

## Death and Afterlife in Egypt

Egyptians focused on materiality in their belief system of afterlife and immortality. They expended enormous efforts in building appropriate tombs for the deceased and filled them with all sorts of items from his/her earthly life together with artistic renderings of the deceased and of idealized scenes. The artistic reproductions of the dead persons were essential. The way the deceased was represented was set by specific canons to insure that the soul would return to this world and take residence in the appropriate body.

### Two important things to notice:

1. The figures have no perspective and are represented in weird and unrealistic positions. Why? The artist must clearly show all the deceased's body parts (composite body) so that they can be reused after death. The figures in the Egyptian tombs are not just art. They are functional. The deceased lives through them. They believed that after death their **akh** or spirit would return to this world through the figures in his/her tomb and reside there.
2. The deceased hoped relatives and priests would bring fresh offerings to sustain his **akh**, but in case they forgot or slacked off, he/she had his/her tomb filled with items that the **akh** could use. Provided with this magic in stone – food and drink, the support of servants, the company of singers and dancers, and opportunity to fish and hunt – the **akh** could continue to experience all the pleasures of the here and now for eternity.

How does a person reach eternity after death? Here are the steps.

### DEATH

On the tombs, there is a hieroglyph that says:

***Raise yourself. You have not died. Your life force will dwell with you forever.***

Life everlasting begins with a journey from the tomb through the underworld. The **ka**, or life force, leaves the body first, followed after the burial by the **ba**, or soul. The **falcon-headed god Horus** leads the **ba** through doorways of fire and cobras into the hall of judgment.

### JUDGEMENT

On the tombs, there is a hieroglyph that says:

***Oh my heart that I have had when on Earth, do not stand up against me as a witness, do not make a case against me beside the great God.***

The **jackal-headed god Anubis** weighs the deceased's heart, site of the conscience, against the feather of **maat**, or things as they should be. **Osiris, king of the underworld**, and other gods watch as judges. If the heart is too heavy or too light, a monster that is **part lion, part crocodile, and part hippopotamus** devours it, dooming the deceased to a perpetual coma.

### ETERNITY

On the tombs, a hieroglyph says:

***I have come forth in this day-time in my true form as a living spirit. The place of my heart's desire is among the living in this land forever.***

If the heart balances, the *ba* and the *ka* reunite to form an ***akh***, or spirit, which emerges in the right realm ruled by Osiris. The *akh* can now reenter the living world and enjoy its pleasures, including the spouse's love and the attention of the servants. The utopian life portrayed on the tomb walls is now his/hers for eternity.

**Prepared for the SBMA Docent Council by Gabriella Schooley, April 27, 2006**

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