

W1982: Weighing of the Heart

In this scene the deceased is judged by having their heart weighed against truth and cosmic order, i.e. Ma'at. It was believed that if the heart was heavy and thus the deceased was not 'True of Voice' the heart would be eaten by the Devourer (Ammut). The Devourer is also shown on this coffin in the scenes depicting Osiris enthroned and Osiris on the mound. This vignette, together with that of the deceased being led before the enthroned Osiris, and the 'jubilation scene', may all be considered part of the larger judgement theme, related to Chapter 125, 'the declaration of innocence' of the *Book of the Dead* and additionally Spell 30, the 'Chapter of the heart' (Yoyotte 1961, 44). The weighing of the heart scene is central in that it shows the actual judgement of the deceased upon which their afterlife depends.

The weighing of the heart is not at first apparent in judgement scenarios. The theme of judgement of the dead, first appears in the *Pyramid Texts* (e.g. PT, 316–319; Faulkner 1969, 69), but largely, at this date¹, as a royal right. By Middle Kingdom, the theme of judgement also appeared in non-royal context (Yoyotte 1961). Scenes of the weighing of the heart occur as early as the 11th Dynasty (Seeber 1976, 67) but are more common in the New Kingdom in tombs, papyri and on coffins. While the weighing of the heart scenes allude to the New Kingdom chapter 125 of the *Book of the Dead*, the chapter does not actually include the weighing of the heart as such but rather describes the judgement in other terms. The judgement takes place before 42 gods and the deceased proclaims their declaration of innocence, denying all 'sins'.

¹ The *Pyramid Texts* date from the late Old Kingdom to First Intermediate Period, the earliest being of the 5th Dynasty though may represent a much earlier set of beliefs.
Carolyn Graves-Brown 17.4.2012

Obviously, the heart and Ma'at are central to this scene. In our scene, Ma'at appears in the right of the balance as a squatting woman, but in some other weighing scenes a feather represents her. The heart is on the left. Since Ma'at was considered the embodiment of justice, viziers in charge of law courts in ancient Egypt were called 'priest of Ma'at'. Additionally, the hall in which the judgement took place was known as the 'hall of two truths' (*maaty*)².

The importance of the heart is made clear in chapter 30B of the *Book of the Dead*; a plea for the heart not to oppose the deceased before the tribunal. The heart was the essence of the person, their seat of intellect and emotion. For meanings relating to the heart in ancient Egypt see Naguib (1994, 105ff) and Piankoff (1930). Several chapters of the *Book of the Dead* reveal the fear that one's heart might be taken or destroyed. This explains why the heart was not removed from the body during mummification. A heart scarab with chapter 30B of the *Book of the Dead*, might also be put in with the mummy. The Egypt Centre has such an example on loan from the British Museum (BM7900).

The type of scales represented here is the equal arm balance. In use, such balances operated by placing a measure weight in one of the pans and the item to be weighed in the other until the two are balanced by the level bar. Here, the cords of the balance are hung with what resembles a string of beads. On some representations e.g. the Papyrus of Nany (Foreman and Quirke 1996, 141) these are actually amuletic *djed* and *tit* symbols.

Thoth sits on top of the scales with the moon-disc and crescent emphasising his lunar role. He is here shown in ape form (he appears elsewhere on the coffin with the head of an ibis). His importance in the weighing of the heart scene is shown in texts where he both a judge and the scribe who records the result. His position on top of scales suggests that he is the personification of judgement particularly as Ma'at sometimes occupies this position (Seeber 1976, 68). He is particularly identified as the indicator of balance, the plummet (Manassa 2006, 127).

Anubis, with the dog or jackal-head, stands in front of the scales. Anubis is sometimes given the title 'he who is over the scales' (Seeber 1976, 154) or, as early as the *Pyramid Texts* (DuQuesne 2005, 465), 'assessor of hearts' and 'overseer of the tribunal'. His role as a judge and his epithet 'assessor of hearts' are discussed by Willems (1998). Prior to the 21st Dynasty, Thoth or Horus took the role as deity in charge of the weighing proceedings; during the 21st Dynasty, Anubis takes on this role. Two parallel lines meaning 'true of voice' are positioned near Anubis left foot. 'True of voice' indicates that the deceased has been found suitable to enter the afterlife.

Under Anubis' raised arm are two small figures. The higher one has a lotus blossom in their hair and probably represents the dead person about to be reborn, though on the papyrus of Nany the figure is painted black which suggested to Foreman and Quirke (1996, 141) that this is the deceased's shadow³. However, here it is shown with crossed arms and the net covering alluding to Osiris. The deceased was linked with Osiris on

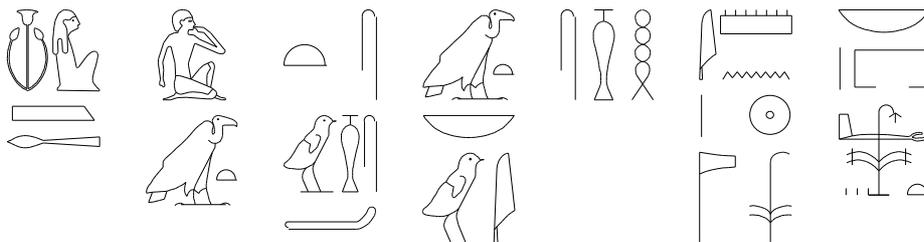
² For more information on the meaning on Ma'at which can be loosely translated as truth and order see: Teeter (1997); Hornung (1992, 131-146).

³ Black is also a symbol of Osirian fertility and hence rebirth.
Carolyn Graves-Brown 17.4.2012

death. Some depictions are more explicitly Osirian and show the figure holding a crook and flail. Others show this figure as a child (Seeber 1976, 101–104). The lotus flower is additionally a symbol of rebirth and appears elsewhere on this coffin on the head of the deceased. These symbolic references suggest that the figure indeed represents the deceased waiting to be reborn. The figure is typical of the 21st Dynasty (Seeber 1976, 102).

Underneath the figure is Ma'at with a feather on her head. She sits on a rectangular block, which is the personified birth brick, Meskhenet. In ancient Egypt women squatted on birthing bricks in order to give birth. In 2001 an actual archaeological example was found, from Middle Kingdom Abydos (Weger 2002). Such bricks would have been used as a pair to support a woman giving birth. Despite the lack of actual bricks, others are shown iconographically, for example at the Hathor temple at Dendera (Nunn 1996, pl. 9.1). Roth and Roehrig (2002) believe the presence of the birth brick in the weighing of the heart scene may stem from the idea that a person's life is mapped out at birth on their birth brick by Thoth, which is taken into consideration on the day of judgement. According to the demotic story of Setne II, at judgement a man's deeds are judged according to that which was mapped out for him by Thoth (Seeber 1976, 86–88; Roth and Roehrig 2002, 137). There are suggestions from the New Kingdom onward that Meskhenet was a goddess of fate (Roth and Roehrig 2002, 136). The bricks also had a protective function (Roth and Roehrig 2002, 132). Seeber (1976, 83–85) further explains the metamorphosis of the brick into the goddess Ma'at. Birth bricks were sometimes personified with a female head. The inclusion of Ma'at emphasises the judgement role. Hence Ma'at sits on our brick. The birth brick itself alludes to the rebirth of the deceased and similar items are placed in tombs (Roth and Roehrig 2002).

If the deceased is found wanting her heart will be eaten by the Devourer. If the deceased is successful she will be able to declare 'I am pure, I am pure, I am pure'. This triumphal image appears adjacent to the heart weighing scene. An inscription begins above the left arm of the jubilant priestess and ends to the right of Thoth atop the scales. It reads:



nb pr šm^cyt

Imn

hs

Mw.t-nb-iw

s.t-iw-hs

Mw.t

m³ hrw

'Lady of the House, the Chantress Iwesemhesetmwt, true of voice'.

References

DuQuesne, T. 2005. *The Jackal Divinities of Egypt I. Oxford Communications in Egyptology VI*. Oxford: Darengo Publications.

Foreman, W. and Quirke, S. 1996. *Hieroglyphs and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.

Hornung, E. 1992. *Idea into Image* (trans. E. Bredeck). New York: Timken Publishers.

Manassa, C. 2006. 'The Judgement Hall of Osiris in the Book of Gates', *Revue d'Égyptologie*, 57, 109–150.

Naguib, S.-A. 1994. 'Interpreting Abstract Concepts: Towards an Attempt to Classify the Ancient Egyptian Notion of Person' *Discussions in Egyptology* 29, 99–124.

Nunn, J.F. 1996. *Ancient Egyptian Medicine*. London: British Museum Press.

Piankoff, A. 1930. *Le "coeur" Dans les Textes Égyptiens Depuis l'Ancien Jusqu'à la Fin du Nouvel Empire*. Paris: Geuthner.

Roth, A.M. and Roehrig, C.H. 2002. 'Magical Bricks and Bricks of Birth', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, 88, 121–139.

Seeber, C. 1976. *Untersuchungen zur Darstellung des Totengerichts im Alten Ägypten*. München: Deutscher Kunstverlag.

Teeter E. 1997. *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt*. (Studies in Ancient Egyptian Oriental Civilization, 57). Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago.

Weger, J. 2002. 'A Decorated Birth-brick from South Abydos', *Egyptian Archaeology*, 21, 3–4.

Willems, H. 1998. 'Anubis as a Judge', in Clarysse, W., Schoors, A and Willems, H. (eds.) *Egyptian Religion the Last Thousand Years. Studies dedicated to the memory of Jan Quaegebeur*. Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 719–743.

Yoyotte, J. 1961. 'Le Judgement des Morts Dans l'Égypte Ancienne', *Sources Orientales*, IV 17–80. Paris: Editions du Seuil.