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OPET FESTIVAL. See Festivals.

ORACLES. To distinguish them from individual magical practices, such as oneiromancy or recourse to seers, the Egyptian consultation of oracles may be described as requesting a deity to answer some practical question through the agency of its public image. The evidence for such oracles before the Ptolemaic period comprises four sources: the many oracular decrees, either engraved on the outer walls of temples or delivered on papyrus to private persons to use as amulets; references to particular oracular processes found in administrative or private records; a few original petitions on papyrus or ostraca laid before the god; and statues and reliefs clearly associated with oracles.

Origins and Development. A few three-dimensional artifacts have been thought to constitute archeological evidence of early oracles, but, for lack of any explicit text that supports this opinion, it is impossible to decide whether the "rocking" falcon of Predynastic date in the Brooklyn Museum was a cult statue of Horus capable of delivering oracles by nodding, or a simple ex-voto.

Actual documents concerning oracles do not predate the New Kingdom, and most come from the Ramessid or Third Intermediate Period. Recently, however, *bi-yr* (strictly speaking, "omen"), translated as "oracle," has been documented in the king's address engraved in the

tombs of some early eighteenth dynasty viziers, in a provision pertaining to disputes about field boundaries and forbidding the settlement of such problems through "any *bi-yr*." The date of composition of this text is much debated, however. According to van den Boorn, it is not earlier than the second part of Ahmose's reign; but the more traditional late Middle Kingdom date may be better, since titles attested before the seventeenth dynasty and already out of use at the very beginning of the eighteenth occur in it (BiOr, 48, 5/6, 821-831).

Such an early date is not surprising, since Egyptian oracles probably developed from the use of processional statues during the yearly festivals. Before Amenhotep I, there is no figure of the dummy bark of Amun and its booth enclosing the oracular image of the god of Karnak, but the existence of this most often reproduced of all oracular statues can easily be traced much earlier through appearances of its name in texts. In New Kingdom dedications of temples visited by processions as well as in oracular documents, the idiom referring to the portable statues that were to utter public oracular sentences was "this august god." Obviously a colloquial expression, this phrase is to be distinguished from "image," the term used for the hidden cult statues. The processional Amun of Karnak, carried in his bark during the Opet and Valley festivals, was the most prominent of all such oracular gods from the Theban area. "Lord of Gods" (*Nb-ntrw*) his epithet in documents, stresses his supremacy over his many lesser oracular gods of the region, such as those listed in Papyrus BM 10335 dating from the reign of Ramesses IV ("Amun of Pe Khenty," "Amun of Te Shenyt," "Amun of Bukenen"). The term "Lord of Gods" for a portable image is encountered as early as the beginning of the twelfth dynasty (Stela Louvre C 200, graffito from Deir el-Bahri), suggesting that processions around Thebes were a well-established practice by then. This would explain the provision not much later in the *Duties of the Vizier* to prevent people from interrogating the portable gods about such important matters as field boundaries.

Nonetheless, we have to wait until the time of Thutmose III for details about the oracular process. In a biographical inscription engraved at Karnak, the king tells how he was chosen as the next pharaoh. During the morning, the god in his bark "perambulated" the northern hypostyle hall and, before the eyes of the gathered courtiers, eventually "settled" in front of the young prince. Thutmose III prostrated himself on the ground, and the god led him to the place reserved for the king (a procedure that was repeated by the *Nb-ntrw* to "enthroned" Ramesses IV some 330 years later, according to Papyrus Turin 1882). Other instances of "advice" asked by pharaohs of the "Lord of Gods" are reported during the eighteenth dy-

nasty. To know the best route to Punt, Queen Hatshepsut herself questioned the *Nb-nrw*. This oracle was not sought during a procession, when the statue could move as a way to answer questions; rather, she "heard" the divine "order" "at the Lord of Gods' stairway"—a reference to his bark shrine at Karnak, where the bark rested on its altar. This may hint at a speaking oracle, or at a revelation obtained while sleeping inside this "Great Seat."

During the Ramessid period, evidence about oracles grows more abundant. Many ostraca and papyri have been found at Deir el-Medina, where the development of the judicial powers of oracles came as a response to the collapse of the pharaonic court system (a fact emphasized by the literary topic of Amun "the vizier of the feeble," met from Merenptah on). Thus, we have information about lesser oracles of the Theban area, particularly those involving the processional statues of the deified Amenhotpe I, worshipped by the workmen of the necropolis. Through many short and often elliptical questions on ostraca found in the garbage pit near their village, we get a glimpse of what the workmen used to ask their gods: whether they would retrieve something lost or stolen; whether the object was in the hands of a neighbor; whether the questioner would be promoted. All these questions could be answered by nodding. Ramessid oracles on papyrus or stelae gives a more accurate picture of the practical way the "god" transmitted his advice to the gathered people.

Oracular Proceedings. Oracles could be uttered by any processional image. This is the reason that so many oracular gods are attested, not only at Thebes but all through the country: Horus of the Camp and Horus-khau at el-Hiba, Sutekh at Dakhla, Isis at Coptos, the deified Ahmose at Abydos, and others. The statues were either hidden in a tabernacle, fastened to a portable bark or mounted directly on poles, or they were unveiled and visible to the public. Thus, the statue of the deified Amenhotpe I of the west bank sat in an open palanquin. The Lord of Gods, however, always remained inside the booth of his bark, except in an oracle scene dating from 651 BCE that represents him in a portable shrine (Papyrus Brooklyn 47-218-3). Oracles took place during a public appearance of the statue carried on its priests' shoulders. The "putting down" of the tabernacle on its "Great Seat" (a station built on the processional way or a temple bark shrine, such as the granite sanctuary of Karnak) signified the end of the oracular session: from that point on, the god could no longer be approached by anyone except his priests (Papyrus Nevill, late twentieth dynasty).

Barks, shrines, or palanquins were carried around by *w'b*-priests, as opposed to the higher-ranking "prophets," who were the only ones admitted into the presence of the nonremovable cult statues. Of course, the Egyptians were

aware that the porters, especially those who led the march, could interfere in the oracular process. That is probably why the "w'b of the front (of the bark)" and "procession master" of the Lord of Gods Pameshemu was forbidden to introduce his own petition during the oracles held under Pinudjem II to punish the scribes of the temple found guilty of embezzlement (inscription of the steward of Amun Thutmose, near the tenth pylon of Karnak).

In theory, to be successful, the oracular process had to be carried out without any influence along the route. Therefore, the path had to be carefully prepared and protected, so as to be pure. Some of the precautions include the arrangement of processional sphinx-lined avenues to connect Karnak and Luxor; the use, during the twenty-first dynasty, of a "soil of silver" (owing to its color, the purest existing material), where oracles of the Lord-of-Gods could be held safely; fan-bearers and censer-bearers all around the tabernacle to ward off flies; and the fixing of the time of the session (during the "morning," whenever stated). In all likelihood, the oracular process itself, or at least the procession during which it took place, began with an Opening of the Mouth rite carried out on the god as well as on the prow and stern figureheads of his bark, since "prophets" garbed in the leopardskin of the funerary priest associated with this ritual are always figured walking alongside the tabernacle.

Perambulating and nodding. Oracles could identify an evildoer as well as an individual worthy of appointment to an office (not just kingship). The bark was carried around before the likely persons; then it "stopped" supposedly of its own accord, in front of the appropriate person. In this way, a "chief of *mdjy*-policemen" was appointed by the bark of Isis at Abydos under Ramesses II (Stela Oxford 1894/106), and the evil scribes of Amun were identified under Pinudjem II. When it was impossible to summon all the candidates, their names could be read aloud, and the "god" likewise "stopped" at one of them. Such were the cases of the cultivator Pethaem-diamun, who stole garments (Papyrus BM 10335), or of the official Nesamun, who was promoted to the rank of "scribe of the storehouse" instead of his father (Karnak, relief dating from Ramesses XI). Usually, however, the god was only asked an oral question by the "prophet" who led the session. The god answered by "nodding" in approval or by "walking backward" as a way to say no (tomb of Amenmose, the "first prophet" of Amenhotpe of the Forecourt under Ramesses II; Ostraca Petrie 21, Year 27 of Ramesses III; etc.).

Drawing from a pair of petitions. Sometimes, a set of two documents, one with a statement and the other with its contrary, was put before the portable statue, and the god "took" one of them. That *mdjy* meant in practice some process of drawing lots is clear in Ostr. Gardiner 103

(Ramesses III's reign). According to this report of a dispute over inheritance, the contradictory documents put before the deified Amenhotep I were "cast" twice. The most complete account of this procedure is found in the aforementioned inscription of Thutmose. These documents were also put before the god twice, and the Lord-of-Gods "took" twice the one that said "one says that there is nothing to investigate against Thutmose," discarding that which said "one says that there is something to investigate against Thutmose."

Only one original pair of documents has survived: Papyrus Boston a+b, a petition relating to a dispute over a cow dating from the early twenty-first dynasty; it is addressed to Horus of the Camp, the god of el-Hiba. But we possess examples of the documents "taken" by the god written in Demotic, Greek, or Coptic from Oxyrhynchus, Tebtunis, and Antinoë. These examples are good evidence that the oracular process by drawing of lots continued to be used well into the Greco-Roman and even Islamic period, in spite of the disappearance of the old gods.

Speaking statues and other procedures. In many cases, however, the mechanical process employed to obtain oracular utterances remains obscure. All the amuletic decrees on papyrus protecting the carrier against a long list of diseases and dangers, delivered during the twenty-first to twenty-third dynasties, begin with the word "said" written in a darker ink before the name of the oracular god. Such an opening, also met in the Stela of Apanage from the twenty-second dynasty, does not help us to understand how these oracles were pronounced. It is likely that in addition to the moving of the statue or the drawing of lots used during the New Kingdom, other methods developed until the Late period, and that these involved some device to let people hear the voice of the god. Such speaking oracles took place in a special room, before a statue of the god or in front of a relief representing his bark facing and resting on a pedestal (Coptite chapel of Cleopatra VII). At Kom el-Wist in the Delta, a bronze tube concealed in the pedestal of a Ptolemaic statue of a bull and connected to a small chamber where a priest could be hidden was discovered in 1941. It is recorded that Hatshepsut was told the route to Punt, and Alexander the Great was spoken to by Zeus-Ammon when alone in the temple of Siwah. This development may explain Herodotus's statement (400 BCE) that the way of issuing oracles varied from temple to temple.

Theban Theocracy and *Nb-nrw*. Most of the Theban oracular decrees from Ramesses VI onward were issued by "this august god Lord of Gods Amun-Re," often also referred to as "the great god first to come into existence," an epithet stressing the demiurgic powers originally held by the *Nb-nrw*, which was later taken over by lesser processional images. Many of these texts, sometimes accom-

panied by reliefs of the oracular setting, are engraved along the processional route of the bark, leading from the tenth pylon to the granite sanctuary, where the *Nb-nrw*, "who pronounces oracles" and "announces what comes before it exists" (Taharka's hymn to the Lord of gods), was stored between festivals. It is likely that this area also held the "soil of silver" of Karnak mentioned by the inscriptions of Henttawy and Thutmose as the place of the "god's approach." Such "beautiful feasts(s) of the *ph-ut*" were sophisticated forms of oracular sessions, which could be held alongside the yearly festivals. They often included other processional images—Mut, Khons-Neferhotpe, Mentu-Re, or Thoth—with the Lord of Gods as a way of strengthening his decisions. As an image that issued decrees about such important matters as the endowment of high-ranking persons and shrines or the recall of exiles from the oases, the *Nb-nrw* became a powerful political weapon through which his clergy ruled Upper Egypt; there are decrees concerning the properties of Henttawy, Maatkare, and the chief of Ma-tribes Nimlot, an inscription reporting the acquittal of the steward Thutmose, a stela from Akoris recording a donation to a temple, the so-called Stela de l'apanage and the Stela du Bannissement.

This fact perhaps explains the steady decrease in the power of the Lord of Gods after the twenty-first dynasty, when more efficient kings put an end to the independence of the Theban clergy. But in their distant capitals, the Napatian and Meroitic priests went on pulling the strings of their puppet-pharaohs through similar devices (cf. Coronation Stela of Aspelta), until their ruthless suppression by the skeptic Ergamenes around 200 BCE.

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ORAL TRADITION. A number of recent commentators on Egyptian literature have suggested that its origins lie in oral tradition. The challenge is to define the material's characteristics that betray this origin. Some assistance in the task comes from the work done on orality, oral tradition, and performance in other cultures from the ancient world, like Greece and Israel, as well as from discussions of modern oral cultures.

By definition, *orality* and *oral* mean "spoken," and they assume *aurality* and *aural*, or "heard." The latter implies the presence of an audience that hears the speaking, whether the speaking is simple narration, instruction, rhetoric, ritual invocation, or song of some kind—in other words, performance. Because performance occurs in a time and place, the concept of orality also incorporates an ephemerality, at least for the individual act. With regard to the specific oral performance, such ephemerality is absolute; but with the inclusion of tradition, as in the traditional content of performance, a sense of stability comes into play.

Tradition includes the transmission of any kind of cultural communication, spoken or otherwise, from generation to generation. The idea thus embodies the sense of an unbroken line with the past which projects into the future by means of the heirs of the present-day carrier of the tradition. One must understand tradition as a document belonging to the time of its bearer, however, as well as containing the past. For example, the Pyramid Texts were the prerogative of Old Kingdom royalty, whereas

during the Middle Kingdom, nobles and officials used variants of many of them on their coffins; during the New Kingdom, other variants of these same texts appeared as parts of the *Book of Going Forth by Day* (*Book of the Dead*), commonly considered available to any who could afford them. Even more dramatic is the use of parts of the Underworld Books from New Kingdom royal tombs in the mythological papyri of the Third Intermediate Period by those who could afford them. Tradition, then, is not the rote transmission of the past but, rather, the past in the context of the present and thus affected by that context to a greater or lesser extent. One must therefore approach tradition as dynamic, not static, noting that it includes conservation of the past while reflecting the effects of the present. Thus, when one finds written material from an oral narrative—for example, a recorded folktale—what is present represents one instance of performance for one particular audience. This performance brings to this audience the story as told many times before by many different narrators, but it also presents the story in response to this particular audience in this particular time and place.

Performance also includes what the audience brings to it. The language and words used resonate with the audience as they actively involve themselves in the performance. This involvement may be evident in overt actions of the audience, such as accompanying a singer with song, clapping, appreciative sounds, and the like; more significant, however, are the values, traditional understanding, and knowledge that the performer activates in the audience through words and actions. In a way, the performance itself is incomplete if viewed simply in terms of the performer; only the audience can complete it.

Much of the study of oral tradition in written form has revolved around the identification of formulas and themes that recur within a given traditional genre, such as epic or folktale. Since we lack a significant corpus of any given genre, or even a clear identification of what the genre identification is, of many Egyptian materials, we must look for alternative kinds of markers of oral tradition in order to ascertain the presence and extent of such a tradition in ancient Egypt. One of these markers appears in the ancient Egyptians' sense of the power inherent in a name. Arguably the best narrative example comes from the tale in which Isis tricks Re into revealing his name. The fact that in this revelation, only she (and, through her, Horus) learns the name—the audience gets no clue—delineates the ancient Egyptians' concept of the power of the name: if one knows an individual's name, one has power over that person. The name of a person designates that individual's essence. Consequently, a person is called into life by name and, correspondingly, can be annihilated by the loss of his or her name. The Egyptians' use of theophoric names—personal names incorporating the