



Isis kneeling, from the sarcophagus of Amenophis II in the Valley of the Kings near Thebes. *Hirmer Fotoarchiv*

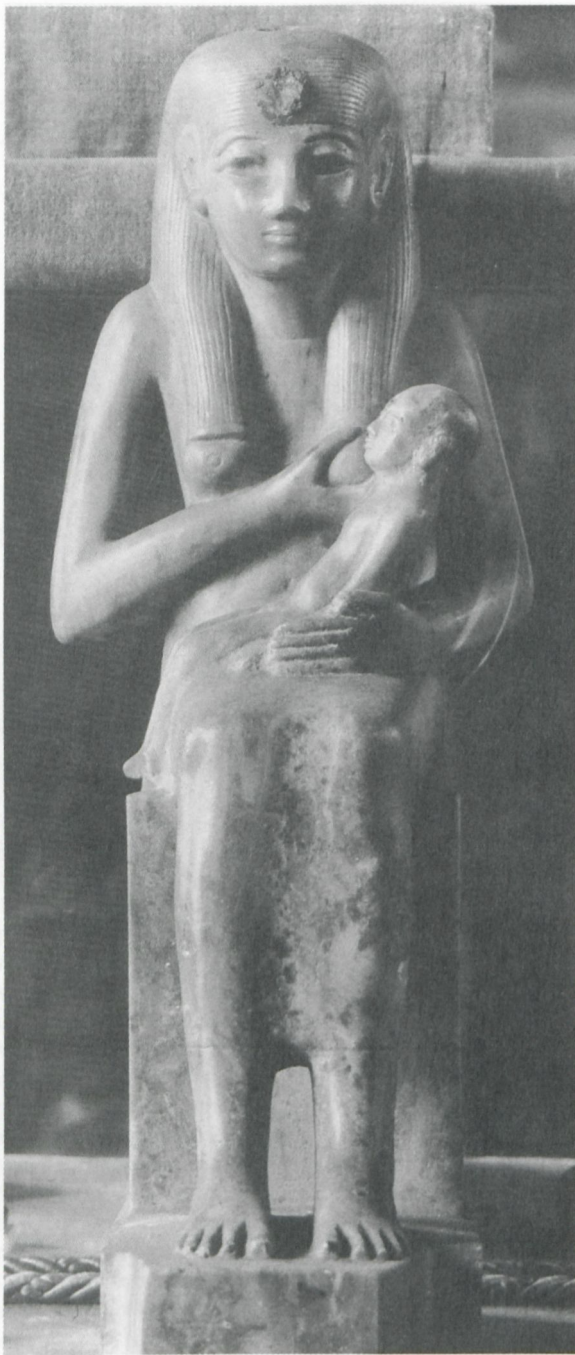
## Egypt

If one wants to provide a brief overview of Egyptian divinities, including demons and the multitude of personifications, it is a good idea not to get bogged down in details. The sheer number of such beings can make it difficult even for specialists to see the big picture. Besides the fifty to one hundred known divinities that would occur to every Egyptologist after a moment's

thought, there are thousands upon thousands of further entities one could call minor gods to avoid placing them in the same category as "demons." A precedent for using the terms *major gods* and *minor gods* is provided by a stele of Rameses IV (ca. 1152–1145 BCE) from Abydos. Furthermore, no opposition between gods as greater and demons as lesser divine beings existed in ancient Egyptian terminology. And finally, the creatures that today one might readily characterize as demons, such as many inhabitants of the Egyptian underworld—as depicted in the Book of Caverns, for instance—are rarely referred to as gods in Egyptian texts.

Despite these difficulties, scholars have of course tried to determine what conditions must be fulfilled in order to speak of an ancient Egyptian supernatural being as a god. One definition that has found wide acceptance was proposed by Jan Assmann, who suggested that for the term to be properly applied three conditions must be fulfilled: the divinity must be associated with a cult or topographical site and must possess both a cosmic and a mythic dimension. In the case of Osiris, for example, who clearly qualifies, long litanies (e.g., Book of the Dead, utterances 141–42) list the places where he was worshiped; a large temple to him remains preserved in Abydos, and countless inscriptions have survived in which individuals directed prayers to Osiris. The cosmic dimension is addressed when Osiris is conceived as





Isis suckling her son Horus, 1st millennium BCE. Louvre. *Foto Marburg/Art Resource, New York*

floodwaters or as the corpse of the sun-god. The best-known example of the last dimension is the Osiris myth that has come down to us in complete form only in Plutarch, although single references or episodes play a central role in a large number of Egyptian texts. Briefly, the story involves the murder of the legitimate ruler Osiris

by his younger brother Seth, who dismembered the body and distributed the parts throughout the country. However, Seth was unable to prevent their collection, reassembly, and embalming, which made it possible for the dead Osiris to sire a legitimate heir, Horus, with Isis. Horus grew up amid all kinds of perils, but finally defeated Seth and ascended the throne.

The Egyptians developed several ordering principles for the world of their divinities. The simplest principle involved linking three gods together as a triad. As a rule, the triad consisted of father, mother, and son, so that Amun, the god of Karnak, was venerated with his wife Mut and her son, the moon-god Khonsu. This becomes particularly clear at the Theban temples of the New Kingdom, which contained three shrines: one at the center for the barque of Amun, one to the right for the barque of Mut, and one to the left for the barque of Khonsu. The next, more complex principle consisted of associating many gods in enneads, or groups of nine (in which the number nine stood for the idea of “many” rather than the actual number of divinities in each group). The best-known and most important such group is the ennead of Heliopolis, which has a clear genealogical structure spanning four generations. At the top is Atum, the sun-god of Heliopolis, who created his progeny Shu, god of the air, and Shu’s wife Tefnut out of himself. The third generation consists of Geb, god of the earth, and Nut, goddess of the sky. Together with the fourth generation—Osiris, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys—they make up a group that does in fact consist of nine members. Most of the known enneads comprise divinities venerated at a particular site; in many cases it is not possible to determine exactly how many members each group had or to identify them by name.

The recent publication of a papyrus from Tebtunis, dating from the Roman era, has revealed a quite different system, in which each of the great gods has a title corresponding to an official in the Egyptian palace administration. At the apex is Re-Harakhte as king, followed by Shu as crown prince and Thoth as vizier. Anubis, represented in the form of a jackal, is in charge of cattle—a role known from other texts. The role of Seth as head of the physicians of upper Egypt, on the other hand, is entirely unexpected. This identification of gods with government officials is only part of a larger system. In principle, Egyptian divinities could be associated with any class of animate or (from today’s perspective) inanimate entities; there are documented cases of identification with snakes and other animals, stars, and minerals.

The lesser gods number literally in the thousands. A good example is Coffin Text 627 from the Middle Kingdom, inscribed on two coffins from Siut and el-Bersheh, which mention the companions of the lord of all things, to be understood as a group of eighty-one gods. Only the coffin from el-Bersheh lists the names of all eighty-one, and while almost none of these beings appear any-



where else in surviving Egyptian texts, both their determinatives and phonetic representations indicate that they must unquestionably be identified as gods. There is little evidence of any topographical association or cosmic and mythical dimension—the three marks of divine status—and yet they are gods all the same, who must have had a certain importance four thousand years ago, although perhaps only locally and for a brief period. The reasons behind the order in which they are listed are completely unknown, as is the case for many other lists; scholars are at a loss to interpret them—understandably, given the sparseness of surviving artifacts. Nevertheless these little-known deities seem to have been important to Egyptians, for otherwise they would not have recorded their names (and often their appearance) in so many texts.

The lesser gods appear in the greatest numbers in the Books of the Underworld that decorated the royal tombs of the New Kingdom. These great compositions—such as the *Amduat*, the *Book of Gates*, and the *Book of Caverns*—describe the night journey of the sun-god through the underworld and provide a detailed description in words and pictures of all the creatures whom he encounters during the twelve hours of darkness. The *Amduat* alone, the oldest work (first documented under Thutmose I, ca. 1504–1492 BCE, but presumably created during the Middle Kingdom), lists 908 divinities; in all the Books of the Underworld combined, some 2,500 deities occur. A further group of sources, still largely unresearched, consists of funerary artifacts, both the wooden coffins of the Third Intermediate Period and, perhaps even more important, the later stone sarcophagi. The latter display long rows of gods with animal heads, most of them holding a long knife in each hand, on their outer sides, where they function as guardians. Each of these gods has a name, and the extensive accompanying texts assign each one a precise function in protecting the sarcophagus.

The power of these beings was summoned solely as a defense against robbers, who might later come to desecrate the tomb and rob the deceased. The same function was served by whole armies of protective deities who watch over the outer walls and entrances of the great temples of the late period. At the temple of Horus in Edfu, for instance, four companies of guardian deities (falcons, lions, snakes, and bulls), each with its own commander, are positioned to defend the temple against potential attackers from any direction. At Dendara another such group, consisting of seventy-seven members, guards both the entrance to a chamber of Sokar inside the temple and a shrine of Osiris on the roof. The gods in this last group are also depicted on several coffins. A final example for this class of divinities is the water-spouts in the form of lions on the outer walls of the great temples of the late period, whose power was meant to ward off all attacks from the air.

The Egyptians' preference for representing the order

of their world in lists indicates a connection between certain divinities and specific divisions of time. This system extends from gods associated with individual hours of the day or night to monumental lists showing that each day of the year possessed its own god. Most of these catalogues of “chronocrats,” or gods of a single day, come from the temples of the Greco-Roman period, but the tradition extends back at least to the New Kingdom. Amunhotep III (1388–1351/1350 BCE) had 365 large granite statues of Sachmet erected in the temple of Mut in Karnak: a comparison with the late lists shows that each was associated with a calendar day. The Egyptians of the late period also filled the remaining gaps by naming protective divinities for the twelve months and the thirty days of the lunar month. While these gods were considered to be helpers or benefactors as a rule, there were many others whose activities were viewed as menacing. Some of them were demons of disease, to whom Egyptians attributed a considerable number of illnesses. The most notable example is the annual pestilence that occurred when the Nile floods subsided, which may have been bubonic plague. It was thought to be spread by the so-called knife demons and wandering demons sent out by Sachmet, the goddess of disease.

Other beings universally feared were the dead—not the blessed dead who had received proper burial, but the unburied, who could haunt the living and inflict many kinds of harm. According to a mythological calendar dating from the New Kingdom, great heat would cause the ground to crack on a day with particularly negative associations, allowing the evil spirits to rise through the fissures. But they could also enter a person in dreams or through bodily orifices and release their poison; amulets, spells, and other magical practices were among the means used to protect against such spirits.

An entirely different group of gods widely venerated at certain times consisted of deified human beings. Both the living and the deceased could be deified, although the former practice was restricted to kings. The best-known examples are the deification of Sesostrius III (1836–1818 BCE) in Nubia and of Rameses II (1279–1213 BCE), whose veneration was clearly more prevalent in Nubia than in Egypt. Nonroyal persons were always deified only after their death. The most important among them was Imhotep, who built the Step Pyramid for King Djoser in the 3rd Dynasty (27th century BCE). In the late period Imhotep was considered a god of healing, and shrines were built for him in various places around Egypt, such as Memphis, Philae, and Deir el-Bahri.

Personifications were another widespread phenomenon in ancient Egypt. These were objects or areas that were represented and addressed as persons, and it was also thought that they could initiate action. Egyptian personifications can be categorized according to their significance in cult rites and the magnitude of personal-ity attributed to them or sorted thematically according

to the objects and areas for which they stand. One instance of an important personification for the entire period of ancient Egyptian history is Maat, the goddess of order in the world and in life; Hapi, god of floodwaters, is another.

The variety of themes is striking. Numerous objects and abstractions connected in the broadest sense to human nourishment could be personified, and so two beer jugs became Menquet and Tenemit, goddesses of beer who were responsible for brewing. They were often depicted in processions of people bearing offerings in the Greco-Roman period. They were accompanied in these processions by other personifications such as Neper, the god of grain, Aqyt (bread), and Hab (fishing and bird catching), to name a few. From this type of personification, it was only a small step to personifying the geographical areas that supplied different kinds of food; thus we find various denominations for fields, canals, and rivers personified in the same processions.

There are also depictions of geographical processions, which in terms of iconography and location (in the lowest register in the temples) are hardly distinguishable from the processions of gift bearers. They include long rows of personifications of the regions of Egypt, frequently divided into four main groups; they are shown in geographical order from south to north, offering products typical of their region to the temple or the main god of the temple. Furthermore, individual toponyms could themselves become objects of veneration; examples include the two personifications of the region on the western bank of the Nile at Thebes: Meresger (She Who Loves Silence) and Cheftethernebes (She Who Faces Her Lord) (a reference to Karnak). An example from a later date is the personification of the Temple of Isis in Dendara, who is shown being honored by the king, just like Hathor or Isis, in a ritual scene on the outer wall of both the *pronaos* and *naos* of the temple of Hathor there.

Still other personifications are derived from the area of religion or the royal palace, as when two whips or the king's beard are portrayed as divine beings. A last important group consists of personifications of abstract concepts, such as the goddess Maat. Other important divinities in this category are Hu, the god of divine utterance, Sia, god of knowledge, and Heka, god of magic, who was venerated as a child-god in the Greco-Roman era at the temple in Esna.

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