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The Ancient Egyptian Underworld in the Tomb of Sety I

SACRED BOOKS OF ETERNAL LIFE

IN 1817 THE ITALIAN ADVENTURER Giovanni Belzoni discovered a magnificent tomb in the Valley of the Kings on the West Bank of Luxor in Egypt. The tomb was intact, undisturbed for more than three thousand years. The colors were clear and bright as on the day it was finished, the brushes of the ancient artists still lying on the floor. A royal tomb of colossal proportions and beautiful carvings, it offered instant fame and fortune to its discoverer. Belzoni wanted more; he was determined to show his find to the public in Europe. Having taken wax squeezes of the most beautiful reliefs, he had them recast in plaster for a London exhibition in Picadilly Circus. The exhibition was a huge success, inspiring a wave of "Egyptomania" and traveling to Paris to meet the awakened curiosity of the European public.

It was August Mariette, the French director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service in Cairo, who identified the tomb as that of Sety I, a famous king of the Egyptian New Kingdom.¹ The tomb, one of the largest in the Valley of the Kings, was the most lavishly decorated of all. But Belzoni's enthusiastic campaign marked the beginning of its steady and dramatic deterioration. Mrs. Belzoni sold the beautiful alabaster sarcophagus from the tomb to the architect John Soane along with other finds. Some objects from the tomb made their way to the British Museum, the Louvre and the Berlin Museum. More wax squeezes of the painted reliefs were taken and some of the most beautiful scenes lost their colors almost entirely. The tomb became a favorite destination for every visitor to Luxor and soot from torches used to light its

colorful interior began to stain the painted ceilings. Even the renowned Egyptologists Champollion and Lepsius vandalized the tomb, the first cutting off two life size reliefs from a door jamb for the Louvre and the second removing an entire column from the sarcophagus chamber for the museum in Berlin.

Howard Carter, who became Chief Inspector of the Valley of the Kings in 1903, wrote the following report: “For very many years, the state of this tomb has been bad... This condition has not been improved by former explorers and antiquity hunters... The sculptured walls have been hacked indiscriminately to remove the king’s cartouches as well as pretty pieces of relief. Parts of columns and doorjambs, which acted as supports, have been removed... Each season has recorded small falls of stone from the ceilings, walls and columns... Portions that fell broke into a myriad of fragments, some of which I fear can never be properly replaced.”²

Despite all the public attention, the tomb remained virtually undocumented as a whole. The only publication it merited was a set of inaccurate drawings made by Eugene Lefebure in 1883. In the 1920s Harry Burton, the field photographer of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, took pictures of the reliefs on black-and-white glass negatives. This has been the only comprehensive record of the tomb of King Sety I; it is with these photographs that Erik Hornung was able to publish a study in 1991.³ Hornung’s book is the only publication to date of this magnificent monument since Belzoni’s discovery.⁴

THROUGH THE UNDERWORLD TO HEAVEN:

THE PHARAOH’S VOYAGE TO THE IMPERISHABLE STARS

Deep behind the winding cliffs at Luxor a limestone rock with a pyramid-shaped peak towers high above the Western hills. To the ancient Egyptians this was the mountain of eternal life where kings of Egypt were laid to rest. Called “el Qurn”—“the Horn”—in Arabic, in ancient times it was sacred to the goddess Meretseger—“She Who Loves Silence.” The Valley of the Kings is at the foot of the peak. It was within the limestone rock that vast beehives of corridors and chambers were carved out for the

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deceased pharaohs. Every tomb was an entry to the Duat, the Underworld. At the doorway to the Duat the hawk-headed Horus, god of the western mountain, awaited the kings. As guardian of kingship, Horus escorted the great pharaohs to the kingdom of his father Osiris, deep under the earth.

A royal tomb was a model of the kingdom of Osiris. As the sun set on the western horizon it entered this dark kingdom. Traveling through the night hours on its heavenly barge the divine light illuminated the deep caverns of the Underworld and all the spirits that dwelled within it. Protected by Sia and Heka, the gods of Seeing and Magic, the soul of Ra descended deeper and deeper into the night. It is in the Underworld that the sun god encountered his nemesis Apophis, the great serpent of darkness and oblivion.

Every soul had to be judged by Osiris, the god of the Underworld, before it could be laid to rest. But to meet Osiris, all souls had to make a perilous journey through the night and encounter the serpent. However, Ra, the divine light in all his forms and manifestations, sailed nightly on the river of the Underworld, guiding all righteous souls to eternal life. Once united with Osiris, the soul could be reborn.

When a king died, the journey became crucial to the whole nation. The pharaoh was the earthly incarnation of Horus, son of Osiris. When King Sety died it was one of the most difficult periods in Egypt's religious life. The country had just endured the monotheistic "heresy" of king Akhenaten of the previous ruling family.⁵ The gods had abandoned Egypt and dynastic struggle was followed by losses of territory and prestige. The entire balance of Egypt was disturbed and the Egyptian world could not survive without balance. Sety, the father of Ramesses the Great, had just reclaimed lost territories and restored the ancient religious orders. The Egyptians were determined to get him to the other side, to eternal life.

Sety's tomb had to be the most glorious ever built. Deep inside the rocks of the Western mountain architects hewed out a vast network of corridors and chambers and artists carved delicate reliefs over every inch of space. All the *Books of the Underworld*

were written to guide the king in the beyond. The secret names of Ra were invoked for his protection and the twelve gates of the hours of the night opened before his wandering soul. His images were brought back to life with magical spells of Opening the Mouth while the Heavenly Cow stood ready to carry him to the sky on her back. The tomb itself became a living image of the Underworld with all its secrets. During the funeral, the king was laid to rest in the vast sarcophagus chamber under the vault of the night sky in the embracing arms of the sky goddess and her imperishable canopy of stars.

Sacred writings of the *Books of the Afterlife* were essential in providing guidance and protection against the enemies of Ra, the followers of the serpent. Every royal tomb in the Valley of the Kings contained these texts in one form or another. In the tomb of Tuthmosis III they were written out in the form of a large papyrus covering the walls. The figures and letters were drawn in shorthand; it was essential to have sacred writings, no matter how simple, accompanying the royal mummy in order to ensure magical protection for the king's soul.

The *Books of the Afterlife* were reserved for the tomb of the king.⁶ These texts were esoteric writings: only the king as the earthly sun could know the secrets connected with the sun's course in the Underworld. The inclusion of all the *Books of the Afterlife* in the tomb of Sety I reflected particular religious concerns of the time, a new preoccupation with unifying ancient customs. The polytheistic aspect of ancient Egyptian religion was a result of combining several creation myths that came from different sources. After Akhenaten's monotheism there was a need to unite them into a single respectable religious system. To face this challenge the priesthood was encouraged to probe more deeply into ancient dogmas. The results of this rethinking were evident in the effort to unite all the existing *Books of the Afterlife* and create a single body of religious texts. Sety's tomb acquired a new importance; it became an extension of the funerary temple where ceremonies and rituals, once reserved for the temple precinct, now transformed the tomb into a temple of rebirth. Having died, the king "blended with him out of whom he had come."⁷ He became

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Osiris and Ra and took part with the sun in its cosmic movement. “Blended with the All, he is one and many, he is god.”⁸

The sheer size of the tomb and the use of all the available wall surfaces for decoration made it possible to include all the *Books of the Afterlife*: the *Amduat*, the *Book of Gates*, the *Litany of the Sun*, the *Book of the Heavenly Cow*, the *Ritual of Opening the Mouth* (chapter 12) and the *Judgment of Osiris*. The sarcophagus was decorated with the complete version of the *Book of Gates*. It provided the final completion of the sacred texts.

During the funeral ceremony the sacred texts were recited and the mythical stories re-enacted. The funeral rites must have resembled a medieval passion play with members of the king’s family and priests playing the parts of gods who were officiating at the king’s rites of rebirth. The combination of images, sacred writings and ritual re-enactment constituted a proper religious burial and ensured the king’s everlasting life.

The texts describe the spirit of the deceased king following the setting sun into the Netherworld. Seventy-five secret names of Ra were spoken for his protection. Sailing deeper into the night, the divine barge went past the cave of Sokkar, the guardian of cemeteries and entered the realm of the gods. Following in the retinue of Ra, the spirit of the king descended past the gates of the hours of the night into the realm of Osiris. Here, Osiris, the god of the Underworld, judged his soul. The ceremony of Opening the Mouth was performed on Sety’s statues to help him merge with Osiris. In the golden shrine—the sarcophagus chamber—the body of the king became one with the body of Osiris. From here the king’s soul descended still deeper into the realm of the primeval ocean through the narrow shaft below the sarcophagus. Having dissolved in the realm of chaos and darkness before creation he became an unborn child. Only then was he ready for new life. He was Osiris and Ra merged into one within the circle of eternal transformation. The sun could rise again above the boundless waters at the beginning of creation. The unfolding of life was ready to begin again. Ascending upwards, the king’s spirit left the Underworld and “stepped forth into daylight,”⁹ joining the eternal cosmic cycle.

LITANY OF THE SUN:

THE SEVENTY-FIVE SECRET NAMES OF RA

The earliest fragments of this text are found on the funerary shroud of Tuthmosis III. The full composition was written out for the first time in the tomb of Sety I with its official title, "Litany of Ra." From then on it became the standard decoration of the first and second corridors of all Ramesside royal tombs: the texts filled the first corridor while the figures were represented in the second. Parts of texts from the tomb of Sety were used in Merenptah's decoration of Sety's cenotaph of Osiris, the "Osireion" in Abydos.¹⁰

This literary composition was essentially a eulogy of the deity who lights up the Netherworld at night. The multitude of his images and names opened up the entire nocturnal world for the deceased. The sun-god had seventy-five secret names or forms. They were known only to Isis, the Great Magician. The seventy-five names symbolized the manifold expressions of his being. Each image was a god imbued with a specific name, power and nature of his own. Every deity played a different role in maintaining the Great Harmony or Ma'at. Together they were reflections of the all-creative, universal power of life.

In the Underworld Ra became like all the dead "a cavern dweller." At this point the deceased soul of the king spoke for the first time saying that he had thorough knowledge of Ra's secret names and forms. They were invoked to open up the Netherworld for his soul, a mere reflection of the sun god's soul. The text also invoked the United One equating the soul of the deceased king with him.

THE AMDUAT

The *Book of What Is* in the Duat—the Netherworld, first appeared in the New Kingdom. Unlike the older and always changing collection of spells, usually referred to as "The Book of the Dead," this text had a permanent content. The oldest fragments of the Amduat date to Queen Hatshepsut who employed them in the decoration of the tomb of her father, Tuthmosis I. Like the *Book of Gates*, the *Amduat* described the journey of the

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sun-god through twelve hours of the night. The earliest complete versions of the book were found in the tombs of Tuthmosis III and his chief vizier, Useramon. In these tombs, the hours were distributed according to the four cardinal directions along a rectangle with two hours on each of the short sides and four hours on the long sides. In the tomb of Amenhotep III, the texts were written in the sarcophagus chamber in sequential order. After the reign of Akhenaten, the *Amduat* was left out of all royal tombs, until, in the tomb of Sety I, it resumed its traditional place in the sarcophagus chamber. Here, the first three hours surrounded the sarcophagus, the fourth and fifth were in the third corridor and the remainder were scattered around the tomb. From Sety I onwards, down to Ramesses III, the third and fourth hours were always represented in the third corridor. The twelfth hour is missing in the tomb of Sety; it may have been written on some part of the lost funerary equipment. The *Amduat* was reserved for the tombs of kings; even queens had no right to use it. It was never written on funerary papyri.

The story described the sun god entering a gateway called “the Swallower of All” during the first hour of the night and crossing into the world of twilight. The real Underworld was entered during the second and third hours; it was a land of abundance containing the rejuvenating waters of Osiris. The sun god distributed portions of land to the blessed dead who carried ears of grain in their hands. As he sailed through the fourth hour the divine passenger went past the “Hidden Chamber of the West;” during the fifth, seven gods and seven goddesses pulled his boat past the sandy cave of hawk-headed Sokkar, the guardian of cemeteries.¹¹ In the sixth hour, the sun god accomplished his union with the body of Osiris. He had to overcome the great serpent Apophis in the seventh hour in order to raise the dead in the eighth and subdue the “enemies of Osiris” in the ninth. In the tenth hour the sun god encountered souls of people drowned in the Nile who had not been given a proper burial. The water of the Nile was described as a regenerating element providing the drowned with a blessed posthumous existence. The eleventh hour was filled with preparations for the coming

sunrise, the god's rebirth on the eastern mountains of the sky. It was crucial for time and the birth of the hours not to miss the right moment for the new sunrise. The primeval gods were present at the twelfth hour because every sunrise entailed the repetition of the original creation. As mentioned above, the twelfth hour of the *Amduat* is missing in the tomb of Sety.

LITANY OF OPENING THE MOUTH:

“You Will Go Forth from Darkness for the Love of Light; Go forth from the Underworld for the Love of Soaring among Great Spirits”

The tomb of Sety contains the most complete representation of the Ceremony of Opening the Mouth ever represented in a royal tomb. These scenes are unique in Egyptian art and their importance for interpreting the ancient ritual is essential. Reliefs in the corridor leading to the sarcophagus chamber represent King Sety's statues placed on pedestals as priests performed sacred rites that endowed them with everlasting life. Texts of the *LiturgY of Opening the Mouth for Breathing* were written below the images, shown in sequence on both walls. The texts were probably recited and rites performed on the king's statues during the funeral ceremony. While animating the statues, the ritual also reanimated the king's mummified body. There were seventy-five different rites¹² performed by priests, among whom we can distinguish Horus, the heir apparent—Ramesses II, and Thoth, “the heart of Ra”—the god of Magic. They “opened” the mouth, ears and nose, of the deceased king, reassembled the bones and limbs, put the heart back in its place and “caused the statues to live, awakened by their voices.”



THE BOOK OF THE HEAVENLY COW

This book was included for the first time in a royal tomb in one of the side rooms off the sarcophagus chamber. The earliest description of the myth is found on one of the gold shrines from the tomb of Tutankhamun (Shrine I) albeit in incomplete form. The tomb of Sety preserves the first complete version.

The story of the Heavenly Cow described the punishment of

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the human race by Ra for their rebellion against him. Hathor, the cow goddess who was the “eye” of Ra, was sent to eradicate humanity and exterminate people from the face of the earth. This fall of the human race abolished the Golden Age established at the dawn of creation. In the Golden Age death did not exist nor was heaven divided from earth. Humans were no different from gods and night not distinguished from day. But people had rebelled and upset this heavenly balance. Thus, Hathor, the celestial cow, was sent to wreak a feast of destruction. However, before her task was complete the sun god took pity on people and saved them by causing the vengeful goddess to become drunk on red-colored beer that she mistook for blood.

In the new age, Ra had to reorder the world. He established rules and laws that people had to obey. Then he retired to heaven on the back of the heavenly cow and henceforth the vault of the sky had to be supported by Shu, the god of air, Neheh and Djehuti, two gods of eternity, and the ruling king. The Netherworld was set up under the earth as the kingdom of the dead. As for king Sety, he was also taken to the sky by the heavenly cow. Being the son of Ra he dwelt with his father “until the end of time.”

THE GOLDEN SHRINE

The burial chamber with its deep yellow background recreated the sacred space of the original golden shrine of eternity where the Creator first fashioned the world. These beliefs reflected the ancient Memphite concept of a single deity, Ptah-Neheh, “the father of Atum, the creator of the one who himself has no creator,” who “in his being contained the primeval water before creation.”¹³

At the very back of this room, there is a small shrine with the image of Osiris in the “Hidden Chamber.” On the left wall of the shrine, Anubis holds out the ceremonial adze¹⁴ for opening the Mouth of the mummified body of Osiris. On the right side, there are the four sons of Horus, protectors of the viscera in the four canopic jars. This little shrine reflected the final rituals performed on the mummy of the king as he was being “united with Osiris.” The cult of Osiris was here merged with the Memphite

religious tradition of Ptah. Images of Ptah, the primeval god of Memphis, are found in the largest side-room of the sarcophagus chamber. They marked the deliberate association of these two traditions in the attempt to unify two important religious doctrines.

**THE BOOK OF GATES: THE SUN'S JOURNEY
THROUGH THE TWELVE HOURS OF THE NIGHT**

The alabaster sarcophagus of Sety I contains the earliest complete and continuous version of the *Book of Gates* in existence. Texts from the first half of the *Book of Gates* also decorate the two pillared halls in the tomb. The *Book of Gates* was similar to the *Amduat* both in content and in its New Kingdom origin.¹⁵ Like the *Amduat*, the *Book of Gates* described the Underworld as divided into twelve sections crossed by the solar bark during the twelve hours of the night. It was different from the *Amduat* in that an enormous gate shaped like a New Kingdom temple pylon guarded every section of the Underworld. The soul of light who traveled through this dark world was here accompanied by Sia and Heka, gods of Seeing and Magic. Unlike in the *Amduat*, where Osiris was a passive presence and where he never spoke, in the *Book of Gates* the journey was focused on the judgment of Osiris in the sixth hour. This scene has a prominent place in the first pillared hall of the tomb of Sety. A staircase descending deeper into the tomb marked the entry into the domain of Osiris. The Judgment of Osiris was a precondition for the salvation of the soul.

FIRST HOUR: THE GATE OF NO RETURN

At sunset the bark of the sun god crossed the western horizon into the other world. The mountain parted to let him enter this kingdom, a reversal of the world above. The sun god was represented as a scarab within a disk—a symbol of transformation. A serpent surrounded the disk with the tail in its mouth—the Uroboros. Two figures flanked the scarab—Sia—the god of divine intelligence and Heka—the personification of the magical utterance and the power of the word.

Ra said to the mountain: “Set forth light, O mountain, let

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radiance arise from the darkness which devours me, which slays both men and gods! May you who dwell in these regions have breath, may you receive the light! I have decreed death and they have slaughtered everything that exists. I have hidden you from those upon the earth.”

To the right of the solar bark we see twelve gods of the Western hills who had come into being from the eye of Ra. They had been sent to the hidden mountain to guard the doorway that consumed men, gods and everything created.

SECOND HOUR: RA’S DECREE OF DOOM

The boat of Ra now approached a gateway with a closed door—the gate of the second hour. It had a single leaf door guarded by a serpent standing on its tail.

Ra said to the serpent: “Throw wide open your door before the light! The portal will be closed after this god had entered through it and there will be lamentation upon the mountain when they hear the door shut. This abode is in darkness so that the transformations of god may take place.”

As four gods towed the boat of Ra through this region, Sia and Heka guarded his sacred shrine. The text reads: “This god is drawn by the gods of the Duat to make divisions in the earth, to work designs therein, to weigh words and deeds in Amentet (the land of the West), to magnify the great god among little gods in the Duat, to place the blessed souls upon their thrones and to judge the damned, to destroy their bodies by an evil death.”

Ra said: “Grant me the crown that I may have possession of the throne that is in the earth. Let Sia and Heka unite themselves for me. No one will shut the doors against you and the damned will not enter after you.”

The gods “who were at peace” worshipped Ra on earth. On the left side, the creator god Atum was depicted as an aged man leaning heavily on a stick. Four figures, described as “the inert,” were lying prostrate at his feet. Twenty more were shown behind Atum with hands tied behind their backs—“the apostates of Ra upon the earth, who have thrust aside the right to invoke evil against him who is in the egg.”

Horus spoke: "The words of my father Ra are Ma'at against you, I am the son who comes from his father, I am the father who comes from his son. You are fettered and tied, my father has mastery over you. Your evil deeds have turned against you and your doom decreed before the Light. You who have committed sins, your corruptible bodies shall be cut in pieces, your souls shall have no existence, and you shall never see Ra when he journeys in the hidden land. Hail Ra, your enemies are in the place of destruction!"

THIRD HOUR: GODS OF THE BOILING LAKE

As the bark approached to enter this gate the guardian gods exclaimed: "Let this gateway open before the one of the horizon, to him that is in heaven. Come, O traveler, who journeys in the Amentet. . . You shall illuminate the darkness, you shall open the way to the light in this hidden habitation."

The sun sailed past twelve mummified gods and the doors of their shrines were flung wide open to receive his light. Behind these shrines there was a large lake of boiling water in which twelve other gods stood submerged up to their waists. In front of every god there was a large ear of wheat.

Ra said to them: "Open the doors to your shrines that my radiance may penetrate the darkness in which you are. I found you weeping and lamenting with your shrines closed but air shall be breathed to your nostrils, I will grant you abundance overflowing."

The gods replied: "Hail, Ra, come into our lake, you great god who never fails. We worship you and rejoice when you pass through our region, when the great god passes through our secret place!"

FOURTH HOUR: GODDESSES OF THE HOURS

As the bark approached the gate of the fourth hour, the following words were spoken: "Open the earth, force a way through the earth and dispel our darkness! Hail Ra, come to us!"

Six goddesses of the hours stood on either side of a slope, three on land and three on water. The two groups were separated

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by a giant serpent with many coils, described as “spewing out twelve snakes that will be devoured by the hours.”

Ra said to them: “Hark, O goddesses of the hours of the night sky! It is your duty to eat the offspring of the serpent, you shall destroy it! Guide me through this region, for I have created you to worship me!”

To the left of the boat the mummified Osiris, wearing the white crown of the South, came out of a mountain. He stood in an underground shrine with a vaulted dome and only his head was visible above ground. He was Khenti Amentiu, the Foremost of the Westerners. A flame goddess in the form of a uraeus guarded the shrine; behind Osiris there were twelve followers of Horus, the aged one, “who work on behalf of his father Osiris, performing magical ceremonies and restoring him to the crown.” Horus said: “My heart goes to you, father, you who are avenged against those who worked against you. You are guided by magical ceremonies, you have mastery, Osiris, you have rulership, Foremost of the Westerners, everything is yours, ruler of the Underworld, whose forms are exalted in the hidden place. The blessed spirits worship you and the dead are in terror of you. I have restored your crown to you!”

FIFTH HOUR: THE TIME KEEPERS

In the fifth hour, Ra encountered the Time Keepers. He addressed the following words to them: “You, who hold the measuring cord in the land of the blessed souls, take the cord and draw it tight, mark out the passage to the fields of Iaru where the gods sit upon their thrones. They are in the fields of peace.” The Time Keepers replied: “Journey on, O one of the horizon, for the gods are content with their possessions and the blessed with their fields.”

The four races of man were represented in the Fifth Hour: the Egyptians, the Desert Dwellers, the dark Nubians and the fair-skinned Libyans. It is Horus who addressed them: “Magical protection to you, creatures of Ra, who have come into being from the great one at the head of heaven! Let there be breath to your nostrils! You are the tears of the eye of my splendor!”

SIXTH HOUR: THE JUDGMENT OF OSIRIS

In the sixth division Osiris, the ruler of the Underworld, sat enthroned wearing the double crowns of the South and North. Holding the scepter of kingship and the symbol of life he was seated on a stately throne on top of a platform with nine steps. On top of the stairs in front of the seated Osiris was a bearded god who held a balance on which the deeds of the deceased king were weighed against a feather.¹⁶ In the background, a boat sailed away from Osiris carrying a pig, the symbol of Seth, driven away by a monkey with a stick—the god Thoth. In the top corner the jackal-headed figure of Anubis looked on, as the enemies of Osiris were subdued under the platform of his throne.

Osiris said to the righteous: “You are the truth of the truth (the Ma’at of Ma’at). Be at peace, you... who dwell in the house of Him whose souls are holy. Live on what you live and have mastery over the cool waters in your lake.”

Twelve male figures tending large ears of wheat—“those who are at work in the fields of the Duat”—faced seven reapers. Ra said to the reapers: “Take your scythes and reap your grain for it is granted to you... join yourselves to me in the circle of the hidden forms. Hail to you, O reapers.” The reapers replied: “Let plants spring up in the field of the Duat and let Ra shine on the members of Osiris. When you shine, young plants are born, O great god, creator of the egg.”

SEVENTH HOUR: THE GREAT SERPENT

In the seventh domain lived twelve gods whose hands and arms were hidden. They were described as “possessing hiddenness, holding mystery.” Ra said to them: “Receive my forms and embrace me in your mysteries. You shall be in the Hwt-Benben (the temple of Ra),¹⁷ where my body rests. Your mysteries are the mysteries of the Duat, cover your arms with them.” They replied: “Let your soul be in heaven, at the head of the horizon, let your shadow come into the hidden place, let your body go to the earth. Fulfill yourself and take your place with your body in the Duat.”

The body of the serpent Apophis was held up above the ground by twelve figures. Twelve human heads grew out of the body of

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Apophis, the first appearing from his head and the other eleven from his back. The figures were described as “the adversaries of his two-fold evil... whose duty is to seize the fiend when heads come out of him.” Ra said: “Turn your back, serpent, go back! When the heads appear from you, may you perish!”

Above them the upright figure of a god had a rope twisted around his neck. The two ends of the rope were held by twelve starmen. The text says: “The enemy of Ra comes forth from the Duat. Seize the rope and tie the mouth of the serpent! Let the hours come forth! Let the rope enter into the mouth of the serpent and come to the place where the hours are born!” The twelve starmen replied: “The serpent is tied up with the rope, the hours of the gods are yours, O Ra, given to the eternal light! Rest in your hidden body...”¹⁸

EIGHTH HOUR: THE DEFEAT OF THE SERPENT

The bark crossed the way of Horus, represented as an aged man leaning on a staff. Below him there were twelve figures with hands tied behind their backs. They were “the burnt enemies of Osiris.”

Horus exclaimed: “Let there be fetters on your arms, O enemies of my father... you who are hostile to Ra. You will be hacked to pieces, your souls shall be destroyed and you shall not live because of what you have done to my father Osiris; you have put his mysteries behind your backs, you have dragged out his statue from his secret place. The word of Osiris is Ma’at against you and my word is Ma’at against you... you shall come to an end! The fire from the serpent will blaze against the enemies of Osiris when Horus decrees that it shall be so! Whoever knows words of power against the serpent will not enter upon his fiery path.”

NINTH HOUR: TOWERS OF THE SCARAB

In the ninth hour, Ra addressed the gods: “Rise up for Ra, you gods, come into being! Take the power of light, you gods, my power of creation, receive the crowns of the South and North and pull tightly at the stern of my boat. Come into being from me. Come forth after your transformations... appear, after your

transformations in heaven, you, mighty of forms, the ways of the hidden place are open to you and the portals of the earth unfolded for you, we will guide your wings to the mountain. Enter into the East and come forth between the thighs of your mother..."

TENTH HOUR: GODS WHO LIGHT THE SKY

In the tenth hour, Ra reached to the sky-goddess Noot. The goddess called out to him: "Open, you face of Ra and drive away the darkness from Amentet. Let him give light by what he has set forth, by the light... Come, offspring of the heights of heaven, come into being, O Ra!"

All the gods and goddesses "make the rising up for Ra... they come into being of their own accord at the season when Ra is born in Noot. They come into being for the births of Ra... it is they who transport the great god to the horizon to the East of heaven."

ELEVENTH HOUR: THE SERPENT IN FETTERS

During the eleventh hour, nine gods with knives in their right hands and scepters in the left, escorted the bark of Ra in a procession. The first four had jackal heads and the last five had heads of bearded men. The nine gods were "the company who slay Apophis." The serpent Apophis was fettered by chains to the ground. The nine gods were described as "those who take their knives and hack at Apophis. The fetters of the rebel are in the hands of the children of Horus who hold his chains between their fingers."

As hidden hands opened the door to make way for Ra, the remaining gods "turned away" the god Seth from this gate of the Duat. Eight star goddesses who protected the hours and the crocodile-headed Sobek "carry the disk of Ra, making way through the Duat and into the height of heaven with his image that is in their hands. They utter magic words to the door so that Ra may give himself to the body of Noot. When the two arms of Noot embrace Ra, the stars utter hymns of praise, they journey on with him to the heights of heaven taking up their places in the body of Noot."

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TWELFTH HOUR: THE BIRTH OF RA

Behind the twelfth gate, we can see the end of the Duat. The boat of the sun god was about to be submerged in the waters of Noon, the primeval ocean, and taken from there into the sky in the form of a disk pushed forth by a scarab. The text says: “Noot receives Ra.”

All the religious texts were laid out in the tomb in especially designated areas—parts of the Underworld. The events depicted on the walls were re-enacted by members of the royal family and priests. It is almost certain that Ramesses II, the son of Sety I and heir to the throne, played the part of Horus—he is represented in one of the scenes of *Opening the Mouth*. Priests and priestesses probably played the other parts. The myths were re-enacted as a religious passion play—the funerary rites ensured Sety’s passage through the Underworld to heaven. Surrounded by sacred texts and living images on the walls of his own temple of rebirth, the king’s spirit traveled the eternal worlds on its timeless journey.

EPILOGUE: THE TOMB TODAY

The unique collection of New Kingdom literature found in the tomb of Sety was illustrated in a style that marked the height of early Ramesside art. One of the largest tombs in the Valley of the Kings, it still offers a rich and evocative image of the ancient Egyptian afterlife. It is an invaluable historical monument as well as a treasure trove of ancient literature and art.

Tragically, its condition is steadily deteriorating. Sety’s tomb has been closed to the public for several years because it is unsafe for visitors. A ceiling in one of the back rooms has collapsed and adjacent chambers require additional structural supports. The reliefs need cleaning and conservation. However, a full-scale restoration project still awaits funding and action. If something is not done soon, it may be too late.

NOTES

¹Sety I ruled from 1306–1290 B.C. He ushered in a period of great prosperity and was succeeded by his son Ramesses the Great.

²H. Carter in *Annales de Service des Antiquites de l’Egypte*, 6 (1903–4), 112.

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³E. Hornung, *The Tomb of Pharaoh Seti I/ Das Grab Sethos I., Photos H. Burton* (Zurich and Munich 1991, text English and German).

⁴Some texts and representations from the tomb of Sety I are discussed by Hornung within the framework of other religious literature in *Valley of the Kings. Horizon of Eternity* (Zurich and Munich 1982) and in *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Ithaca and London, 1999).

⁵Akhenaten, originally Amenhotep IV, ruled from 1353–1335 B.C. He closed the ancient temples and abolished the polytheistic worship of the old gods instituting instead the faith in one god only—the solar disc Aten. His policies caused a rift with the powerful priesthood of Amun and resulted in political and social upheaval.

⁶Around 1000 B. C. the High Priests of Amun appropriated this royal privilege for their own sarcophagi and burial papyri.

⁷A. Piankoff, *The Litany of Re* (New York, 1964), 50.

⁸*Ibid.*, 51.

⁹“Stepping Forth into Daylight” is the ancient Egyptian title of the so-called “Book of the Dead.”

¹⁰Another complete version is also found in the temple of Ramesses II at Abydos.

¹¹Representations of the cave of Sokkar are always oriented north, as indicated in books for artists working in the tomb.

¹²Reflecting the seventy-five images of Ra that represented all the different aspects needed to maintain Ma’at—Divine Harmony. Some of the seventy-five scenes of *Opening the Mouth* were omitted.

¹³The text found on the “Stone of Shabaka,” now in the British Museum, seems to originate from Memphite theological teachings of the post-Amarna period.

¹⁴The similarity of the shape of the adze of Anubis and the constellation of Ursa Minor represented on the ceiling have been noted and related by D. V. Etz, “A New Look at the Constellation Figures in the Celestial Diagram,” *JARCE XXXIV* (1997), 150.

¹⁵Fragmentary texts from the *Book of Gates* were first included in the sarcophagus chamber of Horemhab.

¹⁶The feather is the symbol of Ma’at—Truth or Divine Harmony.

¹⁷The tradition of the “Hwt Benben” dates to the Old Kingdom. The first obelisk may have been a “Hwt Benben” stone that stood on a large alabaster pedestal (still in situ) inside Ni-User-Ra’s sun temple at Abusir (Dynasty V).

¹⁸On the subject of black holes mentioned in the *Books of the Underworld* see Hornung, “Black holes viewed from within: hell in ancient Egyptian thought,” *Diogenes* 165, vol. 42/1 (Spring 1994), 133–156.