

APULEIUS IN THE UNDERWORLD: A FOOTNOTE TO *METAMORPHOSES*, CHAPTER 11

John Carey, Ph.D.

© 1995 by the author. Originally published in *Alexandria 3*
(Phanes Press – Wheel Weiser Conari).

John Carey is based at the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, where he teaches Celtic languages and literature. His articles have appeared in many publications including *Temenos*, *Avaloka*, and *Gnosis*. In this commentary on Chapter 11 of *The Golden Ass*, he connects Lucius's experiences with the ancient Egyptian concept of the Amduat, demonstrating the Egyptian tradition contained within the Isis Mysteries.



The high point of the eleventh book of Apuleius's *Metamorphoses* is undoubtedly the moment when the protagonist Lucius, who has suffered throughout most of the narrative in the form of an ass, miraculously regains his human appearance during a festival of Isis. What follows, although an anticlimax in merely narrative terms, has a vivid interest of its own: we are told how the grateful youth became a student of the mysteries of Isis, and was at last rewarded with enlightenment. The veiled passage in which he refers to this epiphany runs as follows:

... Igitur audi, sed crede, quae vera sunt. Accessi confinium mortis et calcato Proserpinae limine per omnia vectus elementa remeavi, nocte media vidi solem candido coruscantem lumine, deos inferos et deos superos accessi coram et adoravi de proxumo. Ecce tibi rettuli, quae, quamvis audita, ignores tamen necesse est.

“Listen then, but believe, for my account is true. I approached the boundary of death and treading on Proserpine's threshold, I was carried through all the elements, after which I returned. At dead of night I saw the sun flashing with bright effulgence. I approached close to the gods above and the gods below and worshipped them face to face. Behold, I have related things about which you must remain in ignorance, though you have heard them.”¹

Much has been written about these suggestive lines, and it is not my purpose to recapitulate all of the relevant scholarship here. Rather, I take as my point of departure the views of J. Gwyn Griffiths who in his exhaustive commentary on the eleventh



Statue of Isis-Aphrodite, terracotta, Ptolemaic dynasty. Louvre Museum. Photo by Marie-Lan Nguyen/Wikimedia Commons.

book has repeatedly drawn attention to points in which Apuleius's account reflects native Egyptian tradition. In the case of the present passage Griffiths has argued for a connection between Lucius's revelation and ancient Egyptian doctrines of the afterlife, particularly the descriptions of the sun god's nocturnal journey through the underworld, which are found in certain funerary treatises.²

Further evidence of such a connection is furnished by the rituals which follow the epiphany, in which Lucius successively dons twelve cloaks,³ then appears to the populace wearing a radiate crown and holding a torch.⁴ Not only do I find Griffiths's position persuasive, but I believe that it can be taken further: the purpose of this note is to suggest that in hinting at the mysteries of Isis, Apuleius was actually paraphrasing an Egyptian text.⁵

Themes similar to those which we glimpse in Apuleius's cryptic description can be found in many Egyptian funerary writings. Thus we find the following at the beginning of a spell in the Book of the Dead:

Secrets of the nether world, mysteries of the god's domain: seeing the disk when he sets in life in the west and is adored by the gods and the blessed in the nether world. . . . As for every blessed one for whom this roll is used, his soul goes forth with men and gods; it goes forth by day in any form it wishes to assume. It is not kept away from any gate of the west in going in or out. It prevails among the gods of the nether world, for it is one who cannot be repelled. These gods surround it and recognize it. Then it exists like one of them. . . . It knows what befalls it in the light; it exists as a blameless soul.⁶

The similarities here are suggestive; but a closer parallel can be found. One of the most important and widely disseminated accounts of the sun's night journey was the work known as the *Amduat*, first written



Text from the walls of the Tomb of Thutmose III (KV34), 18th Dynasty. The tomb contains the earliest known complete version of the *Amduat*. Photo © 2002, Hajor/Wikimedia Commons.

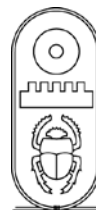
circa 1500 BCE. Not too long thereafter an abridged version was produced, and this proved extremely popular: it has been found carved in several tombs, and there are a great many papyrus copies. In summarizing the original *Amduat*, the reviser abstracted the names and magic words which it was most useful for the deceased to know, omitting descriptive passages and speeches placed in the mouths of supernatural beings; but he also added sections at the beginning and the end.⁷ Here are the lines which appear as the conclusion of the shorter version:

*The beginning is light,
the end is primeval darkness.
The sun's path westward,
the secret schemes which this god achieves.*

*The chosen clues, the secret writing
of the underworld,
which is not known by anyone
save the chosen.*

*Thus is that image made,
in the secrecy of the underworld,
invisible, imperceptible!*

*Whoever knows these secret images
is well provided for, is an initiate.
Always he goes in and out of
the underworld,
always he speaks to the Living Ones,
as has been proved true, millions of times!⁸*





Pendant of King Osorkon II, with Isis, Osiris, and Horus; gold, lapis, and red glass; 874–850 BCE (22nd Dynasty). Photo © Guillaume Blanchard/Wikimedia Commons.

Nearly everything in Apuleius's description is here as well: the statement that only the initiate can understand the secrets being discussed, the journey into and out of the underworld, the privilege of communing with the gods, the assertion of truth. The only significant omission is the lack of any direct reference to the sun's night journey—but this is of course the subject of the Amduat as a whole.

On the strength of these correspondences I propose that the mysteries into which Apuleius was initiated retained strong links with the pharaonic past, and that the abridged version of the Amduat was one of the scriptures from which he was instructed. The wonders which he experienced are, indeed, closed to us; but I think that he may have told us a little more than he intended.⁹

ENDNOTES

¹ Apuleius of Madauros, *The Isis Book* (*Metamorphoses*, Book XI), J. Gwyn Griffiths, ed.

and trans., (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), 98–99.

² Comments in Apuleius, *The Isis-Book*, 292–308. See especially the discussion of the sun seen at midnight on page 303: “This remarkable phenomenon is presented, on the first level, as something bizarre. Yet it admirably suits the situation in the Book of Amduat, where the sun-god is depicted as voyaging through the twelve hours of the night in the Osirian underworld. This, in fact, is the crucial point in determining the exact Egyptian context...” Similar arguments may be found in the work of earlier scholars: thus Willi Wittmann, *Das Isisbuch des Apuleius* (Stuttgart: W Kohlhammer, 1938), 111–19; and R. Reitzenstein, “Zum Asclepius des Pseudo-Apuleius,” *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 7 (1904) 393–411: 406–8.

³ *The Isis-Book*, 98–99; on p. 309 Griffiths points out the evident link between the twelve cloaks and the twelve underworld regions traversed by the sun god. Cf. Wittmann, *Isisbuch*, 114; Reitzenstein, “Zum Asclepius,” 408.

⁴ *The Isis-Book*, 100–101. On p. 315 Griffiths comments that “in this cult the initiate can be identified with none other than Osiris, but here, after a ceremony which depicts the visit of the sun-god to the Osirian realm of the dead, the triumph over the dead is fittingly symbolized by an Osiris-figure with solar attributes. An identification with the god is therefore present.”

⁵ It is noteworthy that Apuleius mentions books in hieroglyphic script which were kept in Isis's shrine, and describes a priest reading from them to his disciples (Griffiths, *The Isis-Book*, 96–97). On p. 285 Griffiths observes that “Apuleius begins the *Metam.* with a description of an Egyptian papyrus roll, and there is every reason to believe that he was acquainted with papyri in which various Egyptian scripts were used.”

⁶ Thomas George Allen, trans., *The Book of the Dead or Going Forth by Day* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 22. I have slightly adjusted Allen's punctuation and capitalization in order to make this excerpt read more smoothly.

⁷ On the wider use of such passages, which he calls “preliminary and terminal rubrics,” see Allen, *Book of the Dead*, 2.

⁸ Erik Hornung, ed. and trans., *Das Amduat: Die Schrift des Apuleius verborgenen Raumes*, Teil III: Die Kurzfassung, Nachträge (Wiesbaden: Otto Harassowitz, 1967), 35. Have translated Hornung's German; he gives the hieroglyphic text of the passage in question on pp. 25–26.

⁹ For more on the survival into late antiquity (and beyond) of the doctrines of the Amduat, see my article “The Sun's Night Journey: A Pharaonic Image in Medieval Ireland,” forthcoming in the *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57 (1994).