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HARC/RELI 241: Ancient Egypt: Art and Religion
10.28.18

On the Divinity of the Pharaoh

Every Sunday morning parishioners of the Church of England recite the *Prayer for the Majesty of the Queen* which begins with the invocation “O LORD our heavenly Father, high and mighty, King of kings, Lord of lords, the only Ruler of princes, who dost from thy throne behold all the dwellers upon earth,” (Church of England, 2018). These lines bear a striking resemblance to an image of the afterlife of the Egyptian pharaoh that was articulated as early as the Old Kingdom. After death, “[the Pharaoh] encircled the heavens, sailing in the divine bark in the company of the gods,” and most importantly in the company of his heavenly father, Re, the sun god (David, 138, 2003). Here we will trace the development of the concept and imagery of the “God-King” from the Old Kingdom to the Amarna Revolution. While the resemblances of the God-King to the Abrahamic heavenly Father are striking, a true genealogy of the Abrahamic image falls outside the scope of this paper. Instead, we will focus on the role of the God-King in Ancient Egyptian society and religion.

David writes in her *Handbook to Life in Ancient Egypt* that “every king was believed to be the offspring of the chief state god, and this unique origin was thought to endow him with special qualities to enable him to exercise the kingship,” (David, 138, 2003). There are two sources for this notion of kingship: 1) as tribal leaders increased their power they gradually came to be regarded as kings, and 2) in the Old Kingdom, the priesthood felt that the cosmogonies of the various cities had to be rationalized into a state religion (David, 138, 164, 2003). As early as the Old Kingdom, the pharaoh was therefore identified with the hawk-God Horus. The 26th century BCE diorite statue of Khephren “seated upon his lion throne with the falcon of Horus, of which he is also an incarnation” is touted by Aldred as a “supreme masterpiece” of early Egyptian statuary and depicts the hawk-God holding Khephren’s head with his wings (Aldred,

72, 2014). Furthermore, David writes, this divine status granted the king special privileges not visited upon the peasantry, “not only in his lifetime but also after death when, at least in the Old Kingdom, he alone could expect to experience an individual eternity,” (David, 138, 2003). This fundamental difference between the kingship and the commoner was reflected in the modes of representation found in early Egyptian art; interestingly it finds a Christian analogue in the notion expressed in the Nicene Creed that Christ is “begotten, not made” in stark contrast to the Genesis creation myth where Adam (and thereby humanity) is clearly *made*. Thereby, a fundamental, ontological difference is posited between God and His creation. But I digress.

While austere and idealized images of kingship that abstracted the pharaoh from the world were common in the Old Kingdom, it’s important to recognize that the role of the pharaoh was also conceived as an earthly mediator between the world of men and the world of gods. As evidenced by the 23rd century schist statute of King Phiops I, among many other examples, the pharaoh was depicted serving numerous ritual functions in the temples (Aldred, 97, 2014). It is thought that the pharaoh’s ritual involvement was mythologized to protect his claim to divinity. “Although the priests acted as the god’s servants and in reality performed all the rituals, it was the figure of the king who was shown performing this role in all the temple wall scenes,” (David, 161, 2003). The absolute power of the pharaoh justified his ownership and control of the people and resources of Egypt, to such an extent that beginning in the third and fourth dynasty, pharaohs erected monumental structures known as pyramids to consecrate the sites of their eternal rest, the building of which likely consumed and claimed the lives of thousands of peasant Egyptians. “The concept of the god-king is most clearly defined in the Old Kingdom when it was emphasized in the burial customs—the king rested in his pyramid while his subjects were placed in tombs and graves,” (David, 138, 2003). While such absolute power may have been used tyrannically, David writes that “in principle, even the king was subject to Ma’at, the goddess of truth, in reaching his decisions and taking action, and he had to obey the principles of balance and order that she personified,” (David, 138, 2003).

By the Middle Kingdom, changes in the religious substratum of Egyptian thought began to surface with profound effects on the kingship. The Middle Kingdom emerged from a feudal intermediate age of provincial lords known as nomarchs. In the early Middle Kingdom, the pharaoh was therefore “little more than the first among equals,” (Aldred, 113, 2014). Out of this chaos emerged a new order: the cult of Osiris. Whereas in the Old Kingdom the pharaoh took the title “Son of Re”, in the Middle Kingdom “Osiris became the supreme royal god, closely associated with the divine rituals performed at the kings’s accession and coronation, and whereas the living king was regarded as the incarnation of Horus at death he now became Osiris, god and judge of the underworld,” (David, 138, 2003). Perhaps the “abject poverty” of the First Intermediate Period fixated the Egyptians on the macabre; or perhaps the droughts of the First Intermediate Period inspired prayers to the god Osiris for increased fertility; or perhaps political maneuvering necessitated a break from earlier tradition in the formation of the new kingdom, but whatever the origins, the God-King of the Middle Kingdom exercised his office in a very different manner from his Old Kingdom predecessors (Aldred, 109, 2014).

Part of the decline of the Old Kingdom was attributed to the tension felt between the economic viability of the Egyptian kingdom and the offerings made to the pharaoh and the gods (Aldred, 106, 2014). “In the Middle Kingdom, when there was democratization of religious beliefs and customs and Osiris achieved widespread acclaim, the new rulers replaced Re (the royal patron deity of the Old Kingdom) with Osiris,” (David, 138, 2003). Part of this democratization was the idea that eternal life was accessible to all who participated in the cult of Osiris, which “offered resurrection and eternal life to followers who had lived according to the rules and emphasized that goodness rather than wealth ensured immortality,” (David, 152, 2003). The power of this democratization can be understood by analogy with the emergence of Christianity; in Christian theology, Jesus died for the sins of all people and is resurrected, thereby offering eternal life to any who believe in him. Similarly, the death and resurrection of Osiris (made incarnate in the death and birth of the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom) inspired

hope for eternal life for all Egyptians. As Osiris was associated with the king, Egyptians thereby hoped for eternal life *through* the earthly mediation of the pharaoh. This idea will be developed in the New Kingdom and reach its zenith with the monotheistic cult of the Aten created by pharaoh Amenhotep IV.

By the New Kingdom, the sun god Amen-Re “had been elevated as chief god of the state,” as evidenced by the grand temple at Karnak (David, 139, 2003). In the late 18th dynasty, the reign of Amenhotep IV transformed the cult of the sun-god Amen-Re into a monotheism centered on one aspect of this god, known as the Aten or sun-disk. “As many observers have remarked, Akhenaten was not averse to claiming a considerable share of the Aten’s godhead, and for some scholars that share approaches complete identity,” (Aldred, 174, 2014). By prohibiting the worship of other gods and insisting on identity with or solitary access to the Aten, Akhenaten approaches the most complete form of divine authority ever visited upon the earth. A curious aspect of the Amarna Revolution, made manifest in art, is “a new attempt to represent space in two dimensions,” which was “rare in the ancient world before this time,” (Aldred, 175-6, 2014).

How this mode of representation corresponds to the religious ideas of the Amarna Revolution is a mystery to me, but nevertheless the incarnation of a new kind of divine kingship, a monotheistic monarchy, could have represented the introduction of a new dimension to religious life in ancient Egypt. But it was not to be. At the end of Akhenaten’s seventeen-year reign, he and his family were slaughtered and systematically erased from Egyptian history. “Later generations regarded him as a heretic who ruled without the traditional gods’ approval,” (David, 175, 2003). What Akhenaten’s example does demonstrate is that the divine kingship of the pharaoh was rigidly constrained by the social and religious structure of Egyptian society. This radically inverts the assumption that a divine king wields absolute power over his society.

References

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Ancient Egyptian religion: there were many gods like Osiris, Isis, Ra, and Anubis. The god Anubis weighed your soul when you died. But later, Egyptian religion turned to Christianity and then to Islam. Polytheism and Egyptian religion. As in the rest of Africa, the people of ancient Egypt were polytheistic throughout the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. That means that they believed in many gods. What is polytheism? Egyptian religious rituals More African religions All our ancient Egypt articles All our Africa articles. She holds a doctorate in Classical Art and Archaeology from the University of Michigan. Follow her on Instagram, Pinterest, or Facebook, or buy her book, Vandals to Visigoths. We're trying to go ad-free!