

WCMA Egyptian Art Module

Glossary of Mythological Figures

Amun: a god of fertility and the sun, and the king of the gods. He was often depicted wearing a double-plumed crown with either red or blue skin. He was worshipped by the royal family, who gave great gifts of wealth to Amun's temples following military campaigns. Alexander the Great also venerated Amun under the name Zeus-Ammon.

Anubis: the god of mummification and guide of the dead in the underworld. Anubis wrapped Osiris, the first mummy. He was depicted as a jackal or a jackal-headed man, and during mummification, priests would wear an Anubis mask. Anubis guided the deceased to the afterlife.

Bastet: a cat goddess who protected the deceased. She was depicted either as a cat or a cat-headed woman. As part of New Years festivities, amulets of Bastet or litters of kittens were given as gifts to invoke Bastet's protection at the end of the year.

Bes: a household god who protected children and women, especially during childbirth. A short god with a comical appearance, he was usually depicted with his hands on his hips. A lion's mane surrounds his face, and he has a lion's tail.

Geb: the god of the earth. His laughter caused earthquakes, grain was said to sprout from his ribs, and green plants sprung from his back. He was often shown with green skin, symbolizing fertility and vegetation. Geb was married to the sky goddess, Nut, and was the father of Osiris.

Hathor: a goddess of women and motherhood, music and happiness, and foreign lands. Hathor was usually depicted as a woman wearing a long wig tied with a hair band and sometimes wearing a turquoise or red sheath dress. She was also depicted in cow form wearing a sun disk.

Horus: the son of Osiris and Isis and god of the sky. He was often depicted as a falcon or with a falcon's head. His right eye was said to be the sun and his left eye the moon. The pharaoh was associated with Horus, sometimes as a descendant of Horus or as Horus's physical manifestation on earth.

Isis: the wife and sister of Osiris and mother of Horus. After Osiris had been dismembered by Seth, Isis and her sister, Nephtys, reassembled his body. Along with Nephtys, Isis protected the dead. Their images are usually seen at the head and foot of caskets, either in the form of women or black kites (birds). Isis was also a goddess of magic, and her name was often invoked in spells of protection and healing.

Maat: the personification of the Egyptian concepts of truth and cosmic order. She was also known as a goddess of judgment. A deceased person was judged by weighing his or her heart against the feather of Maat. She was depicted as a woman wearing a large feather on her head.

Mut: the mother and queen of the gods. She was usually shown as a woman wearing a vulture headdress, sometimes surmounted by the White or Double Crown. She can sometimes be seen with a lioness head.

Nephtys: the sister of Isis and wife of Seth. She and Isis put Osiris back together again after he had been destroyed by Seth. An image of Nephtys is usually found at the head of a coffin or sarcophagus, with Isis at the feet.

Nut: the personification of the sky and the heavens; her laughter was thunder and her tears were rain. She was also associated with resurrection, because the sun was reborn from her each day. Sometimes, an image of Nut was painted on sarcophagus lids to represent the resurrection of the deceased.

Osiris: the god of the dead and the afterlife. Osiris ruled the underworld and judged whether a deceased person may enter eternal life. Osiris was often depicted as a mummy with a white body and green- or black-colored skin. Black represented the silt deposited by the Nile and green represented new plants, so green and black were colors of rebirth

Sekhmet: a lioness deity whose name means "powerful." She was the protector of the pharaoh and could breathe fire. Hot desert winds were called "the breath of Sekhmet." She was shown as a lion-headed woman wearing a sun disk on her head.

Seth: the brother and rival of Osiris. Seth ruled over deserts and rainstorms, and he was associated with chaos and strife. He was known as the "Red One," the nemesis of Osiris, and was usually seen as the root of evil. He was also said to possess great strength; iron was called "the bones of Seth" because of its hardness.

Sebek: (also called Sobek) a powerful god of water closely associated with crocodiles and often depicted as a crocodile-headed man. Temples to Sebek included pools where sacred crocodiles lived. These crocodiles would be mummified when they died. Crocodiles were greatly feared by those who lived or traveled on the Nile River. People would wear amulets of Sebek to keep them safe.

Thoth: a moon god who invented writing. Thoth presided over scholars and scribes, and he sometimes acted as a messenger for the gods. Thoth had a reputation for truthfulness; a person with great integrity was said to be "straight and true like Thoth." He was depicted as either an ibis (a bird with a long, curved bill) or a baboon, though most commonly as an ibis-headed man.

Wadjet: a cobra goddess associated with Lower Egypt. She was an important protector of the king, who wore an image of the cobra on his crown.

Sources

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