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## EARLY EGYPTIAN ABSTRACT THINKING – REMARKS ON PHILOSOPHICAL ELEMENTS IN THE EGYPTIAN FORMATIVE PERIOD

**Abstract:** The article discusses the problem of the existence in the early, Egyptian formative period, elements of pre-philosophy. On the basis of archaeological research we can assume that, already in the predynastic period Egyptians used the concepts and elements that can be associated with philosophy. As an example the double Horus signs associated with names of early rulers can be displayed. However, this discussion also applies to the broader issue of describing before-Greek civilizations and societies as devoid of an abstract and philosophical thinking.

**Keywords:** pre-philosophy, abstract thinking, early Egypt, predynastic Egypt, Egyptian philosophy

The term “philosophy” was probably created in the Greek world in approx. 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Therefore, it is difficult to determine whether earlier authors known as philosophers from our perspective possessed philosophical self-awareness. P. Hadot (2002: 9) uses the term “philosophy before philosophy” in relation to the first Greek philosophers. The first certain, yet still quite accidental use of the word “philosophy” derives from the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. and the concept of philosophy was determined in more detail by Plato. Aristotle also contributed to determining the borders of philosophy in the Greek culture and historical and philosophical tradition. Aristotle considered the first philosophers those, who did not yet know the word “philosophy”, i.e. Ionic nature philosophers. In line with a certain account retold by ancient authors in the form of anecdotes, i.e. in the writings of Diogenes Laertios [Diog. Laert I.12] or Cicero [Cic., *Tusc.* V.8], the word “philosophy” was already known to Pythagoras and Heraclitus, which, however, seems little probable. An important issue is also the aspect of roots and inspirations of Greek philosophy. Did it emerge as an independent phenomenon not preceded by prior accomplishments and observations, or was it an effect of hundreds of years of functioning of other cultures and their accomplishments? What was the role of the inhabitants of the valley of the Nile in the building

of Greek outlook on the world and, as some believe, was their life devoid of thoughts and reflections of abstract and philosophical nature?

The sources of Greek thought may derive from a complex of political, social, economic and cultural factors which occurred in the archaic period of history of the Greek world and which led to the transformation of religion, morality sciences and practical and technical knowledge into science and philosophy. J.P. Vernant (1962: 75-96; 96-127) differentiates a complex of three features determining the novelty of the Greek thought with respect to earlier thoughts determined as "Eastern." These are: birth of a thought providing explanation of the world independent from mythology and religion, clarification of existence of the cosmos and course of natural phenomena; introduction of an idea of autonomous order governing the world, a cosmic order without theogonic character, yet relying on the principle of immanent law (*nomos*), imposing the same character to all phenomena of nature (*kratos*); emergence of geometric nature of thought – geography, astronomy and cosmology describing the world within the scope of specific space and built upon relations occurring solely among its elements, relations that are reversible and symmetrical.

It seems quite strange that these foundations of Greek philosophy are not seen in earlier cultures. We appreciate fine art or architectural accomplishments of pre-Greek civilizations, ignoring traces of thoughts with philosophical nature. Egyptian or Sumerian mythologies are treated as collections of fairy tales and hardly anybody tries to perceive deeper reflection or message in them. In relation to earliest periods, where there are no or hardly any written sources, questions about philosophy, religion or general perception of the world are most frequently rejected.

According to some authors, the concept of history of philosophy which is commonly accepted today relies on an erroneous premise that abstract and metaphysical thinking begins only when first references to it appear in preserved written records. However, the manner of reasoning perceived today as philosophical was born much earlier and Greek philosophers drew from this source from the very beginning of their searches. Pythagoras for many years studied in the schools of Egypt and Babylon, Thales was also the pupil of Egyptian priests. In a slightly later period the so-called "Eastern" science and thought were also abstract, which is testified by the fact that already in the 5<sup>th</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. such philosophers as Democritus or Plato went to study in Egypt when they were young. The interpretation of the history of philosophy which has been functioning for hundreds of years and determining it as an exclusive invention of the Greeks has found its reflection in the works of such thinkers as Kant, according to whom the Greeks followed the right path of studies and divagations, whereas everything that was before them can only be called "stumbling in the dark." Beginnings of philosophy are evaluated in a similar manner by A.N. Whitehead (1898; 1906), who wrote with contempt

about Egyptian mathematics which, according to him, did not go beyond the period of struggling with arithmetic; it was Pythagoras who discovered the abstract significance of numbers in describing the image of nature. It was only in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when this manner of looking at the ancient times changed. A number of important archaeological discoveries were made at that time in Egypt and Mesopotamia, showing mathematical, astronomical, religious and philosophical thinking of these civilizations in a new light. Discovery of a whole range of Egyptian papyruses and steles and Mesopotamian plaques provided new information indicating, e.g., that already 1000 years before Pythagoras the Babylonians successfully used “his” statement, whereas Egyptian mathematics was on a high level. Discovery of documents showing pre-Greek mathematics caused a partial change in its evaluation and showed the genius of the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Indians and the Chinese. Today, we know that mathematics and astronomy were on a much higher level in these civilizations than was assumed before. For example, the Egyptians and Babylonians dealt with mathematical problems without relation to their practical application, therefore reaching a high threshold of mathematical searches. Summing up, the hitherto theory about solely utilitarian nature of pre-Greek mathematics has little to do with reality. Therefore, the statement that the Greek invented philosophy by introducing abstract manner of conduct, differing from their utilitarian predecessors, cannot be deemed certain. In spite of our – constantly increasing – knowledge about the ancient Egypt, many experts and researches of this civilization believed until recently that the contemporary knowledge and culture had solely utilitarian nature. Even such meritorious researchers as A. Gardiner (1920) wrote that no other nation has shown such repugnance for clear philosophical thought and such interest in solely material issues as the Egyptians and meriting them with philosophical knowledge is unjustified. However, many monuments provide information about these aspects which could have seemed unknown to the Egyptians. Therefore, it is necessary to ask how much were first Greek philosophers influenced by pre-Greek science and philosophy. In Plato’s *Timaios*, we find opinions of an Egyptian priest which were heard by Solon during his stay in Egypt. The priest claimed that the Greeks did not have in their souls any complex outlook deriving from older tradition and science. Yet without knowing the Egyptian relics providing us with knowledge about the abstract dimension of Egyptian thought and science, it is not possible to examine the beginnings of Greek philosophy, i.e. philosophy as such, correctly. Works such as the Rhind Mathematical Papyrus or the Moscow Mathematical Papyrus clearly show much higher level of mathematical knowledge of the Egyptians than the Greeks at the time when Thales initiated Greek philosophy. However, it is sometimes hard for us to believe that authors of such structures as pyramids and huge temples, authors of works of art which are still impressive today, people who traded far and wide and had writing and fine art schools and rulers who

conducted complex and wise international policy did not possess the mentality of tribes from the time before the Neolithic revolution.

The Egyptian sources allow us to perceive important features of Egyptian religion, Egyptian outlook on the past issues, as well as being and non-being in Egyptian terms, often indicating underappreciated development of Egyptian thought. It is characterized by certain rationalization of abstract scientific methods (e.g. mathematical). Therefore, we can observe the activities of Thot – the god responsible for writing and science; Imhotep is also worshipped – a scientist and architect whose greatest popularity took place during the period of contacts between the Greeks and the Egyptians. By following hundreds of years of functioning of Egyptian beliefs, we see how mechanisms of domesticating the content deriving from abstract scientific searches are developed. The specific path of the Egyptian society and the atmosphere of certain isolation and peace definitely influence the manner in which the Egyptian society rationalized its involvement in development of abstract paths of cognition. The Greek mythology, which emerged in completely different circumstances, was not able to answer the cognitive questions similarly to Egyptian myths. Therefore, a need emerged to fill a gap in a new area, yet via the first philosophers (so-called philosophers of nature), the Eastern knowledge and experiences mainly from the area of mathematics and astronomy became known to the Greeks.

Important terms which very well portray the manner of abstract and philosophical thinking of the Egyptians – functioning in the Egyptian religion – are definitely such terms as *nr* and *maat*. The former denoted all-embracing divinity, a type of impersonal force, which is the source of all ethics, all existence and the ruler of fate (Hornung 1983: 30-49). A similar notion also existed in Sumerian religion (*nam-tar*), indicating a type of fate – a power taking care of order in the world. In Egyptian writings, the thought about the creator appears quite often; he created all beings from himself and is present in these beings at all times. Such a vision is present in the above-mentioned Shabaka Stone. Multiplicity of forms and beings found its clarification and justification in the Egyptian dualist concept of all things, treating each whole as a component of contrasts (similarly to the Sumerian and Indic culture). This vision, so well known to Egyptologists, found its numerous reflections in art, myths and Egyptian customs.

Everlasting ethical values and laws of nature were personified by the abstract concept of *maat*, personified as the Goddess Maat (Hornung 1983: 65-67). This was the symbol of balance, the guardian of order in the world, justice and punishment. Violation of *maat* – the eternal order – had negative consequence, including destruction of the entire community. This balance guaranteed execution of every idea and concept. Ideas and concepts, being prior in relation to their implementation, proved to the Egyptian thinkers that reality may be subject to random changes and transformations without any loss for individual beings and their elements, as far as *maat* is preserved. Transformations of gods into animals

or rulers into heavenly bodies were not an expression of a “simplistic ideology”, but an illustration of a mythological concept. However, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that a myth, as mentioned before, was communication of an idea describing the world and its functioning for the Egyptians, therefore it constituted a certain type of pre-philosophy.

Another aspect of the Egyptian perception of the world and a testimony for existence of a certain connection between the abstract and the real and measurable is the contemporary manner of perceiving and understanding the past (Kemp 2009: 76 and next). Continuity with the past was one of the ideological foundations of the early Egyptian state. Ideological side of the Egyptian state needed the past to legitimize power. In this sense, the Egyptians were really utilitarian, whereas the need of indicating their forefathers and the forefathers of their forefathers was used for pragmatic purposes. However, this interest in one’s roots, manifested in preparation of lists of rulers, had its deeper justification. The past was the model of order and harmony, whereas the rule of subsequent rulers introduced an incessant chain of peace and stability, symbolizing the balance necessary for existence – *maat*. This continuity of ordered royal power was so important in itself and constituted such significant basis of the image of the past expected by the Egyptians that in principle, there was no need to refer to history in a narrative manner – there was no need for describing the fates of individuals (Kemp 2009: 81). References to the past and the forefathers had also deeper sense in the Egyptian perception of time and history of the world. Royal letters went back into the past containing initially quite recent history, i.e. recorded quite accurately, and subsequently into the half legendary state of affairs retold from generation to generation, back to the gods, whose rule preceded the reign of “human” kings. This state of affairs allowed for clasping, with the use of countable years, the times really accessible for Egyptians and these, whose history they did not know. It allowed for creating a history in a way that they wanted to see and to get their bearings in the passing of time. Depriving the past of narration and evaluation, the Egyptians went ahead of their time trying to create an objective image. Today’s researchers know that by studying written sources it is never possible to reach the complete truth about the past. In this sense, this mission is doomed to failure. The past shown in a specific written source is an image constructed by the eyes of seemingly objective witnesses who, however, are not free from conditions, prejudices and ideas of a given time. This image, in fact, is never truthful.

A very interesting area of Egyptian pre-philosophy is its ontological aspect. The issue of existence of being and non-being found its numerous reflections in Egyptian beliefs and texts from the area of eschatology and mythology, whereas studies on this issue today constitute an important branch of analyses based both on philological and content related issues (e.g. Hornung 1991: 152 and next).

Therefore, let us try to indicate several elements showing the existence of abstract or pre-philosophical search already at the beginnings of the Egyptian state.

Already in the earliest period, deprived completely or almost completely of written sources, there appears the desire for idealization of the image of the state as a structure ensuring maintenance of order and harmony, juxtaposed to chaos and disordered world. The image is seen both in the desire for cultural unification of the entire young state and in the omnipresent emphasis on the role of administration and royal power which appeared at that time. This is particularly visible in the mass appearance of names and royal titles symbolizing not only the ordinary right of ownership (there is a dispute among researchers regarding the royal right of ownership in the early period of existence of the Egyptian monarchy), and primarily bringing under control the entire “mess” which had to dominate these areas before the period of the united state. This idealized and symbolic role of the state is related to the function of the emerging society as divine reflection – harmonious order ensuring balance and, therefore, welfare and stability. This is clearly seen in the example of early settlements, e.g. Tell el-Farkha had a clear division into social layers, treated not as misery of some and welfare of others, but as fulfillment of the imposed, assumed and necessary roles. For the Egyptians, it seems, their place in the community in which they had to function was “always proper.” Each element influenced the balance and had its specific role as an indispensable part of the whole. Therefore, the archaeological material does not show any traces of social conflicts or – in a negative sense – separation of social groups. Probably the entire communities inhabiting a given settlement constituted a team working at different positions, yet for the common, probably not fully understood, purpose; individual villages and regions were, in turn, parts of a larger whole, etc.

A very important element of the Egyptian iconography and writing, appearing since the very beginning of formation of the Egyptian state, is symmetry, treated as a geometrical and mathematical phenomenon, visible both in residential buildings and graves, in fine art works and utility items, as well as the above-mentioned mythological and philosophical dualism, indicating the omnipresent existence of opposites, which only together constitute a full and complete entirety. Such symbolic appears in earliest relics of Egyptian iconography, where individual elements (e.g. animals or humans) are combined into harmonious pairs. The artist’s intention was probably to present the final, desired harmony of the turbulent world, achieved solely by reconciliation of opposites. Multiplicity of presentations with animals suggest great significance of harsh forces of nature in the early Egyptian art and ideology, whereas the appearing humans probably symbolize the order introduced by man’s rule. This dualism is best reflected in the account of the fight of Horus and Seth; in the later period, it gave rise to the philosophical tradition of dualism in the Middle

East, which presented the constant conflict between the good and the evil – the light and the darkness. In the period of rule of the so-called 0 Dynasty or even earlier, symbols of royal power in the form of two opposing symbols appear, i.e. the falcon – Horus constituting probably the first proof for the existence of this dualistic concept of the nature of the world (e.g. Dreyer, Kaiser 1982; fig. 14).

Already in earliest periods of the Egyptian monarchy or even in the period preceding its establishment it is possible to see clear beginnings of the developmental cycle of Egyptian mathematics and architecture which several hundred years later bore fruit in the form of pyramids and temples. These phenomena are most perceptible in the architecture of residential and temple buildings, as well as in sepulchral architecture whose incessant development is seen clearly from the late Neolithic period to the period of the Old Kingdom and construction of the pyramids.

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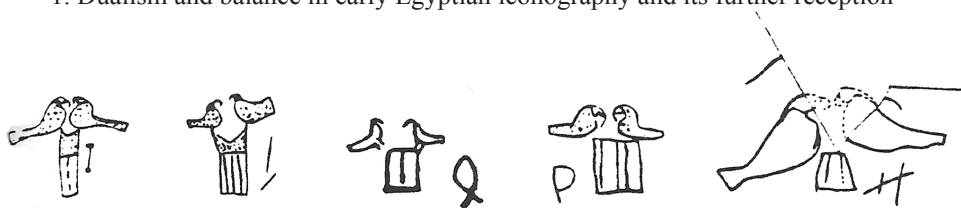
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1. Dualism and balance in early Egyptian iconography and its further reception



Predynastic royal names with two opposing forms of Horus

(after: Dreyer G., Kaiser W., Umm el-Qaab. Nachuntersuchungen im frühzeitlichen Königsfriedhof. 2. Vorbericht, MDAIK 38: 211-269, 1982)



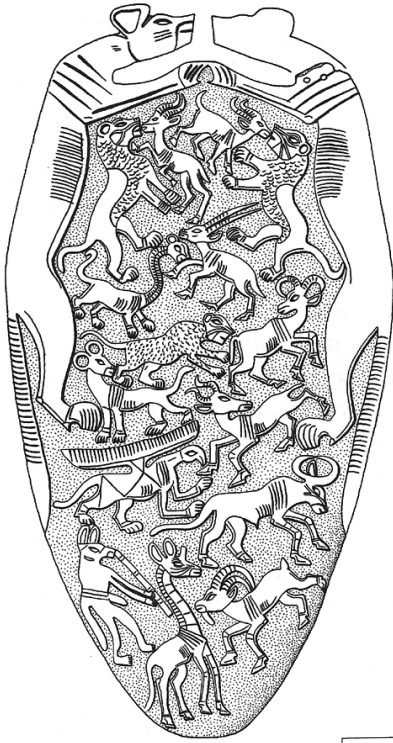
The royal name of king Khasekhemui, 2nd dynasty (after: Capart J., *Memphis à l'ombre des pyramides*, Bruxelles 1930, fig. 116)



Separation of fighting lions - the balance of power is maintained. Scenes from the Hierakonpolis painting and from the Gebel Arak knife (after: Quibell J.E., Green F.W., *Hierakonpolis II*, London 1902, pl. XXVIII; Mellink M.J., Filip J., *Ancient Egypt*, Berlin 1917, fig. 4)







Oppositely arranged lions on a Dog's pallet from Hierakonpolis - maintaining a balance (after: Petrie W.M.F., *Ceremonial Slate Palletes and Corpus of Protodynastic Pottery*, London 1953, pl. F)

Reconciliation of the opposing forces - Horus and Set, Throne of the Senuseret I, Middle Kingdom (After: Lange K., Hirmer M., *Egypt: architecture, sculpture, painting in three thousand years*, London 1961, fig. 86)

