

Stars, Gods, and Religion in Ancient Egypt

“The earliest home of the gods that we can discern is the sky.”¹

Although an aura of mystery surrounds the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians this much is certain: they were obsessed with the stars. The leading gods were identified with prominent stars; their most impressive and enduring monuments—the pyramids—were decorated with stars and patterned after a celestial prototype; and their single-minded goal, upon dying, was to return to a celestial Hereafter where they hoped to be reunited with the sun god and the Imperishable Stars. In the face of such incontrovertible facts it seems self-evident that Egyptian religion is fated to remain elusive until we gain greater insight into that culture’s central beliefs regarding the stars and cosmos.

To read the standard works on Egyptian religion is to learn that the Sun was worshipped as Horus, the Moon as Thoth, Orion as Osiris, Sirius as Sothis or Isis, and the Circumpolar Stars as the “Imperishable Stars.” It is our contention that each and every one of these oft-cited identifications is erroneous. If we are correct in this judgment, it follows that Egyptologists have thoroughly misunderstood the essential nature of Egyptian religion. Indeed, as we will attempt to document in this monograph, the time for a reevaluation of all the available evidence is long overdue. We begin our reappraisal with an analysis of the cult of Horus.

The Horus-Star

“Pharaoh is Horus, and of this god little enough is known.”²

The great gods confront us already at the dawn of history. The Egyptian Horus is a case in point, his preeminence in ancient Egyptian religion being everywhere apparent. The pharaoh himself was considered to be the earthly incarnation of the god, a belief-system reflected in the so-called Horus names borne by early rulers from the first dynasty on.³

¹ E. Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 1982), p. 227.

² H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), p. 37.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Yet if it is commonly acknowledged that Horus represents the quintessential Egyptian god, there is no consensus as to his origins or fundamental nature. That he was a celestial power all authorities concur. The question, however, is what celestial power best explains Horus's multifarious functions in Egyptian religion?

A survey of the relevant scholarship on the matter reveals that Horus has typically been identified with the sun.⁴ That said, leading Egyptologists have advanced arguments that the god is to be identified with the planet Venus;⁵ with the star Sirius;⁶ and with the amorphous sky itself.⁷ It is our opinion that all of these interpretations are not only erroneous but fundamentally misguided insofar as they reflect a fatally flawed methodological approach to the Egyptian star-religion—namely, an attempt to force-fit the ancient descriptions of the most prominent celestial bodies to the familiar appearance of the current solar system. The failed methodology and fuzzy thinking which predominates in modern Egyptology is especially evident in the following statement of Rudolf Anthes:

“The heavenly Horus was a star as well as the sun, and perhaps also the moon. It seems as if he was that celestial body which appeared conspicuous either at day or at night.”⁸

In order to bring clarity to the difficult question of Horus's celestial identification, it is necessary to begin at the beginning—in this case, just prior to the beginning of history itself. The cult of Horus is prominent already in predynastic times (Writing itself is first attested in Egypt during the Predynastic Period, ca. 3200 BCE, in the Abydos tomb

⁴ T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 11, writes: “The solar element in Horus clearly predominates.” James Allen, *Genesis in Egypt* (New Haven, 1988), p. 11 offers a similar opinion.

⁵ R. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, 1997), pp. 216-234.

⁶ R. Anthes, “Horus als Sirius in den Pyramidentexten,” *ZAS* 102 (1975), pp. 1-10.

⁷ W. Schenkel, “Horus,” *LÄ III* (Berlin, 1977), col. 14, writes: “The oldest function of Horus may have been that of a Heaven-god.”

⁸ R. Anthes, “Egyptian Theology in the Third Millennium B.C.,” *JNES* 18 (1959), p. 171.

known as U-j.⁹). Rulers from the Naqada I period, for example, worshipped the falcon-god prior to the unification of Egypt.¹⁰

In the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3000-2600 BCE), Horus is explicitly identified as a star. An annal from the First Dynasty reign of King Aha bears the name “Festival of the Horus-Star-of-the-Gods.”¹¹ Early royal domain names likewise contain reference to the Horus-star. The domain established by Anedjib (also First Dynasty) was called *Hr-sbꜣ-ht*, “Horus, star of the corporation (of gods).”¹² Hetepsekhemwy (Second Dynasty) established a domain called *Hr-hꜣ-sbꜣ*, “Horus risen as a star.”¹³ Khasekhemwy founded a new domain called *Hr-sbꜣ-bꜣw*, “Horus, the star of souls.”¹⁴ Most informative, perhaps, is the domain established by Djoser at the beginning of the Third Dynasty, named *Hr-sbꜣ-ḥnti-pt*, “Horus-star at the front of the sky.”¹⁵

To judge by the evidence of these names, Horus was originally conceived as a stellar power—indeed, as a most prominent star “at the front of the sky.” That said, the names in question are not sufficiently informative to pinpoint exactly which particular celestial body represented Horus during this period.

In addition to the god’s stellar roots, there is clear evidence that Horus was conceptualized as a powerful warrior very early on. This idea is apparent already in the Pyramid Texts as the following spell from Queen Neith’s pyramid testifies:

“So, ascend to the sky amongst the stars in the sky, and those before you shall hide and those after you shall be afraid of you, because of this your identity of Horus of the Duat...of the one who strikes them, of the one who spews them out, and wipes them out,

⁹ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 2001), p. 19.

¹⁰ J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 33.

¹¹ E. Hornung, *Idea Into Image* (Princeton, 1992), p. 158.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁵ It will be noted here that Toby Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 122, translates this name as “foremost star of the sky.”

and you will strike them, spew them out, and wipe them out at the lake, at the Great Green. You shall come to stand at the fore of the Imperishable Stars and sit on your metal throne from which the dead are far away.”¹⁶

The names of early pharaohs also bear witness to Horus’s warrior prowess. Toby Wilkinson offered the following observation:

“The Horus names of several First Dynasty kings expressed the aggressive authority of Horus, perhaps reflecting the coercive power of kingship at this stage of Egyptian statehood. Names like ‘Horus the fighter’ (Aha), ‘Horus the strong’ (Djer) or ‘arm-raising Horus’s (Qaa) call to mind the warlike iconography of the earliest royal monuments from the period of state formation.”¹⁷

This evidence, taken in conjunction with the Early Dynastic domain-names, strongly suggests that the stellar Horus was imagined as a formidable warrior. As we will document, this portrait of the god constitutes a decisive clue as to his stellar identity.

Additional information regarding the star-god Horus is to be found in the Pyramid Texts dating from roughly a half millennium later (ca. 2300 BCE). That Horus was not the sun, as often maintained, is suggested by various hymns wherein the god is explicitly distinguished from the ancient sun god Re. In the following passage, for example, Horus (as the deceased king) is implored to ascend to heaven and join Re:

“Rê summons you into the zenith (?) of the sky as the Jackal, the Governor of the Two Enneads, and as Horus Ḥnty-mnit.f; may he set you as the Morning Star in the midst of the Field of Rushes.”¹⁸

¹⁶ J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 323.

¹⁷ T. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

¹⁸ PT 1719d as translated by R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969). All passages from the Pyramid Texts are from Faulkner’s translation unless otherwise indicated.

Here, as elsewhere in the Pyramid Texts, Horus is identified with the “Morning Star.” In this guise Horus is described as the “son” of the sun god and thus he would appear to represent a distinct celestial body altogether—presumably a particularly prominent planet or star.

In order to clarify the origins of Horus’s cult it will be necessary to identify the celestial body signified by the epithet “Morning Star.” Unfortunately, this is not a simple matter to determine from the Egyptian texts alone. The earliest texts, such as the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, never describe the star-god in such a manner or astronomical context that his identification with a particular star is conclusive. Instead we read that the Morning Star—as Horus—ascended to heaven in order to command the Imperishable Stars in the celestial Hereafter.

Raymond Faulkner considered it a foregone conclusion that Venus must be the stellar body referenced by the phrase “Morning Star.” Thus, in a comprehensive survey of Egyptian star-lore Faulkner wrote as follows: “As regards the identification of the Morning Star and the Lone Star with actual celestial bodies, there can be little doubt that, as elsewhere, the Morning Star is Phosphorus, Venus as seen at dawn.”¹⁹

Rolf Krauss has produced the most detailed and informed study of Egyptian star-religion to date. He, too, would identify the Horus-star with the planet Venus, citing as evidence various passages in the Pyramid Texts that purportedly describe it as shining in the “eastern” portion of the morning sky while moving with respect to other stars, a characteristic of planets rather than stars.²⁰ Krauss summarized his findings as follows:


¹⁹ R. Faulkner, “The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts,” *JNES* 25 (1966), p. 161.

²⁰ R. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, 1997), pp. 216-234. Krauss cites Spell 437 as being especially instructive in this regard although no evidence adduced by him is determinative with regards to the identification of Horus with Venus (see Appendix One).

“As early as the beginning of dynastic times Horus seems to be identified with the planet Venus. The names of the so-called royal vineyards describe Horus as a star. The name of Djoser’s vineyard reveals that Horus is a particular star ‘at the front of the sky’. The identification of Horus with Venus as known from the Pyramid Texts suggests itself...Royal ideology and ideas about the Hereafter seem to have had cosmological and stellar foundations which may well go back to predynastic times.”²¹

Yet the identification of Horus with the planet Venus *is not known* from the Pyramid Texts—quite to the contrary, as we intend to show. Here Krauss has simply assumed what has yet to be proven—that early references to Horus as the “Morning Star” have reference to Venus—and argued in a wholly circular fashion.

Lord of the Netherworld

Horus’s early epithets offer a wealth of insight into his astral identity. A recurring epithet of the god is Duat, written with the following determinative——and conventionally translated as “Netherworld.” The word Duat is derived from the root *dwꜣ*, “morning,” whence comes Horus’s epithet *Neter Dua* signifying “Morning Star (or Morning God).”²² The etymology of Duat suggests that Horus’s identity as the Morning Star is indissolubly connected to his role as Lord of the “Netherworld.” In a passage from the Pyramid Texts the association between the “Morning Star” and the Duat is made explicit: “O Morning Star, Horus of the Netherworld, divine Falcon, *wꜣdꜣd*-bird whom the sky bore...”²³

²¹ R. Krauss, “The Eye of Horus and the Planet Venus: Astronomical and Mythological References,” in J. Steele & A. Imhausen eds., *Under One Sky* (Münster, 2002), p. 205.

²² J. Allen, “The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts,” in J. Allen et al eds., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), p. 23.

²³ PT 1207.

Although often sought for underground, the earliest texts confirm that the Duat was celestial in nature.²⁴ The following passage is especially telling in this regard:

“Make the sky clear and shine on them as a god; may you be enduring at the head of the sky as Horus of the Netherworld.”²⁵

Horus is here described as standing at the “head” or front (*hnt*) of the sky as Lord of the Duat. This epithet, together with the fact that the Horus-star is said to shine and “clear” the sky, would appear to confirm the Duat’s location in plain and prominent view.

Other spells implying that the Duat is to be found in close proximity to the ancient sun-god point to the same conclusion. Thus, Egyptian sources state that the sun god made his daily appearance from the Duat.²⁶ Especially relevant here is the following passage from the Pyramid Texts, wherein the deceased king ascends to the Duat in order to be near Re:

“Lift up your faces, you gods who are in the Netherworld [Duat], for the King has come that you may see him, he having become the great god. The king is ushered in with trembling, the King is robbed. Guard yourselves, all of you, for the King governs men, the King judges the living within the domain of Rê... The King sits with those who row the bark of Rê, the King commands what is good and he does it, for the King is the great god.”²⁷

²⁴ E. Hornung, “Dat,” *LÄ I* (Berlin, 1977), col. 994. See also L. Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” in B. Shafer ed., *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 119-120.

²⁵ PT 1948.

²⁶ J. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt* (New Haven, 1988), p. 5. See also the discussion in S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* Vol. 4 (New York, 1952), p. 34.

²⁷ PT 272-274.

Samuel Mercer, in his commentary on this particular passage, acknowledged the Duat's fundamental identity with the domain of Re: "The *Dw3.t* here is heaven, identical with the 'land of Rê' (273b), which is heaven, where the king becomes a great god, 272b."²⁸

The intimate association between Horus Duat and the region of the sky occupied by the ancient sun god is also evident in the following passage, wherein Horus is said to illuminate the sky from his station in the Duat near Re:

"Re has [taken (?)] me to himself, to the sky, to the eastern side of the sky; As this Horus, as the dweller in the Netherworld, As this star which illumines the sky."²⁹

In apparent contradiction to its intimate association with the ancient sun-god, the Pyramid Texts elsewhere describe Horus Duat as standing in close proximity to the Imperishable Stars—the latter conventionally identified with the circumpolar stars.³⁰ Thus, in the following passage the deceased king is identified with Horus Duat and set amongst the Imperishable Stars:

"May you go up as Horus of the Netherworld who is at the head of the Imperishable Stars."³¹

Horus Duat is here described with the epithet *hntj jhmw-skjw*, translated alternately as "head" or "front" of the Imperishable Stars.³² Taken literally, this passage poses a seemingly insurmountable problem for the conventional view that Horus is to be identified with the planet Venus, since that planet can hardly be said to stand at the

²⁸ S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* Vol. 2 (New York, 1952), p. 126. K. Sethe offered a similar analysis in *Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den altägyptischen Pyramidentexten*, Vol. 1 (Wiesbaden, 1962), pp. 283-284.

²⁹ PT 362.

³⁰ J. Allen, "The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts," in W. Simpson ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), p. 4.

³¹ PT 1301.

³² R. Krauss, op. cit., p. 229 renders this passage as follows: "Mögest du herausgehen als Datischer Horus, 'befindlich an der Spitze' der 'Unvergänglichen Sterne'."

“front” of the circumpolar stars (In its current orbit, Venus never moves more than 45 degrees from the ecliptic and is thus far removed from the circumpolar region at all times).³³

Horus and Nergal

Additional insight into Horus’s stellar identity can be gained by comparing the Egyptian astral traditions with those from other ancient astronomies. The evidence from ancient Mesopotamia is especially relevant in this regard since it was the site of the earliest systematic observations of celestial phenomena—hence its status as the original homeland of scientific astronomy itself. In the very early Egyptian sources, as we have seen, Horus was represented as a prominent star and raging warrior. In Babylonian astronomical texts it is the planet Mars—conceptualized as the god Nergal—that was regarded as the warrior-star par excellence.³⁴ A systematic analysis of the cults associated with Horus and Nergal will readily confirm their fundamentally analogous nature.

Horus, as we have seen, was known as “Lord of the Netherworld” (*Duat*). This epithet finds a precise parallel in the cult of Nergal, who was invoked as *umun-úrugal*, “Lord of the Netherworld.”³⁵ The epithet “Enlil of the Kur” attests to the same general idea.³⁶

Nergal is elsewhere described by the epithet *Lugal-IGI.DU-anna*, “king at the front of heaven.”³⁷ It is obvious that this epithet forms a close counterpart to Horus’s epithet *sbꜣ-ḥnti-pt*, “star at the front of the sky,” cited earlier. The fact that the latter epithet is

³³ R. Krauss, op. cit., p. 129 concedes this point.


³⁴ D. Brown, *Mesopotamian Planetary Astronomy-Astrology* (Groningen, 2000), p. 56. See also the extensive discussion in E. Cochrane, *Martian Metamorphoses* (Ames, 1997), pp. 15-26.

³⁵ D. Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, 2003), p. 404.

³⁶ F. Wiggermann, “Nergal,” *RA* 9 (Berlin, 1999), p. 218.

³⁷ W. Lambert, “*Lugal-IGI.DU-anna*,” *RA* 7 (Berlin, 1983), p. 142. F. Wiggermann, op. cit., p. 216 translates the epithet as “the one who goes in front.”

attested already in the Third Dynasty confirms its archaic and likely archetypal nature (see Chapter X).

In the Pyramid and Coffin Texts Horus is intimately associated with the *akhet*, an important Egyptian cosmological concept conventionally translated as “horizon”—hence the epithet *Horemakhet* (“Horus in the horizon”). As its hieroglyph reveals——the *akhet* came to signify the celestial mountain associated with the sun-god’s daily appearance.³⁸

The planet-god Nergal is likewise associated with the mountain of sunrise. Thus an early Sumerian temple hymn says of Nergal that he “rises in the mountain where the sun rises.”³⁹ According to the Sumerian hymn *Enlil and Ninlil*, the new-born Nergal was assigned the mountain of sunrise (*Hursag*) during Creation.⁴⁰ This Sumerian tradition, in turn, finds a close parallel in the Egyptian tradition that Horus was installed within the *akhet* at Creation (see Chapter X).⁴¹ Such evidence, considered together with the fact that Egyptian astronomical texts from the New Kingdom identified the planet Mars as *Horemakhet*—“Horus-of-the-horizon”⁴²—strongly suggests that it was the planet Mars, not Venus, which formed the subject of the Egyptian traditions testifying to Horus’s intimate association with the *akhet*.

In the Coffin Texts, as in the Pyramid Texts, Horus is described as “raging” against the gods.⁴³ There, as elsewhere, the word used to describe the god’s terrible wrath is *dndn*.⁴⁴

³⁸ J. Assmann, “Horizont,” LÄ III (Berlin, 1977), cols. 3-7.

³⁹ A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), pp. 106.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 88. See also “A tigi to Nergal (Nergal C),” in J. Black et al., *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/>) (Oxford, 1998).

⁴¹ See, for example, CT II:220a and 223b.

⁴² As in Senmut’s tomb, for example (TT 353). See also O. Neugebauer & R. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts*, Vol. 3 (London, 1960), p. 179.

⁴³ CT I:51.

⁴⁴ R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Oxford, 1973), p. 10.

Nergal, too, was renowned for raging against the gods. Witness the following passage:

“O warrior, splendid one...Mighty of arms, broad of chest, perfect one without rival among all the gods, Who grasps the pitiless deluge-weapon, who massacres the enemy, Lion clad in splendor, at the flaring-up of whose fierce brilliance, The gods of the inhabited world took to secret places...”⁴⁵

Of the various words used to describe Nergal’s wrath, *dandannu* is particularly common.⁴⁶ The latter Akkadian word, it will be noted, is an apparent cognate of the Egyptian verb used to describe Horus’s raging.

To summarize: As a warrior-star, the star “at the front of the sky,” Lord of the Netherworld, and raging one—not to mention his intimate association with the mountain of sunrise—Horus shares a specific and multifaceted pattern of characteristics with the Sumerian Nergal. These analogous epithets and mythological attributes, in turn, suggest that the two gods share a fundamental affinity and likely trace to a common celestial prototype. Indeed, it is our contention that there is a perfectly logical explanation for the structural parallelisms common to the cults of Horus and Nergal: Both gods originated as personifications of the planet Mars.

Horus’s identification with the planet Mars constitutes a cornerstone of this study. If valid, it stands to reason that this identification will revolutionize Egyptology as we know it while shedding some much needed light on the stellar identifications of other deities mentioned in the Pyramid Texts.

Horus Sopd and Sothis

⁴⁵ B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 622.


⁴⁶ E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 72.

“In Egypt, we have the unique opportunity of determining the time and the circumstances in which the most substantial sector of her mythology, the myths centering on Horus, originated. The time was the beginning and middle of the third millennium B.C., starting with the earliest documentation of history, and the circumstances were prompted by the establishment of the kingship in Egypt. . . This myth was rooted in the first known conception of the highest god, the ruler of All, who appeared in the trinity of the Horus falcon, the Horus king of Egypt, and the heavenly Horus. It came into existence through speculations that were conducted in a clearly logical manner, based upon faith in the universal and eternal character of the king of Egypt, and enriched by cosmogonic ideas that had been transmitted from prehistoric times.”⁴⁷

In a handful of passages from the Pyramid Texts the Horus-star is equipped with the epithet *Sopd*. The identity of this particular star has long baffled scholars. Kurt Sethe and other Egyptologists argued that Horus Sopd is to be understood as the Sun.

According to Otto Neugebauer and Richard Parker, the star in question is to be identified with Sirius. Indeed, they go so far as to claim that the matter is not open to question:

“That *špd* and *špd.t* ‘Sothis’ are both identified with Sirius is one of the rare certainties in Egyptian astronomy.”⁴⁸

The word *spd* means “sharp” or “to be pointed” and this meaning would seem to jibe with its determinative, which features a pointed thorn-like object—.⁴⁹ By analogy *spd* came to mean “effective” or “pre-eminent.”⁵⁰ According to Faulkner the latter meaning is reflected in the following Pyramid Text, wherein the deceased king ascends to heaven as Sopd: “You go up to them empowered, effective, as all my children, as all my children, in this your name of Sopd.”⁵¹ Here the god Sopd himself is described as *spd*, “effective” or “sharp,” a play-on-words that informs other Pyramid Texts as well.⁵²

⁴⁷ R. Anthes, “Mythology in Ancient Egypt,” in S. Kramer ed., *Mythologies of the Ancient World* (Garden City, 1961), pp. 85-86.

⁴⁸ *Egyptian Astronomical Texts I* (London, 1960), p. 25.

⁴⁹ R. Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I* (Mainz, 2003), p. 1111 entry 27525. See also the discussion in R. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1927), p. 484.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, entry 27528.

⁵¹ PT 1534.

⁵² J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 184 translates the term as “sharp” in his translation of the passage in question.

A key to understanding the archaic references to Horus Sopd is his identification as the “seed” of Osiris. This motif is most evident in the mythological fragment found in Pyramid Text 632=1636, wherein Osiris is addressed as follows:

“Your sister Isis comes to you rejoicing for love of you. You have placed her on your phallus and your seed issues into her, she being ready as Sothis, and Ḥar-Sopd has come forth from you as Horus who is in Sothis. It is well with you through him in his name of ‘Spirit who is in the *Dndrw*-bark’, and he protects you in his name of Horus, the son who protects his father.”⁵³

As the seed of Osiris, Horus Sopd is clearly distinguished from Sothis. Here, as is always the case, Horus Sopd is masculine in nature. Spd.t, whose name is formed from the same root as Sopd, is identified as Osiris’s consort and is clearly female. Whether denoted as Spd.t or as Isis, the stellar goddess in question represents the female receptacle of Osiris’s seed—i.e., Horus-Sopd himself. It is our opinion that it is impossible to make sense of this passage or of the other references to Sopd in the Pyramid Texts without first recognizing the fact that the names Sopd and Spd.t denote two entirely different stars, one conceptualized as male and the other as female. We thus arrive at the following equations:

Sopd=Horus=masculine seed of Osiris

Spd.t=Isis=female receptacle of Osiris’s seed.

The crux presented by PT 632 has generated a good deal of commentary and speculation. Rudolf Anthes’s discussion of this particular spell is particularly confused: He would identify “Horus who is in Sothis” as the star Sirius because of the reference to Spd.t, which he would understand as Sothis/Sirius. *Sopd*, in turn, he would understand as an epithet of Horus but one devoid of any reference to a star apart from its relationship to

⁵³ PT 632-633.

Sothis/Sirius. Of Horus Sopd, Anthes writes: “We understand it with Sethe as ‘the top Horus,’ whatever the significance of *špd* as an adjective may be.”⁵⁴

Anthes’s hypothesis, amazingly, ignores the clear distinction between Horus Sopd and Isis Spd.t. The latter celestial object, as noted above, is always female and embodies the receptacle within which Horus Sopd is implanted. The deceased king, on the other hand, is consistently identified with Horus Sopd—not with Spd.t—and therefore the myth of his ascent to heaven implies that Horus Sopd represents an independent star prior to its conjunction and interaction with Isis/Spd.t. By ignoring the possibility that Horus Sopd had a stellar aspect apart from his relationship to Spd.t, Anthes mistakenly assumed that he, too, was to be identified with Sirius.

In order to clarify the issues involved here it is instructive to examine the various attestations of *spd* in the Pyramid Texts. This exercise, in turn, will require that we review the sacred traditions surrounding Horus.

That Horus was identified with the divine seed is a recurring theme in Egyptian religious tradition. This idea is evident in the following passage from the Pyramid Texts, wherein the deceased king is identified as Horus:

“The King is your seed, O Osiris, you [the King] being potent in your name of Horus who is in the sea, Horus at the head of the spirits.”⁵⁵

As the “seed” of Osiris, Horus here assumes the very role ascribed to Horus Sopd in PT 632=1636. Indeed, the word translated as “potent” here is *spd.t(y)*, a patent reference to Sopd as the (sharp) seed of Osiris.⁵⁶ Most important, however, is the fact that the spell in question leaves no doubt about Horus’s stellar nature in his role as the divine seed: “The

⁵⁴ R. Anthes, “Horus als Sirius in den Pyramidentexten,” ZÄS 102 (1975), p. 4.

⁵⁵ PT 1505.

⁵⁶ J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 182 translates the word in question as “sharp.”

King is your seed, O Re^c, you being potent in this your name of ‘Horus at the head of the spirits, Star which crosses the sea’.”⁵⁷

In addition to identifying the deceased king as the divine seed—here Re^c has substituted for Osiris—this passage unequivocally identifies the seed in question as Horus and as a star to boot. This testimony complements our deduction, stated above, that the divine seed itself—as Horus Sopd—is a star entirely separate and distinct from Spd.t.⁵⁸

The express purpose of the Pyramid Texts, it will be remembered, was to help the deceased king navigate his way to the celestial Hereafter. Upon reaching heaven, the king’s goal was to become transfigured as an *akh* and join the celestial entourage of Re^c. Thus, in the following hymn the deceased king is identified as an *akh*—translated here as “spirit”:

“Raise yourself, King...being a spirit at the head of the spirits...that you may have a soul thereby, that you may be effective thereby, that you may be powerful thereby...O King, you are a spirit and your survivor is a spirit.”⁵⁹

It will be noticed that the deceased king receives the epithet “at the head of spirits,” an epithet otherwise associated with Horus (in PT 1505 and 1508 above and elsewhere). This epithet implies that the deceased king was here identified with Horus. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the deceased king is described as *spd*, sharp or “effective,” a likely allusion to Horus’s stellar aspect as Horus Sopd.

Allusions to the same mythological theme are evident elsewhere in the Pyramid Texts as well. In the following passage the deceased king—as Horus—is identified with a star:

“The King is a great one, the King has issued from between the thighs of the Ennead. The King was conceived by Sakhmet, and it was Shezmētet who bore the King, a star

⁵⁷ PT 1508-1509.

⁵⁸ See also R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 161, who offers a similar interpretation.

⁵⁹ PT 859.

brilliant and far-travelling, who brings distant products to Rē daily. The King has come to his throne which is upon the Two Ladies and the King appears as a star.”⁶⁰

The phrase translated as “brilliant” here is *spd ḥst*—literally “star with sharp front”⁶¹—unequivocal evidence that a star characterized as *spd* was deemed the embodiment of the deceased king. The clear import of this passage, in our opinion, is that the deceased king was identified with the star otherwise denoted Horus Soped.

A number of spells describe the king’s post-mortem journey and ensuing transfiguration as an occasion of great tumult and danger, distinguished by a disturbance of the stars and the shaking of heaven and earth (see Chapter X). One of the most important texts in this regard would compare (or identify) the ascending king with an entity described as *Spd-wr*:

“Geb laughs, Nut shouts for joy before me when I ascend to the sky. The sky thunders for me, the earth quakes for me, the hail-storm is burst apart for me, and I roar as does Seth...I will be as effective as *Spd-wr*, I will preside at the head of the Two Conclaves.”⁶²

It will be noticed that the deceased king, as *Spd-wr*—literally “the great sharp one”⁶³—assumes rule at the front or head (*ḥnt*) of the Two Conclaves, thereby recalling the enthroning of the king in the previous passage (PT 262-3). The fact that the king in PT 262 was expressly compared to the *spd*-Star can hardly be a coincidence.

In his notes to this passage, Faulkner does not even mention *Spd-wr*, much less seek to explain its significance therein. Nor did *Spd-wr* receive any mention in Faulkner’s comprehensive survey of Egyptian star-religion.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ PT 262-263.

⁶¹ So translated by J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 42 and Samuel Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁶² PT 1149-1160.

⁶³ So translated by James Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶⁴ R. Faulkner, “The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts,” *JNES* 25 (1966), pp. 153-161.

Anthes's discussion of this passage is equally indifferent. Indeed, Anthes goes so far as to deny that *Spd-wr* has any reference to a star:

“The fact that *spd wr* seems to have survived in the Edfu-temple probably does not help us any further. I can only understand *spd wr* as ‘the great top,’ whatever that may mean, and see no indication that it is a star.”⁶⁵

Much more helpful and in harmony with the evidence is the analysis offered by Samuel Mercer; he would understand *Spd-wr* as a reference to the war-god Sopdu:

“The word *špd* is ‘to be sharp’; ...The ‘great *špd*’ is most likely the god Sopdu, a warlike god, Asiatic in type, and worshipped as ‘smiter of the Asiatics.’...There is a play on words between *špd*, ‘sharp’ and *špdw*, ‘Sopdu.’ If the word *špd* does not stand for the god Sopdu here, it must according to the context be a proper noun, and as such occurs only here in the PT.”⁶⁶

Understanding *Spd-wr* here as a pseudonym for Sopdu makes perfect sense given the deceased king's fundamental affinity with Horus Sopdu.⁶⁷ The passage in question, after all, has to do with the pharaoh's post-mortem ascent to heaven, an event known to involve him in a stellar capacity (often as Horus). Indeed, in the analogous passage in Utterance 248, quoted above, the deceased king is explicitly identified as the *spd*-star. Anthes rejected Mercer's obvious solution, claiming there was no evidence for Sopdu's cult as early as the building of the pyramids, but this claim is demonstrably false.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ R. Anthes, op. cit., p. 3.

⁶⁶ S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts in Translation and Commentary*, Vol. 3 (New York, 1952), p. 571.

⁶⁷ Inke Schumacher offers a similar opinion in *Der Gott Sopdu der Herr der Fremdländer* (Göttingen, 1988), pp. 48, 317.

⁶⁸ See I. Schumacher, op. cit., pp. 4-52. R.G., “Sopdu,” *LÄ*, cols. 1107-1110.

By now a recurring pattern should be evident: The deceased king, as a star, journeys to heaven in order to claim his rightful throne. In more than one instance that star is expressly identified as Horus Sopd or *Spd*. The star in question, moreover, is clearly and consistently distinguished from Sothis.

Other passages also hint at a distinction between Sopd and Sothis in the earliest sources. Especially relevant here is the following ascension text from the Pyramid Texts (Utterance 302):

“The sky is clear, Sothis lives, because I am a living one, the son of Sothis, and the two Enneads have cleansed themselves for me in Ursa Major, the imperishable. My house in the sky will not perish, my throne on earth will not be destroyed, for men hide, the gods fly away. Sothis has caused me to fly up to the sky into the company of my brethren the gods.”⁶⁹

As the “living one, the son of Sothis,” we would see a reference to the star Sopd. Even Faulkner acknowledges that this epithet has reference to a star,⁷⁰ although he does not mention Sopd by name or comment on the difficulties in translating this passage. Anthes, meanwhile, observes that Unis’s Pyramid (W) contains a variant text wherein the living one is expressly identified as Sopd: “W on the other hand clearly shows that NN is the *spd*-Star as the living one, the son of Sothis, who has become visible in the morning sky.”⁷¹

Anthes’s insight is most significant insofar as it serves to further bolster the hypothesis that the *spd*-star, as Horus Sopd, was conceptualized as the stellar embodiment of the deceased king. And as the “son of Sothis,” the masculine *spd*-star is clearly distinguished from Sothis.

⁶⁹ PT 458-459.

⁷⁰ R. Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969), p. 92 footnote 3.

⁷¹ R. Anthes, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

Granted that the deceased king ascends to heaven as Horus Sopd, how are we to reconcile this testimony with that which would identify the ascending king as the Morning Star (*Ntr-dwꜣj*)? The conventional view is that such seemingly contradictory traditions reflect a conflation of originally distinct conceptions about the precise stellar identification of the deceased king. Such is the view expressed by Anthes, for example: “Still, the star is apparently not in all cases the same heavenly body, but very often it is identified with the Morning Star...”⁷²

It is our opinion that there is a more logical solution to the matter. We would interpret *Ntr-dwꜣj* “Morning Star” and *Sopd* as simply different epithets for the same celestial body—i.e., the planet Mars. Thus, we would understand the respective traditions surrounding Sopd and “Morning Star” as complementary in nature and disavow the thesis that there was a “conflation” of originally independent and contradictory views with respect to identity of Horus’s star.

There is some support for this conclusion.⁷³ The Egyptian scribes themselves set Horus Sopd and Horus Duat in apposition within the Pyramid Texts. In PT 331a, for example, the name Horus Sopd substitutes for that of Horus Duat. If nothing else, this substitution hints at a fundamental affinity between Horus Sopd and Horus Duat. Thomas Allen entertained the same possibility many years ago:

“*Hr špd* and *ymy Dwꜣ.t* in vocative have interchanged places in W and T texts of 330 and 331. Are they identified?”⁷⁴

If Horus Sopd and Horus Duat were simply different names for the same stellar body the apparent discrepancy between these two variant passages disappears. Yet once admit this possibility and it becomes extremely difficult to avoid the conclusion that Horus Sopd is to be identified with the Morning Star in light of the fact that Horus Duat is expressly identified with *Neter Dwꜣ* in PT 1207.

⁷² R. Anthes, op. cit., p. 10.

⁷³ R. Krauss, op. cit., p. 93 raised the same possibility in passing.

⁷⁴ T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 30.

The same conclusion is supported by the fact that both star-gods are intimately related to a celestial ship. Of Horus Sopd we read as follows in PT 1637: “Ḥar-Sopd has issued from you in his name of ‘Horus who is in Sothis’; you have power through him in his name of ‘Spirit who is in the *Dndrw*-bark’.”⁷⁵ Of Horus Duat, similarly, we read that he was identified as the Morning Star and set in front of a giant celestial boat:

“O Morning Star, Horus of the Netherworld, divine Falcon, *wꜣdꜣd*-bird whom the sky bore...give me these your two fingers which you gave to the Beautiful, the daughter of the great god, when the sky was separated from the earth, when the gods ascended to the sky, you having a soul and appearing in front of your boat of 770 cubits which the gods of Pe bound together for you, which the eastern gods built for you.”⁷⁶

The fact that Sopd is expressly identified with *Dwꜣw* in PT 480 and PT 994b is also relevant here.⁷⁷ In the former passage the deceased king is addressed as follows: “The Fields of Rushes worship you in this your name of *Dwꜣw* as Sopd who is under his *ksbt*-trees.” Here Sopd-*Dwꜣw* is seemingly localized either within or in close proximity to the Fields of Rushes. Yet in PT 1719 the Field of Rushes is identified as the dwelling-place of the Morning Star:

“Rē summons you into the zenith(?) of the sky as the Jackal, the Governor of the Two Enneads, and as Horus *Hnty-mnit-f*; may he set you as the Morning Star in the midst of the Field of Rushes.”⁷⁸

The name *Dwꜣw*, like *Ntr Dwꜣ*, means “of the morning”⁷⁹—both names being written with a star-determinative. The fact that both gods were identified with the deceased king

⁷⁵ PT 1637.

⁷⁶ PT 1207-1210.

⁷⁷ See the discussion in S. Mercer, op. cit., p. 214.

⁷⁸ PT 1719.

⁷⁹ E. Otto, “Dua,” and “Duai,” in LA, cols. 1147-1148.

(as Horus) and clearly identified with a star in the “morning sky” would appear to argue for their fundamental affinity and probable identity.⁸⁰

To summarize: A wealth of evidence suggests that by Horus Sopd the ancient Egyptians were describing a star otherwise identical with Horus Duat, the latter explicitly identified with the Morning Star. Insofar as Horus Duat is to be identified with the planet Mars, it follows that Horus Sopd likewise had reference to the red planet.

⁸⁰ I offered a similar argument in “Sothis and the Morning Star,” *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 77-94.