



Earth's motions in pharaonic Egypt: Religious interpretations

Emmanuel Jambon

Collège de France, Chaire de civilisation pharaonique,
52 rue Cardinal Lemoine, F-75231 Paris Cedex 05
(nesheny@yahoo.fr)

Received: 28/7/2006

Accepted: 6/11/2006

Abstract

This paper will deal with the representations of the earth's movements in pharaonic Egypt. At first, testimonies of an ancient literary pattern, the "sky and earth" figure, will be observed, and then, the pictures where earth is represented "alone". We will explore the different ways the Egyptians depicted and interpreted this phenomena through various texts.

Keywords: nature, earthquake, religion, funerary literature, cosmology, magic.

Introduction

"If the sky has tottered, if the earth has moved, it's when he (Ramesses) has begun to exercise the monarchy of Re, the two crowns of Atum, the uraei of the Lord of all being on his head and the ornaments of the Two Lords (Horus and Seth) being united upon his body, their victories and their parts being by him after he had plundered the South and North, the West and East being in submission" (Kitchen 1979, 236-237 ; Kitchen 1996, 89)

King Ramesses II (ca. 1279-1212 B.C.), described here in the *First Hittite Marriage Stela*, is then shown in possession of matchless strength.

Such bombastic style could lead us to consider this text as outright propaganda. Though obviously metaphoric, this use of cosmic convulsion is not iso-

lated in Ancient Egyptian literature and has deep roots in Egyptian cosmology that can be traced back to the oldest documents of this civilisation.

I wish to draw here the sketch of this Egyptian conception of the earth's motions, showing that, since the beginning, two major patterns and their variations have been used to express and explain the description of such movements. In Egyptian cosmology, the earth, a masculine being, has a rather passive role (Bickel 1994, 182-196). This point could easily be related to the actual situation, since sky and water, other major bodies of the Egyptian cosmos, offer an appearance of perpetual –though regular– fluidity, the earth remaining more or less the same, year after year. When it moves, something happens that could be considered unusual and therefore not completely

inscribed in the original plan of the creator. We will examine how Ancient Egyptian scholars have presented these phenomena through two patterns: one staging sky and earth, another the earth alone.

Sky and earth: Illustrations of a pattern

The emergence of a solar god

The pyramid of the last king of the Vth dynasty, Unis (ca. 2380-2350 B.C.), is the first one to present texts engraved on the walls of its funerary apartments. One of these *Pyramid Texts*, chapter 273, also known as the “Cannibal Hymn” (Faulkner 1924; Eyre, 2002), describes the return of the pharaoh to life in the appearance of a new god, violent and powerful:

“The sky flies cloudy, the stars darken, the (celestial) bows move, the bones of the Akeru tremble, the Moving-ones, as for them, become silent after they have seen Unis apparent and provided with ba, as a god who lives of his Fathers and feeds of his Mothers; Unis is the lord of ruse (litt. ‘quality of the jackal’), whose name his mother ignores” (Sethe 1908, 393-394; Piankoff 1968, 44; Eyre 2002, 7, 76-78; Allen 2006, 50).

The *Akeru* are a group of subterranean genii, leonine watchers of the netherworld ways (de Wit 1951, 91-106). *Akeru*’s bones could well be interpreted as the stronger parts of the earth’s body, namely “the rocks”. This general convulsion accompanies the eruption of a new-born god –whom the king is associated with, by the presence of his name– and could be understood as a sign of “theophany”.

The question however remains: do we have here the first historical attestation of the Egyptian point of view on the original causes of seismic events? And are we actually dealing here with a seismic phenomenon? It has recently being proposed that this entire description could be interpreted as a metaphoric depiction of the rising sun (Goebis 2003) and this explanation could give us some clues to decrypt this luxuriant landscape of terror. The sun as it rises at dawn disturbs the morning mist and fades out the stars. The “cannibalistic” allusions could also relate to this phenomenon: as it extinguishes the starlight, the sun be-

comes a new “king” who must, at least symbolically, eat up his forerunners. Furthermore the bright light of the sun rising above the eastern desert could well be an explanation for the Egyptian concept of *ba*, a kind of supernatural ability and “manifest” power. Finally, one can interpret the moving of the “celestial bows” together with the “bones of the *Akeru*” as a poetic depiction of atmospheric vibrations resulting from the sun’s heat. Even if things seem thus to be clear, this first testimony is however ambiguous and offers various renderings.

Seen in its funerary context, this text is one of these ritual spells which, quoting James P. Allen: “Originally recited by a lector priest... were carved on the walls of the pyramid’s chambers to ensure their ongoing effectiveness” (Allen 2006, 5). In so doing, our text leads to a major change in the cosmic structure: the dead king lives again, not as a simple man or a roaming ghost, but as a most powerful crowned god, settled in the heart of the created world and driving out his ancestors from their thrones.

Finally, we could also perceive this as an attempt, in the peculiar agglutinative Egyptian way of using embodied conceptual tools, to explain the functioning and the mechanisms of the cosmos through one of its dramatic moments: the dawn. In this case, we must assume that the trembling of the *Akeru*’s bones could be nevertheless seismic, being confronted with the astronomical darkening of stars and waving of celestial bows or with the atmospherical flying of clouds. These three distinct features and their related phenomena are combined here in a global picture, where the magical efficiency of the sun expresses a fundamental manifestation of life: movement.

“Birth between mountains”

Another text taken from the same context (chapter 685 of the *Pyramid Texts*), but slightly later in date since it is only known from the pyramid of king Pepi II Neferkara (ca. 2270-2200 B.C.), presents an address to the deceased king:

“The water of life which is in the sky comes! The water of life which is in the earth comes! The sky burns for you, the earth quakes for you, before the

god's birth. *The two mountains are opened, the god is coming into being, the god has power over his (own) body; the two mountains are opened, this Pepi Neferkara is coming into being this Pepi Neferkara has power over his (own) body*" (Sethe 1910, 2063-2064; Allen 2006, 291).

Once again, we are dealing here with a group of phenomena that can in a large extent be designated as 'natural'. The waters of life in the sky, on the one hand, and the waters of life in the earth, on the other hand, could be respectively identified with rain and Nile flood, since both, according to Egyptian belief, are supposed to stem from the great initial flood called the Nun. The creator himself originates from this Nun, a kind of "primeval soup" containing all the potentiality of life. As for it, the burning sky could refer to an atmospheric perturbation like a storm with lightnings or maybe, a khamsin with its big reddish clouds. It could also be understood as a description of the effect of the rising sun at dawn, like in chapter 273 supra. Such an interpretation could plausibly be linked to the mention of birthchild in the second part of this text, but is not sufficient to explain what happens there; the quaking of the earth and the "opening" of the two mountains seem indeed to depict a real seismic event. This text has to do once again with theophany that involves a general cosmic convulsion, and there is more way than one to understand the picture.

It is obvious that the introduction of chapter 685 uses the imagery of parturition as a metaphor for the king's desire to attain *post mortem* divine destiny. Flooding, inflammation and shaking are some of the medical symptoms typical of childbirth. Moreover, the opening of the two mountains –the verb *wep* which means precisely "separate", 'split' and a dual form of the term "mountain" *djuy*– definitely calls to mind the opening of the thighs of a woman in labour. Finally, the last two repeated sentences: "the god (or the king) is coming into being, the god (or the king) has power over his (own) body" recall midwife joyful interjections accompanying the birth and encouraging the mother. But if the child is a god, maybe a solar god, who is the mother?

In later Egyptian conceptions, the goddess of the

sky Nut is frequently presented as the sun's mother. It can not however be the case here if we recognize in the "burning" of sky, the "shaking" of earth and the 'splitting' of two mountains signs of parturition of one body. We must admit therefore that the sky, the earth and the mountains are limbs of a huge feminine body engulfing the entire cosmos, a genre of "cosmotheogony" that was not clearly further developed by the Egyptians. Again, the earth's motion is part of a more general physiological theory, in which all the natural, seismic, atmospheric and hydrographic convulsions are staged in a cosmic drama.

The laughter of gods, the seism and the hailstorm

We have seen that the king, in his search for resurrection, was wrapped in the attributes of an anonymous and aggressive divinity in chapter 273 or in those of a still unnamed but childish and sweeter one in chapter 685. Sometimes, however, the identity of the acting-god is specified. For instance, we can read in chapter 511 of the same *Pyramid Texts*, in the oldest known version dating to Pepi I (ca. 2330-2280 B.C.), the following introduction:

"Geb laughs, Nut bursts out laughing before him (i.e. the king), when Pepi comes out to the sky. The sky grumbles for him, the earth shakes for him, the hailstorm is dispelled for him, when he growls like Seth" (Sethe 1910, 1149-1150; Allen 2006, 153)

One can notice at once new phenomena in addition to the earth's motion: the sky produces a loud noise and a hailstorm, or maybe the hail-stones themselves, is or are dispelled. The structure of text makes it clear that these phenomena take place in the presence of three gods. First of all, the opening divine laughters are assigned to the tutelary divinities of earth (Geb) and sky (Nut); we must assume therefore that a correlation exists between this divine manifestation and the grumbling/shaking of the cosmos in the second part of the text. One can think too that the rise of the king has to do with the final representation and its three components: the gathering of the hail (storm or stones), a growling and the god Seth. The occurrence of the cosmic elements follows the Egyptian scribal

idiosyncrasy. In most of the texts where it appears, the divine couple is quoted as “Geb and Nut”, showing a preeminence of the masculine principle; on the contrary, the “sky and earth” pair, much more attested than the opposite, put forward the feminine part. In this text, the scribe does not only follow a “literary” or “cultural” pattern, but builds a chiasmatic scheme which is not purely formal and has valuable significance.

If one has in mind that the main theme of this funerary formula is the guidance of the king from his earthly grave to his new heavenly position, we are in a better position to understand what is happening here. The laughter of Geb and Nut which precedes the rise of the king are in fact probably provoked by the movement of the king. In a general study dealing with situations in Ancient Egypt when laughing and crying occur, Waltraud Guglielmi has shown that laughing could have two major functions in Egyptian religious and social conceptions (Guglielmi 1980). It happens in cases of crisis and as such, helps to cope with the stress associated with it. It is also used as a ‘rire d’accueil’, a way to greet a new person in a group. Both these cases apply to the context in which the laughter of the two cosmic deities takes place. On the one hand, the troubles associated with the death and resurrection of the king are here considered as a real crisis for the organisation of the world and laughing appears as an efficient way for Geb and Nut to deal with their disarray. On the other hand, it is clear – as shown by the intervention of Seth in the last formula – that Geb and Nut are welcoming their terrible son, the stormy Seth, by this means.

This text shows a set of various events, concepts and levels of interpretation. There is, for example, a mixture of divine and more concrete level of figuration: “Geb and Nut” have their (reversed) counterparts in “sky and earth”; they are followed by the mentions of king, sky, earth, hail – all concrete “phenomena” –, and, at last by a god’s name, Seth. The process of restoration that was opened by divine cosmic laughter ends then with thundering divine manifestation.

It appears that every element of this complex pic-

ture has a reason to be used stronger than a simple piece in a formal scheme. What we have here is not a single regular structure but, on the contrary, series of irregular levels interconnected. In this context, the earth’s motion, viz. earthquake, plays a central role. It is a concrete manifestation of the divine power, an event which asserts that the magical potentiality of the formula will succeed.

The scarcity of the “sky and earth” motif from later funerary texts: a geo-historical hypothesis?

It must be observed that, in relation to the notion of the earth’s motion, this “sky and earth” pattern is less employed after the end of the Old Kingdom. Such a cosmological feature is hardly present in later funerary texts. It is rare in the *Coffin Texts* of the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2050-1634 B.C.) (see however e.g.: de Buck 1951, 180o-q) and completely absent from the *Book of the Dead*, compiled at the very beginning of the New Kingdom (ca. 1543-1080 B.C.) and known until the end of the Ptolemaic period (330-32 B.C.). This disappearance can be attributed to many external or internal factors from which, in the state of my knowledge, it is very difficult to choose. One can imagine that the Egyptian priests in charge of writing these texts had some new theological interpretation of this kind of phenomena; one must consider however a more historical hypothesis.

Even though this hypothesis has yet to be confirmed, such discrepancy in the written sources may be due to the possible influence of regionalism. The Pyramid Texts were very likely mostly written in an area comprised between the royal court of Memphis and its necropolis (modern Saqqarah), about 20 kilometers to the south-west of modern Cairo and Heliopolis, nowadays the north-eastern suburbs of the Capital. This region is a rather seismic, undoubtedly more than the Delta or the Upper Nile valley (El-Sayed et alii, 1999; El-Hadidy-Youssef 2003, 22, Fig. 4). On the contrary and even if it is difficult to conclude definitely on the place of their conception, most of the *Coffin Texts* were likely to have been written in southern regional towns. It is thus tempting to imag-

ine that the *Coffin Texts* and the New Kingdom *Book of the Dead* were compiled, if not actually written, in a less seismic zone than the one where the *Pyramid Texts* originated from. This could explain the silence of some sources in relations to others, within the same funerary genre. This is however only an hypothesis and must be confirmed –or infirmed– in the future.

Ramesses II, a seismic king?

If the earth's motions, especially the 'sky and earth' pattern are mostly absent from funerary texts after the end of the Old Kingdom, they appear punctually in other genres of text. I quoted, at the beginning of this paper, the *First Hittite Marriage Stela* during the time of Ramesses II, but this kind of phenomenon appears in the same reign too, in a document known as the *Decree or Benedictions of Ptah-Tenen*.

If we compare these two texts, the version of the *Marriage Stela* reads as follows:

"If the sky has tottered, if the earth has moved, it's when he (Ramesses) has begun to exercise the monarchy of Re"

In the *Decree*, the memphite chthonian god Ptah-Tenen says:

"I am moving in order to predict great and excellent marvels for you (i.e. Ramesses); if the sky totters, earth being in joy and those who are inside delighted, it is because of what has happened to you; the mountains, the waters and the walls that are (all) on earth, they wave because of your perfect name, when they see the decree I have made for you" (Kitchen 1979, 273-274; Kitchen 1996, 106-107)

It has been shown (Goelet Jr. 1991; Kitchen 1999, 160) that these two documents were produced by the royal chancellery for propagandistic purposes and that they are closely related one another. The *First Hittite Marriage* was written at the occasion of the arrival of the Hittite princess in Egypt and is dated to year 34 of Ramesses II. The *Decree* is dated to year 35, and could be a recapitulation of the 'marvels' of the reign of the pharaoh –which include the arrival in Egypt of a foreign Princess– after the birth of a royal child from this young queen. The rare formula "if the sky tot-

ters" or "has tottered", that appears in both texts, give us furthermore a hint of this aspect of the production of the two documents. Seen in this light, what can we think about the repeated seismic evocation?

The earth' motion, summed up in the single phrase "the earth has moved" in the *First Hittite Marriage*, is on the contrary fully developed in the *Decree* which mentions mountains, water and walls. This aspect gives us the impression that an actual earthquake could be behind the occurrence of this old literary figure. Ogdon Goelet Jr. has suggested relating both texts to an earthquake that seems to have taken place at Abu Simbel during year 31 of Ramesses (Goelet Jr. 1991, 36). We have yet to see whether further research will confirm this interesting hypothesis, since the correlation between the sky and the earth's movements is more often than not a stylistic device, as shown before and the vocabulary of universal joy very present in the *Decree*, has numerous previous parallels in Egyptian royal literature.

Earth alone: variations

The mouth and jaws of the earth

As opposed to the 'sky and earth' pattern, images associated solely with the earth are less a "pattern" *sensu stricto* than an accumulation of various representations of the earth's motion. This is already illustrated in the *Pyramid Texts* where various motions of the earth appear, rarely as "quaking" or "trembling", but rather as scenes of "opening". These are very commonplace in funerary corpora, such as in chapter 548 of the *Pyramid Texts* of Pepy I:

"Words to say. The earth's mouth is opened to this Osiris Pepy, after Geb talked to him (i.e. Pepy); this Pepy is venerable as a King of Upper Egypt and strong as Ra again. The Two Enneads utter 'Go in peace' to Pepy. The eastern doors of the sky are opened for him by Imenkaou" (Sethe 1910, 1343; Allen 2006, 172)

With the exception of Imenkaou who is not well known, but could be a gardian of the eastern horizon or an epithet of the sun god himself, the other deities mentioned here are all from the circle of Heliopolis. Osiris –as the model for the dead king– Geb, Ra the

solar god and ‘the Two Enneads’ are theologically bound to this city. The end of the excerpt, with the mention of the eastern gate of the sky, seems once again to be related to the rising of the sun. The opening of the earth’s mouth is presented as a consequence of words formulated by Geb. It must be noted that ‘the mouth’ (*ro*) is already a common word in the *Pyramid Texts* for ‘opening’, i.e., ‘door’ (see e.g. Sethe 1908, 526a, 527a). If this depiction could stem originally from an architectural context, the landscape in this passage of the *Pyramid Texts* has a divine and cosmical dimension. It could well be that the opening of earth’s mouth has here a seismic value, since noise (Geb’s words) and the breaking of the ground (earth’s mouth) are two symptoma of an earthquake.

Later in the Egyptian history, chapter 4 of the *Coffin Texts* shows us something similar:

“(O) Osiris this NN, the earth opens its mouth for you, Geb loosens for you his jaws which were on you! May you eat your bread and receive your abundance (of offerings)! May you go to the Great road, may you come to the Great town...” (de Buck 1935, 11a-12b; Barguet 1986, 95)

As in the previous text the earth’s body and Geb present two aspects of the same reality. The opening of the earth’s mouth and the loosening of Geb’s jaws are clearly in this passage a metaphoric depiction of the opening of the tomb’s doors allowing the dead to “go forth by day”.

Could yet this text refer to an actual earthquake? Such a possibility can not totally be excluded, and some seism could well have influenced the conception of such a literary image. One can not be sure that the Egyptian scribes had specific seismic phenomena in mind when composing the text, as was probably the case with the Decree of Ptah-Tenen, but maybe such an image was unconsciously there, in the same way the Nile flood is present behind the word “abundance” (*bāh*) which is a metaphorical use of a term designating the inundation.

Finally this complex landscapes, made up of reminiscences and lexical allusions to natural forces such as the Nile flood, the rising and lighting of the sun, or the outburst of storms as previously seen, serve one

purpose: to sustain the dead –king or not– in his fight against the immobility of death. In such a context, nothing stands against the literary use of actual earth motion.

Earth talks and opens: processus of glorification

The two previous texts deal with the dead bodies lying in the earth body itself. If the latter moves, following the active principle of “magical sympathy” or “equivalence”, the first ones, transfigured, can move too; another passage of *Pyramid Texts* (chapter 437 by Pepy I) shows this quite clearly:

“*The earth is talking: ‘The two doors of Aker are opened for you (i.e. the King), the two doors of Geb are thrown opened for you, and you go out at the voice of Anubis when he glorifies you as Thoth, so that you may part the gods, that you may fix the limit of the (celestial) bows between the Two Powers, following this glorification of yours that Anubis has decreed’*” (Sethe 1908, 796-797; Allen 2006, 105)

This text stages an important aspect of the Egyptian funerary mind: the so-called “glorification” (*sakhou*). This verb *sakh* is a s-causative built on the root *AKH*, which has a wide semantic field. Karl Jansen-Winkel has stressed the fact that the basic meaning of all the terms derived from this root is “power which manifestations are apparent without being visible itself” (Jansen-Winkel 1996). This is, for example, the explanation of the name of the “horizon” in Egyptian: *akhet* as “a place where the sun reveals (or hide) its form but lets its light pervade the sky”. There is a strong connection in this chapter 437 between this theological concept of *akh* and funerary practice of “glorification”, on the one hand, and the earth’s motions, on the other.

If we follow the scenario of this ritual drama, we see that the earth talks first and, as recently stressed by James P. Allen (Allen 2006, 105, 201 n. 21) that the following of the spell is its utterance. This noise of subterranean origin is linked by the text with another one: ‘the voice’ of the Jackal god Anubis when glorifying the dead king. Between these two sounds are three moves, two of them of chthonian nature: the

opening of the doors of, respectively, Aker and Geb, and the third one probably astronomical: the rising of a glorified body presented as Thoth. It is indeed well known that the ibis god Thoth and the moon have deep links, would it be only in the comparison of the shape of the beak of the bird and the lunar crescent (Boylan 1922, 62-68; Derchain 1962, 36-40).

Finally, it seems that this chapter 437 of *Pyramid Texts* could be a kind of nocturnal counterpart to the "Cannibal Hymn". The rise of the moon in chapter 437 and the one of the sun in chapter 273 of *Pyramid Texts*—as metaphors for the king's resurrection—, are embedded in a general portrait of cosmic convulsion. In both cases, it is an epiphany which is staged and in both cases, the earth's motions play a prominent part in this divine manifestation.

Seism in a tale

The same theme is to be found in a famous tale dating to the Middle Kingdom, known as the *Shipwrecked Sailor*. A man reaches a mysterious and beautiful island unharmed, after having survived a sea storm; he discovers that there is plenty of food there, and makes a burnt offering to the gods in order to thank them:

"Then I heard a stormy voice and I thought: 'It is a sea wave!' (but) trees began breaking and earth began moving. I unveiled my face and found that it was a snake which was coming, he was thirty cubits long, his beard was more than two cubits long; his body was covered with gold and his eyebrows were of real lapis-lazuli" (Blackman 1932, 43, 56-66; Simpson et alii 2003, 48-49)

This monstrous snake—the Egyptian cubit is about 0.52 meters and so this serpent must have measured more than 15 meters—shows most of the characteristics of Egyptian gods, such as the divine beard or as the gold and lapis lazuli that make up its body. The description of the natural phenomenon is particularly precise, and shows us without any doubt a seismic event. Thus, this literary text is in keeping with the "classical" religious interpretation of the funerary ones. The earth's motion on the island of the shipwrecked is a sign or omen that is typical of divine

manifestation or epiphany. This snake-god plays a crucial role in the rest of the story. After the frightful episode quoted above, the snake prophetises the coming of a boat and the safe if not triumphal return to Egypt of "the little man", as he names the shipwrecked. The seism could well be considered here, as in the *Pyramid Texts*, as the apex of the crisis and the beginning of its resolution.

Coptos and the first crack: a late cosmogony

A later text shows a divine epiphany once again, and although similar in many ways to what we have seen before, is different in many of its aspects.

Engraved on the first gate of the roman temple of Geb in the Upper Egyptian city of Coptos, a short text dating to Caligula describes the mythical origin of the sanctuary:

"[As for this mound, it is] the ground that came into existence at the beginning, gone forth from the coil of the snake Irta, this hill in its length, which the foundation (i.e. the earth) is on the back, when it (the hill) breaks (out) in the vicin[ity of this mound]; if it quakes, the entire earth moves after this earth has begun to support the Netjery Shemâ of the Prince of gods, the Ancestor who begot the guardian-gods, master of earth, the one whose children boast their king" (Traunecker 1992, 150-156).

This kind of text, particular to the Late Period, is named after Adolphe Gutbub a "monographie". It translates clerical meditations based on local theologies (Gutbub 1973, 502-503). The purpose of such texts is generally to illustrate the old age and the venerability of the local god and his sanctuary, in this case, Geb and the Netjery Shemâ. Such "monographies" are also motivated by the will to explain, through pseudo-etymologies or mythical accounts, some of the peculiarities of the local cults or toponymy.

The choice made here is as radical as possible: the beginning of the history of the temple is "The Beginning", i.e., the Creation itself. The vocabulary used here is clearly rooted in the representations of the first phases of the world. For example the snake Irta, whose name means: "The-one-who-has-made-earth",

is one of the forms of the Creator (Traunecker 1992, 151 n. c). The subtlety of this theological discourse can also be seen in the term *qebeb* used for “ground” in the first sentence, which is a rare word chosen for its phonetic connection to the name of the god Geb.

The earthquake accompanies the emergence of the divine temple. It thus follows the pattern used since the *Pyramid Texts*, although it plays here a very special role in that it is the only occurrence, to my knowledge, of such a phenomenon in a cosmogony. If this point has probably to be connected with the personality of the major god of this temple of Coptos, Geb, the earth-god par excellence, it also probably highlights the scarcity of the Egyptian sources that have come down to us.

These texts draw all in all a positive picture of the earth’s motions. However, Egyptian literature also shows darker aspect of the earth’s motions, where danger and threat loom.

Dangers of the year: earth motions in magical context

Sources from various periods show us the negative side of earth’s movements. The oldest one is an e-merology known by two papyri dating to Ramesses II and referred to as *Calendars of Lucky and Unlucky Days*. Each day of the year is described in relation with a mythical event or, at least, a mythical depiction of a natural event, an archetype, which explains the nature and qualities of the three parts of the day (on this partition see: Leitz 1994, 480); one of these entries reads:

“3rd month of the Inundation-season; 4th day: Uncertain! Uncertain! Uncertain! To move by this earth under the forepart of the Nun. As for anyone who sails in this day: destruction in his house” (Leitz 1994, 110-111).

Here the term used for earth is the commonest one: *ta* and, followed by the deictic “this” may possibly be translated as “land” or “country”; but whatever meaning we choose –physical body of earth or geopolitical territory– it is quite the same significance which is here looked for by the scribe. The “forepart of the Nun”, i.e. the wave of the Nile flood, is on that particular day at its highest level (gregorian 8th of

september, see: Leitz 1994, 488) and in highest flood years, can reach mounds where, in ancient Egypt, the villages and towns were built. The earth’s motion is not of seismic nature, but rather hydrological, which is indeed well adapted to the purpose of this cyclical and predictive calendar.

In the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1069-715 B.C.) a group of documents known as *Oracular Amuletic Decrees* appeared. These papyri, of various length, deal mainly with the warding off of ills and threats, and are all organized along similar lines: at first, a god or a group of gods is presented decreeing a general protection for an individual named in person. In one of these decrees, dedicated to a woman called Tasheretenioh, we read:

“We shall keep her safe from the one who causes the earth to totter and who is called (The) Mover” (Edwards 1960, 53, pl. XIXA)

As noted by Iorweth E.S. Edwards, these Decrees throw an invaluable light on the Egyptians’ fears concerning their daily life: “they contain nothing which has any bearing on their conception of the Next Life, only their hopes and fears for this life” (Edwards 1960, xix). However, the dangerous demon called the ‘Mover’ (*Remenremen / Menmen*), who is unfortunately not known by any other Egyptian sources, could be compared with divine entities who are residing in the deep Underworld. In the *Book of the Caverns*, an Egyptian funerary book of the New Kingdom, we can find a snake door-keeper, among many others called “Sons-of-earth”, named: “Earth[qu]ake, of great force, who moves and makes those who are on him move” (Piankoff 1946, 10, pl. VII). Perhaps, we could consider that the “Mover” who “causes the earth to totter” in the Decree for Tasheretenioh has something to do with this kind of chthonian entities. There is no doubt that, even if these decrees were conceived for the ‘present life’, they were written by scribes who most probably knew the ‘books of the Netherworld’.

To conclude with the use of the image of the earth’s motions in a magical context, we must move on to the Saïte Period (664-525 B.C.), when rituals on New Year’s day were compiled for specific purposes, as an *aide-mémoire* for the chief ritualist who led the

ceremony. This book consists in a long series of feasts, recitations and ritualistic gestures centered around the person of an anonym king who must be protected against various threats –pestilence, illnesses, plagues and so on– during this crucial period of the year. One of the last rituals of a cycle entitled “Ceremonial of the Great-Seat (i.e. the throne) read during the earth feasts” is the “Bringing the earth from the Benben-castle”:

“Formula: The earth has moved; Geb is catching fire. The earth of life is around you; those from the circle of Atum are the protection of you body; your fleshs will not shiver; your limbs will not be broken; nothing evil will destroy you because the gods are the protection of your body, Heliopolis throwing your enemies away” (Goyon 1972, 63, 96; Goyon 1974, pl. VI-VIA)

Even if it is difficult to know exactly what kind of phenomena are the earth’s motion and the burning of the earth-god Geb, we can nevertheless clearly see the narrow magical connection between these cosmic events, the threats from which the king is protected and the way he is. The earth obviously plays here a central role. In the cosmological introduction, where it acts as an archetype, its movement and burning are probably allusions to the title of the rite: “Bringing the earth from the Benben-castle”. This place is an heliopolitan sanctuary, and *benben* is the name of the sacred stone which plays an important role in heliopolitan solar cults. The phrase “The earth has moved; Geb is catching fire” can be a way of describing the dawn in cosmological terms: time of bringing (movement) and lightning (fire) the “earth”. We must not forget that the very *raison d’être* of this ritual is to protect the body of king from illnesses, so the “shivering” of the fleshs is probably due to fever which could easily be represented too by “movement” and “fire”.

To sum up, this text is at the heart of the Egyptian model of representation. In religious texts, each level –cosmical, ritual or physiological– having a link with others. This principle legitimates the magical or ritualistic process, which gives us in turn information on the Egyptian vision of Nature.

Conclusion

Let us now summarize what we have seen through some examples. Even though the Egyptians probably developed quite subtle theories on the causes or the divine origin of the earth’s motions, and foremost among them, earthquakes, they did not leave behind many sources dealing with this theme.

It should be added that, although the dire consequences of such phenomena were likely to be disastrous, Egyptians do not seem to have been interested in this –except, maybe in the case of the *Oracular Amuletic Decree*–. They either do not seem to keep historical records of such seismic events, as nothing of this kind can be found in the numerous Egyptian annals.

This natural phenomenon is thus limited to religious sphaera, which is quite revealing in itself, as it sheds light on the Egyptian conception of such disasters. The absence of historical records dealing with this matter should nevertheless not be considered as a kind of ‘taboo’, since occurrences of these events are mentioned in other types of literature. An explanation of this relative historical indifference, from a concrete point of view, could be in the very massive stone or mudbrick architecture that could have been, since the beginning of Egyptian civilization, a pragmatic manner to escape the risks of destructions induced by earthquakes.

In conclusion the Egyptian interest for these phenomena seems to have been relatively limited and, with the exception of the oldest funerary conceptions in the *Pyramid Texts*, rarely used even in metaphorical terms. In comparison, other natural phenomena, such as the sun cycle or the Nile flood are much better documented. The earth’s motions, occurring in “sky and earth” pattern or in ‘earth alone’ representations can be interpreted in a great number of ways. The most frequently stated phenomenon, the earthquake, is understood as a marker of epiphany –particularly solar ones– as a sign of a “crisis” and its resolution and, last but not least, as a model for the movement of life. This large range of meaning shows us that the earth’s motions in Ancient Egypt was seen as anything but simple ‘natural’ phenomena. Even

though traces of their physical impact seem, to my knowledge, not to have been registered, they were nevertheless religiously associated with the functioning of the cosmos. In the end, when the earth moved in Ancient Egypt, it was often the sign of the reenactment of the initial creation and, in spite of violent troubles and deathly threats, of its definite establishment.

Acknowledgements

This study is an abridged version of some of the conclusions of my Ph.D. ("Troubles et merveilles de la nature dans l'Égypte pharaonique. Les mouvements de la terre" – Paris IV-Sorbonne, December 2005– under the supervision of Pr. Nicolas Grimal) and I wish especially to thank Dr. Panagiotis I. Kousoulis who has invited me to write this contribution to the MAA Journal and Dr. Jean Revez who has kindly accepted to read this paper and to correct my English.

References

- Allen, J.P. (2006) *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts*, Leiden – Boston.
- Barguet, P. (1986) *Les Textes des Sarcophages Égyptiens du Moyen Empire*. Littératures Anciennes du Proche-Orient, Paris.
- Bickel, S. (1994) *La cosmogonie égyptienne. Avant le Nouvel Empire*. Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 134, Fribourg – Göttingen.
- Blackman, A.M. (1932) *Middle-Egyptian Stories*. Bibliotheca Aegyptiaca 2, Bruxelles.
- Boylan, P. (1922) *Thoth the Hermes of Egypt. A Study of some Aspects of theological Thought in Ancient Egypt*, London.
- Buck, A. de (1935) *The Egyptian Coffin Texts I*, Chicago.
- Buck, A. de (1951) *The Egyptian Coffin Texts IV*, Chicago.
- Derchain, Ph. (1962) "Mythes et dieux lunaires en Égypte" In *La Lune, mythes et rites, Sources Orientales* 5, Paris.
- Edwards, I.E.S. (1960) *Oracular Amuletic Decrees of the Late New Kingdom*. Hieratic Papyri in the British Museum IV, London.
- El-Hadidy-Youssef, S. (2003) "Seismicity of Egypt", *Newsletter of CSEM-EMSC* 20, Bruyères-le-Châtel (www.emsc-csem.org)
- El-Sayed, A, Vaccari, F and G.F. Panza (1999) *Deterministic Seismic Hazard in Egypt*, Miramare – Trieste.
- Eyre, Ch. (2002) *The Cannibal Hymn. A Cultural and Literary Study*, Liverpool.
- Faulkner, R.O. (1924) The "Cannibal Hymn" from the Pyramid Texts. *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 10, 97-103.
- Goebs, K. (2003) Zerstörung als Erneuerung in der Totenliteratur. Ein kosmische Interpretation des Kannibalenspruchs. *Göttinger Miszellen* 194, 29-50.
- Goelet Jr., O. (1991) The Blessing of Ptah. In E. Bleiberg, R. Freed (eds.), *Fragments of a Shattered Visage. The Proceedings of the International Symposium on Ramesses the Great*, Memphis, 28-37.
- Goyon, J.-Cl. (1972) *Confirmation du pouvoir royal au Nouvel Au Brooklyn Museum [Papyrus 47.218.50]*. Bibliothèque d'Étude 52, Le Caire.
- Goyon, J.-Cl. (1974) *Confirmation du pouvoir royal au Nouvel Au Brooklyn Museum [Papyrus 47.218.50]*, *Wilbour Monographs* VII, Oxford.
- Guglielmi, W. (1980) Lachen und Weinen im Ethik, Kult und Mythos der Ägyptern. *Chronique d'Égypte* LV/n° 109-110, 69-86.
- Gutbub, A. (1973) *Textes fondamentaux de la théologie de Kom Ombo*. Bibliothèque d'Étude 47, Le Caire.
- Jansen-Winkeln, K. (1996) "Horizont" und "Verklärtheit": Zur Bedeutung der Wurzel. *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 23, 201-215.
- Kitchen, K.A. (1979) *Ramesseid Inscriptions Historical and Biographical*, II, Oxford.
- Kitchen, K.A. (1996) *Ramesseid Inscriptions II Translated and Annotated: Translation*, Oxford.
- Kitchen, K.A. (1999) *Ramesseid Inscriptions II Translated and Annotated: Notes and Comments*, Oxford.
- Leitz, Ch. (1994) *Tagewählerei*, Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 55, Wiesbaden.
- Piankoff, A. (1946) *Le Livre des Quererts*, Le Caire.
- Piankoff, A. (1968) *The Pyramid of Unas*, Bollingen Series XL:5, Princeton.
- Sethe, K. (1908-1910), *Die Alt ägyptischen Pyramidentexte I-II*, Leipzig.

Simpson, W.K., Ritner, R.K., Tobin, V.A. and E. F. Wente

Jr. (2003) *The Literature of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo.

Traunecker, Cl. (1992) *Coptos. Hommes et dieux sur le*

parvis de Geb, *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 43,

Leuven.

Wit, C. de (1951) *Le rôle et le sens du lion dans l'Égypte*

ancienne, Leiden.