In Egyptian mythology, Osiris is the god of the dead. He is generally depicted wearing a feathered crown and bearing the crook and flail of a king. In the myths, Osiris was killed by his brother Seth. His sister and wife, Isis, retrieved the corpse, and Osiris' son Horus avenged his death.

Osiris' name is more accurately transliterated from ancient Egyptian as Wsir, or from Coptic as Ousire or Ousiri. The characters used to spell his name were a throne, followed by an eye, the order of which was later reversed. There is no consensus on its original meaning, with interpretations including "seat of the Eye," "the seat that creates," "that which has sovereign power and is creative," "He who takes his seat/throne," "the place of creation," and "the Mighty One." The association of his name with a seat or throne is reinforced by Pyramid Text 2054, and it is noteworthy that Isis (see ISIS, Pharaonic Egypt), the name of his sister-wife, is written with the same sign.

Most textual information on Osiris comes from the 5th Dynasty Pyramid Texts, the 19th Dynasty tale The Contending of Horus and Seth, the 25th Dynasty 's De Iside et Osiride. Regarded as one of four children created by the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb, Osiris was one of Egypt's first anthropomorphic deities. He was paired with his sister Isis and the brother of Seth and Nephthys. During the Old Kingdom (see Old Kingdom, Egypt) he was possibly envisioned in jackal form, as suggested by a text in Neferkare's Pyramid. Such a manifestation would be normal for an Old Kingdom deity associated with Death, in keeping with Anubis', Khentamentiu's, and Wepwawet's conceptualization. The Pyramid Texts provide only scattered allusions to Osiris' form and function but make the following clear: he was regarded as the brother and husband of Isis; he was a member of the Great Ennead of Heliopolis (see Heliopolis, Ain Shaâms/Matariya); his brother Seth caused his death; he gained life after death. This last point is exemplified by utterance 219 within the Pyramid Texts. In the early Old Kingdom, Osiris appears to have been a royal deity. References to him can be found in the tombs of private individuals by the end of the 1st Dynasty, although these occur mostly in offering formulas and do not stress any unique relationship between the deceased and the god. By the beginning of the Middle Kingdom (see Middle Kingdom, Egypt), Osiris was no longer exclusively linked to the cults of dead kings (see Kingship, Pharaonic Egypt). The Coffin Texts demonstrate his association with a wider portion of the population and an expansion of his role. Old Kingdom royal imagery associated with Osiris, namely his mummy wrappings, was maintained in Middle Kingdom depictions. In the Ramesside period, as with other major cults (see Cults, divine, Pharaonic Egypt), Osiris was combined with the sun god, Re, to form a composite deity. During the Greek and Roman periods, the traditional conception of Osiris was largely replaced by the composite deity Sarapis, himself a combination of Osirian aspects and the deity Apis. In the Roman period, it was common for deceased private individuals to be represented as Osiris and wearing his crown. Worship of him continued in Philai until it was abolished by order of Emperor Justinian (see Justinian I), although funerary practices derived from Osiris worship continued for some time.

Osiris' most important social role was as facilitator of belief in life after death. Despite the Pyramid Texts' lack of detail about his death, they suggest that he was murdered by his brother Seth. The Memphite Theology (see Memphis, Pharaonic) also states that he was either drowned in the Nile or thrown into it after his death. While Egyptian burial rites predate the creation of his cult, the mythology and ritual surrounding Osiris facilitated the belief that life was possible after the death of the body. His role in early royal burials indicates that he was considered central to the mummification process. Anubis, who mummified the dead, is shown embalming both dead kings and Osiris. The Opening of the Mouth ritual, central to the reanimation of the corpse, was considered a means to achieve the form of life attained by Osiris. The reanimation of the body, the basis for the belief in a life after death, is mirrored in Osiris' epithet "He who is permanently benign and youthful." The concept of life after death was supported by Egypt's yearly regenerative floods, and it was no accident that Osiris was associated with this phenomenon. His connection with the floods, and by extension agriculture (see Agriculture, Pharaonic Egypt) allowed him to be equated with the prehistoric god of harvest, Neper. This association resulted in the practice of Grain Osirises, Osiris Beds, and creating moulds in the form of the god filled with sprouting plants for the festival of Choiak.
The earliest evidence for Osiris posits him in the role of sole ruler of the realm of the dead. This role equated him with the dead king, an association that appealed to both royal and non-royal Egyptians. While living kings were seen as manifestations of Horus, dead kings were believed to continue their rule through association with Osiris, albeit in the afterworld. His role as ruler of the land of the dead also made him the ultimate authority in judging a deceased's worthiness for continued life. Evidence for the belief in such judgment can be found as early as the early Old Kingdom. This concept had been elaborately developed by the New Kingdom (see New Kingdom, Egypt), from which depictions of Osiris overseeing a deceased's judgment are common.

Osiris' associations developed considerably over time. He appears to have absorbed the qualities of other Old Kingdom gods linked with death, such as Khentiamentiu, whose connection with the western land of the dead was subsumed by Osiris. This connection with death, burial, and regeneration associated Osiris with the earth. Such chthonic links, however, did not exclude him from association with certain astral phenomena, such as the constellation Orion, the circumpolar stars, and the star Sirius. Osiris also had an aggressive, warlike aspect, related to his feud with his brother Seth.

Worship of Osiris was widespread, with early sources connecting him to Heliopolis, Busiris, and Abydos (see Abydos, Egypt). His ba (one of two elements believed to comprise the soul) was worshipped in ram form in the Delta city of Mendes. Another recounting of Osiris' death claims that his body was dismembered and the various parts scattered throughout the country. His wife and sister, Isis, magically assembled the various parts, resulting in both his resurrection in the afterlife and his impregnation of Isis. The latter occurrence resulted in the birth of Horus. The various scattered parts of Osiris were equated with the different nomes (see Nome), and this relationship is reflected in the nomes' standards and symbols. This conceptualization identified Osiris with the entire country, unlike other deities, different aspects or manifestations of whom were worshipped in different regions.

SEE ALSO: Ruler Cult, Pharaonic Egypt

References and Suggested Readings


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