

Period of Rule by Other Gods

Summary: After the creator had withdrawn, the earth was ruled by a series of gods. Violent struggles sometimes accompanied the transfer of power from one generation to the next. Osiris, son of Geb, was chosen as king of Egypt and ruled with his sister, Isis. Their ideal reign was brought to an end by the jealousy of their brother, Seth. This god and his followers murdered Osiris and mutilated his body. With the aid of magic, Isis was able to revive the body of Osiris long enough for her to conceive a son. Isis fled to the marshes where she gave birth to Horus.

Both the child Horus and the body of Osiris were frequently attacked by Seth and his followers. Horus survived to challenge Seth's right to rule Egypt. The two gods fought each other in many different ways. The Eye of Horus was damaged by Seth, and the testicles of Seth were damaged by Horus. Thoth restored the damaged Eye, and eventually Horus prevailed. He became king of Egypt and was reconciled with Seth. Horus performed rites that helped Osiris to rise again as king of the Underworld. In time, Horus was succeeded as king of Egypt by a series of gods and demigods.

The Reigns of Shu, Geb, and Osiris. Egyptian king lists trace the ancestry of historical kings back into a mythical age. According to Manetho's history of Egypt, this age lasted for over 11,000 years.³⁰ The order of the rulers in this divine dynasty was not fixed. Creator deities such as Ptah or Ra sometimes begin the list of divine ancestors, but either Shu or Geb may be named as the first god-kings of Egypt. Other sources treat Osiris or his son Horus as the first Egyptian kings. In stories such as *Astarte and the Sea* (see "Astarte" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts") and the *Two Brothers*, the Great Ennead seem to rule as a group. The idea that each generation of the Ennead must have ruled in turn is probably a later rationalization of mythical history to fit an established pattern of royal succession.

Hymns to Shu in the Harris Magical Papyrus hail this god as the eldest son and heir of Ra and the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. The myth of Shu's separation of his children Geb and Nut to create the cosmos seems at some point to have been reinterpreted in more human terms of sexual jealousy and father-son rivalry. The latent hostility between Shu and his son, Geb, is made explicit in a text of the fourth century BCE.³¹ Like Ra before him, Shu has to contend with the forces of chaos and with rebels against the divine order. Geb challenges Shu's leadership, which causes the latter to withdraw from the world. Geb either rapes his mother, Tefnut, or takes her as his chief queen; thus he separates Shu from his sister-wife, as Shu had previously separated Geb from his sister-

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Figure 15. A ruler of the fourth century BCE worships Osiris Wenenefer (center), shown as an idealized king of Egypt. Relief in the temple of Behbeit el-Hagar. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

wife. That Geb's claim to the throne is disputed is clear from an episode in which he tries to put on his father's headdress and is burned by its serpent guardian. Eventually, Geb is accepted as ruler and has to rally his forces to defend Egypt against the "children of Apophis."

More usually, Geb was regarded as the legitimate ruler of everything on earth. In the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, Geb seems to be the chosen heir of the departing sun god. The warnings in this text about the need to control "the snakes who are in the earth and the water" suggest that Geb's reign was not thought of as a peaceful one. In the fragmentary tale of *Astarte and the Sea*, a sea monster opposes the gods and exacts tribute from Geb and Nut. A few scattered references allude to a myth in which Osiris tries to seize power from his father, Geb.³²

When Geb passed on the throne to his eldest son, Osiris, it might be logical to assume that he withdrew under the earth as Ra and Shu had withdrawn to the sky. There is, however, no clear account of this happening. After the reign

of Osiris, Geb takes on the role of judge in the Divine Tribunal of the gods. This Tribunal usually seems to meet in Egypt itself rather than in the underworld.

In most Egyptian sources, the reign of Osiris is only described in the vaguest terms. Osiris is the good king, and Isis is his queen and chief protector. The oldest references to Osiris link him with the astral or the funerary spheres. By the end of the Old Kingdom it became customary for all kings to be regarded as a form of Osiris after they died. The idea that Osiris had once reigned on earth as these kings did probably postdates this development.

When Greek writers began to take an interest in the myths of Osiris, they recreated Osiris and Isis as the great "culture heroes" who taught agriculture and crafts to the peoples of the world and established law and religion. Plutarch claimed that Osiris had civilized the whole world, a way of acknowledging the cultural debt that the Greeks felt they owed to Egypt. For the Egyptians, "culture heroes" were largely unnecessary, since most aspects of civilization were already implicit in the creator's establishment of *maat*.

The Murder of Osiris. The death of Osiris is one of the most important events in Egyptian myth and one of the most obscure. There are no detailed accounts of the murder until the late first millennium BCE, and even these occur in descriptions of Egyptian religion by foreigners. In the Pyramid Texts, Seth is named as the attacker of Osiris and, by implication, as his killer. In Pyramid Texts spell 477, Seth claims to be taking revenge for a kick that Osiris had given him. Later tales loosely based on the Osiris myth make sexual jealousy a motive for the falling out between the two brothers. Some Egyptologists have argued that Osiris was originally a god of the dead rather than a god who died,³³ but once the concept of Osiris's death was established, a slayer had to be identified.

Many Egyptian texts imply that Seth took the form of a dangerous animal, such as a wild bull, a wild ass, or a crocodile, to kill his brother in a lonely place. The Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts allude to Osiris being cast down or trampled and his body thrown in the Nile. In later times it was often stated that Osiris died by drowning. Being a god, Osiris probably had to be killed in several different ways to render him permanently dead.

A belief developed that the attack on Osiris was a unique and terrible crime, carried out on the "night of the great storm." Yet in theological terms, his was a necessary death. By dying, Osiris becomes ruler of the underworld and a source of life for others. A remarkable dialogue in Book of the Dead spell 175 has Osiris complain about his sad fate to Atum. The creator god replies that Osiris has been favored beyond all others. He has been granted an eternal kingdom in the "land of silence," whereas his son will be the perpetual ruler in the land of the living. Many Egyptian thinkers tried to make sense of death by mak-

ing something positive out of the death of Osiris, but it is the loneliness and despair of Osiris that is the most memorable element in this dialogue.

Early allusions to the death of Osiris all imply that it took place in a remote spot with no witnesses. Classical writers change this into a public assassination. Diodorus Siculus (whose visit to Egypt is described in "Introduction") says that Osiris was butchered by "his brother Typhon" (Seth). Typhon divided the body into twenty-six pieces and gave one piece to each of his followers to keep.

Plutarch relates that in the twenty-eighth year of Osiris's reign, Typhon (Seth) and his followers plotted against him. Typhon secretly obtained the exact measurements of his brother's body and had a beautiful chest made to fit it.³⁴ Typhon displayed the chest at a feast and promised to give it to whoever could fit inside it. Seth's seventy-two followers all tried the chest, but it did not fit any of them. Finally Osiris lay down in the chest. As soon as he did so, the conspirators bolted on the lid and sealed the chest with molten lead. Then they threw it into a branch of the Nile, which carried the chest out into the Mediterranean sea.

Isis was away in the city of Coptos, but she heard a terrible lament from the deities of the northern marshes and knew that Osiris was dead. She searched Egypt for the body and followed sightings of the chest all the way to Byblos in the Lebanon.³⁵ There the chest had grown into a marvelous tree that the king of Byblos had felled and made into a pillar in his palace. Isis stayed in the palace for a while in disguise before declaring herself and demanding the pillar containing her husband's coffin. She brought the coffin back to the Delta, but one night Typhon found it. He tore the body into fourteen parts and scattered them throughout Egypt. Isis searched for the parts and buried each in the place where she found it. The penis of Osiris had been eaten by fish, so she had to replace this with a model.³⁶ Some parts of Plutarch's narrative have few parallels in Egyptian sources, but from the Pyramid Texts onward, Isis is presented as a grieving wife searching the country for her murdered husband.

Isis is usually helped by her sister, Nephthys, and both goddesses may take bird form to carry out the search. When Isis finds the body or its parts, she restores them to wholeness. This originally seems to have meant that Isis was able to reverse the putrefaction of the flesh so feared by the Egyptians.

By the end of the second millennium BCE, the idea of the mutilation of the body by Seth was firmly established. This concept was greatly elaborated in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Lists on temple walls mention fourteen or sixteen parts of the body of Osiris buried at various sacred sites. This was sometimes increased to forty-two parts, one for each district of Egypt.

The vigil of Isis and Nephthys as they watch over and lament the body of Osiris is one of the keynote images of Egyptian culture. It is unusual in showing

deities experiencing strong emotion, even though this emotion is conveyed by formalized gestures of mourning, such as beating the brow.

Isis already knows that she is destined to bear a child who will be king. In order to bring this about, she has to revive the sexual powers of Osiris, just as the Hand Goddess aroused the penis of the creator to create the first life. A relief at Abydos shows the all-important moment when Isis in bird form uses her wings to fan the breath of life into Osiris. Hymns celebrate the exaltation of Isis when she knows that she has conceived the child who "is king even in the egg." Summoned by her cry of triumph, other deities acknowledge and bow down to the unborn Horus.

At some point, the myth of the death of Osiris and the restoration of his body by Isis was combined with the cult of Anubis as protector of the dead and overseer of funerary rites. All aspects of an Egyptian funeral were given mythical precedents in the mummification, entombment, and revivification of Osiris. A number of myths, particularly in Papyrus Jumilhac, deal with attempts by Seth and his followers to destroy or despoil the body of Osiris. The corpse is successfully protected by the magic of Thoth and by the ferocity of Anubis in his role as guardian of the tomb.

The Birth and Childhood of Horus. After a pregnancy of ten months, Isis gives birth to a son called Horus. This god was often referred to as Horus, son of Isis, to distinguish him from Horus the Elder, the sky god whom some traditions made a brother of Osiris and Seth. These two gods had distinct mythologies but were often treated as aspects of the same deity.

The place of Horus's birth is said to be in the Delta, usually in the region of Chemmis. To evade his enemies, the divine child was hidden inside a papyrus thicket or on a floating island. This "nest of Horus" is one of the few mythical places that is commonly shown in Egyptian art. Temple wall scenes depict kings in the role of the Horus child in the marshes being washed or suckled by a cow. This cow can be identified with a number of goddesses but most often with Hathor, whose name literally means Mansion of Horus. She seems to have been regarded as the mother of Horus the Elder and the wet nurse or foster mother of Horus the Younger.³⁷ Many other deities were imagined as protecting the divine child whenever Isis was forced to be absent.

In literary spells these deities can be changed into the humble human inhabitants of the marsh. The theme of the poisoning of the infant Horus was a common one in magical texts (see "Horus the Child" and "Serqet" in "Deities, Themes, and Concepts"). Several spells start with Isis lamenting because her child has been poisoned. The source of the poison is usually the bite of an earth-dwelling snake.

in the morning, Ra at noon, and Atum in the evening, but none of these is his true name; so the pain continues.

Isis insists that she cannot heal him without knowing his true name. When the pain gets worse, Ra gives in and whispers his name to Isis. The actual true name is not given in the story.²⁰ Ra tells Isis that when the time comes, she can pass on the secret to Horus, the son who will be born to her. Then Isis recites magical words that drive the poison out of Ra and destroy it. The mention of Horus at the end of the narrative provides a justification for the behavior of Isis. By gaining knowledge of the secret name to pass on to her son, she is ensuring that Horus will become the ruler of Egypt. The Egyptian audience for this story would know that her marvelous child, Horus, is himself destined to be poisoned in a similar way by a close relative and only cured through the secret knowledge of one of the gods.

Isis was not the only goddess to act against her "father," the creator sun god. Isis acted in a secret manner, but the goddess known as the Eye of Ra openly defied his authority. The story of the quarrel between the solar eye and her father and its eventual resolution is sometimes known as the myth of the Distant Goddess.

The Distant Goddess. As described earlier, the Sole Eye was a separable active force even when the creator was still inert in the primeval waters. The Eye was sometimes treated as a female form of the sun god, but she was also called the "daughter of Ra." Various important goddesses were associated with this role, most commonly Bastet, Hathor, Mut, Sekhmet, Tefnut, and Wadjet. For reasons that are rarely stated, the Eye goddess becomes angry and uncontrollable and refuses to stay with her father, Ra. Originally, this may only have been thought to happen when the Eye returned with Shu and Tefnut. Later versions of the myth seem to relate to the period when the world and humanity were well established.

In these versions, the Eye goes to a distant realm, sometimes identified with the Nubian or Libyan deserts. There she rages in her terrible leonine form, destroying everything she meets. Ra is left vulnerable to his enemies, so he sends out one or more of the gods to persuade his daughter to return. This is a dangerous undertaking because the fiery power of the solar eye is stronger than all other deities.

In some versions the chosen divine messenger is Onuris (Inhur). Onuris was a hunter god whose name means "the one who brings back the distant one." The Onuris myth is only known from scattered allusions. It seems that as the most powerful and cunning of hunters, Onuris is able to track down and subdue the solar lioness. He brings her back to Egypt and is rewarded with marriage to the lion goddess.



Figure 14. A dwarf god celebrating the return of the Distant Goddess. A relief in a temple which originally stood on the island of Philae. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

Other texts name Shu as the one who goes to persuade his sister-consort Tefnut to return. A reference to Shu in Coffin Texts spell 75 as having “pacified her who is in the middle of her rage” may allude to this mythical role. Thoth sometimes accompanies Shu or undertakes the mission on his own.²¹ As “the heart and tongue” of the gods, Thoth uses wise words to appease the dangerous goddess.

Several versions of an elaborate literary treatment of this myth were current in the late first millennium BCE. In the longest of these, Hathor-Tefnut is roaming the distant southern desert in the form of a “Nubian cat.” Thoth disguises himself as a dog-faced baboon to approach the angry goddess. He alternately harangues and cajoles her. Thoth lectures her about her duty and dignity as the daughter of Ra. He tells her about the desolate and gloomy state that Egypt has fallen into without her bright presence. He paints word pictures of the delicious food offerings and the singing and dancing she will receive in the

temples of Egypt if she returns. Thoth also tells her a series of entertaining animal fables on the theme of cosmic justice.

The best known of these is the story of the lion and the mouse.²² It tells of a mighty lion who (like the Distant Goddess) inspired fear wherever he went. One day, in the remote mountains where the lion lived, he met a panther suffering horrible wounds. The lion asked the panther who had pulled out his fur and ripped his skin. The panther replied that it was "Man." The lion did not know what men were, but he resolved to find Man and punish him.

On his journey he encountered chained horses, donkeys, cows, and oxen. The lion asked them who had imprisoned them, and they all replied "Man." Then the lion found a bear and another lion who had both been tricked and tortured by Man. The lion vowed that he would make Man suffer the same pain he had inflicted on all these animals.

As the lion searched for Man, a tiny mouse ran under his paw. The mouse begged the lion not to crush him. He pointed out that he was too small to satisfy the lion's appetite. The mouse promised that if the lion gave him his life, he would one day save the lion in return. The lion laughed at this, because he thought that no one was powerful enough to endanger him, but he let the mouse go anyway.

The lion did not realize how cunning Man was. A hunter had set a net over a hidden pit. The lion fell into the trap and was caught in the meshes of the net and bound with leather straps. He struggled for hours but could not free himself. In the middle of the night, the little mouse came and told the lion that he had come to repay him for the gift of life, because "it is beautiful to do good." The mouse gnawed through the straps and ropes until the lion was free. Then the mouse climbed into the lion's mane, and they went back to the mountains together.

The implication of this and the other fables is that if the destructive anger of the solar eye is not balanced by the justice and truth personified by Maat, the world will slide into chaos. The volatile goddess is not easy to persuade. One vivid passage describes how she becomes angry with Thoth and transforms from a cat into the terrible solar lioness whose eyes and nostrils spurt flame. Then "Thoth jumped like a frog, he quivered like a grasshopper."

Eventually, Thoth lures the goddess back toward Egypt. On the borders she is greeted with music and dancing that help to transform her into the "beautiful of face." This is the first of a series of benevolent forms of the Eye goddess.²³ An obscure passage deals with an attack on the goddess while she is sleeping. Thoth wakes her in time, and the forces of chaos are defeated. Eventually the goddess reaches Memphis, the capital of Egypt, where she is transformed into Hathor of the Southern Sycamore and joyfully reunited with her father. She is

needed to defend the creator sun god from his enemies. Chief among these, as in the fable of the lion and the mouse, is "Man."

In many mythologies, the gods make several attempts at creating people before they are satisfied. Such myths usually involve the destruction of the unsatisfactory part of humanity. As early as the Middle Kingdom, there are references to the creator deciding to destroy humanity and abandon the earth.²⁴ The fullest version of this myth is given in a text known as the Book of the Heavenly Cow, which is inscribed in five royal tombs of the New Kingdom. The earliest copy is on one of the large golden shrines surrounding the coffins of King Tutankhamun.²⁵

The Destruction of Humanity. After Ra had become the ruler of both gods and men,

Humanity plotted against him, while his majesty, may he live, may he prosper, may he be healthy, had grown old. His bones became silver, his flesh became gold, his hair true lapis-lazuli. When his majesty saw how humanity was plotting against him, his majesty said to his followers "Summon for me, my Eye, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut and the father and mothers who were with me when I was in the primeval waters, as well as the god Nun.²⁶ Let him bring his followers with him, but bring them secretly in case the humans see and their hearts escape.

The gods and goddesses all came and asked Ra to speak. He told them, "Humanity, which came into being from my Eye, is plotting against me. Advise me what you would do about it." Nun and the other deities advise Ra to send his Eye against the rebels. "No Eye is more able to smite them. Let it go down as Hathor."

The guilty ones among humanity flee into the desert through fear of Ra, but Hathor slaughters them and wades in their blood. When she returns to Ra, she tells him that she has "overpowered humanity and it was sweet to my heart." Ra replies, "I shall have power over them as king by culling them." Thus, says the text, "the Powerful One came into being."²⁷

The goddess intends to continue her slaughter the next day, but for reasons that are not explained, Ra has changed his mind. He summons messengers who can travel as fast as shadows and sends them to fetch a large quantity of a red mineral. Then he orders the Side-Lock Wearer in Heliopolis, a title of the high priest of Ra, to grind up the mineral while his maid servants mash barley to make beer. They make 7,000 jars of beer and add the red mineral to it to make the beer look like blood. Ra has the beer taken to the place where the goddess plans to destroy humanity. Before dawn Ra pours the red beer out until the fields are flooded to a depth of "three palms."²⁸ When the goddess arrives at dawn, she sees her own

beautiful reflection in the flood. "She drank and it delighted her heart. She came back drunk without having noticed humanity." Ra welcomed her back and from that day on alcohol was drunk during the festivals of Hathor.²⁹

It is not clear whether Ra took pity on humanity after the first day's slaughter or whether he only wanted to save the portion of humanity that he regarded as innocent. The latter is probably implied by the fact that the people killed on the first day have fled to the desert, part of the realm of chaos. These people become Enemies of Ra, a group that is shown in the Underworld Books being horribly tortured in the afterlife. The second day's slaughter is to take place in fields, presumably in the agricultural land of the Nile valley, usually associated with the realm of order.

The goddess Maat was sometimes said to have been sent down to live among humanity. She would stay with a virtuous person even after their death, but in times of general disorder and strife she would withdraw. Humanity was sometimes divided into the Followers of Horus (good) and the Followers of Seth (bad). This division appears to justify the ruthless destruction of many humans by the gods. A ritual drama inscribed on the walls of the temple of Horus at Edfu describes a rebellion by the people of Nubia in the 363rd year of Ra's reign. The rebels are tricked into killing each other, and their leader, Seth, is beheaded. A myth in Papyrus Jumilhac tells how the goddess Isis transforms herself into a form of Hathor, slaughters all the Followers of Seth with fire, and wades in their blood. This might seem to be a direct borrowing from the Book of the Heavenly Cow, but it should probably be seen as an example of a repeating pattern of events.

In the Book of the Heavenly Cow, even though the rebels have been defeated, the world can never be the same again. Ra announces that he is sick and weary, and he cannot bear to remain on earth. Nun, the god of the primeval waters, orders Shu and Nut to help Ra. Nut is transformed into a cow, and Ra rides away on her back. As the earth darkens, some of humanity beg Ra to stay, and they shoot at his enemies. This, says the text, was how death came into being. From this point on, humanity has to fight and die to maintain the divine order.

Nut carries Ra up into the heavens, and the single creator god transforms himself into many heavenly bodies. He creates the fields of paradise for the spirits of the dead. Nut "began to tremble because of the height," so Ra creates the Heh gods who live in twilight. Shu and the Heh gods support the body of Nut. Then Ra tells Geb to warn the powerful serpents that live under the earth not to abuse their magic because he will still look down on them. Ra puts Osiris in charge of humanity and calls "the moon of Thoth" into being, so that Thoth can rule the night sky as his deputy. This begins the era when the world was ruled by a series of lesser gods.

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Some early uses of the *djed* symbol imply that it could be thought of as a pillar holding the sky above the earth. Once a year the reigning king joined in a ceremony at Memphis to raise a tall *djed* column by pulling on ropes. Ptah, the chief god of Memphis, carried a scepter that combines the *djed* with an *ankh*, the symbol of life. Life, stability, and power were the three qualities that gods traditionally bestowed on kings. Raising the *djed* column was also part of the Heb Sed (jubilee festival) through which an aging king's powers were renewed. On some occasions the raising of the *djed* was preceded by a mock combat between people representing the opposing forces of order and chaos.

By the New Kingdom, the *djed* was closely associated with the mythology of Osiris. The taboo subject of the murder of Osiris could be alluded to by saying that Seth had "laid the *djed* on its side." Scenes in temples or royal tombs show the god Horus (or the king playing the role of Horus) raising the *djed* column to help his father Osiris to rise from the dead. The Book of the Dead contains a spell to be spoken over a gold *djed* amulet hung round the neck of a mummy. This spell promises that the dead person will get back the use of his or her spine and be able to sit up again like Osiris. A *djed* column was sometimes painted on the bottom of coffins for the same reason. Model *djed* columns became one of the amulets most commonly placed on mummies.

See also Horus; Osiris; Ptah; Sokar

References and further reading:

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ENNEAD OF HELIOPOLIS

The first four generations of deities in the creation myth of Heliopolis were referred to as the Ennead of Heliopolis.

See also Atum; Geb; Isis; Nephthys; Nut; Osiris; Seth; Shu and Tefnut

EYE OF RA

The Ancient Egyptian word for eye (*irt*) sounded like a word for "doing" or "acting." This may be why the eyes of a deity are associated with divine power at its most interventional. Since the word *irt* was feminine in gender, divine eyes were personified as goddesses. In different contexts, the eyes of the creator were identified with various celestial bodies, such as the disk of the sun, the full moon, the morning star, and Sopdet (Sirius). These celestial eyes could all be shown as the part-hawk, part-human eye known as the *wedjat* eye (see Figure 12). The Eye of Ra was regarded as Ra's daughter and protector. This Eye goddess was associ-

ated with both fire and water. Her fiery glance destroyed the enemies of the divine order while her tears created life.

After the primordial creator god Atum had produced Shu and Tefnut, they became lost in the watery darkness of the *nun*. Atum sent his Eye to find them "and gave light to darkness." This act was sometimes interpreted as the first sunrise and the moment when Atum was united with Ra to become the creator sun god. In the earliest versions of the myth, the Eye that was sent forth may have been thought of as the morning star that precedes the sunrise.

The Eye returned with Shu and Tefnut, but wept with rage when she saw that Ra-Atum had grown a new solar eye: the Glorious One. Human beings were created from the tears of the angry Eye or from the tears of joy shed by Ra-Atum's new eye (see "The Creation of Humanity" under "Linear Time" in "Mythical Time Lines"). Ra-

Atum placated the angry Eye by placing her on his forehead as the uraeus. Shown as a cobra coiled around the sun disk, she was more powerful than all other deities.

Important goddesses such as Hathor, Bastet, and Mut can be called both the Eye of Atum and the Eye of Ra. Other Egyptian texts refer to these two eyes as if they were separate entities. This may be to distinguish between the creative and destructive aspect of the Eye goddess. The pupil of the Eye could be thought of as a womb in which gods and other beings were formed. A child or a dwarf can be shown inside the Eye, representing the sun that will be born in the red sky of dawn.



Figure 28. A king is given power over foreign lands by Sekhmet, one of the goddesses who could be known as the Eye of Ra. Relief in the temple of Seti I at Abydos. (Courtesy of Richard Pinch)

The unblinking gaze of the Eye of Ra could embody the dangerous aspects of the sun's heat. The rays of the sun were compared with arrows shot by a divine archer to destroy the wicked. They could dry up the water of life and turn fertile land into desert. A myth with many variants deals with a quarrel between Ra and his daughter, the Eye goddess. She goes off into the deserts to the south or west of Egypt and lives as a savage lion or a wild cat (see "The Distant Goddess" under "Linear Time" in "Mythical Time Lines"). The sudden disappearance of the Eye of Ra has been interpreted by some Egyptologists as a solar eclipse.

Ra misses his daughter and needs his Eye to defend himself against the forces of chaos and the rebels among humanity. He sends one or more of the gods on a dangerous mission to retrieve the wandering goddess. The ferocious goddess is pacified by Thoth, Shu, or Onuris and persuaded to return to Egypt. In the Greco-Roman Period, the return of the Eye goddess was linked with the heliacal rising of Sirius that signaled the coming of the dangerous but life-giving Nile flood.

The goddess is given an ecstatic welcome by all creation and is reconciled with her father. She then becomes his consort and the mother of a divine child who will be the new form of the sun god. In some places a pair of goddesses was worshipped as the aggressive and pacified forms of the Eye of Ra, such as Satet and Anuket at Aswan and Ayet and Nehemetawy at Herakleopolis.

On many occasions the Eye goddess fought on behalf of her father, Ra. When part of humanity rebelled against the aging sun god, the Eye was sent down as Sekhmet, the raging lioness, to destroy the rebels (see "The Destruction of Humanity" under "Linear Time" in "Mythical Time Lines"). Such was her ferocity that she had to be tricked into returning to her father to prevent her from devouring all of humanity. In the fight against the Apophis monster, the Eye of Ra fought him under many names such as Bastet, lady of terror; Wadjyt, the Devouring Flame; Sekhmet, the Glorious Eye; and Wosret, the Great One.

The feline Eye goddess also represented royal power at its most brutal. Kings were described as striking down their enemies as Sekhmet had destroyed the enemies of Ra. Satirical cartoons that showed valiant mice winning a war against cats may have been a coded way of expressing the hope that ordinary Egyptians could overcome royal tyranny.

See also Apophis; Atum; Bastet; Hathor; Mut; Onuris; Ra; Satet and Anuket; Sekhmet; Snakes; Stars and Planets; Thoth

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J. C. Darnell. "The Apotropaic Goddess in the Eye." *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 24 (1997): 35-48.

mother in a fit of rage. Seth buries the eyes on a mountainside where they grow into lotus flowers. Meanwhile, the goddess Hathor heals Horus with gazelle milk and restores his eyes. A similar story in Papyrus Jumilhac has Anubis bury boxes containing the eyes of Horus on a mountainside. Isis waters the eyes to bring them back to life, creating the first grape vines in the process. This myth reinforces the common ritual identification of the Eye of Horus with the wine, food, and perfumes offered to the gods in temples. The growth of useful plants from the buried eyes of Horus is a parallel to the growth of barley and wheat from the body of his father, Osiris.

Myths that involve a single lunar Eye of Horus often name Thoth as the god who rescued it from under the earth or under water. At some point, the eye must have been torn apart like the body of Osiris, since Thoth is said to have put the pieces together again. The six parts of the *wedjat* eye (pupil, brow, and so on) were used in the hieroglyphic script to write the fractions that made up the standard grain measure. Rituals of counting and completing the Eye of Horus were performed in temples every month, linking it to the lunar cycle.

Once the eye was restored to Horus, he used it to revive his murdered father, Osiris. In commemoration of this event, a *wedjat* eye was often placed over the evisceration wound on a mummy to make the body whole again. Horus the Physician and Thoth, the Physician of the Eye of Horus, were asked to heal all kinds of ailments. Drugs used in Egyptian medicine were prescribed in measurements based on the *wedjat* eye. An abbreviated version of the Eye of Horus is still used by pharmacists as a symbol of their profession.

See also Eye of Ra; Feline Deities; Horus; Moon; Onuris; Seth; Thoth

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Primary sources:

PT 111, 145, 160, 587; CT 249, 157, 934–936; RDP; Ad 10th hour, BD 17, 112; PBM 10059; H&S; PJ

FELINE DEITIES

Many Egyptian deities were represented by predators of the cat family (*felidae*). There were North African and Near Eastern species of lions, and leopards and cheetahs were found to the south of Egypt. Smaller cat species, such as servals, inhabited the deserts or marshes. One of these species, *felis silvestris libyca*, seems to have been domesticated by the Egyptians by around 2000 BCE. Cats were chiefly prized for their ability to kill pests such as rats, mice, and snakes. Similar predators, such as mongooses and genets, seem to have been regarded as

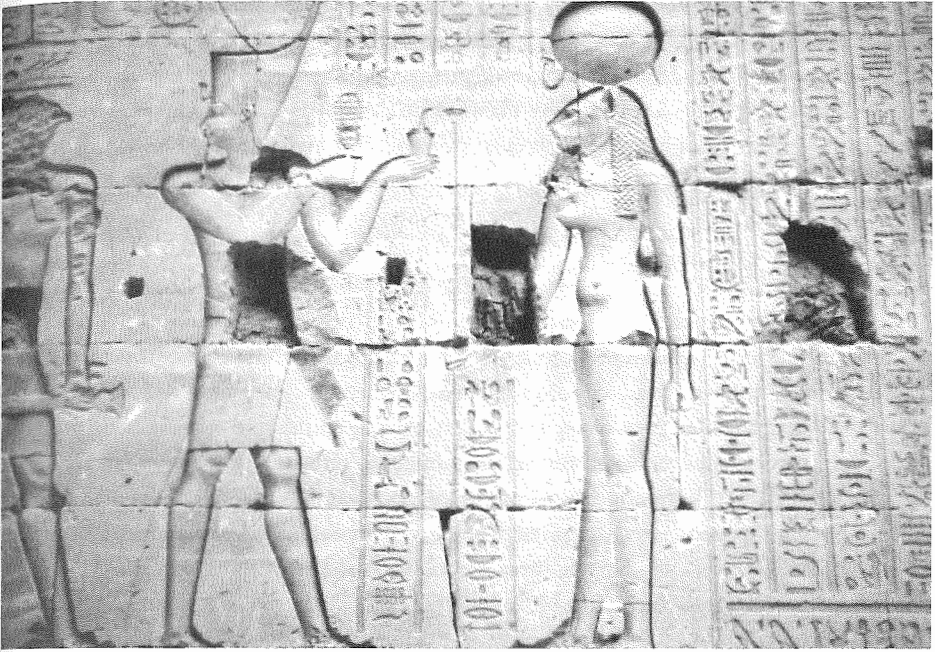


Figure 29. A king appeasing a lion-goddess who is too dangerous to be looked at directly. A Ptolemaic relief in the temple of Horus at Edfu. (Courtesy of Geraldine Pinch)

members of the cat family by the Egyptians. The characteristics of several feline species were sometimes combined in a single image.

Lion gods were not as important as lion goddesses, but the lion was an ancient symbol of royal power. Male leopards and panthers (black leopards) were associated with the uncontrollable rage of the god Seth, whereas female leopards played a protective role. Leonine goddesses usually have a short mane or ruff like that of a lynx or an adolescent male lion. Since they function as a manifestation of the wrath of the sun god, their gender is ambiguous. The lion was a component of Egyptian monsters such as Bes and Taweret, the sphinx and the griffin. These mythical creatures were invoked as magical guardians of people and places. There are many mentions in the Pyramid Texts of the deity Ruty (Double Lion) who guarded the horizon, the place of regeneration for deities and kings. This deity may derive from earlier images of a pair of leopards or panthers who seem to represent the sky. By the New Kingdom, the spotted leopard-lions of the horizon were identified with the first divine couple, Shu and Tefnut. An alternative representation of the place of the sun's birth was a pair of striped cats flanking a lotus flower.

Many other feline deities acted as ferocious guardians. According to a temple ritual, the body of Osiris was guarded by four lion goddesses: Wadjet, Sekhmet, Bastet, and Shesmetet (Smithis). In the Pyramid Texts the goddess Mafdet helps the dead king by clawing out the eyes of evil snakes. Her sacred animal may originally have been some kind of mongoose, but she was later depicted as a cheetah or a lynx. As the divine executioner, Mafdet served justice by running down and slaughtering the "enemies of Ra." Her symbol was a harpoon fixed to a block.

The Coffin Texts mention Pakhet the Great who hunts by night as a lioness or a panther. Her name means "the one who scratches." The claw amulets worn by Egyptian queens and princesses may evoke the protective might of this goddess. The lion-headed Barque of Pakhet provided an escort for the solar barque. Like other feline deities, she could also take the form of the fire-spitting cobra who protected the sun god's heirs.

Unnamed lions, lionesses, panthers, and cats are shown on magical objects fighting the traditional enemies of the divine order (see, for example, Figure 30). The images of lions and cats tearing out the throats of foreign captives may allude to the myth of the Eye of Ra being sent down in her lion form (Sekhmet) to destroy the humans who had rebelled against the sun god. Other goddesses who could be identified with the lion form of the creator's eye included Bastet, Hathor, Mehit, Mut, Tefnut, and Wadjet.

When the eye who was the first-born daughter of Ra became alienated from her father, she wandered the deserts in the form of a lion or a cat (see "The Distant Goddess" under "Linear Time" in "Mythical Time Lines"). A relief in the temple of el-Dakka in Nubia showed this goddess with the full mane of a lion and the swollen teats of a nursing lioness. In this form she was dangerous even to other deities. Those she devoured would be annihilated forever, with no hope of rebirth. In her cat form she was a fierce fighter but a force for good. The myth of Thoth and Shu luring the Distant Goddess back to Egypt with promises of food and comfort mirrors the way the Egyptians had transformed wild cats into pets.

It was in cat form that the daughter of Ra assisted her father in an epic battle against the chaos monster Apophis. One terrible night Ra himself took the form of the Great Tom Cat and fought the Apophis serpent under the *ished* tree at Heliopolis. He sliced up Apophis with his knife and split the *ished* tree in two, creating the twin trees of the horizon (see Figure 22).

In her pacified form, the feline daughter of Ra united with the creator sun god to produce a divine child. At Bubastis, the lion god Mahes (Mihos, Myysis) was the cub of Bastet and Atum-Ra. In the first millennium BCE, Bastet was increasingly represented as a fertile mother, suckling or surrounded by many kit-

tens. Her dangerous leonine form was played down but not forgotten. An Instruction Text of the Greco-Roman Period warns Egyptian men that women are like a friendly cat when you can give them what they want and like a raging lioness when you cannot.

See also Bastet; Eye of Ra; Hathor; Mut; Onuris; Ra; Sekhmet; Shu and Tefnut; Sphinx

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GEB

Geb was the chief earth god and the mate of the sky goddess Nut. They were the children of Shu and Tefnut, the first divine couple. Geb and Nut formed the third generation in the group of nine gods who made up the Ennead of Heliopolis. In the early stages of creation, the earth god and the sky goddess were locked in a passionate embrace. The forcible separation of Geb and Nut by their father Shu was one of the most important cosmic events in Egyptian myth.

Geb was nearly always shown in human form. His skin could be painted green, probably to symbolize the plants that "come forth from the body of Geb." Living creatures were said to "crawl on the back of Geb." None of these life-forms could come into being until Shu separated Geb and Nut so that air and light could exist between them. After their separation, Geb and Nut became the parents of five divine children: Osiris, Horus the Elder, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys. As a sky goddess, Nut was also considered to be the mother of all heavenly bodies, so Geb was sometimes called the "father" of the sun god Ra. In the Book of Nut, Geb is said to be appalled by Nut's habit of eating her children. He is rebuked by the sun god, who explains that Nut's behavior is a necessary part of the cycle of death and rebirth.

Geb himself was said to swallow up the dead, and he was in charge of the dangerous snakes who lived under the earth. Like other **chthonic deities**, Geb could be a terrifying god, responsible for destructive earthquakes. The ceremony of "hacking the ground" was said to honor Geb but may in origin have been a rite to subdue the dangerous earth god. A myth found only in an inscription of the fourth century BCE tells how Geb violently rebelled against his parents. He seized the throne from Shu and forced Tefnut to be his queen. Geb assumed most of the divine regalia of Ra but was bitten by the fiery serpent who guarded the sun god and all legitimate rulers.

MAHES (MIHOS)

Mahes was a fierce lion god.

See also Bastet; Feline Deities

MEHET-WERET (MEHURIT, METHYER)

Mehet-Weret was a primeval cow goddess who gave birth to the sun god. Her name originally meant the "Great Flood" but was later reinterpreted as the "Great Swimmer." She was a female counterpart of Nun, the god of the primeval ocean, and a rival for his title of "oldest of beings." In some contexts, Mehet-Weret is merely an epithet of creator goddesses such as Hathor, Neith, or Isis.

Mehet-Weret was thought of as existing before creation as a kind of fertile current in the primeval ocean. Spell 17 of the Book of the Dead states that the sun god Ra was "born from the buttocks" of Mehet-Weret. The primeval lotus, from which the sun child is alternatively said to have emerged, was probably also a form of this goddess. After creation, Mehet-Weret was identified with the celestial waters traveled by the sun barque. In the nocturnal sky she was probably the "river" of stars we know as the Milky Way.

Mehet-Weret could be shown as a cow-headed woman, a seated cow, or a cow carrying a child. One of Mehet-Weret's titles was "mound" or "island," alluding to the idea that the newborn sun god was raised above the primeval waters on the head or back of Mehet-Weret so that he could begin his work of creation. In a variation on this myth, Neith/Mehet-Weret is said to have saved the infant sun from her children (the first crocodiles) by carrying him through the waters of chaos. This finds a parallel in later mythical history. After a revolt by humanity, Ra begins a new order by being carried up into the heavens on the back of Nut in cow form. Nut and Mehet-Weret are sometimes treated as a pair of cosmic cows with parallel myths and sometimes as the same deity. Nut has an alternative sky form as a giant nude woman stretched above the earth. Ritual spoons in the form of a nude female swimmer may depict Nut/Mehet-Weret.

The starry-patterned cows that form the sides of a golden bed from the tomb of Tutankhamun are labeled Isis-Mehet [Weret]. The purpose of such funerary beds was to help the dead king to ascend to the heavens, supported by the celestial cow. In the Book of the Dead, the cow who stands at the entrance to the realm of the dead is sometimes named as Mehet-Weret. By the New Kingdom all the elite dead could hope to be helped by the cow goddess during the vulnerable period of rebirth.

See also Cattle; Hathor; Neith; Nut