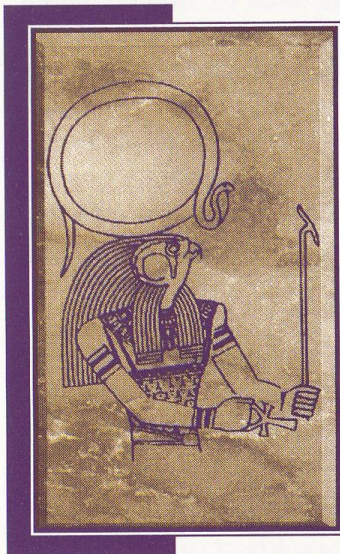


Pippin Carter, Ph.D. Curator of Egyptology

The people of ancient Egypt believed that their numerous deities were much like themselves, with similar aspirations and physical requirements. Although they varied over time, each of the gods had specific responsibilities, and every event in a person's life was controlled by one or more of these deities. Sometimes, gods were merged for political reasons, but the flexible Egyptian religion still allowed priests to worship local deities. Visitors to our new Egyptian exhibit at the Leyendecker Museum will gain a better understanding of this ancient culture if they will take but a few moments to read the following, in which twelve of the important Egyptian gods are described:

A M O N R A :

Amon began his career during the Old Kingdom, functioning as a local deity for the city of Thebes. As political circumstances changed, Amon gradually became more powerful, acquiring new responsibilities as the followers of other gods were defeated by the Theban princes. For example, when Shu's followers were defeated, Amon took over Shu's life-giving functions and became the god of the wind that began Creation.



During the Middle Kingdom, Amon was represented as a goose and known as the Great Cackler who laid the Cosmic Egg. Except for the feathers, this goose image was eventually dropped.

Climbing in popularity, Amon became known as Amon Ra, who wielded supreme power as the

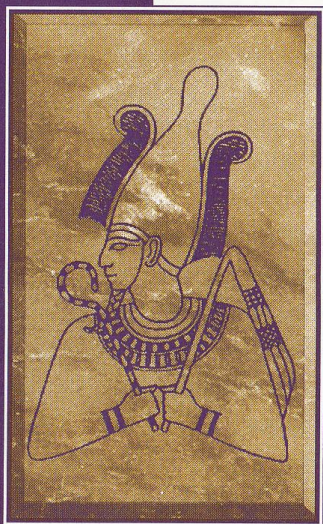


Sun-god, wearing the symbol of the solar disk. He gained the ability to sail over the heavens and the Underworld on his golden barge.

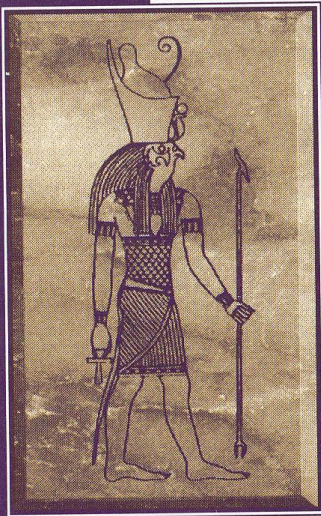
Amon Ra was most popular from 1570 B.C. to 663 B.C., known as the New Kingdom, when he held complete dominion over the vast Egyptian empire. He became known as “King of the Gods” and “Lord of the Thrones of the World”— the source of all life in Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld. As was true of previous Sun-gods, Amon Ra was also believed to be the father of the pharaohs who ruled Egypt. These pharaohs built many temples to honor Amon Ra, who responded by leading them to military victories.

Despite his cosmic presence and association with the pharaohs, Amon Ra was also popular among the humble citizens. The common people considered Amon Ra a loving father who would protect them against the injustices of the strong. When Thebes was finally conquered by the Assyrians, Amon Ra fell with the kingdom and all forms of Sun worship disappeared. The Greeks, however, identified Amon Ra as their own Zeus.

O S I R I S :

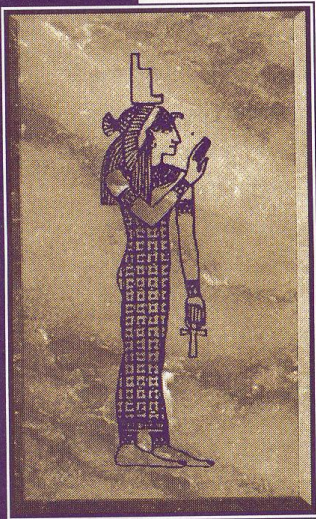


God of the earth and vegetation, Osiris made the crops grow. Originally the symbol for the annual drought and the flooding of the Nile, Osiris absorbed the characteristics of so many gods that he ruled over the dead as well as the living. In representing the sun after it set, he symbolized the motionless dead. Osiris was also considered the protector of the planet Venus.



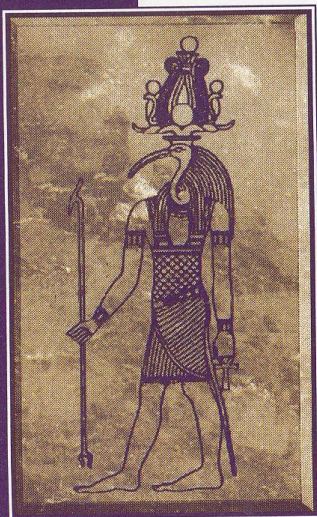
H O R U S :

Horus was the sky god and the spirit of light. Horus began his career as a local god worshipped in the delta region of the Nile. His cult spread throughout Egypt and was popular enough to carry over into Roman times. When the kings of Upper Egypt moved into the south, uniting the two lands, Horus became known as the "Uniter of the South and the North." Horus was also considered the protector of the planet Saturn.



I S I S :

The most popular Egyptian goddess was Isis, mother of Horus and sister-wife of Osiris, also known as the "Queen of all gods." She was the symbol of the female creative power that conceived every creature and thing. She was the great mother that protected children. Her love crossed the boundaries of Heaven, Earth, and the Underworld. The symbol of Isis in the night sky was the star Sept, chosen because its appearance meant the beginning of the new year and the impending Nile flood.

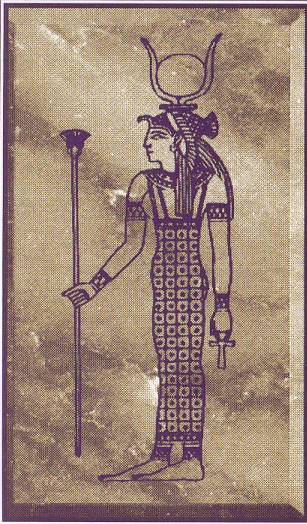


T H O T H :

Thoth was the god of wisdom. As the patron of the arts and sciences, Thoth created speech, hieroglyphics, and wrote the Egyptian Book of the Dead, among other things. He was considered the heart and tongue of the great sun god, Amon Ra. After weighing the words of the dead, Thoth also gave the gods the final verdict on

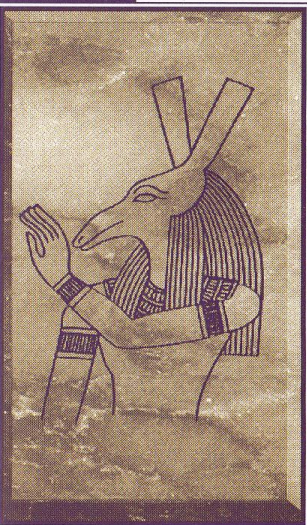


whether a soul was to be punished or blessed. Later, the Greeks identified Thoth with their god Hermes, crediting him with the invention of astronomy, astrology, mathematics, land surveying, medicine, and botany. He was also the first to organize religion and government.



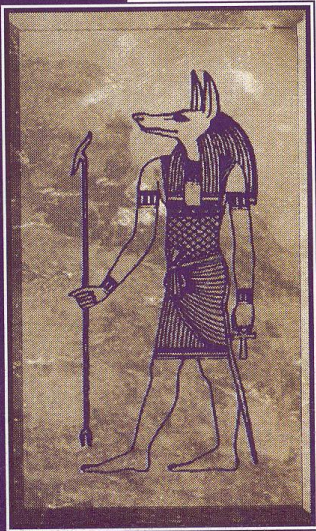
H A T H O R :

Hathor was one of the oldest known goddesses of Egypt. Great festivals were celebrated in her temple, the most important being the festival of her birth, held at the new year and ending with a drunken orgy. Her temple became known as a palace of enjoyment and intoxication, giving rise to her title as “Mistress of Merriment,” as well as her popularity as the goddess of love and happiness. She also had the function of supplying celestial food for the dead in the Underworld. The Greeks identified her with Aphrodite.



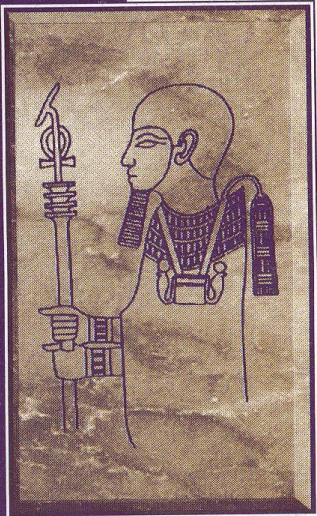
S E T H :

Also known as Set, he was the god of evil and darkness. Originally worshipped as the Lord of Upper Egypt, Seth’s followers were eventually conquered by the followers of Horus, placing Seth’s name in disrepute. The priests of Horus declared Seth to be an enemy of all other gods and ordered that his images be destroyed. As the archenemy of Amon Ra, he was considered the natural opponent to all that was good in the universe. He was also associated with the desert and with storms.



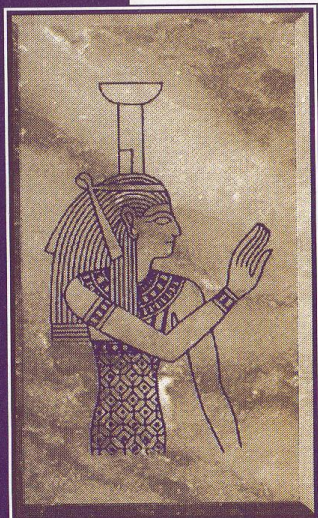
A N U B I S :

Anubis invented burial rites and the process of mummification when he embalmed the murdered and dismembered body of Osiris so well that it resisted decay. After that event, Anubis presided over funerals and guided the dead through the Underworld. Anubis watched over the body of the deceased on its journey, making sure that it was not eaten by Amam, the “devourer of the dead.”



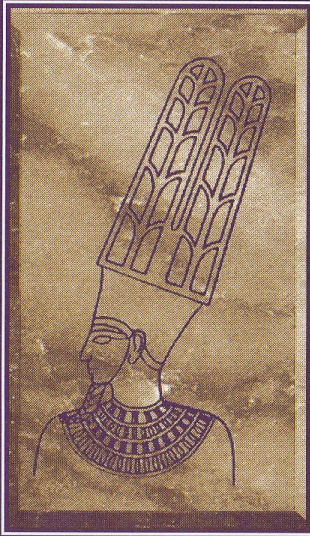
P T A H :

Ptah was the protector of artists and craftsmen. He was the master craftsman who worked in metals, built the cities, and sculpted the gods. Ptah was worshipped as the local deity of Memphis along with Sekhmet, the lioness goddess of war. The Greeks identified Ptah with their god, Hephaestus, and the Romans referred to him as Vulcan.



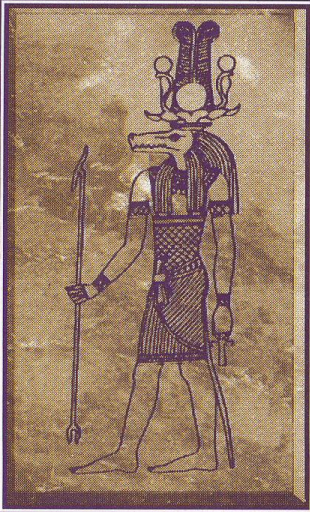
N E P H T H Y S :

Nephthys was the goddess who represented darkness, decay, and death—the female counterpart to Seth. However, she was also considered a friend of the dead, and symbolized the life that springs from death. She often appeared with Isis on the walls of mummy cases, her arms reaching out in a protective gesture. She was also known as “mistress of the gods.”



M I N :

God of fertility and bringer of rain, Min was also worshipped as a god of roads and travellers. Caravan leaders would make offerings to Min before journeying through the desert. Honored at harvest festivals, Min always received the first offering from the Pharaoh. Min's functions were absorbed in later periods by Amon Ra. The Greeks associated Min with their god Pan.



S O B E K :

Worshipped in cities that depended on water, such as Crocodilopolis, Sobek was a crocodile god. At Crocodilopolis, a sacred crocodile wearing crystal and gold earrings, as well as bracelets on its forepaws, was kept in a lake alongside Sobek's temple. Treated as if it were the true Sobek, the crocodile was mummified and buried in a sacred vault when it died. Sobek was both friend and enemy to the god Osiris.