



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

Pyramid Texts

Vol. 1 The Tomb

Chapters 1-3

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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Chapter 1: The Walls That Waited

In 1880-1881, excavators working at Saqqara opened a group of royal pyramids whose inner chambers carried long columns of funerary hieroglyphs. Auguste Mariette initiated the investigation; Gaston Maspero's work brought the inscriptions of Pepi I and Merenre in 1880, followed by Unas, Pepi II and Teti in 1881, into modern scholarship.

The contrast with the great Giza pyramids was striking. These smaller Old Kingdom pyramids were lined with ritual writing. In Unas's pyramid the signs run in vertical columns across chamber and passage walls, while the ceilings evoke a star-filled sky. The discoveries revealed a body of religious and funerary material preserving some of the earliest substantial written evidence for Egyptian ideas about death, royal rebirth and the gods.

We call these inscriptions the Pyramid Texts. They are not a single book written at one moment. They are a collection of ritual utterances, offering formulae, hymns, protective spells and ascent texts preserved in different combinations from pyramid to pyramid. Kurt Sethe's early twentieth-century edition established the familiar numbered system and contained 714 utterances. Later discoveries added further texts and variants, so modern scholarship does not depend on one final universal total.

Unas preserves the earliest surviving royal corpus of Pyramid Texts. The Sixth-Dynasty kings Teti, Pepi I, Merenre and Pepi II each received their own selections, and by the end of the dynasty royal women were also receiving Pyramid Texts. Jequier's excavations added the pyramids of queens Neit, Iput II and Wedjebten, as well as King Ibi. More recent work at Saqqara has added material from Ankhesenpepi II and Behenu. The corpus therefore grew over time, and spell counts vary according to pyramid, edition and numbering system. Four and a half thousand years later, the walls are still giving scholars new evidence to compare.

One more thing about the words themselves: they were already old when the masons cut them. The language of many utterances is centuries more archaic than the reign of Unas - grammar and vocabulary that had passed out of ordinary speech long before his pyramid was built, inherited from liturgies recited by generations of dead priests, some of it perhaps older than the pyramids altogether. The Egyptians were not composing these texts in 2350 BCE. They were copying and carving a tradition they had received, like a cathedral choir still singing Latin. When you read the Pyramid Texts, you are hearing an echo of an echo, ritual language carried down out of Egypt's deep past and fixed in stone at the moment it might otherwise have vanished. That is part of their strangeness. They were ancient even to the ancients.

Who were they for? Almost nobody. That is the first thing to grasp. In the Old Kingdom, eternity was royal property. The Pyramid Texts were carved for kings and a handful of queens,

and for no one else - no illustrations, no copies for commoners, no papyrus editions you could buy for your father's grave. That would come centuries later, when these same spells leaked downward onto the coffins of officials and eventually into the Book of the Dead, and every Egyptian with enough money could hire a scribe to write "Osiris" before his name. But in 2350 BCE, the machinery of resurrection had one customer at a time, and he had ruled Egypt.

What do the texts do? They work. That is the second thing to grasp, and the strangest for a modern reader. These are not prayers in our sense - not requests, not hopes, not meditations. They are scripts and commands, carved in stone so that the carved word itself does what it says, permanently, for as long as the stone stands. A spell on a wall does not describe the king's resurrection; it performs it, over and over, forever. Some are stage directions for the funeral liturgy, with rubrics telling the priest when to pour the libation, when to burn the incense, how many times to speak the line. Some are the king's own voice, shouting at serpents. Some are hymns. Some are threats. Together they do three jobs: protect the dead ruler's body, reanimate it, and launch him into the sky, where he will be transformed into an akh - a transfigured, effective spirit, luminous and potent, fitted for life among the gods.

Modern scholarship has shown that the location of utterances inside Unas's pyramid matters. Ritual texts cluster around the burial chamber, other compositions occupy the antechamber and passage, and the corridor continues the movement outward. This retelling uses that spatial pattern as an educational journey from the coffin toward the sky. It is a modern organising framework, not a claim that the ancient Egyptians left a six-chapter book to be read like a modern narrative.

The destination, when you get there, is several places at once, and the Egyptians saw no contradiction in that. The king will join the sun god Ra in his barque and row across the daylight sky. He will become Osiris, lord of the dead, and sit on Osiris's throne. He will rise as a star - as the companion of Orion, as the child of Sothis, the star we call Sirius - and he will take his place among the Imperishable Stars, the circumpolar lights of the northern sky that never set, never die, never go down into the earth the way the sun does. All of these are true at once. Egyptian theology did not build systems; it piled up certainties.

So follow the texts the way they were meant to be read. Start in the dark, in the burial chamber, where a dead king lies in his stone box and the walls begin, in a low voice, to argue with the fact of it.

Chapter 2: A Great One Sleeps, A Great One Wakes

The burial chamber of Unas's pyramid is a small stone room at the end of the long crawl, and at its western end sits the sarcophagus - greywacke, a dark hard stone, sunk against the wall, where the king's body lay. Everything in this room is about that body. The ceiling above it is a

field of carved stars. The walls around it carry the densest concentration of spells in the pyramid, and they all face inward, towards the coffin, like people gathered at a bedside.

A dead man lies here. The texts begin by denying it.

Over and over, the texts refuse to treat burial as the king's final state. Utterance 213 presents him as departing alive and taking up royal authority in the realm of Osiris. The body is still in the sarcophagus, but the ritual language insists that death is a transition to be overcome, not an ending to be accepted.

The waking formulas return to one task again and again: the king must rise. Different utterances tell him to gather his head and limbs, shake off the dust of the grave and stand again. Some versions address Unas; others survive for later kings. Repetition is part of the ritual force. Sleep, immobility and death are answered with commands to assemble, awaken and live.

But waking is not enough. A dead king must be able to breathe, speak, see and eat. The burial-chamber ritual therefore combines purification, offerings and actions that restore the body's functions. Rubrics prescribe water, incense, natron and repeated recitation, showing that these were not simply stories but words connected with ritual performance.

The Opening of the Mouth belongs to this restoration. The Pyramid Texts and later funerary traditions preserve several ritual implements and descriptions, and modern translations do not reduce them to one simple tool or material. The essential idea is clearer than the technical details: death has closed the king's mouth, and ritual opens it so that he can speak, receive food and act effectively again.

Food follows immediately. Water, beer, wine, bread, meat and other offerings are repeatedly identified with the restored Eye of Horus. The damaged and healed Eye becomes a model for the king himself: what was broken can be made whole. Each offering therefore does more than feed him. It renews him.

The north wall becomes a catalogue of provisions because hunger and thirst are dangers the texts repeatedly deny. The king is equipped for continued existence with food, drink, oils, linen and the words that make those gifts effective. He is not being remembered as dead. He is being supplied for life.

Beer is the Eye. Milk is the Eye, drawn from "the breast of Horus," from "the breast of your sister Isis." Every offering, whatever it is, carries the same charge: wholeness restored after violence, life handed back to the dead.

Then come the seven sacred oils, one by one, set "on the brow of this Unas, that he may become an akh under you" - anointed until he has power over his own body again and terror

risers in the eyes of the spirits who see him. Linen follows, and eye-paint. And then the feast proper, dozens of utterances long, each spell presenting a single dish: breads of many named kinds, roast meat, the foreleg, the ribs, the liver, the spleen, geese, pigeon, figs, wine of the North, beer of several brews, grain, fruit - and over each one the same cry: "Osiris Unas, take the Eye of Horus!"

Why this obsession with food? Because the texts know exactly what death is: hunger without end. The fear that runs under the whole pyramid is not pain, not judgment - it is starvation. "Unas is not thirsty, he is not hungry," the spells repeat like a charm against the worst possibility, "the arms of the Desert God keep away his hunger." And most bluntly: "The abomination of Unas is hunger; he does not eat it." The dead eat, and eating makes them live. So the king is fed like a child at first - his nurse is the milk-goddess, "it is she who makes him live again, it is she who gives Unas birth" - and the feeding is itself a rebirth: "Unas is conceived at night, Unas is born at night, for he belongs to the Followers of Ra who are before the Morning Star."

Woken, mouth opened, anointed, fed - now the chamber's great litany can begin.

On the south and east walls stands Utterance 219, the resurrection litany, the longest and most thunderous text in the room. It is built as a procession: the priest - or the king's own son, performing the rite his father can no longer perform; the dead king is Horus too, the son who enacts the rites and avenges his father, both parts played by the same man - turns to each of the great gods in turn and makes the same announcement to each. To Atum, the self-created first god; to Shu and Tefnut, air and moisture; to Geb the earth and Nut the sky; to Isis, to Seth, to Nephthys, to Thoth, to Horus, to the Great and Little Enneads, the whole assembled company of heaven. And to each one the cry goes up:

"Atum, this your son is here - Osiris - whom you have preserved alive. He lives! He lives! This Unas lives! He is not dead, this Unas is not dead! He is not gone down, this Unas is not gone down! He has not been judged, this Unas has not been judged! He judges - this Unas judges!"

Notice what that last line does. Every later Egyptian expected to stand trial after death, heart weighed against the feather of truth. The Pyramid Texts are older than that idea, and they will have none of it. The king is not acquitted; he was never in the dock. The verdict is not "not guilty" - it is "not your defendant." He judges. The courtroom belongs to him.

And to Seth - the murderer of Osiris, the enemy woven into the litany because he cannot be left out - the refrain comes with a blade in it. Osiris lives, the gods are told, and he lives "that he may punish you." Resurrection here is not only survival. It is the threat of revenge walking back through the door.

The litany closes by sealing the identity it has built. The king is catalogued under Osiris's cult names - He-in-Heliopolis, He-in-Busiris, He-in-Orion - and then the formula locks god and king into a single body: "Your body is the body of this Unas, your flesh is the flesh of this Unas, your bones are the bones of this Unas. You go, this Unas goes; this Unas goes, you go." From this wall onward the king carries a double name - Osiris Unas - the dead god and the dead king fused into one traveler with one fate.

The burial chamber has done its work. The man in the greywacke box has been woken, fed, armed with speech, and declared alive by every god who matters. Now he has to get out - and the way out of the pyramid, the texts warn immediately, is crawling with things that bite.

Chapter 3: Serpents at the Threshold

Carved on the gable directly above Unas's sarcophagus - the first spells a waking king would face, the wall he would see if he sat up in his coffin - is a set of eighteen short, jagged charms against snakes and scorpions. The placement is a shield hung over a sleeper. The road the king must travel out of death runs through a necropolis infested with venomous things, and before the walls feed him or crown him or fly him to the stars, they arm him against the ground itself.

These are the oldest-feeling texts in the pyramid. They are short, terse, broken in rhythm, full of words even the later Egyptians half-forgot. Unlike the Offering Ritual, there are no stage directions here, no priest speaking for the king. The king speaks himself, first person, in the voice of a man alone in the dark who has just seen something move.

The commands come like blows: "Fall! Glide away!" "Monster, lie down!" "Beast, lie down!"

The most famous of them, Utterance 226, coils around itself like its subject:

"A serpent is entwined by a serpent - the young bull is entwined by the serpent. Earth, swallow that which came out of you! Monster, lie down, glide away! The majesty of the pelican falls in water. Serpent, turn over, that Ra may see you!"

Every line is a weapon of a different kind. "Earth, swallow that which came out of you" sends the snake back to what spawned it - you came from the ground, go back into it. "The majesty of the pelican falls in water" names an omen, a fall, a thing tumbling where it cannot hurt. And the last line is the slyest of all: "turn over, that Ra may see you." A snake on its belly is hidden, dangerous, one of the earth's own creatures. Flipped on its back it is exposed to the sun god's eye - caught, helpless, seen. The charm doesn't stab the serpent. It turns it over and lets heaven look at it.

Other spells press gods down onto the snakes like thumbs. One calls Atum's fingernail onto the spine of Neheb-Kau, the great serpent "Provider of Kas," pinning its backbone like a viper's head pinned down with a stick. Another summons the panther-cat Mafdet - the goddess who goes after the enemy's face: "She strikes you in your face, she scratches your eyes, so that you fall down in your dung and glide down in your urine." There is no dignity in the death these spells give snakes. They go down filthy, blinded, humiliated. When Ra himself is called in, the charm is done with subtlety: the sun god appears against the serpent and "cuts off your head with this his knife."

And then there is the counter-magic - spells that work less like weapons than like a chess player's announced trap. Utterance 230 turns the serpent's own bite into a snare: "Unas has bitten the earth, Unas has bitten Geb, Unas has bitten the father of he who bit him." The king has already bitten everything first - the ground, the earth god, the serpent's own father - so any snake that strikes him strikes a bite already laid claim to. And the logic of it twists further: "If you bite Unas, he will make you one; if you look on Unas, he will make you two." Bite him and you are absorbed into him, made one with the thing you attacked. Look at him - even look - and you are split, divided against yourself. The charm ends by spreading the enchantment over the whole world: "Heaven is enchanted, earth is enchanted." The king has salted the cosmos with his magic. There is nowhere safe to strike him from.

One short charm divides the threatening creatures between realms: the royal uraeus belongs above, while a crawling creature associated with Horus is assigned to the earth. The point is a boundary. The king's path is upward; the dangerous things of the ground are ordered to remain below.

Not all of these charms work by wit. Some are nothing but barked orders. To the Hepenu-serpent and the scorpion, the king says only: "Turn over, glide into the ground!" No argument, no spell-logic - the flat command of a man who expects to be obeyed, because the carved word is itself the shove.

The Egyptians never stopped needing these. In later pyramids the serpent spells migrated - moved from above the sarcophagus out to the antechamber's east wall and beyond, as if each generation of priests repositioned the shield where they judged the danger thickest. And when a Middle Kingdom scribe copied the old charms for a commoner's coffin, he gave Utterance 226 a plain working title: "Spell for driving away the rrk-serpent in the necropolis." That is what it always was. A man talking to a snake in a graveyard, written down - and kept in use, in one form or another, for a thousand years.

Serpents are not the only hostile things on the road. Just beyond the burial chamber, in the passage between the rooms, the walls perform a different kind of violence: the execration rite of the red jars. In the living ritual, red pottery vessels - red, the colour of chaos and the desert

and Seth - inscribed with the names of enemies were smashed against the ground, breaking the hostile powers the way the clay broke. Utterance 244 is the carving of that smash. The pyramid performs the breaking forever, stone doing what the priest's hands did once.

Then come the watchers. The way to the sky is patrolled, and the guards are not friendly functionaries. Utterance 251 faces demons the texts describe with terrible faces - doorkeepers of the beyond who must be named, faced down, passed. And woven through the ascent spells is a warning that drops in suddenly, like a hand closing on your elbow at the edge of a dock: "Beware of the Lake!"

The Lake is one of the dark waters of the otherworld - the watery regions the dead must cross, where a soul can be lost, drowned into non-being, taken. In the spells of becoming a falcon, the king is told to fly and fly high, because the water below is not empty. Later Egyptian books of the dead would draw these waters and name their crocodiles and their keepers in loving, terrible detail. The Pyramid Texts only glance at them - a command, a warning, a flash of something with teeth just under the surface - and move on. Somehow that is worse. The fully mapped monster can be prepared for. The Lake is just a shout in the dark: don't fall in.

Read the eighteen charms together and they sketch a map. The dead king travels, at first, as any Egyptian travelled - on foot, at ground level, through reed-thicket and riverbank mud, at the hours when vipers come out. The afterlife does not begin among the clouds. It begins as a walk through Egypt's own fields at dusk, in bad country, with the grave clothes still stiff on the body, and every patch of shade suspect. Only a man who has cleared the ground earns the sky.

What all these spells share is a view of the afterlife utterly unlike the peaceful heaven of later imagination. The road out of death is a contested road. It bites, it stings, it guards its doors, it waits under its water. Nobody drifts to the stars. The king fights his way out of the grave the way he fought on earth - with weapons, with tricks, with the names of powers, and above all with his voice. Every one of these charms is meant to be said, and the saying is the doing.

By the time the texts move from the sarcophagus gable towards the antechamber, the ground-level threats lie behind - the snakes turned over for Ra to see, the jars smashed, the guards faced down. Ahead now is water: the great celestial river that lies between the earth and the sky, and on its shore, a ferryman who does not have to stop for anyone.

Source note

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