

In February, Dr Bernadette Brady gave a talk to the group via Zoom on 'The Moon in Ancient Egypt - A Journey from Henchman to king-maker to a god-enabler'. She began by reminding us that the Egyptians believed that there was an equivalent of the River Nile in the sky, and that boats travelled on both of them. At the entrance to the Per-Wer in Dendera Temple, an inscription: *smn pt smn t3 smn rmt* proclaims that 'The sky is stable, The earth is stable, The people are stable', suggesting their interrelationship to the sky thus revealing a culture which viewed the movements of the sky as a reflection of the actions of the gods and that it was a two-way relationship: if the people were stable then the sky was stable. A central part of Egyptian cosmology, therefore, involved the role of the pharaoh in maintaining ma'at and making offerings to the gods. This is evident from the earliest written texts.

In turning to the moon, during the **Old Kingdom**, a Pyramid Text in the Pyramid of Unis refers to the moon as henchman - "*the Courser, the lord's knife-bearer, the one who will slit their throats for Unis and take out for him what is in their belly - he is the messenger he sends to confront.*" The 'courser' was a crescent moon, similar to a crescent shape flint knife of the time. However, in Merenre's Recitation 375, the moon's first reappearance is seen as a new beginning, as being refreshed and revitalised to 'become clean at the new-moon day'.



Thoth crowned with the full & crescent moon
Tomb of Ramesses V & VI
Wikipedia / Diego Delso

The moon is also linked to Thoth as he was viewed as the Ba of the Moon. In Pyramid Texts 210, the king speaks: "I go round the sky like Ra, I traverse the sky like Thoth". The sun and the moon are seen as the two companions 'who cross the sky, who are Ra and Thoth'. Thoth's connection as the Ba of the moon, enabled him to engage with the physical world, just as the pyramids were the king's Ba, his vehicle to do so. Unis Recitation 215 also link the moon to a ferryman who can look both forwards and backwards - to the sunset - the crescent moon which points to the east, and at sunrise - the balsamic moon which points to the west.

Khonsu was also seen as a moon god - his name *ḫnsw* translates as 'the traveller'. At this stage, Khonsu was the son of Shezmu, the demonic god of red wine and slaughter. He tended to destroy wrongdoers by crushing their heads in winepresses to remove their blood!



By the **Middle Kingdom**, the moon was a spirit in the sky, seen as a personified helper of the king's passage to the afterlife. The Coffin Texts, a collection of 1185 known spells, inscribed on the interior walls of wooden coffins of the elite, mention Khonsu as a messenger spirit in the sky, crushing the opposition with his burning rage (Spell 573),

the one “who sends out the anger of the ‘Lord of lords’, I am he who burns hearts, I am the slayer among you” (Spell 310).

Why was the moon viewed as ‘difficult’? If we consider the two great lights in the heavens which are the sun and the moon, whereas the sun is regular, the moon is not. The lunar month is based on the lunar phase which is close to 29.5 days in length. Thus if a new moon occurred on the first day of the month, the 14th or 15th day of each month would always be a full moon. But the moon does not keep to the seasons. Each lunar cycle can vary up to 10 hours, so the exact day of the new moon can vary. The times of moon rise and moon set also vary as does its height during the month. The full moon also varies in size and colour and twice a year it can be eclipsed - blacked out when the eclipse is total. The ancient Egyptian lunar calendar was probably their religious festival calendar. They also used a civil calendar but that had no relationship to the celestial bodies of the sun or moon. Lunar Festivals, therefore could shift away from their correct seasonal time of the year, hence the moon needed to be watched.

The Egyptians understood that the movement of the sun was regular, whereas the moon was not: therefore they viewed it, as shown in the Pyramid Text and Coffin Texts, as untamed, demonic and savage in its variability. Towards the end of the Second Intermediate Period, there was a shift in thinking about the moon. At the start of the **New Kingdom**, the founder of the 18th Dynasty, Ahmose, was named after the moon, his name - *iḥ-ms* - means ‘the moon is born’.



Ceremonial axe of Ahmose I (Public Domain)

Egyptian astronomers were in awe of the wonders of the night sky. The moon’s irregularities led the Egyptians to constantly observe and calculate its changing positions. Their curiosity posed questions and their observations gave them answers which they incorporated without eliminating their previous notions. Jan Assman has suggested that in keeping a record of the moon’s phases, it laid the foundation of their planning, counting, calculating, weighing and distribution processes. The moon’s link with Thoth led him to become the god of writing and reckoning, and the patron of scribes. So the moon was viewed as an ‘intellectual heavenly body’ while the sun was the heavenly body of power and rulership. In this way the solar-based rule of Ra was counterbalanced by the lunar intellectuality of Thoth.



Tutankhamun Pectorals (Public Domain)

Amenhotep III built chapels for both himself and his wife, Queen Tiye at Soleb. He also equated himself with the moon in Nubia and the sun in the north. The moon also appears in royal regalia on two of Tutankhamun's pectorals. One pectoral features a lunar barque sailing on a celestial Nile above a field of lotus flowers.

Another, more complex scene, shows the solar barque with Khepri holding the sun disk flanked on each side by Thoth in baboon form crowned with the full and crescent phases of the moon.

During the New Kingdom, Khonsu rose in importance between the 18th & 23rd Dynasties, becoming one of the divine Theban triad as the son of Amun rather than Shezmu, evidenced by several Khonsu cults with different levels of *hm-ntr* priests. By the **Late Period** from the 26th Dynasty, the moon divine link shifts from Khonsu to Osiris with *wsir-i'ḥ* (Osiris-Moon) and his promise of regeneration that was observed in the moon each month. The appearance of the phases of the moon, as with Osiris, are linked to the west for while the sun travels from east to west, the phases of the moon, how they appear in the sky, move from west to east:

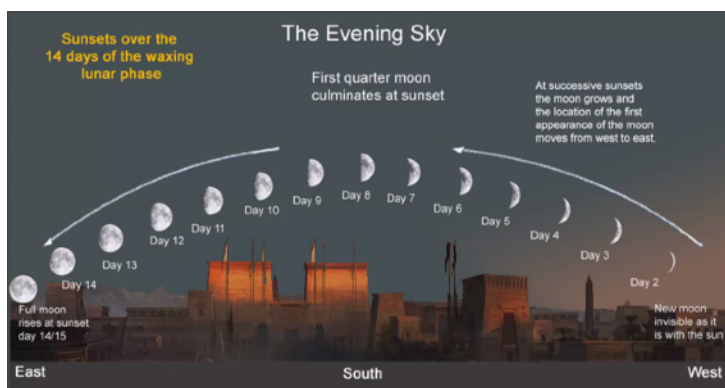


Image (c) B.Brady

* *The Evening Sky – Waxing moon.* During sunsets over the 14 days of the waxing lunar phase, the moon appears in the west as a thin crescent on Day 2, then both grows in shape and height in the sky until day 8, before descending while still growing towards a full moon low in the sky at Day 14/15 in the east.

* *The Morning Sky – waning moon* During sunrises over the 14 days of the waning lunar phase, the moon rises in the west on Day 15, then diminishes in disc shape while rising eastwards in the sky until Day 21 before gradually decreasing in the sky and becoming a thinner crescent shape until Day 27 until the new moon is blocked out by the sun's light.

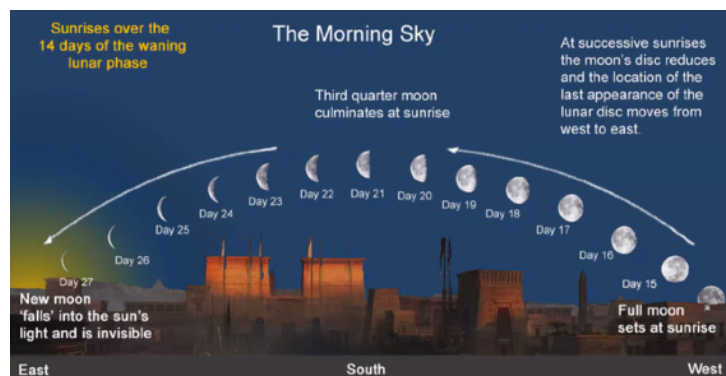


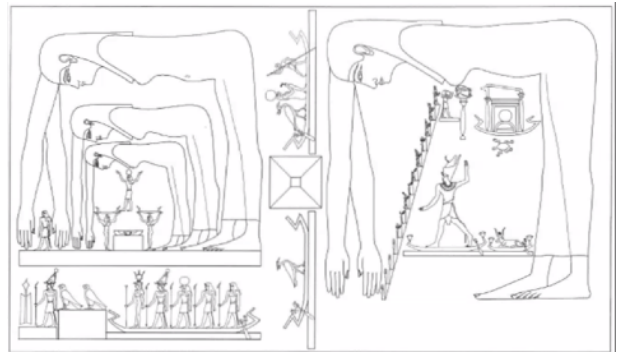
Image (c) B.Brady

In the **Ptolemaic Period** Osiris became the dominant moon-linked deity. Also at this time a new way of depicting the moon was developed. At the Temple of Hathor at Dendera, scenes include 'Lunar Staircases' that show the lunar processions of the gods. All told there are 3 lunar staircases: which features the 14 gods of the horizon – the first is in the hypostyle hall, the waxing cycle from the new moon through to the full moon. The second is the staircase to the roof, and the third in the western Osirian chapel. In this chapel the lunar stair case appears to be for the Khoiak Festival - a spring green festival during the 4th month of Akhet [mid-October to mid-November]. The appearance of the new moon in early October is linked to the re-birth of Osiris and is the lunar cycle after the September equinox.



Dendera Lunar Staircase (Photo: Mike Brown on Facebook)

The stair case is next to a relief showing 3 overarching representations of the sky goddess Nut, one inside the other. Dr Brady argued that these are the three defining paths of the sky of the ecliptic, summer solstice, equinox and winter solstice . The lunar stair, adjacent to this shows the full moon being presented to the sun, or joining the sun, this union occurs only with the full moon is adjacent to the equinox. For at the time of the Equinox, the sun and the moon rise and set in the same place and take the same elliptical path through the sky.



Summarising the story of the moon

- Old Kingdom Pyramid Texts - the moon is a knife and a protector. The king is reborn with the new moon. Ra is power; iaH is regeneration.
- Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts - Khonsu emerges as a ruthless protector - a 'rage that burns'.
- New Kingdom - sees Khonsu as part of the Theban Triad and merged with the creator god Ptah, and with Thoth linked to wisdom.
- Late Period - Orisis merged with iaH and the theology of death and rebirth
- Ptolemaic Period - Osiris is linked with the lunar phases, celebrated at the Khoiak Festival at Dendera.

Thus, the journey of the moon, in Egyptian culture is the shift from the unpredictable to finally being linked to the god which offered life after death, celebrated in the lunar phase after the September equinox.

.....Q&A.....

PB - More than just explaining the moon intellectually, the Egyptians embraced and applied their understanding to serve their religious and cultural beliefs. They had to fit it in with their theology.