

4 Reading and seeing Ma'at

The Eloquent Peasant (MK) - (Ancient Egyptian: Sekhti-nefer-medu, "a peasant good of speech")

Translated by R. B. Parkinson in *The Tale of Sinuhe and other ancient Egyptian poems, 1940-1640 BC* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1997), pages 58-75.

- Ancient Egyptian story, composed around 1850 BCE (MK)
- one of the longest Egyptian tales that has survived completed
- about poor peasant, Khun-Anup aiming to gain justice
 - Khun-Anup, traveling to market with his donkeys heavily laden with goods to exchange for supplies for his family
 - while en route, Nemtynakht, a vassal of the high steward Rensi, notices the peasant approaching his lands and devises a scheme to steal Khun-Anup's donkeys and supplies, tricks peasant by placing a cloth on the narrow public path, where one side was bordered by the river and the other side were the private fields of Nemtynakht → forces peasant to either trample the cloth, step into the water, or take his donkeys over Nemtynakht's fields in order to continue journey
 - while Khun-Anup appealing to Nemtynakht's sense of reason, one of Khun-Anup's donkeys eats some of Nemtynakht's barley → Nemtynakht seizes Khun-Anup's donkeys and goods
 - Khun-Anup complains that punishment is unfair → Nemtynakht beats him and threatens peasant with death if he dares to complain
 - Khun-Anup does not accept this injustice, unsuccessfully appeals to Nemtynakht for ten days, then seeks out the high steward, the noble Rensi son of Meru to present his case
 - Rensi brings peasant's case to magistrates/judge, who dismiss the case as merely being a matter of a peasant at odds with a landowner
 - Rensi then brings story of wronged peasant before pharaoh Nebkaure → telling him how elegantly the peasant speaks
 - Pharaoh is intrigued, instructs Rensi to not respond to the peasant's pleas, so that the peasant would continue to make his elegant speeches to be written down for the pharaoh
 - Continues for nine days - after Khun-Anup threatened suicide, realised why he is being ignored → insulted Rensi, is punished with beating
 - but Khun-Anup is then given justice: Rensi, after reading Khun-Anup's last speech, is impressed and ordered the donkeys and the goods to be returned to Khun-Anup and the peasant to be compensated with all the property of Nemtynakht, making Nemtynakht as poor as Khun-Anup had been
- set in the Ninth or Tenth Dynasty around Herakleopolis

- elaborate reflection on the connection – or disconnection – of ethical order and refined speech, transliterated into refined writing → Theme of Ma'at
 - Ma'at as law based on the idea of harmony and balance, allows for social hierarchy to be prevalent in every men's everyday life
 - Ma'at exemplified in courts: justice and social hierarchy as dependent on judge and how he interprets ma'at

*And this peasant came to petition
the High Steward, Meru's son Rensi,
and said, 'High Steward, my lord!
Great of the great,
leader of all that is not and all that is!*

*If you go down to the Sea of Truth,
you will sail on it with true fair wind;
the bunt will not strip off your sails, nor your boat delay;
nor will misfortune come upon your mast, nor your yardarms break;
you will not go headlong, and be grounded;
nor will the flood carry you off;
nor will you taste the river's evil, nor stare in the face of fear.
But to you the fish will come caught; you will catch fatted fowl.*

*For you are a father to the orphan
and a husband to the widow,
a brother to the divorced,
an apron to the motherless.
Let me make your name in this land, with every good law:
Leader free from selfishness!
Great one free from baseness!
Destroyer of Falsehood! Creator of Truth!
Who comes at the voice of the caller!*

*I speak so that you will hear.
Do Truth, praised one whom the praised praise!
Drive off my need—look, I am weighed down!
Examine me—look, I am at a loss!'*

The Instruction of Amenemope (British Museum Papyrus 10474, Chapter 20, lines 5-20)

translated in Lichtheim, Miriam *Ancient Egyptian Literature: A Book of Readings*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976, II, pp158-9.

- The religious function of *maat* includes promise, or hope, for humans concerning the ultimate justice and rightness of the cosmos in which they existed - despite of knowledge that injustice occurs in everyday life

- gods directly involved in redressing injustices (in life and after death)
- gods give and maintain *maat* and receive it themselves

Maat is a great gift of god,

He gives it to whom he wishes.

The might of him who resembles him,

It saves the poor from his tormentor.

Do not make for yourself false documents,

They are a deadly provocation;

They (mean) the great restraining oath,

They (mean) a hearing by the herald.

Don't falsify the oracles in the scrolls,

And thus disturb the plans of god;

Don't use for yourself the might of god,

As if there were no Fate and Destiny.

Hand over property to its owners,

Thus do you seek life for yourself;

Don't raise your desire in their house,

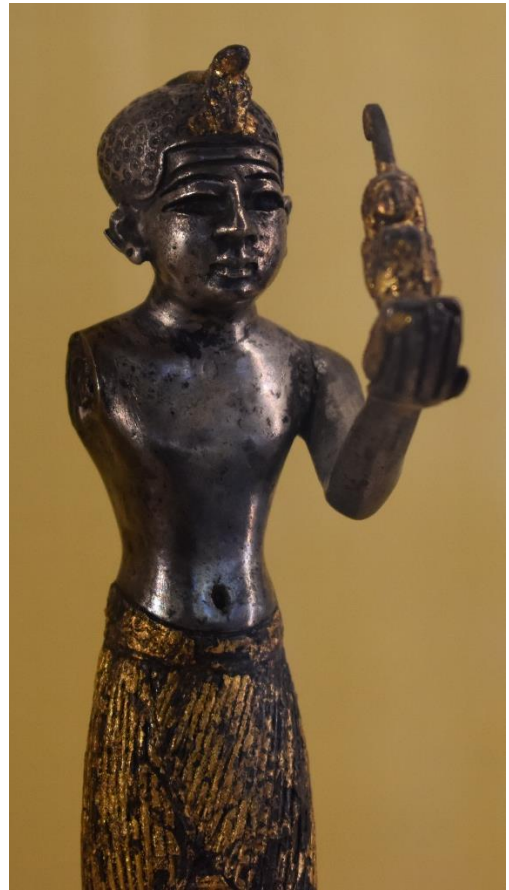
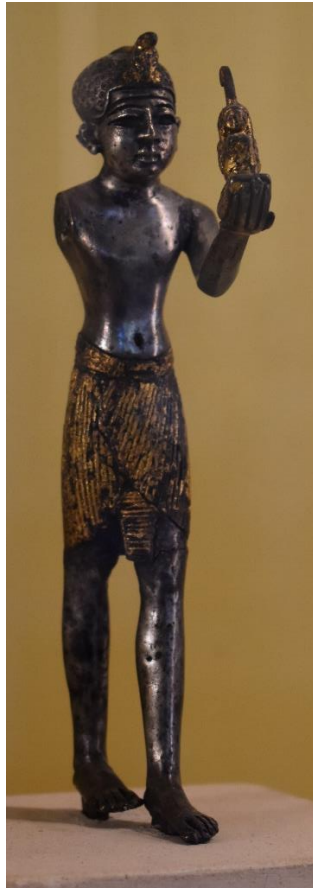
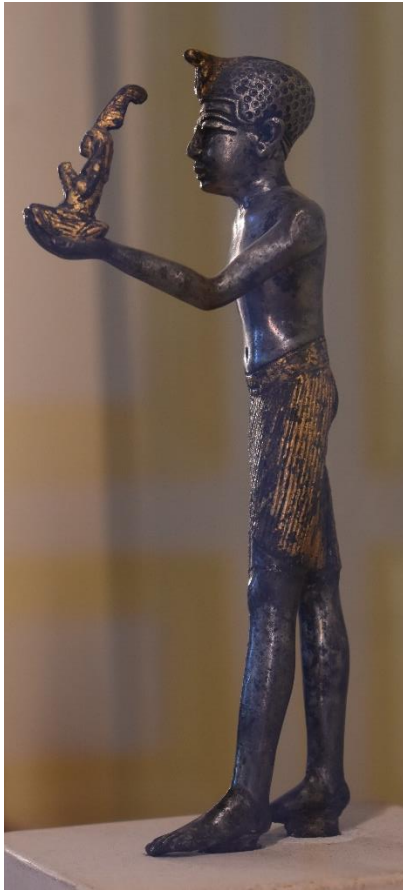
Or your bones belong to the execution block.

Part of the normal cult for most major gods was the offering of meals to the gods, in theory by the pharaoh (delegated to a pure priests as stand-in): included two symbolic acts

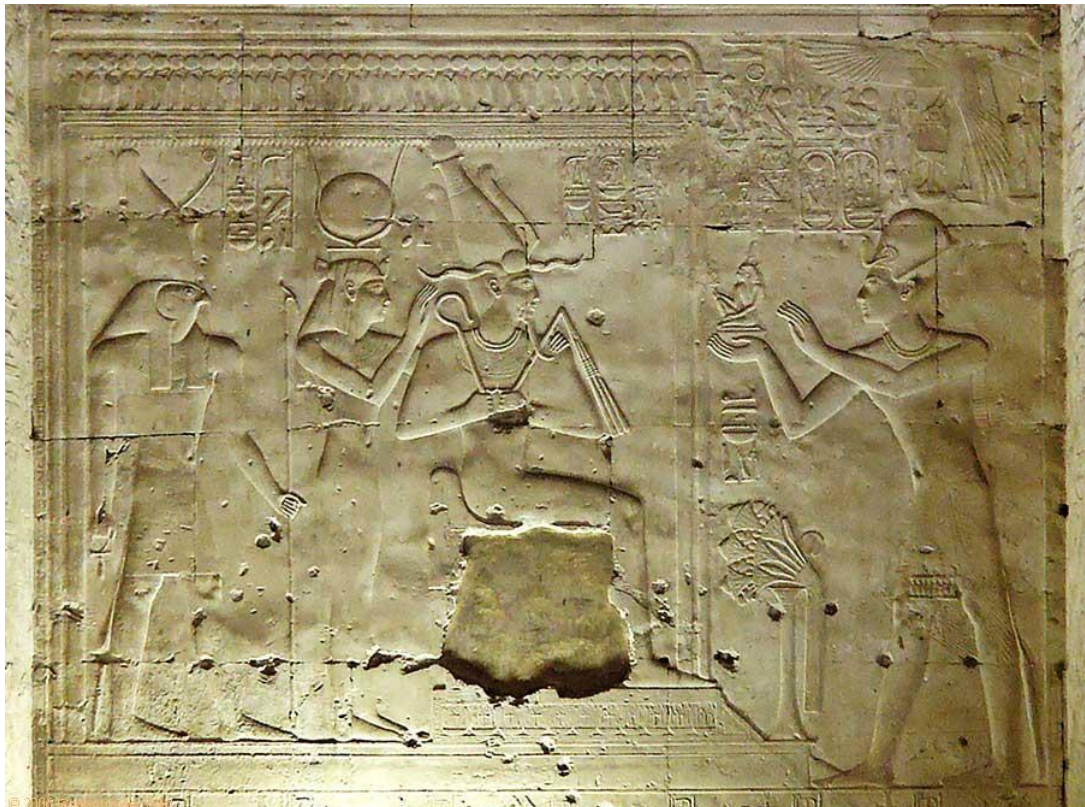
- offering of incense
- offering of Maat = beyond mere reciprocation, as establishment of progressive set of complex relationships among the gods, the pharaoh, the priests and the people



Egyptian; Nubian. Pharaoh Offering an Image of Ma'at, 1st century B.C.E.. Sandstone, 48.3 × 5 × 68.7 cm - Brooklyn Museum 37.1525E) <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/en-GB/objects/4171>)



Seti I offering a figure of the goddess Ma'at / New Kingdom (Department of Egyptian Antiquities of the Louvre E 27431)



Abydos, Temple Seti I