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Cosmology and Divination in Ancient Egypt

Introduction

Focusing on the roles of, and relationship between, cosmology and divination in an ancient Egyptian context, this paper first establishes the setting, then turns to understanding what cosmology and divination are, elaborating on some of the many forms divination took within that cosmological framework before again evaluating them together in order to explore how they may shed some light on an ancient Egyptian worldview. Following the course of enlightenment ideologies in academia until only a few decades ago, studies regarding divination practices had been relegated to the side as something irrational, as ‘somehow equivalent to religious decay’ or as David Frankfurter paraphrasing A. A. Barb puts it ‘the derivatives of once-great religious systems now bastardized and purveyed by charlatans’ (Frankfurter 2015, 233). Surely a decreasingly prevalent reductionist mindset (but one that surely still exists) is becoming more and more unraveled as such a dismissive stream in academia is increasingly scrutinized while previously sidelined material and texts are translated and studied. What can studying divinatory practices tell us about the culture and the thought-world of people using them? What of its role in ancient Egyptian societies? If we are to dismiss it as Barb and many others did then we are plotting to gain little, but if it is opened up, as scholars have been moving to do, then we might gain new insight into a more robust worldview that includes the majority population, viewing them as more than just background actors. Having been historically easier to access and garner a cohesive picture from, scholarship has leaned heavily on the officiated practices of elite circles, the beliefs and practices of the wealthy and powerful members of a society. That being said, such

accounts should not discredit the beliefs and practices of the poor or the average citizen, etc. as less rational or meaningful. These practices and beliefs ‘still depended on a center and a tradition’ (Frankfurter 2015, 234), and therefore can aid us greatly in understanding how that center and tradition were understood and reconciled in individual minds and personal spaces (Frankfurter 2015, 234).

Literature Review

For cosmology in ancient Egypt there are several collections of texts that serve as primary source material for our purposes, which are seen referenced heavily throughout the secondary sources material as well. These texts are Otto Neugebauer and Parker’s *‘Egyptian Astronomical Texts’*, E. A. Wallis Budge’s *‘The Book of the Dead’*, *‘The Pyramid Texts’* by S. Mercer and *‘The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts’* presented in three volumes by O. R. Faulkner. All of these sources come to us from between the 1950’s and 1980’s and some of the more recent secondary sources scrutinize some of the analyses put forth in these highly influential earlier primary sources, as we ought to do, which perhaps hold some unproven assumptions (such as Neugebauer’s decanal belt theory) that continue to influence how we imagine Egyptian cosmology and worldview (Conman 2003, 37, 41-47). Summarizing the contents of these sources, Nicholas Campion succinctly describes them as consisting ‘of the collected accounts of texts associated with cosmological matters, including funerary rites and the journey to the stars, primarily from pyramids, tombs, and coffin lids’ (Campion 2012, 83).

One of our crucial primary sources, the *‘Egyptian Astronomical Texts’* are, in brief summary, a collection of mythological and astrologically related hieratic texts and some demotic commentary, much of which is reflected in other sources, like ‘the ceilings of the royal tombs of Seti I and Ramesses IV, dating back to the thirteenth and twelfth centuries BCE respectively’

(Ritter 2016, 152). Throughout the collection it seems Neugebauer's 'main interest in it lay in "Chapter E" the marking of the hours of any night by the culmination... of one of a group of thirty-six constellations, known today by the Greek name of "decans"' (Ritter 2016, 152) – These stars, the decans, have since become central in discourse on ancient Egyptian cosmology, a notion that is addressed more in future paragraphs as it is also central to this paper.

While there are other noteworthy translations out there, E. A. Wallis Budge's *The Book of the Dead* is the one utilized here. Usually referred to as 'The Papyrus of Ani' due to being compiled for the Theban scribe Ani, consists of a collection of 'religious compositions' including declarations and spells to aid the deceased in the afterlife (Budge 1967, 2). We come to find that an Egyptian afterlife would often entail a journey to the stars, making the descriptions held in there highly relevant to us and the quantity and condition of the texts of The Papyrus of Ani, which dates from about 1500 to 1400 BCE, make it the 'largest, the most perfect, the best preserved, and the best illuminated of all the papyri which' date to this period just prior to that of the *Egyptian Astronomical Texts* (Budge 1967, Preface).

The *'Pyramid Texts'* are the oldest funerary texts from Egypt that we have and, to some extent, depict some beliefs and practices from the Old Kingdom period while *'The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts'* (a collection of 1185 spells, incantations and other religious texts) come from inscriptions around coffins to act as a sort of afterlife guidebook, completed as a detailed map on the inside of the coffins. These texts are partially derived from the earlier Pyramid Texts and, primarily dating to the twenty-second and twenty-first centuries BCE (but potentially reaching as far back as the twenty-seventh century BCE), would have some inspiration on The Book of the Dead which comes later (Mark 2017). While individually the cosmological significance of these texts is clear, when these texts come together they provide us a glimpse of

the ideological shifts and syncretizing cosmological ideas experienced by the Egyptian people from the the Old Kingdom onward.

Secondary Sources

The first chapter of Nicholas Campion's 2012 edition of *'Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions'* greatly informed my initial research on the relationship between religion, cosmology and astrology, while the eighth chapter illustrates what that relationship entails in an ancient Egyptian context following the decanal belt theory put forth by Neugebauer and Parker, which, as previously mentioned, has serious implications for our understanding of Egyptian cosmology and worldview. Dieleman (2003) also follows this direction, which seems quite popular in academia following Neugebauer and Parker's 1960 publication, and expounds on the role of the Egyptian priesthood in the Graeco-Roman periods along with their astronomical and cosmological duties. By understanding what the priests believed and practiced, how they were part of and otherwise worked with social elites as well how they worked with the populace, what their roles were and so forth, we may get a clearer idea of the differences in worldview between these strata of society.

While the decanal belt theory raised by Neugebauer and Parker was widely accepted and continues to be used (Campion 2012; Dieleman 2003) it has also been thoroughly critiqued (Conman 2003), though it would seem that this critique has not gained the traction or inspired the response that perhaps it ought to. Joanne Conman sets out to criticize some of Neugebauer's assumptions regarding the decans and using modern technology (at least at the standard of the early 2000's compared to the 1950's) thoroughly tests Neugebauer's propositions and proposes a working alternative, adjusting our conception of ancient Egyptian astrology and cosmology in the process (Conman 2003, 41-47). For the purposes of this paper Conman's research and

adjustment to how the decans ought to be regarded will be emphasized – seeing as ‘Neugebauer never produced any list of stars that followed the pattern he claimed to have discerned, and thus never proved the existence of his hypothetical belt’ (Conman 2003, 47), Conman’s far more tested hypothesis will be our go-to reference for placing (or timing) the decans and the ‘dw3t’.

Exploring the principles and framework of ancient Egyptian ritual, Dieleman and David Frankfurter, both of whom address the subject in Frankfurter’s recent (2019) *‘Guide to the Study of Ancient Magic’* have been of particular interest. In chapter six Dieleman addresses *‘heka’*, a conceptualization of the mechanisms lying at the heart of ancient Egyptian ritual action, aiding in understanding the principles and framework of ritual, how it was done theoretically and what the process would entail for the practitioner and their goals. On the other hand in regards to the different kinds of divination, oracles and oracular innovation and the general framework and nature of divination from pharaonic Egypt into the Graeco-Roman periods, Frankfurter’s 2015 chapter in *‘Mantike’* and Luigi Prada’s 2017 article *‘Dreams, Rising Stars, and Falling Geckos’* are particularly enlightening.

Finally, while several of the other secondary sources delineate the topic as well, Kasia Szpakowska provides a concise evaluation of dreams as an important mode of divine communication in the ancient Egyptian world. Some historical examples are provided that help to establish the role dreams play in Egyptian society and go on to address who it is that populates the heavens; who inhabits the divine world.

When in Ancient Egypt

In order to frame cosmological and divinatory material in their appropriate contexts it is necessary to set a historical frame of reference. To this end a brief reference to William J. Murnane via the University of Memphis website can set a rough historical timeline of ancient

Egypt as accepted in contemporary scholarship. It should be noted that dates before the mid seventh century BCE are approximate – however most of the divinatory material referenced through this study range from after the 5th century BCE, varying from the Late Period (ca. 664 - 332 BCE) into the Graeco-Roman periods. On the other hand the earliest cosmological material referenced here, the ‘*Pyramid Texts*’ date back much earlier, to the Old Kingdom (ca. 2675 - 2130 BCE), hence this cosmological material sets the framework for the principles underpinning divinatory acts and ritual in Egypt’s ancient history as well as being integral to understanding any ancient Egyptian worldview (Campion 2012, 5; Dieleman 2019).

Astrology is also an integral aspect of both Egyptian cosmology and divination and needs mention and explanation as its role is unique and not static. Dieleman explains that ‘for predicting the future, Egyptians preferred recourse to mythological precedents instead of the regular movements of the stars. Therefore, Egyptian mythology does not contain any references to the underlying ideas of astrology’ and referencing Neugebauer he states that ‘...mathematical astronomy had only been developed in rudimentary form during the pharaonic period’, that is, Egypt up until being conquered by Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, the beginning of the Macedonian Period (Dieleman 2003, 140). Although the principle behind ritual and divination is thus of a mythological conception, the mythology itself does turn to the sky and the stars, though not all of them equally; some stars, observable planets and constellations are viewed as divine beings or sacred places while the rest are not of particular cosmological importance. While still being based on strict observance and interpretation, astronomy in the pharaonic period was not particularly advanced in regards to mathematical precision (and thus no zodiacal depiction, etc.) when compared to their contemporaries like the Babylonians; the ideology behind it would have been centered on a present chaotic mythological cosmos (not of the past but taking place

continuously), divine beings and worlds, humans and the material world, ritual duty, as well as time and direction coming to confluence (Conman 2003).

Cosmology and Divination

Cosmological Overview

In modern Western scholarship the term ‘cosmology’ has come to evoke the idea of a form of study, as a ‘detached, scientific investigation of the cosmos’, which is somewhat at odds with the ‘standard premodern perspective, in which the study of the cosmos aids understanding of the nature of existence’ (Campion 2012, 4). In tune with the way Nicholas Campion has described it, cosmology as a conception of the ‘cosmos’ may be thought of as akin to ‘nature’ including ourselves and our surroundings as an integral participant ‘much as are the sky and the stars’ (Campion 2012, 5); it is more than just studying the universe but includes matters of ontology, epistemology as well as the role of human society. In his chapter on cosmology in Egypt in the same edition, Campion describes the religious system throughout ancient Egypt as a ‘cosmotheism’ suggesting that their perception of ‘the cosmos itself is the object of worship’, that despite the ‘multitude of deities in the Egyptian system, each had a function and a place in the cosmic order, so much so that it was the cosmos itself’, such as the movement of the sun and moon, the perpetual turning of the sky, the rising of certain stars and planets and other celestial phenomena, that was ultimately the focus of religious ritual action (Campion 2012, 83).

It is no simple task to summarize Egyptian cosmology in a satisfying manner and to do so without emphasizing that there were syncretic shifts in cosmological beliefs throughout Egypt’s many eras as new ideas are incorporated or expounded on by pharaohs and priests, while older ideas are sometimes phased out, abandoned or reintroduced would be irresponsible (Campion 2012, 84). Although of course there will be exceptions and it may be somewhat reductionist to view it so briefly and generally, some of the foundational cosmological ideas are identified

below. Unfortunately it would be beyond the scope of this paper to present such a deep cosmology in its entirety.

Throughout Egyptian cosmology celestial order (Ma'at) is balanced around the the body of the deity known as Nut whos figure constitutes the sky dome; the field of celestial activity itself. On a daily and nightly basis Re, the sun, acts as a mobile median in the perpetually turning sky, separating the left side, visible in the night, and the right side that is visible in the day (Conman 2003, 36). Every dusk Re undulates as it turns from the front of Nut to the back, illuminating the holes in the firmament (Lesko 1991, 117), making the stars visible while Re perilously travels to the land of immortality, the *dw3t*, to be consumed and later rejuvenated at sunrise, commencing a daily cosmic cycle of death and rebirth before undulating around to the front of Nut once more to begin a new day at sunrise (Conman 2003, 36). The '*dw3t*' (spelled here with a 3 due to being unable to type the correct character) is both a place Re travels to as well as being of a certain time; a 'magical time of rejuvenation' that marks the hour that the part of the sky opposite the sun faced the Egyptians, as well as the time that Re would join Osiris, 'the lord of eternal life' (Conman 2003, 37). To be specific, the sun entering the *dw3t* is marked by the rising of a specific decan star each night and catalogued by a temple priest, specifically the hour-priest who's job was to record these celestial movements (Dieleman 2003, 138). There were 36 decan stars, each of which at some point over the course of a year in each 10 day week would have a turn rising just before the sun (heliacal rise), marking the beginning of a new 10 day week in the process (Conman 2003, 41; Neugebauer & Parker 1960). When Re traveled through the *dw3t* each night in his eternal cycle the outcome was not certain, the turning of the sky not a function of natural law; the cosmic story of creation is enacted continuously, providing the world with order, Ma'at, a process in which we have a natural human duty to ritually uphold

- our participation mandatory if the orderly cosmos is to continue on to tomorrow (Campion 2012, 86; Conman 2003, 39-40; Dieleman 2003). Of course these duties were not limited to the actions of the Pharaoh and the temple priests (the social elite), but for the most part their ritual duties, which they are the chosen experts of, were of the utmost importance to collective Egyptian society which thus endeavored to support itself with all of existential order perceived to be at stake (Campion 2012, 86; Dieleman 2003).

Any attempt to summarize the precise makeup of the *dw3t* in the northern night sky will prove quite complicated as the intricacies of the cosmos, the planets, stars and the various deities are not always presented the same way throughout the many dynasties and different periods of Egyptian history. Some celestial bodies (planets and stars) involved in this process, depending on the time period, the cosmic story being told and so on, have both supportive or detrimental capabilities and implications regarding Re's cosmic passage; having the possibility or great magical power to either help or harm Re (Conman 2003, 38-41). The polar stars to the north or the stars with a connection to that pole could be viewed as dangerous due to their indestructible nature and power over the cyclic cosmic process while also embodying the goal of many cosmically motivated acts, including the northern orientation of tombs, facing the direction and time of celestial rebirth and immortality (immortality or rejuvenation through the *dw3t* accompanying the sun) (Conman 2003, 38).

Heka

When Egyptian priests or ritualists acted to maintain Ma'at or otherwise accomplish some goal by ritual means, how did they believe their actions were transpiring; what was the principle underlying these actions? Dieleman, reviewing the famous works of Jan Assmann and the late Robert Ritner, explains that 'Egyptian rituals can be understood as attempts to intervene

in the natural course of events by mobilizing *heka* and so integrating the world of here and now into the cosmic domain of divine forces' (Dieleman 2019, 87). *Heka*, he explains, is a neutral, natural and primordial force that the Egyptians believed was first employed by the demiurge (creator god) in the creation of the ordered world and continued to be integral in sustaining life-giving cycles and maintaining the cosmos. However, unlike deities who wield it at their whim, humans could only manipulate *heka* to achieve some kind of change through ritual action. *Heka* may have been conceptualized as a kind of vital life force or the physical manifestation of divine forces. Until recently Egyptology had not been so open to the study of *heka*, having largely grouped it separately from or subordinate to religious belief and practice; labeled somewhat derogatorily as magic. However as those boundaries and assumptions are increasingly questioned, Dieleman staunchly argues for the view that '*heka* does not allow for such distinction' and doing so wrongly evades its immense value for understanding the underlying principles of Egyptian ritual and cosmological processes (Dieleman 2019, 88).

Many Faces of Divination

Having now discussed some foundational concepts in Egyptian cosmology, its relatively rudimentary earlier mythological/astrological relationship and the basics of how it might have been interacted with by humans, some of the many methods ancient Egyptians took to communicate with the divine, divination, can now be addressed more easily. From the tombs opening toward the rise of the northern decan stars and the vast material evidence of intricate funerary rites found in tombs and pyramids, it is understood that ancient Egyptians endeavored to ensure their entry into the divine world in their deaths; the world inhabited by the gods and the deceased (Szpakowska 2003). However, one did not need to wait until death to receive divine epiphanies, confirmations and instruction. To begin, it may be pertinent to address one of the

earliest and best accounted forms of divine communication, that is by way of dreaming, also known as ‘Oneiromancy’. As with many examples in the ancient world, liminal spaces and dimensions were considered to potentially allow for divine encounters and for the Egyptians slumber is one such dimension. One well known early example comes to us on the ‘so-called Dream stela of Thutmosis IV (c. 1400 BCE), which still stands between the front paws of the Great Sphinx at Giza’ (Prada 2017, 4). According to the story depicted on the stela, prince Thutmosis falls asleep by the sphinx and dreams of the deity the sphinx is associated with at the time who tells him that if he cleans the sand off the statue, returning it to its former glory, then he would be granted the throne of Egypt (Prada 2017, 4). Other New Kingdom period dream related accounts attest to the popularity of dream divination across social strata. Oneirocritica, dream interpretation handbooks from the 13th century BCE, ‘are the best- and longest-attested type of divinatory literature from Egypt’ and serve to extend the realm of dream interpretation and divination to the learned, not limited to the prerogative of oracles or temple priests, allowing one to interpret for themselves so long as they could read (Prada 2017, 5; Szkapowski 2003, 121). There are also a few (around 20) much older surviving private letters that discuss oneiromancy roughly between the late Old Kingdom to the early Middle Kingdom, though at that time it would seem that dreams were treated as ‘a two-way window between the realms of the living and the dead’ and not necessarily ‘used by an individual to access the gods directly’ (Szkapowski 2003, 112). Prior to and even after the development of oneirocritica, incubation oracles were how one might have sought to communicate with divine beings via slumber – in this case one would sleep at a designated site that will facilitate the process, beckoning a deity into ones dreams, and after awaking would receive interpretive assistance from the oracle or trained temple priest as well (Frankfurter 2015).

Astrological Divination

Astrological divination is considered quite the ‘relative late-comer’ in comparison to many other forms of divination in Egypt, having come during periods of increased contact with the Near East in the first millennium BCE, even more so after the Assyrian and Persian invasions of Egypt (Prada 2017, 7). In the Graeco-Roman Period astrological divination and writings would go on to become much more numerous and commonplace, becoming increasingly accessible in the private and domestic sphere during a time when many forms of divination underwent more and more innovation (Prada 2017, 7-8). To be clear, leading up to the Graeco-Roman Period Egyptian priests were already practicing judicial astrology, reading celestial movements as omens, however by the Roman period both judicial as well as horoscopic astrology ‘were well established among the native priesthood’ which is well documented by Demotic horoscopes, astrological handbooks and so on (Dieleman 2003, 145).

Omens

Amongst the many branches of divination present throughout Egyptian history, oneiromancy and astrology would be considered as holding the most prestige, yet aside from divining through dreams or with the movements of celestial bodies, the reading of omens was a diverse and thoroughly attested divinatory style throughout ancient Egypt (Prada 2017). While astrology can often be considered a type of omen interpretation, what is referred to here is more along the lines of reading into and interpreting coincidental or random happenings like lightning strikes and the behavior of animals, etc. rather than the movements of planetary bodies. Examples vary from dish or bowl divination involving the shapes created by oil in water (lecanomancy), divination through animal behavior such as coincidental interactions with mice, the happenstance of a gecko falling off of a wall and a vast corpus of other examples that are too

numerous to list here which are known from Roman period handbooks written in Demotic (Prada 2017, 7-9). Animal related divination was not limited to living animals - reading the markings, patterns and composition of animal entrails (known as extipacy) was practiced in many cultures in the ancient world including the Egyptians. Other natural phenomena that were included in divinatory practices include the occurrence of thunder (brontoscopy) documented as early as the New Kingdom period and was still being 'practiced a millennium later, in the Ptolemaic times', along with the reading of other meteorological omens (Prada 2017, 7).

Oracles in Egypt

Having already mentioned oracles, oracular divination and temple priests in in the context of their relationship to cosmology and divination, it is necessary to elucidate who oracles were and what they did aside from simply being diviners. Oracles in ancient Egypt seem to have largely been members of the Egyptian priesthood and oracular use seems to stem from quite early in Egyptian history, for example there are attestations of the processional oracle from the Pharaonic to Graeco-Roman periods of Egypt (Frankfurter 2015, 236). The processional oracle is an event in which 'priests would march out of the temple carrying an image of the god on their shoulders... the god's image would be seen to move around on the priests' shoulders in direct response to a question' (Frankfurter 2015, 236). By the time the Romans have conquered Egypt many other types of oracular divination can be found belonging to different cults. To name a few types, there were lot-oracles which may have later developed (through further innovation) into another form known as ticket-oracles and book-oracles as well as a host of different incubation oracles who deal with oneiromancy. Aside from aiding supplicants in interpreting the oracular dreams they had in their temple or shrine, incubation oracles may have also seen innovation or elaboration in the Graeco-Roman period. Referred to as voice oracles, these priests might speak

the gods messages from behind the walls – ‘turning a place where the god spoke in dreams into a place where he could communicate vocally as well’ (Frankfurter 2015, 239). It is not clear if the messages spoken by the priests were sensible or mantic, if they were meant for one or all of the patrons or what state the priests uttering the messages might have been in. Indeed very little is known about voice oracles in comparison with other oracles. For example, like in Hor’s dream of Thoth in *The Archive of Hor*, one would generally not dream of the deity in their typical iconographic form but instead the deity would ‘actually introduce themselves in the dream or vision’ or otherwise the identification of the deity might be left to a professional interpreter amongst the priestly staff of the incubation oracle (Frankfurter 2015, 240). In the case of ticket-oracles, the client would give two options regarding a practical matter to the oracle attendants and, through the oracle, the god would choose one (Frankfurter 2015, 241). In all or most of the listed oracular examples, especially for those of the later Graeco-Roman periods, the oracles would be linked to their sacred locations; their oracular feats tied to the shrine or temple from which they provide communication (Frankfurter 2015, 243).

Conclusion

This paper has sought to separately delineate cosmology and divination in an Egyptian context in order to bring the two back together with the intention of feeling out their relationship and role in ancient Egyptian society. To reiterate, while cosmology might be thought of as a meaning system, the backbone for how one ascribes meaning to themselves and the world that they experience, divination, chiefly astrology in this case (whether it be rudimentary or in its most mathematically complex of forms), is the practical application of that meaning system which serves to understand our past, navigate the present and assure us of our decisions leading into the future. Although they may not always be thought of as being directly connected,

divination will have a cosmological backbone; there is some sense of divinity, a consciousness, being or entity with which one communicates, that provides a message or informs a decision. If that divinity is considered an authority in our perception of the world then they are integral in our understanding of the cosmos and ourselves. In the lives of the ancient Egyptian people these divinatory methods were, for the most part, provided by a professional, learned elite class of temple priests who in some ways acted as the middle-man, negotiating between the gods and the people, helping them navigate their lives with cosmic mindfulness in the midst of a cosmos that depended on the functioning of their society to continue. Perhaps not every Egyptian who sought the wisdom of Bes via dream oracle thought their own actions were pivotal in the maintenance of Ma'at, but they would regard the temple they visit and the highly trained temple priests who work there as being exactly for that purpose; as holding a position closer to the sacred, dealing with sacred and powerful texts, capable of working with the Pharaoh and thus being authoritative enough to be able to convey and interpret the messages of a god. Perhaps not every Egyptian was a reverent fan of the Pharaoh or the temple priests, but there is little doubt that the foundational cosmological ideas underpinning their culture and traditions would inform their perception of natural processes, the function of life and the nature of reality.

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