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EARLY TIMES THE STORY OF ANCIENT EGYPT

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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Bernice Houston and Clifton Jean Strauss

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The Boston Museum of Fine Arts
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Page 52: The British Museum (London)

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine a land where the sky is always blue and cloudless, where the light of day and the darkness of night occur with dramatic suddenness, where nearly all roads lead north or south, and where the people live much as their ancestors did thousands of years ago. Such a place is Egypt, a desert country in the northeast corner of Africa.

It is very hot in Egypt in the daytime, although the evening often ushers in refreshing breezes. The air is very dry. Less than one inch of rain falls on most parts of the country during an entire year! Snakes and lizards thrive among the desert's rocks and pebbles, but few people would want to live in such a barren and inhospitable environment were it not for the Nile River that flows gently through the center of the land.

The River Brings Life To The Desert

The Nile is the longest river in the world, covering a distance of over four thousand miles. It has two branches: the Blue Nile that originates in the mountains of Ethiopia, and the White Nile whose source is Lake Victoria in southern Uganda. The two branches meet at the modern city of Khartoum in the Sudan. From there the river flows

northward into Egypt, its narrow valley cutting through limestone hills for hundreds of miles until the terrain flattens. The valley is never more than twelve miles wide, and sometimes it measures only one mile. Just north of the city of Cairo the Nile splits into a maze of smaller rivulets that meander through green marshes until they finally empty into the Mediterranean Sea.

The river is the habitat of many species of fish and waterfowl, not to mention crocodiles, and it serves as a major highway for boats. Thousands of years ago Egyptian farmers learned to channel the water of the Nile in order to grow their crops in the fertile soil along its banks, and their modern descendants continue to use many of the ancient methods to harvest grain and cotton there to this very day. The river is

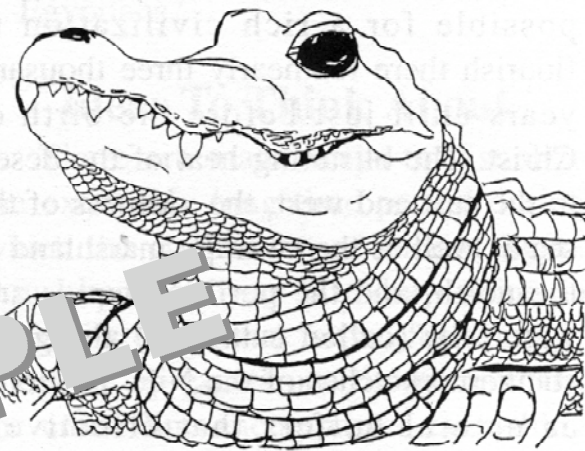


fig. 2 — a Nile dweller

CHAPTER V — RELIGION

The first settlers of the Nile Valley were very superstitious. They did not understand the forces of nature, and so they invented stories to explain such natural events as the rising of the sun, the flooding of the Nile, and death itself. From earliest times they were in awe of the creatures of the fertile valley—the beasts that grazed along the floodplain, the serpents that slithered across the mud, the birds that soared effortlessly in the cloudless sky, and the animals that swam in the cool waters of the Nile.

Divine Spirits In Animal Bodies

They believed that immortal spirits inhabited the bodies of these creatures. As hunters, they knew their survival depended upon finding plenty of game, and so they worshipped the spirit of the species of beast they stalked. They hoped that by pleasing the spirit with their prayers and dances they could convince it to provide them with plenty of animals for their hunt. They also worshipped the spirits of dangerous animals like snakes and crocodiles, hoping that such reverence would prevent those creatures from doing them harm. Sobek, a crocodile god, became an important deity in many parts of Egypt. Other animals were considered sacred because of their usefulness. For example, the mongoose was revered because it devoured snakes. Cats were valued because they consumed pesky rodents, while dogs and geese warned of approaching strangers.

Every small village had its own special deity. The people of Naquada in Upper Egypt worshipped Seth, a fierce, long-snouted beast who seems a combination of wild dog and donkey. In nearby Nekhen, the people prayed to a strong and cunning falcon god known as

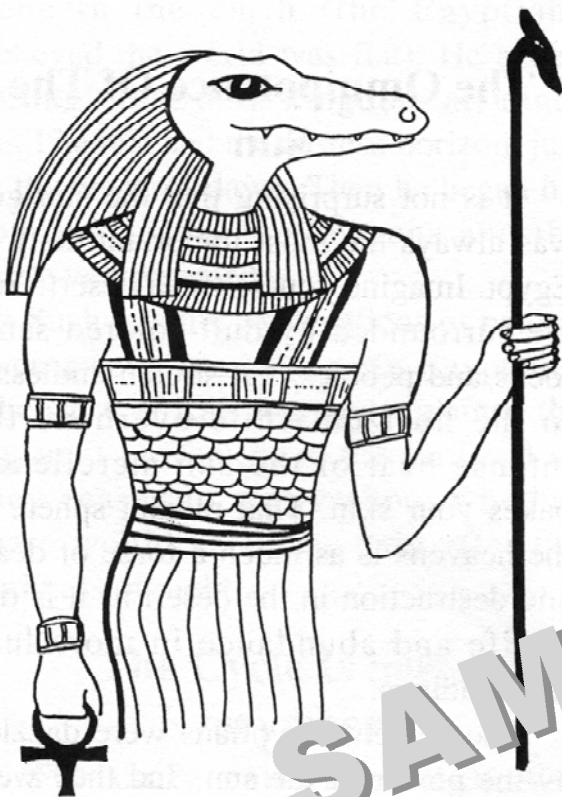


fig. 25 — Sobek

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Ma'at clearly reflects the love of order and stability that pervaded Egyptian culture and it helps to explain that ancient people's utter disdain for anything that might upset the everyday pattern and rhythm of life in the Nile Valley.

A Diversity Of Deities

Over the centuries, the myths about the gods and goddesses became more and more complex as new deities were added to the list. Being a conservative people, the Egyptians never considered eliminating any old beliefs when new ones were acquired. And so by the end of the New Kingdom their religion had become a complicated network of relationships among over two thousand deities! Some gods, such as Osiris and Ra, were worshipped by all Egyptians; many local gods were only worshipped by the inhabitants of a small area. Gods of special interest to ordinary people up and down the Nile included Taweret, the goddess of childbirth, Bes, the god of pleasure, and the cobra goddess Meretseger (she was worshipped to prevent the possibility of snakebites!).

Scholars have always wondered why Egyptian gods are often shown with the head of an animal but the body of a human being. The most likely explanation for such strange looking deities is that the priests wore masks of the

animal gods to whom they were appealing when they performed religious ceremonies. Paintings were made of the masked priests, and these images became identified with the gods themselves. Thus, Anubis is represented both as a sleek jackal and as a jackal-headed man; Horus has been painted and sculpted both as a falcon and a falcon-headed man.

Sacred Animals

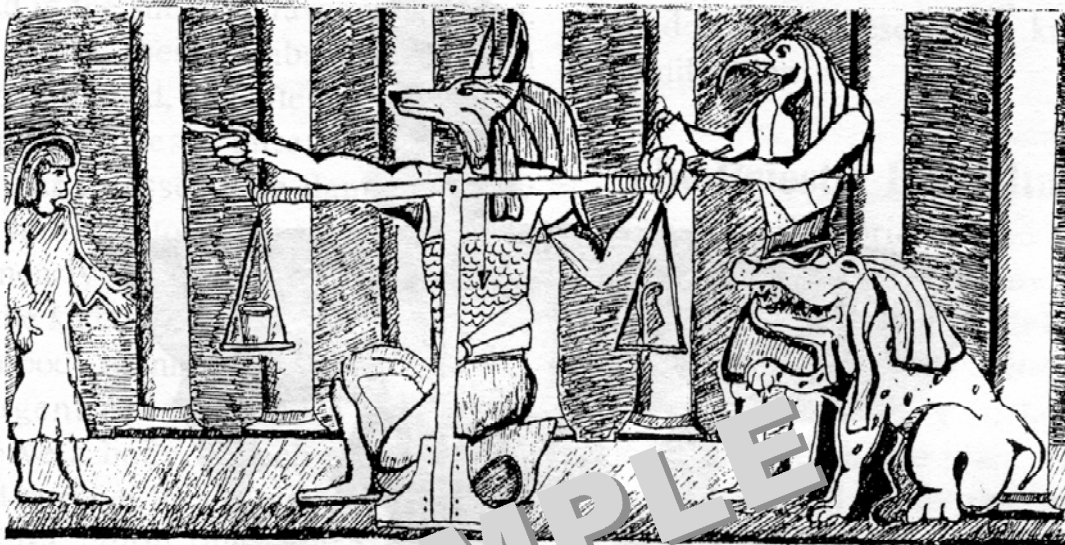
The many animals that the Egyptians considered sacred led very comfortable lives. For example, the cats that protected the grain from rodents were greatly pampered. When they died, the family members shaved their eyebrows as a sign of mourning. A dead cat's body was mummified and given a special funeral. The spirit of the cat (symbolized by the goddess Bastet) was called "miu"—this certainly suggests that cats around the world have always made the same sound!

Bulls were sacred to Ptah, the god of craftsmen in the city of Memphis. A special bull referred to as Apis lived on the grounds of Ptah's temple. The Egyptians believed that the spirit of the god entered the bull during religious ceremonies. His dung was used for magical and medicinal purposes! Apis was black with a white triangular patch between his horns. He also had a patch

the blocks (many are inscribed with pictures and hieroglyphs) so that they can eventually be reassembled. So Akenaten's temple to the sun also will once again rise above the Nile Valley!

Projects

1. Pretend that you are one of the earliest dwellers of the Nile Valley. There is no organized religion. You are fascinated and yet frightened by the apparent movement of the sun. Write a story that explains, in mythical terms, why the sun crosses the sky each day and then is replaced by the stars at night. Illustrate your story, and then present it to your class.
2. Write a play based on the story of Osiris, Seth and Isis. Choose several classmates to act it out.
3. Find out more about Egypt's ten or twelve most important deities. Draw a picture on poster board of each one and attach a short description of his/her special duties. Below is a drawing of Anubis, Thoth and the Devourer done by Ben Keyes, a seventh grade student at Fay School.
4. "To speak of the dead is to make them live again." This is a quote from the wall of an Egyptian tomb. Explain what it means.



is, Thoth and the Devourer