

Black Holes Viewed from Within: Hell in Ancient Egyptian Thought

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Among the ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs is a sign that can be termed and defined as a "Black Hole." It is a circle (writing being two-dimensional) filled in black, appearing in the Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts for the first time.¹ Initially serving as a determinative for concepts like "death" or "enemy," it is also later used for words like "pit," "hole," or "cave,"² and in a few rare instances this black circle determines the word for the Netherworld (*dat*) or shade.³

Another sign that cannot be omitted here is the Nothing, the void, the absence of a sign. In our own writing system, this serves to separate words — between two words, we leave an empty space, which is nothing, but conveys meaning. The addition of a little nothing reduces chaos to order! This is an innovation, since in most scripts (such as the ancient Egyptian, the more recent Coptic, or in ancient inscriptions) texts are written continuously, without separating words.

The hieroglyphic system employs an empty space in other contexts, and again the Pyramid Texts are our earliest source, where it appears as the determinative for the word "concealed/hidden."⁴ Although used rarely in the New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld, one case in the Book of Gates is particularly instructive, where the word "Exterminated" is not written out, but merely left blank:⁵ the damned in the Netherworld, of whom we shall soon hear more, are so absolutely eliminated that even their representation as "Exterminated" is no longer visible and left out of the script; having virtually fallen into the space between two words, it is eliminated. Such subtleties were however a bit much for the ordinary Egyptian scribes, who failed to grasp their meaning, and the same is true of modern editors and translators.

We thus perceive that the ancient Egyptian script was so flexible that even non-being — total elimination — could also be ex-

pressed in writing!⁶ With the Black Hole, which absorbs visible light and is thus unable to betray its presence, but is nevertheless not nothing, and thus a tangible reality, a part of being, we are confronted with something that is bound up with the void.

Black Holes are defined as entities that draw in everything never to release it, as Gustav Meyrink eloquently adumbrated in 1913 in his tale, "Die schwarze Kugel."⁷ In every way, it is truly a "Land without Return," as the Realm of the Dead in the Beyond is termed in many religions. The Egyptian Beyond retains only the bodies of the dead, while their Ba-souls and Shades are free to fly about, always wishing "to enter and to go forth" in the Netherworld. Only the Harper's Songs, composed after Akhenaten's Amarna Age, emphasize the refrain, "No one returns from there," or "no one who as left returns," or simply, "There is no return."⁸

In accordance with such expressions, the Netherworld can be defined as a sphere "bearing every secret, which may be entered, but from which there is no departure,"⁹ and the Gate of Entry in the Amduat bears the name, "All Devourer." This remains the exception; as decisive for the Egyptian view is the Sun-god's traversal of the Netherworld, which he leaves each morning, rejuvenated and renewed. It is the example of the mightiest star that man strives to imitate after death and his own descent into the Netherworld.

There are however regions or places in the Netherworld that do not permit a return, such as one of the 14 hills in Spell 149 of the Book of the Dead, where of the ninth Hill, called Ikesi, it is said, "From which they do not re-emerge, who enter it . . . its opening is fire, its breeze is destruction for noses":¹⁰ and the like is said of the eleventh hill of this Spell.

"From which there is no escape" is the epithet par excellence of the ominous "Places of Destruction" (*Hetemit*) of the Egyptian Netherworld, and it is here that we move from the written hint to the all-consuming reality of the black hole. The concept of the "Place of Destruction" is unusual and obscure in the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts;¹¹ only the Books of the Netherworld of the New Kingdom elaborate on it, situating it in the most profound depths of the world.

The Egyptians conceived of a world whose dimensions are best portrayed in the statement that the primeval ocean Nun is reputed

to have risen up out of a depth of “millions and millions of [miles]” according to the Book of the Fayum.¹² The nightly trajectory of the Sun takes it far above this precipice, and in the Books of the Netherworld, the scenes of punishment are assigned to the lowest registers. In the Book of Caverns, the Place of Destruction is in primeval darkness. In the Book of the Earth it is associated with the primeval ocean, both meaning the abyss, from which Creation emerged, and which surrounds it. From this invisible, immeasurable depth, “the arms of the Place of Destruction” reach up into the visible parts of the Netherworld, while they themselves remain invisible.

Since the Amarna Age (ca. 1350 B.C.), the idea of an all-consuming abyss was depicted in the form of the Devourer of the Dead, a monster embodying features of the lion, crocodile, and hippopotamus. Waiting beside the balance at the Judgment of the Dead, it incorporated the very Jaws of Hell, threatening all who do not measure up at the last and terrible examination by the judges of the Beyond. The spirit of the Amarna Age loved images, and thus gave form to this monster, as to so much else, but the idea is substantially older. “Oh, you who see everything and achieve the destruction of everything” is the phrase addressed to an unknown creature at the beginning of Coffin Text Spell 768, and the “man millions [of cubits] long, in the darkness who cannot be seen” (from Spell 1146) may be the same menace incarnate.

In the course of time, ancient ideas of a Court in the Beyond crystallized into the clear form of the Judgment of the Dead familiar to us in the New Kingdom, and above all from Spell 125 of the Book of the Dead.¹³ The deceased comes before Osiris, the judge and ruler of the dead, where his heart — the center of personality — is weighed against Maat, and thus the balance dominates the depictions of the proceedings. At the Judgment of the Dead, the real state of each human life is compared to the ideal, and balanced: the ideal incorporating the idea of Maat, the correct, proper order of things and relations. The Egyptians were under no illusions concerning this harsh ordeal, and knew that no one could pass. But it would be mistaken to assert that both court and judgment thus had to be “magically outflanked” (Morenz), even if a little magic was always involved.

The Judgment of the Dead is more the Egyptian version of Purgatory. It is not a Last Judgment, happening but once, being

rather perpetually renewed; it is the great purification that alone enables man to enter the Beyond, and thus the world of the gods. Even in the temple — a divine place, an earthly Beyond — precise codes of purity rule, and in the end this cultic purity is probably patterned after the purity of the Beyond, which the Judgment of the Dead is meant to guarantee.¹⁴ Man must be pure before looking the gods in the eyes, and becoming divine himself, the latter being achieved through the ritual of “member apotheosis,” where each and every member, from the top of the head to the tip of the toes, is identified with a divinity, although the catalog of deities listed is not constant. The only important element is the confirmation, “none of my members is without god,” i.e., “I am divine, through and through!”

The final statement made before the Court of the Dead is the analogous affirmation, “none of my members is without Maat,” i.e., “I am thoroughly pure and unstained!” The “Declaration of Innocence” uttered by the deceased frees him point by point of everything contrary to Maat, every trace of evil being progressively eliminated. At the Judgment of the Dead, it is not the evil-doer who is condemned and damned (although the text might sound like that), but rather the elimination of man’s evil that is achieved. The pure stays on, and the ill is expunged, falling into the jaws of the monster: the most effective rubbish disposal imaginable — leaving no filth whatsoever — is what takes place in the Hall of the Two Maat-goddesses, as the venue of the Judgment of the Dead is called.

“Devouring” is a frequently used term in the Books of the Netherworld. The actual gate of the Netherworld in the *Amduat* is called the “All Devouring,” and a feminine counterpart “who devours everything” appears in the second hour of the night as a goddess, who incorporates the entire Realm of the Dead with the “Beautiful West,” and a number of the punitive demons bear the name, “who devours millions.” The Netherworld is thus a sphere, like a Black Hole, that devours everything, an abyss that draws everything in, like the Hades of the early Christian texts. A renowned devourer is also Apopis, the arch enemy of the Sun, who repeatedly sets himself in the path of the sun, striving to bring it to a halt, by drinking dry the primeval ocean over which the solar barque sails. The Book of Gates names him simply

“Devourer” and the 34th and 35th scenes depict him disgorging the devoured creatures.

A special case is the devouring of time past, to which we shall return in the second part. Analogous to the gates of the Amduat, the door-keepers are called “Devourers” in the Book of Gates, where each hour of the night is closed off with a gate, through which the Sun-god and the blessed dead must pass. In order to scare off those who do not belong, these doormen have particularly ferocious names, such as the two demons of the second gate, called “Blood sucker” and “Devourer of the non-existent.” The dead are in fact all “devoured,” but even more so that which should not be, which is removed at the Judgment of the Dead, and completely eliminated.

In the Amduat, the “Place of Destruction,” that of the damned, is defined as “non-being.”¹⁵ Fire-spewing serpents take the Ba-souls of the sinners of this establishment and roast them with their flames.¹⁶ The Book of Gates consigns all the enemies of the Sun-god to the Place of Destruction assigned them at the Judgment of the Dead.¹⁷ In the Book of Caverns, Re himself places them there, where the “evil-doers” go.¹⁸ The concept of the Place of Destruction is systematically elaborated on in this later, Ramesside, Book of the Netherworld. The lowest registers of all six divisions of the Book are devoted to it, for it belongs in the “lowest regions” of the *dat* (Netherworld). But, even earlier, in the cryptographically written Book of the Netherworld inscribed on one of Tutankhamun’s shrines, the lowest register refers to the Place of Destruction where the “caverns” of gods are found, whose bodies are in the “primeval darkness,”¹⁹ while their souls follow the solar disk. The Place of Destruction appears here for once not as a place of punishment — an important point, to which we shall return in the second part of this paper.

Serpents guard this place as “Door-keepers,” the enemies bound to them.²⁰ The Sun-god says to the tortured denizens, “Oh beheaded ones, who are without heads in the Place of Destruction! Oh fallen ones, who are without Ba-souls in the Place of Destruction! Oh bleeding upended ones, whose hearts have been torn out! Oh, you enemies of Osiris — I consign you to destruction, I condemn you to non-being! The slaughterers in Osiris’s slaughterhouse shall butcher you. . . . You are enemies: you exist

not and you shall not exist! . . . I assign you to the Place of Destruction, from which your souls shall not come forth" (p.338).

The image belonging to this condemnation depicts fettered fallen "enemies," their heads at their feet, and their hearts torn out, guarded by horned demons armed with knives. In the third division, even their bird-formed Ba-souls are fallen and separated from them; the sinners begging for mercy with raised arms are said to be "those who do not see Re's rays, and do not hear his words. They are in darkness, and their souls do not leave the earth, and their shades do not alight on their bodies" (p.351). The integrity of soul and body that formed the basis of continued existence for the Egyptians was denied them. Darkness is theirs (and in the following scene they rest in the primeval darkness), the Sun-god repeating, "You have no share of my light": they belong to non-being, their forms in the Places of Destruction (p.351).

The following divisions of the Book of Caverns provide additional details about this penal colony, the fourth division depicting a cat-headed god "from whose surveillance none escape": he is probably at once one of Re's helpers, and a manifestation of the Sun-god himself, who frequently assumes the guise of a tom cat for his role in retribution (in the seventh hour of the Night of the Amduat, there is a demon with cat's ears). He is accompanied by a lion-headed goddess as a manifestation of Sakhmet, this unusually dangerous and wild goddess, who dispatches disease, and is thus the guardian deity of physicians. Another pair of divine avengers, the "Destroyers": "their darkness" is characterized "as blood" and they live "from the abomination of their hearts" (p.367). The Place of Destruction is a dark place filled with blood and decay, and those who dwell there lose both vision and hearing: "They do not see Re, neither do they hear his voice, they do not behold the rays of the solar disk . . . they are in primeval darkness" (pp. 367f.).

In the fifth division, we see "the slaughterer, who is in the Place of Destruction," where she guards the enemies of Re whom he placed in the primeval darkness. We can also perceive "the arms of the Place of Destruction," which hold a cauldron aloft, beneath which a fire is kindled. And this is not a product of the medieval Christian world, but the Book of Caverns of the eighth century B.C. One cauldron contains the heads and hearts of the damned, a

second simmers with their bound bodies, upended and headless, and a third is reserved for their souls, their shades and their "meat." Traversing above, the Sun-god admonishes the demons and serpents to do their duty: "spew flame, kindle the flames beneath that cauldron bearing the enemies of Osiris!" (p. 392). There is "no escape" here either: "you are butchered in the Place of Destruction, your souls are destroyed, and your shades too" (p. 393). His speech takes the form of a litany, celebrating the destruction of the enemies of Osiris, each verse beginning with, "Destroyed are the enemies of the Lord of the Netherworld [i.e., Osiris]":

Destroyed are the enemies of the Lord of the Netherworld — their heads have fallen in the cauldrons
Destroyed . . . — their hearts are consigned to the flames
Destroyed . . . — the Uraeus serpent like one cooks them
Destroyed . . . — fire is mighty in the Netherworld
Destroyed . . . — the arms of Nun are under their cauldrons
Destroyed . . . — the corpses fall head over heels
Destroyed . . . — their heads have been cut off
etc. (p. 393)

Another Litany, uttered when the god has arrived "over the Place of Destruction" (the preposition emphasizing the depths once again!), has each verse begin with "You are the enemies of Osiris":

You are the enemies of Osiris — your corpses are torn asunder, your hearts cut out
You are . . . — your souls are driven off, your blood spilled
You are . . . — your shades are driven off, your forms as nothing
You are . . . — you are destroyed, your very shapes punished
You are . . . — the non-being, who are not
etc. (p.40)

In the sixth and final division of the Book of Caverns, Re refers to the "sharp knives in the Place of Destruction," from the putrefaction and the blood of the punished": they "are in their bad and miserable places, they do not exist, and their souls do not exist in eternity" (p. 402), "they lie fallen on their sides, with destroyed souls and bloody shades" (p. 416). They cannot see the light of his disk, but they hear him when he holds his sermon, and admonishes the demons one more time. But, only a little further on, it is said that they cannot hear "the words of this great god," being thus incapable of any communication whatsoever.

Closely related to the Books of the Netherworld is the Litany of Re, dating to early in the eighteenth Dynasty, the Egyptian name being "The Book of the Worship of Re in the West." This work takes the form of a long litany in which the Sun-god is addressed in all the forms and functions that he assumes in the course of his nightly journey through the Netherworld, each of the 75 forms of address being illustrated with the appropriate figure. Only one of these forms of address (no. 40) is related to the Place of Destruction: it is Re, "who commands the heat in the Place of Destruction," with the corresponding figure filled in red and joined to the sign for "fire." A later chapter of the "Book of the Worship" mentions the "condemnation to the Place of Destruction."²¹ It is not irrelevant that the only reference to the Place of Destruction in the New Kingdom commoners' Book of the Dead (Spells 127, verse 26) cites precisely this reference from the litany of Re, a royal text!

Only Pharaoh, the son and image of the Sun-god, can actually look into this horrid abyss, from which ordinary mortals step back. The Book of the Dead thus avoids even mentioning these wretched places, which would give them reality, while the royal Books of the Netherworld do not hesitate to provide more and more detailed descriptions of these places, listing the entire arsenal of punishments and tortures to be found there with loving care. Here the destructive imagination, borne by each of us, was given free reign.

Before taking another look at these punishments, it must be remarked that the Place of Destruction is also mentioned in formulae intended to prevent the deceased from "entering" or falling into them. And again, it is the dead king himself who, beholding the spectacle, seeks to avoid it. It is in the Litany of Re that we hear him plead, "Oh, Re, who is in the West, thou avenger . . . save me from those in your slaughterhouse, your hasty and hurried messengers who grab souls and bodies! They are not meant to grab me, they are not to get me . . . their bonds should not be wound about me, they should not throw me on their altars. I am not meant to sink into the realm of the destroyed, I am not to be punished in the West!"²² The closing text of the third hour of the Amduat has Re reassuring the blessed dead, with certainty, that they will not end up in the Place of Destruction.²³

What distinguishes ancient Egyptian visions of Hell from others is the lack of specified punishments, intended for certain cate-

gories of sinner. While the "Declaration of Innocence" of the Book of the Dead (Spell 125) contains a detailed catalog of failings that the Egyptians regarded as worthy of punishment, the countless scenes of punishment in the Books of the Netherworld never identify the failing: whether murderer, slanderer, thief, or blasphemer, they are all simply "enemies," to be dealt with in the same fashion, without any possibility of purification; they are simply to be destroyed for all time. This changes in the early Christian Egyptian (Coptic) texts of the Beyond, such as the Gnostic "Pistis Sophia" or in "St. Paul's Journey to Hell," where the "place of cries and gnashing of teeth" is reserved for murderers, poison mixers and "those who throw infants into the water."²⁴ Otherwise, these texts draw heavily on the ancient Egyptian conception of the world.

The faults of those punished in the Place of Destruction are only described very generally. They have "done something against" or at the most "done evil against" the gods and their divine order, for the most part against Osiris and the Sun-god. This is an ancient tradition, for even in the Pyramid Texts (§ 1699), Osiris's murder by his brother Seth is described vaguely, Seth having "done evil against" his brother. Just what happened, we are only able to learn from the much later record by Plutarch, an ancient authority: his colleagues in the Pharaonic period were afraid of describing the crime, which would have rendered it real. But in the Books of the Netherworld, Horus punishes the damned as the murderers of his father Osiris. He "instructs that those who struck his father are to be butchered, the corpses of the enemies and the bodies of the dead, the upended ones, the ones who are unable to move, and the forms of the destroyed ones" — such is the text of the major scene of punishment in the eleventh hour of the night of the Amduat, where the damned are eliminated in fire-filled pits. Dressing them down, Horus emphasizes that his father is now striking back, "after he became weary," after which he colorfully portrays their wretched fate:

Your corpses shall undergo the sharp [blade],
your souls destroyed, your shades treaded under foot,
your heads cut off!
You never came into existence, you move upside down
You raise yourselves not, who are fallen in your pits,
You have not escaped, you have not flown!
etc. (p. 181)

The destruction threatened here is done by flame and sword. For the Egyptians, it was seemingly not a paradox that there was an eternal all-consuming flame in the impenetrable darkness of this Black Hole. Torture by fire may be typical of the conceptions of hell in other cultures, but it is never so richly portrayed as in the places of punishment of the Places of Destruction, which we have seen.

The Egyptian Netherworld (even beyond the places of punishment) is full of creatures spewing fire, mainly snakes, for the Egyptians had a healthy respect for the "fiery" poisonous breath of the cobra, the Uraeus, as it is known since antiquity. But there are also plenty of door-keepers or demons, with fire-spewing eyes or tongues, with names like "He who burns with his Eye," "He who cuts with his Eye," or "He who cuts with his tongue." Even the Sun-god himself can "shoot" with his "flaming" rays, or employ his "fiery" eyes against enemies.

The most original portrayal of this hell of fire is in the ambivalent "Lake of Fire," a rectangular or round body where the water is fire, suitably colored in red, or given red waves. The fiery torture is however reserved for those who are to be punished and destroyed; for Osiris and the blessed, it is a lake of life, which will quench their thirst. Given the climate of Egypt, being deprived of the chance to quench one's thirst is a true torture of hell, when unable to find any shade and unmercifully exposed to the sun. In the Coffin Texts a ladle is mentioned, "which serves water to those who are, but withholds it from those who are not" (Spell 473). The ideal hope was personified in the goddess of the tree, who offers water from the cool shade of her tree to the deceased and his soul. Spell 149 of the Book of the Dead tells a different tale, of a Lake of Fire "whose water is seen from afar by gods and the deceased, but they cannot quench their thirst."

In the tenth scene of the Book of Gates, ears of corn sprout out of the lake, "which is full of barley" to feed the blessed. Birds flee the pool because of its stench, however. In the Book of Two Ways, it separates the two paths that the deceased must tread, and leaving the path results in immediate destruction in the Lake of Fire. S. Schott considers it to be an entity antedating the creation, where fire and water are still not separate.²⁵

The ambivalence of the Lake of Fire corresponds to the moral contrast between the "silent" quiet person and the "hotheaded"

one on the Egyptian Teachings. It is an extremely poetic image of how only the "silent one" (who exercises self-control) can find the hidden well in the desert, where he can profit from its refreshing cool water,²⁶ while the hotheaded and rash find only the fire they deserve! The Creator of the Coffin Texts (Spell 1130) ascribes the disturbance of his balanced order to the "heat" of the heart, the emotions, which are responsible for injustice, and it is to continue beyond death in the embers of hell.

The fire of the depths burns not only in the Lake of Fire, but also in many other places of punishment. In pits filled with flames, the "enemies" and all the component parts of their persons are eliminated in the eleventh hour of the Amduat, from which we have already quoted the lecture delivered by Horus on that occasion. In the Book of Gates (Scene 22) the same pits are depicted as large furnaces from which tongues of flame emerge, ensuring that the "enemies" are completely consumed.

We have already mentioned the cauldrons held aloft by the arms of the Place of Destruction, reaching out of the invisible depths, containing pell-mell the heads, hearts, bodies, souls, and shades of the damned. The Book of Caverns (Fifth Division) supplies elaborate depictions of this cauldron punishment (as we have mentioned), but these are already foreseen in the 65th form of address of the Sun-god in the Litany of Re in the name of the demon "Who is above his cauldron" in the Amduat (no. 821). In the earlier Coffin Texts (Spell 473) the cauldron is a menace to those caught in the giant net stretching between heaven and earth, analogous to the nets used for birds and fish.

In the Book of the Earth, the blood of beheaded enemies flows into cauldrons around the "Hidden Room" with the corpse of Osiris. Demons who "devour" bodies and souls stand ready (p. 458ff.). In another passage of the same text, the avenging creatures beside two cauldrons are said to "throw the heads into their cauldron, but bodies and hearts into their furnaces" (p. 478).

A tomb mural of the Roman period in the provincial cemetery at Akhmim relates the image of the cauldron with the Judgment of the Dead: a cauldron stands right before the Devourer of the Dead, beside the balance. The skeleton-like figures of the punished betray Roman influence.²⁷

The fire-breathing serpents have been mentioned already, but the “Fiery One” of the 60th Scene of the Book of Gates is worthy of particular attention. He is depicted as a giant coiled snake from whose open jaws flames strike the bound sinners lined up in front of it. “Enemies of Osiris” are identified even here as “burnt,” for the snake’s fiery breath sets them alight and bakes their souls, as the adjoining text of Horus’s speech graphically relates. Horus turns first to the “enemies of my father,” and then to the reptile itself, which is at once supported and subdued by seven “Sons of Horus”:

Open your mouth and show your jaws
that you may spew fire on the enemies of my father! (p. 272)

The paths of the “Land of Sokar” in the fourth and fifth hours of the Amduat are filled with flames coming from the mouths of serpents, rendering them impassable; even Isis appears as a fire-breathing serpent here, cutting off access to her brother-spouse Osiris. In the Book of Gates, the fourth hour presents a “Lake of Uraeus-serpents”: and according to the Sun-god, their “flames glow for my enemies,” their “fire being in those who are evil against me” (p. 220).

An unusual image in the tomb of Ramesses VI depicts serpents shooting forth from the sun itself, against bound enemies. Even the Sun-god is borne on serpent legs (an early adumbration of the Abraxas-images!), the adjoining text stating that even his arms are serpents.²⁸

Sparing the reader further details of hellish punishment,²⁹ we will take leave of punishment by fire — but punishment by binding deserves mention. Prisoners of war were bound, which could even lead to being bound at the stake. Among the figures of the Litany of Re, the Sun-god himself appears as the “Fetterer” in a daring representation with two bonds emerging from the neck rather than a head, symbolizing his function.³⁰

The ultimate fate of the bound can be seen in some of the tombs of Twentieth Dynasty date, where whole friezes show headless bound “enemies,” painted alternately red (bloody) and black (non-existent). In other scenes, their heads are literally placed at their feet, and numerous demonic names are related to this practice. In the Book of the Dead (Spell 93), fields are mentioned “where the gods behead those who answer them there.” Insofar as corporeal

integrity was the unconditional prerequisite for a blessed further existence, one can understand just how drastic this punishment was. The reattachment of a severed head was regarded as the demonstration of magical mastery, but it was doubtless better to avoid taking the risk and escape from this form of punishment. Spell 43 of the Book of the Dead is thus explicitly designed to prevent the deceased from being relieved of his head in the Realm of the Dead.

Also depicted are those punished by having their hearts torn out and tossed into the cauldrons of fire in the Place of Destruction. The other innards are first mentioned in the Apocalypse of St. Paul, where avenging angels with a three-pronged fork rip out the innards of sinners (Chapter 34). "Bloodsuckers" have been mentioned, and there are any number of other bloodthirsty demons. In the Book of the Celestial Cow, the goddess Hathor gets drunk on beer that looks like blood, and in an even more extreme vision, the punished swim in the blood that is pressed out of them;³¹ and once again the early Christian Apocalypse of St. Paul can be cited, where the "Lake of Blood" (Chapter 38) is mentioned as a place of punishment.

Missing from the ancient Egyptian sources are punishments using water and cold. The Egyptian apparently found it difficult to conceive of an ice cave, and water was such an elementary part of life that a flood was not a negative part of the world. More striking is the absence of scorpions, concerning which there is a whole collection of magical spells: but they fail to appear as torturers in the Place of Destruction, the scorpion goddess Selkis appearing only in the subduing of Apopis.

But the goal of all these punishments is to inflict not suffering itself, but rather complete elimination. The Book of Caverns has a whole litany repeating that "the enemies of the Lord of the Netherworld [Osiris] are destroyed," as has been quoted, repeating the injunction fourteen times. The damned are thus frequently designated as "eliminated" or "non-being" and "negated." They are not, and they should not be: extinguishing their existence is the "second" or "repeated death," frequently mentioned with fear in the Book of the Dead, and its forerunners; it is then that even the Ba-soul and the shade perish. The contrasting fates of Osiris and his enemies are clearly represented in a scene of the Book of

Caverns, where Osiris — whose legs are still not visible — rises from the depths while at his sides “the bloody falling corpses facing down” fall head over heels into the abyss. The legend identifies the depths as those of the Place of Destruction (p. 418f.). In the Book of the Dead, it is the wish of the deceased that all his enemies “fall into the depths” (Spell 149, line 84).

The names of many of the avenging demons indicate that their business is destruction. One of these beings, a guardian god at the Temple of Edfu, is named “He who eliminates the being”¹³² The damned forgo existence and become non-being, which is why the non-being is an “abomination” for the blessed (Coffin Texts VI 136), avowing at the Judgment of the Dead, “I do not know that which is not,” in order to avoid any punishment.

As Osiris rules as the Lord of all the Dead, blessed and Damned, he has epithets associating him with the non-being. He is “the One ruling the being and the dead,”¹³³ he is the one to whom “comes what is, and what is not,” and in the Book of Caverns, he is even the “Greatest of those who are not” (p. 358). Through his descent into the Netherworld, the Sun-god Re himself comes in contact with the non-being and those who dwell there, “commanding those who are and those who are not” in the Litany of Re (Formula 51) and is like Osiris “Lord of that which is, to whom that which is not belongs.”

The Black Hole signifies elimination and dissolution, leading to non-existence. Whatever is there belongs to non-being. To show that this process also has its positive side is the object of Part II.

II.

First of all, we must say a few words about the personnel of the Egyptian hell. If I have frequently referred to the “demons,” this is not quite correct, as the Egyptians do not make a distinction between gods and demons; at the worst, the deceased live in terror of the evil “messengers” of the gods.

The names of these punitive deities very often refer to functions assigned to the Sun-god himself. This is especially clear from the Litany of Re, as under the 75 names and forms of the night Sun-god, we find nine with punitive functions: “Eliminator of his foes,” “He who places his foes in their hands,” “Commander of

the heat of the Place of Destruction," "Lord of the fetters for his enemies," "He who assigns the flames to his cauldrons," and others.

If the Place of Destruction is that place where the Sun-god is regenerated, then it is logical that the Sun-god is also present as the executor. Everything that is opposed to the renewal of light must be driven off and eliminated. This god is thus at once responsible for elimination and respiration in this place, as it is formulated in Address 41 of the Litany of Re. Osiris reveals the same ambivalence. As Lord of the Judgment of the Dead and Punishment, he is a "Lord of those who are not," but certainly not a power of chaos. Among the 42 assistant judges, however, are even Apopis, the solar foe, and beings like "Devourer of Shades," "Bone Crusher," "Flaming One," "Devourer of Innards," "Thrower."

Behind this is the frequently attested idea that the enemies of the Creation mutually eliminate themselves; this is also an element of chaos. The Sun-god can thus appoint his own "enemies" to guard and punish, in order to achieve the absolute elimination of the forces of chaos. But we want to turn to the life-giving breath that he offers the Place of Destruction.

Descriptions of this place, which we have come to know as a penal colony in the first part, are also joined with repeated references to the corpse of Osiris. The scene quoted from the Book of the Earth showed Osiris in the "Hidden Chamber" with his Ba-soul and a "casket" containing his corpse, surrounded by scenes of punishment, with cauldrons and the beheaded on their knees (p. 459). The casket is in the most secret place in the Netherworld, known only to Osiris himself and the Sun-god or the deceased,³⁴ invisible and unknown to all others. The casket is guarded by the jackal-headed Anubis, and served as the model of the *cista* in the later mystery cults of antiquity.

The object is the protection of this corpse; being helplessly rigid, it is particularly exposed to danger, and thus it must be hidden in an especially secret place. This essential protection provides another rationale for the Judgment of the Dead, as the "enemies" are always regarded as the enemies of Osiris: their effective elimination assures that the blessed dead are not in danger.

In the Amduat there is an indication that Osiris's corpse is also that of the sun. In the sixth hour of the night, in the darkest hour in

the depth of the night, the Sun-god Re encounters his own corpse. It is only logical that just beside this, in the seventh hour, we find the great judgment scene, in which the Sun-god's arch enemy, Apopis, is driven off and defeated, and with him the enemies of Osiris.

The solar corpse takes the form of a scarab beetle, thus bearing within himself the germ of regeneration, as the scarab dung beetle is the rejuvenated morning form of the sun. Ambrosius identifies Christ, the Light of the World, as *bonus scarabaeus*. Significant indications, however, such as the presence of Isis, are at hand that Osiris himself is also buried here. The text refers to the "secret tombs" with the "images" of Osiris, and there is even a specific reference to "Osiris's corpse" (p. 122).

He is not only the ruler and judge of the dead, but also the nightly body of the sun, a vessel for the god's Ba-soul. Just as he begat his son Horus although dead and putrefying (for Isis conceived posthumously), so the light begets new light in the dark. But first, the sun must itself decay and putrefy, and thus we may explain the astounding name of one of the manifestations of the sun in the Litany of Re: "Stinking with veiled Putrefaction" (no. 60), for only out of putrefaction, dissolution, and decay can new life be born.

The mummy resting in the sarcophagus in the deepest part of the tomb is the visible manifestation of the sun's corpse, at once Re and Osiris. In the royal tombs, the heavens decorate the ceiling above, so that the Ba-soul can climb up to the heavens again, after leaving the body.

The guardian of the sixth hour of Amduat, at the nadir of the sun's nocturnal path, is the god Nun, embodying the depths of the waters, the primeval ocean before creation. His water is at the same time the "Water of Tatenen," the god of the damp, dark depths of Creation — and it is here that the Sun-ba unites with the solar corpse, it is here that new life comes into existence, rekindling the light of the sun. It is nothing other than the world before creation, from which the sun emerged at the beginning of time! In the Book of Caverns, the Sun-god proclaims that he returns to this primeval world, alighting at the place of his first birth (pp. 327ff.).

According to the Egyptian cosmogony, Creation is not a singular event, eliminating the world beyond Creation once and for all. This remains present and available, and thus every evening, the

sun can return to the depths, from which it came forth "the first time," as the Egyptians termed Creation. The Egyptians beheld each dawn as a re-creation of the world. In the Egyptian view, Chaos is both an integral part of, and yet beyond, the world: it is not merely a menace, but also a chance of renewal. It is real creative chaos that we encounter here. Gershom Scholem revealed the way in which later philosophical speculation brought chaos from the void in a masterly paper in 1949, using the Kabbala.³⁵

In general, the Egyptian world before Creation is characterized by negation: the absence of the givens of the world of Creation. It is without space; heaven and earth are not yet separated; without time, without a beginning or an end; without limits or form; without gods; completely undifferentiated (in Egyptian: "before there were two things") and nameless ("before the name of any thing had been uttered"). "Dark, deep, and inert" are the words the Egyptian used in a positive sense to describe this primeval world.

The one unique god of the primeval beginning is frequently defined by paradoxes: not (yet) existing, between being and non-being. In a hymn to the sun, he is "The One who begat his begetter, who created his mother." Also paradoxical is a reference to Aton, Akhenaton's god: "You are he who created what is not."³⁶ Chaos is defined by the preceding Octogad system with the desert of the sea, endless, dark, and obscure, each characteristic personified by a pair of deities. At Creation, something emerged from the depths of the abyss, the primeval hill or the primeval plant (the lotus), or the swimming celestial cow, and only then did the first sunrise follow.

According to another captivating image of the creative process, the infinite tranquillity of the Beginning was broken by the cry of the first bird. The primeval waters over which it spread its wings continue to exist, surrounding the newly-emerging world of the Creation. The Egyptians consciously brought chaos into the Creation, so that it did not fall victim to inflexibility. The Sun-god thus moves into the depths of the primeval chaos on his nightly voyage, in order to regenerate himself from his own corpse.

The Amduat dared show the god's corpse, but in the Book of Gates and Tutankhamun's virtually contemporary cryptographic Book of the Netherworld, it remains invisible, merely mentioned

in the text, and even the arms bearing it are invisible because they come into contact with it! In both works, the bearers of the solar corpse are portrayed with “hidden” invisible arms. They bear “the mystery” (*seshta*), or “the secret image which is in the Netherworld, in which Re is.”³⁷ Re himself is in it, for he must always return to join his own body, as the Ba-soul and body must find each other in the Beyond, making new life possible. This unification, leading to renewal, occurs at the nadir of the solar voyage, at the most profound point. Since that time, it is the greatest secret of all the mysteries to behold the sun at midnight.

The scenes on a series of sarcophagi have catfish-headed gods (the catfish representing the deep, dark waters) around an invisible “mystery,” accompanied by the earth-god Aker, through whose realm the Sun-god’s nightly journey takes him.³⁸ We have here the desired analogy, associating the god’s corpse with that of the Pharaoh within the sarcophagus. The Pharaoh is entitled to the care and protection guaranteed the corpse of Re and Osiris, promising him the revival of Osiris, and bringing him into the constantly renewed path of the sun.

The Book of Caverns (third division, lower register) depicts the god’s corpse again, protectively encircled by a serpent, as in the *Amduat*. The god’s figure, addressed as Osiris, is among the pictures of the damned, to whom the Sun-god says, “You belong to Non-being and your forms are in the Place of Destruction” (p. 351). The adjoining description assigns them to the primeval darkness as well, where “they cannot behold the light of the sun” (p. 352). The adjoining description shows that the god’s corpse and the damned are both in the Place of Destruction in the primeval darkness, and here Osiris bears the epithet, “with veiled putrefaction which the dead [damned] cannot approach, from the stench of which however those who are in the West [the blessed] live” (p. 353) — again we have the positive important aspect of corruption and decay for Egyptian, mentioned earlier. One passage of the Book of the Earth notes that the reek of filth in the sarcophagi is so great that he dare not look (p. 447) — but it is in this dissolution that new life appears!

Invisible and shrouded in secrecy is the sun’s corpse in its hiding place. But it is precisely the damned, suffering punishment, who behold it — but such is the surprising and seemingly para-

doxical formulation in the Book of Gates. This hints at nothing but that the god's corpse (containing Osiris!) shares the same space as the punished enemies, in the Place of Destruction, which is why the guardians of the damned are "eliminated in their caves" (p. 321), all sharing the common fate of being eliminated, the reformation of all being.

The Place of Destruction is thus no mere place of punishment and suffering; our Black Hole thus acquires a many-faceted, differentiated meaning. Being becomes Non-being through elimination, but renewed Being emerges from it. The fire that burns there rekindles the Light of the World each day anew, purifying and consuming: a straight line leads from here to the statement of the Gnostic Pistis Sophia (ca. 125 A.D.), that Christ sets the world on fire in order to burn it and renew it at the same time.

The ambiguity of darkness comes to the fore here, Gnostic texts from Egypt giving the "external darkness," as a place of chaos, a prominent role, chaos generally being defined with darkness and water. The solar corpse emits no light, and is thus invisible. It belongs to darkness, the brilliant star is enshrouded in black, becoming a black sun, the *Sol neger* of alchemy. The "arms of darkness" holding it in the Book of the Earth (p. 450) are the very "arms" of the Place of Destruction, reaching out from the concealed depths (p. 442). They prevent the sun from falling into the abyss, from the ultimate extinction in Nothing.

"The dark-faced one" is the Sun-god with veiled head (Litany of Re, 62nd form of address), portrayed without form: he is the one "who ordains his eclipse" (72nd address). Paradoxically, the Sun-hymns call him "Dark one with radiant form" or "Dark one with huge flame, glowing without limit."³⁹ Another hymn hints that the dead could not bear the full brilliance — "dark and smoky," he comes to them, for "their abomination is light!"⁴⁰ In the later mysteries, initiation always takes place at night.

The sun's path brings both light and darkness: as the sun moves on, darkness overtakes the dead. He is the god of light, who brings the dark, "the dark one who renders faces unrecognizable."⁴¹ His glowing "eye," the solar disk, loses its radiance and must be healed or "re-filled" anew, clearly analogous to the moon, which wanes and waxes.

Delivery by the unconscious dominates this world of primeval images, for the sun's descent into the depths where it is renewed can also be understood as a descent of consciousness into the depths of the unconscious, the light of the nightly sun making the images of the depths visible, protective arms saving us, like the sun, from falling into the depths ourselves.

But back to darkness! According to the *Amduat*, even in the fourth hour of the night the darkness is impenetrable, lit up only by the living torches of the fire-breathing snakes at the bow and stern of the vessel bearing the sun. Everywhere this dreadful darkness is pierced by the bright dots of the shining snakes, blazing a trail that the sun can follow through this Inferno. It is only orally that the sun is able to interact with the creatures of this region of the Netherworld, his voice penetrating the darkness, reaching the blessed dead.

Fear of these dark depths pervades even the oldest texts of the dead: it is an "abomination" to the king in the Pyramid Texts (§ 323), and the Coffin Texts (IV 81) refer to the "painful darkness of the Westerners." After Akhenaten's vain attempt to negate the dark Beyond with his faith of Light, later dirges wail that the Netherworld is the "Realm of Darkness, where there is no light."

The Egyptians conceived however of this dark abyss also as a basin into which time past falls. Many passages of the Books of the Netherworld refer to time, boldly attempting to make an imagery of time.⁴² Individual hours are "born" and — when their time is up — "devoured" by the inexhaustible reserves of all time. Both are entwined in the name of a rope borne by gods in the Eighth Hour of the Book of Gates: "The devourer which bears the hours." The hour was the smallest defined period of time known to the Egyptians, and they are depicted as stars above the snake's coils. The Sixth Hour of the same book depicts another time-rope: doubly coiled, it spooled forth from a god named Aqen, and thus comes from out of the profound depths that this god symbolizes, only to disappear again into his precipice: Cronos devours his children! Each coil of the rope corresponds to an hour, and with the passing of each hour, a little bit of the time-rope slips into the abyss. We thus meet the god named in the texts of Tutankhamun: "He who eliminates the hours."

More frequent, however, is the portrayal of time as the body of a giant coiled snake, with each coil again corresponding to a single hour. In Scene 31 of the Book of Gates, "lifetimes" are measured off for the dead on the body of a snake: named "Double Line," it joins the concept of rope and serpent in one. The only representation of time in the earlier Amduat uses the snake as well, and is assigned to the Sun-god as the "Lord of Time" (Eleventh Hour, upper register). The hours appear as stars, but in another scene (20) of the Book of Gates, they appear as women, corresponding to the feminine gender of the word "hour" in Egyptian. It is a constant refrain of these texts that the hours are "eliminated" or "devoured," but in another source, they step "into the darkness under Osiris's heels,"⁴³ off the edge of the world, the abyss where the Place of Destruction is.

The black hole is thus the location of time past, the abyss into which the hours fall, whence there is no return. All time past is present here. But does not the very darkness of the hole signify regeneration for the past and "dead" hours, a revival? Do the hours of the past not return, renewed and rejuvenated, as the hours of the future?! Such an Egyptian philosophy of time appears to us more balanced and better founded than the doctrine of the eternal return of the same. Changed and rejuvenated, the past returns, having penetrated and re-emerged from the structures of the black hole. *Eadem mutata resurgo* is graven on the spiral on Jakob Bernouilli's tomb in Basle, which decorates the invitation to this meeting. It is not the same that returns, as the Egyptians regarded the sun of each dawn as a new sun: "every sun" is the Egyptian phrase for "for all time" or "daily."

Egyptian texts are replete with the craving for more time: from the gods, one "bids for a longer lifetime" (a standard expression!) which it is in their power to give. But such extra time can only be found in the Beyond, where it is measured, and it is to the Beyond that the Magician of Papyrus Vandier goes in order to get more time for his king.⁴⁴ As is true of everything else, time has a different quality in the Beyond; transforming and rejuvenating itself, it acquires the ability to return. This idea forms the close of the Amduat with an impressive image of the giant serpent through whose body the Sun-god and his entire entourage march — in the "wrong" direction — moving from senility to infancy. Possible time

reversals can however even be found in the Pyramid Texts, where the years are “turned about” (§ 705b).

Time reversal permits us to leave the Black Hole, but first we must throw one final glance at the dead Osiris, for “he cannot die who beholds the dead Osiris” — one of many paradoxical statements (from the Coffin Texts this time, VII 302), for whoever actually sees the dead Osiris must himself be dead. But this text is actually concerned with avoiding the ubiquitous fear of a “second death,” signifying ultimate elimination. In contrast to later mystics, the ancient Egyptians never sought that.

The secret of the death of Osiris opens the way out of the Black Hole. The entire Netherworld must be understood as a temple with Osiris enthroned in the innermost sanctuary. Passing through gate after gate, one is finally confronted with Osiris himself. He incorporates the worst conceivable form of death, for he did not merely die, but was violently murdered and dismembered: in a word, eliminated. And yet, new life came forth from his corrupt decaying body when he begat his heir: Horus, son of Isis.

This wonder is also personified by the Phoenix that rises from the ashes of the fire in which it is burned. And the Greek Phoenix is nothing other than the Egyptian primeval bird, the Benu, which spread its wings above the boundless waters at the beginning of Creation.

For all the weariness of death, Osiris is also the resurrection — not merely at the end of all time, but daily. As Jan Assmann⁴⁵ put it so well, he symbolizes “the situation where it is reasonable to say to the Dead, ‘Arise!’” In his person and his fate, the fear and fertility of Chaos are joined: the two facets of this world we have been discussing.

After the end of the Old Kingdom, each Egyptian became an Osiris at death: being departed, he bore this divine name like a title, whether man or woman. And there are even “Osiris Cats”! At the very center of the black hole, where Osiris’s body lies in its hiding place, we face no one but ourselves. The chaos is within us.

Notes

1. §969a, not filled in.
2. Possible renderings of *qrrt*; see esp. the Eighth Hour of the Amduat. E. Edel has two references to the black disk as a determinative in *Die Inschriften der Siut-Gräber* (Opladen 1984), 47.
 3. *Dat*: E. Hornung, *Texte zum Amduat* (Geneva, 1987ff.), 124; shade, *ibid.*, 279.
 4. §§ 399a and 434ac.
5. E. Hornung, *Das Buch von den Pforten des Jenseits* (Geneva, 1979-84), I: 28 and II: 60f.; in Amduat for "punished," another name for the damned: *Texte zum Amduat*, 167.
6. See also "Hieroglyphen: Die Welt im Spiegel der Zeichen," *Eranos Yearbook* 55 (1986), 403-38.
7. G. Meyrink, *Des deutschen Spießers Wunderhorn. Gesammelte Novellen* (Munich, 1913), III, 100-105 (reference thanks to F. Teichmann).
8. German translation of the Songs of the Harpers: E. Hornung, *Gesänge vom Nil: Dichtung am Hofe der Pharaonen* (Zürich and Munich, 1990), 163-170. English translation: M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*.
9. G.A. Gaballa, *MDAIK* 35 (1979), 79.
10. E. Hornung, *Das Totenbuch der Ägypter* (Zürich and Munich, 1979, 1990), 309, 311.
 11. PT § 485c; CT III 3b(?).
 12. H. Beinlich, *Das Buch vom Fayum* (Wiesbaden, 1991), 260 (I. 1228), 287.
13. For the earlier period, cf. R. Grieshammer, *Das Jenseitsgericht in den Sargtexten* (Wiesbaden, 1970); for the imagery, see Ch. Seeber, *Untersuchungen zur Darstellung des Totengerichts im alten Ägypten* (Berlin, 1976); more general is J. Yoyotte, *Jugement des Morts. Sources Orientales* (Paris, 1961) IV, 15-80
14. On the analogies between priests and the declaration of innocence, see most recently, J. Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten* (Munich, 1990), 140-49.
15. Lower register of the Third Hour, see *Texte zum Amduat*, 304f.
16. Close of Sixth Hour, see *Texte zum Amduat*, 521ff. The Book of Gates, Scene 31 sends Ba-souls to the Place of Destruction where they are to be eliminated.
17. In Scene 33, at the Hall of Judgment; see E. Hornung, *Das Buch von den Pforten des Jenseits*, II, 150.
18. E. Hornung, *Ägyptische Unterweltsbücher* (Zürich and Munich, 1972, 1989), 358.
19. E. Hornung, *JSSA* 13 (1983), 30 and 31, after A. Piankoff, *Les Chappelles de Tout-Ankh-Amun* (Cairo, 1952), IV.
20. Book of Caverns, see *Unterweltsbücher*, 324; door-keepers, 321f. Their task is "slitting the throats of the beheaded and hacking off the heads of the eliminated" (321). The parenthetical numbers following the quotes refer to the pages in *Unterweltsbücher*.
21. E. Hornung, *Das Buch der Anbetung des Re im Westen* (Geneva, 1975-1976), I, 188f.; translated II, 85.
 22. *Ibid.*, I, 175 and II, 83.
 23. *Texte zum Amduat*, 337f.; translation, *Unterweltsbücher*, 92.
 24. E. Brunner-Traut, *Altägyptische Märchen* (Munich, 1983, 1989), 272.
 25. S. Schott, "Zum Weltbild der Jenseitsführer des Neuen Reiches," *NAWG* (1965) No. 11, 192.
 26. G. Fecht, *Literarische Zeugnisse zur "Persönlichen Frömmigkeit" in Ägypten* (Heidelberg, 1965), 75.

27. F.W. von Bissing, *ASAE* 50 (1950), 557, with pl. I; E. Hornung, *Altägyptische Höllenvorstellungen*, *ASAW* 59 (1968).
28. E. Hornung, in: *Funerary Symbols and Religion. Festschrift M. Heerma van Voss* (Kampen, 1988), 45-51.
29. See Hornung, *Höllenvorstellungen*.
30. The figure belongs to Address no. 64, and has a parallel in the Fourth Hour of Amduat (no. 310).
31. S. Schott, *ZÄS* 74 (1938), 90f. On the association of darkness and blood, made clear by a passage of the Book of Caverns (49, 3: "The eliminated, whose darkness is blood"), one can also cite the title of a Dynasty VI Chief Butcher, "Privy Counsellor of Darkness" (see H.G. Fisher, *ZÄS* 105 (1978), 56f.).
32. Probably to be understood as "He who destroys the existence [of the enemies]," see J.-C. Goyen, *Les Dieux-gardiens et la genèse des temples* (Cairo, 1985), I, 103.
33. A. & A. Brack, *Das Grab des Tjanuni* (Mainz, 1977), p. 34 (Text 23). The translation offered there cannot be defended. For the following passages, see E. Hornung, *Der Eine und die Vielen* (Darmstadt, 1971), 166f.; E. Hornung, *Egyptian Conceptions of God* (Ithaca, NY).
34. Litany of Re, p. 163; on the casket (which becomes the cista of the mysteries), *ibid.*, p. 165. References to the Litany of Re refer to passages quoted from *Anbetung* (see note 21).
35. "Kabbalah und Mythos," *Eranos Yearbook* 17 (1949), esp. 309f.
36. M. Sandman, *Texts from the Time of Akhenaten* (Brussels, 1938), 46, 15 (Tomb of Ahmes).
37. *Buch von den Pforten*, I, 162-67, Scene 38/39 (see note 5); E. Hornung, *JSSEA* 13 (1983), 32.
38. E. Hornung, *Zwei Ramessidische Königsgräber: Ramses IV und Ramses VII* (Mainz, 1990), 122-24.
39. J. Assmann, *Ägyptische Hymnen und Gebete* (Zürich and Munich, 1975), Nos. 21 and 46, 2f.
40. Hymn of Tjanefer, *ibid.*, no. 108, 8f.
41. *Ibid.*, no. 193, after *ZÄS* 38 (1900), 27.
42. See also the details in my paper, "Zeitliches Jenseits im alten Ägypten," *Eranos Yearbook* 47 (1978), 269-307.
43. *Königsgräber*, 125ff. (see note 38).
44. G. Posener, *Le Papyrus Vandier* (Paris, 1985); German translations H.-W. Fischer-Elfert, *BiOr* 44 (1987), 5-21; and *Märchen*, no. 34 (see note 24).
45. *Ägypten: Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur* (Stuttgart, 1984), 155.