



# Introduction

## The sun god of Heliopolis

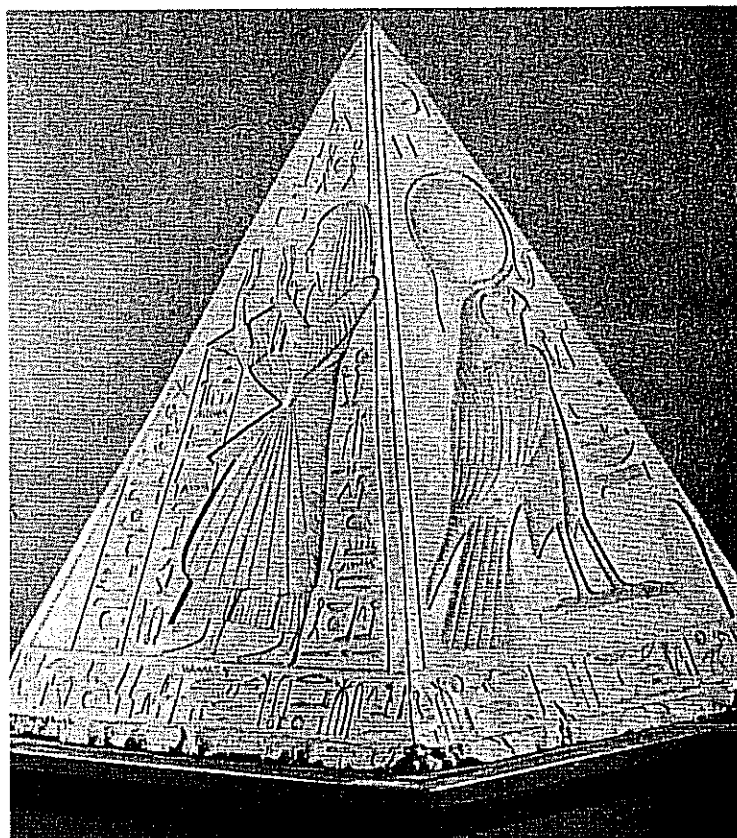
Under the suburbs of north-east Cairo lie the ruins of Yunu, once counted among the foremost and most ancient sanctuaries in Egypt. It was known as Heliopolis, or City of the Sun, to Herodotus, the Greek historian who visited the region in the fifth century BC, well over two thousand years after the first dedications had been made at its shrines. Here the intellectuals at the time of the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt (c. 3000 BC) began to formulate a cosmogony to explain the vital elements of their universe, culminating in their significant input into the *Pyramid Texts* of Dynasties V and VI.

Before the development of a structured cosmos there existed in darkness a limitless ocean of inert water. It was envisaged as the primeval being called Nu or Nun. No temples were ever built to honour it, but the nature of Nu is present in many cult sanctuaries in the form of the sacred lake which symbolises the 'non-existence' before creation. In fact, this vast expanse of lifeless water never ceased to be and after creation was imagined to surround the celestial firmament guarding the sun, moon, stars and earth as well as the boundaries of the underworld. There was always a fear in the Egyptian mind that Nu would crash through the sky and drown the earth. Such a destruction is hinted at in Spell 1130 of the *Coffin Texts* in Faulkner's 1973 edition where we read: 'mounds will be cities and cities become mounds and mansion will destroy mansion'. When this *Götterdämmerung* ('twilight of the gods') occurs the only survivors will be the gods Atum and Osiris in the form of snakes, 'unknown to mankind and unseen by other gods'.

Atum, 'lord of Heliopolis' and 'lord to the limits of the sky', constitutes the demiurge, the creator of the world, who rose out of Nu at the beginning of time to create the elements of the universe. As the sun god, he self-developed into a being and stood on a raised mound, an image suggestive of the banks and islands that re-emerge after the season of the Nile inundation. (It was natural that the régime of the River, source of Egypt's life and prosperity, should influence the concepts of creation just as the early scribes' environment dictated the signs of the hieroglyphic script.) This primeval mound became formalised as the *Benben*, a firm pyramidal elevation to support the sun god; the actual stone relic, perhaps regarded as the petrified semen of Atum, was alleged to survive in the *Hehwt-Benben* (Mansion of the Benben) in Heliopolis.

The underlying notion of the name Atum is one of totality, thus as the sun god he is the *Monad*, the supreme being and quintessence of all the

*The sun god Re-Horakhti before  
the Benben (primeval mound) of  
Heliopolis. Pyramidion of  
Ramose from Deir el-Medina,  
c. 1300 BC.*



forces and elements of nature. Therefore, he contains within himself the life-force of every other deity yet to come into being. In Egyptian thought totality had a positive power, as in the idea of completing an eternity of existence, and a destructive aspect, as in consigning an enemy to the flames. This dualism inherent in the Monad allows for the future birth of a constructive goddess such as Isis as well as a god of chaos and confusion such as Seth.

But how was a male principle in solitary splendour going to give birth to his progeny? Here the ingenuity of the Heliopolitan theologians was boundless. Two accounts evolved of how the life-giving essence in Atum passed from his body to produce a god and goddess. Utterance 527 of the *Pyramid Texts* makes the unequivocal statement that Atum masturbated in Heliopolis: 'Taking his phallus in his grip and ejaculating through it to give birth to the twins Shu and Tefnut'. This direct imagery only makes sense if we remember that Atum possessed inside himself the prototype of every cosmic power and divine being. Otherwise, the word-picture of an orgasm by an ithyphallic sun god becomes a scurrilous caricature instead of an evocation of a sublime and mysterious act of creation.

In Utterance 600, however, the priests offer another explanation for the birth of Atum's children, relying on the assonance of words with similar consonantal skeletons. Punning was a useful tool of instruction in ancient Egypt, as shown by one example from a British Museum papyrus concerned with the interpretation of dreams: seeing a 'large cat' in a dream meant a 'bumper harvest' because the two phrases contained phonemes, or syllables,

that were quite similar. So while not denying that the Egyptian sense of humour was pervasive and is all too often overlooked, we ought to regard the puns in the creation myths as attempts to convey intellectual concepts and not to elicit laughter at verbal dexterity – or, of course, groans at excruciating facetiousness. Atum is addressed as the god who ‘spluttered out Shu and spat up Tefnut’. Shu is the mucus of Atum in as much as his name – from a root meaning ‘void’ or ‘empty’, an apt notion for the air god – is not too dissimilar to the word whose consonantal value is *yshsh* (no vowels are written in hieroglyphs) and which means ‘sneeze’ or ‘splutter’. In the case of Tefnut, whose name eludes precise interpretation and is sometimes guessed to mean ‘dew’ or ‘moisture in the air’, the first two consonants of her name form the word *tf*, translated as ‘spit’. Extracts from the Papyrus Bremner-Rhind bring together the salient points surrounding the procreative act of the Monad:

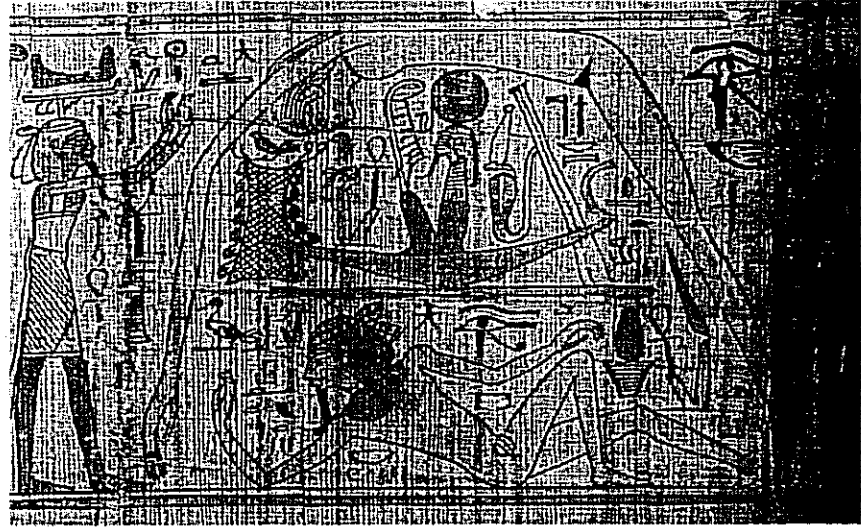
All manifestations came into being after I developed ... no sky existed no earth existed ... I created on my own every being ... my fist became my spouse ... I copulated with my hand ... I sneezed out Shu ... I spat out Tefnut ... Next Shu and Tefnut produced Geb and Nut ... Geb and Nut then gave birth to Osiris ... Seth, Isis and Nephthys ... ultimately they produced the population of this land.

The deities named here form the *Pesdjed* of Heliopolis, a group of nine gods and goddesses for which the Greek term *Ennead* is frequently used. Obviously the nine deities can be restricted to the genealogy devised at Heliopolis, but the notion of a coterie of gods and goddesses was transferable; the Temple of Abydos had an Ennead of seven deities while there were fifteen members of the Ennead in the Karnak temple. Probably because signs grouped in threes in Egyptian hieroglyphs conveyed the idea of an indeterminate plural, the concept of nine gods and goddesses indicates a plural of plurals, sufficient to cover a pantheon of any number of deities in any temple.

The first deities Atum created, Shu and Tefnut, could be represented as lions, as, for example, on the ivory headrest of Tutankhamun. In vignettes from the *Book of the Dead* Shu, wearing the ostrich plume which is in fact the hieroglyph for his name, raises his arms to support the body of the sky goddess Nut arched over her consort, the earth god Geb. Shu’s role in the Heliopolitan cosmogony seems suppressed, no doubt because he had a strong solar streak in his nature that could not be allowed to approximate to the sun god *par excellence*. He encompassed the concept of air permeated by the rays of the sun – a notion used by the pharaoh Akhenaten in the earlier didactic name of the Aten, paramount sun god for less than two decades in the fourteenth century BC: ‘Live Re-Horakhty rejoicing on the horizon – in his name as Shu who is in the Aten [i.e. sun disc]’.

Lioness-headed Tefnut escapes definitive categorisation. Her association with moisture or dew is attested in the *Pyramid Texts*, where there is also a passage suggesting that she is the atmosphere of the underworld. Perhaps the emphasis should be placed on her automatic access to the sun god, since as his daughter she becomes equated with his all-powerful solar eye.

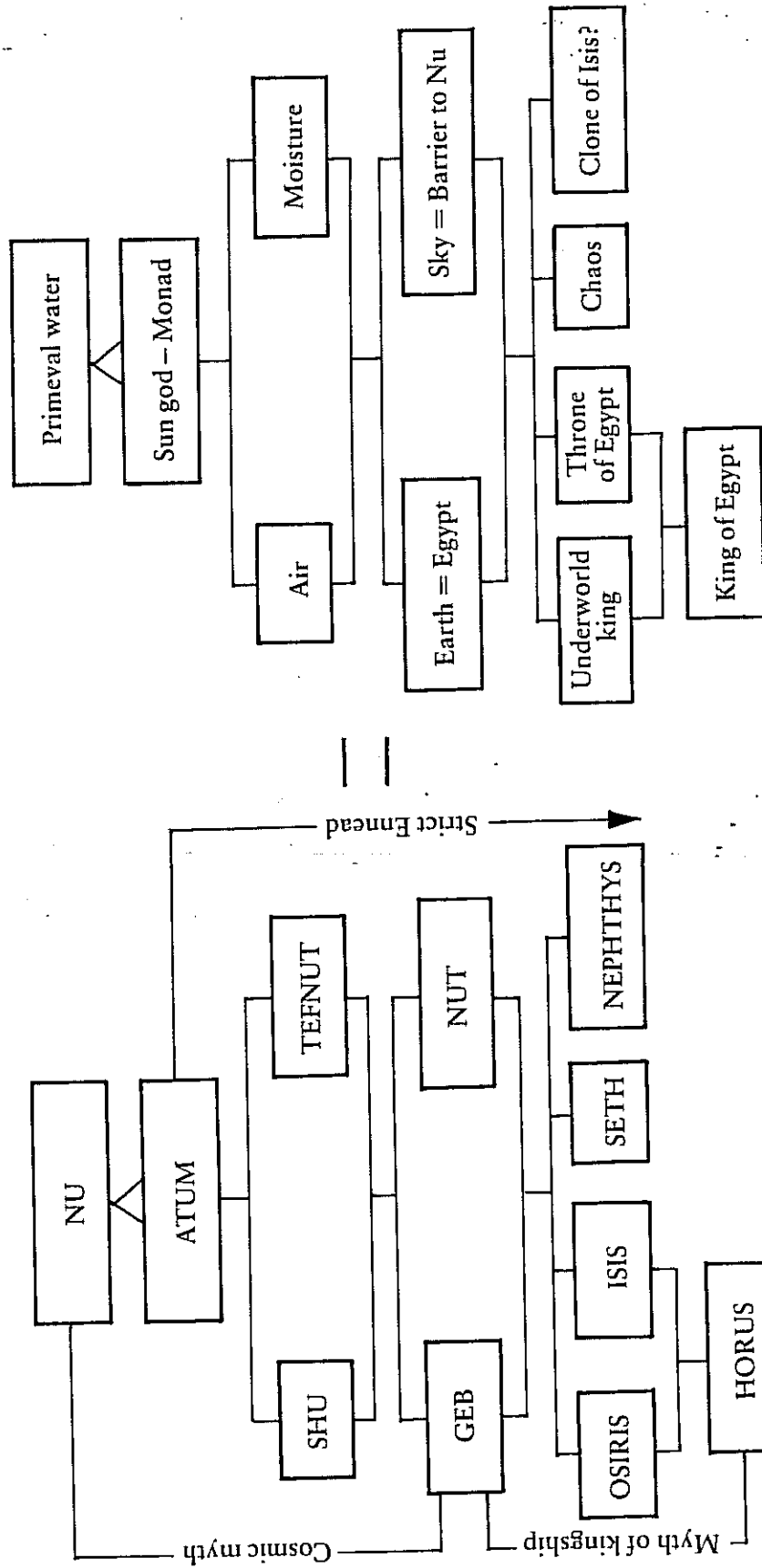
*The Heliopolitan view of the cosmos: the sky goddess Nut arches her body over her supine consort the earth god Geb from whom she is separated by the air god Shu, c. 1300 BC.*



By natural processes Shu and Tefnut gave birth to Geb and Nut. Egyptians viewed the earth as a male principle and the sky female, in contrast to Indo-European mythology. Geb, the earth god, personified the land of Egypt and through him the link was established with the throne of the reigning pharaoh. The sky goddess Nut became one of the most represented deities from the elder Ennead. Her body is stretched across Geb but, after giving birth to four children, she is separated from him by Shu in accordance with the directive of Atum. Beyond her is Nu and non-existence. The ornate paintings of her in the sarcophagus hall of the tomb of Ramesses VI (1156–1148 BC) in the Valley of the Kings stress her importance – here the sun god journeys across the firmament along the underside of Nut's arched body; on reaching the western horizon at the end of the allotted twelve hours of day, the sun god is swallowed by the sky goddess; he traverses the inside length of her body during the hours of night, and at dawn Nut gives birth to the sun god on the eastern horizon amidst a display of redness that is the blood of parturition.

At this point in the genealogy, the priests of Heliopolis evolved a clever transition that incorporated the Osiris cycle of myths into the solar corpus. It lies in the fact that Nut bore Geb four children – Osiris, Isis, Seth and Nephthys. This created a connection between the elder cosmic deities of the Ennead and the political world. It also subordinated the upstart god Osiris, not attestable epigraphically or archaeologically before Dynasty V (2465–2323 BC), to the position of great-grandson of the sun god, thereby emphasising the impressive antiquity of the Monad. The legend of Osiris will be considered later but it is worth noting here that in completing the Ennead of Heliopolis the four offspring of Nut and Geb represent the perpetual cycle of life and death in the universe following Atum's act of creation. The Osiris cycle conforms to the dualism of the cosmic order established by the sun god and a balance is struck between the opposing principles of totality: Osiris *completes* a legitimate reign in Egypt; Seth *destroys* the lawful possessor of the throne of Geb. But more later.

# The theogony of Heliopolis



Osiris was the firstborn of the offspring of Geb and Nut. His birthplace was near Memphis at Rosetau in the western desert necropolis. This spot was particularly apt for the birth of Osiris since his pre-eminent role is that of the god of the underworld and Rosetau, or 'Mouth of the passage-ways', is the symbolic entrance into Osiris' nether realm. An epithet, originally for a funerary deity at Abydos, which Osiris often carries is 'Khentamentiu', or 'Foremost of the Westerners', a title which similarly emphasises Osiris' status as ruler of those buried in the desert cemeteries whence their spirits hoped for access into the underworld.

As the eldest son of Geb and Nut, Osiris inherited the right to govern the land of Egypt. In the traditions of kingship preserved in the New Kingdom papyrus known as the Turin Royal Canon, Egypt in predynastic times was under the rule of a succession of gods – Ptah, Re, Shu, Geb, Osiris, Seth and Horus. (We have to ignore here its continuation with Thoth, Maet and the Followers of Horus.) Osiris' consort was his sister Isis, thus providing a divine prototype for marriage between full or half-brothers and sisters in the royal family. The prosperity of Egypt during his reign is conjured up in eloquent phraseology on the stela of Amenmose (c. 1400 BC during Dynasty XVIII) in the Louvre Museum. There, Osiris is described as commanding all resources and elements in a way that brings good fortune and abundance to the land. Through his power the waters of Nu are kept under control, favourable breezes blow from the north, plants flourish and all animal life follows a perfect pattern of procreation. Also Osiris receives immense respect from other gods and governs the system of stars in the sky. Of his cult-centres throughout Egypt the mid-Delta sanctuary of Djedu (Busiris) and his Upper Egyptian temple at Abydos are paramount. His regalia consists of the crook and flail sceptres and tall plumed 'atef' crown described as 'sky-piercing'. So like many stories throughout history we begin with a benevolent and successful king and queen, Osiris and Isis, ruling in a golden age.

This idyllic scene is now shattered by the usurpation of the throne by Seth, Osiris' antagonist-brother. Tradition maintained that Seth ripped himself from the womb of Nut in Upper Egypt at Naqada where his major temple in the south was later erected. Violence and chaos became attributes of Seth but despite his 'bad press' in the myth of kingship we ought not to overlook the fact that occasions stand out when support for this god was strong. Certainly on present archaeological evidence Seth is a god of greater antiquity than Osiris, since we find the composite creature which represents him on the late predynastic macehead of King Scorpion, a ruler of Upper Egypt, in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. (At present no archaeological proof exists for Osiris before Dynasty V, c. 2465 BC.) The Seth animal has a slightly crescent-shaped proboscis and two upright projections from the top of its head and – if represented in complete quadrupedic form rather than just the head on an anthropomorphic body – it has an erect forked tail.

In the *Pyramid Texts* there are tantalising references to Osiris suffering a fatal attack from this creature. He is described as 'falling on his side' on



ABOVE LEFT The god Osiris, who in the myth of kingship inherits the throne from Geb, is murdered by Seth and becomes ruler of the underworld. His distinctive 'atef' crown comprises ram-horns and ostrich feathers. Late-Period bronze.



ABOVE RIGHT Seth, god of chaotic forces and opponent of Osiris and Horus in the myth of kingship. Outside this myth, Seth was regarded as an ancient and prestigious deity. Here, above the head of his heraldic creature, he wears the Double Crown of a pharaoh. Late-Period bronze.

the river bank at Nedyet in the district of Abydos. His murder is confirmed by the grief displayed in the weeping of Isis. The spells painted on the coffins of courtiers in the Middle Kingdom identify the murderer of Osiris unequivocally as Seth, and declare that he attacked Osiris in Gahesty and killed him by the river at Nedyet. These sparse details reflect the horror held by the Egyptians of the assassination of the monarch and violent transfer of power — it was a theme not to be developed or dwelt upon. It is interesting to note that historically there are relatively few instances of bloody *coups d'état* during



the first two thousand years of dynastic Egypt. In fact there are several inscriptions that try to suppress the idea that Osiris was murdered – although subsequent events do not make sense without his death. An example is the hymn on the stela of Amenmose where Osiris is portrayed as invincible, a slayer of foes and crusher of conspirators, although a little later in the text Isis is searching for his body. Similarly the valuable inscription on the stela of Ikhnofret in Berlin Museum re-interprets the event into a victory-procession for the adherent of Osiris. This stela gives an insight into the rituals in honour of Osiris held at his major cult centre at Abydos: Ikhnofret was an official of King Senwosret III (1878–1841 BC) commissioned by the pharaoh to organise the annual festival of Osiris at Abydos and adorn the sacred image of the god with gold. During the ceremonies the statue of Osiris in the regalia of kingship, decked out with lapis lazuli, turquoise and gold, was carried on the 'Neshmet' boat. The ancient canine deity Wepwawet acted as the champion of Osiris during this procession. There follows the suppression of the assassination of Osiris: the 'Neshmet' boat is symbolically attacked but during the combat it is the foes of Osiris who are killed by the river at Nedyet. Illogically, the next stage of the ceremony is to conduct the funerary boat of Osiris to his tomb in the desert of Abydos at Peqer. Incidentally, this tomb was located towards the desert cliffs in the region called by the Arabs 'Umm el-Ga'ab' or 'Mother of Pots' from the vast quantity of pottery offered on the early dynastic royal monument that had become re-interpreted as the god's sepulchre.

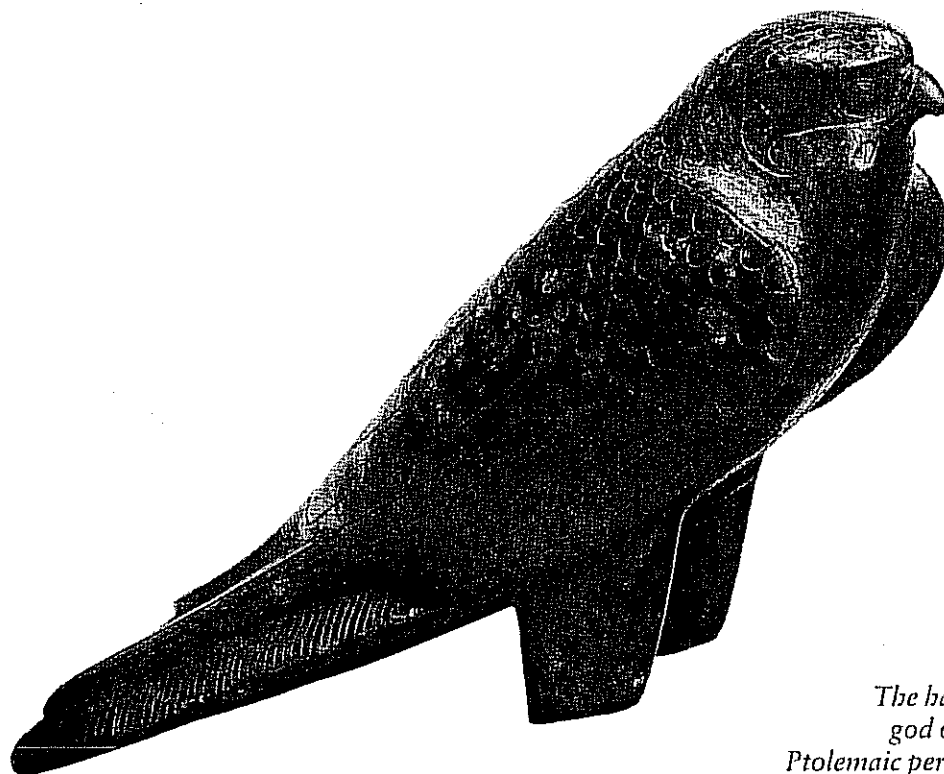
With Osiris dead, Seth becomes ruler of Egypt, with his sister Nephthys as his consort. However, the sympathies of Nephthys are with her sister Isis who is distraught at the death of Osiris. Isis determines to use her immense magical powers to recover the body of Osiris and to resurrect it sufficiently to conceive a son to avenge the monstrous usurpation and murder. Tirelessly she and Nephthys roam Egypt lamenting Osiris until eventually his body is located at Abydos. Other cult centres claimed to be the resting place of Osiris' body – or parts of it – such as the Abaton on Biga Island just south of the First Cataract of the Nile at Aswan or Herakleopolis where the burial was held to be under the 'Naret-tree', but it is at Abydos that we find the fullest documentation of the next episode in the myth.

Therefore, let us go into the shrine of the god Sokar in the Temple of King Sety I (1306–1290 BC), at Abydos. This temple is renowned for the most exquisite reliefs to have survived in Egyptian art, primarily in the seven sanctuaries and in the suite of inner apartments dedicated to Osiris, Isis and Horus. The Sokar sanctuary has suffered severe damage but two representations give explicit visual indications of the impregnation of Isis with the seed of Osiris. In the inscription of Amenmose the goddess Isis discovers the body of Osiris, shades it with her wings (she can take the form of a kite) and creates the breath of life with her wings so that Osiris revives from death and impregnates her. Similarly on the walls of the Abydos temple this act of procreation involves the magic of Isis and her transformation into

a sparrow hawk to receive the seed of Osiris. One representation shows Isis and (by anticipation) Horus at either end of the lion-headed bed of mummification. Osiris, whose putrefaction has been halted by the skills of Isis, raises one arm to his head which Isis is holding and grasps his phallus in the other hand to stimulate it into orgasm. The other depiction follows on from this act with Isis as the sparrow hawk pressing herself down upon the phallus of Osiris. Osiris' role in the myth of kingship in Egypt is now completed. He descends into Duat, the underworld, and reigns there as Lord of Eternity. In Egyptian religious thought it was not the earthly rule of Osiris that was significant but the miracle of his resurrection from death, offering the hope of a continuity of existence for everyone in the underworld where one of Osiris' titles proclaims him as 'ruler of the living'. As can be seen, the main protagonist has become the goddess Isis, the hieroglyphs of whose name contain the symbol of the throne.

## The vengeance of Horus

The resulting child of Isis and Osiris is the hawk god Horus. His name means the 'Far-Above-One', derived from the imagery of the soaring of the hawk. Horus is a complex deity into whom have been amalgamated concepts not directly involved in the myth of kingship – the idea of the god as a vulnerable child or as the sky-falcon whose eyes are the sun and moon. However, all diverse elements were skilfully woven into a tapestry, the sum total of whose different emphases was the god Horus with whom the sovereign of Egypt identified.



*The hawk Horus,  
god of kingship.  
Ptolemaic period bronze.*