

Jochem Kahl, *Ra is my Lord: Searching for the Rise of the Sun God at the Dawn of Egyptian History,*

Wiesbaden, Otto Harrassowitz GmbH & Co. KG, 2007.

ISBN 9783447055406

This monograph is an attempt to define the role of the sun god Ra during the Early Dynastic period. The author should be complemented on his compilation of data concerning Ra during Dynasty II and Dynasty III. It is extremely useful to see lists of both royal and non-royal personal names from the Early Dynastic period being provided in the one book, as this is a somewhat rare occurrence. What is not particularly useful are the efforts made by the author to transpose the religious sensibilities and beliefs of the Old and Middle Kingdoms onto the Early Dynastic period. While religious, social and political developments which occurred during the Predynastic, Protodynastic and Early Dynastic periods obviously formed the basis for later developments within Egypt, this is not to say that every development during the Early Dynastic period had a counterpart during the Old Kingdom. Some Early Dynastic religious, social and political adaptations would have continued into the Old Kingdom but a number would not. During the reign of each king, regardless of whether they ruled Egypt during the Early Dynastic period or the Old Kingdom, new circumstances would arise to which the court and the attendant bureaucracy would have to adapt. Not every change would be successful and not every development would be adhered to by the next king, let alone the next dynasty.

A couple of examples can be taken from the monograph to illustrate this point. The emphasis upon the possibility that Weneg was seen as the son of Ra from Dynasty II onwards is problematic as all the literary evidence for Weneg being a subordinate of Ra are taken from late Old Kingdom contexts. These literary sources are from the Pyramid Texts and were recovered from the pyramids of Pepy I, Merenra and Pepy II. Given that there is around c.340 years between the end of Dynasty II and the beginning of Dynasty VI, it is

highly likely that whatever sources of religious significance from the Protodynastic and the Early Dynastic periods were incorporated into the later Pyramid Texts, these earlier sources would have been utilised to best fit the needs and circumstances of the kings of Dynasty VI. Although the Pyramid Texts of Dynasty VI state that Weneg is either a follower or a son of Ra, it does not follow that Weneg was considered to be either a follower or a son of Ra during the Early Dynastic period.

The author also emphasises the term 'the Golden One' as being synonymous with Ra, even during the Early Dynastic period. A connection is also made between the term 'the Golden One' and the possible Gold name of kings from Dynasty I. It is argued by the author that this might indicate that Ra was being associated with the kings of Dynasty I, even as early as the reigns of Djer or Den. There is a problem with this supposition. In the very next paragraph, the author relates that the estate of Qaa was named 'Horus is the Gold of the Corporation of Gods' (p.46). The name of this estate suggests that the term 'the Golden One' could refer to deities other than Ra, especially during the Early Dynastic period. As the name of the estate of Qaa implies, Horus is also considered to be first among a corporation of gods. The kings of Dynasty I linked themselves through their Horus names with the god Horus rather than Ra and given the importance of Horus during the late Protodynastic period, it is unlikely that when religious references to gold occur in Dynasty I, these references refer to Ra.

To assume that during Dynasty I, religious references to gold refer invariably to Ra assumes that Ra was the pre-eminent deity during Dynasty I. There is little evidence that this was the case. It is also possible that Horus, as a sky god, may have possessed some identification during the late Protodynastic period and Dynasty I with the sun and that this identification was subsumed at a later date into the deity Ra. This hypothesis remains speculative. The author provides an example from the reign of Khasekhemwy which illustrates of the use of gold to designate deities other than Ra. Khasekhemwy's neby name 'The Two Powers have Appeared, Gold is their Body' (p.46), fairly obviously refers to the goddesses Wadjet and Nekhbet. The author also suggests that

the sentence upon a cylinder seal of Peribsen – ‘The Golden One, He united the Two Lands for his Son, the nswt-bity king Peribsen’ (p.46) – refers to Ra. Given that the author also indicates that Peribsen replaced the falcon of Horus atop his serekh with the unknown animal of Seth, it is possible that ‘the Golden One’ referred to by Peribsen was Seth. This would reinforce the notion that the term ‘the Golden One’ is a general term, which during Dynasty I and Dynasty II, could be applied to any number of deities associated with the king.

The author uses documents such as the Pyramid Texts, Coffin Texts, the Saqqara List and the various fragments of Manetho to support his argument concerning the importance of Ra, especially during Dynasty II. Manetho in particular should be treated with some caution as he is writing his king lists over 2300 years after the end of the Early Dynastic period. The achievements of Manetho cannot be understated but while his king lists should provide an appropriate intellectual framework; this framework should not be used to constrict the actual archaeological evidence at hand. This is especially true for the periods of time before the advent of the Old Kingdom. It is not really important if Manetho claimed that during the reign of the second king of Dynasty II the Mnevis bull was worshipped as a god. What is important is whether there is any archaeological evidence dating from Dynasty II which can either confirm or reject Manetho’s assertion. If there is archaeological evidence to suggest that the assertion has some factual basis, then from what context was the evidence recovered and how has the evidence been interpreted by modern archaeologists?

Another assumption regards the role of Maat during the Early Dynastic period. Any mention of Maat in an Early Dynastic context is thought by the author to provide further evidence for the increasing importance of Ra during Dynasty II. The author argues that because Maat was closely associated with Ra during the Old and Middle Kingdoms, Maat should be just as closely linked with Ra during the Early Dynastic period. As the author indicates ably, even during the Early Dynastic period, Maat could be considered to be both a general principle and the personification of that general principle. It does not

follow that this general principle and the personification of it should be associated almost exclusively with a single deity. The author relates that even in the later Pyramid and Coffin Texts, Maat can be associated with Horus and Ptah, deities of some importance during the Early Dynastic period. Another cylinder seal from a late Dynasty I context possessed a name 'Maat is in the face of Neith' (p.52), which suggests that Maat could be linked to a larger number of deities in the Early Dynastic period than was the case in the Old and Middle Kingdoms. It is also possible that the rise of the use of Maat in personal and some royal names during Dynasty II could also be related to fears of growing political instability within the Early Dynastic nation-state.

What can be deduced from the information provided by the author is that a few people with various scribal titles, especially during Dynasty I and Dynasty II, had elements of their personal names which included Ra. It is only in Dynasty III that members of the scribal elite whose personal names included Ra became uncommon. It is also not clear how far the use of Ra in personal names extended outside the scribal elite of the Early Dynastic period, even during Dynasty III. There is little evidence to suggest that knowledge and veneration of Ra was a wide-spread phenomenon within Egyptian society during the Early Dynastic period. A suggestion can be developed that from Dynasty II, the deity Ra was venerated by a small section of the scribal elite. The scribal elite was highly circumscribed by education and geography, in that the education necessary to become a scribe was available only to a few and that the scribes need to remain close to the centres of power and influence in Egypt. It is also possible that before Dynasty III, the word Ra could have referred either to the deity or the object. The royal name, Nebra or Raneb, might reflect this ambiguity. As mentioned previously, the compilation of data concerning Ra within Early Dynastic contexts is welcome.

Ben Suelzle,
School of Historical Studies, Monash University.