

## FINGERS, STARS, AND THE 'OPENING OF THE MOUTH': THE NATURE AND FUNCTION OF THE *NTRWJ*-BLADES<sup>1</sup>

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In *JEA* 78, it was argued that the 'opening of the mouth' ritual of the Egyptian mortuary cult re-enacted the transitions of birth and childhood in order to render the reborn dead person mature enough to eat an adult meal. Here its central act, the opening of the mouth itself, is shown to mimic the clearing of a newborn's mouth with the little fingers. Originally, the gesture resembled that of anointing; later the fingers were replaced by the finger-shaped *ntrwj*-blades, and in the Sixth Dynasty the adze was imported from the statue ritual. As frequently happened in Egyptian religion, however, ritual texts and iconography continued to invoke the older implements along with the newer tools, in order to render the ritual more effective. The relationship between birth and statues is intriguingly paralleled in a Mesopotamian statue ritual.

IN New Kingdom tombs and papyri, 'opening of the mouth' scenes often display a collection of the tools used in the ritual (fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> Prominent among them are adzes, the wood-carving tools that E. Otto identified as the principal instruments of the New Kingdom rite, which he saw as essentially a statue ritual.<sup>3</sup> Oddly, these otherwise comprehensive collections never include the instruments used in the earliest accounts of the 'opening of the mouth', the two blades cited in the Pyramid Texts of Unas and other Old Kingdom editions of the ritual.<sup>4</sup> The name of these two blades, *ntrwj*, does occur in the New Kingdom ritual, sometimes modified to *ntrtj*, but it is attached to one of the adzes.<sup>5</sup>

The blades are attested in four different contexts in the Old Kingdom. They are mentioned in the Pyramid Texts, where they are called *ntrwj*; in inventory texts from the mortuary temple of Neferirkare at Abu Sir, where they are called *sbwuj*;<sup>6</sup> and in several

<sup>1</sup> This article is a revised and expanded version of a talk presented at the Sixth International Congress of Egyptologists at Turin in September of 1991. I would like to thank Dr James P. Allen, who drew my attention to several of the most telling passages in the Pyramid Texts; Dr A. Cohen, who answered my questions on obstetric matters; and Prof. Edward Anders, who gave me useful references and suggestions about meteorites. I am especially indebted to Prof. Anne D. Kilmer for pointing out the Mesopotamian parallel to my reconstruction of the Egyptian ritual and for allowing me to quote some of her own unpublished work. Prof. Irene J. Winter also provided useful comments and references on the Mesopotamian connections. Dr Emily Teeter, Dr Maarten J. Raven, and a reviewer for the *JEA* also offered thoughtful critiques and suggestions. My arguments depend heavily upon the interpretation of the entire 'opening of the mouth' ritual that I proposed in *JEA* 78 (1992), 113-47, and the relevant conclusions of this article and the arguments supporting them are summarized here.

<sup>2</sup> For accessible colour photographs of these collections, see R. O. Faulkner, *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead* (Austin, Texas, 1990), 38 (upper right of lower figure) and 54 (lower right of figure); T. G. H. James, *Ancient Egypt: The Land and its Legacy* (Austin, Texas, 1988), 151, fig. 107; R. E. Freed, *Ramesses the Great* (Memphis, Tennessee, 1987), 109 (upper figure); K. el-Mallakh and A. C. Brackman, *The Gold of Tutankhamun* (New York, 1978), colour pl. 2. This last example was redrawn as fig. 1 here.

<sup>3</sup> *Das ägyptische Mundöffnungsritual* (Wiesbaden, 1960), II, 2-3.

<sup>4</sup> Pyr. 30 b, attested in the pyramids of Unas, Pepi II, Neith, and Oudjebten.

<sup>5</sup> Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 17-18.

<sup>6</sup> P. Posener-Kriéger and J. L. de Cenival, *The Abu Sir Papyri* (London, 1968), pls. 20.g, 21.o, and 22B. See also P. Posener-Kriéger, *Les archives du temple funéraire de Néferirkarê-Kakai* (Cairo, 1976), 173-4.

the bricks of birth.<sup>41</sup> The use of obviously inappropriate tools in both these sequences suggests an intentional incongruity, meant to highlight the crucial scenes of the ritual and their meaning. The adze, a statue-making tool, was used in the central act of the funerary ceremony to stress the permanence of the mummy as a cult image; similarly, a gesture with the human little finger, taken from a human birth ritual, was incorporated into the statue ritual to emphasize the equation of the statue with the human being it represented. The compilers of the ritual exchanged the implements of the human rebirth ritual with the adze of the statue ritual to blur the boundaries between the statue of the deceased and his mummy in both environments.

One further example in which the implements of the New Kingdom ritual are related to the original use of fingers to open the mouth is the name of another adze, *dwn-ꜥ*, which is sometimes used in Scene 26. This name, which Otto translates 'Arm-ausstrecker',<sup>42</sup> represents a different metaphor for the gesture made by the hand of the midwife, and equates the entire adze with the outstretched arm, from which it follows that the active part of the implement, the blade at the end of the handle, represented the fingers at the end of the arm.

### The little fingers and the seven sacred oils

In one Sixth Dynasty tomb scene (fig. 6), the cult functionary extends his two little fingers towards the deceased, in a gesture very like the one that I have hypothesized as the original 'opening of the mouth' act.<sup>43</sup> This gesture, however, is used to perform the ritual of anointing. A similar gesture, in which one little finger is offered while the other hand holds the jar (fig. 7),<sup>44</sup> continues to be the typical gesture for anointing throughout Egyptian history.

The use of the same gesture in both these rituals might be explained by the hypothesis that the anointing ritual was yet another version of the 'opening of the mouth' sequence. In practice, however, the two rituals seem to have been carefully distinguished. In the Pyramid Texts, neither the spells accompanying the seven sacred oils nor those that follow, accompanied by offerings of eyepaint and cloth, make the slightest reference to the mouth of the deceased or contain any other elements that can be related to the birth sequence. Moreover, the oil rite was performed using a platter that was very like the platter used to hold the *ps̥-kf* set, but had seven round depressions for oils rather than recesses to hold ritual equipment. The occurrence in the archaeological evidence of

<sup>41</sup> Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 96–7 (Scene 36). The four *ꜥbwt* offered here may represent the four bricks of birth. I hope to examine the role of these bricks in funerary rites in a subsequent article.

<sup>42</sup> Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 19.

<sup>43</sup> W. K. Simpson, *The Mastabas of Qar and Idu* (Boston, 1976), 6–7 and fig. 25, captioned *wꜥh*, 'anointing'. G. Lapp, *Die Opferformel des Alten Reiches* (Mainz, 1986), 170, notes the apparent lack of parallel scenes in the Old Kingdom. I have also failed to find further clear examples, although the figure accompanying the caption *wꜥh* in a Sixth Dynasty offering list (following the presentation of the seven sacred oils) might also be making this gesture; as his lower arms are damaged, this is uncertain (Jéquier, *Tombeaux de particuliers*, fig. 127 on p. 112). More likely, however, the figure follows a closer parallel, where the hands are extended slightly, palms down, at hip level (Jéquier, *Pepi II*, II, 86). Perhaps significantly, both of these offering lists also contain the offerings that accompany the *ps̥-kf* sequence.

<sup>44</sup> The figure is taken from the temple of Seti I at Abydos: R. David, *A Guide to Religious Ritual at Abydos* (Warminster, 1981), 66, no. 14. This example is anomalous, in that the caption indicates that the king is wiping off the *md̥*-ointment; in other less well-preserved scenes, however, the same gesture is used for its application.



FIG. 6. Gesture used for anointing in the Sixth Dynasty tomb of Qar.

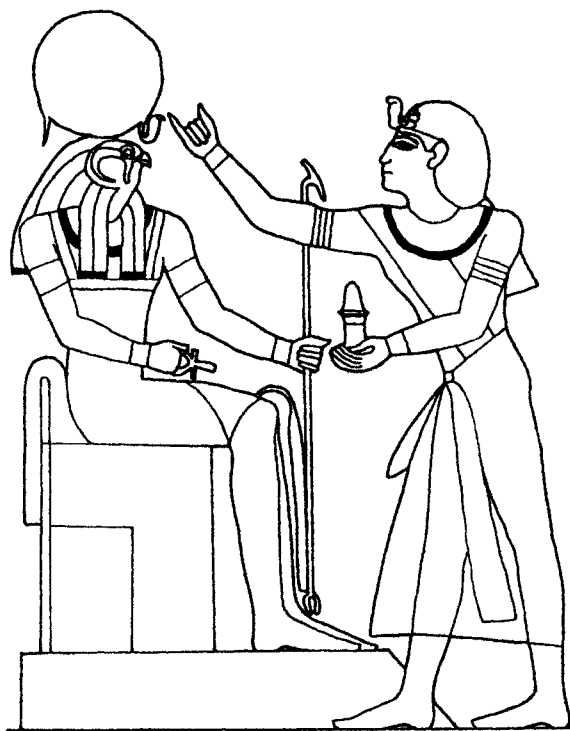


FIG. 7. Seti I anointing the uraeus of Re-Harakhti, from his cenotaph temple at Abydos.

complementary ritual platters for the two rites further demonstrates that the oil ceremony was performed along with the 'opening of the mouth' and was not replaced by it. The parallel relationship of the two rituals can also be seen in the Pyramid Texts and type A/B offering lists, where the anointing ritual directly follows the offerings made with the *psš-kf* set (list type B). In the pyramid of Unas, the second register of the offering ritual begins at this point, graphically emphasizing the parallel nature of the two rituals as well as the break between them.

The New Kingdom ritual of the 'opening of the mouth' excludes oils entirely, except in a single scene, Otto's Scene 55.<sup>45</sup> The accompanying text normally includes only two sacred oils, *mdt* and *bšs*, neither of which is among the seven oils of the Old Kingdom rite; two texts, however, 6 and 7 in Otto's enumeration, give a list of ten oils, including the seven sacred oils. A presentation of green and black eyepaint (Scene 56) follows the presentation of the oils just as it does in the Old Kingdom sequence. The accompanying texts make no reference to the opening of the mouth,<sup>46</sup> and Scene 55 normally occurs some distance from the *ntrwj* (Scene 26) and the scenes involving other mouth-opening tools: the little fingers (Scenes 14 and 33), the gold finger (Scene 32), the *psš-kf* (Scene 37), and the ostrich feather (Scene 39).<sup>47</sup> Thus, the oils are again part of a sequence that

<sup>45</sup> Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, 120–6.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 120–4. The text that follows the offering of the oils and eyepaint in three editions of the New Kingdom ritual makes frequent references to the deceased having been born on this day, however, including an echo of the sequence involving the *kr* as a placenta in the womb: 'your *kr* is before you, your *kr* is behind you' (ibid. 124–6, especially n. 7 to the translation).

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 126–7.



FIG. 8. The presentation of the two little fingers in the 'opening of the mouth' ritual from the tomb of Amenemhat (TT 53).

follows, and is clearly distinct from, the part of the ritual specifically dedicated to opening the mouth.

The gesture of offering either a single little finger or both is shown in some of the New Kingdom mouth-opening scenes (fig. 8).<sup>48</sup> It is clearly related to the gesture shown in New Kingdom anointing scenes, and almost identical to their Old Kingdom counterpart. Just as the same gesture was used in both spheres in the New Kingdom, so it seems likely that it was used in the parallel rituals in the Old Kingdom, possibly to stress their complementary roles and to lend unity to the actions of the priest through repetition.<sup>49</sup> When the human little finger in the mouth-opening ritual was replaced by the *ntrwj*-blades, and they in turn were replaced by the adze, the gesture remained the principal one in use in the anointing ritual. It was thus primarily associated with anointing in later periods, while in 'opening of the mouth' rituals it played a secondary and historical role, and was depicted only in the fullest versions.

#### *ntrwj*-blades and fingers of *bj*

A significant peculiarity of the *ntrwj* is their composition. They are said in all the textual sources to be of *bj*, which was clearly a material thought to be meteoritic.<sup>50</sup> Meteoritic iron has been found in Egypt in burials as early as the Predynastic period.<sup>51</sup> It was

<sup>48</sup> Otto, *Mundöffnungsritual*, II, fig. 2a (lower left of photograph). Although this scene is uncaptioned, its position adjacent to the presentation of the *ps̄-kf* (Scene 37) makes it almost certain that it is Scene 33 rather than Scene 55, which always occurs considerably later.

<sup>49</sup> There were also practical advantages. The little finger's softness and sensitivity suited it to delicate jobs, and its smaller diameter allowed the mouth of an oil jar to be correspondingly small, helping to protect valuable perfumes and oil from evaporation and spoilage.

<sup>50</sup> J. R. Harris, *Lexicographical Studies in Ancient Egyptian Minerals* (Berlin, 1961), 166–8; G. A. Wainwright, *JEA* 18 (1932), 3–15.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. W. M. F. Petrie, G. A. Wainwright, and E. Mackay, *The Labyrinth, Gerza and Mazghuneh* (London, 1912), 15–19.