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ASTRAL MYTHOLOGY IN EGYPT

Stars played an important role in Egyptian beliefs concerning life after death, as early as in the Pyramid Texts. The soul of the deceased king ascends to the celestial region of the imperishable (circumpolar) stars that never set under the horizon or the soul himself undergoes a transubstantiation into a star.¹ We can trace astral religious conceptions even further back in time. Stars were associated with the sky goddess in the form of a cow (Bat or Hathor) on a palette from Gerzeh² in the pre-dynastic period.

While the cult of the stars retained its popularity throughout the millennia of ancient Egyptian history – although with varying intensity –, interestingly enough there was little interest in their genesis or their creation. If one looks for this motif in Egyptian literature, the most important source is the myth of the Celestial Cow. This myth is first attested in the 18th dynasty, in an account of the departure of Re from the earth and the division of the universe into a human world, the sky and the netherworld. The originally homogenous cosmos in which the human race and the gods were living in the same place was separated into three components following some kind of sin committed by mankind against their king, the sun god. At first the god decided to kill them, but he eventually took compassion on mankind and saved them from complete destruction. However, after learning of their evil disposition, he no longer wanted to live among them and mounting the celestial cow, he departed from the earth. Since then, death has arrived to the earth, and the creation of the fields of the other world became necessary. Thus a differentiated tripartite cosmos came into being.³ After the creation of the Field of Rush, i.e. one of the regions of the world beyond, the god declares that “I will furnish it with everything and these are the twinkling stars.”⁴ It must be noted that the verb *ꜥꜥꜥꜥ* (*jhjh*) seems to carry the con-

¹ Cf. e.g. Pyr. 379–380, 782e, 1201d, 1456–7, etc.

² E. HORNUNG: *Der Eine und die Vielen*, Darmstadt 1971, 94.

³ KÁKOSY: *Selected Papers* (*Studia Aegyptiaca* VII, 1981), 81–92.

⁴ E. HORNUNG: *Der Ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh* (OBO 46), Freiburg Göttingen 1982, 13, 42 (line 153–4), 61.

notation “twinkle or sparkle in green light”.⁵ The message conveyed by this myth is that stars first appeared after the division of the cosmos, implying that they came into being at a relatively late stage of the process of creation.

Another tradition, much older than that in the myth of the Celestial Cow, has been preserved in the Pyramid Texts. In one passage a goddess, obviously a goddess of the heaven, is said to have “strewed green stone, malachite and turquoise as stars”.⁶ Accordingly, stars are composed of different minerals.⁷ This popular concept was never accepted in higher theology, although a reference to it seems to occur in chapter 17 of the Book of the Dead. There the deceased states that “I have strewed green stones”,⁸ most likely with the intention of identifying himself with the celestial goddess. This passage is a remarkable example of how Egyptian literature retained archaic elements in later periods, even when fully different conceptions dominated religious thought.

In the most widely accepted conception it was the sky goddess Nut who gave birth to the stars. She is usually depicted as a naked woman arching over the earth and held aloft by her father Shu. The setting of the stars every morning led to the birth of a myth in which Nut was conceived as a sow who daily swallowed the stars as piglets.⁹ A multitude of amulets¹⁰ depicting a sow with sucking pigs testifies to the widespread expectations attached to Nut as symbol of fertility.

At the time when Amun became the supreme god of the Egyptian pantheon, the creation of the stars came to be attributed to him. “He (Amun) created the heaven and made it luminous through the stars.”¹¹

In the myths and mythologems discussed above, the stars came into being in a later phase of cosmogony. However, we also know of myths reflecting different views. In a Ptolemaic cosmogonical inscription from Edfu, the heaven, as well as the constellations Khentet (*hntt*) and Mesekhtyu (*mshtjw*) appear at an initial stage of the birth of the universe.¹² This change in conceptions may have been a result of the increasing influence of the heavenly bodies over the determination of destiny, i.e. the spread of astrological conceptions.¹³

Moreover, Egyptian gods possessed since times of old astral forms and the myth of Osiris too had a celestial projection. In a papyrus dating from the 4th century B.C. Isis addresses her husband with the following words: “You are the Orion (*s3h*) on the southern sky. I am the goddess Sothis and I am protecting you. I have captured your enemies in the Ursa Maior (*mshtjw*) in the northern sky.”¹⁴ While Osiris

⁵ Cf. Wb. I. 18.

⁶ Pyr. 567 b. Cf. also 569.

⁷ For the *šzmt* malachite cf. S. AUFRÈRE: L'univers minéral dans la pensée égyptienne, (BdÉ CV/2), Le Caire 1991, 541–543.

⁸ Urk. V. 88.

⁹ H. GRAPOW, ZÄS 71 (1935) 45 ff.

¹⁰ L. FÓTE: Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts 40 (1973) 3 ff, 97 ff.

¹¹ N. DE GARIS DAVIES: The tomb of Nefer-Hotep at Thebes, New York 1933, pl. 34.

¹² Edfou VI. 182, line 12. Cf. A. BARUCQ M. ALLIOT, BIFAO 64 (1966), 140.

¹³ Cf. KÁKOSY: Decans in Late-Egyptian Religion, Oikumene 3 (1982), 187–191.

¹⁴ Pap. British Museum 10209 III, 3, 5–6. FAIYZA MOHAMED HUSSEIN HAIKAL: Two Hieratic Funerary Papyri of Nesmin, (BAe XIV) Bruxelles 1970, 36. Cf. S. SAUNERON, Esna IV. 3 (400): Isis

ascended to the sky as Orion, Mesekhtyu was regarded as the stellar form of Seth, and thus the strife between the two brothers continued in the celestial spheres and Osiris had to be protected against his brother by Isis even in the cosmic heights. Gods assumed a double character: they were not only physical agents, but their abode was placed in the summit of the heaven. The doctrine that the souls of the gods were radiant on the sky was familiar also to Plutarch.¹⁵

Egyptian theologians were particularly interested in Mesekhtyu¹⁶ and tried to explain how this constellation came into being. Mesekhtyu corresponds to our Ursa Maior (Big Dipper, Plough), but in Egypt it was seen as either as the foreleg of an animal, most likely that of the bull, or was represented as a bull. The author of the Papyrus Jumilhac derived the origin of the constellation from the struggle of Horus and Seth. During or after the battle Horus cut off one of Seth's forelegs and threw it up to the heaven, where it was guarded by demons (*h3jtjw*).¹⁷

If one searches for additional myths, a rather obscure text from Edfu, the book of the "Protection of the House" can probably be interpreted as an allusion to an aetiological myth concerning the birth of Mesekhtyu. One passage reads as follows: "It is the protection of the forelegs of the two *benti* apes which Seth captured as a sceptre in his time."¹⁸

The role of these apes in Egyptian mythology makes it clear enough that Seth was accused in the book of the "Protection of the House" of committing an aggression against Re by assaulting his apes. The *benti apes* appear in the Pyramid Texts as the "two beloved sons" of Re,¹⁹ and they kept their solar associations in later periods. In an inscription of Amenhotep III they praise the setting sun,²⁰ and they are present in the group of eighteen apes at the entrance to underworld in the Book Amduat. They also appear in the late versions of the Amduat.²¹ On a Late Period sarcophagus they appear as protective gods.²² Besides the myth discussed above, the *benti* also occur elsewhere in the temple of Edfu.²³

In contrast to the papyrus Jumilhac, the *benti* myth thus attributed a different origin to the constellation of Mesekhtyu. Since Seth is the acting person in the text in Edfu, his constellation cannot be identified with his own foreleg. The two forelegs of the *benti* apes could be the Ursa Maior and Minor, although the latter was not represented in this form in Egypt. The influence of Greek astronomy which established a close connection between the two constellations must be taken into consideration in

tethering the Foreleg and preventing it from descending to the *Dat* region. See R. HANNAH: The Tethering of the Meskhetiu, GM 160 (1997), 33-41. In Esna IV 69 (450) Isis is identified with Sothis.

¹⁵ De Iside 21. Cf. J. G. GRIFFITHS: Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride, Cardiff 1970, 371 ff.

¹⁶ On Mesekhtyu cf. O. NEUGEBAUER - R. A. PARKER: Egyptian Astronomical Texts III, Providence, Rhode Island, London 1969, 190 1.

¹⁷ Pap. Jumilhac XVII.11. J. VANDIER: Le Papyrus Jumilhac, Paris [1962], 129.

¹⁸ Edfou VI. 148, line 36. Cf. D. JANKUHN: Das Buch "Schutz des Hauses", Bonn 1972, 65.

¹⁹ Pyr. 1437 c.

²⁰ Urk. IV.1673.

²¹ E.g. G. MASPERO - H. GAUTHIER - ABBAS BAYOUMI: Sarcophages des époques persane et ptolémaïque (Cat. général... du Musée du Caire), II, Le Caire 1939, 29

²² Ibid. 90.

²³ E.g. Edfou I 255, 286.

the Ptolemaic Period. Remarkably, the notion of forelegs as sceptres is paralleled in the Greek Magical Papyrus in Paris, in which the Ursa Maior, depicted as the shoulder of a young bull, is held in the right hand of a solar god.²⁴

The motif of *catasterismos* was undoubtedly present in Egyptian literature. An inscription in Edfu relates how Horus and Hathor became heavenly bodies. "Third month of the season *peret*, day 24. Festival of the winged sundisk.²⁵ Ascending to the sky by the male winged sun-disk and the female winged sun-disk. They became stars of the heaven".²⁶ The winged disks are Horus and Hathor who had been metamorphosed from solar divinities into constellations.

Since the cult of the astral forms of the gods was rather widespread in late Egyptian religion, one may justifiably ask whether there existed a link with the *catasterismos* literature in Alexandria. I do not suggest direct ties, although in one case Greek and Egyptian elements seem to mingle with each other. During the third Syrian war Ptolemy III Euergetes' wife, Berenice II was so worried for her husband's life that she cut a lock of her hair and dedicated it to the temple of Arsinoe-Aphrodite Zephyritis near Canopus. The lock mysteriously disappeared from the sanctuary, and was eventually discovered by the court astronomer Conon as a cluster of stars (Coma Berenices). Although only fragments of the papyri recording Callimachus' poem immortalising this event have survived, the original can more or less be reconstructed from Catullus' translation or paraphrase (66).²⁷ G. Hölbl²⁸ has aptly noted the Egyptian parallel in Plutarch's *De Iside* 14. When Isis heard the tragic news of her husband's death, she cut off one of her locks in the city of Coptos and, although Plutarch does not elaborate the subject, she obviously dedicated it in her temple in this city. As a matter of fact, the cult of "Isis of the hair" is attested in Coptos.²⁹ A lock of Isis was kept also in Memphis.³⁰

In sum, Greek and Roman *catasterismos* myths had their antecedents in Egypt. The point to be clarified by future investigations is to what extent the similarities are merely of phenomenological nature or whether there were real historical interconnections between the two cultures in this domain.

I offer this article to Professor Ritoók my first teacher of Greek, who always took an interest in my scholarly activity.

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²⁴ PGM IV.700. Cf. H. D. BETZ: *The Greek Magical Papyri in Translation*, Chicago, London 1986, 52.

²⁵ M. ALLIOT, (*Le culte d'Horus à Edfou I*, Le Caire 1949, réimpression 1979, 229) translates the sign *Bḥdtj* as the god of Edfu.

²⁶ Edfou V. 352, line 14.

²⁷ G. HÖLBL: *Geschichte des Ptolemäerreiches*, Darmstadt 1994/99, P. FRASER: *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford 1972 I, 729-30, II, 1021-26.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 99.

²⁹ J.G. GRIFFITHS: *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, Cardiff 1970, 314.

³⁰ Lucian, *Adv. indoct.* 14.