

13-268 Copper alloy figurine of Osiris, god of the living dead

This fine bronze figurine of Osiris was bought by Sir William Burrell on 3 May 1954 from the dealers Spink and Son for the sum of £130. As with most of his antiquities, the archaeological provenance of the object is not known, and in this case there is no dedicatory inscription in Egyptian hieroglyphs. What we know about the figurine must therefore be deduced by analysis of its features and by comparison with analogous pieces.

The figurine shows the attributes of the god Osiris, as a dead king. In his hands he carries the emblems of kingship, the flail (*nekheka*) in his right hand and the crook (*heka*) in his left. The crook is in origin a shepherd's crook. Its Egyptian name (*heka*) means a ruler and therefore it embodies the concept of kingship and care for the people of Egypt. On his head is the atef crown worn specifically by Osiris. Many of the elements in this headdress also reflect concepts of kingship. The central tubular shape is the white crown (*hedjet*) of Upper Egypt. The body of a cobra crawls sinuously down the front of the crown, its head rearing on the brow. Wadjet, the cobra goddess of the Lower Egypt city of Buto was the traditional protectress of pharaoh, as a *uraeus* on his brow spitting fire at his enemies. On either side of the crown is a stylised ostrich feather. This feather is the symbol of the goddess Maat, whose name means truth, justice and order, principles which a king was required to uphold.

These rest on two curly ram's horns (elements that are not always present in the *atef* crown) which project horizontally on either side. These horns are characteristic of *Ovis longipes palaeoaegyptiaca*, a species of ram present in Egypt from the earliest times and also associated with Khnum, a creator god worshipped at Esna and Elephantine in Upper Egypt. Another species of ram found in Egypt from 12th Dynasty (*Ovis aries platyra aegyptiaca*) has distinctive curly horns and is associated with the god Amun (Alexander the Great adopted curly ram's horns in representations of himself after his visit to the oracle of Ammon at the Siwa Oasis, when the god is believed to have acknowledged Alexander as his son). Straight horns are characteristic of the form of ram taken by the god Ba-neb-djedet ("the ram who is lord of *Djedet*" - modern Mendes in Lower Egypt). The similarity in sound of the Egyptian word for ram (*ba*) with that for one of the forms of the spirit, caused Ba-neb-djedet to be considered an embodiment of the spirit (*ba*) of Osiris.

Other features of the figurine show that Osiris is a dead king. On his chin he wears a false plaited beard with an upturned end, characteristic of Osiris and worn by pharaohs after their death to show their divinity. The figurine's body wears a broad collar around his neck and is wrapped in a linen shroud through which his forearms project. Osiris' body has therefore been mummified in preparation for burial. This draws attention to Osiris' chief and unique characteristic. In Egyptian religion he is the only god to die but, as the first mummy, to live again as king of the dead in the afterlife.

Osiris is one of the Nine Gods (*ennead*) who, according to the creation myth of Heliopolis (ancient On, the centre of sun worship, near modern Cairo), first came into being. Atum (whose name means "the all") rose out of Nun, the waters of chaos, on the primeval mound. He spat or masturbated to create the first generation of male and female gods, Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture). They in turn had a male child, Geb (earth) and a female child, Nut (sky). This couple then gave birth to the third generation of male and female gods: Osiris and Seth, and their sisters, Isis and Nephthys.

The myths concerning these four divinities have not come down to us in a complete and authentic form as



we might expect by comparison with Greek myths. There is a comprehensive story told by the Greek writer, Plutarch (46-126 CE) who wrote his "De Iside et Osiride" as a result of his travels in Egypt during the Roman Empire. However, his account is suspect because, though it may draw on strands of genuine Egyptian tradition, it is heavily contaminated by his Greek perspective and by the late date at which he wrote. Whilst no complete Egyptian account is preserved, allusions to the Osiris myth do occur in genuine Egyptian records. The 18th Dynasty stela of Amenmose in the Louvre (C286) preserves the "Great Hymn to Osiris". The British Museum's 19th Dynasty Papyrus Chester Beattie (1 recto), dating to the reign of Ramesses V, records the "Contendings of Horus and Seth". Two papyri from the Ptolemaic Period preserve the "Lamentations of Isis and Nephthys" (Papyrus Berlin 3008) and the "Songs of Isis and Nephthys" (Papyrus Bremner-Rhind 10188). Egyptian temples built during the Roman Period at Esna, Dendera and Philae, allude to rituals in the cult of Osiris, Isis and Horus in the hieroglyphic inscriptions on their walls. From these various sources the elements of the myth of Osiris can be reconstructed.

Osiris married his sister Isis and ruled Egypt as a just king. But his bad brother Seth was jealous of Osiris' power and plotted to murder him. Seth constructed a chest that would only fit Osiris' body and invited him to a feast. The chest was offered to whomever it would fit. When Osiris got inside Seth had the lid sealed and the chest thrown into the river Nile where Osiris drowned. The chest is clearly a coffin and symbolises death and burial. Isis searched for her dead husband and eventually found his body in Byblos (on the coast of modern Lebanon) where the chest had washed up and caught in the roots of a cedar tree. Egypt traded throughout her history with Byblos, her chief source of cedar wood. The "lady of Byblos", the goddess of the city, was equated by the Egyptians with Isis. She brought his body back to Egypt where she hid it in preparation for proper burial. But Seth found the body and this time dismembered it, scattering the cut pieces across Egypt. This echoes the Egyptians' ancient anxiety, first recorded in the Pyramid Texts, that the body of the dead should be preserved intact for the spirit to survive. It is also an explanation for the many cult sites of Osiris across Egypt. The chief of these were at Abydos in Upper Egypt (ancient *Abdju*, near modern Luxor) where his head was buried, and Busiris in Lower Egypt (ancient *Djedw*) the location of his backbone. The Egyptians equated Osiris with Andjety, the local god of Busiris, whose amuletic symbol the djed pillar may represent a stylised backbone. A *djed* pillar was often painted on the base of a wooden anthropoid coffin so confirming this meaning. In Egyptian the word *djed* means "stability". One of the ceremonies associated with Osiris was the king's raising of the *djed* pillar, in which a huge fetish of this symbol was made to stand upright, to evoke both the stability of king's reign and the raising of Osiris from the dead.

Though Nephthys was married to her sister Seth, she sided with Isis over the murder of their brother. Together they searched Egypt as kites, birds of prey whose screeches convey the depth of the sisters' grief, and collected the pieces of his body. These Isis reassembled to create Osiris' mummy. But the penis had been eaten by a fish (a Nile carp or *Lepidotus*) and had to be reconstructed through the power of Isis' magic (Isis had tricked the sun-god Ra into revealing his secret name to her, so that she acquired vast magical powers). She then used magic to bring Osiris back to life and, hovering as a kite over his mummified body, conceived their son, the falcon god Horus. Osiris, though reborn, had died and so could not return to the land of the living. He therefore passed into the west to become king of the dead. One of his epithets, "foremost of the westerners" (*khenty-imentw*) reflects this leadership of the dead who live beyond the setting sun in the west. Another of his epithets "continuing to be perfect" (*wenen-nefer*) refers to the revival of his mummified body, which will never decay.