



# ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

## March 2022 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

### "Understanding 'Composite' Forms of Egyptian Divine Beings" Jordan Miller

At the beginning of March 2022 the first in person meeting of the Essex Egyptology Group since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic took place! Our speaker was Jordan Miller (<https://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/people/jordan-miller>) who is doing his DPhil at Oxford University (he was in the gap between submitting his thesis and doing his viva when he spoke to us). He opened by telling us that one of his hooks into Egyptology when he was younger was the amazing imagery – both captivating and confusing. And from this came his interest in these composite divine beings that is the subject of his talk. The composite forms seen in Egyptian art are most famously human bodies with animal heads. But you do also see other examples like a mix of two or more animals, or of a human or animal with an inanimate object as part of their body. An example he showed us of the latter was of a human figure with a scene of the cow Hathor coming out of the Western Mountain as its head!

Miller gave us an overview of the structure of the talk before he got into the details – the focus of the first part was taking us through the theoretical underpinnings of his work: the terms used for the composite figures, how Egyptologists' interpretations of them have changed over time, what ontology is, and the concept of visual language and how he's using it as a way of looking at these figures. After that he would move on to the practical aspects with some case studies from the Amduat and the Book of Two Ways.

The Egyptians themselves tell us that they didn't consider the composite figures as literal representations of real beings – they are artificial constructs. So they are not fantastical beasts, like you find on medieval maps from our own culture's history: they are not things that might exist somewhere if you travel far enough away from the known world. Miller did note that there are some overlaps – for instance in the Ptolemaic Period there are griffins which are thought of as potentially real beasts just not ones that people have actually seen – but he wasn't going to discuss these sorts of composites.

One of the terms used for this sort of figure is that they are "hybrids", but Miller doesn't like that because of all the other things it implies that aren't true of these composites. For instance it implies that there are two original things which combine, and it makes you think of biology and one type of being breeding with another to give rise to a third. But these are purely visual composites, and are also not necessarily combining two or more beings so much as two or more qualities which are represented with parts of beings.

Despite being purely symbolic they were still regarded as being in a sense real – Miller gave the example of the serpent in the Egyptian story The Shipwreck Sailor. It's described in terms that make it sound like a cult statue made of precious metals and jewels, but in the context of the story it's a living being. The symbolic

forms can also be actual living beings – such as the Apis Bull which is a real bull who actually exists but it also defines the nature of the god via symbolism.

Another important thing to remember is that in Egypt we deal mainly with multiplicity, particularly before the 1st Millennium BCE. There's less of a one to one correspondence between god/divine being and animal/composite being. This comes later, with the Greeks and Romans and with the Abrahamic religions. In this later period also comes the idea of transcendent beings (outside the universe that we're a part of) and then the composite beings or animals are seen as approximations in the real world of the transcendent deity – much like the idea in Plato's cave where the world we perceive is just shadows of the real Platonic world.

Miller now moved on to talking about the ways that Egyptologists have interpreted these composites in the past as a way of leading up to how he himself is interpreting them. As with pretty much everything the interpretation is driven by contemporary fashions. So in the 19th and early 20th Centuries the religion and imagery of Egypt was interpreted as part of an evolutionary model of progress. The general idea they had was that first cultures had primitive ideas about animal gods, then this evolved into human shaped gods and later into civilised monotheism. So they were fitting Egyptian religion into this scheme as a precursor to and a step along a road to their own modern Christianity. This also ties in with the racist ideas current at that time of a superior race who "brought civilisation with them to the Nile".

During the 20th Century the dominant interpretation changed from this evolutionary model to an iconographic model. The imagery was now seen as being a pictographic metalanguage, and the images are approached as being things to be read and as being allegorical. The aim of this sort of analytical approach is to identify the conventional meaning of a symbol so that you can then read off the symbols present in a scene and thus understand the meaning. This is similar to the interpretation of Western art – Miller showed us a picture of Botticelli's Primavera, which has been subjected to this sort of analysis by many art historians and there has been much squabbling over which of the meanings is the "correct" one. Egyptologists are often more happy than Western art historians to settle on a range of meanings for an image! Miller sees a parallel between this approach to Egyptian images and how hieroglyphs were approached before they were deciphered. They were seen as mystical symbols and not as having any semantic information – a large part of Champollion's leap to decipherment was to think outside that box and see them as spelling words in a meaningful way. So Miller wonders if what we need to do is to get outside this box for images too?

He told us that when he started his PhD he was embedded in the iconographic approach himself, but he found it raised all sorts of unanswered questions – why are some forms more common than others? why are some restricted to particular contexts? why do some forms that would seem to "make sense" in iconographical terms not exist? why are some forms not interchangeable that you'd think should be? In essence the function of the images seems to influence the forms and their use, and that lead him to thinking about ontology. The ontological approach is the study of what beings are understood to exist by a culture, how they are constructed and how they relate to each other. Ontology is a major field within philosophy, and it's also much talked about by anthropologists. Miller showed us a whole array of books published on the subject in a variety of domains – in terms of Egyptology he particularly recommended "Seeing Perfection" by Rune Nyord

(<https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Seeing-Perfection-Egyptian-Representation-Elements/dp/1108744141/>) as a relatively short and readable introduction to this field. Within this framework representation of the gods is about how they can act in the world, it's bringing the gods into being in the world. So representing the rituals and the gods on, say, tomb walls makes them exist. The contexts in which they are represented constrain how they can be represented – layout and format may be determined in different ways

by the needs of carving on a wall or writing on a papyrus. Decorum is also important – it might be improper to represent some things next to other things, which will then restrict what can and can't be done in a scene.

Two key concepts are interiority and physicality, and all beings have both. Interiority can be thought of as the vital force that animates a being – in our culture we'd think of this as mind or spirit. Physicality is the body or "envelope" within which this interiority is housed. In modern Western culture we restrict the possible sorts of bodies that can have interiority a lot – we think of humans as the only things that can really have interiority. Animals have some but we get into discussions about how much, and draw distinctions between animals like chimpanzees or dolphins or even octopi as being "more like us" and cat or dogs or insects as not. Plants and rocks and so on are not seen as housing interiority at all. However other cultures have broader ideas about what bodies might house vital force.

Miller then went on to explain how physicality imposes perspective. Given what he'd just said it's clear that our own culture doesn't give us useful examples, so he talked us through a couple from Mayan culture. When a human looks at a glass of beer they see it as a concept "beer". But when the jaguar looks at a glass of beer he does not see it as this concept of "beer". Instead the thing that the jaguar sees as "beer" is what we would call blood. Because the concept "beer" means "tasty nutritious liquid I want to drink" – from a human perspective this is beer, from a jaguar perspective this is blood. Miller also gave the example of "home" – which again looks very different from a human perspective and from a jaguar perspective whilst being the same concept. He brought this back to the Egyptian context and his work on divine beings by considering what sorts of bodies there are in their thought – there are biological bodies of course, but there are also bodies of stone and bodies of ink and colour. And each of these have different perspectives: a stone body with stone food offerings in front of it is (from its stone perspective) just the same as a biological body with biological food offerings in front of it from its biological perspective.

Thinking about physicality and interiority also helps to understand the Egyptian ideas about the ingestion or tattooing of texts – like the idea that consuming a text might heal you of a disease. The images or words of the text are seen as a physicality, a body which an interiority can be within. And so you are combining two beings: your own body & interiority with the being of the text. Egyptian ideas about mummified bodies can also be seen through this lens – the mummified body covered in texts is a new physicality, not the same as the body of the living person. But it can still contain the interiority of the person, who will now have a different perspective and needs than they did when they inhabited a living body.

Miller now began to transition from theory to practice, and returned to considering 2D images of composite figures. From the theoretical discussion he said that we can now consider each form of a divine being as defining "being" differently. So Horus as a hawk-headed man is a different being to Horus as a winged disk, and all the sorts of Horus exist in parallel. The question now is how to assess these different beings and the contexts they show up in – what method of analysis should be used? When anthropologists consider these sorts of ideas they can go and talk to the people of the culture they are studying and ask them how they see things. But Egyptologists don't have that option, so he needed different techniques. He told us that he has chosen to use Neil Cohn ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil\\_Cohn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neil_Cohn))'s ideas about visual language (developed from comic books) as the basis of his analysis. This involves thinking about visual language as an actual language – so you can look at the syntax of how images interact (like you might look at the ordering of words in a verbal language), and you can look at the morphology of images (like we divide up words into roots with suffixes, prefixes, tense markers,

gender markers etc). He has used both these approaches on images from different texts. In his work on the Amduat he has been looking at the imagery at a syntactic level – looking at the position of elements within a composite figure and the relationship to other images. And for the Book of Two Ways he has been looking at the imagery on a morphological level, in particular looking at the blurry boundary between image and text – how to tell if this is a hieroglyph or an image?

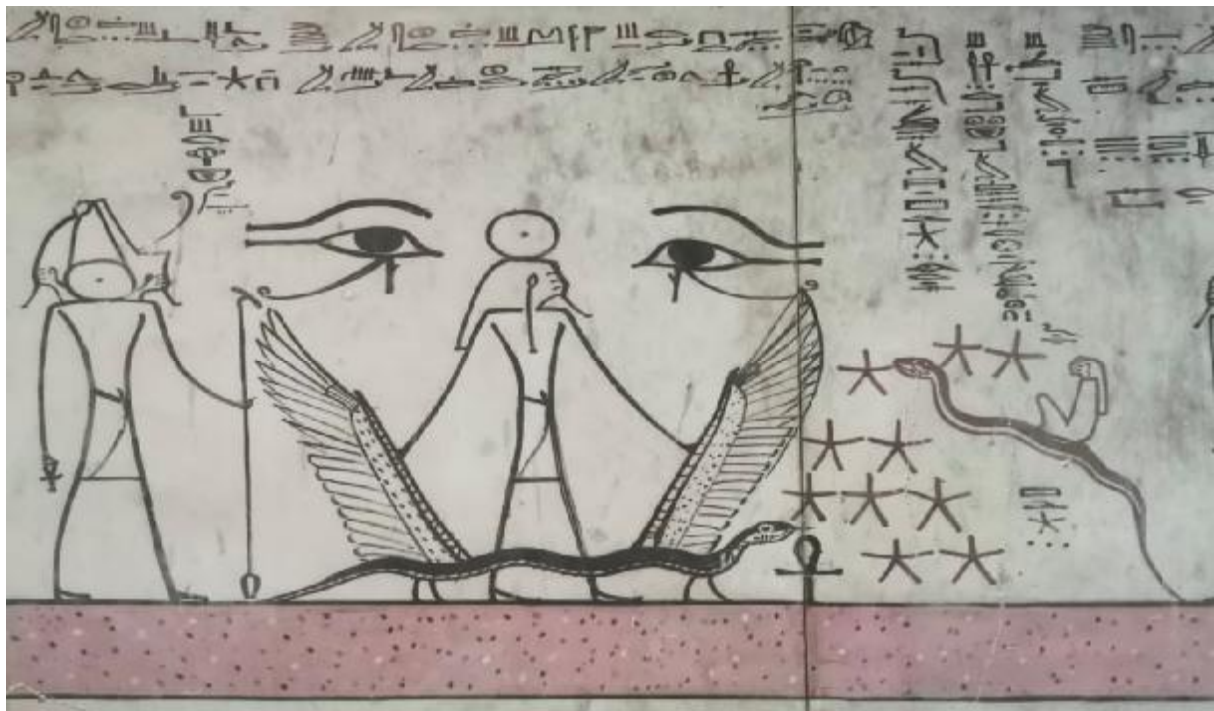
After a break for coffee and some of Pat's wonderful cake (which we haven't had for 2 years!) Miller resumed and dove into his case studies. His first example was from the Amduat, so we started in the Valley of the Kings in the New Kingdom royal tombs. He showed us a photo of the burial chamber of KV34 (the tomb of Thutmose III) which has the Amduat as the decoration around the walls. The Amduat is one of several Underworld books and it charts the nightly journey of the sun god through the night in text and images. There are 12 tableaux, one for each hour of the night, and the heart of the text is the sun god's union with Osiris in the night leading to the rebirth of the sun god in the morning. Miller said that the text includes an introductory text which identifies the whole thing as a compendium of texts and knowledge. By putting it in the tomb the deceased person is inducted into this knowledge – the earliest examples are painted to give the impression of a papyrus with writing on it, so a transfer of the original context onto this new context of a tomb wall.

The introductory text also tells us the purposes of this knowledge: "to know what is in the hours and their *netjerus*". *Netjeru* is a key word here – it can be translated as "god" but it also means the images of the gods. So the images aren't subordinate to the gods as the same word is used for both (this isn't the *netjeru* and the pictures of the *netjeru*, they are both *netjeru*). Instead the images bring these divinities into being (they are the physicality which the interiority can inhabit). And the images are not subordinate to the text – you can see when looking at the tableaux that the layout is driven by the needs of the image, and the text is labelling and captioning the visual parts. One of Miller's examples here is the 4th Hour, where there is a pathway that zig-zags across the whole tableaux and the text fits around this.

So Miller said that we can understand the Amduat as a comic strip, and he has used Scott McCloud ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott\\_McCloud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scott_McCloud))'s ideas about the construction of comics to further analyse the Amduat. Comics are organised into panels separated by negative space (which is called the "gutter"). Designers of comics draw a narrative thread using transitions across the gutter. For instance you might have one panel with a close up of one speaker in a conversation followed by another panel of the other speaker in that conversation – this is a subject to subject transition. Another type of transition is scene to scene – often indicated by a phrase such as "10 years later" or "Paris, France". And you can do clever things with characters in one panel interacting with another across the gutter to tell a story in a way that you can only do with a comic. There are similar things in the Amduat – here Miller used the example of the 5th Hour. In this tableau the sun god on his boat is being dragged by entities pulling a rope to take him through the underworld. One of the entities doing the dragging is a scarab beetle that comes out of the top dividing line of the register to hold the rope. Miller said you can see this as the morning form of the sun god (Khepri) reaching through to help move his past self along to where he becomes Khepri. And Miller showed us an example from McCloud's book where a character uses a fishing line to take money out of the wallet of his future self in the panel below – the same construction technique, in a very different context.

As well as considering the tableaux as wholes they are also made up of building blocks of other imagery and composites and these can be considered individually as well. Miller said that all are ontologically equal (e.g. they are all beings). In fact

the Egyptians are explicit about this in the text because they are all labelled with a caption that starts "This *netjeru* is like ...", which puts them all on an equal footing.



Scene from the Amduat, from the Bolton Museum facsimile of the Tomb of Thutmose III, photo © Jordan Miller

The main case study that Miller took us through was a group in the 11th Hour (figure 753-755). This consists of a snake, with two pairs of legs and a pair of wings on its back. Behind this stands an anthropomorphic figure with a sun disk on his head reaching out to the wings of the snake. The group represents the moment of creation. The anthropomorphic figure is Atum and he is actually within the serpent – represented by the juxtaposition of the images as is the standard convention in Egyptian art (just like the contents of a box will be shown above it). The words in the associated text have to do with swallowing – and Miller talked about how this is (verbal) imagery that shows up in the Pyramid Texts as well, such as in the Cannibal Hymn where the gods are swallowed in order to gain access to their powers.

Miller has compared this composite to variants in other texts – he took us through two variants from later Third Intermediate Period texts. One had a scarab on the head of Atum instead of the sun disk and Miller pointed out that this is the morning form of the sun so this composite figure represents Atum specifically in the role of the morning sun, Khepri. The other example has at first glance quite a different layout to the composite in the Amduat – there are two winged & legged serpents, one above the other as if there was a mirror between their backs. This is actually a top down view of the same singular serpent as in the other two (profile) forms of the scene, Miller compared it to a spatchcock chicken where you see both sides of the chicken (serpent) flattened out into a 2D plane.

One difference in layout between his figure from the Amduat and some other variants is that in the others the various elements are shown separated out and in parallel. But the figure from the Amduat combines them all into a single composite being. And that idea shows up when you start making other comparisons as well – for instance if you look at the 12th Hour of the Amduat there is an oval ring, representing the horizon, around all three registers of the tableaux. Within this is a serpent helping to pull the boat of the sun god, and to the far right is Khepri as a scarab lined up to move through the horizon and rise as the morning sun. The single figure from the 11th Hour only occupies a single register so there is no need for a border round the whole thing, instead the serpent can be the horizon too. There

was a variant from a Third Intermediate Papyrus where this was even clearer – here the serpent's tail and head curled up like a U shape, and within this U the area was divided into registers inside the single figure. The top of these had baboons (who the Egyptians thought would greet the sun) and below them the rising of the sun took place. So Miller explained that this single image inside the 11th Hour tableau actually recapitulates the point of the entire system that the Amduat describes – how the sun god is reborn to rise again in the morning.

There are other images in other texts that back up this idea of the serpent as the horizon. For instance Miller showed us an image from a papyrus that is in the Louvre that has an image of a serpent arching above the scene, and in the text it is explicitly named as the Duat. Below that serpent is Geb, reclining as he does in the more familiar imagery of Geb the earth lying beneath Nut the sky. So this image explicitly equates the serpent of the Duat with the sky that is Nut: the earth below the sky is the same conceptually as the earth beneath the horizon of the Duat.

Miller's next two examples moved a bit further afield from the image that is the core of this case study. The first of these examples is a scene from the Book of Caverns – it shows a goddess called Shetayt (which means The Secret One). And if you examine the image you can see that she condenses many processes and beings into her single person in the Book of Caverns that are represented as separate images in other texts like the Amduat (and these processes and beings include the composite image of his case study). The second example was from the Book of Gates where the reverse is true – it explodes out all these elements again, but organises them in a different order and thus makes a different statement. The key difference is that in this case Nut is subordinate to Osiris (rather than than the other way round as is the case in the Amduat, where for example you see Osiris as a smaller element resting on the horizon/sky in the 12th Hour).

Miller finished up this section of his talk by drawing out two key points about this type of syntactical analysis, before giving us the take home message for composite beings in the Amduat. The first point is that as he'd just demonstrated looking at the images in this way can lead you to the conclusion that some of them are making contradictory statements, and this is not a flaw in that analytical method. After all, I could write down two contradictory things and it doesn't mean that the whole syntax of English is thereby meaningless! And in fact this is a better state than the iconographical analysis where elements have defined meanings in themselves and the rest of the composition is ignored. The second of his points was that in order to fully analyse an image in this sort of way you need to look at the whole context. Images like this one can only be understood in the context of not just other elements of the same scene – you also need to consider the other scenes they are linked to within the text, and other similar (or contrasting) scenes in other texts. And in summary, in the Amduat the composite beings are a way of bringing several ideas or gods together into a single scene or composition.

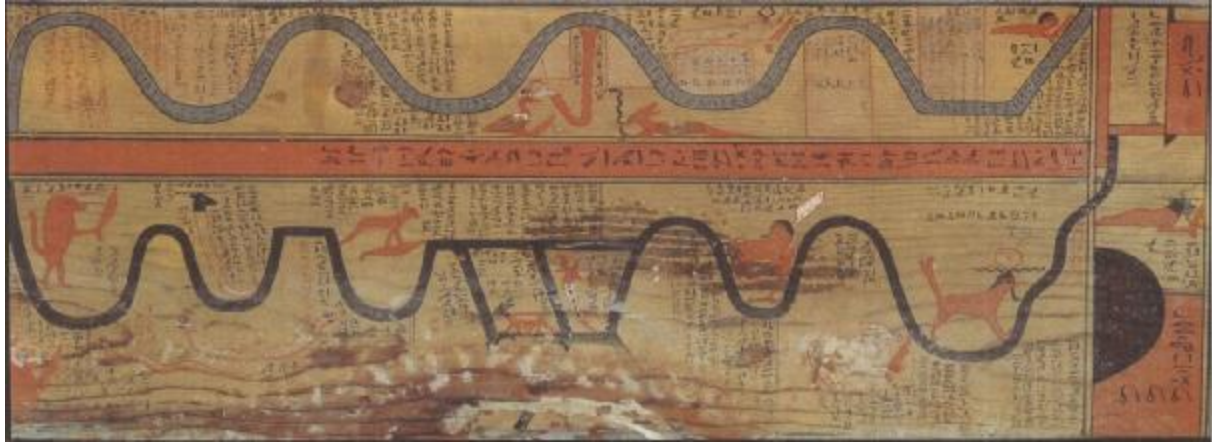
The next section of the talk was Miller's second case study, from the Book of Two Ways. This is a Middle Kingdom text which is part of the Coffin Texts. These started out as ritual utterances, which were possibly used by the living but were then adapted for use on the coffin to help the deceased. The Book of Two Ways dates to the first half of the Middle Kingdom from the late 11th Dynasty to the 12th Dynasty, and all the known examples are from Deir el Berhsa in Middle Egypt. The two coffins he's studied in this case study are B1C and B5C, which are both in the Cairo Museum (accession numbers CG28083 and JE37566 respectively). They date to the time of Senwosret II to Senwosret III.

Before he went into the specific pieces of imagery he wanted to talk about Miller backed up a bit to give us some more context for where he was coming from with his analysis. He showed us a quote which discussed how in the Egyptian writing system the "original link between hieroglyph and image is always present" as being

a unique feature to the Egyptian context. But Miller thinks that we shouldn't be drawing such a sharp boundary between text and image in any context. In this he's been influenced by James Elkin's ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_Elkins\\_\(art\\_historian\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Elkins_(art_historian))) work on art history – in particular his idea that "writing and pictures can be perceived as sets of properties so an image might be a picture only on balance". Of course there are features of Egyptian writing that make this blurry boundary particularly obvious, and not just that the symbols used started out as drawings of things in the world – there are also determinatives. These symbols sit at the end of a word and let you know which sort of word it is (like is it a word about people? or something cloth? or an abstract concept? etc). They are (as all hieroglyphs are) small pictures, and have no equivalent in the spoken language, yet they are a part of the text.

The Book of Two Ways plays on this ambiguity that is particularly a feature of the Egyptian writing system – so it is unlike a modern comic where the text is next to but separate from the image in a panel. In some places in the Book of Two Ways a name might be written where you might expect to see a representation of the divine being in question. In other places the writing might take the shape of the thing it is describing – like text describing mound is shaped like a mound. Another example he showed us was of Coffin Text 1072 which is written in a box with crisscrossing strips, and Miller said he sees this as a determinative for the whole text within which the text is written. He wonders if this playing around with using textual elements as decorative elements can be traced back to the Pyramid Texts. In the pyramids where these were first written there are no accompanying images – the texts are essentially wallpaper which provides the right environment (via the meanings) for the deceased. But Miller wonders if sometimes the words themselves function as images – for instance in some places the columns of text all begin with "words spoke by" (which has a distinctive zigzag snake at the beginning) and the repeated words form a frieze across the top of the wall.

Miller now took us through a few concrete examples of images from the Book of Two Ways on the two coffins he has analysed. The first of these was a composite figure which is part of Coffin Text 1140 on coffin B5C – it consists of a standing bull with a vertical serpent attached to its tail. The text of the spell next to it references a deity called He with Mouth Agape in the Darkness and Miller said that the bull is to be read as this deity figure. So what is the serpent? Perhaps it represents a knife – serpents, serpent-shaped staffs and knives are closely linked objects in Egyptian visual art, and can be substituted for each other. In addition to this general point an adjacent spell (CT1139) does mention a knife, and thus Miller wonders if this is a representation of a deity (the bull) with a knife (the serpent) – and the image acts as a determinative for the spell indicating that it is about this divine being. But why is it represented like this? Why not just a "normal" figure with a knife? One part of the answer is that bull and serpent (verbal) imagery is used a lot in the Coffin Texts and the Pyramid Texts, and so using a bull with a serpent here brings that verbal imagery into the visual imagery. And it also shows a non-hierarchical relationship between the two elements – a figure holding a knife positions the knife as subordinate to the divinity. But formulating the image this way puts the knife (serpent) on an equal footing to the bull.



Part of the Book of Two Ways on Coffin B1C,  
from Wael Sherbiny, *Through Hermopolitan Lenses* (2017), pl. 1a.  
Image generously provided by Jordan Miller.

Another visual element that turns up on both coffins (as part of CT1045 on B1C and CT1156 on B5C) is a sort of donkey serpent composite – with the head of a donkey and a sinuous serpent body (see top centre on the image above). Miller thinks that this may be a divinity called the *h<sub>j</sub>w*-being, which is normally written with either a donkey or a snake determinative so these creatures are both associated with it. He thinks that this is symbolic – both donkeys and snakes are associated with chaos, and so representing the *h<sub>j</sub>w*-being in this way brings the idea of chaos quite strongly into a single figure.

His final examples were from coffin B1C, and consisted of several guardians of gates in the Underworld. One had the head of a jackal and body of a man, another was a seated man with horns. Miller said that there seems to be a need for some sort of anthropomorphic element in these composites – a need to show them as having the qualities of a human. The figures are drawn as big hieroglyphs – they are images, but they are also to be read as part of the text. So their status as image or text is ambiguous, and he said he likes to say that they are "picturing" the divinity in these cases rather than "depicting" it because that terminology doesn't draw such a sharp distinction between text and image in one's mind. Other examples from this coffin have two elements, and the animal element is this ambiguous hieroglyph and/or image with a seated man determinative to provide the essential anthropomorphic element. Some examples even seem to have completely decomposed the composite – like a turtle and a serpent side by side representing a single being.

Miller wrapped up this second half of his talk by summarising the key points from his analysis of these case studies in the Amduat and the Book of Two Ways. The first point is that composite figures can be categorised into different types suitable for different contexts and uses – they may be composed of joined bodies, or of joined body parts in a single figure. Or they may be "decomposed" with separated and distinct images of bodies or body parts which are nonetheless intended to be interpreted as a single being. The Amduat and the Book of Two Ways show different emphases in their use of composite figures – in the Amduat the focus is on the coherence of the overall composition, whereas in the Book of Two Ways the focus is on the status of individual figures. And this relates to the purpose of these compositions – the reasons and ideas behind why the Ancient Egyptians inscribed them on their funerary equipment. The Amduat is intended to teach the deceased necessary knowledge and the consistency of forms and schematization of the elements across the many many figures is an aid to learning and understanding. The Book of Two Ways was written during a time when picturing certain types of beings was thought to be dangerous or disrespectful – so half-writing half-drawing the forms of these divinities is safer, hence the focus on ambiguity in this text.



Miller finished up by talking a little about the things he'd like to investigate next. One thing is to look into how composite figures let the Egyptians display dynamism in their art. He showed us a couple of examples – a ram headed scarab, representing the transformation of Atum into Khepri, and a two headed goddess who is facing both the deceased and Osiris, which is a compression of several actions in sequence into a single image. This is something we see in modern comics too – like drawing someone's arm in several places to show how it has moved. Another avenue for future research is that he'd like to look into how these ideas get applied to representations of humans – do they use the inscription and the material of a statue to bring some qualities to the representation? Or the pose, or the clothing? He also pointed out that, given how central composite figures are to Egyptian thought, how we interpret them can affect how we understand archaeological evidence.

I found this a really interesting talk, with a lot that was completely new to me (particularly in the theoretical underpinnings) – it was particularly interesting to think about how the Amduat shares features with modern comic design. But I think what will stick with me the longest is the idea that it's not that the food offerings drawn on the wall "magically become" real food in the afterlife, but that from the perspective of the tomb owner as he's drawn on the wall these are already "real" food.