander the Great conquered Egypt in 332 BCE, the country became more and more influenced by Greek culture. Isis had many sacred cities throughout Egypt, but the center of her cult was on the island of Philae. Isis eventually became the patron goddess of the new capital, Alexandria, and her image started to appear on the city's coins, where she was referred to as Isis Pelagia (Isis of the Sea). She was often depicted wearing clothing and hairstyles that were more Greek than Egyptian, and thus more familiar to the new immigrants.

**Worship of Isis**

In the Ptolemaic Kings period (304–30 BCE), daily ceremonies in the temples of Isis began with a morning ritual that involved singing hymns of praise and dressing the image of the goddess. In the late afternoon there was a service that may have included a dramatic presentation of the Osiris myth, and the day ended with further hymns.

Many of the most important sources of information about the nature of Isis worship in the last centuries BCE are Greek texts, but there are also three important Egyptian-language sources—"The Songs of Isis and Nepthys," "The Lamentations of Isis and Nepthys," and "The Hourwatches." Hymns to Isis in Greek have been found in Egypt and other countries of the Mediterranean. In most of the hymns, it is the goddess herself who speaks. She first gives her name and an account of her family tree, then describes herself, her attributes and characteristics, her deeds, her inventions, and the benefits she has given to humankind. Strangely, most of these hymns make no reference to the Osiris myth. Instead, Isis appears as an independent deity who can be identified not only with the Egyptian goddesses Renenutet and Hathor, but also with various Greek and Syrian goddesses. The link between Isis and Demeter, the Greek corn goddess, was particularly strong because Demeter was connected with a myth of death and resurrection similar to the Osiris myth. Through her identification with Demeter, Isis was credited with the discovery of grain and the creation of all law. Having become identified with Hathor, the goddess of love and beauty, Isis was also identified with the deities Aphrodite, Atargatis, and Astarte. Isis and Artemis became linked in people's minds because both goddesses guarded women in childbirth, symbolized chastity, and were associated with Bastet, the cat-goddess. Later, Isis would become associated with the moon, perhaps because her crown, which contained a sun disk held between two cow horns, was mistaken for the moon, or simply because she was identified with Artemis.

**The Temple of Isis at Philae**

During the Ptolemaic Kings period the island of Philae in the Nile River was the center of the cult of Isis and her connection with Osiris, Horus, and the Egyptian kingship. Under the Roman occupation (30 BCE—330 CE) the main temple there became the focus of the cult of Isis and Hathor. It was the last ancient temple in use in Egypt, and was not closed until the reign of the Emperor Justinian I (527–565 CE). There are many legends connected to Philae, but the best known is the story of how Isis found the heart of Osiris on the island after his murder by his brother Seth. By the dawn of...
the modern era, the island was practically covered with temples, courts, and other buildings. When the first Aswan dam was built in 1902, the island and its monuments became half-submerged during the annual flood. In the 1970s the temples were dismantled and rebuilt on the nearby island of Agilkia.

This photograph of the temple of Isis at Philae was taken shortly before it was moved to drier land on a neighboring island.

Isis Mysteries

When Egypt became part of the Roman Empire in 30 BCE, the worship of Isis declined. It gradually became a mystery religion—a private cult that people could choose to join. Those who took part in it were promised salvation and immortality. Initiates had to fast and abstain from sex for 11 days, after which they attended a ceremony where they had to confess all their sins. They were then baptized in a ritual that symbolized death and resurrection, took an oath of allegiance to Isis, and swore to keep all details of the cult secret. The participants then shared a meal at which music and dances were performed. Converts were given new names. The cult of Isis spread throughout Italy in the first and second centuries CE.

Worshipers of Isis regarded her as the supreme deity. She was described as the one who determined the paths of the sun, moon, and stars and who controlled the elements. She was the source of all vegetation and fertility. Her control extended over mortals, deities, and the entire universe. She was the founder of civilization. Isis and Thoth (later Hermes) were credited with being the inventors of the hieroglyphic alphabet, and Isis was regarded as the lawgiver who imposed order on humanity. As the inventor of navigation, Isis was the patroness of the sea and of sailors. She was also said to have invented medicine and healing drugs. Everything concerned with procreation was under Isis’s control: she was the patron of love and marriage, the deity who ordained love between men and women and between children and their parents. Eventually Isis became the savior goddess, offering individual redemption to those who took part in her mysteries.

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At the dawn of the Common Era, the worship of Isis was founded on celebrations of the mysteries associated with the death and resurrection of Osiris. The most detailed account of these rituals appears in The Golden Ass, a Latin text by Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–c. 170 CE). The author describes how, during his initiation ceremony as a priest of Isis, he saw the goddess rise from the sea in the form of a queen accompanied by the moon. Apuleius refers to Isis by many titles, including queen of heaven, earth, and the underworld, and mother of wheat.

By the fourth century CE, the five days from October 28 to November 1 were set aside for a feast known as the Isia, which was a celebration of Osiris's death and resurrection. Egyptian devotees mourned Osiris by wailing, beating their breasts, and cutting the flesh of their arms.

For many years the cult of Isis competed with the newly founded Christian religion. Despite periodic purges of the followers of Isis, the goddess was still worshiped as late as the sixth century CE.

See also: ANUBIS; ARTEMIS; BOOK OF THE DEAD; DEMETER; EGYPT; GEB; HORUS; NEPTHYS; NUT; OSIRIS; RE; SETH.

Further reading


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