

- » Meeting the Egyptian deities
- » Examining the place of religion in everyday life in Egypt
- » Unwrapping the mysteries of the mummies and other fun bits of Egyptology

Chapter **18**

Three Cheers for Egypt: Ra, Ra, Ra!

Egyptian civilization has been around for a very, very long time. The Egyptian dynasties got their start about 5,000 years ago, long before the rise of Greek civilization. And they held sway over the Nile region for thousands of years, creating a sophisticated civilization, an elaborate system of writing, a complex group of gods, and noteworthy burial practices.

In this chapter, we tell you about the Nile River and why it's so important for Egyptian history and mythology, the many gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt, the Divine Pharaohs, and of course mummies!

Write Me a Really Big River

The Nile was Egypt's defining feature. The entire Egyptian civilization existed within a few miles of the great river; all around was dry desert, but the Nile's banks were lush with plants and animals. Every year the Nile would overflow, flooding the land around it; and when the waters receded, the plants sprang up like magic. It was a relatively easy place to live (for those times, anyway) and thus was fertile ground for culture. Check out the map of Egypt in Figure 18-1.

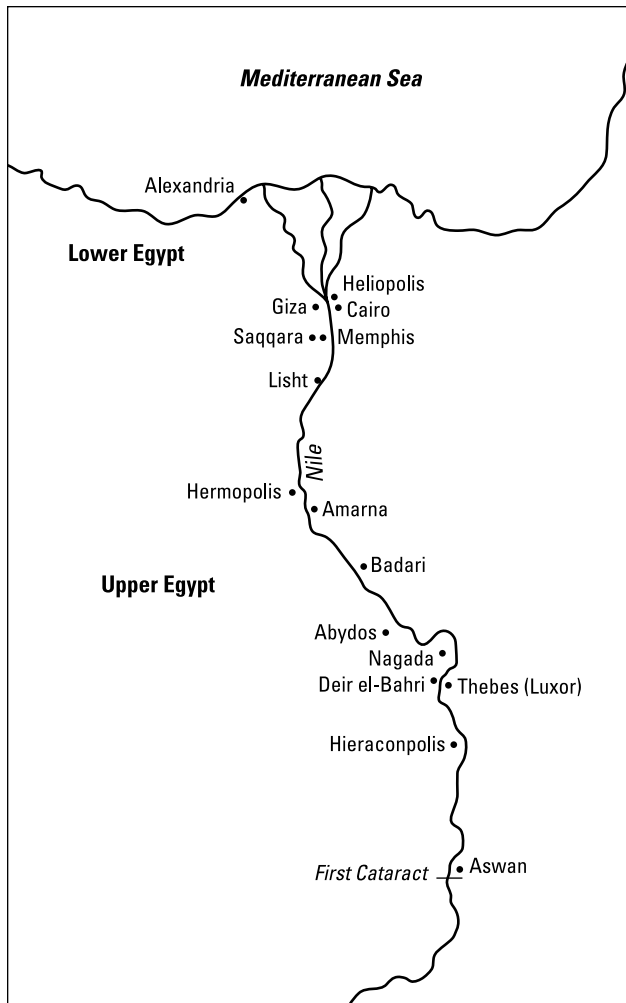


FIGURE 18-1:
Ancient Egypt.

This endless cycle of destruction followed by fertility became the foundation of Egyptian religion. Creation was an ongoing cycle of renewal repeated every day, and the Egyptian people's job was to help the gods ward off destructive demons who may prevent the cycle from progressing as it should.

The Egyptians didn't have the same sort of mythology many of their neighbors across the Mediterranean Sea, such as the Greeks and Romans; deities were real entities, but they didn't engage in shenanigans like the immortals on Mount Olympus. A few stories about Egyptian gods survive today, but some of the best (such as the story of Isis and Horus) come from Greek writers. The Egyptians themselves didn't start writing down their myths until about 2000 BCE, after Egyptian civilization had already been around for a while.

THE TWO EGYPTS

Egypt was actually split into two Egypts, Upper Egypt and Lower Egypt. *Lower Egypt* was in the northern part of the country and encompassed Memphis and the Nile delta. *Upper Egypt* was much larger, extending all the way to Elephantine Island near Sudan. The important city of Luxor and the Valley of the Kings (home of many elaborate tombs) were there. North of that is where you'll find the huge pyramids, near where the Nile River starts to branch into many smaller streams that flow into the sea.

Lower Egypt was north of Upper Egypt; that can be confusing to cultures that traditionally put north above south on their maps by convention. Upper Egypt was at a higher altitude than Lower Egypt; the Nile flowed down from Upper Egypt into Lower Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea.

A Cavalcade of Creation Stories



REMEMBER

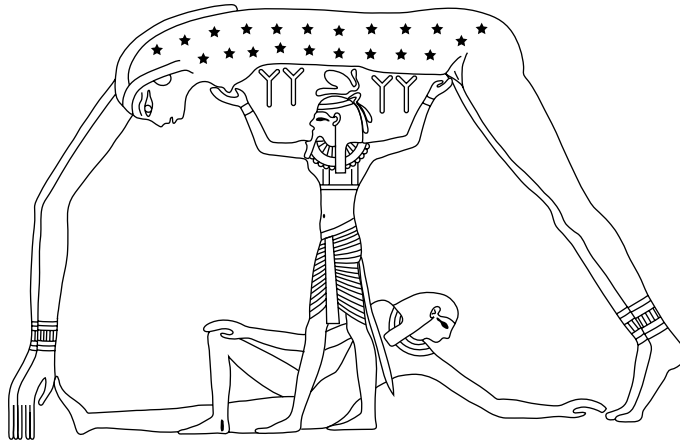
The Egyptians didn't have a single creation story. Instead, people in different parts of the country told different stories of how the world came into existence and of the creation of gods and people. We tell a few in the following sections.

Order from chaos: One version of how the world began

In the beginning was the *primordial* (ancient) water of creation. A mound rose out of it. Atum, the creator god, emerged from the water all alone. Apparently having nothing better to do, he masturbated. He caught his semen in his mouth and spat out two children: Shu, god of air, and Tefenet, goddess of moisture. These two went off to explore; Atum couldn't find them, so he sent another daughter, a fiery goddess also called Atum's divine Eye, to see whether she could find them. She brought them back, and Atum wept to have his children back safe. His tears turned into the first humans.

Shu and Tefenet had two children: Nut, the sky goddess, and Geb, the earth god. Nut and Geb fell in love and embraced one another so tightly no room existed between them. Nut got pregnant, but her children had no room to be born. Nut and Geb's father, Shu, separated them and held Nut high up over the earth (as you can see in Figure 18-2), which created room for living creatures and air for them to breathe. Water surrounded the earth and sky. Every night Nut swallowed the sun, and every morning she gave birth to it again.

FIGURE 18-2:
The air god, Shu,
is separating the
sky goddess, Nut,
from the earth
god, Geb.



Nut had two pairs of twins, Osiris and Isis and Seth and Nephthys. Osiris and Isis fell in love in the womb, but Nephthys (a girl) hated her brother Seth. Nevertheless, Nephthys became Seth's wife and Isis became Osiris's wife. As first-born male, Osiris was destined to rule Egypt, and he did for a short time.

Egyptian creator gods and their side of the story

The Egyptians also had four creator gods, each with his own *cult* (set of religious practices that people followed when worshipping a particular god). The story of the world's origin and the creation of humans came out differently for each of them.

A different take on Atum

The Atum worshipped at the city named Heliopolis is a snake that emerged from the primeval chaos (like Amon in the next section). Though he's usually depicted as human, he has both male and female attributes. He's sometimes called Ra-Atum and represents the evening sun who returns to Nut's womb. (You can find that story in the earlier section "Order from chaos: One version of how the world began.")

Amon-Ra fusion

Amon-Ra became a national god in the second millennium BCE, when the fertility god Amon, worshipped in the Egyptian city of Thebes, fused with the sun god Ra, whom we discuss later in the chapter. In his myth, Amon is the first being in existence. In one story, he takes the form of a goose and lays the cosmic egg from

which life comes. In another, he emerges from the primordial chaos in the form of a snake, just like Atum in the preceding section.

Khnum, sculptor of humans

Khnum had a cult on Elephantine Island. He controls the yearly rising of the Nile and its life-giving power. His sacred animal is the ram, and he's usually depicted as a man with a ram's head. Khnum is a potter; he made humans and animals out of clay and breathed life into their bodies.

Heavy-metal god Ptah

Ptah was worshipped at the city of Memphis (in Lower Egypt), where he was considered the god who existed at the beginning of time and created everything. (Check out the nearby sidebar “The two Egypts” for more on Lower and Upper Egypt.) He created all gods by thinking of them and speaking their names aloud. He fashioned gods and kings out of gold and other metals, which also gave him the position of the god of crafts.

Gods and Goddesses of the Sands

The ancient Egyptians had a huge number of deities. Some had more stories attached to them than others, but they were all fairly important. In addition to starring in the Egyptian creation stories (see the preceding sections), they were widely worshipped and give us some cool tales, especially the story of Horus and Seth.

Major players

In Egyptian mythology some gods and goddesses are simply more significant than the rest. They just seem to pop up at a greater frequency than the others. Here are a few of the biggies.

Ra, the sun god

Generally, the sun god is the main god of Egypt. He's born from Nut every day at dawn, grows up by noon, and is old by evening, when he goes to the underworld for the night before being born again the next morning. He takes the sun over the sky in a boat. Osiris and sky goddess Nut join him on his boat at night.

You can see one depiction of Ra in Figure 18-3. But the sun god took many forms; one of the most popular was a *dung beetle*, a creature that pushes round balls of dung around, imitating the sun's progress across the sky.

The Egyptians believed that the world would eventually end and that Ra himself could age. In one story, as Ra is getting older, people begin plotting against him, and he decides to punish them. He sends the goddess Sekhmet to kill them, but he stops her before they're all destroyed. But he feels so tired that he decides to retire. He appoints the god Osiris to be ruler over humanity (see the “Osiris, first among equals” section later in this chapter for more on this god).

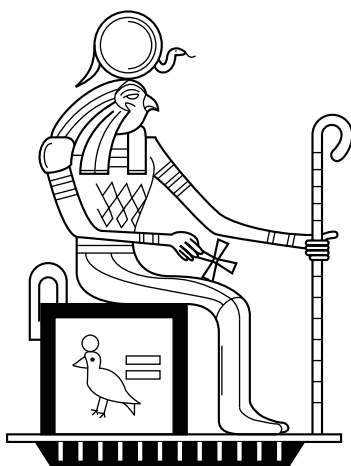


FIGURE 18-3:
The sun god, Ra.

The sun god generally went by the name “Ra” (or “Re”), but this name was usually fused with another deity’s name. For instance, the midday sun was called Ra-Harakhty, and the evening sun was Ra-Atum. Really, his name was secret. When Ra was getting old, Isis tricked him into revealing his secret name to her, but she promised to tell no one but Horus, so no one ever found out what it was.

Isis, a mover and a shaker

Isis is the wife and sister of Osiris and the mother of Horus. Egyptians worshipped her as the great mother goddess. She’s one of Egypt’s earliest goddesses.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Isis is mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, some of the earliest records of Egyptian religion (around 2465 to 2150 BCE).

Isis is a political mover. As Egypt passed from the rule of its native kings to the Ptolemies, Isis became the official goddess of the new state cult. She also traveled through the Greco-Roman world, becoming identified with the Greek goddesses Demeter, Selena, and Hera (see Chapter 5).

In one myth (that's extremely similar to a story about the Greek goddess Demeter from Chapter 5), Isis gets a job nursing a baby boy for a noblewoman. She takes a liking to the child and puts him in the fire every night to make him immortal. One night, the mother sees her doing so and screams. The baby dies, and Isis leaves.

Osiris, first among equals

As we note earlier in the chapter, Osiris is the brother and husband of Isis. He's the ruler of the underworld, and, incidentally, the first mummy. His jealous brother Seth murders him to take over his throne, and Isis mummifies him, after which point he goes to his new job with the dead.

Osiris is the god of agriculture and teaches people how to farm. The Egyptians compared his death and dismemberment with the annual harvest and cutting down of crops. His reanimation was the sign that crops would rise again the next year.

When Ra (whom we discuss earlier in the chapter) retires, he passes his throne to Osiris. Osiris has a brief reign as king of the earth, in charge of deities and everything else. He reigns with Isis at his side and presides over a golden age.

Seth, a stormy uncle

Seth is the brother of Isis and Osiris. He is usually depicted as having a human body and an animal's head. No one agrees on what kind of animal, so it is often called the "Seth Animal", but some think it looks like an aardvark. After murdering Osiris and having a lengthy disagreement with Isis and her son Horus, he finally accepts a job as the god of storms. (See the later section "Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth" for the full story.) Seth lives in the desert. Egyptians depicted him as part wild donkey, part pig (or anteater).

Horus and his band of pharaohs

The son of Isis and Osiris, Horus is king of the gods and god of the sky, a position he has to fight his uncle Seth to acquire (see "Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth" for that tale). He's depicted as a falcon. *Pharaohs*, the Egyptian kings, were considered earthly manifestations of Horus.

Other deities, national and local

Although some deities were worshipped throughout Egypt, others had a more local influence. Different localities had favorite deities they worshipped specially, resulting in a huge number of gods and goddesses all over the Egyptian land. Here are a few more, though certainly not all, Egyptian deities:

- » **Thoth:** He's the moon god. He's depicted as a baboon, an *ibis* (a large wading bird), or a man. He's associated with secret magical powers, many of which were written down in the mythical Book of Thoth. (Thoth is kind of equivalent to Hermes in Greek mythology; read about him in Chapter 4.)
- » **Anubis:** He has the head of a jackal. He receives the souls of dead people and leads them through the many trials the soul has to pass before reaching Osiris and paradise.
- » **Hathor:** She's the goddess of lovers, fertility, and birth and also the wife of the sun god. She has the shape of a cow. (Isis also has cow like aspects; the cow was a common symbol for the life-giving female.) She nurses kings from her udder. Women wore *amulets* (charms) from her sanctuary to prevent prolonged labor. She is also the goddess of music and dance.
- » **Sekhmet:** The "Powerful One," she's a lioness goddess. She kills rebellious humans for the sun god. Sometimes criminals were sacrificed to her.
- » **Bastet:** The cat goddess, she's the patron of love, sex, and fertility. She started out as a lioness like Sekhmet but got milder as time went on and turned into a gentler pussycat.
- » **Bes:** He's a fat dwarf with the mane and tail of a lion. His tongue sticks out of his mouth as a warning to enemies. He's the special helper for women in labor and safeguards young children. People put his image on furniture and wore him as amulets around their necks to ward off demons.
- » **Selket:** The scorpion goddess, she's a guardian of the living and the dead.

Trouble in paradise: Horus and Seth

The gods Horus and Seth both think they should be king of the gods — Horus because he's the son of the former king Osiris and Seth because he's Osiris's brother and jealous that Osiris gets to be king. Both deities fight for the throne.

Assembly required, battery not needed

Seth, jealous of his brother Osiris, kills him, cuts him into pieces, and seizes the throne. Isis, distraught, gathers up the pieces of Osiris's body; she can't find his penis, so she makes one out of wood.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

The Greek writer Plutarch said that a fish had eaten Osiris's penis, and he used this logic to explain why Egyptian priests didn't eat fish.

Then, with the help of the jackal god Anubis, Isis reassembles Osiris and holds everything together with mummy bandages. He comes back to life long enough to get her pregnant.

Isis is afraid Seth will kill her baby if he finds him, so she hides in the marshes of the Nile delta. There she bears her son, Horus, and raises him to avenge his father's murder and reclaim the throne. Seth tells all the dangerous elements in the marshes — the plants, animals, insects, and diseases — to harm Horus if they can. But Isis goes around and learns all their names, which gives her power over them and keeps Horus safe. She teaches Horus the names of all the dangerous beasts, and he grows up immune from harm by them.

Trials, contests, and mutilations

When Horus is grown, he and his mother go before a tribunal of gods to demand his throne. Seth argues that he's the only god strong enough to defend the sun-boat (see the earlier section "Ra, the sun god"), but Isis persuades the deities he's wrong. Seth refuses to continue the trial with Isis there, so the gods reconvene on an island. The ferryman isn't supposed to take Isis there, but she disguises herself, bribes the ferryman, and manages to get over to the island. Then she turns into a beautiful woman and complains to Seth that she's a widow and a stranger has stolen all her cattle, robbing her son of his inheritance. Seth agrees that this act is a crime; Isis uses this statement as evidence he's incriminated himself.

Seth still refuses to relinquish the throne and challenges Horus to a contest: They'll each turn into a hippopotamus and stay under water for three months. Horus agrees, but Isis is worried he may lose. So she throws a harpoon at Seth (though she hits Horus first). Horus gets really angry at his mom; he cuts off her head and runs into the desert with it. Isis turns herself into a statue and returns to the gods; the god Thoth fixes her up with a cow's head as a replacement for the one Horus took.

The sun god punishes Horus for hurting his mother by letting Seth tear out his eyes. The goddess Hathor restores them with a judicious application of gazelle milk.

The pen is mightier than the harpoon

Horus appeals to the gods again. They write a letter to Osiris asking what to do. Osiris responds that he'll send demons to plague the gods if they don't give Horus the throne. Horus becomes king, Isis rejoices, and Seth gets a new home and a new job: He goes to live with the sun god in his new position as god of storms.

Religion in Egyptian Life

Religion was very important to the ancient Egyptians. Everyone from the kings to the lowest walks of life had to observe all the proper rituals, or the chaotic demons would wreak havoc over the land.

Pharaohs: Church and state



REMEMBER

In Egypt, religion was a state matter. Egyptian kings, called *pharaohs*, were believed to be descendants of the deities Isis and Osiris, which made them divine. The pharaoh was considered a manifestation of the sky god, Horus. We cover Isis, Osiris, and Horus earlier in the chapter.

Kings and their agents the priests served the deities in their temples. These temples were huge and grand to reflect the hugeness and grandeur of all of creation. The gods resided in these temples, and priests took care of them, bathing and dressing their statues and laying out feasts for them to eat. Temples weren't like modern churches — most people never set foot in them — but more like machines to keep the cycle of the world in motion.

Pyramids: Houses of eternity

Like all other Egyptians, pharaohs wanted to be reborn after their deaths. And like everyone else, they had to prepare for the trip to the land of the dead. But kings could spend huge amounts of community money and mobilize thousands of workers to help them out, and that's where pyramids come from.



REMEMBER

Pyramids were tombs for kings. People have suggested that they were used as astronomical observatories, sundials, or for talking to extraterrestrials, but the archaeological evidence says that pyramids were just tombs.

Egypt has over 90 pyramids, ranging from the delta to the first cataract of the Nile. (In this context, *cataracts* are similar to whitewater rapids.) Egyptians saw the pyramids as a symbolic representation of the mound of creation that appeared out of the primordial chaos at the beginning of the world. A king entombed in a pyramid went through the death-rebirth cycle and was reunited with the gods every day. Priests and other supporters performed rituals and made offerings to make sure the pharaoh had a good afterlife. The tombs themselves were full of treasure and offerings of (formerly) living creatures, such as wives, servants, and pets.

Death and the afterlife

The Egyptians took death seriously. They built elaborate tombs to protect their spirits after death, preserved their bodies so that they'd remain intact, and communicated with ancestors. They all hoped to be reborn after death to spend time with the gods Ra and Osiris.

The dead had direct access to the gods and could intervene on behalf of their relatives, so people would set up household shrines to their ancestors and make offerings to them. They'd write letters to their ancestors asking for help on all manner of problems — marital problems, legal difficulties, and requests for children. Sometimes they just wrote to say “hi.”

At times, people would become convinced their dead relatives were making trouble for them. For instance, a man in 1200 BCE was certain his bad luck was the doing of his dead wife. He wrote her a letter reminding her what a good husband he'd been and insisting that it wasn't his fault she'd died while he was away on business.

At night when people slept, they visited the world of the dead in their dreams. Of course, knowing what to make of dreams is hard, so some people established themselves as expert dream interpreters.



TIP

The interpretations were a lot like modern horoscopes — vague enough so that people could see whatever they wanted in them.

Mummies and rebirth

All Egyptians wanted to be reborn after they died, and mummification was an important part of this process. Without a physical body, a dead person's spirit would go hungry and be unable to find peace in the afterlife. Before a body was embalmed, people considered it an empty shell; after mummification and a funeral, the dead person would be “reanimated” and could partake of offerings from their family.

The Book of the Dead

The trip to Osiris, king of the dead, was perilous. Monsters and traps lurked all along the way. A famous Egyptian document, *The Book of the Dead*, told people what they had to do to run the gauntlet and reach Ra's sun-boat and the *Field of Reeds*, the Egyptian version of heaven.

The way to Osiris had several gates. The Egyptians imagined they'd encounter rivers, islands, deserts, and lakes of fire. Wealthy people had spells inscribed onto their coffins to help them through all this stuff.

MAKING MUMMIES

Some of the earliest mummies formed when bodies buried shallowly in the desert sand dried out before they rotted. But this method wasn't reliable, so the Egyptians worked out some more elaborate techniques. Mummification came in several forms, some more complicated and expensive than others. Basically, the embalmer would lay out the body, remove the brain through the nose with an iron hook, and pull the internal organs out through an incision in the body's side. The organs went into special containers that were protected by the gods. The embalmer packed the body with *natron* (a kind of salt) to dry it out. After 40 days or so, the embalmer removed the natron, washed the body, coated it with oils and resins, and wrapped it in several hundred yards of linen.

After a person got to Osiris, they had to declare themselves innocent or guilty of various crimes. Anubis led the person to a set of scales and weighed their heart on it. The counterweight was a feather from the goddess of truth. If the heart weighed more than the feather, the person was obviously guilty, and a female monster called the Devourer of the Dead would summarily eat them. Figure 18-4 shows this scene. Anyone who passed the test got to move among the gods or even ride in the sun-boat.



FIGURE 18-4:
Anubis weighing
a soul.

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