

Research on Ancient Egyptian Religion and History

Edward F. Wente

Most Egyptologists would deny the existence of mysticism and mystical initiation until perhaps the Hellenistic age, when foreign influences are believed to have substantially affected certain aspects of indigenous religious practices. But Professor Wente has been considering the question whether the pharaonic Egyptian use of certain mortuary texts not only on the occasion of death but also during life suggests that the history of mysticism began long before the Hellenistic period.

In considering two important "guidebooks" to the underworld, the Book of Amduat and the Book of Gates, Professor Wente has discerned some features that foreshadow the mystical initiation of Lucius into the cult of Isis at Kenchreai, Greece, which is described in *The Golden Ass of Apuleius* of the second century A.D. His basic conclusions are pre-

sented in an article, "Mysticism in Pharaonic Egypt?" appearing in the July 1982 issue of the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, vol. 41. In a lecture on the problem of mysticism in ancient Egypt, given in June, 1982, at the University of California, Berkeley, Professor Wente suggested that a holistic approach to such matters as magic and religion, symbolism, and the concept of time in ancient Egypt might provide an atmosphere more conducive to the appreciation of the mystical element in Egyptian religion.

In connection with his research into the history of the New Kingdom, Professor Wente collated Ramesside autobiographical inscriptions in the Cairo Museum during the autumn of 1981, making significant improvements upon previously published readings. In particular, his recent collation of the difficult stele of Setau, the viceroy of Kush who served under Ramesses II, has

proved fruitful. During his stay in Cairo Mr. Wente was invited to present a paper at the Institute d'Egypte on "The Evidence of the Royal Mummies in Relation to New Kingdom History," in which he discussed problems presented by the extremely low biologic ages at death of some of the kings, and by the recent analysis of the cranio-

facial morphology of members of the royal families. It would appear that certain of the royal mummies were misidentified when they were rewrapped during the Twenty-first Dynasty, but with the aid of refined techniques of cluster analysis it may be possible to provide new identifications.