

The Young Ancient Egypt  
Volume I  
**THE CREATION OF EGYPT**  
TOLD BY IMHOTEP



text passed down to  
Tarek Ben Blaze

**Imhotep, the son of Ptah**

May I present myself? I am Imhotep. I was born about 4670 years ago in Egypt. That is a very long time. I am afraid that so many years is hardly to imagine for you. To give you some idea, let us represent time as a long snake, with a head of 1 cm. Let us suppose that your age is 10 now, and that your age matches the head of the snake. To go back in time 4670 years, we must give the snake a body of almost 4 meters and 70 cm.! Incredible, isn't it? The name of the city where I was born was *Memphis*, close to the present Cairo, the capital of Egypt. I did many good and wonderful things for Egypt, because I was gifted by God with great knowledge and wisdom. I was a skilful architect, a well-known writer and a great healer. Moreover I have been the most important counsellor of one of the first famous kings who ruled over Egypt. His name was Djoser. But I was also a reliable helper who assisted ordinary people. I helped them in their daily problems, when they were anxious, or in distress. God gave me the power to heal them, if they were ill. I protected the pregnant. I got the woman who could not fall pregnant with a baby. I gave a son to everyone who implored it. I comforted them all and made them happy. For that reason I was venerated as a god. In ancient times Egyptian people made many small statues of me. They often depicted me on their monuments. Truly, I am proud to be the son of the mighty god *Ptah*. Therefore I wear the same blue cap as he does. As you can see below (*Fig. 1*), I am portrayed sitting on a chair, with a papyrus scroll on my knees.



*Fig 1. Imhotep*

**Imhotep, the Mediator.**

Because they trusted me so much, people came to me at the entrance of the temples. I heard their prayers and spoke on their behalf to the great god, who dwelled hidden in the inner part of the temple. Once, I even rescued the Egyptians from death, after the river Nile did not inundate Egypt during seven years. The whole country was dried out. There was no food for man and cattle. So everyone suffered from famine. It was I who advised the King what he had to do, in order to bring the flood back to Egypt.



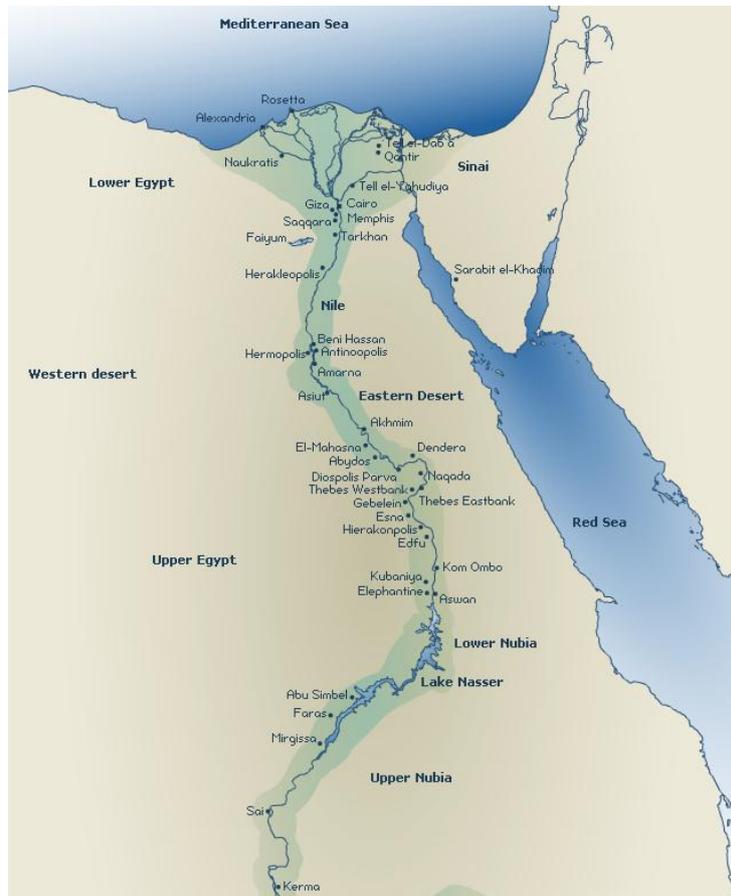
*Fig. 2.* The Step pyramid of King Djoser



*Fig. 3.* The pyramids of Giza

**Imhotep, the architect**

You can see one of my famous works even nowadays. When you go to Saqqara Necropolis, about 20 km. wards South from Cairo, you will find king Djoser's tomb which I designed and built. He has been buried in it. Look the picture representation on the drawing at the top of the facing page (*Fig. 2*). Such a building is called a pyramid. Today, thousands of tourists from all over the world come daily to admire that building. It became the model for all great pyramids that have been built for Egyptian kings who lived after me. You can visit them at Giza, near Cairo. The three pyramids that you see on the bottom of the facing page (*Fig. 3*) are those of the kings Mycerinus (left), Chephren (in the middle) and Cheops (right) at Giza. They are the biggest and most famous pyramids of Egypt. But there are also many other smaller pyramids, elsewhere in the country.



*Fig. 4. Map of Ancient Egypt*

**Egypt before the High Dam**

You will understand now, that I, Imhotep, can tell you about Ancient Egypt better than anyone else. Let us start at the beginning. First of all, you must know that modern Egypt is quite different from ancient times. In my time, the water of the river Nile was not yet blocked and controlled by the Great Dam, which is now in the South, near the city called *Aswan*. In my time the name of that place was *Elephantine*. Can you find this city on the map (*Fig. 4*)? The Great Dam was only built about 80 years ago. Before that, the Nile would rise every summer, about 19 July. It burst its banks and flooded the whole country. Then, Egypt looked like an ocean. From the North to the South, from the eastern desert to the western desert, the whole land was flooded (*Fig. 5*). During some months the water stood above the fields and saturated the soil. As it drained, firstly the hills emerged, then the lower parts of the country. The water of the flood left a layer of fertile sludge which covered the fields. This happened from time immemorial, and so, Egypt became famous as the most fertile country of the world. You will understand now, that Egypt was called "Gift of the River". Thanks to the flooding of the Nile there was plenty of food for everybody: grain, herbs, fruit and also meat, fowl and fish. But sometimes the Nile did not overflow. In that case, the fields that were dried up, could not be worked. The soil was far too hard. Rain is very rare in Egypt. I only rains a little in Egypt. Thus, it is not difficult to imagine, that life in Egypt was impossible without the yearly flood. Without water, nothing can grow. If the Nile did not flood, as a result, there was no food for people and animals. There was famine

in the land, and thousands of people and animals died. Conversely, the Nile could rise too high. Then, many things were destroyed in the country. Thousands of people and animals were swept away by the raging waves of the flood and drowned. All stocks were destroyed. So, there were nothing for the survivors to eat. Also it could happen that the flood water did not arrive in time in Egypt. The Nile could overflow too late, or the flood could begin too early, in which case the fields could not be worked on time. As a result, the crop became small. But, thanks to God, as a rule, the flood brought prosperity and happiness for everybody.



*Fig.5.* The whole land flooded

### Hapy, god of the flood

Now, you understand, I hope, that people in Ancient Egypt believed that annual coming of the flood was the work of a mighty and powerful god. It could not be the work of man. It could not be by accident either. Only a god could do something like that. The Egyptians called him *Hapy*. He is the god of the inundation. Every year, when Hapy arrived at the southern border of Egypt and the Nile burst its banks, people honoured him with great exuberant feasts. In fact, Hapy was a god of abundance, a god who nurtured man. How would you represent such a god? On the next page, you can see how the Ancient Egyptian portrayed him (*Fig. 6*). They gave this god female breasts. Strange, isn't it? But do you know a better way to represent nourishing, than the motherly breast which fed you when you were a baby? And to express the many gifts of the flood, the Egyptians represented Hapy with a fat belly. Notice the lines that are depicted all over his body! They represent the sign for water . In his hands, he has an offering table . Three signs for life are hanging down from it. Three expresses abundance. So Hapy brings abundant life. In his hands he also holds the staff that conveys the prosperity that the inundation brings. The sign  means life. Tourists often buy this sign as a pendant to hang on their necklaces. And the sign  stands for prosperity. Such signs are called *hieroglyphs*.



*Fig. 6.* Hapy, god of the Inundation

### **The First Time – the creation story of Memphis**

People in Ancient Egypt were healthy and happy from day to day, from year to year. They believed that this only could be due to God. That did not only apply to everyday life, but the beginning of life and of the world must have been the work of a god too. So, the Egyptian people started to think about the origin of the world and of their country. And they said: "If Egypt arises every year from the inundation, life must have started from a flood likewise. Before the creation, Egypt must have

looked like how we see it during the inundation. In the beginning Egypt was covered with water. The country looked like an ocean. From the North to the South, and from the Eastern desert to the Western desert, everywhere was water". And people called this flood *Nun*. They believed that he was the father of all living things. The primeval waters were covered in darkness. There was no land yet. Nor was there any sky. No people, animals or birds had come into being. So far, all Egyptians were in agreement. Before *the First Time*, as they called the creation of the world, there was only the flood and darkness. But how did all things come into being from that flood? How was man created? Every important city had its own story to answer these questions. In Memphis, for example, people said, that Ptah (*Fig. 7*), the god whom I personally admire most, had created all things by the thought of his heart and the word of his tongue. From the primeval waters, they said, Ptah arose like a hill. After this, all other land emerged from the ocean. And Ptah thought all things in his heart and brought them into existence by his commanding word. In this way he created all food and provisions. Through his word he made the crafts and all other things. Obviously, people in Memphis were fascinated by the mysterious power of speech. Have you ever experienced the creative power of words yourself? You can have control over someone simply by calling his name. If you call for example the name of a friend, when you see him walking in a crowded street, he will stop and look out for you. You can make someone feel happy by kind words. But your speech can also hurt or distress someone very much.



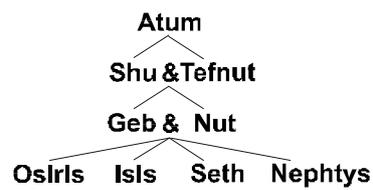
*Fig. 7. Ptah of Memphis*

#### **Other creation–stories**

In *Heliopolis*, a city which was not far from the place where Cairo is now, some people called the first god *Atum*. Other people called him *Re*. The first god did not have a mother nor a father. He came into being by himself. He emerged from the primeval flood *Nun* as a hill and stood on top of it. Then, he spat out two other gods. One was male and the other was female. The first one was called *Shu*. He became the air. The other one was called

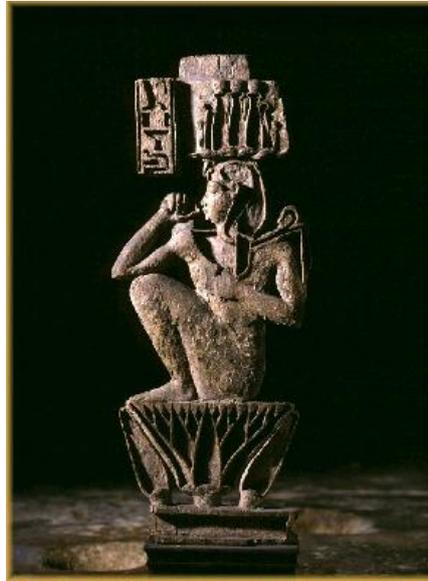
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*Tefnut*. She became the moisture. Shu and Tefnut gave birth to two other gods. The male one was called *Geb*. He became the earth. The female was *Nut*. She became the heaven. In their turn, Geb and Nut brought forth two pairs of gods. The first pair was *Osiris* and *Isis*. Osiris is male. Isis is female. The names of the second pair are *Seth* and *Nephthys*. This is the family tree:



*Fig. 8.* Shu lifts up Heaven from Earth

On the facing page (*Fig. 8*) you see the earth god Geb. He is stretched out on the floor. On his body you can see the reeds that grow on the earth. The body of the goddess of the sky is strewn with stars. In between Shu sits the god of the air. He lifts up the heaven from earth. On the right, the barge of the sun god is represented in which he travels along the heaven by day. Left, you can see the barge of the sun god used at night. In the city called *Hermopolis*, yet again another story was told. People from Hermopolis called the primeval hill which raised up from the flood in the beginning, the *Island of Fire*. After the hill had raised up from the flood, eight gods came. They made a big egg and laid it down on the hill. From the egg the sun god *Re* appeared on his own, and began to create all things. According to other people, the sun god came forth as a child from a lotus flower that floated on the flood. You can see this young god on the next page (*Fig. 9*). He has his finger in his mouth, like a child. His name is *Nefertem*. It means, that he is always youthful. Here, you can see that Egyptians always chose things from their daily lives to explain how life began and is renewed every morning. Every day, they saw thousands of lotus flowers floating on the Nile. Early in the morning, when the sun rises, they open their petals. At sunset, the flowers close. And isn't the egg a perfect symbol to represent the wonder of new life? Do you understand how a chicken can come out of an egg alive and well? Every time the birth of new life is a wonder. You may call it a mystery.



*Fig. 9.* Nefertem sitting on the lotus flower

### **True stories**

In fact, each story that tells about the beginning or the origin of life is true. Let me try to make this clear with the help of an example. Suppose that three children, John, Peter and Mary saw an accident. A car crashed into a wall. The driver was injured. First the police asked John what he had seen. John said: "A beautiful new car had to stop suddenly. But when braking very hard, the car skidded and was ruined. What a pity! It was a beautiful car!". Next, Peter was asked what he had seen. He said: "Suddenly a man crossed the road. He did not pay attention to the approaching car.

Then I heard a heavy bang. The noise is still in my ears". Finally Mary said that she had noticed that the man in the car had badly wounded his head. She said: "I saw blood everywhere". John, Peter and Mary all tell a different story about the same accident. Yet they did not lie, as all stories were true. But each of them told what struck him or her most. The stories complement each other. Together they tell the truth. Not only Peter's story *or* only the story of John, *or* only Mary's is true. But each story, the one of Peter *and* that of Mary *and* John's throw light on the accident. In the same way people from different places in Ancient Egypt told their story about the origin of the world and of life. And every story tried to make clear that life can not have been made by man. Life must have been created by God. Often such a story, that explains how something came into being, is called a *myth*.

#### **The creation of man.**

One famous myth tells about the creation of man. How did he come into being? Usually it is simply said that god created man together with the animals, the birds and the fish. But it is not explained, how they were made. However, one story says that it was the god Khnum, who made man on his potter's wheel. You can see a drawing of Khnum and his potter's wheel on the facing page (*Fig. 10*). The god sits at his potter's wheel modelling a human figure. Man is moulded by God from clay. Do you know what that means? The Ancient Egyptians wanted to explain through this myth, how man can not live without the food which the earth provides. Isn't that a true story? Look at the head of

the goddess on the right of the drawing. Her name is *Heqet*. She specialises in helping giving birth. She gives the hieroglyph that stands for life to the newly moulded man. For that reason she is depicted with a frog's head. For frogs know the mystery of birth. They are born from the frogspawn by themselves, without being helped by anyone. To express that Khnum is a powerful creator of life, people represent this god with the head of a ram. For especially this animal is considered to be very fertile. Like Khnum and Heqet, many other gods were portrayed with a human body and an animal's head. It is very characteristic of Ancient Egypt. You can read more about the Egyptian gods and goddesses in the second volume of this series.



*Fig. 10.* Khnum and Heqet

**Many gods.**

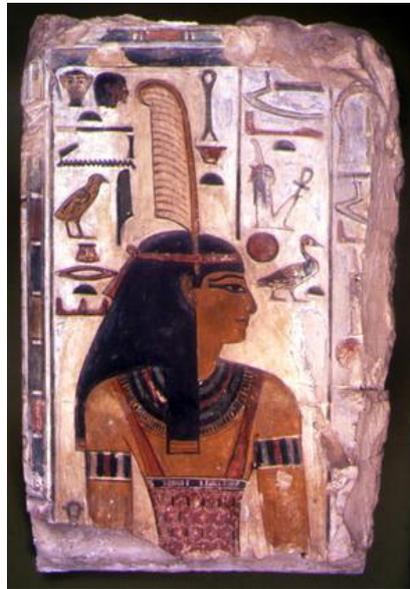
You may wonder why we had so many gods in Ancient Egypt. For I told you, that each important city gave a different name to the primeval god. We became acquainted already with Ptah of Memphis, Atum of Heliopolis and Re of Hermopolis. But I must also mention here the name of the god *Amun* (Fig. 11). He was believed to be the most important creator of The First Time by the inhabitants of Thebes. This city has been the capital of Ancient Egypt for many centuries. Besides we met a number of other gods and goddesses. Do you still remember their names? Some of them formed pairs: Shu and Tefnut, Geb and Nut, Osiris and Isis, Seth and Nephthys. But you were also introduced to Hapy, Nun, Khnum, Heqet and the young god on the lotus flower Nefertem. And there are hundreds more divinities. I'll try to explain to you why people in Ancient Egypt venerated so many gods. Maybe it is difficult to imagine, but you must realise that we, in my time, were totally dependent on nature. We did not have technology and modern industry then, as you do now. You can get food that has been grown artificially. Farmers in your time utilise fertilisers to speed up the growth and to improve the products. They apply pesticides to kill the vermin which affects plants and fruit. And many provisions are imported from other countries. So, if your farmers have a bad harvest, it is not a catastrophe for your country. People will not be famine-stricken. For that reason, many people in your time take it for granted that they have sufficient food and that they are healthy. Modern people are convinced that all things in nature can be controlled and manipulated. But in my time,

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through experience we knew that this was impossible. We believed that the powers, which we saw in nature, were gods. They showed that they had a will like people. For example, we venerated the yearly flood as a god. I told you about him above. He could make one man rich, and another poor. And the sun is a god as well. His power is really overwhelming. His heat can be deadly. But it is life-giving as well. And we met a lot of other quite different powers around the world. We could not imagine that all these powers came from one god. So we concluded that there must be many different divinities. Life is such a mystery and so variously shaped, you know!



*Fig 11.* Amun, god of Thebes



*Fig. 12* The goddess Maat

### **The paradise**

We believe that after the creation had been completed at the First Time, gods ruled on earth. That must have been a wonderful time, a golden age! The sun, which we venerate as the god Re, as I told you before, rose for the First Time and gave light and warmth throughout the whole day. He did not set in the evening. So there was no difference between day and night. There was no distress. Death did not yet exist, nor illness. There was no underworld yet. Gods and men lived together on earth. In this primeval time all living beings were in peace. The daughter of Re, the goddess Maat (*Fig. 12*), prescribed their life. Maat taught man to keep

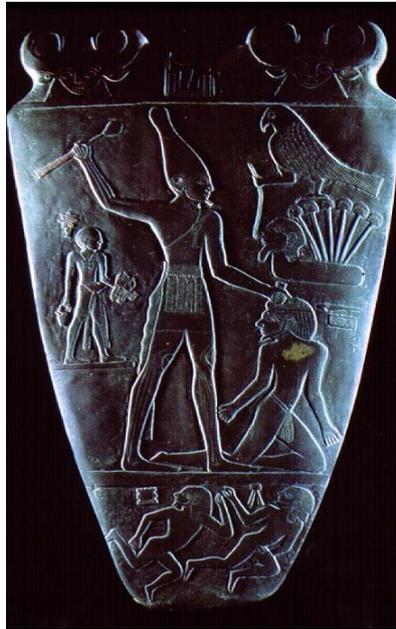
all things in balance and harmony. So there were no rich people at one side and no poor people at the other side. There was not too much in one place and too little in another place. There was no envy or jealousy. All people loved each other and were friends.

### **Rebellion of mankind**

As you know, life is no longer a paradise. It is often very hard indeed. You can see that everyday on TV. Now, one of the true stories explains, how paradise was lost. The myth tells: Re had become an old man. His strength and vitality were diminished. Then, man planned an attack to throw Re from his throne. When Re heard these plans, he decided to wipe out all people from earth. He drove them to the desert and slew them by the heat of the sun. But at night, Re regreted what he did, and he rescued the rest of the people with the life giving water of the inundation. Nevertheless, Re was very disappointed. He no longer wanted to rule man on earth. So he ascended to heaven to shine only by day, and he appointed the moon to take his place by night. From that time on, people have fought on earth. Distress and death had come in their lives. Paradise was lost.

**The first king**

After the god Re had finished his rule on earth, human kings took over his throne. The first king who is said to have ruled over Egypt is called *Menes*. You can see him, slaying an enemy, on the next page (*Fig. 13*). In my time, a story was told about this king. It said that originally two different countries existed. One was located in the South. It was called *Upper Egypt*. It stretched out from Elephantine to Memphis. The other country stretched out from Memphis to the Mediterranean. This country was called *Lower Egypt*. These two separate countries were unified by king Menes. There are many representations of this event. You can see one on the last page (*Fig. 14*). On the left, you can see the god of the inundation representing Upper Egypt. He has a clump of lotus plants, which are typical for the southern part of Egypt, on his head and between his legs, and he holds a lotus flower in his hands. On the right is a god of the inundation, representing the North of Egypt. On his head and between his legs you can see a clump of papyrus, clump of papyrus, and he holds a papyrus plant in his hand. This plant is characteristic for the North. The two gods tie the lotus and the papyrus together, as you can see in the middle. That means that they unify Upper and Lower Egypt. Since that time we always call our country *the Two Lands*. Much later, foreign people gave to the country another name, which they took from an old name of Memphis, the city of Ptah, my favorite god. In this way the modern name of my beloved country, Egypt, came into use.



*Fig. 13. Menes, the first King*

This is the end of my story. I hope that you enjoyed it. Now you know how Egypt and its gods came into being. If you would like to learn more about Ancient Egypt, its gods, kings, pyramids and hieroglyphic writing, please read the other volumes of this series. The gods and kings like to tell you their stories!



*Fig. 14.* The Unification of the Two Lands

**Other volumes planned in the series**

**THE YOUNGH ANCIENT EGYPT**

Egyptian Gods and Goddesses – told by Bes

Egyptian Kings – told by Geb

Egyptian Pyramids – told by Cheops

Everyday life – told by Hathor

Egyptian Hieroglyphs – told by Thot

Egyptian Magic – told by Heqa

Egyptian Temples – told by Maat

Egyptian Burial – told by Anubis

The Egyptian Hereafter – told by Osiris

The Egyptian Story of Isis and Osiris – told by Horus

Akhenaten, the heretic king – told by Akhenaten