PTAH, CREATOR OF THE GODS
RECONSIDERATION OF THE PTAH SECTION OF THE DENKMAI.

BY
RAGNHLILD BJERRE FINNESTAD
Bergen, Norway

The Ptah section of the Shabaka stone has largely influenced the theories on Egyptian religion. It has been regarded as a systematic account of Egyptian cosmogonic mythology, and the image of Ptah has, through numerous treatises on the section, asserted itself as that of a creator. An especially comparative interest has been taken in the text, because Ptah is said to create by his word; and parallels have been drawn with the Jewish conception of the word as a creative instrument. However, the greater part of the interest aroused by the Ptah section is due to its value as a document of Egyptian religion.

The Shabaka text is written on a rectangular stone of black granite, measuring 92 × 137 cm (British Museum, No. 498). It is written in vertical columns and reads from the left. Parts of it are obliterated. On the top of the stone are two horizontal lines announcing that the text was written anew from an old book damaged by worms, by orders from king Shabaka (25. dyn.), who placed the stone in the temple of Ptah in Memphis.

The left-hand section of the stone deals with the mythical conclusion of peace between Seth and Horus, and with the unification of the two countries by Horus; the text especially stresses that Memphis is the scene of these happenings; it also associates another mythical event with the town: Osiris' drifting ashore and being buried in Memphis. The account of this last episode is repeated verbatim at the end of the right-hand section of the stone, and with it the Shabaka text concludes. The rest of the right-hand section constitutes the so-called "Ptah section"; it deals with the creative activities of the town god of Memphis.

The text was first published in 1837 by S. Sharpe (Egyptian Inscriptions from the British Museum and other sources, 1. series, 36-38, London), but a successful translation was not offered until 1902, when J. H. Breasted published his translation (The Monist, vol. 12, 321 ff),
his new text publication having appeared in 1901 (ZÄS, 39). In 1911 A. Ermann presented the results of his examinations of the text, under the title of “Ein Denkmal memphitischer Theologie” which has become one of the most common designations of the text (SPA W, 43). A text publication with a translation was given by K. Sethe in 1928 (Untersuch. X, Leipzig; reprinted in Hildesheim 1964). H. Junker published in 1940 a translation of the Ptah section which he called “Die Götterlehre von Memphis” (APAW, 23, 1939, Berlin 1940), and in 1941 a translation of the left-hand section of the stone, which he called “Die politische Lehre von Memphis” (APAW, 6). — An English translation has been given by J. A. Wilson (ANET, 3. ed. 1969, 4 f), and one by M. Lichtheim in 1973 (Ancient Egyptian Literature, vol. 1, Los Angeles. London).

As regards subject matter the Ptah section is commonly held to be a cosmogony: Ptah first creates the gods, that is: the powers behind the cosmic processes; he then creates the contents of cosmos: living creatures, plants, activities going on there. — It is the view of this article that the subject matter of the section is in its essence not a cosmogony but a theogony. The author presents Ptah as the creator of the life of the gods. The theogony is seen from a cultic point of view, everything that Ptah creates is associated with the cultic life of the gods.

The purpose of the text has often been discussed. Without going into the problematic question of the relationship between the Ptah section and the left-hand section, the following views might be mentioned. Two of them consider the purpose polemical: the text asserts the supremacy of the Memphite theological system over the Heliopolitan, or it has the political aim of claiming the hegemony of Memphis and its priesthood over Heliopolis and its priesthood. A third theory regards the text as a philosophical treatise with the purpose of presenting an

1) See p. 17f with notes.
3) Junker regards the text as “ein neues Dogma mit politischem Hintergrund” p. 6. (ref. to Sethe, p. 5) Cf. too, p. 77. Holmberg sees it as a “polemical treatise directed against Heliopolis” pp. 19, 121. H. W. Fairman: “The whole inscription is propaganda in favour of Ptah of Memphis in opposition to the rising power and influence of Re and the priesthood of Heliopolis.” The Triumph of Horus, London 1974, p. 3.