

Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Isis.

By Caroline Tully.

Born in 1854, five years before the publishing of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, Samuel Liddell Mathers was a prime candidate for all the intellectual fads of the later nineteenth century. Spiritualism, the belief in the ability to communicate with the dead through a medium, invented in 1848 by the Fox sisters in the United States, saw its Golden Age in the United Kingdom in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s (Owen 1989: 1). Theosophy, a combination of *mystic Hinduism*, Buddhism, Hermeticism, occultism, spiritualism and contemporary Egyptology interpreted Egyptosophically, founded in 1875 by Helena Blavatsky (1831–1891), arrived in London by 1884 (King 1999: 141; Hornung 2001: 141–3). Mathers had already become a Freemason in 1877, the same year as Blavatsky's influential *Isis Unveiled* was published. In 1882 he joined the Rosicrucians and three years later, Anna Kingsford's Hermetic Society. By 1888 Mathers had co-founded the Isis-Urania Temple of the Golden Dawn, assumed sole leadership of the Order by 1893, and within the next five years would establish a cult of the Egyptian goddess Isis in the flourishing Paris occult scene (Greer 1995: 46, xvii; Webb 1974: 153–90).

Mainly self-educated in the Reading Room of the British Museum, Mathers followed a self-directed course of research in magic, alchemy, symbolism and ancient Egyptian religion. One who would become a future student of his, William Butler Yeats, described him as a man of *much learning but little scholarship* (Howe 1972: 34). Financially supported by Golden Dawn co-founder, Doctor William Wynn Westcott, *as a full-time student of the occult* and consequently not having to work, Mathers would have been able to spend ample amounts of time in the British Museum looking at both Egyptian statuary and textual material (Hutton 1999: 75). Indeed, in 1887 he met his future wife, Mina Bergson, in the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery where she was sketching statues (Greer 1995: 55). The British Museum at this time functioned as an intellectual center where members of the London academic, literary, journalistic and artistic circles regularly met. The library staff was also part of this literary world and the museum's senior keepers lived on site and were accessible for social and research purposes (Wilson 2002: 189). Mathers, whose main interest was Egypt, would have had access to Samuel Birch (1813–1885), Keeper of Oriental Antiquities from 1866–85, and then (Sir) Ernest Alfred Thompson Wallis Budge (1857–1934), Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities from 1893–1924 (Dawson & Uphill 1972: 27, 45).

Birch had published translations of hieroglyphic texts by 1838 and books on Egyptian hieroglyphs and grammar by 1857 and 1867 respectively. He had also made the first translation of the collection of funeral texts known as the *Book of the Dead* (Wortham 1971: 97). Budge too had translated many Egyptian texts including the *Papyrus of Ani*, one of the most noted versions

of the *Book of the Dead*, by 1895 (Dawson & Uphill 1972, 45–6).¹ In the liberal and accommodating environs of the British Museum, Mathers would have had access to these texts and possibly even the papyri they derived from. Another future student of his, Arthur Edward Waite, described seeing Mathers *staggering as usual under a load of books, and he said I have clothed myself with hieroglyphics as with a garment, so I inferred he was then deep in Egyptology* (Howe 1972: 34). Mathers may even have been able to exert influence on museum employees: it is rumoured that Budge extended his helpfulness to the point of permitting a Golden Dawn temple within the British Museum itself (Greer 1995: 155, 430. n.4).

By May 1892 Mathers, who had under the influence of the Celtic Movement added ‘MacGregor’ to his name, and his wife Mina, who had changed her name to the more Celtic ‘Moina’, moved permanently to Paris (Howe 1972, 34; Greer 1995: xvii). Mathers’ years of amateur Egyptological studies in the British Museum meant that when visiting the Louvre’s substantial Egyptian collection he could confidently pontificate on the meanings of ancient Egyptian statuary to his students. The problem was however, that Mathers’ ideas on ancient Egyptian religion were hopelessly Hermetic, his interpretations coloured by an unwarranted belief in occult meanings. One of his students, Max Dauthendey, relates that *we often visited the vaults of the Louvre which contained the great Egyptian collections. In the process I learned a good deal about the secret traditions of the occultists* (Colquhoun 1975: 88). Despite Mathers’ lack of real Egyptological qualifications he projected expertise as is evident from several admiring newspaper articles which mention how both he and Moina lectured on Egyptian religion and held soirées for those interested in the subject (Gaucher 1900: 446–9, 470–472; Lees 1900: 82–87).

By 1896 MacGregor and Moina were heavily involved in the exploration of what they termed *The Egyptian Mysteries*. By 1898 they were *restoring the Mysteries*, while 1899 saw them putting on public performances of *Rites of Isis* at the Théâtre Bodinière in Paris, having been *converted to the strange and passionate mysticism of the worship of Isis during their travels in Egypt*, a claim which was almost certainly untrue (Greer 1995: xviii, 207).² This led in 1900 to their establishment of private initiations into the *Mysteries of Isis*. As Mathers explained to a journalist, Paris was the perfect site for the restoration of the Mysteries of Isis because, firstly, there were altars to Isis in ancient Gaul; he was therefore, simply reviving something that was already there (Gaucher 1900: 448). Secondly, Mathers conflated the ship on the Paris Coat of Arms with the Barque of Isis, seemingly in a combination of its form in which Isis searched for the severed limbs of Osiris (Plutarch. *De Iside et Osiride*. 18) and as the boat portrayed in Apuleius’s description of the *Ploiaphesia* or *Isidis Navigium* festival (*Metamorphoses*. 11.16).

¹ The actual papyrus, donated by Budge, had been available in the British Museum since 1888.

² They were reliant in Paris on the financial beneficence of their wealthy friend Annie Horniman, which might have but probably did not extend to paying for them to visit Egypt (Greer 1995, 155). Although Colquhoun (1975: 86) suggests, without any evidence, that it did.

Suggesting etymological proof, Mathers explained that the word *Baris* (Diodorus Siculus. *Library of History* 1.92.4), which he believed was Coptic for ship, is where ‘Paris’ derived:

From the depths of time and from the obscurity of the past we said that the Goddess extended her protective hand on this City that she had no doubt blessed... the name of Paris stems also from the vessel of Isis... It was on a barque of reeds, we learn from Diodorus of Sicily, that Isis travelled the seas... (Gaucher 1900: 448).

Mixing history with mythology, Mathers evidently believed that Isis altars in Gaul — actually Roman altars (Takács 1995: 168, 170–1) — were connected to the deity’s own travels and that the alleged Isian origin of the name of the French capital meant that Paris was destined to witness a revival of the *Mysteries of Isis*. ‘Paris’ however, does not derive from ‘Baris’ but from the Gaulish *Parisii* tribe (Cunliffe 1998: 368). In typical Hermetic fashion Mathers interpreted Paris symbolically as Isis’ boat itself: *The immense city... isn’t it the triumphant vessel of Isis, the immortal Baris sailing on the ocean of the ages! (Gaucher 1900: 448).*

As eccentric as it sounds, the blame for these ideas cannot be laid at Mathers’ feet. The source for his belief in Paris’ connection to Isis was probably the fact that the Isis religion enjoyed a revival during the French Revolution when Isis was recast as the goddess of reason and nature intended to replace Christianity. At this time there was also speculation about a connection between Isis and the name Paris and it was believed that the cathedral of Notre Dame was built on the ruins of an earlier temple of Isis. Under Napoleon Isis became the tutelary goddess of Paris and Egyptian forms such as the pyramid, obelisk and sphinx were popular. Jacques Louis David’s *Fontaine de la Régénération* which consisted of a statue of an Egyptian goddess with water streaming from her breasts was erected on the ruins of the Bastille and there was even temporary employment of the Egyptian calendar (Hornung 2001: 132–4).

Along with the public performances of the Rites of Isis at the Théâtre Bodinière and the facilitation of the private Mystery initiations, the Mathers maintained a domestic shrine to Isis in their Paris apartment which, according to journalist Frederic Lees, consisted of an altar on which was a Pharaonic era-style winged figure of Isis crowned with a horned disk — probably either an actual antiquity or a sculpture made by Moina Mathers who was an artist. In front of this statue were flowers and on each side, lotus flowers and drawings of Osiris and Nephthys, Horus and Harpocrates. The journalist was highly impressed and felt himself to be transported *back thousands of years B.C. — I saw that I was in a little temple of the goddess Isis*. This feeling was enhanced by *the heavy odour of incense, telling of a recent ceremony, mingled with the perfume of the flowers (Lees 1900: 82).*

The public performances of the Rites of Isis by the Mathers — who were now calling themselves the Count and Countess MacGregor — at the Bodinière Théâtre involved a similar altar construction. In this performance, no doubt composed with the help of Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses*

(11.23), Mathers, as *the Hierophant Ramses* and Moina, *the High Priestess Anari*, celebrated what observers took to be an *Isis mass*:

The Hierophant Rameses, holding in one hand the sistrum, which every now and then he shook, and in the other a spray of lotus, said the prayers before this altar, after which the High Priestess Anari invoked the goddess in penetrating and passionate tones. Then followed the 'dance of the four elements' by a young Parisian lady, who, dressed in long white robes, had previously recited some verses in French in honour of Isis. A short time before this lady had become a convert. Her four dances were: the danse des fleurs, which symbolised the homage of the earth to the Egyptian goddess; the danse du miroir, which represented waves of water; the danse de la chevelure, symbolical of fire; and the danse des parfums for the air. Most of the ladies present in the fashionable Parisian audience brought offerings of flowers, whilst the gentlemen threw wheat on to the altar. The ceremony was artistic in the extreme. (Lees 1900: 84).

In his subsequent conversation with Lees, Mathers proposed a metaphorical elucidation of the sistrum,³ paraphrasing Plutarch (*De Iside* 63). Plutarch's symbolic explanation as well as the tendency of Hermetic thought to attribute a secret symbolism to everything will have contributed to Mathers taking a further step and interpreting his and Moina's priestly costumes as entirely symbolic. *Nothing that you can see here is without its meaning, nothing is without its purpose... It is the same with our dress.* According to Lees (84):

The Hierophant Rameses and the High Priestess Anari appeared... in their priestly robes — the most beautiful costumes which ever priest and priestess wore, beautiful because they express so much to the believer. The priest was dressed in his long white robe; around his waist was the zodiacal belt; around his arms and ankles were the sacred bracelets; over his shoulders was fastened a leopard skin, the spots of which symbolise stars in the world atmosphere, what the theosophists call the astral body. Similarly, the uskh, or collar, around his neck represents abundance of matter, whilst the sidelock is the emblem of youth. 'True wisdom is always young.' But the dress of the High Priestess Anari is better adapted for giving a good idea of the symbolism of the Isis worshipper. Her long, flowing hair expresses the idea of rays of light radiating through the universe. Upon her head is a little cone symbolical of the Divine Spirit, and a lotus flower symbolic of purity and wisdom. 'The lotus springs up', said the Hierophant Rameses, 'from the muddy waters of the Nile. The cone is the flame of life. The whole idea of the dress of the priestess is that the life of matter is purified and ruled by the divine spirit of life from above.'

Not only were the priestly garments interpreted through a Hermetic, therefore completely non-Egyptian, lens — for example the High Priestesses' cone was an ancient Egyptian perfume

³ An instrument that was played primarily by queens, princesses and priestesses — not men (Teeter & Johnson 2009: 30).

dispenser, not a symbol of *the flame of life* — they were also anachronistic. Their rites being modeled on the Graeco-Roman Isis religion meant that the garments worn by the Mathers as Isiac cult officials should have been Hellenistic. Priestesses of the Hellenised Egyptian cult of Isis wore a type of garment originally used for statues of deified Ptolemaic queens (Ashton 2008: 194): a multicoloured wrap dress (Plutarch. *De Iside*. 77) with a black fringed shawl tied in an ‘Isis knot’ (Apuleius. *Met*. 11.3). Greek and Roman sculptures of Isis in this guise were available in the British Museum and the Louvre, and the depiction of priests performing an Isis ceremony from Herculaneum had been accessible since the eighteenth century, so it was not a case of this information being unavailable (Maulucci 1998: 106–7; Renfrew & Bahn 2000: 22). The garments Mathers and Moina wore however were not Graeco-Roman but Pharaonic. Hers, a New Kingdom wrap dress, very obviously derived from the garment of Tutu, wife of Ani, as seen in vignettes in the *Papyrus of Ani* (Vogelsang-Eastwood 1992: 28–9; Faulkner 1985: 13) which we know Mathers was familiar with (Colquhoun 1975: 85), and his, the costume of a Sem Priest (Winlock 1932: 187).

This anachronistic choice of garment was no doubt influenced by Mathers’ belief that the newly available *Book of the Dead* depicted an earlier form of Isis religion (Lees 1900: 83, 85). The male figure in the *Papyrus of Ani* is not a Sem Priest however, although a Sem Priest does feature in part of Spell 1 illustrating Spell 23 of the *Papyrus of Hunefer* in the British Museum and there is a sculpture of this type of priest in the Louvre, both of which Mathers could have seen (Faulkner 1985: 54; Etienne 2006: 135). Not to mention that a Sem Priest, while having a role in the Pharaonic religion of Osiris, was not the correct type of priest for Hellenistic Isis religion (Mojsov 2005: 52). The addition of a Zodiacal belt to the costume, while referring to Greek astrology of the early Ptolemaic period, may have been a feasible part of a Sem priest’s costume because we know they still existed in the first century CE (Hornung 2001: 30–1; Winlock 1932: 187). Mathers had probably discovered this type of priestly figure through Gaston Maspero’s 1887 study and conflated the funerary Sem Priest, the contents of the *Book of the Dead* and the Hellenistic Mysteries of Isis together as different parts of the one Isis religion (Bjerke 1965: 209).

It was this kind of not-quite-right approach to ancient Egyptian religion that characterized the Mathers’ reconstruction of the *Egyptian Mysteries*. Undoubtedly inspired by Herodotus’ application of the Greek term ‘mysteries’ to Egyptian religion (*Histories*. 2.171), Diodorus’ erroneous claim of an Egyptian origin for the Greek Mysteries of Eleusis when in fact it was the other way around (*Lib*. 1.29.2,4; Martin 1987: 78), Apuleius’ *Metamorphoses* (11.21–6), and Plutarch’s mention of Isis and Osiris initiations and mystic rites (*De Iside*. 2, 25, 28), the main problem with the Mathers’ attempt at creating this initiatory system was that there were no *Egyptian Mysteries* to begin with. While there certainly were Graeco-Roman mysteries of the Hellenised Isis, the idea that there were ancient Egyptian ‘mysteries’ originated with Greeks like Herodotus misunderstanding the Egyptian cult of Osiris at Abydos and interpreting it as ‘mysteric’ because it was carried out by a specially consecrated priesthood, unlike the part-time

priests of Greece (Burkert 1987: 39–40; Lefkowitz 1997: 93). While access to the inner recesses of the Egyptian temple was limited to the priesthood, festivals were open to the public, not restricted to groups of initiates (Morenz 1973: 89–90). Plutarch's text is about the training of priests who are the bearers of Isis' sacred objects, not about initiation into a cult like Eleusis, the type of which only came to Egypt in the third century BCE and which catered to Alexandrian Greeks (Lefkowitz 1997: 94). Only Apuleius' description of the initiation of a priest of Isis can be considered to be an Egyptian ritual with some of the characteristics of a Greek mystery cult (Burkert 1987: 40). Although it is in fact a hybrid consisting of a Greek *katabasis* (heroic underworld journey by a living person) combined with the Egyptian belief in the equation of a dead person's soul with the sun god, Re, by day and Osiris by night, it has become known in Europe as the 'Egyptian initiation' par excellence (Lefkowitz 1997: 98).

Was this then the type of initiatory ritual the Mathers were presenting to their increasingly large group of aspirants? From journalist, Andre Gaucher's, eye-witness description it seems not. Blindfolded, as if being inducted into Freemasonry, Gaucher is taken by carriage to a secret location outside Paris where, after the blindfold is removed he finds himself in:

a vast room entirely spread in white, ornamented with flowers to the most gracious affect. Around me, enveloped in long robes, or rather multicoloured tunics, men and women, fixed, serious, attentive, their faces turned towards the back of the room where, on a sort of plinth supporting a platform, a veiled statue was set up...Isis?... And as if they had awaited my arrival, the long curtains which masked the back of the room stirred and half opened. At the foot of the statue a man and a woman appeared, also dressed in white, the waist girded by a long sash the colour of saffron. They have bare arms, with large circlets of gold or silver. And the woman leaves her abundant black hair to float over her shoulders... First at the foot of the veiled statue; both kneeling, lit the scented fire of a brazier, and the stirring air of the sanctuary is charged with a strong odour of incense and benzoin. Then the priest and priestess pick up grains of wheat and flowers on the floor. They threw them on the attendants, who bow deeply. A bouquet of spices and flowers is finally burnt on the incandescent charcoals of the brazier. The Priest of Isis advances towards the statue [and] slides the mysterious veil to the ground. The Goddess appears smiling while the attendants bow and cry, 'Isis! Isis! Isis!' The priestess has fallen to her knees. The priest remains standing, his arms widespread, his head high, ecstatic. A heavy silence, alarming, weighs on the kneeling crowd, slowly as if the ground gave way beneath her pedestal, the statue descends little by little. Quickly, the priest re-covers her with her veil. He then lets out a dreadful cry which answers the mournful wailing of the kneeling.

The description of the ritual subsequently becomes quite fantastic and certainly rather high-tech for 1900. The sinister-sounding turn of events, evocative of Symbolist author Joris-Karl

Huysmans' Black Mass (1891: 22–30),⁴ may have been exaggerated because that was what Gaucher was hoping for:

a long and sinister rushing is heard. The white garlands and curtains collapse along the walls with a shiver of evil omen and the walls appear decked in black... Only two torches burn to the right and left of the sanctuary, scarlet, sooty... At a distance, in a large and sombre recess, an enormous mass, chaotic, breaks [out of] the black depth. Again a cry from the priest, brief like a call, and the attendants stand up straight, formal, motionless. They cry three times, "Osiris! Osiris! Osiris!"... It's obviously the Egyptian God wearing a gigantic pschent... I haven't the time to reflect on this new oddity... Here from the top of the statue a luminous feature, phosphorescent, shoots out and moves circulating its inexplicable rays. One by one the attendants come out haloed from the changing light that seems to move around them in a formidable magnetic effluvium. Round and about, under the eyes of the God, the worshippers fall in ecstasy or catalepsy. Around me sighs, convulsive cries. Their bodies roll on the ground, in the darkness, in the anguish of dreadful nervous spasms. Others stand, straight, rigid, their faces bloodless, their eyes haggard. The vision descends into a nightmare. A scarlet torch illuminates the back of the sanctuary with an infernal glimmer, I believe that at the rear I distinguish the gigantic statue in a frightening rictus. Horror!

Gaucher eventually falls unconscious and is taken home (1900: 470–2). Instead of the participants undergoing an Apuleian-style initiation, it seems rather that they were witness to what was intended to be a reconstruction of the Autumn festival of the search for and discovery of Osiris. That it was November when this ritual occurred and its inclusion of mourning, joy and ecstasy seems to confirm that this was what Mathers had in mind. This fits also as an example of the above-mentioned mistaken belief that public Egyptian festivals for Osiris were actually mystery initiations, as well as with the idea that participants in the Graeco-Roman Isis processions were all *mystae*, rather than simply members of the *collegia* (Burkert 1987: 40). Perhaps the actual revelation of the 'mystery' in Mathers' ritual was the unveiling of the Isis statue, inspired obviously by Plutarch's description of the statue of Saite Isis *I am all that has been and is and will be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle. (De Iside. 9).*

MacGregor and Moina Mathers' desire to revive the *Egyptian Mysteries* involves a combination of several factors. Coming from a Hermetic background they were undoubtedly initially inspired by the strong tradition within Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry of an Egyptian origin in which Osiris and Isis featured as promoters of Hermetic wisdom (Ebling 2007: 127). They also seemed to genuinely believe in these deities and that their 'mysteries' would provide both succour and empowerment (Owen 2004: 66–7). Essentially self-educated, instead of inserting themselves into a scholarly Egyptology context where they would undoubtedly fail, the Mathers set themselves

⁴ Gaucher would have certainly been familiar with this infamous novel. Huysmans was a friend of Jules Bois, journalist and promoter of the Théâtre Bodinière where Mathers' Rites of Isis were staged (Webb 1974: 158).

up as authorities amongst other amateurs. The aesthetic pleasure derived from the contemplation of Egyptian antiquities and evocative ancient texts triggered imaginative reveries leading into sessions of clairvoyant contact with the past. If they discussed matters with professional Egyptologists it certainly did not rub off and the Mathers maintained that their understanding of Egyptian religion involved *beautiful truths... dead to the Egyptologist, but so living and so full of vital force to them* (Lees 1900: 83). The Mathers acquired spiritual authority, social credibility, students, media attention, notoriety and modest financial gain through ownership of this old-new spiritual system (Colquhoun 1975: 84). Whilst they obviously had a genuine interest in ancient religion, they were unwilling — or unable — to look at it without the distorting lens of Hermetic symbolism, fitting evidence to their theories and using ancient material to find out what they already ‘knew’ (Harrison 2003: 147).

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Title:

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Date:

2009

Citation:

TULLY, C. (2009). Samuel Liddell Macgregor Mathers and Isis. Evans, D (Ed.). Green, D (Ed.). Ten Years of Triumph of the Moon: A Collection of Essays, (1), pp.62-74. Hidden Publishing.

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