



The 42 Laws of Maat: The Moral Principles of the Ancient Egyptians

October 10, 2024 by [Claudine Cassar](#)

The Ancient Egyptians had a cultural ethos that was deeply rooted in the concept of Maat or Ma'at. Maat was not just a goddess in the Egyptian pantheon but represented a complex framework of order, truth, and justice. Central to these principles were the 42 Laws of Maat, which provided a moral and spiritual code that guided the Egyptians in



Kirkus - "A gripping narrative of the roots, rise, and fall of a notorious criminal organization."

Top Posts

[The Pantheon of Ancient Egyptian Gods – A Comprehensive Guide](#)

[Claude Lévi-Strauss's Structuralism](#)

[The Yakuza – Japan's](#)

their daily lives and their understanding of cosmic harmony.

Table of Contents



In post, we'll delve into these ancient principles of Maat and see how they reflect the perennial quest of the ancient Egyptians for balance and righteousness.



Goddess Ma'at (or Maat) of Ancient Egypt – partly restored and partly re-constructed image of a wall-painting. TYalaA, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

[Notorious
Organized
Crime
Syndicate](#)

[The Life and
Legacy of John
Locke – The
Father of
Liberalism](#)

[What is the
Sociological
Perspective –
Understanding
Sociology.](#)

[Émile
Durkheim: The
Father of
Sociology and
His
Contributions
to
Anthropology.](#)



Subscribe to Anthropology Review!

Get updates on the latest posts and more from Anthropology Review straight to your inbox.

Recent Posts

Your Email.

SUBSCRIBE

We use your personal data for interest-based advertising, as outlined in our [Privacy Notice](#).

Understanding the Cosmos Maat: The Foundation of Ancient Egyptian Cosmology

To fully grasp the profound impact of the 42 Laws of Maat on ancient Egyptian civilization, we must first delve into the essence of Maat herself.

Maat, or Ma'at, was not merely a goddess in the traditional sense. She was the embodiment of an all-encompassing truth that governed both the cosmos and the societal order of the Nile valley's inhabitants.

Maat represented the intrinsic force that maintained the universe's balance. She was integral to the very fabric of existence, from the predictable flooding of the Nile, which ensured fertile soil, to the overarching moral codes that dictated human conduct.

In essence, Maat was the harmonizing element between the physical and the metaphysical, between earthly living and the divine.

[The Relationship between Human Rights, Culture and Empire](#)

[Consumer Anthropology in Action: How Brands Tap into Cultural Trends](#)

[Consumer Anthropology: Understanding How Culture Drives](#)

[Consumer Choices](#)

[The Main Subfields of Business Anthropology](#)

[Fortifying 'Fortress Europe': The EU's new Pact](#)



Maat wearing the feather of truth

Her iconography is rich with symbolism. Maat is most commonly depicted as a woman with wings or, more famously, with an ostrich feather adorning her head.

This feather, known as the “Feather of Truth,” served as a potent emblem of her authority and the ideal of balance. It was against this feather that the hearts of the deceased were weighed in the afterlife, according to the ‘Book of the Dead,’ a fundamental mortuary text of ancient Egypt.

For the pharaohs, who were charged with the maintenance of Maat throughout the land, their connection to her was paramount.

They were considered the “Chosen of Maat” and were believed to have a divine mandate to uphold her principles.

The representation of pharaohs making offerings to Maat was not merely symbolic but also a public declaration of their commitment to justice and societal order.

Without Maat, chaos, known as *isfet*, would reign, a state that was antithetical to the continuation of life and the order of the cosmos.



Ma'at. Léon-Jean-Joseph Dubois, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

The 42 Laws of Maat

The 42 Laws of Maat, also referred to as the negative confessions or declarations of innocence, were the spiritual statutes by which every Egyptian aspired to live. These confessions covered a broad spectrum of ethical conduct, from the most fundamental human interactions to the profound responsibilities towards the gods and the natural world.

The laws outlined a standard for ethical and moral conduct.

Here is a list of all 42 declarations:

1. I have not committed sin.
2. I have not committed robbery with violence.
3. I have not stolen.
4. I have not slain men and women.
5. I have not stolen food.
6. I have not swindled offerings.
7. I have not stolen from God/Goddess.
8. I have not told lies.
9. I have not carried away food.
10. I have not cursed.
11. I have not closed my ears to truth.
12. I have not committed adultery.
13. I have not made anyone cry.
14. I have not felt sorrow without reason.
15. I have not assaulted anyone.
16. I am not deceitful.
17. I have not stolen anyone's land.
18. I have not been an eavesdropper.
19. I have not falsely accused anyone.
20. I have not been angry without reason.
21. I have not seduced anyone's wife.
22. I have not polluted myself.
23. I have not terrorized anyone.
24. I have not disobeyed the law.
25. I have not been exclusively angry.
26. I have not cursed God/Goddess.
27. I have not behaved with violence.
28. I have not caused disruption of peace.
29. I have not acted hastily or without thought.

30. I have not overstepped my boundaries of concern.
31. I have not exaggerated my words when speaking.
32. I have not worked evil.
33. I have not used evil thoughts, words or deeds.
34. I have not polluted the water.
35. I have not spoken angrily or arrogantly.
36. I have not cursed anyone in thought, word or deeds.
37. I have not placed myself on a pedestal.
38. I have not stolen what belongs to God/Goddess.
39. I have not stolen from or disrespected the deceased.
40. I have not taken food from a child.
41. I have not acted with insolence.
42. I have not destroyed property belonging to God/Goddess.

These declarations covered a wide array of transgressions, addressing not only physical acts but also moral and spiritual ones. They were designed not just as a legalistic framework but as a holistic approach to living a life that was in alignment with the order of the universe.



Male Mummy of 50-year-old Djed-Hapi Ptolemaic Period Egypt 305-30 BCE Penn Museum. Mary Harrsch, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The Journey to *Duat*

During the journey that the soul takes in the Egyptian underworld, known as *Duat*, it encounters a formidable tribunal comprising 42 divine judges, each representing one of the unified provinces, or nomes, of Egypt at the time.

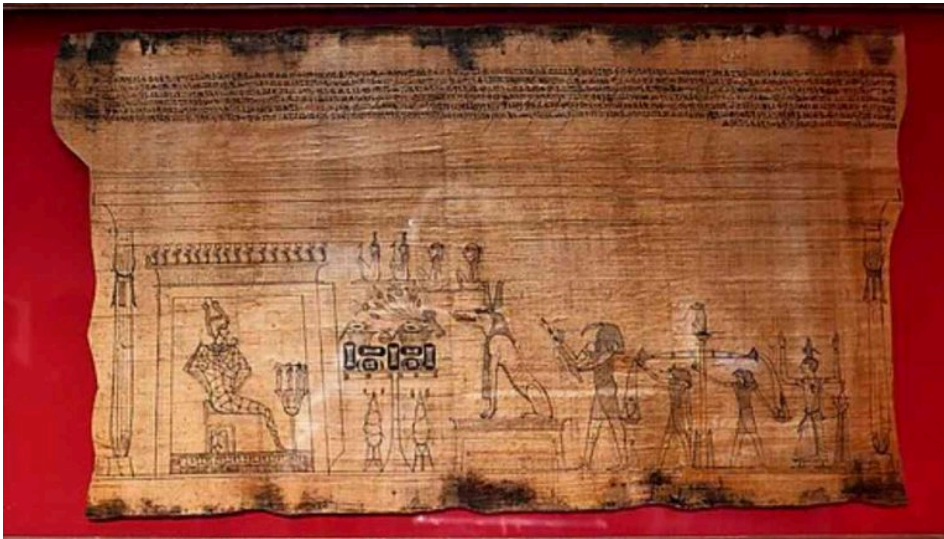
The ancient Egyptians believed that these 42 deities embodied the laws of Maat and served as guardians of the cosmic order, overseeing the moral and ethical fabric of society.

In the presence of these divine adjudicators, the deceased would assert their adherence to each law, effectively proclaiming a life lived in harmony with Maat's precepts.

Each invocation before the divine judges was a testament to the deceased's character, a declaration that they had not committed sins

ranging from theft and falsehood to environmental harm and sacrilege.

The culmination of this ritual was the symbolic weighing of the heart against the feather of Maat. Should the heart be found lighter or equal in weight to the feather, the soul was judged worthy of progressing to *Aaru*, the field of reeds, an idyllic representation of paradise where the soul would exist in eternal contentment.



Tribunal of Osiris. JI FilpoC, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

The Worship of the Ancient Egyptian Goddess Maat

In temples across Egypt, statues and inscriptions of Maat served as constant reminders to the people and the priesthood of the importance of maintaining cosmic equilibrium.

The 42 principles of Maat permeated every aspect of Egyptian life, from the judicial system to agricultural practices, from architectural designs to

the religious ceremonies that sought the favor of the gods.

Maat's principles also extended to personal virtue and integrity, laying the groundwork for a society where mutual respect and moral rectitude were held in the highest regard.

The concept of living in truth, or "*maa kheru*," was not only desired but required for one's soul to successfully achieve the afterlife.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 42 Laws of Maat consisted of principles that provided both a guide for living an upstanding life and a framework for the judgment of souls in the afterlife.

These laws were recited as declarations of innocence in front of 42 divine judges, encapsulating a range of ethical norms from honesty and justice to respect for property and the sanctity of family. Adherence to these laws ensured that the deceased could claim a place in [*Aaru*](#), the idyllic paradise of eternal contentment.

Claudine Cassar

Claudine Cassar began her professional journey in business, earning a BSc in Business and Computing from the University of Malta, followed by an MSc in International Marketing from the University of Strathclyde



and an MPhil in Innovation from Maastricht Business School. At the age of 23, she founded her first company, which she successfully sold to Deloitte 17 years later.

At 45, Claudine made a bold career shift, returning to university to pursue a degree in Anthropology. Three years later, she graduated with a BA (Hons) in Anthropological Sciences. In 2022, she published her debut book, "[The Battle for Sicily's Soul](#)."



📁 [Ancient Egypt](#)

- < [Shu – The Egyptian God of Air, Wind, Peace and Lions](#)
- > [Meidum Pyramid: A unique blend of Early Dynastic and Old Kingdom Architectural Traditions](#)

