

Ancient Egyptian Religion II: The Hermopolitan and Other Pantheons

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1 The Hermopolitan Pantheon

The name *Khemennu* (*ḫmnw*) means “eight” in Egyptian, and it is the name of a town in Middle Egypt which the Greeks called Hermopolis, “the city of Hermes”, because they equated the town’s patron god, Thoth, with their own Hermes.

The connection between Thoth and Hermes is a bit of a tenuous one. Hermes had numerous roles in the Greek pantheon, but perhaps the most important one was as messenger to Zeus. Thoth, too, served as something of a messenger, because he was the god most responsible for the writing and keeping of records. Additionally, Hermes was the patron of magicians, because to the Greeks, they were tricksters. Thoth was a god strongly connected with magic too, but this was because the Egyptians ascribed magical powers to words, particularly the written word. These two associations cemented the identification of Khemennu as Hermopolis.

The name “Eight” derives from the pantheon worshiped in Khemennu. This pantheon always consists of eight gods in four pairs, male and female, led by Thoth. One listing of the Eight is:

- Nun and Nunet (the primordial ocean)
- Heh and Hehet (eternity)
- Kek and Keket (darkness)
- Amun and Amunet (hidden things)

These gods are particularly abstract beings, and the myths about them are little more than lists of their names and pictures of them. The male deities are usually shown with frogs’ heads, and the females with cobras’ heads. Like Re, their worship was not limited to just one city, but it was particularly prominent in Khemennu, which adopted them as Thoth’s associates in the act of creation.

The Eight were traditionally the first beings in existence, and from their initial interactions and cooperation was produced the primordial mound. From this mound arose a lotus flower, and from this flower sprang none other than Re.

Later, when the cult of Thoth was combined with that of the Eight, it was said that an ibis, the sacred bird of Thoth, laid the cosmic egg at Khemennu, from which the Eight were hatched; then they created Re as described above.

Thoth had two different wives in the myths. We have already met Ma’at, the personification of cosmic order and justice. He was also united with Seshat, the goddess of writing and history.

2 The Memphite Pantheon

The chief god worshipped at Memphis was Ptah. He was preeminently the patron god of sculptors and craftsmen, which might actually explain his prominence in the capital city of early Egypt. He

is usually depicted as a man wrapped up like a mummy, probably to illustrate his tremendous age, as opposed to Osiris who actually died.

In connection with his patronage of artisans, Ptah was the creator of the universe. He did it by naming things in his heart and then willing them into being, or sculpting them with chisel and knives, or fashioning the egg of the world upon a potter's wheel. Additionally, he is credited with fashioning the bodies inhabited by the deceased in the next world.

Ptah was syncretized at a fairly early point with the god Sokar, a hawk-headed deity worshipped as the patron of Saqqara, and guardian of the souls of the dead from Memphis. The two together were later fused with Osiris to form Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, a particularly popular protector of the dead.

Ptah's family at Memphis included his wife, none other than lioness-headed Sekhmet, "the powerful lady", whom we have already met as the destructive Eye of Re. She was associated with—either as sister, or as another form of—the cat goddess Bast, who was seen as a goddess of beauty and pleasure (in addition to being patron of domestic cats themselves).

In early Memphite tradition, Ptah and Sekhmet were joined by their son Nefertum, depicted as a man with an oversized lotus flower and ostrich feathers on his head. Nefertum is a god of happiness, primarily, but in later myths his place as the third member of the Memphite triad has largely been usurped by Imhotep—the same Imhotep who was a historical person and who designed the Step Pyramid complex for Netjerykhet Djoser. Imhotep was such a popular and legendary figure that he eventually was considered a god, and the god of medicine and architecture; arts which, in conjunction with his work at Memphis and Saqqara, made him an appropriate choice for a son of Ptah. By the Ptolemaic period, Imhotep was identified by the Greeks as Asklepios, the son of Apollo whose medical skills were capable of raising the dead, and his temple near Memphis was known as the Asklepion.

3 The Apis Bulls

Also at Memphis, there was kept a sacred bull known to the Greeks as the Apis bull; the Egyptian name for this creature was Hapi, who was also a god of the Nile. By the Ptolemaic period, there was a god known as Asar-Hapi, or "the Osiris Apis", i.e. the dead Apis. The Greeks identified this being as "Serapis", who became a popular god of death and resurrection, and by extension the agricultural cycle, in Ptolemaic Egypt and, later, throughout much of the Roman world.

There was only one Apis bull at Memphis at any time; it was carefully selected based on its markings and was well-cared for throughout its life. Upon its death, it was mummified and placed in a tremendous catacomb at Saqqara known as the Serapeum. The Serapeum was known to the classical authors, and Napoleon's expedition searched for it, but failed to find it; Auguste Mariette succeeded in 1850. A few of the mummies were found intact, such as Apis XIV, who was buried during Year 44 of Rameses II. Rameses's son Khaemwase, in fact, was a priest of the Apis and chose to be buried in the Serapeum rather than a tomb of his own!

4 The Theban Pantheon

We have seen numerous references to Amun during our resumé of Egyptian history; it is time to consider him in his theological context. Amun's name is found among the Eight at Khemennu, as we have seen. His name seems to mean "hidden" or "invisible". His role as a creator-god at Khemennu was nothing compared to the importance he would achieve as patron god of Thebes.

While there are very few myths about Amun in the Greco-Roman sense of interesting "stories" about him, there are very many hymns of praise to him in Middle and New Kingdom literature. By the end of the New Kingdom, Amun had become the closest thing Egypt had to a Supreme Being. He was seen as the creator, all-powerful and all-knowing, undying, lord of all things; and yet he was also seen as a very personal god, the best friend and best helper of even the lowliest worshiper in need of aid. Unlike Re and Horus, who were gods for kings, Amun was simultaneously the god above all other gods, and the patron god of Everyman. In spite of this, he is very, very frequently syncretized with Re. Before the Ptolemaic revivals of the Osirian and Memphite religions, Amunism

was on the verge of absorbing all the other religions of Egypt, with all the other gods being seen as servants, or even merely aspects, of Amun.

Though Amun's consort is Amunet among the Eight, at Thebes he has another wife, Mut, "the mother", who like him is not very interesting mythically but comes to take on the roles, theologically, of all the other goddesses, rather like her husband does with the gods. Their son is Khonsu, the moon god. Several statues of both Amun and Khonsu have been found bearing the features of King Tut; statues of Mut found in association with these are usually presumed to be portraits of Ankhesenamun.

5 The Elephantine Pantheon

The chief god of the Elephantine triad is Khnum, who has a ram's head, a symbol of vigor and creative force. Khnum is best known in Egyptian art as the god who sculpts human beings on his potter's wheel before their birth. Khnum's wives, or possibly wife and daughter, are Sati and Anuket. Sati spreads fertility throughout the land, and Anuket distributes happiness and cool water.

6 The Gods of the Nomes

As a final note, let us close by noting the most popular gods as patrons of the forty-two nomes. Horus had no less than eight, and his wife Hathor had six; thus they had one-third of the nomes between them. Amun had three, and his aspect Min, the god of fertility, had two of his own. Khnum also had three. Interestingly, Re, Osiris, Isis, and Set each had only one.

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