

Before Time, after Time: existential time markers in Ancient Egypt - beginning, end and restart. A preliminary approach (with a special focus on the Heliopolitan conception)

Guilherme Borges Pires*

RES Antiquitatis 1 (2019): 143-157

Abstract

In ancient Egypt, Time was part of the whole “being” that was brought into existence in the “First Time” (sp tpj). Following a linear conception (D . t) of Time we might ask: if Time had a beginning, should we expect for it to come to an end? However, the simultaneous Egyptian circular approach to Time (nHH) turns each end into a new beginning. How should we approach Time before its existence? Can we refer to a “post-Time”? Is the “end” definitive or temporary, awaiting for the (re)start of a new Demiurge’s action? Is the immobility of the pre-Creation similar to one after the “end of the world”? This paper intends to be a preliminary approach to this issue. We will follow the traces suggested by some textual sources, focusing on the Demiurge, an entity connected to Time by means of creation and destruction.

Keywords: Ancient Egypt, Time, Creation, End of the World, Demiurge.

Date of submission: 3/1/2018

Date of approval: 8/3/2018

* CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. E-mail: guilhermecborgespires@gmail.com.

Before Time, after Time: existential time markers in Ancient Egypt - beginning, end and restart. A preliminary approach (with a special focus on the Heliopolitan conception)

Guilherme Borges Pires

Introduction

Time is a deeply human dimension: humankind both creates and is created by Time. Every human experience is profoundly rooted on Time. Despite the variations on the Time's perception throughout the world, in most cases, it seems to be impossible to divest Time from human experience: Time is Humanity and Humanity is Time (for a brief introduction on this topic see for instance: Pomian 1984, *passim*; Pomian 1993, 11-91; Mainzer 1999, *passim*; Whitrow 2004, *passim*; for an exemple of temporal conceptions outside the European/Classical vision of the world see Whorf 1950, 67-72).

For the *homo religiosus*, Time, such as Space, is not homogenous (Eliade 1992, 38). Just like human collectives differently perceive distinct spaces/places, in the immense temporality of the whole existence, specific time markers are assigned to a higher importance and religious symbolism, particularly the one that marks the beginning of Time and the one which points out its end.

This paper intends to be a modest preliminary approach to these existencial time markers in Ancient Egypt, presenting the current state of knowledge about this topic. We will follow the traces suggested by some textual sources as we will be focusing on the Demiurge, the author of Creation and therefore extremely connected to Time by means of creation, destruction and renovation. Given the preliminary character of the present work no particular chronology or textual typology were chosen. Nevertheless, due the own character of the available sources and to the primacy of the Heliopolitan theology over the others (Bickel 1994, 53; Servajean 2007, 74), one will most certainly sense a special focus on that cosmological conception.

A brief note on ancient Egyptian temporal conceptions

As any other civilization, the Egyptians cogitated about temporal aspects, something that can be understood not only by their complex setting of daily (political, administrative, economic, social...) activities but also by their theological and philosophical speculation. According to Kaddish (2001, 5) we can even refer to an omnipresence and urgency of Time in the Egyptian collective life even if, contrarily to most modern languages, the Egyptian does not present a whole encompassing term for "Time" (Otto 1954, 135-148; Winand 2003, 17).

Nevertheless, we may observe many words somehow connected to Time in the Egyptian vocabulary. Each part of the day had its own term. In what concerns the most remote time, one can point words like *pAw.t* (primordial times, origins), *js.wt* (ancient times) and most importantly *sp tpj* (“the First Time”), which designated the demiurgical moment, that is, the Cosmos beginning. Vocables such as *hAw*, *rk*, *a.t*, *wrS*, *nw*, *rr*, *sw*, among others, seem to refer to a somehow undefined temporal span, being rendered in modern terms by “moment” and/or “(period of) time”. *aHaw*, “duration”, could either designate an individual lifetime (also conveyed in the expression *tp-tA*) or a more generic interval, unlike the words *rnP.t* and *tr*, which embodied specific notions - “year” and “season”, respectively, and their constant return and repetition was covered by the term *nrj*. The idea of an episodic recurrence could be given by the word *sp* and its negative form (*n sp*) can be translated in modern languages as “never”. (Kadish 2001, 407).

The daily life, full of political, social, economic and administrative exigencies, required a temporal establishment. In fact, the labour achievements demanded for a temporal flux to go along with the human needs and actions. The Egyptians were then able to manipulate Time, defining and locating “events” (Kadish 2001, 406). The register of the king’s most notable actions (whether factual or not), the notes on the officials’ activities or even the individual lifetime somehow convey a linear temporal perception, measured in durations, intervals and spans, being evoked by the word *D.t*. This corresponds to one side of the Egyptian dual and complex notion of “Eternity”, a concept which has been subjected to a diverse epistemological exploration by many authors, such as Assmann (1974, 1975, 2003) Hornung (1978), Roeten (2004), Servajean (2007), among many others.

Simultaneously, throughout their history, the Egyptians built a temporal vision and experience which was due to the Space in which they identified and recognized themselves in: the day (*hrw*) and night (*grH*) succession or the Nilotic flood (with its consequent agricultural seasons) structured the Egyptian time’s perception both in pragmatic and theologic-philosophic terms.

This periodic and eternal repetition invited the Nilotic people to cogitate about a circular and cyclic temporal conception, usually summarized by the word *nHH* (Leclant 1969, 231; Hornung 1996, 72-74; Taylor 2001, 31; Sales 2015, 19). This would correspond to the other face of the Egyptian perception on “Eternity”. By *nHH* the Egyptians conveyed the natural rhythms, alien to human beings but crucial to Maat’s accomplishment. We refer thus to an observation that derives from “being in the world”, that is, from the observation of the phenomena repetition in a clear human submission to the geonatural sequences (Sales 2015, 20).

But of course, there was a starting point for these repetitive phenomena. Eternity had for sure a “first time” (*sp tpj*).

Time and Creation: from inertia to action

In the Egyptian *Weltanschauung*, that is, in the way the Nilotic people saw themselves in reference to their spatiotemporal ambiance, Time is extremely connected to the Creation

of the universe. We can associate Time to Genesis (Bickel 2003, 43), that is, Time as a result of the Creator's activity. Time, as everything else, was created by the Demiurge when he manifested himself in the "First Time" (sp tpj) in the Primeval Waters called by the Egyptians as the Ocean Nun (Nwn).

Despite this intimate connection between Time and Genesis in the "Two Lands", it is striking to notice the absence of an Egyptian myth clearly stating the creation of the temporal dimension (Servajean 2007, 47). However, a brief excerpt from the *Book of The Heavenly Cow* (firstly attested in Tutakhamon's reign) indicates that the countable time - the years (rnp.wt) - appeared as a result of the Humanity's rebellion and the subsequent Ra's departure towards the upper world to join the gods (nTr.w):

Dd=f n nTr.w pry.w m jAbty.t p.t jm.w jAw.w n nTr jAw
xpr(w).n=j jm=f jnk jr(w) p.t smn(w) [Hr.t] r rd.t bA.w
nTr.w jm=sn jn=j Hna=sn r nHH ms.n(=j) rnp.wt

"Il dit aux divinités sorties de l'orient du ciel: "Faites des louanges au dieu ancien dont je suis né! Je suis celui qui a fait le ciel et qui a établi [le ciel lointain] pour placer les *baous* des dieux (bA.w nTr.w). Je m('y) suis retiré avec eux pour toujours (nHH) et (j')ai mis au monde les années".

(Hornung 1982, p.1, left column; Servajean 2007, 47)

Therefore, according to this specific text, Time - or, at least, the temporal progression - is a consequence of the world's reorganization by the Demiurge when the human actions put an end to an initial time where gods and humans lived together.

Should we look into more cosmogonical texts, such as the ones connected to the Heliopolitan conception, we will notice that these first cosmological instants are qualitatively different from the others as they also represent the moment when disorder gives place to order, when the Chaos is confined to the limits of the organized world (Bickel 1994, 56-59). Nevertheless we are referring to a totally different vision here, given that, according to this theology, nothing - apart from the Primeval Waters where the Demiurge was somehow drowned - existed. There were no gods nor human beings as Creation had not yet happened. There was no Time: before Creation, there was no Time. How should we refer to a time which truthfully is not? I prefer to simply report to this instance as "before Time" (Ramos 1998-1999, 49-68). Therefore, perhaps contrary to the myth of the Heavenly Cow, there is no such thing as a perfect time lost by means of Creation, whose loss one feels nostalgic about. Instead the general determination is to maintain this time directly connected to Genesis intact. By accomplishing Maat, the pharaoh must preserve the "time of Ra", mainly through the application of the due rites (Bickel 2003, 47). So we can state that "pre-Creation" means "pre-Time" but also "pre-Maat" and that is why it is so important to preserve in the present the order initially established in the "First Time". In fact, Creation is not the end of Chaos: it is only its relegation to the peripheral boundaries of the Cosmos. Indeed, Creation is not a completed or finished task. On the contrary, it keeps on being accomplished, as pointed out by Vernus (2011, 180): "beaucoup s'en fait, la création étant achevée mais non parachevée".

Therefore, in this everlasting cosmic and existential process one might be faced with several crises. The solution to overcome any of them is the return to the origins, as stated by Hornung (1996, 33): “Le monde se comprend à partir de ses origines. (...) le seul fait de revenir aux origines du monde (...) permet un éternel, un dépassement des crises”. Creation seems to be the ultimate referent of a mythic representation of Time: the present is legitimated not through a sequential past but from a specific primordial point in that remote past, which is continuously re-enacted (Loprieno 2003, 127). In ancient Egypt this particular moment of the past to which everything is referred to is, of course, the Genesis.

This *topos* remained so attached to the Egyptian theological thought that in the New Kingdom, *sp tpj*, mentioned in the fourth and twelfth Amduat’s hours, would designate a daily apparition of the Sun (Bickel 1994, 56-59), in a process of *creatio continua* (Assmann 1995, 80-87). Each day is a reenactment of the order firstly established at the moment of the Cosmos Creation. Every morning, the birth-giving creator sun-god would appear in the same place as the day before, renewed; by the end of the day, as an old and tired man, the god would be swallowed by his mother Nut who would (re-)give birth to him, as a divine solar child on the following day. As stated by Zandee (1959-1962, 48): “Every sunrise is equal to the first one the world ever saw. Each morning is a repetition of creation”. The use of the expression *s.t n sp tpj* - “the place of the First Time” - in temples’ dedicatory inscriptions symbolically linked them to the place where Creation had once happened thus connecting the building to the very first cosmological moment (e.g. west wall of the upper courtyard of Hatshepsut’s temple at Deir el-Bahari).

The sun-god’s movements of rising (*wbn*) and setting (*Htp*) divide the continuum of Time into temporal units and thus create Time itself, which reinforces the extreme connection between Time and Creation. It is the solar Demiurge who is responsible for the existence of the temporal measurements, as we can read in the Papyrus Leiden I 344 (vso. iii, 10-11):

*jr hrw sxpr wnw.wt jp.tw r s.t nmtt=f wp rnpwt [Abdw] kmt xft
sodd=f [wjA] m pt*

“Who creates the days and brings the hours into existence, so that they are counted according to his movement, who divides the years and [months], so that they are complete while he travels [in the bark] in the sky”

(Zandee 1992, 234-239; Assmann 1995, 82).

As stated by Assmann (1995, 97), if on one hand the Sun’s light omnipresence turns the Space available to human experience, on the other its periodic movement turns Time’s human apprehension possible. This is particularly important in the New Kingdom solar hymns, where we can read expressions which emphasize the everlasting aspect of the (re)creation: “you appear in your place of yesterday/ in your condition of yesterday” (Zandee 1959-1962, 48).

The Egyptian Creation might be envisaged as the transmutation from the Sole One to the Many (Hornung 1986, *passim*). We refer then to a process of giving both shape and name to the formless matter which had been drowned in the Primeval Waters. Thus we may affirm that the loneliness of the Demiurge signifies an inertness time, which, in fact, is an

absence of Time itself. In fact, one fundamental condition for the accomplishment of Time is that life itself exists: it is only with the “breath of life” (Assmann 1995, 83) given by the Demiurge to every living being that existence begins and thus Time starts. One day, on the *sp tꜥj*, with no apparent reason, the Demiurge realizes his own existence and begins to create.

This *causa sui* moment marks the transition from inertia to action and so we can identify an intense relation between activity and Time in ancient Egypt. The time of the Creator’s action is indeed the creation of Time itself. This creative task entails a vital ontological transition: from the non-Being to the Being. We should nevertheless mention that this “non-Being” is not textually expressed as “nothing”. The author of the *Pyramid Texts*, for instance, presents the pre-Creation not as a pure ontological absence but instead as the opposite of the order established in the Genesis. This “non-Time” is then presented as if we were referring to the negative of a photograph:

“I was born in Nu when the sky had not yet come into being, when the Earth had not yet come into being, when the establishment (of the world) had not yet come into being, when disorder had not yet come into being, when the awe that came into being for the eye of Horus had not come into being” (*PT* 486).¹

The start of Time in ancient Egypt is contemporary with the origins of all existing forms, which occurs in the initial dawn (Sauneron and Yoyotte 1959, 43).

In ancient Egypt we do not find a single Creation narrative but a plurality of them. In Heliopolis, for example, the Genesis is somehow biological: Atum gives birth to the primordial couple - Shu and Tefnut - by means of ejaculation and/or expectoration. Profoundly cosmic, these deities carry in themselves the essence of Time, as we can read in CT 80:

sk Sw m nHH tnf.t m D.t

“Vois, Chou est la pérennité, Tefnout est l’éternité” (Bickel 1994, 134)

This wholeness is given by a gloss in CT 335: “As for what exists, it is eternity and everlasting. As for eternity, it is day; as for everlasting, it is night” (Faulkner 1973, 263).

Therefore, we can say that the Egyptian cosmic time is both linear and circular, the two being complementary, such as the day and night. As argued by Winand (2003, 20), the concepts of pendulum (from which Time balances between two ontological states, one of the idyllic and the other chaotic) and line (from time which progresses from two different states) are easily reconcilable. As pointed out by Bickel (2003, 45):

“Chu représente la vie, un principe qui est en éternel mouvement et en constant renouvellement; cette caractéristique concorde avec le concept de *neheh*. Tefnout, quant à elle, représente le principe de *maât*, la valeur inaltérable qui trouve son pendant dans l’immuabilité du temps-*djet*”

¹ I express my gratitude to Professor Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska who has allowed me to use this still unpublished translation.

Shu and Tefnut are thus the totality of Time, inaugurated by Creation. Moreover the god is given the name of “Life” (anx) and the goddess is called “Truth” (mAat), as we can read in CT 80:

Dd.jn tm sAt.j pw anx.t Tfnt

wnn=s Ana sn=s Sw

anx rn=f mAat rn=s

“Atum dit: “c’est ma fille vivante, Tefnout,

elle sera avec son frère Chou.

“Vie” est son nom à lui, “Maât” est son nom à elle” (Bickel 1994, 49-50)

Creation, which inaugurates Time, relies on a harmonious cosmic life: “Life, truth and time were the energies that perpetuated the world created by Atum” (Assmann 1995, 80).

Should we consider other Egyptian fundamental theological and cosmogonical traditions, we will perhaps notice that no particular attention is paid to “before Time”. The so-called *Memphite Theology* (Lichtheim 1973, 51-57; El Hawary 2010, pl.XV, among others) presents the verbal Creation with no specific mention to the Time the action takes place:

xpr(w) m HAty

xpr(w) m ns m tjt Jtm

jw wr aA PtH swD(w) [n=f nTr.w nb].w kA.w=sn sk

m HAty pn m ns pn

There took shape in the heart

there took shape on the the tongue in the form of Atum.

For the very great one is Ptah, who ordered the *kas* of all gods

through this heart and through this tongue

(Shabaka Stone, col. 53; Lichtheim 1973, 54; El Hawary 2010, pl.XV)

Therefore, the demiurgical act is presented with no indications on the cosmological state of the world before the *mise en oeuvre* of Ptah’s accomplishments. No description of what preceded it is given nor of the place the god is when he decides to bring the Cosmos into existence. We are informed that Ptah created “everything” (x.t nb.t; Shabaka Stone, col.59) and no Time creation is explicitly stated. In fact, this document provides with a lot more details regarding the spacial, geographical and administrative structuring of the world (Shabaka Stone, cols.59-60) than to temporal aspects.

If we consider the cosmovisions connected to the Ogdoad, a theological concept which often association with Hermopolis should be nuanced (Bickel 1994, 27-29; Zivie-Coche 2009), the task of tracing a temporal perception is made extremely difficult by the profusion and geographical dispersion of the sources. The *Pyramid* and the *Coffin Texts* provide us with no clear and absolute mention of this group of eight deities (four males and

four females) neither of their role and connection to the Creation (Bickel 1994, 54). The “Ogdoad” (xmnꜣyw, “The Eight”) is firstly mentioned in Hatshepsut’s Speos Artemidos (18th dynasty) and from the 26th dynasty it acquires the graphic appearance of four couples, each one with a given name; it is only from the Ptolemaic Period that “the Ogdoad” becomes a common designation, particularly, in Thebes (Zivie-Coche 2009, 167-172).

It is not the purpose of this paper to deal with all the temporal features that one might identify in every textual attestation relating to the Ogdoad and so we would not dare to refer to an “ogdoanian conception of Time” and even less to an “Hermopolitan” one. We would nevertheless like to briefly consider one excerpt from the propylene of Khonsu, dated from Ptolemy III Euergetes’ reign, where we are informed that the Ogdoad was fashioned in the Nun, where the “fathers and mothers”, born in Thebes, created Light:

xmnꜣyw nbi m Nwn it.w mw.wt ir Sw ms m WAsT

“L’Ogdoadé façonné dans le Noun, les pères et les mères qui font la lumière” (Zivie-Coche 2009, 189)

We are facing therefore with a primordial oceanic condition of the pre-Cosmos, where the deities are put into the world and the Light is created. We understand that they belong to a different Time, the one in which they performed Creation:

Dd.w ir itn qmꜣ Ax.w m hAw=sn

“Les ancêtres qui font le disque solaire, qui ont créé toute chose utile en leur temps” (Zivie-Coche 2009, 190)

Therefore if the first excerpt point us to a continuum, where *sp tpj* is daily renewed through the permanent creation of Light, the second presents a specific temporal dimension, when Creation effectively took place and the Time of the current cosmological state somehow began.

If Time is a Creation’s output, than it must mean that before the Genesis even past did not exist. This somehow resonates in the Rameses II’s Rhetorical Stelae from Abu Simbel, where we can read:

tꜣ mn(.w) mj sp tpj=f nn wn Xr-HA.t

“the country being stable like in its First Time when there was no Past” (*KRI* II, 312, 12), translated by Loprieno (2003, 131)

The wholeness of Time seems to start at Creation, as suggested by a rather enigmatic *Coffin Text* spell, which, once again, deeply interconnects the temporal dimension to the cosmic beginning:

jr nt(y).t wn(=w) nHH pw Hna D.t

“Quant à celui qui est venu à l’existence, c’est le temps (nHH) et l’éternité (D.t)” (Servajean 2007, 52)

“After Time”: the end of Time?

Should we admit that Time had a beginning then the logical epistemological consequence is to ask whether or not it will have an end. Is Time an everlasting reality in ancient Egypt?

Winand (2003, 21) points out that in civilizations that thought their temporalities in circular means, such as the Nilotic one, the search for the origins was stronger than the concern about the end of the world. In fact, as we have previously mentioned, the Creation was not envisaged as a single cosmogonic occasion. On the contrary, every sunrise was the repetition and renewal of the maatic organization of the Cosmos, in which Time played a very important role, conveying an idea of an “eternal return”, a religious and anthropological concept which has been worked by several authors, such as Eliade (1978). However the inevitable experience of temporal linearity enables a certain eschatology (Winand 2003, 21). Simultaneously, as argued by Assmann (2003, 120), if one conceptualizes a Creator-god which existed before Creation, that is, “before Time”, it is logical to question his existence after the end, that is, “after Time”.

Therefore the Egyptians also cogitated about other existencial time marker: the one that corresponded to the terminus of the Creation. Nevertheless, according to Elsebaie (2013, 91), it is difficult to follow the traces suggested by the Egyptian texts connected to the end of the world, since we do not have elaborated myths that may serve as counterparts of the Genesis ones.

Time, as every single product of the demiurgical activity, is limited: it has an immense duration but is not infinite. One day - very distant in Time - the Many will return to the One, the matter’s indifferentiation will come back and with that the immobility which is contrary to movement caused by the Creation. This idea of Time as limited reality can be attested in *PT 274*: “*The King’s lifetime is eternity [nHH]/ His time is everlastingness [D. t]*” (Faulkner 1998, 92).

The dead king seems in fusion with the Creator in an Eternity which appears more to be a temporal dilatation than an effective infinite existence.

According to the Nilotic religious anthropology, in the end Time will be the annihilation of itself with the consequent return to the aquatic and liquid state of Chaos, as we can read in *CT 1130*:

jw jr.n=j HH m rnp.wt m jmytw=j r wrD-jb sA Gb
 Hms.kA=j Hna=f m st wat
 jw jA.wt r njwt jw njwt r jA.wt
 jn Hw.t wS=s Hwt

“J’ai instauré des millions d’années entre moi et ce fatigué de coeur, le fils de Geb, ensuite je serai assis avec lui en un seul endroit, et les buttes deviendront des villes et les villes des buttes, chaque maison ruinera l’autre”. (Bickel 1994, 229)

and mainly in the famous chapter 175 from the *Book of Dead*:

jw=k r Hhw n HHw
 aHa n HHw
 jw rdj.n=j hAb=f wrw
 jw=i gr.t r HD jrt.n=j nbt
 jw tA pn r jj m nnw
 m HwHw mj tpy=f a
 jnk sp Hna wsjr
 jr.n=j xprw=j m ktxwftw
 nn rx sn rmT nn mA sn nTrw

“You are to have millions of millions, a lifespan of millions. When I have had him send out the elders, and I shall indeed destroy all I made, and this land shall turn into Nun, as a floodwater, as its original condition. I alone am to remain, with Osiris, when I have transformed myself into other snakes, which men do not know, which gods do not see” (Quirke 2013, 438)

The end of the world is thus announced by the Creator himself: everything will return to its original state (Elsebaie 2013, 97-98). This systematic reversal of the creative work seems to be alien to both gods and human beings (Bickel 2003, 52).

Actually, Atum, the god who pronounces the spell above cited, is etymologically implied with both creation and destruction, since the Egyptian word tm means at the same time “to complete” and “to not exist”, thus signifying both the “Whole” and the “Nothing” (Elsebaie 2013, 98; Popielska-Grzybowska 2013, 255). The Genesis’ author is simultaneously the destruction’s promotor. Like the “First Time” had not been caused by anything, there seems to be no apparent reason for the cosmic annihilation: both creation and destruction are manifestations of the Demiurge’s free will (Elsebaie 2013, 100).

This state of “after Time” is then similar to the one we found “before Time”, particularly, in the Heliopolitan conception. Aquatic Chaos seems to be the non-Time environment in this cosmivision, which is equivalent to non-existence, including the gods’ one, as we read in a Ptolemaic text, translated and quoted by Assmann (2003, 121):

“On dit de lui dans les écritures: celui qui dure après le temps *neheh*, parce qu’il est l’Un qui reste ensemble avec la Majesté de Rê, tandis que la terre sera dans le flot et sera submergée par l’océan primordial comme avant son origine et tandis qu’il n’y aura pas de dieu et pas de déesse qui, eux aussi, se retransformeront en serpent”

The Egyptian cosmic end is thus the return to the One, not to the Nothing. According to the Egyptian thought the world is not the extension between two “nothings” but between two “Ones” instead (Bickel 2003, 52). Therefore we have:

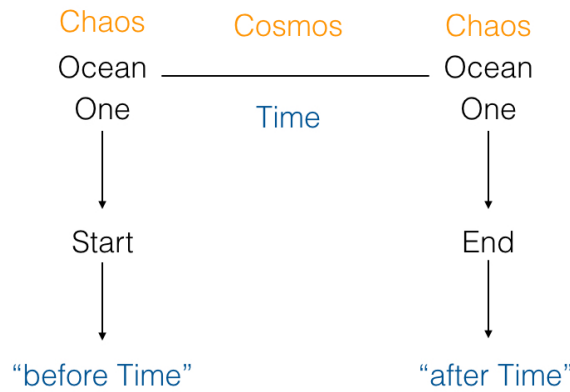


Fig. 1 - Chaos & Cosmos; “Before Time” & “After Time”

One should underline that the time of the end is not better nor worse. In fact, it is just a return to the initial Nun, where only the Demiurge and Osiris, united and transformed, will find a virtual existence:

“(…) contrairement aux menaces magiques qui n’envisagent qu’un cataclysme, la pensée théologique, très cohérente, prévoit un retour ordonné jusque dans le Noun qui deviendra l’élément de “post-existence”. Tout ce qui constitue cet univers (les dieux, les morts, les vivants et le cosmos) sera ainsi privé d’existence, seuls le créateur et Osiris trouveront dans le Noun à nouveau une existence virtuelle” (Bickel 2003, 52).

The Egyptians did not live in the apocalyptic hope of a better world to come neither regarded the world’s annihilation from a negative perspective (Elsebaie 2013, 101). Consequently no one awaits for a new Creation, since the one established at the “First Time” already had all existential potentialities, as argued by Bickel (2003, 52).

The Egyptian cosmic time seems to be the apparently impossible conciliation between linearity and circularity which, in the end, will merge into immobility, just like it had happened in the beginning. The “before Time” and the “after Time” in ancient Egypt are both characterized by non-action and inertia. The Time created is, in the end, the Time destroyed.

Nevertheless from a circular temporal perspective we may regard each end as a new beginning in a logic of permanent restart. Niwiński (2013, 215) advises us to pluralize the concept of “end of the world” in ancient Egypt. The notion that each end was symbolically identical with the new beginning is ichnographically expressed by the Uroboros snake, which bites his own tail (ꜥꜣ ꜣꜣ ꜣꜣ), in a clear manifestation of beginning, end and restart. A textual identification of this circular serpent is possibly suggested in CT 717:

pꜣH.n tm mH.n=f r=f ann=f ann

“Atoum a mordu, il a rempli sa bouche, il s’est lové (?)” (Bickel 1994, 230).

The Demiurge is thus the one and only being, the One that provoked both creation and destruction and therefore contains the ultimate power to overcome the cosmic annihila-

tion. Atum is the one who, in the end “will be there (...) waiting for that miraculous moment when he will take again consciousness of himself to recreate.” (Elsebaie 2013, 101).

Final Remarks

By the end of this paper one should be aware of the diversity - both synchronically and diachronically - of the Egyptian sources concerning Time, even if they do not always explicitly referred to it. Different temporal conceptions and perceptions co-existed in the Nilotic country, throughout time and space. More targeted studies are thus required in order to fully and deeply analyse and consider this core civilizational reality, something that would not fit in the scope of this paper, which main goal was to present a preliminary overview on the subject.

We may understand that the Egyptian Demiurge is a being with a specific and distinct temporality, who is able to create, repeat and reverse. The Demiurge, the Creation's author, specially regarded through the Heliopolitan lenses, will resist to the end of Time, surviving to the final moments of the Cosmos. He lives “before Time”, in the “Time” but also “after Time”. Experiencing different temporalities such as the ones here qualified as “time of inertia” or “time of action”, the Egyptian Creator survives to the various ontological cosmic mutations. The Demiurge creates, lives and exceeds the Time itself. He superintends over Time:

nnk sf jw=j rx.kwj dwA

“Yesterday is mine, I know tomorrow”. (CT 335; Bickel 1994, 187; Faulkner 1973, 260).

This fact is particularly important in the New Kingdom when the Egyptians conceptualized a divine being which is out of the Time and therefore able to exist before its concretization and after its terminus. Quoting Assmann (2003, 120): “S'il y a un dieu qui est en dehors du temps et aux yeux duquel le temps dans sa totalité apparaît comme le jour passé, il est nécessaire de penser que c'est un dieu qui existait avant la genèse du monde et qui existera après sa fin”. Time, as space, is, until its very ultimate limits, under the Demiurge's jurisdiction (Vernus 2011, 180).

In the beginning there were the Waters and in the end too. Or should we say: in the beginning and in the end there was/will be the non-Time? Is inactivity the true Egyptian Eternity? This immobility corresponds to a stationary conception of Time, which exists in parallel with the circular and the linear and can be found in Egyptian art, where the Egyptians try to overcome Time through an idealized iconography. Indeed François Dumas (1977, 432) classifies the Nilotic art as “un art à mesure de l'éternité” which tries to transmute the present life into Eternity. We may also address the Egyptian funerary beliefs in stationary terms. Indeed after being declared as “justified” in the Osirian court, the deceased inhabits an apparent lack of Time, out of the temporal constraints, according to Sales (2015, 38). Is there any past or future in the after-life? Do individuals live there as in an “eternal present”?

One should not misconceive this “eternal present” with the whole Eternity. In fact, the after-life is within the limits of the created universe, which means that the deceased will stay there for as long as the Universe exists. The moment Cosmos ceases, the beyond spaces will no longer exist too:

“Comme le monde des vivants, les espaces imaginaires de l’autre monde, conçus avec une étonnante richesse de détail, sont intégrés dans la course solaire et font partie du cosmos. L’autre égyptien se situe entièrement à l’intérieur des limites de l’univers créé, tant du point de vue spatial que temporel” (Bickel 2003, 51).

Therefore, destruction seems to be a wholeness in ancient Egypt. Simultaneously, the true suspension of Time is apparently only experienced by the Divine. Using Assmann’s (2003, 112) terminology, we can say that the Egyptian absence of Time is located at the limits of the “big time”, that is, the cosmic and divine temporality, contrary to the “small time”, in which humans and terrestrial beings live.

The “eternal return”, previously mentioned, allows the proximity between these two times, even if the separation between sky and earth, the contends between Horus and Seth or the departure of the old and tired Ra from this world (as described in the Myth of the Heavenly Cow) from this world serve as continuous mementos of the ontological impossibility of returning *de facto* to the “First Time”. The rite is the open door to that wish and so the time of the ritual is always of sustenance and repetition (Sales 2015, 31) in its quality of sacred time (Eliade 1992, 38). As stated by Bickel (2003, 50), only the ritual can overcome the spilt between the “First Time” and the “now”. The ritual gives the illusion that the “First Time” is in fact “every time”.

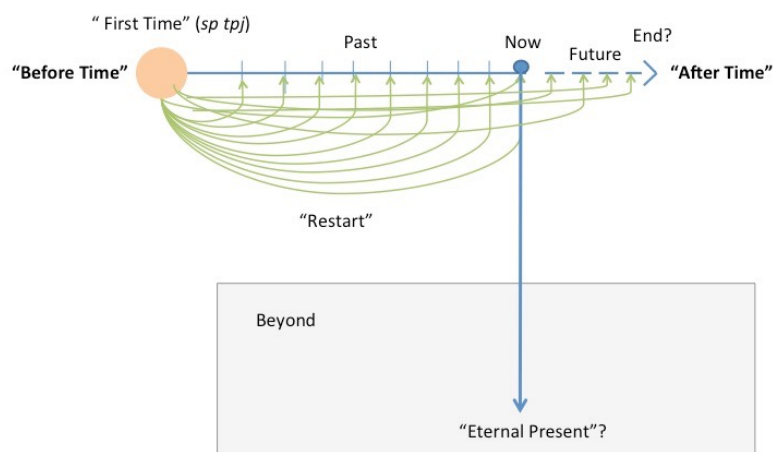


Fig. 2 - Time and the return of time in Ancient Egypt

To sum up, we may state that it is impossible to disconnect Time from Creation in ancient Egypt: the Genesis inaugurates Time and so before it there was not any temporality, which will again be verified when the world is brought to an end. Therefore, Creation and Destruction are true existential time markers for the Nilotic people since the only one to inhabit the “before Time” and the “after Time” is the Demiurge. Time is activity, order and life, and the absence of Time means the lack of all ontological features. Time is a true existential wholeness.

References

- Assmann, Jan. 1974. “Ewigkeit.” In *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, vol. 2, 247-254. Wiesbaden: Otto Harroswitz.
- Assmann, Jan. 1975. *Zeit und Ewigkeit im Alten Ägypten: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ewigkeit*. Heidelberg: Abh. d. Heildelberger Ak.d.Wiss.
- Assmann, Jan. 1995. *Egyptian Solar Religion in The New Kingdom. Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism*. London and New York: Kegan Paul International.
- Assmann, Jan. 2003. “La notion d'éternité dans l'Égypte ancienne.” In *Représentations du temps dans les religions. Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre d'Histoire des Religions de l'Université de Liège*, ed. Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Ohnan Tunca, 111-122. Liège: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège.
- Bickel, Susanne. 1994. *Les Cosmogonies Égyptiennes. Avant le Nouvel Empire*. Göttingen: Universitäts Verlag.
- Bickel, Susanne. 2003. “Temps liminaires, temps meilleurs? Qualifications de l'origine et de la fin du temps en Égypte ancienne.” In *Représentations du temps dans les religions. Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre d'Histoire des Religions de l'Université de Liège*, ed. Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Ohnan Tunca, 43-54. Liège: Bibliothèque de la Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège.
- Daumas, François. 1977. *La civilisation de l'Égypte pharaonique*. Paris: Arthaud.
- El Hawary, Amr. 2010. *Wortschöpfung. Die Memphitische Theologie und die Siegestele des Pjje - zwei Zeugen kultureller Repräsentation in der 25. Dynastie*, OBO 43. Fribourg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1978. *O mito do eterno retorno*. Lisboa: Edições 70.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1992. *O Sagrado e o Profano*. São Paulo: Livraria Martins Fontes Editora, 1992.
- Elsebaie, Sherine. 2013. “A Study on the End of the World as Viewed by the Ancient Egyptians.” In *Studies on Disasters, Catastrophes and the Ends of the World in Sources*, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia, vol. IV, ed. Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska and Jadwiga Iwaszczuk, 91-102. Pułtusk: Pułtusk Academy of Humanities.
- Faulkner, Raymond Oliver. 1973-1978. *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*, 3 volumes. Great Britain: Aris & Phillips.
- Faulkner, Raymond Oliver. 1998. *The Ancient Pyramid Texts*. Oxford: The Clarendon Press.
- Hornung, Erik. 1978. “Zeitliches Jenseits im Alten Ägypten.” *Eranos Jahrbuch* 47: 269-307.

- Hornung, Erik. 1982. *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen*. OBO 46. Fribourg/Schweiz: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Hornung, Erik. 1986. *Les dieux de l'Égypte - Le Un et le Multiple*. Monaco: Éditions du Rocher.
- Hornung, Erik. 1996. *L'esprit du temps des pharaons*. Paris: Philippe Labaud Editeur.
- Kadish, Gerald. 2001. "Time." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Volume 3, ed. Donald B. Redford, 405-409. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kitchen, Kenneth Anderson. 1979. *Ramesside Inscriptions, Historical and Biographical II*. Oxford: B.H. Blackwell [= KRI II]
- Leclant, Jean. 1969. "Espace et Temps, Ordre et Chaos dans l'Égypte pharaonique". *Revue de Synthèse*, Tome XC, n°55/56: 217-239.
- Lichtheim, Miriam. 1973. *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Vol. 1. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Loprieno, Antonio. 2003. "Temps des dieux et temps des hommes en ancien Égypte" In *Représentations du temps dans les religions. Actes du Colloque organisé par le Centre d'Histoire des Religions de l'Université de Liège*, ed. Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Ohnan Tunca, 123-142. Liège: Bibliothèque de Faculté de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Université de Liège.
- Mainzer, Klaus. 1999. *The Little Book of Time*. Munich: C.H. Beck Verlag.
- Niwiński, Andrzej. 2013. "Catastrophes and the Ends of the World in Pharaonic Egypt." In *Studies on Disasters, Catastrophes and the Ends of the World in Sources*, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia, vol. IV, ed. Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska and Jadwiga Iwaszczuk, 215-220. Pułtusk: Pułtusk Academy of Humanities.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. 1984. *L'ordre du temps*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Pomian, Krzysztof. 1993. "Tempo/Temporalidade." In *Enciclopédia Einaudi, Volume 29. Tempo/Temporalidade*, 11-91. Lisboa: Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda.
- Popielska-Grzybowska, Joanna. 2013 "tm tmm - the End and Nothingness as Completion and Completeness. Ancient Egyptian Plays on Words." In *Studies on Disasters, Catastrophes and the Ends of the World in Sources*, Acta Archaeologica Pultuskiensia, vol. IV, ed. Joanna Popielska-Grzybowska and Jadwiga Iwaszczuk, 255-259. Pułtusk: Pułtusk Academy of Humanities.
- Quirke, Stephen. 2013. *Going out in Daylight - prt m hwr. The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead. Translation, sources, meanings*. GHP Egyptology 20. London: Golden House Publications
- Ramos, José Augusto. 1998-1999. "O tempo antes do tempo." *CADMO* 8/9: 49-68.
- Roeten, Leo H. 2004. "Some observations on the nHH and D.t eternity." *Göttinger Miszellen* 201: 69-77.
- Sales, José das Candeias. 2015. "Concepção e Percepção de Tempo e de Temporalidade no Egípto Antigo." In *Política(s) e Cultura(s) no Antigo Egípto*, ed. José das Candeias Sales, 17-47. Lisboa: Chiado Editora.
- Sauneron, Serge and Yoyotte, Jean. 1959. "La Naissance du Monde Selon L'Égypte Ancienne." In *La Naissance du Monde*, ed. Serge Sauneron et al, 17-87. Paris: Editions du Seuil.
- Servajean, Frédéric. 2007. *Djet et Neheh. Une Histoire Du Temps Égyptien*. Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée.
- Taylor, John H. 2001. *Death and afterlife in Ancient Egypt*. London: The Trustees of the British Museum.

- Vernus, Pascal. 2011. "Les jachères du D miurge et la souverainet  du pharaon: sur le concept d'empire". *Revue d' gyptologie* 62: 175-197.
- Whitrow, Gerald James. 2004. *Time in History: Views of Time from Prehistory to the Present Day*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Winand, Jean. 2003. "R flexions sur l'anthropologie du temps: le cas de l' gypte ancienne. Questions et m thodes." In *Repr sentations du temps dans les religions. Actes du Colloque organis  par le Centre d'Histoire des Religions de l'Universit  de Li ge*, ed. Vinciane Pirenne-Delforge and Ohnan Tunca, 17-36. Li ge: Biblioth que de la Facult  de Philosophie et Lettres de l'Universit  de Li ge.
- Whorf, Benjamin Lee. 1950. "An American Model of the Universe". *International Journal of American Linguistics* 16.2: 67-72.
- Zandee, Jan. 1959-1962. "Prayers to the Sun-God from Theban tombs." *JEOL* 16: 48-71.
- Zandee, Jan. 1992. *Der Amunhymnus des Papyrus Leiden I 344, verso*. Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden.
- Zivie-Coche, Christianne. 2009. "L'Ogdoade   Th bes   l' poque ptol ma ique et ses ant c dents." In *Documents de Th ologies Th baines Tardives (D3T 3)*, ed. Christophe Thiers, 167-225. Montpellier: Universit  Paul Val ry (Montpellier III) - CNRS.