Hapi was a personification of the Nile River, and thus a god of fertility. He was immensely important in the Egyptian pantheon because without the river the region would have been too arid for human settlement. Hapi was sometimes referred to as "lord of the fishes and birds of the marshes."

Life in ancient Egypt was centered on the Nile River, and the waterway was worshiped as a god. Hapi (also spelled Hapy and Hepy) is the Egyptian name for the Nile. The name Nile comes from the Greek Neîlos; its origin is unknown, but it may be related to Egyptian nwy, "water." In Greek mythology, Nile was an ancient Egyptian king who confined the river within channels and helped to fertilize the country. He was the father of Memphis, who married Epaphus, the son of Zeus and the cow-maiden Io. In the Predynastic Period (before c. 2925 BCE), the name Hapi referred to both the river and the god, but later the god was called Hapi, and the river became iterw, meaning "the river" or "the running one."

The Nile River flows north from deep within the African continent. Every summer, it is swollen by heavy tropical rains in the south, especially in Ethiopia, and bursts its banks in Egypt. When the waters recede, the banks of the river and the floodplain are covered with rich, fertile silt, in which the farmers plant their crops. The Egyptian economy has always depended heavily on the river.

Although Hapi was worshiped by everyone in Egypt, he had no temples dedicated to him. Instead he was represented in the temples of the other gods, usually as an androgynous figure—a fat man with female breasts. His skin was green or blue. He was often depicted holding a tray, on which were the lotus of Upper Egypt and the papyrus of Lower Egypt, or two vases for libations of water. Hapi, therefore, represents a united Egypt. The symbol of this union, the sema-tawy, is a double image of Hapi, one on each side of a throne, tying together a lotus and a papyrus. Hapi also appeared as a territorial marker, holding a tablet with the name and symbols of the nome, or province, of the god in whose temple he was placed. As a god of the sacred river, he wore a fisher's belt and a crown of aquatic flowers on his head, with an utchat, an "eye of Osiris," on his forehead; he sometimes held a plate of the fruits cultivated on the Nile's banks. Less commonly, Hapi was represented as a man with two goose heads looking in opposite directions.

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Hapi's origins

The mystery that surrounded the origin of the Nile River was paralleled by the stories of Hapi's life. According to one myth, he was born in the underworld below the Aswan Falls, where the primeval waters of Nun (the water of chaos) flowed. As a result, he was particularly worshiped in Swentet (Aswan). In another account, Hapi was said to have been born on Bigehin, an island in the Upper Nile, and dwelled in the caverns of the nearby falls, which were ruled by the creator god Khmun. Khmun allowed Hapi to flood every year, causing the annual inundation.

Other Gods Named Hapi

Hapi (Egyptian *hpy*) was also the name of one of the sons of the falcon god Horus. The sons represented the cardinal points of the compass and also played an important role in the ceremony of mummification. Their heads decorated the lids of canopic jars used to preserve the internal organs of the deceased. From left to right below they were Qebshenuf, a falcon, who preserved the intestines; Dwamutef, a jackal, who preserved the stomach; Imset, with a human head, who preserved the liver; and Hapi, a baboon, who preserved the lungs.

Hapi (Hepu) was also the name of Apis (Egyptian *hpw*), the sacred bull consecrated to Osiris. Only one real bull was considered to be the sacred Apis at a time. When it died a new Apis was
transported to Memphis on a boat with a specially built golden cabin. The festival of the Apis bull lasted seven days, and the bull was often consulted as an oracle.

Hapi had two wives, both water goddesses. Mut, or Muit, meaning "water's flow," was similar to Nun. She represented humidity, which was the origin of the primeval universe, although she never attained great prominence. The other wife was Nekhbet, a vulture-goddess worshiped in Nekheb, the ancient provincial capital of Lower Egypt. Nekhbet was associated with both fertility and creation. She lived at the entrance to the abyss, at the place where Hapi was born and Khmun ruled.

Sometimes Hapi was merged with other gods representing fertility, such as Osiris, in whose mythical cycle Nekhbet was also involved. A version of Hapi was merged with Sobek, the crocodile-god, as well as with Khmun, Hapi's ruler, and with Nephri, the lord of grain. Later Hapi became linked with Osiris as the husband of Sothis, a manifestation of Isis who appeared as the star Sirius. The isle of Bigehin, where Hapi was born, was also the birthplace of Osiris. Hapi was one of the few gods not completely banished by the heretical pharaoh Akhenaton (ruled 1379-1362 BCE), who considered him to be an incarnation of the only true god Aten.

See also: EGYPT; HORUS; ISIS; OSIRIS.

Further reading


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