“I Am Isis”: The Role of Speech in the Cult of Isis

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In ancient Egyptian texts, no deity speaks more than Isis. The goddess was depicted as interacting with other deities, as well as with her followers, through speech. Features unique to her were translated across cultural and linguistic boundaries as her expanding biography responded to Greek influences following Alexander the Great’s conquest of Egypt in 332 BC. One of these characteristics is her ability to engage in dialogue with others and to communicate effectively. Her verbal communication was a pivotal factor in the development of her cult as the world’s first universal religion. This essay examines the oral patterns and performative speech acts of Isis in pharaonic texts from the Old Kingdom onward and how her role as a communicator was later a central feature of Greco-Roman versions of her cult. In the Hellenistic period Isis became a universal deity as changes were made to both her textual and iconographic representations in order for her to appeal to non-Egyptian audiences across the Mediterranean and beyond for a period of more than six hundred years.

First, it will be crucial to understand with which deities Isis interacted in ancient Egypt and the various forms of oral practice that were in place. Next, we will look into the areas Isis defined through spoken language and the tangible data archaeology provides. Finally, the concept of monotheism as revealed in Isis cults will be considered, which not only influenced the emergence of other universal divinities but also shaped religious thinking in late antiquity. It was not only mythical, narrative elements of the biography of Isis that were rewritten over time; her interactions with her pharaonic husband, Osiris, and later with her Hellenistic consort, Serapis, are indicative of her transition from a goddess who communicated only with other gods to a recipient of prayers—one who could both speak and listen—with universal appeal. In Egyptian religious texts, dialogues formed part of mythical narratives whose function it was to trigger actions through speech. These speech acts are performative, which means that by making an utterance, the speaker carries out actions.[[1]](#endnote-2) Isis is a goddess who creates actions through words.

Isis’s Speech in Pharaonic Texts

Isis, companion of the god Osiris and mother of their child, Horus (fig. 3.1),[[2]](#endnote-3) is a prime example of the eloquence of the Egyptian gods. No deity can be described in terms of character and cultic function better than Isis based on the texts that capture her direct speech. The abundance of sources in which she speaks can best be explained by the effectiveness of her words—no goddess has more influence over mythical events than she does. This attribute may have had its beginning in the myth of Osiris, a narrative that the ancient Egyptians never told in a single, continuous story but imparted through a loose collection of references.[[3]](#endnote-4) One of the main events this myth describes is the search for the murdered Osiris by his sisters, Isis and Nephthys. Eventually the goddesses find Osiris lying dead on his side, “because his brother Seth threw him to the ground in Nedit.”[[4]](#endnote-5) Already in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom, which were first canonized in writing around 2350 BC, the two sisters are assigned the role of weeping and lamenting mourners.[[5]](#endnote-6) Around 2000 BC, in the Middle Kingdom, the speech of Isis is reproduced literally in a Coffin Text of a private individual, which suggests that the finding of Osiris and the subsequent lamentation for the dead was staged and ritually performed as part of Egyptian funerals:

[block quote] “Oh tired one, oh tired one, lying there!

Tired in this place you did not know I knew.

Behold, I have found you in this your place, great weary one.”

“Sister,” Isis says to Nepthys, “our brother is this!

Come, let’s lift his head,

come, let’s join his bones together,

come, let us tend his limbs!”[[6]](#endnote-7) [end block quote]

Already in the Old Kingdom texts about Isis include her lamentations but also her comfort and encouragement for the deceased Osiris. Throughout the myth the dialogue between Isis and Osiris is one-sided because Osiris is already dead and must remain passive as a recipient of Isis’s words, as well as the entire set of death rituals. Isis addresses Osiris’s body, and what she says comes into being. So says a Coffin Text of the Middle Kingdom:

[block quote] Greetings, Osiris N here,[[7]](#endnote-8)

with what Isis, the mistress of the western deserts, says:

In front be your seat in the tent of the god.

May she pronounce your beautiful name in the barque (the sun-barque of Ra)

on the day the characters are calculated (when the dead are summoned).[[8]](#endnote-9) [end block quote]

The following utterance, which belongs to a speech that is attested in the six Osiris liturgies of the Ptolemaic period, is a later example of Isis’s protective speech on behalf of Osiris.[[9]](#endnote-10) Here Isis addresses the four sons of Horus:

[block quote] Isis says: “Come,

you four *Akh*-spirits, who cross the cool heaven!

Amset, Hapj, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuef:

Protect your father Osiris!

Subdue his enemies for him.

Take for him (Osiris) his (Seth’s) allies

to the custody of the eastern execution site.”[[10]](#endnote-11) [end block quote]

While Osiris has been killed by his brother Seth and his limbs dispersed all over Egypt to make sure his body cannot be found and buried, his mourning sister-wife refuses to accept that Osiris is dead. In fact, no text ever described Osiris as a dead person; the word that describes him—*mwt*—is used exclusively for revenants who never received a burial in accordance with funerary rituals. Isis does not accept the killing of her brother-husband, and therefore her role is not limited to lamenting. Together with her sister, Nephthys, she searches for the body parts of the deceased Osiris, which the Nile has washed ashore all over Egypt,[[11]](#endnote-12) and fends off the enemies of Osiris sent out by Seth. The early 18th Dynasty stela of Amunmose, a man who held the title “Chief of Amun’s Flocks,” contains the most complete pharaonic version of the Osiris myth:

[block quote] His sister has provided his defense,

she has driven away the rebels and fended off the deeds of the screamer (Seth)

through the magic power of her mouth;

the power of the tongue, whose words do not go astray,

effective in commanding.[[12]](#endnote-13) [end block quote]

In joining together Osiris’s limbs, Isis makes his death treatable, and it is through her speech that he receives his new status as ruler in the realm of the dead. This mythical sequence informed Egyptian funerary belief, for it is here that the interaction of linguistic and physical treatment of the body of Osiris becomes most evident, and the deceased, who is equated with Osiris, is not forgotten. In the process of mummification, which provides protection of the physical body, the associated linguistic utterances become social action aimed at introducing Osiris (the deceased) to the community of gods in the realm of the dead, which guarantees his eternal existence. By having his or her body symbolically collected and joined together just as Osiris’s was, the deceased escapes eternal death. Death in ancient Egypt therefore is not something that can happen in isolation: it requires others to care for the body so that it can die successfully and enter a life in the beyond. Re-membering and remembering are the central aspects of mummification: the physical care for the dead and linguistic management of death. The ancient Egyptians had various terms for these procedures. One of the Egyptian expressions for addressing and healing the Osiris corpse is hn.w “jubilation,” which, according to the Osiris hymn on the stela of Amunmose, begins with the rejuvenation of a dead body, that is, mummification:

[block quote] Isis, the magical powerful, the protector of her brother,

who sought him tirelessly,

who passed through this country in mourning

and did not rest until she had found him,

who gave shade with her feathers

and breathed a breath of air with her wings,

who rejoiced (literally: “made hn.w”), “mourner of her brother.”[[13]](#endnote-14) [end block quote]

Through the power of her words, Isis also succeeds in conceiving a son, Horus, with Osiris after his death (fig. 3.2). With Horus’s birth the Osiris story enters a second phase, which is called the Horus myth. None of these myths would function without Isis; she is the link but also the mythical antecedent for what is told. The Horus myth revolves around Isis’s son, whom the mother raises by herself in a hidden place in the papyrus thicket of the Nile Delta.[[14]](#endnote-15) Isis’s magic and healing powers are central to the themes of the Horus myth as well. Thus, a text from the New Kingdom Ramesside period (1295–1069 BC), known as the London Medical Papyrus, which can be assigned to the genre of magical discourse, preserved all the details necessary to alter fate with the help of myth. The utterance consists of two parts, a recital and a manual. The text to be recited by the magician has some peculiarities, since it does not lay out the entire myth but mentions in a quotation only what is already known to the initiate, thus preventing the uninitiated from grasping the mythical secret and letting it slip out at the wrong opportunity. Not unlike the later texts of the so-called cippi of Horus, the “incantation of a cremation,” is laid out as follows:

[block quote] Horus was a child inside his nest,

A fire (fever) had fallen into his limbs,

he did not know it, it did not know him.

His mother was not there to conjure it,

his father had gone for a walk

(with) Haphap and Amset.

The son was small, the fire strong,

nobody was there to save him from it.

Then Isis stepped out of the workhouse

at the time she loosened her thread:

“Come, my sister Nephthys, with me,

accompany me.

I was deaf, my thread surrounded (me).

Clear my way that I may do what I understand,

that I extinguish it (the fire) with my milk

and with the healthy water that is between my thighs.”[[15]](#endnote-16) [end block quote]

In this utterance, Isis not only appears as the mother who heals her son but also shares her concerns with her sister, Nephthys. This makes her one of the few deities of ancient Egypt who not only acts silently but also communicates with and confides in others. Apparently, already in the Ramesside period, religious texts attached importance to the fact that Isis could listen and take advice from others and could take action even in moments of imminent danger.

Whereas Isis’s communication with Osiris went in one direction, with the child Horus (Greek: Harpokrates from Her-pa-khered, Horus-the-Child), a dialogue can be imagined, and indeed in one Demotic text it is probably Isis asking the divine child about the violation and restoration of the world order.[[16]](#endnote-17) This text, which is difficult to understand, has no known parallel and is probably best understood as a narrative interpretation of the well-known Horus myth, perhaps in the context of an Isis oracle in a temple or in the field of domestic magic.[[17]](#endnote-18) Much clearer is Spell 6 of the so-called Metternich Stela, a cippus of Horus from the reign of the 30th Dynasty pharaoh Nectanebo I (r. 360–342 BC).[[18]](#endnote-19) This spell is introduced with the words “I am Isis”; it is not only Isis, however, who speaks. Isis is said to have left the spinning mill where her brother Seth, the murderer of Osiris, sent her to work in the evening. It is there that she meets Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom. He reminds her of the fact that Horus is the heir of Osiris, who one day must be enthroned as the ruler of Egypt:

[block quote] Come, divine Isis!

It is also good to hear (to others)

And one lives when the other leads him.

Why don’t you hide with the young son?

that he may come to us (the gods),

once his limbs are firm

and all his powers have been created,

and you let him sit down on his throne,

by granting him the office of ruler of the two countries.[[19]](#endnote-20) [end block quote]

The utterance continues and reports how Isis is joined by seven scorpions that gather together and, for somewhat obscure reasons, sting the daughter of a lady, who is then immediately inflicted with some sort of fever. Isis, who feels responsible, steps in and speaks:

[block quote] Come to me, come to me!

Behold, my mouth has life.

I am the daughter who is known in her city,

because the worm gives way because of her utterance,

after my father raised me to know.[[20]](#endnote-21) [end block quote]

Isis manages to save the child from death, but more is to come. Her next words, repeated twice, are meaningful: they equate the dangers of the scorpions’ poison with the fate of Horus, who appears to be in a similar situation. Here we are dealing with ritual language, which creates emphasis and meaning through repetition:

[block quote] Oh, may the child live and the poison die,

may Ra live and the poison die,

then Horus may (also) recover for his mother Isis,

then the sick person may also recover.[[21]](#endnote-22) [end block quote]

This speech introduces Horus as the prototypical sick patient, who can be healed through the power of his mother’s magic words[[22]](#endnote-23) and thus becomes the model for every sick person. Moreover, it lays the foundation for the healing power of Isis, which was one of her cult’s most celebrated qualities during its triumphal proliferation throughout the Mediterranean.

Spell 14 of the Metternich Stela makes clear where Isis’s knowledge of healing and magic comes from. The power of Isis’s language is probably most clearly expressed here, again in a self-description:

[block quote] I am Isis, the goddess, the owner of magic,

who performs magic with powerful speech and with chosen words.[[23]](#endnote-24) [end block quote]

In this episode Horus, hidden in a papyrus thicket, appears to have been tracked down by Seth’s marauding gang, stabbed by a poison-bearing animal, and left to die. Isis was at first powerless. Although she asked her neighbors (the inhabitants of the Nile Delta) for help, no one could assist her. Even her sister, Nephthys, did not succeed in saving the young Horus until Isis as a last resort called upon the gods for help. The sun was interrupted in its course because of the violence of her calling.[[24]](#endnote-25) Once again, it was Thoth who tried to calm Isis, but she called to him angrily:

[block quote] Oh, Thoth, how great is your thought,

but how hesitant is (also) your behavior (. . .).

Behold, Horus is in need because of the poison

And his misfortune is such a bad one,

that the very needy (child) will die.[[25]](#endnote-26) [end block quote]

It is because Isis is able to call upon others for assistance that Horus is saved.

Speech in Lamentation and Burial

When investigating deities who interact with one another through speech in ancient Egypt, including Isis, cult hymns play an important role.[[26]](#endnote-27) In Egypt these hymns take the form of monologues directed to three types of audiences: a deity who remains passive during the performance (hymns to the gods), a previously defined active group of believers to whom a god speaks (aretalogy),[[27]](#endnote-28) and a deceased individual who recites the hymn for himself. A dialogue is not the intended outcome, although the hymns’ basic function as a form of communication is beyond doubt.[[28]](#endnote-29) As hymns aim at “involving an imaginary or actual reader,”[[29]](#endnote-30) their purpose is not an exchange of words in the form of a response or even a dialogue; the speaker does not expect a spoken response, and the person addressed usually remains passive. In certain circumstances a verbal act takes place separately, for instance, in the form of an offering ritual that follows the hymn. If, however, a hymn is intended to receive a response, the situation must be changed, for example, by introducing affirmative verbal forms such as the imperative, which we have seen above in Isis’s address to the sons of Horus.

While in magical texts the individual performing the ritual appears in the role of a god to force a certain positive or negative turn against the background of mythical events, funerary texts are more complex. Here we are dealing with literature for the dead, such as texts read by the deceased himself (the Book of the Dead),[[30]](#endnote-31) recitations (performed by priests for the deceased in the roles of gods, such as the Nightly Vigil), wishes,[[31]](#endnote-32) and prayers of the deceased,[[32]](#endnote-33) and sometimes even personal testimonies representing individual opinions.[[33]](#endnote-34) The recitation texts—including lamentations and mourning of the deceased, in which Isis sometimes appears as a speaker—fall into four categories: canonical lamentations, personal lamentations,[[34]](#endnote-35) lamentations during the funeral procession, and the Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys.[[35]](#endnote-36)

Recitation texts of the first category, the canonical lamentations, under which the lamentation for the deceased is subsumed, have their origin in transfiguration texts and were unified at an early date.[[36]](#endnote-37) These recitations are referred to as glorification texts, which make up part of elaborate mortuary liturgies.[[37]](#endnote-38) Their aim is to transform a dead person into an Ax (*akh*), a “glorified spirit,” who receives the status of an Osiris N. These texts are at home both in the embalming hall and in the burial chamber and were canonized as early as the Old Kingdom, around 2350 BC, inside the pyramid of the 5th Dynasty pharaoh Unas at Saqqara. Minimally edited and handed down from the Middle Kingdom at the latest until Roman times, these texts had a lifetime of more than twenty-four hundred years. Forming the largest corpus of funerary texts in ancient Egypt, the mortuary liturgies are also the oldest continuously used funerary texts in the world. They address primarily the transformation of the dead individual, a role that was traditionally performed by Isis, and the ascension of the dead to the sky in his transformation as an *akh*.

The dominant theme of the first of these main topics is the impressive description of the mourning of Osiris during mummification in the embalming hall. A Coffin Text of the Middle Kingdom describes the triple constellation of the active Isis and Nephthys and passive Osiris. The setting is the nocturnal hourly vigils, in the early morning hours before the funeral procession to the tomb begins:

[block quote] Trembling befalls the eastern land of light

at the wailing from the wry.t.

Isis is in great lamentation,

Nephthys cries

this oldest god, the lord of gods (Osiris).[[38]](#endnote-39) [end block quote]

The second category, the personal lamentations, are individual compositions. Here no two texts are alike, and no actual reenactment of the myth of Osiris is envisaged by the speaker, as an example from the New Kingdom Theban Tomb 338 (Maia) shows. The mythical subject of this spell is, again, Isis mourning Osiris:

[block quote] His beloved (sister?) Tai-imentet, she says

“My eyes are full of tears,

my heart is full of sorrow,

and my body is filled with pain for my good brother!

If I (nevertheless) find out what hurts him (the body),

I would command that he (the pain) leave him.”[[39]](#endnote-40) [end block quote]

The third category contains lamentations during the funeral procession. We are informed of their existence mainly through indirect references, such as quotations and incipits of funeral songs, as well as by ritual references, such as that of the Papyrus Ramesseum E from the early Middle Kingdom (ca. 1950 BC), in which the agents of the funeral procession are listed:

[block quote] [proceeding of the mourners] and K[enut] women

to all Rechit-people while they mourn.[[40]](#endnote-41) [end block quote]

The fourth category contains the most extensive collection of mourning songs of Isis and Nephthys. The chants, known in scholarly literature as lamentations, reenact the myth of Osiris and accompanied the funeral procession. In these lamentations, Isis and Nephthys are recognizable as independent actors who want to awaken their dead brother and prepare for his entrance into the underworld through their songs of mourning. Isis and Nephthys play almost interchangeable roles and ultimately serve the purpose of introducing Osiris to his mother, Nut, who—interpreted as a coffin—embraces him, as the Pyramid Texts state:

[block quote] Nephthys has embraced all your limbs

in this her name “Seshat, Lady of the builders.”

She has let you be healed by handing you over to your mother Nut

in her name “burial.”

She has embraced you in her name “coffin.” [[41]](#endnote-42) [end block quote]

According to the myth, restitution takes eight days, the time needed to reanimate Osiris to the point where he can even hear the lamentations and glorifications. According to Pyramid Text 670 and Coffin Text 754, this restitution takes place in two intervals of four days each, whose names contain plays on words: on the fourth day (jfdw) the evil was “wiped away” (fd), on the eighth day (Xmn.w) Osiris “forgot” (Xmn) what was done to him.[[42]](#endnote-43) According to Coffin Text 345, these days are holidays on which the deceased is addressed:

[block quote] O Osiris N here,

those who mourned Osiris shall mourn for you

on that feast of the fourth day.

Those who lamented Osiris shall lament you

on that feast of the eighth day,

on which the gods fainted.

O Osiris N here,

may Horus cleanse you in that lake of cooling!

O Osiris N here,

may Anubis, the embalmer, cover you.[[43]](#endnote-44) [end block quote]

In the funerary cult the myth of Osiris is integrated with a cult calendar, which prescribes the duration of certain ritual processes in detail. In other words, myth is synchronized in order to receive authenticity.[[44]](#endnote-45) Papyrus Berlin 3008—a Ptolemaic period document that records a later copy of the Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys, which were originally composed at an uncertain date—names the time and place of performance in detail: the fourth month of the flood, day 25, in all temples of Osiris Chontamenti.[[45]](#endnote-46) Thus it becomes evident that the mourning is a nationwide, ambulant lamentation. Apart from the deadlines to be observed, the theatrical character of these performances is supported by the alternating speeches of the two participants, Isis and Nephthys, who address Osiris in quick succession:

[block quote] Nephthys speaks, she says:

“O good king, come to your house,

Onnophris, justified, come to Djedet

Oh, passionate bull, come to Anpet,

oh, lover of women, come to Hat-mechit,

come to Djedet, to the place your Ba loves.

The Bas of your fathers are your companions,

your young son Horus, the child of your sister, is before you.

I am the light that guides you every day,

I will never leave you.” [end block quote]

Turning to Osiris, Nephthys continues:

[block quote] Oh, you Heliopolitan, come to Sais,

“Saite” is your name.

Come to Sais to see your mother Neith (Isis),

good child, you shall not move away from her.

Come to the breasts that overflow,

good brother, you shall not depart from her. [end block quote]

Finally, speaking to the ritual recipient, the deceased, Neith (that is, Isis) says:

[block quote] Oh, my son, come to Sais,

Osiris N.

Come to Sais, your city,

your place is in the palace,

you will rest here beside your mother.

She will protect your body, drive away your enemies,

it will protect your body forever.

Oh, good King, come to your house,

Lord of Sais, come to Sais![[46]](#endnote-47) [end block quote]

In this passage Nephthys refers to the Osiris myth, which is intended as a model for the deceased. There follows a speech by Isis that begins with similar words but is more detailed and deals above all with the death rites themselves in order to reassure her husband of their reliability. The main theme is a review of the succession to the throne of Egypt. Isis, the “King Maker,”[[47]](#endnote-48) uses the contact with Osiris to praise their son, Horus, the future king of Egypt:

[block quote] Isis speaks, she says:

“Come to your house, come to your house,

good king, come to your house.

Come, see your son Horus

as king of gods and men.

He has conquered cities and regions

with the greatness of his fame.

Heaven and earth are in awe of him,

the bow-land is in fear of him.

Your court of gods and men belong to him

in the Two Lands, performing your rites.

Your two sisters with you libate for your Ka,

your son Horus brings you sacrifices

in the form of bread, beer, oxen, and fowl.

Thoth recites your liturgy

and addresses you with his sayings.

The sons of Horus guard your body

and daily worship your Ka.

Your son Horus stands up for your name and your shrine,

and makes sacrifices to your Ka.

The gods, with vessels of water in their hands,

pour out water for your Ka.

Come to your court, King our Lord,

do not leave him.” [end block quote]

This concluding speech of Isis makes it clear that the primary function of these lamentations is to introduce the deceased to both his earthly family and the gods in the afterlife through the reception of offerings.

Of great importance, however, is the postscript to the lamentations of Papyrus Berlin 3008. This passage explains the context of the performance in more detail, and although—as made clear by the designation of all temples of Osiris Chontamenti as the location of the events—the text is at home in temple ritual, it harks back to its original use in funerary rites. But this postscript is highly significant for another reason, namely the location of these rites. Even though there is no lack of evidence for the procession of the dead in ancient Egyptian texts and monuments, the textual sources are surprisingly silent about the events of the actual burial. There are, however, texts, again mortuary liturgies, as well as the book with the title “The God’s protection is around (me),”[[48]](#endnote-49) whose recitation accompanied the lowering of the coffin into its chamber via the tomb shaft. It can be assumed that in the tombs of the Ramesside period a change in architectural practices made it possible for the closest family members to accompany the deceased to the door of the burial chamber. By means of winding descents underground, so-called sloping passages,[[49]](#endnote-50) the living were able to accompany the deceased to the final resting place. The majority of Egyptian burial chambers, though, could be reached only via narrow vertical shafts,[[50]](#endnote-51) with simple steps carved out of the rock, each of which offered space for only one person to ascend and descend, and were certainly not designed to cater to the elderly. Since in most cases the final rites could not be performed in front of the door of the burial chamber, they had to be carried out aboveground and at a time when only the closest relatives were still gathered.

The lamentations of Papyrus Berlin 3008 provide information about this event, which is also anchored in ritual. Here the interaction given in the myth can be considered in comparison to actual conditions during the burial, since the persons appearing in it play the roles of gods. This unique text, which immediately follows the speech of Isis, describes the ritual:

[block quote] Now after this has been recited, the burial site must be completely sealed off so that it is not seen or heard of by anyone other than the recitation priest and the sem-priest. Bring two women with beautiful bodies. They are to be made to sit on the floor at the main entrance to the hall of appearance. On their arms the names of Isis and Nephthys are to be written. Vessels of faience filled with water shall be placed in their right hands, offering bread from Memphis in their left hands, and their heads shall be inclined. To be performed in the third hour of the day, as well as in the eighth hour of the day. You shall not be tired in reciting this book in the hour of the feast.[[51]](#endnote-52) [end block quote]

From this postscript it becomes clear that the lamentations of Papyrus Berlin 3008 were to be recited during the lowering of the coffin by two women who appeared in the mythical roles of Isis and Nephthys. At the end of column 5 of the papyrus manuscript there is a sketchy drawing showing the two women, each holding a loaf of bread in one hand and a vessel in the other. One may assume that these vessels are the blue faience bowls, usually decorated with aquatic motifs, whose meaning in the funerary cult has not yet been fully explored.[[52]](#endnote-53)

In addition to the drawing on the papyrus manuscript itself, the unique ritual instruction of Papyrus Berlin 3008 can now be reconciled with a drawing on a New Kingdom ostracon on which the coffin is depicted as a pictogram. This sherd, apparently from Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, is part of the former Gardiner Collection and is now in the Manchester Museum, University of Manchester (fig. 3.3). Though it has been published a number of times,[[53]](#endnote-54) it has never been considered in its original context and associated with recitation texts performed, as depicted in the drawing. There can be no doubt that the structure shown on the ostracon is a cross section of a tomb shaft in which a person is seen descending. Most probably a priest, this person uses steps that have been cut into two opposing shaft walls. Ancient Egyptian depictions of underground tombs of this kind have rarely survived, but a representation on the papyrus of Nebqed, from the reign of the 18th Dynasty pharaoh Amenhotep III (r. 1391–1353 BC), shows that the Egyptians were quite concerned with the question of what happened in the underground part of the tombs,[[54]](#endnote-55) which was usually sealed off and therefore inaccessible. While the papyrus of Nebqed depicts only the supplies for the dead individual’s body provided by the Ba-bird, the ostracon from Manchester throws light on aboveground and underground funerary rites,[[55]](#endnote-56) depicting various stages of the final burial.

As indicated in the ritual instruction of Papyrus Berlin 3008, a lector priest is indeed present during the rites at the mouth of the tomb shown on ostracon Manchester 5886. There he is shown burning incense and pouring a libation. Next to him four mourning women are shown. From left to right, one holds her hand in front of her face, the next two have both hands raised, and the fourth female has her arms and hair hanging down. There is nothing to suggest that two of the female figures represent Isis and Nephthys, but according to the information provided by Papyrus Berlin 3008, the mourning rites are to be expected here, together with lamentations, incense, and libation spells. The scene shown on the top of the Manchester ostracon depicts the closing chapter of the funerary ritual. The scene at the bottom is related to the final rites, which include the deposition of the coffin. Therefore, it seems that the ostracon describes the final funeral rites in chronological order: after the coffin is placed in the burial chamber and recitations of funerary spells have finished, the priest climbs up through the tomb shaft and conducts, together with mourners, the final rites. The standardized execution of these rituals is marked by recitations of mortuary liturgies in the burial chamber and the Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys outside the tomb.

The activities of Isis in ancient Egyptian funerary cult suggest two different roles, which are at first glance closely connected. During the funerary rites, she helps to transform the deceased into Osiris and to introduce him to the other gods in the hereafter. The passive god Osiris is the “interlocutor,” who, while he does not speak, still reacts within the confines of the funerary rituals when he stands up to receive his offerings, ascends to the sky, and so on. These rites are located in the embalming hall or—insofar as they coincide with the offering rites—in the sphere of the tomb, accompanied by glorification texts known from mortuary liturgies. The second category includes the mourning rites,[[56]](#endnote-57) in which Osiris is bid farewell, accompanied by lamentations. But what performances and speech precede these final rituals and how does Isis guarantee their success? An important part of the farewell takes place when the dead individual is embraced. According to a Coffin Text, the farewell occurs at the entrance of the tomb before the interment of the deceased, when his dead body descends to the burial chamber located at the end of the tomb shaft:

[block quote]Anubis, the lord of the mouth of the shaft, is awake,

about this god, the son of the lord of gods.

Isis has her arms around you,

as she did for the Lord of All.[[57]](#endnote-58) [end block quote]

The mention of the Lord of All and the reference to the sunset[[58]](#endnote-59) are both chosen deliberately.[[59]](#endnote-60) In the cult of the sun, as in the funerary cult, the sky goddess Nut is usually the one with whom the idea of an embrace is associated. While relatives embrace the dead to bid a last farewell, Nut embraces him in a gesture of welcome. Within the mythical model of the death of Osiris, this concept is particularly attractive because Nut is in fact the mother of Osiris,[[60]](#endnote-61) and the embrace of the dead by Nut became a central motif of funerary belief,[[61]](#endnote-62) referring to rebirth. Nut welcomes and physically embraces Osiris, after Horus has ensured his father’s well-being in the beyond. In a Coffin Text of the Middle Kingdom that discusses the attachment of the head during the process of mummification, the lector priest describes this process in the words of Osiris as follows:

[block quote]My mother (Nut) gave me her secret transfiguration spells,

as my son spread his arms over me,

to remove the injury that Seth did to me,

in order to hide (or: heal) what he (Seth) did to me.[[62]](#endnote-63) [end block quote]

Isis, however, takes on her traditional mythical role as the wife and sister equipped with magical power. In the following text, Isis as goddess of the West (that is, the necropolis) explains this constellation in her own words, reassuring her husband of her love and protection:

[block quote] O Osiris N, welcome in peace!

I unite myself with you, I embrace you with my arms,

I bring life to your limbs;

I remain as the protection of your body,

I will wrap my arms around you for all eternity.[[63]](#endnote-64) [end block quote]

Apart from Isis’s authority as a goddess of magic, her traditional roles within funerary texts are widely varied, with her responsibilities as supporter of rituals and orchestrator of lamentations being the most important. She is able to fulfill both duties only through her ability to interact with other gods and her eloquence, paired with her perseverance in protecting her family. Her success in changing the fate of those she cares for is based on the ancient Egyptian understanding that death is not final. Clinical death, to use a modern term, is only a disease, and as a result, an individual suffering from death can be healed. Just as Isis can save her young child from deadly fever with powerful and persuasive utterances, she can override the possibility of a person’s second, and final, death through the application of myth played out in ritual. Or in other words, Isis’s spoken words are the medicine that ultimately saves the patient, the ritual is the surgery, and finally myth functions as an operation theater. No other goddess in ancient Egypt had the healing powers of Isis or was able to perform the ritual and live the myth that enabled her authority.

Hellenized Isis

For the ancient Greeks, Isis was particularly attractive because their own pantheon did not include a goddess who simultaneously possessed all these characteristics: a healer, a communicator, a protector, a fertility figure, a mother, and one who promised life after death. Individual female goddesses embodied some aspects of Isis, and the *interpretatio Graeca* (the Greek explanation and understanding of what was regarded as Egyptian religion) helped Isis worshippers to adjust her gradually to a new role in Greece as her cult was adopted. This development was significant enough to carry Isis via the island of Delos into Italy,[[64]](#endnote-65) before she eventually returned to Egypt as a Hellenized goddess during the Roman period (fig. 3.4).[[65]](#endnote-66)

While the healing power of Isis was certainly one of the features that attracted ancient Greeks to her the most, her role in the Osiris myth must have appeared as a paradox. To outsiders, it appeared that she had the power to awaken the dead, and while this may have appealed to some, this aspect of Isis was undoubtedly not regarded as useful. The Greeks did not worship dead gods,[[66]](#endnote-67) and they may have had political reservations regarding the resurrection of previous kings or dead husbands, making the myth of Osiris as Isis’s companion unappealing enough to have him written out of the role. When Isis reached foreign shores,[[67]](#endnote-68) she had left Osiris behind, as his character was untranslatable into the Greek worldview.

As for the Hellenized Isis, her role in funerary cult had to give way just as her iconography and the architecture of sanctuaries dedicated to her changed from their pharaonic antecedents (fig. 3.5). Accordingly, Osiris cults are very rare outside of Egypt, and where they do appear—as, for example, in Delos—almost nothing is known about them, or they were completely redesigned to transform Osiris, previously the god of the dead, into a god of happiness and bacchanalia through his association with Dionysus.[[68]](#endnote-69) In Ptolemaic Egypt and throughout the Mediterranean, Isis was given a new consort, the god Serapis, who combined aspects of Osiris and the sacred Apis bull of Memphis. Isis’s ability to listen to others and take advice was preserved when she appeared together with Serapis as a team of “hearing and healing gods.”[[69]](#endnote-70)

The role of Isis in relation to Osiris became limited to the finding of the sacred water of the Nile. The emergence of the sacred water, the sacramental interpretation of the bodily fluid of Osiris, was celebrated as an annual Isis festival called *inventio Osiridis* every year between October 29 and November 2 all across the Roman Empire.[[70]](#endnote-71) The concept of the river as the embodiment of the bodily fluids of Osiris is not restricted to the Nile Valley. It is also present in Greek riverine landscapes, including the Inopos River, on the island of Delos, which was thought to flow underneath the ocean bed to take the floods of the Nile to Greece.[[71]](#endnote-72) The finding of the sacred water is the central ritual of the Hellenistic Isis cult, and sanctuaries of Egyptian deities in the Aegean and Italy were without exception placed at natural or artificial water sources.[[72]](#endnote-73)

In the Mediterranean, however, the interaction of the goddess with other deities is limited. Isis is not silent, but she lacks others with whom to communicate. Instead of talking to other gods, she replaces them or shares sanctuaries with them, as in the cities of Kyme (in Asia Minor),[[73]](#endnote-74) Pergamon,[[74]](#endnote-75) and many others throughout the Aegean.[[75]](#endnote-76) What is important to note, however, especially in view of her unprecedented success in the Mediterranean, is the eloquence and sophisticated rhetoric Isis was still known for.

Probably the most important self-testimony of the goddess, which was spread exclusively in the Aegean, was the Hellenistic Isis aretalogy.[[76]](#endnote-77) Isis’s transition from Egyptian to universal goddess is evident in this text, which opens with the statement “I am Isis.”[[77]](#endnote-78) Her ability to monologize, as she does in the aretalogy, is indeed not something new, as pharaonic texts demonstrate. Versions of the aretalogy have been discovered on inscriptions in sanctuaries dedicated to Egyptian gods in Kyme, Thessaloniki, Maroneia, Andros, Telmessos, and on the islands of Ios and Delos.[[78]](#endnote-79) Later Roman authors quoted the aretalogy as well: Diodorus Siculus used a version of this text supposedly from Memphis in the first century BC. In his *Bibliotheca Historica*, he not only refers to the aretalogy of Isis but also alludes to her parting from Egypt:

[block quote] I am Isis, the queen of every land, she who was instructed of Hermes, and whatsoever laws I have established, these can no man make void. I am the eldest daughter of the youngest god Cronus; I am the wife and sister of the king Osiris; I am she who first discovered fruits for mankind; I am the mother of Horus the king; I am she who riseth in the star that is in the Constellation of the Dog; by me was the city of Bubastus built. Farewell, farewell, O Egypt that nurtured me.[[79]](#endnote-80) [block quote]

These texts show striking similarities to the Isis hymn in the eleventh book of the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius.[[80]](#endnote-81) In this text Isis speaks in the first person as well and describes her qualities, functions, and power of action. Although the content of the Isis aretalogy is primarily Greek in origin and addresses an exclusively Greek audience, it retains some knowledge of the Egyptian cult of the goddess. In the fifty-five lines of the fully preserved, stylized version of the text from Kyme,[[81]](#endnote-82) twelve aspects of Isis mentioned are consistent with the pharaonic goddess. At first glance this seems to be a considerable number, but in view of the fact that the Isis aretalogy names a total of fifty areas of responsibility for Isis, this correspondence is rather low and raises doubts regarding genuine references to pharaonic Egypt.[[82]](#endnote-83) Three-quarters of the new Isis’s characteristics are Greek in origin and not Egyptian. In other words, the goddess Isis who arrived in the Aegean is essentially a product of Hellenistic religious thinking.

In the Hellenistic period, Isis was associated with not only spoken but also written language. In the Isis aretalogy she claims to be the inventor of the Egyptian script: “I am Isis, the mistress of every country. I was brought up by Hermes (Thoth), and with Hermes I invented the script, the hieroglyphs and the Demotic script, so that not everything would be written with the same characters.”[[83]](#endnote-84) Gods could communicate with one another through writing. We are indeed informed that the ancient Egyptian gods sometimes wrote to each other in the form of letters.[[84]](#endnote-85) During the Hellenistic period this practice did not cease: Serapis was known as a letter writer.[[85]](#endnote-86) The majority of the gods’ utterances were spoken, however, and not written. In Hellenistic times Isis could apparently even bestow language itself. Thus, in a literary Isis aretalogy from the *Vita Aesopi*, a story has been preserved in which the mute slave Aesop meets the goddess Isis with the help of a priestess.[[86]](#endnote-87) In her prayer the priestess compares the absence of language to the absence of light: “At least give him language, for you are able to bring back what has fallen into darkness.”[[87]](#endnote-88) But Aesop, once he regains his language, wonders: “Where did I get the language from? (. . .) Certainly in gratitude for the fact that I acted piously against the priestess. So it is good to be pious. I expect to receive from the gods the good hopes (for a better hereafter).”[[88]](#endnote-89)

The relationship of Isis with her interlocutors has undergone a change. In Egypt, Isis spoke with gods but usually not with mortals,[[89]](#endnote-90) in accordance with her mythical role. In the Aegean, she spoke with the cult community but not with the gods. The example of the god Serapis, her consort in the Aegean, may explain this circumstance: with him there is no linguistic interaction. Instead her pairing with Serapis involved more of a division of tasks between two self-reliant deities than a constructive cooperation. This approach helped believers to differentiate the sometimes specific functions of Isis and Serapis, but it also makes it difficult to understand how the gods were assigned to certain tasks. For example, Serapis was regarded as a god who liberates slaves, especially in Boeotia,[[90]](#endnote-91) and Isis acted as a nurse for the sick and women in childbirth.[[91]](#endnote-92) In the Peloponnese, in contrast, Serapis was equated with Asclepius, the god of salvation,[[92]](#endnote-93) while in the name of Isis, it seems, a sanatorium was maintained in Philippi.[[93]](#endnote-94) This diversity of functions makes it difficult to assign clear responsibilities to Isis and Serapis. The Hellenized Isis, who was invoked by cult communities as the “One of a Thousand Names” and at the same time as “the Only One,” had successfully discarded the high degree of specialization of an ancient Egyptian deity and could be interpreted and worshipped in a wide variety of ways. These henotheistic traits, however, had their price—namely, her detachment, resulting in a lack of engagement with the other gods. Thus it is precisely the hymnal exclamation “I am Isis,” already emerging toward the end of pharaonic culture, that describes the maturing of Isis into a universal goddess, while at the same time diminishing her powers of communication and interaction.

Interaction between gods is naturally possible only where other gods exist—that is, in polytheistic religions and not in monotheism. Isis is the example of a deity who mastered the transition from a polytheistic to a henotheistic deity, even if not permanently.[[94]](#endnote-95) For the canonization of monotheism after polytheism, however, experiences with the autonomous rule of Isis were certainly groundbreaking, defining the renunciation of interaction with other divinities as desirable, since it proved that other gods no longer existed.

Inscriptions dating to 100 BC in the temple of Horus at Edfu (room E), written in hieroglyphs, have Isis say, “I am the only one.”[[95]](#endnote-96) Three hundred years later, a Latin inscription discovered in the Mithraeum of Santa Maria Capua Vetere addresses Isis as “una quae est omnia” (the one who is all),[[96]](#endnote-97) thus identifying her claim for exclusivity within the respective pantheons. Once again Isis is defined by language. The Romans were particularly aware of the fact that the boundary of thought formed by the Judeo-Christian God simultaneously draws the decisive language boundary; all other boundaries of the human language have only the character of demarcations. In the dialogue *Octavius*, authored by the early Latin apologist Marcus Minucius Felix (d. AD 250) a point is made that one God cannot be defined or described by any other name: “If I call him father, you will think of him earthly; if I call him king, you may consider him corporeal; if I call him lord, you will consider him mortal in the end (. . .). Remove the attachment from names, and you will see him in his glory!”[[97]](#endnote-98) Monotheistic religions trust in the authoritative communications of one God, and the first divinity who brought things into being with words was Isis.

1. Austin 1962. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. The abundance of popular literature on pharaonic Isis is matched only by a few reliable monographs, such as the fundamental work of Münster (1968) and the work of Dunand (2000), which also deals with the expansion of Isis into the Mediterranean. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. The earliest examples of the myth of Osiris as a consistent narrative appear only in the work of later Greek historians: Diodorus Siculus in the first century AD (*Bibliotheca Historica* 1.21) and Plutarch in the early second century AD (*De Iside et Osiride*; see Griffiths 1970). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Sethe 1910, PT 532=Pyr. §1256b; PT 701=Pyr. §2188a. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Sethe 1910, PT 535=Pyr. §1281a–1282a; PT 701=Pyr. §2192b. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. De Buck 1935, CT 74=I 306a–f. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. The abbreviation *N* denotes the individual deceased person who is ritually transformed into an Osiris, not the god Osiris. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. CT 48 = I.211d–212a. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. For example, on Papyrus Louvre N 3129 L/37.13–15, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010378546>; Trismegistos no. 56940, <https://www.trismegistos.org/hhp/detail.php?tm=56940>; see Assmann 2008, 49–50 (including other sources). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. Assmann 2008, 49–50. Unless otherwise noted, all translations of ancient texts are the author’s own. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Münster 1968, 2–3. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, C 286, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010026515>; translation in Assmann 1999, 479. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Lines 14–15, after Moret 1930, 714. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. Last reviewed in a monograph by Forgeau 2010, esp. 45–56. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. pMed. London XIV, 8–14; translated, for example, in Assmann 2004, 43. London, British Museum, EA 10059; Trismegistos no. 380900, <https://www.trismegistos.org/hhp/detail.php?tm=380900&i=2676>. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
16. Papyrus Wien D. 12006; see Stadler 2004. On the question of the identity of the interlocutors, see also Dielemans 2009, 227–28. Vienna, Papyrussammlung der Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
17. Stadler 2004, 272–73. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
18. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 50.85, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546037>; Sander-Hansen 1956, 35–43. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
19. Sander-Hansen 1956, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
20. Sander-Hansen 1956, 41. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
21. Sander-Hansen 1956, 41–42. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
22. For Isis as a magician who uses language, see Ritner 1993, 33–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
23. Sander-Hansen 1956, 38; Ritner 1993, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
24. Sander-Hansen 1956, 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
25. Sander-Hansen 1956, 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
26. Baruq and Daumas 1980; Assmann 1999. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
27. In hymns to the gods, priests or believers name and address a deity and proclaim its power to work. In contrast, in the Isis aretalogy the deity herself addresses believers and functions as a confessional hymn. Assmann (1975, 425) has applied the concept of aretalogy also to the texts of so-called personal piety, which he understood as “proclaiming the power of a deity.” Only a few texts take on the character of a miracle story, for example, the “Dream Revelation of Hathor” (see Assmann 1978). The term *aretalogy* has not become generally accepted for this genre of text, though. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
28. Knigge 2006, 16, 31–35. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
29. Knigge 2006, 35. The term *audience* may be more appropriate. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
30. Probably the most important collection of texts is the so-called Book of the Dead, in which the majority of the sayings are neither used liturgically nor recited individually by priests but “read” by the dead themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
31. This is probably the largest group; see Assmann 2002, 31. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
32. Particularly noteworthy here are the widespread Nut spells, which go back to models from the Old Kingdom and became more prominent, especially from the New Kingdom onward; see Falck 2001, 49–74; Bommas 2010, 53, fig. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
33. These are mainly ceiling texts in tombs of the New Kingdom; see Assmann 2005b, 347–88; Bommas 2015, 562–64. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
34. Lamentations by children are described by Assmann as “self-claims”; see Assmann and Kucharek 2008, 878. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
35. Smith 2009, 67–166, esp. texts 1, 2, 4–6. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
36. For example, the sequence of lamentations in Coffin Text proverbs CT 51–59 (Assmann 2002, 269) and CT 74 as well as Totenbuch chapter Tb 172 (Assmann 2002, 53). These compilations must be distinguished from individual creations; see Assmann and Kucharek 2008, 865. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
37. Assmann 2005a. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
38. Beginning of De Buck 1935, CT 49=I.215a–d; Assmann 2002, 266. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
39. Assmann and Kucharek 2008, 585. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
40. Díaz Hernández 2014, 27 (col. 83–84). For the performance of this ritual, see Bommas 2020. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
41. Sethe 1910, PT 364 = Pyr. §616a–e. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
42. Assmann 2002, 436. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
43. De Buck 1951, CT 345; Assmann 2002, 436. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
44. Bommas 1999, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
45. Berlin, Staatliche Museen, P. 3008; Trismegistos no. 57089, <https://www.trismegistos.org/hhp/detail.php?tm=57089>. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
46. For Papyrus Berlin 3008, see Lichtheim 2006, 116–21; Smith 2009, 129–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
47. Bommas 2011a. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
48. Altenmüller 1975, 762. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
49. Assmann 1984, 284–86. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
50. It is hard to image that the recently reexcavated but still unpublished shaft of the tomb of the governor of Beni Hassan, Baqet II (BH33), dating to the early Middle Kingdom (ca. 2000 BC), was accessed by family members, given its depth of twenty-four meters; Naguib Kanawati, Macquarie University, Sydney, communication with the author, November 15, 2019. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
51. Smith 2009, 133–34. Perhaps the final sentence refers to the long recitations during the burial ritual? [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
52. For the meaning of these bowls in the cult of the dead, see the approach of Strauss-Seeber 1974. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
53. Gardiner 1913; Steindorff and Wolf 1936, 47, fig. 11; David 2007, 186. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
54. Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département des Antiquités égyptiennes, N 3068, <https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010003125>; D’Auria, Lacovara, and Roehrig 1992, 44. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
55. The University of Manchester, The Manchester Museum, 5886, [http://harbour.man.ac.uk/mmcustom/Display.php?irn=100351.php](http://harbour.man.ac.uk/mmcustom/Display.php?irn=100351&QueryPage=%2Fmmcustom%2FEgyptQuery.php). I would like to thank Campbell Price, curator of Egypt and Sudan, Manchester Museum, University of Manchester, for the generously granted rights of use. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
56. Kucharek 2005, 342–58. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
57. De Buck 1935, CT 50 = I.228b–c; see Assmann 2002, 279. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
58. Is this to be understood as the time for the final rites at the tomb shaft? [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
59. On the connection between the course of the sun and the fate of the dead, which is particularly tangible in this passage, see Assmann 1990, chap. 6. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
60. This myth is cited in pLeiden I 346 (see Bommas 1999, 15–17) and in the fragments pBologna KS 3359 (to be discussed by the author in a forthcoming publication); pLeiden I 346, Leiden, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, AMS 23a vel 1, <https://www.rmo.nl/collectie/collectiezoeker/collectiestuk/?object=170923>; Trismegistos no. 34724, <https://www.trismegistos.org/text/34724>; pBologna KS 3359: Bologna, Museo Civico Archeologico, 3359; Trismegistos no. 110258, <https://www.trismegistos.org/hhp/detail.php?tm=110258>. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
61. See Rusch 1922, n. 20. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
62. De Buck 1956, CT 532 = VI.126i–l; translated in Assmann 2002, 245. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
63. Davies and Gardiner 1915, plate X. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
64. Malaise 1972. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
65. Bommas 2006, 221–39. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
66. Bommas 2005a, 25. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
67. She is first attested in Piraeus in 333/332 BC; see Bommas 2005a, 33–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
68. Bommas 2013, 100–101. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
69. Witt 1997, 185–97; Bommas 2005a, 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
70. Bommas 2011b, 85–91. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
71. Bommas 2005a, 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
72. Wild 1981. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
73. Bommas 2005a, 52. [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
74. Mania 2001; Bommas 2005b. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
75. Bommas 2005a. [↑](#endnote-ref-76)
76. Totti 1985, 1–4; translated in Merkelbach 2001, 115–18. Where the text actually comes from is the subject of a heated debate that cannot be discussed in detail here. Basically, two camps have formed (Stadler 2005, 7–9), one of which believes that this text, written in Greek, is—as the text itself claims—of Egyptian origin. (Quack 2003 translated the Greek text into a fictitious demotic. This is a questionable procedure without probative value.) The other considers the text to be Greek and its self-referential character to be secondary due to stylistic investigations and nongenuine functional descriptions of Isis. [↑](#endnote-ref-77)
77. On the concept of aretalogy in ancient Egypt, see Assmann 1975. The incipit of this text was used by Jan Bergmann as the title of his book (Bergmann 1968). [↑](#endnote-ref-78)
78. Merkelbach 2003, 113; Bommas 2005a, 52–53; see also Mazurek 2018, 635n126. [↑](#endnote-ref-79)
79. Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca Historica* 1.27; translated in Oldfather 1933–67, 1:86–89. [↑](#endnote-ref-80)
80. Apuleius, *Metamorphoses* XI.5. See Kenney 2004; Mazurek 2018, 622–23. [↑](#endnote-ref-81)
81. Bommas 2004, 142n15. [↑](#endnote-ref-82)
82. Müller (1961, 89–90, including the texts in hieroglyphs) drew attention to the Isis hymns on both sides of the entrance to the central chapel of the temple of Isis at Aswan; see the more recent (and sometimes deviating) copy by Bresciani 1978, 102, 104. Another example for the self-portrayal of a deity is the stela of Amenhotep III, found behind the Colossi of Memnon, in which Amun-Re speaks in the first person. [↑](#endnote-ref-83)
83. Translated in Merkelbach 2001, 115. [↑](#endnote-ref-84)
84. Thus in the “Narrative of Horus and Seth”; Lichtheim 1976, 215. On the subject of the celestial letters, or *Himmelsbriefe*, see Merkelbach 2001, 126–27, with an example of the introduction of the Serapis cult in Opus; Bommas 2005a, 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-85)
85. In addition to celestial letters, invitations to cult banquets should also be mentioned, which have been documented only in Egypt—but there in large numbers; Bommas 2005a, 99–100, fig. 120; Sharp 2010, 97–98, fig. 90. [↑](#endnote-ref-86)
86. Possibly this text originates from the Artemis cult; see Merkelbach 2001, 222. [↑](#endnote-ref-87)
87. Merkelbach 2001, 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-88)
88. Merkelbach 2001, 223. [↑](#endnote-ref-89)
89. The only early exception known to me is an oracle scene from the Ramesside period, in which a colonel of the security authority named Pa-en-Ra during a barque procession first addresses Isis hymnally before receiving her oracle’s message (Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1894; Frood 2007, 194). [↑](#endnote-ref-90)
90. Bommas 2005a, 69–70. [↑](#endnote-ref-91)
91. Bommas 2005a, 34. [↑](#endnote-ref-92)
92. Bommas 2011b, 82–83. [↑](#endnote-ref-93)
93. Bommas 2002, 134–35. [↑](#endnote-ref-94)
94. For a definition of henotheism in relation to prophetic monotheism, see Lang 1998, 152. [↑](#endnote-ref-95)
95. Junker 1910, 59 (ad 51), 117 (ad 66). [↑](#endnote-ref-96)
96. Merkelbach 2001, 98. [↑](#endnote-ref-97)
97. Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 18.10. For an English translation of the entire chapter, see <http://www.tertullian.org/fathers2/ANF-04/anf04-34.htm#P5633_859358>. [↑](#endnote-ref-98)