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## **THE THRILL OF TIME THROUGH THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION AND ART: *OUROBOROS* AS AN ARCHETYPE FOR THE META-PHYSICS OF ETERNITY\***

In this paper not only the concept of time taken into its realization (hence the virtual *Einfühlung* of time *per se*), but also the time presented in the examined ancient Egyptian works of art are taken into account and are thoroughly discussed, with particular emphasis on the archetype of the *Ouroboros* (anc. Eg.: *sd-m-r3*) and its semantics not only in the ancient Egyptian *forma mentis*, but also in Alchemy. Through the colourful prism of the metaphysical or theological conception of time and eternity as they were meant by the ancient Nile-dwellers we are in a position nowadays to present plausible deductions about their relation to time, their quest for eternity and also examine the ways we could use in order to investigate the notions of time in relation to the specific art-forms created by them and studied here. The way the anonymous ancient Egyptian artists – for whom the meaning of *Art* (*hmt*) was not the same as it is for us today, but that “art” was only used as a vehicle towards their virtual *θέωσις* in the hereafter and their quest for immortality – have conceived and depicted time through their artefacts (especially

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during the high Pharaonic Era: c. 2575 BC to c. 714 BC) also provides a solid means in order to assess which are the philosophically and aesthetically relevant notions of time in the history of art of the ancient Mediterranean nations, between which Egypt holds a very high pedestal.

**Keywords:** *Ouroboros*, ancient Egyptian cosmovision, time, eternity, art, ancient Cosmology, modern Cosmology, Alchemy, Freemasonry, (Jungian) archetypes

## I. Introduction: Some Physics ... in the Ancient Egyptian Context

In modern Physics and Cosmology the notion of time<sup>1</sup> is extremely significant and difficult to comprehend, since not only time is believed to have started at the moment of creation of the Universe (Big Bang) and since then it flows continuously, being an important variable in the field equations, but also it is impossible to freeze it and measure it in the same manner we can stop and measure distances in space, since it is closely connected to the notion of entropy and growing disorder (a fact which hints to the irreversibility of the physical processes). *Hora ruit* and time haunts everything; from the moment we are born, we are walking gradually to the virtual end of “our own” time; yet is it a real end, or is it just part of a spatio-temporal transformation that we cannot yet satisfactorily explain in terms of pure science? Such questions were also haunting several ancient Mediterranean nations; and of course the Egyptians were not an exception.

On the contrary they were the nation the most preoccupied with the ideas of the hereafter, rebirth and immortality, all of which are closely connected to the conception of time. In the ancient Egyptian *forma mentis* the very notions of *time* (*zp*, *rk*) and *eternity* (*nhh*, *dt*) were crucial indeed<sup>2</sup>. Their significance pertained in the fact that the Egyptian theologians were discriminating between them in a very sophisticated and subtle way, considering them not only as the lot of

<sup>1</sup> For the point of view of modern Astrophysics and Cosmology, see: [Burke 1983; Hawking 1988; Hawking 2001; Prigogine 1980; cf. also Capra 1975; Zukav 1979; Dodd 1985; Maravelia 2006a, *chap. V*]. On the ancient Egyptian cosmovision, see: [Wallenwein 1995].

<sup>2</sup> On the Egyptian conception of time, see: [Assmann 1975; Assmann 1991; Goebis 2003, 238–253; Westendorf 1974, 136–141; Hornung 1978, 269–307; Zivie-Coche 1991, 52–79; Gunkel 1921. See also [Maravelia 2018, *in press*].

gods, but also as the reward for all the *transfigured/beatified spirits* (*3hw*) of the deceased. Through their cosmovisional ideas concerning the firmament and the astral bodies, through their conception of the sky goddess Nūt, the ancient Egyptians have inherited the World's Human Thought with invaluable and bright tokens of philosophical insight, usually well-hidden behind meta-physical allegories.

The archetype of the *Ouroboros*, the cosmic serpent eating its own tail, symbolized for the Egyptians the regenerative non-existence of the void, out of which the primeval creator-god Atūm emerged and created everything. One of the most ancient depiction of the *Ouroboros* in the art of ancient Egypt is a drawing on the mythological (mortuary) papyrus of Hor-ouben (*Hr-wbn*), today kept at the premises of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (№ 133) and dating to 21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty (c. 1080–945 BC) [Piankoff, Rambova 1957, 22, *fig. 3*; see also Reemes 2015, 350, *fig. 60*]<sup>3</sup>. On this we can see the following (Fig. 1a–1b): The solar god – as an infant with thumb at mouth (alluding to Harpokratēs), bearing the side lock of hair and the pharaonic/Osirian royal sceptres – is surrounded by the eternal serpent that bites its tail, standing on the double-lion god of the horizon Aker<sup>4</sup>. Two hands are protecting the solar youth<sup>5</sup>. Between the lions of Aker a strange animal's head (Sethian animal?) is also depicted. The *Ouroboros* symbolizes the regenerating power of non-existence of the void (vacuum) encircling the Cosmos [Hornung 1996, 164, 271]<sup>6</sup>. The snake remains (Fig. 2a–2b), but the world enclosed by it sinks away into the primeval watery Abyss and oblivion, vanishing with the gods and all living forms, thus the state of things before creation returns (see *infra*). The sun-god as a child within the *Ouroboros* is a very characteristic and

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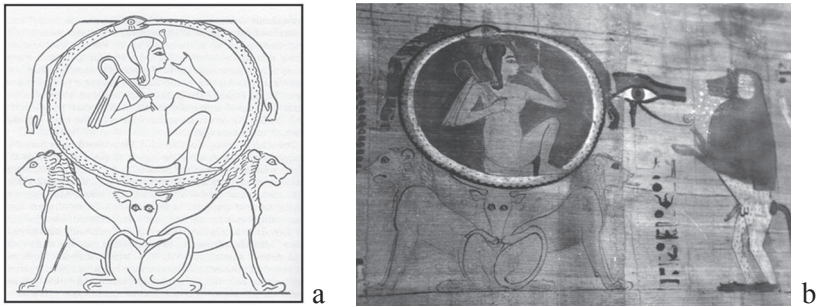
<sup>3</sup> The earliest known depiction of the *Ouroboros* is found on the second golden shrine of Tut'ankhamūn, where two *Ouroboroi* surround a large mummiform figure probably representing the unified Rē' and Oriris (see [Piankoff 1949, 113, *fig. 1*; Reemes 2015, 324, *fig. 34*]).

<sup>4</sup> On Aker, see [LÄ I, 1975, 114–115 (art. "Aker"); de Witt 1951]. The lion looking towards the West alludes to yesterday and death; while the one facing the East alludes to tomorrow and resurrection.

<sup>5</sup> In the form of an inverted *k3*; cf. our discussion in [Maravelia 2007b, 36–50 (especially p. 44)].

<sup>6</sup> On the ancient Egyptian conception of the *Ouroboros*, cf. also [Du Quesne 1996, 141–155]. On the semantics of the *Ouroboros*, see also [Tarasenko 2005, 6–31].

important symbol, alluding also – due to its solar symbolism – to the solar baby or youth, the *divine stripling and heir of eternity* (*hwn ntry, iw<sup>c</sup>w nḥh*)<sup>7</sup>. Hence, the description of the primeval chaos, of the initial amorphous state of being, which virtually includes the subsequent creative order, is symbolically represented by the archetype or *κοσμικὸν μίμημα* of the *Ouroboros*, the serpent eating its own tail<sup>8</sup>, thus alluding to the perpetual cosmic and/or natural circle of periodicities.



**Fig. 1. a** – A depiction of the *Ouroboros* (anc. Eg.: *sd-m-r3*) as a linear drawing. The solar god as an infant is surrounded by the eternal serpent that bites its own tail, standing on the double-lion god of the horizon Aker. **b** – Original of the same depiction. From the mythological (funerary) papyrus of Hor-ouben (*Hr-wbn*) at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (№ 133, Dynasty XXI, c. 1080–945 BC) (photo by Mykola Tarasenko, 2002).

In the *Book of the Dead* there is a very characteristic and interesting eschatological passage, where the supreme solar creator, the primeval god *Rē<sup>c</sup>-Atūm* predicts the catastrophic end of the Universe, which will destroy every god and every human with his own and

<sup>7</sup> See again [Maravelia 2007b, 36–50].

<sup>8</sup> On the symbolism of the *οὐροβόρος ὄφις*, see [Symbols 1996, 728–729 (art. “ouroboros”)]. On an interesting Hellenistic astrological text about the *Ouroboros*, as this last was presented by the ancient Egyptian priests (see: [Papathanasiou 1990, 121–133, n. 108]). A recent dissertation on the *Ouroboros*, disconnecting it as a time- and/or eternity-symbol and connecting it to protective enclosures, is [Reemes 2015 (see especially pp. II–III and 278–281)]. Finally, on the Jungian archetypes and mythology, see [Jung 1959; Jung 1956; Jung, Kerényi <sup>2</sup>1963].

Osiris' exceptions<sup>9</sup>. According to this text, the cosmos will return to the primordial state of inertia and non-existence in the abysmal ocean of Nūn, while the supreme solar and creator-god will be transformed into a gigantic serpent (possibly an alternative archetypal form of the *Ouroboros*<sup>10</sup>), which no god will be able to see and no human will be able to know. These beliefs show that – following the ancient Egyptian ideas of the imperial period (New Kingdom) – the ultimate destiny of the Universe was also considered as very luminous. And this is because the high solar god was meant to survive after the destruction of the Cosmic Everything (*Ntt-Wn*), uniting himself with Osiris (the god of resurrection) and inundating the Cosmos with the splendid ultimate light of his supersubstantial union to the god of the Netherworld (**Fig. 2b**). Hence, from a certain point of view, the ultimate end of the Universe would be light, a fact that reminds us of certain modern cosmological theories (see e.g.: [Maravelia 2006a, 396–397; Weinberg 1978; Rovelli 2004; cf. also Zukav 1979; Hawking 1988; Hawking 2001])!

The primeval creator-god (Rē'-)Atūm, ancestor of the Heliopolitan *Great Ennead of Gods* (*Psd̄t-n̄trw ʕt*), according to the ancient Egyptian conceptions, was the initial cause of everything. He was the Cosmic Serpent *par excellence*, so nicely depicted in the ancient Egyptian cosmovision, though only before and after the *Totality* [which is one of the hieroglyphic meanings of his name (*Tmw*)] of the space-time continuum, in an extra-temporal and extra-spatial region, where neither gods nor mortals had access. Atūm was truly the first of the old gods, the *deus otiosus* of Nature in his pitiless transcendence.

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<sup>9</sup> See BD 175 (in pBM EA10470); cf. e.g. [Faulkner, Goelet 1998, *pl. 29, cols 16–19*]: *iw.k r ḥḥ n ḥḥ <n> ʕḥʕw n ḥḥ*; [...] *iw.i grt r ḥḏ(i) irt n.i nbt*; *iw t3 pn r iy m Nwn, m ḥ{w}ḥw, mi tp.f-ʕ*; *ink zp ḥnʕ Wsir*; *ir.n.i ḥprw.i m* [...] *ḥf3w, nn rḥ.zn rmt̄, nn m33.zn n̄trw*. On another similar passage from the *Coffin Texts*, see CT VII, 1130, §§ 461c–471g; CT II, 80, §§ 27d–43h. For an analysis, see: [Maravelia 2012, 103–105]. On BD 17, cf. [Tarasenko 2006, 339–355]; see also [Naville <sup>2</sup>1971].

<sup>10</sup> Here we should compare the two representations of Atūm, like an ancient Egyptian decan, in the form of a serpent, although bearing human hands and feet (cf. [Sauneron 1970, *fig. 2–3*]); several decans were depicted during the Late Period as astral serpents (cf. Kákosy 1982, 173ff; Kákosy 1981, 255–260, *fig. 1–3; Taf. 43*). On the Egyptian decans, see also: [Locher 2003, 429–434].

When the nocturnal Sun visits daily the realms of the Netherworld, it is in his allotropic form (Atūm-Rē<sup>4</sup> or Khnūm-Rē<sup>4</sup>), that unites himself with Osiris (**Fig. 2b**), the Egyptian *primogenitus mortuorum* and god of the dead, in order to resurrect the sleeping dead and resume creation during the dawn of the next morning, vanquishing death and repeating the regenerative act of the primeval creation. Thus, the Sun would re-rise victorious as a winged scarab-headed god, the divinity of the morning youthful Sun<sup>11</sup>.

## II. Time and Art in Ancient Egypt and in the Modern World

How art was conceived in ancient Egypt? The notion of *Art* in ancient Egypt was not being considered and conceived in the same way we (Westerners) think and speak of it! There was no *art* in ancient Egypt in the way *we* recognize art in our modern world! The term closest to the notion of *art* in ancient Egypt was *hmt*<sup>12</sup>, meaning *skill, craftsmanship*. Even if the ancient Nile-dwellers were speaking of *art*, this very *art* was not an absurd or abstract concept; it was not an aesthetic category independent of their predominant metaphysical and religious experience [Aldred 1988, 11]. It was this last experience that was encompassing and including the whole of the ancient Egyptian social reality, as well as all of the subsequent human activities. Besides this fact, in ancient Egypt the firm belief to the power of magic was so deep and comprised every aspect of the human life, even the so-called *art* itself. It was exactly this belief at the universal immanence of the magical force – usually personified as the god Heka (*Hk3*) – that was motivating the ancient Egyptians to believe that this force should be propitiated, if they needed to pray for help, or even that it should be annihilated if it was inimical ... The ancient Egyptians considered that they were living in a polymorphic Universe, full of gods, divinities, demons, (good or evil) spirits of the dead, and

<sup>11</sup> We must – however – add a negative or evil aspect of the serpent's archetype (**Fig. 2a**) in the Egyptian cosmovision and that is 'Apophis, the wicked demon that tries to prevent the sunrise but is always defeated (see e.g.: [Maravelia 2006a, 262, n. 254; 324, 354, n. 195; 360–361, n. 213, 219; *passim*; Borghouts 1973, 114–150]). On depicting Rē<sup>4</sup> and Osiris united (from Nefertiri's tomb, QV 66), see: [Maravelia 2006a, 309, 440, *fig. 1*].

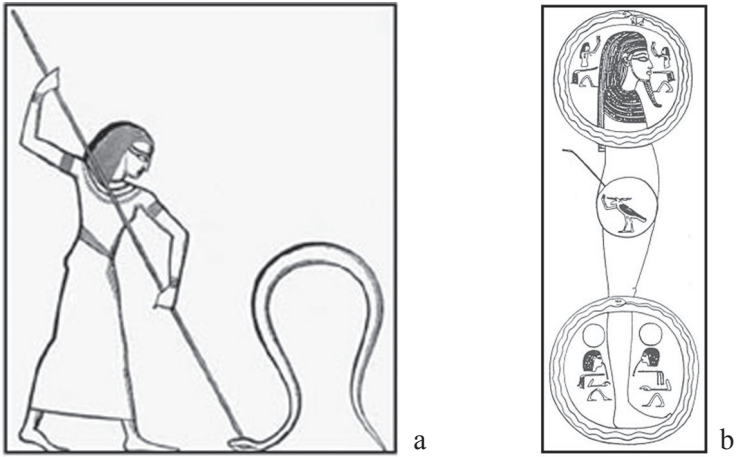
<sup>12</sup> On this see e.g.: CD 170, and cf. pPrise 5, ll 9–10: *n in.tw drw hmt, nn hmww ꜥr 3hw.f* [i.e.: The limit of Art (= craftsmanship) cannot be attained! There is no craftsman who can touch its perfection!]; see: [Žába 1956].

of course humans (who were actually the principal reason for the social problems, wars, & c.). Only the continuous adoration and propitiation of those supreme and divine powers and the use of magic could restore the all-desirable equilibrium and the complete harmony, which would be propitious for both humans and their various institutions! The continuous presence and officiation of the pharaoh (*nb irt-ht*) was the ultimate depositary for the social and the universal harmony in ancient Egypt. The monarch-high priest, as a virtual *pontifex maximus*, was responsible for the lives of his subjects. Through the daily rituals and offerings performed in all state temples, by offering a statuette of the goddess Ma'at (*Mꜣꜥt*) to the gods, he – directly or indirectly, by the mediation of the high-priests – was restoring Order by exalting this very goddess<sup>13</sup>. This symbolic cultic action was hinting to the archetypal symbolism of an ideal world, exactly as it was created at the very *first time* (*zp tpy*), emerging out of the primeval watery chaos, the Abyss of the *Ancient-of-the-Days*, god Nūn (*Nwn*). However, this equilibrium was sometimes unstable or metastable, hence it was possible that the social or the cosmic machine would collapse into chaos and havoc, either because of neglect or because of the *mundane sin* (*isft*). *Magic* (*hkꜣ*), according to the ancient Egyptian beliefs, could not only preserve, but also restore the cosmic harmony. Here lies the very essence of the ancient Egyptian *art*: that kind of *art* (revealing itself through the magnificent architecture, the sophisticated amuletic jewellery, the intriguing sculpture or the unique colourful paintings) consists of the best proof of the former<sup>14</sup>. *Art* in ancient Egypt was not performed *per se*, but was just the means of production of metaphysical tools, the craft which would provide the pharaohs, priests, nobles and commoners the necessary amuletic tokens, periapts, prophylactic, homœopœic, dynatic, magical instruments or apotropaic objects, to defend themselves against evil, but also to conquer the afterlife, where they were meant to be immortal champions of Ma'at, as well as joining themselves to the periodic cycles of celestial phenomena, *in secula seculorum*.

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<sup>13</sup> On the idea of cosmic order in ancient Egypt and the goddess Ma'at, see: [Bleeker 1962, 193–200]; on time and cosmic order, see: [Maravelia 2007a: 1243–1250].

<sup>14</sup> On the ancient Egyptian art, see: [Aldred 1988; Michalowski 1968]. On different samples of Egyptian art – coming from all the historical periods – see: [Scamuzzi 1965; Saleh, Sourouzian 1987; Seipel 1989].



**Fig. 2. a** – The ancient Egyptian conception of vanquishing evil incarnated in the form of a malevolent snake: a divinity (*ntr*) or the justified deceased (*m<sup>3</sup>c-hrw*) is smashing its head using a spear. **b** – The most ancient representation of the *Ouroboros*, from the second golden shrine of Tut'ankhamūn (where Osiris and Rē' are unified in the Netherworld) (after: [Piankoff 1949, 113, fig. 1]).

There are many instances, where art and time are either interrelated or the latter expresses and manifests itself through the former. This is particularly evident in the case of several Egyptian artefacts or (meta-physical) paintings with a cosmographic significance. Let us selectively examine three characteristic cases.

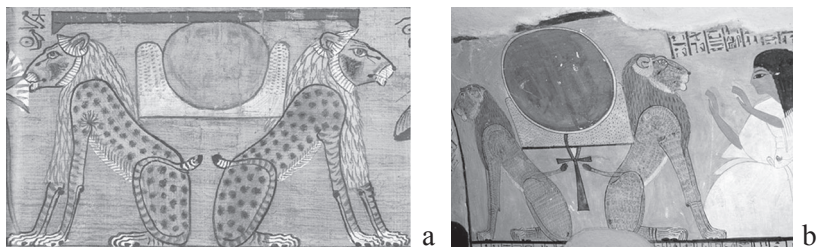
**1. The Case of the Horizon-God Aker (*3kr*).** It is of a great importance to examine the semantics of the horizon-god Aker<sup>15</sup> relatively to time and art. This divinity is usually depicted as a double lion (the god of the horizon is also a virtual guardian to the gates of the Netherworld), or – to be more precise – as Two Lions (*Rwty*), the backs of which are facing each other, while the horizon-hieroglyph<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> On Aker see: [Bisson de la Roque 1930, 575–580; de Witt 1951; Lurker 1986, 25 (art. “Aker”); Ogdon 1986, 127–135; Hart 1987, 1 (art. “Aker”); BMD 1996, 19–20 (art. “Aker”). Cf. also n. 4, *supra*. On the *Rwty*-scene, see: [Tarasenko 2007, 77–122; Tarasenko 2017, 619–625].

<sup>16</sup> On the hieroglyphic sign N27 see: [EG, 489; Wilkinson 1992, 134–135].



stands on top of them, several times so to say crowned by the sky-hieroglyph<sup>17</sup> (Fig. 3a–3b). The lion looking towards the West alludes to yesterday (*sf*), evoking death; while the one facing the East alludes to tomorrow (*dw3w*), symbolizing resurrection.



**Fig. 3.** *a* – Detail from the New Kingdom funerary papyrus of the *Book of the Dead* of Any (BM EA 10470, c. 1250 BC), showing the double-lion of Aker, as the horizon-god (observe the *3ht*-hieroglyph under the *pt*-hieroglyph). The right lion looks to the west, hence towards *yesterday* (*sf*) and death, while the left lion stares towards the east, hence towards *tomorrow* (*dw3w*) and the resurrection. *b* – Detail of a funerary painting depicting the purified deceased clad in white linen, adoring Aker. The horizon symbol bears a red solar disc and a suspended sign of life (*ꜥnh*). Tomb of In-herkh‘aou (*In-hr-hꜥw*) at Deir ‘el-Medina (TT 359), 20<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, c. 1170 BC.

Aker was actually an earth-god, whose cult derived from the Early Dynastic Period, represented not only as a juxtaposed double sphinx or lion, but also as a double human head. A usual representation was a narrow tract of land (since he embodied the Earth), with a human or a lion head at either end. Another depiction shows Aker bearing the sacred solar boat (the socket of which holding its mast was identified to Aker), thus alluding to the nightly journey of the Sun through Aker’s kingdom. Consequently the two horizon lions guard the entrance and the exit to the Underworld. In the *Pyramid Texts* it is stated that the gates of Aker are opened unto the king, in order that he enters or exits the Netherworld. Thus, the kingdom of the dead becomes the junction point between the eastern and the western horizons, bringing also close (in an allegorical sense) the notions of resurrection and death. Aker was mostly considered as a rather benevolent deity, since he was thought to absorb the poison from a snake-bite, the venom from a swallowed obnoxious fly, as well as to imprison the coils of

<sup>17</sup> On the hieroglyphic sign N1 see [EG, 485; Wilkinson 1992, 126–127].

the evil serpent ‘Apophis, after being hacked to pieces by Isis. In the ancient Egyptian notion of the Underworld (*Dw3t/Imnti*) Aker could provide along his back a safe journey and a secure passage for the solar boat, the Sun and his crew travelling from West towards East during the dark hours of the night. The notion of time passing is here considered through the darkness and the realm of the dead, while during the day it is thought to take place through the diurnal journey of the Sun in the firmament. From the rich cosmographic iconography of the tomb of Ramesses VI (see *infra*), from the massive tomb of Pedamenopet (*P3-di-Imm-Wpt*) of the Saite Period (26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) located at the ‘el-‘Asāsif necropolis at Thebes West, and from several mythological papyri alike of the priesthood of Amūn during the Third Intermediate Period (21<sup>st</sup> Dynasty), it would be possible – in principle – to reconstruct a *Book of Aker*, related to the nocturnal journey of the Sun from West to East, from sunset to sunrise, from death towards resurrection. The only hints of a malevolent aspect of the horizon-god Aker are met in the case of his “mitosis” into the *Akerou* (*3krw*), primeval deities more ancient than even the earth-god Geb. In the *Pyramid Texts* there is a hope that these will not seize the monarch, while later on this hope is generalized by the belief that everyone will escape their grasp and eternal encapsulation into the terrestrial realms of the Egyptian *Hadēs*.

This ancient Egyptian divinity is also a very significant cosmographic symbol. We could not imagine a better paradigm of a purely cosmovisional character, combining also metaphysical and religious semantics, that is so close to the notion of time, as that is expressed not only through the previous, but also via the very art used to depict it! Horizon (*3ht*) *per se* is a notion concerned with a change or shift in phase or in hypostasis. The astral bodies and the Sun set under the horizon, virtually dying, in order to rise again next day, virtually resurrecting, in a perpetual cosmic and periodic cycle that by itself defines time through its passing. All the heavenly bodies – by “changing phase” – they pass into the invisible realm of the Netherworld (⊗), they are encapsulated, but still maintaining their essence of immortality and regeneration. Thus, they contributed to the measurement of time by their harmonious periodical motion, providing also to the Egyptians of Antiquity a means of metaphysical inspiration. Past (~ death, yesterday, setting), present (current moment of observation) and future (~ resurrection, tomorrow, rising) are combined in a unique alloy of cosmographic symbolism. Netherworld (~ Aker is the guardian

and the gate of *Hadēs/Dw3t*), earth (~ the ground and the visible horizon) and sky (the crowning *pt*-hieroglyph) are interlaced in a spatio-temporal mixture of astronomical significance. And by what an art is this very symbolism performed and depicted? An art full of allegories and hidden semantics! An art expressing the conception and the passage of time by itself; an art that was serving religion and the metaphysics of eternity! Sometimes the deceased is shown dressed in white linen (alluding to his purity and flawlessness) adoring the horizon-god, ready to enter or leave the realm of the Great Beyond (**Fig. 3b**).

**2. The Case of a Typical Time-Measuring Instrument (an Ancient Egyptian Clepshydra).** The *clepshydra* was a non-precise ancient time-measurement instrument and as an artefact consists of the most characteristic time-expressing and time-measuring object (**Fig. 4a–4b**). If such an artefact bears also cosmographic representations, like the one presented here, then one understands how important its study in the context of this paper is. The *clepshydra*<sup>18</sup> was measuring time by water (or even sand) falling from an upper to a lower vessel, thus providing a means to count its passing. The device was often consisting of a water-filled vase made of either stone, pottery or copper, having a hole in the base, through which the liquid was drained away. A *clepshydra* is independent of the Sun [unlike the sundial (*γνώμων*)], being able to indicate time intervals during the night and at periods of cloudy weather; however, it is imprecise (just like the sundial)<sup>19</sup>.

The case of the Karnak *clepshydra* examined here briefly<sup>20</sup> is particularly interesting (**Fig. 4a**). If for the lay-people in ancient Egypt the precise measurement of time was not important, for the *priests-astronomers* (*imyw-wnwt* / *ώρολόγοι*) it was of the utmost significance. They should be able to determine accurately not only the time of the daily cultic observances at temples, but also to know the dates of the great feasts and of the inundation of the Nile (that was related to the Egyptian New Year). In cloudy nights when the decanal constellations were not visible, the *clepshydrai* would compensate for this very knowledge and help the priestly observers in their duties. The Karnak

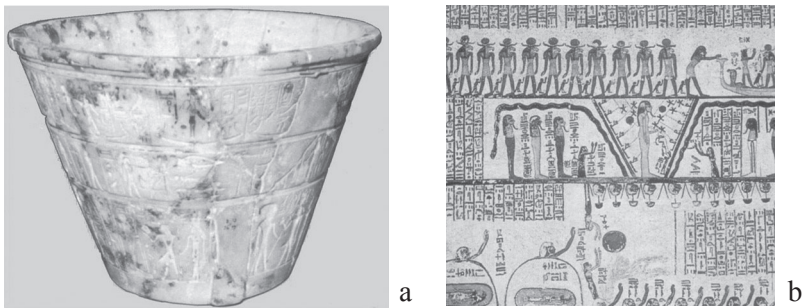
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<sup>18</sup> See, for instance: [Couchoud 1988, 25–34; de Bourgoing 2001, 30–31; BMD 1996, 66 (art. «clepshydra (“water clock”))].

<sup>19</sup> On these time-measuring devices, see e.g.: [Cotterel *et al* 1986, 31–50; Hölbl 1986, 59–60].

<sup>20</sup> For a more detailed presentation, see: [Corteggiani 1986, 98–99].

*clepsychra* – the oldest known from Egypt, dated to the reign of Amenophis III (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty) – was such an instrument, made during one of the most developed eras of the ancient Egyptian history. To be more precise (since this was only a votive offering), the water clocks used by the priesthood during the New Kingdom would be similar in form and function. It is not our wish to fully describe this device here, but we could say that it bears a lot of interesting cosmographic representations on its three registers (that were pasted during ancient times with cornaline and glass-paste). The water was flowing through a very thin channel starting from the interior and ending at the exterior in a relief form of a seated cynocephalus (one of the sacred animals of Thoth, god of Mathematics, measurements, time and the Moon) that has not survived until our era. On the upper register the planets and some constellations are depicted, together with a list of decans. On the middle register we can see the northern asterisms together with a framed depiction of Amenophis III, offering to the solar god Rē'-Horakhty, assisted by Thoth. Finally, the lower register is subdivided in six tables (corresponding per two to the three seasons of the ancient Egyptian year), in which the pharaoh appears between two divinities corresponding to the twelve months of the year.



**Fig. 4. a** – The most ancient example known of an Egyptian *clepsychra*, dated from the reign of Amenophis III (18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, c. 1370 BC). On its three registers several cosmographic and religious depictions of divinities abound (planets, decans, northern constellations, month-deities, cosmic divinities, & c.). Egyptian Museum, Cairo J.E. 37525. **b** – Detail of the cosmographic paintings from a royal monument. In the central register a male ithyphallic divinity is standing inside a *clepsychra*, accompanied by some stars, symbolizing the 12 nightly hours (*wnwt nt grḥ 12*). Tomb of Ramesses VI (KV 9, c. 1151–1143 BC) (photo by the author).

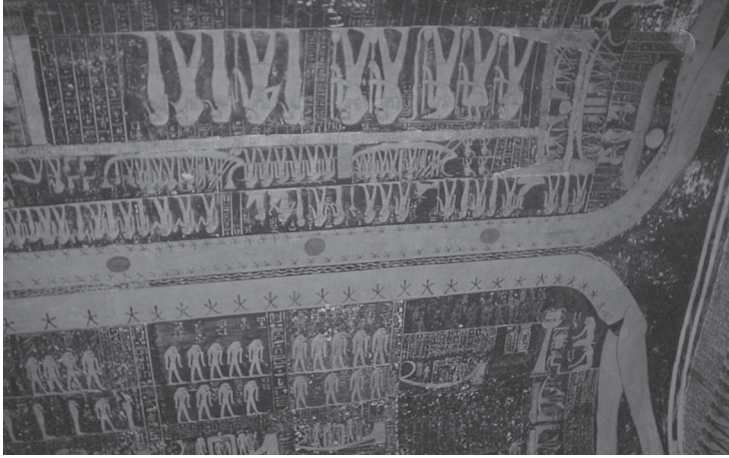
Hence, it is not only the fact that all the three registers of the *clepshydra* do show cosmic divinities, stellar bodies and bear a strong astronomical significance. It is also that all of them (decans, monthly deities, northern constellations, cosmic deities) are closely related to the flow and the measurement of time. If the surrealists were talking about the *poèmes-objets*, we could also claim that this very object is a *timely-* or *time-object*, since its particular use would be the measurement of time whenever other devices or methods would not be applicable. And this makes its direct connection to the allegorical depiction of a *clepshydra* in a funerary context, namely that examined here and found as a detail of a certain painting at the tomb of Ramesses VI (**Fig. 4b**). In this, a male ithyphallic divinity (symbolizing Osiris in his nightly junction with the solar god (**Fig. 2b**) is standing inside a *clepshydra*, accompanied by several stars (actually nine, divided in three groups of three, since  $2 \times 1\frac{1}{2}$  (= 3), respectively, of the three remaining hours should correspond approximately to the time of dusk after sunset and before sunrise), symbolizing the *12 nightly hours* (*wnwt nt grḥ 12*). The solar disc appears two times, actually corresponding to sunset and the upcoming sunrise. Moreover, twelve small figures, in two groups of six, are flanking the left and right side of the water clock, alluding to the 12 nightly hours, while a huge serpent is enveloping the whole scene in a protective manner, having being shaped in a truncated cone's (*clepshydra*-like) form. The allegory of this imagery is connected too with the passage of time and its measurement during night-time, the period when the upcoming morning resurrection of the Sun is being prepared.

**3. The Sky-Goddess Nūt (Nwt).** In ancient Egyptian mythology the heavenly goddess was thought of as female in her sex<sup>21</sup>, while the terrestrial divinity was considered as male. Actually, the Egyptian celestial goddess Nūt<sup>22</sup> was one of the personifications of the cosmic elements evolved by the priesthood of Heliopolis in order to present a

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<sup>21</sup> See, for instance: [Martinelli 1994, 61–80]; opposite to the ancient Hellenic mythology.

<sup>22</sup> For Nūt, see mainly: [LÄ IV, 1982, 535–541 (art. “Nūt”); Lurker 1986, 90 (art. “Nūt”); Hart 1987, 143–147 (art. “Nūt”); Posener 1992, 192 (art. “Nout”); BMD 1996, 207–208 (art. “Nūt”)]. For a thorough study, see: [Bergman 1979, 53–69; Billing 2002; Billing 2003, 129–36]. Cf. also [Rusch 1922; Grapow 1924, 9, 24–28 (especially pp. 27, 32); Piankoff 1934, 57–61; Sander-Hansen 1937; Buhl 1947, 80–97; Hornung 1982, *passim*].



**Fig. 5.** The ancient Egyptian conception of the celestial vault can be seen here explicitly in the astronomical roof of the tomb of Pharaoh Ramesses VI (KV 9, c. 1151–1143 BC). The celestial goddess Nūt, personifying it, begets daily the heavenly bodies from her uterus at their rising and eats them at their setting. She extends her body over the Earth, while the Sun travels on it during the day and the stars cross it during the night. The *Book of Day* and the *Book of Night* are also seen (photo by the author).

viable cosmovisional model of the Universe (**Fig. 5**). Nūt (*Nwt*) was the daughter of goddess Tefnūt (*Tfnwt*) personifying the primordial moisture, and of god Shū (*Šw*) personifying the luminiferous aether, hence the empty space of the atmosphere and light. Ancient Egyptians visualized her mainly as human in form, but she was also depicted as a divine bovine (a heavenly cow)<sup>23</sup>, or even as a bee wielding great power over the gods [Hart 1987, 143]. The celestial goddess united with her brother and husband Geb (*Gb*), personifying the Earth, in a supersubstantial hierogamy, giving birth to four divine children, coupled in two pairs: Isis (*3st*; personifying the fertile land) and Osiris (*Wsir*; personifying the Nile), Nephtys (*Nbt-Hwt*; personifying the land between the fields and the desert) and Seth (*Sth*; personifying the desert), belonging all together to the Osirian mythological

<sup>23</sup> For the funerary synthesis known as the *Book of the Celestial Cow* and the concomitant mythology, see: [Maystre 1941, 53–115; Piankoff 1977, 26–37; 142–143; Guilhou 1984, 87–93; Guilhou 1989; Hornung 1982; Hornung 1999, 148–151]. Cf. also [Maravelia 2006b, 41–65].

cycle, conceptualizing the principles of Kingship and Nature's periodical regeneration. Nūt was also conceived as a personification of the Milky Way, which is a principal feature of the firmament. In this aspect her symbolic depiction as a swimming girl holding a goose has to be understood as a virtual allusion to the Galaxy and Cygnus constellation, as they appear projected on the celestial sphere<sup>24</sup>.

However, Nūt is more frequently depicted as a young goddess arching her body over the Earth (represented by the recumbent god Geb), separated from him by Shū. Although the Egyptian iconographical customs were representing Nūt stretching her body over the Earth, her arms and legs being depicted tightly together, the actual conception of her is that both her fingers and toes touch the four cardinal points on the horizon, thus conceptualizing the *four pillars of heaven*<sup>25</sup> (*shnwt nt pt 4*). It was probably from the Egyptian idea that Nūt swallowed the solar god and his entourage, in order to give them birth again next dawn, the notion arose that Geb became upset with his wife for having eaten her children. In the cenotaph of Pharaoh Sety I at Abydos [Frankfort 1933, I, 72–86; II, *pl. LXXXI–LXXXVI*]<sup>26</sup> Nūt's swallowing of celestial deities was likened to a sow devouring her piglets. Ramesses VI (1151–1143 BC) too built a splendid tomb (KV 9) in the Valley of the Kings [PM I<sup>2</sup>, 511–517 (KV 9)]<sup>27</sup>. In this tomb the *Book of the Earth* occurs for the first time, while the astronomical ceiling combines images from the *Book of the Day* and the *Book of the Night*, together with the outstretched diurnal and nocturnal figures of Nūt (**Fig. 5**). Here we can find a detailed representation on the ceiling of the sarcophagus chamber. Nūt is painted twice on a colossal scale, depicting the day and the night sky. The body of Nūt is painted golden-yellow, while her eyes' make-up and hair are depicted

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<sup>24</sup> A first hint on this topic, although with some astronomical errors that we discussed in [Marvelia 2003, 66–70], can be found in [Kozloff 1992, 331–348; Kozloff 1993, 169–176].

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance: Urk. IV, 620: 16 (for a relevant reference to the *Poetical Stela of Tuthmosis III*).

<sup>26</sup> For the dramatic text in the cenotaph of Sety I, see also: [EAT I, 1960, *chap. 2; tabs. 44–51*]. Additionally, Nūt is depicted on the interior of the calcite sarcophagus box of Sety I (see for instance [Reeves, Wilkinson 1997, 137]).

<sup>27</sup> See also: [Reeves, Wilkinson 1997, 164–165; cf. also: ASAE 18, 1919: 270–274]. For a wall documentation, see: [Piankoff, Rambova 1954]. See also [Siliotti 1999, 64–67].

black, as well as the stars on her body. The solar disc is painted in red. The solar god sails in his barge along the exaggeratingly elongated body of Nūt until evening, when the solar disc approaches the mouth of the heavenly goddess to be swallowed, being depicted bigger near her mouth. A multitude of stars are also depicted flanking the diurnal course of the sun, probably alluding to the knowledge of the ancient Egyptians of the fact that stars exist on the sky during the day too, but are invisible, except when a total eclipse of the Sun occurs. The sun travels safely together with the stars through the hours of the night inside the body of the goddess. At dawn, the red glow of which was called the *Daughter of Nūt* by the Egyptians (*z3t Nwt*), the solar disc emerges anew as a winged scarab from her vulva to bring light and the promise of regeneration to the world. The background is depicted in dark blue, bearing on both sides astral deities and decans painted in golden-yellow, together with numerous columns of hieroglyphic inscriptions. The imagery operates at differing levels, showing the sun as a red disc being swallowed and reborn from the very womb of the goddess, and as a god in the solar sacred bark sailing upon the heavenly waters of the firmament.

Nūt is a universal goddess, the equivalent of Isis, as a *post mortem mater lactans*; and of Hathor in her cosmic hypostasis, as directly related to the solar god [for the latter was his daughter (*filia Solis*)]. She keeps the malevolent chaotic forces from breaking through the sky and devouring the world, thus contributing towards the celestial harmony and helping Ma'at in her cosmic role. Her body is the firmament, the celestial vault, the sky and the Galaxy. It divides the Cosmos, created in the *very beginning* (*p3wt tpyt*) by Rē'-Atūm according to his rules of universal harmony, from the amorphous, achronous, dark and infinite primeval matter, the merging with which should be tantamount to non-existence and catastrophe. It also divides the visible from the invisible celestial hemisphere, the high from the low. How Nūt was maintaining this equilibrium was not examined by the Egyptians, who were always remaining on symbolic and allegorical explanations of the cosmic essence, and who considered this as a divine unfathomable and incomprehensible fact, summed up by the epithet *mysterious/secret* (*št3yt*) attributed to their sky-goddess [Hart 1987, 146]<sup>28</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> On the root *št3*, see [Wb. IV, 551ff (especially S. 553, I: (e)); cf. Urk. V, 55: 10].



Let us now briefly assess the relation between the creation of sacred space, the perpetual flow of time and the imaginary in ancient Egypt, based on the depictions of the heavenly goddess discussed above. Nūt, archetypal image of the devouring female, is also a source of life and regeneration. Not only she takes but also gives back life in a periodical repetitive eternal cycle, alluding to the human biological cycle as well as to the cosmic phenomena. She defines a virtual *space-time continuum*, which constitutes the scenery for cosmic activities. Sacred space becomes cosmic space and infinite time becomes archetypal time in the context of her representations. A unification of spatial and temporal dimensions is thought to take place in a miraculous manner, conceptualizing the affinity of celestial phenomena to the life of humans. The above becomes below, the high meets the low, the divine visits the human, the perpetual is unified to the mortal (and vice versa), in an irresistible alloy of harmony testified by these depictions of the sky-goddess. The conception of the sky as a female divinity agrees with the ancient Egyptian *forma mentis* and the modes of thought of ancient theologians, whose environment hinted to these conceptions. Thus, her soft, fluid and variable characteristics as a goddess – a plausible archetypal projection of the terrestrial river’s fluidity onto the celestial sphere, where the Galaxy was considered by several ancient nations as a heavenly river [Allen 1963, 474ff]<sup>29</sup> – are comprehensible and justified. It is like time has stopped, when one looks Nūt’s representations in the astronomical ceilings of the royal tombs. The pause of time means *eternity* (*dt*) and *everlastingness* (*nḥḥ*); both of these notions<sup>30</sup> being connected to the afterlife beliefs of ancient Egyptians and their expected resurrection. The pause of time-flow, relatively and subjectively meant for the deceased humans as the end of their (life)time, could also well be interpreted in

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<sup>29</sup> In Egypt, the correlation of Nūt, the Galaxy and the Great Flood/*Μεθύνηρ* (*Mhyt-Wrt*) has been already discussed (see mainly [Broze 1999, 63–72; cf. also Sauneron 1961, 43–48; Allen 1988, 19; Kozlof 1993, 173]). For the Copts the Milky Way was called ΠΑΜΩΙΤ ΝΤΕ ΠΙΤΩΣ (cf. [Allen 1963, 481; Crum 1939, 453b, citing Kircher 1643, 50]). The Milky Way is also conceived as the “backbone of the night” by certain tribes in Botswana [Maravelia 2006a, 391, n. 73]).

<sup>30</sup> For the notions of *eternity* and *everlastingness* in the ancient Egyptian thought, see for instance [Bakir 1953, 110–111; Bakir 1974, 252–254; Allen 1988, 26–27]. Cf. also [Maravelia 2018, *in press*].

terms of their virtual unification to the eternal stop of time-flow. Hence, if we think in metaphysical terms, this would mean their incorporation into the *Great Beyond*, the Divine Essence, which is found and meant out of any cosmic dimension and comprehension, transcendently existing into everlastingness, out of space and not with time (*non cum tempore*). The royal (and several other noble's) Egyptian tombs were thought of as virtual small universes, tiny cosmic theatres of unfathomable semantics and birth mansions for eternity. Nūt played a considerably important part towards this symbolism in her depictions as the sky vault, hosting the course of the Sun and of stellar bodies. It is there – on her body – that the cosmic activities take place. It is there – on her divine limbs – that the periodical changes of the firmament with its constellations, Sun, Moon and planets are dramatized and conceived as virtually significant for the terrestrial life and for humans. Day and night, space and time, good and evil, order and chaos are virtually fighting in an *allegorical battle* (*ὁσμίνη*), which keeps the Universe in life and sustains the Cosmos. Hence, the liturgical (and also aesthetically significant) creation of sacred space, corresponds to the consequent creation of a holy archetypal time, a time of cosmic symbolism that governs the plethora of periodic astronomical phenomena. Nūt becomes the recipient of heavenly bodies, hence metaphorically of terrestrial beings *post mortem*. She constitutes the divine receptacle and fountain of both time and space, underlying in their fundamental unity as categories of the *space–time continuum*. The relation between cosmic space and archetypal time is certainly based on the semantics of heaven as an all-encompassing and global hypersphere, where time is defined by the periodical motion of the stars, Sun, Moon and planets, inherent to the firmament and its “miracles”. There is a significant relation of unity, clearly shown, in the examined depictions of Nūt, out of which time is expressed allegorically through art and the funerary liturgical art is virtually transformed into the eternal flow and fluidity of time. The great significance of Nūt is unequivocally accepted, and that is exactly why we dedicated to this very topic a considerably longer part (than to the two previous cases).

It is evident that the three previous examined testify for the interrelation between art and time in the ancient Egyptian artefacts, a fact that shows explicitly that the Egyptians of Antiquity were prone to

express philosophical ideas, namely time-categories and the notion of eternity through their visual and plastic arts. However, it is now time to end our discussion by giving some hints concerning similar notions (time and art) and their concomitant symbolism in the (more) modern Western art and philosophy.

Time is often symbolized by the wheel, by the twelve signs of the zodiac, describing the circle of life as they move round [Symbols 1996, 1008], and in general by any circular shape. In this aspect, an ellipse is also a time-symbol, since according to the laws of Newton and Kepler the planets revolve around the Sun in elliptical orbits. The centre of a time-circle is consequently regarded as the motionless aspect of existence, the pivot which makes the motion of existence possible, and the one contrasting with the other, like time with eternity (which brings us close to St Augustinus' time definition). All motion takes a virtual circular shape once it becomes part of the evolutionary curve between a beginning and an end, thus lays itself open to measurement which is none other than that of a time-scale<sup>31</sup>. Still, time cannot be frozen (at least far from a gravitational singularity, like that of a black hole), so as to "stop" it and measure it, as we stop in space to measure distances or surfaces. We need time to measure time, so time can be measured, but not in the sense we measure space or other physical quantities (i.e.: electric charge, angular momentum, power, intensity of sound, & c.). The symbolic passage from the temporal to the spatial does not succeed to suppress all rotary movement, but it conceals the ephemeral nature of existence, since it displays no more than an instant in space [Symbols 1996, 1009].

Art – in our Western society – has been conceived as a struggle against death, as has been mysticism alike: both symbolize the struggle for eternal life and immortality<sup>32</sup>. By definition, human time is finite and divine time infinite; or rather it is a negation of time, *timelessness* (ἄχρονον)! The former is limited, while the latter is perpetual. There is no common ground for a direct comparison between

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<sup>31</sup> Concerning the ancient time-reckoning (especially in ancient Egypt), see: [Borchardt 1920; Krupp 1980, 24–27; Locher 2003, 429–434; Spalinger 1996, 67–77; Sloley 1931, 166–178]; and also (in ancient Hellas, & c.): [Morgan 2000, 17–31; Nilsson 1920].

<sup>32</sup> On these issues and the ancient Egyptian thought, see: [Maravelia 2003, 55–72 (especially pp. 63–66)]. On time, in general, cf. also [Aveni 1989; Barbour 1999; de Bourgoing 2001; Brandon 1951; Butterfield 1999].

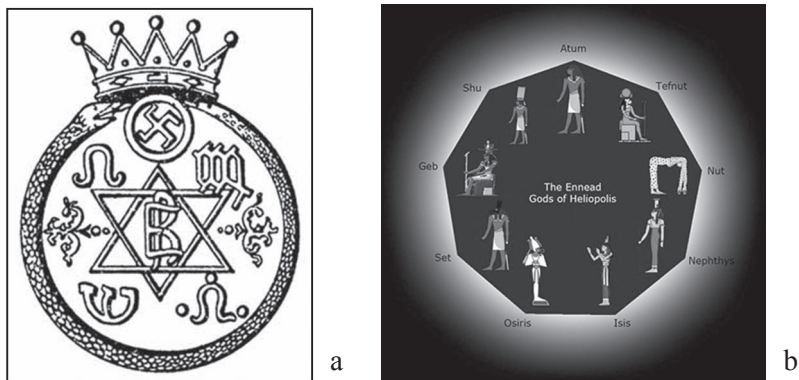
these two time-categories. To escape from time is to escape utterly from the cosmic order, to enter another order and another Universe<sup>33</sup>. Hence, time is indissolubly linked to space.

### III. The *Ouroboros* in Astronomy, Alchemy and in Biased Esoteric Views

The *Ouroboros*’ *κοσμικὸν μίμημα* represents the marriage of the chthonian world (symbolized by the snake biting its own tail), and the celestial world (symbolized by the circle, the most “divine” and perfect between all 2–dimensional shapes). A serpent biting its own tail [Symbols 1996, 728–729 (art. “ourobos”)] symbolizes a closed cycle of development. At the same time this symbol enshrines ideas of motion, continuity, self-fertilization, and – consequently – of the eternal return. The image’s circular shape – as we already noted – gives rise to another explanation: the marriage of the chthonian world (represented by the serpent) [Symbols 1996, 844–858 (art. “serpent”)] to the celestial realm (represented by the circle [Symbols 1996, 195–200 (art. “circle”)]), symbolizing the circular and unchanging motion of the Heavens). Confirmation of this interpretation might be found in some examples in which the *Ouroboros* is partly black and partly white (**Fig. 9b; 11a**). It would thus bear the meaning of the marriage of opposing principles: female-male, heaven-earth, day-night, good-evil, *yin-yang*) and of all the properties possessed by these opposing elements. Babylonian religious speculation derived from the circle (which was also a symbol of time<sup>34</sup>) the notion of infinite, cyclical and universal time, transmitted to the ancient Hellēnes in the archetypical image of the *Ouroboros*. And it is in this circle that one can meet the divine properties *par excellence*: a circle has neither a beginning nor an end, being continuous and omnidirectional. In the Neo-Platonic thought, God is compared to a Circle of which the Centre is everywhere, an allegory also used in Sufism.

<sup>33</sup> A possible existence of the speculative *Einstein-Rosen bridge*, that is the so-called *wormhole*, uniting a black hole in our Universe with a white hole in another (parallel) Universe, would be the physical entity through which this could be possible (in principle).

<sup>34</sup> On time as a symbol, see [Symbols 1996, 1008–1009 (art. “time”)]. According to St Augustinus, time was nothing but the shifting image of motionless eternity. Christ is both a *Pantokratōr* and a *Chronokratōr*, as Saturn/Kronos ( $\approx$  *Χρόνος*) was considered in the ancient Hellenic cosmovision, especially in that of the Orphics (cf. e.g.: [Maravelia 2006a, 370–371; Maravelia 2007a, 1244–1248]).



**Fig. 6.** *a* – The depiction of a crowned *Ouroboros*, together with astrological (zodiacal), alchemical and other symbols (like a hexagonal star and an encircled swastika crowning it). *b* – Schematic circular depiction of the Heliopolitan Great Ennead. Starting from Atūm (unity), the creation of the first pair of divinities occurs (couple), leading to the further virtual “mitosis” of the initial cosmic and divine cell to more components (1 → 3 → 5 → 9).

Another interpretation may see in the *Ouroboros* the contrast between two different levels of being. The serpent eating its tail falls into the shape of a circle, a break with its linear development which would seem to mark as big a change as emergence upon a higher level of existence, a level of celestial or spiritualized existence, symbolized by the circle. The serpent thus transcends the plane of brute life to move forward in the direction of the most basic living impulses. However, the explanation depends upon the symbolism of the circle, the image of celestial perfection and apparent periodical harmony. An opposite image may be conjured up by the serpent biting its tail, ceaselessly revolving around itself enclosed within its own cycle, and that is the image of the *samsara* [Symbols 1996, 824 (art. “samsara”)], the wheel [Symbols 1996, 1099–1103 (art. “wheel”)] of life, alluding also to the very ancient symbol of the *swastika* [Symbols 1996, 956–957 (art. “swastika”)]<sup>35</sup> (**Fig. 6a**). The swastika was an antique Indo-European

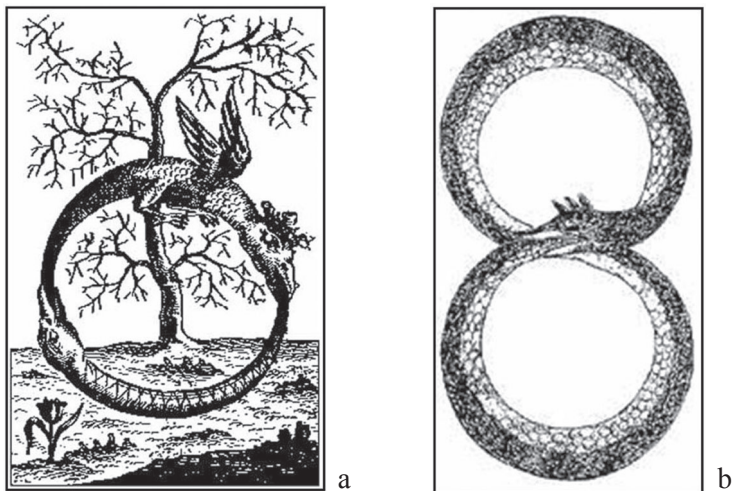
<sup>35</sup> It is a symbol of activity, a quadrupled cross (*gammadion*, ~ 4Γ), displaying clearly a rotary movement around a fixed centre or a pole. As a development of human reality, it may well express the furthest development of secular power, which would explain why the swastika was an attribute of the French Emperor Charlemagne (also, regrettably, extensively misused by the German Nazis).

symbol, used also extensively in Archaic Hellas (Hellenic: Γαμμιάδιον; Latin: *Crux Gammata*; Sanskrit: *svástika* (स्वस्तिकि)); however, it was also used as a Proto-Christian cross in tombs. By its circularly rotating allegory the swastika provides a virtual resemblance to the periodic cyclical motion of the *Ouroboros*. As one condemned never to escape its own cycle and raise itself to a higher plane, the *Ouroboros* symbolizes eternal return, the endless cycle of rebirth and a continual repetition which betrays the dominance of a basic death-wish. Additionally, the representation of the Ennead of Heliopolis as a virtual circle (**Fig. 6b**), with a certain beginning, but without end, alludes also to the idea of creation of the initial powers of life out of the primordial chaotic abysmal ocean (*Nwn*), as well as to the periodical continuity of the immanent forces of nature, allegorized as the Ennead divinities.

Basically dragons<sup>36</sup> (**Fig. 7a–7b; 9a–9b**) are thought of as strict guardians (of treasures) or as symbols of evil and diabolical tendencies, hence the draconic symbol has an ambivalence, also alluding to the confrontation of the duality principles (cf. *καδοικεύς*<sup>37</sup>). This hints to the neutralization of opposing tendencies, of e.g.: alchemical sulphur and alchemical mercury. Oppositely, the immanent, undeveloped nature is portrayed in the *Ouroboros*, actually the dragon eating its own tail. The dragon reflects the image of the active First Cause, the Demiurge, the force and spiritual vigour, being also a celestial symbol of the *vis vitalis* and the power of manifestation, ejaculating the primeval waters of the cosmic egg [Symbols 1996, 308. Cf. also Maravelia 2006a, 365–369; Maravelia 2007a, 1246ff, fig. 1]. Perhaps, the most striking significance of the serpent [Symbols 1996, 844–858 (art. “serpent”)] as an archetype, which can be also transposed to the symbolism of the *Ouroboros*, is its volatile character: it evades time which can be clocked; it evades space which can be measured; it surpasses logic which can be rationalized [Symbols 1996, 845]. Then it escapes to the lower reaches from which it came and into which it can be imagined as timeless, changeless and motionless (yet swift and *all-transformable* ~ *ἀλλοτριμορφοδίαιτον*) in the fullness of its life.

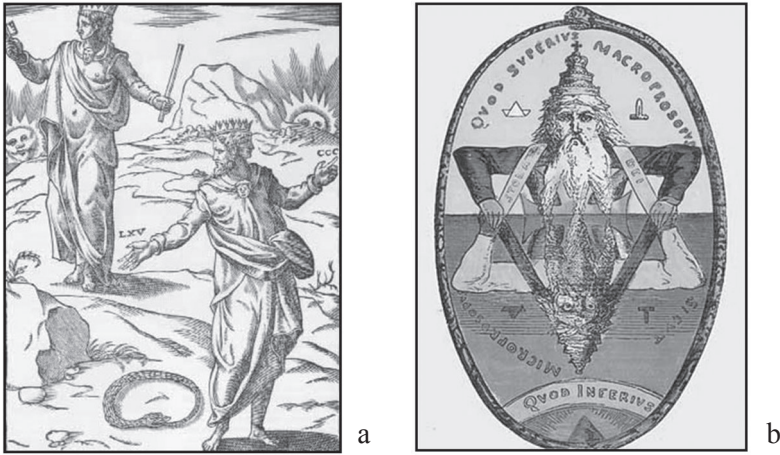
<sup>36</sup> On dragons see: [Symbols 1996, 307–310 (art. “dragon”).]

<sup>37</sup> See: [Symbols 1996, 142–145 (art. “caduceus”).] Interestingly, unlike its Roman Catholic counterpart, the bishopric staff in the Orthodox Church ends at two opposing and intertwined snake-heads, looking at each other, with a cross between them.



**Fig. 7.** *a* – An alchemical conception of a double and partly winged *Ouroboros* near a leafless tree. *b* – A twisted *Ouroboros*, reminding an inverted mathematical (and freemasonic) symbol of infinity.

There are two ways of sustaining something: it may either be carried or enfolded by creating an unbroken circle around it in order to prevent its falling apart. The second role corresponds – once again – to the self-biting serpent, the *Ouroboros* [Symbols 1996, 846]. In this context, the circumference complements the centre, so as to suggest Nicolaus Cusanus' notion of God himself. The *Ouroboros* is also the symbol of cyclical manifestation and return, sexual auto-intercourse (reminding of Atūm's primordial self-intercourse, too), perpetual self-fertilization, continuous transformation (e.g.: of forms, of death into life, and vice versa, & c.). In Bachelard's words, it is "the material dialectic of life and death, death springing from life and life from death". While it conjures up the image of the circle, it is predominantly the circle's dynamism that is the first wheel, apparently motionless because it revolves on its own axis, but with perpetual motion since it is continuously self-renewed. Universal life-giver, the *Ouroboros* provides the motive power not only of life but of time, creating both within itself (**Fig. 8a–8b**)! It is often depicted in the shape of a twisted chain (**Fig. 7b**), its links being the hours. Setting the stars in motion, it is also the first representation and the virtual "mother" of the zodiac.



**Fig. 8.** *a* – Alchemical representation of a certain phase of the *Opus Magnum* with an *Ouroboros* on the ground. *b* – Another alchemical depiction of the antithetic macrocosmic and microcosmic levels, encircled by an *Ouroboros* and forming the hexagonal star, hinting to the characteristic *dictum* of the *Tabula Smaragdina*: “quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius”.

An old symbol of an old god of Nature dethroned by the spirit, the *Ouroboros* remained a powerful cosmographic and geographic deity; and – as such – was carved round the edges of the earliest representations of the world, like what is undoubtedly the earliest African *imago mundi*, the Benin Disc<sup>38</sup>. Its sinuosities frame all things, bringing together opposites, the primeval oceans on which floats the square shape of the Earth. Terrifying in its anger, it becomes the psalmic *Leviathan* or the Nordic *Midgardorm*, which was – as the *Edda* states – older than the gods themselves, or even the Hellenic (Hesiodic) *Ωκεανός* encircling the Earth! It is finally the ultimate *substantia* of formless primeval matter and of watery Abyss from which everything came into being and into which everything will return, in order to be reborn in a perpetual cycle of *transformations* (*μεταμορφώσεις*, *μετενσωματώσεις*). In the Cosmology of the Gnostic Ophites, the sea-monster<sup>39</sup> (*Leviathan*, *Αράκων*, *Ouroboros*), as the celestial, primordial water, forms the outermost circle of the world of creation, which

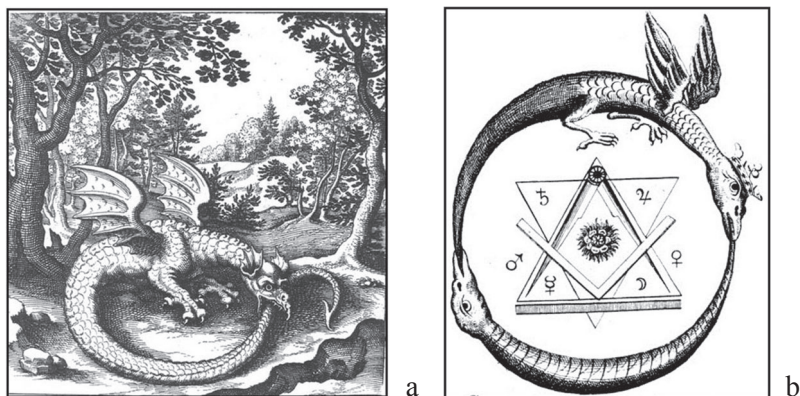
<sup>38</sup> On this, see e.g.: [Frobenius 1936, 147–148]. The *Ouroboros* of the Benin Disc is hermaphrodite and himself twin (cf. also [Symbols 1996, 848]).

<sup>39</sup> E.g.: in *Psalmi* civ (ciii): 26. On the *Edda*, cf. e.g.: [Stange 2004].



is inaccessible to the experience of the senses, and shuts it off from the divine world of love and light [Roob 2001, 38]. There exist several depictions of how the ancient Pagans supposedly imagined the chaos: in one of them a dark figure symbolising Time (*Χρόνος*) dwells in the centre of the Earth, enclosed by the *Ouroboros*, the serpent of Eternity [Roob 2001, 188; De Hooghe 1744].

In the alchemic and freemasonic symbolism<sup>40</sup>, the *Lost Word* (*Απωλεσθείς Λόγος*) of the murdered Master Mason Hiram is nothing but the lost member of Osiris. Finding this means bringing together the beginning and the end (A–Ω), completing the circle and consequently the *Ouroboros* [Roob 2001, 221] (**Fig. 9a–9b**).

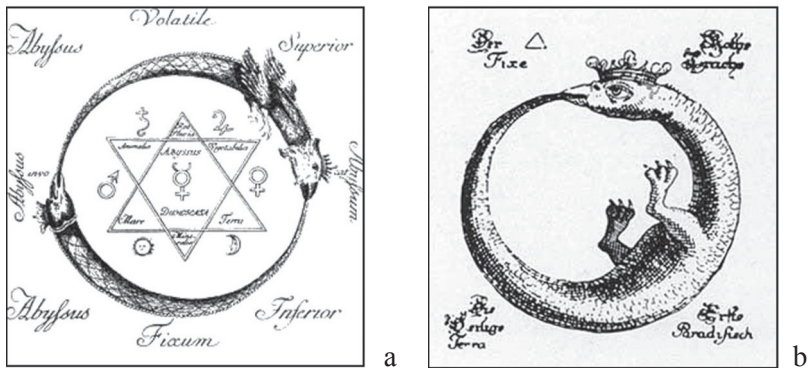


**Fig. 9. a** – Allegoric representation of a dragon, biting its own tail, like a virtual *Ouroboros*. **b** – A double and partly winged *Ouroboros*, encircling alchemical, astrological and freemasonic symbols, namely: the square, the compass and two triangles.

In the *Alchymia* of Andreas Libavius (1540–1616) the author describes the *Ouroboros* symbolically as the symbol *par excellence* of the second *fixatio* after the second *putrefactio* [Roob 2001, 300–303; Libavius 1606]. Other authors like A. Eleazar have also referred to a serpent symbolism that alludes to the *Ouroboros* [Roob 2001, 402;

<sup>40</sup> On the history and symbolism of Freemasonry, as well as on the Hiramic myth, see (between others) the following: [Béresniak 2000; Duchane 2007; Kirk MacNulty 2006; Lhomme *et al.* 2004; Naudon 1988; Naudon 2004]. On Alchemy and the *Ouroboros*, see [Sheppard 1962, 83–96]. The Hiram story can be found in the *Bible* (*I Reg.* 5–10, *passim*).

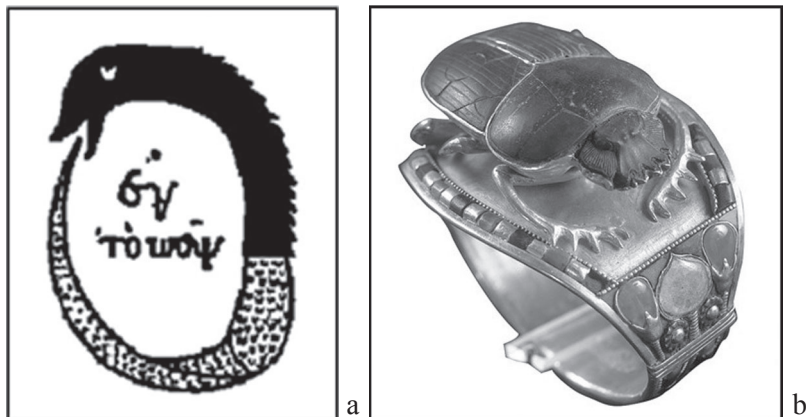
Eleazar 1760]. According to him, the *Ouroboros* is the cosmic spirit, which begets everything and transforms itself into all the natural entities. In Coptic the word *ouro* (ⲟⲩⲣⲟ) means *king* and in Hebrew the word *ob* (Ⲕ) means *snake* [Roob 2001, 403; Eleazar 1735]. In alchemical and magical literature one can also find the *Ouroboros* as a double snake alluding to the duality of nature [Roob 2001, 404; Kirchweger 1921]. Quicksilver was also compared to a self-biting snake and the ancients, according to Maier, were considering the *Ouroboros* as both “the change and the return of the year”, as well as “the beginning of the *Great Work (Opus Magnum)*, in which the poisonous moist dragon’s tail is consumed” [Roob 2001, 421; Maier 1618] (**Fig. 10a–10b**).



**Fig. 10. a** – A double *Ouroboros*, encircling the hexagonal star together with astrological and alchemical symbols, the central of which is that of mercury. **b** – A crowned dragon-like *Ouroboros* surrounded by alchemical symbols and descriptions.

In other instances the *Ouroboros* is also bestowed with demonic properties. For instance, Böhme claims that Devil may show his own image to the poor soul that wants to turn away from God, in the form of a snake (i.e.: the fire-wheel of essence) and tempts it [Roob 2001, 426; Böhme 1682]. According to Johannes Macarius, the Egyptian *scarab (hpr)* and the *Ouroboros* are also interrelated, as both are an expression of “ἐν τὸ πᾶν” (**Fig. 11a–11b**), the eternal transformation of the ever unchanging [Roob 2001, 672; Macarius 1657]<sup>41</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> For **Fig. 11a**, cf. also [Reemes 2015, 284, 415; fig. 125].



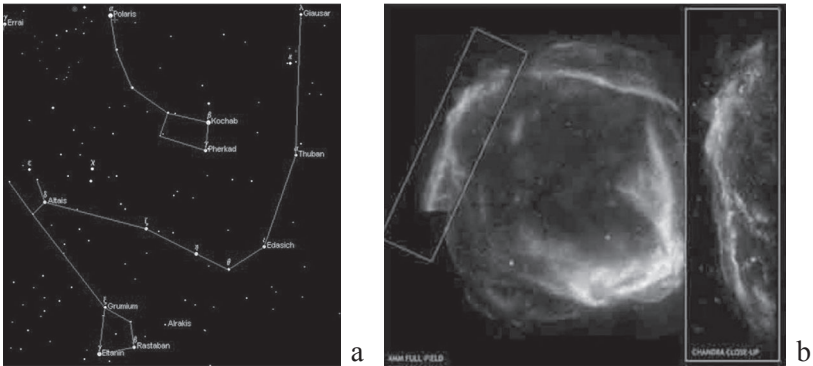
**Fig. 11. a** – The *Ouroboros* depicted in a black and white antithesis (with an ancient Hellenic *dictun*). **b** – A typical scarab bracelet for royal amuletic use, depicting the symbol of the newly born Sun. From the tomb of Tut‘an-khamūn (KV 62, c. 1320 BC), made of gold and semi-precious stones.

In Alchemy, the ninth key of Basil Valentine describes the brightly coloured phase in the *Opus Magnum*, known as *cauda pavonis* [Maravelia (Μαραβέλια) 2001, 254]; it occurs under the zodiac sign of Libra and shows that the matter is gradually dying. The threefold *Ouroboros* depicted there refers to the *tria prima* and the three large sections of the *Opus Magnum*, while the whole depiction is based on a reversed femininity (Venus’) symbol ♀, of the antimonic *prima materia* [Roob 2001, 678; Stolcius von Stolckenberg 1624]. Additionally, the idea of the colour circle or wheel develops out of the figure of the *Ouroboros*, constructed in the emblems of Nicolas Flamel from the two self-consuming dragons of light and darkness. The former symbolizes the dry, sulphurous principle, while the latter he called the *volatile black woman* and is the mercurial moisture [Roob 2001, 682].

In a cosmographic context, the ancient constellation of Draco was considered as a very important one by many nations<sup>42</sup> (**Fig. 12a**). The archetypal conception of the celestial dragon by the ancients is also to be noted. According to the ancient astronomical and astrological

<sup>42</sup> On the constellation of Draco see: [Maravelia 2006a, *Chap. III, n. 205*]; see also [le Bœuffle 1996, 53–68]. Cf. also [Allen 1963, 202–212; Cellarius <sup>2</sup>2006, *Tab. 23–26 & p. 212*].

beliefs, there was a celestial dragon encircling all the celestial spheres (**Fig. 12b**) that was also met in both the Babylonian and the Chaldaean mythologies<sup>43</sup>. This circular cosmic serpent – reminding us the *Ouroboros* – was embracing the heavens and was considered as the principal cause of both the solar and the lunar eclipses<sup>44</sup>. The modern constellation Draco corresponds to the ancient Egyptian northern asterism *Rrt*, depicting a divine female hippopotamus.



**Fig. 12.** *a* – The constellation of Draco situated between Ursa Major and Ursa Minor. *b* – A pseudo-colour photo of an interstellar nebula, virtually resembling a cosmic *Ouroboros*.

#### IV. Discussion and Conclusions

In our study not only the concept of time taken into its realization (hence the virtual *Einfühlung* of time *per se*), but also the time

<sup>43</sup> See [CCAG VIII, I, 194: “De Dracone Cælesti”. Cf. also CCAG X, 10: # 9; 40: # 22]. On the Orphic conception of the serpent as a divine cosmic symbol, see [Leisegang 1939].

<sup>44</sup> See: [CCAG VII, *Annexe, Codex 7*, 125; VIII, I, 199: “Τὴν μὲν σύστασιν ἔχουσιν ἐκ τῆς συμβλήσεως τῶν δύο παραλλήλων ἐκκέντρων κύκλων Ἥλιου τε καὶ Σελήνης αἱ δὴ κατὰ διάμετρον δύο συμβλήσεις Ἀναβιβάζων καὶ Καταβιβάζων. Τούτων τῶν δύο κύκλων ἡ περιφέρεια παρὰ τῶν Χαλδαίων Δράκων ὠνομάσθη καὶ αἱ τούτων συμβλήσεις ἢ μὲν κεφαλὴ τούτου ἢ δὲ οὐρὰ. [...] Λέγουσιν μὲν τὸν Ἀναβιβάζοντα εἶναι τὴν κεφαλὴν τοῦ λεγομένου Δράκοντος, τὸν δὲ Καταβιβάζοντα τὴν οὐρὰν τούτου καὶ αἱ σεληνιακαὶ καὶ αἱ ἡλιακαὶ ἐκλείψεις τότε γίνονται ὅτε πλησιάζουσιν εἰς τὰς συνόδους”]. At this point, we should also note that the North Pole of the orbital plane of the lunar orbit around the Earth lies in the constellation of Draco. Concerning the nodes and the eclipses, see [Maravelia 2006a, *Chap. II, § 1; fig II.2, II.5*].

presented in the three characteristic cases of the examined ancient Egyptian works of art were taken into account and were thoroughly discussed, with particular emphasis on the archetype of the *Ouroboros* and its semantics not only in the ancient Egyptian *forma mentis*, but also in Alchemy, Astronomy and some Esoteric Systems (like Alchemy and Freemasonry). Through the colourful prism of the metaphysical or theological conception of time and eternity, as they were meant by the ancient Nile-dwellers, we are in a position today to present plausible deductions about their relation to time, their quest for eternity and also examine the ways we could use in order to investigate the notions of time in relation to the specific art-forms created by them and studied here. The way the anonymous ancient Egyptian artists – for whom the meaning of *Art* (*hmt*) was not the same as it is for us nowadays, but that “art” was only used as a vehicle towards their virtual *θέωσις* in the hereafter and their quest for immortality, serving religion and the metaphysics of eternity – have conceived and have depicted time through their handicrafts (especially during the high Pharaonic Period, from c. 2575 BC down to c. 714 BC), also provides a solid means in order to assess which are the philosophically and aesthetically relevant notions of time in the history of art of the ancient Mediterranean nations, between which Egypt holds a very high pedestal. The importance of the sky-goddess Nūt, in the astronomical ceilings of the Ramesside and Late Period, towards the above, was paramount, as well as the symbolism of Aker and the depictions of the time-measuring astronomical *clepshydra*. No matter if the *Ouroboros* (*sd-m-r3*) was or was not a time- and/or eternity-symbol in the ancient Egyptian *forma mentis*, the protective enclosure formed by this archetypal serpent could be considered as a virtual receptacle of both space and time and as a *mutatis mutandis* limit to the Universe (*Ntt-Wn*), separating order ( $\sim m^3t$ ) from chaos ( $\sim isft$ ), bringing together a meta-physical space-time continuum, related to the firmamental periodicities, as well as to the alluded immortality and resurrection of the justified deceased *post mortem*.

### Abbreviations

AntOr – Antiquo Oriente: Cuadernos del Centro de Estudios de Historia del Antiquo Oriente. Buenos Aires.

ASAE – Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte. Le Caire.

BAR – British Archaeological Reports. Oxford.

- BdÉ – Bibliothèque d'Étude / Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale. Le Caire.
- BMD – British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt. Cairo.
- BIFAO – Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale. Le Caire.
- BSEg – Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie, Genève. Geneva.
- BSFÉ – Bulletin de la Société Française d'Égyptologie. Paris.
- CCAG (1898–1953) – *Catalogus Codicorum Astrologicorum Græcorum*, T. I–XII, Bruxelles.
- CD – Faulkner's Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian. Oxford.
- CMAG (1924) – *Catalogue des manuscrits alchimiques grecs*, Bruxelles.
- DE – Discussions in Egyptology. Oxford.
- EAT – Egyptian Astronomical Texts. Providence, RI.
- EES – Egypt Exploration Society. London.
- EG – Gardiner's Egyptian Grammar. Oxford.
- GM – Göttinger Miscellen: Beiträge zur Ägyptologischen Diskussion. Göttingen.
- IFAO – Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale. Le Caire.
- JAS – Journal of Archaeological Science. New York.
- JEA – Journal of Egyptian Archaeology. London.
- JHIE – Journal of the Hellenic Institute of Egyptology. Athens.
- JNES – Journal of the Near Eastern Studies. Chicago.
- LÄ – Lexikon der Ägyptologie. Wiesbaden.
- MÄS – Münchner Ägyptologische Studien. München & Berlin.
- MDAIK – Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Abteilung Kairo. Wiesbaden & Mainz.
- OLA – Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta. Leuven.
- OLP – Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodica. Leeuwen.
- PM – Porter B. and Moss R. L. B. (1960–1964) (with Burney, E. W.): *Topographical Bibliography of Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphic Texts, Reliefs and Paintings P: Royal Tombs and Smaller Cemeteries*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Urk. – Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums. Leipzig & Berlin.
- VA – Varia Aegyptiaca. San Antonio, TX.
- YES – Yale Egyptological Studies. New Haven, CT.
- ZÄS – Zeitschrift für ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde. Berlin.

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A. Маравелія

### Коливання часу в давньоєгипетській релігії та мистецтві:

#### Уроборос як архетип для метафізики вічності

У цій статті розглядається не лише концепт часу, як реалізації (звідси й віртуальне *Einführung* часу як такого), а й детально обговорюється час, що репрезентований на давньоєгипетських витворах мистецтва з конкретним акцентом на архетипі *Уробороса* (єг.: *sd-m-r3*), і його семантика як у його давньоєгипетських уявленнях, так і в алхімії. Завдяючи барвистій призмі метафізичної або теологічної концепції часу та вічності, як їх розуміли стародавні мешканці долини Нілу, ми наразі можемо відтворити їхні правдоподібні уявлення про час, прагнення до вічності, а також перевірити способи, якими ми могли б скористатися, щоб досліджувати поняття часу щодо конкретних створених ними художніх форм і вивчити їх. Те, як анонімні давньоєгипетські художники, для яких значення мистецтва (*hmt*) було відмінним від того, яким воно є для нас сьогодні, оскільки для них “мистецтво” використовувалося тільки як засіб для віртуального *θέωσις* і прагнення до вічності, задумали і зобразили час на своїх артефактах (особливо в період розквіту епохи фараонів: із 2575 р. до н. е. по 714 р. до н. е.), також дає надійні підстави для того, щоб оцінити філософські та естетично значущі уявлення про час в історії мистецтва стародавніх середземноморських народів, серед яких Єгипет займає дуже високе місце.



**Ключові слова:** *Уроборос*, давньоєгипетський світогляд, час, вічність, мистецтво, стародавня космологія, сучасна космологія, алхімія, масонство, (юнгівські) архетипи

*А. Маравелія*

**Колебание времени в древнеегипетской религии и искусстве:  
*Уроборос* как архетип для метафизики вечности**

В данной статье рассматривается не только концепт времени, как реализации (отсюда и виртуальное *Einführung* времени как такового), но и подробно обсуждается время, представленное на древнеегипетских произведениях искусства с конкретным акцентом на архетипе *Уробороса* (ег.: *sd-m-r3*), и его семантика не только в древнеегипетских представлениях, но так же и в алхимии. Благодаря красочной призме метафизической или теологической концепции времени и вечности, как их понимали древние обитатели долины Нила, мы в настоящее время можем представить их правдоподобное отношение ко времени, стремление к вечности, а также проверить способы, которыми мы могли бы воспользоваться, чтобы исследовать понятие времени в отношении конкретных созданных ими художественных форм и изучить их. То, как анонимные древнеегипетские художники, для которых значение искусства (*hmt*) было не таким, каким оно есть для нас сегодня, так как для них “искусство” использовалось только как средство для виртуального *θεωσις* и стремления к вечности, задумали и изобразили время на своих артефактах (особенно в период расцвета эпохи фараонов: с 2575 г. до н. э. по 714 г. до н. э.), также дает надежные основания для того, чтобы оценить философские и эстетически значимые представления о времени в истории искусства древних средиземноморских народов, среди которых Египет занимает очень высокое место.

**Ключевые слова:** *Уроборос*, древнеегипетское мировоззрение, время, вечность, искусство, древняя космология, современная космология, алхимия, масонство, (юнговские) архетипы

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