Frank Kammerzell (Göttingen):

Sacred spaces, secret places, and the storage of knowledge in Ancient Egypt

Abstract

The role that sacred spaces played as places of information conservation in the Ancient Egyptian civilization can hardly be overestimated. Like in many other communities, the religious sphere was one of the most important domains of usage of written communication. Tombs and temples, which represent two highly prominent classes of sacred spaces, are not only the physical carriers of a substantial portion of the extant body of Egyptian texts, but frequently also housed documents written on papyrus or other portable objects: An institution incorporating a *scripitorium* as well as a library and called ‘The House of Life’ was an integral part of the larger temples.
International Workshop “Creating and representing sacred spaces”

SACRED SPACES, SECRET PLACES, AND THE STORAGE OF KNOWLEDGE IN ANCIENT EGYPT

Frank Kammerzell

Göttingen, 28.6.–2.7.2000
(1) The fabulous appearance of a book of divine origin

From the prologue of a series of medico-magical spells, London Medical Papyrus (pBM 10059), col. 8,11-13 (Grapow 1958: 274), c. 1350 BC.

Having fallen down into the courtyard of the temple in Koptos as a mystery of the said goddess (Isis), this protection spell was discovered at night by the lector-priest of that temple. Whereas the land was in darkness at that moment, the moon shone upon this book on all its way. It was brought as a miracle to the Majesty of the late King Monarch Ghiwafwa (“Cheops”, r. 2554-2531 BC).

(2) A year name commemorating the supernatural appearance of a sacred text

From the rock-inscription of a quarry expedition at Maghara, Sinai (Gardiner, Peet & Černý 1952-55: I, pl. VII,13), reign of King C’it’kar-ku-lidouw Jasasaj (“Djedkare Asosi”, reigned 2355-2317 BC), c. 2350 BC.

Only cols. 1-4 are glossed and translated.
Sacred spaces, secret places, and the storage of knowledge

King-Monarch Two Ladies Horus of Gold living infinity

Year after the third time of assessing all the cattle and small livestock / the god’s causing that a precious stone with a text of the god himself was discovered on the altar of the sun-temple ‘Enclosure-of-the-Sun-God’ (of King Niwasalliiduw, r. 2395-2364 BC) / Horus C’it’ghaadaw, King-Monarch and He-of-the-Two-Ladies C’it’ghaadaw Horus-of-Gold C’it’karliiduw who may live eternally.

(3) Texts copied from tomb inscriptions

Prologue of the Harper’s Songs, pBM 10060 (pHarris 500), col. VI,2-3, XIXth Dynasty, c. 1280 BC.

“This papyrus is said to have been found, together with several others, in a box hidden under the ruins of the Ramesseum at Thebes.” (Budge 1923: 23; cf. also Dawson, in: Journal of Egyptian Archaeology 35, 1949, 163)

Songs that are to be found in the tomb of the late King Antef and are (inscribed there) in front of the harper.

(4) Hymns allegedly copied from a temple wall

Introductory remarks to two hymns addressed to Amun and Thot from pBerlin 3056, col. 8,4-5 (Möller 1905: 27-32; Osing 1983: 349), a religious papyrus compiled in the reign of one of the kings of the XXIIth Dynasty (946/5-730 BC) who bore the name Takelot, 9th century BC.

The words from Heliopolis that are written next to the figure of Amun and the figure of Thot on the wall of King Ghapar-ka’-ri’ya (Sesostris I., r. 1956-1911/10 BC) in the Temple of Amun.
(5) A recipe for “soothing the itch”, allegedly found in a temple

pEbers, col. 75,12-13  (Grapow 1958: 408). A medical text with a calendar from the 9th year of Amenophis I. (r. 1525-1504 BC) on the verso, 16th century BC.

It is a veritable medication. It was discovered during a revision in the Temple of Wenennofre.

(6) A religious spell, also said to have been found during a temple revision

Book of the Dead, postscript of Ch. 137A (pBM 9900 of Nb-sm-šj = Naville, Totenbuch [1886] I pl. 150, l. 23-24), XVIIIth Dynasty, 16th-14th century BC.

It was the late prince Horadjedef who discovered this roll in a secret box among the god’s own texts in the temple of Unut, Lady-of-Unu, when he made a revision in the temples of the gods of Upper and Lower Egypt.

(7) Two pieces from a compilation of religious texts, allegedly found in a temple

(7a) pBerlin 3057 ("pSchmitt"), col. 22,14 (= Möller 1900: 3), c. 300 BC.

Discovered next to a leather roll in the library of the Temple of Osiris in the period of King Nib-mu ʿša-Rūša (Amenophis III., reigned 1388-1351/50 BC).

(7b) pBerlin 3057 ("pSchmitt"), col. 21,15 (= Möller 1900: 2), c. 300 BC.

Discovered on other rolls in the period of King Min-ghapar-Rūša.
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Discovered on another roll from the time of King Min-ghapar-Ri’i’a (Thutmosis III., reigned 1479-1425 BC) in the period of King Nib-mu’ya-Ri’i’a (Amenophis III., r. 1388-1351/50 BC) in the library of the Temple of Osiris at Abydos.

(8) A spell allegedly discovered in the course of construction or restauration works in a temple

This spell was discovered in a foundation-wall of the One-who-is-in-the-Henu-bark by an overseer of the masons in the time of the Majesty of the late King-Monarch Husaptaj (“Dewen”, r. 2889-2842 BC), and this copy has been concealed without being seen or heard.

(9) The royal mummy – a safe hiding place?

The book that was discovered at the neck of the late King Wasmu’ri’ya (Ramses II, r. 1279-1213 BC) in the necropolis.
Another spell hidden beneath a deceased

The texts of the jar which the prince and magician Khaemwase (son of Ramses II, lived c. 1279-1225 BC) discovered under the head of a spirit in the western necropolis of Memphis and which is holier than any jar in the House of Life, as it had been made in the Gate of Fire between the spirits and the deceased.

Religious spell allegedly found under the statue of a deity

This spell was discovered in Hermopolis on a block of haematite inscribed with real lapis lazuli under the feet of this god.
(12) Recipes against pains, also said to come from under the feet of a god

pEbers, col. 103,1-2 (Grapow 1958: 11-12), 16th century BC.

Beginning of a book about the roving of pains in any limb of a person, being what was discovered among texts under the feet of (a statue of the god) Anubis in Letopolis and was brought to the Majesty of the late King-Monarch Husaptaj (“Dewen”, r. 2889-2842 BC).

(13) Another medical papyrus, giving more detailed information on the same source

“Great Medical Papyrus Berlin” (pBerlin 3038, col. 15, 1-2 = Grapow 1958: 12). Ostensibly found in the early 19th century AD – together with pBerlin P. 3047 (a juridical text) – in a jar that was hidden in the ground near the pyramids of Saqqara (cf. Burkhard & Fischer-Elfert 1994: 218), 13th century BC.

Beginning of a compilation about the roving of pains that was discovered among ancient texts in a box containing documents under the feet of (a statue of the god) Anubis in Letopolis in the era of the Majesty of the late King-Monarch Husaptaj (“Dewen”, r. 2889-2842 BC) after he already had become weak.
(14) **A long way from blueprint to completion**

Inscription from Western Crypt No. 3 of the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (Chassinat & Daumas 1965: 158,7-159,1 and pl. 583), 1st century BC.

It was King-Monarch and Lord of Both Lands Min-ghapar-Rii’ā, Son-of-the-Sun-God and Lord-of-the-Crowns C’ahauti-masesa (Thutmose III, r. 1479-1425 BC) who – when he made his monument on behalf of his mother Hathor, Lady-of-Dendera, Eye-of-the-Sun-God, Lady-of-the-sky und Head-of-all-the-gods – discovered the great scheme of Dendera among ancient texts written on a very large parchment from the time of the Followers of Horus that was found inside a breccie wall of the palace in the era of King-Monarch and Lord of Both Lands Meryre, Son-of-the-Sun-God and Lord-of-the-Crowns Pijapij (Pepi I, r. 2285-2235 BC) upon whom may be bestowed any life, durability and stability like the Sun-God, eternally.
Where to find the secret book of Thot


He said to the rowers: “Row me to the place where that book is!” [They rowed him by night] as by day. In three days he reached it. He cast sand before him, and a gap formed in the river. He found six miles of serpents, scorpions, and all kinds of reptiles around [the place where the box was]. He found an eternal serpent around this same box. He recited a spell to the six miles of serpents, scorpions, and all kinds of reptiles that were around the box, and did not let them come up. [He went to the place where] the eternal serpent was. He fought it and killed it. It came to life again and resumed its shape. He fought it again, a second time, and killed it; it came to life again. He [fought it again, a third] time, cut it in two pieces, and put sand between one piece and the other. [It died] and no longer resumed its shape.

Naneferkaptah went to the place where the box was. [He found it was a box of] iron. He opened it and found a box of copper. He opened it and found a box of juniper wood. He opened it and found a box of ivory and ebony. [He opened it and found a box of] silver. He opened it and found a box of gold. He opened it and found the book in it. He brought the book up out of the box of gold.

(15) Synopsis

<table>
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<th>Source</th>
<th>actual date</th>
<th>alleged time of discovery</th>
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<td>(10)</td>
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<td>under the head of a mummy in the western necropolis of Memphis</td>
<td>Gate of the Fire</td>
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<td>c. 1250 BC</td>
<td>prior to 1250 BC</td>
<td>in a place surrounded by monsters and an eternal snake, in the innermost of six encapsulated boxes</td>
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(17) pBM 10059, col. 8,11-13, c. 1350 BC (document 1)

mythical time of composition

found in Koptos

temple courtyard

discovered during the reign of King Cheops, c. 2550 BC

time of actual compilation, c. 1350 BC

(18) Book of the Dead, Introduction of Ch. 167 (document 10)

unspecified time of composition

found in Memphis

in the western necropolis

under the head of a mummy in a jar

discovered by Prince Khaemwase (1279-1225 BC), c. 1250 BC

time of actual compilation, c. 1000 BC

(19) “Great Scheme of Dendera” (document 14)

composed in the era of the “Followers of Horus”, before 3000 BC

discovered by Pepi (I) Meryre, 23rd cent. BC

rediscovered by Thutmosis III, 15th century BC

time of actual compilation, 1st century BC

found in the palace

inside a wall of breccie

among old texts on a very large parchment
(20) The secret book of Thot (document 15)

- Mythical time of composition
- Book found by Naneferkaptah
- Fictional time of event: Khaemwase is told the story of the book by Naneferkaptah’s wife, c. 1250 BC
- Time of actual compilation, c. 230 BC

(21) Comparable structural constraints?

Temple of Karnak, source: Golvin & Goyon (1987: 14)
(22) Conclusions

The creation and representation of imaginary sacred spaces in Ancient Egypt exhibit the following constraints:

A) Structural parameters

- Sacred space often has a **fractal structure**. Sacred places were not only frequently superimposed onto or encapsulated into each other in such a way that a high degree of self-similarity of the whole with its parts of every size can be observed, but also seem to have been generally perceived as such.
- The traditional distinction [sacred] versus [profane] is not an equipollent or privative contrast but should rather be defined as a matter of **gradation**. Something or some place might be [sacred] in relation to another one, but at the same time can also be [profane] or [less sacred] in relation to a third entity or place.

B) Pragmatic parameters

- The visitor’s or user’s perspective is significant, as (gradually) distinct degrees of accessibility for different (groups of) individuals show up.
- The “eye of the beholder”: What is perceived as an entity of unstructured sacredness at one particular level of observation appears to be a more complex, structured entity of sacred and profane (or more sacred and less sacred) zones after zooming closer.
- The sacredness of places and spaces is not necessarily constant. There must have been means for temporary suspending and subsequent reinauguration of sacredness.

Select bibliography


Sacred spaces, secret places, and the storage of knowledge


Naville, Edouard. 1886. Das Ägyptische Totenbuch der XVIII. bis XX. Dynastie aus verschiedenen Urkunden zusammengestellt und herausgegeben, 2 Bde., Berlin: A: Asher


**Abbreviations**

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Zeittafel zur Geschichte Ägyptens


um 10000 Feuchtphase ermöglicht (neuerliche) Besiedlung der Sahara, halbseßhafte Gruppen

7./6. Jt. erneute Aridisierung treibt die Bewohner der Randgebiete ins Niltal und bewirkt im

6./5. Jt. die Einsetzung der Neolithisierung Ägyptens

4500 – 3900 (auf der Basis archäologischer Funde vorgenommene Einteilung in) verschiedene regionale Kulturregionen: Naqada I (Oberägypten), Badari (Mittelägypten), Maadi (Unterägypten); kleine bäuerliche Dorfgemeinschaften in der Niederwüste mit rundbautigen Hütten aus Holz und Flechtwerk; Lebensgrundlage Jagd, Haustierhaltung, Getreide- und Flachsanbau

3900 – 3500 Naqada II; Vereinheitlichung der materiellen Kultur in Delta und Niltal; Siedlungen am Fruchtlandrand mit rechteckigen Häusern aus Nilschlamm; Beginn arbeitsteiliger Güterproduktion

3500 – 3200 Naqada III; weitere Vereinheitlichung der materiellen Kultur; politische Organisation in Fürstenstümern.

3150 – 3000 „Dynastie 0“: Herrschergräber in Abydos; früheste hieroglyphische Schriftdenkmäler, Beginn annalistischer Aufzeichnungen

2657 – 2120 Altes Reich (III. – VIII. Dyn.)

2120 – 2020 Erste Zwischenzeit (IX. – X. Dyn., Beginn der XI. Dyn.)

2020 – 1793 Mittleres Reich (XI. – XII. Dyn.)

1793 – 1550 Zweite Zwischenzeit (XIII. – XVII. Dyn.)

1550 – 1069 Neues Reich (XVIII. – XX. Dyn.)

1069 – 332 Römische Kaiserzeit: Ägypten „Kornkammer“ des Römischen Reichs, infolgedessen stetiger ökonomischer Niedergang des Landes

664 – 332 Spätzeit (XXVI. – XXXI. Dyn.)

204 – 305 Ptolemäerzeit: Ägypten multiethnische und multikulturelle Gesellschaft; Alexandria Zentrum der hel lenistischen Kultur; Verbreitung ägyptischer Kultur im Ichthalmaeraum; Kleopatra VII. (reg. 51 – 30); Cäsar in Ägypten (47); Verbrennung der Bibliothek von Alexandria; nach den Siegen Octavians bei Philippi (31/30) wird Ägypten Römische Provinz; Abtransport ägyptischer Kunstwerke (u.a. Obelisken) nach Rom

30 v.Chr. – 395 Byzantinische Zeit: Konzil von Chalkedon (451), Trennung der koptischen Kirche von der Reichskirche

1805 – 1952 Dynamis Mehmed Ali als Statthalter, Khediven (seit 1866), Sultane (1914 – 1922) bzw. Könige

1922 staatliche Unabhängigkeit

1953 Proklamation der Republik