



Ladder of Heaven in Ancient Egypt

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The Concept of Heaven:

For the ancient Egyptians the cosmos, the created world was regarded as a three storey structure comprising heaven, earth and the lower sky. The horizon was the most important element where the sky and earth meet and where the sun enters the Duat. The Duat was considered the realm of the gods and all the human beings who died. Moreover, the mythological concept of the cosmos shows the cycle of the sun being associated with the sky goddess Nut and the imagery of pregnancy. Therefore the Egyptians beliefs about the hereafter were strongly shaped by two myths that were centered on the sun-god Re and Osiris god of resurrection.

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Although the heaven was commonly known in the ancient Egyptian language as "pt" which is a synonym for the sky as it was the main place for heaven. Additionally, there were other words indicating heaven as "nwt" which was the most characteristic word, as it was personified as a goddess. Furthermore, there was another word often used for heaven "qbHw". The ancient Egyptians thought that heaven was a great ladder as mentioned in the pyramid text spell 479a, corresponding to the stairway of the sun.

The ancient Egyptians divided heaven into four regions like the Old Testament, and they usually referred to in order like West, East, South and North. Furthermore they personified the sky and the earth, the sky as goddess Nut and the earth as god Geb. Nut was the far-off one known as "Hr.t": heaven, ¹ widely known as the mother of all.

According to the different scenes goddess Nut had several forms, sometimes it was pictured as a woman with elongated body bending over the earth and touching it with the hands and feet,ⁱⁱ other times it was represented as a cow with star-spangled belly, upheld by the atmosphere god Shuⁱⁱⁱ. However, it was pictured in the imagination of the ancient Egyptians as a granary^{iv} or as a great sieve^v, she was regarded as man's great protectress who usually furnished him with bread and drink, his staple food and considered as "nTsn" and "q"^{vi} where she was regarded as a garment spread over her children.

At the beginning the ancient Egyptians thought that heaven was accessible only for the deceased king, but later on it was opened to the commoners, as it was democratized. The ancient conception of the cosmos mentions that the earth rests on the primeval ocean, above it the vault of heaven which was supported



by the four pillars and below it was the counter- heaven which lies beneath the primeval ocean.

According to the Pyramid Texts the main desire was to keep the body as an integral whole, emphasized by the physical intactness in the tomb which does not exclude the ascent to heaven, but it was rather a prerequisite for it. The most famous sentence mentions that: "*The double doors of heaven are opened for you...you sit upon the throne; you command the spirits*".^{vii} This might indicate that the ascent to heaven and the existence there are linked with the Heliopolitan doctrine and regarded as a counter part to the dominion of Osiris over the dead. Moreover, in the Coffin Texts the main theme was not only the denial of death, but also the idea of the existence of the dead in heaven. Therefore, they believed that the dead man's soul was separated from his body, and then assigned to heaven, as the Ba or the soul belongs to heaven and while the dead body belongs to the nether world.^{viii}

All this indicate that the Egyptians secured access to the realm of the dead in heaven, which was previously reserved to the king, and to the soul or "Ba" of the private persons who were associated with heaven. Consequently, the preservation of the body in the tomb became the prerequisite for ascent to heaven. Additionally, it might be concluded that the two spheres, tomb and heaven, were linked, as the sarcophagus and the burial- chamber were interpreted as heaven. This link was emphasized in the depiction of the sky goddess Nut embellishing the ceiling of the sarcophagus, which was usually decorated with stars and thus turned into a canopy of heaven. However, the idea of the dead going to heaven was linked with the Heliopolitan doctrine, it also led to a denial of death. Therefore, the ancient Egyptians believed that heaven was raised high up for the Ba. This idea might reflect the fact that the



tomb was not the only abode of the dead; but an existence in heaven was claimed especially as a dwelling for the soul "Ba".^{ix} According to the idea of the deceased becoming Osiris, it means that he was absorbed into the substance of the deity. However, the Heliopolitan idea indicated that the deceased ascended to heaven and accompanied the sun-god in his journey; it also had the effect of elevating the deceased to a plane as durable as the created world.

Furthermore, the mortuary literature used to have great descriptions for the fields of heaven or Paradise of the ancient Egyptians, which was illustrated in a plan as it contains various lakes, islands and cities. Additionally they called heaven "the fields of offerings", or even "the fields of Hetep". Moreover, the Coffin Text spells mentions that god Hetep who was identified with the deceased, had a number of activities in which the deceased will be engaged with, as for example "feeding the spirits" which was considered as an important function for god "Hetep" and working in the field's of Hetep was something very important for the deceased, as he was quite content to do any duties in these fields.

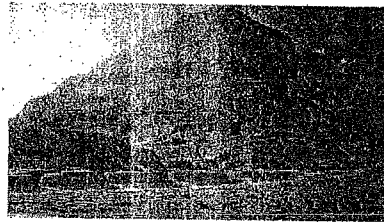
According to the Coffin Text spells, being Hetep means that he is the lord of the field of Hetep and that *"he rises in the Birth-place of the god and goes to rest there"*. Therefore, all the spells refer to the fact that the deceased had to rise up at the end where he will rest with gods. Consequently, as the deceased will ascend, he is in deep need of something to rise upon up

The meaning of Ladder:

For the ancient Egyptians the ladders and the steps were regarded as symbols of ascensions, one of the famous representations depicts Osiris as "god at the top of a staircase", which symbolizes his resurrection in the afterlife. For this



reason the step pyramid of Zoser at Saqqara was made initially to facilitate the ascension of the dead king to heaven. Furthermore, the primeval hill which, initiate mainly creation would be depicted as a flight of stairs. Additionally, it was regarded as an amulet which might be given to the deceased, it was represented in the form of a staircase which hope for new life.



(Fig.1) The step pyramid at Saqqara, which was regarded as the steps leading the deceased to heaven. The monument designed by Imhotep and belongs to king Zoser dating back to the 3rd dynasty around 2670B.C.

The phenomena of heaven and earth were so basic to Egyptian life to the extent that they were associated with many deities, such as Hathor, Bat and Horus who were identified with the sky. As there were many divinities in the ancient Egyptian religion which had celestial association there appeared many divinities related to the primary bodies in the heaven.

The ancient Egyptian Book of the Ways of Rosetau, famously called the Book of the Two Ways, which is carefully preserved on the interiors of some coffins of El-Bersha, dating back to the Middle Kingdom. These texts provide the earliest real map of heaven, which was designed specifically for the purpose of guiding the "equipped spirit" known as "akh-aper" of the deceased on its journey in the afterlife. This map was made for the benefit of those followers of the lunar cult who desired to become stars in the night sky. Moreover, this map used to





include the location of Thoth's mansion in the place of truth "maat". The heaven map also located the mansion of Osiris and the Field of Hetep "peace or offerings", where the deceased used to continue serving Osiris.

The ancient Egyptians usually uses Rosetau, Imhet and duat for indicating the "Underworld or Netherworld", but the usage of these terms is inaccurate and misleading for the fact that all of them were located in the sky, therefore they might be related to heaven. Sometimes, the word Rosetau was used for the meaning of beyond or afterworld, including heaven. However the word Imhet referred essentially to heaven which Imentet the west later became. In the ancient Egyptian language the word heaven was known as "pt" and the supporter of heaven was "HH". The Field of Reeds and the Field of Hetep were representing the eastern and western horizons, the western was regarded as the nearest thing to paradise.^x

The ladder of Heaven in the Religious Books:

The ancient Egyptians had several religious books and texts among which was the famous Pyramid Texts, where we found several references to a divine ladder, by means of which the deceased king might ascend to heaven. The

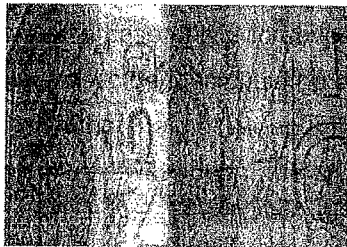
ladder was called "mqt": "  "xi or "mAqt": "  "xii".

The ladder of heaven is mentioned in the Pyramid texts being related to the celestial journey of the Sun god and the dead king. In the primitive versions they said that they used reed floats, later they mentioned the usage of a boat, and sometimes they even replaced the ladder by a staircase or just mentioning flight of steps. For this reason one should put in consideration that the ancient



Egyptians might use the ladder or the staircase for the same purpose or the same indication.

Dating back to the Archaic period, there were small tablets made out of ebony or ivory which had been found in archaic tombs at Abydos, upon them engraved scenes representing a god or a king enthroned on the top of a staircase and sometimes even a depiction of a staircase only. Moreover the representation of the "Sed-platform" in the early dynastic periods could be a step which helped in the development of the idea of the staircases and the ladders. The first representation of the "sed-platform" was upon the Mace-head of Narmer (founder of the 1st dynasty), which was found in the temple of Horus at Hierakonpolis (Fig.2). Most probably, the scene upon this mace-head depicts the rituals of the "Sed-festival". It shows the king seated on his throne and underneath him the fan bearers who were shown behind the stairs which leads to the throne of the king or which leads to his canopy, to indicate how supreme he was, as the high person always dominate the other people or the commoners.



(Fig.2) A scene depicted upon the mace-head of king Narmer.

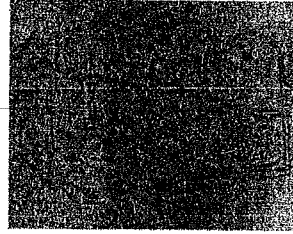
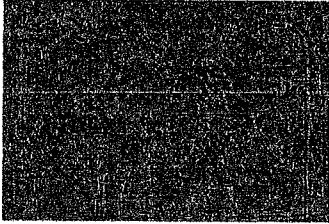


For example in Berlin Museum, there was a tablet which belongs to King Djer where the scene is divided into four parts, in the second register there is a rectangular panel to its left side a large flight of steps inscribed as shown in (Fig.3). The scene depicts the steps in front of it seated on the ground a human figure wrapped in a long cloak and to its right side some hieroglyphic signs.^{xiii}

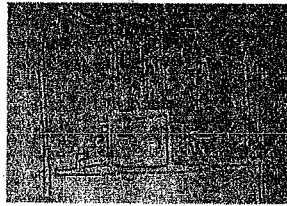


(Fig.3) The tablet of king Djer, dating back to the Archaic period, now in Berlin Museum. Newberry, *PSBA*, 34 (1912), pl.33, 15.

Moreover, there is another tablet bearing the name of king Den and his chancellor Hemaka (Fig. 4), representing the king while performing a ritual before the shrine of the god which lies on the top of flight of steps. Inside the shrine there is a mummified figure of the king or the god, wearing the white crown of Upper Egypt and holding the flail scepter. According to J. Vandier this might be a representation of the Heb-Sed. Other scholars suggest that the scene was referring to god Osiris who was in the shrine which was placed upon the stairs, as Osiris had the title of "the god on the top of the staircase". Additionally, there is another tablet of king Den depicting the Heb-Sed shrine empty having two staircases leading up to it as seen in (Fig.5)^{xiv}



(Fig. 4) A tablet for king Den from Abydos, dating back to the Archaic period.



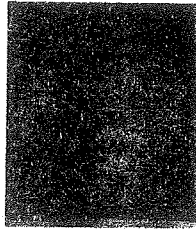
(Fig. 5) Another tablet for king Den from Abydos, depicting empty Heb-Sed shrine.

The staircase was found in several religious texts as for example the texts of Merenre and Pepi II, which was an address to Osiris. Consequently, the staircase was connected with Osiris and Abydos as included in several royal mortuary texts.

According to the religious Books heaven was a duplicate of the earth life; gods ate and adorned themselves, married, fought, ruled and served. However to men they were manifested as a rule in the form of the stars of heaven. Consequently, the inhabitants of heaven were gods, goddesses, defied kings and stars. Therefore the question was what will happen to the priests, princes and the commoners after their death! According to the Pyramid texts the



deceased nobleman and the commoners went to heaven as mentioned in the solar theology, but the texts were not concerned with future of the ordinary individuals, but with the fate of the royals. Furthermore, there is an example which clearly shows the platform of the "Heb-Sed" upon an alabaster vessel^{xv}, found in the niches of the underground galleries of the Step Pyramid. This platform can be reached by double staircases which emphasizes how the steps were made as in (Fig.6).



(Fig. 6) An Alabster vessel decorated with the "Sed-Platform", having doubl staircases, now in Cairo Museum .

In spell 474 a of the Pyramid text it mentions: "*the spirit belongs to heaven and the body belongs to the earth*". The deceased king usually flies away^{xvi}, while the gods fly up.^{xvii} Therefore, the Pyramid Texts admits that the deceased king was the only human being who went to heaven after his resurrection, purification, the opening of the mouth, his ceremonial spiritualization and his deification which were not performed to the commoners. Doubtless every deified person was regarded as a god or goddess and he was a citizen in heaven, as Re or Hathor. Then ordinary deceased used to be ruled by the deceased king from his throne in heaven.^{xviii}

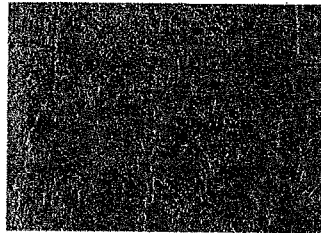
Furthermore, in the different spells of the Pyramid text the voyage of the deceased king to heaven is described and referred to in numerous passages. The ladder was the most popular means of reaching heaven. It was mentioned



several times in the Pyramid texts as the ladder was known in the ancient Egyptian language as "mAq.t" or "pAq.t" from "iAq" which means "to mount" ^{xx} Consequently, according to the Pyramid text the word "mAq.t" was referring to the ladder of two sides, both curving towards each other at the lower end and terminating in one piece which seems to have been stuck in the ground, the rungs being between the two sides where they were separated. These ladders were usually bound together by cables or ropes. ^{xx}

Moreover, there were other means for getting to heaven, such as stairway or stairs, mentioned in the ancient Egyptian language as "rwd". ^{xxi} One of the popular ideas which help to reach heaven was the boat whether it was mentioned as "sxn" meaning "reed-float" which appears usually in pairs, ^{xxii} together with the sail boat or the row boat. ^{xxiii}

The most famous Utterance of the Pyramid Text where they mentioned how the ladder were made to allow the deceased to ascend to heaven like the sun god Khepri was spell no.668, which was shown also in a scene on the Temple of Hateshpsut at Deir El Bahary.



(Fig. 7) These four gods, friends of the King, the Sons of Horus, they tie the rope ladder for this King, they make firm the wooden ladder for this King, they cause the King to mount up to Khepri when he appears in the eastern horizon. The ladder's timbers have been hewn ... the lashings which are on it have been drawn tight with sinews ... the rungs have been fastened to its sides with leather.



Additionally, the ancient Egyptians believed that the deceased could reach heaven by air, by flying as a goose (366a-b), or other bird such as heron (891b), or ascending on the wing of a falcon (250c), or on that of Thot (595a), or Khepri (1757b). The deceased might ascend as well on a cloud as mentioned in spell (1560a), or as a rain-cloud (1774a), or as a hail-storm (336b). Furthermore, he could mount on the rays of the sun, or as on steps of light (spells 852e, 960c, 1680c). However, according to spells 165a-b, 365b and 2053b the deceased might reach heaven on stairs in the form of incense; or could float up on warm breath as mentioned in spell 541b.

The ancient Egyptians added that the deceased could ascend on more substantial things, as the horns of a bull (1432a), or the hips of Isis and Nephthys (379), or by being given by taking the arm of a deity as Nut (1090e), or Re and Shu (275e-f); as well as seizing the tail of the ox of the oxen (Re) spell 547a-b.

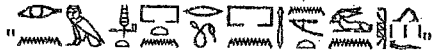
The deceased could also ascend to heaven in a standing posture of his own power (2160b), or even as the artists represent the ascension of Jesus. Additionally, the earth (Geb) would rise under the feet of the deceased king and Tefnut might lay hold of his arm (990b).

The ancient Egyptians imagined that Shu the air god upheld the sky on his two hands, as they were *sxn.wt* or "supporters of heaven",^{xxiv} they also imagined them as the bordering mountains or the hills of the Nile valley and they depicted them in the form of Shu and Tefnut.^{xxv} Sometimes they were represented as four pillars in the Book of the Dead. The ancient Egyptians believed that the entrance to heaven was in the East, where the sun rose and that they were two great doors or a double-leaved door like the portals of their palaces. They imagined that there were mansions, lakes, roads and even marshes. They



believed that heaven was inhabited by divine beings, but they were concerned more with the deceased deified kings who rose from their earthly death and ascended to heaven to live there as gods. Sometimes the deceased king is depicted capturing heaven, he takes up the manner of life of the celestials, and over them as king.^{xxvi}

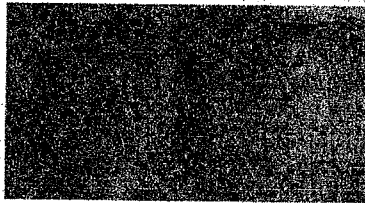
During the Middle Kingdom, there were several examples for the staircase or the ladder as for example the stela of Ikudidi, the deceased says:



"I have made this tomb at the staircase of the Great God, in order that I may be among his followers."

Furthermore, during the reign of king Amenemhat III (12th dynasty), there was a high official who visited Abydos and left a commemorative tablet, his name is Sisetet who, said: *"The Stela which the master of the Double Cabinet of the Office of the Chief Treasurer, Sisetet, made in order that his name might endure at the staircase of the Great-God"*.

The representation of the "Sed-platform" was different from the usual depiction where the platform used to have stairs from both sides as in (Fig.7) which was a relief from Medamoud belonging to king Senuset III, here the king was represented seating on the double Heb-Sed throne or platform.



(Fig.7) Relief from the Temple of Medamoud, belonging to king Senusert III, dating back to the 12th dynasty, depicting a scene where the king was shown



seated upon the double "Heb-Sed" platform to ensure his power and full control upon Upper and lower Egypt.^{xxxvii}

Moreover, during the Middle Kingdom there were several stelae being inscribed with the synonym of the staircase or ladder, among them the stela which belongs to the Physician of Serket, named Soker-em-hat^{xxxviii} who inscribed a text suggesting that the staircase was a place where the offerings could be brought:



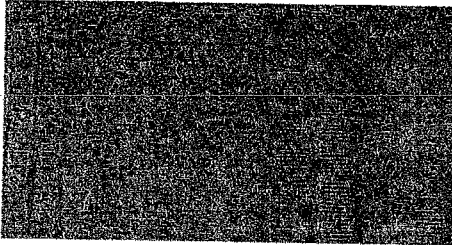
"Bring to him immediately the offerings of the Necropolis together with the followers of Osiris upon the staircase."

However, by the New Kingdom the staircase of the great god was firmly fixed in the religious traditions and rituals. Not only being mentioned in the religious texts, but it was also depicted in the religious art. In the great Temple of Deir El Bahary, there was a scene depicting In the "Book of the Gates" there are scenes showing Osiris in the last judgment Hall, seated at the top of a staircase. Additionally, there is an illustration engraved upon the alabaster sarcophagus of king Sety I (dating back to the 19th dynasty), the scene depicts god Osiris as judge of the dead seated upon his throne which was placed on the top of a staircase. Moreover, there was an identical scene painted on the western wall of the entrance passage of the Osireion at Abydos.

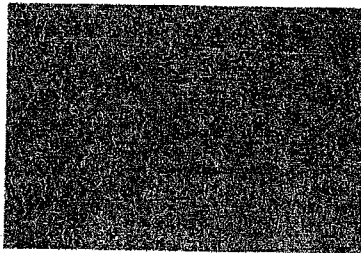
Furthermore, at Abydos in the Temple of King Sety I (19th dynasty), on the eastern wall of the corridor of the kings, a reference appeared among the list of deities and their cult centers or places of worship, exactly opposite to the famous kings list.



Additionally, it was depicted in the royal tombs of the Valley of the Kings and upon their sarcophagi. Among these tombs was the tomb of king Horemheb, king Sety I as shown in (Fig.8), and the tomb of king Ramesses VI, as demonstrated in (Fig.9). According to Piankoff, the most common scene represented in the royal tombs depicts the Judgment Hall where the throne of the God is set upon a staircase, up which mount nine gods who were the Ennead of Osiris, in front of Osiris a mummified figure holding the balance upon his shoulder and above the staircase there is a boat carrying a pig and an ape.



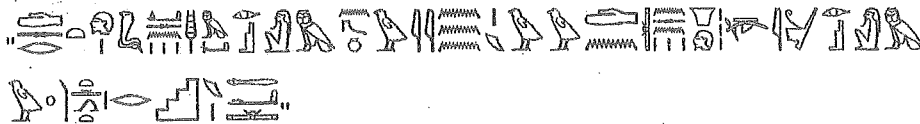
(Fig.8) A religious scene shown in the tombs of Horemheb and Sety I, dating back to the New Kingdom (18th & 19th dynasties).



(Fig.9) A religious scene depicting the scene of the Last judgment, having steps and some figures ascending these flight of steps, as if they were representing some divinities, or figures which will assist the deceased to enter heaven.

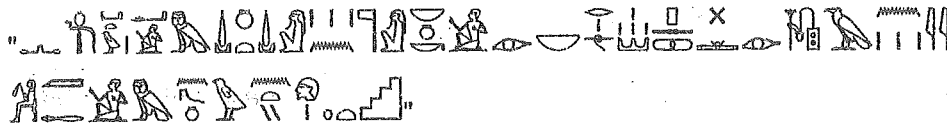


Finally, the staircase is mentioned and represented several times in the Book of the Dead, as for example chapter CLXVIII the staircase was associated with god Osiris or the deceased identified with Osiris, as it says: ^{xxix}



"May the goddess Desert grant that Osiris may have power the water. And there shall be made unto them (the gods) an offering of a libation of one vase upon the earth by Osiris, when he shall walk up the great staircase." ^{xxx}

Moreover, there were other numerous texts dating back to the New Kingdom implying that the deceased used to receive offerings at the staircase of the God of Abydos, as in chapter XXII of the Book of the Dead where he says: ^{xxxi}

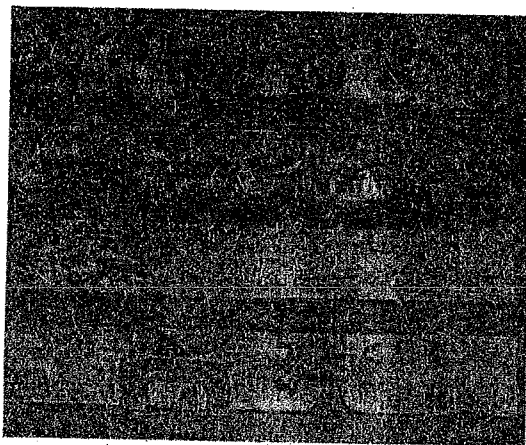


- *"May my hand not be forced back in the presence of the divine council of any god. I am Osiris, the lord of Rostau, may I (Osiris) the scribe Ani, victorious, have a portion with him who is on the top of the Steps (Staircase)."*

The most important fact which should be noticed is that the staircase or the ladder or the steps were not only mentioned in the texts of the Book of the Dead but also shown in several vignettes of the Book of the Dead. For example in chapter CX which was related to Sekhet-hotep, the vignettes depicts a series of fields separated with canals and lakes, while the scene in the Nebseni shows in the lower register a staircase placed in a boat which might reflect a certain journey, or might be referring to the journey to heaven. However in the papyrus



of Ani, the staircase was depicted three times once on an island as it was described "he who is in his booth", while the second time in a boat upon a stand and the third time inside a boat moving in a lake as shown in (fig. 10).



(Fig.10) A scene from the papyrus of Ani, representing chapter 110 of the Book of the Dead, showing the fields of offerings or heaven. In the bottom register far left three lines of text mentioning about the place of the blessed dead, it is the effective noblemen who harvest them. Then caption above flight of steps: Suddjebai. While, the caption on the right side of the lower loop of is Ishet. The a caption of snake-headed boat representing the holy shore and finally the caption of a boat which had upon it flight of steps to indicate that by the end of the journey, the deceased had to ascend to heaven, or to go reside with gods.^{xxxii}

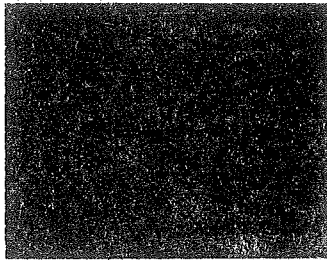
Furthermore, chapter CXLIX of the Book of the Dead deals with the fourteen "lats" of the kingdom of Osiris. According to the Papyrus of Nu the vignettes represented different forms of the "lats and their guardians". The eleventh "lat"



is depicted in the form of a staircase and inside it a jackel-headed divinity holding a knife and a mace-head as shown in (Fig. 11). Although in the accompanying text there is no mentioning of the staircase, but in the 11th line the deceased says:

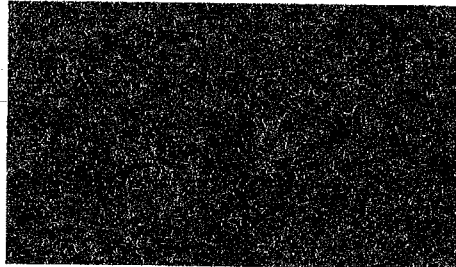
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"I set up a ladder to heaven among the Gods, and I am one among them." ^{xxxiii}



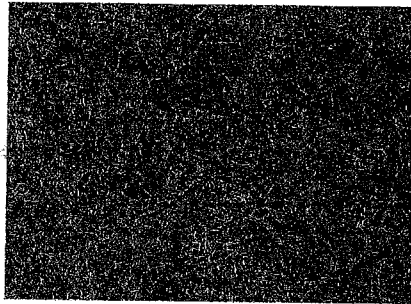
(Fig.11) A religious scene from the papyrus of Nu, depicting chapter CXLIX, showing the 11th line in the form of a staircase. British Museum, No. 10477.

However, the ladders or the staircases were mentioned in the different funerary religious books, one cannot skip mentioning the example which appeared in the "Book of the Amduat". In the Fourth Hour where the name of the region was "land of Sokar": the scene was divided into three registers representing the sun-god who reaches a completely different landscape, a bleak sandy desert full of snakes with a path zigzagging or a ladder leading downwards. In the lower register the last section of the road leads to the entrance of the "imhet" which was another term used for the "Duat" and also for the realm of Sokar, and in the depth of this underworld desert one can reach or even touch the celestial beyond and the representation of the stars emphasizes that it is in the sky.



(Fig.12) The fourth hour, which was known as the "Land of Sokar", where the gates were depicted as ladders or flight of steps, to emphasize upon the significance of the ladders as represented in the three registers.

Furthermore, in the Eighth Hour where the name of the region was called "Caves of the Mysterious Gods" the scene was also divided into three registers, the upper and the lower had many ladders. Each register had six red doors indicated by the ladders or the staircases, and five caves, when god Re passes the doors open at his word, the caves are illuminated, the images becomes visible, and the corpses remain in the sand.^{xxxiv}



(Fig.13) The eighth hour of the "Amduat", which was called "The Caves of the Mysterious Gods", where to separate between the caves he presented ladders, to indicate a new role for the ladders.



Additionally, in the late "Book of Traversing Eternity", the deceased was assured to be permitted to ascend the staircase of the Heb-Sed, as he mentioned:



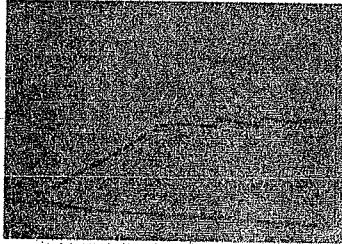
"Thou ascendest the staircase of Hwt-Heb-sed."

Consequently, the staircase or the ladder of heaven had so many references in the religious Books, but it still have a mysterious significance and it can have several indications as

Firstly: being the staircase of the Great God in Abydos.

Secondly: The flight of steps leading down from the island in the Osireion to the water-channel.

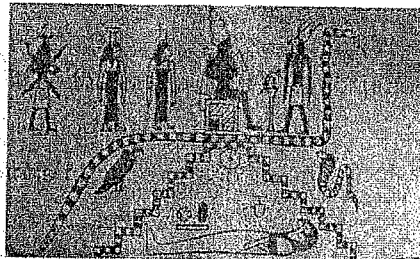
Thirdly: The ladder or the staircase leading from the quay of the canal to the first pylon of the Temple of Sety I. Concerning the Temple of king Sety I if one consider a section for this temple, you will see that the whole building is one gigantic ladder or staircase, leading to the desert where the sacred tomb of Osiris lies. Additionally, when you study the great temples of the New Kingdom, you will recognize that the height of the roof decreases gradually as you approach the Sanctuary, as this was normally achieved by lowering the height of the walls and the columns see (Fig. 14). This might reflect the fact of having a large model of the ancient sacred ladder or staircase which ensures its existence in the ancient Egyptian beliefs.



(Fig.14) A large model of the ancient sacred staircase.

Some scholars suggested that there should be a monumental staircases or ladders inside the tombs, but unfortunately they were undiscovered yet although there were so many indications for its existence in the texts and the scenes as their presence will help the deceased to ascend to heaven after the judgment.

However, some scholars believed that the staircase might be the name of some natural features, as for example the "Devil's Dyke, Devil's Bridge, Giant Causeway", the staircase or the ladder was indicated to allow the dead to travel to the kingdom of Osiris. Moreover, the slope of sand descending in the tombs might be hiding rock-cut or masonry steps.



(Fig.15) God Osiris enthroned on a mound. Piankoff, A., *The tomb of Ramesess VI. The mummy is depicted as if buried under the ground then he will ascend to heaven to accompany Osiris.*

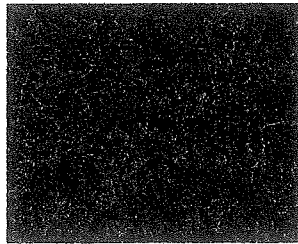


According to Erman the significance of the ladder or the staircase lies in the fact that the deceased wished to be near the Gods or near the Master of Abydos.

Finally, the ancient Egyptians belief was that the Hereafter used to contain the same physical features and sacred cities and that the ladder of heaven was a mythological feature.

Consequently, from the study of the iconography of the steps of the "Sed-platform" during the early dynastic confirms the hypothesis that the principal content of the festival was the idea of consolidation of the pharaoh's power over the bipartite^{xxxv} Egyptian state by means of ritual. Therefore climbing steps or stairs or ladders emphasizes that the person has great power and is superior over the others, and to indicate that he will be with the gods having power over the others.

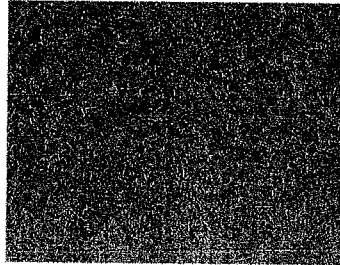
Dating back to the 22nd dynasty, in the tomb of Osorkon II at Tanis, in the tomb of "Xnsw-Hb, on the southern wall of the antechamber, in the centre of the main scene, god Osiris was depicted sitting on the throne on a nb-vase standing on a podium with steps. This indicates that the gods has to be represented higher to that they are in heaven or in the sky, therefore whenever the deceased wished to ascend to heaven he had to use steps, ladder or staircases, as in (Fig16).



(Fig.16) A religious scene belonging to the tomb of xnsw-Hb, dating back to the 21st dynasty. (after Montet, *Le tombeau of Sheshonq III*, pl. liii.15)



However, in the tomb of SheshonqIII, there is a scene depicting god Osiris enthroned upon flight of steps having a wild animal ascending the staircase holding two knives, as if he wants to research the god and help him to defeat the demons of the underworld, as shown in (fig 17).^{xxxvi}



(Fig.17) Papyrus BM EA 9932, The court during the last judgment. (after Niwinski, *Illustrated Theban Funerary Papyri*, pl.46a).^{xxxvii}

The deities related to the ladder of heaven:

For the ancient Egyptians the ladder of heaven was identified with goddess Nut, the sky goddess, and sometimes Nut was called ladder, as mentioned in the pyramid text spell number 1941a-b.

It is interesting to note that with the entrance of Osiris, god of death in the Pyramid Text, the ladder of heaven was Osirianized.^{xxxviii} Additionally, the ladder of heaven was identified with Isis and Nephthys, as mentioned in 972a. According to the Pyramid Text spell 971b, there was a ladder for god Set (god of evil), while in spell 468b there was a ladder thought to be under the guardianship of god Thot (god of wisdom and knowledge, inventor of writing).

The mystery lies in the place where the ancient Egyptians set the ladder of heaven. In spell 2078a-20080f there was a description given for the making and setting up of the heavenly ladder, the place was most probably Letopolis. In



some spells of the Pyramid text the ladder of heaven was personified and addressed as a person.^{xoo dx}

Moreover, in the late Egyptian writings the ladder played an important role as in the Coffin Texts as well as the Magical texts. For example the mystery play which was performed at the ascension of Senusert I (2000 B.C.), when there was a heavenly ladder made to enable Osiris to go to heaven.

However, since the New Kingdom onwards the sun-god had several symbols associated with the elevations, as the falcon which was usually depicted perching on top of a mountain, while the creatures were depicted adoring him being scattered around the mountain to show that the sun-god had to be higher. Additionally, he was sometimes illustrated in a sacred boat but on the top of a gradient hill, or platform which used to resemble the step- pyramid, while the solar disk can be seen also upon a high mountain. All these scenes reflects the fact that the gods had to be raised on a higher level to indicate their importance and emphasize that the higher place was for the gods, therefore paradise and heaven were always high. Consequently, as the gods stay there so the deceased had to ascend upon the ladders, steps or staircases to reach there together with all the righteous creatures.

Concerning the creation myths, the ancient Egyptians believed that the whole world had been a primeval ocean then appeared the primeval hill upon which was created the god then from it all the other creatures, for this reason they mentioned in the religious texts "thy ancient dome was in the hill or hills of Wnw", this place was declared by the Egyptians as the birth-place of the sun-god for the Hermopolitans. Therefore they designated temple of god Amun at



Karnak as "The Horizon of the Universe", while the temple of Khonsu was called "Thy elevation which rose out of Nun". Furthermore the city of Thebes itself was regarded as "the great mound which had emerged from Nun", thus describing that it was "the huge mound which emerged from Nun where heaven and earth were still united." Not only Thebes was considered as the high land but also any sacred land as for example Medint Habu which was described as "the highland which sprouted in Nun, where the egg which was composed first, the great semen of the divine spirit."

The mythology of the Ascension:

According to the ancient Egyptians conception, the sun-god Re was regarded as the son of the earth god Geb and the sky goddess Nut and they were supposed to give him birth every morning and to swallow him up every evening. For this reason they thought that the man can be identified with the sun-god, after death he disappears in the west, but he has to pass through the body of the sky goddess Nut to rise again from the east. Therefore, the sky goddess Nut became the protector of the dead and the personification of the coffin, as the sun hides inside the body of the sky the deceased was conceived in the coffin till he becomes able to ascend to heaven to stay with the deities.

This concept was clearly expressed in the tombs of the New Kingdom as in the tomb of Ramesses IV and the Osireion of Sety I. For example, in the tomb of Ramesses IV there was a text mentioning that the sun-god Re had to rise towards the sky and consequently the deceased had to follow the same role.^{x1} The deceased king had to pass through several rituals to be ready for the ascension to heaven. After the purification and the prayers of the funerary



rituals the deceased was prepared for his entrance to the Hereafter. Therefore, the deceased entrance to the Hereafter and the assumption of power was considered a means of ascent- purification.^{xli} Consequently, the rejection of an impure state and the acceptance or reception of the purity state was regarded as a method of attaining immortal status, as it was mentioned in the Pyramid Text as follows:

"I am pure, I am conveyed to the sky thereby"^{xlii}, "or a stairway to the sky is set up for me that I may ascend on it to the sky, as I ascend on the smoke of the great censuring."^{xliii}

Additionally, one can conclude that the censuring of the smoke is a metaphor for the efficacy of the purification-rites during the preparation of the soul to ascend to heaven. Furthermore, the ascent of the soul is said to be: "going to the double (ka)", so, the appearance of the double initiates the motion towards ascent.

Finally, the purity of the deceased, his royal status and the status as a man of morality and his rights as being heir to the domains of the earth and sun-gods were sufficient for the king to attempt to reach the horizon. For this reason there were many religious texts dealing with the preparations for the ascent. The King was prepared to be raised by Re or Atum through the actions of the "messengers of the double". Moreover, in one of the versions the king made an appeal to the sky-goddess Nut saying: "set your hand on me with life and dominion,^{xliiv} so that he might lift himself to her"^{xliv}, because if the body decayed, he would not be able to reach the Hereafter.



Actually, we have to differentiate between two types of royal power which had been presented in the theology of the Pyramid Texts: the first type was the power of kingship through Re and the second type was the power of the absolute rule in the earthly and celestial realms. As a conclusion, the first was a mythology conception of the king's position in the cosmic structure, however the second was the political fact justified in the religious doctrine. Therefore, the texts emphasize upon the self-sufficiency and the capabilities of the king to lift himself or to ascend on special devices unaided by other divinities.^{xvii} Moreover, the texts admitted that the king did not rely upon goddess Nut in his preparation for ascent, but he could use his powers as a supreme mortal to reach the Hereafter. Some scholars believed that Nut might have acted a minor role in the actual ascension, but her significant role was in the rebirth of the king.

According to the Pyramid Texts there were many methods mentioned for the ascent of the deceased to heaven, they can be divided into two categories: ritual transmission and ritual identification. Therefore, the king might ascend using the sandals of Nut as an aid^{xviii}. Additionally, ascent by transmission might be in the purity of the king through the Eye of Horus and the mention that his illness might be removed by the two kites of Osiris.

Consequently, one can deduce that the king had to use a ladder to reach the Hereafter, but the origin of the ladder was unclear, however the religious texts spell 1431 states that "a ladder was set up for him that he may ascend on it", while spell 468 indicate that the ladder must be opened up for the king by the "daughter of Anubis... the companion of Thot, who is at the uprights of the ladder." Additionally, the king had to pray for the use of the ladder which was employed by the other divinities:

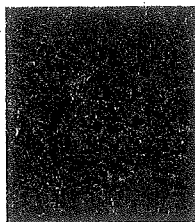


"I am your son, I am Horus; you begot me just as you begot the god, the Lord of the Ladder. You have given to him the ladder of the god, you have given to him the ladder of Seth, that he may ascend on it to the sky and escort Re. Now let the ladder of the god be given to me, that I may ascend on it to the sky and escort Re..."^{ixlviii}

The most famous religious texts shows the king climbing a ladder to meet the gods and it mentions: " A ladder is knotted together by Re before Osiris, a ladder is knotted together by Horus before his father Osiris when he goes to his spirit, one of them being on this side and one of them being on that side, while I am^{xlix} between them" as Horus and Re were shown flanking the ladder.¹

According to a series of religious texts the deceased king was lifted with the aid of some gods as he mentioned: "Horus lifts me up, Seth raises me". At this point the means of ascent was unclear, as he sometimes implies that the king was ascending by means of "SdSd", which is an element of the cult standard of Wepwawet (the opener of the road) and other times by using "sfrt-Htpt" which was an element associated with Osiris.ⁱⁱ

Finally the ascent was accomplished in different ways, which were: the king's life-essence which could be transmitted to the sky, or by using the powers of a being ritually identified with itself, or by mounting to heaven on a ladder, or any other device.



(Fig.18) The flight of steps being used as an amulet to ascertain the great significance of the ladders and the



- ⁱ Heaven was mentioned as Hr . t in the Pyramid Text spell 785 d.
- ⁱⁱ A great example for this depiction was in the tomb of Ramesses IV.
- ⁱⁱⁱ It was shown in this form in the tomb of Seti I dating back to the 19th dynasty.
- ^{iv} As mentioned in the Pyramid text in spell 786 a.
- ^v As described in the Pyramid text 638 c.
- ^{vi} In the Pyramid in spell 1426 c.
- ^{vii} Pyr utt.355, utt. 373. Allen, J.P., (1988), *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Atlanta, p.137.
- ^{viii} Urk., IV, 481.
- ^{ix} Morenz, S., (1996), *Egyptian Religion*, Cornell University Press, p.198-213.
- ^x Baines, J.; Lesko, L.; Silverman, D., *Religion in Ancient Egypt*, p.34-39, 119-121.
- ^{xi} Wb. II, 158.
- ^{xii} Wb. II, 33, Faulker, R., "A Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian", Oxford (1962), p. 103.
- ^{xiii} Newberry, P.S.B.A, XXXIV, 1912, pl. XXXIII, 15.
- ^{xiv} Petrie, F. *Royal Tombs*, vol.I, pl. XIV.
- ^{xv} GM 64872,
- ^{xvi} PT. 463d, Mercer, S.A.B., (1952), *The Pyramid Texts, its translation and Commentary*, New York, p. 94.
- ^{xvii} PT. 459a.
- ^{xviii} PT. 1166 b, 381b, 319c.
- ^{xix} PT. 1473b, 1474b.
- ^{xx} PT.138c, 2079a.
- ^{xxi} PT. 365a.
- ^{xxii} PT. 337a-d.
- ^{xxiii} PT.1092a, 367b.
- ^{xxiv} Urk. IV, 428, I.
- ^{xxv} Wb. IV, 135.
- ^{xxvi} Massey, G., (2009), *Ancient Egypt The light of the World, A work of Reclamation and Restitution in Twelve Books, Vol.II*, New York, p. 207.
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- ^{xxviii} Now preserved in Cairo Museum, No. 20088.
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- ^{xxxiv} Binder, S., (1995), *The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology, Vol.6*, "The Hereafter: Ancient Egyptian Beliefs with special Reference to the Amduat", p. 7-29.
- ^{xxxv} Indication for the two parts: upper and lower Egypt.
- ^{xxxvi} Lull, J., (2001), JEA Vol.87, "A Scene from the Book of the Dead belonging to a private twenty-first dynasty tomb in Tanis", pp. 180-186.
- ^{xxxvii} Niwinski, (1989), *Studies on the Illustrated Theban Funerary Papyri of the 11th and 10th Centuries B.C.*, Freiburg, pl.46a.



- xxxviii PT. Utterances 306, 474, 480, and 572.
- xxxix PT. Utterances 971b, 1253a, 1431c-1432a.
- xj Piankoff, A., JEA 1934, vol. 20, The Sky-goddess Nut and the Night Journey of the Sun, pp.57-61
- xli PT. 710.
- xlii PT. 1423.
- xliii PT. 365.
- xliv PT. 1036.
- xlv As goddess Nut was a symbol of the entire sky.
- xlvi PT. 542, 543 and 547.
- xlvii PT 539, 540.
- xlviii PT. 973-75.
- xlix I am referring to the king.
- ⁱ CT sp. 629, 404, 605.
- ⁱⁱ Dav is, Whitney. M, (1977), The Ascension- Myth in the Pyramid Texts, pp.161-179.