

3-4a Philosophy, Religion, and Eternal Life

Egypt's religion was almost infinitely polytheistic. At least 3000 separate names of gods have been identified in Egyptian writings, many of them the same deities but with different names over the centuries. Each of them controlled a different aspect of life in the Nile Valley. Chief among them were the gods of the sun, *Amun* (AH-mun) and *Ra* (Rah), who were originally separate but later combined into one being, [Amun-Ra \(\(AH-mun-RAH\) Originally the Egyptian god of air and life; later he came to represent the sun and creation.\)](#), and came to represent the embodiment of all the gods. Other important deities included *Isis*, goddess of mothers and wives; [Hathor \(An ancient Egyptian fertility goddess who protected women during pregnancy and childbirth.\)](#), protector of women in pregnancy and childbirth; *Anuket* (Ah-NEW-keht), goddess of the Nile and of fertility; *Osiris* (Oh-SIGH-ris), ruler of plants and the afterlife; Anubis (Ah-NEW-bihs), jackal god of the underworld, who weighed the souls (*ka*) of the dead; *Horus*, the god of order, made visible as the ruling pharaoh; and *Ptah* (similar to thah), who came from the primordial mound under the earth from which all living things emerged. As time passed, Ptah came to represent the rebirth and renewal of all life.

Shrines and temples to spirits and divine beings were found everywhere, in Egyptian homes and public places. As in all agrarian civilizations (see [Chapter 1](#)), periodic offerings had to be made to the dead, to family spirits, and to the greater gods to insure regular renewal of everything on which Egyptians depended. Household and family spirits regulated individuals' identities and lives (see [Framing History: Patterns of Belief](#)).

Framing History

Patterns of Belief: Body and Soul: Personhood, Sexuality, and Spirituality in New Kingdom Egypt

To a person of the twenty-first century, some aspects of ancient civilizations like ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt were peculiar, even eccentric. One of these was the close association between sexuality and spirituality. In a world where the survival of all living things depended on regular cycles of production and reproduction, people comprehended all creative acts as being biological in character. Egyptians believed the god Ra-Atum created the earth and the sky from an act of autoeroticism. To sustain the world, and to ensure its renewal, they thought that the gods demanded that they perform annual rites that were replete with sexual acts that were symbolic of the primordial creative deed. Not just any individual could successfully perform these rites, only the pharaohs and the temple priests of Ra and the other principal deities. Failure to execute them exactly right could result in

disastrous floods, droughts, famines, or plagues. (In a departure from most early civilizations, however, Egyptians associated the earth with a god, rather than a goddess.)

On the level of the individual, Egyptians did not differentiate between their internal spiritual and intellectual lives and their external physical selves. The boundaries between the inner, private lives of individuals and their external public and social lives were blurred to the point of making the two aspects of their identities indistinguishable. This meant that, unlike modern people, they did not separate body from “soul”; each was an integral part of a person’s identity. Egyptians’ bodies bore as great a significance to their notions of personhood as did their thoughts, feelings, and “souls.” Parents had to exercise great care in choosing a newborn’s name, since the act of saying it carried a great weight that extended beyond life. Merely uttering someone’s name had spiritual power.

Paintings from tombs, dwellings, and even pottery sherds suggest that Egyptians enjoyed warm family lives in which both parents played important roles. At least until puberty, children went unclothed. (See the Egyptian Family wall mural.) In ways that are typical of early agrarian societies, Egyptian males and females occupied different places in the family because they were expected to fulfill different roles. Given their important reproductive powers, females were portrayed as sexual beings from childhood onward. Murals and paintings invariably pictured them as surrounded by symbols of their sexuality. Archaeologists who excavated Egyptian workers’ dwellings found rooms allocated specifically for the uses of women and female adolescents, including childbirth and votive offerings to Isis and Hathor, the most important goddesses of fertility and childbirth.

It was the duty of the males of the family to perform the outdoor work on the family farm and to bring in the crops needed to pay their taxes and feed their families. Since Egypt was a patrilineal society, the gods to whom they sacrificed were the spirits of the lands they tilled and the ancestors. As if to underscore the parallel roles of men and women, homes also contained a room reserved for male use, where the senior male performed the prayers, chants, and small votive offerings to the ancestors to ensure the prosperity of the clan and the family.

Egyptian Family.

Details from the tomb of Inherkha show the loving relationships that existed between Egyptian parents and their children during the New Kingdom period.



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Analyze and Interpret

How do you suppose Egyptian notions of the body influenced their funerary practices? How did they associate sexuality with their religious beliefs? Given the attention in Egyptian paintings and wall murals to ancient women's and girls' sexuality, would it be accurate to conclude that Egyptians considered them to be merely "sex objects"?

Egyptians firmly believed in the afterlife. Originally, it seems to have been viewed as a possibility only for the upper class, but gradually the afterlife was democratized. By about 1000 B.C.E., most Egyptians apparently believed in a scheme of eternal reward or punishment for their ka, which had to submit to the moral Last Judgment by Osiris. [Ka \(\(kah\) The immortal soul in the religion of ancient Egypt.\)](#) (kah) referred to the life essence that could return to life, given the correct preparation, even after the death of the original physical body.

Once again, it was nature that weighed most heavily not only on how ancient peoples understood earthly phenomena but also on what they imagined the structure of the cosmos to be and the kinds of gods that governed it. For this reason, the gods of the Mesopotamians were capricious and angry ([Chapter 2](#)). But in the land that was “the gift of the Nile”—where Ra, the sun god, shined year in and year out, and where Satis, the goddess of the flood, was represented by the *ankh*, the symbol of fertility and life—Egyptians believed order and stability to be fundamental governing attributes of the cosmos. They incarnated these features in the goddess Maat.

The impact of natural time, with its circularity, implied that no event, no life, was unique and that all were consigned to endless repetition in a cosmic order that had no beginning or end. While Egyptians did not believe in reincarnation as Hindus do ([Chapter 4](#)), they did believe in an afterlife where mortals went to dwell forever after leaving their earthly existence. There, judgment was passed on each soul when it was weighed against the feather of Maat. This was not a judgment that included any notion of morality, as modern people would understand it (particularly those who believe in a monotheistic God), but rather how it weighed against universal order and “rightness.”

Mostly, it seems, Egyptians expected reward. They thought of eternity as a sort of endless procession by the deceased’s ka through the heavens and the gods’ abodes there. In the company of friends and family, watched over by the protective and benevolent gods, the individual would proceed in a stately circle around the sun forever. There was no need to work and no suffering. Such was heaven. The notion of hell as a place where the evil paid for their sins came along in Egypt only during the New Kingdom, when Egyptian civilization began to decline.

In the reign of the young and inexperienced Akhnaton (1367–1350 B.C.E.), the priests vehemently opposed a unique experiment: the pharaoh’s attempt to change the basic polytheistic nature of Egyptian religion. Why Akhnaton (aided by his beautiful wife Nefertiti) attempted to introduce a monotheistic (one-god) cult of the sun god—newly renamed Aton—we can only guess. This attempt at [monotheism \(A religion having only one god.\)](#) was a great novelty in ancient civilization, and it was not heard of again until the emergence of Judaism five or six centuries later. The pharaoh announced that Aton was his heavenly father and that Aton alone was to be worshiped as the single and universal god of all creation. The priests naturally opposed this revolutionary change, and as soon as Akhnaton was dead (possibly by poison), they denounced his ideas and went back to the old ways under the boy-pharaoh Tutankhamen.

The Feather of Maat.

Maat was the embodiment of many things, among them, truth and justice. She was represented by a feather, and when artists painted her, she always had a feather in her hair. Egyptians believed that when a person died, their soul passed into the underworld, where Anubis weighed it against truth, Maat, to determine its fate. In

this painting, the ka, shown as a heart, is being weighed in the scales against the feather of Maat.



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