

LIQUIDS IN TEMPLE RITUAL

السوائل بطقوس المعابد

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LIQUIDS IN TEMPLE RITUAL

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Mu-chou Poo

Flüssigkeiten im Tempelritual

Les liquides utilisés dans les rituels du temple

In ancient Egypt the liquids most commonly used in temple rituals included wine, beer, milk, and water. The meaning of the ritual act was intimately related to the nature of the liquid employed, as well as to whatever religious and mythological associations the liquid was known to possess. With the exception of beer, all the ritual offerings of liquids were connected in some way with the idea of rejuvenation.

كانت أكثر السوائل المستخدمة بالطقوس بالمعابد هي النبيذ والجعة والحليب والماء، فكان مغزى الطقسه مرتبط بطبيعة السائل المستخدم وأيضاً متعلق بالإرتباطات الدينية والأسطورية المعروفة عن هذا السائل. لقد إرتبطت التقدمة الطقسية للسوائل، فيما عدا الجعة، بفكرة التجديد بطريقة أو بأخرى.

The ritual offerings in Egyptian temples and funerary settings constitute an important part of the outward expressions of Egyptian piety. In temple rituals in particular, according to the images preserved on temple walls, we know that often, though not always, each ritual act was accompanied by a series of incantations (often inscribed on the wall beside the images), including the title of the ritual, the ritual liturgy, and the reply of the deity who was receiving the ritual performance or offering. Although there is still some uncertainty regarding whether the temple reliefs represent actual ritual acts (Poo 2007), most scholars agree that the meaning of the rituals can be deciphered, at least partially, by examining these texts. Although these ritual liturgies had a long-standing textual tradition that can be traced as far back as the Pyramid Texts, most of the best-preserved texts were from the Ptolemaic and Roman temples. The present discussion, therefore, mostly utilizes texts from this period.

Of the numerous rituals recorded on temple walls, the offering of liquids occupied a rather large proportion. Here we discuss four kinds of liquids employed in temple rituals: wine, beer, milk, and water. The meaning of an individual ritual act was intimately related to the nature of the liquid employed, as well as to whatever religious and mythological associations the liquid was known to have. Certain deities might have some particular connections with a particular offering, as we shall see below. Yet as far as we can tell, there could be multiple recipients for the same kind of offering, and a particular deity could receive multiple offerings at different times.

Wine

Wine was often an important item in funerary and temple cults. From as early as the Old Kingdom, wine was regularly mentioned in offering lists as part of the funerary establishment (Barta 1963). In temple rituals, wine was also often offered to various deities. In the pyramid temple of Fifth Dynasty king

Sahura, for example, the king was shown offering wine to the goddess Sakhmet (Borchardt 1910: 126). Besides its general significance as an item that pleased the deities, the offering of wine took on certain specific religious and mythological associations. Already in the Pyramid Texts, Osiris was mentioned as the “Lord of Wine in the Wag Festival” (PT Spell 442: §820a). The Wag Festival was celebrated at the beginning of the inundation, on the 17th, 18th, or 19th of Thoth, the first month of inundation (Schott 1950: 39ff.). The festival itself was a funerary feast that was probably aimed at the celebration of the resurrection of life that the inundation brought. Since Osiris epitomized resurrection, there may be a certain connection between Osiris as the god of vegetation and rejuvenation and the symbolic coming to life of the grapevine. The fact that wine production depended upon the coming of the inundation might therefore have fostered the meaning of wine as a symbol of life and rejuvenation. A text in the Ptolemaic temple of Edfu contains the following sentence: “The vineyard flourishes in Edfu, the inundation rejoices at what is in it. It bears fruit with more grapes than [the sand of] the riverbanks. They [the grapes] are made into wine for your storage” (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfon VII*: 278). Thus the relationship between the inundation and the production of wine is clearly stated.

On the day following the Wag Festival, there was, at least in the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods, a festival of “the Drunkenness of Hathor” celebrated at Dendara. The calendar of festivals at Edfu alludes to the relationship between Hathor and the inundation: “It is her [Hathor’s] father, Ra, who created it for her when she came from Nubia, so that the inundation is given to Egypt” (Alliot 1949: 216; see also Derchain 1972: 21 - 23).

In the Ptolemaic and Roman temples, Hathor-Sakhmet was often referred to as “Lady of Drunkenness,” and this epithet was often regarded as an allusion to the famous story “The Destruction of Mankind”

(Hornung 1982). Although beer was featured in the story, the effect of alcoholic drink in general was probably what made wine (and beer) an important temple offering, particularly in connection with the honoring of the goddess Hathor-Sakhmet.

In another mythological story about Hathor-Tefnut, or the Eye of Ra, the god Ra commanded that his daughter, the lioness Hathor-Tefnut, be brought back to Egypt from Nubia (Junker 1911: 7). Parallel to the story of the Destruction of Mankind, Thoth and Shu were assigned the mission. After Hathor was brought back to Egypt, her wild and bloodthirsty nature needed to be appeased with dance and music, and the offering of wine (Daumas 1970). As Greek and Roman authors noted, the Nile water turned red during the inundation, which suggests the color of wine (Bonneau 1964: 65ff.). As Hathor’s return to Egypt (according to the mythological story) corresponded to the rise of the Nile waters—which not only resembled wine in color, but could in fact bring a prosperous harvest of grapes and wine—it is fitting that she be referred to as the Mistress of Drunkenness and identified with the inundation.

On the other hand, when we examine the numerous offering scenes on the temple walls, it becomes clear that, as a common offering, wine could be offered to many deities other than Hathor. The religious meaning of wine, moreover, was not limited to the allusions to the mythological stories related to Hathor, or to its intoxicating nature, important as it was in many ancient cultures, but had wider significance. The color of wine, when it was red, and even disregarding its association with the mythological story, already suggested an association with blood and the life-giving force of nature. As this association was not limited to ancient Egyptian culture, it is all the more possible to believe that the symbolic association of wine and blood did exist in Egypt. The winepress god, Shesmu, for example, was referred to as bringing wine to Osiris on the one hand—“Shesmu comes to you [Osiris] bearing wine” (PT Spell 581:

§1552a)—and on the other hand he was shown pressing the blood of the enemies with the winepress (Poo 1995: 151 - 152; Schott 1938). It is reasonable to suspect here an allusion to the grape juice being pressed from the winepress.

Moreover, offering liturgies testify that wine was regarded metaphorically as the “Green Eye of Horus”—that is, the power of rejuvenation: “Take to yourself wine—the Green Horus Eye. May your *ka* be filled with what is created for you...” (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfou I*: 258). And reference to the contending of Horus and Seth can also be found in the liturgy of wine-offering:

Take to yourself the wine that was produced in Kharga, O noble Falcon. Your wedjat-eye is sound and supplied with provision; secure it for yourself from Seth. May you be powerful by means of it . . . may you be divine by means of it more than any god (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfou V*: 150).

Beer

Being the most popular and affordable drink in ancient Egypt, beer featured prominently as an offering in funerary as well as temple rituals. The brewing of beer involves the fermentation of cereals, and, as studies of beer residues show, the brewing of beer in general comprises several steps. First, a batch of grain was allowed to sprout, thereby producing an enzyme. Then another batch of grain was cooked in water to disperse the starch naturally contained within it. The two batches were subsequently combined, causing sugar to be produced, and then sieved. Finally, the sugar-rich liquid was mixed with yeast, which fermented the sugar into alcohol (see Darby et al. 1977: 529 - 550; Samuel 1996a, 1996b).

Like the offering of wine, the beer-offering was a common ritual in Egyptian temples. However, although Hathor’s epithet “Mistress of Drunkenness” was found in beer-offering scenes (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara I*: 102: 14, 142: 8), it is somewhat surprising to learn that, contrary to our expectations, the mythological story of the Destruction of Mankind does not appear to have been

alluded to in the beer-offering liturgies. What were emphasized in the offering liturgies were concerns regarding the correctness and meticulousness with which the beer was brewed:

Take the sweet beer, the supply for your majesty, which is brewed correctly. How sweet is its taste, how sweet is its smell! (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara VII*: 130).

How beautiful are these beer jars, which are brewed at the correct time, which fill your ka at the time of your wish. May your heart be joyful daily (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara VI*: 163: 9 - 11).

Take for yourself the wonderful beer, which the noble one has brewed with her hands, with the beautiful plant from Geb and myrrh from Nefy (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfou I*: 367: 9 - 11).

The deities’ emphasis on the proper brewing of beer is interesting, since the production of wine was never mentioned as having been done by gods.

It is mentioned that music was performed during the offering of beer: “Take the beer to appease your heart...for your *ka* according to your desire, may you drink it, may [you] be happy, as I make music before you” (Junker and Winter 1965: 271: 1 - 4). This leads us to rethink whether the epithet of Hathor as “Mistress of Drunkenness” necessarily alludes to the mythological story of the Destruction of Mankind, and not to a more general sense of intoxication and rejuvenation. After all, beer, above all other offerings, would be the obvious choice for alluding to the story if indeed the story gave rise to Hathor’s epithet.

Milk

Since the function of milk is to nourish, and its white color is associated with purity, the significance of the offering of milk in temple rituals was also built around these allusions. Milk was often offered, for example, to Harpocrates (the child Horus), milk being a obvious source of nourishment for children: “May you be filled with milk from the breasts of the *hesat*-cow” (Junker 1958: 180); “Take the milk, which is from the breast of your

mother” (Junker 1958: 185; and see, similarly, Junker and Winter 1965: 319, 385, 389). The result of nourishment was no doubt to strengthen the body, as the following texts indicate: “May your limbs live by means of the milk and your bones be healthy by means of the white Horus Eye [milk]....The king rejuvenates his [Osiris’s] body with what his heart desires [milk]” (Junker 1913: 14).

Milk was also offered to other deities, among them Hathor and Osiris, in various rituals (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara VII*: 19, 129, 147, 158; Junker 1958: 42; Junker and Winter 1965: 65, 343; Sauneron: *Esna VI*: 96), especially in the Abaton-ritual, in which 365 bowls of milk were brought before Osiris daily (Junker 1913: 9). One offering liturgy reads: “Oh, ‘White [milk]’, which is from the breasts of Hathor. Oh, sweet [milk], which is from the breasts of the mother of Min; it entered the body of Osiris, the great god and lord of Abaton” (ibid.: 11). Here the whiteness of milk is clearly referenced, thus indicating milk as a liquid of purification. This is confirmed by such liturgical texts as “offering milk to his father and purifying [lit. overflowing] the offering of his *ka*,” or “purifying the offering of His Majesty with this White Eye of Horus [milk]” (ibid.). Since the libation of water was metaphorically referred to as the “milk of Isis” (Guglielmi 1982), the reverse is also true. These general religious significations aside, there seem to be no further mythological or theological allusions that can be connected to milk.

Water

Of all the temple rituals, the ritual of purification was likely the one that needed to be performed first in any program of daily ritual. The priest, the temple grounds, and even the libation jars needed to be purified before any ritual offerings to the deities were performed. The water of purification could be presented to the deities in two ways, either poured onto the ground or onto the altar or statue as a gesture of general purification:

Spell for purifying [] as far as the heaven, the earth, to Harakhty, to the great Ennead, to the small

Ennead, to Upper Egypt, and to Lower Egypt. My arms are given the water [lit. inundation], that it may purify the offering and every good thing of Tebtunis, with its Ennead, [] for your ka [?]. It is pure (Osing and Rosati 1998: *Papiri della Società Italiana [PSI] inv. I 70, fr. A2, 17 - 20*).

Purification with the four jars of water: take the Eye of Horus, as it purifies your body (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara III*: 110).

Oh water, may you purge all impurity and evil from the daughter of the Creator, oh Nun, may you purify her face (Chassinat and Daumas: *Dendara IV*: 249).

Thus the water cleansed the statue of the deity from the outside, as an ablution, purifying the image in a direct and mundane sense.

On the other hand, water could be offered to the deities as a drink (libation). In a papyrus found in the Roman Period temple at Tebtunis, no less than six libation rituals were included in the daily temple ritual program (Osing and Rosati 1998; see also Poo 2007). The deities were urged to drink the water offered to them in symbolic recognition of the rejuvenating power of the Nile:

Offering libation. Words spoken: May this water rejuvenate your body, may your majesty drink from the water (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfou IV*: 62: 13 - 63: 2).

Offering libation. Words spoken: This libation is brought from Abydos, it came from the region of the Sea of Horus. May you drink it, may you live by means of it, may your heart be sound by means of it, the divine water to [fill?] your altar [with] the libation that I like (Chassinat and Rochemonteix: *Edfou IV*: 218: 3 - 7).

The act of drinking the water provided a sense of purification from the inside, thus imbuing the ritual with a heightened spiritual significance. Moreover, allusions to the inundation were often made, as the pouring of the water was regarded as symbolizing the coming of the inundation, and the libation water was compared to Nun:

Hail to you, precious libation jar, which inundates Nun and Nut (Osing and Rosati 1998: PSI inv. I 70, fr. A1, 13 - 14).

Spell for presenting libation. Words spoken: Hail to you, Nun in your name of Nun. Hail to you, Inundation in your name of Inundation (Osing and Rosati 1998: PSI inv. I 70, fr. A1, 20 - A2, 1).

Pouring libation to the altar. Words spoken: Hail to you, the Powerful, take to yourself the libation, which begot everything living. I have come to you, the vases are inundated, the jars filled with the flood, and the vases filled with the inundation for your Majesty (Chassinat and Daumas: Dendara II: 17: 10 - 15).

Here the significance of libation is no longer merely purification; rather, it has been elevated to the level of cosmic rejuvenation by associating the pouring of water with the coming of the annual Nile flood. This metaphor, found in the Pyramid Texts, was of course very ancient:

O King, your cool water is the great flood that issued from you (PT Spell 460: §868).

You have your water, you have your flood, you have your efflux that issued from Osiris (PT Spell 676: §2006; PT Spell 679: §2031).

In sum, the overwhelming ritual significance of water was its affinity to the Nile flood: the rejuvenating power of nature (Blackman 1912). Whether the water was poured before the deities, or on the statues of the deities as an ablution, or drunk by the deities as a libation, merely expressed a variation of the same idea.

Conclusion

The basic meaning of any offering was to incur the blessing of the deities, or deceased ancestors, who were regarded as capable of protecting or aiding those who presented the offering. In funerary settings, as we saw in the offering lists, the Egyptians would provide what they considered an appropriate amount and selection of offering items. The significance of the offerings as sustenance for the deceased is self-evident. However, in the temple-ritual setting, although the primary

significance of offerings to deities remained basically the same as that of funerary offerings, the subsequent elaboration of the rituals and liturgies that accompanied the offerings to deities served to exalt the meanings attached to the actual offering items. Thus the offering of a certain item would become a symbolic action relevant to either the characteristics or functions of the recipient deities, or the offering item itself would become symbolic of a certain beneficent deed or cosmic force—on a level of importance matched by that of the deities. Even so, only occasionally do we find an item that is offered exclusively to a certain deity, the offering of mirrors to Hathor being an example (Husson 1977). In most cases, however, there seems to be no one-to-one correspondence between the offering and the recipient god. This indicates that despite particular theological or mythological allusions implied by such offerings as wine or water, the basic underlying significance of an offering as an object that supplies a “need” of the deity in exchange for blessings remains the same. In the Temple of Hathor at Dendara, on the outer wall of the sanctuary, the offering of wine was represented symmetrically opposite representations of beer offerings on the opposing walls, indicating a certain affinity between them, perhaps due to their alcoholic content. The offering of water, on the other hand, was paired with the offering of bread and beer, which suggests that water, bread, and beer were endowed with the power of sustenance. Moreover, the offering of wine was also in one instance paired with the “dance for Hathor,” which implicitly suggests a connection between wine and the “ecstasy of Hathor” (Leitz 2001: 8).

In conclusion, it is interesting that all the ritual offerings of liquids were, each in its own way, somehow connected with the idea of rejuvenation. Perhaps this need not be surprising, since all the offering-liquids were, in a sense, nutrients that could be used by the human (or divine) body, and could thus be considered sources of rejuvenation. In the case of beer, the absence of specific allusions

to the intoxicating power of alcohol and the mythological stories of Hathor-Sakhmet or

Hathor-Tefnut in the offering liturgies remains unexplained.

Bibliographic Notes

Poo (1995) provides a study of various aspects of wine in Egyptian society and religion, including its production, use, representation, and religious significance, and liturgical texts of wine-offering rituals. For a comprehensive study of beer in Egyptian society, see Helck (1971). For the offering of beer and water, a number of liturgies have been studied in Poo (2007). Guglielmi's (1982) entry discusses the religious significance of milk and deities related to milk as an offering.

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