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Hathor in the Context of the Coffin Texts

BG McGill

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The modern understanding of Egyptian religion is heavily based on the extensive funerary texts. The basic collection of Egyptian funerary literature includes the Pyramid Texts, dating from the Old Kingdom, the Coffin Texts, dating from the Middle Kingdom, and the Book of the Dead, dating from the New Kingdom. Funerary texts are comprised of mortuary rituals and spells to attain eternal life. This paper focuses on the Middle Kingdom and the Coffin Texts. The Middle Kingdom consisted of a brief period of unification, a civil war instigated by the nomarchs or nobles, a reunification, and the eventual downfall to the Hyksos. This period is most specifically characterized by a diffusion of power from the pharaoh to the nomarchs.1 During this time, there were significant changes in the funerary texts. One change is the additional emphasis of the goddess Hathor in the Coffin Texts. This paper will establish the role of Hathor in context of the Coffin Texts as justification and intercession for the common man in attaining eternal life as shown through her origins and her role in the afterlife.

The Coffin Texts were influential documents because they are evidence of a democratization of eternal life to the common people. The 1185 spells of the Coffin Texts were derived from the Pyramid Texts, which were initially inscribed by pharaohs to ensure their elitism in attaining eternal life.2 Prior to the Middle Kingdom, only pharaohs were capable of attaining eternal life, and as a result, they engraved the necessary literature in stone to ensure a permanent assurance of a safe passage throughout the eternities. Likewise, nobles attempted to preserve these same important concepts and to some extent succeeded in following the pattern of the previous pharaohs. From the very beginnings of

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1. Janet Richards, Society and Death in Ancient Egypt: The Mortuary Landscapes of the Middle Kingdom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 7. This event is also later depicted by scholars as the emergence of the middle class. The middle class seems to deplete the strength of the pharaoh and eventually weakens all of Egypt.

the texts, the social and political change was manifest in differences in each text’s introductions. The Pyramid Texts started with an introduction of the pharaoh being the son of a god. This shows that the purpose of the Pyramid Texts was directed only to/for the pharaoh. In contrast, the first text of the Coffin Texts reads, “Here begins the book of vindicating a man in the realm of the dead.” The fact that “a man” was the audience shows that the Coffin Texts are extended to more than the pharaoh and were democratized to the common man. This introduction to the literature is very influential to the reading the text. In addition to the introduction of the texts, painting instead of carving shows that less money was used to preserve these important rituals, but it also shows that a very similar religion remained important though the power of rule shifted. This indicates that there was no direct change in the religious beliefs but that there was just an extension of eternal life to the nobles. This change is shown in several cases beyond the scope of this paper, but most important is the change in the role of the goddess Hathor.

Hathor faced a very important role as an intercessory in a common man’s attainment of eternal life. Within the Coffin Texts, she is a ready participant in many of the crucial actions that were required for safe passage to eternal life. Just the basic requirement of sacrifice to Hathor indicates she is an important figure and it was necessary to have her approval and protection. Additionally, there were basic praises and specific spells for the purpose of venerating Hathor and gaining her favor that reemerge time and time again. Becoming a scribe of Hathor is also mentioned. The purpose of this position is unclear other than showing dedication and reverence for the power and influence of a goddess. Scribes were also necessary in temple practice, which was apart of her veneration. In Spell 295, Hathor also had the responsibility of maintaining one of the gates that the deceased would pass through in the afterlife. The position of a guardian appears significant in this passage because Hathor also created the gate. Creating an obstacle in the afterlife shows a significant amount of control over the destiny of the deceased. As a result, the deceased would want to please the goddess even more to insure the protection of a deity. This reliance gives Hathor the position of an intercessor. The combination of these aspects displays that the authors or instigators of the Coffin Texts felt that Hathor had important powers and that those powers should be used to their benefit.

Aside from ritualistic behavior, the Coffin Texts record Hathor being endowed with significant power and influence. One aspect of Hathor’s role was helping the deceased to destroy the snake, which is considered one of the greatest obstacles in the afterlife. There are many spells that include Hathor,
which encourage and instruct the deceased in this endeavor. This particular event was especially important because Osiris, lord of the afterlife, was present. His presence shows that his power is needed in order to complete the challenge. The fact that Osiris and Hathor were associated multiple times is evidence of Hathor’s importance, because she was able to work with Osiris. It is also recorded that Hathor cared for Osiris and made him glad. These writings show that Hathor and Osiris had a relationship beyond taking care of the dead. This appears to be a dependency but is not mentioned enough to be crucial in the analysis of the Coffin Texts. It is, however, a sharp contrast to the Pyramid Texts which do not form any relationships between Hathor and other gods. Hathor’s role and power have obviously increased over the timebridge of the Old and Middle Kingdom. In accordance with this account, there are other lesser trials where Hathor was present to aid the deceased.

One unique role of Hathor was her association with clothing. Hathor was often seen giving clothing and receiving clothing as an offering. It is merely speculation, but it seems that clothing could be a symbol of the protection of a goddess. This would make sense, as the ritual was repeated often. Hathor was also referred to as literally being the sandals of the diseased. This could also be a symbol for the guidance that she could provide in the afterlife. One particularly unique example is the dress of Hathor. This object was mentioned multiple times and was scattered throughout the Coffin Texts. One ritual is entitled: “Weaving the Dress for Hathor.” This is one of the few examples where a dress was woven for Hathor, because in most cases Hathor is the one bestowing the gifts of clothing. This relates back to the original idea of giving offerings to a goddess who is important and in return receiving her protection and intercession.

A final example of Hathor’s influence is found in Spell 331 of the Coffin Texts. This spell required the deceased to become the goddess Hathor. Once again, this is showing the importance and significance of her role. Hathor is given a very absolute title in this passage: “the Primeval, the Lady of All, who lives on truth.” This title shows that Hathor was timeless and had a wide range of power and authority and should be regarded as such. Hathor is quite evidently an important goddess in context of the Coffin Texts.

In addition to Hathor’s role as an intercessory, her roles provided the nobles justification for a claim to power. By justifying Hathor’s power, those who claimed association to her were also endowed with power. Essentially, these two aspects combine because the nomarchs would have justified Hathor’s importance as a deity to conclude that her power would allow for safe passage in the afterlife.

In the Old Kingdom, the pharaohs worshipped the same predominant gods and goddesses: Osiris, Horus and Isis. These three gods are essential to

8. Spells 370 and 375.
10. Spell 486.
11. Spell 331.
an ancient Egyptian's perception of the afterlife. In short, Osiris is the lord of
the after life because he is the first resurrected being, because he is husband
to the goddess Isis. Horus then takes on much responsibility of the afterlife
because he is the son of Osiris. These three deities are involved in the majority
of the rituals that concern safe passage to eternal life. In addition, as previously
mentioned, pharaohs were considered sons of gods, most specifically Re, the
sun-god. Because pharaohs were the only people able to attain eternal life,
these gods are directly correlated with the pharaoh's power and claim to deity.
In this case a pharaoh would not have a major need for the goddess Hathor. As
a result, the goddess Hathor is rarely mentioned in the Pyramid Texts. She is
present in the Pyramid Texts of the Old Kingdom but is not emphasized until
the emergence of the Coffin Texts. The few citations of Hathor in the Pyramid
Texts consist of her description but in no way depict her importance as a god-
ess. She is initially associated with the sky where it is questioned if she is the
mother of Horus. In another instance she is depicted as having horns. These
horns can be identified as bovine features. Hathor is continually depicted with
these features and more specifically as a cow throughout the rest of Egyptian
history. Another mention of Hathor describes a solar disk associated with her
description. The solar disk establishes a relationship to the sky, which is im-
portant when her creation story is later addressed. Though there is very little
information about Hathor in the Pyramid Texts, the fact that she is mentioned
shows that she was part of the Egyptian pantheon prior to the Coffin Texts and
was not a mere creation of the nomarchs. Hathor was, however, based on the
Pyramid Texts when she was later magnified as a goddess and used to justify the
power and purposes of the nomarchs. According to this assertion, Hathor can
be considered a goddess of the common people, or nomarchs, rather than solely
the pharaoh, who would not have had a monumental reason for her existence.

The origin of Hathor is more fully depicted in the Coffin Texts than the
Pyramid Texts. She is said to have been created before the sky and the earth. The
point in time of her creation was not substantial to the pharaohs of the Old
Kingdom, as shown by the minimal records mentioning her, but this aspect was

14. Hathor, as a goddess, is mentioned a total of three times in the Pyramid Texts and
four times in the mansion of Horus.
15. R. T. Rundle Clark, Myth and Symbol of Ancient Egypt (London: Thames and
Hudson, 1959). This is asserted by Clark, but the evidence is clear on this subject as Hathor
is mentioned only three times in the Pyramid Texts and nearly a hundred times in the
Coffin Texts.
17. Utternace 405.
18. Carving of Hathor with bovine features at the Temple of Deir el Medina, as shown
in Robert A. Amour, Gods and Myths of Ancient Egypt (Cairo: The American University in
Cairo Press, 1986), 90. There are countless depictions of the goddess Hathor with bovine
features.
19. Spell 44.
significant to nomarchs. Hathor was created before the sky and from that point was considered an earth/cosmic goddess. This would make her a more original, ancient, and special goddess. The age of Hathor was one means of justifying her importance; because she was old meant that she was important. The nomarchs tried to justify seizing power by using age as a means for projecting more significance on Hathor’s position in the pantheon of Egyptian gods.

In addition to the time of her creation, the most common account of her creation was when Ra rose as a sun god and Hathor took her place beside him in his solar boat. This myth identifies that Hathor was significant even from the very point of creation. The solar boat or bark is continually referred to in the Coffin Texts. Controlling the bark is a significant role because it connects Hathor to the sky/cosmic origins and Re, who was a very influential and anciently respected god. The bark is important because it is one of the methods of transportation in the afterlife. In Spell 61 Hathor is the goddess in charge of steering the bark. Her importance is shown in this passage as this is a monumental task to transport the deceased in their journey of reaching eternal life. This action carried great responsibility and reverence. Hathor has additional power that allows the deceased to pass through the sky. This is another important part of the steps necessary to be taken for eternal life.

There are also further connections between Hathor and Re. Hathor was often considered the daughter of Re and Nut. Nut is the original “mother-goddess” mentioned in the first utterances of the Pyramid Texts. The connection of Hathor to Nut and Re is significant in the Coffin Texts because both play significant roles in the origins of Egyptian funerary ritual. Again, Re is the sun god, of whom pharaoh is considered a son, and Nut is the original mother-goddess, which indicates her importance in the life and fertility cycles of nature. Hathor is later syncretized with the two goddesses Nut and Isis in several spells of the Coffin Texts. In Spell 334, Hathor is repeatedly depicted as a mother and has matronly qualities and responsibilities. Isis was the wife of Osiris, the lord of the afterlife. Isis aided in the resurrection of Osiris, which gives her credibility and importance as a goddess. Associating Hathor by heredity with these deities validated her worship as a more important goddess. This relationship between Hathor and other gods in turn validates the nomarchs, who venerated Hathor on their coffins. This justification gives nomarchs more credibility in an Egyptian system that is based on heredity as seen by the dynasties and pharaoh being son of a god.

The diversity in Hathor’s roles in the Coffin Texts shows that she is a universal goddess. As mentioned previously there have been many shrines,

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21. There are innumerable accounts of Hathor’s association with a bark. Additional spells about the bark include 623, 654, and 753.
23. Utterance 1.
25. This is also tied to Hathor’s role with clothing.
chapels and temples devoted to the veneration of Hathor. Some examples include Deir el-Medina, a temple dedicated to Hathor; Dendera, a chief cultic center; Philae, an example of syncretism of Isis and Hathor; Luxor, Cusae, Deir el-Bahri, which contains a chapel dedicated to the veneration of Hathor; and Abu Simbel, which contains a small temple to Hathor. Each of the cities is relatively influential and contains some type of monument to Hathor. One of her various forms is fertility and the importance of fertility and the mother-goddess role were universally important. Nearly all the cities in Egypt have some form of Hathor.

The Middle Kingdom is a unique time in ancient Egyptian history. The rise of a middle class and the democratization of eternal life changed the remnants that can be observed today. The funerary texts are a significant portion of the remaining literature and give significant insight into the world of the Egyptians. The inscriptions on the Coffin Texts show a sharp contrast between the Old Kingdom Pyramid text’s portrayal of the goddess Hathor and the roles of Hathor in the Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts. The ancient Egyptian goddess Hathor is a very diverse deity. Her general purpose is very broad, but her roles in the Coffin Texts aim at achieving two aspects in particular: the need for Hathor as an intercessor and giver of power and subsequent justification of the nomarch’s social and political purposes. This evolution is significant and can be explained only by the careful study of the primary texts.