Images of Time in Ancient Egyptian Art*

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To the ancient Egyptians life in this world represented the phase preceding life in the next world, which itself was sanctioned by death, a phenomenon viewed as a necessary transition that allowed the individual to get access to a new form of existence.[1]

The preoccupation with immortality and, hence, time in general is well attested in Egyptian literature and has generated a significant number of specialized studies.[2] In art, the concept of time is usually mentioned in the surveys in relation to statuary art and architecture. The Egyptian concern for everlastingness is observed to be expressed characteristically in the selection of hard materials, massive proportions, youthful and idealized portrayals of individuals, who typically are shown in repose and lacking facial expressions.[3]

As for pictorial art, the issue of time has been explored in relation to space. The by now classic study by Henrietta Groenewegen-Frankfort on space and time in Egyptian art focuses on the pictorial rendering of figures and objects in space and deals with time insofar as it is linked to the movement of the figures.[4] Since space and time are essential factors contributing to the telling of a story visually, it may be said that it is while attempting to assess the narrativity of images (or lack thereof) that scholars have traditionally considered the issue of time in two-dimensional images.[5] Temporality or the degree to which images convey a sense of time is, therefore, not considered in the present essay, which instead focuses on the representations of time as a pictorial theme.

The Texts

The phenomenon of time was probably perceived at first through the observation of the cyclical rhythm of nature, such as the alternating of day and night, the succession of seasons, and the recurrence of the annual inundation of the Nile. This early experience led eventually to the formulating of concepts about the nature of time.[6] Although the Egyptians did not have a word for time in general, they used a number of terms to refer to the various units of time and to connote distinctions in meaning.

In Egyptian thought, time is classified essentially as being either human or divine. Human time is that which is experienced by individuals while on earth. It is viewed as the "here-time" as opposed to the "there-time" to which the individual has access at death.[7] The earthly existence (*ꜥḥꜥw*)—the temporal space allocated to individuals within the limits of birth and

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[1] Erik Hornung, *Idea into Image: Essays on Ancient Egyptian Thought*, trans. E. Bredeck (Timken Publishers: New York, 1992), 66 and 95; Wolfhart Westendorf, "Tod," *LÄ* 6:614.

[2] For references, see Lászlo Kákosy, "Zeit," *LÄ* 6:1361–71; also note 12 below.

[3] Art as an expression of overcoming time is noted by Siegfried Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. A. E. Keep (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1973), 197–98; also Cyril Aldred, *Egyptian Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 15; W. Stevenson Smith, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, 2d ed. rev. W. K. Simpson (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981), 15–18; and Heinrich Schäfer, *Principles of Egyptian Art*, ed. E. Brunner-Traut, trans. and ed. J. Baines (Oxford: Griffith Institute, 1986), 24 and 46.

[4] H. A. Groenewegen-Frankfort, *Arrest and Movement* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA., 1987) 15–141.

[5] Helene J. Kantor, "Narration in Egyptian Art" *AJA* 61 (1957), 44–54; Schäfer, *Principles*, 227–28.

[6] Kákosy, *LÄ* 6:1361.

[7] Jan Assmann, *Zeit und Ewigkeit im alten Ägypten: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Ewigkeit* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1975), 11.

death—is organized in time increments of years (*rnpwt*), months (*ȝbdw*), days (*hrw*), hours (*wnwt*), and even moments (*ȝwt*), the shortest time periods. According to the texts, 110 years represent the ideal length of time the Egyptians, in their quest for additional time, wished to spend on earth before dying and proceeding to the afterlife. Yet, compared with the inexhaustible supply of time in the other-worldly existence, this-worldly existence is extremely brief.[8] The transitoriness of a human lifetime, which is said to be equivalent to a single hour in the afterlife, constitutes a well-known literary theme. For instance, in the "Instruction for King Merikare," dated to the First Intermediate Period, the judges of the dead are said to view human existence as a single hour.[9] In one of the songs inscribed in the tomb of the priest Neferhotep (TT 50) of the reign of Horemheb, life on earth is thought to be but a dream.[10] This notion appears also in the New Kingdom books of the Netherworld (see below). The insignificance of human time is further underlined by its characteristic linearity as opposed to periodicity—the predominant aspect of time in general and the prerogative of divine time in particular.[11]

By contrast, divine time lies beyond the confines of the human realm. The Egyptians further define this time as being either *nḥḥ* or *ḏt*—two terms whose significance has been and still is a matter of debate among Egyptologists and which can be translated as either cyclical perpetuity or infinite, absolute timelessness, respectively.[12] Divine time, which is eternal, is thus a combination of two aspects: endless repetition and linear continuity. Since *nḥḥ* and *ḏt* are frequently used in the texts in proximity to one another, they seem to reinforce each other. Although occasionally they even appear to be interchangeable, they are not synonymous, for each word seems to be connected to a specific context. Briefly stated, while *nḥḥ* is generally associated with the sun-god, Re, the day, the morning sun, the beginning, the horizon, and tomorrow; *ḏt* is associated with the ruler of the dead, Osiris, the night, the evening sun, the end, the kingdom of the dead, and yesterday.[13]

The Images

The first and by far the most significant group of images depicting time includes the illustrations found in the New Kingdom books of the underworld. In them, time is often depicted as a gigantic and endless snake, called Metui (Metuty), the "doubly twisted one." In the lower register of the Fourth Division of the *Book of Gates* depicted in the tombs of Sety I (shown) and of Ramses VI, Metui is carried to the west (i.e., the realm of the dead) by twelve deities. Hieroglyphic signs for lifetime (*ʿḥʿw*) are placed above its body (fig. 1).[14] The text above the scene says:

> "They establish the duration of life and they appoint the days for the souls in the West, destined for the Place of Destruction."
>
> Re speaks to them:
>
> "O gods who preside in the Netherworld, who carry the serpent Metuty while measuring the duration of life. Take hold of Metuty, measure the duration of life which is placed on him for the souls of the West, destined for the Place of Destruction. Annihilate the souls

[8] Hornung, *Idea*, 60–63.

[9] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 1 (University of California: Berkeley, 1973), 101.

[10] Miriam Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2 (Berkeley: University of California, 1976), 116.

[11] Miroslav Verner, "The Ancient Egypt Confrontation of Man and Time," in *Aspects of Ancient Oriental Historiography*, Contributions to the Symposium, Charles University 1973, ed. V. Souček (Charles University: Prague, 1975), 43.

[12] See, for instance, Jan Assmann, "Ewigkeit," *LÄ* 2:47–54; Abd-el-Mohsen Bakir, "*Nḥḥ* and *ḏt* Reconsidered," *JEA* 39 (1953), 110–11; and "A Further Re-appraisal of the Terms: *Nḥḥ* and *Ḏt*," *JEA* 60 (1974), 252–54; Erik Hornung, "Zeitliches Jenseits im alten Ägypten," *Eranos Jahrbuch* 47 (1978), 290–307; Lászlo Kákosy, "Einige Probleme des Ägyptischen Zeitbegriffes," *Oikumene* 2 (1978), 101–8; Andrzej Niwinski, "Noch einmal über zwei Ewigkeittsbegriffe. Ein Vorschlag der graphischen Lösung in Anlehnung an die Ikonographie der 21. Dynastie," *GM* 48 (1981), 41–53; Eberhard Otto, "Altägyptische Zeitvorstellungen und Zeitbegriffe," in *Die Welt als Geschichte* 14, nos. 3/4 (1954), 135–48; Edward F. Wente, "Funerary Beliefs," *Expedition* 24 (Winter 1980), 22; Wolfhart Westendorf, "Die Geburt der Zeit aus dem Raum," *GM* 63 (1983), 71–76; and L. V. Žabkar, "Some Observations on T. G. Allen's Edition of the Book of the Dead," *JNES* 24 (1965), 75–83.

[13] Assmann, *LÄ* 2:48; Hornung, *Idea*, 68; and ibid.

[14] Hornung, *Eranos* 47:282–83; and *The Valley of the Kings*, trans. D. Warburton (Timken: New York, 1990), 142.

Fig. 1. Lower register of Fourth Division, Book of Gates, *Tomb of Sety I, detail. Photo Artemis & Winkler, Zurich.*

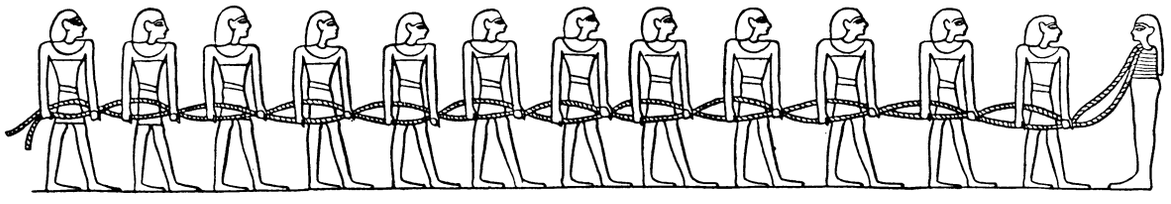

Fig. 2. Upper register of Fifth Division, Book of Gates, *Tomb of Ramses VI. Alexandre Piankoff,* The Tomb of Ramesses VI. *Copyright © 1954 by PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.*

> of my enemies, order (them) to the Place of Destruction that they may not see the mysterious region."[15]

Thus the scene is to be understood as depicting the gods measuring out lifetimes for the blessed individuals who are in the beyond.

In the upper register of the Fifth Division in the same book, the mummiform god Aken is shown with a cord hanging from his neck. A star, the hieroglyphic determinative for hour, is placed above each loop (fig. 2).[16] The text above says:

> "Hold fast the double rope, draw for you out of the mouth of Aken the coming out of hours through which you are happy.
> The hours come to rest in your places while the double rope comes out of the mouth of Aken. When the twisted one comes out, the hour is born. While Re calls it, it reaches its place of rest. Then Aken swallows the double rope . . . "[17]

Aken is thus giving birth to time by spinning out of his mouth an endless rope pulled by twelve figures. Each loop represents the birth

[15] Alexandre Piankoff, *The Tomb of Ramesses VI,* vol. 1, ed. N. Rambova (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), 170.

[16] The stars above the loops are not reproduced on Piankoff's fig. 47 (shown) but they are visible on plate 47 in vol. 2 of the same work, see ibid.; also Hornung, *Eranos* 47:285; and note 6 above.

[17] Piankoff, *Ramesses VI,* 1:174.

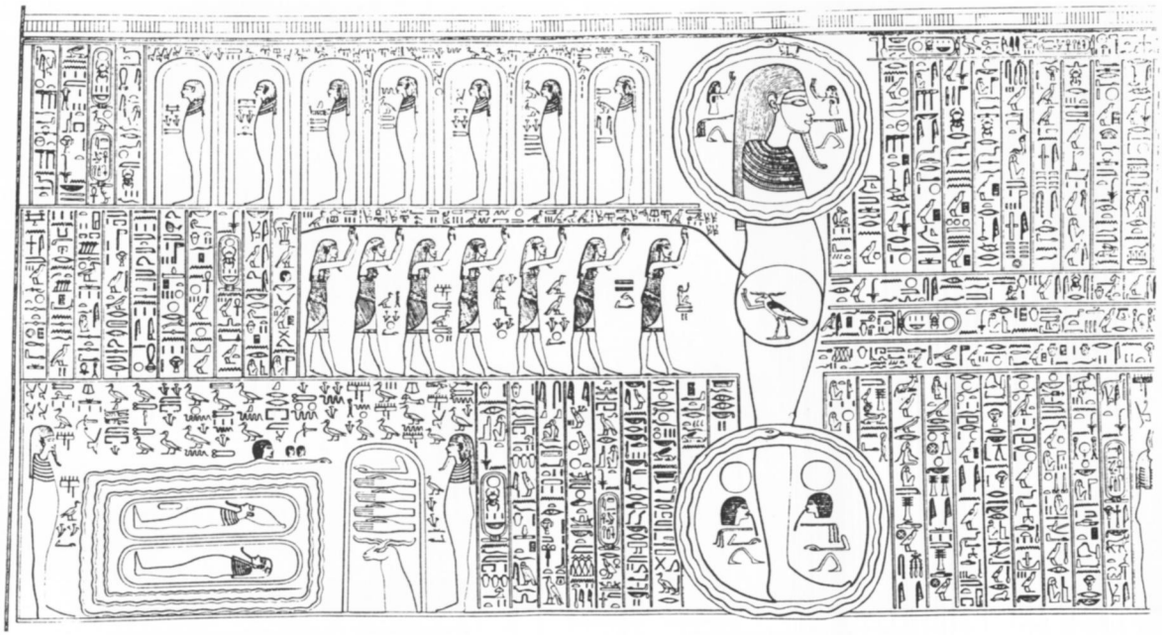

Fig. 3. Exterior left panel of Tutankhamun's second shrine (Cairo Museum, no. 1321). Alexandre Piankoff, The Shrines of Tut-Ankh-Amon. *Copyright © 1955 by PUP. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.*

of an hour in the afterlife—the equivalent to an entire human lifetime—which the god swallows again once it has run its course.

A motif first found on Tutankhamun's second gold shrine depicts a snake with its tail in its mouth, called in Egyptian *sd-m-r* ("tail-in-the-mouth") and later in Greek the ouroboros ("tail-eater") where the term derives from originally (fig. 3).[18] The full circle described by the time-snake as its tail joins its head is a metaphor for the end of time catching up with and running into the beginning of time.

Iconographically, the images discussed above are reduced to very few visual components excluding all non-essential elements, such as descriptive details. They depict little or no action nor do they provide the setting for a story. The images are, therefore, non-narrative. (One might, of course, argue that while the virtually static imagery of the ouroboros is non-narrative, by contrast, that of Metui as a huge snake dispensing lifetimes or as an endless rope giving birth to hours, is minimally narrative.) Rather, the images are imparted with a symbolic or iconic value that stands for time.

Stylistically, the images are carefully selected so as to approximate or translate pictorially the abstract notion of time as closely as possible. On one level, the endless and continuous supply of time is readily suggested by the linear shapes of a rope or that of a snake. On another, the cyclical pattern of the inexorable repetition of *nḥḥ*-time is conveyed by linear shapes describing twisted or circular motions.

The abstract concept of time is here rendered through iconographic and stylistic over-simplification. Despite this schematization, the images evoke both temporal dimensions and function as direct icons for the enduring of eternal time in its cyclical and infinite aspects. Indeed the first two images evoke life in the beyond as being experienced through perpetual regeneration and thus refer to the mythical notion of the dead awakened to a new lifetime, as the sun-god journeys through each nightly hour. When Re moves to the next hour (or region) of the underworld, the dead has completed another lifetime and goes back to

[18] Kákosy, "Uroboros," *LÄ* 6:886–87. The ouroboros is a complex metaphor which can be read on several other levels of meaning; ibid., for a synopsis.

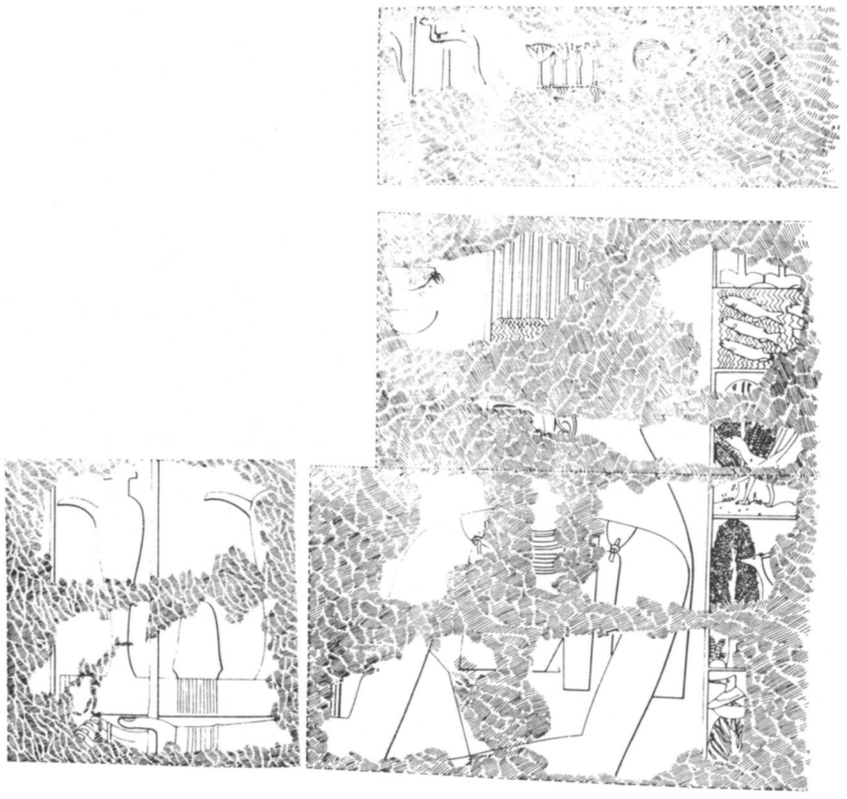

Fig. 4. Personification of 3ḫt, *east wall of "World Chamber," Sun Temple of Niuserre, Abu Gurob. Photo Akademie Verlag, Berlin.*

sleep.[19] As for the image of the ouroboros, it evokes the uninterrupted and continuous aspect of *ḏt*-eternity, as well as the periodicity of *nḥḥ*-eternity.

The difficulty in visualizing a concept as abstract and complex as that of time prompted the Egyptians to create not only an imagery whose significance could be grasped at once but also one which would function as metaphors for time. This led to the creation of a symbolic imagery consisting of signs, which are not based on actuality but which, as we have seen in the case of the serpent, can translate formally the aspects of the concept of time. Moreover, it should be noted that this system of abstract symbolism applies to the divine realm and, hence, eternal time. That we know, for instance, that the mummiform figure out of whose neck hangs an intertwined rope that is being held by other figures is in fact a metaphor for the god Aken giving birth to hours assisted by twelve deities, is communicated to us by the text. The images thus require prior knowledge of the text—what Maria Mayenova calls "verbal intervention"[20]—for their meaning to be apprehended. In other words, without the knowledge of what the signs stand for or refer to, these tend to appear esoteric to the non-initiated.[21]

Another type of imagery depicting time can be observed in the so-called "world chamber" in the sun temple of the Fifth Dynasty King Niuserre at Abu Gurob. Two of the three Egyptian seasons, namely, *šmw* and *3ḫt*, are preserved as large male and female personifications (fig. 4).[22] Here time is evoked through the association of elements,

[19] Hornung, *Eranos* 47:281–82; and *Idea*, 63.

[20] Maria R. Mayenova, "Verbal Texts and Iconic-Visual Texts," in *Image and Code*, ed. W. Steiner (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1981), 134.

[21] For this process of signification, refer, for instance, to the semiotic work of Charles Sanders Peirce, see *A Comprehensive Bibliography and Index of the Published Works of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Texas Research Institute for Studies in Pragmaticism (Greenwich, 1977).

[22] Elmar Edel, *Zu den Inschriften auf den Jahreszeitenreliefs der "Weltkammer" aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Niuserre* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1961–63); and Elmar Edel and

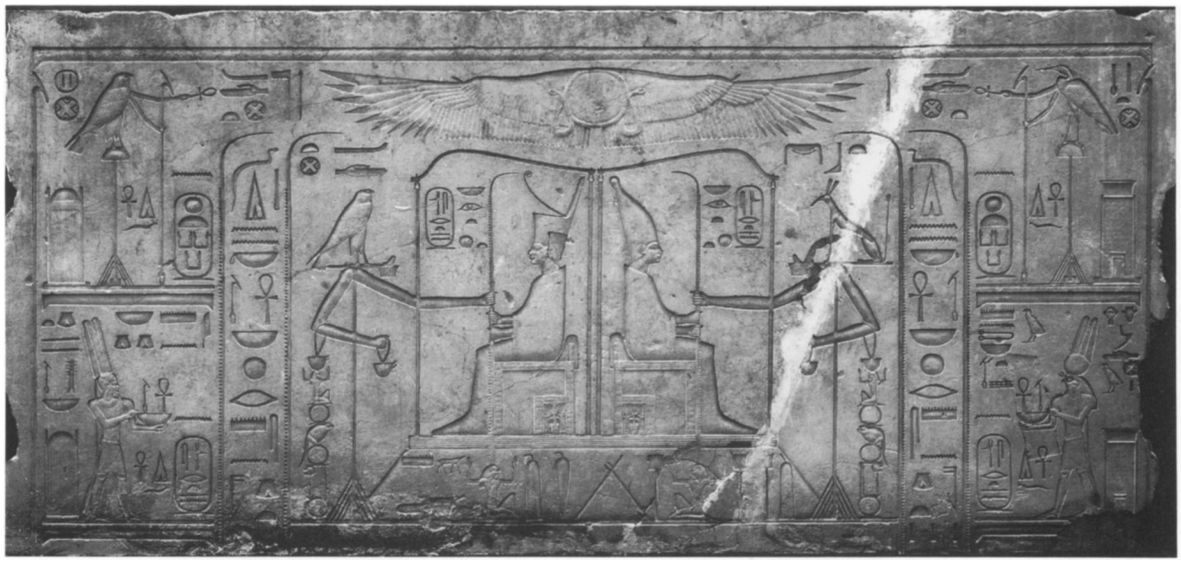

Fig. 5. Senwosret III in the Sed-festival pavilion, Madamud (Cairo Museum, no. JE 56497 A). Photo Hirmer, Munich.

such as the fauna, flora, and activities, that are characteristic of each time period or natural season. The fact that large figures personifying the seasons are intercalated and very much a part of the imagery suggests the symbolic or metaphorical nature of the latter. The purpose of these images is thus not to present a pictorial narrative of the natural seasons but instead to juxtapose tableaux depicting activities that occur regularly so as to convey the notion of periodicity of nature and, by analogy, of cyclical time on earth. While on one level, the images denote a smaller temporal frame, namely, the year on earth and its division into seasons, on another, the symbolic presence of the personifications transcends it to divine time.

Unlike the previous images, whose symbolism derived from a system of signs for time, the symbolism of the present images is achieved by combining two modes of expression—scenes and signs, namely, the scenes of activities which, albeit stereotypical, are partially based on reality and the personifications of the seasons which are not.

The important *sed*-festival (*ḥb-sd*), which celebrated the king's renewal of powers and the reaffirmation of his divine nature every thirty years,[23] is evoked pictorially through a variety of images. The best known representation of the ceremony is that of two images of the king seated back to back in a double pavilion, wearing the crown of Lower Egypt and the crown of Upper Egypt, respectively (fig. 5). Other images include that showing the king running a ritual race as well as other general depictions of the royal jubilee.[24]

On one level, the images of the *sed*-festival, which are normally accompanied by a text, constitute a pictorial reference to that event and hence, a historical document. On another level, by representing an event that in theory took place every thirty years, the images become closely associated with the notion of time, in general, and act as symbolic representations or

Steffen Wenig, *Die Jarhreszeitenreliefs aus dem Sonnenheiligtum des Königs Ne-User-Re*" (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1974). The depiction of personified seasons occurs also in the Sixth Dynasty private tombs of Mereruka and of Ikhekhy at Saqqara; see Prentice Duell, *The Mastaba of Mereruka*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), pl. 6; T. G. H. James, *Mastaba of Khentika, called Ikhekhi* (London, 1953), pl. 10; and William Stevenson Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1946), fig. 231 and p. 355.

[23] Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 79–88; for further references, see Karl Martin, "Sedfest," *LÄ* 5:782–90.

[24] For a recent discussion of the representations of Amenhotep III's *sed*-festivals, see Arielle P. Kosloff and Betsy M. Bryan, *Egypt's Dazzling Sun: Amenhotep III and his World* (Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, 1992), 38–41.

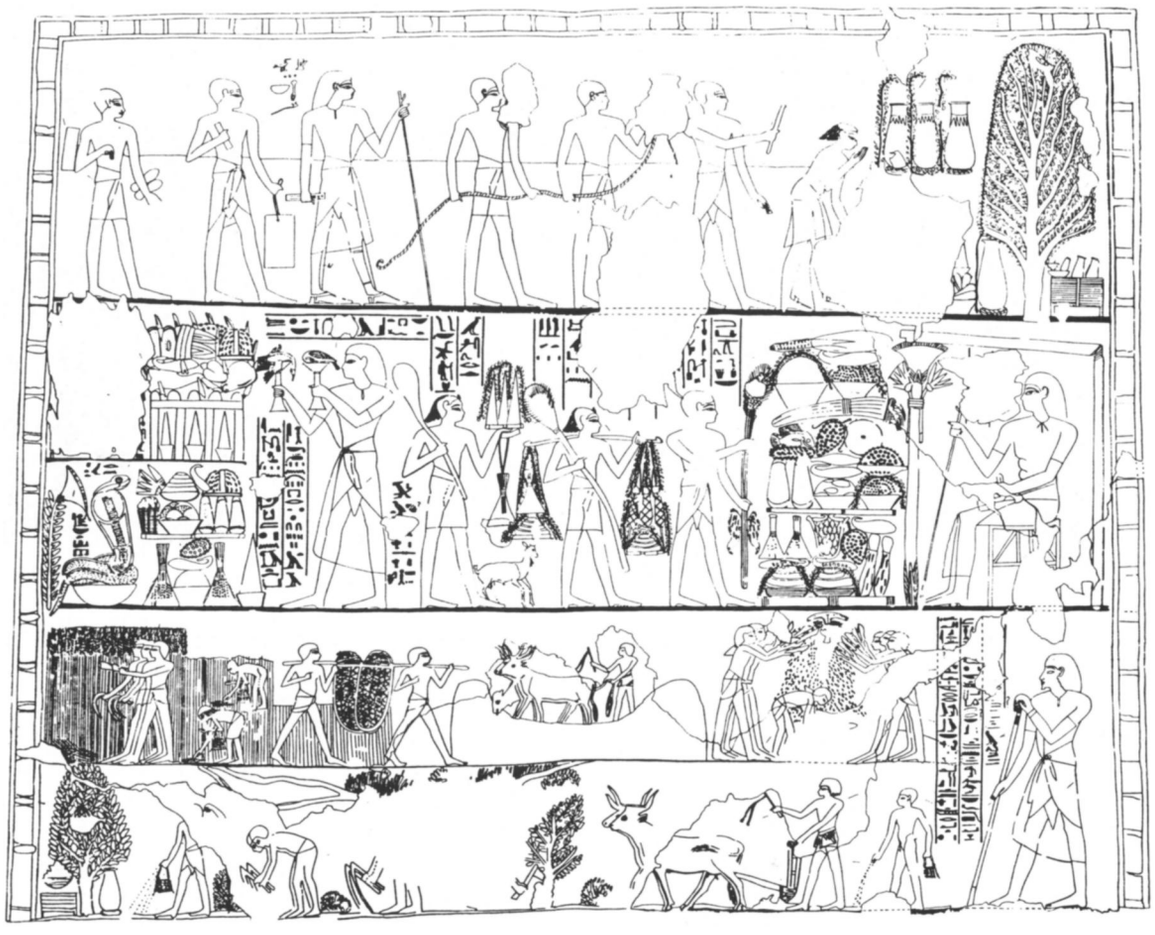

Fig. 6. East wall, outer chamber, tomb of Djeserkaraseneb (TT 38). From Nina de Garis Davies, Scenes from Some Theban Tombs, *pl. II. Photo Griffith Institute, Oxford.*

metaphors for time repeating itself in cycles, in particular. As they refer to an event taking place in this world and hence, in earthly time, these images are expressed in human terms, such as the garb and the throne that pharaoh used during the ceremony. As opposed to the previous images, the symbolic significance of the images is conveyed through the heraldic and formalized composition as well as through its high level of schematization, not through the presence of signs.

Scenes of field work depicted on the walls of the private tombs refer by analogy to the natural seasons, the periodicity of the natural phenomena and hence, the cyclical aspect of time. The fact that certain tasks and their corresponding seasons tend to be emphasized over others suggests that ultimately the scenes evoke divine time rather than linear time, according to the human experience.

Among the various activities, the measuring of the fields was an activity performed annually at the time of the harvest of cereals. Its depiction on tomb walls, first introduced in the Eighteenth Dynasty, is often placed spatially remote from the scenes depicting activities with which the measuring would have been associated in reality, and what is more, frequently at the end of the agricultural cycle or next to activities explicitly evoking the inundation, such as the transport of the harvest by boats (see, for instance, the Eighteenth Dynasty tombs of Djeserkaraseneb (TT 38), Menna (TT 69), Khaemhet (TT 57), and Khnummose (TT 253) at Thebes. Cf. fig. 6). The

discrete spatial placement of the activity seems to suggest that the measuring took place at the end of the agricultural cycle just before the inundation, in a sense as an event foreshadowing the beginning of the next cycle.

Thus the perpetual repetition of time, namely, *nḥḥ*-time, is evoked not only by the depiction of activities recurring at regular intervals each year, such as field work, but also occasionally through formal composition, such as with the measuring of the fields. In this case, the notion of cyclical time is conveyed through both iconography and style.

Conclusion

Analysis shows first that images of time vary according to the particular aspect of the concept of time (i.e., linear or cyclical and human or divine) that is being articulated. Second, it indicates that, depending on the concepts, the visual modes of expression differ and are in some cases combined. It further suggests that aside from illustrating the main groups of images, the examples above can be organized according to a hierarchy.

In the case of the first group of images, the concept of time is articulated through the use of a system of direct and abstract symbols. The images—in effect, conventional signs for time and, therefore, not based on actuality—display a high level of formal synthetic expression, relying on an external referent (the text) for their meaning to be further defined. Typically these images refer to divine time exclusively.

The images of the second group are representations of aspects of time and as such, are formally more elaborate. The images depicting the personifications of the seasons constitute a combination of scenes and signs. Since they are partly mimetic and partly symbolic, they refer to the periodicity of time in its earthly as well as divine dimensions, although admittedly their symbolic value denotes ultimately the immutability of the divine realm. The images of the *sed*-festival belong also to this group of images but their emphasis differs slightly. Since they are based on the actuality of a specific event, namely, the royal jubilee, they tend to refer to earthly time more explicitly. In addition, their symbolic significance derives from the iconography as well as the heraldic and highly abbreviated composition, in other words, style.

The third group of images, exemplified by the scenes of agriculture from daily life, may be said to be based mostly on earthly reality and evoking explicitly human time, but implicitly divine time. Here, however, the reference to time does not constitute the primary function of the scenes.[25]

In general, the symbolism of the first group of images, which consists of a system of signs, may be called images *of* time, while the symbolism of the other two groups, which is achieved through scenes or representations of events with varying degrees of symbolic significance, may be called images *referring to* time.

Finally, from the preceding observations, a pattern of hierarchy emerges, which can be summarized as follows. In Egyptian art, the concept of time is dealt with differently according to whether the images refer to time as a broadly defined concept (e.g., Metui, the ouroboros) or as specific temporal divisions (e.g., the natural seasons and the thirty year cycle marked by the *sed*-festival). Furthermore, the references to time follow a progression corresponding to a progression of realm as well. In other words, the abstract and broad aspect of time tends to evoke the divine, while the more concrete references to time increments, the earthly. Finally, the visual modes articulate the concept of time according to the same hierarchical progression, namely, that of signs, of scenes, and combinations thereof.

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[25] In my doctoral thesis, I argued that the primary function of agricultural scenes depicting on appearance daily life was to help the deceased tomb owner to reach the afterlife; refer to "Agricultural Scenes in the Private Tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty: A Study in Iconographic Polyvalence" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1992), especially 227–30, 266–67, and 285.