

AN ISIS TIMELINE

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The journey from the ancient Egyptian myths of Isis as the grieving wife gathering the parts of her slain husband Osiris to the Universal Goddess of the pervasive Isis Mysteries in the Roman Empire is traced by the author in this timeline. The Isis Mysteries were the most widespread mystery school of antiquity, and the Temple of Isis at Philae was the last major pre-Christian shrine to be closed in the sixth century CE. Ms. Schaefers received her M.A. from the University of Leiden, specializing in the Gnostic movements and the Isis Mysteries in the classical Mediterranean world. She is an instructor at Foothill College in Los Altos Hills, California, and volunteers at the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

To the unconquerable Isis

—Inscribed on a statue of Isis found within the church of St. Ursula, Cologne, Germany.¹

The Mysteries of Isis were one of the most pervasive religious movements in the Greco-Roman world. From Nubia to Greece, Rome, and parts of modern Turkey, to the Northern provinces along the Rhine and Danube rivers, and even to London, the Isis Mysteries enjoyed popularity unrivaled by any competitor. Its iconography would form a springboard for budding Christianity, while its rituals and traditions would be preserved within esoteric schools such as the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, and Pythagoreans. At the core was the deity herself, Isis—an Egyptian goddess known in the very

oldest of times as the Mistress of Heaven, Mistress of the House of Life, Mistress of the Two Lands, Mistress of Shelter, and the Great Lady. Nevertheless, why did Isis, apart from every other Egyptian goddess, grow to such popularity? What was the evolution and journey of the mysteries, and why do they remain at the heart of so many of today's philosophies?

The Egyptian Goddess

Twenty-seventh – Fourth Centuries BCE

- Isis had a special connection to Lower Egypt, where it is believed she may have originated. The Egyptian word for Lower or Northern Egypt was *Tā-meh* or “Flax Land.” Flax was used to make the Egyptians’ primary fabric—linen. The other plant that grew along the Nile, papyrus, was used famously for



Isis Lactans (Isis Nursing Horus), cast bronze, Ptolemaic period (332-31 BCE). From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.

paper, but was also an ingredient in a type of toothpaste, and the stem was fried and eaten as a delicacy. Isis had dominion over these two plants, but also over barley and wheat, staples of the Egyptian diet that were used for creating beer and bread respectively. Isis, as the Greek writers Herodotus (fifth century BCE) and Diodorus Siculus (first century BCE) would write later, was indeed a fertility goddess, but that was just one of her many roles. Both writers affirmed, as did Plato (fifth-fourth centuries BCE) that Isis at her shrine at Saïs was identified with the Goddesses Neith and Athena.

- Isis's primary role was as a compassionate divine mother to her son Horus, and as the protector of earthly family life. Isis or *Auset*, as her ancient Egyptian name implies, was the "Throne" of Egypt. The mother of Horus, and consequently of Egypt's Pharaohs, she was also the "Lady of the House of Life" and "Mistress of Magic." To outsiders, like the Greeks, Isis represented mystery, fertility, and her worship, as evidenced in Plato, was of the utmost antiquity.
- From the Greek historian Plutarch (46-120 CE) we are given the story of Isis and Osiris; where Isis is portrayed as a devoted wife and mother, but also as the



The Altar of Isis at Philae. Photo by Schorle/
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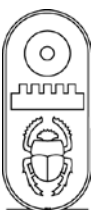
personification of human grief. *The Lamentations of Isis*, found in Egypt's most archaic records, the *Pyramid Texts* (ca. 2400 BCE / Dynasty IV or V) relates the sorrow of Isis as she learns of her husband's death and dismemberment. Her tears were thought to cause the yearly flooding of the Nile—the life-force of Egypt. Plutarch also notes a remarkable inscription at the Shrine of Isis at Saïs, testifying to the growing universality of the Goddess: "I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no mortal has hitherto raised."²

- Isis's husband, Osiris, represents death, but also rebirth when paired with Isis. Together they symbolized and created balance, or *Ma'at*, which was at the core of Egyptian thought. There were temples dedicated to Isis throughout Egypt, including major centers at Busiris and Philae. The temple at Philae hosted one of Isis's major celebrations centered on the yearly Nile inundation. Isis was the giver of life, the symbol of the Nile's annual reawakening.
- Isis's trait of compassion was a key to her popularity in Egypt and beyond. With outstretched wings, she represented protection to those on their journey to the eternal field of reeds, ruled by Osiris. Isis was the loving wife that gave life to her husband and expressed joy for his resurrection. She was the one who burned incense for her child Horus, and nurtured and supported him. Isis's adherents from Egypt, and then later in the Greco-Roman world, were drawn to these ideals of a nurturing mother and loving wife.

With the arrival of Alexander the Great in 332 BCE, Isis and the nature of her worship would take on a whole new breadth of meaning.

Ptolemaic Isis, Out of Egypt Fourth – First Centuries BCE

- Ptolemy I (323-284 BCE) adopted the office of Pharaoh from Alexander the



Great, who had just previously driven the Persians from Egypt. For the next three hundred years, and culminating with the reign of Cleopatra VII, the Ptolemies ruled Egypt from Alexandria. As ruler of a newly-freed nation seeking direction, Ptolemy felt compelled to address the meshing of the Greek and Egyptian worlds that his reign represented. He devised a unique solution.

Ptolemy employed two theological experts—Manetho, an Egyptian priest, and Timotheus, from an Athenian priestly family of Eleusis—to centralize and merge the religious philosophies of his



Isis (on the left, holding a sistrum), Serapis (wearing a modius), the child Harpocrates (holding a cornucopia), and Dionysos (holding the thyrsus). Marble relief, last quarter of the second century CE. Found at Henchir el-Attermine, Tunisia. Louvre. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

kingdom. Isis received a new consort, Serapis (the Ptolemaic version of Osiris). Alexandria became a place of learning with a new library and museum instated. Isis, the traditional “Lady of the House of Life,” presided over the museum, and was worshiped there. Horus, Isis’s son, became associated with Apollo, and her counterpart Osiris became Serapis, a Greco-Egyptian amalgamation of Osiris/Zeus/Dionysus and Ptah. For the next three hundred years, Isis and Serapis were seen as true counterparts to more recognizable Greek deities. Isis was losing her exotic mystique and adopting a more warm familiarity amongst the Greek-speaking inhabitants of Egypt. Her adherents were becoming more diverse, and so would her practices.

- The Greek world, adjusting to Macedonian rule outside of Egypt, readily accepted the deities emerging from Egypt and recognized them as counterparts to their own gods and goddesses. The Isis mysteries were identified with those of Eleusis and Isis herself was worshiped in traditional centers such as Delphi and Delos.

The spread of Isis’s cult from Ptolemaic Egypt appears largely due to the influence of Italian merchants, who may have carried the faith to the Greek island of Delos, the commercial center of the Aegean, sometime in the first few centuries CE. Shortly thereafter, a priest named Apollonius would set up a temple to Isis’s counterpart, Serapis. On Delos, there remains a large free-standing stone (the Aretalogy of Serapis) that attests to the presence of Egyptian priests during the third century BCE. From Delos, temples began to arise all over the Mediterranean. Isis’s more famous temples at Philae and Herculaneum were also constructed during this period.

- The next mention of the Isis mysteries comes via senatorial decrees against the cult in 182 BCE, and then again in 58, 53, and 48 BCE. Sometime during these latter three



Fresco illustrating Io being welcomed into Egypt by Isis (sitting, holding a snake and with a crocodile at her feet). Io is carried by a river god, setting her down at Kanopus, near Alexandria. Roman fresco from the Temple of Isis in Pompeii. Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples.

decrees, the doors to an Isis temple were beaten down. These actions may have been in response to the Isis mysteries' independent priesthood and its devotion to a personal, caring, and most importantly, foreign deity—factors that represented a threat to Rome's increasingly powerful political and adamantly traditionalist elite.

On March, 15 44 BCE, just a few years after the last decree, Julius Caesar was assassinated for dallying too much with this new societal shift in the form of Cleopatra VII. Cleopatra often identified herself with the combined goddess Isis-Hathor (mother goddess of love and beauty) and held parades and rituals in traditional Egyptian style, primarily at the Temple of Dendera. As the Romans were still a republic, they did not take kindly to Caesar's flaunting of Cleopatra and her Egyptian ways, but most notably to hints that he might crown himself King in Egypt, and perhaps also in Rome.

Isis in the Greco-Roman World

First Century BCE – Sixth Century CE

- Under the reign of Octavian Augustus (63 BCE-14 CE), the first Roman Emperor, the mysteries of Isis are called "obscene" and are initially not well received. Augustus had recently fought and defeated Mark Antony, Cleopatra, and the Egyptian Navy at the Battle of Actium, and was not very

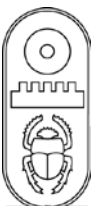
inclined to immediately adopt and appreciate Egyptian customs. Soon after, though, he did instate a lasting peace throughout the newly-formed Roman Empire, and a friendlier hand was offered to Isis and her mysteries.

Augustus instated a Roman policy that assured the newly-formed empire dominance in the Mediterranean for centuries afterward. By harmonizing foreign deities into its own religious system, the Roman pantheon became acceptable to many of the conquered and integrated cultures. This system of syncretism, or the meshing of traits to create something new, while retaining elements of the originals, defined Isis's spread through the Greco-Roman world. As bitter memories of Cleopatra and Mark Antony faded, the Roman populace appeared eager to embrace Isis and her worship, although in a much more Roman way. Mystery religions were already well established by this time.

- The Roman Isis Mysteries had as its predecessors those of Eleusis, Dionysus,



Statue of Cleopatra VII, late Ptolemaic period. One of only seven known statues of the renowned Ptolemaic Pharaoh to have survived to the present day, in a pose designed to display her political power. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.





Ruins at Eleusis, looking toward the legendary “Cave of Pluto (Hades).” Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

and Mithras from Greece. With a format already in place, the allure of truly antique Egyptian knowledge, and a scholarly resume direct from Alexandria, the worship of Isis exploded.

- Diodorus of Sicily (first century BCE) was of the opinion that two of the known world’s most ancient deities would also be the most long-lived—Isis, the moon, and Osiris, the sun. To the newly-forming Roman society, sense had to be made of Egypt’s plethora of deities. As per Diodorus, the Greeks would often appropriate the most famous gods and heroes of Egypt. As was seen a few centuries earlier under Ptolemy I, Isis and Osiris were decreed to be on the top of the hierarchy. Isis was identified with Hera, Selene, Demeter, Artemis, and other major Greek deities. Both Diodorus and Herodotus preserve claims of the Eleusinian and Demeter mysteries as originating from those of Isis. Diodorus even confidently states that the priestly families of Eleusis at Eumolpidae are Egyptian because they are the only Greeks who “swear by Isis.” When Greece came under Roman dominion, the amalgamated Greek Isis would again merge, this time with Roman counterparts.

- During the reign of Gaius Caligula (37-41 CE), the mysteries were state-sanctioned, and a favorite of Gaius; he would become an initiate and was fond of participating in parades. The mysteries also enjoyed prosperity under Vespasian (69-79 CE) and Titus (79-

81 CE). Isis and her counterpart Osiris (at this point firmly identified as Serapis) would become official state deities, reinforcing the power and position of the emperors, as Isis had once done in Pharaonic times.

- For the Roman world, Isis represented antiquity, fertility, motherhood, and imperial power all rolled up in one. She was goddess of the Moon and dwelled in the star Sirius (*Sothis* in Greek). Apuleius (125-180 CE), the author of one of the only known glimpses inside the Isis mysteries in *The Golden Ass*, praises Isis as a “perpetual comfort of humanity,” and by her power over life “nourishes the whole world and bears a great



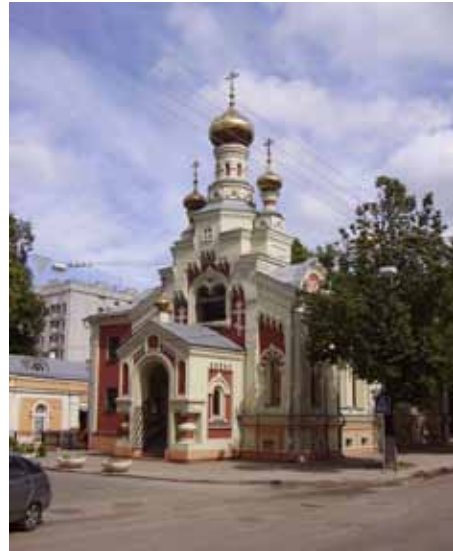
Roman statue of Isis, black and white marble, first half of the second century CE, found in Naples, Italy. Collection of Greek and Roman Antiquities in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna. The Romanization of the Egyptian Isis is complete with her vesture and iconography. Photo by Gryffindor/Wikimedia Commons.

compassion to the troubles of the miserable as a loving mother would.” Earlier in Egypt, under Ptolemy III, Isis had gained a nationwide holiday with the rising of Sirius. This festival represented the beginning of the Nile flood, the summer solstice, and the birth of a new year. Isis appealed to all. Her wings were both protective and symbolic of sails. Isis the Navigator cast off from the shore of Alexandria, and set foot on Delos and on Italy. She was the Queen of Heaven, and on earth was the ideal mother, giver of life, love, and prosperity.

- Devotion to Mary, the mother of Jesus, begins to grow among Christians in the early centuries. One of the earliest examples of this is the work *The Protevangelium of James* (ca. 150 CE), which, although not included in the Christian New Testament, included many of the elements of Marian veneration, including her being raised in the Temple, the Virgin Birth of Jesus, and other themes. Late in the second century, the earliest known image of the Virgin was painted in fresco in the Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome.



The Virgin and Child with Balaam the Prophet, late second century, Catacomb of Priscilla in Rome. The image depicts her nursing the Infant Jesus, reminiscent of Isis nursing Horus. This is the earliest known image of Mary and the infant Jesus, independent of the Magi episode. The figure at the left appears to be the prophet Balaam pointing to a star (outside the frame). The reference to the star is from Numbers 24:17 in the Hebrew Scriptures.



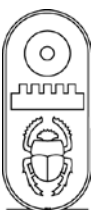
Eastern Orthodox “Our Lady, Joy of All Who Sorrow” Church, nineteenth century, Nizhny Novgorod, Russia. The title is reminiscent of Isis’s appellation in *The Golden Ass*: “Perpetual Comfort of Humanity.” Photo by Bestalex/ Wikimedia Commons.

It depicted the Virgin suckling the child Jesus, strongly reminiscent of images of Isis suckling Horus.

- During the fourth - sixth centuries CE, the mysteries of Isis and other competing movements declined, due in part to the spread of Christianity.

- As early as the third century, the title *Theotokos* (Godbearer) began to be used for Mary by Christian writers. At the Christian Council of Ephesus (431), this title was officially sanctioned by the Imperial Churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Rome, and others. This served to promote the veneration of Mary throughout these areas, and to identify her with Isis.

- Correspondingly, temples to Mary the Theotokos began to be built throughout the Christian world, including St. Mary of Blachernae (Constantinople) built by the Empress Pulcheria, ca. 450 CE, and Santa Maria Maggiore (Rome, fourth - fifth centuries), and the Church of Mary in Ephesus, which was probably built for the Council.³ The popularity of this dedication has continued.





Theotokos Joy of All Who Sorrow, icon of Mary, 1888, St. Petersburg, Russia.

- The inheritance from the Mysteries of Isis to the Cult of the Virgin was well on its way, as many of the characteristics of Isis, including *Queen of Heaven* and *Joy of All Who Sorrow* were transmitted through Mary the Godbearer throughout the ensuing history of Christianity. While there is no exact count as to how many churches, shrines, schools, and other Christian institutions are named for her today, it is certainly one of the most popular dedications in the world. The legacy of Isis is well enshrined.
- The Egyptian Isis temple at Philae, built during Ptolemaic times, would be

the last to be closed in the sixth century, as the Roman Emperor Justinian (ruled 527-565 CE) closed the last of the pre-Christian temples within the empire. It was converted into a church of the Virgin Mary, which was subsequently closed in Muslim Egypt during the seventh century. There is speculation that the Temple of Isis in London, attested to have been rebuilt in the second century CE,⁴ may have survived somewhat past this date, as Britain had been lost to the empire in the fifth century.

- Today, Isis is well represented by revivals of her mysteries among neo-pagans, and also in popular culture. As the Goddess movement has emerged in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, she has become a powerful symbol of the universal nurturing and salvific Source of All.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Greek: *Isidi inui[te]*.
- ² Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, 9, 354C (from the *Moralia*). Available at The Internet Sacred Texts Archives at www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plu/pte/pte04.htm.
- ³ en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blachernae; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Basilica_di_Santa_Maria_Maggiore; en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Church_of_Mary.
- ⁴ www.roman-britain.org/places/londinium.htm; www.britannia.com/history/londonhistory/.



David Roberts, *Island of Philae, Looking Down the Nile*, 1838, lithograph. The Philae Temple as seen from the south.