The symbolism of the Djed-pillar in
The Tale of King Khufu and the Magicians

Jennifer McKEOWN

The Tale of King Khufu and the Magicians, known from one fragmentary copy –Papyrus Westcar– dated to Dynasty 15,\(^1\) appears to be a late Middle Kingdom composition\(^2\) and is generally considered to be a pure Folk-Tale where history overlaps with mythology.\(^3\) It weaves a tale of fantasy around an authentic Old Kingdom framework, centred upon King Khufu and his sons\(^4\) –Khafre, Baufre and Hardedef\(^5\)– but referring back to Kings Djoser, Nebka\(^6\) and Sneferu, and forward to Userkaf, Sahure and Neferirkare of Dynasty 5 (see figure 1).

\(^1\) From the style of hieratic writing and width of parchment (Erman, 3-6).
\(^2\) From its language and style (Erman, 7-21; Lichtheim, 215; Parkinson, 117).
\(^3\) As Eyre expresses it (Eyre, 415).
\(^4\) Assuming an unnamed son recounts the first, largely incomplete tale, Simpson (Simpson, 745) suggests this could be Crown Prince Kawab, owner of mastaba G7110/7120, who predeceased his father. Other candidates are Khufukaef and Djedefre.
\(^5\) Khafre is next-but-one successor to Khufu. Baufre may be identical with hr-bt=f, son of Khufu interred at Giza, and/or king bsw=f-rf who appears in a Middle Kingdom inscription (von Beckerath, 1975a, 600). Hardedef will be discussed later.
\(^6\) Nebka is another name of the little-known Sanakhte, first king of Dynasty 3 and Djoser’s brother (Clayton, 32). This Nebka is more likely to be that in the narrative than the tentative 4th Dynasty owner of the unfinished pyramid at Zawiyet el-Aryan (Clayton, 51), although Nebka follows Djoser in the Tale.

Papyrus Westcar appeals to the imagination of the audience through anticipation, metaphor, double-meaning and word-association –thus can be experienced at different levels. I shall explore how such literary devices are used in connection with the symbol of the djed-column so much in evidence in the Fourth Tale –that of Hardedef and the Magician Djedi– and consider relevant historical, religious and textual material. I hope consequently to offer an interpretation of the allegory represented by the complete Westcar.
The hieroglyphic biliteral $\text{Dd}$ representing the \textit{djed}-column of Osiris is used as the phonetic determinative of $\text{Ddi}$, meaning "to be stable, enduring"\(^7\), and in the later variant writings\(^8\), $\text{Ddi}$ and $\text{Ddi}$.

In the Fourth Tale the appearance of $\text{Dd}$ in the names $\text{Ddi}$, Djedi (the Magician), $\text{Ddi}$-$\text{snfrw}$, (where Djedi lived\(^9\)), $\text{Ddi}$-$\text{Ddt}$ Ruddjedet (mother of the 5th Dynasty kings) is surely deliberate to invoke associations with this ancient symbol.

The \textit{djed}-pillar was a prehistoric fetish, a wooden column imitating a bundle of stalks tied together\(^10\)–probably the last sheaf of corn to be cut at harvest-time– which in the ancient world was believed to contain the retreating spirit of the corn thus treated in a special way. The ceremony of \textit{Raising the Djed-pillar} probably originated as a pre-historic post-harvest ritual to re-vitalise the corn spirit. As Egyptian theology developed Ptah, then Osiris (as chthonic fertility-god and essence of all eternal life) became associated with the \textit{djed}, and \textit{Raising the Djed-pillar} with the resurrection of Osiris. The \textit{djed} was treated as a living god; it was adorned with loin-cloth and feathers, and human eyes painted in\(^11\).

Two early cult-sites for the \textit{djed}-pillar were the Western Delta towns of $\text{Ddw}$,\(^12\) now Busiris, and $\text{Ddt}$ now Mendes.\(^14\)

Although the Cult of Osiris was established by Dynasty 5 at the latest,\(^15\) the identification of Osiris with the \textit{djed}-pillar cannot be shown conclusively until Dynasty 18. The Theban

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9. Town near the pyramid of Sneferu at Meidum (Kaster, 263).
11. Watterson, 55-56; Rundle Clark, 235-6; Altenmüller, 1975a, 1100-1102.
12. Of many variant writings for $\text{Ddw}$. See Collier & Manley, 41.
13. At $\text{Ddw}$, Osiris supplanted the indigenous god Andjety and took over his royal insignia of crook, flail and atef double-plumed crown. Later, when the myth of Osiris's dismemberment developed, $\text{Ddw}$ claimed to be the burial-place of Osiris's backbone and the \textit{djed}-pillar became the embodiment of this sacred relic. (Shaw & Nicholson, 213-214; Watterson, 56).
14. The ram-god $\text{br-nb-Ddt}$ "manifestation of the Lord of Djedet" was known here from Dynasty 2 (Shaw & Nicholson, 181).
15. Griffiths, 21-24 and 68; Rundle Clark, 98.
The tomb of Kheruef (TT192) has splendid reliefs of Amenhotep III offering to the Osirian djed (fig. 4); also of this king erecting the djed-pillar (fig. 5). The texts (Appendix I) tell us that the king himself performs the ceremony in order that the god Sokar-Osiris might grant favourable conditions for the impending celebration of Amenhotep’s Sed-festival.18

Van der Vliet (406-7) points out that the specific occasion here for Raising the Djed-pillar exemplifies the general occasion of providing a "Time boundary" to separate one era from another - e.g. to close Temple Festivals on the final day. The djed standing upright implies continued life and stability in the world.19

As is clear from the above iconography, Raising the Djed-pillar not only symbolised the resurrection of Osiris but, with king as Enactor, served as a metaphor for the continuing stability and endurance of the monarchy. The djed-pillar has been used in royal architecture as "cosmic pillars" or "sky supports" since Dynasty 2,20 being particularly evident in Djoser's funerary complex (see Figures 2-3).21

Kings may first have set the djed-column upright in Memphis during the Old Kingdom (Sethe, 156) but the earliest textual evidence comes from the Middle Kingdom. The 11th/12th Dynasty Coffin Texts, relate occasions of Raising of the Djed to certain times and places connected with the Osiris-Horus-Seth myth, when the ceremony signified the Triumph of Osiris over his enemies.22

"O Thoth, vindicate Osiris against his foes in (...) the great tribunal which is in Khem on that night of erecting the djed-pillar in Her-wer (...) the great tribunal which is in Pe and Dep on that night of erecting the two djed-pillars...". "O Thoth vindicate Osiris against his foes in (...) the great tribunal which is in Djedu on that night of erecting the djed-pillar".23

The same mythology dominates the Royal Cult of Succession and directly links the king with Raising the Djed-pillar – notably in the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus discovered in a tomb dated to Amenemhet III.24

17. Osiris is named by the head of the Personified djed-pillar in Chart 2. In Plate 57, Amenhotep's daughters "adore Ptah-Sokar, the djed-pillar of Osiris".
19. To be upright is to be alive, to have overcome the inert forces of death and decay (Rundle Clark, 236).
20. A stela of Khasekhemui has a djed-column support (Rundle Clark, 237).
21. Where they, together with Tyets (knots of cloth or leather, the symbol of Isis), were used to frame the Royal Name enclosure vertically. Rundle Clark, 236-237, gives a detailed explanation of the symbolism of the djed-pillar in delimiting and guaranteeing the space of air and world in which the king’s authority holds good. He believes this is the origin of the cartouche.
22. Van der Vliet, 410-411; Altenmüller, 1975a, 1101.
This sacred work honours Senusret I but may have older origins. It has both funerary and dynastic concerns and seems to be a "Coronation Drama" performed at the Sed-festival to re-enact the royal accession ceremonies. It is played before a statue of the (deceased?) king onlooking from a boat. Scenes 12-15 and vignettes 7-9 (fig. 4) involve the djed-rituals and reveal that

a) a goat and a goose are killed and their heads offered to the djed. These heads represent the head of Seth (twice);

b) the djed carrying an im3-branch is raised by the king's issue (or new king?) and a cord attached to it. The accompanying text identifies the djed as Seth and the im3-branch as Osiris. Thus Raising the Djed causes the im3 (Osiris) to rise over the djed (Seth) and symbolises the Triumph of Osiris over Seth.

Returning to The Tale of Hardedef. Prince hr-dd=f is an historical figure. In his mastaba at Giza, his name was written. Variant writings are known from Dynasty 5/6 inscriptions. Both also contain the biliteral dd: and .

Curiously, the Prince's name in pWestcar is written without the djed-column, whereas the listener might expect to hear . This appears intentional and causes me to pose the question "Why did Hardedef need to go in search of the djed-pillar he lacked"? For that indeed is what he did in fetching Djedi who is not only eponymous with -but a personification of- the djed.

Hardedef finds a prostrate djed-pillar; Djedi is "lying down, inactive" (line 7.15). Interestingly sdr has the same root as sdrt the Festival of Laying (Osiris) to Rest. We may have anticipated Djedi to be already dead - from his immense age and the funeral-offering quantities of food he consumes every day (lines 7.2-7.3). The djed-deity, however, might expect to receive such offerings daily!

25. The cursive hieroglyphs and retrograde writing of hieroglyphs in columns are typical of religious documents used in temples.
26. Sethe, 98, suggests Dynasty 1, but Altenmüller, 1975b, 1139, considers Dynasty 5/6 to be the earliest likely date because of the strong Osirian overtones. Senusret is named on the papyrus but not as the king in the text.
27. Altenmüller, 1975b, 1138.
28. The im3-tree may be a date-palm, Gamer-Wallert, 54.
29. Sethe, 48; Altenmüller, 1975a, 1101-1102. In a sense, the Djed is Seth when prostrate and Osiris when upright.
30. Reisner found his mastaba (G7210/7220) in 1926 in the Giza Necropolis. It had been desecrated - the lacuna could be D46 or A50. (Brunner-Traut, 7; Drioton, 46).
31. Junker, 26; Goedicke, 45. These are from stele of followers of the cult of the deified hr-dd=f, who "adored" him or "were revered before" him.
32. That is the writing in The Instruction of Prince Hardjedef and other literature quoting him are similar e.g. (Brunner-Traut; Posener, 1952, 113) is no surprise since the versions known of these texts all post-date pWestcar.
34. His 110 years was the age all Egyptians aspired to but probably never reached.
Hardedef addresses him as *im3hy*, the usual term for the revered dead. Djedi has Osirian attributes—the power to restore life—and immortality:

"he knows how to put on a head again that has been cut off" (line 7.4);

"Your condition is like one living beyond (the) years (of the) state of death, burial and interment ... one who sleeps until dawn devoid of disease". (Hardedef to Djedi, lines 7.17-7.19).

"Disease" here is written not $\text{\textbf{h3yt}}$ but $\text{\textbf{h3t}}$, homophonous with a word for "corpse", word-play strengthening our feeling that Djedi is immune from death.

The word *nis* used when Hardedef "summons" Djedi to Khufu (line 7.20) also has the meaning "to evoke (the funeral repast)". Hardedef tells Djedi he "will eat dainties of what the king gives ... that (the king) may conduct him in due time to his forefathers in the necropolis". Offering formula language to the still-living? Or might the listener have images of the king offering to the djed and performing the associated rituals? The ambience is mortuary throughout but careful choice of words develops associations with immortality, Osiris and the *djed*-pillar.

The symbolism reaches its zenith in Line 8.2, when Hardedef "helps Djedi up". Literally translated, $s\text{\textbf{h3:n=f sw}}$ means "he

35. Faulkner, 1962, 183.35.

36. Translated thus by both Lichtheim, 218, and Kaster, 264.
causes him to stand". $s^h$ also means "raise up" or "erect (buildings)"). I find it compelling that this is a carefully worded metaphor for Hardedef Raising the Djedef-piller, which is always written $s^h$ $dd$ in the textual sources. Possibly, an anticipatory verbal echo of this event exists in the construction $h$ $pw$ $ir.n$ (name) "There was a standing which (name) made" used to introduce each tale and when Hardedef first finds Djedi.

The metaphor continues as the now upright and re-vitalised $djed$ walks to the boats, his accompanying children and books (lines 8.2-8.4) possibly developing associations with the Children of Horus and Thoth –important players both in Royal Funerary Ceremonies and in the Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus.

At Khufu's Court, Djedi was "dragged in" before the king (line 8.10). $st$ –appropriate for a pillar– also implies the disrespect shown by Khufu for the djed. They met in the $wh$ $wy$, the "pillared forecourt" of the palace ironically having papyrus-columns. But is the $djed$-pillar unknown at the palace? Khufu, unlike Hardedef, did not recognise Djedi and his attributes at the start of the Tale (lines 6.24-7.6). Even after Djedi has demonstrated his ability to join the severed heads of geese and ox (lines 8.13-8.25), Khufu appears blind


38. A better translation for $st$ (Faulkner, 1962, 255) than Lichtheim's "ushered".
to his Osirian qualities. Djedi's display of magic resonates with echoes of the *djed*-scenes (12-16) of the *Dramatic Papyrus* (cf. supra and figure 5). The close parallels and colourful additions are analysed in Appendix III.

Khufu's later blackened reputation among the Greeks probably stemmed from this episode of *Westcar*. The king's callous order to decapitate a prisoner for Djedi's demonstration of magic and his lesser concern with the miraculous regeneration of the dead than his obsession with perfecting his Pyramid gain him no sympathy. We are not surprised at Djedi's prophecy that this tyrant's Dynasty will give way to that of Ruddjedet's children (lines 9.1-9.14). Khufu is dismayed; at this point perhaps he becomes aware that his failure to encompass the *djed* has forfeited his Dynasty stability and endurance. Djedi is assigned to dwell with Prince Hardedef, his rations enhanced (line 9.19-9.21) –strangely now including leeks!

It has often been commented that the fulfilment of Djedi's prophecy in *Westcar* attempts to "explain" the change of kings that gave rise to Dynasty 5 and the contemporaneous emergence of the theology of Re. However, the account of *the birth of the Children of Re* occupies only the Fifth Tale and needs to be reconciled within the meaning of the entire text. Moreover, late 4th Dynasty kings had already adopted the epithet *sA-ra* and suffixed their names with -re (see Figure 1). I believe my interpretation of the symbolism of the *djed*-pillar offers some clues.

The missing first section of the Papyrus may explain why the four princes were relating their tales of magic to Khufu. Superficially it is to entertain him but, at a deeper level of interpretation, were they attempting to deal with some crisis in the monarchy? The Fourth Tale is redolent with imagery of *Raising the Djed-pillar*, which rite Van der Vliet argues could be evoked in any political or mortuary situation where continuity is threatened, including the legitimacy of royal succession. The previous Tales are linked to the Fourth through

(a) the introductory construction "h* pw ir.n" and subtle anticipation of the *djed* imagery;

(b) the framework of separate scenes enacted before a non-participating king mirroring that of the *Dramatic Papyrus*. The Royal Succession is again implicated.

The Egyptian author "explains" a situation by establishing homologues. The present-day logician, demanding a cause and effect relationship, would see the first three princes seeking solutions from parallels in the Golden Ages of Khufu's forefathers Nebka, Djoser and Sneferu. Khufu learns nothing and rewards the kings rather than the magicians. Hardedef tries the present. He goes in search of the *djed*-

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39. Khufu is seeking to discover "the numbers of secret chambers in the sanctuary of Thoth" (Gardiner, 1925, 2-5) which he wants to copy in his Tomb. The latter is the Great Pyramid, the building of which some believe may have bankrupted Egypt, but it represents the height of achievement in pyramid construction.

40. These again take the form of funeral offerings - however they have been doubled to match those assigned to Khufu's forefathers. They greatly exceed the mortuary offerings offered by Khufu to the magicians of the previous tales.

41. Only the narrator's voice would clarify whether this is intended as a straightforward allusion to Osiris as the god of vegetation or (more likely) a cynical laugh at Khufu's ignorance in allocating such offerings to the Osrian *djed*.

42. Clayton, 60; Simpson, 744; Hart, 145.

43. Possibly a problem of succession consequent to the death of the Crown Prince Kawab.

44. Van der Vliet, 408-411. Raising the *Djed* marked the transitory nature of the situation and the necessity of overcoming the dangers involved, hence the association with the accession of a new king or a commemoration of such (e.g. *sed*-festival).

45. In *Westcar* Khufu is the silent observer and his ancestors take the active role - in direct reversal of the roles in the *Dramatic Papyrus*.

46. He sends funeral offerings on a grand scale for the kings in contrast to the derisory quantities he orders for the magicians.
pillar, symbolically missing from his own name, and through his symbolic Raising of the Djed-pillar hopes to restore stability to his father's monarchy. But to no avail. The djed is assigned to dwell with Hardedef whose name is thus restored \[\text{Djedefhor}\].

The Middle Kingdom audience undoubtedly knew Prince Hardjedef's reputation as sage and writer and would have seen the pun. \[\text{Hr-Dd=f}\] probably never became king although a 12th Dynasty inscription found near the Wadi Hammamat shows the names of Khufu, Djedefra, Khafra, Hardjedef and Baufre sequentially in cartouches and Reisner argues for his and Baufre's inclusion in the king lists.

His relative Djedefre \[\text{Dd=f-ra}\] "he endures like Re" probably was known as Khufu's successor. The word-play in replacing Horus in \[\text{Dd=f-hr}\] with Re reflects a significant change in the basic dogma developing at the end of the Old Kingdom as Re became transcendent and Osiris emergent. Later the concept of the High God's "twin souls", Osiris and Re, developed—beautifully illustrated in a Book of the Dead papyrus showing the souls of Osiris and Re embracing at Mendes within the protection of a pair of djed-pillars (figure 6).

Djedefre was in fact the first king to adopt the epithet "son of Re" and his name incorporates both Re and the djed (Osiris emergent?) symbolising the duality of the High God.

The Fifth Tale of pWestcar also alludes to the Twin Ba Dogma in that the father and mother of the 5th Dynasty kings are Re and \[\text{rwD}\] (Ruddjedet) whose name combines \[\text{rwD}\] meaning "strong, enduring, flourishing, permanent" and meaning "stability" with its related concepts of the djed-pillar and Osiris. Her name could mean "stability flourishes" or even "Osiris is enduring". A double-meaning

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48. Drioton, 41 ff. The names are written consistently with the suffix -r, including \[\text{hr-dd=f-r}\].
49. Between Khafre and Menkaure (Reisner, 243-246).
50. Although totally dilapidated today, his pyramid high up at Abu Roash had an imposing position due west of Heliopolis and an exceptionally long causeway.
51. Horus did not disappear as State God but merged with Re to become Re-Hor-Akhty (Watterson, 83-85).
52. Rundle Clark, 124-156, 157-158.
may be intended as \(r(w)d\) could also be heard as \(\text{r(w)d(w)}\) "staircase" thus giving a second level of meaning to Ruddjedet's name. She is the "Stairway to stability" for the new Fifth Dynasty. Either interpretation inculcates that, despite Re becoming transcendent, the symbol of the djed with its important connotations of stability and Osiris is retained.

This interpretation may itself be a tale of fantasy, and I may have uncovered layers of meaning that never existed, but the author surely intended the very clear symbolism of the djed-pillar to evoke in the contemporary audience at least some of the ideas I have explored. I suspect this Folk-tale parodies sacred works such as the Dramatic Papyrus and the Osiris Mysteries Plays which taught the people the legends and symbols representing metaphysical religious concepts. Performances of the sacred works were surely popular but restricted to designated times within the Temple-festival Calendar. Folk-tales such as The Tales of King Khufu may be their secular homologues with both didactic and entertainment value and continuous accessibility.

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APPENDIX I

Texts from the Tomb of Kheruef (TT 192) concerning the Djed-Pillar
(Oriental Institute of Chicago, 58-61 and Plates 54, 56 and 57)

Before the king:
"Erecting the djed-pillar by the king himself that he may achieve 'given life like Re' for ever and ever"

Above the rope drawn by king:
"Erecting the djed-pillar by the king himself at dawn of the jubilee"

Above the djed-pillar:
"The erecting of the djed-pillar by the king which he did for his father Sokar-Osiris, the great god, residing in Shetyet, that he might give all life, all stability and dominion., all health, all joy, and all provisions that are required in the jubilee like his father Horus-Tanen"

Above the rope drawn by three men:
"Giving a divine offering and making an offering to the djed-pillar"

Above the two bowing men:
"Ushering in the Setem-priest and the Chief of the Master Craftsmen and causing them to stand at the steps of the throne to perform the ceremonies of the erection of the djed-pillar in the king's presence"

Before the princesses (Amenhotep's daughters):
"Adoration of Ptah-Sokar, the djed-pillar of Osiris, the great god, who resides in Shetyet, by the king's children"
A comparative analysis of the imagery in *The Dramatic Papyrus* (scenes 12-16) and in Djedi's display of magic to Khufu (lines 8.13 - 8.25 of pWestcar)

There are some very close parallels (detailed in the Table below) but also some varied details in the Djedi and Khufu scene which have allowed some ingenious additional imagery.

Djedi first refuses Khufu's suggestion to demonstrate his magic with a human head (head of Seth?). This is replaced not by the expected goose and goat but by two birds. Has the author used a form of paranomasia, deliberately substituting beasts whose names allow some word-play? -since their homophones combine to say "set-up a great pole"!

Introduction of a third creature may be to allow another metaphorical allusion to Raising the djed and a parallel to Seth's submission to Osiris.

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Ramesseum Dramatic Papyrus  
(after Sethe's German translation1')

Scene 12 - Lines 41-45 - Vignette 7 (Decapitation of goat and goose)

Scene 13 - Lines 46-47 - Vignette 8 (Offering to the djed)

46. It happened that an offering was presented to the djed-pillar with the head of the goat and with the head of the goose. It is Horus who has become mighty. What he says, is done to him ... 

47. Geb speaks to Thoth, "Give to him the head twice. The head of Seth". Presentation of the goat's head and of the goose's head.2'

Scene 14 - Lines 48-50 - Vignette 9 (Erection of the djed-pillar)

48. It happened, the raising of the djed-pillar by the king's issue (descendants). It is Horus who has ordered his children to erect (it).

49. Horus3' to the Children of Horus. Speech: "Have him remain under him". Seth under Osiris who is wept for. Raising of the djed-pillar.4'

50. Isis and Nephthys to the Children of Horus. Speech: "Drive (him) under the enemy". The Children of Horus. The king's issue (descendants). The Greatest-of-Seers (high-priest of Re at Heliopolis).

Scene 15 - Lines 51-52 - no Vignette

51. It happened that a rope was put on the djed. It is Seth who is slaughtered.

52. Horus to the Children of Horus. Speech: "Let him stand bound". Seth bound, making the djed bend.5'

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1' Sethe, 155-160.
2' Sethe (155, note 47a) interprets this that the head of Seth is to be presented twice, once in the form of a goat and once in the form of a goose.
3' Written as the w/t (N31) sign as with Middle Kingdom coffins (Gardiner, 489).
4' Sethe (48) explains that Raising the Djed causes the im3 (Osiris) to rise over the Djed (Seth) thus symbolises the Triumph of Osiris over Seth.
5' The rope further symbolises Seth's submission to Osiris.
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