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ANTHROPOMORPHIC DEITIES

الآلهة المجسمة

Richard H. Wilkinson

Anthropomorphe Götter
Dieux anthropomorphes

The ancient Egyptians visualized their deities in many ways, and while anthropomorphic gods and goddesses represented only one of the major forms that deities took in ancient Egyptian culture, the sub-category was broad and encompassed several different types. Although they all shared the common characteristic of exhibiting primarily anthropomorphic identity in their iconographic form and mythological behavior, deities of this class might take fully human, hybrid ("bimorphic"), or composite form. They could include deifications of abstract ideas and non-living things, as well as deified humans—living, deceased, or legendary (such as Imhotep). While a category of "anthropomorphic deities" was not one that the Egyptians themselves differentiated, deities of this type included many of Egypt's greatest gods and goddesses, and the anthropomorphic form was used more than any other to depict the interactions of humans and the gods in religious iconography.

تصور المصريون القدماء آلهتهم بأشكال عديدة ومع أن الآلهة المجسمة تمثل شكلاً واحداً فقط من الأشكال الرئيسية التي اتخذتها الآلهة في هذه الثقافة فإن هذه الفئة عريضة وتشمل عدة أنواع مختلفة. فبالرغم من أن الآلهة في هذه الفئة متشابهة في إظهار هوية أساسها مجسم في شكلها الأيقوني وفي سلوكها الميثولوجي فهي قد تأخذ شكل آدمي أو شكل مزدوج أو شكل مركب. وقد تشمل الفئة تأليه الأفكار التجريدية والأشياء الغير الحية بالإضافة إلى البشر المؤله من الأسطوريين والميتين والأحياء. وفي حين أن المصريين لم يفرقوا بين الآلهة المجسمة وغيرهم من الآلهة فإن هذه الفئة كانت من أهم الآلهة في مصر القديمة وكان الشكل المجسم مستخدم أكثر من أي شكل آخر في الأيقنة الدينية لتوضيح التفاعل بين البشر والآلهة.

The visualization of deities in Egyptian culture was manifold and could include a great many different forms ranging from strictly human, to hybrid (or "bimorphic") and composite varieties.

Development and Iconography

Deities manifested in fully human form appear at a fairly early date. Decorated vases from the Naqada II Period (c. 4000 - 3300 BCE) display a number of apparent divine emblems including two that have been connected with anthropomorphic deities worshipped in the Pharaonic Period: the god Min and the goddess

Neith. Thus, both male and female (Hassan 1992) anthropomorphic deities seem to have played a role in Egyptian religious thought before the establishment of the earliest known dynasties, though many clearly originated in the Dynastic Period (fig. 1). It has been suggested that this "anthropomorphization of powers" was associated with a fundamental change in human perception of the world occurring between the time when Predynastic kings still had animal names and a time in which humans began to impose their own identity upon the cosmos (Hornung 1982: 105 - 107; Morenz 1973: 19 - 20).



Figure 1. Triad of Menkaura, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. A possible connection between the relatively late rise of many anthropomorphic deities—primarily in the Dynastic Period—and the position of the human king cannot be ignored. The association of monarchs and deities is clear from as early as the Old Kingdom.

“Hybrid,” or perhaps more accurately “bimorphic” (half-human, half-animal), deities could have the head of either a human or an animal and the body of the opposite type. The head is consistently the essential element of bimorphic deities (Fischer 1987). Such deities are only partly anthropomorphic in nature as well as in form, however, and are not central to the focus of this survey. They were “. . . the

product of a compromise between anthropomorphic thought aimed at abstraction and the appearances of natural forces” (Traunecker 2001: 46). Technically, one might argue that representations of goddesses with wings (Isis, Nephthys, etc.) are hybrid forms, though these are usually classified as fully anthropomorphic (fig. 2).



Figure 2. Winged goddess, Tomb of Siptah, Valley of the Kings. Depictions of anthropomorphic goddesses with wings are really a form of the hybrid deity type, but are usually classified as purely anthropomorphic, as this attribute is only shown in some cases.

Composite deities differed from the hybrid or bimorphic forms in that they embodied a combination of several deities or parts thereof, rather than an individual god in a particular guise. They could thus be made up of numerous anthropomorphic or zoomorphic deities and include, in the former case, beings such as multiple-headed and many-armed deities that may have incorporated a

combination of as many as a dozen different gods. Yet despite their bizarre appearances, there remains a degree of logic to many of these polymorphic deities. This is perhaps most obvious in zoomorphic examples such as the fearsome Ammit and the more benign Tawaret, which were both part hippopotamus, crocodile, and lion, but fused to very different effect. It also seems probable that fused anthropomorphic deities of this type shared some connection or suggested a specific kind of divine identity to the ancient Egyptians, though the connections may not be clear to us today. Syncretized deities such as Ra-Horakhty, Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, and Amun-Ra may also be classified as deities of this type, though they are usually viewed as one deity simply residing within another, and their iconography may stress the characteristics and attributes of only one of the component deities (Bonnet 1939/1999; Hornung 1982: 91 - 99).



Figure 3. Four sons of Horus in fully anthropomorphic form, Tomb of Aye, West Valley. Even where strong representational traditions were established, variation occurs in the form in which deities were portrayed. This may be seen in deities such as the four sons of Horus—with zoomorphic identities for three of the four usually, but not always, utilized in the New Kingdom.

While a rigidly fixed iconography for a given god was uncommon (fig. 3), and many deities appeared in several guises, deities with primary anthropomorphic identities (usually those deities whose earliest representations are anthropomorphic) are less frequently depicted in other forms, though exceptions occur. As time progressed, the goddess Isis (depicted

anthropomorphically in her earliest representations) was depicted as a serpent, a bird, a scorpion, or other creature, based on her particularly rich mythology. When individual gods or goddesses were depicted in multiple forms, the various forms often reflected the original nature of the deity (for example, Hathor, who could be represented as a cow, as a woman with the head of a cow, or as a woman with a face of mixed human and bovine features). It was also theoretically possible for all deities to be depicted in human form—at least from the New Kingdom—and representations of groups of anthropomorphically depicted gods (including such traditionally zoomorphic or hybrid deities as Anubis) do occur, for example, in some temple settings.

The Nature of Anthropomorphic Deities

Despite the prevalence of zoomorphic deities in Egyptian thought and the fact that these forms appear to have represented the earliest of Egypt's divinities, anthropomorphic gods and goddesses were of great importance and embraced a greater number of deities than any other form in developed Egyptian religion. The fluid manner in which anthropomorphic deities were represented in different forms argues against the notion that the human-formed gods were viewed as more important, yet they were nevertheless of fundamental significance in terms of the developed concept of deity itself. It is perhaps not coincidental that anthropomorphic forms were routinely utilized for the generic representation of "god" or "gods" from the Old Kingdom onward (Hornung 1982: 40), and representations of enneads—which suggest the totality of the gods by their nature and numerical significance—most frequently depict gods anthropomorphically (fig. 4). Deities of this type included many of Egypt's greatest gods and goddesses and the anthropomorphic form was that in which deities were most frequently depicted in their interactions with humans in religious iconography.



Figure 4. Deities of the Solar Barque, Gilded Shrine of Tutankhamun, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. Representations of enneads commonly utilize anthropomorphic depictions of deities in generic form where the individual deities are identified only by name labels.



Figure 6. Personified estates bearing offerings, Temple of Ramesses II, Abydos. The generic nature of some anthropomorphic deities—such as personifications of geographic regions, estates, temples, etc.—meant that they were often only identified by name.



Figure 5. Statue of Amun, Dynasty 18, Luxor Museum. Many anthropomorphic deities, such as Amun, god of wind and “hiddenness,” personify abstract aspects of reality that were difficult to personify in zoomorphic form.

The preponderance of deities of anthropomorphic form may also have historical implications. Although there were numerous reasons why the nature of Amarna religion was inimical to Egyptian religious orthodoxy, the fact that the greatest of Egypt’s established deities were anthropomorphic, or portrayed as at least partly so in developed Egyptian religion, may have made it less likely that the non-anthropomorphic nature of the Aten would have been widely accepted as a supreme deity. It is certainly clear that the anthropomorphic deities of other ancient Near Eastern cultures were readily absorbed into Egyptian religion, whereas non-anthropomorphic foreign deities usually were not.

In many cases, the anthropomorphic form was applied to deities whose original identities and roles were abstract or not easily symbolized in the natural world (fig. 5). Thus the so-called “cosmic” gods and goddesses of the heavens and earth such as Shu, god of the air or light, and Nut, goddess of the sky, were generally anthropomorphic in form, as were “geographic” deities, i.e., deities representing specific topographical and geographic features or areas such as mountains, cities, estates, and temples (fig. 6). Though in some cases attributes—such as blue skin for the marsh gods and for Hapi, god of the Nile inundation—might be given to these deities,

they are often only identified iconographically by their names. Fecundity figures representing personifications of aspects of non-sexual fertility (Baines 1984) are minor deities of this type. Other deities—some of them very ancient, such as the fertility god Min—do not fit precisely within these general categories but were also usually manifested in human form. In addition, this category includes elevated humans such as deified living kings, deceased kings—and to some extent their royal *kas* (Bell 1985: 256ff.; Frankfort 1948b: 74 and passim; Silverman 1991: 58 - 74)—as well as some other notable individuals (Wildung 1977).



Figure 7. Figure of Isis, Tomb of Amunhorkhepeshef, Valley of the Queens. The somewhat fluid nature of the identities of Isis and Hathor, which were often blurred both in terms of their iconographies and their titles and epithets, is not uncommon among anthropomorphic deities.

The essential identity of many anthropomorphically depicted deities can be difficult to ascertain, however. A number of important gods and goddesses were given

different names and epithets suggesting multiple identities. Some, such as the deity Neferhotep, clearly fulfilled several distinct roles, sometimes without exhibiting any single identity that could be said to be clearly “primary” (Hassan 1998; Silverman 1991: 23). Generally, and often as a result of the fusion of multiple deities, the greater the god or goddess, the wider the range of associations and identities the deity might have (fig. 7).

Human Characteristics

Not only were deities perceived as taking human forms, but they were also imagined to take on human roles, characteristics, and behavior. The Memphite Theology, which describes the god Ptah (fig. 8) as creating with his heart and his tongue (i.e., through deliberative thought and executive speech), underscores the essentially anthropomorphic nature of the god’s actions at even the most transcendent level. Like their human subjects, the Egyptian gods were said to speak, to hear, and to perceive smells and tastes. They could eat and drink (sometimes to excess), they could work, fight, lust, laugh, and cry out in despair. Anthropomorphic deities were clearly viewed as having human needs, and this was, of course, the basis of many aspects of their cults (Teeter 2001). They could also interact well or poorly and could express anger, shame, and humor—sometimes exhibiting distinctive personality traits as part of their identities.

The “humanness” of anthropomorphic deities also embraced human social structures: the social relationships inherent in human pairs and family groups were just as much a part of the divine as the human sphere. As time progressed, many of the cults of the major deities were organized into triads (te Velde 1971) of a “father,” “mother,” and “son”—such as that of Amun, Mut, and Khons at Thebes (fig. 9), or Ptah, Sakhmet, and Nefertem at Memphis—and “child deities” such as Horus the child and Ihy were also independently venerated, especially in the first millennium (Budde et al. 2003; Sandri 2006). Many deities were also organized into generational groups, and a great deal of Egyptian religious thought



Figure 8. The god Ptah, Tomb of Merneptah, Valley of the Kings. The fact that the creative accomplishments of Ptah were effected by means of deliberative thought and executive speech underscores the essentially anthropomorphic nature of that god's divine role according to the Memphite Theology.

was developed within the parameters of these familial structures.

The anthropomorphic deities of the Egyptian pantheon also reflected non-kinship societal relationships. Just as the Egyptians were ruled by a king, so there was also a “king of the gods.” Although Ra (or Amun-Ra) was usually given this epithet, the god Osiris could be said to fulfill this role in terms of the afterlife realm and Ptah was often said to be “King of Heaven.” Several deities were given monarchial attributes (fig. 10). Likewise, the essential roles of some deities (for example, Thoth the scribe, and Montu the warrior) reflected aspects of human society. Although such roles bound the respective deities to specific mythological situations, they were not exclusive and did not



Figure 9. Statue of the presentation of a triad of Amun, Mut, and Khons, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. The Theban triad of Amun, Mut, and Khons exemplifies the familial and generational relationships found in many groupings of anthropomorphic deities.

limit the gods' power in other settings. Indeed a wide range of roles and powers is particularly associated with anthropomorphic deities, as noted above.

Ultimately, the very categorization of Egyptian deities as “anthropomorphic” must be mediated through an understanding of the multiple ways in which these deities could be envisioned and depicted, as well as the divine roles and associations that were shared by deities of different forms. The category was, after all, not one that the Egyptians used themselves. Yet the importance of this type of deity in understanding Egyptian religion is not only found in the development of humanity's view of itself and its gods that seems to have occurred in the earliest stages of Egyptian

history (the “anthropomorphization of powers”), but perhaps also in the underlying possibility that at some level the ancient Egyptians may have felt an increasing identification with their anthropomorphic gods—especially in periods of Egyptian history when the phenomena of personal piety and communication with the gods (Wilkinson 2003: 50 - 51) seem to have been more pronounced.



Figure 10. Atum wearing the double crown, Luxor Museum. The ideological association of anthropomorphic deities with the Egyptian king is perhaps seen in both the divine or quasi-divine aspects of representations of kings as well as the monarchial attributes of certain deities.

Bibliographic Notes

The literature regarding Egyptian anthropomorphic deities is vast and the following comments regard only some of the works mentioned in this article. Among works of a general nature, Silverman (1991) provides a short but useful examination of the nature of divinity and deities that touches on numerous aspects of the role of anthropomorphic deities in Egyptian religion. Other relevant literature includes studies by Assmann (1984), Bonhême (2001), Černý (1952), Derchain (1979), and Frankfort (1948a).

Among more focused works, Hornung’s (2005) study—a re-worked sixth edition—provides a broad but substantive examination of the concept of divinity in ancient Egypt that maintains a fairly constant dialogue with Morenz’s (1973) ideas regarding the question of the unity and plurality of Egyptian deities. Bonnet (1939), Baines (1984), Bell (1985), Budde, Sandri and Verhoeven (2003), te Velde (1971), and Wildung (1977) are all important studies of specific types or groupings of anthropomorphic deities. Similarly, Hassan (1992, 1998) discusses a possible development of anthropomorphic goddesses and their relationships with Egyptian religion in general, though many aspects of the earliest development of Egyptian deities remain beyond our current knowledge.

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