



SACRED DEITIES OF ANCIENT EGYPT:

FEROCITY AND THE FEMININE

&

MOON AND EARTH AS EXPRESSIONS OF THE

DIVINE MASCULINE

Jacqueline Thurston

THERE ARE MEMORIES THAT WILL BECOME STORIES

I entered Luxor Temple, one among a jostling throng of tourists. Spontaneously, I glanced back over my shoulder. I was gobsmacked—there is no other word to describe the physical force of my experience—by the sight of a beautiful low relief carving in black stone of Seshat. Over her linen dress, the goddess wore the pelt of a leopard, a garment traditionally worn by *sem* priests who knew the sacred secrets necessary to prepare the deceased for burial. Seshat faces an inner wall. Her placement means she remains hidden and thus usually goes unseen. Only an accidental turn of the head at precisely the right moment reveals her presence.

Understand that in this moment of confrontation, I did not know her name. I did not know she was the mistress of all forms of writing, ranging from lists of captured slaves and bounty to sacred religious texts. I did not know that the precise meaning of Seshat's enigmatic headdress remains unknown. Fully clothed in a linen dress, the claws of a leopard brushing against her arms and legs, counting the years of the reign of the pharaoh, graced by her mysterious emblem, Seshat launched me on a journey that would span a decade. Over time, my quest would culminate in a book titled *Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt*. But Seshat was the beginning. Her intriguing symbolic fusion of instinctual, bestial energy combined with intellect and knowledge; her role as a guardian of texts both mundane and sacred; her enigmatic emblem; and her companion, Thoth, Lord of the Moon, sustained me as my creative pursuit grew from one year to many years. We had, I discovered, a reciprocal relationship. Seshat embodied aspects of myself that I simultaneously knew but did not know. Meeting her

resembled a Mobius strip, a topographical phenomenon in which the surface moves seamlessly and continuously from the inside to the outside and from the outside to the inside.

Remember, I was an older woman in her late sixties to early seventies, drawn to Egypt initially on a lark. I did not imagine I would become a solo traveler in a culture where I was an outlier. I did not envision sitting on the ground after sunrise with a stonemason and his crew, drinking tea with sugar in small glass cups while eating *ful medames*, a traditional concoction of fava beans, at breakfast before climbing a wall of scaffolds to see their restoration situated at the very top of one of the temple walls. I did not envision standing in awe in Hathor's temple at Dendera in the aftermath of the Egyptian revolution of January 2011. The temple was empty, mercifully devoid of tourists. It had become a silent sanctuary filled with echoes of the past. It is my hope that as you read this written reflection, you may also find yourself inexplicably, even deeply, drawn to the figures or mythos of one of the gods or goddesses of ancient Egypt. May you also experience the uncanny moment in which the kohl-lined eyes of a deity spring fleetingly to life and you feel seen, known, recognized.

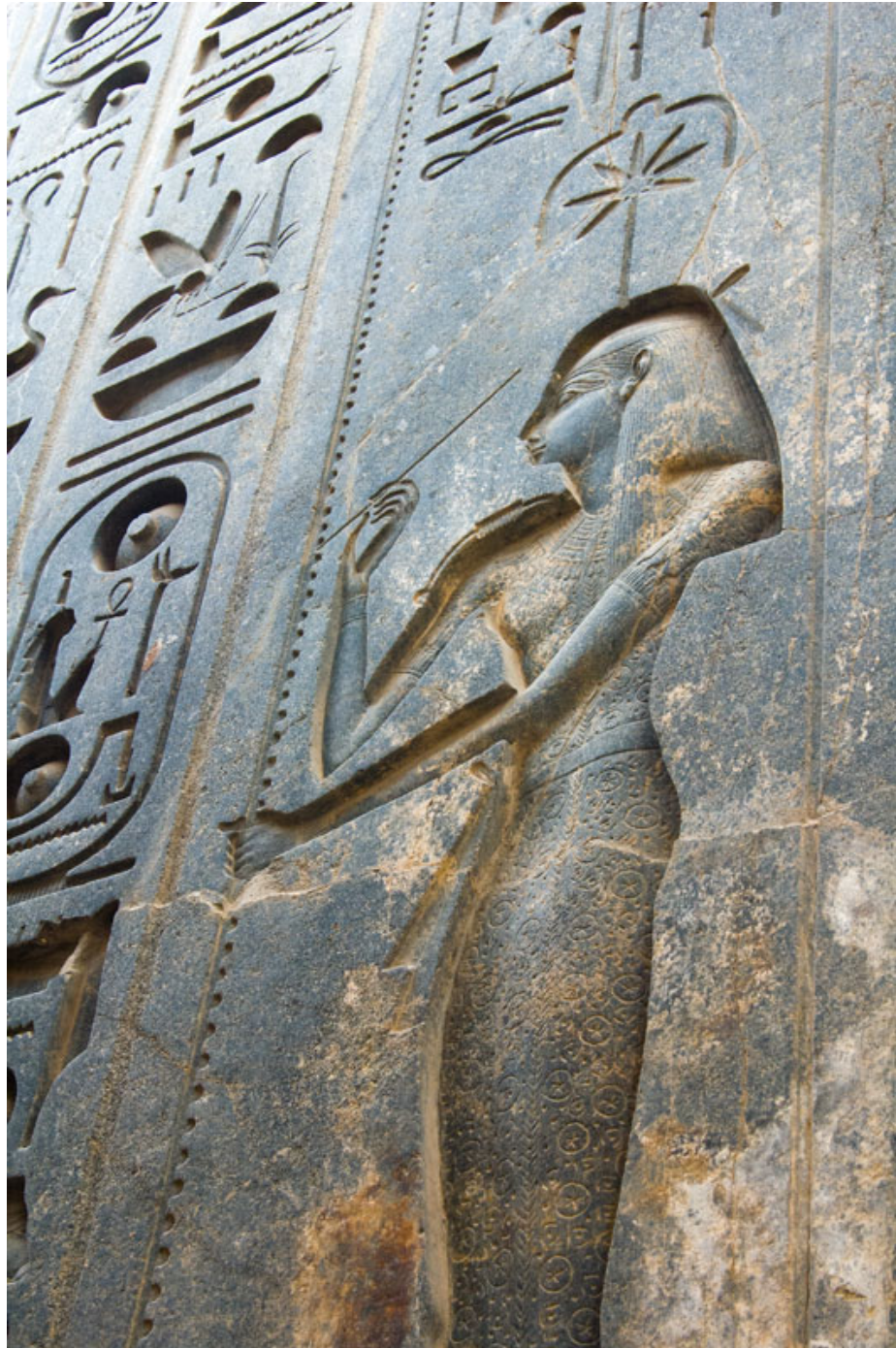


Figure 1 Seshat, She Who Is Foremost in the House of Books, Luxor Temple.



Figure 2 The mummy-shaped coffin protected the body, ensuring its preservation for eternity. The belief of this culture in permanence is a dramatic contrast to the precarious nature of their day-to-day lives. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.

PANDEMICS AND THE VICISSITUDES OF NATURE

Written on the cusp of the winter of 2020 and the spring of 2021, this reflection does not exist in a vacuum. The spring of 2020 was marked by a pandemic, international in scale, and by a dramatic confrontation with questions of social injustice. In the early months of the pandemic, as Jews celebrated

Passover, time collapsed and the past fused with the present. During this troubled and turbulent time, we shared with ancient Egyptians the experience of living through a time of upheaval and unrest. We also became intimately acquainted with the unknown, with anxiety, with fear, and with hope. The vicissitudes of drought, destructive sandstorms, floods, and pestilence were common events that shaped the forms of ancient Egyptian gods. Hippos, crocodiles, lions and lionesses, leopards, jackals, cobras, and equally lethal smaller creatures, scorpions and poisonous vipers, were woven into the fabric of the lives of the men, women, and children of this ancient civilization. Many of the deities were visualized as having human bodies crowned with the heads of animals. This embrace of instinctual animal energy allowed ancient Egyptian deities to meet the creatures of the animal kingdom as potential equals.

The following exploration of these themes is drawn from my book *Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt*. Illustrated with my photographs, this written reflection celebrates Jung's vision of opposing dimensions within our psyche and within our culture. The potential for polar opposites to complete, contain, and counterbalance one another and the tensions inherent in this relationship provide the bedrock for a revealing exploration of the deities of this ancient culture. Jackals and wild dogs were predators. In the pantheon, the predatory nature of the jackal was reversed, and the jackal-headed god Anubis became a guardian figure of cemeteries who was chosen to preside over the embalming and preservation of the pharaoh's body so that he might live for eternity.

ANUBIS



Figure 3 The complex, patterned border of a shrine provides a foil for a portrayal of Anubis as a jackal-headed male deity. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.



Figure 4 Anubis as a wild dog, with a flagellum nestled between his hind leg and his flank, lies on the temple he protects. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

Wild desert dogs were scavengers, feeding on carrion. Their predations threatened the preservation of an intact body. The visualization of Anubis as a wild dog protecting and preserving the corpse for eternity reversed corporeal reality and transformed the destroyer of flesh into a preserver of flesh. Anubis was rendered as a man with the head of a wild dog and as a crouching black jackal with the flagellum of Osiris, a symbol of kingship, nestled between his hind leg and flank. When portrayed in his prone animal form, he often wore a magical collar and ceremonial tie around his neck. His ebony hue was symbolic and had two principal associations. The black body of Anubis recalled the fertility of the silt of the Nile and the color of embalmed corpses. The inky cast of the rich hue of the fertile earth and the black resin poured over a deceased body implied eternal life and rebirth. In this fascinating pantheon, masculine and feminine sacred deities often had companion figures of the opposite sex who presided over the same domain. The secret spells and rituals necessary to prepare the dead for burial were not exclusively limited to a male figure. The ferocious jackal god, Anubis, the god of mummification, had a lesser-known female counterpart, Anput, who was also portrayed as a wild black dog.

GUARDIANS OF CHILDBIRTH: TAWERT AND BES



Figure 5 The dwarf god Bes with a panther head on his chest. The tail of a lion hung between his short bandy legs. A large tongue protruded aggressively from his mouth. Temple of Hathor, Dendera.



Figure 6 This depiction of Taweret ornaments an astrological ceiling. The goddess is protected by a crocodile on her back, a portrayal that intensifies her ferocity. Tomb of Seti I, Valley of the Kings

Two deities, one masculine and the other feminine, were needed to ensure the safety of pregnant women, women in childbirth, and newborn infants. The lion–dwarf god Bes was portrayed nude with an aggressive protruding tongue and a panther’s head centered on his broad chest. The tail of a lion hung between his legs. His grotesque appearance and the display of his often-prominent genitals made him a ferocious protector of pregnant women. His counterpart was the terrifying goddess Taweret, a fantastic being who fused the features of a pregnant woman, a lioness, a hippo, and a crocodile. Bes and Taweret unleash the aggressive dimensions of their sexuality as a protective force. Bes and Taweret are vivid reminders of the gravity and danger of moments that required the presence and participation of both the divine masculine and the divine feminine.

Both deities were beneficent in nature but grotesque and hideous in form. Their imposing appearance must have been necessary to successfully ward off the dangers that accompanied pregnancy and childbirth. The feminine deity Taweret is portrayed with the sagging breasts and pregnant belly of a woman; the formidable head of a hippopotamus; and the strong, stout legs, forearms, and paws of a lion. Her arms are a wonderful fusion that integrates a shoulder that appears to be human with the paws and claws of a lion. Taweret’s image culminates with the long, dangerous tail of a crocodile that flows from the back of her head to the ground. Her pregnant body is dwarfed by bestial imagery. Feminine crocodile deities were believed to be fiercely protective, while masculine crocodile deities were terrifying symbols of destruction. The lioness and the crocodile were fearsome creatures, and the pugnacious nature of the hippopotamus was legendary. Taweret, whose name means “the great one,” was

an apotropaic fecundity figure. The awe-inspiring nature of her composite being prevented malevolent forces from harming women during labor and childbirth.

FEROCITY AND THE FEMININE

Why did the ancient Egyptians choose two formidable feminine deities, the vulture and the cobra, as the principal guardians of the pharaoh? The presence of imposing feminine deities based on life forms capable of inflicting death, or intimately associated with death itself, presents an intriguing conundrum. Perhaps their ferocity and intimate connection with death were counterbalanced by their fecundity and capacity to bring forth new life. Cobra and vulture may also have unconsciously served as symbols of rebirth. The lethal cobra shed its skin to reveal a shimmering new body, and the vulture fed masticated dead flesh to its offspring, ensuring their survival. Reflect for a moment on the nature of this ancient culture in which the word for “mother” could be written with a single vulture glyph.

NEKHBET: THE VULTURE GODDESS

Figure 7 The vulture deity Nekhbet grasps shen symbols for eternity and the handle of a striped, plumed khu fan in her great talons. Tomb of Rameses V and Rameses VI, Valley of the Kings.

The image of the vulture soaring above the land heralded imminent death or the presence of death itself. The ancient Egyptians would have witnessed the vulture using its long talons and hooked beak to tear the flesh from the bones of a

corpse. The dead flesh consumed by the vulture may have been intuitively perceived as containing the potential to be transformed into new life. The selection of a predator as the emblem for the word “mother” transformed the association between the vulture and horrific images of death into a symbol of new life—making the vulture a noble guardian of the king.

WADJET: A COBRA GODDESS

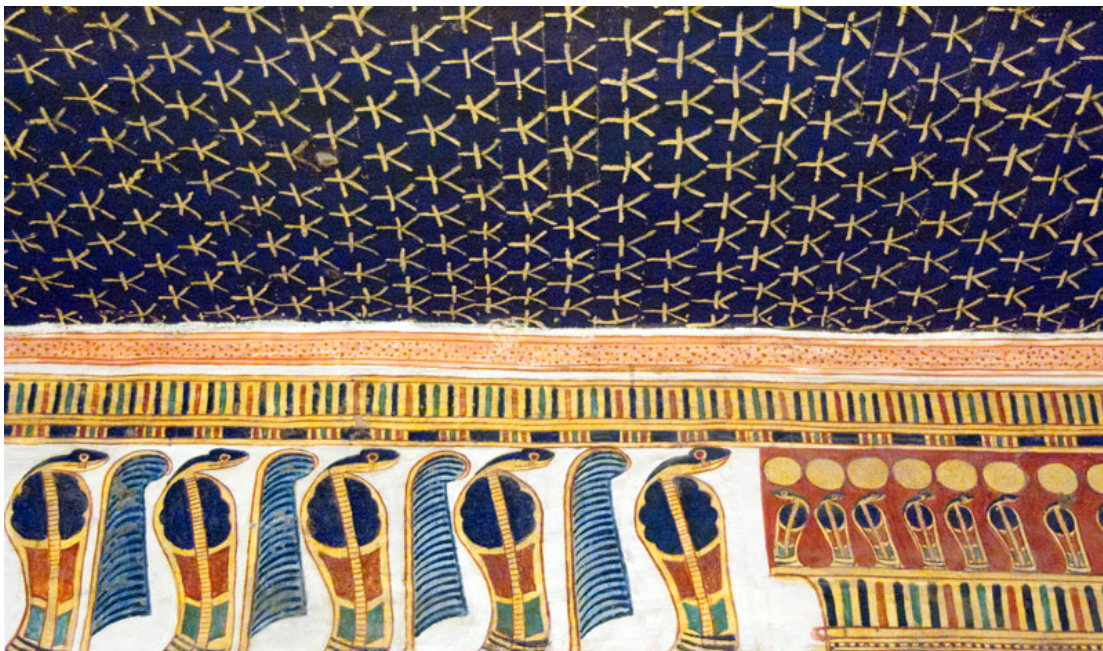


Figure 8 Hooded cobras alternating with ostrich feathers guard a frieze of cobras bearing sun disks protecting a shrine. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

Wadjet, whose name means “the green one,” reigned in the north where the Nile divided into many branches before flowing into the Mediterranean Sea. Worship of Wadjet was centered in the ancient Pharaonic city known to the Greeks as Buto, now the modern city of Tell el-Farein. The cobra goddess was the

iconic source for the uraeus, the striking cobra whose serpentine body protected the solar disk of the sun god. Curved protectively over the upper arc of the sun disk, her menacing head was counterbalanced by her long tail. The cobra goddess was one of several formidable feminine deities, each of whom could express the destructive heat and all-seeing essence of the solar Eye of Ra. Ornamental bands bearing a procession of rearing cobras decorated the walls of sacred sites throughout Egypt. The imposing imagery of cobras, crowned with gold sun disks, paid tribute to Wadjet's capacity to simultaneously inflict death and protect against death.

SERKET: THE SCORPION GODDESS



Figure 9 The scorpion deity, Serket, crowned with a scorpion whose stinger is not shown. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

The name of the scorpion goddess, Serket, means “she who causes the throat to breathe.” In the earthly realm, the sting of the scorpion caused respiratory failure. In the mythic realm, physical reality was reversed, and the scorpion became a protective symbol of the vital breath of life. Serket embodied an elegant paradox. The scorpion’s ability to cause respiratory failure was magically reversed. She became associated with the power to bestow the breath of life upon the sacred dead and to ensure their rebirth in the afterlife. In one mythic tale, an entourage of seven scorpions was chosen to protect Isis and her infant son.

Portrayals of Serket took the form of an elegant woman who bore the image of a scorpion, its curved tail raised to deliver a fatal sting, upon her head. Visual taboos governed the portrayal of the scorpion. Although the scorpion was portrayed in a menacing stance, the scorpion’s stinger was usually not shown. As an affirmation of Serket’s benevolent nature, sometimes an image of a harmless water scorpion was substituted for its poisonous counterpart. The image of the scorpion was so potent that it was not included in Serket’s written hieroglyphic name until the New Kingdom. Ancient Egyptians did not believe that images lay dormant in the realm of pictorial illusion. The omission of the scorpion’s stinger paid tribute to their profound belief in the power of the image to come alive. The very scale of the scorpion, minuscule in contrast to the lion, may have made its lethal nature seem more menacing. The presence of large, dangerous mammals and reptiles, such as the crocodile, the lion, or the hippo, would have been readily apparent, while the equally dangerous scorpion might easily have gone unnoticed. Granting the venomous insect the stature of a deity also elevated it to

the realm of myth, where it served as a protective presence. Serket was also believed to protect mothers and children from the venom of scorpions and snakes.

The ancient Egyptians envisioned sacred feminine as capable of wrathful destruction. They did not find Mut's capacity to put a subject to death by fire abhorrent or incompatible with her potential for nurturing. What we today refer to as the feminine was deeply associated with the capacity for violence and rage. Symbolic rites to propitiate the wrath of the goddesses and call forth their protective powers were designed to protect the land and its people from the vagaries of fate.

MOON AND EARTH AS EXPRESSIONS OF A MASCULINE

PRINCIPLE

The interplay between gods and goddesses reveals the wonderful contradictions and complexities in the interlocked symbol systems of feminine and masculine figures. Many feminine deities are memorable because they embody psychological qualities traditionally viewed as masculine in character. The modern reader is intrigued to learn that contemporary ideas about symbolic associations with fertility and the earth are not affirmed in the Egyptian pantheon. Min, one of the principal gods of fertility, was masculine, not feminine, as we might anticipate. Today, Western women treasure the moon as an expression of a cosmic feminine principle, acknowledging a connection between lunar cycles and menstrual cycles. In contrast, the Egyptians honored the masculine deity Thoth as a moon god and created a composite deity that took the

form of a baboon wearing a crescent moon, or a full moon, on his shaggy head. As an expression of the moon, Thoth also took the form of a man with the curved neck and feathered head of an ibis. Silver moonlight and primal animal energy joined one another in the figure of Thoth.

THOTH: LORD OF THE MOON, THE SILVER ATEN

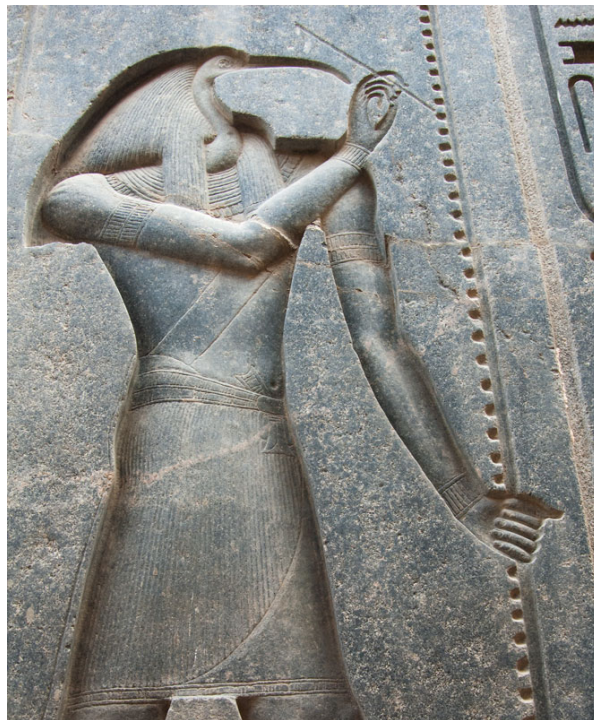


Figure 10 Thoth with the head of an ibis counts the years of the reign of the pharaoh. Luxor Temple.

Thoth was the Lord of the Moon, a lunar deity and a god of great wisdom, who was believed to have invented writing, mathematics, and the languages of mankind. Thoth's role as a lunar god is at first disconcerting, because contemporary feminist thought has associated the moon with the feminine—linking menstrual cycles to lunar cycles. The logical progression of numbers may

have led the Egyptians to create an association between Thoth, the inventor of mathematics, and the predictable natural cycles of the phases of the moon. Although the moon was not symbolized by a feminine deity, feminine deities were associated with aspects of the moon. Nekhbet, the vulture goddess, could symbolize the radiant luminosity of the moon. The goddess Nekhbet was linked to the moon through a vision of the moon as all-seeing orb of light in the night sky, rather than through an association with cycles of birth and fertility.

Thoth was shown in an anthropomorphic form with the body of a man and the head of an ibis. In dramatic contrast to this image, he was also visualized as a sacred baboon bearing a crescent moon on his shaggy head. Thoth's two iconographical forms, the ibis and baboon, pose striking contrasts. The ibis is an elegant, ascetic, feathered creature whose great wings lift it from the earth into the sky. The baboon is a primal earthbound creature that, by virtue of its physical nature, overtly displays its sexuality.

Thoth could assume multiple guises and play a profusion of roles in the pantheon. He was a god of many-layered meanings: a lunar deity in service of the sun god in the afterlife, a font of wisdom who brought language and mathematical principles into being, an icon of justice, and a divine healer. His many permutations were an expression of the richly varied psychological dimensions that the Egyptian religion called for in its gods.

THE EARTH EMBODIED AS MASCULINE IN NATURE

The Egyptian vision of the fecundity of the earth as a masculine principle stands in marked contrast to the mythic stories of other cultures in which the

earth was conceived of as feminine. Min, the ancient god of fertility, shared the intimate connection between the earth and a masculine principle with two other male gods. Osiris, the deified dead king, and the crocodile god Sobek were also associated with fertility, and over time both acquired the title Lord of Vegetation. Images of newly sprouted seeds springing from the mummified body of Osiris served as a testimonial to his regenerative nature.

OSIRIS: LORD OF THE UNDERWORLD



Figure 11 Osiris, Lord of the Underworld, grasps the crook and the flail, symbols of his kingship, in his hands. Tomb of Nefertari, Valley of the Queens.

Like the life-giving waters of the great Nile River, the god Osiris symbolized rebirth and the renewal of vegetation. After his death at the hands of

his brother and archrival, Seth, he was reborn as Lord of the Underworld. His flesh was sometimes rendered with black pigments to symbolize the fertile silt of the Nile. It might also be painted a rich deep green to evoke the hue of living vegetation springing from the earth. The death and resurrection of Osiris is a pivotal moment in a larger mythic story. His rebirth as Lord of the Underworld is made possible by the unwavering dedication of his consort, Isis, who finds his body and restores it fleetingly to life so that they might conceive an heir to the throne, Horus. There appears to have been a taboo regarding the visual depiction of the murder of Osiris. The memorable event involving his death is alluded to in written texts but never illustrated visually. The story could be implied using the abstract language of words but not permitted to come alive in imagery. This convention kept the death of Osiris fluid and preserved the possibility that his death was a transition preceding his rebirth rather than a fixed, irreversible moment in time.

MIN: LORD OF VEGETATION

Although the written accounts of graphic ceremonial displays of feminine sexuality are startling and memorable, perhaps the most dramatic visualization of the sacred housed within the human body occurs in images of the masculine deity Min, an ithyphallic fertility figure. The overt sexual display created by his exposed erect phallus and his merger with other gods is a graphic testimony to the fusion of the sacred with sexuality.



Figure 12 The phallus of Amun-Ra, portrayed as Min, penetrates an offering table resplendent with the bounty of the land. White Chapel, Karnak Temple.

Min represented the fertility of the land and masculine procreativity. His large erect penis may be understood both metaphorically and literally. The explicit sexual nature of Min celebrates the fecundity of the harvest and the virility of Osiris, whose death and rebirth could also be affirmed by ithyphallic imagery. In painted images, the face of Min is black. The cyclical inundation of the land by the Nile, tangible promise of the fecundity of the land, was affirmed by the figure of Min. Thus, the black-hued visage of painted images of Min symbolized the fertility of the earth's rich soil from which new growth would once again arise. To ensure abundant harvests, statues of Min were carried out into the fields to bless them and the fertility of the land. In depictions of Min, the pharaoh

appears before the god with offerings that celebrate the riches of the harvest. Stands of tall Egyptian lettuce, lettuce in pots, and offering tables laden with lettuce often appear in these scenes. Lettuce may have been prized as an aphrodisiac, since the milky substance it exuded resembled semen. The engorged phallus mirrored the moment when new shoots sprang from the earth, assuring an abundant, life-sustaining harvest.

SEXUALITY AS A SACRED SYMBOL OF FERTILITY



Figure 13 A remarkably complex portrayal of a serpentine figure of Nut. During the day, Nut holds the stars in her body. During the night, a series of repeated red disks represents the passage of the sun through her body until it is born at dawn from her pelvis. Tomb of Rameses V and Rameses VI, Valley of the Kings.

While masculine deities were intimate expressions of the fertility of the earth, many feminine deities were also symbols of fertility and generativity. The rooftop of the temple at Dendera was the site of the festival of the New Year, a major ritual celebrating Hathor. An extravagant ceremony, called the Uniting of the Disk, reunited Hathor, the daughter of the sun god, with her father. Another remarkable ritual celebrated Hathor when she made an annual pilgrimage from her temple at Dendera to the temple of Horus at Edfu, the site of their sacred marriage—a ritual that was celebrated by a great festival. The union of the god and goddess may be thought of in literal sexual terms and as a symbolic fusion of a masculine creative principle with a feminine creative principle. The vision of the elaborate pageantry and insight into the ecstatic nature of Hathor's union with the sun and with Horus are so intriguing that we cannot help but long to slip back in time to witness these celebrations and their culmination at dawn.

Although Nut resided in the sky and not in the earth, she was granted the singular power to birth the sun, a masculine being, from her womb each morning. In this rich pantheon, multiple fertility myths coexisted harmoniously and created a cosmology in which both masculine and feminine principles participated in ensuring fecundity and virility.

SPIRIT OF LIFE, THE ANKH

Figure 14 Clasp the signs of kingship in one hand and an offering in the other hand, Seti I receives the symbol of eternal life. Temple of Seti I, Abydos.



Figure 15 Vibrant new branches laden with grapes spring from the base of dying plants whose weeping limbs and drooping leaves form a descending cascade reminiscent of a stream of tears. The fantastic plant forms that emerge from their dying counterparts are a symbol of rebirth. Temple of Khnum, Esna.

As a counterpoint to the disconcerting complexity of the gods and goddesses, the symbolic promise of eternal life enshrined in the image of the *ankh* appeared as an iconic companion to virtually all of the deities. This sacred talismanic symbol of life was ritualistically carried in the hands of the gods. Memorable images show the *ankh* symbol offered to the king as a promise of the breath of life. Poised beneath his nostrils and hovering just in front of his mouth, the *ankh* offering in the hands of the gods nourished the king so that he might live forever. The symbol of rebirth was also embodied in abundant riches of the natural world. Fields of water lilies opening in response to the first rays of the sun, a seemingly miraculous response to the rising sun, led to the inclusion of the blue lotus in creation motifs.

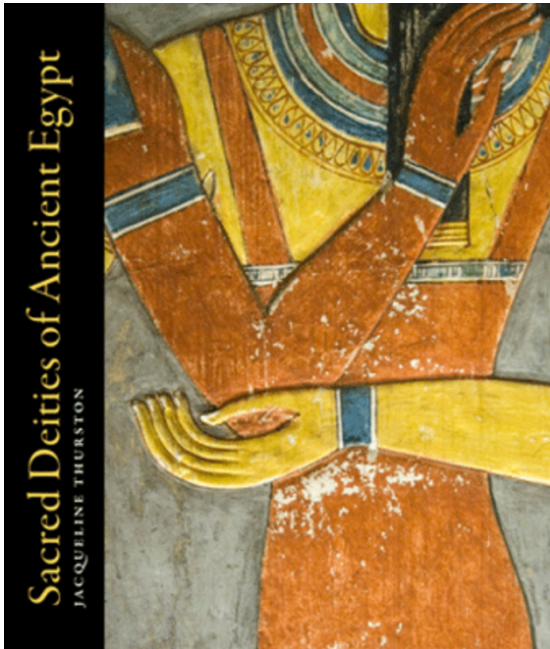
A MYTHIC WEB

The mid-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries have been marked by an intense interest in gender issues. A profound probing of the psychological and metaphysical existence of a “feminine principle” has accompanied the pursuit of gender equality in the social and political spheres. Ancient Egyptians were not consumed, as we are, with masculine and feminine issues of equality. They created a cosmology populated with goddesses whose stories were inseparable from the stories of the gods. Separating feminine from masculine deities arbitrarily simplifies a complicated web of overlapping spheres of influence rich in dichotomies and polarities. The mythic stories of these sacred masculine and feminine deities illuminate their unique roles in the pantheon, as well as the complex and often contradictory traditions that governed the nature of their

relationship to one another. The photographs and text in *Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt* are a tribute to the elusive combination of mystery and meaning that the gods and goddesses of this ancient culture continue to exert.



Figure 16 Soaring columns culminate in the elegant heads of Hathor, a goddess of love. Her features were later obliterated by Coptic Christians to erase the fusion of “Eros and the Sacred” that she embodied. Temple of Hathor, Dendera.



Sacred Deities of Ancient Egypt

Fine Arts Press

224 pages 185 color plates

Hardcover: \$38 Purchase from:

www.FineArtsPress.com



Jacqueline Thurston, M.A., is an artist, writer and Professor Emerita in the School of Art and Design at San Jose State University, where she taught for over forty years. She is twice the recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Photography Fellowship and was a Fulbright Scholar to Egypt. Thurston's photographs are in major national and international museum collections, including the San Francisco

Museum of Modern Art; the Library of Congress; the International Museum of Photography; the Carnegie Museum of Art; the Albright-Knox Museum; the Cantor Museum; the University of New Mexico Museum of Art; the Center for Photography at Arizona University; the Bibliothèque Nationale, France; and the Bibliothèque Alexandria, Egypt.