

Cradling Gods and Guiding Sons: Motherhood in Ancient Egypt

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In ancient Egypt, the mother-child relationship was a social cornerstone, often expressed through the divine archetype of the goddess Isis and her child, Horus. The bond between the healing goddess and her son, the king of the gods, both modeled and reflected the relationship between ancient Egyptian mothers and their children. Though the mother-child relationship was ever-evolving, Egyptian mothers extended great care and affection to their children as they ushered them toward adulthood with the protection of the gods.

Ancient Egyptian myth tells us that Isis protected Horus in the womb and after his birth through his young adult years. During her pregnancy, Isis relied on divine magic to hide from the spiteful deities who sought to end Horus's life before it began. During his infancy, childhood, and early adulthood, she fended off threats to her child, whether they came from wild animals or malevolent gods.¹ Even as an adult, Horus sought her advice, protection, and healing skills to assure his ascendancy to the Egyptian throne.

Isis's feats of love and her success protecting Horus would have been heartening to Egyptian mothers. With risks abounding, Egyptian families worked tirelessly to protect their children from the hazards of both the spiritual and physical realms. The Egyptians believed that the gods, demons, and the dead could harm babies and children. Additional threats from crocodiles, hippopotami, snakes, and scorpions made the Nile Valley a very dangerous place.

Ancient Egyptian families employed protective amulets and petitioned statues of powerful gods, like Isis, to draw on positive mythic scenarios. Prayers and offerings to a statue of Isis holding or nursing Horus could call on the mother goddess's power to ward off threats to children, both real and imagined. If Isis's powers of trickery and great magic were enacted for mortal children, they may have the same positive fortune as Horus to grow to adulthood.

Though Egyptian mothers had authority over young children, their motherly influence did not vanish as their children matured. As their children grew to adolescence, rituals, such as the cutting of the hair, marked the beginning of a child's integration into adult society.² This, and other rites of passage, indicated a shift away from maternal dependency and new roles within the family unit.³ Yet, the esteem and great respect held for mothers was clear in Egyptian society even as young adults carved out paths of their own. Mothers continued to work in the best interests of their adult children, and they were respected and venerated for their wisdom. This dynamic was mirrored in Horus's continued reliance on Isis even as he matured.

Through divine figures like Isis and Horus, the ancient Egyptians ritualized and celebrated the evolving mother-child bond. Starting with physical and spiritual protection and culminating in mutual respect, this relationship was immortalized in art and ritual. It demonstrated the lasting societal reverence for motherhood in ancient Egyptian society.

¹ James P. Allen, *The Art of Medicine in Ancient Egypt* (CT: Yale University Press, 2005), Part A.

² Lesley A Beaumont. *Children in Antiquity: Perspectives and Experiences of Childhood in the Ancient Mediterranean* (London, England: Routledge, 2020), Chapters 1 and 8.

³ Gay Robins, *Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993), 20-22 and 98.

Further Reading!

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