

Ancient Egyptian Gods and Symbols

AAH



The lunar god, Aah, was responsible for creating the Egyptian calendar, which is 30 days to a month and 12 months to a year. He is considered the patron of the student or learner, as he spent much time studying with the god of wisdom, Thoth. Aah wears a crown with the disk of the full moon and the horns of the crescent moon, and holds the *udjat* symbol in his hands. Related Object: 16.39

ALABASTER



A translucent or semi-translucent variety of gypsum (calcium sulfate) used for centuries for carving, statuary, and other ornaments. In ancient Egypt, vessels of alabaster were used to hold oils and scents, and were often placed in tombs as votive offerings. Related Object: 2000.160.1 29.17.112,a,b; 16.175

ANKH



The *ankh* symbol represents life and eternal existence. It is the fully resurrected and glorified form of the deceased in the afterlife, and the result of a successful union of the *ba* and *ka* which can then roam freely about the earth. The *ankh* is a recurrent attribute of the gods, who present eternal existence to the king. Related object: 16.417, 72.87

ANUBIS



The god of the dead and embalming, Anubis guarded the mummy from evil forces during the night. He is usually depicted in canine form, with a jackal head. Related Object: 16.35

APIS BULL



Apis was the most important among the sacred bulls of the Lands of the Nile, and originally a fertility symbol. Bulls in general were considered to have a special relationship with heaven as the guard of the road to the afterlife, while as the great inseminator the bull was imbued with the power of life. Apis wears the sun disk and uraeus between his horns. Related Object: 16.58

BA



An element of the soul, the *ba* was able to leave the tomb and travel about the earth during the day. However, it had to return to the tomb at night or risk the perils of darkness. The *ba* came into being only when the *ka* and body were united. It is always depicted as a human-headed bird, typically a falcon.

BAST

The lion-headed goddess Bast (also known as Bastet) was originally considered ferocious and savage. However, with the domestication of cats in about 1500 B.C.E., her character shifted to one of soothing, peaceful nurturing, while the destructive side of Bast was transferred to the goddess Sekhmet. Reflecting this shift, her head (originally a lion) was depicted as a cat. Related Object: 16.34

BES

Regarded as a protective spirit who warded off evil, Bes was associated with music, dancing, and humor, and was considered the protector of women and children. He is often shown with deformed legs and the face of a cheeky and good-natured old man. Related Objects: 16.225, 16.483, 62.81.15

CAT

Cats were revered in ancient Egypt not only as household pets, but as representations of the goddess Bast. Symbolizing protection and motherhood, cat amulets were often carried by women hoping for greater fertility. Because of their connection to the goddess, cats themselves were respected and mummified alongside humans. Related Objects: 16.90, 76.73.81

DJED

Originally, the *djed* pillar was probably a pole around which ears of corn were tied in tiers, a harvest symbol of power in which the energy of the grain was preserved. Over time, however, the *djed* came to represent stability, and eventually became equated with the backbone of Osiris. Related Objects: 23.13.5, X95.155, 16.307

**HEART
SCARAB**

The heart was a symbol of life in ancient Egypt, as well as the seat of the emotions and intellect. When the heart wearied the body died, and it was left in its place during embalming though all other organs were removed. A person's true character was revealed in his or her heart, and so great care was taken to prevent it from rising up against the deceased. Heart scarab amulets inscribed with the Book of the Dead were wrapped in bandages and placed on the body to prevent it from making an utterance. Related Object: 16.244

HORUS

Horus was originally imagined to be a sky god, represented as a falcon with outstretched wings. His eyes were seen as the sun and moon, which moved as he flew across the sky. Over time, Horus came to be equated with kings, and to his people, the ruler was a manifestation of Horus. Horus himself was given a rival--his uncle Seth-- who battled and then reconciled, giving the power of Upper Egypt to Seth and Lower Egypt to Horus. In later times Horus was regarded as the ruler of all Egypt, while Seth remained god of the infertile desert and of those who lived there. Related Objects: 16.108, 16.65

IMHOTEP

The patron of scribes (holding a scroll), Imhotep was revered as a sage and considered the god of medicine and healing during the Ptolemaic period. Small votive statues were offered to him by those who had undergone miraculous cures.

Related Object: 29.17.612

ISIS

Isis, whose name means throne, represents not only royalty but also the idealized female. Seen as a protector of the dead and healer of the sick and weak, she is the ideal mother and woman, a friend to seamen, slaves, and rulers alike. Isis is the wife and sister of Osiris and the mother of Horus. She often wears the double crown of Egypt and carries her attributes, the serpent and jug. The “Isis knot” at her breast represents fertility. Related Object: 68.9.5

ISIS WITH INFANT HORUS

The mother of Horus, Isis was symbolically regarded as the king's mother. Having protected her son Horus from snakes, predators, and other dangers, it was believed she would protect mortal children as well. Related Object: 16.30

KA

Represented by two upraised arms, the *ka* is an individual's life force or spiritual twin, created at birth by the god Khnum. The *ka* remained separated from the body until death, when it merged with the deceased's lifeless form. After death, the *ka* needed a place to live. It is for this reason that bodies were mummified, as the *ka* could live eternally either in the body or tomb statue.

LENTOID FLASK

Lentil-shaped cosmetic vessel. Related Object: 29.17.73

MUT

A sky goddess and great divine mother, Mut is thought to have originated in the Nile River delta or in Middle Egypt. The name Mut means “mother,” and her role was that of an older woman among the gods. She was associated with the uraeus (rearing cobra), lionesses, and royal crowns. Related Object: 16.52

NEITH

The goddess of war, Neith blessed hunters' weapons as well as protected the living and dead. Because she was seen as the patroness of weaving, mummy wrappings were regarded as a gift of Neith which allowed the dead to partake in her divine power. She wears the red crown of Lower Egypt. Related Object: 16.31

OSIRIS

Osiris, one of the best-known and probably the most important Egyptian god, was both a god of fertility and the embodiment of the dead and resurrected king. He carries the crook and the flail, symbols of guardianship and power. As the ruler of the netherworld, Osiris was seen as the night form of the sun and interpreted through the phases of the moon. While the deceased king was equated with Osiris, the living king was seen as Horus. Related Object: 16.40

PTAH

A creator god and maker of things, Ptah was patron of craftsmen and sculptors alike. He was believed to create by means of his heart and tongue, fashioning the world through the power of his word. Seen as the "ancient one", Ptah united in his person both the masculine and feminine. He was always represented wrapped like a mummy and with a shaven head and tight-fitting cap. Related Objects: 16.38

SCARAB

The scarab beetle was considered a symbol of self-creation and new life, as the Egyptians believed that the beetle came into being of itself from a ball of dung. In addition, because a beetle pushes a ball of dung before it, Egyptians believed that the sacred beetle *Khepri* rolled the solar ball across the sky, giving light and warmth to the people below. Because of its connotations with new life, the beetle was a popular amulet to be placed with the deceased in a tomb. Related Object: 62.81.14, 16.245

SEKHMET

The goddess of war and the destroyer of the enemies of the sun god, Sekhmet was associated with both disease and with healing and medicine. Usually depicted as a lioness or a woman with the head of a lioness, she also wore a headdress with the solar disk and uraeus serpent. During the Middle Kingdom, Sekhmet developed as the negative aspect of the goddess Bastet, who had originally borne these negative connotations. Related Object: 16.51

THOTH

The ibis-headed god of the moon, learning, and wisdom, Thoth was believed to have invented writing and language. He was a scribe, interpreter, advisor of the gods, and representative of the sun god, Re. Related Object: 29.17.613, 16.66

UDJAT



The *udjat*, or an amulet in the form of an eye, is a complex symbol in Egyptian thought. The right eye, called the Eye of Ra, symbolized the sun, while the left eye, called the Eye of Thoth or Aah, symbolized the moon. Together they represent Horus, whose falcon features are reflected in the eye's design. The *udjat* is an ancient Egyptian symbol of health, protection and healing. In a battle with Seth, the god of chaos and confusion, Horus lost his left eye. However, the goddess Hathor healed the wound and the *udjat* came to symbolize the process of 'making whole' and healing. The left eye also represented the moon, as the waxing and waning in the lunar cycle reflected Horus' losing and regaining his sight.

Related Objects: 16.278, 16.279

URAEUS



The stylized, upright form of an Egyptian spitting cobra used as a symbol of sovereignty, royalty, deity, and divine authority in ancient Egypt.

Related Object: 99.84.2