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Ancient Egyptian Mythological Narratives

Structural Interpretation of the Tale of Two Brothers,
Tale of the Doomed Prince, the Astarte Papyrus,
the Osirian Cycle, and the Anat Myth

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Propositions for PhD Thesis

Unit 1: *Interpreting Ancient Egyptian Narratives: A Structural Analysis of the Tale of Two Brothers, the Anat Myth, the Osirian Cycle, and the Astarte Papyrus*

My point of inquiry with which I set out to write this study was to try and understand the role and position of texts containing non-Egyptian characters and motifs in the ancient Egyptian cultural system. It seemed too easy or too trivial to consider them as simply borrowed or as infiltrations from other cultures. Of course, cultures do come into contact with each other and influence each other on many levels. But can a certain text or motif which is grounded in a specific cultural tradition be simply taken and re-planted in a different one? Is it that simple? At the same time, however, there are clearly non-Egyptian gods and goddesses interacting with Egyptian gods and goddesses.

In order to understand the mechanics of such "migration" of cultural motifs, my analysis had to proceed in several phases. First, I decided to look at the interpretations which are standardly offered to explain such phenomena in Egyptology. There are basically two governing approaches to the issue. The first group of scholars proceeds by enumerating the motivic parallels which we know about from other cultural contexts. This is, indeed, a very important undertaking. It is very interesting to establish comparative material to see, for example, what had been left out or added during the process. However, scholars often stop at this point as if they thought that this is the interpretation itself. The second group of scholars offers various historical explanations as to why and who might have wanted a certain myth to be established within the Egyptian tradition. This is also a valid approach, as myth certainly has a relationship to social and historical reality. There is, however, a great danger which many scholars could not avoid; the danger of simplifying this relationship and claiming that myth is a simple mirror image of historical reality. The interrelation seems to be of a rather more subtle character and a myth is often in direct contradiction to the documented reality. Furthermore, the historical approach does not address the mechanics of the myth migration process.

It therefore became obvious that in order to understand the position of narratives containing non-Egyptian motifs I first had to analyse the character of Egyptian myths in general with the prospect that after establishing the governing principles of its language, the attempts at "translating" foreign motifs might become clearer.

The situation of egyptological studies with regard to the issue of myth interpretation is also quite specific. Egyptology seems to be a very self-contained and conservative discipline standing to a certain extent outside methodological discussion or development in other disciplines (such as ancient Greek studies, anthropology, sociology, psychology, etc.). At the same time, it is characterised by a

strong inclination towards classic(al) interpretation methods focusing on linguistics and historical analysis. Both methods are very valuable as they provide very effective tools in analysing primary material. However, they are not sufficient and maybe even ill-suited for understanding the symbolic nature of religious and mythological language. The linguistic and historical approach tends to order material into discrete units in a diachronic manner dissecting the primary material into individual parts and showing their relative position within sets of secondarily established criteria (historical time, language levels, etc). On the other hand, the language of myth seems instead to be symbolic, having the ability to connect various ontological levels of human experience with the surrounding world into complex motivic clusters, taking advantage at the same time of the multivalence of its symbols. Part I is therefore devoted to a discussion on this topic, the most important argument being that the ancient Egyptians used a rather "configurational" way of injecting meaning into the world around them as opposed to the "narrative" based Western approach.

Part II concentrates on an analysis of specific ancient Egyptian narrative compositions. As the focus of the work was originally supposed to be the Astarte Papyrus, Part II commences with a summary of the major works devoted to its interpretation so far (Chapter 1) followed by a translation of the whole text (Chapter 2). Afterwards I make a very long detour (Chapters 3–6) comprising approximately two thirds of the whole book only to return to the text of the Astarte Papyrus in Chapter 7. This approach was conditioned by the fragmentary character of the Astarte Papyrus. In order to be able to analyse its position within the system of ancient Egyptian narrative myths, I first had to try and actually understand the character of the system. In order to establish this framework, I decided to choose one specific composition (the *Tale of Two Brothers*) and also a specific interpretation method (neo-structuralism). The choice of the *Tale of Two Brothers* was motivated by the fact that it has survived almost in its entirety. One of the main topics of the composition is clearly the interaction between Egypt and foreign lands – a crucial topic if one wants to analyse the mechanisms of myth migration. The choice of structuralism as the interpretation method was intended more for the sake of convenience. I try to avoid any methodological dogmatism. Using the label "neo-structuralism" (and its Lévi-Straussian branch, to be even more specific) offers a very convenient way of informing the reader immediately about the elementary ideas and approaches which inspire my understanding of the Egyptian material. It is a certain "code name" by which I try to present clearly to the reader the background from which my approach stems. It is, therefore, supposed to serve only as a general framework, because Lévi-Strauss' approach has proved to be erroneous in many ways, for example, for example in his disregard the narrative aspect of myths in general. Even though I have criticised the narrative-oriented approach of

Western scholarship, there must be a reason why a certain myth was chosen to be passed on in a narrative form whereas others were not. At the same time, there are episodes in non-narrative sources which we meet in narrative contexts. Narrativity thus seems to be somehow crucial for the overall function of the text. In Chapter 3 I therefore not only summarise the basic ideas of the Lévi-Straussian structuralist interpretation method, but also point out its flaws and suggest in what way they may be overcome. In relation to the crucial topic of narrativity, I follow the suggestion of Terence Turner and consider narrativity not as a diachronic aspect of the composition, but as yet another synchronic structure which organises the motifs contained within the composition. I claim that myth should be treated not only as a musical score in which various instruments play simultaneously (synchronically) and together form a symphony (Lévi-Strauss), but that the order in which the various parts of the composition follow one another is crucial (Terence Turner). Later on in the overall analysis of the *Tale of Two Brothers* I take advantage of the conclusions arrived at by the semioticians (A. J. Greimas, for example) who analyse the narrative as exactly such a structure. The diachronic aspect which Lévi-Strauss attributed to the narrative itself then seems to have been mediated by the personal experience of both the author of the composition and the listener/reader. I also take my inspiration from depth psychology in that mythological symbolism often very closely resembles the functioning of symbols as analysed in dreams. Still, I try to avoid the culturally biased views of both the Freudian line of psychology and also the fallacy of the universally shared meanings of the Jungian archetype (a certain meaning is not given by the individual units of the symbolical language themselves but is always rearranged through the specific relationships which these units have with each other).

Chapter 4 includes a structural analysis of the *Tale of Two Brothers*. I have divided the composition into so-called Initial Episodes (I–III) and one Terminal Episode. Between these units there are five triads of Episodes (A–O). My division more or less follows the division of the original text as indicated by its rubra, however, it is not identical. The analysis proceeds in the following way. First I present a translation of the relevant part of the composition. A commentary follows in which I explain not only various important motifs of the text (cross-referencing other authors, if useful) but I also explain the basic semiotic tactics which the narrative applies thus gradually "decoding" the symbolic language of this specific myth. As the reader progresses through the story, the principles on which I based my division of the composition become transparent as well as the synchronic relations between the various Episodes. At the end of every analysis I have also included a diagram graphically summarising the relationships between the various parties involved. This proves crucial as the spatial relationships help to visualise and exemplify the textual analysis.

Whereas Chapter 4 focused on specific details, in Chapter 5 I proceed to a more holistic analysis of the structure of the Tale of Two Brothers. I follow Jan Assmann's observation that the text is divided into rubra which indicate a certain shift of focus, thus defining individual chapters. Assmann (followed by Wolfgang Wettengel) was persuaded that the twenty four chapters stood for the daily cycle of the sun, thus strengthening the ideological content of the whole composition and stressing the close connection of Bata to the sun god Re. As ingenious as this observation is, it unfortunately fails to come to more general conclusions about the connection of the *Tale of Two Brothers* to other compositions within ancient Egyptian mythography. It is difficult to take anything from this type of interpretation in the case of compositions which do not follow this division or which are too fragmentary for us to tell. At the same time, however, the *Tale of Two Brothers* does include motifs which we meet in other contexts and compositions. This means that the 24-part division must be an additional aspect to the mythical structure which follows certain, more general principles also detectable in other compositions. By contrasting the contents of the individual Episodes, I came to the conclusion that we may group them into certain "Clusters" (each composed of three Episodes).[1] The basic relationship between Episodes in one Cluster is the classic Hegelian triad of thesis–antithesis–synthesis. We can see that every Cluster, therefore, has an inner dynamic of its own. At the same time, every Cluster is defined by its relationship to (a) the previous Cluster, (b) the following Cluster, representing motivic combinations of each other. The inner narrative dynamics of the Clusters are then combined with the other Clusters and the story becomes connected on more levels than just that of the apparent narrative. At the same time, Cluster 3c is in direct relationship to Cluster 1 – the narrative thus creates a kind of a structural circle contrasting the units from the beginning of the story with those at the end. This is also mirrored in the original division of the narrative into rubra: the very beginning (Rubrum 1 – part of Initial Episode I) and the very end of the narrative (Rumbrum 24 – Episode O and Terminal Episode) show the structural coherence of the whole narrative:

Rubrum 1: Anubis is like a father (owner of an estate) to Bata, the son (successor?).

Rubrum 24: Bata is like a father (pharaoh) to Anubis, the son (crown prince).

The initial situation was inverted through the inner mechanism of the myth into its own opposite. The individual Episode Clusters are interspersed with Initial Episodes I–III. These have a different function to the Episode Clusters. The Initial Episodes can

[1] **Cluster 1**: Episodes A–C; **Cluster 2**: Episodes D–F; **Cluster 3a**: Episodes G–I; **Cluster 3b**: Episodes J–L; **Cluster 3c**: Episodes M–O.

be likened to establishing the scene in a theatre and the triads of Episodes then perform the play. The Initial Episodes move the story further; they change the "frames" of the story, that is, they change the syntactic structure of the plot; we could also say that they shift the ontological focus of the listener/reader from one level to another. In each "frame" a different set of paradoxes is therefore being dealt with. At the same time, because all of these levels describing various and, in many aspects, completely differing levels of human experience with the outside world form part of one narrative, the story actually creates a medium in which these levels may be brought in the mind of the listener into direct contact and meaningful relationships between them may be illustrated.

Once having described the configurational relationships of the individual parts of the *Tale of Two Brothers*, I proceed to an analysis of the transformations of the individual characters. As each Episode is defined by its relationships to other units of the whole composition, the individual characters are defined by the structure of the story. Bata thus comprises the characteristics of Horus, Seth, Osiris, and Re. I explain the mechanism using the approach developed, for example, by semiotics (A. J. Greimas). I touch upon the fact that this process is also applied to other (male) characters within the story. The main focus of the whole text then seems to be an explicit identification of the main male characters through the function of positional kingship. The whole story therefore seems to be a statement about the transformative and mediating function of the office of the Pharaoh.

Once having established the "vocabulary" and "syntax" of myth, in Chapter 6 I look at other Egyptian compositions which seem to contain clear variations on the themes contained in the *Tale of Two Brothers* and I try to show that there are structural similarities with other compositions even though the outward content of the stories seems to be quite different. The idea which lies behind my approach is quite a simple one. The elementary building block of mythological language is the symbol. By conducting a detailed analysis of one composition (in this case, the Tale of Two Brothers) I tried to discover the basic principles which govern symbolic language (choosing a narrative was the easiest way because the relationships between the various symbols have the form of a sequence, which is a type of ordering to which we are accustomed). Because individual mythological compositions may be considered smaller or bigger aggregates of symbols, the relationships between individuals myths should also be governed by the very same principles as those detected within single compositions.

By analysing the structure of the Osirian Cycle (which I understand to include the Osiris Myth and the Contendings of Horus and Seth) and a set of magical texts called the Anat Myth, I create a certain "structural net" of several basic constellations or mythemes which are contained in the previously analysed compositions, but in varying combinations.

Part of Chapter 6 is also dedicated to the discussion of the paradoxical nature of female characters. I claim that the strongly androcentric Egyptian society, with its tendency to marginalise women in certain aspects, actually equipped the female principle with a special type of power which was essentially unavailable to the male counterparts – an independence from power structures. Power and influence stems solely from a certain social structure or a situation involving several parties. Power does not exist by itself. It is always dependent on a system of roles and relationships within which power may be demonstrated, offered or denied. This shows that the concept of power is relational in essence (power over somebody/with regard to something). In order to safeguard power, the individual in question must to a certain extent adjust his/her life to the rules and structures which provide power. As a result, (s)he becomes bound by these rules. From the point of view of the ancient Egyptian man, the role and position of women within society had a paradoxical quality. Women, who had very limited access to social power positions, gained a different type of power which could never have been acquired by men – a certain independence from the power structures and the limitations which they imposed on those who wished to gain access to socially powerful positions. The roles which are often assigned to female characters and principles in ancient Egyptian mythology suggest that they were viewed by men as having abilities which their male counterparts either lacked or which were out of their bounds or uncontrollable. At the same time, there is no denying that women were an integral and important part of Egyptian society. The combination of these circumstances put ancient Egyptian female characters into the ideal role of mediators who facilitate contact between various male parties. I then identify certain basic patterns with regard to the female principle in all of the previously analysed compositions. These patterns are also integrated into the "structural net" of ancient Egyptian mythological narratives.

Once having this "structural net" at my disposal, I finally return to the analysis of the fragmentary *Astarte Papyrus* (composed during the reign of Amenhotep II) in Chapter 7. I carry out the analysis following the same principles as for the other compositions and gradually come to the conclusion that rather than being an infiltration of foreign material into ancient Egyptian tradition the whole composition seems to have been a rather cunning appropriation of Near Eastern motifs by Egyptians. The author actually seems to have deliberately "mimed" the Near Eastern mythological structure of the Baal-cycle, integrating it into a clearly Egyptian symbolic system of mythical language. The reasons for this could be historical/political (an attempt at culturally appropriating the mythological tradition of the conquered Near Eastern cultures), or social (an attempt at integrating the mythological tradition of the possibly politically very influential West-semitic communities living in Egypt at that time). At the same time, however,

the foreign motifs seem to have triggered the pronunciation of certain Egyptian motifs which were only latently present in older Egyptian compositions. Myth structures can therefore "migrate" from one culture to another. They do that, however, once emptied of the ethical and culturally-defined meanings which they carry in the original context only to be "re-contextualised" within the symbolic net of values of the other culture.

What I am hoping my work has been able to show is the fact that there is an inherent system in ancient Egyptian thought manifested in its writings. This is not merely a haphazard set of opposing ideologies represented by quarrelling priestly lobbies. Nor is it a mechanical reflection of historic events. It is a system with very specific rules, full to the brim with paradoxes which the ancient mind incorporated within its structure and, through constant transformations and permutations, accommodated these conflicting experiences within a system of thought. In this, I am persuaded, I have succeeded. It is, however, true that a structural analysis often comes to very trivial conclusions: (fe)male deities may be identified; opposites are inverted pictures of each other and therefore any individual motif can be converted into its opposite; basic structural oppositions are formed by pairs such as culture × nature, order × chaos, etc. The goal of any structural analysis must not be these trivial conclusions. What is fascinating is to analyse the permutational symbolic mechanisms which transform individual motifs into each other. Even though these processes follow certain basic principles, what is original is the combination and the choice of motifs which then undergo the variation process. Originality in such a context is not mediated by creating new categories (or introducing foreign ones) but through a clever (re)ordering of the existing categories showing the established patterns in a new light.

Unit 2: Accommodating Ambivalence: Case of the Doomed Prince and His Dog

The ambition of this additional chapter is to extend the methodology of Unit 1 to yet another New Kingdom narrative so as to test the conclusions at which I have arrived. Let us, therefore, have a brief look at the *Doomed Prince* from a distance.

The overarching theme of the narrative is the question of (il)legitimacy of the Hero to the throne and also the issue of (im)maturity. The difference is that legitimacy is thematised at the onset of every Episode Cluster (Episodes A, D, G) save the last one where the theme of immaturity takes finally over, being only latently present throughout the story in the Hero's designations of "child" and "boy". Both themes than directly connect in the anticipated interaction of the hero with the dog.

Issue of legitimacy is clearly emphasised at the very beginning of the narrative but already there it exhibits an inherent paradox:
a) the pharaoh has no son, i.e. no legitimate heir to the throne;

b) Hero's birth is granted by the gods (seemingly unproblematic);

but

c) Hero is forced to live in a house, "which was equipped with personnel and with every good thing of the palace, l.p.h.", but in fact is not the palace resembling rather a tomb.

Thus even though the Hero is an uncontested heir, his characterisation does not at all fit the image of a fully competent successor: he is outside the centre of power, he is isolated, immobile, restricted and a child.

From this point on the plot dynamics of every Episode Cluster focus on one of these issues, present them as two extremities and gradually mediate between them simultaneously always having a recurse to the issue of legitimacy (through immobility). The outcome at the end of every such movement is always a stable but unsatisfactory situation thus conditioning the continuation of the plot.

The first Episode Cluster (A–C) therefore thematises the issue of "restriction". First he is allowed to obtain a dog, which in turn leads to his emancipation and request to leave thus becoming mobile after his initial immobile state. Having achieved this, he is, however, evicted "outside" the orderly zone.

I have repeatedly argued that whenever a "foreign" locale, character or motif is included, we must keep in mind that its primary goal is to provide a framework in which typically Egyptian issues are then formulated and typically Egyptian solutions found. Episode Cluster II (D–F) therefore sketches out a hierarchically stratified cultural landscape with the Chief of Naharin as ruler, his daughter as his only heiress, and a class of young elite Syrian aristocrats who are all eligible for marriage and thus for the status of the ruler. Thus Episode Cluster II represents an inversion of the Egyptian landscape in Episode Cluster I. There the hero was alone, isolated and without a contender to the throne – but also without the possibility to advance from his isolation to the centre of order, the palace and attain maturity. This strengthens the idea already proposed by other commentators that the Chief of Naharin seems to be playing a structurally similar role to that of the Hero's actual father, the pharaoh. In this framework, the motif of Hero's immobility (injured feet) is once again put to use in connection with the topic of legitimacy. First of all, the injury enables to integrate the Hero among the ranks of the local princes: the Syrian Princes take care of him and provide for him thus showing their respect to him as their peer. Contextually, however, it also reaffirms the Hero's rightful claim to the throne. The princes are, at that moment, *the* group from which the status of the characters is derived. Simultaneously, being a projection of the Egyptian milieu into this fictional "foreign" landscape, it also enables to bring the Hero from his isolated state from the beginning of the story and place him among other contenders to the throne – exactly as one would expect in the reality of the Egyptian situation

(Ramesses II's, during whose reign the surviving copy of the *Doomed Prince* was created, 96 sons and 60 daughters are very illustrative in this context!)[2] This Hero's "re-contextualisation" was enabled by means of his self-presentation as the "son of a chariot-warrior from Egypt". I have argued that even though the issue of (lower) social status is here thematised, considered contextually, his position of a possible successor to the ruler is confirmed – only this time as "one of many". Furthermore, the royal imagery associated with the chariot and weapons in Egypt, might have been intentionally alluded to so that his characterisation would have been automatically understood by the readers/listeners as "a prince" (pharaoh himself being *the* chariot-warrior of Egypt, as we see on temple-wall reliefs). Furthermore, it has been remarked that the Hero is characterised in such a way in total of three times in each of the Episodes (D–F) and in each case it leads to different results. As mentioned, the first time it enables hero's recognition by the Syrian Princes. The second time it is employed to introduce the Hero to the Chief of Naharin provoking his anger. Hero's identity therefore has both a legitimising and an illegitimising effect. I have tried to explain this by pointing out the fact that before actually becoming a pharaoh, even the crown prince's claim could have been questioned by other (senior) members of the royal house which is so nicely portrayed in the Horus vs. Seth interaction. The story could not have played out such a dynamic if it were actually happening "inside" Egypt: precisely because the initial situation straightforwardly stipulated Hero's claim to the throne as the *only* rightful son. By transposing the plot of the story "outside", the narrative can take advantage of the "foreign" milieu to stress certain paradoxical aspects which it is only impossible (and maybe precarious) to describe if staying solely within an Egyptian setting (who would dare doubt the claim of the crown prince?). By depicting "a prince" (read: son of a chariot warrior from Egypt)—once as a legitimate heir among others and simultaneously as an illegitimate "outsider"—stresses the implicit paradox of the status of a crown prince. Every prince is a legitimate heir but potentially also an illegitimate foreigner (depending on who actually ascends the throne).

Third time Hero's identity as the son of a chariot warrior is revealed is when the Chief of Naharin has him brought in front of him. The Hero introduces himself in the identical way as did the servants before, which consequently caused the Chief's rage. Only this time the very same sentence managed to persuade the Chief about Hero's worth. From this point of view the whole episode containing the Chief of Naharin's attempt at Hero's life seems to be completely redundant. However, as the dynamics of this Episode Cluster focus on the gradual progression of the Hero within the three basic hierarchical levels of the "outside" as sketched out by the plot

[2] Dodson & Hilton, *Complete Royal Families* p.166. In view of this the beginning of the story might have been considered especially amusing to the contemporary Egyptian acquainted with the situation of the royal court.

(Princes, Daughter, Chief), Episode Cluster II enables the Hero to overcome his isolation from the centre of power, which was an important issue in Episode Cluster I. from this point of view the "redundant" exchange becomes necessary.

In Episode Cluster III (G–I) the main plot dynamic lies in establishing the hierarchy in which the animal fates have to be dealt with mediating between two opposites of friend × enemy. The hierarchy of the animals is indicated by the failed attempt of the wife to have the dog killed and by the failed attempt of the crocodile. The narrative made it obvious that the most clearly defined category of evil must be confronted first (the dog himself attempts the same at the beginning of the following cluster leading to Hero's flight from him).

With the beginning of Episode Cluster III, we witness another change of focus on the existential transformation of the Hero through addressing the issue of (im)maturity. Whereas all the other categories (being restricted, proximity to the source of power) are in a way external qualities, maturity can be attained only through an existential transformation. It has been remarked that such a status was in Egyptian reality achieved by a young man founding his own household. Even though this event occurred and the Hero moved in with his wife, it had no effect on his status as he was still continuously being referred to as a "boy". The animals therefore represent a mechanism through which the process can take place. To understand why exactly the story chose these three precise animals as vehicles for this process, I conducted a brief survey into the associations the animal's had with categories of evil and subsequently also the god Seth who—even though not mentioned in the text itself—is traditionally associated with these categories. The conclusions of this survey have corroborated the picture presented by the narrative itself: the snake being on one end of the spectrum, crocodile in between, and the dog on the other. Furthermore, all of the animals are directly connected with Seth and, interestingly enough, the dog being the one most similar. Through the principle of homology, I formulated that:

1	Hero	:	Seth	:: animals	:	(il)legitimacy
2	Hero	:	animals	:: Seth	:	(il)legitimacy
3	Hero	:	(il)legitimacy	:: Seth	:	animals

Having established the relationship of Seth to the animals and based on the analysis of the previous parts of the narrative which focused on the Hero *vis à vis* the issue of legitimacy, I concluded that the relationship of the animals towards the category of (il)legitimacy is the paradoxical character of the spectrum of which they are representatives. Evil and death have many forms. Some of these forms are easily

recognizable. Others, however, are not as easily defined and by defying clear classification represent an existential threat to both the individual and the society.

The dog must therefore come last because—as the most complicated category of the three animals—he is, in fact, the biggest threat to the Hero being the most ambiguous of the three fates. The ability to accommodate ambiguity thus proves not only being the essential message of the whole narrative and religion, but—once again—the very core of ancient Egyptian kingship.