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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 and from the 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
CREATION

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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 Papyri. The normal practice is to reconstruct the Egyptian cosmology. Geb, the male earth, was covered by Nu, the woman sky. The goddess Nut, the sky, enclosed the land. Geb lay on the earth, and Nut, the sky, rose and fell in rhythm on the mound in the middle of the waters of Nun.

Nut bore four children: the four sons of Horus, the gods of the sky, the sun, the dead, and the earth. By Geb, the earth, she bore the four children: the four sons of Horus, the deities of the sky, the sun, the dead, and the earth.

The children of Nut and Geb were the four sons of Horus: the sky, the sun, the dead, and the earth. Nut and Geb were the parents of the four sons of Horus: the sky, the sun, the dead, and the earth.

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CELEBRATION

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 primordial mound emerged from the chaotic waters, just as Egypt’s flood re-emerges 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

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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 primordial 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 priestly powers.

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:

> 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.