

Mesopotamian religion, beliefs and practices of the Sumerians and Akkadians, and their successors, the Babylonians and Assyrians, who inhabited ancient Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) in the millennia before the Christian era. These religious beliefs and practices form a single stream of tradition. Sumerian in origin, Mesopotamian religion was added to and subtly modified by the Akkadians (Semites who emigrated into Mesopotamia from the west at the end of the 4th millennium bc), whose own beliefs were in large measure assimilated to, and integrated with, those of their new environment. As the only available intellectual framework that could provide a comprehensive understanding of the forces governing existence and also guidance for right conduct in life, religion ineluctably conditioned all aspects of ancient Mesopotamian civilization. It yielded the forms in which that civilization's social, economic, legal, political, and military institutions were, and are, to be understood, and it provided the significant symbols for poetry and art. In many ways it even influenced peoples and cultures outside Mesopotamia, such as the Elamites to the east, the Hurrians and Hittites to the north, and the Aramaeans and Israelites to the west.

Historical development

Cultural background

Human occupation of Mesopotamia—"the land between the rivers" (i.e., the Tigris and Euphrates)—seems to reach back farthest in time in the north (Assyria), where the earliest settlers built their small villages some time around 6000 bc. The prehistoric cultural stages of Hassūna-Sāmarrā and Halaf (named after the sites of archaeological excavations) succeeded each other here before there is evidence of settlement in the south (the area that was later called Sumer). There, the earliest settlements, such as Eridu, appear to have been founded around 5000 bc, in the late Halaf period. From then on the cultures of the north and south move through a succession of major archaeological periods that in their southern forms are known as Ubaid, Warka, and Protoliterate (during which writing was invented), at the end of which—shortly after 3000 bc—recorded history begins. The historical periods of the 3rd millennium are, in order: Early Dynastic, Akkad, Gutium, 3rd Dynasty of Ur; those of the 2nd millennium: Isin-Larsa, Old Babylonian, Kassite, and Middle Babylonian; and those of the 1st millennium: Assyrian, Neo-Babylonian, Achaemenian, Seleucid, and Parthian.

Politically, an early division of the country into small independent city-states, loosely organized in a league with the centre in Nippur, was followed by a unification by force under King Lugalzagesi (c. 2375–2350 bc) of Uruk, just before the Akkadian period. The unification was maintained by his successors, the kings of Akkad, who built it into an empire, and—after a brief interruption by Gutian invaders—by Utu-hegal (c. 2116–c. 2110 bc) of Uruk and the rulers of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur (c. 2112–c. 2004 bc). When Ur fell, around 2000 bc, the country again divided into smaller units, with the cities Isin and Larsa vying for hegemony. Eventually Babylon established a lasting national state in the south, while Ashur dominated a similar rival state, Assyria, in the north. From the 1st millennium bc onward, Assyria built an empire comprising, for a short time, all of the ancient Middle East. This political and administrative achievement remained essentially

intact under the following Neo-Babylonian and Persian kings down to Alexander's conquest (331 bc).

The religious development—as indeed that of the Mesopotamian culture generally—was not significantly influenced by the movements of the various peoples into and within the area—the Sumerians, Akkadians, Gutians, Kassites, Hurrians, Aramaeans, and Chaldeans. Rather it forms a uniform, consistent, and coherent Mesopotamian tradition changing in response to its own internal needs of insights and expression. It is possible to discern a basic substratum involving worship of the forces in nature—often visualized in nonhuman forms—especially those that were of immediate import to basic economic pursuits. Many of these figures belong to the type of the “dying god” (a fertility deity displaying death and regeneration characteristics) but show variant traits according to whether they are powers of fertility worshiped by marsh dwellers, orchard growers, herders, or farmers. This stage may be tentatively dated back to the 4th millennium bc and even earlier. A second stage, characterized by a visualization of the gods as human in shape and organized in a polity of a primitive democratic cast in which each deity had his or her special offices and functions, overlaid and conditioned the religious forms and characteristics of the earlier stage during the 3rd millennium bc. Lastly, a third stage evolved during the 2nd and 1st millennia bc. It was characterized by a growing emphasis on personal religion involving concepts of sin and forgiveness and by a change of the earlier democratic divine polity into an absolute monarchical structure, dominated by the god of the national state—to the point that the pious abstained from all human initiative, in absolute faith and reliance on divine intervention. As a result of this development, since the ancient Mesopotamians were intensely conservative in religious matters and unwilling to discard anything of a hallowed past, the religious data of any period, and particularly that of the later periods, is a condensed version of earlier millennia that must be carefully analyzed and placed in proper perspective before it can be evaluated.

The literary legacy: myth and epic

Present knowledge of ancient Mesopotamian religion rests almost exclusively on archaeological evidence recovered from the ruined city-mounds of Mesopotamia during the 19th and 20th centuries. Of greatest significance is the literary evidence, texts written in cuneiform (wedge-shaped) script on tablets made of clay or, for monumental purposes, on stone. Central, of course, are the specifically religious texts comprising god lists, myths, hymns, laments, prayers, rituals, omen texts, incantations, and other forms; however, since religion permeated the culture, giving form and meaning to all aspects of it, any written text, any work of art, or any of its material remains are directly or indirectly related to the religion and may further scholarly knowledge of it.

Among the archaeological finds that have particularly helped to throw light on religion are the important discoveries of inscribed tablets with Sumerian texts in copies of Old Babylonian date (c. 1800–c. 1600 bc) at Nippur and Ur, the Sumerian and Akkadian texts of the 2nd and 1st millennia from Ashur and Sultantepe, and particularly the all-important library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (reigned 668–627 bc) from Nineveh. Of nonliterary remains, the great temples and temple towers (ziggurats) excavated at almost

all major sites—e.g., Eridu, Ur, Nippur, Babylon, Ashur, Kalakh (biblical Calah), Nineveh—as well as numerous works of art from various periods, are important sources of information. The Uruk Vase, with its representation of the rite of the sacred marriage, the Naram-Sin stela (inscribed commemorative pillar), the Ur-Nammu stela, and the stela with the Code of Hammurabi (Babylonian king, 18th century bc), which shows at its top the royal lawgiver before the sun god Shamash, the divine guardian of justice, are important works of art that may be singled out. Other important sources are the representations on cylinder seals and on boundary stones (*kudurrus*), both of which provide rich materials for religious iconography in certain periods.

In working with, and seeking to interpret, these varied sources two difficulties stand out: the incompleteness of the data and the remoteness of the ancients from modern man, not only in time but also in experience and in ways of thought. Thus, for all periods before the 3rd millennium, scholars must rely on scarce, nonliterary data only, and, even though writing appears shortly before that millennium, it is only in its latter half that written data become numerous enough and readily understandable enough to be of significant help. It is generally necessary, therefore, to interpret the scarce data of the older periods in the light of survivals and of what is known from later periods, an undertaking that calls for critical acumen if anachronisms are to be avoided. Also, for the later periods, the evidence flows unevenly, with perhaps the middle of the 2nd millennium bc the least well-documented and hence least-known age.

As for the difficulties raised by differences in the ways of thinking between modern man and the ancients, they are of the kind that one always meets in trying to understand something unfamiliar and strange. A contemporary inquirer must keep his accustomed values and modes of thought in suspension and seek rather the inner coherence and structure of the data with which he deals, in order to enter sympathetically into the world out of which they came, just as one does, for example, in entering the sometimes intensely private world of a poem, or, on a slightly different level, in learning the new, unexpected meanings and overtones of the words and phrases of a foreign language.

Egyptian religion, indigenous beliefs of ancient Egypt from predynastic times (4th millennium bce) to the disappearance of the traditional culture in the first centuries ce. For historical background and detailed dates, see Egypt, history of.

Nature and significance

Egyptian religious beliefs and practices were closely integrated into Egyptian society of the historical period (from c. 3000 bce). Although there were probably many survivals from prehistory, these may be relatively unimportant for understanding later times, because the transformation that established the Egyptian state created a new context for religion.

Religious phenomena were pervasive, so much so that it is not meaningful to view religion as a single entity that cohered as a system. Nevertheless, religion must be seen against a background of potentially nonreligious human activities and values. During its more than 3,000 years of development, Egyptian religion underwent significant changes of emphasis and practice, but in all periods religion had a clear consistency in character and style.

It is inappropriate to define religion narrowly, as consisting only in the cult of the gods and in human piety. Religious behaviour encompassed contact with the dead, practices such as divination and oracles, and magic, which mostly exploited divine instruments and associations.

There were two essential foci of public religion: the king and the gods. Both are among the most characteristic features of Egyptian civilization. The king had a unique status between humanity and the gods, partook in the world of the gods, and constructed great, religiously motivated funerary monuments for his afterlife. Egyptian gods are renowned for their wide variety of forms, including animal forms and mixed forms with an animal head on a human body. The most important deities were the sun god, who had several names and aspects and was associated with many supernatural beings in a solar cycle modeled on the alternation of night and day, and Osiris, the god of the dead and ruler of the underworld. With his consort, Isis, Osiris became dominant in many contexts during the 1st millennium bce, when solar worship was in relative decline.

The Egyptians conceived of the cosmos as including the gods and the present world—whose centre was, of course, Egypt—and as being surrounded by the realm of disorder, from which order had arisen and to which it would finally revert. Disorder had to be kept at bay. The task of the king as the protagonist of human society was to retain the benevolence of the gods in maintaining order against disorder. This ultimately pessimistic view of the cosmos was associated principally with the sun god and the solar cycle. It formed a powerful legitimation of king and elite in their task of preserving order.

Despite this pessimism, the official presentation of the cosmos on the monuments was positive and optimistic, showing the king and the gods in perpetual reciprocity and harmony. This implied contrast reaffirmed the fragile order. The restricted character of the monuments was also fundamental to a system of decorum that defined what could be shown, in what way it could be shown, and in what context. Decorum and the affirmation of order reinforced each other.

These beliefs are known from monuments and documents created by and for the king and the small elite. The beliefs and practices of the rest of the people are poorly known. While there is no reason to believe that there was a radical opposition between the beliefs of the elite and those of others, this possibility cannot be ruled out.

Sources and limitations of ancient and modern knowledge

The only extensive contemporaneous descriptions of ancient Egyptian culture from the outside were made by Classical Greek and Roman writers. Their works include many important observations about Egyptian religion, which particularly interested the writers and which until late antiquity was not fundamentally different in type from their own religions. Herodotus (5th century bce) remarked that the Egyptians were the most religious of people, and the comment is apt because popular religious practices proliferated in the 1st millennium bce. Other significant Classical sources include Plutarch's essay on Isis and Osiris (1st century ce), which gives the only known connected narrative of their myth, and the writings of Apuleius (2nd century ce) and others about the Isis cult as it spread in the Greco-Roman world.

In other respects, ancient Egypt has been recovered archaeologically. Excavation and the recording of buildings have produced a great range of material, from large monuments to small objects and texts on perishable papyrus. Egyptian monuments are almost unique in the amount of inscription they bear; vast numbers of texts and representations with religious content are preserved, especially from the later 2nd and 1st millennia bce. Much of this material is religious or has religious implications. This dominance may be misleading, partly because many monuments were in the desert, where they are well preserved, and partly because the lavishing of great resources on religious monuments for the king and the gods need not mean that people's lives were dominated by religion.

In addition to favouring large monuments and the elite, the archaeological record has other important biases. The formal cults of major deities and the realm of the dead are far better known than everyday religious activities, particularly those occurring in towns and villages, very few of which have been excavated. The absence of material deriving from the religious practice of most people in itself constitutes evidence suggesting both the inequality of society and the possibility, confirmed by other strands of evidence, that many people's religious life did not focus on official cult places and major temples.

Many official works of art present standard conceptions of the divine world and of the king's role in this world and in caring for the gods. Much religious evidence is at the same time artistic, and the production of works of art was a vital prestige concern of king and elite. Religious activities and rituals are less well known than this formalized artistic presentation of religious conceptions. The status of personal religion in the context of official cults is poorly understood.

Official forms were idealizing, and the untoward, which is everywhere an important focus of religion, was excluded almost entirely from them. The world of the monuments is that of Egypt alone, even though the Egyptians had normal, sometimes reciprocal, relations with other peoples. Decorum affected what was shown. Thus, the king was almost always depicted as the person offering to the gods, although temple rituals were performed by priests. Scenes of offering and of the gods conferring benefits on the king may not depict specific rituals, while the equal form in which king and gods are depicted bears no direct relation to real cult actions, which were performed on small cult images kept inside shrines.

An additional limitation is that knowledge of many central concerns was restricted. The king was stated to be alone in knowing aspects of the solar cycle. Knowledge of some religious texts was reserved to initiates, who would benefit from them both in this life and in the next. Magic evoked the power of the exotic and esoteric. Evidence for some restricted material is preserved, but it is not known who had access to it, while in other cases the restricted knowledge is only alluded to and is now inaccessible.

Death and the next world dominate both the archaeological record and popular modern conceptions of Egyptian religion. This dominance is determined to a great extent by the landscape of the country, since tombs were placed if possible in the desert. Vast resources were expended on creating prestigious burial places for absolute rulers or wealthy officials. Tombs contained elaborate grave goods (mostly plundered soon after deposition), representations of “daily life,” or less commonly of religious subjects, and some texts that were intended to help the deceased attain the next world and prosper there. The texts came increasingly to be inscribed on coffins and stone sarcophagi or deposited in burials on papyrus. Some royal tombs included long passages from religious texts, many of them drawn from nonmortuary contexts and hence more broadly valuable as source material.

One crucial area where religion extended beyond narrow bounds was in the ethical instructions, which became the principal genre of Egyptian literature. These are known from the Middle Kingdom (c. 1900–1600 bce) to the Roman period (1st century ce). As with other sources, the later texts are more overtly religious, but all show inextricable connections between proper conduct, the order of the world, and the gods.

King, cosmos, and society

The king was the centre of human society, the guarantor of order for the gods, the recipient of god-given benefits including life itself, and the benevolent ruler of the world for humanity. He was ultimately responsible for the cults of the dead, both for his predecessors in office and for the dead in general. His dominance in religion corresponded to his central political role: from late predynastic times (c. 3100 bce), state organization was based on kingship and on the service of officials for the king. For humanity, the king had a superhuman role, being a manifestation of a god or of various deities on earth.

The king’s principal original title, the Horus name, proclaimed that he was an aspect of the chief god Horus, a sky god who was depicted as a falcon. Other identifications were added to this one, notably “Son of Re” (the sun god) and “Perfect God,” both introduced in the 4th dynasty (c. 2575–2465 bce), when the great pyramids were constructed. The epithet “Son of Re” placed the king in a close but dependent relation with the leading figure in the pantheon. “Perfect God” (often rendered “Good God”) indicated that the king had the status of a minor deity, for which he was “perfected” through accession to his office; it restricted the extent of his divinity and separated him from full deities.

In his intermediate position between humanity and the gods, the king could receive the most extravagant divine adulation and was in some ways more prominent than any single god. In death he aspired to full divinity but could not escape the human context. Although royal funerary monuments differed in type from other tombs and were vastly larger, they too were pillaged and vandalized, and few royal mortuary cults were long-lasting. Some kings, notably Amenhotep III (1390–53 bce), Ramses II (1279–13 bce), and several of the Ptolemies, sought deification during their own lifetime, while others, such as Amenemhet III (1818–c. 1770 bce), became minor gods after their death, but these developments show how restricted royal divinity was. The divinized king coexisted with his mortal self, and as many nonroyal individuals as kings became deified after death.

The gods, the king, humanity, and the dead existed together in the cosmos, which the creator god had brought into being from the preexistent chaos. All living beings, except perhaps the creator, would die at the end of time. The sun god became aged and needed to be rejuvenated and reborn daily. The ordered cosmos was surrounded by and shot through with disorder, which had to be kept at bay. Disorder menaced most strongly at such times of transition as the passage from one year to the next or the death of a king. Thus, the king's role in maintaining order was cosmic and not merely social. His exaction of service from people was necessary to the cosmos.

The concept of *maat* ("order") was fundamental in Egyptian thought. The king's role was to set *maat* in place of *isfet* ("disorder"). *Maat* was crucial in human life and embraced notions of reciprocity, justice, truth, and moderation. *Maat* was personified as a goddess and the creator's daughter and received a cult of her own. In the cult of other deities, the king's offering of *maat* to a deity encapsulated the relationship between humanity, the king, and the gods; as the representative of humanity, he returned to the gods the order that came from them and of which they were themselves part. *Maat* extended into the world of the dead: in the weighing of the heart after death, shown on papyri deposited in burials, the person's heart occupies one side of the scales and a representation of *maat* the other. The meaning of this image is deepened in the accompanying text, which asserts that the deceased behaved correctly on earth and did not overstep the boundaries of order, declaring that he or she did not "know that which is not"—that is, things that were outside the created and ordered world.

This role of *maat* in human life created a continuity between religion, political action, and elite morality. Over the centuries, private religion and morality drew apart from state concerns, paralleling a gradual separation of king and temple. It cannot be known whether religion and morality were as closely integrated for the people as they were for the elite, or even how fully the elite subscribed to these beliefs. Nonetheless, the integration of cosmos, king, and *maat* remained fundamental.

