

# Ra

**Ra** (/rɑː/<sup>[1]</sup> Ancient Egyptian: *𓇺* or *𓇺*; also transliterated *rʿw*; cuneiform: 𓇺𓏏 *ri-a* or 𓇺𓏏𓏏𓏏 *ri-ia*)<sup>[2]</sup> or **Re** (/reɪ/; Coptic: ⲣⲏ, Ⲣⲉ) is the ancient Egyptian deity of the sun. By the Fifth Dynasty in the 25th and 24th centuries BC, he had become one of the most important gods in ancient Egyptian religion, identified primarily with the noon sun. Ra was believed to rule in all parts of the created world: the sky, the Earth, and the underworld.<sup>[3]</sup> He was the god of the sun, order, kings, and the sky.

Ra was portrayed as a falcon and shared characteristics with the sky god Horus. At times the two deities were merged as Ra-Horakhty, "Ra, who is Horus of the Two Horizons". In the New Kingdom, when the god Amun rose to prominence he was fused with Ra into Amun-Ra.

The cult of the Mnevis bull, an embodiment of Ra, had its center in Heliopolis and there was a formal burial ground for the sacrificed bulls north of the city.

All forms of life were believed to have been created by Ra. In some accounts humans were created from Ra's tears and sweat, hence the Egyptians call themselves the "Cattle of Ra". In the myth of the Celestial Cow it is recounted how mankind plotted against Ra and how he sent his eye as the goddess Sekhmet to punish them.

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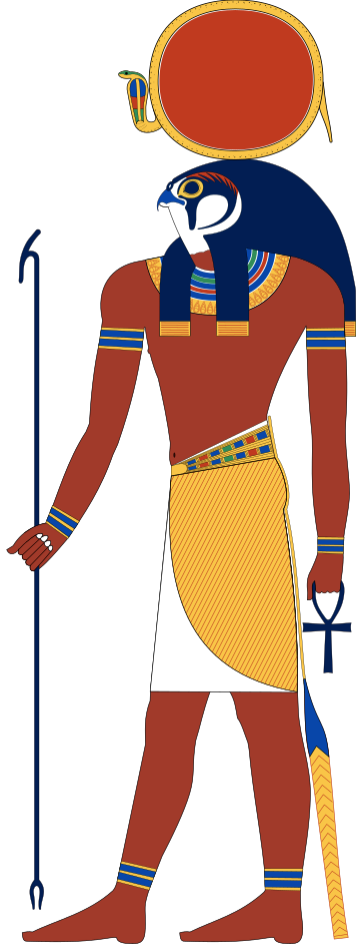
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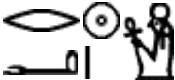
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Ra




In one of his many forms, Ra, god of the sun, has the head of a falcon and the sun-disk inside a cobra resting on his head.

Name in hieroglyphs



or




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## Religious roles

### The sun as a creator

The sun is the giver of life, controlling the ripening of crops which were worked by man. Because of the life giving qualities of the sun the Egyptians worshiped the sun as a god. The creator of the universe and the giver of life, the sun or Ra represented life, warmth and growth. Since the people regarded Ra as a principal god, creator of the universe and the source of life, he had a strong influence on them, which led to him being one of the most worshiped of all the Egyptian gods and even considered King of the Gods. At an early period in Egyptian history his influence spread throughout the whole country, bringing multiple representations in form and in name. The most common form combinations are with Atum (his human form), Khepra (the scarab beetle) and Horus (the falcon). The form in which he usually appears is that of a man with a falcon head, which is due to his combination with Horus, another sky god. On top of his head sits a solar disc with a cobra, which in many myths represents the eye of Ra. At the beginning of time, when there was nothing but chaos, the sun god existed alone in the watery mass of Nun which filled the universe.<sup>[4]</sup> "I am Atum when he was alone in Nun, I am Ra when he dawned, when he began to rule that which he had made."<sup>[4]</sup> This passage talks about how Atum created everything in human form out of the chaos and how Ra then began to rule over the earth where humans and divine beings coexisted. By having sexual intercourse with himself he spat out of his mouth the god Shu, god of air, and the goddess of moisture, Tefnut.<sup>[5]</sup> The siblings symbolized two universal principles of humans: life and right (justice). Ra was believed to have created all forms of life by calling them into existence by uttering their secret names. In some accounts humans were created from Ra's tears and sweat.<sup>[4]</sup> According to one myth the first portion of Earth came into being when the sun god summoned it out of the watery mass of Nun. In the myth of the Celestial Cow (the sky was thought of as a huge cow, the goddess Meht-urt) it is recounted how mankind plotted against<sup>[6]</sup> Ra and how he sent his eye as the goddess Sekhmet to punish them. Extensions of Ra's power were often shown as the eye of Ra, which were the female versions of the sun god. Ra had three daughters Bastet, Sekhmet, and Hathor who were all considered the eye of Ra who would seek out his vengeance. Sekhmet was the Eye of Ra and was created by the fire in Ra's eye. She was violent and sent to slaughter the people who betrayed Ra, but when calm she became the more kind and forgiving goddess Hathor. Sekhmet was the powerful warrior and protector while Bastet, who was depicted as a cat, was shown

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
|                      | or <div></div> |
| Major cult center    | Heliopolis  |
| Symbol               | Sun disk  |
| Personal information |   |
| Consort              | Hathor, Sekhmet, Bastet and sometimes Satet   |
| Offspring            | Shu, Tefnut, Hathor, Sekhmet, Bastet, Satet, Ma'at and sometimes Serket                           |
| Parents              | None (self-created), alternatively Neith (in some accounts) or Ptah (in others)                   |
| Siblings             | Apep, Sobek and sometimes Serket  |

as gentle and nurturing.

## In the underworld

Ra was thought to travel on the *Atet*, two solar barques called the *Mandjet* (the Boat of Millions of Years) or morning boat and the *Mesektet* or evening boat.<sup>[7]</sup> These boats took him on his journey through the sky and the *Duat*, the literal underworld of Egypt. While Ra was on the *Mesektet*, he was in his ram-headed form.<sup>[7]</sup> When Ra traveled in his sun boat, he was accompanied by various other deities including *Sia* (perception) and *Hu* (command), as well as *Heka* (magic power). Sometimes, members of the *Ennead* helped him on his journey, including *Set*, who overcame the serpent *Apophis*, and *Mehen*, who defended against the *monsters* of the underworld. When Ra was in the underworld, he would visit all of his various forms.<sup>[7]</sup>

*Apophis*, the god of chaos, was an enormous *serpent* who attempted to stop the sun boat's journey every night by consuming it or by stopping it in its tracks with a hypnotic stare. During the evening, the Egyptians believed that Ra set as *Atum* or in the form of a ram. The night boat would carry him through the underworld and back towards the east in preparation for his rebirth. These myths of Ra represented the sun rising as the rebirth of the sun by the sky goddess *Nut*; thus attributing the concept of rebirth and renewal to Ra and strengthening his role as a creator god as well.<sup>[8]</sup>

When Ra was in the underworld, he merged with *Osiris*, the god of the dead.<sup>[7]</sup>

## Iconography



Ra-Khepri  
(solar disc and  
scarab beetle).

Ra was represented in a variety of forms. The most usual form was a man with the head of a falcon and a solar disk on top and a coiled serpent around the disk.<sup>[7]</sup> Other common forms are a man with the head of a beetle (in his form as *Khepri*), or a man with the head of a ram. Ra was also pictured as a full-bodied ram, beetle, phoenix, heron, serpent, bull, cat, or lion, among others.<sup>[9]</sup>

He was most commonly featured with a ram's head in the Underworld.<sup>[7]</sup> In this form, Ra is described as being the "ram of the west" or "ram in charge of his harem."<sup>[7]</sup>

In some literature, Ra is described as an aging king with golden flesh, silver bones, and hair of *lapis lazuli*.<sup>[7]</sup>



Figure of Ra-  
Horakhty,  
3rd century BC

## Worship

The chief cultic center of Ra was *Iunu* "the Place of Pillars", later known to the *Ptolemaic Kingdom* as *Heliopolis* (*Koinē* Greek: *Ἡλιούπολις*, *lit.* "Sun City")<sup>[3]</sup> and today located in the *suburbs* of *Cairo*. He was identified with the local sun god *Atum*. As Atum or Atum-Ra, he was reckoned the first being and the

originator of the Ennead ("The Nine"), consisting of Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Osiris, Set, Isis and Nephthys. The holiday of "The Receiving of Ra" was celebrated on May 26 in the Gregorian calendar.<sup>[10]</sup>

Ra's local cult began to grow from roughly the Second Dynasty, establishing him as a sun deity. By the Fourth Dynasty, pharaohs were seen as Ra's manifestations on earth, referred to as "Sons of Ra". His worship increased massively in the Fifth Dynasty, when Ra became a state deity and pharaohs had specially aligned pyramids, obelisks, and sun temples built in his honor. The rulers of the Fifth Dynasty told their followers that they were sons of Ra himself and the wife of the high priest of Heliopolis.<sup>[7]</sup> These pharaohs spent much of Egypt's money on sun temples.<sup>[7]</sup> The first Pyramid Texts began to arise, giving Ra more and more significance in the journey of the pharaoh through the Duat (underworld).<sup>[7]</sup>

During the Middle Kingdom, Ra was increasingly affiliated and combined with other chief deities, especially Amun and Osiris.

At the time of the New Kingdom of Egypt, the worship of Ra had become more complicated and grander. The walls of tombs were dedicated to extremely detailed texts that depicted Ra's journey through the underworld. Ra was said to carry the prayers and blessings of the living with the souls of the dead on the sun boat. The idea that Ra aged with the sun became more popular during the rise of the New Kingdom.



Ra on the solar barque.

Many acts of worship included hymns, prayers, and spells to help Ra and the sun boat overcome Apep.

The rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire put an end to the worship of Ra.<sup>[11]</sup>

## Relationship to other gods

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### Gods merged with Ra

As with most widely worshiped Egyptian deities, Ra's identity was often combined with other gods, forming an interconnection between deities.

#### Amun and Amun-Ra

Amun was a member of the Ogdoad, representing creation energies with Amaunet, a very early patron of Thebes. He was believed to create via breath and thus was identified with the wind rather than the sun. As the cults of Amun and Ra became increasingly popular in Upper and Lower Egypt respectively they were combined to create Amun-Ra, a solar creator god. It is hard to distinguish exactly when this combination happened, but references to Amun-Ra appeared in pyramid texts as early as the Fifth Dynasty. The most common belief is that Amun-Ra was invented as a new state deity by the Theban rulers of the New Kingdom to unite worshippers of

Amun with the older cult of Ra around the 18th Dynasty.<sup>[12]</sup> Amun-Ra was given the official title "King of the God's" by worshippers, and images show the combined deity as a red-eyed man with a lion's head that had a surrounding solar disk.<sup>[12]</sup>

### Atum and Atum-Ra

Atum-Ra (or Ra-Atum) was another composite deity formed from two completely separate deities, however Ra shared more similarities with Atum than with Amun. Atum was more closely linked with the sun, and was also a creator god of the Ennead. Both Ra and Atum were regarded as the father of the deities and pharaohs and were widely worshiped. In older myths, Atum was the creator of Tefnut and Shu, and he was born from ocean Nun.



Fragment of a limestone stela of Djeho (Djedher), the God's Father of Min. Ptolemaic, 27th Dynasty. From

Egypt. The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, London

### Ra-Horakhty

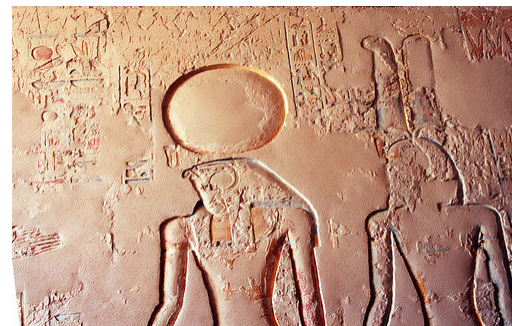
In later Egyptian mythology, Ra-Horakhty was more of a title or manifestation than a composite deity. It translates as "Ra (who is) Horus of the Horizons". It was intended to link Horakhty (as a sunrise-oriented aspect of Horus) to Ra. It has been suggested that Ra-Horakhty simply refers to the sun's journey from horizon to horizon as Ra, or that it means to show Ra as a symbolic deity of hope and rebirth. (See earlier section [#The sun](#)).

### Khepri and Khnum

Khepri was a scarab beetle who rolled up the sun in the mornings and was sometimes seen as the morning manifestation of Ra. Similarly, the ram-headed god Khnum was also seen as the evening manifestation of Ra. The idea of different deities (or different aspects of Ra) ruling over different times of the day was fairly common but variable. With Khepri and Khnum taking precedence over sunrise and sunset, Ra often was the representation of midday when the sun reached its peak at noon. Sometimes different aspects of Horus were used instead of Ra's aspects.

### Raet-Tawy

Raet or Raet-Tawy was a female aspect of Ra; she did not have much importance independent of him. In some myths she was considered to be either Ra's wife or his daughter.<sup>[13]</sup>



Ra and Amun, from the tomb of Ramses IV.

## Gods created by Ra

### Bastet

Bastet (also called Bast) is sometimes known as the "cat of Ra".<sup>[14]</sup> She is also his



daughter by Isis and is associated with Ra's instrument of vengeance, the sun-god's eye.<sup>[14]</sup> Bastet is known for decapitating the serpent Apophis (Ra's sworn enemy and the "God" of Chaos) to protect Ra.<sup>[14]</sup> In one myth, Ra sent Bastet as a lioness to Nubia.<sup>[14]</sup>

### **Sekhmet**

Sekhmet is another daughter of Ra.<sup>[15]</sup> Sekhmet was depicted as a lioness or large cat, and was an "eye of Ra", or an instrument of the sun god's vengeance.<sup>[15]</sup> In one myth, Sekhmet was so filled with rage that Ra was forced to turn her into a cow so that she would not cause unnecessary harm.<sup>[15]</sup> In another myth, Ra fears that mankind is plotting against him and sends Hathor (another daughter of Ra) to punish humanity. While slaughtering humans she takes the form of Sekhmet. To prevent her from killing all humanity, Ra orders that beer be dyed red and poured out on the land. Mistaking the beer for blood, Sekhmet drinks it, and upon becoming intoxicated, she reverts to her pacified form, Hathor.<sup>[16]</sup>

### **Hathor**

Hathor is another daughter of Ra.<sup>[17]</sup> When Ra feared that mankind was plotting against him, he sent Hathor as an "eye of Ra".<sup>[15]</sup> In one myth, Hathor danced naked in front of Ra until he laughed to cure him of a fit of sulking.<sup>[17]</sup> When Ra was without Hathor, he fell into a state of deep depression.<sup>[18]</sup>

## **Other gods**

### **Ptah**

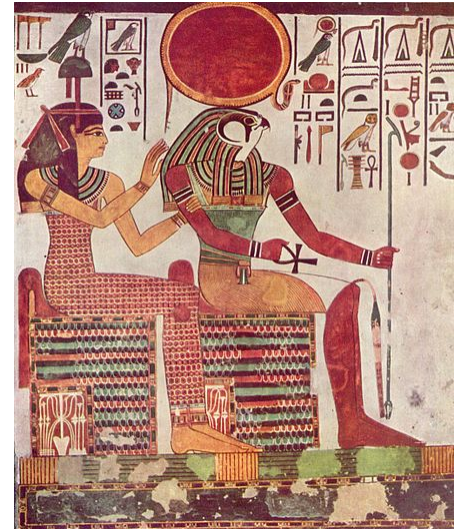
Ptah is rarely mentioned in the literature of Old Kingdom pyramids.<sup>[19]</sup> This is believed by some to be a result of the Ra-worshipping people of Heliopolis being the main writers of these inscriptions.<sup>[19]</sup> While some believed that Ra is self-created, others believed that Ptah created him.<sup>[20]</sup>

### **Isis**

In one myth, Isis created a serpent to poison Ra and only gave him the antidote when he revealed his true name to her. Isis passed this name on to Horus, bolstering his royal authority.<sup>[21]</sup>

### **Apep**

Apep, also called Apophis, was the god of chaos and Ra's arch-enemy. He was said to lie just below the horizon line, trying to devour Ra as Ra traveled through the underworld.



Imentet and Ra from the tomb of Nefertari, 13th century BC



Pyramidion of Khonsu, with the image of Ra-Horakhty in the middle.

## In popular culture

## See also

- Raet-Tawy

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