

CHAPTER 5

IT'S A GOD-EAT-GOD WORLD

EGYPTIAN RELIGION

The ancient Egyptians had a god for everything. That palm tree set back from the Nile sprouting on the rise behind your cousin's house? It had a god. The make-up your father applied from his palette in the morning? It had a god, too. More than 2,000 names of gods have been found written in limestone, on papyrus, and scratched on mud-brick walls. Some gods were powerful and worshipped by many, and some were wispy spirits known to just a few. There were gods whose spirits lived inside real things, such as the Nile, the sun, the sky, and the earth. And there were gods for protection against dangers, such as the bites of crocodiles, scorpions, and snakes. There were gods who stood for learning—the art of music and medicine; and there were gods who stood for the learned—the scribes and the architects. You name it, the Egyptians had a god for it.

There were good gods and bad gods, and fierce gods to protect you from the bad gods. There were gods for the living and gods for the dead. Some gods were human, some were animal, and some were a little of both. The bulls of one breed were so sacred that they lived like kings, and when they died the Egyptians mummified them, just like they would a pharaoh. They covered the bulls in jewels and placed them in coffins carved out of solid blocks of granite each weighing 80 tons. These sacred bulls even had their own cemeteries. At a burial site at Saqqara archaeologists have found 24 bulls, each in an elaborately carved coffin.

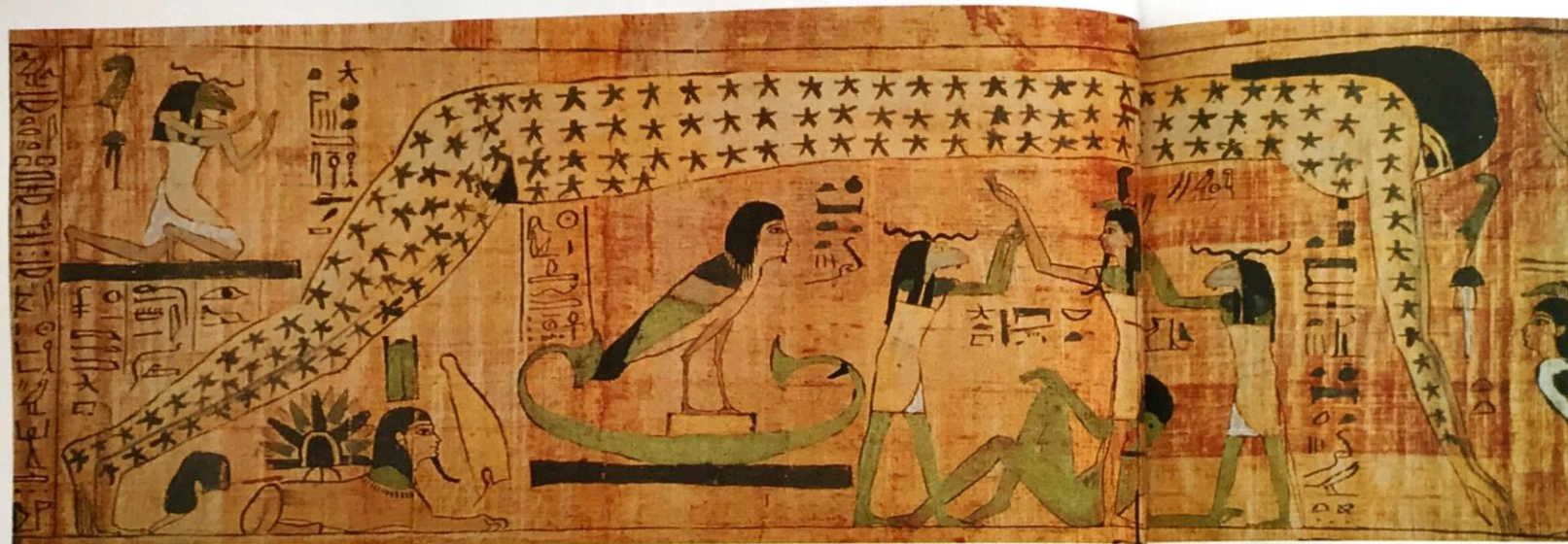
The most important god in Egypt was the sun god. The Egyptians pictured the sun god pushing the sun across the sky just as the scarab beetles pushed tiny dirt balls across the ground. Every morning the Egyptians were grateful when the sun was born again like the tiny scarab eggs hatching in the dirt ball. And every evening when the sun

ANIMAL REMAINS
AT SAQQARA, GREAT
ABYDOS STELA,
PLUTARCH, AND
PYRAMID TEXTS



Animal remains, Saqqara,
about 612–30 BCE

In addition to bulls, the Egyptians also embalmed birds, such as this ibis.



Egyptians believed that the sky was an ocean of water. Stretched out in a push-up, Nut, the sky goddess, separates the watery sky from the earth.

set, they worried that an evil snake would swallow the sun as it passed through the Underworld.

Different towns in Egypt worshipped different gods. The leaders of the town would try to convince everyone that their god was the most powerful. If their god was powerful, it meant they were powerful, too. Before Upper and Lower Egypt were unified, each had its own capital with its own goddess. Upper Egypt's goddess looked like a vulture. Lower Egypt's goddess looked like a cobra. After Upper and Lower Egypt unified, the kings wore a crown with both a vulture and a cobra to symbolize the joining of the regions.

One of the pharaoh's most important jobs was to take care of the gods. If the gods were happy, the Egyptians figured they would be happy, too. The crops would grow, the Nile would flood to the right level, and Egypt would be at peace with its neighbors. Life would be in balance, or *ma'at*. The pharaohs built great temples to show respect to the gods. Inside each temple, in the innermost room, they placed a shrine. And inside the shrine, they kept a statue of the god for whom the temple had been built. Every day the priests served the statue as if it were alive.

One pharaoh, King Neferhotep (who ruled about 1741 to 1730 BCE), paid special attention to the temple at Abydos.

King Neferhotep wanted to be sure the priests were taking care of the statue exactly as they were supposed to take care of it. After all, those priests were the king's representatives. So if they displeased the gods, then the gods were displeased with the king as well. *Ma'at* would be thrown all out of whack.

On the road leading to Abydos, there was a stela, which is a slab of rock with inscriptions on it. The stela

tells the story of King Neferhotep's concern over the spirit of the god Osiris, who lived in the statue, which lived in the shrine, which lived in the innermost room inside the temple at Abydos. According to the stela, King Neferhotep "desired to see the ancient writings." The ancient works were kept by the priests, "the real scribes of hieroglyphs, the masters of all secrets." King Neferhotep told the priests who watched over the ancient records that he planned a "great investigation" into the proper care of the statue of Osiris. The priests replied, "Let your majesty proceed to the house of writings and let your majesty see every hieroglyph."

King Neferhotep studied the ancient writings in the library. He learned how the gods were cared for from the beginning of time. He learned exactly what rituals pleased the gods. He decided that he should go to Abydos himself to explain to the priests what he had learned. King Neferhotep sent a messenger ahead telling the priests to bring the statue of Osiris to meet his royal barge on the Nile when he landed.

When King Neferhotep arrived near Abydos, the priests met him. The statue of Osiris had traveled with them in its shrine. The shrine had been placed in a cabin on a boat modeled after the boat that the Egyptians believed the gods

66 Great Abydos Stela, Abydos, about 1740 BCE



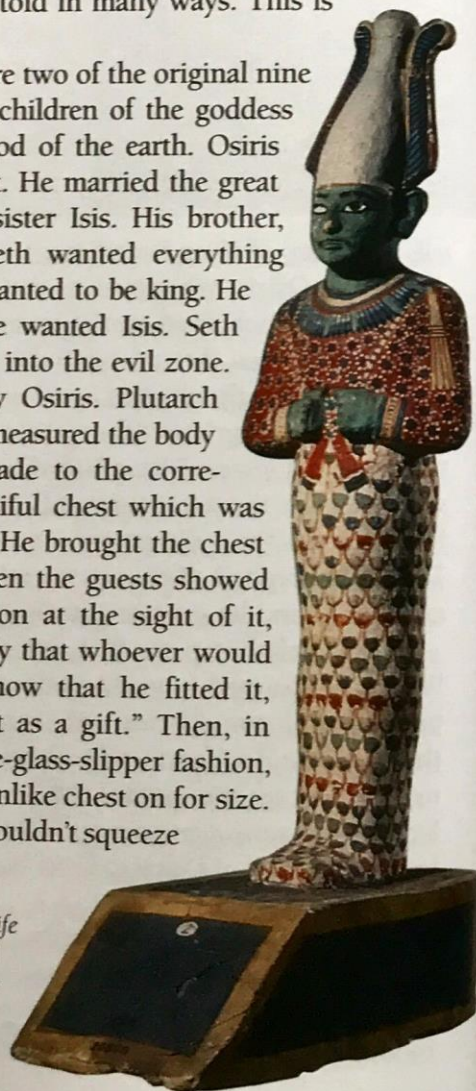
Scholars believe that the symbol called the ankh in the center of this stone slab is the origin of the much-later Christian cross. It also looks like a key—for ancient Egyptians, the key to eternal life.

used to navigate the stars. The boat rested across poles shouldered by a procession of priests.

On the seven-mile journey from the Nile to the temple, King Neferhotep was entertained by the priests, who acted out the Legend of Osiris. We know bits and pieces of the legend from inscriptions on the tomb walls and from songs such as the *Great Hymn to Osiris*. The most complete version of the legend, however, was written much later, probably in the first century CE, by the Greek historian Plutarch. The legend has been told in many ways. This is one version:

Osiris and Isis were two of the original nine gods. They were the children of the goddess of the sky and the god of the earth. Osiris became king of Egypt. He married the great love of his life, his sister Isis. His brother, Seth, was jealous. Seth wanted everything that Osiris had. He wanted to be king. He wanted his power. He wanted Isis. Seth pushed sibling rivalry into the evil zone. He plotted to destroy Osiris. Plutarch writes, "Seth secretly measured the body of Osiris and had made to the corresponding size a beautiful chest which was exquisitely decorated. He brought the chest to a banquet, and when the guests showed pleasure and admiration at the sight of it, Seth promised playfully that whoever would lie down in it and show that he fitted it, should have the chest as a gift." Then, in true Cinderella-and-the-glass-slipper fashion, everyone tried the coffinlike chest on for size. Some were so fat they couldn't squeeze

Say the right spell in the afterlife and this statue of Osiris would come to life. Osiris protects the spells inside the box on which he stands.



Plutarch, *Of Isis and Osiris*, about 45–125 CE



The falcon god Horus wears the crown of Lower Egypt. Egyptians believed gods ruled Earth before humans did. The first human kings were called "The Followers of Horus."

into the box. Others were so small they slid right out. But, finally, when Osiris tried the coffin, the fit was just right. Plutarch writes that Seth "ran and slammed the lid on, and after securing it with bolts from the outside and with molten lead poured on, they took it to the river and let it go to the sea..." Osiris drowned. Death came to Egypt for the first time.

Seth enjoyed everything that once belonged to Osiris. But whereas Osiris was kind, Seth was cruel. There was no *ma'at* in Egypt with Seth in charge. There was war and hunger and lawlessness. Only Isis was unafraid of Seth. She found Osiris's body and turned herself into a bird and sang to him. In a fury, Seth cut Osiris into pieces and scattered him all over Egypt. Isis and her sister searched "in a papyrus boat, sailing through the marshes" for all his parts. They collected the pieces of Osiris, and with the help of Anubis, god of the dead, they sewed him back together.

From a passage in the Pyramid Texts, we know that Isis and Osiris had a son who challenged Seth, "in the name of 'Horus the son who avenged his father.'" Each time Horus fought Seth to take back the throne, Isis protected him from injury with her power. In a final battle, Seth turned into a ferocious crocodile. But Horus managed to spear the crocodile, killing Seth. In the end, Horus restored *ma'at* to Egypt.

When the play was over, King Neferhotep and the procession had arrived at Abydos. Abydos was one of the most sacred places in ancient Egypt. One legend claims that Osiris himself is buried there. Another legend says the only part of Osiris buried at Abydos is his dismembered head.

Unlike today's religious buildings, in ancient Egypt temples were not open to the common people. Anyone entering

Plutarch, *Of Isis and Osiris*, about 45–125 CE

Plutarch, *Of Isis and Osiris*, about 45–125 CE

Pyramid Texts, about 2375–2184 BCE

MULTI-PAPYRUS

Papyrus was not only used to make paper. Among other things boats, sandals, rope and mats were made from this versatile reed.

the temple had to be “pure” so as not to offend the god. To become pure, the priests bathed several times a day. Hair could carry dirt or worse, lice, so priests shaved their bodies every three days. They even pulled out their eyelashes. The common Egyptian could only catch a glimpse of the shrines as they were moved from place to place. When the priests

MAJOR GODS AND GODDESSES OF EGYPT

Amun	Creator god, associated with fertility; sometimes pictured as a goose, but most often represented as a man
Anubis	Necropolis god, connected with mummification; usually has head of a dog or jackal
Bastet	War goddess; has head of a lioness or cat
Hathor	Goddess of women, also sky goddess, tree goddess, or necropolis goddess; has head of a cow or cow's horns, often with sun disk on head
Horus	Sky god; has head of a hawk, often with double crown
Isis	Wife of Osiris, guardian, and magician; often has hieroglyph of her name on her head
Montu	War god; often has head of a hawk, with sun disk and two plumes on top
Neith	Goddess of war and hunting; wears red crown or has two crossed arrows and shield on her head
Osiris	Ruler of the Underworld, god of dying vegetation, and husband of Isis; usually shown as a mummy and holding a scepter and wearing white crown with plumes and horns
Ptah	A creator god; the patron of all craftsmen, including architects, artists, and sculptors; frequently shown as a man dressed as a mummy, he built the boats for the souls of the dead to use in the afterlife
Re	Sun god; has head of a hawk, often with sun disk on head
Seth	God of disorder, deserts, storms, and war; usually has head of an unidentified animal
Thoth	God of writing and counting; has head of an ibis, often with moon crescent; sometimes depicted as a baboon



brought the statue of Osiris to meet King Neferhotep, people would have lined the route, not only to see the priests sing, dance, and perform, but also to peek at the shrine.

The statues were kept inside the temples, in the innermost room. The priests didn't believe the statue actually was the god, but they did believe the god's spirit lived inside the statue. In the morning, the high priests would break the clay seal on the sanctuary door. They would chant and burn incense. A priest would gently wake the god by lighting a torch, symbolic of the sunrise. The priests bathed, dressed, and presented food to the statue. Then when the day's rituals were completed, the priests would back out of the room, smoothing away their footprints with a reed broom. The sanctuary doors were sealed so that the god could get a good night's sleep undisturbed.

Plucking out your eyebrows and eyelashes may sound painful, but being a priest had advantages. For one thing, you didn't have to pay taxes. All the priests except the highest order spent only three months of the year serving at the temples. The rest of the time they lived ordinary lives, working at their professions—scribes, artists, musicians. And even the highest priests had families outside the temples.

Abydos wasn't the only sacred site. There were many others throughout Egypt. Some temples were mortuary temples for dead kings, and others were built to honor a particular god. Some, like Abydos, were both. Abydos honored Osiris, and because Osiris was the King of the Dead, it also became an important burial ground.

For Egyptians, the stories about the gods were comforting and provided guidance in a world that was unpredictable and governed by forces they didn't understand. Horus watched over them in this life. Osiris watched over them in death. When their world was in turmoil, they believed it was Seth fighting with Horus that created the chaos. When all was well, they were sure that Horus had won the battle. They believed that one day Horus would defeat Seth in a smashing final combat. Then Osiris would be able to return to the world of the living and all sorrow would end. Until then, it was a god-eat-god world.



The Eyes of Horus are inscribed at the top of this stone slab. Horus, the god often shown as a hawk, has the eyes of a hawk—all seeing. The Eyes of Horus were often painted on the prows of ships to “see” the way.

**ARCHAEOLOGIST AT WORK:
AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVID O'CONNOR**

Professor David O'Connor's work is the stuff movies are made of—he digs in the city built to honor the King of the Dead. But Professor O'Connor's work isn't done on a movie set. The Egyptian desert poses challenges for even the hardest adventurer. Since 1967 Professor O'Connor has met those challenges, excavating in Abydos, in Upper Egypt, so that we may have a better understanding of how the people in the Old Kingdom lived as far back as 5,000 years ago. David O'Connor is currently the Lila Acheson Wallace Professor of Ancient Egyptian Art at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. He was formerly Professor of Egyptology at the University of Pennsylvania.



When you were a kid did you know you would become an archaeologist?

Yes, quite early on I became very interested in archaeology and ancient civilizations. In fact, when I was a kid of about 9 or 10, living in Australia, I read about the ancient city of Babylon, which was in Mesopotamia. I built a large model of that city in a field next to our house. Then, because I had read that ancient cities were often attacked and burned by enemy soldiers, I burned the whole model down. Today, we call this experimental archaeology!

What drew you as a scholar to Egypt, more specifically Abydos?

What attracted me was the richness of its archaeology. If you are interested in the ancient Near East and ancient Africa as I was, among all those cultures, the archaeology of Egypt has survived much better than anywhere else in terms of monuments, art, and objects of daily life. And so Egypt is really the best place to try and reconstruct

the ideas of very early people. Abydos attracted me as an archaeologist because it's a very important and mysterious site. That's what archaeologists like better than anything else. It's a mystery that needs to be solved. We knew Abydos was very important to the ancient Egyptians because some of their earliest kings were buried there. Later it became the center for the god Osiris, the king of the dead. That made Abydos very significant to all Egyptians. We knew these things from the work of earlier archaeologists at Abydos, but there were still many things about the site that were mysterious and unknown, and that's why we decided to go back there.

What time of year do you usually excavate?

In Egypt we prefer to excavate in the winter or the spring, because in the summer and the early autumn the weather is very, very hot. So it's difficult to work out of doors, which is what we do.

Is it ever dangerous or scary?

Working at Abydos, we do have to be careful to watch out for snakes, especially poisonous snakes and scorpions that can give you a very painful sting. Both of them live in or near the desert, and that's where our work is located. However, the good thing is we work there mostly in the winter and in the winter the snakes hibernate. They are not very active in the cooler weather. The same is true for scorpions.

The earliest excavators in Egypt took things without paying much attention to where they were found. When you excavate you take great care in mapping out where everything is found in relationship to everything else. Why is that important to do?

One of the first excavators of Abydos, William Petrie, set an example for the ones to follow. He is considered the founder of scientific archaeology in Egypt. We are careful about not just finding things, but where they were found. As at other archaeological sites in Egypt, we are very careful when we excavate buildings, or find objects, to record them in place. Just to give you an idea how seriously we take that, when we find a brick wall we actually draw in all the bricks, not just the wall. And the reason why we pay so much attention to where objects are found, or how they are located with regard to other objects or buildings, is because knowing this makes it much easier to understand how the objects were used and what the buildings were used for.

What is one of the most exciting discoveries you have made at Abydos?

Our most exciting discovery at Abydos was

that of 14 full-size wooden boats, each one about 75 feet long and buried in the desert.

What were boats doing more than eight miles from the Nile?

The boats we found were far away from the Nile, buried in the desert, because they were intended not to be used on the river, but to be used in the afterlife, in the world of the dead. They had been buried at Abydos in order to be available for one of the early kings who had been buried there.

Why might a king bury boats with him?

Like a lot of things at Abydos, the use that might have been made of these boats by a dead king is mysterious. There are several possibilities. One is that the boats were imagined to deliver supplies to the dead king for all eternity. Another possibility, which we know from later ideas about the royal afterlife, is one in which the king himself sails in the boats through the world of the dead, just like the sun god was supposed to do.

These huge boats were made out of wood. Wood is scarce in the desert. Is there anything you can learn from finding out where the wood came from?

The kind of information we can get by identifying the wood or woods (there may be more than one) depends on the kind of wood the boats turn out to be made of. If it's a local wood, then it tells us about the Egyptians' own technology, but if it's an imported wood, like cedar from Lebanon, then we get important information about Egyptian early trading partners.