



BOJANA MOJSOV

OSIRIS

*Death and Afterlife
of a God*

Osiris

To my parents



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of a God*

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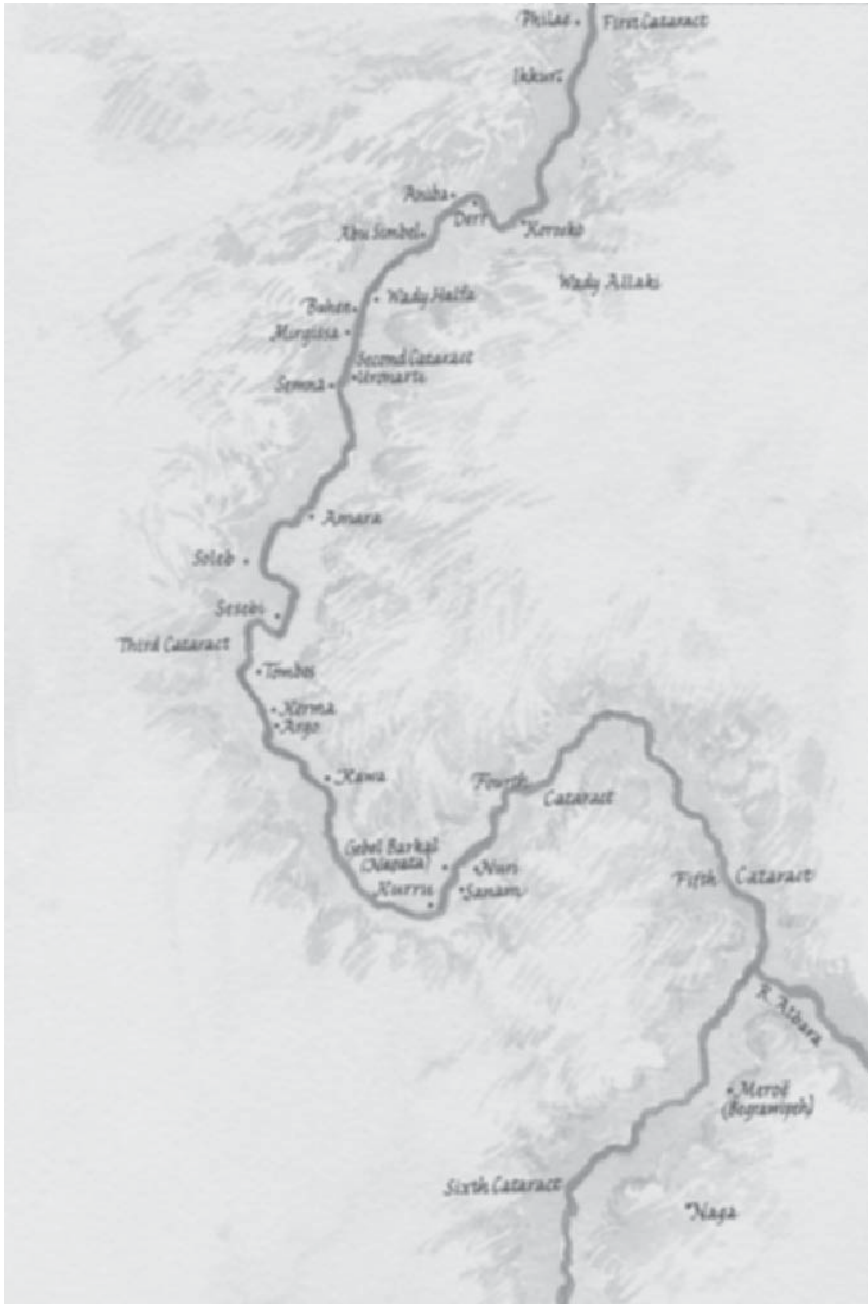
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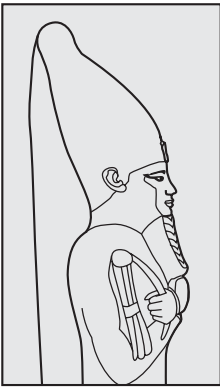


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INTRODUCTION

Osiris resplendent, with his tall, plumed crown, sits enthroned at the gate of the netherworld, surrounded by the court of immortals. Jackal-headed Anubis leads the deceased to him; hawk-headed Horus stands in attendance of the final verdict on the soul's justification; ibis-headed Thoth grasps the pen and tablet to record the judgment. Osiris, pointing his scepter of eternal kingship, the shepherd's crook, addresses the approaching soul: "Enter, because you know."

The myth of Osiris, judge of souls in the netherworld and shepherd to immortality, was at the heart of ancient Egypt. Yet, because of the peculiar nature of their religion, the Egyptians never took the trouble to write down or explain his myth. It was up to the Greek philosopher Plutarch, who visited Egypt in the first century AD, to record the first continuous account of the myth of Osiris. In Egypt, the death and resurrection of Osiris were matters not to be divulged – a Great Mystery.

Egyptian history lasted for more than three thousand years, longer than our own. It was recorded in full scope by the Egyptian priest Manetho in the third century BC at the request of Ptolemy I, then Greek ruler of Egypt. Manetho divided the kings and queens of Egypt into 30 ruling families or dynasties, a simple and durable convention still followed by modern scholars. Manetho's original book, called *Aegyptiaca*, no longer exists (it may have perished when the library of Alexandria was burned), but we have partial copies of it by Josephus, Africanus, Eusebius, and Syncellus.

The terms Old, Middle, and New Kingdom are modern designations used for convenience. So are the three Intermediate Periods. They break down the long history of Egypt into three stable categories interrupted by three divisions. After the end of the Third Intermediate Period, we have 600 years more Egyptian history, usually described as the Late Period. During the Late Period, Egypt was ruled by the last three native Egyptian dynasties before being conquered by foreigners – Persians, Greeks, and Romans.

The present book begins with the myth of Osiris. The story mainly relies on Plutarch's account, though I have abbreviated it, leaving out the Greek names of the gods and the complex genealogies that relate the Greek gods to the Egyptian. In the following chapters, I trace the story of Osiris to prehistoric Egypt and its appearance among the sacred kings of the Nile valley. For millennia, the flood of the Nile had been of central importance to life in the valley – this area has some of the lowest rainfall in the world and people had always depended on the river to water their fields. The sacrifice of the king, Son of the Nile and Father of the Tribe, was linked with the life of the river. Osiris was buried when the flood abated, before the season of plowing. At harvest time at the spring equinox, his loving wife Isis breathed life into his body and he engendered a son. Theirs was the Savior Child of light, born at the winter solstice with the sun. From time immemorial the myth of Osiris had explained the unfathomable cycles of nature.

As Egyptian history unfolded, the cult of Osiris grew in popularity. In the Middle Kingdom (2055–1650 BC) he assumed the role of the Great Judge of souls in the netherworld who dispensed bread and beer to the justified souls. Every year in the town of Abydos his death and resurrection after three days were celebrated in a publicly enacted passion play called the Mysteries of Osiris. In the New Kingdom (1550–1069 BC), after the rise of the sun cult and the monotheistic religion introduced by King Akhenaton, the cult of Osiris clasped hands with the cult of Ra and Osiris became an enlightened savior-god, shepherd to immortality for ordinary people. By the Late Period (1069–332 BC), his cult had spread around the Mediterranean. As the redemptive figure of the Egyptian god loomed large over the ancient world, Isis came to be worshipped as the Primordial Virgin and their child as the Savior of the World.

When the Greeks established themselves as rulers in Alexandria (332–30 BC), they continued to worship Osiris as Sarapis and passed his cult on to the Romans. Through the Greeks the Hellenized version of the Osiris myth endured in Western culture. The rise of science and philosophy in Alexandria paved the way for the rich spiritual legacy of late antiquity. It was in Roman Alexandria (30 BC – AD 394) that the new Christian religion blossomed, inspired by the writings of the Egyptian, Greek, and Jewish philosophers. By then Osiris had become, in the words of Carl Jung, “the Patriarch of all the Near Eastern savior-figures.”

A list of Egyptian gods and goddesses is given at the beginning of this book for quick reference, while a more detailed glossary is provided at the end. A chronological table for three and a half thousand years of Egyptian history through which the myth evolved is also at the end of the book (it follows the dates in the *Oxford History of Egypt*, cited in the bibliography). I should point out that in my abbreviated version of Egyptian history I have set together the

Third Intermediate Period and the Late Period in one chapter. In the text, I have sometimes used the Egyptian way of counting the years of rule: the accession of every king was marked as year one of king NN and years of rule were then added from year one on. Thus, for example, year seventeen of Akhenaton denotes the seventeenth year after he came to the throne.

A brief note about the use of Egyptian words: I have used the word “pharaoh” to describe the first kings of Egypt, even though the earliest mention of this word in Egyptian records dates to the New Kingdom and the archives of Akhenaton. Literally, the biblical word “pharaoh” – the Egyptian “per a’at” – meant “great house.” This phrase was used in the same way as the phrases the Great Porte and the White House are used to designate the Turkish sultan and president of the United States. I have taken the liberty of calling the first kings of Egypt pharaohs because of the absolutist meaning the word implies.

In the writing of the names of the goddesses Nout and Mout as well as in related names, such as Senmout, I have chosen the spelling that implies the long “u” in pronouncing them. In the spelling of the names of kings I have generally followed the Egyptian pronunciation. At times, however, such as with the names of kings Apries, Amasis, and Nectanebo, I used the Greek ones, because of their more common use. In the chronology at the end of the book, where space permitted, I have given both versions side by side. In the names of towns I have also used Greek names followed by the modern names in brackets, omitting the ancient Egyptian names in order to avoid clutter.

Many sources quoted in the present book come from the writings of Herodotus, Diodorus, and Plutarch. Though these Greek writers visited Egypt rather late in her history, their descriptions of Egyptian customs still convey the immediacy of eyewitness accounts. I have briefly described their lives and work, as well as those of other ancient writers mentioned in the book, in the glossary.

The terms “Upper Egypt” and “Lower Egypt,” contrary to expectation, refer respectively to the south and north. Because the Nile flows from south to north, the Upper Nile is in the south and the Lower Nile is in the north.

A final note: in the old days the flooding of the Nile was the main event of the Egyptian year. This came to an end with the completion of the Assuan High Dam in 1965. From then on, the Nile no longer floods in Egypt. The country has become industrialized and Egyptian culture has changed – the oneness of the people and the soil, the role of the river as the harbinger of life, the perception of the cycle of the seasons and of time. I have looked below the High Dam to Sudan to resuscitate the past and experience the power of the Nile inundation. It is there than one can still see the full impact of the flood and its effect on the life of the people, particularly on the southern tribes who still practice their age-old customs.



EGYPTIAN GODS AND GODDESSES

- Amun** (Amon, Amen) “the hidden one.” Theban god of the air and of the breath of life; the ram was sacred to him.
- Andjety** “he who came from the Anedj waters”; the original god of Djedu-Busiris who became assimilated with Osiris.
- Anubis** the jackal-headed god of embalming, said to have helped Isis find and preserve the body of Osiris. Anubis was the counter of hearts who greeted the dead on their entry to the netherworld; he connected the visible and the invisible worlds.
- Apep** (Apophis) the serpent of darkness and oblivion, the nemesis of Ra.
- Apis** the bull of Memphis, the living incarnation of Ptah. The king’s power animal, associated with Osiris in the netherworld. At the burial of a king a bull was sacrificed and buried with him to assist on the journey to the hereafter.
- Aton** the sun disk, a manifestation of the sun god championed by Akhenaton.
- Atum** (Tem, Temu, Atem) “the undifferentiated one,” the primal element, the creator dwelling in the primeval waters as a spirit. One of the solar trinity worshiped at Heliopolis, he brought himself into being by uttering his own name and then created the universe. The shrew, mouse, and ichneumon were sacred to him. His name may be at the root of the biblical “Adam” and the Greek “atom.”

Bastet	the goddess of Bubastis, patron of pleasure and protector from evil spirits. The cat was sacred to her.
Bennu	the mythical phoenix, worshiped at Heliopolis as the soul of Osiris and symbol of Ra's renewal. His name meant "to rise, shine." His appearance was that of a heron with long plumes falling from the back of his head.
Bes	leonine dwarf-god, whose grotesque appearance was intended to frighten away evil spirits. He safeguarded new mothers and newborn children and was in charge of music, dance, and jollity. Popular among kings and commoners, he was worshiped as the protector of domestic happiness and even supervisor of the bed and its pleasures.
Geb	son of Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture), god of the earth. Represented as a man with a goose on his head. It is peculiar to Egypt that the earth was always envisioned as a male; grammatically as a noun it had the male gender. In the Book of the Dead, Geb was called "the great cackler."
Hapi	personification of the Nile, represented as a portly figure bearing food offerings.
Harpocrates	Greek for the Egyptian "Hor-pa-khered," Horus the Child.
Hathor	"the house of Horus," the primeval goddess represented as a cow, renowned as the Great Mother, goddess of love, beauty, and music. Her instrument was the sistrum, a musical rattle of metal and wood. It was used on festive occasions and to frighten demons. Her cult center was at Dendera. From the Late Period on, she was celebrated in the sacred marriage.
Heqat	the frog, related to fertility. She presided over births as a midwife.
Hor-sa-Iset	Horus-the-son-of-Isis.
Horus	"the distant one," the falcon god of the sky, protector of kingship. His early cult center was at Hieraconpolis, the later ones at Edfu and Kom Ombo.
Ihy	the golden calf, the child of Hathor.
Isis	one of the four children of Geb (earth) and Nout (sky), sister and wife of Osiris, mother of Horus-the-child. The star Sirius (the Egyptian Sepdet) was associated with

	her. Her titles included those of Mother of God, Great of Magic, Mistress of Heaven and the New Year, Star of the Sea (in Alexandria), Virgin of the World (in the Hermetic tradition).
Khenti Amentiu	“foremost of the Land of the West,” the jackal-god of Abydos who was assimilated with Osiris.
Khepri	the scarab beetle, the rising sun, part of the solar trinity of Heliopolis as Khepri-Ra-Atum.
Khnum	“the molder,” the divine potter who fashioned the bodies of people from clay. The ram-headed god of Elephantine island at Assuan, protector of the Nile.
Khonsu	“one who travels across the sky,” the moon god, child of Amun and Mout, worshiped at Thebes. His statues were believed to have the power of casting out demons.
Ma’at	goddess of justice and truth. The measuring scales were her attribute.
Meretseger	“she who loves silence,” the goddess of the Theban necropolis.
Min	god of creative energy who gave all living things the power to reproduce themselves, represented as an ithyphallic figure and worshiped as a fertility god. The lettuce plant, believed to possess aphrodisiac powers, was sacred to him. His cult center was at Koptos.
Mout	wife of Amun, mother of Khonsu.
Nefertem	the lotus child, son of Ptah and Sakhmet.
Neith	war goddess of Sais who taught mortals the art of weaving. The bow and two crossed arrows were her symbols.
Nekhbet	the vulture, ancient protector-goddess of Upper Egypt.
Nephthys	(Egyptian Neb-hat) “mistress of the house,” one of the daughters of Geb and Nout, sister of Osiris and Isis, wife of Seth.
Noun	“father of the gods,” the primeval ocean out of whom all life emerged.
Nout	“mother of the gods,” goddess of the sky, daughter of Shu and Tefnet, worshiped as the Great Mother, whose body encompassed the sun, moon, and all the stars.
Osiris	the son of Geb and Nout. Primeval king of Egypt who brought civilization to his people. Related with the constellation of Orion (the Egyptian Sah). God