Introduction

The song cycle *The Goddess Isis in Song* originated as an Undergraduate Research Fellowship focused on exploring connections between religious music and the culture from which it came. As I dove into Egyptian mythology, I became fascinated with the complex network of timelines and stories weaved together in this belief system. *The Goddess Isis in Song* was born as a result of investigating Isis’ character arc by tracing her evolution throughout the pharaonic period.

To truly understand Isis’ character arc, some background information on Egyptian myth is needed. The ancient Egyptians believed in a cyclical timeline, and they passed on their myths using an oral tradition. There was no one official religious text such as the Quran or the Bible, and the myths were never codified into one volume such as Hesiod’s *Theogony*, an important text for the study of Greek mythology. Because of this, many variations of myths can be found, and the various characteristics of gods and goddesses tend to be melded together to form new identities. As with many ancient religious, the geography and natural features of the land the ancient Egyptians inhabited played an important role within their belief system.

The annual Nile flood made the Nile valley and Delta inhabitable, providing the soil of the Black Land (land near the Nile and Delta) with nutrients in stark contrast to the barren deserts of the Red Land. Because of this, many Egyptian deities are associated with the yearly inundation, though they strangely did not have any deities of the sea. There was rarely rain in ancient Egypt, which made for ideal stargazing conditions. As a result, many of the important gods and goddesses of Egyptian mythology are tied to celestial bodies.

As the Nile flood was the sole sustainer of life, it became a symbol of *ma’at*, which is the divine order established by the creator deity. The opposition to this divine order was *mnn*, the personification of chaos or *ispet*, often shown to be a primeval water from which life emerged. Many deities have been associated with the creator, most commonly Ra. Ancient Egyptians believed that Ra originally lived in Egypt, but withdrew to the heavens. However, he and other gods could be persuaded to return to earth to offer advice or help to those in need.

Historical Context

The timeline of Egyptian myth was often altered from King to King and Pharaoh to Pharaoh, often to make the Pharaoh appear to be descended from the most powerful god or goddess. The first time we recognize this happening is in the Predynastic and Early Dynastic Periods, lasting from roughly 3200-2686 BCE. During this time, Egypt was not a united kingdom, with the Southern Kingdom praising the god Seth and the Northern Kingdom becoming equated with Horus. During this time the system of hieroglyphic writing was invented. By the emergence of the first dynasty, the Pharaoh himself was equated with Horus, and was the political and religious leader of all of Egypt. Various other gods emerged during this time, becoming the specific patrons of towns, but always under Horus. All these deities were synthesized into the Two Ladies and Two Lords, which is where the goddess Isis emerges.
In the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period from 2686-2055 BCE, we see the first pyramids being built and we have the first instances of written texts on religion, such as the Pyramid Texts. In this time, the king is called the Son of Ra, emphasizing his divine right to the throne. The Pyramid Texts were inscribed on the tombs of Pharaohs, meaning to guide their journey to the afterlife. The Pyramid texts form the basis for our modern understanding of Egyptian mythology, and over 200 deities are mentioned within these texts. There are nine deities whose importance is stressed constantly throughout the Pyramid texts who will form the Ennead, otherwise known as the Great Hermopolis, similar to the twelve olympians of Greek mythology. These gods are Ra, Seth, Geb, Nut, Isis, Osiris, Nephthys, Shu, and Thoth.

In the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period from 2055-1550 BCE, we see two more important texts emerge: the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead. Again, these texts are inscribed on the Coffins and pyramids of the dead to assist them in the afterlife with various spells and incantations. While the Pyramid Texts made allusions to the creation story, it is with the Coffin Texts that we get the first complete telling of the major events in Egyptian Mythology. Within the New Kingdom and Third Intermediate Period, lasting from 1550-747 BCE, we see the emergence of familial ties in the worship of deities, with these family groups being worshipped as one. It is during this time that we see Isis, Osiris, and Horus being portrayed as a family unit.

In the Late Period and the Ptolemaic Period from 747 to 30 BCE, Egypt fell under siege from several powerful empires, being occupied by foreign powers and fighting for their independence during much of this period. Much of Egyptian myth was developed during this period in the attempt to solidify a national identity. Isis and Horus emerge at the forefront of deities worshipped during this time. In the Roman Period, from 300 BCE to 395 CE, the Roman rule of Egypt saw a melding of Greek and Egyptian mythic traditions, with prominent gods and goddesses being equated with each other such as Athena and Isis. In the next 300 years, Christianity became the dominant religion in Egypt. In this transition between religions, we see that Isis was equated with the Virgin Mary and her son Horus evolved into Baby Jesus.

**Timeline of Major Mythic Events**

I have laid out the following mythological events, but as aforementioned, the Egyptians would not have conceived of these events in linear time. The Egyptian mythological timeline is divided into seven parts, these being chaos, the emergence of the creator, the creation of the world, the reign of the sun god, the period of direct rule by other deities, a period of rule by kings, and finally a return to chaos.

In the beginning chaos, all of the source material for life and earth was contained in the dark waters known as the **mnu**. Eventually, the creator emerges from the **mnu** and speaks the earth and humanity into existence. The details of this creation become murky depending on who is the creator, but the divine order is always established. In this time, the earth and sky are made separate and personified by Geb and Nut respectively. Geb and Nut become the parents of Osiris,
Seth, Horus, Isis, and Nephthys in some sources. The creation of humanity is glossed over in many texts, but where it is mentioned humans emerge from tears cried by the creator.

In the next sequence of events, humanity is ruled directly by the sun god, usually Ra. In some stories, Isis is a human during this period of time and tricks Ra into revealing his true name, gaining power over him and becoming a goddess. This illustrates humanity becoming wicked and rebelling against Ra, and he sends his Eye (often personified as Isis) to destroy humanity and Ra returns to the sky, commanding the solar barge which propels time and divides night from day.

From this point on, humanity is ruled by either other gods and eventually by Pharaohs in Ra’s stead. The first god to take on this mantle is Geb, who passes the title to Osiris, who is married to Isis at this point. Seth becomes jealous of Osiris’ power, and brutally murders him to seize the throne, scattering his body throughout Egypt. Isis sings a terrible lament, and is joined by her sister Nephthys in searching for his body, eventually reanimating him and becoming pregnant with their son Horus. As the mother of Horus, Isis becomes the goddess who assists women in childbirth, guiding souls into the world.

Osiris becomes the main funerary god, and because Seth is still in power, Isis must go into hiding with Horus. While in the wild, Horus is poisoned by either a snake or scorpion, and Isis’ cries of terror are so powerful that they stop the journey of the solar barge. The creator god hears her plea for help and sends the ennead, the nine chief Egyptian deities, to heal Horus. Horus goes on to defeat Seth, in a Divine Tribunal usually led by Geb, eventually taking his rightful throne.

After all the gods returned to the solar barge, the period of rule by kings began. The king was charged with maintaining the ma’at established by the creator. Humanity continues to worship the gods, and a few tales tell of humans encountering the gods here and there. Because of her association with Osiris, Isis becomes the goddess who helps guide souls into the afterlife, leading them into the realm of her husband.

Egyptian myth predicts a return to chaos, after humanity becomes too rebellious and divided, quarrels form among deities driving them apart, and the creator becomes too weary, allowing the earth to descend back into the Nun, allowing the cycle to be complete but also spurring on regeneration.

The Goddess Isis in Song pays tribute to five different aspects of Isis, all taken from different variations of the mythical canon. Each aspect of Isis has been related to important events in Isis’ timeline, and every event has been given a movement to commemorate it. These events are as follows: the transformation of Isis from human into goddess, the mourning of her husband Osiris and the hunt for his body, the poisoning of her son Horus, Isis guiding the human soul through birth and the afterlife, and finally Isis emerging as the supreme sorceress and creator goddess. Although many details of Isis’ character change throughout her different iterations, she is always described as wise and she is associated with the dawn, which symbolizes the beginning of life and power.
Works Cited


