

The Acropolis

Philosophy for today

Special Edition:
Cultures and
Civilisations of the
Ancient World



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Philosophy, History, Culture, Education and more!



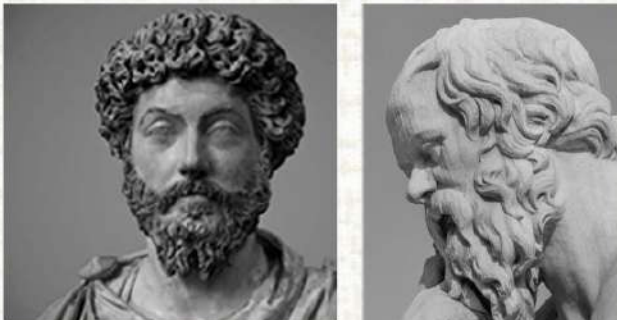
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Philosophy for Living

inspired by
Philosophies
of East & West



What is The Acropolis?

In ancient Athens the Acropolis, literally meaning the High City, was the place which supported the highest ideals of the people. The founder of New Acropolis International, Professor George Livraga, chose this name to capture the key objective of philosophy; that we as individuals build a new high city within, that we discover the heights of our own potential, so that we may externally build a new high city, a new and better world, together. The Acropolis magazine is motivated by this objective and aims to share inspiring content, combining all the major endeavours of philosophy, art, science, education and culture.

About Us

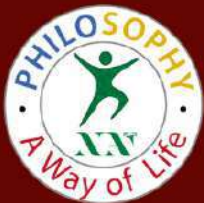
New Acropolis is an international organisation working in the fields of philosophy, culture and volunteering. Our aim is to revive philosophy as a means of renewal and transformation and to offer a holistic education that can develop both our human potential as well as the practical skills needed in order to meet the challenges of today and to create a better society.

For further details please visit: www.acropolis.ie



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Becoming a Good Citizen Through the Practice of Philosophy

In 2022 in Brasilia, the General Assembly of the IONA¹ brought together all the Directors of New Acropolis from around the world. There, the Honourary President Délia Steinberg Guzman noted that today we are facing the fact that physical subsistence has become the fundamental objective for the entire global population. People are constantly seeking new formulas to economically earn a living, while leaving aside all that apparently does not produce any material benefit.

The perception is clear, she says, "that philosophy does not pay the bills, so no one teaches us how to live anymore." We try to learn several ways to earn a living, but we no longer know how to approach what gives value to life.

Unfortunately, and the statistics prove it, even in rich countries, the cases of suicide among young people are increasing as well as the psychological disturbances which destabilise their existence.

Philosophy teaches us how to live. Beyond intellectual speeches and books, knowing how to live begins with knowing who we are. Those who know themselves recognise their strengths and weaknesses, know their resources, their own imagination and creativity, their resistance and ability to survive in the midst of storms. They are able to create an oasis of serenity in the eye of the storm.

The International President, Carlos Adelantado, underlined that recent times have highlighted the fissure that exists between the citizen and the State. It is becoming more and more difficult to establish links capable of promoting the collaboration necessary to face the challenge of living together with any guarantees of success.

The crises we have experienced have repeatedly brought out the best in individuals and the worst in established systems.

A climate of mistrust has crept into the consciousness of the world population.

Corruption, wickedness, lies can find no place when people are incorruptible, have a good heart and make truth an end in their lives.

The time has come to consider temperance, common sense, honesty, presence of mind and the fight against adversity as the supports of inner forces that can balance our emotions and direct our lives to a higher state of consciousness.

Let us remember, underlines the International President, that for the evolution of humanity the existence of a climate of cooperation, mutual respect and freedom is necessary.

In these difficult times, the global initiatives of New Acropolis have helped alleviate the suffering and loneliness of thousands of people around the world.

We carried out 223,300 hours of lessons, which brought together 30,452 participants; more than half a million people took part in various activities to promote philosophy; 24,400 people took part in our 1,951 volunteering activities (social, ecological and healthcare related) in more than 60 countries.

Philosophy as a way of life encourages us to become better citizens.

Alain Impellizzeri
Director, New Acropolis Ireland

¹International Organisation New Acropolis

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Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt

The emergence of the Egyptian Civilisation in the narrative of the Narmer Palette



The Narmer Palette dated between circa 31st century and circa 30th century BCE - Wikicommons

Information on Predynastic and Early Dynastic civilisations in Egypt comes from the archaeological expeditions and the finding of artifacts in the second half of the 19th century. Egyptologists also drew on the 3rd century BCE Manetho's *Aegyptiaca* ("History of Egypt"): a major chronological source of information relating to the reigns of the kings and dynasties of ancient Egypt. The document itself has been lost but it is referred to in other secondary sources.

The earliest evidence of human habitation of Egypt is 700,000 years ago. From 4000 BCE, the El Omari people lived in Lower Egypt (the region of the Nile that runs north from Memphis to the open sea) in dwellings more sophisticated than their hunter gatherer ancestors. Approximately at the same time, the Taisan and Ma'adi civilisations lived in the same regions. They were further developed in terms of architecture: they built large buildings, with underground chambers, stairs and hearths.

During the Ma'adi culture cemeteries became more widely used with three attested to be in use. Civilisation in Upper Egypt (the section of the Nile Valley that stretches south from Memphis to the First Cataract at Aswan) grew slower than Lower Egypt initially. The Badarian culture existed between 4500 – 4000 BCE. They lived in mobile tents and stationary huts. They also used cemeteries to bury their dead, and grave goods, such as food and personal belongings were placed with the deceased.

The so-called Naqada culture, named for the town of Naqada, followed the Badarian culture. Naqada I sub-period (3900–3650 BCE) is known for its black-topped and painted pottery. Their dwellings had windows, hearths, walls of wattle and daub, and windbreaks. From 3500 BCE we see the beginning of mummification while the practice of leaving grave goods with the deceased continued.

Naqada II (3650–3300 BCE), represented throughout Egypt, introduced metal working. They initiated trade with other regions, e.g. Palestine, which led to changes in their culture and art. Their houses were made of sun baked bricks, while expensive houses even had courtyards. Even graves became more ornate during this time.

The city of Abydos (north of Naqada) became an important burial site. Large tombs of up to 12 rooms were built there. It became a "city of the dead" and later a burial place for the first pharaohs. Between 3400 and 3200 BCE hieroglyphics were developed, used as inscriptions on art and for record keeping. The earliest writing was found in Abydos on clay seal impressions and bone and ivory pieces.

Naqada III (3300–2900 BCE) is sometimes referred to as the Protodynastic period. Naqada III was significantly influenced by Mesopotamia and this can be seen in their baking of bricks, the symbolism on tomb walls, designs on ceramics, monumental tombs in Abydos and Hierakonpolis (the "city of the Hawk"). Communities of Egypt grew with trade and, consequently, populations of Upper and Lower Egypt grew.

Of all the things that were uncovered by 19th century archaeologists, one object above all has come to represent the beginnings of "ancient Egypt" to the modern world. An item was found among a group of sacred implements ritually buried in a deposit within an early temple of the falcon god Horus at the site of Hierakonpolis.

Frequently described as a landmark of Egyptian art, King Narmer's Palette can also be considered a landmark of human history. The beautifully carved palette, 63.5 cm in height and made of smooth greyish-green siltstone, is decorated on both faces with detailed low relief. The series of ambiguous scenes have been difficult to interpret and have resulted in a number of theories regarding their meaning.

For many, not only does its meaning remain a mystery, but also the purity and completeness of its manufacture, as many things of Egyptian origin. Using much harder and technologically advanced tools, a modern mason



Predynastic Hieroglyphs - Wikicommons

took 600 hours to make a replica. The high quality of the workmanship and the complexity of the imagery clearly indicate that this was a significant object.

On earlier palettes, human figures had appeared along with birds and beasts as one of the many equal elements of a composition. In the Narmer's Palette, human figures, and human action, take centre stage, with King Narmer's images being 2 or 3 times larger than those of other people. All the other elements of the Palette insistently and constantly identify Narmer as a pharaoh.

Narmer is, in fact, referred to as the last king of the Protodynastic period and the first king of the Early dynastic period. Some say that Narmer, credited with unifying Upper and Lower Egypt, is the same person as King Menes, named in the Manethos manuscript. Narmer married Princess Neithhotep of Naqada possibly to strengthen ties. Her tomb was very elaborate suggesting she may have ruled herself. During this time the use of the four tiered Djed pillar (symbolising stability) and the Ankh (symbolising life) were also used.

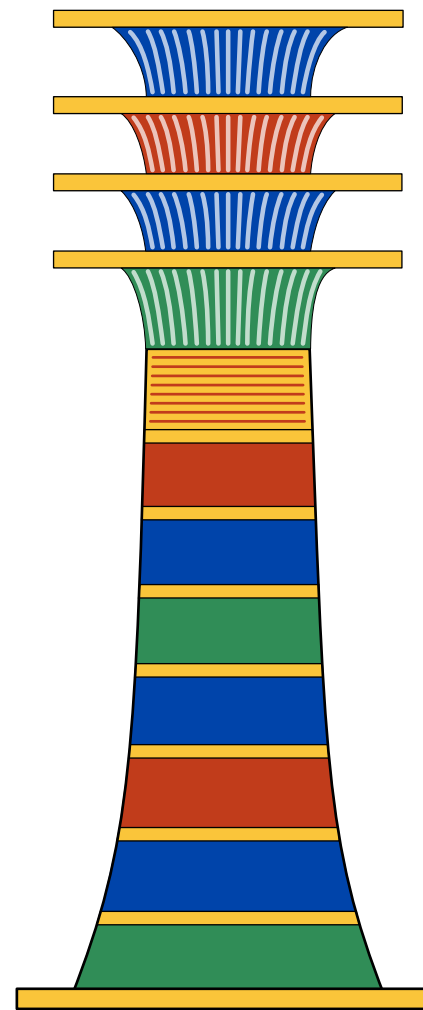
It is disputed whether the unification was peaceful or achieved through military pursuit. Claims of peaceful unification are contested with reference to the Narmer Palette by 19th century historians. They propose that Narmer is portrayed as a military figure conquering Lower Egypt by force.

Recent archeology has proved that the movement of the northern population into Lower Egypt began many centuries before the time of Namer and it didn't appear to have been accompanied by warfare. Some historians argue that the unification was likely a slow process.

Like other decorated palettes, the Narmer's Palette's ultimate purpose derived from the simple pigment-grinding silestone slabs of earlier ages. Research suggests that these decorated palettes were used in temple ceremonies, perhaps to grind or mix makeup to be ritually applied to the image of the god. A small circular pigment-grinding dish is present on Narmer's Palette, surrounded by two monsters, their necks and head entwined; above them are the figures of the King and court inspecting ten decapitated men.

On one face of the Palette, Narmer wears a headdress that later hieroglyphic texts describe as the "Red Crown" and identify as the crown of the ruler of the regions of Lower Egypt. On the Palette's other face, the figure of Narmer is identified by name, size and regalia, the most obvious of which is a tall headdress known as the "White Crown", commonly identified as the crown of Upper Egypt. This is the first preserved example where both crowns are used by the same ruler.

There are a number of formal and iconographic characteristics appearing on the Palette that remain conventional in Egyptian two-dimensional art for the following three millennia. Much of the regalia worn by the



The Djed pillar, and ancient Egyptian symbol meaning 'stability', is the symbolic backbone of the god Osiris. - by Jeff Dahl courtesy of Wikicommons

king (crowns, kilts, royal beard, and bull tail), as well as other visual elements, including the pose Narmer takes on one of the faces where he grasps an enemy by the hair and prepares to smash his skull with a mace, continue to be utilised from this time all the way through the Roman era.

Although modern “translations” of the Palette’s narrative and symbols are still imprecise, it looks like its purpose should be linked to a more sacred function. Rather than an actual historical representation, these scenes were purely ceremonial and related to the concept of unification in general. The art of the period shows that Egyptians linked the concept of unification with that of conflict.

The Palette’s imagery is connected to the careful balance of order and chaos (known as *ma’at* and *isfet*) that was a fundamental element of the Egyptian idea of the cosmos. It may also be related to the daily journey of the Sun god that became a central aspect in Egyptian religion in the subsequent centuries. In later texts, the Red Crown is connected with bloody battles fought by the Sun god just before dawn on his daily journey. The White Crown is related to the dazzling brilliance of the full midday sun at

its zenith as well as the luminous nocturnal light of the stars and moon.

By wearing both crowns, Narmer may not only be ceremonially expressing his dominance over the unified Egypt, but also the early importance of the solar cycle and the king’s role in this daily process.

Another interpretation is that this artifact displays the inner path that the individual needs to walk during his life in order to be able to execute authentic power over himself and act in the world according to wisdom. By this reading, Narmer’s Palette is not about warfare in the world but rather of pursuing peace within in order to avoid the former.

In any case, the Palette’s careful images insist on certain symbols of power identified with the office of the pharaoh. Amid images of suffering, the defining signs of kingship, courtly rank and hierarchy are laid out in ordered and precisely balanced compositions. However, not all the elements had to be immediately understood: the scenes hold their own wisdom, internal dialogues and tremendous power.

The Narmer’s Palette lays out the attributes, the qualities and the identity of the pharaonic order, whether inner or outer. It’s not just a mere documentation of the earthly exploits of a single man; its craftsmanship employs images far older than any text, to display a new system, and to offer in its balanced compositions, a meditation on the suffering required to maintain equilibrium in the daily battlefield of life over chaos and over oneself.

Whether by peaceful, forceful or other means, it is indisputable that the unification of Egypt, personified by the office of the pharaoh, laid the foundation for the rise of one of the greatest civilisations of all times.

Sofia Clifford & Giulia Giacco

The Mystic World of the Sufi

An insight into the deep history of esoteric Islam

Tasawuf or Sufism is widely known as Islamic mysticism or asceticism. This however may not mean much to many on the surface. After all mysticism is supposed to be mystic! A much simpler description is the ways through which one reaches God through personal experiences.

Encountering the divine is what is expected in the afterlife, but Sufism extends this fundamental principle to the possibility of realising such proximity in this life. Sufi orders can be found all across the Muslim world and beyond. Each Sufi order or Tariq takes its own identity based on practices, reflecting its cultural heritage and linguistic context. One thing, however, remains universal in Sufi traditions: the core message of looking within to find the divine through self-reflection and examination. The more you polish the mirror of the heart, the more you will see the light within, they say.

But even this ‘heavenly journey’ divides those in search of the divine, and so we can find in Sufism two attitudes: on the one hand, there are those who choose absolute isolation and mourn their separation from the one and only God, and are only after their own salvation; and on the other, there are those who use their ethereal and spiritual experiences to lead others in the direction of the Truth.

The second are those with ‘prophet-like’ qualities, worthy of becoming *murshid* or spiritual guides, and *murrids*, which are followers, would pledge allegiance to them in their journey to find enlightenment.

The Sufi does not prescribe to the strict monastic piety of the devout. In fact, this attitude has been widely criticised and attacked by mainstream and extremist sects within Islam as deviants from the more traditional doctrine and Sufis have long been persecuted as infidels (*Kafirs*) because of their unconventional beliefs and practices.

Junayd of Baghdad, a Persian Sufi leader of the Iraqi Tasawuf who was considered one of the central figures in the spiritual chain of many Sufi orders, (830–910 CE) said that “Tasawuf is not achieved through excess of prayer and fasting, but it is reached through strength of heart and generosity of human spirit.”

Rumi, the famous 13th-century Persian poet and philosopher whose followers founded the Mewlewī Sufi order (the so-called “whirling dervishes”) in Konya after his death, describes Tasawuf as “finding happiness when sadness strikes”.

If we look at the origin of the word, “sufi” is believed to



Dance of Sufi Dervishes circa 1480 /1490 The Metropolitan Museum of Arts

come from *şūf* (“wool” in Arabic), a reference to the rough wool cloth early day Sufis would wear to symbolise simplicity and rejection of the material world. An alternative etymology links the name to the word *saf* or line. Sufis are those in the first *saf*: they are, in other words, brave pioneers and leaders in search of the light.

There are many symbols that may help us understand better the mystic world of Sufism, often considered as “the inward dimension of Islam”. Certain terms in Sufism hold symbolic meanings in esoteric (inner, hidden) literature. They are even considered as the holiest of Sufi knowledge.

The wide and deep spectrum of Sufism practices and ideology, in addition to its mystic nature, means that



Beggar's Bowl (Kashkul) late 19th–early 20th century - The Metropolitan Museum of Art

documentation and analysis of Sufism is scarce. Therefore, symbols and creative ways of expression have long been the way to communicate meanings and lessons. To the Sufi, the world is a reflection of that which is above, so the images used are mainly drawn from natural or higher emotional elements. The journey towards God is a journey of symbols in the world of Sufis.

A Sufi sees the symbols and through them, yearns for his true purpose and thus thrives to seek his truth. Every time he forgets and drowns in his inner subconscious, he sees a symbol, remembers, and tries to look beyond it. What can be seen with external powers can be perceived with internal ones too. Here is a short overview of some of the main elements of Sufi symbolism that may help us better connect to its nature:

Wine and drinking

Wine and gatherings around it have long been present in Middle Eastern literature, similarly to the neighbouring Mediterranean cultural region. Sufis used the concept to visualise insatiable yearning, and an eruption of happiness, comradeship, detachment from the ordinary, all while drawing an intricate distinction between themselves and the dry, pious clerics of mainstream religious orders. "There are men here who drink up seas of existence and ask for more with open mouths" (Bayazid Bastam, 9th century CE).

The Lover

By contemplating the beauty of a loved one, of someone we yearn for, we can perceive a higher and more universal beauty. Which is the beauty of God for the Sufi. While this symbolising of the divine through the "lover" is a prominent concept, to many Sufis the beliefs of the simple believer or even the exoteric theologian was nothing but a "hidden idolatry". He who is not truly "realised" cannot truly love God, rather he loves what he conceived him to be.

The "realised" however, sees the beauty of the lover and loves unconditionally and without expectations, and is so satisfied in that love that nothing else matters. "The beggar of your home, of the eight heavens has no needs/ The prisoner of your love, from both worlds is thus free". (Hafez, Persian poet 1315-1390 CE)

Kashkul (the beggar's bowl)

A small bowl, originally made of a particular fruit and later found in ceramic or metallic material, is a signifier of Sufis, especially in Iran. Decorated with intricate designs and messages, it is yet a simple and powerful sign of poverty as well as self-sufficiency, and detachment from material riches. Its etymology is very interesting as the noun is composed of the word konash meaning "to make" and kol meaning "complete" or "full".

The Tree

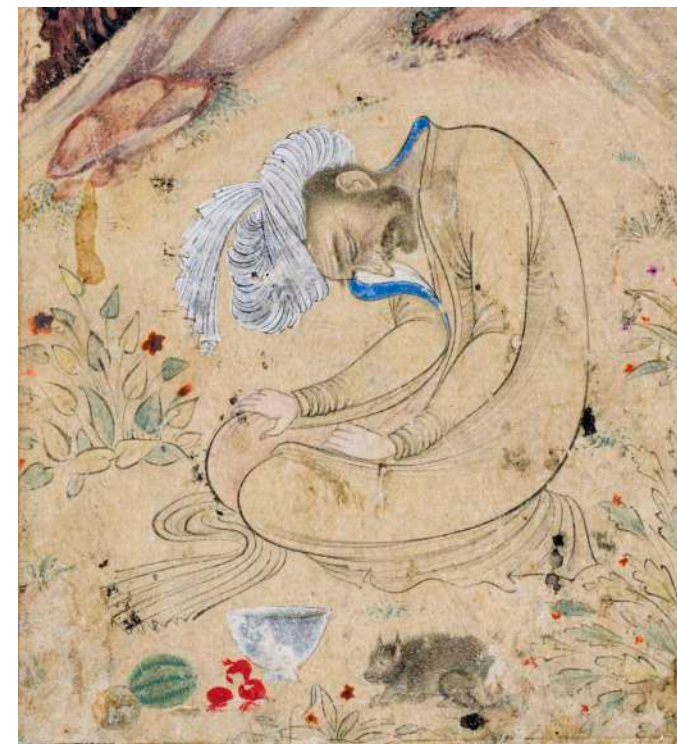
This is a metaphor of the world, and it has a prominent place in Sufi ideology. The tree is a central image; starting from roots (the essence) we arrive at the trunk (the seven heavens), from where branches and leaves (the four elements) extend to bear its fruits (the Human being). Other trees come up in Sufi texts as well; the 'tree of knowledge', 'the tree of light' and 'the tree of existence', which are often a clear hint at THE tree in the story of Adam and Eve.

The relationship between Sufi symbols and literature is famously mutual. Sufi drew from cultural and existing literary concepts and depictions, and in turn the literature of the region was heavily influenced by the presence and ideas of the Sufis. This marriage is particularly fruitful, and for many literature has been a way to become acquainted with Sufism.

It deserves a separate presentation as some of the masterpieces it was able to produce, especially in poetry, are particularly beautiful, a beauty that can cross the frontiers of languages and translations, thanks especially to the generous use of imagination and symbolism.

Sufism consists of an unfathomably rich tradition of poetry written in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and many other languages. The West knows little about this literature which is a loss, since such poetry forms a historic literary testament to a shared humanity.

The mystic way of the Sufis has inspired many and has engaged scholars in debating and decoding their messages for years. The quiet, humble and sometimes "blasphemous" Sufis, crazed to the eyes of the world, have inspired poets and artists for centuries. But the message, no matter how conveyed, remains the same; look within to find what you seek.



A Sufi in Ecstasy in a Landscape - Iran, circa 1650-1660
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

*For years my heart inquired of me
Where Jamshid's sacred cup might be,
And what was in its own possession
It asked from strangers constantly
Hafez, sonnet 143*

Mysticism in the Islamic context has traditionally been intertwined with the notion of Hikmah, which is at once both wisdom and knowledge. Islamic mysticism stands on two pillars: first practical (of which Sufism is part), then through a type of philosophy which includes, but is not limited to discursive reasoning.

The term "Sufism" refers to a broad range of practices and concepts as part of the tradition of spiritual practice called Taṣawwuf in Arabic. Sufism refers to the inner dimension of Islam which aims to attain mystical knowledge and love of God through meditative practices, or dhikr, ethical cultivation, and purification of the heart and self.

Additionally, Sufi figures and concepts have come to have cultural significance beyond the circle of people formally initiated into Taṣawwuf, such that the Sufi tradition can be understood as including a range of social and cultural practices and relationships. Poetry, art, liturgies, biographical and philosophical works, and other forms of Sufi literature are part of this wider significance.

Interestingly enough, whereas many observers have depicted Sufism as marginal to mainstream Islam and have predicted the demise of Sufism as the world modernises and more individuals have access to "education", Sufism has for centuries been central to mainstream Islam, and it continues to thrive around the world among all social classes.

Alaleh Eghbali & Giulia Giacco



The “Sacred Marriage” in ancient civilisations

“Hieros Gamos” (literally “Sacred Marriage”) is the Greek term used by scholars to refer to the symbolic union of the deities of Sun-Sky-Fire with the Water-Earth-Nature goddesses, in mythologies from different ancient civilisations. From this metaphysical union, a host of other deities was often born and the fertility of the land was renewed and guaranteed every year.

Furthermore, historians have observed that in ancient societies based on cereal agriculture, especially in the Middle East, at least once a year special dignitaries representing the deities would enact that metaphysical union in the physical plane. This ritual was deemed to bring about not only the fertility of the land and prosperity of the community, but also the continuation of the cosmos.

As ritually expressed, there are three main forms of the hieros gamos: between god and goddess (most usually symbolized by statues); between goddess and priest-king (who assumes the role of the god); and between god and priestess (who assumes the role of the goddess). In all three forms there is a relatively fixed form to the ritual: a procession that conveys the divine actors to the marriage celebration; an exchange of gifts; a purification of the pair; a wedding feast; a preparation of the wedding chamber and bed; and the secret, nocturnal act of intercourse. In some traditions this appears to have been an actual physical act between sacred functionaries who impersonate the deities; in other traditions it appears to have been a symbolic union. On the following day the marriage and its consequences for the community are celebrated.

We can see some scholars have applied the term hieros gamos to all myths of a divine pair (e.g., heaven–earth)

whose sexual intercourse is creative. On the other hand, some claim the term should probably be restricted only to those agricultural cultures that ritually reenact the marriage and that relate the marriage to agriculture, as in Mesopotamia, Phoenicia, Canaan, Israel, Greece, and India.

For a broader investigation, let us look into one example of each: one mythological and one historical.

As stated in the book “The Sacred Isle” by Dáithí Ó hÓgáin, in pre-Christian Ireland the goddess Danu was the consort of the Daghdha in his Newgrange chamber. Danu was the earth-goddess representing the soil and its irrigation and was taken to be the partner of the ancestral sun-deity.

Interestingly, an aquatic goddess called Danu occurs in Sanskrit literature. It therefore appears that the Irish Danu was an Indo-European goddess in origin. This Indo-European goddess, whose own name would have meant “the flowing one”, is considered to have given rise to the names of many rivers, most notably the Danube. Since Celtic was the only Indo-European language to have reached Ireland, the cult of Danu must have been brought here as part of the Celtic religions. Once in Ireland, this river-goddess in origin took over the function of land-goddess in general.

If we want to look for historical examples of rituals enacting the metaphysical sacred marriage, the Sumerian civilization (the first culture to flourish in Mesopotamia) and later Babylon are better documented.

In the myths concerning Inanna (the primordial goddess) and Dumuzi (the primordial god), Dumuzi must spend half the year in the underworld. When his time is up and he returns from the underworld in springtime, he joyously mates with Inanna and the land reawakens. Those familiar with the Greek myth of Demeter and Persephone will recognize the precedence found in the earlier Inanna myths.

Some of their religious rituals involved sacred sexuality in the form of the Sacred Marriage or hieros gamos, an act simulating marriage between the fertility goddess Inanna/Ishtar and the shepherd god, Dumuzi. In this act, the high priestess of Inanna would have intercourse with either the high priest or the king of the city. Through the sexual act, divine fertile energy was released on the land ensuring good crops and productive herds.

All the great ancient civilisations of East and West aimed to build a society that reflected, on Earth, the harmony they saw in the Universe. Such perception was not only a matter of religious devotion, but also of deep philosophical investigation, which can be gleaned from their myths.

Inanna, who later transformed into the Akkadian goddess Ishtar, the Phoenician Astarte and later still as the Greek goddess Aphrodite, is the goddess of love, sex, beauty and fertility. There seems to have existed at least one order of priestesses of this goddess who performed as sacred courtesans. This order of priestesses was called Nin-Gig in Sumeria, and the rite was essentially performed as a devotion or prayer to the goddess to ensure fertility.

All the great ancient civilisations of East and West aimed to build a society that reflected, on Earth, the harmony they saw in the Universe. Such perception was not only a matter of religious devotion, but also of deep philosophical investigation, which can be gleaned from their myths. For us, an enriching exercise is to remain open-minded enough to accept that, although not utilizing the same technical language we find in our scientific articles, myths often contain a rich knowledge of cosmogony and psychology, veiled behind symbols and metaphors.

Lilian Salaber & Laura Lorincz



Rosarium Philosophorum - Anonymous (1550)



Shinto - A spiritual history of Japan

Shinto (神道) is often called Japan's "indigenous" religion, but some sources claim that it originated in an animistic tradition that may be older than the Japanese islands themselves. Its origins are difficult to trace, but Shintoism was the only religion in Japan until the arrival of Buddhism in the 6th century CE, which converted many Japanese. From then on Shinto faiths and traditions took on Buddhist elements, and later, Confucian ones. Confucianism and Taoism also influenced Japan, but more as philosophies rather than religions.

Due to the Chinese tradition, the people of Japan felt the need to identify their own religion, and from this arose Shintoism, which is a more traditional form of Japanese spirituality, which can also be viewed as a religion.

Shinto's key concepts of purity, harmony, family respect, and subordination of the individual before the group have become parts of the Japanese character whether the individual claims a religious affiliation or not.

The ancient Japanese worshipped divine ancestors and communicated with the spirit world via shamans; some elements of these beliefs were incorporated into what became known as Shinto, which began during the period of the Yayoi culture (c. 300 BCE - 300 CE).

To give us some historical context of the people at the time and how Shintoism evolved, we can observe the emergence of the Yayoi from the prior culture of the

Jōmon, one of the oldest cultures of prehistoric Japan. The name Jōmon, meaning "cord-marked", referred to the characteristic pottery attributed to that period. The pottery was decorated by impressing cords into the surface of wet clay. Jōmon pottery is generally accepted to be among the oldest in East Asia and the world.

However it was the rise of the Yayoi people that saw considerable leaps in development to Japanese culture. Key areas of rice cultivation and metallurgy brought about remarkable transformations. The Yayoi crafts included weaving and silk production, evolutions in glassmaking and woodworking, as well as new architectural styles. It was their metallurgy that allowed them to spread, with bronze and iron weapons and tools giving them the advantage needed to replace the Jōmon people as the dominant culture in Japan.

The population of Japan began to increase rapidly, with an estimated 10-fold increase over the Jōmon. It was during the Yayoi period that the various tribes gradually formed into a number of kingdoms. The Yayoi gave way to the Kofun after the 4th century CE and though this would soon see Buddhism introduced to the land of Wa (倭, "Japan", from Chinese 倭; which is the oldest attested name of Japan in foreign sources), Shinto remained indelibly ingrained in the traditions of Japan.

In Shinto tradition certain natural phenomena and geographical features were given an attribution of divinity, for

example the sun goddess "Amaterasu" and the wind god "Susanoo". Rivers and mountains were also especially important.

The word Shinto comes from Chinese "Shen" (神), meaning "divine spirit", and "Tao" (道), meaning "way", to form the meaning of "Way of the Spirits". In Shinto, gods, spirits or supernatural forces are known as "Kami", and governing nature in all its forms, they are thought to inhabit places of particular natural beauty. In contrast, evil spirits or demons, "Oni" don't represent an inherent evil force, and their power is usually only temporary.

The overriding belief in Shinto is to promote harmony and purity in all aspects of life. Humans are thought of as being fundamentally good, and evil is caused by evil spirits. The purpose of Shinto, therefore, is to pray and offer to the Kami to keep away evil spirits. As in Buddhism you have the Way of Buddha, in Shintoism you have the Way of Kami.

Shinto's key concepts of purity, harmony, family respect, and subordination of the individual before the group have become parts of the Japanese character whether the individual claims a religious affiliation or not.

Shinto, which is considered a syncretic religion (a fusion of different beliefs and practice), differs from Buddhism which has a clearer doctrine and beliefs. Buddhism and Shinto also have different beliefs about the afterlife. Buddhists believe in a cycle of death and rebirth that continues until a person achieves an enlightened state. Whereas, Shinto believes that after death a person's kami passes on to another world and watches over their descendants. This is primarily why ancestral worship still plays an important part in modern-day Japan. For Shintoism, everything arises from two opposite principles, Yo (active) & In (passive) and there is no real creator of the religion, whereas, it was born purely by observing nature.

Of known bibliographies we have 'The Kojiki', written in 712 CE, and 'The Nihongi' written in 720 CE. Both these manuscripts are the works of a compilation of mythological oral tradition, explaining how the Kami created the universe, Japanese history and topography, and these scriptures are considered as important historical documents and not sacred texts, like The Bible or Quran. There are a few important core values that guides Shinto-

ism practice:

1. Purity - Unlike wrongful deeds or "sins", the concepts of purity (Kiyome) and impurity (Kegare) are temporary and changeable in Shinto. Purification is done for good fortune and peace of mind rather than to adhere to a doctrine.

2. Sincerity - "Makoto" refers to sincerity of the heart. If goodness and sincerity are not in your heart, all acts are pointless.

3. Harmony with nature - Since Kami can possess anything, it is nature itself. As you can find kami everywhere, it is important to keep places clean and be aware of the environment.

4. Focus on the present - Shinto is strictly focused on the present, and is a celebration of what we know and have right now.

Festivals - "Matsuri", Shinto festivals, bind a community together and bring good fortune to it.

In Conclusion, Shinto is a very interesting religion/philosophy, which is understandable why it's still being heavily practised and worshipped by the majority of Japanese nowadays.

In one form or another, Shinto has survived up to today because it is not supported by intellect, but by emotion and the fact that in its essence, Shinto is not a dogmatic religion, rather, it places its values in the community, purity of actions, and reverence of nature.

In the words of writer Joseph Campbell; "Shinto, at root, is a religion not of sermons but of awe: which is a sentiment that may or may not produce words, but in either case goes beyond them."

Guilherme Paes & Aidan Murphy

The Thracians - A Forgotten Culture

In the annals of time, uncover a rich heritage, often overlooked



Thrace and present-day state borders - Wikimedia

When exploring the world of the ancient Greeks and Romans, we can discover equally fascinating cultures of whom we know little about. One such group were called the Thracians, who lived in an area called Thrace, which is present-day Bulgaria, parts of Romania, Greece and the Black Sea littoral. We do not have any writings from the Thracians and most of what we know about these people comes from Greek and Roman writers.

Scattered through Greek and Roman mythology, history and philosophy the Thracians appear. The Greek hero Heracles visited Thrace on one of his twelve labours; the Roman hero Aeneas stopped off in Thrace after leaving the shores of Troy to seek a new homeland, which would later become the city of Rome. In the journeys of the Greek hero Jason and the Argonauts, Jason encounters a seer Phineus in Thrace. Zeus had sent the harpies (half-human and half-bird) to steal the food put out for Phineus each day. Jason took pity on the emaciated seer and killed the harpies.

The earliest mention of the Thracians is in Homer's Iliad. The Thracians are allies to the Trojans, led by Acamas and Peiros. Later in the Iliad, Rhesus, another Thracian

king, makes an appearance. Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, says the following about the Thracians:

"The Thracians are the biggest nation in the world, next to the Indians; were they under one ruler, or united, they would in my judgement be invincible and the strongest nation on earth; but since there is no way or contrivance to bring this about, they are for this reason weak."

The Thracians were made up of different tribes and throughout much of antiquity Thracians were not a single kingdom but were divided. However in the 6th century BC, Thrace had come under the rule of Darius I, the king of Persia. The Persians eventually retreated and this sparked a new era for the Thracians under the Odrysian Kingdom, a burgeoning state grouping some Thracian tribes united by the Odrysae (referring to the coalesced faction of Thracian tribes. Perhaps it was the external threat from the Persians that encouraged the Thracians to unite together beyond their differences for mutual protection.

The Thracians were renowned for their healing ability. In the Platonic dialogue 'Charmides', Socrates speaks to a Thracian physician he had met which described the nature of health: "...so neither ought you to attempt to cure the body without the soul...is the reason why the cure of many diseases is unknown to the physicians of Hellas, because they are ignorant of the whole, which ought to be studied also; for the part can never be well unless the whole is well". The Thracians thought that a human being consisted of a mortal and immortal part (Soul), which was the same view the ancient Greeks held. When the person died the immortal part went to the other side. Herodotus, described one of the customs of the Thracians about life and death:



A tomb painting at the Aleksandrovo kurgan, a Thracian tomb located in Bulgaria.

Hypothesis for identification as Zalmoxis (king, or priest, or god of the Thracian tribe Getae), or rather anonymous hero-king because of the double ax. Painted circa 4th century BC.

"When a child is born all its kindred sit round about it in a circle and weep for the woes it will have to undergo now that it is come into the world, making mention of every ill that falls to the lot of humankind; when, on the other hand, a man has died, they bury him with laughter and rejoicings, and say that now he is free from a host of sufferings, and enjoys the completest happiness."

This was a different perspective to the ancient Greeks and to us in the Western world today. But what happened after physical death according to the Thracians? Herodotus tells us, the Thracians believed that when they died they went to a place where they lived eternally with their god Zalmoxis, enjoying "every conceivable good". According to legend, Zalmoxis was a king of one of the Thracian tribes, the king of Getai, and he taught that no one dies but goes to another place after death.

When Zalmoxis died, he resurrected three years later and he proved to the Thracians that through his resurrection he was telling the truth. This story is reminiscent of the figure of Jesus Christ a few hundred years after Zalmoxis. Herodotus gives a different explanation to what happened suggesting that Zalmoxis had hid in an underground cabin for three years and reappeared but admits he did not know the truth of the matter.

Mircea Eliade, a Romanian scholar, gives a different interpretation of the story of Zalmoxis, interpreting it more symbolically rather than literal. He explains that Zalmoxis' sojourn in the underground cabin for three years was part of an initiatory ritual; where he went through an "initiatory death" the experience of which can bring about a new way of being and access to new insights about oneself and life. Then Zalmoxis went out and shared his



Basrelief of a Thracian god, 3rd century BC, exhibited in Teteven History museum

One interpretation of this symbol is the Hero and his companion-helper striving to awaken something within oneself through an inner struggle to overcome a more instinctive or animalistic nature.

experiences and teachings with others.

This same motif appears in the life of the philosopher Pythagoras and in the myths of descent into the underworld so common in myths across the world. The double-headed axe was an attribute of Zalmoxis. It was also depicted on coins of Thrace as the symbol of the kings of the Odrysae, who considered Zalmoxis the ancestor and protector of the royal house. The Greek philosopher Plutarch makes a connection with the Lydian word labrys and the word axe. Many scholars assert that the word labyrinth is derived from labrys and the meaning of the word labyrinth, which would be 'house of the double axe'. This would tie into the image of Zalmoxis as a sage and guide.

When archaeologists started studying the remains from all across Thrace what they found was over three thousand reliefs of a man or deity on horseback. The figure's name is not known but from the dedicatory inscriptions on the reliefs, he is known as "Hero" or "the God Hero". The reliefs tell us something about this mysterious figure from the surroundings he is in. In some reliefs there is a tree with a snake coiled around it; in another the Hero is hunting a boar with the aid of a dog or lion. There is one relief with the horseman with three heads holding a double axe hunting a boar.

What comes to mind when looking at these reliefs is Saint George and the Dragon or Perseus and Pegasus. These beautiful pieces of art contain symbolic elements that convey something deeper than the artistic form. The boar represents spiritual authority because it feeds on acorns from the sacred oak tree and it uproots the mysterious truffle thought to be produced from lighting.

So one interpretation of this symbol is the Hero and his companion-helper striving to awaken something within oneself through an inner struggle to overcome a more instinctive or animalistic nature. It is a motif that is



Protagoras 1637 by Jusepe de Ribera - Wikimedia

universal and seen in countless cultures across the world. These reliefs show that the Thracians were not only a martial society but had a deeper mystical dimension to their culture.

One of these Thracian mystical figures that impacted the ancient Greek world was Orpheus. Orpheus was a Thracian bard, a legendary musician and sage in ancient Greek religion. According to legend, he travelled with Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, and even descended into the Underworld of Hades, to recover his wife Eurydice who died after stepping on a viper. Many ancient commentators have identified Orpheus as a transmitter of timeless philosophical teachings and have influenced the philosophy of Plato.

Notable Pre-Socratic philosophers from Thrace include Protagoras, a sophist who appeared in a number of Plato's dialogues. Protagoras was famous for saying that "man is the measure of all things", a view in philosophy called relativism, where there is no objective truth and everything is relative. Plato opposes this view in his dialogues and explains that some things are relative but there is also an objective reality that the human being can connect to. Another philosopher from Thrace was Democritus, known in antiquity as the 'laughing philosopher' because of his emphasis on the value of 'cheerfulness' and was one of the two founders of ancient atomist theory.

With the rise of the Roman Republic, Thrace was absorbed into its empire and made a province. The Romans had done what the Thracians could not, to

create a unity among the different tribes. Under the Romans, the Thracians still continued with their local beliefs and customs in parallel with the Roman traditions. A famous Thracian during the Roman period was Spartacus.

There are different accounts of his life from Roman historians but they agree that at one point he was a Roman soldier and was later enslaved and sold as a gladiator. Spartacus and other gladiators escaped from the gladiator school and recruited other slaves in the region to form a slave rebellion that inflicted numerous defeats on the Romans. However the slave rebellion was eventually defeated and Spartacus was reported to have been killed in battle.

The ancient Greeks and Romans have had a profound impact on our world today and when exploring that civilisation it is to remember that the boundaries between different cultures and traditions are not as solid as we may think. There is exchange of teaching, ideas, myths and so on. The Thracians helped shape the ancient world as much as the ancient Greeks and Romans helped shape the Thracians. Though they may be less known today, the impact of Thracian culture is still with us.

Michael Ward & David Murtagh

Mesoamerica



The Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan - Wikicommons

The Magic Key to Mayan Architecture

Timeless knowledge hidden behind proud ruins

Deep within the jungles of Mexico and Guatemala lie the fascinating ruins of the mysterious Mayan civilisation. These ruins stand as a quiet witness to the highly developed culture which once dominated this area. Their pyramids, temples and palaces still captivate human minds and souls and leave a deep impact within.

Mayan cities were the political, administrative and ritual centres for the regions which included the city itself and the surrounding countryside. The first cities were formed in the Middle pre-classic period (ca. 1000-400 BCE), and developing more in the Late pre-classic period (400 BC-250 CE). Large city-states were formed during the Classic period (250 AD-900 CE) when the Mayan civilisation had its golden age. Many cities had similar features such as plazas, stepped pyramids, palaces, carved monuments, ball-courts but not all of them contained everything.

The cities tended to expand organically using deliberate urban planning. They used to grow outwards from the centre and as well upwards as new structures were built over the old ones (Chichen Itza "El Castillo" - Pyramid inside - pyramid inside etc like a Russian doll). This upwards movement expressed in the architecture most likely had symbolic meaning for the Mayan society. Through building new structures over the old ones, the Maya were creating symbolic connections with their ancestors, trying to connect with their essence.

The architecture also integrated natural features and the

"...It is scarcely possible to avoid the conclusion, orthodox in every age but the present, that the cosmic canon inherent in the solar system as in every other department of nature, was revealed to men, not invented by them."

– *City of Revelation, John Michell*

Mayan architects used locally sourced materials (for example limestone at Palenque, sandstone at Quirigua and volcanic tuff at Copan).

The main buildings in Mayan cities were huge stone structures which were usually standing on top of platforms which varied in height from 1 metre up to 45 metres depending on the importance of the building. Typical Mayan architectural features were stone steps on one side of the platform which contributed to the common bi-symmetrical appearance of Mayan architecture, the other features are the corbel vault and the roof comb.

The most striking monuments of the Classic Maya cities are Temple-Pyramids. They usually contained one or

more rooms but were quite narrow, so they were not meant for public but for ceremonial occasions. Mayan priests usually used the temples for rituals and sacrifices.

Palaces were the places where most likely lived the royal families (rulers of the city). They could be large, elaborate buildings but we also find smaller palaces which could be used as the administrative and governing centres. Many had beautiful courtyards, patios and towers.

Ball-courts were a common feature in most Mayan cities. They were used for playing a ball game typical for Mesoamerica. It involved two teams of players trying to bounce a rubber ball through a single ring without using hands or feet. The game could be played simply for fun as a sport or it could give symbolic and ritual meaning. Other features typical for Mayan cities were ceremonial platforms used for rituals and public ceremonies.

What ideas and values are hidden behind the architecture of Mayan cities?

Topography of the area usually determined where the larger buildings were constructed; also they might be sited to take advantage of natural panoramas and views. The alignments of the ceremonial buildings were very significant. Buildings were aligned with compass directions (for example north-south), they were also positioned in the way to take advantage of solar or other celestial events (winter and summer solstice or equinoxes).

Also, the outlines of the structures, when looked from above, could form or resemble Mayan hieroglyphs (symbolic characters). At the spring or autumn equinox the sun could for example cast its rays through small openings in Maya observatories, lighting up its interior walls. The famous city of Chichen Itza is one of the most popular places where this kind of alignment can be observed.

The famous site of Chichen Itza is located in Yucatan, Mexico. It is dominated by the massive Kukulcan pyramid called “El Castillo” (the castle) which lies in the centre of the archaeological site. The pyramid is dedicated to Quetzalcoatl, the Feathered-Serpent god and was built in such a way that at the vernal and autumnal equinoxes, the sun gradually illuminates the stairs of the pyramid and the serpent head at its base, creating the image of a snake slithering down the steps into the Earth. Every year thousands of people come to see this extraordinary event which has had a great spiritual impact on human beings for hundreds of years.

The wonder city of Teotihuacan is yet another example of architecture that mirrored timeless ideas and aspirations of this enigmatic civilisation. Harelstone¹ spent years to understand the invisible side of this symbolic city and the ability of Teotihuacanos to weave in the fabric of the



Serpent head at the base of El Castillo photo by Frank Kovalchek

universe in their cities on earth. He said that the cosmic truths were built into the layout of this city in such a simple manner, that once learned, one could decipher it even after a whole civilisation would disappear.

Once we understand this, we realise that Teotihuacan was not only a ceremonial site, but also a “cosmic university” and dutiful preserver of knowledge about telluric movements, planetary orbits, and even more, about the world of sound, heat and colour, smell and touch, the wavelengths of light, the micro-universe of atoms, and the macro-universe of galaxies. And all of this is built into the stone blocks and streets of the city, for all those who want to know.

It is said that architecture is a measure of civilisation, and Peter Tompkins² sees a need to engender architects sensitive to the cosmic values of geometry, as it is an exact language in which physical and spiritual ideals could be expressed and preserved. And Teotihuacan becomes really a representation of the Sky on Earth, as we will see, silently but intuitively reminding people of a universal law “As above so below.”

“Cosmic University”, a book of wisdom and a state of consciousness

It is clear that this city was designed by master mathematicians. This was not an obstacle to “reading” its knowledge. On the contrary, the Mayan approach to mathematics was far simpler than ours. Their mathematical system allowed a four-year old child to multiply, divide, and obtain square roots without a need to memorise a multiplication table. Yet complex enough to allow for far more sophisticated calculations, allowing them to precisely measure planetary orbits.

In a way, these invisible truths were accessible to anyone who’s in search of them with perseverance, imagination and constancy. It seems that this civilisation held that transmission of wisdom and knowledge should not be only through intellect and logic, but through experience, intuition, intelligence and imagination. When we learn through experience, we are able to integrate this

The ball court at Chichen-Itza. It is the largest ball court in ancient Mesoamerica. It measures 166 by 68 meters (545 by 232 feet). The walls are 12 metres high, and in the center, high up on each of the long walls, are rings carved with intertwining serpents. Photo by Brian Snelson courtesy of Wikimedia



knowledge into our way of life, which is quite important.

Because for the Mayan people, understanding the laws that move the universe was not a simple quest, but should lead to an individual capable of living in harmony with that universe, recognising oneself as belonging to it. Therefore this city was similar to a book of wisdom and silent reminder of a state of consciousness they wished to awaken - a human being harmonised with nature, connected with its inner workings and an example of it.

Their sophisticated knowledge is mind-blowing the more one gets to discover all that was constructed into it. We can imagine Teotihuacan as an astronomical computer, allowing them to calculate the synodic return of the planets or anticipate the cyclic phenomena of solstices, equinoxes, and eclipses of the sun and the moon. To unlock the mysteries of these ruins, however, one needed a magic key.

For that Harleson had to find out what was the standard unit of measure of the city’s builders. It was a unit of 1.059m or the 12th root of 2. It is also derived if one divides the polar diameter of the Earth into 12 million parts. This unit, rooted in the cosmic dimensions, was the key to open the doors to mathematical understanding of the city. He named this unit Hunab, the Mayan word for “unified measure”, but also for a supreme deity, Hunab Ku, as sole dispenser of movement and measure, whose symbol was the compassed circle and the square.

This measure revealed that Teotihuacan hid the knowledge of our Solar System in plain sight. The Way of the Dead (its name is not of Mayan origin, but a name given in modern times), is a measure of distances of the planets of our Solar System.

The centre (and a mark for the sun), is marked by the Quetzalcoatl Pyramid.

Progressing northward, the landmarks demarcated the exact distance of all the known planets, including another potential one. It was a precise scale model of our universe.

Generally these ancient cities, although ruins, leave a powerful impression on ourselves. Their beauty stands like a symbol of something lasting that often we perceive only with our intuition. What is the most fascinating about it all, is not the size or sophistication of their architecture, but the mindset with which they built them.

Mayan architecture continues to connect us with our world through a silent language of numbers and proportions expressed in astonishing structures surpassing the challenges of time. They are a galvanising example of a civilisation founded on deep values, reminding us that a civilisation is built based on such aspiring principles, not simply on materialistic comforts. If they placed such an importance on this intricate relationship between a human being and the cosmos, maybe we can consider the same.

Ivona Ward & Zuzana Majerčíková

Footnotes:

¹Hugh Harlestone, Jr. was an American engineer, who spent a quarter of a century in Mexico, dedicated to study of Teotihuacan. His contributions recovered a long lost knowledge of Teotihuacan, and we gained a deeper understanding of this mathematical and hermetic model.

²Author of the book “Mysteries of the Mexican Pyramids” which was one of the sources for this article



The Caral People of Peru

In the desert of Peru lies a mystery we continue to unravel

The desert of central Peru is an inhospitable place. Trapped between the Pacific ocean on one side, and the mighty Andes mountains on the other, not much grows here. About 200 km north of the capital Lima is an area known as Caral-Supe. The area is dominated by a series of valleys that contain rivers flowing down from the Andes to the Pacific ocean. For many years, explorers who ventured to Caral-Supe were mystified by the presence of many large hill-like mounds in the area. Some thought they were a natural, geographical feature.

In 1994, Peruvian anthropologist and archaeologist Ruth Shady Solis visited the area. She studied the rounded mounds, and thought she could see a structure within one of them. Excavation revealed a massive stepped pyramid structure made of stone. Further excavations of nearby mounds followed, and many more structures were revealed.

Lengthy and painstaking excavations of the mounds, supported by the Peruvian army, have revealed a large complex of villages centred on the city of Caral-Supe, believed to have been the focus of the wider network. The city was centred around a massive plaza, surrounded by six stepped pyramids. Each pyramid was surrounded by numerous buildings. Alongside them were a sunken amphitheatre and a temple containing a furnace.

Caral was situated straddling both banks of the river Supe, a source of fresh water coming down as snowmelt from the Andes. Numerous irrigation canals and terraces for crop cultivation on the steep slopes were found. The city was divided into an upper half, with bigger, public buildings on the higher side of the river, and a lower half,

with simpler, residential dwellings on the lower side. The upper half is believed to be where the nobility lived and ruled, and the lower half where the workers lived.

"This place is somewhere between the seat of the gods and the house of man" - Ruth Shady Solis

No pottery was found, which puzzled the archaeologists at first. A limited amount of art, in the form of primitive clay figurines depicting people were uncovered in and around the temples. Many other objects were found: foodstuffs including fish bones and sea shells, seeds of cotton, squash, beans, guava, nuts, as well as cotton fabrics, and musical instruments - flutes and cornetts - made from animal bones.

Despite being 23 km from the coast, the people of Caral enjoyed a varied diet of foods that included fish from the Pacific coast. A form of writing known as 'quipu' was found and carbon-dated. Quipu is a complicated system of coloured, knotted cords, used for communication of messages, and for recording information such as inventories and tax records. Quipu was used extensively by the Incan civilisation in the second millennium CE.

An important find was a 'shicra' bag, woven from reeds and used for carrying stones. Carbon dating of the bag's materials revealed Caral to date from 2,600 BCE. So, civilisation at Caral-Supe was contemporaneous with the building of the pyramids of Egypt.

This revelation added Peru to the list of places where civilisations first evolved: Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China and Mesoamerica (Central America). It made Caral-Supe the oldest civilisation in the Americas. It also

explained why no pottery was found - Caral belongs to what is known as the "Andean Pre-ceramic" era, and so preceded the introduction of pottery.

The monumental architecture found at Caral would have required crafts people, architects, a huge workforce, and leaders - all signs of complex civilisation. But why did the people of this area of Peru, five thousand years ago, choose to build a civilisation like Caral-Supe? Why did they leave their coastal fishing village life, or nomadic hunter-gatherer life behind? Archaeologists call this transition "Crossing the Great Divide". Some scientists argue that city based civilisations were formed to protect their citizens from warfare. However, in Caral no evidence of weapons, fortifications or warlike iconography was found. It would appear that warfare was not the motivation.

The archaeological evidence found suggests that the Caral-Supe civilisation was a peaceful society founded on irrigation based agriculture, and the trading of agricultural produce for goods from further afield. The availability of an endless supply of fresh water from the Andes led to irrigation and enrichment of a previously arid landscape. Growing crops such as squash, beans and cotton led to surpluses of produce. That surplus produce could be traded or bartered for other goods with neighbouring communities - dried fish from the coast, for example. This led to specialisation of skills and trades, a major step away from previous lifestyles.

"This society was very interested in developing in harmony with nature. They never occupied the valley, they didn't settle on productive land. Fertile fields were deities" - Ruth Shady Solis

But the evidence found points to another reason for these people "crossing the great divide" - religion. Religion of one form or another is evident during the formation of all civilisations. At Caral, religious belief and practice is strongly suggested in a number of ways: the presence of monumental architecture in the form of stepped pyramids, temples, amphitheatres, and fire pits.

Caches of musical instruments and clay figurines found in the Caral temples hint at the ceremonial functions that were performed. Archaeologists believe that the evidence from Caral signifies a civilisation that was led by a



Quipu in the Museo Machu Picchu, Casa Concha, Cusco

powerful religious ideology. The word 'religion' comes from the latin 'religare', which means "to bind together". A religion connects its followers to the divine, to the spiritual.

Shady Solis describes the influence of Caral religion in her book "The Caral-Supe Civilisation: 5000 Years of Cultural Identity in Peru":

"Religious leaders were, at the same time, political leaders, specialising in astronomy or medicine, among other subjects. The lords were mediators between the social group they belonged to and the supernatural power of the gods. Religion was a highly effective instrument for ensuring the cohesion of the people..."

Trade and religion appear to have been two of the major factors that led to the development of the Caral civilisation. However, Caral began to decline circa 1800 BCE, and over the following 200 years the area was slowly abandoned. The causes of this decline and abandonment are unclear. Natural disasters may have been a factor. Peru is an active earthquake zone, with many earthquakes every year. There is some evidence that around 1800 BCE a drought, caused by climate change led to famine in the area. Another possible factor was migration of the population to more fertile areas inland and along the coast, bringing their agricultural skills with them.

Whatever the reasons for Caral's demise, these peaceful people have left their mark in history. They thrived for nearly one thousand years. They built a complex Andean society, that predated the Incan civilisation by four thousand years. They spread their agricultural skills widely in Peru. Caral was formally declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2009 - a fitting tribute to the people who built the Caral civilisation.

Tim Leahy

The Power of Tragedy in Ancient Greece

Examples from Euripides' Medea.



Acropolis of Rhodes, Odeon (c. 5th Century BCE) - Wikicommons

According to Nietzsche, tragedy constitutes the essence of Greekness, something that ceased to exist when Christian values spread across the Roman Empire together with their essentially optimistic view of the afterlife. It is interesting to notice how, although Greeks had a particular word for “humans” – ἄνθρωπος (anthropos) –, humanity is always referred to by Homer as πρῶτος (protos), those who are destined to die, and by Plato as θάνατος (thanatos), the mortals.

The idea of death – with its tragedy – is deeply rooted in Greek culture, where Nature is perceived as the frame in which the cosmic order exists. Inspired by the teachings of Socrates, Greek culture derived their laws and values from nature, and for this reason, in the poleis (the cities), the interests of collectivity are placed in front of individual needs.

There is in Greek culture an “ethic of the limit” and an awareness of human caducity that makes those who – like Medea – operate outside the natural order and are not born in this civilised society to be perceived as barbaric menaces.

In 431 BCE, Athens and Sparta, even when united by this common culture and identity, soon fractured into different political views. In fact, on multiple occasions, their tensions nearly erupted into a civil war and were only cooled due to threats from common foreign enemies like Xerxes and the Persian army.

The hostilities between the two titans reached the point of no-return when Athens declared war on Corinth to maintain their economic hegemony in the Mediterranean and Sparta was called to defend the interests of the Peloponnesian League and their attacked ally.

The clash that would have condemned Athens to lose its power forever was about to begin when Euripides staged his *Medea* during the Dionysia Festival to offer a critical reading of the current political events.

It is important to note that tragedies always accompanied religious festivities as they were assigned both a sacral and a temporal dimension. In fact, in every poleis, theatres were strategically placed next to temples and regarded as places where mundane affairs and the

timeless could meet. The idea of timelessness is particularly pertinent when it comes to myths and tragedies, as their storytelling revolves around a time that is cyclical and repeatable. A 'Moment Zero' in the history of humanity and Gods, separated from any historical events and suspended in mystery that can be helpful to transmit values and lessons.

Euripides' tragedy takes place in this mythical dimension: coincidentally, we meet Medea for the first time at the dawn of times in the city where the Peloponnesian War began, Corinth. Medea, the princess of Colchis, a barbaric sorceress, granddaughter of the god Helios – the Sun – and niece of Circes, is preparing to be exiled with her children by the king of Corinth, Creon, because her husband Jason abandoned her for a Greek bride. As the Choir reflects behind her, she is "doomed!" as "an exile needs help and protection, a destination and shelter" (*Medea*, 379-381) while she is forced to leave overnight.

King Creon, decrees that “when the sun comes up tomorrow if you and your children have not crossed the border, you die” (371-373), and remarks that his decision is taken in the interests of his family as Medea’s nature is “clever and vindictive” (304) and cannot be trusted.

Line after line we discover that, when Jason departed from Iolcus with the Argonauts to find the Golden Fleece, on his path to heroism, he met Medea. Hit by one of Eros' arrows upon Aphrodites' request, she falls in love with the young man and decides to betray her homeland to help him on his quest. Medea made Jason promise to marry her in exchange for her support, a help that would contribute to the hero's victory and legendary fame.

To use her own words: "I saved your life when my father challenged you to harness the fire-breathing bulls, plough the field of death, and sow the monster seeds. I killed the insomniac serpent coiled inseparably around the Golden Fleece, whose light and shimmer raised by me brought your success instead of death. More eager than wise, I abandoned my country and father to follow you to Iolcus, where I engineered your uncle's murder [...]. All this I did for you!" (477-494).

Jason, defending himself from her accusations of betraying her, explains to Medea that she should be content with her destiny as she now lives in Greece, “the center of the world”, where her uncivilised methods and abilities cannot be tolerated: “Justice, not force, rules here!” (545-546).

Medea, who not always operates within the realm of civilisation and human or natural laws, and whose actions are often dictated by self-interest, incarnates the archetype of the outcast, according to Greek culture.

Furious and heartbroken, Medea notices how shameful and intolerable it would be for Jason “to live the rest of” his “days with a barbarian” like her (600-601), as this relationship pushes the hero outside of his community



J. W. Waterhouse, *Jason and Medea* (1907). Wikicommons

and makes him a “broken refugee” (560).

Euripides, with an intense escalation of events, invites us to reflect on the brutality of the circumstances that force men and women to leave their homes and never find a place to belong, a scenario sadly familiar to this century as it was to the dramatist 2500 years ago. But the myth also makes us reflect on the danger of allowing personal interests to win over societies.

In a vengeful deed, Medea decides to kill her sons, and explains to a desolated Jason how they had to die "because of broken promises" (1338). As noted by some commentators, this act for which Medea would become infamously known was introduced by Euripides and never present in the previous versions of this myth, where the Corinthians kill the boys. This was presumably to depict to his contemporaries the power of desperation and invite them to empathise with the victims of the Peloponnesian War which Athens was also in danger of becoming involved in.

However, we cannot ignore how the myth depicts filicide as the most atrocious act which it believed subverted the cosmic order: mothers give life and not death, and only a God or an outcast that plays outside the rules of society and Nature is able to commit such a crime.

A hundred years later, Aristotle would notice how her departure on the chariot of the Sun with the corpse of her sons is depicted through a *deus ex machina*. This tool in plays was reserved for divine representations, making Medea *de facto* a metaphysical being. This would also



E.F. V. Delacroix, *Medea about to kill her children* (1862). Oil on canvas, Louvre Museum - Wikicommons

explain why her terrible gesture remains unpunished, like all the Gods' acts against humanity.

We understand, through Euripides, that Medea is divine enough to know how to use magic and be of use to the Argonauts in the Colchis, a foreign and uncivilised land, to face monsters and supernatural challenges. But not enough for her individuality to be tolerated in the civilised society, where everything is done κατὰ μέτρον (katà métron), according to measure and within limits.

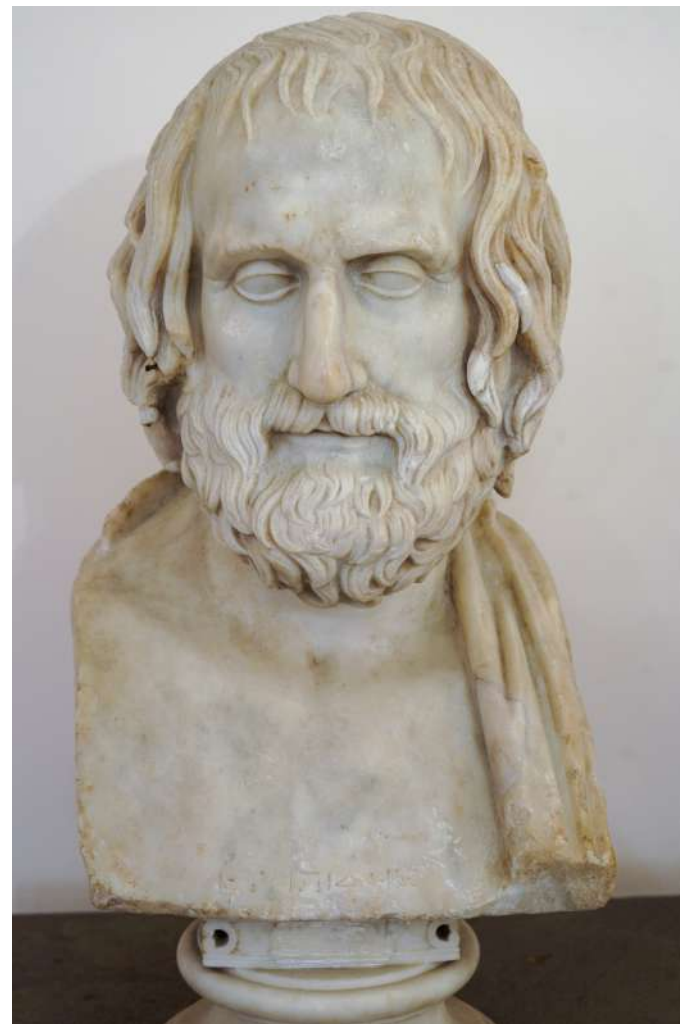
As mentioned, Medea and the other classic plays that reached our century are the inheritance of a society that believed in the ephemeral nature of the human as a single individual and understood the emotional implications of death profoundly. However, we shouldn't be surprised that the expression of their culture managed to achieve a timeless value and trespass their chronological and geographical borders, as it is the product of a civilisation also recognised the importance of collective growth.

Edith Hall notes that there are specific reasons why Medea became the most depicted tragedy in history, overshadowing other masterpieces like Phaedra, Antigone or Prometheus Bound. Some include its focus

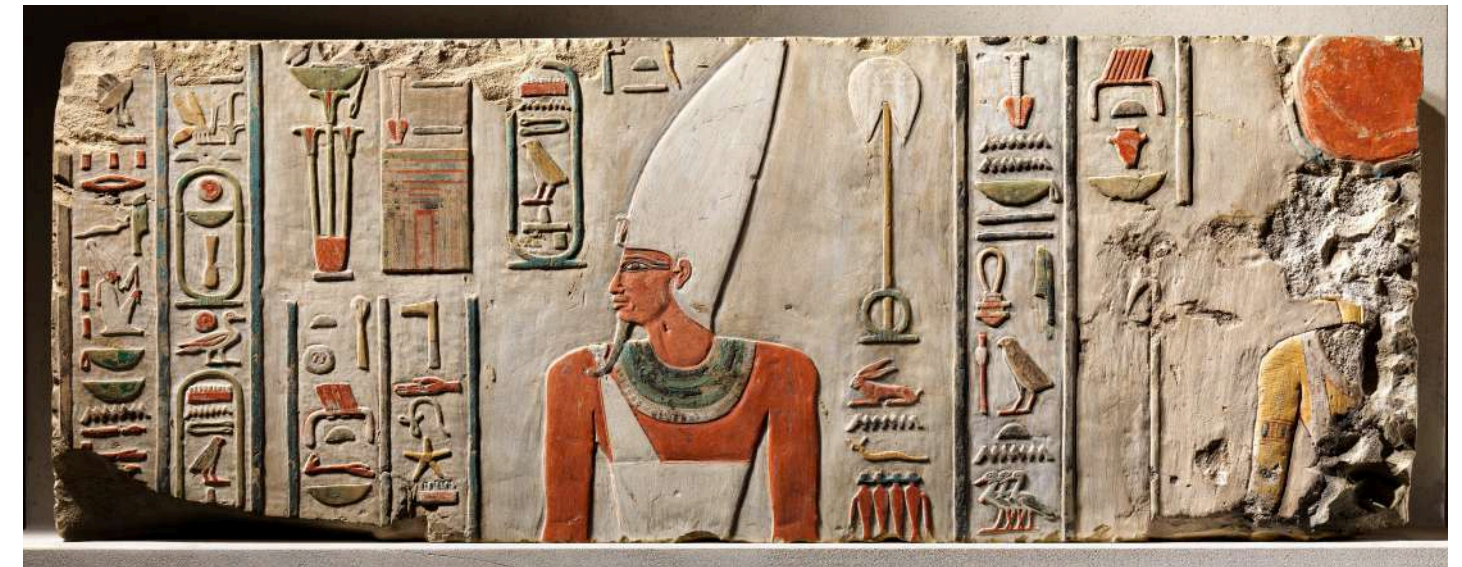
on the conflict between sexes and ethnicities or the psychological exploration of motherhood and romantic relationships. These topics, relevant to both Euripides' and our society, allowed Medea to be revisited countless times and remain pertinent for more than two thousand years.

Nevertheless, the true power of the ancient tragedies reside in their ability to raise metaphysical questions within the spectator's or reader's mind, who is forced to investigate the aspects left open by the plays' themes regarding morality of actions depicted through the lenses of spiritual and cosmic purposes.

Alessandra Diotto & Giulia Giacco



Anonymous, *Euripides* (c. 340–330 b.C.). Marble herm copied from a Greek original, Naples



Egypt - The Middle Kingdom

Explore one of the greatest epochs of ancient times

Ancient Egypt, as it is defined today in archaeological terms, was a civilisation situated along the river Nile valley that formed around 3000 BCE and continued up until approximately 30 BCE. The beginnings of this civilisation can be credited to the river itself. With predictable flooding each year across its vast delta region, this annual event known as 'Inundation' created very high yielding soil that was soon able to support a dense population and flourishing collective culture.

This bountiful land was literally an oasis surrounded by desert, so it is no surprise that the ancient Egyptians worshipped the river as a god in which their very existence sprang from. And it is through this reverence of the lands in which it gifted the people, that the Egyptians were able to form a collective spirit which allowed them to accelerate all aspects of human evolution.

The civilisation of course was not without its ebbs and flows over time and historians have divided up ancient Egypt into three distinct periods of the 'old kingdom', 'middle kingdom' and 'new kingdom'. These are seen as 'renaissance' periods or 'golden ages' whereby Egypt was united as one kingdom, often stretching from the mouth of the Nile (and during the new kingdom reaching to parts of Syria) in the north down to the first cataract in Aswan, Nubia which would be parts of modern day Sudan.

The old kingdom is often referred to as 'The Great Pyramid age' and it is during this period the iconic structures we still see today were built such as the Great Pyramid of Giza or the Sphinx, but in this article we will take a closer look at the middle kingdom which was a time when Egypt excelled in many of the complex systems of politics, art, religion and industry.

When the old kingdom fell into decline around 2150 BC there followed an "intermediate period" whereby Egypt was divided politically and many tribes ruled different regions. The middle kingdom brought about a change to this structure with the reign of Mentuhotep II in the eleventh dynasty (2060–2009 BC). Through a series of successful war campaigns against the rival Heracleopolis tribes of lower Egypt he finally brought about the unification of the upper and lower kingdoms once more under the Pharaoh's rule.

Following reunification, Mentuhotep II stripped many tribes or 'nomarchs' of the very power which had led to civil unrest and the decline of the old kingdom. He then set about centralising power through the city of Thebes which was in the upper kingdom and appointed Theban elites who were loyal to him into important government positions.

Unifying the vast lands of the two kingdoms and trying to centralise power brought about a more complex system of governance and administration for the Pharaohs' rule. Positions known as 'Viziers' were appointed to govern upper and lower Egypt respectively. The vizier was much like a prime minister that oversaw the running of the region and all administrative departments from law, tax, agriculture, civil projects, finance etc reported to him. He in turn would brief the Pharaoh each day and through his governance the Pharaoh's wishes were enacted.

A very important part of the vizier's role was also to be chief justice of the courts and hear important cases. Through documents excavated from the region of Tutmose III, there are guidelines for the ideal nature of this role which echo that of a modern day judge in regards the emphasis on impartiality, fairness and



Naophorous Block Statue of a Governor of Sais - The Met

treating every citizen with equal rights. But however much justice was highly regarded as a major ethical imperative of the time, the vizier was first and foremost a servant of the Pharaoh who was the real chief justice. The vizier's main concern in judgements was to carry out the wishes of the Pharaoh and this meant regular consultation with him on important cases.

Even though the Pharaoh was all powerful and ultimately autocratic in rule, the middle kingdom is marked out as having a succession of Pharaoh's which seemed to have exercised restraint and a more tempered rule. This encouraged a greater emphasis on civic morality and stability throughout the kingdom.

Author J.E Manchip White in his book 'Ancient Egypt: Its Culture and History' has commented that "an innate sense of social morality was strong in every citizen" and for Egyptians, religion was seen less in the sense of guiding the individual to higher spiritual enlightenment but more as a way of strengthening bonds of the collective through a common aesthetic; one that inspired the individual to be part of that community. It is also noted that in the afterlife for the Egyptian, "It was more important to stand before the 'Assessors' with a good record as a citizen than with an individual consciousness that one had done no wrong."

This 'record as a citizen' also seemed to run right up to the Pharaoh, for as much as he was the absolute ruler,

his power ultimately came from his ability to protect the lands and the people. This came down, crucially, to the health of the Nile and defence from foreign invasion.

Throughout the middle kingdom there were large fortresses built along the river Nile and in the eastern delta region to protect against foreign threats from the African plains of the south or the Eurasian region to the east. They also saw great importance in the upkeep of irrigation systems and to the monitoring of the river which was meticulously recorded for levels each day. The administration also placed heavy importance on the individual districts known as 'nomes' to look after their parts of the river. Officials from the Pharaoh's court were regularly sent out to assess this upkeep and fines were issued if not up to standard.

During the middle kingdom this large scale construction work on fortresses, tombs and also civic projects brought about a skilled professional work force of stonemasons, carpenters, engineers, architects etc which had to be well maintained with food, shelter and even medical facilities for them and their families. There were still of course slaves used in these construction projects, most being tasked with the arduous work of shifting colossal rock from quarries to the sites of construction. But much like modern day economies with a vibrant and diverse workforce, it is suggested that a middle class demographic emerged during the middle kingdom that in turn increased the demand for more crafts such as jewellery, statues and also books which first emerged during this period.

The block statue is a prominent example of craft in the middle kingdom period. These statues were used in temples typically as funerary monuments of non-royal yet important individuals. Interpretations of the meaning of block statues vary. Some Egyptologists see them as simple representations of men in repose. Others feel they have a religious meaning: they seem to show the soul emerging from a mound in the underworld at the moment of rebirth.

Other interpretations suggest the figure is seated in place, and at a moment's notice can stand erect and 'go out into the day.' It is perhaps fitting that we struggle with various interpretations of these surviving treasures from Egypt as the ancients saw life not as a quest for singular concrete truths, which we are now more drawn towards, but instead they saw life through a very fluid and poetic consciousness. Religion, nature, the physical realm or that of the after life were part of the shifting kaleidoscope of consciousness never to be fully grasped.

An example of this poetic view of religion was in the Egyptians worship during the middle kingdom of the god Osiris. He was the god of fertility but also the ruler of the underworld. Through this association, the health of the Nile and harvest each year was attested to his blessing, so much so that the myth of his life and death was a

symbolic rendering of the cycles of the season. Each spring as crops grew, Egyptians would rejoice in the rebirth of the God and also when it came to harvest they would recite ritual rites at the dismemberment of Osiris (who, as myth goes was killed and dismembered by his brother Set with his body parts spread throughout Egypt).

And much like the cycle of the seasons seen through the myth of Osiris, the era of the middle kingdom rose from the turbulence of the intermediate period to give birth to a time of rich development in Egyptian civilisation and human civilisation as a whole. Like all ages it had its high point before descending back down into a new intermediate period where the kingdom fractured and divided once more. By looking at the vast ancient Egyptian era in this very broad way we can see a prime example of the cyclicity of existence in its high and low tides over time but ultimately always flowing forward like the great river they worshipped.

Paul Savage & David Murtagh



Osiris, Egyptian God of Fertility and the Afterlife. - Wikicommons

**HOMAGE TO THEE, O OSIRIS,
SON OF NUT, LORD OF THE
TWO HORNS, WHOSE ATEF
CROWN IS EXALTED, MAY THE
URERET CROWN BE GIVEN
UNTO THEE, ALONG WITH
SOVEREIGNTY BEFORE THE
COMPANY OF THE GODS. MAY
THE GOD TEMU MAKE AWE TO
THEE TO EXIST IN THE
HEARTS OF MEN, AND
WOMEN, AND GODS, AND
SPIRITS, AND THE DEAD.**

Prayer to Osiris, Egyptian Book of the Dead



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