

Imagining the beyond – The conceptualization of Duat between the Old and the Middle Kingdom

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the evolution of the conceptualization of the notion of Duat in the Old and Middle Kingdom funerary texts. This notion is already attested in the Pyramid Texts, which provide only ambiguous references to it, which seemingly identify the Duat both with (part of) the sky and with a liminal domain located presumably somewhere between earth and horizon, and endowed with regenerative power. Towards the end of the Old Kingdom, with the emergence of the Coffin Texts, the depiction of the cosmos appears slightly altered. A better-defined universe is now sketched in the spells: contrasted with the earth and the diurnal sky stands the Duat, which is to some extent described as including both (nether)sky and netherworld. This paper aims to trace the process of development of the concept of Duat within the broader frame of the ancient Egyptian afterlife beliefs attested in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts. Moreover, a brief analysis of a particular category of funerary items popular during that period shows that the evolution in the conceptualization of the afterlife found in funerary texts underlies changes in material culture as well.

The notion of Duat is a major component of the ancient Egyptian afterlife belief system, as it refers to the realm of the dead.¹ Yet, scholars do not agree on a proper definition of what the Egyptians meant as Duat.² The term is mostly translated as “underworld” or “netherworld,” but a portrayal of the Duat as such is found only in the funerary compositions preserved in the New Kingdom royal tombs. The creation of a chthonic netherworld, in fact, represents the culmination in the evolution of the concept, reached after thousands of years of development, and is therefore not necessarily applicable to older periods. Even during the New Kingdom, it is only one of multiple scenarios encountered when analyzing funerary documents and depictions relating to the afterlife. In fact, on the one hand, the Underworld Books primarily portray the Duat as a subterranean region; on the other, the Books of the Sky represent it as a regenerating, hidden space within Nut.³ The complementarity of many notions intertwined in the conceptualization of the Duat is the reason why a single delineation of it cannot be achieved without having to sacrifice a plethora of meanings and layers of tradition nested within one another. I will therefore not translate the word Duat in this paper, as our vocabulary offers only a limited range of terminology, which is inevitably influenced by modern notions of the afterlife.

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Katja Goebis for her helpful comments and suggestions on this topic. I also owe a big thanks to Christina Geisen, who proofread the first draft of this paper and suggested ways to improve it.

² This spelling of the word Duat is the most common in modern Egyptology, and will be maintained in this paper. Three different orthographies are attested (*d3t*, *dw3t*, *d3*), but they can all be considered variants of the same phonologic entity; see remarks in J. Allen, “The cosmology of the Pyramid Texts,” in W. Simpson, ed., *Religion and philosophy in ancient Egypt* (New Haven, 1989), 21-22 with n. 143.

³ See, e.g., the overview in J. Roberson, “The Royal Funerary Books. The Subject Matter of Scenes and Texts,” in R. Wilkinson and K. Weeks, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Valley of the Kings* (Oxford, 2016), 316-32.

The concept of Duat appears already in the oldest funerary composition from ancient Egypt, the Pyramid Texts, which are attested from the late Fifth Dynasty until the Graeco-Roman period.⁴ It is generally accepted that the spells of this corpus point to a celestial hereafter awaiting the king, but the multiplicity of cosmological notions of the afterlife illustrated in the texts, together with the difficulty of fully comprehending their grammar and lexicon, makes it quite arduous to appreciate that all these concepts may express a somewhat coherent view of the afterlife, in which the king gains access to the daily cosmic cycle to achieve immortality.⁵ The major elements involved in this process are the Duat and the Akhet (*ꜥḥt*)⁶, both cosmic birthplaces for the king and the stars, and the sky (*pt*), a watery expanse containing fields and waterways, through which the royal deceased travels incessantly as an imperishable *akh*.⁷ Within this universe, the Duat plays an important role, but it eludes an unambiguous definition, as it appears to condense within itself multiple layers of meaning. In fact, already in the Pyramid Texts its dual nature, celestial and chthonic, is evident, and it finds expression in the theme of the deceased's relationship with the gods Re and Osiris, respectively. This apparent dichotomy contributed to generate some confusion in the earliest days of Egyptology, with scholars initially holding that two distinct concepts of the afterlife originally existed, which later became mixed together in this corpus.⁸ The first entailed detachment from earth and resurrection by means of a celestial-solar process of elevation towards the sky, whereby the deceased joined the sun, the moon, and the stars. While it was held that this tradition of the afterlife was only reserved to the king, some caution is needed when considering this alleged exclusivity. The pre-existing material that was incorporated in this corpus was in fact drawn from a pool of earlier non-royal tradition, and was adapted to fit the status and expectations of its royal beneficiary.⁹ The second tradition

⁴ The most recent comprehensive study of the Pyramid Texts is H. Hays, *The Organization of the Pyramid Texts. Typology and Disposition* (Leiden-Boston, 2012). The latest publication of the texts is J. Allen, *A new concordance of the Pyramid Texts* (Providence, 2013), which includes the spells found in the pyramids of Wenis (W), Teti (T), Pepi I (P), queen Ankhnesneferibre II (An), Merenre (M), Pepi II (N), and queens Neith (Nt), Ipout (Ip), and Wdjefnetjer (Wd). These abbreviations will be henceforth cited whenever needed.

⁵ For a survey of Egyptian cosmology and cosmogony, see J. Allen, *Genesis in Egypt: The Philosophy of Ancient Egyptian Creation Accounts* (New Haven, 1988). On cosmology in the Pyramid Texts, see Allen, "Cosmology," and R. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten* (Wiesbaden, 1997).

⁶ The usual translation of the term Akhet as 'horizon' (*Wb* I, 17.12-23) may only be appropriate for New Kingdom sources, in which it seems indeed to be intended as the line where earth and sky meet. Earlier sources portray the Akhet as the liminal zone that the night sun crosses when rising from the Duat, an interface between two spheres of existence (life and death) and a juncture of cosmic realms (Duat, earth, sky); Allen, "Cosmology," 17-21. It is also a 'light-land', namely the place where the solar radiance becomes effective (*ꜥḥ*) again; K. Jansen-Winkel, "'Horizont' und 'Verklärtheit': zur Bedeutung der Wurzel *ꜥḥ*," *SAK* 23 (1996), 201-15.

⁷ Allen, "Cosmology," 1, 3-10. In PT 217-218, the king is said to be an imperishable *akh* (*ꜥḥ i.ḥm-sk*) joining the sun god in the beyond; further references to spells detailing this process can be found, e.g., in W. Barta, *Die Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte für den verstorbenen König* (Munich-Berlin 1981), 104-5.

⁸ A. Erman, *A Handbook of Egyptian Religion* (London, 1907), 94, 97-98. This vision was also promoted by H. Kees, *Totenglauben und Jenseitsvorstellungen der alten Ägypter. Grundlagen und Entwicklung bis zum Ende des Mittleren Reiches*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1956), 67-97. For additional references, see K. Goebis, *Crowns in Egyptian Funerary Literature. Royalty, Rebirth, and Destruction* (Oxford, 2008), 4-5, 9.

⁹ Scholars have long believed that non-royal individuals were not granted afterlife privileges in the Old Kingdom. As a consequence, a dichotomy between the king and other people, especially in terms of funerary expectations and

was centered on a netherworldly hereafter, and it implied resurrection through interment, thereby associating the overcoming of death with the burial in the west and the necropolis. To this tradition belonged funerary gods such as Anubis, Khentimentiu, and Osiris. Since this chthonic hereafter was shaped on the mythical story of the death and resurrection of Osiris and on his becoming the prototype of all the deceased, it was thought to be available also to non-royal individuals. As a result of this misconception, some scholars have understood the Duat in the period under consideration – Old Kingdom and possibly also Middle Kingdom – as being the chthonic afterlife over which the god Osiris ruled, while others have defined it as the exclusively celestial counterpart of the diurnal sky, though conceding that it might also have been imagined as a netherworld.¹⁰ However, more recent research has shown that such a twofold characterization of the Duat does not necessarily point to the existence of two originally independent views of the afterlife, but that the Osirian destiny was part of the celestial cycle instead, and that the Osirian and the solar aspects both belonged to a single conceptualization of the afterlife, with the gods Osiris and Re playing a major role in the deceased's afterlife already in the Pyramid Texts, though not being unified yet.¹¹ Their temporary nocturnal union, which is one of the core principles of Egyptian theology, may be traced back to at least as early as the Coffin Texts¹², and represents the focal point of the New Kingdom Underworld Books.¹³ The double nature of the Duat as early as the Old Kingdom has been acknowledged for instance by Allen, who claimed that, on the one hand, the Duat in the Pyramid Texts is closely related to the stars and imagined as a cosmic region, while on the other hand it seems to have been visualized “primarily, if not exclusively, as lying in the region beneath the earth.”¹⁴ Given these three basic approaches to the problem of definition and localization of the Duat in the ancient Egyptian

based mostly on the perception of the Pyramid Texts as intrinsically royal, was over-emphasized. On this complex subject, see the most recent discussion in S. Bickel, “Everybody's afterlife? "Pharaonisation" in the Pyramid Texts,” in S. Bickel and L. Díaz-Iglesias, eds., *Studies in ancient Egyptian funerary literature* (Leuven, 2017), 119-48.

¹⁰ For the Osirian afterlife, see J. Breasted, *Development of Religion and Thought in Ancient Egypt: Lectures Delivered on the Morse Foundation at Union Theological Seminar* (New York, 1912). On the celestial afterlife, see K. Sethe, *Übersetzung und Kommentar zu den altägyptischen Pyramidentexten* (Glückstadt-Hamburg, 1935-1962), vol. 1, 49-52, 284. For additional references, see H. Altenmüller, “Pyramidentexte,” in *LÄ V* (1984), 14-23, esp. 17-18; U. Rößler-Köhler, “Jenseitsvorstellungen,” in *LÄ III* (1980), 253 with n. 7-8. For surveys of the various interpretations of the Egyptian afterlife, see Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 1-11; Goebis, *Crowns*, 9-10.

¹¹ Barta (*Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte*, 136-50) already interpreted the apparently twofold destiny of the deceased in the Pyramid Texts as the two sides – diurnal and nocturnal – of the daily cycle of the sun, in which the king took part; similar remarks in J. Allen, *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Atlanta, 2005), 7-8; Goebis, *Crowns*, 5-6, 9.

¹² S. Bickel, “Die Jenseitsfahrt des Re nach Zeugen der Sargtexte,” in A. Brodbeck, ed., *Ein ägyptisches Glasperlenspiel: ägyptologische Beiträge für Erik Hornung aus seinem Schülerkreis* (Berlin, 1998), 48-53.

¹³ The principle of solar-Osirian unity finds its earliest clear expression in an enigmatic composition found in three New Kingdom tombs, whereby a giant deity spanning the height of the cosmos epitomizes the union of the two gods; J. Darnell, *The Enigmatic Netherworld Books of the Solar-Osirian Unity: Cryptographic Compositions in the Tombs of Tutankhamun, Ramesses VI and Ramesses IX* (Fribourg-Göttingen, 2004), esp. 374-424. On the theological principle known as “solar-Osirian unity,” see also C. Manassa, *The Late Egyptian Underworld: Sarcophagi and Related Texts from the Nectanebid Period* (Wiesbaden, 2007), 430-35, and the comprehensive discussion in M. Smith, *Following Osiris: perspectives on the Osirian afterlife from four millennia* (Oxford, 2017), 306-22.

¹⁴ Allen, “Cosmology,” 21-23.

funerary texts (chthonic Duat, celestial Duat, or both)¹⁵, it appears evident that it is only through a careful examination of the spells in which the term appears that a more accurate description of how this domain was imagined can be achieved.

Throughout the Pyramid Texts, the word Duat is attested in forty-two passages, amounting to about 5% of the material included in this corpus.¹⁶ Considering the large number of spells covering the walls of the Old Kingdom pyramids and the cosmographical theories equating parts of the cosmos with the pyramid chambers¹⁷, this count is quite remarkable. In fact, it suggests that, though the Duat designated a core notion regarding the Egyptian afterlife, it was not the dominant concern of these texts, despite their funerary character. It was not the only destination for the deceased king, and was accordingly treated as just one of the possible locales that he may visit during his perpetual cycle of rebirth in the afterlife, representing a counterpart to the other celestial or terrestrial regions that he is said to traverse during his post-mortem existence. Within the texts, in fact, the king's destination upon death and rebirth is primarily imagined to be the sky. This is the focus of the first of the two abovementioned traditions mingling in the Pyramid Texts, that of a celestial hereafter, in which the king participates in the cycles of the sun and the stars across the sky. Accordingly, the spells employ a range of "ascensional" verbs¹⁸ and images to describe his movements, such as *pri* 'to go forth'¹⁹, *iꜣ(r)*, *i3q* and *i3d* 'to climb, ascend'²⁰, *itt* (*Wb* I, 151.6) and *p3i* (*Wb* I, 494.1-14) 'to fly up'.²¹ Upon his ascent, the king reaches what is (mostly) described as a celestial domain, in close proximity with the stars, among which the Imperishable Stars in the northern sky play a major role.²² Regardless of the connection with the Duat, an ever-present upward motion permeates the whole corpus. The king, who is identified with various stars, has many means at his disposal to reach the sky and the Duat, mostly ladders

¹⁵ These three alternatives do not exhaust the entire range of possibilities regarding the definition of the nature of the Duat, especially since its features changed over time. They are rather meant to provide a quick identification of the major trends in the study of this notion.

¹⁶ This number includes the three orthographies of the word Duat as they appear in Allen, *A new concordance*. In most cases, only minor changes occur across the various versions of the same spell. Accordingly, only one attestation was counted for every passage in which the word Duat appears, disregarding how many attestations of the same passage occur across the pyramids. Compare the same approach in H. Hays, "Unreading the Pyramids," *BIFAO* 109 (2009), 208, n. 68, and fig. 2. Conversely, if one considers each single occurrence of the word Duat throughout the corpus and counts all its attestations in the same spell across the various pyramids, the number becomes eighty-one.

¹⁷ J. Allen, "Reading a Pyramid," in C. Berger, G. Clerc, and N. Grimal, eds., *Hommages à Jean Leclant* (Cairo, 1994), vol.1, 5-28. This theory was convincingly disputed in Hays, "Unreading the Pyramids." See also the recent reappraisal of this matter in B. Mathieu, "Re-Reading the Pyramids. Repères pour une lecture spatialisée des Textes des Pyramides," in Bickel and Diaz-Iglesias, *Studies in ancient Egyptian funerary literature*, 375-462.

¹⁸ Allen, "Cosmology," 4-5; D. Rull Ribó, "Solar ascension and Osirian raising in the *Pyramid Texts* concentrating on the study of the determinatives," in J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin, eds., *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists: Grenoble, 6-12 septembre 2004* (Leuven-Paris-Dudley, 2007), vol. 2, 1650-56.

¹⁹ *Wb* I, 518-525.3.

²⁰ For *iꜣ(r)*, see *Wb* I, 40, 41.14-25. For *i3q*, see *Wb* I, 33.15-18. For *i3d*, see *Wb* I, 35.5.

²¹ For *itt*, see *Wb* I, 151.6; for *p3i*, see *Wb* I, 494.1-14.

²² The Imperishable Stars (*i.ḥmw-sk*) were the stars observable in the northern night sky, which were never seen to set under the line of the horizon, hence their name (Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 14-126).

of various types.²³ As a consequence, the Duat seems to have been imagined as a celestial domain or part thereof, lying somewhere above the earth, and possibly identifiable with the night sky.

The physical element *pt* ‘sky’ could also be personified in the goddess Nut, who was believed to conceive the sun each night and to give birth to him again in the morning.²⁴ In the Pyramid Texts, she additionally appears in the role of mother of the king, of the stars, and of other celestial beings, to which she also gives birth²⁵, and which travel along her belly in their barques, the Day Barque (*m^cndt*) and the Night Barque (*m^sktt*).²⁶ In one spell, Nut is said to receive (*šzp*) or swallow (*ḥm*) the deceased king, in what is the only known attestation before the New Kingdom of the motif found in the so-called Dramatic Text, which concludes the Book of Nut in the cenotaph of Seti I at Abydos.²⁷ There is therefore some ambiguity also in the portrayal of the sun, who is cosmogonically self-created and born and yet, on the other hand, astronomically rises and sets, with his mother Nut perpetually swallowing him to then give birth to him again. This goddess could be also identified with the coffin, the sarcophagus, and the tomb²⁸, hence the connotation of her celestial body as an enclosing space welcoming the deceased and activating their rebirth process.²⁹

In accordance with the rejuvenation and rebirth symbolism connected to the figure of Nut, a genealogic-cosmological relationship is postulated between Nut and the Duat. In a few passages, the latter plays an active role in giving birth to the king and Osiris-Orion, after both had previously been conceived by the *pt*-sky.³⁰ However, while it is the *pt*-sky that is said to conceive, it is its embodiment Nut who, according to one spell, indirectly gives birth in or

²³ Countless are the mentions of ladders and stairways, on which the king ascends to the sky. PT 271 (§390a-b) is one of the most significant passages to this regard, as it states: *pry NN ḥr m3qt tn irt.n n.f.it.f R^c ndr Ḥrw Štš m^c n NN šd.sn NN r d3t* “King NN ascends on this ladder, which his father Re made for him. Horus and Seth take hold of King NN’s hand and take King NN to the Duat.” See also PT 568 §1431c-1432b and PT 610 §1717a.

²⁴ E.g., PT 606 §1688b-c; for additional references, see Barta, *Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte*, 84.

²⁵ E.g., PT 504 §1082a-b, PT 577 §1527.

²⁶ E.g., PT 222 §209a, 210a-c.

²⁷ PT 563 §1416c-1417d. The passage in the cenotaph of Seti I states: “After his Majesty sets in the western Akhet, they (i.e., the stars) enter into her mouth in the place of her head in the west; she eats them.” See A. von Lieven, *The Carlsberg Papyri 8: Grundriss des Laufes der Sterne. Das sogenannte Nutbuch* (Copenhagen, 2007), 80-81, 413.

²⁸ See, e.g., PT 364 §616d-f. On these identifications, see: Allen, “Cosmology,” 17 with n. 113; N. Billing, *Nut: the goddess of life in text and iconography* (Uppsala, 2002), 179-80; Hays, “Unreading the pyramids,” 197-98.

²⁹ In virtue of their association with the goddess Nut and the concept of rebirth, the coffin and the sarcophagus could both be regarded as a symbolic maternal uterus, to which the deceased would return upon death. On this ideology, see, e.g., Billing, *Nut*, 25-41, 151-56; J. Assmann, *Death and Salvation in Ancient Egypt* (Ithaca, 2005), 165-73. The Pyramid Texts include a large series of spells dealing with the role of Nut in the reconstitution of the deceased’s body and in his rebirth; see A. Morales, *The transmission of the Pyramid Texts of Nut: analysis of their distribution and role in the Old and Middle Kingdoms* (Hamburg, 2017). Note also that Hathor’s role as uterine sky goddess and vessel of solar rebirth is very commonly found in funerary texts – especially in the Coffin Texts – as well as in tombs inscriptions. See, e.g., J. Wegner, “A Decorated Birth-Brick from South Abydos: New Evidence on Childbirth and Birth Magic in the Middle Kingdom,” in D. Silverman, W. Simpson, and J. Wegner, eds., *Archaism and Innovation, Studies in the Culture of Middle Kingdom Egypt* (New Haven-Philadelphia, 2009), 458-63 with additional references.

³⁰ PT 442 §819c-822c; PT 577 §1527a-c.

through the Duat, which is designated as her daughter.³¹ While the reappearance of the king at dawn coming from the Duat is the logical consequence of a sequence of events leading up to the his leaving the nocturnal sky together with the diurnal celestial bodies, Krauss has argued that the Duat is here to be understood as a part of the sky as a whole, which would explain why the personified sky (Nut) is called the mother, whereas the Duat is her daughter.³² This is confirmed by the much later Books of the Sky, in which the Duat is envisioned as being located within the body of the goddess.³³ In all the examples just mentioned, the Duat is given a connotation of transitional area, where regeneration and the process of becoming an *akh* take place before the newly reborn king can proceed to the sky. Even though it seems at times to be treated in the spells as coinciding with the celestial domain altogether, a passage describing the doors of the sky being open for the king coming from the Duat suggests that the latter should be regarded as distinct from and located prior to the sky, along the deceased's path towards rebirth in the morning, possibly right below the eastern Akhet.³⁴

Among the many spells in the Pyramid Texts that mention the Duat in connection to a celestial environment, particularly relevant for the purpose of this study is one passage in which the king is described fading at dawn on the eastern Akhet along with the other stars of the night sky, Orion and Sothis/Sirius.³⁵ These are all said to be encircled (*šni*) by the Duat, an expression which in later astronomical ceilings and in pCarlsberg I is used to refer to the heliacal setting of decans, starting the invisibility period of those stars below the Akhet.³⁶ Accordingly, the Duat may be meant to represent the space below the Akhet, between earth and sky, which would hide the

³¹ PT 504 §1082a-b. The interpretation of this passage presents some difficulties. M and N have *iw(r) pt m irp is ms.n Nwt m z3t.s dw3t* “The sky has become pregnant with wine; behold, Nut has given birth in/as/from her daughter, the Duat.” For other options of translation, see J. Allen, *The inflection of the verb in the Pyramid Texts* (Malibu, 1984), 72-73 §130, and Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 170-73. The other two versions of this passage (P and Nt) have *msi.n Nwt z3t.s dw3t* “Nut has given birth to her daughter, the Duat,” and *msi.n Nwt n z3t.s dw3t* “Nut has given birth for her daughter, the Duat,” respectively.

³² Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 173, 215.

³³ The Books of the Sky (Book of Nut, Book of the Day, Book of the Night) focus on the representation of the diurnal and nocturnal journey of the sun and stars through the body of the sky goddess Nut. One passage in the Book of Nut is most explicit about this idea, since it states: *ʿq ḥm n ntr pn m r3.s m-hnw dw3t* “It is into her (Nut’s) mouth that the Majesty of this god (Re) enters, inside the Duat” (text Bb, von Lieven, *Nutbuch*, 72-73). Similarly, the text of the final scene of the Book of the Night states that the rising sun is *Ḥpri ḥfdt r 3ḥt ʿq m r3 pr m k3t* “Khepri, climbing to the Akhet, having entered from the mouth (of Nut) and come out of the vulva (of Nut)”; G. Roulin, *Le Livre de la Nuit: une composition égyptienne de l’au-delà* (Fribourg-Göttingen, 1996), vol. 1, 341-42, and vol. 2, pl. XX.

³⁴ See for instance PT 670 §1972a, 1973d: *wn ʿ3wy pt izn ʿ3wy pdwt ... [n wr pn pr] m d3t* “The two doors of the sky are opened; the two doors of the celestial expanse are drawn aside... [for this great one who came forth] from the Duat.” This scenario is depicted and described more explicitly in the New Kingdom royal tombs, especially those of Merneptah, Tawosret, Ramses III, and Ramses VI; discussion in J. Roberson, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Earth* (Atlanta, 2012), 32-37, 39-41, 55-59, with further references.

³⁵ PT 216 §151a-c recites: *šn S3ḥ in d3t wʿb ʿnh m 3ḥt šn Spdt in d3t wʿb ʿnh m 3ḥt šn NN pn in d3t wʿb ʿnh m 3ḥt* “Orion is encircled by the Duat, pure and living in the Akhet; Sothis is encircled by the Duat, pure and living in the Akhet; this king NN is encircled by the Duat, pure and living in the Akhet.” Compare PT 466 §882a-883d.

³⁶ C. Leitz, *Altägyptische Sternuhren* (Leuven, 1995), 64; Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 158-60. For the relevant passage in pCarlsberg I, see von Lieven, *Nutbuch*, 63-68. It is worth noting that Nut’s typical mode of interaction with the deceased involved the act of embracing, which is one of the meanings of the verb *šni* (*Wb* IV, 489.4-490.6). By means of her embrace, the goddess became integrated with her son, the deceased in the coffin (PT 222 §208b).

nocturnal celestial bodies that became invisible during the day and all those that regularly went through a period of invisibility, such as Sothis/Sirius or the sun every night.³⁷ The perception of a subterranean location of the Duat may thus be the result of its function of harboring the sun and stars, which were seen sinking below the visible line of the horizon at their setting and reappearing from it in the morning and in the evening, respectively. The chthonic characterization of the Duat may therefore represent an attempt to explain the invisible part of the journey of the celestial bodies in a hidden area perceived as lying beneath the earth, and is related to the other tradition of the afterlife that I am now going to discuss. Interestingly enough, later on the verb *šni* is found associated with the curved body of Osiris both in the concluding image of the Book of Gates, where the god is said to physically encircle the Duat, and in a scene of the Book of Caverns, where his curled-up figure is lifted by Isis and Nephtys.³⁸

In parallel to these cosmic-celestial notions, and complementing them, a second idea of the afterlife emerges in the Pyramid Texts, which hints at a chthonic version of the Duat, standing in opposition to the sky, and potentially located below the earth and commensurate with it, existing in parallel to the earth and its gods, Geb and Aker.³⁹ A series of texts describes how “the earth speaks, the door(s) of Aker/Duat is/are opened, the doors of Geb are caused to be drawn aside” for the king’s emergence.⁴⁰ Another passage designates the king as “this *akh* who has come forth from the Duat, Osiris NN who has come forth from Geb,” thereby seemingly equating the Duat to the personification of the earth.⁴¹ At the same time, however, the setting of these spells is celestial, since the king is said to ascend to the sky and the Akhet by means of a stairway set up for him to the Duat, to the southern night sky where Orion is.⁴² Adding to the complexity of this

³⁷ Because the sun would also rise on the eastern Akhet of the sky coming from the Duat, it has been argued that, in the spell just cited, this may be intended as the moment when the light spreads just before sunrise, thus as “dawn”; N. Beaux, “La *douat* dans les Textes des Pyramides: espace et temps de gestation,” *BIFAO* 94 (1994), 3. However, this suggestion cannot be reconciled with the complexity of the scenario depicted in this spell, where the Duat denotes the space enclosing the celestial bodies when they are invisible, and wherefrom they rise.

³⁸ For the scene in the Book of Gates, see E. Hornung, *Das Buch von den Pforten des Jenseits: nach den Versionen des Neuen Reiches. Teil 2: Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Geneva, 1980), 290. The scene in the Book of Caverns is the first in the upper register of the fourth division (n. 41) in D. Werning, *Das Höhlenbuch: textkritische Edition und Textgrammatik* (Wiesbaden, 2011), vol. 2, 184-85.

³⁹ Allen, “Cosmology,” 23-24; Hays, “Unreading the pyramids,” 196 with n. 5. Aker was an ancient earth god with a primarily leonine character, who was often represented as a double sphinx and was usually associated with entrance to and exit from the beyond, as is most explicitly depicted in the Underworld Books. The god could be regarded both as a chthonic deity, whom the sun met prior to his nocturnal union with Osiris, and as a personification of the netherworld space, with the his heads coinciding with the western and eastern mountains of the Akhet, namely the liminal points of the Duat, and with his body spanning the whole (chthonic) Duat itself. On these characteristics of Aker, see E. Hornung, *Das Amduat: die Schrift des verborgenen Raumes. Teil 1 und 2* (Wiesbaden, 1963), vol. 2, 104; J. Ogdon, “Some notes on the name and the iconography of the god *3kr*,” *VA* 2.2 (1986), 127-35; J. Roberson, “The early history of “New Kingdom” netherworld iconography: a late Middle Kingdom apotropaic wand reconsidered,” in Silverman, Simpson and Wegner, *Archaism and Innovation*, 429-33.

⁴⁰ PT 437 §796a-b; PT 483 §1014a-b; PT 610 §1713a.

⁴¹ [*3h pn pr m d*]3t *Wsir NN pr m Gbb* (PT 670 §1986b).

⁴² PT 437 §802c; PT 610 §1717a. Based on the frequent associations with Orion, Krauss has speculated that the allegedly chthonic Duat alluded to in some spells could be the sub-horizontal southern sky from which Orion rises

picture, the Pyramid Texts also mention a female entity, N(u)net (*Nnt/Nwnt*)⁴³, a ‘nether-sky’, namely an expanse of water possibly lying inverted beneath the earth, as seems to be underscored by the determinative most frequently classifying this name, namely the sky upside down [GLYPH I] (N50).⁴⁴ Since the primeval ocean Nun was also believed to exist underground, N(u)net may be its counterpart, existing in a lower region of the cosmos, as a lower sky keeping the underground waters of Nun at bay. This lower (nocturnal) sky, together with the upper (diurnal) sky⁴⁵, forms the two parts of the daily cosmic circuit which the celestial bodies and the king were thought to travel along, and which was based on the alternation of night and day.

Beginning already before the end of the Old Kingdom, copies of the Pyramid Texts were also inscribed on elite coffins and other items of funerary equipment along with the Coffin Texts⁴⁶, a partially new corpus of 1185 spells attested from circa 2200 B.C.E. onward and found mostly in nomarchal centers in Middle Egypt.⁴⁷ These texts have often been said to be representative of the phenomenon known as “democratization of the afterlife,” which holds that a diffusion of funerary practises and beliefs previously attested only in royal contexts occurred after the end of the Old Kingdom.⁴⁸ For a long time, scholars believed this to be reflected in the wider diffusion of the Coffin Texts amongst the (elite) common people, in contrast to the (allegedly) exclusively royal Pyramid Texts. It is now generally accepted that this theory represents an oversimplification and a partial misunderstanding of the social changes that took place in the period of political instability following the end of the Old Kingdom, the historical context in which the Coffin Texts emerged. Therefore, modern usage of this term refers to a socio-cultural phenomenon that entailed a widening of the participation of larger strata of population in a new model of funerary (material) culture and afterlife beliefs. The democratization theory has also been crucial in crafting the modern, artificial perception of the Pyramid and Coffin Texts as being two

(*Astronomische Konzepte*, 150-152, 209-215, 284-285). However, this hypothesis does not account for all the other passages that characterize the Duat in different ways, adding to its complex and ambiguous nature.

⁴³ For an overview of this element, see, e.g., Allen, “Cosmology,” 12-14; additional attestations in C. Leitz, *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen* (Leuven, 2002-2003), vol. 3, 550, and vol. 4, 246.

⁴⁴ See for instance PT 215 §149b, PT 218 §166c, PT 301 §446a, PT 606 §1691b.

⁴⁵ It is only with the Coffin Texts that a proper “under-sky” or “lower-sky” (*pt hrt*) appears, and is contrasted with the *pt hrt* “upper sky” (Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 117-118). As will be discussed below, this is in line with the more defined concepts on the afterlife that appear to have been developed after the end of the Old Kingdom.

⁴⁶ A. de Buck, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Chicago, 1935-1961); the numbering system henceforth used when citing spells of this corpus relies on this edition. For the latest theories, discoveries, and an updated list of the sources inscribed with Coffin Texts spells, see H. Willems, *Historical and archaeological aspects of Egyptian funerary culture: religious ideas and ritual practice in Middle Kingdom elite cemeteries* (Leiden-Boston, 2014).

⁴⁷ E. Hermsen, *Die zwei Wege des Jenseits: das altägyptische Zweiwegebuch und seine Topographie* (Fribourg-Göttingen, 1991), 19 with n. 6. While it is widely accepted that the bulk of the Coffin Texts dates back to the period between the late Eleventh Dynasty and the end of the Middle Kingdom, the time when they were first recorded cannot be established with absolute certainty; Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 133-35, 158-61, 165-77.

⁴⁸ Detailed discussions of the theory of the “democratization of the afterlife” and of its many pitfalls are found notably in M. Smith, “Democratization of the afterlife,” in J. Dieleman and W. Wendrich, eds., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology* (Los Angeles, 2009), 1-16; H. Hays, “The death of the democratisation of the afterlife,” in N. Strudwick and H. Strudwick, eds., *Old Kingdom, new perspectives: Egyptian art and archaeology 2750-2150 BC* (Oxford, 2011), 115-30; Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 124-35. See also Bickel, “Everybody’s afterlife?”

completely different compositions. However, as recent research has shown, the transmission of the Pyramid Texts into the Middle Kingdom happened alongside the transmission of the Coffin Texts, which resulted in these two collections sharing many more similarities than previously assumed.⁴⁹

Given the close connection between Pyramid and Coffin Texts, it is no surprise that the latter employ many concepts that were already present in the Old Kingdom corpus. However, the Coffin Texts also introduce new notions and stress different concepts, among which the most striking is the dangers awaiting the deceased within or beneath the earth. The Pyramid Texts already included spells aimed at ensuring that the earth would not keep the king imprisoned, but it was mainly a celestial hereafter that was sought after. Conversely, the Coffin Texts bustle with chthonic demons and dangerous beings or objects, often materialized in gates blocking the passage of the dead. A quite complicated picture emerges from the analysis of the passages referring to the Duat in these texts: although a more systematized organization of the beyond is observable, various notions concerning its topography are still “fluctuating”, not having been fixed without ambiguity yet, and older layers of tradition interact with new ideas.⁵⁰

Like the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts contain a large number of astronomical references and statements about the cycles of the various celestial bodies, and the bulk of the spells point to such a celestial universe as the stage for the afterlife of the deceased.⁵¹ It is often implied that the Duat is part of the sky, or that at least a close relationship exists between these two domains, whereby they overlap to a certain extent, while the strong connection with the Akhet is stressed.⁵² This can also be surmised from the Duat’s association with Mesqet, a toponym that in these texts seems to still refer to a region located somewhere in the eastern portion of the sky.⁵³ At the same time, the Duat could be associated with the West, the place of sunset and consequently the symbolic location of the realm of the dead. That the notion of a chthonic Duat existed in the Coffin Texts can be inferred from numerous hints disseminated in the spells, most significantly

⁴⁹ On the transmission of funerary literature in the Old and Middle Kingdoms operating as an uninterrupted cultural phenomenon, see: B. Mathieu, “La distinction entre Textes des Pyramides et Textes des Sarcophages est-elle légitime?,” in S. Bickel and B. Mathieu, eds., *D’un monde à l’autre: Textes des Pyramides & Textes des Sarcophages. Actes de la table ronde internationale “Textes des Pyramides versus Textes des Sarcophages”, IFAO, 24-26 septembre 2001* (Cairo, 2004), 247-62; A. Morales, *The transmission of the Pyramid Texts into the Middle Kingdom: Philological Aspects of a Continuous Tradition in Egyptian Mortuary Literature* (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2013).

⁵⁰ Bickel, “Die Jenseitsfahrt des Re,” 54-55.

⁵¹ Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 183. Compare Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 54. See also P. Wallin, *Celestial cycles: astronomical concepts of regeneration in the ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Uppsala, 2002).

⁵² For example, the caption concluding spell 154 (CT II 268a-b) recites *pṛt r pt wb3 dw3t* “Ascending to the sky, opening the Duat.” Cf. spell 784 (CT VI 414f), also speaking of the opening of the Duat in a celestial context. Similarly, see spell 18 (CT I 53d-54j), spell 256 (CT III 365b-d), and spell 326 (CT IV 160c-162d).

⁵³ While originally the term Mesqet appears to have referred to a celestial area in the eastern sky, its meaning shifted over time, resulting in its designating a region located somewhere below the Akhet, thus beneath the earth. A compilation of source material and an overview of the scholarly debate on Mesqet can be found in A. Egberts, *In quest of meaning: a study of the ancient Egyptian rites of consecrating the meret-chests and driving the calves* (Leiden, 1995), vol. 1, 292-93. See also H. Willems, *The Coffin of Heqata (Cairo JdE 36418). A Case Study of Egyptian Funerary Culture of the Early Middle Kingdom* (Leuven, 1996), 262-70.

consisting in references to the many chthonic creatures and demons inhabiting it, especially the giant serpent Apophis, the prototypical enemy of the sun god at night.⁵⁴ However, while the celestial-cosmic notions of the afterlife are stated quite explicitly throughout the entire composition and form the main background against which this is set, the idea of a journey across a netherworld is referred to far less often.

Such twofold characterization of the afterlife can be appreciated especially in the representations and descriptions included in the Book of the Two Ways, the first Egyptian cosmography mapping the beyond and its two zigzagging paths on land and on water.⁵⁵ It is in this book that the notion of Rosetau (*r3-sṯ3w*) is properly structured for the first time. While this could refer to a physical place on the one hand, namely the Memphite necropolis, at the same time it could also be a generic designation of other necropoleis. Accordingly, Rosetau also came to designate the realm of the dead, and more specifically one of chthonic nature.⁵⁶ One spell even seems to imply that the notions of Duat and Rosetau overlap, and that the latter may be a region within the Duat, at the same time functioning also as the entrance to the Duat itself, located in the necropolis area.⁵⁷ Yet, Rosetau could also be imagined to belong in a celestial-stellar context, as some spells of the Coffin Texts seem to point to.⁵⁸ In parallel to Rosetau and the notion of Duat, the term Imhet (*imḥt*) occurs in these texts for the first time. Originally referring to the Lower Egyptian source of the Nile as a ‘cave’, it acquired the meaning of ‘underworld’ due to the fact that said source was imagined as a bridge between this world and the next.⁵⁹ Since it is often associated with themes of opening and offering in the funerary texts as early as the Coffin Texts,

⁵⁴ Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 43-48.

⁵⁵ Hermsen, *Zweiwegbuch*, and B. Backes, *Das altägyptische »Zweiwegbuch«: Studien zu den Sargtext-Sprüchen 1029-1130* (Wiesbaden, 2005). W. Sherbiny, *Through Hermopolitan lenses: studies on the so-called Book of Two Ways in ancient Egypt* (Leiden-Boston, 2017) presents the most up-to-date edition of all the sources of this composition, including some hitherto unpublished ones, and challenges many of the traditional scholarly views on it.

⁵⁶ *Wb* II, 398.9-10. See the brief overviews of Rosetau (with further references) in: Hornung, *Amduat*, vol. 2, 90-91; Hermsen, *Zweiwegbuch*, 111; A. el-Kholy, “Quelques remarques sur le Ra-setaou,” *ArOr* 67.1 (1999), 45-50. Spell 1080 (CT VII 352a-353c) connects a sandy desert landscape with the mystery of the body of Osiris in Rosetau, thereby making its chthonic nature explicit. It has been suggested that the substructure of the pyramids of Senwosret II and later kings in the Fayum may be architectural evocation of the depths of the realm of Osiris, with the winding corridors and the shaft introduced by Senwosret II possibly conveying notions of the afterlife evoked later by the fourth and fifth hours of the Amduat, namely the domain of Sokar; U. Rößler-Köhler, “Königliche Vorstellungen zu Grab und Jenseits im Mittleren Reich, Teil I: ein ‘Gottesbegräbnis’ des Mittleren Reiches in königlichem Kontext: Amduat, 4. und 5. Stunde,” in R. Gundlach and W. Seipel, eds., *Das frühe ägyptische Königtum: Akten des 2. Symposiums zur ägyptischen Königsideologie in Wien, 24.-26.9.1997* (Wiesbaden, 1999), 73-96. This interpretation finds corroboration in J. Wegner’s finds in the tomb of Senwosret III at Abydos, which the scholar has convincingly shown to be a likely precursor of the royal Amduat tombs, best known from the New Kingdom; J. Wegner, “The tomb of Senwosret III at Abydos: considerations on the origins and development of the royal Amduat-tomb,” in Silverman, Simpson, and Wegner, *Archaism and Innovation*, 136-46.

⁵⁷ Spell 241 (CT III 325j-l): *iw.i iw.k(wi) r r3-sṯ3w r rh sṯ3 n dw3t isbt Inpw ḥr.s* “I (i.e., the deceased/Osiris) have come to Rosetau in order to know the secret of the Duat, into which Anubis is initiated.”

⁵⁸ The most explicit celestial association is arguably found in spell 1035 (CT VII 282a-c), where the deceased states: “I have passed over the paths of Rosetau, whether on water or on land, and these are the paths of Osiris; they are in the limit of the sky” (*sw3.n.i w3wt nt r3-sṯ3w ḥrt mw 3 w3wt nw nt Wsir iw.sn m dr n pt*); Backes, *Zweiwegbuch*, 282. See also spells 236 (CT III 303i-e) and 1150 (CT VII 500a-b).

⁵⁹ For the meanings of this term and further bibliographic references, see Egberts, *In quest of meaning*, 123-24.

it has been suggested that Imhet may also have been intended as a designation of the tomb itself, meant as a point of connection between the world of the living and the world of the dead, leading to the innermost part of the structure beyond its entrance and, by extension, also to the netherworld.⁶⁰ In the Amduat, Imhet designates the deepest part of the netherworld in the fourth and fifth hours, the domain of Sokar within Rosetau, where (re)creation takes place and Re is reborn.⁶¹ Furthermore, an address to the deceased introduces Imhet and Duat as two possibly parallel, or at least overlapping, realms: “May those who are in Imhet praise you, may those who are in the Duat glorify you.”⁶² Since Imhet was imagined in the Amduat as an arid, chthonic domain, it is possible that it coincided with one of the two ways of Rosetau, most likely the lower one on earth. On the other hand, considering the celestial associations of the Duat in these texts, this latter could be regarded as the upper, watery way existing below the earth, in the nethersky N(u)net mentioned above.⁶³ This doubling is perhaps the reason behind the creation of the distinction between an Upper Duat (*dw3t hrt*) and a Lower Duat (*dw3t hrt*), which is first attested in the Coffin Texts, although not very consistently.⁶⁴ In the Coffin Texts, both seem to be located below the earth: the Upper Duat may have been imagined as a cosmic region containing a path across a watery lower firmament, while the Lower Duat possibly coincided with the deepest portion of the netherworld, a chthonic realm within which the terrestrial path to Rosetau was found.⁶⁵ At any rate, the division of the Duat in two areas may represent a transitional stage between the older, predominant celestial tradition and the somewhat newly structured chthonic notions, the coexistence of which needed to be justified and harmonized.⁶⁶

All these multifaceted concepts of the afterlife, differing in many ways from those dominating in the Pyramid Texts, make it difficult to appreciate the general picture sketched in the texts.

⁶⁰ J. Assmann, *Altägyptische Totenliturgien. Band 2: Totenliturgien und Totensprüche in Grabinschriften des Neuen Reiches* (Heidelberg, 2005), 199-202. An inscription in the Eighteenth Dynasty Theban tomb of Kheruef (TT 192) compares the entrance to the tomb with the entrance to Imhet, thus equating the latter with the netherworld or a part thereof: *i sb3 tpy n imht mr.f ʿq bwt.f prt wn n.i* “O first gate of Imhet, (called) ‘He desires entry, his abomination is going out’, open for me!”; Epigraphic Survey, *The tomb of Kheruef: Theban Tomb 192* (Chicago, 1980), 41, pl. 23.

⁶¹ Hornung, *Amduat*, 82 with n. 11, 88; cf. Assmann, *Altägyptische Totenliturgien 2*, 260 with n. 103. See also Rößler-Köhler, “Königliche Vorstellungen.”

⁶² *dw3 tw imyw imht s3h tw imyw dw3t* (spell 1068, CT VII 329c-330a). Compare chapter 9 of the Book of the Dead, called *r3 n wb3 imht* “a spell for opening Imhet.” To this statement the deceased may reply by saying *wb3.i dw3t* “may I open the Duat,” possibly implying that Duat and Imhet were used as a couple of synonyms. On this, see Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 55 with n. 44; cf. Backes, *Zweiwegebuch*, 318 with n. 750.

⁶³ N(u)net is attested in the Coffin Texts in spell 306 (CT IV 60k, 61o). Moreover, a *pt hrt* “lower sky” is mentioned in spells 631 (CT VI 253n), 770 (CT VI 405i), 956 (CT VII 170m), and 957 (CT VII 176c).

⁶⁴ Upper Duat and Lower Duat are mentioned in spell 107 (CT II 119f, i). References to the Lower Duat only are found in spells 317 (CT IV 114c, 118d) and 320 (CT IV 144h). Additionally, spell 220 (CT III 203 b) mentions an upper way of the sky and a lower way in the earth, which may refer to the Upper and Lower Duat. On this division of the Duat and what it may represent in later funerary compositions, see C. Leitz, “Die obere und die untere Dat,” *ZÄS* 116 (1989), 41-57; compare the discussion in Darnell, *Enigmatic Netherworld Books*, 66-68, 375-79.

⁶⁵ Darnell, *Enigmatic Netherworld Books*, 379. Alternatively, the Upper Duat may also have been the domain of dusk and dawn in the liminal area where the Akhet meets the earth, or possibly the day sky, while the Lower Duat coincided with the underworld (Hermsen, *Zweiwegebuch*, 24, 113; Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 56). The ambiguity of the texts mentioning the two parts of the Duat unfortunately does not allow for a definitive solution.

⁶⁶ W. Westendorf, “Das Ende der Unterwelt in der Amarnazeit oder: die Erde als Kugel,” *GM* 187 (2002), 108.

Despite the seemingly incompatibility of a celestial and a chthonic tradition of the hereafter, reflected in the complex relationship between Re and Osiris, I believe that it is exactly within the contradiction that a reconciliation of opposites becomes possible. The syncretistic union of the solar and chthonic god is attested for the first time on a Middle Kingdom coffin from Deir el-Bersheh (spell 1046, CT VII 298a, coffin B4L).⁶⁷ As was the case already in the Pyramid Texts, the figures of Re and Osiris, representing opposite realities and destinies, can be brought together in the figure of the goddess Nut, mother of both gods. The ultimate goal of both the Pyramid and the Coffin Texts was the successful *akh*-ification of the deceased and his rebirth in the next world, which is reflected in the generic term used to label funerary texts, namely *s3hw* ‘akh-makers’.⁶⁸ As long as such destiny was fulfilled, its whereabouts could remain mysterious and perhaps voluntarily blurred. Therefore, we should attach less importance to a clear distinction between a celestial domain and a netherworld when trying to figure out what the concept of Duat encompassed. It was in fact multiple things at once, and attempting to separate the layers that made it up and map them would be counterproductive.⁶⁹ Besides, the ancient Egyptians themselves knew that the word Duat could designate various domains, and they were aware that the emphasis on its meaning could shift over the course of time.⁷⁰

The different perceptions of the Duat that we gather from the funerary compositions just discussed depend in large part upon the various characterizations that their authors decided to bestow on it, according to whether the more “celestial” aspect of it was to be emphasized, or whether it was its “terrestrial” counterpart to gain more relevance in a specific context. Given this multifaceted nature of the Duat, an interesting approach to what the term encompassed is found in cognitive linguistics⁷¹, and more specifically in the analysis of the determinatives associated with the word Duat in the texts. As is now well-known, the use of determinatives in the Egyptian writing system extends beyond their signaling the end of a word. In fact, determinatives functioned as a system of iconic tools to classify the world, reflecting the organization and categorization of knowledge, hence the collective mind, of the ancient Egyptian culture; at the

⁶⁷ Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 49 with n. 30.

⁶⁸ *Wb* IV, 24.1-10. This conclusion about the nature of the Pyramid Texts and, to a lesser extent, of the Coffin Texts, was reached only after a long scholarly debate on the meaning of said compositions. Regarding the Pyramid Texts, see: Barta, *Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte*, 4-58, 63-64, 67-68, 104; Allen, “Cosmology,” 2-3; Hays, *Organization of the Pyramid Texts*, 7-13. A thorough discussion of the terms *s3hw* and *3h* in funerary literature, with a particular focus on Pyramid and Coffin Texts, can be found in J. Assmann, *Altägyptische Totenliturgien. Band 1: Totenliturgien in den Sargtexten des Mittleren Reiches* (Heidelberg, 2002), 13-37.

⁶⁹ What the “modern” mind instinctively perceives as a dialectical opposition between a celestial and a chthonic afterlife was not such to the Egyptians, for whom the two notions complemented one another. In line with the oft-cited principle of the “multiplicity of approaches”, in fact, various explanations of the same phenomenon could be equally true at the same time without being inconsistent; H. Frankfort in *Ancient Egyptian religion: an interpretation* (New York, 1948), 18-19, *passim*. Further references in Hays, “Unreading the pyramids,” 196 with n. 11.

⁷⁰ Bickel, “Jenseitsfahrt,” 56.

⁷¹ Cognitive linguistics is a branch of linguistics that studies the human cognitive system as having its basis in physical and sensorial experience, and stresses the interrelation of linguistic structure and thought processes. For a comprehensive overview of this field of study and further references, see R. Nyord, *Breathing flesh: conceptions of the body in the ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (Copenhagen, 2009), 5-35.

same time, they also provided a wide variety of encyclopedic, pragmatic, and grammatical information.⁷² Acting like icons conveying many basic components of (Egyptian) cultural knowledge in a condensed form, they can unveil a complex network of connections and symbolic meanings hidden behind their graphic appearance, thereby opening a window into the ancient Egyptians' mindset and their "Egyptianicity."⁷³ As determinatives play a major role in the interpretation of the ancient Egyptian world, the analysis of the ones classifying the word Duat in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts may offer valuable insight into the underlying development of the conception of the afterlife during the periods in which such collections of texts originated.

Throughout the Pyramid Texts, various determinatives are used in association with the term Duat, but the majority of cases feature the sign of the star in a circle [GLYPH 2] (N15), with the sign of the plain star [GLYPH 3] (N14) ranking second for number of attestations.⁷⁴ The incidence of other determinatives is much lower; nevertheless, these can still contribute to our understanding of the various aspects of the Duat. For instance, the use of the sign [GLYPH 4] (N31) could suggest the idea the Duat was regarded as a path towards rebirth⁷⁵, while the sign [GLYPH 5] (O49) may indicate that it was imagined to be a defined locale in the cosmos, as opposed to other areas that were left unnamed and/or undetermined because of their undefined character.⁷⁶ Furthermore, the signs [GLYPH 6] (N1) and [GLYPH 7] (N37) also appear in conjunction with the word Duat, pointing to the idea of the sky or more generically a celestial domain and to its watery nature respectively.⁷⁷ Finally, a group formed by the signs [GLYPH 3] and [GLYPH 8] (N5+N19) accompanies the word Duat once, but in a passage whose context suggests that this should be interpreted as denoting the morning.⁷⁸ Based on the analysis of the

⁷² O. Goldwasser, *From icon to metaphor: studies in the semiotics of the hieroglyphs* (Fribourg-Göttingen, 1995), esp. 80-106; O. Goldwasser and C. Grinevald, "What are 'determinatives' good for?," in E. Grossman, S. Polis, and J. Winand, eds., *Lexical semantics in Ancient Egyptian* (Hamburg, 2012), 17-53. All the references to hieroglyphs cited henceforth follow the conventional sign list in A. Gardiner, *Egyptian grammar: being an introduction to the study of hieroglyphs* (3rd ed., Oxford, 1957).

⁷³ Goldwasser, *From icon to metaphor*, 58.

⁷⁴ Out of a total of eighty-one attestations of the word Duat across all the pyramids inscribed with this corpus (see above), the sign [GLYPH 2] is used as determinative fifty-five times (68%), while the sign [GLYPH 3] appears sixteen times (20%).

⁷⁵ Beaux, "La douat dans les Textes des Pyramides," 4 with n. 36. This sign is attested three times as determinative of the word Duat (PT 569 §1434c – twice in P, M).

⁷⁶ This sign, which is used twice on its own as determinative of the word Duat (PT 215 §148a, 151a – Wd), was generally employed to classify words conveying the notion of (Egyptian) village, city, or urbanised area in general, and was applied whenever the place to which it referred possessed features that made it a "locale" with more or less specific boundaries; e.g., A. Loprieno, "Travel and fiction in Egyptian literature," in D. O'Connor and S. Quirke, eds., *Mysterious Lands* (London, 2003), 31-51. On the use of the word *nīwt* "town, city" as a celestial toponym in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts, see the remarks in Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte*, 25 with n. 69.

⁷⁷ Three attestations of the word Duat are accompanied by the following combinations of signs: [GLYPH 2] and [GLYPH 6] in PT 437 §802c – P; [GLYPH 3] and [GLYPH 6] in PT 603 §1677a – N; [GLYPH 3] and [GLYPH 7] in PT 466 §882c – M.

⁷⁸ PT 273-274 §404a – W, T. This passage is part of the Cannibal Spell, and details how the king feeds on gods in order to magically absorb their power during a morning meal (*išft dwt*, §404a), an evening meal (*mšrwt.f*, §404b), and a night meal (*išft h3w*, §404c); see, e.g., Goebis, *Crowns*, 205-30. The interpretation of Duat as 'morning' in this context is further substantiated by the possible connection between the etymology of the word *dwt* and the semantic

determinatives and of the various contexts discussed above, the hypothesis that the Duat was imagined as a netherworld does not seem likely. Instead, a celestial-cosmic domain seems to be meant, in which the northern night sky played a major role, as abode of the Imperishable Stars. Not only was the king destined to live an eternal life after death in company of gods and celestial bodies, but he also assumed an active role in participating in the cosmic cycles as a star himself. Such cycles, being based on regular movements of various celestial bodies across the sky during the year, represented perpetual regeneration, and were thus the perfect metaphor for the king's never-ending post-mortem existence. Taking the visual level of meaning even further, it may even be argued that the predominant determinative [GLYPH 2] suggests a conception of the Duat as an all-enclosing space quite literally encircling the celestial bodies and the *akhs* as well, which is what the spells mentioned above point to when referring to the heliacal setting of the stars.⁷⁹ Those spells characterize the Duat as the environment of the invisible phase of growth and progress of the celestial bodies before (re)birth in the morning on the eastern Akhet.⁸⁰ This would justify the apparent connection of the Duat with the earth that is observable in the texts mentioned above, since the celestial bodies – and the king with them – were seen to reappear above the Akhet rising from the earth, thus leading to the speculation that they might have come from a subterranean space located between the two ends of the Akhet. This would thus represent a transitional area between the two phases, namely invisibility and visibility, the former being the place/moment of darkness and the latter the one in which the sun shines. Accordingly, the Duat could be a notion of both time and space situated between two physical or metaphysical dimensions, whereby it could be imagined as lying in the sky and beneath the earth at the same time.

When analysing the occurrences of the word Duat in the Coffin Texts, one feature stands out. As opposed to the Pyramid Texts, where the (chiefly) cosmic-celestial destiny of the deceased was epitomized by the determinative representing a star in a circle, the same word in the Coffin Texts is almost always determined by the sign [GLYPH 9] (O1), which never appeared before.⁸¹

field of *dw3*, denoting the morning and morning worship (Barta, *Bedeutung der Pyramidentexte*, 95-96; Allen, "Cosmology," 23-24; Beaux, "La *douat* dans les Textes des Pyramides," 5).

⁷⁹ The *akhs* could be associated with the stars, and specifically with the Imperishable Stars. On this, see, e.g., G. Englund, *Akh – une notion religieuse dans l'Égypte pharaonique* (Uppsala, 1978), 57-59.

⁸⁰ Beaux, "La *douat* dans les Textes des Pyramides."

⁸¹ The passages of the Coffin Texts mentioning the Duat are 109. Considering all the attestations of the word Duat in a given passage of the same spell every time they appear on a different carrier, the count goes up to 237. Out of these 237 occurrences, 228 display the sign [GLYPH 9] as determinative (96%), with the remaining nine either displaying a different determinative (N23 [GLYPH 10] in spell 335, CT IV 225d) or other determinatives used in conjunction with the house sign. Thus, we find [GLYPH 3] and [GLYPH 9] in (spell 108, CT II, 121d – pGardiner III; spell 495, CT VI 76h – B3Bo), while [GLYPH 9] and [GLYPH 5] appear once in spell 397 (CT V 114f – T1C). In spell 891 (CT VII 101n – S10C), the determinative is a variant of the sun disk [GLYPH 11] (N5), which appears without the usual central dot. The word Duat is accompanied by the group [GLYPH 12] (N14+N5+N19) and [GLYPH 13] (N14+N5) in spell 463 (CT V 335e – B9C and pGardiner II, respectively). Finally, spell 937 (CT VII 145e) in pGardiner III and in pGardiner IV shows two signs not attested elsewhere in this corpus, and which precede the usual house sign. In the former case, the sign consists in the usual star (N14) enclosed in a square, while in the latter the same star appears within a square with a rounded top. Since these signs occur in hieratic documents, it is possible

This represents the prototypical ground plan of a small one-room house, and is usually employed in the logographical writing of the word *pr* ‘house’.⁸² However, when the sign is used as a superordinate determinative, its literal meaning ‘house’ is removed, and the sign is used instead to classify terms conceptually belonging to the category ‘buildings’ or ‘habitat’, such as [GLYPH 14] *ḥt* ‘room’ or [GLYPH 15] *ḥt* ‘Akhet’.⁸³ On the one hand, the replacement of the older stellar determinative through the house sign may be a consequence of the growing tendency to create more standardized orthographies and combinations of determinatives classifying a word, which was part of a process of standardization of the Egyptian script started at the beginning of the Middle Kingdom.⁸⁴ On the other hand, this evolution has the potential of revealing more details about the underlying conceptualization of the afterlife in the period between the Old and the Middle Kingdom. To this regard, it is particularly significant that the same choice of determinatives can be observed also in the copies of Pyramid Texts spells occurring on coffins and other carriers dated to the Middle Kingdom, which represent an intermediary phase of transmission of this stream of funerary tradition.⁸⁵ In the vast majority of cases, in fact, the word Duat is accompanied by the determinative [GLYPH 9], which may point to a progressive transition towards a different conceptualization of the notion, later fully appreciable in the Coffin Texts. In the Middle Kingdom, copies of the Pyramid Texts appear at times along Coffin Texts spells, which may have provided the idea of a “newer” determinative – the house sign – found now also in the older texts. This in itself is indicative of a perceived evolution of the concept, which needed to be reflected in the determinatives, being these effective tools to communicate a range of notions in a condensed form. I believe that, by using the determinative denoting a generic enclosed space, the idea of the Duat as a more confined domain was introduced, which was based on the notion of a more specific, circumscribed area within the cosmos. Such a development would match the increasing attention to the systematization of material and knowledge that can be observed in the Coffin Texts and that, when applied to the physical organization of the afterlife and its geography, can be especially appreciated in the Book of the Two Ways, anticipating the large Theban compositions of the New Kingdom.⁸⁶ Given that the house sign could be used to refer to the broader category ‘habitat’, it is highly likely that the Duat

that they were transcribed as distinct signs by de Buck, but may originally have been intended to be the usual sign [GLYPH 2], appearing different probably due to peculiarities of the scribe’s handwriting or to a diverse scribal tradition. I am indebted to Dr. Foy Scalf for suggesting these remarks to me.

⁸² *Wb* I, 511.7-516.1, including all the various meanings behind the generic term ‘house’.

⁸³ A superordinate determinative is one defining the broader conceptual domain to which the word determined belongs (e.g. Goldwasser, *From icon to metaphor*, 46, 86-88).

⁸⁴ Goldwasser and Grinevald, “What are ‘determinatives’ good for?,” 44; A. Loprieno, *Ancient Egyptian: a linguistic introduction* (Cambridge, 1995), 21.

⁸⁵ Many of the Middle Kingdom exemplars of Pyramid Texts are published in J. Allen, *The Egyptian Coffin Texts, Volume 8: Middle Kingdom copies of Pyramid Texts* (Chicago, 2006).

⁸⁶ The attempt at systematizing the materials merged into the Coffin Texts appears evident for instance in the rubrics, captions, and titles dotting many of the spells. The notion of Duat as a defined space, however, became more clearly delineated in the early New Kingdom, when the phrase *pt, t3, dw3t* “sky, earth, Duat” is found quite commonly to describe a three-tiered universe into separate spheres, at times including also the primeval ocean Nun (Allen, *Genesis in Egypt*, 5; cf. Assmann, *Altägyptische Totenliturgien* 2, 464-65).

was imagined as a physical place where the deceased would reside forever, their home in the next world, functioning as the prototypical habitat where they would fulfill their own regeneration process. The same evolution also affected the word *ꜣḥt* ‘Akhet’, which was at first written phonetically and only later by means of the iconic sign [GLYPH 16] (N27) augmented by the addition of the house sign as determinative.⁸⁷ In fact, also the Akhet, like the Duat, was imagined as a place where the effective rebirth of the deceased took place, and where the blessed dead (*akhs*) could reside.⁸⁸ Accordingly, the words *dwꜣtiw* ‘those of the Duat’ and *ꜣḥtiw* ‘those of the Akhet’ could be assigned the now usual house determinative, as both categories of beings were naturally imagined to have their eternal abode in the Duat and the Akhet or the sky.⁸⁹

Another avenue of interpretation of the prevailing choice of the house sign to classify the word Duat in the funerary texts of this period becomes apparent when analyzing the content of the Coffin Texts. Family bonds, and in particular the relationship between father and son, hold a preeminent position in this corpus, in contrast with the Pyramid Texts, where they were not particularly stressed. In the earlier corpus, in fact, the king’s or queen’s “family” was represented by the ensemble of all those gods and goddesses who took on the role of his/her father or mother. Alternatively, in the ritual context of most Pyramid Texts spells, the recipient of the cult (i.e., the king/Osiris) was often called “father” by the officiant, acting as his son (Horus).⁹⁰ Without the rituals performed by the son for his dead father, the latter would have no chance of survival in the hereafter, and the former would have no right to succeed him on earth, and to inherit his social position. As mentioned above, the sign [GLYPH 9] could be used logographically to write the word *pr*, the primary meaning of which is ‘house’. However, the term could also refer to the inhabitants of the house, namely the household.⁹¹ The family unit plays a major role throughout the Coffin Texts, where many spells are concerned with the deceased being able to reunite with his own *ꜣbt* in the afterlife. This term, usually translated as ‘family’, rather denotes a domestic group with a well-defined socio-legal status, and whose social, material, and legal aspects were imagined to be replicated in the next world.⁹² In a world in which the nomarchal culture – forming the background of the rise of the Coffin Texts in the provincial centers⁹³ – relied on the

⁸⁷ The Pyramid Texts generally use a phonetic spelling for Akhet, like [GLYPH 17] (e.g., PT 273-274 §412c – W, T) or [GLYPH 18] (e.g., 216 §151a – W). In the Coffin Texts, the writing [GLYPH 19] appears (e.g., spell 51, CT I 236d) along with remnants of the older phonetic writing, which may be also accompanied by the sky determinative, in analogy to what attested already in the Pyramid Texts (e.g., spell 6, CT I §17b – B4C). For further references, see Allen, “Cosmology,” 17-20; cf. also *Wb* I, 17.12-14.

⁸⁸ The conception of the Akhet as an eternal abode was deeply rooted in the Egyptian culture, especially in royal and religious contexts; Goldwasser, *From icon to metaphor*, 99; cf. J. Assmann, “Horizont,” in *LÄ* III (1980), 5.

⁸⁹ For the word *dwꜣtiw* accompanied by the house sign as determinative, see, e.g., spells 236 (CT III 302g – G1T) and 458 (CT V 332a – B3L). For *ꜣḥtiw* see, e.g., spells 159 (CT II 371a – B2Bo) and 317 (CT IV 117g – S1P, S2C).

⁹⁰ For the relationship between father/beneficiary/Osiris and son/ritualist/actor/Horus, see for instance the remarks in K. Goebis, “A Functional Approach to Egyptian Myth and Mythemes,” *JANER* 2 (2002), 42-55.

⁹¹ *Wb* I, 512.4-13.

⁹² On the importance of the notion of *ꜣbt* in the Coffin Texts, see Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 185-92, 202.

⁹³ The nomarch figure is generally assumed to have emerged towards the end of the Fifth Dynasty, with the process being complete in the Sixth Dynasty (Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 28 with n. 91, 33-53).

office of nomarch being passed down for generations within one family, stressing the ideological importance of the household may be another factor to be taken into consideration behind the proliferation of the spells focusing on the relationships within its members also in the afterlife. This, in turn, may be connected with the house determinative used to classify the word Duat in this composition, as the beyond had probably come to be imagined as a space and time in the afterlife when a replica of one's own household could be functionally reunited.

Furthermore, not only do many Coffin Texts spells evoke aspects of the life in the next world that mirror life on earth, but the same concepts seem to underlie two closely associated categories of funerary items that were particularly popular between the First Intermediate Period and the end of the Middle Kingdom, the period to which most coffins inscribed with Coffin Texts spells can be dated. These items are the funerary models and the so-called soul-houses. The former, despite first spreading during the Sixth Dynasty in northern Egypt, became most widely distributed in the major nomarchal centers in the period spanning the end of the Eleventh Dynasty and the beginning of the Twelfth.⁹⁴ Although these wooden models represent a residence uniquely in the case of Meketre⁹⁵, the many activities usually featured have a close connection with the household and its welfare, all serving as miniature tableaux of daily life. The inclusion of such models in the tomb furnishings, though it has been generally explained through their alleged magical purpose of providing for the deceased's needs in the afterlife, may perhaps be interpreted as reflecting the deceased's attachment to his own family in this world, something that he certainly would have wished to cherish in the next world as well. A detail of the Meketre models suggests a connection with the second category of items mentioned above, the soul-houses, which consist in anepigraphic fired clay models of houses with representations of offerings in the forecourts. They were found mostly in First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom modest provincial burials, mainly in Upper Egypt but also in Lower Nubia and in the oases.⁹⁶ Meketre's garden model can be regarded in essence as a libation basin (the pool) with associated vegetation and architecture, a use that has been postulated also for the courtyards of the soul houses, which may have functioned as a cheaper version of the stone offering trays.⁹⁷ Soul-houses have traditionally been interpreted as funerary objects, the equivalent in poorer burials of the wooden

⁹⁴ A. Tooley, *Egyptian models and scenes* (Princes Risborough, 1995), 12.

⁹⁵ Tooley, *Egyptian models*, 57-58. These are models A and B in H. Winlock, *Models of Daily Life in Ancient Egypt from the Tomb of Meket-Rē' at Thebes* (Cambridge, 1955), 17-19, 83-84.

⁹⁶ The first study of this particular material is W. Petrie, *Gizeh and Rifeh* (London, 1907), 14-20 with pls. XIV-XXII. A more comprehensive analysis, discussing the origin, evolution, and function of the pottery offering trays from which the soul houses are thought to have originated, is found in A. Niwiński, *Plateaux d'offrandes et "maisons d'âmes."* *Genèse, évolution et fonction dans le culte des morts au temps de la XIIe dynastie* (Warsaw, 1975). A new typology for these artifacts, in which soul-houses represent domestic architecture structures, was subsequently put forward by A. Tooley in *Middle Kingdom Burial Customs. A Study of Wood Models and Related Material* (Ph.D. diss., University of Liverpool, 1989), 249-304. A more recent reappraisal of the problematic interpretation of these items is F. Leclère, "Les "maisons d'âme" égyptiennes: une tentative de mise au point," in B. Muller, ed., "*Maquettes architecturales*" de l'antiquité: regards croisés (Proche-Orient, Égypte, Chypre, bassin égéen et Grèce, du Néolithique à l'époque hellénistique). *Actes du colloque de Strasbourg, 3-5 décembre 1998* (Paris, 2001), 99-121.

⁹⁷ Leclère, "Les maisons d'âme," 111-14.

models placed in elite tombs⁹⁸, or possibly miniature substitutions of the funerary chapel, at the same time evoking features of domestic architecture.⁹⁹ However, many were found in settlements, thus clearly pointing at other possible uses of the soul houses. These may have been ritual objects used within the household, possibly accompanying the lives of its members from house to grave, and they may therefore have been considered to function as posthumous projections of the identity of the individuals and of the household.¹⁰⁰ Even though the wooden models and the Coffin Texts on the one hand, and the soul houses on the other were expressions of the culture of different strata of the population (elite and popular, respectively), they all appear to have aimed at the preservation of the uniqueness of the household beyond the boundaries of life and death, permanently projecting the importance of family bonds in the afterlife as well. I therefore suggest that the determinative [GLYPH 9], other than pointing to an underlying conception of the Duat as a more circumscribed area within the cosmos, also reflects the ideological significance of preserving the household's identity in the afterlife, as this latter came to be imagined as the place and time where one's family would be reunited, functioning also as a house of sort, although an immaterial one this time, and a counterpart of that shared by the members of a family in this world. In the reign of Senwosret III, a major reform took place, which affected all aspects of material culture, language, and even institutions and society.¹⁰¹ As for burial customs, the old funerary models of clay and wood completely disappeared, and were replaced by a new type of funerary assemblage, which included new coffin types and new kinds of objects, such as shabtis and *apotropaia*.¹⁰² The nomarchal culture eventually came to an end, and so did the tradition of the Coffin Texts.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Soul houses are generally said to have functioned as a dwelling place for the soul, as graves markers, or as offering items; Nawiński, *Plateaux d'offrandes*, 82-83. As for their belonging in the popular culture, this was not always the case, as a few exemplars were found in contexts linked to high-ranking individuals; Tooley, *Middle Kingdom Burial Customs*, 299-300. On the possible connection between the wooden funerary models and the soul houses, see Leclère, "Les maisons d'âme," 117.

⁹⁹ Leclère, "Les maisons d'âme," 115, 121.

¹⁰⁰ These considerations are based on notions of household archaeology and identity, and were inspired to me by a paper entitled "The Social and Cultic Significance of Soul Houses from Settlements," delivered by N. Picardo at the at the Eleventh International Congress of Egyptologists, Florence (Italy), August 26, 2015.

¹⁰¹ Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture* offers a broad perspective on the cultural history, religion, and provincial administration in the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom. J. Richards, *Society and death in ancient Egypt: mortuary landscapes of the Middle Kingdom* (Cambridge, 2005) analyzes social changes from the perspective of provincial elite cemeteries. A good survey of funerary beliefs and practises between early and late Middle Kingdom is found in D. Doxey, "Funerary beliefs and practices in the Middle Kingdom," in R. Freed, L. Berman, D. Doxey, and N. Picardo, *The secrets of Tomb 10A: Egypt 2000 BC* (Boston, 2009), 39-63.

¹⁰² J. Bourriau, "Patterns of change in burial customs during the Middle Kingdom," in S. Quirke, ed., *Middle Kingdom studies* (New Malden, 1991), 3-20, esp. 10-16; W. Grajetzki, *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt* (London, 2003), 54-57; Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 219-25. The group of objects generally referred to as "apotropaia" includes magical wands and knives attested in the material record between the second half of the Eleventh and the end of the Seventeenth Dynasty; H. Altenmüller, *Die Apotropaia und die Götter Mittelägyptens. Eine typologische und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung der sog. „Zaubermesser“ des Mittleren Reiches* (Munich, 1965).

¹⁰³ Willems (*Aspects of Egyptian funerary culture*, 171-81, 220) wishes to link this phenomenon to the disappearance of nomarchal culture in the same period. However, it would be more correct to say that it was the tradition of coffins inscribed with Coffin Texts spells that came to an end. The corpus did not disappear altogether, but was rather

A final layer of meaning can be postulated to exist behind the use of the house sign as the chief determinative of the word Duat in the Coffin Texts. As discussed above, the goddess Nut, personifying the sky already in the Pyramid Texts, was believed to conceive and give birth to the sun, the king, and the stars, and could additionally be identified with the sarcophagus, the coffin, and the tomb itself. As such, she embodied a space that could contain all phases of life, death first and new life next, passing through the phase of regeneration, which she had the power of realizing. Being the coffin an item that ritually transformed the deceased into a newborn *akh*¹⁰⁴, the placement of the body within it could be thought of as a return to the maternal womb, whereby the mother Nut would nurture her son, the deceased, in order to effectively enable him to cross over to his new, celestial life. Adding to this ideology of Nut/sarcophagus being an enclosed space fostering regeneration, the possibility exists that her name may coincide with the word *nwt* “oval,” as a variant determinative of her name seems to allude to in at least one case in the Pyramid Texts.¹⁰⁵ Her body as container, physically resembling the idea of an oval as a confined space, thus functioned as a “pre-birth environment,” within which the mystery of renewal and rebirth took place.¹⁰⁶ Additionally, the oval can be conceptually associated with the notion of an enclosed habitat, which lies behind the use of the house sign as main determinative of the word Duat in the Coffin Texts. Nut, as mother of the sun and the king, and as an all-enclosing and (en)closed space materialized in the sarcophagus, therefore represents the central concept that links the tradition of a celestial afterlife to that of a chthonic one.

The flexibility displayed in these texts concerning the conception of the Duat underscores its nature of liminal domain full of regenerative power, situated between two modes of existence and accordingly also between two areas, geographical or otherwise. As such, it could be envisioned in the sky or somewhere between earth and Akhet, and it may even have been thought to be located within the body of Nut, harboring the sun and stars and offering a place of regeneration through (re)birth, as is later described in the Book of Nut. Wherever the Duat was imagined to be, the change detected in the use of the various determinatives associated with it is certainly indicative of an underlying evolution in its conceptualization, which took place in the period between the appearance of the Pyramid Texts and the earliest tradition of the Coffin Texts, dating back perhaps even to the late Sixth Dynasty.¹⁰⁷ The tendency towards a better organization of the notions of the afterlife lead to the evolution in the choice of the determinative(s) classifying the

transformed into a partially new corpus of funerary literature known today as the Book of the Dead, and some popular Coffin Texts spells resurfaced much later, unaltered. See, e.g., L. Gestermann, “Aufgelesen: Die Anfänge des altägyptischen Totenbuchs,” in B. Backes, I. Munro, and S. Stöhr, eds., *Totenbuch-Forschungen. Gesammelte Beiträge des 2. Internationalen Totenbuch-Symposiums 2005* (Wiesbaden, 2006), 101-13.

¹⁰⁴ On the coffin as a ritual element, see H. Willems, *Chests of life: a study of the typology and conceptual development of Middle Kingdom standard class coffins* (Leiden, 1988), esp. 46-47, 239-40; cf. Willems, *Heqata*.

¹⁰⁵ [GLYPH 20] in PT 593 §1629a, N (Allen, “Cosmology,” 16-17). Although the association between Nut and the oval is certainly justified, one dubious attestation of this determinative is not enough to establish whether or not the two names referred to the same entity; Billing, *Nut*, 11.

¹⁰⁶ Billing, *Nut*, 11, 115.

¹⁰⁷ Willems, *Egyptian funerary culture*, 225 with n. 321.

word Duat, during which one prevailing sign ([GLYPH 9]) became consistently assigned to this notion. This all-encompassing sign was to iconically stand for all the characteristics that the Duat possessed in the imagination of the ancient Egyptians, from its being a (now) more confined space to its functioning as a habitat for the deceased. Its location was of secondary importance, since the foundational conception that underlies both the celestial and the chthonic tradition is a functional one, according to which the Duat could stand for both a space and a time in which gods and men were regenerated, rising to a new form of existence. It is this functional aspect of the Duat as an (en)closed and enclosing space that was chosen to be emphasized through the house/habitat sign as the chief determinative for the word in the Coffin Texts and in the contemporary tradition of the Middle Kingdom copies of the Pyramid Texts. The vivid imagination of the ancient Egyptians – which had generated a cosmos where the boundaries between sky and netherworld were blurred in order to keep any destiny available for the deceased – was eventually transforming the next world into a more circumscribed and better organized domain within their universe.