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# EGYPTIAN MYTH

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## 走近埃及神话

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Geraldine Pinch 著 邢颖译



通识教育  
双语文库

A VERY SHORT  
INTRODUCTION

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Postmodernism	解读后现代主义
Socrates	众说苏格拉底
The World Trade Organization	权力、政治与 WTO

# Contents

	Acknowledgements	vi
	List of illustrations	ix
1	The myth of Egypt: imagined Egypts	3
2	Divine words: language and myth	15
3	The gods themselves: deities and myth	30
4	The beautiful moment: creation myths	43
5	Black Land, Red Land: the landscapes of myth	54
6	Lord of the Two Lands: myths of nationhood	66
7	The big fight: conflict and reconciliation	77
8	The eyes of heaven: pairs and sequences	89
9	Personal myths: myth and popular religion	100
10	The blessing of the mummy: the mythology of death	112
	Notes	123
	Further reading	126
	Timeline	130
	Glossary	133
	Index	135

# 目录

图目 ix

绪论 147

第一章 埃及神话：人们脑海中的埃及形象 149

第二章 神词：语言与神话 160

第三章 对于神本身的认识：神与神话 175

第四章 美丽的时刻：创世神话 188

第五章 黑土地、红土地：神话的地理环境 199

第六章 两土地之王：国家神话 210

第七章 一场大战：斗争与和解 221

第八章 天空之眼：双元性与连续性 232

第九章 个人的神话：神话与民间宗教 243

第十章 木乃伊的祝福：死亡神话 254

年表 265

# List of illustrations

- |      |  |       |   |   |    |
|------|--|-------|---|---|----|
| 1    | Cleopatra's Needle<br>(obelisk of Thutmose III)<br>on the Thames<br>embankment | 4     | 6 | Gilded statuette of<br>Tutankhamun as a<br>harpooner  | 67 |
|      | John Ross  |       |   | Griffith Institute, Oxford  |    |
| 2a–b | Drawings of the<br>upper part of the<br>Metternich Stela                       | 18–19 | 7 | Page from the story of<br>'The Contendings of<br>Horus and Seth' in<br>Papyrus Chester<br>Beatty I  | 78 |
| 3    | Pair statue of<br>Sobek-Ra and<br>Amonhotep III in<br>the Luxor Museum         | 31    |   | Alan H. Gardiner, <i>The<br/>Library of A. Chester Beatty:<br/>Description of a Hieratic<br/>Papyrus with a Mythological<br/>Story, Love Songs, and<br/>Other Miscellaneous Texts</i><br>(London, 1931) |    |
|      | University of Arizona<br>Egyptian Exhibition Archive                           |       |   |   |    |
| 4    | The Shabaqo Stone<br>in the British<br>Museum                                  | 44    | 8 | Three amulets<br>representing<br>lunar and<br>solar eyes  | 89 |
|      | © British Museum   |       |   | © British Museum  |    |
| 5    | Floor of the outer<br>coffin of the<br>physician Gua                           | 55    |   |   |    |
|      | © British Museum   |       |   |   |    |



9 Ivory protective wand  
of the Lady of the  
House, Seneb 101

10 A corn mummy of  
the Late Period 113  
© British Museum

## 图目

- 图 1. 位于泰晤士河畔的“克里奥帕特拉尖塔”（图特摩斯三世方尖碑） 150
- 图 2a-b. “梅特涅石碑”上部的图画 162-163
- 图 3. 卢克索博物馆的索贝克一拉与阿蒙霍泰普三世雕像 176
- 图 4. 大英博物馆的“夏巴卡石碑” 189
- 图 5. 医生古阿的外棺底部 200
- 图 6. 图坦卡蒙持鱼叉的镀金小雕像 211
- 图 7. 《彻斯特比提蒲纸本一号》上的《荷鲁斯与塞特的争斗》故事原文 222
- 图 8. 代表月亮和太阳之眼的三个护身符 232
- 图 9. “房屋中的女士”塞涅波的河马长牙防护魔杖 244
- 图 10. 后王朝时期的一个谷物木乃伊 255

# Introduction

In the late 4th millennium BC, the valley and delta of the River Nile were formed into the twin kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt. Over the next 3,000 years Egypt was ruled by 32 dynasties of kings (see the timeline at the end of this book). One title for an Egyptian king was Pharaoh (meaning ‘Great House’), and so this great span of time is often known as the Pharaonic Period.

1

For much of the 3rd and 2nd millennia BC, Egypt was the wealthiest and most powerful nation in the Ancient Near East. The Egyptians were pioneers of monumental stone architecture. They produced magnificent sculpture and painted reliefs, and invented the hieroglyphic script, one of the world’s earliest and most beautiful forms of writing. Even after Egypt lost its political independence in the late 1st millennium BC, its culture and religion survived to influence those of Greece and Rome.

Mythology was an integral part of Egyptian culture for much of its timespan. Characters and events from myth permeate Egyptian art, architecture, and literature. Myths underpinned many of the rituals performed by kings and priests. Educated Egyptians believed that a knowledge of myth was an essential weapon in the fight to survive the dangers of life and the afterlife.

There is disagreement among Egyptologists about when mythical narratives first developed in Egypt. This dispute is partly due to the



difficulty of deciding what should be counted as a myth. Today, the term myth is often used in a negative way to refer to something that is exaggerated or untrue. In ancient cultures, myth did not have this negative connotation; myths could be regarded as stories that contained poetic rather than literal truths. Some scholars separate myths from other types of traditional tale by classifying them as stories featuring deities. This simple definition might work quite well for Egypt, but not for all cultures.

Myths are generally set in a remote time or place where humans and deities can interact. They are stories imbued with meaning and power. Myths could be used to explain or justify the way the world is. Even in modern times we acknowledge that a myth can take on a life of its own and become more influential than the original facts on which it was based. For the Egyptians, myths had the power to transcend individual experience and act as a bridge between the human and divine worlds.

Egyptian mythology never solidified into one standard version. It continued to change and develop over 3,000 years. The chief deities of regional temples generated their own myths. The basic events, which might be described as 'core myths' (see Box 1 in Chapter 1), were constantly retold and given many different actors and settings.

This book is arranged thematically, with each theme illustrated by a particular Ancient Egyptian artefact. These artefacts have been chosen to emphasize the diversity of the source material that Egyptologists work from. Hopefully, the objects will serve as access points to a culture that can seem very alien to the modern Western mindset. I shall not pretend that everything about Egyptian myth can be made simple. The complexity of this subject is what makes it endlessly fascinating to study.

# Chapter 1

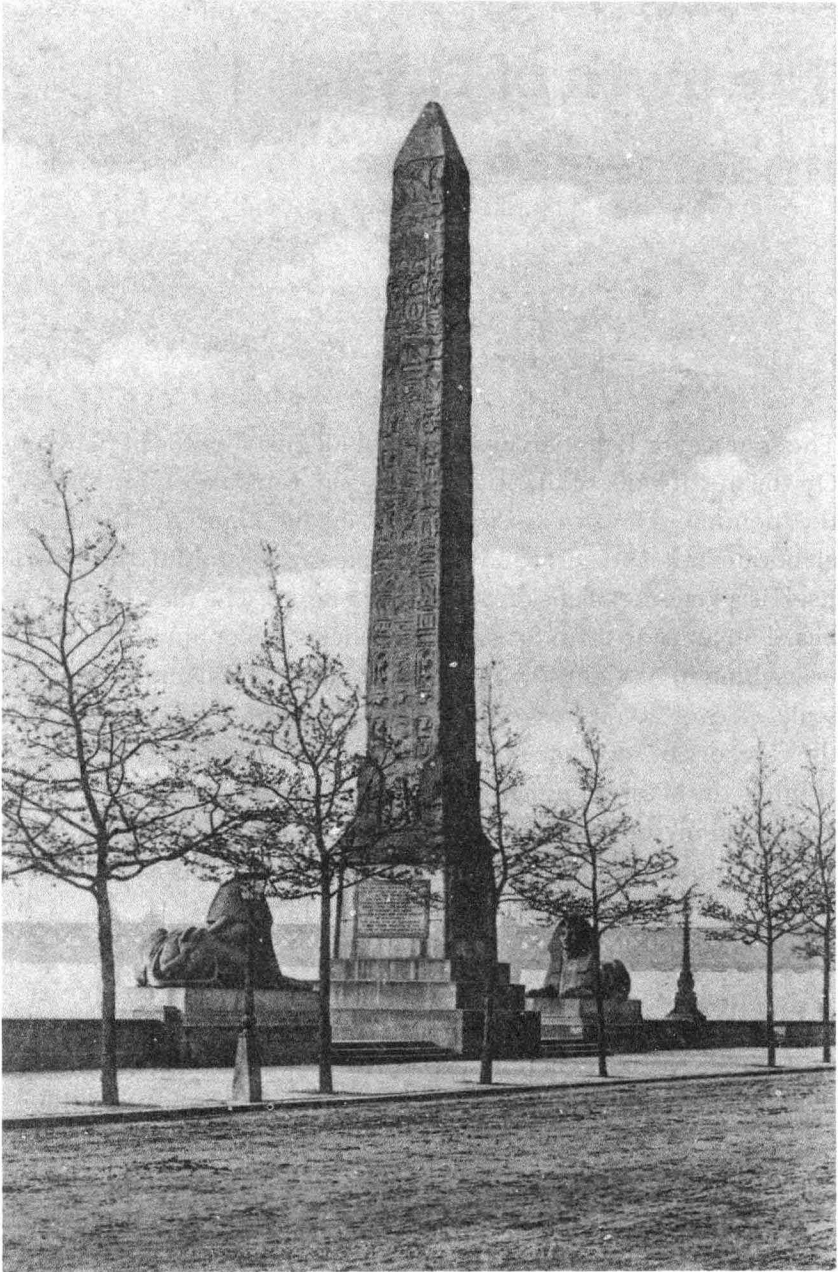
## The myth of Egypt: imagined Egypts

The sources for Egyptian myth are not all dusty scrolls of papyrus. On the north bank of the River Thames in central London stands the monument known as Cleopatra's Needle (Figure 1). Though its elaborate base and surrounding sphinxes are Victorian, the 'needle' itself is a genuine obelisk from Ancient Egypt. The nickname, based on an Arab term for obelisks, reflects the popular idea that everything in Ancient Egypt was on a monumental and inhuman scale. At over 20 metres (68 feet) tall, Cleopatra's Needle belongs to the category of super-obelisks made for Egypt's greatest temples.<sup>1</sup> It fulfils the Western image of Egyptian architecture by being both grand and mysterious. The Egyptians had a gift for creating striking visual symbols to convey complex ideas. An obelisk is a sculptural representation of a mythological place and time.

3

### The adventures of an obelisk

Cleopatra's Needle actually dates to the reign of King Thutmose III (c.1479–1425 BC), who lived around 1,400 years earlier than the Cleopatra everyone has heard of (Cleopatra VII). Thutmose's granite obelisk was one of a pair quarried in Aswan and floated 400 miles down the Nile to Heliopolis ('City of the Sun'). The pair were made to stand at the entrance to the great temple of the sun god, Ra. Solar mythology was crucial to Egyptian culture, so this was one of Egypt's most important temples. The priests of



1. Cleopatra's Needle (obelisk of Thutmose III) on the Thames embankment

Heliopolis were renowned in the ancient world for their knowledge and wisdom. Many of the myths discussed in this book may have originated in Heliopolis. The temple of Ra was later plundered to build Cairo. Its scant remains now lie under a modern suburb and the city's airport. Cleopatra's Needle is a sad reminder of how much of Egypt's heritage has been lost or displaced and how difficult it is to piece together the scattered remains.

By erecting these obelisks in Heliopolis, Thutmose III was carrying out one of the main functions of an Egyptian king. That function was to facilitate the daily cycle in which the sun god was thought to renew the universe. The tips of the obelisks were covered with an alloy of gold with silver, called electrum. The structures would have been sited so that the sun lit them up every morning. Together, the obelisks represented the place of renewal, the mountains of the horizon. Cleopatra's Needle is the western horizon, the place of sunset and death. The other obelisk of the pair is the eastern horizon, the place of dawn and rebirth. Like most Egyptian symbols, obelisks can represent more than one thing simultaneously. Individual obelisks also stood for the primeval mound, the place of the very first sunrise at the dawn of creation. They acted as markers of mythological time. The role of these obelisks as elements in a working model of the cosmos was obscured by their subsequent history.

In the 13th century BC, the famous ruler Ramesses II inscribed his name on the obelisks. They may have been moved to the Nile Delta at this time to stand in one of the temples he built or enlarged there. By the 1st century BC they were in Alexandria, the capital city of the Ptolemy dynasty, of which Cleopatra VII was the last representative. Alexandria was the intellectual hub of the Hellenistic world; a centre for science and philosophy. The presence of obelisks was a reminder of more elusive forms of knowledge which could not be tested by experiment or attained by rational

argument. An inscription shows that the obelisks were re-erected under Cleopatra's nemesis, the Emperor Augustus, outside a temple dedicated to the cult of Julius Caesar. Eventually, one of Alexandria's frequent earthquakes toppled the western obelisk.

This obelisk was offered to Britain by a Turkish governor after the British had defeated Napoleon's army at the Battle of Alexandria in AD 1801. Cleopatra's Needle remained an uncollected present until AD 1877, when it was transported to Britain on the barge 'Cleopatra', with the loss of six lives on route. The successful erection of the obelisk on the Thames embankment inspired envy in America. So the other obelisk of the pair was transported to New York and erected in Central Park in AD 1881. Parted by an ocean, the function and meaning of Thutmose III's obelisks were lost. This was a fate shared by many Egyptian obelisks, but new meanings were assigned to them in new contexts. The first Egyptian obelisks had been moved to Europe in the reign of Augustus. They were used to adorn various monuments, including his tomb. This encouraged the idea that obelisks were principally monuments to the dead. In recent centuries, obelisks have frequently been used to mark tombs or commemorate war dead. Ancient Egypt has often been branded as a society obsessed with death, but Egyptian thought was not morbid. In their original setting, the obelisks celebrated the victory of life over death.

## Secret wisdom

Obelisks are usually inscribed in the type of Egyptian writing known as hieroglyphs. By the end of the 4th century AD, there were very few people left who could understand the hieroglyphic script. Around this time an Egyptian named Horapollo wrote a treatise that popularized the idea that the hieroglyphic signs were an esoteric symbolic language which concealed great religious truths. As early as the 1st century AD, the Roman author Pliny the Elder had asserted that the Egyptians inscribed their most secret



knowledge on obelisks. This knowledge was said to be nothing less than the nature of the universe and the meaning of life. The belief that the Egyptians possessed this secret is the primary myth about Ancient Egypt.

When Egypt became a Christian country in the 4th century AD, the 'pagan' culture of the Pharaonic past was rejected. In the Hebrew books of the Old Testament the polytheism of the Egyptians was contrasted unfavourably with the monotheism of the Jews. Early Christians continued to believe in the existence of pagan deities but downgraded them to the status of demons. The violence and sexuality of some of the myths told about Egyptian deities were used to support this view.

The Muslim Arabs who conquered Egypt in the 7th century AD were also hostile towards Ancient Egyptian religion. Arab scholars interested in alchemy did preserve some examples of the texts known as the Hermetica. These were produced in Egypt during the Graeco-Roman Period and are mainly written in Greek. They claimed to be the secret teachings of the great sage Hermes Trismegistus, a figure partially derived from Thoth, the Egyptian god of wisdom. The Hermetica mix Greek philosophy with Egyptian myth and give allegorical significance to magical and alchemic practices. They promise the secret of immortality to initiates who follow the teachings of Hermes.

## Renaissance and Enlightenment

The great rediscovery of Classical learning in the Renaissance period made some information about Egyptian myth available. From the 6th century BC onwards, many famous Greek authors had written respectfully about Egyptian religion. The philosopher Plato credited Thoth with the invention of writing, mathematics, and astronomy. The myth of Atlantis, related by Plato in his dialogue *Timaeus* (c.348 BC), is attributed to a wise Egyptian priest who knew about a whole series of destructions going back to the early