

Chapter

6

The Egyptian Pantheon

Objectives

To discover the physical characteristics of the gods and goddesses, and to identify the role each deity played in the land of the living and the land of the dead.

Mystery

How did the ancient Egyptians conceive and visualize their invisible gods and goddesses?

Discussion and Research Projects

1. Like many other ancient cultures, the Egyptians worshipped a multitude of gods and goddesses. Why do you think they had so many deities?
2. Gods and goddesses can be classified into pairs of opposites. The pairs may be male and female, or represent opposite phenomena such as order and chaos. Make a list of the gods and goddesses that constitute pairs of opposites.
3. Classify the gods and goddesses according to their role in the land of the living and the land of the dead. The land of the living would include the natural world on earth and the sky; the land of the dead is the invisible world where the Egyptians hoped to be reborn into eternity.
4. The gods and goddesses were visualized with bodies, heads and headdresses that gave each a unique appearance. Most had human bodies with either a human, animal, bird or insect head. Which god does not fit this pattern?

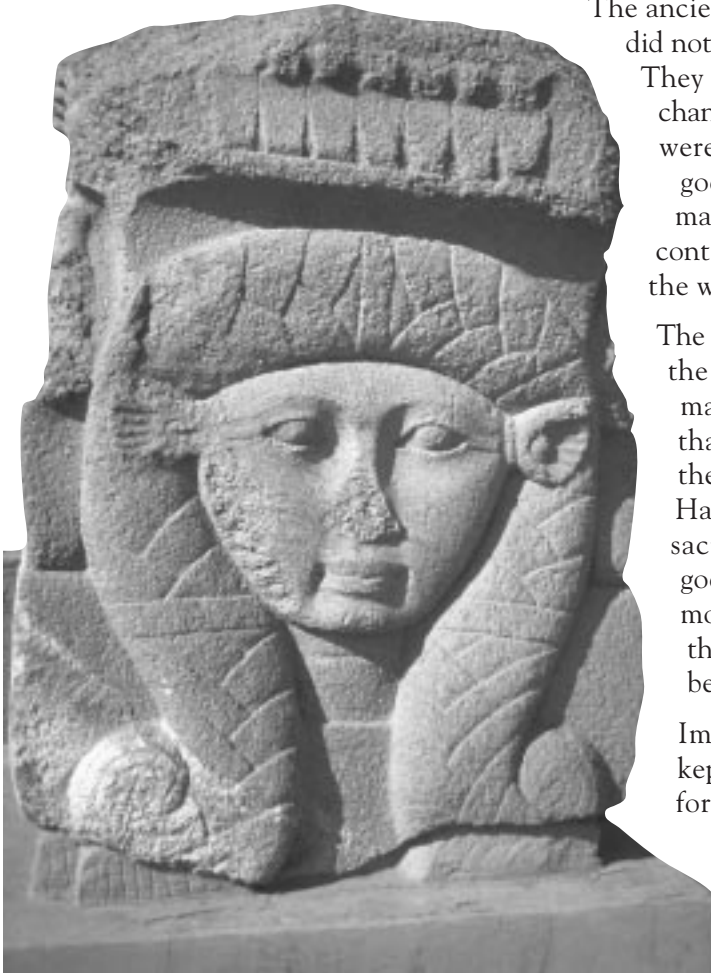


5. Classify the gods and goddesses into the following categories:
 - bird heads
 - insect heads
 - human heads
 - animal heads
 - mythical heads
 - a single animal body
 - a combination of animal bodies
 - a combination of human and bird bodies
6. Classify the gods and goddesses according to what they hold in their hands:
 - crook and flail
 - feather
 - rod or sceptre
 - *ankh* (symbol of life)
 - sistrum (rattle)
7. List the various types of headgear worn by the gods and goddesses.
8. Since the Egyptians portrayed their gods and goddesses as part human, part animal, bird or insect, do you think they worshipped animals, birds and insects?
9. Some gods and goddesses were depicted in several ways. Can you give examples of this?
10. The sun god was the principal god of ancient Egypt. Identify a number of ways this god was depicted.
11. Many gods and goddesses have sun symbols on their heads. Make a list of them and draw their headdresses.
12. The sun disk worn by the gods and goddesses is often surrounded by a snake. What do you think the snake represents?
13. Do you think the ancient Egyptians worshipped the sun? Why do you think the sun god was so important to them?
14. The sun god is a symbol of light and enlightenment. Which god was given the task of enlightening humans and giving them wisdom? What does he carry in his hand that symbolizes learning and writing?

Creative Projects

1. Use **Activity Sheet 13** to learn to identify the gods and goddesses in the Egyptian pantheon that are represented in animal form.
2. Use **Activity Sheet 14** to learn about the cosmic gods and goddesses and what they represent.
3. Use **Activity Sheet 15** to learn about the symbolic meaning of human- and animal-headed gods and goddesses.
4. The ancient Egyptians displayed incredible imagination in visualizing their gods and goddesses. See if you can do as well! Do a number of drawings showing some of the characteristics of the ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses. Example: sun, moon, earth, sky, order, disorder, love, justice, wisdom.

FACT SHEET: The Gods and Goddesses



Hathor, with a human face and cow ears
CMC S97 10018 (photo)

The ancient Egyptians recognized many gods and did not have a single system of religious beliefs. They were always ready to adopt new gods or change their views about the old ones. There were local gods, cosmic gods and personal gods. The prime role of the gods was to maintain order in the universe, ensure the continuance of the cycles of life and prevent the world from falling into chaos.

The oldest gods in the pantheon appeared in the pre-dynastic period and represent animals, birds or reptiles. Egyptians believed that animals possessed divine powers, so they associated them with certain deities. Hathor, the goddess associated with the sacred cow, is an example. The cosmic gods representing the forces of nature are more recent. They did not appear until the historic era, when the dynastic period began.

Images of the gods and goddesses were kept in temples, where the pharaohs cared for them, assisted by an army of priests and priestesses. By the New Kingdom, however, the priesthood was the exclusive domain of men. Temples were not a place of worship for the common people. Only the pharaohs and priests were allowed into them to worship and care for the deities.



Thoth, represented as a baboon wearing a lunar crescent and disk

It is easy to get confused when trying to identify the Egyptian gods. There is a large number of them and they are not always depicted the same way. For example, Thoth, the god of writing and messenger of the sun god, is seen as a human with the head of an ibis, or as a baboon or the moon. Like the Greek gods, the Egyptian gods symbolized aspects of life, human emotions and the physical world. Gods and goddesses are often grouped into pairs to represent the dual nature of life, the negative and positive forces of the cosmos. An examples is Osiris and Seth, representing life and death, order and destruction.



Amemet

Amemet

Depicted with the rear of a hippopotamus, the fore of a lion and the head of a crocodile, she devoured the hearts of those judged guilty when their hearts were weighed against a feather in the afterworld.

Amun

Chief of the gods during the New Kingdom, Amun was depicted as a man with two tall plumes rising above his headdress, or as a ram or a goose. He, his wife, Mut, and their son, Khonsu, represented the Theban Triad, the sacred family of Thebes. Amun rose in prominence but did not become a state deity. He was associated with the god Re and venerated as the god Amun-Re.



Amun

Amun-Re

Amun-Re, a form of the sun god, is sometimes depicted as a sphinx or as a human with the head of a hawk. The disk of the sun is a symbol of this god.

The word Amun means “the hidden” or the “hiddenness of divinity”, whereas Re means “the sun” or the “divinity in the power of the sun”. The god Amun-Re is a representation of these two ideas: the ever-present invisible power and radiant light of the divine force that sustains life.



Amun-Re

To trace the origin of Amun-Re, we must go back to the Old Kingdom and Heliopolis, where the god Re first appeared as the primary manifestation of the sun god. Re is depicted with the head of a falcon surmounted by the sun disk during his passage across the sky, and with the head of a ram during his nocturnal voyage in the underworld. This local god became a national god, resulting in the erection of sun temples throughout the land. In the fourth dynasty, the pharaohs began to consider themselves manifestations of this god. Later, during the Middle Kingdom, when Amun became the most important god, Re was fused with him to become Amun-Re.

Re is sometimes spelled Ra, and Amun-Re is sometimes written as Amen-Ra or Amun-Ra.



Anubis

Anubis

Anubis was a jackal-headed deity who presided over the embalming process and accompanied dead kings to the afterworld. When kings were being judged by Osiris, Anubis placed their hearts on one side of a scale and a feather representing Maat (order and truth) on the other. The god Thoth recorded the results, which indicated whether the king could enter the afterworld. Anubis is the son of Osiris and Nephthys.



Atum

Atum

A primeval cosmic god, Atum is the sun god as creator, the substance from which all creation unfurled. He is the Lord of the Universe. In his human form, he represents the king of Egypt, who wears the Double Crown of Egypt.



Photo: Royal Ontario Museum
CMC ECD98-040 #39

Bastet

A cat goddess, Bastet represents the more protective aspects of motherhood, compared to the aggressive lion-headed Sekhmet. With a female body and a cat's head, she is often seen holding a sistrum.

Bes

This dwarf god has a grotesque mask-like face and protruding lips. He is often shown carrying musical instruments, knives or the hieroglyph representing protection. Despite his appearance, he is a protector of the family and is associated with sexuality and childbirth.

Geb and Nut

These two gods embody opposites. The earth god Geb, who represents dry land, is the husband of sky goddess Nut, who represents the sky, a mirror image of the watery sea. Nut is portrayed as a woman with the hieroglyph of her name on her head or as a woman with an arched body covered with stars. She is the daughter of Shu and Tefnut.

Hapi

Hapi, who brought abundance, controlled the annual flooding of the Nile that enriched the land for growing crops. This deity is depicted as a man who has plants on his head and holds an offering table filled with the produce of the land.

Hathor

This goddess is represented in three different ways: as a woman holding a *menit* necklace and wearing a crown consisting of a cow's horns and a sun disk; as a woman with cow ears; and as a cow. She is the daughter of Re and the consort of Horus, the falcon god of the heavens. She is also regarded as the mother of each reigning king (as is the goddess Isis). Hathor has two aspects to her personality: her vengeful side took on the leonine form of the goddess Sekhmet and tried to destroy humanity following the rebellion in the creation myth; and her bovine form is associated with sexuality, joy and music.

Horus

Horus, the falcon-headed god, is a familiar ancient Egyptian deity. He has become one of the most commonly used symbols of Egypt, seen on Egyptian airplanes, and on hotels and restaurants throughout the land.

Horus is the son of Osiris and Isis, the divine child of the holy family triad. He is one of many gods associated with the falcon. His name means "he



Bastet



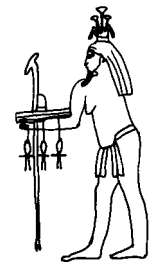
Bes



Geb



Nut



Hapi



Hathor



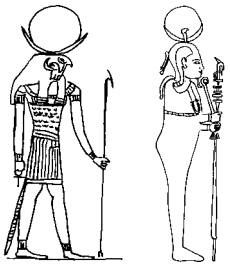
Horus



Isis



Khnum



Khonsu

Khonsu



Maat

who is above” and “he who is distant”. The falcon had been worshipped from earliest times as a cosmic deity whose body represented the heavens and whose eyes represented the sun and the moon. Horus is depicted as a falcon wearing a crown with a cobra or the Double Crown of Egypt. The hooded cobra (uraeus), which the gods and pharaohs wore on their foreheads, symbolizes light and royalty. It is there to protect the person from harm.

When Horus was an infant, his father was killed by his brother Seth. To keep her son from being harmed, Isis hid Horus in the marshland of the Nile, where she protected him from the poisonous snakes, scorpions, crocodiles and wild animals. As he grew up, he learned to ward off danger and became strong enough to fight Seth and claim his rightful inheritance, the throne of Egypt. As a result, Horus is associated with the title of kingship, the personification of divine and regal power. Kings believed they were descended from Horus, who was considered to be the first divine king of Egypt.

Isis

Isis represents the power of love to overcome death. She brought her husband and brother, Osiris, back to life and saved her son Horus from certain death. She is portrayed wearing the hieroglyph for “throne” on her head; from the New Kingdom onward, she sometimes wore a solar disk between cow horns. She is also often depicted mourning the death of her husband and nursing their son.

Khnum

A straight-horned, ram-headed god who is often depicted creating humans on his potter’s wheel, Khnum emerged from two caverns in the subterranean world in the ocean of Nun. He was the god of the First Cataract of the Nile in Upper Egypt and controlled fertility by sending half the waters of the river to the south and half to the north.

Khonsu

Son of the Theban couple Amun and Mut, he is a moon god often depicted with the head of a hawk surmounted with a crescent moon and a lunar disk. He is also seen as a youth with a sidelock of hair, and a crescent moon and a lunar disk on his head.

Maat

Maat is the goddess of truth and justice. She is identified as a woman with an ostrich plume in her headband.

Min

A human or mummified god, Min is depicted with an erect phallus. He carries a flail in his right hand and wears a crown with two plumes. He is the protector of fertility and of travel in the desert.



Min

Mut

Wife of the Theban god Amun, she was first portrayed as a vulture and later as a woman. She, Amun and their son, Khonsu, represent the Theban Triad, the sacred family of Thebes.



Mut

Neith

A goddess linked to war and weaving, she is an important personage of the funerary cult, along with Isis, Nephthys and Selkis. She is usually depicted wearing the red crown of Lower Egypt.

Nekhbet

Portrayed as a vulture, Nekhbet was the principal goddess of Upper Egypt, whose king she protected. Her northern counterpart was the cobra goddess Wadjet.



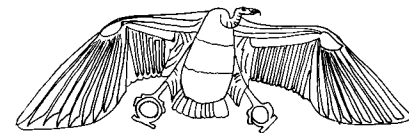
Neith

Nephthys

Nephthys is the daughter of Nut, sister of Isis and wife of Seth, the god of disorder. Her loyalties, however, lay with Osiris, by whom she had a child, Anubis. When Seth found out who the father was, he murdered Osiris, and Nephthys joined Isis in the search for Osiris's body. Along with her sister Isis, she befriends and protects the dead. She is represented as a female with the hieroglyph of her name on her head.

Osiris

Osiris is one of the principal Egyptian gods who first appeared in funerary texts during the Pyramid Age, when the practice of mummification began (2400 B.C.). He presided over the court that determined the fate of kings when they died. He is portrayed as a mummified man wearing a tall white crown adorned with two ostrich feathers.



Nekhbet

According to Egyptian mythology, Osiris was murdered by his brother Seth then brought back to life by the love of his sister and wife, Isis. This myth describes the forces of destruction that initiated the process of mummification. The love of Isis is symbolic of regeneration and the promise of eternal life. The cycle of destruction, death and rebirth was repeated each year in the annual flooding of the Nile, the river that provided the essential ingredients needed to sustain life, giving birth to one of the first civilizations.

Osiris is also equated with the miracle of the Nile and the rich harvest, as the text from the sarcophagus of a high priestess of Amun named Ankhnesneferibra attests:



Nephthys



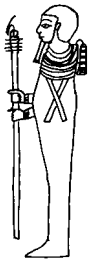
Osiris

Hail, you are the maker of grain, he who gives life to the gods with the water of his limbs, and bread to every land with the water that takes form under him.¹¹

Osiris and Isis had a son named Horus. Together they represent a holy family: god, goddess and divine child. In the New Kingdom, the main temples throughout Egypt venerated a holy family modelled on the Osiris, Isis and Horus triad.

Ptah

Creator god of the city of Memphis and husband of Sekhmet, Ptah is depicted as a mummified man holding the *was* sceptre (one that has a crooked handle in the shape of an animal head and a forked base).



Ptah

Re, the Sun God

The sun god was considered the central and original power of creation. The daily rising and setting sun offered tangible evidence of the sun's power to fall into the western sky and be reborn each morning in the eastern sky.

Re brought the concept of Maat — the principle of truth (Right) and balanced justice — to the Egyptians. This fundamental concept became the cornerstone of the Egyptian civilization. The cosmic journey of the sun, symbolized by the scarab (dung beetle that pushes the sun disk across the sky), would continue as long as the cult of the sun god and Maat were respected. In the beginning stages of the deities, the kingship of Re was transferred to other forms of the sun god — to Shu, then Geb and, finally, Osiris.



Re, the Sun God

On earth, the kings of the Old Kingdom were considered the mortal embodiment of the sun god. In other words, a king was a god on earth, and his right actions prevented the world from falling into chaos.

The sun god is also known as Re-Horakhty (the Horus of the Horizon) and Atum (the All), the substance from which all creation unfurled. Re-Horakhty is identified as a god with a human body and falcon head who wears a crown in the form of a sun disk

surrounded by a cobra, or a crown made from ram horns and ostrich feathers. Atum is depicted as King of Egypt and Lord of the Universe and wears the Double Crown of Egypt. All these forms of the sun god represent the promise of resurrection, an answer to the dilemma of human mortality.

The cult of the sun was maintained by the Egyptian kings over the centuries. They built pyramids (symbols of the stairway to the sun or the angled rays of the sun) and later solar temples in honour of the sun god. When a king died, his actions were judged in the afterworld by Osiris, a form of the sun god and ruler of the underworld. If they were considered just, the king was transformed into a form of the sun god.

Sekhmet

Sekhmet is depicted as a woman with a lion's head wearing a sun disk and a uraeus (cobra). She was an important goddess in the Theban capital during the New

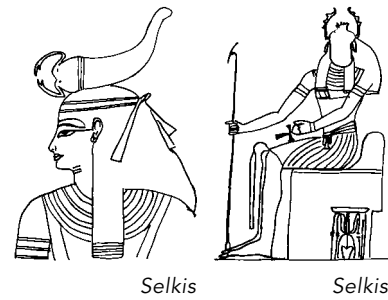


Sekhmet

Kingdom (1550–1070 B.C.). Her name means “she who is powerful”, and as such, she personifies the aggressive aspects of female deities.

Selkis

Selkis is usually depicted as a woman with a scorpion on her head. Her name means “the one who causes the throat to breathe”. She is a protector of the falcon-headed canopic jar, and along with three other deities, Isis, Nephthys and Neith, guarded the royal coffins and canopic chests.



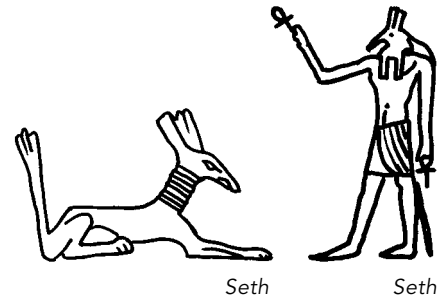
Selkis

Selkis

Seth

Seth is the offspring of Geb and Nut. As the god of disorder, he was responsible for killing his brother, Osiris. In the Egyptian dualistic concept of the cosmos, Seth is placed in juxtaposition with Horus, the god who ruled the land with order and stability.

Seth is an animal-headed deity with a curved head, tall square-topped ears and an erect arrow-like tail. The animal he represents has not been identified. He is sometimes portrayed with a human body and an elongated bird-like head, similar in appearance to the god Thoth.

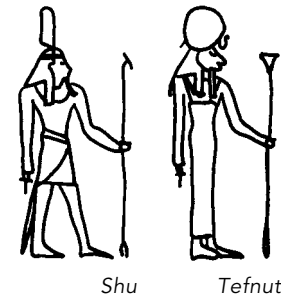


Seth

Seth

Shu and Tefnut

Shu is a male god who is paired with his sister, Tefnut. Together they represent two fundamental principles of human existence. Shu symbolizes dry air and the force of preservation. Tefnut symbolizes moist or corrosive air that brings about change, creating the concept of time. Shu and Tefnut are the offspring of Re (or Atum, a form of the sun god), a primeval cosmic god, progenitor of the elements of the universe.

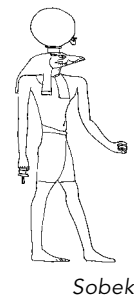


Shu

Tefnut

Sobek

The name of this crocodile-headed god means “he who causes to be pregnant or fertile”. At his cult centre at Kom Ombo, he shared a temple with Horus. He was later assimilated into the cult of Amun, being worshipped as a manifestation of the sun god, Re.



Sobek

Sphinx

A statue with the body of a lion and the head of a human or an animal, the sphinx represents a form of the sun god.



Sphinx



Taweret

Taweret

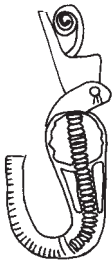
A goddess that protected women in childbirth, Taweret is portrayed with the head of a hippopotamus, the arms and legs of a lion, and the back and tail of a crocodile. Her heavy breasts and full belly indicate she is pregnant.

Thoth

Thoth is the messenger of the sun god. He is the god of learning and wisdom, the inventor of writing and science, and the protector of the scribes. He is depicted as a human with the head of an ibis, or as a baboon or the moon.



Thoth



Wadjet

Wadjet

She was a cobra goddess whose lethal force protected the king of Lower Egypt. Her northern counterpart was the vulture goddess Nekhbet.



Two cobra goddesses (Wadjets) flank a pharaoh's cartouche
CMC ECD98-030 #30