

*The Depictions of Astral Rebirth in the 26th Dynasty Tomb of Benaty**

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Introduction

In my recent analysis of the Dendera zodiacs, I proposed that the primary purpose of these artefacts, dating from the 1st century BCE and CE, was not to catalogue the various constellations of the sky, as has hitherto been widely believed,¹ but rather to recount and illustrate the astral aspects of the myth of Osiris, including notably the birth of his son, Horus.² My claim is essentially based on Plutarch's remark that the conception and birth of Horus were tied to three key points in the annual solar cycle: the autumnal equinox, the winter solstice, and the spring equinox.³ Acting on Plutarch's hints, and assuming that the images in the zodiacs marked specific cultic or celestial events connected with the divine regeneration cycle, I could determine that Horus' astral rebirth was centred not only around the yearly wanderings of the sun, but manifested itself through a series of occurrences that involved both the sun and the moon (see below). It is of course well-known that the concept of rebirth in general

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¹ S. Cauville, *Le zodiaque d'Osiris*. Leuven: Peeters, 1997, 32-36; A. von Lieven, *Der Himmel über Esna. Eine Fallstudie zur Religiösen Astronomie in Ägypten am Beispiel der kosmologischen Decken- und Architravinschriften im Tempel von Esna*. Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 64. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2000, 187; C. Leitz, "Die Sternbilder auf dem rechteckigen und runden Tierkreis von Dendera," *Studien zur Altägyptischen Kultur* 34 (2006), 285-318, 289-315; J. Lull and J. A. Belmonte, "The Constellations of Ancient Egypt," in J. A. Belmonte and M. Shaltout (eds.), *In Search of Cosmic Order: Selected Essays on Egyptian Archaeoastronomy*, 157-94. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press. 2009, 178-192.

² G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs as Narratives of the Myth of Osiris, Isis, and the Child Horus," *Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne* 8 (2015), 133-185, 137-152.

³ Plutarch, *De Iside et Osiride*, 65; J. G. Griffiths, *Plutarch's De Iside et Osiride*. Swansea: University of Wales Press, 1970, 221; the reference to the first equinox being disguised as the civil date II Akhet 6 ("the sixth day of Phaophi") in the narrative, see my arguments in G. Priskin "The Dendera Zodiacs," 141.

was inextricably linked with various celestial phenomena all throughout Egyptian history, as evidenced both in writing, by numerous astronomical references for example in the Pyramid and Coffin Texts,⁴ and visually, in the decoration of tombs and funerary equipment.⁵ So, as regards the astral rebirth myth recorded by the zodiacs of the Graeco-Roman era, the question naturally arises whether the projection of Horus' nativity onto the sky, and the association of its development with particular events and dates, was the invention of the Egyptian hour-watchers (astronomer-priests) living around the 1st century BCE, and was prompted in some way or other by the adoption of the zodiac into the indigenous astral beliefs? Or, and this is perhaps the more likely possibility, was it the case that the celestial rebirth saga about the family of Osiris had been around for quite some time, but was not revealed in a form that withstood the test of time (or – due to the lack of a familiar framework like the zodiac – was only represented through such allusions that would not be readily recognisable for us)?

In this paper I will argue that the astral myth about the birth of Horus had been devised prior to Ptolemaic times, and that good evidence to this effect can be found in the 26th dynasty tomb of Benaty located at Qarat Qasr Selim in the Bahariya oasis.⁶ Benaty – whose name is often spelled out as Bannentiu in Egyptological literature⁷ – lived in the second half of the 6th century BCE, and was a wealthy merchant or landowner who must have benefitted greatly from the booming wine industry that made Bahariya prosper during the Saite Period.⁸ His hypogeum tomb has no superstructure; if it ever had one, it has completely disappeared by now. The tomb thus consists of a six-metre deep vertical shaft in the south, to the north of which lies a larger, decorated pillared hall that is surrounded by three smaller chambers on three sides (see fig. 1). From these only the original burial chamber in the north is decorated; the eastern and western side rooms were cut later in Roman times.⁹ Despite the rather humble stature of Benaty in terms of cultic involvement, a strong thematic link con-

⁴ R. Krauss, *Astronomische Konzepte und Jenseitsvorstellungen in den Pyramidentexten*. Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 59. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1997; P. Wallin, *Celestial Cycles: Astronomical Concepts of Regeneration in the Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts*. Uppsala Studies in Egyptology 1. Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002.

⁵ O. Neugebauer and R. A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts III: Decans, Planets, Constellations and Zodiacs*. Providence: Brown University Press, 1969, 6–104; E. Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*. Translated by D. Lorton. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999, 26–151.

⁶ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts: Bahria Oasis I*. Cairo: Government Press, 1942, 65–93; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II: Bahriyah and Farafra Oases*. Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1974, 140–153.

⁷ H. Sherbiny and H. Bassir, "The Representation of the Hedgehog Goddess Abaset at Bahariya Oasis," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 50 (2014), 171–189, 173–176.

⁸ A. Fakhry, s. v. Bahriya, Oase, in W. Helck and E. Otto (eds.), *Lexikon der Ägyptologie I*. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975, 601–4.

⁹ A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 141.

nects his tomb with the later zodiacs, and that is the abundance of Osirian motifs in its decorative programme, a feature that is shared by other contemporaneous tombs in the area.¹⁰ In the middle of the northern wall of the burial chamber Osiris sitting in his Judgement Hall is depicted twice, once facing east and once west.¹¹ His duplicated figures form the nucleus of the two scenes occupying the entirety of the eastern, northern, and western walls of the burial chamber. In the east the weighing of the heart is shown, whereas in the west Benaty approaches Osiris in procession with a series of seven divinities.¹² The northern half of the eastern wall of the pillared hall shows Osiris and Horus as they stand beside a false door that frames two registers; the upper one contains an embalming scene, while in the lower one Isis and Nephthys adore the erect mummified Osiris.¹³ Also in the pillared hall, on the western half of the southern wall we see Benaty as he is led by Inmutef and Anubis into the presence of the Osirian triad, that is Osiris, Isis, and Horus.¹⁴ All these scenes underline a rather evident truth, namely, that the Osirian vision of the afterlife had a profound influence on the decoration of the tomb.

While Benaty's final resting place is also known for some other peculiarities, for example for one of the earliest attestations of Ha, god of the western desert, in the oases,¹⁵ or the appearance of the hedgehog goddess Abaset,¹⁶ the depictions that intrigue us most for the comparison with the zodiacs are found on the eastern and western halves of the northern wall of the pillared hall (fig. 1). Traditionally they are interpreted as a "snapshot" taken at the beginning of the night, such that the eastern scene represents the rising full moon, whereas on the other side the simultaneous event of the sun setting in the west is captured.¹⁷ At this point, it should be noted that quite similar – though unfortunately much more fragmentary – scenes also exist in the nearby tomb of Tjaty,¹⁸ but their spatial arrangement is a bit different (lunar scene on the eastern wall, solar scene in the north), and some details also differ (most notably perhaps,

¹⁰ A. Dodson and S. Ikram, *The Tomb in Ancient Egypt: Royal and Private Sepulchres from the Early Dynastic Period to the Romans*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2008, 287.

¹¹ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 89; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 149.

¹² A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 90–93; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 148–153.

¹³ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 69–71; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 144.

¹⁴ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 82–84; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 146–148.

¹⁵ K. Jasper, "Did the Ancient Egyptian Traveller Consider Ha, God of the Western Desert, while Traversing His Domain?" in C. Alvarez, A. Belekdanian, A.-K. Gill, and S. Klein (eds.), *Current Research in Egyptology 2015: Proceedings of the Sixteenth Annual Symposium*, 62–73. Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2006, 65.

¹⁶ H. Sherbiny and H. Bassir, "The Representation of the Hedgehog Goddess," 181–189.

¹⁷ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 71–78; F. Colin and F. Labrique, "Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya," in F. Labrique (ed.), *Religions méditerranéennes et orientales de l'antiquité: Actes du colloque des 23–24 avril 1999 à Besançon*, Bibliothèque d'Étude 135: 45–78. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 2002, 48–53.

¹⁸ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 136–139; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 130.

the solar boat is heading west), so it is not possible to make generalisations about the two sets of scenes. As for the interpretation of the depictions in Benaty's tomb, I will here outline an alternative understanding of their meaning which takes into consideration the ideas that are encapsulated by the later cosmic diagrams, that is the zodiacs. In order to do this, however, first I will have to revise in the most summary fashion some of the representations of the Graeco-Roman zodiacs by which they tell the story of how Horus, son of Osiris and Isis, was born.

Key events in the nativity of Horus according to the zodiacs

The birth story of Horus is told in great detail by the round zodiac found in the second eastern Osirian chapel on the roof of the Dendera temple (middle of the 1st century BCE),¹⁹ and by the rectangular zodiac that is depicted on the ceiling of the pronaos (first half of the 1st century CE).²⁰ A more concise version is offered by the zodiac that decorates the ceiling of the inner room in the tomb of Petosiris in the Dakhleh oasis (beginning of the 2nd century CE).²¹ Since, as we shall see later, this is the zodiac that in a sense displays the closest similarities with the astral depictions in Benaty's tomb (that is, apart from the obvious fact that it is also found in a tomb), I fully reproduce its inner frame here (fig. 2), whereas from the Dendera zodiacs I only show the parts that are immediately relevant for the discussion (fig. 3). Petosiris' zodiac is also the one that makes a direct reference to the child Horus by depicting him with his usual posture and paraphernalia in its very centre (cf. fig. 2).²²

From the examination of the data it transpires that the first key moment in the astral birth of Horus was the day when the autumnal equinox coincided with the full moon.²³ It is easy to grasp the significance of such a day: the sun and the moon spend exactly the same amount of time in the sky, and the full disc of the latter acts as a perfect nocturnal counterpart of the earlier. At present it is not entirely clear whether the astral birth of Horus was celebrated only and exclusively in those years when this subtle equilibrium between the two major cosmic actors set in. Since all three zodiacs record this event, it is fair to assume that even if the astral rebirth myth was observed regularly every

¹⁹ S. Cauville, *Le temple de Dendara X/2. Les chapelles osiriennes*. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1997, pl. 60.

²⁰ S. Cauville, *Dendara XV. Traduction. Le pronaos du temple d'Hathor: Plafond et parois extérieures*. *Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta* 213. Leuven: Peeters, 2012, pl. viii.

²¹ J. Osing, M. Moursi, Do. Arnold, O. Neugebauer, R. A. Parker, D. Pingree, and M. A. Nur-el-Din, *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla aus dem Nachlass von Ahmed Fakhry*. *Archäologische Veröffentlichungen* 28. Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1982, pl. 41.

²² See also L. Kákosy, *Egyptian Healing Statues in Three Museums in Italy (Turin, Florence, Naples)*. *Monumenti e testi* IX. Turin: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, 1999, 19.

²³ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 141, 163.

year, those years in which the full moon fell on the day of the autumnal equinox – which happens several times a century – were especially propitious in this regard. This preliminary stage of the birth saga was marked by putting a symbol of the full moon in the sign of Pisces (i.e. the area in the sky where the full moon was seen on the day of the autumnal equinox): in the round zodiac it is a wedjat-eye inscribed into a disc adjoined by a squatting baboon carrying an oryx on its back,²⁴ in the rectangular zodiac it is a disc encircling the figure of Osiris as he holds a pig by the tail, as well as the aforementioned baboon,²⁵ whereas in the tomb of Petosiris it is again a wedjat-eye with legs, wings, and a row of ureai on top (fig. 2).²⁶ Another allusion is made to the co-occurrence of the autumnal equinox and the full moon by a human figure with four ram heads;²⁷ in the Dendera zodiacs it makes part of the decans (in the round zodiac the four heads have no human body), while in Petosiris' zodiac it stands not far from the composite wedjat-eye sign.

Isis conceives with his child, however, not during the time of perfect equilibrium, but on the day when the moon first becomes invisible following the autumnal equinox.²⁸ According to a text on the propylon of the Khonsu temple at Karnak (3rd century BCE), the day of lunar invisibility was the time when Khonsu conceived,²⁹ and a papyrus from the Fayyum, dated to the 1st century CE, emphasises that he and Horus were born on the same day.³⁰ This implies that Horus' conception – even independently from the evidence provided by the zodiacs – can also be tied to the day when the moon becomes invisible. After the full moon the ever dwindling waning crescent is seen each day gradually closer and closer to the rising sun, so that on one morning it is completely engulfed by its glare. This moment – when the moon is between the sun and the earth – is called conjunction (I use the term in a looser sense; astronomically speaking conjunction sets in when the sun, moon, and earth are perfectly aligned). The invisibility of the moon is thus experienced as seeing only the rising sun on the eastern horizon, with no prior sighting of the crescent of the moon in its vicinity, and since after the autumnal equinox (late September/early October according to the Julian calendar) the sun dwells in the sign of Libra (in the epoch when the zodiacs were created), the zodiacs mark the conception of Horus by depicting just this, i.e. an image of the rising sun in Libra. In the round zodiac this image is a disc enclosing a child (an avatar of the morning sun), while the rectangular zodiac adds another telltale detail, because the disc containing the child is combined with the akhet-hieroglyph

²⁴ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 161.

²⁵ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 171.

²⁶ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 177.

²⁷ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 169, 176-177.

²⁸ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 142-144.

²⁹ K. Sethe and O. Firchow, *Thebanische Tempelinschriften aus griechisch-römischer Zeit. Urkunden des Ägyptischen Altertums* 8. Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1957, 74 [89b].

³⁰ G. Widmer, "Un papyrus démotique religieux du Fayoum: P. Berlin 6750," *Bulletin de la Société d'Égyptologie de Genève* 22 (1998), 83-91, 91.

alluding to the eastern horizon (fig. 3). In the zodiac of Petosiris the head and limbs of the child protrude from the body of a scarab, another prime representative of the rising sun (fig. 2). Here the sequential listing of the zodiacal signs does not allow for the placement of this image next to the sign of Libra, but it is appropriately positioned on the eastern side of the artefact.

References to the next stage of development, the gestation of Horus at the winter solstice,³¹ are omitted in both the zodiac of Petosiris and the tomb of Benaty, so I quickly move on to the next key event in the story, and that is the birth of Horus around the vernal equinox.³² Both written evidence,³³ and the zodiacs themselves indicate that it took place on the day when the thin sickle of the waxing moon at the beginning of its cycle was seen for the first time after the spring equinox.³⁴ At this time of the year (late March/early April) the sun dwells in the sign of Aries, and consequently the thin first crescent will appear in the adjacent sign of Taurus shortly after the sun plunges below the western horizon. In the round zodiac this moment is indicated by the figure of a priest holding a ram-headed staff (symbol of the setting sun), facing the signs of Aries and Taurus, and anticipating the appearance of the first crescent; in the rectangular zodiac the scene is more straightforward, because in addition to the observer the unmistakable symbol of the moon with its crescent is depicted above the bull (the sign of Taurus; fig. 3). In the zodiac of Petosiris the sun – as it has just set, beside the sign of Aries and in the west – is shown as a winged scarab travelling in the solar boat and hailed by eight baboons in the netherworld (fig. 2). Next to it, in the visible world, we can see the appearance of the lunar crescent signalling the birth of Horus, and also a female bust, which is the classical representation of the moon (in keeping with the mixed style of this late zodiac).³⁵

³¹ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 144–149.

³² G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 149–152.

³³ E. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou V. Mémoires publiés par les membres de la mission archéologique française au Caire* 22. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1930, 352; S. Sauneron, *Le temple d'Esna II: textes nos. 1–193*. Cairo: Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1963, 77; G. Widmer, "Les fêtes en l'honneur de Sobek dans le Fayoum à l'époque gréco-romaine," *Égypte, Afrique & Orient* 32 (2003), 3–22, 17.

³⁴ G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 150.

³⁵ H. Whitehouse, "Roman in Life, Egyptian in Death: The Painted Tomb of Petosiris in the Dakhleh Oasis," in O. E. Kaper (ed.), *Life on the Fringe: Living in the Southern Egyptian Deserts during the Roman and Early-Byzantine Periods*, 253–70. Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1998, 262–267.

The scenes about the conception and birth of Horus in the tomb of Benaty

Having thus reviewed the most salient developments reflecting the nativity of Horus in the heavens, now we can turn our attention to the depictions in Benaty's tomb that will be shown to refer to the same concepts. As already stated above, the scene on the eastern half of the northern wall of the pillared hall has been interpreted as recording the emergence of the full moon on the eastern horizon at the beginning of the night.³⁶ It should not be forgotten, however, that the conjunction of the sun and the moon is also an event that takes place in the east. Apart from its implications concerning divine conception, the day of lunar invisibility was also of utmost importance for the ancient Egyptians, because it was the temporal borderline at which they began a new lunar month.³⁷ Indeed, the careful analysis of the lunar scene in Benaty's tomb suggests that it refers to this stage of the lunar cycle, rather than the full moon. In the middle of the upper register a disc surmounting the lunar crescent encloses a sitting child who faces right. It is therefore perhaps more likely that this figure is the lunar child,³⁸ and not the solar one that customarily designates the rising sun, though this latter alternative – especially in the light of the reasoning below – cannot be categorically ruled out either.³⁹ Rather disconcertingly, however, the Egyptian texts that describe the lunar cycle associate both the time of the full moon and the beginning of the month with childness,⁴⁰ so it cannot be readily determined which phase the infant within the disc refers to. What is really pertinent to the present discussion is the fact that certain texts link infancy with the day of lunar invisibility.⁴¹

The child enclosed within the disc on top of the lunar crescent thus in my opinion evokes the day of the moon's invisibility, i.e. the conjunction of the sun

³⁶ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 71–73; F. Colin and F. Labrique, “*Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya*,” 50–56 (with the possible refinement that it may simultaneously allude to the beginning of the month).

³⁷ R. A. Parker, *The Calendars of Ancient Egypt*. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 26. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1950, 9; R. Krauss, “Lunar Days, Lunar Months, and the Question of the “Civil-based” Lunar Calendar,” In E. Hornung, R. Krauss, and D. A. Warburton (eds.), *Ancient Egyptian Chronology*, Handbuch der Orientalistik 83: 386–391. Leiden, Brill, 2006, 387–389.

³⁸ Cf. F. Colin and F. Labrique, “*Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya*,” 50.

³⁹ For an identically depicted solar child, see the mythological papyrus of Herytwebkhet, 21st dynasty, in A. Piankoff, *Mythological Papyri*. Bollingen Series LX. New York: Pantheon, 1957, pl. 1.

⁴⁰ An overview of the sources, all dated to the Ptolemaic era, is found in F. Colin and F. Labrique, “*Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya*,” 51–53.

⁴¹ E. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou III*. Mémoires publiés par les membres de la mission archéologique française au Caire 20. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1928, 213; K. Sethe and O. Firchow, *Thebanische Tempelinschriften*, 68 [81i]; F. Colin and F. Labrique, “*Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya*,” 51.

and the moon. Therefore the central image of the upper register is an amalgamation of the imperceptible moon and the rising sun (hence the child may ultimately be solar). That this is the correct interpretation is suggested by some other details of the scene. From the two sides Isis and Nephthys, surrounded by a host of other gods, gently touch the disc and lift it, in accordance with their usual role of assisting the emergence of the sun.⁴² Four strings of ankh-signs emanate from the disc, signalling – as usual – the rays of the sun; there is no need to suppose that they represent beams of the full moon on analogy with the sun⁴³ – a claim that cannot be substantiated by evidence from elsewhere (the vertical streams of ankh signs in the tomb of Tjaty may be explained along the same lines).⁴⁴ In the lower register eight snake-headed figures flank Shu supporting the sky, and they – as the traces of their names also indicate – no doubt represent the Hermopolitan ogdoad.⁴⁵ This group of deities had a pre-eminent role in Hermopolitan cosmogony, according to which they continually participated in the prime moment of creation, that is the emergence of the sun from the primaeval waters.⁴⁶ Indeed, a scene in the sanctuary of the Hibis temple in the Kharga oasis (6th–5th century BCE) that can be put in parallel with the lunar representation in Benaty's tomb offers a visual record of this act, showing in two registers the eight snake- and frog-headed gods surrounding a child who is wearing a disc on the head and is rising from a lotus bud.⁴⁷ The child there is undoubtedly solar, because in a caption he is named "Re-Harakhty of Hermopolis" (*RC-Hr.w-3h.tj n Hmnw*; though he is linked to the pre-eminent cult centre of Thoth, so after all he may have some lunar overtones as well).

There are also other details in the pillared hall that further validate the above reasoning. Opposite the lunar scene, on the eastern half of the southern wall, a depiction shows Benaty as he is being introduced by Iunmutf and Anubis to Amun-Re-Kamutf.⁴⁸ This composite deity is shown with the characteristic representation of Min (an ithyphallic figure with an upraised hand holding the flail), and in fact, numerous Ptolemaic scenes in the Theban area

⁴² J. Assmann, *Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit einer frühen Hochkultur*. Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1984, 131; F. Colin and F. Labrique, "Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya," 50 n. 34.

⁴³ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 73.

⁴⁴ See A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 136.

⁴⁵ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 72; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* II, 144.

⁴⁶ V. A. Tobin, s. v. Myths: Creation Myths, in D. B. Redford (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Ancient Egypt* II. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, 469–472.

⁴⁷ N. de G. Davies, *The Temple of Hibis in el Khargeh Oasis III: The Decoration*. Publications of the Metropolitan Museum of Arts Egyptian Expedition 17. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Arts, 1953, pl. 4 [v].

⁴⁸ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 66–67; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* II, 143.

identify the same god with the name Min-Amun-Re-Kamutef.⁴⁹ As regards the lunar cycle, inscriptions from the Graeco-Roman temples clearly indicate that Min's role is to "take the place" of the moon on the day of its invisibility.⁵⁰ Moreover, a passage in the Book of Traversing Eternity directly associates Kamutef with the same lunar day.⁵¹ On the southern half of the eastern wall, flanked by a series of divine standards, the reclining emblem of Nefertum is depicted,⁵² which may be yet another allusion to the rising sun (cf. chapter 174 of the Book of Going Forth by Day).⁵³ Therefore the connotations of these scenes on the eastern part of the pillared hall reinforce the signification of the lunar scene on the northern wall.

In contrast to the obscure nature of the scene on the east of the pillared hall, the meaning of its counterpart on the western half of the northern wall has long been correctly established. The interpretation of this scene is of course greatly helped by the fact that the inscriptions above the human figures and jackals towing the solar boat state that the vessel is poised in the west (*jmn.t*), and at the mountain of Manu (*M3nw*), the mythical western entry point of the netherworld (fig. 2).⁵⁴ The depiction therefore without doubt represents the sun god as he is setting in the evening with his select entourage.⁵⁵ A more in-depth look into a few details, however, refines this statement further and shows that the moment captured is really the one when the sun has just sunk below the horizon. In the lower register, beside Shu and four other figures supporting the sky, we can once more see the Hermopolitan ogdoad, now represented by eight baboons, hailing the solar boat.⁵⁶ As has been pointed out earlier, this group of deities customarily assist the rising sun in the east. Their presence in the west can be made sense of on account of the belief that the rise of the sun in the visible world was equivalent with its descent into the netherworld, and the

⁴⁹ D. Klotz, "The Theban Cult of Chonsu the Child in the Ptolemaic Period," in C. Thiers (ed.), *Documents de théologies thébaines tardives* I, Cahiers de l'ENiM 3: 95–134. Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry (Montpellier III), 2009, 110 n. 97.

⁵⁰ E. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou* III, 211; E. Chassinat, *Le temple d'Edfou* VII. Mémoires publiés par les membres de la mission archéologique française au Caire 24. Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, 1932, 311; S. Cauville, "Le pronaos d'Edfou: une voûte étoilée," *Revue d'Égyptologie* 62 (2011), 41–55, 43.

⁵¹ M. Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, 415.

⁵² A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 67–68; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* II, 144.

⁵³ T. A. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day: Ideas of the Ancient Egyptians Concerning the Hereafter as Expressed in Their Own Terms*. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilization 37. Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1974, 183.

⁵⁴ F. Colin and F. Labrique, "Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya," 48.

⁵⁵ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 74–77; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* II, 145–147; F. Colin and F. Labrique, "Semenekh oudjat à Bahariya," 48–49.

⁵⁶ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 75; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt* II, 146.

two mirror events were accompanied by the same actions.⁵⁷ The solar scene in Benaty's tomb and the solar boat on the western part of Petosiris' zodiac are two instances which, through the portrayal of the baboons, clearly express this parallelism (for the association of the baboons with the entry into the duat, see also chapter 126 of the Book of Going Forth by Day).⁵⁸ The direction in which the solar boat is heading is also informative. It is only possible in the netherworld that the boat is sailing eastwards, as it is in fact doing on the northern wall of the pillared hall; if it was still above the horizon, the boat would have to be depicted facing west. The situation that the sun god is already in the netherworld may also explain why his figure sitting in the solar disc is named and shown as Re-Harakhty, and not as Atum, the usual evening manifestation of the sun. The similarity with the zodiac of Petosiris is again tangible, because there, too, the sun below the western horizon takes on its morning form, a winged scarab (for the sun as a scarab in the western entry zone of the netherworld, see also the first hour of the Amduat and the Book of Gates).⁵⁹

What is more, the solar scene depicts not an ordinary sunset, but rather an evening on which the first crescent of the waxing moon appears. To the right from the solar disc we can see a baboon – according to the caption next to it, Thoth himself – as he offers the wedjat-eye and a feather to the solar deity. This motif, involving the wedjat-eye only, occurs not infrequently in the solar boat,⁶⁰ and is usually associated with the return of the distant eye of Re.⁶¹ Its role as such may be underlined by the presence of a lion-headed goddess playing the sistrum within the solar disc. The feather may stand for Maat (order and righteousness), since the baboon making the offering in the solar boat is sometimes named Lord of Maat (*nb m3^C.t*),⁶² and also the wedjat-eye and Maat are often presented together, though the particular combination of the two signs in Benaty's tomb is quite unique.⁶³ However, the feather may have another layer of signification in the solar scene, especially because in the caption it is also

⁵⁷ E. Hornung, *Das Amduat. Die Schrift des verborgenen Raumes II: Übersetzung und Kommentar*. Ägyptologische Abhandlungen 7. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1963, 10.

⁵⁸ T. A. Allen, *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day*, 102.

⁵⁹ E. Hornung, *The Ancient Egyptian Books of the Afterlife*, 42 fig. 14, 66 fig. 30.

⁶⁰ C. Leitz, (Hrsg.), *Lexikon der ägyptischen Götter und Götterbezeichnungen VII*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 116. Leuven: Peeters, 2002, 640. For examples, see T. DuQuesne, "Seth and the Jackals," In W. Clarysse, A. Schoors, and H. Willems (eds.), *Egyptian Religion: The Last Thousand Years; Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 84: 613–28. Leuven: Peeters, 1998, 616 fig. 3; T. Bács, "The Last New Kingdom Tomb at Thebes: The End of a Great Tradition?" *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan* 16 (2011), 1–46, 43 fig. 24.

⁶¹ P. Wilson, *A Ptolemaic Lexikon: A Lexicographical Study of the Texts in the Temple of Edfu*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 78. Leuven: Peeters, 1997, 286.

⁶² T. DuQuesne, "Seth and the Jackals," 616 fig. 3.

⁶³ E. Teeter, *The Presentation of Maat: Ritual and Legitimacy in Ancient Egypt*. Studies in Ancient Oriental Civilizations 57. Chicago: The Oriental Institute, 1997, 15 n. 68.

referred to by an ideogram (𓂏) that allows for the alternative readings šw.t and $m3^c.t$. The feather, or more precisely, the “feather of the west”, was the symbol of the first crescent of the moon appearing just after sunset over the western horizon.⁶⁴ Consequently, the rather conspicuously depicted feather in the hands of the baboon – besides the concepts of the returning eye and Maat – may equally evoke this celestial phenomenon, that is the sighting of the first lunar crescent after sunset.

In sum, the scene on the eastern half of the northern wall records the rising sun on a day when it is in conjunction with the moon, while the scene on the opposite side shows the sun setting below the horizon on a day when the first crescent of the moon appears. Thus the two scenes basically represent two stages of the daily solar cycle. Quite often, the Egyptians conceptualized the daily course of the sun as consisting of three stages: morning, midday, and evening.⁶⁵ Indeed, the northern wall in the pillared hall may also allude to this tripartite division, because on the lintel of the doorway leading into the burial chamber, and thus at one of its usual places and between the two larger scenes, the winged solar disc with two ureai – a symbol of the sun at the height of its power – is depicted.⁶⁶ That such an allusion may be intentional is supported by the representations on the western wall of the pillared hall which show Benaty adoring three manifestations of the sun god, Re-Harakhty, Atum, and Khepri, together with their female consorts and two other divinities.⁶⁷ Notwithstanding the subtle hint at the three forms of the sun on the northern wall, the eastern and western scenes obviously form a meaningful unit on their own. On top of that, they clearly represent situations that – according to the later zodiacs – were key moments in the astral birth of Horus (see concordance of the scenes in fig. 3). Though explicit references to the equinoxes are lacking, it seems to be a fair assumption that – in harmony with the overall Osirian ambience of the tomb – the scene in the east evokes the conception of Horus at the conjunction of the sun and the moon after the autumnal equinox, whereas the scene in the west refers to the birth of Horus itself on the day when the waxing crescent of the moon first appears after the vernal equinox.

Conclusion

The similarities between the astral depictions in Benaty’s tomb and the details of the zodiacs showing the conception and birth of Horus are quite obvious and strongly suggest that the ideas about Horus’ heavenly rebirth were current

⁶⁴ H. Goedicke, “Coffin Text Spell 6,” *Bulletin de la Société d’Égyptologie de Genève* 13 (1989), 57–64, 61; H. Willems, “The Feather of the West,” *Revue d’Égyptologie* 56 (2005), 208–213.

⁶⁵ J Assmann, *Ägypten. Theologie und Frömmigkeit*, 129.

⁶⁶ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 74; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 143 fig. 71.

⁶⁷ A. Fakhry, *The Egyptian Deserts*, 78–81; A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 146.

at least as early as the Saite Period, well before the 1st century BCE, the creation of the first Dendera zodiac. The analysis has shown that while the visual representations of the conception of Horus – a child inscribed into the rising solar disc – are quite akin in Benaty's tomb and the Dendera zodiacs, when we look at the overall picture, the astral scenes on the northern wall of the pillared hall display the closest similarities with the zodiac of Petosiris, because the depictions of the birth of Horus employ the same motifs (sun sailing in a boat in the liminal zone of the netherworld, representation of the lunar crescent), and also both sources offer a concise version of the myth, leaving out references to the winter solstice. In the tomb of Petosiris another scene does allude to the winter solstice through mentioning the festival of Sokar,⁶⁸ but such a reference is apparently lacking in the tomb of Benaty. The absence of help provided by the zodiacal signs, or other decipherable written or visual clues, underlines the difficulties that the interpretation of earlier Egyptian astral scenes may involve. Hopefully, however, more evidence will come to light in the future about the possible connections between the zodiacs and previous Egyptian iconographic traditions, which will also put the astral scenes in the tomb of Benaty into further perspective.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ J. Osing *et al.*, *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla*, 93–94; G. Priskin, "The Dendera Zodiacs," 178–179.

⁶⁹ Since the initial inception of this paper, I have presented evidence that the images of certain decans in the later Graeco-Roman zodiacs were the descendants of the depiction of the ancient Egyptian constellation of the boat as it appears on the astronomical ceiling of the Ramesseum (13th century BCE), suggesting that the ideas about the Osirian astral rebirth cycle were already known in the New Kingdom, see G. Priskin, "The Astral Myth of Osiris: The Decans of Taurus and Libra," *Égypte Nilotique et Méditerranéenne* 9 (2016), 79–111.

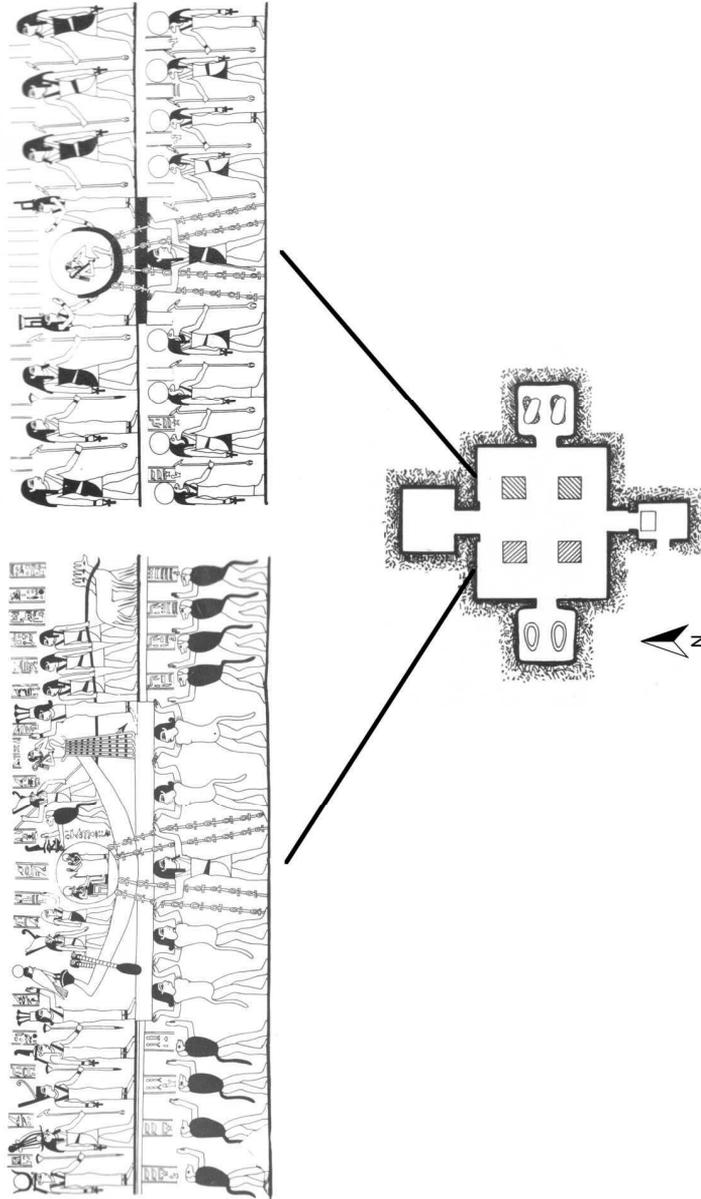


Figure 1. Astral scenes in Benaty's tomb (after A. Fakhry, *The Oases of Egypt II*, 142 fig. 70, 145 fig. 72, 147 fig. 73; © The American University in Cairo Press).



Figure 2. Inner frame of the zodiac of Petosiris (adapted from J. Osing et al., *Denkmäler der Oase Dachla*, pl. 41; © Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Kairo).

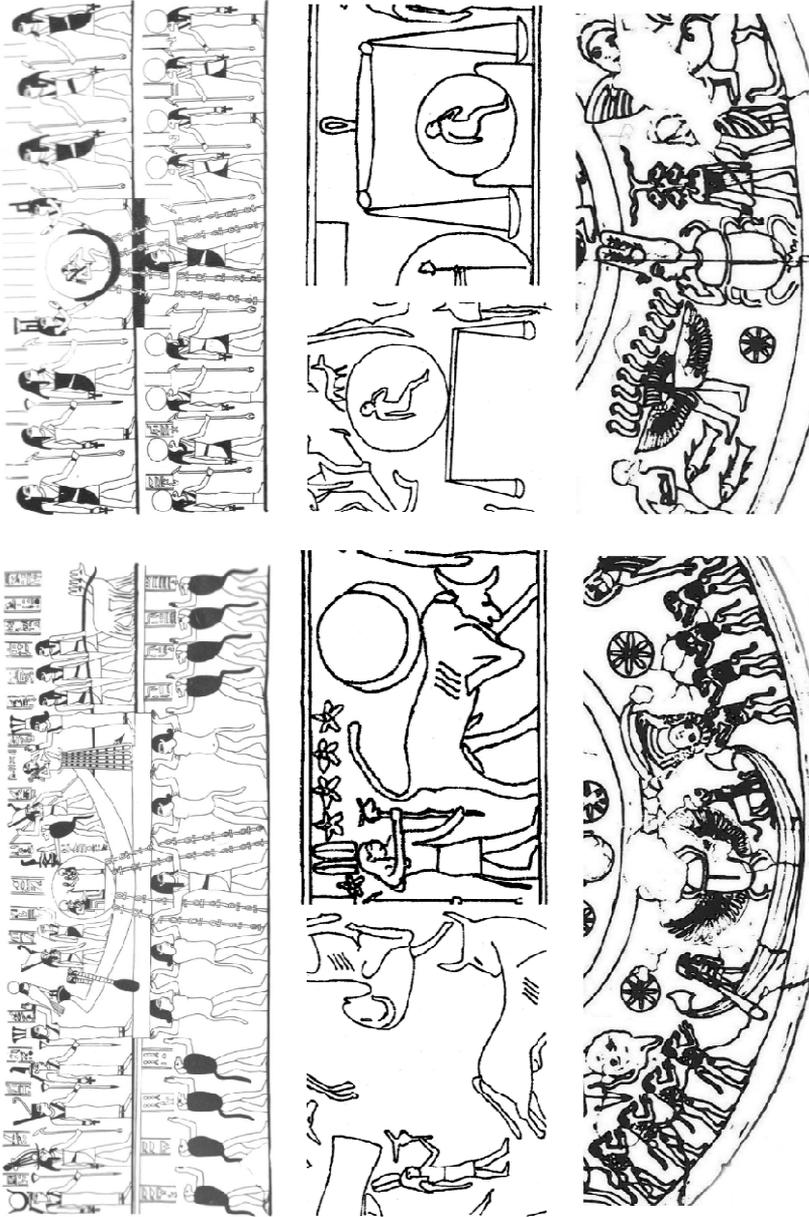


Figure 3. Concordance of the astral motifs in Benaty's tomb (top row), the Dendera zodiacs (middle row), and the zodiac of Petosiris (lower row) (© The American University in Cairo Press, author, and Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Kairo).