

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
ANCIENT  
EGYPT

DONALD B. REDFORD

EDITOR IN CHIEF

Jacobus van Dijk

HELL, Vol. 2, pp. 89–91

PARADISE, Vol. 3, pp. 25–27

PTAH, Vol. 3, pp. 74–76

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

**PTAH.** The god Ptah was one of the major deities of Egypt, yet surprisingly little is known about his early history. With few exceptions, the major textual sources date from the New Kingdom or later, when Egyptian religion had long been shaped according to the dominating theology of Heliopolis. Nevertheless, Ptah is known to have been worshiped as early as the Early Dynastic period, the date of his image on a stone vessel found at Tarkhan, south of el-Lisht. There he is shown in his usual anthropoid form without indication of limbs—a form that he shares with some other ancient gods such as Min and Osiris—that was later interpreted as the form of a mummy. Wearing a tight-fitting skullcap, he stands on a pedestal in an open shrine, holding a scepter. Later representations usually show him with a straight beard; the scepter is almost invariably a *was*-scepter, which from the New Kingdom on is often combined with *ankh* and *djed* symbols. Occasionally the god is shown seated.

The evidence from the Old Kingdom is sparse and consists mainly of personal names and a few titles. Theophoric names composed with the name of Ptah appear at the end of the fourth dynasty and seem to have suddenly become very popular during the fifth, suggesting that the god had begun to play an important role on the level of personal piety. By contrast, royal names of the same period ignore Ptah, and he is virtually absent from royal inscriptions. In the Pyramid Texts, Ptah occurs only two or three times, always in connection with the provision of food for the deceased king. From the end of the fourth dynasty, titles referring to the priesthood of Ptah confirm the existence of a temple in the capital city, Memphis. Most of the holders of these titles are also connected with the royal workshops, particularly with the making of jewelry. Some of them also bear the title “Chief Controller of Craftsmen” (*wr ḥrp ḥmwt*), which soon becomes the title of the high priest of Ptah in Memphis. Clearly Ptah was associated early on with arts and crafts. Perhaps he was originally a local god who assumed the role of divine craftsman and patron deity of artists, craftsmen, and builders when Memphis became the capital of Egypt and, therefore, the location of the royal workshops. It is equally possible that he had been associated with the royal workshops even before these were transferred to Memphis. In any case, Ptah was the chief god of Memphis throughout Egyptian history, and the name of his temple—*Hwt-k3-Pth* (“Temple of the *ka* of Ptah”)—became the name of the city of Memphis and ultimately of the whole country (*Hikuptah* > Gr. *Aigyptos*, “Egypt”). Little remains of this temple, but it is thought to have been even larger than the vast complex of Amun-Re at Karnak. Some of the god’s epithets also refer to Memphis: “South of his Wall” means “having a temple south of the (White) Wall” (i.e., Memphis), or perhaps “whose (enclosure) wall is in the south (of Memphis)”; “who is upon the Great Throne” refers to the Great Temple in Memphis; and “Lord of Ankhtawy” probably refers to the area on the west bank of the Nile between the city and the necropolis in the desert. Other common epithets of the god include “Lord of *Maat*” (the principle of world order), “Great of Strength,” and “Benevolent of Face,” an epithet that is often wrongly said to be restricted to gods depicted in human form.

At an early date, Ptah was linked with Sokar, another Memphite god, who was chiefly a god of the dead; as Ptah-Sokar (later Ptah-Sokar-Osiris), he plays a role in many funerary texts. Other deities worshiped in Memphis were the lion goddess Sekhmet and the lotus god Nefertum, with whom Ptah forms a triad (father-mother-child) from the New Kingdom on. He is also associated with the Memphite form of Hathor, the “Lady of the Southern Sycamore,” who had a temple in the southern part of the city. From the eighteenth dynasty on, the sacred Apis bull of



PTAH. *Statue of Ptah from the Treasury of the tomb of Tutankhamun, eighteenth dynasty.* (Courtesy David P. Silverman)

Memphis, originally an independent god, was viewed as the living manifestation of Ptah. In the Late period, the deified mortal Imhotep was regarded as his son. According to the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, the temple of Memphis also contained a statue of Ptah as a dwarf (Gr., *pataikos*), and images of Ptah in this form have been found.

The meaning of the name *Ptah* is not known. An etymology found in the Coffin Texts (Spell 647) connects it with a verb *ptḥ* (“to fashion”), but although this would obviously agree well with his role of divine craftsman, it is also possible that the verb is actually derived from the god’s name rather than the other way round. The same spell also contains the first allusions to Ptah as a creator god, but these are already cast in Heliopolitan terms. Texts from the New Kingdom further expand this idea, in

particular the Memphite Theology—long thought to date back to the Old Kingdom, now shown to be much later, probably the Ramessid period of the New Kingdom—and a series of hymns to Ptah in a papyrus in Berlin. These texts equate him with the primeval god Atum, who created the world at the beginning of time through his “heart” (thought) and “tongue” (word); this god manifests himself as the earth god Tatenen, the Primeval Mound, who is embodied in Ptah, the divine sculptor who forms a concept of creation in his mind and then realizes it materially. As primeval creator god, Ptah, or Ptah-Tatenen, as he is often called, he becomes one of the three state gods of Egypt, along with Amun of Thebes and Re of Heliopolis. One famous text says that all the gods are forms of this trinity: “Three are all the gods: Amun, Re, and Ptah, there is none like them. Hidden is his identity as

Amun. He is visible as Re. His body is Ptah." In another text, the sun god Re is said to be his own Ptah or "fashioner" who casts his body of gold. In late texts Ptah is even depicted as the father of the Ogdoad of Hermopolis, the primeval elements from which the ordered universe developed. As primeval god he encompasses the whole world: his feet are on the earth, his head is in the sky, his eyes are sun and moon, his breath is the air, and the liquid of his body is the water. Images of Ptah as a sky god show him with a blue skullcap and a body covered in feathers. This universal god is also a god of destiny, who decides between life and death and determines the length of the king's reign and of every individual's lifetime. As "Ptah who hears prayers," he played an important role in the personal religion of many ordinary Egyptians.

Outside Memphis, Ptah was worshiped in many places where artists and craftsmen were active, such as Deir el-Medina and the Sinai. He had cults in all of Egypt's important temples, including those of Karnak, Western Thebes, Abydos, Piramesse, and Nubia.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, James P. *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts*. Yale Egyptological Studies, 2. New Haven, 1988. Excellent discussion of Ptah as creator god, with translations of some of the key documents, pp. 38–47.
- Begelsbacher-Fischer, Barbara L. *Untersuchungen zur Götterwelt des Alten Reiches im Spiegel der Privatgräber der IV. und V. Dynastie*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 37. Freiburg and Göttingen, 1981. On Ptah in the Old Kingdom as reflected by personal names, priestly titles, and names of institutions, see pp. 126–151.
- Bonnet, Hans. *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte*. Berlin, 1952. This famous work contains a detailed entry on Ptah (pp. 614–619), which however relies heavily on the Memphite Theology, which Bonnet dates to the Early Dynastic period.
- Erichsen, W., and Siegfried Schott. *Fragmente memphitischer Theologie in demotischer Schrift (Pap. demot. Berlin 13603)*. Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Abhandlungen der geistes- und sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse, Jahrgang 1954, Nr. 7. Mainz and Wiesbaden, 1954. Edition and translation of an important late Ptolemaic text dealing with Ptah as creator god.
- Junge, Friedrich. "Zur Fehldatierung des sog. Denkmals memphitischer Theologie, oder Der Beitrag der ägyptischen Theologie zur Geistesgeschichte der Spätzeit." *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts Abteilung Kairo* 29 (1973), 195–204. Concludes mainly on linguistic grounds that the Memphite Theology does not represent a copy of an Old Kingdom original, but was newly composed as a pseudo-ancient text by order of King Shabaka of the twenty-fifth dynasty.
- Lichtheim, Miriam. *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, vol. 1. Berkeley, 1973. See pp. 51–57 for a complete modern translation of the Memphite Theology, which is still assigned an Old Kingdom date. The introduction contains a bibliography of earlier publications and discussions of this important text.
- Sandman Holmberg, Maj. *The God Ptah*. Lund, 1946. A fundamental work which offers a comprehensive discussion of all aspects of the god. Like all the literature predating the 1970s, it puts a great deal of emphasis on Shabaka's Memphite Theology, still thought to date from the Old Kingdom. Includes a bibliography.
- Schlögl, Hermann Alexander. *Der Gott Tatenen nach Texten und Bildern des Neuen Reiches*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis, 29. Freiburg and Göttingen, 1980. Monograph on the god Tatenen, who from the New Kingdom onward was considered a form of Ptah. In an excursus (pp. 110–117), the Memphite Theology is dated to the nineteenth dynasty on historico-religious grounds.
- Stolk, Martinus. *Ptah: Ein Beitrag zur Religionsgeschichte des Alten Ägyptens*. Berlin, 1911. An early monograph on Ptah, now largely superseded but still useful as a succinct survey of the data. Contains a list of personal names from all periods of Egyptian history composed with the name of Ptah.
- Velde, Herman te. "Ptah." In *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, 4: 1177–1180. Wiesbaden, 1982. The most up-to-date summary of what is known about Ptah, and the only one to take into account the late date of Shabaka's Memphite Theology.
- Wolf, Walther. "Der Berliner Ptah-Hymnus (P 3048, II–XII)." *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 64 (1929), 17–44. Translation and commentary of a series of hymns to Ptah dating from the end of the twentieth dynasty, which were sung or recited during the rituals in the temple.

JACOBUS VAN DIJK