


The Primeval Hill

“In the texts the concepts of creation, sunrise, and kingly rule are continually merged; the verb *hri* (which marks the appearance of Pharaoh on the throne) denotes sunrise

and is written with the hieroglyph  that depicts the sun rising over the Primeval Hill.”¹

“The first texts that deal with Egyptian ideas about the universe and its creation appear nearly a thousand years after the beginnings of recorded Egyptian history. For earlier concepts, we are dependent on pictorial and architectural images, and on what later texts tell us these may have meant. One of the earliest notions seems to have been that of the primeval hill, the first ‘place’ to emerge from the infinite waters, over which the sun first arose. It is tempting to see in this image a reflection of the environment experienced by Egypt’s first settlers: watching the highest points of fertile land emerge as the annual Nile flood receded, these early farmers could easily have pictured the world gradually appearing in the same way at creation. Whatever its origins, the image of the primeval hill remained potent throughout Egyptian history. Some temples contained, in their sanctuaries, a mound of earth or sand evoking it. The tombs of Egypt’s first dynasties were marked by a similar mound, promising a new creation and rebirth to those buried below it.”²

“Brief, one-sentence myths and allusions have as much importance as lengthy epic-style narratives.”³

“We may consider the ancients’ perception of the stars in the sky a pure metaphor but for many of them it has apparently empirical reality, it was simply what they saw.”⁴

An archaic and widespread mythological tradition localizes Creation atop a Primeval Hill, the latter of which is said to have first appeared or congealed in the wake of a flood of epochal proportions. In ancient Mesopotamia this Ur-hill was known as Duku (du₆-ku), “Holy Mound.” According to an early Sumerian text known as *The debate between Grain and Sheep*, the Duku was the place where the gods were created and received their original form (ki-ulutum₂): “At that time, at the place of the gods’ formation, in their own

¹ H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), pp. 150-151.

² J. Allen, “The Celestial Realm,” in D. Silverman ed., *Ancient Egypt* (London, 1997), p. 120.

³ W. Lambert, “Kosmogonie,” *Reallexikon der Assyriologie, Vol. 6* (Berlin, 2000), p. 219.

⁴ G. Selz, “The Tablet with ‘Heavenly Writing’, or How to Become a Star,” in A. Panaino ed., *Non licet stare caelestibus Studies on Astronomy and Its History Offered to Salvo De Meis* (Milan, 2014), p. 55.

home, on the Holy Mound, they created Sheep and Grain.”⁵

Elsewhere in the same text the Hill is referred to by the name *hur-sag-an-ki-bi-da*, “the mountain of both heaven and earth.”⁶ It was there that the great god An—elsewhere invoked as the “King of the Gods”—created the Anuna, a generic name for the other satellite gods serving as his Divine Council: “When, upon the hill of heaven and earth, An spawned the Anuna gods,…”⁷ The fact that the Primeval Hill was known as the “mountain of both heaven and earth” serves to contextualize the natural events in question during that distant period when heaven and earth were still united; i.e., prior to their eventual separation as per the Creation accounts of many ancient cultures.⁸

The Primeval Hill is elsewhere identified as the locus of the prototypical sunrise. A bilingual hymn to Shamash from the Neo-Assyrian period testifies to this archaic theme:

“Sun-god, when you rise from the Great Mountain, when you rise from the Great Mountain, the ‘Mountain of the Spring,’ when you rise from Duku, the place where destinies are determined, when you rise at the place where heaven and earth embrace, at the horizon.”⁹

In addition to serving as the locus of sunrise, the Duku mound also functioned as the dwelling place or “seat” of Dumuzi, an archaic god best known for his tragic love affair

⁵ Lines 26-27 from “The debate between Grain and Sheep,” in J. Black et al, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/>) (Oxford, 1998), hereafter *ETCSL*. See also B. Hruška, “Zum ‘Heiligen Hügel’ in der altnesopotamischen Religion,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 86 (1996), p. 166.

⁶ F. Wiggermann, “Mythological Foundations of Nature,” in D. Meijer ed., *Natural Phenomena* (Amsterdam, 1992), p. 295 observes: “The *hur-sag-an-ki-bi-dan-ke*, ‘Mountain of Heaven and Earth’ is, according to all commentators, identical with the *du₆-kù*.” On the *hursag* and related cosmic mountains, see also D.O. Edzard, “Deep-Rooted Skyscrapers and Bricks,” in M. Mindlin et al eds., *Figurative Language in the Ancient Near East* (London, 2000), pp. 13-24.

⁷ Line 1 from “The debate between Grain and Sheep,” *ETCSL*. See also R. Clifford, *Creation Accounts in the Ancient Near East* (Washington, D.C., 1926-274), p. 20.

⁸ S. Kramer, *From the Poetry of Sumer* (Berkeley, 1979), p. 26, observes: “The Sumerian credo that in most ancient primeval days heaven and earth were united, and had to be separated...was current to some extent through all the millennia of Mesopotamian history.”

⁹ W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Winona Lake, 1998), p. 316, citing K. 2873:3-4=CT 17 41, otherwise known as the “Third House Prayer.”

with the goddess Inanna.¹⁰ Thus, a common kenning for Duku was “Mound of the Shepherd”—the latter word being an early epithet of Dumuzi’s.¹¹ Another early text reports that Inanna invested the shepherd god with his divine garment on the mound in question: “Let me [Inanna] [...] to clothe Ululu (i.e., Dumuzi) on the shining mound.”¹²

Duku was also conceptualized as the Underworld. It is occasionally identified with Arali, for example, the latter denoting Dumuzi’s Underworld domicile.¹³ Indeed, the two cosmic entities are placed in apposition on more than one occasion, as in the following passage: “The shepherd, lord Dumuzi, bridegroom of Inanna, lord of Aralli, lord of ‘the shepherd’s hill.’”¹⁴ Another early hymn invokes Arali as follows: “Arali, the shining mound.”¹⁵

How or why a Primeval Hill otherwise associated with the locus of the sunrise should be identified as the Underworld is puzzling at first sight and, not surprisingly, scholars have been bemused by such traditions. Diane Katz, in her authoritative study of Mesopotamian concepts of the Underworld, offered the following commentary with regards to a passage in the so-called *Udughul* incantation wherein it was claimed that the “evil *galla* came out of the *kur*, From the holy mound, the source mountain, from its midst they came out”¹⁶:

“This *Udughul*-incantation makes interesting associations: among *kur* [the Underworld], *du₆-kù* (‘holy mound’), and *kur-idim* (‘source mountain’); and between the realm of the dead and the traditional regions of creation. The linkage between *kur* and *du₆-kù* is rather confusing. The general geographical implication is that the *kur* was still associated with

¹⁰ A. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (Leuven, 1992), p. 47.

¹¹ F. Wiggermann, “The Image of Dumuzi,” in J. Stackert *et al.* eds., *Gazing on the Deep* (Bethesda, 2010), p. 329 observes: “‘Shepherd’ (EG/sipa, ES/suba, Akkadian *rē ū(m)*) is the most common epithet of Dumuzi in all periods.”

¹² M. Geller, “The Free Library Inanna Prism Reconsidered,” in T. Abusch ed., *Riches Hidden in Secret Places* (Winona Lake, 2002), p. 91.

¹³ On Arali as a Sumerian name for the Underworld, see W. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

¹⁴ Lines 12-15 from Edin-na ú-sag-gá as quoted in T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, 1987), p. 61.

¹⁵ A. Sjöberg, “A Hymn to Inanna and Her Self-Praise,” *JCS* 40 (1988), p. 173. See also the author’s statement on page 176: “*du₆/dul-šuba* (MUŠ₃.ZA), ‘the shining mound’ refers to the cultplace of Dumuzi in a-ra-li.”

¹⁶ *Udughul* 768-769.

the eastern mountain region and it may also imply that the *kur* was conceived of as a mountain or hill... Nevertheless, because *kur* was associated with *du₆-kù*, and since we do not know how the two mythological sites related to each other, the meaning remains unclear.”¹⁷

Although it is evident that traditions attached to Duku are properly placed during the Time of Beginnings—i.e., *in illo tempore*, to use a phrase made famous by Mircea Eliade—such memories were kept alive by the fact that every local Mesopotamian temple claimed to contain a miniature embodiment of the Primeval Hill.¹⁸ The general idea was that each temple was believed to model or even to *be* the original locus of Creation:

“The temple was structurally and conceptually connected to the moment of creation, thereby representing the ordering of the world and, in its contemporary context, connoting an ordered world that functioned as originally intended. Another prominent means of solidifying the connection with creation was the *du₆-kù* (‘pure hill’ or ‘sacred hill’), a pedestal lined with clay bricks, most often situated in the forecourt of vestibule. This pedestal represented the sacred mound upon which creation emerged from the primeval waters.”¹⁹

That the Primeval Hill formed a prominent concept in Mesopotamian cosmogonical traditions is obvious even from this brief survey. On this matter there is a rare consensus among modern scholars. For Jan van Dijk, the “*du₆-kù* was ‘the heilige Hügel über dem Weltberg, auf dem in der Urzeit die Anunna-Götter wohnten auf dem Landwirtschaft,

¹⁷ D. Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld* (Bethesda, 2003), p. 99. Wayne Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 316 likewise recognized the Duku’s intimate connection to the Underworld in his comprehensive survey of Mesopotamian cosmic geography: “In K. 2873:3-4, the Sumerian equivalent of Akkadian *duku* includes the name of the underworld, *kur*, suggesting that *duku* here is to be identified with the underworld rather than the *Apsu*.”

¹⁸ Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (Zürich, 1972), p. 113, surveying the evidence, concludes that, in ancient Mesopotamia, “every temple has its *du-ku*, its ‘pure hill.’” See also A. George, *Babylonian Topographical Texts* (Leuven, 1992), pp. 45, 149.

¹⁹ M. Handley, *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East* (Atlanta, 2013), pp. 79-80.

Viehzucht, Weberei, alles, was zur Kultur Sumers gehörte, entstanden ist.”²⁰ For Blahoslav Hruška, similarly, “Der Heilige Hügel war eigentlich eine der wichtigsten kosmischen Hierophanien der altmesopotamischen Religion.”²¹

Yet if scholars are in agreement as to the central importance of the Ur-Hill in the cosmogonical traditions of ancient Mesopotamia, there is little consensus with regards to its original referent in the natural world. One of the few scholars to even attempt an explanation, Jeremy Black, theorized that Duku had reference to the numerous mounds which dot the Mesopotamian landscape:

“A hill known as the Holy Mound, then, was the birthplace of the Anuna, and the other gods, at the time before sky and earth were separated. They lived up on it, and mankind lived down below. The imaginative stimulus for the idea of a single Holy Mound—a dul or tell—must have been the numerous ruin mounds that dot the surface of the Mesopotamian plain, with evidence of ancient habitation. Nobody lived on them, but you only have to investigate them cursorily—if your village is next to one and you stroll up there of an evening—to realize, from the ceramic remains and the occasional skull or bone, that they had been inhabited in the past. But by whom? The mythic imagination tells us that this is where the gods lived in the most distant past, with their feet on the ground but close to the sky.”²²

Thorkild Jacobsen, like Black, ignored the explicit celestial imagery attached to the Holy Mound while speculating as to its possible terrestrial origins. For Jacobsen, Duku is to be identified with the verdant pastures in the Mesopotamian hill country:

“[Duku was] probably the luxuriant vegetation, the wondrously fresh green pastures of the foothills, contrasting so markedly with the barren Mesopotamian plain, that led the Sumerians to seek the origin and home of Laḡar, the power manifesting itself in the thriving flocks, in the faraway green hills.”²³

²⁰ Å. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), pp. 50-51. See also A. Tsukimoto, *Untersuchungen zur Totenpflege (kispum) im alten Mesopotamien* (Berlin, 1985), pp. 216-217.

²¹ B. Hruška, *op. cit.*, p. 172.

²² J. Black, “The Sumerians in Their Landscape,” in T. Abusch, *Riches Hidden in Secret Places* (Winona Lake, 2002), p. 47.

²³ “Sumerian Mythology,” *JNES* 5 (1946), p. 141.

Jacobsen returned to this vexing question decades later. At that time he offered a completely different interpretation, arguing that the Duku had reference to underground storage systems for grain:

“Duku, ‘the holy mound’, was a sacred locality. Originally and basically the term designated the plastered-over pile of harvest grain, but it was extended to underground storage generally. Enlil’s ancestors—powers for fertility in the earth—were located in Duku.”²⁴

I, for one, find it difficult to keep a straight face when reading these learned opinions. The very claim that “the imaginative stimulus for the idea of a single Holy Mound... must have been the *numerous* ruin mounds that dot the surface of the Mesopotamian plain” is illogical and absurd on its face. Are we to believe that the ancients were so naïve as to believe that their awe-inspiring gods were born and lived out their lives on these diminutive hillocks with “their feet on the ground but close to the sky”? Is it possible to imagine that the Mesopotamian skywatchers were so starstruck by the familiar sight of the Sun’s ascent over these nondescript clumps of sand that they would invent a cosmogonic myth to describe its triumphant appearance over a colossal mountain, replete with thunderous roaring, burgeoning springs, and glistening gates? Such a hypothesis strains credulity at every step and is tantamount to making a mountain out of the proverbial mole-hill.

It will be noted, moreover, that the ad hoc hypotheses of Black and Jacobsen will never account for the unique constellation of interrelated beliefs attached to this Primeval Hill—i.e., its proverbial status as the locus of sunrise, Creation, and the determination of destinies, not to mention its intimate association with Dumuzi, Inanna, and the Underworld.

Equally damning for these learned speculations is the fact that other cultures widely removed from Mesopotamia preserved analogous traditions. Such was the case in ancient Egypt, for example, where a Primeval Hill formed the original matrix for Creation.²⁵ Rundle Clark pointed out the obvious when he referred to “the universal

²⁴ T. Jacobsen, *The Harps That Once: Sumerian Poetry in Translation* (New Haven, 1987), p. 371.

²⁵ A. de Buck, *De Egyptische Voorstellingen betreffende den Oerheuvel* (Leiden, 1922). See also K. Martin, “Urhügel,” *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, Vol. 6 (1985), cols., 873-876; A. A. Saleh, “The So-called ‘Primeval Hill’ and other Related Elevations in Ancient

Egyptian belief that creation started with the emergence of a mound, the Primeval Hill, above the waters of chaos.”²⁶

The Egyptian traditions surrounding the Primeval Hill state unequivocally that it traced back to that distant period *before* heaven and earth were first separated from each other, thereby complementing the testimony from Mesopotamia. The ancient temple at Thebes, for example, was invoked as follows in an early hymn: “The Huge mound which emerged from Nun at the very beginning, when heaven and earth were still united.”²⁷ A famous passage from the *Book of the Dead* alludes to the same general idea:

“I was Re in his glorious appearings when he began to rule what he had made. *What does it mean?* It means Re when he began to rule what he had made, when he began to appear as king, before the Supports of Shu had come into being, when he was upon the hill which is in Hermopolis, when he destroyed the Children of Impotence on the hill which is in Heliopolis.”²⁸

According to a popular Egyptian cosmogonic tradition, it was Shu who first separated heaven and earth and thus this particular passage testifies to the belief that Re originally ruled alone on the Primeval Hill *prior* to Shu’s formative act of separation. Exactly how the union of heaven and earth is to be understood from the standpoint of cosmogonic myth or natural science remains unclear and has yet to be explained, but it stands to reason that the union in question must reflect a commonplace perception of the natural world prevailing at the time of Creation inasmuch as analogous traditions will be found around the globe.²⁹

As the cosmic matrix where Creation unfolded, the Primeval Hill came to assume a central role in Egyptian symbolism, especially as it was materialized in monumental architecture. Thus, a fundamental theme in Egyptian religious iconography identifies the temple with the Primeval Hill, the latter widely conceptualized as the original “place” of

Egyptian Mythology,” *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts* 25 (1969), pp. 110-120.

²⁶ R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol* (London, 1959), p. 25.

²⁷ A. A. Saleh, *op. cit.*, p. 118, citing Sethe, *Theb. T.* 112.


²⁸ R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Austin, 1972), p. 44.

²⁹ W. Staudbacher, *Die Trennung von Himmel und Erde* (Darmstadt, 1958); A. Seidenberg, “The Separation of Sky and Earth at Creation,” *Folklore* 90 (1959), pp. 477-482; G. Komoroczy, “The Separation of Heaven and Earth,” *Acta Antiqua* 21 (1973), p. 36-45.

Creation.³⁰ All Egyptian temples, in fact, were assimilated to the Primeval Hill, as Henri Frankfort recognized:

“In Egypt the creator was said to have emerged from the waters of chaos and to have made a mound of dry land upon which he could stand. This primeval hill, from which the creation took its beginning, was traditionally located in the sun temple at Heliopolis...Each Holy of Holies throughout the land could be identified with the primeval hill. Thus it is said of the temple of Philae, which was founded in the fourth century B.C.: ‘This [temple] came into being when nothing at all had yet come into being and the earth was still lying in darkness and obscurity.’ The same claim was made for other temples...The equation with the primeval hill received architectural expression also. One mounted a few steps or followed a ramp at every entrance from court or hall to the Holy of Holies, which was thus situated at a level noticeably higher than the entrance. But this coalescence of temples with the primeval hill does not give us the full measure of the significance which the sacred locality had assumed for the ancient Egyptians. The royal tombs were also made to coincide with it. The dead, and, above all, the king, were reborn in the hereafter. No place was more propitious, no site promised greater chances for a victorious passage through the crisis of death, than the primeval hill, the center of creative forces where the ordered life of the universe had begun. Hence the royal tomb was given the shape of a pyramid which is the Heliopolitan stylization of the primeval hill.”³¹

What was true of the temple and pyramid was also true of the throne. Thus it is that the word used to describe the Primeval Hill—*h·yt*—was also employed to describe the Pharaoh’s appearing on his radiant throne:

“The word  meaning ‘mound’ derives its meaning from the verb ‘to appear,’ and the ideograph of ‘appearing’ and so of the king ‘appearing on his throne’

³⁰ K. Martin, *op. cit.*, col. 874: “Wie sich in jedem Tempel jeden Tag die Weltschöpfung stets neu wiederholt, so ist der Tempel ein Bild des Urhügels.” See also E. Hornung, “Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography,” in J. Sasson ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 4* (London, 1995), p. 1717, who wrote as follows: “Certain forms of architecture, such as the pyramid and the temple sanctuary, were conceived as images of the primeval hill appearing after creation.”

³¹ H. & H. A. Frankfort, “Myth and Reality,” in H. Frankfort et al eds., *Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man* (Chicago, 1946), pp. 161-162.

(eventually coming to mean ‘crown’ or ‘diadem’) was originally the picture of the ‘oerheugel,’ the *hy* of earth on which Rē originally appeared.”³²

If the symbolic equations between the Primeval Hill, temple, and throne are obvious, being emphasized again and again by the ancient Egyptian scribes, the ultimate source of the symbolism itself remains a complete mystery. Why would Creation be localized atop a Primeval Hill? And how exactly are we to understand the religious significance of the Primeval Hill’s symbolic equivalence with the pyramid, temple, and throne? Granted that the pyramid was conceptualized as a place of rejuvenation, how are we to understand the natural historical origins of this symbolism?

Not surprisingly, scholars have been less than convincing when attempting to explain the origins of the Primeval Hill’s formative role in Egyptian religion and cosmogony. Witness the following analysis offered by Stephen Brandon who, like Jeremy Black, would rely on the familiar terrestrial landscape to explain the mythical details:

“The esoteric references here to a ‘Hill’ have their explanation in the fact that various Egyptian temples claimed to be built upon a ‘primeval hill’ that had been the first land to emerge from the watery deep of Nun, and hence had become the site of the first acts of divine creation. The source of this imagery of the ‘primeval hill’ is obvious, namely, the yearly inundation of the Nile. As the flood-waters begin to subside, the higher parts of the land emerge as hillocks.”³³


The source of the imagery is obvious? If the source of the imagery is to be found in the natural phenomena attending the Nile’s annual inundation how, then, are we to account for the analogous traditions around the globe? Such ad hoc and superficial hypotheses, far from being the exception, tend to be the rule in modern scholarly analyses of ancient cosmogonical traditions.


If the armchair-speculations of Black and Brandon are deemed to be inadequate, how are we to understand the universal tradition of a Primeval Hill from the standpoint of natural science and human experience?

³² H. R. Hall, “Review of *De Egyptische Voorstellingen betreffende den Oerheugel*,” *JEA* 10 (1924), p. 186.



³³ S. Brandon, “Ancient Near Eastern Cosmogonies,” in *Studia Missionalia* 18 (1969), p. 252.

At the outset of our investigation into the natural historical origins of the Primeval Hill, it will prove instructive to review the conventional understanding of the Egyptian

hieroglyph , transcribed *h^c*. The glyph in question shows a semi-circular object surmounted by what appears to be a corona or halo of some sort. Egyptologists, predictably, have sought to interpret the glyph by reference to the familiar solar system.³⁴ Thus John Wilson writes:

“The Egyptian hieroglyph which means the primeval ‘hillock of appearance’ means also ‘to appear in glory.’ It shows a rounded mound with the rays of the sun streaming upward from it () , graphically portraying this miracle of the first appearance of the creator-god.”³⁵

In addition to being one of the world’s foremost experts on the ancient Egyptian language, James Allen is also the author of the most comprehensive analysis of Egyptian cosmogonical traditions.³⁶ Allen’s understanding of the Primeval Hill differs but little from that offered by Wilson:

“The primeval hill itself they honored as the first ‘place’ in the world...Many Egyptian temples had a mound of earth in their sanctuary, which not only commemorated the primeval mound but which was also viewed as *the* primeval hill. Like the creation accounts themselves, these various mounds did not compete for recognition as the primeval hill but were viewed as alternative, and complementary, realizations of the ‘first place’. The image of the primeval mound is preserved not only in creation texts but also in hieroglyphs. The word ‘appear’ is always written with the biliteral sign , representing the rays of the sun appearing over a mound of earth. In early hieroglyphs this sign has the form , where the image is even clearer.”³⁷

Yet to be explained, however, is how we are to conceptualize the alleged “mound of earth” from the standpoint of natural science. Is it a terrestrial structure associated with

³⁴ A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1950), p. 489.

³⁵ J. Wilson, “Egypt,” in H. Frankfort et al eds., *Before Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1946), p. 60.

³⁶ *Genesis in Egypt* (New Haven, 1988).

³⁷ J. Allen, *Middle Egyptian* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 131.


the eastern horizon? If so, where is it to be found? Is it an abstract rendering of the Earth's curvature over which the familiar Sun appears to rise? If so, how can this interpretation be harmonized with that which views the Primeval Hill as reflecting the congealing hillocks in the floodwaters of the Nile? To even pose such basic questions is to expose the superficial and illogical nature of the conventional explanations of the Primeval Hill. For not only is it patently obvious that no such Hill is to be found along the eastern horizon, it is equally evident that an abstract or metaphorical explanation could never account for the manifold mythological characteristics of the Hill in question—i.e., its celebrated status as the matrix of Creation, the meeting-place of heaven and earth, the locus of resurrection and rebirth, and its express identification with the Underworld. Indeed, not one of these widespread thematic patterns—each of which, mind you, is inseparably intertwined with the others—can be understood by reference to an abstract and otherwise invisible mound of earth.

In order to discover the Primeval Hill's structural prototype in the natural world, it is essential to consider the semantic range associated with the hieroglyph purportedly depicting it. An examination of its various uses in the Pyramid Texts reveals that the *h*-glyph is intimately associated with archaic ideas of kingship. In addition to denoting the Creator-god's "appearing" on the Primeval Mound, the verb *h*:*y* is elsewhere used to describe the Pharaoh's enthronement. Indeed, there is much reason to conclude that the Egyptian rituals of enthronement were believed to reenact or reactualize the former cosmic event *in illo tempore*.

The same verb was also employed to describe the Pharaoh's appearance at important religious festivals. In a comprehensive survey of the term's use in ancient Egypt, Donald Redford observed:

"The verb *h*:*y* means basically 'to shine forth in dazzling splendour, to appear in glory, to arise,' and was used primarily of the sun. It could also be used of any celestial body, e.g. a star, that made a spectacular appearance in the sky. In the Pyramid Texts the king is spoken of as appearing 'as a star,' or 'as a great god,' and the literal meaning of *h*:*y* here is graphically illustrated by the use in parallel texts of *q*:, 'be high,' and *b*:, 'appear in the sky as a *bai*.' By a slight semantic extension a cult image that put in an appearance at a

festival could be said to have ‘arisen in glory’; and this rather frequent use gave rise to the noun ‘festival.’”³⁸

If we are to take our lead from the semantic function of the glyph  in the earliest Egyptian texts, it stands to reason that the creator’s spectacularly dazzling “appearance” on the Primeval Hill was something that took place in the sky. If so, the testimony of the Egyptian scribes is in complete agreement with that of the Sumerian skywatchers, who likewise claimed that the Primeval Hill (Duku) was a perfectly concrete “place” in the middle of the sky.³⁹

A valuable clue with respect to deciphering the multifaceted symbolism attached to the Primeval Hill is the archaic Egyptian tradition reporting that it was the sacred “place” upon which the falcon-god Horus alighted on the so-called First Occasion (*sp tpy*).⁴⁰ A singular event in the unfolding of Creation, Horus’s awe-inspiring appearance atop the Primeval Hill formed the divine model *and* mythological charter for numerous Egyptian temples. Witness the following observation of Richard Wilkinson:

“At the beginning of time, according to a view which appears to have been ancient and widespread, a mound of earth rose from the ubiquitous primeval waters of existence. Eventually a great hawk or falcon appeared which settled on a single reed growing on this island...At its most basic level, this myth is reflected in the structure of the Egyptian temple from earliest times, with the original mound doubtless being the mythical prototype for the revetted mounds of sand found in the early temple sites of Hierakonpolis and elsewhere.”⁴¹

While a detailed account of these dramatic formative events has evidently not survived, scattered allusions in the Egyptian texts report that the falcon-god Horus first appeared

³⁸ D. Redford, *History and Chronology of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt* (Toronto, 1967), pp. 4-5. See also the discussion in K. Goebis, *Crowns in Egyptian Funerary Literature* (Oxford, 2008), p. 24.

³⁹ S. Maul, “Die altorientalische Hauptstadt—Abbild und Nabel der Welt,” in G. Wilhelm ed., *Die orientalische Stadt* (Saarbrücken, 1997), p. 116 as translated by Thomas Lampert (online). See also W. Horowitz, *op. cit.*, p. 13; A. Annus, *The God Ninurta* (Helsinki, 2002), p. 78.

⁴⁰ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999), p. 309. See also S. Stephens, *Seeing Double: Intercultural Poetics in Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Berkeley, 2003), p. 59.

⁴¹ R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York, 2000), p. 76.

upon the Primeval Hill in the wake of a period of world-engulfing Darkness, the latter conceptualized as a time of tumult, chaos, cloudiness, or prolonged Night (*hnnw*, *hstj*, *kkw*).⁴² It was in that explicitly catastrophic context that the Horus-star first “appeared” and burst forth in a spectacular display of luminous splendor, thereby bringing “light” to the cosmos and dispelling the darkness, an occasion remembered as the First “Day” or as the “dawning” of the gods. And it was in conjunction with these extraordinary natural events that Horus was crowned in glory and enthroned as Universal King (it will be noted that Horus is the only god celebrated as the “King of the Gods” in the Pyramid Texts⁴³). Thus it is that the god’s ritual texts at Edfu celebrated his glorious manifestation on the First Occasion during a time of apocalyptic darkness:

“When the divine Ruler came forth as the *Sj*-falcon, the one with a head beautiful of face, the Hovering-one spreading real marvels, making the darkness *mꜣ* with his wings... ‘Who has come < out of > the underworld.’”⁴⁴

In addition to bringing light to a world engulfed in preternatural darkness, Horus also restored order to the cosmos—this is the explicit meaning of the term *mꜣ*. Indeed, as Ragnhild Finnestad pointed out in his incisive commentary on the Edfu texts detailing the star-god’s formative role in Creation: “Making the darkness *mꜣ* means, dispelling the darkness and thus turning chaos into cosmos.”⁴⁵

With these archaic mythological traditions in mind, it is tempting to hypothesize that the semantic range of meanings associated with the *h*-glyph originated in the extraordinary natural events attending the Horus-star’s triumphant appearance on the Primeval Hill *in illo tempore*. In addition to representing the prototypical Hierophany in Egyptian religion, this singular and awe-inspiring astronomical event was also conceptualized as

⁴² H. R. Hall, “Review of De Egyptische Voorstellingen betreffende den Oerhevel,” *JEA* 10 (1924), p. 186: “The mound on which each great holy place was built was naturally regarded by its priests and inhabitants as the real original ‘oerhevel,’ the *kꜣy* or ‘high place,’ the *hꜣy* or ‘riser,’ whereon the gods first appeared after the end of the reign of ‘Chaos and Old Night.’” See also E. Hornung, “Chaotische Bereiche in der geordneten Welt,” *ZÄS* 81 (1956), pp. 28-32.

⁴³ PT 1458e.

⁴⁴ 182 4-5 as translated in R. Finnestad, *Image of the World and Symbol of the Creator* (Wiesbaden, 1985), p. 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

Horus's enthronement, a truism reflected in the fact that every Egyptian Pharaoh was enthroned atop a diminutive replica of the Primeval Hill.⁴⁶

It is evident, in any case, that the ancient Egyptians recognized an inherent connection between the stellar Horus and “appearances” of an epochal nature. Horus is invoked as the “Lord of Appearances” in an inscription from King Userkaf's mortuary temple dating from around 2500 BCE: “He of Behdet, the Great God, the colorfully feathered one, who has come forth from the horizon, the perfect god, the lord of appearances.”⁴⁷ A similar epithet—*ntr h^c.w*—is attached to Horus in the Pyramid Texts.⁴⁸ Indeed, one of the earliest attested examples of the *h^c*-glyph—an Early Dynastic domain name from the reign of Hetepsekhemwy (ca. 2800 BCE) depicted in Figure one—finds it being employed as an epithet of the Horus-star (Toby Wilkinson translated the phrase *Hr-h^c-sb^s* as “Horus rising as a star”).⁴⁹ Whatever the precise meaning of this particular phrase, there can be no denying the fact that the Egyptian scribes recognized an archaic historical connection between the Horus-star and the Primeval Hill.

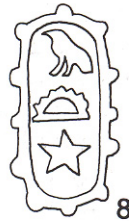


Figure One

It is significant that Horus is specifically described as a star already in these very early texts. If nothing else, this confirms the probable astral origins of Egyptian religion. As for which particular star Horus is to be identified with, there is much reason to believe that the falcon-god was originally identified with the “Morning Star.” The following passage from the Pyramid Texts is especially instructive in this regard:

⁴⁶ H-J. Fabry, “kisse,” in G. Botterweck et al eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, Volume 7* (Stuttgart, 1995), p. 239: “The terminology itself reveals an organic connection between the notion of the pharaoh's throne, the primeval hill, and the concept of *m^st*. The estrade or platform of the throne symbolizes the primeval hill, but also appears in the orthography of *m^st*.”

⁴⁷ N. Strudwick, *Texts From the Pyramid Age* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 83.

⁴⁸ T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 18, citing PT 7 and 8.

⁴⁹ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999), pp. 119-121.

“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.”⁵⁰

It will be noted that the verb *hꜣ* is used to describe the glorious “appearance” of the “Morning Star.” Equally significant is the fact that the Star’s prototypical appearance is placed at that precise juncture when heaven was separated from earth, the latter representing a singular and clearly delineated juncture in the natural events remembered as Creation.⁵¹

To summarize our findings to this point: The fact that Spell 519 describes Horus as “appearing” (*hꜣ*) as the “Morning Star” during the momentous events attending Creation, suggests that it was this particular Star—and not the familiar Sun—that formed the prototypical “god of appearances.” If so, this finding has profound implications for the history of Egyptian religion.

Testing the Theory

It is often said that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence in order to be entertained. And there is much to be said for this theoretical postulate. This naturally begs the question: Is it possible to point to any definitive evidence supporting the historical reconstruction advanced here? In fact, the evidence on the matter is at once abundant and compelling and, properly interpreted, it serves to rule out the conventional hypothesis that the Egyptian *hꜣ*-glyph describes the familiar sunrise.

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence is provided by the abundant Egyptian testimony to the effect that the spectacularly brilliant star that “appeared” at Creation presented a greenish form and effected a “greening” of the cosmic landscape. In the aforementioned text from the Pyramid Texts describing the appearance of the Morning Star at the time of

⁵⁰ PT 1207-1210.

⁵¹ E. Hornung, “Ancient Egyptian Religious Iconography,” in J. Sasson ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, Vol. 3/4* (Farmington Hills, 1995), p. 1717 writes: “The most important event of the creation: the separation of heaven and earth.”

the separation of heaven and earth, the Horus-star is described as follows: “O Morning Star, Horus of the Netherworld, divine Falcon, *wꜣdꜣd*-bird whom the sky bore...”⁵²

The word *wꜣdꜣd*, left untranslated by Faulkner, is a reduplication of the root *wꜣd*, which denotes “to make green” or “to make flourish.”⁵³ The reference, in any case, is to the brilliant green color of the Horus-star (Rundle Clark, in his translation of this passage, renders the phrase “O Morning Star, O Horus of the underworld, O Divine Falcon, O Green Green Bird.”)⁵⁴

While no one in their right mind would ever describe the familiar sunrise as presenting a “greenish” hue, ancient Egyptian descriptions of the *prototypical* “sunrise” at Creation routinely make exactly this claim. Thus it is that the *Book of the Dead* describes the Horus-star as radiating a turquoise (*mḥkꜣt*) color upon appearing (*ḥrt*) in heaven:

“[Harmachis], [when] thou risest in the horizon of heaven, a shout of joy to thee from the mouth of all peoples. Beautiful one, becoming young at [thy] time in (or as) the disk within the hand of thy mother Hathor. Rising therefore in place every heart every dilateth for ever...[Thou] risest in the horizon of heaven, thou sheddest [upon] the two lands emerald light.”⁵⁵

Another spell from the same collection of funerary texts describes Ra/Harmachis in analogous fashion:

“O Ra, thou who art Ḥeru-khuti (Harmachis), the mighty man-child...king of earth, prince of the netherworld, governor of the mountains of Aukert (i.e., the netherworld),

⁵² PT 1207a.

⁵³ R. Faulkner, *A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (Oxford, 1991), p. 55.

⁵⁴ R. Clark, “The Origin of the Phoenix,” *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* 2 (1949/50), p. 11. See also Samuel Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts Vol. 2* (New York, 1952), p. 597: “The personage addressed by the lector at this point is called the morning star (1719f), who is none other than Horus of the Dꜣ.t, the divine falcon (cf. 748b), the ‘great green’ (cf. 1720c=802b)...The term translated ‘great green’ is *wꜣdꜣd* (cf. 1530a; also Heb. *yerakrak* and Eth. *warakrik*), which is a reduplication of the word *wꜣd*, ‘green’.”

⁵⁵ E. Budge, *The Egyptian Book of the Dead* (New York, 1967), pp. 5-6, quoting from the papyrus of Nekht (British Museum No. 10471).

thou dost rise in the horizon of heaven and sheddest upon the world beams of emerald light...”⁵⁶

The solar cult reached its greatest heights during the New Kingdom (1500-1200 BCE). Yet even in these later texts the ancient sun-god is expressly associated with a greening of the cosmos: “Hail to you who rises in Turquoise” (*jnd hr.k wbnw m mfk*).⁵⁷ Such imagery is so commonplace that Egyptologists readily acknowledge the point even though it stands in direct contradiction to experience and astronomical reality: “In vielen Belegstellen hängt ‘Türkis’ besonders mit der aufgehenden Sonne zusammen.”⁵⁸

The “greening” of the cosmic landscape during the extraordinary natural events associated with the prototypical appearance and transfiguration of the Horus-star must be kept in mind when attempting to understand the original astronomical phenomena

encoded within the Egyptian *hr*-glyph: ☉. For as Margit Schunck documented in her systematic study of the imagery attached to this particular glyph, the curious corona associated with the logogram was typically accorded a brilliant green color:

“Für die Farbgebung der Sonnenkorona über dem Hügel der Hieroglyphe wurde in der Mehrzahl ein kräftiges Grün, Blaugrün oder, wie die oben angeführte Schemazeichnung zeigt, wechselnd blaue und grüne Strahlen gewählt.”⁵⁹

Yet how can this be if the familiar sunrise formed the original reference for the *hr*-glyph? Where, pray tell, is a greening affect associated with the current Sun’s appearance over the eastern horizon?

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 251.

⁵⁷ TT 53 as translated in J. Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom* (London, 1995), p. 15.

⁵⁸ J. Zandee, *Der Amunhymnus des Papyrus Leiden I 344, Verso, Vol. 1* (Leiden, 1992), p. 364. See also J. Borghouts, *Book of the Dead [39]: From Shouting To Structure* (Wiesbaden, 2007), p. 52: “In certain hymns the sun is said to strew the sky with turquoise.”

⁵⁹ M. Schunck, *Untersuchungen zum Wortstamm hr* (Bonn, 1985), pp. 8-9.