



THE GODS AND THEIR REALM

The Creation of the World and the Gods

The feud between Set and Horus began long before Horus was born, when Set and Osiris were the first brothers born among the gods. Like many pantheons of gods around the world, the Egyptian gods started off as a single family, with the children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren of the original creator, Atum.

At the very beginning, there was a void filled with only the primal waters of chaos, and this was called Nu. The only solid thing in the world – in fact the only thing in reality at all – was a pyramid-shaped rock called the Benben, and when the Egyptians later built actual pyramids, they topped them with carved Benben stones to represent this one, and sheathed those capstones in gold.

Then a very strange thing happened. The first god was sitting on the Benben stone. He didn't come *from* anywhere; he simply was there at that moment. The name given to him by the Egyptians, Atum, derives from the word meaning 'to complete', and so his name refers to the fact that he completed himself. This was only the beginning, however, and he had more creation to finish.

Atum finds that there's a serpent – Apep – in the chaos surrounding the world. (Universal Images Group / DeAgostini / Alamy)



Of course, Atum only had himself with which to create anything. The earliest version of the story is in the Pyramid Texts. These are spells carved and painted into the walls of pyramids' burial chambers from around the 5th Dynasty – 2400-2300 BC – which were intended to both protect and guide the pharaoh in his journey through the afterlife, as well as to persuade and threaten the gods into being favourable. Two hundred and twenty-eight spells were recorded, at the end of the 5th Dynasty, in the Pyramid of Unas at Saqqara. According to these, Atum sneezed out Shu, the god of the air, and spat out Tefnut, the goddess of water. In later, and ruder, versions, he created this first pair of siblings by means of a quite different bodily fluid.

The first thing that Shu and Tefnut did, like all good children, was leave home. They went off to explore the universe into which they had been born. Atum was distraught at the loss of his children, and so created fire, to light the way that led to them. Eventually, the message of fire found them, and they returned, making Atum so happy that he burst into tears. These tears fell upon the rock, where they became the first men.

Shu and Tefnut, meanwhile, being the first male and female couple, had done what came naturally, and mated. As a result, Tefnut soon gave birth to a son and a daughter. The son, Geb, became the earth, and the daughter, Nut, became the heavens, in the form of the night sky. In turn, Geb and Nut became parents themselves, to two sons and two daughters. The sons were none other than Osiris and Set, and the daughters were Isis and Nephthys.

Both of Geb's sons would go on to be very famous in Egyptian mythology, and to have a lasting legacy, but the eldest son, Osiris, would have influence all the way to the present day. Geb's eldest son is still known today as Osiris, but there were some who called him by a different name at first. Some called him Horus, the same name that would be given to his own son, and insisted that he was therefore Horus the Elder, who only became Osiris when he went into the underworld to rule over it.



Pyramid Texts? The clue's in the name: texts carved or painted inside pyramids. In this case, the burial chamber of Unas, last pharaoh of the 5th Dynasty, inside his pyramid at Saqqara. There are 228 spells carved into this lot. (The Art Archive / Alamy)