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Osiris – one deity, many symbols*

Abstract: *Osiris is one of the most popular and important deities in the Egyptian pantheon. At first glance, one might associate the god's popularity with its role as god and king of the dead, due to the importance of the Afterlife in the ancient Egyptian imaginary. However, he is also associated with ideas of regeneration and rebirth, and ultimately, with the cosmos and the cycle of life. This deity was also linked with vegetation and the waters of the Nile – the vehicle through which his rebirth was made possible – and also with the monarchical system, and with Order (Maat), working as the opposite of his brother, Seth. Osiris is not only a deity which has symbols connected to him, he is also at the same time a symbol – better yet, various symbols – himself. Using Plutarch's account of the Osirian mythic cycle as our source, we intend to identify and analyse the symbols associated with this god. Likewise we intend to try to understand why it is that more than a god with powers and attributes, Osiris was a god of symbols, incorporating a multitude of meanings and attributes in himself.*

Keywords: Osiris, netherworld, life, death, regeneration, vegetation, Plutarch

Osiris was a prominent deity in the Ancient Egyptian pantheon and religious thought and is also one of the most famous and easily recognisable of the Egyptian deities.¹ The subject of this paper is the god Osiris and the symbols connected with him and his attributes, but also the symbols that he himself is or represents. In other words, our goal is not only to explore the symbols connected with this deity, but Osiris as a symbol (or symbols) as well.

To start, we shall make a generic characterisation of Osiris, in which we will briefly stress elements such as the position of this god in the Egyptian pantheon, his mythological background, his functions and his cult, as well as his attributes, that is, the symbols that function as his identifiers. Afterwards, some of the cases in which Osiris is himself a symbol will be enumerated. However, it is important to state that Osiris is a figure with a very large and complex presence in the Egyptian religion and thought, and because of that it is impossible to make a complete and exhaustive list of all the symbols connected to him and of all the instances in which he acts as a symbol in a short paper such as the present.

As such, this paper presents itself merely as a small fragment of this broad and complex subject, with clearly defined boundaries delimiting it. Therefore, for this specific analysis on the relation between Osiris and symbols we chose to focus on Plutarch's version of the Osiris' Myth,² a source which we will have the opportunity to address more extensively later on. Through this particular account of the myth, we intend to point out the instances in which Osiris appears as a symbol and try to understand them in the context of Ancient Egyptian religious and symbolic thought.

* Centro de Humanidades/Portuguese Centre for the Humanities. I would like to thank my tutor, Professor Maria Helena Trindade Lopes, whose constant encouragement made this paper possible.

¹ J.G. GRIFFITHS, *The origins of Osiris and his cult*, Leiden 1980; B. MOJSOV, *Osiris. Death and Afterlife of a god*, Padstow 2005; M. SMITH, *Following Osiris: Perspectives on the osirian Afterlife from four millennia*, Oxford 2017.

² De Iside et Osiride in PLUTARCH, *Moralia V*, trans. F. COLE BABBITT, Cambridge 1999, pp. 6-191.

Osiris (*wsir*)³ belonged to the fourth generation of the cosmogony of Heliopolis.⁴ He was the son of Geb and Nut and together with his siblings – Isis, Seth and Nephthys – and his son, Horus, represented the historical and social components of the Cosmos.⁵

Although it is difficult to trace the origins of this deity, the existence of Osiris as an individualised god is fully attested in the Fifth Dynasty, with him appearing as a god with an established set of characteristics and a mythological background in the *Pyramid Texts*.⁶ He had several cultic centres, of which Abydos (*ꜥbdw*) and Busiris (*ꜥdw*) stand out as being the most significant ones.⁷ Abydos, located in Upper Egypt, is known to have an Old Kingdom temple dedicated to Osiris, as well as a symbolic place of burial of the god, known as Osireion. In Lower Egypt stood Busiris, a city in which it was believed to be located the backbone of Osiris and that has in its Egyptian name the hieroglyphic sign *ꜥd*,⁸ a *djed* column, one of the symbols of the god.⁹

Osiris is a male anthropomorphic deity. He is usually depicted with a mummified body,¹⁰ symbolising the fact that he was the first Egyptian being mummified. His skin is usually represented as green or black.¹¹ In Ancient Egypt, green symbolised vegetation, but also regeneration and the cycle of life. On the other hand, BLACK was a colour linked to death and the Underworld, but also to resurrection and life, because it was the colour of the fertile soil of the margins of the Nile river.¹²

The most common ways in which Osiris appears represented are either standing up in a very stiff position, resembling a mummy, or seating on a throne. This kind of representation is not exclusive to Osiris. In fact, it is usual to find representations of other gods seated on thrones. However, Osiris is one of the gods that is most frequently depicted in this fashion, symbolising his role as the king of the dead, but also his connection to sacred kingship.¹³ The insignias that identify Osiris are similarly symbols of kingship and that we usually see in the representations of the pharaohs. He is portrayed with a crown, either the White Crown (*hedjet*, *ꜥd.t*), the crown of Upper Egypt that seems to symbolise an association of the deity with this region of the Two Lands, or the Atef Crown (*ꜥtf*), a crown similar in shape to the White Crown but that is flanked by two ostrich feathers.¹⁴ With both of his hands he

³ For the various possible meanings of the name Osiris see: J. DAS C. SALES, *As divindades egípcias. Uma chave para a compreensão do Egípto antigo*, Lisboa 1999 (hereinafter referred to as: *As divindades egípcias*), p. 121. On this topic, see also: W. WESTENDORF, Zur Etymologie des Namens Osiris: *wꜥs.t-jꜥ.t “die das Auge trägt”, [in:] J. OSING, G. DREYER (eds), *Form und Mass: Beiträge zur Literatur, Sprache und Kunst des alten Ägypten, Festschrift für Gerhard Fecht zum 65. Geburtstag am 6. Februar 1987*, Wiesbaden 1987, pp. 456-461; Y. MUCHIKI, On the transliteration of the name Osiris, *JEA* 76 (1990), pp. 191-194; J.P. ALLEN, The name of Osiris (and Isis), *Lingua Aegyptia* 21 (2013), pp. 9-14.

⁴ R.T.R. CLARK, *Myth and symbol in ancient Egypt*, London 1978 (hereinafter referred to as: *Myth and symbol*), p. 103; R.H. WILKINSON, *The complete gods and goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, London 2003 (hereinafter referred to as: *The complete gods*), p. 18.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

⁷ S. QUIRKE, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, London 1992 (hereinafter referred to as: *Religion*), pp. 52, 54 and 57.

⁸ Hieroglyphic sign R11 in Gardiner's List.

⁹ WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, p. 122.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 120.

¹¹ *Loc. cit.*

¹² R.H. WILKINSON, *Symbol & magic in Egyptian art*, London 1994 (hereinafter referred to as: *Symbol & magic*), pp. 108-109. Similarly, the god Min – a very ancient god, associated with masculine fertility and procreation – is depicted with black skin, in his anthropomorphic representation, probably in an attempt to link the deity with the humid soil of the Nile's banks, symbol of fertility and life. See WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, pp. 115-117.

¹³ WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, pp. 120-121.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 121; M.H.T. LOPES, *O Egípto faraónico. Guia de estudo*, Lisboa 2003, pp. 35-36; SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, pp. 128-129. See also: K. GOEBS, *Crowns in early Egyptian funerary literature:*

holds the crook (*heket*, *ḥk.t*) and the flail (*nekhaha*, *nḥ3ḥ3*), two of the oldest symbols of the Egyptian kingship and that possibly reflect an agricultural and pastoral past.¹⁵ Another attribute of the god Osiris is a piece of leather – probably cow’s skin – that is depicted hanging from a stick.¹⁶

The *djed* pillar was the most emblematic symbol of the god Osiris. Although it is possible that it had a different meaning in its origins (some authors state it was originally an attribute of the god Ptah¹⁷), the *djed* column became associated with the backbone of Osiris. It was a symbol of stability and revival.¹⁸ The symbolism of the *djed* pillar played an important role in the rituals of the Egyptian kingship. The ritual of the “raising of the *djed* pillar” consisted of erecting a large post. This symbolical act enabled the stability of the pharaoh’s reign but it also acted as a re-establishment of Maat in the entire Cosmos. The ritual had yet another meaning, this one closely related to the god of the dead: it re-affirmed the victory of Osiris – assisted by Isis and Horus – over his brother Seth.¹⁹

Osiris could be represented as a *djed* pillar. In those instances, the *djed* pillar was depicted with eyes, arms, and hands holding the crook and the flail,²⁰ the Osirian insignias that were mentioned above.

The *djed* column appeared in several different supports in Egyptian art, such as small amulets that were believed to have had protective qualities and that were placed in the mummy; painted on the bottom of coffins, where the back of the deceased was placed, in an effort to associate the dead with Osiris; or in architectural features of tombs, such as pillars.²¹ In all of these cases, the presence of the *djed* pillar equated the presence of the god Osiris and had the symbolic and magical power of guaranteeing stability.

Another symbol associated with Osiris are the so-called “seed” or “corn-mummies”. These were small objects, shaped like mummies, in order to resemble Osiris, and filled with soil from the Nile basin and seeds.²² When plants sprouted from the seed-mummy it was seen by the Egyptians as a symbol of fertility and of Osiris’ regenerative powers as well as a manifestation of the god’s revival.²³

As was mentioned in the beginning of this paper, Plutarch’s account of the Osirian myth acts as our main source to identify some of the instances in which the god acts as a symbol and also, if there are any more symbols related to this deity in this source in order to add them to the ones we have cited so far. One of the reasons for choosing Plutarch’s account of the myth is because it is the most complete version of the myth that we know of. The Egyptian versions of the Osiris’ Myth are incomplete; they refer only to certain episodes of the cycle, making loose allusions to the events that constitute this myth.²⁴ However, we still take them in consideration in this analysis, especially the most relevant of them all, the *Great Hymn to Osiris*, preserved in the Amenmose stela (Louvre C 286), dating from the 18th dynasty.²⁵

Royalty, rebirth, destruction, Oxford 2008 and EADEM, Crowns, [in:] D.B. REDFORD (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 1, Oxford 2001, pp. 321-326.

¹⁵ WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, p. 120.

¹⁶ SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, p. 130. See also p. 132, Fig. 128.

¹⁷ WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian art. A hieroglyphic guide to Ancient Egyptian painting and sculpture*, London 1992 (hereinafter referred to as: *Reading Egyptian art*), p. 165.

¹⁸ CLARK, *Myth and symbol*, pp. 235-236.

¹⁹ WILKINSON, *Reading Egyptian art*, p. 165.

²⁰ WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, p. 121.

²¹ WILKINSON, *Symbol & magic*, p. 17.

²² WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, p. 122.

²³ WILKINSON, *Symbol & magic*, p. 94; SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, p. 122.

²⁴ M.H.T. LOPES, O mito de Osíris: análise de um mito fundador, *Hathor* 2 (1990), p. 9. To learn more about the Osiris’ Myth, see: D. STEWART, *The myth of Osiris in the ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Auckland 2015.

²⁵ M. LICHTHEIM, *Ancient Egyptian literature*, vol. 2, Los Angeles 1976 (hereinafter referred to as: *Literature* 2), pp. 81-86.

In the 1st century AD, Plutarch, a Greek biographer, collected various episodes of the Osiris' Myth in a single narrative known as *De Iside et Osiride*.²⁶ While being chronologically removed from the Egyptian accounts, *De Iside et Osiride* contains most of the original elements of the myth's creation.²⁷

Osiris is chosen to rule over Egypt and the main goal of his governance was to put an end to the "primitive" and barbaric stage that the Egyptians were in.²⁸ He is successful in achieving this purpose, which he does so by teaching mankind agriculture – in the Amenmose stela he is referred to as the one who makes the food grow²⁹ – but also rules and religion. This means that Osiris is a symbol of a civilised state, of civilisation itself, and that the Egyptians owed to this deity the basis of what made their prosperous existence possible. In Plutarch's account it is also stated that Osiris did so without having to resort to force, which indicates that Osiris is also the symbol of the perfect king, because he was able to teach the Egyptians everything they needed to know in order to live in an organised society without making use of violence or coercion.

*One of the first acts related of Osiris in his reign was to deliver the Egyptians from their destitute and brutish manner of living. This he did by showing them laws, and by teaching them to honour the gods. Later he travelled over the whole earth civilizing it without the slightest need of arms (...).*³⁰

After being murdered and cast away in a wooden chest by his brother Seth, Osiris ends up in Byblos, where, over time, his chest becomes entangled in heather and eventually is fully covered by it, becoming a tree. If this is not the first mythological instance in which the god is associated with vegetation, it is at least a very significant example of the symbolical relation between Osiris and flora, since they become one.³¹

*(...) the chest had been cast up by the sea near the land of Byblus and that the waves had gently set it down in the midst of a clump of heather. The heather in a short time ran up into a very beautiful and massive stock, and enfolded and embraced the chest with its growth and concealed it within its trunk.*³²

When Isis arrives at Byblos, she discovers that the king of the country demanded the tree that contained the body of Osiris to be cut down and used as a pillar in his dwelling. Although the connection is not at all clear, one may sense a link between this episode of the myth and the *djed* pillar, since the body of Osiris, enclosed in the wooden chest, was giving stability to the king's palace.³³

*The king of the country admired the great size of the plant, and cut off the portion that enfolded the chest (...), and used it as a pillar to support the roof of his house.*³⁴

²⁶ QUIRKE, *Religion*, p. 58.

²⁷ M.H.T. LOPES, *O homem Egípcio e a sua integração no cosmos*, Lisboa 1989, p. 63.

²⁸ SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, pp. 123-124. We must point out the influence of the Greek mentality on this retelling of the Egyptian myth – that is visible right at its beginning – with the author suggesting that mankind lived in an uncivilised condition before the reign of Osiris, because it did not yet follow the Egyptian way of living and culture.

²⁹ "Plants sprout by his wish, /Earth grows its food for him" (LICHTHEIM, *Literature* 2, p. 82).

³⁰ *De Iside et Osiride*, 356, 13.

³¹ LOPES, *Hathor* 2 (1990), p. 11.

³² *De Iside et Osiride*, 357, 15.

³³ LOPES, *Hathor* 2 (1990), p. 11.

³⁴ *De Iside et Osiride*, 357, 15.

Isis is able to recover the chest containing the body of her husband and returns to Egypt with it, where she tries to hide it. However, Seth finds it by chance and mutilates the body of his dead brother, cutting it in fourteen parts, which he then scatters in different places.³⁵

*(...) but Typhon [Seth], who was hunting by night in the light of the moon, happened upon it [Osiris' chest]. Recognizing the body he divided it into fourteen parts and scattered them, each in a different place. Isis learned of this and sought for them again, sailing through the swamps in a boat of papyrus.*³⁶

Fourteen is a multiple of seven, a number that holds some significance to Osiris. For instance, it is said that Nut was pregnant with the god for seven days. As Richard H. Wilkinson suggests, this number may be symbolic of the fourteen parts that comprise Egypt, seven in Lower Egypt and seven in Upper Egypt.³⁷ Jan Assmann tells us of a Late Period festival that took place at the end of the inundation that began with a ritual that consisted in the gathering of the forty-two mutilated parts of the body of Osiris, which then were bound together and that each represented a province of Egypt.³⁸ According to Assmann this ritual had a political and historical symbolism:

*(...) the Egyptians projected the fragmented body of Osiris onto the multiplicity of regions in order to represent and create a unity of the land through the ritual of reuniting the limbs into a single body. (...) The unity that was remembered and renewed in the course of these ceremonies has a political, historical, and cultural meaning (...).*³⁹

Despite the number being different, forty-two is also a multiple of seven and the symbolical meaning of this ritual appears to be the same as that evoked by Wilkinson.

All the parts of the body of Osiris, except for the phallus, are recovered by Isis, who then proceeds to bind them together again, through a process of mummification, the first ever made. If the parts of the body of Osiris, notwithstanding how many they were, represent various parts of Egypt, then we might see the mummified body of the god as a symbol of the unified Two Lands. In other words, Osiris was also a symbol of territorial unification, an idea that reinforces his association with the monarchical system and his status as a symbol of the perfect pharaoh.⁴⁰

It is this process of mummification – along with the funerary rites performed by Isis – that enables Osiris to be reborn and to resurrect. Through this episode of the Osirian Cycle, the god becomes a symbol of revival and of the hope of an existence in the Afterlife, stressing the crucial importance of the preservation of the body in order to achieve life after death.⁴¹

In its origins Osiris was probably a chthonic deity that later acquired connections with fertility and agriculture. Over time, and as a result of a syncretic process, Osiris obtained other features, namely a connection with the waters of the inundation of the Nile and the life-force contained in them, as well as the role of funerary god, and finally, of king and judge of the dead.⁴² Osiris is a god with several functions and spheres of action, however, the important place he occupied in the Egyptian pantheon, as well as the popularity that he

³⁵ SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, p. 124.

³⁶ De Iside et Osiride, 357, 18.

³⁷ WILKINSON, *Symbol & magic*, p. 136.

³⁸ J. ASSMANN, *Religion and cultural memory. Ten studies*, Stanford 2006, pp. 14-15.

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

⁴⁰ LOPES, *Hathor 2* (1990), p. 9.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 11-12.

⁴² WILKINSON, *The complete gods*, pp. 118-119; SALES, *As divindades egípcias*, pp. 121-123; M. ELIADE, *Tratado de História das Religiões*, Lisboa 1970, pp. 196-197, 317.

