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MYTH OF THE HEAVENLY COW أسطورة البقرة السماوية

Nadine Guilhou

Der Mythos von der Himmelskuh

Le Mythe de la Vache Céleste

The “Myth of the Heavenly Cow” is the conventional title of an Egyptian mythological narrative that relates how humanity once rebelled against the sun god and how thereupon the sun god reorganized the cosmos. The narrative is embedded in the so-called Book of the Heavenly Cow, which is preserved in several versions dating to the New Kingdom. It is an etiological myth explaining the origins of certain natural phenomena and religious festivals as well as legitimizing the institution of Egyptian kingship.

<أسطورة البقرة السماوية>> هو العنوان التقليدي لأسطورة تقص تمرد الانسانية ضد إله الشمس والذي نتج عنه أن أعاد إله الشمس تنظيم الكون. هذه الأسطورة تمثل جزءاً مما يعرف باسم <<كتاب البقرة السماوية>> والذي يوجد منه عدة نسخ محفوظة حتى الآن تعود إلى الدولة الحديثة. والأسطورة تشرح أصول عدة ظواهر طبيعية ومهرجانات دينية إلى جانب إضافة الشرعية على المؤسسة الملكية المصرية.

The “Myth of the Heavenly Cow,” also known as “The Destruction of Mankind,” is the name scholars of today use in reference to a mythological narrative that tells about the rebellion of mankind against the sun god and about the sun god’s subsequent decision to reorganize the cosmos. The narrative is embedded in a larger ritual text, the so-called *Book of the Heavenly Cow*. This composition forms part of the corpus of royal funerary compositions of the New Kingdom, the so-called *Books of the Netherworld*. It is first attested on the inside of the outermost of the four gilded shrines of Tutankhamen (KV 62), where it appears in excerpts on the left and back panels (Piankoff 1951 - 1952: fig. 16, pls. I, XXI; 1955: 26 - 37, fig. 47). It also occurs in variant versions in four other royal tombs located in the Valley of the Kings, namely those of Sety I (KV 17: Room M; *PM*: 543 [43]; [Theban Mapping Project](#): Chamber Je), Ramesses II (KV 7:

Room L; *PM*: 506 [27]; Theban Mapping Project: Chamber Jf), Ramesses III (KV 11: Room X; *PM*: 526 [58]; Theban Mapping Project: Chamber Jc), and Ramesses VI (KV 9: Corridor C: niche; *PM*: 512 [10]; Theban Mapping Project: Corridor D: Recess). In the tombs of Sety I, Ramesses II, and Ramesses III, the composition fills all four walls of a subsidiary room annexed to the sarcophagus chamber, to the right of the latter’s entrance (Maystre 1941: 54 - 55). In the tomb of Ramesses VI, one episode only has been retained, inscribed in a small recess built into the left (south) wall of the third corridor (Piankoff 1954: 225 - 226, fig. 157). A fragment of wall relief with text of the *Book of the Heavenly Cow* is preserved at the Musée Lapidaire in Avignon, France (catalog no. 8; fig. 1); it comes from a royal tomb, in all likelihood that of Sety I (Guilhou 1998). In addition, two papyri from the Egyptian Museum of Turin also preserve parts of the



Figure 1. Wall fragment with text of the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*. Musée Lapidaire, Avignon no. 8.

composition (catalog nos. 1982 and 1826; Roccati 1984: 23 and note 35); they date to the late New Kingdom and derive from the craftsmen’s village of Deir el-Medina.

The Narrative

The Myth of the Heavenly Cow is one of the few coherent narrative accounts of the deeds of the gods of ancient Egypt. The events in the narrative take place in a mythical time at a moment when the sun god Ra has reached old age and mankind stirs up rebellion against his rule. Upon the advice of the council of gods, Ra sends his daughter Hathor, the fiery, protective “Sun Eye,” to kill the rebels. When she returns in the evening from her slaughterous undertaking, Ra feels pity for humankind and decides against continuing the massacre. To appease the raging goddess he orders that beer be mixed with red ochre, so as to make it look like blood, then spread throughout Egypt during the night. The next morning, the goddess discovers the red liquid and, in her blood-thirst, drinks it until she is



Figure 2. Vignette of the Heavenly Cow, tomb of Sety I.

intoxicated. Thereupon she returns appeased to the palace, leaving the rest of humanity undisturbed. As an alternative solution, the sun god decides to leave the earth for the sky, which is created for him in the form of the Heavenly Cow, a manifestation of the sky goddess Nut. Humanity is now left without the presence of the gods on earth. Subsequently the sun god reorders the cosmos into three layers of existence—the sky, the earth, and the beyond (*duat*)—and assigns specific tasks to the gods Geb, Osiris, and Thoth in this new configuration.

The version preserved in the tomb of Sety I is the most complete. It includes the complete sequence of events, the rubrics with ritual instructions, and all three vignettes. The other versions are abbreviated—some even leave out entire sections (for a convenient table and set of drawings comparing the monumental versions, see Maystre 1941: 54 - 56). The vignette of the Heavenly Cow appears in all monumental versions except for Ramesses VI’s, occupying the wall opposite the entrance to the annexed chamber (fig. 2). It shows the heavenly cow, looking to the left, with star-spangled belly. The god Shu, standing between the cow’s legs, supports her belly with his raised arms. Each leg is itself supported by two *Heb*-gods. Two solar barks

traverse her belly, one between her front legs displaying the sun god as a passenger, the other beneath her udder. The two additional vignettes, much smaller in size, show the king holding the pillar of the sky and the gods Djet and Neheh holding the supports of the sky. The composition is rendered into distinct episodes by way of rubrics at the end of each episode. These rubrics are concerned with practical instructions on how to perform the accompanying ritual and also elaborate on the ritual function of the myth. Tutankhamen's version contains only a limited selection of episodes, but preserves, together with the Avignon fragment (see fig. 1), the final rubric in its most complete form.

Being an etiological myth, the narrative structure follows the scheme of the folktale. Set at the end of the reign of the gods on earth, the story line explains the origin of representative kingship and of the king's destiny after death. It also aims at explaining the creation of the invisible night sky (*duat*), through which the sun god travels each night. Additionally, the myth provides an explanation for the dangers present during the five final days of the year (epagomenal days) before the yearly return of the inundation.

The myth is structured in two principal parts. The first part (columns 1 - 27, following the Sety I version), which deals with the aging of the sun god and the ensuing rebellion of mankind, gives the reasons for the reorganization of the created world. The reorganization is the topic of the second part (columns 27 - 95), which is itself subdivided into subsections. This reorganization is concerned with the distinct, interacting layers of visible and invisible reality. It organizes the various forms of the divine by causing the *ba*'s (the visible manifestations of the gods) to be present in different beings and phenomena of the material world (the so-called *ba*-theology). It also regulates the relations between the worlds of gods and men by establishing certain customs and rituals, which thus serve as codified memories of divine providence. Although the myth is presented as a narrative about the destruction of mankind and

subsequent separation of the spheres of existence, it is, like all Egyptian myths, performative, and thus inseparable from its function in ritual, which in this case is primarily funerary in nature, but also bears relevance to the living.

The Application

The myth must be read in combination with the rubrics, which provide an extension of the narrative and instructions for its application in ritual. In fact, the rubrics determine the form of the narrative and the selection of embedded "mythemes."

The application of the myth is twofold. First, it serves as a model, setting forth a mythological precedent, so to speak, in which the reigning king, earthly representative of the gods, will upon his death follow the example of the sun god in leaving the earth for the sky. The sun god's departure, and by extension that of the reigning king, is not presented as his "death," but rather as his departure for another world—namely, the *duat* and the Island of Baba. His absence necessitates a reorganization of the earthly realm as well as the creation of a celestial space. As such, the narrative is self-sufficient. Inscribed in a royal tomb, it is transformed from a literary text into a ritual text, its application guaranteed and perpetuated through its written presence.

Secondly, the rubrics point to the execution of rituals as part of the burial proceedings and funerary cult. Such metatextual markers are rare in the royal funerary corpora of the New Kingdom (the so-called "Litany of Ra" is one of the few additional examples of a text containing such rubrics). In the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, the recurrent use of the technical term "incantation" (*rꜥ*) in the first rubric (related to the *ba*-theology and concerning the supports of the sky) is indicative of the myth's ritual function. Moreover, the ritual execution of the vignette of the Heavenly Cow herself is described in this rubric. This reveals that the first rubric—with its ritual instructions, and which closes the first part of the narrative—is inextricably related to the myth.

The concluding section of the text is no longer narrative in nature, but rather an incantation. Known as the *ba*-theology, it explains how the sun god installed the *ba*'s, or manifestations of the gods, in nature. The extant versions differ in the way the text is reproduced. The Ramesses VI and Papyrus Turin 1982 versions entitle this part “an incantation” (*rꜥ*), whereas the Sety I version is without title. The Sety I version also includes ritual prescriptions for the preparation of a female figurine and injunctions of ritual purity, which are missing in the former. The incantation proper reproduces the speech of the sun god addressing “the gods who rise in the east of the sky” (i.e., the stars) in the first person singular: “It is I who made the sky, established to place the *ba*'s of the gods therein.” When reciting these words, the ritualist identifies with the sun god, ritually becoming one with him. In the Ramesses VI version, the text switches from first-person-singular to third-person-singular discourse in line 11 by substituting the “I am,” preserved in the Sety I version, with “King Ramesses VI is.” This substitution activates the magical power of the spell for the deceased king. The ritualist, speaking on the king’s behalf, thus achieves for the ruler identification with the sun god: “King Ramesses VI is Ra, the radiant one.”

Meanings

The myth allows for three complementary interpretations. First, it displays how the gods share power and tasks after the departure of the sun god. Shu becomes the support of the Heavenly Cow, separating the sky from the earth; Geb is now responsible, together with Osiris, for guarding the earth—in particular the mounds and the snakes that inhabit them. This scenario can be understood as a “spatial distribution” of power. Moreover, the installation of the god Thoth as both vizier and moon, substituting for the sun god in the sky each night, can refer additionally to a “temporal distribution” of power. The pharaoh, physical representative of the gods on earth, partakes in the organizing: mortal, he nonetheless endures like the sun god

through his integration in the cosmos, rendered visually with the vignette of the king supporting the pillar of heaven. From the onset of the narrative, the royal character of the sun god’s office is emphasized: he is called “majesty” (*hm*) and “king of Upper and Lower Egypt” (*nswt-bjtj*), his name in the latter case being written within a cartouche. In this way, the assimilation of the king with the sun god, a major theme in the so-called “Litany of the Sun,” is further reinforced.

Second, the myth can be interpreted in relation to the Egyptian calendar (cf. Derchain 1978). Hathor’s deadly assault on humanity can be understood as a mythical explanation of the uncompromising heat and contagion in summer, which falls at the end of the year according to the Egyptian calendar. The final five days of the year, the so-called epagomenal (“added on”) days, were particularly feared as a period of danger and misfortune. The danger was believed to have passed at the moment the Nile began to flood, commencing a new year and a new agricultural cycle. The red color of the beer, produced by mixing it with Nubian hematite (red ochre), can then be read as a reference to the red silt of the first inundation waters. The appeased goddess returning to the palace evokes the episode of the “return of the Distant Goddess,” which was yearly celebrated in the Festivals of Drunkenness (*Tekhy*), attested, for example, on the 20th day of the first month of *akhet*, or the inundation season, in texts in the Ptolemaic Temple of Hathor in Dendara (Arquier and Guilhou 2009: 12 - 14; Cauville 2002: 50 - 59). In addition, the reorganization of the cosmos resulted in a daily cycle of day and night: the sun and moon travel in succession through the visible sky, while the sun descends at night into the invisible sky (*duat*).

Third, the myth can be interpreted as raising the issues of the existence of evil, mankind’s free will, and divine providence. The existence of evil is attributed to humanity and not to the creator god. The latter crushes mankind’s rebellion brutally through the intervention of Hathor; to destroy evil he is compelled to

annihilate humanity, an action that conflicts with the idea of creation itself. The ultimate solution—a separation of the cosmic levels of existence—limits the problem to the earthly realm. In this sense, the composition is complementary to the other netherworld books, such as the *Amduat*, the *Book of Gates*, and the *Book of Caverns*, which show how manifestations of disorder are punished and overcome in the Beyond.

Language and Writing

The language in which the myth's text is written appears to be that of a transitional phase of Egyptian, with grammatical features typical of the Second Intermediate Period. The narrative verb forms are indicative of a date of redaction between the beginning of Dynasty 18 and the Amarna Period (Spalinger 2000: 258 – 261; cf. Lorton 1983). As regards orthography, the versions of Sety I and Ramesses II are so similar that we can probably assume the artisans used the same source-text; in all likelihood, the two versions were inscribed by the same workshop. The Tutankhamun and Ramesses III versions show obvious variation in this respect. In the case of Tutankhamun, the variation may result from the use of a different source-text or from the physical particularities and spatial limitations of the gilded shrine. The significantly simplified hieroglyphic spellings in Ramesses III's tomb signal the use of yet another source-text, while reflecting a further development in tomb design and decoration influenced, undoubtedly, by the reduced physical dimensions of the annexed room. The hieratic version of Papyrus Turin 1982 is almost identical to the version in the tomb of Ramesses VI.

Relations to Other Texts

References to the Myth of the Heavenly Cow occur in several texts and depictions that are both earlier and later in date than the *Book of*

the Heavenly Cow (for a list of parallels, see Hornung 1991: 88 - 101). The motif of evil introduced with the rebellion of mankind is already present in Spell 1130 of the Coffin Texts. The motif of the repression of the rebellion recurs as a mytheme in the *Teaching for King Merikara* (E 133 - 134; Quack 1992: 95) and the Calendar of Good and Bad Days (specifically, month 1, inundation season, day 12; Leitz 1994: 23 - 25). The *Heb*-gods, who hold and support the legs of the Heavenly Cow, are already mentioned in connection with the god Shu in the so-called *Shu Book*, a cluster of Coffin Text spells (CT 75 - 83) concerned with the nature of this particular deity (Willems 1996: 273 - 286).

In the context of funerary culture, the motif of the cow can be observed in Spell 186 of the *Book of the Dead*. The vignette of this spell shows Hathor as Mistress of the West, appearing from the western mountains in the form of a cow with the sun disk between her horns. She welcomes the deceased into the Beyond, where he or she will be regenerated.

As regards texts of later date, the motif of the creation of mankind and that of the cow goddess carrying the sun god recur in the cosmogony of the goddess Neith in the Temple of Khnum at Esna (Sauneron 1968: *Esna III*: 206: 7ff.). In this text, the second stage of creation is executed and announced by the creator god Neith; following the creation of space, time is established by means of the creation of the sun god. In the so-called *Book of the Fayum*, preserved in multiple manuscripts of Roman date, the mytheme of rebellion and separation from the earth is recounted; the Fayum is presented here as a privileged region in the cultic landscape of Egypt, being the place where the Heavenly Cow brought and protected the sun god (Beinlich 1991: 314 - 319). One of the accompanying vignettes shows the cow goddess, named Mehet-Weret in the caption, carrying on her back the sun god as a child.

Bibliographic Notes

The text was first translated into a modern language by Edouard Naville; his French translation is based on the Sety I version (Naville 1875). For the first synoptic edition of all monumental versions, see Maystre (1941). This edition has been replaced by Hornung (1982; re-edition 1991), which also includes a German translation, philological commentary, and an analysis of the religious significance of the text. The Avignon fragment is published in Guilhou (1998). The hieratic version on the recto of Papyrus Turin 1982 can be consulted in Pleyte and Rossi (1869 - 1876: pl. 84). For a comprehensive study of the composition, see Guilhou (1989). For additional translations, see Sternberg el-Hotabi's work in German (1995) and Wenté's work in English (2003).

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External Links

- Theban Mapping Project
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- Figure 2. Vignette of the Heavenly Cow, tomb of Sety I. Photograph © Farid Atiya.