

THE IMPORTANCE OF CELESTIAL BODIES IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Assignment for God and the Cosmos



COSMOLOGY AS A FORM OF EARLY PHILOSOPHY

- There is a bias in Western thought that philosophy began with the Greeks.
- Through the strict science of philosophy was developed by Hellenic scholars, the broader definition of philosophy as a rational system of human thought allows for appreciation and analysis of pre-Hellenic cultural systems of proto-philosophy. (Allen, Genesis in Egypt)
- The iconographic framework of religious myths can make it difficult for us to appreciate the concepts in ancient cosmologies.
- However, these are issues of form not content, as mythological stories provided ancient Egyptians with a means of visualising and communicating understanding of the universe and its processes.
- In this presentation, I will use this framework of philosophy as a rational system of human thought to explore the impact of celestial bodies on ancient Egyptian philosophy. (Allen, Genesis in Egypt, p. ix)

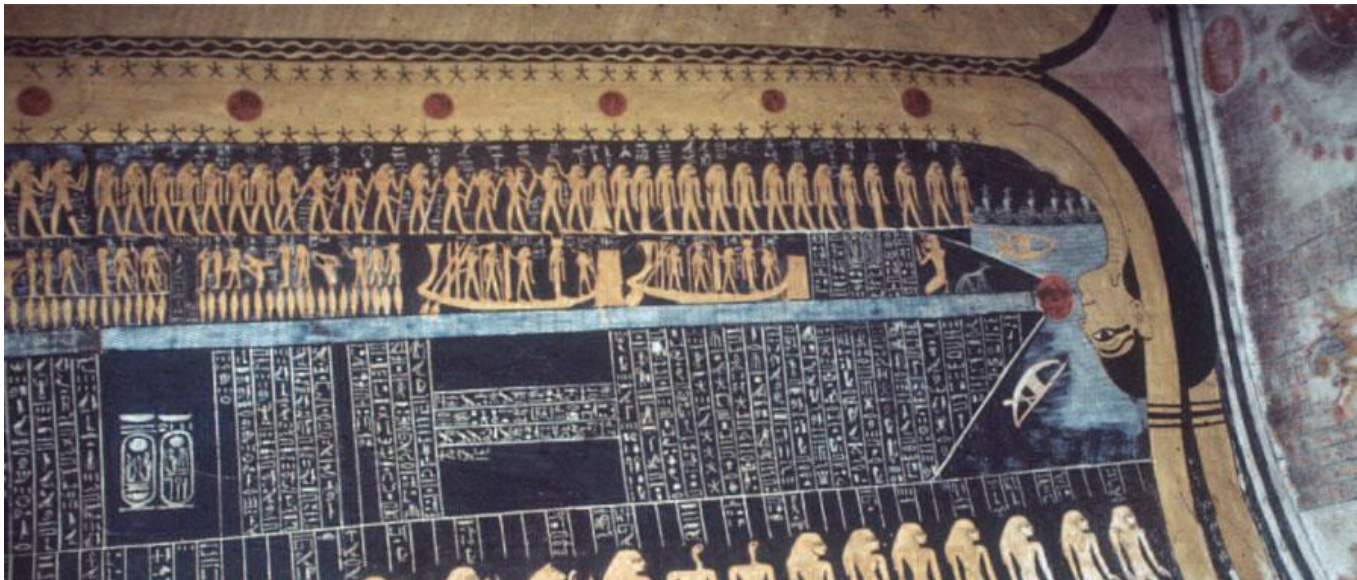
THE EGYPTIAN WORLD VIEW

- It is important to first understand the Egyptian understanding of their own geography, which was separated into two major areas:
 - Black Land
 - Red Land
- The world was conceived of as a bank of earth divided in the middle by the Nile and surrounded by primeval waters, sometimes called 'the Great Circular Ocean', that were personified as the god 'Nun'.
- The sky was seen as an active force and believed to be continually turning and moving around the sun and stars. This belief linked the power of the sky to the goddess Nut and her body, which was believed to be covered in stars (Conman, p. 36).



THE CELESTIAL DEITIES

- Along with the goddess Nut, the other celestial bodies visible for the ancient Egyptians were personified and understood as deities. The celestial bodies were understood to move across or through Nut's body, protected by her. (Campion, p. 88)
 - Nut = goddess of the sky
 - Thoth = god of the moon
 - Ra = god of the sun (scarab god Khepri)
 - Isis = linked to the star Sirius

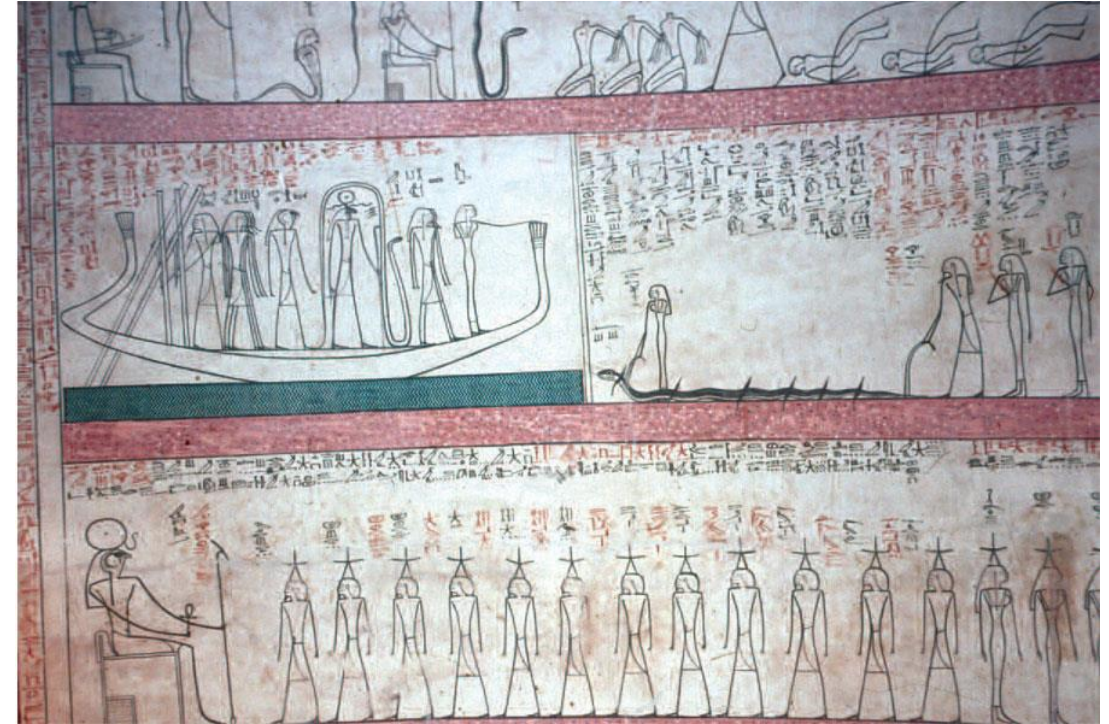


Thoth
carving
from the
outer wall
of the
Temple of
Horus,
Edfu,
Egypt

Goddess Nut; Images from sarcophagus
chamber of Ramesses VI (Roberson, 2008,
p. 22)

THE SOLAR JOURNEY

- Across Egypt, the eager welcoming of the sun's return at dawn was universal, attested in various hymns from all periods of ancient Egyptian history. (Plumley, p. 22)
- While various explanations about the means of this journey existed, such as the sun as a hawk flying across the sky, or a scarab beetle rolling the fiery ball of the sun like a ball of dung, the most popular myth was the god Ra journeying across the sky on his solar boat, moving across the sky during the day and then moving below the horizon and entering the Duat at night.
- Accompanying him on his journey, Ra had a crew of deities such as Horus and Isis who helped him defeat enemies and forces of chaos he encountered on his dangerous nightly journey through the Egyptian underworld.

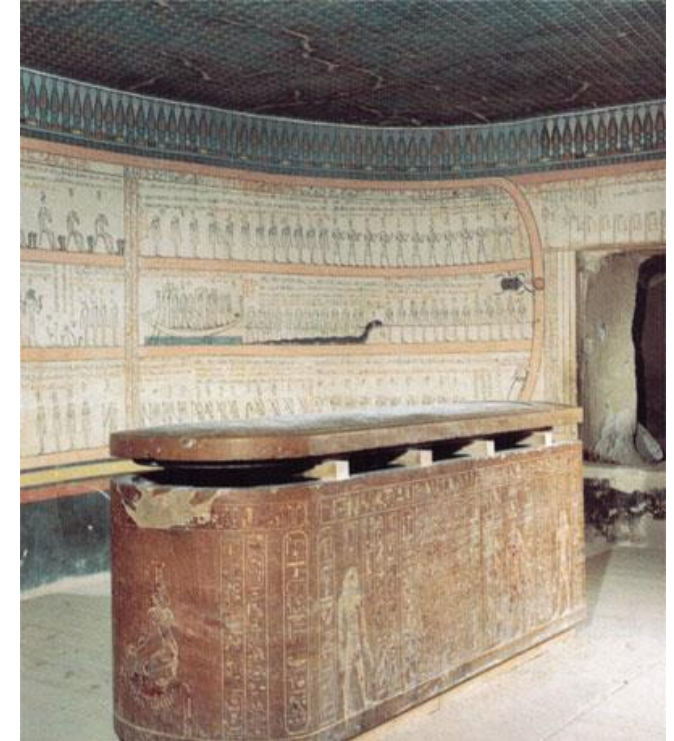


Tomb of Thutmose III, Roberson, 2008, p. 18.

THE SUN'S JOURNEY AND BELIEF IN REBIRTH

Tomb of Thutmose III, Roberson, p. 18

- The sun journey's significance for the ancient Egyptians is evident in its popularity as a theme for royal tomb architecture. Tombs in this style were arranged in a linear fashion to depict the twelve regions of the Duat, with the sun god Ra shown transversing the Duat during each hour of the night before his rebirth at dawn in the east. (Roberson, 2008, p. 15-16)
- The main purpose for the inscription of the Amduat in tombs was to give pharaohs information about the underworld's geography and monsters for his own journey through the afterlife. (Richter, 2008, p. 73)
- The importance of the sun's movement for not just the understanding of mythological ideas but also understanding of the Egyptian afterlife and death can be discovered through looking at the inclusion of celestial bodies like the sun in tomb art. From the daily cycle of the sun, the Egyptians underpinned their belief in the possibility of rebirth after death.



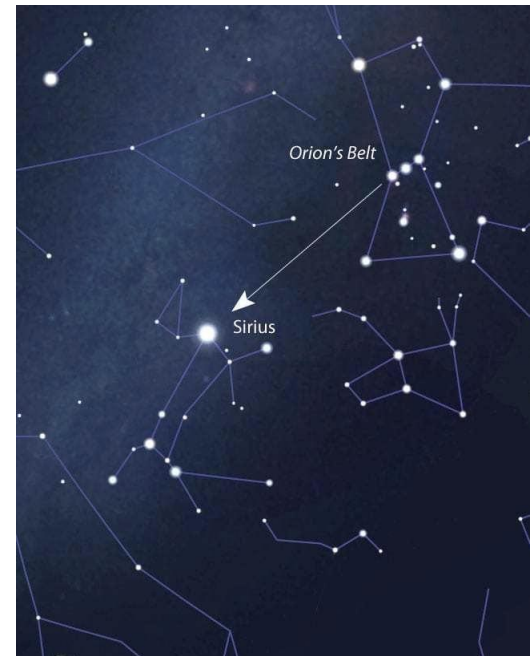
THE EGYPTIAN WORLDVIEW

- To clearly demonstrate the importance of celestial bodies in the Egyptian conception of the world, the subject of directions is really enlightening.
- The Egyptians understood directions as regions of the sky rather than that of the earth, and thus direction was entirely dependent on time:
 - Left = east = night
 - Right = west = daytime (Conman, p. 37)
- “The sun was attached to the sky and functioned as a mobile meridian, so that time and direction was not easily separable concepts in ancient Egyptian thought.” (Conman, p. 68)
- This example really shows the fundamental importance of the Egyptian cosmology in defining the ancient Egyptian concepts of time and orientation.



IMPORTANCE OF STARS AND CONSTELLATIONS

- The Egyptians also attributed a lot of importance to stars, particularly the star Sirius, which was the star of the goddess Isis, with the solar year itself being tied to observation of the stars as well as the sun. (Campion, p. 87)
- Sirius, called Sopdet by the Egyptians, becomes almost invisible due to close proximity to the sun for a period each year, and its reappearance as a bright evening star on the eastern horizon in late summertime coincided with the annual Nile flood, which improved the fertility of the land and reinforced the belief in an eternal cycle of solar time.
- The movement of the star Sirius coinciding with the movement of the Nile not only led to a strong link with the goddess Isis, whose tears after the death of her consort Osiris were sometimes understood to be the cause of the Nile flood, but also strengthened the Egyptian idea that the cosmos revolved around cycles, with their entire world participating in the constant cycles of the sun rising and setting and the annual flooding then receding of the Nile. (Campion, p. 87)

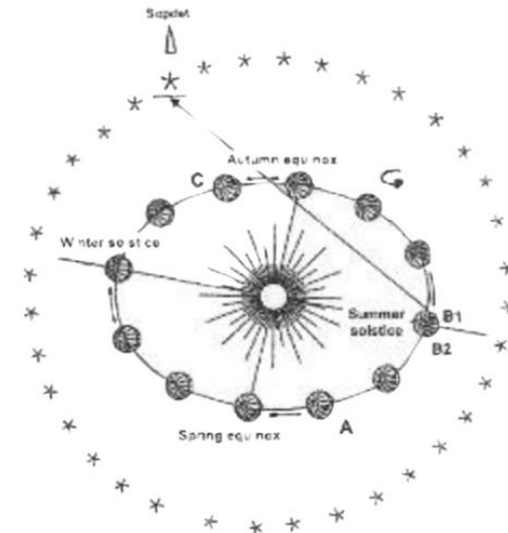


STAR MOVEMENT AND THE EGYPTIAN CALENDAR

- In ancient Egypt, astrological observations were primarily done for time keeping, to better know when crucial rituals had to be enacted. There was a specific class of priest called 'imy-wnwt' – hour-watcher/observer/astronomer. Duties dating from 2nd/3rd centuries BCE – timekeeping; calendar collation; purification rituals; official announcements of movements of the most important star Sirius.
- The observation of the evolution of stars was reserved for priests in charge of measuring time, because it was believed that to keep justice and cosmic order (Ma'at) on earth, it was necessary to perform the right rituals at the right site and right timing. Therefore, the ancient Egyptians were required to understand the natural world in a rational, systematic way to record this information because of the necessity of correct religious practice. (Canhao, 288)
- The Egyptians had a 365-day year, with a new year starting from the day of the current Pharaoh's crowning, relating to the prevalent viewpoint that the world existed, and events happened cyclically, dictated by the life and death of the Pharaoh. This period of 365 days was likely obtained by observing the interval between two appearances of the star Sirius, used as a reference. Furthermore, every ten days of the translational movement of the earth, a new star would appear and be visible for ten days, and this led to the separation of the month into three periods. (Canhao, 288)

STAR MOVEMENT AND THE EGYPTIAN CALENDAR

- The Egyptians had months of three ten-day periods, each marked by the appearance of a 'decan', which were stars that appeared to be born, live and die, and thus were known as the living (ankhu). (Canhao, 287)
- The decanal system led the Egyptians to further divided the day into twenty-four hours, with the day divided into ten hours according the sun's movement, plus two hours of twilight – sunrise and sunset. (Canhao, 288)
- The Egyptians created a complex system of stellar clocks, organising them in tables with columns and rows to mark the decan rising at each measured interval. This detailed and dedicated study of the nature of the universe and the movement of the stars is a clear example of a rational system of human thought, the definition of philosophy I'm using for this presentation to allow full appreciation of the intricate methodology that Egyptians used in their systems of thought.



Hours	1	2	3	4	Decans....	33	34	35	36
1	I	II	III	IV	.....	XXXIII	XXXIV	XXXV	XXXVI
2	II	III	IV	V	.....	XXXIV	XXXV	XXXVI	I
3	III	IV	V	VI	.....	XXXV	XXXVI	I	II
4	IV	V	VI	VII	.....	XXXVI	I	II	III
5	V	VI	VII	VIII	.....	I	II	III	IV
6	VI	VII	VIII	IX	.....	II	III	IV	V
7	VII	VIII	IX	X	.....	III	IV	V	VI
8	VIII	IX	X	XI	.....	IV	V	VI	VII
9	IX	X	XI	XII	.....	V	VI	VII	VIII
10	X	XI	XII	XIII	.....	VI	VII	VIII	IX
11	XI	XII	XIII	XIV	.....	VII	VIII	IX	X
12	XII	XIII	XIV	XV	.....	VIII	IX	X	XI

THE IMPERISHABLE STARS AND ETERNITY

- As well as the frequent movement of the stars and their impact on the calendar, the presence of never-setting stars visible in the north from the land of Egypt contributed to the Egyptian views of time, the afterlife and eternity. Opposed to the 'living' stars which were viewed as having a lifecycle, dying when they passed out of view, the circumpolar stars were called those who do not know destruction – ikhemn-sek. (Campion, p 91)
- Pharaohs were sometimes believed to ascend to the stars and join the imperishable ones. The constant sight of the 'immortal' stars added to the Egyptian ideas about time, which was divided between eternal sameness and eternal recurrence, with the idea of eternal sameness (a static constant) reinforced by the existence of constants in the environment like these stars.
- For example, the Great Pyramid of Giza built by Khufu faces the eternal, never-setting northern stars, which represented the immortal pharaoh's celestial kingdom. The point of a pyramid structure was journeying to a physical, not just ethereal, location in the afterlife. (Campion, p 91)

CYCLES AND SEASONS

- Marked by and linked to the Egyptian reverence and observation of celestial bodies were the various cycles that defined their concepts of time.
- The Egyptian year was divided into three agricultural seasons based on the natural cycle of the Nile's annual flooding and receding. These three seasons were Akhet (flood), the season when the river level rose and then flooded over the land; Peret (emergence), when the water subsided and the land would reemerge, and Shomu (Harvest), when the height of agricultural activity would take place on the newly fertile land. (Campion, p. 87)
- As well as this annual cycle, the daily rising of the sun from the east and setting of the sun in the west with no large variation in its journey created a dependable and repetitive frame of reference for the Egyptians' philosophical belief in eternal recurrence.
- For the ancient Egyptian, "there were some things which appeared to be indestructible, permanent, never changing. In particular, the seemingly unchanging and ever continuing physical conditions in the Nile Valley fostered in his mind a sense of determined continuity in creation. Ever before him were the daily rise and setting of the sun, the annual rise and fall of the waters of the Nile, the yearly recurring cycle of life." (Plumley, p. 24)

THE EGYPTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF TIME

- The ancient Egyptian philosophy of time was deeply linked to their understanding of the celestial bodies and the observations of their cyclical movements, and was described with two complementary ideas:
 - **Djet**
 - Meaning eternal sameness, associated with Osiris and his eternal state of death (Roberson, p. 25)
 - Ideas of lasting duration (eternal maintenance) (Canhao p. 284)
 - Linear time, with the finite ending of death.
 - **Neheh**
 - Meaning eternal recurrence,
 - Canhao describes as: “the cyclic time grounded on the periodicity of cosmic phenomena particularly the movement of the sun, which reborns every day”
 - Linked to ideas of rebirth and transformation.
- Canhao describes this succinctly as the “co-existence of two different concepts created by the gods: a cyclic time, marked by traditions and religious rituals, and so related to the sacred; and a more linear time, marked by daily activities and therefore profane. The union of these two concepts stood for the wholeness of time.” (Canhao, p. 285)

THE IMPORTANCE OF CELESTIAL BODIES

- As well as the religious practices of worshipping the celestial bodies, the ancient Egyptian cosmology's focus on the importance of the movement of the celestial bodies such as the sun and the star Sirius underpins their philosophy of time as both cyclical and eternal.
- By observing the eternal nature of the circumpolar stars, the Egyptians grounded their beliefs in an immortal soul and a celestial afterlife, shown by evidence like pyramid architecture being oriented to facilitate physical ascension for the pharaoh to this starry paradise.
- When defining philosophy as a rational system of human thought, the Egyptians' detailed and ordered understanding of the celestial bodies they could observe and analyse can be defined as a proto-philosophy in its relation to their understanding of time, eternity and the afterlife.

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