

The celestial underworld, or mysterious beyond

The Beyond was an integral part of the ordered universe, representing an intermediate zone between the edge of the visible—or conceivable—world and the waters of Nun. Both its location and its organization were therefore simultaneously precise and vague.

Complex in nature

The western horizon marked the boundary where the Beyond began. The setting sun entered Duat, an underworld that was nevertheless celestial because the sun moved across it at night. This realm was simultaneously a counter-earth, a counter-heaven, and a counter-Nile—a reverse image of every component of visible human reality. Its structure was very complicated, for sky, waters, flames, land, and darkness were juxtaposed and overlapping. Not just a passage for the sun at night, it was also the sanctuary of Osiris, the dreaded god of the dead. Indeed, Duat was the abode of the dead, retaining their mortal remains yet allowing their immortal entities to return to the world of the living.

Multiple aspects

The multiple natures and functions of this realm explain its various depictions. It might be the sum of linked, partitioned spaces through which the sun travels to regenerate itself, or it might be a set of fortress-spaces nestling inside one another, guarding the residence of Osiris. Caverns, celestial spheres, and natural or contrived landscapes all reflect the many funerary concepts linked to survival and regeneration. The same is true of its inhabitants, whose appearance reflects the mystery associated with this netherworld.



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