

The image features a close-up of a golden Egyptian mask with a headdress, set against a background of hieroglyphs and a pyramid landscape. The mask is the central focus, with its eyes looking forward. The headdress is ornate, with a central gold and blue ornament. The background is a dark, textured surface with hieroglyphs. At the bottom, a landscape with three pyramids is visible under a blue sky.

THE WORLD OF MYTHOLOGY

EGYPTIAN MYTH

A TREASURY OF LEGENDS, ART, AND HISTORY

ANN KRAMER

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Previous page: The temple of Kom Ombo was dedicated to the crocodile god Sobek and the falcon-headed god Haroeris, also known as Horus the Elder.

Opposite: The god Amun sits on a throne protecting the pharaoh Tutankhamun (1333–1324 B.C.E.). Amun wears two plumes on his head, symbolizing the lands of Upper and Lower Egypt.

This page and opposite: A temple dedicated to the great god Amun stands at the center of the temple complex of Karnak, begun in the sixteenth century B.C.E.

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CONTENTS



Introduction.....	6
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GODS OF THE COSMOS

How the World Was Made.....	12
Days Upon the Year.....	16
Gods and Goddesses.....	20
Devastation of Humankind.....	22
The Secret Name of Ra.....	26

OSIRIS, SETH, AND ISIS

The Murder of Osiris.....	32
The Wanderings of Isis.....	36
The Afterlife.....	40
The Vengeance of Horus.....	42





PHARAOKHS AND GODS

The Three Crowns	48
Lord of the Nile	52
Temples, Priests, and Pharaohs	56
The Great Queen Hatshepsut	58
The Prince and the Sphinx	62
The Doomed Prince	66



MAGICAL STORIES AND LEGENDS

The Enchanted Island	72
The Clever Thief	76
The Land of the Dead	80
Magic and Medicine	84
The Blinding of Truth	86
Timeline of Ancient Egypt	90
Glossary	92
For More Information	93
Index	94

INTRODUCTION

The myths of ancient Egypt are among the oldest in the world. Written down by scribes and priests, they date back at least 5,000 years. Myths are stories about supernatural beings, and Egyptian myths are about their gods. These stories provide a vital insight into the Egyptians' religious beliefs and the Egyptian way of life.

The ancient Egyptian civilization has a history that spans millennia. From about 5500 B.C.E., there were farming communities around the Nile River. Two separate kingdoms emerged: Lower Egypt in the north and Upper Egypt in the south. In about 3100 B.C.E., Pharaoh Narmer united the two kingdoms, creating what was then the wealthiest and most powerful state in the world. After Narmer, pharaohs ruled Egypt for 3,000 years until, in 30 B.C.E., Egypt became part of the Roman Empire. Historians divide pharaohs into dynasties or groups, and Egypt's history into the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms.

GIFT OF THE GODS

Egypt is a hot, dry country. The Nile River, which runs through the center, provides water, fertile soil, food, transport, and materials for building. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 B.C.E.) said Egypt was the gift of the Nile, and the Egyptians believed the Nile was a gift from the gods. The river was the lifeblood of Egypt and there would have been no civilization there without it.

Every year the Nile swelled and flooded the surrounding land in what was called the inundation. When the floodwaters receded, they left behind a deposit of rich black silt, which gave ancient Egypt its name, Kemet, the “Black Land.” The river teemed with fish, and boats traveled up and down it, carrying people and goods. Either side of the Nile was a vast expanse of desert where little grew and few people lived. The desert was a hostile area, and full of dangerous animals, but it was also rich in minerals.

A SOPHISTICATED CULTURE

Ancient Egypt was a sophisticated, wealthy, and stable culture. The pharaoh, or king, ruled the country. Egyptians believed in divine kingship: that their pharaohs were divine beings chosen by the gods. Below the pharaoh were court officials, priests, scribes, civil servants, merchants, soldiers, skilled workers, farmers, entertainers, and slaves.

The Egyptians developed one of the first writing systems, in around 3200 B.C.E. It used a complex system of pictures and symbols called hieroglyphs. Professional writers called scribes wrote on papyrus, a paper-like material made from reeds found on the banks of the Nile. The Egyptians were also great builders and engineers who constructed pyramid temples, and other monuments to their gods and pharaohs.

Ancient Egyptians worshipped hundreds of gods—we may never know exactly how many. They believed gods had created the universe and controlled every aspect of their lives. For the Egyptians, the world could be a dangerous and unpredictable place: if the sun did not shine, or if the Nile did not flood, there would be chaos. They looked to the gods to ensure order and stability.

Sun worship was a major part of Egyptian religion, but ideas about death were also fundamental. The Egyptians believed that, if they lived good lives, they would be reborn and live again in a perfect afterlife. This belief in rebirth underpinned all their myths, rituals, and ceremonies. It profoundly influenced the Egyptians' view of the world.

Right: The Nile River, which flows through Egypt, is the world's longest river. It travels 4,189 miles (6,741 km) northward from East Africa to the Nile Delta, where it flows into the Mediterranean Sea.





Left: The oldest recorded Egyptian myths are these carvings in the pyramid of Unas in Saqqara. Known as the Pyramid Texts, they are more than 4,000 years old.

The Egyptians worshipped different types of gods: some were gods of the cosmos; some were gods of love, fertility, or wisdom; and others were gods of the underworld or animal gods. Many combined different roles. Gods and goddesses evolved and changed during ancient Egypt's long history, and different gods were worshipped in different regions of the kingdom.

CHANGING MYTHS

Egyptians developed myths to explain the mysteries of the world around them: how the universe was created, why the sun rose and set, how the Nile flooded, and what happened after death.

The myths changed over time, sometimes to make sense of something new. They also varied from place to place. There were different religious or cult centers, each of which had its own chief god or family of gods. The most important cult centers were Memphis, Thebes, Heliopolis, and Hermopolis. As one or another city rose in status, so too their gods and myths became more important and spread. As a result, there are often several different versions of the same myth, and several myths contradict each other.

Until fairly recently, Egyptian myths were not as well known as those from other cultures. Priests and scribes decorated pyramids, temple walls, obelisks, and coffins with gods and stories about them, but no one outside ancient Egypt could read the hieroglyphs. For a long time our knowledge of Egyptian myths came from accounts written in Greek and Roman by historians who visited Egypt, such as Herodotus and Plutarch (c. 46–127 C.E.).



In 1822, a French Egyptologist, Jean-François Champollion, managed to crack the hieroglyph code, which meant historians and archaeologists could finally begin to translate the myths from their original sources. Obviously the sources themselves are fragmented or damaged, and some myths are incomplete. There may still be more to discover, but those myths that we already know reveal a great deal about the real and mythical world of ancient Egypt.