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## COSMOGONY (LATE TO PTOLEMAIC AND ROMAN PERIODS)

### نظرية الخلق (من العصر المتأخر حتى العصرين البطلمي والروماني)

Brett McClain

Kosmogonie (Spätzeit und griechisch-römische Zeit)

Cosmogonie (basse époque et époque gréco-romaine)

*Cosmogonies of Late Period and Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt are founded upon those of the earlier "classic" ages, incorporating old texts and themes but elaborating them to form new compositions, synthesizing elements of the major Heliopolitan, Memphite, and Hermopolitan theologies with texts and rituals more specific to the deities of local cult centers, as well as newly developed theological concepts.*

تأسست نظريات نشأة الكون الخاصة بالعصر المتأخر والعصرين البطلمي والروماني على تلك النظريات التي تعود إلى العصور «الكلاسيكية» السابقة والتي تحتوى على نصوص ومواضيع قديمة، ولكن تم صياغتها بشكل جديد، حيث تم دمج عناصر كل الأنظمة اللاهوتية من هليوبوليس، ومنف، وهرموبوليس مع النصوص والطقوس الخاصة بعبادة المعبودات المحلية بالإضافة إلى مفاهيم لاهوتية جديدة.

**I**t is essential when considering the Egyptian cosmogonical systems current during the Late and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods to keep in mind that, as with other elements of religious thought, they were the result of a steady and continuous process of development extending back to the times of the earliest religious writings. At no point in Pharaonic history were Egyptian beliefs about the world's origins suddenly transformed into something significantly other than they had previously been. Indeed, so deeply rooted are even the latest Egyptian cosmogonical compositions in the textually attested belief systems of the earlier dynastic ages, incorporating fundamental Middle Kingdom and even Old Kingdom concepts (as exemplified in Smith 2002: 201 - 204), that Derchain was moved to opine that “. . . a presentation of historical

evolution is hardly conceivable . . . . The only suitable method of classification should then be purely typological...” (Derchain 1977: column 748)—a valid opinion, perhaps, if the subject is to be considered thematically, as a component of the spectrum of ancient Egyptian religious beliefs. Within the period under consideration, however, an awareness of the historical framework of their continuing development is indispensable. This is true not only because of the widespread influence of concepts found in early texts upon later compositions (see, for example, von Bomhard 2008: 59 - 76), but also because the selection, nature, and preservation of the textual source material attesting later cosmogonies was determined by historical circumstances. The evidence for cosmogonical beliefs in Ptolemaic and Roman times originating from sites in the Fayum is a

case in point, as on the one hand the heavy colonization of that province under the Ptolemies and the resulting foundation of new temple complexes led to the composition of cosmogonical treatises emphasizing preferentially Fayumic elements (cf. Smith 2002: 198 - 199), while on the other hand fortuitous environmental conditions in that region have led to the preservation of papyrus copies of these compositions, which are of the greatest significance (Beinlich 1991). Conversely, the generally poor preservation of temple sites in Lower Egypt has led doubtless to the loss of much significant written and inscribed material (the primary exceptions being the Nectanebid naoi with their astronomical/cosmographic treatises) that would surely have shed light on the cosmogonical ideas current in the Memphite region and the Delta—wherein theological thought and composition certainly continued to flourish—during the same period. Even in Upper Egypt, the varied and inconsistent preservation of temple structures dating to the Late and Ptolemaic and Roman centuries affects the availability of cosmogonical sources. Although large-scale temple construction, and the concomitant production of theological treatises on papyrus for temple use, continued to be undertaken between the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty and the beginning of the Ptolemaic Period, these monuments and their libraries are, with notable exceptions such as the temple of Hibis in Kharga, relatively sparsely preserved, resulting in a stretch of several centuries during which the cosmogonical text-tradition is less easy to follow, particularly when compared to the vast body of evidence from the subsequent Ptolemaic and Roman monumental programs.

Within the historical strictures thus imposed, determining as they did both the production and, to a great extent, the preservation of religious texts, the sources may also be surveyed geographically, since, as is well known, the various cosmogonies current throughout Egyptian history were, in origin, rooted in locally specific traditions and framed around the pantheons specific to individual cult-centers—members of a varied

and colorful congress of separate, yet sometimes interdependent, cosmological systems that was maintained with remarkable consistency through the very latest texts in the Roman Period. Thus in these later stages of history the three great “theologies”—the Memphite, the Heliopolitan, and the Hermopolitan—are still useful in identifying and categorizing various thematic elements; though interdependent to some degree even in the New Kingdom, and increasingly synthesized with local cults as time passed, each of these cosmogonies continued to offer a distinctive presentation of cosmic origins.

### *Heliopolitan Traditions*

Well attested in mortuary literature from the earliest times, the essential elements of the Heliopolitan theology are elaborated in written documents of the Late Period. Among these is a papyrus (P. Brooklyn 47.218.84) dating to the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, which preserves a significant exposition of that city’s foundation myth, including a description of Ra-Atum’s self-stimulatory act of creation, aided by his two hands, which are divinized as an avatar of Hathor-Nebet-Hetepet (Meeks 2006: 9 - 10, 192 - 197). The Heliopolitan theology is most fully recorded, however, in a section of the *Book of Knowing the Manifestations of Ra and of Overthrowing the Serpent Apophis*, a text of late New Kingdom origin, found in the fourth-century BCE manuscript P. Bremner-Rhind (Faulkner 1937: 166). It details the creation by Atum-Khepri of Shu and Tefnut in the primordial waters of Nun by means of masturbation and spitting, with these two deities subsequently engendering Geb and Nut, who then produced Osiris, Horus, Seth, Isis, and Nephthys; also described is the origin of mankind from Atum’s tears (Faulkner 1938). That this papyrus was copied, at least in part, by a Theban priest (Faulkner 1936: 121) illustrates the continuing widespread influence of Heliopolitan mythology at this time, even in a city with a flourishing cosmological system of its own.

### *Memphite Traditions*

The cosmogonical system of Memphis is most famously known from a stela inscribed during the reign of Shabaqo during the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and based, according to the introductory section of the text, on a “worm-eaten” document, presumably found in the temple of Ptah. Though written in Old Egyptian, and once thought to be a copy of a document dating to the Old Kingdom (Junker 1940: 6 - 16; Sethe 1928: 2 - 5), the text transcribed under Shabaqo is now generally considered to have been of later date, composed in a deliberately archaizing style (Junge 1973, but cf. von Lieven 2007: 255 - 257). It contains a long section in which Ptah-Tatenen is said to bring Atum, with Shu, Tefnut, and the rest of the Heliopolitan Ennead, into being by the power of his creative thought and word, with all elements of divine and human existence also being thus created. The intent of the text was therefore in part to assert the primacy of Ptah over Atum as demiurge, and of Memphis as royal city *par excellence* (Lichtheim 1973: 54 - 56). A series of documents and representations from the New Kingdom through the Ptolemaic Period also indicates that among the initial creative acts of Ptah was the lifting up of the heavens, an event commemorated by rituals held at Memphis on the first day of the month *Phamenoth* (Berlandini 1995). During the Ptolemaic Period, Ptah-Tatenen was ecumenically venerated as creator of the cosmos and “father of the gods and goddesses” in many other cult centers, especially within the Thebaid (see below). A fragmentary Demotic treatise (P. dem. Berlin 13603) also attests the textual transmission of elements of the Memphite theology in later times (Erichsen and Schott 1954).

### *Hermopolitan Traditions*

The third of the great systems, that of Hermopolis, is attested in few sources from its city of origin (but see Roeder 1953: 366 - 374, 409 - 410, 439; Lefebvre 1924: 101 - 108) and lacks a major theological document like the Shabaka Stone, clearly setting out its

theogony in “pure” form. Indeed, it is best known elsewhere, since it was integrated with other cosmogonies, particularly those of Memphis and the Theban region (compare, for example, the Hermonthite text: see Thiers and Volokhine 2005: 73 - 77), from the New Kingdom onwards; an important recent study (Zivie-Coche 2009) draws attention to the dominance of Theban sources for the Hermopolitan myth. During the Late and Ptolemaic Periods, the Hermopolitan Ogdoad of primordial deities—Heh and Hehet, Kek and Keket, Nun and Nunet, and Niu and Niuwet representing the four components of pre-creation (infinite time, darkness, the primeval waters, and the void), for the last of which Amun and Amunet are sometimes substituted—figure prominently in cosmogonical texts of major temples and in a selection of papyrus documents. In the typical late versions of the myth, Ptah-Tatenen was held to be the creator of the Eight, whose genesis occurred within the primeval waters of Nun—which itself is sometimes identified with the demiurge. The male and female members of the Ogdoad then join to form Ra, who emerges from a lotus (Ryhiner 1986), or (in Theban-inspired recensions) Amun, who appears as a bull (Smith 2002: 39, 42 - 53). Another topos, rather obscure but appearing in both earlier and late texts, is that of the primordial “hidden egg,” created by Ptah, from which the eight demiurgic deities emerge; this also seems to have been of Hermopolitan origin (Sauneron and Yoyotte 1959: 59 - 62), but appears also in Theban texts, such as the late Ptolemaic cosmogonical treatise found in the Temple of Khons at Karnak (Mendel 2003: 42 - 51).

### *Regionalization*

The salient features in the development of cosmogonical thought in the Late and Ptolemaic Periods were the redaction of elaborate texts recording the creation myths particular to regional cult centers and their widespread adaptation, especially for use as part of the decoration in the great temples constructed under Ptolemaic patronage, a process which continued with the creation of



Figure 1. Amun and the Ogdoad over entrance to bark shrine, small temple of Amun, Medinet Habu.

even more sophisticated compositions for the monuments constructed under Roman domination. These texts are heavily infused with earlier cosmological material of many sorts—mortuary literature, ritual and magical texts, and fragments of old myths of Heliopolitan, Memphite, or Hermopolitan origin, compiled together, expanded, and adapted to suit the needs of local religious establishments. They are nevertheless unprecedented in their number, length, and elaboration, and in the degree to which mythical elements of varied origin are syncretized; they also contain much new material, written specifically for the regions to which the texts applied.

A notable early example of this regionalizing syncretism, from the period immediately preceding the Macedonian conquest, is given by the cosmological/astronomical texts appearing on a set of monolithic naoi carved during the reign of Nectanebo I for a temple or temples at Saft el-Henna in the eastern Delta, and dedicated to Shu-Sopdu. One of these, the celebrated “Naos of the Decades,” contains a cosmogonical inscription that describes the moment of creation when Shu separated the sky from the earth in the form of his children, Nut and Geb, following the Heliopolitan tradition. In this account, however, the four pairs of the primeval “souls of the Ogdoad” are also enclosed by Shu’s creative act within the vault of the heavens, and their corpses become the progenitors of the divine decan-stars, the initiation of whose eternal cycle signals the beginning of time (von Bomhard 2008: 54 - 76, 226 - 232, 243 - 244). It can only be supposed that this account reflects the type of specific regional

cosmogony that must have been composed for temples throughout Lower Egypt, but of which few other traces now remain.

Thanks primarily to the extensive preservation of Late Period, Ptolemaic, and Roman monuments in Thebes, the development of its cosmogonical system is also textually and iconographically well attested. Here, the synthetic creation myth developed in late and Ptolemaic times was based heavily on that of Hermopolis, references to the Ogdoad appearing in texts as early as the 25<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. The most important change in the Theban versions was the elevation of Amun-Ra, supreme god of Thebes, as primordial creator (Sethe 1929: 122 - 126); identified with Nun, “the great one who came into being at the beginning,” he is said to be the progenitor of these eight male and female deities, “who built the builders and fashioned the fashioners,” and thus also the father of Ra, the sun god. In this role Amun is also identified with Ptah-Tatenen in several inscriptions. Among the many sources for this theology are an elaborate dedicatory inscription carved on the gateway of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Pylon at Karnak (Drioton 1945) and several lengthy texts in the small temple of Amun at Medinet Habu, all dating to the reign of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. The old shrine at Medinet Habu had already by this time assumed special significance as the mortuary cult-place of the “deceased” Ogdoad (Sethe 1929: 53 - 61), who are called “the blessed dead who live in the Mound of Djeme” (fig. 1), and as such was the destination of a cult procession in which the statue of the ithyphallic Amun of Luxor Temple was carried across the Nile to make offerings to



his divine “progenitors” every ten days (Doresse 1979). Featuring prominently in the cosmogonical accounts from Medinet Habu and in related inscriptions throughout the Thebaid are the deities Kematef and Irita, ophidian manifestations of the primordial Amun, who function in the primordial waters as the progenitors of the Ogdoad (Gabolde 1995: 251 - 253; Klotz 2008: 164 - 172, 177 - 189; Thissen 1996). Another significant, and even more sophisticated, cosmogonical treatise was carved late in the Ptolemaic Period within the temple of Khons in the precinct of Karnak (Mendel 2003: 11). The “Khons cosmogony” identifies Amun as demiurge explicitly with Ptah-Tatenen, “who created the egg which went forth from Nun . . . who created heaven and earth . . . so that he might bring forth the egg and so that the Ogdoad might come into existence . . .” (Cruz-Uribe 1994: 173) and, alongside Amun, Ptah, and other major divinities, depicts the Ogdoad together with a group of twelve other gods (fig. 2), representing the active forces by which the creator accomplished the making of the cosmos. Altogether, the Theban records of Ptolemaic date portray a well-developed cosmogonical system, based on those of Memphis and Hermopolis but specifically adapted to suit the context of Amun’s sacred city. Yet closely related texts concerning Amun in the temple of Hibis in Kharga show that this synthesis was already in process much earlier, during the Persian occupation, and that Amun was revered as creator beyond the confines of the city itself (Klotz 2006: 2 - 3, 9 - 10). An inscription of Roman date from the temple of Coptos, north of Thebes, also exhibits Theban elements in a cosmogonical vision that focuses on the emergence of a primordial mound, with Geb as father of the gods (Traunecker 1992: 149 - 156, 341 - 351). During the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, the Hermopolitan-Theban system was also heavily drawn upon for the composition of treatises in the Fayum, for whose lacustrine environment the account of the genesis of the Ogdoad in the primeval ocean was, evidently, particularly appropriate (Beinlich 1991: 312 - 327; Smith 2002: 198 - 199).



Figure 2. Twelve primordial deities at the temple of Khons, Karnak.

Equally elaborate cosmogonical systems were redacted, largely from preexisting text traditions, at the other major sacred sites of Upper Egypt during the time of the Ptolemies. These generally depict the local cult center as the point of first origin, the temple structure mythologically encapsulating the primeval mound of the earth. At Edfu, texts describe an island of sand, covered with a thicket of reeds, in the waters of chaos. Upon this island gather an assembly of *Shebtiu* creator-deities who have emerged from the surrounding waters; in their presence there appears a slip of reed, which forms a perch (*djeba*) upon which the original falcon-god comes to rest. This becomes the “seat of the first occasion” of the god. Thereupon follows the emergence of mythical sacred districts associated with the temple of Edfu, along

with the foundation of the temple itself (Kurth 1998: 179 - 188; Finnestad 1985: 8 - 78; Reymond 1969: 12ff.), the whole process being guarded against evil by the presence of cadres of fierce protector-deities (Goyon 1985: 3 - 148). At Dendara, the cosmogonical texts are primarily concerned with the birth of Hathor, considered to be both the daughter of Nun-Irta and herself a demiurge (Preys 2006). Certain texts indicate that Hathor is engendered by sacred exudations that come from the eye of Ra as he emerges from the lotus (thus adapting the Hermopolitan cosmogony), combining with the sand of the primordial mound to form her being (Cauville 1990: 88 - 92); the birth of Isis is described in her shrine behind the main temple in parallel terms. The texts also record the genesis of the siblings of Isis (Osiris, the Elder Horus, Seth, and Nephthys), all the children of Nut according to the Heliopolitan theology, in their respective home-cities (ibid.: 93 - 94). The child-god of the Dendara triad, Harsomtus, also assumes a demiurgic role, being identified with both Ra and Tatenen in some of the temple's inscriptions (el-Kordy 1982). In the temple of Kom Ombo, texts expounding the mythical origins of the city reflect the Heliopolitan cosmogony, but identify Haroeris with Shu, and Sobek with Geb, as the progenitors of Osiris (Gutbub 1973: 18 - 31, 91 - 105). At Philae there are few cosmogonical references, although Horus-son-of-Isis is praised as creator of the gods (Žabkar 1988: 23 - 25). In addition to such treatises, the decorative schemes of many late temples also include ritual scenes in which principles of the various cosmogonical systems—the Memphite, the Heliopolitan, and the Hermopolitan—play a role.

Acknowledging the primacy of the local deity, the priests of each temple incorporated a multitude of heterogeneous textual and iconographic sources, some quite ancient, into compositions in which various origin myths functioned interdependently to actualize the shrine's function as a simulacrum of the created world.

The development of these synthetic cosmogonies continued through the last centuries of Egyptian civilization. Some of the latest texts, inscribed at Esna early in the second century CE, exhibit such systems at the height of their sophistication. Here, in elaborately detailed litanies, was recorded Neith's creation of the universe, which, like that of Ptah, was by means of her creative word; first the primordial mound, then the Ogdoad and the sun-god, her son, are brought into being, after which the goddess undertakes a journey to her ultimate residence at Sais (Sauneron 1962: 253 - 270; Sternberg-el Hotabi 1995: 1078 - 1086). Alongside Neith, Khnum-Ra also enjoyed the status of demiurge, praised in similar litanies as the father of all humanity, who formed mankind along with all living things upon his potter's wheel (Sauneron 1962: 95 - 106). As at other sites, Heliopolitan, Memphite, and Hermopolitan elements are integrated within these compositions, which are nevertheless texts of unprecedented depth and elaboration, specifically constructed with regard to the temple's two regnant deities and its calendar of cultic festivals. The Esna cosmogony demonstrates the extent to which the evolution of cosmological thought continued and flourished through the terminal phase of the Egyptian religion.

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The most useful summaries of Late Period and Ptolemaic and Roman cosmogonical sources are given by Sauneron and Yoyotte (1959) and Derchain (1977). Though somewhat dated, Sethe (1929) is still fundamental for the Theban/Hermopolitan system, but Mendel (2003) and Klotz (2006) offer significant contributions; additionally, the recent dissertation by Klotz (2008) presents a compendium of religious texts from Roman Thebes, including the various cosmogonical treatises. Also critical for understanding the Hermopolitan system is the Demotic



treatise concerning the primeval ocean published by Smith (2002). Examination of the Dendara cosmogony focuses on astronomical aspects in a study by Cauville (1997), with fuller treatment of the extensive material in the Isis temple also by Cauville (2009a, 2009b). The Edfu cosmogony is covered comprehensively by Reymond (1969), with translations of some of the core texts by Kurth (1998), while Sauneron (1962) presents an extensive treatment of the cosmogonical texts from Esna. For the Kom Ombo material, the fullest exposition is given by Gutbub (1973).

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Figure 1. Amun and the Ogdoad over entrance to bark shrine, small temple of Amun, Medinet Habu. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. Twelve primordial deities at the temple of Khons, Karnak. Photograph by the author.