



Stories of the Ancient World

Rulers of Nature



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Rain, wind, the tides and the rising and setting of the Sun were all extremely confusing to ancient people. In order to explain how these mysterious things happened, many people told stories about gods and goddesses who controlled the natural world.

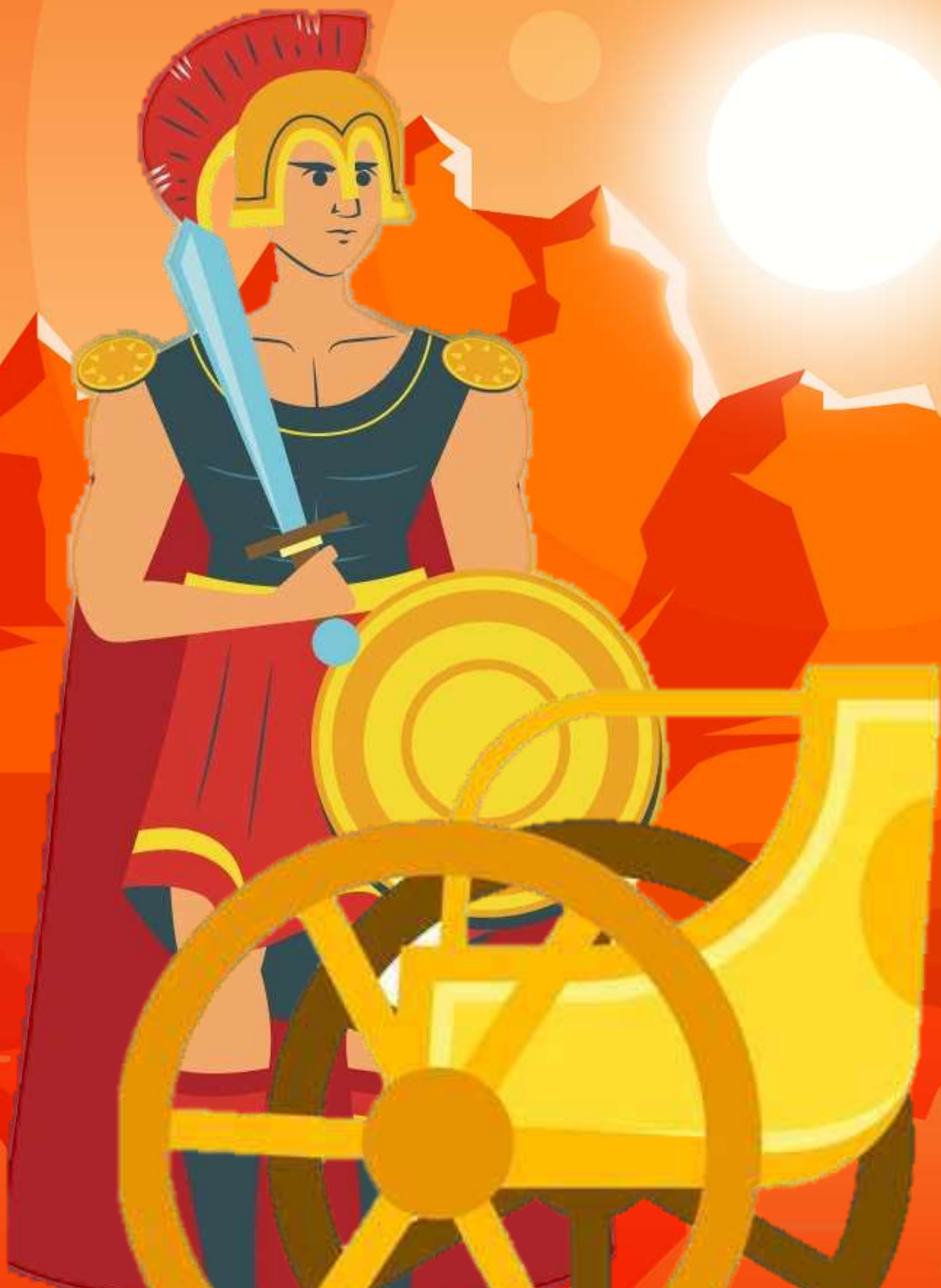


In some of these stories, humans praised and thanked the gods for giving them what they needed from the Earth. But the natural world could also be very frightening. Many ancient people thought that floods, plagues, fires and storms, were signs that a god or goddess was angry with them.



The Sun and The Moon

How does the Sun rise every day and set in the evening? Many of us today, would still find that question difficult to answer, even with our scientific knowledge of the Earth going round in the Sun. different ancient societies answered it in different ways. Some said that a god or goddess pulled the Sun in a chariot across the sky.



Others thought that the Moon was at war with the Sun of the world. Gods and goddesses representing the Sun and the Moon were some of the most important deities in many ancient religions.



Goddess of The Moon

Artemis was the ancient Greek goddess of the Moon. She was also the goddess of wild animals and had a special relationship with bears. In one story, a baby girl called Atalanta was abandoned by her father, who had recently lost her cubs, to rescue Atlanta and raise her as her own cub. When she was older, Atalanta started wearing short tunics, living in the mountains and hunting, just like Artemis.



In the ancient Greek city of Athens, young girls were sent to the temple of Artemis for one year just before they started puberty. While they were there, the girls were referred to as 'arktoi', which means 'bears' in ancient Greek.



Sun Charioteers

Many ancient people thought that the Sun moved across the sky because a god was carrying it in a chariot. The chariot, a small horse-drawn cart on two wheels, was one of the first vehicles ever invented. The ancient Greeks believed that the Sun rose because it was pulled across the sky by the golden chariot of the god Helios.



Surya, the Hindu sun god, was carried across the sky in a chariot pulled by seven horses, which represented the seven days in a week. He was accompanied by two goddesses of the dawn, who carried arrows to fight against the darkness.



Four Directions

It wasn't just the Sun and the Moon that were thought to be controlled by gods and goddesses. While Buddhists often worshipped Surya as their sun god, they also had gods for the four directions on the map – North, South, East and West. These were referred to as the Four Heavenly Kings.



Jikokuten, was the god of the East and also of music. The Four Heavenly Kings were believed to come down to Earth on specific days to check whether humans were behaving. They could be fierce when they found that this was not the case, as Jikokuten's expression shows!



Calendar

The Aztecs believed that the world was created and destroyed in a cycle, with each cycle called a sun. When this sun stone (below), was made, they thought there had been four previous suns, shown by four squares around the head of a god in the centre. The Aztecs whose empire survived until 1521, called themselves the 'people of the sun' and believed they had to feed it with sacrifices of blood. The sun stone is made of volcanic stone but was originally painted in bright colours.

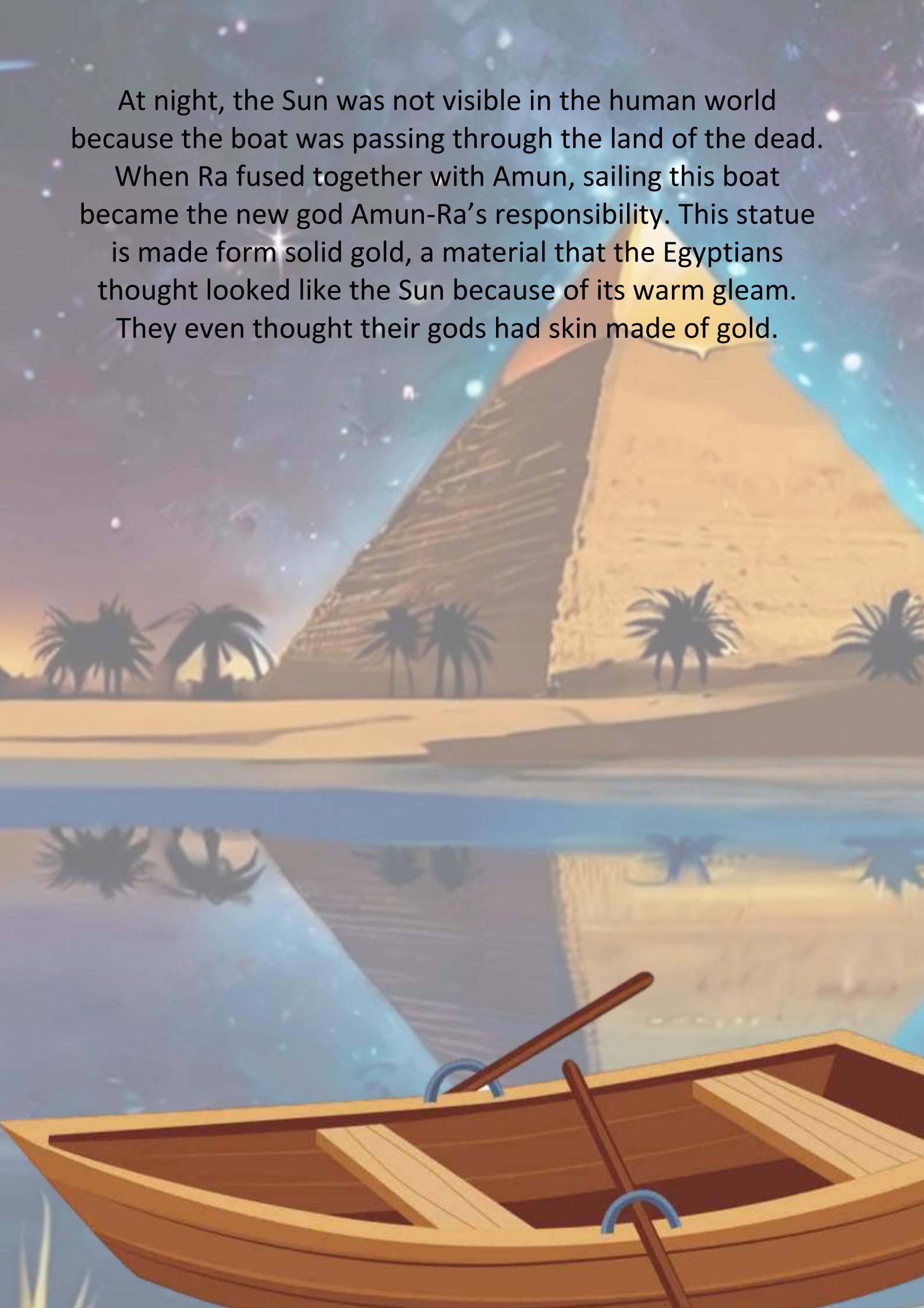


Sun Sailors

Amun was one of the most important gods in ancient Egypt. One story tells of how he fused with the Sun and god Ra into the king of the gods. Ra travelled across the world in a burning boat every day and this is how the Egyptians explained the Sun moving across the sky.



At night, the Sun was not visible in the human world because the boat was passing through the land of the dead. When Ra fused together with Amun, sailing this boat became the new god Amun-Ra's responsibility. This statue is made from solid gold, a material that the Egyptians thought looked like the Sun because of its warm gleam. They even thought their gods had skin made of gold.



Gods and Animals

Just as we love our pet cats and dogs, people in the past had particular animals they liked to show in their art. Some of these creatures were very ordinary animals and others were ferocious mythical beasts. Many ancient gods and goddesses had a special relationship with animals.



Some of them had animal companions that were often show with them in art – these give us a clue as to which god is being shown in mysterious ancient objects. Others could transform into animals or control them.



Animal Mummies

The ancient Egyptian god Thoth, was the god of the Moon, writing, mathematics and everything to do with learning. Ancient Egyptian gods could appear in the form of animals. Thoth is often shown in art with the head of a baboon (a type of monkey). The ancient Egyptians made mummies of animals after they had died and buried them at temples to honour the gods. All sorts of animals were turned into mummies.



Wise Owl

The Greek goddess Athena, called Minerva by the Romans, is almost always shown with her owl companion, like the tiny one she is holding in the statue above. Athena is the goddess of war, but also of wisdom, so it is obviously why the ancient Greeks associated the wise owl with her.



Coins that were used in the city of Athens, which was named after the goddess, had a picture of Athena on one side and an owl on the other.



Half Snake, Half Bird

The ancient Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl was known as the Feathered Serpent. He had the coils of a snake but also the feathers of the quetzal, a bird that lives in Mexico. Quetzals have bright, shimmering green feathers that ancient people loved to wear. Quetzalcoatl is often associated with being a ruler and having knowledge, and he plays an important role in many Aztec creation stories and myths.



Monster Kids

Ancient Mesopotamian gods sometimes had children who turned out to be monstrous beasts. One of these was a demon called Lamashtu, who had the head of a lion. She was thrown out of the home of the gods when she told everyone that she wanted to eat human babies for dinner. Lamashtu roamed the Earth after that, stealing newborn babies and frightening pregnant women.

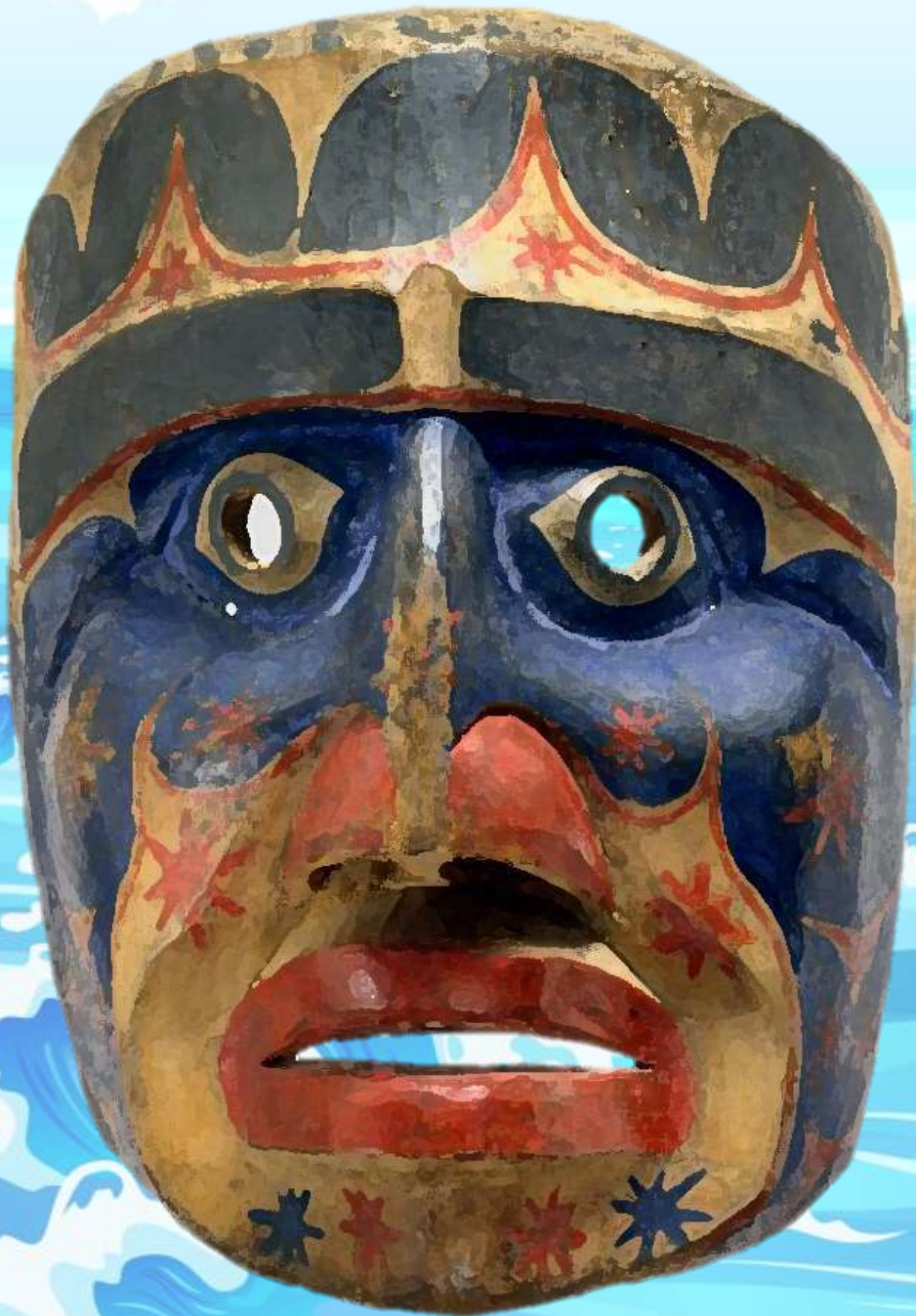


This picture, made from volcanic glass, shows Lamashtu surrounded by objects associated with women – a comb, a pin, and a spindle used for weaving. They might have been given to her by women as offerings, in exchange for protection for themselves and their children.



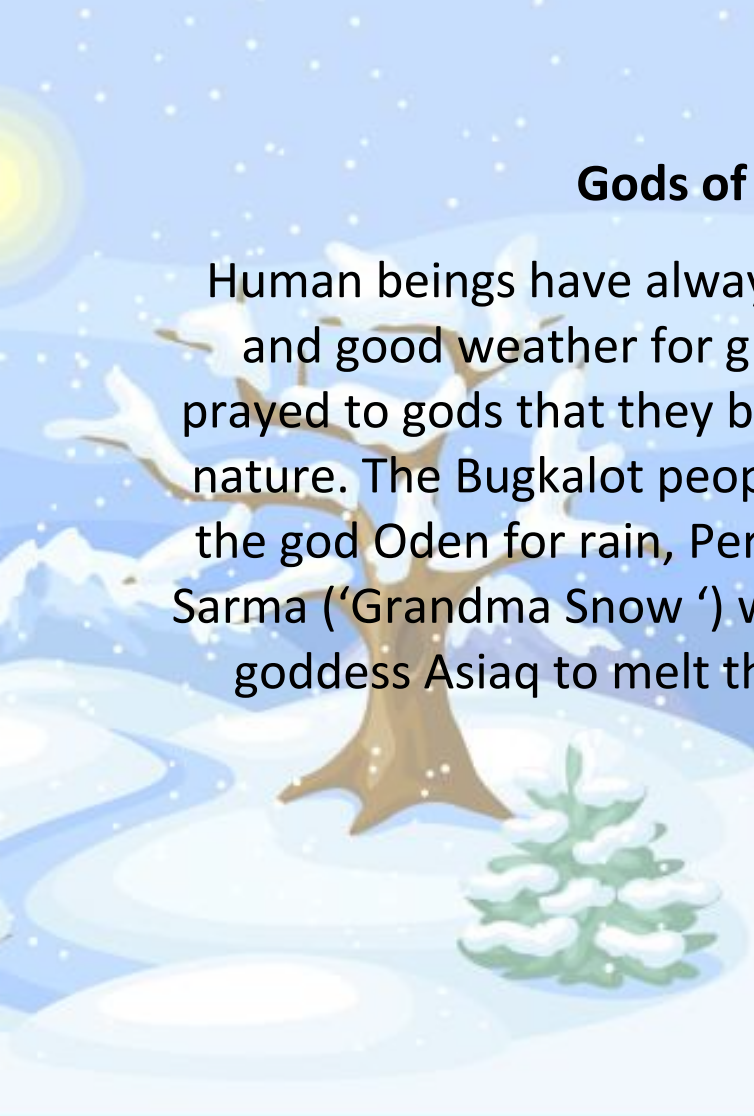
Chief of The Sea

The Kwakwaka'wakw are an Indigenous people of the northwest coast of North America. Their ancestors made this mask to show Komokwa, the Chief of the Sea, also called Kumugwe or Copper Maker. He was a powerful supernatural being. He ruled over all the creatures of the sea, including any land dwellers who fell in. The mask shows that Kumugwe looked like a sea creature himself, from his scalloped beard to the gills around his mouth.



Gods of The Seasons

Human beings have always been reliant on the seasons and good weather for growing food. Ancient people prayed to gods that they believed controlled the cycles of nature. The Bugkalot people of the Philippines prayed to the god Oden for rain, Persian mythology spoke of Nane Sarma ('Grandma Snow') while the Inuit people called the goddess Asiaq to melt the snow and send the spring.



The changing colour of the leaves in autumn was thought to be the work of gods and goddesses too, with Papa Bois responsible for the forests in some ancient African (and later Caribbean) myths.



Harvest Bells

In ancient Japan, bells called dotaku were used in ceremonies for bringing a good harvest. Around the third century BCE, Japanese people changed from mostly eating animals that they hunted, to eating food that they formed, especially rice.



Festivals took place every year when the rice seeds had been planted. People prayed to the gods of the harvest, asking them to make the crops grow. After the festival, the dotaku bells were buried in the ground to absorb the life force of the Earth before being used again. They belonged to the community as a whole and not to any one person.



Nature Spirit

The coming of spring and the fertility of crops was a hugely important event in the lives of many ancient people, many of whom lived only from what the land provided them. This object shows an Indian nature spirit called a yaksha. These spirits could be kind and helpful or mischievous and hurtful. They were associated with crops, trees and spring. Yakshas were local gods and goddesses, and many towns would have their own yaksha who they got to know well.



Gods of The Food

In ancient Egypt, the flooding of the Nile was the most important event and made all of life possible for the people who lived on the river's banks. Although we now know that the good comes because of snow melting in the mountains, the ancient Egyptians thought the gods did it. They thanked Hapi, the god of the floods, and also believed that Taweret, the goddess of childbirth, was in part responsible for it. this stature shows Taweret, who had the head of a hippo.



Prayer for Help

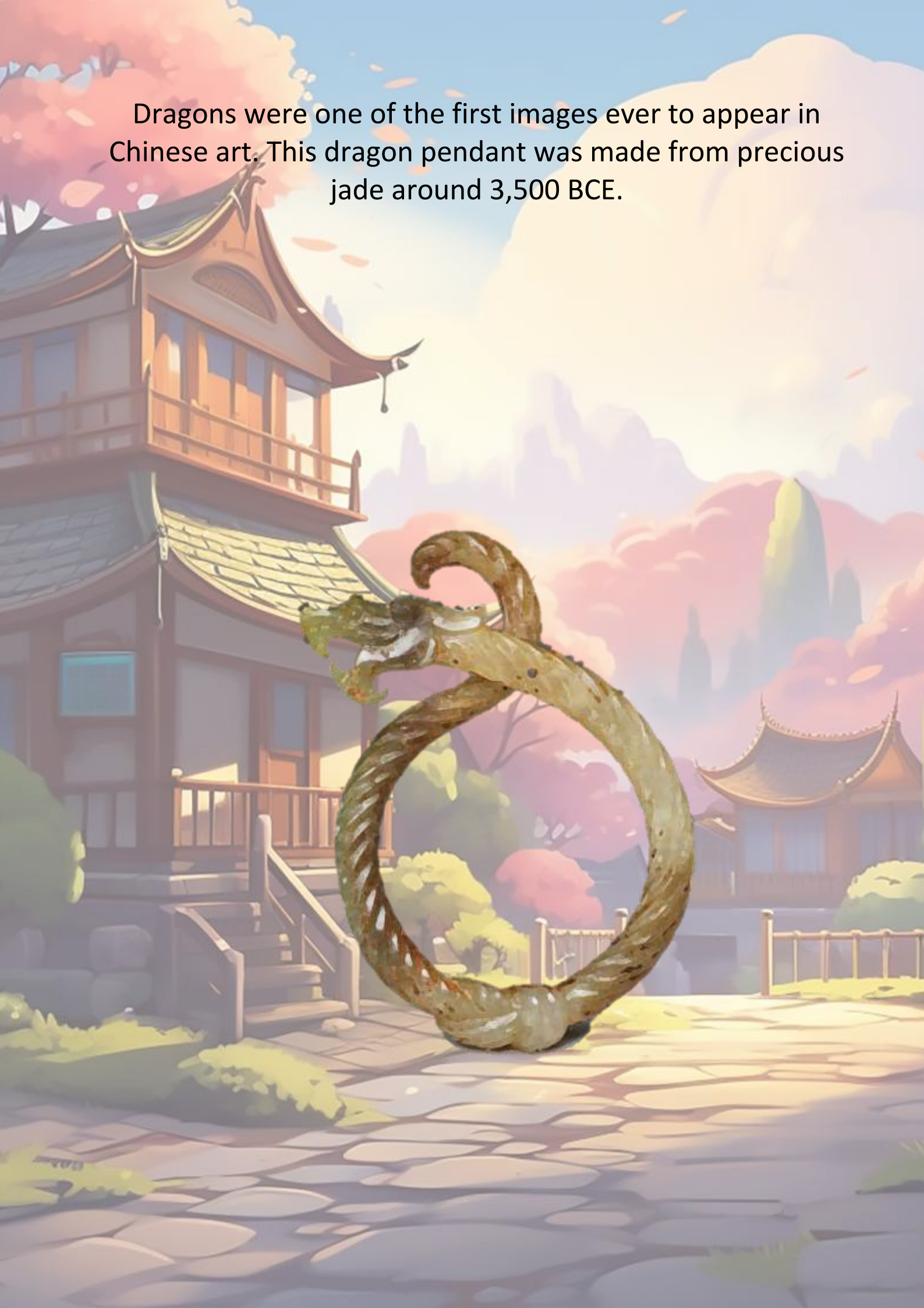
Ancient people knew exactly what would help their crops grow; sunlight and rain. Ancient Mesopotamia, had plenty of both (this area is called 'the Fertile Crescent' for this reason).



The people there gave thanks to the gods for their lucky place in the world – and asked for help when they needed it. art often showed people, like this young man, raising plants up towards the sun (which was often shown flying in the sky with wings) and asking the gods and goddesses to help him.



Dragons were one of the first images ever to appear in Chinese art. This dragon pendant was made from precious jade around 3,500 BCE.



Spirits of Rain

In the Dogon religion, spirits help crops grow and people to have children. The Dogon people lived in a very dry area and so they really needed the help of the spirits. They made statues of humans worshipping spirits and left them at special shrines. The statues were often made of wood, a material that usually rots away, but was preserved in this region because the air is so dry. The figure in this wooden statue is raising their arms to ask the spirits to send rain.





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