

Constellations (Egypt)

I. Introduction. Depictions of c. are fairly rare in Egypt. The only cases where a complete image of the starry sky is intended date from the Greco-Roman Period and are confined to temple ceilings. Much more frequent, and also earlier attested, are selections of some c. of special religious importance or visual impact. Other c., though attested by decan names and constituents of star clocks, are not given pictorial representation. The identification of the Egyptian depictions with actual modern c. poses serious problems. Sirius (Sothis), Orion, and the bull for the big dipper are clearly fixed. The depiction of the remaining figures of the classical sky image is not exactly consistent in the relative positions and definitely not intended to be an accurate map. This makes all proposals hazardous. The study of the religious importance of c. has long been neglected in Egyptology. Of the relatively large number of Egyptian astronomical representations, only a small but representative choice of the principal types has been retained in the catalogue.

II. Typology. The early coffin type (1*) shows within a diagonal star clock a strip with the most important sky phenomena, namely the sky goddess →Nut, the big dipper (in the form of the foreleg of a bull), Orion (see also 2-3), and Sothis. With the exception of the big dipper, they are depicted as anthropomorphic deities with their characteristic attributes. Nut is holding the sky above her raised hands, Orion appears with the *s3h* hieroglyph (GARDINER 1957: no. D61) on his head and turning backward, and Sothis has a pointed triangle on her head.

The classical sky image (4-8) shows a combination of the southern and northern halves of the sky. The northern half depicts the tutelary gods of the lunar days (mostly anthropomorphic) and a group of northern c. They include: a →bull (either a complete animal or an ovoid shape with a bull's head); a falcon-headed man spearing the bull; the goddess Selqet above the bull; a large erect hippopotamus (sometimes with a crocodile on its back) leaning on a mooring post and an upright small crocodile and holding the bull on a chain; a man before a →crocodile; sometimes another crocodile with curved tail; a →lion (sometimes with the tail of a crocodile); and a large →bird of prey (sometimes missing). The tutelary deities of the decans and the planets (partly anthropomorphic, partly animal-headed)

dominate the southern half. Only a few conspicuous southern c. receive pictorial rendering, primarily a sheep, a large barque, an ovoid shape, and the forms of Osiris-Orion and Isis-Sothis. Some late derivatives reduce the model to the most important figures (NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: III 93, pl. 50).

III. Sources

III.1. Chronological range. The earliest images of c. in Egypt (1*) are attested on coffins of the early Middle Kingdom (2050-1900). The earliest examples of the classical sky image appear shortly thereafter, as testified by the fragmentary coffin of Heni (4) and a Roman papyrus (5), which records an early Middle Kingdom original from about 2000. This classical sky image dominates the extant documentation from the New Kingdom until the beginning of the Ptolemaic period. Some remnants of its original conception are attested down to the Roman period (NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: III 93, pl. 50). The existence of these types from the Old Kingdom is arguable due to indirect criteria (QUACK 2002).

III.2. Geographical distribution.

The early coffin type is mainly attested at Assiut and from a few other Upper Egyptian locations (Thebes, Gebelein, Assuan). Still, its place of origin is more likely to have been the Memphite residence. The classical sky image and its derivatives are represented by finds throughout Egypt. It is generally not probable that there were significant patterns of knowledge in principle, though perhaps in application to particular types of objects (like the coffins in the Assiut and early Upper Egyptian tradition).

III.3. Object types. Images of the c. are normally confined to objects, which are reasonably capable of symbolizing the sky, such as coffin lids (1*), ceilings of temples (8), and tombs (6*). Within temples, the hypostyle halls and the Osirian (→Osiris) chapels are the areas most frequently decorated with c.; they rarely appear in sanctuaries. The usage for the sarcophagus rooms of tombs probably derives from the adaptation of Osirian decoration patterns for deceased human beings. Though only slightly sloping, the outer sides of water clocks receive the same treatment as ceilings (7). Isolated c. like the Orion image can also be depicted on game boards (2) or magical stelae (3).

IV. Conclusion. Although the sky and its phenomena played a major role in Egyptian religion (KRAUSS 1997; VON LIEVEN 2000; WALLIN 2002), only a few

individual c. reached greater importance. The big dipper was considered to be the leg of Seth, who had attacked →Osiris. As a punishment his leg was cut off and set into the sky, where it was watched by demons and guarded on a chain by a giant hippopotamus goddess who was connected with Isis. He was therefore not able to set in the west; the myth thus served as an aitiology for the fact that the big dipper is a circumpolar constellation (VON LIEVEN 2000: 24-28). Given that the big dipper was no longer fully circumpolar in Southern Egypt due to the effects of the precession of equinoxes, a magical text accuses Thoth of having loosened the chain holding Seth (QUACK 1996: 156f). Seth's victim, Osiris, was connected with Orion who was viewed as a wide-striding god; this corresponds to the fact that Orion has a rather long path, being near the equator. The most important constellation was Sirius since its heliacal rising coincides with the onset of the Nile inundation. Other c., even those depicted in the classical sky image, have rarely left a recognizable mythological connection.

V. Catalogue

1* Coffin lid, wood/stucco, **measurements**, Thebes, tomb of queen Aashyt, 2050. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JdÉ 47355. *NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: I 10f, pl. 9 **2** Game-board, wood/stucco, Thebes, tomb 93, 11th cent. PUSCH 1979: 324-327, pl. 86 **3** Stela, limestone, 1186-1184 (time of Sethnakht). KAKOSY 1998: 128, 132-136 **4** Coffin (fragmentary), wood/stucco, Assiut, 2000-1900 (early 12th dyn). GUNN 1926 **5** Papyrus, Tebtunis, 1st-2nd cent. CE (two antique copies of tomb, which is dated to about 2000 BCE). OSING/ROSATI 1998: 81f, 92-94; pl. 8, 12 **6*** Ceiling, plaster, 3.6 x 3 m, Thebes, tomb of Senmut (TT 353), 1470. NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: I 22f, pls. 24-25; *DORMAN 1991: 138-146, pls. 84-85 **7** Water clock, alabaster/glass/cornaline, Karnak (favissa), 1400. NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: III/2 pl. 2; NELSON/LEBLANC 1976: 139-149 **8** Ceiling (of hypostyle hall), sandstone (?), **measurements**, Ramesseum, 1250. NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69: III/2 pl. 5

VI. Selected Bibliography

KRAUSS 1997 • VON LIEVEN 2000 • NEUGEBAUER/PARKER 1960-69 • QUACK 2002

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