Egyptians loved life so passionately that they wanted it to last forever, and did everything in their power to prolong it indefinitely. They preserved and wrapped the body, placed it in a secure tomb, and surrounded it with all the items essential for its eternal well-being in the blissful and prosperous realm of Osiris, lord of the underworld paradise.

The story of Isis and Osiris, in which Osiris is resurrected from the dead, helps to explain the Egyptians’ understanding of death as simply a continuation of life. At the beginning of the saga, Osiris and Isis, his sister and wife, ruled over Egypt during a golden age of peace and prosperity. But their jealous brother, Seth—the lord of chaos—envied their happiness and success, and plotted to murder Osiris and seize the throne for himself.

Seth invited Osiris to a banquet, at which he tricked his unsuspecting brother into trying out a fine coffin
that he had commissioned. As soon as Osiris was inside, Seth sealed the coffin and flung it into the Nile—Osiris drowned and death was created.

Following the murder, the distraught Isis managed to retrieve her husband’s body, only to have it snatched away from her by Seth, who savagely dismembered it and scattered the pieces far and wide across Egypt. Not to be deterred, Isis adopted the form of a kite and took to the skies with her sister. Nephthys, and together they managed to retrieve each part. The god’s head, for example, was found at Abydos and his heart at Athribis. Every site at which one of Osiris’s body parts was found later became a place of pilgrimage associated with his worship. Isis then put Osiris’s body back together with the help of Anubis, the god of embalming, and so produced the first mummy. All subsequent mummies were believed to be protected by the god who had preceded them.

This scene is from the Book of the Dead produced in about 1285BCE for a royal scribe, Hunefer. It depicts the passage of the deceased (shown, far left and center, wearing white robes) through “the Hall of Two Truths,” the final stage before entering the afterlife. Anubis weighs the heart of the deceased to determine whether he is worthy of passing into the afterlife. Thoth records the verdict and Horus leads the successful candidate to the throne of Osiris. (See also pages 53–54.)
Using her immense magical powers, Isis then restored Osiris back to life and reinvigorated him temporarily so that she could conceive their son, Horus. Isis quite literally created new life from death—a miraculous act captured in a number of relief scenes and sculpture. She raised Horus in secret, and he grew up to reclaim the throne from his usurping uncle, Seth (see box, page 33).

While Horus became the king on Earth, his resurrected father, Osiris, became lord of the underworld. The embodiment of justice and righteousness, Osiris guaranteed salvation to all those who died and were judged worthy of everlasting life in the underworld paradise. For the ancient Egyptians, he gave eternal hope to the living.

**PREPARING FOR THE AFTERLIFE**

In ancient Egyptian belief, the preservation of the corpse—mummification—was fundamental to the continuation of life after death. In the earliest period of the country’s history, bodies were simply placed into hollows in the sand, where they were dessicated and preserved naturally by the hot, dry conditions. As burial practices among the elite became increasingly sophisticated, purpose-built, rectangular tombs (*mastabas*) replaced burial in the sand (see page 25), and natural preservation gave way to artificial preservation techniques. The word “mummy” itself comes from *masu*, the Persian word for “bitumen”—the substance that the Egyptians were once, wrongly, believed to have used in the preservation of bodies.

As the mummification process became more refined and elaborate, all internal organs, except for the heart and kidneys, were removed and preserved separately inside what are known as “canopic jars.” Meanwhile, the eviscerated body was dried out beneath a layer of natron salts. The corpse was then washed and purified,

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*In this illustration, from the Book of the Dead buried with the scribe Ani (ca. 1290 BCE), the deceased is shown plowing, reaping, and threshing; sailing across the Lake of Offerings; and worshipping a range of gods including Re, the seven Hathor cows, and the Heron of Plenty.*
the incision sewn up, and the skin anointed with a variety of oils, spices, and resins. Finally, the body was wrapped in fine linen bandages. Instructions in the “Book of the Dead”—the Egyptian “handbook” for ensuring the deceased’s proper burial and safe passage into paradise—state that the dead had to be “pure, clean, clothed in fresh linen, and anointed with the finest myrrh oil,” in order to enter the afterlife.

As the embalmers wrapped the body, protective amulets were placed among the bandages while priests recited the incantations needed to activate them. Following the standard seventy-day embalming process, the prepared corpse—complete with its funerary mask depicting the deceased as living and youthful—was placed in its coffin. It was then ready for the ritual funeral procession, accompanied by priests, maa dancers, mourners, and servants carrying all the necessary funerary equipment.

Before the tomb, and amid clouds of purifying incense, the priests performed the “Opening of the Mouth” ceremony, essential for reanimating the ka (soul) and senses of the deceased. The noise and movement of music and dancing were believed to revitalize hearing and sight; incense and flowers brought back the sense of smell; and offerings of choice cuts of meat and wine enabled the deceased to eat and drink in the afterlife. The standard offering formulae recited during this ceremony request for the deceased “a thousand of every good and pure thing for your ka and all kinds of offerings on which the gods live.”

The reanimated mummy was then laid to rest in its tomb and surrounded by funerary objects ranging from items used in daily life to those designed specifically for burial, such as the Book of the Dead and other instructive funerary texts, and shabris (magical figurines that were believed to come to life and act as servants for their owner). With the funeral complete, the deceased set out from the tomb on a hazardous journey through the underworld—which culminated in his or her judgment before the throne of Osiris, the lord of the dead.

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**THE VALLEY OF THE KINGS**

As the sun sank into the Theban Hills on the western horizon, dead souls sank down into the eternal embrace of Hathor, goddess of the West, who was regularly shown emerging from the hillside at her sacred site of Deir el-Bahari. Here, the Eleventh-dynasty king Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II (ca. 2008–1957 BCE) was laid to rest in his tomb below his funerary temple, surrounded by six priestesses of the goddess, who would protect his spirit.

The later New Kingdom pharaohs, from Amenhotep I to Ramesses XI, also associated Deir el-Bahari with Hathor, but amended the earlier arrangement by constructing a separate temple and tomb; their funerary temples, which face the river, remain highly visible, whereas their tombs were hidden in the valleys on the other side of the hills. The main valley—named after the kings buried within its depths—is marked by the natural pyramid shape of the Theban Peak, a rock known to the Egyptians by the apt name of Meretsere, or “She who Loves Silence.” The superbly decorated rockcut tombs include the huge funerary chambers of Thutmose III, Amenhotep II, Horemheb, Sety II, and the later Ramesside kings. Favorite courtyards, such as Yuya and Thuya, were also occasionally buried here as a mark of honor.

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**IN THE HALL OF OSIRIS**

The judgment before Osiris (see illustration, pages 50–51) was the key stage in the transformation of the deceased into an akh—a spirit that could help its living relatives. In a chamber of the underworld called “the Hall of Two Truths,” the deceased was led by Anubis before Osiris, god of the underworld and ultimate judge of the dead, and forty-two gods making the assessment. The deceased was presented with a long list of sins and had to deny each in turn. Anubis tested the veracity of
their denials by weighing their heart—the seat of thought and consciousness—against a feather representing maat (truth). If heart and feather were of equal weight, the deceased was declared “true of voice” and “justified.” Thoth recorded the judgment and Horus led the deceased to the throne of Osiris—and from there they passed into the blessed afterlife. But if the heart was heavy with sin and tipped the scales, it was thrown to Ammut, a hybrid monster that annihilated evildoers by devouring their hearts.

VISTIONS OF PARADISE
The Egyptians’ ultimate aim was to live forever in their beloved homeland; they envisaged eternal paradise as simply a continuation of their lives on Earth, albeit with a few refinements. In the idealized afterlife, the shabti figures (see page 53) would perform all manual work—detailed models placed in tombs often represented the kind of activities they would perform. Harvests would be enormous, and drought and illness nonexistent. The deceased and their families would enjoy banquets and boating trips, or relax in their flower gardens. An inscription on Tutankhamun’s drinking cup expresses the ultimate Egyptian wish: “May your soul live, may you spend millions of years, O lover of Thebes, with your face to the north wind and your eyes beholding happiness.”

To help the deceased reach blessed eternity, funerary texts acted as a kind of guidebook to the afterlife. The earliest surviving maps from Egypt are those depicting the route to the afterlife in texts known as “The Book of Two Ways,” which were painted on the inside of Middle Kingdom coffins. Later incantations in the New Kingdom Book of the Dead are entitled “Spell for Not Dying a Second Time,” “Spell Not to Rot and Not to Do Work in the Land of the Dead,” and “Spell for Not Having your Magic Taken Away”—as well as “Spells of Transformation,” which would change the deceased’s form to facilitate his or her passage through the underworld. One magic formula for transforming the dead person into a lotus states: “I am this pure lotus flower that has ascended by the sunlight and is at the nose of the sun god, Re. I am the pure lotus that ascends upward.” The lotus opening its petals at dawn symbolized the morning sun emerging from the darkness of night, and, similarly, life arising from the darkness of death.

Funerary texts present several conceptions of paradise. Thus the deceased may inhabit the underworld with Osiris; or rise up to the heavens to become one of the “Imperishable Stars” (see below); or join the sun god, Re, in his “Barque of the Millions” in its journey across the sky. Later myths incorporate the Re and Osiris stories, as the two gods meet each night in the underworld on the sun’s voyage through the darkness. As with the various creation myths (see pages 22–24), the acceptance of a range of ultimate destinations for the deceased is typical of the Egyptians’ tolerant and multifaceted belief system.

THE HEAVENLY REALM
The Egyptians studied the movements of the moon and stars from observatories situated on their temple roofs, and a section of the priesthood was trained in astronomy to ensure that the necessary rituals were performed at the correct hour. Stellar motifs were often used to embellish the ceilings of both temples and tombs. Many of these decorations depict the sky goddess Nut as a star-covered woman stretching out above the surface of the Earth—she is often shown performing a similar act of protection over the deceased on the inside of their coffins lids. The coffin lid depicting Nut, opposite, dates to the latest period of ancient Egyptian history, but references to the sky goddess have been found in sources as early as the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts (see page 25).

The dead themselves were also thought to rise up to join the ranks of the “Imperishable Stars,” a term used of the stars around the Pole Star, which were visible in the night sky at all times of the year. This belief is first referred to in the Pyramid Texts. By the Middle Kingdom, sarcophagus lids were decorated with