

Ouroboros The Ancient Egyptian Myth of the Journey of the Sun

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In the main church of Weimar, there is a tomb slab decorated with a snake forming a circle by biting its tail.¹ Within the circle we see the Greek letters Alpha and Omega surrounded by the words LICHT LIEBE LEBEN—light, love, life (figure 1).

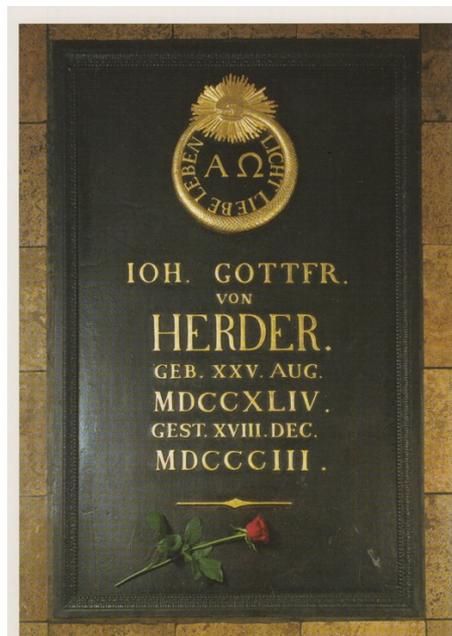


Figure 1: Tomb slab of Johann Gottfried von Herder in the Herder Church in Weimar.

Alpha and Omega symbolize Beginning and End, thus the totality of time. Above, where tail and head of the snake meet, there is a radiating sun. We are looking at the tomb slab of Johann Gottfried Herder who served as priest in this church and created with Wieland, Goethe and Schiller the “Weimarer Klassik”, the Golden Age of German literature.² The tail-biting snake is known by its Greek name Ouroboros, “tail-devourer”; it made its first appearance in ancient

¹ Cf. the paper by Aleida Assmann in this issue of *Aegyptiaca*.

² Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), Christoph Martin Wieland (1733–1813), Johann Wolfgang Goethe (1749–1832), Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805).

Egypt. In what follows, I am trying to trace, in a small number of examples, the career of this symbol in Egypt and beyond until it ended up on the tombstone of Herder.

The Egyptian conception of the sun-god and his daily journey through heaven and underworld formed the central myth of Ancient Egypt.

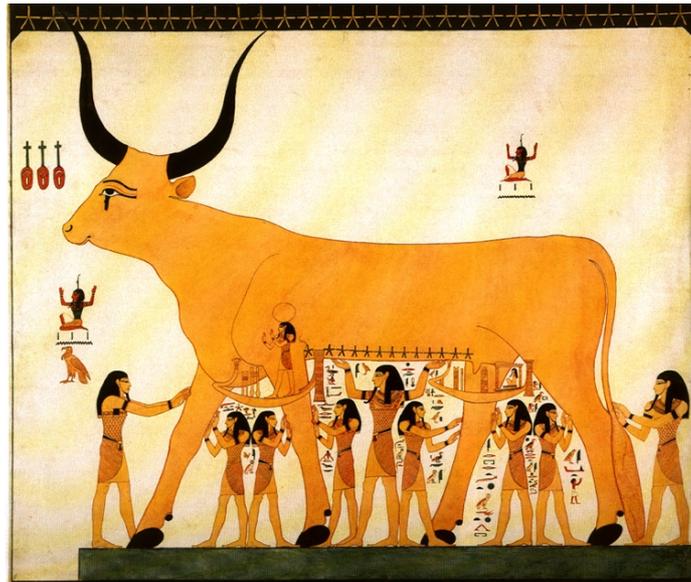


Figure 2: The Heavenly Cow.

In figure 2 from the tomb of Seti I, the heaven is represented as a gigantic cow, and the sun god is sailing E-W on its belly.³ The solar myth does not take place *in illo tempore*, when the great formation occurred—that of the world with heaven and earth, of the state with cult and kingdom; indeed, it does not take place in a particular time, but rather actually *creates* time in the first place. In its continuous past, present, and future occurrence, it generates time in its eternal state of circulation. The Egyptians have accompanied this myth, which continuously unfolds in front of their eyes, around the clock with sacrifices and recitations, to confirm its success and participate themselves in this success with their state and their social cohesion, as well as with their individual lives and deaths.

For the Egyptians, this success was by no means a matter of course. The Egyptians did not assume that the sun would rise again the next morning in its

³ Erik Hornung, *Der ägyptische Mythos von der Himmelskuh. Eine Ätiologie des Unvollkommenen* (Freiburg/Schweiz: Universitäts-Verlag, 1982), 82.

accustomed place, but rather made huge efforts to conjure and encourage this both ritually and symbolically. In their view, the journey of the sun in its continuously renewing state of circulation was incessantly threatened by a counteracting force, a gravitation towards chaos, standstill, and termination, which was symbolically embodied in the figure of a giant water snake.

This snake, named Apep (Greek *Apophis*) threatened to swallow the water of the primordial ocean and strand the bark of the sun god, in which he traveled with his entourage across the sky.⁴ This enemy had to be continuously defeated—in the sky with the support of the accompanying gods, especially the god Seth, who spears Apep and forces him to once again spit out the water he had swallowed; and on earth through the rites of the royal sun cult.

The support in the overcoming of gravitation to chaos is, however, not the only source from which the sun gains its energy for the continuous rounding of the world. Unlike most other cosmogonic myths, the Egyptian myth of the origin of the world does not conceive of chaos as a preexistent state to be replaced by cosmos. There is no idea of a cosmogonic fight like in Babylonian mythology and many other creation myths, of overcoming the powers of chaos by the powers of order. On the contrary: Nun, the primordial water, out of which the sun initially rose the first time; Kuk, the primordial darkness, the endless airy expanse; Niau, the original inexistence, that constitute the Egyptian idea of preexistence, continue to be present in the existing world. Every morning, the sun rises again from the primordial water, which, in the form of the annual flooding of the Nile, gushes from the underworld and, in the form of ground water, lies below the surface of the earth. Every night, the world returns to primordial darkness, which preceded the creation of the world and continues to reign over the peripheral zones of the created world. According to the Egyptian conception, without this continued existence of the preexisting state, there would be no regeneration. The pre-world is, according to Egyptian thought, neither “chaos” nor a “gaping void,” but rather an embryonic *pleroma*. In the continuing presence of the pre-worldly within the Egyptian world lies the mystery of cyclical time, of reversibility and regeneration. Into this pre-worldly sphere, the sun god returns every night; in it, he regenerates the energies he used up during the day—by progressing from childhood via maturity to old age.

⁴ Bruno Hugo Stricker, *De grote Zeeslang* (Leiden: Brill, 1953).

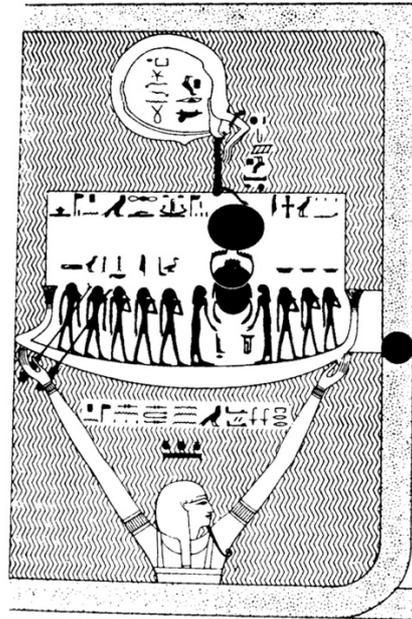


Figure 3: The sun rising from the primordial water, the final image from *The Book of Gates*.

The final image in *The Book of Gates*, a book about the underworld, depicts the sun rising from the primordial water and darkness (figure 3).⁵ We see an expanse of water, out of which a male figure emerges from below, who, with outstretched arms, pushes the sun bark upward. In the bark manned by various gods, Isis and Nephthys lift a scarab upward, which in turn pushes a round disk or ball in front of it. Three energies thus work together in this process, which refers to the rising of the sun: the arms that push the sun bark upward, Isis and Nephthys who lift a scarab upward, and the scarab that pushes the orb of the sun. From above, two figures come down, in the opposite direction of this upward movement. Standing on the head of a male figure, the back and legs of which curve like the Ouroboros, is a female figure, who receives the sun rising from below with her arms. Inscriptions explain the scene. Next to the arched male figure, one can read: “This is Osiris, who surrounds the underworld”; and next to the female figure standing on his head: “This is [the goddess of the sky] Nut, who receives [the sun god] Re.” Above the bark scene is written (from left to right): “This god takes a seat in the morning bark [with] the gods, in whose midst he is.”

⁵ Jan Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit, Altägyptische Zeitkonzepte* (München: Fink, 2011), 41–3, figure 1.

Primordial ocean and darkness—these cosmogonic energies are active during the birth/transformation of the sun and his rise upward into the sky and are symbolized by the god with the arms that push the bark upward.

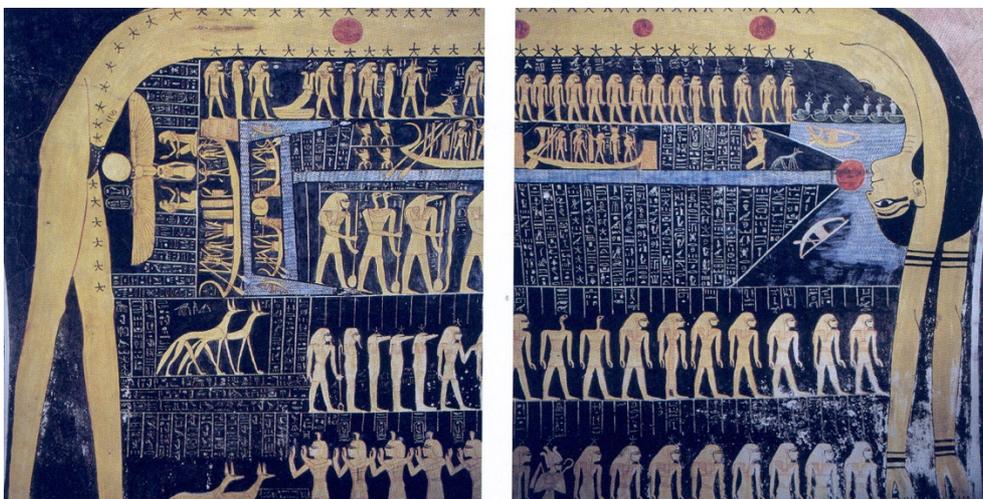


Figure 4: The birth of the sun in the morning and its setting in the mouth of the sky goddess (from *The Book of the Day*).⁶

Another picture depicts the same myth of the journey of the sun in another way (figure 4).⁷ Here, the sun is born in the morning from the vulva of the sky goddess, travels by day in his bark on her body, and returns back inside her through her mouth in the evening (in Egypt, the sky is feminine, and the earth masculine). In Egyptian thinking (or rather in the Egyptian imagination), these pictures like the one representing the sky as a cow and this one representing it as a woman giving birth to the sun in the morning and swallowing it in the evening are by no means contradictory, but rather complement each other. Here, the sun appears as the child of the sky goddess, who, however—matured to manhood and ruler of the universe during the day—as her husband, once again makes her pregnant with himself. There was no orthodoxy in ancient Egypt, neither in textual nor in visual representation.⁸

⁶ Segments from the figure in Edwin Conville Brock, “Das Grab von Ramses VI”, in *Im Tal der Könige. Von Grabkunst und Totenkult der ägyptischen Herrscher*, ed. Araldo De Luca and Kent R. Weeks (München: Frederking & Thaler, 2001), 263–5.

⁷ Marcus Müller-Roth, *Das Buch vom Tage* (Fribourg and Göttingen: Academic Press and Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

⁸ Henry Frankfort dubbed this principle “multiplicity of answers”, see his *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1948).

Yet the Egyptian cosmogony places the sun god at the beginning of all things: he emerged from himself (Egyptian *cheper djeseḥ*, Greek *autogénēs*). The Egyptian symbol for this idea of spontaneous self-generation is the beetle, *scarabaeus sacer*, *kheper* in Egyptian, who was thought of as originating all by himself without any sexual intercourse. As a verb, *kheper* means “to become”, “to transform oneself”, to develop. In Egypt, this notion held the same place of absolute centrality as in Greece the notion of “being”, *ousia* and *to on*.

Everything else also emerges from the self-generated *cheper-djeseḥ*, the sun: first air and fire, then the sky and the earth. In a later phase of cosmogony, heaven and earth separate, the sun removes himself to the sky and starts to circle the sky by day and the underworld below the earth in two barks, one for the day and one for the night. Only then, in the second phase of cosmogony, does the circulation occur with its cyclical time, which is what the myth of the journey of the sun is all about.

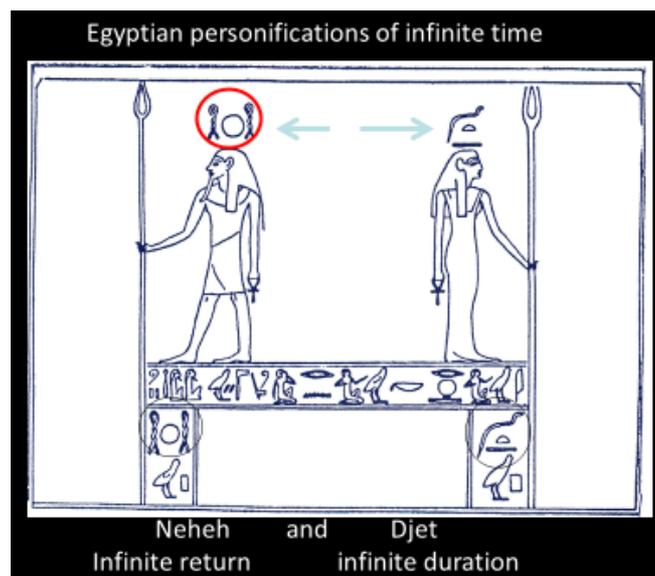


Figure 5: Nehem and Djeh, image on a golden shrine in the tomb of Tutankhamun.

In Egyptian, this circular and regenerative time is known as *neheḥ*, written with the sun between two signs for “h”, which, through the symmetrical arrangement of the signs in the form of a hieroglyphic anagram, graphically expresses the concept of cyclicity. The counter-concept of cyclical time is represented by the goddess to the right who is called “djeh”, meaning endless duration exempt from

any “becoming”, transformation, development (figure 5).⁹ These two deities, endless becoming and endless remaining constitute together the Egyptian concept of time. The endlessly becoming, changing sun stands for *neheh*, the cyclical time of regeneration and Osiris, the eternally remaining god of the dead and the underworld stands for *djet*, the immobile. This concept of time, its circulatory nature, its energies of infinite regeneration, and finally its power of protection against any form of transiency, is expressed in the symbol of the snake that forms a circle by taking its tail in its mouth—ouro-boros, or “tail-devourer”, in Greek.

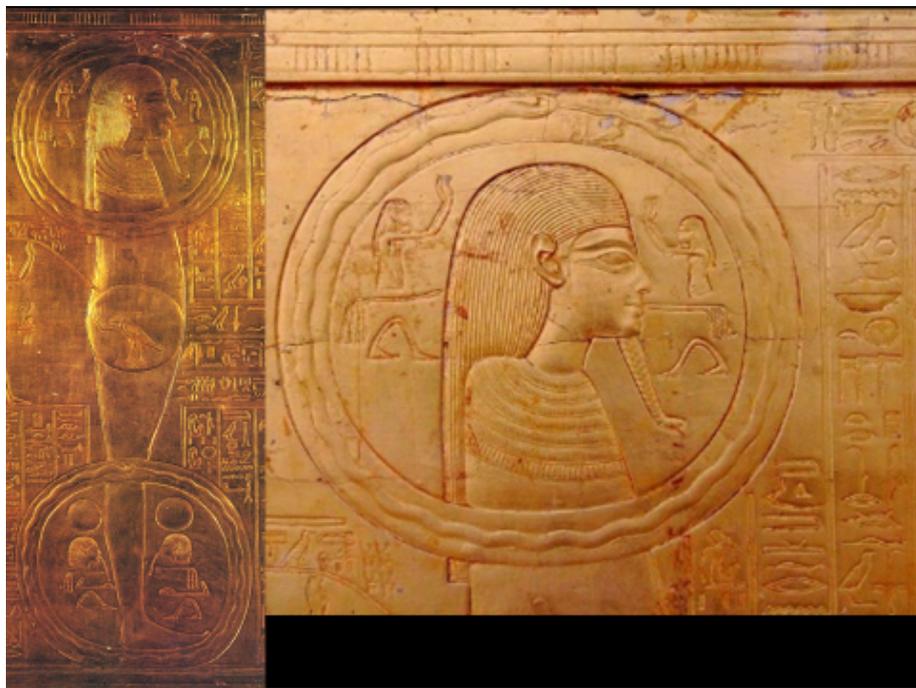


Figure 6: The sun god and the Ouroboros, image on a golden shrine in the tomb of Tutankhamun.

The Ouroboros first appeared in its classical, circular form on a golden shrine in the tomb of Tutankhamun, the pharaoh who, at the end of the revolutionary Amarna Period, returned to Thebes and the traditional religion (figure 6).¹⁰ The Amarna Period had rejected the entire traditional iconography in favor of a new, strictly canonized pictorial program. In turn, during the Post-Amarna Period, there was then a veritable flood of new visual ideas and an explosion of

⁹ Cf. Jan Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 13–85, figure 12; Frédéric Servajean, *Djet et Neheb. Une histoire du temps égyptien* (Montpellier: Université Paul Valéry, 2007).

¹⁰ Jan Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, figure 6.

iconographic creativity. The head and feet of a large figure spanning all three registers are each enclosed by an ouroboric snake.

A second comparable breakthrough of iconic creativity marks the period after the end of the New Kingdom in the tenth century BCE. During this time, one encounters the classical pictorial formula of the sun god encircled by the Ouroboros.



Figure 7: The sun god as a child in the Ouroboros, Heruben Papyrus.

The vignette in the Heruben Papyrus depicts the sun god in his morning form as a child in the red solar disk encircled by the Ouroboros (figure 7).¹¹ From above, the receiving arms of the sky goddess hang down; below, the sun rests on a bucranium (an ox's head with horns), another symbol of the sky goddess, between two lions, which stand for both the western and eastern Akhet, that is to say, the sites of the sunset and sunrise, and “yesterday” and “tomorrow”, the temporal vertices of the never-ending solar cycle.

¹¹ Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 54–6, figure 6.

The Ouroboros refers to the mystery of cyclical time, which flows back into itself. In Egyptian thought, this temporal concept stands in close connection with the annual flooding of the Nile. The Egyptian year begins with the onset of the flooding of the Nile in the summer. Through the flooding, the fruitfulness of the land is regenerated. The flooding of the Nile is thus a key symbol of cyclical time, which does not irreversibly pursue one goal, but rather flows back into itself like a circle and thus enables renewal, repetition, and regeneration. This Egyptian mental association of the year, the journey of the sun, the flooding of the Nile, and the infinitely regenerating abundance of time (Neḥeh), as symbolized by the Ouroboros, is impressively echoed in the poem on the consul Stilicho by the late classical poet Claudian.¹² Here, Claudian makes reference to the underground cave near the first cataract, from which, the Egyptians believed, the flooding of the Nile breaks forth. With Claudian, it appears as a symbol for time, eternity, and the return of the Golden Age, in which abundance, peace, and justice reigned on earth:

<p>Est ignota procul, nostraeque impervia genti, Vix adeunda Deis, annorum squalida mater, Immensi spelunca aevi, quae tempora vasto Suppeditat revocatque sinu: Complectitur antrum, Omnia qui placido consumit numine, serpens Perpetuumque viret, squamis caudamque reductam Ore vorat, tacito relegens exordia lapsu.¹³</p>	<p>Far away, unknown, beyond the range of our race, scarce to be approached by the gods, is the dark mother of the years, the cave of immeasurable time, which in its vast interior spawns and countermands the ages: A snake surrounds the grotto, peaceful in spirit, swallowing everything and eternally rejuvenating itself with its scales, but swallows its tail with its head thrown back, and silently returns to the beginning.</p>
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¹² Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 57f.

¹³ Claudian, *De Consulatu Stilichonis*, liber II, verses 424–30.



Figure 8: The Cave of Time, engraving from Vincenzo Cartari's *Le Immagini degli dei antichi* (Venice 1571, third edition, with illustrations), 35.

In the sixteenth century, Vincenzo Cartari illustrated this poem with an engraving that depicts the cave of immeasurable time: below, the Ouroboros, which encircles it; to the left and right of the opened door, Apollo as the sun god and the multibreasted Diana of Ephesus, who is equated with Isis; in the opened door, the god of the Nile, as he received the directive from the sun god to flood the river; and in the back, inside the cave on stairs, putti that embody the flood levels of the rising Nile (figure 8).

There is a fifteenth-century commentary by Marsilio Ficino on a section in Plotinus's writings, the so-called *Enneads* (V,8), where he reports on the methods of the Egyptian sages, whereby they do not communicate their wisdom in normal text and speech, but rather in pictures, which can summarize an entire discourse in one image. Ficino illustrates this process using the example of the Ouroboros:

The discursive knowledge of time is, with you, manifold and flexible, saying for instance, that time is passing and, through a certain revolution,

connects the beginning again with the end [...]. The Egyptian, however, comprehends an entire discourse of this kind by forming a winged serpent that bites its tail with his mouth.¹⁴

Another late classical author, who was highly celebrated in the Renaissance, is the Egyptian Horapollo. He wrote two books on hieroglyphics, which were discovered in 1419 by the Italian traveler Cristoforo Buondelmonti in a monastery on the Cycladic island of Andros and brought back with him to Florence.¹⁵ The first book (the second is a later, non-authentic supplement) discusses roughly seventy hieroglyphs, which, according to current knowledge, were, for the most part, read correctly, but incorrectly explained. In Horapollo's book, the Ouroboros appears at the beginning as the second sign: "When they want to write *world* (cosmos), they draw a snake that bites its own tail and is marked by manifold scales; with these scales, they refer to the stars in the firmament."¹⁶

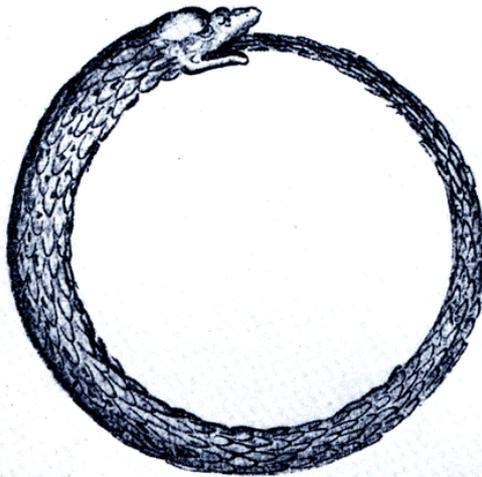


Figure 9: Ouroboros, drawing by Albrecht Dürer.

¹⁴ Marsilio Ficino, "In Plotinum V, viii" = Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Supplementum Ficinianum: Marsilii Ficini Florentini philosophi Platonici Opuscula inedita et dispersa*, 2 vols. (Florentiae, 1937–45; repr. Florentiae: Olschki, 1973), quoted in Liselotte Dieckmann, *Hieroglyphics: The History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis, Missouri: Washington University Press, 1970), 37.

¹⁵ Heinz-Josef Thissen, ed., *Des Niloten Horapollon Hieroglyphenbuch*, vol. 1 (München: Saur, 2001).

¹⁶ Quoted in Thissen, *Hieroglyphenbuch*, 2–3.

In a drawing on the margin of his copy of Horapollon's *Hieroglyphica*, Albrecht Dürer gives the Ouroboros its classical form (figure 9).¹⁷

In Egyptian thinking, the journey of the sun has both that aspect of the “world,” which is circled by the sun god (this is the meaning that Horapollon emphasizes), as well as the meaning “time” (in the sense of “Neḥeh”), which is created by the movement of the sun. This meaning is also cited in ancient sources as the meaning of the Ouroboros.¹⁸



Figure 10: The Ouroboros as a symbol of the oneness of everything, Codex Marcianus graecus 299 fol. 188v, tenth/eleventh century.

Special meaning is given to the Ouroboros in the context of alchemy. The title vignette of a Medieval alchemistic manuscript depicts a snake that bites its own tail and thus forms a circle, which surrounds the Greek words ἓν τὸ πᾶν (one is the whole; figure 10).¹⁹ The monistic maxim of the alchemists, “one is all, and by it all, and for it all, and if it does not contain all, all is nothing,” is combined here with its central symbol, the Ouroboros.

¹⁷ Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 61, figure 11.

¹⁸ Cf. the references in Jack Lindsay, *The Origins of Alchemy in Graeco-Roman Egypt* (London: Muller, 1970), 261–77: “eternity” (262–66), “time” (267–70); see also Kurt Reichenberger, “Das Schlangensymbol als Sinnbild von Zeit und Ewigkeit,” *Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie* 81 (1965): 346–51.

¹⁹ Assmann, *Steinzeit und Sternzeit*, 60, figure 10.



Figure 11: The Ouroboros as a dragon, drawing by Theodoros Pelecanos in the transcript of an alchemistic treatise from 1478.

The extrawordly, transcendent aspect of the oneness of being is predominantly illustrated and spatialized in the form of a dragon (with feet) that encircles the world (figure 11).²⁰ The Ouroboros on Herder's tomb slab stands in this tradition, since, here as well, it encircles alpha and omega as a universal formula that corresponds with the *ben kai pan* in figure 10. Herder was not an alchemist, but rather a member of the Illuminati, who, in his book *Gott: Einige Gespräche über Spinoza's System nebst Shaftesbury's Naturhymnus* (*God: Several Conversations about Spinoza's System Together with Shaftesbury's Hymn to Nature*, 1787) expressed his support of Spinoza's concept of God as the unity of all things.

How does all this fit together? To what extent is the principle of oneness, which encompasses the universe and encircles this from the outside, equated not only with eternity, but also with time and even the year? The idea that the world is simultaneously contained within and encircled from without by a principle that constitutes and continuously maintains it can be found in hermetic writings (*Corpus Hermeticum*), namely as eternity:

Eternity's lifegiving power stirs the world, and the place of the world is in living eternity itself; since everlasting life hedges [circumvallatus] it about and, in a manner of speaking, holds it together [constrictus], the world will never stop moving nor be destroyed.²¹

²⁰ Manuel Lima, *The Book of Circles: Visualizing Spheres of Knowledge* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2017), 47, figure 44.

²¹ "In ipsa enim aeternitatis vivacitate mundus agitur et in ipsa vitali aeternitate locus

Circumvallatus and *constrictus* are clear allusions to the ouroboric symbol, which is attributed here to the meaning of everlasting life (*sempiternitas vivendi*). This “eternal life” encloses and protects the world (*nec corrumpetur*) and keeps it in motion (*agitatur, nec stabit aliquando*), for, in this cosmology, the world is understood as an animate being: “For if the world was and is and will be a living thing that lives forever, nothing in the world is mortal.”²²

In the world surrounded by and filled with eternal life—since all is one—death has no place. Here, eternity is equated with “cosmic life,” which is simultaneously a guarantee for the immortality of all living beings on an existential level. For the oneness of all, however, and the endlessness of cosmic life, from which this concept of immortality is derived, the Ouroboros is a symbol which, on an existential level, takes on the character of a symbol of salvation.

est mundi, propter quod nec stabit aliquando nec corrumpetur sempiternitate vivendi circumvallatus et quasi constrictus,” *Asclepius* 30, Brian P. Copenhaver, trans., *Hermetica. The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius in a new English translation with notes and introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 85.

²² “Si enim animal mundus vivensque semper et fuit et est et erit, nihil in mundo mortale est,” *Asclepius* 29, in Holzhausen, *Das Corpus Hermeticum deutsch*, Teil 1, 337.