

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

Aset

Aset/Isis is the daughter of the Earth, Geb and the Sky, Nut.¹ She is one of a pair of goddesses with her less beautiful sister, Nephthys. They have two brothers, the gods Osiris and Set, who are also, respectively, their husbands. They are a Divine Tetrad, a linked group of four deities, which is associated with the development of settled agrarian living. Aset and Osiris symbolise day, light and the organised and productive farmland of Egypt, while Set and Nephthys are night and darkness as well as the chaotic desert with its sandstorms and droughts and the destructive yet life-giving power of the annual Nile floods. The sisters Aset and Nephthys clearly parallel Inanna and Ereshkigal.

Aset's name, in hieroglyphs, contains the symbols for a throne and an egg. In her earliest depictions, Aset's headdress is a throne, although later, after she had been syncretised with Hathor, she wore the sun-disc and horn headdress of the latter deity as well, with the throne on top of the disc.² Again this parallels Inanna, whose headdress was of horns.³

The identification of Aset with the throne is important and represents a significant development of the mythology concerning kingship. In Sumer, Inanna conferred the power to rule through the Sacred Marriage. In Egypt, the power to rule is conferred in the form of the throne itself.

Nearly all the representations of Aset place her in close proximity to the throne, either through her headdress or a real throne. In the latter cases, she is almost always seen behind the throne and the seated king. Frequently, she is accompanied by Nephthys. Together, they are the Goddess.

When Aset is depicted standing behind the throne of Osiris or the king, the throne part of her head-dress usually disappears and, instead, the monarch is sitting on it. The Goddess, through Aset, confers the power to rule to the monarch, by giving him the throne and her blessing. Thus the Goddess is not merely protecting the king, but creating him. She is, literally, the king-maker.

¹ Note that the genders of the Earth and Sky are inverted from the Sumerian version.

² Hathor's head-dress, with the sun held by cow's horns, symbolises that the sun is under the control of the Goddess. She controls time.

³ The horns are sometimes described as 'bull's horns' but this is incorrect. They are cow's horns. The Sumerian Ki, the Goddess Earth, was 'the Good Cow' and Inanna, as an anthropomorphic representation of Ki, wears cow horns. Hathor was also the 'Divine Cow' and is represented as such at Hypostyle Hall of the Chapel of Hathor, 'Temple of Millions of Years' of Queen Hatshepsut, West Uaset-Thebes. Bulls and their horns represent the male element in goddess theology.

The king is acting in Aset's name and by her divine authority. This device has been a useful political tool for monarchs for millennia. It is the origin of the claim 'divine right to rule'. Her authority is what gives the king's deeds and words legal and religious sanction and what protects him against usurpers.

Egyptian kings were transformed into Osiris through ritual and culture. They became the consort of the Goddess, and it was this relationship that gave them the power of monarchy. The difference between the Sumerian and Egyptian cultures is only that the ritualised sexual element of the union is far more emphasised in the former. The underlying cultural meaning is the same.

At the temple of Seti I at Abydos in Upper Egypt, a carved relief illustrates the point. Here, Ramses II is depicted wearing Osiris' tall, bulbous headdress, symbolising the identity of king and deity. He is sitting on the throne, and Aset stands behind him. As usual in images like this, the throne element of her head-dress is missing, since the king is sitting on it. Her right hand is raised, not in defence or warning, but in blessing, and in her left she holds an ankh.

The ankh is a form of a cross with the upper element formed from the shape of a womb, egg or fruit. The lower is a phallic element, here penetrating the womb. It symbolises the union of the sexes that makes life possible and, because it represents both male and female elements, it symbolises the power of creation.⁴

The ankh in Aset's hand is an important part of the gift she brings. She has given the king the throne of Osiris to sit on. With the ankh, which contains the Fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, she gives him the divine wisdom necessary for a king to rule – to be the earthly representation, indeed incarnation, of the good and wise Osiris.

⁴ The ankh has many references to the Goddess. For example, another is that it represents the rising sun over the Nile, with the upper oval the sun, the horizontal bar the surface of the river and the lower upright being the light reflected from the water. This is a parallel with the blood-coloured egg of Shammuramat rising at dawn over the Euphrates, making it a symbol of Goddess resurrection. The ankh is a hugely potent Goddess object.