

Preface

“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 and planets. Their leading gods were identified with the most prominent celestial bodies; the pyramids were purposefully patterned after a celestial prototype (the *akhet*) and elaborately decorated with stars; and their single-minded goal, upon dying, was to return to a celestial Hereafter wherein they hoped to be reunited with the great mother goddess and the Imperishable Stars. In the face of the abundant and unequivocal evidence attesting to their profound interest in astronomical phenomena, it stands to reason that Egyptian religion is fated to remain elusive until we gain additional insight into that culture’s core beliefs regarding the stars and cosmos. The present monograph attempts to summarize the data at hand and reconstruct the celestial background and mytho-historical context of ancient Egyptian stellar religion.

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, and the Circumpolar Stars as the “Imperishable Stars.” It is our contention that each and every one of these oft-cited identifications is erroneous and, should this claim be substantiated, it follows that modern scholars have thoroughly misunderstood the original astronomical context of Egyptian religion. Indeed, as we will attempt to document in this monograph, the time for a thorough reevaluation of the available evidence is long overdue.

Horus and the Deceased King

“Horus, the first king and the pattern of rule and authority.”²

“Royal ideology and ideas about the Hereafter seem to have had cosmological and stellar foundations which may well go back to predynastic times.”³

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

² R. Clark, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt* (London, 1959), p. 31.

³ 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.

The Pyramid Texts represent the oldest body of religious texts in the world and, as such, they constitute an invaluable resource for reconstructing the worldview of the ancient Egyptians. Inscribed on the pyramid-walls of pharaohs from the fifth and sixth dynasties, their primary purpose was to serve as an aid to the deceased king in his post-mortem ascent to heaven.⁴ The basic message of the ascension hymns in the Pyramid Texts can be summarized in short order: the pharaoh aspired to ascend to heaven in order to achieve a transfigured state as an *akh*. As a result of this magical transformation—which was held to occur within the *akhet*—it was believed that the deceased king would be “reborn” or otherwise rejuvenated after which he would shine forever thereafter as an Imperishable Star.

To this relatively straightforward summary, one which most Egyptologists would doubtless accept, we would append the following correlary beliefs: (1) the deceased king ascended to heaven in the form of a star; (2) the king ascended by means of a tangible structure—most commonly by a ladder but also by “sunlight” or some other extraterrestrial contrivance; (3) the king longed to be reunited with the *jtn*, commonly translated as the “solar disc”; (4) the king’s transfiguration involved a *mysterium conjunctionis*—specifically, a physical reunion or *rapprochement* with a stellar Mother Goddess, personified alternately as Hathor, Isis, or Nut.⁵ Confronted by this peculiar belief-system, already fully developed by the time of Unis’s Pyramid (ca. 2350 BCE), the question naturally arises as to how to explain its origin. We will return to this intriguing question in chapter X.

The Pyramid Texts contain a veritable goldmine of information about ancient Egyptian conceptions of celestial topography and the various stars overhead. In order to reconstruct the mytho-historical context of ancient Egyptian funerary beliefs, it is first necessary to identify the star embodied by the deceased king. It is our view that the god Horus, already identified with a star in the third millennium BCE (see chapter X),

⁴ J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 58.

⁵ J. Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 2005), pp. 172-173.

represented the divine prototype for the post-mortem ascent of the deceased pharaoh. PT 928 is instructive in this regard: “I go up on this eastern side of the sky where the gods were born, and I am born as Horus, as Him of the horizon.” Purposefully emulating Horus, the deceased king here ascends to the *akhet* (the Egyptian word translated as “horizon” by Faulkner), the site of his much-anticipated magical transfiguration.

It is doubtless no coincidence that the deceased king’s final resting place corresponds precisely to the celestial locus traditionally assigned to Horus. As Horus resides in the *akhet* (928) so, too, does the deceased king: “The King’s place is at the head Of all the august ones who are in the horizon.”⁶ As Horus resides at the front of the Imperishable Stars (1301) so, too, does the deceased king (652, 732, 1926). If Horus resides at the front of the stellar spirits (800, 1232, 1505) so, too, does the deceased king (795, 859). If Horus settles in the solar bark (CT II:222) so, too, does the deceased king (274).

Additional examples could be provided as well, but this brief summary should suffice to demonstrate a significant overlap with respect to the celestial stations associated with the deceased king and the Horus-star. This striking correspondence in celestial placement, in turn, constitutes compelling circumstantial evidence that the mythology associated with the Egyptian pharaoh was purposefully modeled on the astronomical behavior and mythological career of the Horus-star (see Chapter X). This deduction, in turn, naturally begs the question: Is it possible to securely identify the Horus-star?

The Horus-Star

“Pharaoh is Horus, and of this god little enough is known.”⁷

“Horus was the power of kingship. To the Egyptians this was as much a force of nature as those embodied in the other gods. It was manifest in two phenomena: the sun, the most powerful force in nature; and the pharaoh, the most powerful force in human society. Horus’s role as the king of nature is probably the origin of his name: *hrw* seems to mean ‘the one above’ or ‘the one far off’...This is apparently a reference to the sun, which is ‘above’ and ‘far off’ in the sky, like the falcon with which Horus is regularly associated (and with which his name is usually written).”⁸

⁶ PT 407.

⁷ H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), p. 37.

⁸ J. Allen, *Middle Egyptian* (Cambridge, 2010), p. 148.

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 evident everywhere. The pharaoh himself was considered to be the earthly embodiment of the god, a belief-system reflected in the so-called Horus names borne by Egyptian rulers from the first dynasty on.⁹

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 body best explains Horus's manifold functions in Egyptian religion?

A survey of the relevant scholarship on the matter reveals that Horus has typically been identified with the Sun.¹⁰ That said, leading Egyptologists have advanced arguments that the god is to be identified with the planet Venus;¹¹ with the star Sirius;¹² and with the amorphous sky itself.¹³ 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 earliest descriptions of the most prominent celestial bodies to the familiar phenomena of the current solar system. The fuzzy thinking and faulty methodology which predominates in modern Egyptological circles is evident in the following statement from Rudolf Anthes:

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

¹⁰ T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 11, writes: “The solar element in Horus clearly predominates.” See also the quote of James Allen at the outset of this chapter.

¹¹ R. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, 1997), pp. 216-234.

¹² R. Anthes, “Horus als Sirius in den Pyramidentexten,” *ZÄS* 102 (1975), pp. 1-10.

¹³ W. Schenkel, “Horus,” *LÄ* III (Berlin, 1977), col. 14, writes: “The oldest function of Horus may have been that of a Heaven-god.” See also L. Lesko, “Ancient Egyptian Cosmogonies and Cosmology,” in B. Shafer ed., *Religion in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 1991), p. 93.

“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.”¹⁴

In order to bring some clarity to the difficult question of Horus’s celestial identification, it is instructive to review archaic traditions that have survived from the prehistoric period. The cult of Horus is prominent already in predynastic times.* Rulers from the Naqada I period, for example, worshipped the falcon-god prior to the unification of Egypt.¹⁵

In the Early Dynastic Period (ca. 3000-2600 BCE), Horus is explicitly identified as a star. Thus, an annal from the First Dynasty reign of King Aha bears the name “Festival of the Horus-Star-of-the-Gods.”¹⁶ Early royal domain names likewise reference the Horus-star. The domain established by Anedjib (First Dynasty) was called *Hr-sbꜣ-ht*, “Horus, star of the corporation (of gods).”¹⁷ Hetepsekhemwy (Second Dynasty) founded a domain called *Hr-ḥꜣ-sbꜣ*, “Horus risen as a star.”¹⁸ Khasekhemwy’s domain was called *Hr-sbꜣ-bꜣw*, “Horus, the star of souls.”¹⁹ Most significant, 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.”²⁰

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

¹⁴ R. Anthes, “Egyptian Theology in the Third Millennium B.C.,” *JNES* 18 (1959), p. 171.

¹⁵ J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 33.

¹⁶ E. Hornung, *Idea Into Image* (Princeton, 1992), p. 158.

¹⁷ T. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999), p. 121.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

²⁰ Toby Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 122, translates this name as “foremost star of the sky.”

In addition to his status as a prominent star, there is clear evidence that Horus was identified 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, 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.”²¹

The names of early pharaohs likewise 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’ (Qaa) call to mind the warlike iconography of the earliest royal monuments from the period of state formation.”²²

This evidence, taken in conjunction with the Early Dynastic domain-names, 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 original stellar identification.

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:

²¹ As translated in J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 323.

²² T. Wilkinson, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

“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.”²³

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.” Yet this, too, is easier said than done insofar as the earliest Egyptian texts, such as the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, never describe the Horus-star in a clearly recognizable astronomical context that would enable a secure identification with a particular star. 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 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.”²⁴

Rolf Krauss has produced the most comprehensive 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

²³ 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.


²⁴ R. Faulkner, “The King and the Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts,” *JNES* 25 (1966), p. 161.

the “eastern” portion of the morning sky while moving with respect to other stars, a characteristic of planets rather than stars.²⁵ Krauss summarized his findings as follows:

“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.”²⁶

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. Indeed, 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

What, then, do the Pyramid Texts tell us about the Horus-star? Horus’s epithets offer a wealth of insight into his astral identity. A recurring epithet of the god is Duat, conventionally translated as “Netherworld” and written with the following determinative—. The word Duat, in turn, is derived from the root *dws*, “morning,” whence comes Horus’s epithet *Neter Dua* signifying “Morning Star (or Morning God).”²⁷ The etymology of Duat suggests that Horus’s identity as the Morning Star is indissolubly connected to his role as Lord of the “Netherworld.” Indeed, a passage from the Pyramid Texts sets the two epithets in apposition: “O Morning Star, Horus of the Netherworld, divine Falcon, *wꜣdꜣd*-bird whom the sky bore...”²⁸

²⁵ 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 even remotely conclusive with regards to the identification of Horus with Venus (see Appendix One).

²⁶ 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ PT 1207.

Although often sought for underground, the earliest texts confirm that the Duat was celestial in nature.²⁹ 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.”³⁰

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 a prominent place in the visible sky overhead.

Other spells implying that the Duat is to be found in close proximity to the ancient sun-god point to the same conclusion. 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 robed. 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.”³¹

²⁹ 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.

³⁰ PT 1948.

³¹ PT 272-274.

Samuel Mercer, in his commentary on this particular passage, acknowledged the Duat's fundamental identity with the domain of Re: "The *Dwt* here is heaven, identical with the 'land of Rē' (273b), which is heaven, where the king becomes a great god, 272b."³²

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:

"Rē 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."³³

In apparent contradiction to its intimate association with the ancient sun-god, the Pyramid Texts elsewhere describe the Horus-star as standing in close proximity to the Imperishable Stars—the latter conventionally identified with the circumpolar stars.³⁴ 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."³⁵

Horus Duat is here described with the epithet *hntj jhmw-sjkw*, translated alternately as "head" or "front" of the Imperishable Stars.³⁶ Taken literally this passage poses a seemingly insurmountable problem for the conventional view that Horus is to be

³² S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts* Vol. 2 (New York, 1952), p. 126. R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 212-214 offered a similar opinion.

³³ PT 362.

³⁴ J. Allen, "The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts," in W. Simpson ed., *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), p. 4. P. Wallin, *Celestial Cycles* (Uppsala, 2002), p. 94 observes: "The astronomical identification of the *ihmw-sk* as the circumpolar stars of the northern sky is generally accepted."

³⁵ PT 1301.

³⁶ J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 117, translates as "at the fore of the Imperishable [Stars]." R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 229 translates: "Mögest du herausgehen als Datischer Horus, 'befindlich an der Spitze' der 'Unvergänglichen Sterne'."

identified with the planet Venus, since that planet can hardly be said to stand at the “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).³⁷

Horus and Nergal

Additional insight into Horus’s stellar identification can be gained by comparing the Egyptian astral traditions with those from other ancient astronomies. The evidence from ancient Mesopotamia is especially instructive in this regard insofar as it was the site of the earliest systematic observations of the most prominent celestial bodies—hence its status as the original homeland of scientific astronomy itself. In some 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.³⁸ 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.”³⁹ The epithet “Enlil of the Kur” attests to the same general idea.⁴⁰

Nergal is elsewhere described by the epithet *Lugal-IGI.DU-anna*, “king at the front of heaven.”⁴¹ It is obvious that this epithet forms a semantic analogue to Horus’s epithet

³⁷ R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 129 concedes this point.

³⁸ 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.


³⁹ D. Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, 2003), p. 404.

⁴⁰ F. Wiggermann, “Nergal,” *RA* 9 (Berlin, 1999), p. 218.

⁴¹ 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.”

sb3-hnti-pt, “star at the front of the sky,” cited earlier. The fact that the latter epithet is attested already in the Third Dynasty confirms its archaic and likely archetypal nature.

A common epithet for Horus throughout the Pyramid Texts is *nd jt.f*, “avenger of his father.”⁴² Nergal, likewise, was invoked as “avenger of his father.”⁴³ Such epithets are of great antiquity and likely reflect some prominent event in the common history of the two planetary gods.

In the Pyramid and Coffin Texts Horus is intimately associated with the *akhet*, an all-important Egyptian cosmological concept conventionally translated as “horizon”—hence the epithet *Horemakhet* (“Horus-of-the-horizon”). As its hieroglyph reveals——the *akhet* came to denote the twin-peaked celestial mountain associated with the sun-god’s daily appearance.⁴⁴

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.”⁴⁵ According to the Sumerian hymn *Enlil and Ninlil*, the new-born Nergal was assigned the mountain of sunrise (*Hursag*) at the time of Creation.⁴⁶ This Sumerian tradition, in turn, finds a close parallel in Egyptian texts, wherein Horus was installed within the *akhet* at the time of Creation (see Chapter X).⁴⁷ Such evidence, considered together with the fact that Egyptian astronomical texts from the New Kingdom identified

⁴² S. Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 311 observes: “The assertion that Horus avenged his father is very common in these texts, e.g. 634, 636, 1637, 1685, 1753, 2191.”

⁴³ A. Livingstone, “Nergal,” in K. van der Toorn et al eds., *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (Leiden, 1995), col. 1171.

⁴⁴ J. Assmann, “Horizont,” *LÄ* III (Berlin, 1977), cols. 3-7.

⁴⁵ A. Sjöberg & E. Bergmann, *The Collection of the Sumerian Temple Hymns* (Locust Valley, 1969), pp. 106.

⁴⁶ *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).

⁴⁷ See, for example, CT II:220a and 223b.

the planet Mars as “Horus in the Akhet” (*Horemakhet*),⁴⁸ 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. The following passage is representative in this regard: “You are Horus with his White Crown on his head...He rages against the gods with his power, he controls the life of the gods.”⁴⁹

Here, as elsewhere, the word used to describe the god’s terrible wrath is *dndn*.⁵⁰

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...”⁵¹

Of the various words used to describe Nergal’s unrivaled strength, *dandannu* is particularly common.⁵² The latter Akkadian word, it will be noted, is a possible cognate of the Egyptian verb used to describe Horus’s raging.

To summarize our findings in this chapter: As a warrior-star, the star “at the front of the sky,” Lord of the Netherworld, “avenger of his father,” and rager against the celestial

⁴⁸ As in Senmut’s tomb, for example (TT 353). See also O. Neugebauer & R. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts, Vol. 3* (London, 1960), p. 179.

⁴⁹ CT 1:51.

⁵⁰ See the discussion in R. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Oxford, 1973), p. 10.

⁵¹ B. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda, 1993), p. 622.

⁵² E. von Weiher, *Der babylonische Gott Nergal* (Berlin, 1971), p. 72.

gods—not to mention his intimate association with the mountain of sunrise—Horus shares a diverse set of specific 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 the present study. If the identification with Mars can be substantiated, it stands to reason that it 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/Sirius


“The morning star, Sirius, seen by the Egyptians as a goddess. In Egypt the star disappears below the horizon once a year for a period of some seventy days; its reappearance in midsummer marked the beginning of the annual inundation and the Egyptian year. The star's rising was also seen as a harbinger of the sunrise and therefore associated with Horus in his solar aspect, occasionally specified as Horus in Sothis (*hrw jmj spdt*), Sothic Horus (*hrw spdtj*), or Sharp Horus (*hrw spd*).”⁵³

In a number of passages from the Pyramid Texts the Horus-star is equipped with the epithet *spd*. The identity of this particular star has long perplexed scholars. Kurt Sethe and James Allen have presented arguments that Horus Sopd is to be understood as the Sun.⁵⁴ 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 *spd* and *spd.t* ‘Sothis’ are both identified with Sirius is one of the rare certainties in Egyptian astronomy.”⁵⁵

⁵³ J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 441.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

⁵⁵ *Egyptian Astronomical Texts I* (London, 1960), p. 25.

The word *spd* means “sharp” or “to be pointed” and this meaning would seem consistent with its determinative, which features a pointed triangular object—.⁵⁶ This meaning is evident in the following Pyramid Text, wherein the deceased king ascends to heaven as Sopd: “You should go forth toward them, ba as one fully born, sharp as one fully born, in your identity of Sopdu.”⁵⁷

A decisive key to understanding original nature of Horus Sopd is his identification as the “seed” of Osiris. This motif is evident in the mythological fragment found in Spell 366, 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.”⁵⁸

As the seed of Osiris, Horus Sopd is clearly distinguished from Sothis. Here, as is always the case in these texts, Horus Sopd is conceptualized as masculine in nature. Sothis/Spdt, whose feminized name is formed from the same root *spd*, is identified as Osiris’s consort. Whether identified as Spdt 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 numerous other references to Sopd in the Pyramid Texts without first recognizing the fact that the names Sopd and Spdt denote two entirely different stars, one conceptualized as male and the other as female. We thus arrive at the following equations:

⁵⁶ R. Hannig, *Ägyptisches Wörterbuch I* (Mainz, 2003), p. 1111 entry 27525. See also the discussion in A. Gardiner, *Egyptian Grammar* (Oxford, 1957), p. 484. According to Faulkner, the same word also came to mean “effective” or “pre-eminent,” perhaps by analogy.

⁵⁷ PT 1534 as translated in J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 184.

⁵⁸ PT 632-633.

Sopd=Horus=male seed of Osiris.

Spdt=Isis=female receptacle of Osiris's seed.

The crux presented by PT 632 has generated a good deal of discussion and speculation. Rudolf Anthes's analysis of this particular spell is particularly confused: He would identify "Horus who is in Sothis" as the star Sirius because of the reference to Spdt, 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 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."⁵⁹

Anthes's hypothesis, amazingly, ignores the clear distinction between Horus Sopd and Isis Spdt. The latter celestial body, 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 Spdt—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/Spdt. By ignoring the possibility that Horus Sopd had a stellar dimension apart from his relationship to Spdt, 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 *špd* in the Pyramid Texts. This exercise, in turn, will require that we review the mythological traditions surrounding Horus.

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

⁵⁹ R. Anthes, "Horus als Sirius in den Pyramidentexten," *ZÄS* 102 (1975), p. 4.

“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.”⁶⁰

As the “seed” of Osiris, Horus appears in 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.⁶¹ 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 King is your seed, O Rē, you being potent in this your name of ‘Horus at the head of the spirits, Star which crosses the sea’.”⁶²

In addition to identifying the deceased king as the divine seed—here Re 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—as Horus Sopd—is to be distinguished from Spdt.⁶³

The express purpose of the Pyramid Texts, it will be remembered, was to aid the deceased king in navigating his way to the celestial Hereafter. Upon reaching heaven, the Egyptian pharaoh hoped to become transfigured into an *akh* and join the Imperishable Stars. 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.”⁶⁴

The pharaoh here 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

⁶⁰ PT 1505.

⁶¹ J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), p. 182 translates the word in question as “sharp.”

⁶² PT 1508-1509.

⁶³ See also R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 161, who offers a similar interpretation.

⁶⁴ PT 859.

that the deceased king was identified with Horus. Equally noteworthy is the fact that the king is described as *spd*, sharp or “effective,” a likely reference to Horus’s stellar nature 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 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.”⁶⁵

The phrase translated as “brilliant” here is *spd ḥꜣt*—literally “star with sharp front”⁶⁶—unequivocal evidence that a star characterized as *spd* was deemed to be 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 as Horus Sopd.

Spd Wr

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 a stellar agent denoted 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.”⁶⁷

⁶⁵ PT 262-263.

⁶⁶ So translated by J. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 42 and Samuel Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

⁶⁷ PT 1149-1159.

It will be noticed that the deceased king, as *Spd-wr*—literally “the great sharp one”⁶⁸—assumes rule at the front or head (*hnt*) 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 a *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.⁶⁹

Anthes’s discussion of this passage is equally indifferent. Indeed, the renowned Egyptologist 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.”⁷⁰

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.”⁷¹

⁶⁸ So translated by James Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶⁹ R. Faulkner, “The King and the Star Religion in the Pyramid Texts,” *JNES* 25 (1966), pp. 153-161.

⁷⁰ R. Anthes, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

⁷¹ S. Mercer, *The Pyramid Texts in Translation and Commentary, Vol. 3* (New York, 1952), p. 571.

Understanding *Spd-wr* here as a pseudonym for Sopdu makes perfect sense given the deceased king's fundamental affinity with Horus Sopd.⁷² 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 Spell 248, quoted above, the deceased king is explicitly identified as the *spd*-star. Anthes rejected Mercer's obvious solution, claiming that there was no evidence for Sopdu's cult as early as the building of the pyramids, but this claim is demonstrably false (A funerary text from the mortuary temple of Unis at Saqqara states: "Soped wishes that Unas may live"⁷³). Indeed, the god's cult is already attested during the First Dynasty reign of Semerkhet.⁷⁴

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 (Spell 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."⁷⁵

⁷² Inke Schumacher offers a similar opinion in *Der Gott Sopdu der Herr der Fremdländer* (Göttingen, 1988), pp. 48, 317. As she points out, p. 146, Sopdu was explicitly identified with *Spd wr* in Edfu 7:162.

⁷³ Quoted from R. Giveon, "Soped in Sinai," *Festschrift für Westendorf, Vol. 2* (Göttingen, 1984), p. 782.

⁷⁴ R. Wilkinson, *Early Dynastic Egypt* (London, 1999), p. 296. See also I. Schumacher, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-52. R. Giveon, "Sopdu," *LÄ 5* (Wiesbaden, 1984), cols. 1107-1110.

⁷⁵ PT 458-459.

As the “living one, the son of Sothis,” we would see a reference to the star Sopd. Faulkner acknowledges that this epithet has reference to a star,⁷⁶ 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.”⁷⁷

The variant text in Unis’s pyramid is most significant insofar as it serves to further bolster the hypothesis that the *spd*-star, as Horus Sopd, was conceptualized as the stellar avatar of the deceased king. And as the “son of Sothis,” the masculine *spd*-star is explicitly distinguished from Sothis.

Granted that the deceased king ascends to heaven as Horus Sopd, how are we to reconcile this testimony with other passages that 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, who sought to identify Horus Sopd with Sirius: “Still, the star is apparently not in all cases the same heavenly body, but very often it is identified with the Morning Star...”⁷⁸

It is our opinion that there is a more logical and economical 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 analogous in nature and reject the thesis that there was a “conflation” of originally independent and contradictory views with respect to identity of Horus’s star.

⁷⁶ R. Faulkner, *Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, 1969), p. 92 footnote 3.

⁷⁷ R. Anthes, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

⁷⁸ R. Anthes, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

This conclusion is supported by several different lines of circumstantial evidence.⁷⁹ Certainly it is significant to find that the Egyptian scribes substituted Horus Sopd for Horus Duat within the Pyramid Texts. In PT 331a, for example, the name Horus Sopd replaces 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?”⁸⁰

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.

The same conclusion is supported by the fact that both star-gods are intimately related to a celestial ship. Thus, PT 1637 describes Horus Sopd as follows: “*H̄ar-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’.”⁸¹ 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.”⁸²

⁷⁹ R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, pp. 93 and 288 raised the same possibility.

⁸⁰ T. Allen, *Horus in the Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 1916), p. 30.

⁸¹ PT 1637. See also PT 633, where the same statement is repeated.

⁸² PT 1207-1210.

The fact that Sopd is expressly identified with *Dwꜣw* in PT 480 and PT 994b is also relevant here.⁸³ In the former passage the deceased king is invoked 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:

“Rēꜥ 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.”⁸⁴

The name *Dwꜣw*, like *Ntr Dwꜣ*, means “of the morning”⁸⁵—both names being written with a star-determinative. The fact that these two gods were identified with the deceased king (as Horus) and clearly identified with a star in the “morning sky” would appear to argue for their fundamental affinity and probable identity.⁸⁶

The star-god *hd-tꜣ*, mentioned in several obscure spells in the Coffin Texts, is also of interest here. Although little is known of this particular god, it is significant to find him described as the “son of Sothis” in Spell 760. The passage in question reads as follows:

“My mother is Sothis, and she prepares my path, she sets up a stairway to this very great plain of Nenmut for my ascent from the Valley of the Mountain of the Sehseh-bird on the north within my river-banks, at the place whence Orion issues.”⁸⁷

The name of the god, according to Faulkner and Krauss, denotes “He of the Dawn.”

Krauss, together with Goebis, would identify *hd-tꜣ* with the morning star.⁸⁸ That this is

⁸³ See the discussion in S. Mercer, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁸⁴ PT 1719.

⁸⁵ E. Otto, “Dua,” and “Duai,” in W. Helck ed., *LÄ I* (Wiesbaden, 1975), cols. 1147-1148.

⁸⁶ I offered much the same argument in “Sothis and the Morning Star,” *Aeon* 3:5 (1994), pp. 77-94.

⁸⁷ CT V:389.

⁸⁸ R. Krauss, *op. cit.*, p. 288.

the correct interpretation is bolstered by the fact that *ḥd-tꜣ* elsewhere appears at the bow of Re’s boat—i.e., in the very position assumed by Horus Duat as the Morning Star.⁸⁹ Granted that this “son of Sothis” can be identified with the Morning Star—and we concur with Krauss and Goebis in this regard—it is difficult to deny the deduction that Horus Sopd—expressly identified as the “son of Sothis” in PT 458—is likewise to be identified with the Egyptian Morning Star.

To summarize our findings in this chapter: A wealth of circumstantial evidence suggests that by Horus Sopd the ancient Egyptians were describing a star otherwise identical with Horus Duat, the latter star-god being explicitly identified with the Morning Star by the authors of the Pyramid Texts. Insofar as Horus Duat is to be identified with the planet Mars, it follows that Horus Sopd likewise had reference to the red planet. This identification will prove to be of profound and far-reaching significance when we turn to consider the celestial identification of Sothis in the next chapter.

⁸⁹ See here CT VI:349, wherein one reads: “*ḥd-tꜣ .jmj ḥꜣt wjꜣ Rꜣw.*”