

ENCOUNTERS WITH ANCIENT EGYPT

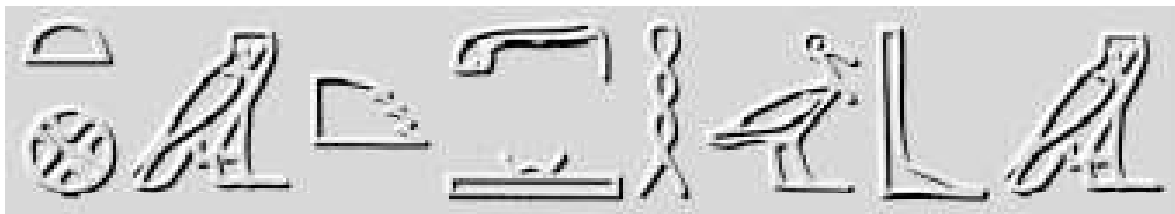
Mysterious Lands

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CHAPTER 2

THE EGYPTIAN CONCEPT OF THE WORLD

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For the ancient Egyptians, as for most ancient cultures, their own land was the centre of the universe, and their experience of this land coloured their perceptions of the universe as a whole.

The Egyptian perception of Egypt itself was defined by the Nile. The river's flow from south to north determined the orientation of those who lived along its banks. South, where the river originated, was Up: the Egyptian word for "south", *rsu*, is related to the word meaning "awaken", and the root *hnt* means both "upstream" and "forward". Northern Egypt, where the river divided into several branches, forming the marshland of the Delta, was called *mhw*, from the word meaning "immersed"; to go north was to go "downstream" (*hdi*). The Egyptians lived primarily in the arable land along both sides of the Nile and in the Delta, known as *kmt* "black (land)". The level nature of this primary zone of habitation is reflected in the Egyptian hieroglyph for "land" (*t*), which depicts a flat strip of earth. On either side of the "black land" lay the desert, which the Egyptians called "red (land)" (*dšrt*). Throughout the Nile Valley, the desert begins with a series of cliffs or hills, described by the Egyptian term *h3st*, written with a hieroglyph of three hills; the same word was regularly used to designate countries outside Egypt proper.

The Egyptian word for "land", *t*, also appears in texts with reference to the world as a whole, with the same duality as the English word "earth": for example, "the entire world (*t*), both sky and land (*t*)" (Coffin Texts Spell 335 (after de Buck 1951: 292)). The character of the hieroglyph with which this word is written suggests that the Egyptians thought of the earth as essentially a flat plate of land. The sky was visualized in similar fashion, as a flat surface with projections that touched the earth at its extremities; these projections were occasionally described and depicted in metaphorical terms as four sceptres or columns.

In Egyptian thought, the earth and sky were divinities, like all the forces and elements of nature. The earth was the god Geb and the sky his female consort, Nut; their sex reflects the grammatical gender of the two terms "earth" (masculine *t*) and "sky" (feminine *pt*). This worldview was occasionally depicted in the image of a recumbent god with a goddess arching over him, touching the surface on which he reclines with her feet and hands (metaphorical analogues of the four sceptres or columns of other depictions). The same images usually showed a second deity

standing between Geb and Nut, his hands raised to support the goddess above him. This was the god Shu, the Egyptian personification of the air, wind and atmosphere. In one text, Shu describes himself as follows: “the air of life is my clothing ... the pressure of the wind is my skin ... the storm-cloud of the sky is my emanation, the storm of a dark day is my sweat. The length of the sky is my reach, and the breadth of the earth is my base” (Coffin Texts Spell 80; Allen 1988: 22).

The sky itself was the subject of detailed speculation. With nothing but the naked eye to rely on, Egyptian observers saw it as the surface of a vast body of water – like the Nile or the sea, blue during the day and black at night. Early texts refer to both its waters and its shores; the sky itself was sometimes called *kbhw* “cool water” as well as a *bi* “basin”, and the name of its goddess, Nut, may mean ‘the watery one’. The apparent motion of the sun and stars across it was understood, described and depicted as a voyage by boat.

Speculation about the nature of this celestial expanse centred on the sky at night, probably because it exhibits more diverse features than the unbroken stretch of the usual day sky in Egypt. The stars, like the sun, apparently move across the sky both during the night and in the course of the year, and for that reason they were viewed as voyagers over its surface rather than as fixed elements of its topography. The Egyptians identified stars both individually (notably, Sirius) and as members of constellations, including Orion and Ursa Major. They also recognized as distinct entities the five planets visible to the naked eye (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn). The zodiac does not appear in Egyptian sources until the Roman Period (Neugebauer and Parker 1960: vii).

The major fixed feature of the night sky was known as the ‘Winding Waterway’, recently identified as the ecliptic (the 12 degree-wide arc that the sun, moon and visible planets follow in their course across the sky throughout the year). Running from east to west, the Winding Waterway divided the night sky in two, occasionally reflected in references to “the two skies”. These two regions were home to the “Field of Rest” (also translated as “Field of Offerings”), in the north, and the “Field of Reeds”, in the south. (The latter is the source of the Elysian Field of Classical myths, ‘Elysian’ deriving from the Greek pronunciation of the Egyptian word for reeds). Some stars were visible in these ‘fields’ for only part of the year, disappearing below the horizon for several months at a time. Others could be observed year round and were seen as permanent residents: the “Imperishables” in the north (the circumpolar stars) and the “Unwearying Ones” in the south.

Egyptian texts refer to the Field of Rest and Field of Reeds in terms indicating that both areas were understood as marshes, with regions of dry land as well as water. One early source describes the circumpolar stars as alighting on “the big island in the midst of the Field of Rest” (Pyramid Texts Spell 519; Faulkner 1969: 193). The extent to which the two fields were thought to occupy their respective halves of the sky is uncertain. They may have been seen as filling the entire sky north and south of the Winding Waterway to the horizon, or as narrower regions close to the horizon (the north celestial pole, “in the midst of the Field of Rest”, lies about 30 degrees above the horizon when viewed from northern Egypt). In either case, these ‘fields’ undoubtedly reflected the Egyptians’ experience of their own country, where the marshland of the Delta gives way to the open waters of the Mediterranean.

Whether open water or marshland, the sky was held above the earth only by the presence of the atmosphere, the god Shu. Together with the Duat, usually understood as a counterpart space below the earth, it formed the limit of what the Egyptians considered to be the entire world, often summarized as “sky, land, and Duat” (Allen 1988: 5–7). The world’s boundaries are also reflected in the epithet “Lord to the Limits”, given to the god Atum, source and sum of all matter in the world; as the atmosphere, the god Shu is called Atum’s “utmost extent” (Coffin Texts Spell 75; Allen 1988: 15–18). In contrast, a hymn to the transcendental god Amun, who was thought to exist apart from nature, describes him as “farther than the sky ... deeper than the Duat” (P. Leiden I 350; Allen 1988: 53).

What lay beyond the sky and Duat was also the subject of Egyptian speculation, even though, like the Duat, it could only be intuited indirectly. Since the sky was seen as a watery expanse, the universe beyond was understandably thought to be water. The world as described above was therefore a kind of bubble within this infinite ocean: the name of the god Shu, its air, means both “empty” and “dry”. The universal ocean itself was a god as well. In the earliest texts his name is Nu, the masculine counterpart of Nut, also meaning “the watery one” (Allen 1988: 4). Nu was seen not only as the ocean beyond the sky but also as the source of all the world’s water.

Since he could not be observed directly, Nu’s nature was defined by contrast with the known world. His essence as water contrasted with the world’s dryness (particularly salient in Egypt). Where the world is lit by the sun, Nu lay perpetually in “uninterrupted darkness”. The world is active; Nu was “inert” (this term was the source of his name in later texts, Nun). While the world is finite and defined, Nu was infinite and undefined (“lost”, in Egyptian terms). And finally, Nu was “hidden”, in contrast to the tangible world. Each of these qualities was recognized individually as a god: in early texts, Nu (water), Kuk (darkness), Huh (infinity), and Tenemu (“lostness”) (Allen 1988: 20); in sources from the Ptolemaic Period, Nun (inertness), Kuk, Huh, and Amun (“hiddenness”). These gods were thought to have participated in the creation of the world, as a kind of dynamic potentiality that resulted in the reality of creation. Since the Egyptians envisioned creation in biological terms, each member of the quartet was also thought to have a female counterpart. Together the eight gods were known as the Ogdoad. Their cosmology was centred in the city of Hermopolis, which for that reason was called “Eight-town” (Bickel 1994: 28 for the question of the earliest date of this association).

The Egyptian view of the universe is represented most fully in the ceiling decoration of the cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos (Figure 2:1; Frankfort 1933: pl. 81). Carved ca. 1280 BC, it was reproduced 130 years later in the tomb of Ramesses IV in the Valley of the Kings, and its texts were copied, with commentary, more than a thousand years later in two papyri from the second century AD (Allen 1988: 1).

The ceiling depicts the sky goddess, Nut, supported by the god Shu standing on the earth, shown in this case as a flat surface labelled “sand”. Nut’s hands and feet extend slightly below the level of the earth, indicating that the Egyptians were aware of the earth’s curvature beyond the visible horizon. Along her body are stars and a crescent moon, and a winged sundisk is represented at her mouth. These reflect one explanation of the daily solar cycle, in which Nut was thought to swallow the sun in the evening and give birth to it again at dawn. In this view, the interior of Nut’s body

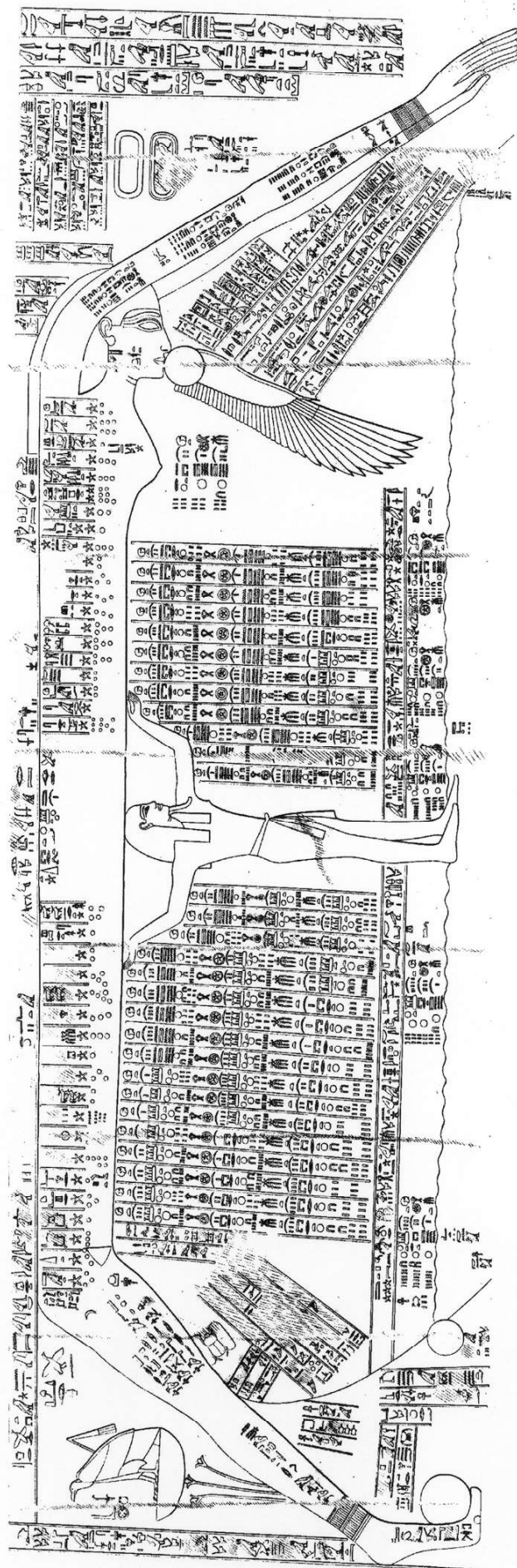


Figure 2:1 Depiction of the world on the ceiling of the cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos (Frankfort 1933: pl. 81).

was seen as the Duat, through which the sun was thought to travel during the night: text near the winged sundisk explains that “this god enters her mouth, inside the Duat” (for these and the other phrases inscribed around the image, see Allen 1988: 1–7). Though such a concept seems at odds with the alternative location of the Duat beneath the earth, Egyptian logic gave equal weight to both views.

Since the sun sets in the west, Nut faces this direction, as indicated by a label at her head: “Her head is the western Akhet, her mouth is the west”; in the same manner, her crotch is labelled “the eastern Akhet”. The Akhet, often loosely translated “horizon”, was a liminal zone between the Duat and the visible horizon. It represents the Egyptian explanation for the fact that light remains for some time after the sun has set and appears before the sun has risen.

A winged scarab at Nut’s knee, reflecting the Egyptian hieroglyph for “come into being”, represents the rising sun. The accompanying label reads: “This god comes forth at her rear; he is on course toward the world (*ḥ*), apparent and born; he produces himself afterwards; he parts the thighs of his mother, Nut; he distances himself toward the sky.” The cycle of the stars is explained in a similar manner: “When this god enters her mouth, inside the Duat, it stays open after he sails inside her, so that these sailing stars may enter after him. They come forth after him and where they row is to their harbors.”

The space above Nut represents the universal ocean. This is not depicted as such, but is described in several labels. The text above Nut’s body reads: “What is above this sky exists in uninterrupted darkness, and its southern, northern, western, and eastern limits are unknown, these having been fixed in Nu, in inertness. There is no light of the Ram [a form of the sun god] there, he does not appear there – a region whose south, north, west, and east land is unknown by the gods or the akhs [spirits of the deceased], there being no brightness there. And as for every place devoid of sky or land, that is the entire Duat.” This clearly identifies the outer space beyond the sky as a limitless expanse of water (Nu), inaccessible to the elements, forces and beings that inhabit the world. It also defines the Duat in negative terms as a place that is not sky or land. Since these last two elements are part of the world, the Duat was apparently also considered part of it as well. Its description as a place supports this interpretation, since the universal ocean itself was thought to contain no place as such (“lost”); in one text, the god Atum describes his existence before the creation of the world as “when I was alone with Nu, in inertness, and could not find a place in which to stand or sit” (Coffin Texts Spell 80; Allen 1988: 22).

The space above Nut’s head and arms contains depictions of birds and is labelled: “The uninterrupted darkness, the cool water of gods, the place from which birds come. This extends from her north-western side up to her north-eastern side and is open to the Duat that is in her northern side, her rear being in the east and her head in the west. These birds exist with human heads and bird natures, each one speaking to the other with human speech. After they come to eat plants and get nourished in the black land, they alight under the brightness of the sky and have to change into their bird natures.” As is still the case, Ancient Egypt saw the annual migration of flocks of birds from Europe into Egypt and the Sudan to its south. At the time this text was first carved, Europe was unknown to the ancient Egyptians: to them, the birds appeared to come from outer space. The birds’ access to the “uninterrupted darkness” and their

description as human is explained by the text's reference to a connection between the Duat and the universal ocean. Like the visible world, the Duat was thought to be inhabited by living beings; among these were the spirits of people who had drowned in the Nile, subsequently envisioned as floating in the waters of the Duat. The text apparently reflects the view that these spirits re-entered the world for a few months each year in the form of migratory birds.

Given the ancient Egyptians' view of the solar cycle as a circumnavigation of the world's limits, it was perhaps inevitable that they should also have come to see the world itself in circular terms. Indications of such a view can be found from as early as the Middle Kingdom, in characterizations of the world as "what the sundisk encircles", but unequivocal references to a circular world are not attested until late in ancient Egyptian history. The best illustration of this view exists on the lid of the sarcophagus of Wereshnefer, from Saqqarah, carved at the beginning of the Ptolemaic period and now displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 2:2; Ransom 1914).

Encircling the scene is the body of Nut; stars and sundisks on her torso are meant to depict the nightly journey of these celestial bodies through the Duat, as in the image from the ceiling of Seti I's cenotaph. Winged sundisks at her mouth and crotch

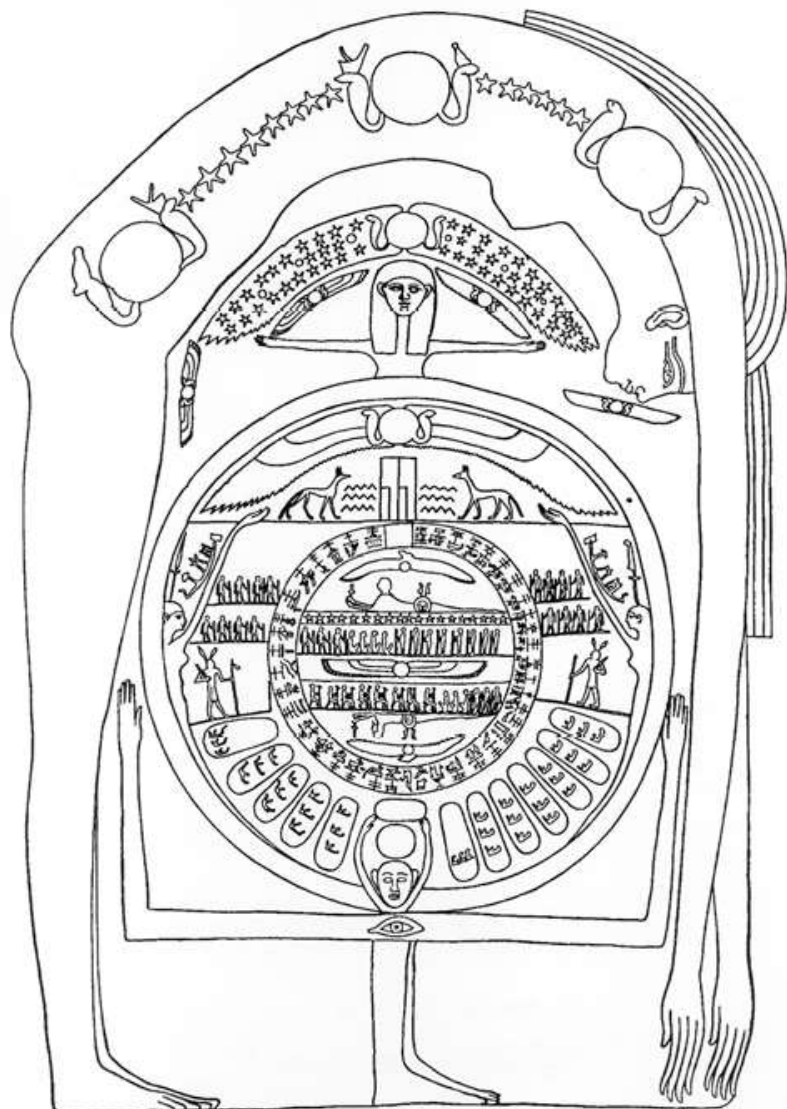


Figure 2:2 Depiction of the world on the lid of the sarcophagus of Wereshnefer (Metropolitan Museum of Art 14.7.1; Drawing MM 464 B).

represent the sun at sunset and sunrise. Below Nut's belly, the head and outstretched arms of the god Shu support both a large sundisk whose wings are sprinkled with stars and two smaller winged sundisks, together representing the night and day sky. Between Nut's hands and feet are a second pair of feet joined to two upraised arms. This image represents the earth god, Geb, and is meant to be understood both visually and as a hieroglyphic monogram of the god's name as it was pronounced in the Ptolemaic Period. Between Shu and Geb is a circle depicting the world, and Geb is shown standing in order to support it.

The circle itself is a complex amalgam of images. Though presented in two dimensions, it was intended to depict three – a true globe. The sundisk at the top of the outer circle and the images inside the inner ring belong in the same dimension as the depiction of Nut, Shu and Geb, while the rest of the circle is to be understood as rotated 90 degrees perpendicular to these. The winged sundisk represents the sun in the day sky. Despite their size, the images inside the inner ring should be seen as covering the full extent of the outer circle: they represent the visible world, at the top, and the Duat beneath it, at the bottom.

In line with the Egyptian perception of the world, Egypt itself lies at its centre. The images below the sundisk at the top of the larger circle represent the waters of the Nile (wavy lines) arising from caverns (the central rectangles) to Egypt's south. Stretched along the inside of the outer ring are the bodies of two goddesses, representing the west (right) and east (left). The boats at their arms are those of the sun god at sunset and sunrise, and the figures standing before them are the gods of the world's elements and forces. The ovals in the lower half of this circle are symbols of the lands surrounding Egypt. The inner ring is Egypt itself, represented by the standards of the 40 nomes (states) into which the country was divided at the time.

Conclusion

An eloquent summary of the ancient Egyptian view of the world, the scene on Wereshnefer's sarcophagus is also one of the earliest maps of the world as round. Though the Egyptians' perception of the world and the universe beyond did not correspond entirely to the reality we now know, it is nonetheless testimony to the persistence and ingenuity of their imagination.

Throughout ancient Egyptian history, that perception was remarkably uniform in its basic details. The extent to which it was shared in common by all Egyptians, however, is uncertain. The surviving texts and images that describe or reflect the Egyptian view of the world are almost exclusively limited to funerary literature and tombs, where they served as background to the mysteries of creation and daily rebirth. References are much less common in the more mundane writings of everyday life, such as the stories, instructions and autobiographies that constitute the bulk of ancient Egyptian literary texts, and they appear only rarely in hymns and prayers before the time of the New Kingdom.

In that respect we might be justified in concluding that the view of the world described above represented only the specialized knowledge of an educated few. Speculation, however, is a universal human trait. The farmers and artisans of Ancient

Egypt must surely have looked at the night sky with the same curiosity as their more learned contemporaries, and the limited evidence that does exist indicates that they saw it in the same way. Ordinary Egyptians may not have had the detailed understanding of the universe preserved in specialized religious texts and images, but even as early as the Old Kingdom some of them were named after gods such as Nu, the universal ocean (Ranke 1935: 206, no. 9), reflecting a fairly widespread knowledge of its basic elements. The fact that such knowledge appears never to have been codified in a specific myth also suggests that it reflects a common worldview rather than religious dogma promulgated by an educated elite.

As far as we can tell, the picture of the universe preserved in ancient Egyptian sources was one that was shared by all the inhabitants of Ancient Egypt and, at least in its major elements, remained essentially unchanged throughout Egyptian history.