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The Death of the Egyptian King

Teodor Lekov

The Egyptian concept of Kingship is based on the fact that the Egyptian king is a God, and not only one of the numerous gods that inhabited the spiritual space of the Egyptian mind, but the Sole Ruler of the Cosmos, the Supreme One, The Image of the Creator himself. This idea is closely linked with the belief of the immortality of the ruler. Egyptian texts always stress the fact that the departed from the world of the living Egyptian king is actually alive. From the time of the Vth Dynasty king Unas on, we read the statement as this, written in the burial chamber of his pyramid:

\[ h3 \text{ Wnjs n sm.n.k is mwt.tj sm.n.k } \text{ \textcopyright nh.t(j)} \]

O, Unis! You have not gone dead, you have gone alive!¹

At the same time ancient Egyptians experienced the brutal and cruel nature of the death, they faced the death in everyday life, they perfectly know that even the king could not escape from it’s inevitable coming. Egyptian worldview maintains a complex picture of notions representing the nature of the king and the nature of human beings in relation to the powers of the Creator. Through this complex unity of the personal aspects the King, and later also his subjects could achieve the state of immortality.

If we compare the images of the kings in their sculptures – an ideal image of the immortal son of the god with a calm face without expression of emotions, without any trace of the old age and discomfort, staring with his eyes into eternity, and compare this image with the outlook of the actual mummy of the old king, bearing the traces of illness, health problems and the agony of the death, we can grasp that these two images describe different aspects of reality – visible reality (the physical remains of the dead body) and invisible reality (the life after dead in an ideal form). On the other hand in everyday life everything is the opposite. The

¹ PT Spell 213 = Pyr. §134a; See also PT Spell 219 = Pyr. §§ 167b, 168b, 169b et al.
so-called “visible reality” is invisible, i.e. the image of the king’s mummy is buried deeply in the tomb, and the “invisible reality” – image of the eternal king is usually open to the public. The textual evidence also provides abundant material for the descriptions of these two dimensions the complex visible/invisible reality. Although the belief of immortality in Ancient Egypt is a well established, typical cultural feature of the Egyptians according to later Creek authors, the death of the physical body is an inevitable fact. As an author of an ancient tomb inscription from the time of Ramesses IV says:

\[ kj \ hpr(.w) \ m \ ht \ hr \ sbj \ dr \ r.k \ ntr \ d3m.w \ iw(.w) \ r \ st.sn \]

The form manifested in body will go, that is from the time of the God.
The young ones will come to their places.

Trying to recreate event of the king’s death, we have also at our disposals evidences from the social context of the royal funeral and several representations showing burial customs of the Egyptians. Images of the funeral such as these from the Book of the dead and from the Theban tombs are rare for the funeral of the kings, and we can point an example like a funeral procession represented in the tomb of the king Tutankhamun. Few details will help us to catch the atmosphere of funeral, here the king’s courtiers (smr.w) who drag the mummy of the young king to it’s final resting place, are speaking: “Nebkheprure, go in peace, o, God who guards the earth!”

We could collect and add many tiny details, every piece of written and visual information, that enables us to see how disturbing and catastrophic event is the death of the king for his family, relatives, and loyal subjects. The signs of grief and sorrow could be seen in the several royal images from the time of Sethos I and Ramesse II that show a young crown prince in mourning after the death of his fa-

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2 See well known example of Herod. II. 123, and Žabkar 1963.
3 KRI.VI.191.14–15; Tomb of Inherkhauy (TT 359).
4 See for example representation in Reeves 1990, 72; von Lieven 2016, 294.
The faces of the princes are unshaved. The same custom lives in Bulgaria even in our days – male relatives of the dead man do not shave themselves some time (40 days) after the death.

The image of the king’s death from the perspectives of the invisible reality is express in two different textual sources with two different approaches to the event. On the one hand we have king’s ritual of resurrection, performed in sources like Pyramid texts, and later funerary books, which gives us the intimate, internal look on the event. On the other hand, we have dozen of examples of description of king’s death in the words of his servants, which gives us through the eyes of the witnesses, contemporary to the event, external point of view to the same object. The vocabulary of these descriptions of the actual physical death of the king, and the notions that they convey would be of great importance for modern understanding the complex picture of the Egyptian ideas of immortality.

The passages of the texts mentioning king’s death are treated in detail only in few works and they never have been collected entirely and studied more deeply. Some scholars describe these examples as euphemistic expression for the king’s death, but here we have more a reflection of deep-rooted concept for the nature of the king’s person, than display of an example of a high literary style. The following list of textual examples referring to the death of the king is arranged chronologically: Probably one of the earliest, and most detailed description of the king’s death is dated from the Middle Kingdom, in the well known Story of Sinuhe:

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5 Descroche-Noblecourt 1947; Mathieu 2002, 228–230 with ostracon DeM 2568 from Deir el Medina and Ostracon Baltimore 32.1.

6 These examples are treated in detail only in a few works, mainly from the point of view of stylistics: Grapow 1942, 141–144; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 202–204; Blumenthal 1970, 53–55; Grimal 1986, 545–548. Grapow (Grapow 1942, 141) made an important observation that in many cases when one speaks of the death of other persons is normal to use “NN died” or so, but in the case of the king’s death such a phraseology is inappropriate. Blumenthal (Blumenthal 1970, 55) also remarks that “in the ideology of the official inscriptions there in no place for the king’s death”.

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1) \( r\ ntr\ r\ zht.f \)
\( njswt\ bitj\ (sh\tp-ib-R)\| \)
\( shrj.fr\ pt \)
\( hnm\ m\ itn \)
\( h^f.w-ntr\ 3bh(.w)\ m\ ir(j)\ sw \)

The God ascended to his Akhet
the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, (Shotepibre) |,
he goes up to the sky, united with the Disc,
the flesh of the God is mixed with him who created it.\(^7\)

In another place of the same Story, we meet more concise formula of the
king’s death:

2) \( njswt\ bitj\ s\tp-ib-R\|\ wD3.w\ r\ zht \)
The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Shotepibre proceeded to Akhet\(^8\).

Some variants of the last formula are attested before the time of the Story of
Sinuhe, from the time of the First Intermediate period and also from the private
inscriptions from the Old Kingdom:

3) \( hr\ w\nh-nh\ njswt\ bitj\ s3-R\|\ Intf\ n\h(.w)\ mj\ R\|\ r\ sD3.f\ m\ htp\ r\ zht.f \)
Hours Wakh-ankh, the king of Upper and Lower Egypt, the son of Re, Intef,
who lives like Re, finally goes in peace to his Akhet\(^9\).

Also the expression is attested in even more short form the time of Senwosret I:

4) \( ink\ hrd\ ts\ mdh\ hr\ hm.f\ sD3\ m\ htp\ njswt-bjtj\ (hpr-k3-R)\| \)

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\(^7\) Sin. R 5–8 = Blackman 1932, 3. The text was composed in the first half of XII\(^{th}\) dynasty – Parkinson, 1997, 22.

\(^8\) Sin. B 36 = Blackman 1932, 16.

\(^9\) Stela of Teti – BM. 614, 11–12; Blackman 1931; Clere 1948, 16.
I was a child with a tied knot when his Majesty departed in peace, the King Kheperkare who lives eternally.\(^{10}\)

There is also more profane expression, describing the dead of the king, attested in the everyday life speech. This is the example of pap. Prisse:

5) \(\text{ḥt} \cdot n \; \text{hm} \; n \; \text{njswt} \; \text{bjtj} \; \text{hwjn} \; \text{mnj.n.f}\)

And then the Majesty of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt died Huny (lit. he has been moored)\(^{11}\)

In literary texts of the New Kingdom also similar expressions occur, for example in the *Story of the Two Brothers*, describing the death of Bata:

6) \(\text{iwf} \; 30 \; n \; \text{rnp.t} \; m \; \text{njsw} \; \text{nw} \; \text{Km.t}\)

\(\text{iwf} \; \text{wldj} \; n \; \text{nh} \; \text{iw.} \; \text{p3j.f} \; \text{sn} \; \text{33} \; \text{ḥt} \; (w) \; \text{r} \; \text{st.f} \; \text{hrw} \; n \; \text{mnjt}\)

“And he (completed) 30 years as a King of Egypt and he departed from life, and his elder brother has taken his place in the day of (his) dead (lit. mooring).\(^{12}\)”

\(^{10}\) Stela BM 828, 5–6 = Budge 1912, Pl.21. The expression \(\text{sD} \cdot \text{m} \; \text{ḥtp}\) is attested already in the private texts of Old Kingdom – Wb.IV.378.1–3.

\(^{11}\) pap.Prisse 2,7–8. Here is used the verb \(\text{mnj} – \text{“to moor”},\) (from the same root – \(\text{mnjt} – \text{“mooring post”), describing the dead as the actual image of the part of the funeral procession – the landing after the crossing of the river, when the ship is tied to the mooring post at the harbor. Cf. also the use of the determinativ \(\text{Z6}.

\(^{12}\) pap.Orbiney 19,6–7 = LES.29, 8–10. Cf. the determinativ of \(\text{wldj} \) written as “30”, obvious mistake for the similar orthographic form the sign “dead” – \(\text{ḥt} \cdot \) – Gardiner in LES 29a – 19,7.
The characteristic way of describing the dead of the king we have founding the Story of Sinuhe continues to be used in the time of the New Kingdom. In the tomb of an official Ineni (TT 81) the dead of the king Amenophis I is described like this:

7) \( sb.t \ hmf^c h^w m \ nfr \ rnp.wt \ m \ htp.w \)
\( pr \ r \ pt \ hnm.fitn \)
\( 3bh.n.f \ pr.n.f \ im.f \)

His majesty spent his life with beauty of the years in peace.
Than he went to the heaven,
he united (himself) with the disk,
he mixed (himself) with the one from whom he went out\(^{13}\).

Another inscription in the same tomb for the dead of Thutmosis I:

8) \( htp \ njswt \ m \ cnh \)
\( pr \ r \ hrt \)
\( km.n.f \ rnp.wt.f \ m \ ndm-ib \)

The King rest in the life,
he went to the heaven,
he completed his years in joy\(^{14}\).

And again in the same tomb for the death of Thutmose II:
He went to the heaven,
He united (himself) with the gods\textsuperscript{15}.

The biographical inscriptions of the warrior Amenemheb contain description of the dead of Thutmosis III almost with the same words of the \textit{Story of Sinuhe}:

Lo, the King completed his lifetime with many beautiful years, with power and might, with triumph, from the beginning of year 1 till the end of year 54, 3th month of the season \textit{peret}, the last day of the month in the time of the king of Upper and Lower Egypt Menkheperre, true of voice. He went to the heaven, he united (himself) with the disk. The flesh of the God was mixed with the one who created it\textsuperscript{16}.

\textsuperscript{15} Urk.IV.59, 13–14.

\textsuperscript{16} Urk.IV.895,14–17–896,1–3.
Later in the time of the New Kingdom the event of the royal death is described in the same manner, but no so accurately:

11) \textit{hn\text{n}.\textit{f} hrj \textit{\text{t}k.f} m nb.w hrt-n\text{tr}}

He united (himself) with the heaven,
he entered among the Lords of the necropolis.
(for the death of Amenemhet I)\textsuperscript{17}

12) \textit{wn.in hm.f \textit{\text{n}h} wd\text{t} snb hr pwj r \textit{t}t pt}

Then his Majesty (may he will be alive, complete and healthy)
flew to the heaven\textsuperscript{18}.

In the stela of Sethos I dedicated to the memory of his father Ramesses I at Abydos:

13) \textit{hn\text{n}.\textit{f} hrt}
\textit{\text{t}h\text{c}.n.j hr st.f}
\textit{ink pw s\text{n}h rn.f}

He united (himself) with the heaven.
Then I stayed at his place (throne).
I will be the one who will make his name alive\textsuperscript{19}.

In the inscriptions of the Ramesses II dedicated to the renovation of the temple of his father – Sethos I at Qurna:

\textsuperscript{17} pap.Chester-Beatty IV vs.6,14.
\textsuperscript{18} pap.Orbiney 19,3 = LES.29,3.
\textsuperscript{19} KRI.I.111,15.
14) *ist kḥ. n.f ḫtp. n.f hṛt
       ḫnn. n.f ṟ ḫ mp ḫ pt

Lo, he died (lit. “he cooled himself”),
he rested at the heaven,
he united (himself) with Re who is in the sky.²⁰

In a similar inscription from the temple of the king Sethos I at Abydos, Ramesses II speaks for the time, when he found the temple:

15) ḫ. n. ṛ ṟ ḫ pt He (his father Sethos I) already entered the sky.²¹

There are several examples among the inscriptions from Deir el-Medina where is described the announcement of the death of the king to the villagers. The chief policeman Nahtmin reports at his arrival that king Sethos II is dead:

16) ḫj ṭṣj. ṭ ṭ ṭ ṭ ḫ ṛ ṛ ṛ ṟ ḫ ṛ ṛ ṛ ṛ ṛ pt

The falcon is lifted to heaven.²²

Also, the chief policeman Mentiumes reports for the death of the king Ramesses III and the coronation of the new king – Ramesses IV:

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²⁰ LD.III.152 = KRI.II.636.1.
²¹ KRI. II. 326. 3.
²² O.CGC 25,515,vs.IV,3 = KRI.IV.382,8.
The falcon flew (to the sky, namely the Majesty) of the King Usermaatre, beloved of Amun, the son of Re, Ramesesu, ruler of lunu, be alive, complete and healthy.\(^{23}\)

In the historical section of the pap.Harris, the description of the king's death is presented by the king Ramesses III himself:

\[\text{ptrj htp.}\text{j m Igrt mj it.}\text{j R}^c\]
\[\text{šbn.}\text{j psdt }^c.\text{t m }\text{ḥrt }\text{t}^3\text{ dwt}\]
\[\text{smn Imn-}\text{R}^c \text{s}^3.\text{j r st.}\text{j}\]

Indeed, I rested at Igeret (Underworld) like my father Re, I mixed (myself) with the Great Ennead in the sky, in the earth and in Duat. Amun-Re established my son at my throne.\(^{24}\)

In the inscription from the tomb of Osorkon II at Tanis, the death of the king is described with the term Ba for the first time:


His Ba ascents to the place of his existence, the House of the Millions of years.
The godly king took his place. His Ba united (himself) with the heaven\textsuperscript{25}.

The inscription is a part of a lament written by the general Pasherieniset at the entrance area of the King’s tomb. Its unusual style shows familiarity and personal feeling toward the king, but also that Egyptian king began to be viewed less a god, but more as a human ruler\textsuperscript{26}.

In the text of the \textit{Adoption of Ankhnesneferibre} at Karnak the phraseology already found at the \textit{Story of Sinuhe} was repeated once again:

\begin{align*}
\text{20)} & \quad \text{	extit{pr ntr pn ntr nfr nb t3.wj psmtk r pt}} \\
& \quad \text{	extit{hnm.f m itn h\textsuperscript{5}w ntr i3bh m ir sw}} \\
& \quad \text{	extit{c\textit{h\textsuperscript{6}.n sh\textsuperscript{7} s3.f m st.f}}} \\
\end{align*}

This god went out, the young god, lord of the two lands, Psamtik, to the sky.
He was united with the disc, the god’ flesh was mixed with the one who created it.

\textsuperscript{25} Montet 1942, fig.69, Pl.XXXI, 4–6; Montet, 1947 I, 71–73; Jansen-Winkeln, 2007, 110; Desroches-Noblecourt 1947, 204 ; Ritner 2009, 347.

\textsuperscript{26} Shaw 2003, 230.
Then his son ascended to his throne.

She, adoring the god, Nitokris, true of voice, went out to the sky.

She was united with the Disc, the god’s flesh was mixed with the one who created it.

From the Ptolemaic period the death of the Queen Arsinoe II is described like this in the Great Mendes stela:

21) *ntr.t tn pr.s r pt hmn.s h₅w n km₃ nfrw.s*

This goddess went to the sky, she was united with the flesh (of the God) who created her beauty.

And after the completion of the ceremony of the Opening of the mouth, four days later, it is said that:

*prj.s m b₃ ñh*

She went as a living Ba.

The same expressions are also used in the description of the death of the sacred bulls Apis, Buhis, the sacred cows of Isis, etc. It will be mentioned few important examples.

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27 Leahy 1996, 151, and note s).
28 Urk. II. 40.
29 For the death of the sacred animals and the concept of Ba, see: Žabkar, 1968, 73–74, esp. n.125.
In the stela for the death of the sacred cow Hesat, from the 14th year of Prolemy I:

\[
\text{pr b} \text{ n ħm.t lst hst iw (=r) ḫḥḥ(w)} \\
\text{sšd b} 3 \text{s r pt} \\
\text{ḥnms ħn° R°}
\]

Ba of the Incarnation of Isis, (the cow) Hesat went to Kebkhu, her Ba moved swiftly upwards to heaven, and she was united with Re.

\[
\text{ḥnhn b} 3 \text{ lst ṣpj.f iw (=r) pt}
\]

... and Ba of Isis has been returned, as it (Ba) flew up to heaven.\(^{30}\)

One of the most intriguing examples, describing the death of the sacred bull is a stela dedicated to the death of the Buhis bull from the 13th regnal year of Hadrian:

\[
\text{ḥs b} 3 \text{ pt ħnm ınt}
\]

His Ba hasten to the sky to join the Disc.\(^{31}\)

The last known example is from a stela dedicated to the death of the Buhis bull from 12th regnal year of Diocletian:

\[
\text{ṣpj b} 3 \text{ f r ħrt ḥr gs ntr}
\]

His Ba flew to heaven at the side of the God.\(^{32}\)

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\(^{30}\) Stela Cairo CG 22180 = Urk. II 160, 12–14; 161, 3–4; See also Caminos 1958, 81–82.

\(^{31}\) Stela Pushkin Mus.I.1.a.5376 (5863); = Berlev 1982, No.147, p.219.

\(^{32}\) Stela BM EA 1696 = Mond/Mayers 1934, No.19 XLVIa, ll.4–5.
From the above mentioned examples we could describe the image of the royal death as is perceived in the minds of the Egyptians from the Middle Kingdom onwards till the Roman age. The following major points are clearly visible:

1) The king “ascents” (\(\text{fr}, \text{shrj}, \text{sfrj}\)), “goes out” (\(\text{prj}\)), and in the later texts “flies” (\(\text{pj}\)) or simply “goes”, “proceeds” (\(\text{wd3}, \text{sd3}\)) to the heaven (\(\text{pt}, \text{hrt}\)) or Akhet, in peace (\(\text{m htp}\)).

2) The king unites himself (\(\text{hnm}\)) with the Sun-disc (\(\text{itn}\)), or he rests in it (\(\text{htp}\)), he unites himself with Pe, or simply with the heaven.

3) The flesh of the God (\(\text{awt-ntr}\)) is mixed with the One who created it, with the gods, or with the Ennead. Here is especially powerful the image of cyclical returning to the source of life – the Sun-God.

The Kings in these cases is called simply “falcon” the image of the god Horus, the most characteristic royal god and also the potent image of ascending. In other examples the King is mentioned by his royal name with the element Re in it (the so called \(\text{njswt hjtj}\) name), or by the term “His Majesty”, “His Person”, His Incarnation”. This means that namely the nature of the king described by his throne name, the name he received at the time of coronation, merges with the Sun. At the Late period the agent of the movement to the sky is finally verbally expressed – the falcon that ascent to heaven is actually the Ba, the so-called Soul of the Egyptians, an external manifestation, and the potential of life force. So, the people avoid the usage of the word Ba, they do not describe the event of royal death as flight or so just as a kind of euphemism. Actually for them the king does not die, he just returns to the source of life that created him, he returns to the Sun God, to the state from which he goes out to join the realm of eternal life.

We have no direct evidences which describe the royal death from the epoch of the Old Kingdom, but these ideas correspond firmly with the material from the Pyramid texts and other religious compositions.

**Bibliography:**

