

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet



The Ancient Egyptians Gods and Goddesses

The ancient Egyptians worshipped many gods and goddesses. There were three main categories of deities:

- Universal gods who represented the forces of nature - the sun, moon, and stars
- Local gods associated with an area
- Personal gods, objects and creatures chosen for individual worship.

There are many versions of myths associated with the gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt, here are just a few connected to gods represented in the Fitzwilliam's collection.

Isis and Horus (Gallery 19, Case II, No.2)
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The Story of Isis and Osiris

The god Osiris was killed by his jealous brother Seth. Osiris' devoted wife Isis searched long and hard for him, she travelled all over the world and on her travels she came across scattered pieces of Osiris' dead body. She collected them all and lovingly put him back together again. This is how the first mummy was made. With her magical powers, Isis breathed new life into Osiris, and he lived again but only in the afterlife. Subsequently, Isis and Osiris had a son, Horus. Many struggles and fights ensued between Horus and Seth as Horus tried to take back his father's throne. Eventually, Horus was declared ruler of the living, Osiris was declared ruler of the underworld, and Seth was banished to rule the deserts. In ancient Egypt, each living pharaoh was believed to be the god Horus, and each deceased pharaoh turned into Osiris.

Osiris

Osiris, ruler of the underworld, was associated with death, resurrection and fertility. He was represented as a mummy holding two symbols of kingship, the crook and flail. These symbols alluded to both his power to control and guide the people. His special headdress, called the Atef crown, consisted of the white crown of Upper (southern) Egypt with two plumes, and sometimes ram's horns. His skin could be shown as white, like mummy wrappings, black, like the fertile rich Nile soil, or green, which represented new plant life, or even red like the silt-laden water of the Nile in flood.

Horus

On gaining the throne of Egypt the living human pharaoh became Horus. In this way the power of the pharaoh was absolute, and he was powerful enough to maintain “maat”, balance and right order within the universe.

The god Horus was represented as a hawk-like bird, or with a hawk-like head, and he ruled the sky. In one of his many mythological battles with the god Seth, Horus lost his left eye. In some stories this eye had a character of its own and wandered independently. In other tales the eye was buried in the ground. Eventually, the missing eye was magically restored to him and he was healed. The symbol of this ‘wedjat-eye’ or ‘udjat’, or “eye of Horus”, came to symbolise for the Egyptians, the general process of ‘making whole’, protection, strength, healing and perfection. Unsurprisingly, given the risks and dangers of life in ancient Egypt, Wedjat eye amulets were extremely common and popular..

Isis

Isis was the mother of Horus, and was, therefore, also the symbolic mother of the living Egyptian pharaoh. She embodied the virtues of a good Egyptian wife and mother, strength and devotion, but Isis was also magical. Isis was sometimes depicted cradling her baby Horus, but was also often shown as a protector goddess on coffins or sarcophagi, as she is on the sarcophagus lid of Ramesses III in gallery 20.

Ptah

Ptah was the god of craftsmen, and the association with shaping and making, led to him also becoming a creator god. It was believed that he brought the whole universe into existence with “thoughts from his heart and words from his tongue”. The power of words is a strong trait in Egyptian thought as demonstrated in the magical powers of writing.

Shaven headed Ptah wears a tight fitting skull cap and is usually portrayed as a mummy, whose hands are uncovered from the wrappings. He holds his staff, the design of which varies, sometimes with the “djed” pillar that represented stability, the “ankh” sign that represented life and the “was” sceptre that symbolised his power and dominion. Ptah often stands on a plinth shaped like the measuring rod used by workmen, this shape is also the hieroglyphic shape meaning truth. The important city of Memphis chose Ptah as its patron god.

Thoth

Thoth was god of writing, calculation, knowledge and scribes. He was often represented as an Ibis headed man holding a scribe’s palette and reed pen, writing, recording or calculating. In the important texts of the ‘judgment of the dead’, he recorded the results of the weighing of the heart ceremony. A person’s deceased ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ would hope to pass this test and so be allowed entry to the afterlife. As well as his scribal recording role, sometimes Thoth is represented as a baboon, sitting on top of the scales observing this procedure. Thoth was associated with the moon, so he was often shown with a headdress incorporating a disc and crescent symbolising the phases of the moon. His long curved beak, when shown as an ibis, also resembles the shape of the crescent moon.

Anubis

Anubis was the god of the dead, associated with embalming and mummification. It is said that he wrapped the first mummy, the body of the dead god Osiris. He was usually shown as a seated black dog or jackal, or as a man with jackal’s head. Anubis’ black colouring recalls the rich fertile Nile soil – and its associations with rebirth. He was the watchful guardian of the necropolis; he supervised burial rites and safeguarded the dead on their way to the afterlife. Interestingly, even today, jackals can still be seen roaming the edge of the desert where the Ancient Egyptians once buried their dead.

Amun

Amun was always represented in the shape of a man wearing a cap with two tall plumes and occasionally a sun disk. Amun's sacred animals were the ram and the goose, but unlike some of the other gods and goddesses who might be shown in part animal form, Amun was never represented as a ram or as ram headed himself. Amun means hidden or invisible and he was believed to be present everywhere. His title "king of the gods" demonstrates his great importance. His main centre of worship was Thebes - where the temples of Luxor and Karnak dedicated to Amun, still stand in modern Egypt today.

The Sun

Re was one of the gods of the sun (there were 72 forms of the Sun God). The Sun God journeyed across the sky each day in his solar barque. Through the day the Sun God sailed through the sky and lit up the world with the sun's rays. At night he sailed through the dark netherworld, battling the evil snake Apopis who tried to swallow the sun and make darkness reign forever. Fortunately, the Sun, in the form of a scarab Kephri, emerged again victoriously each dawn, on the Eastern horizon, greeted by dancing and singing baboons. Like all gods the Sun God was credited with a creator role. This powerful god was credited with making the winds, waters, gods and all of mankind.

Hathor

Hathor was a sky goddess and, importantly, goddess of fertility. She was represented as a cow. The Egyptians told of how she stood across the earth with her legs marking the four cardinal points, the sun disk up high between her horns was of course the sun, her belly was the sky and her hide and her udders became the stars and planets. She was sometimes shown as an actual cow, or as a woman wearing a headdress showing the sun disk between cow's horns. At the temple of Hathor there was an annual celebration called The Feast of Drunkenness, commemorating the occasion when Hathor was prevented from destroying mankind by being made drunk.

Examples of Gods and Goddesses

There are many depictions of gods and goddesses shown throughout the galleries, but a selection of statuettes and figurines can be seen in Gallery 19, Cases II and I3.