

# THE VEIL OF ISIS: THE EVOLUTION OF AN ARCHETYPE HIDDEN IN PLAIN SIGHT

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**T**he image of the Veil of Isis has persisted through the centuries from ancient Egyptian Saïs—where Athena and Isis were identified as one—to the present day. Originally, a symbol of wisdom, initiation, and the Mysteries, it has successively become an image of protection, of the secrets of nature, of hidden history and truths to be revealed. In each historical context the Veil is an invitation to delve further into the truths which have been hidden in plain sight from the eyes of those who will not see.

The origins of the Veil of Isis are lost in the mists of time, however, we can pick up the trail of the story in the important late dynastic Egyptian city of Saïs, where the Divine Feminine was very much revered and active.

Saïs, the provincial capital of the fifth Nome of ancient Egypt in the western Nile Delta near the Mediterranean, was dedicated to the Goddess Neith. Saïs rose to prominence in the Twenty-fourth

*The Goddess Neith, Lady of Saïs, Saite Period (664-525 BCE). Although missing her arms, which were made separately, this is one of the finest representations of the Goddess. The shape of her body and the smile on her face betray her date as during the Saite Period, when she was venerated as the Goddess of the Egyptian Capital. From the collection of the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum.*

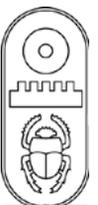


Dynasty (eighth century BCE) and during the Twenty-sixth Dynasty (seventh-sixth centuries BCE), to which it gives its name: The Saite Dynasty.

Saïs's patroness, Neith, was known as a goddess of war, but more importantly, since her name can mean "water," she was identified with the primordial waters out of which all manifestation arose—the Mother of all things. Because of this, she was also patroness of the household arts, especially weaving, of nursing mothers, as she is the "nursing mother," and of wisdom. As "The Weaver" she weaves all of the manifested cosmos into being on her loom. In her role as the primordial source of all things, she transcended gender to encompass all.<sup>1</sup>

## Assimilation of the Goddesses into One

Another claim to fame of Saïs was the nearby "grave of Osiris," and Osirian Mysteries were carried out on an adjacent island in the delta. It was natural therefore for Isis and Neith, both very ancient goddesses, to be assimilated to one another. Further, Greek visitors to Saïs such as Herodotus, Plato, and Diodorus Siculus also identified this Neith-Isis with Athena, holding that Athena built the city before she founded Athens, and that when Athens and Atlantis were destroyed by the great flood, Saïs survived. Thus the triple Goddess Neith-Isis-Athena was worshiped at the goddess's shrine at Saïs, a combination of very ancient feminine divinities.<sup>2</sup>





Bas-relief sculpture of the Roman goddess Minerva (Athena) recovered from the ruins of Herculaneum (Area Sacra Suburbana), ca. first century BCE—first century CE. Collection of the Herculaneum Deposito Archeologico. Photo by Ken Thomas/Wikimedia Commons.

Plutarch, in commenting on the truths hidden in Egyptian religion, recounts that this shrine contains a most striking inscription:

“And the shrine of Athena at Saïs (whom they consider the same as Isis) bears this inscription, ‘I am all that hath been, and is, and shall be; and my veil no mortal has hitherto raised.’”<sup>3</sup>

This ties together the universality of the divinity of Isis—consonant with her identity with Neith, the Primordial Source of all that is, with the evocative symbol of the Veil of Isis, concealing unglimped mysteries. It is that symbol, the Veil covering the Source of All from our gaze, that has inspired philosophers, mystics, and artists for two millennia.

### The Veil in Religious Symbolism

In religious imagery, the Veil of Isis was translated into Christian terms, easily understandable given the substantial parallels

between both the Egyptian and the Universal Isis, and the Virgin Mary. A particular example of this veil imagery occurred in the Roman Capital, Constantinople. On several occasions, in the ninth, tenth and fourteenth centuries, the Virgin was seen in the Church of Blachernae spreading her veil over The City in protection from invasion and epidemics.<sup>4</sup>

A feast-day was established for this “Protection of the Theotokos (God-Bearer)” on October 1, and has become one of the most popular feasts among Slavic Byzantine (Orthodox and Catholic) Christians, still celebrated today, called *Pokrov*, or Holy Protection, and today transferred in Greece to “Ochi Day,” October 28, when, in 1940, Greek Prime Minister Metaxas rejected Mussolini’s ultimatum.<sup>5</sup>

This icon of the protective veil of the Virgin seems to have also spread to Western Europe and Roman Catholicism in the “Virgin of Mercy” image, showing the Virgin Mary spreading open her cloak/veil which covers and protects those who are kneeling beside her. The first known instance of this image is from Italy in about 1280.<sup>6</sup>

### The Veil of Nature

The Veil of Isis has also become an image of the secrets of nature, philosophy, and history.



Russian Icon of the Holy Protection (Pokrov), late fourteenth century.



Duccio di Buoninsegna, *Virgin of the Franciscans* (Virgin of Mercy), ca. 1280. The first known version of this image in the West. National Gallery of Sienna. Photo: The Yorck Project/Wikimedia Commons.

Even in ancient times, there was controversy over how to describe nature and nature's secrets. Heraclitus reputedly taught "Nature loves to hide itself."<sup>7</sup> Pierre Hadot, a modern philosopher and cultural historian, identifies two approaches prevalent throughout the Western European Medieval, Renaissance, and modern periods, for discovering the "secrets of nature."<sup>8</sup> The "Promethian" approach was seen as "stealing Nature's secrets," much as the mythic Titan stole the Fire of the Gods. Along this path is mechanistic technological work, which seeks to dominate nature. The "Orphic" approach, on the other hand is one of creative, artistic union with nature, in order to discover her secrets through an initiatic gnosis.

### Artemis of Ephesus

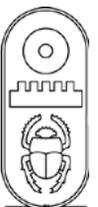
One further ancient Goddess was destined to be assimilated to Isis at the dawn of the modern world. From as early as the Bronze Age, the Goddess Artemis

(Diana for the Romans) was worshiped at her magnificent temple in Ephesus (near modern-day Selçuk in Turkey). The Temple was one of the Seven Wonders of the World, and contained a statue of the goddess which undoubtedly pre-dated Hellenic culture, to which great cultic significance was attached.<sup>9</sup>

She is covered by dozens of milk-giving breasts—*polymaston*<sup>10</sup>—indicating that she is the source of all life.<sup>11</sup> The Greco-Roman manifestation of this Goddess is probably an assimilation of the older Anatolian "Mistress of Nature and Life" who was worshiped in the same area.<sup>12</sup> We can consider the parallel imagery with the ancient Egyptian Neith, the Primordial source of all Being, "nursur of crocodiles."



*Artemis of Ephesus*, marble and bronze. Roman copy of an Hellenistic original of the second century BCE. Albani Collection. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen / Wikimedia Commons.



Auguste Puttemans (1866-1927), *Statue of Isis*. The statue was given to President Herbert Hoover by the people of Belgium in 1922. It is currently located at the Herbert Hoover National Historic Site in West Branch, Iowa. Photo by Ammodramus/Wikimedia Commons.



At the beginning of the sixteenth century, this representation of Artemis as an allegory for Nature resurfaces in the art of the Italian Renaissance. Raphael uses the *polymaston* Artemis of Ephesus figure in his 1508 “Philosophy,” as part of his Stanza della Segnatura in the Vatican. Niccolò Tribolo created his marble “Nature” with this design in 1529 at the Château de Fontainebleau in France.

Scholars, artists, and esotericists from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth century followed the identification of Artemis and Isis (already the Universal Goddess of the Isis Mysteries) made in the ancient world to represent Nature.<sup>13</sup>

The writers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were quick to adopt this association. The Jesuit esotericist Athanasius Kircher refers to the Veil of Isis as a symbol of Nature’s Mysteries in *Oedipus Aegypticus* (1650s),<sup>14</sup> and uses the image of the polymastic Isis/Artemis in the frontispiece to his *Mundus Subterraneus*, Volume II (1664).<sup>15</sup> This example is followed by many.

Hadot suggests that Kircher’s reference to Isis’s Veil as Nature’s Secrets is at the very foundation of the Egyptomania of the Romantic and modern periods.<sup>16</sup> By the middle of the eighteenth century, this identification was complete with all its parts: Nature, all nurturing, in the figure of an Egyptian Goddess covered by the Veil of Isis, hiding her secrets.<sup>17</sup>

### The Unveiling of Isis

As the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries progressed, and the exploration of science grew rapidly in Western consciousness, it was a natural step to conceive of this as “Removing the Veil.” One of the first instances of this image in art is in Gerardus Blasius’s *Anatomy of Animals* (1681).<sup>18</sup> Hadot describes the frontispiece:

“Here we see Science, represented in the form of a young woman with a flame above her head, symbol of the desire for knowledge,<sup>19</sup> a magnifying glass, and a scalpel in her hands, unveiling a woman who has four breasts on her chest. Nature also bears the symbols of the seven planets on her chest. On her right arm, which bears a scepter, perches a vulture, a reminder of the first types of images of Nature, discussed earlier. Other animals are gathered around her, and at her feet we see two putti, the symbols of scientific labor: one of them is dissecting an animal; the other examines entrails while looking at Nature with admiration.”<sup>20</sup>

This basic imagery would set the stage for the respectful unveiling of Isis, revealing the Secrets of Nature. This would be repeated in various designs by Anton van Leeuwenhoek (1687), Peter Paul Rubens (1620), as well as many others.

### Hidden in Plain Sight

For civic celebrations in 1814 and 1825, the philosopher and polymath Goethe used an emblem created by the Weimar drawing school, *Genius Unveiling a Bust of Nature*. The symbolism of Nature was clearly the same as the polymastic Isis. For Goethe, the key to understanding nature is intuition, grasping the all:

*Nature gives all with generosity and  
benevolence.  
She has no pit  
Or shell  
She is all at once*<sup>21</sup>

And in another place:

*If you succeed in making your intuition  
First penetrate within,  
Then return toward the outside,  
Then you will be instructed in the best way.*<sup>22</sup>

Goethe uses the phrases *offenbares Geheimnis* and *öffentliches Geheimnis*, more or less a “secret in broad daylight,” reminiscent of “Hidden in Plain Sight”:

*O mountain of unexplored bosom,  
Mysterious in broad daylight,  
Above the astonished world.*<sup>23</sup>

And,

*Nothing is within, Nothing is  
without,  
What is inside is also outside.  
Seize, then, with no delay,  
The sacred mystery in broad  
daylight.*<sup>24</sup>

*Genius Unveiling a Bust of Nature*, 1825, Weimar, Germany. Collection of the Frankfurt Goethe Museum.

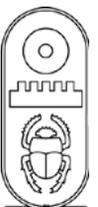
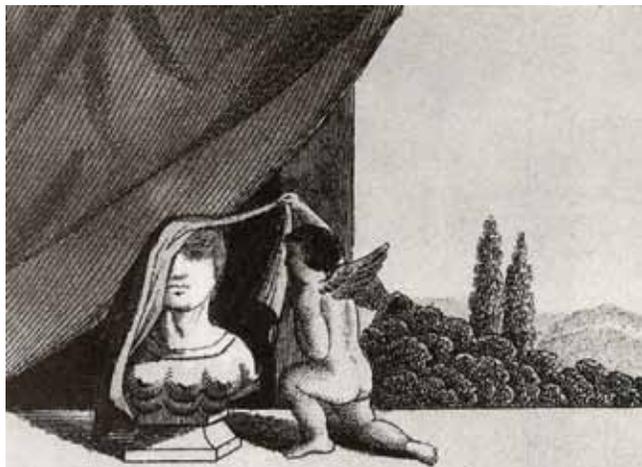
### The Universal Isis

Through the romantic period of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Veil of Isis and Unveiling Nature through intuition and Gnosis continue to be important themes.

Karl Leonhard Reinhold, a Masonic writer, writing on the Hebrew Mysteries, follows a well-known Masonic theme: the Hebrew Mysteries are actually the Egyptian Mysteries in a new manifestation. In this process he identifies the Isis of Saïs with YHVH in the Burning Bush who proclaims “I am Who Am.”<sup>25</sup> In the English version of the passage in Exodus, the parallel is not as clear, however, in the Septuagint Greek version, created by the Jewish initiates in Alexandria in the second century BCE, the identification is more obvious, as the Voice from the Burning Bush says, “Ego eimi ho On,” “I am Being.”

Unusual as this may sound to conventional monotheists, it is well attested as far back as Ancient Egypt, as a modern scholar of Egyptian religion points out:

“That is the situation in Ramesside theology. The unity of God is realized as neither preexistence nor a (counter-religious) monotheistic concept, but as latency, as a ‘hidden unity,’ in which all living plurality on earth has its origin and whose inscrutable nature can be experienced and stated only in its manifestations, the ‘colorful reflection’ of



the polytheistic divine world...This idea occurs also in the Corpus Hermeticum: all names are those of one god.”<sup>26</sup>

The version of the inscription at Saïs reported by the fifth century Neoplatonist Proclus (412 – 485 CE) continued to exert great influence on philosophers, artists and mystics. Erik Hornung, a leading modern scholar of Egyptian religion and its continuing influence, comments on the importance of these lines:

“Schiller again used this text, which was found ‘on a pyramid at Saïs,’ in his essays ‘The Mission of Moses’ (1790) and ‘On the Sublime.’ And in his ‘Critique of Judgment’ (1790), Kant states, ‘Perhaps there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed, than the well-known inscription upon the Temple of Isis (Mother Nature): “I am all that is, and that was, and that shall be, and no mortal hath raised the veil from before my face.”’ For Beethoven, who had it standing framed on his desk, and for many other contemporaries, this quotation was the embodiment of Egyptian wisdom.”<sup>27</sup>

### Isis Today

Throughout the journey of millennia, Isis has taken on many forms, and incorporated all of the Divine within her, ultimately becoming the manifestation of the Source of All. Today, she is present practically everywhere one would look. A simple Google internet search on her name yields 21,900,000 sites or pages dealing with myriad aspects of Isis, from neo-Egyptian religious groups, to clothing lines. This is a respectable total for a divinity whose last ancient temple at Philae was closed almost 1500 years ago.

The Loving Mother of Horus, the Savior Goddess, the Queen of Heaven: Isis still holds her Veil protectively over her children after thousands of years. No



Michel Erhart or Friedrich Schramm, *Virgin of Mercy*, from the Church of Our Lady in Ravensburg, ca. 1480, limewood, original colors with some over-painting. Photo by Andreas Praefcke/Wikimedia Commons.

one has lifted the Veil because there is no need to. The Mysteries the Veil conceals are Hidden in Plain Sight, open to all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear her message through the ages, as true today as in ancient Saïs:

*I am what is, and what will be, and what  
has been,  
No one has lifted my veil.  
The fruit I bore was the Sun.*<sup>28</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “Neith” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neith>.

<sup>2</sup> For more information, see “Saïs” and “Neith” at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sais> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neith>, to which these introductory paragraphs are indebted.

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *On Isis and Osiris*, 9, 354C (From the *Moralia*). Available at The Internet Sacred Texts Archives <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/plu/pte/pte04.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> See “Protection of the Mother of God” at Orthodox Wiki [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Protection\\_of\\_the\\_Mother\\_of\\_God](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Protection_of_the_Mother_of_God).

<sup>5</sup> See “Protection of the Mother of God” at Orthodox Wiki [http://orthodoxwiki.org/Protection\\_of\\_the\\_Mother\\_of\\_God](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Protection_of_the_Mother_of_God) and “Ochi Day” at Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ochi\\_Day](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ochi_Day).

<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Protection\\_of\\_the\\_Mother\\_of\\_God](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Protection_of_the_Mother_of_God).

<sup>7</sup> Heraclitus Fragment 123; see also Fragment 208: "Nature loves to hide." See also William Harris, "Heraclitus, the Complete Fragments," available at <http://community.middlebury.edu/~harris/Philosophy/heraclitus.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> Pierre Hadot, *The Veil of Isis* (Cambridge; London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 91-98.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Fleischer, *Artemis von Ephesos und der erwandte Kultstatue von Anatolien und Syrien*. Études préliminaires aux religions orientales dans l'Empire romain, 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

<sup>10</sup> "many breasted"

<sup>11</sup> "Temple of Artemis at Ephesus" at Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemis\\_of\\_Ephesus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Artemis_of_Ephesus).

<sup>12</sup> Armand Delatte and Philippe Derchain, *Les intailles magiques gréco-égyptiennes* (Paris: Bibliothèque Nationale, 1964), 179.

<sup>13</sup> Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 236-237.

<sup>14</sup> Athanasius Kircher, *Oedipus Aegypticus*, vol. 1 (Rome: 1652-1654), 191.

<sup>15</sup> Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> See Jean-Baptiste Boudard, *Iconologie tirée de divers auteurs* (Parma: 1759); second edition, vol. 3 (Vienna, 1766), 1; and H. Lacombe de Prével, «Nature» in *Dictionnaire iconologique* (Paris: 1779); cited in Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 372-373, n. 28 and 29.

<sup>18</sup> Gerardus Blasius, *Anatome Animalium* (Amsterdam, 1681), Frontispiece Engraving.

<sup>19</sup> Hadot, *Veil of Isis*: See A. Goesch, Diana Ephesia (Frankfurt; New York: P. Lang, 1996), 224, citing Cesare Ripa, "Intellecto," in *Iconologia* (Padua: P. P. Tozzi, 1611), available at <http://emblem.libraries.psu.edu/Ripa/Images/ripatoc.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 239.

<sup>21</sup> J.W. von Goethe, "Certainly: to the Physicist" in "God and the World," *Goethes Werke*, 1, 3, (Weimar: 1887-1919), 105. Translation in Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> J.W. von Goethe, "Genius Unveils the Bust of Nature" in *Goethes Werke*, 1, 4, pg. 127.

<sup>23</sup> J.W. von Goethe, "Winter Journey in the Harz" (1777). Translated in Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 256, from J.-F. Angelloz in H. Carossa, *Les pages immortelles de Goethe* (Paris: Corrêa: 1942), 125.

<sup>24</sup> J.W. von Goethe, "Epirrhema" in *Goethes Werke*, 1, 3, pg. 88. Cited and translated in Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 256.

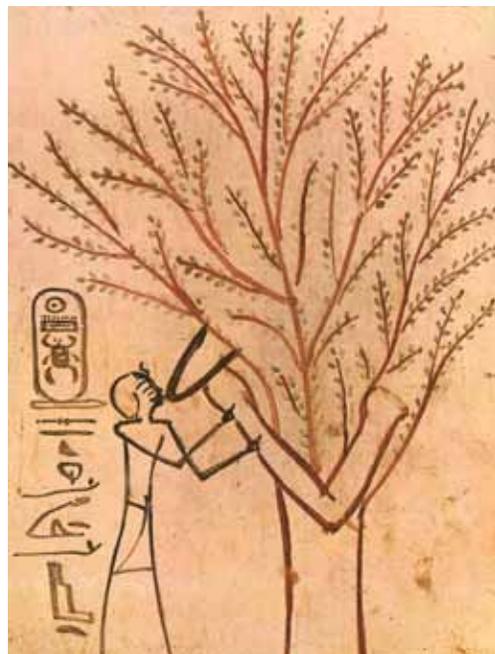
<sup>25</sup> K. L. Reinhold, *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey* (Leipzig,

1787), 202; See Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 97-199; See also Ernst Cassirer, *Language and Myth*, trans. S.K. Langer (New York: Harper, 1953), 96-97. In Hadot, *Veil of Isis*, 267-268. It is interesting to note that the Eastern Orthodox Icon type "The Unburnt Bush" (*Neopalimaya Kupina*), depicts a stylized mandala of the flames, within which, unconsumed, is the Virgin Theotokos (Mary) holding the Christ child, much as an Isis-Horus image. The Icon's Feast is September 4.

<sup>26</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum* 4:10; *Asclepius*, Section 20.

<sup>27</sup> Erik Hornung, *The Secret Lore of Egypt* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 134.

<sup>28</sup> Proclus, *Commentary on the Timaeus* 1, 30, translated in Hornung, *Secret Lore*, 134.



*Isis in the Guise of a Sycamore Tree Suckles the Pharaoh Thutmose III*, Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1426 BCE), tomb of Thutmose III. The traditional founding of the Rosicrucian tradition dates from the Pharaohs Hatshepsut and Thutmose III uniting all of the priesthoods and Houses of Life under Hatshepsut's Vizier Hapuseneb.

