



EVERYDAY IMAGES, RESURRECTION METAPHORS

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RESUMO – Graças aos numerosos documentos que chegaram até nós do Antigo Egito, quase todos relacionados às suas crenças religiosas, sabemos sobre seus deuses, as cerimônias que praticavam, sua mitologia e, acima de tudo, como enterravam seus mortos e os procedimentos para ressuscitá-los. Na esfera funerária, sabemos que os antigos egípcios mumificavam para preservar o cadáver e que realizavam rituais para promover a ressurreição do falecido e seu renascimento na outra vida. Os textos funerários desempenhavam um papel crucial nesse processo. Alguns o ajudavam a superar as dificuldades que impediam seu caminho para a eternidade e outros evocaram situações míticas que promoveriam sua ressurreição. Nesse ponto, é interessante notar como os antigos egípcios, por meio das palavras, souberam transformar situações cotidianas em momentos de grande potencial simbólico. Por exemplo, quando um texto funerário do Egito Antigo aludia a “filhotes dentro do ninho”, isso poderia ter um significado mais profundo? A resposta é sim. Veremos como os momentos banais do mundo dos vivos adquiriram grande importância ao serem introduzidos através dos textos no mundo dos deuses. No Egito Antigo, um artista desenhou a realidade nas paredes, transformando-a em um fato sagrado. Da mesma forma, o escriba escreveu pequenos fragmentos da vida cotidiana, tornando-os uma promessa de vida eterna.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE – Egito antigo; funerária; ressurreição; morto

ABSTRACT – Thanks to the numerous documents that have come down to us from Ancient Egypt, almost all related to their religious beliefs, we know about their gods, the ceremonies they practiced, their mythologies, and above all how they buried their dead and also how they did to resurrect them. In the funerary sphere, we know that ancient Egyptians mummified to preserve the corpse and that they carried out rituals to promote the resurrection of the deceased and his rebirth in the Hereafter. Funerary texts played a crucial role in the regeneration of the dead. Some helped him to overcome the difficulties that hindered his way to eternity and others evoked mythical situations that promoted his resurrection. At this point, it is interesting to note how the ancient Egyptians, through words, knew how to turn everyday situations into moments with great symbolic potential. For example, when a funerary text from Ancient Egypt alluded to “chicks inside the nest”, could that have a deeper meaning? The answer is yes. We will see how banal moments of the world of the living, acquired great importance when they were introduced through the texts in the world of the gods. In Ancient Egypt, an artist drew reality on the walls, turning it into a sacred fact. In the same way, the scribe wrote small fragments of daily life, making them a promise of eternal life.



KEYWORDS – Ancient Egyptian;
funerary; resurrection; deceased

The metaphor, as a comparison rhetoric tool, was a source very used in ancient Egyptian literature. Religious texts of Ancient Egypt utilized gestures and facts from the common life to allude to events within the divine realm.

For instance, we can read in the sarcophagus of Ramses IV, “the water from the eyes of these two goddesses is falling...” The whole inscription is about the lament made by Isis and Nephthys¹. Therefore, here the word **water** refers to the tears, that is, the text is describing metaphorically the weeping of both goddesses². Because of the assimilation of water with tears, the expression “the water falls” becomes synonymous with **crying**.

Funerary texts of Ancient Egypt are plenty of written expressions describing common gestures or everyday moments, which evoke sacred scenes in favour of the resurrection of the deceased. Let us see at some of them.

Remove the Hair from the Injured Eye

First, we need to situate briefly the reader in the Myth of Osiris. According to the legend, Osiris was king of Egypt. His brother Seth murdered him out of envy,

threw the dismembered body into the Nile, and usurped the throne of Egypt.

Isis, sister and wife of Osiris looked for the limbs of her husband with the aid of Nephthys. Once they found the corpse, Anubis did the embalming, while the two goddesses made the mourning rite. Both practices granted the resurrection of Osiris in the Hereafter.

To dethrone Seth, Osiris needed a legitimate heir. To get it, Isis acquired the appearance of a kite and put herself over the erected phallus of her husband. This way, she conceived Horus, the rightful heir to the Egyptian throne.

When Horus reached adulthood, he avenged his father's death and fought against Seth. For the ancient Egyptians this fight between uncle and nephew was reflected in the lunar cycle.

¹ Valdesogo, 2005, p. 24. The inscription accompanies an image of Isis and Nephthys at both sides of the head of the outer box of the sarcophagus of this Pharaoh. They pull their front lock of hair towards the mummy, a typical

mourning gesture made ritually by Isis and Nephthys in the benefit of the resurrection.

² For a better knowledge on the mourning rite in ancient Egypt, see Valdesogo, 2019.



In this battle, Seth seriously wounded the eye of Horus (assimilated to the new moon). Fortunately, the god Thoth healed Horus's damaged eye and restored it. This gave rise to the *Udjat* eye, an image of the

full moon and a symbol of resurrection. In this way, Horus became king of Egypt, and Osiris resurrected as sovereign of the Hereafter.



Figure 1
God Thoth represented as baboon holding the Udjat eye.
Late Period. The Walter Arts Museum, Inv. 48.475.

Knowing that, we can now look at chapter 335 of the **Coffin Texts**³, which deals with this moment of the legend and mentions how Thoth heals the eye of Horus:

[...] I have restored the eye after being wounded the night of the Two Companions fight. I have raised the

hair from the Udjat eye when he was furious. Who raises the hair from the Udjat eye? [...] He is Thoth who raises that hair [...]. (CT IV, 335)

The text describes the image of Thoth removing the hair from above the wounded eye in order to heal it. Here it is also important to point to chapters 610

³ The **Coffin Texts** (CT) were funerary formulae written in the coffins of the Middle Kingdom for helping the dead with the resurrection.



and 667 of the **Coffin Texts**⁴, which relate how Thoth spits on the injured eye of Horus in order to heal it.

It is a very common gesture: to remove what is in the way to clean a wound. Nevertheless, it appears in the sacred sphere as an action of resurrection and regeneration. Because thanks to removing the hair from the eye:

- Thoth heals the injured eye.
- The full moon appears and illuminates the black sky of the night.
- Horus recovers his eye and avenges the death of Osiris.
- Horus becomes king of Egypt and Osiris comes back to life as sovereign of the Hereafter.

The Little Bird in its Nest

In the same line of the previous section, we find chapter 1131 in the **Book of the Two Ways**⁵. Although it is a text whose translation is not easy, it alludes clearly to the dead's resurrection:

Heal to you [...] your putrefaction is in it⁶. It shines more than the sky with

your ba-soul; being Re in the middle of the sky to guide all that are close to him. Atum-Re turns himself with the odour⁷. The lock of hair sAmt⁸ is cut⁹; the eye is sealed by the little bird in his hole...

P. Barguet translated the sentence “the eye is sealed by the little bird in his hole” as “the eye is closed by the little bird that trembles”¹⁰. He and William A. Ward transliterate the Egyptian sentence as Hdk sAmt irt xtmt n tA nbAbA.f¹¹, that makes a verb nbAbA¹², whose translation is unknown. However, if we consider the transliteration: n bAbA.f¹³, the sentence becomes understandable.

The little bird TA  is in his bAbA



. One of the meanings of this last word is “hole”, and within this meaning, it can refer to the seven openings of the head: the mouth, the ears, the nostrils, and the eye orbits¹⁴. That makes possible to translate bAbA as “the eye socket”. In fact, this is the translation of this word in the Kahun Medical Papyrus¹⁵.

⁴ Valdesogo, 2005, p. 78-79.

⁵ The **Book of the Two Ways** appears in some coffins of the Middle Kingdom. They describe a kind of road map of the Afterlife.

⁶ The text refers with that to the field sxt of the Hereafter.

⁷ Of the putrefaction?

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⁹ To know more about cutting the hair sAmt in funerary rite of Ancient Egypt see: Valdesogo, 2019, p. 86.

¹⁰ Barguet, 1986, p. 665.

¹¹ 

¹²  (nbAbA)

¹³  (n bAbA.f)

¹⁴ Wb I, p. 419, 1.

¹⁵ The Kahun Medical Papyrus, Column 1, 20-22.



Figure 2

Chicks in the nest. Painting from the tomb of Menna (TT69) in Seikh abd el-Qurna (Luxor). Dynasty XVIII. Photo: www.osirisnet.net

Therefore, we would have the expression “the eye is sealed (or closed)”, since the little bird is inside it, as if it were a nest; so that the eye cannot see. The metaphor would come from such an everyday scene as the stay of a chick in the nest until it has the ability to fly¹⁶.

In the funerary sphere, this metaphor would allude to the blindness, which the death causes and that plunges the deceased into a state of temporary darkness. The lack of vision ends with the opening of the eyes, the deceased regains the sense of sight and he has again access to light as a symbol of new life.

However, the chick’s exit from the nest has another reading. Later in the same chapter we can read: “... may live the bird that comes out of you ... fly the fly, may live Osiris!”

The flight is a clear image of resurrection. In daily life, the chick can manage on its own when it leaves the nest and flies. In the funerary context, this serves to refer to the resurrection of the deceased, since it will resurrect in the Hereafter when, like the chick, it is ready to fly.

The fact of flying is connected with the resurrection of Osiris-bird (the deceased). When the bird is in its nest (in the eye socket), the eye remains closed (sealed), that is, in complete darkness. The deceased is in the dark moment of death. On the other hand, it is a period of incapacity, which does not allow him to have his independence and his own mobility.

When the bird takes flight, the eye socket is liberated and the eye opens. The

¹⁶ It is important to point that the hieroglyph used in the word bAbA depicts a chick inside the nest.



deceased leaves the state of blindness and accesses the light, his new eternal life. In addition, he becomes a being able to fend for himself and direct his new life in the Hereafter¹⁷.

Remove the Curtains

To understand the following “daily life scene” as an image for resurrection, we need to introduce briefly something about goddess Hathor.

Hathor was a very important Egyptian goddess with many attributes. Her name Ht-Hr means the “House of Horus,”¹⁸ and she was a celestial deity closely connected with the full moon from predynastic times. Hathor, in her lunar facet, welcomes the deceased when he is in the night sky (death)¹⁹.

Referring to Hathor, we read in chapter 533 of the **Coffin Texts**:




To transform in Hathor’s scribe...I am the one, who is glad with her head, in front of her horns...I pass across the big house of Hathor...My two locks of hair *wprty*²⁰ open (separate). The face of Hathor clears for me. Hathor holds out her arms for me.

The deceased, scribe of Hathor, is glad when he is before the two antlers of the goddess. It is widely known the relationship between the horns and the crescent quarter of the moon. In religions where the bovid as divinity is prominent, it is usually identified with the moon or is associated with lunar deities²¹.

The crescent quarter of the moon, assimilated to the antlers, is a symbol of lunar resurrection because it is when the night star begins its recovery towards the full moon. This contributes to that celestial vision of Hathor, which starts from very ancient times in Egyptian thought. The goddess, in her lunar facet, welcomes this way the dead in her capacity as a funerary goddess.

Consequently, to separate the two locks of hair *wprty* is something more, than just a linguistic resource. *Wprt* in Egyptian language was the lateral lock of hair of childhood²². In the propylone of the temple of Khonsu in Karnak this word names the lateral lock of hair of this god²³. For D. Meeks the word *wprt* means, “lock of hair on the temple of the head”²⁴.

¹⁷ The concept of the flight for the resurrection is something, which goes back to the Old Kingdom. In the *Pyramid Texts*, the king usually took the shape of a bird and used the faculties of this animal to ascend.

¹⁸  The name of Hathor (Ht-Hr) is a combination of two hieroglyphs:  (house) and  (falcon).

¹⁹ To read more about Hathor a lunar and funerary deity: Valdesogo, 2005, p. 54.

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²¹ Briffault, 1974, p. 382

²² *Wb* I, 305, 6.

²³ Sethe and Firchow, *Urk.* VIII 67, 78 and 81

²⁴ Meeks, 1977-1979, II, 94, 78.0951.



Figure 3

Comparison of crescent (photo: www.channing.info) with the horns of a bull (relief from the Open Air Museum in Karnak. Photo: M^a Rosa Valdesogo)

Here we are dealing with the entrance of the deceased in the Hereafter; meanwhile Hathor welcomes him. Therefore, it seems logical to think that our chapter 553 is mentioning *npṛty* as the two lateral locks of hair of the goddess. The hairstyle of Hathor characterizes her image, with two large side locks of hair that frame her face.

To open or separate the two lateral locks of hair *npṛty* of Hathor means to uncover or clear the lunar face, which illuminates in front of the deceased. For **illuminate** the text uses the Egyptian verb HD; a word, which Egyptian language uses for everything related to the concept of white, clear, silver, moon²⁵. Therefore, to separate the locks of hair *npṛty* means to see the moon, it is the access to the light after the blindness of the death. The moon/Hathor is the one, who allows seeing during the night, that is, she is the

one, who illuminates, who guides, and welcomes the dead in the night (death).

In addition, in another chapter of the **Coffin Texts**, we read, “The gates of heaven open before your beauty; you go out and see Hathor”²⁶. To get into the celestial sphere and see Hathor, either the doors are opened, or the two locks of hair *npṛty* are separated. We could think of assimilation of the heavenly gates with the two locks of hair *npṛty*, which when opened as if they were curtains allow the dead to see the light (the face of Hathor/the moon) in the middle of the night sky.

²⁵ *Wb* III, 206-208.

²⁶ *CTI*, 44.



Again, a gesture as everyday as removing the hair from the face allows the Egyptian religion to refer to something as important as the lunar resurrection of the

deceased, uncovering the face of Hathor (the moon) by parting the two locks of hair wprty.



Figure 4

Goddess Hathor with lateral ringlets. Column from the temple of Khnum in Elephantine Island.
Photo: M^a Rosa Valdesogo

The woman who dishevels her hair

As already said at the beginning of this article goddess Isis put herself on the phallus of her husband Osiris to beget Horus, the rightful heir to the throne of Egypt²⁷. However, this action was also

very important because thanks to it, Osiris could recover his virility.

Egyptian iconography usually depicts the copulation of this divine couple with Isis in a shape of a kite, flying and putting herself on the erected phallus of Osiris.

²⁷ Vide *supra* p.1.



Figure 5

Isis as a kite puts herself over the erected phallus of Osiris. Relief from the temple of Abydos.

Photo: www.commonswikimedia.org

Funerary literature mentioned it also widely and used different ways to refer to it. Religious texts already in the Old Kingdom considered Isis and Nephthys as responsible of regenerating the procreative capacity of the deceased²⁸, so funerary literature mentioned also widely.

In Egyptian thought the dead had a strong sexual facet because Osiris was “the one who ejaculates over the mourners”²⁹ and “the lord of the sexual pleasure”³⁰, “the lord of the love”³¹, the one who “gives life to the woman”³², “the one who begets”³³; and the mourners ask him to have sexual relations:

“Copulate you with us as a male”³⁴

“Copulate you with your sister Isis”³⁵

Egyptian religious texts had a very “human way” for referring to the sexual

act, which Isis carried out with Osiris. In this regard, we must refer to the chapter 17 of the **Book of the Death** from the New Kingdom:

I am Isis, you found me when I had my hair disordered over my face, and my crown was dishevelled. I have conceived as Isis, I have procreated as Nephthys. Isis dispels my bothers (?). My crown is dishevelled; Isis has been over her secret, she has stood up and has cleaned her hair” (Urk. V, 87, 1-4 and Urk. 88, 17-89, 3).

According to H. Goedicke the chapter is describing clearly the copulation of Isis and Osiris. Isis, dishevelled her hair, put herself over the body of her husband Osiris, who lies face up³⁶; she gets

²⁸ *Pyr.* 123-125, 366, 628 a, 631 b, 632 a-d

²⁹ *CT* 991

³⁰ *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 1,23; 12,8.

³¹ *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 3,5.

³² *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 14,27.

³³ *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 3,26.

³⁴ *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 2,9.

³⁵ *The Songs of Isis and Nephthys* 5,25.

³⁶ It reminds the image the primeval copulation between goddess Nut and god Geb. The union of



pregnant and protects the dead. All this actions are the secret of Isis; afterwards the goddess stands up and rearranges her hair³⁷.

Female hair has always been considered an erotic and attractive element, especially the long, loose hair³⁸. Considering that, it seems clear that chapter 17 of the **Book of the Dead** refers to the copulation of Isis with Osiris in its more “human way”; that

is Isis (the woman) bending over Osiris (the man) and with the long, loose hair dishevelled on her face³⁹.

This sexual act between Isis and Osiris was not a taboo in Egyptian iconography. There are many examples of it, but always the scenes are the same one: Isis in the shape of a kite put over the erected phallus of Osiris.



Figure 6

The mourners disheveling their hair over the mummy. Stele of Abkaou from Abydos. Dynasty XI. Musée du Louvre. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais.

sky (Nut) and earth (Geb) was the union of the first couple during the creation of the world, symbolized by the sexual act.

³⁷ It is also interesting to point out that in Papyrus Turin, just before that episode we read: “[...] both sisters are given to me for pleasure...” (Rachewiltz, 1989, p. 59)

³⁸ The notion of carnal provocation linked with female hair appears also in other religious

traditions (Derret, 1973, p. 101). Let us think for instance of Mary Magdalene in the Christian tradition (Chevalier and Gheerbrandt, 1969, p. 369).

³⁹ For a deeper knowledge of the relationship between hair and eroticism: Valdesogo, 2019, pp. 38-45.



The “human version” of this copulation existed in funerals. During the mourning rite, the mourners did this gesture of disheveling the hair over the face to remember this sexual moment, in which Isis copulated with Osiris⁴⁰. That

was one of the practices to bring the deceased back to life.

In addition, it existed in the literature. Here the scribes had the power of “drawing” with words a moment of sex between a man and a woman as a regenerating act in the benefit of the dead.



Figure 7

The mourner and the embalmer with the hand on the mouth. Scene from the tomb of Qar in Guiza. Dynasty VI. After Simpson, W. K., *The Mastabas of Qar and Idu G7101 and 7102*. Boston, 1976, fig. 24)

My Hand is in Your Mouth.

There is another gesture made by the mourners in some funerary scenes of Ancient Egypt, which we should mention. They are those in which they touch their mouths with their hands.

The best example is the scene of the funerary procession from the tomb of Qar in Guiza, dating from Dynasty VI. In a

moment of the funerals, there are three main characters: one mourner, the embalmer and the lector priest behind him. The mourner and the embalmer are facing each other and uttering some words. The Egyptian inscription among them says “DAt rA”⁴¹. Looking at the gesture of both, it seems logical to suppose that this short sentence is just literally describing their posture, both with the

⁴⁰ For knowing more about the mourners disheveling their hair: Valdesogo, 2019, pp. 19-22.

⁴¹



hand on the mouth. However, nothing is so easy in Egyptian iconography.

The expression D3t r3 meant also in Ancient Egypt to feed⁴². It was the way of expressing the fact of taking the mouth to the food, as when the mother takes the baby to her breast for nursing him. That quotidian gesture of bringing the breast to

the baby's mouth is, in fact, a very basic way of opening the baby's mouth, for allowing him to nurse. The first tip given to mothers at the beginning of the breastfeeding is to open well the baby's mouth and to point the nipple to the middle part of the baby's palate.

Considering that this inscription is above the altar with food, it would be more logical to go with the translation of "*feeding*". The deceased, assimilated to Osiris, became a newborn and needed to suck on his mother Nut's breast milk. This way he started his new life in the Hereafter.

The expression "the hand in the mouth" evokes also the image of Isis as mother of Horus. The image of Horus as a child suckling at Isis' breast also granted the dead's resurrection, since Horus was the avenger who eliminated the evil (Seth) and recovered the *Udjat* eye as a symbol of the final resurrection.

Therefore, the expression "the hand in the mouth" in the funerary sphere was a linguistic resource to refer to the everyday gesture of breastfeeding and thus promote the new life of the deceased in the afterlife. The dead, assimilated to a newborn, would need this gesture as a symbol of his first feed for the Hereafter.



Figure 8
Statuette of nursing woman. Guiza. Dynasty V.
Metropolitan Museum of Art of New York.
Photo: M^a Rosa Valdesogo

⁴² *Wb* V, 514.



Figure 9

Isis feeding Horus. Late Period.
Walters Art Museum. Inv. 54.416.

Photo: www.wikipedia.org

Nevertheless, in the relief from the tomb of Qar, the embalmer made also this movement of approaching the hand to the mouth. The expression DAt rA related to a masculine figure cannot have a maternal explanation.

Our scene happens during the Opening of the Mouth Ceremony. It was a group of practices made just before burial aimed at the resurrection of the deceased. One of these was the one in which the funerary *sem* priest opens the dead's mouth (or the statue's dead mouth) with his little finger.

To open the mouth in the ancient Egyptian funerary thought was necessary for granting the new life to the dead. In the real life, it is something closely related to

the first moment of life of a newborn. As A.M. Roth says: "at birth the baby's mouth is obstructed by mucus that must be cleared before the baby can breathe"⁴³ and usually doctor after the cut of the umbilical cord, puts his little finger into the mouth of the child for detecting abnormalities.

Therefore, "the hand in the mouth" (DAt rA) in Ancient Egypt could also refer to that gesture done in the Opening of the Mouth ceremony by the *sem* priest in the New Kingdom and maybe the embalmer in the Old Kingdom for symbolizing the new birth of the deceased. A gesture for helping him in his breathe.

⁴³ Roth, A. M., 1979, p.63.



It is also relevant to notice that, according to the scenes of the New Kingdom, the *sem* priest opened the mouth's dead with his little finger just before the performance of the professional mourner, whose mourning

rite was devoted for giving "rebirth" to the dead.

Summing up, the ancient Egyptian expression "the hand in the mouth" would indicate the Opening of the Mouth and would symbolise:



Figure 10

Opening of the Mouth Ceremony. Tomb of Rekhmire (TT100) in Seikh Abd el-Qurna. Dynasty XVIII.

Photo: www.osirisnet.net

- The opening of the mouth for helping the dead to breathe.
- The first breastfeeding of the dead as a newborn.

In this article, we have seen how ancient Egyptians were able to draw

images with their words to help the deceased in his resurrection. They were actions of daily life but turned into divine acts to promote the resurrection of the deceased:



- To remove the hair of a wound to clean it and heal it.
- The bird that matures and leaves the nest, turned into an adult bird capable of fending for itself.
- A couple having sex in a common posture.
- A couple having sex in a position as common as that of the woman (active) over the man (passive).
- A woman helping her baby in his first feed.
- A newborn being aid with a finger in his/her mouth for helping him in his first breath.

Scribes in ancient Egypt knew how to draw, because learning to write was learning to draw. We notice also that not only they drew hieroglyphs, but also “drew scenes” with those hieroglyphs. That is, they could depict with words, moments that, even sometimes, Egyptian art did not express with images.

With the written language, moments of daily life became part of the divine scene of Ancient Egypt. In this way, they became propitiatory moments for the deceased and contributed to the success of the resurrection process.

The conclusion is that the written word and the drawn image formed a perfect tandem in Ancient Egyptian thought.



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