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# ANCIENT EGYPT

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FACTS AND FICTIONS

STEPHEN E. THOMPSON

# Ancient Egypt

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# Ancient Egypt

Facts and Fictions

Stephen E. Thompson

Historical Facts and Fictions



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*For my children, Rachel and Jacob, and for  
my grandchildren, present and future.*



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# Preface

Ancient Egypt—its monuments, artifacts, language, and religion—have long been a source of fascination to many. In fact, there is a special term, *Egyptomania*, to describe the avid curiosity, bordering on obsession, that many have experienced with regard to ancient Egypt. Over the hundreds of years during which scholars have been writing about Egypt, numerous misconceptions and errors have crept into common perceptions of ancient Egypt. Popular culture, through short stories, novels, and movies, has also contributed to the spread of such misconceptions. In the pages that follow, eight popular misconceptions about ancient Egypt (here labeled *fictions*) will be examined through primary sources. Each chapter begins with a brief statement of the erroneous belief held by many (“what people believe happened”) and a discussion of how that false belief became widespread (“how the story became popular”). After this account is a selection of primary sources illustrating the erroneous belief. This is then followed by an explanation of the correct understanding (“what really happened”) and a selection of primary sources, mostly translated from the Egyptian language in its various forms, supporting this corrected view.

Many of the translations of the Egyptian sources are my own, and I readily acknowledge my debt to previous translators of the various passages under discussion. Whenever possible, I have included references to these previous translations in the selections for further reading at the end of each chapter. The *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* (<http://aew2.bbaw.de/ta/index.html>) has also served as an incredibly useful tool when translating Egyptian texts. The dates given for the lengths of the reigns of the

Egyptian kings are taken from Hornung, Krauss, and Warburton (2006, 490–495).

### **Further Reading**

Hornung, E., R. Krauss, and D. A. Warburton, eds. 2006. *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*. Leiden: E. J. Brill.

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# Introduction

*One asked how we Egyptians worship our native gods, another why certain animals are deified in one place and others in another and what stories were told of each. One inquired about the construction of the pyramids, another about the cause of the subterranean galleries. In a word, there was nothing Egyptian into which they did not inquire, for anything heard or told of Egypt has a special charm for Greek listeners.*

—Heliodorus, *Aethiopica* (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, p. 1997)

This passage comes from a novel written in the third or fourth century CE and reflects the Greek obsession with all things Egyptian. The speaker is an Egyptian, a priest of Isis in her temple at Memphis, who was visiting the oracle of Apollo at the city of Delphi in Greece. While there, he found himself interrogated by Greeks hungry for information regarding Egyptian religion and culture. Once Greeks began to visit Egypt in large numbers, they developed a fascination with Egypt—its antiquity, its monuments, and its “foreign” customs and religious practices. Beginning with Herodotus, the father of history, some Greek visitors to Egypt wrote about their visits, describing what they witnessed and what native informants told them. In addition to Herodotus, important among such authors are Hecataeus, Diodorus Siculus, Strabo, and Plutarch. The Greeks expressed considerable admiration for Egyptian society and developed a tradition that all the great Greek statesmen, philosophers, and mathematicians had studied in Egypt at some point in their lives.

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Egypt, and after his death, one of his generals, Ptolemy, took control of Egypt, inaugurating the Ptolemaic Dynasty, which lasted until 30 BCE. The most famous member of this dynasty was Cleopatra the Great, and her role in the civil war between Octavian and Mark Antony led to the creation of Roman propaganda unfavorable to both Cleopatra and Egypt (even though Cleopatra was Greek, not Egyptian). The Roman attitude toward Egyptian religious practices is far more negative and ridiculing than that of the Greeks. With the coming of Christianity to both the Roman Empire and Egypt, traditional Egyptian religious practice came in for more abuse as a “pagan” religion. One result of the Christianization of Egypt to have far-reaching consequences for the Western acquaintance with ancient Egypt was the closure of the temples to the Egyptian gods by the Roman Emperor Theodosius in 383 CE. By this time, the native Egyptian language, written in several different scripts, was used by a small number of priests employed by the temples. The closure of the temples resulted in the loss of the ability to read the traditional Egyptian scripts.

The use of the hieroglyphic script ended in the fourth century, and the use of a cursive script known as Demotic ended in the fifth century. After that, the only form of the Egyptian language still in use was Coptic, which was a development of Christian Egypt intended to enable Egyptian converts to read the Christian scriptures, translated into their language. Coptic used the Greek alphabet, augmented by a few additional characters, to write Egyptian. The use of Coptic was relegated solely to religious purposes with the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641, after which Arabic gradually supplanted both Greek and Coptic as the official language of Egypt. Coptic became for the Egyptian Coptic Church what Latin was for Catholic Christianity: the traditional language of worship.

Arab scholars resembled the Greeks in their largely positive assessment of ancient Egyptian society. The Quran mentions or alludes to Egypt thirty times, and the references to the Egyptians in the Hadith (quotations attributed to the Prophet Muhammed) are largely positive. By comparison, Egypt is mentioned in the Bible approximately 680 times, but given Egypt’s role in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament as the oppressors of God’s chosen people, it hardly gets a positive treatment (El-Daly 2005, 19).

The loss of the ability to read the Egyptian hieroglyphic and Demotic scripts meant that for almost 1,500 years, knowledge of ancient Egyptian society, history, and religion came through the literature left behind by

Egypt's conquerors. During the Latin Middle Ages (500–1350 CE), the main source of information about Egypt for people in Western Europe was the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament), travel accounts written by Europeans who had visited Egypt, and from the mid-tenth century CE, the writings of Arab scholars (Burnett 2003, 66). The attempt to fit Egyptian monuments into the sacred history of the Bible led to such notions as the pyramids being the granaries built by the biblical Joseph. Christian scholars of the Middle Ages reversed the flow of information found in the classical sources, which credited Egypt with the origin of writing, philosophy, mathematics, and astronomy. European Christian scholars credited the biblical Abraham with teaching astronomy and the arts to the Egyptians, as did Jewish tradition.

The reintroduction of Greek and Roman literature to Western Europe during the Renaissance provided a new source of information on ancient Egypt. The publication of Horapollo's fifth-century work *Hieroglyphica* (published in Venice, Italy, in 1505 in Greek and in Latin translation in 1515) introduced the Europeans to the erroneous interpretation of hieroglyphs as a symbolic script, and this misunderstanding resulted in outlandish attempts at translating Egyptian texts by scholars such as Athanasius Kircher. It was not until Jean-François Champollion deciphered hieroglyphic Egyptian in 1822 that the Egyptians could speak for themselves.

The observant reader will notice a pattern in the pages that follow. The sections of each chapter outlining the incorrect views and conceptions of ancient Egypt largely draw on sources from the classical, biblical, or Muslim world, while the sections correcting these erroneous views draw on sources from ancient Egypt, written in the Egyptian language. The best way to correct popular misconceptions of ancient Egypt is by providing accurate information directly from the ancient Egyptians themselves. My hope is that the careful reader will come away from this book with misconceptions about ancient Egypt corrected and a greater appreciation for the voices of the ancient Egyptians. As is conventional when translating Egyptian texts, parentheses around words indicate words not present in the Egyptian original, but necessary to give the sense in English. Square brackets around words indicate that the original Egyptian text contained gaps (called *lacunae*), and the translation is based on a hypothetical reconstruction of the Egyptian original. Angular brackets indicate a word or words that are thought to have been left out by the scribe when copying the text.



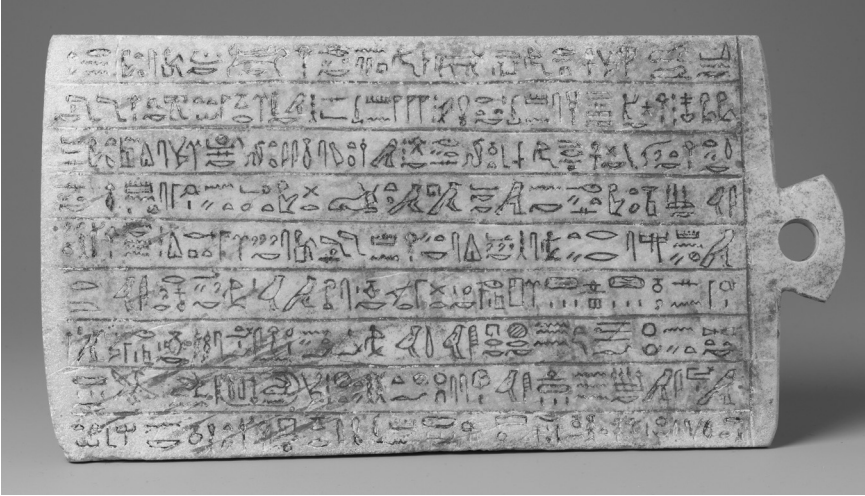
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# Hieroglyphs Were a Secret Code Created to Conceal the Wisdom of Ancient Egypt

## What People Think Happened

The Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system is arguably one of the most beautiful writing systems ever developed. Egyptian hieroglyphs were individual pictures that, when finely executed, were tiny, individual works of art. Egyptian hieroglyphs were not only used as a means of communication but also as decoration. Hieroglyphs were normally used in monumental contexts, such as tombs, temples, statues, and stelas, and the arrangement of the hieroglyphic inscriptions owed much to the desire to present an appealing, symmetrical appearance. Hieroglyphic inscriptions could be written in rows or columns, to be read from either left to right or right to left, depending on the need of the composition. Because of its pictorial nature, many observers ignorant of the principles of the hieroglyphic writing system assume that the hieroglyphic script is “picture writing,” or a pictographic script. In a pictographic script, the individual signs communicate by means of depicting the individual or object to which they refer. Once knowledge of the real significance of the hieroglyphic signs was lost, it was simple for the casual observer to assume that a script consisting of images of people, animals, plants, and things was communicating through pictures and concepts, not through words. Since the meaning of these images and the messages they were meant to convey



Although a hieroglyphic text appears to be a pictographic script to the uninitiated, most of the signs represent the sounds of the language, and those that do not serve to help determine the meaning of the word being spelled out. (Funerary Tablet of Horpaa, priest at Hermopolis and son of Djehutyhor, 332–30 B.C. Accession No. 55.144.1. Rogers Fund, 1955. Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

were not readily apparent, it was assumed that this was intentional and that to understand the meaning of hieroglyphic inscriptions, one had to be initiated into their secrets.

### **How the Story Became Popular**

When the Greeks first arrived in large numbers in Egypt during the Egyptian Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, under the reign of Pharaoh Psammeticus I (664–610 BCE), they encountered a civilization that was already over two thousand years old. The Greeks were impressed with the great antiquity of Egypt, by the large and impressive monuments they observed, and by the hieroglyphic inscriptions they found covering the walls of tombs and temples. Since the Egyptian civilization was the oldest civilization known to the Greeks, they assumed that Egypt was the source of all science, technology, arts, and philosophy. All the great sages and philosophers of Greece were said to have traveled to Egypt at some point in their lives, whether they actually did or not, to study from the masters of all knowledge.

The Greeks believed that the collective wisdom of Egypt was to be found carved on the walls of the Egyptian temples in the thousands of tiny

pictures they found inscribed there. In fact, the term *hieroglyph* derives from the name the Greeks attached to the images they found decorating the walls of the Egyptian temples. They called these pictures *ta hiera gram-mata*, “the sacred letters,” or *ta hieroglyphica*, “the sacred carved (images).”

The ancient Greek and Roman visitors and immigrants to Egypt occasionally asked Egyptian informants about the nature of the hieroglyphic writing system. Even though the Greeks believed that the collective wisdom of Egypt was found encoded in the hieroglyphic script, there is no evidence that any of the Greeks whose writings on the subject are preserved ever actually studied the Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system or learned the Egyptian language. We know that some Greeks studied Egyptian, because we have a letter written in Greek from a mother to her son congratulating him on having learned to write Egyptian; with this skill, he would have a steady income as a teacher in the local medical school. The script this young man would have learned was not hieroglyphic but the script used to write everyday documents on papyrus, called Demotic.

Those classical authors were convinced that the individual hieroglyphs did not represent sounds or the spoken language but communicated concepts and ideas through the images they portrayed. They were also convinced that the hieroglyphic writing system was intended to obscure, rather than reveal, the secret knowledge of the Egyptians, which was only accessible to the Egyptian priests or others who had been initiated into the secrets of the hieroglyphic writing system. The Greeks passed on their understanding of the hieroglyphic writing system to later Roman authors. With the spread of Christianity to Egypt, the hieroglyphic script was associated with the blasphemous idolatry of the ancient Egyptian religion. The Coptic monk Shenoute (370–465 CE) referred to hieroglyphic inscriptions as “prescriptions for murdering man’s soul,” and interest in Egyptian hieroglyphs waned. The European Crusades into the Middle East between 1095 and 1204 rekindled interest in the Middle East among European scholars. The fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453 resulted in an influx of Greek-speaking scholars and classical Greek texts into Europe, helping initiate the Renaissance in Italy.

Renaissance scholars were fascinated with the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. They accepted the assertions of the classical authors that Egypt was the original source of all knowledge, and since Egypt was the oldest civilization known to them, they assumed that the hieroglyphic script preserved the original language of Adam as well as the *prisca theologia*, the original true theology from which all other religions descended. They also accepted the assertions of the Greek and Roman authors that the

hieroglyphic script did not preserve sounds, as does a traditional alphabet, but was a symbolic script communicating concepts that could only be grasped by the initiated.

This renewed interest in hieroglyphs was accompanied by an increased interest in the philosophy of Plato, referred to as Neoplatonism. In Plato's philosophy, the world we perceive around us is transitory and impermanent and subject to constant change. The "real" world is that of ideas and concepts. For example, any individual table will eventually decay and disappear, while the concept of table is permanent and will exist forever. The concepts are a pattern for the real world around us. The world of ideas is arranged hierarchically, from least to most abstract, the most abstract being the concept of the good. Neoplatonists believed that the Egyptian hieroglyphs expressed Platonic ideas and therefore offered insights into the "real" world.

This understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs was confirmed by the discovery of a manuscript written in Greek that provided a description of 189 hieroglyphic signs and their interpretation, titled *The Hieroglyphics*, by Horapollo. Horapollo showed no interest in how the Egyptian language sounded; his understanding of the hieroglyphs was strictly symbolic. This work influenced the publications of Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit and polymath. In several monumental works published in the seventeenth century, Kircher provided translations of all the hieroglyphic inscriptions known to him. Kircher relied on the symbolic interpretation of hieroglyphs as explained in the works of classical scholars. His work was so extensive that his opinions of the hieroglyphic script held sway and served as a stumbling block, until Jean-François Champollion deciphered hieroglyphs in 1822.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### PLATO, *PHAEDRUS*

*The Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428–348 BCE) was the most famous of the students of Socrates, and most of what we know of Socrates's life and thought comes from the Plato's writings, since Socrates wrote nothing down. Plato's preferred method of presenting his ideas was the dialogue, in which he had individuals engage in a spirited back-and-forth exchange of ideas. In this text, we find Socrates on his last day alive engaging in a discussion with Phaedrus on the immortal nature of the soul. Here we encounter a theme that we will see developed further elsewhere: the idea that Egypt, as the oldest-known civilization, was the ultimate source of much of the world's knowledge.*

*In this passage, Plato has Socrates credit the invention of writing to the Egyptian god Thoth (here called Theuth), to whom Plato attributed the recognition that the sounds of consonants and vowels could be represented with symbols. Thoth was considered the Egyptian god of wisdom and writing. He was frequently depicted as a baboon, an ibis, or as a human body with an ibis head. (The significance of animals in Egyptian religion will be discussed later). Naucratis was a city in the Egyptian Delta (Lower Egypt) in which the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty pharaoh Amasis (570–526 BCE) allowed Greek merchants to settle. The exchange referred to here is set during the time in which the gods ruled Egypt personally. Here the god Amun (spelled Ammon) is ruling Egypt from his capital city, Thebes, in Upper Egypt. The Egyptians did consider their script to be of divine origin and referred to the written script as “divine words.”*

Socrates: At the Egyptian city of Naucratis, there was a famous old god, whose name was Theuth [Thoth]; the bird which is called the Ibis is sacred to him, and he was the inventor of many arts, such as arithmetic and calculation and geometry and astronomy and draughts and dice, but his great discovery was the use of letters. Now in those days the god Thamus was the king of the whole country of Egypt; and he dwelt in that great city of Upper Egypt which the Hellenes call Egyptian Thebes, and the god himself is called by them Ammon. To him came Theuth and showed his inventions, desiring that the other Egyptians might be allowed to have the benefit of them; he enumerated them, and Thamus enquired about their several uses, and praised some of them and censured others, as he approved or disapproved of them. It would take a long time to repeat all that Thamus said to Theuth in praise or blame of the various arts. But when they came to letters, This, said Theuth, will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories; it is a specific both for the memory and for the wit.

**Source:** Plato. 1892. *Phaedrus*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett. London: Oxford University Press.

## DIODORUS SICULUS, METAPHORICAL HIEROGLYPHICS


*Diodorus of Sicily, also called Diodorus Siculus, set out to write a universal history in Greek from the mythological beginnings of the world down to 60 BCE. Only part of his work is preserved. His work includes information on geography and ethnography (the study of peoples and cultures), with particular interest in the unusual. He probably visited Egypt sometime in ca. 60–56 BCE. The Egypt of Diodorus’s day was under the reign of the*

*Ptolemies, the successors of Alexander the Great, but they were soon to fall to the emerging Roman Empire. Diodorus is one of the first authors we know of to explain Egyptian hieroglyphic writing (which he refers to as “Ethiopian writing”) as representing not sounds but concepts. He cites as examples the hawk, which represents swiftness, and the crocodile, evil. By mastering the “appropriate metaphorical transfer” through repetition, a scribe skilled in the hieroglyphic writing system could read the texts. This misunderstanding was to lead scholars down a wrong path in their interpretation of hieroglyphs until their decipherment by Champollion in the nineteenth century. The belief that hieroglyphs were metaphorical or symbolic in meaning led to quite outlandish attempts to interpret hieroglyphic inscriptions.*

4 We must now speak about the Ethiopian writing which is called hieroglyphic among the Egyptians, in order that we may omit nothing in our discussion of their antiquities. Now it is found that the forms of their letters take the shape of animals of every kind, and of the members of the human body, and of implements and especially carpenters’ tools; for their writing does not express the intended concept by means of syllables joined one to another, but by means of the significance of the objects which have been copied and by its figurative meaning which has been impressed upon the memory by practice. For instance, they draw the picture of a hawk, a crocodile, a snake, and of the members of the human body—an eye, a hand, a face, and the like. Now the hawk signifies to them everything which happens swiftly, since this animal is practically the swiftest of winged creatures. And the concept portrayed is then transferred, by the appropriate metaphorical transfer, to all swift things and to everything to which swiftness is appropriate, very much as if they had been named. And the crocodile is a symbol of all that is evil, and the eye is the warder of justice and the guardian of the entire body. And as for the members of the body, the right hand with fingers extended signifies a procuring of livelihood, and the left with the fingers closed, a keeping and guarding of property. The same way of reasoning applies also to the remaining characters, which represent parts of the body and implements and all other things; for by paying close attention to the significance which is inherent in each object and by training their minds through drill and exercise of the memory over a long period, they read from habit everything which has been written.

**Source:** Diodorus Siculus. 1935. *The Library of History*. Vol. 2, book III, section 4. Translated by C. H. Oldfather, 1–4. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### PLUTARCH, *DE ISIDE ET OSIRIDE*

*Plutarch was a Greek scholar and priest who authored many works of philosophy, rhetoric, biography, and religion between roughly 50 and 120 CE. He visited Egypt at some point in his life. A year or two before his death, while serving as a priest of Delphi, he wrote De Iside et Osiride (On Isis and Osiris), an account of the myth of the Egyptian gods Isis and Osiris, and the rituals associated with their worship. In the passages quoted here, we encounter the idea that the great scholars, philosophers, and lawgivers of Greece had visited Egypt and studied with priests there. Plutarch comments on the Egyptian writing system and explains a hieroglyphic inscription he encounters at the Egyptian town of Sais, in the Delta, symbolically. His description of the writing of the name of Osiris is correct: . However, his explanation is a popular etymology, which is also found in Diodorus Siculus. The true explanation is that the scepter represents the consonants ws and the eye ir, and together they make up Osiris's name in Egyptian, Wsir. It is apparent that Plutarch had the help of native Egyptian informants for some of his information.*

10. Witness to this also are the wisest of the Greeks: Solon, Thales, Plato, Eudoxus, Pythagoras, who came to Egypt and consorted with the priests; and in this number some would include Lycurgus also. Eudoxus, they say, received instruction from Chonuphis of Memphis, Solon from Sonchis of Sal's, and Pythagoras from Oenuphis of Heliopolis. Pythagoras, as it seems, was greatly admired, and he also greatly admired the Egyptian priests, and, copying their symbolism and occult teachings, incorporated his doctrines in enigmas. As a matter of fact most of the Pythagorean precepts do not at all fall short of the writings that are called hieroglyphs; such, for example, as these: "Do not eat upon a stool"; "Do not sit upon a peck measure"; "Do not lop off the shoots of a palm-tree"; "Do not poke a fire with a sword within the house." For my part, I think also that their naming unity Apollo, duality Artemis, the hebdomad Athena, and the first cube Poseidon, bears a resemblance to the statues and even to the sculptures and paintings with which their shrines are embellished. For their King and Lord Osiris they portray by means of an eye and a sceptre; there are even some who explain the meaning of the name as "many-eyed" on the theory that os in the Egyptian language means "many" and iri "eye"; and the heavens, since they are ageless because of their eternity, they portray by a heart with a censer beneath. In Thebes there were set up statues of judges without hands, and the statue of the chief justice had its eyes closed, to indicate that justice is not influenced by gifts or by



intercession. The military class had their seals engraved with the form of a beetle; for there is no such thing as a female beetle, but all beetles are male. They eject their sperm into a round mass which they construct, since they are no less occupied in arranging for a supply of food than in preparing a place to rear their young.

32. . . . At Sa'is in the vestibule of the temple of Athena was carved a babe and an aged man, and after this a hawk, and next a fish, and finally an hippopotamus. The symbolic meaning of this was: "O ye that are coming into the world and departing from it, God hateth shamelessness." The babe is the symbol of coming into the world and the aged man the symbol of departing from it, and by a hawk they indicate God, by the fish hatred, as has already been said, because of the sea, and by the hippopotamus shamelessness; for it is said that he kills his sire and forces his mother to mate with him. That saying of the adherents of Pythagoras, that the sea is a tear of Cronus may seem to hint at its impure and extraneous nature. Let this, then, be stated incidentally, as a matter of record that is common knowledge.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1936. *Moralia*. Vol. 5, sections 10 and 32. Translated by Frank Cole Babbitt, 27–29, 79–81. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### HORAPOLLO, THE HIEROGLYPHICS

*Horapollo was a scholar and teacher who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, in the fifth century. He descended from a family with a long tradition of teaching literature and philosophy. His father, Asclepiades, was known to have studied Egyptian philosophy and written a history of Egypt. It is highly unlikely that Asclepiades could actually read Egyptian hieroglyphs, since by his time this knowledge had been lost for about a century. His son, Horapollo, wrote a treatise on the Egyptian writing system, The Hieroglyphics. A copy of this work was found on the Greek island of Andros around the year 1419 by Cristoforo Buondelmonti, who brought it back with him to Florence in about 1422. It was published in Venice, Italy, in 1505, and a Latin translation of the Greek text was published in 1515. Horapollo apparently had some accurate knowledge of Egyptian writing, but his explanations show that while he was familiar with how some words were written, he was not familiar with how the hieroglyphic system functioned. He is correct when he says that the Egyptian word Noun was written with three water jars (𐀎𐀎𐀎), but that is due to the phonetic value of the sign (nw), not to any association with the heart.*

*Horapollo's symbolic interpretation of Egyptian hieroglyphs was enormously influential with Renaissance scholars, who viewed Egyptian hieroglyphs as a symbolic script, and as we will see, this approach led to some outlandish "translations" of Egyptian texts.*

21. To signify the *rising of the Nile*, which they call in the Egyptian language Noun, and which, when interpreted, signifies New, they sometimes portray a lion, and sometimes three large water-pots, and at other times heaven and earth gushing forth with water. And they depict a lion, because when the sun is in [the constellation] Leo it augments the rising of the Nile, so that oftentimes while the sun remains in that sign of the zodiac, half of the new water [Noun, the entire inundation?] is supplied; and hence it is, that those who anciently presided over the sacred works, have made the spouts[?] and passages of the sacred fountains in the form of lions. Wherefore, even to this day in prayer for an abundant inundation . . . And they depict three water-pots, or heaven and earth gushing forth with water, because they make a water-pot like a heart having a tongue,—like a heart, because in their opinion the heart is the ruling member of the body, as the Nile is the ruler of Egypt, and like [a heart with?] a tongue, because it is always in a state of humidity, and they call it the producer of existence. And they depict three water-pots, and neither more nor less, because according to them there is a triple cause of the inundation. And they depict one for the Egyptian soil, as being of itself productive of water; and another for the ocean, for at the period of the inundation, water flows up from it into Egypt; and the third to symbolize the rains which prevail in the southern parts of Ethiopia at the time of the rising of the Nile. Now that Egypt generates the water, we may deduce from this, that in the rest of the earth the inundations of the rivers take place in the winter, and are caused by frequent rains; but the country of the Egyptians alone, inasmuch as it is situated in the middle of the habitable world, like that part of the eye, which is called the pupil, of itself causes the rising of the Nile in summer.

38. To denote the *Egyptian letters*, or a *sacred scribe*, or a *boundary*, they delineate ink, and a sieve, and a reed, and they thus symbolize the *Egyptian letters*, because by means of these things all writings among the Egyptians are executed: for they write with a reed and nothing else: and they depict a sieve, because the sieve being originally an instrument for making bread is constructed of reed; and they thereby intimate that every one who has a subsistence should learn the letters, but that one who has

not should practice some other art. And hence it is that among them education is called *sbo*, which when interpreted signifies sufficient food. Also they symbolize by these a *sacred scribe*, because he judges of life and death. For there is among the sacred scribes a sacred book called *Ambres*, by which they decide respecting any one who is lying sick, whether he will live or not, ascertaining it from the recumbent posture of the sick person. And a *boundary*, because he who has learnt his letters has arrived at a tranquil harbor of existence, no longer wandering among the evils of this life.

**Source:** Cory, A. T. 1840. *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo Nilous*, 41–44, 58–59. London: William Pickering.

### CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *STROMATA*

*Clement was born at Athens around 150 CE, the son of non-Christian parents. At some point in his life, he converted to Christianity and traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, to study Christian theology. In his work, Stromata (Miscellanies), probably written around 200 CE, Clement comments on the Egyptian writing system. Clement recognized the use of three different scripts: epistolographic, today known as Demotic; hieratic; and hieroglyphic, which he divides into literal and symbolic types. “Anaglyphs” refers to signs carved in low relief on solid surfaces. Clement believed that the hieroglyphs expressed meaning symbolically rather than phonetically. He also believed that the hieroglyphs encoded “mysteries” that were only revealed to the kings and priests. Again, there is evidence that Clement had some correct notions of Egyptian. Demotic was the script used for everyday purposes such as tax receipts, contracts, and so on. By Clement’s time, hieratic was used strictly by priests writing religious and ritual texts on papyrus, and hieroglyphs were used for monumental texts on stone. Clement was obviously familiar with the work of Plutarch, as a comparison between this passage and the excerpt from Plutarch above will show. He was incorrect in his opinion that each type of script expressed meaning in different ways: one literally, one symbolically. All three scripts were variants of each other and expressed meaning in the same way.*

Wishing to express Sun in writing, they make a circle; and Moon, a figure like the Moon, like its proper shape. But in using the figurative style, by transposing and transferring, by changing and by transforming in many ways as suits them, they draw characters. In relating the praises of the kings in theological myths, they write in anaglyphs. Let the following stand as a specimen of the third species—the Enigmatic. For the rest of

the stars, on account of their oblique course, they have figured like the bodies of serpents; but the sun, like that of a beetle, because it makes a round figure of ox-dung, and rolls it before its face. And they say that this creature lives six months under ground, and the other division of the year above ground, and emits its seed into the ball, and brings forth; and that there is not a female beetle. All then, in a word, who have spoken of divine things, both Barbarians and Greeks, have veiled the first principles of things, and delivered the truth in enigmas, and symbols, and allegories, and metaphors, and such like tropes.

...

Whence also the Egyptians did not entrust the mysteries they possessed to all and sundry, and did not divulge the knowledge of divine things to the profane; but only to those destined to ascend the throne, and those of the priests that were judged the worthiest, from their nurture, culture, and birth. Similar, then, to the Hebrew enigmas in respect to concealment, are those of the Egyptians also. Of the Egyptians, some show the sun on a ship, others on a crocodile. And they signify hereby, that the sun, making a passage through the delicious and moist air, generates time; which is symbolized by the crocodile in some other sacerdotal account. Further, at Diospolis in Egypt, on the temple called Pylon, there was figured a boy as the symbol of production, and an old man as that of decay. A hawk, on the other hand, was the symbol of God, as a fish of hate; and, according to a different symbolism, the crocodile of impudence. The whole symbol, then, when put together, appears to teach this: Oh you who are born and die, God hates impudence.

**Source:** Clement of Alexandria. 1885. "Stromata." In *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, edited by Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, translated by William Wilson. Book 5, sections 4.21.4 and 7.41–7.42. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co.

### TARIKH AL-YA<sup>C</sup>QUBI, *HERMES THE COPT*


*This document differs from the others we have seen in that it was written by an Arab author after the conquest of Egypt by Islam in 640. Al-Ya<sup>c</sup>qubi, who died around 905 CE, was from a noble family in Baghdad linked closely to the Abbasid Caliphs. He left Baghdad at a young age and began his travels throughout the Muslim world. His stay in Egypt earned him the nickname "The Egyptian." The excerpt is from his two-volume history of the world,*

*beginning with Adam. Here he makes reference to Egyptian Christians (Copts) and states that no one is able to read hieroglyphs in his day, because the secret of the hieroglyphic script was closely guarded by the elite sages and priests. Al-Yaʿqubi believed that the hieroglyphic texts contained religious and scientific knowledge kept from all but the priests and others to whom the king granted permission. As we saw above, Hermes is the Greek equivalent of Thoth.*

The Sage (Hakeem) of the Copts is Hermes the Copt. They are the builders of the temples who write in the script of the temples (Hieroglyphs) and here is how it looks. And in our time nobody knows how to read it, because only the elite among them were writing in it; they would not allow the common people to do so. The ones in charge of it were their sages and priests. It had the secrets of their religion and the origin of sciences which nobody was allowed to see but their priests, who did not teach it to anyone unless ordered to do so by the king.

**Source:** Al-Yaʿqubi, Abu Al-ʿAbbas Ahmad Ibn Abi Yaqub, *Tarikh Al-Yaʿqubi* 1:187–188. Quoted in El-Daly, Okasha. 2005. *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium*, 85. London: UCL Press. Used by permission of Taylor and Francis, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center.

### ATHANASIUS KIRCHER, *PRODROMUS COPTUS*

*Athanasius Kircher (1601/2–1680) was a German Jesuit scholar whom some consider the founder of modern Egyptology. Kircher’s claim to that title stems from the fact that he was the first person to write a European-language (Latin) grammar of Coptic, the last stage of the Egyptian language, which was written with Greek letters. This short Coptic grammar was included in the book excerpted here. In Prodrōmus Coptus, which appeared in 1636, Kircher presented the argument that the Coptic language, which was still in use by the Egyptian Coptic Church, was directly related to the language of the ancient Egyptians who had produced the hieroglyphs. Kircher has the distinction of being the first modern scholar to correctly identify the phonetic value of an Egyptian hieroglyph, when he equated the hieroglyph of three water-signs  with the Coptic word for water, mu, and assigned the value of m to the hieroglyph. Unfortunately, this insight did not deter Kircher from his conviction that “true” hieroglyphs did not represent sounds but were symbols that transmitted esoteric knowledge. In this passage, we get a brief summary of Kircher’s opinion on how hieroglyphs communicated information. In later publications, Kircher offered up fantastic translations of Egyptian hieroglyphic*

*texts based on his symbolic, allegorical understanding of hieroglyphs. Kircher's interpretation of hieroglyphs remained standard up until the Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822.*






[Hieroglyphs are a kind of writing] much more excellent, sublime, and nearer to abstract thoughts, by which the whole reasoning and conception of the highest things, or some remarkable mystery hiding in the bosom of nature or divinity, is presented to the wise man in a single view with an appropriate, skillful connection of symbols. Therefore in writings of this kind, the attributes of speech . . . having been abandoned, it is necessary to be led from the external visible image to the hidden forms of things, and from the sensible object to the idea of the intelligible, in the manner of that common saying of the Kabbalists, "When I found a pomegranate, I ate the seeds and threw away the rind."

Since, nevertheless, the hieroglyphic mental concept of the things depicted can hardly be grasped without conceiving of things indicated by names, words, and other parts of speech, on account of the dependence of the formal concept on the object or sensible things, a certain [kind of] reading was established appointing names and words for things signified through symbols.

**Source:** Stolzenberg, Daniel. 2013. *Egyptian Oedipus: Athanasius Kircher and the Secrets of Antiquity*, 208. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Used by permission.


## What Really Happened


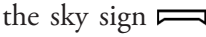

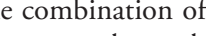
The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic writing system employed pictures to represent the spoken language. There were two types of signs used: ideograms (also called logograms), which communicated by depicting the object they represented, and phonograms, which represented the sounds of the Egyptian language. The Egyptians had three types of phonograms: those that represented a single consonant (alphabetic signs), those that represented two consonants, and those that represented three consonants. A single sign could belong to both categories, meaning that it could be used at times to depict an object and at times to represent a sound. A key to the Egyptian writing system was the rebus principle, in which a word is written by using a picture of an object with the same sound. An example in English would be writing the word *belief* with the image of a bee and a leaf. An individual Egyptian word could consist of

several types of signs. For example, the Egyptian word for brother was *sn* (the Egyptian language did not write vowels until the Coptic stage of the language), written . In this, , an arrow, represented the two letters *sn*, and , a single ripple of water, represented the letter *n* as what Egyptologists call a phonetic complement, meaning that the second sign simply repeats the *n* inherent in the first sign. Finally, the last sign, , is the logogram of a seated man, which has no sound but helps determine the meaning: brother. A word written similarly but with a different logogram determining its meaning is  *sn*, meaning *to smell*. In this case, the logogram determining the meaning is a human nose. For most of Egyptian history, about 760 different hieroglyphic signs were used in writing the Egyptian language.

As noted above, hieroglyphs were used for monumental purposes. They were carved in stone or wood, on the walls of temples, tombs, or monuments, such as stelas. The hieroglyphs could be decorative as well as communicative. For everyday record keeping, Egyptian scribes employed a more cursive script written with a reed brush on papyrus, broken pieces of pottery, or a stone called ostraca. This writing employed ligatures, meaning lines connecting signs, much as modern cursive script connects letters, while printing does not. While all scribes learned to read hieroglyphs, not all would have learned to produce them. That was the job of the draughtsman or stonemason.

Beginning with the Greek conquest of Egypt, a drastic change took place in the nature of the hieroglyphic writing system used to inscribe texts on the walls of temples. By this period of Egyptian history, the use of the hieroglyphic script was the exclusive preserve of the priests in the temples. The hieratic script was also limited to use in writing the sacred texts on papyri, while a new script, Demotic, which was even more abbreviated than hieratic, was used to write everyday documents. The number of hieroglyphic signs used in the temple inscriptions increased drastically, from the 760 noted above to over 6,000. A sign that previously had one or two different phonetic values could have as many as twenty or thirty different values. An individual word could also have any number of different spellings, and each temple might employ its own unique ways of writing the same words.

In addition, the priests began to exploit the symbolic properties of the hieroglyphic script in new ways. For example, the name of the god Ptah was usually written as , *p + t + h* concluded by a seated god logogram as a determinative. Using the new rules of the Ptolemaic writing system,

however, the god Ptah's name could be written as  the sky sign  representing the letter *p*, the man with upraised arms  representing the *h*, and the land sign  representing the letter *t*. But the combination of the signs also symbolized a function of the god Ptah, to separate the earth from the sky at the time of creation. The priests responsible for crafting the many hieroglyphic texts covering the walls of the temples built by the Ptolemaic kings exploited the symbolic properties of the hieroglyphic script to their fullest. So the Greeks were not entirely wrong. The hieroglyphs of their day could communicate symbolically, but in addition to their symbolic meaning, hieroglyphs could represent the consonants of the Egyptian language.

It is understandable how the Greeks would have come away with the impression that the hieroglyphic writing system was the exclusive preserve of the priests and that the hieroglyphs communicated information symbolically rather than phonetically. In fact, the Greeks could have received this information from their native Egyptian informants, the priests. It is debated why the priests took the hieroglyphic writing system in this direction. This use of hieroglyphs, which scholars call cryptographic writing, had been practiced in Egypt since the Old Kingdom, but in limited fashion. It wasn't until the Greek Period that the use of cryptographic writing exploded, and the reasons why can only be hypothesized. Some scholars believe that the purpose of cryptographic writing was to hide sacred information from the foreign rulers of Egypt. Others point out that the Greek rulers of Egypt could not have read texts written in the traditional hieroglyphic script anyway, so this would not have been a reason to resort to such a complicated writing system. One suggestion is that with the coming of Greek rule to Egypt, the traditional elites of the priesthoods felt their social standing slipping, and they compensated for this by employing a new writing system to preserve the social distance between themselves and the illiterate masses. A third suggestion is that rather than trying to hide secret knowledge, the priests were simply engaging in an intellectual exercise; in other words, they were playing games with the hieroglyphic script to exploit its potentialities to their fullest.

So, were Egyptian hieroglyphs intended to be a secret code concealing Egyptian wisdom from all but select initiates? No. Hieroglyphs were simply one of several scripts the Egyptians used to write their language. Did the Egyptians have "secret knowledge," accessible to only a few? As we will see in these documents, perhaps. But that knowledge was recorded in the same scripts used to write everyday communications. The complex nature



of hieroglyphs limited their use mainly to monuments of wood and stone. As Egyptian civilization underwent profound changes under the rule of the Greeks and Romans, the use of hieroglyphs was gradually confined to the walls of Egyptian temples, and as the last temples were closed due to the rise of Christianity in Egypt, the ability to read and write the hieroglyphic script disappeared. The last hieroglyphic inscription dates to 394 CE, and sometime after that, the last person able to read hieroglyphs passed from the earth. Not until Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822 were scholars able to begin unraveling the hieroglyphic script and, with it, the mysteries of Egypt.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### *HYMN TO THOTH*

*The idea that the Egyptian god Thoth was responsible for the invention of writing was familiar to the Egyptians. This Egyptian document is a hymn to the god Thoth, the god associated with wisdom, writing, science, astronomy, medicine, justice, and record keeping. Thoth could be represented as a baboon, an ibis, or as a human form with an ibis head. Thoth was associated with the moon and was responsible for regulating the seasons and the moon's phases. This hymn is found engraved on a statue of General Horemheb (ca. 1343–1315 BCE), who was the de facto ruler of Egypt under Tutankhamun and eventually ascended to the throne. The statue depicts Horemheb before he became king seated as a scribe, cross-legged with a papyrus scroll unrolled on his lap. Hesret was a designation for a sacred area in the city of Hermopolis, the city sacred to the god Thoth, in Middle Egypt. The vizier was the highest appointed position in Egypt and assisted the pharaoh in governing Egypt. Thoth, as the inventor of writing, was considered the patron god of scribes. Thoth was credited with inventing not only writing but speech itself, and for distinguishing the different languages from each other. Dat is an Egyptian word for the underworld and refers to Thoth's role as scribe of the final judgment, responsible for recording the final verdict of the gods for an individual at death.*

Praising Thoth, Son of Re, the Moon; (whose) emergence is beautiful, Lord of appearances in glory, who shines on the gods by . . . the great general and royal scribe Horemheb; he says:

Hail to you, Moon-Thoth, Bull in Khmun, who dwells in Heseret, who extends the places of the gods, who knows the secrets, who records their

utterances, who distinguishes one message (i.e., language) from another, who judges everyone.

...

Let us give praise to Thoth, the accurate plummet for the scale, who rejects evil, who accepts the one who does not support the committing of error. The Vizier who judges matters, who pacifies conflict with peace. Scribe of the mat who establishes the record, who punishes the guilty, who receives what is under the arm; one who is of sound arm, a wise one among the Ennead, who reports what was forgotten. He is wise for the person who goes astray, who recalls the passing moment, who proclaims the hour of the night. His words have endured forever. He is one who enters the Netherworld, who knows those who are there, who records them in the list of names.

**Source:** Winlock, H. 1924. "A Statue of Horemhab before His Accession." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 10, no. 1: 1–5, pl. 4. Translated by S. E. Thompson.

### ***THE REPORT OF WENAMUN***

*This short excerpt is from a much-longer account known as The Report, or Tale, of Wenamun. Wenamun was an agent of the High Priest of Amun at Thebes, Herihor (fl. 1087 BCE), and was sent on a mission to the port city of Byblos, located in modern Lebanon, to acquire wood to construct a new boat for the god Amun of Thebes. Wenamun's mission takes place as the Egyptian New Kingdom has ended. Egypt was no longer the regional power it once was, and its government was fragmented. Herihor was the virtual ruler of southern Egypt, while northern Egypt was controlled by Smendes. Wenamun experienced many hardships on his journey to Byblos. A member of his crew stole the gold and silver entrusted to him for the purchase of the wood. The ruler of Byblos, Tjekerbaal, refused to provide Wenamun with the wood he needed unless he could pay for it. Wenamun demanded the wood as a gift, as tribute to the god Amun. The excerpt is from a speech by Tjekerbaal in which he points out to Wenamun that his ancestors did provide the pharaohs with wood but only in return for gold and silver. Of interest here is Tjekerbaal's acknowledgement that Egypt was the oldest civilization, having been established by Amun first, and, as the oldest civilization, was the source from which technology and learning spread to the rest of the world. This is reminiscent of the Greek tradition that all the great Greek philosophers and politicians had studied in Egypt at some point in*

*their lives. Of course, an Egyptian scribe placed these words in Tjekerbaal's mouth.*

Look, ever since he placed Seth beside him, Amun has thundered in the sky. Now Amun founded all lands, but he founded them only after he had founded the land of Egypt, from which you have come. Now technical skill has spread forth out of it (Egypt) until reaching the place where I am. Now learning has gone forth from it (Egypt) until reaching the place where I am. Now why have they made you undertake these foolish journeys?

**Source:** Gardiner, A. H. 1932. *Late Egyptian Stories*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 68–69. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine élisabeth.

### THE LOUVRE STELA, *THE SECRETS OF HIEROGLYPHS*

*The text excerpted here derives from a stela dating to the reign of Mentuhotep II (2011–2000 BCE), a ruler of the Eleventh Dynasty. A stela was a monument carved in wood or stone and set up as a type of memorial of the deceased. It would have served as a focal point for the deceased to receive offerings and prayers from the living. Stelas could be decorated with both scenes and hieroglyphic texts. This stela, discovered at Abydos in the early 1800s, was created by an overseer of craftsmen, sculptor, and scribe named Irtyesen. The scenes on the stela show Irtyesen and his wife receiving offerings from their adult children. The text is unique in that Irtyesen goes into great detail in describing his skill as a craftsman and sculptor. Such descriptions are rare, and the vocabulary used in the text is not always known with certainty; translations may differ considerably.*

*Note that in this text Irtyesen brags about his knowledge of the “secrets of hieroglyphs” and that this knowledge allowed him to “acquire all magic.” While the ability to read and write hieroglyphs was not a closely guarded secret, it was a skill possessed by relatively few Egyptians, probably no more than 1 percent of the population, although it has been argued that the level of functional literacy could have been much higher. Since hieroglyphs were only used in monumental contexts, and not for daily communications, only a small number of the literate would have been skilled in the reading and writing of the hieroglyphic script. In this text, Irtyesen also brags about the skills of his son, whom he has trained in the secrets to which he is privy. This illustrates the method in which a trade or profession was acquired in ancient Egypt; a boy usually went into the same occupation as his father and would have received*

*his earliest training at home. The passage concludes with a prayer that Irtysen hoped viewers of his stela would recite and thereby provide him with the necessary goods in the afterlife.*

May the Horus, Uniter of the Two Lands, Two Ladies, Uniter of the Two Lands, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Son of Re, Mentuhotep (II), live forever. His true and favorite servant, who does everything he praises daily, revered before the Great God, Irtysen.

...

The overseer of craftsmen, the scribe (and) sculptor, Irtysen, says: "I know the secrets of hieroglyphs, the performance of festival offerings; I have acquired all magic; there is nothing that has alluded me! I am a craftsman skilled in his craft, who became foremost in what he had learned. I know the art of gridlines, the canon of proportions, (how to) carve (a relief), how to fit the mortise into the tenon so that it is inserted properly. I know the register scene, the stride of a female statue, the proper position of ten (or eleven) birds, the pose of striking down a captive, (how) one eye looks at its pair, how to make frightened the face of an enemy figure, the raising of the arm of one who harpoons hippopotamus, (and) the stride of a runner. I know how to make pigments and their inlays, without allowing heat to burn them nor water to wash them away. There is no one to whom (these secrets) are revealed except for me, alone, and my own eldest son, whom the god ordered to practice what was revealed to him. I have seen what his two hands produce when he acts as the overseer of works in all precious, costly stone, beginning with silver and gold, and ending with ivory (and) ebony.

An invocation offering (consisting of) 1000 loaves of bread, jugs of beer, fowl, cuts of beef, alabaster vessels, pieces of linen, and all good and pure things for the revered one, Irtysen, justified (i.e., deceased), born of (his mother) Idet, justified (deceased).

**Source:** Translated by S. E. Thompson, after Project Rosette. Accessed July 9, 2019. <http://projetrosette.info/page.php?Id=799&TextId=1&line=8&bloc=0&langue=FR>.

### PAPYRUS LANSING, *BE A SCRIBE*

*Papyrus Lansing belongs to a category of Egyptian texts referred to by scholars as Late Egyptian Miscellanies. These papyri, which date to the latter half of the New Kingdom, were used for the instruction of scribes in the scribal*

*schools. Egyptian boys (and only boys attended the scribal schools) learned by rote; they copied and recopied exemplar texts to help them develop their skills at reading and writing by mastering vocabulary, individual signs, and handwriting. Egyptian scribes learned both hieratic and hieroglyphic script, although the ability to produce hieroglyphs on monuments of stone or wood was a skill developed by craftsmen, not scribes. The number and location of scribal schools is unknown. There were schools located in the major administrative centers of Egypt, and major temples and provincial centers probably ran their own schools. As with all occupations, it was common for a son to follow the occupation of his father. The age at which schooling began is uncertain, but formal instruction lasted about four years. Additional training would have taken place on the job as an apprentice.*

*Considering the number of scribes a large state like Egypt needed to function efficiently, the ability to read and write was not a restricted skill. It would have been available to any with the means and opportunity to devote to schooling. As with early education in the United States, the texts Egyptian students were made to study contained practical advice for life. Papyrus Lansing is probably a fictitious letter from a royal scribe, Nebmaatrenakht, to his pupil Wenemdiamun. Despite the fact that this letter is over two thousand years old, it contains advice any parent could give to a student away from home today. Nebmaatrenakht extols the virtue of education and encourages his pupil to focus on his studies and not to be distracted by leisure activities. We learn that corporal punishment was very much a part of the instructional methods of an Egyptian teacher. Nebmaatrenakht scolds Wenemdiamun for spending too much time drinking, partying, and dallying with women. It seems the life of a student away from home has not changed much in the last three thousand years.*

[Beginning of the instruction for letter writing which the royal scribe, chief overseer of cattle of Amun-Re King of the Gods, Nebmaatrenakht] made for his apprentice, the scribe Wenemdiamun. [The royal scribe], chief overseer of the cattle of Amun [Re King of the Gods, Nebmaatrenakht, says to the scribe Wenemdiamun]. . . . "Follower of Thoth" is the name of one who does it (i.e., becomes a scribe). He will make friends with those greater than he is. Joy . . . [write] with your hand, recite with your mouth. Do what I say . . . my heart is not disgusted . . . to my instructing you. You will find it useful. . . . You will be extolled by your superiors; you will be sent on an assignment. . . . Love writing, hate pleasure, so that you may become an excellent official. Do not turn your attention to the hill; neglect movement and walking. Spend the day writing with your fingers,

and read aloud by night. Take the papyrus roll (and) palette to yourself as a friend. It is more pleasant than sweet wine. Writing, for the one who knows how, is more useful than any office. It is more pleasant than bread or beer, than clothing or ointment. It is more precious than an inheritance in Egypt or a tomb in the West.

...

And I beat you with every stick, but you do not listen. If only I knew of another method of accomplishing it, I would use it with you so you would listen. You are a man worthy of writing, even though you haven't had sex yet (in other words, he is a child). Your mind is capable, your fingers skilled, your mouth is prepared to read aloud. As for writing, it is more delightful than a box of sweet breads made with chufa. It is more delightful than a mother giving birth, whose heart does not become weary as she succeeds in nursing her son, her breast in his mouth every day. The heart of the one who can write rejoices; he is rejuvenated every day.

...

Set your face to becoming a scribe. It is a good office for one of your disposition. When you summon one person, a thousand answer you. You travel freely on the road, you are not like a hired ox. You will be ahead of the others. I spend the day teaching you, but you do not listen. Your heart is like (that of) a fool. I give you instruction, but they are not in your mind. Internalize their <content>. The hill is in your sight daily, like a chick after its mother. You take the path to pleasure; you have made friends with those who like to party. You hold court in the brewery like the alcoholic. You sit in the living room with the one who neglects his office. You consider writings an abomination. You associate with the prostitute. Don't commit these acts! What use are they? There is no use for them. Take note of it!

**Source:** Gardiner, A. H. 1937. *Late-Egyptian Miscellanies*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 99–102, 106–107. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine élisabeth.

### **BOOK OF THE DEAD, SPELL 190**

*This excerpt is from a collection of texts that have come to be known as the Book of the Dead. The Egyptians called collections of these texts "The papyrus-roll for going forth by day." Beginning in the New Kingdom, Egyptians with the means to do so would have themselves buried with a papyrus containing a*

*collection of texts intended to ensure their transition to a pleasant afterlife. The length of the papyrus, and the number of spells, was limited to what an Egyptian could afford. Over 190 texts, called spells or utterances, made up this collection, and no one papyrus contained them all. The text presented here is an example of so-called secret knowledge. This particular text, which is attested in the Eighteenth Dynasty, usually introduced or concluded a longer collection of texts. Note the emphasis on the power inherent in these texts and the warning to share them only with one's closest friends.*

*There is an ongoing debate among Egyptologists concerning the extent to which the ancient Egyptians had restricted religious knowledge shared only with initiates. One must compare the statements made in this and similar texts with the fact that presumably anyone with the means could be buried with a copy of the Book of the Dead. It is easy to understand how foreign observers could get the impression that Egyptian hieroglyphs contained secret knowledge available only to initiates; their native Egyptian informants probably told them so, with texts such as these in mind. An akh was the glorified, effective aspect of a person that continued to exist in the afterlife and could affect the lives of the living, positively or negatively. The ba was one aspect of an individual which continued to exist after death, akin to Western conception of the soul. The ba provided the deceased with the power of mobility, allowing him or her to move in and out of the tomb. It also enabled the deceased to transform into any form that would be advantageous in the afterlife.*

Papyrus roll for making able an *akh* in the opinion of Re, making him powerful before Atum, magnifying him before Osiris, causing him to be mighty before The Foremost of the Westerners, (and) for placing respect for him before the Ennead.

This papyrus roll is to be performed on the day of the (new) month, the Sixth-day Festival, the Wag-festival, the Festival of Thoth, the Festival for the birthday of Osiris, the Festival of Sokar, and on the night of the Haker-festival.

These are the secrets of the Underworld, initiation (into) the secrets of the realm of the dead, (for) breaking mountains and opening valleys, secrets known to no one at all, how to care for the dead, to widen his stride, and cause that he move about, (to) drive away deafness, to reveal his face with the god.

You should do (this) without allowing anyone to see (it), except for your true friend and the lector priest, without allowing another to see (it), not (even) a foreign slave.

You should do this within a booth (made) of cloth decorated throughout with stars. As for every deceased individual who will carry out this papyrus roll for himself, his *ba* will go forth with the living. it will go forth by day; it will be powerful among the gods, without them opposing (it). These gods will surround (it), they will recognize him. Then it will be like one of them, so that it will inform you of that which happens to him in the daylight. This book is a truly great secret. The common people from among the population should never see (it).

**Source:** Lapp, G. 1997. *The Papyrus of Nu*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, pl. 45. London: British Museum Press.

### **THE ROMANCE OF SETNA KHAEMUAS AND THE MUMMIES**

*This excerpt from a text of the early Ptolemaic Period illustrates the Egyptian belief in the existence of written texts of great magical power, knowledge of which was greatly restricted. This is one of two stories concerning Prince Khaemuas the fourth son of Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great, a pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty in the New Kingdom. The historical Prince Khaemuas, a high priest of the god Ptah at Memphis, was known for his interest in the ancient monuments at Saqqara and Giza. As a result, he is known as the world's first Egyptologist, a person involved in the study of ancient Egypt. Even during his lifetime, he was renowned as a great sage, and after his death, he was known as a powerful magician. Later tradition attributed to him the discovery of magical texts within ancient tombs, a theme of this tale.*

*This story relates how Setna Khaemuas gained access to a book of magic spells written by the god Thoth himself. These texts gave those who knew them considerable power but also brought great danger to the one who possessed them. The story begins, however, not with Setna Khaemuas, but with a story narrated by Ahura, a daughter of Pharaoh Merneptah, a son and the successor of Ramesses II. Her husband, Na-nefer-ka-ptah, becomes obsessed with obtaining the magic Book of Thoth. After several trials, including doing battle with an "eternal serpent," which he kills three times, he finally obtains the secret Book of Thoth. Na-nefer-ka-ptah then employs a traditional Egyptian method for obtaining the power of a magical text; he dissolved the writing in liquid and swallowed it. For the ancient Egyptians, the power of a text resided in the signs themselves, and by ingesting the signs, one absorbed their power. Once Thoth discovers that his book has been stolen, he appeals to the sun god Re [Ra], who grants him permission to have Na-nefer-ka-ptah; his*



*wife, Ahura; and their son killed. Much later, Setna Khaemuas takes the Book of Thoth from the tomb of Na-nefer-ka-ptah and suffers his own misfortunes as a result.*

“And when my brother Na-nefer-ka-ptah went to the cemetery of Memphis, he did nothing on earth but read the writings that are in the catacombs of the kings, and the tablets of the ‘House of life,’ and the inscriptions that are seen on the monuments; and he worked hard on the writings. And there was a priest there called Nesi-ptah; and as Na-nefer-ka-ptah went into a temple to pray, it happened that he went behind this priest, and was reading the inscriptions that were on the chapels of the gods. And the priest mocked him and laughed. So Na-nefer-ka-ptah said to him, ‘Why are you laughing at me?’ And he replied, ‘I was not laughing at you, or if I happened to do so, it was at your reading writings that are worthless. If you wish so much to read writings, come to me, and I will bring you to the place where the book is which Thoth himself wrote with his own hand, and which will bring you to the gods. When you read but two pages in this, you will enchant the heaven, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; you shall know what the birds of the sky and the crawling things are saying; you shall see the fishes of the deep, for a divine power is there to bring them up out of the depth. And when you read the second page, if you are in the world of ghosts, you will become again in the shape you were in on earth. You will see the sun shining in the sky, with all the gods, and the full moon.’

...

“Na-nefer-ka-ptah then went to the place where he found the box. He uncovered a box of iron and opened it; he found then a box of bronze and opened that; then he found a box of sycamore wood and opened that; again, he found a box of ivory and ebony and opened that; yet he found a box of silver and opened that; and then he found a box of gold; he opened that and found the book in it. He took the book from the golden box, and read a page of spells from it. He enchanted the heaven and the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; he knew what the birds of the sky, the fish of the deep, and the beasts of the hills all said. He read another page of the spells, and saw the sun shining in the sky, with all the gods, the full moon, and the stars in their shapes; he saw the fishes of the deep, for a divine power was present that brought them up from the water.

...

“As I could not write, I asked Na-nefer-ka-ptah, who was a good writer and a very learned one; he called for a new piece of papyrus, and wrote on it all that was in the book before him. He dipped it in beer, and washed it off in the liquid; for he knew that if it were washed off and he drank it, he would know all that there was in the writing.

...

“Thoth discovered all that Na-nefer-ka-ptah had done with the book; and Thoth hastened to tell Ra, and said, ‘Now know that my book and my revelation are with Na-nefer-ka-ptah, son of the King Mer-neb-ptah. He has forced himself into my place, and robbed it, and seized my box with the writings, and killed my guards who protected it.’ And Ra replied to him, ‘He is before you; take him and all his kin.’ He sent a power from heaven with the command, ‘Do not let Na-nefer-ka-ptah return safe to Memphis with all his kin.’

**Source:** Petrie, W. F. 1899. “Setna and the Magic Book.” In *The Universal Anthology*, edited by R. Garnett, L. Vallee, and A. Brandl, 150–153. London: The Clarke Company, Limited.

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# The Egyptians Worshipped Animals and Gods with Animal Heads

## What People Think Happened

Even the most casual observer of ancient Egyptian art cannot help but be struck by the prominence animals played in Egyptian religious iconography. The walls of Egyptian tombs and temples teem with images of animals, such as falcons, ibises, baboons, bulls, cows, and crocodiles. Museums around the world display copies of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, a collection of texts intended to provide a deceased Egyptian with a pleasant afterlife. Many of these texts are accompanied by illustrations, and occasionally these illustrations show an Egyptian in the act of worshipping an animal. Egyptians are depicted kneeling with arms raised in adoration before baboons, rams, lions, herons, cows, scarab beetles, and jackals. Similar scenes are occasionally found on Egyptian stelas, such as the stela from the Ashmolean Museum, which shows an Egyptian and his wife worshipping a pair of cats (Malek 1993, 88).

In addition to appearing to worship animals, Egyptians are often depicted worshipping strange, hybrid beings with animal heads and human bodies. Earlier scholars who took an evolutionary view of religion assumed that civilizations in a very primitive stage of development worshipped animals as gods. The mixed form combining human and animal characteristics in one figure was assumed to be a step toward the “more

advanced” worship of gods in purely human form. In this view, Egyptian animal worship was considered an indication that their society was still in a “primitive” state of intellectual development.

### **How the Story Became Popular**

While the Greeks admired Egypt for its great antiquity and considered it the origin of writing, philosophy, mathematics and medicine, they were unable to appreciate the role animals played in Egyptian worship practices. When Greek and Roman visitors witnessed Egyptians apparently venerating animals, they could hardly withhold their scorn and ridicule. From the fifth century BCE, large numbers of Jews began to migrate into Egypt, and later Jewish texts give evidence that they shared this negative view of the Egyptian use of animals in worship practices. The Greek historian Strabo, writing in the first century BCE, noted that Moses himself had “taught, that the Aegyptians were mistaken in representing the Divine Being by the images of beasts and cattle” (Strabo, XVI.2.35). In a document dating to the second half of the second century BCE, Eleazar, the high priest of Jerusalem, is reported to have said, “Why need we speak of the other very foolish people, Egyptians, and the like, who place their reliance upon wild animals and most kinds of creeping things and beasts, and worship them, and offer sacrifices to them while living and when dead?” (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, 1914–1915).

With the coming of Christianity, the Egyptians faced further criticism for their use of animals in worship practices. Paul, in the Epistle to the Romans, wrote that “Claiming to be wise, they became fools; and they exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling a mortal human being or birds or four-footed animals or reptiles” (NRSV Romans 1:22–3). The Christian apologist Aristides, writing in the second century, expressed his contempt for the Egyptian practice of worshipping animals: “The Egyptians, because they were sillier and more foolish than the Greeks, have erred more than any other people. The cults of the Chaldeans (Babylonians) and the Greeks were not enough for them; they even installed irrational animals as gods” (Smelik and Hemelrijk 1984, 1985).

The spread of the Christian religion throughout Egypt, and the closing of the Egyptian temples, eventually led to the abandonment of the Egyptian practice of venerating animals. There seems to be little question that the role of animals in Egyptian religion was a source of scorn and derision from Egypt’s neighbors, whose writings served as a major source of information on Egyptian religion until the decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### HERODOTUS, *THE ROLE OF ANIMALS IN WORSHIP*

*Herodotus (ca. 490–415 BCE) was a Greek historian from Halicarnassus, on the coast of western Turkey. He is regarded as the father of history, in the sense that he collected and evaluated sources in writing his account of the wars between the Greeks and Persians. Since Egypt was part of the Persian empire at the time, Herodotus devoted a lengthy section (book 2) of his history to a description of the geography, flora, fauna, customs, and history of Egypt. Herodotus's discussion of Egypt is the first such account in Greek preserved. Herodotus traveled to Egypt sometime between 449 and 430 BCE, and he claims to have received much of his information from Egyptian priests and other native informants.*

*In the passages quoted below, Herodotus describes the role of animals in Egyptian worship. He erroneously claims that all wild animals are considered sacred to the Egyptians. He describes several animals that are considered sacred, including the crocodile, a type of Nile fish, snakes, and a type of goose. Along with these actual animals, Herodotus includes a discussion of the mythical phoenix. The word champsai represents Herodotus's attempt to render in the Greek alphabet the Egyptian word for crocodile and probably derives from the Egyptian for "some crocodiles." Herodotus is one of the earliest commentators to note that the Egyptians imposed the death penalty on anyone who killed one of the sacred animals.*

65. Egypt, though it borders upon Libya, does not very much abound in wild animals, but such as they have are one and all accounted by them sacred, some of them living with men and others not. But if I should say for what reasons the sacred animals have been thus dedicated, I should fall into discourse of matters pertaining to the gods, of which I most desire not to speak; and what I have actually said touching slightly upon them, I said because I was constrained by necessity. About these animals there is a custom of this kind:—persons have been appointed of the Egyptians, both men and women, to provide the food for each kind of beast separately, and their office goes down from father to son; and those who dwell in the various cities perform vows to them thus, that is, when they make a vow to the god to whom the animal belongs, they shave the head of their children either the whole or the half or the third part of it, and then set the hair in the balance against silver, and whatever it weighs, this the man gives to the person who provides for the animals, and she cuts up fish of equal value and gives it for food to the animals. Thus food for their



support has been appointed: and if any one kill any of these animals, the penalty, if he do it with his own will, is death, and if against his will, such penalty as the priests may appoint: but whosoever shall kill an ibis or a hawk, whether it be with his will or against his will, must die.

69. Now for some of the Egyptians the crocodiles are sacred animals, and for others not so, but they treat them on the contrary as enemies: those however who dwell about Thebes and about the lake of Moiris hold them to be most sacred, and each of these two peoples keeps one crocodile selected from the whole number, which has been trained to tameness, and they put hanging ornaments of molten stone and of gold into the ears of these and anklets round the front feet, and they give them food appointed and victims of sacrifices and treat them as well as possible while they live, and after they are dead they bury them in sacred tombs, embalming them: but those who dwell about the city of Elephantine even eat them, not holding them to be sacred. They are called not crocodiles but champsai, and the Ionians gave them the name of crocodile, comparing their form to that of the crocodiles (lizards) which appear in their country in the stone walls.

72. There are moreover otters in the river, which they consider to be sacred; and of fish also they esteem that which is called the lepidotos to be sacred, and also the eel; and these they say are sacred to the Nile: and of birds the fox-goose.

73. There is also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I did not myself see except in painting, for in truth he comes to them very rarely, at intervals, as the people of Heliopolis say, of five hundred years; and these say that he comes regularly when his father dies; and if he be like the painting, he is of this size and nature, that is to say, some of his feathers are of gold colour and others red, and in outline and size he is as nearly as possible like an eagle. This bird they say (but I cannot believe the story) contrives as follows:—setting forth from Arabia he conveys his father, they say, to the temple of the Sun (Helios) plastered up in myrrh, and buries him in the temple of the Sun; and he conveys him thus:—he forms first an egg of myrrh as large as he is able to carry, and then he makes trial of carrying it, and when he has made trial sufficiently, then he hollows out the egg and places his father within it and plasters over with other myrrh that part of the egg where he hollowed it out to put his father in, and when his father is laid in it, it proves (they say) to be of the same weight as

it was; and after he has plastered it up, he conveys the whole to Egypt to the temple of the Sun. Thus they say that this bird does.

74. There are also about Thebes sacred serpents, not at all harmful to men, which are small in size and have two horns growing from the top of the head: these they bury when they die in the temple of Zeus, for to this god they say that they are sacred.

**Source:** Herodotus. 1890. *The History of Herodotus*. Parallel English/Greek. Translated by G. C. Macaulay, 2.65, 69, 72–74. London: Macmillan. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/hh/hh2060.htm>.

### DIODORUS SICULUS, *DEVOTION TO SACRED ANIMALS*

*Diodorus of Sicily, also called Diodorus Siculus, set out to write a universal history in Greek from the mythological beginnings of the world down to 60 BCE. Only part of his work is preserved. His work includes information on geography and ethnography (the study of peoples and cultures), with particular interest in the unusual. He probably visited Egypt sometime between 60 and 56 BCE. In this passage, Diodorus describes what he perceived as the Egyptians' fanatical attachment to their sacred animals, a devotion that included executing anyone responsible for the death of one of these animals. He claims to have witnessed the lynching of a Roman official by an Egyptian mob for the offense of killing a cat.*

6. And whoever intentionally kills one of these animals is put to death, unless it be a cat or an ibis that he kills; but if he kills one of these, whether intentionally or unintentionally, he is certainly put to death, for the common people gather in crowds and deal with the perpetrator most cruelly, sometimes doing this without waiting for a trial. 7 And because of their fear of such a punishment any who have caught sight of one of these animals lying dead withdraw to a great distance and shout with lamentations and protestations that they found the animal already dead. 8 So deeply implanted also in the hearts of the common people is their superstitious regard for these animals and so unalterable are the emotions cherished by every man regarding the honour due to them that once, at the time when Ptolemy their king had not as yet been given by the Romans the appellation of "friend" and the people were exercising all zeal in courting the favour of the embassy from Italy which was then visiting Egypt and, in their fear, were intent upon giving no cause for complaint or war, when

one of the Romans killed a cat and the multitude rushed in a crowd to his house, neither the officials sent by the king to beg the man off nor the fear of Rome which all the people felt were enough to save the man from punishment, even though his act had been an accident. 9 And this incident we relate, not from hearsay, but we saw it with our own eyes on the occasion of the visit we made to Egypt.

**Source:** Siculus, Diodorus. 1933. *The Library of History*. Vol. 1, book 1. Translated by C. H. Oldfather, 83. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

### CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA, *PAEDAGOGUS*

*Clement was born at Athens around 150 CE, the son of non-Christian parents. At some point in his life, he converted to Christianity and traveled to Alexandria, Egypt, to study Christian theology at the catechetical school of Pantaenus. Around 200 CE, he became the head of the school for two years. In this passage, Clement compares a woman who focused on her outward appearance instead of her inner, spiritual life to a sumptuously decorated Egyptian temple that housed an animal of some sort, which Clement apparently thought ridiculous. Clement's view of the role of animals in Egyptian worship is similar to that of the early church fathers such as Tertullian, Jerome, and Augustine.*

But those women who beautify the outside, are unawares all waste in the inner depths, as is the case with the ornaments of the Egyptians; among whom temples with their porticos and vestibules are carefully constructed, and groves and sacred fields adjoining; the halls are surrounded with many pillars; and the walls gleam with foreign stones, and there is no want of artistic painting; and the temples gleam with gold, and silver, and amber, and glitter with parti-coloured gems from India and Ethiopia; and the shrines are veiled with gold-embroidered hangings. But if you enter the penetralia (interior) of the enclosure, and, in haste to behold something better, seek the image that is the inhabitant of the temple, and if any priest of those that offer sacrifice there, looking grave, and singing a pæan in the Egyptian tongue, remove a little of the veil to show the god, he will give you a hearty laugh at the object of worship. For the deity that is sought, to whom you have rushed, will not be found within, but a cat, or a crocodile, or a serpent of the country, or some such beast unworthy of the temple, but quite worthy of a den, a hole, or the dirt. The god of the Egyptians appears a beast rolling on a purple couch.

**Source:** Clement of Alexandria. 1885. "The Instructor." In *Fathers of the Second Century*, edited by A. Cleveland Coxe. Book 3, chapter 2, Vol. 2, 272. New York: Christian Literature Publishing.

### LUCIAN, *THE GODS IN COUNCIL*

*Lucian (born ca. 120 CE) was from Samosata, a city on the banks of the Euphrates River in what today is Turkey. Lucian's native language was probably Aramaic, but he was a skilled writer of Greek satire. In his later life, he served in a minor office in the Roman administration in Egypt. In this passage, which describes a dialogue between Zeus and Momus, who is the personification of faultfinding, Momus ridicules the gods of the Egyptians, who appear as animals. The "dog-faced gentleman" is a reference to the Egyptian god Anubis, who is frequently depicted as a jackal or as a human with a jackal head. The "piebald bull" is a reference to the Apis bull. Momus argues with Zeus that the Egyptian gods are mere animals who cannot be gods equal to the Greek gods. Zeus replies that there is a hidden significance to the Egyptian gods to which Momus has not been initiated, but Momus will have none of it and continues to ridicule the Egyptian gods.*

Momus. But I should just like to ask that Egyptian there—the dog-faced gentleman in the linen suit—who he is, and whether he proposes to establish his divinity by barking? And will the piebald bull yonder, from Memphis, explain what use he has for a temple, an oracle, or a priest? As for the ibises and monkeys and goats and worse absurdities that are bundled in upon us, goodness knows how, from Egypt, I am ashamed to speak of them; nor do I understand how you, gentlemen, can endure to see such creatures enjoying a prestige equal to or greater than your own.—And you yourself, sir, must surely find ram's horns a great inconvenience?

Zeus. Certainly, it is disgraceful the way these Egyptians go on. At the same time, Momus, there is an occult significance in most of these things; and it ill becomes you, who are not of the initiated, to ridicule them.

Momus. Oh, come now: A God is one thing, and a person with a dog's head is another; I need no initiation to tell me that.

Zeus. Well, that will do for the Egyptians; time must be taken for the consideration of their case. Proceed to others.

**Source:** Lucian. 1905. *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*. Translated by H. F. Fowler and F. G., 10, 11 Oxford: Clarendon. Accessed July 10, 2019. <https://lucianofsamosata.info/TheGodsInCouncil.html>.

### PLUTARCH, *DE ISIDE ET OSIRIDE*

*Plutarch (ca. 40–120 CE) was a philosopher, biographer, and priest at the oracle of Delphi. At some point in his life, Plutarch visited Egypt, and shortly before his death, he wrote an account of the myth of Isis and Osiris, which he had learned while there. In this passage, Plutarch is explaining the origin of the Egyptians' veneration of animals. Before this passage begins, Plutarch compares the Egyptians' worship of animals to the Greeks' worship of images of their gods as the gods themselves and not simply as representations of the gods. Plutarch says that most Egyptians consider the animals themselves to be gods, resulting in "ridicule and derision," leading the weak to "sheer superstition," not true religion. Plutarch then gives several possible explanations for the Egyptians' veneration of animals, but he ultimately dismisses them all. He concludes that the Egyptians worshipped certain animals because of their usefulness to people or because they recognized some animals as images of the power of the gods.*

This has been to no small degree the experience of the Egyptians in regard to those animals that are held in honour. In these matters the Greeks are correct in saying and believing that the dove is the sacred bird of Aphroditê, that the serpent is sacred to Athena, the raven to Apollo, and the dog to Artemis—as Euripides says,

Dog you shall be, pet of bright Hecatê.

But the great majority of the Egyptians, in doing service to the animals themselves and in treating them as gods, have not only filled their sacred offices with ridicule and derision, but this is the least of the evils connected with their silly practices. There is engendered a dangerous belief, which plunges the weak and innocent into sheer superstition, and in the case of the more cynical and bold, goes off into atheistic and brutish reasoning. Wherefore it is not inappropriate to rehearse in some detail what seem to be the facts in these matters.

72 1 The notion that the gods, in fear of Typhon, changed themselves into these animals, concealing themselves, as it were, in the bodies of ibises, dogs, and hawks, is a play of fancy surpassing all the wealth of monstrous fable. The further notion that as many of the souls of the dead as continue to exist are reborn into these animals only is likewise incredible. Of those who desire to assign to this some political reason some relate that Osiris, on his great expedition, divided his forces into many parts, which the Greeks call squads and companies, and to them all he gave standards in the form

of animals, each of which came to be regarded as sacred and precious by the descendants of them who had shared in the assignment. Others relate that the later kings, to strike their enemies with terror, appeared in battle after putting on gold and silver masks of wild beasts' heads. Others record that one of these crafty and unscrupulous kings, having observed that the Egyptians were by nature light-minded and readily inclined to change and novelty, but that, because of their numbers, they had a strength that was invincible and very difficult to check when they were in their sober senses and acted in concert, communicated to them and planted among them an everlasting superstition, a ground for unceasing quarrelling. Before he enjoined on different peoples to honour and revere different animals; and inasmuch as these animals conducted themselves with enmity and hostility toward one another, one by its nature desiring one kind of food and another, the several peoples were ever defending their own animals, and were much offended if these animals suffered injury, and thus they were drawn on unwittingly by the enmities of the animals until they were brought into open hostility with one another. Even to-day the inhabitants of Lycopolis are the only people among the Egyptians that eat a sheep; for the wolf, whom they hold to be a god, also eats it. And in my day the people of Oxyrhynchus caught a dog and sacrificed it and ate it up as if it had been sacrificial meat, because the people of Cynopolis were eating fish known as the Oxyrhynchus or pike. As a result of this they became involved in war and inflicted much harm upon each other; and later they were both brought to order through chastisement by the Romans.

73 . . . The consecrations of the animals took place at indeterminate times with reference to the circumstances; and thus they are unknown to the multitude, except when they hold the animals' burials, and then they display some of the other sacred animals and, in presence of all, cast them into the grave together, thinking thus to hurt and to curtail Typhon's satisfaction. The Apis, together with a few other animals, seems to be sacred to Osiris; but to Typhon they assign the largest number of animals. If this account is true, I think it indicates that the object of our inquiry concerns those which are commonly accepted and whose honours are universal: for example, the ibis, the hawk, the cynocephalus, and the Apis himself, as well as the Mendes, for thus they call the goat in Mendes.

74. There remain, then, their usefulness and their symbolism; of these two, some of the animals share in the one, and many share in both. It is clear that the Egyptians have honoured the cow, the sheep, and the ichneumon because of their need for these animals and their usefulness. Even so the

people of Lemnos hold larks in honour because they seek out the eggs of the locust and destroy them; and so the people of Thessaly honour storks, because, when their land produced many snakes, the storks appeared and destroyed them all. For this reason they passed a law that whoever killed a stork should be banished from the country. The Egyptians also honoured the asp, the weasel, and the beetle, since they observed in them certain dim likenesses of the power of the gods, like images of the sun in drops of water. There are still many people who believe and declare that the weasel conceives through its ear and brings forth its young by way of the mouth, and that this is a parallel of the generation of speech. The race of beetles has no female, but all the males eject their sperm into a round pellet of material which they roll up by pushing it from the opposite side, just as the sun seems to turn the heavens in the direction opposite to its own course, which is from west to east. They compare the asp to lightning, since it does not grow old and manages to move with ease and suppleness without the use of limbs.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1936. *Isis and Osiris*. Translated by Frank C. Babbitt. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Accessed October 27, 2018. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis\\_and\\_Osiris\\*/home.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Plutarch/Moralia/Isis_and_Osiris*/home.html).

### POLYAENUS, *STRATAGEMS IN WAR*

*Polyaenus was a Macedonian author who lived in the second century CE. When war between Rome and the Parthians (162–166 CE) broke out, he was too old to fight. Instead he wrote his work, Stratagems in War, dedicated to Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus. In a collection of anecdotes, Polyaenus sought to provide the emperors with advice on how to defeat the enemy. Of the eight books, the first six draw on examples from Greek generals, while the seventh draws on stories about Roman and non-Greek commanders. In this excerpt, Polyaenus recounts how the Persian emperor Cambyses used the Egyptians' veneration of animals against them in war, resulting in the Persian conquest of Pelusium, a city of the eastern Delta. The fall of Pelusium opened the way for Cambyses' conquest of Egypt in 525 BCE. There is no truth to this legend. There is also no truth to the story told by Herodotus that Cambyses, once he conquered Egypt, executed the Apis bull. When the Apis died in 524 BCE, an inscription on its sarcophagus indicates that Cambyses provided for the embalming and burial of the Apis. The story below does serve to indicate how ridiculous the Romans considered the Egyptians' attitude toward animals to be.*

When Cambyses attacked Pelusium, which guarded the entrance into Egypt, the Egyptians defended it with great resolution. They advanced formidable engines against the besiegers, and hurled missiles, stones, and fire at them from their catapults. To counter this destructive barrage, Cambyses ranged before his front line dogs, sheep, cats, ibises, and whatever other animals the Egyptians hold sacred. The Egyptians immediately stopped their operations, out of fear of hurting the animals, which they hold in great veneration. Cambyses captured Pelusium, and thereby opened up for himself the route into Egypt.

**Source:** Polyaeus. 1793. *Stratagems of War*. Book 7. Translated by R. Shepherd, 9.1. London.

### PHILO, ON THE DECALOGUE

*Philo of Alexandria (Philo Judaeus) was a Jewish philosopher and author who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, from ca. 20 BCE to 50 CE. Ever since Alexander's conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE, large numbers of Jews had migrated to Egypt. By Philo's day, approximately one hundred thousand Jews had settled there. Philo belonged to a prominent Hellenized Jewish family, with connections both to King Herod in Judea and the government in Rome. He received a typical Greek education in philosophy, history, and literature, and he wrote in excellent Greek. The nature of his Jewish education is unknown, but it appears from his writings that his knowledge of Hebrew was rudimentary at best.*

*In his writings, Philo attempted to give an allegorical, Hellenizing interpretation to the foundational scriptures of Judaism, the Torah (also known as the Pentateuch), the first five books of the Bible. This passage is from his discussion of the Ten Commandments, known as the Decalogue. He uses the Ten Commandments to structure his discussion of Jewish law, frequently drawing on references to Greek and Roman law. In this passage, Philo offers an explanation similar to that found in Plutarch for the Egyptians' veneration of animals (the Egyptians venerated animals they found useful). But in Philo's opinion, the Egyptians went too far, extending their worship to savage wild animals. Philo notes how visitors to Egypt pity the Egyptians for their ridiculous beliefs.*

But the Egyptians are rightly charged not only on the count to which every country is liable, but also on another peculiar to themselves. For in addition to wooden and other images, they have advanced to divine honours irrational animals, bulls and rams and goats, and invented for each



some fabulous legend of wonder. And with these perhaps there might be some reason, for they are thoroughly domesticated and useful for our livelihood. The ox is a plougher and opens up furrows at seed-time and again is a very capable thresher when the corn has to be purged; the ram provides the best possible shelter, namely, clothing, for if our bodies were naked they would easily perish, either through heat or through intense cold, in the first case under the scorching of the sun, in the latter through the refrigeration caused by the air. But actually the Egyptians have gone to a further excess and chosen the fiercest and most savage of wild animals, lions and crocodiles and among reptiles the venomous asp, all of which they dignify with temples, sacred precincts, sacrifices, assemblies, processions and the like. For after ransacking the two elements given by God to man for his use, earth and water, to find their fiercest occupants, they found on land no creature more savage than the lion nor in water than the crocodile and these they reverence and honour. Many other animals too they have deified, dogs, cats, wolves and among the birds, ibises and hawks; fishes too, either their whole bodies or particular parts. What could be more ridiculous than all this? Indeed strangers on their first arrival in Egypt before the vanity of the land has gained a lodgement in their minds are like to die with laughing at it, while anyone who knows the flavour of right instruction, horrified at this veneration of things so much the reverse of venerable, pities those who render it and regards them with good reason as more miserable than the creatures they honour, as men with souls transformed into the nature of those creatures, so that as they pass before him, they seem beasts in human shape.

**Source:** Philo. 1937. *The Decalogue*. *Philo*. Vol. 7. Translated by F. H. Colson, 76–80. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

### What Really Happened

There is no question that animals played an important role in Egyptian religious beliefs and worship practices. Nature in general served as a source of religious imagery for the ancient Egyptians. The Nile, the desert, the sun, the moon, and the stars all played a role in Egyptian religion, so it is not surprising to find that animals did as well. The earliest evidence for Egyptian depictions of their gods indicates that they imagined them in animal form. As early as the Predynastic Period, the Egyptians were burying animals with grave goods, evidence that divine powers were thought to assume animal form. Votive objects in the form of animals

have been found at Abydos and Hieraconpolis dating to the First Dynasty (ca. 2900–2730 BCE). The first evidence for the mixed form, in which a deity is shown with a human body and animal head, dates to the reign of King Peribsen (ca. 2660–2650 BCE). It is important to know, however, that the true name and appearance of a god was hidden; only the dead were privileged to know the true form of a god. For example, in papyrus Leiden I 350, a series of hymns dating to the fifty-second year of the reign of Ramesses II, ca. 1240 BCE, we read,

Amun is one, who conceals himself from them, who hides himself from the gods. His appearance is not known.... None of the gods know his true form. His image is not revealed in writing. One has no information about him.... He is too secret to uncover his majesty; He is too great to question; He is too mighty to know. One falls dead immediately due to the anxiety of speaking his secret name, whether ignorantly or knowingly. There is no god able to speak it to him. (He is) a *ba* whose name is hidden, as is his mystery. (Translated by S. E. Thompson)

When the Egyptians depicted a god as a human with an animal head, they were communicating information about the nature and function of the god, not about the god's actual appearance. An individual god could be depicted in different forms. The god Thoth could appear as a baboon, as an ibis, or as an ibis-headed human. A stela from Asyut dating to the Ramesside Period depicts the god Amun as a bull, a goose, and as a goat. None were thought to be the real form of the god.

The use of living animals in Egyptian worship practices can be dated to the First Dynasty (ca. 2870 BCE), but the practice became more common beginning with the New Kingdom and flourished during the Late and Greco-Roman periods (722 BCE–391 CE). The key to understanding the role animals played in Egyptian religion is the concept of *ba*, or manifestation. The *ba* of a god was the means through which he could make his presence known, and a god could have several *bas* (see below). As the *ba* of a god, an animal could provide a worshipper with a more personal, immediate interaction with the god. Egyptian temples would keep certain living animals to serve as the *bas* of one or more gods. One type of such animal, known as a temple animal, was a specific member of a particular species thought to be the vehicle through the god could make his presence known and reveal his will. In essence, a temple animal functioned much as did the statue of a god in the temple, as a means through which the god's presence was manifest and the means through which the god could communicate with his worshippers.



The Apis bull was considered to be the *ba*, or manifestation, of the god Ptah. The animal was thought to be able to give oracles revealing the will of Ptah. When the Apis died it was mummified and buried in catacombs known as the Serapeum at Saqqara. (Apis Bull Statuette, 664–343 B.C. Accession No. 17.190.62. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

These animals were chosen because of their particular appearance. The most famous example of this type of animal is the Apis bull at Memphis, which was thought to be the *ba* of Ptah. Other examples of this type of animal were the Buchis bull at Armant (*ba* of Montu and Re), a crocodile at Kom Ombo (*ba* of Sobek), and a ram at Elephantine (*ba* of Khnum). These animals could also be referred to as the *webemu* (herald) of the god and were frequently let out into public view to provide oracles to worshippers. For example, at certain times of day, the Apis bull was let out into a courtyard where visitors could put yes-or-no questions to the bull, and the answer was received when the bull entered one of two stables. Priests could also function as the intermediary between a worshipper and his or her god, taking a question to the god and returning with the answer. When a temple animal died, it received an elaborate mummification and burial, and the search began for its replacement.

The second type of animal used in Egyptian worship practices is known as *votive animals*. These animals were members of a particular species

associated with a deity and were kept in large numbers (flocks, herds, etc.) at temples for the purpose of being mummified and buried. Worshipers would visit the temple to pay for the embalming of one of these animals as a means of earning the favor of a deity. Examples of such animals include ibises (sacred to Thoth), falcons (sacred to Horus), cats (sacred to Bastet, Name should read Bastet) kept at Saqqara, and dogs (*ba* of Anubis) at Abydos. The animal mummies would be deposited in a temple, and on certain occasions, the mummies would be collected and buried in cat-combs or other burial locations. Many of the animal mummies show evidence that the animal had been strangled or had its neck broken, possibly to ensure a ready supply of dead animals for mummification. The treatment of these votive animals would seem to contradict the accounts of Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus that the penalty for killing one of these animals was death. It is more likely that the identity of the person responsible for the death of an animal played a greater role in determining his fate than the simple act of killing such an animal.

Although animal cults existed in Egypt from the Predynastic Period, they only gained in popularity during the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1539–1292 BCE). It was not until the Late and Greco-Roman Periods that the use of animals in Egyptian worship practices reached incredible heights of popularity, leading to the millions of animal mummies preserved today. There are several possible explanations for this surge in popularity. The increased emphasis on the role of animals in Egyptian worship practices coincided with foreign domination of Egypt, first by the Persians and then later by the Greeks and Romans. By focusing on this uniquely Egyptian aspect of their religion, the Egyptians could have more clearly differentiated themselves from their conquerors and resisted assimilation to the culture of the invaders.

It is also possible that a motivating factor for the increase in the number of animal cults was economic; they were profitable for the temples. Thousands of pilgrims visited the temples to make donations to cover the mummification of an animal in hopes of having a prayer answered or of receiving an oracular answer to a question, perhaps by means of a dream. This would have been a substantial source of income for a temple and its personnel. During the Ptolemaic Period, the Greek rulers of Egypt provided subsidies to the temples for the maintenance of animal cults. After the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, these subsidies were discontinued, and the importance of animal cults in the temples declined. Such cults did not disappear, however, until the closing of the last Egyptian temples by Emperor Theodosius in 391 CE.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### *THE BOOK OF THE HEAVENLY COW*

*The title of the work from which this passage is excerpted derives from the fact that the text is accompanied by an image of the sky, represented as a cow with stars along her belly, being held up by the god of the atmosphere, Shu, and by eight supporting gods, two for each leg. The text is first attested in the tomb of Tutankhamun (died 1324 BCE) of the Eighteenth Dynasty and in several tombs of Nineteenth Dynasty kings. Based on the language of the text and the fact that there is an allusion to this story in a Middle Kingdom literary work, scholars believe the story itself may date to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 1980–1760 BCE). It relates the story of how humankind angered the sun god Re, who decided to destroy them. Re, however, changes his mind and preserves humankind, but removes himself from their presence and ascends to the sky.*

*This passage explains the various forms, known as *bas*, through which a god could be manifest in the world. Nun, which represents the primeval ocean, is manifest in water. Shu, the god of the atmosphere, is manifest in the air. For our purposes, it is important to note that various animals are described as the *bas* of the gods; the god Sobek is manifest in the crocodile, and a snake can be the manifestation of any god or goddess. In other words, a crocodile was not itself the god but just a means through which the god could make his presence or will known. This was a distinction lost on the Greeks and Romans. When they observed the Egyptians venerating an animal, they assumed that the Egyptian considered the animal a god, not simply a means through which the god made his presence manifest. Note that many gods or goddesses could be manifest in a snake. Bakhu was a mythical place in the east, from which the sun rose every day.*

Nun was embraced by the Great One himself. He said to the gods who came forth from the Eastern Sky: “Give praise to the Great God from whom I developed. I am the one who made the sky and put [it] in place in order to place the *bas* of the gods in it. I am with them throughout the eternity created by the years. My *ba* is magic; it is greater than that. Air is the *ba* of Shu. Rain is the *ba* of Heh. Darkness is the *ba* of Kek. Water is the *ba* of Nun. The crocodile is the *ba* of Sobek. The *ba* of every god and every goddess can (appear as) snakes. The *ba* of Apep is in Bakhu. The *ba* of Re (appears as) magic throughout the entire world.

A man should say (this spell) so that he may be protected through magic: “I am this pure magic which is in the mouth and belly of Re. Gods be far from me. I am Re, the shining one.”

You should say (this spell) when you pass by at dusk, at the last light. “On your face; you shall fall down, O enemy of Re. I am his *ba*, pure magic. O Lord of Eternity who created everlastingness, who destroys the years of the gods, from whom Re descends and ascends every day. Lord of his god, ruler of the one who created him, may the fathers of the gods love you. Pure magic is on his head.”

**Source:** Hornung, E. 1982. *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 26–27, verses 272–296. Freiburg: Universitätsverlag.

### STELA OXFORD ASHMOLEAN MUSEUM, *THE TOM-CAT*

*This brief text comes from a stela showing a man and his wife in the act of praising the sun god Re (another way of referring to the god Re), who appears in the form of two cats. The stela comes from the village of Deir el-Medina, where the workmen who excavated and decorated the tombs of the kings in the Valley of the Kings lived, and dates to approximately 1250 BCE. The sun god Re is depicted as the great “tom-cat.” Someone who encountered this stela without the ability to read the hieroglyphic text might come away with the erroneous impression that the couple were worshipping two cats, and not the sun god. In the Book of the Dead, the sun god is frequently depicted as a cat killing the serpent Apep, who attempted to stop the sun in its tracks, prevent sunrise, and thereby bring an end to creation.*

*The Egyptians thought of the sun as going through an entire life cycle every day, from birth at dawn, adulthood at noon, old age at sunset, and death and rebirth during the night. Atum was the form of the sun as an old man at sunset. The two cats represent the sun god at two stages of his life: at sunrise (the beautiful Tom Cat) and at sunset (the Great Tom Cat). The Egyptian word for beautiful can also mean “young one.” The ka was an aspect of the individual created at a person’s birth and was thought to be transmitted from parent to child. The ka was the link between the physical and spiritual worlds and was the means by which material offerings of food and drink were transmitted to the nonmaterial world of the gods and the dead.*

Image on Right: The Beautiful Tom Cat Re

Image on Left: The Great Cat, the Peaceful One, in his pet name of “Atum is at Peace.”

Giving praise to the Great Tom Cat;

Kissing the ground [before] Pre, the Great God.

The peaceful one; he returns in peace.

May you cause that [I] see [ ] as you have made.

Shine on me so that (I) may see your beauty.

Turn yourself towards me, Beautiful, Peaceful One.

The Peaceful One knows to return [to peace].

May you give life, prosperity, and health to the *ka* of . . . .

**Source:** Translation by S. E. Thompson from an image of Stela Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 1961.232.

### THE CATTLE HUNT SCARAB OF AMENHOTEP III

*The scarab beetle was a symbol of rebirth and the rising sun and was a frequently used image in amulets. This text comes from a commemorative scarab (two-and-nine-sixteenths by fifteen-sixteenths inches) issued during the second year of King Amenhotep III of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1389 BCE). Commemorative scarabs served the same purpose as a commemorative coin or stamp today: to call attention to a particular person or event. One of the duties of the Egyptian king was to protect his people from chaos, and one symbolic means of doing this was through the wild animal hunt. Eighteenth Dynasty kings were proud of their hunting prowess.*

*Amenhotep III had this scarab issued with the hieroglyphic text translated below to commemorate his successful bull hunt. Even though a bull could serve as the ba of any number of gods, Amenhotep had no fear of dispatching ninety-six such animals. Note that the Horus name, one of the five names a ruler assumed when taking the throne, was “Mighty Bull appearing in Truth.” All the kings of Dynasties Eighteen through Twenty-Two included the epithet “Mighty Bull” in their Horus names, probably to indicate the power and virility of the king. The Faiyum was an oasis just south of Memphis on the west of the Nile, which contained the only freshwater lake in Egypt.*

Year 2 under the majesty of Horus “Mighty Bull appearing in Truth,” Two Ladies “He who establishes laws (and) pacifies the Two Lands,” Horus of Gold “Great of Arm who smites the Asiatics,” King of Upper and Lower Egypt Nebmaatre, Son of Re Amenhotep Heka Waset, may he be given life, (and) the Great Royal Wife, Tiy, may she live.

(This is) the miracle which occurred for his majesty. One came, reporting to his majesty: “There are wild bulls in the desert in the area around the Faiyum.” His majesty sailed northward in the royal ship “Appearing in Truth” that evening, setting out on a good journey, arriving safely at the Faiyum by morning. His majesty appeared in his chariot, with his entire army following him. His majesty commanded the officers, all the common soldiers and the young recruits, to watch out for the wild bulls. Then his majesty commanded that these bulls be confined with enclosures and ditches. Then his majesty set out against all these wild bulls, their number (being) one hundred and seventy. The number that his majesty brought back from the hunt that day (was) fifty-six. Then his majesty spent four days (there) in order to allow his horses to rest. Then his majesty appeared in his chariot, bring back forty bulls from (this) hunt, making a total of ninety-six bulls (in all).

**Source:** Hieroglyphic text from De Buck, A. 1982 [reprint of 1948]. *Egyptian Readingbook*. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Chicago: Ares Publishers.

### THE TURIN INDICTMENT PAPYRUS, *THE CRIMES OF PANANKET*

*This brief passage is from a much longer text known as the Turin Indictment Papyrus, which dates to the reign of Ramesses V (1149–1146 BCE) and describes the numerous crimes of Pananket, including illicit sex with married women, blinding a woman and her daughter, and theft of property from the temple of Khnum at Elephantine. Of particular interest is the passage below, which describes Pananket’s theft of five calves, a black cow, and the great bull of Mnevis. He sold the cow and calves to priests further south and the bull of Mnevis to Nubian policemen at the Fortress of Senmut, located on an island in the Nile known today as Biga. These were not just any animals from the temple herds, but were examples of the special temple animals described above, which were thought to be the manifestation of a god, entitled to a cult during life and an elaborate burial at death. The Mnevis bull was thought to be the herald of the sun god Re. Apparently Pananket had no fear of mistreating such a special animal. This calls into question the truth behind the assertions in classical authors concerning the Egyptians’ fanatical devotion to their sacred animals.*

The matters which were charged to Pananket, a priest of the Temple of Khnum.



Accusation concerning the black cow which is in his (Pananket's) possession, after having given birth to five calves of Mnevis. He removed them; he got rid of them in the field; he gave them up; he sent them south and he sold them to the priests.

Accusation concerning the great bull of Mnevis which was under his control. He gave it up and he gave it to some (members) of the group of policemen of the Fortress of Senmut and he accepted payment for it.

**Source:** Turin, P. 1887, rt. 1, 2–3. From Gardiner, Alan H. 1948. *Ramesseid Administrative Documents*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 74. London: Oxford University Press. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

### THE ARCHIVE OF HOR

*Hor was an Egyptian priest born around 200 BCE in the town of Pi-Thoth in the Egyptian Delta. Initially a priest of Isis in a local temple, around 165 BCE, Hor had a dream in which the god Thoth appeared to him and told him not to worship any other god except for him. As a result, Hor took up residence in the Ibis shrine to the god Thoth located near Memphis, where he served as a scribe. Each year, thousands of pilgrims would visit the Ibis shrine to pay for the mummification of an ibis as a votive offering to Thoth, in hopes of gaining his favor or getting an answer to a question through an oracle. Hor had a reputation as a soothsayer, and his documents record several of the dreams he received from the god.*

*The Ibis shrine was a busy place, approximately ten thousand burials of ibises took place each year. Hor's archive of texts, written on broken pieces of pottery called ostraca, provide detailed information about the operation of the extensive organization necessary for the upkeep and mummification of so many birds. Plots of land were set aside, the produce of which went to support the flocks of ibises and their maintenance workers. One estimate is that at least fifty people would have been involved in staffing the Ibis cult at Saqqara. In addition, the pharaoh provided a stipend to assist in the maintenance of the shrine. Ibis mummies were created throughout the year and collected in a place known as the "houses of rest." Once a year the mummies, which had been placed in pottery jars, were taken to the catacombs at the Serapeum for burial.*

*Unfortunately, those in charge could not be relied on to take good care of the flocks of ibises in their charge. From Hor's archive, we learn that the ibises' food was stolen at times, and the birds were allowed to go hungry, some even dying from hunger or neglect. The text below relates an investigation that took place around 172 BCE into the conduct of the ibis cult, resulting in the arrest*

*of six men and the issuance of new regulations for the ibis cult. One of these regulations specifically calls for “one god (i.e., ibis mummy) in one vessel.” When investigating the many jars deposited in the Serapeum, archaeologists have noted that several jars were empty or contained only bones and feathers. It is not uncommon to find that many carefully bandaged animal mummies contain not whole mummies but a collection of bones from several different species.*

*As a result, it seems likely that some of the priests were involved in an attempt to swindle the worshippers, who had paid for the mummification of an ibis and instead received only an empty jar or one filled with random bones, feathers, clay, or stones. Others have argued that priests engaged in such practices when the demand for mummies created by the number of pilgrims visiting shrines during festivals exceeded the supply of dead animals. Salima Ikram has speculated that around ten thousand dog mummies would have been needed during the annual festival at Saqqara (Ikram 2015b, 15). A third suggestion is that all parts of a sacred animal were considered just that—sacred—and merited special treatment and burial at death (Kessler and Nur el-Din 2015, 156). Whatever the reason, one result of the investigation instigated by Hor was the instruction that each jar should contain one ibis mummy, and a system of inspectors was instituted to make sure this instruction was followed. This is hardly the type of conduct one would expect from priests of a god toward his sacred animal.*

## Recto

From the scribe of the nome of Sebennytos, Hor son of Harendjiofef. No man shall be able to lapse from a matter which concerns Thoth, the god in person who holds sway in the temple of Memphis, and likewise Harthoth (?) within it. The benefit which is performed for the Ibis, the soul (*ba*) of Thoth, the three times great, is made (for) the Hawk also, the soul of Ptah, the soul of Apis (?), the soul of Pre, the soul of Shu, «the soul of Tefnut», the soul of Geb, the soul of Osiris, the soul of Horus, the soul if Isis, the soul of Nephthys, «the great gods (of) Egypt», the Ibis (and) the Hawk. That which was spoken to the great souls of Hepnebes «in the chapel of Thoth»:

‘Thoth has caused the habit to occur to them of imparting regularity «and it shall not fail» into the Ibis (and) the Hawk within it: for it affects (?) likewise the excavation(?) of the courtyard which contains him within his houses of rest: «and all earnestness is to be imparted into the inspectors» not to trust the servants (of) the ibises and the servants (of) the Hawk the god in person, when they perform his burial.’

It happened that this lasted until Year 16 of the father (of) the father. (But) the said utterance was abused (for) 32 years, up to Year 9, Pharmuthi, day 29 (of) the Pharaohs for ever. The elders among the priests (of) Ptah who recorded within the chapel held session (in) the forecourt together with Ahmose (son of) Petineftem, the agent (of) Pharaoh, who was controller of the temple. The scribes (of) Ptah read out the documents. They sent in haste to Alexandria to determine the law (of) the matter which concerned these things habitually (and) which was established for ever. They brought the servants (of) the ibises (to) Memphis [in Pharmuthi, day 30] together with the servants (of) the Hawk (to) the forecourt. Guilty[. . .]. They seized (?) Onnofri (son of) Hapertais ‹who made the inspection›, and Harkhemi and Nefertemertais and Djehepetrosh and Hor (son of) Khensthoth and Hor (son of) Hapertain, making six men. They took them (to) the prison (and) secured them (in) the stocks (?). They caused the inspectors to be brought (of) the houses of rest (of) the Ibis (and) the houses of rest (of) the Hawk openly before the priests.

#### Verso

Khaahapi, the priest in session (in) splendour(?) received the said inspectors (and) took them to his house. The 25 priests passed in review the matter whose content is written below, (and) they wrote it into the regulation(?) for Year 10. They commanded in the presence of the priests to choose three priests (of the) year, who are reliable, and who shall direct the sustenance and the fortune (of) the Ibis. They are to come (to) Hepnebes (at) every counting, and shall perform the investigation (of) the gods (in) the house of waiting (of) the god which they shall find at the time, and they are to impart regularity into it, one god (in) one vessel. (When) the occasion occurs (of) the burial of the Ibis which is performed in one completed year swiftly (?), they shall assemble the people of the Serapeum (at) Hapnebes, and they shall lead in procession the Ibis (and) the Hawk to his house of rest, the appropriate priest in attendance. They are to (place) the inspectors (of) the houses of rest (of) the Ibis (and) the houses (of) the Hawk (in) one chest, which is sealed (in) the storeroom (?) (of) the three priests and they shall give it into the hand of the pastophoroi (of) the forecourt (of) the Serapeum. The priests are also to assess for the bandaging ‹two payments of the god› one HD apart from the bandaging: regularity in this, 1  $\frac{1}{4}$  payments: its fine (?)  $\frac{3}{4}$  payment, making 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  HD: its linen (?) makes  $\frac{1}{2}$  HD: and this becomes the total for the men who perform the burial.

**Source:** Ray, J. D. 1976. *The Archive of Hor*. Text 19. London: Egypt Exploration Society. Used by permission of the Egypt Exploration Society.

### PLINY, *NATURAL HISTORY*

*Pliny, known as Pliny the Elder (23/4–79 CE) was a Roman aristocrat and admiral who wrote a thirty-seven-book work known as Natural History, which attempted to be an encyclopedia of all contemporary knowledge. This excerpt is from the section on land animals and provides a description of the Apis bull. The Apis cult had previously been described by Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus. Pliny's description of the special markings the Apis bull had to exhibit differs somewhat from that found in Herodotus, and both descriptions differ from the depiction of the Apis bull found in an Eighteenth Dynasty tomb, which shows the Apis bull with a black head, back, and rear; white sides, belly, and legs; and a white spot on its forehead. The horns are shown projecting straight from the head at a forty-five-degree angle. Given the considerable amount of time that passed between the three descriptions, it is possible that each description was accurate for its time.*

*First mentioned during the reign of King Aha (ca. 2870 BCE), the Apis bull is attested from the very beginning of Egyptian history. The Apis was considered to be the ba and herald of the creator god Ptah of Memphis, and the deceased Apis became the god Osiris-Apis, or Osorapis, and could continue to give oracles to devotees through dreams or priests. Pliny describes the various ways the living Apis bull could provide oracles or predict the future by his behavior. Pliny, unlike other classical authors, describes the Apis bull being put to death after reaching a designated, but not specified, life span. Considering the evidence for the execution of other sacred animals, this is not beyond the realm of possibility. There is evidence that during the Old Kingdom, the body of the deceased Apis would have been cooked and eaten during a ceremonial feast, possibly as a way for the king to assimilate the power and virility of the bull. In the Pyramid Texts, the earliest religious texts known from ancient Egypt, carved in the pyramids of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasty kings, there are references to the king devouring the gods to assimilate their power.*

In Egypt an ox is even worshipped as a deity; they call it Apis. It is distinguished by a conspicuous white spot on the right side, in the form of a crescent. There is a knot also under the tongue, which is called “cantharus.” This ox is not allowed to live beyond a certain number of years; it is then destroyed by being drowned in the fountain of the priests. They then go, amid general mourning, and seek another ox to replace it; and the mourning is continued, with their heads shaved, until such time as they have found one; it is not long, however, at any time, before they meet with a successor. When one has been found, it is brought by the priests to Memphis. There are two temples appropriated to it, which are called

thalami, and to these the people resort to learn the auguries. According as the ox enters the one or the other of these places, the augury is deemed favourable or unfavourable. It gives answers to individuals, by taking food from the hand of those who consult it. It turned away from the hand of Germanicus Cæsar, and not long after he died. In general it lives in secret; but, when it comes forth in public, the multitudes make way for it, and it is attended by a crowd of boys, singing hymns in honour of it; it appears to be sensible of the adoration thus paid to it, and to court it. These crowds, too, suddenly become inspired, and predict future events. Once in the year a female is presented to the ox, which likewise has her appropriate marks, although different from those on the male; and it is said that she is always killed the very same day that they find her. There is a spot in the Nile, near Memphis, which, from its figure, they call Phiala; here they throw into the water a dish of gold, and another of silver, every year upon the days on which they celebrate the birth of Apis. These days are seven in number, and it is a remarkable thing, that during this time, no one is ever attacked by the crocodile; on the eighth day, however, after the sixth hour, these beasts resume all their former ferocity.

**Source:** Pliny the Elder. 1855. *The Natural History*. Chapter 71 (46). Translated by John Bostock. London: Taylor and Francis, Red Lion Court, Fleet Street.

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## Ancient Egyptians Considered the Pharaoh to Be a God

### What People Think Happened

One of the first ideas students encounter when they begin their study of ancient Egypt is that the Egyptians considered the king to be a god. For example, in a frequently used textbook in AP World History courses, students read, “From the time of the Old Kingdom, if not earlier, Egyptians considered the king to be a god sent to earth to maintain *ma’at*, the divinely authorized order of the universe” (Bulliet et al. 2011, 26). Another popular world history textbook states, “The early pharaohs claimed to be gods living on the earth in human form, the owners and absolute rulers of all the land” (Bentley and Ziegler 2011, 53). It is not surprising that students would encounter such statements in general works on world history.

Since the decipherment of hieroglyphs, the subject of Egyptian kingship has generated an enormous literature in Egyptology. This is due to the fact that the Egyptians did refer to their kings as *netjer*, the Egyptian word translated as “god.” Early Egyptologists interpreted this to mean that the Egyptians considered their kings to be fully divine. In 1912, Baillet wrote that “the pharaoh is a god in his essence. His humanity is only an appearance. His human body serves as a support and residence of a divine spirit” (Baillet 1912, 7 trans. by S. E. Thompson). In 1958, H. W. Fairman wrote, “From the earliest historic times, therefore the dominant element in the Egyptian conception of kingship was that the king was a god—not merely godlike, but very god” (Fairman 1958, 75).

It seems indisputable that the Egyptians thought their ruler a god on a par with the other members of their pantheon.

### **How the Story Became Popular**

Over two thousand years ago, Egypt's neighbors believed that the Egyptians considered their king to be divine. The biblical prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied between 593 and 571 BCE, had been deported to Babylon when Nebuchadnezzar conquered Jerusalem in 598 BCE. Ezekiel wrote that on January 7, 587 BCE, the "word of the Lord" came to him, saying, "Mortal, set your face against Pharaoh king of Egypt, and prophesy against him and against all Egypt; speak, and say, Thus says the Lord God: I am against you, Pharaoh king of Egypt, the great dragon [crocodile] sprawling in the midst of its channels, saying, 'My Nile is my own; I made it for myself'" (NRSV Ezekiel 29:2–3; see also vv. 9–10). In this passage, the Lord is decreeing destruction on Egypt because Pharaoh Apries failed to come to the aid of Jerusalem when the Babylonians invaded in 588 BCE. Ezekiel is saying that the Egyptian king claims ownership of the Nile because he created it, something only a god could do. Ezekiel may also be referring to the fact that the pharaoh was frequently equated with the crocodile god Sobek.

The Greeks also believed that the Egyptians considered their pharaohs to be gods. Alexander the Great capitalized on this Egyptian belief when he visited the Temple of Amun at the Siwa Oasis shortly after his conquest of Egypt in 332 BCE. There, an oracle of the god Amun proclaimed that Alexander was the son of Amun, whom the Greeks equated with Zeus. Alexander had coins minted depicting him with the ram's horn of Amun, further stressing his identification with the Egyptian god. Later accounts describe how the god Amun assumed the form of Nectanebo II, the last native pharaoh of Egypt, to impregnate Alexander's mother, Olympia, with him.

Alexander's successors in Egypt, the Greek Ptolemies, continued to portray themselves as gods in the tradition of the pharaohs in order to legitimize their rule in the eyes of their Egyptian subjects. Ptolemy I had himself depicted on coins as Amun. Ptolemy II declared his parents to be gods and built temples dedicated to their worship. The statues of some Ptolemaic rulers were set up in Egyptian temples, where they received offerings just like the traditional Egyptian gods. After the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BCE, Roman emperors were considered to be gods just as the pharaohs had been. At the Egyptian town of Philae, Augustus

was called the “son of Re” and “the good god, the son of Shu, the true heir of the lord of the gods.” An inscription in the temple of Khnum at Esna in southern Egypt describes how the god Khnum-Re modeled the emperor Trajan on his potter’s wheel, just as he did the native Egyptian pharaohs, and describes the emperor as the son of Re. (Dunand and Zivie-Coche 2004, 201). The Greek and Roman rulers of Egypt found the Egyptian royal ideology portraying the pharaoh as divine to be useful propaganda for legitimizing their rule over the Egyptian people.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### MANETHO, *AEGYPTIACA*

*For the ancient Egyptians, the first kings of Egypt were the gods themselves. The Egyptians dated events by the reigns of their kings, and this practice contributed to the need to keep lists of kings in the order of their reigns, as well as the length of each individual reign. Only two examples of such lists survive. One is known as the Turin Canon of Kings, which dates to the reign of Ramesses II (reigned 1279–1213 BCE), and the other was written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho, who lived around 250 BCE. Other than his birthplace, Sebennytos in the Nile Delta, nothing certain is known of Manetho’s life. Unfortunately, his original work is not preserved, but we do have excerpts quoted in the work of later authors. The excerpt below was preserved in the work of the Byzantine chronographer George Syncellus (who died in the early ninth century) titled Extract of Chronography.*

*In both the Turin Canon and the work of Manetho, we learn that the first rulers of Egypt were the gods. Manetho lists the Egyptian gods by their Greek equivalents; their Egyptian identities are given in brackets next to each name. The beings referred to by Manetho as “gods” were known to the Egyptians as the Great Ennead, a group of Lower Egyptian gods, and the “Demigods” belonged to the Lesser Ennead, a group of Upper Egyptian gods. These gods could be ascribed reigns of fantastic lengths. To bring Egyptian and Babylonian chronology more into line with the chronology of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, earlier chronographers had shortened the figures given in the original records by equating Egyptian years with lunar months. Using this equivalence, the original figure of 9,000 years for Hephaestus [Ptah] was converted to 727  $\frac{3}{4}$  years, and the reigns of the other gods were also shortened. By contrast, the Turin Canon gives the reign of Horus as 300 years and the reign of Thoth as 7,726 years. In addition to king lists that give gods as the first rulers of Egypt,*

*we also have stories of their rule. In the Book of the Heavenly Cow, we have an account of the rule of the god Re on Earth, which ends with human-kind's rebellion against Re and his retreat to the sky. In a very real sense, the Egyptian kings were considered to be the continuation of the rule of the gods on earth.*

*On the Antiquity of Egypt.*

Manetho of Sebennythus, chief priest of the accursed temples of Egypt, who lived later than Berossos in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphus, writes to this Ptolemy, with the same utterance of lies as Berossos, concerning six dynasties or six gods who never existed: these, he says, reigned for 11,985 years. The first of them, the god Hephaestus, was king for 9000 years. Now some of our historians, reckoning these 9000 years as so many lunar months, and dividing the number of days in these 9000 lunar months by the 365 days in a year, find a total of 727  $\frac{3}{4}$  years. They imagine that they have attained a striking result, but one must rather say that it is a ludicrous falsehood which they have tried to pit against Truth.

*The First Dynasty of Egypt.*

1. Hephaestus [Ptah] reigned for 727  $\frac{3}{4}$  years.
2. Helios (the Sun), [Re] son of Hephaestus, for 80  $\frac{1}{6}$  years.
3. Agathodaemon [Shu], for 56  $\frac{7}{12}$  years.
4. Cronos [Geb], for 40  $\frac{1}{2}$  years.
5. Osiris and Isis, for 35 years.
6. Typhon [Seth], for 29 years.

*Demigods:*

7. Orus [Horus], for 25 years
8. Ares [Onuris], for 23 years.
9. Anubis for 17 years.
10. Heracles [Khonsu], for 15 years.
11. Apollo [Horus of Edfu], for 25 years.
12. Ammon [Amun], for 30 years.
13. Tithoes [Thoth], for 27 years.
14. Sosus [Shu], for 32 years.
15. Zeus [Amun-Re], for 20 years.

**Source:** Waddell, W. G., trans. 1940. *Manetho*. Loeb Classical Library Vol. 350, 15–17. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Loeb Classical Library® is a registered trademark of the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Used by permission.

### THE KUBBAN STELA, *THE TITLES OF THE KING*

*This stela, set up in 1277 BCE, commemorates the success of an expedition Ramesses II sent out to dig a well in the Wadi Alaki in order to provide water for the men mining gold in the eastern desert of Nubia. This excerpt is included to illustrate the titles every king bore and as an example of the ways a king was identified with and as a god. By the Fifth Dynasty, every king bore five names bestowed at coronation, each associating him (and, in a few instances in Egyptian history, her) with the tutelary gods of Egypt. The word translated here as “majesty” has also been rendered as “incarnation,” meaning the individual person of the king.*

*The Horus name identified the king as the earthly incarnation of the sky god Horus. The Two Goddesses were Nekhbet (vulture) and Wadjet (cobra), who were thought of as the protective goddess of Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively. The meaning of the third name has been a matter of discussion. This title has been rendered as “Golden Horus,” or “Falcon of Gold,” or simply “Gold.” There is no doubt that gold was the material from which the statues of the gods were made. It is possible that this name, first attested under the Fourth Dynasty king Sneferu, identified the king with the sun god Re. Note that in the Westcar Papyrus, the newborn son of Re who will one day become king is described as having limbs covered with gold. The throne name, preceded by the title King of Upper and Lower Egypt, was introduced into the royal titulary in the Fifth Dynasty. From the Middle Kingdom, this name always contained the name of the sun god Re and was the most important of the five names. From the Middle Kingdom on, this was the only name used in texts. The fifth name identified the king as the offspring of Re and was his original birth name. Both the fourth and fifth names were enclosed in a ring called a cartouche, which symbolized the king’s rule of “all that the sun encircles.”*

*Note the number of times in this preamble to the main text that Ramesses II is identified as or with a god. We are told that he was a good god, beloved of Amun-Re, and that Re, Amun, and Horus were his father. The king is identified as the gods Horus and Seth. He is described as possessing the might of the god of war Montu from birth. The purpose of this introductory passage, in addition to providing the date of the event, was to express the divinity and power of the king.*

Year 3, first month of the second season, day 4, under the majesty of Horus: Mighty Bull, Beloved of Truth; Favorite of the Two Goddesses: Defender of Egypt, Binder of the Barbarians; Golden Horus: Rich in years, Great in Victory; King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Usermare-Setepnere;

Son of Re: Meriamon-Ramesses (II), given life, forever and ever, beloved of Amon-Re, lord of Thebes, and presider over Karnak; shining upon the Horus-throne of the living, like his father, Re, every day; Good God, lord of the Southland, Horus of Edfu, of brilliant plumage, beautiful hawk of electrum. He protects Egypt with his wing, making shade for the people, as a wall of might and victory. When he went forth from the body, (at birth) he was (already) terrible for capture, while his might was extending his boundaries; color was given to his limbs like the might of Montu. (He is) the double lord, (Horus and Seth) on the day of whose birth there was exultation in heaven; the gods said: "Our seed is in him." The goddesses said: "He hath come forth from us to exercise the kingship of Re." Amon said: "I am Irsu (the one who made him; a designation of the god as father of the king), I have put justice into its place." The earth is established, heaven is satisfied, the divine Ennead is content with his qualities, the Bull, mighty against Kush the wretched, smiting the rebels as far as the land of the Negro. His hoofs trample the Troglodytes, his horn goes into them; his fame is mighty in Khenthennofer; as for his terror, it has reached Karoy. His name circulates among all lands, because of the victories which his two hands have wrought. Gold comes forth from the mountain at his name, like (that of) his father, Horus, lord of Bek, great in love in the southern countries, like Horus in the land of Miam, lord of Bohen; the King of Upper and Lower Egypt: Usermare-Setepnere; Son of Re, of his body, Lord of Diadems: Meriamon-Ramesses (II), given life forever and ever, like his father, Re, every day.

**Source:** Breasted, James H. 1906. *Ancient Records of Egypt*. Vol. 3, of *The Nineteenth Dynasty*. 5 vols, 118–119. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

### THE WESTCAR PAPYRUS, *DJEDI'S PROPHECY*

*The Westcar Papyrus, also known as Three Tales of Wonder or Khufu and the Magicians, is preserved on a papyrus dating to ca. 1630–1520 BCE. Based on the language of the text, scholars date the composition to the Twelfth Dynasty (ca. 1939–1760 BCE). The story itself is set in the Old Kingdom and recounts how King Khufu (Fourth Dynasty, builder of the Great Pyramid) is being entertained by his three sons, who tell him stories. The beginning of the papyrus is lost, but three stories are preserved.*

*This excerpt comes from the end of the papyrus. The king's son Hordedef has told his father of a powerful magician named Djedi, who is 110 years old and can perform miracles. Khufu has sent a boat to bring Djedi to the palace*

*so that he can witness him perform magic, including reattaching the head of an animal that had been decapitated, restoring the animal to life. Once at the royal court, Djedi prophesies the birth of the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty, who will be sons of the sun god Re. In this passage, we learn that the god Re has sent the goddesses Nephthys, Meskhenet, and Hekat and the god Khnum to assist in the delivery of the triplets. Rauser is a priest of Re, and his wife, Ruddjedet, is pregnant with triplets fathered by the sun god Re. The infants are born already possessing the signs of kingship. The name of the oldest, "May he be mighty" (Useref), is a play on the name of the first king of the Fifth Dynasty, Userkaf.*

Then Djedi said "It is the eldest of the three sons who are in the womb of Ruddjedet who will bring it [a chest containing an architectural plan of Thoth's shrine] to you." Then his majesty (Khufu) said: "I want what you have described, (but) who is this Ruddjedet?" Djedi replied "She is the wife of a priest of Re, lord of Sakhbu; she is pregnant with three children of Re lord of Sakhbu, who told her 'they will exercise this excellent office [the kingship] in this entire land. The eldest of them will serve as the "Greatest of Seers" in Heliopolis."

Then his majesty became depressed on account of (what he was told). Djedi said "Why are you in such a mood, O monarch, my lord? Let me assure you, (first) your son, then his son, then one of them (will become king)." Then his majesty replied, "when will Ruddjedet give birth?" <Djedi replied> "she will give birth on the fifteenth of the first month of Growing Season."

...

Then one day it happened; Ruddjedet began to suffer; her contractions were painful. The majesty of Re, Lord of Sakhbu said to Isis, Nephthys, Meskhenet, Hekat, and Khnum, "I want you to travel (and) deliver Ruddjedet of the three children who are in her womb, who will exercise kingship in the entire land. They will build temples for your cities, they will provision your altars, they will richly provide for your offering tables, they will increase your offerings."

These gods set out, after assuming the forms of female musicians, while Khnum accompanied them carrying the birthing stool. They arrived at the home of Rauser, and they found him standing with his loincloth upside down. They presented their necklaces and sistrums to him. He said "my ladies, look, (my) wife is suffering; her delivery is difficult. Then



they said: “will you allow us to examine her? We are knowledgeable at delivering babies.” He told them “proceed!” They then entered to Rujedet and sealed the room behind them. Isis placed herself in front of her, Nephthys behind her, and Hekat was hastening the delivery. Then Isis said “may you not be mighty in her womb in this your name of “May he be mighty.” Then the child rushed forth upon her two arms as a child of 1 cubit (21 inches), his bones were firm, his limbs were (as if) covered with gold, his royal headdress was as true lapis lazuli. Then they washed him, his umbilical cord was cut, and he was placed upon a cloth on a brick bed. Then Meskhenet presented herself to him and said “He is a king who will exercise kingship in the entire land,” while Khnum was making his limbs hale.

**Source:** Hieroglyphic text from Erman, Adolf. 1890. *Glossar, palaeographische Bemerkungen und Feststellung des Textes*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, pls. IX–X. Berlin: Spemann.

### THE SEHETEPIBRE STELA, INSTRUCTION FOR HIS CHILDREN

*Sehetepibre was an official who served under Kings Sesostri III and Amenemhet III (1837–1773 BCE) of the Twelfth Dynasty. He is not the original author of the text; that honor belongs to a vizier named Kairsu. This stela was set up as a funerary monument at Abydos, and in it, Sehetepibre extolls his virtues as a loyal servant and appeals to the living to recite an offering formula for his benefit in the afterlife. In addition, Sehetepibre instructs his children on how they can pass a lifetime in peace and have a successful afterlife. The main way to accomplish these goals is by loyalty to the king. The king is identified as Sia (goddess of wisdom); as the sun god Re, who bestows light and life on Egypt; as Khnum, a creator god; and as Bastet and Sekhmet, two fierce and protective goddesses. It is noteworthy that Sehetepibre admonishes his children to put the king in their hearts. The Egyptians believed that a person could place a god in his heart and provide a dwelling for him there. The concept of the royal ka will be discussed in the next section.*

Beginning of the instruction which he made for his children.

I declare something important, so that I may cause you to listen, so that I may inform you of the (proper) conduct for eternity, the true conduct of life, (and how to) pass a lifetime in peace. Worship King Nymaatre, living forever, within yourselves; instill His Majesty in your hearts. He is Sia in

hearts. His two eyes seek out everyone. He is Re by whose rays one sees. How he illuminates the Two Lands more than the sun disk! How he nourishes the land more than a high inundation! He fills the Two Lands with strength and life. Noses are cool when he falls into a rage. He is satisfied to breathe air. He gives food offerings to those who are in his entourage; he provides for those loyal to him. He is the royal *ka*. His utterance is wealth. He is one who creates that which will be. He is Khnum for everyone. He is the begetter who creates mankind. He is Bastet who protects the Two Lands. Those who worship him become those whom his arm protects. He is Sekhmet against the one who disobeys his command. The one whom he hates will suffer. Fight for his name; show respect for his life/oath. May you be free from wrongdoing. The one beloved by the king will be a blessed one. There is no tomb for the one who rebels against his majesty. His corpse is as one thrown into the water. If you do this, then your limbs will be sound (and) you will find them forever.

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1959. *Ägyptische Lesestücke zum Gebrauch in akademischen Unterricht*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 68–69. Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung.

### DEIR EL BAHRI, *THE DIVINE BIRTH CYCLE OF HATSHEPSUT*

*Hatshepsut (ruled 1479–1458 BCE) was one of the remarkable women of ancient Egypt. She was the daughter of Thutmosis I and the wife of Thutmosis II (her stepbrother), and stepmother of Thutmosis III. When her husband Thutmosis II died young, having ruled Egypt for only two to four years, his designated heir, Thutmosis III, was still a child. Hatshepsut acted as his co-ruler and regent for seven years, after which she proclaimed herself king of Egypt and took on all the attributes of kingship, even having herself depicted as male in her statuary. For the next twenty years, she was the ruler of Egypt, even though her stepson was technically her co-ruler.*

*In order to bolster her claim to the throne, Hatshepsut had a series of scenes carved in her mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri depicting her divine conception and birth. In this excerpt, the god Amun has taken the form of Hatshepsut's father in order to impregnate her mother. Amun then declares that the child she has conceived will grow up to become the ruler of Egypt. Through a series of scenes, we see the pregnancy of her mother and the delivery of Hatshepsut, attended by the gods. These scenes are reminiscent of the divine birth stories found in the Westcar Papyrus, above. Both emphasize the belief*

*that the king of Egypt was of divine parentage and destined to rule Egypt from birth.*

Words spoken by this august god, Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, after he had assumed the form of this her husband, the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Aakheperkare (Thutmose I). He had found her asleep in an interior (room) of the palace. She awoke at the scent of the god and rejoiced because of his majesty. He immediately went to her; he was aroused by her; he gave his heart to her. He allowed her to see him in his form of the god after he had come before her. She rejoiced at the sight of his beauty, as his love coursed through her body. [The palace was filled with the divine scent,] his every [odor] was from the land of Punt.

Words spoken by the Royal wife and mother Ahmose when the majesty of this august god, Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands (appeared to her):

“My lord, how great is your might! The sight of your front is splendid. You have enclosed my majesty in your power. Your fragrance is throughout all my body.” After this the majesty of this god did everything he desired with her.

Words spoken by Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands before her:

Khnumet-Amun Hatshepsut is the name of the daughter whom I have placed in your womb; this utterance will come forth from your mouth (i.e., this is what you will name her). She will exercise efficient kingship throughout this entire land. My might will belong to her; . . . my Wereret-crown will belong to her. . . . She will rule the Two Lands. My might will be hers; my power will be hers; respect due to me will also be due to her. My White Crown will belong to her; My kingship (will belong) to her so she may rule the Two Lands. She will lead all the living. . . .

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1906. *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 219.10–220.6; 220.16–221.15. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.

## DIODORUS SICULUS, *DARIUS AND CAMBYSES*

*Diodorus of Sicily, also called Diodorus Siculus, set out to write a universal history in Greek from the mythological beginnings of the world down to 60 BCE. Only part of his work is preserved. His work includes information on*

*geography and ethnography (the study of peoples and cultures), with particular interest in the unusual. He probably visited Egypt sometime between 60 and 56 BCE. In these passages, Diodorus states that the Egyptians considered their pharaohs to be gods because of the kindness they showed to their subjects. The tendency of the Egyptians to consider their rulers divine is illustrated by their treatment of the Persian ruler Darius I. Diodorus contrasts the Persian ruler Cambyses, who conquered Egypt in 525 BCE, with his successor Darius I, who ruled 521–486 BCE. Cambyses was considered a cruel ruler who showed disrespect to native Egyptian religious traditions by killing the Apis bull and burning the corpse of Pharaoh Amasis. Darius, on the other hand, showed such respect for Egyptian tradition that the Egyptians considered him to be a god during his lifetime.*

90 2 In general, they say, the Egyptians surpass all other peoples in showing gratitude for every benefaction, since they hold that the return of gratitude to benefactors is a very great resource in life; for it is clear that all men will want to bestow their benefactions preferably upon those who they see will most honourably treasure up the favours they bestow. 3 And it is apparently on these grounds that the Egyptians prostrate themselves before their kings and honour them as being in truth very gods, holding, on the one hand, that it was not without the influence of some divine providence that these men have attained to the supreme power, and feeling, also, that such as have the will and the strength to confer the greatest benefactions share in the divine nature.

...

95 4 A sixth man to concern himself with the laws of the Egyptians, it is said, was Darius the father of Xerxes; for he was incensed at the lawlessness which his predecessor, Cambyses, had shown in the treatment of the sanctuaries of Egypt, and aspired to live a life of virtue and of piety towards the gods. 5 Indeed he associated with the priests of Egypt themselves, and took part with them in the study of theology and of the events recorded in their sacred books; and when he learned from these books about the greatness of soul of the ancient kings and about their goodwill towards their subjects, he imitated their manner of life. For this reason he was the object of such great honour that he alone of all the kings was addressed as a god by the Egyptians in his lifetime, while at his death he was accorded equal honours with the ancient kings of Egypt who had ruled in strictest accord with the laws.

6 The system, then, of law used throughout the land was the work, they say, of the men just named, and gained a renown that spread among other peoples everywhere; but in later times, they say, many institutions which were regarded as good were changed, after the Macedonians had conquered and destroyed once and for all the kingship of the native line.

**Source:** Diodorus Siculus. 1933. *The Library of History*. Vol. 1, book 1. Translated by C. H. Oldfather, 90, 95. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

### What Really Happened

As the documents discussed above show, there is considerable evidence that the Egyptians did consider their kings to be gods. In numerous instances, the king was directly identified as a god (*netjer*), as a good god (*netjer nefer*), or even a great god (*netjer a'a*). The king is repeatedly referred to as the son of various gods or identified with various gods. The term *king* is preferable to the word *pharaoh*, which derives from the Egyptian for Great House (*per-a'a*), meaning royal residence, and was only used to refer to the king from the Eighteenth Dynasty on. As a study of the following documents will show, however, there are many instances in which the king behaved, or was treated, in a less than godlike manner.

On at least two instances we know of (and possibly a third (Kanawati 2002)), the king fell victim to a palace coup and was assassinated. The actual power of the kings waxed and waned throughout the three thousand years of Egyptian history, and during times when the power of the king was weak, he was treated as such. There are also many instances in which the king is not reticent to exhibit the limitations of his power and his dependence on the gods. For example, in 1259 BCE, during the reign of Ramesses II, the Egyptians entered into a peace treaty with the Hittites, an Indo-European-speaking people who entered what is today western Turkey around 2000 BCE, with whom they had been engaged in conflict for several decades. In order to seal the alliance, it was agreed that Ramesses II would marry one of the daughters of the Hittite king, Hattushili III.

In late autumn of 1246 BCE, the princess and her entourage began the long trip to Egypt, arriving in February of 1245 BCE. When Ramesses II realized that that the princess would be traveling through mountainous terrain during winter and would possibly encounter rain and snow, he prayed to the god Seth, the patron god of the Nineteenth Dynasty, for help: "The sky is in your hands, the earth is under your feet, whatever

happens is what you command—so may you not send rain, icy blast or snow until the marvel you have decreed for me [the Hittite princess] shall reach me!” The stela records that Ramesses II’s prayer was answered, and the party experienced summerlike weather for the duration of their trip (Kitchen 1982, 86).

The question is, how do we reconcile these contrasting views of the Egyptian king? We first must establish what is meant by the Egyptian term *netjer*, frequently translated as “god.” There is no doubt that the word *netjer* corresponds in some respects with our term *god* because in the bilingual decrees issued during the Ptolemaic Period in Greek and Egyptian, the Greek for god, *theos*, was used to translate the Egyptian *netjer*. The Egyptian term, however, could refer to a wider range of beings than the Greek *theos*, or the English *god*. In addition to referring to the gods properly speaking, *netjer* could be used to refer to certain living animals, to the mummified remains of certain animals, and to the human dead, in addition to the king, living or dead. So, referring to the king as a *netjer* was not exactly identical with calling the king a god, as the term is understood in English.

It is also undeniable that the king’s *netjer*-hood was an acquired characteristic. As *The Coronation of Horemheb* illustrates, rulers did have lives before they ascended to the throne, and despite royal propaganda that attributes the king’s divinity to his (or her) special birth, the king only acquired the status of *netjer* as a result of the coronation rituals; throughout his (or her) life, the king underwent a series of rituals intended to maintain that status.

The key to understanding how the king could acquire the status of *netjer*/god is the Egyptian concept of the royal *ka*. Each Egyptian was thought to possess a *ka*, which can roughly be translated as “life force.” This *ka* was created at a person’s birth and was thought to be transmitted from parent to child. The *ka* was the link between the physical and spiritual worlds and was the means by which material offerings of food and drink were transmitted to the nonmaterial world of the gods and the dead. The royal *ka* was the life force that had been possessed by all the kings of Egypt, and at the coronation, this *ka* was passed on to the new king. It is the receipt of the royal *ka* that transformed the king into a *netjer*, a god.

That the royal *ka* had an existence separate from the living king is visible in a stela of the vizier Rahotep, who served King Ramesses II. In the upper register of this stela ([http://www.smaek.de/index.php?id=1093&news\\_id=1153](http://www.smaek.de/index.php?id=1093&news_id=1153)), we see an image of Ramesses II standing before a statue labeled “Ramesses-meryamun, ruler of rulers, the great god, lord of heaven

forever.” Behind the statue are four large human ears, a graphic illustration of the statue’s role in hearing the prayers of supplicants. Ramesses II is in the act of offering two containers, possibly of wine and incense, to his own statue. In the lower register, Rahotep is shown in the act of praising the statue, and the text accompanying his image reads, “giving praise to your *ka*, Lord of Appearances, Ramesses-meryamun, Ruler of Rulers, the great god who hears the prayers of humankind.” In this stela, what appears to be Ramesses II worshipping himself is really Ramesses II worshipping the royal *ka* embodied in a statue of Ramesses II.

This stela illustrates another feature of the king’s *netjer*-hood. As the only living person who had the status of *netjer*/god, the king was the only person who could directly approach the gods. The walls of all the temples of Egypt depict the king as the only person who could stand before the gods during the rituals performed in the temples. Obviously, this must be a pious fiction, since there was only one king but many temples throughout Egypt, all needing officiants every day. In reality, the king delegated the ability to perform the temple rituals to priests throughout Egypt.

Since the king’s divinity was an acquired characteristic, it was important that the king maintain his status as *netjer* throughout his life. The well-being of Egypt depended on the king’s ability to intercede with the gods on behalf of Egypt and its people. There were numerous rituals intended to renew or reinforce the king’s relationship with the royal *ka* and, therefore, reinforce his *netjer*-hood. Once a year, the king traveled to Thebes to participate in the Opet festival at the Luxor temple. During this ritual, which reenacted some of the rituals of the coronation, the king’s royal *ka* was renewed. At the beginning of each year, the king participated in rituals intended to renew royal power for the coming year. After thirty years on the throne, the king participated in a series of rituals known as the Sed festival intended to renew the king’s flagging strength and vigor. After the first Sed festival, a king could celebrate additional Sed festivals at intervals of two or three years. Amenhotep III celebrated four Sed festivals, while Ramesses II celebrated fourteen.

So in one sense, the Egyptians did consider the king to be a god, a *netjer*. What the Egyptians meant by the term, however, is not the same as would be commonly understood by the term *god* in English today. The Egyptian king acquired his divinity at his coronation, and since an acquired status could be lost, the Egyptians spent considerable effort to maintain the king in his new, divine status. And there were always those, especially members of the king’s innermost circle, who recognized just how human the king really was.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### *INSTRUCTION OF AMENEMHET*

*This excerpt is from a longer composition written in the early Middle Kingdom, probably during the Twelfth Dynasty (1939–1760 BCE), which purports to be an instruction from the dead king Amenemhet I, to his son and successor, Sesostris (Senwosret) I. In this section, the deceased king describes the circumstances of his murder in what appears to be a palace coup. This is one of two instances that we know of in which a king falls victim to a conspiracy within the royal palace; the other is also included in this section. Kings typically had several wives, and jockeying for position among the wives on behalf of their sons was apparently not uncommon. The tone of this text is certainly not what one would expect from a god-king. Amenemhet is very pessimistic, urging his son to trust no one. Apparently, Amenemhet's status as a god did not dissuade members of the royal court from assassination. The "huge battle" referred to below may be a reference to a wrestling match that would have been staged as part of the funeral ceremony of the deceased king.*

The beginning of the instruction which the Majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Sehetepibre, the Son of Re, Amenemhet, justified (deceased), made. He spoke a true message for this son, the Lord to the Limit, saying:

Appear as a god; listen to what I say to you. You will be king over the land; you will rule over the river banks. You will accomplish an excess of good.

Be wary of the staff who are of no significance, about whose threat one pays no heed. Do not approach them alone. Do not trust a brother. Do not make a friend. Do not create intimates. There is no profit in such actions.

Only lay down at night after you have protected yourself, because there is no one (left) among a man's servants on a day of trouble. I gave to the poor man, and I reared the orphan, and I made the one who had nothing end up like the one who had (much).

It was the one who ate my food who raised opposition. The one to whom I gave my arms was creating danger with (them); the one who was dressed in my fine linen looked on me as a shadow. The one anointed with my myrrh was pouring water under me.



O living images, my partners among men, provide me with a funerary lament such as has never been heard before, (stage) a huge battle such as has never been seen. One fights on the battlefield when the past has been forgotten. Goodness does not profit one who is ignorant of the one whom he should know.

It was after supper, when night had fallen (and) I had begun an hour of relaxation. I was lying upon my bed because I had grown tired (and) I began to fall asleep. Then weapons (intended for) my protection were wielded, and I made like a desert serpent.

I awoke to fighting. When I gathered my wits, I found that there was combat among the palace guard. If I had received them with weapons in my hand I would have caused the cowards to retreat in trembling. But there is none brave at night, (and) no one fights alone. Success will not happen without a protector.

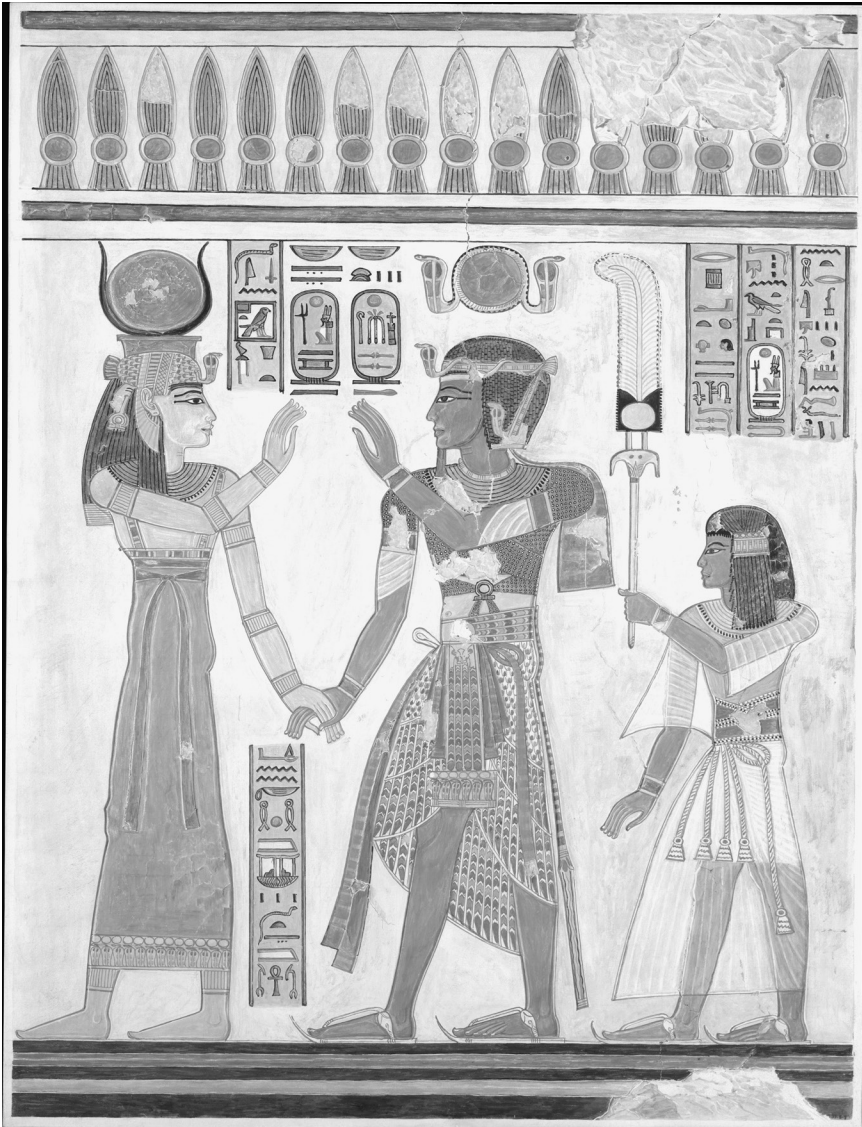
Behold, the execution happened while I was without you [Senwosret I], before the courtiers heard that I was handing over to you, because I did not plan (for) it; I did not anticipate it. My heart did not contemplate the idleness of servants.

Is there a woman who levies troops? Are troublemakers sheltered within a home? Is water released when the earth is hacked up? Does one harm a commoner because of what they do? Trouble has not come after me since I was born. Never did the like of my deed(s) occur as one who behaves as a hero.

...

Senwosret, my son, my feet have set out. You are my own heart, my eyes gaze upon you who were born at a joyous hour among the sunfolk as they praised you. Look, I have acted previously so that I can arrange the future for you. I am the one who will accomplish what is in my heart. You are wearing the White Crown of the divine heir (literally: seed). Things are as they should be, as I have initiated for you. I have descended into the bark of Re. Arise to the kingship which has existed from the beginning. [The remainder of the text is uncertain.]

**Source:** Volten, Aksel. 1945. *Zwei Altägyptische politische Schriften*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 106–113, 119, 123. Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard.



A scene from the tomb of Prince Amenherkhepeshef (1184–1153 BCE) with his father Ramesses III, who is greeting the goddess Hathor. Ramesses III was assassinated as a result of a conspiracy among members of his harem. (Ramesses III and Prince Amenherkhepeshef before Hathor, Original ca. 1184–1153 B.C. Accession No. 33.8.7. Rogers Fund, 1933. Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

### ***THE HAREM CONSPIRACY AGAINST RAMESSES III***

*Despite his name, Ramesses III bore no relation to the earlier Ramesses II, known as Ramesses the Great. Ramesses II reigned during the Nineteenth Dynasty. Ramesses III's father, Sethnakht, was the first king of the Twentieth Dynasty and may have been a commander of troops who seized power when the last ruler of the Nineteenth Dynasty, Queen Twosret, died childless. Ramesses III (reigned 1187–1157 BCE) was the last significant king of the Twentieth Dynasty, and following his assassination, his successors quickly lost the ability to govern Egypt effectively. Even before his death, the power of the crown showed signs of decline. During Ramesses III's twenty-ninth year, we have a record of the first recorded strike in history, when the tomb workers at Deir el-Medina refused to work because they had not been paid in some time. Around this time, we also learn of bands of Libyan nomads carrying out raids in the Theban area.*

*The first passages are excerpted from a longer account of a conspiracy carried out in Ramesses III's harem, in which one of his lesser wives, Teye, conspired with a number of officials and servants to have the king assassinated and her son, Pentaweret, ascend to the throne. This conspiracy included an attempted coup d'état planned to coincide with Ramesses III's assassination. The excerpt from Papyrus Rollin relates how the conspirators employed magic in an attempt to ensure the success of their plans.*

*There has been some disagreement about whether or not the attempt on Ramesses III's life was successful. A recent thorough examination of Ramesses III's mummy (Hawass et al. 2012) reveals that he probably died instantly from having his throat slit during the coup attempt. Although the assassination attempt was successful, the coup itself was a failure, and Teye, Pentaweret, and over thirty other conspirators were captured and either executed (described as "caused his punishment to overtake him") or sentenced to commit suicide. Several of the names listed below are not the real names of the individuals involved but pejorative names assigned to the conspirators. For example, Pabakkemen means "the blind servant," Penhuybin means "Penhuy the evil," and Binemwaset means "the evil one in Thebes." Despite the official royal ideology that accorded the king the status of netjer (god), those who knew him best and most intimately had no qualms about plotting his death.*

Men who were brought because of the great crimes which they committed. They were given to the place of inquiry before the great officials of the office of inquiry, so they could be interrogated by the Overseer of the Treasury Montuemtawy, the Overseer of the Treasury Payefruy, the

fanbearer Kel, the butler Pabasa, the Scribe of the Dispatch Office May, the standard bearer Hori. They interrogated them (and) found them guilty (and) they caused their punishment to overtake them (and) their crimes seized them.

The great criminal Pabakkemen was the chamberlain; he was brought because he conspired with Teye and the women of the harem (and) he had joined with them, and he had begun to take their messages outside to their mothers and their brothers, saying “gather men, incite hostility in order to foment rebellion against their Lord.” He was placed before the great officials of the office of inquiry. They investigated his crimes (and) they found that he had committed them. His crimes seized him. The officials who investigated him caused that his punishment overtake him.

The great criminal Paury son of Rum was the Overseer of the Treasury. He was brought in because he had conspired with the great criminal Penhuybin, and he joined with him in order to foment insurrection against the lord. He was brought before the officials of the office of inquiry and they found him guilty (and) they caused his punishment to overtake him.

The great criminal Binemwaset, who was the overseer of the archers of Kush. He was brought in because of the message of his sister, who was in the itinerant harem, sent him, stating: “Assemble men, create an insurrection, and come and rebel against your lord.” He was brought before Kenden, Baalmehar, Pairsun, and Djheutyrekhnefer, and they examined him and found him guilty. They caused his punishment to overtake him.

Pentaweret is the one who was given another name. He was brought in because he conspired with Teye his mother when she plotted with the women of the harem concerning rebelling against his lord. He was placed before the butlers for his interrogation. He was found guilty. He remained in his place, he committed suicide.

The great criminal Henutenamun was a butler. He was brought in because of the crimes of the women of the harem whom he was with, which he had heard (about), but he did not report. He was placed before the butlers for his interrogation. He was found guilty. He remained in his place (and) he committed suicide.

The great criminal Paury was the scribe of the King’s apartment of the itinerant harem. He was brought in because of the crimes of the women of the harem whom he was with, which he heard (about), but (which) he

did not report. He was placed before the butlers for his interrogation. He was found guilty. He remained in his place (and) he committed suicide.

### FROM PAPYRUS ROLLIN

He began to make writings of magic (spells) for perverting and inciting, and to make some gods of wax and some potions for causing weakness in men. They were placed in the hand(s) of Pabekkamen whom Pre did not allow to become chamberlain, and the other great criminals, saying: "Bring them inside," and he brought them inside. Now after he allowed them to enter, the evil deeds which they did—(but) which Pre did not allow him to be successful at—were carried out. He was examined. The truth was found concerning every crime and every evil deed which his heart had found fit to carry out; they were true; he had done all of them with the other great criminals like him. The great crimes of the land which they had committed were great crimes worthy of death. Now when he realized the great crimes worth of death which he had committed, he committed suicide.

**Source:** Kitchen, K. A. 1983. *Rameside Inscriptions: Historical and Biographical*. Vol. 5. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 351–352, 356–361. Oxford: B. H. Blackwell.

### **RAMESSES XI: FIGUREHEAD RULER**

*This letter was written in ca. 1077 BCE during the reign of Ramesses XI, the last of the Ramesside rulers of the Twentieth Dynasty. The letter was written by General Piankh to the scribe of the workman's village at Deir el-Medina, Dhutmose, nicknamed Tjaroy. By this time Ramesses XI's control of Egypt was severely weakened. As a result of a rebellion in Upper Egypt, Ramesses XI had appointed a general, Herihor, as governor of Upper Egypt and high priest of Amun at Thebes, the first time both military and religious offices were combined in one person. Herihor was succeeded by General Piankh, who controlled Upper Egypt, while Lower Egypt was controlled by Smendes. By this time, Ramesses XI was merely a figurehead ruler, as indicated by Piankh's statement "As for Pharaoh, l.p.h., whose superior is he still?" The abbreviation l.p.h. stands for the Egyptian ankh udja seneb, which means "living, prosperous, and healthy." This abbreviation was written after the mention of a king's name, the word pharaoh, or any word referring to the king. The fact that the Egyptian king was considered to be a netjer did not stop officials from being clear-eyed when it came to who really wielded political power.*

The general of Pharaoh, l.p.h., to the scribe of the Necropolis, Tjaroy:

I have heeded all the words you have written to me concerning them; the matter (of which) you made a report concerning the two policemen, reporting that they said these words: “Unite with Nodjme and Payshuweben,” and they will send (a letter) and they will have these two desert policemen brought to this house, and they will get to the bottom of these matters in very short order. If they discover it is true, you should place them in two baskets and throw them in the river by night, without letting any man of the land find out.

Another matter: As for Pharaoh, l.p.h., how in the world will he reach this land (Nubia)? As for Pharaoh, l.p.h., whose superior is he still? And also, for the past three months I have sent a boat (to you), but you have not sent a deben of gold or a deben of silver, either. It is all right; don't worry about what he did. When this letter reaches you, you will supply a deben of silver and a deben of gold, and you will send it to me by boat.

**Source:** Cerny, J. 1939. *Late Ramesside Letters*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 36–37. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine élisabeth.

### ***THE PRAYER OF RAMESSES III***

*Papyrus Harris 1 is one of the longest papyri from ancient Egypt, measuring around 138 feet in length. It is the posthumous record of Ramesses III's many donations to the temples of Egypt. The concluding section of the papyrus contains a brief historical account of the king's reign. The papyrus is dated on or around the date of the king's murder (1157 BCE) as a result of the harem conspiracy described above. In the following excerpt, Ramesses III concludes the list of his benefactions to the Temple of Re in Heliopolis with a prayer to Re. The entire content and tone of the prayer indicate that Ramesses III did not consider himself to be the equal of the gods but to be dependent on them for blessings. The king petitions the god Re to establish his son and heir, Ramesses IV, on the throne and to bless him with health and a long and successful reign. There is possibly an element of propaganda to this passage, since it would have been prepared under the reign of Ramesses IV, and this prayer can be used to establish the dead king's wish to see his son Ramesses IV on the throne and not one of his other sons by a lesser wife. The “Nine Bows” was the Egyptian term referring to foreign, non-Egyptian peoples.*

May you (the sun god Re) complete for me the mighty works which I made for you, my father, when I have reached the West like Osiris. Allow me to receive offerings which come forth from before you, that I may breathe (the fragrance of) incense and myrrh like your Ennead (does). Make your rays anoint my head daily so that my *ba* may live (and) behold you at dawn. Comfort me, my august father, just as I was effective for your *ka* while I was on earth. Hear my prayer, do as I say, that which the gods and men have reported to you. Confirm my son to be king, as lord of the two banks, so that he may be made to rule just as you, as monarch, l.p.h., in Egypt. Usirmaatre Setepenamun is the one you have chosen for yourself to be my heir, to magnify your name. Place the White Crown (and) the divine double crown on his head just as when you appear on earth as Horus (of) the Two Ladies. Make all his limbs sound, make his bones strong. His firm eye sees millions of beloved (ones). Make his lifetime upon earth like the constellation of the Great Bear; he is sharp like a mighty bull who seizes the Two Lands. Give him the Nine Bows united under his feet as they beg peace in his name, (while) his mighty arm is (bearing down) on their heads. You are the one who reared him when he was a child; you appointed him to be hereditary prince on the dual throne of Geb. You declared that he will be king on the throne of the one who fathered him. Those things you promise come to pass, enduring and beneficial. Give him a great and exalted reign (with) many impressive Sed-festivals like Tatenen. King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands Usirmaatre Setepenamun, l.p.h., son of Re, Lord of Appearances, Remessuheqamaatmeryamun, l.p.h.

**Source:** Hieroglyphic text of P. Harris I, 42, 1–10. Found in W. Erichsen. 1933. *Papyrus Harris I: Hieroglyphische Transkription*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 47. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine elisabeth.

### **THE CORONATION OF HOREMHEB**

*The king's status as a netjer was acquired, not inherent. It was not until the old king's death and the accession of the new ruler that it became obvious who the next king was to be. The new king acceded to the throne the day after the old king's death. The coronation took place at a later date, probably to give the Egyptians time to make the elaborate preparations necessary for the coronation ceremony. The Egyptians also preferred to wait for an auspicious date on which to hold the coronation ceremony. At coronation, the king received the crown and royal uraeus (cobra emblem). The cobra-goddess Weret Hekau represented the protective uraeus affixed to the king's brow.*

*The coronation inscription of Horemheb is unique in that it is the earliest royal text we know of in which the new king acknowledges at length his non-royal origin. Horemheb discussed how he performed his duties before becoming king in his own right. King Tutankhamun had appointed Horemheb as crown prince and deputy. After being crowned as king by Amun, Horemheb receives his official five-part titulary. Hesu-er was a sacred precinct of Hermopolis, the city of the Ibis-headed god Thoth. Hut-nesu was a town located at the current Kom el-Ahmar Sawaris, and Per-nezer was a sanctuary located in Lower Egypt.*

His father Horus placed himself behind him, the one who created him protected him. One generation passed [and another came]. . . . He (Horus) knew the day he would be satisfied to bestow the kingship on him; now this god (Horemheb) had been honored before everyone, he (Horus) having desired to "lengthen his stride" until the day of his assuming his office had arrived, causing him. . . . of his time, the King's heart was satisfied with his conduct, rejoicing at his selection. He appointed him to be chief spokesman of the land in order to steer the laws of the Two Banks (Egypt), the Hereditary Prince of the entire land. He is a unique individual without equal, [his] plans . . . the people over what came out of his mouth. He was summoned before the Monarch (when) the palace had fallen into rage. He opened his mouth and answered the King, satisfying him with what came forth from his mouth, he being unique and effective without. . . . all his plans were as the footsteps of the ibis, his actions were the image of the lord of Hesu-er, rejoicing in Maat like the Beaky One (Thoth), delighting in it like Ptah. When he awoke in the morning, he was burdened with it (Maat); it being placed. . . . his conduct, treading upon her path. She (Maat) is the one who will protect him on earth throughout eternity.

Meanwhile, he was governing for a period of many years, reporting . . . the magistrates [came] bowing at the gate of the royal palace. The Great Ones of the Nine Bows, south as well as north, reached him, their arms stretched out to him at his approach, paying honor before him like a god. It was under his command that everything which could be done was done . . . tread. He was respected greatly by everyone. Prosperity and health were prayed for on his behalf. "Surely, he is the father of the Two Banks (Egypt), (his) excellent wisdom is the god's gift so [he] may steer. . . .

Now after many days had passed, the eldest son of Horus, being chief spokesman (and) hereditary prince of the entire land, then the desire of



the heart of this august god Horus, Lord of Hut-nesu, was to establish his son on his eternal throne (and) [he] commanded. . . . Amun. Then Horus set out, rejoicing, to Thebes, the city of the Lord of Eternity, (with) his son in his embrace, to Karnak, in order to introduce him before Amun in order to assign his office of King to him, (and) to establish his life-span. Now while . . . his beautiful festival before Karnak Temple. Then the majesty of this god saw Horus, Lord of Hut-nesu (and) his son, who was with him, for the royal induction (ceremony), in order to give him his office and his throne. Now then Amun-Re joined in the rejoicing when he saw . . . day of his making submission. Then he (Amun) presented himself to this noble, the Hereditary Prince over the Two Lands, Horemheb. Then he (Amun) proceeded to the Royal Palace and he placed him (Horemheb) before him (Amun) at the Perwer of his (Amun's) noble daughter Weret-[Hekau] . . . in greeting. She embraced his beauty (and) she affixed herself on his forehead. The Divine Ennead, the Lords of the Per-nezer were in jubilation because of his appearance in glory. Nekhbet, Wadjet, Isis, Nephthys, Horus, Seth, and the entire Ennead that preside over the royal throne . . . praise to the height of heaven, rejoicing at the pleasure of Amun, (saying): "Behold, Amun has arrived, with his son before him, at the palace in order to set his crown on his head, in order to exalt his lifetime like his own. We have assembled ourselves so that we may establish for him . . . (and) [assign] to him the insignia of Re, (and) so that we may pay honor to Amun on his behalf. You have brought our protector to us. Give him the jubilees of Re (and) the years of Horus as King. He is the one who will do what pleases your heart in Karnak, as well as Heliopolis and Memphis. He is the one who will enrich them."

The great name of this good god was created, his titulary is like the incarnation of Re, being:

Horus Mighty Bull, effective of governance

Two Ladies, Great of Miracles at Karnak

Horus of Gold, Satisfied with Maat, who brings the Two Lands into being

King of Upper and Lower Egypt Djoserkheperure, Setepenre

Son of Re, Horemhebmeriamun, given life.

**Source:** Gardiner, A. H. 1953. "The Coronation of Haremhab." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 39: 13–31, pl. II. Translated by S. E. Thompson.

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# The Pyramids Were Built as Storehouses, Work Projects for the Egyptian People, or Repositories of Knowledge

## What People Believe Happened

During the Republican presidential primaries in the run-up to the 2016 election, it became known that one of the candidates, Dr. Ben Carson, held an unusual view of the purpose of the Egyptian pyramids. In a commencement address Carson delivered at Andrews University in 1998, he stated,

My own personal theory is that Joseph built the pyramids to store grain. Now all the archeologists think that they were made for the pharaohs' graves. But, you know, it would have to be something awfully big if you stop and think about it. And I don't think it'd just disappear over the course of time to store that much grain. . . . [W]hen you look at the way that the pyramids are made, with many chambers that are hermetically sealed, they'd have to be that way for various reasons. And various of scientists have said, "Well, you know there were alien beings that came down and they have special knowledge and that's how—" you know, it doesn't require an alien being when God is with you.

Carson confirmed to CBS News in the run-up to the 2016 election that he still held this belief (Brown and Uchimiya 2015).

Tim Worstall, a contributor to *Forbes* magazine, wrote an essay in which he offered something of a defense of Carson's view by comparing pyramid construction to Keynesian deficit spending on infrastructure during times of economic downturns, in this case, during low Nile flood levels when food would have been scarce (Worstall 2015). This idea was hardly original with Worstall; in 1773, the Prussian court official Cornelius de Pauw believed that the pyramids were giant make-work projects for the Egyptians (Hornung 2001, 159). As we will see, some ancient authors also believed that the purpose of building the pyramids was to keep the working classes of Egypt occupied.

These are hardly the only explanations given for the purpose of the pyramids, or more properly, for the pyramid of Khufu at Giza, as most such theories ignore the many other pyramids the Egyptians built over more than one thousand years, or at most, they take into account the three kings' pyramids on the Giza plateau, ignoring the others. Other explanations for the purpose of the Great Pyramid include that it was built as a type of almanac allowing the Egyptians to use the shadows the pyramid cast to indicate the seasonal equinoxes and solstices, that it was constructed as an astronomical observatory, and or that it served as the stage for the initiation of the chosen into the mysteries of ancient Egypt (Tompkins 1978). Finally, among the most outlandish purposes attributed to the Great Pyramid is the theory that it was built by a "race of human reptilian hybrid shape shifters" in order to "usher in a new age of heavy solar activity that would drive the shape shifting reptilian mind control over the planet" (Wynn 2008, 275–76). There seems to be no limit to the inventiveness of those attempting to explain the purposes of the Egyptian pyramids.

### **How the Story Became Popular**

When the Greeks first arrived in large numbers in Egypt during the Twenty-Sixth Dynasty, under the reign of Pharaoh Psammeticus I (664–525 BCE), they encountered a civilization that was already over two thousand years old. The Greeks were impressed with the great antiquity of Egypt, by the large and impressive monuments they observed, and by the hieroglyphic inscriptions they found covering the walls of tombs and temples. By the time the Greeks arrived, however, the great age of pyramid building in Egypt had long since passed. The last kings known to



Scene from a mosaic in St. Mark's Basilica, Venice, ca. 1275, showing Joseph overseeing the storing of grain in the pyramids. (*Joseph Gathering Corn*. Circa 1275. Mosaic at St. Mark's Basilica, Venice.)

have built pyramids belonged to the Thirteenth Dynasty (1759–ca. 1630 BCE). By the time uniform rule over all of Egypt was restored in the New Kingdom, the pharaohs had adopted another method for their burials: the underground rock-cut tomb. Smaller pyramids continued to be built for the graves of wealthy private individuals.

With the passage of time, the original purpose of the pyramids was no longer operative; they had long since been robbed of their royal occupants, and the daily cult of offerings had ceased to function. When travelers visited the pyramids, and many did, they were awed by their size (the Great Pyramid at Giza was the world's tallest man-made structure until well into the nineteenth century) and the amount of labor that must have been involved in their construction. The size of the Great Pyramid led some early Greek visitors to assume that the pyramid could only have been built by cruelly exploiting slaves, leading to the tradition of Khufu as a tyrant. Other early visitors saw the pyramids as evidence of the Egyptian rulers' vainglory and selfishness.

Some early Christians found a place and a meaning for the pyramids in the sacred history found in the Bible. The idea that the pyramids were



built by the biblical Joseph to serve as granaries during the seven plentiful years to store up grain for the seven years of famine described in the Book of Genesis/Breshit first becomes evident during the fourth century. When Islamic rulers took control of Egypt in the seventh century, the pyramids entered into Muslim lore. Rather than seeing the pyramids as evidence of the Egyptian rulers' pride and selfishness, the Muslim historian and philosopher Al-Baghdadi (1161–1231) saw them as evidence of “noble intellects” and “enlightened souls” who were possessed of considerable engineering skill (El-Daly 2005, 48). A major topic of discussion among Muslim scholars was whether the pyramids were built before or after the biblical flood, which Abu Ma'shar, writing in the ninth century, dated to 3100 BCE (El-Daly 2005, 10). According to a legend that one scholar traces back to 840/41 CE, the pyramids were built before the flood to preserve Egyptian wealth and learning (Fodor 1970, 350). Long after the pyramids had ceased to fulfill their original purpose, those who encountered them attempted to explain them by recourse to their own conceptions of humankind and world history. That process continues unabated even now.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### ARISTOTLE, *POLITICS*

*Aristotle (38–322 BCE) was a Macedonian philosopher who traveled to Athens at the age of seventeen to study with Plato in his academy. After Plato's death, Aristotle left Athens, and in 342 BCE, he was invited by Philip II of Macedon to become tutor to his son, Alexander, later known as the Great. In 335 BCE, Aristotle returned to Athens, where he opened his own school at the Lyceum. After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, Aristotle left Athens again, probably due to an outbreak of anti-Macedonian feelings. Aristotle returned to Macedonia, where he died in 322 BCE. Aristotle's writings encompass a number of subjects, including ethics, government, art, geology, physics, chemistry, and biology. He is considered by some to be the first biologist and is credited with inventing formal logic.*

*In Politics, Aristotle engaged in an analysis of the various forms of governments that existed in his day. In book 5, Aristotle discussed how to preserve the various forms of government, and toward the end of this book, he focused on monarchy and tyranny, and what preserves and destroys these governments. Aristotle considered tyranny the worst form of government. In this section, Aristotle noted that one way tyrannies preserve their power is by keeping their*

*subjects poor and occupied. He cited the pyramids of Egypt as an example of the type of project used to keep the subjects of a tyrant busy and poor (due to having to pay taxes to support the construction project), rendering them unable to rise up and overthrow him. Here we encounter the idea of the builders of the pyramids, particularly Khufu, as tyrants.*

And it is a device of tyranny to make the subjects poor, so that a guard may not be kept, and also that the people being busy with their daily affairs may not have leisure to plot against their ruler. Instances of this are the pyramids in Egypt and the votive offerings of the Cypselids, and the building of the temple of Olympian Zeus by the Pisistratidae and of the temples at Samos, works of Polycrates (for all these undertakings produce the same effect, constant occupation and poverty among the subject people; and the levying of taxes, as at Syracuse for in the reign of Dionysius the result of taxation used to be that in five years men had contributed the whole of their substance).

**Source:** Aristotle. 1944. *Aristotle in 23 Volumes*. Vol. 21, book 5, section 1313B. Translated by H. Rackham. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0058%3Abook%3D5%3Asection%3D1313b>.

### DIODORUS SICULUS, *LIBRARY OF HISTORY*

*Diodorus of Sicily, also called Diodorus Siculus, set out to write a universal history in Greek from the mythological beginnings of the world down to 60 BCE. Only part of his work is preserved. His work included information on geography and ethnography (the study of peoples and cultures), with particular interest in the unusual. He probably visited Egypt sometime between ca. 60 to 56 BCE. In this passage, Diodorus described the origin of Lake Moeris, which derives from the Egyptian Mer-wer, "the Great Lake," known today as Birket Qarun. This natural body of water is in the center of the Faiyum in Middle Egypt. There is some indication that Amenemhet III (1818–1773 BCE) of the Twelfth Dynasty carried out large-scale irrigation works there. Diodorus attributed these works to a King Moeris. Amenemhet III built a pyramid on the bank of a channel leading from the lake, which may be one of the pyramids Diodorus is referring to. Diodorus made a distinction between the king's tomb and the two pyramids, and noted that the purpose of the pyramids was to serve as a monument to his good deeds. The two statues Diodorus mentioned as being erected on the tops of the pyramids may be a reference to two colossal*

*statues of Amenemhet III that were set up at nearby Byahmu, in the Faiyum region, but not on the tops of pyramids.*

52 1 For since the Nile did not rise to a fixed height every year and yet the fruitfulness of the country depended on the constancy of the flood-level, he excavated the lake to receive the excess water, in order that the river might not, by an excessive volume of flow, immoderately flood the land and form marshes and pools, nor, by failing to rise to the proper height, ruin the harvests by the lack of water. 2 He also dug a canal, eighty stades long and three plethra wide (approximately 9 miles long and 300 feet wide), from the river to the lake, and by this canal, sometimes turning the river into the lake and sometimes shutting it off again, he furnished the farmers with an opportune supply of water, opening and closing the entrance by a skilful device and yet at considerable expense; for it cost no less than fifty talents if a man wanted to open or close this work. 3 The lake has continued to serve well the needs of the Egyptians down to our time, and bears the name of its builder, being called to this day the Lake of Moeris. 4 Now the king in excavating it left a spot in the centre, where he built a tomb and two pyramids, a stade (630 feet) in height, one for himself and the other for his wife, on the tops of which he placed stone statues seated upon thrones, thinking that by these monuments he would leave behind him an imperishable commemoration of his good deeds. 5 The income accruing from the fish taken from the lake he gave to his wife for her unguents and general embellishment, the value of the catch amounting to a talent of silver daily; 6 for there are twenty-two different kinds of fish in the lake, they say, and they are caught in such abundance that the people engaged in salting them, though exceedingly many, can scarcely keep up with their task.

Now this is the account which the Egyptians give of Moeris.

**Source:** Diodorus Siculus. 1933. *Library of History*. Book 1.52. Loeb Classical Library, vol. 1 of 12. Translated by C. H. Oldfather. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Accessed July 10, 2019. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus\\_Siculus/1C\\*.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Diodorus_Siculus/1C*.html).

### PLINY, *NATURAL HISTORY*

*Pliny, known as Pliny the Elder (23/4–79 CE) was a Roman aristocrat and admiral who wrote a thirty-seven-book work known as Natural History, which attempted to be an encyclopedia of all contemporary knowledge. In this*

*passage, Pliny referred to several pyramids throughout Egypt, including the Great Pyramids of Giza, of which he said, "the renown of which has filled the whole earth." Pliny considered the pyramids monuments to the vanity of the pharaohs, whose construction was intended to consume the wealth of Egypt, leaving nothing to their successors or any rivals who would want to challenge their rule. Pliny held an opinion like that of Aristotle and Tim Worstall: the purpose of building the pyramids was to keep the working classes occupied. A nome was an administrative district in Egypt. The Arsinoite nome encompassed much of the Faiyum, while the Memphite nome was centered on ancient Memphis, modern Mit Rahina. The Labyrinth was the name given by the Greeks to the mortuary temple associated with the pyramid of Amenemhet III at Hawara.*

We must make some mention, too, however cursorily, of the pyramids of Egypt, so many idle and frivolous pieces of ostentation of their resources, on the part of the monarchs of that country. Indeed, it is asserted by most persons, that the only motive for constructing them, was either a determination not to leave their treasures to their successors or to rivals that might be plotting to supplant them, or to prevent the lower classes from remaining unoccupied. There was great vanity displayed by these men in constructions of this description, and there are still the remains of many of them in an unfinished state. There is one to be seen in the Nome of Arsinoïtes; two in that of Memphites, not far from the Labyrinth, of which we shall shortly have to speak; and two in the place where Lake Mœris was excavated, an immense artificial piece of water, cited by the Egyptians among their wondrous and memorable works: the summits of the pyramids, it is said, are to be seen above the water.

The other three pyramids, the renown of which has filled the whole earth, and which are conspicuous from every quarter to persons navigating the river, are situated on the African side of it, upon a rocky sterile elevation. They lie between the city of Memphis and what we have mentioned as the Delta, within four miles of the river, and seven miles and a-half from Memphis, near a village known as Busiris, the people of which are in the habit of ascending them.

**Source:** Pliny the Elder. 1855. *The Natural History*. Book 36.16. Translated by John Bostock and H. T. Riley. London: Taylor and Francis. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.02.0137:book=36:chapter=16&highlight=pyramids>.

### JALĀL AL-DĪN AL-SUYŪṬĪ, *THE TREATISE ON THE EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS*

*In 641 CE, under the rule of the Caliphate of Umar, invading Muslim armies took control of Egypt away from its Byzantine rulers. Native Egyptians had not been much involved with the hostilities and were regarded by the Muslim conquerors as kin to the Muslims rather than defeated enemies. After the Muslim conquest, Arab travelers and settlers descended on Egypt in large numbers. Encountering the impressive and numerous monuments of the ancient Egyptian civilization, Arab scholars began collecting any information they could on ancient Egypt. Among their sources were the traditions and folktales that had been circulating among the Egyptians. Coptic monks, who still used a language related to that of ancient Egypt, were another source of information on ancient Egypt. Arab writers also had access to the works of Greek and Latin authors, in addition to Jewish works. Eventually medieval Arab authors produced a considerable number of works in Arabic on the history and customs of the ancient Egyptians (El-Daly 2005, 9–29).*

*Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī was a Muslim historian and religious scholar born in Cairo in 1445 CE. He was a prolific author, producing over fifty works of history, in addition to numerous works on the Quran and other Muslim religious texts, biographies, literature, medicine, food, and even a work on sexology. al-Suyūṭī was careful to name the sources he was quoting in his works on ancient Egypt, and many of his quoted passages represent all that is known of these Arab works on Egypt (El-Daly 2005, 182). In the passage quoted below, al-Suyūṭī described the building of the great pyramids and explained the reasons for their construction. When Sawrid, who lived before the Great Flood, learned through a dream that Egypt would be destroyed in the flood, he commanded the building of the pyramids as a storehouse of Egypt's wealth, scientific and religious knowledge, and the great deeds of illustrious priests. Sawrid (also transliterated as Saurid or Surid) was the name given in Arabic legends to the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza. The name perhaps derived from the Greek Suphis, identified in one version of Manetho's Aegyptiaca as Cheops (Khufu), the builder of the Great Pyramid (Fodor 1970, 357). In Arab legends, Sawrid was said to have lived three hundred years before the Great Flood described in the book of Genesis.*

Several historians say that the builder of the Pyramids was SAWRID, the son of SALYUF, king of Egypt, who lived three hundred years before the Deluge. The cause of it was as follows: He dreamed that the earth had turned upside down over its inhabitants, men were thrown down on their

faces, and the stars collapsed, crashing one against the other with terrific noise. This dream worried him, but he kept it to himself. Thereupon he dreamed again that the fixed stars had come down to earth in the shape of white birds, and kept seizing human beings and throwing them between two mighty mountains, which then slammed shut over them; all the while the luminous stars remained obscured. Awakening in terror, he assembled the chiefs of the priests from all the provinces of Egypt. . . . After he had narrated (his dreams) to them, they measured the elevation of the stars, and having done this fully and thoroughly, they deduced the fact of the impending Deluge. The king asked, "Will it reach our country also?" "Yes," said they, "and it will be devastated, and remain so for a number of years." Whereupon the king ordered the building of the Pyramids.

He had canals constructed within them, bringing the (water of the) Nile to a certain point and leading it on to points in the West and in Upper Egypt. He filled the Pyramids with talismans, wonderful things, riches, treasures, etc., and inscribed upon them the sayings of the wise men, including all the secret sciences, the names of drugs and their benevolent and injurious properties, the science of talismans, arithmetic, geometry, and medicine, all this explained (so as to be clear) to him who knew their writing and their languages.

When the king issued the order for the construction of the Pyramids, they hewed out giant columns and awe-inspiring stone-plates, and brought over blocks of rock from the region of Aswin, wherewith they built the foundations of the three Pyramids, binding them together with lead (solder) and iron (pins). They built the gates of the Pyramids forty cubits below the ground, and made the height of each Pyramid one hundred royal cubits, which is equal to five hundred of our cubits, such as we use today; each of their sides was made also one hundred royal cubits long. The building of the Pyramids was begun under a favorable star, and when they were completed the king had them covered with colored brocade from top to bottom, and instituted a festival in their honor which was attended by all the people of his realm.

In the Western Pyramid he made thirty treasure chambers, and filled them with abundant wealth, (various) instruments, and images made of exquisite jewels, as well as fine iron tools, rustproof weapons, glass (of such excellent quality) that (it) would bend and yet not break, strange talismans, (various) kinds of simple and compound drugs, deadly poisons, and other things.

In the Eastern Pyramid he constructed models of the celestial spheres and stars, and (placed there also) finely wrought images made by his ancestors, as well as the incenses which were offered before them, and the (sacred) books relating to them. In the great colored Pyramid he placed the bodies of the (deceased) priests, (laid out) in coffins of black quartz. With (the body of) each priest was placed his book, recording the miracles which he had wrought and (containing) a general account of his life, the contemporary events, and the past and future happenings, from the beginning of time until its end.

**Source:** al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, and Leon Nemoy. 1939. "The Treatise on the Egyptian Pyramids." *Isis* 30: 21–23. Used by permission, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center.

### ***THE TRAVELS OF SIR JOHN MANDEVILLE***

*Ben Carson was not the first individual to express the opinion that the pyramids had been built by the biblical Joseph to serve as granaries during the prophesied seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. This explanation for the pyramids seems to have originated with Gregory of Nazianz, the Archbishop of Constantinople during the fourth century. He is quoted in Pseudo-Nonnos as stating, "The Pyramids are themselves worthy of viewing and were built in Egypt at great expense. The Christians say they are the granaries of Joseph, but the Greeks, among whom is Herodotus, that they are the tombs of certain kings" (Pseudo-Nonnus 2001, 120–121).*

*This idea received widespread circulation in the work known as The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, which purports to be a guidebook for pilgrims traveling to Jerusalem written by an English knight who had spent thirty-five years traveling in the Middle East and Asia. The work, written in the middle of the fourteenth century, is a compilation of information and accounts from several other works. Written in French by an unknown author, the work draws heavily from an account of William of Boldensele, a Dominican priest who made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1332 and published an account of his travels in 1837, and from the memoir of Odoric, a Franciscan priest who traveled as a missionary to India and China in the 1320s, published in 1330. Interestingly, William of Boldensele notes specifically that the notion of the pyramids as Joseph's granaries "cannot be true at all," since there is no space inside the pyramid in which to store grain (Higgins 2011, ix–xix, 231).*

And now also I shall speak of another thing that is beyond Babylon, above the flood of the Nile, toward the desert between Africa and Egypt; that is

to say, of the garner[s] [granaries] of Joseph, that he let make for to keep the grains for the peril of the dear years. And they be made of stone, full well made of masons' craft; of the which two be marvellously great and high, and the tother ne be not so great. And every garner hath a gate for to enter within, a little high from the earth; for the land is wasted and fallen since the garner[s] were made. And within they be all full of serpents. And above the garner[s] without be many scriptures of diverse languages. And some men say, that they be sepultures of great lords, that were sometime, but that is not true, for all the common rumour and speech is of all the people there, both far and near, that they be the garner[s] of Joseph; and so find they in their scriptures, and in their chronicles. On the other part, if they were sepultures, they should not be void within, ne they should have no gates for to enter within; for ye may well know, that tombs and sepultures be not made of such greatness, nor of such highness; wherefore it is not to believe, that they be tombs or sepultures.

**Source:** *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. 1915. London: Macmillan and Co. Limited, 35–36. Accessed July 10, 2019. <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?view=image;size=100;id=uc1.l0074492711;page=root;seq=9;num=iii>.

## What Really Happened

There is little doubt that the pyramids of Egypt, particularly the Great Pyramid of Khufu/Cheops at Giza, are the most iconic symbols of ancient Egypt. Few realize, however that the enormous pyramids visible today on the Giza Plateau are just a fraction of the pyramids the Egyptians built over one thousand years. One estimate is that the Egyptians built over one hundred pyramids, not all of monumental proportions and not all of stone. Pyramids were not only built for kings; smaller pyramids were built for queens and princesses. Some pyramids were built of mud brick cased in limestone, and when their remains are viewed today, they hardly resemble a pyramid in shape. When royalty ceased to build pyramids for themselves in the Eighteenth Dynasty, wealthy private individuals incorporated smaller and steeper pyramids in their tombs. There is also little doubt as to why the Egyptians built pyramids: they served as tombs, or part of the tomb, for deceased Egyptians.

The topic to be considered is, why pyramids? Egyptian kings did not always provide pyramids for their burials. The origin and meaning of the word *pyramid* have been a matter of some discussion. The English word *pyramid* is thought to derive from the Greek word *pyramis* (pl. *pyramides*), meaning a wheat cake. Most dictionaries of hieroglyphic Egyptian give



the Egyptian word for pyramid as *mer*, and one scholar has tentatively suggested that it meant “place of ascension.” More recently, another scholar has suggested that hieroglyphic sign used to write the Egyptian word for pyramid should be read as *meher*, meaning “the place or means by which one ascends.” It is certain that the pyramids were used as tombs for deceased Egyptians, but exactly why that shape was chosen has been a matter of speculation.

Unfortunately the Egyptians themselves were not fully straightforward in stating the symbolism that they saw in a pyramid. It is generally assumed that the pyramid shape had an association with the sun and the sun god Re. One theory speculates that the pyramid’s shape derives from the appearance of sunbeams streaming down from the sky on a cloudy day, which take on a slanted appearance. There are indications in Egyptian texts that indicate that the Egyptians thought of the pyramid as being associated with the sun. The name of the Great Pyramid at Giza was Akhet Khufu, the “Horizon of Khufu.” The Egyptians thought of the horizon as the place from which the sun god rose from the underworld every morning to begin his daily voyage through the sky and to which he returned every evening to descend back into the underworld to be rejuvenated for another day. The capstone of a pyramid, essentially a miniature pyramid known as a pyramidion, was called a *benbenet*, a word which derived from the Egyptian root meaning “to shine, rise,” with reference to the sun.

During the Old Kingdom, the interior chambers of some of the pyramids were inscribed with religious texts known as Pyramid Texts. These texts make repeated mention of the fact that the deceased king (or queen) wished to ascend to the sky to join the sun god in his daily travels. That the pyramid was thought of as a place of ascension is also indicated by the names of several pyramids of the Old Kingdom: “Sneferu rises,” “The *ba* (roughly, soul) of Sahure rises,” and “Arisen and Perfect is Merenre.” As one scholar explains, “[the pyramid] had evolved into the site of a mystery that allowed the dead king to unite with the *ba* of the sun god” (Arnold 1997, 60) and, as a result, obtain eternal life.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### PYRAMID TEXT, SPELL 610: INVOCATION OF THE SPIRIT

*Beginning with King Unis (also spelled Wenis, ca. 2321–2306 BCE) the walls of the inner rooms of the pyramids of the Old Kingdom were inscribed*

*with hieroglyphic texts that scholars call Pyramid Texts. These texts are found in the pyramids of ten kings and queens of the Old Kingdom. After the Old Kingdom, nonroyal Egyptians included some of these texts on their coffins, tomb walls, and papyri, for over two thousand years. These texts, known as spells, can be divided into two types: mortuary liturgies and mortuary literature. Mortuary liturgies were recited as part of the rituals conducted during the funeral and burial of the deceased. By inscribing these texts on the walls of the rooms and passageways of the royal tomb, the Egyptians ensured that these rituals would be perpetually carried out on behalf of the deceased. Mortuary literature were texts included to provide the deceased with the knowledge and ability to overcome any obstacles faced in the afterlife.*

*This particular text formed part of the resurrection ritual, allowing the deceased's spirit to continue to exist in the company of the gods. In this text, a reference is made to a stairway, which provided the king's spirit with the means to ascend to the stars (specifically, the constellation of Orion) and become one of the gods. One of the earliest Egyptian views of the afterlife was that the spirits of the dead could ascend to the sky to become one of the circumpolar stars, the stars that appeared to circle around the North Star and never set below the horizon. The king's transformation into a god is indicated by the fact that he will eat the same food the gods eat and that he will have the same odor as the gods. It has been suggested that the first pyramids, which were not true pyramids but step pyramids consisting of a series of six tiers or steps one atop the other, may have been intended to serve as the means by which the deceased king's spirit could ascend to the sky.*

*Tower was the Eighth Upper Egyptian Nome (district), and Taseti was the First Upper Egyptian Nome. The akh was the glorified, effective aspect of a person which continued to exist in the afterlife. Geb was a god who represented the earth, and the opening of the door-leaves of Geb refers to the opening of the earth so that the deceased's spirit could ascend to the heavens.*

Awake for Horus; arise for Seth. Raise yourself, O first-born of Geb, at whom the Two Enneads tremble. The shrine will be ready for you. The (Feast of) the First of Three Days will be celebrated for you; you will appear at the month festival; you will be purified for the New Moon festival. The Great Mooring Post will call out, because you are "He who stands without tiring in the midst of Abydos." Land, hear this which the gods said. Horus says that he will glorify his father (as) Ha, as Min, as Sokar, foremost of "Spread Lake." [The earth] speaks to you, the door of the horizon opens for you. The two door-leaves of Geb are opened for you so that you may go forth at the voice so that [he] may glorify you as Thoth,

as Anubis, the official of the tribunal. You shall judge, associating with the Two Enneads who are between the two scepters with this your *akh* which the gods have ordained exist for you. You stride with the stride of Horus; you speak the words of Seth; the limit of your foot is the limit of the god's foot. You shall go to the lake; you shall go upstream to Tawer. You shall traverse Abydos with this your *akh* which the gods have ordained exist for you. A stairway has been set down (in) the netherworld to the place where Orion is. The constellation "ox of the sky" will receive your arm. You shall eat from the food offerings of the gods. The odor of Dedwen is on you, the Upper Egyptian child who comes forth from Taseti; he offers to you the incense with which the gods are censured.

**Source:** Allen, J. P. 2013. *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts*. Part 5. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301967/PT%20V%20\(539-672,%20Pyr%201303-1989\).pdf](https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301967/PT%20V%20(539-672,%20Pyr%201303-1989).pdf).

### PYRAMID TEXT, SPELL 600: SPELL FOR PROTECTION OF THE PYRAMID

*This spell belongs to the genre of mortuary literature and was intended to provide for the protection of the deceased king and his pyramid. One theory associates the pyramid with the original place of creation, called the primeval hill. In Egyptian creation stories, creation begins when a god or goddess, who is floating in a vast, dark, watery expanse, finds a solid place on which to stand and, from that place, starts to create the world. This solid ground is the primeval hill, and it is speculated that the pyramid represents this hill, and as such, it is a place of creation and rebirth for the soul of the deceased king.*

*This spell begins with a description of the first act of creation, when the sun god Atum-Kheperer stands on the high hill, also referred to as the benben-stone. This term is related to the term for the pyramid capstone, the benbenet, mentioned previously. From this location, Atum-Kheperer produced the first male and female pair of gods, Shu (atmosphere) and Tefnut (moisture), and embraced them. Each Egyptian was thought to possess a ka, which can roughly be translated as "life force." This ka was created at a person's birth and was thought to be transmitted from parent to child. The ka was the link between the physical and spiritual worlds and was the means by which material offerings of food and drink were transmitted to the nonmaterial world of the gods and the dead. The hieroglyph used to write ka was a pair of arms with the elbows bent at right angles, reaching upward.*

*Atum is told to extend his arms in the ka gesture around the king and his pyramid to protect them for eternity. The Ennead was the first nine gods of the*

*Heliopolitan creation narrative, with Shu and Tefnut producing Geb (earth) and Nut (sky). Geb and Nut in turn produce Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys. The “Nine Bows” was the Egyptian term referring to foreign, non-Egyptian peoples. One objection to equating the pyramid with the primeval hill is that there are no clear references to this hill until quite late in Egyptian history, long after the age of the pyramids.*

Atum-Kheperer, you have become elevated as the high hill; you have risen as the benben-stone in the house of the Benu-bird in Heliopolis. You have coughed up Shu, you have spit out Tefnut. You have put your arms around them as the arm(s) of a *ka* so that your *ka* might be with them.

Atum, place your arm(s) around the king, (and) around this construction, around this pyramid, as the arm(s) of a *ka*. May the *ka* of the king exist in him firmly forever.

Ho, Atum, may you protect this king, this pyramid of his, and this construction of the king. May you prevent anything evil from happening to it forever just as you protect Shu and Tefnut.

Ho, greater Ennead which is in Heliopolis: Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys, the children of Atum. He is happy because of his children in your name of “Nine Bows.”

There should be none among you who will turn his back on Atum when he protects this king, when he protects this pyramid of the king, when he protects this construction from all the gods and the dead, when he prevents anything evil from happening to it forever and ever.

Ho, Horus, this king is Osiris; this pyramid of the king and this his construction are Osiris. Take yourself to him. Do not be far from him in his name of pyramid.

You have become very black in your name of the House of Kem-wer [Great Black]. Thoth has placed the gods under you, ferried over and directed as erector of the wall, inserter of the pedestal.

Horus, here is your father Osiris in his name of House of the Monarch. Horus has given you the gods, he has presented them to you as stone blocks, so they may illuminate your face in the White Chapels.

**Source:** Allen, J. P. 2013. *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts*. Part 5. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301967/PT%20V%20\(539-672,%20Pyr%201303-1989\).pdf](https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301967/PT%20V%20(539-672,%20Pyr%201303-1989).pdf).

### PYRAMID TEXT, SPELL 508: JOINING THE GODS

*This spell has much in common with Spell 610 discussed above. A major theme of the spell is the rebirth of the king, with references to his being nursed by Bastet, considered the daughter of the sun god Re. As in Spell 610, reference is made to the fact that the king eats the same food and has the same odor as the gods, indicating his identity with them. The interesting addition in this spell is the reference to the role of sunlight in the king's ascension to the sky. Sunlight is said to function as "a staircase under his feet." Some scholars have suggested that the pyramid functioned as a physical representation of sunbeams allowing the king to ascend to the sky. This is based on the appearance of sunbeams shining through clouds on a cloudy day, which take on a slanted appearance suggestive of the sides of a pyramid. This theory is based on speculation, as there is no text which refers to the pyramid itself as a sunbeam. The Djender-bark was the boat used by the sun god in his travel through the Duat (underworld).*

The one who emerges goes forth; this king goes forth. The Mistress of Dep rejoiced; the hearts of those in the midst of Elkab exulted on that day on which the King went forth from there to the sun's place. This King has set down for himself this your sunlight as a staircase under his feet, so that he may go forth on it to that, his mother, the living uraeus on the head of Re. Her heart has compassion for him, (and) she gives him her breast to suckle from. "My son," she says, "accept this my breast so that you may suckle it," so she said, "since you have not reached your number of days."

The sky thunders, the earth trembles, the gods of Heliopolis quiver at the sound of the offering before the King. His mother Bastet has nursed him, she who dwells in the midst of Elkab has reared him; she who dwells in the midst of Dep has given her arms to [him] on his behalf. Look, he has arrived! Look, he has arrived! Look, this King has arrived at life and dominion. He will make his meals of figs and wine from the vineyard of the god. The butcher will make a meal from that which is in his hands for him. When he goes, he catches. His sweat is the sweat of Horus; his odor is the odor of Horus. To the sky, to the sky, in the company of the gods who come forth. The King is (bound for) the sky among the gods who come forth.

"This is my brother; this is the one at my side," so said Geb as he seized the King by his arm and led him from the gates of the sky. The god is in his place; happy is the god in his place, since Satis has purified him with her four jars in Elephantine.

“O, where have you come from, my son?”

“My father, I have come before the Ennead that belongs to the sky, that I might satisfy it with its *pak*-biscuits,” (said the King).

“O, where have you come from, my son?”

“My father, I have come before the angry one of the Djender-bark.”

“O where have you been, my son?”

“My father, I have come before these my two mothers, the two vultures with long hair and hanging breasts who are on Sehseh-mountain. They will extend their breasts to my mouth, (and) they will never wean me, ever.”

**Source:** Allen, J. P. 2013. *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts*. Part 4. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301966/PT%20IV%20\(422-538,%20Pyr%20752-1302\).pdf](https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301966/PT%20IV%20(422-538,%20Pyr%20752-1302).pdf).

#### **PYRAMID TEXT, SPELL 534: SPELL FOR PROTECTION OF THE TOMB**

*This excerpt comes from one of only four spells from the Pyramid Texts (the others are Spells 599, 600, and 601) containing the word for pyramid. This spell was to be recited during an offering that served to consecrate the pyramid and its temple for the dead king. One purpose of this spell was to protect the pyramid and the king buried within it from harm. The reference to “giving the finger” is to the little finger and refers to a gesture used in cursing. Anyone who will curse the pyramid and its temple will be tried before the tribunal of nine gods and will find himself without possessions and will find himself devouring his own corpse. The Parter refers to the deceased in jackal form. This text has been cited as evidence that the purpose of the pyramid was to serve as the means by which the deceased’s spirit was able to ascend to the sky.*

Words spoken by Horus. A funerary offering of Geb.

Go back, be far away!

Horus respects me; Seth protects me.

Go back, be far away!

Osiris respects me; Kherti protects me.

Go back; be far away!

Isis respects me; Nephthys protects me.

Be far above!

Mehenti-irty respects me; Thoth protects me.  
 Go back; be far away!  
 The Slaughterers respect me; the praised ones protect me.  
 I have come; I have offered this house to this King.  
 The Broad Hall here is more pure than cold water.  
 The leaf of its door swings back and forth; its lock is two evil eyes.  
 Osiris should not come in this his evil approach.  
 Do not open your arms for him.  
 Resist! Go to Nedit. Hold on! Go to Adja.

...

Should this King and his *ka* arrive, you should open your arms to him. Open the door of his gods. Should he ask to go forth to the sky, then he should go forth. I have come as the Parter.

A Geb and Atum offering:

This pyramid and this temple are consecrated for the King and his *ka*. That which this pyramid and temple encircle is for the King and his *ka*. This Eye of Horus is pure. May it endure (for them). The one who will give his finger against this pyramid and temple for the King and his *ka*, he has given his finger against the temple of Horus in the cool water, he has tread on the House of the Mistress (and) on every place of his [father] Geb. His case will be heard by the Ennead. He will have no possessions; he will have no home. He is one who is ostracized; he is one who will devour himself.

**Source:** Allen, J. P. 2013. *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts*. Part 4. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301966/PT%20IV%20\(422-538,%20Pyr%20752-1302\).pdf](https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301966/PT%20IV%20(422-538,%20Pyr%20752-1302).pdf).

### PYRAMID TEXT, SPELLS RELATING TO THE OFFERING RITUAL

*The pyramid was just one aspect of a much-larger installation dedicated to the afterlife of the king. In addition to the pyramid, in which or under which the king was buried, other structures made up what scholars refer to as the pyramid complex. Abutting the east face of the pyramid was a structure known as the pyramid temple, or mortuary temple. In this temple, offerings were made to five statues of the king every morning and evening. After religious*

*ceremonies were conducted on the statues to allow them to partake of offerings, and by extension transmit the benefit of these offerings to the deceased king, the statues would be offered food, drink, and other items.*

*Leading from the mortuary temple to a structure known as the valley temple was a covered walkway known as a causeway. The valley temple, which faced a human-made canal connecting the pyramid complex to the Nile river, was a place for the deceased king, in the form of statues, to greet the gods of Egypt who would have paid him visits, also in the form of statues, during various festivals throughout the Egyptian year. In addition, a smaller satellite pyramid southeast of the main pyramid may have served as the burial place of a statue of the king's ka. Additional components of a pyramid complex could include smaller pyramids for queens or princesses and pits for the burial of boats, perhaps intended for the king's use in the afterlife.*

*The spells included here are a sampling of those that would have been recited during the daily ritual providing offerings to the deceased king. Spell 25 accompanied the offering of incense, Spell 32 water and incense, Spell 79 eye makeup, and Spell 81 clothing (two strips of cloth). All offerings could be described as the "Eye of Horus," a reference to Horus's eye that had been injured in battle with Seth but was restored by Thoth (representing the waxing and waning of the moon). Horus restored his dead father Osiris to life by offering him his healed, sound eye. Frequently these spells contain a word play based on the item being offered. For example, Spell 32 mentions that the Eye of Horus, representing cool water, has been placed under the soles of the king. This is a play on the Egyptian words for soles (kebew) and cool water (kebe-hew). Tayit was the goddess of weaving.*

### **Spell 25**

A traveler has gone to his *ka*. Horus has gone with his *ka*. Seth has gone with his *ka*. Thoth has gone with his *ka*. Dewen-anwy has gone with his *ka*. Khenty-irty has gone with his *ka*.

Ho, king. The arm of your *ka* is before you.

Ho, king. The arm of your *ka* is before you.

Ho, king. The foot of your *ka* is behind you.

Osiris of the king. I have given the Eye of Horus to you. Complete your face with it. Let the scent of the Eye of Horus diffuse over you.

Words to be spoken four times.

Incense (on the) fire.



**Spell 32**

These your cool waters, Osiris, these your cool waters, O King, have come from your son, have come from Horus. I have come, bringing to you the Eye of Horus to cool your heart with it. I have brought it to you under you, (under your) soles. Take to yourself the efflux which came from you. Do not let your heart be weary under it.

Words to be spoken four times. The voice has gone forth for you.

Cool water, 2 pellets of incense.

**Spell 79**

Words to be spoken four times.

Osiris of the King, I will paint the sound Eye of Horus on your face.

Green eye paint, black eye paint.

**Spell 81**

May you awake in peace. May Tayit awake in peace. May those from the town of Tayit awake in peace. May the Eye of Horus which is in Dep [awake] in peace. May the Eye of Horus which is in the “House of the Red Crown” awake in peace.

You who receive the working women, who adorn the Great One in the sedan chair, may you cause the Two Lands to bow to this king just as they bow to Horus. May you cause the Two Lands to fear this king just as they fear Seth.

May you sit opposite the king when he is divine. May you open his path before the *akhs* so that he may stand before the *akhs* just as Anubis before the Westerners. To the front, to the front, before Osiris.

Two strips of cloth.

**Source:** Allen, J. P. 2013. *A New Concordance of the Pyramid Texts*. Part 2. Translated by S. E. Thompson. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301964/PT%20II%20\(1-246,%20Pyr%201-256\).pdf](https://oi-idb-static.uchicago.edu/multimedia/301964/PT%20II%20(1-246,%20Pyr%201-256).pdf).

**EXCERPT FROM THE ABU SIR PAPYRI**

*Carrying out the many rituals associated with a pyramid complex took a large staff of people and a considerable amount of food, clothing, containers, and other items. The income to support a pyramid complex came from the landed*

*foundations that a king set aside during his lifetime, and the produce from these estates was destined for the royal palace, which then distributed them to the previous king's pyramid complex. Hundreds of such domains could be allocated to provide for the needs of a pyramid complex. The size of such domains is unknown, although a figure equivalent to about forty acres per domain has been mentioned in some texts.*

*The Egyptians were meticulous record keepers, and we are fortunate that fragments of the records from several pyramid complexes of the Fifth Dynasty kings Neferirkare (ca. 2415–2405 BCE), Neferefre (ca. 2404 BCE), and his mother, Khentkawes II, have been preserved. These papyri show that the Egyptians carefully documented the goods delivered to the pyramid complex, and their apportionment to the staff serving the complex. The priests and various workmen who served the complex derived their income from the offerings made to the deceased king and the gods; once they had been placed before the statues of the king, they were then shared among the staff of the complex, with each person's share carefully determined based on status and carefully documented.*

*The excerpt below preserves records of the conducting of rituals for the statues of the queen mother Khentkawes II. A phyle (a Greek term meaning company or tribe, translating the Egyptian sa) was a group of forty individuals divided into two groups of twenty men each. The exact meaning of the title khenty-she is uncertain; suggested translations include tenant or pyramid official. It seems certain that the khenty-she was in some sort of personal service to the king. The tasks of dressing, purifying (washing), decorating, and censuring were carried out on the statues of the deceased.*

**Source:** Strudwick, Nigel. 2005. *Texts from the Pyramid Age*. Edited by Ronald J. Leprohon, 170–171. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature. Used by permission of SBL Press.

Those who carry out the cult rites around the pyramid			Receiver of the writings after carrying out the rites for the king's mother Khentkawes				Second month of Shemu season, day 18		
Day rites	Night rites	Priest	Phyle <i>imy-nefret</i> section <i>hat</i>	Nefermetut	Dresser	Purifier	Decorator	Censer	
Priest	<i>Khenty-she</i>								<i>Khenty-she</i>
Phyle <i>imy-nefret</i> section <i>hat</i>					(statue wearing white crown)	(statue wearing red crown)	(statue wearing nemes)		
Nakhti Nefersemen	Khuwinefer			x					
Nakhti Khuwinefer	Nakhti								
Khuwinefer	Nefersemen	Nakhtiliri		x					
Nakhti Sheded Meri	Nisueq	Nakhti		x					
Khuwinefer	Nakhti Iri	Sheded Meri		x					
Nakhti Iri	Khuwinefer	Sheded Meri		x					

Source: Strudwick, Nigel. 2005. *Texts from the Pyramid Age*. Edited by Ronald J. Leprohon, 170–171. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature.

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## Ancient Egyptian Society Was Heavily Dependent on Slave Labor

### What People Think Happened

The image of Egyptian society that many tourists come away with after having visited the monuments of Egypt is of a society built on cruelly exploiting the labor of slaves. Anyone who has visited the great pyramids of the Giza Plateau cannot fail to come away impressed by the engineering feat of moving thousands of blocks, many weighing several tons, over large distances, both horizontal and vertical. The amount of manual labor involved is difficult to comprehend, and it is even more difficult to believe that anyone would willingly work on such a project. One could hardly fault visitors from reaching the same conclusion after having visited the temple of Amun at Karnak and viewing the forest of 134 columns in the hypostyle hall, the tallest being sixty-nine feet tall and so broad at the top that fifty people could stand on their capitals. Visitors to the rock-cut tombs of the Valleys of the Kings and Queens would also be led to a similar conclusion, descending over three hundred feet through underground passageways carved out of rock.

The sheer monumental size of the remains of ancient Egypt almost compel the visitor to the conclusion that only the forced labor of enslaved people could have built such monuments. When this impression is reinforced by the image presented in the Bible of the Egyptians as cruel taskmasters who exploited the Hebrews as slaves for four hundred years, it is no surprise that even those with only a passing knowledge of ancient Egypt believe that Egyptian civilization was supported on the backs of

slaves. For example, in his book *Confederates in the Attic: Dispatches from the Unfinished Civil War*, Tony Horwitz recounts a conversation he witnessed in Richmond, Virginia, during a discussion of the appropriateness of erecting a statue of the African American tennis player Arthur Ashe among the statues of the heroes of the Confederacy located along Monument Avenue. When one person argued that the statues of the heroes of the Old South should be torn down, his interlocutor responded, “Should we tear down the Pyramids because they were built by slaves?” (Horwitz 1999, 251).

### How the Story Became Popular

During a visit to Egypt in 1978, Menachem Begin, the prime minister of Israel, almost caused an international incident with his comment “we built the pyramids,” a reference to a Jewish belief that Hebrew slaves had labored on the pyramids while in Egypt (Wynn 2008, 280; Perry 2007). Anyone who has seen the 1956 film *The Ten Commandments* cannot help but be struck by the cruelty with which the Egyptians treated their slave work force. The Egyptians are shown forcing their slaves to endure backbreaking labor to move enormous stone blocks to construct a city for Seti I ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttZ-GWbq\\_pI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ttZ-GWbq_pI)). Slaves are whipped, and their lives are depicted as having no importance to their cruel masters. The director, William Wyler, based the image of an Egyptian society dependent on cruelly exploiting slave labor on the story of the Exodus found in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (see below).

Wyler was hardly the first person to present the Egyptians’ use of slave labor in an unfavorable light. In 1756, in his *Essai sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*, the French Enlightenment philosopher Voltaire wrote that

Their pyramids cost many years and much expense; it was necessary that a large part of the nation and many foreign slaves be long employed in these immense works. They were nurtured by despotism, vanity, tyranny, and superstition. In fact, there was only one despotic king who was able to force nature thus. England, for instance, is now more powerful than Egypt was: could a king of England employ his nation to erect such monuments? Vanity was doubtless part of it; the ancient kings of Egypt sought to erect the most beautiful pyramids for their fathers or for themselves; tyranny provided the labor. (Voltaire 1929, 86; translation by S. E. Thompson)

Voltaire wrote before the decipherment of hieroglyphs, so his sources on ancient Egypt would have been the classical historians. It seems that the

sheer size and grandeur of the pyramids led ancient historians to the conclusion that the only way the Egyptians could have built such massive structures was through the ruthless exploitation of thousands of slaves. It is possible that the Greek historians writing about ancient Egypt could have derived their information about the despotic Khufu (Cheops) from native informants. An Egyptian story preserved from the Middle Kingdom depicts Khufu as an unfeeling ruler who would casually sacrifice the life of a prisoner simply for his own amusement. Even the Quran depicts the Egyptians as cruel oppressors and sinful tyrants (see Suras 10, 83 and 14, 6, for example). In the opinions of the ancient authors, the Egyptian civilization was built on the backs of cruelly exploited slaves.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### HERODOTUS, *THE CONSTRUCTION OF THE GREAT PYRAMID*

*Herodotus (ca. 490–415 BCE) was a Greek historian from Halicarnassus on the coast of western Turkey. He collected and evaluated sources in writing his account of the wars between the Greeks and Persians. Since Egypt was part of the Persian empire at the time, Herodotus devoted a lengthy section (book 2) of his work to the history of Egypt. Herodotus traveled to Egypt sometime between 449 and 430 BCE, and he claims to have received much of his information from Egyptian priests and other native informants. The name Rhampsinitus (also spelled Rhampsinitos) is a combination of the Egyptian names Ramesses and Saneit (meaning “son of (the goddess) Neith”). Rhampsinitus is a legendary, not historical, figure. He also occurs in the Library of History by Diodorus Siculus (I 62,5) where he is known for his miserliness, and the great treasure he was able to amass during his lifetime. In this passage, Herodotus describes the construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza by Cheops (Khufu). He describes the labor required to move the massive stones involved in the construction as being accomplished through compulsion, resulting in the “utter misery” of the Egyptian people. Herodotus states that it took gangs of one hundred thousand men working in three-month shifts twenty years to build the Great Pyramid.*

124 Till the time of Rhampsinitus Egypt (so the priests told me) was in all ways well governed and greatly prospered, but Cheops, who was the next king, brought the people to utter misery. For first he shut up all the temples, so that none could sacrifice there; and next, he compelled



all the Egyptians to work for him, appointing some to drag stones from the quarries in the Arabian mountains to the Nile: and the stones being carried across the river in boats, others were charged to receive and drag them to the mountains called Libyan. They worked in gangs of a hundred thousand men, each gang for three months. For ten years the people were afflicted in making the road whereon the stones were dragged, the making of which road was to my thinking a task but a little lighter than the building of the pyramid, for the road is five furlongs [5/8 of a mile] long and ten fathoms [60 feet] broad, and raised at its highest to a height of eight fathoms [48 feet], and it is all of stone polished and carven with figures. The ten years aforesaid went to the making of this road and of the underground chambers on the hill whereon the pyramids stand; these the king meant to be burial-places for himself, and encompassed them with water, bringing in a channel from the Nile. The pyramid itself was twenty years in the making. Its base was square, each side eight hundred feet long, and its height is the same; the whole is of stone polished and most exactly fitted; there is no block of less than thirty feet in length.

**Source:** Herodotus. 1920–1925. *The Histories*. Book II, 124. Translated by A. D. Godley. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Herodotus/home.html>.

### **DIODORUS SICULUS, ON THE HARDSHIP OF BUILDING TOMBS**

*Diodorus Siculus wrote a universal history in Greek from the mythological beginnings of the world down to 60 BCE. He probably visited Egypt sometime between ca. 60 and 56 BCE. The Egypt of Diodorus's day was under the reign of the Ptolemies, the successors of Alexander the Great, but they were soon to fall to the emerging Roman Empire. Sesosis could refer to Sesostris (Senwosret) I (1920–1875 BCE), the third ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty. It is also possible that Sesosis represents a combination of two Egyptian kings of the Twelfth Dynasty, Sesostris I and III (1837–1819 BCE). Diodorus has his chronology confused; he discusses Sesosis, a ruler of the Twelfth Dynasty, before he turns to Chemmis (Cheops/Khufu) and Cephren (Khafre), rulers of the Fourth Dynasty.*

*Both kings apparently treated their labor force harshly. Sesosis's Babylonian prisoners revolted against their harsh treatment. According to Diodorus, the Egyptians who built the pyramids of Chemmis and Cephren so resented their cruel treatment that the kings were unable to be buried in the pyramids*

*they had built for themselves, fearing that their workforce would destroy their bodies once they were interred in their pyramids. In other words, their labor was for nothing; the kings were never buried in their elaborate pyramids. This idea could derive from the fact that by the time of Diodorus, the pyramids would have been long since robbed and the mummies removed or destroyed. As we have seen, it was not uncommon for the builders of the royal tombs to also be the ones who robbed them. A stade is roughly 210 yards.*

56 1 Sesoösis now relieved his peoples of the labours of war and granted to the comrades who had bravely shared in his deeds a care-free life in the enjoyment of the good things which they had won, while he himself, being ambitious for glory and intent upon everlasting fame, constructed works which were great and marvelous in their conception as well as in the lavishness with which their cost was provided, winning in this way immortal glory for himself and for the Egyptians security combined with ease for all time. 2 For beginning with the gods first, he built in each city of Egypt a temple to the god who was held in special reverence by its inhabitants. On these labours he used no Egyptians, but constructed them all by the hands of his captives alone; and for this reason he placed an inscription on every temple that no native had toiled upon it. 3 And it is said that the captives brought from Babylonia revolted from the king, being unable to endure the hardships entailed by his works; and they, seizing a strong position on the banks of the river, maintained a warfare against the Egyptians and ravaged the neighbouring territory, but finally, on being granted an amnesty, they established a colony on the spot, which they also named Babylon after their native land.

...

64 1 Upon the death of this king his brother Cephren succeeded to the throne and ruled fifty-six years; but some say that it was not the brother of Chemmis, but his son, named Chabryes, who took the throne. 2 All writers, however, agree that it was the next ruler who, emulating the example of his predecessor, built the second pyramid, which was the equal of the one just mentioned in the skill displayed in its execution but far behind it in size, since its base length on each side is only a stade. 3 And an inscription on the larger pyramid gives the sum of money expended on it, since the writing sets forth that on vegetables and purgatives for the workmen there were paid out over sixteen hundred talents. 4 The smaller bears no inscription but has steps cut into one side. And though the two kings built the pyramids to serve as their tombs, in the event neither of

them was buried in them; 5 for the multitudes, because of the hardships which they had endured in the building of them and the many cruel and violent acts of these kings, were filled with anger against those who had caused their sufferings and openly threatened to tear their bodies asunder and cast them in despite out of the tombs. 6 Consequently each ruler when dying enjoined upon his kinsmen to bury his body secretly in an unmarked place.

**Source:** Diodorus Siculus. 1933. *The Library of History*. Vol. 1, book I. Translated by C. H. Oldfather, 56, 64. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.

### EXODUS, JOSEPH AND THE PHARAOH

*According to the biblical story of Joseph, found in the book of Genesis, Joseph was sold into Egypt as a slave by his jealous brothers. Joseph's ability to interpret the pharaoh's (which pharaoh is never stated) dreams lead to his appointment to be "over all the land of Egypt" (NRSV Genesis 41:37). Later, when a famine occurred in the land of Canaan, Joseph's father, Jacob, believing Joseph to be dead, sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain to keep the family alive. Eventually Joseph forgave his brothers and invited his family to move to Egypt to escape the famine. The first passage picks up the story after the deaths of Joseph and the unnamed pharaoh who allowed his family to move to Egypt. We learn that the Israelites have been reduced to slaves, forced to work building cities for Pharaoh. In the second passage, we learn of Moses and Aaron, who have been sent by God to convince Pharaoh to free the Israelites from bondage. Their efforts resulted in even harsher working conditions for the children of Israel.*

*Since the decipherment of hieroglyphs, the question of the historical nature of the events described in the Book of Exodus in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament has generated an enormous literature. The consensus regarding the historicity of the biblical Exodus has been summed up by William Ward: "the empirical evidence of archaeology and language does not remotely resemble the biblical narrative of the Exodus" (Ward 1997, 111; see also Finkelstein and Silberman 2001, 48–71). There are scholars, however, who continue to argue for the substantial accuracy of the Exodus narrative (for example, Hoffmeier 1997). Regardless of one's opinion on the historical nature of the biblical account, it is undeniable that the description of the treatment the Israelites received at the hand of the Egyptians has colored popular conceptions of Egypt as a land of cruel taskmasters who worked their slaves mercilessly.*

## Ch. 1

8 Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. 9 He said to his people, "Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. 10 Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to oppress them with forced labor. They built supply cities, Pithom and Rameses, for Pharaoh. 12 But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread, so that the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites. 13 The Egyptians became ruthless in imposing tasks on the Israelites, 14 and made their lives bitter with hard service in mortar and brick and in every kind of field labor. They were ruthless in all the tasks that they imposed on them.

## Ch. 5

1 Afterward Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and said, "Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'Let my people go, so that they may celebrate a festival to me in the wilderness.'" 2 But Pharaoh said, "Who is the Lord, that I should heed him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord, and I will not let Israel go." 3 Then they said, "The God of the Hebrews has revealed himself to us; let us go a three days' journey into the wilderness to sacrifice to the Lord our God, or he will fall upon us with pestilence or sword." 4 But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why are you taking the people away from their work? Get to your labors!" 5 Pharaoh continued, "Now they are more numerous than the people of the land and yet you want them to stop working!" 6 That same day Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters of the people, as well as their supervisors, 7 "You shall no longer give the people straw to make bricks, as before; let them go and gather straw for themselves. 8 But you shall require of them the same quantity of bricks as they have made previously; do not diminish it, for they are lazy; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and offer sacrifice to our God.'" 9 Let heavier work be laid on them; then they will labor at it and pay no attention to deceptive words." 10 So the taskmasters and the supervisors of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh, 'I will not give you straw. 11 Go and get straw yourselves, wherever you can find it; but your work will not be lessened in the least.'" 12 So the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt, to gather stubble for straw. 13 The taskmasters were urgent, saying, "Complete your work, the same daily assignment as when you were given straw." 14 And the supervisors of the Israelites, whom Pharaoh's taskmasters had set over

them, were beaten, and were asked, “Why did you not finish the required quantity of bricks yesterday and today, as you did before?” 15 Then the Israelite supervisors came to Pharaoh and cried, “Why do you treat your servants like this? 16 No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, ‘Make bricks!’ Look how your servants are beaten! You are unjust to your own people.” 17 He said, “You are lazy, lazy; that is why you say, ‘Let us go and sacrifice to the Lord.’ 18 Go now, and work; for no straw shall be given you, but you shall still deliver the same number of bricks.” 19 The Israelite supervisors saw that they were in trouble when they were told, “You shall not lessen your daily number of bricks.”

**Source:** Exodus 1:8–14; 5:1–19. *New Revised Standard Version Bible*, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

### FLAVIUS JOSEPHUS, *ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS*

*Flavius Josephus (37/8– ca. 100 CE) was a Jewish politician, soldier, and historian who served as the general of Jewish forces in Galilee during the Jewish revolt from Rome in 66–70 CE. When he and his forces were besieged at Jotapata, he surrendered to the Romans and switched sides in the war. In return, he was rewarded with Roman citizenship, a house in Rome, a pension, and land in Judea. His work Antiquities of the Jews, written around 80 CE, was a retelling of Jewish history from the creation up to the rebellion against Rome. In his retelling of the story of the bondage of the Israelites, Josephus added a few details that seem to originate with him. The idea that the Egyptians forced the Israelites “to build walls for their cities and ramparts, that they might restrain the river, and hinder its waters from stagnating, upon its running over its own banks” was not mentioned elsewhere.*

*For our purposes here, Josephus’s most significant addition is that the Israelites were forced to build pyramids. Josephus seems to be the first author to attribute the construction of the pyramids, by which we are to understand the Fourth Dynasty pyramids at Giza, to the Israelites. This is impossible, since the pyramids at Giza were built between 2509 and 2436 BCE, hundreds of years before even the earliest possible date for the biblical Joseph. One scholar has suggested that Josephus, writing in the first century CE, was influenced by the Roman love of all things Egyptian, as indicated by their importation of obelisks from Egypt to Rome and the increase in popularity of Egyptian religious cults, such as the cult of Isis. Josephus may have chosen one of the most*

*iconic symbols of Egypt, the pyramid, to embellish his account of the labors of the Israelites while in Egypt (Ziffer 2015, 686).*

*Beginning in the nineteenth century, Jewish Haggadot (singular, Haggadah, the Jewish text which outlines the texts to be recited during the celebration of the Seder) began to be illustrated with images of the pyramids, which, according to Irit Ziffer, “gave rise to the popular Israeli/Jewish lore of ancient Israelite slaves involved in building the pyramids.” As Ziffer notes, however, “not one shred of evidence has ever been found in Egypt that confirms such an early history of Israel in Egypt” (Ziffer 2015, 684).*

[198] Joseph also died when he had lived a hundred and ten years; having been a man of admirable virtue, and conducting all his affairs by the rules of reason; and used his authority with moderation, which was the cause of his so great felicity among the Egyptians, even when he came from another country, and that in such ill circumstances also, as we have already described. At length his brethren died, after they had lived happily in Egypt. Now the posterity and sons of these men, after some time, carried their bodies, and buried them at Hebron: but as to the bones of Joseph, they carried them into the land of Canaan afterward, when the Hebrews went out of Egypt, for so had Joseph made them promise him upon oath. But what became of every one of these men, and by what toils they got the possession of the land of Canaan, shall be shown hereafter, when I have first explained upon what account it was that they left Egypt.

[201] Now it happened that the Egyptians grew delicate and lazy, as to pains-taking, and gave themselves up to other pleasures, and in particular to the love of gain. They also became very ill-affected towards the Hebrews, as touched with envy at their prosperity; for when they saw how the nation of the Israelites flourished, and were become eminent already in plenty of wealth, which they had acquired by their virtue and natural love of labor, they thought their increase was to their own detriment. And having, in length of time, forgotten the benefits they had received from Joseph, particularly the crown being now come into another family, they became very abusive to the Israelites, and contrived many ways of afflicting them; for they enjoined them to cut a great number of channels for the river, and to build walls for their cities and ramparts, that they might restrain the river, and hinder its waters from stagnating, upon its running over its own banks: they set them also to build pyramids, and by all this wore them out; and forced them to learn all sorts of mechanical arts, and to accustom themselves to hard labor. And four hundred years did they

spend under these afflictions; for they strove one against the other which should get the mastery, the Egyptians desiring to destroy the Israelites by these labors, and the Israelites desiring to hold out to the end under them.

**Source:** Josephus, Flavius. 1895. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Book 2. Translated by William Whiston, 198–204. Auburn and Buffalo: John E. Beardsley. Accessed July 16, 2019. <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0146%3Abook%3D2%3Asection%3D198>.

### PHILO, *LIFE OF MOSES*

*Philo (Philo Judaeus) was a Hellenized Jew who lived in Alexandria, Egypt, from 20 BCE to 50 CE. He was from a noble family and received an excellent education in Greek philosophy. In 38 CE, after a series of Greek pogroms against the Jews of Alexandria, Philo was chosen to lead a delegation of Jews from Alexandria to Rome to appeal to Emperor Gaius Caligula in order to counter the argument that the Jews were unpatriotic because they refused to worship the emperor. In his philosophical writings, Philo sought a synthesis of Greek philosophy (primarily Plato) and Jewish theology by employing an allegorical approach to the Jewish scriptures. In this excerpt from Philo's biography of Moses, Philo describes the harsh conditions under which the Hebrews labored while enslaved in Egypt. The comment that the Hebrews were treated as prisoners of war is interesting, in light of the fact that a major source of slaves in New Kingdom Egypt was prisoners of war. According to Philo, the Egyptian taskmasters were so cruel that they often worked the Hebrews to death and then refused to allow them to bury or mourn the dead.*

So, then, these strangers, who had left their own country and come to Egypt hoping to live there in safety as in a second fatherland, were made slaves by the ruler of the country and reduced to the condition of captives taken by the custom of war, or persons purchased from the masters in whose household they had been bred. And in thus making serfs of men who were not only free but guests, suppliants and settlers, he showed no shame or fear of the God of liberty and hospitality and of justice to guests and suppliants, Who watches over such as these. Then he laid commands upon them, severe beyond their capacity, and added labour to labour; and, when they failed through weakness, the iron hand was upon them ; for he chose as superintendents of the works men of the most cruel and savage temper who showed no mercy to anyone, men whose name of “task-pursuer” well described the facts. Some of the workers wrought clay into brick, while others fetched from every quarter straw which served to

bind the brick. Others were appointed to build houses and walls and cities or to cut canals. They carried the materials themselves day and night, with no shifts to relieve them, no period of rest, not even suffered just to sleep for a bit and then resume their work. In fact, they were compelled to do all the work, both of the artisan and his assistants, so that in a short time loss of heart was followed necessarily by bodily exhaustion. This was shown by the way in which they died one after the other, as though they were the victims of a pestilence, to be flung unburied outside the borders by their masters, who did not allow the survivors even to collect dust to throw upon the corpses or even to shed tears for their kinsfolk or friends thus pitifully done to death. And, though nature has given to the untrammelled feelings of the soul a liberty which she has denied to almost everything else, they impiously threatened to exert their despotism over these also and suppressed them with the intolerable weight of a constraint more powerful than nature.

**Source:** Philo. 1935. *Philo*. Vol. 6. Translated by F. H. Colson, 295–297. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

## What Really Happened

Slavery in ancient Egypt is a much-debated topic, for several reasons. The meaning of the term *slave*, and the definition of slavery, are very much culturally dependent. A student in the United States familiar with the history of slavery there has a concept of slavery involving a racial component, an aspect of slavery absent in ancient Egypt. Scholars have yet to come to an agreement on a definition of slavery that would be valid for all cultures across history. Orlando Patterson has defined slavery as “the permanent, violent, and personal domination of natively alienated and generally dishonored persons.” According to Patterson, a slave is always “an excommunicated person,” lacking an independent social existence (quoted in Davis 2006, 30–31). As we will see, several aspects of this definition of slavery do not apply to ancient Egypt. A more limited definition of a slave is a person who may be bought or sold (Cruz-Uribe 1982, 47). There is no doubt that during certain periods of Egyptian history, it was possible for a person with means to buy other people. For example, the First Intermediate Period official Merer states that “I purchased cattle, I purchased people, I purchased fields, (and) I purchased copper.”

Several words in the Egyptian vocabulary refer to individuals who, at various times in their lives, were subject to involuntary servitude, whether or not any should be translated as “slave” has been a matter of much



discussion. The most common terms translated as “slave” are *hem*, *bak*, and *meret*. *Meret* is a collective term, not used to refer to an individual. It is uncertain the extent to which these terms would refer to a slave, meaning a person subject to being bought and sold, rather than some other form of compulsory labor, such as conscript labor (sometimes referred to as *corvée* labor) or serfdom, in which an individual is tied to a particular piece of land and when the land changes ownership, the person does as well but is not subject to sale apart from the land.

We must also keep in mind that the Egyptians had no conception of what we would term *human rights*; all Egyptians were in some sense subservient to someone above them, and the king was subservient to the gods. An absolute separation between the status of free and slave would not have existed in ancient Egypt. Rather, people existed on a sliding scale, some freer than others, but all would have had obligations to the state. Finally, it is important to note that Egyptian history spans over three thousand years, and customs and practices changed and developed over that time.

As noted previously, one of the factors contributing to the notion that ancient Egyptian society was built on the backs of slaves is the mere existence of the great pyramids at Giza. Recent archaeological discoveries, however, have revealed that much of the labor used in constructing the pyramids was skilled labor, and the workers were well compensated for their work. Within the last few decades, archaeologists have unearthed the settlement known as Heit el-Ghurab, which would have housed many of the workers who built the pyramids of the Fourth Dynasty. These workers would have possessed the skilled labor necessary for constructing the pyramids. The excavator of this site, Mark Lehner, has concluded that “Heit el-Ghurab was a place of high-status royal service” and that the workers housed there “enjoyed a status above that of the most common workers” (Lehner 2015, 498–499).

Of course, not all the labor involved in building the pyramids was skilled labor. While the ability to quarry and transport hard stone was a precious skill, someone had to perform the difficult labor of hauling the quarried stone. For this type of labor, the Egyptians would have used conscript labor, also known as *corvée* labor. *Corvée* labor has been defined as “unpaid, unskilled manual labor exacted in lieu of taxation in the form of money or goods” (Golet Jr. 2015, 531). When the state, or a state institution such as a temple, had need of workers for military or mining expeditions, construction projects, or agricultural labor, the demand would go out to the institutions and elite members of society to supply workers to

the state. As one scholar has put it, “a large part of Egypt’s population will have lived knowing that their names were written on lists controlled by rich landowners and senior officials . . . who, as part of their own dependence on the king, from time to time were required to summon them . . . and send them off to work on someone else’s (normally royal) project” (Kemp 2018, 181).

Those subject to *corvée* were required to show up for duty, and failure to do so brought consequences. During the Middle Kingdom, an individual (either male or female) called up for labor had to report to an enclosure known as the *kheneret*. Failure to respond to a summons to *corvée* labor resulted in a sentence of permanent labor, and if the individual summoned could not be found, a family member or members of the same sex were required to work in their stead. Every ten years, a court would meet to consider releasing the dependents from their sentence. As the Decree of Neferirkare illustrates, certain institutions could be exempted by the king from supplying conscript labor, and any official who would violate such a decree and remove an exempt worker for *corvée* service could be subject to punishment. The Nauri Decree of Seti I of the Nineteenth Dynasty lists receiving two hundred blows and five open wounds, as well as having to fill in personally for each day of service lost to the institution, as punishment for an official conscripting an exempt worker.

The use of conscript labor for large-scale state projects meant that there was no need for the state to maintain large numbers of slaves; a temporary workforce was always available. Slavery, such as it existed in ancient Egypt, was largely a private institution and never formed a major part of the Egyptian economy. There are several ways an individual could become a slave. As noted above, a sentence of slavery, either for life or for a determined period of time, could result from criminal wrongdoing. A family member could be used as collateral for a loan, and if the loan (usually of grain) was not repaid, the person would be reduced to forced labor in the creditor’s household.

Women in particular were used as debt collateral. The status of slave could be inherited; the children of a female slave were themselves slaves, regardless of the status of the father. One scholar has suggested that during the New Kingdom a “house of female slaves” existed for the purpose of producing additional slaves (Loprieno 2012, 11). During the first millennium BCE, there is evidence of individuals selling themselves into slavery because of economic difficulty or dedicating themselves and their family members to the perpetual service of a god in a temple, perhaps to escape the demands of the state for conscripted labor.

The most common source of slaves throughout Egyptian history was prisoners of war. As early as the Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2543–2436 BCE), there is a record of King Sneferu returning from a raid into Nubia and bringing seven thousand captives. The Twelfth Dynasty king Amenemhet II (1878–1483 BCE) stated that he returned from a campaign in Syria-Palestine with 1,554 Asiatics (the common term used for inhabitants of the Middle East). The use of slaves increased during the New Kingdom with the influx of captives taken in the wars conducted by the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasty pharaohs as they were building and maintaining Egypt's empire in Nubia and Syria-Palestine. The accounts of royal military expeditions to Syria-Palestine describe the pharaoh returning to Egypt with thousands and even tens of thousands of captives who could be assigned to temples, the royal court, or other royal departments as workers. Thutmosis III (1479–1425 BCE) recorded that he brought back 7,300 captives from his campaigning in Syria-Palestine, while Amenhotep II (1425–1400 BCE) claimed to have brought back 89,600 such prisoners.

The conquered rulers of the cities of Syria-Palestine were required to send an annual tribute (a tax) to the kings of Egypt, and this tribute frequently included men and women to serve as slaves. For example, the annual tribute Thutmosis III received from the rulers of Syria ranged from 50 to 702 people. Individual soldiers also took captives as booty or were rewarded for acts of valor with prisoners as slaves (see the text of Ahmose son of Abana). The names of prisoners taken in battle would have been carefully registered, and they would have been tattooed with the name of the king or god they were to serve. Prisoners of noble origin (meaning the children of the foreign rulers) could be integrated into the entourage of the king, while the common men and women were assigned to work in the temples or royal property located throughout Egypt. Those with military skills could be integrated into the Egyptian military. At times groups of foreign captives were settled together in their own communities.

The status of slaves in ancient Egypt highlights the ways in which Egyptian slavery differed from that in other cultures. Contrary to most definitions, slaves in Egypt did function as members of society. Slaves could own property independent of their masters (see the Cairo Stela) and be responsible for the taxes on that land. Slaves could serve as third-party guarantors of a debt; testify in court, even against their masters; initiate legal proceedings; draw up legal contracts; and even be found guilty of a crime and be responsible for paying the fine, all as independent agents. The work slaves performed was not strictly manual labor; slaves



Relief from the Temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel, showing Nubian captives being brought back to Egypt as prisoners of war. Prisoners were the main source of slaves in New Kingdom Egypt, but eventually they could assimilate fully into Egyptian society. (Lansbricae /Dreamstime.com)

could perform occupations such as cowherder, royal barber, builder, sandal maker, and priest. During the New Kingdom, Asiatic slaves of noble background could serve as chamberlains, butlers, and even chief royal herald to the king. Nubian slaves were particularly valued for their military prowess, and could become mercenaries in the king's army, serving as shield bearers, charioteers, and fanbearers of the king.

There are instances (see the Adoption Papyrus) in which slaves were adopted by their owners and allowed to marry members of their owner's family, illustrating that the boundary between slave and master was not hard and fast. In one instance, the slave Hesysunebef was adopted by his master in the workmen's village of Deir el-Medina. He became a member of a team of workmen, eventually rising to the rank of deputy. Thutmosis III's barber, Sibastet, freed a slave whom he had acquired while on a military expedition, designated him coheir to his property, and married him to his niece, Takamenet [meaning, the blind woman]. More importantly, Sibastet passed on the position of royal barber to his former slave. Since

the practice in ancient Egypt was for a son to follow in the profession of his father, it seems that Sibastet had adopted his slave, in practice if not in fact.

Despite these freedoms and opportunities, however, a slave was still the property of someone else. In a text known as the Adoption Papyrus, we learn that the slave Dienhutiry was purchased by a husband and wife for the purpose of producing children for the husband. Foreign slaves were usually brought to Egypt in bonds and were tattooed with the name of their owner. Slaves could be owned collectively; an entire village could own a slave, with members of the village entitled to a portion of the slave's labor. Slaves could be rented by the day from the owner, much as one would rent the services of a farm animal. Slaves could be included in an owner's will and passed on to his or her heirs, just as any other property. During the New Kingdom, there is evidence of slave merchants who peddled slaves, seemingly on a house-to-house basis. There is no evidence of a slave market in ancient Egypt. While the lot of a slave in ancient Egypt may have been better than that of other slaves in world history, a slave still occupied the lowest level of Egyptian society.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### GIZA PYRAMID CREW NAMES

*As we have seen in the documents cited above, the sheer size of the pyramids conjured up images of thousands of brutally oppressed slaves forced to labor ceaselessly for the aggrandizement of the king. There is considerable information available, however, that indicates this was not the case. Many of the blocks used in the construction of the pyramids and accompanying structures (mortuary temple, valley temple) preserve texts painted in red giving information about the crews assigned to the blocks. From these texts, we learn that those working on a pyramid were divided into crews of between 320 and 400 men. Each crew was divided into two gangs (apr in Egyptian), which would have consisted of between 160 and 200 men. Each gang was divided into four or five phyles (sa in Egyptian), consisting of forty men. Each phyle was divided into four divisions of ten men each.*

*Mark Lehner has estimated that it would take five or six crews to build the large Fourth Dynasty pyramids (Lehner 2015, 436). This estimate does not include the labor involved in quarrying and transporting the blocks. When those workers are added to the total, estimates for the number of men required*

*to build the Great Pyramid of Khufu rise to thirty-six thousand. The names of the various gangs and crews included such terms as noblemen, friends, acquaintances, or beloved ones, compounded with the name of the reigning king. It has been argued that these workers were “elite troops of young recruits,” not ordinary workmen or slaves (Lehner 2015, 438–439). These workers would have been temporarily provided as donations of labor conscripted by the king from the large estates of nobles located throughout Egypt, particularly in the areas of the Nile Delta and Middle Egypt. Additional unskilled labor would have been provided by the use of captives taken from neighboring Nubia, Libya, or the Levant (Syria-Palestine). Once the construction project was finished, these captive laborers could have been assigned to cultivate the lands necessary for the maintenance of the pyramid complex they had helped build. These workers would have been rapidly assimilated into Egyptian society.*

### **Khufu (Horus Name Medjedu)**

The crew “The pure ones of Horus Medjedu.”

The crew “Horus Medjedu is the one who purifies the Two Lands.”

The crew “The companions of Horus Medjedu.”

The crew “The pure ones of Khufu.”

The crew “The white crown of Khnumkhufu is pure.”

**Source:** Strudwick, Nigel. 2005. *Texts from the Pyramid Age*. Edited by Ronald J. Leprohon, 155. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature. Used by permission of SBL Press.

### **PAPYRUS CAIRO, A PROTEST TO THE VIZIER**

*This papyrus was discovered within the Step Pyramid enclosure of Djoser at Saqqara and dates to the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2305–2118 BCE). It contains a letter from an unnamed expedition leader to an unnamed vizier complaining about instructions the expedition leader had received concerning the clothing of his workmen. The western enclosure refers to the Step Pyramid complex of Djoser at Saqqara. On the surface, it appears that this letter is about providing clothing for the gangs (apṛ) working at the Tura limestone quarries. Tura is located on the east bank of the Nile just southeast of modern Cairo and was the source of the limestone used for the pyramids. It is also possible that this letter refers to paying the work gangs, rather than simply clothing*

them. The Egyptian economy was not a money economy; people were paid in commodities. The Sixth Dynasty official Metjetji refers to paying those who worked on his tomb with clothing, bread, and beer. This would be yet-another indication that those workers involved in the quarrying of limestone were not slaves but paid laborers.

The expedition leader is complaining about the possibility of losing six work days for a task that should only take one. His suggestion is that the clerk could bring the clothing with him, since he is coming to Tura anyway, removing the need for the work gang to travel to Saqqara. Assuming that the word *apr* refers to the gangs working on a pyramid, at a minimum, the troop would have consisted of three gangs (the smallest plural; two would be dual), meaning the expedition leader had to bring between 480 and 600 men to Saqqara. This would explain why transporting such a number of men to Saqqara for payment or clothing would take six days. It seems simpler to ship the clothing to Tura for distribution on site. This, of course, would require trusting officials to distribute the clothing accurately and fairly at Tura, rather than in the presence of the vizier himself. The expedition leader refers to himself in this letter with the polite circumlocution “the servant there” used when addressing a superior. Here this is translated in the first person. This letter was found torn in half, and Alan Gardiner has suggested that this action was the vizier’s response to the expedition leader’s complaint.

Year 11, month 1, Shemu, day 23. The Expedition leader says:

A letter of the vizier was brought to me to bring a troop of the gangs of Tura in order to clothe (them) in his presence at the western enclosure. But I object to the requirement of (that) location, since the clerk is coming to Tura with the transport ship. Now I will spend six days in the Residence together with this crew (and) they won’t have been clothed. It is a delay of the work under my responsibility, since it is (only) one day that should be lost for clothing this troop. So say I. Inform the clerk.

**Source:** Gardiner, Alan H. 1927. “An Administrative Letter of Protest.” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 13: 75–78. Translated by S. E. Thompson.

### **DECREE OF NEFERIRKARE FROM ABYDOS**

*This stela records a royal decree by the Fifth Dynasty King Neferirkare (2415–2405 BCE) on behalf of the overseer of priests Hemwer. The original of this document would have been written on papyrus, and this copy engraved on a stone stela would have been set up in the temple to which it refers (see*

<https://www.mfa.org/collections/object/decreed-of-neferirkare-130692> for an image of this stela). As mentioned above, a frequent source of labor for royal projects was conscription. When the king or a high official had a project for which he needed workers, the various nomes (districts) and institutions throughout Egypt could be required to send laborers. At times, kings would issue decrees exempting certain institutions, such as temples or funerary foundations, from having to provide laborers.

In this decree, we see the priests, workers, and meret-people of this particular temple (which is not named) declared exempt from such conscription, and anyone violating this decree would forfeit his property and workers, and would himself be subject to conscription. The exact status of meret-people has been a topic of some discussion. Meret-people could have been those dependent on a more powerful individual or institution who would have been subject to conscript labor under normal circumstances. In this view, the status of meret was temporary and lasted only for the duration of the conscription. Another view is that the status of meret was permanent and referred to people who were tied to a particular plot of land controlled by another; when the land was transferred to another, so were the meret-people assigned to that land, much like medieval serfs. In any event, the ability to conscript labor as needed would have made the large-scale use of slaves unnecessary in ancient Egypt.

Horus Usir-Khau.

A royal decree (for) the overseer of priests Hemwer. I do not permit any man to have the power to:

- Take any priest who is in the nome in which you live for compulsory labor or any work except (that of) conducting the ritual for his god in the temple in which he is, as well as maintaining the temples in which they take place.
- Raise [compulsory laborers] from any work on any god's land on which the priestly service is performed by priests.
- To take away any of the meret-people who are on any of the god's land on which the priestly service is performed by priests for any compulsory labor or any work of the nome.

They are exempt forever by a decree of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Neferirkare. There is no authority over it for any service.

As for any man of the nome who will seize any priest who is on the god's land on which the priestly service is performed in this nome for



compulsory labor or any work of the nome, you shall send him to law court, so that he may be placed in [ . . . ] plowing. . . .

As for any man of the nome who will seize the meret-people who are on the god's land for compulsory labor or any work of the nome, you shall send him to the law court, so that he may be placed . . . plowing. . . .

[As for] any noble, royal acquaintance, or person who shall act against this decree of my majesty which has been placed in the law court, (his) house, field, people and all his property will be confiscated, and he will be placed in any compulsory labor.

Sealed in the presence of the king himself. Month 2, Shemu day [11+x].

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1933. *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 170–171. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.

### TEXT FROM THE TOMB OF AHMOSE, SON OF ABANA

*Ahmoose, son of Abana, was a soldier who served under three kings at the beginning of the Eighteenth Dynasty (Ahmoose, Amenhotep I, Thutmose I, ca. 1539–1483 BCE). Ahmoose describes his involvement in the expulsion of the Hyksos, a group of people from Syria-Palestine who had come to rule northern Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period (1759–1539 BCE). The town of Avaris was the Hyksos capital during their rule of Egypt. For his bravery on the battlefield, Ahmoose was rewarded with what we would call a medal (the gold of valor), as well as prisoners of war, who became his slaves. Slaves could become agricultural workers, farming land assigned to their owner.*

*Ahmoose records that he was given five setjat (about seven-tenths of an acre) of land on two occasions as a reward for valor. Egyptian soldiers typically removed a hand from any enemy soldiers they killed as a means of verifying their accomplishments on the battlefield. Mitanni was an important kingdom located in northern Mesopotamia, and Egypt and Mitanni competed for control of Syria for much of the Eighteenth Dynasty. During the Middle Kingdom, the Egyptians had conquered Lower Nubia, but Egyptian weakness during the Second Intermediate Period allowed the Nubians to gain their independence under the kingdom of Kush. As Ahmoose relates, not only were the early Eighteenth Dynasty kings intent on expelling the Hyksos, but they also reclaimed Lower Nubia. Sharuhem was a town in southern Palestine.*

Overseer of Rowers, Ahmose, son of Ebana, deceased, says:

I speak to you, all people, to inform you of the favors which happened to me. I was rewarded with gold seven times before the entire land, male and female slaves likewise. I was endowed with an extremely large number of fields. The name of a brave man is in what he has accomplished. It shall never, ever, be destroyed from this land.

...

Now after I had founded a house I was taken to the ship "Northern" because of my bravery. Then I followed the monarch, l.p.h., on my feet when he was travelling in his chariot. One (i.e., the King) laid siege to the town of Avaris. I acted bravely on my feet in the presence of his Majesty. I was appointed to (the ship) "Appearing in Memphis." Fighting took place on water in the canal of Avaris. I inflicted a casualty, and I brought back a hand, (and) it was reported to the royal herald. Then I was awarded the gold of valor.

Then fighting occurred again in this place. I inflicted a casualty again there, and I brought back a hand. Then I was again rewarded with the gold of valor.

Then fighting took place in (that part of Egypt) south of this town. I took one captive and I went down to the river. Now look, he was captured on the side of the town, and I crossed the water carrying him, and it was reported to the royal herald. Then I was rewarded with gold again. Then Avaris was captured, and I brought back captives from (it): one man, three women, total: four individuals. Then his Majesty gave them to me as slaves. Then Sharuhen was besieged for three years. Then his Majesty captured it. I took plunder from it: two women, (and) one hand. The gold of valor was given to me. Look, the captives were given to me as slaves.

Now after his Majesty had slain the Bedouin of Asia he sailed south to Khenet-hen-nefer in order to destroy the Nubian nomads. Then his Majesty made great (piles) of corpses from them. I brought out plunder from there, two living men and three hands. Then I was rewarded with gold again. Two women were given to me as slaves.

Then his Majesty sailed northwards, his heart rejoicing at (his) bravery and strength, after he had seized the southerners and northerners.

Then Aata came south; his fate bringing about his reckoning, (when) the gods of Upper Egypt seized him. He was found by his Majesty in Tent-taa.

His Majesty captured him alive, (and) all his men were easy prey. Then I carried off two young warriors as captives from Aata's boat. I was given five people as (my) share, and five setjat in my town. The same was done for the entire crew.

Then that enemy came, Teti-an was his name, after he had gathered to himself rebels. His Majesty slew him, along with his entire crew. Then three people and five setjat of land in my town were given to me.

Then I rowed (for) the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Djeserkare (Amenhotep I), true of voice (i.e., deceased) when he traveled south to Kush to extend the borders of Egypt. His Majesty slew that Bedouin in the midst of his army, they were carried off in fetters, with none left out; the fugitives were struck down as those who never existed. Now while I was at the head of our army I fought valiantly, and his Majesty saw my bravery when I brought back two hands to present to his Majesty. Then his people and his cattle were hunted down, and I brought back a living captive to present to his Majesty. In two days I brought his Majesty back to Egypt from the upper basin. Then I was rewarded with gold, and I brought back two female slaves as plunder, in addition to those I presented to his Majesty. I was appointed as a "Warrior of the Ruler."

...

Now after this (his Majesty) set out for Syria in order to vent his anger throughout the land. When (his Majesty) reached Mitanni, his Majesty, l.p.h. (Thutmose I), found that enemy gathering his troops. Then his Majesty made great piles of corpses from them. The captives his Majesty brought back from his victories were without number. Now, when I was at the head of his army the King saw my bravery. I brought back a chariot, its horse and rider as a living captive to present them to his Majesty. Then I was rewarded with gold again. I have (now) grown old, having reached old age, praised as in earlier times, beloved (by my lord), I rest in a tomb which I myself made.

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1906. *Urkunden der 18. Dynastie*. Vol. 1. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 1.16–10.9. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.

## THE ADOPTION PAPYRUS

*This papyrus, which was created ca. 1095 BCE, consists of two sections. The first, dated to the accession of Ramesses XI in ca. 1106 BCE, records the adoption of Nanefer (also referred to as Rennefer) by her husband, Nebnefer. Nanefer*

*and Nebnefer were childless, and by adopting his wife as his child, Nebnefer was able to ensure that she inherited his property after his death; otherwise, the property would have reverted to Nebnefer's siblings. At some point in the marriage, Nebnefer and Rennefer purchased a slave girl, Dienhutiry, probably for the purposes of providing children to Nebnefer. Dienhutiry had three children, and it seems that after the death of Nebnefer, Rennefer adopted them as her own children. Rennefer also adopted her younger brother, Padiu, and arranged for his marriage to Taimenet, the oldest of the three children of Dienhutiry.*

*This papyrus is important for the light it sheds on topics such as marriage, inheritance, and adoption in ancient Egypt. Our interest here lies in the information provided about slavery. It seems that the difference between slave and free was not so great that it was not unheard of for a free Egyptian to have legally recognized children by a slave. It also seems that the children of a female slave inherit her status as slave regardless of the status of the father, since Rennefer finds it necessary to declare that she has freed Dienhutiry's children. Rennefer also had no qualms about marrying her brother to a former slave girl. Apparently, there was no social stigma attached to marrying current or former slaves. Of course, purchasing another human being for the purposes of reproduction implies a certain level of unconcern for what we would consider basic human rights.*

Year 18, Month 1, Akhet, day 10 under <his> Majesty, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lord of the Two Lands, Minmaatse Setepenptah, l.p.h., Son of Re Nebkhou, Lord of Appearances, Remessekhaemwasetmery-Imn (Ramesses XI), the god (and) ruler of Heliopolis, given life forever and ever.

On this day, a declaration of the stablemaster Nebnefer and his wife, a singer of Seth, Spermeru-Rennefer, to the effect that:

We purchased the female slave Dienhutiry, and she gave birth to three children, one boy and two girls, making a total of three. I (Spermeru-Rennefer) adopted them, fed them, and I raised them, and up until this very day they have done me no wrong, but have treated me well, and I have no sons or daughters except for them. And the overseer of stables Padiu entered into my household and he married Taimenet, their older sister, since he was related to me (as) my younger brother, and I accepted him for her, and he is with her today.

Now look, I have made her (Taimenet) a free woman of the Land of Pharaoh, l.p.h. Whether she gives birth to a boy or girl, they will be free people of the Land of Pharaoh also, precisely because they are with the overseer

of stables Padiu, this younger brother of mine. And the children shall be with their older sister in the house of Padiu, this overseer of stables, this younger brother of mine. Now I am hereby making him a son of mine today, exactly like they are.

She said “As Amun endures and as the Ruler, l.p.h., endures, I am making the people whom I listed free people of the Land of Pharaoh, and if a son or daughter, brother or sister, of their mother and their father should contest their rights, except for Padiu my son, since they are not with him as servants any more, but they are as brothers and sisters, children, they are free people of the Land [of Pharaoh]. May a donkey have sex with any man and his wife who will call them a servant.”

**Source:** Gardiner, A. 1941. “Adoption Extraordinary.” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 26: 23–29, pls. VIA, VIIA. Translated by S. E. Thompson.

### RESTORATION STELA OF TUTANKHAMUN

*Tutankhamun's father, Akhenaten (1353–1336 BCE) had closed all the temples of Egypt and concentrated worship on only one god, Aten, the god of the sun and light. With Akhenaten's death, worship of the old gods was restored, and in this monument, known as the Restoration Stela, Tutankhamun (ca. 1334–1324 BCE) records his actions restoring the closed temples to their former status. Tutankhamun recorded providing slaves to the temples from those taken captive in war to labor in the temple workhouses. In order to function properly, temples needed a wide range of workers, including bakers, butchers, brewers, fishermen, fowlers, beekeepers, and herdsmen. We also learn that female slaves had been used as entertainment for the palace, serving as singers and dancers. Of particular interest here is the notion that slaves could become free as a result of being “purified” to enter temple service.*

Then his Majesty made monuments for the gods, [manufacturing] their sacred images from genuine electrum of foreign lands, rebuilding their sanctuaries as monuments (standing) until the end of eternity, endowed with products forever, instituting divine offerings for them as daily offerings, providing their offerings on earth. He gave more than had ever been (given) before. He surpassed that which had been [done] since the time of the ancestors. He installed *wab*-priests and divine servants from among the children of the officials of their towns (and) from among the sons of well-known men whose names were renowned. He multiplied their

[offering tables?] with gold, silver, bronze, and copper without limit. . . . He filled their workhouses with male and female slaves, as the spoils of his Majesty's plunder. . . . for the temples and cities, doubled, tripled, quadrupled, with silver, [gold], lapis lazuli, turquoise, all (types) of precious stones, royal linen, white cloth, fine linen, moringa oil, resin, fat, [. . .] incense, balsam, and myrrh, without limit of all good things.

His Majesty, l.p.h., built their river barges from genuine cedar of Lebanon (and) the choicest (wood) of Negau, overlaid with the best gold of foreign lands, so they would illuminate the Nile.

His Majesty, l.p.h., purified the male slaves and female slaves, female singers and dancers who had been slave girls in the King's house, their labor having been assessed to the palace . . . of the Lord of the Two Lands. I cause that they be freed for my fathers, all the gods, so that they may be satisfied with that which their *kas* love.

**Source:** Lacau, P. 1926. *Steles du Nouvel Empire*. Vol. 1.2. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 227–228. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale.

### THE CAIRO STELA, *SLAVES AS OWNERS OF PROPERTY*

*This stela dates to the late Ramesside Period (1190–1077 BCE) and was probably originally set up in the temple of Horus at Buhen. The upper register of the stela shows Peniun and Ta'aat worshipping Horus of Buhen. The stela is inscribed in hieratic, which is unusual at this period in Egyptian history. Hieratic was usually written with a brush on papyri and ostraca (pieces of pottery or flakes of limestone); stelae were usually inscribed in hieroglyphs. The use of hieratic may have resulted from the attempt to replicate a legal document; the two parts of the text are referred to as "depositions," meaning they would have been originally made orally in a legal case. The stela could have been set up in a temple to provide a record of the transfer of land from the original owners to Peniun and Ta'aat. It is also possible that the stela was originally set up on the land in question as a boundary marker and public record of how the land came to be transferred to its new owners.*

*The exact relationship between these two individuals is never specified, but since they are both depicted on the same stela, it is likely that they were husband and wife. As previously noted, slaves did have rights independent of their masters. One of those rights was that of land ownership. In the text below, we see two instances of slaves disposing of their property to their masters. In the first, the slave Shedist sold some farmland to her master in return for the*

*enumerated items and a promise that she would be cared for in her old age. In the second, the slave Tabes sold some farmland to her mistress Ta'aat. The Egyptian economy was cashless for most of its history, and transactions were based on the exchange of goods of an agreed upon value. A heseb of land was the equivalent of seventy-three square feet (6.8 square meters) and a cubit was eighteen inches (0.523 meters). A khar was about twenty gallons, and a hin was about a pint. Sections of the stela are damaged, and the script is difficult to decipher. Only the relevant portions have been translated here.*

Deposition of the sandal-maker Peniun. He said: "As for me, the citizeness Shediset, a slave of mine, came to me, saying: 'Look after me while I live and you will acquire my farmland. Do not allow me to give it to a stranger.' She gave me a heseb of farmland. List of what I gave to her for it: two skirts of good quality linen, a shawl of good quality linen, two khar of real barley, two smooth bedsheets, three sherek-garments. . . ."

Deposition of the citizeness Ta'aat; she said: A slave of mine named Tabes came to me, saying: "I am impoverished. Give me (some) provisions and you may take my farmland which I own. Do not allow me to sell it to another." List of the land which she gave to me: "2-cubit" farmland 6 (cubits?), low lands subject to the inundation. . . . List of items given to her in exchange: 2 shawls of good quality linen, fresh vegetables 8 oipe, with 2 sacks of real barley and 4 hin of oil. . . .

**Source:** Bakir, Abd El-Moshen. 1952. *Slavery in Pharaonic Egypt*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, pl. III–IV. Cairo: L'Institut français d'archéologie orientale. Used by permission of IFAO. Translation by S. E. Thompson supplemented by Hassan and Ouda 2018.

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# Curses or Booby Traps Protected Egyptian Tombs

## What People Think Happened

Few can doubt that the ancient Egyptians devoted considerable effort and expense to preparing for the afterlife. From the enormous pyramids of the Old Kingdom to the rock-cut tombs of the New Kingdom, the Egyptians appropriated a considerable portion of the labor and resources of Egypt to tomb building and provisioning. Private individuals with means went to great lengths to prepare for their burials, and a gift from the king of a tomb or architectural element of a tomb to an individual was memorialized for eternity in the tomb's inscriptions. Perhaps the most well-known effort the Egyptians made to prepare for the afterlife was the creation of a mummy, the embalmed remains of a deceased individual. Considerable effort (lasting anywhere from thirty to two hundred days) and expense could go into making a mummy.

Given this investment in labor and treasure, it would be logical to assume that the Egyptians would have tried to protect their tombs and mummies, since they were considered essential to a pleasant afterlife. There are two means that people frequently assume the Egyptians employed to protect their burials: curses and booby traps. A curse is an expressed wish that harm or misfortune happen to another individual as a result of some offense committed by the other individual. Curses are thought to manifest themselves when an individual involved in the discovery or excavation of a tomb falls victim to unexpected illness, accident, or death.

For example, Philipp Vandenberg has compiled a list of archaeologists working in Egypt who died from “fever with delusions and anticipation of death, strokes accompanied by circulatory collapse, and sudden cancers that were quickly terminal” (Vandenberg 1977, 60), which he suggests may be the result of the “curse of the Pharaohs.” It seems that the more famous an archaeological discovery, the more likely the popular press is to attach a curse to it. For example, in July 2018, the *New York Times* ran a story about a black granite sarcophagus that had been discovered at the bottom of a pit in Alexandria, Egypt. Speculation was that this was the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great and “that opening the sarcophagus might unleash a curse.” When the sarcophagus was opened, it was found to contain “three skeletons floating in foul-smelling sewage.” As far as anyone can tell, no curse was unleashed (Specia 2018).

A fictionalized version of a curse with roots in ancient Egyptian literature was the idea that an Egyptian mummy itself could seek revenge against those who disturbed its rest. This motif first appeared in English literature in short stories of the 1860s. Examples of such tales include a short story by Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of Sherlock Holmes, titled “Lot No. 249,” published in 1892, and a novel by Bram Stoker, the creator of Dracula, *The Jewel of Seven Stars*, published in 1903. Roger Luckhurst has attributed the rise of stories about angry mummies taking revenge on those who disturb their rest to the anxiety caused by the British colonialization of Egypt in the nineteenth century and the expropriation of artifacts from their original homes (Luckhurst 2015). This same motif became popular in movies, particularly in the Universal Studios film *The Mummy*, which appeared in 1932.

Such stories and films also include examples of booby traps in tombs or temples that impede the heroes on their quest, a recent example being the 1999 Universal Pictures film *The Mummy*. Vandenberg has suggested that the Egyptians spread poison on the mummies and artifacts included in an Egyptian tomb in order to protect them from harm (Vandenberg 1977, 178). Despite the prominent role accorded such traps in fiction and speculation, no actual example of such a booby trap has been discovered in an Egyptian tomb.

### **How the Story Became Popular**

The supposed sarcophagus of Alexander the Great was not the first time the public believed that remains from ancient Egypt were protected by a curse. The most famous example of the “mummy’s curse,” or the “curse

of the pharaohs,” occurred in conjunction with the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in November 1922 by Howard Carter and his wealthy patron, Lord Carnarvon. The discovery of this tomb set off a press sensation, and reporters from all over the world converged on the Valley of the Kings to report on the amazing find. Carnarvon, however, had entered into an exclusive deal with the *Times* of London, giving them sole rights to the publication of photos and reports of the ongoing clearing of the tomb. As a result, all other news organizations, including the Egyptian newspapers, were relegated to the sidelines, their reporters left scrambling for information they could publish.

Such an opportunity presented itself when Carnarvon became ill from an infected mosquito bite. The infection developed into blood poisoning and pneumonia, resulting in his death in April 1923. The newspapers now had a story they could run with. Both the New York *World* and the *Daily Express* of London ran a story twelve days before Carnarvon's death quoting Marie Corelli, a British novelist and mystic, as stating,

I cannot but think that some risks are run by breaking into the last rest of a King of Egypt whose tomb is specially and solemnly guarded and robbing him of his possessions. According to a rare book which I possess, which is not in the British Museum, entitled “The Egyptian History of the Pyramids” . . . the most dire punishment follows any rash intruder into a sealed tomb. This book gives long and elaborate lists of “treasures” buried with several of the kings, and among those are named “divers secret poisons enclosed in boxes in such wise that they who touch them shall not know how they come to suffer.” (Luckhurst 2012, 9)

Another report described how a clay tablet had been discovered in the antechamber of the tomb carrying a hieroglyphic inscription that, when translated by Alan Gardiner, one of the foremost British Egyptologists of the day, read, “death shall come on swift wings to whoever toucheth the tomb of the Pharaoh.” The fact that this tablet was not included among the catalogue of artifacts from the tomb was said to be due to the actions of Carter and Carnarvon, who destroyed the tablet to prevent the laborers from abandoning their tasks out of fear. Years later, the anthropologist Henry Field reported seeing an inscription over the door of the tomb stating, “death to those who enter” (Luckhurst 2012, 13). Another curse was reported to be found written on a torch covered in gold and mounted on a clay brick in front of a statue of the god Anubis. The brick bore an inscription supposedly ending with the statement “I will call all those who cross the threshold into the sacred precincts of the King who lives forever.”

This part of the inscription was also said to have been erased by Carter to prevent panic from spreading among the workmen (Tyldesley 2012, 228). The remains of the famous boy king were not the first artifacts from ancient Egypt thought to pose a danger to those who possessed them. The British Museum possesses a “mummy board” (accession number EA22542, viewable at [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=117233&partId=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=117233&partId=1)) that carries the nickname “the unlucky mummy.” This object, whose original owner is unknown, dates to around 950 BCE, during the Twenty-First Dynasty. A mummy board was made of wood covered in plaster and decorated with scenes, in this case relating to the afterlife, and was intended to cover the mummy in its coffin. This object was purchased by Thomas Douglas Murray during a trip to Egypt sometime in the 1860s or 1870s. According to an account given by his brother Wyndham sixty years after the events occurred, the mummy board contained “an inscription that anybody who disturbed the mummy would come to trouble.” Shortly after acquiring the mummy board, Douglas Murray was involved in a hunting accident in which his gun misfired and the bullet struck him in the arm, resulting in his loss of the arm. This was just one of the many rumors surrounding those who came into possession of or attempted to photograph the mummy board once it was on display in the British Museum (Luckhurst 2012, 25–60).

Another such cursed object currently resides in the Rhode Island School of Design museum in Providence, Rhode Island. On display there are the coffin and mummy of Nesmin, a priest of the gods Min and Khonsu, who lived around 250 BCE in the Upper Egyptian city of Akhmim. This mummy and coffin were purchased by a British soldier and explorer, Walter Herbert Ingram, when he was in Egypt in 1885. In 1888, Ingram was killed while on a hunting trip in Egypt. Ingram shot, but only wounded, an elephant, and when Ingram fell off his horse, the wounded animal trampled him to death. What was left of Ingram’s body was quickly buried, but his remains were later washed away by heavy rains in the area. In a letter to the author H. Rider Haggard, written in 1889, Rudyard Kipling mentions the story of Walter Ingram and notes that the mummy had contained a curse to the effect that “any man who disturbed [the mummy] . . . should die horribly in the open as a beast dies at the hand of a beast and there should not be enough of him to put into a matchbox.”

In July 1896, the *Strand Magazine* of London published an interview with Admiral Lord Charles Beresford in which he recounted the story of Walter Ingram. Beresford stated that when an expert from the British



The coffin of Nesmin (ca. 250 BCE). It was claimed that the inscriptions on the coffin contained a curse which was responsible for the death of Walter Herbert Ingram in 1888. There is no curse found on the coffin. (Coffin and Mummy of Nesmin. Accession No. 38.206. Museum Appropriation Fund and Mary B. Jackson Fund, Rhode Island School of Design.)



Museum translated the hieroglyphic text on the coffin, it contained a “long and blood-curdling” curse, stating that “whosoever disturbed the body of this priest should himself be deprived a decent burial; he would meet a violent death, and his mangled remains would be ‘carried down by a rush of waters to the sea’” (Luckhurst 2012, 63). After Ingram’s death, the mummy passed into the possession of the wife of Sir Henry Meux, his hunting partner. On her death in 1911, the coffin and other Egyptian artifacts Lady Meux had acquired were left to the British Museum, but due to the conditions of the gift, the museum refused to accept them. The coffin of Nesmin was auctioned off by Sotheby’s in London and was purchased for the American newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst. When Hearst’s media empire collapsed in 1939, Sotheby’s again sold the coffin, this time to its current owner, the Rhode Island School of Design (Luckhurst 2012, 61–84).

Stories of traps and curses protecting ancient Egyptian remains existed long before the nineteenth and twentieth centuries of our era. As the documents cited below will illustrate, the ancient Greeks and the Arab conquerors of Egypt also knew of stories involving Egyptian treasures and tombs protected by traps or supernatural means. Even today in the Egyptian countryside, “many people say that the ruins of temples and graves from this ancient period are haunted by spirits who protect the place from intruders and grave robbers. These spirits are tied to these places by the powerful magic of the Pharaoh and many stories relate the terrible consequences of violating the graves” (Drieskens and Lucarelli 2002, 85).

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### HERODOTUS, *RHAMPSINITOS AND THE CLEVER THIEF*

*Herodotus (ca. 490–415 BCE) was a Greek historian from Halicarnassus on the coast of western Turkey. He is regarded as the father of history, in the sense that he collected and evaluated sources in writing his account of the wars between the Greeks and Persians. Since Egypt was part of the Persian empire at the time, Herodotus devoted a lengthy section (book 2) of his history to a description of the geography, flora, fauna, customs, and history of Egypt. Herodotus traveled to Egypt sometime between 449 and 430 BCE, and he claims to have received much of his information from Egyptian priests and other native informants. This passage relates the story of the Egyptian king Rhampsinitos and his treasure. The name Rhampsinitos is a combination*

of the Egyptian names *Ramesses* and *Saneit* (meaning “son of (the goddess) *Neith*”). *Rhampsinitos* is a legendary, not historical, figure. He also occurs in the *Library of History* by *Diodorus Siculus* (I 62,5) where he is known for his miserliness and the great treasure he was able to amass during his lifetime.

*In this story, the king falls victim to the individual he trusted to build his treasury, who included a secret back entrance to the storehouse. Just before his death, the builder shared this information with his sons, who used this entrance to slowly loot the treasury. As we will see later in this chapter, this folktale is not far from reality, because the tombs of the ancient Egyptian kings were frequently robbed by the very individuals who had constructed or equipped them in the first place. In his commentary on Herodotus, Alan Lloyd notes that a stone chamber in an Egyptian palace would have been highly unusual, as it was usually built of mud brick (Asheri, Lloyd, and Corcella 2007, 327). Such a structure is probably based on the stone crypts sealed by moveable blocks in Egyptian temples. The motif of a king prostituting his daughter for his own benefit is also found at Herodotus II, 126, where we are told that Khufu prostituted his daughter in order to raise the money to complete his pyramid.*

121. After Proteus, they told me, Rhampsinitos received in succession the kingdom, who left as a memorial of himself that gateway to the temple of Hephaistos which is turned towards the West, and in front of the gateway he set up two statues, in height five-and-twenty cubits, of which the one which stands on the North side is called by the Egyptians Summer and the one on the South side Winter; and to that one which they call Summer they do reverence and make offerings, while to the other which is called Winter they do the opposite of these things.

121. (a) This king, they said, got great wealth of silver, which none of the kings born after him could surpass or even come near to; and wishing to store his wealth in safety he caused to be built a chamber of stone, one of the walls whereof was towards the outside of his palace: and the builder of this, having a design against it, contrived as follows, that is, he disposed one of the stones in such a manner that it could be taken out easily from the wall either by two men or even by one. So when the chamber was finished, the king stored his money in it, and after some time the builder, being near the end of his life, called to him his sons (for he had two) and to them he related how he had contrived in building the treasury of the king, and all in forethought for them, that they might have ample means of living. And when he had clearly set forth to them everything

concerning the taking out of the stone, he gave them the measurements, saying that if they paid heed to this matter they would be stewards of the king's treasury. So he ended his life, and his sons made no long delay in setting to work, but went to the palace by night, and having found the stone in the wall of the chamber they dealt with it easily and carried forth for themselves great quantity of the wealth within.

121. (b) And the king happening to open the chamber, he marvelled when he saw the vessels falling short of the full amount, and he did not know on whom he should lay the blame, since the seals were unbroken and the chamber had been close shut; but when upon his opening the chamber a second and a third time the money was each time seen to be diminished, for the thieves did not slacken in their assaults upon it, he did as follows:—having ordered traps to be made he set these round about the vessels in which the money was; and when the thieves had come as at former times and one of them had entered, then so soon as he came near to one of the vessels he was straightway caught in the trap: and when he perceived in what evil case he was, straightway calling his brother he showed him what the matter was, and bade him enter as quickly as possible and cut off his head, for fear lest being seen and known he might bring about the destruction of his brother also. And to the other it seemed that he spoke well, and he was persuaded and did so; and fitting the stone into its place he departed home bearing with him the head of his brother.

121. (c) Now when it became day, the king entered into the chamber and was very greatly amazed, seeing the body of the thief held in the trap without his head, and the chamber unbroken, with no way to come in or go out: and being at a loss he hung up the dead body of the thief upon the wall and set guards there, with charge if they saw any one weeping or bewailing himself to seize him and bring him before the king. And when the dead body had been hung up, the mother was greatly grieved, and speaking with the son who survived she enjoined him, in whatever way he could, to contrive means by which he might take down and bring home the body of his dead brother; and if he should neglect to do this, she earnestly threatened that she would go and give information to the king that he had the money.

121. (e) Upon this the king, when it was reported to him that the dead body of the thief had been stolen away, displayed great anger; and desiring by all means that it should be found out who it might be who devised these things, did this (so at least they said, but I do not believe the

account),—he caused his own daughter to sit in the stews, and enjoined her to receive all equally, and before having commerce with any one to compel him to tell her what was the most cunning and what the most unholy deed which had been done by him in all his life-time; and who-soever should relate that which had happened about the thief, him she must seize and not let him go out. Then as she was doing that which was enjoined by her father, the thief, hearing for what purpose this was done and having a desire to get the better of the king in resource, did thus:—from the body of one lately dead he cut off the arm at the shoulder and went with it under his mantle: and having gone in to the daughter of the king, and being asked that which the others also were asked, he related that he had done the most unholy deed when he cut off the head of his brother, who had been caught in a trap in the king's treasure-chamber, and the most cunning deed in that he made drunk the guards and took down the dead body of his brother hanging up; and she when she heard it tried to take hold of him, but the thief held out to her in the darkness the arm of the corpse, which she grasped and held, thinking that she was holding the arm of the man himself; but the thief left it in her hands and departed, escaping through the door.

121. (f) Now when this also was reported to the king, he was at first amazed at the ready invention and daring of the fellow, and then afterwards he sent round to all the cities and made proclamation granting a free pardon to the thief, and also promising a great reward if he would come into his presence. The thief accordingly trusting to the proclamation came to the king, and Rhampsinitos greatly marvelled at him, and gave him this daughter of his to wife, counting him to be the most knowing of all men; for as the Egyptians were distinguished from all other men, so was he from the other Egyptians.

**Source:** Herodotus. 1890. *The History of Herodotus*. Vol. 1. Translated by G. C. Macaulay. London and New York: MacMillan and Co.

### JALĀL AL-DĪN AL-SUYŪṬĪ, *THE TREATISE ON THE EGYPTIAN PYRAMIDS*

*In 641 CE, under the rule of the Caliph Umar, invading Muslim armies took control of Egypt from its Byzantine rulers. Native Egyptians had not been much involved with the hostilities and were regarded by the Muslim conquerors as kin to the Muslims rather than defeated enemies. After the Muslim*

conquest, Arab travelers and settlers descended on Egypt in large numbers. Encountering the impressive and numerous monuments of the ancient Egyptian civilization, Arab scholars began collecting any information they could on ancient Egypt. Among their sources were the traditions and folktales that had been circulating among the Egyptians. Coptic monks, who still used a language related to that of ancient Egypt, were another source of information on ancient Egypt. Arab writers also had access to the works of Greek and Latin authors, in addition to Jewish works. Eventually medieval Arab authors produced a considerable number of works in Arabic on the history and customs of the ancient Egyptians (El-Daly 2005, 9–29).

Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī was a Muslim historian and religious scholar born in Cairo in 1445. He was a prolific author, producing over fifty works of history, in addition to numerous works on the Quran and other Muslim religious texts, biographies, literature, medicine, food, and even a work on sexology. al-Suyūṭī was careful to name the sources he was quoting in his works on ancient Egypt, and many of his quoted passages represent all that is known of these Arab works on Egypt (El-Daly 2005, 182). In the passage quoted below, al-Suyūṭī describes the supernatural guardians of the pyramids at Giza tasked with protecting them from intruders. Sawrid (also transliterated as Saurid or Surid) was the name given in Arabic legends to the builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza. The name perhaps derived from the Greek Suphis, identified in one version of Manetho's *Aegyptiaca* as Cheops (Khufu), the builder of the Great Pyramid (Fodor 1970, 357). In Arab legends, Sawrid was said to have lived three hundred years before the Great Flood described in the book of Genesis.

For each Pyramid he (Sawrid, King of Egypt) made a guardian, the one for the Western Pyramid being an idol of quartz, standing upright and holding a sort of javelin; around his head was coiled a snake, and if anyone approached the idol, the snake would leap at him, no matter from which direction the man came, and would coil itself around his neck, kill him, and then return to its place.

The guardian of the Eastern Pyramid was an idol of black onyx with brilliant (widely) open eyes, sitting upon a throne and holding a sort of javelin. If anyone (so much as) looked at him, he would hear such a roar from the direction of the idol, that the man's heart would be seized with terror and he would sink upon his face and be unable to flee, even until he died.

For guardian of the colored Pyramid he made an idol of baht (a stone said to be found in the Atlantic Ocean, prized in Western Africa) stone,

(sitting) upon a pedestal of the same material. If anyone looked at him, the idol would seize him and hug him tightly, and would not release him until he died. (p. 23)

**Al-Mas'udi** says: The length and width of each of the two pyramids is four hundred cubits, and their foundation is (the square of) their height. Each contains seven chambers, according to the number of the seven planetary stars, each chamber being under the name of a star and its aegis. At the side of each chamber there was erected a concave golden idol, with one of its hands placed over its mouth, and a hieratic inscription upon its forehead. When the inscription is read (aloud), its mouth opens and a key to the (chamber's) lock comes out. These idols receive(d) their own sacrifices and frankincense, and have spirits assigned to them charged with guarding the chambers, their idols, and their contents, consisting of images, (books on the) sciences, wondrous things, jewels, and (other) treasures. (p. 31)

It is said that the spirit in charge of the seaward Pyramid has the shape of a naked woman with her private parts uncovered and with her tresses reaching down to the ground. Several people have seen her going around the Pyramid at midday. The spirit in charge of the neighboring Pyramid has the form of a naked, tawny, and beardless youth, and was seen going round the Pyramid after sunset. The spirit in charge of the third Pyramid has the shape of an old man holding a censer and clad in monkish garb; he was seen going around the Pyramid at night. (p. 32)

**Source:** al-Suyūṭī, Jalāl al-Dīn, and Leon Nemoy. 1939. "The Treatise on the Egyptian Pyramids." *Isis* 30: 17–37. Used by permission, conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center.

### MURTADA IBN AL-KHAFIF, *THE EGYPTIAN HISTORY*

*Murtada ibn al-Khafif (1154/5–1237 CE) was an Islamic historian from Cairo. This excerpt is from his only known work, The Egyptian History. The original Arabic manuscript is lost; all that remains is a French translation published in 1666, and an English translation of the French, published in 1672. This is probably the book Marie Corelli refers to as the source of her information on the dangers awaiting those who entered Egyptian tombs. In the following passage, Murtada ibn al-Khafif relates the story of a group of young men who entered what we presume to be the Great Pyramid of Khufu, with the apparent intention of stealing whatever treasure they could find. As a*

*result, several meet their deaths, and one is crushed in some sort of trap. This unfortunate individual is apparently allowed to return from the dead just long enough to issue a warning against tomb robbery to his surviving companions.*

Another history relates, that after the Pyramid was opened people went in out of curiosity for some years, many entering into it, and some returning thence without any inconvenience, others perishing in it. One day it happened that a company of young men (above 20 in number) swore that they would go into it, provided nothing hindered them, and to force their way to the end of it. They therefore took along with them meat and drink for two months; they also took plates of iron and bars, wax-candles and lanterns, lath and oil, hatchets, hooks, and other sharp Instruments, and entered into the Pyramid: most of them got down from the first descent and the second, and passed along the ground of the Pyramid, where they saw bats as big as black eagles, which began to beat their faces with much violence. But they generously endured that inconvenience, and advanced still till they came to a narrow passage, through which came an impetuous wind, and extra ordinary cold; yet so as they could not perceive whence it came, nor whither it went. They advanced to get into the narrow place, and then their candles began to go out, which obliged them to put them into their lanterns. Then they entered, but the place seemed to be joined and close before them: whereupon one of them said to the rest,

“Tie me by the waist with a cord, and I will venture to advance, conditionally that if any accident happen to me, you immediately draw me back.”

At the entrance of the narrow place there were great empty vessels made like coffins, with their lids by them; whence they inferred, that those who set them there had prepared them for their death; and that to get to their treasures and wealth there was a necessity of passing through that narrow place. They bound their companion with cords, that he might venture to get through that passage; but immediately the passage closed upon him, and they heard the noise of the crushing of his bones: they drew the cords to them, but they could not get him back. Then there came to them a dreadful voice out of that cave, which startled and blinded them so that they fell down, having neither motion nor sense. They came to themselves awhile after, and endeavored to get out, being much at a loss what to do. At last after much trouble they returned, save only some of them who fell under the descent. Being come out into the plain they sat down together, all astonished at what they had seen, and reflecting on what had happened

to them; whereupon the Earth cleft before them, and cast up their dead companion, who was at first immovable, but two hours after began to move, and spoke to them in a language they understood not, for it was not the Arabian. But some time after one of the inhabitants of the Upper Egypt interpreted it to them, and told them his meaning was this: "This is the reward of those who endeavor to seize what belongs to another." After these words their companion seemed dead as before, whereupon they buried him in that place. Some of them died also in the Pyramid. Since that, he who commanded in those parts, having heard of their adventure, they were brought to him, and they related all this to him, which he much wondered at.

**Source:** al-Khafif, Murtada ibn. 1672. *The Egyptian History*. Translated by J. Davies, 44–47. London: Thomas Basset. Spelling and punctuation modernized.

### What Really Happened

The curses supposedly found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, on the mummy board purchased by Murray, and on the coffin of Nesmin simply never existed. Today we would apply the term *fake news* to these accounts. When the wording of the fictitious curses is compared with the actual curses employed by the ancient Egyptians, it will easily be seen how different they are. The location of the fictitious curses would be inaccurate, from the Egyptians' point of view. In order to be effective, the curses had to be in the publicly accessible parts of the tomb or on publicly visible monuments to the dead, not areas inaccessible to the public, such as burial chambers or on coffins. The torch mounted on a clay brick was indeed found in the Tomb of Tutankhamun, but it was inscribed with a version of *Book of the Dead* Spell 151 and did not include the last line supposedly erased by Carter. Spell 151 is found approximately 167 times throughout Egyptian history, and none of these occurrences include anything like the line supposedly erased. Stories such as these found a ready audience in England during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries due to a resurgence in an interest in magic, and specifically Egyptian magic. As Luckhurst describes it, "there was a full-scale magical revival in the late Victorian period which was heavily invested in recovering the lost wisdom and supposedly immense supernatural powers of the ancient Egyptian priests" (Luckhurst 2012, 213).

The ancient Egyptians were anxious to protect their tombs, grave goods, and physical remains. The Egyptians believed that the dead continued to



have needs like those of the living. The dead needed food, drink, and the accoutrements of daily life. The Egyptians believed that the continued existence of the body of the deceased was necessary so that it could function as a home for the *ba* and the *ka*. One result of these beliefs was that the tombs of the wealthy became veritable storehouses of valuable goods. The Egyptians employed physical means to protect their tombs and mummies, including various methods of blocking the passageways to the burial chambers as well as using heavy granite sarcophaguses to house their coffins and ingenious locking mechanisms to make it difficult to open a coffin or sarcophagus once closed. The pyramid of Amenemhet III (1818–1773 BCE) at Hawara included a series of dead-end passages and hidden trap doors to discourage thieves.

None of these methods were intended to harm intruders but simply to prevent them from accomplishing their goals. By the New Kingdom, the Egyptians had realized that large pyramids simply served as advertisements to thieves of royal burial locations. New Kingdom kings adopted the practice of separating the public part of their burials, known as their mortuary temples, from the private, inaccessible portion—the tomb itself—containing their burial goods and physical remains. The tombs were located in the Valley of the Kings, where they could be more easily guarded. Archaeological remains and documents from ancient Egypt provide evidence that these efforts were largely unsuccessful.

The Egyptians, however, had other means to protect their burials. Through the use of threats or curses inscribed in the public parts of their tombs, the Egyptians hoped to discourage would-be tomb robbers. As noted earlier, the Egyptians believed the dead continued to have daily needs such as food and drink. In order to help fulfill these needs, an Egyptian burial included a public portion where priests and relatives (sometimes the two were identical) could visit the dead to make offerings or perform rituals on behalf of the dead. It is in these public portions that we find the use of threats and curses intended to ward off thieves. Sometimes such threats came from the state, represented by the king. At other times, it is the deceased himself who threatens to take action against anyone who violates his tomb. This is especially common in curses from Old Kingdom tombs.

For the wealthy, there was more to a proper burial than just a tomb. Statues of the deceased had to be created, and land had to be set aside to provide for the offerings for the deceased as well as income for those priests tasked with performing the rituals for the dead. Servants to work the land were needed as well. All these aspects of a proper burial were subject

to protection through curses or threats, just as the tombs were. During the New Kingdom, curses practically disappeared from tombs (making it unlikely that Tut's tomb had contained any curses) but appeared on other types of monuments such as stelas, statues, and so on.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### OLD KINGDOM TOMB CURSES

*During much of the Old Kingdom, high-ranking officials were buried in stone or mud-brick structures known as mastabas (the Arabic word for bench, a structure which these tombs were thought to resemble). The tomb consisted of two main parts: the below ground burial chamber, in which the body of the deceased was buried, and the above-ground mastaba, which could contain several rooms and served as the accessible part of the burial. Relatives and those charged with providing the daily offerings of food and drink would visit the mastaba. The focus within the mastaba was a structure known as the false door. This was essentially a stela decorated with images of the deceased and inscriptions listing the offices the deceased had held and the offerings he was to receive in the afterlife. The structure is called a "false door" because it resembled the doors used in Egyptian homes and served as the portal between the world of the living and that of the dead. Offerings to the deceased were made before the false door.*

*The first example of a curse presented here is from the false door of Meni. Not much is known about Meni. On his false door, he is described as the "elder of the house." Since his false door was removed from his tomb, it is uncertain where his tomb was located or when he was buried. Strudwick (2005, 253) has suggested that his tomb was in the Western Cemetery at Giza, and he dates the stela to sometime within the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2305–2118 BCE). In this brief inscription, which is a typical example of the types of statements found in Old Kingdom mastabas, Meni takes pains to mention that he paid those who worked on his tomb to their satisfaction. He threatens anyone who would harm his tomb with an attack from a crocodile or snake. Other such threats from Old Kingdom tombs include the hippopotamus, the lion, and the scorpion as animals that will harm anyone who violates the tomb.*

*A visual representation of the threats posed to those who violate a tomb is to be found on the false door belonging to a royal servant named Hetepu, also buried in the Western Cemetery of Giza, tentatively dated to the late Fourth or early Fifth Dynasties. At the end of a curse similar to the one from the false*

*door of Meni, we find the figure of a man being attacked by several animals, including a bird of prey (hawk or falcon), vulture, snake, scorpion, crocodile, and an unidentifiable animal (hippopotamus, lion, or dog) is shown clinging to his arm (Handoussa 2010, 144). These are not just any animals, however. One of the abilities the Egyptians believed the dead possessed was that of transformation; they were thought to be able to transform themselves into any form they wished. It is probable that the deceased himself, in the form of one of the dangerous animals mentioned, threatened to harm anyone who damaged his tomb.*

*The idea of the tomb owner himself taking vengeance on anyone harming his tomb is illustrated by the inscription from the tomb of Nenki. Nenki was an official during the reign of the Sixth Dynasty king Pepi II (ca. 2216–2153 BCE), and his tomb is located to the west of the pyramid of Pepi II at South Saqqara. In this threat passage, Nenki makes what is the most common threat found in Old Kingdom curses: he will take anyone who damages his tomb to court in the afterlife to be judged by the “Great God.” The identity of the Great God is uncertain; it could be Osiris, who in later texts is depicted as the judge of the dead. He could also have been a local deity with jurisdiction limited to the necropolis (burial area). Court action and “wringing his neck like a bird” were thought to take place in the afterlife, not on earth. An akh was the glorified, effective aspect of a person that continued to exist in the afterlife and could affect the lives of the living, positively or negatively. Here the deceased Nenki is threatening what we might classify as a haunting, the akhs from the afterlife causing fear among the living.*

### **From the False Door of Meni**

As for any man who made this (tomb) for me, he was never angry. As for the craftsman or the stone mason, I have satisfied him. The elder of the house, Meni, says:

A crocodile shall be against him in the water; a snake shall be against him on land, (that is), the one who will do anything (harmful) against this (tomb). I have never done anything (evil) against him. It is the god who will judge him.

### **From the Tomb of Nenki**

The Mouth of Nekhen, Priest of Maat, who satisfies the heart of the King when speaking his name. One who organizes matters, the keeper of secrets of hearing (cases) alone in the six houses of administration, the revered one, Nenki, says:

As for this tomb which I made in the West, (in) the necropolis, I have made it in a pure place in the midst thereof. As for any noble, any official,

or any man who shall dislodge any stone or any brick from this (my) tomb, I will be judged with him by the Great God. I will seize his neck like a bird's. I will cause all those upon earth to fear the *akhs* who are in the west, distant from them. The revealed one, true Mouth of Nekhen, Nenki.

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1933. *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 23, 260. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.

### ***DECREE OF KING DEMEDJIBTAWY FOR THE VIZIER IDI***

*This type of threat against anyone who would harm the tomb of the deceased is unlike the others we have discussed in that it is a decree of a king, Demedjibtawy, in favor of one of his high officials, Idi. Demedjibtawy was a king of the Eighth Dynasty (ca. 2150–2118 BCE), who is unknown other than from this decree, which would have been inscribed in the tomb of Idi. Among Idi's many offices was that of stolist of Min. A stolist was a priest responsible for the care and clothing of the statue of a god in his temple. Every day in all the temples throughout Egypt, the statues of the gods were washed, clothed, and presented with food offerings. In this decree, we see that all aspects of the tomb, including statues of the deceased and tomb furnishings, fell under the protection of the king. A ka-chapel was the location in the publicly accessible part of the tomb in which offerings were made to the deceased. In order to ensure that the deceased received an unending supply of food and drink, land would be set aside so that its produce would both provide for the deceased's needs and compensate those who performed the daily offerings on his behalf.*

*In this decree, the king threatens anyone who would damage the tomb or interfere with the funerary foundation of Idi with confiscation of their property, included any inherited property; their execution; and denial of the proper burial, preventing them from joining the successful dead as an akh. The king even threatens that in the afterlife they will be bound by order of the king, the god Osiris, and the god of their home town. Much later in Egyptian history, we find scenes of the Egyptian version of hell in which the unsuccessful dead are bound to stakes. The king also threatens any official who allows the tomb or funerary foundation of Idi to be violated.*

A decree of the king for the god's father, beloved of the god, the hereditary prince, foster child of the king, overseer of the pyramid city, vizier and stolist of Min, Idi.

As for any person of this entire land who will do anything destructive or evil against any of your statues, offering tables, *ka*-chapels, furniture, or

monuments which are in any chapels or temples, my majesty does not allow their property or the property of their fathers to remain in them. My majesty does not allow that they join the *akhs* in the necropolis. My majesty does not allow them to exist among the living [on earth].

As for any person of this entire land who will interfere with or reduce the property of your funerary foundation which is entered in the registry (or) which is made for your statues which are in the temples of Upper Egypt, being fields, bread, beer, meat or milk which were provided for you by decree, my majesty has not decreed that they exist among the *akhs* in the necropolis, but that they will be bound and tied up under the commands of the king, Osiris, (and) of their local gods.

As for any supervisor or official who does not take action against any man who will carry out these deeds until the king, vizier, or (other) officials arrive, he has no right to his office (or) his seal; he has no right to any of his property; his children have no right to it.

The one who will remain as an official is the one who will prevent the commission of these deeds.

Make for yourself a copy of this decree and send it to every official of Upper Egypt, as well as placing a decree in stone at (the) gate of every chapel in which you have monuments.

**Source:** Sethe, Kurt. 1933. *Urkunden des Alten Reiches*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 304.13–306.11. Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung.

## EIGHTEENTH DYNASTY STATUE OF WERSU FROM KOPTOS

*This text is from a damaged statue group depicting Wersu and his wife, Satre, seated, each with one arm around the other. Not much is known of Wersu, and the statue has been dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1539–1292 BCE) on stylistic grounds. Statues of an individual, either in the tomb chapel or in the outer courts of temples, served as a dwelling for the ka of the deceased individual and, as such, were a means for the deceased to receive offerings. For the ancient Egyptians, the relationship between an individual and his statue was not established by the physical similarity between the two but by the fact that an individual's name was carved on a statue. As a result, it was not uncommon for Egyptian kings and commoners to usurp the tombs and monuments of their predecessors. It was much cheaper and faster to simply carve out a*

*previous owner's name and insert one's own than it was to commission a whole new tomb or statue. Curses and threats were one attempt to prevent this from happening. In this text, Wersu threatens anyone who would damage his corpse or usurp his statue with misery in this life (his heart will not find peace) and in the afterlife. He will be rejected by the sun god Re, will not receive offerings of water, necessary for existence, in the next life, and his ba will be destroyed, meaning the individual will have no afterlife existence.*

Wersu says:

As for anyone who will damage my corpse in the necropolis, who will remove my statue from my tomb, he will be rejected by Re. He will not receive water from the libation-vessel of Osiris. He will not bequeath his property to his children, forever.

(The) Overseer of the foreign lands of gold of Amun Wersu, justified (i.e., deceased) says: As for the one who trespasses in my place, who will damage (my) tomb, who will remove my corpse, the *ka* of Re will reject him. He will not bequeath his property to his children. His heart will not find peace during life. He will not receive water in the necropolis. His *ba* will be destroyed forever.

This land is expansive, without limit. Act for yourselves just as (I) have. A *ba* is effective through acting for itself.

**Source:** Griffith, F. Ll. 1915. "A New Monument from Coptos." *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 2: 5–7. Translated By S. E. Thompson.

### **LETTER TO THE DEAD: A HUSBAND TO HIS DECEASED WIFE**

*There is little question that the Egyptians believed that the dead could have an effect on the living, for both good or ill. We have several examples of letters that Egyptians wrote to their deceased spouses (frequently husbands writing to wives) or relatives, requesting their assistance with a problem they are encountering that they believe is being caused by the akh of a deceased individual. Occasionally the letter writer asked his deceased relative to take legal action against the malevolent akh in the court of the netherworld. This would be the same tribunal to which tomb owners threatened to take those who violated their tombs during the Old Kingdom.*

*This document was written by an unnamed husband to his deceased wife, Ankhiry, who he apparently believed was causing him difficulty. The husband goes to great length reminding his wife of the good things he did for her while she was alive. He reminds her of the efforts he made to have the illness that took her life treated and the way that he has mourned her since her death. The letter does not contain a date, but based on the handwriting, it has been assigned to the Nineteenth Dynasty (1292–1191 BCE). Such letters, which were occasionally written on pottery vessels placed in the deceased's tomb along with offerings of food or drink, provide evidence that the Egyptians did believe that communication between the living and the dead was possible and that the dead could continue to play a role in the lives of the living.*

To the able spirit Ankhiry: What offence have I committed against you (to explain) my existing in this evil condition in which I (find) myself? What have I done against you? You have placed your hand on me although I have committed no offence against you. Even when I was with you as a husband, up until this (very) day, what have I done against you that I have hidden? What have (I done) against you? Because of your action(s) I have made an accusation (against) you; although what have I done against you? I shall plead my case against (you) verbally before the Ennead of the West and one shall judge between you and (me by means of) this letter (about) the issue with you (which) I have written about.

What have I done against you? I married you when I was a young man, (and) I was with you while I served in every office, and you were with me. I did not divorce (you); I did not cause your heart pain. Now I did it while I was a young man, while I was serving in every important office for Pharaoh, l.p.h., without divorcing (you), saying "She must be with me," so I would say. As for anyone who would come to me in your presence, I did not receive them for your sake, saying "I will act according to your wish."

Now look, you are not allowing me any peace of mind. I will be judged with you, and lies will be distinguished from the truth. Now look, when I was training the soldiers of the army of Pharaoh, l.p.h., together with his chariotry, I would (make) them come to lie down on their bellies for you, bringing all sorts of good things to place before (you). I never hid anything from you during your lifetime.

I did not allow you to suffer any injuries caused by me in the manner of a master. You did not find me humiliating you in the manner of a farmhand, entering another house. I did not cause a man to criticize me (concerning) anything I did to you.

And when you were placed in the tomb in which you are, I have been unable to go out as usual, doing that which one like me does when (at) home; your oil, your food, and your clothing as well were brought to you. I did not give them to another place, saying “The woman exists,” so I said, and I would not cheat on you.

But look, you do not know the good I have done for you. I am writing you to let you know what you are doing. Now when you became ill with the sickness which you contracted, I (called for) the chief of physicians, and he treated you (by) doing what you said to do. Now when I followed after Pharaoh, l.p.h., going to the south, this condition befell you. I spent a total of eight months not eating or drinking like a normal person. Now when I arrived at Memphis I requested (leave) from Pharaoh, l.p.h., and I (hurried) to where you were, and I wept exceedingly with the people in my neighborhood, and I provided fine cloth to wrap you, and I had many clothes made, and I left nothing good undone for you.

Now look, I have spent the last three years sitting around, without going into (another) house, although it is proper that one such as I should do this. But look, I have done it for you. Now you do not distinguish good from evil. One will judge between you and me. Now look, the sisters in the house, I did not have sex with even one of them.

**Source:** Gardiner, Alan, and Kurt Sethe. 1928. *Egyptian Letters to the Dead Mainly from the Old and Middle Kingdoms*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 7–8. London: Egypt Exploration Society. Used by permission of the Egypt Exploration Society.

### AMENHOTEP'S KA-CHAPEL

*Stela British Museum 138 is an unusual document. It is an example of a text in the hieratic script incised on a limestone stela. Generally, texts on wood or stone monuments were written in hieroglyphs, while hieratic, a more cursive script using ligatures to connect signs, was used for writing on papyrus or ostraca (pieces of pottery or flakes of limestone). One scholar has suggested that the reason for using incised hieratic was to allow the stela to replicate what was originally a document written on papyrus. Another unusual aspect of this document is its date. According to the text, the decree was issued in year 31 of Amenhotep III (1360 BCE), but the nature of the script indicates that the stela was inscribed during the Twenty-First Dynasty (ca. 1076–944 BCE). The purpose of the original document was to establish the funerary temple of Amenhotep, son of Hapu.*



*Amenhotep, son of Hapu was an extraordinary individual. He entered the administration of Amenhotep III as a royal scribe and priest of Horus-Khentikheti and rose to the office of "Overseer of all the works of the king," making him responsible for the construction of temples dedicated to Amenhotep III in Soleb (in ancient Nubia, modern Sudan) and Karnak. When he died, Amenhotep was given the extraordinary privilege of having his own funerary temple (called ka-chapel in the stela) near that of his king. Such a temple was for carrying out the daily rituals of offerings of food and drink necessary for Amenhotep to have an enjoyable afterlife. Eventually Amenhotep, son of Hapu became one of the few humans who entered the pantheon of the Egyptian gods. During the Ptolemaic Period, he was revered as a god of wisdom and healing.*

*The stela appears to be a copy of the original document establishing the foundation, providing it with servants. The document threatens any official who allows Amenhotep's ka-chapel to fall into ruin or who removes servants from Amenhotep's service for other purposes. They are threatened with physical destruction, removal from office, and the violation of their wives while they are forced to watch. Apophis was the serpent god who attempted to prevent the sun from completing his daily voyage through the sky and the underworld, and there were rituals conducted on New Year's Day in which Apophis was symbolically destroyed. The punishments for those violating Amenhotep's foundation were not only of this life. We read that such individuals will also be denied offerings once they have died ("those of the cavern" refers to the dead, and the threat is that the violators will not be able to eat the funerary offerings intended for the deceased) and will also face the Egyptians' ultimate fear in the afterlife—total destruction.*

Year 31, month 4, Akhet, day six before the majesty of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt Nebmaatre . . . Amenhotep (III).

(On) this day one was in the *ka*-chapel of the hereditary noble, royal scribe Amenhotep. The mayor and vizier Amenhotep, the overseer of the treasury Mery-Ptah, and the royal scribes of the army were brought in, (and) it was announced to them in the presence of his majesty, l.p.h., "hear the decree which has been issued to equip the *ka*-chapel of the hereditary noble, royal scribe, Amenhotep who is called Huy, the son of Hapu, in order to repay his goodness, to cause that his *ka*-chapel endure (equipped with) male and female slaves, forever, (from) son to son, heir to heir, in order to prevent it from being violated throughout eternity, since it has been equipped by Amun-Re King of the Gods, for its time upon earth. He is the King of Eternity; he is the protector of those who are buried.

As for a general or a scribe of the army who will come after me and will find the *ka*-chapel fallen into ruin, with male and female slaves who are cultivating my foundation, and who will take a man from it, assigning (him to) any forced labor of Pharaoh, l.p.h., or any duties of his own, or if another (person) interferes with it, and fails to defend it, he shall be in the destruction of Amun, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands, foremost of his chapel. He will not allow that they be satisfied with the office of Royal Scribe of the Army which they received of me. He will place them in the royal flame on the day of his rage; his uraeus-serpent will spit fire on their brows, their flesh being blackened, while it devours their bodies, as they become like Apophis on New Year's Day. They will drown in the sea which will hide their corpses. They will not receive the rank of the righteous. They will not consume the food of those of the cavern. Water from the inundation of the river will not be poured out for them. Their son(s) will not be installed in their places. Their wives will be raped while their eyes watch. The chiefs will not set foot in their houses while they are on earth. They shall not share in the leadership of the dual shrines. They shall not hear the king's words at the hour of rejoicing. They shall belong to the knife on the day of destruction. They will call them "snake." Their bodies will be blackened; they will hunger without bread (until) their bodies perish.

**Source:** Translated by S. E. Thompson from photos of stela available at the British Museum, EA138. Accessed July 10, 2019. [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=120288&partId=1&people=114299&page=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=120288&partId=1&people=114299&page=1).

### ***THE STORY OF SETNA AND NANEFERKAPTAH***

*This story, the copy of which dates to the early Ptolemaic Period, is the first "mummy's curse" story known. It is included as the first story in a collection of such tales written between 1832 and 1929 (Irish 2017). These stories relate how a mummy returns from the dead to wreak vengeance on those who have disturbed it. In fact, this story is the inspiration for the "scroll of Thoth" in the 1932 Universal film The Mummy. The ancient Egyptians apparently enjoyed tales of vengeful mummies returning from the dead as much as people today do, to judge by the popularity of recent mummy movies.*

*Setna is patterned after the historical Prince Khaemuas, the fourth son of Ramesses II, also known as Ramesses the Great, a pharaoh of the Nineteenth Dynasty in the New Kingdom. The name Setna derives from Khaemuas's title as high priest of the god Ptah of Memphis. At this point in the story, Setna*

*and his foster brother An-he-hor-eru have entered the tomb of Na-nefer-ka-ptah in Memphis and Setna has engaged in conversation with the akh of Na-nefer-ka-ptah's wife, Ahura. When Setna demands the Book of Thoth, the mummy of Na-nefer-ka-ptah rises from his bier and proposes they play a board game, with the winner getting the Book of Thoth. Setna loses but is able to steal the book due to the power of an amulet and the magic books that his brother has brought him. As Setna leaves the tomb carrying the Book of Thoth, Na-nefer-ka-ptah comforts his wife, predicting that soon Setna will be returning the book in the posture of a defeated enemy. As this part of the story ends, Setna has done just that.*

And Setna said to Ahura, "Give me the book which I see between you and Na-nefer-ka-ptah; for if you do not, I will take it by force." Then Na-nefer-ka-ptah rose from his seat and said, "Are you Setna, to whom my wife has told of all these blows of fate, which you have not suffered? Can you take this book by your skill as a good scribe? If, indeed, you can play games with me, let us play a game, then, of fifty-two points." And Setna said, "I am ready," and the board and its pieces were put before him. And Na-nefer-ka-ptah won a game from Setna; and he put the spell upon him and defended himself with the game board that was before him, and sunk him into the ground above his feet. He did the same at the second game, and won it from Setna, and sunk him into the ground to his waist. He did the same at the third game, and made him sink into the ground up to his ears. Then Setna struck Na-nefer-ka-ptah a great blow with his hand. And Setna called his brother An-he-hor-eru and said to him, "Make haste and go up upon earth, and tell the king all that has happened to me and bring me the talisman of my father Ptah and my magic books." And he hurried up upon the earth, and told the king all that had happened to Setna. The king said, "Bring him the talisman of his father Ptah, and his magic books." And An-he-hor-eru hurried down into the tomb; he laid the talisman on Setna, and he sprang up again immediately. And then Setna reached out his hand for the book and took it.

Then—as Setna went out from the tomb—there went a Light before him, and Darkness behind him. And Ahura wept at him, and she said: "Glory to the King of Darkness! Hail to the King of Light! all power is gone from the tomb." But Na-nefer-ka-ptah said to Ahura, "Do not let your heart be sad; I will make him bring back this book, with a forked stick in his hand, and a fire pan on his head." And Setna went out from the tomb, and it closed behind him as it was before. Then Setna went to the king and told him everything that had happened to him with the book. And the king

said to Setna, "Take back the book to the grave of Na-nefer-ka-ptah, like a prudent man, or else he will make you bring it with a forked stick in your hand, and a fire pan on your head." But Setna would not listen to him; and when Setna had unrolled the book he did nothing on earth but read it to everybody.

*[Some time later, Setna encounters an extraordinarily beautiful woman named Tabubua, and he is filled with an all-consuming desire to have sex with her. Before she will agree to his proposition, Tabubua requires that Setna sign over to her all his property, that his children agree to the transfer of property, and that the children then be killed. Setna agrees to all her requests, and as he and Tabubua climb into bed to complete the transaction, Setna suddenly wakes up finding himself naked in the presence of his father, the pharaoh. Setna finds out that his children are not dead and that the entire experience was the result of his being "enchanted" by Naneferkaptah.]*

Then Setna told all things that had happened with Tabubua and Na-nefer-ka-ptah. And the king said, "Setna, I have already lifted up my hand against you before, and said, 'He will kill you if you do not take back the book to the place you took it from.' But you have never listened to me till this hour. Now, then, take the book to Na-nefer-ka-ptah, with a forked stick in your hand, and a fire pan on your head."

So Setna went out from before the king, with a forked stick in his hand, and a fire pan on his head. He went down to the tomb in which was Na-nefer-ka-ptah. And Ahura said to him, "It is Ptah, the great god, that has brought you back safe." Na-nefer-ka-ptah laughed, and he said, "This is the business that I told you before." And when Setna had praised Na-nefer-ka-ptah, he found it as the proverb says, "The sun was in the whole tomb." And Ahura and Na-nefer-ka-ptah besought Setna greatly.

**Source:** Petrie, W. M. Flinders. 1899. "Setna and the Magic Book." In *The Universal Anthology*, edited by Richard Garnett, Leon Vallee, and Alois Brandl, 155–157. New York: Grolier Society.

### THE ABBOT PAPYRUS, TOMB ROBBERY IN ANCIENT EGYPT

*Despite all the efforts the Egyptians made to protect their burials, it is a sad fact that almost all tombs of the kings, queens, and elite members of society were robbed in antiquity, sometimes soon after burial. To add insult to injury, in many cases the thieves were the same individuals who had constructed the tombs. Quarrymen, stone masons, and carpenters all had skills that were*

*useful in burrowing into a rock-cut tomb. In some cases, it is apparent that the amulets destined to be included within the wrappings of a mummy were stolen by the embalmers themselves. One reason the tomb of King Tutankhamun has attracted so much attention since its discovery is the fact that it is the only royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings that was not robbed in antiquity. The tomb was broken into by thieves, but they were apparently interrupted before they could steal anything.*

*Toward the end of the Twentieth Dynasty, there are indications that Egypt was in the midst of economic and political difficulties. The inability of Ramesses III to pay the workers employed in tomb construction at Thebes led to the first recorded workers' strike in history. During the reign of Ramesses IX, we have records indicating that there were days the tomb workers were unable to work due to hunger, since their food supplies had not arrived. The passage below, dated to year sixteen of Ramesses IX (ca. 1114 BCE), is excerpted from a much-longer papyrus detailing an investigation of reported tomb robbery in the Valley of the Queens (the Beautiful Place).*

*The tombs of the elites were all found robbed. Interestingly, we are told that in year fourteen, a coppersmith named Pakharu had been apprehended with two accomplices on suspicion of tomb robbery, and after examination he had confessed to robbing the tomb of the wife of Ramesses III. In year sixteen, however, when that tomb was inspected, it was found to be intact! It is possible that Pakharu had confessed to a crime he did not commit, since the examination of suspects in ancient Egypt involved beatings. Note that in year sixteen, Pakharu underwent a "very severe examination." It is also possible that corrupt officials played a role in the inspections of year sixteen. In any event, it is more than apparent that the Egyptians had little regard for any curses or threats when they robbed the tombs of nobles and royalty, damaging and in some cases destroying their mummies. It seems that the fear of curses did little to protect Egyptian burials from harm.*

The pyramids, tomb chambers, (and) funerary chapels were inspected on this day by the controllers (of the Tomb Building Administration). . . .

The funerary chapels (and) tomb chambers of the blessed dead (and) the ancestors (and) the residents of Thebes who rest in them on the West of Thebes; it was found that the thieves had robbed them all, they overturned the owners from their inner coffins and outer coffins and they were abandoned on the desert edge, their (burial) equipment which was given to them as well as the gold, silver, and objects which were in them, were stolen.

The Mayor and Chief of Policemen of the Great and Noble Tomb (i.e., the tomb of the reigning king), Pawera'a, together with the chiefs of the policemen, the policemen, the controllers of the Tomb Building Administration, the scribe of the vizier, the scribe of the Overseer of the Storehouse, who were with them, reported them to the Mayor of Thebes Khaemwaset, the Royal Butler Nesuamun, the Scribe of Pharaoh, to the Chief of the Estate of the Divine Adoratrice of Amun-Re, King of the Gods, to the Royal Butler Neferkareemperaumn, and the important officials. The Mayor of the West and Chief of Policemen of the Necropolis Pawera'a put the names of the thieves in writing before the vizier and the officials and butlers. They were seized, imprisoned, (and) examined. They confessed what had happened.

Year 16, 3<sup>rd</sup> month of Akhet, day 19; the day of going to inspect the "August Place" (royal tombs) of the Royal Children, Royal Wives, and Royal Mothers who are in the Beautiful Place, by the Superintendent of Thebes and Vizier, Khaemwaset, the Royal Butler Nessuamun, Scribe of Pharaoh, after the coppersmith Pakharu, son of Kharu (and) his mother Mytsheri, of Western Thebes, a member of the staff of the Temple of Wesirmaatre Meryamun in the Temple of Amun who is under the supervision of the First Prophet of Amun-Re King of the Gods Amenhotep, the man who had been found there and seized with two (other) men of the temple near the tombs, whom the Superintendent of Thebes and Vizier Nebmaatrenakht examined in year 14. (He told them): "I was in the tomb of the Royal Wife of the King Wesirmaatre Meryamun (Ramesses III), Isis. I brought (out) some items from (it) and I disposed of them."

Now the Vizier and Butler had the coppersmith taken in front of them to the tombs, blindfolded like a prisoner, (and) they let him see (again) after he reached (the tombs). The officials said to him: "Go before us to the tomb which you said, 'I brought out items from it.'" The coppersmith went before the officials to a common tomb of the children of King Wesirmaatre Stepenre, l.p.h. (Ramesses III), the great god, in which no burial had (yet) been made (and) it had been left open, and (to) the house of the workman of the tomb Amuneminet, son of Huy, which is in this place, and said "Behold the places where I was." The officials had the coppersmith undergo a very severe examination in the Great Valley. It was not found that he was aware of any place (other than) the two places he had indicated. He swore an oath on the life of the King on pain of being beaten, having his nose and ears (cut off), and being impaled on a stake, saying "I do not know of any place here among the tombs except for

this open tomb and this house which I pointed out to you.” The officials examined the seals of the August Place (royal tombs) which are in the Place of Beauty, in which the royal children, royal wives, royal mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers of Pharaoh, l.p.h., rest. They were found intact.

**Source:** Peet, T. Eric. 1930. *The Great Tomb-Robberies of the Twentieth Egyptian Dynasty*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, pls. 2–3. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Reprint Martino Publishing, Mansfield Centre, CT, 2005. Used by permission of Oxford University Press.

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# Cleopatra Was Responsible for Mark Antony's Defeat by Octavian (Augustus Caesar)

## What People Think Happened

The struggle between Mark Antony and Octavian for control of Rome came to a head at the Battle of Actium. The fleets of Antony and Octavian squared off in the Bay of Actium on the western coast of the Peloponnese, in 31 BCE. As the conflict raged, the sails of Cleopatra's ships were suddenly raised, and Cleopatra and her sixty ships made for the open sea, leaving the battle behind. When Mark Antony realized that Cleopatra was abandoning him, he deserted his men, jumping to a smaller ship that delivered him to the fleeing Cleopatra. His men continued to fight, but once they realized their commander had abandoned them for Cleopatra, they surrendered to Octavian.

Antony had lost the battle because he could not carry on without Cleopatra. He had deserted his men because of his love for the Egyptian queen. From this point on, Antony's men gradually deserted him. The final climactic battle took place on August 1, 30 BCE at Alexandria, Egypt. As Antony's fleet approached Octavian's ships, they raised their oars in surrender and then joined with Octavian's navy as they approached Alexandria. Some Roman historians report that Antony blamed Cleopatra for the defection of his navy (she, after all, had supplied the ships). As soon as

Antony's infantry saw the navy's desertion, they switched sides also. The conflict was over; Antony and Cleopatra had lost.

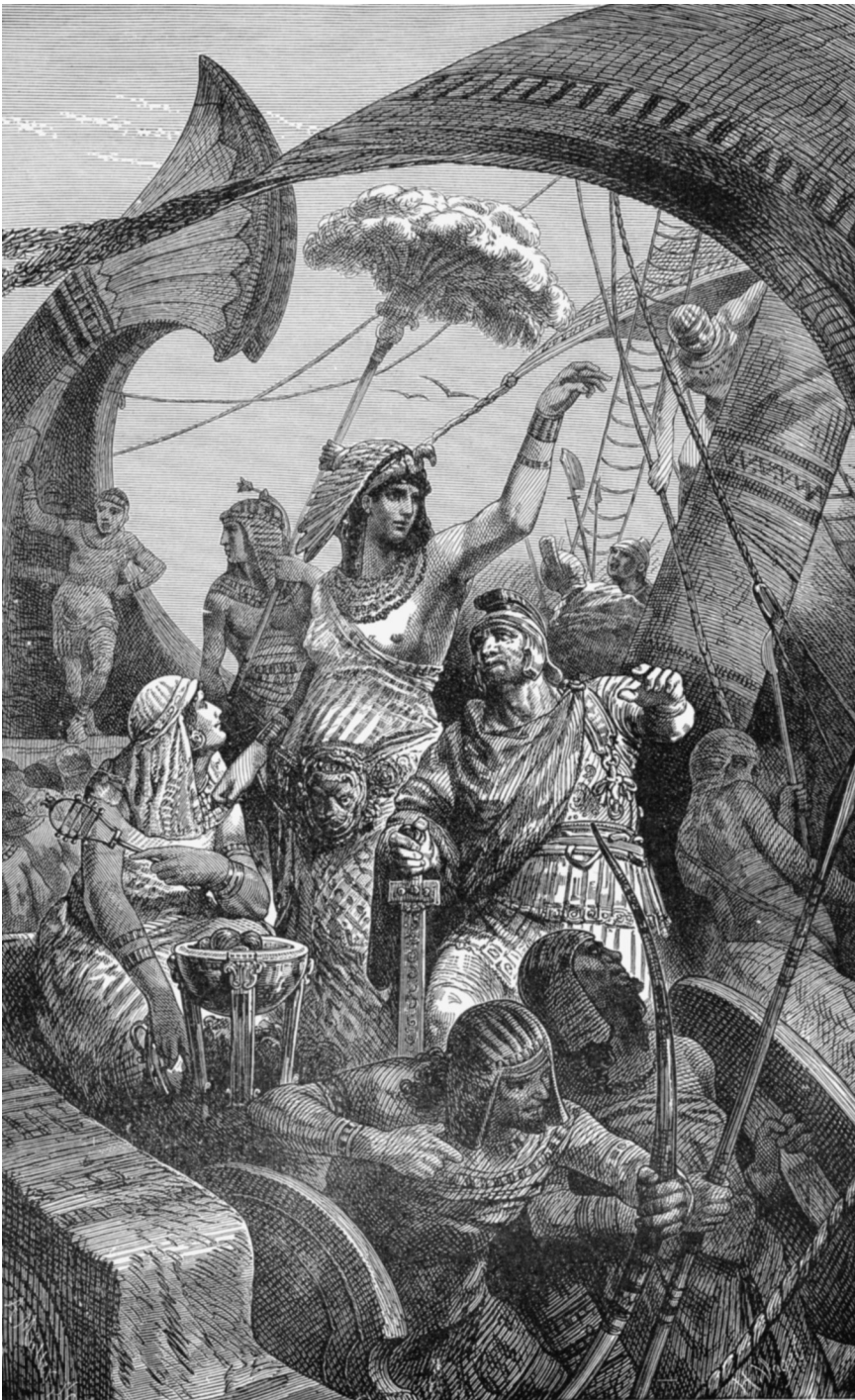
### **How the Story Became Popular**

Cleopatra is arguably one of the most famous individuals from ancient Egypt. The great irony is that Cleopatra was not Egyptian but Greek, the last member of a ruling dynasty that originated from Macedonia in northern Greece. The other irony is that almost all that we know of Cleopatra derives from documents from Roman history written in Greek or Latin. Due to the wealth Egypt produced, Cleopatra became involved in the events that resulted in the end of the Roman Republic and the beginning of the Roman Empire. As a result, all the accounts relating to Cleopatra must be viewed through the lens of partisan political propaganda. When reading carefully, one can usually separate fact from fiction, but not always to general agreement.

Cleopatra joined forces with two of the most powerful Romans of her day: Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. Enemies of both depicted the men as overcome by Cleopatra's feminine wiles, beauty, flirtatiousness, and sexuality. It was portrayed that their desire for Cleopatra led both to make unwise decisions, even to betraying Rome itself. Later authors and historians further developed the themes of Cleopatra's sexuality and licentiousness found in Roman propaganda, to the point where Cleopatra became little more than a prostitute with whom men were willing to exchange their lives for a night of pleasure. As we will see below, Mark Antony was said to have abandoned his troops at the Battle of Actium to follow Cleopatra when she fled the scene of battle. Some historians portrayed the Battle of Actium as the climactic event that led to Antony's defeat by Octavian, who was to become known as Caesar Augustus, the first Roman emperor.

In 332 BCE, Alexander the Great conquered Egypt. After a brief stop-over to be declared the son of the god Amun and to found the city of Alexandria, he continued eastward on his mission of conquest, eventually dying in Babylon in 323 BCE. After his death, Alexander's generals divided his empire, and Ptolemy took Egypt, inaugurating the Ptolemaic Dynasty, which ruled Egypt from 323 to 30 BCE. The Ptolemies practiced brother-sister marriage, apparently in imitation of the practice of the Egyptian and Greek gods, thereby emphasizing their own divinity.

By the time of the reign of Cleopatra's father, Ptolemy XII, Rome had become the military power in the Mediterranean and played a large role in



*Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium.* Roman propaganda attributed Mark Antony's defeat to his infatuation with Cleopatra. When he saw her sailing away he supposedly abandoned his men to their fate to chase after his beloved queen. (Ridpath, John Clark, *Ridpath's History of the World*, 1901)

determining who ruled Egypt. In 58 BCE, Ptolemy XII was driven from the throne by the citizens of Alexandria, who were incensed to learn that he had paid 6,000 talents to Pompey and Julius Caesar, who with Crassus formed the First Triumvirate of Rome, in order to be recognized as king of Egypt and a “friend and ally of the Roman people.” They were further incensed to learn that Ptolemy XII had failed to resist the annexation of Cyprus, part of the Ptolemaic Empire, by Rome. Ptolemy XII fled to Rome with his eleven-year-old daughter, Cleopatra, in order to petition the Roman Senate for help in regaining the throne. Ptolemy managed to convince Aulus Gabinius, an ally of Pompey the Great, to restore him to the throne of Egypt in 55 BCE for a bribe of 10,000 talents. A twenty-five-year-old Mark Antony was a cavalry commander in Gabinius’s army, and he and Cleopatra, who was in her early teens, may have met at this time. The historian Appian, writing around 150 years later, states that Antony fell in love with Cleopatra at first sight. Shortly after returning to the throne, Ptolemy XII died in 51 BCE, leaving the kingdom of Egypt to his children Ptolemy XIII, ten, and Cleopatra, eighteen, who ruled as king and queen.

Cleopatra, however, was not inclined to rule jointly with her much-younger brother, and for a year, she took sole control of Egypt. In 49 BCE, civil war broke out in Rome between Julius Caesar and Pompey the Great. Pompey sent his oldest son, Cnaeus Pompey, to Alexandria to request assistance from the Ptolemies. Cleopatra felt obligated to assist Pompey, since he had supported her father while he was in Rome. Cleopatra supplied Pompey with five hundred cavalry troops from the Roman soldiers stationed in Egypt, as well as fifty or sixty warships. One historian, Plutarch, mentioned that there was a rumor that Cleopatra had a brief love affair with Cnaeus Pompey while he was in Egypt.

By the summer of 49 BCE, the supporters of Ptolemy XIII had forced Cleopatra from the throne, and she eventually fled to Syria. In 48 BCE, Julius Caesar defeated Pompey at the Battle of Pharsalus, and Pompey fled with two thousand soldiers to Egypt, hoping to get support from the Ptolemy XIII to continue his war with Caesar. Instead, in an effort to persuade Caesar to leave Egypt out of Rome’s civil war, Ptolemy XIII and his advisers had Pompey murdered as soon as he landed at Alexandria. He was decapitated, and his head was embalmed and placed in a jar. When Caesar arrived in Alexandria in pursuit of Pompey, he was presented with Pompey’s head and signet ring. Ptolemy XIII’s goal was thwarted, however, when Caesar, in desperate need of funds to pay his troops, stayed in Egypt to collect the debt Cleopatra’s father owed him. While in Egypt,

Caesar mediated the dispute between Cleopatra and her brother, declaring both co-rulers of Egypt. Caesar also engaged in a brief affair with Cleopatra, possibly fathering a son (Ptolemy XV Caesar, dubbed Caesarian, "little Caesar" by the Alexandrians).

Caesar's attempted to collect the debt he felt the Ptolemies owed him by looting the temples of Egypt; this resulted in the Alexandrian War, in which Potheinos, an advisor of Ptolemy XIII, led a rebellion against Caesar and his army. Things went poorly for Caesar and Cleopatra until reinforcements arrived, and the Alexandrians were defeated in 47 BCE. Ptolemy XIII drowned in the Nile while trying to escape. Caesar installed Cleopatra's younger brother, Ptolemy XIV (age twelve or thirteen) to replace Ptolemy XIII and returned to Rome, leaving three legions behind to protect the unpopular Cleopatra. Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIV were in Rome as guests of Julius Caesar when he was assassinated in 44 BCE, and they quickly returned to Egypt.

After Caesar's death, Mark Antony joined with Octavian, Caesar's designated heir, and another Roman general, Lepidus, to form the Second Triumvirate in order to battle with those responsible for the death of Caesar. After their victory at the Battle of Philippi, the members of the Second Triumvirate divided the Roman territories among themselves, with Mark Antony receiving the territories in the east, including Egypt. In 41 BCE, Mark Antony summoned Cleopatra to meet with him at Tarsus, in modern Turkey. Egypt was the richest province in the East, and during the war, Cleopatra had supported those responsible for Caesar's assassination.

Cleopatra arrived for her meeting with Mark Antony in a ship decked out with the most lavish finery. Cleopatra invited Mark Antony and his entourage to a banquet on her ship, and she spared no expense to impress the Roman general. After several days of banqueting and political discussions, Mark Antony and Cleopatra began both a political and romantic alliance that would resound throughout history. Eventually, the struggle for control of the Roman Empire boiled down to a conflict between two individuals: Mark Antony, who had served Caesar as a general, and Octavian, the son of Caesar's niece, whom Caesar had adopted as his son in his will.

In 33 BCE, a propaganda war broke out between Octavian and Mark Antony. Octavian had Mark Antony portrayed as totally controlled by the exotic Egyptian queen by whom he had three children. Mark Antony's defeat by the Parthians in 36 BCE was attributed to the fact that his desire to spend as much time as possible with Cleopatra influenced his decision-making. When Octavian declared war, it was not on Mark Antony

(which would have meant yet another Roman civil war) but on Cleopatra, whom the poet Horace wrote in 30 BCE had “plotted insane ruin for the Capitol and death for our rule” (Jones 2006a, 186). After Mark Antony and Cleopatra were defeated in 30 BCE, Octavian adopted the name Augustus and became the first of a long line of Roman emperors.

There is an adage that history is written by the victors. For centuries, Roman historians repeated and embellished the stories put forward by Octavian’s propagandists as historical fact, and their writings were used by later authors in crafting their histories, plays, novels, and films of ancient Rome and Egypt until we get the view today of a Cleopatra possessed of an exotic beauty and dangerous sensuality who led her lover, Mark Antony, and her kingdom, Egypt, to ruin.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### CASSIUS DIO, CAESAR AND CLEOPATRA

*Mark Antony was not the only powerful Roman to fall under Cleopatra’s spell. This passage from the Roman History of Cassius Dio describes the first meeting between Julius Caesar and Cleopatra. Cassius Dio (164–after 229 CE) was a Roman historian who wrote a history of Rome from the founding of Rome to 229 CE. By his own account, he spent ten years collecting sources and twelve years writing his history. Unfortunately, not all his work survives. Cassius Dio recounts that Caesar had traveled to Egypt in pursuit of Pompey, only to find that the Egyptians had executed Pompey upon his arrival. Caesar sought to collect the debt owed him by the heirs of Ptolemy XII, an, as the passage points out, this required raiding the temple treasuries and levying taxes on the people.*

*When Caesar arrived, Ptolemy XIII was ruling with the help of ministers, having driven his co-ruler and sister, Cleopatra, from Egypt. Caesar declared that he would mediate the dispute between the two rulers, but Ptolemy XIII attempted to prevent Cleopatra from entering the royal palace to meet with Caesar. Cassius Dio states that Cleopatra had sneaked into the palace by night. Plutarch provides more daring details, stating that Cleopatra had herself wrapped up in some bedding and carried into the palace on the shoulder of her attendant. When the bedding was unrolled in the presence of Caesar, out popped Cleopatra, in her most alluring attire. Note that Cassius Dio attributes Cleopatra with the “power to subjugate” others due to her beauty and charm and that Caesar immediately fell under her spell and became her ardent supporter.*

34.1 These were the events which occurred in Rome during Caesar's absence. Now the reasons why he was so long in coming there and did not arrive immediately after Pompey's death were as follows. The Egyptians were discontented at the levies of money and indignant because not even their temples were left untouched. 2 For they are the most religious people on earth in many respects and wage wars even against one another on account of their beliefs, since they are not all agreed in their worship, but are diametrically opposed to each other in some matters. As a result, then, of their vexation at this and, further, of their fear that they might be surrendered to Cleopatra, who had great influence with Caesar, they began a disturbance. 3 Cleopatra, it seems, had at first urged with Caesar her claim against her brother by means of agents, but as soon as she discovered his disposition (which was very susceptible, to such an extent that he had his intrigues with ever so many other women—with all, doubtless, who chanced to come in his way) she sent word to him that she was being betrayed by her friends and asked that she be allowed to plead her case in person. 4 For she was a woman of surpassing beauty, and at that time, when she was in the prime of her youth, she was most striking; she also possessed a most charming voice and a knowledge of how to make herself agreeable to every one. 5 Being brilliant to look upon and to listen to, with the power to subjugate every one, even a love-sated man already past his prime, she thought that it would be in keeping with her rôle to meet Caesar, and she reposed in her beauty all her claims to the throne. 6 She asked therefore for admission to his presence, and on obtaining permission adorned and beautified herself so as to appear before him in the most majestic and at the same time pity-inspiring guise. When she had perfected her schemes she entered the city (for she had been living outside of it), and by night without Ptolemy's knowledge went into the palace. 35.1 Caesar, upon seeing her and hearing her speak a few words was forthwith so completely captivated that he at once, before dawn, sent for Ptolemy and tried to reconcile them, thus acting as advocate for the very woman whose judge he had previously assumed to be.

**Source:** Cassius Dio. 1916. *Roman History*. Vol. 4, book 42, sections 34.1–35.6. Translated by Earnest Cary. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### APPIAN, *THE MEETING IN TARSUS*

*Appian (end of first century–160s CE) was born in Alexandria, Egypt, and later became a Roman citizen. He wrote a history of Rome in Greek, structuring his work not chronologically but ethnographically, describing each people*



*the Romans conquered in order. Because of his background, events in Egypt played an outsized role in his history. In this passage, Appian described the meeting between Cleopatra and Mark Antony that took place in Tarsus (a city in Cilicia, in modern Turkey) in 41 BCE. Mark Antony accused Cleopatra of not sufficiently supporting those avenging the assassination of Caesar. Cleopatra responded that she had sent four legions of soldiers to Dolabella, a friend and supporter of Caesar, and had planned on sending a fleet of ships, but was prevented by the weather.*

*Just as we found with Cleopatra and Caesar, Mark Antony is described as captivated by Cleopatra's beauty and wit. Due to his love for Cleopatra, Mark Antony's interest in governing diminished, and he meekly followed her orders. Appian attributed the misfortunes that would befall Mark Antony to his passion for Cleopatra. After this initial meeting, Cleopatra returned to Egypt, and Mark Antony proceeded eastward to deal with some of the rulers of the eastern provinces, in preparation for his invasion of Parthia. Mark Antony spent the winter of 41–40 BCE in Egypt with Cleopatra, and her bad influence over Antony is apparent from the fact that he abandoned Roman customs for those of the east (Greece), adopting Greek dress and spending his days in discussion with philosophers. Elsewhere we learn that Antony and Cleopatra formed a "Club of Inimitable Livers," dedicated to banqueting and amusements with friends. Six months after Antony left Egypt, Cleopatra gave birth to twins, Alexander Helios and Cleopatra Selene.*

8.1 Cleopatra came to meet him [Mark Antony] in Cilicia, and he blamed her for not sharing their labours in avenging Caesar. Instead of apologising she enumerated to him the things she had done, saying that she had sent the four legions that had been left with her to Dolabella forthwith, and that she had another fleet in readiness, but had been prevented from sending it by adverse winds and by the misfortune of Dolabella, whose defeat came suddenly; but that she did not lend assistance to Cassius, who had threatened her twice; that while the war was going on she had set sail for the Adriatic in person with a powerful fleet to assist them, in defiance of Cassius, and disregarding Murcus, who was lying in wait for her; but that a tempest shattered the fleet and prostrated herself with illness, for which reason she was not able to put to sea again till they had already gained her victory. Antony was amazed at her wit as well as her good looks, and became her captive as though he were a young man, although he was forty years of age. It is said that he was always very susceptible in this way, and that he had fallen in love with her at first sight long ago when she was still a girl and he was serving as master of horse under Gabinius at Alexandria.

9.1 Straightway Antony's former interest in public affairs began to dwindle. Whatever Cleopatra ordered was done, regardless of laws, human or divine. While her sister Arsinoe was a suppliant in the temple of Artemis Leucophryne at Miletus, Antony sent assassins thither and put her to death; and Serapion, Cleopatra's perfect in Cyprus, who had assisted Cassius and was now a suppliant at Tyre, Antony ordered the Tyrians to deliver to her. He commanded the Aradians to deliver up another suppliant, who when Ptolemy, the brother of Cleopatra, disappeared at the battle with Caesar on the Nile, said that he was Ptolemy, and whom the Arcadians now held. He ordered the priest of Artemis at Ephesus, whom they called the Megabyzus, and who had once received Arsinoe as queen, to be brought before him, but in response to the supplications of the Ephesians, addressed to Cleopatra herself, released him. So swiftly was Antony transformed, and this passion was the beginning and the end of evils that afterwards befell him. When Cleopatra returned home Antony sent a cavalry force to Palmyra, situated not far from the Euphrates, to plunder it, bringing the trifling accusation against its inhabitants, that being on the frontier between the Romans and the Parthians, they had avoided taking sides between them; for, being merchants, they bring the products of India and Arabia from Persia and dispose of them in the Roman territory; but in fact, Antony's intention was to enrich his horsemen. However, the Palmyreans were forewarned and they transported their property across the river, and, stationing themselves on the bank, prepared to shoot anybody who should attack them, for they are expert bowmen. The cavalry found nothing in the city. They turned round and came back, having met no foe, and empty-handed.

10.1 It seems that this course on Antony's part caused the outbreak of the Parthian war not long afterward, as many of the rulers expelled from Syria had taken refuge with the Parthians. Syria, until the reign of Antiochus Pius and his son, Antiochus, had been ruled by the descendants of Seleucus Nicator, as I have related in my Syrian history. Pompey added it to the Roman sway, and Scaurus was appointed praetor over it. After Scaurus the Senate sent others, including Gabinius, who made war against the Alexandrians, and after Gabinius, Crassus, who lost his life in the Parthian war, and after Crassus, Bibulus. At the time of Caesar's death and the intestine strife which followed, tyrants had possession of the cities one by one, and they were assisted by the Parthians, who made an irruption into Syria after the disaster to Crassus and co-operated with the tyrants. Antony drove out the latter, who took refuge in Parthia. He then imposed

very heavy tribute on the masses and committed the outrage already mentioned against the Palmyreans, and did not wait for the disturbed country to become quiet, but distributed his army in winter quarters in the provinces, and himself went to Egypt to join Cleopatra.

11.1 She gave him a magnificent reception, and he spent the winter there without the insignia of his office and with the habit and mode of life of a private person, either because he was in a foreign jurisdiction, in a city under royal sway, or because he regarded his wintering as a festal occasion; for he even laid aside the cares and escort of a general, and wore the square-cut garment of the Greeks instead of the costume of his own country, and the white Attic shoe of the Athenian and Alexandrian priests, which they call the phaecasion. He went out only to the temples, the schools, and the discussions of the learned, and spent his time with Greeks, out of deference to Cleopatra, to whom his sojourn in Alexandria was wholly devoted.

**Source:** Appian. 1913. *The Histories*. Book 5. Translated by Horace White. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### PLUTARCH, *THE MARCH TO PARTHIA*

*Plutarch (ca. 50–120 CE) was from the city of Athens and was a prolific writer. Among his many works are his Parallel Lives, in which he compares the lives of two great men in order to illustrate proper morals, or the lack thereof, for his readers. Plutarch generally accepted the negative propaganda about Antony and Cleopatra circulated during the time of Octavian. In 53 BCE, Crassus, a member of the First Triumvirate with Caesar and Pompey, had been defeated and killed in battle with the Parthians, located in what is today Iran and Iraq. Caesar had been planning an attack on the Parthians when he was assassinated. Mark Antony planned on avenging Crassus's defeat and, at the same time, gaining a great military victory for himself.*

*In 36 BCE, Antony set out for Parthia, but due to a series of disastrous decisions and an act of treachery by Monaeses, a Parthian governor general, Antony was unable to take the Parthian city of Phraata. With supplies running out, he decided to retreat over the Armenian mountains to the coast of Syria. The Parthians harassed the retreating Romans all along the route, resulting in the loss of twenty thousand infantry and four thousand cavalry and delaying their march. Antony and his army had to march over the Armenian mountains in winter, losing an additional eight thousand men. Rather than achieving a glorious victory, Antony had suffered an ignominious defeat, losing between one-fourth and one-third of his army.*

*Later authors, influenced by Octavian's propaganda, attributed Antony's failure to Cleopatra's influence over him. According to Plutarch, Antony's judgment was clouded by his desire to spend as much time as possible with Cleopatra, and as a result, he pressed on in his march to Parthia, denying his men necessary rest.*

37.1 And now Phraates put Hyrodes his father to death and took possession of his kingdom, other Parthians ran away in great numbers, and particularly Monaeses, a man of distinction and power, who came in flight to Antony. Antony likened the fortunes of the fugitive to those of Themistocles, compared his own abundant resources and magnanimity to those of the Persian kings, and gave him three cities, Larissa, Arethusa, and Hierapolis, which used to be called Bambycé. <sup>3</sup> But when the Parthian king made an offer of friendship to Monaeses, Antony gladly sent Monaeses back to him, determined to receive Phraates with a prospect of peace, and demanding back the standards captured in the campaign of Crassus, together with such of his men as still survived. Antony himself, however, after sending Cleopatra back to Egypt, proceeded through Arabia and Armenia to the place where his forces were assembled, together with those of the allied kings. These kings were very many in number, but the greatest of them all was Artavasdes, king of Armenia, who furnished six thousand horse and seven thousand foot. Here Antony reviewed his army. There were, of the Romans themselves, sixty thousand foot-soldiers, together with the cavalry classed as Roman, namely, ten thousand Iberians and Celts; of the other nations there were thirty thousand, counting alike horsemen and light-armed troops.

4 And yet we are told that all this preparation and power, which terrified even the Indians beyond Bactria and made all Asia quiver, was made of no avail to Antony by reason of Cleopatra. For so eager was he to spend the winter with her that he began the war before the proper time, and managed everything confusedly. He was not master of his own faculties, but, as if he were under the influence of certain drugs or of magic rites, was ever looking eagerly towards her, and thinking more of his speedy return than of conquering the enemy.

38.1 In the first place, then, though he ought to have spent the winter in Armenia and to have given his army rest, worn out as it was by a march of eight thousand furlongs, and to have occupied Media at the opening of spring, before the Parthians had left their winter quarters, he could not hold out that length of time, but led his army on, taking Armenia on his left, and skirting Atropatené, which country he ravaged.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1920. *The Parallel Lives*. Vol. 9. *Life of Antony*, books 37.1–38.1. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### LIVY, *PERIOCHAE*

*Livy (59 BCE–17 CE) was a Roman historian who wrote a massive history of Rome from its founding down to 9 BCE under the patronage of his friend Augustus (Octavian). Only a portion of his work survives, but the Periochae provide ancient book-by-book summaries of Livy's history. In this brief summary of book 130, Livy attributes Antony's failure to conquer Parthia to his infatuation with Cleopatra. But unlike Plutarch, who blames Antony for beginning the attack before his army was ready, Livy attributes his failure to having delayed setting out for Parthia because he wished to spend more time with Cleopatra and then pushing on with the retreat during the winter because he was in a hurry to return to Cleopatra. The fact that Antony summoned Cleopatra to meet him in Syria once he arrived helped give credence to this interpretation. Both Plutarch and Livy are examples of ancient historians attributing Antony's failures not to his own misjudgment but to Cleopatra's influence over him, a tendency we will see again when we consider the Battle of Actium.*

Marcus Antonius, having spent much time in luxurious indulgence with Cleopatra, having arrived late in Media, with eighteen legions and sixteen thousand horse, made war upon the Parthians. When, having lost two of his legions, nothing prospered with him, he retreated to Armenia; being pursued by the Parthians, he fled three hundred miles in twenty-one days, great trepidation and danger encompassing his whole army. He lost about eight thousand men by tempests; he was himself the cause, as well of the losses by the tempests, as of the unfortunate Parthian war; for he would not winter in Armenia, being in haste to revisit Cleopatra.

**Source:** Livy. 1850. *History of Rome by Titus Livius: The Epitomes of the Lost Books*. Book 130. Literally translated, with notes and illustrations, by William A. McDevitte. London: Henry G. Bohn, John Child and Son, printers.

### PLUTARCH, *THE REJECTION OF OCTAVIA*

*In 40 BCE, Antony and Octavian signed the Treaty of Brundisium in which they divided the Roman Empire between them, with Antony taking the east (including Egypt), and Octavian the west. To seal the pact, Antony married*

*Octavian's recently widowed sister, Octavia. In 37 BCE, Octavia acted as mediator between her husband and brother in negotiating the Treaty of Tarentum, in which the Second Triumvirate was confirmed for another five years. Antony promised to supply Octavian with 120 ships for his war with Sextus Pompey, and Octavian promised troops (either two or four legions, possibly twenty thousand men) to Antony. Antony promptly delivered the ships. In the spring of 35 BCE, Octavia set out for Athens with two thousand men and 70 ships (all that remained from the initial 120 lent to Octavian) as gifts to Antony.*

*Some ancient authors, including Plutarch, believed that Octavian sent Octavia to Antony with less than the promised number of troops as a provocation and insult, hoping to get him to repudiate his Roman wife in favor of his foreign mistress. Antony sent word to Octavia in Athens accepting her gifts but telling her to return to Rome, since he planned on embarking on another military campaign soon. This passage from Plutarch attributed Antony's rejection of Octavia not to political calculations but to Cleopatra's manipulation of Antony. Again, we see Antony making a military decision (delaying another expedition against Parthia) because of Cleopatra. In actuality, Cleopatra was probably not with Antony (being still on her way from Alexandria) when he learned that Octavia was in Athens.*

53.1 But at Rome Octavia was desirous of sailing to Antony, and Caesar [Octavian] gave her permission to do so, as the majority say, not as a favour to her, but in order that, in case she were neglected and treated with scorn, he might have plausible ground for war. When Octavia arrived at Athens, she received letters from Antony in which he bade her remain there and told her of his expedition. 2 Octavia, although she saw through the pretext and was distressed, nevertheless wrote Antony asking whither he would have the things sent which she was bringing to him. For she was bringing a great quantity of clothing for his soldiers, many beasts of burden, and money and gifts for the officers and friends about him; and besides this, two thousand picked soldiers equipped as praetorian cohorts with splendid armour. These things were announced to Antony by a certain Niger, a friend of his who had been sent from Octavia, and he added such praises of her as was fitting and deserved.

3 But Cleopatra perceived that Octavia was coming into a contest at close quarters with her, and feared lest, if she added to the dignity of her character and the power of Caesar her pleasurable society and her assiduous attentions to Antony, she would become invincible and get complete

control over her husband. She therefore pretended to be passionately in love with Antony herself, and reduced her body by slender diet; she put on a look of rapture when Antony drew near, and one of faintness and melancholy when he went away. 4 She would contrive to be often seen in tears, and then would quickly wipe the tears away and try to hide them, as if she would not have Antony notice them. And she practised these arts while Antony was intending to go up from Syria to join the Mede. Her flatterers, too, were industrious in her behalf, and used to revile Antony as hard-hearted and unfeeling, and as the destroyer of a mistress who was devoted to him and him alone. 5 For Octavia, they said, had married him as a matter of public policy and for the sake of her brother, and enjoyed the name of wedded wife; but Cleopatra, who was queen of so many people, was called Antony's beloved, and she did not shun this name nor disdain it, as long as she could see him and live with him; but if she were driven away from him she would not survive it. 6 At last, then, they so melted and enervated the man that he became fearful lest Cleopatra should throw away her life, and went back to Alexandria, putting off the Mede until the summer season, although Parthia was said to be suffering from internal dissensions. However, he went up and brought the king once more into friendly relations, and after betrothing to one of his sons by Cleopatra one of the king's daughters who was still small, he returned, his thoughts being now directed towards the civil war.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1920. *The Parallel Lives*. Vol. 9. *The Life of Antony*, book 53, sections 1–6. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### PLUTARCH, *THE BATTLE OF ACTIUM*

*The inevitable breach between Antony and Octavian occurred in 32 BCE, when Octavian declared war not on Antony but on Cleopatra. Both sides began to prepare for war; Antony and Cleopatra by establishing a string of bases in Greece, from Methone in the south Peloponnesus to the island of Corcyra (Corfu) in the north, with the major part of their force concentrated at Actium. Octavian spent the time raising the funds necessary to support his troops. In March 31 BCE, Octavian's admiral Agrippa began the systematic conquest of Antony's forces on the Greek coast, beginning with Methone, disrupting Antony's supply lines from Egypt, and bottling up Antony's forces at Actium. By September, Antony was in a desperate situation and had to decide how and where to engage Octavian's forces. Cleopatra argued for a naval battle, and Antony accepted her arguments. Plutarch's account of the Battle of*

*Actium, in which Antony is said to have deserted his men and ships to follow a fleeing Cleopatra, became the basis for many later depictions of the battle, including that found in Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra.*

66.1 Though the struggle was beginning to be at close range, the ships did not ram or crush one another at all, since Antony's, owing to their weight, had no impetus, which chiefly gives effect to the blows of the beaks, while Caesar's not only avoided dashing front to front against rough and hard bronze armour, but did not even venture to ram the enemy's ships in the side. 2 For their beaks would easily have been broken off by impact against vessels constructed of huge square timbers fastened together with iron. The struggle was therefore like a land battle; or, to speak more truly, like the storming of a walled town. For three or four of Caesar's vessels were engaged at the same time about one of Antony's, and the crews fought with wicker shields and spears and punting-poles and fiery missiles; the soldiers of Antony also shot with catapults from wooden towers. 3 And now, as Agrippa was extending the left wing with a view to encircling the enemy, Publicola was forced to advance against him, and so was separated from the centre. The centre falling into confusion and engaging with Arruntius, although the sea-fight was still undecided and equally favourable to both sides, suddenly the sixty ships of Cleopatra were seen hoisting their sails for flight and making off through the midst of the combatants; for they had been posted in the rear of the large vessels, and threw them into confusion as they plunged through. 4 The enemy looked on with amazement, seeing that they took advantage of the wind and made for Peloponnesus. Here, indeed, Antony made it clear to all the world that he was swayed neither by the sentiments of a commander nor of a brave man, nor even by his own, but, as someone in pleasantry said that the soul of the lover dwells in another's body, he was dragged along by the woman as if he had become incorporate with her and must go where she did. 5 For no sooner did he see her ship sailing off than he forgot everything else, betrayed and ran away from those who were fighting and dying in his cause, got into a five-oared galley, where Alexas the Syrian and Scellius were his only companions, and hastened after the woman who had already ruined him and would make his ruin still more complete.

67.1 Cleopatra recognized him and raised a signal on her ship; so Antony came up and was taken on board, but he neither saw nor was seen by her. Instead, he went forward alone to the prow and sat down by himself in silence, holding his head in both hands. . . . He spent three days by himself



at the prow, either because he was angry with Cleopatra, or ashamed to see her, and then put in at Taenarum. Here the women in Cleopatra's company at first brought them into a parley, and then persuaded them to eat and sleep together.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1920. *The Parallel Lives*. Vol. 9. *Life of Antony*, books 66–67. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### What Really Happened

Most of our information about Antony and Cleopatra derives from the propaganda propounded by Octavian and his supporters in their efforts to turn Rome against Antony. According to this propaganda, Cleopatra's greatest sins are that she was a foreigner, that she was obsessed with sex, and that she was a member of a barbaric culture whose members were cowardly and not to be trusted, who even worshipped animals as gods. From the Roman perspective, Egyptian women were considered wanton, since unlike Roman women, they were free to enter the legal life of Egypt, making contracts, buying and selling property, and so on without a male guardian. Cleopatra was said to have used her considerable skills at seduction and sex to emasculate the men around her, particularly Antony, sapping him of his independent will and reducing him to her servant.

Once Antony had fallen under her spell, his every action was said to be intended to gain her favor, often at the expense of the well-being of Rome. Every decision Antony made, from the timing of his invasion of Parthia to the way he would confront Octavian, was claimed to be influenced by his lust for Cleopatra. Antony was accused of wanting to move the capital of the Roman empire to Alexandria, Egypt, and of giving away Rome's colonial conquests in the east to Cleopatra and her children. Octavian's propaganda carried the day, and the image that most have of Cleopatra today is that of a beautiful sexual libertine, manipulating the men around her. Plutarch's *Life of Antony*, written 150 years after the events it describes, influenced all later depictions of Cleopatra, from Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* to the depiction of Cleopatra in the HBO series *Rome*.

A careful reading of our sources, critically comparing them to one another, allows the modern reader to differentiate propaganda from fact. Despite the portrayal of Antony as totally under Cleopatra's control, the documents describe several instances in which Antony acts contrary to Cleopatra's desires. As we will see, there are indications in the accounts of the Battle of Actium that Antony and Cleopatra had planned their flight before the battle even began. The real goal of the battle, indicated by the

presence of sails on some of their ships, was to break the blockade imposed on Antony's troops by Octavian's fleet under his admiral Agrippa. At this, they were as successful as could be expected. Military historians believe that once Agrippa took Antony's base at Methone, cutting off his supply lines from Egypt, the results of the battle were a foregone conclusion.

Authors who wrote contemporary accounts of the Battle of Actium, such as Horace, Propertius, Virgil, and Livy, make no mention of Cleopatra's treachery. As to Cleopatra's supposedly sexually promiscuous nature, there are only two individuals named with whom she had relations: Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. The accounts of her attempted seduction of Octavian and Herod strain credulity. Once the propaganda is stripped away, the picture of Cleopatra that emerges is an independent ruler willing to do whatever it took to maintain the independence of her kingdom from Roman domination. While Antony may have made some disastrous military decisions, they were not due to a hopeless infatuation with Cleopatra. Antony's relationship with Cleopatra was detrimental to him in one way; it gave Octavian a potent source of propaganda to turn much of Rome against him. That propaganda has influenced opinions of Cleopatra for two thousand years.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### JOSEPHUS, *ANTIQUITIES OF THE JEWS*

*Flavius Josephus (37/8–ca. 100 CE) was a Jewish politician, soldier, and historian who served as the general of Jewish forces in Galilee during the Jewish revolt from Rome in 66–70 CE. When he and his forces were besieged at Jotapata, he surrendered to the Romans and switched sides in the war. In return, he was rewarded with Roman citizenship, a house in Rome, a pension, and land in Judea. His work *Antiquities of the Jews*, written around 80 CE, was a retelling of Jewish history from the creation up to the rebellion against Rome. In this excerpt, Josephus recounts how Herod (73–4 BCE) (the same Herod mentioned in the birth narrative of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew), who had been appointed king of Judea by Antony, was summoned to meet with Antony in Laodicea, in modern Turkey, to account for the murder of Aristobulus III, the high priest in Jerusalem.*

*Aristobulus's mother, Alexandra, had written to Cleopatra asking her help in getting justice for her son, and Cleopatra had prevailed upon Antony to summon Herod to account for his actions. Cleopatra had been unhappy that the territory of Judea, which had once belonged to the Ptolemaic Empire, was*

*given to Herod in 37/6 BCE, and she hoped to persuade Antony to remove Herod from kingship and restore Judea to Ptolemaic control. Cleopatra failed in her attempt, and Herod returned from Laodicea confirmed in his kingship. Antony warned Cleopatra not to meddle in the affairs of the client-kings. This incident serves as an example of how Antony retained his independence from Cleopatra and illustrates how he was willing to refuse her requests when he felt it was in his interests to do so.*

[62] However, no such things could overcome Alexandra's grief; but the remembrance of this miserable case made her sorrow, both deep and obstinate. Accordingly, she wrote an account of this treacherous scene to Cleopatra, and how her son was murdered; but Cleopatra, as she had formerly been desirous to give her what satisfaction she could, and commiserating Alexandra's misfortunes, made the case her own, and would not let Antony be quiet, but excited him to punish the child's murder; for that it was an unworthy thing that Herod, who had been by him made king of a kingdom that no way belonged to him, should be guilty of such horrid crimes against those that were of the royal blood in reality. Antony was persuaded by these arguments; and when he came to Laodicea, he sent and commanded Herod to come and make his defense, as to what he had done to Aristobulus, for that such a treacherous design was not well done, if he had any hand in it. Herod was now in fear, both of the accusation, and of Cleopatra's ill-will to him, which was such that she was ever endeavoring to make Antony hate him. He therefore determined to obey his summons, for he had no possible way to avoid it. So he left his uncle Joseph procurator for his government, and for the public affairs, and gave him a private charge, that if Antony should kill him, he also should kill Mariamne immediately; for that he had a tender affection for this his wife, and was afraid of the injury that should be offered him, if, after his death, she, for her beauty, should be engaged to some other man: but his intimation was nothing but this at the bottom, that Antony had fallen in love with her, when he had formerly heard somewhat of her beauty. So when Herod had given Joseph this charge, and had indeed no sure hopes of escaping with his life, he went away to Antony.

...

[71] At this time a report went about the city Jerusalem among Herod's enemies, that Antony had tortured Herod, and put him to death. This report, as is natural, disturbed those that were about the palace, but chiefly the women; upon which Alexandra endeavored to persuade Joseph to go

out of the palace, and fly away with them to the ensigns of the Roman legion, which then lay encamped about the city, as a guard to the kingdom, under the command of Julius; for that by this means, if any disturbance should happen about the palace, they should be in greater security, as having the Romans favorable to them; and that besides, they hoped to obtain the highest authority, if Antony did but once see Mariamne, by whose means they should recover the kingdom, and want nothing which was reasonable for them to hope for, because of their royal extraction.

...

[74] But as they were in the midst of these deliberations, letters were brought from Herod about all his affairs, and proved contrary to the report, and of what they before expected; for when he was come to Antony, he soon recovered his interest with him, by the presents he made him, which he had brought with him from Jerusalem; and he soon induced him, upon discoursing with him, to leave off his indignation at him, so that Cleopatra's persuasions had less force than the arguments and presents he brought to regain his friendship; for Antony said that it was not good to require an account of a king, as to the affairs of his government, for at this rate he could be no king at all, but that those who had given him that authority ought to permit him to make use of it. He also said the same things to Cleopatra, that it would be best for her not busily to meddle with the acts of the king's government. Herod wrote an account of these things, and enlarged upon the other honors which he had received from Antony; how he sat by him at his hearing causes, and took his diet with him every day, and that he enjoyed those favors from him, notwithstanding the reproaches that Cleopatra so severely laid against him, who having a great desire of his country, and earnestly entreating Antony that the kingdom might be given to her, labored with her utmost diligence to have him out of the way; but that he still found Antony just to him, and had no longer any apprehensions of hard treatment from him; and that he was soon upon his return, with a firmer additional assurance of his favor to him, in his reigning and managing public affairs; and that there was no longer any hope for Cleopatra's covetous temper, since Antony had given her Celesyria instead of what she had desired; by which means he had at once pacified her, and got clear of the entreaties which she made him to have Judea bestowed upon her.

**Source:** Flavius Josephus. 1895. *The Works of Flavius Josephus*. Book 15, sections 62, 71, and 74. Translated by William Whiston. Auburn and Buffalo: John E. Beardsley.

### APPIAN, *THE CAPTURE OF SEXTUS*

*Sextus Pompeius was the son of Pompey the Great, who had continued his opposition to the Second Triumvirate even after the defeat of Cassius and Brutus at the Battle of Philippi. He was able to take control of Sicily and to intercept grain shipments bound for Rome, reducing the city to a state of famine. In 36 BCE, Octavian's admiral Agrippa defeated Sextus's fleet, but Sextus himself was able to escape to Asia Minor, where he attempted to enter into an alliance with the king of Parthia. He was taken prisoner by Marcus Titius, one of Antony's officers, and subsequently executed. Cleopatra had hoped to have Sextus's life spared since his father, Pompey the Great, had been helpful in restoring her father to the Ptolemaic throne. This is another instance in which Antony refused a request by Cleopatra, again illustrating his ability to act independently of her when he thought it best.*

143 1 Thus was Sextus Pompeius captured. He was the last remaining son of Pompey the Great, and had been deprived of his father when very young and of his brother while still a stripling. After their death he concealed himself for a long time and practised robbery secretly in Spain until he had collected a large following, because he made himself known as Pompey's son. Then he practised more open robbery. After the death of Gaius Caesar he carried on war vigorously and collected a large army, together with ships and money, took islands, became master of the western sea, brought famine upon Italy, and compelled his enemies to make peace on such terms as he chose. Of most importance was the aid that he rendered in the proscriptions to Rome when exposed to utter destruction, rescuing many of the nobility who were, at this later time, safe at home by means of him. But stricken with some strange aberration, he never pursued an aggressive policy against his foes, although fortune offered him many opportunities; he only defended himself.

144 1 After such a career Pompeius was taken prisoner. Titius brought Pompeius' soldiers into Antony's service and put Pompeius himself to death at Miletus in the fortieth year of his age. This he did either on his own account, angry at some former insult, and ungrateful for the subsequent kindness, or in pursuance of Antony's order. Some say that Plancus, not Antony, gave this order. They think that Plancus, while governing Syria, was authorized by letters to sign Antony's name in cases of urgency and to use his seal. Some think that it was written by Plancus with Antony's knowledge, but that the latter was ashamed to write it on account of the name Pompeius, and because Cleopatra was favourable to

him on account of Pompey the Great. Others think that Plancus, being cognizant of these facts, took it upon himself to give the order as a matter of precaution, lest Pompeius, with the co-operation of Cleopatra, should disturb the auspicious respect between Antony and Octavian.

**Source:** Appian. 1913. *The Histories*. Book 5, sections 143–144. Translated by Horace White. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### CASSIUS DIO, *THE BATTLE OF ACTIUM*

*In this account of the preparations for the Battle of Actium, we get evidence that the battle plan was designed to allow Cleopatra and Antony, and as many ships and men as possible, to escape the blockade that had been imposed on them by Octavian's fleet under Agrippa. The fact that the royal treasury that Cleopatra had brought Antony was loaded onto one of the ships indicates that the goal was to provide a means for this ship and others to run the blockade, taking the treasury with them for use in rebuilding their army and fleet so they could continue the struggle at a later date. Otherwise why would they unnecessarily risk losing their treasury at the bottom of the Ionian Sea or, worse, to their enemy Octavian?*

3 Now, because of this reverse and because Antony himself on his return had been defeated in a cavalry battle by Caesar's [Octavian's] advance guard, he decided not to let his men encamp thereafter in two different places, and so during the night he left the intrenchments which were near his opponents and retired to the other side of the narrows, where the largest part of his army was encamped. 4 And when provisions also began to fail him because he was shut off from bringing in grain, he held a council to deliberate whether they should remain where they were and hazard an encounter or should move somewhere else and protract the war. 15 1 After various opinions had been expressed by different men, Cleopatra prevailed with her advice that they should entrust the best strategic positions to garrisons, and that the rest should depart with herself and Antony to Egypt. 2 She had reached this opinion as the result of being disturbed by omens. For swallows had built their nest about her tent and on the flagship, on which she was sailing, and milk and blood together had dripped from beeswax; also the statues of herself and Antony in the guise of gods, which the Athenians had placed on their Acropolis, had been hurled down by thunderbolts into the theatre. 3 In consequence of these portents and of the resulting dejection of the army, and of the sickness prevalent among them, 10 Cleopatra herself became alarmed and

filled Antony with fears. They did not wish, however, to sail out secretly, nor yet openly, as if they were in flight, lest they should inspire their allies also with fear, but rather as if they were making preparations for a naval battle, and incidentally in order that they might force their way through in case there should be any resistance. 4 Therefore they first chose out the best of the vessels and burned the rest, since the sailors had become fewer by death and desertion; next they secretly put all their most valuable possessions on board by night.

**Source:** Cassius Dio. 1917. *Roman History*. Vol. 5, book 50, sections 14.3–15.4. Translated by Earnest Cary. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

### PLUTARCH, *THE PRESENCE OF SAILS*

*This excerpt from the Life of Antony preserves the most telling piece of evidence that the initial battle plan called for breaking out of the blockade imposed by Agrippa's fleet. Roman ships in battle maneuvered by means of oars, not sails. When heading out for battle, a ship's sails and accompanying ropes and tackle were left on shore, as they were bulky and heavy, impeding a ship's maneuverability. In this account, Antony tries to hide his intentions from his men by explaining that the presence of the sails was necessary for pursuing the fleeing enemy.*

64 1 When it had been decided to deliver a sea battle, Antony burned all the Egyptian ships except sixty; but the largest and best, from those having three to those having ten banks of oars, he manned, putting on board twenty thousand heavy-armed soldiers and two thousand archers. It was on this occasion, we are told, that an infantry centurion, a man who had fought many a battle for Antony and was covered with scars, burst into laments as Antony was passing by, and said; 2 “Imperator, why dost thou distrust these wounds and this sword and put thy hopes in miserable logs of wood? Let Egyptians and Phoenicians do their fighting at sea, but give us land, on which we are accustomed to stand and either conquer our enemies or die.” To this Antony made no reply, but merely encouraged the man by a gesture and a look to be of good heart, and passed on. He had no good hopes himself, since, when the masters of his ships wished to leave their sails behind, he compelled them to put them on board and carry them, saying that not one fugitive of the enemy should be allowed to make his escape.

**Source:** Plutarch. 1920. *The Parallel Lives*. Vol. 9. *Life of Antony*, book 64, section 2. Translated by Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

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# The Myths of Osiris, Isis, and Horus Were the Basis for the Accounts of Jesus Found in the Christian New Testament

## What People Think Happened

In the 2008 movie *Religulous*, social critic and comedian Bill Maher offered an extended critique of organized religion. At one point in the film, viewers are shown a series of slides stating,

Written in 1280 BC, the Egyptian Book of the Dead describes a god Horus. Horus is the son of the god Osiris, born to a virgin mother. He was baptized in a river by Anup the Baptizer, who was later beheaded. Like Jesus, Horus was tempted while alone in the desert, healed the sick, the blind, cast out demons and walked on water. He raised Asar from the dead. “Asar” translates to “Lazarus.” Oh yeah, he also had 12 disciples. Yes, Horus was crucified first, and after 3 days, two women announced Horus, the savior of humanity had been resurrected. (Maher 2008)

In their book *The Jesus Mysteries: Was the “Original Jesus” a Pagan God?* authors Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy offer an extensive list of parallels between the accounts of Jesus as found in the New Testament and the

myths of Osiris, whom they refer to as Osiris-Dionysus. A selection of those parallels includes the following:

- Jesus is the savior of mankind . . . ; so is Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus is born of a mortal virgin who after her death ascends to heaven and is honored as a divine being; so is Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus is born in a cave on December 25 or January 6, as is Osiris-Dionysus.
- The birth of Jesus is prophesied by a star; so is the birth of Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus is visited by the Magi, who are followers of Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus is portrayed as a quiet man with long hair and a beard; so is Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus turns water into wine at a marriage on the same day that Osiris-Dionysus was previously believed to have turned water into wine at a marriage.
- Jesus rides triumphantly into town on a donkey while crowds wave branches, as does Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus's disciples symbolically eat bread and drink wine to commune with him, as do the followers of Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus is hung on a tree or crucified, as is Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus's corpse is wrapped in linen and anointed with myrrh, as is the corpse of Osiris-Dionysus.
- Jesus was said to have died and resurrected on exactly the same dates that the death and resurrection of Osiris-Dionysus were celebrated. (Freke and Gandy 1999, 60–61)

From parallels such as these, Tom Harpur, described at one time as “the leading religion writer in Canada,” concluded the following:

The truth is that the Gospels are indeed the old manuscripts of the dramatized rituals of the incarnation and resurrection of the son god Osiris/Horus, rituals that were first Egyptian, later Gnostic and Hellenic, then Hebrew, and finally adopted ignorantly by the Christian movement and transferred to the arena of history. They were not considered history until, in Christian hands, their esoteric meaning had been obscured and the wisdom needed to interpret them non-historically was wanting. (Harpur 2004, 80)

In other words, Jesus never really existed. The stories told about him derived from millennia-old myths of pagan gods, particularly Osiris, Horus, and Isis. Christianity is based on a fiction.

### How the Story Became Popular

With the beginning of the Renaissance in northern Italy in the middle of the fourteenth century, humanist scholars turned to texts from the Greco-Roman world to explore such subjects as literature, history, and philosophy. Earlier, during the eleventh century, Byzantine rule of southern Italy ended when Norman mercenaries drove out the Byzantines. One result of this conquest was an influx of Greek manuscripts into Italy, including works on medicine, mathematics, geography, as well as the writings of Plato and Aristotle. The fall of Constantinople to the Ottomans in 1453 resulted in an influx of Greek-speaking scholars bearing Greek manuscripts into Europe.

A renewed interest in the writings of Greek and Roman historians contributed to an increase in interest about ancient Egypt, especially when scholars read that the great Greek philosophers, lawgivers, and mathematicians had all studied in Egypt. Interest in Egyptian religion and mythology increased when the first edition of Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris* was published in Venice in 1509. Renaissance humanists saw in the story of the murdered Osiris and the miraculous conception and birth of Horus to the mother goddess Isis a reflection of the nativity, death, and resurrection of Jesus, as related in the Gospels. These similarities were explained by recourse to what was called the *prisca theologia*, the original theology taught by God to the first man, Adam, which was then passed on to his descendants. The Egyptians were thought to be the world's oldest civilization, and the writings of Hermes Trismegistus (Thoth) were thought to best preserve this original theology in a work known as the *Hermetica*.

When Enlightenment scholars rejected the reliability of sacred history, meaning the account of the creation and spread of humankind and civilization as recorded in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), they realized that the Egyptian and other so-called pagan myths long predated both the Hebrews and early Christians. Some scholars began to doubt that Jesus had ever existed. They argued that since there was little evidence of Jesus outside of the New Testament Gospels and the accounts of Jesus's life found in the Gospels were contradictory in many instances, there was no reliable evidence for the existence of a historical Jesus. In addition, the recognition that many of the stories of Jesus and his teachings were paralleled in the myths of pagan religions called into question Jesus's existence for some scholars. They argued that Jesus had never existed; he was merely the historization of figures from pre-Christian mythology.

The first scholar to deny the existence of Jesus was the Frenchman Constantin François Volney, who in 1791 published an essay arguing that the early Christians invented Jesus as a sun god and savior modeled on similar gods in other ancient cultures. The word *Christ*, Volney argued, was derived from the Hindu god Krishna. Volney was followed by others who similarly denied the existence of Jesus based on parallels between his life and pagan mythology, mostly encountered in Greek texts. The parallels the early humanists drew among Osiris, Horus, and Isis and Mary and Jesus, originally intended to demonstrate the antiquity of the true theology, were later used to deny the historicity of Jesus and Mary. The decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822 and Mesopotamian cuneiform in 1851 presented scholars with an additional source of parallels to the life of Jesus.

In 1906, the German scholar Peter Jensen argued that both Jesus and Paul were mythical figures derived from the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Earlier, in 1877, William Ricketts Cooper had used the recent translation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* into English in 1867 to draw parallels between events from the life of Jesus and stories about Osiris, Isis, and Horus. Cooper, however, did not question the existence of Jesus but saw these parallels as evidence that the ancient Egyptians had some knowledge of the “true theology.” Later individuals, like Gerald Massey and Alvin Boyd Kuhn, used such parallels to argue against the historical existence of Jesus. Their ideas reached a wider audience with the publication of works by Tom Harpur (2004, 2007) and Timothy Freke and Peter Gandy (1999). It is not uncommon for these ideas to receive a fresh airing in online media during the Easter season (Blake 2017).

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### GODFREY HIGGINS, *ANACALYPSIS*

*Godfrey Higgins (1772–1833) was the son of a wealthy Englishman who attended Trinity Hall, Cambridge University, where he studied Greek and Latin. He joined the Yorkshire militia in the early 1800s to prepare for Napoleon’s expected invasion of England. He retired due to illness with the rank of major around 1808, and from then on, he devoted himself to the study of religion and philosophy. He was a social reformer and worked diligently to improve the treatment of the mentally ill. His major work, Anacalypsis,*

*was originally published in two volumes beginning in 1830. Higgins died in 1833, and his son saw to the publication of the remaining volume in 1836.*

*In this massive work of over one thousand pages, Higgins lays out his view of the history of the world and its religions. Higgins believed the most ancient religion to be Buddhism, and he drew extensive parallels between events in the life of Krishna (whom he refers to as Cristna) as told in the Bhagavad Gita, a Sanskrit poem written between 200 BC and 200 CE, and the life of Jesus. Higgins believed that the basic beliefs of humankind's original religion were preserved, to one extent or another, in all the world's religions. He believed in a historical Jesus, although he considered many of the stories told about Jesus to have their origin in world mythology.*

*In these passages, Higgins drew parallels between events in the story of Jesus and the Egyptian gods Horus and Isis. Higgins considered himself a Christian, although he defined Christian in his own idiosyncratic way. For Higgins, Jesus was originally a man from Nazareth, who belonged to the sect of Pythagorean Essenes. For preaching against the priests of the Pharisees, the dominant sect of Judaism at the time, Jesus was executed at age fifty, not by crucifixion. For additional details on Higgins and his beliefs, see Godwin 1994, 76–90.*

The cross was the Egyptian Banner, above which was carried the crest, or device of the Egyptian cities. It was also used in the same manner by the Persians. According to oriental traditions, the cross of Calvary and that supposed to be set up by Moses in the Wilderness were made of the Wood of the tree of life in Paradise. It was carried in the hand by the Horus, the Mediator of the Egyptians, the second person of their Trinity, and called Logos by the Platonists. Horus was supposed to reign one thousand years. He was buried for three days, he was regenerated, and triumphed over the Egyptian evil principle.

...

The worship of the Virgin was in no sense applicable to Mary the wife of Joseph. If this worship had been originally derived from her, or instituted in her honour, she would not have been called a virgin as a distinguishing mark of honour; for she was no more a virgin than any other woman who had a large family: for such a family, after the birth of Jesus, it cannot be denied that, according to Gospel accounts, she had. Therefore, why, more than other women, should she be called a virgin? The truth is, that the worship of the virgin and child, which we find in all Romish countries, was nothing more than a remnant of the worship of Isis and the god

Horus—the Virgin of the celestial sphere, to whom the epithet virgin, though a mother, was without absurdity applied.

**Source:** Higgins, Godfrey. 1874. *Anacalypsis, an Attempt to Draw Aside the Veil of the Saitic Isis; or An Inquiry into the Origin of Languages, Nations, and Religions*, 294–295, 445. London: J. Burns.

### **WILLIAM RICKETTS COOPER, *THE HORUS MYTH* IN ITS RELATION TO CHRISTIANITY**

*William Ricketts Cooper (1843–1878) was born in London, where he originally worked as a carpet designer. Cooper was described by E. A. Wallis Budge, the keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian antiquities in the British Museum, as a “remarkable man” (Budge 1920, 7–8). Cooper had no formal education in Egyptology and was largely self-taught. He served as the secretary of the Society of Biblical Archaeology from 1872 to 1878, and he was instrumental in the publication of the translation series Records of the Past and Archaic Classics. Cooper was probably the first person to point out similarities among Horus, Osiris, and Jesus based on the recent translation of the Book of the Dead by Samuel Birch. As is seen in the following passage, Cooper believed in a form of prisca theologia, the original theology that God had revealed to Adam and passed on to the human race. Traces of this original theology later surfaced in the religions of the world. Of all the authors quoted in this section, only Cooper has an entry in the Who Was Who in Egyptology (Bierbrier 2012, 130–131).*

The definite language of the Nicene Creed . . . explains the nature and attributes of the founder of our religion, and it is my province, as far as I am able to do so, to show to-night in what degree the nature and those attributes were anticipated in the Egyptian dogma of Horus, Nets, the only-begotten son of his father—the Deliverer of Mankind from the Evil One. . . .

There are, I take it, then, in all religions and notably in the oldest, certain fundamental truths which were derived from a primeval revelation—fundamental truths which have in some theologies been neglected, in others lost sight of, in a third misunderstood and in a fourth perverted and corrupted. In the depths of His infinite mercy, we are told, that the Supreme Being left not Himself without witness in the world—such a witness, for example, as is afforded by the science of natural theology—and He revealed to the earlier civilizers of mankind certain salvatory

truths, the full elucidation of which he reserved for the ages to come. Hence it follows, that as in all ages there were those to whom He was pleased to reveal Himself and to teach His word, there must always have existed among the traditions of the human race the remembrance of those elementary doctrines which were derived from what was really the pre-patriarchal church. . . . Rather, instead, would I base my argument upon this hypothesis therefore, that long prior to the time of Abraham the cardinal dogmas of the Church were known to the nations of the world, and that it was reserved to the Father of the faithful and his descendants to hold and to transmit to us the whole of those dogmas in their integrity.

...

Suffice it then to restate that there is certain evidence, that no doctrine was more permanent, survived more dynastic changes, was less influenced by the three great religious innovations to which Egypt was subjected in the Twelfth, Seventeenth, and Nineteenth Dynasties, or which exercises a holier control over the grosser passions of the flesh, than the dogma of Horus, the Deliverer of Mankind and the Justifier of the Righteous.

The very first of the chief epithets applied to Horus in this his third great office has a startlingly Christian sound; it is the "Sole begotten Son of the Father," to which, in other texts, is added "Horus the Holy Child," the "Beloved son of his father." The Lord of Life, the Giver of Life, both very usual epithets on the funeral scarabei, the "Justifier of the Righteous," the "Eternal King" and the "Word of the Father Osiris."

...

The idea of a personal deity, who assumed human form for the accomplishment of the destruction of a personal evil being, was questionless one of the very earliest dogmas of the Egyptian faith, and was the direct result of a primitive revelation to some member of the pre-patriarchal church, by whose descendants Egypt was first colonized.

**Source:** Cooper, W. R. 1877. *The Horus Myth in Its Relation to Christianity*, 3–4, 22, 61. London: Hardwicke and Bogue.

### GERALD MASSEY, *THE HISTORICAL JESUS AND THE MYTHICAL CHRIST*

*Gerald Massey (1828–1907) was born into a life of poverty and hard work in Hertfordshire, England, in 1828. Massey received no formal education, but*



*he read voraciously and was largely self-taught. He was a well-respected poet, and several volumes of his poetry were published. Massey became interested in Egyptology and spent considerable time in the British Museum studying the materials there with the help of the curator, Samuel Birch. It is possible that Massey studied the Egyptian hieroglyphs, although his publications give no evidence that he had an accurate understanding of the language. Massey came to believe that the stories told about Jesus in the Gospels all derived from Egyptian myths about Osiris, Isis, and Horus and that a historical Jesus never actually existed. He published several books defending his theory, including *The Historical Jesus and the Mythical Christ* (1883) and his magnum opus, *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World* (1907).*

As a mental model the Christ was elaborated by whole races of men, and worked at continually like the Apollo of Greek sculpture. Various nations wrought at this ideal, which long continued repetition evoked from the human mind at last as it did the Greek god from the marble.

It was Egypt that first made the statue live with her own life, and humanized her ideal of the divine. Hers was the legend of supreme pity and self-sacrifice so often told of the canonical Christ. She related how the very god did leave the courts of heaven and come down as a little child, the infant Horus born of the Virgin, through whom he took flesh, or descended into matter, "*crossed the earth as a substitute*," descended into hades as the vivifier of the dead, their vicarious justifier and redeemer, the first fruits and leader of the resurrection into eternal life. The Christian legends were first related of Horus, or Osiris, who was the embodiment of divine goodness, wisdom, truth, and purity; who personated ideal perfection in each sphere of manifestation and every phase of power. This was the greatest hero that *ever lived in the mind of man—not in the flesh*—to influence with transforming force; the only hero to whom the miracles were natural *because he was not human*. The canonical Christ only needed a translator, not a creator; a transcriber of the "sayings" and a collector of the "doings" already ascribed to the mythical Christ.

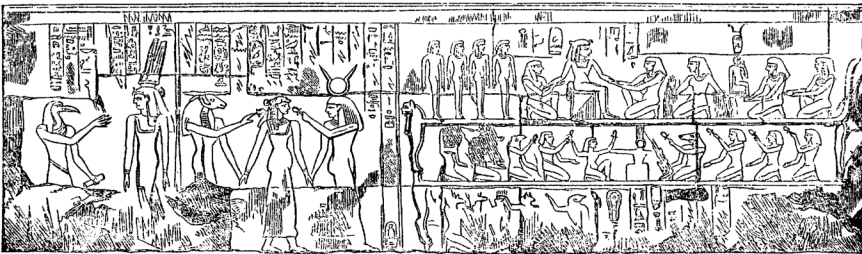
The humanized history is but the mythical drama made mundane. The sayings and marvellous (*sic*) doings of Christ being pre-extant, the "*spirit of Christ*," the "*secret of Christ*," the "*sweet reasonableness of Christ*," were all pre-Christian, and consequently could not be derived from any "personal founder" of Christianity. They were extant before the great delusion had turned the minds of men, and the figure-head of Peter's Bark had been mistaken for a portrait builder.

The Christ of the Gospels is in no sense an historical personage or a supreme model of humanity, a hero who strove, and suffered, and failed to save the world by his death. It is impossible to establish the existence of an historical character *even as an imposter*. . . . The Christ is a popular lay-figure that never lived, and a lay-figure of Pagan origin.

**Source:** Massey, Gerald. 2006 [1883]. *The Historical Jesus and the Mythical Christ*, 167–169. New York: Cosimo.

### FROM GERALD MASSEY, *ANCIENT EGYPT: THE LIGHT OF THE WORLD*

*In 1907, Gerald Massey published his magnum opus, Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World, in which he spent over nine hundred pages providing evidence for his belief that Jesus had never existed but was a creation from a combination of Egyptian myths regarding Osiris, Horus, and Isis. Much in this work is a repeat of what Massey had already published in his previous volumes on the same topic. In this passage, Massey compares scenes from the Temple of Amun at Luxor with the stories of Jesus's birth as told in the Gospels. Massey is following the accepted Egyptian chronology of his day, which placed the Eighteenth Dynasty far earlier than we now know it was; Amenhotep III reigned from 1390–1353 BCE, not during the eighteenth century BCE, as Massey would have it. He also employs an older method of transliterating Egyptian hieroglyphs. What Massey transliterates as Mut-em-Ua, Taht, Kneph, we would render as Mutemwia, Thoth, and Khnum. Massey's interpretation of this scene is an example of what scholars call eisegesis, in which an interpreter reads into a text what he or she wants to see, rather than attempting to understand a text on its own terms and in its own context. The actual meaning of these scenes will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.*



(Massey, Gerald. 1907. *Ancient Egypt the Light of the World*. Vol. II, pp. 756–758. London: T. Fischer Unwin.)



Images such as this bronze statuette of Isis nursing Horus are thought to have influenced the later depictions of Mary nursing the infant Jesus. (Isis nursing Horus, ca. 1070–343 B.C. Accession No. 17.190.1641. Gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1917. Metropolitan Museum of Art.)

Before it could be for the first time understood, the story outlined so elusively in the canonical Gospels had to be retold in accordance with the astronomical mythology, and more especially in terms of the Osirian eschatology. The legend was so ancient in Egypt that in the time of Amen-hetep, a Pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty, it was humanly applied to his child and to his consort Mut-em-Ua in the character of the divine woman, the mother who, like Neith, was ever-virgin. . . . The story of the Annunciation, the miraculous conception (or incarnation), the birth and the adoration of the Messianic infant had already been engraved in stone and represented in four consecutive scenes upon the innermost walls of the holy of holies (the Meskhen) in the temple of Luxor (which was built by Amen-hetep III. about 1700 B.C., or some seventeen centuries before the events depicted are commonly supposed to have taken place). In these scenes the maiden queen Mut-em-Ua, the mother of Amen-hetep, her future child, impersonates the virgin-mother, who conceived and brought forth without the fatherhood.

The first scene on the left hand shows the god Taht, as divine word or logos, in the act of hailing the virgin queen and announcing to her that she is to give birth to the coming son. (That is, to bring forth the royal Repa in the character of Horus or Aten, the divine heir.) In the second scene the ram-headed god Kneph, in conjunction with Hathor, gives life to her. This is the Holy Ghost or spirit that causes conception, Neph being the spirit by nature and by name. Impregnation and conception are apparent in the virgin's fuller form. Next, the mother is seated on the midwife's stool, and the child is supported in the hands of one of the nurses. The fourth scene is that of the Adoration. Here the infant is enthroned, receiving homage from the gods and gifts from men. Behind the deity, who represents the holy spirit, on the right three men are kneeling offering gifts with the right hand, and life with the left. The child thus announced, incarnated, born and worshipped was the Pharaonic representative of the Aten-sun or child-Christ of the Aten-cult, the miraculous conception of the ever-virgin mother imaged by Mut-em-Ua. (The scenes were copied by Sharpe from the temple at Luxor.) Thus the divine drama was represented humanly by the royal lady who personated the mother of God, with her child in this particular religion.

And here a dogma of "historic personality" may be seen in the germ. Indeed, when the Pharaoh first assumed the vesture of divinity and a doctrine of historic personality for the Messiah could be and was established, Ra was the representative of God the Father and the Repa was a type of

God the Son, as heir-apparent for the eternal. The father was the ever-living and the son the ever-coming one. These, in the cult of Annu, were Atum-Ra the father, and Iusa, the Egyptian Jesus, the coming son. The eternal existence of the father was thus demonstrated by the ever-coming of the son.

**Source:** Massey, Gerald. 1907. *Ancient Egypt: The Light of the World*. Vol. 2, 756–758. London: T. Fischer Unwin.

**ALVIN BOYD KUHN, *THE LOST LIGHT:*  
*AN INTERPRETATION OF ANCIENT SCRIPTURES***

*Alvin Boyd Kuhn (1880–1963) was a prolific lecturer and author, producing ten books and what his New York Times obituary referred to as twenty booklets on such varied topics as the philosophy of religion, psychology, semantics, and biblical interpretation. Kuhn's work was largely self-published. In addition, Kuhn was a popular lecturer, having given over 1,945 lectures in the United States and Canada (n.a. 1963). Kuhn received a PhD from Columbia University, and he spent twenty-five years teaching languages in high schools in Pennsylvania. Kuhn was an exponent of the idea that Jesus had never existed and that the stories told of him derived from Egyptian myths. Kuhn's reference to "the Ritual" refers to Samuel Birch's English translation of the Egyptian Book of the Dead, which he titled The Funeral Ritual. In his thinking, Kuhn was greatly influenced by Gerald Massey, whom he referred to as "a scholar of surpassing ability whose sterling work has not yet won for him the place of eminence which he deserves" (Kuhn 1940, 69).*

Very apt, then, is the story of Isis and Osiris. Their infant, Horus, was suckled by Isis in solitude. She reared him in secret, and his limbs grew strong in the hidden land. None knew the hiding place, but it was somewhere in the marshes of Amenta, the Lower Egypt of the mythos. This is matched in toto by the story of the birth of the mythical Sargon of Assyria. Likewise it is the background of the "flight into Egypt" of Jesus in the Gospels. The divine child had to be taken down into "Egypt" until the Herut menace was passed and in order that the son of God might be brought up out of it. As the angel of the Lord says to Joseph, "Arise and take the young child and his mother and flee into Egypt," so at the birth of Horus the god Taht says to the mother, "Come, thou goddess Isis, hide thyself with thy child." She is bidden to take him down into the marshes

of Lower Egypt, called Kheb or Khebt. But the Egyptian version gives us more ground for understanding the maneuver as a cosmographic symbol, because Taht tells Osiris that there “these things shall befall: his limbs will grow, he will wax entirely strong, he will attain the dignity of Prince . . . and sit upon the throne of his father.” This is highly important, since it makes the hiding away a part of the cosmic process and not a mere incredible incident in Gospel “narrative.” In the mutilated Gospel account the sojourn in Egypt is left as if it were a matter of brief duration, followed by the child’s return. In the fuller Egyptian record it is seen that the dip into Lower Egypt is that necessary incubation in matter that must continue until it has brought the infant potentialities to actualization and function. As the seed in the soil, so the god in the earthly body and the “child” in “Lower Egypt”—all are hidden away for the growth that only thus could be attained. The secreting of the child is no more than the planting on earth of the divine seed in its appropriate soil—humanity. In the Ritual the Manes, or Osiris-Nu, says: “I am he whose stream is secret.” Of Ptah it is also said: “Thy secret dwelling is in the depths (or the deep) of the secret waters and unknown” (Renouf: *Hibbert Lectures*, p. 321).

**Source:** Alvin Boyd Kuhn. 1940. *The Lost Light: An Interpretation of Ancient Scriptures*, 191–192. Elizabeth, NJ: Academy Press.

### What Really Happened

Those authors most vocal in arguing for a mythical Jesus based on parallels between Egyptian myths and the life of Jesus, whom I will refer to as *mythicists*, are not Egyptologists, and they frequently misuse, misinterpret, or outright invent Egyptian myths to support their case for a mythical Jesus. For example, in the brief text presented in the film *Religulous* there are several errors: the *Book of the Dead* was not written in 1280 BCE; Anubis (who is referred to as Anup) was never called “the Baptizer”; and Horus never raised Asar from the dead, nor was he crucified and resurrected, nor did he heal the sick, blind, cast out demons, or walk on water. Mythicists frequently draw a comparison between the virgin birth of Jesus and the conception of Horus by Isis. As the following texts will illustrate, Isis was definitely not a virgin; the conception of Horus came about through intercourse between Isis and Osiris. The miraculous nature of this conception lies in the fact that Osiris was murdered and dismembered by Seth, but Isis was able to gather and reassemble his parts and revive him so that they could have intercourse.

The mythicists draw a parallel between the historical Herod, who sought to have the infant Jesus murdered, forcing the Holy Family to flee to Egypt, and the Egyptian serpent they refer to as Herut, or Herrut, whom they say attempted to kill the infant Horus. There are several problems with this identification. First, Herod was most certainly a historical individual, serving as the vassal king of Judea for the Romans. Second, the infant Horus was never said to be attacked by a serpent named Herut or Herrut. As the text from the Metternich stela shows, the infant Horus was bitten by a poisonous animal, but which kind is never specified, because the purpose of the text was to protect people from all poisonous animals.

The mythicist understanding of the nature of the New Testament Gospels is frequently misinformed. For example, the story in the Gospel of Matthew of Herod's attempt on the life of the infant Jesus fits in with Matthew's overall goal of depicting Jesus as another Moses, since in Exodus 1:15–22 we read that Pharaoh had decreed the murder of all newborn Hebrew boys. The Gospel story has no relationship to the myth of Horus. Mythicists frequently cite Osiris as an example of what is called a "dying and rising god," meaning a god who dies or is murdered, and then returns to life, and they then point out that Jesus also was said to have been executed and resurrected. The problem with this parallel is that while Osiris was murdered, he never returned to life. Instead, he goes to the Egyptian underworld, where he serves as ruler and judge of the dead (Smith 2005).

Finally, mythicists cite the parallel between the birthdate of Horus, which, according to Plutarch, took place at the winter solstice, and the traditional date of the birth of Jesus, December 25. The problem with this parallel is that the Gospels do not give a date for the birth of Jesus. December 25 was not mentioned as the birthday of Jesus until the middle of the fourth century, and not all Christians recognize December 25 as the date of Jesus's birth. Eastern Christianity recognizes January 6 as the birth date of Jesus. The reasons these dates were chosen are complex, and a topic of discussion, but they have nothing to do with the birth of Horus (McGowan 2002).

While such parallels between the Gospel accounts and Egyptian myths are largely spurious, there are legitimate parallels to be seen between Jesus and Horus, mostly in the ways in which the two individuals are depicted in art, which one would expect as a result of the syncretism that takes place when new and old religious traditions come into contact. The Egyptian method of depicting the infant Horus seated on the lap of his mother, Isis, while nursing has been cited as the origin of the similar depiction of the infant Jesus and Mary in scenes known as *Maria lactans* (Mary nursing).

An amuletic gem from the Byzantine Period depicts Jesus standing on the backs of two crocodiles, holding two scorpions in each hand, similar to the way Horus is depicted on the *cippi* (see the Metternich stela [Barb 1964]). In addition, there are amulets depicting the infant Jesus seated on an open flower, with a finger raised to his mouth (Michaïlidès 1951, 86; Petrie 1914, pl. XLIX), similar to the depiction of Horus as Horus-the-child rising from a lotus flower (for an example, see scene g at <http://edoc3.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/lepsius/tafelwa4.html>). Perhaps the most interesting example of the influence of ancient Egypt on the Gospels is found in the Demotic story of Setne Khamwas and Si-Osiri, where an Egyptian account of a vision of the underworld is paralleled by a parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Scholars are undecided about whether this is an example of direct influence of the Egyptian text on the Gospel or whether both sources rely on a folktale common among cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean.

## PRIMARY DOCUMENTS

### STELA LOUVRE C286, *THE GREAT HYMN TO OSIRIS*

*The best way to illustrate the unfoundedness of the parallels among Osiris, Horus, and Jesus is by examining the Egyptian accounts of these gods in context. This hymn to Osiris is preserved on a calcite stela about three feet (103 centimeters) by two feet (62 centimeters) wide dedicated by Amenmes, who lived sometime during the first half of the Eighteenth Dynasty (ca. 1539–1336 BCE). The image at the top of the stela shows Amenmes seated facing right before a table of offerings. His wife, Nefertari, is seated behind him, and a son stands behind her. Another son stands facing Amenmes and Nefertari, in the posture of making an offering. To the right, another woman, named Baket, is seated facing left. Her relationship to the other people depicted on the stela is not specified, but she is described as deceased. Standing facing her is a priest of Osiris named Saiy, who is offering her water and incense. Below this scene, we see six additional children of Amenmes, two sons and four daughters, all kneeling.*

*Osiris's role as a god of fertility, responsible for the growth of plants, as well as his role as the ruler of the dead are mentioned. Isis's role as his protector and the one who restored Osiris to life after his murder by Seth (which is pointedly not mentioned) is stressed, as is her part in helping Osiris achieve an erection ("lifted up the lethargy of the weary-hearted") so that he could impregnate her*



*with their son, Horus. Obviously, Horus was not the result of a virgin birth; the description of his conception is quite graphic and is frequently depicted in scenes as Isis, in the form of a bird, alighting on the erect penis of Osiris. The allusion to Isis's nursing Horus "in solitude" is elaborated on further below. There is an allusion to the trial between Horus and Seth before Geb, in which Horus was allowed to inherit the kingship over Egypt, formerly held by Osiris but usurped by Seth when he killed Osiris. "The evil which was installed in the court of Geb" is a reference to Seth; Geb was the father of both. Maat is frequently translated as "truth" or "justice," and refers to the proper order of the world, as established by the gods at creation. Maat is frequently depicted as a goddess wearing a feather on her head.*

The Overseer of the cattle of Amun, Amenmes:

Praising Osiris by the Overseer of the cattle of Amun, Amenmes (and) the Lady of the House Nefertari. He says:

Hail to you, Osiris, Lord of Eternity, King of the Gods, numerous of names, sacred of manifestations, of secret rituals in the temples. He is the One of Noble *Ka*, foremost in Busiris; (one) rich in possessions in Letopolis, recipient of praise in Andjety [9th Nome of Lower Egypt]. Pre-eminent of food offerings in Heliopolis, the Lord of Recollection in the (Hall of) the Two Truths, the secret *ba* of the Master of the Cavern. (He is) the Holy One in Memphis, the *Ba* of Re, (while) his own body rests in Heracleopolis, (where his) praise is splendid in the Naret-tree which exists to support his *ba*. (He is) Lord of the Temple in Hermopolis, the terrifying one in Hypselis, the Lord of Eternity, Foremost in Abydos, whose throne is far away in the Necropolis. His name endures in the mouths of men; he is the original god of the entire Two Lands, who provides food, foremost of the Ennead. (He is) an excellent *akh* among the *akhs*, for whom Nun pours his water. The North wind blows south for him. The heaven produces a breeze for his nose in order to satisfy his nose.

Annual plants grow at his heart's desire; the arable land produces sustenance for him. The sky and the stars hearken to him; the great doors are opened for him. (He is) the Master of Praise from the Southern Sky, who is adored in the Northern Sky. The Imperishable stars are under his control. The Unwearying Stars are his thrones. At the command of Geb offerings go forth for him; as the Ennead worships him. Those in the underworld pay homage, those on the hill bow down, (and) the ancestors rejoice when they see him. The dead fear him; the Two Lands united give

him praise at the approach of his majesty. (He is) an effective noble, foremost among the nobles. As his office endures, his rulership is confirmed. Beneficent Ruler of the Ennead, who is beloved by the one who sees him; fear of whom pervades all lands so that they declare his reputation prominently. Everyone makes offerings to him, (the) Lord who is renowned in heaven (and) in earth. He is the recipient of much praise at the Wag-festival, as all lands as one shout acclamation. He is the Great One, the best of his brothers, the Chief of the Ennead, who established Maat throughout the Two Lands; who places the son on his father's throne. He is praised by his father Geb, loved by his mother Nut, one mighty of strength when he overthrows the rebel; (with) powerful arm he slays his enemy, placing fear of him on his foe, who has defeated evil; stout-hearted when he tramples enemies.

He has inherited from Geb the kingship of the Two Lands [Egypt] when he saw his excellence. He has handed over to him the governance of the lands because of the successful deeds he had accomplished. This land is under his control, its water, its air, its plants, all its cattle, all birds, all poultry, serpents, (and) its desert herds have been presented to the son of Nut.

He has appeared on his father's throne like Re when he rises in the horizon when he places light over darkness. He has illuminated the shadow with his two plumes; he has flooded the Two Lands like the sun disk at dawn. His White Crown has pierced the sky and it has mingled with the stars. (He is) the ruler of every god, (his) commands are effective, (he is) praised by the Greater Ennead, beloved of the Lesser Ennead. His sister [Isis] acted as his protector, driving away foes, putting a stop to the trouble-maker [Seth] with the effectiveness of her speech, (she being) skillful of speech. Her words cannot fail, since (her) commands are effective, Isis the effective, the protector of her brother who looked for him without ceasing, who traveled this land in mourning. She would not rest before she found him. (She) made a shadow with her feathers, creating a breeze with her wings, offering praise when her brother moored. (She is the one who) lifted up the lethargy of the weary-hearted, who received his semen which created the heir, who suckled the child in solitude, his location was unknown; who revealed him in the court of Geb when he had grown strong. The Ennead rejoices: "Welcome, Osiris's son Horus, stout-hearted, true of voice, son of Isis, heir of Osiris." The tribunal of Maat assembled for him, the Ennead, the Lord of All himself, the Lords of Maat were united in it, ignoring the evil which was installed in the court of Geb in order to give the office to its owner, the kingship to its rightful

owner. Horus was found justified, (and) the office of his father was given to him. He [Horus] came forth crowned at the command of Geb, (and) he received the rulership of the Two Lands, the White Crown having been established on his head. The land has been assigned to him as his property, heaven and earth are under his supervision. Mankind has been assigned to him, the common people, patricians, the people of Egypt, the Aegean; that which the sun encircles is under his control: the north wind, the Nile, the flood waters, the tree of life, every plant. Nepri gives his every herb and produce of the farmland; he introduces satisfaction and places it in all lands. Everyone celebrates, minds are happy, hearts rejoice, everyone is joyful. Everyone adores his generosity. How pleasing is his love for us. His kindness pervades hearts. His love is great in every person. They presented his enemy to the son of Isis. His offence failed; evil was done against the one who causes disturbances [Seth]. The one who commits an offence, his deed reaches him. The Son of Isis has protected his father. His name has been sanctified and restored. Majesty has taken its place; (his) reputation endures according to its custom. The roads are open, the streets are clear. The Two Banks [Egypt] are satisfied. Evil has perished, the accuser has fled. The land is at peace under its lord. Maat has been established for its lord; evil has been rejected. May your heart be joyful Wennefer (Osiris). The son of Isis has received the White Crown; the office of his father has been presented to him within the court of Geb. When Re speaks Thoth writes. The court is satisfied. Your father Geb issued a decree for you, and it was done according to his declaration.

**Source:** Translated by S. E. Thompson, after Project Rosette. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://projetrosette.info/page.php?Id=799&TextId=18&typeNav=fac&langue=FR#debutTab>.

### **COFFIN TEXT, SPELL 148: THE CONCEPTION OF HORUS**

*This text comes from a collection of texts found on the inner sides of wooden coffins from the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2118–1760 BCE), although the language of the texts indicates that some existed earlier, during the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2118–1980 BCE). These texts are intended to provide for the successful transition to the afterlife of a deceased Egyptian. The purpose of this text is stated in the title: to allow the deceased to become a falcon. The Egyptians believed that the dead could transform themselves into any number of forms necessary to escape enemies in the afterworld and ascend to world of the gods.*

*In this text, the transformation is accomplished by recounting the details surrounding the conception and birth of the falcon god Horus. Again, we see that Isis would hardly qualify as a virgin mother; it is her brother Osiris's semen that impregnates her. There is an allusion to Isis hiding from Seth during her pregnancy. Atum was a form of the sun god and in one creation account is said to have arisen from the primeval ocean and begun the process of creation by creating air and moisture. The Unfurler refers to the god who stood at the prow of the solar boat as it traveled through the sky and underworld and was responsible for the prow and stern ropes of the boat. In images, Horus is frequently shown in this position.*

Spell for becoming a falcon.

Lightning flashes, the gods are afraid. Isis awakes pregnant with the semen of her brother Osiris. She raises herself up; the woman hastens, her heart pleased with the semen of her brother Osiris, and she says: "Ho! Gods, I am Isis, the sister of Osiris who wept on account of the father of the gods, Osiris, who parted the slaughter of the Two Lands. His semen is inside my body. I have knitted the form of a god in the egg as my son, foremost of the Ennead who will rule this land, who will inherit (from) Geb, who will speak for his father, who will slay Seth, the enemy of his father Osiris. Come, O gods, may you provide his protection within my uterus. Know in your hearts that this god who is in his egg is your Lord, the blue-haired one, the form of the Lord of the gods who are great and beautiful, adorned with two plums of lapis lazuli."

"Ho," says Atum, "your heart is wise, O woman. How do you know that he is a god, the lord and heir of the Ennead, so that you may act against him in the egg?"

"I am Isis, more effective and more noble than the gods. The god who is in this my womb is the seed of Osiris."

Then Atum said: "If you are pregnant, then you should hide from the gods that you are pregnant and will give birth, and that he is the seed of Osiris, so that that opponent who killed his father will not come and destroy the egg in its infancy; the one of whom the Great of Magic is afraid."

"Hear this, O gods," says Isis: "Atum, the lord of the Temple of the Divine Images, has decreed for me the protection of my son within my womb; he has stationed troops around him within this my uterus, because he knows that he is the heir of Osiris. A falcon amulet which is in this womb of mine has been provided by Atum, Lord of the Gods."

[Isis speaks to Horus] “Come, go forth upon the earth so that I may give you praise, so that the followers of your father Osiris may follow you. I shall make your name after you have reached the horizon, having passed beyond the walls of the House of ‘He whose name is hidden.’ Strength will go forth from within my body. Power has reached within my body. The power of his strength has arrived, the radiant one sails forth after he made his own throne, sitting in front of the gods in the entourage of the Unfurler.

Falcon, my son Horus, dwell in this land of your father Osiris in this your name of ‘Falcon on the walls of the House of He of Hidden Name.’ I ask that you be in the entourage of Re of the Horizon, in the prow of the primeval bark of eternity and endless space.”

Isis goes down to the Unfurler who brought forth Horus. Isis asked that he be with the Unfurler as the guide of eternity. “Behold Horus, you gods.”

“I am Horus, the Great Falcon on the walls of the House of He of Hidden Name. My flight has reached the horizon; I have passed by the gods of Nut [the sky], promoting my position over the Primeval Gods, (even) the Ascender cannot match my first flight. My place is far from Seth, the enemy of my father Osiris. I have reached the paths of eternity at dawn; I am exalted in my flight. No god has done what I have done. I will attack the enemy of my father Osiris, with the result that he will be placed under my sandal in this my name of Aggressor.”

“I am Horus, whom Isis bore, whose protection was established while in the egg. The fiery breath of your mouths has not attacked me. That which you have said against me cannot reach me. I am Horus, my place is far from men and gods. I am Horus the son of Isis/Osiris.”

**Source:** de Buck, A., and A. Gardiner. 1938. *The Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Vol 2. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 209–226. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. Used by permission of the Oriental Institute.

### **THE METTERNICH STELA, *HOW ISIS RESCUED HER SON HORUS FROM A SCORPION’S STING***

*This text comes from an object known as a cippus, which was intended to provide protection for Egyptians from snakes, scorpions, crocodiles, and any dangerous animals, and to provide relief to those who were stung or bitten by snakes or scorpions. A cippus depicted the god Horus as a nude child standing on the backs of crocodiles and clutching dangerous animals in each hand. This*

*particular example shows Horus clutching two snakes, two scorpions, an oryx, and a lion, in his hands. This stela, thirty-three inches by thirteen inches, was set up in the necropolis of the Mnevis bulls at Heliopolis in honor of Mnevis and Pharaoh Nectanebo II (360–343 BCE) by the priest Nesuatum. The stela was covered with hieroglyphic texts describing various mythological stories involving the healing of individuals—or even animals, as one spell on this stela is for healing a cat who had received a poisonous bite—by the gods. In order to benefit from the healing power of the texts, a person had to either touch the stela or drink water that had been poured over the hieroglyphic texts. Cippi could be set up in basins designed to catch the water poured over them.*

*Mythicists frequently compare the story of Isis and Horus found on this stela with the flight of Joseph, Mary, and the infant Jesus to Egypt to escape the wrath of Herod found in the Gospel of Matthew. The form of the god Horus depicted on the stela was called Horus-Shed, which earlier translators rendered as “Horus the Savior,” providing those seeking parallels between Jesus and Horus with a ready example. More recently, it has been argued that in this instance shed actually means enchanter, or reciter, in the sense of reciting magical spells. Earlier texts had included allusions to Isis hiding from Seth during pregnancy and childbirth (“suckled the child in solitude, his location was unknown” from Stela Louvre C286, for example); this text provides details about where Isis hid (Khemmis in the Delta) and what occurred while in hiding.*

*Earlier translators of the text understood the text to refer to the death and restoration to life of the infant Horus, providing a parallel to the death and resurrection of Jesus. The text does not refer to the death of Horus; note that the ailing Horus is said to “howl.” Cippi do provide a parallel to later depictions of Jesus. During the Byzantine Period, there are depictions of Jesus standing on the backs of crocodiles, just as the infant Horus was. For an example from the sixth century, see [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?assetId=524002001&objectId=58872&partId=1](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?assetId=524002001&objectId=58872&partId=1).*

I am Isis, who was pregnant with her infant, expecting the divine Horus. I gave birth to Horus, son of Osiris within the nest of Khemmis. I rejoiced exceedingly because of it, when I saw the one who would avenge his father. I hid him, I concealed him because of fear of that one. I wandered to Imu, arising early through fear of the evil doer. I spent the day searching so the child could eat. Having returned to embrace Horus I found him—the beautiful Horus of Gold, the minor child who did not have a father—after he had watered the banks with his tears, with the drool from

his lips. His body was exhausted, his heart weary, his veins of his body did not fill. I let out a shriek: "It is I; it is I." The child was too weak to answer. (My) breasts were full, (but his) belly was empty, (but) his mouth craved his food. The well overflowed, but the child was thirsty. My heart fled, (my) lamentation was great. The minor child refused the jar, the loneliness having been prolonged. (I) feared the lack of one who comes at my voice. My father [Geb] was in the underworld, my mother [Nut] was in the necropolis, my older brother [Osiris] was in the sarcophagus, the other as an enemy [Seth], he had been oppressive to me for a long time. My younger sister [Nephtys] was in his house. Indeed, to whom among men may I appeal, so that their hearts will turn to me? I will call to those who are in the delta marshes. They will run to me immediately! The delta-dwellers came to me from their houses. They jumped up for me at the sound of my voice. They shrieked, saying "how great is my suffering." There was no one there who could conjure with his spell, while every person among them were crying out loudly. There was no one there who knew how to restore life.

A woman came to me, famous in her town, a noble lady, foremost in her district. She came to me carrying life. Her heart was confident on account of her skill. (She said): "Fear not, fear not, child Horus. Don't be downcast, don't be downcast, mother of a god. The child is safe from the evil of his brother. The bush is hidden, death cannot enter it. The magic of Atum the father of the gods who is in heaven is the one who made life. Seth cannot enter this district. He cannot travel about within Khemmis. Horus is safe from the evil of his brother, (and) his followers cannot harm him. Seek the course of this (poison) throughout him, so that Horus may live for his mother. Perhaps a scorpion has stung him, or a greedy snake has bitten him."

Isis placed her nose in his mouth to learn the odor thereof from within his body. She identified the suffering of the divine heir. She found (him) to be under the influence of poison. She embraced him quickly; she jumped around him, like fish (do) when thrown into a frying pan. "Horus has been bitten, O Re. Your son has been bitten; Horus has been bitten."

The minor child howled from worry; those around the child were speechless. Nephtys came to him weeping, her shriek pervaded the Delta marshes. Selkis (said): "What is it? What is wrong with the child Horus? Isis, call out to heaven so that the crew of Re will stop. The bark of Re will not travel while the child Horus is on his side." Isis sent forth her voice

to heaven, her cries to the bark of millions. The sun-disk halted in her presence. It did not move from its place. Thoth arrived, equipped with his magic power, bearing the great command of justification. "What is it? What is it, divine and effective Isis who knows her spell. There is no harm to your son, Horus. His protection is the bark of Re. Today I have arrived in the divine boat, while the sun disk is in its place of yesterday, while darkness has come into existence, and light has been driven away until Horus is healed for his mother Isis. . . . I am Thoth, the eldest, the son of Re, whom Atum, father of the god commanded to heal Horus for his mother Isis, (and) to heal the sufferer likewise."

...

Thoth spoke to these gods and to the inhabitants of Khemmis: "O nurses who are in Pe, who strike themselves with their hands, who beat themselves with their arms on account of that Great One [Osiris] who departed from them, be watchful over this child. Seek his way among men. Confuse the path of those who rebel against him until he has seized for himself the throne of the Two Lands. Re is in heaven defending him; his father is watching over him; the magic power of his mother protects him, while causing love for him to pervade (the land), spreading fear of him among people. One waits for me to dispatch the night-bark, to make the day-bark set sail. Horus is entrusted to you, being destined for life. I will announce to his father that he lives. I will cause the of the night-bark to rejoice, so that the crew may sail on."

It means Horus lives for his mother Isis, and that the sufferer lives for his mother also. The poison is powerless. The expert will be praised on account of his task delivering a report to the one who sent him. May your heart rejoice, Re-Horakhte, your son Horus has been assigned life, and all people and animals who are suffering from poison live also.

**Source:** Translated by S. E. Thompson, from texts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Accessed July 10, 2019. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/546037>.

### ***DIVINE BIRTH NARRATIVE OF AMENHOTEP III AT LUXOR***

*In Egyptian royal ideology, the king was considered the son of a god. Beginning in the Fourth Dynasty, the king's name at birth was enclosed in a cartouche and preceded by the epithet "son of [the sun-god] Re." The Middle Kingdom*



*tale known as Khufu and the Magicians described how three kings of the Fifth Dynasty were conceived by the sun god Re. The Eighteenth Dynasty kings look to Amun as their patron god, and the temple of Amun-Re at Luxor and the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri preserve scenes and texts in which the conception and birth of the king are described. These are the scenes that Massey maintained were the source of the birth narratives of Jesus in the gospels. Massey was working with an earlier publication of the scenes from the Luxor temple containing several errors. What Massey took as "three men offering gifts," an obvious parallel to the magi who visited the infant Jesus (although the number three is traditional and is not mentioned in the Gospels) were actually three gods, one of which was the ram-headed god Khnum. Most importantly, the conception of the future king by Amun-Re was certainly not a virginal conception.*

*The following text accompanies the scene of the king's conception by his mother. The scene itself is quite chaste, showing Queen Mutemwia and Amun-Re seated in separate chairs, holding hands, while Amun offers an ankh, symbolizing the breath of life, to the queen with his other hand. The text, however, leaves little to the imagination as to what took place; Amun-Re assumed the identity of the queen's husband, Pharaoh Thutmose IV, and impregnated her. As we saw with the account of the conception of Horus, there is no tradition of a virgin birth in ancient Egypt.*

Speech by Amun-Re, Lord of Karnak, pre-eminent in his harem, when he had assumed the form of this her husband, King Menkheperure (Thutmose IV), given life. He found her as she slept within the innermost part of her palace. She awoke on account of the divine fragrance, and turned towards His Majesty. He went straightway to her, he was aroused by her. He allowed her to see him in his divine form, after he had come before her, so that she rejoiced at seeing his beauty. His love entered her body. The palace was flooded with the divine fragrance, and all his odors were those of the land of Punt.

Speech by Mutemwia before the majesty of this august god Amun-Re Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands: "How great are your *bas*! How welcome is this your . . . How hidden are the plans which you devised. How satisfied is your heart with my majesty; your fragrance is throughout my body."

Afterwards, the majesty of this god (Amun-Re) did everything he wished with her.

Speech by Amun-Re, Lord of the Thrones of the Two Lands before her majesty: “Amen-hotep (III) Heka waset (Ruler of Thebes) will be the name of this child which I have placed in your womb, according to this verbal utterance which will come forth from your mouth. He will become an excellent king over this entire land. My ba belongs to him; my appearance belongs to him, my White Crown belongs to him, so that he will rule the Two Lands like Re forever.”

**Source:** Brunner, Hellmut. 1964. *Die Geburt des Gottkönigs*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 45–46, pl. 4. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

### THE CONTENDINGS OF HORUS AND SETH

*The composition known as The Contendings of Horus and Seth is one of the longest narratives preserved from ancient Egypt. The papyrus on which it is preserved dates to the reign of Ramesses V (1149–1146 BCE). Much of what we know of the mythology of Horus, Seth, Osiris, and Isis derives not from a narrative but from allusions in hymns or ritual texts. This text is the earliest preserved narrative myth from ancient Egypt. The text describes itself as “the judgment of Horus and Seth” and purports to be a court transcript of the trial of Horus and Seth before the court of the gods, presided over by Pre-Horakhty. Through a total of fourteen episodes, Horus and Seth press their case as Osiris’s rightful heir. At times, the gods compete in challenges; at others, they are involved in physical combat, and even rape. Finally, Horus is declared the legitimate heir of Osiris, and Seth is allowed to go live with Pre-Horakhty, where he serves as a protector of the solar bark in its daily travels.*

*In the episode translated here, Seth finds Horus on a mountain, assaults him, and blinds him. Seth’s aim of rendering Horus unable to fulfill his duties as heir to Osiris is thwarted when Hathor restores Horus’s sight. Harpur (Harpur 2004, 96) compares this incident with the Temptation of Jesus in the Gospels (Matthew 4:1–11 and parallels), in which Satan/the Devil takes Jesus up to a high mountain to tempt him. The reader can easily see that the only similarity between the two accounts is the location on a mountain. Horus was not being tempted by Seth but assaulted. Jesus does not succumb to the Devil’s temptation and commands him to depart. Horus is grievously wounded by Seth and is only healed by the intervention of a sympathetic goddess. As with many of the parallels drawn between episodes in the Gospel accounts of Jesus and Egyptian mythology, any similarity can be seen as trivial when the Egyptian texts are understood in context.*

The adjudication between Horus and Seth, mysterious of appearance, the greatest of the nobles and officials who had ever existed. Now a young [god] was sitting before the Lord of All, claiming the office of his father Osiris, beautiful of appearances, the son of Ptah, who illuminates [the west] with his appearance. Thoth presented the sound eye to the greatest noble who was in Heliopolis. Then Shu, son of Re, spoke before Atum, the Great Prince in Heliopolis: "justice prevails over might; deliver it by saying 'give the office to Horus.'" Then Thoth said to [the Ennead]: "True a million times."

...

Then Pre-Horakhty became exceedingly enraged, because Pre's wish had been to give the office to the mighty Seth, son of Nut. Onuris cried out loudly before the Ennead, saying "What should we do?"

...

Then Pre-Horakhty and Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, wrote to the Ennead, saying: "What are you doing still sitting here? As for the two young men whom you are forcing to spend their lives at court, when my letter reaches you, you should put the White Crown on the head of Horus, Son of Isis and assign him to the throne of his father Osiris." Then Seth became extremely angry. Then the Ennead said to Seth: "Why are you angry? Is it not according to the instruction of Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, and Pre-Horakhty, that action should be taken?" Then the White Crown was placed on the head of Horus, son of Isis. Then Seth cried out before the Ennead, since he was very angry, saying: "Should the office be given to my younger brother, while I, his older brother, still stand?" Then he swore an oath, saying "Let the White Crown be removed from the head of Horus, son of Isis, and let him be thrown into the river, where I will contend with him for the office of ruler." Then Pre-Horakhty agreed.

...

Then the Ennead went up into the mountains to search for Horus son of Isis. Now Horus was lying under a *shenusha*-tree in the oasis land. Then Seth found him; he seized him and threw him on his back on the mountain, and he removed his two sound eyes from their sockets. He buried them on the mountain to illuminate the earth. His two eyeballs became two bulbs which grew into lotus plants. Then Seth departed, and he lied to Pre-Horakhty, (saying): "I did not find Horus," although he had found him.

Then Hathor, Mistress of the Southern Sycamore, went and found Horus as he was lying down weeping in the desert. Then she captured a gazelle and she milked it, and she said to Horus: "Open your eyes so I may pour this milk in (them)." Then he opened his eyes so she could pour the milk in; first in the right one, then the left. Then she said to him: "Open your eyes," and he opened his eyes, and she examined them and she found that he was healed.

...

Then Atum, Lord of the Two Lands, the Heliopolitan, wrote to Isis as follows: "Bring Seth, equipped with manacles." Then Isis brought Seth, equipped with manacles, as a prisoner (would be). Then Atum said to him: "Why did you prevent judging you by seizing for yourself the office of Horus?" Then Seth answered: "On the contrary, my good Lord. Let Horus son of Isis be summoned and the office of his father Osiris be given to him." Then Horus, son of Osiris was brought and the White Crown was given to him, and it was announced to him: "you are a good king of Egypt; you are the good lord, l.p.h., of every land for ever and ever.

Then Isis cried out to her son Horus, saying: "you will be a good king; my heart rejoices, for you will brighten the land with your appearance." Then Ptah the Great, South of his Wall, Lord of Ankh-towy, said: "What will be done for Seth, now that Horus has been given the throne of his father Osiris?" Then Pre-Horakhty said "Let me be given Seth son of Nut so that he may dwell with me as my son, and he will thunder in the sky, and he will be feared."

**Source:** Gardiner, Alan H. 1932. *Late-Egyptian Stories*. Translated by S. E. Thompson, 37–38, 47–48, 50–51, 59–60. Brussels: Fondation égyptologique reine élisabeth.

### SETNE KHAMWAS AND SI-OSIRI

*The texts cited so far have been chosen to illustrate the spurious nature of the parallels drawn by those arguing for a mythical Jesus based on supposed parallels between the Gospel narratives and Egyptian mythology. This passage has been chosen as an example of a possible legitimate example of Egyptian influence on a parable attributed to Jesus in the Gospel of Luke (16:19–31). This text is written in Demotic on a papyrus, the back of which was used to record official land registers in Greek dated to year seven of the Roman emperor Claudius (46–47 CE). In 1918, Hugo Gressmann drew attention to*

*the similarities between the parable known as the story of "Dives and Lazarus" and this passage from the story of Setne Khamwas.*

*In this story, Setne Khamwas and his son, Si-Osiri, visit the underworld and witness what happens to those whose deeds do not measure up to Maat. The weighing of deeds is a reference to the Egyptian view of the final judgment, in which a person's deeds are weighed against the ideal of Maat (truth, justice, the proper order of things) before Osiris, the judge of the dead. Those whose deeds do not measure up are consigned to an eternity of torment in the underworld, variously referred to as Amenti (the West, the abode of the dead, the direction in which the sun set into the underworld every night) and Tè (another word for the underworld, the realm of Osiris).*

*Setne and Si-Osiri witness a reversal of fortune in which a rich man honored during life is found wanting in the afterlife, while a poor man finds himself honored in the afterlife. The theme of the story is similar to that of a parable told by Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. This is not the only example of a tale of retribution in the afterlife, and rabbinic sources preserve several such stories, but none date to earlier than 400 CE. The Egyptians are the first civilization known to believe in a postmortal judgment of the dead and in a "hell" involving tormenting punishments for the unworthy. So, to some extent, it is undeniable that Egyptian beliefs had an impact on this parable of Jesus. The parallel in no way supports the idea of a mythical Jesus, however.*

[And on a certain day it happened that] Setne [was] made ready for [the festival] according to (?) [his custom (?) in] his [own (?) dwellings . . . the child [Si-Osiri was brought for the] [festival] (to be held) in [his] presence.

[At a] certain moment behold! Setne heard the voice of a wailing, . . . and he looked [from the upper chambers] of his dwelling [and behold he saw a rich man] whom they were carrying out to the desert-necropolis, the wailing being [loud exceedingly]. . . [ his condition] being more (?) glorious than his own (?). He gazed [again] he [looked] at his feet (?), behold! he saw [a poor man being carried out from Memphis to the cemetery] . . . he being wrapped [in] a mat, there being . . . and [none] walking [after him. Said] Setne, ' By [Ptah, the great god, how much better it shall be in Amenti for great men (?) for whom [they make glory (?) with] the voice of [wailing] than for poor men whom they take to the desert-necropolis [without glory of funeral]!'

. . .

And Setne saw (there) a great man clothed in raiment of byssus, near to the place in which Osiris was, he being of exceeding high position (?).

Setne marvelled at those things which he saw in Amenti. And Si-Osiri walked out in front of (?) him; and he said to him, 'My father Setne, dost thou not see this great man who is clothed in raiment of royal linen, standing near to the place in which Osiris is? He is that poor man whom thou sawest being carried out from Memphis, with no man following him, and wrapped in a mat. He was brought to the Tè and his evil deeds were weighed against his good deeds that he did upon earth; and it was found that his good deeds were more numerous than his evil deeds, considering (?) the life destiny which Thoth had written for him . . . considering his magnanimity(?) upon earth. And it was commanded before Osiris that the burial outfit of that rich man, whom thou sawest carried forth from Memphis with great laudation, should be given to this same poor man, and that he should be taken among the noble spirits as a man of God that follows Sokaris Osiris, his place being near to the person of Osiris. (But) that great man whom thou didst see, he was taken to the Tè, his evil deeds were weighed against his good deeds, and his evil deeds were found more numerous than his good deeds that he did upon earth. It was commanded that he should be requited in Amenti, and he [is that man] whom [thou didst see], in whose right eye the pivot (?) of the gate of Amenti was fixed, shutting and opening upon it, and whose mouth was open in great lamentation. By Osiris the great god, Lord of Amenti, behold! I spake to thee on earth [saying, "There shall be done] to thee even as is done to this poor man; there shall not be done unto thee that which is done to that great man," for I knew that which would become of him.'

**Source:** Griffith, F. Ll. 1990. *Stories of the High Priests of Memphis*, 44–45, 48–49. Oxford: Clarendon. Accessed July 10, 2019. <http://www.etana.org/sites/default/files/coretexts/15563.pdf>.

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