



# Stories of the Ancient World

## How the World Began



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Was there a time before the world began? For the people who have lived in Australia since ancient times, the era before time began was called 'Everywhen', while the ancient Greeks called it 'Chaos'.



Some of the stories that ancient people told about how the world came to be might seem far-fetched. But even today, we are still wondering whether anything came before the Big Bang. It is not surprising then that ancient people came up with so many different ideas for how the world began.



## The Heart of Ptah

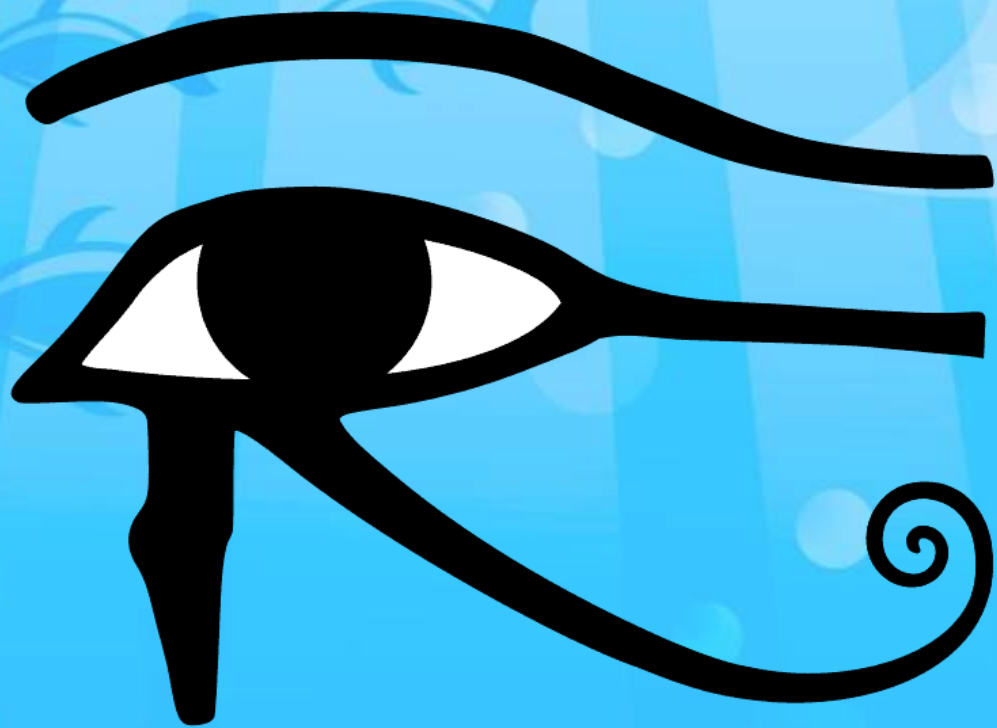
The ancient Egyptian had many different ideas about who – or what – had created the world. But all of the theories began with the sea. The dark watery depths of the sea were all that there was. It is impossible to say when, because time had not yet begun, but one day the Sun was born. The Egyptians called this day ‘The First Moment’.



Some believed that a huge blue lotus flower had floated across the ocean and unfurled its petals to reveal a baby who cast bright rays out over the whole world. They named the child Atum – the Sun and also the creator of the world



Atum was neither male nor female, and had one extremely powerful all-seeing eye. They had been living all alone at the bottom of the sea before time began. Using this loneliness as building blocks, Atum made Shu, the god of air, and Tefnut, the goddess of moisture. Shu and Tefnut grew in Atum's mouth and when they were ready to be born, Atum spat them out into the world.



There was another story that said that Shu and Tefnut had been born under even more mysterious circumstances. The sea in which the world began had a name: Ptah. There were no humans yet to see Ptah, but if there had been, they would have seen a man, much smaller than most, with green skin, a long beard, and legs that pointed in opposite directions.

Ptah could do extraordinary things. He could bring the whole world into existence by willing it with his heart and speaking it out loud. And so, Ptah – some believed – spoke the names of Shu and Tefnut, and they existed. Then he spoke the names of eight other gods and they existed too.



The eight gods helped Ptah to organise the universe. They were paired together, and each pair represented one of fluidity, darkness, the infinite and rest. Shu and Tefnut went on to have two children, Geb and Nut. Geb was the god of the Earth, whose laughter created earthquakes and who was known as the father of the snakes.





Nut was the goddess of the stars in the night sky, and carried a ladder with her wherever she went so that she could go up into the sky whenever she needed to. Nut and Geb were the parents of Osiris, Isis, Set and Nephthys and it is from them that all of the other Egyptian gods descended.



Humans were an afterthought for Both, Ptah and Atum. In fact, the existence of humans was entirely accidental. Many centuries passed and the world thrived in perfect harmony without any humans at all. But as Shu and Tefnut grew older – many centuries older, though they didn't look different since gods age much less quickly than humans – they began to be curious about the depths of the ocean that surrounded them.



Shu and Tefnut went off one day to explore the ocean and never returned. They disappeared into its darkness, and although Atum searched throughout the watery world for them, they could not be found anywhere. Eventually, Atum sent their one eye throughout the whole world to look for the pair. Desperately sad to have lost their only children, Atum began to cry. From each one of the tears Atum cried, a human sprouted. Eventually, the eye found Shu and Tefnut, and Atum was so happy that they cried all over again – only this time it was gods and goddesses that came from each teardrop, not humans.



Although the humans had come into existence by accident, they never stopped thanking the gods and goddesses for the gift of life. They prayed exactly as Ptah told them to, and they built enormous temples to worship the deities who had made the world and put them in it. The Egyptians had a special relationship with the sun god, who they called by different names – Atum, the Sun who gave life to everything, Ra, the god of the midday brightness, and Horus, the god of its setting and rising.



The Egyptians imagined that the Sun was carried on a ship across the ocean. Just as the sun rises from the ocean in the morning and sinks back under it in the evening, they believed the world too had risen from the depths of the sea and would one day be returned to watery darkness again.



## Egyptian Gods

The ancient Egyptians loved showing their gods in sculptures, drawings and writing. They believed art provided the spirits of gods and goddesses with a resting place on Earth – they could also rest inside people and animals, or in natural phenomena like storms or floods. Ancient Egyptian artists were more interested in capturing this spirit than with showing what the gods might actually have looked like.



## Motherly Love

Many Egyptian gods were not strictly male or female – some did not have a gender, or took on different ones at different times. Among the gods with genders, female ones were no less important than males. In Egyptian mythology, the love of a mother is often shown to be the most important force in the universe. This image shows the goddess, Isis feeding her son, Horus.



## Many Gods in One

There were so many Egyptian deities that it is impossible to count them. People worshipped the ones who were important in their lives: sailors might worship the crocodile gods of the Nile, and pregnant women worshipped Bes, the protector of children. People also combined their favourite gods into one – this figuring has the head of a falcon, the body of a crocodile and a disc on its head showing it is also a sun god.





## God of The Dead

Anubis, the god of the Underworld, was often depicted with the head of a jackal, a type of wild dog. Egyptian gods were not always good or kind, and many people worshipped them mostly because they were afraid of them. Anubis weighed the hearts of dead people to decide whether they had been good enough to enter the realm of the dead. Souls whose hearts were weighed down with bad deeds would be fed to Ammit, a monster with the head of a crocodile, the claws of a lion and the body of a hippopotamus.



## The Original Mummy

The Egyptian gods were not immortal. They could be hurt and even die. Osiris, the god of agriculture, was murdered by his brother, Set, the god of storms and violence, who wanted to seize his power. Set chopped Osiris into pieces and sprinkled them across Egypt. Isis, Osiris' wife and goddess of magic and healing, collected the pieces of her husband's body and wrapped them up. After his death, Osiris became the ruler of the afterlife, and the way that his wife wrapped his body was said to be the origin of the famous Egyptian practice of mummification.



The goddess, Isis, was often shown with a sun disc and cow horns on her head. Osiris was shown as a mummy wearing a crown with ostrich feathers attached, holding a shepherd's creek and a whip.



## Blue Eyes

The piercing eye of Horus was worn as an amulet for protection and to encourage healing. This bright blue amulet is made from a material called 'Egyptian faience', similar to glass. Its bright colour comes from a glaze made with copper, which looked like much more expensive precious stones such as turquoise or lapis lazuli.



## Parting Gifts

small amulets are often found inside the wrappings around mummies. Many Egyptians were buried with images of the chosen gods they had prayed to during their lives, or one showing Nephthys (right), the goddess who projects the dead. Removing these objects from the mummies is a practice that many archaeologists disagree with, because it involves disturbing burial sites and digging up the bodies of real people.



## Out of Chaos

For the ancient Greeks, the world began with a strange and shapeless place called 'Chaos'. All things were mixed in together: wet was mixed with dry, good with bad, and light with dark. There was no day and no night, and all the minutes and hours that would later make up time were jumbled together. Then, a nameless god changed all of this. He sifted the land out from the sky and squeezed the sea out of the air. He fished the stars and the Sun and Moon out of Chaos and hung them one by one in the sky. He gave everything a name and a place.



Now that the world had been put in order, it found its own rhythm. The sea flowed towards the shore and back out again, and the Sun began to find its ways across the sky every day. For a while everything seemed perfect. Gods and goddesses, giant and monsters all lived peacefully together. There was no need for laws because everyone was good without even thinking about it. The Earth offered all kinds of fruits and vegetables as foods. The Greeks called time 'the Golden Age'.



The god, Kronos, was the youngest child on the Earth and the sky. He lived in constant fear that the one day he might have a child who became more powerful than himself. As soon as his wife, Rhea, gave birth to each of their children, Kronos opened his mouth wide and swallowed the baby whole. Each time, Rhea pleaded with Kronos to forget about his obsession with power and control and to let their child live. But he refused.





By the time Rhea felt her sixth child kick inside of her, she had a plan. She went to the island of Crete, where she hid in a cave and gave birth to a boy, who she called Zeus. But Kronos leapt over the sea, banged on the door of the cave and demanded Rhea come out. Rhea asked the nymphs who lived there, who sometimes took the form of women and sometimes of bees, to keep Zeus safe. They buzzed with fear, but promised that they would take good care of the child if Rhea convinced Kronos to leave them alone.



Rhea was ready. She picked up an infant-sized rock from the floor of the cave and wrapped it in a blanket. She kissed the real baby Zeus goodbye and stepped out of the cave, cradling the rock in her arms as if it a baby. Kronos snatched the bundle from her swallowed it whole. Then he grabbed Rhea and went back to Mount Olympus.



When Zeus was older, the bee-nymphs told him what had happened to each of his brothers and sisters. In shock, he stormed out of the cave and stomped along the beach, trying to decide what to do next. The waves began to whisper to him. suddenly, a woman appeared out of the sea foam and offered him a potion that would bring his brothers and sisters back. He decided to give it a try.



Zeus tracked down his father, Kronos and sneaked the potion into his drink. As soon as it touched Kronos' lips, he started to groan and clutch at his stomach in pain. He staggered three steps to the left and then three steps to the right and then vomited a huge wave, on which floated all of Zeus' brothers and sisters. Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades and Poseidon, were all there – along with the rock that Kronos had swallowed instead of the infant Zeus all those years ago.



The Golden Age was over. Kronos and his brothers and sisters went to war against Zeus and his brothers and sisters, until eventually, Zeus' side won and ruled over all the world. All the world that is, except humans – because they had not been created yet. Zeus gave the task of creating humans with giving the gifts of the gods to all of the Earth's creatures.



Prometheus spent several days selecting the best material and eventually chose mud, which he carefully sculpted into human form with his fingers. He asked the goddess Athena to breathe life into the mud figures. Epimetheus has been working hard too. He had given cats their curiosity, elephants their long memory and bats their ability to find their way in the dark. But by the time Prometheus had brought the humans to life from mud, his brother had no gifts left to give.



Prometheus was disappointed that Epimetheus had not kept back any gifts for his humans. He promised them something special – that they alone would have the ability to make fire. He lit a torch from the Sun and brought it back down to Earth. Prometheus had made his humans special but at great cost – fire had belonged to the gods and when they found out, they were going to be angry. From that time on, the Greeks worshipped the gods partly out of fear of being punished for the fire that was stolen when the world was just beginning.



## Head of Zeus, 3rd or 2nd Century BCE

This head was carved from marble. Zeus is usually depicted with a beard, showing his authority as father of the gods.

