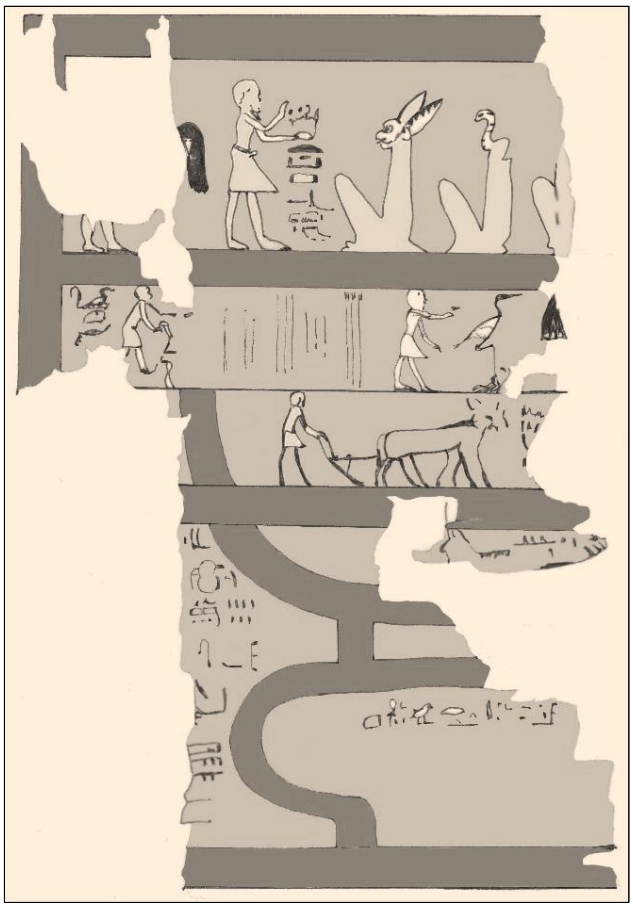
Elysian Fields or Sekhet-Aaru – Greek or Egyptian?

Paul Dunbavin (2023)

*The evolution of the Egyptian **Field of Reeds**: (Sekhet Aaru) over three millennia is examined here together with the Greek references to the **Elysian Fields** and **Elysium**. It will offer a cross-disciplinary view, looking across academic boundaries, without preconception to either Egyptology or Greek scholarship. It may also assist other researchers as a convenient summary and entry point to the various papyri and historical sources. So often these have to be sought as references to 'spell 110' within the extensive literature about the Egyptian Book of the Dead or among the papyri in the Museum catalogues. Specific analysis of the Elysian Fields and their landscape therefore tends to be obscured and lost within complex analysis of the hieroglyphic inscriptions and funerary customs. The vignettes of the Field of Reeds are discussed here along with an accompanying drawing or photograph, together with links to the best image sources available. As an article for the general reader or cross-disciplinary researcher the specialist terms drawn from wider Egyptology are held to a minimum and explained where necessary.*

The name *Book of the Dead* comes from the Arabic 'book of the dead man' as papyri with hieroglyphics and colourful scenes were typically found along with looted graves. To the Egyptians they were *The Chapters of Coming Forth by Day* – a set of instructions for the deceased to ensure their passage into an eternal afterlife. Nineteenth century Egyptologists would recognise the texts as spells and prayers; and noted their evolution from earlier forms on the walls of Old Kingdom pyramids and on the coffins from the Middle Kingdom. During the Old Kingdom, mummification and the hope of an eternal afterlife was the preserve of the king. The opportunity became democratised, at first only to high officials, but by the New Kingdom it was open to anyone who could afford an elaborate funeral.

Preparation for the afterlife was a profitable industry in ancient Egypt. One could be cynical and regard the evolution of the book of spells, along with the decorated coffins, ushabtis, mummified cats and various other grave goods as an opportunity for priests to extract a profitable income from the pious



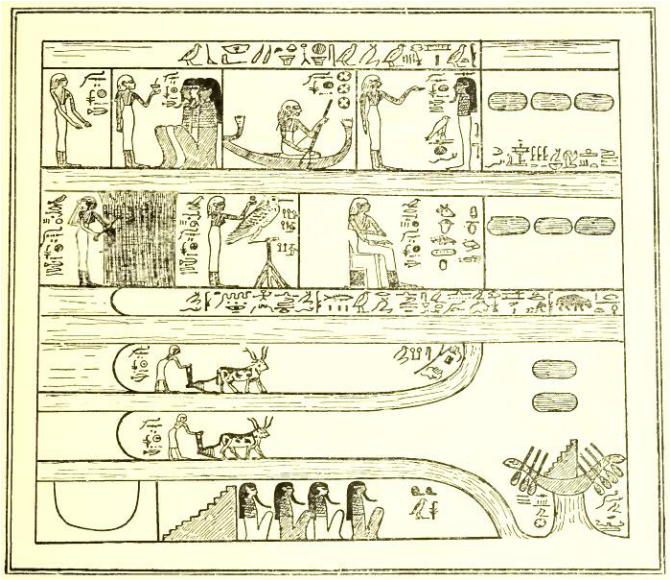
Spell 110: The Elysian Fields

The author's crude drawing from the papyrus of Nebqed, currently on display in the Louvre Museum, Paris.

and the gullible. To judge from the number of tombs that were robbed so soon after they were sealed, not all Egyptians were quite as devout as the hieroglyphic texts might suggest. Among the formulae found in the papyri was an illustration of *Sekhet Aaru*. Perhaps a picture of the eternal paradise was essential to show the customer what they were buying!

Only those who could pass the test of a virtuous life might hope for an eternal afterlife. Should they be eligible then they needed to know the geography and rituals of the Netherworld and overcome yet more obstacles. The next world was personal; it had to be properly defined and its nature could be specified simply by reciting or writing-down the formulas. For example: a spell granted that the deceased would not die for a second time; another spell would animate his ushabtis to work on his behalf; yet another to ward-off serpents, and so on. It seems that one merely needed to know the words of power, and to utter them at the appropriate point, in order to defeat the hazards and to pass through its gates. However, I shall not digress further here into the many contradictions of Egyptian religion beyond those relevant to the *Field of Reeds* and its perceived geography.

According to Sir E. A. Wallis Budge, British Museum keeper of Egyptology at the turn of the twentieth century, the origin of some spells could be traced back to King Den of the First Dynasty; and likely embodied concepts from the predynastic era. Logically, their composition cannot be older than the invention of mummification to preserve the body for the next life and the elaborate tombs in which they were buried. [S*ee Budge: The Book of the Dead, intro xxxix re: spell 64*]



We may see that the Egyptian underworld had many divisions. It was place of contradictions that does not make complete sense. The limitless underworld or *Duat*, held both the righteous and the unrighteous souls. The virtuous were allowed to enter *Sekhet Aaru*, which was part of a larger realm called: *Sekhet Hetep* (Fields of Peace) where the company of gods resided, some of whom ruled their own territories within the fields. We see the righteous spirit navigating the canals in his boat, loaded with gifts to propitiate the various gods. In the upper registers, separated by the canals, we see him making offerings to animal-headed deities. We see him ritually adoring the Bennu Bird and making further offerings to Osiris, who allows him through the gate. He is depicted cutting down the reeds and ploughing the fields of wheat (although his shabtis would perform this work on his behalf). In the lower registers, towards the sea, we see the island and a palace (denoted by a staircase) where the great company of gods resided; and the boat of the Sun God Re, usually moored in a blind channel or navigating the outer canal.

The numbers assigned to the various spells are an artefact of nineteenth century Egyptology. The ancient Egyptians themselves could seemingly choose which formulae they wished to include for the benefit of the deceased, much like the hymns and prayers of a modern funeral. Richard Lepsius in 1842, in his translation of the papyrus of Iufankh, would assign the number 110 to the scene depicting the Field of Reeds. Not every papyrus would contain this spell and not every burial would have a papyrus, depending upon the wealth, status and the piety of the deceased.

In reviewing the various depictions of the Elysian Fields in the appendices, I shall adopt modern vernacular by describing the layout either as 'portrait' or 'landscape', or as square where this is indeterminate. It is important to guard against the assumption that this layout has significance. It may be that the format was imposed by the available space of the media on which it was drawn: papyrus, coffin or temple wall. The canals of Sekhet Hetep may have been depicted as straight channels simply to differentiate them from the meandering rivers and streams. We must also refrain from assuming that geographical north is at the top, which is why I have used the terms left, right, etc, rather than east-west.

The Field of Reeds is evidently a coastal scene conveying the sense of a rectangular agricultural plain adjacent to a marshy river delta. We must assume that uncultivated land lies beyond the rectangular boundary canal. *However, this is not a map of Egypt!* It does not resemble at all the Nile or its delta and there is certainly no harsh desert in the Netherworld!

Even in the earliest vignettes on coffin walls, we see that the arrangement of the mandatory elements was somewhat free. Some features are common to all forms. The grid of canals or ditches are drawn *horizontally* to divide the fields – *never vertically*; and they were wide enough for boats to navigate. The canals may cross winding rivers, but they never cross or meet each-other. The fields are bounded by *a rectangular outer waterway*, which sometimes extends to the sea. The river-flow may be depicted to either left or right, and occasionally also towards the bottom of the vignette; *but never the top*. The island with the gods and staircase is typically placed adjacent the sea or in the lowest division, but always separated from the fields by a river or an arm of the sea. One or two boats may be present, usually moored in a blind channel, but sometimes in the sea or floating on the boundary canal. Three, four or five seated gods may be shown in the available space. Amid the fields, where the spirit will plough and cut the reeds, there are various pools and lakes.

Over the centuries, the geography evolved and some features were dropped from the scene. While Egyptologists may focus upon the evolution of the hieroglyphic text and the religious ascendancies through the dynasties, this neglects a gradual decay in the depiction of the physical features of the plain. Over the millennia these degenerate from the original portrayal of rivers, canals and islands to become mere lines and boxes enclosing the familiar text.

The Heliopolitan Recension – No Vignettes!

The spells that would become the Chapters of Coming Forth by Day are first recognised on the walls of the Fifth Dynasty pyramid of Unas; and those of later kings and queens up to the Eighth Dynasty. These hieroglyphic texts contain no artwork and are extremely cryptic.

From the *Pyramid Texts* we may gain an impression of the paradise into which the king expected to be reborn in the afterlife. He could wander freely between this place and among the stars as he wished. The underworld and its divisions should not so much be equated with Heaven or Hades of later religions, rather it was a vision of a real place on earth, beyond the setting sun in the west, into which the late king wished to be reborn. However, we would not gain from these early fragments any sense of its divine landscape.

The closest that we get to a reference to *Sekhet Aaru* within the *Pyramid Texts* would be the voyage of the deceased king, as he travels westwards with the sun in the boat of Re, along the "winding canal" (the ecliptic or perhaps the Milky Way) to the place where it sets [*Pyramid Utterances 264 & 268*]. In this place was the *Marsh of Reeds*, sometimes called the *Marsh of Offerings* or the *Marsh of Rest*. Perhaps we may see in this the prototype of the place depicted in the later vignettes.

Another early reference to Sekhet Aaru may be found in the Book of the Heavenly Cow dating from the First Intermediate Period (2181-2040 BC). Here we are told that Re (Atum) created the Field of Reeds after forgiving mankind for their rebellion against his rule. We may therefore consider that these concepts were established long before the Old Kingdom.

Despite the customary reference to the Pyramid texts as the *Heliopolitan Recension*, we need not assume that a formal 'recension' of the texts, or specifically of Spell 110, occurred either before or after this period. The transitional forms may simply have been lost.[*Note 1]

Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts

Depictions of *Sekhet Hetep* first appear on the decorated Twelfth Dynasty coffins from Deir-el-Bersha. The colourful coffins of **Gua** and **Seni** present a busy coastal scene; up to a third of the space within the scenes is taken up by the sea and islands. Clearly the detailed geography was considered important at this early period. The *Coffin Texts* do not yet show any imagery of the seated gods or of the deceased, ploughing, reaping, etc.

It is in the *Coffin Texts* that we see the emergence of Osiris as lord of the underworld and the creator sun-god Re is less in evidence; but his boat is always prominent in the canals. Later, the deceased would be termed 'the Osiris-X' much as one might today refer to 'the late Mr-X' and it is Osiris whom the deceased must convince to let him enter. Egyptologists would consider that the later spells more closely follow the forms in the *Coffin Texts* rather than the cryptic *Pyramid Texts*. However, the journey of the deceased, westward with the setting sun, reveals its older roots.

The Theban Recension

After a gap of some 400 years from which we have no surviving images of the Field of Reeds, they reappear on the papyri of the Eighteenth Dynasty. They were no longer used as decoration on coffins. Termed the *Theban Recension* by nineteenth century scholars, again it is not clear that any formal redefinition of the texts occurred during this interval.

In the scenes dating from the reigns of Thutmose IV and Amenhotep III we begin to see a simplification from the geographical features in the *Coffin Texts*. The written content grows steadily in prominence and the space available for the sea and islands is compressed. In the earliest forms we see the boat moored in a blind channel, with sometimes a *small island* below, which is dropped from the scene over the next few centuries. The extra space now allows images of the deceased to be shown, which become a standard feature from this point forward.

The earliest form may be the small relief-carved vignette within the tomb of **Senenmut**, who was a favourite of Hatshepsut (**1507-1458 BC**). This contains the recognisable elements from the earlier coffin texts, including the long harbour-island below the boat as found in the papyrus of **Nebseni**; however the entire scene orientation is reversed. [*Note 4]

Variant forms begin to appear after the Amarna period when the old religion and the concept of the afterlife were temporarily suppressed. Egyptologists would propose that different 'master' versions of the chapters were preserved within the regional nomes and their temples, each with their distinctive version of the afterlife. Simplified forms of the rectangular canals and divisions would, in some cases, forget the outflow to the sea and the island of gods becomes just an internal island within the fields (see: **Ani, Nakht,** and **Anhai**). In others the position of the sea might vary to left or right (see **Userhat, Nesi-Khensu**). We see more 'artistic-license' used in the colourful version within

the tomb of **Sennedjem**; and fewer divisions (**Nesitanebtashru, Nakht**); sometimes there might be fewer gods and staircases depicted, or only a single boat.

In the later forms following the Third Intermediate Period, when Upper and Lower Egypt were divided under foreign rulers, we begin to see the original significance of the rectangular enclosing waterway being forgotten; it becomes just a border for the interior scenes.

The Saite Recension and the Ptolemaic Era

By the Late Period, the Book of the Dead had become a hodgepodge of formats and religious material. The spells had no fixed sequence or any rules as to which should be included.

Following the reunification after 664 BC when Psamtik (Psammetichos) expelled the Nubians and Assyrians, the Twenty-sixth 'Saite' Dynasty established the capital of the unified Egypt at Sais in the western delta. After such a long period of foreign rule, the native Egyptian culture was revived. At Sais, the ancient temple and religion of the Libyan goddess *Neit* returned to prominence. The older customs from the First Dynasty and pyramid age were promoted, along with a standardisation of the spells within the Book of the Dead. This was also the period when alliances with the Greeks and trade between Egypt and the Aegean grew in importance and influence. Greeks began to visit Egypt and to absorb its culture and religion.

The standard format crystallised many of the elements and loss of detail that we see evolving in the earlier versions of Spell 110. Little extra can be learned by studying these late vignettes individually. A few are included in the appendices to demonstrate the forms of *Sekhet Hetep* that were current when Greek travellers first encountered the Egyptian myths of the Underworld.

Following the conquest by Alexander in 332 BC the transfer of Greek culture would now influence Egypt rather than the reverse. The Greeks would equate their own gods and goddesses with those of Egypt; for example, the sun god Re was equated with Helios and the war goddess Neit with Athene. Osiris, the lord of the underworld, would be identified with Greek Hades or Dionysus. The Greeks would note the similarity between the Egyptian *Sekhet Hetep* and their own vision of *Elysium*. During the Ptolemaic Dynasty we see a further loss of the geographical detail depicted within the fields. As the Greeks adopted Egyptian funeral customs their papyri became ever more repetitive and the geographical features become scarcely recognisable.

The Greek Elysium

In the earliest Greek references to the underworld we find nothing resembling the rectangular Elysian Fields of the Egyptians. We have no detailed description of the plain itself; there are no drawings to compare with the Egyptian vignettes. Greek mythology was preserved orally in songs and poetry and the earliest references we have are contemporary with the Late Period of Egypt.

In Homer's *Odyssey* (eighth century BC) we find the netherworld of virtuous heroes first referred-to as the Elysian Field, to which the heroes retire after death and where the refreshing winds from Oceanus blow. A century or so later in Hesiod's *Works and Days* the same agricultural plain may be identified by its alternative name of the *Island of the Blessed*. This is the earliest reference that would place the fields on an island in the little-known western ocean. A similar theme recurs in Pindar's Odes from the fifth century BC. He echoes the Egyptian theme: whereby the soul is judged by Hades and only the virtuous heroes may pass on to spend eternity in the Elysian Field.

In the later geography of Strabo, Plutarch and others, we find them summarising other lost sources that would attempt to identify *Elysium* and the *Islands of the Blessed* with real places along the Atlantic coast; for Strabo this was the plain and islets near Gades in Spain; for Plutarch an unidentified idyllic Atlantic island, perhaps Madeira. We may see that the paradise of the afterlife was perceived as a real place on earth, somewhere in the west beyond the known regions.

Of importance must be to identify how much of the similarity arises due to transfer of beliefs from Egypt to Greece and vice versa; and how much may have existed independently before the period of contact. The Homeric poetry would seem to imply that the core-beliefs date from at least the Mycenaean period, before the Trojan wars; there is no evidence that the concept of an afterlife existed in the pre-Greek Aegean or Crete.

Diodorus Siculus records that the Egyptian beliefs of afterlife were first introduced into Greece by the poet-hero **Orpheus** in imitation of the Egyptian rituals. He would claim that Orpheus also introduced the concept of the River Styx, one of the five rivers of the Underworld; and the boatman *Charon*, who would ferry the souls across. Classical scholars may debate the era when Orpheus lived or even whether he was a real person. However temples of the Orphic cult were in existence by the sixth century BC. The wording of Diodorus makes clear that Orpheus visited Egypt long before Solon's time, which would place him at the very latest in the seventh century BC. However, none of his new concepts are identifiable in the Homeric epics.

To find any further purely-Greek references that might tells us what they believed about the internal features of the Elysian Fields we may infer this from the reaction to the geography as given to Solon by the priests of Sais.

In Plato's *Critias* we see a chain of preservation through notes and oral transmission that record Solon's visit to the Temple of Neit; and his philosophical discussion with an Egyptian priest. The priest offered him a 'history' of a real rectangular plain that formerly existed on an island in the western ocean; with an island-palace of god-kings (or at least he gives them the names of Greek gods). The plain was a 3:2 rectangle bounded by canals, open to the sea in the south, dissected by rivers and canals; and the city too is ringed by yet more canals. Although the similarities may be apparent to modern readers, neither Solon nor Plato attempted to link this 'historical' place with their own understanding of the Greek *Elysian Fields*. This is sufficient to suggest that they did not know of (or did not recognise) any internal features of the mythical *Island of the Blessed*.

The Egyptian priest said that this 'history' had been recorded in their temples since the earliest times. It is also important to note that the rectangular plain was *described* to Solon; he did not see an actual image of it. Archaeology establishes that the temple of Neit dates from the First Dynasty and it may be significant that Solon's visit took place during the Saite Dynasty when the oldest traditions were revised for the Saite Recension of The Book of the Dead.

Modern academic consensus remains that Plato's narrative is fictional philosophy – yet there are relict internal details that would suggest the story given to Solon preserves a core of truth. Suffice to say that if any Greek version had described the Elysian plain as a rectangular grid of canals then modern Greek scholars would long since have linked the two places – but we are told only of the underworld rivers. Similarly, if any of the Egyptian versions of Spell 110 depicted the rectangular plain *on an island*, or if they showed the city of the gods ringed by more than one canal, then Egyptologists would surely have linked the two. However these details are not present.[*Note 3]

In summary, we may see that transfer of religious ideas from Egypt to Greece could have occurred in the early First Millennium BC both before and during the revival of the Saite Dynasty. This influence would then have returned to Egypt during the Ptolemaic period along with other Greek ideas.

A table to highlight the similarities and differences between the Egyptian and Greek versions of the Elysian Fields is given in Appendix 4 below.

Conclusions

From the limited evidence available to us we may see that the geography of the Elysian Fields as depicted in Spell 110 degraded gradually from a lost original form.

The oldest version of *Sekhet Hetep* may have been closer to that described to Solon, as held in the temple of Neit. This represented a recollection of a real agricultural plain known to the Libyans, which entered Lower Egypt before or during the First Dynasty along with the religion of Neit. At some point between the First Dynasty and the Twelfth it merged with wider Egyptian funerary customs, to be depicted on coffins as an idealised vision of the Land of the Dead. Neither of these views should be considered as wholly accurate to the original lost source.

From the early drawings of Spell 110 we may see an evolution of the perceived format of the plain. The *rectangle* may be just an artefact of its drawing in order to fill a rectangular space. The earliest Greek view of the plain stresses no such regularity of form. We should regard the geographical layout from the Coffin Texts and the papyri of the Eighteenth Dynasty as closest to the original source.

From its beginnings the depiction of the fields within Spell 110 undergoes an evolution whereby geographical layout is gradually neglected and religious text takes precedence, until the final versions become barely recognisable caricatures of the original.

However, some older depictions of the Field of Reeds may have remained on public display until the end of Dynastic Egypt. Unfortunately, the Temple of Neit is now lost in the mud of the Delta; and the other temples similarly lay in ruins, their stones quarried for re-use. However, while we cannot as yet verify the oldest version as described to Orpheus and Solon, we may be confident that the later Neo-Platonists who went in search of it were actually seeing murals of the Elysian Fields surviving on a temple wall. A clue to what they found might be the wall in the tomb of Sennedjem, or more likely one of the 'portrait' versions of Spell 110 as found in the late papyri of Nes-min and Djedhor.

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*** Note 1: Recension**

The dictionary definition of a ***recension***: "a new version of a text established by critical revision".

*** Note 2: Museum Sources**

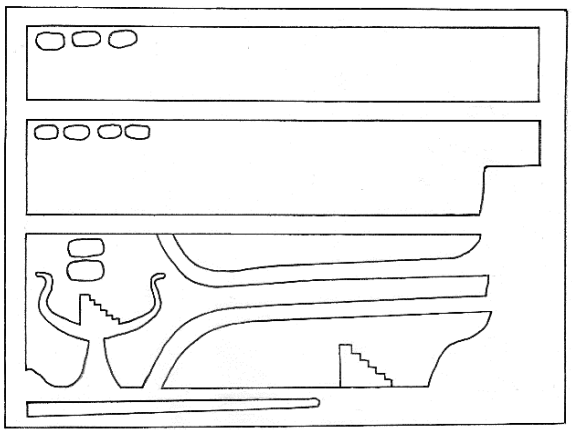
The guardians of the major Egyptian papyrus collections have been reticent to offer open access to their collections, thus rendering comparative research difficult; to gain access can sometimes seem as difficult as persuading Osiris to let you in! Accessibility ranges from restricted copyright, thru membership only, to open public domain access in some instances. For some papyri, the drawings made by earlier scholars are freely reproducible but publication of the original photographs may be restricted. In such cases I have here offered an online link to the best source available.

*** Note 3: Ignatius Donnelly**

In the nineteenth century Donnelly would assert in his book: *Atlantis, the Antediluvian World* that Plato's Atlantis was the inspiration for the Egyptian and Greek Elysium. As twentieth century oceanography discredited the notion of sunken land-bridge continents, the parallels between the Elysian Fields and those described in Solon's 'history' became an untouchable non-subject. However, once stripped of all the modern fantasies, the core of similarities still remains to be explained.

***Note 4**: **Senenmut**

The author's outline drawing of the *Sekhet Hetep* from the tomb of Senenmut, showing only the basic geographical layout.



The detailed content may be seen in the drawing at Figure 2 of the thesis by Milagros Álvarez Sosa. I would not entirely agree with his analysis as he tends to treat the waterways as mere free-format enclosures for the hieroglyphic text, rather than as the primary features of the scene into which the text must somehow be fitted.

Compare this arrangement with that in the coffin of **Seni**. In both cases the boat is moored in a landlocked channel, whereas that of **Gua** shows the boat floating freely in an arm of the sea and the entire layout is reversed.

Appendices

1. Middle Kingdom Coffin Texts - Dynasty XII



Seni

British Museum, EA30842
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA30842
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/412257001

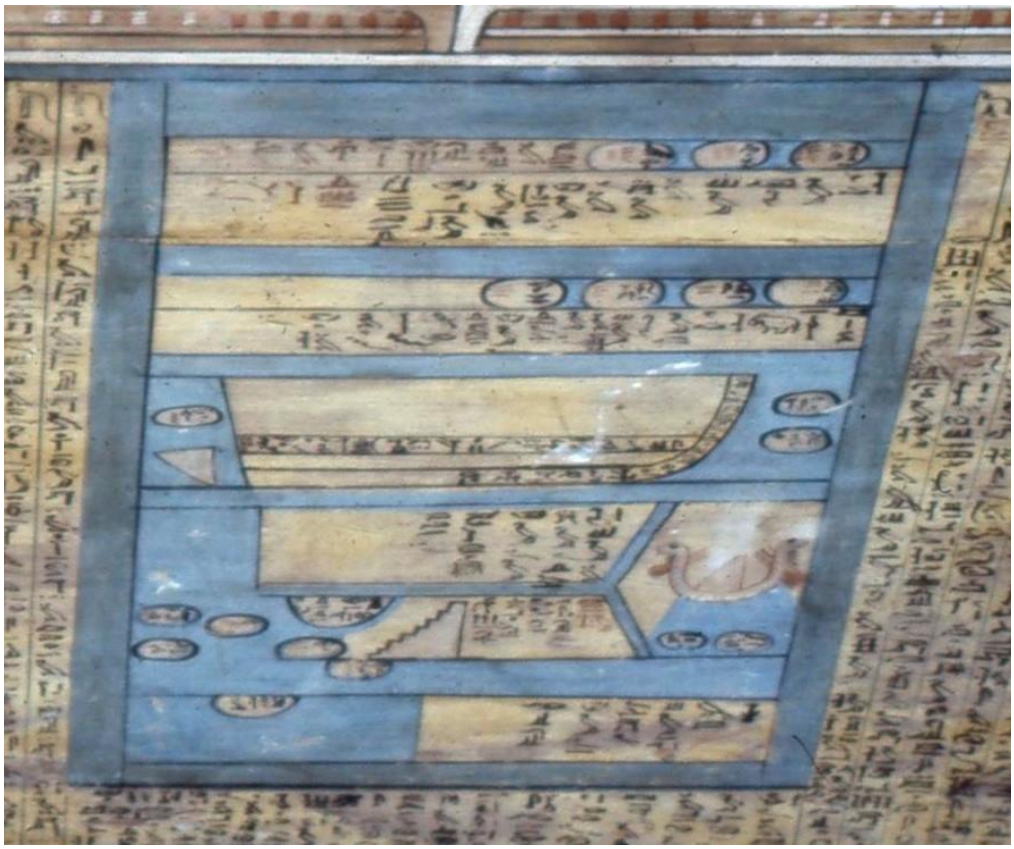
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Twelfth (Theban) Dynasty coffin (**c.1850 BC**).
On the lower mid-side-wall of the painted wooden inner-coffin of Seni.
The vignette is small and faded; it is difficult to see on the interior side-wall of the coffin.

In this early example we see multiple meandering rivers between the straight horizontal canals and discharging to the sea at lower right. The landscape-rectangular format may have evolved simply to fit the details into the limited space of a coffin wall; we should therefore be wary of regarding the landscape orientation as the oldest form.

We see two cartouches below the boat, rather than the waterway shown in later examples, and the gap between these oval cartouches resembles the mooring-channel seen in later examples. Yet more cartouches lie at lower-right. These may be the source of the relict 'harbour island' shown in the later papyri; the curious long rectangular island below the boat of Re (see: **Gua** below) is just about visible at bottom left, cramped by the available space.

The thesis paper by Milagros Álvarez Sosa (in Spanish) discusses this vignette in greater detail.



Gua

British Museum, EA30840
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA30840
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/412034001

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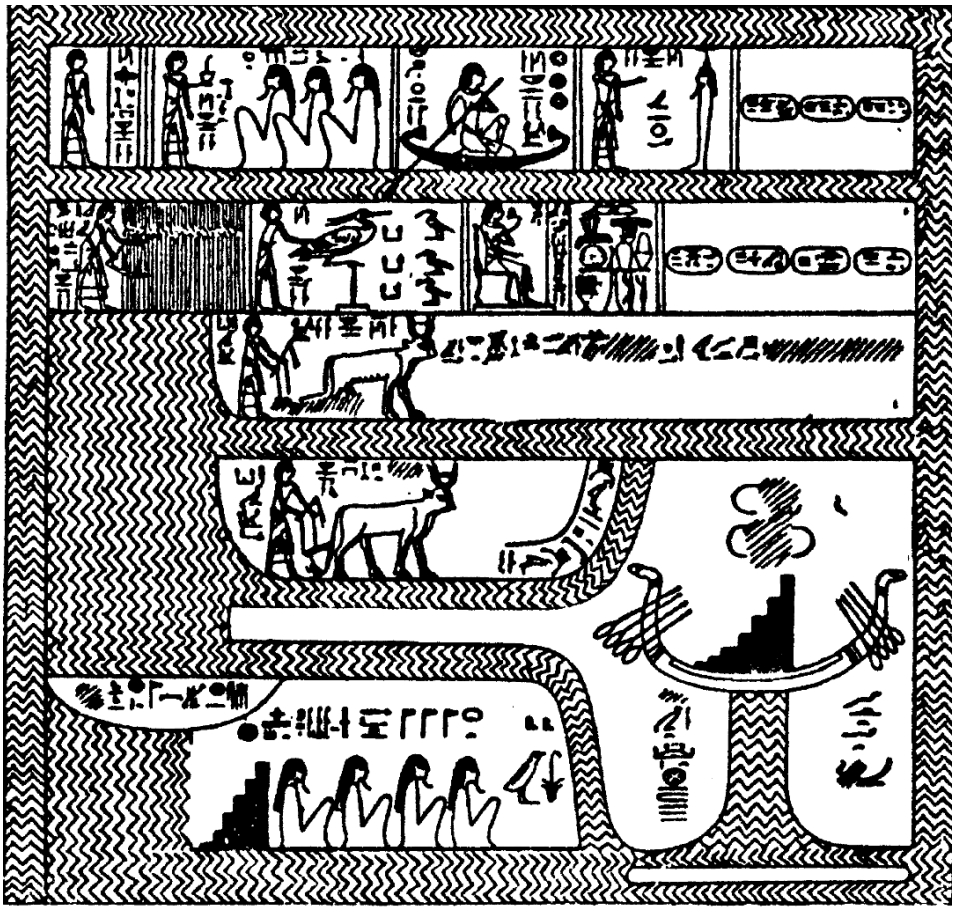
The cropped-rectangle is here distorted as the camera is looking down into the coffin.

Twelfth Dynasty, Middle Kingdom (**1991–1778 BC**) from Deir el-Bersha.
On the mid-side-wall of the painted wooden inner-coffin of Gua.

In this early 'portrait' version we see one of the busiest depictions of the waterways. Inside the rectangular boundary canal and below the straight canals, we see multiple rivers and islands reminiscent of a delta. The sea is shown at both sides and also below with the boat floating freely in the sea at right. Another rectangular island lies at lower right. We may perhaps see from this example the reason *why* later artists were uncertain where to depict the sea; and in which direction the rivers should flow. We may also consider that the artist is attempting to reproduce a complex map; and that accurate geography is considered as important as the religious symbolism. This vignette may be the oldest surviving version of spell 110.

A drawing of this vignette may be found in the analysis by André de Ruiter (in Dutch).

2. The Theban Recension – Dynasty XVIII



Nebseni

British Museum EA9900,18
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA9900-18
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/20445001

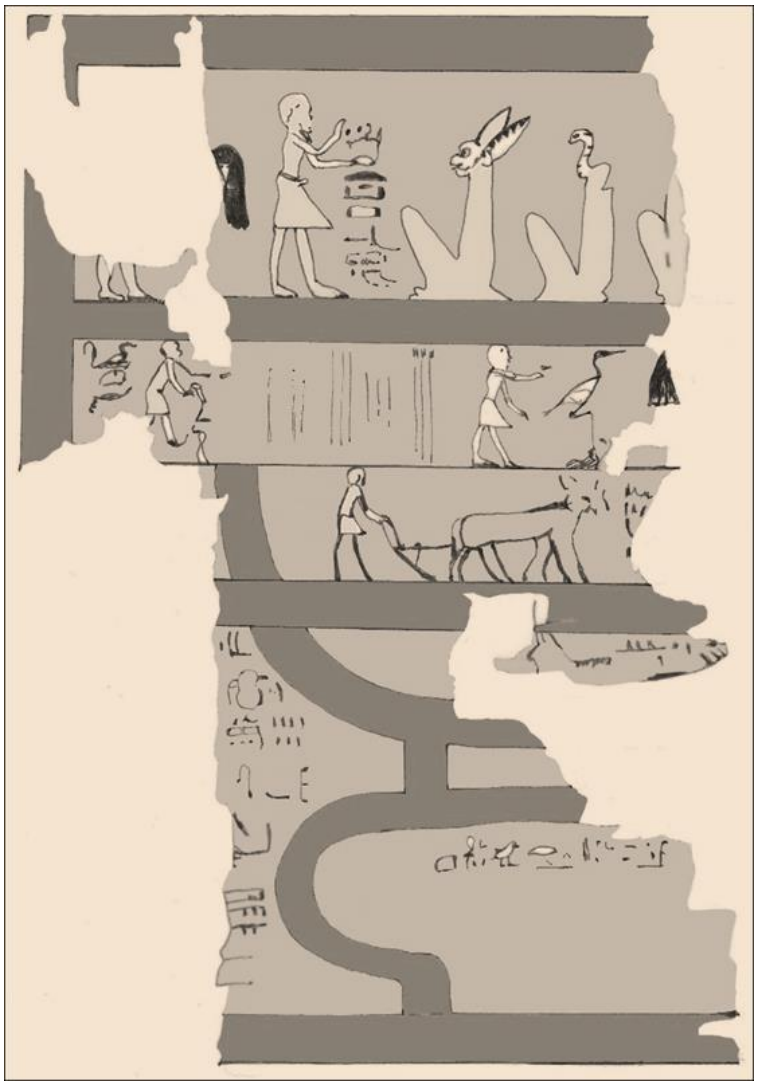
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Open-source drawing from the Guttenberg Archive
Original drawing by E.A. Wallis Budge (1908) *Egyptian Ideas Of The Future Life*, Third edition
The original (click on the picture/link above) shows damage across the centre of the vignette.

Thutmose IV Eighteenth Dynasty (**1400BC-1390BC**) from the Temple of Ptah (Memphis)

Format: square/rectangular, with the island and sea to the left; the island of the gods lies at bottom left and the various rivers and canals are present. The rectangle of canals does not enclose the sea at the bottom. The moored boat is shown at right in a blind channel, with a long 'islet' apparently blocking the exit (a wharf or harbour?); this may be a vestige of the long island that we see below the boat on the coffin wall of **Gua**. Another possibility is that it preserves an empty cartouche or text-enclosure that was misunderstood by the later artists (compare: **Seni**).

The portrait version on the tomb wall of Senenmut is similar to that of Nebseni but with the features reversed and retaining a more prominent example of the long island. * Note 4



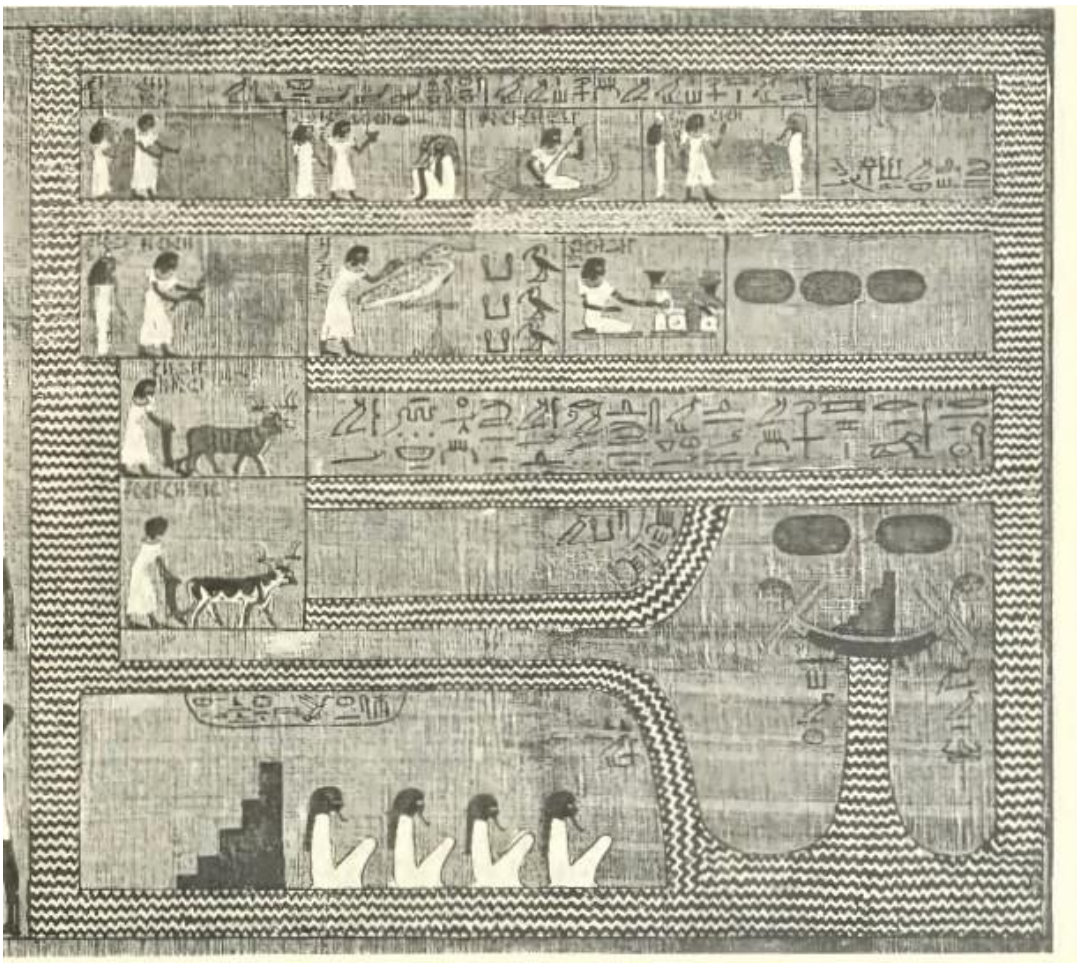
Nebqed

Louvre Museum: N3068; N 3113,
© Département des Antiquités-Egyptiennes.
https://collections.louvre.fr/en/ark:/53355/cl010003125
This drawing is by the present author. Reproduction is subject to an acknowledgement of this article as its source; and compliance with the re-use terms of the Louvre Museum, Paris.

Dated: **1400-1352** to the reign of Tuthmosis IV or Amenhotep III

Spell 110 lies at the far right of the long papyrus and is somewhat tattered, but it contains the usual elements. The text is faded and difficult to discern. The style is unlike the other versions surviving from this period, but it reappears in later examples.

The coloured portrait layout preserves the straight canals and the meandering rivers in blue, but their outflow to the sea is indeterminate from the surviving portion. As there were typically three or four seated gods this would suggest that the full vignette was a square (*compare with Nebseni and Yuya*). There are no boats or stairs on the surviving fragment. The lowest division bounded by the curving river was perhaps intended to be the island of the gods in the finished version.



Yuya

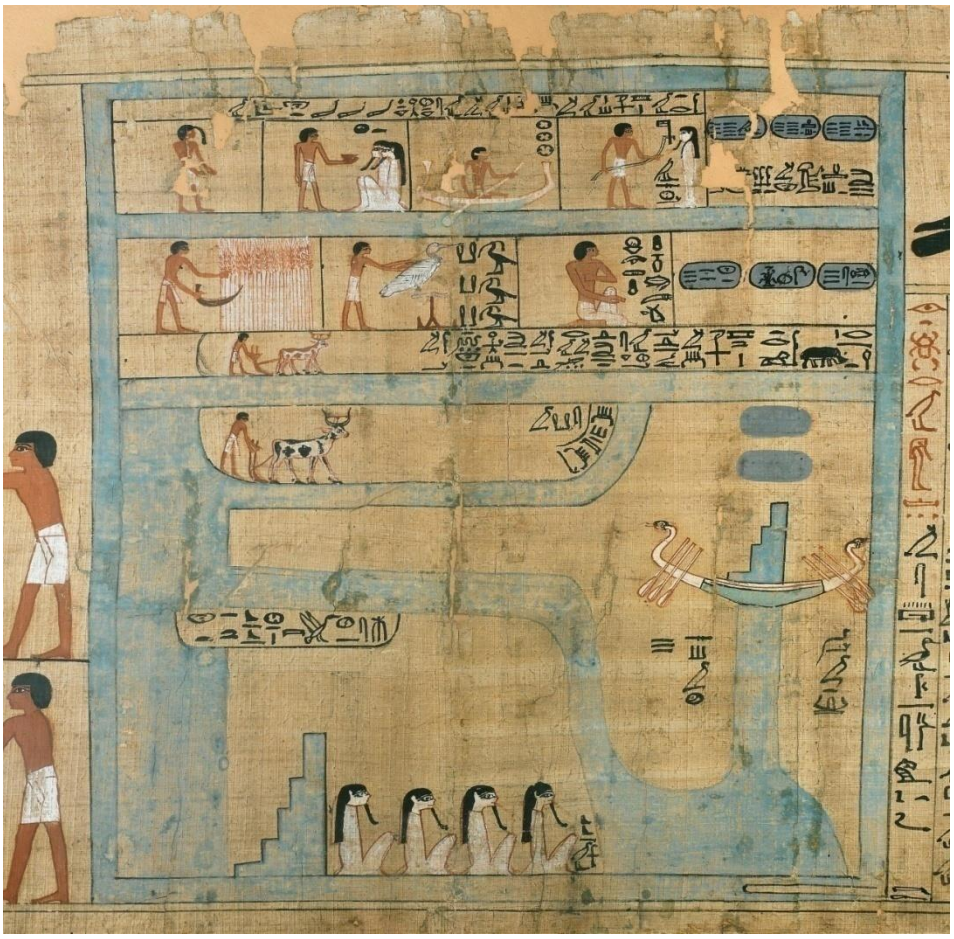
Now in the Cairo Museum, Gallery of Yuya and Thuya.

The B & W image is from plate XVIII on p 67 of Davis (1908) *The Funeral Papyrus of Iouiya*;
© The linked colour image is copyright of Cairo Museum but may be found in various commercial image catalogues.
https://www.digitalfototreff.de/wcf/index.php?attachment/46041-051-0-kairo-ägyptisches-museum-grab-von-yuya-und-tuya-eltern-von-königin-teje-pa/

Discovered in the Valley of the Kings, tomb KV 46.
Dated to reign of Amenhotep III, Eighteenth Dynasty, New Kingdom, **c. 1386-1349 B.C.**

The style is similar to the papyrus of **Nebseni** above but, although only a century later, the sea at left is already becoming vestigial. Rather it is the channel to the boat at right that is open to the sea, but the long harbour-island is not present.

Note that in these versions the rectangular outer channels do not fully enclose the sea as in some other images.



Userhat

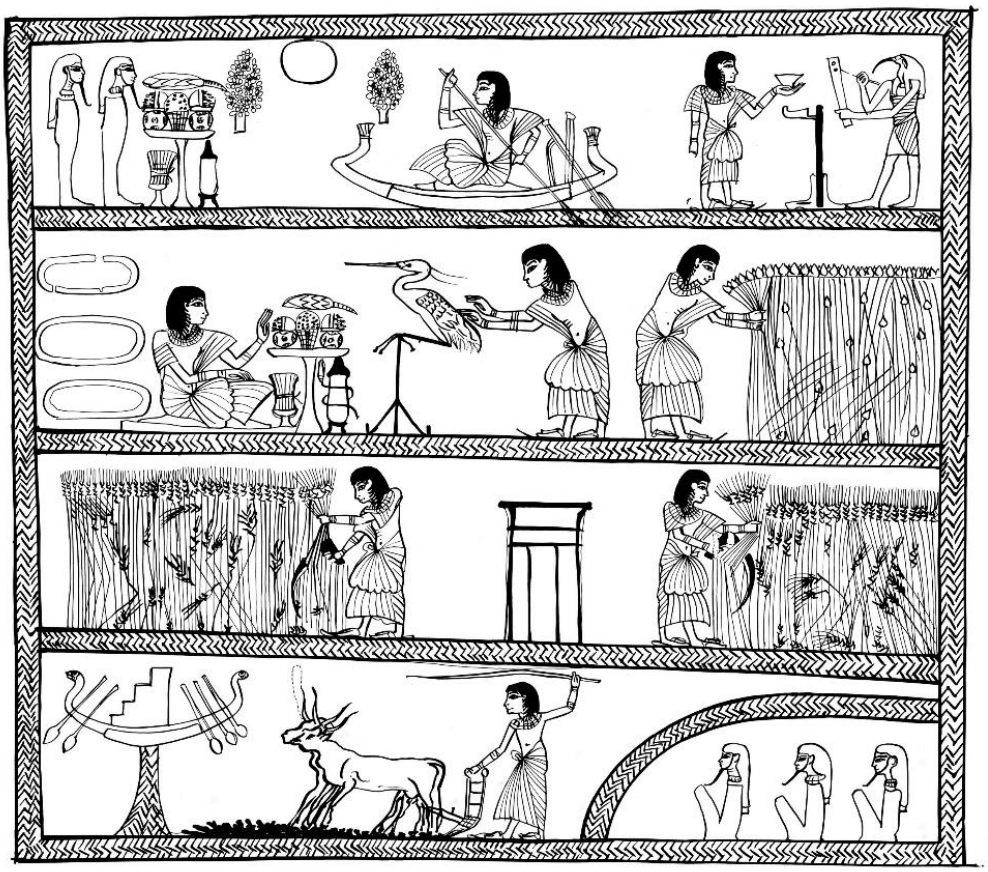
British Museum EA10009,3
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10009-3
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/819482001

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Loosely dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty; from an unknown location

The layout is similar to the other early examples: **Nebseni** and **Yuya**, with straight canals and meandering rivers shown; and the island of the gods at left. The boundary canal here encloses the sea at the left side and also at bottom right (compare: **Gua** coffin).

Here we see clearly that the channel to the boat comes direct from the sea, and curiously, we may also note the vestigial harbour-islet placed in the surrounding canal rather than blocking the mouth of the boat channel; the presence of this relict detail would suggest that it belongs with the earliest group. It would seem that the artist no longer knew what this feature was but feared to leave it out.



Nakht

British Museum EA10471,13
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10471-13
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/850393001

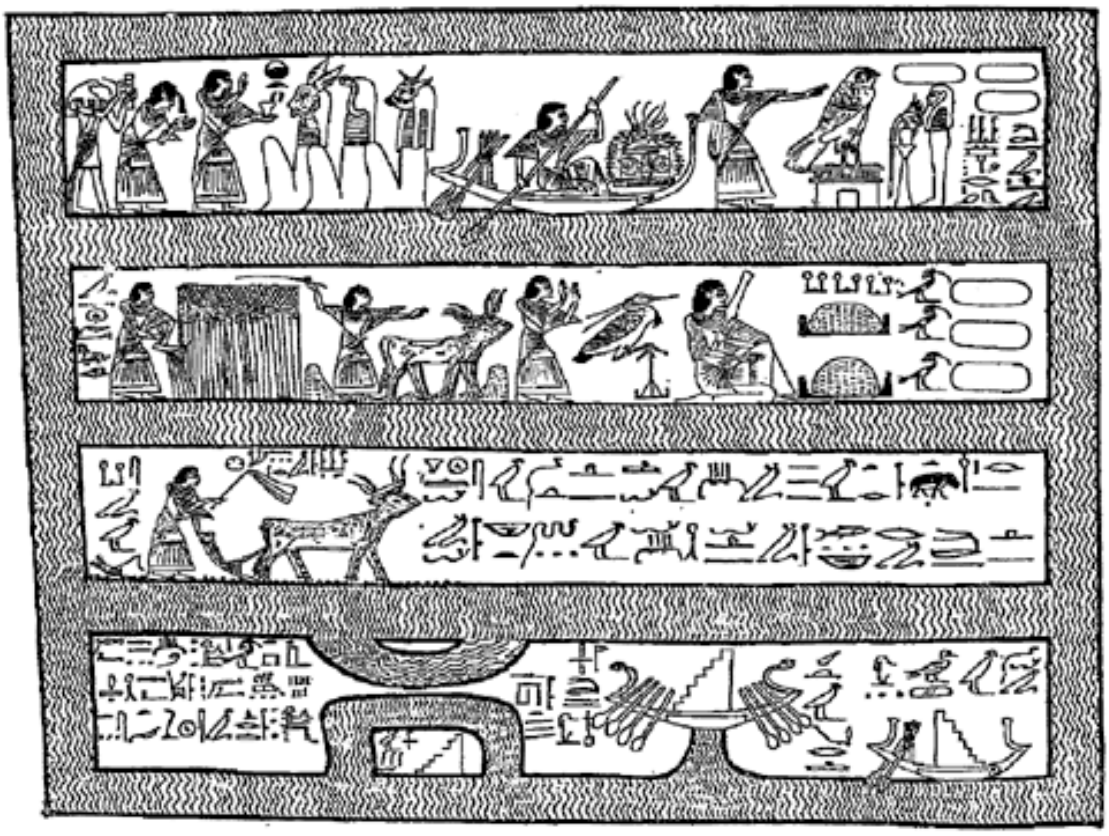
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The original papyrus is in colour.

Eighteenth Dynasty, from an unknown or unstated Egyptian location.

An early example showing a more simplified arrangement. The format is square/landscape-rectangular.

The island of the gods is preserved at bottom right as an island within the rivers and canals. The grid of straight horizontal canals is depicted but the meandering rivers (other than around the island of the gods) are lost. The outflow to the sea is also absent and the single boat and its waterway have transferred to the left.



Ani

EA10470-35 – British Museum
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10470-35
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/686280001

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Open-source drawing from: Guttenberg Library

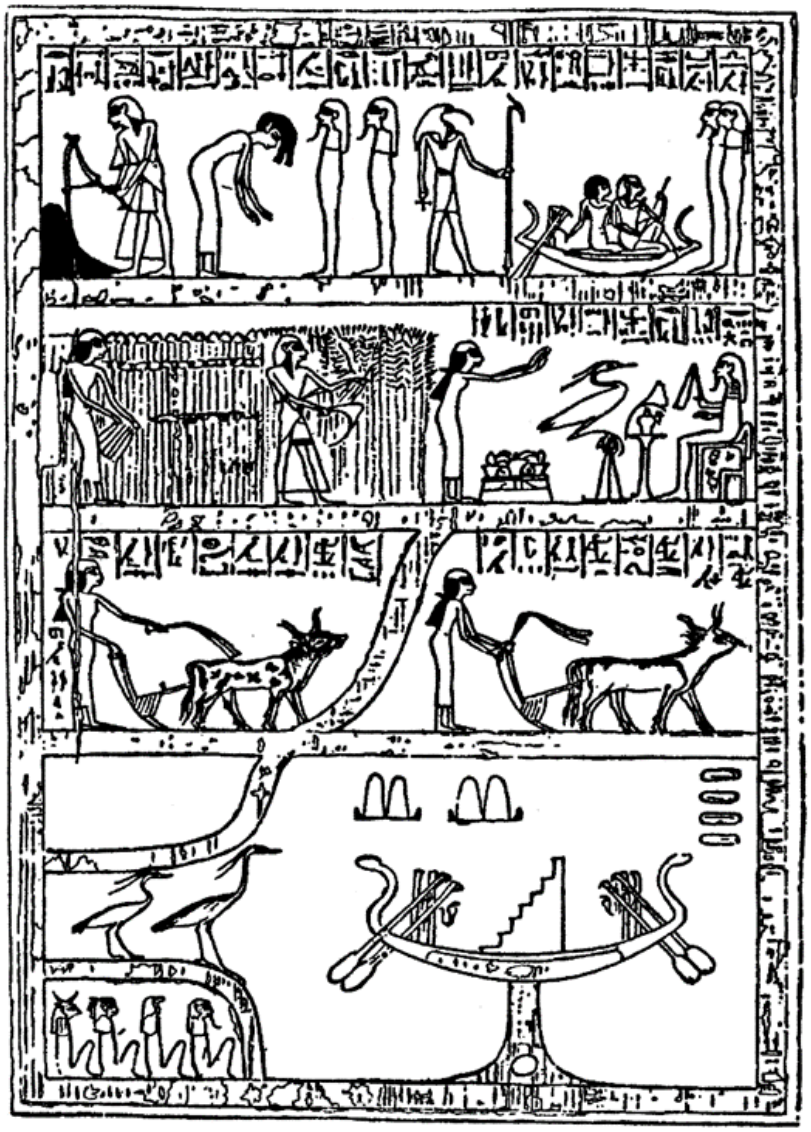
Original drawing by E.A. Wallis Budge (1908) *Egyptian Ideas of the Future Life*, Third edition
The original papyrus is in bright colours.

Nineteenth Dynasty (**1292 BC to 1189 BC**) from the Tomb of Ani, Thebes

The layout has become landscape-rectangular; it introduces a major reorganisation of the elements and we see more space made available for the text.

The island of the gods is preserved at bottom left; the straight canals are shown but the meandering rivers are reduced to mere vestiges; the outflow to the sea is lost. The boat mooring channel is instead open to the boundary canal with no 'harbour' at the entrance. One of the boats is portrayed as rowing on the outer canal.

The island of the gods becomes an arc of the outer canal and contains only the staircase. Note that the layout of the island and the meander above is similar to the semi-circular cartouches found in later versions.



Anhai

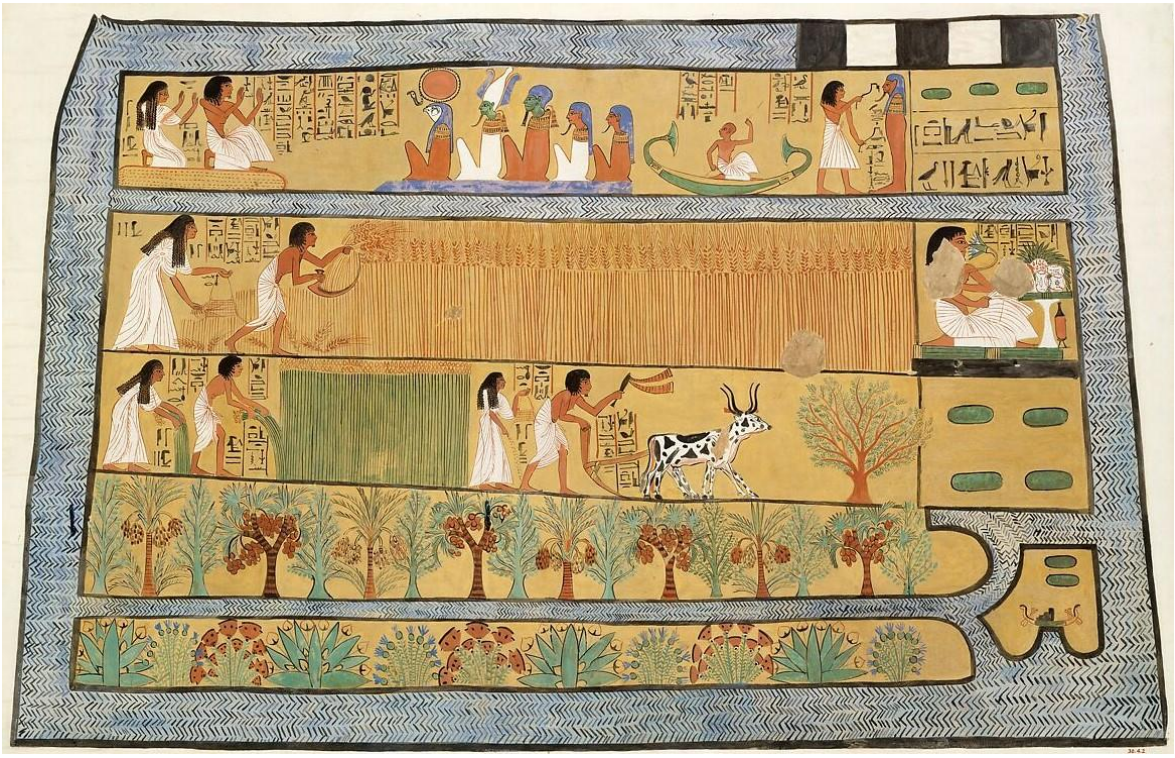
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10472-5
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/818973001
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Open-source drawing from the Guttenberg Library

Original drawing by E.A. Wallis Budge (1908)

Loosely determined as Twentieth Dynasty (**1189 BC to 1077 BC**) from an unknown location; hieroglyphic text; it is most similar to the **Nebqed** style.

Portrait rectangular; the colour original shows the canals in blue. The island of the gods is at lower left; the canals and rivers are preserved but outflow to the sea is lost. However, the boat channel retains a small circular ‘island’ at the entrance – the final appearance of the harbour-island from earlier depictions.



Sennedjem

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/548354

This colour image is the painting '*Sennedjem and Iineferti in the Fields of Iaru*' by Charles K. Wilkinson and is public domain. It is on view in the Metropolitan Museum of New York.

The original is extant on the east wall of Sennedjem's vaulted family crypt at Deir-el-Medina. Dating approximately: **1295–1213 BC.**

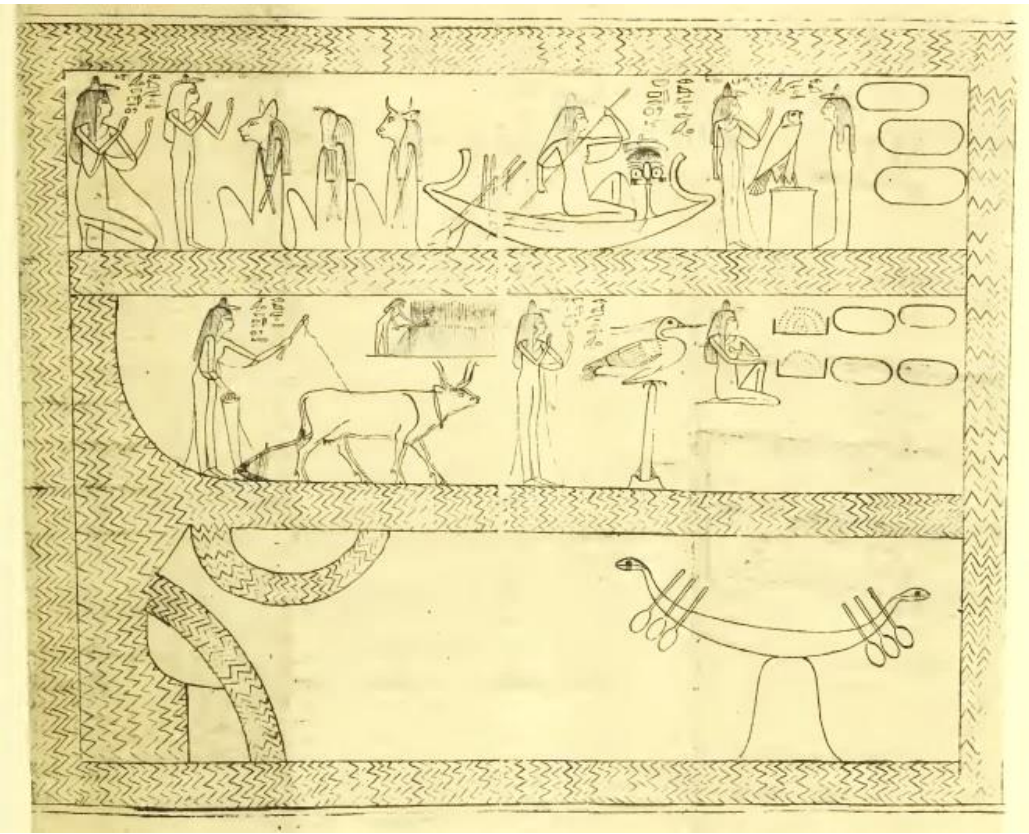
The layout is landscape-rectangular but may simply have been stretched as artwork to fill the entire half-barrel end wall of the tomb. The waterways and meandering rivers here flow towards the island at right and preserve the sense of discharge into the sea. The miniscule boat is depicted as moored in a channel *on the island* rather than lying off one of the waterways.

The African savannah vegetation is not found on other versions. It fills the space normally occupied by the gods of the Ennead and their staircase-palace. Perhaps the humble Sennedjem did not expect an afterlife among all the gods and deified kings.

Further information sources:

Unfolding Sennedjem's Tomb

Tomb of Sennedjem



Nesitanebtashru

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10554-81
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/116975001

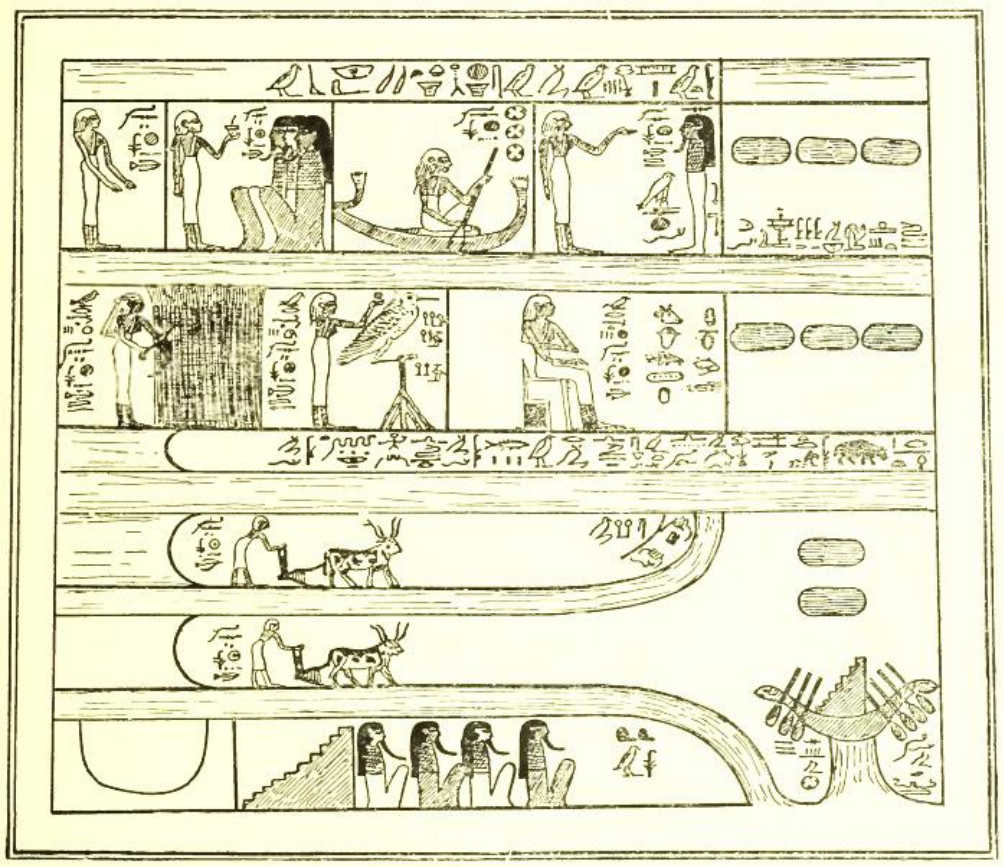
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From the Greenfield Papyrus. Made around **990-969 BC** – to quote from Budge below:
"About the date of the Greenfield Papyrus there is fortunately no difficulty. Nesitanebtashru, princess and priestess, flourished, as has been shown above, in the first half of the tenth century before Christ, and as she was probably buried at Der al-Bahari before 950 B.C., her papyrus must have been written in the second quarter of the tenth century before Christ."

ia600507.us.archive.org
The drawing above by Budge is from Plate XCV on page 337 of the 'Plates' section in the pdf.

Not in colour. The meandering rivers and the sea are clearly preserved even in this comparatively late landscape-rectangular version but no gods or staircase are shown on the featureless island and the channel to the single moored boat is not hatched as a true waterway. The drawing appears unfinished.

Note that here the rectangular boundary canal again encloses the 'sea'; it is treated as a mere border to the vignette, as if the artist were copying from a standard formula.



Nesi-Khensu

The original papyrus is understood to be in the Egyptian Museum at Cairo.

ia600507.us.archive.org
The drawing of the vignette above is by E.A. Wallis Budge from his book on the Greenfield Papyrus, on Introduction page XV (page 25 of the pdf).

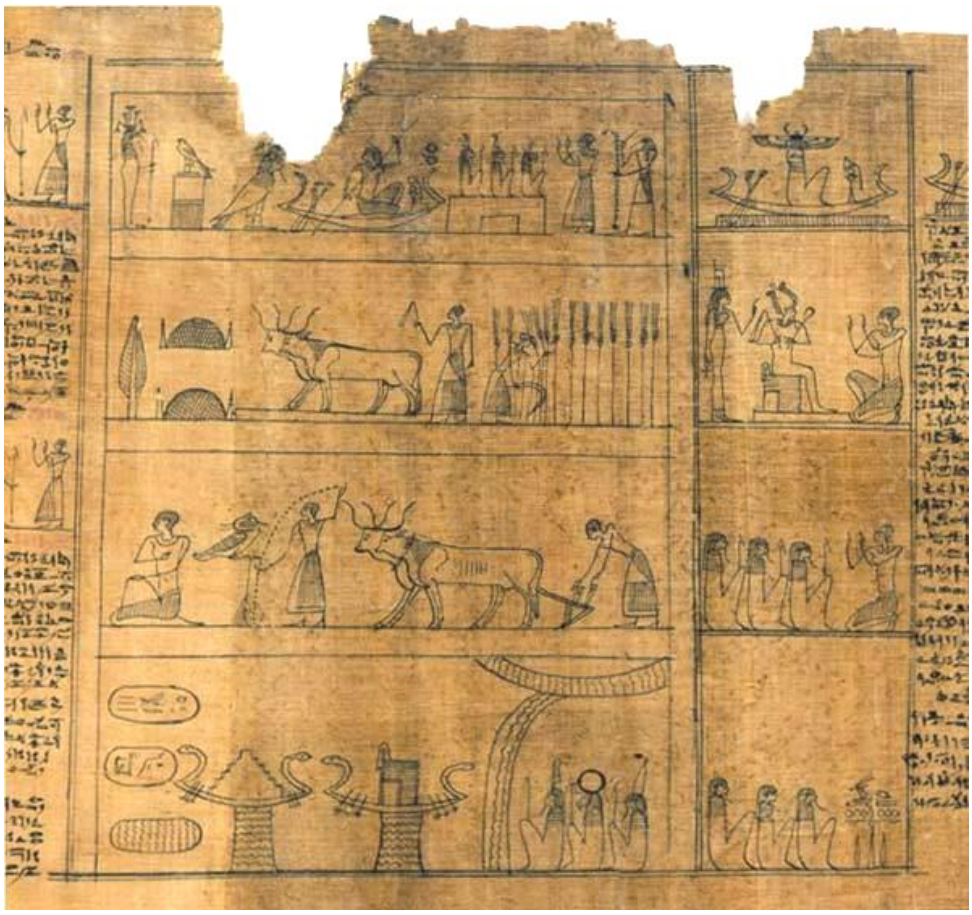
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According to Budge, in his description of the papyrus of Nesitanebtashru (p 31) this papyrus dates from the same era but is reverting to the older Theban format of some 500 years earlier.

The river flows to the left and the vestigial sea is denoted by the semi-circular boundaries; the island of the gods is at left with the boat and its channel at right; however the outer boundary canal is not hatched as are the other waterways and is part-way to becoming just a rectangular border to the scene.

Note also the unused semi-circular cartouche at bottom left. Compare this example with **Nebseni** and the other early-Theban examples above. It is also a well-known image depicting the sun rising or setting between two mountains.

3. The Saite Recension – Dynasty XXVI



Nes-min

https://dia.org/collection/book-dead-nes-min-section-13-43990

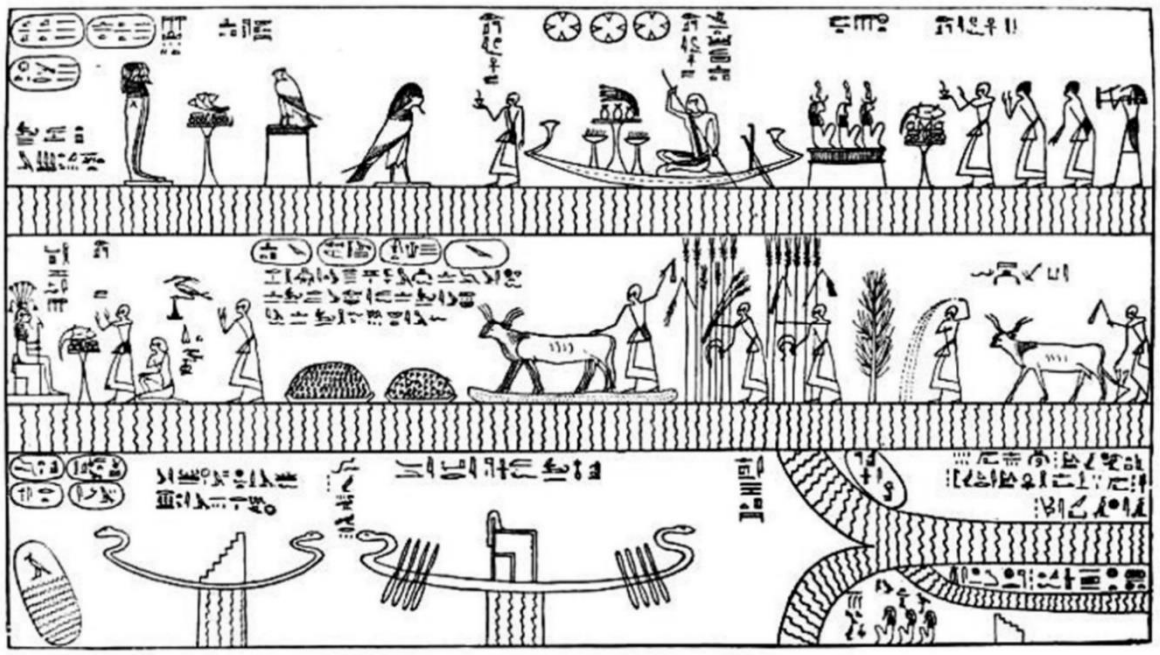
©Copyright Detroit Institute of Arts and reproduced subject to their terms & conditions.
The Book of the Dead of Nes-Min, Section 11, between 4th and 3rd century BCE, ink on papyrus. Detroit Institute of Arts, Founders Society Purchase, Mr. and Mrs. Allan Shelden III Fund, Ralph Harman Booth Bequest Fund, and Hill Memorial Fund, 1988.10.11.

From an unknown location, the style is fourth century BC or earlier (pre-Ptolemaic).

A late example of the portrait format. The straight waterways are preserved, but the base of the outer rectangle has been contracted to a thin line. The lack of any hatching suggests that the former canals are just regarded as wide borders and frames. The meandering rivers and island persist at lower right.

Although the channels to the boats are hatched as waterways they already begin to resemble the 'plinths' that we see on later Ptolemaic versions.

Further information see: William Peck



Iufankh

Turin Museum**,** Cat. 1791

This drawing is from the Rice Archive but is widely reproduced elsewhere.

The original may be viewed via the Museo Egizio online catalogue (membership required)
Create an account and search for Spell 110, Catalogue No 1791, C1791rt_6.tif at far right.
Unfortunately, the museum scan has chopped-off the far-right end!

Date of production uncertain; considered to be of late Ptolemaic age.

Landscape rectangular – not coloured. The rectangular outer waterway has here become just an enclosing frame (not included in the above drawing) but the horizontal interior channels remain. The meandering rivers enclose a vestigial island of the gods at lower right – but any sense of an outlet to the sea has gone. The waterways to the two boats remain.

This image is significant as this was the papyrus used by Richard Lepsius to assign numbers to the various spells: denoting the Elysian Fields as Spell 110. Others would later add more spells from other sources.

****

An almost identical example would be the papyrus of **Djedhor** in the Liverpool Museum (1978.291.264). The format is square, intermediate in form between Nes-min and Iufankh. The only distinction to note is that all the waterways are clearly drawn as hatched.



Hori

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA10479-7
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/932905001

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A typical example of the late versions of Spell 110 drawn with thin dividing lines.
These date from the Ptolemaic period after 332 BC.

In this brightly coloured late papyrus all sense of the canals and waterways has been forgotten. The straight canals and the rectangular boundary waterway have become just boxes and dividing lines; any sense of rivers discharging at the sea has long gone. The waterways and stairs have become 'plinths' upon which the boats sit. The meandering rivers and the island of the gods have been misunderstood as semi-circular cartouches.

Compare this layout with the older papyrus of **Ani** above.

Other examples of this late form are:
Ankwahibra – also in the British Museum.
Hornedjitef in the Louvre Museum.
Kha in the Turin Museum, Catalogue No 1837, C1837rt_2.tif (mid-scan).

4. Elysium in Greek Literature – Some Abridged Quotations

Homer (c. eighth century BC)
"The Deathless Ones will waft you instead to the world's end, the Elysian fields where yellow-haired Rhadamanthys is. There indeed men live unlaborious days. Snow and tempest and thunderstorms never enter there, but for men's refreshment Okeanos sends out continually the high-singing breezes of the west." [*Odyssey 4. 560*] Walter Shewring translation for Loeb

Hesiod (c. seventh century BC)
"And there they live a carefree life, beside the whirling Ocean on the Blessed Isles. Three times a year the blooming, fertile earth bears honeyed fruits for them, the happy ones, and Kronos is their king..." [*Works and Days 156*] Dorothea Wender translation for Penguin

Pindar (fifth century BC)
"...to the Tower of Kronos, where the Airs, daughters of Ocean, blow round the Island of the Blest..." [*Olympian Ode 2, 70-75*] C.M. Bowra translation for Penguin

Strabo (first century AD)
"So then the poet [*Homer*] informed through his inquiries of so many expeditions to the outermost parts of Iberia, and learning by hearsay about the wealth and the other good attributes of the country (for the Phoenicians were making these facts known), in fancy placed the abode of the Blest there, and also the Elysian Plain…"
[*Geography, 3.2.13*] H.L. Jones translation for Loeb

Plutarch (first century AD):
[*In the context that a ship had just returned to Gades from the Atlantic Islands*]
"Therefore a firm belief has made its way even to the Barbarians that here is the Elysian Field and the abode of the blessed, of which Homer sang."
[*The Parallel Lives: Sertorius and Eumenes, VIII*]
...

Orpheus (date uncertain)
*As described by **Diodorus Siculus** in Histories, I, 96, 1-5*

"For the priests of Egypt recount from the records of their sacred books that they were visited in ancient times by **Orpheus**, Musaeus, Melampus and Daedalus, also by the poet **Homer** and Lycurgus of Sparta, later by **Solon** of Athens and the philosopher **Plato**…"
...
"Orpheus, for instance, brought [*to Greece*] from Egypt most of his mystic ceremonies, the orgiastic rites and…his experiences in Hades. For the rite of Osiris is the same as that of Dionysus and that of Isis is very similar to that of Demeter, the names alone having been interchanged; and the punishments in Hades of the unrighteous, the Fields of the Righteous… All these were introduced by Orpheus in imitation of the Egyptian funeral customs…" [*There follows a quotation from Homer's Odyssey 24, 1-2 and 11-14*].

Solon (before 630 BC)
Relevant extracts as paraphrased in Plato's *Critias*. (Jowett translation)
"Towards the sea, half-way down the length of the whole island, there was a plain which is said to have been the fairest of all plains and very fertile." *Critias, 113*

"...the country immediately about and surrounding the city was a level plain, itself surrounded by mountains which descended towards the sea; it was smooth and even, and of oblong shape, extending in one direction three thousand stadia, but across the centre island it was two thousand stadia. This part of the island looked towards the south, and was sheltered from the north. ...
It was naturally for the most part rectangular and oblong, and where falling out of the straight line had been made regular by the surrounding ditch. ...
Farther inland, likewise, straight canals of a hundred feet in width were cut from it through the plain, and again let off into the ditch leading to the sea..." *Critias, 118*

Comparison Table

Feature	**Egyptian Aaru**	**Greek Elysium**	**Solon**
An Island of the gods	✓	✓	?
A city or palace on an island	✓	?	✓
A rectangular irrigated plain	✓	X	✓
Straight canals surround and dissect the plain	✓	X	✓
A plain dissected by rivers	✓	✓	✓
Multiple canals ring the city	X	X	✓
Only a single canal/waterway around the city	✓	X	X
Located in the 'west'	✓	✓	✓
Located on an island in the western ocean	X	✓	✓
Possessed an idyllic climate	✓	✓	✓
Agriculture (ploughed fields)	✓	✓	✓
An empire of ancient kings	X	X	✓

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Relevant Hyperlinks

Online sources of information that were influential to the study should also be acknowledged.

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https://papyri.museoegizio.it/Login.aspx
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Tags: Elysian Fields, Elysium, Book of the Dead, Egyptian religion, Sekhet Aaru, Sekhet, Hetep, Spell 110, Atlantis, Orpheus, Solon, Pyramid texts, Coffin texts.

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