# The Feather of Truth: The Development of Ma'at from a Moral Concept to a Worshipped Deity, from Old Kingdom Origins to New Kingdom Heights

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## Can we use statistical analysis to investigate the evolution of ancient religion and society?

### Introduction

Ma'at is widely known as the deity of truth and justice responsible for the weighing the heart of the dead. However, this was not always the case, in the Early Dynastic and much of the Old Kingdom *maat* was simply known as the socio-religious concept of social order that the King upheld. Yet by the New Kingdom she was a fully-fledged anthropomorphic deity with her own mythology. How and did this change occur and why was Ma'at eventually depicted as a woman? My work demonstrates how aspects of the *maat* concept slowly become integrated into the deity of Ma'at over time from Old Kingdom origins to the hight of her worship during the New Kingdom (~2650-1069 BCE).

### Research Context

Egyptian religion is among the most heavily studied aspects of Egyptian Archaeology. As such, there is plenty of material that explores both the deity and concept of Ma'at. However, many of these works either write as if the concept and the God are interchangeable or ignore the existence of one or the other altogether. Few also take the evolution of the deity into account with many sources presenting Ma'at in a static being who had the same attributes from her conception which is a significant oversimplification.

In the case of Ma'at, we have a rare occasion where a deity has been clearly formed and developed within the Dynastic archaeological record. Many deities, such as Horus, have early versions originating from the Pre-Dynastic. Or, like Osiris, they appear during the Dynastic period but with more obscure evidence explaining their origins. Therefore, we have the rare opportunity to use Ma'at as a case study to show how religion can influence society and vice versa. By utilising statistical analysis, I will show how Ma'at developed over time through textual and iconographical depictions and reveal how this may be linked to certain societal shifts.

### Old Kingdom

- First appear in the title '*ḥm-nṯr Mꜣꜥt*' (Priest of Ma'at)
  - Administrative title of the 'priests of Ma'at' not actually religious in nature. Believed to uphold social order on behalf of the King.
  - Title only held by men while Ma'at in personal names seen in both men and women
- Possibly depicted in the Pyramid Texts which are exclusively found in royal contexts
  - Due to a less systematic hieroglyphic scheme divine determinative not used so some utterances may be about the deity others the concept



### 1st Intermediate Period - Middle Kingdom

- Little mention of Ma'at during the 1st Intermediate Period, possibly due to political troubles
- Divine determinative appears in Coffin Texts showing Ma'at definitively appearing in mortuary texts
  - These texts found exclusively in non-royal contexts
- Increase in fables and instruction literature in the Middle Kingdom, emphasis on being moral or 'justified' indicating a change in *maat* being held by non-royals, possibly linked to past political and social turmoil
- Ma'at usually shown in writing as being upheld by the dead so that they may be judged as being 'true' in life
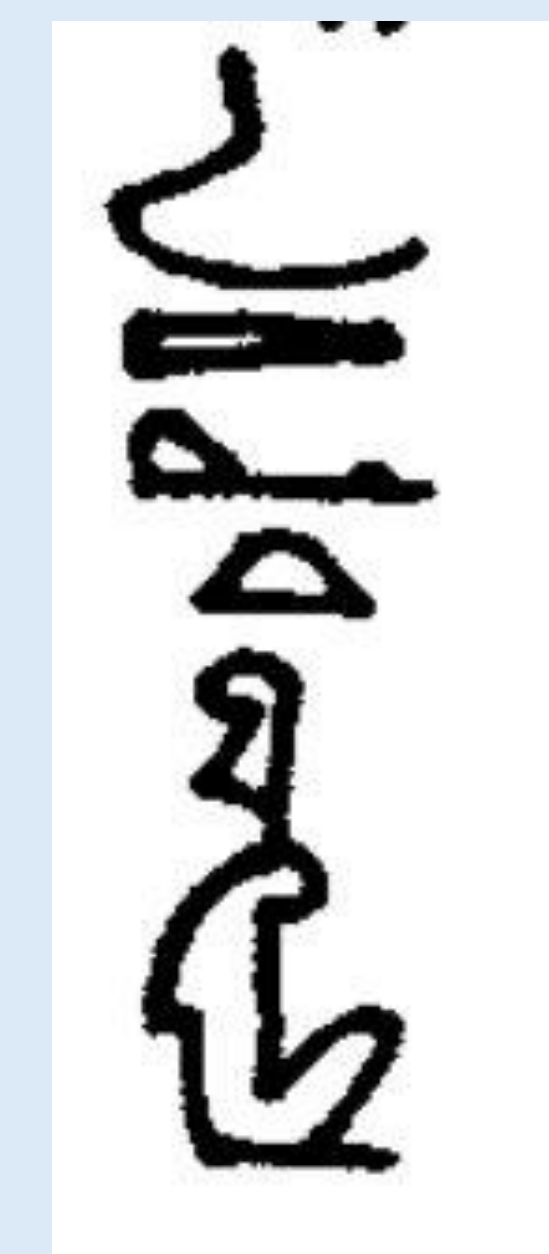


### 2nd Intermediate Period – New Kingdom

- Ma'at first depicted in the Book of the Dead weighing hearts in New Kingdom, both royal and non-royal contexts
- Sharp increase in popularity of depictions of the deity on temple and tomb walls, now appears with wings
- There is now non-mortuary physical depictions of Ma'at being presented to other Gods to prove the virtue of the one offering. This is typically done by the King but there is evidence of royal women and non-royals being depicted
- Almost complete assimilation of the concept of *maat* into the deity Ma'at
- Present in world creation myths dating to this period but possibly from
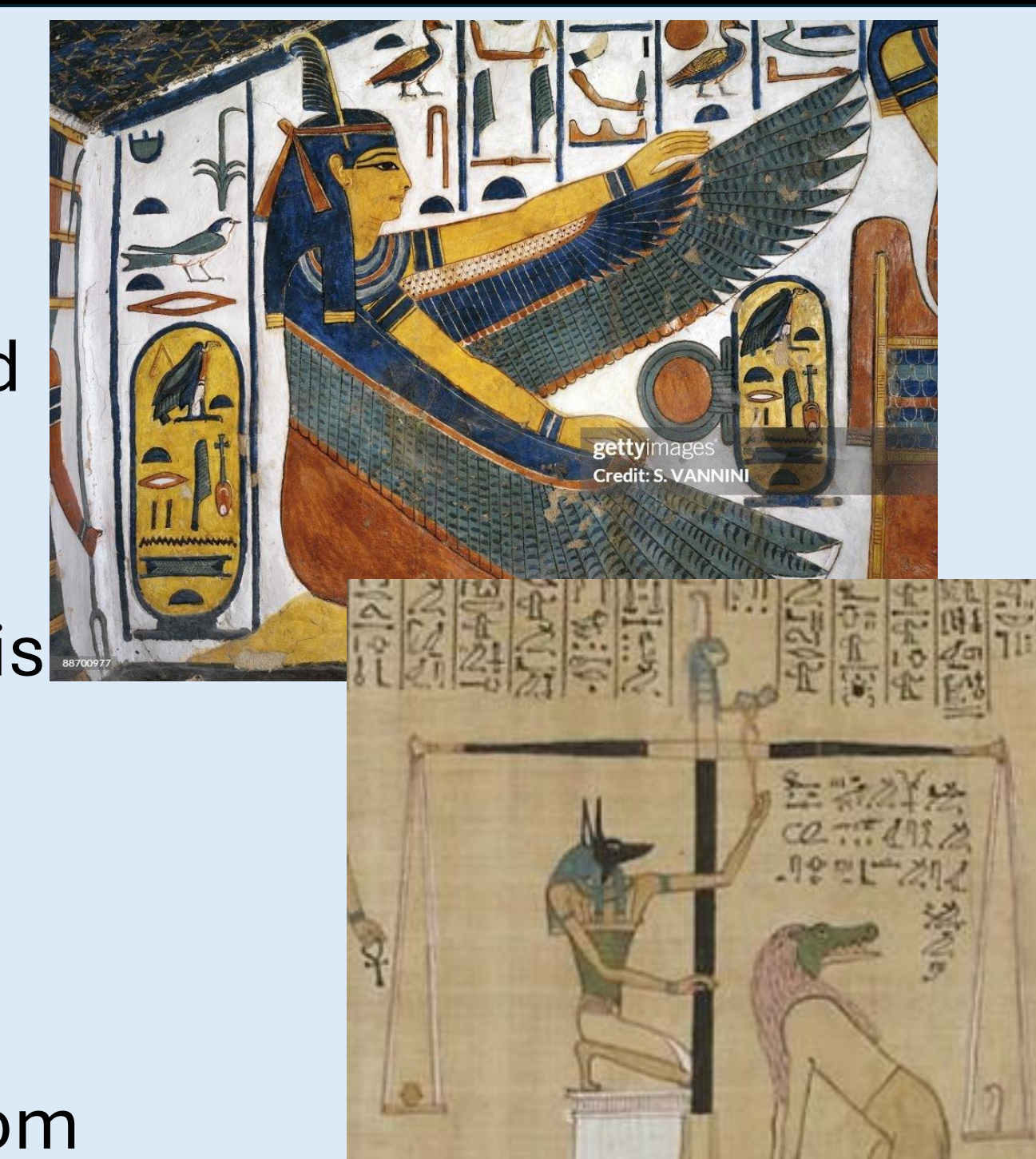


### Methodology and Next Steps

As this research is in its early stages only preliminary research has taken place. This has consisted of a literature review of societal conditions, gender and class roles, as well as Ma'at herself and how she is studied in different aspects of Egyptological literature. This has yielded the creation of an archaeological framework from which results of this thesis can framed and discussed. Studies on the evolution and translation of hieroglyphs has also been conducted, so original translations of literature can be produced.

The next stage of the thesis is data collection. Data will be collected from a mixture of online collections, published literature and site visits to areas such as the temples of Karnak. As the nature of physical and textual depictions are so different, a relational database management software will be utilised for storage, in this case SQLite. This will be used to assess any initial patterns within the data.

The raw data will then be exported into R for the creation of statistical models and the graph codes will be published in the thesis appendix. Data will then be used to address the research questions of when and why Ma'at was fully anthropomorphised, why she is depicted as a woman and what Ma'at means to differing social classes.