

# PYRAMID TEXTS: DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

ca. 2404–2193 BCE

*“Let there be none of you who will turn his back to Atum as he saves...this his work from all the dead.”*

## Overview



The Pyramid Texts are the oldest religious texts preserved from ancient Egypt, dating to between 2404 and 2193 BCE. They are called the Pyramid Texts because they were carved on the walls of the subterranean chambers and corridors of the pyramids of ten kings and queens of Old Kingdom Egypt (ca. 2687–2191 BCE), beginning with Unas, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty. These pyramids are located at Saqqara, which served as the cemetery for Memphis, the capital of Egypt during the Old Kingdom. The texts were mostly written in vertical columns of hieroglyphs and have been divided into sections called *spells* by scholars. Each section begins with the hieroglyphs for *djed medu*, or “words to be spoken,” and ends with the hieroglyph for the word meaning “chapter.” The number of spells varied from pyramid to pyramid, with the pyramid of Unas containing 227, while the pyramid of Pepi II Neferkare contained over 600. There was considerable repetition of spells among the pyramids, and the total number of individual spells is now thought to be around 750. The location of the spells within each pyramid is significant and helps to determine the order in which the spells should be read. The purpose of these texts was to permit the deceased king (or queen) to make a successful transition to the next life and to continue to enjoy a royal existence there.

Following the end of the Old Kingdom, the Pyramid Texts began to be inscribed on tombs, sarcophagi, coffins, papyri, and other funerary monuments of nonroyal Egyptians, and this practice continued up until the end of pharaonic civilization. As a result, the Pyramid Texts can boast of an almost-continuous period of use of over two thousand years. The French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero discovered the Pyramid Texts in 1880, beginning with the pyramid of Pepi I, and since that time they have been a subject of constant study and publication by scholars. Through these efforts Egyptologists have been able to gain insight into the earliest beliefs and rituals of the ancient Egyptians.

## Context

The Old Kingdom is a term applied to the Third through Sixth Dynasties (sometimes extended to the Eighth), the first lengthy period of centralized government in ancient Egypt. The first king of the Third Dynasty (ca. 2687–2649 BCE), Djoser, and his counselor and architect, Imhotep, are famous for having constructed the first monumental building out of stone, the step pyramid complex at Saqqara. There, Imhotep transformed the existing large rectangular structure of brick and rubble—today called a *mastaba*—which was built over the underground burial chambers of the kings of the First and Second Dynasties, into a step pyramid, so called because it consisted of what appears to be six *mastabas* of descending size stacked one on top of the other. The step pyramid covered the underground burial chambers of the king, which would have contained the king’s tomb as well as the grave goods he expected to need in the afterlife. It has been theorized that the steps of the pyramid would have served as a means for the deceased king’s spirit to ascend to the sky, as Egyptians then believed that the afterlife of the king involved his ascending to become one of the group of northern stars that never disappear from the night sky (the circumpolar “Imperishable Stars”). The use of the step pyramid in royal burials continued throughout the Third Dynasty.

The Fourth Dynasty (ca. 2649–2513 BCE) was a time of religious change in ancient Egypt. Beginning with this dynasty, there is evidence of increasing emphasis on the worship of the sun, deified as Re, and the sun begins to play a larger role in the nature of the king’s afterlife. This is seen most dramatically in the shift from the use of step pyramids to the use of true pyramids—that is, with flat surfaces—as first built for King Snefru, of the Fourth Dynasty. This dynasty was the great age of pyramid building, and the most recognizable monuments from ancient Egypt, the pyramids of Kings Khufu, Khafre, and Menkure, as well as the Great Sphinx of Khafre, all located at Giza, belong to this period. The pyramid itself was a solar symbol. One hypothesis for the conceptual origin of the pyramid is that if one looks to the sky on a mostly cloudy day, one can

observe sunbeams descending as if forming the sides of a pyramid. One of the terms used by the Egyptians to refer to a pyramid was *akhet*, or “horizon,” the place from which the sun, and therefore also the dead king’s spirit, ascended into the sky. The relationship between the Egyptian king and the sun was emphasized even further during the Fifth Dynasty (ca. 2513–2374 BCE), when the kings adopted the use of a title that explicitly referred to the king as the “son of Re,” a practice that continued throughout the rest of pharaonic history. In addition to building pyramid complexes for their burials, the kings of the Fifth Dynasty also built special temples, called sun temples, which served to further join the deceased king with the sun in the afterlife.

Beginning with Unas, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty, and continuing into the Eighth Dynasty (ca. 2190–2165), the kings introduced the practice of inscribing hieroglyphic texts within the underground chambers of their pyramids at Saqqara. Although the Pyramid Texts did not appear as such until the Fifth Dynasty, there are indications that some of the texts are older. According to the modern Egyptologist James Allen, the grammar of the texts reflects a stage of the Egyptian language that ended about fifty years prior to the appearance of the texts in the pyramid of Unas. Some of the texts may be even older, as they refer to burial practices in use during the First and Second Dynasties, when the kings were buried in graves beneath mud-brick mastabas. Newer spells that appear for the first time in the Sixth Dynasty (ca. 2374–2191) pyramids reflect features of the contemporary language, indicating the composite nature of this collection of texts.

The Pyramid Texts can be divided into two types: mortuary liturgies and mortuary literature. Mortuary liturgies are short texts that were recited as part of the funerary rituals that accompanied the burial of the king. These texts address the king in the second person (“you are”/“you will”) and were recited by a priest who played the role of the dead king’s son. The spells of this group belong to three main rituals: the offering and insignia ritual, the resurrection ritual, and the morning ritual. The offering and insignia ritual combined what were originally two separate rituals and entailed the presentation of a large meal and items of royal dress and regalia (for example, scepters, staffs, bows and arrows, crowns) to a statue of the deceased king. The resurrection ritual was performed in order to release the dead king’s spirit from its body and allow him to journey daily with the gods. The morning ritual was based on the daily morning routine of the king during life—the king would awake, cleanse himself, dress, and eat breakfast; items involved in these activities would be presented to a statue of the dead king. By recording the texts of these rituals on the walls of the king’s pyramid, it was as if their performance at the king’s burial had been frozen in time, and the king would continue to benefit from the performance of these rituals throughout eternity.

Spells belonging to the genre of mortuary literature had a different purpose: to equip the deceased with the ability to magically overcome any obstacles that might confront

him as he continued to exist after death. These were composed in the first person (“I”) and were addressed to the gods by the spirit of the deceased king. Over time, the first-person pronouns were replaced by the name of the king in whose pyramid the text occurred. These spells could provide the deceased with protection from such harmful agents as snakes and worms (which could harm the king’s body or the contents of his tomb), serve to protect the pyramid itself, or allow the deceased’s spirit to leave the tomb safely each morning and spend the day in the company of the gods.

The Egyptian view of the afterlife involved the concept of travel by the deceased’s spirit. The path of the deceased was symbolically represented by the structure of the underground chambers of the pyramid, on whose walls the Pyramid Texts were carved. The burial chamber represented the *duat*, the underworld, the place where both the body of Osiris, god of the underworld, and the dead king lay. West of the burial chamber and connected to it by a passageway was the antechamber, representing the *akhet*, the horizon, from which the sun god Re and the deceased were reborn each day and in which the deceased made the transition into an *akh*, a glorified or effective spirit. The *akh* was the aspect of an individual that received a glorified or exalted status after death, provided the proper rituals were performed. A sharp turn to the north in the antechamber brought one to a long corridor broken up by a vestibule and ascending corridor. This was the pathway that the *akh* would take as it ascended into the sky each day.

The spells of the offering and insignia ritual always appear on the north wall of the burial chamber of a pyramid, and the spells of the resurrection ritual always appear on the south wall. The location of the morning ritual varied, and its spells could be found on the east wall of the burial chamber or antechamber. Most of the texts in the burial chamber are intended to release the spirit from its body so that it can begin its journey toward rebirth at dawn. Many of the texts found in the antechamber belonged to the category “mortuary literature” and were meant to be used by the dead king’s spirit while making the transition into an *akh*. The spells found within the corridor, vestibule, and ascending corridor are similar to those in the antechamber, being mostly concerned with allowing the spirit to cross the *akhet* and ascend into the sky to be with Re and the other gods.

### **About the Author**

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There is nothing known regarding the authors of the Pyramid Texts, as the ancient Egyptians did not credit any individual with composing any of the spells. Given the composite nature of the texts and the considerable span of time over which they were composed, one must imagine many authors rather than a single author. Certain characteristics of the texts indicate that they would have circulated orally before being written down. Those spells belonging to the category of mortuary liturgy were intended primarily for



recitation, and inscribing them within the pyramids was a means used to make a permanent record of their performance. A building called the “House of Life” was attached to many temples, and in this building priests would study, compose, and copy the texts used in rituals. Scholars have deduced from the types of errors that occurred in the carving of the Pyramid Texts on the walls of the chambers that these texts were taken from papyrus copies, and it is possible that these copies were made and stored in a House of Life. So even though the Pyramid Texts had their origin as oral texts recited in rituals, at some point they were written down, copied, and recopied by priests laboring at such an institution.

### Explanation and Analysis of the Document

Though the Pyramid Texts were discovered in 1880, the first English translation, by S. A. B. Mercer, did not appear until 1952. Alexandre Piankoff published the hieroglyphic texts and a translation into English from the pyramid of Unas in 1968, and in 1969 R. O. Faulkner published a translation into English of all the available Pyramid Texts. In 2005, James Allen published what is considered the most useful and up-to-date translation of the Pyramid Texts, treating each pyramid as a separate document, and his years of careful study have yielded numerous insights, drawn on extensively here. The bracketed wording represents gaps in the hieroglyphic text that the translator has filled with wording from parallels at other pyramids. The parenthetical wording has no equivalent in the underlying Egyptian text but was added to give the sense in English.

#### ◆ Invoking Osiris

The first excerpt from the Pyramid Texts is commonly known as spell 477, here entitled “Invoking Osiris.” This translation is based on the texts appearing in the pyramid of Pepi I, where this spell is seen on the west wall of the antechamber, among other spells to allow the deceased to enter the *akhet* (horizon). This spell belongs to the genre of mortuary literature, serving to introduce the deceased king Pepi I to Osiris. In order to do so, the text makes allusions to events from the myth of Osiris and Seth. Myths are often stories that describe the activities of gods or superhuman beings; in many instances, they explain why the world is the way it is and why people behave in certain ways. In Egyptian mortuary liturgies and literature, the deceased Egyptian—whether an Old Kingdom king or a New Kingdom official buried with a copy of the Book of the Dead—played a role in mythical events, and, as a result, certain benefits or privileges accrued to the individual. The authors of these texts did not consider it necessary to describe these myths in detail but merely made allusions to the various events that made up a particular myth. Full narrative myths are rare in ancient Egypt, not appearing until the New Kingdom. By piecing together the mythical allusions made in the funerary literature of the Old and Middle Kingdoms, scholars have been able to assemble coherent accounts of

Time Line	
ca. 2687– 2668 BCE	■ Djoser, the first king of the Third Dynasty, the first dynasty of the Old Kingdom, reigns. He and his architect, Imhotep, build the step pyramid complex at Saqqara, the world’s first monumental architecture built of stone.
ca. 2649– 2609 BCE	■ Snefru, the first king of the Fourth Dynasty, reigns. Snefru replaces the use of the step pyramid with a true pyramid in his funerary monuments.
ca. 2609– 2584 BCE	■ Khufu, of the Fourth Dynasty, reigns, building the Great Pyramid at Giza.
ca. 2576– 2551 BCE	■ Khafre, who builds one of the pyramids at Giza as well as the Great Sphinx, reigns.
ca. 2513– 2374 BCE	■ During the Fifth Dynasty, the sun (Re) comes to play a larger role in beliefs regarding the king’s afterlife. Kings of this dynasty adopt names indicating that they see themselves as the son of Re and build special monuments called sun temples.
ca. 2404– 2374 BCE	■ Unas, the last king of the Fifth Dynasty and the first king to inscribe Pyramid Texts on the walls of the underground chambers of his pyramid, reigns.
ca. 2109– 2107 BCE	■ Ibi, a king of the Eighth Dynasty, reigns. Ibi is the last Old Kingdom king to have Pyramid Texts inscribed within his pyramid.
ca. 1991– 1786 BCE	■ During the Twelfth Dynasty, numerous officials use Pyramid Texts in their tombs or on their coffins.
ca. 755– 525 BCE	■ During the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth Dynasties, rulers of Egypt make use of the Pyramid Texts to associate themselves with the great kings of Egypt’s distant past.
1880 CE	■ The French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero opens the pyramid of Pepi I and discovers texts carved on the walls of the burial chambers, now known as Pyramid Texts.

many ancient Egyptian myths. A full understanding of spell 477 requires familiarity with the story of Osiris and Seth, one of the great myths from ancient Egypt.

Osiris and Seth were brothers, sons of the god Geb and the goddess Nut. Osiris was said to have inherited the rule of the Two Lands (that is, Upper and Lower Egypt) from his father, Geb. Seth then killed Osiris, although exactly how he did this is rarely mentioned in Egyptian texts. But Osiris's wife, Isis, and her sister Nephthys managed to restore the deceased Osiris's sexual potency long enough to allow Isis to conceive a son, Horus. Seth was tried for his crime before a court made up of the major gods of Egypt, presided over by Atum, while Geb served as Osiris's advocate. The tribunal decided in favor of Osiris, who was awarded kingship of the underworld and the dead who inhabit it, and the kingship of Egypt was taken from Seth and conferred on Horus.

As the present spell opens, all creation is in an uproar because Osiris has been murdered by Seth (who "threw Osiris to the Earth"). Horus and Thoth, the god of wisdom and writing, are said to raise Osiris up and make him stand up before the "Dual Ennead," a term referring to the gods of both Upper Egypt (the southerly Nile Valley) and Lower Egypt (the northerly Nile Delta). The tribunal takes place in the "Official's Enclosure in Heliopolis," which refers to the sanctuary of the sun temple at Heliopolis. Paragraph 2 reports remarks made by Seth to this tribunal, and each comment of Seth's becomes an explanation for an epithet applied to Osiris. Seth's claim that Osiris has been attacking him leads to Osiris's epithet "earth-attacker." Seth's accusation that Osiris has been kicking (*sah*) him is given as the reason for associating the constellation called *sah* by the Egyptians—now known as Orion—with Osiris. The Egyptians did not believe that similarities in sound between words were coincidental, but rather revealed essential information about the relationship between entities.

In paragraph 4, the verdict of the tribunal is given; Osiris is awarded the kingship of the underworld. The "Marsh of Reeds" was a region of the night sky south of the ecliptic, the path traveled by the sun through the sky in the course of the year, which the Egyptians thought of as a canal of water bisecting the sky. The Horus Mounds and Seth Mounds were located at the edge of the sky and were inhabited by the gods and *akhs*.

Paragraph 5 represents a transition in the text, demonstrating how this recounting of myth will serve to benefit the dead king, Pepi. Thoth is said to be armed with a knife and will "remove the heads" and "cut out the hearts" of any who would prevent Pepi from joining Osiris. In the following paragraphs, Pepi claims that he will perform certain services for Osiris—wipe his face, clothe him, amputate a limb from Osiris's opponent—tasks that he is qualified to accomplish through having undergone the proper rituals ("having become clean") in the necropolis (cemetery) of Heliopolis, called Djedit. In the final paragraph, Horus declares that, as a result, Pepi will be counted not among the dead but among the dead who have become gods after death. The Egyptian term *netjer*, often translated as "god," had a

far wider frame of reference than the English *god*. *Netjer* could refer to the Egyptian king, certain living animals, and dead people or animals; here it refers to the glorified dead. Because of his status, Pepi will enjoy the same nourishment and purification—water, bread, cleansing—that these gods receive throughout eternity.

#### ◆ Spells for the Protection of the Pyramid

There are three spells contained within this excerpt from the Pyramid Texts: numbers 600, 601, and 599. Each new spell begins with the word "recitation," from the Egyptian *djed medu*, "words to be spoken." These spells are translated from the versions found in the pyramid of Pepi II, Pepi Neferkare, where they are located on the east wall and gable of the burial chamber. The purpose of the pyramid and its attendant structures was to provide for the burial and cult (daily rituals) of the dead king. It was necessary for this cult to continue if the king was to enjoy a pleasant afterlife, and the spells in this selection were intended to protect the pyramid from harm. These spells belong to the category of mortuary literature, but the original first-person pronouns have been replaced by the name of the deceased king, Pepi Neferkare.

The first spell in this group contains a recounting of one of the Egyptian stories of creation. The ancient Egyptians had several creation accounts, each one attributing the creation of the universe to a different god or group of gods. Scholars usually refer to these accounts by referencing the city important to the major god in the account. For example, the Memphite cosmogony attributes creation to the god Ptah, of Memphis. The creation account described here is called the Heliopolitan cosmogony, because the main creator god is the sun god Atum, associated with Heliopolis, near modern-day Cairo.

In the Heliopolitan account, before creation the universe existed as an infinite, dark, watery expanse called Nun. Within this vast ocean a god, Atum, created himself. The name *Atum* means both "complete, finished" and "the undifferentiated one." Here he is called "Atum Beetle." The beetle (scarab), particularly the dung beetle, called by the Egyptians *khepri*, was an aspect of the sun and represented the rising morning sun. The association with the dung beetle came from this insect's habit of rolling a ball of dung across the desert floor, an image that was transformed into the god Khepri pushing the sun across the sky. Once Atum came into existence within Nun, he needed a place to stand. For this, again, the Egyptians drew on an image observed in the natural world. Each year the Nile River overflowed its banks and flooded the valley; as the floodwaters began to recede, the highest points of ground would emerge from the floodwaters first. The first dry ground to emerge from Nun was called the *benben*, the "primeval mound," thought to have been located at Heliopolis. The reason this myth is recounted in a spell to protect the pyramid is that the pyramid was thought to be an architectural representation of the *benben*; its pyramid-shaped capstone was called the *benbenet*.

As related in spell 600, once the sun god Atum Beetle emerges from Nun—essentially the first sunrise—and



stands on the primeval hill, he begins the work of creation by sneezing out the god Shu and spitting out the goddess Tefnut. The names of the gods and their method of creation represent wordplay. Shu, whose name means “void” or “emptiness” and who represented the atmosphere, was created by sneezing. Tefnut was created by spitting, and while the meaning of *Tefnut* is uncertain, one tradition associates her with moisture. Atum is said to put his arms around his children as *ka*-arms (the hieroglyph of two extended arms had the phonetic value *ka*) and, by doing so, places his *ka* in them. The *ka* was one of the components that made up an individual and represented the life force, the difference between a living and a dead body. It was thought of as a double of the living person, coming into existence when the body came into being. It was transmitted from parent to child, and it represented the aspect of the deceased that was able to make use of food and drink offerings that were presented. Here Atum is portrayed as passing on his “life force” to his children Shu and Tefnut. Atum is then said to do the same for the deceased Pepi Neferkare, and by putting his arms around the deceased king and his pyramid, he grants them protection for eternity.

The fourth paragraph mentions the Big Ennead of Heliopolis. An *ennead* is literally a group of nine gods. Atum, Shu, and Tefnut are the first three. Geb (male) and Nut (female) were the children of Shu and Tefnut, with Geb representing dry land and Nut the sky. Originally Geb and Nut were locked in an embrace, and Geb impregnated Nut. A significant act of creation takes place when Shu (the atmosphere) steps in and separates Geb and Nut, essentially creating a space in which life can take place, a bubble within the vast watery expanse of Nun. This act is frequently depicted in Egyptian religious iconography as Shu standing on a prone Geb while lifting the arching body of a woman spangled with stars high overhead. Nut then gives birth to two pairs of gods and goddesses, Osiris and Isis and Seth and Nephthys, whose mythical origins are relevant to spell 477. Atum’s children are referred to as the Nine Bows, a term the Egyptians used to refer to all the lands outside of Egypt—essentially the whole world as was known to them at the time. The members of the Big Ennead, also called the Heliopolitan Ennead, thus include Atum, Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Seth, and Nephthys.

Paragraph 5 equates Pepi Neferkare with Osiris and commands Horus to look after him and his pyramid. Paragraph 6 features two instances of wordplay, as the Egyptian terms for “put,” “ferry,” and “guide” are related to the names of the two enclosures, *dedja* and *demaa*, but there is nothing more known about these two structures. In the last paragraph is an allusion to the myth of Osiris, in which Horus defends his father in the tribunal and wins for Osiris the kingship of the beatified dead (here called the gods). Again, wordplay is involved, between the words for “elevated” and “reeds” and for “brighten” and “White Palaces.”

The next spell, 601 (again beginning with “Recitation”), is a series of injunctions to the members of the Big Ennead to protect the pyramid of the king and make his name endure throughout eternity. Each deity is associated with

a particular location, some identifiable with geographic locations in Egypt and others not. In paragraph 7 of this spell, Osiris is referred to as “Foremost of the Westerners.” For the Egyptians, the West was the direction of the dead; it was the direction in which the sun set each night. As a result, most cemeteries were located on the west of the Nile, and the dead could be referred to as “Westerners.” In paragraph 11, the god “Eyes Forward” was a form of the falcon-headed god Horus from the city of Letopolis (modern-day Ausim) in northern Egypt. Wadjet (paragraph 12) is a goddess thought of as a rearing cobra and, as part of his headdress, also thought to protect the king. Her cult center was also in northern Egypt, at Buto (present-day Tell el-Fara’in).

The last spell, 599, begins by equating the deceased Pepi Neferkare with Geb, called “the persuasive mouth” because of his role as advocate for Osiris in the tribunal of the gods. As a result, Pepi is also endowed with the power to persuade the gods to protect him and his pyramid throughout eternity. In the second paragraph of this spell, the king and Geb promise the gods food offerings in return for their protection of the pyramid of Pepi. The final paragraph continues this theme. The gods are promised food, drink, clothing, ointment (used as a deodorant), and even the rulership of the gods, at the head of the Dual Ennead, in return for protecting Pepi’s pyramid. The verb phrase “will be ba” is understood to mean “will become impressive,” yet another characteristic the gods are promised.

### Audience

The Pyramid Texts can be divided into two types of text, mortuary liturgies and mortuary literature. The mortuary liturgies were the scripts of rituals recited on behalf of the dead king and so were addressed to him. Mortuary literature was addressed to the gods by the deceased king. While there is evidence that the offering ritual of the Pyramid Texts would have been recited for nonroyal individuals during the Old Kingdom, there is no evidence that these texts would have been read and studied by the living for their own benefit. It is apparent, however, that later scribes had access to papyrus copies of the texts carved in several Old Kingdom pyramids. Beginning in the First Intermediate Period (ca. 2165–2061 BCE) and continuing to the end of pharaonic Egyptian history, private individuals made use of Pyramid Texts in their burials, and, at times, details of the texts allow modern scholars to identify the Old Kingdom pyramid serving as the source of a particular Pyramid Text.

### Impact

The Pyramid Texts were intended for use by royalty. With the collapse of the Old Kingdom, the afterlife previously available only to kings and queens gradually became available to all Egyptians with the means to prepare a proper

*“This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One has found out, which makes one both to see and to know, which leads to peace, to discernment, to enlightenment, to Nirvana. Free from pain and torture is this path, free from groaning and suffering; it is the perfect path.”*

(Section 1)

*“And what is the root of unwholesome karma? Greed is a root of unwholesome karma; Anger is a root of unwholesome karma; Delusion is a root of unwholesome karma.”*

(Section 1)

*“In this respect one may rightly say of me: that I teach annihilation, that I propound my doctrine for the purpose of annihilation, and that I herein train my disciples; for, certainly, I do teach annihilation—the annihilation, namely, of greed, anger and delusion, as well as of the manifold evil and unwholesome things.”*

(Section 1)

*“But, how does the disciple dwell in contemplation of the body? There, the disciple retires to the forest, to the foot of a tree, or to a solitary place, sits himself down, with legs crossed, body erect, and with attentiveness fixed before him. With attentive mind he breathes in, with attentive mind he breathes out.”*

(Section 1)

*“Whenever the disciple is dwelling in contemplation of body, feeling, mind and phenomena, strenuous, clearly conscious, attentive, after subduing worldly greed and grief—at such a time his attentiveness is undisturbed; and whenever his attentiveness is present and undisturbed, at such a time he has gained and is developing the Element of Enlightenment ‘Attentiveness’; and thus this element of enlightenment reaches fullest perfection.”*

(Section 1)

*“And further: after the subsiding of verbal thought and rumination, and by the gaining of inward tranquility and oneness of mind, he enters into a state free from verbal thought and rumination, the second trance, which is born of Concentration, and filled with Rapture and Happiness.”*

(Section 1)

burial for themselves. As a result, Pyramid Texts were used by nonroyal Egyptians during the Middle Kingdom in their coffins or on their tomb walls. Portions of the Pyramid Texts were used by later scribes when they created new funerary compositions such as the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead. Later dynasties—the Twenty-fifth and Twenty-sixth—returned to the use of Pyramid Texts in their tombs as a conscious attempt to emulate the great rulers of the Old Kingdom.

In modern times, the Pyramid Texts have not had the same impact on the popular imagination as has the Book of the Dead, and they remain largely unknown to any but students of ancient Mediterranean religions. This is possibly due to the fact that there are literally hundreds of papyrus copies of the Book of the Dead scattered in museums throughout the world, where they can be viewed by the visiting public, while the Pyramid Texts have been available only in specialized publications not easily accessible to the general public prior to the growth of the Internet. Because of the practice of illustrating the Book of the Dead, many of these papyri are veritable works of art. Nevertheless, the Pyramid Texts, as the earliest religious texts from ancient Egypt, have been of the utmost importance in reconstructing Egypt’s foundational religious beliefs and practices. The practice of burying the dead with texts to ease their transition to the afterlife began with the Pyramid Texts, and this practice ultimately led to the creation of the Coffin Texts and Book of the Dead, which are both likewise important sources of knowledge of ancient Egyptian religion.

### Further Reading

#### ■ Books

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—Commentary by Stephen E. Thompson



## Questions for Further Study

1. Read this entry in conjunction with the Egyptian Book of the Dead. Taken together, what do the two documents tell you about Egyptian conceptions of death and the afterlife? How did the Pyramid Texts contribute to the evolution of the later Book of the Dead?
2. The sun played a significant role in the religious worldviews of many ancient cultures. How is the Egyptian view of the sun similar to, or different from, that of Amaterasu, as described in the entry on the Yengishiki?
3. Most religious cultures have some conception of an “underworld,” a place distinct from “heaven.” Compare the Egyptian underworld, ruled over by Osiris, with other conceptions of the underworld in Greek, Roman, Christian, and other religious cultures. How do these conceptions of an underworld reflect religious anxieties?
4. Why were most Egyptian cemeteries located on the west bank of the Nile River, as opposed to the east bank? How did this practice reflect something about Egyptian religious belief?
5. Compare the account of the creation of the world with creation accounts in other religious traditions, including Christianity (Genesis) and Jewish mysticism (Sefer Yetzirah). Do you see any similarities in these creation accounts? How do they fundamentally differ? Explain.