

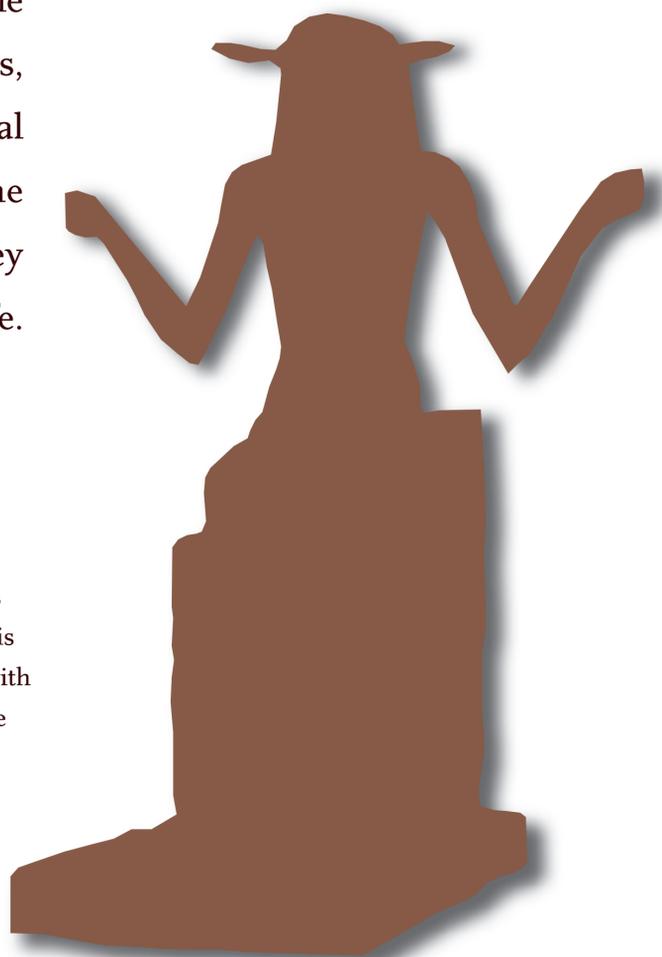
# THE GODS



**THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS** associated both natural phenomena (such as the sun, earth, water, and air) as well as abstract concepts (e.g., order and disorder, creativity, love, and fury) with higher beings, the gods. The gods could be represented in art with human characteristics, as animals, or as part-human and part-animal. Certain animals were associated with specific deities to indicate the gods' characteristics: for instance, the goddess Sekhmet has the head of a lion to indicate her strength and ferocity. Generally, the object of worship was not the animal itself but the deity made manifest by the animal.

To explain the world about them, ancient Egyptians constructed narratives (myths) in which the gods brought about such phenomena as the annual flooding of the Nile or motions of the sun, moon, and stars. In these myths, the deities are portrayed like a human family: Atum, the creator god, produces two children Geb (earth) and Nut (sky); Osiris and his wife, Isis, become the parents of the sky god Horus. The Egyptians used rituals, hymns, and prayers to maintain the natural order of the universe and to appease the gods. These interventions also played a key role in the transition from death to afterlife.

Osiris's netherworld was thought to be a dangerous place with gates watched by frightening deities. This ram-headed guardian figure was originally coated with black resin, which signified his connection with the realm of the dead.

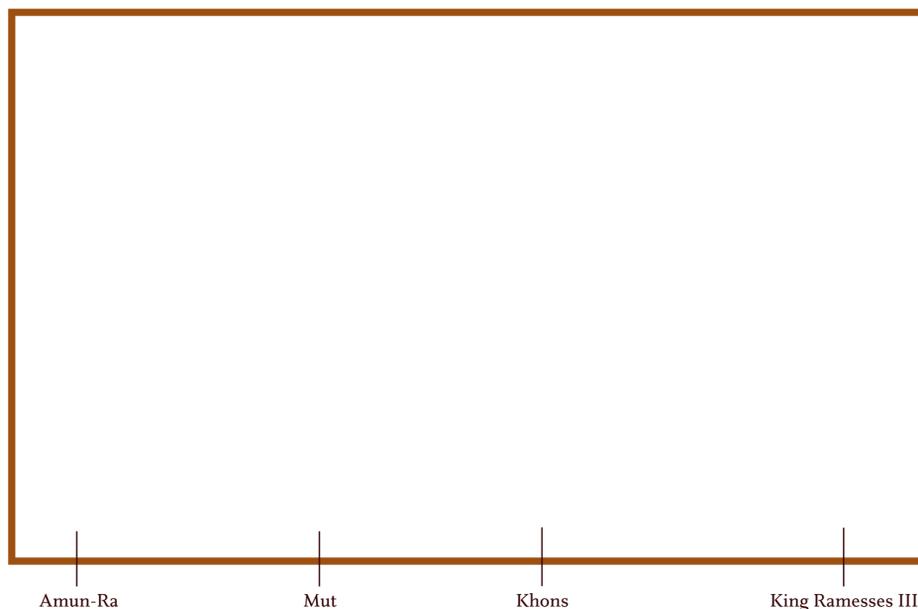


# SERVING THE GODS



THE GODS EXISTED beyond the earthly world, in the sky or the *Duat* (netherworld), but temples served as their earthly dwellings. Temple sanctuaries contained cult images (statues made of precious metal), which were animated by the spirit of a god. Every day, priests opened the shrine containing the god's image to purify and clothe it and to leave food and drink offerings. If the offerings displeased the gods, the balance of the universe might be disturbed, and Egypt could be devastated by famine, sickness, or invasion.

Nesperennub's title, "Opener of the Doors of Heaven," indicates that his role in this ritual was to open the doors of the shrine. The revelation of the god each morning was likened to the sun's rising into the sky at dawn, a moment that symbolized the renewal of all life and creation. Other priests burned incense and took care of the god's toilet and feeding, a ritual that included pouring libations to purify the god's dwelling and his meal. Inscriptions on Nesperennub's coffin show that here, too, he played a role, sprinkling water from a tall libation-jar over the offering table in front of the cult-statue.



A scene from the Great Harris Papyrus, shows King Ramesses III before the gods of Thebes, Amun-Ra, Mut, and Khons. These deities were regarded as father, mother, and child, respectively, in a sacred family.

# PRIESTS



**THE EGYPTIAN KING** was the chief intermediary between gods and mortals. In theory, he performed every ritual in every temple in the land in order to maintain the goodwill of the gods, but in practice, priests usually fulfilled these tasks. In earlier periods, ordinary citizens performed the priestly duties for a specified time, but beginning in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC), it was customary for people to serve as “full-time” priests.

The roles of the priests became diversified and each office carried a stipend as well as specific duties, which were rarely onerous. Posts became hereditary, and it was common for particular families to serve in the same temple for many generations. At the same time, an individual could “collect” offices, entitling him to carry out a variety of duties in different temples. The more junior priests worked on a shift-basis, rotating on and off duty in groups. While their term of office lasted, they were obliged to observe regulations relating to purity such as bathing in the temple lake, shaving their heads, abstinence from sexual contact, and adherence to dietary restrictions and a dress code.

Hapy

Ra-Horakhty

Priest

This painting from a coffin shows a priest offering a tray of food to the seated gods Ra-Horakhty and Hapy.

# OTHER OFFERINGS

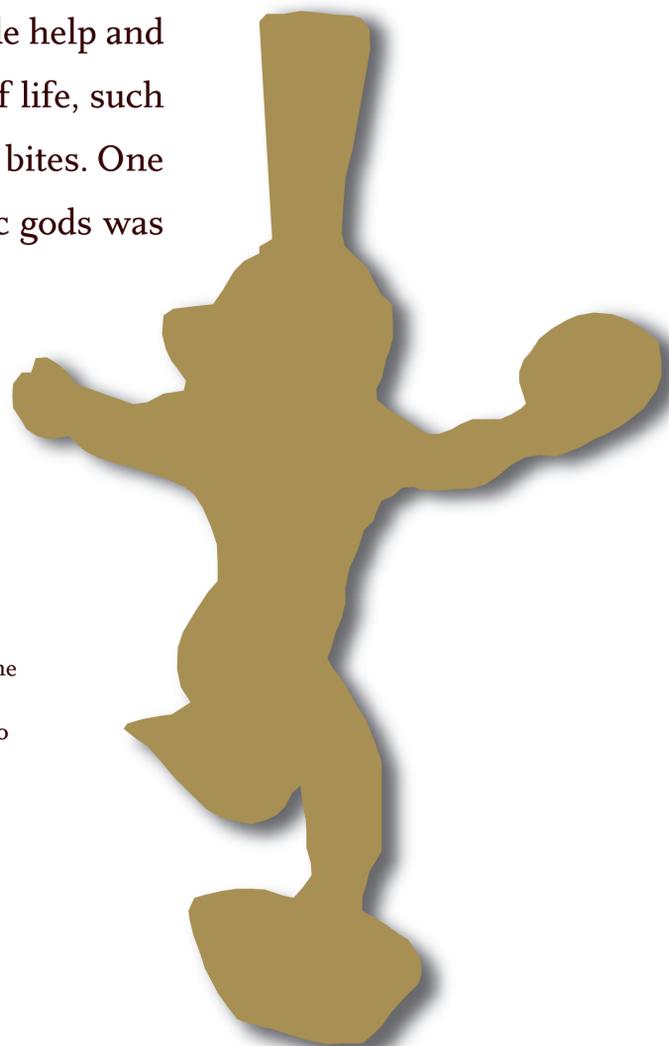


IN EARLY EGYPTIAN HISTORY, only kings and priests could directly approach the gods in their temples. Beginning in the New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1069 BC), votive offerings (objects such as statuettes dedicated to a god in his or her temple) attest that more people experienced a personal relationship with the divine, often in the hope that the god would respond to a private prayer or petition.

The presentation of mummified animals was another means of communicating with the gods associated with specific animals: cats were dedicated to the goddess Bastet; crocodiles to Sobek; and ibises to Thoth. Thousands of these mummified animals were offered at religious festivals and buried in special cemeteries afterwards. Radiography of the mummies shows that the animals were often deliberately killed; many cats suffered death from a broken neck or a blow to the head.

Other gods were often approached to provide help and protection in the face of the daily hazards of life, such as childbirth, disease, or snake and scorpion bites. One of the most familiar of these more domestic gods was Bes; he and other gods were often represented on items of furniture or as small three-dimensional figures believed to give divine protection.

Bes, a dwarflike deity with a grotesque face like that of a lion, protected the home from danger. This wooden figure shows him dancing and playing a tambourine to drive away evil spirits.

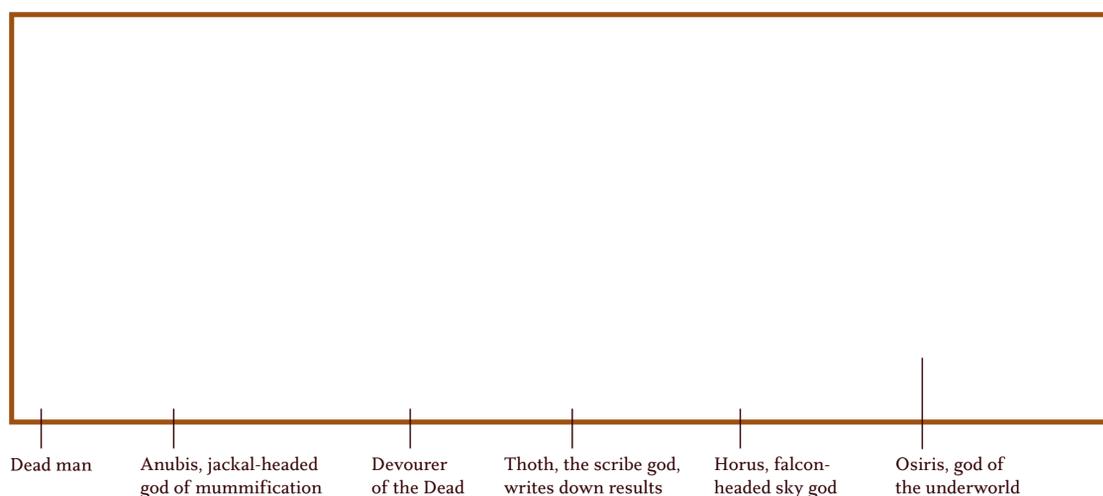


# LIVING FOREVER



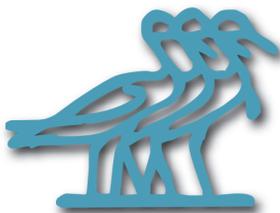
THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS believed that death marked a transition from the land of the living into another realm where life would be renewed and continue forever. These regions were accessible only to the gods and the transfigured dead: the sky-realm in which the sun god Ra travelled and the netherworld, or *Duat*, where the god Osiris ruled as king of the dead. Through a closer relationship with these powerful deities, the deceased hoped to attain the same immortal status and spend eternity travelling with Ra across the sky or following Osiris in his kingdom. The belief in an afterlife was so strong that Egyptians dedicated enormous resources of time, thought, manpower, and materials to ease the passage across the threshold of death.

The transition was hazardous and required the observance of certain formalities and rituals. After the corpse had been mummified, it was deposited securely in a tomb or grave, so family members could care for the spirits of their relatives. Magic played a key part in the process of transition. Rituals activated divine powers for the dead, and tombs were equipped with religious texts and images.



Before the dead person could enter the afterlife, their conduct on earth had to be assessed. This judgement was depicted as the heart being weighed in a balance before Osiris, as in the *Book of the Dead* of Hunefer.

# THE DAY OF BURIAL



**AFTER MUMMIFICATION**, a procession of mourning relatives, friends, and servants bearing grave goods accompanied the corpse to the tomb. A series of rituals culminated in the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, which involved touching the mummy's face with implements that symbolically opened the eyes, mouth, nostrils, and ears. This ceremony restored the bodily faculties of the dead and enabled the *ba*-spirit to enter and leave the mummy at will. This relationship between the *ba* and the mummy became the basis of the person's future existence.

The body was then put into a coffin in the burial chamber, its earthly resting place and the point of contact between the natural and supernatural worlds. At the tomb, the living offered prayers as well as food and drink to sustain their dead relatives. They expected their own descendants to perform the same service for them. The offerings nourished the *Ka*, the spirit aspects of the dead that remained in the tomb. The dead person's *ba*—depicted as a human-headed bird—could “come forth” every day and enter the mysterious realms of the sky and the *Duat*. From the tomb, the deceased could make the journey to paradise, using spells to obtain help on the way.

Priest burning  
incense

Offerings  
of food

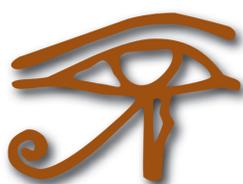
Mourners

Mummy

Priest wearing  
Anubis mask

The Opening of the Mouth ritual is performed on the mummy of Hunefer at the entrance to his tomb. This crucial rite restored the person's bodily faculties, enabling him to breathe, see, hear, and speak.

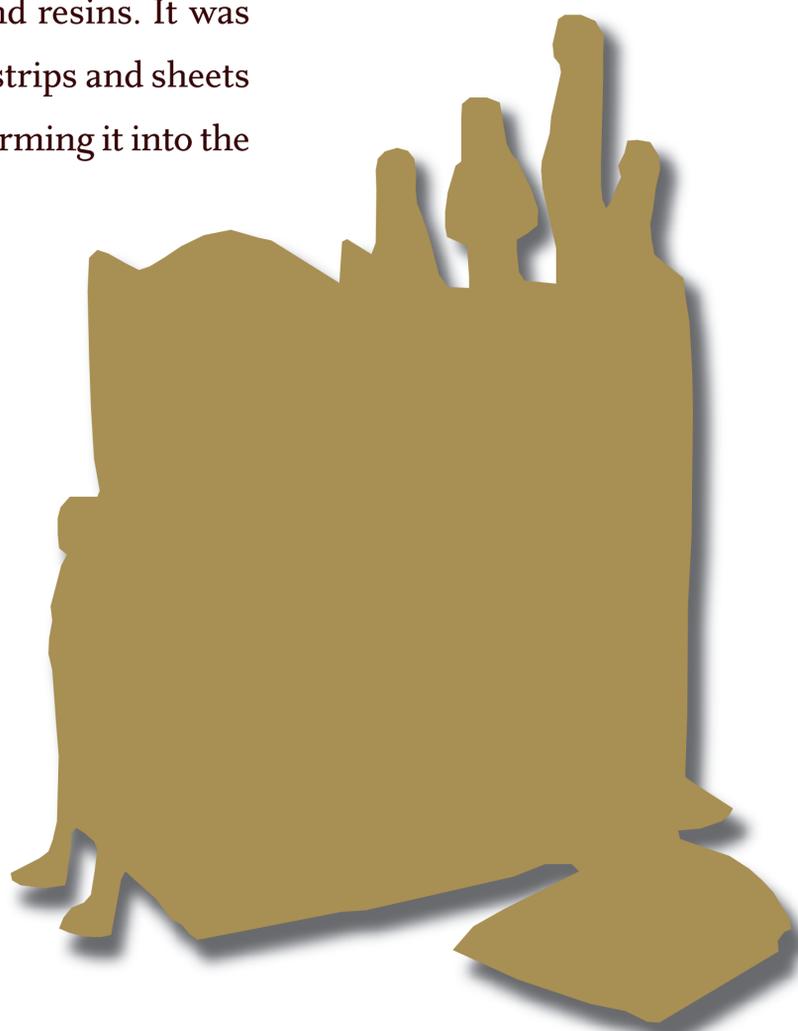
# MUMMIFICATION



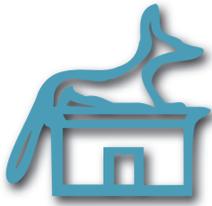
FOR THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS a person consisted of physical and spiritual parts. The heart, the name, and the shadow were manifestations of the individual, as were the all-important spirit entities, the *ka* (the person's life force) and the *ba* (which approximated the personality). They believed that all these components became separated at death but that rituals performed after death would reunite them and enable the individual to enter the afterlife.

The corpse underwent mummification—a process that traditionally took seventy days—to cleanse it of impurities and transform it into a divine body. The parts most susceptible to decay were extracted. The brain was removed via the nose using a metal hook, and the digestive organs, liver, lungs, and kidneys were extracted through an incision in the abdomen and preserved separately; the heart was usually left in place. The body was desiccated using a natural compound of salts called natron and anointed with oils and resins. It was wrapped in many layers of linen strips and sheets and adorned with a mask, transforming it into the shape of a divine being.

The *shabti* figures, which worked as the dead person's substitute in the hereafter, were usually fashioned to resemble miniature mummies. They were often stored in a painted box shaped like a shrine.



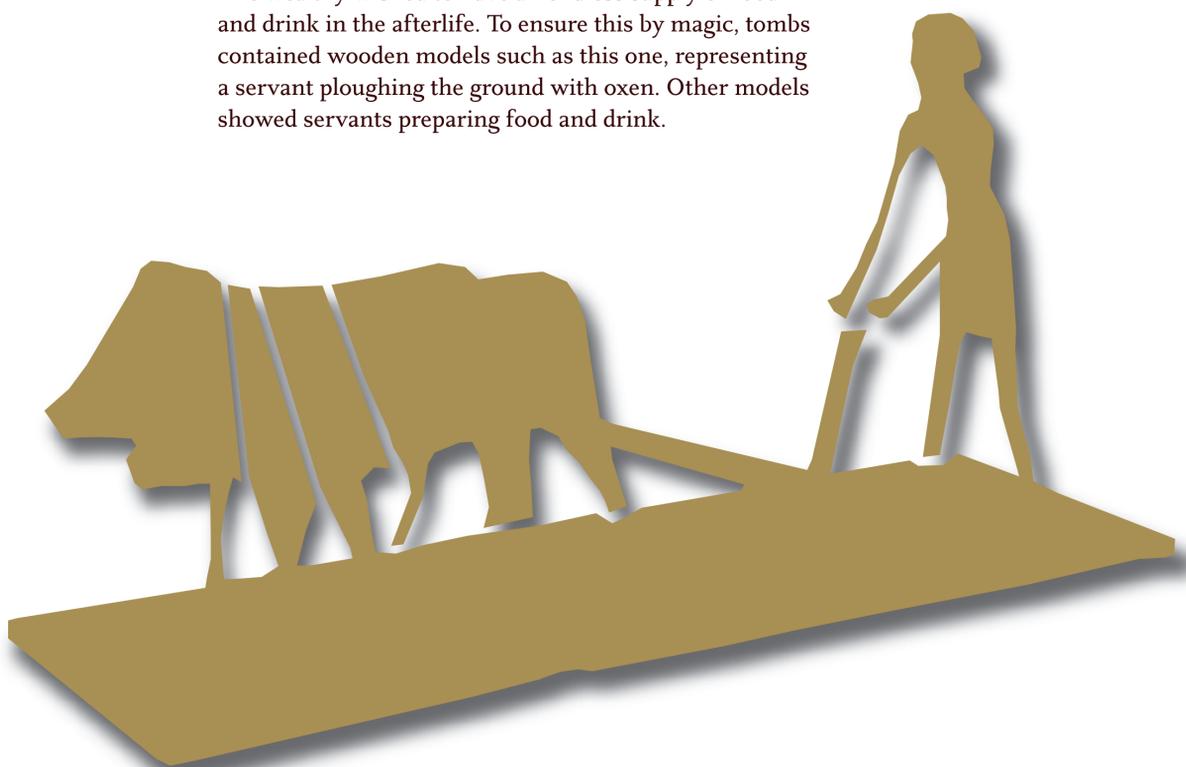
# EQUIPPING THE TOMB



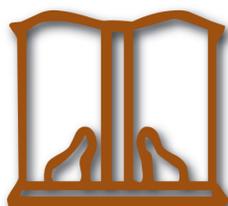
EGYPTIANS AT EVERY LEVEL OF SOCIETY sought to provide for the dead. The poor might be buried with a few pots of food and drink and simple bone or shell jewelry, while the wealthy might be mummified and enclosed in elaborate wood or stone coffins, surrounded by grave goods and magical aids.

The *ka* spirits of the dead needed food, drink, and clothing. Living relatives brought these offerings to the tomb chapel. Pictures of these offerings were carved or painted on the walls of tombs or on coffins to ensure by magic that the dead were provided with offerings for eternity. Models of servants preparing food fulfilled the same purpose. Another way to provide for the dead was to inscribe the words of the spell that summoned offerings onto a stela (stone tablet) placed in the tomb chapel. The collection of magical texts the Egyptians called “Spells for Coming Forth by Day” (and known today as the *Book of the Dead*) gave the deceased special knowledge and powers for successfully reaching the other realm. In the tombs of the wealthy, extracts of these texts were often written on the tomb walls, coffins, or long papyrus scrolls.

The wealthy wished to have an endless supply of food and drink in the afterlife. To ensure this by magic, tombs contained wooden models such as this one, representing a servant ploughing the ground with oxen. Other models showed servants preparing food and drink.



# SERVING THE KING



**THE EGYPTIAN KING** held supreme authority over the administration, army, and religious practices. As the intermediary between the world of men and the realm of the gods, the king was chief priest of every deity and the living incarnation of the god Horus, a status his heir (ideally his son) inherited upon the king's death. In practice, the king relied upon a hierarchy of officials who looked after the day-to-day running of the government, temples, and military.

In Nesperennub's lifetime, Egypt was politically divided among several rulers who claimed authority over different parts of the country. Each ruler had a court of officials, often members of influential families; to secure their allegiance, the kings sometimes gave their daughters to them in marriage. Descendants of such marriages recorded their royal ancestry for posterity in inscriptions.

Many officials fulfilled both priestly and secular offices. An inscription found at the temple of Karnak reveals that Nesperennub was not only a priest but also "Fan-Bearer on the Right Hand of the King." Although the title sounds menial, the fan-bearers attended the king on formal occasions and in processions. This role gave them direct access to the ruler, and the potential to influence royal policy.

Inscription from a temple doorway, shows the god Horus as a falcon above the names of King Amenemhat III.

