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WHEN ISIS “MOORED” OSIRIS:
THE MANY MEANINGS OF *mni*

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The Osiris myth is central to the ancient Egyptian religious universe. In this myth, Osiris is murdered by his brother, Seth, but is revived by his sister-wife, Isis, for long enough to impregnate her with his son and heir, Horus (Smith 2017, 5–6). Details are scant in Old Kingdom sources (e.g., Pyramid Texts 366, §632, and 518, §1199; Faulkner 2007, 120, 191), and it is not until the New Kingdom that a coherent narrative begins to emerge. In particular, the Great Hymn to Osiris on the Stele of Amenmose (Louvre C 286; Dynasty 18) “contains the fullest account of the Osiris myth extant in Egyptian, as distinct from Greek, sources” (Lichtheim 1976, 81). Aspects of the Osiris myth, which had long been alluded to indirectly in temple and tomb decoration, later came to be revealed more explicitly in select locations; for example, wall reliefs depicting the conception of Horus are found in the Ramesside and Greco-Roman temples of Abydos and Dendera, respectively (O’Connor 2009, 36, Fig. 9; Cauville 1997, Pls. 106 and 135). However, textual references to the events of the myth typically remained oblique (Louvre 2009; Moret 1930, 725), perhaps for reasons of genre and decorum (Baines 1991, 101–105). Following its fusion with the solar theology of Re, the Osiris myth became the touchstone of New Kingdom funerary texts, such as the Book of the Dead and the Books of the Netherworld (Faulkner 1985; Hornung 1999), and the myth’s importance was further highlighted by the development of performative ritual texts such as the Osiris Liturgies (Assmann 2004–2008; Kucharek 2010). Mark Smith (2017) provides an excellent and recent overview of the cult of Osiris, tracing its trajectory through four millennia.

The physical object at the centre of the present study is the aforementioned Stele of Amenmose (Louvre C 286), a large limestone stele (1.03 × 0.62 m); the proper names in its text, combined with erasures of the name of Amun, date it to the early 18th Dynasty, an assignation consistent with its palaeography and artistic conventions (Louvre 2009; Moret 1930, 725–726). It has long been known to Egyptologists, having first been published in the mid-nineteenth century (Chabas 1857). In the lunette of the stele are offering-scenes for Amenmose – the Overseer of the Cattle of Amun – and his wife Nefertari, as well as a lady named Baket (Lichtheim 1976, 81; Louvre 2009). The body of the stele is engraved with a long adoration-text (25 horizontal lines) which has come to be known as the Great Hymn to Osiris; as mentioned above, the coherence and directness with which it narrates episodes in the Osiris myth makes it exceptional among pharaonic sources (Lichtheim 1976, 81; Louvre 2009; Moret 1930, 725–726). Portions of the Great Hymn remained known at least four centuries after the text was inscribed for Amenmose; much of its cult topography and praise of Osiris as lord of

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the elements and food supply (lines 1–5) are incorporated or paralleled in a hymn to Osiris on the Stele of Amenemone (London BM 645, lines 4–7 and 10–12), which dates to the 22nd Dynasty (Jansen-Winkel 2005, 131–135). Concise bibliographies of early and more recent scholarship on the Great Hymn are provided by Moret (1930, 725–726) and Assmann (1999, 481), respectively.

The present paper, which is philological in nature, addresses a central event in the Osiris myth as it is narrated in the Great Hymn on the Stele of Amenmose. Specifically, the Great Hymn says (in line 15) that, when Isis eventually located Osiris’s body after his murder by Seth, she “moored her brother”. The key phrase is *ʒs.t ʒh.t [...] mni.t sn=s* (Moret 1930, 741–743 and Plates I-II, lines 14–15), “Beneficial Isis [...] who moored her brother”; *mni.t* is the perfective active participle of *mni*, feminine, used adjectivally to qualify Isis. The present paper argues that, in this particular usage, *mni* may carry as many as seven layers of meaning.²

The primary meaning of the verb *mni* is “to moor”, as in guiding a ship to land and tethering it there (sense 1) (Faulkner 1962, 107; Hannig 2006, 356, meaning-groups 1 and 3; Jones 1988, 215 no. 33; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae*, 2020, *mjni*, translation 1). Perhaps the best-known such mooring in Egyptian literature is that which opens the Tale of the Shipwrecked Sailor, “We have now reached home. The mallet has been taken off, the mooring-post [*mni.t*, noun] driven in, The bowline cast ashore” (lines 3–5; De Buck 1948, 100; Simpson 2003a, 47). By extension, *mni* can also mean to rescue a drowning person (sense 2) (Faulkner 1962, 107), based upon *mni mh nb* (B1 168; Parkinson 1991, 27) in the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant, “Rescue all who are drowning” (Nederhof 2009, 36). A similar translation is listed by Hannig (2006, 356, meaning-group 3, sub-meaning “retten” {12917}, “save”). The appropriateness in the Great Hymn of the primary sense has long been recognised; the *Wörterbuch* gives for *mni.t* the example of “der Isis, die den toten Osiris ans Land zog” (Erman & Grapow 1971, II 74.11, *mnj.t*): “Isis, who pulled the dead Osiris ashore”.³ But both senses may well have been intended because, as the Memphite theology – a composition of Ramesside date – explains, “Osiris was drowned in his water. [...] Horus quickly commanded Isis and Nephthys to grasp Osiris and prevent his drowning (i.e., his submerging). (63) They heeded in time and brought him to land” (Lichtheim 1973, 55). Thus, Osiris was grasped/tethered and brought to shore (i.e., steered and docked like a ship; sense 1), and was – at least figuratively – saved from drowning (sense 2).

Sense 1 is unambiguously enshrined in Adolf Erman’s translation of the Great Hymn, in which the key phrase *ʒs.t ʒh.t [...] mni.t sn=s* is rendered as “Beneficial Isis, [...] that [...] brought her brother to land” (Erman 1927, 143). In the Tale of the Eloquent Peasant (B1 line 168), Richard Parkinson perceives both sense 1 and sense 2; taking *mni* to be a nominal imperfective participle (more properly *mnj*), he translates: “Lander of all who drown” (Parkinson 2012, 143). His commentary on this passage is revealing: “*mnj-mh-nb* develops the image of the previous verse [= ‘Look, I am under way, but boatless!’]. In [*The Teaching of*] *A Man [for his Son,]* the king ‘lands (*mnj*) someone who lacks a landing (*šw m-mnj*)’ (4.7).

² Some of these are listed (without explanation or discussion) in a footnote to an earlier paper (Graham 2020, 2, fn. 8). *Mni* is now thought to have a full spelling of *mini* [Allen 2010, 461, *mjni*; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2020: *mjni*], but the traditional/conventional transliteration *mni* (= *mnj*) will be retained throughout this paper as it is the form used in almost all of the literature cited.

³ Translations from the German are those of the author.

Mh̄j ‘to drown’ (*Wb.* II, 121-2.9) is the inevitable consequence of being boatless while on the water; it may recall the fate of Osiris (e.g. P. Wilson 1997a, 450)⁴ (Parkinson 2012, 143). Parkinson then goes on to anticipate our sense 5, remarking that “The strong associations of ‘landing’ with death (*Wb.* II, 74.4-9; e.g. Jones 1988, 215 no. 33; Zandee 1960, 53)⁵ underline the mortal character of the peasant’s plight here” (Parkinson 2012, 143).

As an extension of the tethering or linking inherent to its nautical context, *mni* can mean “to attach” in a general sense (sense 3) (Faulkner 1962, 107). For this, Faulkner cites Sethe (1906, 30, line 15; repeated 31, line 10), *mni.n=s wi m rpy.t n.t hm.t=s*, as translated by Gardiner (1916, 41): “she [the queen] attached me [the priest Yuf] to the (cult of the) statue of her majesty”.⁶ This meaning too is appropriate in the Great Hymn, since Isis is supposed to have gathered together the pieces of her dismembered brother in order to reconnect them and reconstitute his body. Although most explicit in Plutarch’s late account, *De Iside et Osiride* (Babbitt 1936, 45–47, §18), there are hints of such an activity in much earlier writings. For example, in Utterance 482 of the Pyramid Texts, the speaker says to Osiris: “Your eldest sister [Isis] is she who gathered up your flesh” (Faulkner 2007, 169); another translation has “your eldest sister, who collected your flesh” (Allen 2015, 136). The verb in question is *s3k*, “to pull together” (Allen 2013, PT482 §1008b; Faulkner 1962, 211). One may take the same sense of reattachment from Miriam Lichtheim’s translation of the segment of the Great Hymn that reports the discovery of Osiris’s remains, in which she renders the key phrase *3s.t 3h.t [...] iri.t hn.w mni.t sn=s* as “Mighty Isis [...] Who jubilated, joined her brother...” (Lichtheim 1976, 83). However – as we shall see in the next paragraph – Lichtheim’s turn of phrase also admits a very different interpretation.

Having been pulled ashore, the dead Osiris was revived temporarily⁷ – just long enough for Isis to copulate with him. Here, too, the verb *mni* is singularly apt, for – in another extension of its nautical sense of tethering – it may be used euphemistically to indicate sexual partnership and union (sense 4) (Erman & Grapow 1971, II 74.16, *mnj*; Faulkner 1962, 107, “marry”; Hannig 2006, 356, meaning-group 6). Its best-known use in this mode is probably the phrase *mni.n=f wi m s3.t=f wr.t*, used autobiographically by Sinuhe (B 78–79; Gardiner 1916, 40–41); during his sojourn in the Levant/Syria, the fugitive Egyptian says that the local chieftain Amusinenshi “placed me in front of his children, and he married me to (literally, moored me to) his eldest daughter” (Simpson 2003b, 58). There is no doubt that the sexual sense of *mni* is intended in the Great Hymn to Osiris, as a longer quotation from Lichtheim’s translation makes clear: “Mighty Isis [...] Who jubilated, joined her brother, Raised the weary one’s inertness, Received the seed, bore the heir” (Lichtheim 1976, 83). Viewed in this light,

⁴ In the bibliography of the present paper, the equivalents of Parkinson’s two references are (respectively) Erman & Grapow 1971, II 121–122, *mhi*; Wilson 1991, 807–808, *mh* and *Mhi*.

⁵ In the bibliography of the present paper, the first of Parkinson’s three references is Erman & Grapow 1971, II 74.4-0; the other two are exactly as he cites them.

⁶ Others read “She endowed me with the statue of her person” (Frood 2003, 71). Either way, Yuf is being united with the statue, with *mni* conveying the sense of attachment. While *ts* might seem the natural choice of verb for the reconstitution of Osiris’s body (e.g., Faulkner 1962, 307, group 2), note the suggestive overlap of *mni* with *mn* (Wilson 1991, 761), “to be attached” (Faulkner 1962, 106); with *Mni*, “king Menes”, the mythical uniter of Upper and Lower Egypt; and with *mni*, “to act as a herdsman (*mni.w*)”, i.e., to group together and guard from harm, to shepherd (Faulkner 1962, 108).

⁷ On the otherwise unattested use of *mni* to indicate the return of the dead to life, see note 11 below.

Lichtheim's ambiguous claim that Isis "joined" her brother has her doing something quite different to reassembling his body-parts.

In addition to the interpretations already adduced, *mni* can mean "to moor someone (in the West)", i.e., to prepare their corpse for burial and inter it in the proper manner (sense 5) (Erman & Grapow 1971, II 74.7; Hannig 2006, 356, meaning-group 2; Moret 1930, 742–743, especially note 61). The reconstitution of Osiris's body formed the first part of this procedure; after his brief revivification, Isis would then have completed the preparation of Osiris's corpse for burial so that he could enter and commence his reign in the Netherworld. Arguably, the use of *mni* in the Great Hymn reflects the entirety of this final stage in the siblings' interaction. Alexandre Moret translates the key phrase in the Great Hymn with this funerary sense, rendering *3s.t 3h.t [...] mni.t sn=s* as "Isis l'inspirée [...] qui [...] fait aborder (ensevelir) son frère": "Inspired Isis, who 'approached' (i.e., buried) her brother" (Moret 1930, 741, line 15). Jan Assmann, too, chooses a funerary sense, rendering the phrase as "Isis die Mächtige, [...] das Klageweib ihres Bruders": "Isis the mighty, [...] her brother's mourning-woman" (Assmann 1999, 480, line 94). Carolyn Graves-Brown extends the funerary credit to include Nephthys: "Isis and Nephthys [...] are sometimes referred to as the two 'mooring posts', 'to be moored' being a phrase used to denote death" (Graves-Brown 2010, 165). Accordingly, the verb may serve intransitively as a metaphor for "to die" (*Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2020: *mjni*, translation 3); Jan Zandee mentions "the well-known 'euphemism' for dying, 'to land'", and cites multiple examples from the Book of Two Ways,⁸ adding that "'He does not land' occurs also in other places as an equivalent of 'he does not die'" (Zandee 1960, 53). Zandee's commentary also links the concept of "mooring (in the West)" with our sense 1, in which a vessel makes landfall and docks: "Sometimes there is thought yet of landing in the literal sense of the word: to arrive somewhere. The dead says: 'I am one [...] who landed safely with Osiris.'⁹ In one of the songs of the harpers [...]: 'remember the joy, till this day comes on which one lands in the land that loves the silence'¹⁰" (Zandee 1960, 53).

Although Graves-Brown gives joint funerary credit to Isis and Nephthys, it is clear that the main protagonist in the aftermath of Osiris's murder is Isis; it is she who takes charge of her brother-husband's body, "steering" it through the stages of reconstitution, revivification, arousal, consummation, mummification and burial. As a further extension to its nautical sense of guiding a boat safely to land, *mni* can have the general meaning of "to steer" or "to lead" (sense 6); for example, the king may be said to steer his country on its course through history (Erman & Grapow 1971, II 74.8-9; Hannig 2006, 356, meaning-group 4; *Thesaurus Linguae Aegyptiae* 2020, *mjni*, translation 2). Once again, this sense of *mni* is entirely appropriate to the interaction between Isis and Osiris. It is Isis who "steers" Osiris expertly through the many hurdles that separate his murder by Seth from his emergence as Lord of the Netherworld, and it is her quick thinking which ensures that Osiris is succeeded by a son and heir who will come to rule the world of the living.

The Great Hymn to Osiris on the Stele of Amenmose uses the polysemous verb *mni* to describe the interaction of Isis with Osiris in the aftermath of his murder. In any given usage

⁸ Among them Coffin Text VII, Spell 1162; in the bibliography of the present paper, Faulkner 2015, III 183.

⁹ The cited source is Coffin Text IV.308; in the bibliography of the present paper, Faulkner 2015, I 265 (Spell 335, part II).

¹⁰ The cited source is Lichtheim's translation of the Song of Neferhotep I (late 18th Dynasty), line 9; in the bibliography of the present paper, Lichtheim 1945, 195.

of the verb, one would normally expect to find only one or two of its different meanings appropriate. However, in the usage under examination – which describes what is arguably the central event in the core myth of ancient Egypt – all six of the independently attested senses of *mni* are relevant; all of them find either implicit or explicit expression in Egyptian articulations of the events that follow Osiris’s death. To have six simultaneous senses would be remarkable, but there may even be one more; inclusion of the meaning “to revive the dead”, based on the revivification of Osiris in the Great Hymn – as done by Faulkner (1962, 107) and Hannig (2006, 356) –,¹¹ would bring the total number of concurrent meanings to seven.

The mythic episode under discussion encompasses the retrieval, reconstitution, resuscitation and burial of Osiris’s body, as well as the conception of his son Horus – momentous events that forever transform the nature of Egyptian belief, ritual and kingship. The great potency of this mythic episode warrants a special linguistic setting, and one is duly provided by the activation of *all* potential meanings of the verb chosen to describe it.

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¹¹ For this meaning, Faulkner (1962, 107) cites de Buck (1948, 111, line 15), which is our locus in the Great Hymn to Osiris. Presumably the same usage underpins Hannig (2006, 356, meaning-group 3, sub-meaning “wieder-beleben,” “revive” {12918}).

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