ABSTRACT

The following is a study of the roles of myth and history in ancient Egypt. The research investigates the notions of cyclical and linear time in order to understand how the two interacted in the physical world. It uses the help of modern physics to re-examine the difference between cyclical and linear modes of thought. Mircea Eliade identifies cyclical time with his definition of sacred time as “indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable.” The study brings up the following question: Can sacred time be measured? The ancient Egyptians’ understanding of time has been gleaned from various creation myths and netherworld texts. Cyclical and linear forms of time were then graphed to see if they could have had the same origin in both the mythical and physical world. This paper hopes to confront ancient Egyptians on their own terms by accepting their texts and images as truthful, accurate depictions of how they experienced time.

There is much disagreement over whether the ancient Egyptians had a concept of history that existed apart from mythical reality or whether their historiography developed out of mythology. There are two main arguments in the world of Egyptology. The first is that the Egyptians blurred the line of distinction between myth and history because it was not significant or relevant to how they experienced time. The second is that the Egyptians were fully aware of the difference between the two subjects, but their understanding was manipulated by political tensions. This paper draws from both arguments to form a new hypothesis: myth and history represent a dualistic reality. To prove this idea, the myths are analyzed from literary, historical, and scientific perspectives. The purpose is to come closer to an understanding of how cyclical time worked and whether the Egyptians recognized certain physical phenomena of the universe.
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INTRODUCTION

There has been much debate about the roles of myth and history in ancient Egypt. This is partly due to the fact that only a small amount of the recovered physical evidence resembles what modern historians would label historiographical. Historical information can be drawn out of various types of found written documents, but these texts were not composed for the purpose of illuminating future generations about the past. Many are heavily influenced by ancient Egypt’s deep reservoir of mythical explanations. The writers of these texts, usually scribes working in the pharaoh’s bureaucracy, gave Egyptian history the appearance of static permanence. Any breaks in the stable monotony of monarchies were regarded as volatile. The mythical origin of the cosmos was forever recurring and contingent on the pharaoh’s ability to uphold social order. It was therefore crucial that the king’s life be stretched over the longest period possible. As the driving force of Egyptian history, the pharaoh maintained an image of longevity and changelessness. The Egyptians were excellent chroniclers who diligently recorded the names and length of reign of each king. However, when arriving at the overall meaning and reason behind historical events, the Egyptians often referenced myths.

In the West, history is ordered along a linear progression. The study of history is therefore based on observable factors that follow a cause-and-effect relationship. Ancient Egyptian mythical texts, however, describe time in general as cyclical and renewable ad infinitum. Myths focus on the now and are believed to transcend the limits of space-time, presenting themselves as revealing the true state of the universe. Both history and myth represent narratives of meaningful time that reflect the physical world. The Egyptian monarchy used mythical symbols to explain historical events in order to make their
government appear ever-present. By conflating the difference between social and cosmic order, they secured their position in society. Monuments served to remind the populace about how the created world works. Myth's spiritual power was therefore used in the service of the state, blurring the line between historical and religious spheres. At the core of myth is the underlying belief that the temporal world is not as it presents itself to be. Together, history and myth represent the dual nature of the ancient Egyptian experience of time. Several questions then arise: How tangible was the mythical world? If myth was a living reality, can its events be measure in space-time?

This paper hopes to confront ancient Egyptians on their own terms by accepting texts and images as truthful, accurate depictions of how they experienced time. It does not attempt to critique their thought process, but approaches it as equally valid and rational to our own. This may seem naïve, but it is with the sole intention of being able to approach the living world they structured for themselves. In order to understand the relationship between myth and history, an inquiry into the implications of cyclical and linear modes of thought is necessary. These two forms of time will be tested according to scientific principles with the goal of making the ancient Egyptians' understanding of the world as real to us as it was to them.

NOTIONS OF TIME

The ancient Egyptians did not have a word for universal passing time, but used the terms Neheh and Djet to refer to two different forms of eternity that existed in the created cosmos. The Egyptians measured increments of time using precise water clocks¹ and sun dials, but did not restrict themselves to clock time alone. Instead, they formed an

ideology around a qualitative and flexible concept that appears to not always be bound to
space. The Egyptians thought of time as having a beginning and end, though the time
within these two points itself was not quantified.\(^2\) As a whole, time was not standardized
and could be distributed differently under different circumstances. For instance, strict
timekeeping would have been the most crucial in areas such as farming in order to
maintain a stable food supply. As a result, an exact solar calendar was developed to track
the seasonal changes in the agricultural cycle. Clearly for the Egyptians, time possessed
both qualitative and quantitative elements. They experienced a time that could start, stop,
and be re-birthed—a perception that influenced their ideas about history as well.

\(\textit{Neheh}\) represented cyclical, uncompleted time
that infinitely repeated itself and was rejuvenated.
This time was associated with the solar deity Ra and
the movements of the sun, representing all that will
come into being.\(^3\) It was depicted as a sundisk on the
horizon in between two double-helix shaped flax wicks alongside a falcon. \(\textit{Neheh}\)
perpetually returned to its origin, \(\textit{Zep Tepi}\), and "played a fundamental role in cosmic
time, of which historical time was only an application or avatar on the human level."\(^4\)

\(\textit{Djet}\) symbolized linear time with a future endpoint and was
linked to the underworld of Osiris. It was depicted as a
determinative sign composed of a serpent hanging over land and

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\(^{3}\) Ibid. 69
was thought of as that which has been completed. Linearity did not strictly apply to cosmic or historical time, but represented a state of being. *Neheh* and *Djet* were shapes that symbolized “the entire supply of time available to the world”\(^5\) and were shown supporting the arc of heaven. *Neheh* and *Djet* could cease, as in the *Book of Going Forth by Day* from the eighteenth dynasty of the New Kingdom, when Atum the creator god threatens, “I shall destroy all that I have made and this land will return into *Nun*, into the flood waters, as in the first state.”\(^6\) It is rare to find descriptions of the end of time in ancient Egypt, but this famous passage establishes the belief that the universe had both a beginning and an end. Two points in time that were considered the most threatening were nighttime, when the sun was thought to journey into the linear underworld, and the epagomenal days\(^7\) at the end of the year when *Neheh* halted and *Djet* took over. In both cases, *Djet* represented periods of time in which the order of the created world became vulnerable to cessation.

It is important to mention that the Egyptians did not follow the law of the excluded middle, in which either a proposition or its negation is true.\(^8\) For them, a proposition and its negation together created a valid duality. *Neheh* and *Djet* therefore do not represent a dichotomy that is mutually exclusive, but were rather thought of as a complete whole.

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\(^7\) People wore protective linen amulets around their necks that were lined with twelve knots to ensure their safe journey into the new year. These knots were supposed to bind the gods so they could commit no harm against the wearer. Linen was thought of as possessing healing properties because of its association with the dead and wounded.

\(^8\) Noted during a class lecture on January 10, 2011 by Professor Daniel L. Selden.
Historically, Neheh and Djet have been two words with few definitions. Egyptologists can agree on. This is partly because the words appear interchangeable in certain contexts. They are often found at the end of royal titularies, granting the given king with life everlasting. There are no clear definitions or philosophical explanations of these terms in Egyptian texts. The standard view is that Neheh and Djet are concepts of sacred time that apply to the gods and are therefore limitless. In this scenario, they are aspects of myth that represent a metaphysical reality that requires us to “stop thinking of time as something spatial, statically definable, almost visible, and instead appreciate time as the transcendental design of history, human as well as cosmic.”9 Time is then seen as both an internal, intellectual structure and the relationship between events. In this case, the only measuring tool is internal experience. The neat divisions of past, present, and future did not apply as mythical time could repeat itself, be reversed, and renewed. The universe and all its contents could be reborn into a new state again and again. However, there are dissenting opinions that believe that Egyptian “time is also limitless; nevertheless, it is characterized by two eternally recurring individual phenomena, namely: ‘birth’ or ‘coming to light’ and ‘death’ or ‘darkness with the end of physical activity’.10 Here Neheh and Djet are described as marking points in a human lifespan. The question then arises: Did Neheh and Djet operate in the human world?

Another impassioned argument has been whether the ancient Egyptians were conscious of historical time. Historical information can be gleaned from a variety of sources including king-lists, annals, tomb autobiographies, wisdom literature, and monuments. Erik Hornung argues that history was only valued for its mythical

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significance, so that “The Egyptians thought the past was of interest only to the extent that it was also the present and could be the future.” The pharaoh’s decrees often dictated history in a literal sense. Any rebel or instigator of change, people whom we would today call “creators of history,” were considered chaotic and vile figures that represented fissures in the natural cycle of king’s reigns. As a result, history was viewed as unchanging. It appears that the monarchy’s goal was for Egyptian history to be timeless. At the start of a new reign, the phrase *h3.t-sp*\(^{12}\), meaning the beginning of time, was used to mark the year. Every thirty years, the king would ritually renew his position with a *Sed* festival. The most important part of this royal celebration was the king’s ceremonial run around the *Sed* courtyard with the deed of Egypt in hand. This represented a period of renewal for king, country, and cosmos. The pharaoh’s role was perceived as integral to maintaining the universe and was designed to be a perfect mirror of cosmic order. If each new reign marked a renewal of time, then each king became the first ruler to establish order and produce history “over again.” History could therefore be conceived of cyclically as repeating itself or starting over. This created a safe, structured mold the future could easily fall into. Though historical texts were pragmatically consulted in times of crisis, such as famine, flood, or plague, they were found alongside mythic religious literature in cult centers. History and myth, and by extension, linear and cyclical modes of thought, often blended together.

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\(^{12}\) This phrase has also been rendered as “regnal year,” thereby avoiding its mythical implications.
MEASURING SYSTEMS

Early forms of time keeping in ancient Egypt began by observing Earth's natural rhythms. These rhythms not only included observable patterns of day, night, and the moon's periodicity, but internal clocks such as the human diurnal sleep cycle. The visible movement of life on earth must have appeared synchronized to pre-historic Egyptians. This phenomenon of "being attuned to the cosmos, probably provided a natural background and intuitive basis for cyclical religious cosmologies throughout the world." 13 Since the Pre-dynastic period, gnomons were used to measure time. Sundials were founded on the simple principle that the sun travels through the sky in an arc and as a result, shadows on earth change position throughout the day. When the sun reaches its highest point midday, it casts the shortest shadow.

Cyclical time was originally based on the visible pattern of perpetual returns—of sunrise, sunset, and the seasons. Later, time measurement developed into stellar observation and charted the trajectories of various star transits. Particularly important constellations to the ancient Egyptians were Sirius, Orion, Ursa Major, and the Milky Way. 14 Old Kingdom Pyramid texts reference many stars, such as the ikhemu sek, or "those that do not know destruction," that are understood to be the circumpolar stars. 15 Buildings in ancient Egypt could be directed towards celestial events, such as the rising sun, or specific times of the year. For example, the interior of Ramesses II's temple at Abu Simbel is illuminated by a beam of light on only two days of the year: February 21,

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15 Ibid. 174.
the pharaoh’s birthday, and October 21, his coronation date. Significant points in time were therefore taken into account when constructing space.

The study of early funerary customs in ancient Egypt shows that space was originally measured in relation to the human body. East and West were associated with the sun’s arc across the sky, whereas North and South were first thought of in reference to the Nile’s flow. As early as the Pre-dynastic period, the Egyptians buried their dead with their heads pointing towards the Nile. However on certain bends the river deviates from its typical South-North flow. As a result, several bodies are buried “in reverse” along major turns. 16 Beginning in the fourth dynasty, pyramids began to be accurately aligned according to true north and space was measured by observing the celestial bodies. It is unclear exactly how the Egyptians were able to find this direction so accurately. One problem with delineating true north was that there was no visible circumpolar North Star. The most perfectly aligned pyramid is that of Khufu, whose sides are off by only three arc minutes, or 1/20 degree. 17

The Egyptians first created a lunisolar calendar in the third millennium BCE whose new year was determined by the length of time between two heliacal risings of Sirius. 18 This calendar could not accurately predict the start of the agricultural cycle consistently, so farmers relied on natural signs to denote seasonal changes. The Egyptians were prompted to formulate a second solar calendar to govern civil life, while they retained their lunar one for religious festivals. Both systems totaled 360 days that were divided into twelve months and three seasons. Each 3bd, or month, was thirty days long and was made up of three, ten-day weeks. Months were attached to the seasons that were

16 Ibid. 173.
17 Ibid. 173.
18 Ibid. 175.
the most important aspect of the year. The season of Akhet lasted from mid-July to mid-November and represented the Nile’s inundation in summer. Peret spanned mid-November to mid-March and constituted the growing period in winter. Shemu stretched from mid-March to mid-July and represented harvest time in spring. Seasonal events continually moved forward in the calendar and the Egyptians had to compensate for being five days short of Earth’s total revolution around the sun. As a result, the religious calendar added a thirteenth month every two or three years and the civil calendar added five epagomenal days, known as the “five days over and above the years.”

The Egyptians also invented a twenty-four hour clock that allowed for twelve hours each for the day and night. As in many ancient societies, a single hour was not a standardized unit, but fluctuated according to the solstice so that it became longer in the summertime and shorter in winter. A human life was divided in hrw, days, wnw.t, hours, and 3.t, or minutes. An individual’s lifetime was said to be the equivalent of a single hour for the gods in the afterlife. The difference between increments of human and divine time is illustrated in the netherworld books of the New Kingdom. In these texts, the gods can perpetually renew and reverse time. Ra travels in the Duat, or afterlife for twelve hours until he is reborn again the next morning at Zep Tepi. One depiction of this process is found in the upper register of the fifth division of the Book of Gates from the tomb of Ramesses VI. The sixth and deepest hour of the Duat presents the mummified god Aken with a rope hanging around his neck. The rope’s two ends form several twisted loops held by a line of twelve figures. Above the loops are stars representing the hieroglyphic determinative for an hour. Each twisted rope therefore symbolizes a single hour that has

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19 Noted in class lecture by Barbara Richter on June 22, 2010.
been drawn through the mouth of Aken. This image illustrates the joining of cyclical and linear time as Patricia A. Bochi explains,

On one level, the endless and continuous supply of time is readily suggested by the linear shapes of a rope or that of a snake. On another, the cyclical pattern of the inexorable repetition of neheh time is conveyed by linear shapes describing twisted or circular motions.21

This is a metaphor for the god birthing the hours with the help of twelve other divinities.22 Though human and divine time was measured using different scales, they were both subject to the same ordering quality.

MYTHICAL TIME

Mircea Eliade argues that the cyclical nature of mythical time gave ancient peoples a sense of power and freedom in history. Individual citizens felt absolved of their misdeeds and free from suffering each time the cosmos renewed itself. This cycle alleviated the tense compression of what Eliade calls the “terror of history.” The entire collective of Egypt participated in this scheme of regeneration and creation. Myth describes the concept of sacred time in which divinities are able to be reborn, reverse time, and shape-shift. For the modern reader, “if such language were allowed to be referential at all, it could only be such transcendentally—for it fails to refer to anything genuinely observable.”23

For historians, myths reveal the Egyptians’ hidden symbol-system and provide a glimpse of the ancient thought process. Eliade explains, “Myth presents a complex

22 Ibid. 58.
system of coherent affirmations about the ultimate reality of things, a system that can be regarded as constituting a metaphysics. This thought process has been criticized in the past as irrational and primitive. Since myth does not present time as linear, mythical events are assumed to be unreal and have not been measured in time-space. Though ritual re-enactments of mythical events occur in specific sacred spaces the events themselves are not thought of as enfolding in space. In the following section creation myths are measured in space-time in order to answer the question: Is sacred time quantifiable?

COSMOGONIES

The oldest myths recount that before creation, there existed a substance known as Nun that can be thought of as the dark matter of the universe. In the Nun, there is no beginning and end, no light, no boundaries, nor differentiation of any kind. This state has been described as an “inert principle who contained in himself all the possibles, all the virtualities of being, some, but not necessarily all of which would be activated at the moment of creation.” In this homogeneity of matter there is neither conflict nor friction of any kind because “two things did not yet exist.” The myths do not tell how long the Nun had existed before the appearance of the gods, as there is no time associated with the space. Out of this mysterious material, the gods gradually gained consciousness of themselves. From this process emerges two identifiable things: the god and the Nun itself.

In the Heliopolitan cosmogony, Atum describes his first experience of self-consciousness, “I was alone with Nun in a state of inertia, when I found no place to stand,

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26 Ibid. 46.
27 Ibid. 41.
when I found no place to sit..."28 The Nun would have never been known to exist if it were not for a second thing. The god creates definable limits and boundaries in the Nun, forming the dynamic of the observer and the observed.

The idea that an observer affects or creates the observed reality is a well-studied phenomenon in quantum physics. This has been best illustrated with the double-slit experiment that involves a barrier that has two slits and a wall behind it. When light is shone through the two slits there is an interference pattern on the back wall. This is because waves spread out over space and can be in more than one place at a time. Areas in which wave crests meet will shine brightly whereas areas where a wave crest meets a wave trough will cancel each other out to create darkness. The result is a patchwork pattern. Alternatively, if paint is sprayed through these two slits it creates an image on the wall the exact size and shape of the openings because it is made up of particles. Now let us say a small amount of radiation is shot through the two slits, radiation that is so low that it is known to be on average one electron. An interference pattern is then created on the wall behind, because the electron behaved as a wave and spread out. When scientists placed a detector in this experiment, the electron oddly behaved like a particle and went straight through with no interference pattern on the back wall. This led scientists to believe that simply observing an electron changed it to a particle. An electron can be everywhere, but a particle is a substance that can only be in one place at a time. This experiment is associated with the famous Schrödinger’s Cat experiment in which the cat is both alive and dead in the box before it is observed. It could be both, but once you look inside, it can only be in one state.

28 Ibid. 50.
If we apply these ideas to the creation myths, then the Nun is the electron, whose energy exists everywhere all at once and the first self-created god is both the detector and the resulting particle. The self-created god became conscious of himself and in becoming conscious of himself, becomes himself. The Nun changed when first observed by a differentiated one who transformed the indeterminate nature into order. The Nun is said to exist post-creation process at the periphery of the universe. It continues to sustain the world with its rejuvenating creative water just as the Nile sustains life in Egypt.²⁹

Zep Tepi is the term used to mark the self-created god’s first emergence and beginning of the ordered universe. It is difficult to discern whether the Egyptians viewed this event as the origin of both mythical and historical time. In the past, Egyptologists have associated the concept with sacred time that is “indefinitely recoverable, indefinitely repeatable.”³⁰ Many believe Zep Tepi is timeless, in that it refers to no identifiable point in space-time. It has been argued that Zep Tepi could not be the origin of both Neheh and Djet, boldly stating that Djet’s “everlastingness is not in any case concerned with the creation of the world.”³¹ Yet, as the only known origin of the created cosmos, Zep Tepi could very well be the beginning of both Neheh and Djet. The Egyptians possessed a rich, multi-layered understanding of the world they lived in. Zep Tepi is an example of what Ernest Gellner calls a multi-functional expression, which he describes as “not one in which a man combines a number of meanings…on the contrary, the conflated meanings constitute, for him, a single and indivisible semantic content.”³²

²⁹ The Nun became an archetype for the river’s inundation and is often depicted in the New Kingdom. The watery substance appears on an undulating brick enclosure wall at the temple of Hathor at Dendera from the eighteenth dynasty.
To take a minimalist approach, *Neheh* simply symbolizes cyclical time, and *Djet* linear. In order to understand the cyclical nature of passing time, the continual pattern of sunrise and sunset, humans needed to comprehend the linearity of the hours. The Egyptians had words for small increments of time that led to the all-important points of sunrise and sunset. In order to recognize repetitious natural cycles they needed to understand and follow the linear stacking of one day after the other.

In physics, an “event” is anything that can be measured with space and time coordinates. When an event occurs in the universe, it emits light that spreads in space as a circle over time. When graphed, it forms what is referred to as a future light cone with the event as the tapered point. Everything that travels at or below the speed of light is affected by the event, and the rim of the cone gradually hits more and more space over time. At the moment the event takes place, faraway regions of the universe are not yet affected and therefore exist in the “elsewhere” void surrounding the cone. Events spread infinitely as a continuum, leading scientists to believe that if, one day, we look far enough into the universe we will see what it looked like at the time of the Big Bang.
According to the Heliopolitan cosmogony, *Zep Tepi* began with Atum’s emergence atop the primordial mound made from the chaotic abyss of the universe. This bubble of creation gradually expanded as the god pushed the boundary of the created world against the chaos, forming a larger and larger circle. Divinities are able to travel along the border between created and uncreated worlds. If we think of *Zep-Tepi* as emitting energy that spreads in a space as a circle through time, than its future light cone encompasses the created world, while the “elsewhere” area remains the chaotic void.

This is a great model for understanding how the Egyptians thought of their continually expanding world with its infinitely occurring origin. This describes the linear
qualities of Zep Zepi. It shows how the first Zep Tepi occurred once and acted as the mold by which all other copies were made. This also shows the origin of historical time.

At the moment of creation, the gods manifested themselves in sacred, cyclical time. For the ancient Egyptians, time travel was an innately religious idea. Eliade explains, "By its very nature sacred time is reversible in the sense that...it is a primordial mythical time made present."\(^3\) The Akhu, or blessed dead, and the gods were able to travel backwards through time in the underworld where cyclical and linear timelines conjoined. The union of cyclical and linear time is elaborately described in the Amduat from the tomb of Thutmosis III. In it, Ra, the embodiment of cyclical time, floats on his barge across the arc of the sky until he is reborn the next morning. This process is a microcosm for the origin of the universe and depicts how the first creation occurs each day. In the inscription, Ra's journey spans the twelve hours of the night. During the fifth hour, Ra becomes the ba of Osiris and fuses with his corpse. At this point, we are shown the two consubstantial realities of cyclical and linear time. Next, the Nun waters rejuvenate Ra-Osiris. During the twelfth hour of the Amduat, Ra, all other gods, and the Akhu are dragged backward through the Mehen snake, the embodiment of time. Hornung describes this as the following: "They enter the serpent's tail as venerable, gray-haired, infirm individuals whose lives are essentially over, and they emerge from the serpents mouth as young children."\(^4\) The twelfth hour articulates the main goal of Ra's journey: to reverse and rejuvenate the world.

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The unification of *Djet* and *Neheh* has been conceived of as a spiral, with Ra's body wrapping over the corpse of Osiris with every curve so that "if one visualizes this spiral in three dimensions, as a combination of *nhh* (cyclical time) and *dt* (linear time), and with the spiral moving through time, it perfectly reflects the daily repetition of the solar cycle." Most people imagine traveling back in time as a car in reverse and cannot fully comprehend the concept of cyclical time. As Ra travels through the underworld and the twelve hours of the night, he is traveling in reverse order of the hours of the day. When he is reborn at sunrise, time is renewed on a separate, but parallel plane. Each day's curve creates a new line, with the past as a series of phantom coils. This is best depicted as a slinky. *Zep Tepi* is the point in which Ra separates from Osiris and rounds a new curve on the spiral. This is a model for the first division between time and space.

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Djet (dt) - Linear Time

Neheh (nḥḥ) - Cyclical Time

Ouroboros Shape

Combination of Djet and Neheh
Linear + Cyclical = Spiral Time

Zep Tepi

Fig. 5 Illustration by David Rager from Richter’s “The Amduat and Its Relationship to the Architecture of Early 18th Dynasty Royal Burial Chambers.” Red additions by Catie Damon. Explanation: If you divide a circle in half, then the circumference above its diameter would represent a new day and the circumference below its diameter would represent a reversal of that day. The ouroboros shape is divided into twelve hours. The twelve slots above the diameter are the hours of a day and the twelve slots below the diameter are the hours of the night. If Ra travels along the lower arc of the circle, he goes through the hours of the day in reverse order until he reaches sunrise, or Zep Tepi.

In the underworld, cyclical and linear time occur simultaneously. Perhaps the lower curve that depicts Ra’s journey through the Duat collapses into a straight line when he becomes the ba of Osiris’ body. At the moment before the next sunrise, or Zep Tepi, Osiris and Ra separate and return to their respective forms. Each new day creates a parallel curved plane that could stop with the end of time. In Tutankhamun’s tomb there is an image of a snake eating its own tail, symbolizing time’s ability to renew itself and
the seamless transition from the end of time to its origin. This is called the \textit{ouroboros} motif in Greek, meaning tail eater. However, the \textit{ouroboros} symbol is not an accurate image for this process, because the new day is not exactly like the last one. There is opportunity for change, a different outcome, and an end to the spiral process.

What happens after \textit{Zep Tepi} is then described in different ways. In all Egyptian cosmogonies, Ra is the original autogenous god who manifests himself in various forms at the point of creation. In the \textit{Book of Shu} in coffin spells 78-80 he proclaims, “I had manifested myself as manifestation of the existing...If I acted priorly among the anterior ones, it was that my name existed prior to theirs, if I created anterior time and the anterior gods, it was to create all that is desirable on this earth.” \textsuperscript{36} Each autogenous god acts as Ra at the point of creation as he is the embodiment of the sun, the believed origin of the physical world in ancient Egypt.

\textit{Heliopolitan Theology}

In the Heliopolitan theology from the Old Kingdom, Atum spontaneously appears on a primeval hill that rises out of the Nun. This process is described in Pyramid Text Utterance 600:

\begin{quote}
Atum-Kheprer, you have come to be high on the hill, you have arisen on the Ben-ben stone in the mansion of the Benu-bird in Heliopolis, you spat out Shu, you expectorated Tefnut, and you put your two arms around them as the arms of a ka-symbol, so that your ka might be in them.”\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid. 137.
Atum’s body then becomes the substance through which all things are created. He masturbates to produce Shu, who is associated with air and spits out Tefnut, goddess of moisture. Atum’s body spews out fluids to create gods that signify basic compounds that make up the soon-to-be-created world. Tefnut and Shu are the first gods to sexually reproduce, after which the divine population increases. The resulting offspring are Geb and Nut, the embodiments of earth and sky. Atum explains his existence in the Book of Going Forth by Day from the New Kingdom, “I am Atum, when I was alone in Nun, I am Ra when he appeared at the moment when he began to govern that which he had created.”38 In total, Atum creates the Ennead of nine gods that includes: Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Seth, Osiris, Isis, and Neptys.

Hermopolitan Theology

The Hermopolitan tradition, also from the Old Kingdom, credits the Ogdoad, a group of eight deities, with the creation of the world. The eight are made up of four couples that represent the male and female versions of the basic elements of the pre-world state. They are made up of forces that are hard to distinguish, such as darkness and invisibility. They begin with Nun and Naunet, who represent the primordial water, Heh and Hauhet, who embody infinity and expanse, Kek and Kauket, or darkness, and Amun and Amaunet who symbolize invisibility. Males are depicted with frog heads and females with serpent ones. These gods have a lifespan in which they are born, grown old, and die. They are said to be buried in a mound, which becomes the archetype for human funerary cults. That the creation mound also becomes the first grave speaks to the ancient Egyptian belief that life is a circle and that the end of time leads back to its origin.

38 Ibid. 49.
Memphite Theology

The Memphite theology is known as a later, "intellectual" creation myth which was written on a slab of basalt, known as the Shabaka stone, dating from the twenty-fifth dynasty in the Third Intermediate Period. The text states that the original version was written on a worm-eaten papyrus found and copied by the king during the first dynasty. At the time the cosmogony was written, Memphis was the current capital of Egypt and therefore the first creator god is the local deity Ptah. In this myth, the vehicles of creation are Sia, or perception, Hu or utterance, and Heka, or magic as opposed to bodily fluids described in other stories. Ptah perceives of the world through his heart and uses the combined magical qualities of performative speech to create. The text philosophically identifies the heart as the seat of the brain and the soul. It is written, "Sight, hearing, breathing—they report to the heart and it makes every understanding come forth. As to the tongue, it repeats what the heart as devised."39 The heart essentially animates all life, it is the original source of intention and agency. Egyptologists regard this cosmogony as one of the more sophisticated creation myths. It is written,

Thus all labor, all crafts are made, the action of the hands, the motion of the legs, the movements of all the limbs, according to this command which is devised by the heart and comes forth on the tongue and creates the performance of everything.40

The Heliopolitan, Hermopolitan, and Memphite creation myths all possess common characteristics. Nun is always infinite and permanent, existing after the creation of the ordered world. All creator gods are autogenous and become conscious of

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40 Ibid. 55.
themselves. These myths provide the basic, foundational symbols that the Egyptian monarchy drew upon to legitimize their rule.

HISTORICAL TIME

Modern historians study the factors and conditions of different periods in time to understand why past events occurred. Their focus is on physical evidence, particularly written documentation of the "facts of the case." For this paper's purpose, history is understood as temporal events and the narration of those events. This paper has been centered on ideas and images created by the stp, the elite of Egypt. It is estimated that on average, only one percent of the ancient Egyptian population was literate.\footnote{Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, \textit{Egypt and the Egyptians}, (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 91.} Only elite priests and scribes in the government bureaucracy were trained to read and write. During the course of any historical investigation, the many accounts gathered from primary sources soon begin to overlap, becoming a patchwork of competing narratives. A plot begins to emerge and history becomes the never-complete compilation of these stories.

The subject continues to be re-examined by future generations and as more information is collected, students learn of a fuller, people's history. In the West, history is viewed as the impetus of progress and understood to be meaningful time aimed at a future end point. In ancient Egypt, the overarching narrative of historical events that defined its direction was \textit{Ma'at}, or justice. Hornung describes \textit{Ma'at} as the "foundation of all order in the created sense" and the "basis for life in a specifically social sense."\footnote{Erik Hornung Erik, \textit{Idea into Image}, (New York, NY: Timkin, 1992) 194.} \textit{Ma'at} was both a goddess of truth and an abstract moral principle in both myth and history.
The mythological order of time was maintained by the king who was often depicted offering *Ma'at*, symbolized by a feather or figurine of the goddess, to another god. Re-enacting religious rituals guaranteed each year’s order and kept chaotic, foreign forces away. It was believed that *Ma’at* needed to be upheld throughout the course of history. *Ma’at* was also a key factor in the Egyptian final judgment in the afterlife when an individual’s heart was placed on a scale against the weight of the feather. The individual in question would give a series of confessions, such as in spell 125 from the *Book of Going Forth by Day*: “I have not done wrong; I have not slain people; I was not sullen...”43 If heart and feather were equal, then the person became a part of the *Akhu*. If the individual’s heart was heavier, than it would be devoured by the demon Ammut. *Ma’at* played a crucial role on the individual, national, and universal levels.

“The Maxims of Ptahhotep,” “The Instruction of Amenemope,” “The Teaching of King Amenemhet I, and “The Teaching for King Merikare” are all examples of wisdom literature that attempt to explain and implement the concept of *Ma’at* in society. Once again, kingdoms represented microcosms of universal order and it was the ruler’s duty to uphold a balanced human world. The writings of Ptahhotep from the Old Kingdom and Amenemope from the New Kingdom address non-royal audiences and outline how to maintain one’s political, societal, and cosmic position. In “The Teaching of King Merikare,” the narrator frames kingship as a constant battle against rebellion and the chaotic cosmic forces it represents. In “The Teaching of King Amenemhet I,” the narrator is an assassinated king who warns his son not to trust the semblance of order or any kind of human relationship. *Ma’at* is the moral foundation of Egyptian society that legitimizes

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the authority of a single, semi-divine ruler. In the teachings, it possesses a wide range of qualities, including justice, order, and correctness. In these stories, history is a constant oscillation between chaos and order.

As an intermediary between the human and divine worlds, it was the pharaoh’s duty to introduce and integrate Ma’at into his kingdom. Citizens of ancient Egypt were expected to act in accordance with Ma’at and help it become “actively realized time and again.” In “The Teaching for King Merikare,” the narrator fears rebellion and repeatedly condemns political agitators. He harshly writes, “Get rid of him, and slay his children, Obliterate his name, and destroy his supporters, Banish (all) memory of him and of the partisans who respect him.” This was composed during the First Intermediate Period, a time of decentralized government when multiple dynasties could rule at once. Many provinces vied for power and there was a quick turn over of rulers. Intermediate periods represented punctures in the smooth transition between Egyptian monarchies.

The narrator uses a militaristic tone, stressing the need to build up an army with strategic buffer zones. Equating danger of political rebellion with the original creation process, he states, “But as for him who revolts against you, this is (like) a destruction of heaven, (Like) destroying a hundred years of monuments.” He describes an ongoing drama that threatens cosmic harmony and human history.

Monuments testify to achievement, organized power, and serve as religious centers in which divine and human worlds can communicate with one another through prayer and offerings. When the assassinated Amenemhet I defends his character, he states

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46 Ibid. 154.
47 Ibid. 163.
that his palace “has been built for eternity. And constructed (to endure) throughout the ages. This I know, for I was its lord, its lord for all time.” He also warns against Isfet, that represents chaos, disorder, and evil, advising, “Put no trust in a brother, Acknowledge no one as a friend, Do not raise up yourself intimate companions, For nothing is to be gained from them.” In this case, Isfet can manipulate Ma’at in order to take advantage of someone.

Ma’at’s political and moral function are tightly intertwined. In “The Instruction of Ptahhotep,” the vizier, whose job included the title “priest of Ma’at,” states, “A son who listens is a (true) follower of Horus.” Hearing is a crucial channel of learning and therefore pathway to Ma’at. Knowledge is most effectively transmitted through listening and is verified through obedience. Is this political propaganda so that reverence of Ma’at always means obedience to the king? Or does Ma’at represent a larger, abstract structure of positive human history? The idea seems to represent a connective tissue that binds humans to their hearts, species, earth, and universe in a web of interconnectedness. At the same time, it serves to remind the Egyptian population of the “way of the world” and how society functions. It is the foundation of their civilization that synthesizes mythical meaning with historical events. Ma’at is believed to have always existed in the created world and Egyptian laws reflect the absolute reality.

48 Ibid. 170.
49 Ibid. 168.
HISTORICAL WRITINGS

There is much disagreement over whether the ancient Egyptians had a concept of history that existed apart from mythical reality or whether their historiography developed out of mythology. Redford argues that the Egyptians understood historical sequencing of events as shown by their annals, daybooks, and king-lists. The first annals, found as early as the Pre-dynastic period, recorded the height of the Nile’s annual inundation and later encompassed other aspects of life such as taxes, construction projects, and cult ritual practices.52 This kind of documentation led to daybooks that kept an account of business transactions of the temples, royal palace, necropolis, and treasury.53 Beginning in the twelfth dynasty, king-lists gave a concise chronological sequence of royal names and lengths of each monarchy.

Hornung argues however, “mythical generality gave way to historical particularity”54 and that the ancient Egyptians’ concept of history was mimesis of mythological events. He sites apotropaic engravings on monuments paired with religious rituals as evidence for their concept of cyclical time applied to history. The Egyptians used art motifs and symbols to depict both historical and non-historical events. For example, Ramesses III’s funerary temple at Medinet Habu depicts the same victory of the Egyptian army over the Hittites of Kadesh that Ramesses II used. Ramesses II’s army, however, was ambushed by the Hitties and beaten back. Not only was the triumphant depiction inaccurate, it was later co-opted by another ruler.

53 Ibid. 101.
There were no historiographies, no word for historian, as we understand it today. It is helpful to use Eliade’s advice, “But if the word is lacking, the thing is present; only it is ‘said’—that is, revealed in a coherent fashion through symbols and myths.”\(^{55}\) Myth’s influence on history will therefore be taken into account when analyzing the Egyptian sources.

The following explores history made by the pharaoh, the bureaucracy, and the citizenry. This funneling from the universal to individual level is done in order to better understand how historical and mythical time interacted together in the physical world. Though the texts deal with temporal events, the overarching narratives inevitably mesh history and myth together as the two ideas were inseparable for ancient Egyptians and contributed to their dualistic approach to human existence. Myth speaks to humankind’s need for meaning and the monarchy took this need for religiosity and wove it into a system of historical real time.

The pharaoh is a prime example of someone who embodies both mythical and historical time. Pharaohs represented the living Horus who maintained a stable, eternal role. Individual rulers died, but transformed into the next leader through the royal \(ka\). Each ruler could be thought of as a “Horus X, who in the person of the reigning pharaoh plays a role in the historical world of spatial and temporal particulars.”\(^{56}\) In fact, the ancient Egyptian populace were conscious of the historical length and sequence of kingships. King-lists document rulers in chronological order, however, most of the lists that have been found were used for cult purposes and do not represent an interest in historical inquiry. For the Egyptians, the lists acted as a relative dating system.


Occasionally, lists mention the heliacal rising of a given star and exact dates can be ascertained. Kings whose years of reign can be accurately dated include Senwosert III, Amunhotep I, Thutmose III, and Ramesses II.\textsuperscript{57} It is only with Manetho, an Egyptian priest from the third century BCE of the Ptolemaic period, that we have the first compilation of these lists with the goal of forming a complete chronicle of kings. His work gave modern historians their standard framework of thirty-one Egyptian dynasties beginning with Menes and ending with Alexander the Great.

The King-list tradition first became organized as a chronological ordering of king names and reign lengths in the Middle Kingdom. During this time, Egypt experienced many co-regencies and rulers popularized a new reverence for the past by focusing on family genealogy in order to legitimize their power. Tombs were refurbished and became popular memorials for public viewing. Historical interest peaked during the Ramesside period of the nineteenth and twentieth dynasties. Having been preceded by appointed kings, these pharaohs felt a strong need to establish their family’s lineage. The New Kingdom had experienced many changes to traditional kingship. The role of pharaoh was now considered a job office that had to be filled and was often taken by force rather than divine right.

So, royal interest revived the practice of offering to the deceased kings and increased public popularity of ancestor cults. Material culture of ancestor worship increases in the New Kingdom. Ancestor busts have been found that were used to venerate deceased individuals in private household shrines. Many funerary stelae and

\textsuperscript{57} Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, \textit{Egypt and the Egyptians} (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 30.
votive offerings have been recovered, along with niches in household architecture that were most like the sites for libations, food, and drink offerings.

Renewed interest in the past often results in canonization. Ernest Gellner explains that some agrarian societies “Deliberately organized so as to avoid dangers of possibly disruptive innovations. Ancestors, or past institutional forms, perhaps in idealized versions, are held up as the moral norm, the prescriptive ideal.”58 Both the Middle and New Kingdoms looked to the glory of prior kingdoms for inspiration. As a result, that culture became revered as “classical.” The Egyptians were firmly entrenched in the past and reworked it to conform to a stable, static ideal.

Created to establish political power and divine right, these king-lists became a “part of a divinely sanctioned, uninterrupted line of rulers which goes back ultimately to Menes, and before him, the demi-gods and Great Ennead.”59 Several cult king-lists are historically accurate and quite extensive, such as Seti I’s table at Abydos from the nineteenth dynasty. Found on the second hypostyle hall of his mortuary temple, the list depicts the king with his son, Ramesses II, holding a papyrus scroll. It contains seventy-six cartouche king names from Menes to Seti I, omitting Akhenaten, Hatshepsut, Smenkhare, Tutankhamun, and Ay. Seti I would have been fully aware of the existence of these rulers, but chose not to worship them in his temple for various reasons. For example, the infamous Akhenaten from the eighteenth dynasty was considered a heretic by all subsequent kings. Akhenaten’s blatant disregard for Egyptian religious heritage and his blasphemous attempts to destroy polytheistic iconography was shunned. By choosing not to include the rulers in the wall inscription, Seti I is refusing to write them

into the shared eternal life of the pharaohs. The list is not a pure historical account, but provides modern historians with the most complete list of Old Kingdom rulers.

Fig. 6 King-list of King Set I at Abydos

The most historically accurate king-list found is the Turin Canon from the nineteenth dynasty under Ramesses II. Found on the back of a papyrus tax document, the Turin Canon is a chronological king-list from the Pre-dynastic rulers to the seventeenth dynasty. The document is missing a beginning and end, along with the standard introduction that would have named the scribe who wrote it. It includes the names of rulers and their length of reign in years, months, and days. The list is divided into eleven columns with up to thirty rows. Many of the names are grouped according to family. Written on the back of an older papyrus, the king-list was not meant to be a formal or official record. It begins with the Great Ennead, followed by the lesser, divine spirits, mythical kings, and human pharaohs. Despite their historical accuracy, the king lists always begin with the gods. It was crucial that the pharaoh display his “ability to repeat
what the creator god had done at the beginning of time. Each new king became a part of a long, eternal chain of Horus rulers. This mythology served to both elevate their power and create a consistent, familiar government.

_Annals_

One early form of historical documentation is known as _gwnt_, or annals, that began as an annual list documenting a wide range of events such as taxes, cults, battles, and temple construction projects in the Old Kingdom. _Gwnt_ organized events for the palace administration that had to do with the function and order of the state. The annals were written in rectangles, with event descriptions on the right and the king’s name in a _serekh_ on the left. The bottom register was reserved for documenting the Nile’s flood height after its annual inundation. Tracking the river’s height was crucial for the implementation of an irrigation system. Noting seasonal regularity enabled the Egyptians to predict future farming conditions. This is an interesting case because it demonstrates the Egyptians’ ability to understand a natural phenomenon both qualitatively and quantitatively. The Nile was the god Hapy, a symbol of fertility and the primordial Nun from which all life sprung that could also be measured.

_Gwnt_ gave detailed notations of events, but lacked an overarching narrative. This is partly because the annals were only read by those who had experienced the history themselves. The narrative that linked national events together existed in the cultural memory of the people. Each scribe would have witnessed the conditions and factors that

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60 Ibid. 163.
had caused the events to take place. At the same time, the Egyptian people were familiar with the mythological explanation of current events.

Assman explains that this type of notation “supports the memory and purview of early rulers who use it to achieve a hitherto unprecedented degree of insight and control.” Written organization was integral to an expanding economic and bureaucratic system. The annals gave the government a consistent record of the internal workings of the state, allowing for systemization and greater centralized power so that “standardization and conceptual quality control became possible.” Written by scribes revered as civil servants of the king, gwnt recorded many aspects of bureaucratic life. Listed information included captured goods on military expeditions, stocks and reserves, the regulation of public building supplies, and the maintenance of agricultural storehouses. For example, eighteenth dynasty annals from Thutmose III at Karnak describe a variety of foreign territories and the tribute received from them. In the sixth campaign there is a detailed account of his victory over Kadesh in which it states:

Now the children of the princes and their brothers were brought
To be hostages in Egypt. Now, whoever of these princes died,
his majesty was accustomed to make his son go stand in his
place. List of the children of princes carried off in this year:
36 men; 181 male and female slaves; 188 horses; and 40
chariots, worked with gold and silver or painted.

The passage attests to the Egyptian practice of holding captive the heirs of foreign rulers. These accounts were most likely not intended to inform readers, but to elevate the king’s image as a powerful conqueror. However, Gwnt were referenced during times of

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catastrophe, such as plague or flood. The Egyptians therefore also utilized these texts pragmatically.

Gwnt were used not only to find descriptions of temporal events that had occurred in the past, but also as stories that revealed the mythological repetition of events. By the end of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom, gwnt grew less functional and included more kingly epithets. The annals gradually became a way to legitimize and ensure a pharaoh’s rule. They became closely associated with the Sed Festival, which ritually renewed the monarchy after thirty years. Annals not only recorded, but also commemorated the king’s reign. In the hypostyle hall at Karnak from the New Kingdom, Thoth is depicted as saying, “I have established thine annals in millions of years and hundreds of thousands of Sed Festivals; I make thy lifetime approximate that of the Heavens.”

Gods and kings were the chief gwnt authors in Egyptian art. Thoth, the god of scribes, was often pictured writing on the leaves of the Ished tree, a symbol of recording the year’s events. Thoth was believed to have given hieroglyphics to the Egyptian people and the hidden power behind the signs. As a proclaimer of truth and god of knowledge, Thoth worked together with the king to record human history. The king’s history is designed to honor and follow the gods, who in turn, grant him a long life in order to carry out his royal plans.

During the Middle and New Kingdoms, annals represented a mixing of historical dictation with mythological beliefs. Gwnt grew increasingly more religious and historical events fell by the wayside. Rhetorical cult statements dominated and the uniqueness of

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65 Ibid. 70.
events became a device used to elevate the current monarch. For example, it is written in Hatshepsut’s chapel from the New Kingdom,

   It had indeed not been heard of since the primordial time of this land, the period of him who shone forth in the Nun; it did not happen to the kings of Upper and Lower Egypt beginning with the first generation, nor had it been heard of since the time of God; it was not in the annals of those who were aforetimes.\textsuperscript{66}

Redford explains that the statement, ‘in the time of those who were aforetime,’ refers to a distant past, but was employed to describe “an event or situation which that remote period had witnessed, had never been repeated until now.”\textsuperscript{67} Hyperbole became increasingly popular when describing historical events. The blending of myth and history is further exemplified by where gwnt is said to be stored. It was either kept in the Sed pavilion or under the Ished tree in Helipolis. One is a physical place within the royal complex and the other a mythological site. Over time, gwnt ceased to be in the service of the state and became a part of the king’s list of benefactions as it became more important for the king to be validated through spiritual genealogy.

\textit{Tomb Autobiographies}

Tomb autobiographies are personal histories that are juxtaposed by religious prayers and offerings. They provide a glimpse into the unrepeatable, unique world of individual experience amidst the dominant cyclical culture. We have a number of tomb autobiographies of upper class Egyptian citizens written for the general public as memorials of the tomb owner’s accomplishments. These tomb inscriptions reveal the desire to both immortalize life deeds and emulate the king. The king maintained the

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid. 83.
\textsuperscript{67} Ibid. 138.
necropolis that functioned both as a memorial complex and museum of past achievements. Tombs therefore maintained the deceased's spiritual and historical existence, referencing both mythological and historical timelines. From a religious perspective, tomb engravings guaranteed eternal life in the netherworld. From a historical perspective, they informed the public about the tomb owner.

The autobiographies also served to inform tomb viewers and now modern historians about how famous events, such as military expeditions and construction projects took place. Hornung describes the inscriptions as publicizing the “accomplishments and status of the deceased, whose rank depended on both closeness to the pharaoh and the successful completion of royal commissions.”

“The Autobiography of Weni” from the sixth dynasty of the Old Kingdom in Abydos is found on a slab of limestone in his tomb chapel. It charts the ascension of Weni's position from storehouse worker to personal confidant of the pharaoh and governor of Upper Egypt. Weni describes the factors leading up to events, showing the cause-and-effect relationship of the history he witnessed. He consistently works above and beyond normal expectations to exceed his rank. Weni moves up to become an inspector of palace tenants, an overseer of Pepi Mernere's robing room, and an inspector of priests. He establishes himself as such a trustworthy person that he becomes the head of the Egyptian army. He states,

His majesty sent me at the head of this army, there being counts, royal seal-bearers, sole companions of the palace, chieftains and mayors of towns of Upper and Lower Egypt, companions, scout-leaders, chief priests of Upper and Lower Egypt, from the villages and towns that they governed and from the Nubians of those foreign lands.

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Most of the people Weni is describing are patricians, Egyptians of noble birth. Despite their inherited positions, Weni is sent to oversee them while he was operating as an overseer of royal tenants. It is his job to check and regulate their behavior so that they do not abuse their positions. He is in charge of making sure “that no one attacked his fellow, so that no one seized a loaf or sandals from a traveler, so that no one took a cloth from any town, so that no one took a goat from anyone.” Weni upholds order and balance so that the king’s military escapades do not turn into total war. He also gives a travel account of their journey to the land of the “Asiatic sand-dwellers,” listing all the noble houses involved in the expedition.

Weni’s close relationship to the pharaoh is best exemplified when he says,

There was a secret charge in the royal harem against Queen Weret-yamtes, his majesty made me go in to hear (it) alone. No chief judge and vizier, no official was there, only I alone...Never before had one like me heard a secret of the king’s harem.\(^70\)

Weni boasts of his intimate relationship with the pharaoh. This seems like an issue that is a bit too sensitive to reveal to the public. Perhaps noblemen were not entrusted to hear this case for fear of public slander against the Queen. Weni is again trusted for his discretion.

All his accomplishments lead to Weni’s appointment to the office of governor of Upper Egypt. As governor, he is thorough and methodical, stating, “I counted everything that is countable for the residence in this Upper Egypt two times, and every service that is countable for the residence in this Upper Egypt two times.”\(^71\) Countable is translated as taxable, meaning Weni either overtaxed the Egyptian populace or was elected to be tax

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\(^{70}\) Ibid. 19.

\(^{71}\) Ibid. 21.
collector two times. His crowning reward is the beautiful tomb that signifies his wealth, power, and emulated the king’s own mortuary structure.

This autobiography is the main source of information regarding Egyptian-Nubian political relations at the time. It describes the Egyptian policy of conscripting Nubians and Libyans for campaigns. As a result, the Egyptian army was able to take advantage of the Nubian economy by collect many expensive goods such as gold, feathers, ebony, and ostrich eggs.\textsuperscript{72}

“The Autobiography of Harkhuf” found at Qubbet el-Hawa, Aswan from the sixth dynasty narrates the governor’s four expeditions to Yam, in modern-day Nubia. It is regarded as the primary source for Egyptian-Nubian political relations at the time.\textsuperscript{73} Harkhuf was a native of Elephantine and served under the two kings Merenere and Pepi II. The inscription begins with a standard prayer to the gods in which Harkhuf describes himself as charitable and just. At one point, he addresses the reader directly to promise protection to those tomb visitors who praise him and death to those who are “unclean.” Harkhuf’s list of titles include: Count, Governor of Upper Egypt, Royal Seal-bearer, Sole Companion, Lector Priest, Chamberlain, Warden of Nekhen, and Mayor of Nekheb that all gives the reader a sense of the political power the tomb owner possessed. Harkhuf proceeds to describe his four visits to Nubia. On his third visit, he finds that the Nubian king is fighting in Libya and follows him there. After helping with the fight, he embarks on his return journey only to confront the ruler of a confederacy of territories. He describes a historical, dramatic situation free of mythical language.

\textsuperscript{72} Douglas J. Brewer and Emily Teeter, \textit{Egypt and the Egyptians} (New York: Cambridge University, 2007) 40.

\textsuperscript{73} Miriam Lichteim, \textit{Ancient Egyptian Literature} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 23.
Harkhuf’s story of his journey ends with a letter from the boy-king Neferkare asking for the safety of a pygmy that Harkhuf reportedly found. The king excitedly describes the precautions that must be taken so that the pygmy should not be harmed or lost on the trip back to Egypt. He instructs,

When he goes down with you into the ship, get worthy men to be around him on deck, lest he fall into the water!
When he lies down at night, get worthy (20) men to lie around him in his tent. Inspect ten times at night! My majesty desires to see this pygmy more than the gifts of the mine-land and of Punt.\(^7^4\)

The boy-king’s sentiments are completely transparent. This is a rare instance when the emotions of the king are made clear and is most-likely due to the fact of his age. This passage reveals the king’s desire, allowing readers a glimpse of the human side of the young pharaoh.

_Egyptian Reflections on Myth and History_

Myth stretches time into an all-encompassing, ever-present substance, whereas history deals with the relationship of cause-and-effect. The Egyptian monarchy imbued historical writings with religious origins and symbols to become ever-present. The intertwining of religion and kingship became so strong that one wonders if they were not really one in the same. Pharaohs strove to give history the appearance of being timeless. Redford argues: “That society was supposed to have remained unchanged since its formulation, in an unbroken chain of repetitions of the ‘time of the god,’ is most certainly a proposition of an historical nature.”\(^7^5\) The blending of myth and history does not

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\(^7^4\) Miriam Lichtheim, _Ancient Egyptian Literature_ (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) 27.

\(^7^5\) Donald B. Reford, _Pharaonic King-Lists, Annals and Day-Books_ (Ontario, Canada: Benben Publications, 1986) 139.
represent their lack of understanding, but the Egyptian government’s attempts to legitimize their rule. In Utterances 273-274 from the Pyramid Texts King Unas is proclaimed as one “who lives on the being of every god, who eats their entrails when they come, their bodies full of magic.” The king feasts on the gods and becomes full with their magic, literally taking their spiritual power for his own sustenance. This metaphorically describes a very real process that Egyptian kings used to substantiate themselves.

The question arises: How did it feel to be caught in the middle of cyclical and linear modes of thought? In an excerpt from “The Burden of Kha’kheperre’sonbu,” dated to be either from the Middle Kingdom or Second Intermediate Period, the writer reflects on feeling as though unique writing never occurs:

Had I unknown phrases,
Sayings that are strange,
Novel, untried words,
Free of repetition;
Not transmitted sayings,
Spoken by the ancestors!
I wring out my body of what it holds,
In releasing all my words;
For what is said is repetition,
When [only] what was said is said.
Ancestor’s words are nothing to boast of;
They are found by those who come after.  

This passage represents a vulnerable, personal account about being at the intersection point between myth and history on the individual level. The poetic lament represents the closest glimpse of how Egyptian citizens may have felt about the entanglement of myth and history.

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CONCLUSION

There have been numerous studies on the interaction between myth and history in ancient Egypt. Hornung and Redford represent two opposing arguments in this discourse. Hornung believes that the Egyptians blurred the line between myth and history because the distinction was not significant to them. Myth provided a familiar and safe model for history that was valued more than the chronological sequencing of events. Redford insists that the Egyptians were fully aware of the difference between the two subjects, but were constantly re-envisioning them for political reasons. Though the Egyptian government clearly utilized mythical symbols for their own political intentions, myth and history represented a rich dualistic reality that existed simultaneously in the minds of Egyptians.

By diagramming the origins of Neheh, Djet, and, Zep Tepi, the paper hopes to substantiate the claims of a dualistic reality and illustrate these concepts to make them more tangible for the modern reader. The graphs show that Zep Tepi could have been the origin of both cyclical and linear time, as well as the start of mythical and historical understandings of time. A slinky shape best depicts the spiral process that occurs as a result of the combination of these two types.

Rather than claiming to know how the Egyptians perceived time, the research helps us understand them by drawing parallels between our reality and theirs. In ancient Egypt, there was a taboo against speculating as to what the state of the universe was before creation. Aietological myths and netherworld books illustrate their attempts to comprehend the ineffable. It is impossible to know the ancient Egyptians’ true understanding of the cosmos, but the evidence shows that perhaps they recognized the existence of real physical phenomena of the universe.
REFERENCE LIST


