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THE TRADITIONAL EGYPTIAN ANTECEDENTS OF GRAECO-ROMAN POST-MORTEM ASCENT

Los antecedentes egipcios tradicionales del ascenso post mortem grecorromano

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Resumen: Si bien la civilización egipcia es más antigua, al referirnos a las culturas egipcia y grecorromana solemos aludir a culturas contiguas, y es innegable el profundo impacto que las ideas egipcias tuvieron en el mundo grecorromano. En ciertos aspectos clave, la visión egipcia de la vida después de la muerte anunció las concepciones grecorromana, judía y cristiana primitiva, particularmente en términos del motivo del ascenso *post mortem*. Aunque los canales de transmisión se han perdido en la antigüedad, este motivo todavía puede bosquejarse con suficiente claridad en ambas culturas como para sugerir que Egipto fue una fuente importante de su expresión. Tras algunas consideraciones metodológicas, este ensayo rastrea el motivo del ascenso tal como se manifestó en la cultura grecorromana, y luego analiza la naturaleza de la evidencia egipcia antigua para sugerir la existencia de elementos clave de este mismo motivo desde las primeras épocas de la Civilización del Nilo.

Palabras clave: Egipto; ascenso; muerte; vida después de la muerte; inmortalidad; cultura grecorromana.

Abstract: Despite the greater antiquity of Egyptian civilisation, when we refer to Egyptian and Graeco-Roman cultures, we are generally referring to cultures that were contiguous, and the profound impact that Egyptian ideas had upon the Graeco-Roman world cannot be denied. In key respects, Egyptian views of the afterlife foreshadowed Graeco-

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Roman, Jewish, and early Christian conceptions, particularly in terms of the motif of post-mortem ascent. Although the channels of transmission have been lost in antiquity, the motif may still be sketched clearly enough in both cultures to suggest that Egypt was an important source for its expression. After some methodological considerations, this essay will trace the motif of ascent as it was manifested in Graeco-Roman culture, and then analyze the nature of the ancient Egyptian evidence in order to suggest the existence of key elements of this same motif from the earliest times in ancient Egypt.

Keywords: Egypt; Ascent; Death; Afterlife; Immortality; Graeco-Roman.

1. INTRODUCTION

The impact of traditional Egyptian religion and its views of the afterlife on the Graeco-Roman world is an enormous area of research which is still largely untapped and unresolved. Segal, for example, observes the profound impact that Egyptian ideas of immortality had upon Rome[1] and notes that these «penetrated deep into Roman consciousness»[2]. Egyptian views of the afterlife foreshadowed Graeco-Roman, Jewish, and early Christian conceptions, particularly in terms of the motif of post-mortem ascent. The argument of this essay is that the key elements of the pervasive Graeco-Roman motif of ascent may be found in traditional Egyptian religion from the earliest times. Although the channels of transmission have been lost in antiquity[3], the motif may still be sketched clearly enough in both cultures to suggest that Egypt was an important source for its expression[4].

1 A. F. Segal, «Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment», in H. Temporini and W. Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Romischen Welt* II, Bd. 23 (De Gruyter, Berlin, 1980), 1333–1394 at p. 1350.

2 A. F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (Doubleday, New York, 2004), 27.

3 There have been attempts, for example, to map out possible channels of transmission between traditional Egyptian and early Christian thought, as represented, for example, by the work of A. Roberts, *Golden Shrine, Goddess Queen: Egypt's Annointing Mysteries* (Northgate, Rottingdean, 2008); and R. A. Gabriel, *Gods of Our Fathers: The Memory of Egypt in Judaism and Christianity* (Greenwood, Westport, 2001), 129–165. However, these attempts are highly speculative, and at times simply unconvincing.

4 Although it is not the only source. On Mesopotamian ascent see W. G. Lambert, «The Cosmology of Sumer and Babylon», in C. Blacker and M. Loewe (ed.), *Ancient Cosmologies* (Allen & Unwin, London, 1975), 42–58; W. Horowitz, *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography* (Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 1988), 209; and H. Lewy and M. Tardieu, *Chaldaean Oracles and Theurgy, Mysticism Magic and Platonism in the later Roman Empire*, Série Antiquité (Études Augustiniennes, Paris, 2011), 184.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
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The significant pitfalls in attempting to compare practices and beliefs that are separated not only by culture but also temporally by millennia must be acknowledged. Sandmel used the term «parallelomania» to describe parallels taken from different contexts and writings, which when considered in relation with one another result in extravagant correlations[5]. Sandmel was cautioning against «exaggerations about the parallels and about sources, and derivations»[6]. Accordingly, no attempt will be made here to identify any channels of transmission for Egyptian views into the broader Hellenistic culture, and ultimately questions of sources must remain speculative. This essay merely seeks to demonstrate that a motif of ascent already existed in ancient Egypt in a shape similar to that which existed in the Graeco-Roman world of later times.

It is worthy of mention that the Greeks themselves accepted the derivation of many elements of their cults from the Egyptians. Herodotus, for example, wrote that «the names of the Gods came to Hellas from barbarians, and I myself concluded that they derive specifically from Egypt» («σχεδὸν δὲ καὶ πάντων τὰ οὐνόματα τῶν θεῶν ἐξ Αἰγύπτου ἐλήλυθε ἐς τὴν Ἑλλάδα»)[7]. As Thomas observes, the internal logic in this passage of Herodotus suggests that he is referring to more than the proper names of the gods[8]. Indeed, Herodotus goes on to maintain that many of the central religious observances of the Greeks were also derived from Egypt, writing that «[t]hese customs… have been adopted by the Hellenes from the Egyptians» («ταῦτα μέν νυν καὶ ἄλλα πρὸς τούτοισι, τὰ ἐγὼ φράσω, Ἕλληνες ἀπ᾽ Αἰγυπτίων νενομίκασι»)[9]. It is difficult to know what to make of these statements historically, since even Herodotus was writing of the remote past[10]; however, his views demonstrate that the attribution of important aspects of the Greek religion to Egypt is by no means new.

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5 S. Sandmel, «Parallelomania», *JBL* 81 (1962), 1–13. See also P. Schäfer, «New Testament and Hekhalot Literature: The Journey into Heaven in Paul and in Merkevah Mysticism», *Journal of Jewish Studies* 35 (1994), 19–35: 34; contra G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (Schocken Books, New York, 1954).

6 Sandmel, «Parallelomania», 1.

7 A. L. Purvis (tr.), R. B. Strassler (ed.), *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories* (Anchor Books, New York, 2007), 2.50.1, 141. Greek text from *Herodotus* (The Loeb Classical Library, London, 1966).

8 R. Thomas, *Herodotus in Context: Ethnography, Science and the Art of Persuasion* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002), 277.

9 Herodotus, *Histories* 2.51.1, tr. Purvis, 141. See also Thomas, *Herodotus in Context* (as in n. 4), 281–282.

10 On the reception of Herodotus' statement in scholarship, see G. A. Stilwell, *Afterlife: Post-Mortem Judgments in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece* (iUniverse Inc., New Lork; Lincoln; Shanghai, 2005), 166. More broadly in *Post-Mortem Judgments*, 176–191, Stillwell argues for similarities in the conceptualisations of postmortem judgments in Greece and Egypt.

2. ASCENT AFTER DEATH IN THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

In discussing the ideas of ascent in the Graeco-Roman world, it is significant to recognise the work of Carsten Colpe in critiquing theories from the early history of religions scholarship. He was responsible for the final demise of the idea of the pre-Christian Gnostic redeemer myth, against scholars such as Reitzenstein. Apart from identifying significant philological errors in their work, Colpe argued against the generalization involved in speaking of the Gnostic redeemer myth as if it were a single entity. On the contrary, Colpe pointed out that the Gnostic concept of redemption is complicated and diverse, and that it is not possible for anyone to reconstruct a model of a Redeemer figure by identifying elements in texts without regard for their social and literary contexts[11].

These basic methodological caveats apply to this present research also; while we may note similarities in the understandings of the afterlife that point to a commonality of thought, it is not possible to resolve these into a teleological or linear genealogy. However, rather than *prima fascie* ruling out such a genealogy, Colpe's arguments instead point to the difficulties involved in demonstrating it. Therefore, while not arguing for a teleological relationship, this present research will point out key commonalities and propose the possibility of some influence from the Egyptian Pharaonic ideas of post-mortem ascent on later Graeco-Roman thought.

In the Hellenistic world, the notion of ascent appears to have been an extremely pervasive one, and was both influenced and expressed by many cultures and traditions. Accordingly, the idea of ascent to the heavens was felt in almost every aspect of society. A prime example was the manner in which the Romans formulated the idea of the apotheosis of the emperor, which was a key plank of the emperor cult from the time of the early empire12, and which we can hardly say was merely at the edges of Roman culture.

In the Hellenistic world, a complex milieu of ascent traditions and myths appears to have coalesced to include some recurring themes. The ascent was understood to occur immediately after death, although it could also occur in a visionary sense while the person was alive. It was the soul that ascended, and the body was left behind. As the soul rose it did so though a number of superimposed heavens, and these heavens often had guardians who tested the soul at the various levels. Typically the culmination of the ascent was some form of deification or assimilation into divinity. These commonly recurring

[11] C. Colpe, *Die religionsgeschichtliche Schule: Darstellung und Kritik ihres Bildes vom gnostischen Erlösermythus* (Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1961), 171, 203–206. For a summary of the issues see K. L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Beklnap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 2003). 141–145.

[12] Segal, ibid., 1349–1350, writes that «if astral immortality was promulgated of the emperors, it was scarcely in less demand by the people».

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
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themes may be seen as comprising an «ascent motif». Within the Greek tradition, we are able to identify the ascent motif well before Plato[13].

In spite of the Homeric understanding of the afterlife being that the shades of the dead lead a quasi-existence in a murky underworld[14], notions that the souls of the dead ascend to the sky were also not uncommon in classical Greece; they are mentioned by Euripides and Aristophanes[15], in whose dramatic works immortality is achieved in heaven by becoming stars. Cumont identifies the first precisely dated reference to astral immortality to 421 BC, where Aristophanes greets the appearance of a new star as the recently-dead Pythagorean poet Ion of Chios[16]. In this passage, Aristophanes has a slave wonder whether it is true that «when we die we turn into stars in the sky». The slave asks «So who's a star there now»? Trygaeus tells him that Ion of Chios is the most recent arrival[17]. Eventually, «the idea of the soul going off to where the stars are, and in some way almost being identified with the stars, became widely popular across the Hellenistic world»[18].

In the tenth book of the *Republic*, Plato tells the tale of Er's journey into the heavens, after his apparent death[19]. This work was highly influential, and served as a model for Cicero's *Somnium Scipionis*[20] and for aspects of Plutarch's works[21]. Plato considered that

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13 I. P. Culianu, *Psychanodia I, A Survey of the Evidence Concerning the Ascension of the Soul and its Relevance* (Brill, Leiden, 1983), 1.

14 See Homer, *Odyssey*, books 11 and 24.

15 In the play *Helen*, Theonoe says «For though the mind of dead men does not live, it has eternal sensation once it has been hurled into the eternal upper air». («ὁ νοῦς τῶν κατθανόντων ζῆι μὲν οὔ, γνώμην δ' ἔχει ἀθάνατον εις ἀθάνατον αἰθέρ ἐμπεσών») [Euripides, *Helen* 1014-1016, in D. Kovacs (tr.), *Euripides* V (The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 2002)]. See also Aristophanes, *Pax* 832–833. See also Aristophanes, *Pax* 831–833.

16 F. Cumont, *Astrology and Religion Among the Greeks and Romans*. First published (G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York, 1912). This edition (Cosimo, New York, 2006), 96.

17 Aristophanes, *Pax* 831, in Jeffrey Henderson (ed. and tr.), *Aristophanes: Clouds, Wasps & Peace* (The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 1998), 351. See also J. D. Tabor, *Things Unutterable: Paul's Ascent to Paradise in its Greco-Roman, Judaic, and Early Christian Contexts*. Studies in Judaism (University Press of America, Lanham, 1981), 78.

18 N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Fortress Press, London, 2003), 58–59. See also Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 247. See E. Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity* (3rd ed.; Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2003) 250; R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1962) 26–27; Segal, *Life After Death*, 234, 521–522.

19 Cicero, *Republic*, 10.614–10.621. Known as «The Myth of Er».

20 The *Somnium Scipionis* is found in Cicero, *On the Commonwealth and on the Laws*, 6.9–29, J. Zetzel (tr.) (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1999), 95–102.

21 See, for example Plutarch, «De sera numinis vindicta», 22-31, in *Moralia* 7.44; in Charles W. Super (tr.), *Between Heathenism and Christianity – Being a Translation of Seneca's De Providentia and Plutarch's De Sera Numinis Vindicta* (Orig. pub.: Fleming H. Revell, Chicago, 1899; this edition published by Chandra Chakravarti Press, 2007). Also Plutarch, *De genio Socratis* 21-22 in

«souls on leaving the body reach heaven as if going home (*cum e corporibus excesserint, in caelum quasi in domivilium suum pervenire*)» and argued that «souls on leaving the body, whether they are «airy» that is to say, consisting of breath, or fiery, are carried up on high» («*cum e corpore excesserint, sive illi sint animals, id est, spirabiles, sive ignei, sublime ferri*»)[22]. In Plato's *Timaeus*, we are told that the creator of the world «assigned each soul to a star» («τοις ἄστροισ ἔνειμέ ἑκάστην πρὸς ἕκαστον»)[23], and that «[i]f a person lived a good life throughout the due course of his time, he would at the end return to his dwelling place in his companion star (οἴκησιν ἄστρου), to live a life of happiness that agreed with his character»[24]. Although the idea of the soul returning to the sky already existed, Plato's contribution was to tie this idea to the notion of a rational and self-existent soul[25]. This allowed the conception of a basis for personal survival after death, and Segal observes that «[a]fter Plato, the Greek world took the notion that the isles of the blessed are in the sky seriously»[26].

The concepts of levels, gateways, guardians, and passwords, become very important in aspects of Graeco-Roman narratives of ascent to heaven[27]. This is evident in the system of doorways, guardians, and passwords faced by Dionysos and Xanthias in order to access the underworld as depicted in Aristophanes' play, *The Frogs*[28]. That similar ideas also applied to ascent is suggested in the earliest surviving Greek account of an ascent to heaven, which is the proem in Parmenides' Poem (ca. 480 B.C.E.)[29]. In this account, the figure of Dike, who is presented as a «force restraining non-being», guards the gates of night and day[30]. In the Mithraic and other later mysteries, guards,

A. Corlu (ed. & tr.), *Plutarque, Le Démon de Socrate*, Études et Commentaires 73 (Paris, Éditions Klincksieck, 1970).

22 Cicero, *Tusculanae Disputationes*, 1.11.24; 1.17.40, in A. E. Douglas (ed. & tr.), *Cicero: Tusculan Disputations I* (Aris & Phillips, Warminster, 1985), 34–35, 42–43. Cicero is here referring to Plato's view.

23 Plato, *Timaeus*, 41.5, in R. G. Bury (tr.), *Plato* 9 (The Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, 1929), 1–253. Greek text in D. J. Zeyl (ed.), *Timaeus* (Hackett, Indianapolis, 2000), 29.

24 Plato, *Timaeus*, 42b, Zeyl (tr.), 29. Greek text Bury (ed.).

25 R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (The University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 1962), 26–27.

26 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 234. Note Plato's *Timaeus* 41.2, 3, 5.

27 For their presence in Egyptian cosmology, see E. Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife* (Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1999). See also T. DuQuesne, *At the Court of Osiris: Book of the Dead Spell 194 – A Rare Egyptian Judgment Spell Edited and Interpreted with Commentary*. Oxfordshire Communications in Egyptology IV (Da'th Scholarly Services, London, 1994), 46. See also B. Mojsov, *Osiris: Death and Afterlife of a God* (Wiley, Oxford, 2005), 46.

28 Aristophanes, *Frogs*, lines 440–530. See comments by Radcliffe G. Edmonds III in «Descent to the Depths of Comedy: The *Frogs* of Aristophanes», *Myths of the Underworld Journey: Plato, Aristophanes, and the «Orphic» Gold Tablets* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004) 111–158, 147–149.

29 This poem is preserved almost exclusively by Sextus Empiricus.

30 J. B. Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise (2 Cor 12:1–10): Paul's Heavenly Journey in the Context of*

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

gateways, and obstacles are core features of the cosmologies[31]. In a passage in which he is specifically referring to post-mortem ascent, Tertullian specifically calls the Gnostic idea of the guardians of the entrance to the heavens as Roman superstition, and he asks,

> What powers, keeping guard at the gate, do I hear you affirm to exist in accordance with Roman supersitition [*Romanam superstitionem*], with a certain Carnus, Fornculus, and Limentinus? What powers do you set in order at the railings? [*Quas a cancellis ordinas potestates?*][32].

Segal calls the various aspects of the heavenly journey of the soul the «dominant mythical constellation of late antiquity»[33] while Destri and Pesce refer to it as a «universally recognised mythological concept in the early centuries of the Common Era»[34]. Just how culturally central was the notion of ascent combined with astral apotheosis in the Roman tradition is evident when we consider that, at least by the early century BC, it had been woven by the poet Ennius into the story of Romulus, the founder of Rome[35]. But perhaps, by the time of the early empire, the tradition associating ascent and apotheosis with the founding of Rome was even more strongly associated with Hercules[36]. Galinsky warns us that we should not see Hercules in Rome as merely a literary figure,

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Ealry Christian Experience. Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche, Band, 179 (Walter de Gruyter, Berlin; New York, 2011), 50, citing Parmenides' Poem, 8.14–16.

31 See Origen, *Contra Celsum* 6.22 and comments by Culianu, *Psychoanodia*, 13, quoting A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, (reprint from 1923; Darmstadt, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1966) 69–73. Also, on guards, doorkeepers, and obstacles as part of the Greek myths of journeys to the underworld, see Edmonds, *Myths*, 22–23.

32 Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 10, tr. S. Thelwall, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts; James Donaldson, A Cleveland Coxe; Allan Menzies; Ernest Cushing Richardson; Bernhard Pick, American Reprint (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 633–648, at 643; ed. Giovanna Azzali Bernardelli, *Tertulliano: Scorpiace*, Biblioteca Patristica. (Firenze: Nardini Editore, 1990), 130.

33 A. Segal, «Heavenly Ascent in Hellenistic Judaism, Early Christianity and their Environment», ANRW 2.23.2 (De Gruyter, Berlin, 1980), 1388.

34 A. Destro and M. Pesce, «The Heavenly Journey in Paul: Tradition of a Jewish Apocalyptic Literary Genre or Culural Practice in a Hellenistic-Roman Context?», in T. G. Casey and J. T. (eds.), *Paul's Jewish Matrix*, Bible in Dialogue 2 (Gregorian and Biblical Press, Rome, 2011), 162–200, 170–171.

35 Price, *Divine Cult*, 73–74. Bietenholz considers that the idea of Romulus' apotheosis may have taken root in Rome as early as the time of the Etruscan kings (P. G. Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legends in Historical Thought from Antiquity to the Modern Age*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 59 (Brill, Leiden; New York; Köln, 1994), 50.

36 For a review of these sources, see Hans-Friedrich Mueller, «The Extinction of the Potitii and the Sacred History of Augustan Rome», in *Clio and the Poets: Augustan Poetry and the Traditions of Ancient Historiography*. Mnemosyne, Bibliotheca Classica Batava, Supplementum 224 (Brill, Leiden; Boston, 2002), 313–329, 314–316.

but as a religious phenomenon[37]. In Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the apotheosis of Hercules anticipates those of Romulus, Aeneas, and Julius Caesar[38]. In *Hercules Furens*, Seneca has Hercules say «my *virtus* has borne me to the stars and to the gods themselves» («*iam virtus mihi in astra et ipsos fecit ad superos iter*»)[39].

Galinsky calls Seneca's concept of Hercules «directly an expression of the spiritual hopes and yearnings of their time»[40]. Cicero writes that «Hercules departed to the gods […]. These are already old stories, sanctified in universal religious feeling» («*Abiit ad deos Hercules* […]. *Vetera iam ista et religione omnium consecrata*»)[41]. We are dealing with a concept at the very heart of Roman culture by the time of the Empire. Beyond popular devotion, Stoics such as Cicero idealized Hercules as the perfect embodiment of Stoic virtues[42]. This unavoidably intersected with and informed their speculations about the posthumous survival of the soul, providing the alternative of ascending to the level of gods and being rewarded with celestial immortality. Colish points out that this was the teaching of Posidonius, Seneca, and Marcus Aurelius[43].

As an illustration of the Stoic speculations on the survival of the soul, Seneca in his *Consolation* refers to the blessed dead as wandering «[t]hroughout the free and boundless spaces of eternity» where they are «pervious to the matter of the stars and,

37 K. G. Galinsky, *The Herakles Theme: The Adaptations of the Hero in Literature from Homer to the Twentieth Century* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1972), 126. P. G. Bietenhold, *Historia and Fabula: Myths and Legands in Historical Through from Anqituity to the Modern Age*, Brill's Studies in Intellectual History 59 (Brill, Leiden; New York, 1994), 38, observes that for the Greeks, the «entanglement of myth and history» defied attempts at disentanglement, and that «to the broad masses the question of historical factuality was irrelevant… There was no reason to doubt the ancient deeds any more than the recent ones» (ibid., 41). This was probably true for the Romans as well.

38 On Hercules, see Ovid, *Metamorphosis*, Book 9.134–272; on Aeneas, see 14.566–608; on Romulus see 14.609–851; and on Caesar, see 15.745–870.

39 Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, 1942–43, in Seneca, *Hercules Oetaeus*, of F. J. Miller, (ed.), *Seneca's Tragedies*, vol 2, (Heinemann and Putman's Sons, London; New York, 1917), 183–342, 336.

40 Galinsky, *Herakles*, 164. This also true of passages such as Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.32 and the second book of Valerius' *Argonautica*.

41 Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* 1.32, in A. E. Douglas (ed. and tr.), *Cicero: Tusculan Disputations I*, (Aris & Phillips Ltd.; Bolchazy-Carducci, Warminster; Chicago, 1985), 36–37.

42 Mueller, «Sacred History», 316, citing Cicero, *Tuscalan Disputations,* 1.32.

43 M. L. Colish, *The Stoic Tradition from Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages: vol. 1, Stoicism in Classical Latin Literature*. 2nd impression (E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1990), 31, although she also points out that both Seneca and Marcus Aurelius are quite inconsistent in their understandings of the fate of the soul after death, and in terms of eschatology, and they confess their uncertainties on these types of issues. On stoic anthropology, and in particular the relation of the Stoic soul to the body, see T. Brennan, «Stoic Souls in Stoic Corpses», in D. Frede and B. Reis (eds.), *Body and Soul in Ancient Philosophy*, Gesellschaft für antike Philosophie Kongress (W. de Gruyter, Berling; New York, 2009), 389–407, 404.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

in turn, are mingled with it»[44]. Seneca refers to Marcia's deceased father and her son as now being «far loftier beings, dwelling in the highest heaven [*sed tanto excelsiorum et in summo locatorum*]»[45]. There is little conceptual space between this vision of an elevated, purified afterlife and deification. Seneca also writes to Marcia that her son has

> wholly departed from earth; for a little while he tarried above us while he was being purified and was ridding himself of all the blemishes and stain that still clung to him from his mortal existence [*dum expurgatur et inhaerentia uitia situmque omnem mortalis aeui excutit*], then soared aloft [*excelsa sublatus*] and sped away to join the souls of the blessed[46].

Returning now to the cult of Hercules, although his cult was originally Greek and not Roman: however much the Homeric underworld of murky darkness may have persisted as the destination of the dead, the evidence from Attic vase-paintings is that the idea of Hercules' ascent to heaven had already established itself by the beginning of the sixth century BC[47]. As another example, it is commonly considered that Apuleius invented the myth of Cupid and Psyche; however, as Eisner points out, the motif of Cupid and Psyche goes back at least to the time of Plato, and they are first depicted together on an Etruscan gem from the fifth century B.C.[48] While Apuleius fleshed out the myth, Eros and Psyche were associated with the idea of apotheosis from earlier times[49].

It was however in later antiquity that the idea of ascent after death became widely popular and deeply permeated Roman culture at various levels. Wallace distinguishes between four kinds of ascents to heaven in the Graeco-Roman world: «1. early Greek iatromentes – (medicine-men, or shamans – who were held capable of flight; 2. heavenly ascent as a metaphor for the philosophical flight of the mind; 3. heavenly ascent as a philosophical myth; 4. ascent as a ritual practice; 5. ascent as political propaganda (Roman apotheosis traditions)»[50]. These ideas were not peripheral but central to culture in the Graeco-Roman world.

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44 Seneca, *To Marcia on Consolation*, in vol. 2 of J. W. Basore (ed. and tr.), *Seneca: Moral Essays in Three Volumes* (Harvard University Press; William Heinemann, Cambridge; London, 1958), 88–89.

45 Seneca, *To Marcia on Consolation*, tr. and ed. by Basore, 88–89. Similarly, see also Seneca, *Epistle* 93.10; however, note how in this epistle Seneca expresses his uncertainty by raising the possibility of utter annihilation after death.

46 Seneca, *To Marcia on Consolation*, tr. and ed. by Basore, 88–89.

47 R. Hard, *The Routledge Handbook of Greek Mythology* (Routledge, London, 2004), 286.

48 R. Eisner, «Eros and Psyche», in *The Road to Daulis: Psychoanalysis, Psychology, and Classical Mythology* (Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1987), 211–236, 228.

49 Eisner, «Eros and Psyche», 228.

50 Wallace, *Snatched into Paradise*, 39.

Even from the inception of the notion of imperial apotheosis, divinification was integrally associated with ascension; Suetonius writes that on the night before Caesar was murdered, he had a dream in which he ascended the heavens and was greeted by Jupiter[51]. Correspondingly, Kreitzer observes that «[t]he «ascension star»…becomes characteristic of numismatic depictions of the apotheosis of the emperor»[52]. It became largely standard protocol that, upon their deaths, the emperors received *exaltatio* and apotheosis[53].

The climax of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is the metamorphosis of Julius Caesar through ascension, and his deification after death. Ovid writes that «Julius had to be made a god» («*Ille deus faciendus erat*»)[54], and describes how Caesar's soul «passed from his body» and Venus carried it «to the stars in the heavens» («*caelestibus...astris*»), where it soared higher than the moon (*luna volat altius illa*) «till it finally took the form of a gleaming star» («*stella micat*»)[55]. It is evident that in Roman thought, the concepts of post-mortem ascent and astral immortality were readily appropriated with regard to the apotheosis of the Roman emperors[56]. Their elevation clearly demonstrates the close affinity between post-mortem ascent and divinification, which is also illustrated in the verse dedication of a temple in Italy to Gaisu and Lucius Caesar, Augustus' heirs:

> Nam quam te, Caesar, tem[*pus*] expescet deum
> Caeloque repetes sed [*em, qua*] mundum reges,
> Sint bei tua quei sorte te[rrae] huic imperent
> Regaloque nos felicibu[*s*] voteis sueis[57].
>
> When time summons you, Caesar [Augustus], to be a god,
> and you return to your place in heaven from which you can rule the world,
> let these be the people who in your stead govern the earth
> and rule us, having their prayers to you heard[58].

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51 L. Kreitzer, «Apotheosis of the Roman Emperor», in *Biblical Archaeologist* 53.4 (1990), 201–219, 213, citing Suetonius *Julius* 81.3.

52 Kreiter, *Apotheosis*, 214–215.

53 R. C. Miller, «Mark's Empty Tomb and Other Translation Fables in Classical Antiquity», *JBL* 129.4 (2010) 759–776, 774.

54 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.761, tr. by D. Raeburn (Penguin Books, London, 2004).

55 Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 15.843–851, tr. by Raeburn.

56 H. Bell, «The Preparation for Christianity», in *Cults and Creeds in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 1953), 57; See also Kreitzer, «Apotheosis», 213–5.

57 Hermann Desau (ed.), *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae* (*ILS*), 3 vol., 37, 36 (Weidmann, Berlin, 1962).

58 Tr. in S. Price, «From Noble Funerals to Divine Cult: The Consecration of Roman Emperors», in D. Cannadine and S. R. F. Price, *Rituals of Royalty: Power and Ceremonial in Traditional Societies* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1987), 56–105: 81.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

It is evident from this inscription that imperial apotheosis implied not only acceptance into the realm of the gods, but also at least some of the rights and privileges that this entailed, since they were considered to hear the prayers of those on earth[59]. However difficult it might be to extrapolate from inscriptional evidence the actual beliefs of the people, at least this inscription testifies that deified emperors were objects of prayer[60].

Price criticises the attitude of those scholars who view the Roman ritual of apotheosis as «humbug», as being «anachronistic»[61]. There are enough indications in the ancient texts that imperial apotheosis was viewed as far more than mere political propaganda, and that it was accompanied by an «expectation of sincerity»[62]. This may be illustrated by Pliny's Panegyric, in which Trajan's pious attitude is contrasted with the cynical actions of previous emperors «You gave your father [Nerva] his place among the stars with no thought of terrorizing your subjects, of bringing the gods into disrepute, or of gaining relected glory, but simply because you thought he *was* a god» («*sed quia deus credis*»)[63].

Gradel considers that such expressions of belief are never encountered with regard to cults of the living emperor, and only rarely with regard to the «traditional» gods[64]. Indeed, he considers that the element of belief was essential in the notion of the ascent and apotheosis of the emperors, since the usual condition for worthwhile worship was that the recipient should have power, and «in the absence of power, only one thing could grant to *Divi* the divine status, for which they were neither qualified by this usual requirement nor by tradition, namely belief in their divinity»[65].

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59 On the non-exclusive nature of the terms *diuus* and *deus* in relation to the apotheosis of the emperors, see Price, «Divine Cult», 77.

60 Bietenholz, *Historia and Fabula*, 397, comments that Graeco-Roman Antiquity was aware of the «inherent ambivalence of the notion of factual truth as opposed to fiction», however the authors of antiquity blunted the sharp edges of this distinction, inasmuch as the actual state was grounded on religious foundations.

61 Price, «Divine Cult», 57. See also I. Gradel, *Emperor Worship and Roman Religion* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 2002). P. Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*, tr. by P. Wissing (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1988), explores how the Greeks believed in their myths, and states that their way of belief «only appears to resemble our own» (Veyne, *Myths*, 3).

62 Price, *Divine Cult*, 57.

63 Pliny, *Panegyricus* 11.1–2, tr. and ed. by B. Radice, *Pliny: Letters and Panegyricis*, vol. 2. Loeb Classical Library (Heinemann; Harvard University Press, London; Cambridge, 1969), 348–349. For other examples, see V. Paterculus, 2.126.1; Seneca, *de Clementia*, 1.10.3; Seneca, *Apocolocyntosis*, 11.

64 Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 333.

65 Gradel, *Emperor Worship*, 333.

Manfred Clauss has argued forcefully that the emperor was viewed as a god in a theological sense, and that emperor worship was primarily a religious, rather than merely a political phenomenon[66]. He goes further, making a link between Roman imperial apotheosis and the development of the Christian concept of ascent to heaven, commenting that the dead emperor's path to the heavens was so much taken for granted that what had previously been the role of the Senate and the popular assembles was claimed by the Bishops as their own prerogative. («Was zuvor die Aufgabe des Senats und der Volksversammlungen gewesen war, beanspruchten nun manche Bischöfe als ihr Recht»)[67]. Valerie Hope has also suggested that the concept of imperial apotheosis may have more broadly influenced popular beliefs about life after death[68].

The extent to which people in the Roman world actually believed in some sort of an celestial apotheosis for themselves, apart from the case of the emperors, is a difficult question to answer with precision, particularly since expressions on funerary inscriptions do not necessarily equate with actual beliefs[69]. In the much-debated *Letter of Cornelia*, she is supposed to have written «When I am dead, you will worship me and invoke me, your parent, as a god» («*ubi ego mortua ero, parentabis mihi et inuocabis deum parentem*»)[70]. Furthermore, we have funerary portraiture that shows the deceased person in the guise of a god or goddess; for example the tomb of Claudia Semne, from the mid-second century AD, shows statues of her dressed as the goddesses Venus, Fortuna and Spes. In an associated inscription these statues are referred to as *simulacra Claudiae Semnes in formam deorum* (statues of Claudia Semne in the form of the gods)[71]; and furthermore Claudia is specifically associated with these divinities in the statement that «*Fortuna [et] Spei [et] Veneri et memoriae Claud[iae] Semnes sacrum [hoc monumentum est]*» («This monument is sacred to Fortuna and Spes and Venus and to the memory

66 M. Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott: Herrscherkult im römischen Reich* (K. G. Saur, München; Leipzig, 2001).

67 Clauss, *Kaiser und Gott*, 498.

68 V. M. Hope, *Roman Death: The Dying and the Dead in Ancient Rome* (Continuum, London, 2009), 109.

69 Hope, *Roman Death*, 112.

70 *Letter of Cornelius*, Fragment 2, from C. Nepos, , in E S. Forster, *Lucius Annaeus Florus (Cornelius Nepos): Epitome of Roman History*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge University Press, London; Cambridge, 1966), 694; English translation in J. Farrell, *Latin Language and Latin Culture: From Ancient to Modern Times*, Roman Literature and its Contexts (Cambridge University Press, New York, 2001), 61. Note Forster's older translation on p. 695 of the Loeb volume: «When I am no more, you will offer funerary sacrifices in my honour, and invoke the god of our family». Seymour's translation is to be preferred since *deum* and *parentem* are both singular and accusative.

71 G. Henzen and I. B. de Rossi (comps.), E. Bormann and G. Hen (eds.), *Corpus inscriptionum latinarum: consilio et auctoritate Academiae literarum regiae borussicae* editum (*CIL*), vol. 6, *Inscriptionis urbis Romae Latinae*, Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, 15593 (G. Reimer; Berolini, Berlin, 1862), 1787.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

of Claudia Semne»)[72]. Sarcophagi decorated with mythical scenes from the stories of Adonis, Endymion, and Persephone, who earned immortality, are not uncommon[73]. When considered together with those inscriptions that refer to an afterlife in the sky, or more commonly, in the Elysian fields[74], there is enough evidence to suggest the existence of a significant strain of views, albeit among others, that involved ascent to the sky and identification with the gods after death.

In Plutarch's *On Isis and Osiris*, the background in the Egyptian cults seems clearly evident. Brenk comments that in this text «Plutarch is faithful to the solar or stellar aspects of Osiris, Isis, and other Egyptian deities, without in these passages communicating the soteriological tone of the Egyptian texts»[75]. In later antiquity, Porphyry describes the ladder of divine ascent to God within Plato's *Symposium*[76]. In this regard, Brenk makes the significant observation regarding Osiris that «[b]ehind the Platonic allegories and the allusions of eternity and divinization in religious-political architecture, however, is a whole strain of Egyptian religion in which Osiris and those assimilated to him receive immortality, in particular, celestial immortality»[77].

Porter characterises the core Mithraic myth as having revolved around the journey of the soul after death[78]. In his tantalising description of the Mithraic mysteries, Celsus describes a ladder, with seven gates, and an eighth gate at the top, which allows the soul to pass through the orbits of heaven[79]. Brenk comments that in the later Empire, the Emperor Julian the Apostate claimed that the «ascent of the soul» was at the heart of the Mithraic mysteries[80]. In this regard, their solar theology and its affinity with traditional Egyptian beliefs and their associated imagery should be noted[81]. Brenk further notes the relevance of the Neoplatonist interpretation of Mithraism, as well as the suggestiveness

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72 *CIL* 6.15594.

73 Hope, *Roman Death*, 109–111.

74 Such as the epitaphs of Iulius Gallanius from Haīdra (Tunisia), Lucius Aviancus Didymus from Rome, and Tiberius Claudius Tiberianus. See Hope, *Roman Death*, 114.

75 F. E. Brenk, «A Gleaming Ray: Blessed Afterlife in the Mysteries», in *Relighting the Souls: Studies in Plutarch, in Greek Literature, Religion, and Philosophy, and in the New Testament Background*, 291–308 (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), 156.

76 Porphyry, *Life of Plotinus*, 23. See J. M. Dillon, «An Ethic for the Late Antique Sage», in *The Cambridge Companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 315–335; See also p. 392.

77 Brenk, «Blessed Afterlife», 298.

78 S. E. Porter, «Resurrection, the Greeks and the New Testament» in S. E. Porter, M. A. Hayes, and D. Tombs (eds.), *Resurrection*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 186, 52-81, (Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 76–77.

79 Origen, *Contra Celsum*, 6.22, H. Chadwick (tr.), (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1953), 334.

80 Brenk, «Blessed Afterlife», 297.

81 See, for example, Julian *Oration*, IV., 132D-133,135D, 139D-140A.

of the soul's ascent from this world to Mithras in the ladder of the Mithraeum of Felicissimus at Ostia and the solar ray in the Barbarini fresco[82].

A layered cosmology together with an access system into the heavens for initiates also appears to have been at the heart of the Mithraic mysteries. In his description of the Mithraic mysteries, Celsus also writes that in them «is a symbol of the two orbits in heaven, the one being that of the fixed stars and the other that assigned to the planets, and of the soul's passage through these. The symbol is this. There is a ladder with seven gates and at its top an eighth gate…»[83].

The affinities between the «Mithraic liturgy», which Culianu considers probably to be a description of the soul ascending after death, and traditional Egyptian religion are striking[84]. The soul must introduce itself to the keeper of the aetherial works and speak the magic formula «I am also a star going together with you, rising, with its rays of light, from the depths: oxyoxerthouth»[85]. Culianu describes the journey continuing «through other gates, beyond the Pole and the sphere of the fixed stars, to the Divinity»[86].

The presence of the motif of the ascent of the soul in mythology, philosophy, the founding stories of Rome, and the Emperor cult, reinforced by mystery religions, indicates that we are not faced merely with an idea at the fringe of Roman culture, but rather with one at its core. This was not an uninfluential idea that competed among many others about the afterlife, but instead a concept that manifested itself in so many guises in the thought of the Roman world that eventually, by the late empire, it became the principal view.

It is not surprising that the ascent motif is also prominent within Second Temple Judaism and early Christianity, particularly in the apocalyptic literature[87]. The trials associated with ascent are also evident; for example, in the *Ascension of Isaiah* we find a description of the trials that attend travelers through the various levels of the heavens, including the requirement for passwords[88].

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82 Brenk, «Blessed Afterlife», 297. See also Segal, *Heavenly Ascent* (as in n. 2), 1350–1351.

83 Origen. *Contra Celsum*, 6.22, Chadwick (tr.), 334.

84 Culianu, *Psychanodia*, 13.

85 Culianu, *Psychanodia*, 13,

86 Culianu, *Psychanodia*, 13.

87 J. J. Collins, *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, The Biblical Resources Series (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1998), 34. See also Segal, *Heavenly Ascent* (as in n. 1), 1347. The concept of ascent to the heavens was also at the heart of many Jewish apocalyptic texts of the Second Temple Period and later Judaism.

88 *The Ascension of Isaiah*, Chapter 10.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

In this regard, Segal notes that Enoch and Moses are the most important Jewish figures of «divinisation or angelic transformation»[89]. In the Enochic literature, for example, Enoch ascends to heaven for the ultimate reward: «astral transformation and enthronement in heaven»[90]. In *1 Enoch* 39.7 there is an image of the final judgment that seems to include the transformation of the righteous into angel-like beings[91]. In *2 Enoch* 22:7, after seeing God, Enoch is transformed into «one of his glorious ones»[92], which Segal interprets to be «in short, an angel and a star»[93]. Note that in *2 Enoch* 22:8-10, recension A, the transformation is accomplished through a change of clothing, which represents Enoch's transformed, immortal flesh. Segal notes that «[t]his is a significant parallel with Paul's future glorification of the mortal body in 2 Cor. 5:1-10»[94].

Having considered the shape of the ascent motif within various traditions in antiquity, we will now examine evidence for the same core elements existing much earlier in traditional Egyptian cults.

3. EGYPTIAN EVIDENCE: THE PYRAMIDS

The Egyptian evidence for the post-mortem ascent of the soul is the earliest and most extensive of any of the ancient civilisations[95], in spite of it having been expressed through metaphors and symbols that seem foreign to the Greeks and that the Egyptian cosmology and understanding of the «soul» was different from that of the Greeks. The key elements in the Hellenistic depictions of ascent may already be found in ancient Egypt. This seems to remain true in spite of the fact that classical scholars, as well as scholars of early Judaism and Christianity, have looked for the roots of the ascent myth in a variety of historical traditions, particularly in Babylonian and Persian Zoroastrian

89 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 510; See also *Sirach* 45:1-5; See also the *Testament of Moses* 1:14, 15-19.

90 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 274.

91 C. Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Doctrine, Community, and Self-Definition* (Leiden, Brill, 2004), 15, dates this portion of the *Book of Enoch* to the first century AD.

92 F. I. Andersen (tr.), *2 (Slavonic Apocalypse of) Enoch*, in J. H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha I: Apocalyptic Literature and Testaments*, (New York, Doubleday, 1983) 91–222.

93 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 498.

94 Ibid., 499. See other references to angelification *in 2 Baruch* 51.10-1; *2 Baruch* 51:3-5; and in *Biblical Antiquities/Pseudo Philo* 12.1. Also see references to angelification in the Angelic liturgy of Qumran, consisting of The 'Angelic Liturgy' consists of *IIQShirshab* and the other fragments found in cave 4. In this regard, see Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 304, 413; C. Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology, and Soteriology* (Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 184, 198; R. Elior, *The Three Temples* (Oxford, Littman Library, 2004). See also Morton Smith on *4QMA*, quoted in Segal, *Life After Death,* (as in n. 2), 414.

95 J. Davies, *Burial and Rebirth in the Religions of Antiquity* (London, Routledge, 1999), 28.

beliefs. These scholarly proposals suffer variously from a scarcity of textual evidence, as well as significant problems with dating.

However, in ancient Egypt we have a culture with a fully-fledged antecedent to the Graeco-Roman ascent myth, arguably much earlier than these other cultures, and we have an abundant corpus of textual material which can be dated with reasonably tolerable confidence. Davies, for example, notes that the thanatologies of Egypt and Persia are among the oldest of the Ancient Near East, and that the difference between these sacred texts is that those of Egypt are more extensive while those of Persia are much more elusive[96]. It is, however, true that both sets of text suffer from problems of both interpretation and of trying to establish their cultural significance[97].

Ancient Egypt was a culture which was obsessed with the afterlife[98]. Davies writes that «[m]ore than any other society Egypt appears to have constructed a thanatology in which, in life and in death, the difference between men and gods, that is between mortals and immortals, had been transcended»[99]. The Egyptian affirmation of life was within a cosmology that had no eschatology, no apocalypse, and no end of the world. For this reason, Davies comments that for the ancient Egyptians, uniquely and distinctively «[d]eath was life»[100].

Indeed, one of the key difficulties in studying ancient Egyptian religion is its complexity; as Segal observes «[t]he complexity of Egypt's religion is sometimes dizzying»[101]. A key reason for this complexity is the way that the religion and its associated symbolism developed syncretistically over a very long period of time, encompassing a great deal of ambiguity[102].

Among the very earliest and pervasive strata of Egyptian religion is that which was associated with the stars. In 1966, Faulkner published a study in which he attempted to survey the ideas of the cult of the stars that are present in the Pyramid Texts[103]. In doing so, he noted that, although it had not been studied in detail, behind these texts «lay a

96 Ibid., 27.

97 Ibid.

98 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 77.

99 Davies, *Death*, 29; See also Segal, *Life after Death*, 699.

100 Davies, *Death*, 39. It is for this reason that Wright notes that 'resurrection' is an entirely inappropriate word to describe Egyptian belief. See Wright, *Resurrection* (as in n. 16), 47.

101 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 33.

102 Ibid., 35.

103 R. O. Faulkner, «The King and Star-Religion in the Pyramid Texts» *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 25.3 (1966), 153–161. Four key concepts which Faulkner identified here were 'the stars as gods,' 'the dead king becomes a star,' the king assumes authority over the stars,' and 'the circumpolar stars assist the king'.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

very ancient stratum of stellar religion, in which the stars were regarded as gods or as the souls of the blessed dead»[104].

The landmark remains of ancient Egyptian civilisation, the pyramids, were closely connected with ascent in the afterlife. The pyramids themselves appear to have been literally designed as a ladder to heaven. This is reflected in the fact that the original form of the pyramids, in its invention by Imhotep for King Djoser (2630-2611 BC), was stepped. It was this stepped pyramid form, conceived as a «ladder» to heaven, that subsequently evolved into the smooth-sided shape we traditionally associate with the pyramids.

Katharina Volk calls the ladder that bridges the gap between heaven and earth «a cross-cultural motif»[105]. The Greeks occasionally mentioned ladders as an obviously practical method for reaching the sky[106]. In a philosophical sense, Plato in the *Symposium* describes a *nousanodia*, a spiritual ascent to an inner experience of immortality, known as the «ladder of Diotima» —«ever mounting the heavenly ladder, stepping from rung to rung» («ἀεὶ ἐπανιέναι, ὥσπερ ἐπαναβαθμοῖς χρώμενοιν»)[107]. In Manilius' *Astronomica*, he refers to «the correct order steps mounting to heaven, that they may avail to guide the hesitating seer by a winding path to the stars» («*quod quoniam docui, superest nunc ordine certo caelesitis fabricare gradus, qui doucere flexo tramite pendentem valeant ad sidera vatem*»)[108].

Volk notes that in the first few centuries of the Roman world, there was an explosion of the metaphorical use of the ladder; for example, «miniature ladders have been found in Roman tombs, where they had been placed with the purpose of ensuring a safe passage to the afterlife»[109]. She also considers that this was «a custom presumably taken

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104 Ibid., 153.

105 K. Volk, «'Heavenly Steps': Manilius 4.119–121 and its Background», in R. S. Boustan and A. Y. Reed (eds.), *Heavenly Realms and Earthly Realities in Late Antique Religions* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004), 34–46, 41.

106 See Pindar, fr. 162 Maehler; Polyainus 7.22.

107 Plato, *Symposium*, 211.3, trans. by M. Joyce, in E. Hamilton and H. Cairns (eds.), *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, Including the Letters*, Bollingen Series 71 (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1961), 563; ed. by W. R. M. Lamb, «Symposium», in *Plato III: Lysis, Symposium, Gorgias*, Loeb Classical Library 166, 73–246 (Harvard University Press, Cambridge; London, 2001), 211. On the 'ladder of Diotima,' see J. A. Devereux, «The Object of Love in Ficino's Philosophy», *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 30, No. 2 (Apr.-Jun. 1969), 165.

108 Manilius, *Astronomica*, 4.119–121, ed. and tr. G. P. Goold, Loeb Classical Library 469 (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge; London, 1977), 230–231.

109 Volk, «Heavenly Steps», 41, citing F. V. M. Cumont, *Lux Perpetua* (P. Geuthner, Paris, 1949), 282, who wrote «à l'époque romaine... l'échelle survivait comme amulette ou comme symbole. Bien des gens continuaient à placer dans les tombeaux de petites échelles de bronze» («In Roman times… the ladder survived as an amulet or as a symbol. Many people continued to place small ladders of bronze in the tombs»).

over from the Egyptians». It is interesting that in *Above the Clouds*, Lucian has Menippus say «I did not need a ladder for my ascent, nor to become the eagle's favourite, since I had my own wings»[110]. Here Lucian combines the two principal means of ascent to the sky which we first find in Egyptian texts: the ladder and the bird.

Indeed, the bird as a means of ascent is not unknown in Greek thought, as suggested by the myth of Ganymede being carried off to Olympus by Zeus in the form of an eagle. Javier Arce comments that the idea that a bird, and typically an eagle, transported souls to heaven, was present in certain Hellenistic philosophical schools, Orphism and Pythagoreanism, and by the second and first centuries B.C. the idea had penetrated the cultic world of republican Rome[111]. He observes that «[c]omo tema literario y simbólico el motivo del águila ascendente y signo de apoteosis antecede sin lugar a dudas a la época del Emperador Augusto y se encuentra en el espiritu de ciertos ambientes tanto literarios como en las representaciones oficiales y oficilizadas»[112]. However, it is within the mythology that developed around the notion of imperial apotheosis that the eagle came into full prominence as a principal symbol of heavenly ascension in the Roman world. Although Arce demonstrates that the description of how an eagle was released at Augustus' funerary pyre, as described by Dio Cassius and Herodian[113], is most probably a later elaboration, still «[t]anto en el arte oficial como en el privado, el águila siguió asociada después de Augusto a la iconografía de la apoteosis»[114].

The idea of astral immortality was inherent in the notion of imperial apotheosis from the beginning. In the imperial coinage, the «ascension star», which becomes the numismatic sign for divinified emperors, is placed above the head of Augustus[115]. One cannot help but be reminded of the ceilings covered with stars in the tombs of the Pharaohs, which represented their own destiny in the heavens.

Within the Jewish mystical tradition, the symbol of the ladder occupies a venerable place, as Idel demonstrates[116]. Therefore, in the Hekhaloth literature, there is the

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110 Lucian, *Icaromenippus or High Above the Clouds*, 2, in C. D. Nuttall Costa (tr.), *Lucian: Selected Dialogues*, Oxford World's Classics (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2005), 45–73.

111 Javier Arce, *Funus imperatorum: los funerales de los emperadores romanos* (Alianza, Madrid, 1988), 133.

112 Arce, *Funus Imperatorium*, 133.

113 On the funeral of Augustus see Dio Cassius 56.42.3; on Pertinax, see 75.4.5. Also Herodian IV.2.11. It is significant that the presence of the eagle in Augustus' funeral was not mentioned by either Suetonius or Tacitus.

114 Arce, *Funus Imperatorium*, 133.

115 As an example, Kreitzer, «Apotheosis», 214–215, describes a coin from the reign of Tiberius which has on its reverse a portrait of Augustus and which reads «VIV F DIVOS AUGUST» (Son of the Divine Caesar, the Divine Augustus), and which shows the ascension star above the head of Augustus.

116 M. Idel, *Ascensions on High in Jewish Mysticism: Pillars, Lines, Ladders* (Budapest, Central European University Press, 2005).

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

striking possibility of one having a «ladder in one's house» by which every person could ascend to the world above[117]. Within early Christianity, the ladder as a means of ascent to heaven is prominent in the Passion of Perpetua and Felicitas[118]. The fact remains that the earliest record that we have of a ladder as a means of ascent to the heavens is Egyptian. As such, the Egyptian ladder to heaven may be conceived as the prototype for the motif of the ladder to astral immortality that recurs throughout many of the cultures of antiquity.

Returning now to the pyramids, apart from their being literally a ladder to heaven, the concept of astral immortality was also reflected in the pyramid shape, signifying the spreading of the sun's rays. Segal notes that the steps of the pyramid suggest a staircase for the king for the ascension of the king to the heavens, as is also found in one of the depictions of the king's ascent in the tomb of Unas[119]. Not only did the apex of the pharaoh's pyramid tomb indicate the way to the stars[120], but the pyramids of Giza are also laid out to line up exactly with important stars, suggesting the direction of the journey of the pharaoh's *akh*[121] More specifically, Segal states that up until the Twelfth Dynasty the Egyptians focused on the North Star and the stars above the ecliptic, which were the stars that never set. These stars therefore represented astral immortality and were called the «indestructible stars (Ilkemu-Seku)». It was with these stars that the entrances to the pyramids and tombs were aligned[122].

4. EGYPTIAN EVIDENCE: THE PYRAMID TEXTS

The *Pyramid Texts* consist of hundreds of «spells» or «utterances» inscribed inside some of the pyramids[123]. The *Pyramid Texts* are the earliest of the Egyptian funerary texts, and indeed the oldest substantial corpus of written religious texts discovered anywhere. They were found by French archaeologist Gaston Maspero in 1880, who identified them on the walls of the burial chamber in the pyramid of Pepi I[124]. David describes them as follows:

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117 *Hekaloth Rabbati* 13.2; See discussion in C. Rowland, *The Open Heaven: A Study of Apocalyptic in Judaism and Early Christianity* (London, SPCK, 1982), 22.

118 The *Passion of Perpetua*, 1.3.2; See J. Danielou, *A History of Early Christian Doctrine Before the Council of Nicaea: The Origins of Latin Christianity*, trans. by D. Smith and J. A. Baker, (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1977), 60.

119 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 37.

120 Ibid., 39.

121 Ibid., 38.

122 Ibid., 38–39.

123 Ibid.

124 R. David, *The Two Brothers: Death and the Afterlife in Middle Kingdom Egypt* (Bolton, Rutherford Press, 2007), 62.

> The *Pyramid Texts*… were probably compiled sometime between Dynasties 3 and 5 by the priests of the sun-god Re whose cult-centre was a Heliopolis. They were first used in the pyramid of King Unas at Saqqara during Dynasty 5, but in total they occur, inscribed in hieroglyphs, on the interior walls of five pyramids at Saqqara (belonging to Unas, Teti, Pepi I, Merenre and Pepi II) which date to Dynasties 5 and 6, the pyramids of three queens of Pepi II and the pyramid of King Ibi of Dynasty 8[125].

The central aim of the *Pyramid Texts* appears to be to enable the pharaoh's resurrection and to ensure that he reaches the sky, where he is to take his place among the other gods who form part of the retinue of the sun god Re[126]. Many of the spells in the *Pyramid Texts* explicitly state that the pharaoh rises to heaven by means of a ladder. Examples include: «Stand up, you two uprights, and descend, you crossbars, that Unis may go up on the ladder that his father the Sun has made for him»[127]. «N. ascends on the ladder which his father Ra made for him», and «the gods who belong to the sky and the gods who belong to the earth… make for him conveyance on their arms. So, you shall go forth, Unis, to the sky and step up on it in this its identity of the ladder»[128]. As Segal notes «[t]he ladder, the staircase, was part of the magic of the pyramid itself»[129].

The importance of this, as Segal observes, is that «[t]he association of heaven with immortality is uniquely an Egyptian invention, occurring many millennia before it becomes part of Biblical or Greek tradition»[130]. This is reflected in the main themes of

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125 Ibid.

126 Ibid., 63.

127 Unis Spell 178 in J. P. Allen (tr.), *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts: Writings from the Ancient World*, ed. by Peter Der Manuelian, 23 (Atlanta, Society of Biblical Literature, 2005), 50.

128 Unis Spell 211 in Allen, *Pyramid Texts*, 57.

129 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 38. The spells in the *Pyramid Texts* also provide for means other than a ladder for the pharaoh to ascend to the sky; indeed, anything that could possibly have been considered helpful was invoked, including ramps, steps, wings, clouds, storms, hail, incense, sunlight, beetles, and locusts. See David, *Death and the Afterlife* (as in n. 66), 63; and Hornung, *Afterlife* (as in n. 25), 5. Egyptian beliefs indeed made use of a multiplicity of methods and corresponding symbols to achieve their religious ends. See Ibid., 47; See also O. Goelet Jr., «A Commentary on the Corpus of Literature and Tradition which Constitutes the Book of Going Forth by Day», in R. O. Faulkner (tr.), E. Von Dassow (ed.), *The Egyptian Book of the Dead: The Book of Going Forth By Day, being The Papyrus of Ani* [2] (San Francisco, Chronicle Books. 1998), 138–170, 142; and David, *Death and the Afterlife*, (as in n. 66), 63. Accordingly, even the earliest known pyramid inscriptions, which are found in the Pyramid of Unas, demonstrate a variety of means for achieving ascent. See for example, the inscriptions on the walls of the tomb of King Unas, *Pyramid Text* 302, north wall of the central chamber, quoted in W. Forman and S. Quirke, *Hieroglyphs and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* (London, British Museum Press, 1996), 57.

130 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 38.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

the Pyramid Texts, which will now be briefly surveyed, with examples. The first main theme is ascent to the sky, as in the following examples[131]:

> The spirit is bound for the sky, the corpse is bound for the earth[132].
>
> (890) Someone flies up, I fly up from you, O men; I am not for the earth, I am (891) for the sky… I have soared to the sky as a heron, I have kissed the sky as a falcon…[133]
>
> the King is bound for the sky, the King is bound for the sky on the wind, on the wind! He will not be excluded, and there is nothing through which he can be excluded[134].

The second major theme of the Pyramids is that of Pharaoh becoming one of the stars of the sky in the afterlife, as in the following examples among many[135]:

> O you who are high exalted among the Imperishable Stars, you shall never perish[136].
>
> Open up your place in the sky among the stars of the sky, for you are the Lone Star… look down upon Osiris when he governs the spirits, for you stand far off from him, you are not among them and you shall not be among them[137].
>
> (1466) The King's mother was pregnant with him, (even he) who was in the Lower Sky, the King was fashioned by his father Atum before the sky existed… (1469) the King is an Imperishable Star, son of the sky-goddess… Re has taken this King to himself to the sky… (1470) for the King is a star…[138]

[131] For still other examples, among many, of ascent in the Pyramid Texts, see Utterance 304, «The King Climbs to the Sky on a Ladder», Section 468, in R. O. Faulkner (tr.), *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (Oxford, Clarendon Press,1969) 93; Utterance 302, «The King Flies to the Sky Like a Bird», Section 463, ibid., 92; Utterance 572, «An 'Ascension' Text», sections 1472–1475, ibid., 227.

[132] Utterance 305, «A General Funerary Text», section 474, ibid., 94.

[133] Utterance 467, «An 'Ascension' Text», sections 890–891, ibid., 156.

[134] Utterance 258, «The King Leaves the Earth for the Sky», section 313, ibid., 68.

[135] Other examples include: Utterance 327, «The King Becomes a Star», section 328, ibid., 106; Utterance 570, «The King Becomes a Star», sections 1455–1456, ibid., 224; Utterance 463, «The King is the Lone Star,» section 876, ibid., 154–155.

[136] Appendix to Utterance 463, *Pyramid Texts*, ibid., 155.

[137] Utterance 245, «The Sky-Goddess Speaks», section 251, ibid., 58.

[138] Utterance 571, «The King is the Son of Atum and is a Star», sections 1466, 1469, 1470, ibid., 226.

The third major theme which accompanies ascension and stellar immorality is the assertion of Pharaoh's divinity,[139] illustrated in the following texts, chosen from among many[140]:

> I am pure, I am conveyed to the sky thereby, I remain more than human, I appear in glory for the gods. I have appeared with Re at his appearing[141].
>
> (476) «How lovely to see! How pleasing to behold!» say they, namely the gods, (477) when this god ascends to the sky, when you ascend to the sky with our power upon you, your terror about you, and your magic at your feet[142].
>
> (939) «How lovely to see!» says she, namely Isis; «How pleasing to behold!» says (940) she, namely Nephthys, to my father, to the King, when he ascends to the sky among the stars, among the Imperishable Stars… (941) he goes thereby to his mother Nut, he ascends upon her in this her name of «Ladder». I bring to you the gods who are in the sky… (942) that you may be with them and walk arm-in-arm with them[143].

The divinity of Pharaoh in the afterlife was associated with the identification, and indeed assimilation, of Pharaoh with the sun-god Re, as is clear in the following texts:

> (1687) Go aboard this bark of Re… that you (1688) may go aboard it as Re; sit on this throne of Re that you may give orders to the gods, because you are Re who came forth from Nut…[144]
>
> The reed-floats of the sky are set down for Re
> That he may cross thereon to the horizon,
> To the place where the gods were born,
> Where he was born with them[145].

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139 D. Wildung, *Egyptian Saints: Deification in Pharaonic Egypt* (New York, New York University Press, 1977), 28, argues that the pharaohs were not divine until after death, so that, '[a]s long as he lived, and no matter what he did, no king of Egypt was able to ascend to the realm of the great Gods.' Note however that A. Von Lieven, «Deification» in H. Cancik and H. Schneider (eds.), *New Pauly: Encylopaedia of the Ancient World* 4 (Leiden, Brill, 2004), 180, more broadly maintains that «[t]he veneration of human beings as divinities is documented in all periods of Egyptian history». The purpose of Wildung's monograph is to examine, in contrast, the evidence for two human beings who were actually elevated first to the rank of saint, and then to the realm of the great gods itself, even in life: Amenhotep and Imhotep. (Wildung, *Egyptian Saints*, 1.28).

140 Other examples in the *Pyramid Texts* of the Pharaoh depicted as a god in the afterlife are: Utterance 682, «An 'Ascension' Text», sections 2042-2046, in Faulkner, *Pyramid Texts*, 293; Utterance 302, «The King Becomes a Star», sections 458–459, ibid., 92.

141 Utterance 565, «An 'Ascension' Text», section 1423, ibid., 220.

142 Utterance 306, «An 'Ascension' Text», sections 476–477, ibid., 94.

143 Utterance 474, «A Variant of Utterance 306», sections 939–942, ibid., 162.

144 Utterance 606, «The King is Assimilated to the Sun-God», sections 1687–1688, ibid., 250.

145 Utterance 609, «The King is Heaven-Born and Crosses to the Horizon», section 1705, *Pyramid Texts*, ibid., 252.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

As noted above, concepts of astral immortality, embodying just these themes, were later widespread across the Hellenistic work. This included many Jewish texts, particularly within the apocalyptic literature[146].

5. EGYPTIAN EVIDENCE: THE COFFIN TEXTS

It is notable that the *Pyramid Texts*, in their key themes, clearly foreshadow the later Graeco-Roman concepts by millennia. Furthermore, the themes found in the *Pyramid Texts* provide the foundation for, and are subsequently reflected in, the subsequent funerary texts, through the history of ancient Egypt. The *Pyramid Texts* themselves were accordingly adapted, eventually, for non-royal use, and were inscribed on the coffins of those who could pay for the service[147]. They were known as the Coffin Texts[148], and through their magical provisions, as David notes, «[t]he deceased commoner could now claim access to the sky where he would become the god's equal»[149].

The Middle Kingdom (c.2160-1580 BC) «focused on the stars that set and rose in the sky periodically, some of which were planets (*Ilkemu-Weredu*, «never resting stars»)». Within the Osirian cult, these were a powerful symbol of regeneration[150]. Therefore Middle Kingdom tombs clearly show star charts and astral figures, with the intent of helping the dead to navigate their trip to and through the heavens. Among all of the stars, the north star, considered to be the highest star, was particularly invoked, being described as «the star that cannot perish»[151]. Since this star was at the top of the heavens, this was where the pharaohs should go after their deaths[152].

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146 Of course, divinification was usually out of the question within the monotheistic paradigm of Judaism; however on Enoch and Moses as important figures with regard to ascent and angelification in Jewish texts see *Sirach* 45:1-5 and also the *Testament of Moses* 1:14,15-19. Also see Segal, *Life After Death*, 274, 510. See also *2 Enoch* 22:7, and *1 Enoch* 39.7. On the latter passage, see comments by C. Setzer, *Resurrection of the Body in Early Judaism and Early Christianity: Doctrine, Community, and Self-Definition* (Brill, Leiden, 2004), 15, who dates this portion of the *Book of Enoch* to the first century A. D. Other references to angelification in *2 Baruch* 51.10-1; *2 Baruch* 51:3-5; and in *Biblical Antiquities/Pseudo Philo* 12.1. Also see references to angelification in the Angelic Liturgy of Qumran (The «Angelic Liturgy» consists of *IIQShirshab* and the other fragments found in cave 4). In this regard, see Segal, *Life After Death*, 304, 413; C. Fletcher-Louis, *Luke-Acts: Angels, Christology, and Soteriology* (Mohr Siebeck, Tübingen, 1997) 184, 198; R. Elior, *The Three Temples* (Littman Library, Oxford, 2004).

147 David, *Death and the Afterlife*, (as in n. 66), 61.

148 Ibid., 65.

149 Ibid., 66.

150 Ibid., 39.

151 Ibid., 54.

152 Ibid., 54.

As they developed in the Middle Kingdom, and as reflected in the Coffin Texts, Egyptian beliefs came to be described most pervasively by the cult of Osiris, in whose realm the majority of the people hoped to find immortality[153]. It is significant that earlier, in the *Pyramid Texts,* Osiris was said to dwell in the sky, although there are a few references in the *Pyramid Texts* to Osiris' underworld kingdom. Brenk comments that «[a]lready in the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties… Osiris had solar associations. Though nothing in the earlier myth of Osiris should put him in orbit, he inherited a celestial hereafter and became associated with Orion»[154]. Smith observes that in general terms, throughout Egyptian history

> [t]he location of the realm over which Osiris presided is not always easy to specify. The place is known by a variety of names. Among the commonest of its designations is «*Amente*, the West». Egyptian cemeteries were often located on the west bank of the Nile… Thus, Osiris is often called «foremost in the West» or «foremost of the Westerners». Another common designation for this realm, *Duat*, is conventionally translated as «underworld», and not without reason. According to the evidence of some Egyptian texts, one descended to this region from the earth or ascended from it when returning[155].

However, elsewhere the *Duat* appears to be a celestial region, perhaps situated below the horizon. As Smith notes «[t]he sky is envisaged as the body of a goddess, Nut, and the Duat lies hidden within this. In later texts, the conception of the Duat as a subterranean realm is prevalent»[156]. There is therefore an ambiguity with regard to the location of the *Duat* as being either chtonic or celestial. In the Middle Kingdom, the major focus was on Osiris' realm in the underworld. As far as the Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom are concerned, instead of becoming a Re, or one with Re, as in the *Pyramid Texts*, the focus was on the dead Pharaoh becoming an Osiris[157].

The *Coffin Texts* of the Middle Kingdom retain a focus on a predominantly celestial afterlife[158], although Osiris and his domain of the netherworld have gained significantly in importance. Hornung observes that in the *Coffin Texts*,

> the celestial afterlife of the Pyramid Texts survives, as in the astronomical representa-

153 See David, *Death and the Afterlife*, (as in n. 66), 44–45.

154 Brenk, «Blessed Afterlife», 298.

155 M. Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

156 M. Smith, *Traversing Eternity* (as in n. 94), 2–3.

157 See David, *Death and the Afterlife*, (as in n. 66), 64–65.

158 See the texts found in the Middle-Kingdom tomb above the village of Rifeh, discovered by Flinders Petrie in 1907. (Ibid., 70–72, 78; see also Segal, *Life After Death,* (as in n. 2), 55).

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

> tions on the lids of coffins at Asyut, with their decans and stars from the northern celestial regions, and in the person of the sky goddess, Nut. In the *Book of the Two Ways* as well, a plurality of skies appears as the goal of deceased persons, who are ever and again supplied with the knowledge necessary to avoid dangers and false paths. In dialogues with the guardians of the gateways, the deceased employ this knowledge to establish their legitimacy[159].

In Nakht-Ankh's box coffin from the Middle Kingdom, the winged goddess Nut is invoked in the celestial divinisation of the deceased[160]. In fact, Ricklefs has suggested that Egypt is the likely origin for the depiction of wings as a religious symbol, which then spread throughout Near Eastern Art and ultimately into the Christian conceptual vocabulary[161]. Insofar as wings were an ancient Egyptian symbol associated with the sky and with divinity, they naturally became an enduring symbol of the ascent of the soul to the heavens[162], and of «divine cosmic mastery, and of divinity»[163].

In the funerary texts of the Middle Kingdom, we find the guardians of celestial gateways and the tests that the deceased must pass, together with a plurality of skies. These are all themes that are found much later in Graeco-Roman times. Hornung comments that in the *Book of the Two Ways*, a Middle Kingdom text which is a precursor to the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, the journey to the hereafter commences with sunrise at the eastern horizon, so that the journey itself takes place mainly in the sky[164].

In spells 1,100–1,110 of the *Book of the Two Ways*, the journey to the hereafter also involves going through a system of gateways with seven guardians[165]. In this regard, the Coffin Texts were also based on the earlier Pyramid texts, which were intended to give knowledge to Pharaoh of the dangers and gateways through which Pharaoh must pass in the afterlife. These included specific names and answers to questions he needed to provide in order to pass in safety. Much later this became an important element in the Hellenistic, and indeed Jewish narratives of ascent to heaven[166].

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159 Hornung, *Afterlife* (as in n. 25), 12.

160 Back, horizontal text.

161 N. Ricklefs, *An Angelic Community: The Significance of Beliefs About Angels in the First Four Centuries of Christianity*, Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia, 2002, 79.

162 Ricklefs, *Angelic Community*, 84.

163 Ibid., 79.

164 Hornung, *Afterlife* (as in n. 25), 11. The *Book of the Two Ways* is a funerary text found on coffins in the Middle Egyptian necropolis of el-Bersheh. Hornung, ibid., observes that in the later Books of the Netherworld, the journey to the hereafter begins at sunset.

165 Hornung, *Afterlife* (as in n. 25), 11.

166 Hornung, *Afterlife* (as in n. 25), 5.

6. EGYPTIAN EVIDENCE: THE BOOK OF COMING FORTH BY DAY

During the New Kingdom (c.1539-1075 BCE), new funerary texts were developed which substantially replaced the Coffin Texts, although they were largely based on them. These focused more on the afterlife of the Osirian underworld, instead of the sky. The *Book of Coming Forth By Day*, known to us popularly as *The Book of the Dead*, was the most widely used of these texts. Goelet notes that «[p]erhaps as much as a third of the *BD* chapters can be traced back to material in the *Coffin Texts*, far exceeding the proportion of chapters derived from *Pyramid Texts* antecedents»[167].

The Book of Going Forth by Day was believed to have been written by the ibis-headed god Thoth, the god of scribes and writing[168]. One theme of the *Book of Going Forth By Day* which clearly continues from the earlier texts is the presence of gateways and their guardians, who require the deceased to answer correctly before being allowed to pass. Making a connection with Greek culture, Bremmer suggests that Orphic Gold Leaves found from the fourth century B.C., giving instructions to the dead, functioned «as «passports» and their dialogue form also seems to derive from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*»[169]. In the *Book of Going Forth by Day*, the testing of the dead takes the following typical form:

> *Then shall say* the Majesty of Anubis concerning this:
> Do you know the name of this gateway, as many say to me?
> Then the Osiris, the Scribe Ani, the vindicated, shall say: In peace and in vindication «You Dispel Light» is the name of this gate.
> *Then shall say* the Majesty of Anubis: Do you know the names of the upper and lower portions of the door?
> «Lord of Truth, Master of his Two Legs» is the name of the upper portion. «Lord of Strength, the One who Commands the Cattle» is the name of the lower.
> Pass you on then, for you know, O Osiris, Scribe of the Accounting of the Divine Offerings of all the Gods of Thebes, Ani, the vindicated, possessor of reverence[170].

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167 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 140. The *Book of the Dead* displays the further influence of Osirification. See Segal, *Life After Death,* (as in n. 2), 58.

168 David, *Death and the Afterlife*, (as in n. 66), 68.

169 J. N. Bremmer, *The Rise and Fall of the Afterlife: The 1995 Read-Tuckwell Lectures at the University of Bristol* (London, Routledge, 2002), 20–21. See F. Graf and S. I. Johnston, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets* (New York, Routledge, 2007), 1–49.

170 Faulkner (tr.), «Chapter for entering into the hall of the Two Truths and a chapter of praising Osiris, Foremost of the Westerners», *Book of the Dead*, 30.125.1. Also, 'What is to be said by N when arriving at the eleventh portal of Osiris. Make a way for me, for I know you, I know your name, and I know who is within you. «She who always bears knives, who burns up the rebellious; Mistress of every portal, to whom acclamation is made on the day of darkness» is your name'. (*Book of the Dead*, chapter 146 – 'Here begin the chapters for entering the mysterious portals of the house of Osiris in the Field of Reeds', Faulkner, 121 – and similar for the 13th to the 19th portals).

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

The *Book of Going Forth By Day* illustrates the prominent role that the Egyptians gave to magic in their religion. This was reflected in late antiquity in magical systems and in such works as the *Corpus Hermeticum*. Specifically, Egyptian magical systems were based on imagery and words, and the *Book of the Dead* was accompanied by pictures, suggesting an attitude that the text was subordinate, a mere subtext[171]. Goelet observes that the sheer number of words in the Egyptian language translated as «magic» suggests the complexity of the concept; however, «[t]he most common and important of these words is *heka*… *Heka* magic is many things, but, above all, it has a close association with speech and the power of the word»[172].

The magic associated with words, and specifically names, was particularly highlighted in the magical systems of late antiquity, and indeed knowledge of specific names unlocked access to the various heavens in parts of Judaeo-Christian apocalyptic literature[173]. However, perhaps the earliest known examples of this concept are found in the *Book of Going Forth By Day*. Goelet observes that in this work «[a] telling phrase in this respect is the frequent statement that the deceased makes to threatening beings in the afterworld: «I know you, I know your name». The implication is clear – knowing the name of someone or something gives one a certain amount of control and power»[174]. A clear example is spell 194 in the *Book of Going Forth By Day*[175]. The spell reads as follows:

> *Words spoken by the majesty of Anubis:*
> «Do you know the name of this door
> As many state to me [that you do]»?
> The Osiris N says:
> «You-Overturn-She is the name of this door».
> The majesty of Anubis says:
> «Do you know the names of the upper and lower leaves»?
> «Possessor-of-balance-He-who-is-on-his-Two-feet
> Is the name of the upper leaf.
> Possessor-of-Vigour-Marshaller-of-the-Herds
> [Is the name of the lower leaf]».
> «Proceed then O Osiris [name]
> Because you know [their names]»[176].

171 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 148.

172 Ibid., 145.

173 e. g. *3 Enoch* 18:3; *Ascension of Isaiah* 10.24–31; *(First) Apocalypse of James*, 34.

174 Ibid., 151.

175 Reproduced in DuQuesne, *Osiris*. This spell is also called «Chapter 125: Introduction» by Budge, and «Spell 125.1» by T. G. Allen.

176 Section III, Spell 194, DuQuesne, *Osiris*, 23.

Significantly, DuQuesne notes that «[s]pell 194 is about the process whereby the human person is transformed into an *akh*. In Egyptian, the word *akh* means «transfiguration» and both the concept and the hieroglyphic writing are intimately connected with the word for «horizon»»[177].

Numbers also had definite magical power for the Egyptians, and the number seven particularly «was charged with a special magical potency»[178]. Accordingly there were seven deities who equipped the justified soul every day in the netherworld, and there were seven *bas* of Re. More significantly, in the *Book of Going Forth By Day*, there were seven gateways whose keepers the deceased must satisfy in order to proceed[179]. These seven gateways and their keepers are paralleled in the seven gateways/heavens and their keepers of later Hellenistic, as well as Judaeo-Christian, ascent narratives.

Particularly from the New Kingdom onwards, the myth of Osiris-Isis was central to the Egyptian ideas of the afterlife[180]. In spite of the many ambiguities and significant crossover between the myths and doctrines of Amon-Re and Osiris, the idea of ascent after death appears to have been particularly promoted by the Heliopolitan priesthood, in connection with the identification of the sun god Amon-Re with the Pharaoh[181].

Morenz observes that in Egypt, existence in heaven after death is a counterpart to Osiris' dominion over the dead[182]. This is clear in the oldest of the Pyramid Texts, and the ones that were considered «the most canonical by the Egyptians themselves»[183]. those in the pyramid of Unis. In Utterance 251, the sky-goddess Nut addresses the dead king saying «Open up your place in the sky among the stars of the sky for you are the Lone Star… look down upon Osiris when he governs the spirits, for you stand far from him, you are not among them and you shall not be among them»[184].

One of the preferred modes of travel through the sky was by means of boats. In the Egyptian cosmology of the afterlife, the sky was the location of the heavenly bodies with which the gods and the deceased could be identified[185]. Goelet notes that «[t]he vocabulary of travel through the sky is full of words such as «row», «ferry», «traverse»

177 DuQuesne, *Osiris*, 47.

178 Ibid., 46.

179 Ibid. See also B. Mojsov, *Osiris: Death and Afterlife of a God* (Malden, Blackwell, 2005), 46.

180 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 39,50.

181 Ibid., 47.

182 Siegfrid Morenz, *Egyptian Religion*, trans. by A. F. Keep, (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1973), 204–205.

183 Allen, *Pyramid Texts*, 15.

184 Utterance 251, Faulkner, *Pyramid Texts*, 58.

185 Ibid.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

(written with a boat-determinative)»[186]. A very important pathway through the sky was the Milky Way. The name for the Milky Way in Egyptian means something like «the beaten path», a delightful and evocative interpretation[187].

The region called the Akhet was of great importance for the Egyptian afterlife. This was the junction between the earth and the sky, closely connected with the sun, and is normally translated as «horizon.» However, Goelet suggests that the term *Akhet* is better rendered as «lightland» or «the bright place»[188]. Goelet notes that the most frequently employed determinative for *Akhet* shows the sun rising (or setting) between two hills[189].

The tomb and the necropolis were thus seen by the Egyptians as a juncture between this world and the next, associated with the *Akhet*. Goelet goes on to observe that «[t]he *Akhet* is the place where the gods and spirits come into being. This is significant because there is a strong connection of this region with the *akh*, an important soul-like state of the noble or blessed dead… In the *BD* and other sources the Egyptian word for the funerary prayers, *sakh*, means «to transform into an *akh*»[190].

Goelet notes that one of the most telling terms for «cemetery» in the Egyptian language is *khert netjer*, which he roughly translates as «that which belongs to the god»[191]. He comments that this ancient term, attested in some of the earliest Egyptian inscriptions, demonstrates that even from the earliest stages of Egyptian civili sation, there was already a close connection between the notions of death and divinity[192].

Underneath the earth were the regions of Nun, the primordial waters. Goelet notes that «[t]he name «Nun» … occasionally is written with an inverted «sky» determinative, an indication that Nun may have been considered as a subterranean counterpart to the sky»[193]. The *Duat* is also found under the earth, and is another name for the netherworld. This vast subterranean region is perhaps the most important of all of the components of the afterworld; however, it also seems to have been originally connected with the stars, and the word *duat* was originally written with a star, referring to the night sky. Mosjov accordingly comments that

186 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 143.

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.

191 Ibid.

192 Ibid. Goelet, ibid., 144, also notes that, '[a]s strange as this may seem at first, there is evidence from many sources to show that, in addition to the beings we would normally call gods, the word *netjer* could refer to dead people in general.'

193 Ibid., 143.

> Somehow in the Egyptian imagination the celestial realm during the night reached into the subterranean world. It was sometimes called «the lower Duat», presumably a sort of lower sky into which the stars disappeared. Duat designated the entry to the inner, non-material world of the spirits… Duat was where the gods lived[194].

This connection of the *Duat* with the stars underscores a fundamental point. Because of the deep Egyptian emphasis on complementary dualities, the ancient Egyptians imbued both the celestial and the chthonic regions in their cosmology with a dual, synergistic emphasis[195]. Indeed, even if a celestial afterlife was contemplated, it was still considered that all celestial bodies, with the exception of the Imperishable Stars, must necessarily cross the *Duat* every night[196]. It is therefore not correct to maintain that because Osirian doctrine emphasised descent, it did not involve the notion of an afterlife in the sky[197].

Both the Egyptian cosmology and the conceptualisation of the person are largely foreign to the modern western mind. For this reason, we have difficulties in understanding why ancient Egyptians saw tombs and the physical remains of the person as being so important. Fundamentally, as Goelet notes «Egyptians and modern monotheists hold diametrically opposed views on the relationship between the corpse and the soul»[198]. The Egyptians understood the corpse as preserving the person's essence, rather than merely as physical «remains»[199]. For this reason, the mummy-shape is «used as a determinative in the Egyptian word *qi* «form, shape, nature»»[200].

It is also not possible to directly equate the Greek (and Western) concepts of the soul with the ideas understood by the Egyptians. The ancient Egyptian conception of the human being was monistic[201], and the afterlife involved the whole entity. The *sah*, an Egyptian word for the «body», was not expected to be resurrected after death[202];

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194 Mosjov, *Death and Afterlife* (as in n. 118), 17. In support of this, Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 143, also observes that «Within the *BD*, the word [*Duat*] is most requently written with a star, or a star in a circle».

195 Ibid., 142.

196 Ibid. To maintain this position would require a fundamental misunderstanding of Egyptian cosmology.

197 In this regard, see Brenk's comment referenced in n. 36.

198 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 151.

199 Goelet (ibid.) comments that «[u]nlike the view that appears from time to time among Christian ascetics, the Egyptians did not have the negative concept of the living physical body as a prison for the soul».

200 Ibid.

201 Smith, *Traversing Eternity* (as in n. 25), 3.

202 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 51.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

however, when a Pharaoh died, his person, or his *ka,* survived death[203]. The *ka* is the most ritually important ancient Egyptian concept of the individual afterlife. Segal observes that «[t]he tomb is the «house of the *ka*», which could physically dwell in it. The *ka* was often understood as something like a «twin» or «double». This, the *ka*, was an image of the living person… The *ka* could just as well dwell in a statue, a portrait of the living person…»[204]. This is how the *ka*, which was considered to inhabit the tomb, could also ascend at death and live in the sky[205].

However, in addition to the *ka,* there are two other concepts which are closely related to our concept of the soul. One is the *ba*[206]*,* which is often depicted as a human-headed bird that flies up to the sky at death; however, the *ba* was also believed to visit the grave of the deceased. *Bas* were corporeal and could eat and drink, and assume non-human forms. It was as a *ba* that the deceased could travel throughout the earth or the sky[207].

The other important soul-concept, already mentioned above, is the *akh,* or the spirit that lives in the afterlife. Smart observes that « [t]he akh in effect is the glorified state of the individual»[208]. Exactly how *ka*, *ba*, and *akh* were defined, or how they interacted, is unknown[209], but it is evident that the ancient Egyptians experienced and described self in a different way to how we understand it[210].

The Egyptian understanding of the experience of the afterlife was, in effect, one of spiritual transfiguration[211]. In the process of transfiguration, achieving *akh*-hood seems to have been the ultimate afterlife aspiration of all. The *akh* seems to have had very little to do with the earthly realm, and was closely related to the realm of the solar/stellar. Indeed, according to *the Book of the Dead*, and many other Egyptian funerary texts, the blessed dead, in other words those who had achieved *akh*-hood, became «full-fledged members of the company of the gods»[212]. As noted earlier, Goelet observes that

203 Ibid., 49.

204 Ibid.

205 Ibid. Also see A. Erman, *The Ancient Egyptians: A Sourcebook of their Writings*, trans. by A. M. Blackman, (Gloucester, Peter Smith, 1978), 2–3.

206 See Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 50.

207 Smith, *Traversing Eternity* (as in n. 25), 5. See also Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 50.

208 N. Smart, *The World's* Religions, 2nd. ed. (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998), 205.

209 Segal, *Life After Death*, (as in n. 2), 50.

210 See ibid., 52.

211 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 151, makes the important observation that «contrary to a common misconception about their ideas of life after death, the Egyptians neither believed in the transmigration of the soul on earth in the Hindu or Pythagorean manner, nor hoped for a resurrection in this world. Rather, they believed in *transfiguration* in the next world».

212 Ibid.

the mummiform figure was used as a determinative for the word *netjer*, «god», and that this same world could also mean a «dead person»[213]. Goelet comments that «[t]he mummiform image may appear in this context because the Egyptians thought that the corpse was in some manner divine»[214].

Smith notes that «the Egyptian word for horizon, *akhet*, which denotes the place where the boundary between the visible and the hidden is located, is derived from the same root as akh»[215]. This etymology also clearly associates the *akh* with the sky, with the gods, and with the stellar or solar transfiguration of the deceased[216].

Of course, the deities which Egyptians most aspired to be transfigured into and assimilated with after death were Osiris and Re[217]. It is salient that even in the New Kingdom, the gods Osiris and Re were often associated and even fused together. The differences in their respective mythologies, and the apparently divergent destinations of the dead, presented no difficulty to the Egyptian mind, given their understanding of complementary dualities. Corcoran therefore observes that «[t]he association of Osiris with a solar deity was not of itself, however, inconsistent with traditional pharaonic Egyptian mythology, since from the New Kingdom, one can document the union of Osirian and solar elements in the fusion of the god Osiris with the sun-god Re»[218].

In spite of its Osirian focus, the influence of the Heliopolitan priesthood of Re is felt almost everywhere in the *Book of Going Forth By Day*[219]*;* indeed, as Goelet observes, «Re's influence on all religious thought was paramount throughout Egyptian history»[220]. It was during the Eighteenth Dynasty that hope in a solar afterlife became widespread among

213 Ibid.

214 Ibid.

215 Smith, *Traversing Eternity* (as in n. 25), 4, citing J. Assmann, *Altägyptische Totenliturgien 1* (Heidelberg, Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002), 21-22.

216 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 152.

217 L. H. Corcoran, «Mysticism and the Mummy Portraits» in M. L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Portraits and Masks: Burial Customs in Roman Egypt* (London, British Museum Press, 1997), 45–53, 46. However, note Smith's different interpretation in *Traversing Eternity* (as in n. 25), 6–7 «At the conclusion of the embalming rites, having been returned to life and freed from imputation of wrongdoing, the deceased could be said to possess an Osiris-aspect… Acquisition of this aspect did not involve identification with the deity, contrary to what is said in many books about Egyptian religion. Rather it means that the deceased was admitted to the god's following and became one of his devotees in the underworld. Thus it was a *unio litrugica* rather than a *unio mystica*». In spite of this, my assessment of the weight of the evidence is that it still favours a real belief in the *unio mystica*.

218 Corcoran, «Mummy Portraits» (as in n. 156), 46.

219 Goelet, «Commentary» (as in n. 71), 149.

220 Ibid.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
ISSN: 1989-9289

private individuals[221]. At the same time, Re's role in the next world also changed, so that he was no longer limited to the celestial sphere[222]. For this reason, in the «underworld books» that decorate the walls of Theban royal tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty, «the sun was given an important function in the nether regions that had previously been the territory of such gods as Osiris, Sokar, and Anubis»[223]. Accordingly, the *Book of Going Forth By Day* still refers to the heavens as the destination of the deceased[224].

It is in this context that Goelet notes, with regard to *The Book of Going Forth by Day*, that the Papyrus of Ani places a hymn to Re immediately before the hymn to Osiris Wennefer[225]. In the *Book of Going Forth by Day* the deceased is constantly identified with Re, and with his daily rebirth and dawn[226]. This is exemplified by a number of spells[227] similar to the following: «I will not enter the place of destruction… because I pass pure into the midst of the Milky Way…»[228].

7. CONCLUSIONS

In spite of the apparent distance in time, culture, and geography, key elements of the Graeco-Roman motif of post-mortem ascent are significantly foreshadowed in the earlier Egyptian funerary texts such as the *Pyramid Texts* and the later *Book of Coming Forth By Day*. In this sense, as the earliest texts of this nature known, the ancient Egyptian conceptions may be seen as either the archetypes of Graeco-Roman notions of ascent, or at least as being closer to those archetypes. These findings appear to give some degree of weight to Herodotus' opinion about the Egyptian source of the gods and religious observances of the Greeks. However, these conclusions must be considered being only theoretical in nature, since the historical distance between the primary sources will not bear greater firmer assertions.

Traditional Egyptian religion was still vibrant, preserving its essential elements, well into late antiquity. In spite of the greater antiquity of Egyptian civilisation, when we refer to Egyptian and Graeco-Roman cultures, we are generally referring to cultures that were contiguous; furthermore, it is not possible to deny the profound impact that

221 Ibid., 150.

222 Ibid.

223 Ibid.

224 Ibid.

225 Ibid.

226 Ibid.

227 See other examples including, The *Book of the Dead*, Chapter 144, trans. by Faulkner, 120; and The *Book of the Dead*, Chapter 177 – Chapter for raising up a spirit and causing a soul to live in the God's Domain, trans. by Faulkner, 131.

228 The *Book of the Dead*, chapter 176 – «Chapter for not dying again», trans. by Faulkner, 130.

Egyptian ideas had upon the Graeco-Roman world. While we may not be able to trace lines of transmission, the key elements of the later pervasive Graeco-Roman motif of post-mortem ascent are found in traditional Egyptian religion even from the earliest times. This highlights again the profound influence of Egyptian culture in the world of antiquity, as well as opening up new avenues of research for understanding its cultural legacy in the Mediterranean world.

El Futuro del Pasado, nº 5, 2014, pp. 191-224
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