CHAPTER 1

Belief without a Book

Word Worlds: Ancient and Modern

Religion?

In this book, I seek to address those questions of life in ancient Egypt that most speakers of modern European languages might place under the word *religion*. More neutrally, the core question could be rephrased as: how did inhabitants of Egypt in ancient times express their places in the worlds of Nile and Sahara and their relation to one another, to other peoples, and to the forces and features of life? The terms *religion*, from Latin, and *philosophy*, from Greek, can be used for these topics, but both belong firmly within European histories and therefore carry associations that may fail or obscure attempts to understand non-European settings. The French writer Jacques Derrida has emphasized the specifically West European weight of the word and concept *religion* (Derrida 1998). If we replace *religion* with the word *belief*, we find the same risks of imposing alien ways of thinking on other peoples (Davies 2011). Today, the declaration "I believe in One God" defines the speaker as *not* believing that there are many gods, as holding one belief and not another. Such affirmations place belief in a system of choices, where personal *faith* may be built on the rock of one Holy Book, as with the Torah of Judaism, Christian Bible, and Quran of Islam. Before and outside the idea of the sacred book, *faith* and *belief* may not be matters of choice between opposing systems. Whereas religions of the book refer explicitly to other options of believing or disbelieving, a human group may instead express itself without reference to any contemporary or earlier other society or way of expression.

An analogy might be drawn with literacy. A part-literate society deploys writing in different ways to a fully literate society; in part literacy, then, our clearest analogy would be not reading-and-writing literacy, the norm in richer countries, but computer literacy, still variably extended through social lives. Today, religion occupies a

Exploring Religion in Ancient Egypt, First Edition. Stephen Quirke.

part in a society, even in a deeply religious society, because the religion expresses itself in relation to other religions and other beliefs such as agnosticism or atheism, denoting them, for example, as superstition, paganism, or apostasy. Most sources for ancient Egyptian society correspond instead to a single expression of being in the world: the expression applies across not a part, but the whole, of social life—much as reading–writing literacy may cover most of West European or East Asian society.

After 525 BC, long-term foreign rule brings different belief systems into the Nile Valley more emphatically than before. Achaemenid Iranian rule (525–404, 343–332 BC) introduced Zoroastrian ideas as well as some larger Jewish communities into Egypt; Macedonian Hellenistic rule (323–30 BC) then installed the Greek. When Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire after 30 BC, the pace of Hellenization increased, accompanied strongly from the third century AD by conversion to Christianity, the state religion from AD 313. With these changes, the final millennium of *ancient Egyptian religion* seems to involve a mixed environment structurally closer to the present world of differing belief systems (see papers in Clarysse et al., 1998).

By contrast, in the history of Egypt from the first writing (3100 BC) to the beginning of Achaemenid Iranian rule (525 BC), only once was a different choice expressed as the new and now sole option: years 5–17 in the reign of King Akhenaten. For those dozen years, old expressions of a divine Hidden One (in Egyptian *Amun*) were physically erased in word and image, and all images of the king were directed to a new formulation expressed in image as a sun sphere (in Egyptian *Aten*) extending the hieroglyph *ankh*, "life," to the nose of the king, and in words as "Ra Horus-of-the-Horizon, rejoicing in the horizon, in his name as Light which is in the *aten*" (Figure 1.1). The next generation restored the earlier system (Figure 1.2) and eventually dismantled the monuments of Akhenaten; later king lists omitted the names of those who had made offerings to the creator in the formula "Ra Horus/Ruler-of-the-Horizon, rejoicing in the horizon, in his name as Light which is in the *aten*."

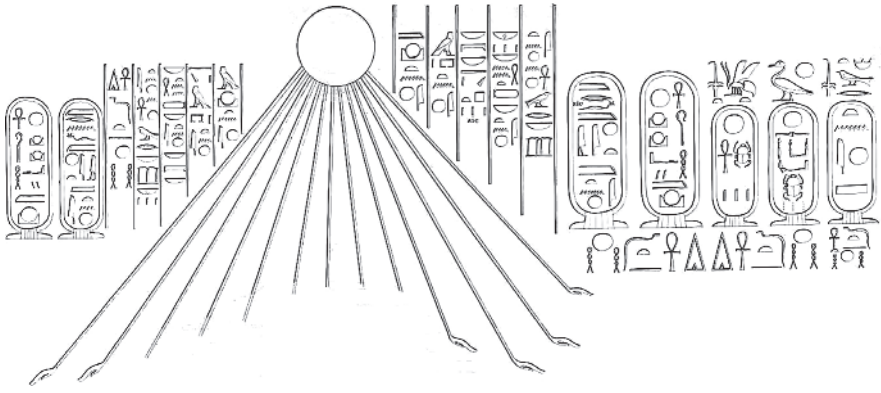


Figure 1.1 Visualizing the creator as sun disk with two kingly names, as formulated in the reign of King Akhenaten, North Tombs of high officials, Akhetaten, about 1350 BC. From Richard Lepsius (ed.), *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopien*, Berlin 1849–1859, vol.3, pl.99.

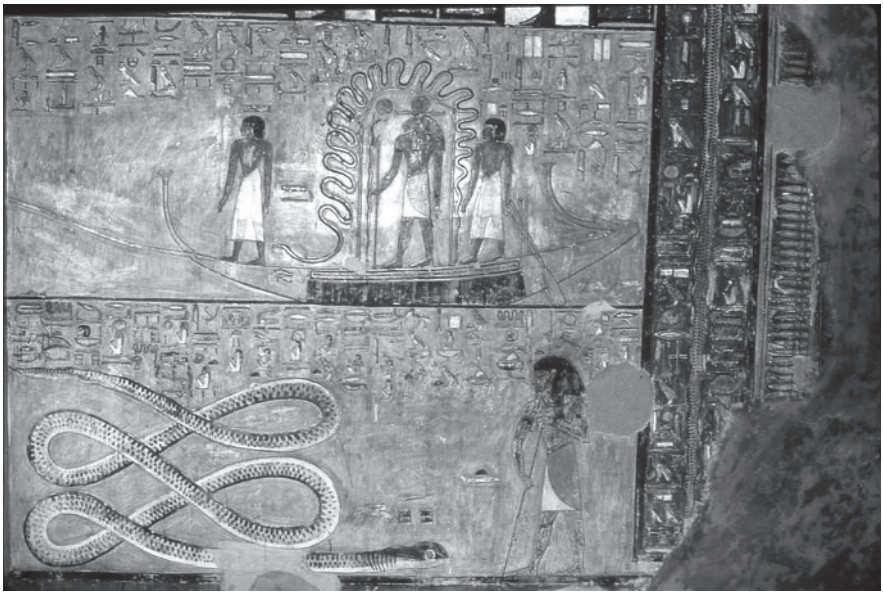


Figure 1.2 The creator expressed in animal–human form sailing over the defeated force of chaos, depicted as giant snake, tomb of King Sety I, Valley of the Kings, Waset, about 1290 BC. © Gianluca Miniaci.

Egyptologists have emphasized this reign as a breakthrough in the history of religions, as the first visible example of monotheism or of belief, and as the exception that illustrates what was *ancient Egyptian religion* for the rest of this 2500-year span (Assmann 2001). The Akhenaten rupture may be of particular fascination for twenty-first-century readers also because they can more easily understand it as a choice in belief, confirming the modern meaning of religion. For other periods, without that apparent choice, the words *belief*, *faith*, and *religion* may stand in the way of an attempt to understand the lives and self-expression of past people.

Modern study of ancient worlds

The words for the object of study are not the only obstacles: the words for, and practices of, the study itself raise equally serious barriers. Over the past 200 years, distinct university disciplines were developed for study of societies. Despite efforts at interdisciplinary research, a university might separate the department of archaeology to study past societies, anthropology for contemporary small-scale societies, sociology for contemporary large-scale societies, history for written documents, and art history for visual sources. Much as past and present producers in different materials adopt forms and technologies from one another, each discipline has developed productive methods and approaches that other disciplines can then take up for study of their own main area. To take two prominent examples,

ethnoarchaeologists developed anthropological applications to interpret archaeological evidence, and the mid-twentieth-century *Annales* historians adopted quantitative measures from sociology.

Both the separation of disciplines and their reconnection in new fields such as cultural studies can help generate fresh insights in understanding the world we inhabit. Egyptology occupies a curious position within this academic landscape, somewhere between archaeology and history. Taken literally, the combination of French or English *Egypt(e)* with Greek *logos*, "word," might be expected to designate a holistic *study of Egypt*. Yet, already from its early use in the nineteenth century, it was taken for granted that *Egyptology* never meant all *Egyptian studies*—that would have covered land, fauna, flora, and people of all ages, in short, the full range found in the monumental *Description of Egypt* published out of the French Expedition of 1798–1801 (Godlewska 1995). Instead, the word narrowly denotes study of the Egyptian past through the ancient Egyptian language as preserved in hieroglyphic inscriptions on monuments, together with any associated finds. The latest version of the language, Coptic, is still used in Christian liturgy in Egypt and is often added to Egyptological study area. Any reader enquiring after *ancient Egypt* needs to be aware that, in university departments, Egyptologists generally train to read Egyptian writing, not to undertake archaeological fieldwork, or study visual arts, or even comparative or historical linguistics. The discipline developed, not as an area study, but as the philological recovery and study of ancient writings—less Egyptology *study of Egypt*, than Egyptiology *study of ancient Egyptian*. If the reader does not know this, she or he may have false expectations over what we can presently know, and the very name of the discipline can become an obstacle to understanding the past. The same risks are run with the rest of our vocabulary, as with modern categories *religion*, *philosophy*, and indeed *economy*, *society*, and *nation*; each writer and reader must make their own decisions on which terms can be used and how, and few are likely to make great impact on how, collectively, any one term will continue being used in any group. For our choices, individual and collective, some awareness of the history of use can still be useful. In the case of *ancient Egyptian religion*, the recovery of available evidence may be distorted as much by the term Egyptology, as by the category *religion*.

Three hurdles

From the experience of preparing a workshop in Berlin on *animal cults* in ancient Egypt, the Egyptologist Martin Fitzenreiter identified several major failings in Egyptology, with substantial impact on the modern question of religion in ancient Egypt (Fitzenreiter 2004): *eurocentrism*, *overemphasis on written sources, and lack of theoretical reflection*.

Eurocentrism

Egyptians today speak Arabic, and people of different cultural backgrounds around the world express strong interest in the ancient past of Egypt. Yet, early twenty-first-century Egyptology remains overwhelmingly a European-language study in institutions of European form: research university and, to a lesser extent, museum.

Eurocentrism makes this condition seem natural, assuming lack of interest by non-European peoples in their own histories (Said 1978; Colla 2007). Internal factors contributed to the emergence of West European studies of the Egyptian past, ahead of Egyptian Arabic and Ottoman Turkish, in the mid-nineteenth century (Mitchell 1988). Current gaps between Arabic-language and European-language production follow most directly from European overseas intervention. Anglo-French control of Egyptian finances after the construction of the Suez Canal opened the way to British invasion of Egypt (1882), with military occupation down to 1952 (Al-Sayyid Marsot 1985; Cole 2000). London-dictated budgets, laws, and university fees and structures, along with Anglo-French agreements on museum directorship and antiquities inspectorate, ensured that Egyptology neither supported Egyptian professionals nor published in Arabic (Reid 2002).

Already from the 1820s, the first people to be called Egyptologists were as European as that word itself. It was they who defined as primary target of study the script area of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script. That script first became accessible in print publication in French through Jean-François Champollion (1824 Précis, following his announcement in the 1822 Letter to M. Dacier). Inside and outside the discipline, we forget that he was taught Egyptian language (Coptic) by an Egyptian Christian in Paris, Father Hanna Chiftigi (Louca 2006, 89–116), and that numerous Arabic studies on ancient Egypt were written before print by Egyptian and other Arab world geographer–historians such as Makrizi and Abd al-Latif of Baghdad, drawing in part on earlier Muslim scholars such as Dhu al-Nun (El Daly 2004). The endemic historical amnesia maintained by Egyptologists led the contemporary feminist Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi to accuse them of cultural genocide (El Saadawi 1997, 169).

Overemphasis on writing

Since the Champollion 1820s publications, Egyptology has remained predominantly a study of ancient writings in the Egyptian language. In the history of ancient Greek and Roman archaeology, written evidence also tended to receive most attention (Morris 1994). As there, philological focus on particular writings separated Egyptology from archaeological fieldwork practice and theory (Giddy 1999). With relatively few exceptions, Egyptologists worked on monumental temples and tombs and failed to apply the advances in prehistoric archaeology to settlement sites, resulting in chronic gaps and distortions throughout our knowledge of the ancient society (Moreno Garcia 2009).

When Eurocentric philological Egyptology adopted as its object of study the language area of ancient Egyptian, they might have defined ancient Egypt as one speech community, tangible in space and time through ancient manuscript and inscription. For emergent nations of nineteenth-century and above all early twentieth-century history, language area may have provided an implicit natural definition as the earliest nation-state. However, in Egyptological practice, script took precedence over language. Although Egyptian is still today written in a Greek-based alphabet, Coptic, and although Coptic is taught in many Egyptology departments, Egyptologists keep the ancient hieroglyphic script as the hallmark of their area of study. Their choice builds on intermittent precedents in Greek, Latin,

Renaissance, and later European writings, where hieroglyphs epitomized enigmatic, mystical forces of symbolism. Definition by hieroglyphic script delineates a time–space block *ancient Egypt* as the span 3100 BC–AD 400, in Nile Valley and Delta, from Aswan to the Mediterranean. The block has been expanded to cover prehistoric material culture in the lower Nile Valley, where it is considered ancestral to ancient Egypt, and to adjacent areas where ancient Egyptian script is found—eastern and western Egyptian deserts, Nubia to the south in the Nile Valley and adjacent deserts, and Sinai to the east, with more limited distribution of hieroglyphic inscriptions across southwest Asia and Mediterranean islands and coasts.

In general, a linguistic definition of ancient Egypt provides a clear criterion and so a clear object of study. The focus on writing has brought remarkable advances, particularly in the privileged domain of literary studies (Loprieno 1996). Yet the discipline has become too easily isolated and lost the advantages of comparative and interdisciplinary study, with surprisingly limited engagement even with the disciplines of linguistics and history. Written sources often interweave with figurative art and can only be understood in architectural context, and philological Egyptologists have often included study of visual arts. Nevertheless, despite remarkable studies within Egyptology, no developed contribution can be found within art history, perhaps the result of too little sustained contact with art historians.

The extent of disciplinary isolation can be exaggerated, and the problem is not confined to Egyptology (archaeology and ancient history Sauer 2004; and anthropology Gosden 1999). Although Egyptology and archaeology tend to practice mutual exclusion, some archaeological expeditions in Egypt have introduced current archaeological theory into Nile Valley fieldwork (Wendrich 2010). The inclusion of prehistoric Egypt into many Egyptological departments and conferences has allowed greater contact with archaeology and anthropology (Wengrow 2006). In some countries, there are also strong links between Egyptology and religious studies (West Germany after World War II, the Netherlands, where Egyptology sometimes belongs within theology departments).

If these links all tend to remain within Eurocentric philosophical frames, that itself is a general problem in interdisciplinarity. From its service in colonialism, anthropology developed the strongest self-critical debate, with insights of great potential for the future of Egyptology and archaeology (Asad 1973; Fabian 1983, 2007). Self-critique holds the power to return beyond the disciplines to their more humane motivation, a description of a society where we seek to understand rather than to control another, aware that understanding only avoids control when resistance is possible from the other side. In his 1940 *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, Walter Benjamin warned that even the dead are not safe from lethal impositions of the present (translation Benjamin 1968 [1940]). The moment of danger does not pass. If we aim to hear, as well as study, past people of Egypt during its centuries with written evidence in Egyptian scripts, the most secure path may be within comparative social sciences, incorporating the advances in understanding provided from philology. In this approach, the study of *religious* practice or ideas about life can start as an open source-grounded effort to recognize what members of that

society marked as distinctive and how—whether or not that corresponds to *religion* within our own understanding of societies.

Egyptologists prioritize written sources in their own writing about *ancient Egyptian religion*, perhaps because their questions and assumptions over *religion* require narrative evidence. Despite the anticlerical Republicanism of early nineteenth-century philologists including Champollion, the first question in religious studies of ancient Egypt came to be, did they believe in One God (monotheism) or many (polytheism)? In answering this anachronistic question, the researcher would extract from collections of written sources the evidence for or against monotheism. Fitzenreiter emphasizes how, whether consciously or not, the models for the approach were scripture and theological commentary as developed in and for monotheistic religions of the book. In prominent sources, ancient writings combine with images are strongly framed by monumental architecture, the principal home of inscriptions and images from ancient Egypt. However, art and architecture did not provide ready verbal answers to such questions as the creation of the world, or the relation to divinity. Instead, these answers were sought in narratives of deities, in manuals for rites, or in hymns and prayers. The work of Jan Assmann stands out for the way he questions what religion means in the context of ancient Egypt and for his close attention to the specific context of each piece of writing and to changing contexts over time. Relatively few studies have started from a wider context as in landscape archaeology, but this aspect is receiving more study now (Effland and Effland 2010; Jeffreys 2010). Similarly, few general accounts of ancient Egyptian religion start from settlement evidence, outside the monumental frame. Nor, where monuments form part of the living landscape, have we yet considered the impact in practice of a monument or inscription on what might be called, following the historian–sociologist Michel de Certeau, the *daily invention* of each social life (de Certeau 1980).

Reflection

Despite a professed love of word, the philological focus has been on detail rather than holistic picture. Philologists have left intact a received picture of ancient Egypt, by their unreflective use of generalized concepts and categories such as society, economy, and religion. For describing any other society, particularly outside the European frame, our vocabulary for cultural and material practices may be inappropriate. Even our most general categories turn out to be unexpectedly recent: Timothy Mitchell has charted the extraordinarily late (mid-twentieth-century) development of the contemporary meaning of *economy* in European-language use (Mitchell 2002). General terms for dimensions such as economic, political, religious, and social may be useful filters for sifting and analyzing evidence. Yet they continually merge and overlap in practice, and the way we use each term in the set must affect our understanding of each of the others and of the whole set. Our approach will differ according to whether we adopt society or culture or ethnic group as the label for the totality, however porous and impermanent we consider it. If we do not define our terms, or reconsider our categories, we are likely simply to reproduce the dominant ideas of our place and time. This problem,

raised by Marxist historians (de Ste Croix 1989), should be of concern to all interested in studying any society, because those dominant ideas may not apply automatically to our particular field of study.

An ancient Egyptian definition of religion? The composition the King as Priest of the Sun

For the dimension of *religion*, over the past fifty years, Jan Assmann has worked most prolifically to define our terms explicitly in a West German theological and literary frame. From eight sources connected with kingship and its writings, Assmann reconstructed a remarkable ancient Egyptian written composition, with no ancient title, called by him *The King as Priest of the Sun*. One key passage states why the creator sun-god Ra installed the *nswt*, "king," on earth (Assmann 2001, 3–6):

> the Sun-god installed the king on the earth of the living, for ever and eternity,
> to judge between people and to satisfy the gods,
> to create what is Right, to annihilate what is Evil,
> giving offerings to the gods, voice-offerings to the blessed dead.

Assmann interprets the first two lines as a broad definition of religion, as ethics and justice: the king must make possible *ma'at*, "what is right," the just and ethical behavior among humans, underpinned by law, *to judge between people*. The next two lines would then respond to a narrow definition of religion as ritual: the king must ensure that offerings were made to satisfy deities and the blessed dead. By using this source to illustrate his broad and narrow definitions of religion, Assmann anchors the Egyptological argument firmly in ancient writing.

The power of the research by Assmann comes not least from his unsurpassed knowledge of the written sources and sensitivity to their architectural and historical context. Yet here, the limitations of the definition from writing can also be seen, both in the restricted circle of sources for this ancient articulation and in the openness of writing to different analysis. In other ancient Egyptian written sources, particularly the literary genre of *Teachings*, the concept of *just and ethical behavior*, includes care for the deities, and the dead (see Chapter 5). Therefore, the division between ethics and cult, central to religious movements such as Reformation Christianity, may not apply in any clear-cut fashion to that ancient Egyptian definition of kingship. In another evident limitation, the *Teachings* describe ethical precepts as given by father to son: even within a conceptual frame of the nuclear family, they leave unanswered how a father might have advised a daughter and a mother a son or daughter and how sisters and brothers spoke. Feminism and gender studies introduce fresh questions and prospects for research.

Accordingly, in place of a theological focus on the most developed expressions of *religious thought*, Fitzenreiter prefers an anthropological focus in order to consider more broadly religious practice, as social activity, out of which *religion* might emerge as a collective longer-term presence, as religious institutions. This approach allows him to suspend certain Eurocentric assumptions, such as the centrality of a

written tradition, or the monotheism versus polytheism debate (as in Hornung 1996), extensively discussed in Egyptology, with reference both to the definition of the word *netjer* (used in Christian writing in its Coptic form *noute* as the translation for Greek *theos*, "God") and to the dozen years when King Akhenaten focussed worship and offerings exclusively on one deity. According to Fitzenreiter, a shift away from word focus to practice allows greater attention to recurrent and prominent phenomena marginalized in previous histories of Egyptian religion, such as ancestor cult and divination, oracles, and the phenomena studied under the heading of *animal cults*.

Using written sources in context

Eurocentrism, logocentrism, and disciplinary isolation are not overturned in one step, and the challenge from Fitzenreiter cannot be met until more studies of broader ranges of sources have been undertaken, from archaeological survey and fieldwork and from new material cultural studies. If the focus on written sources seems set to continue, research can at least be set on the most productive footing possible, following Assmann to seek greatest possible awareness of partiality and context. In one of the main disciplinary divisions, of archaeology from history, a misreading on either side has tended to reinforce mutually a lack of trust and interest between those studying pasts. History may tend to privilege written above material context, without discussion, while archaeology may eject all written sources as *elite*, without defining *elite* (a problem in sociology also, see Scott 2008, 27).

In place of this standoff, a material primacy could be acknowledged, within which writing provides one more indirect approach to peoples in the past, one with the power of human speech (Morris 2000). All writings may be biased to a particular view, but archaeology can help in identifying and analyzing bias, because it offers a context for each manuscript and inscription. Regularly, this context is not direct or primary, as most written material survives only in second, third, or fourth hand places of deposition or inscription. Still, even secondary or tertiary context, precisely observed, allows modern readers to assess the social location of words, much as an anthropologist in direct observation has an opportunity to assess the social location of their participant in conversation.

In the end, the danger with writing bias lies in our usage: we fail too often to observe precise social context, and we exclude other evidence, as if written and spoken words provide a direct guide to the society of the speaker. Implicitly, we assume a society free of contradictions and complexities, one which we could simply read in words. Yet, if we omit the written evidence, we might still impose modern categories and thinking on the past. Beyond any message or communication, the enormous potential of ancient writings is in their linguistic content: they give words to the world in a language that is not the language of the modern writer and reader. The words may prove to be from an *elite*, but even where the linguistic evidence can be made so simple, the vocabulary is not directly that of a twenty-first-century global *elite* that writes and reads studies of the past. As long as we treat

writings as just a subset in the range of evidence, their vocabulary and syntax can help to create a different, less Eurocentric introduction to their society.

Language and politics

In both written and spoken forms, language can act as a medium for expressing or effecting change or continuity in a society. According to one understanding of language, words do not merely label phenomena in a fixed reality, but rather they are one of the means by which humans model and construct social life. In social and historical context, there are collective forces around individual speakers. For appreciating and analyzing those forces in words, we might adopt from the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin the concepts of unified language/centralizing monoglossia as against different dialects/centrifugal heteroglossia (Hirschkop 1999). There is a danger that our interpretation might become one-dimensional, pitting heteroglossia as heroic resistance against monoglossia as the epic voice of a tyrant. Against this, the complementary linguistics of the Italian political writer Antonio Gramsci can keep open to historical enquiry the precise measure and impact of monoglossia and heteroglossia in each context (Ives 2004).

The two extremes of the European twentieth century underpin these two writers. In Russia, Bakhtin had to live through the lethal effects of a unified official vocabulary and speech during the Stalin years of terror before and after the World War II, including mock trials, mass-scale executions, and mass sentencing to labor camps. For Bakhtin, the singular sober voice (monoglossia) carried a literal death sentence, even if, unlike his communist cowriters and friends Valentin Voloshinov and Piotr Medvedev, he survived horrendous hardship to teach in university in the Soviet Union. Conversely, Gramsci saw disunity in speech as a fundamental reason for the fragmented resistance that allowed Mussolini to take power in 1920s Italy, leading to an alliance with 1930s Germany under Hitler. Broken by ten years in Fascist prison, Gramsci did not live to witness the Nazi concentration camps, but his prison notebooks, smuggled to Moscow after his death, preserve his incomplete explorations of the problems of language in human society. Gramsci studied linguistics at university, and his insights may encourage those in archaeology working on even the more *elite* written sources from part-literate societies.

According to the linguistic school in which Gramsci was trained, all speech contains evidence of contradictory workings, allowing us to see how some social expression acquires the force of prestige, almost forcing others to model their own expression on that of the center. Gramsci recognized how those dominating a society are best placed to express their place in the world and to apply its expression to maintaining that place. By contrast, only a fraction of resources for articulating and sharing beyond local horizons would be available to those whose lives are dominated by manual labor. To describe and analyze the more fragmented reflections among manual laborers, Gramsci subversively used the label *folklore* (Crehan 2002). These concepts of unifying versus fragmented, and of prestige in expression, may be productive for Egyptologists. They can help to account for changes over time in the ancient Egyptian written evidence, as well as giving a framework for

assessing the social position of any particular verbal expression from the past. The social understanding of language provides crucial justification for including written sources prominently within the archaeological study of the past.

Applying critical theory to Egyptology

With the conceptual tools of mono-/heteroglossia and prestige, from Bakhtin and Gramsci, the written evidence can remain an essential part of the range of evidence for the particular society/societies in ancient Egypt, provided that it is decentered from its status as core. The subject of study *ancient Egypt* might still be defined as the area of the language community *ancient Egyptian speakers*, if only as a provisional device to commence study. From the introduction of the hieroglyphic script around 3100 BC to the start of Achaemenid Iranian rule in 525 BC, ancient Egyptian is the main language attested in the area from First Cataract to Mediterranean. Accordingly, dominant script and language have formed together one of the criteria for defining my time–space focus as that time span and area. The geographical limit is reinforced by the fusion of the hieroglyphic script with *ancient Egyptian art*, a specific manner of figurative expression. The far larger scope of material culture without writing or depiction further broadly confirms the language area: the same archaeological map emerges from study of the major production industries, pottery and textiles.

In time, the boundary might be drawn later or earlier: during the early first millennium, material culture shifts with the introduction of iron production, and in the opposite direction, the script art fusion remains strong as late as the second–third centuries AD, when some of the best-preserved ancient Egyptian temples were built and some of the most informative ancient Egyptian temple manuscripts were copied. Against these earlier or later alternatives, the major justification for 525 BC as an end point is the change in script/language use. As a unitary and integral social field, *ancient Egyptian religion* ends at the point when the Achaemenid court and administration introduce into the Nile Valley a government using Aramaic script and language, and Zoroastrian beliefs. Even if the new script/language/beliefs exist alongside the ancient Egyptian and even if such coexistence finds New Kingdom antecedents, a new long-term history begins at this point. Coincidentally, or perhaps from the first formal observation, Johann Joachim Winckelmann had inferred the same break in his massively influential 1764 history of ancient art, where he proposed just two periods of ancient Egyptian visual production, pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid, to Roman.

As ancient writing is my own research focus within the evidence spectrum, doubtless, it remains too central throughout this volume. This introduction is intended to keep the reader fully aware of the bias. Alongside visual arts and architecture, the range of material culture and the less tangible yield of modern extensive archaeological fieldwork remain to be explored. Only a joint staff could muster expertise to cover all the possible domains, and a full history of religious practice would need new multidisciplinary research. Within these constraints, a philologist introduces the terrain, noting separate and joint limitations and potential of each

in its range of source types. In the distance, the impossible ideal of a total history remains a powerful frame of interpretation and motivation. In a society, those with greatest economic resources may be directing the material form and content of production, as well as the ideas that influence all parts of the society. Research can target these dominant structures and their impact and assess the scope for filling some of the gaps in our knowledge, for example, the religious practices of fragmented dominated groups, including the bulk of the population in ancient agriculture and animal husbandry, or groups less visible in written and visual source material, by their age, gender, type of work, or ethnicity.

Future

Writing after the January 25, 2011 revolution, new directions may emerge in the study of the past within Egypt, and Arabic may rejoin European languages as a leading research medium. However much we hope for this, much needs to be learned from the lack of change in exactly this area after the 1952 revolution, despite the pan-Arabism and pan-Africanism promoted by Gamal Abdel Nasser into the 1960s (Hassan 2007). The early twenty-first century is being seen as shifting the global centers to South and East Asia; the implications of this for Eurocentric academic studies, including anthropology and archaeology, remain uncertain. A shift in centers of prestige could create new scope for non-European studies, including here Arabic studies of Egyptian evidence, whether or not divided into the same time blocks as now. On the other hand, Eurocentrism may be replaced not by Egyptocentric or Afrocentric study, but by absence of study and thought, amounting to a gap in being human, a failing that is denounced in Islam by the Arabic word *jahaliya*, "ignorance." The better future lies in the hands not of established Egyptologists but of a new generation of thinkers particularly in Africa, including Egyptian Egyptologists and extending broadly across reflective and creative worlds.

Elementals and Sources

Landscape forces and resources

The unique setting of Egypt combines two extremes, expressed in the ancient Egyptian names Kemet, "Black Land," for the fertile Nile Valley and Delta and Deshret, "Red Land," for the Sahara desert with its mountains, flats, and sand seas of shifting dunes. The valley supports abundant plant and animal life; desert cliffs and mountains contain quarries of hard and soft stones, mines of precious metals, and routes to other lands. The Kemet–Deshret dividing line became sharp as today by 3000–2500 BC, when the climate changed to the hyperarid phase that still guarantees almost zero rainfall across northeast Africa between central Sudan and Nile Delta (Wengrow 2006). With the onset of hyperaridity, the river floodplain became far more closed as a social field. The extent of closure can be exaggerated, as in the

Egyptological myth of a uniquely isolated ancient Egypt. In practice, the isolation seems more relative, within dominant patterns of movement for most inhabitants; desert borderlines are always open for crossing, but desert oases never support the same level of population as the river valley, and agricultural settlements might have interacted only sporadically with desert nomads. Until the regulation of the river in the nineteenth–twentieth centuries (Tvedt 2003), the Black Land would be separated from the Red anew in a tense drama every summer, at the unpredictable rising of the river. Summer rains in Ethiopian highlands would swell the river, first detectable in Egypt at the First Cataract, around mid-July, when water pools on Elephantine may have gurgled in anticipation and the waters began to muddy. August and September marked full flood, as low-lying land in the river plain filled slowly or torrentially, until any higher ground stood as islands within a vast elongated lake penned in by desert at either side (Butzer 1974). By November, most floodwaters had spilled out into the Mediterranean, leaving behind a blanket of fertile black silt.

These annual convulsions would have radically different impact on human populations of the Black and Red Lands, depending on their way of life. A trading nomad, a shepherd, and a settled farmer each needed to react at varying speed, to secure collective or individual resources. Those living above the highest predicted flood level might have most time, if a flood surge hit that year, and nomads might have the option to move away entirely for the season of danger. Medieval and early modern Nile levels demonstrate how utterly impossible it would be in any one year to predict the height of the coming flood (Seidlmayer 2001). Too high a flood would create a destructive surge, sometimes inflicting high death tolls on people and animals; the deluge in 1821 was strong enough to sweep away temple ruins at Qau al-Kabir (Belzoni 1835). Too low a flood would leave insufficient water and silt for the farmer, and famine might follow; at different periods, ancient and medieval, Egyptian written sources indicate repeat low floods and devastating famines. Under this lethal annual tension, the flood attracted greater reverence than the river itself. From ancient Egyptian written sources, no name for the Nile is known—it is simply *iteru*, "the river" (the modern word Nile from Greek *Neilos* possibly derives from the plural *na iteru*, "the rivers," the Delta branches). In contrast, the Egyptian word Haʿpy, "Nile flood," is a divine principle; Haʿpy was depicted as a bearded man with heavy-hanging breasts, delivering the abundant food and drink that the flood made possible (Figure 1.3).

Once the Nile flood subsided, again, different opportunities would arise for trading, for herding, and for farming, where a season of sowing could follow and the crop be ready in time for a summer harvest. A detailed history of irrigation cannot be written, until we have an archaeology of the countryside, but in very general terms, increasing numbers of dykes and canals eventually allowed for a second crop and harvest (by 1250 BC?). The floodplain divides into segments, each comprising a basin, into which floodwater flows and overflows away from the main river course and then back around to the river. As a result, irrigation is a relatively local matter, against earlier theories that river control contributed to the creation of

Figure 1.3 The Nile flood (Egyptian *Ha'py*) in dual form as two men with pendant breasts, tying together Upper and Lower Egypt. Inscribed block from the palace of King Merenptah at Mennefer, about 1225 BC. From W. Petrie, *Memphis I*, London 1909.

a centralized state (Wittfogel thesis of *Hydraulic* Oriental Despotism, refuted by Butzer 1974). The ancient agricultural annual cycle disappeared in the nineteenth century AD, when river dams allowed far greater control of water, with year-round irrigation. For ancient times, the interactions between larger and smaller settlements, between town and country, and between different social groups within the settlements remain largely unknown.

Town and countryside

Archaeological sources for the countryside are sparse, but by 4000 BC, agriculture and animal husbandry are visible in the settlements and cemeteries along the desert edge in Upper Egypt. The annual river flood has removed most of the evidence for the lives of past people, who must have lived in greatest number within easiest reach of fresh water, so in the floodplain area. If they lived anywhere the flood reached in later centuries, their homes lie buried along with their fields within the floodplain under accumulated meters of annual silt deposits. If they lived on the higher ground *islands* above the flood limit, the same ground is most often still settled land, and so their homes remain today beneath modern cities and towns, awaiting future archaeological investigation with more sensitive techniques. The desert edge alongside the fields preserves ancient housing much more accessibly, and some of the best-known excavations of ancient towns have been along the Saharan fringe of the Nile valley (Middle Kingdom Lahun, New Kingdom Amarna) (Figure 1.4).

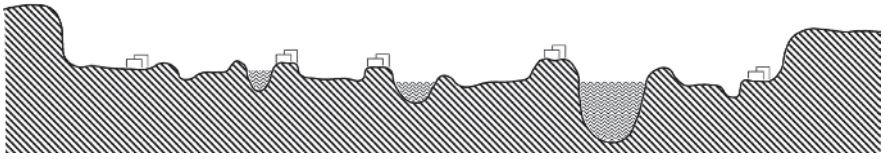


Figure 1.4 Section of the Nile floodplain in Middle Egypt, where the Bahr Yussef, a lateral Nile branch, runs roughly parallel with the main river. © Wolfram Grajetzki *after Kessler 1990.*

By 3200 BC, larger settlements formed at Nekhen and Nubet in southern Upper Egypt, later historic centers (Trigger 1983). Already, the Nile Valley would have offered at least two different experiences of town life: the high-ground *island* within the flood plain, where inhabitants became islanders during the autumn flood months, and the desert margin, where the island of life would be formed on one side by the permanent presence of the Sahara and on the other by the temporary intrusion of the Nile. When we now consider how the inhabitants of ancient Nile Valley and Delta experienced and expressed their lives, we are already facing a wider range of life experience than implied by our term *the ancient Egyptians*. In addition to differences in life chances according to age and gender and by 3200 BC also social class, there are the varying ecologies among the urban, rural, and desert based, with different seasons and spaces. Even within a unit we might assume to be relatively homogeneous, the farming village, historians of more recent rural Egypt warn us against our assumptions on the life of the *fallahin* (the Arabic word for *farmers*):

> Egypt's peasantry were not a homogeneous mass. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, village society comprised economic strata ranging from 'large' landholders of 50 feddan or more, to smallhold fallahin and the landless. (Cuno 1988, 133)

For assessing ancient expressions on our place as humans in our world, different answers might be expected for every one of the social groups implied by our words *village*, *town*, *countryside*, and *desert*.

Time–space blocks: ancient egypt as a chain of ecologies

From the geography of Egypt, the diversity of experience across the Black Land can be set at the level of ecology or lifestyle. Ecological unit then becomes the critical factor in an open definition of *religion* provided by Gramsci:

> the problem of religion understood not in the confessional sense but in a secular sense as unit of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct (though why call this unit of faith "religion" rather than "ideology" or just "politics"). (Gramsci, ed. Gerratana, Quaderni del Carcere II, 1975, 1378)

Table 1.1 Time–space blocks of ancient Egypt

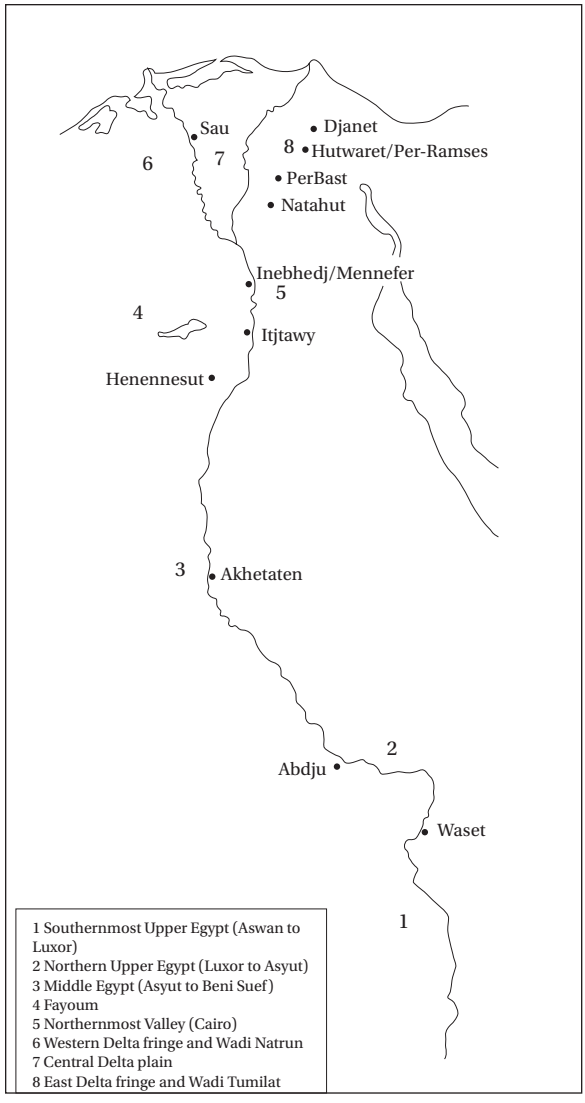
Region (with modern cities)	**Ecology**
Southernmost Upper Egypt (Aswan to Luxor)	Narrow floodplain, sandstone cliffs/desert
Northern Upper Egypt (Luxor to Asyut)	Broad floodplain, limestone cliffs/desert
Middle Egypt (Asyut to Beni Suef)	Broad floodplain, Nile branch, limestone cliffs/desert
Fayoum	Nile branch outflow basin forming *oasis* W of Nile
Northernmost Valley (Cairo)	Narrow floodplain, limestone cliffs/desert
Western Delta fringe and Wadi Natrun	Floodplain margin, desert flats, natron/salt deposits
Central Delta plain	Extensive floodplain, sandhills, northern marshes
East Delta fringe and Wadi Tumilat	Floodplain margin, desert flats, herding terrain

Again following Gramsci, we might define *regions* in terms of their relations with one another, in a chain of *adjacent different ecologies*. This approach suggests eight units within the Nile Valley and Delta from First Cataract to Mediterranean (Table 1.1 and Map 1.1).

Rather than this multiple identity, ancient written and visual sources emphasize the duality of Egypt on varying models: *Shema*ʿ, Upper Egypt, and *Ta-Mehu*, Lower Egypt; *idebwy*, the Two Riverbanks; or *Deshret*, Red Land, and *Kemet*, Black Land. A small number of second-millennium BC written sources confirm the different status of regions 1–2 as *tep-res*, "head of the south," divided at Waset (modern Luxor), or as *Khen-Nekhen*, "Hinterland (?) of Nekhen"—Nekhen being a town in the center of region 1 (Quirke 2009–2010). For the Red Land, the western desert has well-trodden trade roads and the major oases of Dakhla, Kharga, Bahriya, Farafra, and, farther west, Siwa, while the eastern desert has roads to quarries and across to the Red Sea, notably through the Wadi Hammamat parting from Qift/Koptos or Qena, and farther south from Nekheb (Friedman 1999). It is uncertain how far Egyptian language dominated those desert areas. From the second millennium BC, its term for Egyptians was *remetj-en-Kemet*, "people of the Black Land," perhaps not excluding the Red Land but rather as the home to the overwhelming majority of the settled population. Different readers may choose different numbers of regions to test evidence and assertions in this book—the eight ecological regions of the Black Land, or just the six forming the core Valley and Delta, or, instead, the 10 regions, adding the western oases and eastern trade routes. The important point is less an exact number of regions than the plural regional characters and lifestyles to consider beyond the general headings *Egypt* and Kemet.

The time of kemet: dynasties *and periods*

For time divisions within the third to first millennia BC, Egyptologists use a framework of 30 or 31 *dinastiai*, "groupings of rulers," from a history in Greek by the third-century BC Egyptian writer Manetho. His work is preserved mainly in early



Map 1.1 The regions of Egypt as defined by arable floodplain, with central cities of 3000–525 BC. © Wolfram Grajetzki.

medieval Greek and Armenian summaries, sometimes contradicting each other (Waddell 1940). Each dynasty is identified by city, perhaps because Manetho considered the city deity to protect those born there. That already indicates a difference between his conceptions of time and those of more recent historians. Some groupings can be confirmed from sources dating to the particular rulers, and some comprise members of one family, as in the European concept of dynasty. However, many groupings do not start or stop with a new family, and some may derive from ancient revisions of sources (Malek 1982) or literary devices in earlier

records of the past. In one version of Manetho, "the Seventh Dynasty is seventy kings of Memphis, who ruled seventy days" (Waddell 1940, 56–57); the numerical alliteration seems to be a literary means of expressing the end of an era. As a further complication, Egyptologists employ dynasty numbers selectively and variably; most consistently used are 1–6, 11–12, 18–20, 26, and 28–30. Broader, often more manageable divisions can be constructed on the criterion of political unity versus disunity, giving Old, Middle, and New *Kingdoms* and Late Period, separated by First, Second, and Third Intermediate Periods. The centers of power and production can also be used to construct a sequence more closely anchored in the land and the archaeological record. The summary in Table 1.2 includes concordance with dynasties; year dates before 664 BC are all rough estimates and the place-names cited in the form known from the particular period.

Table 1.2 The time of ancient Egypt

Period	**Years BC**	**Dynasties**	**Regional centers**
Early Dynastic	3000–2700	1–2	Abdju–Inebhedj
Old Kingdom			
Early	2700–2500	3 to early 4	Inebhedj only?
Late	2500–2200	Late 4–6	Abdju–Inebhedj/Mennefer
First Intermediate Period (division)			
	2200–2050	7/8–9/10 to early 11	Waset–Henennesut–Mennefer
Middle Kingdom			
Early	2050–1850	Late 11 to mid-12	Waset–Mennefer (from 1950 Itjtawy)
Late	1850–1700	Late 12 to mid-13	Waset–Abdju–Itjtawy–Hutwaret
Second Intermediate Period (division)			
	1700–1550	Late 13 to 15 to 17	Waset–Hutwaret
New Kingdom			
I	1550–1350	Early/mid-18	Waset–Mennefer–Perunefer
II	1350–1325	Late 18	Akhetaten–Mennefer?
III	1325–1200	End 18–late 19	Waset–Mennefer–Perunefer/ PerRamses
IV	1200–1050	End 19–20	Waset–Mennefer–Natahut
Libyan (united)	1050–850	21 to mid-22	Waset–Mennefer–PerBast–Djanet
Third Intermediate Period (Libyan, divided)			
	850–725	22 to 23 to 24	Waset–Mennefer–PerBast–Sau regions
Napata/Kushite	725–664	25/Assyrian invasions	*As TIP but under Napata, 671–664 Ashur*
Saite	664–525	26	Waset–Mennefer–Sau
Achaemenid	525–404	27	*As Saite but under Persepolis/Susa*
Late Dynastic	404–343	28 to 29 to 30	Waset–Mennefer–Sau–Tjebnetjer–Djedet
Achaemenid	343–332	31	*As Saite but under Persepolis/Susa*

Figure 1.5 The *sepat*, "provinces," Neit south and Neit north, depicted as kneeling Nile flood figures, bringing the abundance of water and food offerings, amounting to *power* (*was* scepter) and *life* (looped *ankh* hieroglyph). Red Chapel of the joint sovereigns Hatshepsut and Thutmes III, about 1475 BC, temple of Amun-Ra, Karnak.

Greater detail combined with national coverage can be obtained from a series of ancient written sources, which preserve a conceptual geography of Egypt in thirty-nine *sepat*, "districts" or "provinces," from Aswan to Delta shore (Figure 1.5 and Table 1.3: often Egyptologists cite 42 *sepat*, but this number is only found in some Ptolemaic Period sources; see Helck 1974). From at least the Eighteenth Dynasty, on formalized measuring rods offered at temples or placed in the burial equipment of senior officials, the *sepat* are tabulated and aligned with subdivisions of the cubit, a standard length measure at 52.5 cm (Schlott-Schwab 1981). This eternal chart sets all centers at the same level, without historical variables of changing population size, political significance, or cultural production. Nevertheless, when considering the sources on which we build any image of *ancient Egypt*, it is worth checking their chronological and geographical distribution against this ancient ideal tabulation, because the larger number of units allows more detailed assessment and highlights just how fragmentary the source base remains.

Preservation: geological and historical factors

The list of provinces illustrates the massive gaps across Middle and Lower Egypt in preservation of temple walls, one of the main sources for inscriptions and depictions in modern accounts of ancient Egyptian religion. If we add the temples

Table 1.3 The *sepat*, "religious provinces," of ancient Egypt

Upper Egypt					
Name of *sepat* with (modern usage) number		**Town**	**Name of deity**	**Extent of preservation of temples**	
				Pre-332	**Ptolemaic/ Roman**
1.	Land of the bow	Abu	Khnum		Blocks, foundations
			Satet	Reconstructed	
2.	Throne of horus	Edfu	Horus	Gateway	Intact main temple
3.	Nekhen	Nekhen	Horus	Foundations	
		Nekheb	Nekhbet, Sobek	Foundations	
4.	Waset	Waset	Amun	Substantial	
			Mut	Blocks, foundations	
			Khons	Intact	
			Ipet		Intact
5.	Twin gods	Gebtyu	Min, Isis	Foundations	
6.	Iq (crocodile form)	Iunet	Hathor		Intact
7.	Bat	Hutsekhem	Hathor? Bat?		Blocks
8.	Tawer	Abdju	Osiris	Foundations	
9.	Khentmin	Ipu	Min	Under town?	
10.	Wadjyt	Tjebu	Nemty		Nile destroyed 1821
11.	Seth (?)	Shas-hotep	Khnum	*Not located*	
12.	Iatfet	Per Nemty	Nemty	*Not located*	
13.	Nedjfet fore	Saut	Wepwawet, Anubis	*Not located*	
14.	Nedjfet rear	Qesy	Hathor	*Not located*	
15.	Wenet	Khemenu	Thoth	Gateway	Blocks, foundations
16.	Mahedj	Hebenu	Horus	*Not located*	
17.	Input	Saka	Bata, Anubis?	*Not located*	
18.	Nemty	Hutnesut	Nemtywy?		Blocks, foundations
19.	Wabwy (?)	Sepermeru	Igay?	*Not located*	
20.	Naret fore	Hutnennesut	Heryshef	Blocks, foundations	
21.	Naret rear	Shenakhen/ Semenuhor	Khnum/Horus	*Not located*	
22.	Medenyt Fayoum	Tepihu	Hathor	*Not located*	
		Shedyt	Sobek, Horus	Blocks (site overbuilt in the 1990s)	

Table 1.3 (*Cont'd*)

Lower Egypt					
Name of *sepat* with (modern usage) number		**Town**	**Name of deity**	**Extent of preservation of temples**	
				Pre-332	**Ptolemaic/ Roman**
1.	Inebuhedj	Mennefer	Ptah	*Not located, under village?*	
2.	(Name unknown)	Khem	Khentykhem	*Not preserved*	
3.	Imentet	Hutihyt	Sekhmet-Hathor	*Not preserved*	
4.	Neit south	Djeqa'per	Sobek	*Not located*	
5.	Neit north	Sau	Neit	*Not preserved*	
6.	Khasu	Perwadjyt	Wadjyt	Limited remains	
7.	Wa'mhu west	Besyt?		*Not located*	
8.	Wa'mhu east	Peratum	Atum	Limited remains	
9.	'Andjety	Djedu	Osiris	*Not preserved*	
10.	Kemwer	Hutherib	Khentkhety	Blocks	
11.	Hesbu	[Tell Moqdam]	?	*Not preserved*	
12.	Tjebnetjer	Tjebnetjer	Inheret-Shu	*Not preserved*	
13.	Heqa 'andju	Iunu	Ra/Atum	Enclosure, blocks, obelisk	
14.	Iabty	Benu?/Tjaru	Horus	*Not identified/ preserved*	
15.	Heb? Djehuty?	?	Thoth?	*Not identified*	
16.	Hatmehyt	Djedet	Banebdjedet	Granite shrine	
First attested as sepat *in reign of Hatshepsut, circa 1450* BC*:*					
17.	Behdet	Iunamun	Amun	Foundations	
First as one sepat *in reign of Sety I, circa 1300* BC*; as two under Napatan rule, Dynasty 25, circa 700* BC*:*					
18.	Imet fore	(Per-)Bast	Bast	Blocks, foundations	
19.	Imet north	Imet	Wadjyt	Blocks, foundations	
Attested as sepat *under Napatan rule, first in lists of* sepat *in Ptolemaic inscriptions:*					
20.	Sopdu	Persopdu	Sopdu	*Not preserved*	

constructed for the eternal cult of rulers during their reign, including the pyramid complexes of the Old and Middle Kingdom, a similar pattern emerges. The best-preserved structures are all sandstone monuments in southern Upper Egypt, with the exception of the limestone monuments of the pyramid complexes and associated cemeteries from Fayoum to Giza, and buried temples at Abdju.

In this architectural geography, natural history combines with human intervention. Geology gave Egyptian builders two main stones, coarser sandstone and finer limestone. From central Sudan to as far north as southern Upper Egypt, the Nile

Valley is bordered by sandstone desert and quarries; from Waset/Thebes to the Delta, so for most of the Egyptian Nile Valley, the surrounding desert cliffs and their quarries are limestone. As builders would use blocks from nearby quarries for the bulk of any stone construction, most stone temples from southern Upper Egypt are of sandstone, the northern outpost being the late Ptolemaic and early Roman Period temple of Hathor at Dendera, while stone temples from Waset/Thebes to the Mediterranean are otherwise of limestone. Recycling was common practice at many if not most periods, but the Romans introduced a new method of recycling limestone: it can be burned to obtain lime, essential for the plaster used to cement a new civic architecture. At the end of the fourth century AD, Christianity became the exclusive official religion of the Roman Empire: the temples, already without institutional funding since the third century AD, suddenly became sites for a vast industrial enterprise, lime burning. The effort required for dismantling monuments must have been as great as the effort in their original construction, so this is no local village-level iconoclasm, but a massive expression of national or state will. At a number of sites where limestone monuments once stood, limekilns have been unearthed, some dated by coins to the late fourth to fifth centuries AD (Petrie 1890).

In sum, the ancient architecture survives in Egypt in three specific circumstances:

- Structure too large to dismantle (the largest pyramids, though these too are in variable condition, and not one preserves its original outer casing intact)
- Structure covered by sand during major periods of ancient to modern dismantling (pyramid complexes and surrounding cemeteries of Old and New Kingdom at Saqqara, kingship temples at Abdju)
- Structure built of sandstone (temples of New Kingdom at Waset/Thebes and of Ptolemaic and Roman Period in Lower Nubia, Kom Ombo, Edfu, Esna, Waset/Thebes, and Dendera)

The resulting absence of evidence for entire regions, across Middle as well as Lower Egypt, is compounded by the loss of the very core to ancient Egyptian religious writing, the temples at Iunu/Heliopolis and Mennefer/Memphis. On the basis of scattered but repeated writings, these were arguably the two greatest sacred enclosures in the country. For Iunu, some information has been gained from sporadic excavations on the vast site; the base of a structure might be identified as remains of an extraordinary artificial mound that elevated the main precincts for the worship of Ra‘, the sun (Contardi 2009). For Mennefer, the site remains a mystery; visitors are often shown a low temple site as the temple of Ptah, but its inscriptions and depictions indicate that it was for the cult of King Ramses II, and it seems to face west toward the original Ptah temple, perhaps buried below a renowned medieval village Mit Rahina (Malek 1992). The Ptah temple has a name unique in form, Hut-ka-Ptah, *domain of the ka-spirit of Ptah*, perhaps the origin of the Greek Aigyptos, in turn the source of West European names for the country including English Egypt. Here, it seems, there once flourished a sacred precinct so central to Egypt that it became its very name; yet we do not know why the shrine should, unlike any other sacred place in Egypt, be identified as for the ka-spirit of a deity, rather than directly for the deity itself, and we have no information on the form or plan of this Hut-ka of Ptah (Figure 1.6).

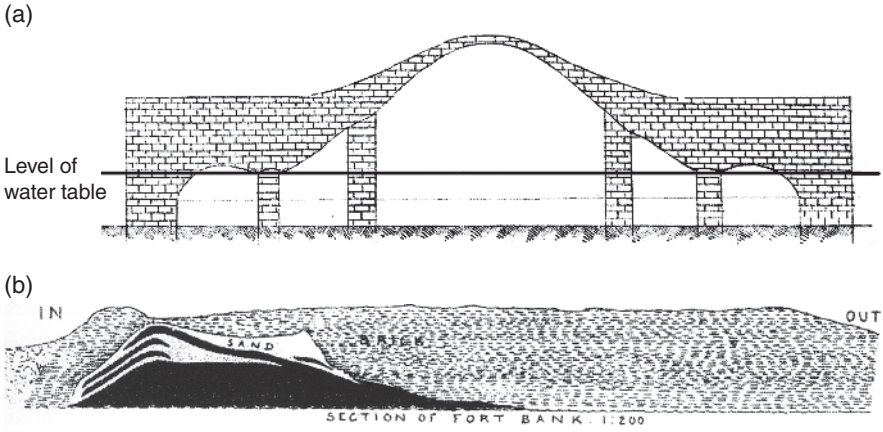


Figure 1.6 The High Mound of Iunu, as recorded by two early twentieth-century AD archaeologists: (a) E. Schiaparelli, redrawn after F. Contardi, *Il Naos di Sethi I da Eliopoli. Un monument per il culto del dio Sole*, Milan 2009, p.14 (b) W. Petrie, *Heliopolis, Kafr Ammar, Shurafa*, London 1912.

Even with those gaps, the climate, geology, and history of Egypt have preserved a quantity and scale of ancient monument with few parallels across the world. Moreover, there are substantial compensations for the gaps in the architectural record, in the wide range of manuscript sources and the smaller sculpture and inscription available. Egyptologists have privileged the written evidence, supported by visual arts, across these three source types—the architectural monument, sculpture in three and two dimensions, and the manuscript. From written and visual evidence around material monumental remains, we can identify sacred architecture as primarily a space for making offerings, with three types of recipient: *netjeru*, "deities"; *nesyu*, "kings"; and *akhu*, "the effective/good dead." Yet is this ancient Egyptian religion, or rather, what part of ancient life in the Nile Valley are we choosing to see here? And what are we omitting?

Beyond written sources: mudbrick architecture

Gramsci commented that "every religion … is in reality a plurality of distinct and often contradictory religions" (Gramsci 1975, 1397). We might start, then, not from a modern sense of religion, with buildings and books, but set out instead on a comparative quest for how other groups of humans have historically marked out parts of living as intensive or separate, so in our terms as *sacred*. If we turn from geography, with its spatial analyses, to the historical periods, for analysis by time phase, we might draft a rather different list of architectural sources by date. Here, we might consider not the most visible, but the least tangible, where archaeological techniques and questions have both retrieved immeasurably more sheer data and generated most substantial new understanding of how different groups of humans live or have lived. From the evidence of the smallest recorded units, through every

scale of structure and settlement, we could restore attention to less central and less well-preserved temples such as the mudbrick structure uncovered near Badari at the border of Upper and Middle Egypt (Chapter 3). Here, the greatest advance in Nile Valley archaeology has been outside the Egyptological mainstream, from research into predynastic Egypt and into Sudanese and Egyptian Nubia to the south (Edwards). The record within the time–space of *ancient Egypt* remains less intensively developed, despite the important analyses of recent decades (Lehner 2010). A list of excavated sites from which plans of small-scale house units have been published could start from a draft such as Table 1.4.

Greater geographical–historical range can be gained from cemeteries, always taking into account the different chances of preservation and, often overlooked, the variations in funeral and burial customs. Burial practice varied far more than the view, common even among Egyptologists, that ancient Egyptians *took everything with them*; even richer groups only stocked tomb chambers with full-house inventories at only two points in Egyptian history, the period around unification, circa 3000 BC, and the period of greatest military presence in western Asia, circa 1450–1300 BC. Changing funeral and burial customs dramatically affect the selected edition of life made available to us as burial equipment (Chapter 7). At some

Table 1.4 Some key published settlement sites in Egyptian archaeology

Date BC	**Upper Egypt S**	**Upper Egypt N**	**Middle Egypt**	**Oases**	**Fayoum**	**Lower Egypt**
4000–3500		Badari			Fayoum	Merimda, Maadi
3500–3000	Adaima Nekhen	Badari (Naqada)				
3000–2400	Nekhen Abu					Giza Abusir Dahshur
2400–2000	Abu	Abdju		Balat		Mendes Kom al-Hisn
2000–1600	Abu	Wahsut Waset		Balat	Lahun Qasr al-Sagha	Abu Ghalib Hutwaret Lisht Mennefer
1600–1450	Abu	Deir al-Ballas				Hutwaret Mennefer
1450–1100	Abu	Malkata Waset Deir al-Madina	Akhetaten		Madinat al-Ghurab	Qantir Mennefer
1100–650	Abu	Madinat Habu	Khemenu			Mennefer
650–525	Abu	Madinat Habu				(Naukratis)

periods, a small selection of goods was placed with richer men and women, as if to sustain them on one final journey, rather than to stock them for eternity. More often, the burials of younger women and of infants would receive greater protection in the form of amulets and jewelry, as if for puberty or childbirth rites they did not live long enough to see (Dubiel 2008). In addition to the variations over time, substantial differences may be expected to nuance, adjust, or overturn the generally top-down normative picture within each period. With improved knowledge of the history of burial rites, a researcher can explore cemetery excavation records as another always-mediated *mirror of life*.

Across different sites, we might look less for monumental or written assertions of activity and first for more direct material traces of actions. Votive deposits provide the primary sources for offerings, and studies of these have begun to bridge the gap with a more broadly defined archaeology of religion (Pinch 1993). Similarly, food and drink, or their containers, and floral remains would provide the essential evidence that the banquets depicted in chapels did take place. Archaeological floral and faunal deposits place in context the visual and written sources for rites of daily and festival offerings and celebrations. Some activities may only be accessible to us in written and visual form, such as the words and gestures of hymns among other ancient performance and practice. Finally, ethnoarchaeology looks to descriptions of living societies to shed light on archaeological material. Direct comparison with other societies can risk doubling the heap of assumptions we make about other societies, but an indirect or heuristic comparative anthropology can provide fresh material from one society for rethinking assumptions about another. The decolonization of archaeology in general and of Egyptology in particular should advance the same aim, of multiplying the number of approaches to ancient material, beyond current Euro-American monopoly on production of knowledge.

Ancient practice and modern prejudice in distinguishing elite *and* popular religion

One of the most deeply rooted modern assumptions pervading accounts of *ancient Egyptian religion* is the opposition between official cult and personalized practice. Such distinctions have impact as a mechanism for legitimating *our own* practice and demoting those *of others*. In the history of religions with a founder figure (so including Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism), later reforming movements express the need to return to the first generation when the founder was alive, in order to recapture the purity of a pristine initial form of practice. These movements identify any intervening developments as deviation but may in turn be denounced as deviating from the original intentions or mission of the founder. In western European history, the sixteenth-century AD Reformation and then Counter-Reformation provide dramatic examples of this violent religious history. A Muslim parallel to Luther or Calvin might be the eighteenth-century AD Wahhabi movement in Arabian Islam.

The vocabulary used against religious opponents within a founded religion includes charges on the one side of superstition, magic, or witchcraft and on the

other of an empty official cult or ritual devoid of sincerity. Perhaps the motivation for attack and counterattack lies in a political and/or psychological need to know who is sincere in their religious practice and who is not. Sincerity and purity tend to be located by modern society outside institutions and their buildings, which may be seen as corrupted and commercialized. In any particular historical context, there may be strong evidence for the accusations against the institutions and strong need for reform. However, there may also be human limits to the ability to identify sincerity and falsehood in others and therefore powerful human drives to institutionalize the sincerity/falsehood division by new forms of religious practice in explicit rejection of others.

In considering practices in other societies, in particular in other times, modern writers struggle to set aside ingrained thinking. The European oppositional approach seems set already by the time of eighteenth-century Enlightenment perceptions of initiated *elite*, manipulative priesthood, and gullible populace. On this model, Egyptologists have asked whether a popular religion existed outside the monumental temples, implicitly equating temple with church or mosque or synagogue. Later twentieth-century Egyptologists recognized these assumptions and so considered instead whether the official cult might not be a small part of a religious world that included *practical religion* with practices that included ancestor worship, divination, and oracles. However, the practice/cult division remains caught on modern binaries of *elite*/popular, initiated/ignorant, and ritual/prayer, none of which may apply. The central topics of ancestor worship, divination, and oracles require fuller attention to wider ranges of sources, but all appear also within the written and visual sources for kingship and the highest officials of the royal court. Most of the material consigned by Egyptologists to categories of, formerly, magic or superstition or, currently, practical religion could be placed without social bias under the heading of *healing*. In the verbal, visual, and material struggle for good health, there is no evidence that a king or courtier turned to any forms or forces different to those invoked among any other visible sector of society. Deities protecting birth, maternity, infancy, and health appear in the same form on amulets found at all levels of society in the archaeological record (Chapter 6).

In a related, equally persistent fallacy, a *religion of the poor* might be identified whenever and wherever inexpensive, often organic materials, sometimes in forms requiring little time or skill, are used for offerings, instead of visibly skillfully produced or inscribed materials—as if the rich make the things they use. The offering of a lump of mud tells us nothing automatically about the social status of the offerer; a particular offering practice might, instead, require that the person in need, or in gratitude, must fashion an offering with their own hands, in which case the rich adult and poor infant may produce similar material results. More sensitive recording of archaeological contexts can be followed by a more open comparison of contexts, with a conscious self-critique to identify as much as possible of the bias each of us brings to drawing a picture of the past: implicitly, the picture will have to become a collaborative and open-ended venture.

Suspending assumptions

In order to avoid the automatic attribution of any form or material to a particular point on a presumed social scale, we might recast these assumptions as questions for new research. Age and gender categories are among the more destabilizing frameworks both in a society and in analysis of that society for instituting continual processes of change within the body of the person/group and for disrupting the tendency of description to produce a static image of the society described. Useful models could be sought here from fields where the assumptions may be least active, for example, in predynastic studies (Hendrickx, Huyge and Wendrich 2010) and Sudan archaeology (Edwards 2005).

Within the written record in the ancient Egyptian language, clues to at least the explicit construction of identity at birth and puberty could be sought in the wide social spectrum documented in personal names. Whereas wealthier levels of society are the more visible in the material record in general, the legal and administrative records from the third to first millennia include manual labor in at least as great numbers, even if still not in proportion to the overall population (written records attest to a high proportion of the highest officials, against only a fraction of the overall population, but the total number of names recorded will be in the low thousands for both less and more wealthy). In very general terms, in each period, no great difference can be found between social classes in the patterns of naming children. For example, in lists of stone haulers from Lahun, circa 1800 BC, many men are named after the king whose burial and cult complex were at Lahun, Senusret II, in the same manner found for high officials of the same period (e.g., Collier and Quirke 2006, 49–53, UC32170, 32184). The connection between hometown and its cult and personal name can be confirmed from other sources. Other worker name lists show a similar preponderance of individuals named after the local god, so placed under their protection. From the same period as the Lahun lists, a legal document from Waset names runaways in southern Upper Egypt town by town, and here again, repeatedly, men from a particular place are named after the main deity of that place (Hayes 1955). Generalizing across the three millennia, the local anchoring of the personal name in local temple cult is an extremely significant finding for the study of the relation between different sectors of society in relation to deities, for it indicates a single social field, with emphasis on king and on local deity—without the class division introduced in studies of *popular* or *practical religion*. This finding justifies closer examination of the written and visual record for the *netjer niuty*, "city deity," of the main towns of ancient Egypt (Assmann 2001, 17–27).

Netjeru deities*: names and forms*

Across the regional map of Egypt, as preserved from scattered inscriptions, certain names appear twice or more as principal deities of a town or *sepat*, whereas others appear only once. From the depictions of different periods, we also obtain an impression of the visual forms most often associated with the names (Table 1.5). Table 1.5 is not intended to present a pantheon of all Egyptian deities. Instead, it

Table 1.5 *Netjeru*, "deities," in the *sepat*, "religious provinces"

1. Attested as principal deity in more than one *sepat*	
Name of deity	Main form
Amun	Man wearing double falcon plume, ram with down-curling horns
Anubis	Jackal/jackal-headed man
Atum	Man wearing double crown
Hathor	Woman with cow horns and sun disk, cow/cow-headed woman
Horus	Falcon/falcon-headed man with double crown
Isis	Woman wearing throne hieroglyph (*Isis*)
Khnum	Ram with horizontal horns/ram-headed man
Min	Man with erect phallus, wrapped body, raised arm holding a *flail*
Neit	Woman wearing red crown or crossed lines on oval
Nemty	Falcon on boat/falcon-headed man, *Seth animal*
Osiris	Man, wrapped body, wearing ostrich plumes headdress
Sobek	Crocodile/crocodile-headed man
Thoth	Ibis/ibis-headed man, baboon
Wadjyt	Rearing cobra, lion-headed woman, woman with cobra and sun disk
2. Attested as principal deity in one *sepat*	
Bast	Lion-headed woman, cat
Bat	Human face with cow horns, on plinth
Heryshef	Ram with horizontal horns/ram-headed man
Igay	*Rare*
Khentkhety	Falcon/falcon-headed man, crocodile
Khentykhem	Falcon/falcon-headed man
Mont	Falcon/falcon-headed man with double falcon plume
Nekhbet	Vulture/woman with vulture headdress
Ptah	Man with wrapped body wearing skullcap
Satet	Woman wearing tall horns and plume headdress
Seth	*Seth animal*/*Seth animal*-headed man
Soped	Man with long beard, double plume headdress
Wepwawet	Jackal, jackal-headed man

summarizes the main forms for just the main deities listed for the 39 *sepat* that constitute the conceptual geography of ancient Egypt. Other deities are equally frequently attested, as partner to main deities or main deity in other towns: Sekhmet appears in cult centers of Ptah, depicted most often as a lion-headed woman; Mut has her own temple, south of the Amun precinct at Karnak, and is depicted as a woman or lion-headed woman wearing a vulture headdress and double crown. Even within its limits, though, the list demonstrates two fundamental features of the ancient Egyptian depiction of deities: a name could be given more than one form, and the same form may be used for more than one name. Correlation of even these names with just their principal forms should, then, be enough to convey the dominant principles behind ancient Egyptian depictions of deities—teaching us how to read the visual form and how not to.

Evolutionary readings of ancient images

Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators interpreted ancient depictions as idolatry, animal worship, and fetishism. Wallis Budge summarized the work of a generation of Egyptological colleagues at the British Museum under the title *From Fetish to God in Ancient Egypt* (Budge 1934). By the time this was published in the 1930s, it must have seemed dated to researchers in other fields; the philosopher Ernst Cassirer was then already redefining his more synchronic approach to *symbolic forms* (see Chapter 4). Earlier histories of Egyptian religion confidently ascribe object forms to a prehistory in which people supposedly worshipped objects or emblems as fetishes; according to this view, people became more sophisticated and worshipped animals instead, until, by early historic times, they were worshipping human forms. This evolutionary history allowed early Egyptologists to read the various forms of deities as an amalgam of different phases in a history of depiction, where human, human–animal, animal, and object stood in a hierarchy on the road toward a single anthropomorphic deity or, in more agnostic or atheistic readings, no deity at all. Yet no such evolution appears in the attested sequence of depictions over time. Following the fourth-millennium BC patterns of depiction, a radical reformulation of depiction accompanies the introduction of writing shortly before 3000 BC. In the new system of depiction, alongside the introduction of hieroglyphic script, the forms of images follow the same principles of composition as the hieroglyphs; or, to put it the other way round, hieroglyphs are small images constructed on the same principles and proportions as large figures. In this new world of expression and communication, art and script are fused (Fischer 1986). From the sparse Early Dynastic sources, all four options for depicting a deity seem already available—human, animal headed, animal, and object (Figure 1.7). Far from being an evolutionary sequence, the four image types are a series of contemporary options for depicting what is not known, according to the information to be conveyed and the requirements of the composition.

Compositional considerations may account for the recurrent choice between depicting a named deity as an animal and as an animal-headed human. None of the names listed earlier was depicted only as an animal or only as an animal-headed human, nor are there any examples where more ancient sources show only animal form, more recent only animal headed. Presumably, then, the body/head choices offer complementary means of visualizing the being or force evoked in the same name throughout the history of this religion art. At a simple level, the compositional principle may have been rhythm and harmony, whereby artists resisted radically different forms within a line of deities, particularly where the king stands or walks or sits among them. Also on the simplest, pragmatic level, a human body might most fluently serve a composition where a named deity would need to sit on a throne or to hold a scepter. Other artistic principles could have generated different results, with, for example, birds holding tall scepters or quadrupeds seated on chairs; such choices are found within ancient Egyptian sources, on manuscript visual descriptions of a world turned upside down (as in the so-called Satirical Papyrus of Turin, from Waset, about 1250 BC, Omlin 1973). The preference for animal-headed human bodies must

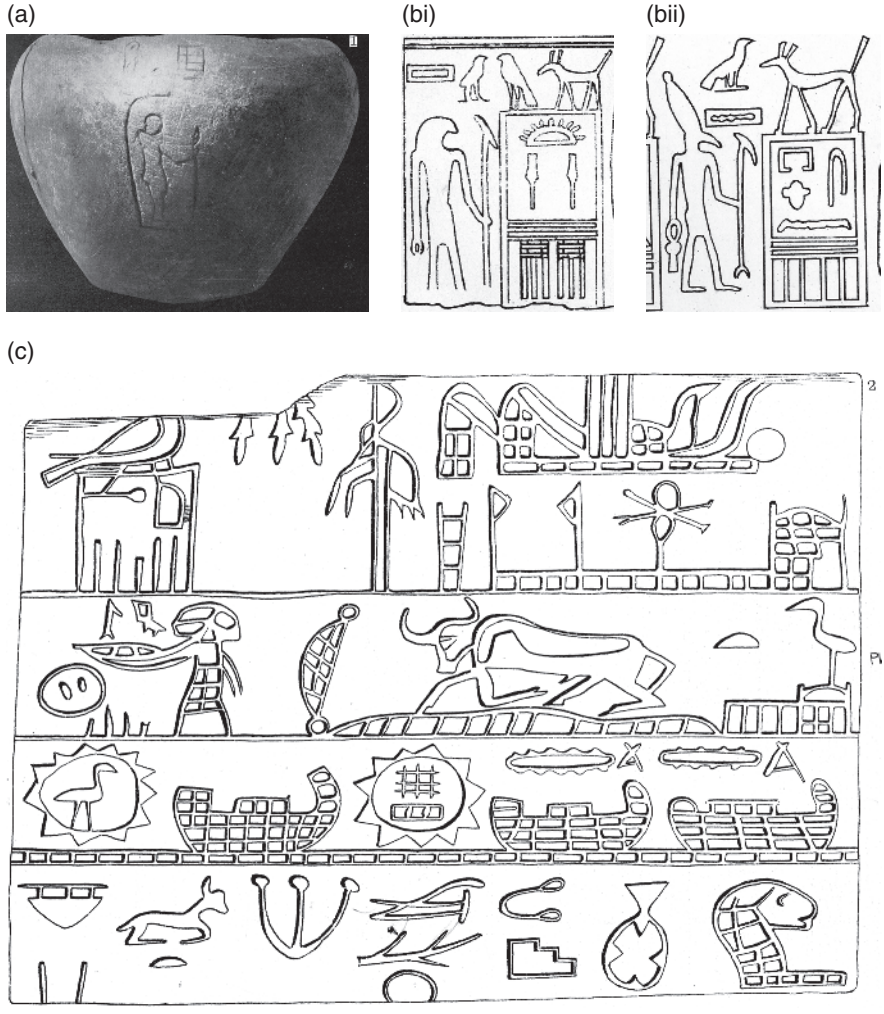


Figure 1.7 Synchronized differences: different depictions of deities as human, animal headed, animal, and object within the period 3100–2900 BC: (a) stone bowl inscribed with image of a deity as a standing wrapped man in a shrine, identified by the aforementioned three single-consonant hieroglyphs as the god Ptah (Semenuhor cemeteries, tomb 231, about 3100 BC); (b) two forms of one deity on a single seal impression, (i) falcon and falcon headed, generally identified as Horus, and (ii) mixed (?) animal and human with the same head, generally identified as Seth (images reconstructed from mud seal impressions found in tombs of late Second Dynasty kings, Abdju); (c) deities depicted through living animals and distinct objects, (i) wild (?) bull in an oval enclosure (second register) and (ii) emblem with crossed arrows in a rectilinear enclosure (first register) (wood label with name of King Aha, found in tombs of First Dynasty kings, Abdju). From (a) W. Petrie, *Tarkhan I*, London 1913 and (b) and (c) W. Petrie, *The Royal Tombs of the Earliest Dynasties II*, London 1901.

Figure 1.8 Limestone stela with two images, cow and adult woman, both with cow horns and sun disk, jointly identified in the hieroglyphic inscription between the two hearing ears of the deity as *Hathor, lady of the sycamore*. From Mennefer, about 1300 BC. W. Petrie, *Memphis I*, British School of Archaeology in Egypt, London, pl.28.

be recognized as specific decisions within a particular conception of, and desire for, harmony—not as some *natural* or inevitable device in a system of visual rules. Comparison of the frequent depiction of the same named deities in whole animal form generally confirms that this is not an attempt to show a different kind of divine nature, but a choice guided by the aim of the composition. A named deity may be depicted as a falcon or hippopotamus particularly in scenes where difference is emphasized either among the deities (as in Late Period and later *catalogues* of deities) or between deity and worshipper (as on New Kingdom and later votive stelae). Entirely animal forms are also more common where a deity is depicted alone, as in votive sculpture. However, in some instances, a visual composition includes other principles of duality or symmetry, where different shapes are juxtaposed without any such spatial logic (Figure 1.8). In such cases, the plural, perhaps even antisingular, image can be recognized as one strategy to communicate a multifaceted divine presence, using visual means where a hymn might deploy combinations or sequences of names or phrases to delineate the elusive deity. On present evidence, a supposed historical evolution from animal to human form seems implausible, as it cannot be seen at work in the choices of creative producers at any period.

Ancient and modern multiplication of forms of netjeru

Late Period and later bronze figures of deities can create an impression of endless variety, particularly where the individual images accumulate in temple deposits or, even more, are assembled from different sites in modern

collections. In ancient times, the number of different forms within a single group may not have been so overwhelming, and each form seems to have had tight localized meanings, lost wherever exact provenance has not been recorded. The bronze figurines were common in early modern collections of Egyptian antiquities in Europe, reinforcing biblical and Roman prejudice against ancient Egypt as home to animal worship. However, the form of the figurine need not be an ancient statement identifying a named deity. Frequently, for example, cat figurines are inscribed with invocations asking the goddess Bast to give life to a named person, and the museum label will then identify the cat as Bast. As the inscriptions do not explicitly identify form and name, it would be more accurate to interpret them as evidence that the cat could convey some feature essential to Bast. In other words, no ancient Egyptian deity *is* an animal or a bird, but instead, the animal or bird world could be used to convey some quality considered divine.

The closest to *animal cult*, in the sense of worship of a living animal, would be the extraordinary status of the sacred bull of Ra at Iunu, Ptah at Mennefer, and Mont at Armant (see Chapter 2, Section The separateness of the human). Only one sacred bull was alive at any one time, the next being sought immediately on the death of the old; the exceptional role of these three bulls is reflected in the unique special name for each—Menwer for the bull of Ra, Hep/Apis for Ptah, and Bekhu for Mont. The sacred bull lived in a special enclosure, as the *herald* of the god, and at death was buried in a stone sarcophagus like a king or high official. The unexplained and remarkable care for the three bulls did not stop, but nor did it seem to foster, the new practice after 700 BC of embalming literally millions of birds and animals for burial in substantial, apparently state-funded catacombs (Figure 2.2). The later embalming of species perhaps reflects instead the meeting of two phenomena: spread in embalming techniques in the first millennium BC to a wider social and geographical range and the use of certain species to denote qualities of *netjeru*. Rarely, a living species might denote a quality only found with one name, separate from all other named divine forces, as in the case of the ibis, only deployed for images of Thoth. Far more often, a particular animal or bird might depict a quality found with several separate names, as the falcon might be a form appropriate for depicting Ra, Horus, and Mont or the lioness for Sekhmet or Wadjyt.

Visual forms as poetic metaphors

As with any language, the elements in this visual repertoire gain their meaning from the ranges and contexts of their use, often most clearly seen at the point where they are not used. The lion-headed woman form may not automatically evoke any *eye of Ra* (force sent out in fury from the creator), because not all images named *eye of Ra* take that form. On the other hand, fury more broadly may be a core idea in the lion metaphor. In reading visual and verbal together, modern readers may find it easiest to consider each visual(–verbal) composition not as *art*, but as *poetry*—as Ogden Goelet recommends us to read ancient Egyptian afterlife literature in the same frame of mind we might bring to surrealist poetry (Goelet 1994). By taking

each visual form as a metaphor to decode, we may come closer to the aims of the composer. The surviving range of written sources, literary and others, can help to interpret the visual forms, minimizing the associations we might think *natural* for each form. For example, the cow form can more plausibly be identified with maternal love, because the hieroglyphic writing of the verb *ames*, "to care for," ends with the hieroglyph of a cow turning to lick the calf at her udder. Before this interpretation begins, archaeological fieldwork and survey provide the context of material culture and ecology for each period, essential to any understanding of the words and images.

Rare compositions combine different forms in an emphatic demonstration of multiple faces of a deity. In one striking example, four forms of a goddess, perhaps Hathor, are combined in a single statue from perhaps the mid-first millennium BC as cow, rearing cobra, lion-headed woman, and woman with sun disk and cow horns (Louvre E26023). The four forms create an exceptional impression specifically on the number four, separating this quadruple divine force from others. Such combinations are not frequent at any period, especially on the scale of that substantial stone image, perhaps intended to act as cult image at a place where offerings would be made to the goddess. In some instances, Hathor is depicted as the maternal cow, providing milk for the king, eternally effective as a statue in offering chapels; the best-preserved example is from the temple of Hatshepsut as king, at Waset, and others include one in a cemetery chapel at Iunyt (Downes 1974; Figure 1.9). Late Period images of the creator adopt a different strategy for a similar effect, adding to one body elements from several different species, sometimes with two or more heads, as a visual statement on the plurality of creative force within the one creator.

Fission and fusion in names of netjeru

The combinations indicate different possibilities for constructing imagery and developing name: whereas the quadruple Hathor statue opens a single name to subsets, fissioning into several *deities*, the creator images merge the multiple into a single, opening the possibilities of fusions. Both directions are frequently found across the two and a half thousand years and can be understood perhaps most easily as changes in focus. In a sense, each deity name identifies for us what an ancient group wished to mark out, or experienced as marked out, as divine; even at any one period, the areas demarcated as separate, by the strategy of naming, might overlap. Over time, the singular impact of an area or force might come to be considered multiple, and each of the multiple parts might be considered sufficiently separate to receive offerings, sometimes under different forms. Horus might be visualized as Horus the Child and then as Horus the Child of a particular place; in specific context, an image of a child deity might be intended to refer to only that localized presence of a divine force. Some contexts might require a succession of different expressions of one divine force; in the embalming rituals, four forms of Anubis may correspond to the four cardinal points or to four duties required in the physical operation. Claude

Figure 1.9 The statue of Hathor and King Amenhotep II, as found in the rock-cut chapel beside the temples of Hatshepsut and Thutmes III, overlain by the later monastery Deir al-Bahari, on the West Bank at Waset. The statue is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo; the photograph shows the statue in its original location, just after it was uncovered.
E. Naville, *Deir el Bahri I*, Egypt Exploration Fund, London, 1895, pl.27.

Traunecker has noted the impact of architecture on the historical process of fissioning: a particular architectural feature, such as a symmetrically sited chapel or a slot in a sequence of symmetrically arranged wall registers, might create a space for new use of a divine quality as a full name (Traunecker 1997). By this *wall theology*, from Isis the good sister, the quality of good sister (in Late Egyptian *Tasenetnefret*) might separate off to provide the harmonious rhythm of wall scenes or temple chapels, where *Tasenetnefret* might stand as an independent deity receiving offerings of her own, a separately acknowledged divine quality to which people of that time and place decided to give space and in some instances offerings.

Equally, over time, two areas might be fused to a composite form (*syncretism*), as in the dominant New Kingdom combination Amun-Ra, where the expression of universal power as *imen*, "hidden" (Amun), combines with the expression of universal power as the source of light and heat *ra*ꜥ, "sun" (Ra), leaving three possible areas to celebrate: Amun, Ra, and Amun-Ra. Rather than puzzling over the decision to leave all three as options, we might understand each occurrence as a choice by one ancient inscriber or composer to focus on one or other or both of the sources of universal power.

Ancient descriptions of netjeru*: hymns and narratives*

For understanding the shared features as well as the separate identities of *netjeru*, Egyptologists have explored three types of ancient writing: hymns, descriptive treatises, and narratives. In hymns, the reciter defines the *netjer(et)* in sets of actions or qualities, where hymns to each named deity can be compared, to catalogue features as shared or unique to one name. Hymns to Osiris and to the sun-god as creator have received most attention. Sometimes, the regular frame of praise is expanded to include more explicit references to relations between *netjeru* (see Chapter 4, stela of Amenmes). Treatises with descriptions of religious geography bring together deities in statements of action more often. Among the treatises, the passage of the sun through the sky of the world and underworld, core motif in tombs of New Kingdom rulers, and the dramatic depiction of the world on ceiling compositions in the tomb of Sety I and in the unique tomb-shrine for the god Osiris behind the temple for the king at Abdju/Abydos may be counted. More difficult to place architecturally, a loose block of basalt inscribed in the period of Napatan rule over Egypt preserves accounts of the creation and of the establishment of kingship at Mennefer/Memphis (Shabako Stone). In general, modern researchers draw on narrative sources, where *netjeru* are more clearly described in action together. Yet longer tales of deities are so rare that Egyptologists have had to rely in part on ancient Greek and Latin versions, above all the account by Plutarch of the Osiris myth. In 1975, Jan Assmann proposed a radical rethink, arguing that there were no myths, in the sense of narratives about deities, before the New Kingdom. As will be discussed in Chapter 4, in the subsequent debate, Susanne Bickel proposed to widen the definition of *myth* beyond narration, while Joachim Quack has observed how *telling the story* of a deity is a form of worship and that the primary goal of the ancient Egyptian sources is to praise—hence the dominance of hymns and the relatively rare use of long tales.

Some Egyptologists have doubted that a *religion* could have *gods* without narratives to teach each new generation who and what the gods are. Yet if, following Gramsci, *religion* concerns the connection between human behavior and the conception of human life, then the ethics can be grounded in individual episodes, with no privileged or prior role for a chronological sequence of episodes. Even from an anachronistic position, the religions of the book do not need to be, and in fact are not, taught from a narrative of birth to death of the founder, but instead, begin from the main precepts for behavior put forward by the founder. These ethical precepts can certainly be placed in the life narrative of the religion founder, as in annual festivals evoking Genesis and Exodus, birth and death of Christ, and the life-transforming journey of Muhammed. Yet, precisely the annual rhythm of the religions shows that each episode carries meaning for the faithful through the link to the teachings of the founder, rather than as a didactic story where you start each time at birth and finish at death. Any overall story can be built up over time, but need not be fully present at any one moment. Moreover, in teaching practice, ethical advice and the guiding content of sermons and sayings take precedence over biographical story lines. For each festival, ritual, and other social action, the immediate relations

of the act in their divine dimension would be a stronger starting point than a longer story—which might never have been needed until, in Plutarch, a Greek tradition of narrative met the ancient Egyptian motifs. Whether or not we call the relations between *netjeru*, "myth," when they are expressed outside narrative form, is a decision for the reader: given general current English usage, though, *myth* may be another word that confuses when applied to a society that did not primarily narrate its divine world. These sources are explored in Chapter 4.

Instituting sacred space: the question of priesthood

The monumental scale of well-preserved temple architecture and sculpture encouraged later generations to a caricature of ancient Egypt as a land ruled by priests and superstition. However, the temples in question were not designed for crowds to hear sermons or readings, but more as containers for safely defusing the encounter between offerer and deity. As offering place, the sacred architecture required stocking with goods and staffing with personnel to keep the place clean and the offerings flowing each day and at festivals. In this sense, there is no clergy, only a *temple staff* (Egyptian *wenut*). Against the image of a separate priestly caste, written sources indicate that most staff served by monthly rota. Anyone with a temple position might serve a maximum of three months in a year but quite possibly less. The rest of the time, presumably, they worked outside the temple, explaining why men with temple positions often also bear administrative titles—a reminder too that ancient work was not a 9–5, 365-day commitment. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, there was no one word for *priest*: the English word is used for a series of ancient Egyptian titles, which presumably reflected different responsibilities but are difficult to separate in practice—*god's servant*, *god's father*, and *pure*. Perhaps, the ancient word closest to our term *priest* is the *nesut*, "king," who must be initiated into sacred knowledge of the workings of life. However, little detail is yet known on the Egyptian term for such *initiation* (*bes*), leaving much to be discovered, as considered in that chapter. With neither priest nor king, the ancient Egyptian landscape is marked by institutions we also struggle to understand in our efforts to classify: the House of Life, the House of Gold, and the holders of the title Bearer of the Festival Roll at the palace and temple. The entire framework seems at odds with all the assumptions we bring to the study of the sacred in the past.

Checklist on assumptions

At the close of these discussions, a reader might compile a short vocabulary for key words where regular English usage renders the term difficult or impossible to apply to the study of ancient Egypt and use this to check the content of the chapters to come. The following words might figure on the list, but each reader will have their own warning vocabulary:

Cosmos (and cosmology)
Dynasty

King (and kingship)
Magic
Myth
Priest
Temple
Tomb

The words will continue to circulate, and most recur in most chapters. The more a reader remains conscious of problems in using them to describe other worlds, the better the chances of a dialogue with those worlds.