

NAU, A LIMINAL ENTITY, AND ITS RELATION WITH THE GOD RA.

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In Ancient Egypt, the Books of the Netherworld picture a lot of liminal creatures, including snake-deities. Among them some are benevolent, some malevolent and one can even find some divinities having both aspects. These books offer both visual representations and textual descriptions giving the functions of these liminal entities. The snake-god Nau gathers all these aspects.

Nau¹ is attested for the first time in the Pyramid Texts and one can find this deity through all the dynastic period and still in the Graeco-Roman temples. This snake-god is often portrayed as the Enemy in the Egyptian texts. On the other hand, scholars have established that this deity has a close relationship with the god Ra.

Since the first occurrences the texts state a relationship between the god Ra and the Nau snake. The last one is often seen as a negative entity and represents the assailant:

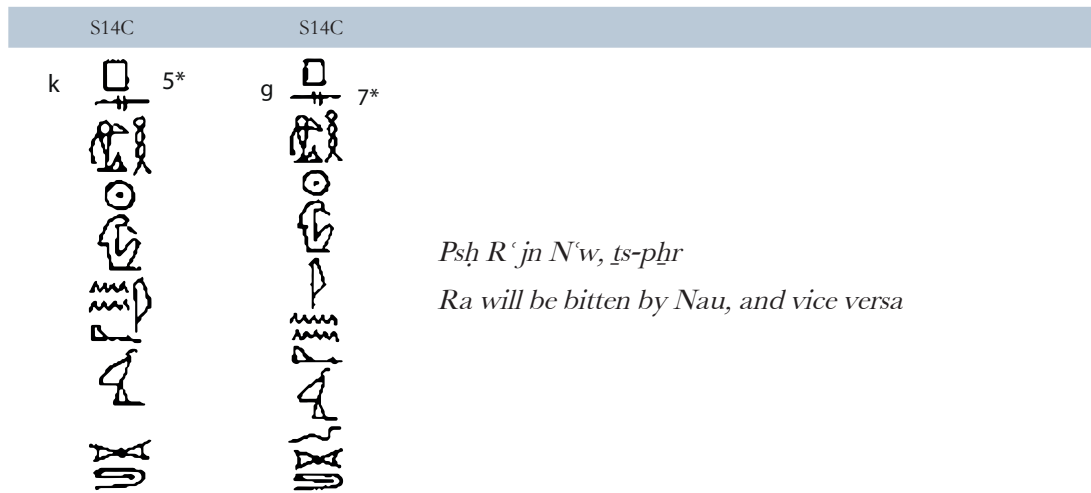


Figure 1. CT VII, 97g = CT VII, 98k [885] (S14C)²

In this extract from the Pyramid Texts and the Coffin Texts, as often, the snake-god is clearly identified with the opponent. Before the New Kingdom and the current use of Apopis as the archenemy, the figure of the assailant was already a snake: in the Coffin Texts the foe of the creator is known as Rerek³. In most cases, in these funerary texts, the snake is the enemy of the god-Ra – the Creator – and by extension, the enemy of the deceased.

However, in the Books of the Netherworld, like the Amduat, a huge amount of snakes is listed. Nevertheless, not all of them can be seen as enemies. The duality of every being is then highlighted. The snakes are dangerous beings but, as so, they make pretty good keepers, and more accurately: gate keepers. They have the necessary strength to prevent someone or something – an entity – to enter the space they guard.

1 Leitz et al. 2002, LGG III, 530c-532b.
 2 See Barguet, 1986, 323.
 3 In the Coffin Texts several spells are entitled ḥsf Rrk “Repel Rerek”: spells 375, 378, 379, 381, 382, 434, 436, 586, 640 and 885.

Nau is one of these snake-gods. He is pictured in the 12th hour of the Amduat:

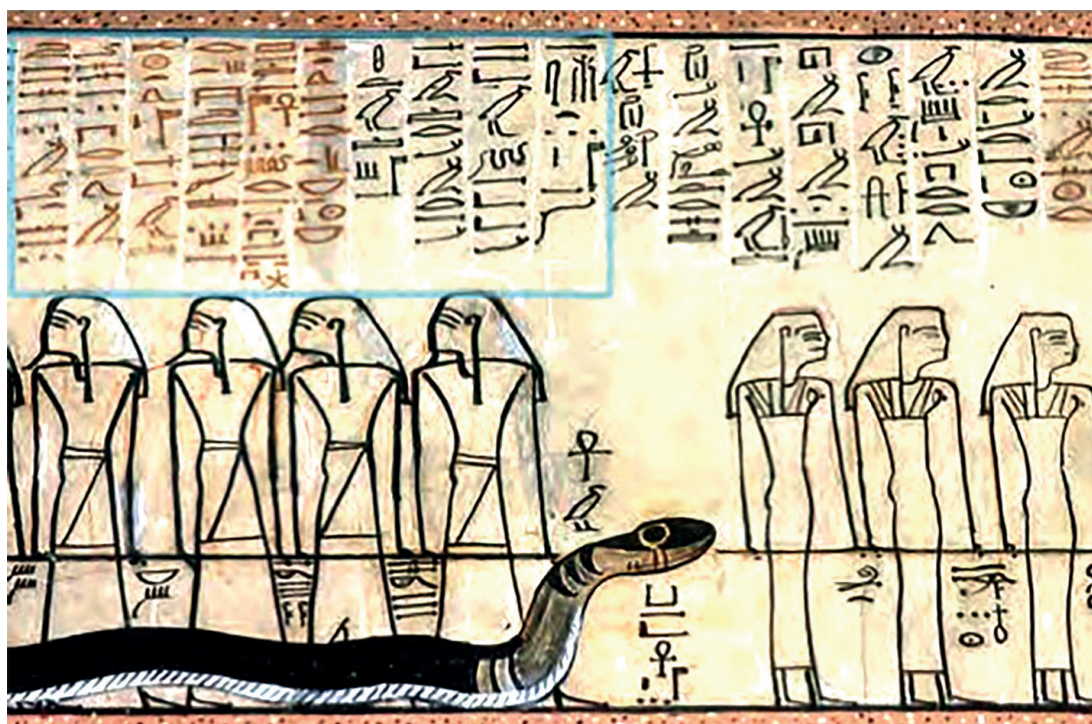


Figure 2. Tomb of Amenhotep II (KV 35), Book of the Amduat, 12th hour, median register ©Theban Mapping Project.

Wnn=sn m d.t=sn ds=sn prr m-h.t ntr '3 r p.t. Wnn šmw pn šz 'nh ntr.w r ns.t=f n(y).t Dw3.t jwty nmt=f r s.t nb.t r'-nb

Mdw ntr pn '3 r=f m rn=f n(y) N'w n'='f n msw.t ntr.

They will be in their own djet-body when they will come after the great god toward the sky. It will be this secret image of "the one who makes the gods live" at his place of Duat, he won't go elsewhere any day. This great god will talk to him in his name of Nau, as he passes through at the time of the god's birth.

The text with this image is enlightening about the relationship between the two deities. Not only the Nau-god is not depicted here as an enemy, as one can see by comparing this image against the representation of Apopis in the 7th hour of the Amduat, but *Nau* is the name that the creator has given him and he has been named after his function.

The snake-god appears at the end of the Book, where the Creator reaches the boundary between night and day, a critical time when the god Ra crosses towards the sky.

On one hand, this scene means that Nau is the Creator servant; he keeps the bark of Re-Atum moving by hauling it. On the other hand, the text points out that the two deities have a particular connexion. It is the creator that has named Nau and naming something, *a fortiori*, a living being, involves a close relationship between the one that acts and the patient, like when parents baptize their child or when someone gives a name to his enemy.

This scene from the 12th hour of the Amduat echoes the text of the Spell 88 of the Coffin Texts⁴:

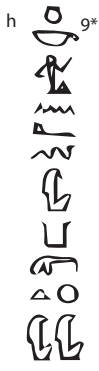

M41C	M41C	
h	q	<i>Jnk N'w, k3 Psd.ty</i>
		(...)
		<i>Wnn=j mj R' r'-nb, mss(w) r'-nb</i>
		<i>I am Nau, the Bull of the Double Ennead</i>
		(...)
		<i>I will be like Ra every day, the one who is</i>
		<i>born every day</i>

Figure 3. CT II, 54h, q [88].

In this spell the deceased identify himself with Nau and lists the abilities of this snake-god. By saying that, finally, he “will be like Ra” he insists on the power of the creator to be reborn every day. This text also elaborates a quasi-identity between the two gods by a kind of syllogism. Both previous texts indicate that Nau is to be found at the time and place where Ra is born every day, hence at the horizon. Such a relation is also present in another passage of the Coffin Texts⁵:







S1C	S2C	B2B0	B1B0	B5C	S10C	
c						
						
						<i>Wr.n, N'w.w hnty.w 3h.t</i>
						<i>The great-ones, Nau-snakes that preside over the</i>
						<i>horizon.</i>

Figure 4. CT III, 398c [267].

4 See Faulkner, 1973, 90 and Barguet, 1986, 478-479.

5 See Faulkner, 1973, 203 and Barguet, 1986, 226.

In this spell the snakes are still in connexion with the horizon, yet this association is described with an additional point: the Nau have a dominant position over the horizon. Finally, the same subject is mentioned in the pLouvre 3129⁶:



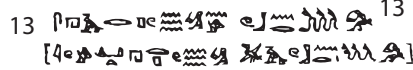
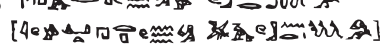
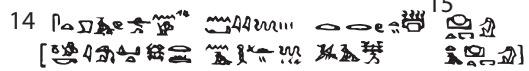
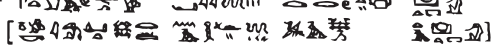
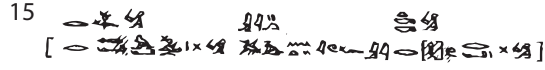

<p>12  12 [</p> <p>13  13 [</p> <p>14  15 [</p> <p>15  15 [</p>	<p><i>Dr~n=j hnn r mh.t n(y) Wnw,</i> <i>sb{3}rp~n=j Wbn-r(3)</i> <i>st3~n=j N'y.w r-rwty 3h.t</i> <i>r hsf jiw tek.</i></p> <p><i>If I dismissed the trouble at the North of Unu,</i> <i>immersed (in water) Uben-Ra</i> <i>and withdraw the Nau from the horizon,</i> <i>is to repel the attack to come.</i></p>
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Figure 5. pLouvre 3129, J, 19-22 = Urk. VI, 115, 17-117, 2.

This specific extract does not point in the direction of this snake-god being benevolent, still it lists different specificities of these snakes and a link is made between the Nau-snake(s) and the horizon. This ritual refers to the Myth of the Children of Weakness that takes place at the first moments of the creation⁷. In this myth the Nau-snake is considered one of the first manifestations of the Creator.

There is another spell of the Coffin Texts referring to the god-snake Nau:







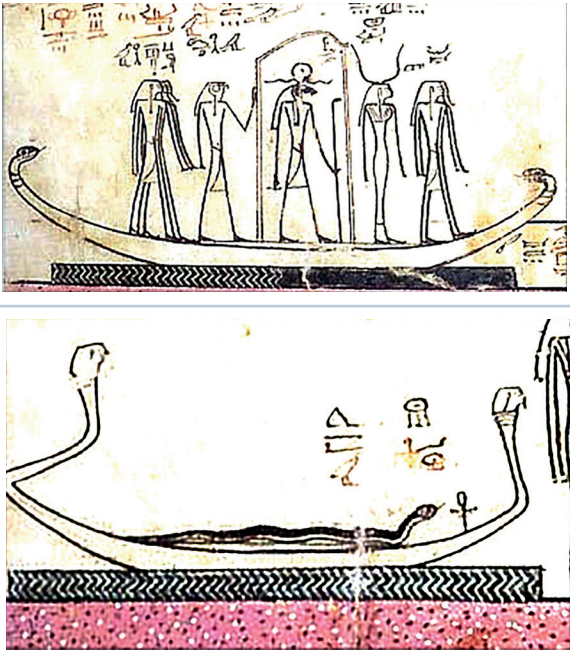
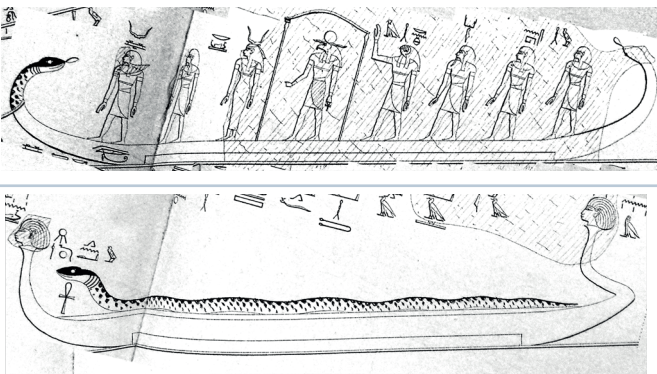
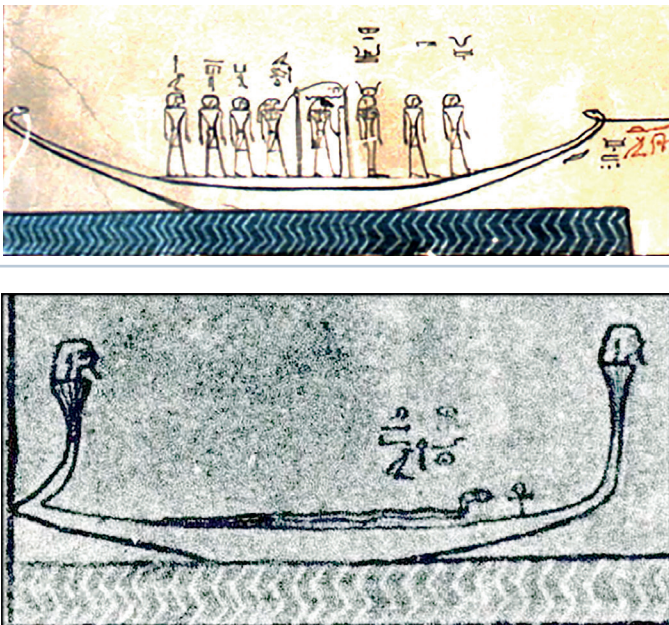
T1C	Sq1Sq	Sq2Sq	Sq1C	TiBe	M2C	
b 						<p><i>Jn n=k N'w pw jm(y) 'Hmn,</i> <i>Bring this Nau which is at the disposal of He-</i> <i>meni</i></p>

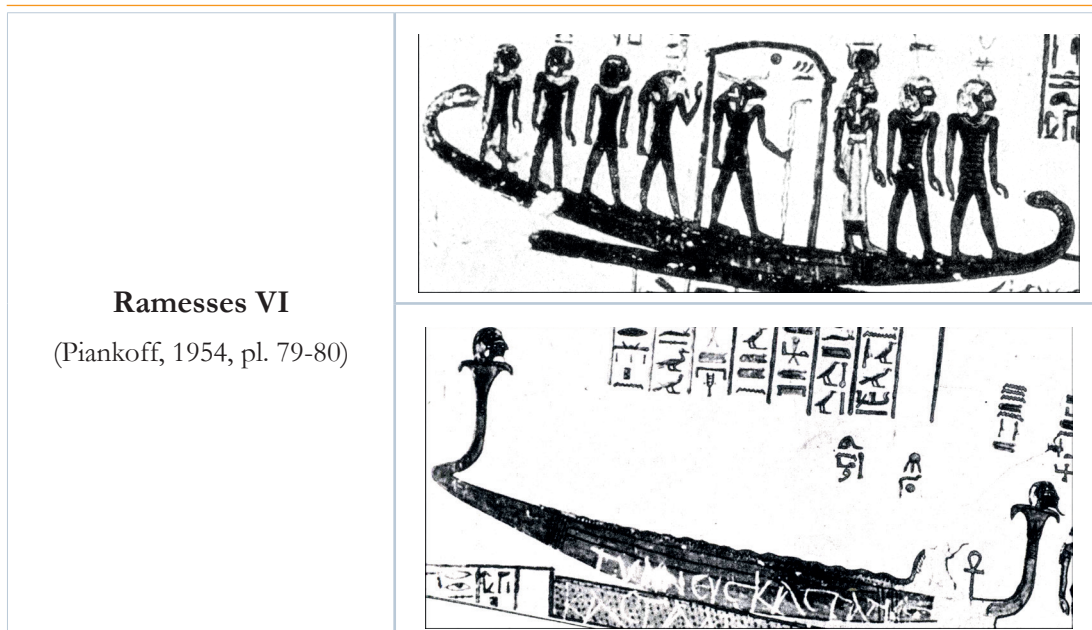
Figure 4. CT V, 93b [397].

The context, can be deduced by other texts⁸ telling the conflict between the god Hemeni from the city of Hefat and a snake. The identity of the snake is only specified in the Coffin Texts. Judging by this, Nau is the assailant vanquished by the local god Hemeni and condemned to serve his winner; then the deceased is using him in his bark.

To enlighten the relationship between Ra and Nau, another passage of the same Book of What is in the Duat deserves to be addressed here: the 4th hour. In the median register, the sun god sails in his boat while in the lower register, at the same place, one can find Nau:

6 See also Schott, 1954, 191.
7 Meeks, 2006, 60, 188 and 199.
8 See a parallel in Bickel, 2004, 97-104.

<p>Thutmose III (after Theban Mapping Project)</p>	
<p>Sethi I (Lefébure, 1889, pl. 23)</p>	
<p>Amenhotep II (after Theban Mapping project and Bucher, 1932, pl. 30)</p>	



Ramesses VI
(Piankoff, 1954, pl. 79-80)

Figure 3. Representations of the median and lower registers of the 4th hour of the Amduat in the main tombs with this book put in parallel.

The lower register pictures a reversed representation of the one right above. In the median register, Ra is in his bark with bow and stern that are snake-headed and goes forward, hauled; while the lower bark is pictured with human heads and stands still⁹.

Several texts can enlighten the meaning of Nau’s name. Scholars propound different translations for this name, interpreting its form from different verbs: from *n’j* “to go, to sail, to cross”¹⁰, *via n’j* “to plait”¹¹, to *n’c* “to be smooth”¹². By looking at all the examples from the Pyramid Texts, one can exclude this last option: this verb shows reduplication in certain verbal forms, which is not present in the texts.

The translation “the smooth one” can be accepted to describe the aspect of snakes, but it is not a particularizing designation and *N’w* is not originally seen as a generic term. The spellings of the theonym show the snake (I14) as determinative and only the legs walking (D54) as an infrequent replacement¹³. Moreover, the god is associated in texts with the verb *n’j*, “to sail”:




<p>Pyr. 422d [281]:</p> <p>W. ⁵³⁵  d</p> <p>T. ²⁹⁴ </p>	<p><i>N’y, n’y, N’y, N’y.</i> <i>Go away, go away, Nay, Nay.</i></p>
<p>Book of Caverns, 5th division, 4th register, 1st figure:</p> 	<p><i>N’y, N’y.</i> <i>The one who glides, Nay.</i></p>

Figure 4. Texts from the Pyramid Texts and the Book of Caverns.

9 Wiebach-Koepe, 2003, 456-457.
 10 VÉgA 3056 (= Wb II, 206, 7-21).
 11 VÉgA 2747 (= Wb II, 207, 1).
 12 VÉgA 3093 (= Wb II, 208, 2-9).
 13 Among these examples are: CT I, 219d [49] (B16C); the 4th hour of the Amduat and Edfu V, 109, 15.

In the first example the text can be seen only as wordplay based on the name but in the second one, it is the designation of the god himself. It has to be understood here as the definition of the essence of this deity.

Finally, there are epithets using this same verb in a similar context, for instance *n' -j3h.w=f*¹⁴ that qualifies Ra by his light that is passing through. The designation of the god-snake, in the 4th hour of the Amduat, “the one who slides¹⁵, the shiny one” is not to be discussed: it must be understood as a denomination of Ra himself. The term *hd* usually refers to a pale white light, like the one of the dawn and, more usually of the moon, but the Amduat happening at night, the term used for the emissions of the solar star may very well have borrowed from the star of the night its vocabulary. As his epithet shows it is him who brings light in this 4th hour of the Amduat.



Figure 5. Eternity-djet pictured as a god seated on a snake.

In the Egyptian texts one can find many examples of a link between the snakes and the night stars. Another reptile is also pictured rising toward the sky. In the 11th hour of the Amduat, at the first register, one can find the scene of a snake mounted by a seated god.

Parallels can give us the confirmation that this scene depicts the eternity-*djet*¹⁶. This serpent is to be seen as the time – eternity – that gives birth to the hours¹⁷.

One can assume that there is a close relationship between the sun and the moon. They are also intertwined with the fate of the deceased. M. Eliade¹⁸ gives a synthesis of different religions’ believes that fits exactly to the Egyptians ones:

“Le soleil devient ainsi le prototype du « mort qui ressuscite chaque matin ». Tout un ensemble de croyances en liaison avec l’initiation et la souveraineté dérivent de cette valorisation du Soleil en dieu (héros), qui sans connaître la mort (comme la connaît par ex. la Lune) traverse chaque nuit l’empire de la mort et réapparaît le lendemain éternel lui-même, éternellement égal à lui-même. Le « coucher » n’est pas perçu comme une « mort » du soleil mais comme une descente de l’astre dans les régions inférieures, au royaume des morts. À la différence de la Lune, le Soleil jouit du privilège de traverser l’enfer sans subir la modalité de la mort.”

Both of them accompany the deceased in its journey in the Netherworld, but only the sun is resurrecting every day. The parallel can be made in the Book of the Amduat: the god Ra passes by the Nau-snake every night but only the heliopolitan creator can go out in the light of day, every day. Yet, Nau is present every night to assist the sun god.

Eliade also wrote about the role of the snakes in the polytheist religions¹⁹ and for him “le serpent, étant une épiphanie de la Lune, remplit la même fonction”²⁰.

In the Amduat, the Egyptian texts and representations explicit the relationship between the creator – Ra – and the Nau-snake: they are both aspects of the same god. The solar god Ra entering the underworld becomes the moon, represented by Nau in this text.

14 See Leitz et al. 2002, LGG III, 529c (21-24th dynasty), see also *n' -j3h*, *n' -j3h.w=f* and *n' -m-j3h.w=f*.

15 And “passes through”, see him pictured in the 12th hour.

16 pBerlin 3005, cf. Niwinski, 1989, pl. 33d.

17 Servajean, 2007, p. 65 et 141.

18 Eliade, 1949, 143.

19 Eliade, 1949, 176-183.

20 Eliade, 1949, 178.

The heliopolitan creator goes in the Netherworld every day. His manifestations in these underworld regions are snakes. But, as Eliade and the Egyptian texts and scenes suggest, Nau is to be understood as a manifestation of the moon, the “negative” or complementary aspect of the solar god. As the vanquished enemy Nau becomes an auxiliary²¹; as such he accompanies Ra every night.

It is also clear in the texts that this snake-god has a close relationship with the horizon. So he is present at the crucial moment when the sun god passes through every day, is born every day. The text of the 12th hour of the Amduat explains us the reason of his name: Nau is named after his function, the function of assisting the creator in passing through.

21 See the similar case of the god-Seth condemned to carry his brother (Mathieu, 2011, 158).

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