

## PEPI I: A CASE STUDY OF ROYAL RELIGIOUS DEVOTION IN THE OLD KINGDOM

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It is often understood as a truism that the Egyptians were religious. They left abundant evidence of their religious practices throughout their history, in the forms of art, literature, and monumental architecture. The amount of evidence we have for the quotidian life of the ancient Egyptian pales next to the amount of religious evidence that remains, contributing to the persistent notion that the Egyptians were obsessed with religion and death. The difficulty with the perception of ubiquitous faith, however, is that it is almost impossible to know whether the rituals were performed, the texts written, and the tombs and temples built as a result of a true belief in and devotion to the gods, or as a result of lip-service bound in the society's expectations. The level of society which left the greatest amount of evidence of their religious devotion was the royals, in particular the kings. As a result, our understanding of religious devotion is generally limited to this rarefied group. Within that particular constraint, it should be recognised that each individual king undoubtedly understood their faith and their devotional duties differently. The king under questions here, Pepi I of the Sixth Dynasty, has left quite substantially different evidence of his devotion to the deities than have other kings during the same dynasty; it cannot be said, therefore, that his religious devotion provides an overarching example of religious devotion throughout the Sixth Dynasty, and much less throughout the Old Kingdom as a whole. Thus, in examining Pepi I's reign for evidence of religious devotion, we are examining the religious devotion of one single king's reign and perhaps by extension, the ruler in that reign.

There is some question whether the Egyptians left evidence of personal piety to the deities that would manifest itself in the archaeological record. Several studies have investigated this, all of which focus primarily on Egyptian society as a whole. The three most recent have been those by John Baines, Jan Assmann, and Barry Kemp.<sup>1</sup> Both Baines and Assmann look at the mechanisms of faith within the religion. In Assmann's view, the origins of personal piety, as the human face of a 'theology of volition', date firmly to the early to mid-18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and may be hinted at in the religious literature as early as the First Intermediate Period.<sup>2</sup> They are seen as developing throughout the period from the Middle Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom.<sup>3</sup> He understands the 'theology of volition' through a textual medium, and analyses the language of the texts for terminology that is indicative of action on the part of the worshipper. Baines discusses piety with much the same thrust, although his understanding of faith includes the Old Kingdom, something concerning which he acknowledges he differs from Assmann.<sup>4</sup> He notes, in particular, that Assmann seems to understand the religion of the Old Kingdom as monolithic and unchanging in hierarchical terms.<sup>5</sup> He also includes evidence outside of purely religious texts, in the form of names, which he sees as the clearest evidence of personal piety, particularly

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<sup>1</sup> See Baines (1987) and Assmann (1989) 55-88 for studies in faith as found primarily in text, and Kemp (1995) for a study devoted to the existence of faith as examined through material remains.

<sup>2</sup> Assmann (1989) 69.

<sup>3</sup> Assmann (1989) 72-74.

<sup>4</sup> Baines (1987) 96.

<sup>5</sup> Baines (1987) 80.

in the Old Kingdom.<sup>6</sup> In viewing the concept of piety as a literary ‘call to action’, however, the question of whether it is possible to ascertain the devoutness of an individual is not taken into account.

Kemp’s study differs from those of Assmann and Baines by considering only material evidence. His examination centres on the remains from the New Kingdom, specifically from the period between Thutmose III and Ramesses III, for evidence of religious thought and feeling;<sup>7</sup> that is, he looks for a marriage of belief and practice in the religious remains from this period. He finds that, despite the numbers of temples and decorated tombs that were built during this period, signs of true belief were almost entirely missing. Earlier evidence, from the late Predynastic and the Old Kingdom, is found in the form of personal votive objects from local shrines. Here, Kemp notes that the earliest votive offerings were small and sometimes included such things as oddly shaped stones.<sup>8</sup> These humble, apparently *ad hoc* offerings to local deities gradually gave way in some areas to taxes in the form of offerings to local deified figures as well as to local deities,<sup>9</sup> and in this change, any notion of personal faith is lost.

The methods of practice, the style of the architecture, and the focus of the religious texts changed throughout Egypt’s history. It is true, as well, that the evidence for the common Egyptian is sparser than it is for the royal or noble Egyptian, and what evidence there is for the commoners is ambiguous, particularly from the Old Kingdom and earlier. Baines’ discussion of the theophoric name as the only solid evidence for faith, principally as it reflects the faith of the commoner, is a *caveat* well-taken. A point made explicit by Baines is the near-impossibility of extending the question of personal faith into the realm of the commoner, a consequence of the lack of evidence, particularly from the earlier periods.<sup>10</sup> This should be recognised as being axiomatic throughout Egyptian history, to varying degrees. While the later periods provide much greater transparency of evidence of personal faith among the non-royal or commoners,<sup>11</sup> it is nevertheless evidence that can possibly be read as being based in a banal perpetuity of action, rather than an affirmation of faith. With greater or lesser ambiguities arising in every period of Egyptian history, it would appear that evidence of faith in ancient Egypt should be examined from temporally and hierarchically specific approaches.

Religious devotion in a single ancient Egyptian individual is not a model that has hitherto been examined, with the notable exception of Akhenaten. It is pertinent that the example of Akhenaten is inconsistent with the rest of Egypt’s kings; his reign stands out as a beacon of idiosyncrasy, one which served as a warning to later rulers. The eccentricities of the Amarna period art and architecture, as well as the physical shift to Akhetaten, make the detection of ephemeral changes that much easier from an individual perspective. It is generally only with such anomalous examples that individual characteristics of worship or even personality can be studied.

The Sixth Dynasty reign of Pepi I seems an unlikely source for such an example.<sup>12</sup> There is generally much less evidence for the individual, even the royal individual, in the Old Kingdom than in later dynasties (although excavations at Saqqara and

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<sup>6</sup> Baines (1987) 95.

<sup>7</sup> Kemp (1995) 26-27.

<sup>8</sup> Kemp (1995) 45.

<sup>9</sup> Kemp (1995) 45.

<sup>10</sup> Baines (1987) 80.

<sup>11</sup> Baines (1987) 97.

<sup>12</sup> Allen (2005).

Abusir<sup>13</sup> are changing this state of affairs). An examination of Pepi I's reign, however, shows that even in such apparently arid circumstances, there is enough information to speculate on his religious devotion.

The lowest regnal date for Pepi I is 27 years, the latest 50/51 years, depending on whether the census was biennial or less regular than that.<sup>14</sup> He celebrated a *sed*-festival, which traditionally occurred on the 30<sup>th</sup> year of reign, as a festival of rejuvenation, noting in a number of inscriptions from the Wadi Maghara<sup>15</sup> in the Sinai to the Wadi Hammamat<sup>16</sup> that it was the 'first celebration of the *sed*-festival'.<sup>17</sup> During his years on the throne, Pepi I sent quarrying expeditions to Wadi Maghara for amethyst,<sup>18</sup> Wadi Hammamat for fine limestone<sup>19</sup> and to Hatnub for alabaster;<sup>20</sup> he had canals dug and monuments built to deities, and had himself portrayed as a smiter of the vile Asiatic<sup>21</sup> and worshipper of Min,<sup>22</sup> among other deities, about which more later. He had inscriptions left everywhere an expeditionary force was sent, to Palestine and Nubia, as well as the quarries.<sup>23</sup> He weathered a conspiracy of some kind – likely against his life – initiated by one of his Great Wives.<sup>24</sup> Pepi I married two non-royal women from Abydos, sisters both named Ankhnesmeryre.<sup>25</sup> It is uncertain but it appears that he married the first Ankhnesmeryre late in his reign, and the second after the first died.

Pepi I left decrees, which were in effect laws, at Koptos<sup>26</sup> and Dahshur.<sup>27</sup> The Koptite decree was for the chapel dedicated to his mother, Ipwt, and declared that the belongings of the chapel, including priests, cattle, and land, be exempt from any burden, meaning corvée or taxes. The decree at Dahshur is more precise in its wording; it exempts the inhabitants of the pyramid towns associated with the pyramids of Sneferu from corvée and taxes, from working for another pyramid town, from being taken by force to work in another pyramid town. It exempts the land being worked for another pyramid town; it exempts the products of the land from being taken by another pyramid town. It is important, here, to recognise that the Dahshur decree is to protect a funerary establishment that is over 300 years old, working for the pyramid and funerary cult of Sneferu. There was nothing for the king to gain personally by leaving stringent edicts regarding such a relatively ancient establishment, and much in terms of revenue and manpower for him, as the country, to lose. In a sense, he was taking these pyramid towns out of the economy, by isolating them from the vagaries of life that affected the rest of the country. They no longer contributed to any economic growth but their own. It may well be significant

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example the series of conferences focused on recent excavations in the Old Kingdom at Saqqara and Abusir, beginning with Bárta (2000), and continuing with Bárta (2005), as well as Bárta (2004).

<sup>14</sup> Baud (2006) 147-51.

<sup>15</sup> Gardiner (1955) 62-3 (Inscription 16).

<sup>16</sup> Spalinger (1994) 303.

<sup>17</sup> Galan (2000) 260; Spalinger (1994) 304.

<sup>18</sup> Urk. I, 91-93.

<sup>19</sup> Urk. I, 95-97.

<sup>20</sup> Urk. I, 107-8.

<sup>21</sup> Urk. I, 104-5; Redford (1986) 138.

<sup>22</sup> Petrie (1896) 4.

<sup>23</sup> Urk. I, 106-107, 108-9.

<sup>24</sup> Urk. I, ; Goedicke (1954) 88-89.

<sup>25</sup> Goedicke (1955) 180-83.

<sup>26</sup> Urk. I, 214-215; Petrie (1896) Pl. V.

<sup>27</sup> Urk. I, 209-13.

both that these towns were entirely devoted to a religious purpose, and that it was Pepi I who enabled them to continue as they had done for 300 plus years.

The monumental evidence of Pepi I's reign has largely been destroyed. All that remains are a few blocks, and evidence of offerings left in his name. Even his pyramid at South Saqqara has been very badly damaged. What does remain, however, is more incidental evidence of Pepi I's reign, including pots with his cartouche on the shoulder,<sup>28</sup> pithemorphic vessels again with his cartouche inscribed on them,<sup>29</sup> lintels of *ka*-chapels,<sup>30</sup> Pyramid Texts, rock inscriptions, etc. The find spots for this evidence range from Tell Mardikh<sup>31</sup> (ancient Ebla) in Syria to Kerma in Lower Nubia.<sup>32</sup> While much of this evidence is secular, a surprising amount of it is dedicated to one goddess in particular, Hathor, more specifically, Hathor of Dendera, and perhaps equally surprising, the only evidence of Pepi I at Dendera is a Ptolemaic inscription, naming him as one of the most important benefactors of the temple, and the throne of a limestone statue of Pepi I found among the stones of the Roman birth-house.<sup>33</sup> Evidence outside Dendera is more abundant, however, and there are numerous objects in widespread distribution – Saqqara,<sup>34</sup> Tanis,<sup>35</sup> Qena,<sup>36</sup> Thebes,<sup>37</sup> Byblos,<sup>38</sup> Kerma<sup>39</sup> – that link Pepi I's name with Hathor of Dendera, including his own set of titles. He called himself the 'son of Hathor, Mistress of Dendera and the son of Atum' in a double cartouche, the first king to do so.<sup>40</sup> This type of display in dual cartouches was frequently used by Pepi I perhaps to express his adoration of the Denderite goddess. An architrave of a *ka*-chapel at Bubastis bears an inscription with Pepi I addressing the local goddess, Bastet, with Hathor of Dendera standing behind the king.<sup>41</sup> In the debris of the Western Deffufa at Kerma, copious fragments of alabaster vessels were found with the names of kings from the Sixth and Twelfth Dynasties; of these, by far the greatest number were from Pepi I, with at least 12 instances in which Hathor of Dendera is mentioned with the name of the king.<sup>42</sup> At Byblos, the principle goddess of the city, Ba'alat Gebal, was identified by the resident Egyptians with Hathor, Lady of Byblos; the remains of the temple to Ba'alat Gebal in Byblos have left several indications that Pepi I was particularly generous to this goddess, including two pithemorphic vessels,<sup>43</sup> and two cultic offering tables.<sup>44</sup> In fact, although all the Sixth Dynasty kings left evidence of devotion to Hathor of Dendera, none equalled that of Pepi I. It is perhaps significant that the only mention of Dendera is found in Pepi I's corpus of Pyramid Texts.

The archaeological evidence seems to indicate that Pepi I was a religiously devout man, primarily dedicated to Hathor of Dendera in particular, but perhaps more

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<sup>28</sup> PM III 2,1 422-23

<sup>29</sup> Fischer (1993) 3.

<sup>30</sup> Habachi (1957) 11-32.

<sup>31</sup> Astour (1988) 546; Reade (2001) 12.

<sup>32</sup> Valbelle (1998) 3.

<sup>33</sup> For depictions of Pepi I in relief at Dendera, see Kurth (1987) 1-23.

<sup>34</sup> PM III 2,1 422-24.

<sup>35</sup> PM IV 14.

<sup>36</sup> PM V, 122

<sup>37</sup> Fischer (1968) 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> PM VII, 390-91.

<sup>39</sup> Valbelle (1998)

<sup>40</sup> Fischer (1968) 40.

<sup>41</sup> Habachi (1957) 11-32, figs. 1-13, pls 1-6; Seidlmayer (1996) 117, 125; PM IV, 29.

<sup>42</sup> Valbelle (1998) 3.

<sup>43</sup> Fischer (1993) 1-9.

<sup>44</sup> Espinel (2002) 112; Wainwright (1934) 30.

generally to Hathor in all her guises. While there is less literary evidence from the reign of Pepi I, there is one very important corpus of texts left to be examined, the Pyramid Texts.

Each corpus of the Pyramid Texts differs from the other in terms of which texts are included and the numbers of texts. Unas' corpus is the smallest. The later kings of the Sixth Dynasty have much larger corpora, but they were much more severely degraded and their sites were more disturbed. The French have been instrumental in excavating and publishing any new texts that are discovered, independent of the primary English publication of the texts translated by Faulkner.<sup>45</sup> As a result, although the 'official' number of Pyramid Texts is approximately 776, the real number is somewhat higher than that. Many of these newly discovered texts have been incorporated into the latest translations by Allen.<sup>46</sup>

In the past, it has been the practice to study the texts in one complete group, melding each king's corpus together with the others.<sup>47</sup> This has had the beneficial effect of giving an overall picture of the purpose of the texts. It also serves to indicate various themes that run through each corpus, such as the so-called 'Reed Float' texts.<sup>48</sup> This group of texts consists of imagery of ascension and movement through the sky, using reed floats as a means of crossing, and is common to every king's group. The texts are located throughout the chambers of the pyramids', but are principally found in the antechamber. Each 'reed float' text is somewhat different: some are found in almost poetic form, with repetitions of statements that change deities in each line, and some are more prosodic, providing more of a picture of a king travelling through the sky over the floats.

The Pyramid Texts are intended to be as loud as possible regarding the position of the king within the afterlife in the sky. Therefore, they all indicate the relationships of the various deities with the king as close, even familial. Among the deities in the repetitious statements we find the king placed as equal. At this point in the texts, the kings are not even Osiris Pepi, for example, or Osiris Unas. They are simply called by their throne names, without the addition of 'Osiris', indicating that they have become part and parcel of the afterlife along with the deities who surround them. In other words, in order to study each king's corpus in association with the others, it is necessary to treat the corpus as statistics.

Focussing on the deities present in each corpus, and simply counting the number of times each deity is mentioned in each corpus, an interesting statistic becomes evident. The 'Reed Float' texts of Pepi I contain upwards of four times the number of deities and sacred places than do the other king's texts. For example, while Pepi I's texts have 9 references to the solitary Akhet,<sup>49</sup> Merenre's have 4,<sup>50</sup> Pepi II's have 3,<sup>51</sup> Unas' 2<sup>52</sup> and Teti's<sup>53</sup> and Neith's<sup>54</sup> only one each. Pepi I's texts also contain a much

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, Leclant (1975), (1977), (1979), (1982a), (1982b), (1984), (1985), and Berger-El Naggar et al (2001).

<sup>46</sup> Allen (2005).

<sup>47</sup> See Faulkner (1969) for his translation of the Pyramid Texts as one continuous corpus.

<sup>48</sup> This is an artificial name, needless to say. The group consists of the texts that mention the reed floats used to cross the sky in the afterlife. I have used the conventional PT and # for each text, as this is a somewhat easier and less cumbersome, though also less precise, method of reference. The 'reed float' texts are PTs 155, 173, 187, 206, 208, 260, 275, 278, 280, 301, 320, 324, 332, 337, 342, 343, 355, 365, 421, 432, 437, 442, 458, 461, 463, 467, 526, 534, 551.

<sup>49</sup> PTs 301, 320, 324, 332, 342, 355, 437, 463, 467.

<sup>50</sup> PTs 260, 275, 278, 365.

<sup>51</sup> PTs 421, 432, 442.

<sup>52</sup> PTs 173, 206.

<sup>53</sup> PT 187.

<sup>54</sup> PT 280.

richer variety of deities and sacred places than do the others; there is a definite comparative lack of fertility of reference in the other corpora. Some of the references solely from Pepi I's corpus include the Bathtub Canal,<sup>55</sup> the Marsh of Rest's Canals,<sup>56</sup> the Jackal Lakes,<sup>57</sup> Bee-eater,<sup>58</sup> Qebehut (Anubis' daughter),<sup>59</sup> Osiris' finger,<sup>60</sup> Thoth's wings,<sup>61</sup> Horus of the Duat,<sup>62</sup> Horus' Sounding-poles,<sup>63</sup> and the Sun's lightning bolts.<sup>64</sup> The Marsh of Reeds alone is referenced 8 times in Pepi I's reed float corpus<sup>65</sup> to Unas' once.<sup>66</sup>

Assigning meaning to these statistics is difficult; they give rise to a number of questions, not the least of which is the issue concerning the choice of texts. Who chose them for the chamber walls? Was it the king himself? If so, was each king involved in the choice, and if not, then who chose them on behalf of the kings who left that duty to another? If we assume that the king at the very least had a hand in the choice of texts, then the numbers may be read as being evidence for royal preference, if nothing else. If the challenge of choosing the texts was left to a high religious official, then it may be that all we are seeing is the religious bent of someone other than the king. The best that can be said, without resorting to outright wishful thinking, is that with Pepi I's reign, the deities in the 'Reed Float' texts suddenly become considerably more numerous and more multi-faceted. Allen notes that as a whole, his corpus has more than ten percent more texts than the next largest, that of Pepi II.<sup>67</sup> A study of the rest of each corpus' deity count, which is underway, may provide more answers.

There remains the ultimately unanswerable question of whether Pepi I was a religiously devout ruler or whether he simply understood the worship of the deities of Egypt as part of a commitment to royal duty. If the latter, he may not have been particularly religious at all; he may simply have felt a profound awareness of his obligation to maintain a healthy relationship with his betters, the gods, in the manner of Roman *pietas*. This would not necessarily imply a particular religious devotion on Pepi I's part, rather a devotion to duty and the honour due one's superiors. It seems most likely, however, that duty and devotion were both intended. The sheer bulk of literary and archaeological evidence, both considerably greater than those left by previous (and to a lesser extent, later) kings may represent at least a modicum of faith inherent in the royal responsibility toward the Egyptian pantheon; arguably, it could be significantly more than just a modicum.

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<sup>55</sup> PT 437.

<sup>56</sup> PT 467.

<sup>57</sup> PT 458.

<sup>58</sup> PT 467.

<sup>59</sup> PT 463.

<sup>60</sup> PT 467.

<sup>61</sup> PT 463.

<sup>62</sup> PT 467.

<sup>63</sup> PT 463.

<sup>64</sup> PT 467.

<sup>65</sup> PTs 301, 320, 324, 355, 437, 458, 461, 467.

<sup>66</sup> PT 173.

<sup>67</sup> Allen (2004) 12.

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