

## Watchers, Slaughterers and Messengers

### On Some Extra-Human Beings from the Pyramid Texts

IN THE SO-CALLED “Egyptian Demonology”, it has been frequently stressed how an Egyptian word corresponding to the Greek *daímon* does not exist and that expressions such as “demons” or “monsters” are often borrowed from Greek, Latin or Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> Many peculiar characters populating the underworld—who are not identified with gods—are therefore defined just as: “messengers”, “watchers”, “wanderers” or “slaughterers”.

Rita Lucarelli highlights the central role of iconography as the most useful source for demonological studies, visual evidence being more direct than texts, that is especially true for the Book of Dead and New Kingdom funerary sources. Still, textual evidence has to be of some interest when we are dealing with contexts devoid of images.<sup>2</sup> The Old Kingdom pyramids of Saqqara fall under this category.

As a matter of fact, Pyramid Texts are “the oldest manifestation of ancient Egyptian mortuary literature”<sup>3</sup> and also the only “decoration”—using a quite inappropriate term—of the pyramids of late V and VI Dynasties, since king Unis. They are essentially ritual and personal spells meant, in James P. Allen’s words,<sup>4</sup> to “allow the deceased’s spirit to find its way safely out of the tomb”. They also describe an underworld made up of different places, divinities, animals, and creatures; and yet, there are some beings who can hardly be labelled: doorkeepers, gatekeepers, god-messengers or more generic guardians, whose description is given solely by ambiguous lexemes or periphrases used to define them. They have no proper names, rather a more or less defined function in different contexts, often equally unintelligible.

The aim of this paper is essentially to investigate some of the Pyramid Texts extra-human beings, contextualising them as deeply as the related spells permit, and collecting details about their semantic and action fields.

1. LUCARELLI 2013, pp. 12–13; LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 1–10; KOUSOULIS 2011, pp. x–xiv; SZPAKOWSKA 2013; CARIDDI, IANNARILLI 2020, pp. 77–79. The issue will be questioned again in the forthcoming book of Prof. Rita Lucarelli, whom I would like to thank for the confrontation that took place on this subject during the conference.

2. LUCARELLI 2013, pp. 13–14; LUCARELLI 2010a, pp. 5–6; LUCARELLI 2010b, p. 86.

3. HAYS 2012, p. XII.

4. ALLEN 2005, p. 6.

Such an analysis can be pursued by combining the information we held from two types of data:

- the content data, concerning the subject of Pyramid Texts spells in which the entities occur;
- the visual data, concerning the formal aspect of the lexemes as it is conveyed by the iconic nature of the signs, and mainly of determinatives (that is particularly effective in the Old Kingdom writing system).<sup>5</sup>

## I. WATCHERS (WRŠW)

In PT 373 we read: “Those of inaccessible places worship you, the Great Ones gather for you, *wršw* wait upon you”, where the term *wršw* (𓂏𓏏𓂏𓂏𓂏) can be translated with “watchers”<sup>6</sup> from the action *wrš*, “to watch”.<sup>7</sup> It is interesting to note that, both in Teti and Neferkara versions, the lexeme is followed by the determinative of the falcon on the perch, classifier for the divinity.

In the Pyramid Texts from Wnis to Neferkara the determinative used for the sphere of the divine is always 𓂏<sup>8</sup> and we need to wait for the Coffin Texts for the introduction of the determinative 𓂏: the explanation is given by the fact that in Pyramid Texts the use of the human figure is quite always avoided for apotropaic reasons.<sup>9</sup> Still, there is some evidence where the anthropomorphic determinative is present, but only partially, like in the following example from Merenra, just with the upper part of the body. The use of the falcon as a determinative would suggest that these Watchers are gods, but it is very relevant that the determinative seems to be changing in relation to the context and to the semantic field expressed in each single spell. In other spells different classifiers are applied, or even completely avoided (𓂏𓏏𓂏𓂏; 𓂏𓏏𓂏𓂏𓂏).

In “your Watchers mourn you” (Pyr. 744b) Merenra shows as determinative the female head with wig (𓂏), probably in order to recall the scope of the mourners; while in “Watchers dance for you” (Pyr. 1947a) *wršw* is classified by the dancer, similar to the one used in the action *ibꜣ*, “to dance”: 𓂏𓏏𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏.

More interesting for the “content data” than for the “visual data” are the passages where we find the “Watchers of Pe” and “Watchers of Nekhen”.

In two spells (Pyr. 795d-e; Pyr. 1013b) the king is said to receive his status as *akh* (*di.f n.f ꜣh.f*) or to be installed (*wꜣn*) among the Watchers of Pe (*wršw ꜣiw*), and to be dignified as a god (*shꜣ.f sw m nꜣr*) among the Watchers of Nekhen (*wršw nꜣnw*).

The souls of Nekhen and Pe are traditionally seen as the ancestors of the king, the predynastic rulers, being Nekhen (Hierakonpolis), the Upper Egyptian center of Horus worship, and Pe (Buto), the Lower Egyptian center in western Delta. These ancestors perform the function to assist the king’s ascent to heaven.<sup>10</sup>

5. In Egyptian culture words are essentially images: this is the central idea in the writing process, especially in funerary contexts. This is very clear during the Old Kingdom, when hieroglyphic signs are believed to have an intrinsic power capable of acting on the reality, and to be endowed with dynamism (IANNARILLI 2018, pp. 40–41).

6. ZANDEE 1960, p. 203 translates “guards”.

7. *Wb* I, p. 336.

8. SHALOMI HEN 2006, especially pp. 137–158.

9. IANNARILLI 2019, pp. 300–301.

10. FRANKFORT 1948, pp. 93–95; ZABKAR 1968, pp. 15–17; BROWN 2016, pp. 89–91.

These Watchers of Nekhen and Pe could be also interpreted as beings connected to the Ancestors who seem to have specific roles: they mourn, they dance, they can install the king among the gods, giving him a noble role that allows him to become an *akh*. So we can observe that these Watchers are connected to *akhs* but are not *akhs*, and to gods, with whom they can share the classifier, but they cannot be totally identified with them.

They own special powers, which are not universal but circumscribed to two/three tasks, and this characteristic brings them closer to demons than gods<sup>11</sup>, meaning with “demons” those ambivalent creatures who act on the border of two worlds, “religious frontier-striders” as Gregor Ahn defines them.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. MESSENGERS (WPWTYW)

We can find collective names of extra-human gangs acting as heralds and/or punishers of the gods, as the Messengers (*wpwtwy*). They played as mediators, like other different categories of beings (netherworld guardians or demons of illness), and they act as intermediaries of other gods. In the underworld books, just when the sun-god is weaker, some divine helpers rush to his rescue, among them also *wpwtwy* appear.<sup>13</sup> In the Old Kingdom the term *wpwtwy* referred to a socially high ranking official close to the vizir whose main duty was to deliver diplomatic messages;<sup>14</sup> later they are mentioned in magical and ritual texts from the Middle Kingdom to the Ptolemaic and Roman Era<sup>15</sup> as “agents of punishment on earth and in the netherworld”.<sup>16</sup> When these ‘wandering demons’ act in the role of messengers, they usually have a precise aim, which can be directed against humankind<sup>17</sup>, but not always is so unequivocal.

Divine emissaries are not always subordinate to other gods, since sometimes they also *are* gods; it is the case of a quote of a *wpwtwy* appearing in one passage of the so-called Cannibal Spell, known from the earliest pyramid of Unis and Teti.<sup>18</sup> Here (Pyr. 402c) we read that Khonsu is the one who slew and strangles lords for the king and takes out their viscera to feed them to him, because he is the *wpwtwy* whom the King “sends to drive back”<sup>19</sup> ().

But there are also the Messengers of Ra ( or , Pyr. 1440c) and Horus (Pyr. 1686a). In the first example the *wpwtwy* seems to have a proper name, of complex interpretation: “I am *Sksn*, the messenger of Ra, and this Pepy cannot be held back from the sky.” This *Sksn* seems to be attested exclusively in Pyramid Texts,<sup>20</sup> written with the divine determinative () in Merenra and

11. LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 4.

12. AHN 2006, p. 503.

13. SCHIPPER 2007, p. 6.

14. SCHIPPER 2007, p. 10.

15. LGG II, pp. 364–366.

16. LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 3.


17. LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 3.


18. And later in the Middle Kingdom at Lisht and Dashour and in Spell 573 of Coffin Texts (CT VI, 177a–183e).

19. In ALLEN 2005 (p. 51) *hsf* is translated “to confront” and in FAULKNER 1969 (p. 81) “to restrain”, but SHMAKOV (2015, p. 138) has noted that “drive back” can better fit into the general context regarding scenes of butchering and handling of cattle that can also be found in Old Kingdom mastabas. This connection between the action *hsf* and Khonsu is also expressed in The Debate between a Man and His Soul (24): *hsf hnsu hr.i* (ALLEN 2011, pp. 40–41).

20. *Wb* 4, 319.4; LGG VI, p. 675. According to James P. Allen (2005, p. 177; p. 234) his name would mean: “Destroys-Them”, therefore considering *sk* derivation of the verb *ski*, ‘to destroy, to remove’ (*Wb* 4, pp. 312–313).

with the bearded-head in Pepy I and we just know that he is linked to the sun-god or to Horus (in Pyr. 1734b he appears as *Sksn n Hr*, maybe a form of the god). We only learn that this extra-human being is able to protect the king, preventing him from being barred (*hsf*) from the sky and indeed, helping his establishment on the throne of the sun-god: “I have come for you as Horus’s messenger, for he has installed you, father Osiris Merenre, on Atum-Re’s throne, that you may lead the mankind (Pyr. 1686a-c). In a single case (Pyr. 2000a-b) *wpwty* seems to be an epithet of the dead king himself: “O Neferkara, come in peace to Osiris, Messenger of the great god come in peace to the great god!”

The presence of the divine determinative  in about one of three issues makes it easier for us to recognise these beings as “gods/demons”, but it is especially remarkable for Teti’s spells, giving that in Wnis and Teti the use of classifiers is rather occasional: only 29 attestations of the falcon on perch in Wnis, far more in Teti with 90 attestations, with the peak reached in Neferkara, where the determinative is applied with regularity.<sup>21</sup>

If we quickly consider some of the later interpretations, we see that in Coffin Texts *wpwty* can be written just with a logogram of a seated anthropomorphic figure with *wp*-horns on the head ()<sup>22</sup> while in the Book of the Dead a malevolent *wpwty* is mentioned as “a messenger who affects and exercises mutilation over the whole earth”.<sup>23</sup> In the Ptolemaic iconography and writing *wpwtyw* can be visualized as standing or seated baboons with praised arms<sup>24</sup> or with knives in their hands (Fig. 1).

In conclusion, is not easy to clarify whether these *wpwtyw* are hostile or benevolent. It seems that the concept of divine messengers changes according to the context; there are also proper gods who can be messengers and envoys of other gods (as Thot<sup>25</sup>), but they are different from beings who have the one and only one function as messengers like *wpwtyw* in Pyramid Texts. Their main duty seems “to bridge over the distance between god and man”,<sup>26</sup> acting as religious border crossers and achieving a task of intermediation (offensive or defensive).

### 3. SLAUGHTERERS (ḤꜣTꜢW)

There are other groups of wandering creatures who can act as divine emissaries, such as the *ḥꜣtiw*. The lexeme has been optionally translated as “fighting or slaughtering gods”,<sup>27</sup> “slaughterers”,<sup>28</sup> “murderers”,<sup>29</sup> “demons of knives”,<sup>30</sup> also considered creatures of darkness.<sup>31</sup> Mentioned from the

21. IANNARILLI 2018.

22. CT VI, 272c.

23. BD 163; 414, II.

24. RICHTER 2016, pp. 251–252.

25. The epithet *wpw* applied to Thot can be translated with “judge”, but also “messenger” when written with the seated baboon determinative and is connected to Thoth’s role in the Contending of Horus and Seth, where he acts as supreme judge between them (RICHTER 2016, p. 252).

26. SCHIPPER 2007, p. 15.

27. *Wb* III, p. 296.

28. LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 3.

29. BORGHOUTS 1978, p. 117.

30. LGG V, 635.

31. ALLEN 2005, p. 86: “He of the night”; p. 184: “Those of the nighttime”. These translations may suggest a derivation from *ḥꜣwi*, “evening, night” (*Wb* III, pp. 225–226).

Old Kingdom until the Ptolemaic and Roman Era, in the Pyramid Texts *ḥꜣtꜣw* seem to be feared and respected by the king for they have so much power that they “will not bend over Teti” (Pyr. 748c), and that the king wishes: “May those of the slaughters respect me!” (Pyr. 1265b).

This impressive strength needs to be neutralised or, at least, controlled in some way: “The slaughters fall on their face to you, and the Imperishable Stars kneel to you” (Pyr. 1535b-c). It is not superfluous to note here that the two actions *ḥꜣr*, to fall, and *mꜣs*, to kneel, are classified by a mutilated determinative: just head and arms for the former (𓂏), only legs for the latter (𓂏). The annihilation of the active and harmful possibilities of the spell, not only in its content but also in the graphic form, is thus complete. The word *ḥꜣtꜣw* itself is in most cases written phonetically, without any determinative (𓂏𓂏𓂏𓂏), but in one occurrence<sup>32</sup> it is followed by the knife (𓂏).<sup>33</sup>

Also, in later sources *ḥꜣtꜣw* continue to be particularly feared, visualized with knives in their hands in association to the damned. A good example is the relief of the tomb of Ramesses IX<sup>34</sup> where these slaughterers are depicted, among other creepy entities, as four standing figures with bull horns and knives in their hands, facing tied up and beheaded people (Fig. 2). In Ptolemaic and Roman periods *ḥꜣtꜣw* will be the manifestations of dead decans, whose demonized stars are seen as vehicles of illness and disease, but they can also receive a private local cult.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4. FINAL REMARKS

For reasons of space, just three categories of extra-human beings from Pyramid Texts have been analysed here, but more of them like doorkeepers, gatekeepers, and other forms of guardians would deserve further investigations.

The remarkable aspect to consider when using Pyramid Texts as primary source is not only the content of the spells, which however remains noteworthy, but also their graphic form. This is particularly true with regard to the use of determinatives. In the whole corpus we observe interesting alterations of these signs and, especially, of those distinguished by an anthropomorphic shape: indeed, all human signs are omitted or partially represented. This is due to the need to eliminate, or treat with particular care, all those figures which, in a particular environment such as the royal tomb, could possibly become dangerous: this implies the idea that, through the process of writing and the modifications that affect it, reality can be controlled and dominated.<sup>36</sup>

32. Pyr. 1265b, from the east wall of pyramid of Pepy where is located a group of spells for the protection of the tomb, and imprecation against the evil(?) guardian of the door at the corridor’s end (Spells 483–485): ALLEN 2005, pp. 98–99.

33. It can be of some interest that in Pyramid Texts one specific divine entity is connected to the semantic field of slaughter: Shezmu, associated both with the wine press and the bloodshed—“Unis is the one who feeds on men and lives on the gods [...]. It is Shezmu who will slaughter them for Unis and cook for him a portion of them [...].” (Pyr. 400a/430a), where the role of this god well fits into the so-called “Cannibal Hymn”. Here the verb used is *rxs*, with the determinative of a knife (CARIDDI, IANNARILLI 2020, pp. 79–80).

34. PM I, pp. 501–505; GUILMANT 1907, pls. LVII–LVIII.

35. LUCARELLI 2010a, p. 3; p. 7.

36. IANNARILLI 2018 and 2019.

The same purpose is achieved by adopting the sole knife instead of the whole anthropomorphic figure with knives we find for the *ḥwtiw*. The use of the divine classifier could therefore be a way to control the potentially threatening power of these entities; a sort of graphic euphemism to avoid representing more harmful determinatives that follow, equally dangerous extra-human beings.

It is tempting to say that the composite and multifaceted way of representing deities and demons with hybrid bodies in later iconographic sources is reflected in the Pyramid Texts precisely through the “hybrid writings” and graphic solutions used to name these beings: with or without determinative, with a partially anthropomorphic one or with the falcon on the standard.

What can certainly be stated is that the Pyramid Texts, while often obscure in their language and purpose, can help us to frame the origin of certain extra-human beings that we often find in later funerary textual and iconographic sources. Nevertheless, it should always be borne in mind that these entities may sometimes change their names and function when moving from this funerary context to others, which does not make their recognition in later sources easy or obvious; this aspect could certainly be the subject of a wider and more extensive study.

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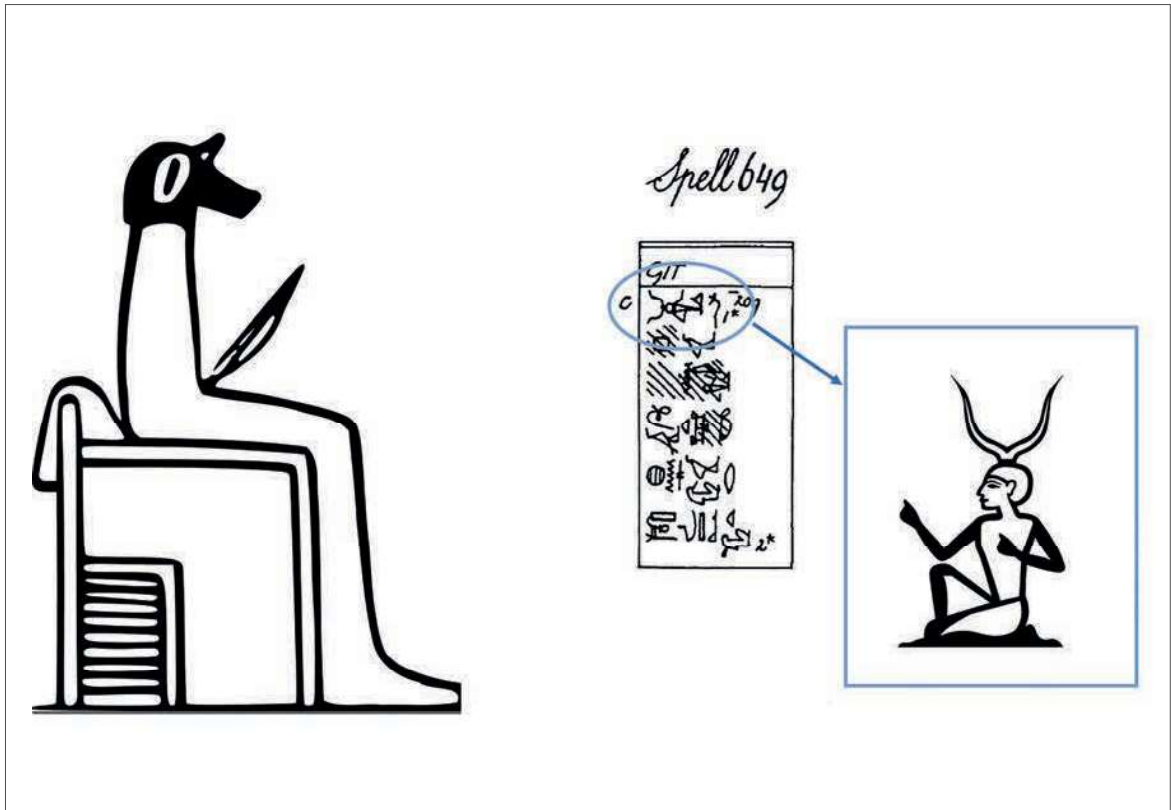


Fig. 1. Depiction of *wpwttyw* in Ptolemaic Temples (left) and in Coffin Texts (right). Author's elaboration.

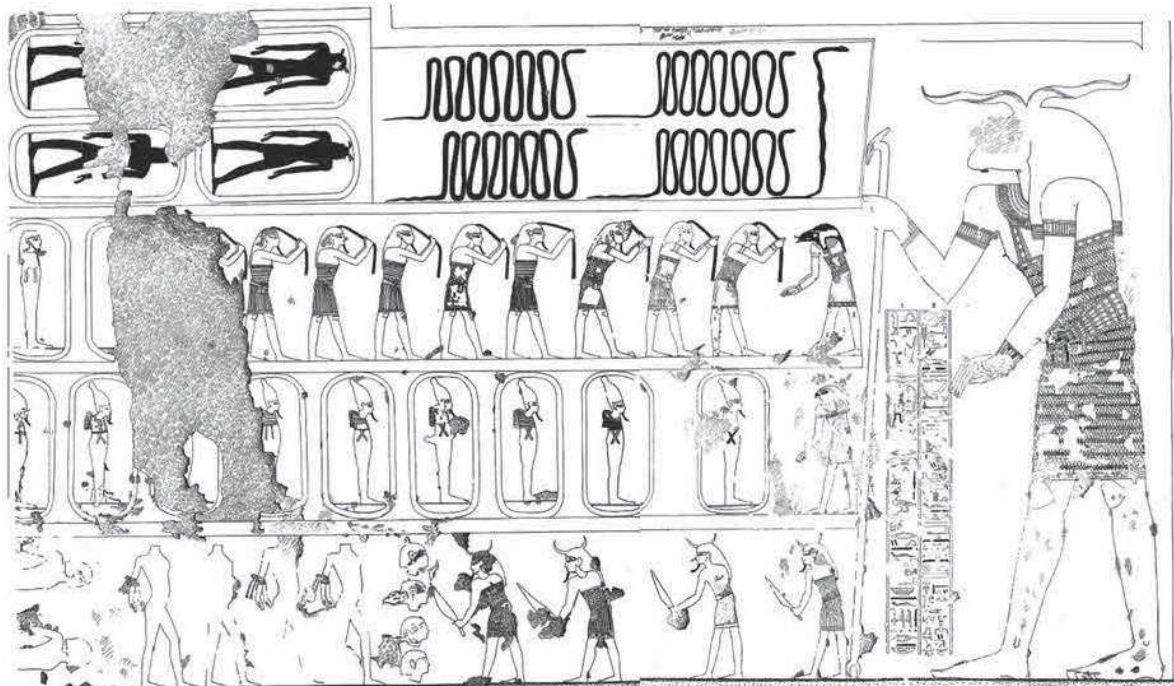


Fig. 2. Relief from the Tomb of Ramesses IX, showing a group of *hstiw* in the lower register. From Guilmant 1907, pl. LVII–LVIII.