Pantheons of the Ancient Mediterranean: Crash Course World Mythology #7

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, and this is Crash Course Mythology. Today we're going to start looking at pantheons.

Pantheons are families of gods and those families are complicated. Really complicated. A whole tangle of grandparents, and parents, and uncles and aunts, and nieces and nephews, and a couple of children of mortal women who were raped, and a pretty staggering amount of violence and incest to just round everything off. They have amazing feasts but honestly could you imagine thanksgiving dinner with these people. I mean Thoth, you had a mistress and a wife and also somehow gave birth to yourself, how is that not awkward.

[Opening music]

The pantheons we are going to examine are families of deities from cultures that are usually considered polytheistic, meaning that they worshipped more than one god. In most mythological traditions, the gods are seen as immortal, and according to David Leeming they are, "personified projections of the human mythmaker's dreams of overcoming the inevitable effects of the physical laws that require death and disintegration." Yeah. We went dark pretty quick.

In creation stories and other myths, gods represent the creative force that brings and sustains life. In many myths, gods are personifications of aspects of nature and of human nature: the sun, the winds, impatience, love. Pantheons, David Leeming argues, help us to explain how and why the world we know came into being, and can tell us a lot about a culture. Leeming writes, "All pantheons are ontological and teleological; that is they are metaphors for the human attempt to make sense of existence itself and to assign ultimate cause. To 'read' a pantheon is to read a culture's sense of itself and of the nature of the cosmos." But can pantheons explain the naked mole rat? Let's find out together.

If you thought I was going to start with the Greeks...ha, gotcha. Hi five Thoth, but we're not starting with Egypt either. Sorry. We're going to start with one of the oldest pantheons we have records for: the family of gods from ancient Sumer in Mesopotamia.

Sumer's pantheon represents the most important natural forces in the lives of Ancient Mesopotamians, and there are a lot of deities here. So strap in. Try to pay attention to everyone's responsibilities, and note what kinds of things don't have gods. Alright, here we go.

The first pair of deities are the earth goddess Ki and the sky god called An. An mates with Ki and Nammu, goddess of primal waters. An and Nammu's children are Enki, the trickster god, and his sister, Ningikuga, the goddess of the reeds. An and Ki, the more significant duo, begot Ninlil, the air goddess and Enlil, the air god. Ninlil and Enlil give birth to Nanna, the moon god. Enki and his sister, Ningikuna, create Ningal, the moon goddess. Ningal and Nanna then have three children, Utu the sun god, Inanna, the great goddess of heaven and earth, and Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld. Ereshkigal's husband is Gugalanna, the Bull of Heaven, and Inanna marries the shepherd Dumuzi. Dumuzi, it turns out, was the son of Enki, the trickster god, and his consort, the sheep goddess Sirtur. It may be worth noting that, yes, the sheep goddess did give birth to a shepherd.

So that is the basic pantheon of Sumer, but what does this tell us about Mesopotamia? First it suggests that, at least in terms of their myths, natural phenomena - like the earth and sky - take precedence over human actions and emotions, like love. I mean, only two of the original Mesopotamian gods, Enki the trickster and Inanna, also the goddess of love, are described as ruling over aspects of human nature. And the sheep, well, we tend to think agriculture when we talk about the Fertile Crescent, but the fact that their pantheon features sheep and a bull, rather than a harvest deity, might recall an earlier life as herders. Or perhaps the bull is symbolic, not only of masculinity but also of farming.

This is the fun part of pantheons specifically, and mythology generally: you can read them in many, many ways. No Thoth, that is not a joke about hieroglyphics, but it does get us to our next significantly moe complex family of gods, the Egyptian pantheon.

Right off the bat I'm going to say that the Egyptian pantheon is even more confusing than your average confusing pantheon, but surprise surprise, its also just as incestuous. First off: there is no standard version of the Egyptian pantheon. The myth changes depending upon who is writing it, and where, and when. For example, in the story of Isis and Osiris, our most complete source isn't even Egyptian, its the Greek biographer Plutarch who wrote in the first and second centuries CE, well after Egypt had become Helenized, and then Romanized. In his version of the Isis and Osiris myths, he gives Egyptian gods Greek names. For example he refers to Thoth as Hermes. He does still give you credit for inventing darts though, so.

There are also different versions of the pantheon depending upon where you are in Egypt. For the most part we'll be sticking with the group of gods worshiped at the city of Heliopolis and headed by Atum or Ra. But we'll give a nod the the fact that in Thebes, the pantheon was led by Amun. And we can't forget the attempted monotheism of Akhenaten. That was classic. And just to make this even trickier, a lot of the Egyptian sources we have for myths are fragmentary, and they're spread out over thousands of years.

So for simplicity, we're going to settle on the nine god pantheon that forms the core of Egyptian religious belief. And it doesn't include Thoth, sorry pal. The Aeniad or nine gods was in place in Heliopolis by 2700 BCE, and is the one found in the pyramid texts, which might be the oldest surviving set of religious texts in the world.

At the top of this pantheon is Atum, aka Re, aka Ra, aka Khepri, aka Amun, or sometimes Amun-Ra depending upon where in Egypt you are. This is why we're trying to simplify things. Atum is the great eye of the heavens and of creation. He was the spitter in our Egyptian creation story.

Atum's creative cough creates Shu, the life spirit, and Tefnut, the world order, or cosmos. This brother and sister pair mate and give birth to Geb and Nut. Geb is the spirit of life and Nut is an Egyptian great mother goddess. The two are separated by their father Shu, and Geb becomes earth while Nut becomes the sky and the stars, which is a neat reversal of the whole earth-mother, sky-father thing.

Like their parents, brother and sister, Geb and Nut, become the mother and father of the rest of the gods, in this pantheon. their children, Osiris and Isis, are probably the best known Egyptian gods, other than hawk-headed Ra. Osiris, god of the underworld and grain, kinda like a Demeter-slash-Hades combo, was probably the most popular of the Egyptian gods. Because hey, who doesn't like food and death. He dies and is revived which happens more than you would expect in myth, actually maybe exactly as much as you would expect in myth. Isis is a goddess of the earth and the moon, and is married to Osiris. The mystery cult of Isis was popular well beyond Egypt into Roman times. And if you're not sure what a mystery cult is, guess what, that's the point.

The second son, and third child, from the Geb-Nut pairing is Set. Set is a god of evil and darkness, and is the nemesis of Isis and Osiris. He is married to his sister Nephthys, a goddess of death and dusk, because you know, if you're going to be married for all of eternity it's nice to share interests.

And the final piece of this puzzle is young Horus, not to be confused with old Horus, or the guy from *Warhammer*. He was conceived miraculously by Isis and Osiris after the latter's death, and he has aspects of a sun god. He is a light that defeats Set's darkness. Most important though, Horus, who is also depicted with the head of a falcon - not a hawk, not an ibis - is the spiritual force behind the pharaohs. I know that you're wondering when we're going to talk about Anubis, Bastet, and Sekhmet, but remember, for the sake of comparative simplicity, we're sticking with this nine-god pantheon.

So, what conclusions then can we draw from this basic pantheon. There are multiple versions of sun gods, with Ra representing both he sun and creation, and Horus representing both the sun and kingship. So we can infer that the sun was important to the Egyptians, probably as much for it's eternal cycle of death and rebirth, as for it's providing life giving energy.

Ancient Egyptian culture is commonly said to focus on death, and that's not wrong. Although death to the Egyptians probably didn't hold the same terror that it does for many in the modern world. I think the most distinct example of this necro-centric ideal is the pyramids, and the mummified corpses and jars full of organs found within them, but also this weeks featured myth, the story of Isis and Osiris.

Take it awa, Thought Bubble.

Osiris was much beloved by the people of Egypt. He showed them how to cultivate grain, gave them laws, and taught them to honour the gods. His brother Set was envious but wouldn't try anything while Osiris was away teaching civilization to the world. But when Osiris returned, Set and 72 accomplices had a plan, a plan involving furniture. They had secretly measured Osiris's body and had built a beautiful chest to his exact dimensions.

At a party celebrating Osiris's return Set suggested that whoever fit in the chest would receive it as a gift. Osiris gave it a shot, and when he lay down in the box the conspirators nailed it shut and sealed it with lead. They threw it in the river and it floated out to sea. Isis, Osiris's wife, went looking for her husband and found the chest near the land of Biblos where a great tree had grown up around it, encasing the coffin in it's trunk. She cut away the wood around the coffin and lay upon it, wailing with such grief and power that the king's younger sons died of fear.

Isis soon left the chest to visit Horus, and Set found the coffin while boar hunting. He cut up Osiris's body into 14 pieces and scattered them far and wide. Isis, discovering what Seth had done, set out to search for the pieces. she found 13 of them but not what Izanagi might have described as his excess. She buried the pieces where she found them, which is why there are so many graves for Osiris in Egypt. Set couldn't find the true grave of Osiris and Osiris would be worshipped throughout Egypt. Win-win, except for the fact that he was dead. Or was he?

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

This is one version of the story, but in another version, upon finding the body of Osiris, Isis and her sister Nephthys wept such a loud lamentation that Ra the sun god took pity on them and sent down jackal headed Anubis to help Isis and Nephthys. The two sisters, with the help of Anubis, Thoth, and Horus, pieced Osiris back together and wrapped him in linen bandages and performed the funeral rites. Isis flapped her wings over the body and Osiris revived. From then on he became the king of the dead, ruling in the underworld.

So this myth illustrated some central facets of Egyptian culture. One is the idea of Osiris as a king and a god, much like the pharaohs. Another is the role of mummification in Egyptian life, or death, or well actually both. The binding of Osiris and his revival is a promise to Egyptians of eternal life. According to David Leeming, "Egyptians believed that every man would live eternal in the other world if only his surviving friends did for his body what the gods had done for the body of Osiris; ...as Osiris dies and rose again from the dead, so all men hoped to rise like him..."

This myth also suggests that in Egypt, the pantheon is somewhat fluid, with gods performing numerous roles. Osiris goes from being the father of civilization to the ruler of the underworld, a role that in later Egyptian mythology will be taken over by Anubis. While Set is the source of evil and trouble, the jealous younger brother always trying - and sometimes succeeding - to take the place of his older brother.

There's a tendency to view pantheons as explanations of natural phenomena that corresponds between particular gods and particular aspects of nature, like the sun's rising and setting. But often the gods resist falling into such restrictive roles. And as myths like Isis and Osiris show, it's the particular stories that matter to people, as much, if not more than, who is the goddess of what and why.

Just ask Saga, Norse goddess of storytelling. We're going to meet her really soon. But until then, thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching, and don't forget to be mythological. Oh, we punted that one, huh?