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Front cover: Miniature figurines from a shrine deposit of Tell el-Farkha, Dynasty 1. Robert Słaboński
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Chapter 10

The Egyptian land-based layer: Between god(s), cosmic sacredness and fertility beliefs

Guilherme Borges Pires

Abstract: Sacred Space is not uniformly perceived. The landscape is experienced in different ways, with greater or lesser human adhesion. The case of the Egyptian civilisation is no exception. Indeed, the different components of the Egyptian land are assigned to different gods. Contrary to the idea of 'Mother-Earth', the most common Egyptian associations with earth are expressed through male deities. Connecting theoretical contributions of the phenomenology of landscape with the core of relations between Egyptian nature and religious beliefs, I intend to (re)consider topics on sacred nature, cosmic sacredness but also fertility in ancient Egypt.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, religion, Sacred Space, phenomenology of landscape, fertility beliefs

Introduction

For the *homo religiosus*, the Space is not uniformly perceived. Human collectives apprehend the landscape as a natural construct (Cauquelin 2000; 2007), which is experienced in different ways, with greater or lesser human adhesion (Tilley 1994, 10–11). In this immense 'everywhere', the land-based layer is a stage for the cosmic sacredness to reveal itself, since it congregates all things: the earth is the fundament for all manifestations; everything that is on the earth is united (Eliade 1977, 297). Nevertheless, this wholeness is composed of several distinct units, differently understood by the human populations.

The Egyptian civilisation is no exception to this reality. Indeed, if we analyse the core connections between the Egyptian religious conceptions and its nature (Horden 1972, 2) in the light of the phenomenology of landscape, we will be forced to understand that the Nilotic people, who perceived their space as an element of the Sacred, dealt with distinct geographic units which led to different religious and

cultural approaches. In this paper, I intend to briefly (re)consider some topics on sacred nature, cosmic sacredness but also fertility and rebirth in ancient Egypt. Given the preliminary stage of my research, I chose not to focus on a particular chronology or textual *corpus*, but rather to present a research question related to this subject.

The Egyptian space

The Egyptian space is, as noted by Richards (1999, 85), characterised by several ‘dramatic transitions’. In fact, should we observe the Egyptian geographic environment, we will immediately notice two striking contrasts: one opposes Upper to Lower Egypt; the other expresses the *système antinomique* (Mathieu 2009, 29–30) between the ‘Black Land’ (*km.t*) and the ‘Red Land’ (*dšr.t*), that is, the fertile soil seasonally inundated by the Nile and the sterile regions of both the Western and Eastern Deserts. These binomials, as part of the duality that points out all the structures of the Egyptian civilisation (Servajean 2013), were absolutely structuring for the Nilotic people, as it has been stated by Butzer (2001, 385): ‘... the ancient Egyptians were vividly aware of the stark contrast between the “Red Land” of the desert upland and the “Black Land” of its seasonally inundated alluvium’.

We may synthesise the ancient Egypt’s geography into four dominant units: the Delta, the Valley of the Nile and the Western and Eastern Deserts. These areas presented several different settings, such as mountain ranges, oases, wadis, plateaux or desert hills that together formed what we can call the Egyptian ‘landscape’, concept theorised by Tilley (1994) and Brunotte (2002), among others. Simultaneously, the Egyptian natural borders as well as its hinge position between the African and the Asian continents, but also between the tropics and the temperate zone, reveal themselves as nuclear guidelines for our frame of understanding this civilisation (Baines and Málek 2000, 20).

According to Kees (1978, 18–22), in the beginning of the Paleolithic, several climate changes occurred in Egypt which allowed the Nile to rip a valley in the landscape and therefore enabled the populations to inhabit closer to the river: the silts annually carried by the Nile increment continuously the arable land. Having come from the desert to the valley in very remote times (Ćwiek 2014, 120), the Egyptians will then regard their space as a ‘blessed geography’ (Lopes 2003, 41), which is proven by the strict connection between land, country and people. Indeed, the word *km.t* can relate to the ‘Black Land’ but can also be translated as ‘Egypt’ as a whole or even as the ‘Egyptians’ (Erman and Grapow 1957, 126). Thus the portion of land that was annually fructified by the Nilotic inundation is assimilated to the Egyptian political entity: the originally neutral term acquires an increasing political connotation, becoming a synonym of the Egyptian state (Poo 2005, 45).

The increasing aridity of the desert, by the end of the 4th millennium BCE, will play a significant role in the formation process of the Egyptian state (Baines and Málek 2000, 14). Even if the desert, in the Egyptian collective mind, would be associated

with images of death, isolation and silence (Lopes 2003, 42), the 'Red Land' was never emptiness. On the contrary, the emergence of the Egyptian civilisation was partly due to the cultural roots brought by the various pre-historic adaptations to the desert (Butzer 2001, 385–386). Therefore, both the 'Black' and the 'Red' lands were relevant landscapes, dynamically interconnected, working together in the daily task of protecting the Cosmos against the chaotic forces that continuously threatened it (Richards 1999, 87; Ćwiek 2014, 120).

Different landscapes, different gods: the Egyptian 'existential space'

As we have seen, the Egyptian land-based layer was composed by different geographic units. Since they were perceived religiously in diverse manners, they were assigned to different gods. This can be attested even in later periods, namely in the 1st century CE, when Plutarch visited Egypt (Willems 2014, 488–493).

According to the Classic author, the Egyptians 'regard the Nile as the effusion of Osiris, so they hold and believe the earth to be the body of Isis, not all of it, but so much of it as the Nile covers, fertilizing it and uniting with it' (*De Iside et Osiride* 38). Isis is not the whole Egyptian land-based layer but only the portion covered by the efflux of Osiris, that is, the efflux of the inundation in itself. We can therefore state that Isis is identified with the 'Black Land'. As the 'Black Land' is fertilised by the river and starts to germinate, so is Isis impregnated by Osiris and gives birth to Horus.

Following the logic of complementary dualities so much cherished by the Egyptians, the soil far from the waterbody is associated to Nephthys, Isis' sister and Seth's spouse: 'The outmost parts of the land beside the mountains and bordering on the sea the Egyptians call Nephthys. This is why they give to Nephthys the name of "Finality" and say that she is wife of Typhon' (*De Iside et Osiride* 38). However, the 'goddess of the house' could also be united to Osiris whenever the flood reached the outmost lands: 'Whenever, then, the Nile overflows and with abounding waters spreads far away to those who dwell in the outermost regions, they call this the union of Osiris with Nephthys, which is proved by the upspringing of the plants' (*De Iside et Osiride* 38). Anubis was the result of this adulterous union, which would have legitimised the Osiris's murder by his brother Seth. While it may be objected that we are referring to a very later text and therefore much different from the 'original' religious account, the textual sources that attest this myth might date back to the *Coffin Texts* (Willems 2014, 488–493) and Alexandra von Lieven (2006, 141–150) points the existence of a positive cult and theology related to Seth which hardly harmonises with the epithet of 'god of confusion' given by Velde (1967).

In any case, mythological sources tend to underline Seth's barrenness, since Nephthys can only conceive if she is united to Osiris. This adulterous union seems to mythico-religious explanation for an Egyptian geographical feature.

Contrary to the majority of the fluvial valleys, the profile of the Nile's one is convex. Consequently, the fields located near the mountains would be the first ones to receive

the flood's water not by overflow but by infiltration (Gabolde 1995, 245–246; Baines and Málek 2000, 16). Therefore, the land closer to the river would be easier to dry and to cultivate. The outmost regions, on the contrary, are thus identified with Nephthys who is, nevertheless, impregnated by Osiris referring to the Nilotic high floods.

The religious speculation carried out by the Egyptians in this endless observation of their own space led to the deification of their geographic and natural contexts and consequently to the establishment of the Egyptian 'existential space'. In the light of the phenomenology of landscape this is built from the individuals' concrete experience and so we are not referring to a passive spatial reality. On the contrary, it is a space created and inhabited through life and activity in an incessant process of production and reproduction to which borders as well as natural elements play a significant part (Tilley 1994, 15–17). Thus, the Egyptian's continuous observation and reflection on their spatial heterogeneity led them to perceive their land in different densities. From the Egyptians' land-based layer different manifestations were revealed and in this 'existential space' establishment different gods were conveyed: Osiris embodied the rejuvenated and fertile soil; Isis personified the chthonic layer covered by the flood efflux; Nephthys was identified with the telluric surface far from the river; and finally, Seth was the desert regions. Eliade stated that the earth receives diffuse forces that act in the sacred Cosmos (Eliade 1977, 297) and the Egyptian one happens to be no exception.

An earth-god: masculinisation of the Egyptian land?

Yet the Egyptian earth seems to be different from others in one aspect: its masculinisation. In fact, the four gods previously mentioned, among many others that have a connection to the Egyptian geography, are the sons of Geb, Lord of the Earth, who imposes his power over the Ennead of Heliopolis, nourishing it, as we can read in the *Pyramid Texts*:

'Atum has given you his heritage, he has given to you the assembled the Ennead ... he sees you powerful, with your heart proud and yourself able in your name of "Clever Mouth", chiefest of gods, you standing on the earth that you may govern at the head of the Ennead ... Fetch them to yourself, take them, nourish them ... for you are a god having power all over the gods' (PT 592 in Faulkner 1998, 243).

As noted by Frankfort (1978, 182), the fact that Osiris is the son of Geb is a promise of resurrection through rebirth. Osiris is brought back to life just like the soil germinates year after year. In the famous 'Great Hymn to Osiris', from the stele Louvre C 286, the god is, as the oldest son of Geb, the responsible for feeding the Ennead as well as the patron of all land products (Barucq and Daumas 1980, 92).

Besides Geb and Osiris, we identify in the Egyptian pantheon other masculine figures connected to land and fertility. Min, the ithyphallic god, is associated to the productivity of the agricultural land; he is sometimes displayed with a lettuce whose white juice may be an allusion to the semen and thus to masculine fertility (Franco

1999, 166). On the other hand, Aker is a god linked to the depths of the earth (Franco 1999, 16). We can also mention Tatenen, often associated with Ptah, god of Memphis, who is connected to the primeval land that irrupted from the Ocean Nun in the 'First Time' (*sp tpj*) and thus personified the fertility and prosperity of the entire Two Lands' territory (Sales 1999, 291–292).

Tellus Mater, Tellus Pater

Generally, we recognise in the cosmic and religious structures the notion of a 'Mother-Earth', a *Tellus Mater* (Eliade 1977, 293–317). In Egypt, however, the most common associations with Earth are expressed through male deities: Ptah, Min and, most notably, Geb. Perhaps, as suggested by Bárta (2010, 44–53), the association between earth and the masculine element is iconographically attested since the Neolithic, though the author only mentions a single scene – from the Cave of the Beasts in the Western Desert – with no apparent parallel.

How can we envisage this Egyptian peculiarity? And what does it tell us about the Egyptian fertility beliefs? Though no categorical and definite answer is intended here, some perspectives of analyses will be presented.

According to Roth (1999, 187–201), this Egyptian particularity might be explained, once again, by the natural and geographic features of the Egyptian space. While in some parts of the world, the land becomes fertile due to the action of the rain, in Egypt, where the rain was scarce, the fields' germination was greatly a consequence of the Nilotic flood. The first case evokes an imagery of earth being penetrated by the sky and so the first is gendered as a feminine being and the second as a masculine one. In Egypt, on the contrary, the land-based layer is regarded as something active: the water that enables the germination comes from the earth itself and not from the sky and because of that the earthly element was gendered as a male (Roth 1999, 195). Therefore, the Egyptian mythology does not align with most earthly cosmogonies in which the earth plays the passive role, as stated by Eliade (1977, 296) and this can justify the presence of an earth-god in ancient Egypt instead of a *Tellus Mater*.

If we define fertility as the ability to procreate and engender we may state that females were somehow excluded of this process. In the Egyptian mind, the woman – or the goddess – receives the child already shaped and formed (Roth 1999, 189). Nut, the sky-goddess, swallows her son Re every night and every morning gives birth to him rejuvenated but with no alteration. Indeed, Nut seems to cause no effect on the Sun: he only passes through her (Lesko 1991, 118). The male element seems thus to be connected to active fertility and the female to an idea of passiveness. And since the earth is a clear active element in the Egyptian geography this would turn it to be perceived manly.

But is the capability to procreate in Egyptian divine world that masculinised?

Truthfully both elements are required in the Creation. We must mention that the Creator is, as demonstrated by Zandee (1992, 169–185) both female and male,

since the gender differentiation comes only in his offspring. Atum is the ‘Sole One’ who reached orgasm with his own grasp and thus gave birth to Shu and Tefnut and so gender differentiation began. We read in the Bremner-Rhind Papyrus: ‘I acted as husband with my fist, I copulated with my hand’ (Roth 1999, 196). In fact, quoting Hassan (1998, 107) ‘Manifestly male, Atum embodies the female principle. His hand is symbolically his female consort. By swallowing his semen, he also develops the uterine function of the mother’. This Heliopolitan feature will find an echo in the Theban cosmology. In Papyrus Leiden I 350, for instance, Amun is called ‘father of fathers and mother of mothers’, *jt jt.w mw.t mw.t* (P. Leiden I 350 V, 3-V, 4 in Zandee 1947, 92; pl.V), therefore containing the masculine and the feminine principle in himself (Zandee 1947, 141). Demiurgical epithets that denote both a masculine and a feminine nature can be observed as well in an excerpt of the *Memphite Theology*:

The gods who came into being in Ptah: ... Ptah-Nun, the father who [made Atum]. Ptah-Naunet, the mother who bore Atum (Lichtheim 1975, 74).

Therefore, even if the gods appear as male in their names and personas, we should note that these Creator gods are said to have, perform or portray feminine aspects in the Creation’s process which may induce the modern researcher into an ambiguity that may have been alien to the ancient Egyptians themselves (Matić 2016, 178).

According to Roth (1999, 193–194), fertility in Egypt would then be a male reality with androgynous (or maybe better saying just ‘both male and female’) features in a direct connection to the gender indifferenciation of the primordial waters of the non-existence (Troy 2001, 238–268). In the beginning, when nothing had yet been born, gender had not yet been born too. And since the Nilotic flood is regarded as a return to the genesis, the god associated to it – Hapy – would challenge the binary expression of gender, being a male with adipose fat and full breasts. As stated by Onstine (2010, 2) ‘fertility relies on both male and female elements, and so the god as a metaphor is always depicted as a male with pendulous breasts’. According to this perspective, Hapy would fit in no gender because fertility in itself surpasses the constraints of this category. However, this assertion might be discussed. What is, in fact, a masculine body? Is it because an individual has full breasts that he should be prevented from being identified with a male, becoming androgynous? Are the pendulous breasts a symbol of fertility and abundance – features connected to the Nilotic flood – and so to the feminine aspect? Aren’t we somehow being influenced by our own social cultural assumptions about gender? Baines (1985, *passim*), for instance, rejects any androgyny in Hapy, arguing that he is a replication of the canonical artistic representation of the scribes and so he is connected to ideas of material abundance and comfort. In any case, it should be noted the strict connection between the flood and the notions of fertility, fecundity and abundance.

To sum up, even if we agree that the fertility in Egypt is predominantly male, that seems no sufficient reason for the earth’s maleness, since the importance of

the feminine aspect is never denied. Osiris, for instance, can only engender his son Horus because Isis was able to magically fabricate his phallus and copulate with him, thus uniting the male element – the phallus – with the female one – the pregnancy (Onstine 2010, 3). So why is the earth a god and not a goddess in Egypt?

Final remarks

Having already presented Roth's theory, I wish to end this paper with a preliminary train of thought. In her fundamental book, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler (1990, ix) defined the gender as 'the effects of institutions, practices, discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin'. Although Butler was for sure not considering the Egyptian religious representations and institutions, if we perceive the Egyptian pantheon as a complex disposal of discourses that reflect daily practices with diverse points of origin we may ask ourselves: given that the ancient Egyptians ascribed to the Sun the maximum creative power (Quirke 2001, *passim*) and that it is assigned to the masculine gender, even if he presents androgynous or ambigenderous features (something that it is indeed arguable), would not the figure of a great 'Mother-Earth' somehow overshadow the importance of the great sun-god? Should this be understood as a gender order that favors the male element? Is the apparent passivity of the female goddesses in the Egyptian cosmovision a symbol of their inferiority in the pantheon? Is the maleness of most gods regarded as Creators in Egypt a consequence of this particular gender order? I stress that these are only questions and not answers. In fact, if we accept this perspective we will be facing some theoretical problems: how does the relative freedom and independence of elite women harmonise with this gender order? How should we understand the emergence of Isis as the 'Great-Mother' in later periods? Moreover: if we accept that the birth-giving creator-god connected to the Sun is both male and female why is it not the male-god of the earth as well?

It seems as if we drifted apart from the Egyptian soil in our digression. But the space is always an invitation for us to consider civilisations as a whole. Indeed, the Egyptian land-based layer was lived and experienced in different ways and from its observation the Egyptians cogitated their theological constructs. Assigning different gods to distinct geographies, experiencing the cosmic sacredness and reflecting on fertility beliefs, the ancient Egyptians inhabit their own space and tried to read its message.

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