

Theology in the Time of Djoser

by David A. Cintron

The step pyramid complex of Djoser is perhaps the most remarkable surviving monument of archaic Egypt. It is the earliest surviving pyramid. It is the only royal monument with texts earlier than the fifth dynasty still in situ. It has also fortunately managed to escape the ramblings and intrusions of the “pyramidiots”.

Possibly the most fascinating aspect of this entire complex is the set of six inscribed panels found in the passageways of the north and south tombs. These were the subject of an article by Florence Dunn Friedman in JARCE 32 ¹. In this article these panels were described as falling into a specific sequence which will be adhered to in this paper, with the first panel being the northernmost and the last panel being the southernmost (fig.1).

Because there are no surviving religious texts earlier than the fifth dynasty, no documents exist from which a theology can be interpolated that has validity earlier than the time of Unas. However a tentative theology for the third dynasty may be extrapolated based upon speculative interpretation of the underground panels of Djoser, as long as an attempt is made to fully explain every aspect of these panels in context. To be complete this must answer the questions, what is the purpose of these panels, and what story do they tell?

As these panels are the only inscriptions that remain after more than 4650 years they were likely of the highest quality. Because these special panels appear in a royal tomb in a funerary context it must be assumed that these panels tell the story of the rejuvenation of Djoser. Perhaps this story is based on the sed festival, and perhaps the sed festival is based on this story. In either case the two are intimately connected. These inscriptions tell a continuing story of rejuvenation. Whether this was an event that occurred every 30 years or every day does not matter. What does matter is the motivation behind the story.

The six panels begin with the king standing in the first panel surrounded by symbolic iconography that illustrates his status as king. Each successive panel shows a slightly different shift in iconography that shows the progression of the journey. The second, third and fourth panels show the king in motion. The fifth and sixth show the king standing once again. Each standing panel shows the king in a specific shrine. Each moving panel shows the king between markers connected with the *sd* festival as he passes a specific landmark.

In the first panel Djoser stands holding a mace and *mks* staff, with a dagger in his belt, as if ready for a journey. The highest and foremost symbol in this panel, and every panel, is the Wepwawet standard. This standard is made up of the royal placenta followed by the Wadjet cobra and a canine figure, most likely Anubis, together opening the way to a new life. The motivation is defined by this standard, the opening of the way to a new life in the hereafter.

That way is led by the royal placenta which has a special significance as the lead symbol in the Wepwawet standard. Several things can be reviewed that are known about the royal placenta. Since predynastic times the placenta and cord blood was collected at birth using the pss-kf knife set². It was most likely stored in a protected location throughout the king's life³. But there is no evidence that it was preserved at death. Neither canopic jar nor mummified form of the placenta has ever been found.

The placenta was saved because it was considered a part of the creation of the royal body. In every birth the placenta follows the newborn into the world. Is it possible the placenta was destroyed at death? It is a logical conclusion if it follows the king into this world to assist his birth that as his "twin" it would need to follow the king into the next world to assist his rebirth. The first panel hints at this.

In the first panel the king stands as Horus Behdetite in the Per Nu, also known as the Per Nesar, or house of flame. Evidence of intentional conflagration has been found in royal mastabas at Saqqara⁴ and Abydos⁵. This indicates that a Per Nesar ritual was enacted after the king's death, and this may be connected with the royal placenta.

There is a stated link between Wepwawet and the *Pr Nsr* in Pyramid Text 569, "An address to Re"⁶. which begins, "I know your name, I am not ignorant of your name; your name is 'Limitless', your father's name is 'you are great', your mother's name is 'Peace', (even) she who bears you on the path of the dawn(?), the path of the dawn(?)." The text is old and the translation is difficult, implying a link to archaic Egypt.

The second part is a repetition of two-line verses with a varying subject. "The birth of Limitless in the horizon will be prevented, if you prevent me from coming to the place where you are. ... The birth of Wepwawet in the *pr-nw* will be prevented, if you prevent me from coming to the place where you are. ..."

All of these verses threaten factors which provide support to Re' if the speaker is not allowed to join Re' in his solar bark. Re' was a known deity in the third dynasty.

"The birth of Limitless in the horizon will be prevented ...

"The birth of Selket will be prevented ...

"The Two Banks will be held back from Horus ...

"The birth of Orion will be prevented ...

"The birth of Sothis will be prevented ...

"The Two Apes, his beloved sons, will be held off from Re' ...

"The birth of Wepwawet in the *pr-nw* will be prevented ...

"Men will be held back from the King, the son of the god,
if you prevent me from coming to the place where you are"

"Your crew of the imperishable Stars will be prevented from rowing you ...

"Men will be prevented from dying ...

"Men will be held back from food,

if you prevent me from going aboard this bark of yours."

If Wepwawet was born in the house of fire, something must have been burned. A placenta would have left scant remains, so this may not be provable.

Following the image of the placenta in the Wepwawet standard are the cobra and the canine. There is no contemporary explanation for why these symbols are combined in this standard, but there are two strong possibilities following the logic of Egyptian religion.

First, the cobra was a powerful symbol from predynastic times. Its periodic shedding of skin can be likened to a rebirthing process, symbolic or real. It was also possessor of the *wadjet* eye. Anubis was the guardian of the underworld in later times and the canine image dates back to the first dynasty at least. Together, these three represent birth (the placenta), death and rebirth (the cobra), and reclamation of death (the jackal).

A second possibility may be found in the real world with a review of the birthing process. In this process the child is delivered first, still attached by the umbilical cord, which must be cut, and later the placenta or “afterbirth”. It can be easily observed that the cobra has a similar shape as an umbilical, and that in nature dogs cut the umbilical with their teeth. This explanation may seem too simple, but if one were to be reborn in a place where no help was expected, that one would require a placenta, cord and cord cutter. These may have been combined in the Wepwawet standard, to open the way to rebirth.

Just behind the Wepwawet standard is the throne cushion, there to ensure that when the king arrives in his new life, he will still be king. This cushion appears only in the panels with shrines and does not appear in the panels in which Djoser is moving.

The first panel states, “’*h*’ [*m*] *Hr Bhd* (*pr nw*)”, interpreted as “standing at the shrine of Horus the Behdetite (Per Nu)”. In every panel the Horus falcon flies at the top right, behind the Wepwawet standard and above the image of the king. This entire scenario is meant to establish the starting point of Djoser’s rebirth in the house of flame.

Other symbology in the first panel includes an *ankh* sign holding a fan, two halves of a *pt* sign with a *shen* ring nested in each half, and a *waset* sign holding a scorpion with its claws bound. Two of these are reminiscent of protodynastic symbology. On both the Narmer and Scorpion maceheads two small human figures carry fans as they stand behind the king. On the Scorpion macehead a scorpion appears in front of the king, and both that scorpion and the scorpion in the first panel display a shape extending downward from the center of the body which is not a normal part of scorpion anatomy. There are more parallels between the Djoser panels and these protodynastic artifacts that will be explored later.

In the second panel Djoser begins his run. The Wepwawet standard is now lifted by a *waset* symbol in this and the next panel. The scene is titled “(’*h*’)-*hd wrw*”, interpreted as “the great white ones” or “the ancestors”. It is thought that the message here is that Djoser first passes by his deceased ancestors as an entitlement to his throne in the hereafter.

Before and behind Djoser's feet appear a pair of bracketing symbols. These are also found on the Narmer macehead. Also on the Narmer macehead are three running figures, sometimes interpreted as captives. These three figures bear such a striking resemblance to the images of the running king Djoser holding his entitlement in the three panels that they are most likely a direct precursor.

Behind Djoser there are now two fans, both leaning as if in motion. The *pt* symbols remain but the scorpion is gone, not to appear again until the fifth panel.

In the third panel Djoser continues to run, and the scene is much the same as the second panel. The scene is captioned "*hr swht rsj(t) imnt(t)*", interpreted as "at the southwest corner of the court", and is interpreted as meaning the king has reached the southwest corner of the funerary complex. This most likely relates to the openings regularly placed in the southwest corner of the first dynasty tombs at Abydos. Djoser is ready to join his ancestors in the west.

In the fourth panel reveals some new imagery. The Wepwawet standard now floats on its own, without being held up by the *waset*. The *waset* stands behind the king as if ready to exit the scene, its power no longer needed. The Horus falcon above the king is specially captioned as *Bhdt* and offers an *ankh* instead of a *shen* ring. The serekh before him now wears the double crown, whereas in the prior panels no crown is worn (except the 3rd panel where this image is lost). The two *pt* symbols representing the two halves of the sky are both on the same level, not one above the other. There is an *ankh* in front of the king but still within the *sed* markers.

The scene is titled "*ms(.t) hr wsht imnt(t) rsj(t)*", which can be interpreted as "born in the southwest court". This caption is similar to the third panel, but there are two interesting differences between these two panels. In the third panel, as in all other panels, the glyphs face towards the king. In this panel, they face away from the king and towards the south wall of the enclosure. Also the words for south and west are transposed in this panel, with south first. As this is the first panel in the south tomb, this may be symbolic that the king is now south of the enclosure.

Clearly there has been a transformation that has occurred in this panel. Having crossed the south wall, he has become "Ptah-south-of-his-wall", and the king is being given and has achieved a new life. He no longer needs the *waset* escort. He has full entitlement to the double crown, equally in both regions of the sky.

In the fifth panel Djoser has completed his run and again stands, mace in his right hand and staff in his left, the red crown on his head. Horus of the serekh wears the white crown. The Wepwawet standard is rooted to the ground and the throne cushion is back. The scorpion is held by a shen ring behind the king, its claws no longer bound. The scene is entitled, "'h' [m] Hr Hm", interpreted as "standing in the Lower Egyptian shrine of Horus Letopolis". Three *waset* signs populate the scene and the *ankh* is absent.

The king has arrived at the shrine of Horus Letopolis, a place of judgment by fire ⁷. If the king's placenta was consumed by fire before his run, actually or symbolically, now his spirit passes through the fire. He has achieved a new level of power. He is now ready to move on to his final destination by becoming *Hnty-irty*, the foremost of vision. This unusual name for Horus Letopolis refers to the story where Seth had blinded Horus, whose sight was then restored. By this association, the king has had his spiritual sight restored.

In the sixth panel Djoser stands as in the fifth, this time wearing the white crown. The Horus falcon again carries the *ankh* and the scorpion is gone. The *ankh* and *waset* symbols holding the fans are again at rest. The scene is captioned, "'h' [m] *pr-wr*", interpreted as "standing in the Upper Egyptian *pr-wr* shrine". This was where the king was officially crowned.

In summary, these panels tell a story of the king's journey from the *pr-nsr* to the *pr-wr*. En route he visits his ancestors, exits the southwest court and is transformed by Horus the Elder. Its location in the funerary apartment implies that this ritual may be repeated continually and forever as a part of the posthumous *sed* festival. But this is only the surface of this story. One does not carve miles worth of passageways through solid rock, pile a mountain of stone on top of them and build a mile long wall around the whole complex just for a glorified art gallery. In order to gain a deeper meaning from this monument a closer look must be taken at the significance of the message.

Most obvious is that there are three signs which occur repeatedly and throughout all of the panels. These are the *ankh*, the *waset* and the *djed*. This last does not occur in the panels themselves but is used as a framing element in the underground corridors. These three symbols combined appear most uniquely in only one other place, and that is in the sceptre held by the image of Ptah.

Ptah is known since at least as early as the first dynasty and so is contemporary with Djoser. The earliest image of Ptah was found in the pottery caches beneath the step pyramid ⁸. His image holds a sceptre of inconclusive form, so his form as the holder of the three part sceptre is not attested as early as the third dynasty but in the time it was known remained unchanged throughout Egyptian history and it is not unreal to assume it was constant throughout dynastic history. It is also known that Ptah was the chief deity of Memphis, the capital city of the two lands overseen by the Saqqara plateau, upon which the Step Pyramid was the most prominent monument when it was built ⁹.

In the Coffin Texts, Ptah is described as the power of growth in the Earth. He is also associated with the Primeval Mound through his identification with Ta-tanen and the Old Kingdom form of *hnty-tnnt*. Interestingly, the *djed* pillars in the underground chambers are carved in the same mound shape as early dynastic burial mounds. Ptah is also described as a medium through which life is transmitted and as the creative speech which derives from perception ¹⁰. Invoking these three symbols of Ptah as the senior deity signifies that the king is associating himself with the power of Ptah as part of his spiritual rebirth.

A link can be made between this third dynasty symbology and better known beliefs. By the time of the Pyramid texts, the king's story of spiritual rebirth had assumed a very specific form. At the time of death, the king becomes Osiris. Osiris is helpless until he assumes control over his fate at which point he becomes Sokar. At the same instant Isis and Nephthys appear to help him to reach the horizon. Isis represents the achievement of spiritual knowledge¹¹ and Nephthys the loss of it¹². The king walks a line that could go either way. The power to speak is given at the Opening of the Mouth ceremony. When the king meets Isis and Nephthys he also achieves divine sight and so the knowledge of the word. Combined this gives him the power to command the gods and so determine his own fate.

In the time of Djoser all of these elements are yet present. There is no evidence that Osiris, Isis and Nephthys were discrete entities but their roles are filled by others in their formative aspects such as Wepwawet and Horus Letopolis. As such it is possible these two stories have a common thread that evolved in the five hundred years between Djoser and Unas. The strongest and most obvious thread that holds these stories together is the king's journey from this world to the next. The next most important element is the quest for divine vision or knowledge to attain high status in the afterlife. In order to determine whether the two stories are different representations of similar theology reconciliation must be attempted.

If Memphis was the domain of Ptah, Saqqara was the domain of Sokar. By the Late Period, Ptah overtly takes the form of Ptah-Sokar-Osiris, but it is possible that these three deities were associated in earlier times. Certainly they were in close proximity. Sokar is known as early as the first dynasty based on year records on the Palermo Stone that represent the Sokar festival. Osiris is not known until the fifth dynasty from the Pyramid Texts of Unas, but this does not mean the divine principle that Osiris represents did not exist in the third dynasty.

The name of *Wsir* is spelled as *st + ir*, interpreted as place, seat, throne or position + eye. Osiris is also called *hnty-imntw*, most often interpreted as "foremost of the westerners". But *hnty* can also be translated as "south" or "southern", creating double entendre with Osiris as "foremost/south of the westerners". This meaning makes more sense when considering the unexplained significance of the southwestern corner in archaic period tomb construction, and in the third and fourth Djoser panels. This phrase must have its roots in further undiscovered myth, possibly indicating the point at which the sun meets the horizon, the origin of the Nile, or both. In any case, the two panels indicate that Djoser is attaining something in the southernmost westernmost corner of his complex. That something leads him to Horus Letopolis.

Horus Letopolis was known as *Hnty Irty*, or foremost of vision. Also as *m-hnty-ir.tj/m-hnty-n-ir.tj*, "he who has eyes" and "he who does not have eyes". Interestingly, the word *hnty* appears in both the name of Osiris Khentymentiu and of Horus Letopolis, and can mean both foremost, or brow (as foremost part of the face), and southern.

The concepts of the eye and of the word are present throughout Egyptian history. There is some argument as to how early the eye appears. It appears as part of the cobra from predynastic times. It is used as a glyph in the word *iri*, to do, as early as the third dynasty. The power to do is connected with the power of sight as an attribute of the living and can be viewed as integral with *is.t-ir.y* which, although not attested in the third dynasty, has been argued as nevertheless present¹³.

This argument allows us to go down a path that gives us a tentative theory of theological framework upon which Djoser's complex was constructed, which can only be confirmed by further research and discovery.

In the Pyramid texts the deceased king begins his journey as Osiris, a helpless spirit who has had his mouth ceremonially opened so he may speak. The texts, or the knowledge behind them, gives him the ability to reach Isis and Nephthys who put him in contact with the power which is his birthright. Using that power he is able to speak the words that empower him to assimilate the power of all of the gods and rule in the world of the afterlife as their equal.

In Djoser's time, the deceased king begins his journey as himself, a spirit who needs to move quickly, led on by Wepwawet and with power of Ptah and the sanction of *hnty-imntw*, reaches *hnty-irty* which grants him the divine knowledge and vision he needs to ascend to the *pr-wr*, where he achieve equal status with the gods.

The power of Wepwawet lends itself to Djoser as a three fold transcendence of the physical body: the offering of the placenta, the cobra as possessor of the eye, and the jackal as guardian of the dead.

The power of Ptah lends itself to Djoser as a threefold transcendence of the world of the living: the power of the *djed* carved in the form of the primeval mound in the underground chambers; the power of the *ankh* granted by Horus Behdetite; and the power of the *waset* to restrain the scorpion long enough to carry Wepwawet to the end of the journey.

If this is a valid representation of theology at the start of the third dynasty, then it is possible to extend this further into another time period?

The Narmer macehead has a strikingly similar set of iconography. In this macehead four standards march at the top level preceded by two bulls in a *wsh* sign. The placenta is followed by the throne cushion, just as in the Djoser panels. Behind these march two Horus standards whereas the Djoser panels feature the *Bhdt* falcon. Is it possible these two falcons represent *m-hnty-ir.tj* and *m-hnty-n-ir.tj*? On the next level the three running kings are bracketed by the same *sed* markers as in the Djoser panels. In the Narmer macehead these are preceded by a human image sitting inside a covered pallet. If this image were to parallel the Djoser panels, it would have to represent the *hd-wrw*. There is no reference to a southwest corner, unless the angled line that Narmer's *sd* runners stand

on is meant to represent this. There is nothing that would serve as a *ms* sign. There is no *djed* pillar, but Narmer does sit on top of a mound stairway.

Narmer himself sits at the top of a *pr-wr* shrine. There are two figures beneath him holding fans. If it is possible that if the Djoser story is a truthful representation of the underground panels of the Step Pyramid, then Narmer's story may be found in his macehead. However, to get as clear a picture as possible of first dynasty theology, there are many more artifacts that must be taken into account, beyond the scope of this paper.

In conclusion it can be stated that the story of Djoser's rejuvenation is a fusion of the Memphite theology as known from later texts with the fifth dynasty Osirian story of the Pyramid Texts. In its simpler, earlier form the king achieves immortality through the transcendancy of Ptah, the creative power between Amun and Re.

What of the rest of the ennead? The names Shu and Geb have been found in a relief fragment of Netjerikhet in Heliopolis.¹⁴ It would seem you could not have Shu and Geb without Tefnut and Nut but these last are not in evidence. Seth is known from the First Dynasty, but Isis, Osiris and Nephthys are not attested although Osiris may have taken the form of Khentyimentiu as discussed earlier.

If the maxim "all the gods are three" from the Leiden papyrus¹⁵ held true in the time of Djoser, then it can be said that Djoser's spiritual quest began as he assumed the form of Amun/Min, "the hidden one" in his sarcophagus, then claiming his divine birthright assumed the power of Ptah by symbolically invoking the process of in-formation through his pyramid complex, itself a form of Ta-tanen, allowing him to travel to the sky to join Re, the ultimate creative manifestation of Amun, with eternal dominion over the world.

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