

TORSO OF ISIS

EGYPTIAN, PTOLEMAIC PERIOD, 332-32 BC
BASALT

HEIGHT: 15 CM.

WIDTH: 9 CM.

DEPTH: 6 CM.

*PROVENANCE:
FORMER PARISIEN PRIVATE
COLLECTION FROM THE 1940S.
THENCE BY DESCENT.*



This elegant basalt torso represents Isis, one of the most important goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. She is depicted standing, facing forwards, while her arms lie flat along the sides of her body. Her delicate curves are subtly defined, with broad shoulders, a prominent chest accentuated by two almost perfectly round breasts, a slim waist, slightly wider hips, and a soberly incised navel. All of these elements give her a distinct elegance and sensuality. This impression is further enhanced by the delicate draping covering her body. All of the

artist's skill is apparent as we can detect the fabric's presence with only a few very fine folds appearing at the hips, and the thicker folds below the chest and on the right shoulder. The draping is tied into a knot sculpted in higher relief, the end of which falls between the two breasts. The finesse of the workmanship, which reveals the delicate curves of our goddess as well as her navel, make this sculpture a work of great elegance.

Above the left shoulder and on the back lie beautiful, individually sculpted wavy locks, commonly referred to as "Libyan curls". The tubular curls are almost shaped like English curls and, over the centuries, have become one of Isis' characteristic physical traits.

Lastly, our goddess is leaning against a rectangular pillar which usually bore hieroglyphic engravings. The pillar follows the curve of her spine, perfectly hugging the goddess' body and sensually outlining the small of her back. Once again, the slight folds in the draping stand out, conveying the desire to translate the beauty of the female body into stone. Finally, the frontal quality of our statuette is accentuated by the absence of the naturally present cavity separating the arms and hips, which was not hollowed out.

The full elegance and refinement of our sculpture of Isis also lies in the material used, basalt. This deep black stone with warm brown highlights was widely used by the Egyptians. Several deposits were exploited in the Nile delta during the Ptolemaic period, and sovereigns made extensive use of this material for official court art. Basalt is a very dense volcanic rock that gives sculptures an almost graphic appearance, accentuating



their hieratic aspect. The hardness of the stone called for great dexterity from artists. Our Isis is a remarkable example of finesse, precision and grace.



Delicate traces of concretion coat the dark basalt, giving it sandy tones that reflect the passage of time on the stone, giving the object an aura.

Isis is one of the most important goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon. Daughter of Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky, she married her brother Osiris and gave birth to Horus. A magician goddess, she was an ideal of a devoted wife and mother. According to legend, when her husband was killed by Set, who scattered his body, Isis travelled the world to piece his body back together and bring it to life again. Such was her popularity that her cult, which appeared around 2450 BC in the Nile delta, spread as far as the Roman Empire. Initially closely associated with Osirian mythology, her individual cult gradually flourished, making

her the preeminent mother goddess, protector of women and children.



From an iconographic perspective, Isis is depicted as a slender young woman, usually wearing a crown shaped like a throne or a solar disc and a sheath dress tied at her chest. This dress is one of the most important attributes of representations of Isis, so much so that the name of the knot holding it in place derives from her name: the Isian knot. The term originally comes from the Egyptian V39 hieroglyph in Gardiner's sign list, called the knot of Isis or tyet, which can be transliterated into tjt. This hieroglyph is a sacred symbol and, in Egyptian society, materialized in the shape of numerous amulets, usually made of jasper (Ill. 1). Its protective power, known to all, is mentioned in spell 156 of the Book of the Dead, which can be translated as follows: "Your blood is yours, your powers of light are yours, Isis. Your magic is yours, Isis. Amulets are the protection of this great one, guarding against one who would cause him harm." (Ill. 2).

This association with the goddess continued over the centuries, and the Isian knot became an iconographic symbol that could be found directly in representations of Isis. As our statue shows, the tyet was sometimes used to tie the garment of the goddess. Many other examples currently on display in museums around the world also show this continuity in representations of the drape of the goddess (Ill. 3-5). Its symbolism was so widespread that it continued to be used in Greek, and later, Roman iconography, when the cult of the goddess was exported throughout the Mediterranean region during conquests (Ill. 6-7).

Our delicate statuette originates from a private collection in Paris, owned since the 1940s, and was passed down as an heirloom within the same family.

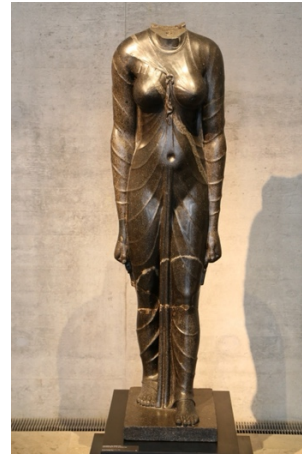
Comparatives:



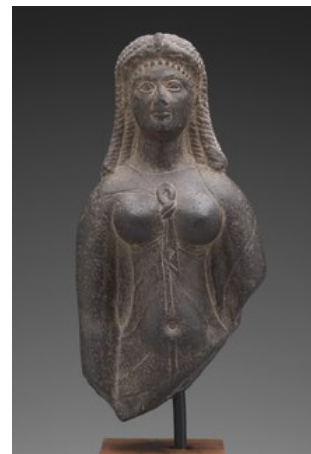
Ill. 1. *Tyet* amulet, Egyptian, New Kingdom, 1250-1100 BC, jasper, H.: 6.5cm. British Museum, London, inv. No. EA20639.



Ill. 2. Book of the Dead, spell 156, Egyptian, 1700-63 BC, papyrus.



Ill. 3. Isis, Egyptian, 1st century BC, black granite. Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich.



Ill. 4. Late Ptolemaic Queen in the Guise of the Goddess Isis, Egyptian, 80-50 BC, basalt, H.: 48.5 cm. Yale University, Yale, inv. No. 1931.106.



Ill. 5. Isis, Egyptian, Ptolemaic Dynasty, 332-32 BC, limestone, H.: 46.5 cm. The Egyptian Museum, Cairo, inv. No. CG 27472.



Ill. 6. Isis, Roman, 1st century AD, basalt, H.: 97.8 cm. Brooklyn Museum, New-York, inv. No. 74.220.

Ill. 7. Isis, Roman, 1st century AD, marble, H.: 179.5 cm. Musei Capitolini, Rome, inv. No. MC0744.