

## Fate in ancient Egypt

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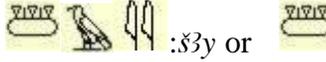
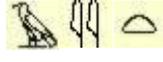
Fate; Destiny; Shay; last judgment; God's will.

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### Abstract

The Ancient Egyptian civilization is one of the richest civilizations in acquiring various concepts and beliefs from nature. These concepts and beliefs can be divided into two categories Secular and Religious. As the ancient Egyptians were very religious people, so their dominant beliefs were religious beliefs which in turn had a great influence upon their secular life. Consequently, both concepts and beliefs were intermingling together. This paper will deal with a unique topic which exists within the different thoughts and beliefs of every human being. No matter what was the time or the age this concept dominates the mind of every human being. Therefore, all the incidents that happens in our life will be automatically related to the fate concept which is stored in the thoughts and beliefs of the human mind.

### The Concept and its development

In the ancient Egyptian language, the fate was known as: “:š3y or : š3yt or š3w: meaning ordain or fix, which reflects the action of the divinities.(Wb IV 402, 8, 9) . The word “š3w” appeared since the end of the Old Kingdom till the late period, especially in the wisdom literature as for example the “Instruction of Ptahhotep” dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> dynasty which stated “*His time does not fail o come, one does not escape what is fated*”. (Jequier, G., 1911; Lichtheim, M., 1980, p.72). According to the Old kingdom literature, it can be deduced that in some cases the fate of a person might be sealed by his nature. As a result, the early expressing of the fate in Ptahhotep doctrine of the Old kingdom obliged us to say that the belief in fate existed since the Old Kingdom although the concept of fate didn't appear except later. (Bunson, M., 1991, p.67). Therefore, the fate during the old kingdom was inescapable and related to death. This reflected that “*death is Kindly fate*” (Lichtheim, M., 1980, p.196). Furthermore, while moving through the old kingdom events specifically in Westcar Papyrus, it was recorded that Re (the sun god) announced : “*Please go, deliver Ruddedet of the three children who are in her womb, who will assume this beneficent office in this whole land. They will build your temples. They will supply your altars. They will furnish your libations. They will make your offerings abundant.*” (Lichtheim, M., 1980, p.220). For the assist in this delivery, he sent Isis, Nephthys, Heket, Meskhenet and Khnum to secure the delivery.

In this incident, Fate was not related to the time or to the indication of death, but it was foretelling the future fate of these three kings as the texts mentioned about each one of them: “A king who will assume kingship in this whole land”. (Lichtheim, M., 1980, p. 220). Consequently, one can deduce that sometimes the idea of fate can express beyond lifespan. (Pinch, Geraldine, 2002, p.76).

However, the story of the two brothers, included that Rehorakhety will order Khnum to create a wife for Bata, as well as, the seven Hathors proclaim that she will die by knife. (Lichtheim, M., 1980, p. 207). This indicates the fate in addition to the instrument or the tool used to fulfill this fate or to lead to this dreadful fate. Moreover, the fate was related to a third aspect which was reflected by the relationship between Renenet and fertility and harvesting to identify material possessions for the individuals. (Miosi, 1982, p. 76).

Dating back to the Middle Kingdom especially in the “Story of Sinuhe”, the flight to Western Asia was described as “Fateful flight”. *Sinuhe stated that: “ I do not know what brought me to this country, it is as if planned(shr) by god”*. (Lichtheim, M., 1975, p.255). This affirms that the divine plan indicates what has been fated. Furthermore, among the teachings of Khety during the Middle Kingdom the texts stated: “ *behold, I have set thee on the way of god, th Renenet of a scribe is on his shoulder on the day of his birth... Meskhenet is (the source of) the scribe’s welfare, he being set before the magistrates”*. (Brunner, H., 1944, Texts and translation die lehre des sohnes des Duauf, (AgFo, 13, 1944), pp.204ff. (ANET, p.434).

Moving through the First intermediate period, in the Admonitions of Ipuwer, the texts mentioned: “*this was predestined for you in the time of Horus, in the age of the Ennead”*. (I,7, textes and translation: Gardiner, A.H., the Admonition of an Egyptian Sage, Leipzig, 1909, p. 20). This reflects that the destiny of numerous people was affected mainly by the political situation of the country, which was during that time total collapse, chaos and disorder.

During the New Kingdom, the word expressing fate was written with the determinative of a deity as if the fate was deified. This idea was confirmed by the association between the fate and three forces. The first was the fate association with the seven Hathor, for the indication of the lifespan and death. (Cerny,J., 1957,Ancient Egyptian Religion, p. 69-70).



**Fig.1.**The seven Hathors



**Fig.2.** Goddess Meskhenet

Wegner, Josef "The Magical Birth Brick" *Expedition Magazine* 48.2 (2006): n. pag. *Expedition Magazine*. Penn Museum, 2006 Web. 05 Feb 2021 (<http://www.penn.museum/sites/expedition/?p=10031>)

Secondly, the association with goddess Meskhenet who was mainly related to the fate reflecting the person status and work. Thirdly, the association with goddess Renenet, who indicates the individual material fortune or misfortune. (Redford, D., 2002, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, Vol. I, p.507). Therefore, the role of fate can be expressed as the force circumscribing the passive aspect of the human life. Moreover, by the beginning of the New Kingdom, in the tomb of Ahmose son of Abana texts mentioned while describing the Nubian enemy by saying: "*His fate brought on his doom, the gods of Upper Egypt grasped him*". (Loret, V., 1910; Lichtheim, M., 1980, p.13).

Additionally, the New Kingdom Texts attested that the deities were supposed to have arbitrary power: loving or hating, accepting or condemning, liking or disliking. This arbitrariness was expressed by the form of the inspiration which will, consequently, reveal the course of the human's life. Therefore, the fate allows us to have an explanation for all the events that affected the human's life.

However, during the Amarna period as well as the Ramesside era fate means initially a fixed lifespan. In Leyden hymns which was addressed to god Amen, they mentioned "*He makes a lifetime long or shorten it.*" "*He gives more than that which is fated (š3yt) to whom he loves.*" Therefore, this affirms that the synonym of fate is the lifespan. Moreover, according to the Tale of Wenamen, dating back to the third intermediate period in the 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty, the texts mentioned that a Syrian prince inscribed: "*I sent them my messengers to reach Egypt in order to beseech for me fifty years of life from Amen over and above that ordained for me (by destiny š3).*" (Pap. Golenischeff, 2, 57f.; translation: Erman, *Egyptians*, p.183). As a conclusion, this prince admits that he believed in the power of Amen to provide over the destined life. Although in other contexts fate indicated death contradicting the lifetime. However, the physician Horus was asked to: "*Preserve that man whose destiny is behind him.*" Here he implies that the destiny or the fate indicated death, he also stated: "*The goodly destiny has come to pass.*" Confirming that life is slipping from between his fingers or his hands. Additionally, fate included death and dying concept, as the fate implied fixing man's span of years, as well as, the manner and the hour of his death. (Morenz, S., 1996, *Egyptian Religion*, p.70-74).

Furthermore, dealing with the different texts of the Late period, the "Instructions of Amenope" stated: "*For man is clay and straw and the god is the builder. He is tearing down and building up every day. He makes a Thousand poor (tw3) men as he wishes, he makes a thousand men as overseers (hy).*" (Amenope 24 XXIV 13-17; translation, Morenz, *ZAS*, 84, 1959, pp.79f., ANET, p. 424). Here, the fate was regarded as god's will for the human beings in all the aspects of life, whether good or bad. Moreover, Wilkinson cites a statement in these Instructions, mentioning: "None can ignore Shay" This statement epitomizes the chief characteristic of the fate which is the inevitability. (Mark,J., 2016, p.84)

### Fate in the Myths

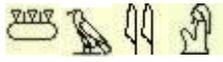
According to the creation myths, specially Memphis creation myth, the events which existed during the creation of the universe were presented in the same way, therefore, the ka's fate were genii of growth and reproduction, as life proceeds according to god's word. (Clark, R.T.R., 1998, *Myth and Symbol in Ancient Egypt*, p. 64).

For example, in the "Tale of the Doomed Prince", there were several instances emphasizing or expressing one's fate. As the seven Hathors announced: "*He will die through the crocodile, the snake or the dog.*" Without any indication for the time or place of death. Consequently, the prince spent his life with this ill-fate, hoping to avoid this fate, by saying: "*To what purpose is my sitting here? I am committed to fate (š3w). Let me go, that I may act according to my heart, until the god does what is in his heart.*" (Budge, E.A.W., 1923, pls. 48-52; Lichtheim, M., 1976, p.200). Then, the prince travelled to Naharin, but it was uncertain he travelled to prolong his life or to alter his fate, but he had his dog with him all the time. The prince married in Naharin and told his wife about his dreadful fate. His wife was terrified and she wanted to kill his dog, but the prince felt that his dog would never harm him or kill him as he raised him up since it was young. There was a crocodile which they believed had followed the prince to Naharin, but he was prevented from attacking the prince by (*nht*) who was considered to be one of the water spirits.

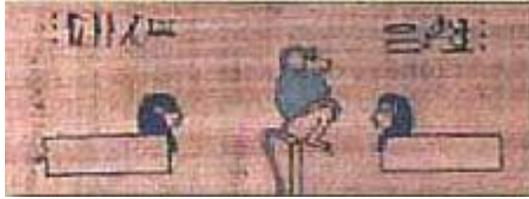
There was also an instance where the wife of the prince killed a snake which entered the prince bedroom. She stated: "*Look, your god has given one of your fates into your hand. He will protect you from the others also.*" (Lichtheim, M., 1976, p. 202).

Another instance happened in this tale, when the prince felt once that his dog might attack him so, he ran towards the lake in the hope that the crocodile will attack the dog, however the crocodile told the prince that this was his fate, but he offered to release him if he kills the water spirit. Unfortunately, the coming part of this papyrus was deteriorating, but it seemed that the prince lived after this instance, so this affirms that the prince was able to alter his dreadful fate. Finally, from this tale, it can be concluded that one could not change his fate by leaving Egypt, but the intervention of the divinities might extend one's lifespan as well as altering the means of death.

### Fate Deities

The main deity related to fate or destiny was god Shai  :š3y who was considered to be a personification for the fate of the human being. The ancient Egyptians believed that the fate of the person starts by his birth. Therefore, god Shai was the deity who decreed what will happen to the human being. Although Shai was regarded as a male god, but there was still a female version known as Shayet. The male version was represented as a man or cobra or a man snake or a human headed birth brick. For this reason, he was associated with goddess Meskhenet, who was worshipped as goddess of birth brick and fate, as well as, goddess Renenutet, the goddess who was responsible of giving the child his true name. Being related to goddess Renenutet, emphasized that they were both in the hands of Thot (god of wisdom and knowledge). King Ramesses II claimed that he

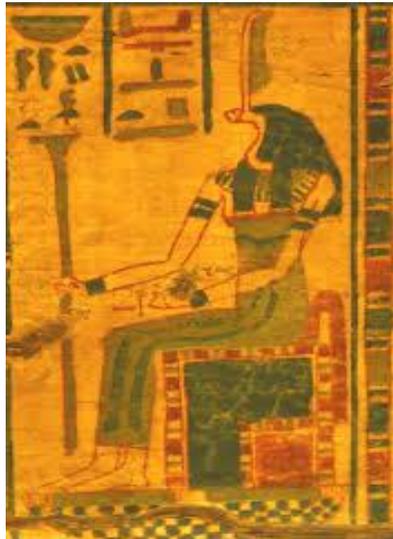
was “*Lord of Shai and the creator of Renenutet.*” Moreover, he was mentioned in Karnak temples as “*Shai of all gods.*” (Goodenough, S., 1997, p. 122).



**Fig.3.**The depiction of god Shai and goddess Reneutet in between them a baboon.

(<http://flowersforgods.com/kemetic-goddess-meskhenet/>)

Furthermore, this could ensure his presence throughout the New Kingdom, even during the reign of king Akhenaton, the one who called for monotheism, as he made a close association between Aten and Shai, to the extent that god Aten sometimes was said to be “*Shay who gives life*”. (Wilkinson, R.H., 2006, p.128). According to Assmann and Hornung no one could ever ignore Shai as it indicated the fate and the destiny of Gods and human beings.



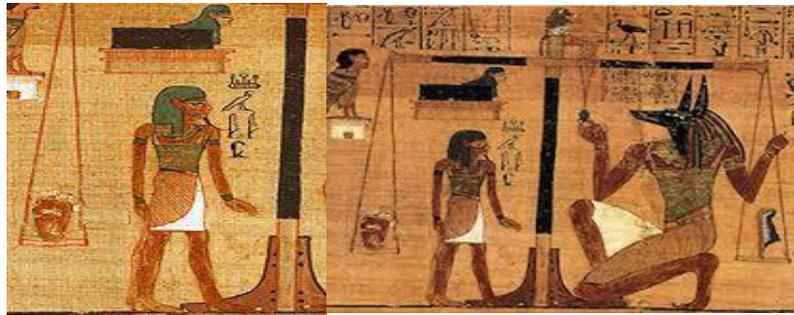
**Fig.4.**Goddess Renenutet.

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Renenutet>)

As god Shai was the main god of fate and destiny, he could have positive or negative influence, as either bringing fortune or misfortune. During the New Kingdom, he used to appear in Osirid court or the Hall of Maat, in the Book of the Dead, initially in the scene of the last judgment as he was regarded as god of birth in the world and god of rebirth in the underworld. (Hornung, E., 1990, p.87,88). His presence in the last judgment scene where the weighing of the heart of the deceased could be interpreted as either helping or hindering the deceased or for telling the court what happened for the deceased during his lifetime. Therefore, he could have protective purposes rather his consideration as a witness against the deceased. Consequently, one might say that the ancient Egyptian regarded Shay as god of lifespan and fortune. (Wilkinson, R.H., 2006, p. 128)



**Fig.5.**The scene of the Last Judgment.



**Fig.6.**God Shai in the weighing of the heart Scene.

(Faulkner, R.O.; *The Ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead*, British Museum, 1985).

Referring to his fortune-telling ability, god Shai during the Ptolemaic era was identified with Agathodaimon, the Hellenistic serpent deity. However, he rarely appeared in the Egyptian art, but the texts indicated that he regarded as conceptualization of destiny and fate rather than being a personal deity to be worshipped and served. (Wilkinson, 2006, p.128). Therefore, the term “Shai” was recognized as “the one who determines” confirming the ancient Egyptian notion of destiny. Additionally, Shai was embedded in theology as the creative will of gods. (Quaegebeur, J., 1975, p. 33-39).

Moreover, there is no clear evidence for connecting the concept of fate, destiny or desire with astrological basis or the calendar of lucky and unlucky days. Furthermore, it can also be concluded that amulets and magic role could never alter the fate of the human beings.

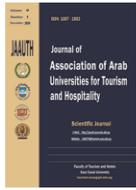
As a conclusion referring to the different tales, the fate or the destiny was moving in two tracks: the first one set by the Sun god and declared by the seven Hathors at birth, however the second was the determination of the lucky and unlucky days of the calendar in the myths. As a result of studying the ordained fate of the human beings, it would not be revealed except by a certain divinity in a definite manner. Consequently, destiny or fate were intelligible in religious sense. (Assmann, J., 2002, *The Mind of Egypt*, p.235-246).

However, the fate or the destiny of the person, could not be altered but still it is related to our religious beliefs, whether the individual accepts or complains he will always be obliged to face his fate. Therefore, the intelligence is to get the best out of your fate, which means to always search for the good side in any fate you face. This will provide you with the positive energy you need to accept your life and proceed forward to achieve your goals.

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## القدر في مصر القديمة

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### المخلص

تعد الحضارة المصرية القديمة من أغنى الحضارات في اكتساب مفاهيم ومعتقدات متنوعة من الطبيعة. يمكن تقسيم هذه المفاهيم والمعتقدات إلى فئتين علمانية ودينية. نظرًا لأن المصريين القدماء كانوا أناسًا متدينين للغاية، فإن معتقداتهم السائدة كانت معتقدات دينية كان لها دورها تأثير كبير على حياتهم العلمانية. وبالتالي، كانت المفاهيم والمعتقدات متداخلة معًا. سنتناول هذه المقالة موضوعًا فريدًا موجودًا في الأفكار والمعتقدات المختلفة لكل إنسان. بغض النظر عن الوقت أو العمر، فإن هذا المفهوم يهيمن على عقل كل إنسان. لذلك، فإن جميع الحوادث التي تحدث في حياتنا سوف ترتبط تلقائيًا بمفهوم المصير المخزن في أفكار ومعتقدات العقل البشري. يعتبر المصير والقدر مفهوماً واحداً لما يحدث للإنسان سواء أكانت أحداثاً مفرحة أو أحداثاً محزنة. لذا كان من الضروري محاولة إلقاء الضوء على هذا المفهوم الذي يؤثر إما بالسلب أو بالإيجاب على حياة كل شخص. أهم ما يميز الشخص الذكي هو تحويل أى مصير إلى شىء إيجابى مما سيسمح له بالوصول إلى هدفه.

### معلومات المقالة

#### الكلمات المتاحية

القدر؛ المصير؛  
الإله شاي؛ الدينونة  
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