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| https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/logreli3.gif | **The Creation Myth** |

**Ancient Egypt:**

**Like other creation myths, Egypt's is complex and offers several versions of how the world unfolded. The ancient Egyptians believed that the basic principles of life, nature and society were determined by the gods at the creation of the world. It all began with the first stirring of the High God in the primeval waters.**

**The** [**creation myth**](http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/religion/deitiescreation.html) **is recounted in the sacred** [**hieroglyphic writings**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcw01e.shtml#page) **found on pyramids, temples, tombs and sheets of papyrus. These writings describe how the earth was created out of chaos by the god** [**Atum**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrga5e.shtml#page)**. The earth was seen as a sacred landscape, a reflection of the sky world where the gods resided.**

**The creation of the universe took place over a long period of time when the gods lived on earth and established kingdoms based on the principles of justice. When the gods left the earth to reside in the sky world, the** [**pharaohs**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgov2e.shtml#page) **inherited the right to rule.**

**The First Gods**

**The** [***Book of the Dead***](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcw03e.shtml#bookofdead)**, dating to the** [**Second Intermediate Period**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egctimee.shtml#second)**, describes how the world was created by Atum, the god of** [**Heliopolis**](http://www.internationalegyptology.com/General%20Web/heliopolis.htm)**, the centre of the sun-god cult in Lower Egypt. In the beginning, the world appeared as an infinite expanse of dark and directionless waters, named** [**Nun**](http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/nun.htm)**. Nun was personified as four pairs of male and female deities. Each couple represented one of four principles that characterized Nun: hiddenness or invisibility, infinite water, straying or lack of direction, and darkness or lack of light.**

**Atum created himself out of Nun by an effort of will or by uttering his own name. As the creator of the gods and humans, he was responsible for bringing order to the heavens and the earth. As Lord of the Heavens and Earth, he wears the** [**Double Crown**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgov5e.shtml#crowns) **of Upper and Lower Egypt and carries the** [***ankh***](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgov5e.shtml#ankh)**, a symbol of life and a** [**was sceptre**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcgov5e.shtml#sceptres)**, a symbol of royal authority.**

[****](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/reli29b.gif)**According to the** [**Pyramid Texts**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcw03e.shtml)**, written on the walls of pyramids, the creator god emerged from the chaotic darkness of Nun as a mythical** [**Bennu bird**](http://www.egyptianmyths.net/phoenix.htm) **(similar to a heron or phoenix). He flew to Heliopolis, an ancient city near Cairo, where, at dawn, he alighted on the Benben, an obelisk representing a ray of the sun. After fashioning a nest of aromatic boughs and spices, he was consumed in a fire and miraculously sprang back to life. The capstone placed at the top of an obelisk or a pyramid is associated with the Bennu. Called a** [**pyramidion**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/arch18b.jpg) **or the Bennu, it is a symbol of rebirth and immortality.**

**The Creator God's Offspring**

**At a time the Egyptians called *Zep Tepi* (the First Time), Atum created two offspring. His son,** [**Shu**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgs4e.shtml#page)**, represented dry air, and his daughter,** [**Tefnut**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgs4e.shtml#page)**, represented corrosive moist air. The twins symbolize two universal principles of human existence: life and right (justice).**

**The twins separated the sky from the waters. They produced children named** [**Geb**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgg1e.shtml#page)**, the dry land, and** [**Nut**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgg1e.shtml#page)**, the sky. When the primeval waters receded, a mound of earth (Geb) appeared, providing the first solid dry land for the sun god,** [**Re**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgr1e.shtml#page)**, to rest. During the dynastic period, Atum was also known as Re, meaning the sun at its first rising.**

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**Shu, the god of air, separates the sky goddess, Nut, from the earth god, Geb. Two ram-headed gods stand beside Shu.
Drawing: Catherine Fitzpatrick**

**Geb and Nut produced four offspring:** [**Seth**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgs3e.shtml#page)**, the god of disorder;** [**Osiris**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgo1e.shtml#page)**, the god of order; and their sisters,** [**Nephthys**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgn2e.shtml#page) **and** [**Isis**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgi1e.shtml#page)**. This new generation completed the Heliopolitan Ennead, the group of nine deities that began with Atum, the primeval creator god.**

**In another version of the creation story, the city of** [**Hermopolis**](http://lexicorient.com/egypt/hermopolis.htm)**, in Middle Egypt, substituted the Ennead with a group of eight deities called the Ogdoad. It consisted of four pairs of gods and goddesses symbolizing different aspects of the chaos that existed before creation. The goddesses were depicted as snakes and the gods as frogs. Their names were Nun and Naunet (water), Amun and Amaunet (hiddenness), Heh and Hauhet (infinity), and Kek and Kauket (darkness).**

**The Sun God's Eye**

**The sun god, Re (a form of Atum), ruled over the earth, where humans and divine beings coexisted. Humans were created from the** [**Eye of Re**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/scie01b.jpg) **or *wedjat* (eye of wholeness). This happened when the eye separated from Re and failed to return. Shu and Tefnut went to fetch it, but the eye resisted. In the ensuing struggle, the eye shed tears from which humans were born.**

**The familiar eye motif is an enduring symbol for the creator, Atum, for Re and for** [**Horus**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgh3e.shtml#page)**, the son of Osiris and Isis. It represents the power to see, to illuminate and to act. The act of bringing the eye back to the creator was equivalent to healing the earth – the restoration of right and order. Maintaining right and order to prevent the earth from falling into chaos was central to the pharaoh's role.**

**Another version of the creation myth states that the *wedjat* simply wandered off, so Re sent** [**Thoth**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgt2e.shtml#page)**, the moon god, to fetch it. When it returned, the eye found that another eye had taken its place. To pacify the furious eye, Re placed it on his brow in the shape of a uraeus (a** [**cobra goddess**](http://www.shira.net/egypt-goddess.htm)**), where it could rule the whole world. Pharaohs** [**wore the uraeus on their brows**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/tut40b.jpg) **as a symbol of protection and to show that they were descended from the sun god.**

**The First Rebellion**

[****](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/reli30b.jpg)**When Re became old, the deities tried to take advantage of his senility. Even humans plotted against him, which led to their fall from divine grace. In reaction to the rebellion, Re sent his eye to slaughter the rebels, a deed he accomplished by transforming himself into** [**Sekhmet**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgs1e.shtml#page)**, a raging powerful goddess (depicted as a lion). After punishing his foes, he changed himself into the contented goddess** [**Hathor**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgh2e.shtml#page) **(depicted as a cow).**

**In pain, and weary of these problems, Re withdrew from the world. Taking the form of Hathor, he mounted on Nut (sky), who raised him to the heavens. The other gods clung to Hathor's belly and became the stars. Following this, Thoth, the moon god, was given a spell to protect humans from harm when the sun disappeared below the earth. From that moment on, humans were separated from the gods, as earth was separated from the heavens.**

**Re's Journey**

[****](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcr09p1.shtml)**Now Re lived in the heavens, where order was established. Each morning he was reborn in the east and travelled across the sky in a boat, called the Bark of Millions of Years, accompanied by a number of gods who acted as his crew. The sun god was carried across the sky by the scarab god, Khepri, a dung beetle. His chief enemy was the Apep, a huge serpent that lived in the Nile and the waters of Nun. Apep tried to obstruct the solar bark's daily passage, but the sun god was ultimately victorious.**

**The sun god was the most important deity in the Egyptian pantheon. He had many names: as the sun disk, he was Aten; as the rising sun, he was Khepri, the scarab; at the sun's zenith, he was Re, the supreme god of Heliopolis; and as the setting sun, he was Atum. Egypt's** [**pyramids**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egca10e.shtml#shape) **and obelisks, as well as the** [**sphinx**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egca15e.shtml#page)**, were associated with the sun god. In the** [**New Kingdom**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egctimee.shtml#new)**, the sphinx was a symbol for the sun god as** [**Re-Horakhty**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/egcrgr1e.shtml#horakhty)**, the winged sun disk that appeared on the horizon at dawn.**

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| https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/reli27.gif |
| **The** [**scarab**](https://www.historymuseum.ca/cmc/exhibitions/civil/egypt/images/life33.jpg) **buries its eggs in dung, which it rolls into a hole in the earth, where the eggs hatch. It became a symbol for the sun god, who took the form of a scarab when he pushed the sun out of the eastern horizon for its daily journey across the sky.** |

**The sun, symbol of light and enlightenment, is probably the most enduring symbol found in ancient and modern religions. Living in a land of eternal sunshine, it is little wonder the ancient Egyptians chose the sun as the prime symbol for the creator of the universe.**