

Ideas That Shaped Egyptian Life

Fascinating Facts

- Scientists believe that it took more than twenty years to build the Great Pyramid at Giza, the burial place for King Khufu.
- In ancient Egypt a special ball game was an important religious event. The pharaoh used a stick to hit a ball to several priests. Because the ball represented the evil eye of Apophis, the gods were happy when this game was played.
- The ancient Egyptians made mummies of all sorts of animals. In one tomb, at least four million mummies of ibises—birds sacred to Thoth—were found.

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Nonfiction	• Summarize	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captions • Chart • Sidebars

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by Rena Korb





In ancient Egypt, people worshiped many gods and goddesses as part of their religious beliefs. In this book you will read about some of these gods and goddesses and how they shaped the everyday lives of ancient Egyptians.

Vocabulary

pharaoh

shrine

myth

afterlife

mummy

tomb

pyramid



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The World of Ancient Egypt

Thousands of years ago a civilization rose up along the banks of the Nile River. The ancient Egyptians developed a rich culture with a royal ruler, a form of writing, and religious beliefs. The Egyptians worshiped many gods and goddesses. They believed that these gods and goddesses controlled the natural forces of the world, such as the flooding of the Nile or the rising and setting of the sun.



Amon-Ra was worshiped by all Egyptians as king of the gods.



IMPORTANT GODS AND GODDESSES OF EGYPT

God or Goddess	Role	Animal Form
Amon-Ra	King of the gods; god of the sun	Ram or goose
Anubis	God of the dead	Jackal
Horus	God of the sky	Falcon
Isis	Goddess of healing; wife of Osiris	Rarely in animal form
Osiris	God of the underworld and agriculture	Bull
Seth	God of evil	Many animals, including a donkey or a pig
Thoth	God of the moon, learning, and writing	Ibis or baboon



Gods and Goddesses

Religious beliefs guided the people for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians worshiped at least seven hundred gods and goddesses. The gods and goddesses all had one or more special roles.

Most Egyptian gods and goddesses were linked to different animals. Artwork often showed a god or goddess with the body of a human and the head of an animal. Sometimes the animals were linked to the gods' special powers. For example, Anubis, the god of the dead, may have been linked to jackals because these animals often were seen around graveyards.

The Egyptian gods were neither all good or all bad, nor were they all-powerful or all-knowing. They did have special powers, such as living almost forever, but they often acted like humans.





Pharaohs sometimes wore a falcon headdress to show their close ties to Horus. Horus was represented by a falcon.

While Egyptians believed in many gods, some were more important than others. In the 1900s B.C., two gods, Amon and Ra, became one god known as Amon-Ra, or simply Ra. Ra was the sun god and the king of the gods. Osiris was the god of the underworld, a place where people went after they died. From his home in the underworld, Osiris also ruled as a god of agriculture and used his power to make crops grow. Horus was the

son of Osiris, and Egyptians believed he ruled Egypt as its first king.

The **pharaoh** was closely tied to these gods. Egyptians even believed that all pharaohs were sons of Ra. While the pharaoh was alive, however, Egyptians looked upon him as the god Horus. The pharaoh also served as the chief priest, and one of his important jobs was keeping the gods happy.

The pharaoh in this statue is wearing a falcon headdress.



Why did the ancient Egyptians have so many gods? Ancient Egyptians did not understand the forces of nature. These forces seemed both good and bad. For example, the Egyptians depended on the Nile River. The flooding of the Nile made the soil fertile for farming. If the floods came early or late, there would be no crops. High floods wiped out villages. The Egyptians hoped that keeping these gods happy would make them more reliable.



The Cat in Ancient Egypt

Ancient Egyptians considered cats to be sacred animals. Bastet and Sekhmet were two goddesses who took the form of a cat. Many families had cats as pets, and parents often honored the cat, called a *miu*, by naming their daughters *Mit* or *Miut*. The cat also had its place in Egyptian mythology. One tale says that Egyptians almost lost a battle until they released thousands of cats to help turn back the enemy.



Sculptures of cats, such as this one, were made by the ancient Egyptians.





The Temples

Gods had their own temples, and major gods had more than one. Unlike temples today, people did not worship there. Instead, temples were considered the homes of the gods. At each temple there was a statue of the god or goddess, often made of gold. Every morning,

as the sun rose, the priests entered. “Awake in peace, great god,” they chanted while the head priest opened the doors of the sacred **shrine**, or holy place. The priests bathed the statue, dressed it in clothes and jewels, and offered it fine food and drink. Throughout the day the priests performed ceremonies, singing to the statue in praise and to entertain it. They also presented the statue to royal visitors. While common people could not enter the temples, they could bring gifts to the god in times of trouble. At sundown the priests put the statue to bed by closing the doors of the shrine and leaving the temple.

This statue of Anubis is the kind of statue one might find at a temple.



This image shows the Temple of Luxor in Luxor, Egypt.



Egyptians could visit outside the temple when they needed help. One memorial stone was found inscribed with the prayer of an artist named Nebre, who asked Ra to help his dying son.

Temples also celebrated many festivals. On these occasions, royalty and common people came together to honor the gods and act out stories about them. Each god also had a feast day. The feast of Amon, which lasted for twenty-four days, began at his temple in Karnak. The pharaoh marched at the head of a group of priests who carried Amon’s statue from the temple to a boat covered with gold. The priests then brought Amon’s statue to his other temple at Luxor. Along the banks of the Nile, crowds gathered to watch and celebrate.





Myths and Legends

Egyptians told **myths**, or stories, about their gods and goddesses and about the world. Depending on where they lived, the ancient Egyptians told several different stories to explain the beginning of the world. One popular version of this myth said that Ra rose from a swirling ocean and made eight other gods. For a while, Ra lived on Earth. As he grew older, Ra became tired of the disorder in the world. Though Ra went back to the heavens, he carried the sun across the sky in his special boat every day. At night, Ra traveled below the surface of Earth to the East. The next morning he made his journey again.



To ancient Egyptians, the eye of Horus represented good luck and healing.



Isis was one of the most important goddesses of ancient Egypt. She was the wife of Osiris and the mother of Horus. She was believed to have great healing powers. There is one myth where she brings her husband, Osiris, back to life after he was killed by her brother, Seth. Because of this, people called on her when they were sick. Because she feared that Seth might harm Horus, she sheltered him while he was still young. Therefore, she was also seen as a goddess of protection. In another myth, Horus grew up and finally defeated Seth in battle.



Rx

Many people believe that our symbol for pharmacies, shown here, comes from a myth in which the left eye of Horus is damaged. The eye was healed by the god Thoth, and the eye that Thoth healed became a symbol of healing.





In this image Anubis prepares a pharaoh for his journey to the afterlife.



The Afterlife

Egyptians believed that death was not the end of life. Instead, death was the start of the next life, or the **afterlife**. Egyptians believed that after death, a person's soul rose from the body and went on a journey to the underworld. The person faced many challenges along the way. He or she needed to pass through guarded doors and stay away from monsters and fierce animals. For help on this journey, the person often sang praises and hymns to the gods.

The end of the journey was not the beginning of the afterlife. First, the person faced judgment. Anyone who had done evil in life could not enter the underworld. Instead, a monster with the head of a crocodile would devour the person, so the person

could never live in the afterlife. However, if the person had not done evil, he or she would be taken to Osiris and entered the next world. The next world was like Egypt, only better, where family and friends were gathered together.



Why Make Mummies?

Egyptians' beliefs about the soul led them to preserve dead bodies as **mummies**.

Egyptians believed that the soul was made up of the *akh*, the *ba*, and the *ka*. The *akh* left the body and went to live forever in the next world. However, the *ba* and the *ka* stayed behind in the **tomb** where the body lay at rest. Without the physical body, the soul could not exist. Priests made Egyptian people, from the poorest laborers all the way up to the pharaoh, into mummies.



This mummy of a princess dates back to 1069–945 B.C.



Tombs and Pyramids

Egyptians believed that people needed certain items to help them make their journey to the afterlife. Egyptians were buried with food and drink, clothing, tools, mummies of pets—whatever a person might need. For example, children were buried with toys, while soldiers were buried with weapons. Because most people were expected to toil in the fields in the afterlife, wealthy people and royalty often had small figures made of stone or wood buried with them. In the afterlife these figures could do any required work.

Egyptian tombs also included the Book of the Dead. The Book of the Dead was a collection of spells, prayers, hymns, and myths told through words and pictures. Egyptians believed it helped the dead make the journey to the next world.

Religious beliefs led to one of the most amazing structures in the world: the Egyptian **pyramids**. To make sure that a king's body was safe, Egyptians built



The Mummy Connection

Other cultures mummified dead bodies. The Incas in Peru preserved the bodies of their emperors and allowed them to live in fine dwellings. These emperors' mummies were brought out among the people for special days.



enormous stone pyramids. These triangular-sided buildings rose high above the sands on the western side of the Nile River. Cemeteries were usually located in the West in Egypt because the West was where the sun set, or “died,” each night.

The pyramids were built to last for centuries. They were made of large stone blocks. The pharaoh's mummy lay in the burial chamber deep inside the pyramid. The only way to reach the special chamber was through a narrow, hidden tunnel.

The pyramids of Egypt are some of the most amazing structures in the world.





Religion and Everyday Life

Egyptians also worshiped the gods in their own homes. Wealthy people built shrines in their gardens. Even the poorest households set up a small shrine in a corner of a room. At these shrines, people made offerings and said prayers to the gods. People also painted images of their gods on the walls and wore their symbols or images as good luck charms.

Egyptians often built shrines for the gods that had special meaning to them. A craftsman might have a shrine for Ptah, the god of craftsmanship, while a scribe might worship Thoth, the god of learning.



The god Thoth was also a messenger for the gods.



The End of the Egyptian Religion

For thousands of years, religion was a major part of the Egyptian way of life. Beginning in 332 B.C., the Egyptian culture began to change. That year the Greeks, under Alexander the Great, took over Egypt. Alexander declared himself a son of Amon-Ra and became the pharaoh. About three hundred years later, the Romans conquered Egypt. Christianity followed soon afterward. By A.D. 200 several Christian communities had developed in Egypt. Some used the temples as churches. In the 600s Muslims invaded and controlled Egypt. Soon most Egyptians practiced the new religion of Islam.

Today most Egyptians still practice Islam. However, some Egyptians keep the ancient Egyptian myths alive by retelling stories and remembering the gods.



Early Christians in Egypt adopted the *ankh*, an Egyptian symbol that stood for the word *life*.



Glossary

afterlife a life believed to follow death

mummy a preserved dead body

myth a traditional story that includes gods and goddesses and often tries to explain events in nature

pharaoh a god-king of ancient Egypt

pyramid a large stone building to serve as a house for the dead

shrine a place where a holy person is worshiped or honored

tomb a grave or other place where the dead are buried

Write to It!

Choose one of the gods or goddesses mentioned in this book. Write a paragraph describing the god or goddess's special role and powers.

Write your description on a separate sheet of paper.

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