

# What the Egyptians knew

**Piero Scaruffi 2004**

- **Part III**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **No word/hieroglyph for "religion"**
- **Human life must mirror cosmic order, and death is the vehicle to become part of that cosmic order**
- **High priests to lead rites and festivals**
- **Pharaoh as intermediary between gods and humans (son of the Sun god)**
- **No theory of gods, only rites and festivals that make people mirror the divine order (as interpreted by the priests)**
- **Faith on a monumental scale (Karnak for Amon)**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Obsession with the afterlife**
  - **Everything in this life is functional to the after life**
  - **The entire economy of the state revolves around the preparation for the king's afterlife**
  - **Palaces (pharaohs) are comfortable but negligible (mud bricks and wood), tombs must be monumental and eternal (today we visit tombs, not palaces, Giza not Memphis)**
  - **The best furniture is for the tomb, not for the palace**

# What the Egyptians knew



**Ra**

# What the Egyptians knew

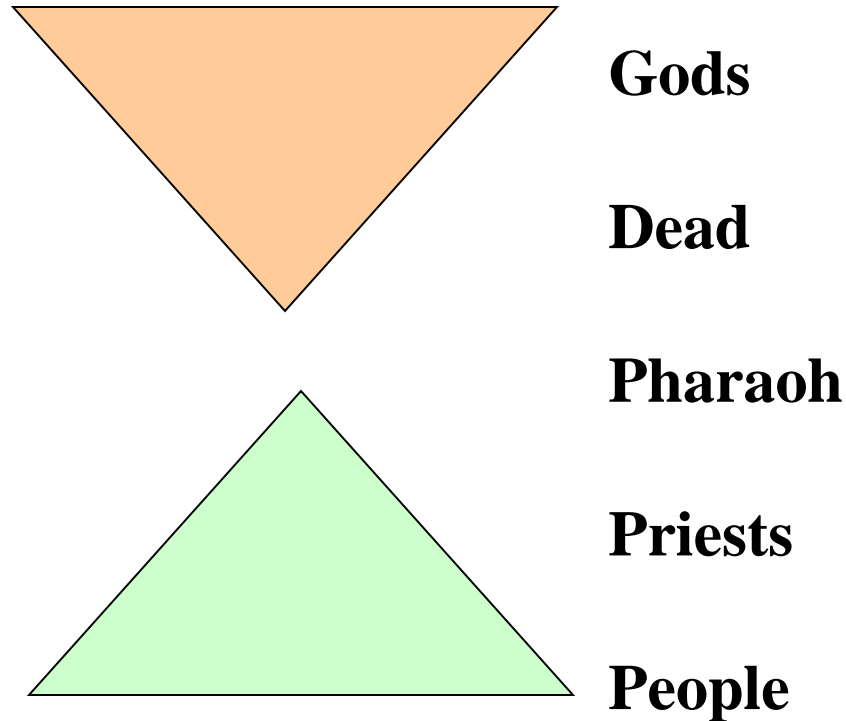
## **Boat of Queen Mutamnia (1400 BC)**



British Museum

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Dual hierarchy: the gods, the dead, the pharaoh, the priests, the people**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Gods behave like humans: mythology not theology (legend of Isis, wife of Osiris, who died, etc)**
- **Animals to represent gods (Apis the bull, Anubis the jackal, Uadjet the cobra, Horus the falcon, Thoth the ibis)**
- **Every Egyptian is created by the gods (a divine nation)**
- **Religion as a cult of fertility**
- **Festivals to rehearse god's myths: "Osiris' mysteries" recount the death and resurrection of Osiris, lord of the Underworld, and bring salvation, resurrection and eternal bliss to humans**
- **Book of Thoth (never found): summary of Egyptian knowledge and instructions for festivals**



**Thoth**



**Uadjet**

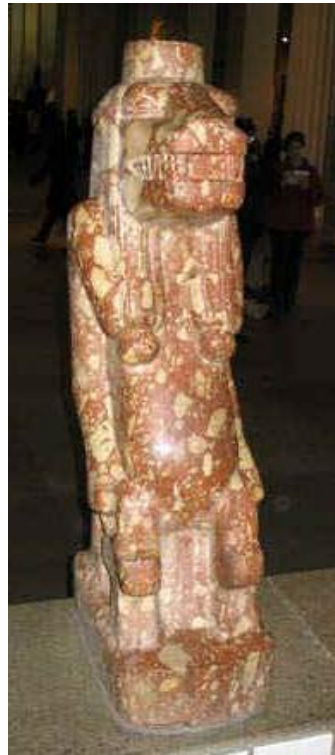


**Apis**

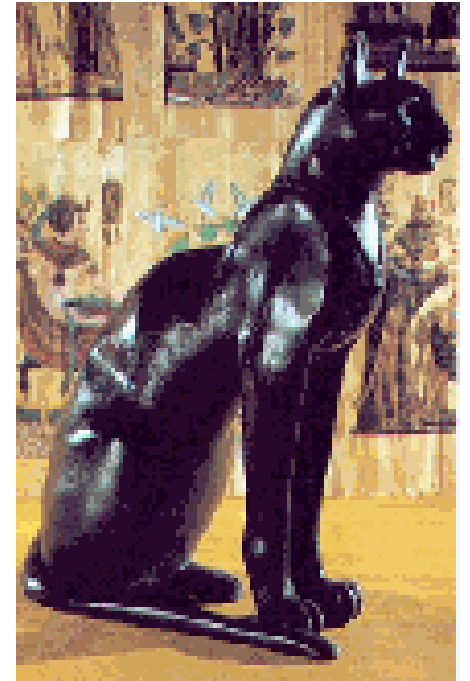




**Horus**



**Taweret**



**Bastet**



**Khepri**

# What the Egyptians knew



**Amon**



**Ptah**



**Maat**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Maat: goddess that personifies cosmic harmony and a model for human behavior**
- **Tuat as the immortal omniscient creator and as the Underworld**
- **Ptah (and later Amon) as the creator, and the other gods as a manifestation of his creative powers**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Ancient creation myths**
  - **Different creation myths from ancient times**
- **Ancient sky-god: Horus**
- **Four Horuses of the eastern sky**
  - **Khepera (morning, scarab)**
  - **Harakhte (noon, hawk)**
  - **Re (afternoon)**
  - **Atum (sunset)**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Cosmogony of Hermopolis**
  - **Nun: age of no space and no time, no sky and no earth, primordial abyss**
  - **Nun: "nothingness, nowhere, darkness"**
  - **Nun: later became a personified deity, but no temples, primeval waters from which the sun god emerged**
  - **Eight attributes of primeval waters (endlessness, invisibility, darkness, etc) were also personified deities (one being Amun), and they gave rise to the egg that originated the world**
  - **Chief deity until 8th dynasty: Thoth (inventor of writing and law)**
  - **Chief deity after 8th dynasty: Atum**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Cosmogony of Heliopolis**
  - **Atum: arose from the primeval waters (Nun) and created the universe**
  - **Atum: bisexual deity Khopri**
  - **Later trinity: Atum (immanent in Nun), Shu (Atum's son), Tefnut (Atum's daughter)**
  - **Shu and Tefnut parented Geb (earth) and Nut (sky)**
  - **Geb and Nut parented Osiris, Isis, Seth, Nephthys**
  - **Osiris and Isis parented Horus (Seth killed Osiris, Horus killed Seth)**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Cosmogony of Memphis**
  - **Nun: product of the eternal mind Ptah, state of non-existence prior to creation**
  - **Ptah: creator of the world**
  - **All other gods were manifestations of Ptah's body parts**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Thebes**
  - **Ken-Ken Ur laid the original egg**
  - **Chief deity from 12th dynasty on: Amun (inherited from Hermopolis and eventually associated with the sun god Re)**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Abydos**
  - **Chief deity: Osiris (originally symbolized the annual rebirth of the land)**
  - **Risen from the dead, became the ruler of the world of the dead**
  - **Osiris determines if one will live forever or not**
  - **Osiris presides over the universal judgement (Book of the Dead)**
  - **Mysteries of Osiris**
  - **His wife Isis more famous during the Roman era outside Egypt**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Abydos**
  - **Osiris**
    - **Set kills his brother Osiris and scatters his body parts**
    - **Isis wife/sister of Osiris reassembles his body**
    - **Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, avenges Osiris' death by killing Set (good vs evil)**
    - **Osiris king of the underworld, Horus king of the living, and Set god of evil**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Cynopolis**
  - **Chief deity: Anubis, funerary deity all over Egypt**
  - **Anubis places the heart of the dead on the Scales of Justice and feeds the souls of evil people to Ammit (eternal annihilation)**
- **Oldest deity of Egypt: Min, god of the nomads and hunters (eastern desert) in the first dynasty**
- **Pharaoh of divine origin (originally son of Re, and later manifestation of Amun)**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Death = immortality**
- **Mummies (2600BC-400AD)**
- **Book of the Dead (1,600 BC): formulas to help the deads in the afterlife journey to Tuat and assume mythological shapes**
- **Tomb not as the resting place of the dead, but as the instrument by which death can be overcome, a place of connection with the heavens and the afterlife ("spirit to the sky, corpse into the earth")**
- **Death as the gateway to eternal life**
- **Ba, the soul, vs Ka, the divine, the spirit (or spirits) that accompanies and guides human as well as divine beings, and that bestows immortality on the Ba**

# What the Egyptians knew

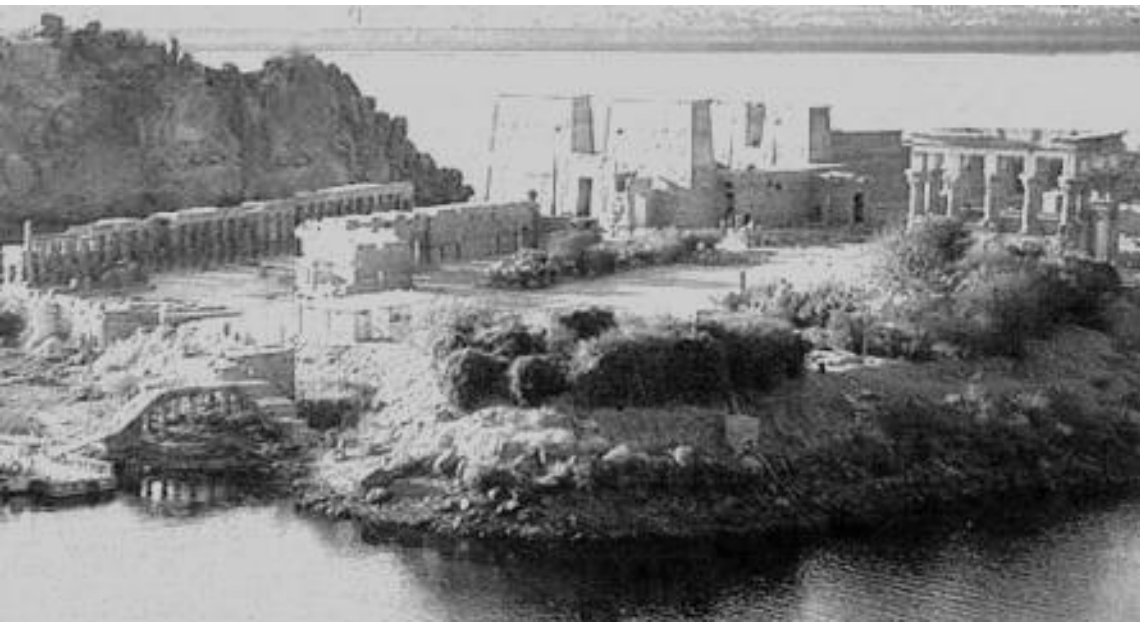
- **The self is made of multiple independent entities**
  - **The ba (immortal soul)**
  - **The ka (immortal divine quality)**
  - **The heart (site of the mind)**
  - **The shadow (khaibit)**
  - **The name (ren)**
  - **The body**
  - **....**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Royal burial**
  - **First dynasty (3032 BC): Abydos (tumuli)**
  - **Third dynasty (2707) - Eight dynasty (2216): Memphis (pyramid)**
  - **Eleventh dynasty (2119): Thebes (rock caves)**
  - **Twelfth dynasty (1976): Memphis (pyramid)**
  - **Seventeenth dynasty (1645): Thebes (rock caves)**
  - **Eighteenth dynasty (1550) - Twentysecond dynasty (946): Thebes, Valley of the Kings (rock caves)**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **The temple**
  - **Mansion of the god**
  - **Representation of the creation**
  - **Microcosm of the universe**



Philae



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Society**
  - **Motivation for linking the scattered communities of Egypt:**
    - **Irrigation**
  - **Motivation for bureaucracy:**
    - **Funerary monuments (e.g., pyramids)**
  - **Motivation for technological progress:**
    - **Funerary architecture (furniture, jewelry, pottery, clothing)**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Society**
  - **Peasants (80% of population)**
  - **Artisans**
  - **Scribes (archivists, librarians, record-keepers, not writers)**
    - **Thoth, god of knowledge (patron of scribes)**
    - **"Adventures of Sinuhe" (1800 BC)**
  - **Architects: simple, imposing structures**
  - **Musicians: musical instruments**
  - **Doctors: medicine**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Society**

- **"Adventures of Sinuhe" (1800 BC)**

At least one Egyptologist feels "it deserves to be called a novel";<sup>8</sup> let's call it a mininovel. What's remarkable about "The Tale of Sinuhe" is the variety of genres it includes: it begins like a formal tomb inscription (the Autobiography genre that is the earliest form of Egyptian writing), at which point Sinuhe begins speaking from beyond the grave, as it were, telling his story in compact, imagistic language. Sesostris's return to the capital is conveyed by "the falcon flew with his attendants" (Parkinson 27) because the new king now embodies the falcon-god Horus. The tale contains "narratives of conquest and combat, eulogies of the king, a royal decree, meditative prayers, and ceremonial lyrics, culminating in the description of the tomb in which Sinuhe's Autobiography is supposedly inscribed" (Parkinson 22). It establishes the ideal for writerly fiction: "Its author employs every sentence construction and literary device known in his period together with a rich vocabulary to give variety and color to his narrative," notes Bernard Lewis (31).

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Society**
  - **Governors**
  - **Central bureaucracy (headed by vizier and including treasury)**
  - **Priests (usually chosen from the scribes)**
  - **Priest-magicians**
  - **Oracles**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Justice**
  - **Administered by precedents**
  - **Personified by goddess Maat**
  - **Chief justice was the high priest of Maat**
  - **All judges were also priests of Maat**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Writing**
  - **Hieroglyphic system: 700 signs expressing different phonetic combinations**
    - **Pictographic, syllabic and (24) alphabetic characters**
  - **A hieroglyphic sign can indicate either an object, an idea or a sound**
  - **Mainly used for official and monumental purposes**
  - **Abbreviated scripts for business and literary purposes: Hieratic, Demotic, Coptic**
  - **Ambiguity of signs led to additional symbol to indicate the sound: pseudo-alphabet of 24 consonants**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Economy**
  - **Wheat and barley (bread and beer)**
  - **Wine**
  - **Linen**
  - **Papyrus (for ropes, sails, sandals, paper)**
- **Imports**
  - **Gold from Nubia**
  - **Copper from the Sinai, Cyprus, Syria**
  - **Cedarwood from Lebanon**

# What the Egyptians knew

- **Monopolies of the king**
  - **Import/export**
  - **Quarries/mines**



# What the Egyptians knew

- **Egyptian women**
  - **Women could become Pharaoh**
  - **Laws were equal for men and women**
  - **Women could own land and run businesses**
  - **Women could divorce**
  - **People of both sexes could have more than one spouse**
  - **The wife was the mistress of the house, directing all household activities**