

BOOK REVIEWS

***The Dawning Moon of the Mind* by Susan Brind Morrow (New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), pp. 289. ISBN 978-0-374-20010-7, 160 × 235 mm, US\$28.**

With this landmark book archaeologist and linguist Susan Brind Morrow has unlocked the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. Specifically, she has examined the Pyramid Texts in the pyramid of Unis, the oldest version of the work found to date. Unis was the last ruler of the Fifth Dynasty, and dates to the mid-24th century BCE.

Morrow gives us a completely different translation of the texts, upending more than a century of scholarly analysis. Until now, Egyptologists have said the beginning of the texts deal with the private parts of a baboon. Morrow reveals it is actually a description of the constellation Orion!! Maybe the fact the ceilings of the pyramid are covered in stars should have given earlier researchers a clue as to what the texts are about. The Pyramid Texts are in fact the oldest astronomical text in existence. Here is an excerpt from her description of the north wall of the antechamber in the pyramid:

The north wall of this room presents a sequence of riddles encoding the visible features of the north side of the night sky. The first verse introduces the primary constellation of the north, the Big Dipper. The riddle lies in the mystery of what the Big Dipper is and what it does. The Dipper is the mechanism that turns the sky like the hand of a clock. Hence it is a paradox: it is the arm of the night, real and active, yet as a pattern of stars it is diffuse and nonmaterial. The night is not a goddess. It is the night.

Morrow goes on to explain the second verse on the north wall deals with the stars Sirius, the falcon and Canopus, the dog. The third verse "... presents this glittering stream of the marvelous sky as a ladder of souls, a word (*mkt*, ladder) that is a pun on the hieroglyphic name of the Milky Way (*mskt*)."

In this description we see the three primary elements that Morrow employs to great effect, elements no other reader of the hieroglyphs has ever done. Recognising the text contains paradoxes, riddles and puns, she reveals what has remained hidden for more than 4,000 years (she

actually lists six linguistic devices the Egyptians used). Morrow places what we can now read here in dramatic terms:

The verse is a return to the catalogue of celestial phenomena that began on the west wall of the entrance-way. It is as though one were in a planetarium, a miniature re-creation of the night sky. But the actual, accurate re-creation of the map of the night sky is effected not with a detailed visual imitation of it, as in Grand Central Station. It is done with iconographic riddles that contain not only the physical description of primary stars and specific constellations, but layers of deeper meaning that reveal their significance in the life of the universe.

Morrow gives us a full translation of the Pyramid Texts, wall by wall and room by room. Her discussion both before and after this translation is illustrated by specific hieroglyphs, which she explains, showing how they have been misinterpreted by previous scholars.

The name of the Dipper, for example, grows out of the word *ms*, "to give birth." Until now the hieroglyph was thought to represent three fox skins tied together by a tail. Morrow reveals it is a botanical illustration! The correct text reads "Great Night uncovers her arms ..." but what does that mean? She explains:

This is a coded line that means night reveals its secret. The secret is that the night sky is a clock. The arms are the Dippers, which swing around the North Star like the arms of a clock. This is at once an astute astronomical observation, a poetic conceit, and a practical measuring device. The monument is a metaphor for time: conception, gestation, and birth.

One feels almost giddy finally knowing what the Egyptians really meant. I read the canonical translation of the Pyramid Texts 30 years ago, but it did not make a whole lot of sense to me. Now I know why: it was wrong. "Hieroglyphs are not recondite or indecipherable ..." writes Morrow.

There is clearly much work for archeoastronomers too, as Morrow links the texts to the pre-dynastic culture of Egypt. She specifically mentions a site on the Nabta Playa, a hundred miles west of Aswan, "... where stones are set up as an astronomical observatory."

Philosophers of the history of science and astronomy will also have much to consider here. The pyramid as a metaphor for time, coming from such a distant time in human history, must be integrated into the very bedrock of how and why man relates to the cosmos.

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