

Egyptian Mythology and Everyday 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.

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

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Numerous gods and goddesses played an important role in the everyday lives of ancient Egyptians. The myths and animals associated with the gods were also part of their religion. In this book you will learn about some of the important gods and myths of ancient Egypt.



Vocabulary

pharaoh

shrine

myth

afterlife

tomb

mummy

pyramid



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The Natural World of 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 complex religious beliefs. In the midst of the desert, the ancient Egyptians harnessed the power of the Nile. They used its annual floods to make the soil fertile and provide water to irrigate the fields. Sometimes the river also brought destruction. If the floods came too early or too late, the year's crop could shrivel up or be washed away. People were threatened with famine from the lack of food or the destruction of their villages by high floods. One thing that helped the Egyptians survive in this world of uncertainty was their belief in numerous gods. They believed that these gods and goddesses controlled all the natural forces of the world, such as the flooding of the Nile or the rising and setting of the sun.

Gods and Goddesses

Egyptian religious beliefs guided the lives of the people for thousands of years. The ancient Egyptians worshiped at least seven hundred deities. They believed in as many gods and goddesses as any culture in the world. They believed in so many deities that most people could not even name all of them.

Gods were neither all good or all bad, nor all-powerful or all-knowing. Despite having special powers, such as living almost forever, they often showed human qualities, such as acting out in fits of anger.



Because ancient Egypt developed over the course of thousands of years, beliefs and ideas—even those related to the gods—changed. In the 1900s B.C., two gods, Amon and Ra, merged into one and became known as Amon-Ra.





Most gods and goddesses were associated with different animals, from the powerful bull to the tiny millipede. Egyptian artwork often showed a god or goddess with the body of a human and the head of an animal. A few deities, however, were never shown in animal form. Others were linked with several animals.

Sometimes these animals reflected the gods' special roles. For instance, Anubis was the god of the dead and may have been associated with jackals because these animals often were seen lurking 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



The Sacred Cat

Egyptians lived their lives around the cat, or the *miu*. Many households had cats as pets, and Egyptian parents even named their daughters *Mit* or *Miut* after the cat. Over time, ancient Egyptians considered the cat to be sacred. Cats appeared in many places in Egyptian religion and mythology. One story says that Egyptians won a battle after they unleashed thousands of cats on the enemy at the frontlines. Many goddesses, such as Bastet or Sekhmet, also took the form of a cat.



Ancient Egyptians made sculptures of cats, such as this one.



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 where 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 and had the power that allowed plants to grow and crops to flourish. Horus was the son of Osiris, and according to mythology he ruled Egypt as its first king.

The **pharaohs** occupied a unique position in Egyptian society. The Egyptian people considered their kings to be descended from Ra. While the pharaoh was alive, the people looked upon him as the reincarnation of Horus—a living Horus. These beliefs meant that a god always ruled Egypt. The pharaoh also served as the chief priest. One of his important jobs was to keep the gods happy.



Part of the Temple of Luxor in Luxor, Egypt, can be seen in this photograph.



The Temples of the Gods

All gods had their own temples, and major gods had several temples. People, however, did not worship at temples. Instead, temples were considered 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 were the deity itself. Every morning, as the sun rose, the priest entered the sanctuary. “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, adorned it with jewels, and offered it fine food and drink. Throughout the day, the priests performed ceremonies, singing to the statue to praise and entertain it. They also presented the statue to important visitors, such as pharaohs. At sundown, the priests put the statue to bed by closing the doors of the shrine and leaving the sanctuary.

Only the nobility were allowed inside the temples, though from time to time commoners did visit the temple courtyard to ask the gods for help. They often inscribed their prayers on stones. Thousands of years ago, a poor man named Nebre used such a stone to ask Ra to rescue his son from certain death.

All Egyptians were welcome to join the many festivals celebrated at the temples. On these occasions, royalty and commoners came together to honor the gods and re-enact important stories about the gods. Other important events at the temples were each god’s special feast day. The feast of Amon was one of the most remarkable. It 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 gilded with gold and towed it to the temple at Luxor while crowds gathered on the banks of the river to watch, cheer, and celebrate.



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 responsible for the phases of the moon.

Rx



The eye of Horus represented good luck and healing to the ancient Egyptians.



The Myths of the Gods

The ancient Egyptians told several different **myths** about their gods and goddesses and about the world. These myths varied depending on where people lived, but the myths all agreed that in the beginning, the world was a swirling ocean. Ra rose from this ocean and created eight other gods. For a while, Ra lived on Earth. As he grew older, he became tired of 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. Because of his actions, the sun could appear the next day.

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. Another myth relates that, when Horus grew up, he finally defeated Seth in battle.



This image shows Anubis with a pharaoh in the Valley of the Kings, a valley where the tombs of many pharaohs are located.



The Voyage to the Underworld

Egyptians constructed a system of religious beliefs in which death was not the end of life. It was merely the start of the **afterlife**. Egyptians believed that after death, the soul rose from the body where it lay at rest in the **tomb**. The soul then embarked on the journey to the underworld. The person faced many obstacles along the way, such as guarded doors, monsters, and fierce animals. To seek the gods' help on this journey, the dead often sang praises and hymns.

The Egyptians had a valuable tool to help them on their journey. Buried in Egyptian tombs was 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. The Book of the Dead showed people what difficulties lay ahead on the journey and how to overcome them. The Book of the Dead was almost like a sacred road map.

At the end of the journey, the person faced judgment from several gods. To see if he or she was worthy of living in the next world, 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 wrong, the heart would be heavy and 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 that life in the afterlife was not possible. If the heart was not heavy, the person would be taken to Osiris, enter the next world, and be reunited with family and friends. The next world was like Egypt, only better.



The Mummy Connection

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

This mummy and mummy case of an ancient Egyptian princess dates back to 1069–945 B.C.



Mummies, Tombs, and Pyramids

The Egyptians' complex beliefs shaped the way they treated the dead. They believed the soul was made up of the *akh*, the *ba*, and the *ka*. 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 and needed the physical body to exist. Therefore, Egyptians preserved the bodies of the dead as **mummies**. Priests mummified all sorts of people, from the poorest laborers all the way up to the pharaoh.

Egyptians also believed that people would need important items to help them make their journey to the underworld or to use there. Egyptians were buried 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 toil in the fields in the afterlife, royalty and nobles often had small figures made of stone or wood buried with them. In the afterlife, these figures could do their work and the dead people could enjoy free time.

These religious beliefs also led to one of the most amazing feats of architecture: the **pyramids**. To ensure that the kings' bodies remained safe, Egyptians built enormous stone pyramids. These triangular-sided buildings loomed 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 pharaoh's mummy lay underneath tons of stone, deep inside the pyramid, in a glorious burial chamber. The only way to reach the special chamber was through a narrow, hidden shaft. The pyramids have stood for centuries.



Religion Among the Egyptians

Unlike people today, most Egyptians could not enter temples. While they visited temples to ask the help of the gods in times of great need, most Egyptians generally worshiped in their own homes. Wealthy people often built shrines in their gardens and even the poorest households set up small shrines in a corner of a room. At these shrines, people made offerings and said prayers to the gods. Because there were so many gods, people could not worship all of them and chose the most meaningful ones. A craftsman might have a shrine for Ptah, the god of craftsmanship, while a scribe might worship Thoth, the god of learning.

The gods were also worshiped beyond their household shrines. People painted images of these gods on their walls and wore their symbols as amulets for good luck.

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



The Death of the Egyptian Religion

For thousands of years, religion was the center of Egyptian life. In 332 B.C., however, great change came to Egypt when Alexander the Great and his Greek army conquered the region. Alexander gained the crown of the pharaoh and declared himself a son of Amon-Ra. Egyptian culture became influenced by Greek traditions. Nearly three hundred years later, the Romans took over Egypt. Christianity soon followed. By A.D. 200, several Christian communities had developed in Egypt. These communities ended much of the traditional Egyptian religion. Some Christians used the temples for their own worship. The story of religion in Egypt did not end with Christianity, however. In the A.D. 600s, Muslims brought the new religion of Islam to Egypt. While most Egyptians today practice Islam, some keep the ancient 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!

Suppose that you are a historian working on a book about the religion of ancient Egypt. Write an introduction for your book. The introduction should give readers an overview of the contents of the book.

Write your introduction on a separate sheet of paper.

Photographs

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