



MYTHOLOGY A TO Z



# Egyptian Mythology A TO Z



REVISED EDITION

PAT REMLER

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# Egyptian Mythology

A to Z

THIRD EDITION



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## Egyptian Mythology A to Z, Third Edition

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# INTRODUCTION



## EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY

The history of ancient Egypt is a vast and captivating story. From our biblical forefathers to modern scholars, many people have been fascinated by the mythology and religion of Egypt. This third edition of *Egyptian Mythology A to Z* is designed to help the reader enter the fascinating world of ancient Egypt. The most important feature of this new edition is the completely revised art program, including for the first time many full-color images.

As Egypt's civilization arose along the banks of the Nile, a rich mythology was born, emerging from the fables and beliefs of the first Egyptians. More than any other ancient culture, the Egyptians were fascinated by the mystery of death, and they put as much effort into creating a "good life" in the next world as they did in this world. The gods of ancient Egypt were complex deities who merged and evolved during Egypt's long history. Even those gods and goddesses with distinct identities were often combined into one, sharing attributes, signs, and duties. We find the mythology of ancient Egypt filled with inconsistencies, a situation that never seemed to bother the Egyptians. The ancient Egyptians were, except for a brief moment in their history, polytheists, believing in many gods, and when a new god emerged and rose to prominence, it was willingly accepted.

## EGYPT: A BRIEF HISTORY

We know very little about the earliest inhabitants of the Nile Valley because no human remains have been found from this period. We do know that the area was first inhabited around 700,000 B.C. by settlers whose only tool was the hand ax. This marked the beginning of the Paleolithic era, or Old Stone Age. By modern standards the rate of change was slow. When we consider the technological advances of the last hundred years, it is almost inconceivable to think that in the first 650,000 years of Egyptian culture, the only improvement was a better ax. When the Egyptians developed additional tools during the Middle Paleolithic period, the climate must have been more temperate, with much more rain, for we know the Egyptians did not live in the desert, and today that is where these stone tools are found. Neanderthals lived during this time—practicing simple surgery, caring for the injured and old, and burying the dead with rituals.

Around 30,000 B.C., the Late Paleolithic period, *Homo sapiens*, modern humans, replaced the Neanderthals (*Homo neanderthalensis*). The level of the Nile began to decline, and the people lived in or near the swampy areas along the banks of the river. They lived on mollusks and fish, cooked on clay hearths, and fashioned grindstones on which they prepared wild cereal grains. Some time around 15,000 B.C. these early inhabitants began hunting with bows and arrows. When the Nile



reached its lowest level between 10,000 and 5,000 B.C. and much of the land had turned to desert, survival was difficult. At this time *Homo sapiens* probably numbered no more than a few thousand. Luckily, at about the same time the Nile was low, a freshwater lake appeared in the Fayoum area (southwest of Cairo), and settlements grew up along its shores. Pottery was developed, and the Egyptians began farming and raising cattle. The history of Egypt is so closely associated with the Nile that to understand the civilization, one must understand something about the river.

The Nile is the longest river in the world. Its main branch, called the White Nile, flows north from Lake Victoria in east-central Africa 3,470 miles to the Mediterranean Sea on Egypt's northern border. Starting in Ethiopia, another river, called the Blue Nile, joins the White Nile at Khartoum, Sudan, where the rivers merge and flow into Egypt.

It was the Blue Nile, swollen by spring monsoons and the runoff of melting snow in Ethiopia, that caused the river to rise. Each year the Nile overflowed its banks, depositing fresh, rich topsoil on the flat plains that spread to either side of the river and enabling Egypt to grow an abundance of crops. Other ancient civilizations had to rely on their unpredictable rainfall to water crops, and often there was too much or too little. Egypt's great fortune was to have a river that renewed the topsoil annually and flowed in sufficient volume to water the fields. Every year Egypt harvested a variety of crops, while other countries thanked their gods when they produced only one. No wonder the ancient Greek traveler Herodotus called Egypt "the gift of the Nile."

The annual inundation amazed the Egyptians, who had no explanation for the river's sudden great swelling, nor the change in its color from red to green. At first the silt suspended in the water caused the Nile to look red, and then the slow moving vegetation floating on top made it look green. It was a natural occurrence, of course, but the Egyptians viewed it as the work of the gods, and they noticed that a certain star (Sothis) rose on the horizon just before the inundation began. The annual spectacle of the rising Nile was surpassed only by the daily performance of the dazzling sun. Each day it rose in the east, traveled across a cloudless, jewel-like sky, and descended into a fireball of colors over the western horizon, as constant and predictable as the Nile. The sun god Re was one of Egypt's most ancient deities.

The Nile was the heart and life of the country, and although Egypt was vast, most of the population lived near the banks of the river. Their lives revolved around the Nile, and the seasons of the year were determined by it. Our 365-day calendar comes from the Egyptians, but they counted only three seasons: 1) *inundation*, when the Nile overflowed its banks and flooded the land; 2) *emergence*, when the waters receded; 3) *summer*, the dry season. Each season had four months of 30 days each. At the end of the year, five extra days, the "epigominal days," were added to make 365 days in the year. These days later became known as the birthdays of the goddess Isis and her siblings. Inundation was Egypt's most unusual season, for it changed the look of the land. It was a time when the fields were under water and little work could be done. Emergence was the season for planting, and the crops were harvested in summer.

The food staples of the Egyptians were bread and beer, a phrase that became synonymous with "food"—similar to our "meat and potatoes." A common funerary prayer begins, "May the king make an offering to Osiris, Lord of the West. May he give bread and beer, cattle, geese, oxen, and all things good and pure on which the gods live." The long growing season allowed the Egyptians to grow a variety of crops, the most important being *emer* (wheat) and onions. Meat was reserved

for the upper classes, but everyone had bread, beer, and onions as well as fish from the Nile.

Year after year the Nile rose, the crops were abundant, and the Egyptians believed that this was the way their world was supposed to be. This idea was expressed in the notion of “divine order,” the way the gods wanted things to be. This belief was encouraged by Egypt’s geographical isolation from its neighbors. To the west are endless miles of desert between Egypt and the Libyan border, to the east a hundred miles of desert and the Red Sea. In the south there were huge boulders in the river, called cataracts, that were all but impassable. The Mediterranean Sea formed a natural border to the north, more of a psychological barrier than a real one. The Egyptians never really developed their sailing skills or ventured out into the open sea if they could avoid it. Their navigational skills developed on the smooth-flowing Nile, where they could sail south with the prevailing wind and north with the current. In later centuries military expeditions took Egyptians to other lands and they returned with great riches, but it was always clear to them that their homeland was a paradise on Earth.

Soon after recorded history began, when the Egyptians began to write in a script called hieroglyphs, their burials became more elaborate. At first the dead were buried in shallow pit graves in the desert, and the hot, dry sand preserved the bodies naturally. But as their mythology and religion continued to develop and become more elaborate, so did their burials. To prevent wild animals from digging up the burials, shallow pit graves were replaced with brick-lined tombs; bodies were covered with animal skins and placed on woven mats. The brick structures became more elaborate and varied with the status of the deceased. Because these bodies were now in tombs, far removed from the natural drying process of the hot sand, they began to rot and decay. While the natural preservation of the hot sand in the desert may have spawned the idea of mummification, Egyptian religion required it, so burials in these tombs forced the Egyptians to devise a means of preserving the dead.

Central to the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians was the myth of Isis and Osiris, in which Isis’s husband, Osiris, is killed by their evil brother Set, who tricks Osiris into climbing into a box. Osiris is sealed in the box and dies when it is thrown into the Nile. Isis, the bereaved wife, searches for and finds the body of her dead husband and is determined to give him a proper burial on Egyptian soil. It is from this myth that the crucial elements of Egyptian funerary practices derived. Like all myths, this one revealed important truths about nature, the universe, and life after death, and many beliefs of the ancient Egyptian funerary cult can be derived from it. The chest that exactly fit Osiris was the precursor of the anthropoid coffin, which is shaped like the deceased and is intended to protect the body. The importance of a proper burial on Egyptian soil is emphasized by the efforts that Isis made to find the body of her husband, and to make sure that it was complete, so that when she spoke her magic words, Osiris would resurrect in the Netherworld. He kept the same body after death that he had during life, so mummification was essential if the deceased was to resurrect and spend eternity in the Netherworld. Here we see a myth answering important questions about life after death.

Mythology, religion, and to some extent philosophy went hand in hand in the ancient world, but the Egyptians did not make a clear distinction between them. All three kinds of thinking try to answer questions about the universe, the nature of humans, and life after death. Mythology answers these questions with stories about the lives of the gods that are not meant to be taken literally. Myths take place in what is sometimes called “primordial time,” the time before time began, before calendars and clocks existed.

Religion, on the other hand, answers the same kinds of questions but takes place in chronological time. The biblical story of Moses and the Exodus, for example, presents Moses as a historical character who actually lived on Earth at a particular time.

Philosophy, like religion and mythology, also attempts to answer questions about the nature of the universe, but unlike religion, which requires only faith, or mythology, which is not to be taken literally, philosophy requires proof. We know the ancient Egyptians had a rich mythology and a complex religion, but there is debate about whether they engaged in philosophical thinking. There are no philosophical papyri and no texts carved on temple walls that present carefully reasoned philosophical arguments. Of the three kinds of thinking that deal with basic questions about humans and the universe, this book is about mythology. As you will see, there is an overlapping between religion and mythology because mythology inevitably deals with the gods.

The reader shouldn't be surprised to read different myths giving different answers to the same questions. In Heliopolis, for example, the priests told one story of how the world was created, and in Memphis they told quite a different story. These myths sometimes competed, but the people didn't believe both versions: They tended to believe the version from their hometown.

## SOURCES OF EGYPTIAN MYTHOLOGY

We know about mythology from several ancient sources. Many papyri still exist, and the mythological texts tell the stories of the gods, such as *The Contendings of Horus and Set*, a classic struggle between good and evil.

From tomb walls we find instructions to help the deceased survive the dangerous journey to the next world. There were several "books" of instructions, all derived from the Book of the Dead, intended to help the deceased reach the next world and resurrection. Each of the "books" have somewhat different expectations of what the next life will bring. In the Book of Gates, the followers of Osiris believe he is the supreme god, and his judgment determines if a soul will go out of existence or will be allowed to resurrect.

Temple walls tell us about the function of the gods and how they interacted with humans. Sometimes the source is smaller than a tomb or temple. The Metternich Stele, for example, a round-topped, flat carved stone, tells the story of the suffering of Isis when her son, the infant Horus, is stung by a scorpion.

Later Greek writers are important sources of Egyptian mythology. The Greeks were always fascinated with Egypt, and many Greek writers were proud to trace their heritage to the ancient Egyptian culture. Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century B.C., wrote extensively about the Egyptians in his work, *The Histories*. Plutarch has left us the most complete story of the Myth of Isis and Osiris in his work *De Iside et Osiride*.

## HOW TO PRONOUNCE THE NAMES OF THE GODS

Unfortunately, there is no standard way to write or pronounce ancient Egyptian names. Sometimes the pharaoh who built the Great Pyramid will be called "Khufu," the Egyptian name as transliterated from hieroglyphs. At other times he is called "Cheops," which is what the Greeks called him. Even Egyptologists don't agree on how to pronounce the names of some of the kings. For example, some call the Middle Kingdom pharaoh "Senwsret" (the ancient Egyptian word), while others call the same king "Sesostris" (the Greek version of his name).

The same problem exists with the names of the gods. The ancient Egyptians called their god of the dead “Osir.” The Greeks added the “is” ending, and the name became Osiris, the name we use today. But the difficulty occurs not simply in the choice between Egyptian or Greek pronunciations. It also arises from the ambiguities in the way the Egyptians wrote their language. Many of their hieroglyphs are phonetic—representing sounds—just like our alphabet. The Egyptians didn’t write most of the vowels, however, so it is not clear how to pronounce words and names. It would be as if we wrote a word “nt”—do we mean “net,” “not,” “nut,” or “nit”? Another difficulty in figuring out how to pronounce the names of the gods is that ancient Egyptian was a “dead language” for 1,500 years—no one spoke the language, so we have to reconstruct how it might have sounded.

Before the hieroglyphic code was cracked in 1822, scholars debated the meaning of inscriptions on temple walls and papyri. Many of their speculations were based upon the belief that the inscriptions were mystical or magical in nature, and they were not far wrong. When the Greeks first came to Egypt, they called the writings hieroglyphs, or “sacred carvings,” since only the priests could read them. When the last priest who could read hieroglyphs died, so did the language. Numerous attempts were made to decipher hieroglyphs, but they all failed because it was believed that hieroglyphs were based on picture writing—that, for example, a picture of a foot meant foot or that a duck meant that the text was talking about a duck. Medieval scholars continued the tradition. It wasn’t until the 18th century that modern linguists began to suggest hieroglyphs were not just pictograms but also represented phonetic sounds.

When Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt in 1798, he took a group of scientists, called the savants, with him to study the country. The most significant discovery was the Rosetta stone, which was covered with writing in three different scripts: Greek, and two Egyptian scripts, hieroglyphs and demotic, a cursive form of hieroglyphs. It was this discovery that led to the deciphering of hieroglyphs by the French linguist Jean-François Champollion.

Because the ancient Egyptians did not write their vowels, our estimate of the pronunciation of the ancient Egyptian language is far from certain. When the Greek version of an ancient Egyptian name is more common, we have used that. Sometimes when both the Egyptian and Greek versions are in use, we mention both. Cross-references to other entries are printed in SMALL CAPITAL LETTERS.



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# TIMELINE FOR ANCIENT EGYPT



PREDYNASTIC	5500–3100 B.C.
EARLY DYNASTIC PERIOD	3100–2686 B.C.
Dynasties 1, 2	3050–2686 B.C.
Narmer and unification of Egypt	3100 B.C.
OLD KINGDOM	2686–2181 B.C.
Zoser builds Step Pyramid	2686–2647 B.C.
Sneferu builds first true pyramid	2613–2589 B.C.
Khufu builds the Great Pyramid	2589–2566 B.C.
Pyramid Texts	c. 2345 B.C.
FIRST INTERMEDIATE PERIOD	2181–2055 B.C.
MIDDLE KINGDOM	2055–1650 B.C.
Coffin Texts	c. 2055 B.C.
SECOND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD	1650–1550 B.C.
Hyksos invaders expelled	c. 1570 B.C.
NEW KINGDOM	1550–1069 B.C.
Book of the Dead	c. 1500 B.C.
Queen Hatshepsut	1498–1483 B.C.
Amenhotep III, Egypt at its peak	1386–1349 B.C.
Akhenaten, the Amarna revolution	1350–1334 B.C.
Tutankhamen’s reign	1334–1325 B.C.
Ramses the Great	1279–1212 B.C.
THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD	1069–747 B.C.
LATE PERIOD	747–332 B.C.
Nubia rules Egypt	712–657 B.C.
Persians rule Egypt	525–404 B.C.
PTOLEMAIC PERIOD	332–32 B.C.
Alexander the Great conquers Egypt	332–323 B.C.
Cleopatra VII	51–30 B.C.
ROMAN PERIOD	30 B.C.–A.D. 395



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# A-TO-Z ENTRIES





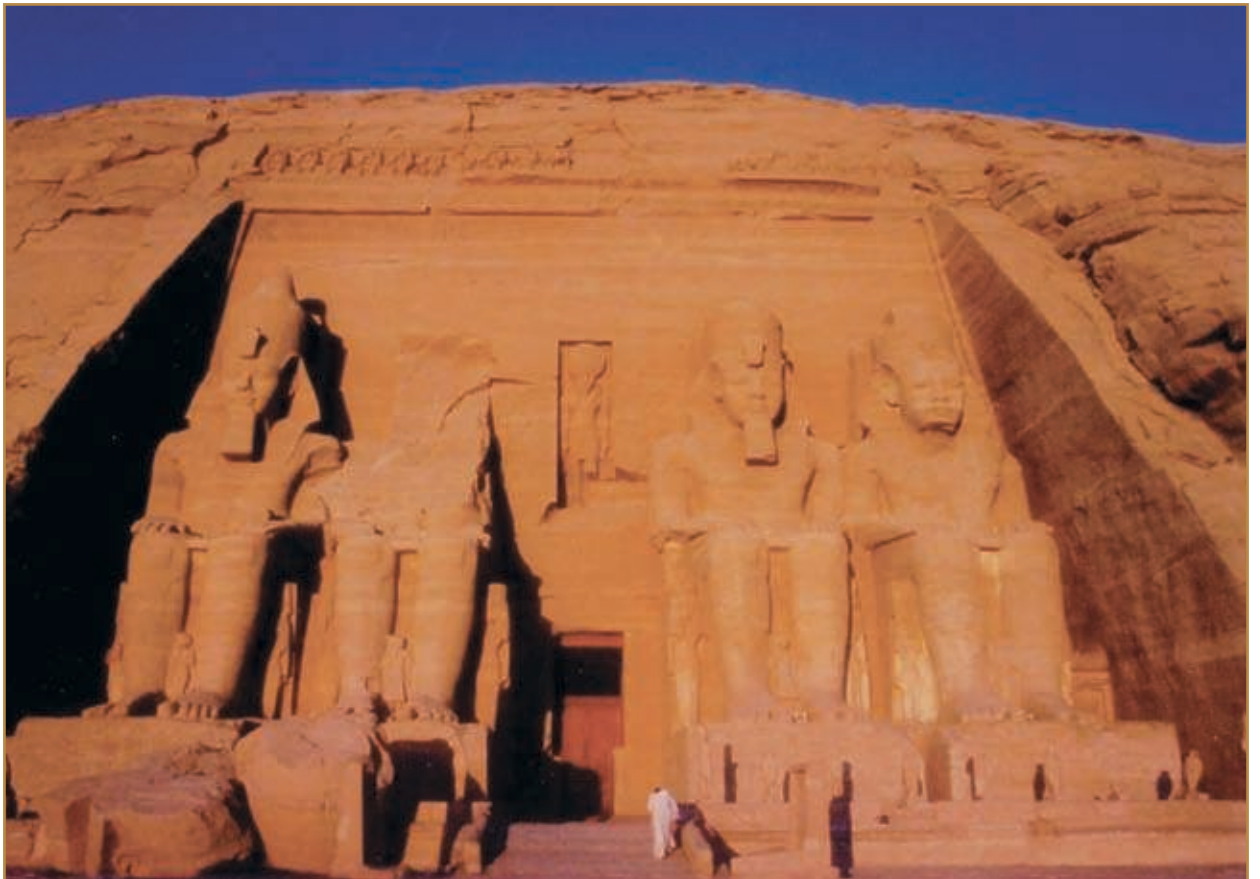


# A

**AAH**  A very early form of the moon god, who was sometimes portrayed as a young boy wearing the side lock of youth, a long lock of hair that was not cut until a boy reached puberty. The Egyptians were fascinated with the phases of the moon. When early farming settlements sprang up on the banks of the Nile, farmers used the moon as their planting guide.

In some ways the moon was as important as and far more interesting to the ancient Egyptians than the sun, because over a period of 30 days, the moon changes its shape. This waxing (becoming larger) and waning (becoming smaller) of the moon has four distinct phases.

The first phase or quarter of the moon's cycle is called the new moon. As the moon moves into the



Abu Simbel was built by Ramses II (also known as Ramses the Great) to demonstrate his power and grandeur. One of the four colossal figures was damaged during an earthquake in ancient times and has not been restored. *(Photograph by Pat Remler)*

second quarter, it becomes a half-moon. During the third quarter the half-moon grows into a full moon, and in the fourth quarter it appears as a half-moon again.

As time passed, Aah became Aah-Djuhty, god of the new moon; he later became associated with the god THOTH.

**AAH-DJUHTY**  God of the new moon, Aah-Djuhty evolved from the moon gods AAH and THOTH.

**ABTU AND ANT** A pair of pilot fish, mentioned in Chapter 9 of the *BOOK OF THE DEAD*, that possessed protective powers and swam on each side of the sun god RE's boat to ward off evil spirits as it passed through the Underworld.

**ABU SIMBEL** A site in Egypt where RAMSES THE GREAT (Ramses II) (1304–1237 B.C.) carved a pair of rock-cut temples. Situated on the west bank of the NILE at Egypt's southern border, Abu Simbel lies 180 miles south of Aswan. The larger of the two temples, the Great Temple, *Hwt Ramesses Meryamun*, called the Temple of Ramses Beloved of Amun, is dedicated to Egypt's principal gods: AMUN-RE, REHORAKHTY, PTAH, and the deified Ramses. The walls of the Great Temple are decorated with religious scenes, including an array of gods and goddesses, and scenes of Ramses's most important battles—the most well-known being the Battle of Kadesh, which depicts Ramses's victory over the Hittites.

The most impressive parts of the temple are four 67-foot-tall seated statues of Ramses that occupy the open-air court in front of the entrance to the temple. Each one was carved from the rock face of the mountain. (It has been suggested that Mount Rushmore in South Dakota was based on these figures of Ramses.) One of the statues (on the left as you face the temple) was damaged by an earthquake in antiquity, and the head lies on the ground. Carved on the sides of each throne are Nile gods tying LOTUS and PAPYRUS plants around the hieroglyph “to unite,” symbolizing the unification of UPPER and LOWER EGYPT.

Statues of the royal family are carved between and beside the legs of all four colossal statues of Ramses. Prominently shown around the first southern statue are: Queen Nefertari (the Great Wife), Muttuya (king's mother), and Prince Amen-hir-khep-shef (the firstborn son). From the second southern statue are: Princess Bint-Anat, Princess Nebet-awy-by, and a female figure whose name has been lost, perhaps Esenofre, a minor wife. The family members shown

with the two northern statues are: Queen Nefertari, Princess Beket-mut, Prince Pi-Ramses, Princess Merit-Amun, Queen Muttuya, and Princess Nofertari. Beneath the statues are figures of bound captives, and above the entrance to the Great Temple is a carving of the sun god REHORAKHTY. To his right is a jackal-head symbol meaning “power”; to the left is MAAT, the goddess of truth. Together the three symbols form an ancient Egyptian pun: they spell one of Ramses's names, *Usr-Maat-Re*, “the Truth of Re is Power.” In front of the Great Temple were two stone basins where the priests purified themselves with Nile water before entering the temple.

The Great Temple has four rooms: The first, called the great hall, has eight square pillars each with a statue of Ramses. The four on the right wear the double crown, signifying the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt, and those on the left wear the white crown of Upper Egypt. In the second hall, the four pillars are decorated with religious scenes—the king in the company of the gods: ANUBIS, SATIS, MIN, MUT, WADJET, AMUN-RE, HATHOR, MONTU, and several manifestations of HORUS. On the entrance to the vestibule the king makes offerings of wine, incense, bread, and flowers to the gods. The vestibule leads to the sanctuary, where statues of the gods are cut into the rock. From left to right are Ptah, Amun-Re, Ramses II (as a god), and Re-Horakhty. The image of Ramses is the same size as those of the gods, suggesting he is the equal of the gods he is honoring. The HOLY OF HOLIES at Abu Simbel is oriented so that on February 21 (Ramses's birthday) and October 21 (Ramses's coronation date), the rays of the sun shine through the corridor into the sanctuary and illuminate Ramses and the gods.

Just north of Ramses's temple is the Small Temple, built for Queen Nefertari, and dedicated to Hathor as Abshek, an obscure Nubian goddess of love and beauty. The front of Nefertari's temple is shaped like a pylon and faced with six colossal statues: four of Ramses and two of Nefertari, each about 33 feet tall.


An inscription over the door reads:

Rameses II, he has made a temple, excavated in the mountain, of eternal workmanship, for the chief queen Nefertari, beloved of Mut, in Nubia, forever and ever, Nefertari for whose sake the very sun does shine.

Inside, the great hall is supported by six Hathor-head columns that incorporate the shape of the SISTRUM, the sacred rattle used in religious ceremonies. In the vestibule, or second room, are religious scenes

with Nefertari in the company of goddesses. On the right of the main vestibule door, Hathor-Abshek looks on as Isis places a crown upon Nefertari's head. On the left side of the vestibule door, Nefertari stands with Ramses, who presents a bouquet of flowers to TAURET, the goddess of pregnancy and childbirth. The third room, the Holy of Holies, where the cult statues were kept, is decorated with various goddesses. One wall is carved to show Hathor as a cow goddess emerging from a mountain to protect the king, who stands in front of her. On the side walls, Ramses and Nefertari appear in the company of the gods with Ramses offering incense and libations to himself and his queen, indicating that they are both deified.

The temples at Abu Simbel are unique because they were carved from a mountain, not built of stone blocks. When the Aswan High Dam was being constructed in the 1960s, both temples were saved from the rising water that formed Lake Nasr behind the dam. UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, and the Egyptian government dismantled the temples, cut the facades into blocks, numbered them, and moved them to higher ground. The reassembled temples were carefully placed so the sun still shines into the holy of holies on February 21 and October 21, just as in ancient times.

**ABYDOS**  The most sacred city in all of Egypt, located on the West Bank of the Nile near modern Sohag, Abydos was a center for religious activity for centuries, from Egypt's Predynastic period to Christian times. Abydos was the earliest and most important cult center for worship of OSIRIS when the god became popular toward the end of the Old Kingdom. According to the mythology, Osiris's body was cut into pieces and spread over Egypt, and legend had it that Osiris's head (some sources claim it was his phallus) was buried at Abydos.

The earliest buildings at Abydos are the tombs of Egypt's Predynastic and Early Dynastic rulers. The first pharaohs came from a town nearby—its precise location is unknown—and were buried at Abydos. Today the oldest remains are from the temple of Osiris-Khentimentiu, dedicated to an ancient jackal god associated with Osiris. Khentimentiu means “foremost of the westerners” (the west was reserved for the dead) and stresses Osiris's role as a protective funerary god.

Excavations have unearthed Early Dynastic royal tombs and several wooden boats. A mud-brick tomb of the First Dynasty king, Djer, was thought to be the tomb of Osiris in ancient times. This may have

contributed to the growing popularity of the cult of Osiris. The most impressive monument to Osiris at Abydos is the OSIREION, a chapel constructed of huge granite blocks and believed to be his false tomb, or cenotaph. In the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 B.C.), people made pilgrimages to Abydos and many left STELE, or offering tablets, for Osiris inscribed with their names and prayers.

Abydos was the center for the “mysteries”—passion plays revolving around the life of Osiris. Abydos became a place of pilgrimage, both real and symbolic. A chorus sang prayers, and the audience lit lamps to represent Isis's search for the pieces of her husband's body. Osiris was the first mummy and was believed to be the first one to resurrect. He became the king of the NETHERWORLD: Anyone seeking to enter needed Osiris's permission. Besides being the god of the dead, Osiris also represented the fertility of the land. Tomb paintings often show him with green skin and his arms crossed over his chest in the form of a mummy. The symbol of Osiris at Abydos was a pole covered with an animal skin and two plumes, which was also associated with ANUBIS (see IMIUT).

The Second Dynasty kings Peribsen and Khasekhemwy constructed their tombs at Abydos to be near the burial place of Osiris.


Today, the greatest monument at Abydos is the TEMPLE OF SETI I, the father of Ramses II. No Egyptian temple can match the carvings and the colors in the temple of Seti I, the first ruler of the Nineteenth Dynasty (1295–1186 B.C.). It is so well preserved that visitors can study the ancient religious ceremonies pictured on the walls of the seven chapels.


Pylons that once stood in front of the temple are now gone, so the approach is from the broad stairs leading to the entrance. Inside, seven aisles lead to seven chapels, each dedicated to a different god, one of which is Seti I. At the entrance to each chapel is a carving of Seti I and the god to whom that chapel is dedicated. The Chapel of Osiris is the third from the right, and here one can see the ancient rituals of the Osiris Cult as performed by the king. Seti is shown as the officiating high priest who is being purified with holy oil. Seti approaches the sanctuary dressed in a simple kilt, carrying an incense pipe and an oil lamp to illuminate the sacred darkness of the sanctuary. The king, chanting prayers, approaches the shrine of Osiris; he unbolts the doors of the sacred shrine; the god, in the form of a cult statue, is greeted with morning hymns and offered food and wine, and incense is burned. The statue of the god is anointed with precious oil and dressed in the finest linen. More prayers are offered, and the god is returned to



An aegis, a miniature shield. For the Egyptians, the aegis was a sign of protection, and they often decorated the prows of their boats with it. (Drawing by Mary Jordan)

his shrine. The king withdraws, bowing, and sweeps away his footprints. This ritual is repeated in each of the other six chapels that are dedicated to HORUS, Isis (wife of Osiris and mother of HORUS), AMUN-RE (the great god of Thebes), RE-HORAKHTY (Horus of the Horizon), PTAH (the creator god), and Seti I. In the chapel of Seti I, the king performs the ceremonies in front of a cult statue of himself.

**ACHET**  An AMULET representing the rising Sun on the horizon, the color of the *achet* is always red, usually carved from a red stone or made of red glass or FAIENCE. The achet was a sign of the sun god RE in the early morning; it was believed to protect the wearer.

**ADZE**  An instrument shaped like a carpenter's tool used in the "opening of the mouth" ceremony. During the funeral, the adze magically gave the mummy "breath" to live again in the next world. When the adze was touched to the face of the mummy, the priest recited the prayer, "You live again, you breathe again."

**AEGIS** A magical symbol in the shape of a broad collar, often inscribed with an EYE OF HORUS or a SCARAB for protection. *Aegis* is the Greek word for shield. Chapter 158 of the BOOK OF THE DEAD men-

tions a "collar of gold" (aegis) to be placed on the neck of the *Ka*, the spirit of the deceased, on the day of burial. The collar is a symbol for an embrace by the god. An example of this collar can be seen in one of the small chapels in the TEMPLE OF SETI I at ABYDOS. Here, the king presents a collar to RE-HORAKHTY in hope that he will be united with his *Ka* for eternity.

The aegis sometimes decorated the prow of sacred boats and was usually shown with an animal head at the top. Sometimes the aegis collar was incorporated into jewelry or ritual objects with the head of SEKHMET or ISIS.

**AESCULAPIUS** Greek god of medicine identified with IMHOTEP, the Old Kingdom architect of the STEP PYRAMID, who was deified during the Ptolemaic period (332–32 B.C.) and worshipped as a god of healing and medicine.

**AF** The name given the sun god after it has set on the horizon and moved into the DUAT. Af is the night sun or the dead sun, for it gives no light while it is traveling through the 12 hours of the night in the Sektet boat of the Underworld. Af is shown with the head of a ram and wears the solar disk on his head, a sign representing the sun that is frequently worn on the headdress of Egyptian deities.

**AF-OSIRIS** A composite god derived from the dead sun god, AF, and OSIRIS, the god of the dead. During the festival of SOKAR each year, the ceremonial boat was placed on its sled at sunrise so the first rays of the sun would shine upon the boat and the sacred chest that rested on its deck. The chest supposedly held the bodies of Af and Osiris, who formed the composite sun god.

**AIR, GOD OF** See SHU.

**AKER** One of the early lion gods in Egyptian mythology, Aker, the god of land, is represented by two lions seated back to back or two lions supporting the symbol for the horizon with the sun rising. The two lions symbolize the sun setting in the west and the sun rising in the east. Because of this, Aker is viewed as an ally of RE, when Re makes his nightly journey through the Underworld. Aker is mentioned in the PYRAMID TEXTS as the earth god who guards the gates to the Underworld. In the BOOK OF THE DEAD, he is shown in the solar boat accompanying Re during his nightly journey. In the Fifth Hour, the AMDUAT, which helped the deceased make the journey through the Underworld, Aker appears as



the two-headed lion god carrying sand upon his back. In *THE BOOK OF CAVERNS*, another religious text, the sun god Re travels across Aker as he continues his journey through the caverns.

**AKH** The *akh* was part of a person's vital force, and when a person died, it was believed that his or her spirit, or *akh*, acquired magical power. The Egyptians thought the *akh* was a radiant light, something like a star. The *PYRAMID TEXTS* tell us that when a man died, his *akh* went to heaven. From the Pyramid Texts of King UNAS, spell 245, the king joins the stars:

This Unas comes to you oh Nut [the goddess of  
the sky]  
This Unas comes to you, oh Nut,  
He has consigned his father to earth,  
He has left Horus behind him . . .  
His magic has equipped him

Nut, the sky goddess, replies:

Make your seat in heaven,  
Among the stars of heaven,  
For you are the Lone Star. . . .

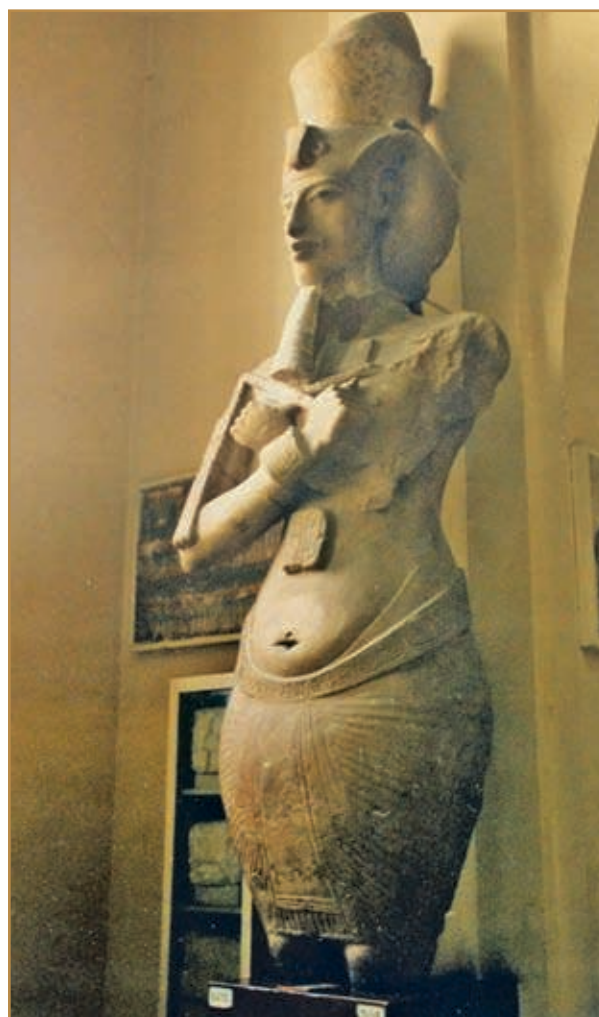
The *akh* was the resurrected form of the king when he had gained mobility in the Netherworld. The nature of the *akh* changed over time as the intricacies of Egyptian mythology evolved. Much later, when religious beliefs had changed, the *BOOK OF THE DEAD* viewed the *akh* as an evil force:

My mouth is strong: and I am equipped against  
the Akhs.  
Let them not have power over me.

**AKHEKH** A composite animal, something like a griffin, associated with the evil aspects of the god SET. Ancient myths describe the Akhekh as the body of an antelope with wings and the head of a bird, on which sat three cobras.

**AKHENATEN** (1352–1336 B.C.) Called the “heretic pharaoh” because he changed the religion of ancient Egypt, Akhenaten was the first known monotheist in history. He believed there was only one god, the ATEN. Soon after he was crowned king, he changed his name from Amenhotep IV to Akhenaten, meaning “Aten is on the horizon.” He then raised the little-known god, the Aten, meaning “disk of the sun,” to supreme god in the religion.

Akhenaten was the son of Amenhotep III, a pleasure-loving king who devoted his life to building



Akhenaten, the “heretic king,” changed the religion of Egypt from many gods to one and was the first known monotheist in the world. (Photo by Pat Remler)

temples, and Queen Tiye, a strong-minded woman if her portraits tell us anything about her personality. Akhenaten's ideas were revolutionary, and from his statues, we can see that his looks were different as well. Instead of an idealized king with a perfectly proportioned body, images of Akhenaten show a long, thin face, slanted eyes, thick lips, pointed chin, and a scrawny neck. He had breasts, a swollen belly, wide hips, and spindly arms and legs. This highly unusual and perhaps realistic portrayal of the king became an artistic fashion as Egyptian art changed to a more realistic style under his reign.

It is not certain when Akhenaten began worshiping the Aten. There were references to the Aten during his childhood: Akhenaten's mother, Queen Tiye, had a pleasure boat named *The Aten Gleams* that she sailed on her private lake. Right after his coronation, Akhenaten made it clear to everyone how important

the new god was. He began building temples to the Aten next to the temple of the traditional god, AMUN, at KARNAK TEMPLE, a group of religious buildings in Thebes.


The Aten was unlike any god the people had ever worshipped. Represented as a sun disk with rays of light reaching down and ending in hands holding an ANKH (the sign of life) and WAS SCEPTER (the sign of power), it bestowed light and warmth upon the king and his family. Unlike the traditional gods of Egypt, however, the Aten was an abstract god without personality.

Akhenaten and his followers left Thebes, the capital of Egypt, and traveled north to a remote desert site about halfway between modern Luxor and Cairo to build a new city in the desert, called Akhet-Aten, “the horizon of the Aten.” The king erected boundary markers called *stèle* that described how the Aten directed him to build the holy city on this site. Akhet-Aten was one of the most beautiful cities in the ancient world, stretching for five miles along the Nile. There were extra-wide streets for the king’s chariot procession and planned neighborhoods with houses for the laborers, administrators, and nobles of the court, as well as several palaces for the royal family and temples for the Aten.

The Aten temples were unlike any other temples in Egypt. There were no roofs and no sanctuary, or “holy of holies,” for the god. Completely open, their vast courtyards were filled with sunshine and altars for offerings to the Aten.

Akhenaten and his wife, Queen Nefertiti, had six daughters. Akhenaten’s happy isolation lasted only a dozen years, as one by one, five of the princesses and Nefertiti died. When Akhenaten himself died after reigning for about 17 years, Tutankhamen, his probable young son by a second wife, became pharaoh. Egypt returned to the old religion, and the city of Akhet-Aten was abandoned when the capital was moved back to Thebes.

It has been said that Akhenaten was a man born before his time, that his ideas were too revolutionary to be accepted in conservative Egypt. He changed his name, the art style, the religion, and the capital. In so doing, Akhenaten’s legacy to the world was monotheism, a new art style, and his beautiful prayer praising the Aten (see HYMN TO THE ATEN).

**AKHET**  The exact spot on the horizon where NUT, the sky goddess, gives birth to RE the sun god each morning. Egyptian mythology relates that at the end of each day, when the sun set, the sun god traveled through the 12 hours of night, crossing the

Underworld. When the sun appeared on the horizon at dawn, it was recognized as a sign of rebirth and renewal and a triumph over darkness. The heretic king AKHENATEN believed the akhet appeared on the horizon to show him where to build Akhet-Aten, his new city in the desert.

Akhet is the hieroglyph for horizon, and the word *akhet* is also the name of one of the three seasons in the ancient Egyptian calendar. It was the first season after the Egyptian new year and corresponds with our month of July. AMULETS in the shape of the akhet represented Re the sun god and provided powerful protection to the wearer. Akhet amulets are almost always red—carved from carnelian or made of red glass or FAIENCE.

**AKHET-ATEN** See AMARNA.

**ALEXANDER THE GREAT** (352–323 B.C.) Macedonian ruler who conquered Egypt and was declared a god. When his father, Philip II, died, Alexander became king of the small Greek state, Macedon. Within a few years, he and his army of devoted men united the Greek states and conquered the Levant and a good part of western Asia. When Alexander and his army marched into Egypt and defeated the hated Persians who occupied the land, the Egyptians hailed Alexander as a liberator. Alexander, ever mindful of local customs, made offerings to the Egyptian gods at MEMPHIS, KARNAK, and LUXOR temples and at Siwa Oasis in the western desert near the Libyan border.

This was more than just a goodwill gesture on his part. Alexander believed that he was descended from the legendary Greek hero Heracles (Hercules) and Achilles through his mother and father. To strengthen his claim to the throne of Egypt he needed to be acknowledged as a god by the Egyptian ORACLE at Siwa Oasis in the western desert. Legend has it that on the long march through the desert, when Alexander and his men became lost, a flock of crows appeared in the sky and led them to the safety of the oasis.

When Alexander approached the Oracle of AMUN-RE (called ZEUS-AMUN by the Greeks), he asked one question: “Who is my father?” When the Oracle answered “Amun,” Alexander knew he would rule. With the endorsement of the Oracle, Alexander, like all Egyptian kings before him, was recognized as the son of Amun and a god on Earth and was crowned king of Egypt.

Alexander founded his capital city, Alexandria, in 331 B.C. on the site of a small fishing village, Rhakotis (Raqote), on the Egyptian shore of the Mediterranean. The architect Deinocrates, who was



Alexander the Great respected Egyptian religion and culture after he invaded. His image was often commemorated on silver coins called *tetra drachma*. (Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Used under a Creative Commons license)

summoned from the Greek island of Rhodes, drew the plans for the city. Alexandria was based on the Greek city model, complete with a grid design open to the cool breezes from the Mediterranean. The city, completed after Alexander's death, grew to be a thriving international port with a population of more than half a million. The most famous building in ancient Alexandria was the "pharos" lighthouse, designated one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World by a Greek librarian. Little of the original structure remains today. Another famous landmark in ancient Alexandria was the library, with its priceless collection of papyrus manuscripts. Legend tells us that the library was burned to the ground when Julius Caesar entered Egypt to settle a quarrel between CLEOPATRA VII and her brother Ptolemy XIII.

Alexander never saw his city but moved on to continue his conquest of the Persian Empire. For all his dreams of ruling as a living god, Alexander died of a fever in Babylon in 323 B.C. When asked by his generals, upon his deathbed, who should succeed him, he simply said, "The strongest." Eventually Alexander's empire was divided among the generals. General Ptolemy chose Egypt and established the Ptolemaic dynasty there. His was the last dynasty, ending when Cleopatra VII committed suicide and the Roman Empire annexed Egypt.

**AMARNA** (also AKHET-ATEN or "Horizon of the Aten") Amarna was built by AKHENATEN (the heretic king) as a cult city to honor his new god, the ATEN, whose motto was: *ankh m maat*, or "living in truth." Worship of the Aten brought with it a new art style. Emphasis was placed especially on "truth in nature." Artists and craftsmen abandoned the traditional static style of depiction and began painting scenes from nature and carving lifelike natural statues of the royal court.

When Akhenaten (1352–1336 B.C.) changed Egypt's religion from the worship of many gods (polytheism) to the worship of one god (monotheism), he claimed he was guided by the Aten. Akhenaten moved his court from the old capital city THEBES (modern Luxor) to a new desert location some 200 miles north. Akhenaten marked the boundaries of his new city with 15 stelae (stone slabs). Some stelae were carved into the limestone cliffs like shrines; others were actual stone slabs erected along the east and west sides of the NILE. On the stelae, Akhenaten recorded his vow never to leave the holy city of Akhet-Aten:

The southern stela which is on the eastern mountain on Akhet-Aten . . . I shall not pass beyond it southward ever. The middle stela . . . [Eastern] I shall not pass beyond it eastward ever. The northeastern stela . . . I shall not pass beyond it northward ever. Likewise from the southwest stela of Akhet-Aten to the northwest stela on the western mountain [he will not pass beyond the western stelae] within these four stelae from the eastern mountain to the western mountain is Akhet-Aten itself. It belongs to my father, [the Aten] who gives life forever. I shall not violate this oath which I have made to the Aten my father in all eternity.

Amarna was built on the east bank of the Nile, with three broad streets parallel to the river. Wide enough to accommodate the great chariot processions of Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti, the Royal Road was the main street. Because it was a planned city with defined neighborhoods (called the North and the South Suburbs and the Central City), Akhet-Aten grew in an orderly way. Akhenaten's royal palace, official buildings, the Great Aten Temple, and the Small Aten Temple were in the Central City—the hub of all activity. Officials and nobles lived in the North and South Suburbs. The famous Nefertiti bust, now in the Charlottenburg Egyptian Museum in Berlin, was found in the South Suburb house of



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