

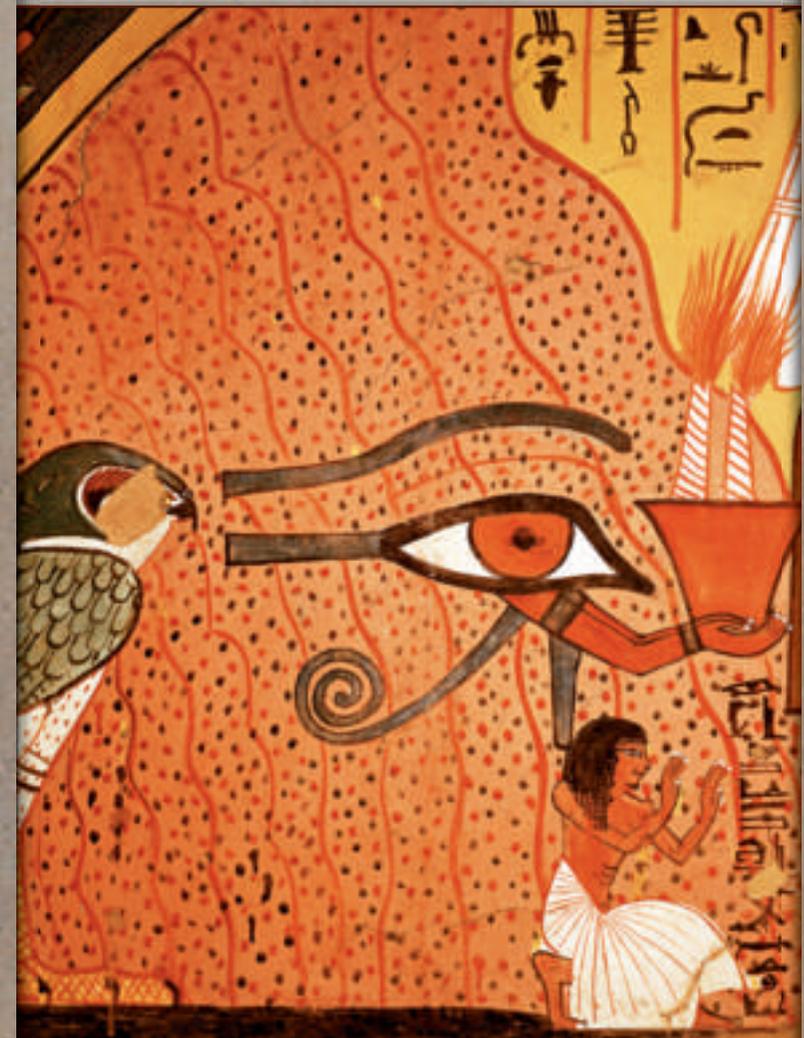
# LIFE AND BELIEFS IN ANCIENT EGYPT

## 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.

| Genre      | Comprehension Skill | Text Feature  |
|------------|---------------------|---|
| Nonfiction | • Summarize         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Captions</li> <li>• Chart</li> <li>• Sidebars</li> </ul> |

Scott Foresman Social Studies





Ancient Egyptians worshiped many gods and goddesses. Common people and royalty alike practiced this religion. In this book you will read about how important the gods and myths were to the ancient Egyptians.

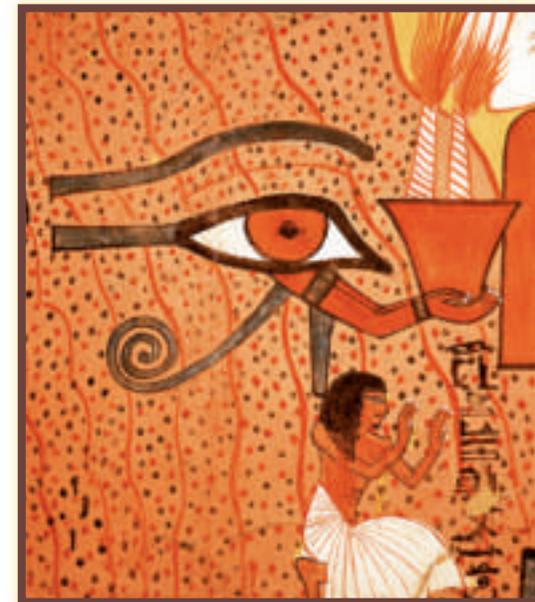


### Vocabulary

pharaoh  
 myth  
 shrine  
 afterlife  
 tomb  
 mummy  
 pyramid



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## Ancient Egypt

Thousands of years ago a civilization developed along the banks of the Nile River. The ancient Egyptians developed a thriving culture with a royal ruler, a form of writing, and a complex religion.

In the middle of the desert, the ancient Egyptians made use of the power of the Nile. They used its annual floods to make the soil fertile and provide water to irrigate the fields. The river, however, also brought destruction. If the floods came early, the year's crop could be washed away. If the floods came late, the crop could die from lack of water. The unpredictability of the Nile brought other threats. People might run out of food, or high floods could wipe out entire villages.

The ancient Egyptians lived in a world of uncertainty. One thing that helped them in times of uncertainty was worshiping numerous gods. 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.

## Gods and Goddesses

Egyptians' religious beliefs guided their lives for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians worshiped at least seven hundred gods and goddesses—probably even more. The Egyptians had as many gods and goddesses as any other culture in the world. They had so many gods and goddesses that people probably could not even name all of them.

Egyptian gods were neither all good or all bad, nor were they all-powerful or all-knowing. Despite having special powers, such as living forever, they often had human characteristics, such as acting out in fits of anger.



These gods and goddesses did not stay the same over time. Ancient Egypt developed over the course of thousands of years, so sometimes beliefs and ideas changed. For instance, in the 1900s B.C., two gods, Amon and Ra, merged to become one god and became known as Amon-Ra, or simply Ra.



As king of the gods, Amon-Ra was loved and worshiped by almost all Egyptians.





Most gods and goddesses were associated with different types of animals, from the powerful bull to the tiny millipede. Egyptian artwork often showed gods and goddesses with bodies of humans and the heads of their representative animals. A few gods and goddesses, however, were never shown in animal form. Others were linked with several animals.

Sometimes these animals were connected to the gods' special roles. For example, Anubis, the god of the dead, may have been associated with jackals because these animals often lurked around graveyards. The gods and goddesses all had at least one special role, but often they had more than one.



## 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                            |



While Egyptians believed in numerous gods, some were more important than others. Amon-Ra was the sun god. Osiris was the god of the underworld, the place people went after they died. From his home in the underworld, Osiris not only ruled the dead, he also ruled as a god of agriculture. His power allowed plants to grow and crops to flourish. Horus was the son of Osiris, and Egyptians believed he ruled Egypt as its first king.

## The Role of the Pharaoh

The **pharaoh** occupied a unique position in Egyptian society. The Egyptian people considered their kings to be descended from Ra. While he was alive, the king was a living Horus. Because the pharaoh was a god-king, a god always ruled Egypt. The pharaoh also served as the chief priest. One of his important jobs was to keep the gods happy.



## The Cat and Religion

Egyptians considered cats to be sacred animals. Bastet and Sekhmet were just two of the goddesses who took the form of a cat. The cat, or a *miu*, also appeared in Egyptian mythology. One tale says that Egyptians were on the brink of losing a battle until they unleashed thousands of cats to help turn back the enemy. Cats also had their place in everyday life. Many families had cats as pets, and parents even named their daughters *Mit* or *Miut* after the cat.



## Myths and Legends

The ancient Egyptians told **myths**, or stories about their gods and goddesses and about the world. The ancient Egyptians actually told several different stories, depending on where they lived, to explain the beginning of the world. In one widespread creation myth, Ra rose from a swirling ocean and created eight other gods. For a while, Ra lived on Earth. As he grew older, however, he became tired of all the disorder in the world. Ra withdrew into the heavens, but every day he carried the sun across the sky in his special boat. At night, Ra traveled below the surface of Earth to the East. The next morning he made his journey again.

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. Because the left eye of Horus represents the moon (the right eye is the sun), the myth also states that the injury is why the moon changes during each month.



To ancient Egyptians, the eye of Horus represented good luck and healing. People painted it in burial places and used it in jewelry.



## The Gods and Their Temples

All gods had their own temples, and some had more than one. Unlike what they do at temples today, people did not worship at the temples in ancient Egypt. Instead, these buildings were thought of as the homes of the gods. At each temple a statue of the god or goddess, often cast in gold, was treated as carefully as if it was the god itself. Every morning, as the sun rose, the priest entered. “Awake in peace, great god,” the singers chanted while the head priest opened the doors of the **shrine**, or holy place. The priests bathed and dressed the statue, draped it with jewels, and offered it fine food and drink. Throughout the day the priests sang to the statue in praise and for the god’s entertainment. The priests also presented the statue to important visitors. At sundown the priests put the statue to bed by closing the doors of the shrine and leaving the temple.

While farmers and laborers were not allowed inside the temples, from time to time they visited the temple courtyards to ask the gods for help. They often wrote their prayers on stones. One stone that has been found came from a poor man named Nebre, who called upon Ra to rescue his dying son.

Temples also had many festivals that welcomed all Egyptians. At festivals, the community celebrated the greatness of the gods and often acted out myths. Each god also had a special feast day. The feast of Amon took place during the annual flooding of the Nile and lasted twenty-four days. The pharaoh marched at the head of a group of priests who carried Amon’s statue from his temple at Karnak. They placed it on a boat, covered in gold like the statue itself, and towed it to the temple at Luxor. Along the banks of the Nile, crowds gathered to watch, cheer, and celebrate.

Shown here is part of the Temple of Luxor in Luxor, Egypt.





## The Afterlife and the Underworld

Egyptians created a belief system in which death was not the end of life. It was only the start of another life—the **afterlife**. Egyptians believed that after death, the soul rose from the body where it lay at rest in the **tomb**. The soul then went on its journey to the underworld. The person faced many obstacles along the way, such as guarded doors, monsters, and fierce animals. To win the gods' help on this journey, the dead were believed to sing praises and hymns.

At the end of the journey, the person faced judgment. To see if he or she was worthy of living in the next world, the god Anubis placed the person's heart on one side of a scale. A feather belonging to the goddess Ma'at was placed on the other side. Ma'at, Thoth, and Anubis then noted which side of the scale hung lower. If the person had done evil, the heart

This Egyptian sarcophagus, or stone coffin, dates back to about 716–525 B.C.



would weigh more than the feather. Instead of entering the underworld, the person would be devoured by a monster with the head of a crocodile, so life in the afterlife was not possible. If the person had not done evil, he or she would be taken to Osiris, enter the next world, and meet family and friends. The next world was like Egypt, only better.



## The Making of Mummies

Egyptians' beliefs shaped the practice of preserving dead bodies as **mummies**. Egyptians believed the soul was made up of several elements. The *akh* was the part of the soul that went on to eternal life in the next world. However, the *ba* and the *ka* stayed behind in the tomb. They needed the physical body to exist. Therefore, Egyptians preserved the bodies of the dead as mummies. Priests made many people, from the poorest laborers all the way up to the pharaoh, into mummies.



## The Burial Places

Egyptians believed that people would need important items to help them make their journey to the underworld or to use in the afterlife. Egyptian tombs were filled with food and drink, clothing, tools, mummies of pets—whatever a person might need in the afterlife. For example, children’s tombs had toys, while soldiers’ tombs contained weapons. Because people were expected to work in the fields in the afterlife, royalty and wealthy people often had small figures made of stone or wood buried in the tombs with them. In the afterlife these figures could do their work and the dead person could enjoy free time.

Egyptian tombs also included the Book of the Dead. Despite its name, the Book of the Dead was not a book. It was actually a collection of spells, prayers, hymns, and myths told through pictures and written words. By showing people how to overcome the difficulties that lay ahead, the Book of the Dead helped them complete the journey to the next world.



## The Mummy Connection

Other cultures mummified dead bodies. The Incas in Peru preserved the bodies of their emperors and allowed them to live in a fine dwelling. These emperor mummies were then brought out to be among the people on special days.



This scene from the Book of the Dead shows the weighing of a person’s heart.



Egyptian beliefs led to some of the most amazing structures in the world: the **pyramids**. To make sure the kings’ bodies remained safe, Egyptians built enormous stone pyramids for them. These pyramids rose high above the sands of the western desert or on the western side of the Nile River. The West was where the sun set, or “died,” each night.

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

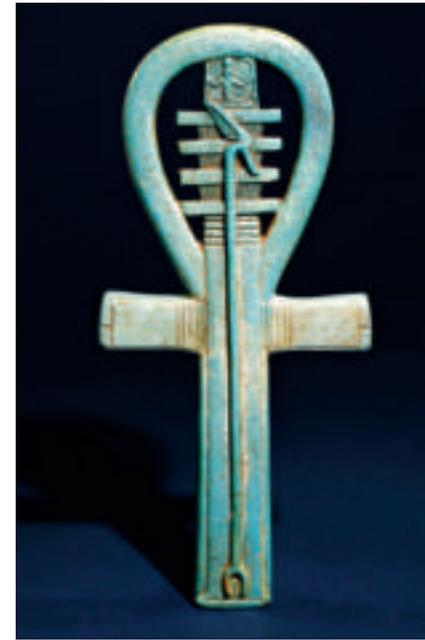


## Daily Religious Practices

Unlike people today, most Egyptians could not enter temples. They visited temples only to ask the help of the gods and goddesses in times of great need. Most of the time they worshiped in their own homes. They painted images of the gods on their walls and wore their symbols or images as amulets, or charms, for good luck. They also built shrines. Wealthy people often put shrines in their gardens, and even the poorest households set up small shrines in a corner of a room. At these holy places, people made offerings and said prayers to the gods. A craftsperson might have a shrine for Ptah, the god of craftsmanship, while a scribe might worship Thoth, the god of learning. No one could worship all the gods—there were too many.



Thoth, the god of learning, was also credited with inventing writing.



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



## New Ideas and Religions in Egypt

For thousands of years, religion played a major role in the Egyptian way of life. Beginning in 332 B.C., however, great change came to Egypt when Alexander the Great and his Greek army conquered the region. Alexander took the crown of the pharaoh and declared himself a son of Amon-Ra. Egyptian culture became influenced by Greek traditions. Around three hundred years later, the Romans took over Egypt. Christianity soon followed. By A.D. 200, several Christian communities had developed in Egypt. Some Christians used the temples for their own worship. In the A.D. 600s, Muslims invaded Egypt. They brought the new religion of Islam. Today, most Egyptians still practice Islam. However, some Egyptians keep their ancient myths alive by retelling stories and remembering the gods.

## 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!

What beliefs held by the ancient Egyptians do you find most interesting? Write two paragraphs describing these beliefs and explain why you find them interesting.

Write your paragraphs on a separate sheet of paper.

### Photographs

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