

Magic and Religion in Ancient Egypt

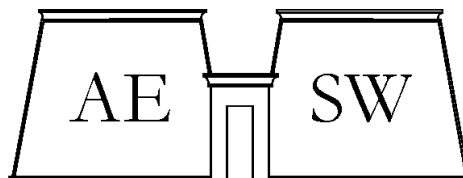
Part II: 81 gods

“An ennead of enneads”

by

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Preview: Aah & Aker



Ancient Egypt, by Sjef Willockx

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Introduction

In June 2005, I published on my website (www.egyptology.nl) Part I of the series "Magic and Religion in Ancient Egypt", under the title: "The Roots". The following comes from the Preface to that paper:

The title of this series: "Magic and Religion in Ancient Egypt" is a description of its content – but also a statement of its perspective. The position of this series is, that the magic and religion of ancient Egypt both have their roots in the same mental background, and that, for the ancient Egyptians themselves, a distinction between magic and religion was meaningless. That is why both will be treated here on an equal footing. The first part of the series will be devoted to this common background of magic and religion.

Part II is to be a cycle of descriptions of 81 gods, in alphabetical order. It will be published in nine groups of nine gods each. It is meant as an introduction to the most important gods of ancient Egypt. In addition to this, it is designed to further clarify the principles of god-forming, as laid out in Part I. To this purpose, also some less important, but particularly illustrative gods and goddesses will be included.

As it happens, the first two gods of the list (Aah and Aker) fall into exactly this category. They are a moon-god and an earth-god, respectively. In comparison to their more illustrious "colleagues" Thoth and Geb, their position in Egyptian cult, myth and religious literature is all but negligible - but the reason for this is, that they stayed so particularly close to their roots. That is why they make excellent demonstration-models.

For the ancient Egyptians, the number "nine" had a special significance. Their language knew three "numbers": the singular, the dual and the plural. The dual was a specialized format for any pair of objects, such as a person's two lips, two hands or two eyes. The plural therefore included anything from the number of three upwards. In writing, this was expressed by indicating the plural of a noun with three strokes or dots, or by simply repeating an ideogram three times. Now when "three" equals "plural", "three times three" equals "a host". That is why the largest group of gods for the Egyptians was a group of nine: an ennead.

The first Ennead of this paper will consist of the following gods:

Aah - Aker - Amentet - Amun - Andjeti - Anubis - Anukis - Apis - Aton.

Some of the ones that you may miss in this listing (such as Amset, Anat, Anti and Arsaphes), will be treated as part of a group of gods (Amset as one of the Sons of Horus, Anat as one of the group of Syrian gods), or under another name (Anti = Nemti, Arsaphes = Harsaphes). I hope to publish it later this year.

As a preview - and a try-out - Aah and Aker are hereby presented. Any comments would be highly appreciated.

Literature

Quoted as:

- Bonnet* Hans Bonnet: *Reallexikon der ägyptischen Religionsgeschichte* (2000: reprint from the original of 1952)
- FD* R.O. Faulkner: *A concise dictionary of Middle Egyptian* (1961)
- Gr.* Alan Gardiner: *Egyptian Grammar, third edition* (1957)
- LÄ* W. Helck et al.: *Lexikon der Ägyptologie: Band 1 – 6* (1975-1986)
- Eine* Erik Hornung: *Der Eine und die Vielen: Ägyptische Gottesvorstellungen* (1971)
- IÄF* Peter Kaplony: *Die Inschriften der Ägyptischen Frühzeit, Part I-II-III* (1963).
- Götterglaube* Hermann Kees: *Der Götterglaube im alten Ägypten* (1941)
- AEI* Miriam Lichtheim: *Ancient Egyptian Literature, Part I–II–III* (1973 – 1976 – 1980)

Abbreviations

- BD Book of the Dead
 CT Coffin Texts
 Pyr. / PT Pyramid Texts (quoted by paragraph)

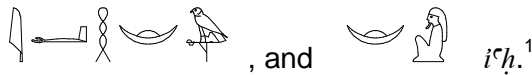
Quotations from these texts were - sometimes with minor adaptations - taken from the translations by R.O. Faulkner:

- *The Ancient Egyptian Pyramid Texts* (1969)
- *The Ancient Egyptian Coffin Texts* (1973-1978)
- *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (1972-1985)

All drawings and photographs are my own, unless otherwise indicated. Hieroglyphs by WinGlyph.

1. Aah (lah, Joh)


The god Aah was a moon-god: a god whose domain was the moon. A few typical writings of his name are:



Some alternative renderings in modern languages of this name are lah, and Joh. The rendering Aah has the advantage of pointing towards a connection with personal names such as Ahhotep and Ahmosis: names, composed with the name of this god. See e.g. the birth name of king Ahmosis (the first king of the 18th dynasty):



The sign for the moon in the latter writing has been variously interpreted. It is mostly seen as a combined picture of both the crescent moon and the full moon, but Wolfgang Helck² explains it as a picture of the moon at the very beginning of its monthly cycle: a narrow crescent, with above it the rest of the moon dimly visible. In a clear night sky, the young moon can regularly be observed in this position. Considering the commonness of multiple images in Egyptian religion, both interpretations are probably valid.

The sign  is harder to explain. Perhaps we should see in the crescent a cradle, from which a small baby moon is rising...

The Egyptian word Aah simply means “moon”. Although at times it is used with the meaning “god of the moon”, it mostly just refers to that white, shiny object in the night sky. This is the entry in Faulkner’s *Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*:

iḥ moon: as satellite (..), as god (..)



To a modern mind, this adds up to a discomforting ambivalence. What are we talking about here: an inanimate object, or a god?

There were more moon-gods in ancient Egypt than just Aah, such as Khons, Nemti and Thoth. In historical times however, these gods had all detached themselves to a considerable degree from their original abode. Thoth had become specialized in certain elements of the “moon-imagery”, such as mathematics and healing. Khons originally was “the Wanderer” (on the night sky), but later assumed a role in the triad of Amun and Mut. Likewise, Nemti was originally “the Strider”, but became later closely associated with Horus. Aah remained much closer to his domain - so close, that he is in fact hardly differentiatable from it. Some books on ancient Egyptian religion do not even mention him as a god.³ So let us start with the question: is this really a god?

¹ FD 11.

² In *LÄ*, in the article “Mond”.

³ E.g. Kees in *Götterglaube*, Helck in his article “Mond” in *LÄ*, and Hornung in *Eine*.

There are at least three indications that Aah was (also) the name of a god. The first is the occasional use of a determinative, indicating that the preceding name is that of a divinity (such as the signs  and  in the spellings above).

A second one has also already been mentioned in passing: its use in personal names. The ancient Egyptians frequently included the name of a god in their personal names, possibly to invoke that god's protection for the child receiving this name (a practice also followed by Christians, when naming their children after saints). Well-known examples are Amenhotep ("Amun is content"), and Thuthmosis ("Thoth is born"). When we then come across names such as Ahhotep ("Aah is content"), and Ahmosis ("Aah is born"), this clearly points to Aah being the name of a god.

Thirdly, there is the occasional use of composite names for gods, such as Khons-Aah,⁴ or Aah-Thoth.⁵ In names like these, both parts of the name are always those of a god.

What *is* a moon-god?

There can be two different reasons why we should refer to a given god as a moon-god. The first is, that the moon was the god's "roots". The origin of many gods was in the perception of a power in a natural phenomenon. Early man experienced a power in the moon, and over time this could develop into a god: a god with the moon as its place of origin. This is what I call a primary moon-god.

After their coming to life, any god could - particularly in ancient Egypt - spread out into more than one area of expression. By means of different mechanisms, a god that was originally not a moon-god, could achieve a more or less close association with the moon. This is what I call a secondary moon-god. Because of the identity of this god's name (Aah) with that of his heavenly abode (the moon), there can be little doubt that Aah was a primary moon-god. Some other Egyptian gods with strong ties to the moon were Horus, Thoth, Nemti and Khons. Khons was almost certainly a primary moon-god. The main reason to assume this is his name, which means "Traveler", or "Wanderer": a clear allusion to the moon: the Traveler along the night sky. The same holds true for Nemti: his name means "Strider", or "He who traverses (the heavens)". But whether Thoth was a primary moon-god or not has in all probability to remain a mystery forever - which in itself fits the later *persona* of this god superbly. Horus' connection to the moon depends on the "Eye of Horus" as an image of the waning and waxing moon, but wherever the Falcon and the Moon may have met: it lies well before the beginnings of history, and thereby forever beyond our grasp.

For early man, the moon was an object of great power and mystery. It dominated the night sky, much as the sun ruled the sky in daytime. Although its radiance is much weaker than the sun's, its usefulness to man during nighttime was no less than that of the sun during the day: the total darkness of the occasional overcast, moonless night must have been a horrible ordeal. Where the sun impressed man with the sheer force of its glow, the surface of the tranquil moon could be quietly observed in attentive reverence. The moon's trajectory along the heavens misses the sun's steadfast dependability, but its waning and waxing provided a regular, recurring drama of cosmic dimensions indeed - as well as a natural unit for measuring time, so suitable for the storing and retrieving of memories.

All this attention for the moon led to the perception of a force, or power inside it: the first kernel of a then still entirely immanent god. When early man first became aware of the might

⁴ Bonnet 141.

⁵ See e.g. CT VII-380, quoted on page 9.

might and majesty of this and other natural phenomena, he did not yet differentiate between the object itself, and the force or power that he experienced in it. To speak of the object was to speak of the power, and vice versa. Only when this power received a name of its own, could it be distinguished from its material domain.

Once this step had been set, the moon's compelling trials and tribulations soon led to further developments: the former power acquired "hands and feet", so that it could act in a myth: a story to explain or celebrate the drama in the sky. As a result, the original complete immanence of the god had shifted towards a partial transcendence. This in turn allowed for the god to acquire characteristics and capabilities that originally did not belong to the power-in-the-object. The moon can only rise and set, wane and wax - but a god of the moon may become angry or appeased, and may be a master of writing, healing or arithmetics.⁶

Presumably, this process occurred during predynastic times more or less simultaneously in various parts of the country, resulting in several "moon-gods". Before the political union of the country at the beginning of the 1st dynasty, most of it was culturally unified for at least several centuries. This cultural unity (comparable with that of the independent city states of ancient Greece) allowed for the various moon-gods (and earth-gods, sun-gods etc.) to have a high degree of similarity, of kinship if you like. So with the advent of political unity, all these highly compatible gods could easily be blended together into that fascinating tapestry of ancient Egyptian religion that we are still trying to unravel.

An exceptionally instructive representation of the moon can be found in the temple of Khons, in the Amun-precinct at Karnak (see Fig. 1 below). In the middle, we see the moon. This is just the moon itself: the celestial body we're all familiar with. On either side is a series of gods, worshipping it. Third god to the right is Thoth: recognizable from his ibis-head, with the moon-disk on top. So here we have a moon-god, adoring the moon! At first sight, this seems contradictory, but is it?

Although a god as Amun is often called "King of the gods", we never see other gods bowing for him, let alone adoring him. Gods do not adore other gods⁷ - and this depiction in the temple of Khons is entirely in keeping with this principle. For the object of veneration here is the moon - not a god of the moon. It is the moon itself, that is a force, a wonder, a miracle. It is the moon itself that fascinates, amazes and enchants: ruling the night sky, illuminating the dark, sailing in beauty along the firmament. No matter how many gods there are, no matter how great and mighty they may be, they are only *derived* from the phenomena. In an essentially immanent world view, even a partially transcendent god can not transcend the boundaries of creation itself. The original phenomenon - be it the earth, the sun or the moon - will always have precedence over the gods it brought forth. The gods, being derived from the phenomenon, can never be greater than the phenomenon itself.

The gods were mere approximations. That is why it never bothered the Egyptians to have more than one earth-god or more than one moon-god: these were just tokens, images, in which one could venerate and celebrate the original phenomenon. To rejoice over these great wonders in more than one divine shape was no more than fitting.

⁶ For more on this, see the forthcoming description of the god Thoth.

⁷ With the exception of the king. The king is a man, but also a god. Yet as a man, he can worship the gods. Even so, this is seldomly depicted: more usually is he seen meeting the gods as their equal, presenting them with offerings, and receiving Health, Life, Stability and Dominion in return.



Fig. 1 Gods worshipping the moon. A Ptolemaic relief from the temple of Khons, in the Amun-precinct at Karnak.

Aah in funerary literature

I will in this series for each god devote a separate section to each of 3 collections of funerary texts: the Pyramid Texts (Pyr.), the Coffin Texts (CT) and the Book of the Dead (BD). To examine the role of a god in this specialized area is interesting in itself, but it also allows us to follow to some extent a god's evolution in time: from the Old Kingdom (Pyr.), to Middle Kingdom (CT) and New Kingdom (BD).

Where appropriate, developments in the Underworld Books will be mentioned, too.⁸

The Pyramid Texts

In the Pyramid Texts, we only find 3 references to the moon - or the moon-god Aah. Since all three mentions lack a determinative - as is not unusual in the Pyramid Texts - we are initially undecided whether the celestial body, or the god is meant. For openers, we will start with Faulkner's translations:

Pyr. 732-3: "(..) you belong to the stars who surround Re, who are before the Morning Star; you are born in your months like the Moon, Re leans upon you in the horizon, the Imperishable Stars follow you".

Pyr. 1001: "For the Moon is my brother, the Morning Star is my offspring".

Pyr. 1104: "He commends me to my father the Moon, for my offspring is the Morning Star."

The moon is here part of an essentially celestial setting. In the Pyramid Texts, this celestial setting - dominated by the sun and the stars, with the moon in a supportive role - is one of the main stages (if not *the* main stage) for the Afterlife. Even when the moon is only seldomly mentioned, it blends in naturally.

The juxtaposition with the Morning Star is a particularly strong indication that the moon is here regarded as a god. The position of the Morning Star (possibly Venus) in the Pyramid Texts as a god, is without a doubt. Usually, the expression Morning Star is spelled: *sb3 dw3w*: "Star of the Morning". But in Pyr. 357, Morning Star is spelled: *ntr dw3w*: "God of the Morning" - with a star as determinative. And what's more: in that text, the Morning Star is in its turn juxtaposed with Sothis:

Pyr 357: "My sister is Sothis, my offspring is the Morning Star".

⁸ These "Books" were series of texts and vignettes, developed during the New Kingdom, originally for use in the royal tombs, only.

Sothis is the star Sirius, *and* a clear-cut goddess (often associated with Isis). So Sothis, the Morning Star and the Moon are in these texts all deities. We can therefore substitute in our translations “Aah” for “the moon”, as follows:

Pyr. 732-3: “(..) you belong to the stars who surround Re, who are before the Morning Star; you are born in your months like Aah, Re leans upon you in the horizon, the Imperishable Stars follow you”.

Pyr. 1001: “For Aah is my brother, the Morning Star is my offspring”.

Pyr. 1104: “He commends me to my father Aah, for my offspring is the Morning Star.”

It makes a small, but appreciable difference.

The Coffin Texts

In both the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead, the crisp and crystalline image of a glorious existence in the sky is largely tainted with earth tones: an effect both of the triumph of the kingdom of Osiris, and of the proliferation of funerary literature as such. As ever in ancient Egyptian religion, nothing of old is discarded completely though, so we still encounter the sun, the stars and the moon. The bold strokes of the original picture have been blurred now though, and the colors have run through.

The Coffin Texts have about a dozen references to the moon. Most of these treat it simply as the celestial body, such as this one:

CT II-64 “O you Sole One, who shines as the Moon”.

Most of the other texts are vague at best - as is not unusual for the Coffin Texts:

CT II-306 “Open to me, you who are in the New Moon”.

CT III-62 “The god comes in peace, say they who are in the Full Moon.”

These references to the new moon and full moon respectively suggest that we are again dealing here with the celestial body.

The next one is a bit different though:

CT VII-221: “He of the New Moon is he who serves him [the deceased] in On, he who crosses the sky with the Great Wanderer (...)”

The Great Wanderer is an allusion to Khons, whose name means Traveler / Wanderer. This text therefore connects Khons with the moon, and both with the deceased - but this still tells us little about whether the moon is here perceived as a god.

CT VII-380: “This is (Aah)-Thoth who is in the sky; the Eye of Horus is on his hand in the Mansion of the Moon”.

Only one variant of this text actually has “Aah-Thoth”. The other variants simply have “Thoth”. This one variant then appears to be the only instance in the Coffin Texts where Aah is unequivocally mentioned as a god.

The Book of the Dead

In the Book of the Dead, we are down to half a dozen of references. In the Pyramid Texts, there was still plenty of room for a non-mythical, essentially factual Afterlife. The Afterlife in

the sky was simply envisaged as “being there”: right there, in the heavens, as they are: just being one of those Imperishable Stars, for ever rotating in majestic, grandiose movement. And the moon was part of that glorious vista.

In the CT and the BD however, the emphasize shifts towards a more down to earth type of Afterlife. The venerable dead does not stop to iterate that he eats, drinks, defecates, urinates and copulates as on earth. In this world, over which Re and Osiris preside in turn, there is little need for the mystery of the moon. The remaining mentions of the moon again are indistinct, bereft as they are of their original context of a celestial Afterlife.

BD, Spell 80: “I have equipped Thoth in the Mansion of the Moon [or: of Aah] before the festival of the fifteenth day⁹ had come (..).”

BD, Spell 110: “O swamp-land, I have come into you, I have taken the Gray-haired One to the roof, for I am the Moon [or: I am Aah], I have swallowed up the darkness.”

In murky waters as these, there is no way of telling how we should translate *iʿh*. Only this one is clear with respect to translation - although unfortunately not in meaning:

BD, Spell 124: “Place bread in my mouth; I will go into the Moon-god [= Aah], so that he may speak to me (...).”

The Late Period

In the Late Period, there is something of a renaissance for Aah, with again a king Ahmosis in the 26th dynasty (better known as king Amasis). It is also from this period, that we are aware of at least one temple for Aah.

Depictions

According to Bonnet, the god Aah can be depicted as a man, wearing the royal kilt, with on his head a tight cap, and a moon-disk.¹⁰

Personal names

Personal names, compounded with Aah, are limited to the already mentioned Ahmosis (“Aah is born”) and Ahhotep (“Aah is content”).

Geographical connection

For about half of the Egyptian gods, we can discern a geographical area (either a city or a region) that it was intensely associated with, and that in many cases may have been its place of origin. For Aah, what little evidence there is, seems to point to middle Egypt. Here, the royal lineage of the 17th and 18th dynasty, descendent from Thebes, showed in the use of names a particular reverence for Aah. Soon after the beginning of the 18th dynasty however, the birth name Ahmosis (“Aah is born”) for princes is replaced by Thuthmosis (“Thoth is born”). Perhaps the rise into prominence of this dynasty necessitated the use of a more prestigious moon-god to replace Aah, who may have been a god whose worship was mostly confined to the region of Thebes: homeland of the dynasty.

Temples

Not many temples of Aah are known, but in the Late Period, a “House of Aah” (temple of Aah) is mentioned in Medamud: a town in the immediate vicinity of Thebes.¹¹ This would be

⁹ A reference to the monthly cycle, in which the fifteenth day is the day of the full moon.

¹⁰ Bonnet 356. No instances known to me.

in keeping with this area as homeland of the god. Helck¹² mentions a “Seat of the Moon” in the Dakhla Oasis, but without giving further details.


Lit.: *Bonnet* 355-356; Wolfgang Helck: *Mond*, in *LÄ*.

2. Aker

Analogous to the moon-god Aah, Aker was an earth-god. The following are two writings of his name, both taken from the Pyramid Texts in the pyramid of Teti:¹³



Compared to Aah, the god Aker exemplifies a slightly more developed stage in the transition from a totally immanent power into a partly transcendent god.

In ancient Egypt, the earth was usually represented by an elongated oval: . This shape made it into the hieroglyphic script as a sign meaning “earth” or “country” (*t*). When the earth was perceived as the abode of a power, this was from early on expressed by adding a human head to this shape.

The beginnings of this iconography can be found in the series of early- and predynastic commemorative slate palettes. On the backside of the so-called City-palette or Libyan palette, we see a landscape with trees. As a caption, an oval is added, marked with a hieroglyph meaning “Libya”. The significance is clear: “this is (a picture of) the land of Libya”. On the Narmer palette, which is presumably a bit younger, we see a more elongated oval, from which sprout six papyrus flowers. From the oval, a head protrudes. A falcon-god - presumed to be Horus - is shown, holding the head by a rope. The inferred meaning is: “Horus [= the king] holds the land of Lower Egypt captive, taking 6.000 prisoners.”

The same class of slate palettes also bears witness of the development of another motif, that will later be combined with that of the strip of land with a human head. It is the motif of two identical animals. On the Narmer palette, it is present as the two cow’s heads at the top, and as the two beasts that have their long necks twisted around the grinding cavity. Several other palettes show two standing dogs, facing each other, and a number of more simple palettes is crowned with the heads of two birds, this time back to back. Several early dynastic clay sealings show a figure consisting of two “merged” animals (dogs or cats?), back to back.¹⁴ At some point, this symmetric animals motif meets up with the strip of land motif, producing a strip of land with *two* human heads on either side. The oldest known example is from the reign of Sahure (2nd king of the 5th dynasty).¹⁵ In addition to restoring the so sought-after symmetry of the design, it had the advantage of presenting a certain likeness to a

¹¹ *Bonnet* 356.

¹² In the article *Mond* in *LÄ*.

¹³ Paragraph 555 and 676, respectively.

¹⁴ *JÄF-III*, fig. 7, 56, 57 and 62. Kaplony states (*JÄF-I*, 71) that these are “surely” depictions of Aker, but this seems questionable. These depictions are all from one rule: that of Aha. After this, there is a gap of at least five centuries before we meet the first probable representation of Aker (during the reign of Sahure). Such a long absence from the archeological record of an already canonized portrayal of a god is unlikely.

¹⁵ Erik Hornung in the article *Aker*, in *LÄ*.

cross-section of the Nile valley: the strip of land in the middle representing the valley floor, and the two heads on either side the two elevated desert plateaus to the east and west. Later still, further elaboration added arms and hands to the figure.

In the Pyramid Texts, we then find the following representations:



The earth-god as a strip of land, with two heads¹⁶



Likewise, with added arms and hands¹⁷

One step towards loosening the bonds that keep a power locked up into his material domain, was giving it a name of its own. By means of this name, it could then be distinguished from its abode: “ta” was the word for “earth”, “Aker” became the name of its power.¹⁸

The name of Aker is used 12 times in the Pyramid Texts: 9 times simply as Aker, and 3 times as Akeru (the “plural” of Aker: we will examine this phenomenon shortly). The tables below list all these instances, and show what determinative follows the name in each case.

Aker:

Pyramid of:→	Unas	Teti	Pepi I	Merenre	Pepy II
Paragraph					
325	Strip of land with 2 heads				
504	Simple strip of land				
555		(none)		Strip of land with 1 head and arms	Strip of land with 2 heads and arms
676		Falcon on standard			
796			Strip of land with 2 heads	Strip of land with 1 head and arms	Strip of land with 2 heads and arms
1014				Strip of land with 2 heads? (damaged)	Strip of land with 2 heads and arms
1553			Strip of land with 2 heads		
1713				The sign “n”: mistake for a simple strip of land?	
2254	(not available to me)				

¹⁶ Adapted from Sethe’s representation in Pyr. 325 / Unas.

¹⁷ Adapted from Sethe’s representation in Pyr. 555 / Pepy II.

¹⁸ This is a step that Aah never made. As we have seen in the previous paragraph, his name and that of his domain (the moon) always remained the same.

Akeru (“plural” of Aker):

Pyramid of:→	Unas	Teti	Pepi I	Merenre	Pepy II
Paragraph					
393	1 stroke (the “singular determinative”)	Falcon on standard + 3 dots			
658		3 simple strips of land			
2202					3 x a strip of land with 2 heads and arms each

Conclusions:

- There is (in this case) a fair degree of consistency in the use of determinatives per pyramid.
- There is a tendency to move towards more elaborate signs (the adding of arms).
- Already in the oldest pyramid (that of Unas), the shape with two heads is used, indicating that the assumed development of a simple strip of land → a strip of land with one head → a strip of land with two heads had already taken place by then.
- In the pyramid that immediately follows on the one of Unas (that of Teti), the god-determinative per sé - the falcon on a standard - is used, demonstrating beyond any doubt that Aker was here perceived as a god.

In the meantime, one more element was about to be added to the Aker motif. A rendering of the original depiction with one head, combined with a more sturdy “body”, must have reminded one artist of a recumbent lion. Adding fore and hind paws, and a tail, he turned it into a lion with a human head: a sphinx. (And for all we know, this may actually have been the origin of the sphinx in the first place.)

The Great Sphinx at Gizeh was in the New Kingdom venerated as a representation of the god Harmakhis (a Greek corruption of Har-em-Akhet, or “Horus in the Horizon”: an image of the rising sun-god). This connects the shape of a lion (the sphinx) both with the sun and the horizon. A well-known vignette from the 17th spell of the Book of the Dead shows two lions, sitting back to back, with between their backs the sun, rising from the horizon (see Fig. 2). Whether this last one is a further elaboration of the Aker-motif, or an independent development, can not be determined with certainty, but all in all it amounts to one of those “meaningful jumbles” that ancient Egyptian religion abounded in.

In any case, a regular determinative for Aker’s name in later days is that of two lions, back to back, as in the following specimen:¹⁹



¹⁹ Adapted from FD 6.



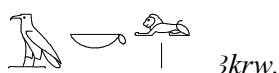
Fig. 2 The deceased in front of the Lions of the Horizon. Tomb of Anherkau, Deir el Medineh (20th dynasty).

As we discussed with Aah, we can (try to) distinguish between primary and secondary cosmic gods. With respect to the earth, it seems certain that Aker was a primary earth-god: derived directly from the awe for the earth as the home of a tremendous might. Geb may also originally have been an earth-god, but his association with the earth may just as well have been prompted by the necessities of mythical story-telling: as partner of the sky goddess Nut, assigning the earth to him would have helped to incorporate him into the scene.²⁰ The Memphite god Ta-Tenen - originally the god of the Primeval Hill - could easily evolve into an earth-god. But gods like Ptah and Osiris, who would later also operate in the role of earth-gods, are doubtlessly of later vocation.

With Aah and Aker, we come face to face with the primary process of god-forming in ancient Egypt: that of an immediate encounter with a natural force. That for both Aah and Aker, this state of affairs is still clearly recognizable in the historic period indicates, that these gods never detached themselves too far from their domain: the moon or the earth. Unlike Khons or Geb, they did not become a “person”, capable of acting in myths.

The Akeru, or “earth-gods”

In addition to the god Aker, sometimes a plural “Akeru” is mentioned, usually translated as “earth gods”. The idea of earth gods, or earth spirits, does not strike us as particularly weird, so the concept is generally accepted. There are however some good reasons to question it. If we return to the Pyramid Texts, we find there the oldest writings for “Akeru” in the introduction to the well known Cannibal Hymn (Spell 273-74). In the texts of Unas (last king of the 5th dynasty), we see this writing:



²⁰ Or the other way around, of course.



In the texts of his successor Teti (first king of the 6th dynasty), the spelling is as follows:



Although the signs are different, the sound-value for both writings is the same: *3krw*, vocalized by us as Akeru.

The letter “w” in ancient Egyptian represents a sound that stands midway between “u” and “v”. As such, it has something of both a vowel and a consonant. As the hieroglyphic script normally ignored vowels, the “w” was apt to being omitted - especially at the end of words. That is why we encounter some words in two different spellings: with and without an ending in “w”, depending on how precise a scribe wanted to be. One example in the area of god’s names is Khons: more full writings of this name read Khonsu. So if we come across an occasional writing Akeru, we may well wonder whether we should perhaps interpret this as a more full writing of Aker, including the semi-vowel at the end of the word.

But there is more. A specialized use of “w” in Egyptian is that of a plural ending for masculine nouns. This “w” is also regularly omitted in writing. Since a plural noun will usually be followed by a determinative that indicates plurality (such as three strokes, or less commonly three dots), the absence of the grammatical ending normally does not pose a problem. Now if we assume that the pronunciation of the name of the earth-god included a weak u/w at the end of the word, this may have prompted a careful scribe to write Akeru instead of Aker. Then the next scribe may jestingly have treated the ending in “w” as an ending of plurality, adding a determinative of plurality, such as the three dots in the example given above.²¹

But there is still one more element to take into account. This involves the sign of the recumbent lion. As a phonetic sign, it has the sound value of r+w. But it can also serve as an ideogram, i.e.: as a picture of what is meant: a lion. The use of this sign in the name for Aker would have been attractive to a scribe, because of Aker’s association with the lion / sphinx. Revealing is the single vertical stroke at the end of the word in the Unas-text, given above. This stroke signifies: “What I mean is the object depicted”. The sign  means the letter “r”, but  means: “mouth”. So the stroke beneath the lion stands for: “I mean this: a lion”. Because of the double meaning of “r+w” and “lion” for this sign, *and* the double meaning of “earth-god” and “lion-god” for Aker, this would for an Egyptian scribe have been a highly appealing play of signs and images. I therefore assume that “Akeru” was originally not a plural, but a more full writing of the name of this earth-god, and that it only later acquired a real plural meaning. When we will take a closer look to the use of Akeru in funerary texts, we will find there some additional support for this theory.²²

Aker in funerary literature

We do not encounter Aker a lot in funerary texts. After the Old Kingdom, the role of myth increased substantially - especially in the realm of funerary beliefs. Poor Aker did however not have much to offer in that respect. His fellow earth-god Geb, being a leading character in the Heliopolitan “traveling road show”, was far better suited to cater for that need. Already in the Pyramid Texts, Geb is mentioned 12 times for each reference to Aker.

²¹ A well-documented parallel phenomenon involves *nisbe*-adjectives (ending in *-y*) being written as duals (that also end in *-y*). So *m3^rty*, hence often erroneously translated as “of the two Truths”. Another regular example is *niwty*.

²² One more reason to be sceptical about Akeru being a plural is, that Aker is not a singular: it is a *name*, not a noun.

At the same time, by staying relatively close to his original domain - the earth - Aker remained particularly associated with it - and in a funerary context, the earth as such was mostly an undesirable, even dreaded environment. The deceased hoped to leave his tomb inside the earth, to ascend to the sky, or travel to the Beautiful West.

The Pyramid Texts: Aker

As already mentioned, Aker is referred to 12 times in the Pyramid Texts: 9 times as Aker, and 3 times as Akeru.

Pyr. 324-325: "Unas is a flame (moving) before the wind to the end of the sky and to the end of the earth ("ta") when the hand of the lightning is voided of Unas.²³ Unas travels Shu and traverses Aker, he kisses the Red crown, (even he) whom the god cast forth."²⁴

In this text from the Unas pyramid, the words "ta" (*t3*, "earth") and "Aker" (*3kr*, "earth-god") are thus used in parallel.

Pyr. 796: "The earth ("ta") speaks: The doors of Aker are opened for you, the doors of Geb are thrown open for you, you come forth at the voice of Anubis, he makes a spirit of you like Thoth."

Both Geb and Aker are earth gods, so the meaning is unmistakably clear: the deceased will be freed from his tomb inside the earth, to become a spirit in the sky.

Several other paragraphs (1014 and 1713) express the same meaning.

These texts connect the earth as a physical phenomenon with the earth-gods Aker and Geb. Surprisingly enough though, a composite name such as Geb-Aker or Aker-Geb is, as far as I know, not attested.

The Pyramid Texts: Akeru

In accordance with my hypothesis regarding "Akeru", I will replace this with Aker.

Pyr. 393: "The bones of Aker tremble."

From the beginning of the famous Cannibal Hymn.

Pyr. 658: "You will not be seized by Aker, you will not be opposed by the starry sky."

Pyr. 2201-2: "O King, live, for you are not dead. Horus will come to you that he may cut your cords and throw off your bonds; Horus has removed your hindrance and Aker shall not lay hold of you."

This negative attitude towards Aker is in the Pyramid Texts not without parallel. At times, the god Osiris is treated likewise, and for the same reason: the Afterlife that Osiris promised was in the Netherworld, below the surface of the earth - not in the sky.

The Coffin Texts

In the Coffin Texts, there are two dozen references to Aker / Akeru: half of these as Aker, the other half as Akeru.

²³ Meaning: when Unas is cast forth as a bolt of lightning.

²⁴ Faulkner translates: "The King travels the air and traverses the earth." This actually coincides with the gist of the text, but such a translation obviously obscures by what means it was conveyed.

The overall atmosphere of the texts has now changed noticeably. Where in the Pyramid Texts “successfully getting there” (into the Afterlife) was the main issue, it is now mostly about avoiding disaster: about fear of *not* getting there. Completely in tune with this, the earth-god is now more consistently portrayed as being dangerous. In fact, he is less of a god, and more of an (evil) spirit. This is enhanced by the regular use of the plural: Akeru, instead of Aker. From here on, the context makes it clear that Akeru should really be understood as a plural: “earth-gods”. As a pack, they are more readily identified as something threatening and dangerous.

CT I-398: “My soul shall not be gripped by the Falcons, my soul shall not be seized by the Pigs, my soul shall not be grasped by the Earth-gods, my soul shall not be seized by magic.”

That here the plural is an intended reality is evident from the parallel use of Falcons / Pigs / Earth-gods: these are all in the plural.

CT III-58: “I will survive Aker.”

CT VI-46: “I am not held by the Earth-gods.”

With texts like these, we may well wonder whether we should still consider Aker a god - or perhaps rather a demon, like Apep. It would not be unheard of: the god Seth at some point turned into a demon. Nowhere however, does the attitude towards Aker get as negative as it gets towards Seth during the Late Period. Perhaps Aker was spared such a fate because he - unlike Seth - never attracted enough attention to really matter.

Several more spells in the Coffin Texts express similar attitudes, but most are rather indistinct and blurred - as is so often the case in the CT.

Book of the Dead

In the BD, the mentions of Aker are down to 5 times (Spells 39, 94, 96, 99 and 108), of which only one is in the plural (Spell 108). In only one instance, the mention of Aker is actually meaningful:

BD, Spell 39: “(...) your bones shall be broken, your limbs shall be cut off, Aker has condemned you, O Apep, enemy of Re.”

There is a connection between the earth-god and snakes, for the earth is their habitat. Apep, as the most dangerous of snakes, is here condemned by Aker, the earth-god himself. But in all other mentions of Aker in the Book of the Dead, his name appears to have been chosen randomly from the list of available gods.

This state of affairs need not surprise us: in the BD, the role of myth has even further increased - and Aker, as said before, did not have much of a mythological component. This lack of the mythological is consistent with his relatively staunch immanence. Aker hardly protruded from his abode: he may have had a head, and sometimes even hands - but he lacked feet...

The Underworld Books

A new strand of funerary texts is formed by the “Underworld Books”. They make their first appearance in the royal tombs of the 18th dynasty, in the Valley of the Kings. In these

“Books”, such as the “Book of what is in the Underworld”, the “Book of Gates” and the “Book of Caverns”, the Afterlife has been relocated decisively from the heavens to the inside of the earth.²⁵ It is the place where the sun goes, after it sets on the western horizon. The sun then enters into the Netherworld, mostly in the form of a ram-headed god. Every night, the gods who are in his retinue have to fight their way back to the eastern horizon, clearing a path for him, that he might triumphantly rise again into the morning sky. In the meantime, his passing brings hope and light to those who forever dwell in the Netherworld: the dead.

This emphasize on the inside of the earth as a location for the Afterlife had a positive effect on the status of the earth-god Aker. We now find regular depictions of the Aker-motif, and in the so-called “Book of Aker”, he is even one of the main protagonists.

The following are some typical depictions: one from the “Book of what is in the Underworld”, the other from the “Book of Caverns”:

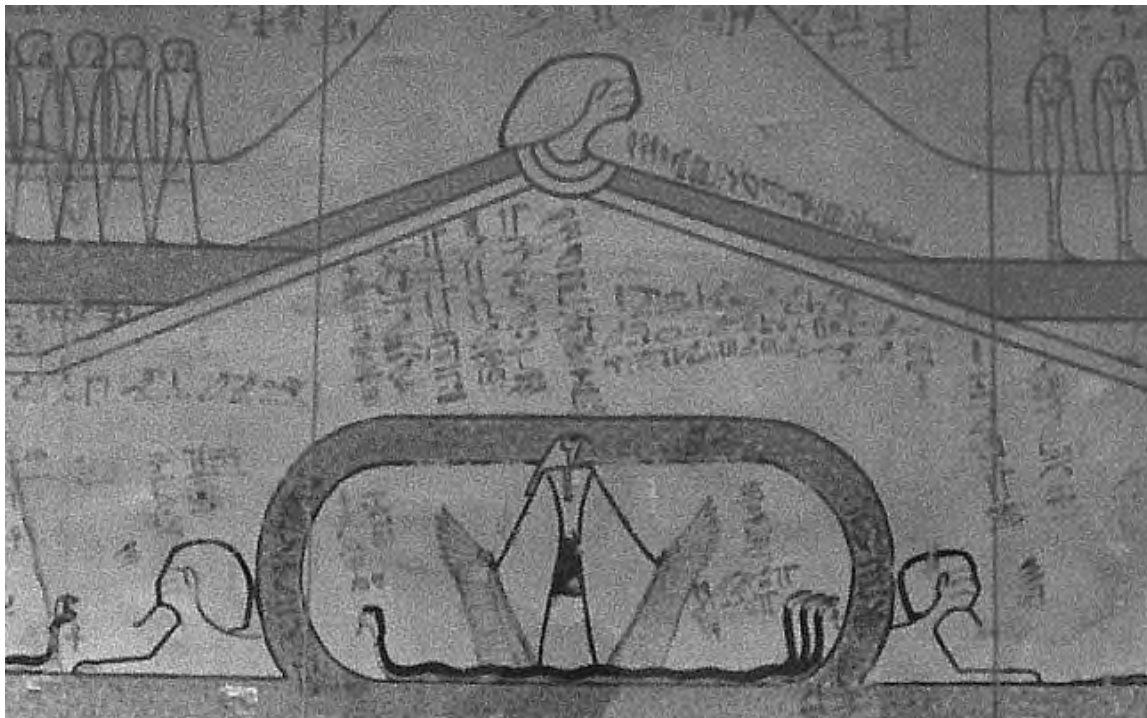


Fig. 3 The sun-god (inside the oval) is protected by Aker, keeping watch on either side. A detail from the Fifth Hour of the “Book of what is in the Underworld”. Tomb of Thuthmosis III, Valley of the Kings (18th dynasty).

²⁵ This relocation is limited to the Underworld-books proper. In other contemporary texts, the heavenly Afterlife still makes an occasional appearance.



Fig. 4 The sun-god (with ram's head) in his bark in the Netherworld, on the back of Aker. From the last division of the "Book of Caverns", in the tomb of Tawesert / Sethnakht in the Valley of the Kings (19th / 20th dynasty).

"Aker" as a word for "earth"

In his *Concise Dictionary of Middle Egyptian*, Faulkner gives as translation for "Aker":

earth-god Aker, [also] the earth itself.

For the latter meaning, he refers to Pyr. 325. For the text of that paragraph, see page 16 above, and my comment in note 24. This one text seems by no means enough grounds for such an extra meaning of the word. (The comprehensive *Wörterbuch der Ägyptischen Sprache* does not give this meaning, either).

Depictions

Depictions of Aker are limited to vignettes in funerary literature and the like, as in Fig. 4. These are in fact oversized specimen of the hieroglyph used to write his name with.

Personal names

No personal names compounded with Aker are known.²⁶

Geographical connection

There are no towns or other regions known with a special connection to Aker. Where Geb had a particularly strong association with Egypt as a country (in several traditions, Geb once ruled Egypt as king), Aker apparently belonged to a lower, almost pre-cultural substratum.

Temples

Aker did not have a daily temple cult of his own: there were no temples dedicated to him.

Lit.: *Bonnet* 11-13; *Eine* 271; *Vergote* 121. Erik Hornung: *Aker*, in *LÄ*.

²⁶ Hornung in *Aker*, *LÄ*. The *Wörterbuch* concurs.