

A SHORT BUT INTENSE HISTORY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

AND SOME LATER INTERPRETATIONS

IN FOUR 90-MINUTE MEETINGS

(+ maybe a visit to the Peabody)

October 17, 2013

Carryover from last time

DID HIEROGLYPHS EVOLVE?

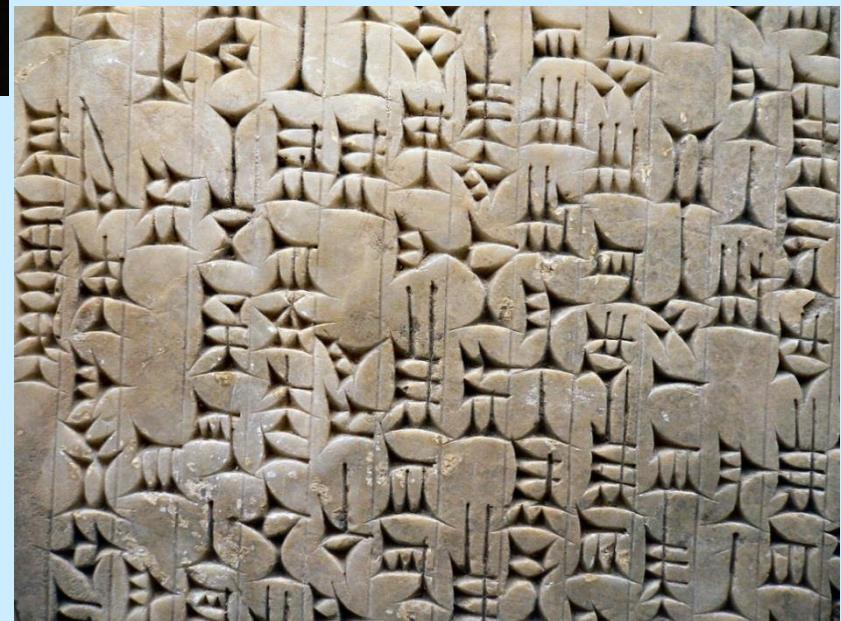
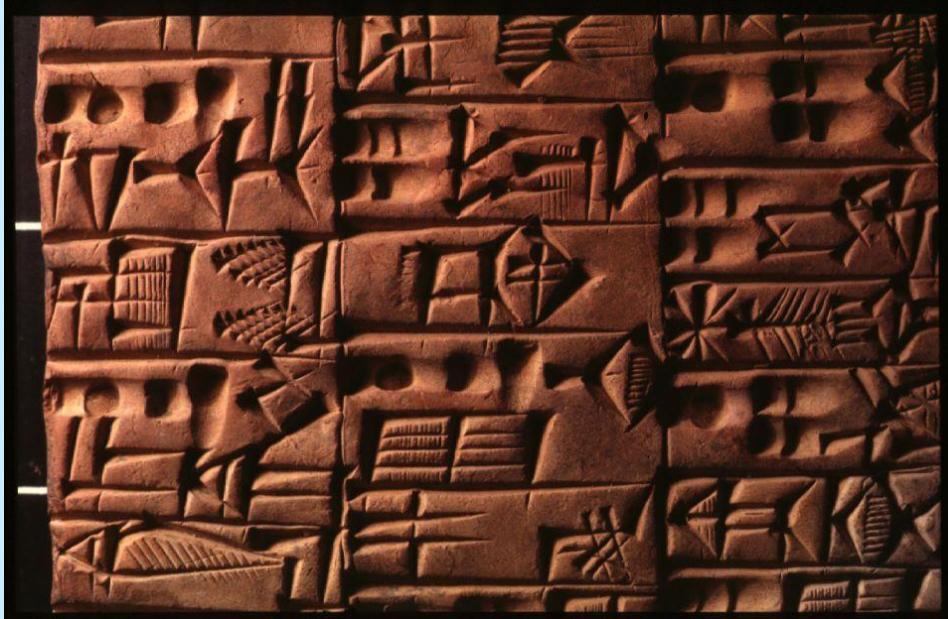
Apparently not. Indications I found on-line suggest that once established, they stayed consistent. However, in late ancient Egypt, the number of symbols expanded.

(Bonus information: The Rosetta Stone records a priestly council's decree that affirms the cult of the 13-year-old Ptolemy V on the first anniversary of his coronation.)

HOW DID WE LEARN TO READ CUNEIFORM?

This wedge-based script was used by many Mesopotamian languages. Over time, it was reduced from about 1000 to 600 characters; its use ended about 100 BCE. Between 1835 and 1851 CE, Henry Rawlinson worked to decipher it via multiple inscriptions in three languages (Old Persian, Babylonian and Elamite) he found on Persian cliffs.

Sample cuneiform



Did skin-color prejudice exist? (decree of Senusret III [dynasty 12])

"[With regard to] the southern frontier... No Black whatsoever shall be permitted to pass [this stone] going down stream, whether travelling by land or sailing in a boat, with cattle, asses, goats, &c., belonging to the Blacks, with the exception of such as cometh to do business in the country of Aqen or on an embassy. Such, however, shall be well entreated in every way. No boats belonging to the Blacks shall in future be permitted to pass down the river by the region of Heh."

Boasting from Senusret III

At Semnah, a fort at the foot of the Second Cataract: "*I made my boundary and went further up the river than my fathers. I added greatly to it. I give commands [therein]. I am the king, and what is said by me is done. What my heart conceiveth my hand bringeth to pass. I am [like] the crocodile which seizeth, carrieth off, and destroyeth without mercy. Words (or matters) do not remain dormant in my heart. To the coward soft talk suggesteth longsuffering; this I give not to my enemies. Him who attacketh me I attack. I am silent in the matter that is for silence; I answer as the matter demandeth. Silence after an attack maketh the heart of the enemy bold. The attack must be sudden like that of a crocodile. The man who hesitateth is a coward, and a wretched creature is he who is defeated on his own territory and turned into a slave.*"

The preceding was an introduction to:

“The Black understandeth talk only. Speak to him and he falleth prostrate. He fleeth before a pursuer, and he pursueth only him that fleeth. The Blacks are not bold men; on the contrary, they are timid and weak, and their hearts are cowed. My Majesty hath seen them, and [what I say] is no lie.

“I seized their women, I carried off their workers in the fields, I came to their wells, I slew their bulls, I cut their corn and I burnt it.

“Furthermore, every son of mine who shall keep intact this boundary which My Majesty hath made, is indeed my son; he is the son who protecteth his father, if he keep intact the boundary of him that begot him. He who shall allow this boundary to be removed, and shall not fight for it, is not my son, and he hath not been begotten by me.”

On the other hand...

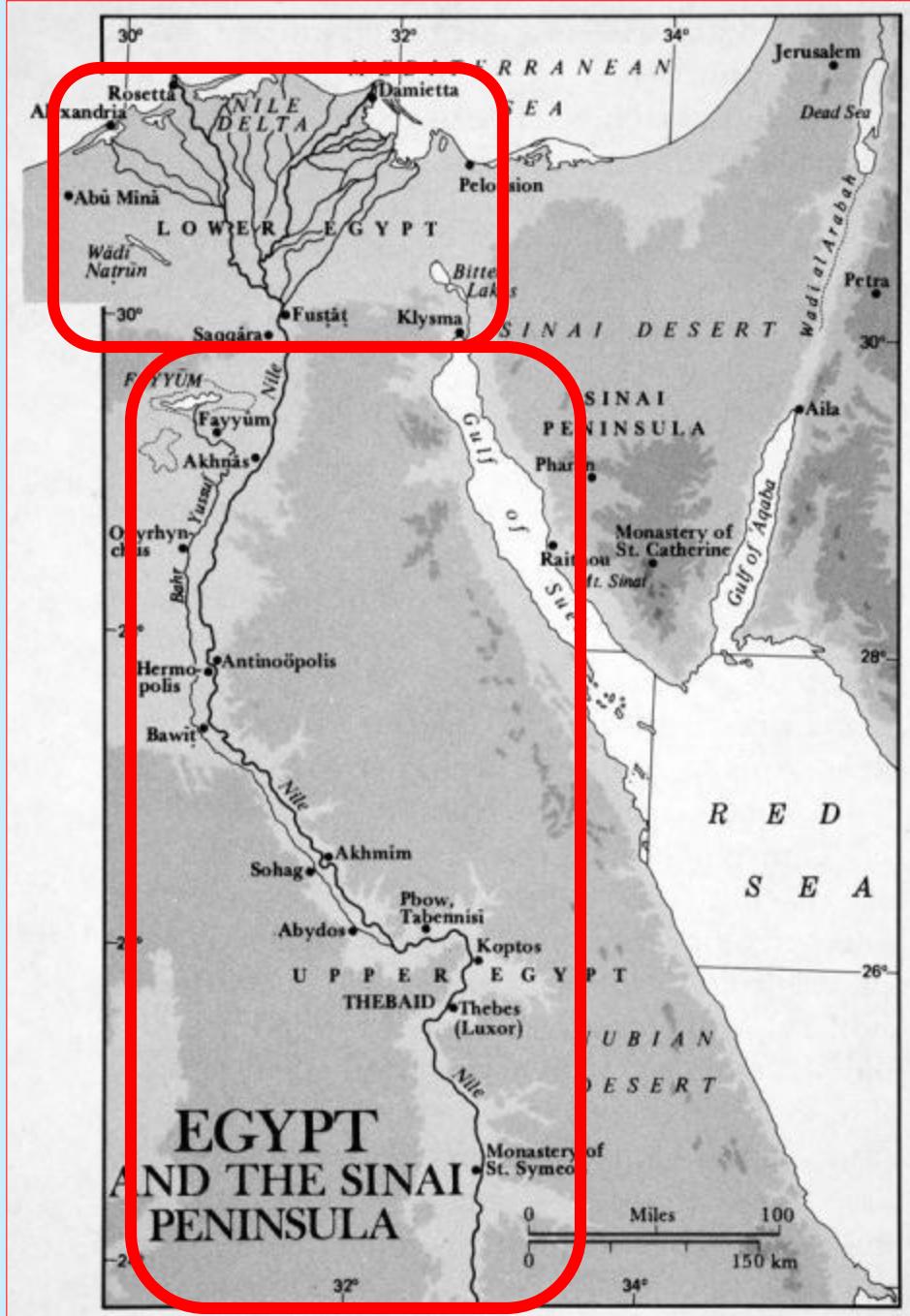
- Black was a sacred color representing the fecundity of the soil.
- It was also one of the two colors (the other was green) used for Osiris.
- Then again, it was the color of devils and fiends who followed the evil snake god, Apophis.

Go figure.

Power of writing

- To put an evil act, such as Seth's murder of his brother, Osiris, into hieroglyphs could make it a permanent part of reality.
- Direct descriptions or representations of such acts were usually avoided.

Review



Lower Egypt

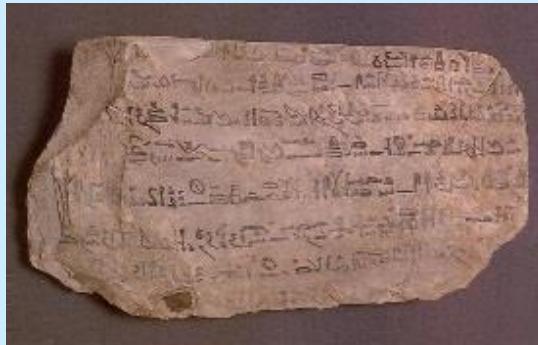
“Black land” = Nile Valley
“Red land” = desert

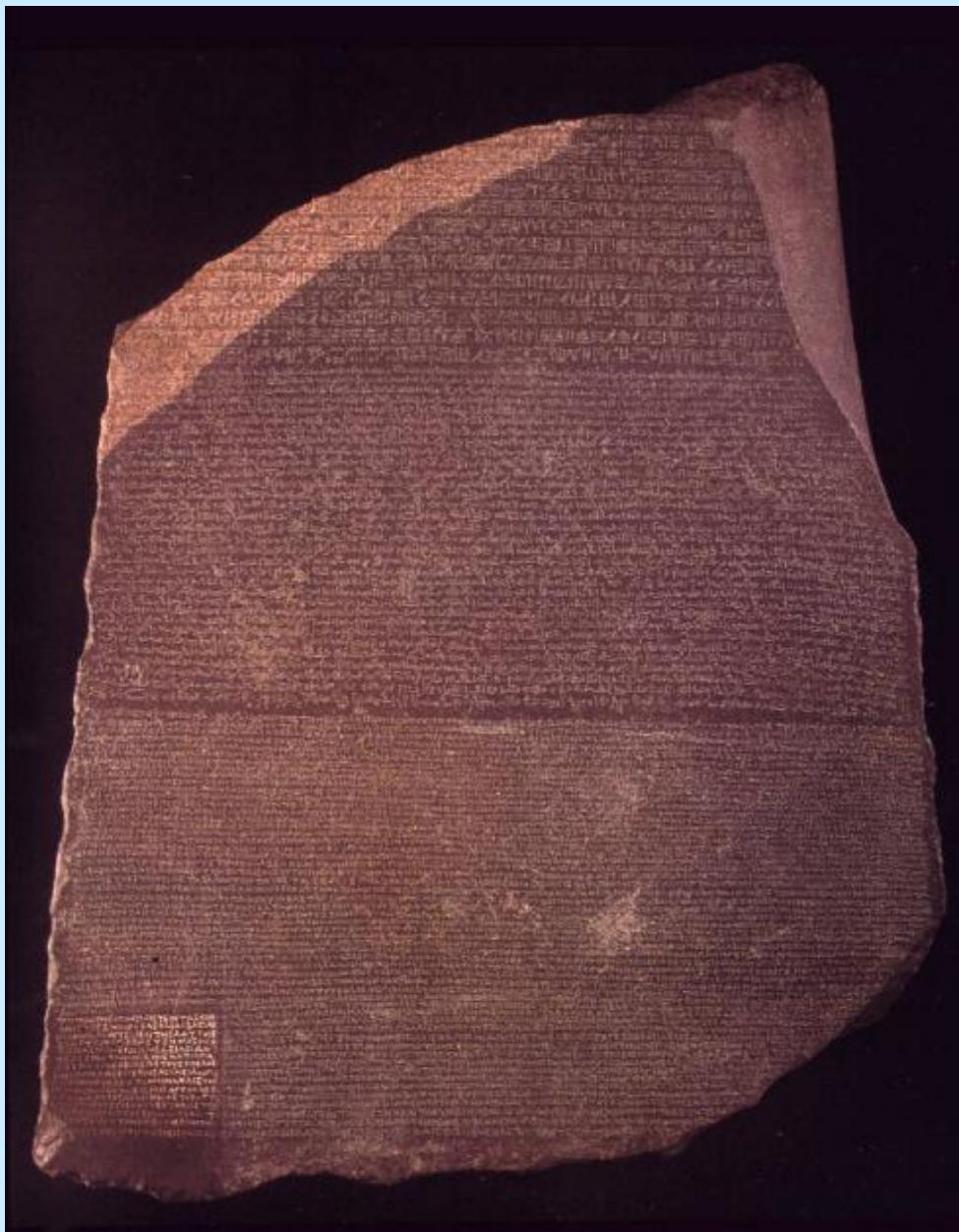
Upper Egypt

Key pre-dynastic moments

- Nile Valley population immigration, competition for scarce resources
- Population diffusion north to Delta, south to Nubia
- Limited burials in relatively elaborate tombs with wood coffins
- Indications of wrapping corpses in strips of linen
- Earliest known hieroglyphs
- Social status of literacy
- Rhythms of nature: central to theology
- Nile flooding: central to Egyptian well-being

Source material

- Ostraca
- Papyri
- Herodotus, Manetho, et. al. in the Greek and early Roman periods of control of Egypt
- King lists
- Other inscriptions on walls of Egyptian monuments
- Art
- Scientific and relative dating (e.g., C¹⁴, thermoluminescence, dendrochronology, calendric or astronomical references, sequence dating)



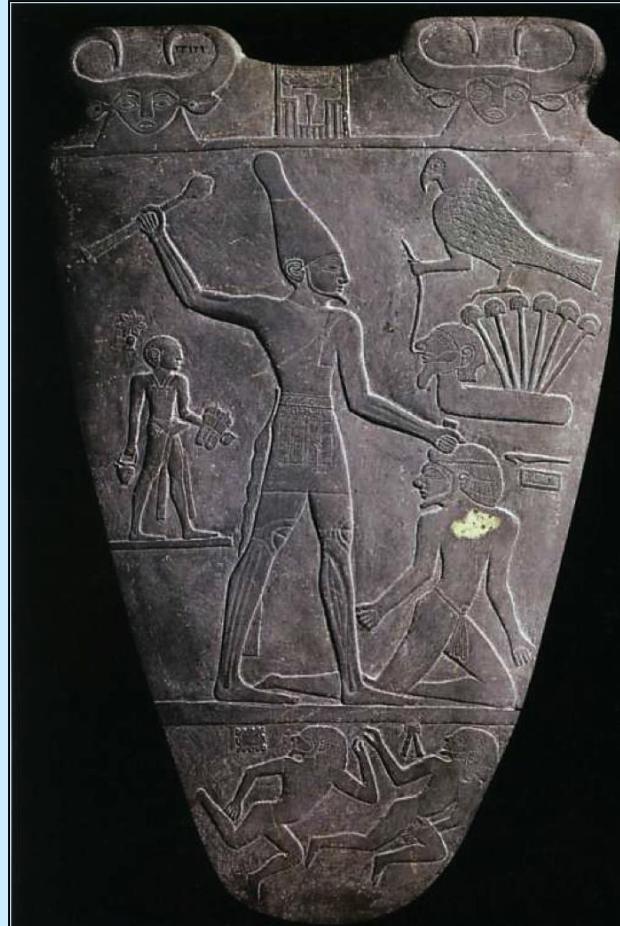
Rosetta Stone
196 BCE

Narmer

Traditionally viewed as having led the south to conquer the north

NARMER PALETTE

Front



Back



Excavated at Hierakonopolis

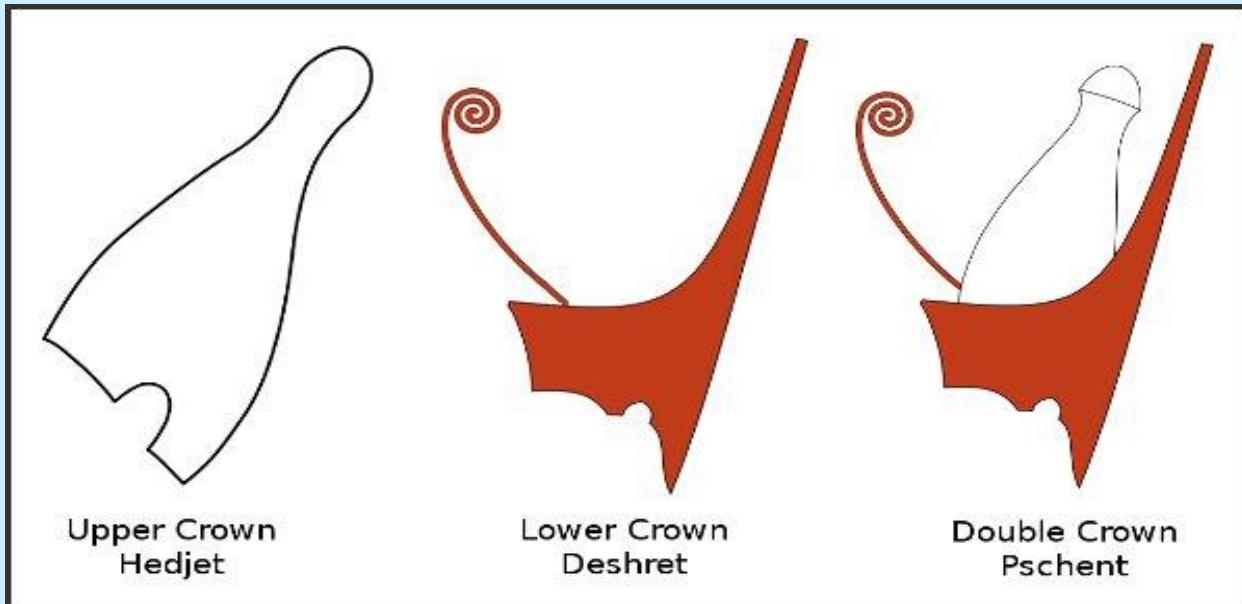
V. The(?) Egyptian mind set; inseparability of “religion” and the rest of life

- Ancient Egyptians were visually oriented and keen observers of their environment.
- They were not prone to distinguish between event and ritual or real and ideal, nor did they distinguish “historical” events from commemorative scenes.
- It is not meaningful to speak of a “secular” realm as we would use the term.

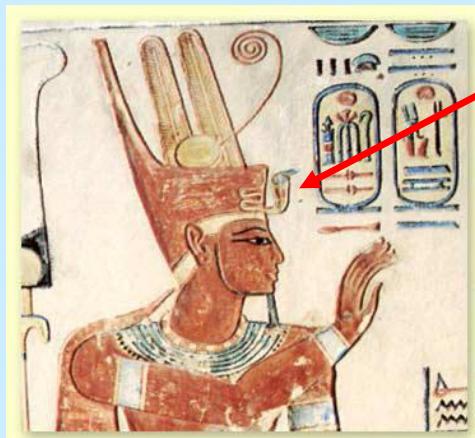
Change

- New explanations or seeming contradictions were layered upon each other.
- Egyptian culture sought stability and orderliness (vs. chaos), continuity (vs. novelty), predictability (vs. randomness), dependability (vs. danger).
- Change occurred, but some institutions retained their form over the millennia, such as:
 - The double crown and dress of the king
 - Many styles of architecture and art

The double crown (reportedly created in dynasty 1)



The double crown symbolized the separateness of the ruler and his power over unified Egypt



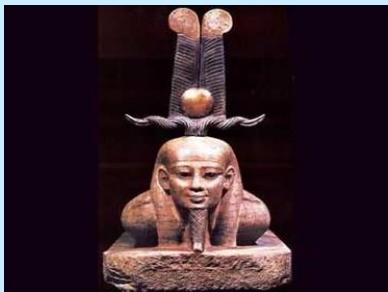
Uraeus



Senusret III (dynasty 12, Middle Kingdom, ca. 1870-1831)

Other crowns (added at different times)

Over the course of Egyptian history, a variety of crowns developed, including:



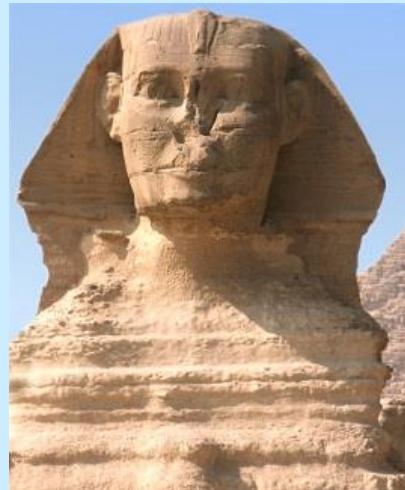
New Kingdom: 2-feathers
(first used in: dynasty 4),
ram's horns



Hatshepsut's coronation
crown; dynasty 18



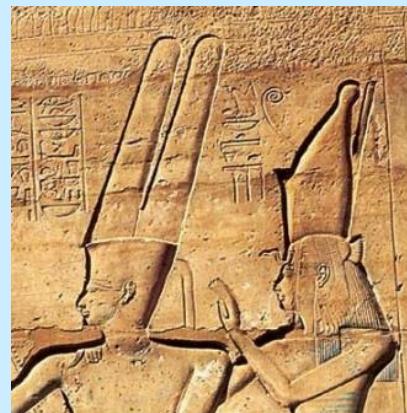
Nemes; 1st use:
dynasty 3
(Djoser)



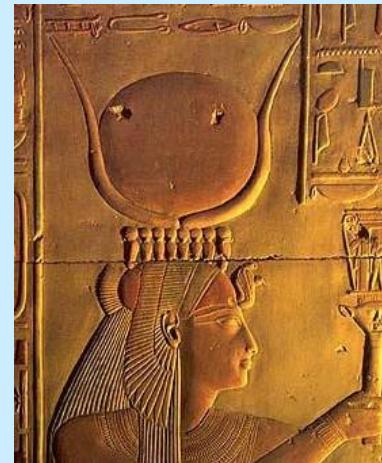
Atef crown (Osiris); earliest
use: dynasty 5



Khephren: blue war crown
(New Kingdom)



Amun crown (also double
crown); first use: dynasty 11



Divine goddess crown
(esp. Isis, Hathor)

Nemes with uraeus and vulture

- The uraeus (Egyptian cobra), ready to strike, represents the Lower Egyptian goddess Wadjet.
- The Egyptian vulture represents the Upper Egyptian tutelary goddess Nekhbet; sometimes it was replaced by a 2nd cobra.

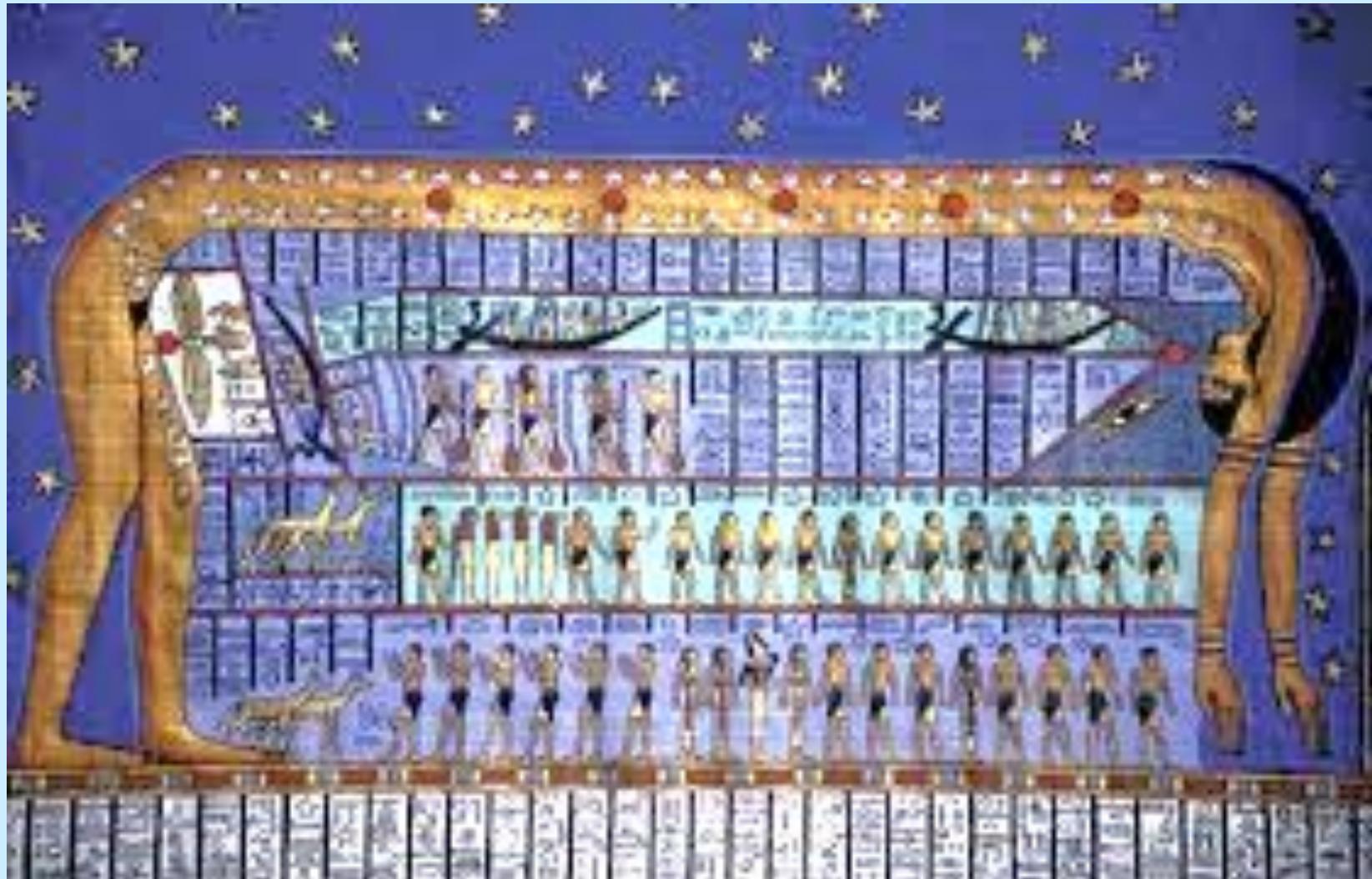


Knowing the unknowable

Everything that was “unknowable”—for example, why and how the sun crossed the heavens, or where the sun went when it set—could be explained only in concrete and familiar terms, without speculative thought.

- The sun crossed the sky in a boat as people traveled the Nile by boat.
- Or the sun was a great orb pushed across the morning sky by a scarab, like the dung beetle of the natural world.

Nut



The heaven that the sun crossed was also the star-studded body of the goddess Nut.

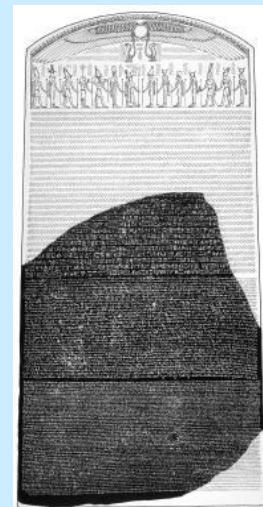
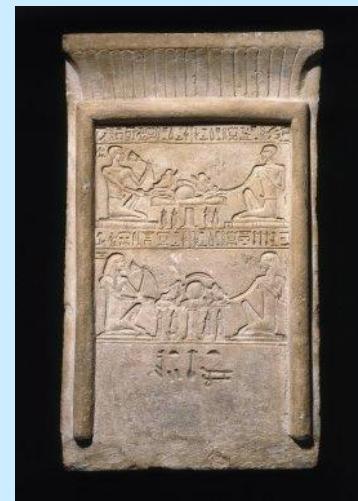
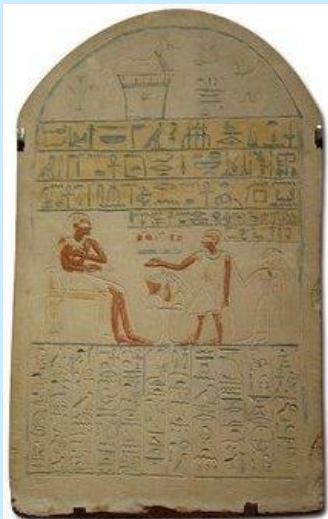
Everywhere they looked, Egyptians saw reminders of religion and the gods. For example:

- Temples were the dominant feature of every landscape, and every good-sized town had many of them.
- Chapels, both private and public, dedicated to specific deities dotted the Egyptian landscape.

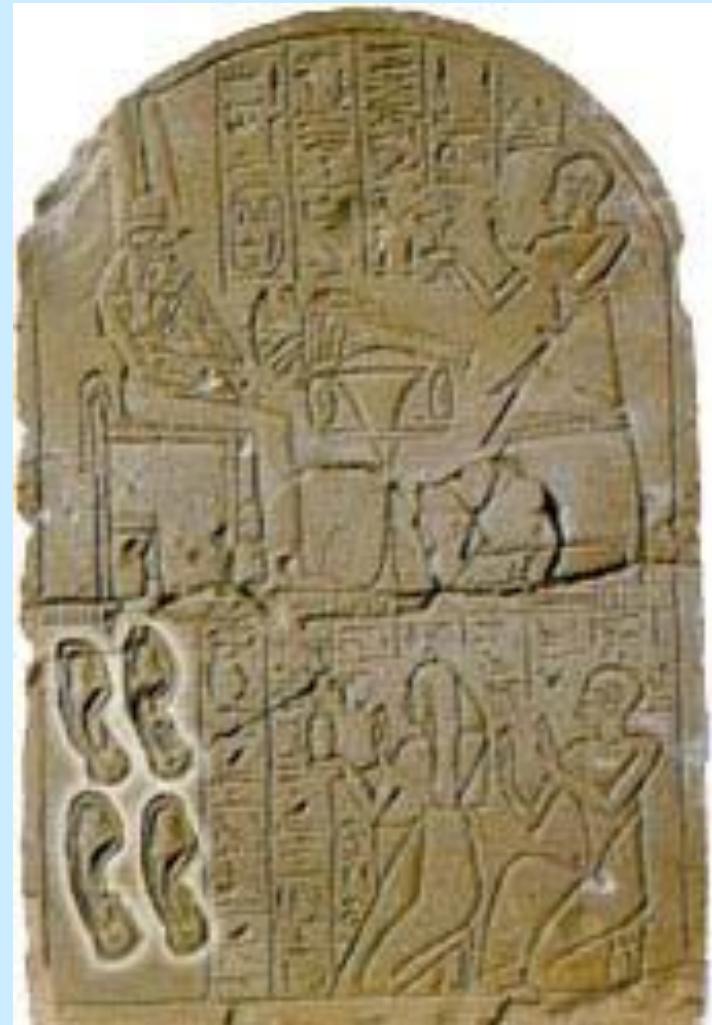
- Chapels of the Hearing Ears were located on the exterior walls of temples, where they could be approached by anyone.
- Portable stelae decorated with the ears of the god and intercessory statues gave petitioners immediate contact with gods assumed to be sympathetic and helpful.

The stela (or “stele”)

- Stela is Greek for a pillar or vertical tablet inscribed or decorated with reliefs and used as a mortuary or historical commemorative.
- They were initially made of wood and later of stone, normally rounded at one end.
- They might be freestanding , part of another structure (e.g., a tomb wall), designate boundaries, or play particular roles in temples and shrines.



- Several of the gods, including Amun, Ptah, Horus, Isis and Thoth were described as "great of hearing" or "of hearing ears."
- Stelae with ears of listening gods began in the New Kingdom.



Magical stelae

Metternich Stela (cippus; pl. cippi)

Dynasty 30 ca. 350 BCE, Alexandria

About 30" high

- The hieroglyphs record thirteen magic spells to protect against or heal poisonous bites and wounds.
- To be cured of a medical problem, you could drink (or bathe in) water that had been poured over the magic words and images on the stela.



Cippi

- A cippus typically included a portrait of Horus.
- Cippi became especially popular in the Ptolemaic period.
- The back of the cippus is covered with texts that call on deities for protection.
- Touching the cippus could be efficacious, and cippi show considerable resulting wear.
- Water run over a cippus became magically activated by its contact with inscriptions and images of Horus.
- The power in the words and images could be accessed by touching them.

Who profited from religion?

- Builders of tombs and temples
- Craftsmen and food suppliers of funerary offerings
- Weavers of textiles for clothing or mummification
- The thousands of men and women who worked (typically part-time) in the temples as priests, singers, porters, and guards
- Farmers and herdsmen whose crops and livestock were presented as temple offerings

Religious bread and circuses?

Egyptian religion provided excitement, joy, and reassurance.

- Festivals might include musicians, troops of soldiers, acrobatic dancers, theatricality.
- Numerous rituals and festivals provided socially acceptable holiday time.
- Worship could work for all without regard to wealth.

VI. Creation

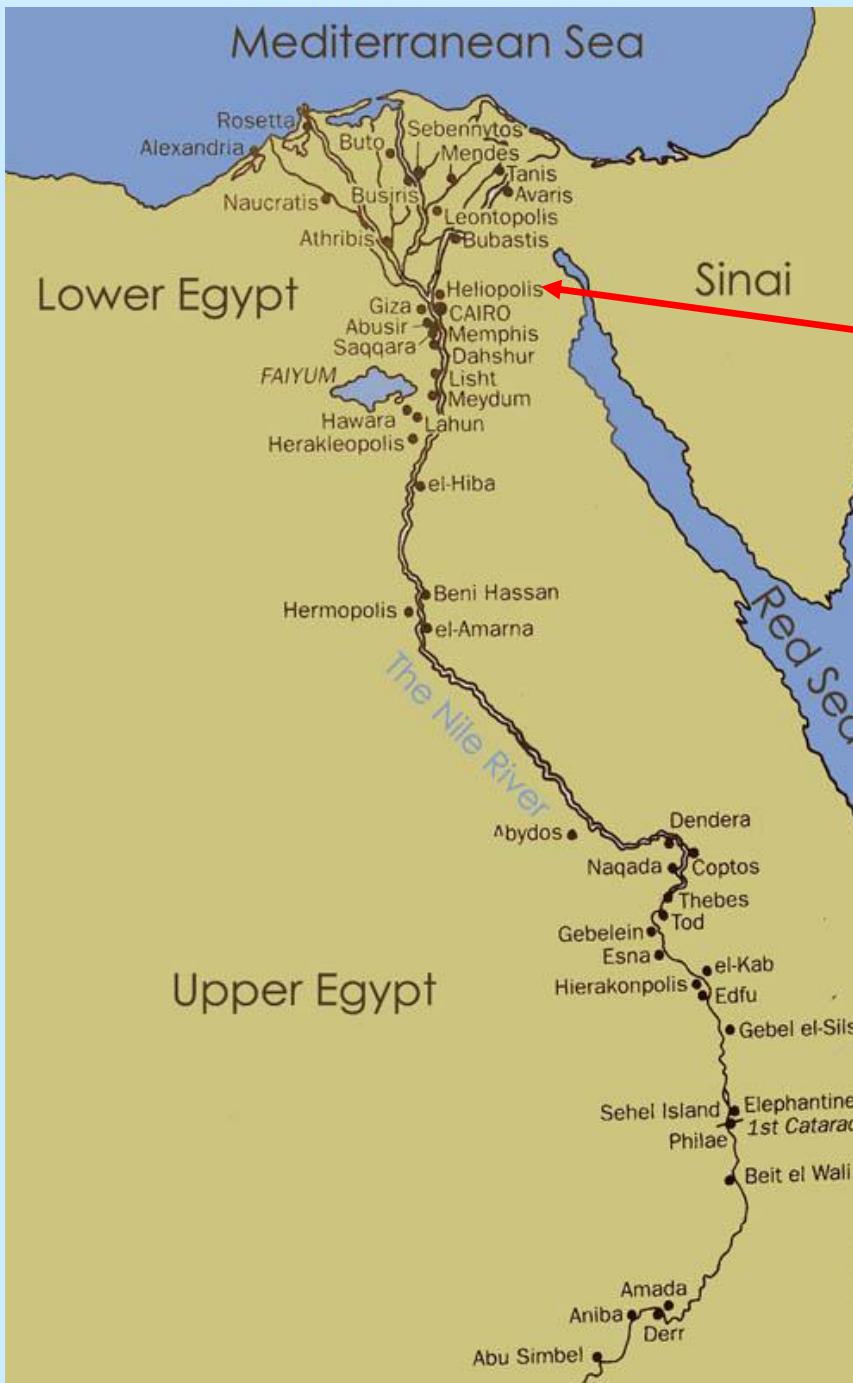
The power of (pro)creation

“Speculating about the beginnings of life, the Egyptians used the models of creativity they saw around them: the sexual acts that produced people and animals, the seed-sowing that produced crops, and the powers of the mind and the hand that produced objects.”

A primary Egyptian story of creation

- In the beginning was a watery chaos, personified as the god Nun: “The great god who creates himself: he is water, he is Nun, father of the gods.”
- The chaotic waters themselves were lifeless but held the potential for life.

- Starting with the end of dynasty 5, various texts state that Atum, alone in the primeval watery chaos of Nun, created himself.
- At first, Atum had no place to stand, and some versions have him creating a small mound or hill (the benben), later sometimes identified as the site of the first temple in Heliopolis.
- Whether standing on the mound or in the water, he masturbated, put his semen in his mouth, and spat and/or vomited out the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut.
- This story underscored the ever-present potential for creation in the midst of chaos.



Heliopolis

Creator gods—Atum

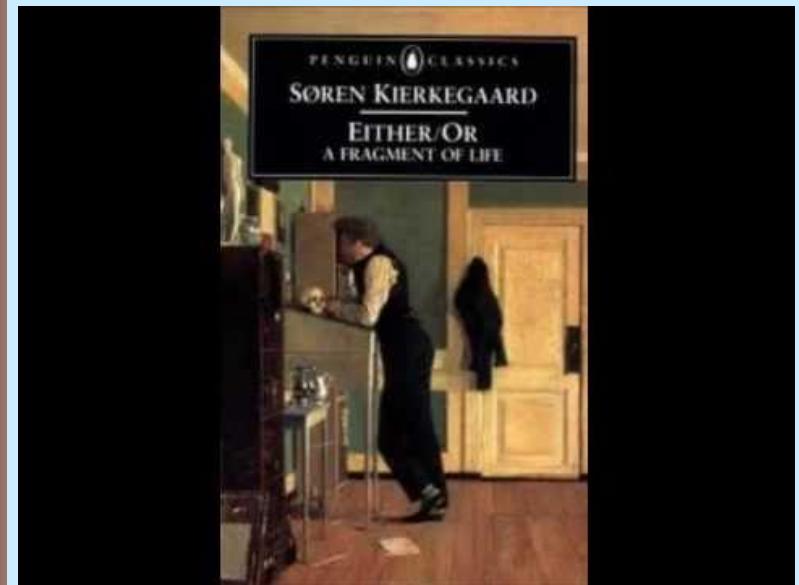
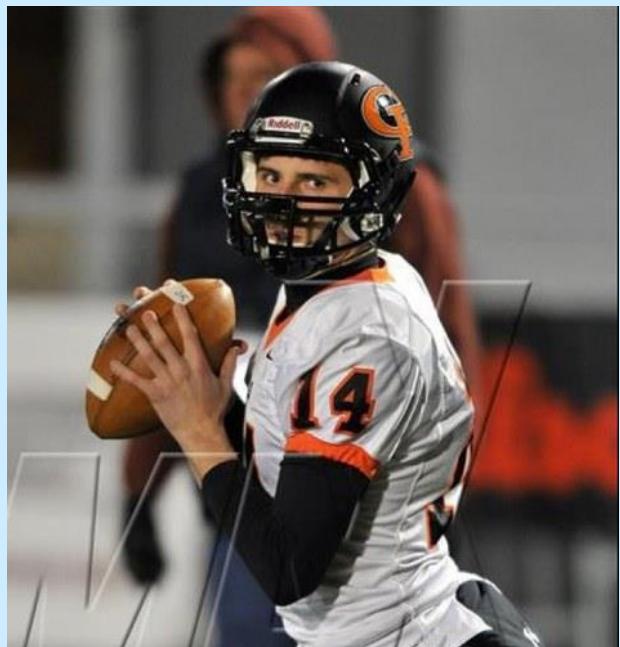


King of gods, primeval, hidden power
Thebes

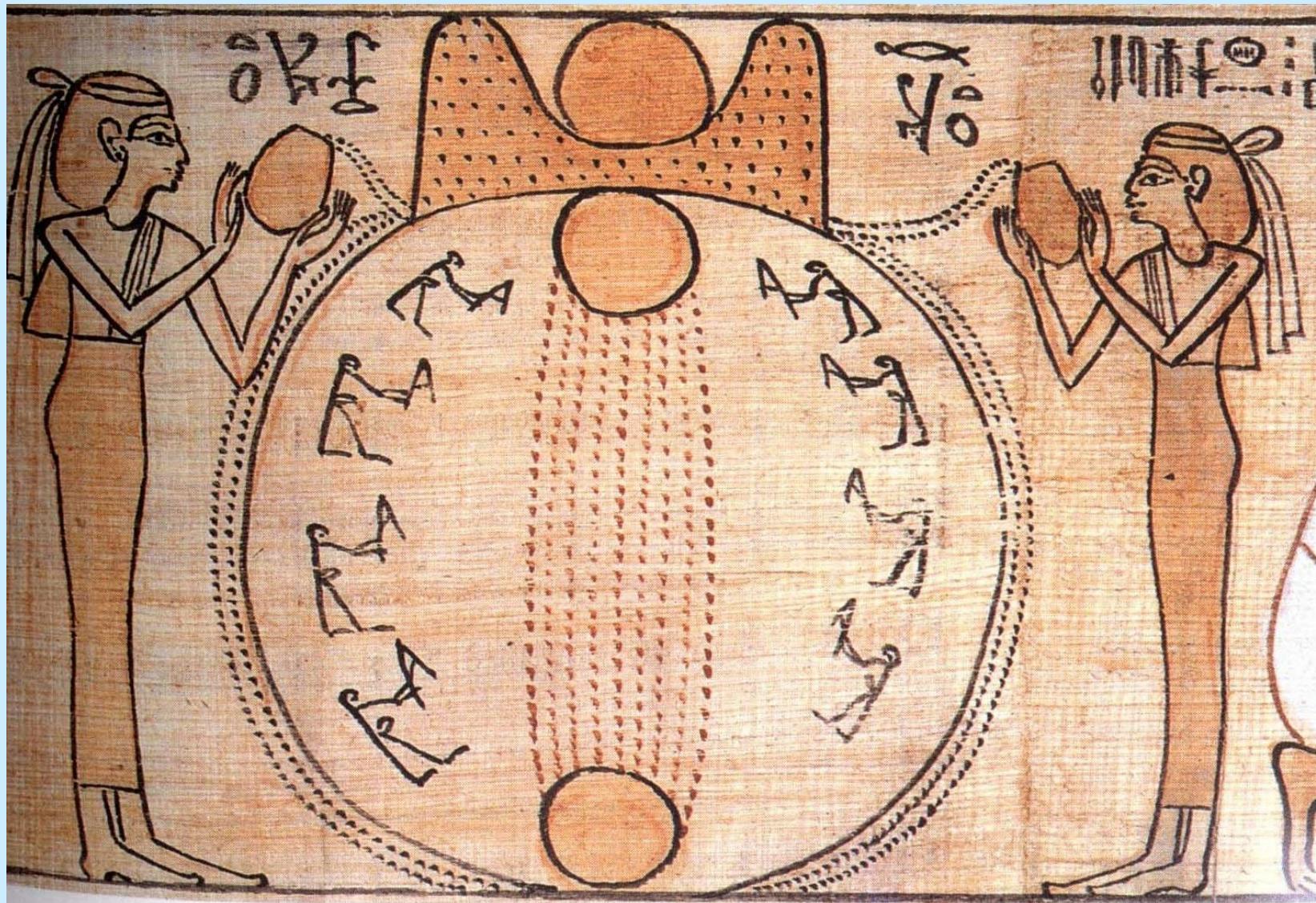
Divine sexuality and Creation

- Papyri found in tombs of high-ranking priests and priestesses graphically illustrate this version.
- Atum's androgynous or bi-sexual nature ("he" was sometimes called the "Great He-She") was sometimes stressed by showing his hand as a goddess during the masturbation.
- In some versions, Atum's sexual pleasure is implied to have been central to his creative act.

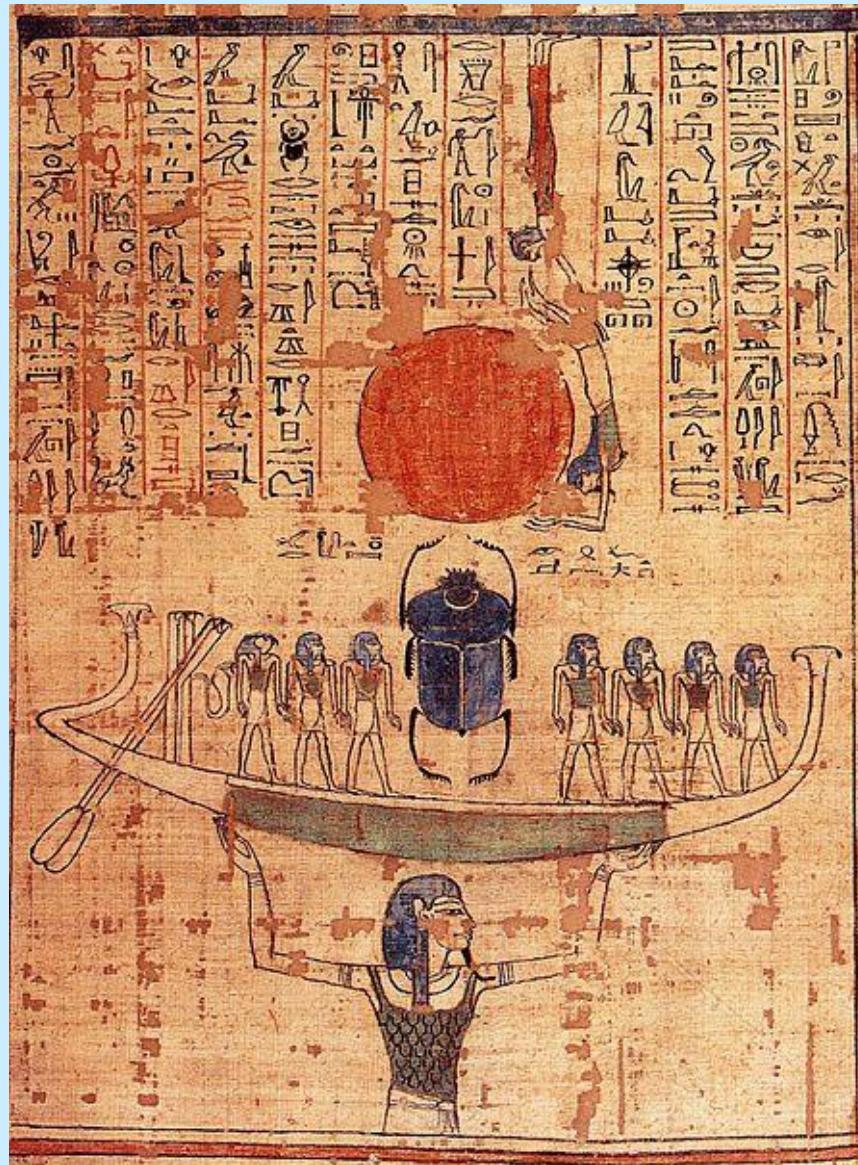
What might this suggest about Egyptian views of life and the universe?



The sun rises over the circular mound of creation as goddesses pour out the primeval waters around it



Nun (after Egypt existed)



The benben

- The image of the mound was likely based on the mounds (*geziras*) that spontaneously appear in the Nile.
- The benben mound has been taken as the prototype for pyramids and the apex of obelisks.
- To echo creation of the universe, Egyptian temples sited sanctuaries on an image of the primeval mound.

Creation and political order

- Atum was not just king of the universe but also of ancient Egypt's political system.
- Created order and political order were interdependent and inextricable.
- The ebb and flow of the Nile was sometimes attributed to Atum's ongoing ejaculations.
- As a consequence of this belief, Egyptian pharaohs were at one time required to masturbate ceremonially into the Nile.

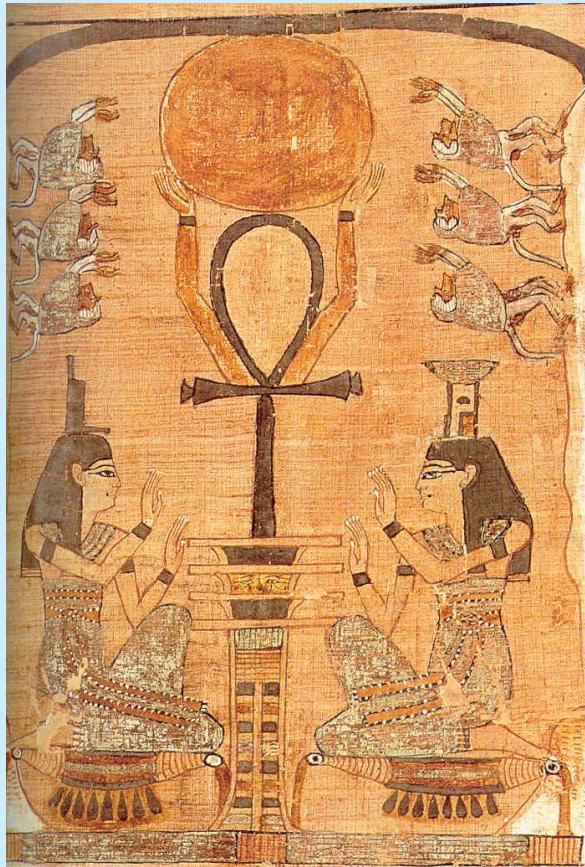
Other creation myths

- In a variant of this myth, a phoenixlike bird, “the great cackler” (Geb, god of the earth) alighted on the mound; its loud cries heralded the beginning of life.
- In another variation, the first god, Nefertem, emerged from a water lily (blue lotus) that in turn emerged from Nun.

Nut and Geb



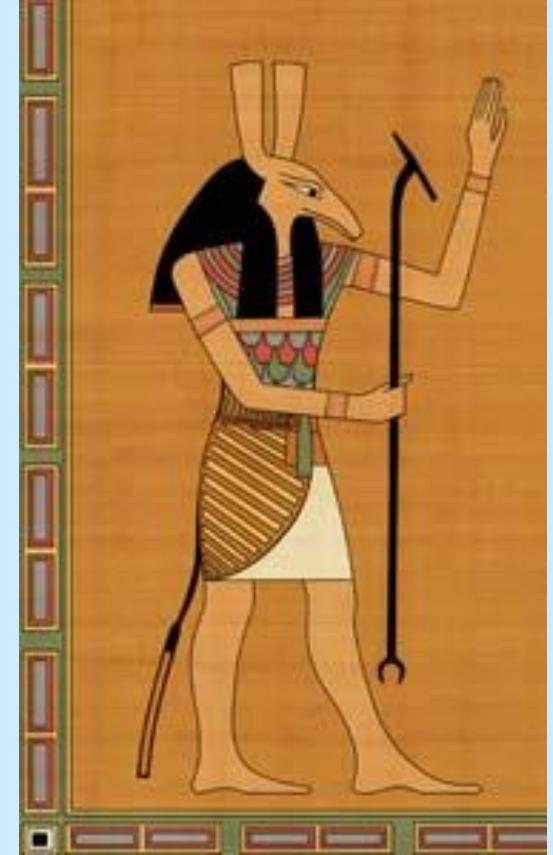
Children of Nut and Geb



Isis and Neith



Osiris



Seth

Osiris

- Originally a local chthonic (i.e., linked to the earth) deity in the Eastern Delta, Osiris had been, associated with agriculture and annually recurring natural events.
- Myths concerning his resurrection mirrored the revitalization of Egyptian soil after the annual flood receded.

A version of the death and resurrection of Osiris

- At a banquet of the gods, Seth (aka Set) fooled his brother, Osiris, into stepping into a coffin, which Seth slammed shut and cast into the Nile.
- Isis, wife and sister of Osiris (and so sister of Seth), found the coffin in the Nile Delta and brought it back to Memphis.
- At one point, Isis was temporarily absent, and Seth cut Osiris's body into pieces and cast them into the Nile.
- Isis retrieved all the pieces except the penis, put Osiris back together, fashioned a replacement penis, and brought him back to life.
- He then impregnated her with Horus, who wrought revenge for his father's treatment.

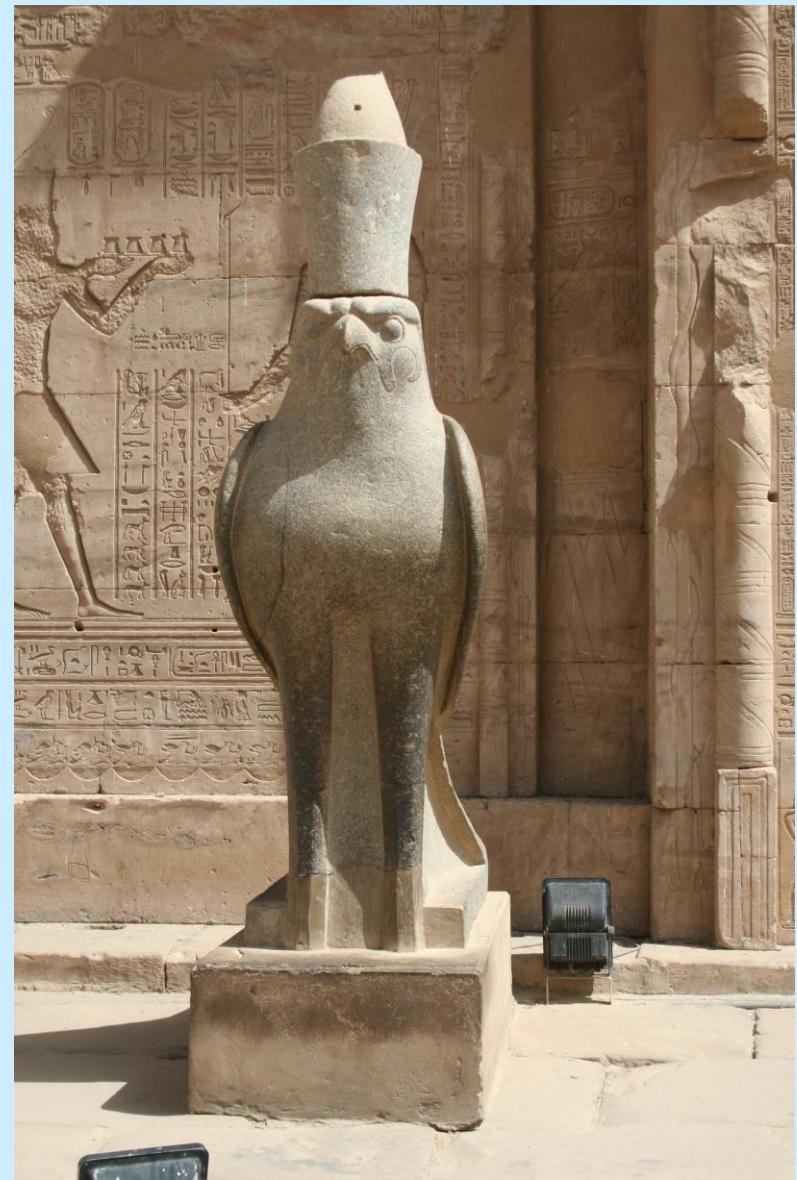


Osiris

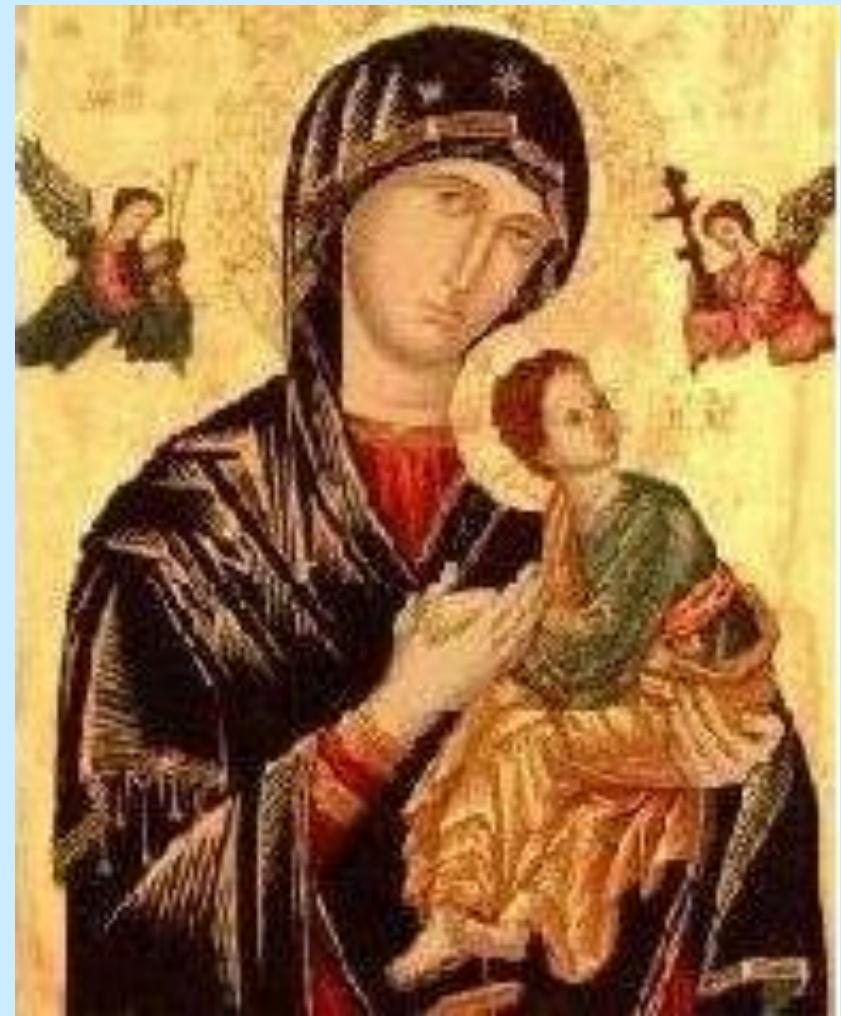


Isis

Horus—son of Osiris and Isis, avenger against Seth



Isis nursing Horus and...



Horus-Osiris-Isis



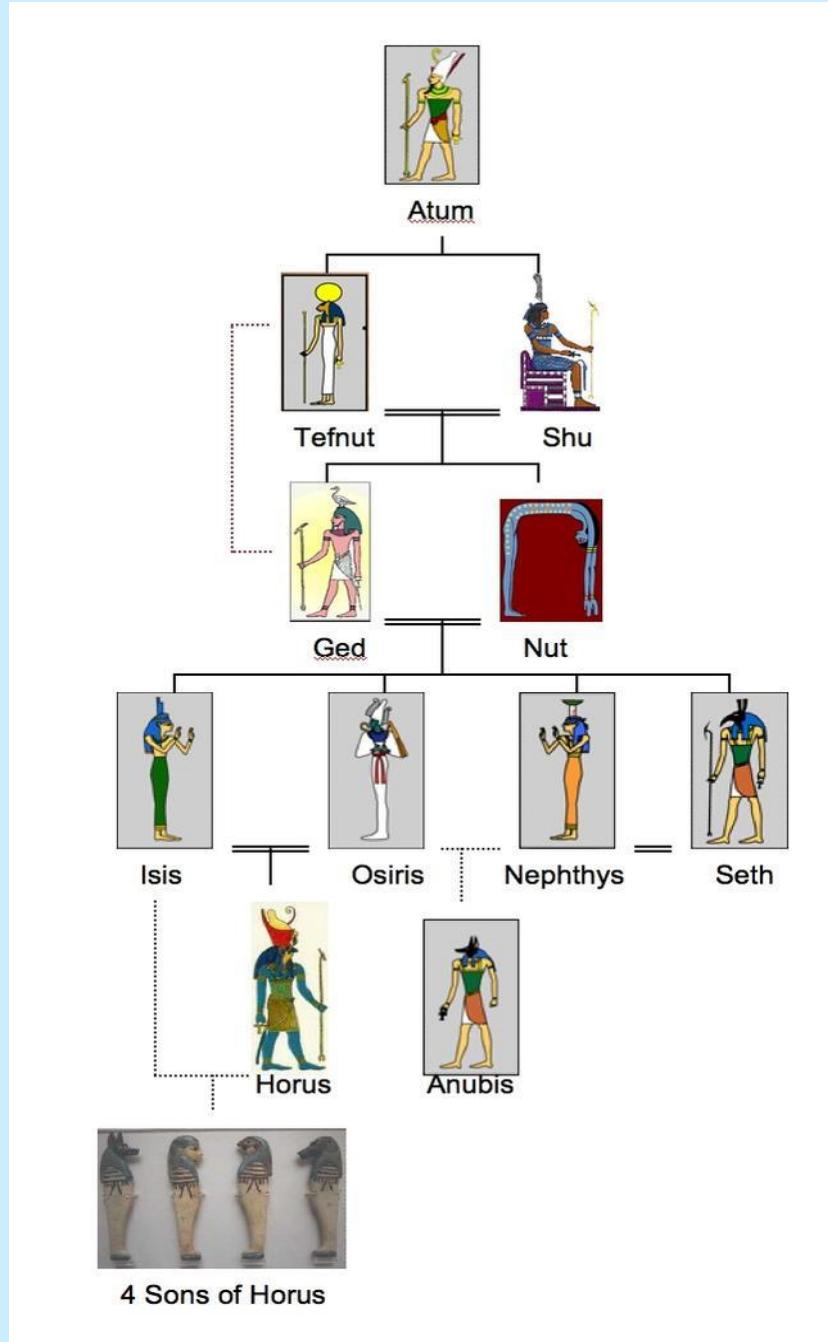
Seth (or Set): God of chaos, infertility, desert, storm



- Seth is responsible for the destructive forces in the world.
- Yet his immoral and evil act of murdering his brother allowed Osiris to fulfill his destiny and become god of the dead.
- Without Seth, there would not have been life after death.

Ramesses
III is
crowned by
Horus on
the left and
Seth on the
right





Myths about the creation of humans

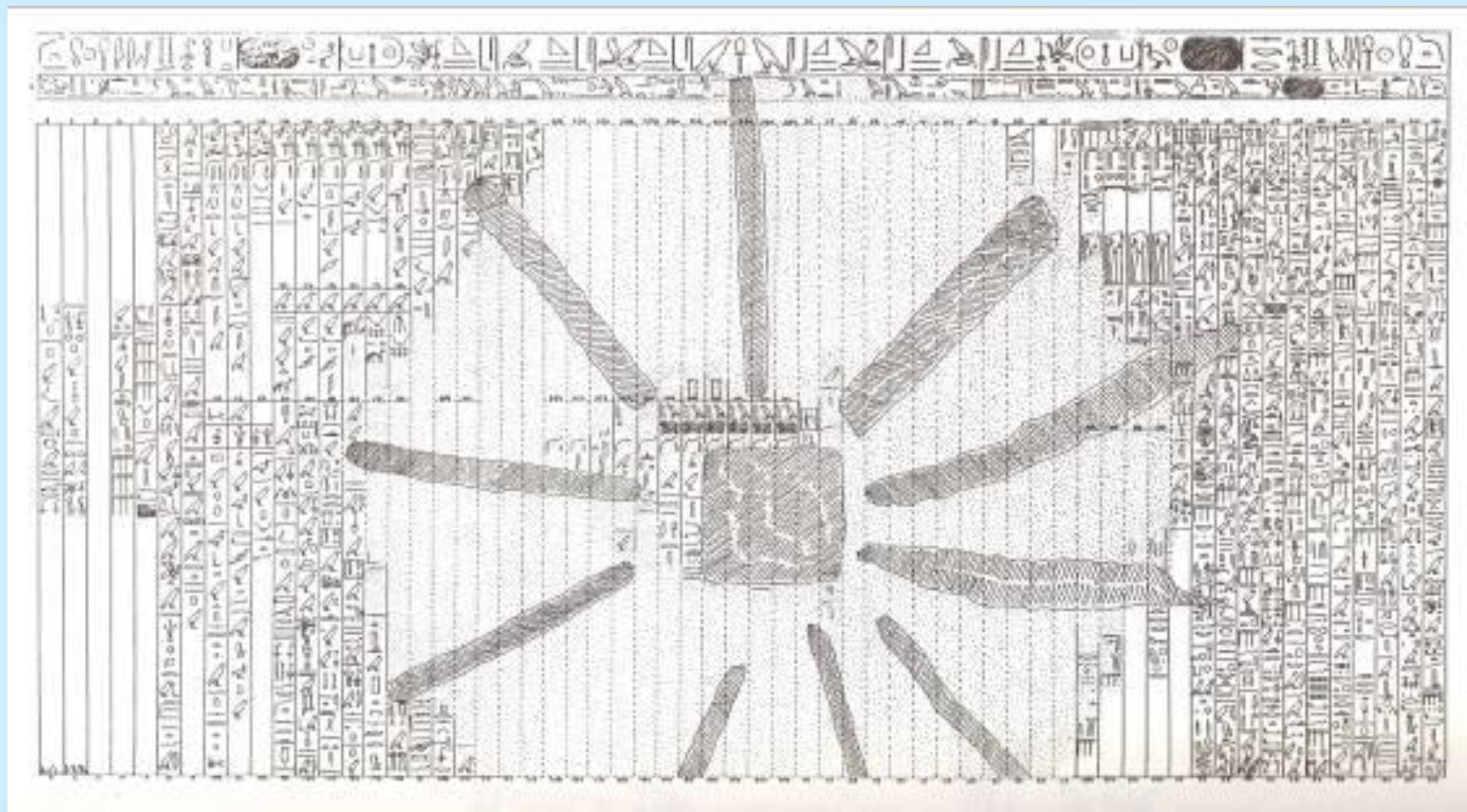
1. The ram-headed god Khnum created humankind on his potter's wheel.
2. Ptah created humans by thinking of them.
3. Ra's ferocious daughter, the eye goddess (created when Ra-Atum sent his eye to search for his lost children, Shu and Tefnut, in the darkness of the primeval ocean) wept upon her return when she discovered that Ra had grown a new eye. Her tears became humans.

- Because new lives kept coming into existence, creation was thought of as happening both in the past and the present
- To produce new life, Khnum or Neith (sometimes credited with creating childbirth) had to make a body and animate it with the breath of life.

The Memphite Theology

Via the “Shebaka Stone” of the reign of Shebako (712-698 BCE), we have an elaboration of Ptah’s version of Creation. (In fact, the account probably originated 500-600 years earlier.)





Memphite account of Creation

- The stela affirms Ptah as creator of the universe.
- Note that the mouth was often central to creation myths: one interpretation of Atum's creation is that he used his mouth as a womb; another is that the myth reflects the power of divine speech.
- Ptah is said to bring deities, people, and animals into being by devising them in his heart (the seat of intelligence in Egyptian thought) and naming them with his tongue.

Ptah



Creator, craftsman
Memphis

Anticipation of Christian thought?

- Like hieroglyphs, the “divine words” of Ptah can make thoughts real.
- This perspective has prompted comparisons between the Memphite Theology and the Gospel of St John’s “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.”

Ptah's other key social roles

- Created the moral and social order.
- Invented the crafts.

VII. More on Egyptian mythology

Where did the gods live?

- One answer: “in the past”
- Deities could manifest themselves in natural phenomena such as storms, floods, and plagues.
- Their spirits could be “resident” in special or unusual people, such as kings and dwarves, in sacred animals, trees, and objects.

Gods' natures

- People were free to worship aspects of the divine that seemed most relevant to their lives.
- The power possessed by deities could be frightening.
- In general, goddesses were feared more than gods.

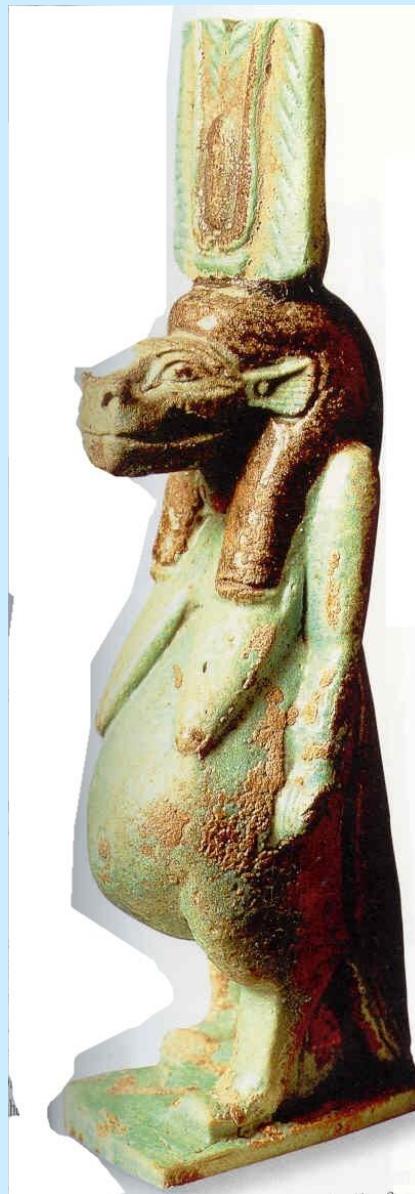
- The gods could act as mediators to solve problems for petitioners.
- People sought to contact a deity for help with personal issues both major (e.g., infertility, illness, grief) and minor (e.g., complaints about a neighbor or theft of small items).
- Contact with the divine had a kind of business or barter character: the petitioner gave something (e.g., prayers, food offerings, a votive object) in expectation of divine reciprocation.

- Because the gods were modeled on humans, they had a physical need for nourishment, a desire for adornment, failings like jealousy, lust, and bad temper.
- The gods appear to have delighted in meddling with humans, sometimes making their lives miserable.
- Ill-treatment by the gods was often viewed as a sign that the victim had done something wrong.
- The gods could turn their backs on Egypt itself when humans disobeyed divine commands.

Allegory?

- The deep desert (exact location varied—the western/ Libyan desert, Nubia, or Punt) was the realm of the Distant, or Far-Wandering, goddess, an estranged daughter of Ra.
- She roamed in the form of a wild cat, a lioness, or a female griffin.
- Gods sent to find her had to disguise themselves as apes or monkeys before risking an approach to her.
- Thoth, god of wisdom and scribes, used his eloquence to persuade her to leave her lonely wilderness and return to civilized society in the Nile Valley.
- Thoth described how desolate Egypt was without her radiant presence and told her fables illustrating the workings of the divine order.

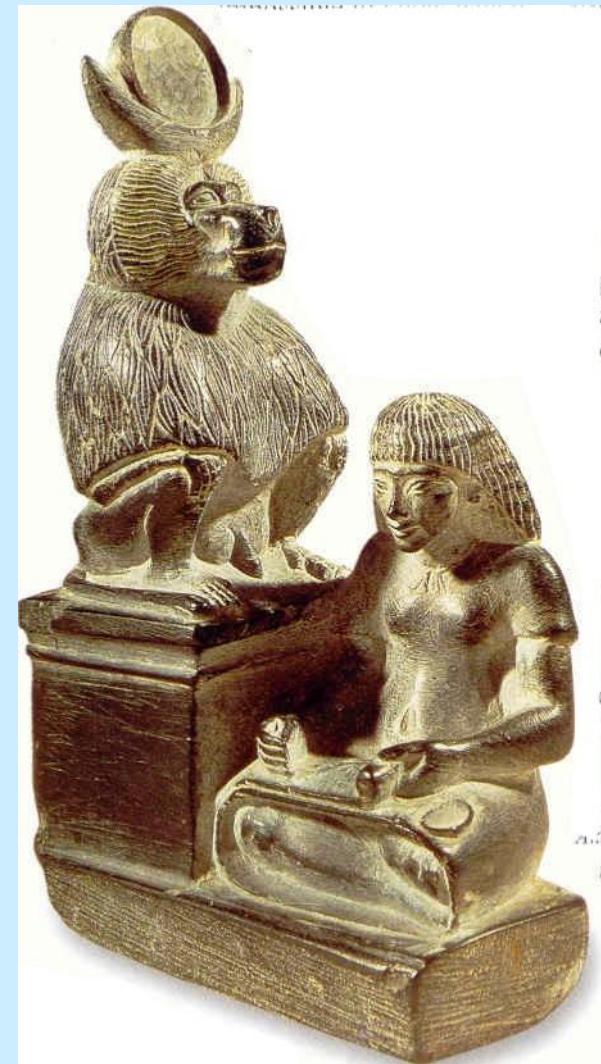
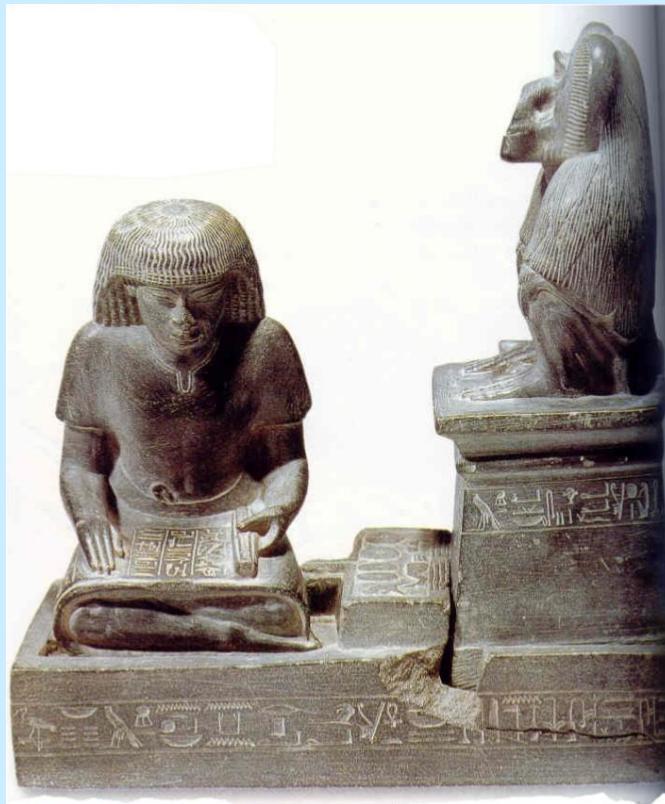
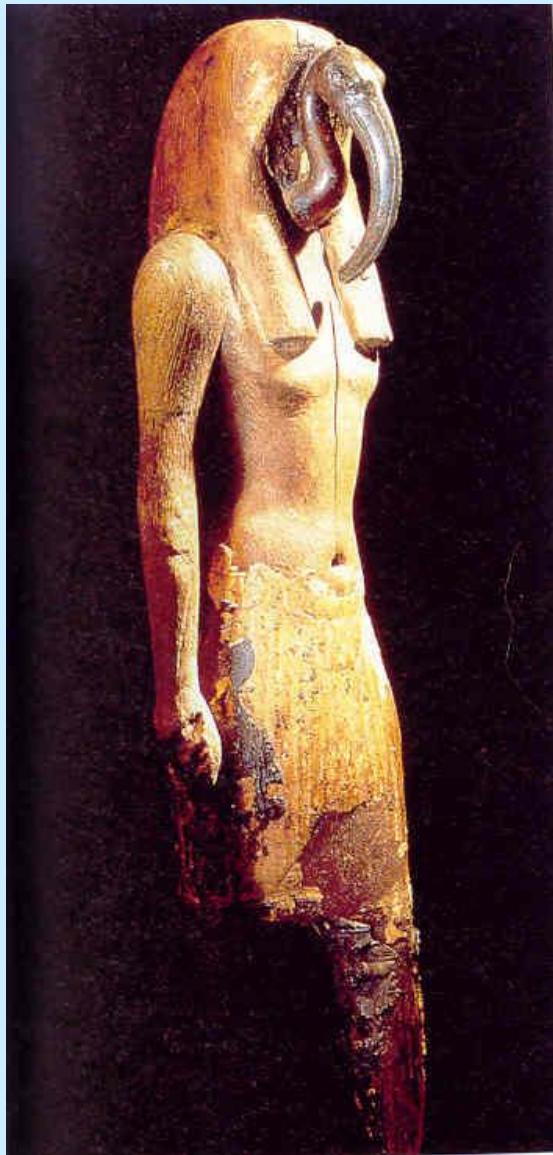
Tawaret: goddess of mothers & pregnant women



Ma'at: goddess of order, truth, justice



Thoth: god of wisdom, protector of scribes



Sobek (crocodile-headed god)

- Associated with Pharaonic power, fertility, and military prowess
- First mentioned in late old Kingdom
- Another creation myth: Sobek laid eggs on the bank of the waters of Nun to create the world.
- Sometimes a force for creation, sometimes allied with the forces of chaos



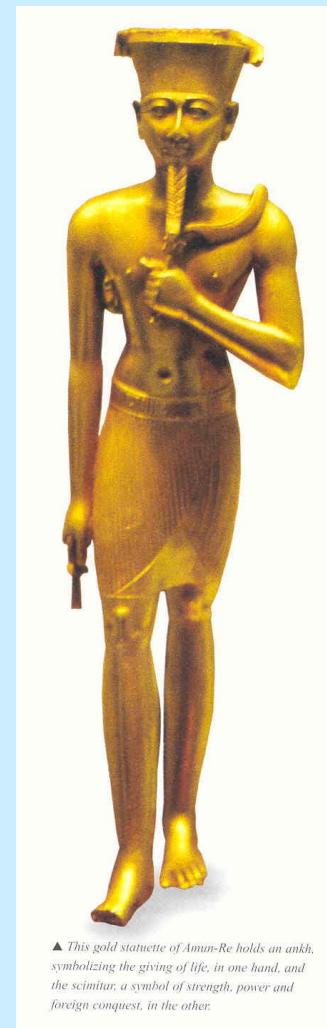
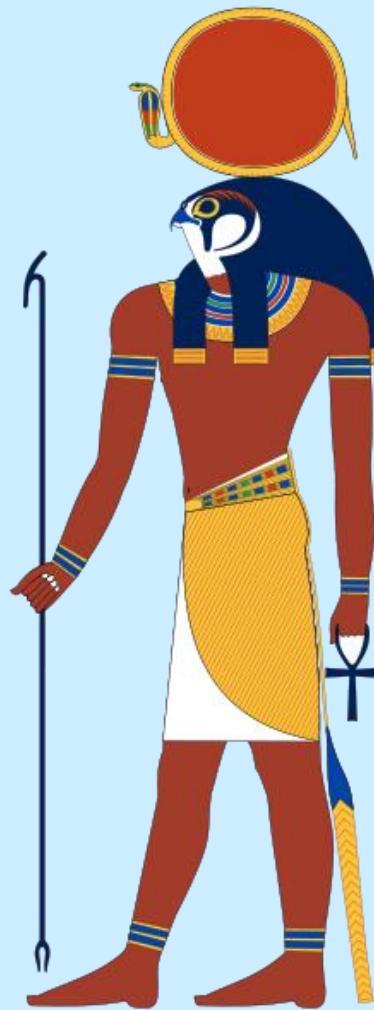
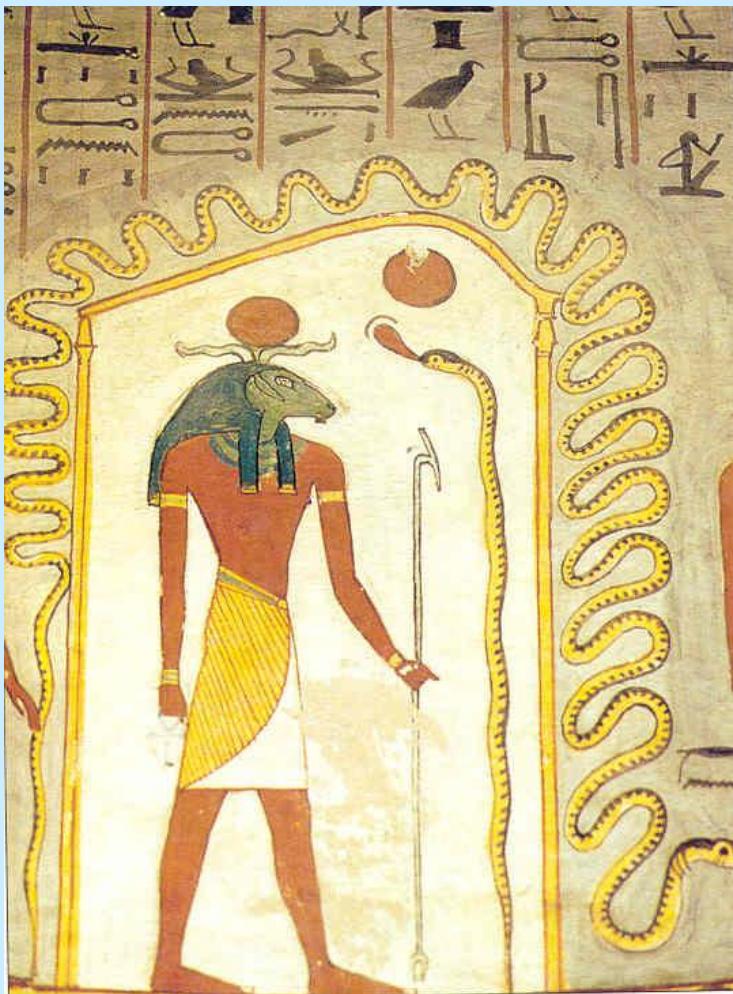
Crocodile mummies in honor of Sobek



Apep/Aapep/Apophis, enemy of Re

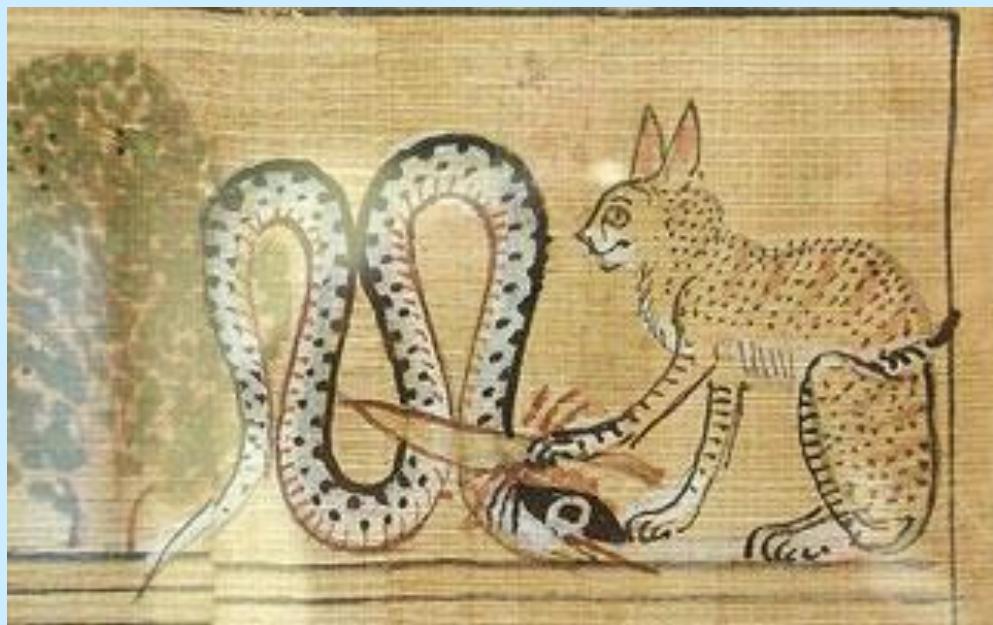
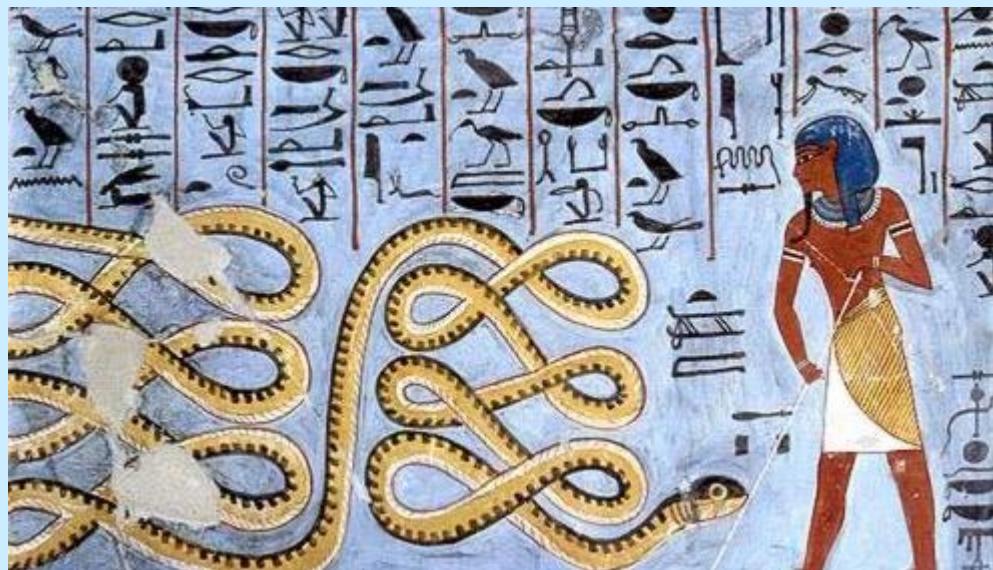
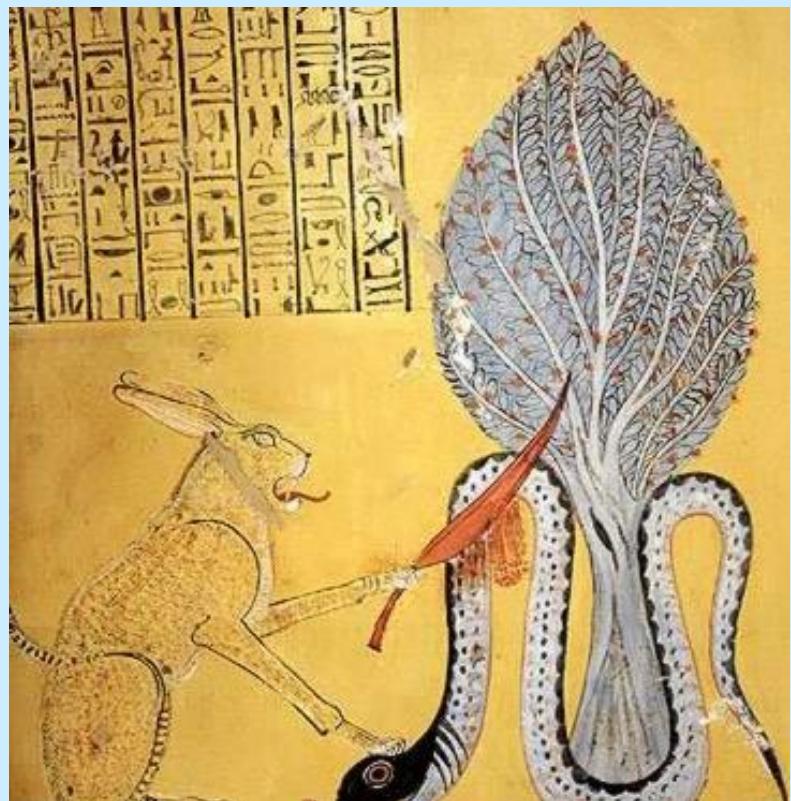
- Apophis was the god of evil, incarnate in many forms but especially in wild and savage animals.
- He was supposed to take the form of a huge serpent and to lie in wait daily near the portals of the dawn to swallow the sun as he was about to rise in the eastern sky.
- He was the deadly foe of all physical and moral order in heaven and in earth.
- He was accompanied by legions of devils and fiends, red and black, and by all the powers of eclipses, storm, tempest, hurricane, whirlwind, thunder and lightning.

Ra (or Re)



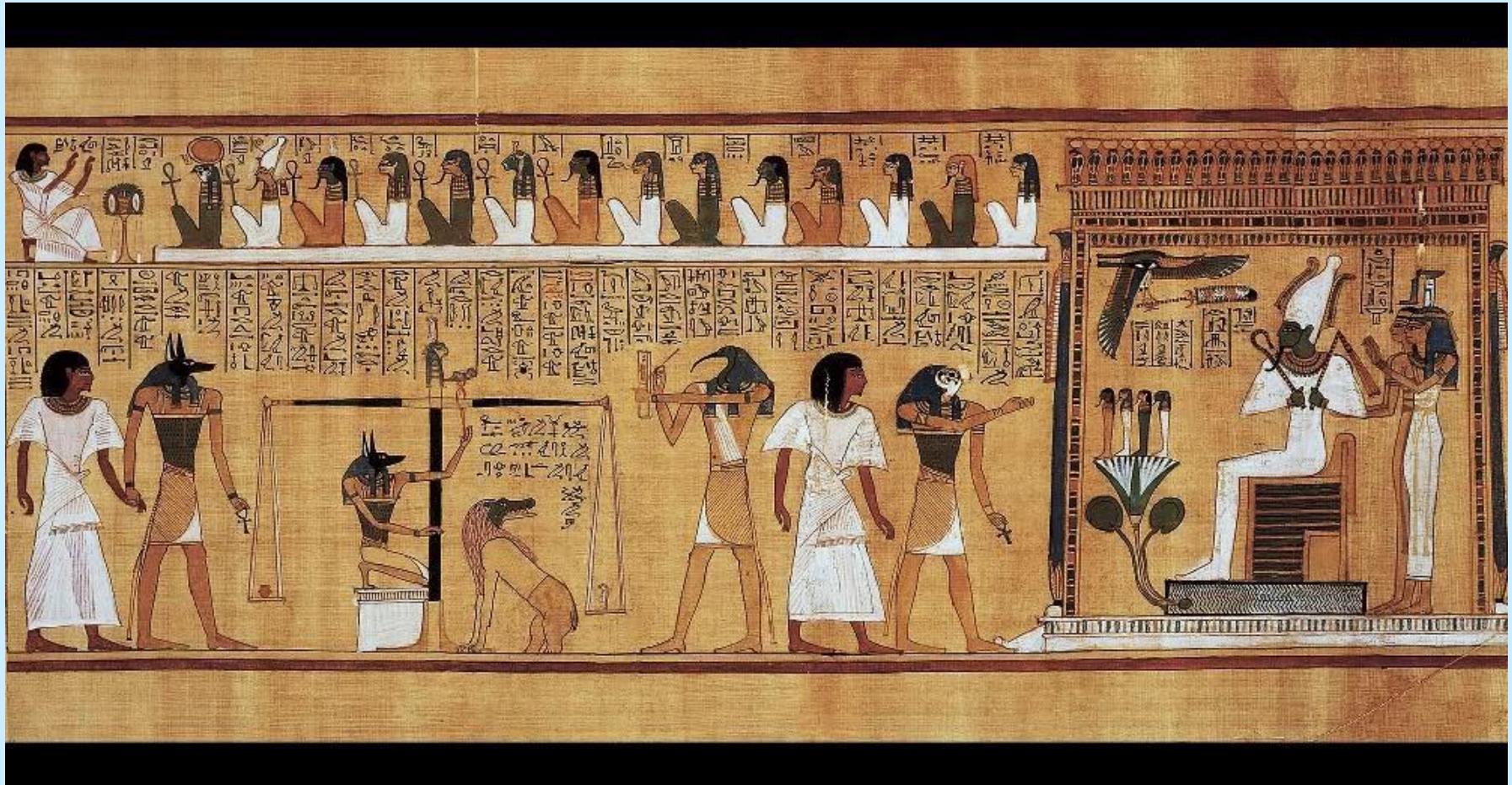
▲ This gold statuette of Amun-Re holds an ankh, symbolizing the giving of life, in one hand, and the scimitar, a symbol of strength, power and foreign conquest, in the other.

Creator, solar god



- In one version, Re/Ra descended nightly to the underworld as a tomcat to cut off the head of Apophis, who threatened his bark.
- Anyone Apophis swallowed became non-existent, a fate dreaded by Egyptians.

Weighing of the heart



The soul

The soul had 3 parts:

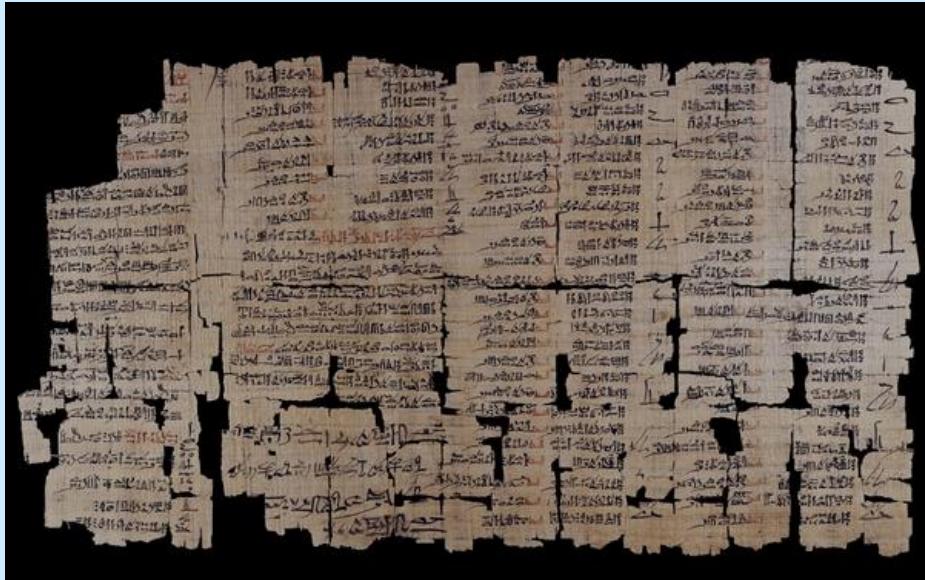
1. *ka*: the “life force” that left the body at death (the living provided food offerings to feed the *ka* for the afterlife)
2. *ba*: the part of the soul that could travel as a bird between the living and dead (sometimes viewed as a crested ibis; also required food in the afterlife)
3. *akh*: the “transfigured” spirit that mingled with the gods after death (limited to the virtuous; might be called to give testimony in a worldly lawsuit)



Trances and dreams

- The Egyptians considered sleep, especially while dreaming, to be contact with another realm that allowed the dreamer to access faraway things and people, including gods.
- In the Greco-Roman Period records refer to people deliberately spending the night in a temple to encourage dreams in which they would communicate with the gods.

The dream book



- This hieratic papyrus, probably dates to Ramesses II (1279-1213 BCE, New Kingdom).
- Each page has a vertical column headed: “if a man sees himself in a dream...”
- Each horizontal line describes a dream, followed by the diagnosis “good” or “bad,” and then the interpretation.

- Examples: “If a man sees himself in a dream looking out of a window, good; his cry is being heard.”
- “If a man sees himself in a dream with his bed catching fire, bad; it means driving away his wife.”

To avoid nightmares

- An early tool was a small figurine (or a substitute, like a bowl), that, when smashed, would forestall the nightmare.
- Middle Kingdom: A mixture of bread and herbs marinated in beer and incense could be rubbed on the dreamer's face to drive out “all the bad dreams that he has seen.”

Fluidity of belief

- In one nome it might be taboo to hunt crocodiles because they represented the local, benevolent god Sobek.
- In another it would be a religious act to kill them because they were “Followers of Seth” who had fought against the good gods Osiris and Horus (and, incidentally, were dangers lurking in the Nile).