

# Veil and Headscarf: Five Aspects of a Cultural Phenomenon

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**Abstract** The discussions about the use of headscarves and veils shape the living conditions of Muslim women in the Middle East and in Europe to this day. To overcome this situation, a thorough and dispassionate documentation of the cultural history of veiling is necessary. This paper will give a short overview of the long history of veiling and it will deal in detail with five different aspects of this phenomenon and with the various connections between Europe and the Middle East: the relationship between death and the veil in the Ancient Near East; the veil in early Christianity; the hair as an erotic symbol in the Ancient Near East; the traditional costume of the Transylvanian Saxons as a European example of the use of veils and the veil of mystery.

**Keywords** Veil. Headscarf. Mesopotamia. Palmyra. Transylvania. Maraş. Death. St. Paul. Tertullian.

**Summary** 1 Veiling in the Ancient Near East. – 2 Death and the Veil in the Ancient Near East. – 3 The Veil in Early Christianity. – 4 Hair as an Erotic Symbol in the Ancient Near East. – 5 Headscarves and Veils in the Traditional Costume of Transylvania. – 6 The Veil of Mystery.

## 1 Veiling in the Ancient Near East

The use of headscarves and veils is not limited to Muslim societies. It has been known for decades that this phenomenon has an exceptionally long history within Near Eastern cultures.<sup>1</sup> Already during the third

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<sup>1</sup> Stol 2016, 22-8. See also Jeremias 1931; de Vaux 1935; van der Toorn 1995; Galter 2001; Vogelsang-Eastwood, Vogelsang 2008, 23-6. This paper is an extended version



millennium BCE, statues like the well-known one from Mari show females with their head covered by a cloak or a shawl. It is still not clear if this veiling was a common practice or restricted to certain occasions or certain groups of persons. In the case of the woman from Mari, the seated position and the polos on her head would indicate an affiliation with the elite. It has recently been speculated that she is a queen.<sup>2</sup>

Our main sources for head-coverings come from objects of art: sculptures, reliefs, paintings, votive plaques, and cylinder seals. Since many of the images are rather small and in almost all cases the original colours have been lost, it is often impossible to distinguish different styles. In the texts numerous designations for headscarves and veils occur,<sup>3</sup> but unfortunately in most cases we know nothing about their appearance, size, or use.

Head coverings are attested for both men and women.<sup>4</sup> Men commonly wear a headband or a bonnet, women a headscarf or a veil. The hem (*sissiktu*) of the garment could, among other things, also be used to cover the head and sometimes the face, but for the most part detailed information on its use in covering the face or body are lacking. Goddesses were said, too, to wear a veil, for example Aya, Ninlil, Ninsun, and Nanaya. The latter one was specifically referred to as “the veiled one among the goddesses” (*pusumti ilāti*) by the scribes of Esarhaddon.<sup>5</sup>

It seems that the veil was not in common use in Sumer during the third millennium BCE – we do not know any Sumerian word for it – but was instead more popular in the north and west of Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the picture is far from clear. Because the earliest attestations for the veil come from Ebla and Mari, Hartmut Waetzoldt thought that the use of the veil occurred first in the north and west and then spread to Babylonia.<sup>6</sup> On the Assyrian palace reliefs, veiled women tend to be depicted in western (Syrian and Levantine) contexts rather than in southern (Babylonian) ones.<sup>7</sup> This could be an indication that use of the veil originated in ancient Syria, but at the moment this is still an assumption.

Originally, headscarves and veils were used to protect a person from cold, wind, sand, or the sun [fig. 1]. This use is still practiced to-

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of the introductory presentation given at the conference. It deals with aspects not covered by the other contributions within this volume. I would like to thank Florian Ksugas for his valuable help in w the pitfalls of the English language.

<sup>2</sup> Otto 2016, 118-20.

<sup>3</sup> Waetzoldt 1983, 200-3.

<sup>4</sup> Börker-Klähn 1972; Boehmer 1983; Van der Toorn 1995, 327-8; Galter 2001, 14.

<sup>5</sup> Waetzoldt 1983, 202; Stol 2016, 27. For the various designations for the veil see Van der Toorn 1995, 327-30; Galter 2001, 14-15 and Giovanna Biga in the present volume.

<sup>6</sup> Waetzoldt 1983, 203.

<sup>7</sup> See Stol 2016, 25-6.



**Figure 1** Women at the ferryboat at ed-Debbah in Sudan (photo H.D. Galter 2004)

day in North-African and Near Eastern societies, and it is not restricted to women, as examples from Berber and Tuareg communities show.<sup>8</sup>

This protection was soon transferred to the immaterial realm. Head and face were regarded as particularly vulnerable due to their prominent position and all their orifices. They were exposed to threats such as demons, witchcraft, the evil eye, or - in the case of women - the covetous glances of men and therefore in need of extra protection.

This protection was especially necessary in phases of transition,<sup>9</sup> e.g. during puberty for girls, in the bridal state,<sup>10</sup> during the mourning period,<sup>11</sup> or at one's own death. Accordingly, we can distinguish different social contexts for veiling: the veiling of the bride, the covering of the head during religious ceremonies, the enshrouding of the dead, or the public veiling of married women. In Mesopotamia, so it seems, veils were originally only worn during wedding ceremonies<sup>12</sup> and only later became a sign of modesty for all married women.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> See the various contributions to the exhibition catalogue Steinmann 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Synnott 1987, 409-10; Pergament 1999, 44.

<sup>10</sup> Stol 2016, 22-4.

<sup>11</sup> Synnott 1987, 409; Hershman 1974, 283-6.

<sup>12</sup> Tsevat 1975; Van der Toorn 1995, 330-8. Brigitte Groneberg (2000, 3) compared the veil of the bride with the veil of the Mesopotamian priestess since in her opinion both became married women.

<sup>13</sup> Stol 2016, 26-7.

In addition, clothing served – and still does today – to distinguish group members from non-members and to convey an individual’s position in society. It informs about the social status, the occupation, the phases of life, the emotional state, or, nowadays, the political views of a person. Headscarves and veils were already used in the Ancient Near East to distinguish urban elite women from prostitutes or slave girls, as is amply documented in various law collections.<sup>14</sup>

In ancient Israel, the veil appears to have been in use in an upper-class urban environment at least from the 6th century BCE onwards. The prophet Isaiah (3,18-23) mentions the *rě’ālâ*, apparently a small face veil among the accessories of the well-situated Jerusalem women.<sup>15</sup> The veiling of women in public is also mentioned in other passages of the Old Testament, for example at the first meeting of Isaac and Rebekah (*Genesis* 24,65). The Moabite woman Ruth also covered herself with a cloth when she went to Boaz in Bethlehem (*Ruth* 3,15). And when Tamar forced Judah, the father of her deceased husband, to take care of her, the veil played an essential role. Tamar discarded the garment of her widowhood, wrapped herself in a *šā’îp*, a kind of cloak, and sat down at the town gate. Judah saw her but did not recognise her. They had intercourse, Tamar became pregnant and thus remained part of the family (*Genesis* 38,11-26).<sup>16</sup> Contrary to sedentary urban habits, nomadic women mostly remained unveiled (cf. *Genesis* 12,14 or 24,15).

From the 2nd century CE onward, veiling seemed to be common practice in Palestine and the Middle East. The Babylonian Talmud refers several times to the veiling of the woman. The tractate *Ketubot* (72) comes to the conclusion that a married woman should cover her hair under normal circumstances. It does so by quoting the *Sotah*-ritual, a fidelity test for women accused of adultery (*Numbers* 5,18). On the other hand, the Mishnah in *Ketubot* (7,6) mentions the behaviour of “going out with her head uncovered” as an offense against Jewish practice and not against Mosaic law.<sup>17</sup> In the tractate *Eruvin* (100), the covering of the woman’s head is described as part of the ten curses put on Eve for transgressing the divine mandate.

Until the 20th century CE, orthodox Jewish married women in the Middle East and in Europe covered their heads in public with a headscarf (*tichel*). These coverings could range from simple square pieces of cloth tied in the back to elaborate head coverings using multiple fabrics and tying techniques. As social constraints made it more and more difficult, some used a wig (*sheitel*) instead to fulfil their need

<sup>14</sup> Galter 2001, 17-19; Stol 2016, 26 and Mario Fales in the present volume.

<sup>15</sup> Van der Toorn 1995, 330; Galter 2001, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Van der Toorn 1995, 330; Galter 2001, 19.

<sup>17</sup> See also *Tosefta Sotah* 5.

for modesty. Although the general practice of covering one's head in public is slowly fading in Western culture, it is still common practice in ultra-orthodox Jewish communities.<sup>18</sup>

Outside of Middle Eastern cultures, the veiling of the female head was also part of everyday life for the upper classes. In the Homeric epics, the predominant garments of women are the *heanos* (ἑανός)<sup>19</sup> and the *peplos* (πέπλος).<sup>20</sup> The *heanos* was a kind of dress, the *peplos* probably some sort of cloak or outer garment covering the whole body. This cloak could be pulled in front of the face. It might not have originated from Greece but from *Asia Minor*, since there is no evidence for its existence in Minoan-Mycenaean art. During the Roman Empire, the Greek traditions lived on. Upper-class women covered their bodies with a cloak (*palla*) in public. A fine example is found in a mural painting of the Villa dei Misteri in Pompeii from the middle of the 1st century BCE. The poet Horace criticised the veiling of elite women, saying that a man can see nothing but the face of a matron, who carefully conceals her other charms. A courtesan, on the other hand, shows her goods before she takes the money.<sup>21</sup>

In the Parthian art of Dura Europos (e.g. in the "Salvation of Moses" from the synagogue), Hatra, and Palmyra, women with headscarves are regularly present. From Hatra we have images of goddesses and queens with long veils over their elaborate headgears, such as the statue of Abu Bint Deimun, wife of Sanatruq I (167-190 CE) [fig. 2].

On murals and funeral reliefs in Palmyra, women's and men's costumes differ primarily in the veil and jewellery. We will deal with these images below.

Headscarves were also worn in pre-Islamic times on the Arabian Peninsula, specifically by upper-class women as a sign of honour and distinction.<sup>22</sup> Three or four generations after the death of Muhammad, the habit of veiling spread to all parts of society and was adopted into the religious canon of social behaviour.<sup>23</sup> How and to what degree Persian and Byzantine practices influenced this development remains to be investigated.

<sup>18</sup> See in general Salzberg s.d.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. *Il.* 3.385; 4.19; 16.9; 23.254.

<sup>20</sup> E.g. *Il.* 5.315; 8.385; 23.254; *Od.* 15.105-106; 18.292.

<sup>21</sup> Hor. *Sat.* 1.2 (*Ambubaiarum collegia*): 94-105.

<sup>22</sup> Vogelsang-Eastwood, Vogelsang 2008, 35-7.

<sup>23</sup> Esposito 2002, 95-8.



**Figure 2**  
Statue of Abu Bint Deimun, Hatra.  
(photo H.D. Galter 2000)

## 2 Death and the Veil in the Ancient Near East

Tablet 8 of the standard Gilgamesh epic contains the death lament of Gilgamesh for Enkidu. Line 59 reads in the translation of Andrew George: “He covered (his) friend, (veiling) his face like a bride”.<sup>24</sup> The Akkadian verb *katāmu* “to veil etc.” was regularly used for the veiling of the bride and its derivation *kutummu* was one of the main designations for the veil that covered the head and the face of the bride.<sup>25</sup> This veiling of the dead seemed to be a common practice in the Ancient Near East. This tradition is still followed today in Jewish and Muslim funerals when the deceased is wrapped in a plain burial shroud. According to the Gospels, Jesus was also buried in accordance with Jewish law:

Joseph bought a linen cloth, took Him down, wrapped Him in the linen cloth and laid Him in a tomb which had been hewn out in the rock. (Mark 15,46, NASB)

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<sup>24</sup> George 2003, 655, l. 59.

<sup>25</sup> CAD K, 298-303 and 612, compare Galter 2001, 15-16.

To cover one's head and face was generally considered a sign of mourning,<sup>26</sup> but in our case we are dealing with the covering of the face of a dying or dead person. For this we have much fewer attestations.

Caesar allegedly pulled the folds of his toga over his head so as to prevent anyone from seeing his face at death.<sup>27</sup> The same is said about Socrates.<sup>28</sup> The murals in the tombs of Palmyra show this "veil of death" is sometimes depicted between columns or palm leaves, as in the painting on the right arch pillar of the main gallery of the hypogeum of the three brothers from the 4th century CE.

On this painting, the deceased has her head and upper body covered by a long veil too. Similar veils appear on other murals, e.g. the one on the left arch pillar of the main gallery or the medallions on the left side of the main gallery.<sup>29</sup> The question remains whether these examples were part of the funeral rites or a symbol of wealth and social standing. In other words, were the women presented veiled because they had died, or because they belonged to the upper-class of Palmyra?

The connection between veiled women and funerary monuments in Syria and Anatolia goes back at least to the 9th century BCE. There is a large group of basalt steles from Iron Age Kahramanmaraş that relate to funerals and memorial rites. Most of them show banquet-scenes with the deceased sitting at an offering table and one or two standing attendants.<sup>30</sup> Periodic banquets played an important part in the Ancient Near Eastern memorial rites (*kispu*).<sup>31</sup> The texts on some other steles indicate that the deceased were supposed to share the sacrifices of food and drink prepared for the deities.<sup>32</sup> The depicted persons, mostly husband and wife, but sometimes also parents with their children, are holding different objects in their hands. These could have been symbols of gender, social status, or occupation. Common male attributes were stylus and writing board, bow and sword, or a balance.

**26** Compare Samuel 15,30; Jeremiah 14,3-4 or Esther 6,12.

**27** Suet. *De vita Caesarum* 1.82.

**28** Pl. *Phd.* 118.a6.

**29** See Ruprechtsberger 1987, 59, fig. 18 and the images on the "Tombs of Palmyra", website of Michael Fuller: <http://users.stlcc.edu/mfuller/palmyratombs.html>.

**30** Orthmann 1971, 366-93 (Maraş A/2, Maraş B/7, Maraş B/8, Maraş B/12, Maraş B/14, Maraş B/19, Maraş B/20, Maraş B/21, Maraş C/1, Maraş C/2, Maraş C/3, Maraş C/5, Maraş D/3); Bonatz 2000, 34-44 and pl. 12-23 (C 22, C 25, C 27, C 33, C 34, C 51, C 60, C 62, C 64, C68). Compare Hawkins 1980 and 2000, 249-58.

**31** See Tsukimoto 1985.

**32** See Struble, Rimmer, Herrmann 2009.

The female figures wore long gowns and a veil or cloak covering their heads. They hold a distaff,<sup>33</sup> a mirror,<sup>34</sup> or a pomegranate<sup>35</sup> in one hand and a cup or beaker in the other. Sometimes they carry a musical instrument<sup>36</sup> or two poppy capsules.<sup>37</sup> Mirror and distaff were typical female attributes in the Ancient Near East.

The funerary stele of Tarhuntiwastis, for example, shows two seated women with long veils at opposite sides of an offering table. Both have a polos-type headgear under the veil. One holds a distaff and a mirror in her hands, the other a distaff and a cup. The inscription says that Azinis had set up this stele with the womanly (?) image of his wife Tarhuntiwastis. Since only one woman is mentioned in the text, it is generally assumed that both images represent Tarhuntiwastis. The stele dates to the 9th century BCE and is housed in the Ancient Oriental Museum in Istanbul (EŞ 7694).<sup>38</sup>

A basalt stele on display at the Adana Museum (Inv. 1956) shows a seated woman at the left side of an offering table [fig. 3]. She is wearing a long veil over a headgear that is adorned with numerous rosettes and she is pulling a thread from a distaff that she holds in her left hand. At the right side of the table, a younger male figure (her son?) is standing with a stylus and a writing board in his hands. The stele dates to the end of the 8th century.

A different scene is depicted on the funerary stele of Tarhupiyas in the Louvre (AO 19222).<sup>39</sup> It dates to the second half of the 8th century BCE and was acquired from the antiquities market. Therefore, we cannot be sure about its origin, but the image and the stylistic similarities point to the region of Kahramanmaraş. The image shows a seated woman wearing a veil and a boy standing on her knees. He holds a stylus in his right hand and a bird is tied to his left hand. A hieroglyphic Luwian inscription gives the personal name Tarhupiyas, but the inscription was incised at a later date.

In 1989 a mortuary monument in the form of a rectangular altar was found during construction work in Kahramanmaraş.<sup>40</sup> The monument is made of dark basalt and is decorated with reliefs on all four sides. The front face shows a seated woman en face sitting on a cline

<sup>33</sup> E.g. Orthmann 1971, pl. 47 (Maraş C/5).

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Orthmann 1971, pl. 45 (Maraş B/7, B/12, B/14).

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Orthmann 1971, pl. 43 (Maraş A/2) and pl. 46 (Maraş B/20).

<sup>36</sup> E.g. Orthmann 1971, pl. 46 (Maraş B/19).

<sup>37</sup> E.g. Orthmann 1971, pl. 47 (Maraş C/2) or pl. 57 (Zincirli B/3).

<sup>38</sup> Orthmann 1971, pl. 45 (Maraş B/7); Hawkins 2000, 273-4 and pl. 124 (MARAŞ 2); Bonatz 2000, pl. 14 (C 33).

<sup>39</sup> Orthmann 1971, pl. 48 (Maraş D/4); Hawkins 2000, 274-5 and pl. 125 (MARAŞ 9); Bonatz 2000, pl. 22 (C 65).

<sup>40</sup> Schachner, Schachner 1996.





**Figure 3**  
Stele in the Adana Museum  
(Riemschneider 1985, pl. 77)

and pulling a thread from a distaff that she holds in her left hand. She is also wearing a long veil over a headgear heavily decorated with rosettes. She is flanked by two younger women (her daughters?), who are also dressed in large cloaks covering their heads and carrying a fan and a flywhisk, respectively. The other side shows a procession of veiled musicians. The monument dates to the 8th century BCE and is on display at the Antakya Museum.

These kinds of images were not restricted to Kahramanmaraş. A similar stele was found in Zincirli<sup>41</sup> and a limestone orthostat from the Long Wall in Carchemish and now in the Museum of Anatolian Civilisations in Ankara shows a seated female figure dressed in the same way with a long veil covering her head and upper body. The four-line inscription on the background of the seated figure identifies her as Watis, the wife of the ruler Suhis II.<sup>42</sup> Although this representation is not on a stele, it has been suggested to be posthumous because the figure is presented larger than other humans and in com-

<sup>41</sup> Orthmann 1971, pl. 57 (Zincirli B/3).

<sup>42</sup> Hawkins 2000, pl. 8.



**Figure 4** Funerary relief of Tamma, daughter of Šamšigeram. BM 125204  
(photo © The Trustees of the British Museum)

pany of the gods. She is sitting on a cline similar to the one in the Antakya Museum.

All these monuments show the deceased women wearing a long veil. But again, we cannot decide whether the veil is indicating the death of the lady or her high social standing. One stele from Tell Fredje, north-east of Hama, shows a banquet-scene with a seated female figure on the right without a veil.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the two young women and the musicians on the altar from Kahramanmaraş

<sup>43</sup> Orthmann 1971, 104, 375 and pl. 7.

are veiled. This could support the argument that the veil is an indication for a higher social status. But it could also mean that the women are taking part in a religious ceremony as do the group of priestesses on the reliefs of the Procession Entry in Carchemish.<sup>44</sup>

In Palmyra, women wearing a long cloak over their heads are depicted on numerous funerary reliefs like the one of Tamma, daughter of Šamšigeram, dating to 50-150 CE, now in the British Museum [fig. 4]. These reliefs are the most important group of objects from Palmyra. The square slabs of local limestone, which were used to seal the burial niches (*loculi*) in the tower tombs and hypogea, show busts in high relief depicting the deceased person and occasionally other family members in a frontal pose. They date to the period between the 1st century BCE and the 3rd century CE. After the Roman conquest of Palmyra in 273 CE, the reliefs ceased to be produced.<sup>45</sup>

The funerary portraits were heavily shaped by Roman influences but nevertheless developed a distinctive local style incorporating features from Persian and Mesopotamian art.<sup>46</sup> They usually depict the individual down to the waist, thereby creating more space for the display of visual elements such as spindle and distaff, clothing, jewellery, or an elaborate headgear.

Palmyrene funerary portraits were not meant to depict the real person. They were representations of the personality and prestige of the deceased and they granted a continuing relationship with their families.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the adornments were used to show the social standing or individual situation of the deceased. They were the major means of individualisation.<sup>48</sup>

The women on these reliefs wear various combinations of a tunic, cloak or veil, headband, and turban. Their right hand is often raised, sometimes holding the veil or a fold of the cloak, sometimes touching their cheek. Other female figures are depicted holding a spindle or distaff as sign of femininity in their left hand. Some reliefs show women holding keys, calendars, or children.<sup>49</sup> In the beginning these domestic symbols were predominant and almost no jewellery appeared. Gradually, the use of these symbols declined and with the increase of wealth in Palmyra women began wearing earrings, bracelets, rings, and necklaces. Almost all of them wear a veil or a piece of cloth over their heads. In the 3rd century holding the veil became the common gesture of the images.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>44</sup> Orthmann 1971, pls 29-30.

<sup>45</sup> Heyn 2010, 632.

<sup>46</sup> Raja 2017.

<sup>47</sup> Heyn 2010, 634.

<sup>48</sup> Sokołowski 2017, 24-8; Klaver 2019, 123-4.

<sup>49</sup> Heyn 2010, 635.

<sup>50</sup> Chehade 1987; Heyn 2010, 636.

On the other hand, there is a group of female funerary portraits depicting women with unveiled heads. This is rather unusual, since Palmyrene women were typically depicted with at least part of their heads covered by a veil. These representations were interpreted as western influences in the time following Hadrian's visit to Palmyra in 129 CE.<sup>51</sup> Another group of busts with long open hair is believed to represent widows mourning their deceased husbands.<sup>52</sup>

As before, the funerary reliefs from Palmyra raise the same question as the steles from Kahramanmaraş: Does the veil indicate the death of the woman or her high social standing?

Most scholars agree that the clothing and the jewellery were part of the costume of upper-class women in Palmyra and pay tribute to the prestige and wealth of the deceased. On the other hand, Cynthia Finlayson postulated that the various female headdresses indicated religious, tribal, and family associations.<sup>53</sup> Nurith Kenaan-Kedar has focused on yet another feature of the reliefs. She argued that the images of women with extensive jewellery reflect the belief in the goddess Ištar/Astarte of Palmyra. The rich sets of jewellery depicted in the reliefs should be seen as a reflection of the jewellery of Ištar/Inana that she wore on her descent to the netherworld and of the hope for a resurrection similar to the one described in the Sumerian and Akkadian tales.<sup>54</sup>

This opens a new line of thought. From the earliest times onward, people in the Ancient Near East were buried with their best clothes and jewellery to pay testament to their social standing and their prestige. By this act they sought to ensure a corresponding position in the netherworld. The stories of Inana's or Ištar's descent are telling examples for this belief. The goddess adorns herself with her best clothes, jewellery, and accessories, including a wig and a headscarf, before departing for her journey.<sup>55</sup> Mesopotamian women behaved in a similar way, as is amply documented by the royal tombs of Ur<sup>56</sup> or the tombs of the Assyrian Queens at Nimrud.<sup>57</sup>

The funerary reliefs from Palmyra are evidence for the same beliefs and hopes. Since the veil symbolised their belonging to the elite, they might also have used it as part of their burial gown.<sup>58</sup> Wheth-

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**51** Parlasca 1987; Krag, Raja 2018.

**52** Heyn 2010, 637.

**53** Finlayson 1998, 710-43; Klaver 2019, 126-7.

**54** Kenaan-Kedar 2012; Compare ETCSL 1.4.1 and Foster 1996, 402-09; see also *infra*.

**55** ETCSL 1.4.1: 14-25.

**56** Zettler 1998.

**57** Damerji, Kamil 1999.

**58** In another chapter below I will analyse the traditional headscarves and veils of the Transylvanian Saxons. It was common practice to bury a woman with her veil or

er the raised hand holding the hem of her cloak or veil that we see on numerous reliefs is indeed a variant of the Roman *pudicitia* gesture, indicating modesty and fidelity, remains uncertain.<sup>59</sup> It might well belong to the group of gestures discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

### 3 The Veil in Early Christianity

The idea that an honourable woman must cover her head in public and in prayer was already present in early Christianity. The 11th-century Byzantine empress Irene Doukaina (c. 1066-1138) is portrayed as a model of modesty and virtuousness by her daughter Anna Komnena. She mentions that her mother carefully observed the paradigm of ideal behaviour and even covered her eyes and elbows.<sup>60</sup> This paradigm was largely based on the First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. In this letter the apostle demands that women should cover their heads during the community prayer:

Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. Now I praise you because you remember me in everything and hold firmly to the traditions, just as I delivered them to you. But I want you to understand that Christ is the head of every man, and the man is the head of a woman, and God is the head of Christ.

Every man who has something on his head while praying or prophesying disgraces his head. But every woman who has her head uncovered while praying or prophesying disgraces her head, for she is one and the same as the woman whose head is shaved. For if a woman does not cover her head, let her also have her hair cut off; but if it is disgraceful for a woman to have her hair cut off or her head shaved, let her cover her head. For a man ought not to have his head covered, since he is the image and glory of God; but the woman is the glory of man. For man does not originate from woman, but woman from man; for indeed man was not created for the woman's sake, but woman for the man's sake. Therefore the woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.

However, in the Lord, neither is woman independent of man, nor is man independent of woman. For as the woman originates from the man, so also the man has his birth through the woman;

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her headscarf in addition to her burial shroud. All this was prepared already during her lifetime. See Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 73.

<sup>59</sup> See the discussion in Heyn 2010, 635-6.

<sup>60</sup> See Garland 1988, 373.

and all things originate from God. Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a woman to pray to God with her head uncovered? Does not even nature itself teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a dishonor to him, but if a woman has long hair, it is a glory to her? For her hair is given to her for a covering. But if one is inclined to be contentious, we have no other practice, nor have the churches of God. (1 Corinthians 11,1-16, NASB)

No other passage in the New Testament has provoked such heated discussions – and continues to do so – as this one.<sup>61</sup> The text was used to argue for a general duty to veil women in public. It was interpreted in such a way that women in some radical protestant communities like the Russian Baptists, the Mennonites, the Amish, and the Hutterites always wear a veil, a headscarf, or a bonnet. Others refer to the safeguarding of the honour of the community<sup>62</sup> or to the necessity of keeping these traditional markers of anthropological difference.<sup>63</sup> The passage even served as evidence that Paul rejected the veiling of women.<sup>64</sup> Cynthia Thompson compared the descriptions in Paul's letter with the statues of women from ancient Corinth.<sup>65</sup> She came to the conclusion that Paul's description was in harmony with Greco-Roman customs. Even the line "for her hair is given to her for a covering (περιβολαίον)" reflected local conventions for long hair to be tied up and not to be kept unbound.<sup>66</sup> With only a few exceptions, the statues from Corinth depict women with long hair arranged into skilful and complex hairstyles. Torsten Jantsch follows the same line of thought. He is convinced that the text is not about a textile head-coverings but about a woman's hair, more precisely about the right hairstyle.<sup>67</sup>

The letter formed part of a long running correspondence between the apostle Paul in Ephesus and the Christian community in Corinth. It was probably written about 53-4 CE. Two or three years earlier, Paul had visited the city and established the community there. In the meantime, questions of public religious practice arose, and the apostle dealt with them. At the same time, he addresses topics such as religious ceremonies, marriage and celibacy, immorality, and the right conduct of women.

In the middle of the first century CE, Corinth was a port city with a booming economy and a large and diverse population. This tre-

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<sup>61</sup> For a history of research on this text see Jantsch 2015a and Marshall 2017, 9-41.

<sup>62</sup> Finney 2010.

<sup>63</sup> BeDuhn 1999.

<sup>64</sup> Schirmacher 2007.

<sup>65</sup> Thompson 1988.

<sup>66</sup> Thompson 1988, 112.

<sup>67</sup> Jantsch 2015b.

mendous cultural, social, and religious diversity was certainly reflected in the traditions and beliefs that the members of the Christian community brought along. There were substantial differences between dress codes for women in Greco-Roman Corinth, Syria, and Asia Minor, the areas Paul was familiar with.<sup>68</sup> In this letter Paul tried to make traditional oriental Christian social concepts mandatory among the new believers.<sup>69</sup> One of these concepts was the gender hierarchy deduced from the creation-account in *Genesis*. A similar attempt is apparent in his somewhat later letter to his younger Greek colleague Timothy:

Therefore I want the men in every place to pray, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and dissension. Likewise, I want women to adorn themselves with proper clothing, modestly and discreetly, not with braided hair and gold or pearls or costly garments, but rather by means of good works, as is proper for women making a claim to godliness. A woman must quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet. For it was Adam who was first created, and then Eve. And it was not Adam who was deceived, but the woman being deceived, fell into transgression. But women will be preserved through the bearing of children if they continue in faith and love and sanctity with self-restraint. (1 Timothy 2,8-15, NASB)

But in the letter to the Corinthians, so it seems, he nevertheless established rules for women praying and prophesying in public, a function that was common in Corinth<sup>70</sup> but did not exist in ancient Judaism and that he himself will later ban in the letter to Timothy.

The keyword in our text is the Greek *exúsia* (ἐξουσία), that was translated in the quote as “authority”. But the word has a wide range of meanings such as “power”, “mandate”, “leverage”, “freedom of choice”, “crown (as a symbol of royal authority)”, or even “veil (as a symbol of authority of the husband)”. In the Vulgate, the Latin word *potestas* is used. Therefore, the sentence “for this cause ought the woman to have (a sign of) authority on her head, because of the angels” could mean that she has to cover her head as a sign of her temporary religious authority when she acts publicly during service (“praying or prophesying”).<sup>71</sup>

During the following centuries, the veil became an established part of Christian tradition. By receiving religious significance, the

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68 Thompson 1988, 113.

69 Lampe 2012; compare Delleman 2013, 14-19.

70 See Marshall 2017, especially 73-108.

71 Compare Lambin 1995 and Du Toit 2015.

use of the veil spread in the West of the Roman empire more widely than in the East.

The early Christian author Tertullian (c. 150-225 CE) from Carthage contributed decisively to this development. He was the first one to produce an extensive corpus of Latin Christian literature and therefore can be regarded as the “founder of Western theology”.<sup>72</sup> Around 209 CE he wrote the work *De virginibus velandis* (“On the veiling of virgins”) because of a headscarf-controversy that erupted in Carthage in the wake of Paul’s 1st letter to the Corinthians. This controversy had much in common with modern debates about the use of the veil in public schools. It seems that there were different views on the veiling of women and girls during service and in public.<sup>73</sup> The main question that arose was whether young unmarried girls (*virgines*) should wear a veil during service in the same way as married women should or not. Tertullian came to a positive conclusion but went one step further in his argumentation. He demanded the veiling of girls starting from puberty even outside the church (*extra ecclesiam*). His understanding of Paul’s letter was that all women, regardless of origin, rank, situation, dignity, or age had to wear a veil.<sup>74</sup>

Tertullian used well-known arguments for his explanation: the topos of modesty and the statement that men are easily seduced by the sight of unveiled girls.<sup>75</sup> Like Paul in his letter he made comparisons to nature, but he also referred to traditions in his North-African environment, where the veiling of women in public was standard practice.

Tertullian particularly mentioned a passage in *Genesis* (6,1-2) that speaks about the marriage between the sons of God and the daughters of men. He argued that even angels had succumbed to the temptation of female beauty. Therefore, all men, regardless of age and social status, were at risk: sons by their mothers, brothers by their sisters, or fathers by their daughters. He concluded that, consequently, all women had to be veiled.<sup>76</sup>

This conclusion already anticipated the traditional Muslim gender discourse that is still going on today. The main argument put forward is that women hold a broad sexual attractiveness which must be strictly controlled. Otherwise, men are prevented from carrying out their religious and social duties which will disrupt the established social order. Veiling protects men from female eroticism and women from male sexual harassment. Tertullian’s work ends with the observation:

<sup>72</sup> Gonzáles 2010, 91-3.

<sup>73</sup> See Fellman 2009.

<sup>74</sup> Elssner 2004, 328.

<sup>75</sup> Dunn 2005.

<sup>76</sup> Elssner 2004, 322-3.





**Figure 5** Processional relief in front of the entrance of the Bel-temple in Palmyra in 2011  
(photo H.D. Galter 2011)

Arabia's heathen females will be your judges, who cover not only the head, but the face also, so entirely (*non caput sed faciem quoque ita totam*), that they are content, with one eye free (*uno oculo liberato*), to enjoy rather half the light than to prostitute the entire face. A female would rather see than be seen. (XVII, 4)<sup>77</sup>

This passage refers to customs of veiling in pre-Islamic Arab societies that could be seen on the processional relief from the Bel-temple in Palmyra [fig. 5] until 2014, when the "Islamic State" blew up the temple.

#### 4 Hair as an Erotic Symbol in the Ancient Near East

Our hair has always been a major element in the formation of first impressions and self-representation, respectively. It documents physical and mental conditions, social aspirations, well-being, or illnesses. It leaves a lasting impression on others and influences judgments about our character or health-condition. As a result, our hair forms an essential and sometimes highly emotionally charged element of nonverbal communication.<sup>78</sup> Our hair is perhaps the most powerful symbol of individual and group identity. It is physical and therefore extremely personal. At the same time, as an element of communication it is public rather than private. It conveys information about age, status, social class or even the gender of the persons involved.<sup>79</sup>

In 1958, Edmund Leach introduced a comparative perspective to the sociological discussion of the hair by giving a synthesis between anthropological and psychological data. After reviewing evidence from Hinduism in India and Buddhism in Sri Lanka, Leach concluded that long hair symbolises unrestrained sexuality, while short hair, tightly bound hair, or a partially shaved head indicates restricted sexuality while close shaven heads act as a sign of celibacy.<sup>80</sup> This view was contradicted by Christopher Hallpike, who used examples from the Bible and from contemporary societies. He suggested instead that trimmed hair indicates social control and uncut hair symbolises being outside society.<sup>81</sup> Other anthropologists have studied hair sym-

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<sup>77</sup> Tertullian, *De virginibus velandis*. [http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-09.htm#P671\\_166987](http://www.tertullian.org/anf/anf04/anf04-09.htm#P671_166987).

<sup>78</sup> Bergler 2003; Hirschman 2002.

<sup>79</sup> Pergament 1999, 46-8.

<sup>80</sup> Leach 1958.

<sup>81</sup> Hallpike 1969. For the further history of the discussion see Synnott 1987, 404-10.

bolism in various cultures.<sup>82</sup> Anthony Synnott has advanced a theory of opposites: opposite sexes have opposite hair and opposite ideologies have opposite hair as well.<sup>83</sup>

Hair as a marker for cultural codes can be traced back to Antiquity. In men, long hair represented strength and virility. In the biblical account of Samson and Delilah (*Judges* 16) the hero was given extraordinary strength but lost it when his long hair was cut. Being combed was seen as a sign of trust, intimacy, and love. Male Sikhs in India still find it indecent to expose their hair in public today.<sup>84</sup>

Women's hair was regarded as a special sign of beauty and often attributed seductive power. The beauty of the Greek goddess Aphrodite was especially indicated by the splendour of her hair. The power of hair as a sexual symbol is further documented in medieval love poetry.<sup>85</sup> A contemporary advisor on dress for women argues in the same way: "My thinking was that a girl just isn't a girl without her hair".<sup>86</sup>

All this is in perfect accordance with Ancient Near Eastern perceptions of sex appeal and female attraction. Both Mesopotamian languages – Sumerian and Akkadian – use words for "abundance" and "opulence" to describe female beauty.

The Sumerian word *hili* means "(to be) luxuriant", "(to have) pleasure", "sex appeal".<sup>87</sup> It is predominantly attested in literature texts written down at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, for instance in Inana and Enki, where "feminine attraction" (*hi-li nam-munus-e-ne*) is mentioned among the "me" of Inana.<sup>88</sup> In the royal hymns of Šulgi of Ur, *hili* is also associated with Inana. She is called "attraction of all mankind" (*hi-li saĝ-gig<sub>2</sub>-ga*)<sup>89</sup> and "attraction of heaven and earth" (*hi-li an-ki-a*).<sup>90</sup> *Hili* is attributed to women and men alike. Šulgi for instance is chosen by Inana for his attractiveness.<sup>91</sup> *Hili* is further said of jewellery, clothing, furniture, fruits and trees.<sup>92</sup> The compound verbs *hili-kar* and *hili-teĝ<sub>3</sub>*, that occur especially in Sumerian love songs are used for "to love", "to be fond of", "to be attracted to".<sup>93</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Derrett 1973; Hershman 1974; Houlbert 1979; for more literature see Synnott 1987, 382.

<sup>83</sup> Synnott 1987; also Synnott 2016, 103-27.

<sup>84</sup> Synnott 1987, 384-6; Pergament 1999, 43-8.

<sup>85</sup> Sleeman 1981, 322-32; Pergament 1999, 45-6.

<sup>86</sup> Hemingway 1979, 143; see also Synnott 1987, 383-6 and compare Banks 2000.

<sup>87</sup> PSD sub *hili*.

<sup>88</sup> ETCSL 1.3.1: Segment I 95; see Stol 2004.

<sup>89</sup> ETCSL 2.4.2.24 (Šulgi X): 43.

<sup>90</sup> ETCSL 2.4.2.01 (Šulgi A): 82.

<sup>91</sup> ETCSL 2.3.2.01 (Šulgi A): 15.

<sup>92</sup> Leick 1994, 74, but compare Jacobsen 1973, 207-8 and Wilcke 1975, 312.

<sup>93</sup> Sefati 1998, 159-60.

The Akkadian equivalent to *hili* is *kuzbu*. The Chicago Assyrian Dictionary<sup>94</sup> lists “luxuriance, abundance, attractiveness, charm, sexual vigor” as translations. Again, it could be used as an attribute for women and men alike.

But *kuzbu* could also refer to the rich adornments of buildings, the abundance of water or the luxuriance of vegetation in a garden. The Assyrian king Sennacherib for example adorned the garden of his *akītu*-temple at Ashur with luxuriant plantations (*musarē kuzbi*).<sup>95</sup>

The Akkadian adjective *šamḥu* had similar meanings: “luxuriant”, “lush”, “prosperous”.<sup>96</sup> It was used to describe canebrakes, pastures, populations, and individuals. It appears in male and female personal names and its female form *šamḥatu* was one denotation for a prostitute in Akkadian. Both forms derived from the verb *šamāḥu* meaning “to grow thickly”, “to flourish”, “to attain extraordinary beauty”.<sup>97</sup>

In 1994 Gwendolyn Leick wrote the book about sex and eroticism in Mesopotamia. Surprisingly enough, in the chapter on femininity and eroticism in Sumerian literature,<sup>98</sup> she does not say a word about what made a woman, especially the goddess Inana, whom she calls “the most feminine of goddesses”,<sup>99</sup> sexually attractive. She discusses the words *hili* and *kuzbu* but comes to the conclusion that the available data forms only inconclusive evidence for the semantic range of the lexemes.<sup>100</sup>

Mesopotamian texts did not praise the luxuriance of the female body, as for instance medieval Arab and Turkish tales do, but the luxuriance of the hair.<sup>101</sup> At the beginning of “Enki and the World Order” it is stated that Enki’s word bestows vigour in the heart of the young man and attractiveness (*hili*) on the head of young woman.<sup>102</sup> Andrew George published a list of shrines in the *E<sub>2</sub>-rab-ri-ri*, the temple of Madānu in the temple complex of Esaḡil in Babylon, in which the shrine of the divine hairdressers of Zarpanitum is called *E<sub>2</sub>-hi-li-sag<sub>10</sub>-ga* “Shrine of beautiful attractiveness”.<sup>103</sup> Rainer Boehmer clearly realised that the goddess on the Uruk-vase has the same hairstyle as her female attendants but is highlighted by the luxuri-

<sup>94</sup> CAD K, 614-15.

<sup>95</sup> Grayson, Novotny 2014, 248 (Sennacherib 168): 35.

<sup>96</sup> CAD Š1, 312.

<sup>97</sup> CAD Š1, 288-90.

<sup>98</sup> Leick 1994, 55-63.

<sup>99</sup> Leick 1994, 66.

<sup>100</sup> Leick 1994, 74 and 184.

<sup>101</sup> Börker-Klähn 1972, 2-5; Stol 2016, 52.

<sup>102</sup> ETCSL 1.1.3: 32-34.

<sup>103</sup> George 1992, 106: 17’ and see the discussion on pages 412-13.



**Figure 6** Vase fragment from Lagash, Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, VA 07248  
(photo bpk / Vorderasiatisches Museum, SMB / Olaf M. Teßmer)

ance of her hair.<sup>104</sup> Another example is the fragment of a stone vase from Lagash around 2300 BCE now housed in the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin [fig. 6] which depicts the goddess Nisaba with long hairlocks.

It shows the goddess Nisaba with long and exuberantly growing locks of hair. All other attributes of the deity, the ears of barley at her crown and the bunch of dates in her hand connect her with a flowering vegetation.<sup>105</sup> And the use of *kuzbu* in connection with a garden, as mentioned above, is comparable to the garden metaphors in Sumerian love songs.<sup>106</sup> A passage from a hymn to Šu-Sîn, king of Ur, attributed to his wife Kubatum, reads:

My hair is lettuce, well watered. It is the sprout of a lettuce, well watered. Its tangled coils [?] have been tightened. My nursemaid has ..... them high and made my hair stag-like. She has tightened its tiny hairgrips and brought order to my charms; my charms, my hair, the lettuce, is the fairest of plants.<sup>107</sup>

Marten Stol compared this orchard metaphor with the golden headgear of queen Puabi resembling leaves and flowers, which was found by Leonard Wooley in the royal graveyard in Ur.<sup>108</sup> The hair of the beloved woman is a common topic in the Inana-Dumuzi love songs. Inana is fond of her long dangling hair and arranges it in a tight hair-do when she goes to war:

I have washed my dangling hair, I have tested my weapons that make his reign propitious. I have straightened my tousled head of hair, I have tightened my loosened hairgrips, and let my hair fall down the back of my neck.<sup>109</sup>

On the other hand, the loosening of her hair indicates a time of sexual encounters:

She lets down her hair [*siki*] which was combed up.<sup>110</sup>

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**104** Boehmer 1989, 280.

**105** Compare the stele from Lagash given in Asher-Greve 2006, 60, fig. 8 and several other images in that article. See also Otto 2016, 114-16.

**106** Compare Lambert 1987, 28-31; Leick 1994, 71 and 120-4; Stol 2016, 52-3.

**107** ETCSL 2.4.4.3: 1-8.

**108** Stol 2016, 49.

**109** ETCSL 4.08.03: 11-15.

**110** ETCSL 4.08.31: 5.

Let me loosen your hairgrip on the holy and luxuriant couch.<sup>111</sup>

All images of sexual intercourse presented by Gwendolyn Leick show the women with loose hair.<sup>112</sup> This visual signal has survived the centuries and is still part of the visual language of modern films. In one case the preparations for Inana's date with Dumuzi include the adornment of her hair with erotic pendants:

She chooses the golden genitals and puts them on the hair of her head.<sup>113</sup>

And again, the garden metaphor is used in the same way as in the love song for Šu-Sîn:

May my sheep eat my unkempt long hair, my plants, my esparto grass.<sup>114</sup>

The hair of the male lover is similarly praised:

My one distinguished by a shock of hair [*suhur*], my one distinguished by a shock of hair! My sweet, my one distinguished by a shock of hair! My one distinguished by a shock of hair like a palm tree! My shaggy-necked one like a tamarisk, my one distinguished by a shock of hair! My man distinguished in the assembly by your shock of hair!<sup>115</sup>

Apart from the denotations of luxuriance and sex appeal the Sumerian *hili* could also designate a wig.<sup>116</sup> This use is found in Sumerian literary texts and in Ur III-documents from the end of the third millennium BCE<sup>117</sup> A ritual text from Seleucid Uruk (W 18728) describes the religious costumes of various groups of the clergy. The royal costume for this ritual consisted of a tunic and at least two robes, ample jewellery and an "Inana wig" (*hili d<sup>i</sup>inana*).<sup>118</sup> Jutta Börker-Klähn assumed that the famous marble head from Uruk too had originally

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<sup>111</sup> ETCSL 4.08.08: 21.

<sup>112</sup> Leick 1994, pl. 1-10.

<sup>113</sup> ETCSL 4.08.20: 14.

<sup>114</sup> ETCSL 4.08.23: 31-32.

<sup>115</sup> ETCSL 4.08.25: 34-38.

<sup>116</sup> Börker-Klähn 1972, 5-6; Stol 2004, 2016, 50-2.

<sup>117</sup> See Attinger, Kreberník 2005, 66 and the attestations listed in the PSD sub *hili*.

<sup>118</sup> Falkenstein 1959, 40-1: rev. 11'.



Figure 7 Votive wig from Ur III period (photo © The Trustees of the British Museum)

worn a ceremonial wig.<sup>119</sup> Gebhard Selz argued in the same way supposing that wigs, artificial beards, and perhaps masks might testify to changes of ceremonial roles and sometimes might even be connected to a temporary divine status.<sup>120</sup>

At the beginning of “Inana’s descent to the netherworld” the goddess adorns herself and puts a wig (*hili*) and a turban (*tug<sub>2</sub>-šu-gur-ra*) on her head.<sup>121</sup> A similar description but without the mentioning of *hili* is found at the beginning of “Inana and Enki”.<sup>122</sup> Sam Kramer challenged the interpretation of *hili* as a wig in his treatment of “Inana’s descent to the netherworld” because the line says that Inana put the *hili* on her forehead, which seemed improbable to him. He translated “locks (of hair)” instead, based on a suggestion by Benno Landsberger.<sup>123</sup> On the other hand Thorkild Jacobsen understood the lines as if Inana put a desert-headscarf, a *kefia* (*tug<sub>2</sub>*) and *aghal* (*šu-gur-ra*), on her head and held a wig (*hili*) in her hand in order to change

<sup>119</sup> Börker-Klähn 1972, 1.

<sup>120</sup> Selz 2004, 193.

<sup>121</sup> ETCSL 1.4.1: 17-18. See Falkenstein 1942, 115-16 and Römer 1993, 462 with note.

<sup>122</sup> ETCSL 1.3.1: 1-2.

<sup>123</sup> Kramer 1951, 2: 18 and the discussion on page 15.



in the palace of the netherworld.<sup>124</sup> But the headdress was the first thing taken from her when entering the first gate of the netherworld.<sup>125</sup>

The model of such a wig from Southern Iraq was purchased by the British Museum (BM 91075) [fig. 7] in 1878. It is made of grey chlorite (8.5 × 8 × 4.5 cm) and carries a votive inscription by Bau-ninam an official of the king Šulgi of Ur (2094-2047 BCE)

For the goddess Lamma, his lady, for the life of Šulgi, mighty man, king of Ur, Bau-ninam, the cup-bearer of Ur-Ningirsu, beloved en-priest of the goddess Nanše, fashioned her ladylike wig [*hili nam-munus-ka-ni*] for her.<sup>126</sup>

Two wigs from the Early Dynastic palace G in Ebla, made of green steatite and beige limestone respectively, were housed in the museum of Aleppo before the civil war.<sup>127</sup> Others were found in Uruk, Ur, Girsu, Mari, Sippar, and Ashur.<sup>128</sup> A model of a male royal wig with carved ears and an elaborate hairstyle from the Early Dynastic III period is also housed in the British Museum (1994,0620.1). It is also made from stone, shows no inscription, and is partially restored.<sup>129</sup>

Similar praises of the hair of the beloved woman can be found in the Hebrew *Song of Songs*:

Your hair is like a flock of goats, moving down the slopes of Gilead. (4:1; 6:5, NASB)

But the hair of the male lover is similarly praised:

His head is the finest gold; his locks are wavy, black as a raven. (5:11, NASB)

It is stated clearly that the flowing locks and tresses of the beloved woman are the means by which the lover is entrapped:

Your head crowns you like Carmel, and your flowing locks are like purple; a king is held captive in the tresses. (7:5, NASB)<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> Jacobsen 1987, 3.

<sup>125</sup> ETCSL 1.4.1: 130.

<sup>126</sup> Frayne 1997, 215-16 (1.2.2030). Note the translation by Marten Stol (2016, 49): "*hili* of her femininity".

<sup>127</sup> Kohlmeyer, Strommenger 1982, 81, nos. 73 and 74; Stol 2016, 50, fig. 8.

<sup>128</sup> Börker-Klähn 1972, 5-6.

<sup>129</sup> Moorey 1996.

<sup>130</sup> The word "tresses" is unclear.

When the rabbis defined the feminine hair as sexually attractive in the Talmud (Berakhot 24a), and prohibited men from praying in sight of a woman's hair, they based their decision on the verse mentioned above: "Your hair is like a flock of goats", which in their opinion proofed the sensual nature of the hair.

The veiling of women is mentioned several times in the *Song of Songs*. It is used to draw attention to other aspects of feminine beauty: the soft pink colour of her temples (4:3) or the shape and colour of her eyes, which became another major aspect of beauty in the *Old Testament*:<sup>131</sup>

How beautiful you are, my love, how very beautiful! Your eyes are doves behind your veil. (4:1, NASB)<sup>132</sup>

Athalya Brenner has summarised the criteria for feminine beauty in the *Song of Songs* mainly based on its chapter 4. The female lover has eyes like doves, long and flowing hair, symmetrical white teeth, red lips, a perfect and a symmetrical appearance. Her breasts for instance resemble twin gazelles. The rest of the body is described by a garden metaphor focusing on the fragrance of the beloved.<sup>133</sup> The mentioning of the hair and jewellery and the fact that the *Song of Songs* uses the same garden similes as the Sumerian love songs once more proofs the fact that the text is part of a larger Ancient Near Eastern tradition of love poetry.<sup>134</sup>

In early Christian tradition, the uncovered hair of women still had the connotation of sensual provocation.<sup>135</sup> Thus, Mary Magdalene was usually depicted with open long hair symbolising her former state as a sinner. This conception of her character as a repentant prostitute goes back to pope Gregory I (c. 540-604 CE) and was based on an erroneous merging of chapters 7 and 8 in the Gospel of Luke. Eve is often depicted in the same way. Capital C in the central apse of the basilica of Notre-Dame du Port in Clermont-Ferrand shows the disobedience of Eve in opposition to the obedience of Mary on capital B. In this relief the angel drags the temptress Eve out of paradise by her long hair.<sup>136</sup> John Milton in *Paradise Lost* (1667) reinforced the image of Eve as a temptation to Adam by describing her hair and, again, using the garden metaphor:

<sup>131</sup> See Avioz 2009 and Black 2000, 311-12.

<sup>132</sup> Similar expressions are found in verses 1:15; 4:9 and 6:5; see Penchansky 2013.

<sup>133</sup> Brenner 1997, 45-50.

<sup>134</sup> See Fischer 2014 and Nissinen 2016.

<sup>135</sup> Cosgrove 2005.

<sup>136</sup> Tumanov 2011; compare Marshall 2010.



**Figure 8** Adam and Eve, Schedelsche Weltchronik, c. 1493. [https://www.apostolische-geschichte.de/wiki/images/Adam\\_und\\_eva.png](https://www.apostolische-geschichte.de/wiki/images/Adam_und_eva.png)



**Figure 9** Gerard David (c. 1450-1523): Madonna and Child, Gemäldegalerie der Staatlichen Museen in Berlin. (photo bpk / Gemäldegalerie, SMB / Jörg P. Anders)

She, as a veil down to the slender waist, her unadorned golden tresses wore dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved as the vine curls her tendrils – which implied subjection, but required with gentle sway, and by her yielded, by him best received – yielded, with coy submission, modest pride, and sweet, reluctant, amorous delay.<sup>137</sup>

The following juxtaposition of Eve and Mary in comparable poses documents clearly that the dichotomies decent/indecent and honourable/dishonourable were established by means of headgear in early Christianity [figs 8-9].<sup>138</sup>

Since the hair was regarded as the most beautiful adornment of a woman, the covering of the hair of the honourable, married woman with a bonnet, headscarf, or veil in public was common practice in

**137** Milton 2001, IV 304-311; compare Dobranski 2010.

**138** Kraus 1982; Krieger 2012, 34 and 53; Wolin 2014; compare Kobler 1970.

Europe during the Middle Ages.<sup>139</sup> In German we still have the phrase “unter die Haube (bonnet) kommen” for getting married.

On the other hand, the removal of the bonnet, headscarf, or veil and the loosening of the hair had a very strong sexual connotation. Nineteenth-century authors like Pierre Louys or Oscar Wilde restored this connotation. In his 1891-92 play *Salomé* Wilde introduced the “Dance of the Seven Veils”, which received worldwide fame through Richard Strauss’s opera *Salome* (1905).<sup>140</sup> This dance is pure fantasy and has no historical role models, neither in the Bible nor in the Ancient Near East. Wilde’s concept of it is believed to be derived from popular performances of veil dances especially at the world exhibitions in Paris (1889) and Chicago (1893). The dancers “Little Egypt” and Loie Fuller were especially associated with veil dances. Influenced by the controversies and scandals caused by these performances and partly also by Wilde’s play a new form of mass entertainment emerged in the music halls including numerous shows of female performers who engaged in various forms of undressing. With and without biblical references the “Dance of the Seven Veils” became a general attraction.

Toni Bentley compared the dance of the seven veils with the successive unclothing of Inana/Ištar in the Mesopotamian tale of her descent to the netherworld.<sup>141</sup> As we have already seen, the goddess had to remove all her jewellery and garments, one by one, at the seven gates of the netherworld. Naked and stripped of all her power she had to submit to the rules of the netherworld. When she finally is revived through a trick of the god of wisdom Enki/Ea, she is given back all the symbols of majesty and power that were taken from her. Unlike modern striptease shows, which are supposed to create some erotic feelings, the unclothing of Inana/Ištar had the opposite effect. In the Akkadian version<sup>142</sup> it resulted in the total termination of all sexual activity on earth. The Sumerian text is suspiciously silent about the consequences.

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**139** See Margit Stadlober in the present volume. For female head coverings in early Christian art compare Koslin 2008 and Dellemann 2013, 102-11.

**140** Caddy 2005; Kultermann 2006; Malik 2008.

**141** Bentley 2002, 32.

**142** Foster 1996, 402-9.



**Figure 10**  
Transylvanian Saxon women  
from Hammersdorf. Picture  
postcard by Jos. Drotleff,  
Hermannstadt 1917 (private  
possession)

## 5 Headscarves and Veils in the Traditional Costume of Transylvania

Within European traditional costumes, in particular the festive costumes, headscarves and veils are still an integral part of clothing. For instance, elements of the Southern German dress of the 14th and 15th centuries have survived in Transylvania until today.<sup>143</sup> Transylvania has had an eventful history and underwent many political, social, and cultural changes. Located at the southeastern fringes of Europe and close to the border of the Ottoman Empire, it was subjected to countless military operations and changing sovereignties. Different ethnic groups, such as Germans, Hungarians, and Romanians, but also Székelys, Turks, and Roma have lived side by side and although

<sup>143</sup> I have chosen this example because of the Transylvanian-Saxon background of my family.

each group maintained its own traditions and costumes, they influenced each other profoundly.<sup>144</sup>

The Transylvanian Saxons, who migrated from the area between the Rhine and the Moselle to the Carpathian highlands in today's Romania in the 12th century, have preserved their traditional costumes for centuries [fig. 10].<sup>145</sup> There have been changes over time, new elements were added, others have been abandoned. But thanks to the strong sense of tradition of the Transylvanian Saxons, a unique landscape of traditional costumes was created, blending German, Hungarian, Ottoman, and Austrian elements. Every region, every town, and every village had its own distinctive costume, by which the residents were recognised.

There was a clear difference between rural and urban costumes. Whereas the rural dress had to be primarily functional and durable, the urban fashion mirrored the social hierarchy within the towns. It defined the position of a person within society and consisted of significantly more accessories and jewellery. The firm social division into generations and genders as codified in the neighbourhood rules was particularly evident in the public space. There was a fixed seating arrangement in church with the women sitting in the main nave and the men at both sides. In that same strictness people had to pay attention to the specifications of their costumes, which marked origin, status, and age through traditional 'recognition marks', which were strictly adhered to. A married woman was dressed differently than a young girl or a confirmand. The costume of older women also differed from younger women in the colour of their garments and in the headgear. All social relations and interactions were controlled by the neighbourhood too.<sup>146</sup>

The Transylvanian folk costume was primarily a festive costume. Wearing it was regarded as a declaration of one's commitment to the Saxon community and the Lutheran Church.<sup>147</sup> Special occasions, such as church attendance, confirmation, wedding, or the "Kronenfest" at St. Peter and St. Paul's Day (29 June) demanded the wearing of the traditional costume. The dress was well-tailored and rich in jewellery and embroideries in primary colours, such as red, blue, yellow, or black, the favourite motifs being floral ones with each of them carrying its own specific symbolism. The manufacture of the

<sup>144</sup> Takács 2017. For the following see Bielz 1965; Treiber-Netolicka 1968; Scola, Bretz-Schwarzenbacher, Schiel 1987; Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011; compare Waltraud Fleischer: *Siebenbürgisch-sächsische Tracht*: <https://www.siebenbuerger.de/porta1/daten/dokumente/50-jahre-lg-baden-wuerttemberg/sachsen/10.htm>.

<sup>145</sup> Orend 1958; Davis 2010, 200.

<sup>146</sup> Schubert 1980, 44-5; Benesch 2013, 185.

<sup>147</sup> Römer 1922; Davis 2010, 202-4.



**Figure 11**  
*Bockelung*  
(photo H.D. Galter 2012)

dress was mainly done by the women at home. This was part of the long-established gender divisions within the family.

Until the middle of the 16th century, the costumes of the urban citizens were based on the fashions of European cities especially in Flanders and Luxembourg. Garments, such as the Krause Mantel, a wrinkled mantle of black fur, the *Heftel*, a large pendant that evolved from the Germanic round fibula, the *Spangengürtel*, a girdle with metal embossing, or the *Borten*, a cylindrical headdress about 15 cm high, coated with black velvet and with colourful ribbons made from silk, embroidered velvet, or gold hanging on the back are from this period.<sup>148</sup> The *Borten* was worn by girls after their confirmation until their marriage. It evolved from the medieval hair band (Middle High German *borte*) of young girls in German territories.<sup>149</sup> The veil of the married woman (*Schlodderdeach*, *Schlejerdaoch*) also corresponds to the female headgear in Flanders in the 15th century [fig. 11].<sup>150</sup>

After the defeat of the Hungarian army by the Ottoman forces at Mohács in 1526, Hungary and Transylvania came under Otto-

**148** Scola, Bretz-Schwarzenbacher, Schiel 1987, 17-18.

**149** Schenk 1992, 159; Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 82-5; Benesch 2013, 193.

**150** Scola, Bretz-Schwarzenbacher, Schiel 1987, 11-15.

man rule. In the following period, oriental influences in traditional costumes were predominant. They reached Transylvania mainly through Hungarian or Polish mediation and mainly concerned the men's dress. Although the covering of the head of a married woman with a white veil looks suspiciously Ottoman, it is part of a much older tradition that had its roots in the southern parts of Germany.<sup>151</sup>

With the annexation of Transylvania by the Habsburg Empire in 1711, economic and cultural ties with Europe were revived. Once again, the western influences of fashion prevailed in the traditional costumes. In the following period, the rural population took over numerous elements from the urban costume but adapted them to their specific region and preference. By the end of the 18th century, wealthy urban families began to adopt the modern fashions that they encountered, especially in Vienna. It was significantly cheaper to purchase ready-made clothing than to manufacture it at home. However, traditional costumes retained their public role as festive wear. They were reserved for special occasions such as festivals or church ceremonies.<sup>152</sup>

Little girls and schoolgirls wore colourfully embroidered and flounced bonnets, confirmed girls either tied a hairband around their heads or put on the *Borten* to go to church. On her wedding day, the bride wore the *Borten* for the last time.<sup>153</sup>

Married women had to cover their hair completely, either with a bonnet or a cloth. Black velvet bonnets, colourfully embroidered and often decorated with pearls, were characteristic of Northern Transylvania. The bonnets of young women had silk embroideries in pink and red, the bonnets of older women showed embroidered flowers in yellow, purple, and blue. In Southern Transylvania, white or black bonnets were worn, and in Burzenland, black velvet ones embroidered with gold.<sup>154</sup>

When going to church the women artfully laid a veil of white tulle over their bonnets or used a white linen or cotton headscarf knotted under the chin (*Knäpdich*).<sup>155</sup> In some regions (e.g. Mediasch or Katzendorf) cloths from tulle were prohibited.<sup>156</sup> An old woman in Honigberg told me that she would never go to church without a headscarf, because she would not be properly dressed.

The preparations for veiling (*Bockelung* or *Schleijern*) were very time-consuming and could often not be carried out by one person

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<sup>151</sup> Orend 1958.

<sup>152</sup> Davis 2010, 204.

<sup>153</sup> Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 75.

<sup>154</sup> Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 77-82.

<sup>155</sup> Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 70-2.

<sup>156</sup> Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 71.





**Figure 12**  
The veil of the married woman, front (photo H.D. Galter 2012)

alone.<sup>157</sup> The woman's hair had to be braided into two plaits, which were placed around the back of the head and attached with hairpins. A small cloth could also be used as a substitute. A bonnet and a cushion were placed on it. Then, a ribbon of wool was wrapped around the head so that no hair would be visible anymore.

Over this ribbon several others made of black, white, or colourful silk were placed and fastened at the neck with needles. They usually fell overlapping down to the hem of the skirt.

Finally, a white, black, or dark blue veil was placed around the head [fig. 12].<sup>158</sup> It was about one and a half meter long and up to 60 cm wide, made of tulle lace, linen batiste, or silk, and often decorated with woven flower patterns. The women wrapped it from left to right and attached it with 4 to 12 buckle needles. Usually these needles were very valuable and had been in family possession for a long time. The more needles were used, the more splendid was the impression the woman left behind. The centre of the head could also be decorated with a brooch. Afterwards, the veil was artfully draped around the chin and the back of the head.

Type and colour of the veil were determined by the age and status of the woman and differed from region to region. For example, in Stolzenburg young married women wore a small yellow veil, in Rode a black or dark blue one. After the birth of the first child at the lat-

<sup>157</sup> Scola, Bretz-Schwarzenbacher, Schiel 1987, 18-19; Schmidt, Förderreuther 2011, 73-5.

<sup>158</sup> Kanz, Rothbacher 2008, 35-46; compare the instructions for veiling: <http://hogrode.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Dokumentation-Festbockelung.pdf> and <http://hogrode.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/Dokumentation-weißC3%9Fbockelung.pdf>.



**Figure 13** Parade at the gathering of Transylvanian Saxons in Dinkelsbühl (photo H.D. Galter 2012)

est, all married women used a white veil. At a later age, the head-dress became much simpler. Women of middle age usually wore white silk headscarves, older women shawls made of linen with elaborate flower embroidery.

The customs for covering the head have changed, they have become looser. Before World War II all married women wore headscarves every Sunday on their way to church. After the war, the use of the headscarf declined. Nevertheless, during the 70s there were still many women who owned a festive costume and wore it on Sundays. With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the large-scale emigration of Transylvanian Saxons to Germany and Austria the use of the costume in Transylvania almost vanished.

But even now, 75 years after the Transylvanian Saxons had to leave their homes in the turmoil of the Second World War, they continue to cultivate their traditional customs in Germany, Austria, Canada, or the USA. Women in the Transylvanian associations still manufacture the elaborate headgears and wear them during festivals and parades [fig. 13].

In other parts of Europe, the veil gradually disappeared from traditional fashion. It was only preserved in the form of the bridal veil or as part of the habits of Christian nuns.

At the beginning of the 19th century, the machine-made tulle was invented and used for fashionable veils, such as the hat veil

(Hutschleier) of the Biedermeier, which was also used in riding hats, or the loose “Iphigenia-veil”, which spread from Spain through the whole of Europe. From England came the veil scarf that was especially worn by women when driving. Such a veil scarf, fluttering in the wind and caught in the spokes of the wheels of her Bugatti, caused the fatal accident of Isadora Duncan on 14 September 1927.

## 6 The Veil of Mystery

In European history, the veil received additional meanings. Apart from the connotations of protection and sheltered life, the sense of hiding, concealment, and mystification were added. In German we still use the expression *etwas verschleiern* (to veil something) to describe the concealment of a fact that we do not want others to perceive. Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy included the concept of the veiled truth, which could only be hinted at in allegories and metaphors.<sup>159</sup>

In chapter 9 of his work on Isis and Osiris (*De Iside et Osiride*) Plutarch (c. 45-125 CE) deals with mystery and secret in Egyptian religion. He gives three examples for the manifestation of these concepts: the figures of the sphinx, the name of the god Amun (“the hidden one”) and the veiled statue of a goddess in the Egyptian city of Sais. According to the Greek writer, the statue represented the goddess Isis/Athena and bore the inscription “I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my garment”.<sup>160</sup> The first part of this inscription already identifies Isis as a preeminent and universal goddess. For this reason she was equated with Athena and Neith of Sais.<sup>161</sup> The second part either points at the virginity of the goddess or, as suggested by Jan Assmann, represents a mistranslation of the original Egyptian expression “There is nobody except me”, again proclaiming the uniqueness of Isis.<sup>162</sup> Plutarch uses the Greek word *peplos* (πέπλος, “mantle”) for the garment indicating the majesty and remoteness of the goddess. It might also relate to Neith’s function as goddess of weaving.<sup>163</sup>

When the Neoplatonist philosopher Proclus (412-485 CE) wrote a commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* dialogue, he mentioned the same inscription in book I, but uses the Greek word *chiton* (χιτών, “undergarment”), thus assigning a clear sexual meaning to the act of un-

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<sup>159</sup> Compare Bezner 2005 and Lobsien 2010.

<sup>160</sup> Griffiths 1970, 131, compare 283-4; see Assmann 1999a, 59-63; 1999b, 13-17.

<sup>161</sup> Assmann 1999b, 12-13.

<sup>162</sup> Assmann 1999a, 60.

<sup>163</sup> Hani 1976, 244-5; Assmann 1999b, 51-3; 2000, 35-42.

veiling.<sup>164</sup> Although the mystery cult of Isis was prohibited in 391 CE, its ideas survived in the gnostic and hermetic literature and in European esoteric traditions.<sup>165</sup> Isis was often combined with Artemis of Ephesus and depicted as a goddess with multiple breasts covered by a veil or already unveiled. During the 15th century, a revival of Neoplatonic thinking started, and nudity was interpreted as an expression of simple and pure truth. The figure of the nude truth (*nuda veritas*) became one of the most popular personifications in Renaissance and Baroque art.<sup>166</sup> Numerous illustrations, such as the frontispiece of François Peyrard: *De la nature et de ses lois* (Paris 1793), showed “the truth unveiled by time”.<sup>167</sup>

The image of the veiled goddess also became a metaphor, an allegorical motif for nature and its secrets. This goes back to the Italian philosopher Marsilio Ficino (1433-99) who, in his own commentary on the *Timaeus* dialogue, used the Latin *velum* for the Greek *chiton*: *velum meum revelavit nemo*. This not only changed the meaning of the veil into a means of concealment, it also combined it with the act of revelation. But the revelation of divine wisdom was an act done by the goddess herself. She could not be arbitrarily “unveiled”.<sup>168</sup>

By way of this metaphor, both the inaccessibility of these secrets and their uncovering by science were symbolised, respectively. Especially from the late 17th to the early 19th century, such allegorical representations were very popular. A second source for these images was the phrase φύσις κρύπτεισθαι φιλεῖ attributed to Heraclitus (*Fragmentum* B 123), which was commonly translated as “Nature loves to conceal herself.” Edmund Spenser popularised this image in his epic poem *The Faerie Queene*, published 1590-96, where nature is described as a woman with a veil.<sup>169</sup> The motive of the unveiling of Isis appeared in many illustrations to scientific works during the 18th century.

The metaphor was then inherited by the Enlightenment movement and subsequently assigned new meanings. When the philosophers searched for alternatives to Christianity, they found them in the mysteries of Isis that were reinterpreted as a secret cult of nature and reason.<sup>170</sup> The main representation of this theology was the legendary veiled image in the temple of Sais.

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**164** Assmann 1999b, 13; 2006.

**165** Hornung 1999, 71-9; Burkert 2004, 79-106; Assmann 2006, 75-107.

**166** Panofsky 1972, 156-9.

**167** Assmann 1999b, 15.

**168** Harrauer 1994-95, 341-2; Assmann 2006, 138.

**169** Hadot 2006, 237.

**170** See Hadot 2006 and compare Assmann 1999b, 20-36; 2006, 100-2.

An early example for this concept can be found in the novel *Das Heimweh* by the German economist, novelist and Freemason Johann Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817). There he describes the travels and adventures of Christian von Ostenheim during several years in the Middle East. He becomes a member of a secret society in Egypt and has to undergo a rite of initiation within a pyramid. During this rite he encounters the veiled statue of Isis. He lifts the veil, sees the four heads of the statue – a woman, an eagle, a lion, and a bull – and finds the key to yet another door in the pyramid.

Numerous publications on the veiling and unveiling of nature appeared during the late 18th century in Germany and Austria.<sup>171</sup> One centre of this discourse was the lodge “Zur Wahren Eintracht” in Vienna.<sup>172</sup> Ignaz von Born, mineralogist and master of this lodge, compared the unveiling of Isis to modern science in a letter sent to Friedrich Nicolai, an Enlightenment philosopher in Berlin on 23 March 1787. In this letter he named the knowledge of nature as the ultimate purpose of science. For him, the image of Isis represented nature and only he who knows all her powers and strengths could unveil her and remain unpunished.<sup>173</sup>

Several other philosophers of the Enlightenment also regarded the knowledge of the truth as a dangerous gift that had to be guarded. Since the truth was part of the sublime, nobody should picture it, name it or unveil it. Immanuel Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790) explicitly connected the concept of the sublime with the veiled image of Isis:

Perhaps nothing more sublime has ever been said, or any thought more sublimely expressed, than in the inscription over the temple of Isis (Mother Nature): “I am all that is, that was, and that will be, and my veil no mortal has removed”.<sup>174</sup>

It was this unavailability of Isis that Kant admired. The goddess was sublime because she was universal, she was past, present, and future. And she was inapprehensible, no one could lift her veil. This veil was a perfect symbol for Kant’s conviction that the sublime evokes wonder and terror at the same time and that man will never be able to know its true nature.<sup>175</sup>

But Kant used the image of the veiled goddess for various concepts. In the quoted note from the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*

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<sup>171</sup> Hadot 2006, 318-19; Assmann 1999b, 38-44.

<sup>172</sup> Assmann 2006, 87-107.

<sup>173</sup> Assmann 1999b, 21.

<sup>174</sup> Kant 2000, 194.

<sup>175</sup> Klatt 1985; Assmann 1998; 1999b, 36-46; 2006, 138-42.

it stood for the ultimate truth, but in his paper “On a Newly Arisen Superior Tone in Philosophy”, published in May 1796, in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, it symbolised the moral law:

The veiled goddess before which we on both sides bend our knees is the moral law in us in its invulnerable majesty.<sup>176</sup>

Kant obviously wanted to bridge the gap between cognitive and moral domains. Isis itself was just an image. The important thing was the veil. This was also acknowledged by Jacques Derrida in his parodistic response to Kant’s essay, in which he dealt with “the intrigue of a certain veil of Isis”. He, too, understood Isis exclusively as a “matter of the veil”.<sup>177</sup>

The veiled goddess remained an awe-inspiring mystery and an enigma that haunted further generations. By putting the emphasis on the veil and stressing the fact that the veiled image was not identifiable, the question arose: What is behind the veil?<sup>178</sup>

The philosopher and Freemason Carl Leonhard Reinhold (1757-1823), who wrote an essay on the mystery of the Hebrews (1787) and interpreted the statement on the statue at Sais (“I am all that has been and is and shall be”) as proof for the identity of divinity and nature, became professor for philosophy in Jena in 1788. There he introduced Kant’s concept of the sublime to Friedrich Schiller (1759-1805).

In 1790 – the same year in which Kant published his *Critique of the Power of Judgment* – Schiller pondered on the revelation on Mount Sinai in his essay “The Mission of Moses”. He picked up ideas of the Carl Leonhard Reinhold and added secular connotations to the concept of “revelation”. In his eyes, the task of Moses was to reveal the secret knowledge of the ancient Egyptian priests to all the people and he combined this idea with the metaphor of the unveiling of Isis: “Beneath an old statue of Isis one could read the words: am all that is, that was, and that shall be; no mortal man has raised my veil”.<sup>179</sup> Ludwig van Beethoven kept this quote in handwriting and framed under glass on his desk.<sup>180</sup>

Three years later, in 1793, Friedrich Schiller wrote his own essay “Of the Sublime” and published it in the journal *Neue Thalia*:

Everything, that is veiled, everything mysterious, contributes to the terrible, and is therefore capable of sublimity. Of this variety

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<sup>176</sup> Kant 1993, 71.

<sup>177</sup> Derrida 1984, 15; compare Assmann 1999a, 60.

<sup>178</sup> Freeman 1995, 117-18; Hadot 2006, 267-9.

<sup>179</sup> Schiller 1970, 385; compare Harrauer 1994-95, 344-6.

<sup>180</sup> Assmann 1999b, 50-1; 2006, 146-7.



**Figure 14**  
Henry Fuseli: Frontispiece to *The Temple of Nature*. Edinburgh 1803. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frontispiece\\_to\\_The\\_Temple\\_of\\_Nature.jpg?uselang=de](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Frontispiece_to_The_Temple_of_Nature.jpg?uselang=de)

is the legend, that one read at Sais in Egypt above the temple of Isis. “I am everything, that is, that has been, and that will be. No mortal man has lifted my veil”.<sup>181</sup>

Finally, in 1795 Schiller published the ballad “The Veiled Image at Sais”, in which he set up an eternal memorial for the veiled Isis:<sup>182</sup> a young man, driven by the thirst for knowledge, travels to Sais and demands from the priest to acquire universal wisdom. As they are standing in front of the veiled statue of Isis, he asks what is hidden behind the veil. The priest answers that it is the truth. No mortal should lift the veil until the goddess herself does. No one had ever tried, not even him. At night, the young man enters the temple without permission and, after some hesitation, lifts the veil. He collapses unconscious at the feet of the statue. No one knows what he saw. But his joy of life is gone forever.

**181** “Of the Sublime. Toward the Further Elaboration of Some Kantian Ideas” by Friedrich Schiller translated by Daniel Platt. [https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/trans\\_of\\_sublime.html](https://archive.schillerinstitute.com/transl/trans_of_sublime.html), not to be confused with “On the Sublime” (1801). See Assmann 2006, 140.

**182** Assmann 1999a; 1999b.

For Schiller, the unveiling was equal to a revelation (*apocalypse*) or initiation. He does not reveal what the young man saw, but the unauthorised uncovering of the awe-inspiring truth led to grief and disaster.<sup>183</sup> This awe-inspiring moment is perfectly illustrated by Henry Fuseli's frontispiece to the philosophical poem "The Temple of Nature; or, the Origin of Society" by Erasmus Darwin [fig. 14].<sup>184</sup> where the unveiling of the statue of Isis is shown as the climactic moment of an in an initiation-like scene.

This idea was sharply criticised by the poets of Romanticism who did want to read in the Book of Nature and to discover the truth contained therein. They regarded the unveiling of the statue of Isis as a perfect metaphor for the human pursuit of knowledge. Johann Gottfried Herder wrote in a letter to Schiller dated 22 August 1795 that the thirst for truth can never cause guilt. Regardless of possible consequences - Herder names madness, blindness, and being crushed - the priestly ban and the resulting feelings of guilt were unacceptable for him.<sup>185</sup>

In his parable "The Novices at Sais", written in 1798, Novalis provides us once again with the picture of a person in pursuit of the ultimate truth. He lifts the veil of Isis in the Sais temple and looks at the divine face, just to recognise himself:

Someone arrived there - who lifted the veil of the goddess, at Sais. - But what did he see? He saw - wonder of wonders - himself.<sup>186</sup>

In the same year, 1798, Napoleon led his campaign to Egypt, heralding the era of colonialism. The Middle East experienced a period of economic and cultural decline. It became part of the "uncivilised world" and vanished behind a veil of prejudice and ignorance.<sup>187</sup>

During the following century, the search for truth, the recognition of reality, and the unveiling of secrets would have been seen as an imperative that encompassed all areas of knowledge: medicine, science, geography, humanities, and art. The veil itself became a symbol for secrets of our world and for the hidden truth that had to be uncovered, as can be seen in the 1899 sculpture *La Nature se dévouant à la Science* by Louis-Ernest Barrias (1841-1909) in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris [fig. 15]. Unlike earlier representations the Isis fig-

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<sup>183</sup> Assmann 2006, 133-7.

<sup>184</sup> Assmann 1997, 126-34 and 2006, 142-3; Kessler 2013.

<sup>185</sup> See Harrauer 1994-95, 352 fn. 40.

<sup>186</sup> Novalis 1997, 76. Compare Mahoney 1992, 112-16; Stone 2008; Ziolkowski 2008, 72-3.

<sup>187</sup> See Galter 2008.





**Figure 15** Louis-Ernest Barrias, *La Nature se dévoilant à la Science*  
(photo © RMN-Grand Palais. Musée d'Orsay / René-Gabriel Ojéda)

ure, clearly identifiable by the scarab on her garment, unveils herself before science.

The Isis metaphor also entered esoteric lore. The book *Isis Unveiled. A Master-Key to the Mysteries of Ancient and Modern Science and Religion* published in 1877 by Helena Blavatsky (1831-91), in which she used the metaphor of the unveiling of the goddess for the truth behind her theosophical belief, laid the theoretical basis of all esotericisms until today.<sup>188</sup>

For the poets of Romanticism, writing and discovering were one and the same thing. Therefore, the unveiling of the truth was a poetic act. But over time, the contrast between the scientific and the artistic worldview became clear. Oscar Wilde wrote in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: “All art is at once surface and symbol. Those who go beneath the surface do so at their peril. Those who read the symbol do so at their peril”.<sup>189</sup> And Friedrich Nietzsche remarked 1882 in *The Gay Science*:

To the realists. – You sober people who feel armed against passion and phantastical conceptions and would like to make your emptiness a matter of pride and an ornament – you call yourself realists and insinuate that the world really is the way it appears to you: before you alone reality stands unveiled, and you yourselves are perhaps the best part of it – oh, you beloved images of Sais! But aren’t you too in your unveiled condition still most passionate and dark creatures, compared to fish, and still all too similar to an artist in love? And what is “reality” to an artist in love! You still carry around the valuations of things that originate in the passions and loves of former centuries! Your sobriety still contains a secret and inextirpable drunkenness! Your love of “reality”, for example – oh, that is an old, ancient “love”!<sup>190</sup>

And five years later he wrote in the preface to the second edition (1887):

There are some things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we nowadays learn as artists to forget well, to be good at not knowing! And as for our future, one will hardly find us again on the paths of those Egyptian youths who make temples unsafe at night, embrace statues, and want by all means to unveil, un-

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<sup>188</sup> Ziolkowski 2008, 75-6.

<sup>189</sup> Wilde 1891, vii. In the German translations the metaphor of the veil is again used: “Alle Kunst ist zugleich Schleier und Tiefe. Wer den Schleier aufhebt, wer die Tiefe erforscht, tut es auf eigene Gefahr”.

<sup>190</sup> Nietzsche 2001, 69.

cover, and put into a bright light whatever is kept concealed for good reasons. No, we have grown sick of this bad taste, this will to truth, to “truth at any price”, this youthful madness in the love of truth: we are too experienced, too serious, too jovial, too burned, too deep for that... We no longer believe that truth remains truth when one pulls off the veil; we have lived too much to believe this. Today we consider it a matter of decency not to wish to see everything naked, to be present everywhere, to understand and ‘know’ everything.<sup>191</sup>

With his negation of a reality that is not influenced by man and with his plea for an aesthetic of the hidden and veiled,<sup>192</sup> Nietzsche strongly opposed the spirit of his time. He challenged the common belief in exploring everything and the view that reality is the last resort for finding the truth.

But this common belief prevailed. It has not only boosted the scientific development in the 20th century, it also shaped our entire worldview. According to Wolf Lotter, we have so far only tried to reduce the complexity of our world in order to break through to the single, universal truth behind it, instead of recognising the variety of possible connections within this complexity.<sup>193</sup>

The concept of the veil as a fabric that covers the truth or the reality is still in our heads.<sup>194</sup> In the German language as well as in English the word “to veil” has strong connotations of “hiding” and “concealing”.

*verschleiern* = *vertuschen* = *verheimlichen*  
to veil = to cover up = to conceal

These connotations have been reinforced by the fact that over centuries persons who did not wish to be identified and tried to stay incognito, covered their heads or veiled their faces. The members of the Catholic fraternities performing the processions during the “Holy week” (*semana santa*) in Spain wear distinctive cloaks and hoods (*capirotes*) to keep the penance anonymous. Only their eyes are visible under the black, purple, or white hoods. Executioners and robbers covered their faces and members of the Ku Klux Klan, the American white supremacist hate group founded in 1865 in Tennessee, created fanciful robes, masks, and hats in order to terrify people and to hide their identities. Even in the fairy tale of Little Red Riding Hood,

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**191** Nietzsche 2001, 8.

**192** Compare Harries 2003.

**193** Lotter 2020.

**194** Ziolkowski 2008, 63-6.

the wolf uses a headscarf to disguise his true identity and by doing so conceals the danger for the girl.

Against this intellectual background, it is perfectly understandable that headscarves are associated with mysteries and fears. Many people regard them as symbols of a remote and archaic part of European culture that has been overcome. During the various emancipation movements of women in the 20th century, headscarves were interpreted as signs of backwardness and a traditional, premodern and, rural lifestyle. This is still happening today and contributes to the consolidating view that an uncovered head demonstrates openness, honesty, and progress. On the other hand, we have seen the return of headscarves as fashionable accessories in recent years.

Nevertheless, the headscarf issue is increasingly becoming a touchstone for the European societies in their dealings with Muslim minorities.<sup>195</sup> The frontline between the supporters and opponents of the headscarf no longer runs along the border between locals and immigrants, but across both camps. Many immigrant families see the increased popularity of the headscarf as a dangerous return to the traditional constraints they had escaped through their migration. On the other hand, there was a growing number of voices in the European public that considered the headscarf to be at least permissible as a sign of the acceptance of the host society. All that changed with the atrocities of the “Islamic state” and the waves of refugees caused by the civil wars in the Middle East.

Although many people dislike the public debates for and against the Muslim headscarf here in Europe, such a free, open, and straight exchange of views represents a major step forward compared to the situation in many states of the Middle East, where a similar debate is simply not possible. However, the debate should not be confined to something as superficial as the headscarf. It should also address other issues that are important for living together in a multicultural and multireligious environment. The aim of such debates must be to identify similarities in diversity,<sup>196</sup> but also to rethink ways of maintaining differences and characteristics in order to enable a unified and harmonic social life.

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**195** See the papers of Carla Amina Baghajati and Gabriel Malli in the present volume.

**196** See Umberto Eco, Furio Colombo, Jacques Le Goff: *Accepting diversity. An interactive Handbook in Progress*. <http://www.tolerance.kataweb.it/eng/index.html>.

## Abbreviations

- CAD = *The Assyrian Dictionary of the University of Chicago*. Chicago 1956-.  
ETCSL = *Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*. <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk>.  
NASB = *New American Standard Bible*.  
PSD = *The Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary*. <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu>.  
RIA = *Reallexikon der Assyriologie und Vorderasiatischen Archäologie*. Leipzig; Berlin; New York 1928-2018.

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