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# TIME IN THE EGYPTIAN NETHERWORLD

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## Resumo

A obtenção de mais tempo de vida é um tema e um desejo universal, patente também na concepção egípcia do outro mundo. Por isso o faraó deseja celebrar, ao menos, um festival Sed durante o seu reinado terreno, mas solicita milhões de festivais Sed no outro mundo. O autor aborda a questão com exemplos retirados do *Papiro Vandier* («Conto de Meriré e do rei Sisobek») e de textos funerários, entre os quais o «Livro dos Mortos», onde se detecta a busca de um «tempo sem limites» ou uma duração de «milhões de anos». Aí se vê um tempo *neheh*, contínuo e ritmado, e o tempo *djet*, a permanência eterna.

E se antes da criação o que existia era um mundo caótico sem tempo, depois da criação passou a existir um tempo contínuo e eterno que corresponde à duração da vida do deus solar Ré, que diariamente passa pelo outro mundo subterrâneo e sempre ressurge brilhando no céu, numa permanente recriação da existência e do tempo.

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The longing for more time is an ancient and universal subject. Two stories from Ancient Egypt tell us about gaining additional time. One is recounted by Plutarch in *De Iside*, ch. 12:

“They say that when Rhea secretly had intercourse with Kronos, Helios came to know about it and set on her a curse that she should not give birth in any month or year. Then Hermes, falling in love with the goddess ... played draughts against Selene. He won the seventieth part of each of her illuminations, and having put together five days out of the whole of his gains, he added them to the 360 ... On them they celebrate the gods’ birthdays”.<sup>1</sup>

The narrative wants to explain the religious meaning of the Epagomenal days, but the play of draughts has to do with the passage of the deceased through the Netherworld, and thus with the realm of the dead.<sup>2</sup> In many Egyptian tombs of the New Kingdom we find representations from Book of the Dead ch. 17, including a play of draughts. According to Herodot (II 122), the still living king Rhampsinit descended into the Netherworld to play against Demeter who is the Egyptian Isis. Thus we can be sure that Hermes gets the additional time he needs out of the Beyond. Further confirmation comes from another story.

This text has been published by Georges Posener who gave the name of *Papyrus Vandier* to the only existing manuscript (mid first millenium B. C.), to honour the former curator of the Egyptian Department of the Louvre. The story told there is now known as “The Tale of Merire and King Sisobek”. It treats of a magician (Merire) who descends into the Netherworld to request more time for the ruling king Sisobek who is threatened by an attempt on his life.<sup>3</sup> In the Netherworld, Merire is received by Hathor and guided before the “Great Living

God" Osiris; it seems (the text is fragmentary) that he succeeds with his wish, gaining a life of hundred years for Pharaoh, but only by risking his own life and remaining for a long time in the Netherworld.

The message conveyed by these texts means that time can be found almost limitless in the Beyond, after death. The longing for more time finds an impressive formulation in ch. 71 of the Book of the Dead where the deceased is approaching the gods with the wish

"May you grant many years beyond the years of my life,  
many months beyond the months of my life,  
many days beyond the days of my life ..."

Like an answer to this demand sounds the end of ch. 62 in the Book of the Dead where the deceased affirms that to him belongs "time without limits", since he is "a heir of time (*Neheh*), to whom eternity (*Djet*) is given". Some lines before, he had pretended to be Re himself who crosses the sky, thus connecting the daily, unceasing course of the sun with limitless time.

The gods who for the Egyptians are not present on earth but dwelling in Heaven or Netherworld, are able to lengthen or to cut short the individual lifetime. In the story of Wenamun, the hero advises the Prince of Byblos to send the timber he asks for to Egypt and to beg from Amun fifty years of life over and above the allotted fate. With this advice, he conforms to the praise of Amun in the famous Leiden hymn, ch. 70: "He lets life be long or breaks havoc within it,<sup>4</sup> he grants an extension to the fate of one he loves". When Ramesses III thinks about time (as *Neheh* and *Djet*), he "finds" Amun as the greatest god of all.<sup>5</sup>

The "Lifetime of Re" is the greatest possible horizon of time, being identical with the total duration of being. His lifetime "is longer than the West and his images" stresses the 13th invocation of the Litany of Re;<sup>6</sup> that means, it surpasses the "eternity" of the other world, since "West" is the realm of the dead. And time after death is so everlasting that it is identical with the duration of being, until heaven and earth unite again. "Millions of years" are promised by the gods for this duration, or "the years of Atum", the creator god, spanning the whole existence of the world.

A specific royal measure of time is the Sed festival, the so-called "jubilee" of Pharaoh. Normally, a king celebrated such a jubilee, which meant a renewal of his reign, after thirty years of reign, the ideal dura-

tion of a generation. But in numerous temple scenes, "Millions of Sed festivals" are bestowed upon him, and it is obvious that the majority of these belong to his existence after death, in the Beyond, drawing from the unfathomable supply of time present there.

The Egyptian terms *Neheh* and *Djet* which we have mentioned have been much discussed in recent years.<sup>7</sup> They are often translated as "eternity", but this is no Egyptian concept. Together, as it seems, they define the whole extension of time, the "millions of years" or "millions of Sed festivals", mentioned in so many texts and especially in wishes for the king. And, as Assmann has shown, they probably mean two different aspects of time, a dynamic and a static one, continuity and discontinuity. It is significant that the Books of the Netherworld in the New Kingdom (ca. 1540-1070 B. C.) often try to define time as a duality; these books, describing the journey of the sun through the twelve hours of night, are an important source for Egyptian concepts of time.

In each hour of his nocturnal journey the sun god rests "for a lifetime" in the region of the hour. So each hour in the Netherworld corresponds to a complete lifetime (*aha'u*) upon earth. That the judges of the dead consider lifetime as a single hour is stressed already by the Instruction for king Merikare which belongs to the early 12th dynasty.

Thus beyond death, time has a different quality, and even a reversal of time is possible, since the sun has to travel backwards in space and time, to rise again in the East. The 12th and last hour of the Amduat demonstrates how the sun god and his following, including all blessed dead, pass the serpent of rejuvenation in the "wrong" direction, from tail to mouth, and thereby become young again. The deceased are not entering eternity, they remain within time and thus are able to share a new lifetime in the Netherworld.

In the 5th hour of the Book of Gates, twelve gods are "carrying the lifetime in the West" in the shape of a huge serpent equipped with hieroglyphs for "lifetime". The body of the serpent represents the inexhaustible supply of time present in the beyond, and the Egyptian view of the duality of time is stressed by calling it *metuy* "twin rope"; each limited lifetime is "measured" on this body or rope. For the duration of their daily renewed lifetime the dead are awakened by the creative word of the sun god, arising from their biers and accepting everything they need in the hereafter.<sup>8</sup>

Several other scenes in the Book of Gates try to make this notion of time visible, be it again in the form of a serpent, or as a double-twisted (again the duality!), endless rope spun from the gorge of a god called Aqen who thus is standing for the unfathomable abyssus of time out of which the individual hours are “born” and swallowed again;<sup>9</sup> these hours are represented as stars or, in scene 20, as female figures, the goddesses of the hours. As stars, they appear again in scene 49 where the rope of time is called “The Devourer which produces the hours”.<sup>10</sup> The serpent’s body and the rope both show the continuity of time, and the image of a serpent representing time, together with stars for the hours, belongs already to the 11th hour of the Amduat.<sup>11</sup>

In a later illustrated book, the “Book of the Earth”, time is represented by an ithyphallic god “Who hides the hours” or “Who destroys the hours”,<sup>12</sup> both names stressing the disappearance of time quanta into the ocean of time. Here again, we find the twelve goddesses of the nocturnal hours who are engendered by time. Another text of this book defines the disappearance of time further: the hours which have elapsed “enter into the darkness under his (i. e. Re/Osiris) soles”,<sup>13</sup> they disappear into the utter darkness of the “Place of Destruction” (*Hetemyt*) which is a place of universal recycling, including time.<sup>14</sup>

From these profound depths, the “lowest regions” of the Netherworld, the hours will appear again, in rejuvenated form, as the Egyptian year, *renpet*, is literally “the rejuvenated”, renewed every year, like the sun is renewed every day. Here, for the first time in history, we grasp the idea of an eternal return as it was formulated later by Pythagoras and his school. But the typical Egyptian variation of this idea is, that it is not an unchanged return, but always transformed into something new. The sun of each dawn is a new sun, “daily” is in Egyptian “every sun”.

The “Place of Destruction” in the Netherworld is not only a place of punishment, dissolution and non-being, but also of hope, of a permanent renewal of being, of the rekindling of light in the midst of darkness. And perhaps it is nothing else than the world before creation, from which the sun emerged at the beginning of time, since in the Book of Caverns the daily descent of the sun god is seen as a return to this primeval world, to the place of his first birth.

The world before creation, before the sun, is a world without time, *Nehet* and *Djet* are never used as categories of this chaotic world, as primeval darkness or the primeval ocean *Nun*. They define the complete

duration of existence in the afterlife which is identical with the lifetime of the sun god Re. The daily course of the sun, passing the realm of the dead in the Netherworld and never ending, guarantees a permanent return of life, a permanent re-creation of being and thus also of time.

## Notas

<sup>1</sup> Text and translation in J. G. GRIFFITHS, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*, Cardiff 1970, p. 134 f.

<sup>2</sup> T. KENDALL, *Passing through the Netherworld*, Belmont/Mass. 1978.

<sup>3</sup> G. POSENER, *Papyrus Vandier*, Cairo 1985, with French translation. German translations are given by FISCHER-ELFERT, *Bibliotheca Orientalis* 44, 1987, 5-21, and E. BRUNNER-TRAUT, *Altägyptische Märchen*, Munich 1989, No. 34; an English translation is still missing.

<sup>4</sup> So the translation by J. L. FOSTER, *Hymns, Prayers, and Songs*, Atlanta 1995, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> Reliefs and Inscriptions at Karnak, Vol. I, pl. 34.

<sup>6</sup> A. PIANKOFF, *The Litany of Re*, New York 1964 (Bollingen Series XL, 4), p. 23. He translates "is longer than that of She who Hides Her Images", which would also mean the realm of the dead.

<sup>7</sup> See especially J. ASSMANN, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im alten Ägypten*. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ewigkeit, Heidelberg 1975, and his article "Ewigkeit" in: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vol. II, Wiesbaden 1977, 47-54.

<sup>8</sup> E. HORNING, *Das Buch von den Pforten des Jenseits*, II, Geneva 1984 (*Aegyptiaca Helvetica* 8), p. 138-140 (scene 31).

<sup>9</sup> E. HORNING, *Buch von den Pforten*, p. 158-160 (scene 36).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 195-197 (eighth hour of the night).

<sup>11</sup> E. HORNING, "Zeitliches Jenseits im Alten Ägypten", in *Eranos Yearbook* 47, 1978, 269-307.

<sup>12</sup> A. PIANKOFF, *La création du disque solaire*, Cairo 1953, p. 17 f.; E. HORNING, *Die Unterweltsbücher der Ägypter*, Zurich & Munich 1992, p. 438 f. and 441.

<sup>13</sup> PIANKOFF, *l. c.*, p. 21, and HORNING, *Unterweltsbücher*, p. 441. This scene and a similar text appear since Ramses III. also on sarcophagi.

<sup>14</sup> E. HORNING, "Black Holes Viewed from Within: Hell in Ancient Egyptian Thought", *Diogenes* No. 165 1994, 133-156; also in the Spanish edition, Mexico 1997, p. 124-146, as "Los agujeros negros vistos desde el interior".



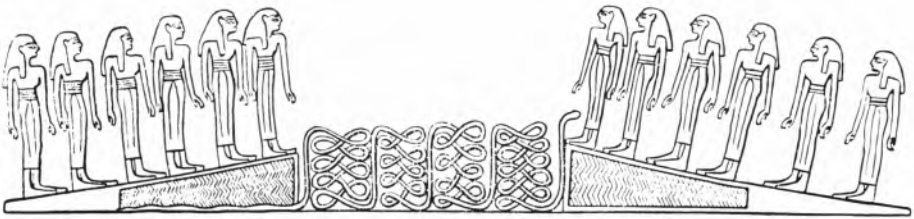


Fig. 1 – The serpent of time and the goddesses of the twelve hours of night. From: A. Piankoff and N. Rambova, *The Tomb of Ramesses VI*, New York 1954 (Bollingen Series XL, 1), p. 162, fig. 40.

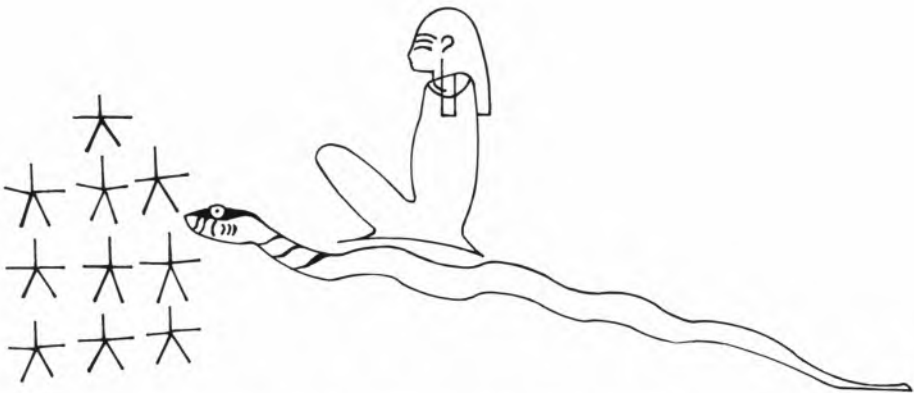


Fig. 2 – The serpent of time in the 11th hour of the Amduat, with hours as stars. Tomb of Amenophis II, Drawing by A. Brodbeck.