



Gods & Religion

The ancient Egyptians interpreted every occurrence in terms of the relationship between natural and supernatural forces. Those phenomena that figured prominently in their lives included the annual cycle of the Nile River's flood, the enormous size and unchanging harshness of the surrounding desert, and the daily cycle of the sun's appearance in the east, gradual movement across the sky, and eventual disappearance in the west. The ancient Egyptians developed a world view in which these and other events and conditions were attributed to the actions of multiple, related gods and goddesses.

The ancient Egyptians imagined the world to be a far different place from what we now know it to be. They believed the earth was a flat platter of clay afloat on a vast sea of water from which the Nile River sprung. In this fundamental description of the world, the forces of nature were identified as divine descendants of the creator god.

When we try to make some sense out of the many Egyptian gods and goddesses, we must keep two important facts in mind. First, early in Egyptian history Lower (north) and Upper (south) Egypt were unified under one ruler. This union resulted in the merging of several cultural traditions. Second, because ancient Egyptian civilization existed for more than three thousand years, the deities and myths gradually changed over time as a result of new ideas, contact with other peoples, and changing cultural values.

One of the best-known legends in Egyptian mythology, for example, revolves around a deity who at one time may have been a local ruler in the Nile River's delta. Originally Osiris was a god associated with the city of Busiris in the Delta; over time this regional god gained countrywide acceptance.

As the religion of Egypt evolved, various gods gained importance. The falcon-headed god depicted on this coffin fragment is identified as Re-Horakhty-Atum, the god central in creation myths. Re, the sun god, had several aspects: Khepri, the morning; Horakhty, the midday; and Atum, the afternoon. During Dynasty XXI (ca. 1070-945 B.C.) with increasing frequency he replaced Osiris in the traditional offering formula.

◀ Back

Next ▶