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FINGERS, STARS, AND THE ‘OPENING OF THE MOUTH’: THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE *NTRWJ*-BLADES¹

By ANN MACY ROTH

In *JEA* 78, it was argued that the ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual of the Egyptian mortuary cult re-enacted the transitions of birth and childhood in order to render the reborn dead person mature enough to eat an adult meal. Here its central act, the opening of the mouth itself, is shown to mimic the clearing of a newborn’s mouth with the little fingers. Originally, the gesture resembled that of anointing; later the fingers were replaced by the finger-shaped *ntrwj*-blades, and in the Sixth Dynasty the adze was imported from the statue ritual. As frequently happened in Egyptian religion, however, ritual texts and iconography continued to invoke the older implements along with the newer tools, in order to render the ritual more effective. The relationship between birth and statues is intriguingly paralleled in a Mesopotamian statue ritual.

In New Kingdom tombs and papyri, ‘opening of the mouth’ scenes often display a collection of the tools used in the ritual (fig. 1).² Prominent among them are adzes, the wood-carving tools that E. Otto identified as the principal instruments of the New Kingdom rite, which he saw as essentially a statue ritual.³ Oddly, these otherwise comprehensive collections never include the instruments used in the earliest accounts of the ‘opening of the mouth’, the two blades cited in the Pyramid Texts of Unas and other Old Kingdom editions of the ritual.⁴ The name of these two blades, *ntrwj*, does occur in the New Kingdom ritual, sometimes modified to *ntrtj*, but it is attached to one of the adzes.⁵

The blades are attested in four different contexts in the Old Kingdom. They are mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, where they are called *ntrwj*; in inventory texts from the mortuary temple of Neferirkare at Abu Sir, where they are called *sbrwj*;⁶ and in several

¹ This article is a revised and expanded version of a talk presented at the Sixth International Congress of Egyptologists at Turin in September of 1991. I would like to thank Dr James P. Allen, who drew my attention to several of the most telling passages in the Pyramid Texts; Dr A. Cohen, who answered my questions on obstetric matters; and Prof. Edward Anders, who gave me useful references and suggestions about meteorites. I am especially indebted to Prof. Anne D. Kilmer for pointing out the Mesopotamian parallel to my reconstruction of the Egyptian ritual and for allowing me to quote some of her own unpublished work. Prof. Irene J. Winter also provided useful comments and references on the Mesopotamian connections. Dr Emily Teeter, Dr Maarten J. Raven, and a reviewer for the *JEA* also offered thoughtful critiques and suggestions. My arguments depend heavily upon the interpretation of the entire ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual that I proposed in *JEA* 78 (1992), 113–47, and the relevant conclusions of this article and the arguments supporting them are summarized here.

² For accessible colour photographs of these collections, see R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Austin, Texas, 1990), 38 (upper right of lower figure) and 54 (lower right of figure); T. G. H. James, *Ancient Egypt: The Land and its Legacy* (Austin, Texas, 1988), 151, fig. 107; R. E. Freed, *Ramesses the Great* (Memphis, Tennessee, 1987), 109 (upper figure); K. el-Mallakh and A. C. Brackman, *The Gold of Tutankhamun* (New York, 1978), colour pl. 2. This last example was redrawn as fig. 1 here.

³ *Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual* (Wiesbaden, 1960), II, 2–3.

⁴ Pyr. 30 b, attested in the pyramids of Unas, Pepi II, Neith, and Oudjebten.

⁵ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 17–18.

⁶ P. Posener-Kriéger and J. L. de Cenival, *The Abu Sir Papyri* (London, 1968), pls. 20.g, 21.o, and 22B. See also P. Posener-Kriéger, *Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakai* (Cairo, 1976), 173–4.



FIG. 1. The 'opening of the mouth' as depicted at the east end of the north wall of the burial chamber of Tutankhamun.

late Old Kingdom compartmental offering lists, where they are called either *ntrwj* or *sbrwj*.⁷ Models of the blades also occur archaeologically, in sets of model implements placed in the recesses of special limestone platters, called 'opening of the mouth' sets or *ps-kf* sets, which are sometimes found in private tombs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties.⁸

⁷ S. Hassan, *Excavations at Giza*, vi/2 (Cairo, 1948), pl. 131. Hassan lists six tombs in which this compartment of the offering list is at least partially preserved. In two lists, those of *Bjw* (Hassan's no. 135) and an unknown tomb owner (no. 139), the reading is clearly *sbrwj*; in three, of *Nj-hb-sd-Nfr-kr-Rc* (no. 137), *Sbkj* (no. 138), and *Jj-mrjj* (no. 142), the reading is clearly *ntrwj*; and in the sixth, *Mnj* (no. 136), the relevant signs are obscured by damage.

⁸ R. van Walsem, *OMRO* 59 (1978), 224-5, to which can be added S. D'Auria et al., *Mummies and Magic* (Boston, 1988), 80-1 (parts of three such sets).

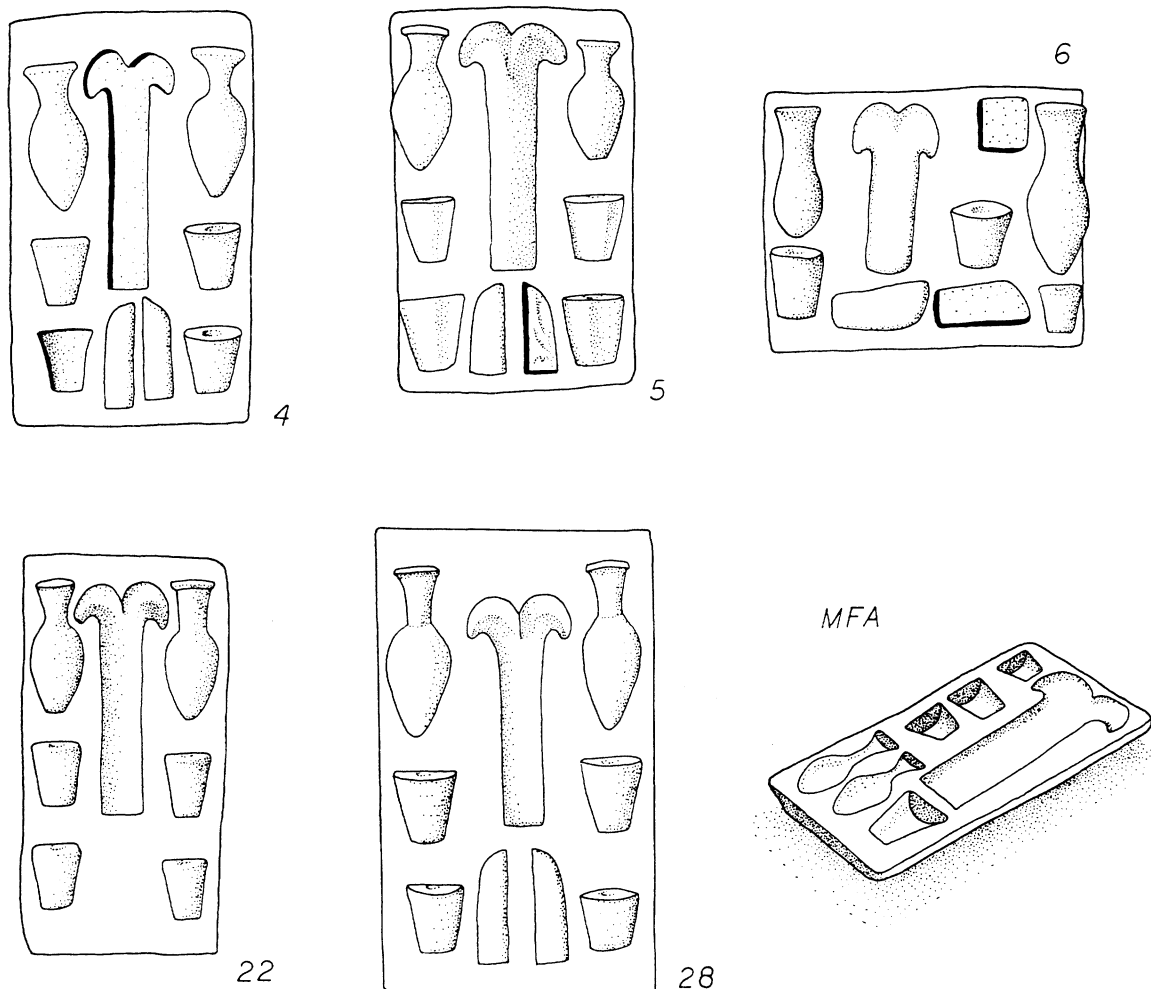


FIG. 2. Old Kingdom *psš-kf* sets from private tombs, showing symmetrical and asymmetrical arrangements and the presence and absence of the *ntrwj*-blades.

Despite the variation in name,⁹ the blades in these sources are all clearly the same. They invariably occur as a pair, they are usually associated with Upper and Lower Egypt, they are said to be made of *bj*, and they are roughly rectangular. Moreover, in all four contexts, they are consistently associated with the same assemblage of objects: the forked *psš-kf* knife, two *hst*-bottles (one of black and one of white stone), and four or five straight-sided *hnt*-cups. This collection of implements, including the *ntrwj*-blades, was presumably the equipment required for a single ritual sequence.

In contrast to the *psš-kf*, which is attested both as a functional Predynastic flint knife and later as a blunt-edged model, no *ntrwj*-blades can be identified that are not parts of

⁹To avoid repeating the variant names, the term *ntrwj* is here adopted throughout, since it is presumably the original, formal name, as opposed to the vernacular *sbw*, and since it is attested in both the Old and New Kingdoms. Previous writers on the topic, myself included, have used the New Kingdom variant, *ntrj*, even in an Old Kingdom context. See, for example, Posener-Krieger, *Néferirkarê-Kakaï*, 174; van Walsem, *OMRO* 59, 222-4; Roth, *JEA* 78, 117.

model sets. Our knowledge of their appearance thus depends exclusively on the models and the determinative signs used in texts. In model sets (fig. 2),¹⁰ the blades are usually represented by flat black stones, although a few sets, probably early, have no blades and no recesses for them.¹¹ When they occur, the blades are roughly rectangular, but one outer corner of each is rounded so that they are mirror images of one another. The rounded edges are normally placed towards the top of the platter (as defined by the placement of the tops of the cups and the forked end of the *psš-ḳf* (knife), so they presumably represent the working ends of the implements rather than their handles.

In the Abu Sir papyri (fig. 3), the determinative sign used for the implement in the most carefully-written example (20,g) clearly has the same shape as the models: rectangular with one rounded corner. In the second example, both upper corners of the sign are rounded, although to differing degrees; and in the third writing, two implements are rendered simply as two horizontal lines. In contrast to the carefully drawn hieratic examples, the contemporary hieroglyphic determinatives show regular, symmetrical forms (fig. 4):¹² the blades are either rectangles or ovals or, in one example,¹³ long narrow triangles with rounded tips. When held in the hands of the officiant, the rectangular form protrudes both above and below the hand, suggesting a length of about 15 cm.¹⁴

The *ntrwj*-blades in the Pyramid Texts¹⁵

In JEA 78, I argued that the Pyramid Texts in which the *ntrwj* and the implements associated with them occur were part of a ritual that mimicked the birth and maturation of a child. Its purpose was to take the newly reborn deceased person through the transitions of birth and childhood, so that he or she could be nourished by the (adult) food provided in such profusion for Egyptian mortuary cults. The ritual therefore emphasized the aspects of the process that affect the way a child receives nourishment: the initial connection with the placenta, the severing of the umbilical cord, nursing, weaning, and teething. This ritual sequence coincides with the upper register of Pyramid Texts on the north wall of the burial chamber of Unas' pyramid and those of subsequent kings. The spells in all three registers on this wall are accompanied by offerings, which were presented along with the recitation of the spells to form the principal funerary offering ritual. All the offerings presented in the upper register were perishable (incense, natron,

¹⁰The numbers 4, 5, 6, 22, and 28 that identify the sets pictured in fig. 2 correspond to the list given by van Walsem, *OMRO* 59, 224–5; the unnumbered set is from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (accession no. 13.3144).

¹¹Most sets are not well dated. However, in the Sixth Dynasty a fixed symmetrical arrangement for the implements seems to have prevailed; all the sets that can be clearly dated to that dynasty are symmetrical. The asymmetrical sets are perhaps somewhat earlier (none has a clear Sixth Dynasty context) and of the three asymmetrical sets known, two lack *ntrwj*-blades. The single symmetrical set that lacks these blades may also date earlier than the Sixth Dynasty.

¹²The numbers of the non-royal examples correspond to the examples given in the compilation of offering lists in Hassan, *Giza*, vi/2, pl. 131. Royal examples are from the Pyramid Texts, except the second example of Pepi II, which was taken from a fragmentary offering list found in his mortuary temple. Wherever possible, examples have been collated with the original publication.

¹³Hassan, *Giza*, vi/2, pl. 131, example no. 138.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, pl. 131, example no. 139, from G. Jéquier, *Tombeaux de particuliers de l'époque de Pepi II* (Cairo, 1929), 112.

¹⁵The analysis presented in this section is an outline of more extensive arguments in Roth, JEA 78, 118–22. I have taken the opportunity to add various corroborative details and interpretations.

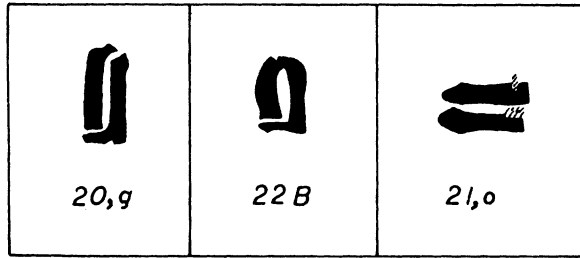


FIG. 3. Hieratic determinatives to the *sbw*j (= *ntrw*j) blades from the papyri found at the mortuary temple of Neferirkare at Abu Sir.

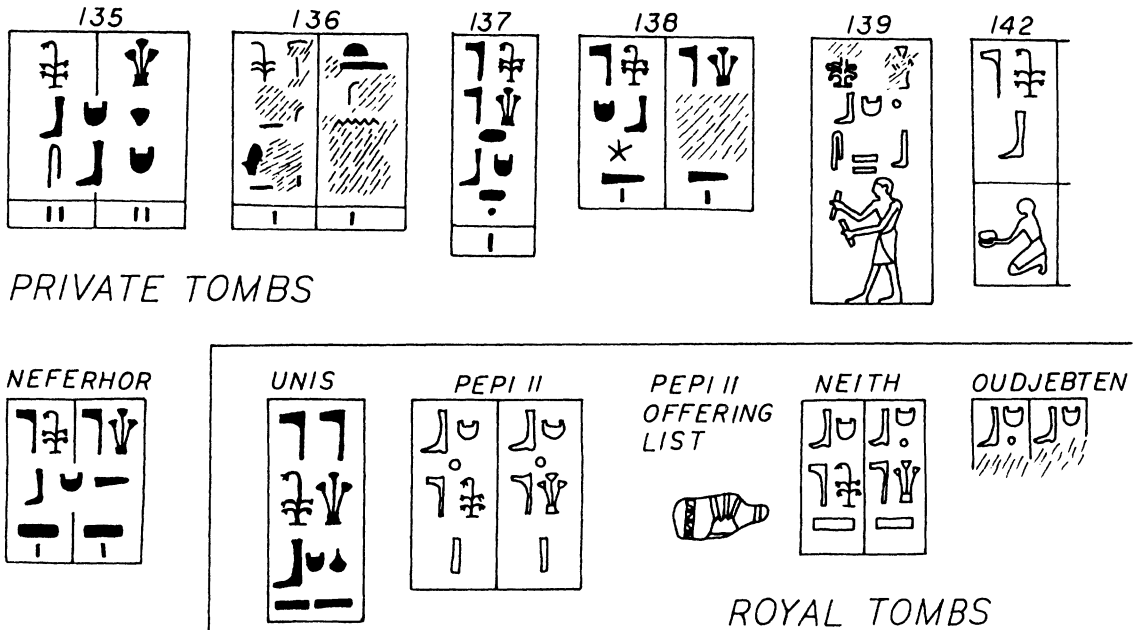


FIG. 4. Writings of the names of the blades in the Pyramid Texts and in offering lists in private tombs. The numbers are those assigned in Hassan, *Giza* VI/2; Neferhor's list is published in Jéquier, *Le Monument funéraire de Pépi II*, II (Cairo, 1938), 41.

food) with the exception of the *ntrw*j-blades, the *psš-*kf**, and various bottles and cups that can be identified with the bottles and cups of the model sets and inventories.

In the pyramid of Unas, this sequence began with protective spells that stressed the presence of Unas' *k* surrounding him (Pyr. 16-18). The *k* here was probably represented by the placenta, in the womb with Unas preparing for rebirth.¹⁶ Unas was then told of a summons (*pr.tj n.k hrw*) to go forth to his son (Pyr. 22-3). Following the summons is a blank space that may mark the actual rebirth, since it is followed by purification spells and a clause comparing Unas' mouth to that of a calf on the day of his birth

¹⁶ H. Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods* (Chicago, 1948), 70-4, and A. M. Blackman, *JEA* 3 (1916), 241 n. 3, suggested the same equation, based mainly on cross-cultural parallels with contemporary African cultures. That the word *krw*, 'sustenance', is related to the word *k*, and that the placenta provides sustenance in the womb, is also suggestive. There is, however, no clear evidence that the Egyptians were aware of the placenta's function.

(Pyr. 26–7). Incense was burnt and all his limbs were cleaned (Pyr. 28). Then a *psš-*kf** knife was presented and said to make firm Unas' lower jaw (Pyr. 30a). This signalled to the newly reborn king that his umbilical cord had been cut and he now needed to nurse at his mother's breast.¹⁷ At the same time, it magically ensured the rigidity of his jaw so he could do so, thus helping Unas to replace the nourishment that was previously supplied through the umbilical connection it had just severed. Unas' mouth was then opened with two *ntrw*j**-blades (Pyr. 30b) and two obscure substances were offered (Pyr. 31). In the next spells, two jars were presented, one full of milk and the other empty; these are explicitly called the breasts of Horus and Isis (Pyr. 32). The 'summons' (Pyr. 22–3) is repeated, again followed by a blank space that may here mark the birth of the placenta. A black and a white *h*ꜣ*t*s**-bottle were elevated in the next passage (Pyr. 33), perhaps signifying by their different colours the contrasting fates of the newborn and his placenta.¹⁸

The next sequence represented the reborn king's weaning and teething. A fresh (soft) cake was offered, and Unas was assured that offerings surrounded him (Pyr. 34); this may refer back to Pyr. 18, where the *k*ꜣ**, the previous source of nourishment, was also said to surround the deceased. The five cloves of garlic offered next were explicitly equated with teeth (Pyr. 35a). The king was then given a heavy cake (Pyr. 35bc) to cut his teeth against, while the wine that followed (Pyr. 36) would have dulled the pain of teething. After this, Unas could apparently chew adult food, and the remaining texts in the register (Pyr. 37–40) offered a complete funerary feast of bread, meat, wine, and beer.

The offering ritual, including this sequence and the spells in the two lower registers that follow it, seems to have grown by accretion. The offerings that accompany this longer ritual are identical to the sequence of offerings in Barta's type A/B offering list.¹⁹ The offerings of the shorter sequence just described correspond to the type B list of offerings, which never occurs independently, but only followed by the type A list.²⁰ In private tombs, the type A/B list did not appear until the last reign of the Sixth Dynasty, but in royal contexts there is evidence to date it as early as the reign of Sahure.²¹ Since *psš-*kf** sets also began to be placed in private tombs in the Fifth Dynasty, the ritual must have been performed in both royal and private cults at that period, although private tombs continued to display only the type A list which had become canonical in the late Fourth or very early Fifth Dynasty,²² just before the earliest introduction of the type B sequence.

The offering ritual received yet another accretion in the early Sixth Dynasty. Fragments from the Pyramid Texts of Mernere show that a new version of the 'opening of the mouth' (Pyr. 11–15) was added, a sequence that involved the adze and the foreleg of a bull known from the New Kingdom edition of the ritual. The position of this addition is preserved in later pyramids: it was placed at the front of the A/B sequence. In the early

¹⁷ The evidence for the use and purpose of this knife was the principal focus of the previous article, *JEA* 78, 113–47.

¹⁸ A similar contrast may be indicated by the representations of Tutankhamun in a childlike posture with black and white faces on the double cartouche box found in his tomb: see the photograph in C. N. Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun* (London, 1990), 158.

¹⁹ W. Barta, *Die altägyptische Opferliste*, MÄS 3 (Berlin, 1963), fig. 5.

²⁰ More precisely, it is followed by the type A list minus its first two offerings, which are identical with the first two of the type B list.

²¹ H. Altenmüller, *MDAIK* 22 (1967), 17–18, has argued convincingly from fragments of offering lists in the mortuary temples of Sahure and Neferirkare that the type A/B sequence occurred in those temples.

²² Barta, *Opferliste*, 47.

Fifth Dynasty and again in the early Sixth, then, a new sequence was inserted at the beginning of an older sequence which was left essentially intact; in the Sixth Dynasty, the addition clearly represented a reworking of the older ritual to which it was joined.

Supporting this model of growth by accretion are numerous passages in the lower registers of the Unas ritual (corresponding to the type A sequence) that anticipate offerings or concepts from the later B sequence. Pyr. 17–18 and Pyr. 22–3 are repeated a short way into the second register. A kind of bread which may be related to the shape of the *psš-ḳf* is offered in Pyr. 60c and Pyr. 73cd and 'mouth-washing' bread is offered in Pyr. 72ef. The 'lifted' bread and drink of Pyr. 61–2 are reminiscent of the elevation of the black and white *hṯs*-vessels of Pyr. 33. In Pyr. 79ab, onions said to be teeth are offered, again occurring just before an extensive list of meats. Still further along, milk (Pyr. 89) and the breast of Horus (Pyr. 91) are offered once again.

These spells are clearly the remnants of earlier versions of the metaphorical birth-and-maturation sequence, which was already present in the type A list. The two additions of the late Old Kingdom, the B sequence and the sequence including the adze and foreleg, were thus simply the latest examples of a long history of additions and revisions to the offering ritual, preserved because of the new custom of inscribing the ritual's text in royal burial chambers. Some form of this ritual probably dated back at least to the Nagada II period, when the *psš-ḳf* knife in burials began to be placed in front of the deceased rather than behind his head with the other knives.²³ This change presumably marked the beginning of its ritual presentation.

The role and origin of the *ntrwj-blades*

The accompanying spell, 'Osiris Unas, I have split open for you your mouth', clearly indicates the function of the *ntrwj-blades*. Why should a newly reborn king need to have his mouth opened? At birth, a baby's mouth is obstructed by mucus that must be cleared before the baby can breathe. In modern births, the mouth is cleared using a bulb syringe,²⁴ but the physician's little finger is also put into the mouth to test for any abnormalities of the palate (fig. 5).²⁵ The small size, softness and sensitivity which make the little finger appropriate for this task would make it equally suitable for cleaning the mouth. Today, the clearing is normally done immediately before the umbilical cord is cut. Although the *ntrwj-blades* follow the *psš-ḳf* in the Pyramid Texts, they consistently precede it in the Abu Sir inventories,²⁶ suggesting that the real order of presentation was the same as in the procedure used today. In the New Kingdom 'opening of the mouth' ritual, too, the presentation of the *psš-ḳf* (Scene 37) follows the central mouth-opening scenes (Scenes 26–7 and 32–3).²⁷ The actions may have been seen as simultaneous.

The most likely prototypes for the *ntrwj-blades* are the two little fingers of the midwife. The model *ntrwj-blades* are shaped like fingers, with the single curved corner represent-

²³ Roth, *JEA* 78, 131–2.

²⁴ Dr A. Cohen, personal communication. If left to itself, the baby will normally swallow this mucus, although this can cause complications. In modern births, the mucus is cleared mechanically as a matter of course.

²⁵ This illustration is taken from J. R. M. Kuntz and A. J. Finkel (eds), *American Medical Association Family Medical Guide* (New York, 1987), 656 (figure).

²⁶ Posener-Krieger and de Cenival, *Abu Sir Papyri*, pls. 20–2.

²⁷ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 9.

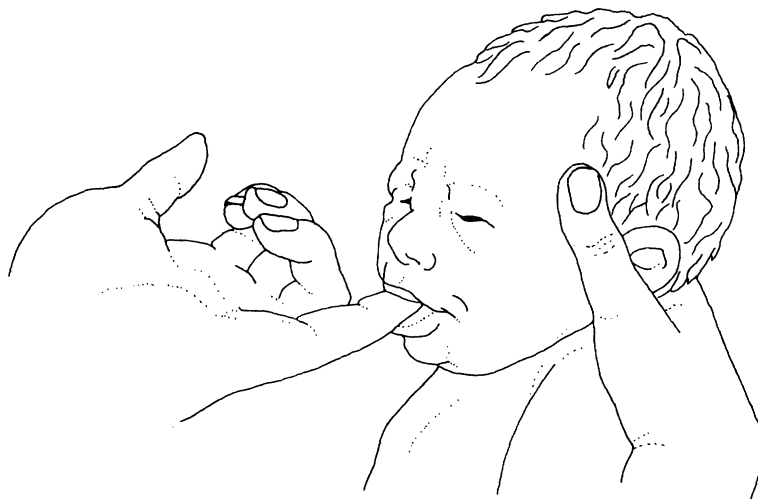


FIG. 5. Illustration from a modern medical reference book, showing the use of the little finger to check for abnormalities in the mouth.

ing the soft part of the finger behind the nail. If they represented the little fingers of the left and right hands of the midwife, both their consistent duality and the fact that they are mirror-images of one another would be explained. The hypothesis that the *ntrwj* were models of human little fingers also explains the occasional omission of the *ntrwj*-blades from model sets and the fact that no prototypes occur in Predynastic tombs corresponding to the functional flint *psš-ḳf* knives. Originally, the gesture was probably performed by the little fingers of the priest, mimicking the little fingers that would have been used at an actual birth. Such fingers would not have been considered part of the ritual 'equipment'.

The 'opening of the mouth' with the little fingers is, in fact, attested in the Pyramid Texts. In Pyr. 1329-30, preserved only in the pyramids of Pepi II and Queen Neith, the mouth of the deceased is said to be opened by a sequence of four implements. The first of these is obscure, but the second is the *dws-wr* adze, presented in the 'mansion of gold', where a version of the ritual was performed upon statues. Then, the mouth is opened by the 'two images (*twj 2*) foremost of the mansion of natron, (*ḥwt ntrj*)'. Since natron was used in mummification, these were presumably the appropriate tools for the dead. There is also clearly a pun on the name of the *ntrwj*-blades that the two images presumably represent.²⁸ Finally, the mouth is opened 'by the little finger of Horus, with which he split open the mouth of his father, with which he split open the mouth of Osiris'.

Horus and Osiris were the primeval participants in the 'opening of the mouth' rite. The Egyptians assigned the responsibility for performing this act to the son or heir, and made his participation a condition of inheritance.²⁹ The role of Horus and Osiris as prototypes and the use of the past tense *sḏm.n.f* relative form to refer to Horus' opening of Osiris'

²⁸ In the pyramid of Neith, the word *twj* is followed by two divine determinatives. The *dws-wr* is also given a divine determinative, perhaps because the name of the goddess Neith is substituted for the word *dws*. Neither of the other implements has such determinatives: G. Jequier, *Les Pyramides des reines Neit et Apouit* (Cairo, 1933), pl. 32.

²⁹ See T. Mersich, *LÄ* 1, 1248, and references therein. An illustration can be found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, where king Ay, the successor and hence theoretically the son of Tutankhamun, is depicted with an adze, opening the mouth of the mummy (see fig. 1).

mouth suggest that the little fingers were the original tools used in the rite. Like the offering ritual, where each new version was added to the beginning of the older sequence, the implements in this spell are named in the reverse order of their historical appearance: the recently introduced adze, the intermediate *ntrwj*-blades, and, finally, the primeval implement, the little finger. The implement named before the adze is problematic. The text reads, 'I split open your mouth with the *šš*' (with the plow determinative), foremost of *Šnꜣ* (a place name, again determined with a plow)'. This implement was perhaps a tool³⁰ that was borrowed from the statue ritual after the adze, but it apparently failed to survive in the mortuary context.³¹

A similar reference to the opening of the mouth of Osiris by Horus is used in Pyr. 13–14, the passage at the beginning the later editions of the offering ritual where the *mshtjw*-adze is offered. In the Old Kingdom, these spells occur only in the pyramids of Pepi II and Aba, but they are well paralleled in later sources. The relevant section reads:

Horus, open (*jwn*) the mouth of this Pepi!
 Horus, split open (*wꜣ*) the mouth of this Pepi!
 Horus has opened (*wn*) the mouth of this Pepi, and
 Horus has split open (*wꜣ*) the mouth of this Pepi,
 with that with which he split open the mouth of his father,
 with that with which he split open the mouth of Osiris, and
 with the *bjꜣ* that came forth from Seth,
 the *mshtjw* of *bjꜣ* that splits open the mouths of the gods.

The two phrases that refer to the implement with which Horus opened the mouth of his father Osiris are usually taken to apply to the *mshtjw*-adze of *bjꜣ* mentioned in the following lines, but they can equally well refer to a separate implement. Like the essentially identical phrases in Pyr. 1330, they probably allude to the little fingers of the birth ritual, offered along with the adze of the statue ritual 'that splits open the mouths of the gods (= cult statues)'. The alternating use of the verbs *wn* and *wꜣ* earlier in the spell may also indicate two parallel operations, although only *wꜣ* is used in the last four lines. Thus, the spell is probably another example of the use of historically successive implements to open the mouth.

The *ntrwj*-blades, unlike the fingers they represent, are made of *bjꜣ*. Fingers of *bjꜣ* are mentioned in two passages of the Pyramid Texts.³² In Pyr. 1983, they are used to open the mouth of Osiris by Horus' four sons, specifically identified to Osiris as *msw n msw.k*, 'the children of your children'.³³ Here again, the mythical setting is used to emphasize the schematic history of the rite. While Horus uses his little fingers to open Osiris' mouth in Pyr. 1330 and probably also in Pyr. 13, in Pyr. 1983 his sons, the next generation, use fingers of *bjꜣ* to perform the ritual. Fingers made of *bjꜣ* were a later development from the

³⁰ As suggested by *Wb.* IV, 543, 3.

³¹ There is a possible later reference to this implement in Scene 32 of the New Kingdom ritual. There, the mouth and eyes are opened first with a *mꜣꜣft* of *bjꜣ* and second with a finger of *ꜥꜣm*. The *mꜣꜣft* invariably has a chisel determinative, but in an offering list it is said to be made of ebony, *hbnj*, which is written with a plow (Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, I, 79–83). This might be the distant echo of the Pyr. 1329–30 passage, a possibility which is somewhat strengthened by the fact that, like this passage, Scene 32 would then also contain a sequence of implements given in the reverse order of their adoption.

³² These spells were brought to my attention by J. P. Allen.

³³ The longer passage in which the mouth-opening occurs contains no references to birth, but instead describes the reconstitution of Osiris by Isis and Nephthys and his resurrection through the actions of his son Horus. The sons of Horus then wash his face, wipe his tears, and open his mouth with their fingers of *bjꜣ*, immediately before he goes forth to traverse the universe.

original little fingers, and assigning their use to a later generation presumably refers to this historical substitution. The significance of *bjj* is discussed below (pp. 69 ff.).

Equally interesting is another passage, attested only in the pyramid of Pepi II,³⁴ in which the goddesses Isis and Nephthys are said to wash the mouth of the deceased with their fingers of *bjj*. It is these goddesses, with the aid of Heqat, who clean the newborn children in the P. Westcar story,³⁵ and whose presence among the better-known birth deities (Meskhenet, Heqat, and Khnum) has hitherto been somewhat puzzling. This passage alludes to their function as divine midwives, a role that is also evoked by the positions they take around the pregnant woman in P. Westcar and the similar positions they take at the head and foot of a coffin. The two principal roles of these sisters are thus symmetrical: to mourn death and to assist at rebirth. Their name as mourners, *drtj*, ‘the two kites’, may even be related to the word *drtj*, ‘the two hands’, which aid in (re)birth. They are presumably also to be identified with the two goddesses referred to by the name of the implements in a few late texts (*ntrj*); the masculine form of the name probably referred to the fingers (*dbꜣ*) themselves.

Little fingers in the New Kingdom ritual

The New Kingdom ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual also mentioned earlier implements. In Otto’s Scenes 14 and 33,³⁶ the mouth is opened not with a tool, but with the little fingers of the priest.³⁷ In a third scene in the New Kingdom ceremony, Scene 32, a ‘finger of *dꜣm*’ is used to open the mouth,³⁸ again reflecting the substitution of a metal finger-shaped implement; as in Pyr. 1329–30, the later form directly precedes the earlier. This golden finger, or perhaps even the human finger it represents,³⁹ is consistently included among the ‘opening of the mouth’ tools collected in New Kingdom scenes (fig. 1).

Scene 14 in the New Kingdom ritual, the first presentation of the little fingers, is located in the middle of the sequence that is most explicitly connected with statue carving and involves sculptors and painters. Correspondingly, the woodworking tool one would expect in such a sequence, the adze, is relegated instead to Scenes 26 and 27, in the sequence that contains many elements reminiscent of the birth-and-childhood progression in the Pyramid Texts. Neighbouring scenes include the *psš-ḳf*, a second scene in which little fingers are offered, the ostrich feather deriving from Pyr. 32b,⁴⁰ and possibly

³⁴ G. Jéquier, *Le Monument funéraire de Pépi II*, I (Cairo, 1936), pl. xviii, lines 1308 + 11 and + 12.

³⁵ P. Westcar, 10, 11; 10, 19; 11, 2.

³⁶ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 65–6 and 93–5.

³⁷ The text uses the dual in only one case: Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, I, 35, text no. 4. In at least some examples, the scene that illustrates it shows that both fingers were used (ibid. II, fig. 2a, reproduced here as fig. 8).

³⁸ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 91–3. The reason for the use of the metal *dꜣm* rather than *bjj* here is not clear; possibly the alternation is due to the relationship of both metals with the god Seth. *bjj* is said to come forth from Seth in Pyr. 14, and the *dꜣm*-sceptre is also probably related to Seth (H. te Velde, *Seth, God of Confusion*² (Leiden, 1977), 89–91).

³⁹ This finger is generally gold or white in colour, where one would expect the primeval finger of Horus to be red. It might be a finger of Isis or Nephthys, however.

⁴⁰ W. Helck, *MDAIK* 22 (1967), 40–1, has suggested that the ostrich feather entered the ‘opening of the mouth’ ritual through a misreading of Pyr. 32b, in which the breast of Isis is represented by the presentation of an empty jar, *mnsꜣ šw* (Helck read the phrase as ‘den *mnsꜣ*-Krug entleeren’, however). This supposes that the ostrich feather used to write the word *šw* was reinterpreted as a separate offering and so made its way into the assemblage of ritual implements. Scene 39 is thus in origin part of the Old Kingdom sequence, as its placement in the New Kingdom ritual suggests.

the bricks of birth.⁴¹ The use of obviously inappropriate tools in both these sequences suggests an intentional incongruity, meant to highlight the crucial scenes of the ritual and their meaning. The adze, a statue-making tool, was used in the central act of the funerary ceremony to stress the permanence of the mummy as a cult image; similarly, a gesture with the human little finger, taken from a human birth ritual, was incorporated into the statue ritual to emphasize the equation of the statue with the human being it represented. The compilers of the ritual exchanged the implements of the human rebirth ritual with the adze of the statue ritual to blur the boundaries between the statue of the deceased and his mummy in both environments.

One further example in which the implements of the New Kingdom ritual are related to the original use of fingers to open the mouth is the name of another adze, *dwn-ꜥ*, which is sometimes used in Scene 26. This name, which Otto translates 'Arm-ausstrecker',⁴² represents a different metaphor for the gesture made by the hand of the midwife, and equates the entire adze with the outstretched arm, from which it follows that the active part of the implement, the blade at the end of the handle, represented the fingers at the end of the arm.

The little fingers and the seven sacred oils

In one Sixth Dynasty tomb scene (fig. 6), the cult functionary extends his two little fingers towards the deceased, in a gesture very like the one that I have hypothesized as the original 'opening of the mouth' act.⁴³ This gesture, however, is used to perform the ritual of anointing. A similar gesture, in which one little finger is offered while the other hand holds the jar (fig. 7),⁴⁴ continues to be the typical gesture for anointing throughout Egyptian history.

The use of the same gesture in both these rituals might be explained by the hypothesis that the anointing ritual was yet another version of the 'opening of the mouth' sequence. In practice, however, the two rituals seem to have been carefully distinguished. In the Pyramid Texts, neither the spells accompanying the seven sacred oils nor those that follow, accompanied by offerings of eyepaint and cloth, make the slightest reference to the mouth of the deceased or contain any other elements that can be related to the birth sequence. Moreover, the oil rite was performed using a platter that was very like the platter used to hold the *ps̄-kf* set, but had seven round depressions for oils rather than recesses to hold ritual equipment. The occurrence in the archaeological evidence of

⁴¹ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 96–7 (Scene 36). The four *ꜥbwt* offered here may represent the four bricks of birth. I hope to examine the role of these bricks in funerary rites in a subsequent article.

⁴² Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 19.

⁴³ W. K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Qar and Idu* (Boston, 1976), 6–7 and fig. 25, captioned *wrh*, 'anointing'. G. Lapp, *Die Opferformel des Alten Reiches* (Mainz, 1986), 170, notes the apparent lack of parallel scenes in the Old Kingdom. I have also failed to find further clear examples, although the figure accompanying the caption *wrh* in a Sixth Dynasty offering list (following the presentation of the seven sacred oils) might also be making this gesture; as his lower arms are damaged, this is uncertain (Jéquier, *Tombeaux de particuliers*, fig. 127 on p. 112). More likely, however, the figure follows a closer parallel, where the hands are extended slightly, palms down, at hip level (Jéquier, *Pepi II*, II, 86). Perhaps significantly, both of these offering lists also contain the offerings that accompany the *ps̄-kf* sequence.

⁴⁴ The figure is taken from the temple of Seti I at Abydos: R. David, *A Guide to Religious Ritual at Abydos* (Warminster, 1981), 66, no. 14. This example is anomalous, in that the caption indicates that the king is wiping off the *md*-ointment; in other less well-preserved scenes, however, the same gesture is used for its application.



FIG. 6. Gesture used for anointing in the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Qar.

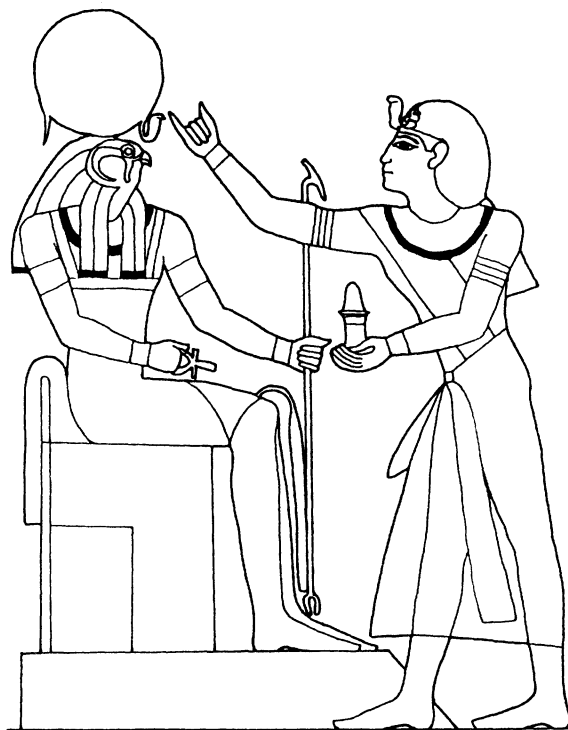


FIG. 7. Seti I anointing the uraeus of Re-Harakhti, from his cenotaph temple at Abydos.

complementary ritual platters for the two rites further demonstrates that the oil ceremony was performed along with the ‘opening of the mouth’ and was not replaced by it. The parallel relationship of the two rituals can also be seen in the Pyramid Texts and type A/B offering lists, where the anointing ritual directly follows the offerings made with the *ps̄-kf* set (list type B). In the pyramid of Unas, the second register of the offering ritual begins at this point, graphically emphasizing the parallel nature of the two rituals as well as the break between them.

The New Kingdom ritual of the ‘opening of the mouth’ excludes oils entirely, except in a single scene, Otto’s Scene 55.⁴⁵ The accompanying text normally includes only two sacred oils, *mdt* and *bꜣs*, neither of which is among the seven oils of the Old Kingdom rite; two texts, however, 6 and 7 in Otto’s enumeration, give a list of ten oils, including the seven sacred oils. A presentation of green and black eyepaint (Scene 56) follows the presentation of the oils just as it does in the Old Kingdom sequence. The accompanying texts make no reference to the opening of the mouth,⁴⁶ and Scene 55 normally occurs some distance from the *ntrwꜣj* (Scene 26) and the scenes involving other mouth-opening tools: the little fingers (Scenes 14 and 33), the gold finger (Scene 32), the *ps̄-kf* (Scene 37), and the ostrich feather (Scene 39).⁴⁷ Thus, the oils are again part of a sequence that

⁴⁵ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 120–6.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 120–4. The text that follows the offering of the oils and eyepaint in three editions of the New Kingdom ritual makes frequent references to the deceased having been born on this day, however, including an echo of the sequence involving the *kꜣ* as a placenta in the womb: ‘your *kꜣ* is before you, your *kꜣ* is behind you’ (ibid. 124–6, especially n. 7 to the translation).

⁴⁷ Ibid. 126–7.

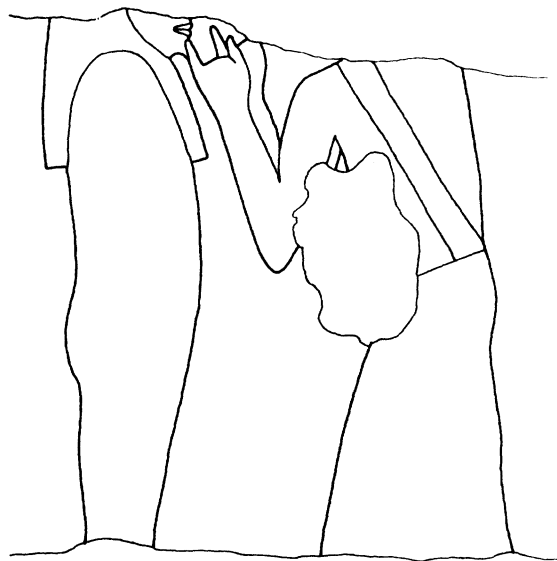


FIG. 8. The presentation of the two little fingers in the 'opening of the mouth' ritual from the tomb of Amenemhat (TT 53).

follows, and is clearly distinct from, the part of the ritual specifically dedicated to opening the mouth.

The gesture of offering either a single little finger or both is shown in some of the New Kingdom mouth-opening scenes (fig. 8).⁴⁸ It is clearly related to the gesture shown in New Kingdom anointing scenes, and almost identical to their Old Kingdom counterpart. Just as the same gesture was used in both spheres in the New Kingdom, so it seems likely that it was used in the parallel rituals in the Old Kingdom, possibly to stress their complementary roles and to lend unity to the actions of the priest through repetition.⁴⁹ When the human little finger in the mouth-opening ritual was replaced by the *ntrwj*-blades, and they in turn were replaced by the adze, the gesture remained the principal one in use in the anointing ritual. It was thus primarily associated with anointing in later periods, while in 'opening of the mouth' rituals it played a secondary and historical role, and was depicted only in the fullest versions.

ntrwj-blades and fingers of *bj*

A significant peculiarity of the *ntrwj* is their composition. They are said in all the textual sources to be of *bj*, which was clearly a material thought to be meteoritic.⁵⁰ Meteoritic iron has been found in Egypt in burials as early as the Predynastic period.⁵¹ It was

⁴⁸ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, fig. 2a (lower left of photograph). Although this scene is uncaptioned, its position adjacent to the presentation of the *ps-kf* (Scene 37) makes it almost certain that it is Scene 33 rather than Scene 55, which always occurs considerably later.

⁴⁹ There were also practical advantages. The little finger's softness and sensitivity suited it to delicate jobs, and its smaller diameter allowed the mouth of an oil jar to be correspondingly small, helping to protect valuable perfumes and oil from evaporation and spoilage.

⁵⁰ J. R. Harris, *Lexicographical Studies in Ancient Egyptian Minerals* (Berlin, 1961), 166-8; G. A. Wainwright, *JEA* 18 (1932), 3-15.

⁵¹ E.g. W. M. F. Petrie, G. A. Wainwright, and E. Mackay, *The Labyrinth, Gerza and Mazghuneh* (London, 1912), 15-19.

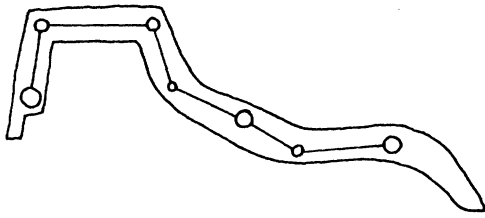


FIG. 9. The constellation *Ursus Major* interpreted as an adze.

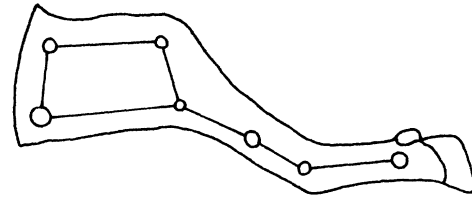


FIG. 10. The constellation *Ursus Major* interpreted as a foreleg.

thought to have magical significance, since the same word is used for 'marvel, miracle'.⁵² That this material came from 'falling stars' was apparently well understood by the Egyptians, as evidenced by the frequent use of a star determinative with the word *bj*, and by the fact that the *ntrw**j*-blades made of this substance are sometimes called *sbw**j*, 'stars'. The context in which this name was used, in inventory documents rather than religious inscriptions, suggests that it was the vernacular name of the implements and that the mouth-opening implements were thus popularly thought of as fallen stars.

Except for the initial human little fingers, all the tools used in the 'opening of the mouth' ritual are associated with iron, meteoritic material or stars. Iron-bladed chisels found in the tomb of Tutankhamun resemble closely chisels shown in representations of 'opening of the mouth' tools.⁵³ The adze itself theoretically had a blade of meteoritic iron and was originally and most frequently called the *dw**s*-*wr*,⁵⁴ a name that is written with a star and is clearly related to the *dw**s**t*, the place where stars are. The constellation we see as a 'Great Bear' or a 'Big Dipper' was called *mshtjw* by the Egyptians, and was compared to both the adze (fig. 9) and the *hps*, the foreleg of an ox (fig. 10).⁵⁵ Both the foreleg and the adze were added to the offering ritual at the same time, in the Pyramid Texts of Mernere, and their association there was probably due to their common association with this constellation. This stellar element was presumably connected principally to the realm of the dead, which in some conceptions of the afterlife was clearly located in the region of the circumpolar stars.⁵⁶ The orientation of the stellar adze/foreleg towards the circumpolar stars is similar to the orientation of the mouth-opening implements towards the mummy/statue in depictions of the ritual.⁵⁷ Even before the adze and foreleg were introduced into the offering ritual of the Pyramid Texts, its text was placed on the north wall

⁵² *Wb.* I, 439, 14-441, 12.

⁵³ Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun*, 194.

⁵⁴ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 5 and 18.

⁵⁵ Wainwright, *JEA* 18, 11 and 163. The figures are my own imposition of these objects on the present constellation. Egyptian 'zodiacs' of the New Kingdom show the Big Dipper as the head and body of a bull, although the name is often determined with a foreleg, as it is from the early Middle Kingdom (O. Neugebauer and R. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts*, I (Providence, 1960), 1-29, and III (Providence, 1969), 183.) The adze is clearly associated with the constellation by its name, which is attested as a constellation in Pyr. 458 in the pyramid of Unas ('the *mshtjw* of the unwearying stars').

⁵⁶ J. P. Allen, 'The Cosmology of the Pyramid Texts', in *Religion and Philosophy in Ancient Egypt*, ed. W. K. Simpson (New Haven, 1989), 1-10.

⁵⁷ An interesting contrast in the orientation of the *hps* under differing circumstances has been pointed out by H. G. Fischer, *The Orientation of Hieroglyphs. Part 1: Reversals* (New York, 1977), 119-27. When it is viewed as an offering, the cut thigh is seen as the front part, but when it is viewed as an emblem of royal strength, as in the title *nb hps*, the destructive hoof is generally foremost. That this orientation is most consistent in the offering mode may reflect the relationship between the constellation and the circumpolar stars.

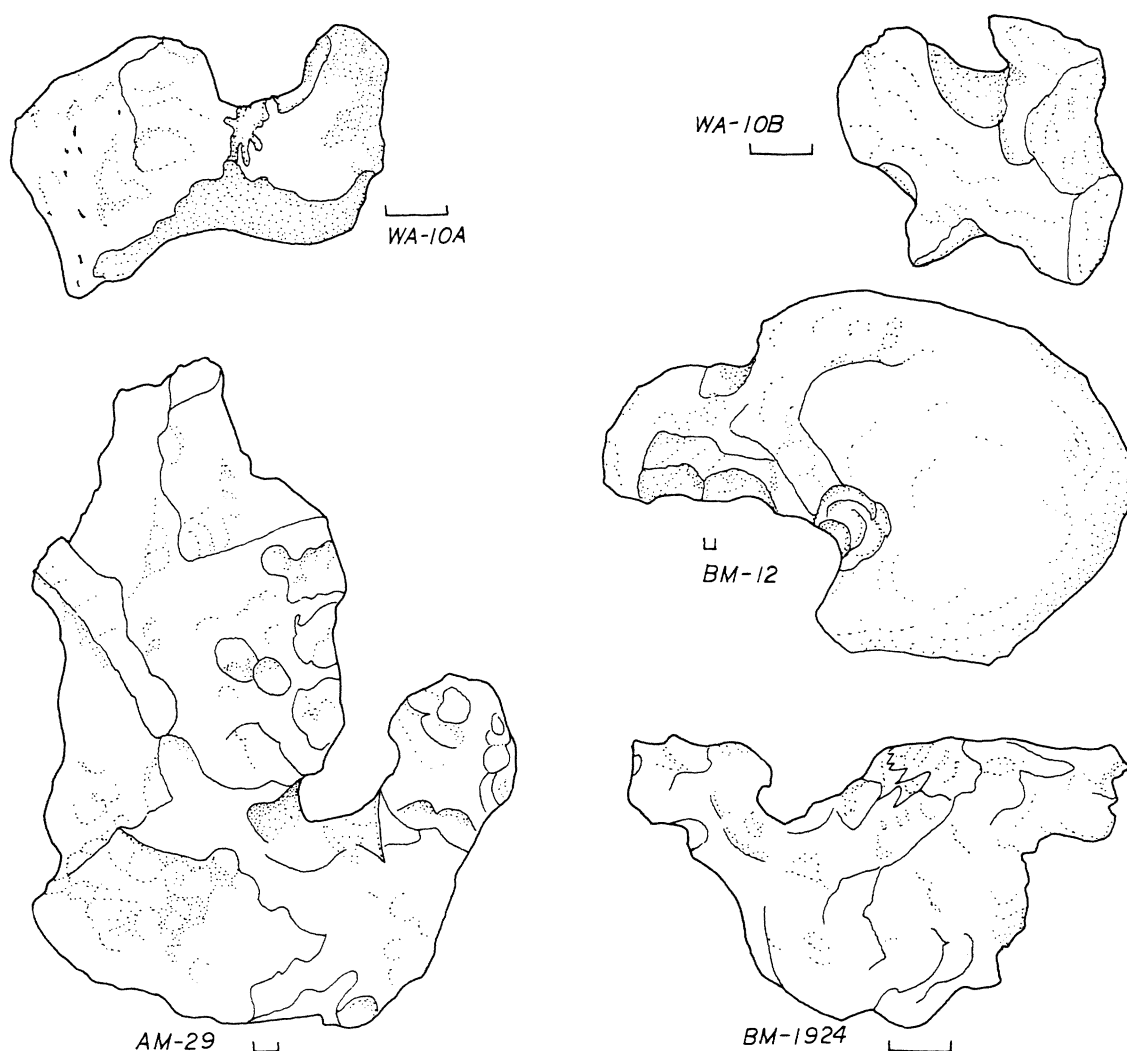


FIG. 11. Examples of meteorites with hand-like forms. The scale marking represents 1 cm.

of the burial chamber of Unas, hinting at the same relationship with the northern circumpolar stars.⁵⁸

The substitution of meteoritic metal for fingers may have resulted from the odd shapes of some meteorite fragments. The Egyptians collected and treasured stones of odd shapes⁵⁹ and iron meteorites especially have a tendency to break into irregular shapes (fig. 11).⁶⁰ The connection with the spectacular appearance of falling stars would enhance the importance of any anthropomorphic fragments, which would have seemed to be 'hands from heaven' indeed. Meteoritic material may have been comparatively common

⁵⁸ The significance of this location was pointed out to me by Maarten J. Raven.

⁵⁹ B. J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization* (London, 1989), 73, fig. 24.9, shows 'natural flint nodules in suggestive shapes', found with other votive objects.

⁶⁰ H. H. Nininger, *Meteorites: A Photographic Study of Surface Features. Part 1. Shapes* (Tempe, Arizona, 1977), 10 (WA-10A, WA-10B), 24 (AM-29), and 82 (BM-12, BM-1924) are drawn from the published photograph as fig. 11.

in ancient Egypt. Farouk el-Baz has suggested that a 4-kilometre-wide crater south-west of Dakhla Oasis is meteoritic in origin.⁶¹ Such a crater, among the largest known, would yield thousands of kilograms of meteoritic iron, including many irregular fragments.⁶²

But the *ntrwj*-blades need not always have been composed of meteoritic material; they may also have been made of material merely supposed to be meteoritic by the Egyptians. G. A. Wainwright argued that the word *bj* seems to have been applied to numerous apparently extra-terrestrial phenomena that were in fact terrestrial,⁶³ such as fossils and blackened hippopotamus bones, as well as to material that resembled actual meteorites in colour or weight, such as hematite or even red quartzite. His interpretation has largely been followed by J. R. Harris in his work on Egyptian minerals.⁶⁴

Among these various materials, Wainwright stressed the supposed meteoritic origins of a conical fossil, up to 15 cm long, of the shellfish *Nerinea requieniana* which is found in great profusion around Letopolis, but nowhere else in Egypt.⁶⁵ A similar fossil, *Lithodomus*, is common in the region around Akhmim, and Wainwright identified these fossil shells as the conical elements that make up the emblem of Min, which was important at both sites. The connection of Letopolis with *bj* and the 'opening of the mouth' ritual is reinforced by several circumstances: the high priest at Letopolis was called *wn-r*, 'the opener of the mouth';⁶⁶ the standard of the Letopolite nome is the foreleg of a bull, which is used in the ritual and is associated with the mouth-opening adze through the constellation *mshtjw*; and Letopolis was the original home of the four sons of Horus, who open the mouth of their grandfather Osiris in Pyr. 1983. There is further support for Wainwright's arguments in a narrow triangular determinative \equiv used in the word *bj*. It occurs, for example, in an offering list as a determinative for a *hnt*-cup said to be made of *bj*,⁶⁷ suggesting that this was thought to be a natural form of the material, since the shape of the sign does not resemble the *hnt*-cup.

⁶¹ *Science* 213 (1981), 439-40. The crater is just to the north-east of the Gilf Kebir. I am grateful to Prof. el-Baz for directing me to his article.

⁶² E. Anders, personal communication.

⁶³ *JEA* 18, 3-15.

⁶⁴ *Lexicographical Studies*, 166-8.

⁶⁵ Wainwright, *JEA* 18, 172.

⁶⁶ The three Old Kingdom examples are *Urk.* 1, 6, 17-7, 1 (=K. R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien* (Berlin, 1849-56), II, pls. 3-4); H. Junker, *Giza*, II (Leipzig, 1934), 189; and Cairo CG 176. The translation of this title as 'opener of the mouth' has been disputed by Otto, *ZÄS* 81 (1956), 115, and by P. Kaplony, *MIO* 11 (1966), 137-63. Otto argued that the title was connected with cloth, on the basis of the thread determinative of the New Kingdom examples, while Kaplony dismissed this determinative as a meaningless analogy with the word *wnhw*, proposing an alternative interpretation based on the rare verb *wnrw*, which occurs with a walking-legs determinative in Spell 820 of the Coffin Texts (CT VII 19m ff.). It describes the action of the Letopolite divinity, Khenty-irty, which Kaplony translates 'sich eilends aufmachen', relating it to *wnj*, 'hurry', and arguing that the passage refers to Khenty-irty's search for his sight. In support, he identifies a causative of the same verb in an Old Kingdom text in the tomb of Sabni at Aswan: 'I sent X with two dependents of my endowment *m swnrw* [+a seated man] bearing incense'. Neither of these passages is unambiguous, however, and there is no reason to take the walking-legs determinative more seriously than the thread. Moreover, in the same spell, Khenty-irty claims the title *wn-r* in both Upper and Lower Egypt. The duality of the office and these geographical associations suggest a connection with the *ntrwj*-blades, and support a suggestion that the title is related to the 'opening of the mouth' ritual. The confusion of the later texts (and the need for Spell 820 as a punning explanation of an inexplicable title) is probably due to the disappearance of the *ntrwj*-blades and their Letopolite associations at the end of the Old Kingdom. It may also be significant that the earliest known holder of this title was the Fourth Dynasty official Metjen, whose tomb also contains the first reference to *wpt-r* as a funerary ritual (Lepsius, *Denkmäler*, II, pls. 4-5).

⁶⁷ Hassan, *Giza*, VI/2, pl. 133, no. 138.

If the fossil shells were believed to be meteorites, their narrow shape and resemblance to fingers seem likely to have inspired their use in performing the 'opening of the mouth' ritual. This hypothesis would also explain the consistent association of the blades with Upper and Lower Egypt. While this association might have simply been the effect of their duality, the natron of Upper and Lower Egypt offered in surrounding spells is said to derive specifically from el-Kab and the Wadi Natrun, and the *ntrwj*-blades might have had similarly specific origins: the fossil beds of Akhmim in the south and Letopolis in the north.

Although the *ntrwj*-blades share the general shape and the right- and left-handed symmetry of human fingers, they differ from hieroglyphic representations of fingers, which are consistently bent at the tip (𓂏). No representations of the *ntrwj*-blades as models or determinatives show this bent shape, even when the shape of the *psš-ḳf* is rendered carefully.⁶⁸ Unless the little finger was thought to be different in shape from the index finger used as the hieroglyphic sign (and the determinatives accompanying the term 'little finger' would not support this assumption), the explanation for this difference must lie in the intervening objects, such as conical fossils and other materials, that modified the finger-like characteristics of the *ntrwj*.

The shape adopted in the models and the determinatives used in the Abu Sir papyri would preserve enough characteristics of fingers to make them recognizable (half-rounded tips and mirror-image shapes), while also making reference to the unnatural straightness of the heavenly fingers that rendered the rite effective. The varied determinatives shown in offering lists (fig. 4) support this theory more directly. The offering list of an anonymous tomb owner⁶⁹ shows a man carrying two rectangular objects that seem to be about 15 cm long. This would accord well with the length of the fossils described by Wainwright (and make the divine fingers somewhat more than twice the length of a human little finger). Most interesting is the list of *Sbkj*,⁷⁰ where the determinative is a cone resembling the fossil. The variety of shapes of the determinatives in other offering lists and Pyramid Texts probably reflects the various 'meteoritic' objects that were used in the actual rite: truly meteoritic material, conical shells, and rounded pieces of hematite.

When did the transition from little fingers to finger-like blades take place? A survey of the material found in Predynastic tombs reveals no convincing meteoritic blades or fossil shells.⁷¹ In the valley temple of Menkaure, however, a collection of objects from a *psš-ḳf* set was discovered under an overturned bronze tray.⁷² In addition to the model vessels and a polished flint *psš-ḳf* bearing the name of Khufu, traces of corroded metal were collected. They were found upon analysis to be iron but to contain no nickel,⁷³ which is invariably a component of iron meteorites. Since the Egyptians included many non-meteoritic materials under the designation *bj*, it is possible that these traces of iron were the remains of *ntrwj*-blades made of some iron-bearing terrestrial material thought by the

⁶⁸ I am grateful to R. van Walsem for raising the problem of this discrepancy.

⁶⁹ Hassan, *Giza*, vi/2, pl. 131, example no. 139; originally published in Jéquier, *Tombeaux de particuliers*, 112.

⁷⁰ Hassan, *Giza*, iv/2, pl. 131, example no. 138.

⁷¹ Most shells in Predynastic tombs are either modified to be worn as jewelry or they are *Spatha rubens*, which seem to have been used as receptacles for ground malachite eye-paint. See R. Mond and O. H. Myers, *Cemeteries of Armant*, 1 (London, 1937), p. 190.

⁷² G. A. Reisner, *Mycerinus: The Temples of the Third Pyramid at Giza* (Cambridge, Mass., 1931), 233.

⁷³ D. Dunham and W. J. Young, *JEA* 28 (1942), 57-8.

Egyptians to be meteoritic. Although the *ntrwj*-blades may thus have predated their first occurrence in texts and models, the lack of recesses for the blades in several private *psš-kf* sets suggests that fingers continued to be used sporadically, possibly because of differential styles of mummification. While it seems likely that the blades were adopted in tandem with improvements in mummification techniques, however, their existence cannot be shown with certainty before the late Fifth Dynasty.

The statue ritual

The origin of the act of opening the mouth in a birth ritual that has been argued here does not preclude the use of the same or a similar ritual for statues. The caption *mst wpt-r m hwt-nbw*, ‘fashioning and splitting open the mouth in the mansion of gold’, occurs as part of a jubilee ritual in the Fifth Dynasty, but the earliest occurrence is probably a text from the valley temple of Snefru at Dahshur,⁷⁴ although both infinitives are restored ([*mst wpt-r*] *zp 4 m hwt-nbw*) on the basis of the phrases *hwt-nbw* and *zp 4*, ‘four times’. This second phrase also occurs in a text relating to the ‘opening of the mouth’ in the contemporary private tomb of Metjen.⁷⁵ The scenes here clearly depict the mortuary ritual, however, since the rite was performed by a *wṯ*, ‘embalmer’, in conjunction with the action *sḫ*, ‘causing to become an effective spirit’. The two references⁷⁶ to the ‘opening of the mouth’ in Metjen’s tomb buttress the restoration of *wpt-r* in the Snefru valley temple text from the same period. An earlier instance has been proposed by E. Brovarski, who interprets two signs on a label of Aha as the phrase *wpt-r*, but his reading is questionable.⁷⁷

In statue rites, the infinitive phrase *wpt-r*, ‘splitting open the mouth’, occurs parallel to and following the verb *mst*, which is normally translated ‘fashioning’ but literally means ‘giving birth’. The verb for giving birth, like the activity it describes, clearly predated the fashioning of statues. Since the first half of the phrase is borrowed from the realm of human birth, it should not be surprising that the second half was borrowed from the same realm. In the clearest account we have of a birth, in P. Westcar, the newborn children are described as if they were cult statues,⁷⁸ possibly because of their divine origin and future kingship, but probably also reflecting a similarity in the way new cult statues and babies were treated. In other contexts, children and their *ks* are described as being of clay, like some early cult figures,⁷⁹ and formed by Khnum on his potter’s wheel, a material and process that reinforce the same link.

⁷⁴ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 3, and references cited therein.

⁷⁵ Lepsius, *Denkmäler* II, pl. 5.

⁷⁶ Ibid. pls. 4–5.

⁷⁷ *Serapis* 4 (1977–8), 1–2. The group has generally been read *Tṣ-stj*, ‘Nubia’, and applied to the bound captive below them. This captive clearly cannot be ‘the ideogram for *twṯ*’, as Brovarski suggests, since the adjacent anthropomorphic *serekh* of Aha is aiming a mace at its head. The placement of *wpt(t)-r* before the verb *ms* rather than after it would also be unparalleled. Probably only the *ms*-sign is attached to the jackal, since *ms* frequently occurs alone with a deity’s emblem on labels of this period (see W. M. F. Petrie, *Royal Tombs*, I (London, 1900), pl. xiv; idem, *Royal Tombs*, II (London, 1901), pls. x and xi), as well as on the earlier entries of the Palermo Stone. The Palermo Stone begins to augment *mst* with *wpt-r* only sometime during the first three reigns of the Fourth Dynasty.

⁷⁸ P. Westcar 9, 10–11; 9, 18–19; 9, 25–6. In these passages, the first three kings of the Fifth Dynasty, newly born, are described as having limbs of gold and headcloths of real lapis lazuli.

⁷⁹ Among the earliest such objects may be the female figurines of fired clay with birds’ heads from the Nagada I and II periods. For an example, see R. Fazzini et al., *Ancient Egyptian Art in the Brooklyn Museum* (New York, 1989), cat. no. 1. Later figures and votive objects were made of clay or faience, a similarly malleable material. For examples, see Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, 73 and 93.

Like a newborn child (or a newly reborn dead person), a cult statue must have been thought to pass through various developmental stages before it could function fully and partake of the food presented to it. Unfortunately, scenes of statues and the rites associated with them in the Old Kingdom never include the 'opening of the mouth' ritual,⁸⁰ and the textual sources give no indication of the implement used to perform it. If, like the verb *ms*, the rite was borrowed from the realm of human birth, it might be expected that at some early period the ritual tool was also the little fingers. On the other hand, the differences between the two types of 'birth' may have been marked from the very beginning of the ritual by the use of an analogous implement. Just as the hands of the midwife released the newborn child from the matrix of its mother before performing the 'opening of the mouth', so the adze released the newly fashioned statue from the matrix of surrounding wood. Hence the adze was an appropriate tool to be used in the corresponding ritual.

The use of birth rituals in the consecration of a cult statue and in rites ensuring the rebirth of a dead person were separate phenomena, however, despite the fact that both must have been performed before statues of dead people. Unlike its mortuary analogue, the rite of 'opening of the mouth' of a statue, like the 'fashioning' that preceded it, was performed only once, to infuse it with the identity of the divinity or person. M. Eaton-Krauss suggests that the statue ritual took place at the workshop, since incense was routinely offered during transport and would not have been effective had not the mouth been previously opened.⁸¹ Her assumption that the 'opening of the mouth' ritual was related to the imbuing of the statue with the identity of the deity or person it represented would accord well with the theory that it mimicked a ritual marking the establishment of a newborn child's independent identity and existence.

By contrast, the funerary rite ensuring the rebirth of the dead occurred repeatedly, probably daily. It must have been performed in front of the dead body originally and, after interment, before a niche like those found at Tarkhan with two slots through which the body was magically made accessible.⁸² In later periods the rite was performed before a funerary statue after the body had been interred. From the damage the implements sustained, according to the equipment inventories in the Abu Sir archives, they were clearly in regular use.⁸³ The use of rituals derived from the same birth metaphor both in the statue workshops and in mortuary rites performed before statues doubtless hastened the association of the two rituals. The simultaneous initial occurrences in the early Fourth Dynasty of the phrase *wpt-r* in both statue and funerary contexts with the identical

⁸⁰ The two 'opening of the mouth' scenes in the tomb of Metjen (Lepsius, *Denkmäler* II, pls. 4-5) show a man beating his chest. In later parallels, this action is normally captioned *sh*, a description that also occurs in the accompanying caption here, so it presumably represents this part of the ritual. The context here is in any case the funerary ritual rather than the statue ritual.

⁸¹ *The Representations of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old Kingdom* (Wiesbaden, 1984), 75-6.

⁸² W. M. F. Petrie, *Tarkhan*, II (London, 1914), pls. xii-iv. These eye holes were vertical slits, like those of many later *serdabs*. One might even speculate that they were not originally intended for the two eyes of the deceased, but for the two *ntrwj*-blades; the later use of eyes of Horus in this position would then have been a reinterpretation. If the slots were regarded as eye-holes from the beginning, however, there may be a connection between the slots and the god Khenty-irty, whose name (*Hntj-jrty*) means 'who is in front of the two eyes'. The priestly title connected with this deity is *wn-r*, 'the opener of the mouth' (see above, p. 72).

⁸³ See n. 6. Only a single adze sign is preserved in the entire archive, used phonetically. The fact that the adze is not mentioned in these inventories supports Eaton-Krauss's contention that the statue rite took place in the workshop.

adjunct *ꜥp* 4 suggests that this association had begun long before the incorporation of the adze into the mortuary ritual in the early Sixth Dynasty. That the two different origins of the unified ritual continued to be recognized even after that adoption, however, is suggested by the switching of the crucial implements in the two parts of the New Kingdom rite, as discussed above.

One indication of this distinction is the use of the verb *wꜥ*, 'split open', in the earliest records of the statue ritual. The use of the gentler verb *wꜛn*, 'open', is limited to the Third Dynasty title of the priest of Khenty-irty at Letopolis,⁸⁴ one of the acts of Horus in Pyr. 13, and the 'opening of the mouth' ritual in Chapter 23 of the Book of the Dead. The use of a less violent verb may reflect the fact that the 'opening of the mouth' ritual recorded in the Book of the Dead is performed only on a mummy (although *wꜥ* is used later in the chapter). The word *wꜥ* is consistently employed in the Old Kingdom for statue rituals and in most of the Pyramid Texts, but the occasional use of *wꜛn*, especially in a spell dealing with Horus' act for Osiris, suggests that this was the verb originally used in the birth ritual and in funerary ceremonies.

Like a baby's mouth, the mouth of an untreated corpse could be opened physically, but as early as the Fourth Dynasty, attempts were made to give the features of the deceased a statue-like permanence and rigidity by padding them and moulding the details in resin-soaked linen. In the later Old Kingdom, the skull and sometimes the entire body were often covered and modelled in plaster for the same purpose.⁸⁵ In effect, these efforts transformed the body of the deceased into a cult statue. The mouths of such mummies, like those of statues, could only have been opened magically, and the growing similarity of mummies to cult statues, as well as the use of statues in mortuary cults, was probably responsible for the adoption of the implement used in opening the mouths of statues into the mortuary edition of the same ritual.

Although we have no information about the adze used in statue rituals, the stellar aspects of the 'opening of the mouth' ritual may have been limited to its mortuary applications. It was, after all, the dead who were reborn among the stars, while statues and children were born to take part in terrestrial society. Although the adze itself has a stellar connection through its association with the constellation *mshꜥꜥw*, this may have been secondary.⁸⁶ The adze with the meteoritic iron blade is probably a combination of an ordinary sculptor's adze with the *nꜥꜣwꜥj*-blades substituted for its cutting blade. This type of duplicate symbolism, fusing different elements that have similar effects, is extremely common in Egyptian rituals, as is illustrated by the disparate elements included in the New Kingdom 'opening of the mouth' sequence itself. If the adze included the *nꜥꜣwꜥj*-blades, it becomes clear both why the blades are never themselves depicted in the New Kingdom friezes of ritual implements, and why one of the adzes used in the New Kingdom is called the *nꜥꜣwꜥj*. In some cases, both blades may have been attached to the handle of the adze;⁸⁷ in other cases, two adzes were used at once.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ *Urk.* I, 6, 17-7, 1.

⁸⁵ S. D'Auria, 'Mummification in Ancient Egypt', in D'Auria et al., *Mummies and Magic*, 14.

⁸⁶ See above, p. 70. The adze is not used as a determinative of the constellation *mshꜥꜥw* until the late Old Kingdom. The foreleg is difficult to reconcile with either the statue ritual or the birth ritual.

⁸⁷ The blade of the adze shown in use in the tomb of Tutankhamun appears to have a dividing line down its centre (see fig. 1).

⁸⁸ Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 17.

The Old Kingdom 'opening of the mouth' ceremony for statues, like that for the dead, probably originally derived from a ritual of birth. When the bodies of the dead began to resemble cult statues, the version of the rite used for statues was integrated into the mortuary realm and ultimately overshadowed the more human elements of the birth ritual, just as the adze of the statue ritual incorporated and obscured the presence of the *ntrwꜥj*-blades. The occurrence of little fingers in Scene 14 of the New Kingdom 'opening of the mouth', amidst sculptors and painters in the most statue-centred part of the sequence, suggests the possibility that the mortuary rite had a reciprocal influence on the statue ritual at the same time.

Mesopotamian connections

It has long been recognized that the Egyptian 'opening of the mouth' ritual has a parallel in early Mesopotamian civilization.⁸⁹ Just as in Egypt, a special ritual to open the mouth (*pit pi*) was performed on statues and other cult objects before they could take part in a cult. A. D. Kilmer has suggested that the Mesopotamian statue ritual was derived from customs surrounding childbirth,⁹⁰ just as the Egyptian ritual was according to the interpretation proposed here. The mouth-cleansing procedure which, Kilmer suggests, mimics the clearing out of the mucus from a child's mouth at birth, is reminiscent of the function suggested for the little fingers that are ritually supplanted by the rounded blades in the Egyptian 'opening of the mouth' ritual.

Further parallels with the Egyptian statue ritual can be seen in I. J. Winter's account of the Mesopotamian ritual.⁹¹ A special verb meaning 'to give birth' is used for the creation of the statue, rather than the verb 'to make'. An 'opening of the mouth' took place before the statue was transported to the temple, which caused the spirit of the deity to 'enter the form', and allowed it to benefit from incense and offerings. After the installation of the statue, a slightly different form of mouth-opening, the *mis pi*, 'washing of the mouth', was performed. The 'opening of the mouth' was apparently repeated on occasion.

Beyond the birth-related elements in their statue rituals, Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultural views and practices surrounding birth itself seem to have some shared characteristics, notably the formation of the child and the placenta of clay, and the use of special bricks.⁹² H. Frankfort even likened the emblem of the Mesopotamian goddess of birth, Ninghursag, to the emblem found on the head of the Egyptian goddess of birth, Meskhenet.⁹³ The use of the 'opening of the mouth' in the statue rituals of these two cultures may thus be part of a larger complex of shared metaphors.

⁸⁹ A. M. Blackman, *JEA* 10 (1924), 47–59.

⁹⁰ In 'Mesopotamian Creation Myths', a UCLA Extension lecture delivered on 12 July 1986, Prof. Kilmer suggested that 'statues, after being formed, were thought of as being "born"; like newborns, their mouths were washed out (*mis pi*) and they were laid in special bowered cribs'. I am very grateful to her for pointing out this parallel, for allowing me to quote from her unpublished manuscript, and for several helpful discussions on this subject. The same interpretation of the Mesopotamian statue ritual was apparently reached independently by P. Boden, in unpublished work cited by I. J. Winter, in *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (1992), 22.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* 21–4. Winter's article gives references to recent work on the Mesopotamian ritual.

⁹² This has been pointed out by A. D. Kilmer, Appendix C, in G. Azarpay, *JNES* 46 (1987), 213.

⁹³ *JNES* 3 (1944), 198–200, equating both these emblems with the bovine uterus. I have argued (*JEA* 78, 144–6) that Meskhenet's emblem is a stylized *psš-ḫf* knife, used to cut the umbilical cord. Ninghursag's emblem is probably not a knife, although a knife is sometimes represented beside it; perhaps it was the umbilical cord itself, with a shape related to that of the Egyptian emblem.

The earliest references to the opening of the mouths of statues in Mesopotamia occur only in the Ur III period (c. 2050 BC),⁹⁴ but since that period is characterized by revivals of earlier Sumerian traditions, it may be far older, dating back into the early Sumerian period, when there were links of some sort with the Egyptian Nagada II culture. The metaphor of childbirth in the Egyptian mortuary ritual cannot have begun later than the Nagada II period, when the *psš-*kf** knife is most often placed in front of the deceased, rather than behind the head with the other knives.⁹⁵ The fetal posture of human remains in burials of even earlier periods can also be related to birth. The birth metaphor is not associated with statues in Egypt until the First Dynasty, however, and the opening of the mouth is not attested until the Fourth Dynasty.

The use of rituals of 'opening of the mouth' to infuse life into an inanimate object in both cultures is already striking. That both these rituals take place in the context of metaphorical re-enactments of customs associated with birth suggests a borrowing from one culture to the other. Although the evidence is clearly inadequate to decide the question, the great age of this metaphor in the Egyptian record suggests that it is at least possible that in this case the Egyptians influenced their eastern neighbours rather than the reverse; if so, it would be characteristic that the first area where they excelled was in the sophistication of their religious and mortuary beliefs.

Conclusion

In the ritual of 'opening of the mouth', the *ntrwj* were used in a metaphorical re-enactment of the midwife's clearing of a newborn child's mouth with her little fingers. The duality and curved edges of the *ntrwj*-blades are reflections of these fingers. The connection of the blades with the world of the dead is represented by their exotic material, thought to have come from the stars, and the perceived characteristic shape of this material influenced the shapes of the model fingers so that they differed from the normal hieroglyphic form. Despite their inappropriateness to the later statue ritual, disembodied fingers are regularly represented among the implements prepared for the New Kingdom 'opening of the mouth' ceremony, helping to explain the omission of the *ntrwj*-blades from such collections and suggesting that the historical connections of the rite with childbirth continued to be understood long after the adoption of the adze from the statue ritual as the principal tool in the mortuary rite. An investigation of the statue ritual itself demonstrates that the ritual's association with statues was also secondary, borrowed from a metaphorical birth sequence that was also used to describe the carving of the statue (*mst*, 'fashioning', literally 'giving birth') from a very early period.

Perhaps the most interesting consequence of this new understanding of these rituals, however, is the light which their evolution sheds on the mechanics of change in Egyptian religious beliefs and ceremonies. When Egyptian rituals or ritual texts make no sense to modern scholars, it is dangerously easy to conclude that they are corrupt versions of lost older forms, and that their original clarity and simplicity were garbled by confused priests who were ignorant of their true meaning. Corruption and misunderstandings did occur, of course, but much of the confusion probably stems from the incomplete cultural knowledge of modern scholarship. As both the 'opening of the mouth' and the larger

⁹⁴ Winter, *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6, 22.

⁹⁵ Roth, *JEA* 78, 130-3.

ritual that contained it illustrate, the Egyptians' reinterpretation of older rituals could be both subtle and historically conscious. Supplementary metaphors, either borrowed from related rituals or invented afresh, infused new meaning into older forms, forms that were themselves the result of an endless sequence of such infusions and reinterpretations. Old metaphors were rarely discarded; instead, they were embedded in successive new versions, intensifying the ritual's effectiveness, deepening and enriching its meaning, and preserving the authority conferred by its age.

Egyptian theologians were clearly conscious of these historical changes and the supplanting of one metaphor by another. They incorporated this history into the rituals themselves by arranging the successive versions in chronological or reversed chronological order, or by associating them with consecutive generations of divinities. The context in which these metaphors occur, both historically and in the historical record implied by such sequences, can suggest the constellations of meanings that attached to the ritual in various periods, as well as the general directions of its evolution. Only by an analysis of the history of its evolution can the 'real' meaning of a ritual sentence, gesture, or implement be approached. And only by crediting ancient theologians with an understanding of their own religious traditions and metaphors can we begin to appreciate the skill with which they manipulated them and the richness and resonance of the doctrines and rituals they created.