

Exploring Magical History
Egypt I
Background and Timeline
By Josephine McCarthy

In the previous essay on exploring magical history, I looked at pre-historic worship of the sun, and the death/burial pattern of light in the darkness at the lowest ebb of the sun in winter, which is part of the ascent mysteries that develop later in ritual history. These are two ancient fragments that are very important for later magical development, but to see how those developments formed, we must now turn our gaze to Egypt.

The history of Egypt is long: in terms of magical interest it stretches from the early solar alignments of Nabta Playa around 5,000BCE to the beginning of the long and ultimately successful invasion of Egypt by the Assyrians which began in 671BCE. In terms of magical history, that was the slow end of the magical structure that flowed through dynastic Egypt.

What came after, in terms of magical history, is a long story of various different cultural and religious influences that mixed with the remaining fragments of the magic of Dynastic Egypt to create something that although it looked very similar on the surface, was very different 'under the hood' in terms of magical dynamics: it was a bit of a soup. Because of that, the remaining magical history of Egypt from the Assyrian incursions to the conquering of Egypt by the Fatimids in 969CE is an entirely different aspect of magical history.

Before we focus on some of the magical dynamics and concepts of Dynastic Egypt in subsequent essays, let us look at the various important points in time in Egyptian history, and take note of the influences. We will also look at some core concepts that will help you if you choose to explore the history of Egypt. We will start by looking at the unique physical land features that played a major part in the emergence of such a great culture.

The gift of the Nile

The inundation of the Nile is one of the major keys as to why a group of pastoralist communities in the 4th Millennium grew into one of the greatest civilisations of human history and gave birth to magical and ritual forms that persist to this day in the various cultures that borrowed, stole or inherited from this great African nation.

The first clue we have that tells us why such advancement was possible is the Nile itself. Each year, before the modern building of the Aswan Dam, the Nile flooded and deposited rich silt along the land corridor on each side of the river. The water fell as monsoon rains in Ethiopia and South Sudan, and filled the lakes and rivers that fed the Nile.

By late summer, the Nile would swell enormously and break its banks, spread its silt across the land. By October the waters would recede, leaving rich soils ready to be farmed. The farming was not laborious: seeds would be cast into the rich new soil, pigs and various farmed animals would tread the seeds into the soil and all the farmers had to do was wait for it to grow^{1 2}.

¹ A. Allan, J & Said, Rushdi. (1995). The River Nile: Geology, Hydrology and Utilization. The Geographical Journal. 161. 90. 10.2307/3059935.

² Herodotus (484BCE-425BCE) Histories II Chapter 1

With such an abundance of fresh silt each year, the land did not sour from over use, nor did salts rise to the surface, a problem connected to irrigation methods which causes salinization issues similar to those suspected in ancient Mesopotamia.

In the second and first millennium BCE, salinization is what likely triggered the movement of major settlements and power centres from south Mesopotamia to North Mesopotamia (Babylon)³. Egypt had no such problems. Each year the Nile flooded and left its fertile black soil across the lands, ready to be farmed.



This in turn gave people time. Time and resources are some of the things that fuel magical and mystical thought and development that goes beyond the usual basic survival mechanisms.

People had the time during the inundation to do other things, and also the light work agriculture left time for creativity, as did the abundance of food and the stable environment.

The weather was essentially uneventful – hot in summer, warm in winter, windy in spring. This in turn created the environment for deep thought (and subsequent religious development), the creation of luxury goods, and in turn, status goods, status burials, and a community hierarchy.

The very early development of hierarchy (kings, priests, scribes, etc.) freed up a section of the population to focus upon religious matters – the priesthood had free time to think, experiment, develop and evolve their spiritual practice.

Timeline

Here is a time line that you can refer back to as we dig around in Egyptian history in subsequent essays, so that you can put things into context of time and place. Important points in history that are relevant to magical history are outlined.

Note: Not every king or event is listed, only those relevant directly or indirectly in some way to the magical history of the dynasties. Please be aware that dates are constantly being re assessed according to the latest findings in archaeology, so many are to be treated as approximations and can overlap.

³ Artzy, M., Hillel, D. 1988. A defense of the theory of progressive soil salinization in ancient Mesopotamia. *Geoarchaeology* 3(3):235-238

Neolithic and Chalcolithic Predynastic Egypt⁴

The early beginnings of Egypt are complex with lots of various communities rising, so the following list is just a focussed selection of examples.

- Nabta Playa (7000-4500BCE) solar and stellar stone alignments, cattle cult and ritual tombs, large scale communal feasting, highly organised society
- Neolithic/Badarian (c. 4400–3800 BCE) agri-pastoralist activities
- Naqada IA–IIB (c. 3800–3450 BCE), beginnings of local urbanizing communities and elite cosmologies
- Naqada IIC–D (c. 3450–3325 BCE), expansion of social networks and the introduction of new sources of power
- Naqada IIIA–B (c. 3325–3100 BCE), processes of elite ascendancy, centralization, and the of ideologies of kingship



Brooklyn museum Egypt terracotta female 3400BC

⁴ Stevenson, A. J Archaeol Res (2016) 24: 421. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10814-016-9094-7>

Early Dynastic⁵

- First and Second Dynasty (c.3100BCE – 2686BCE), north and south united, Memphis capital, human funerary sacrifice (Abydos), and afterlife concepts.

Old Kingdom⁶ (2686BCE – 2181BCE)

- Third dynasty (c.2686BCE -2613BCE), Development of Pyramid building, first pyramid at Saqqara of King Djoser, architect Imhotep
- Fourth dynasty (2613BCE-2494BCE), Golden age of Old Kingdom, height of pyramid building, construction of the Great Pyramid at Giza (Khufu)
- Fifth dynasty (2494BCE-2345BCE) Pyramid of Unas at Saqqara, appearance of the Pyramid texts.
- Sixth Dynasty (2345BCE- 2181BCE) growing power of the nobility weakened the absolute authority of the kings, potentially contributing to rapid decline of the Old Kingdom.

First Intermediate Period (2181BCE-2025 BCE)

- Seventh to tenth dynasty. Dark Period. Egypt divided and weak, various rebellions against kings. General impoverishment of population, suggestions of low inundations of the Nile leading to famine. First appearance of the Coffin Texts.

Middle Kingdom Period (2125BCE – 1773BCE)

- Eleventh dynasty (2025-1985 BCE). Mentuhotep II (reigned 2061BCE-2010BCE) first king of the eleventh dynasty brought the First Intermediate period to an end by re unifying Egypt in the 39th year of his reign (reigned approx. 51 years). His architecture broke with the Old Kingdom Pyramid tradition and his large mortuary temple on the west bank of Thebes inspired much later New Kingdom architecture. His innovations were also religious, bringing the mysteries of Osiris to the fore and linking them far closer to the king. Appearance of the coffin star charts at Asyut burials.
- Twelfth dynasty (1985BCE-1773BCE) The Ikhnofret Stela at Abydos which outlines the kingship, death and resurrection of Osiris rituals enacted at Abydos. King Amenemhat II (reign 1860BCE-1814BCE) built his funerary complex at Hawara (Medinet al-Faiyum) which included the famed Labyrinth⁷, commented upon by Herodotus, and Strabo who praised it as a ‘wonder of the world’⁸.

Second Intermediate Period (1773BCE-1550BCE)

- A period of decline, a lot of kings each with very short reigns and few attestations, dynasty dating very difficult⁹.
- Thirteenth dynasty first Semitic speaking king Userkare Khendjer

⁵ Timeline according to Egyptologist Ian Shaw FSA, reader in Egyptian Archaeology University of Liverpool.

⁶ Shaw, Ian, ed. (2000). *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford University Press.

⁷ Miroslav Verner, *The Pyramids: The Mystery, Culture, and Science of Egypt's Great Monuments*, Grove Press, 2002

⁸ Alan B. Lloyd (1970) The Egyptian Labyrinth - *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 56 (Aug., 1970), pp.

⁹ Kim S. B. Ryholt, *The Political Situation in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period, c.1800-1550 B.C.*, Museum Tusulanum Press 1997

- Thirteenth to Seventeenth dynasties. Egypt heavily divided and weak. Western Semitic, and Hyksos kings. Egyptian kings reigned only in Thebes, Hyksos ruled from Avaris in the north.

New Kingdom (1550BCE- 1069BCE)

- Eighteenth Dynasty (1550BCE-1295BCE) Fifteen kings, considered the overall Golden Age of Ancient Egypt. Most important ones for us in terms of magical and overall history are:
 1. Ahmose I (reigned 1549BCE-1524BCE) expelled Hyksos and united Egypt
 2. Thutmose I (1503BCE-1493BCE) expanded Egyptian Empire to Carchemish (Euphrates) in north and down to Kurgus (past 4th cataract) in south. Thought to be founder of Set Maat (The Place of Truth), the workmen's village for the Valley of the Kings, and the first king, along with his daughter, King Hatshepsut to be buried in the Valley of the Kings, west bank of Thebes^{10 11}.
 3. Hatshepsut (1479BCE-1458BCE) Prolific builder, working with the architect Ineni. Extensive works at Karnak, and the building of the underground temple of Pakhet (lioness goddess) at Beni Hasan, thought to be built on an older temple. Trade missions to Land of Punt, bringing back many goods including the first recorded use of Frankincense¹², and Myrrh trees. Reign of stability and architectural expanse – later kings attempted to take credit for some of her building projects. Built the first major tomb in the Valley of the Kings – extensive 37m long with complex use of the directions and magical elements to the structure.
 4. Akenaten (1351BCE-1334BCE) Amarna Period. King abandoned state religion and detached from state and diplomatic governance. Period of prolonged famine and disease¹³. Moved capital from Thebes to Amarna. First recorded case of smallpox, transmitted from Egyptian prisoners of war to Hittites¹⁴.
 5. Tutankhamun (1332BCE-1323BCE). Died in youth, shrine displays first known example of an extract of the Book of Gates.
 6. Horemheb (1319BCE – 1292BCE) Restored old religion – appointed Paramesse as 'chief of priests of Upper and Lower Egypt, restored the temple and priesthood of Amun at Karnak, stabilized the political and military security, re-established rule of law (Great Edict). Book of Gates appears for first time on a tomb wall – it was not finished before his burial. Last king of the eighteenth dynasty.
- Nineteenth Dynasty (1295BCE-1186BCE)¹⁵ Continued restoration of the religious and government structure.
 1. Ramses I (1292BCE-1290BCE) short reign, was formerly Paramesse. Founder of the nineteenth dynasty (Ramesside period). First tomb to have the complete Book of Gates on walls.

¹⁰ Historical development of the Valley of the Kings in the New Kingdom. Theban Mapping Project (2006)

¹¹ KV20, KV38 Theban Mapping Project 2006

¹² Isaac, Michael (2004). *A Historical Atlas of Oman*. The Rosen Publishing Group. p. 14

¹³ Kuckens, Kathleen, "The Children of Amarna: Disease and Famine in the Time of Akhenaten" (2013). Theses and Dissertations. 888 ScholarWorks@UARK

¹⁴ Hopkins DR. *Princes and Peasants: Smallpox in History*. Chicago: Univ of Chicago Pr; 1983

¹⁵ Siliotti, A. *Guide to the Valley of the Kings and to the Theban Necropolises and Temples*, 1996, A.A. Gaddis, Cairo.

2. Seti I (1290BCE-1279BCE) Capital at Memphis. Reconquered lost territories, extensive building program, constructed the Great Temple at Abydos, instituted the Kings List on the wall at Abydos. Tomb (KV17) used Book of the Heavenly Cow on the ceiling, first tomb highly decorated with Bas relief and high use of colour. Sarcophagus carved and inscribed with the Book of Gates.
 3. Ramses II (1279BCE-1213BCE) Capital at Pi Ramesses. Extensive building program including Pi Ramesses. Extensive military campaigns to expand territory. Undertook the Heb Sed¹⁶ ¹⁷ challenge after 30 years of rule, and then up to fourteen subsequent times.
 4. Twosert (1191-1189 BCE) female king, former queen of Seti II. Last king of the Nineteenth Dynasty. Her tomb (KV14) is magically interesting. A double tomb that contains parts of the Book of the Dead, the Book of Gates, the Amduat, Book of Caverns. Tomb as later usurped by Setnakht.
- Twentieth Dynasty (1189BCE- 1077BCE) Started with civil war and attempted invasions. Loss of kingship power to the High Priests of Amun. This is the last dynasty of the New Kingdom.
 1. Setnakhte (1189BCE-1186BCE) Fragmentation of status and power. Usurped tomb of Twosert.
 2. Ramses III (1186BCE- 1077BCE) Last monarch of authority. Decline in Egypt's political and economic power. Defeated Sea People's invasions, defeated Libyan invaders. Reorganised religious cults and oversaw temple restorations. Workers of Set Maat (Place of Truth, Theban West Bank) strike – first recorded workers strike in world history. Assassinated in attempted coup which ultimately failed – one of his lesser wives attempted to put her son on the throne. His tomb (KV11) contained Litany of Re, Book of Gates, Amduat, Book of Dead, Book of the Earth.
 3. Ramses VI (1155BCE-1149BCE) expanded the number of workers at Set Maat to 120.
 4. Ramses V to Ramses XI (1149BCE – 1077BCE) Slow collapse of the Kingship authority. High priests of Amun at Thebes become de-facto rulers and had control over State finance as outlined in the Wilbour Papyrus¹⁸. Infighting between the sons of Ramses III caused instability and a quick succession of kings. This period was blighted by Libyan incursions, tomb robbery, diseases (Ramses V died of Smallpox), drought, famine, low inundation, corrupt officialdom, and civil unrest.

Third Intermediate Period (1069BCE-656BCE)

- Twenty first dynasty (1069BCE-945BCE) – period of division with Kings ruling Lower Egypt with Tanis as the capital, and the High Priests of Amun ruling Upper Egypt from Thebes. Period of corruption and continued decline, with royal burials (Psusennes I)¹⁹ displaying great wealth while the nation crumbled.

¹⁶ The Heb Sed is a challenge, renewal, and celebration of the kings sacred power. Dates from Pre Dynastic era, named after Set (the Set festival).

¹⁷ Bard Kathryn -Encyclopaedia of the Archaeology of Ancient Egypt – Routledge 1999

¹⁸ Alan H. Gardiner, R. O. Faulkner: *The Wilbour Papyrus*. 4 Bände, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1941-52

¹⁹ Bob Brier, *Egyptian Mummies: Unravelling the Secrets of an Ancient Art*, William Morrow & Company Inc., New York, 1994

- Twenty Second Dynasty (945BCE-715BCE) Meshwesh Libyan Berber rulers in Lower Egypt
 1. Shoshenq I (943BCE-922BCE) frequently identified as the Biblical ‘Shishak’ (1 Kings 11:40, 14:25)²⁰, who took the treasures of the Temple of Solomon back to Egypt. He terminated the hereditary succession of High Priests of Amun and instead the HP were appointed by the king.
- Twenty Third Dynasty (880BCE – 750BCE) Meshwesh Libyan Berber rulers in Upper Egypt. During the twenty second and twenty third dynasty, after a brief period of harmony under Shoshenq I, the two dynasties devolved down in to inter-tribal squabbles (rulers of Upper and Lower Egypt were often related). The kingdoms fragmented into small states and local rulers.
- Twenty fifth Dynasty (747-656BCE) Kushite Empire/Nubian Dynasty. Reunification of Egypt, ruled from Napata in Nubia (Sudan). Temples, religious practice/traditions and art restored, extensive building programs and widespread construction of pyramids in the Nile Valley.²¹ Good to point out here that this African dynasty basically restored Egypt and reinvigorated the ancient religion and culture, yet in most history books it is ignored or overlooked, probably because of modern day racism.
 1. Piye (744BCE-714BCE) Piye was a dedicated worshipper of Amun and viewed the conquest and reunification of Egypt, and the reestablishment of the religion as a holy quest: his soldiers had to ritually cleanse themselves before going into battle. Piye oversaw an extensive rebuilding program with the temples and underwent the Heb Sed challenge and festival shortly before his death.
 2. Shabaka (705BCE-690BCE) returned Egypt to a theocratic monarchy by becoming First Prophet of Amun. He also preserved the Memphite theology from an old religious papyrus, inscribing it into the Shabaka Stone.
- Assyrian Empire began the invasion of Egypt in 671BCE, and ancient Egypt, in magical terms, ceased to function properly.

As you can see already from the timeline, the story of Egypt is not one of a continuous harmonic culture where everything was always wonderful, as is so often perceived. Rather it is a long winding story of success and failures, of good intentions and corruptions: it is the story of humanity itself reflected upon an astonishing society that often struggled to maintain harmony.

Before we move on to begin looking at the early manifestations of religion and culture in the Egyptian story, there are some other ‘references’ that would be useful to place here in this chapter, so that you can easily find and refer back to them as necessary. The first is the concept of Ma’at which is an overarching dynamic that ran as a constant thread through Egyptian religious, cultural and magical history.

²⁰Sagrillo, T., & Sagrillo, T. L. (2015). Shoshenq I and biblical Šišaq: A philological defense of their traditional equation. *Solomon and Shishak: Current perspectives from archaeology, epigraphy, history and chronology*

²¹ Robert Draper. The Black Pharaohs. National Geographic Feb 2008

Ma'at

*I have emerged for Ma'at that I may get her and she is within me.*²²

*One knows a wise one because of his wisdom, an official is at (doing) his good deed: his heart is in balance with his tongue, his lips are accurate when he speaks.*²³

The above two quotes both come from the 5th dynasty and are early examples of Ma'at in 'action'. On the surface, Ma'at is a concept of balance and harmony, and is embodied in the goddess Ma'at. From balance and harmony comes justice and truth. This dynamic was the underpinning of Ancient Egyptian society, and informed everyone in Egypt how to conduct themselves, from the King and high priests, all the way down to the lowliest peasant in the field. In a deeper more mystical sense, Ma'at is the fulcrum between creation and destruction, keeping each power in balance with the other in a constant dance of renewal.

To this end, deities of destruction were given just as much respect as creative deities, and the real enemy in Egypt was not destructive forces, but *chaos*. Destruction and death were considered part and parcel of creation and life, but chaos threatened everything. This is expressed in the Egyptian mythos as the underworld serpent power Apep, the epitome of chaos.

The concept of Ma'at is very important to understand in terms of magical history in Egypt, as the dynamic is the foundation concept that underpins all Dynastic Egyptian magic.

*"How beautiful indeed is the sight, how satisfying indeed to see", says Isis, "how this god goes up into the sky, with his Ba upon him, his ferocity at his sides, his magic at his feet"*²⁴

Concepts of the Soul

Having a little understanding of the ancient Egyptian concepts of the soul will help you as you make your way through Egyptian concepts and history. The Egyptians approached the concept of soul as something that had various different aspects to it, and each aspect had a name, function and to an extent, a personality; essentially the Egyptians saw the inner aspect of a person as a series of 'spirit forms', like a nesting doll. It is an interesting approach and one that in some respects echoes the later Kabbalistic idea of fragmentation, that we are fragments of a whole that yearns for a return to completion.

In that same frame of 'parts' becoming whole, we see a similar concept in the Egyptian funerary process and magical religious texts of death, renewal and ascent. In the Osirian mysteries, the soul which is in parts, upon death and survival of the trials of the underworld (Duat), is drawn back together just like Osiris was re assembled and made whole.

The soul parts are brought together and renewed, ready to rise over the new horizon with the sun, on its journey to join with the stars. Here are the various aspects of the soul – bear in mind that over a 3,000 year span, some of the ideas morphed and evolved, and some names and ideas changed as the religion evolved.

²² James P Allen. Pyramid Texts of Unas. Utterance 260. (2015)

²³ Ptahhotep – Instructions of Ptahhotep 5th dynasty Egypt

²⁴ Pyramid Texts of Pepi I. Recitation 572. Translation James P Allen.

- The Ka, or double. The Ka is the Divine breath of life that turns the inanimate substance of the vessel (body) into a living being. It is the inner person, what we today would call the soul of the person.
- Ba. The Ba is the inner aspect of *the conscious being*, the part of the spirit that journeys in dreams, the part of the person who is active in vision and visionary work, the part of the person's consciousness that can reach beyond the body.
- Swt or shadow. The shadow is the shape of the individual. It is often depicted in wall paintings as a totally black shape of a person. It is the shape that defines or identifies the person. In creation mysticism in Egypt, we emerge out of the Nu, the dark nothing that is often depicted as dark water: we start as a part of the Nu, and as we emerge from the darkness of the Nu first our shape is formed from Nu, the dark shadow or shape, and then it starts to awaken to form itself into a person. Statues of the person are considered to be a Swt, a shape of the individual person but without all the soul aspects that make it a living human being. Magically, the Swt is considered the blueprint for the vessel, which can then be filled with all the aspects of spirit, which in turn can then fill a body.
- Jb- Heart Spirit. The Jb was very important to the Egyptians, as it is the spirit that resides within the heart and speaks the truth about the person's deeds. When the person dies and stands in judgement (a concept that develops at the end of the Old Kingdom), it is the heart spirit that talks of the deeds of the person while they were alive.
- Sekhem. The vital force or life energy that maintained the body.
- Rn. Name. The true name of a person was very important in Egypt and was to be protected at all costs, as it could be used to harm the person magically. The name of a person had magical influence upon the fate and power of the person, so it would be chosen carefully and guarded. In death, so long as the name continued to exist and be connected to the memory of the person and their body, the spirit aspect that stayed upon the land/land of the living could continue to exist. Hence when a king fell out of favour with people or was considered a bad king, his name would be wiped from all monuments and documents in order to block his continued presence.
- Akh. Star. The Akh is a soul that is justified, where all the bits have come back together (the Osiris process) and they take their place among the stars of the gods and the Justified Ones – ones who have been through the judgement process, who have been made whole, and will 'live forever'.



Ba Bird Ptolemaic period. Credit: Rogers Fund 1944

Foundation of the creation myths

Egypt did not have one creation myth, rather it had a few that developed out of regional centres across Egypt, but each one had the same foundation elements within it. The basic elements are important to know about as they will inform you not only in regards to the religion and culture, but also the architecture of Egypt.

Remember that Egypt formed as a result of small regional communities becoming localised power centres, and eventually those power centres were unified. Each area developed its own regional version of the creation myths, and as you will discover if you delve into various Egyptian texts, the Egyptians had no problem with holding more than one 'truth' at a time.

Their approach to life, religion and everything around them was pragmatic, imaginative/creative, with great plasticity of thinking. We are so used to the Greek and Roman way of thinking in their use of logic and allegory which was the major influence on western culture – it can take a little time to adjust to Egyptian thinking when looking at their history and texts.

The main creation myths sprung up in Hermopolis/Khemenu, Heliopolis/Iunu, Memphis/Inbu-Hedj, and Thebes/Waset (Greek and Egyptian names). Each creation myth involved the deities that were most prominent in these centres, but all of them had the same deep underlying concept, the emergence of creation out of the dark waters -

In the beginning was the Nu, the lifeless dark waters of chaos; nothing else existed except what was in the Nu. The Nu was awoken. The Benben rose out of the Nu, and the first rays of sunshine fell upon the Benben.

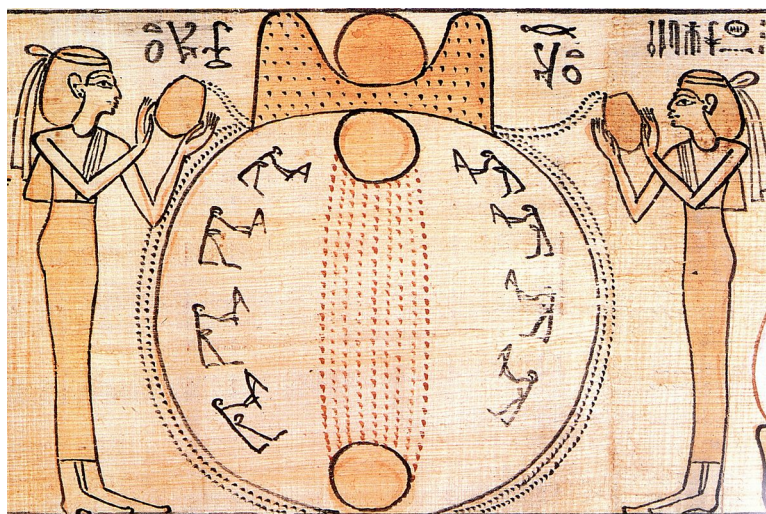
The Nu, is what magicians these days would call the void, something that is the 'nothing that all potential emerges from'. I find it interesting that the foundation of the creation myths has this sense of total darkness and no life, and what triggers life is the first rays of sun casting a light in the darkness. This is doubly interesting when you look at similar concepts emerging out of prehistory in the northern hemisphere.

The Benben is the primordial mound that rose out of the Nu (the world emerging from the void), and the Benben played a major role in ancient Egyptian architecture. It was at times seen as a pyramidal structure which gave birth to the pyramids and was also sometimes fashioned as a pyramidal cap stone.

Another version of the Benben was a round topped mound, and yet another was the obelisk – so you can see how the creation mythos played a role in the various architectural forms that were used for tombs and temples.

Here is an image of the first sunrise from one of the creation myths. The goddesses of north and south pour water over the primordial mound which is being tilled by the Ogdoad, the eight gods and goddesses of creation. The sun travels up to the horizon (akhet) where it rises for the first time.

The image is from the 21st dynasty, New Kingdom, (C11th/10th BC)
Book of the Dead of Khensumose, a priest of Amon-Re.



As you start to delve into the magical history of dynastic Egypt, it really helps if you keep in mind the social political situation of the time you are looking at, along with a basic understanding of the mythos specific to the area of Egypt, and to the people. This can give you deeper insights into the magical ideas and structures you are looking at, and in turn that will help you to follow the trail of crumbs through the many twists and turns of Egyptian magical, religious and mythic history – it is truly a fascinating journey!

© Josephine McCarthy 2018