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Lisa Sabbahy Dr.

The American University in Cairo AUC, lsabbahy@aucegypt.edu

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Isis, Pharaonic Egypt

LISA SABBAHY

The goddess Isis was important in ancient Egypt for her role in the myth of Osiris, her husband-brother who ruled as king. The earliest mention of this myth, and Isis as well, is in the Pyramid Texts, which first appeared in written form at the very end of the 5th Dynasty (ca. 2375 BCE; see OSIRIS). When his jealous brother SETH killed Osiris, Isis, with the help of her sister NEPHTHYS, cared for his body and buried him so lovingly that he lived again and ruled over the underworld. Isis even became pregnant by her dead husband, and bore their son, HORUS, who avenged his father and ruled as king on earth. More details of the myth appear in the Coffin Texts and New Kingdom literature, but the most complete version of the Osiris myth is given much later in PLUTARCH'S *De Iside et Osiride*.

Isis is depicted as a woman wearing her name on her head: the hieroglyph sign of the throne, *asset*, in ancient Egyptian. It has been suggested that Isis is a personification of the king's throne (Altenmüller 1999: 3), and her name is a literal statement of the fact that she "bears" the king. Beginning in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550 BCE), like all other goddesses, Isis can be depicted with horns and a sun disk on her head. By this time, the role of Isis developed into a protector of the dead; just as Isis protected her dead husband, she protects any deceased person. Isis is depicted kneeling at the foot of the coffin, and her helping sister, Nephthys, kneels at the head. These two sisters are considered to be the "official wailing women" for the dead (Bleeker 1958: 2), and can be depicted as kites, birds of prey whose shrill cry resembles wailing. Isis is also found on canopic boxes, protecting the mummified liver.

As protector, Isis is called *Weret hekau*, "Great of Magic," for she rescued her husband and protected her fatherless son by the use of magic and trickery. Her amulet is the *tyet*, a knotted cloth made of hard red stone, placed at the neck of a mummy to protect it. Isis also has stellar significance, and is associated with Sirius (or Sothis), the Dog Star, while her husband, Osiris, was connected with Orion (Münster 1968: 153). Sirius makes an heliacal rising in mid-July, about the time the Nile inundation can be seen in Egypt, and was thought to be the harbinger of the flood.

The first cult temple dedicated entirely to Isis was on the Island of PHILAE. It was built by King Amasis (570–526 BCE) of the 26th Dynasty, and added to by King Nektanebo II of the 30th (Haeny 1985: 199–211). Ptolemy II (285–246) built an entirely new temple to Isis there, and also expanded the Iseum, the temple of Isis at BEHBEIT EL-HAGAR in the Delta, which was begun by King Nektanebo I and then later finished by Ptolemy III (Zabkar 1988: 1–3).

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