

SUNRISE: THE NINE GODS OF HELIOPOLIS

In the beginning nothing existed but the deep, dark waters of Nun. There was no land and no sky. No gods, no people, no light and no time. Only the endless, motionless waters. But deep within the still waters of Nun there floated a perfect egg. And trapped within that perfect egg was a solitary spark of life. Suddenly, inexplicably, the egg cracked open. Life broke free of its confining shell and, with a surge of energy, a mound rose out of the waters. Seated on that mound was the god Atum. Atum had created himself. He now shone as the sun, bringing light to his new-born world.

Lonely on his mound, Atum set about creating the living. He sp^{it} and from the sp^{it} sprang twin children: Shu the god of the dry air and Tefnut the goddess of moisture. Atum and Shu and Tefnut lived together, happy and safe on their mound in the midst of the waters of Nun until, one dreadful day, Shu and Tefnut fell into the waters. Shrieking, they disappeared from view.

Blinded by his tears, Atum called upon his Eye to search for the lost twins. The Eye of Atum found Shu and Tefnut in the deep depths of the waters of Nun. As she restored them to their father, Atum's tears of grief turned to tears of joy. Copious, they fell to the ground. And from these tears sprang men and women. And so began a glorious age when humans and gods

lived in harmony on the mound in the midst of the waters of Nun.

Shu and Tefnut loved each other as husband and wife, and Tefnut bore her brother's children: Geb the handsome god of the earth and Nut the beautiful goddess of the sky. Geb lay down and became the fertile land. He bore the fields and the marshes and the great River Nile. Grain sprouted from his ribs, and plants grew from his back. His laughter brought earthquakes, and his anger brought famine. Nut loved her brother and happily bore his children, the glittering stars that decorate the dark night sky. But one terrible day, just as a hungry mother pig might sometimes eat her young, Nut swallowed her star-children. Geb flew into a furious rage and the land trembled and shook with his anger. To escape Geb's wrath Nut stretched herself above her brother, her fingers and toes resting on the horizons of the north, east, south and west. And Shu knelt with arms outstretched between his beloved children, holding them apart lest they should continue their quarrel.

Now Nut's arched body separated the world from chaotic waters of Nun. Her laughter rumbled as thunder and her tears fell as rain. Along her body the stars and moon twinkled at night, and the sun blazed by day. And every evening she swallowed the sun so that it passed through her body to be reborn from her womb at dawn.

THE MOUND OF CREATION

The priests who served the sun god in the temple of Heliopolis knew how their world had begun. Their myth of Atum and his mound of creation is not preserved in one single, straightforward account, but can be reconstructed from myriad references in art, solar hymns and funerary writings, where the birth of the world

is equated with the rebirth of the deceased in the tomb. The principal written sources for this tale are, in chronological order, the Old Kingdom *Pyramid Texts*, the Middle Kingdom *Coffin Texts*, the various New Kingdom Funerary Texts and the Ptolemaic *Papyrus Bremner-Rhind*,²⁰ but it seems likely that these writings conserve a far older, prehistoric mythology.

The Heliopolitan myth reveals the spherical organization of the Egyptian cosmos. Geb, the male earth, was covered by Nut, the female sky, with Shu, the atmosphere, separating the two. Surrounding this bubble of life were the endless still waters of Nun (or Nu); a dark and unknown danger. Somewhere within the bubble, unmentioned in this tale, was the *Duat*, the land of the dead, the daytime stars and the night-time sun. Egypt was, naturally, the ordered centre of the world within the bubble. The life-giving River Nile rose from the waters of Nun somewhere to the south of the southern border town of Aswan and flowed northwards to empty into the sea. Lining both sides of the river was the fertile Black Land. Beyond this came the desert Red Land, then the mountains and the uncontrolled foreign lands where chaos ruled. The king of Egypt was, naturally, king of this entire world, although his foreign 'subjects' frequently had to be reminded of his god-given right to rule.

This cosmic plan was reflected in formal temple architecture, which allowed each temple to become the original mound of creation. A tall, undulating, wave-like perimeter wall surrounded the temple complex, holding back the forces, or waters, of chaos. The massive entrance gate, or pylon, suggested the mountains of the eastern horizon. Inside the main temple building the columns, often decorated to resemble papyrus stalks or lotus blossoms, represented the marsh plants that thrived on the island of creation. As the priests progressed from the light, public entrance to the dim and private inner sanctuary, the floor rose gradually so that it recreated the first mound. High above the priests, the dark

ceiling was decorated with five-pointed stars or with astronomical scenes so that it became the night sky; meanwhile, the scenes of rituals and nature that decorated the inner walls between the mound (floor) and the sky (ceiling) represented life and activity within the harmonious temple-world. Outside the main building the sacred lakes offered a controlled form of the waters of Nun for use in temple rituals, while lesser temples or shrines housed gods connected with the main temple god. Simultaneously, at its most prosaic level, the temple was quite literally the home of the god who, in the form of a statue, inhabited the sanctuary, the innermost and most secret part. This arrangement of public or semi-public outer areas and private inner chambers reserved for the priesthood and the deity reflected the spatial distribution of all Egyptian houses and palaces.

Atum's story recognized the fact that there must have been a time before time: a time of pre-existence when Nun, who was neither created nor self-created, existed alone. Then, suddenly and inexplicably, the primeval mound emerged from the chaotic waters, just as Egypt's fields re-emerged each year from the life-giving waters of the Nile floods. However, while the beginning of time was marked by an abrupt surging of life and the rising of a mound (the sexual significance of which would not have been lost on the Egyptians), Egypt experienced a more gradual re-emergence; here the deep red waters retreated slowly, leaving behind a thick blanket of mud and a useful crop of stranded fish. As the Egyptians well knew, this 'new' land would be moist and fertile; with careful tending it would yield a crop that would be the envy of the ancient world. This idea of the life-giving mound found echo in the desert cemeteries, where raised mounds covered the most basic of graves: with its mound in place the grave became not only a symbol of death, but a promise of resurrection for the deceased. Eventually, the mound would be formalized in the form of the mastaba tomb – a subterranean tomb topped by a

rectangular stone or brick superstructure – which would itself evolve into the royal pyramid.

Nun, the genderless, boundless waters carrying the potential for life, could be personified in the form of the god Nun: a human-form deity with a curled beard and a heavy wig, who was often shown holding the solar boat of the sun god in his raised arms. By the Middle Kingdom, Nun, who 'came into being by himself', had claimed the title 'Father of the Gods', although technically he was not related to Atum and his progeny. By the New Kingdom he was revered as the 'Lord of Eternity'. However, during the Late Period he developed into a more chaotic, threatening entity, while in the post-dynastic Christian era he became the void of hell. Nun's female element – the element that allowed him to become a creator god – could be independently personified as Mehet-Weret, the 'Great Swimmer' or 'Great Flood', a cow who, born from the first waters, gave birth to the sun god Re in the primeval marsh and raised him into the sky on her horns. Although both were respected throughout Egypt, neither Nun nor Mehet-Weret had specific cult centres or priesthoods.

ATUM: LORD OF TOTALITY

Atum, lord of totality, is an immensely powerful being with a dangerous dual nature. He has the ability to create everything but, as he completes his work, he simultaneously finalizes or ends it. In acknowledgement of the fact that he both creates and rules Upper and Lower Egypt, Atum is usually depicted in human form wearing the double crown; his curled beard confirms that he is a god rather than a human king. He may also be represented as a snake, a scarab beetle, a ram-headed man and, more rarely, as an ichneumon, lion, bull, lizard or ape, or as the mound of creation itself. Already, by the start of the Old Kingdom, Atum is a god of

great importance, and the *Pyramid Texts* detail the deceased king's struggle to become one with the sun god. Although the *Pyramid Texts* will be eventually abandoned, and his cult and mythology will be absorbed by the cult and mythology of Re, Atum will remain a potent being until the end of the dynastic age.

Atum had no need to create a sun for his new world: as a solar deity, he brought his own light with him. Later versions of the myth clarify this, and it is Re, 'the sun', or the composite solar god Re-Atum, who now emerges on the mound of creation. While Re was celebrated as the powerful midday sun, Atum became associated with the old and dying evening sun, an association that linked him firmly with the dead and the afterlife. Meanwhile the beetle Khepri, 'the one who comes into being', was revered as the new-born morning sun. Thus the three aspects of the sun, the vigorous Khepri, the powerful Re and the tired Atum, came to symbolize morning, noon and evening – the three divisions of the Egyptian day.

Khepri is usually depicted as a beetle, although he might also be a beetle-headed man, or a beetle-headed falcon. He is a divine version of the humble scarab beetle whose habit of pushing around an unwieldy ball of dung suggested the image of a gigantic celestial beetle rolling the ball of the sun across the sky. Hidden within the dung-ball were beetle eggs that eventually hatched, crawled out of the ball and flew away, leaving observers to conclude that beetles, like Atum, were male beings capable of self-creation. Plutarch, writing about Egypt's animal gods, reflects this widely held belief:²¹

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.

Every night Khepri died, was dismembered and buried; every morning he was reborn good as new. This enviable ability to regenerate made the scarab one of Egypt's most popular amulets, used from the First Intermediate Period onwards by both the dead and the living. The living also used flat-bottomed scarabs as seal stamps, while Amenhotep III employed large-scale scarabs as 'newspapers': with brief propaganda texts carved on the base, they spread good news throughout his empire. Although Khepri had no cult temple, gigantic stone scarabs were included in the temple complexes of other gods. The best-known example of this is the huge, and to modern eyes curiously appealing, stone beetle which stands beside the sacred lake in the Karnak temple complex of Amen-Re. This statue has developed its own mythology and is today credited with granting wishes and causing the barren to conceive.