



## Standing on the Shoulders of Giants Curriculum

### Ancient Egypt: The Pyramid Texts



Pyramid text from Pyramid of Pharaoh Unas. His is the first pyramid where we find the writings of *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* (*Book of the Dead*).

In the Pyramid Text we find the oldest collection of religious spells known to us from ancient Egypt. This collection forms the basis of much of the later religious theology and literature of ancient Egypt. The passages were eventually separated and categorized, as well as illustrated and eventually evolved into the Book of the Dead, or more properly, "*The Book of the Coming forth by Day*". The oldest of these texts come from the Pyramid of Unas, or more popularly these days, Unas at Saqqara (ca. 2450 B.C.E.). However, the first Pyramid Text that was actually discovered was from the Pyramid of Pepy I. From Unas, the last king of the 5th Dynasty, varying selections of spells were carved in all the royal pyramids of the Old Kingdom, particularly the sarcophagus chamber and antechamber. There were some 227 spells in the Pyramid of Unas, and each subsequent pyramid provided fresh new additions, though no single pyramid contained the whole collection of spells. The maximum number was 675 utterances from the pyramid of Pepy II. With Teti's pyramid, the text also appeared on the sarcophagus itself, and in the pyramid of Pepy I the inscriptions extend beyond the antechamber.

During the rule of Pepy II we begin to find the text in the tombs of queens, and after the Old Kingdom, they even appear on the walls and coffins of officials. Specifically, in the Old Kingdom the text appears in the pyramids of Unas, Teti, Pepy I, Merenre I, Pepy II and Ibi, along with those of queens Wadjes, Neith and Inhotep. Recently (March 2000), the discovery of a tenth pyramid containing texts was announced at the 8th International Congress of Egyptology in Cairo by the Head of Egyptian Antiquities Dr. Gaballah and the Director of Excavations, Prof. Jean Leclant.

We have difficulty really dating the text. The Pyramid Texts have aroused much speculation regarding their origin because they emerge, as a fully-fledged collection of mortuary texts, without any precedent in the archaeological record. The fact that the texts are made up of distinct utterances which do not have a strict narrative sequence linking them together has led scholars to believe that many of them were not composed specifically for the purpose of being inscribed in the pyramids but may have had earlier uses. In fact, spells such as Utterances 273-4, called the Cannibal Hymn, and which only appears in the Pyramids of Unas and Teti, refer to aspects of the funerary cult that seem to no longer been in practice at the time the pyramids were built. Early analysts attempted to date the text as early as possible; even from the predynastic period. A very

early dating of these texts remains a strong possibility, though today, scholars place the text's origins with the date of the monuments where they reside. In reality, we have very little idea of the date of their initial invention, perhaps other than the antiquated language employed.

What might also be called Pyramid Spells, were discovered when Gaston Maspero was working on the pyramid of Teti. He began publishing translations of the text as early as 1882, starting with those of Unas. Kurt Sethe also published pyramid texts in his "Dictionary of the Egyptian Language" in 1899. In 1924, a further translation was rendered by Louis Spleleers in French. Gustave Jequier advanced our knowledge of pyramid text considerably during his investigations in southern Saqqara between 1924 and 1936. He added many spells from the pyramid of Pepy II, and also discovered the versions in the pyramids of Wedjebten, Neith, Iput and Ibi. A systematic investigation of the 6th Dynasty pyramids was initiated by Jean-Philippe Lauer and Jean Sainte-Fare Garnot in 1951. Later, Lauer teamed with Jean Leclant to unearth an additional 700 spell fragments from the tomb of Teti and over 2,000 more from that of Pepy I. In 1952, Samuel A. B. Mercer delivered a full English translation of the text then known, but that has since been superseded by a translation of Raymond O. Faulkner. In addition, the extensive commentaries and translations of Sethe were published after his death, appearing between 1935 and 1962.

The Pyramid Text differ considerably in length, and were not illustrated. Individual spells are not titled, with the sole exception of spell 355, the "Opening the Double Door of the Sky". The individual signs are outlined in green, hopeful for the regeneration of the deceased. Each column begins with a notation "words to be spoken", though in the tomb of Unas this only appears at the beginning of the composition. The spells are separated by a hieroglyph for house, in all the pyramids with the exception Unas, where they are marked by a horizontal line. All together, Sethe found 714 spells, while Faulkner increased the number to 759, though with some duplicates. We call these spells, "utterances", because we believe they were meant to be spoken by priests in the course of the royal mortuary rituals. They are usually numbered by their position within the pyramid, progressing from the burial chamber outward.

We are not really sure in which order the spells are to be read. Sethe started with the north wall of the sarcophagus chamber, but other scholars such as Siegfried Schott and Alexandre Piankoff thought they began at the entrance to the antechamber. There seems no correlation with the text and the four cardinal points. In fact, considerable debate exists as to their actual use and the associated rituals, though there seems to be no question of their ritualistic content. It has been assumed that they were selected from a larger collection of spells for very specific reasons and arranged according to a distinctive point of view.

The language, while Old Egyptian, does seem antiquated, displaying differences from other text of the period, including highly redundant language. It is the earliest use of what is referred to as retrograde writing, where the normal sequence of columns is reversed. There is an avoidance of complete figures of animals and people, believed due to the fear that such signs might come to life and pose a danger.

The main theme in the Pyramid Texts is the king's resurrection and ascension to the Afterworld

and this is described in many different ways. In some of the texts, the king boards the sun-boat of Re and passes through different regions in the sky, encountering many gods. In other texts, the king reaches the sky by flying up as a bird, such as a falcon or a goose. At other times the king climbs up the ladder of the sky. What all these texts have in common is an emphasis on the eternal existence of the king and the location of the sky as the realm of the Afterlife, which is dominated by the sun-god Re. The night sky is also described, particularly the imperishable stars.

Generally, the text is supposed to provide services to the deceased king in his ascent into the sky and with his reception in the world of the divine. Every possible means is given for this assistance, including a ladder or ramp leading to the sky, clouds, storms hail, incense and sunlight. The god, Shu, who holds up the sky is there for his assistance, while the text communicates knowledge to the pharaoh of the customs and places in the hereafter. It also warns him of dangers. There are dialogues with gatekeepers and ferryman where the king is given the specific knowledge that he will need in order to name the correct names and answer all the questions needed to prove his legitimacy and make his way through the afterlife.

Many of the locations remain unclear to us, but the Field of Reeds, the Field of Offerings, the Lake of the Jackal and the Winding Waterway are clearly important. The waterways of the heavens are navigated by boat, so the king is dependent on the efforts of his ferryman. Though the afterworld is celestial in nature, it does not seem to be all that desirable of a place to stay. Not even Re is happy here, only seemingly able to bear out the time before sunrise when he could be freed. The king arrives in this realm violently, and then is repeatedly identified with the creator god Atum.

There are many references to various problems such as repelling the attacks of various supernatural beings and we find, for example in spell 244, the "smashing of the red pots" specifically intended to annihilate one's enemies. But more mundane topics are also approached. On earth, the king had needed a boat to travel throughout Egypt along the Nile; in the next world, he would need a boat as well. Some of the prayers call for food and provisions; some assert that the king will not lose the power of his limbs, that he will still move, breathe, eat, and copulate in the next world.

We find an expressed plea for the king to overcome death by entering the eternal course of the cosmos together with the sun god in his solar barque, but we also find the king with a strong, general association with Osiris. Here, we find the earliest known reference to Osiris as the ruler of the underworld. In spell number 239 this relationship is especially evident, and we find considerable reference to the Osiris legend. Almost all of the myth's elements may be found within this text. Osiris' son, Horus, along with Osiris' two sisters, Isis and Nephthys, search for the murdered god (Osiris). Horus finds his father and revives him. It also provides a version of the contention of Horus and Seth.

A number of specifically ritualistic text stand out, such as the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, which to the best of our knowledge is here presented for the first time. There are also offering and statue rituals. Below are a few selected utterances from the pyramid of Pharaoh Unas ca. 2450 B.C.E.:

### Utterance 213

134: O Unas, you have not gone dead, you have gone alive to sit on the throne of Osiris. Your scepter is in your hand that you may give orders to the living, the handle of your lotus-shaped scepter in your hand. Give orders to those of the Mysterious Sites (the dead)! 135: Your arm is that of Atum, your shoulders are those of Atum, your belly is that of Atum, your back is that of Atum, your bottom is that of Atum, your two legs are those of Atum, your face is that of Anubis. The sites of Horus serve you, the sites of Seth serve you.

### Utterance 214

136: O Unas, beware of the Lake! To say four times: The messengers of your ka have come to you, the messengers of your father have come to you, the messengers of Re have come to you.

137: Go after your sun! You are to purify yourself. Your bones are those of female hawks, the goddesses who are in heaven, so that you may be by the side of the god and leave your house to your son, your procreation. Everyone who shall speak evil against the name of Unas, 138: when you go up, is predestined by Geb to be a despised one of his city, he shall flee and falter. You are to purify yourself with the cool water of the stars, and you will climb down upon ropes of brass, on the arms of Horus, in his name He-of-the-Henu-charge. 139: The (glorified) humanity bewail you after the Imperishable Stars have carried you. Enter then into the place where your father is, where Geb is! He gives you that which was on the brow of Horus, so that you become powerful and full of glory through it, so that you become the One-at-the-Head-of-the-Westerners through it.

### Utterance 217

152: To say the words: "Re-Atum, Unas comes to you, an Imperishable Spirit, Lord of Dispensation in the site of the four papyrus columns. Your son comes to you, this Unas comes to you, that you (both) may stride over the sky, united in darkness, that you may rise on the horizon in the place where you like to be [podium, pyramid].

153: Seth and Nephtys, hurry! Announce to the gods of the South and their spirits : He comes indeed, this Unas, an Imperishable Spirit! If he wills that you will die, you will die; If he wills that you will live, you will live.

154: Re-Atum, Unas comes to thee, an Imperishable Spirit, Lord of Dispensation in the site of the four papyrus columns. Your son comes to you, this Unas comes to you, that you (both) may stride over the sky, united in darkness, that you may rise on the horizon in the place where you like to be.

155: Osiris and Isis, hurry! Announce to the gods of the North and their spirits: He comes indeed, this Unas, an Imperishable Spirit, like the honored (star) over the Nile, so that the spirits in the waters honor him. Whom he wills that he live, he lives. Whom he will that he die, he dies.

156: Re-Atum, this Unas comes to you, an Imperishable Spirit, Lord of Dispensation in the site of the four papyrus columns. Your son comes to you, this Unas comes to you, that you (both) may stride over the sky, united in darkness, that you may rise on the horizon in the place where you

like to be.

157: Thoth, hurry! Announce to the gods of the West and their spirits: He comes indeed, this Unas, an Imperishable Spirit, decked like Anubis on the neck, who rules over the Western Mountain, that he may reckon hearts and that he may have power over breasts! Whom he wills that he live, he lives. Whom he will that he die, he dies.

#### Utterance 219

167: To say the words: "Atum, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

168: Shu, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

169: Tefnut, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

170: Geb, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

171: Nut, this your son is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

172: Isis, this your brother is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

173: Seth, this your brother is here, Osiris, whom has been preserved alive, and who lives that he may punish you. He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

174: Nephthys, this your brother is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

175: Thoth, this your brother is here, Osiris, whom has been preserved alive, and who lives that he may punish you. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is

not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

176: Horus, this your father is here, Osiris, whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges, this Unas judges!

Sources:

Taylor Ray Ellison

Read more: <http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/pyramidtext.htm#ixzz3g4SrQSaY>

Pyramid Texts Online

<http://www.pyramidtextsonline.com/translation.html>