The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Egypt
Godesses of Ancient Egypt

Richard H. Wilkinson

With 338 illustrations, 132 in color

Thames & Hudson
Half-title: The divine one of the heavens and her supporting deities. Outermost shrine of Tutankhamun, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.

Title page: Ramesses I before the enthroned Khnum and Osiris - personifications of the solar and chthonic aspects of the Egyptian view of the cosmos. From the tomb of Ramesses I, Valley of the Kings, western Thebes.

Contents page: Cypriot pillars in the mortuary temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel associate the great monarch with the god Osiris through the king's stance and insignia.

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As most Egyptians and it is only ancient Egyptians who are familiar with the two ancient charters and hoped-for new regulations.
Rule of the Gods

It is one of the ironies of ancient Egyptian religion that although we must cope with a dearth of archaeological evidence regarding the origin of the gods, Egyptian texts of the later periods contain many clear yet often seemingly contradictory accounts of their mythic genesis, and rule of the cosmos. In recent years, many Egyptologists have come to feel that these varying accounts may not simply reflect the conflicting traditions of different cult centres, as has long been assumed, but can instead be seen as different aspects of an underlying understanding of how the world and its creator gods came into being. Certainly, there was no single, unified Egyptian myth of creation, but the major cosmogonies (stories of the origins of the universe) and theogonies (stories of the origins of the gods) associated with the most important cult centres may be more alike than is at first apparent.

Latent power: the Hermopolitan view

At Hermopolis in Middle Egypt there existed a developed myth of creation by means of eight original deities – the so-called ‘Ogdoad’ or ‘group of eight’ who represented aspects of the original cosmos (see p. 77). Although most of the surviving textual evidence for this view of creation comes from the Ptolemaic Period, the ancient name of Hermopolis, Khemnu or ‘eight town’, is attested from the 5th dynasty and may well go back earlier, showing the antiquity of the myth.

According to the Hermopolitan view the eight primordial deities existed in four pairs of male and female, each associated with a specific aspect or element of the pre-creation: Nun (or Nu) and Naunet, Water; Heh and Hauhet, Infinity; Kek and Kauket, Darkness; Amun and Amaunet, Hiddeness. These original ‘elements’ were believed to be inert yet to contain the potential for creation. James Hoffmeier has shown that interesting similarities exist between these elements and the conditions listed as immediately prior to the creation account in the biblical book of Genesis. In Egypt, however, the members of the Ogdoad were regarded as distinct divine entities and their names were grammatically masculine and feminine to reflect the equating of creation with sexual union and birth. They were called the ‘family’ since this deity population in the Hermopolitan elsewhere.

Just as the growth was now a complement of inundation and land from the void, the original creative primordial material was the waters of Nun which blossomed (see p. 19) from the same act of God, light into the Sun, into time and all future events.

The power of the Heliopolitan deities

Heliopolis, the Sun temple, produced a somatic ‘family’ around the solar god, his nine deities, and eight of his children. The first was the logos of nature, their creator, Atum, who placed much on the importance of the dynamic aspect of his name. He was said to have been born in his own egg as a cosmic egg-god. At the moment of creation, he had caused, who came into being as a result of a source of light from himself, from his own power. At the moment of creation, he had caused the cosmos to be born, as a result of a source of light from himself, from his own power. At the moment of creation, he had caused the cosmos to be born, as a result of a source of light from himself, from his own power.
called the ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’ of the sun god, since this deity was the focal point of ongoing creation in the Hermopolitan worldview – as he was elsewhere.

Just as the beginning of the annual season of growth was marked in Egypt by the Nile’s receding inundation and the emergence of high points of land from the falling river, so the Egyptians viewed the original creation event as occurring when the primordial mound of earth (see Tatenen) rose from the waters of the First Time. It was said that a lotus blossom (see Nefertem) then rose from the waters or from the same primeval mound; and it was from this flower that the young sun god emerged bringing light into the cosmos, and with it the beginning of time and all further creation.

The power of the sun god: the Heliopolitan view

Heliopolis, the chief centre of solar worship, produced a somewhat different mythic system built around the so-called Ennead (see p. 78) or ‘group of nine’ deities which consisted of the sun god and eight of his descendants. The Heliopolitan theologians naturally stressed the role of the sun god in their creation stories which focus, as a result, not so much on the inert aspects of preexistence but on the dynamic aspects of the resultant creation itself. The form of the sun god usually associated with this creation was Atum (see p. 98), who was sometimes said to have existed within the primeval waters ‘in his egg’ as a way of explaining the origin of the god. At the moment of creation Atum was said to have been born out of the primordial flood as ‘he who came into being by himself’, thus becoming the source of all further creation. The god next produced two children, Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture), from himself. Several versions of the story exist, but in all of them Atum’s children are produced through the exhalation of the god’s body fluids or

(Above) One variant of the great Ennead or ‘group of nine deities’ which here consists of (right to left) the sun god Re; Horology with Atum and his descendants Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis and Horus. 18th dynasty. Tomb of Ay, western Valley of the Kings, western Thebes.

(Left) A god raises the disk of the sun from the earth into the heavens. Central to the Heliopolitan theology, the sun also played a role in all Egyptian creation accounts. Late Period papyrus. Egyptian Museum, Cairo.
mucus – either through the metaphor of masturbation, spitting or sneezing.

In turn, this first pair produced their own children, Geb (earth) and Nut (sky), who took their respective places below and above their parents, giving the creation its full spatial extent. Geb and Nut then produced the deities Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys who viewed from one perspective represented the fertile land of Egypt and the surrounding desert, so that the key elements of the Egyptian universe were completed at this time. Frequently the god Horus, son and heir of Osiris and the deity most closely associated with kingship, was added to this group, thus supplying the link between the physical creation and societal structures. All these aspects, however, were viewed as simply extensions of the original coming into being of the sun god who lay at the heart of this world view and who was thus ‘the father of all’ and ‘ruler of the gods’.

The power of thought and expression: the Memphite view

While the scholars of Heliopolis focused mainly on the emergence and development of the sun god, Atum, the priests of nearby Memphis looked at creation from the perspective of their own god Ptah. As the god of metalworkers, craftsmen and architects it was natural that Ptah was viewed as the great craftsman who made all things. But there was also another, much deeper, link between Ptah and the creation of the world which set the Memphite view of creation apart. The so-called Memphite Theology which is preserved on the Shabaqa Stone in the Egyptian collection of the British Museum reveals this important aspect of the Memphite theological system. While the inscription dates to the 25th dynasty it was copied from a much earlier source, apparently of the early 19th dynasty, though its principles may have dated to even earlier times. The text alludes to the Heliopolitan creation account centred on the god Atum, but goes on to claim that the Memphite god Ptah preceded the sun god and that it was Ptah who created Atum and ultimately the other gods and all else ‘through his heart and through his tongue’. The expression alludes to the conscious planning of creation and its execution through rational thought and speech, and this story of creation ex nihilo as attributed to Ptah by the priests of Memphis is the earliest known example of the so-called ‘logos’ doctrine in which the world is formed through a god’s creative speech. As such it was one of the most intellectual creation myths to arise in Egypt and in the ancient world as a whole. It lies before, as an image of the philosophical concepts found in the course of creation, there be light from light and darkness from the Christian point of view, it is the beginning with no end – no beginning, no end. God… all this, let the Memphite legend, like Atum, be our guide. Ptah was the creator-becoming male-female.

Mythic variants

As much as the stories of Heliopolitan theogony do not stand isolated from one another but are linked, it is clear that they are not consecutive. Although the stories appear apparently very similar, the gods are not always the same, the stories exist in different versions and which fitted into the Heliopolitan theogony stories related to this one. For example, when Atum is the creator god, the sun god Aten (see p. 205) or as the child (see p. 211) was often a subject of the other creation legend. The Memphite primeval world...
lies before, and in line with, the philosophical concepts found in the Hebrew Bible where 'God said, let there be light, and there was light' (Genesis 1:3), and the Christian scriptures which state that 'In the beginning was the Word [logos]... and the word was God... all things were made by him...’ (John 1:1, 3). Like Atum, however, Pth was also viewed as combining male and female elements within himself. This is seen in early texts, and in the latest period of Egyptian history the name of the god was written acrophonically as pet-ta-heh or p(e)t+t(a)+heh as though he were supporting the sky (pet) above the earth (ta) in the manner of the Heh deities (see p. 109), but also bridging and combining the female element of the sky and the male element of the earth in the androgynous manner of the primordial male-female duality Pth-Naunet.

Mythic variants
As much as these three systems of cosmogony and theogony differ in their details and in the stress placed upon differing deities by their own cults, it is clear that they all share a similar approach to creation. Although the differing approaches were apparently never combined into one unified myth, stories existed for many of the individual myths which fitted into the same overall framework. In the stories stressing the solar origin of creation, for example, we find variants which proclaimed that the sun god came into being as a hawk or falcon (see p. 205) or as a phoenix (see p. 212), in the form of a child (see p. 133), a scarab beetle (see p. 230) or some other creature, but these all originated from the primeval waters or from the mound which rose from them. There are also variants of the manner in which the monad (the prime, indivisible entity) is said to have produced the rest of creation – a Middle Kingdom text found on coffins at el-Bersheh states of the 'All-lord': 'I brought into being the gods from my sweat, and men are the tears of my eye'; but these do not differ radically from those of Heliopolis considered above. To some extent all these stories appear as kaleidoscopic variations of core mythic elements, and may indicate an effort on the part of the Egyptian theologians to incorporate deities which had arisen in different parts of Egypt, or at different times, into existing mythic frameworks. It is often the nature of the creator deities and the basis of their power which is at issue in the varying stories of the origin and rule of the gods.
‘Secret of development but glittering of forms,  
orden god of many developments  
All gods boast in him,  
in order to magnify themselves in his perfection…’  

Papyrus Leiden 1350, trans. by James Allen

The nature of the gods is one of the most fascinating yet complex aspects of ancient Egyptian religion, for the very concept of ‘god’ had a much broader meaning in this civilization than in many others. The deities of Egypt had both human and elevated qualities, the latter often masked by strange animal appearances and seemingly bizarre roles, yet they commanded sometimes surprising heights of religious development.

There is no doubt that the ancient Egyptians honoured literally hundreds of deities. Was there, however, beneath this rampant polytheism, a recurrent insight leading towards an understanding of a unity among gods, a primitive idea of the manifestation of one god in many, or even true monotheism itself? Scholars have debated this question for generations, and only recently have convincing answers begun to take shape.
Forms of the Divine

The ancient Egyptians visualized their gods and goddesses in manifold ways, and this is demonstrated by the Egyptian word "netcher", the etymology and original meaning of which are unknown, although examination of the word's use by the Egyptians shows that it actually encompassed a far wider range of meanings than the English word god. It could include deified humans (famous individuals, and from the 30th dynasty, those who had crowned) as well as what might be called spirits and demons, or in some cases even monsters such as the great chaos serpent Apophis. In fact, a determinative sign indicating 'god' (see box, Writing the Names of the Gods) could be added to the name of any unusual or exotic creature and even the Egyptians' hieroglyphs were themselves sometimes regarded as 'gods'.

Gods, spirits, demons and bou

In addition to their major gods the ancient Egyptians believed in various other types of supernatural beings which are often included in the category of minor deities. Even the earliest religious writings are peopled with frightening creatures (especially underworld monsters and demon-like beings) and throughout ancient Egyptian literature we find references to demons and spirits which seem to be similar to the djins of Arab culture. The ghosts or spirits of the deceased were also feared by the Egyptians and were known as "akhnu", a term which itself was also used of demons in the later periods. But the most feared, or at least most commonly feared, beings were the messengers and "ban" of deities. "Ban" were manifestations or emanations of a god. Often they occurred in groups and seemed quite generic, but they were also linked with specific deities which, when offended, sent their ban to punish or trouble the offender. Magicians used their most potent spells and conjured the images of the most bizarre and frightening beings to combat these ban and hold them at bay.

Appearance of the divine

Despite the fact that the Egyptian pantheon appears to the outside observer to be filled with a veritable menagerie of gods, goddesses and other beings in an almost mindless variety of manifestations, for the most part Egyptian deities were conceived in logical types consisting of human (anthropomorphic), animal (zoomorphic), hybrid, and composite forms.

Generally, the so-called 'cosmic' gods and goddesses of the heavens and earth such as Shu, god of the air, and Nut, goddess of the sky, were anthropomorphic in form, as were 'geographic' deities or those representing specific areas such as rivers, mountains, cities and estates. Certain others, not fitting these categories - some of them very ancient, such as the fertility god Min - also took human form, as did deified humans such as deceased kings and other notables.

Zoomorphic deities were also common throughout Egyptian history. Perhaps the most ancient deity known in Egypt took the form of the falcon, and the worship of animals as representative of deities was especially prevalent in the later periods. Gods associated with specific animal species were viewed as male or female according to their apparent or perceived characteristics. Male deities often took the form of the bull, ram, falcon or lion, and female deities were often associated with the cow, vulture, cobra or lioness.

'Hybrid' or more accurately 'bimorphic' half-human and half-animal deities existed in two forms...
The Egyptian word netcher or 'god' was usually written by means of one of a number of hieroglyphic signs which were added as 'determinatives' or group indicators at the end of names of deities, as well as being used alone. One of the commonly used signs found from Old Kingdom times was a seated divine figure (see illustration 1) which could be male or female and thus was used specifically for gods and goddesses. Variants of this sign which signified individual deities (in a few cases standing or depicted in some other position) were also used, especially in the New Kingdom and later periods. From much earlier times the word 'god' could also be written by means of a hieroglyph depicting a falcon (2) - sometimes on a perch - doubtless indicative of the great antiquity of many of the falcon gods of Egypt. The most commonly used sign for god, however, which was also very ancient, resembles in its developed form a flag atop a pole (see illustration 3) - the symbol of divine presence which fronted Egyptian temples and shrines back to predynastic times. As John Baines has shown, this sign has a complex history and may have developed as a means of signalling the presence of a deity without having a narrow, individual meaning associated with a specific divine power. Very late in Egyptian history the hieroglyph of a star (see illustration 4) could also be used to write the word god, but this is found only from the Ptolemaic Period on. All these signs could be written twice for dual numbers or three times for the plural 'gods' and sometimes in even larger numbers such as three groups of three signifying an ennead or group of nine gods: a writing which could also connote a 'plurality of plurality' or 'all the gods'.

- having the head of either a human or an animal and the body of the opposite type. Evidence for the former dates to at least the 4th dynasty with the sphinx as a human-headed animal, and on the 3rd-dynasty stela of Qahedjet (in the Louvre) a hawk-headed anthropomorphic god is the earliest known example of the latter type. The head is consistently the original and essential element of these deities, with the body representing the secondary aspect. Thus, as Henry Fischer pointed out, 'a lion-headed...
The lion-headed goddess personifies the most common type of "hybrid" or bimorphic deity in which the head of an animal is fused with an anthropomorphic body. Graeco-Roman Period, Dendera Temple, Nubia.

goddess is a lion-goddess in human form, while a royal sphinx, conversely, is a man who has assumed the form of a lion.

Composite deities differ from the hybrid forms by combining different deities or characteristics rather than representing an individual god in a particular guise. They may be made up of numerous zoomorphic or anthropomorphic deities, and range from baboon-hawks or hippopotamus-serpents to multiple-headed and -armed deities combining as many as a dozen different gods. Despite their bizarre appearances, there remains a certain logic to many of these polymorphic deities as seen, for example, by comparing the fearsome Ammut and the more benign Taweret: both are part hippopotamus, crocodile and lioness, but fused to very different effect.

A fixed iconography for a given god was uncommon, and some appear in several guises – Thoth was represented by both the baboon and the ibis and Amun by the ram or the goose. However it is rare for a deity to be found in human, animal and hybrid forms, for example the sun god Re was depicted as a falcon or a human with the head of a falcon but not usually in purely human form. There are some exceptions, such as the represented as a woman with the head of a face of mist.

Divine Identity

Ultimately it is the visual representation that defines the Egyptian concept.
are some exceptions – the goddess Hathor could be represented in fully human form, as a cow, as a woman with the head of a cow, or as a woman with a face of mixed human and bovine features.

**Divine identities**

Ultimately it must be remembered that the various representations of the gods do not reflect the Egyptian concept of what their deities actually looked like. Their assigned forms were merely formalities, giving visible, recognizable appearances to deities that were often described as ‘hidden’, ‘mysterious’ or even ‘unknown’. The physical form allowed cultic or personal interaction with deities, but their real identity was to be found in their own individual roles and characters, which were usually far broader than could be delimited by physical images or representations. Although many deities had clear
associations, such as that of Re with the sun, different deities could share the same associations — Atum, Re, Khepri, Horakhty and several other gods were all associated with the sun, for example. Conversely, many deities were associated with more than one characteristic. Most of the more important gods and goddesses had many different names showing their multiple identities — and some, such as Neith and Hathor, fulfilled several distinct roles, often without exhibiting any single identity which could be said to be clearly 'primary'. Generally, and often as a result of fusion of lesser deities, the greater the deity the wider the range of his or her associations and identities.

The characters of individual deities and their relationships with humanity could be widely different. Some deities were viewed as particularly helpful to humans. Thoth, Horus and Isis were all called senu or 'physician', for example, due to their healing powers. But while many gods and goddesses were viewed as benevolent, others were regarded as being imimical towards humanity. Even some of those who were generally regarded as benevolent could be ambivalent in nature. This was especially true of female deities. Hathor, for example, was worshipped as a goddess of love, music and celebration, but she was also mythically typecast as a raging destroyer of humanity. In some cases deities exhibited different forms according to aspects of their nature, so that in her usual placid role the goddess Bastet appeared in the form of the cat, and in her more ferocious role in the guise of a lioness. Such ambivalence is not rare among the Egyptian gods, and it is sometimes difficult to ascertain whether certain deities were worshipped despite or because of their potential hostility. Like their own human subjects, they could drink (sometimes in excess), think, speak, interact with shame and personality tension.

Time and change

While every god had its own godhead and other regions had times rising and setting for the gods. The result was different — such as the god Re, area of influence. The gods were limited locally and the god's own local deity often at the base of the goddess's change.

Time and change

While every god had its own godhead and other regions had times rising and setting for the gods. The result was different — such as the god Re, area of influence. The gods were limited locally and the god's own local deity often at the base of the goddess's change.
human subjects, the Egyptian gods could eat and drink (sometimes to excess), they could work, fight, think, speak and even cry out in despair. They could interact well or poorly and could exhibit anger, shame and humour — often exhibiting distinctive personality traits as part of their identities.

**Time and change**

While every area of Egypt doubtless originally had its own god or goddess, many deities developed other regional associations through time — sometimes rising to the status of regional or national gods. The reverse could also occur, and some deities such as the god Montu eventually lost much of their area of influence and finally held revered but fairly limited local status. Although the area of origin of a deity often became the location of that god or goddess's chief cult centre, this was not always the case. While the centre of worship of the great god Amun was located at Thebes, for example, it seems that he was not himself of Theban origin.

Change could also affect the organization of gods. As time progressed, many of the cults of the major deities were organized into family triads of a 'father', 'mother', and 'son' — as with Amun, Mut and Khonsu at Thebes, or Ptah, Sekhmet and Nefertern at Memphis. This development effectively strengthened the position of some deities and meant that others, not included in important temple 'families', tended to be relegated to less important status and were less likely to receive cultic service.

Even the character or nature of deities could change with time, and perhaps the most dramatic example of this is found in the god Seth, whose perceived nature, popularity and importance fluctuated widely in different periods. The process of change often occurred in one of two ways — through the assimilation of a less important deity by a greater one or, more rarely, by the assimilation of a characteristic of a great deity by a lesser one. The god Osiris provides an excellent example of the first situation, as he took on many epithets and characteristics from deities which he assimilated during the wide-ranging spread of his cult. On the other hand, the often superlative role played by solar theology in Egyptian religion led to the association of many lesser deities with the sun god or solar characteristics. The phenomenon is especially noticeable in later periods, and in temples of the Ptolemaic Period we find Hathor, Isis, Horus, Khnum and other deities praised not only as the children of the sun god but also as solar deities in their own right with clear solar epithets and iconographic attributes. Egypt's gods were thus susceptible to change through time regarding their very natures as well as their relative importance.
Manifestations of the Gods

God as many gods

In the Egyptian texts the gods are often said to be 'rich in names', and the multiplicity of names (and therefore manifestations) exhibited by individual deities provides an important example of the principle whereby one god may be seen as many. In the New Kingdom text known as the Litany of Re the solar god is identified in 'all his evolutions' as 75 different deities – including not only common forms of the sun but also female deities such as Isis and Nut. Osiris received prayers and litanies of praise under many names, and the mythological story explaining how his body was torn into pieces and scattered throughout Egypt provides an example of how one god could become many. Yet this example is unique and such a physical explanation for multiple instances and locations of a deity was not necessary for the application of the principle. In the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu we find that the goddess Hathor is represented by as many forms as there are days in the year (and each of these is actually named as two variant forms), but there seems to have been no mythic backdrop to this situation which would have required the Egyptians to posit many independent forms of the goddess. Perhaps the ultimate example of the multiplicity of divine names is to be found in the great god Amun, who was given so many names that the number was said to be unknowable.

Another aspect of the multiple names of individual gods can be seen in those cases where a given deity was regarded as the ba or manifestation of another. Of the god Khnum, for example, it was often said that he was the 'ba of Re' or of Osiris and so on, so that a given deity was not only associated with another, but also took on further names and identities in this manner. As several scholars have pointed out, the form, name and epithets of Egyptian deities seem to have been variable almost at will, and are often interchangeable with those of other deities. But while it could be argued that in almost all these cases the various names and manifestations of deities are simply forms of the same underlying god or goddess, individual deities were manifest in often increasingly diverse ways showing a basic Egyptian predilection for the concept of one god as many.

Pantheism

Pantheism, the related idea that identifies all aspects of the universe with a god, is a concept that has appealed to a number of Egyptologists since the latter part of the 19th century. These included scholars of the stature of Edouard Naville and James Henry Breasted, who felt that solar pantheism was an important part of ancient Egyptian religion. Yet, more recently several Egyptologists have shown that Egyptian religion exhibits clear traits which deny this equation. These are the self-imposed limitation of Egyptian religion, which clearly did not try to defy every aspect of creation, and limitations in the number and types of forms which even the greatest gods are said to take. As Erik Hornung has written, 'Amun may appear in the most various forms, but never as the moon, a tree, or a stretch of water', and this list may be extended considerably. In fact, as Marie-Ange Bonhème has put it, the boundaries of the individuality of the Egyptian gods 'forbids certain manifestations so as to prevent a progression toward complete pantheism', and although the vast number of deities found in Egyptian religion may be reminiscent of pantheism, the resemblance is superficial, as Hornung rightly claims. For the Egyptians the creator god may have manifested himself in his creation, but he was certainly not absorbed by it.

Many gods as one

The ancient Egyptians seem to have formed groups among their deities since very early times. Although we cannot tell if the various deities depicted together on Pre- and Early Dynastic palettes and other artifacts were intended to represent groups of any kind, this might have been the case in some instances. However, by the time of the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom the grouping of gods and goddesses into enmeads of nine (though sometimes more or fewer) deities is fully established, as is the grouping of the Souls of Pe and Nekhen, or the Souls of Pe and Heliopolis and the 'Followers of Horus'. Even before the formulation of these groups there seems to have existed a very early grouping of gods called simply the khnet or 'body' – this is found in the Pyramid Texts (PT
is not only associated with the several scholars and epitheps of individual deities, but also associated with those of the same god, argued that in the development of Egyptian names and manifestations of the same god, the individual deities were at times also linked by these ways showing the concept of

differentiation.

The concept of differentiation identifies all the different deities. It is a concept that is very important to Egyptologists since the beginning of the 19th century. These included scholars like Howard Naville and Sir Alan Gardiner, who observed that solar pantheism was the most ancient Egyptian concept. In their time, Egyptologists and scholars who worked on the exhibits clear connections between these beliefs in the self-understanding of the individual deities, which resulted in the creation of different types of forms that were to be used in the life to come. As a result, the concept of differentiation may appear in many ways, starting from the moon, a woman or a child. This list may be continued as Marie-Ange Deonna pointed out the individuality of these deities, certain manifestations of the same god, toward the concept of differentiation. The vast number of deities who have been associated with the same god may be reminiscent of the process of absorption. However, it is superficial, and it may be that the Egyptians the gods were themselves in their own lives and absorbed by it.

The solar god Re-Horakhty, who have formed into a combined god, was very early times. The three main deities of the early Dynastic period were established to represent three worlds, and it is likely that these were the case from the beginning of the time of the expansion of the empire. The grouping of the deities is fully described in two texts: the Souls of Pe to Pe, and the Osiris of Heliopolis and the Osiris of Abydos. Before the formulation of the pyramids, it is likely there have existed a combination of the gods simply the khet or the pyramid. Index of the Pyramid Texts (PT

Manifestations of the Gods

**Syncretism**

There is, nevertheless, a good deal of evidence for the Egyptian practice of linking or bringing together different deities into the body or identity of a combined god or goddess (sometimes, though not always, with 'composite' form). This was accomplished in several ways, most commonly by bringing deities together through the linkage of their names, creating composite gods such as Atum-Khepri, Re-Horakhty, and Amun-Re. Some of these syncretisms may be seen as simple combinations of similar deities or even different aspects of the same god – Atum-Khepri combined the evening and morning manifestations of the sun and Re-Horakhty formed a composite of two other important aspects or forms of the solar deity. In other
cases, syncretism involved the linking of deities of very different natures as with Amun-Re in whom the Egyptian theologians wished to combine Amun and Re as a unifying of the greatest visible and invisible powers of the world. The practice could also reflect the association of a local deity with one of the greater gods (as with Sobek-Re or Khnum-Re), often, as Hermann Junker first pointed out, with the name of the local god being placed before that of the external, and usually greater, god. In these cases the power and standing of the major god were shared with the lesser deity, though the arrangement also accorded more power to the external god in the local sphere. The process which united two deities in this manner could also bring together three, four or even more deities as in the case of the syncretism of Ptah, Sokar and Osiris into one consummate funerary deity, or the form Harmachis-Khepri-Re-Atum which brought together major solar-related gods. The same process could also unite foreign deities with Egyptian ones as with the Asiatic-Egyptian Anat-Hathor and the Meroitic-Egyptian Aresnuphis-Shu, as well as the great Ptolemaic hybrid deity Serapis who brought together Osiris, Apis, Zeus and Helios.
The purpose of syncretisms such as these was doubtless not to simply combine conflicting or competing deities as was assumed by many early Egyptologists. In many cases there clearly was no conflict between syncretized deities, and there is frequently no reason why the two or more united deities should not have been simply worshipped side by side, as Horus and Sobek were at Kom Ombo in the Ptolemaic Period or, in fact, as a great many of Egypt’s deities were worshipped in multiple chapels in temples throughout the land from much earlier times. Rather, it is as if the Egyptians were acknowledging the presence of one god or goddess ‘in’ another deity whenever that deity took on a role which was a primary function of the other. But this indwelling does not mean that one deity was subsumed within another, nor does it indicate that the two deities became identical or that there was also an underlying movement towards monotheism involved in the process. Erik Hornung has shown that, properly understood, syncretism does not isolate but rather links different deities and often the process effectively creates a third god where there were originally only two.
‘I decked the breast of the lord of Abydos with lapis lazuli and turquoise, fine gold, and all costly stones which are the ornaments of a god’s body. I clothed the god with his regalia in my rank of ‘master of secrets’.’

Stela of Ikhnaton

The ancient Egyptians believed that the stability of the created world had to be carefully preserved through the upholding of their deities – for it was the care and sustenance of the gods and the maintenance of cosmic balance which kept chaos and non-being from encroaching upon and overwhelming the world. Thus, the Egyptian concept of religion centred far more upon individual and collective service of the gods and upon right actions than on abstract theological ideas, creeds or tenets of belief.

Collective worship of the gods involved constant service through the daily cleansing, clothing, feeding and entertainment of their images in formal temple settings as well as in a myriad festivals, rituals and mysteries. At a personal level, individuals in all sections of society had access to the gods which developed, especially in the later periods of Egyptian history, into a close relationship with the divine and eventually to the concept of personal salvation itself.

Offering-bearers present bread, beer, vegetables, meat, papyrus, flowers and other gifts to the ba of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris. Tomb of Khnumef, 18th dynasty. Western Thebes.
Care of the Gods

From the very establishment of the ancient Egyptian state around 3000 BC, religion developed along two separate paths - which often ran in very different directions. On the one hand, individual veneration of the gods continued to develop its own stresses and focal points (which are considered in the next section). On the other hand, the founding of the monarchical state enhanced the development of state-favoured and subsidized cults which served the gods formally.

Houses of the gods

Unlike the gods of the ancient Greeks and some other cultures, Egyptian deities did not readily mix with their human subjects, and their interaction was usually found in specific contexts and areas, the most important of which was the temple. From the small reed huts of predynastic times to the towering stone structures of the New Kingdom and later periods, temples were the focal points of individual population centres and of Egyptian society as a whole. Unlike modern cathedrals, churches, synagogues, mosques and other religious structures, however, Egyptian temples were not primarily designed for the worship of the gods. Worship could and did take place within them, but they primarily functioned as complex symbolic models of the cosmos, as interfaces between the physical and supernatural worlds, and as 'houses' of the gods for their care and provision - functions which overlapped to a considerable degree. Even though some deities had no temples of their own and others were not even represented as subsidiary deities in any temple, in a sense they were all represented by the temples, which functioned to preserve cosmic order and thus the gods themselves.

The physical form of the temple was shaped to this purpose. Sacred sites were ringed by _temenos_ walls designed not only to exclude the profane but also to symbolically and even physically keep external unrest and chaos at bay. The outer temple walls defined an area not only sacred in the religious sense but also representative of the very sphere of life and order which existed within the infinite chaos posited by Egyptian cosmography. The architectural programme and decoration of the temple proper furthered this model. Its axial procession way symbolized the path of the sun, and its darkened inner sanctuary acted as a physical metaphor for both the darkness of night out of which came rebirth and the darkness of initial creation out of which sprang life and order in the beginning. These detailed cosmic models functioned like exquisitely and perfectly regulated time pieces with the work of the king, and of the priests who represented him, providing the power to run them through the mystery of cultic service.

(Right) The mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, western Thebes. Although used during the king's lifetime, such royal mortuary temples were designed for the ongoing care of the deceased and divine king.

(Far right) Inner sanctuary and shrine of the temple of Horus at Edfu. Ptolemaic Period.
Temple service

The service and care of the gods was thus paramount not only to the Egyptians' sense of religious responsibility toward their deities but also to the continuation of existence itself. This was effected through the practice of rituals which supported the gods so that they in turn might be able to preserve and sustain the world. In fact, Dimitri Meeks has shown that a single common feature shared by the various beings called 'gods' by the Egyptians is that they were the recipients of ritual. These rituals were of many types but are most easily classified on a temporal basis. Viewed this way we may differentiate the daily ritual service of the gods which tended their basic needs; the occasional but regular rituals which were part of the recurrent festivals of the temple calendar; and finally, the non-regular rituals which were performed only on special occasions or under special circumstances. Rituals of the third class were naturally the least commonly enacted and are rarely depicted in temple scenes, while those of festival and daily rituals decorate the walls of many Egyptian temples. In virtually all cases, however, temple depictions of ritual service do not reflect the reality of the ritual but are rather an idealized representation in which the king and deity are the sole participants. Even in scenes where priests are represented — as in depictions of processions — they are clearly ancillary to the figure of the monarch, for the most fundamental aspect of temple service during the pharaonic period was that in theory, and hence symbolically, it was the king himself who performed all major actions of the service of the cult. This aspect of temple function was rooted in the mythic reality of the king as legitimate descendant and heir of the gods — concepts which will be examined later. However in actual practice it was, of course, the priests who acted as the king's surrogates and who usually performed the rituals involved in the care of the gods.
Images of the gods

The object of this service was the divine image, for
the statue of the deity housed within the sanctuary of
the temple was the focal point of the entire cult.
As a result, the amount of work dedicated to the
production of divine images was often considerable
and the results doubtless awe-inspiring.

Although they were not considered to be the gods
themselves, statues of gods and goddesses were
believed to house the spirits or manifestations of
the deities, and because of this they were treated as
though they were alive. Divine images were taken
from their shrines each day and washed, dressed in
clean clothes, adorned with precious ornaments
and censed. They were given offerings of food and
drink – usually wine, milk or water – and then
returned to their shrines. The distinction between
the medium of the statue and the separate identity
of the deity is clear in textual sources, however:

‘The God of this earth is the sun in the sky.
While his images are on earth,
When incense is given them as daily food,
The lord of risings is satiated.’

The Instruction of Amy

The divine image was not only treated reverentially
but was also the recipient of considerable gifts. For
example, Amenophis III placed images
of the gods to a statue of the images
were even more
often recorded
representing his gods,
whom they were.

On festival days, images of the gods
barques which were driven by the
priests and carried to sites. These were
or their own or simply take up the
position of the festival.

Festivals, rituals, and cults

The festivals were the framework for
celebrations on the gods, and
‘Festival celeb road’
were often inscribed on
the regular daily
high days ceremonies.

Renewal is a key idea in festivals as their rituals
were held on the same kind of
they occurred each day in the community.
Festivals perform a symbolic function. The
birth of Re and times involved the temple rituals
and be united with the
shared re-birth of various festivals.

The key festivals were the first month (celebrated in the
first month) and the tenth month (celebrated in the
festival had the same name as
of course, but the
prominent theme in
The power of the
order maintained this
unscheduled.
kind of ritual known as
the month’ ceremony
or it could be a goddess
potential brought sometimes by
accomplished. Rituals performed were
more focused on
Thus rituals
also served to

Many aspects of special rituals also served to
mysteries (0...
example, Amenophis Son of Hapu, chief steward of Amenophis III, records that he donated 1,000 animals to a statue of the king. Royal gifts to the gods were even more prodigious, of course, and were often recorded in representations of the king presenting his gifts before the image of the deity to whom they were made.

On festival days or other special occasions the images of the gods were often placed in portable barques which were carried upon the shoulders of the priests and taken in procession to significant sites. These were often the temples of other deities, or their own outlying temples where the deity would simply take up temporary occupancy for the duration of the festival or special event.

Festivals, rituals and mysteries
The festivals of the deities provided the structural framework for many of the important rituals focusing on the gods and on cultic or cosmic renewal. 'Festival calendars' or lists of ritual activities were inscribed on the walls and doorways of temples and often included the offerings to be made not only in the regular daily service but also on all the particular high days celebrated in the temple's cult.

Renewal is particularly important in these festivals as their purpose was ultimately directed to the same kind of rejuvenation or rebirth achieved each day in the constant solar cycle. Thus, one of the rituals performed on New Year's Day — also called 'the birth of Re' — and most fully recorded in Ptolemaic times involved carrying the statues of deities up to the temple roof. Here the god or goddess could see and be united with the rising sun in a moment of shared rebirth. Many of the same rituals and religious performances were enacted on a number of key festivals such as those of the first day of the first month (New Year) and the first day of the fifth month (celebrating the rebirth of Osiris). Some festivals had their own particularly focused meanings, of course, but renewal or rebirth was a predominant theme in a great number of them.

The power of the gods was also tapped and order maintained by means of rituals utilized on unscheduled special occasions. This could be the kind of ritual employed in the 'opening of the mouth' ceremony in order to animate a temple statue or it could be one with much wider application. The goddess Sekhmet, for example, was regarded as a potential bringer of plague and disease who sometimes had to be propitiated and her priests were often skilled in medicine. Placation could be accomplished through large-scale magico-religious rituals performed in the temples as well as through more focused rituals directed at individual sufferers. Thus rituals for the care of humanity ultimately also served to care for the gods.

Many aspects of the daily service, festival and special rituals were described by the Egyptians as 'mysteries' (Egyptian Aten). In fact, by virtue of its supernatural basis, any ritual might be said to be a mystery. More particularly, any part of a ritual which was conducted privately, beyond the view of the people at large, was given this name because it was also hidden and part of the secret knowledge of the priests and others who were skilled in its performance. A general atmosphere of secrecy was developed by the priesthoods as time progressed, but in reality the same priests sometimes performed similar rituals — such as the 'opening of the mouth' — in both hidden and open settings, and the boundaries between formal temple ceremonies and private ritual were probably blurred to some degree.
Popular Religion and Piety

Although the common people played little or no active part in the formal rituals conducted by the official cults, they had their own opportunities and avenues for worship of their deities. Herodotus' often quoted statement that the Egyptians were 'religious beyond measure...more than any other people' seems to have applied not only to the great temples with their multitudes of priests and elaborate service of the gods, but also to the piety of many ordinary people. But achieving a fuller assessment of popular religion in ancient Egypt is made difficult by a number of factors. As John Baines has stressed, on the one hand, the archaeological record is incomplete since far less is known of the religious practices of people living in towns, villages and rural areas than about the formal worship that took place in the cult temples of gods and kings. On the other hand, the archaeological record itself can be somewhat misleading. While a great deal of the ancient Egyptian material which has survived is religious in nature, the bulk of it was produced by and for the society's elite - the royal and noble families. Their religion was not necessarily the same as that of the common people, however, and in some cases it was clearly different. We do not know to what degree religious piety was present throughout Egypt's various social classes or to what extent this situation changed over time. Nevertheless, despite these difficulties, a fair amount is known about popular religion - at least in certain areas and times - and we can only presume that what is known is indicative of the broader picture.

Access to the gods

In the earlier periods of Egyptian history there was often no clear distinction between the priesthood and other members of society, as temple service was conducted by individuals who, after their assigned rotation of duties, returned to secular work in their communities. However, in New Kingdom and later times when the priestly offices became professional and largely hereditary ones, the situation changed considerably, and we find a much greater gap between the population at large and those involved in formal service of the gods. Lay individuals could place votive offerings in the outer areas of temples, but the chief occasions during which they could approach the gods were public festivals. At these times lay people might witness the procession of a deity, although it would be from a decorous distance and usually the actual image of the god would not be visible to them. Those outside the priesthood had access to 'hearing ear' shrines placed in the outer walls of many temples, and the colossal statues in front of their pylons were also readily accessible to the people as mediators of their prayers. In some temples the gods could also be approached through oracles which would answer important questions, and common people also had some access to the gods in legal matters. This was sometimes accomplished through specific movements of the god's portable shrine barque while it was being carried in procession, when questions were addressed to the deity. Though we do not know how commonly this type of oracular manifestation occurred or how widely it was accessible, it is probable that such guidance of the gods was sought when the courts were not able to settle a matter.

Another way in which the common people had access to the gods was through dreams. For Egyptians, the sleeper temporarily inhabited the world of the gods, and dreams could thus often involve contact with the gods. The best-known examples of this are found in the records of New Kingdom monarchs such as Thutmose IV to whom the Great Sphinx spoke as a god in a dream, although even the most humble commoner could dream of deities in the same manner. Magical texts describe the meanings of many such dreams which might be experienced, and we have ample evidence of dreams being actively elicited as means to understanding the will of the gods.

Finally, we must not rule out other forms of perception, for the Egyptian gods could also be sensed through their fragrance, through sounds and in other such ways. For the ancient Egyptian even the wind felt on a person's face might be perceived as the breath of a god or the passage of the air god Shu. We should not altogether discount the perceived ability of the Egyptians to encounter their gods in everyday contexts, although these may have been viewed as of relatively less importance than the potential for interaction with the divine found in the houses of the gods.

Gifts to the gods

Flourish visitors to temples donated perishable offerings such as food, drink or flowers as well as non-perishable gifts dedicated to the gods ranging from simple trinket-like objects to finely carved and painted statues and votive stelae. These latter items represent the most important votive gifts found in archaeological contexts.

Statues given as gifts to the gods or placed worshipfully before them were produced in large numbers in many periods. Most of the statues to have survived from ancient Egypt are in fact votive pieces donated to the gods by kings, nobles, priests and various officers of the state, and even as collective gifts from cities and towns. Such votive
possible to them. The term "to hear" refers to the ability to receive messages from the deities. The delivery of these messages was often facilitated by the presence of sacred images of the gods and goddesses. In ancient Egypt, such images were typically found in the form of statues, which were believed to be the embodiment of the deity's essence.

It was believed that the statues were able to communicate with the gods, and that the divine messages were conveyed through the statues. This practice was widespread among the ancient Egyptians, and it was seen as a way to establish a direct line of communication with the divine realm.

The statues were often placed in temples or shrines, and they were surrounded by offerings and ritual performances. The belief in the power of the statues was so strong that it was not uncommon for people to seek out the assistance of a particular statue in times of need.

The practice of using statues to communicate with the gods was not limited to the religious elite. It was a widespread practice among all strata of society, and it was believed to be effective in all situations. The statues were seen as powerful mediators between the human and divine worlds, and they were believed to be able to influence the course of events.

The use of statues to communicate with the gods was a complex and multifaceted practice. It involved a wide range of rituals and beliefs, and it was central to the religious life of ancient Egypt. The power of the statues was so great that they were often referred to as "living gods," and they were revered and worshipped by people of all ages and backgrounds.
In New Kingdom times in particular, such stelae also often depicted one or more large pairs of ears as symbolic listening devices to ensure that the supplicant's prayers were 'heard' by the god. Such 'ear' stelae may be almost completely covered with these depictions or decorated with the representation of a single, huge, pair of ears – presumably increasing the 'auditory' effectiveness of the stelae.

**Private worship and personal piety**

From the Middle Kingdom onwards we find stelae showing the direct worship of Osiris by the deceased and a 'personal piety' movement began to develop, eventually resulting in more direct divine access for the common people – perhaps in contrast to the increasingly hereditary and professional nature of the priesthood. Thus, by New Kingdom times, in addition to the great temples staffed by courses of priests there were numerous small local shrines in which prayers could be offered or votive offerings left for the deity to whom the shrine was dedicated. In the workers' village of Deir el-Medina in western Thebes there were shrines of this type honouring Amun, Hathor, Ptah, Thoth, Isis, Osiris, Anubis and other gods as well as certain deities of foreign origin such as Astarte and Qadesh. A shrine to Hathor excavated there provides an example of one apparently receiving the veneration mainly of women.

These local shrines show evidence of a good deal of use, but it appears that the religion of many Egyptians may have been dominated by the veneration of personal or local gods honoured in even smaller household shrines. Homes excavated at Deir el-Medina contained niches in which were kept the images of departed relatives and also of household deities – most commonly the god Bes and the goddess Taweret. These deities had the power to ward off evil, appearing on plaques or as amulets which were attached to household objects or worn on the person. While such plaques and amulets may be considered apotropaic or protective magic rather than worship *per se*, the two can hardly be separated, as the Egyptian gods figured prominently in all types of magical rituals and procedures aimed at procuring desirable conditions or avoiding undesirable ones. The wish to control or tap the supernatural powers of the cosmos was pervasive in the religions of the ancient world and Egypt was certainly no exception, for its vast pantheon provided a rich realm of possible allies in the practice of religious magic.