

The Movement from East to West

Hegel's Interpretation of the Egyptian Goddess Neith*

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It is well known that history plays a key role in Hegel's thinking, and it is for good reason that one of his most read texts is his famous *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*. It is therefore no surprise that in his treatments of the different fields, such as art and religion, he gives detailed historical overviews in order to see how the key ideas and concepts in these fields arose and developed over time. In these overviews Hegel displays both an enormous learning in a number of different disciplinary areas and a great feel for historical change over long periods of time.

In the narratives that he presents about the development of, for example, religion, history, art or philosophy, Hegel devotes special care to the moments of transition, when one concept gives way to another, or when a new age replaces an older one. One of the most important junctures in these narratives is the shift from what he regards as Eastern thinking to Western thinking. As is well known, according to his account, in history a movement from East to West can be discerned. Given this, it is especially important to determine when specifically the shift takes place and what it means. At what point does the

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development of Spirit become Western? Only in this way can the specific characteristics of the West be properly discerned and defined.

Hegel identifies the important shift from East to West specifically with the transition from Egyptian civilization to Greek civilization. Egypt marks the culmination of the development of the Asian world, whereas Greece marks the beginning of Western history. His *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* trace the following sequence of peoples: China, India, Persia, Egypt (the Orient), which are followed by Greece, Rome and the Germanic World (the Occident). His *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, generally speaking, run parallel to this. For example, his lectures from 1827 organize the world religions in the sequence: Magic, Buddhism, Lamaism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Egyptian Religion (the religions of nature), which are followed by Greek Religion, Judaism, Roman Religion (the religions of spirit), and Christianity. (It should, however, be noted that he is not entirely consistent and at times changes the placement of individual religions in the sequence. In this respect, his biggest problem seems to have been the proper placement of Judaism since he went back and forth on the question of whether Judaism belongs to the East or the West).

The point of transition between East and West, which is described as the movement from Egypt to Greece, thus holds a unique place in Hegel's scheme, and for this reason it deserves special attention. At this key point he presents a striking and complex image to capture this transition. He refers to the message of the Egyptian goddess Neith, which is taken as a contrastive term to specific elements in Greek culture. In the present article I wish to explore Hegel's use of this motif and the background that informs it. The goal is to understand why he thinks that this comparison is a fitting way to capture the crucial transition from ancient Egypt to Greece with respect to both history and religion.

Unfortunately, Hegel's use of this rich motif has not attracted much attention in the secondary literature. The lone exception

to this is Udo Reinhold Jeck's thorough study, which gives a useful overview of Hegel's sources¹. However, despite its title, this work is more of a general study of Hegel's understanding of ancient Egyptian religion and less a focused account of the figure of the goddess Neith. Moreover, Jeck seems not to appreciate the important placement of this motif in Hegel's work, as the cusp between the Orient and the Occident. I broached this topic briefly in my recent work on Hegel's philosophy of religion², but I wish to return to it here since much more needs to be said about it and about Hegel's sources for it.

If there can be any doubt about the importance of the motif of the Egyptian goddess Neith for Hegel, one need only consider the fact that he appeals to it a handful of times in "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate"³, and in his Berlin *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* and *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*.⁴ This might be simply dismissed with the argument that Hegel was making use of the well-known professorial practice of recycling his lectures, but the fact that he returns to this motif in these different contexts is significant since it indicates that he takes there to be something important about this motif.

1. See UDO REINHOLD JECK, "Die enigmatische Inschrift zu Sais. Hegels spekulative Deutung eines ägyptischen Mythologems aus dem Geist des orientalisierenden Platonismus", *Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung*, vols. 15–17, 2014, pp. 159–275.

2. STEWART, *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World*, pp. 192–195.

3. *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. by Herman Nohl, Tübingen: Verlag von J.C.B. Mohr, 1907, p. 250n; *Early Theological Writings*, transl. by T.M. Knox, Fragments transl. by Richard Kroner, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1975, p. 191n.

4. HEGEL, *LPWH*, vol. 1, p. 367; *VPWG*, vol. 1, p. 310. See also *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 152; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 58. *LPR*, vol. 2, pp. 638f.; *VPR*, Part 2, pp. 531f. *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 746; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 631.

1. The Egyptian Goddess Neith in the Ancient Sources

Neith was a goddess who was worshiped in Sais, which was the capital city of Egypt in the 26th Dynasty⁵. Sais was home to a large temple dedicated to her cult. Today neither the ancient city nor the temple survives. There are at least four ancient Greek sources who mention Neith in one way or another, the most important of which are the writer Plutarch, who flourished in the first century AD, and the Neoplatonist Proclus⁶. The goddess is also mentioned in lesser detail by Plato and Herodotus. The Greek sources tended to translate the gods of other religions into the ones they were familiar with from their own Greek pantheon, even though the fit was not always perfect. In this sense Neith was identified with the goddess Athena.

In his accounts of ancient Egyptian religion, Hegel draws extensively on Plutarch's work *Isis and Osiris*, which constitutes a part of the *Moralia*⁷. It can be said that this is his main source of information on this subject. With regard to Neith, Plutarch writes, "In Sais the statue of Athena, whom they believe to be Isis, bore the inscription: 'I am all that has been, and is,

5. See C.J. BLEEKER, "The Egyptian Goddess Neith", in his *The Rainbow: A Collection of Studies in the Science of Religion*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975 (*Studies in the History of Religions* (Supplements to *Numen*), vol. 30), pp. 128–142.

6. See CHRISTINE HARRAUER, " 'Ich bin, was da ist. . . ' Die Göttin Sais und ihre Deutung von Plutarch bis in die Goethezeit", *Wiener Studien. Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie und Patristik*, vols. 107–108, 1994–95 (ΣΦΑΙΡΟΣ, Festschrift for Hans Schwabl), pp. 337–355.

7. Hegel owned the following edition of Plutarch: *Plutarchi Chaeronensis quae supersunt Omnia, cum adnotationibus variorum adjectaque lectionis diversitate Opera*, vols. 1–14, ed. by J.G. Hutten, Tübingen: J.G. Cotta, 1791–1804. (This work is listed as entry numbers 470–483 in *Verzeichniß der von dem Professor Herrn Dr. Hegel und dem Dr. Herrn Seebeck, hinterlassenen Bücher-Sammlungen*, Berlin: C.F. Müller, 1832. This work is reprinted as "Hegels Bibliothek. Der Versteigerungskatalog von 1832", ed. by Helmut Schneider in *Jahrbuch für Hegelforschung*, vols. 12–14, 2010, pp. 70–145.) See *Isis and Osiris in Plutarch's Moralia*, vols. 1–16, transl. by Frank Cole Babbitt, London: William Heinemann Ltd, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1936 (*Loeb Classical Library*), vol. 5, pp. 7–191.

and shall be, and my robe no mortal has yet uncovered”⁸. It is this epigram which proved so fascinating for later writers. In Hegel’s reading notes to Aloys Hirt’s *Ueber die Bildung der Aegyptischen Gottheiten*⁹, he made a note of this passage from Plutarch, which is referenced by Hirt¹⁰. The claim that the goddess is hiding something which has yet to be unveiled seems to imply a mystery cult with secret rites. This is important since Plutarch emphasizes the mysterious nature of the Egyptian philosophy and religion in this context: their philosophy “is veiled in myths and in words containing dim reflections and adumbrations of the truth, as they themselves intimate beyond question by appropriately placing sphinxes before their shrines to indicate that their religious teaching has in it an enigmatical sort of wisdom”¹¹. Plutarch thus associates the sphinx with mystery—a point which Hegel also picks up on.

In the 5th century, the philosopher Proclus, in his commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus*, also quotes the inscription, writing “the Egyptians [...] relate that the following epigram is carved upon the goddess’s inner sanctuary: ‘I know everything that was, is and shall be. Nobody has removed the covering of my cloak. The fruit that I have brought forth the Sun has generated.’”¹² Here he adds an extra line to the formulation found in Plutarch, i.e., “The fruit that I have brought forth the Sun has generated”. Again in his reading notes to Hirt’s work, Hegel

8. See *Isis and Osiris in Plutarch’s Moralia*, vol. 5, Chapter 9, p. 25.

9. ALOYS HIRT, *Ueber die Bildung der Aegyptischen Gottheiten*, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1821, pp. 22f.

10. HELMUT SCHNEIDER, “Hegel und die ägyptischen Götter. Ein Exzerpt”, *Hegel-Studien*, vol. 16, 1981, p. 65: “Sais—Inscription bey Plut[arch] de Is[ide] et Os[iride] p. 354”.

11. *Isis and Osiris*, vol. 5, Chapter 9, pp. 23f.

12. PROCLUS, *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus*, vol. 1, Book 1, Proclus on the Socratic State and Atlantis, transl. by Harold Tarrant, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, Book 1, p. 192 (translation modified). Hegel owned the following edition: ΠΡΟΚΛΟΥ ΔΙΑΔΟΧΟΥ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΙΚΟΥ ΕΙΣ ΤΗΝ ΠΛΑΤΩΝΟΣ ΘΕΟΛΟΓΙΑΝ ΒΙΒΛΙΑ ΕΞ. *Procli successoris Platonici in Platonis Theologiam, Libri sex*, Hamburg: Apud Michaellem Heringivm, 1618. This work is listed as entry 381 in “Hegels Bibliothek”.

notes this reference¹³. Proclus continues, “Hence the goddess is involved in creation processes, invisible and at the same time visible, possessing an allocated portion in the heaven while illuminating generation below by means of the forms”¹⁴. Neith was associated with the Egyptian conception of creation which might explain why she has knowledge of all things past, present and future.

In the text discussed by Proclus, namely, Plato’s *Timaeus*, Critias recounts the following as a part of an alleged account about Solon’s travels to Sais:

In the Egyptian Delta, at the head of which the river Nile divides, there is a certain district which is called the district of Sais, and the great city of the district is also called Sais, and is the city from which King Amasis came. The citizens have a deity for their foundress: she is called in the Egyptian tongue Neith, and is asserted by them to be the same whom the Hellenes call Athena.¹⁵

Hegel also references Plato as a source for information about Neith in his reading notes¹⁶. Absent, however, in this account is the inscription that Hegel finds so important.

The historian Herodotus also refers to the temple at Sais and the religious festivals associated with it. He respects the Egyptians’ secret religious traditions and does not provide the reader with the sacred inscription¹⁷. Given Hegel’s familiarity with Herodotus, it seems safe to assume that he was also

13. See SCHNEIDER, “Hegel und die ägyptischen Götter. Ein Exzerpt”, p. 65: “Genauer Proclus in Tim[aeum] I. p. 30 über dem Eingang zum Allerheiligsten ihres Tempels ‘was ist, was war, und was seyn wird, bin ich. Niemand hob meine Tunica. Die Frucht, die ich gebar, war Helios.’ (In den Beschreibungen, Gebilden ist nichts von einem Schleier erwähnt, oder zu sehen)”.

14. PROCLUS, *Commentary on Plato’s Timaeus*, vol. 1, Book 1, p. 192.

15. PLATO, *Timaeus* 21e. English translation quoted from *Timaeus*, transl. by Benjamin Jowett, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. by Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, 11th printing, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982, pp. 1156f.

16. See SCHNEIDER, “Hegel und die ägyptischen Götter. Ein Exzerpt”, p. 64: “Neith Plato Tim[aeus] p. 21”.

17. See HERODOTUS, *Histories*, Book II, 28, 59, 62, 83, 169–170, 175, 182.

attentive to these references, although he does not explicitly mention him as a source in this context.

2. The Egyptian Goddess Neith in the Modern Sources

In addition to the ancient sources, the goddess Neith was also a motif used by a number of modern writers including those in Hegel's own time¹⁸. Indeed, this ancient motif was one that became famous in the 18th century. Johann Andreas von Segner (1704–77), a Hungarian natural scientist (János András Segner), made use of this motif in his *Einleitung in die Natur-Lehre*, which first appeared in 1746¹⁹. On the cover of the work, the veiled goddess is depicted with a thick robe that covers her entire body. Prevented from seeing her directly, the followers of science hasten to follow after her and to measure the length of her stride and study her gown. They try to gain whatever knowledge they can from empirical observation, so to speak, from the outside, short of lifting her veil.

In 1784 Ignaz von Born (1742–91), the head of the freemasons' lodge in Vienna, published an article entitled "Ueber die Mysterien der Aegyptier", which appeared in the lodge's journal²⁰. With reference to Plutarch's account in *On Isis and Osiris*, he refers to the motif of the goddess at Sais, confusing her with the goddess Isis: "The knowledge of nature is the final goal of our efforts. We honor this producer, nourisher and

18. A wonderful overview of these modern sources is given by Jan Assmann in his *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais. Schillers Ballade und ihre griechischen und ägyptischen Hintergründe*, Stuttgart and Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1999. This motif continues to inspire thinkers to this day. See PIERRE HADOT, *Le Voile d'Isis: Essai sur l'histoire de l'idée de nature*, Paris: Gallimard, 2004.

19. JOHANN ANDREAS SEGNER, *Einleitung in die Natur-Lehre*, Göttingen [no publisher listed] 1746. Assmann calls into question whether the image on the cover of Segner's work is really a reference to the goddess Neith. See his *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais*, p. 38.

20. IGNAZ VON BORN, "Ueber die Mysterien der Aegyptier", *Journal für Freymaurer*, vol. 1, 1784, pp. 17–132.



Figure 1. Title page of Segner's *Einleitung in die Natur-Lehre*.

maintainer of all created things under the image of Isis. Only he removes her veil with impunity who knows her full power and strength"²¹. Here Born seems to follow Proclus' account with the portrayal of the goddess as a kind of mother nature, responsible for all creation. Born was himself a scientist, and

21. *Ibid.*, p. 22: "Die Kenntniß der Natur ist der Endzweck unserer Anwendung. Diese Zeugerinn, Nährerin und Erhalterinn aller Geschöpfe verehren wir unter dem Bilde der Isis. — Nur jener deckt ihren Schleyer ungestraft auf, der ihre ganze Macht und Kraft kennt".

thus it was natural for him, like Segner, to use this image to represent the secrets of scientific knowing in general.

The philosopher Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1757–1823), later known for his letters about Kantian philosophy, was a member of Born's freemasons' lodge in Vienna. In 1788 he published a work entitled *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey* under his lodge name Bruder Decius²². He tries to argue that when founding Judaism, Moses made use of the key aspects of Egyptian religion, which he had learned from the priests. In this work Reinhold, presumably inspired by Born, also refers to the motif of Neith: "Who among us, my brothers, is ignorant of the ancient Egyptian inscription, the one on the pyramid at Sais: 'I am everything that is, was and will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil' . . ." ²³. Instead of seeing the veiled statue as an image of the natural sciences, he puts this in the context of the history of religion. He points out the similarity between this statement and the response of God to Moses in Exodus 3:14. When Moses asks God how he should call him, God does not deign to utter his name but responds simply, "I am who I am". He tells Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you'" ²⁴. These words function like a veil to hide the inner truth that is not for man to see. Moses turns away in order not to look at God, even in the form of a flame coming from a bush. This suggests another point of comparison since the God of the Jews forbade any depictions of him; indeed, forbade even his full name from being written or spoken. This represents the same kind of prohibition, which is expressed in the Egyptian inscription. Mortals are not permitted to see the truth directly.

22. BRUDER DECIUS, *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey*, Leipzig: Georg Joachim Göschen, 1788. This work constitutes two lectures, which Reinhold had previously given in the freemasons' lodge in Vienna.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 54: "Wem aus uns, meine Brüder! sind endlich die alten ägyptischen Inschriften unbekannt; die eine auf der Pyramide zu Sais: Ich bin alles, was ist, war und seyn wird, meinen Schleyer hat kein Sterblicher aufgehoben. . . ."

24. Exodus 3:15.

Kant saw this motif in Segner's *Einleitung in die Natur-Lehre* and was inspired by it. In 1790 he refers to this in the *Critique of Judgment* in connection with his account of the concept of the sublime. He explains:

Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or a thought ever been expressed more sublimely, than in that inscription above the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): "I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and no mortal has lifted my veil". Segner made use of this idea in an ingenious vignette prefixed to his *Naturlehre* so as first to imbue the pupil, whom he was about to lead into this temple, with the sacred thrill that is meant to attune the mind to solemn attentiveness²⁵.

Since Segner's work is intended to be an introductory textbook, its goal is to present the secrets of nature to the new initiates. Kant thus follows the interpretation of the motif developed by the natural scientists.

Reinhold was a personal friend of the polymath Schiller, whom he had helped to attain a position at the University of Jena in 1789. In the same year as the appearance of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* Schiller published an article in his journal *Thalia* under the title "The Mission of Moses"²⁶, which treats not only the ancient Hebrews but also the Egyptians. Inspired by Reinhold's *Die hebräischen Mysterien oder die älteste religiöse Freymaurerey*, Schiller examines the influence of ancient Egyptian culture and religion on the Jews. He points out that Moses was raised as an Egyptian and learned about the Egyptian religion directly from the priests. He tries to argue that the Hebrew idea of monotheism had its earliest roots in the Egyptian religion. While in its details this account is somewhat different from that of Hegel, a clear similarity can nevertheless be seen

25. KANT, *Critique of Judgment*, transl. by Werner S. Pluhar, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987, p. 185n. *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin: Reimer, 1900– (from 1922 Berlin: De Gruyter), vol. 5, p. 316n.

26. FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, "Die Sendung Moses", *Thalia*, no. 10, Leipzig: Georg Joachim Göschen, 1790, pp. 3–37.

in the understanding of a development in religious thought from the Egyptians to the Jews. More specifically, Schiller, like Hegel, emphasizes the Egyptian religion as one of hiddenness and mystery and sees in it the forerunner of the mysteries of Eleusis and Samothrace²⁷. Schiller claims that this aspect of the Egyptian religion developed due to the fact that there were elements of Egyptian society, among others the Hebrews, who were actually monotheists but had to keep this hidden so long as the pagan Egyptian religion remained the religion of the state. Thus they developed a monotheistic religion in secrecy and hid it from general view by developing a kind of mystery cult surrounding it. In this context Schiller compares the inscription at the temple at Sais with the statement of the Jewish God Yahweh or Jehovah: "Under one of the old statues of Isis one could read the words: 'I am what is,' and on one of the pyramids at Sais one found the very ancient odd inscription, 'I am everything that is, what was and what will be; no mortal has lifted my veil'"²⁸. Presumably following Plutarch's (or Kant's) account, Schiller refers to the goddess as Isis and not Neith. But the reference to "the pyramids at Sais" seems to point to Reinhold as the source. In any case, Schiller makes the same point as Reinhold, suggesting that the inscription is similar to when Moses asks God what he should tell the Israelites when they ask what name God goes by, and God's response is "I am who I am"²⁹.

In 1795 Schiller takes up the motif again in a poem entitled "The Veiled Statue at Sais" in his journal *Die Horen*³⁰. In this

27. *Ibid.*, p. 16.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 17: "Unter einer alten Bildsäule der Isis las man die Worte: 'Ich bin, was da ist' und auf einer Pyramide zu Sais fand man die uralte merkwürdige Inschrift: 'Ich bin alles was ist, was war, und was seyn wird, kein sterblicher Mensch hat meinen Schleyer aufgehoben'".

29. *Ibid.*, p. 32.

30. FRIEDRICH SCHILLER, "Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais", *Die Horen*, vol. 1, no. 9, Tübingen: J.G. Cotta, 1795, pp. 94–98. (This journal appears in "Hegels Bibliothek" as entry numbers 839–841). (English translation: "The Veiled Statue at Sais", in *The Poems of Schiller*, transl. by Edgar A. Bowring, New York: Hurst & Co. Publishers,

work Schiller tells the story of a youth who comes to Sais zealous for the secret knowledge of the Egyptian priests. When the youth sees the veiled statue, he asks his guide, the priest or hierophant, what is behind the veil.

“Das mache mit der Gottheit aus, versetzt
Der Hierophant. Kein Sterblicher, sagt sie,
Rückt diesen Schleier, biß ich selbst ihn hebe.
Und wer mit ungeweihter schuldiger Hand
Den heiligen verbotenem früher hebt,
Der, spricht die Gottheit” —
Nun?
“Der sieht die Wahrheit”.

“The Godhead’s self alone can answer thee”,
Replied the Hierophant. “Let no rash mortal
Disturb my veil,” said he, “till rais’d by me;
For he who dares with sacrilegious hand
To move the sacred mystic covering,
He’ — said the Godhead —”
“Well?”
“will see the Truth”.³¹

Driven by his zeal for knowledge, the youth returns to the temple at night and, despite the prohibition, raises the veil. The sight of the truth leaves him languishing in unhappiness and leads to him dying an early death. Schiller interprets the story as a kind of Egyptian version of the Fall. It is about defying the divine command and attempting to know what is only reserved for the gods. The punishment is a grievous death. The end of the poem declares the moral: “Weh dem, der zu der Wahrheit

1884, pp. 182–184.) See HERBERT HAGER, “Friedrich Schiller. Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais”, in *Wege zum Gedicht. II Interpretationen von Balladen*, ed. by Rupert Hirschenauer and Albrecht Weber, Munich: Schnell und Steiner, 1963, pp. 190–202. NORBERT KLATT, “. . . des Wissens heisser Durst.” Ein literarischer Beitrag zu Schillers Gedicht *Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais*”, *Jahrbuch der deutschen Schillergesellschaft*, vol. 29, 1985, pp. 98–112.

31. SCHILLER, “Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais”, *Die Horen*, p. 95. (“The Veiled Statue at Sais”, p. 183.)

geht durch Schuld" ("Woe to that man who wins the truth by guilt").³² Hegel's interpretation is in a sense just the opposite. The Egyptians are stuck in a world-view that keeps things in mystery, whereas the true and proper spirit of humanity (as embodied in the Greeks) is to reveal the truth and see it openly in all its glory. Hegel's interpretation can thus be seen as a criticism of Schiller's account.

When he died in 1801, Novalis left behind an unfinished novel entitled *The Novices of Sais*. This was then published in 1802 in the two-volume collection of his writings edited by Ludwig Tieck and Friedrich von Schlegel³³. This work, which is a meditation on language and nature, also refers to this motif. Here the young novice, who is the first person narrator, explains, "I would also like to determine my person, and if no mortal, according to that inscription, raises the veil, then we must seek to become immortals; he who does not want to raise it, is no novice of Sais"³⁴. This seems to strike a tone much more in line with Hegel's view, implying that it lies in the nature of human beings, as sharing an immortal rational faculty with the divine, to seek the truth. To be a true follower of the god means to try to find the truth by means of investigation.

In addition to this long tradition of modern German writers and thinkers that use the motif of the statue of Neith,

32. SCHILLER, "Das verschleierte Bild zu Sais", *Die Horen*, p. 98. ("The Veiled Statue at Sais", p. 184.)

33. NOVALIS, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, in *Schriften*, vols. 1–2, ed. by Friedrich Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck, Berlin: In der Buchhandlung der Realschule, 1802, vol. 2, pp. 159–169. (English translation: NOVALIS, *The Novices of Sais*, transl. by Ralph Manheim, Brooklyn: Archipelago Books, 2005.) See NICHOLAS A. GERMANA, *The Orient of Europe: The Mythical Image of India and Competing Images of German National Identity*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009, pp. 77ff. WILLIAM ARCTANDER O'BRIEN, *Novalis: Signs of Revolution*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995, pp. 194–215.

34. NOVALIS, *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais*, in *Schriften*, vol. 2, p. 169: "Auch ich will also meine Figur beschreiben, und wenn kein Sterblicher, nach jener Inschrift dort, den Schleier hebt, so müssen wir Unsterbliche zu werden suchen; wer ihn nicht heben will, ist kein ächter Lehrling zu Sais".

Hegel's more immediate sources on Egyptian art and religion also avail themselves of it. For example, the inscription is also briefly discussed by Hegel's Berlin colleague, the aforementioned Aloys Hirt, in his *Ueber die Bildung der Aegyptischen Gottheiten*³⁵. He writes, "According to the inscription, cited by Plutarch (*On Isis and Osiris*, p. 354) and more precisely by Proclus (*Commentary on the Timaeus*, 1, p. 30), which was engraved above the entrance to the most sacred part of her temple, Minerva [sc. Neith] was indicated as its high and secretive goddess: 'I am what is, what was, and what will be. No one has raised my tunic. The fruit which I bore was Helios.'"³⁶ As mentioned above, Hegel made a record of this passage in his reading notes.

The inscription is also mentioned by the art historian Ernst Heinrich Toelken in *Erklärung der Bildwerke am Tempel des Jupiter Ammon zu Siwah*. He writes, "At Sais the inscription of the statue. . . of Minerva was the following: 'I am what is, what will be and was. No one has raised my garment. The fruit which I bore has become the sun.'"³⁷ Toelken thus includes the second part of the inscription, which he interprets as a reference to Neith giving birth to the god of the sun, Ra: "Helios the head of a falcon"³⁸.

Finally, one of Hegel's most important sources of inspiration about the East was the influential work of his friend from

35. HIRT, *Ueber die Bildung der Aegyptischen Gottheiten*, pp. 22f.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 23: "Nach der von Plutarch (de Is. et Os. p. 354.) und genauer von Proclus (in Timaeum 1. p. 30.) beigebrachten Inschrift, welche über dem Eingange des Allerheiligsten ihres Tempels eingehauen war, wird Minerva [sc. Neith] als seine hohe und geheimnissvolle Göttin bezeichnet: 'Was ist, was war, und was sein wird, bin ich. Niemand hob meine Tunica. Die Frucht, die ich gebahr, war Helios'".

37. ERNST HEINRICH TOELKEN, *Erklärung der Bildwerke am Tempel des Jupiter Ammon zu Siwah*, Berlin: Rücker, 1823, p. 141: "Zu Sais war die Inschrift der Statue. . . der Minerva folgende: Was ist, was seyn wird und war, bin ich. Mein Gewand hat keiner aufgedeckt. Die Frucht, die ich gebar, ist Sonne geworden". (This work appears in "Hegels Bibliothek", as entry number 622.)

38. *Ibid.*: "Helios mit dem Falkonkopf".

Heidelberg, Georg Friedrich Creuzer³⁹, that is, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*. Unfortunately, in the editions of the book that are relevant for our purposes, Creuzer refers to the Neith motif only a single time: “The inscription at Sais reports of a veil of Neith–Athena”⁴⁰. In his article Jeck refers to Creuzer at some length⁴¹, but unfortunately the more extensive references to Neith that he cites were added by Creuzer in the third edition of the work, which only appeared after Hegel’s death.⁴² Thus these cannot rightly be regarded as sources for Hegel’s use of this motif.

3. Hegel’s References to the Motif of the Goddess Neith

Hegel was presumably aware of at least some, if not most, of the modern sources just outlined. As we saw, one line of interpretation emphasized the image as representing the secrets of nature (Segner, Born, and Kant). The other line of

39. For Hegel’s relation to Creuzer, see STEWART, *Hegel’s Interpretation of the Religions of the World*, pp. 32–41. JON STEWART, “Hegel, Creuzer and the Rise of Orientalism”, *The Owl of Minerva*, vol. 45, nos. 1–2, 2013–14, pp. 13–34. MARTIN DONOUGH, “Hegel and Creuzer: or, Did Hegel Believe in Myth?” in *New Perspectives on Hegel’s Philosophy of Religion*, ed. by David Kolb, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992, pp. 59–80. JOHANNES HOFFMEISTER, “Hegel und Creuzer”, *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, vol. 8, 1930, pp. 260–282. HANS-GEORG GADAMER, “Hegel und die Heidelberger Romantik”, in his *Hegels Dialektik. Fünf hermeneutische Studien*, Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1971, pp. 71–81. OTTO PÖGGELER, “Hegel und Heidelberg”, *Hegel-Studien*, vol. 6, 1971, pp. 65–133.

40. FRIEDRICH CREUZER, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, vols. 1–4, 2nd fully revised edition, Leipzig and Darmstadt: Heyer und Leske, 1819–21, vol. 2, p. 674: “So meldet auch die Saitische Inschrift von einem Schleier der Neith–Athene”.

41. JECK, “Die enigmatische Inschrift zu Sais”, pp. 233–237.

42. FRIEDRICH CREUZER, *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker, besonders der Griechen*, 3rd improved edition, vols. 1–4, Leipzig: Carl Wilhelm Leske, 1836–43. The four volumes of this work constitute Part 1 of *Friedrich Creuzer’s Deutsche Schriften*, Parts 1–5, neue und verbesserte, Leipzig and Darmstadt: Karl Wilhelm Leske, 1836–58. (Starting with Part 5, vol. 2, this work was published in Frankfurt am Main by Baer.)

interpretation associated Neith with forbidden knowledge or specifically the mysteries surrounding the nature of God in the Old Testament (Reinhold, Schiller, and Novalis). Hegel's use of the motif as representing the Egyptian spirit as a contrastive term to the Greek world and Western civilization thus represents a new interpretation of the motif. But Hegel did not begin immediately with this interpretation. Rather, we can see a gradual development in his use of the idea. Hegel refers to the motif of Neith in all five times, which I will review briefly in what follows so that the train of his development will be evident.

1. The first appearance of this motif in Hegel's *corpus* is from his early essay, "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate" from 1798. Here he writes, "The priests of Cybele, the sublime goddess which is all that is, was, and is to be, and their veils no mortal has unveiled—her priests were castrated, unmanned in body and spirit"⁴³. Although the goddess named is Cybele and not Neith, the reference to "all that is, was, and is to be" and the veils which "no mortal has lifted" are a clear allusions to the inscription on the temple dedicated to Neith at Sais. Moreover, the goddess Cybele was a divinity from Asia Minor, which Hegel clearly associated with Eastern religion.

2. Neith does not appear in Hegel's *corpus* again until his Berlin lectures. In his lecture course on the philosophy of religion from 1821, he notes the Greek association of Neith with Athena: "Helios is a Titan, Apollo is more a knowing God. Zeus is the power of the state (Athena comes out of Neith)"⁴⁴. Even though Hegel mentions Helios immediately before this, he does not mention the inscription, where reference is made to Helios. Likewise, he contrasts the Olympian god Apollo with Helios, an earlier Greek deity, but here he has still not yet

43. *Hegels theologische Jugendschriften*, p. 250n; *Early Theological Writings*, p. 191 n.

44. HEGEL, *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 152; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 58.

hit upon the idea of using the motif to contrast Egypt with Greece. What is at issue is the internal development of the Greek religion from one generation of gods to the next.

3. In his lecture course on the philosophy of world history from 1822–23, Hegel gives a more detailed reference to Neith and quotes the inscription on her temple.

In this regard we have to recall the Greek inscription of the goddess at Sais (the goddess called Neith in Egyptian, Παλλάς in Greek): “I am what is and what was, and no mortal has lifted my covering or my veil”. Expressed here is this unknown—the longing for, and supposition of, something higher, and the added point that it is not disclosed. This is how Plutarch puts it, and in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, Proclus introduces this inscription with the addition: “The fruit that I bore is the sun, Helios”.⁴⁵

This gloss by Hegel can be seen as an elaboration on his reading notes to Hirt’s book. This reference makes it clear that he was familiar with the two variants of the inscription found in Proclus and Plutarch. He goes on to give the following analysis of this:

Helios is the sun of spirit. The renowned prince of light was celebrated at Sais with a festival of lamps [of Neith] (Pallas). . . . The fruit of Neith is the light, but her attributes, the predicates that are given her, one can equally well refer or relate to night, and that not in the specific sense (the Greek sense as such) of Pallas, or Athena, because Neith is called “night” in England too. So night gives birth to the sun.⁴⁶

The association of Neith with night is presumably a reference to the veil which covers her in darkness. Only later does this give way to sunlight. It is here that Hegel for the first time introduces the contrast with Apollo:

45. HEGEL, *LPWH*, vol. I, p. 367; *VPWG*, vol. I, p. 310.

46. HEGEL, *LPWH*, vol. I, p. 367; *VPWG*, vol. I, p. 310.

This sun or Helios, to which this veiled goddess has given birth, is the Greek spirit or the Greek light, is Phoebus Apollo, who has the sun as his radiance. As for the Greek Apollo, this god of light, we know the inscription of his chief temple: "Human being, know thyself!" Apollo is the knowing God. In this instance self-knowledge is not the commonplace, psychological being of our human knowledge; instead it expresses a supreme command, the absolute command, that spirit should know and grasp itself in its own essential nature. This knowledge is what is primary, and the labor of the world, the striving of every religion, ascends to it; there is no inscription more sublime than this. There is no utterance of the Greek spirit more distinctive than this, and so the contrast of the Greeks to the Egyptian spirit was expressed in this way.⁴⁷

Here Hegel attempts to capture the key transition from East to West by juxtaposing the inscription on the temple of Neith with the inscription on the Temple at Delphi. The point is that while Egypt represents hidden knowledge, which is forbidden to be known, the Greeks represent the spirit of science, which demands to know. The god Apollo issues the command to know oneself. The historical transition is found in the suggestion that Neith will give birth to a new god ("The fruit of my body"), who will represent light and knowledge. The Egyptian sun god, Ra, is then associated with the Greek Helios, who was a forerunner of Apollo.

4. Having hit upon this comparison of Neith and the Greek spirit in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, Hegel realizes that he can also use this to good purpose in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*. In these lectures from his course in 1827 he explains:

The Egyptian principle still lacks clarity and transparency on the part of the natural or external features of the configuration; what

47. HEGEL, *LPWH*, vol. 1, pp. 367f.; *VPWG*, vol. 1, p. 310. Hegel also refers to Neith again briefly in his account of the Greeks: *LPWH*, vol. 1, p. 322; *VPWG*, vol. 1, p. 376.

abides is just the task of becoming clear to itself. The stage this principle exhibits can be grasped quite generally as that of the enigma: the meaning is something inner that impels itself to make itself outwardly visible; but it has not yet arrived at the consummation of its portrayal in externality. The inscription of the temple of the goddess Neith in Sais is given in full as follows: "I am what was, what is, and what will be; no mortal has lifted my veil. The fruit of my body is Helios, etc". This still hidden essence expresses clarity or the sun, that which is itself becoming clear or the spiritual sun, as the son who is born from it.⁴⁸

Here there is no comparison made with Apollo, although the transition to the Greek spirit is the key issue. Instead, the comparison is to Oedipus who is able to solve the riddle of the sphinx. A favorite Egyptian motif, the sphinx holds the town of Thebes captive with its riddle, which the Greek Oedipus is able to solve. Thus, while Egypt represents mystery, Greece represents clarity.

One might ask here why Hegel did not make use of this motif in his lecture course on the philosophy of religion in 1824. Since, as we have just seen, he was clearly aware of the motif in 1822–23, why did he wait until 1827 to return to it? The answer to this has to do with the changes that he made in the sequence of the world religions that he treated in his lectures. In the lectures from 1827 (and 1831), the transition is from the Egyptian religion to the Greek religion, and so the use of the motif was perfectly fitting. However, in his lectures in 1824, the order is changed, and as a result the transition is from the Egyptian religion to Judaism. Here the contrast between the mysteriousness and hiddenness of Neith, on the one hand, and the clarity and openness of the Greeks was not possible.

5. Finally, Hegel also returns to this motif in his final lecture course on the philosophy of religion from 1831, right before his death. He explains:

48. HEGEL, *LPR*, vol. 2, pp. 638f.; *VPR*, Part 2, pp. 531f.

The sanctuary of Neith bore the superscription: “No mortal has yet lifted my veil — I bear a son, Helios”, which means that nature is something hidden but there issues from it something other, the manifest. Everything in Egypt denotes symbolically something unexpressed. The spirit of this people is the enigma. The transition from this enigma of the natural to the spiritual is the sphinx, with its animal body and human head. It is the Greeks who make the transition from this enigma to the clear consciousness of spirit.⁴⁹

Here Hegel again uses the motif to symbolize the transition from Egyptian religion to Greek religion, from nature to spirit, and from hiddenness to openness.

4. Hegel’s Use of the Motif of the Goddess Neith

Hegel’s interpretation of the spirit of ancient Egypt is that the Egyptians have only just begun to realize that the human spirit is greater than nature, but they are still in a phase of development in which they are struggling to grasp this for themselves. Therefore, they manage merely to pose the issue as a problem which they are unable to solve. The Egyptians are thus on their way to understanding themselves as spirit, but they have not yet arrived at this goal.

The transitional nature of the Egyptian spirit can be found in many different aspects of its culture. For example, its deities are not purely natural but rather mixed figures containing characteristics of both animals and human beings. Many of the Egyptian gods and goddesses have some kind of animal body with a human head (like the sphinx) or vice versa. Likewise, according to Hegel, the Egyptian writing system of hieroglyphics is caught between the concepts of the mind and nature since it uses images of plants and animals instead of letters to represent sounds. In these cases, Egypt can be seen as still caught up in nature, but with a vague inkling of the human spirit, which is still struggling to emerge from it.

49. HEGEL, *LPR*, vol. 2, pp. 746f.; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 631.

Since the Egyptians were still bound by nature, they were unable to come to a clear understanding of spirit. Hegel explains this as follows in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*:

For the Egyptians truth was still the problem, still this enigma, and they of course possessed or determined it for themselves in their intuition of the animal. Those who reckon truth to be incomprehensible in every respect are directed to the natural domain; for spirit is transparent to itself, is free, and reveals itself to spirit; it has nothing alien within itself. Nature, however, is what is hidden. With their thought in bondage, the Egyptians have to wrestle with something incomprehensible.⁵⁰

As long as nature is the dominant principle, the Egyptians dwell in hiddenness and obscurity. This is evident in Egyptian art and architecture, which is meant to hide and conceal. By contrast, the Greeks come to an understanding of themselves as spirit, that is, as something higher than nature. Therefore, Greek art is about revealing and not concealing.

The Egyptians thus occupy an intermediary stage which is only resolved later by the Greeks, who eliminated the last vestiges of natural religion and conceived of the divine as spirit. The Egyptians remained in the contradiction. In short the principle of the Egyptian religion is nature trying to free itself and become spirit. But this only takes place in the Greek world. The Greeks replace the mixed deities with gods and goddesses in a fully human form.

The inscription on the temple at Sais, for Hegel, captures the Egyptian element of mystery. The spirit of ancient Egypt is like the goddess Neith, a mystery that is hidden beneath a veil. The movement from Egypt to Greece is from hiddenness to clarity. Neith as the final representative of the natural religions will give birth to a new principle, light and knowledge, which is represented by the Greek god Apollo. This corresponds to the movement from nature to spirit that is aware of itself.

50. HEGEL, *LPWH*, vol. I, p. 350; *VPWG*, vol. I, pp. 288f.

Hegel recalls that the god Apollo reveals the truth and brings hidden things to light. He can thus be seen as symbolically removing the veil of nature and seeing the obscure objects or phenomena of nature themselves, thus leading to true scientific knowledge. This is, for Hegel, a key aspect of genuinely Western thinking: the spirit of scientific discovery and the drive to reach clarity about things unknown. The inscription on the temple at Sais indicates that there are certain things which *should not* be known. This motif is similar to the story of the Fall in Genesis with the tree of knowledge of good and evil, which is only given to God to know but is forbidden for humans. The implication is that it is best for humans *not* to know certain things, or, put differently, humans are not mature, rational or responsible enough to have certain kinds of knowledge. But, for Hegel, it lies in the very nature of human beings to learn and to develop their rational faculty. To become truly human, it is necessary that we move beyond our original natural condition.

Hegel's interpretation of the motif is strikingly similar to a depiction that appears on a special dedication that Alexander von Humboldt had made for Goethe. The dedication page appears in *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer*, a work which Humboldt wrote together with his French collaborator Aimé Bonpland and published in 1807⁵¹. The image on the dedication, which was sketched by the famous Danish sculptor Bertel Thorvaldsen and made into a copper engraving by the artist Raphael Urbain Massard, was entitled "Apollo Raises the Veil of the Statue of Artemis"⁵². The image shows Apollo unveiling a statue, which is intended to represent nature.

51. ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT and AIMÉ BONPLAND, *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer*, Tübingen: F.G. Cotta and Paris: F. Schoell, 1807.

52. THOMAS SCHMUCK, "Humboldt in Goethes Bibliothek", *Internationale Zeitschrift für Humboldt-Studien*, vol. 17, issue 32, 2016, p. 72.

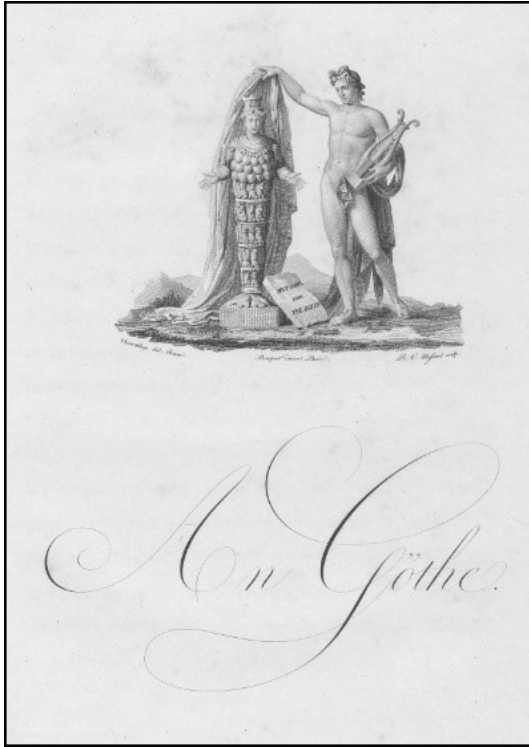


Figure 2. The dedication page to *Ideen zu einer Geographie der Pflanzen nebst einem Naturgemälde der Tropenländer*.

The image that was used for the goddess Artemis is clearly not the later Greek goddess of the hunt that one is accustomed to seeing. Instead, it is a goddess of nature, which is found in the Asian equivalent of the Greek goddess, who was worshiped at a great temple in Ephesus. Hegel himself juxtaposes the earlier goddess with her Greek pendant⁵³. He notes that while the Artemis of Ephesus is clearly a goddess of nature, as one would expect from Eastern religions, the Greek goddess, by contrast, appears wholly anthropomorphic, this representing

53. STEWART, *Hegel's Interpretation of the Religions of the World*, pp. 241–243.

the recognition of spirit. In the *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, we read:

The Diana [sc. Artemis] of Ephesus is still Asiatic and is represented with many breasts and bedecked with images of animals. Her foundation is natural life in general, the procreative and sustaining force of nature. The Diana of the Greeks, on the other hand, is the huntress who slays animals; she has not the sense and meaning of hunting generally, but of the hunt directed at wild animals. And these animals are indeed subdued and killed through the bravery of spiritual subjectivity, whereas in the earlier spheres of the religious spirit they were regarded as absolutely inviolate.⁵⁴

The key to the comparison is that the Greek goddess is the master of nature by virtue of her role as a hunter. The Asian goddess is still continuous with nature and has yet to break free from it.

In the image on the dedication page of Humboldt's book the artist has combined motifs from the Asian Artemis with the Egyptian Neith. With regard to the former, in Hegel's time there was a well-known image, which is reproduced in Creuzer's *Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker*, which was, as noted, an important source for Hegel for information on Eastern religions.

When this depiction is compared to the one of the statue being unveiled by Apollo on the dedication page of Humboldt's work there can be no doubt that this is the same image.

But although the image is taken from Artemis of Ephesus, the motif of unveiling the goddess comes from the epigram of Neith. Most important for our purposes is the fact that it is the Greek god Apollo who is unveiling the goddess. This is precisely the key motif that Hegel uses to capture the difference between the Egyptian and the Greek spirit.

The image in the dedication captures Hegel's point. Apollo is free and graceful, whereas the Eastern goddess is stiff and frozen. Apollo is wholly anthropomorphic and bears a symbol

54. HEGEL, Hegel, *LPR*, vol. 2, p. 649n; *VPR*, Part 2, p. 541n. *VPR*, Part 2, p. 361.



Figure 3. Diana of Ephesus from *Abbildungen zu Friedrich Creuzers Symbolik und Mythologie der alten Völker. Auf sechzig Tafeln*, Leipzig and Darmstadt: Heyer und Leske, 1819, Tabula III, Figure 4.

of civilization: the lyre. The Asian goddess is not anthropomorphic but instead is a combination of the human and the animal. Most importantly, the gesture of Apollo unveiling the Asian goddess shows the Greek spirit of understanding and clarity. Apollo is the god of light, whereas the Asian goddess, without his help would remain hidden in darkness beneath the veil.

I have not been able to document whether Hegel ever saw this dedication page from Humboldt's book. So the connection

made here can be regarded as little more than an intriguing suggestion. At the very least it shows that the contrast between East and West, mystery and science, Egypt and Greece was one that was topical for not only Hegel but also others at the time. It should be recalled that during this period Europe was busy digesting a constant inflow of new information about the cultures of the East, as India, Persia and Egypt were being discovered by contemporary scholars. This new awareness of the “other” of Europe compelled thinkers like Hegel to consider carefully what distinguished European culture from these other civilizations, which each had its own long and venerated tradition. The struggle to define the Western spirit is still with us today, and Hegel’s efforts to come to articulate the issue are, I believe, still useful and relevant in our modern discussions.

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